

Activism Made Easy: A Study of Amnesty International's Online Campaign to Stop Torture

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Introduction

Up until the start of the twenty-first century, the Internet's value to human rights organisations was seen almost exclusively in terms of its communication capabilities and its potential for information gathering and dissemination. It is only since then that organisations have begun to utilise it as a site for action. This paradigmatic shift in thinking [1] has resulted in a range of well organised online campaigns, as well as countless calls for people to sign electronic petitions and send emails to state actors, corporate headquarters, media outlets and other target groups. In 2000 Amnesty International took one of the first and most significant steps into the world of online human rights activism. It launched a major campaign against torture in October of that year which focused on three main interrelated areas: preventing torture, confronting discrimination, and overcoming impunity. The *Campaign to Stop Torture* sought to have human rights activists throughout the world "join forces to step up the fight against torture and hold governments accountable" [2]. The key components in the strategy to achieve this were the creation of a platform for mass public action and the delivery of the anti-torture message to as many people as possible. The medium chosen to achieve these objectives was the Internet.

This paper reviews Amnesty's tactical use of the Internet as a tool for online activism in the *Campaign to Stop Torture*, and in particular at the contribution of the website, <http://www.stoptorture.org>, which was created for the campaign. It analyses the effectiveness of the online activism approach taken, and examines the lessons for non-governmental human rights organisations.

Stoptorture.org

Part of the success of Amnesty International's campaigning lies in its structure, which gives it the ability to simultaneously run global campaigns from its International Secretariat (IS) in London and local campaigns through its national sections [3]. The *Campaign to Stop Torture* was one of the most global campaigns ever undertaken by the organisation, with launches in over 60 countries. It was managed centrally from the IS but it depended on mobilising the worldwide Amnesty membership, which at that time was spread across 160 countries and was in the region of 1.3 million [4].

The campaign aimed to bring people around the world together in a collective effort to eradicate torture. It challenged the use of torture as an instrument of political oppression, and it also highlighted the torture and ill-treatment of convicted and suspected criminals. It emphasised abuses based on identity, especially abuses against women and children, and it sought to make governments accountable for all acts of torture, including those committed by private individuals.

The *Campaign to Stop Torture* used the Internet for two purposes; firstly to try to extend the protection of international scrutiny to a wide number of potential victims, and secondly to provide the public with more opportunities for action. A new campaign website, www.stoptorture.org, which the press release at the time said would "change the face of human rights campaigning" [5] went live on 18 October 2000. The public could register there to receive the latest appeal cases by email or mobile phone text message anywhere in the world. By replying via email or mobile phone they were then included in an online petition, and a pre-written email was sent immediately to the relevant authorities. Those who registered were offered screensavers and other freeware, and website visitors were encouraged to send postcards to friends telling them about the campaign. The *Stop Torture* website also provided visitors with the latest campaign information, and Amnesty reports and publications were made available in English, Arabic, Spanish and French.

For the 2002 – 2006 operational period, Amnesty shifted its campaigning priorities to its *Control Arms* [6] and *Stop Violence Against Women* [7] campaigns. As a result, the *Campaign to Stop Torture* was downgraded to ongoing country-by-country work, even though the practice was far from eradicated. Consequently, the website was also taken down and replaced with just an information website on torture. This new website, <http://www.amnesty.org/stoptorture>, was re-positioned within Amnesty's main site, where it became a more

integrated part of the organisation's overall web presence. The Stoptorture.org URL is still maintained, however. The use of online petitions in campaigns has also continued and even developed further in more recent campaigns [8], but the tactic of sending email notifications to the authorities when supporters sign has been discontinued, largely because of questions over its effectiveness.

The Achievements of Stoptorture.org

While it was active, Stoptorture.org generated a high level of support amongst those who subscribed, and was successful in getting many people that were not previously involved in Amnesty's work to take action - partly because it enabled individuals to act politically without organisational affiliations, unlike the more traditional forms of activism [9]. And despite the high degree of management that it required and the resources needed for site design and technical infrastructure, internal evaluations concluded that the premises underlying the website were sound. In the first 12 months of its operation, up to 26 September 2001, 17 separate actions were issued on Stoptorture.org. Each of these focused attention on the torture or the risk of torture of an individual or group in one of the following countries: Turkey (2 separate cases), Lebanon, Indonesia (2 cases), Mexico (2 cases), Iran, China (2 cases), the Democratic Republic of Congo, Equador, the United Arab Emirates, Brazil, Malaysia (2 cases) and Israel. Between 1600 and 10,900 people from all over the world participated in each of these; the numbers depended in part on how long the case remained open [10].

