

# The (Mis)calculated Risks of Freedom From Torture's Awareness Campaign

Written by Gada Mahrouse

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GADA MAHROUSE, JAN 16 2016

The Careers section of *The Guardian* newspaper displayed an unusual job advertisement on 30 April 2012. It looked like any other, except that in large bold letters at the top it indicated that it was seeking a "Torturer". Designated as a full-time position with a salary scale in the £16,000 – £21,000 range, it was described as follows:

The government of a Middle Eastern State is recruiting a senior torturer to work in a well-equipped prison. Our ideal candidate would be prepared to inflict extreme pain and suffering. [...] Daily work will involve penetrating injuries, blunt trauma, electric shocking, asphyxiation and traumatic removal of digits and limbs.

Further along in smaller print, the ad revealed that it is an initiative of UK-based charitable organization *Freedom From Torture* (FFT) and that its aim is to raise awareness and raise funds "to put torturers out of work for good." The ad also invited readers to visit the organization's website to learn more about its services.

The ad was one of a series of three that ran in the *Guardian* and the *Independent* newspapers that week. A second ad recruited a "human rights abuser for a militia group in Central Africa". One of the job requirements included "using suspension (wires and rope) to stretch limbs apart." The third was described as a position for a "kidnapper" to work for a "South Asian government agency" and also violently depicted methods used to inflict pain. Anticipating the reader's reaction to feeling duped and disturbed by these very real-looking ads, an explanatory line stated: "If this sounds like a sick joke, that's only because jobs like this aren't usually advertised. But the jobs exist and there's no shortage of candidates."

Predictably, the campaign drew immediate attention and sparked debate. Some, like media and visual culture specialist Rick Poyner (2013), were impressed by its "clever hook" and "sophisticated form of *détournement*", and praised the organization for its audacious approach to presenting the issue of torture. Political and economic journalist Daniel Knowles (2013) also liked the campaign. He copied the "Torturer" ad on his blog in *The Telegraph* newspaper, and used it to call for compassion and tolerance by reminding his readers that asylum seekers in the UK are often "victims of people who do exactly this 'job'". In contrast, Goldsmith's Cultural Studies professor John Hutnyk (2013) found the ads offensive and condemned their circulation because of their blatant representations of torture as occurring in "darker nations."

My initial reaction to these advertisements was similar to Hutnyk's. I was taken aback by the campaign's simplistic stereotypes which pivoted on "a dialectical politics of recognition" (Hesford, 2011, p.3). By locating torture as a practice that happens "over there", it seemed to me that the campaign relied upon and reproduced a Manichean polarization of distinctions between a civilized "us" and a barbaric "them", and therefore was caught up in the logic and legacies of western imperialism. Furthermore, given what we have come to know about the uses of torture by American and British forces and their allies over the last decade, I agreed with Hutnyk's point about the irresponsibility of racializing torture this way.

But when I visited the FFT website and discovered more about the organization and the work they do, I became baffled at how they could succumb to adopting this campaign. A cursory look through the print materials produced by

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FFT revealed to me that, in addition to the vital front-line rehabilitation support they offer, the organization also draws attention to the alienation, racism, and numerous barriers to accessing services that their clients face. Furthermore, their materials made evident that FFT is committed to also raising awareness on torture that is perpetuated by countries in the Global North, and that it deliberately uses its platform to openly denounce it. For instance, a section of a report that the organization produced on the occasion of its 25th anniversary in 2012 (less than a year before launching the "Advertising torture" campaign) states that the UK and the US "have balked at criticism of their human rights records when the self-proclaimed bastions of human rights [...] appear to have failed to lead by example" (p.20). The report also refers to the thousands of victims of human rights abuses committed in the name of "counterterrorism" since 2001, reminding readers of the "men shackled and clad in orange jump-suits behind the wire in Guantanamo" and those "rendered across borders for interrogation or held in US-run CIA 'black sites'" (ibid). In other words, these examples clearly illustrated that FFT generally takes a measured approach to influencing policy and condemning torture in ways that challenge mainstream assumptions of who performs torture, what governments enable it, and where it takes place.

