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NOTEBOOK

Sending Out an SMS

by Anneke Bosman [View full notebook in pdf format. \[*note\]](#)

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.

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 campaigned 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.

***Note:** You need Adobe Acrobat Reader to open the files marked with an asterisk (*). You can download a free version of this program from www.adobe.com.



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