Figure 1: stoptorture.org statistics: Oct 2000 to Sep 2001

During the 12 month period up to 8 October 2001, a total of 32,791 subscribers from 188 countries registered on Stoptorture.org. The countries with the highest numbers of subscribers were the US (18.4 percent of the total), UK (14.8 percent), Canada (6.8 percent), France (6.6 percent) and Australia (5.8 percent). Interestingly, with the exception of France, these were the countries with the highest English-speaking Amnesty membership at the time [11]; although the actions themselves were available in French and Spanish, the site navigation, instructions and

registration were only in English, and this may have had an impact on who subscribed. Over 4,000 subscribers also opted to receive the action alerts by SMS text message. These mobile phone recipients had the option of signing the online petition by simply pressing the reply button.

While Amnesty's existing membership base was crucial to the success of Stoptorture.org, a survey of over 700 subscribers indicated that 36 percent were not involved with the organisation prior to signing up. In countries where Amnesty already had a national presence, it thus presented an opportunity for the organisation to expand its membership base; 95 percent of those who were not previously involved indicated that they would consider getting involved with its human rights work in other ways [12]. The statistics from the website also show that there were subscribers from countries where there were no Amnesty structures; even in countries where the rights to freedom of expression and assembly are threatened, this form of cyber-activism presented possibilities for human rights advocates.

The impact of Stoptorture.org for the most important stakeholders, the victims of human rights abuse, also seems positive. Amnesty reported that out of 18 urgent actions posted on the website, involving 79 individual detainees in 11 different countries, 32 were released from detention or saved from torture or imminent extrajudicial execution [13]. This success rate compares very favourably with that of Amnesty's separate and well established Urgent Action (UA) Network, where members respond to urgent cases of human rights violations by sending appeal letters, faxes or emails to the relevant authorities; in 2000, for example, positive developments were reported in one-fifth of the 499 UA cases issued [14]. While several factors may have contributed to the higher success rate of the Stoptorture.org cases, including the types of cases selected, the volume of emails sent to the authorities in a short period of time cannot be discounted.

Is Cyberactivism Effective?

Amnesty cannot prove that the letter-writing actions it began in the 1960s directly or solely influence outcomes, although anecdotal evidence suggests that they do bring positive results [15]. In terms of email, the picture is equally if not more vague, but one thing is clear; the new medium significantly increases the speed and scope of action from Amnesty members and supporters. Even though Stoptorture.org was aimed exclusively at those with access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), this has not in itself limited the effectiveness of the campaign. Because of the history and development of the organisation, a high percentage of Amnesty members have access to the Internet and not surprisingly many of these prefer to send emails than to write letters. With Stoptorture.org, Amnesty was simply recognising this trend within its own membership.

By the early part of this decade even governments were becoming more dependent on ICTs. Since they needed to continue to receive emails in order to function, they could not completely ignore floods of electronic appeals from human rights advocates. The intent with Stoptorture.org was not to block or disrupt the information and communications infrastructure of the recipient authorities; while other groups engaged in this type of 'hactivism' to draw attention to human rights issues [16], Amnesty did not. The email flows were monitored and controlled, often to the extent that the target address was changed to avoid unnecessary disruption to the recipients. And while there were threats of court action by governments, no cases were brought against Amnesty as a result of their organised e-campaigning tactics. Indeed, it was primarily to avoid allegations of hactivism or spamming that Amnesty recorded and made available (online) the names of all those who had signed the petitions and agreed to be listed [17].

Nonetheless, the effectiveness of email when it comes to influencing abusive governments is still open to question [18]. Firstly, the response of authorities to electronic messages is varied and the impact is not as predictable as in the case of conventional mail and faxes, although they cost less to send. Whereas letters must be sorted, documented and filed in most government offices, it is easy to simply read the subject line of an email and then delete it, or to shut down the accounts if there are floods of incoming appeals. In addition, emails may never even reach their intended recipient in countries with unreliable ICT systems or ones that cannot cope with a sudden influx of emails. And finally, there may be suspicion over the originators of the emails. The senders' addresses may look unconvincing (or worse, offensive) because of the abundance of playful usernames. Or there might be grounds for believing that some or all of the emails were automatically generated because of the similarity of the subject line and message content.

Indeed, the generation of identical notifications to the authorities for each person that "signed" the online petition was one of the key drawbacks of the Stoptorture.org website. Amnesty has always believed that the more diverse a letter-writing campaign is, the better its chances for getting the attention and respect of government officials. This applies to online as well as offline activism, so the organisation has now moved from the use of the auto-generated

messages to one where activists are encouraged to send emails with distinct subject lines, by customising pre-existing text on their websites.