Why then, I wondered, would the organization risk circulating ads that elide this knowledge with such crassly racialized representations? In what follows, using a cultural studies framework (Saukko, 2003; Wilkinson, 2013) I speculate on the various practical, strategic and cultural conditions that led to the production and dissemination of this unconventional campaign. Then, focusing on on-line comments that were posted within a few days of the launch of the campaign, I contemplate the effects of circulating such representations. I conclude with the position that although some of the likely pragmatic motives for using the campaign are understandable and somewhat effective at capturing attention, it was ultimately more harmful than beneficial in helping the clients that FFT serves. Put differently: FFT miscalculated the risks of circulating this campaign.

## **Production: Pragmatics & Provocation**

Any discussion on the marketing campaigns produced and circulated by a not-for-profit organization must begin with the recognition that they operate with very limited financial resources. This is certainly the case for FFT. In fact, it is an organization that takes the principled position of not accepting any money from governments "so as to remain completely impartial and independent" and, instead, relies on donations from individuals for nearly three quarters of its funding. The reality of limited resources led FFT to partner with leading international advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather, which produced the Torturer ad campaign for them on a pro-bono basis. This type of partnership reflects a larger pattern whereby some of the world's most powerful advertising agencies are teaming up with not-for-profit organizations. These partnerships are framed as a "win-win" situation because the non-profits get professional marketing services that they would otherwise not be able to afford and, in turn, the advertising agency promotes itself as practicing good "corporate citizenship" (Cotten, Lasprogata, 2012).

Compounding the challenges posed by their limited resources, not-for-profit organizations that variously serve people in distress must also compete with one another against a background of compassion fatigue which requires ongoing innovation in their marketing strategies. At the time of its launch, FFT Chief Executive Keith Best stated: "It is hard not to become desensitised to the stream of stories and images of conflict and suffering we all receive through the news everyday" (sic) (in Weakley, 2012). As Best's statement suggests, the competitive climate and the need to stand apart from other not-for-profits were factors in the decision to implement the Advertising Torture campaign.

FFT's campaign did indeed distinguish itself from more conventional approaches to awareness raising insofar as it brazenly transgressed the more benign victim-focussed campaigns, which often rely on the testimonies of pain and suffering and/or the gratitude of the people they serve. Instead, these were "hard-hitting" ads that depicted vile acts in discomforting detail. This, too, follows a larger trend of attempting to "reach consumers in an increasingly saturated commercial environment" (Parry, Jones, Stern, & Robinson, 2013, p. 113). Referred to as shock-advertising or "shockvertising" by some, such tactics seek to "surprise an audience by deliberately violating norms for societal values" (Ibid.). Being a spoof, the ad created a type of "hyper reality" that caught readers off guard (Chouliariki 2013, p. 67). This can be seen in the detail of the salary. Such details trick viewers into believing the authenticity of the ad and then puzzling over its meaning before realizing that it is not real. The jarring incongruity is presumably what sparks contemplation and provokes critical reflection in the viewers. People take notice. By simply

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appearing as another typical and non-threatening ad in the Careers section, it generated an incongruity between what the ads appeared to be and what they really were (Wettergren, 2005, 103).

While, as Poyner (2012) pointed out, the unlikely placement of the ads in the career section was "far more effective than the routine, all-too-ignorable device of distributing charity leaflets in magazines" such shock and spoof approaches are not without risk. As marketing experts warn, they must be carefully balanced because of their potential to alienate and offend would-be donors (Mittleman and Neilson, 2011). Writing about ads circulated by *Adbusters*, Wettergren (2004) shows instances where the anger and disgust that viewers are meant to direct at the issue in question are instead directed at the organization if they are perceived to take it too far.

The spoof and therefore somewhat playful form of the campaign also raises concerns about the banalization and sanctioning of torture. Focusing on how the U.S. practice of torture has been mediated in American culture in recent years, Marita Sturken (2011) has argued that various strategies of domestication, trivialization, kitschification, and irony have produced a level of comfort about torture for the public. One example she offers focuses on how joking has been a key feature of the mediation of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs. She reminds us that US Army reserve prison guard Lynndie England, who became famous for a pose in which she points her finger toward the genitalia of a naked Iraqi prisoner, inspired a website where people post photos of themselves "doing a Lynndie" pose (p. 434). Sturken urges us to ask: "What are the mediating forms through which torture is made palatable to the American public, and how do modes of proximity and distance, of compassion and indifference/interestedness factor in them?" (p. 428).

