

# MARKETING SOCIETY AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE 2016



**How Amnesty International took on the UK government, and won**

**Category: Marketing on a shoestring**

**Brand: Amnesty International UK**

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**Agency: VCCP**

## Executive Summary

Founded in London in 1961, Amnesty International is the world's leading human rights activist group, tackling issues all over the globe.

But in 2015, Amnesty faced a local issue.

Every 2 years, the London Arms Fair at the ExCel centre trades everything from the latest machine guns to killer drones. However, recent fairs had revealed a more disturbing development: torture equipment and other illegal weapons, like cluster bombs, being advertised for sale, all due UK government inaction and an open loophole in EU law.

This was human rights abuse in Britain. On our soil. On our doorstep.

Despite lobbying and protesting against this; time and time again in 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2013 the UK government had failed to come out on Amnesty's side to stop this happening or close the loophole. So in 2015 they looked to the power of marketing and creativity to galvanise public action.

By launching a spoof campaign directly targeted at the fair organisers and the UK government, Amnesty International managed to provoke a response; not just from the public and media but from the UK government as well.

Where previous lobbying had failed, this campaign succeeded in securing a commitment from the government to help close the loopholes in the EU law. The campaign generated over 628K video views, reached 34.6 million people through free publicity, and contributed to +42.6% increase in petitions.

All on a budget which was the thinnest of shoestrings; a piffling £15K.

Words: 242

## All hushed up

Founded in London in 1961, Amnesty International has always been there to prevent human rights abuses all over the world. Recently however, there has been a more disturbing development occurring much closer to home.

Every two years, since 2001, The London ExCel centre, supported by the UK government, hosts The Defence Security and Equipment International (DSEI) exhibition. It has become The UK Government's calling card, showcasing the very best arms and weaponry the UK and the world has to offer.

It's an event that has all the airs and graces of respectability just like any other trade show; men in suits discussing orders and margins, vendors breaking over a Pizza Express, government officials talking up British industry.



**Figure 1:** The DSEI Arms Fair (Getty Images and Reuters)

Whilst it looks like business as usual from the inside, on the outside, the arms fair was relatively unknown amongst the British public, and frankly the arms dealers and the UK government were happy to keep it that way

London ExCel went as far to have no mention of the fair on their website. Due to begin on 15 September, we noticed a curious omission in between the 'Sea Cadets National Combined Regatta' and 'The Homebuilding & Renovating Show'...

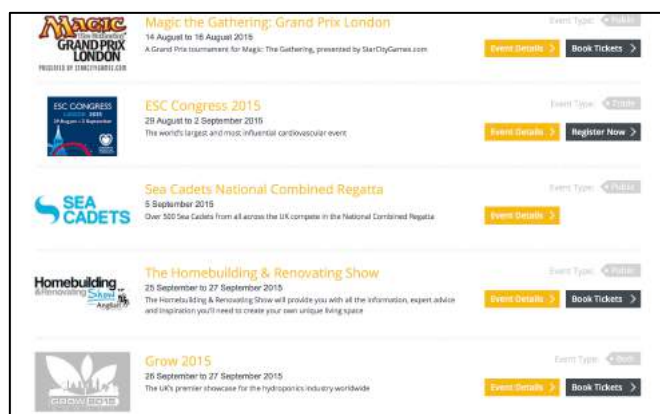


Figure 2: London ExCel website

Whilst a cover-up in itself was worrying, in recent years a more sinister development had occurred. There was evidence to suggest that illegal 'tools of torture' and other illegal weapons were managing to slip through the net, and had been promoted in past arms fairs in 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2013.