Conclusion

Patti Whaley, who was Deputy Secretary General of Amnesty in 2002, recommended that while undertaking activist work, NGOs should ensure that the Internet plays an appropriate role in an effective overall strategy, and that online activism is neither treated as an end in itself or as a marginal activity for a few specialists [20]. In addition to the questions over its effectiveness, there are other issues – many of which are particularly relevant to human rights advocates – that must be taken into account. Accessibility is one; for a host of social, economic, technical or even cultural reasons, most of the world's population still does not have access to the Internet. Concerns over privacy and personal security is another; there are real or perceived dangers inherent in adding one's name to a petition or in being in receipt of certain information, even electronically, in many parts of the world.

If the Internet is to contribute to greater respect for human rights throughout the world, it will not happen solely on the basis of action sites like Stoptorture.org. Its role as a tool for action needs to be built into an overall Internet strategy by human rights organisations. Despite the factors that impede its global reach, the tool presents great opportunity for human rights activists in other areas like organisation, offline mobilisation, research, and human rights education. The large transnational organisations like Amnesty that have the resources to do so must continue to experiment with ways to exploit the Internet's overall activism potential, to push forward towards the limits of its usefulness in a non-exclusionary manner, and to enable other groups to learn from their experiences.

Footnotes

- [1] S. Wray, *Electronic Civil Disobedience and the World Wide Web of Hactivism: A Mapping of Extraparliamentarian Direct Net Action Politics*. Paper presented for *The World Wide and Contemporary Cultural Theory Conference*, Drake University, November, 1998.
- [2] Amnesty International, *Take a Step to Stamp out Torture*, Amnesty International Publications, London, 2000.
- [3] T. Risse, "The Power of Norms versus the Norms of Power: Transnational Civil Society and Human Rights" in A.M. Florini (ed), *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society*, Tokyo: Japan Centre for International Exchange, and Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000, pp. 177-209. See in particular comments on Amnesty's first major transnational campaign against torture in the 1970s.
- [4] V. Schneider, "The Social Capital of Amnesty International", paper prepared for the *Workshop Voluntary Associations, Social Capital and Interest Mediation: Forging the Link*, ECPR Joint Session of Workshops, Copenhagen 14-19 April 2000. Available online at: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/events/jointsessions/paperarchive/copenhagen/ws13/schneider.pdf>.
- [5] See "Emailing the torturers: <http://www.stoptorture.org>", *News Service* No. 196, Amnesty International Publications, London. Retrieved 13 October 2004 at: <http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/Index/ACT400252000?OpenDocument&of=THEMES/TORTURE>.
- [6] *Control Arms* is a campaign jointly run by Amnesty International, IANSA and Oxfam. It was launched October 9 2003. The campaign website is <http://www.controlarms.org/>.
- [7] The *Stop Violence Against Women* campaign was launched on International Women's Day, 8 March 2004. See the campaign website at <http://www.amnesty.org/actforwomen>
- [8] See https://www.controlarms.org/million_faces/index.php/ and <http://web.amnesty.org/actforwomen/actnow-redirect-eng>. The former uses another innovative new tactic in online activism – the collecting of photos and self-portraits of people as a powerful visual message of support for the *Control Arms* campaign. The aim is to collect one million faces by 2006.
- [9] Brundin makes this general point in: *On-line Activism: Transnational social movements on the Internet*. NOPSA, XIII Nordiske Statskundskabskongres, 15-17 August 2002. Retrieved 8 October 2004 at: <http://www.socsci.auc.dk/institut2/nopsa/arbejdsgruppe9/piabrundin.pdf>.
- [10] All figures are taken from internal Amnesty sources and documents.
- [11] The Netherlands and Austria had higher Amnesty memberships than either Canada or Australia in 2002, but they accounted for only 1.4 percent and 0.4 percent of Stoptorture.org subscribers, respectively. This was surprising since the Netherlands accounted for 14 percent of Amnesty members and Austria for five percent, compared to only two percent in Australia. Although activists in the non-English speaking countries might have a basic grasp of the language, it was undoubtedly still a factor.

[12] When asked if they would consider getting involved, 48 percent answered “Yes” and 47 percent answered “Maybe”.

[13] Figures taken from an internal Amnesty report on the impact, outcomes and achievements of the *Campaign to Stop Torture* during 2001.

[14] J. Lebert, “Information and Communication Technologies and Human Rights Advocacy: The Case of Amnesty International: in P. Hajnel (ed.), *Civil Society in the Information Age*. Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2002.

[15] See Lebert.

[16] Wray, *ibid*. Also S. Hick, and A. Teplitsky, “Internet Solidarity: Grassroots Movement Struggles for Human Rights” in S. Hick, E. F. Halpin and E. Hoskins (eds.), *Human Rights and the Internet*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd, New York: St. Martin's Press, LLC, 2000, pp. 52-64.