While relying on deeply racial knowledge in terms of colonial and imperial geopolitics which attributes violence to particular spaces, the ads also cunningly safeguard against accusations of blatant racism by creating the possibility for an alternative interpretation of their self/other depictions. In fact, an important feature of the ads is that they were entirely text-based and contained no images. As a result, they not only managed to circumvent accusations of directly perpetuating voyeurism, they also allowed for some racial ambiguity. That is, although the ads explicitly locate torture and human rights abuses in the Global South, the people being solicited for the work are left somewhat vague and open to interpretation. The torturer ad could therefore be understood to be positioning the typical British newspaper reader (i.e. the person like "us") who is perusing the paper for employment opportunities as a potential torturer, thereby "unsettling familiar distinctions between good and evil" (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 200).

This racial ambiguity of the ads reflects what Chouliaraki (2013) has identified as a "post-humanitarian" market trend, one that has shifted the relationship between Western donors and their largely non-Western recipients of care. This trend has also impacted the aesthetics and moralities around imaginings of suffering. Chouliaraki explains that, given the widespread critiques of how certain realist and "negative" types of appeals exploit and commodify suffering by positioning others as the powerless objects of pity by the West, such images are now used infrequently. The more "positive" and hopeful portrayals that have emerged in response have also been criticized for their "feel good" affects, Chouliaraki explains; while they may assign more agency and self-determination to others than their earlier counterparts, they too contribute to "the euphemistic concealment of systemic power relations" (pp. 55-56, 63). In response to these critiques, humanitarian appeals are increasingly developing alternative and more creative ways to communicate their message by engaging consumers at an intellectual level rather than simply at an emotional one to "remind us that we are now confronted not with the facts of suffering but with acts of representation (p. 69). Indeed, by leaving open to interpretation who the torturers *could be* while simultaneously invoking the racialized understandings of the Global South as violent and barbaric, FFT's campaign is exemplary of the post-humanitarian sensibility insofar as it challenges skeptical and market-savvy viewers to contemplate the ways in which the issue of torture is being represented to them. As Chouliaraki observes, the post-humanitarian style does not attempt to resolve the paradoxes of appeals but, in contrast, renders "these paradoxes the very object of our contemplation and reflection" (p.65).

The ambiguity in the ads and the different interpretations they allow for is also what sparks debate and raises the question of the productive uses of controversy in humanitarian campaigns. It has been argued that, since any attempt to render visible human suffering is generally recognised as an "inherently unstable practice", some humanitarian organizations campaign "more with the aim of using the critical reaction to their work as a means to agitate for human

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rights than with an investment in the understanding that publics will readily sympathize with a humanitarian point of view" (Wilkinson, 2013, p.263). This suggests that it is very possible that in launching the campaign the organization made a conscious effort to provoke controversy, rather than to avoid it.

Humanitarian anti-torture campaigns are often fraught with controversy. In recent years several organizations have had to defend, apologize for, and/or retract the ads they ran. One was a campaign for Amnesty International (AI) which made the news just prior to the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games. It was comprised of staged photographs showing violent scenes of torture against the background of Olympic activities and settings. One of its disturbing images showed a man, hands tied behind his back, having his head forcibly plunged into an Olympic swimming pool by two men dressed in black, presumably Chinese state authorities. The campaign slogan was: "After the Olympic Games, the fight for human rights must go on" (Spencer 2008). The timing and Olympics thematic of this campaign was designed to draw attention to China's disregard for human rights precisely when the country was determined to enhance its political image in public relations. Although in the end AI executives decided not to use the ads because they were "too violent", the images nevertheless circulated widely when the firm that produced the photos entered them for an advertising competition and won.