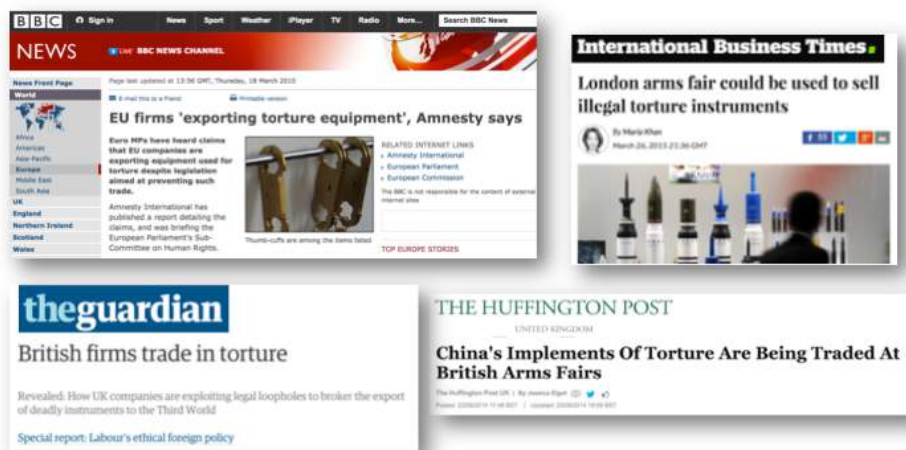


Figure 3: News of torture tools slipping through the net

Despite government promises to crack down on this, instruments such as 'sting batons', 'electric handcuffs' and 'stun guns' continued to be promoted. Although in some cases, such as in 2011 and 2013, the vendors were thrown out after being exposed by campaigners; the loophole in EU law remained, and no one was prosecuted. This was exacerbating a worldwide issue identified by Amnesty International whereby 141 governments were taking part in torture methods to intimidate and interrogate suspects, despite an absolute global ban on torture.

But each and every time the protests had fallen on deaf ears; the incumbent UK government becoming increasingly lax about challenging human rights abuses caused by the arms and security trade, both at home and abroad.



**Figure 4:** News of the UK government's human rights record; including deals with countries with poor human rights records i.e. Saudi Arabia

So for 2015, Amnesty International decided to try something different; they couldn't allow another year when torture equipment continued to be blatantly promoted at a London trade fair. A bolder ambition was defined, and they resolved to do the following...

1. **Make the general public aware of the arms fair, and the illegal sale of torture happening there.**
2. **Get the government to support Amnesty International's position on the trade in torture equipment.**
3. **Close the loophole in EU law, preventing future torture sales from happening.**

## More problems than you can shake a sting baton at

In order to take on the government, Amnesty International approached VCCP to see how a creative campaign could achieve the objectives. Budgets would be tight. The Marketing Society defines anything under £250k as a shoestring budget, but we had the thinnest of shoestrings, less than 10% of the limit - £15K all in.

But that was just one of the problems...

1. This had to be about changing the opinion of a very small-targeted number at the top; we needed to get the government ministers noticing, and in particular the Department for Business who had the greatest power to change things.
2. There were usually a lot of protests at the arms fair from many other organisations; Amnesty International would have to find its own unique voice in this protest to be heard.
3. Anything we did had to garner the support of our greatest asset, namely the activists and the supporters of Amnesty's cause; we had to galvanise them to spread our campaign.

4. We had to get the wider media and public to side with us if we were going to get the government to take notice, but Amnesty International had traditionally found it difficult to broaden their support out of their committed supporter base. 20K actions from the public was the minimum target set.
5. The parameters of the news cycle meant that getting the timing right was essential. Too early and it wouldn't feel relevant, too late and we would miss the boat.
6. It was going to be nigh impossible to do anything like a stunt right outside the arms fair, with security exceedingly tight on the premises.

## Torture on your doorstep

We approached this arduous challenge by defining three clear communications tasks:

1. **Disrupt** – We had to make a big stir.
2. **Engage** – We had to get the public and media on board, and signing our petition.
3. **Rally** – We had to get our activists and the wider public spreading the campaign far and wide.

With the limited budget at our disposal, and the limitations around the site itself, it was decided fairly early on that social media would be a critical factor for success.

However social campaigns weren't like they were in the good old days; new algorithms by Facebook and Twitter have constrained abilities to achieve mass exposure organically. This was reflected in the recent rise in paid social activity between 2014 and 2015<sup>1</sup>

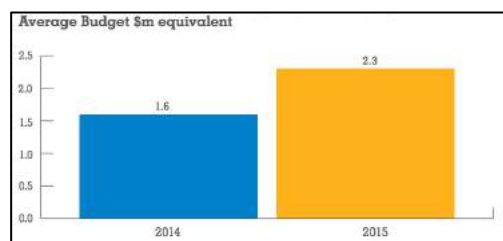


Figure 5: The increase in paid social activity from Peter Field's 'Seriously Social' report

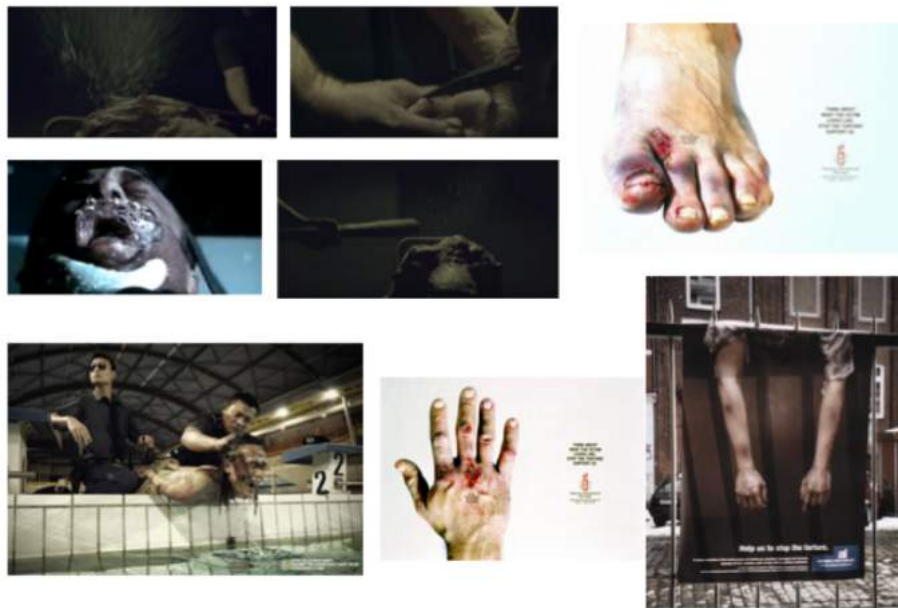
With our miniscule budget, we would have to rely on being famously disruptive the old fashioned way – organically. (We would also have to do some lobbying of our own to secure any free media space in print or outdoor.) The path to success therefore lay in maximising relevance for the target audience.

The only problem was that Amnesty International had struggled with that in the past. 'Stop Torture' campaigns tended to try and shock and confront people with the brutal reality of those affected.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Field 'Seriously Social' p11 (a study that looks at the effectiveness and efficiencies of 32 award winning social campaigns around the world)





**Figure 6:** Previous anti-torture advertising campaigns by Amnesty International

However it had become clear that this wasn't having as big an impact as it could. 'Stop Torture' campaigns tended to get fewer petition signatures, averaging 15K, 25% less than other campaigning areas.

*"We've always struggled to make 'Stop Torture' campaigns feel timely and relevant with people, they have always tended to deal with issues that are so far removed from the everyday experience"*

**Reuben Steains** Innovation Manager, Amnesty International UK

As a socially led campaign we had to make the focus of our message much more relevant, not by focusing on those affected, but rather on how it affected us.

The fact that it was happening in London gave us a golden opportunity to do just that, providing us with a message that could be hugely relevant to the audiences we wanted to reach.

It gave us the opportunity to make torture not a global issue but a provocatively local one. Making what is usually far, feel uncomfortably near.

We articulated this into a simple thought – **Torture on your doorstep.**

## Launching the ad campaign that they never wanted

Focusing on the locality and nearness of this murky trade, there was one interesting and compelling thought we kept coming back to; this event was exceptionally secretive and hushed up, so what if we advertised what was happening right on our doorstep? What would that look like?

To get some inspiration we had a look at how other trade shows promoted themselves...



Figure 7: Trade show advertising examples, 'The Ideal Home Show' and 'The London Boat Show'

It was then that we got to our (not so succinct) idea...

### THE-REALLY-BIG-AND-FAR-REACHING-AD-CAMPAIGN-THAT-THEY-NEVER-REALY-WANTED-YOU-TO-SEE.

At its heart was a simple and compelling idea; highlight what was happening on our doorstep by doing the ad campaign that neither the government, nor the fair wanted.

Stylistically we had to be as bold and brash as possible needed on such modest budgets. So we employed world-renowned artist Anthony Burrill to help execute the campaign in a vivid but also sinister tone.

We also managed to negotiate free space from some media owners eager to help a good cause, and so we started to seed out our campaign...

This kicked off first with a spoof ad, which parodied the conventions of the trade show category...





VO: The London Arms Fair is returning to the EXCEL London...



...since 2005, visitors have been offered guns, tanks and horrific killer drones...



..you may also find offers of illegal torture equipment...



...ankle shattering leg irons, cluster bombs and electric stun batons that cause excruciating pain, but leave no trace...



Glamorous Lady: Oooooo woah!



VO: Its right on your doorstep, just off the A13 near Dagenham...



...come along, its a truly great day out for all..



...supported by the UK government. Visit 'tortureonyourdoorstep.co.uk' to find out more

Figure 8: Spoof Ad 'The London Arms Fair' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhCatmlspr8>

Together with our artist Anthony Burrill we negotiated free outdoor space in both the East End where the event was taking place, and in city centres across the UK. We also went into commuter print publications, such as City A.M. and Metro the day before the fair, plus a further radio spot and online display.