More recently, the Belgian branch of AI ran a series of ads showing the badly beaten-up faces of well-known public figures ranging from the Dalai Lama to fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld who are making uncharacteristic statements – presumably under duress – with the caption "Torture a man and he will tell you anything." In one example, the Dalai Lama – who is known for his Buddhist value of non-materialism – is stating: "A man who does not own a *Rolex* by the time he is 50 years old has wasted his life". In another example, musician Iggy Pop is stating "The future of rock 'n' roll is Justin Bieber." The idea behind these tongue-in-cheek ads was to show the absurdity of these figures willingly making such statements. Not surprisingly, the launch of this campaign was met with a lot of media attention not because of its content, but because AI had reportedly neglected to obtain Iggy Pop's permission to use his image, and subsequently had to issue an apology to him in an official announcement on their website. These examples not only illustrate the lengths to which marketing campaigns must go to draw attention to various causes in novel ways, but also that somehow crossing the line, or even appearing to, can generate a lot of press for not-for-profit organizations. Indeed, whether it is the unauthorized use of celebrities' faces or graphic displays of violence that go too far, the controversies sparked by these campaigns are not necessarily undesirable because they end up getting more publicity than the campaign would have on its own.

A competitive not-for-profit climate along with emergent humanitarian marketing trends are but some of the contextual factors that were likely weighed and resulted in FFT executives' decision to run the campaign, in spite – or perhaps because of – the risks it took. Indeed, a complex convergence of economic, historical, political and cultural factors helps to explain some of the reasoning behind the production and circulation of the Advertising Torture campaign.

## Provocation at all costs?

Those who used Twitter to comment favorably on the Advertising Torture ads focused on their design and indicated that were impressed by the fact that they were initially hoodwinked by them (Storify.com, 2012). One posting described the Torturer ad as "harrowing but effective". Another wrote: "To start with I was horrified; then very impressed. Spot on". Others referred to it as "creative," "clever" and "genius" and thanked the organization for "sticking your necks out & inspiring some controversy". These comments show that the campaign did succeed at the level of grabbing attention. With respect to the campaign's ambiguity around who is being recruited for the torturer job and its ability to provoke thought by blurring the familiar distinctions between good and evil, the on-line responses reveal that if British readers did think that they were being positioned as potential torturers, the spoof nature of the campaign allowed them to quickly dismiss the idea as absurd. For example, in response to Knowles' blog for *The Telegraph* a comment by user *leroy\_jenkins* (2012) stated the following:

Damn it why did it have to be a spoof, I thought that could be a career change! I mean whats (sic) not to like, go to exotc (sic) locales, meet new people, run your own team and gain management experience.... Damn it all sounded so perfect.

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Another user with the handle *pragmatist* wrote: "The pay scale seems very low for a senior torturer. Is job satisfaction being relied on to counter this?" The tone of these responses suggest that the spoof form of the ads inadvertently invited facetiousness and validates Sturken's concern about the current trivialization and normalization of torture.

The favorable and flippant responses the campaign provoked notwithstanding, it is its ability to illicit compassion for torture survivors that matters. Did it succeed in this respect? The comments made in response to Knowles' posting offer some clues. It is important to recall that by re-posting the torturer ad along with his sympathetic views on his *Telegraph* blog, Knowles was likely trying to reach a broader readership that might be swayed to support FFT; his response was therefore exemplary of what the campaign was aiming for. Indeed, Knowles used the torturer ad to try to solicit readers' compassion by reminding them that asylum seekers in the UK are often "victims of people who do exactly this 'job'". He also concluded his piece with the statement: "The victims of torture, wherever they end up, need support – and when they arrive in Britain, we owe them a duty of care."

Instead of compassionate responses, however, Knowles' posting mainly invited a flurry of hostile responses towards the organization and towards victims of torture. From April 30 (when Knowles' article first appeared) to May 2, 2012 (when the comments section for the thread were closed; a period of three days), 133 comments were posted on the blog. Of these 92 strongly disagreed with Knowles. These comments spanned a continuum of discursive racism, with subtle articulations on one end and overt, far right xenophobic on the other (Jiwani and Richardson, 2011). On the subtle end were reason-toned points about limited resources that are better spent on British citizens, such as a comment by user *alegitbritcit* (2012): "we have our own wounded to treat and we are not doing to (sic) well on that matter". Others agreed that while "true" victims of torture should be helped, they are a very small minority and that most asylum and refugee claimants were exploiting and manipulating the kindness and generosity of the British people. This can be seen in the comment of someone with the handle *mincepieking*:

Nobody could properly deny help to genuine asylum seekers, but far too many asylum seekers are simply economic migrants who come here to take advantage of the UK's far generous welfare benefits system.