Figure 9: Posters distributed nationally



Figure 10: Press ads in 'City AM' and 'Metro'

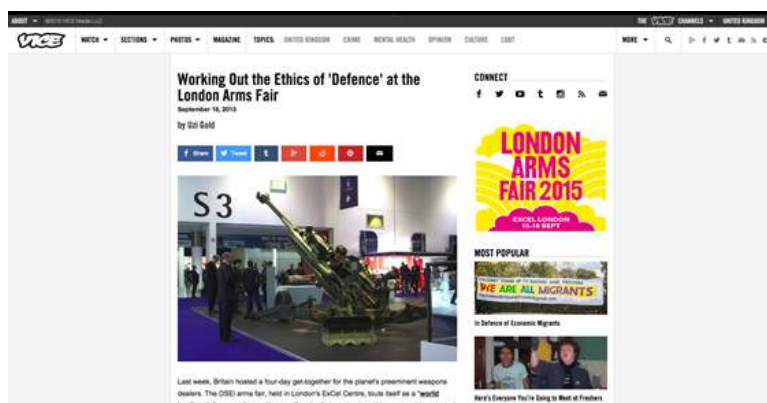


Figure 11: Online display



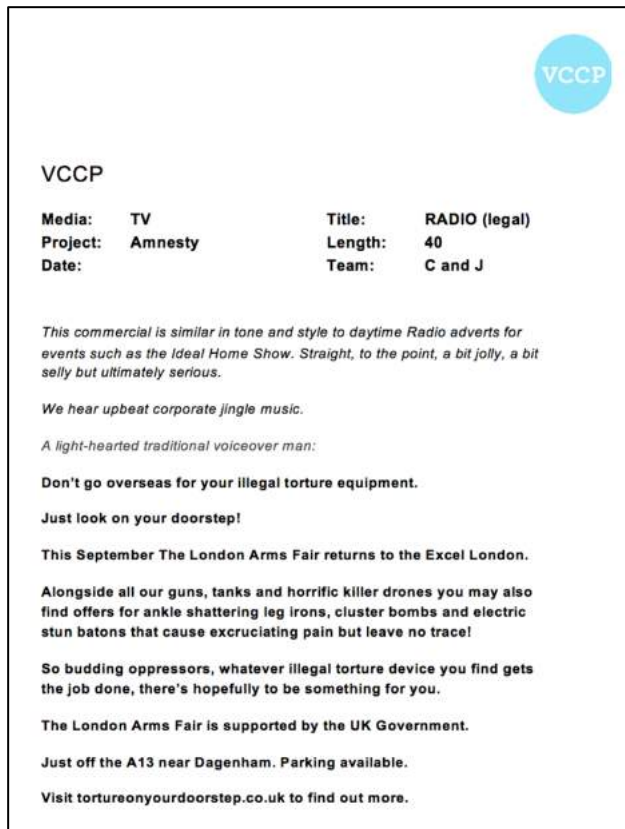


Figure 12: Radio script

...we even did beer mats, pub posters and leaflets...



Figure 13: Beer mats, posters and leaflets

It was also key to galvanise our supporter base, getting them to take to the streets as ‘unofficial arms fair makers.’<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 14:** Amnesty International UK supporters dressed up as ‘Unofficial Arms Fair Makes’

We then seeded the campaign online, and with a tiny £5K paid boost, this is where the campaign really took off...



**Figure 15:** The campaign in social channels

<sup>2</sup> A dark inversion of the London 2012 Olympic Games Makers



We got a great immediate response from the public, who spread it across the internet...



Figure 16: The public spreading the campaign in social media

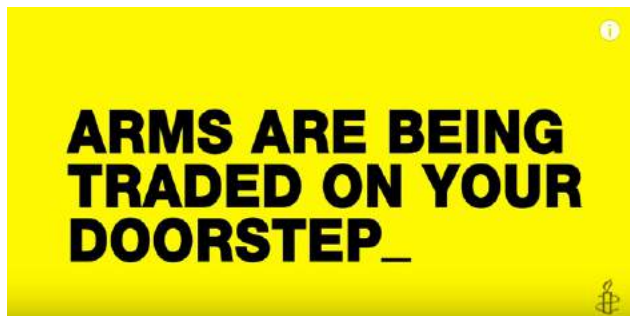
...we achieved outstanding publicity in the national press in print and online; spreading the campaign to a further 34.6 million people.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 17: Earned coverage of the campaign

<sup>3</sup> Gorkana

To wrap things up we released a further piece of content that encapsulated all activity, which also included a direct call to sign the petition.



**VO:** Arms on being traded on your doorstep. Every two years the ExCel, London hosts the London Arms Fair



Alongside guns, tanks and horrific killer drones . You may also find offers of illegal torture equipment



Unsurprisingly the UK government wants to keep this quiet.  
(**UK GOV:** Sssssshhhh all of you)



So we're giving them. 'THE-REALLY-BIG-AND-FAR-REACHING-AD-CAMPAIGN-THEY-NEVER-REALLY-WANTED-YOU-TO-SEE'



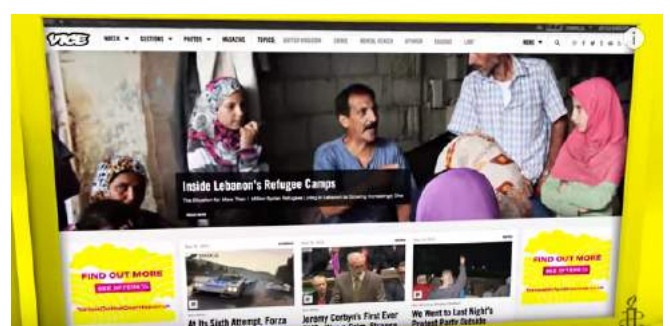
With a film they never wanted you to see...



They definitely wouldn't want you to see a load of big posters – so we put them all over the UK



We ran some press ads they never wanted you to see... and handed out leaflets they never wanted you to read...



...beer mats, and pub posters, they didn't want them either...or this...





We told lots of people on Facebook and Twitter , and they made it go crazy on Facebook and Twitter!



We even got loads of unofficial arms fair helpers to take to the streets, and help point people in the right direction.



And now its over to you. Help us make 'THE-REALLY-BIG-AND-FAR-REACHING-AD-CAMPAIGN-THEY-NEVER-REALLY-WANTED-YOU-TO-SEE' bigger and more far reaching than it already is...

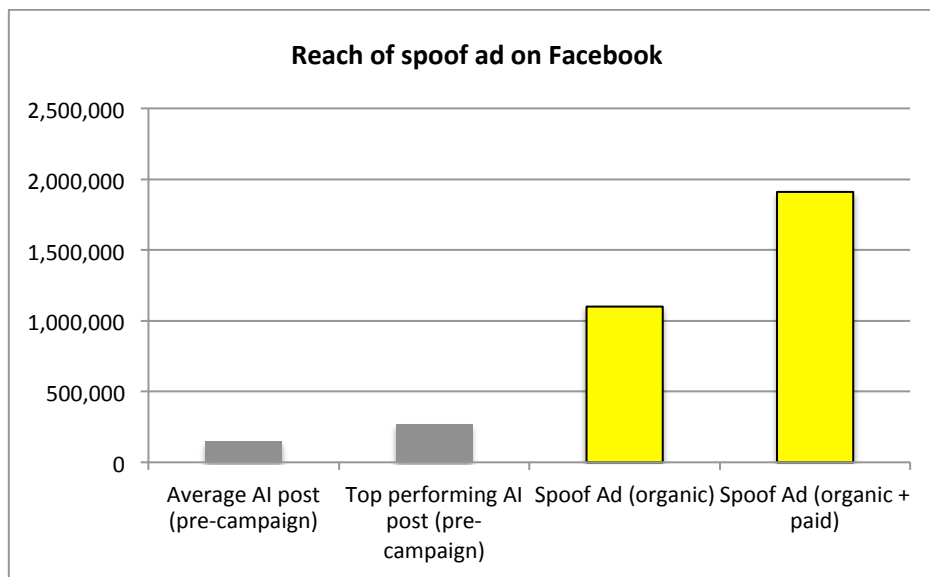


Please share this film now, and click the link to tell the UK government to help stop the illegal trade in torture. Visit [tortureonyourdoorstep.co.uk](http://tortureonyourdoorstep.co.uk) to find out more.