The majority of comments in response to Knowles' piece, however, were unrestrained and overtly attributed qualities and characteristics ranging from brutality, criminality, violence, and barbarism to the other, especially Muslims and Arabs. Commenters were particularly incensed by Knowles' point about a "duty of care". For example user *jinglebalix* wrote:

'Duty of care'? 'Many victims'? How many? How many 'asylum seekers' claims are genuine would you say? How many are made up? How many 'asylum seekers' just fancy the free money, free housing, free medical care, free education, free travel, free food and free society? How many fancy all those benefits, but don't fancy putting anything back – into either society or the coffers? ...How many even fancy tearing down the whole generous system and trampling on the Christian values that prevail in order to construct a 'barbaric' system more in keeping with the one they 'ran away' from in the first place?

Certainly, it is significant that within the British press, the *Telegraph* newspaper and its readership are known for their right-of-centre political views (Tulloch, 2013) [1]. Recognizing that the comments will reflect more conservative political orientations, they nevertheless offer some insights on the less favorable reactions that the campaign engendered. In fact, the FFT campaign not only failed to elicit compassion for these readers, it provided a platform for vitriolic racist and xenophobic attacks against the victims of torture that the organization serves.

One certainly cannot evaluate the overall perception of a campaign based on a number of online comments. The ways in which the campaign was received by some members of the public nevertheless indicate the risks FFT took in circulating this appeal may have been miscalculated.

If the point of the campaign was to provoke controversy over the representations it used, this tactic failed. Although the campaign did compel some (like Hutnyk) to post comments challenging the assumptions underpinning the ads, these were few and far between, compared to the ones condemning FFT's work. Hutnyk's response to the campaign suggested that, given the longstanding racialized discourses of violence and barbarism, organizations like FFT have

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a particular obligation to disrupt "common sense" understandings about the other and use careful representations in their awareness-raising efforts. In other words, rather than re-animate racial discourses of torture, FFT ought to have disseminated a campaign that attempted to disrupt them. This would entail making known the fact that torture and empire are implicated. Drawing on Chouliaraki's (2013) work, one can see that what is missing in the campaign is the framing of torture in terms of a vocabulary of justice that links up with the question of how current global forms of governance perpetuate various forms of political violence around the world. A more responsible and accurate representation of torture, then, would have addressed the historical, economic, and military threats which factor into the violence and conflict in the specific regions that were invoked.

## The (Mis) Calculation of Risks

On the one hand, the grim fiscal realities faced by not-for-profits, along with the competitive climates and changing market driven humanitarian sensibilities help to explain why an organization like FFT would choose to circulate an unconventional campaign in order to gain publicity. On the other hand, one has to be wary of the pragmatic notion that all that matters is to get the message out there. The representations used in campaigns are particularly important to examine, because they are explicitly political insofar as they "shape public values" (Harrison, 2013, p. 529). Indeed, we ought to consider how the normative frameworks that often underlie human rights campaigns "delimit the possible forms of public response to violence and injustice" (Hesford, 2011, p.2). By highlighting the counterproductive and contradictory effects of FFT's well-intentioned campaign, I have shown that despite its clever and unconventional form and its ability to capture the public's attention, it inadvertently worked to reproduce racialized knowledge and thereby harmed rather than helped the clients the organization serves.

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## Notes

[1] Although it would have been interesting to compare the comments in more left-leaning or politically neutral papers like *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, those papers did not provide a forum for comments. It is also important to note that the comments section of discussion boards in the Telegraph are moderated. According the paper, they "moderate to help encourage free, open and civil discussion". One of the criteria for the comments they remove is "Racist, sexist and homophobic material and comments likely to incite religious hatred."

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Gada Mahrouse is Associate Professor at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Concordia University, where she teaches and researches in the areas of critical race studies, cultural studies, transnational feminist and post/de-colonial theories. Her book, entitled *Conflicted Commitments: Race, Privilege and Power in Transnational Solidarity Activism*, focuses on the challenges of solidarity across asymmetrical power relations (McGill Queens University Press, 2014).