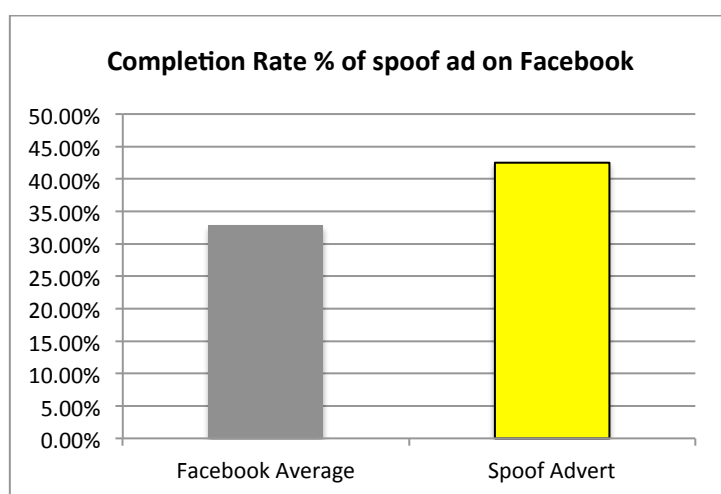
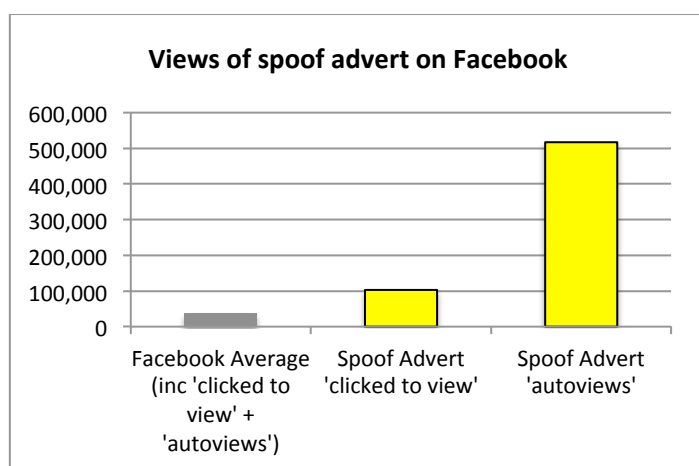
Figure 18: Campaign Film <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCeDIM60kOE>

We saw immediate results. The campaign reached 3M people on Facebook alone. The views for the spoof ad were impressive: in the first 24 hours it reached over 100K and ended up totalling 628K across social media.

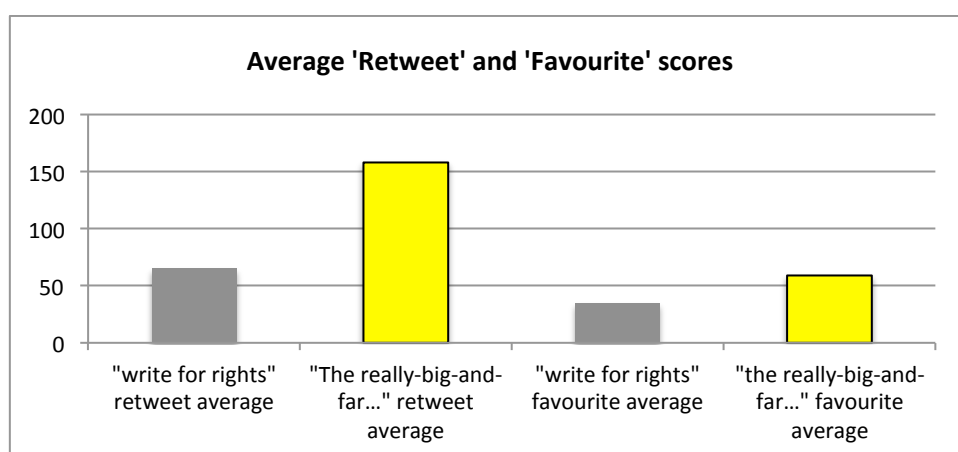
Most of this was driven by organic traction, rather than paid, and performed better than any previous social activity by Amnesty International.



The number of views and completion rate also performed well against industry benchmarks.<sup>4</sup>

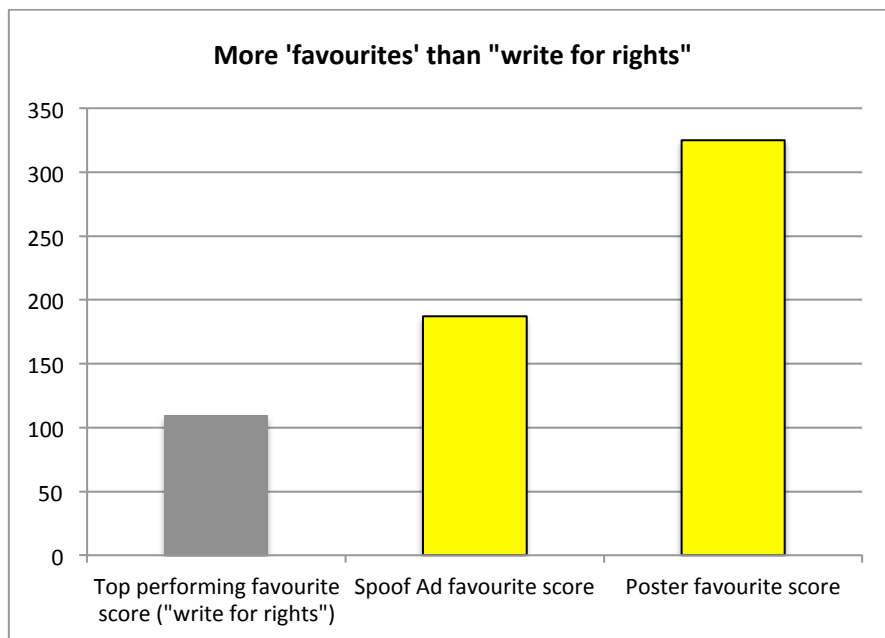
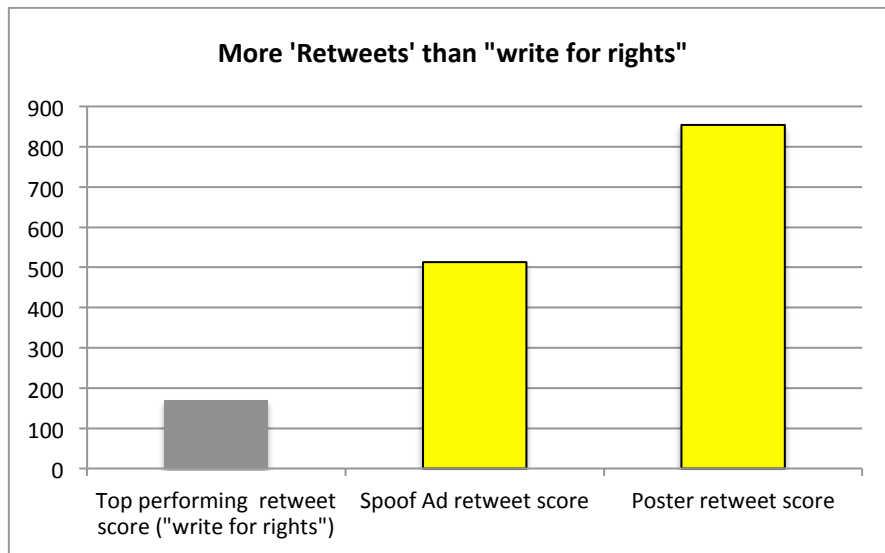


In Twitter we also beat Amnesty's next best performing social media campaign; "write for rights"<sup>5</sup>



<sup>4</sup> 'clicked to view' are people actively choosing to play the advert, 'autoviews' play automatically and anything that runs for at least 3 second is considered a complete 'autoview' by Facebook. Benchmarks are taken from a study by locowise that compared 1,000 branded pages in 2015 inc non-profit brands

<sup>5</sup> A campaign in support of human rights lawyer Waleed Abu who was imprisoned for human rights activism in Saudi Arabia



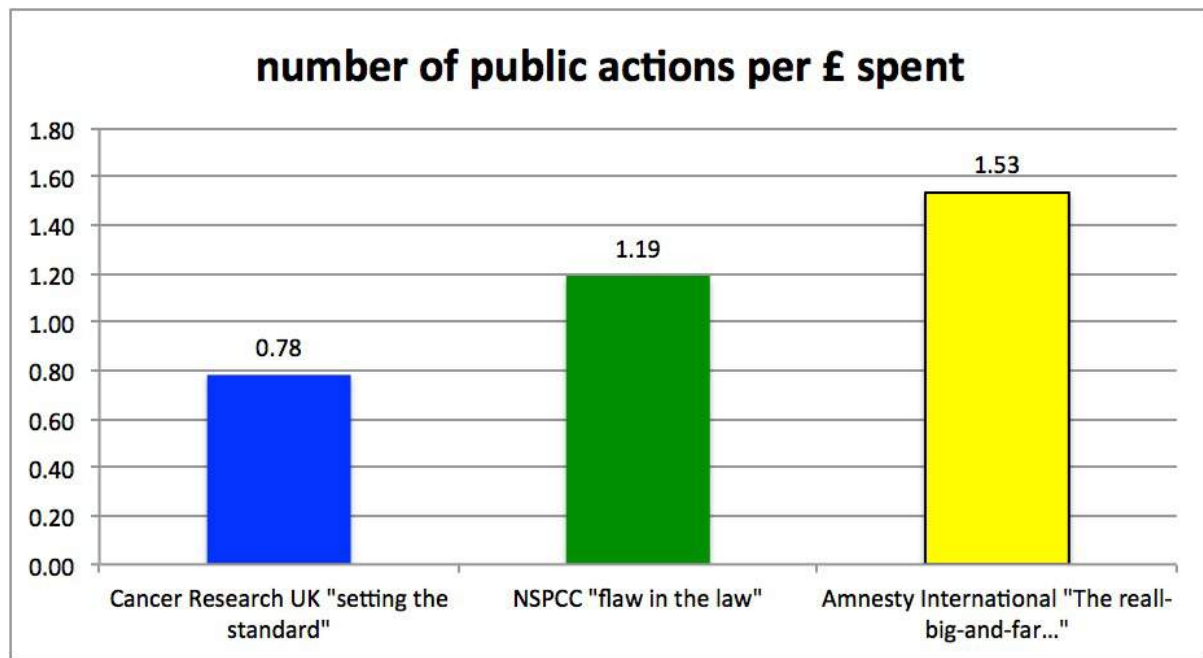
## Torture tackled

Pleasing as the social results were, this meant nothing unless we got the public acting and the government responding.

We achieved just that.

23,000 people sent an email action, +53.3% more than the average 15K for 'Stop Torture' campaigns.

To put this success in context we compared our efficiency in prompting public action with other award winning campaigns designed to change government policy; including 2015 Marketing Society award winner "flaw in the law" by the NSPCC. Our campaign was 29% more effective.



In the wake of this public response Amnesty International's UK director received an unprompted response from Anna Soubry MP - the Minister in charge of this area of work at the Department of Business.

Referencing the 'strength of public feeling', and promising to work with Amnesty in the future it also promised to push for strengthening controls in the EU parliament...

Kate Allen  
Director of Amnesty International UK  
25 New Inn Yard  
London  
EC2A 3EA



Department  
for Business  
Innovation & Skills

The Rt Hon Anna Soubry MP  
Minister of State for Small Business,  
Industry and Enterprise

1 Victoria Street  
London  
SW1H 0ET

T +44 (0) 20 7215 5000  
E [enquiries@bis.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@bis.gov.uk)

[www.gov.uk/bis](http://www.gov.uk/bis)

Our ref: MCSL2015/21441/PS

25 October 2015

Dear Kate

I am aware of the very large number of emails that have been sent to the Secretary of State by members of the public responding to Amnesty's "Torture on your Doorstep" campaign and which is evidence of the strength of feeling on this issue. You will appreciate that it is not possible for us to reply directly to each and every one of these emails but I trust that you will accept this letter as a response to the specific points that they raise about Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) and the proposed amendments to EU Council Regulation (EC) No 1236/2005.

DSEI is commercial exhibition of defence and security equipment which takes place every two years in London. Promoting the supply of prohibited torture goods is not permitted under the UK's trade controls. Any infringement of those trade controls at DSEI, or in any other context, is a matter of serious concern for the Government. Officials from a number of Government Departments worked very closely with the organisers, Clarion Defence & Security Limited, both before and during the event to ensure compliance. I am pleased to say that, as I write, we have received no reports of any alleged breaches of the controls at this year's event.

The European Commission's proposals to amend the EU's controls on trade in goods that could be used for capital punishment and torture are currently being discussed by both the EU Council and the European Parliament. We support proposals to strengthen those controls, where the measures can be implemented and enforced effectively. We have worked closely with Amnesty and other civil society representatives on this important issue, and will continue to do so.

With best wishes

THE RT HON ANNA SOUBRY MP

Cc. Tom Davies

**Figure 19:** Letter from RT HON Anna Soubry MP (Minister of State for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise) to Kate Allen, UK Director for Amnesty International

The campaign was also keenly felt in the EU parliament vote, one month later, which went **630-30** in favour of closing the loopholes in the laws controlling the trade in torture equipment.

*"The-really-big-and-far...' played a big part in ensuring that there was an overwhelming majority vote in favour of our position in the European parliament. The increased interest and profile of the issue in the UK, delivered by our campaign, really helped make this happen"*

**Tom Davies** 'Stop Torture' Campaign Manager, Amnesty International UK

We had reframed a global problem as a local one, we'd launched an ad campaign that neither the arms fair nor the UK government wanted, and we'd demonstrated that ingenious creativity on the thinnest shoestring can force a change in EU legislation.

Torture tackled.

**Words: 1,751** (exc. Footnotes and figure notes)