Rhetorical Analysis of Invisible Children

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Figure 1. *Poster promoting Invisible Children's "Kony 2012" video*

In this essay, I will analyze the website of a viral charity group called Invisible Children. I first heard of their movement because of a controversy in 2012. Invisible Children produced a video called "Kony 2012" where they exposed the evil actions of African warlord Joseph Kony and made a plan for his capture (see Figure 1). This was named the most viral video ever by *TIME* in 2013. However, the video received a lot of backlash and was dubbed "slacktivism," as the explanation of the situation and plan were ignorant to the actual events taking place. To top this off, the director of the video ended up hospitalized for a psychotic breakdown when he was found vandalizing cars naked on a street corner in San Diego. Despite this unfortunate past, Invisible Children is still active and pulling 2.4 million Facebook followers today. They are one of the premier examples of internet activism.

BY THE NUMBERS

10,093
security incidents reported on the Crisis Tracker
to date

75
conflict analysis reports produced
and distributed

2,299
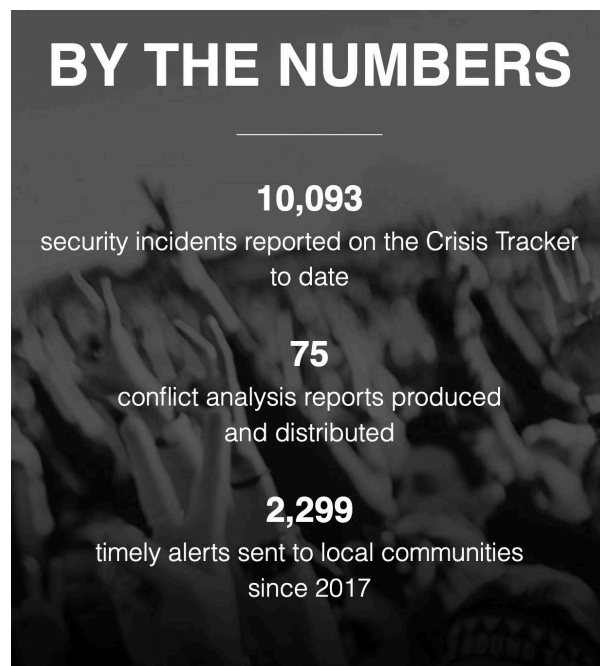timely alerts sent to local communities
since 2017

Figure 2. *Invisible children website displays statistics of what their movement has accomplished*

The Ethos of the Invisible Children website is mostly built on their work of rebuilding and protecting African communities. They call attention to the fact that they've already done a lot of work in Africa by showcasing the number of people who have actually been saved by their program (see Figure 2). In each subsection of their website, there is a list of statistics that showcase the value their work has. This proves that they are already established in the world of social activism. They also attempt to show this visually by displaying many pictures of their workers posed by happy African villagers. This shows that they are actually physically involved as well as internet activists.

Figure 3. *Display of happy volunteers on the Invisible Children home page*

An organization like this with a spotted past is already being put under a microscope when it comes to ethos. I've noticed that a lot of their rhetoric is trying to distance themselves from the

viral controversy that happened in 2012. There are sentences introducing sections of the website

that tend to separate these two eras into different entities. For example, sentences like, "While a

lot has changed in ten years, our commitment to justice and peace in Central Africa remains,"

(see Figure 3) or "We do not fail when we change course. Growth is an indicator of health and

aliveness." They seem to focus a lot on growth. This can be seen as relevant to their mission in

Africa, however they're attempting to rebuild their trust with their audience. Anyone who knows

their history will see their statements of growth as an apology or dismissal of what occurred in
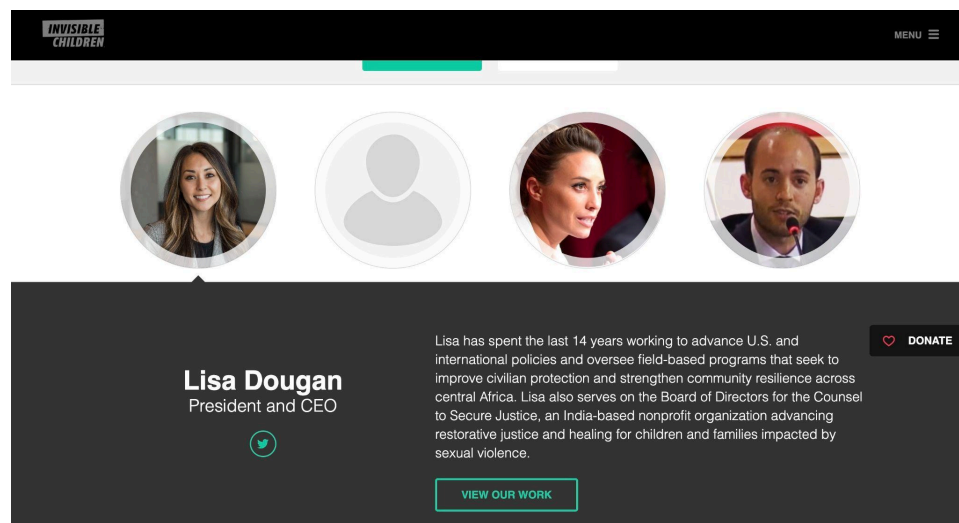
2012.

Figure 4. *Lisa Dougan showcases her qualifications*

The "Our Team" section of the website is the most blatant ethos appeal. It lists each of the board

members that are in charge of the organization and then proceeds to list qualities that qualify

them for this type of work. For example, the CEO, Lisa Dougan, has a description of her

extensive fieldwork when it comes to foreign crisis management (see Figure 4). They also have a

doctor on their board, which they make known by presenting her research. This is meant to

assure the viewer that the board knows what they're doing when it comes to this type of work.

One thing they're missing is three of the board member's biographies, which may steer potential

donors away. Also, the board's biographies that do appear are simply unimpressive. Someone in

charge of a viral movement such as this should have a bit more experience or influence in foreign

policy. I also dislike the fact that they label Dougan as a CEO. It makes their charity sound more

like a business.

For almost two decades, Kony's fighters abducted more than 60,000 children, killed tens of thousands of civilians, and caused the displacement of more than two million people in northern Uganda. After moving from Uganda into central Africa, the LRA continued to terrorize communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and South Sudan. Here is just a glimpse at the LRA's impact since 2008:

2,540
ATTACKS

8,374
ABDUCTED

3,175
KILLED

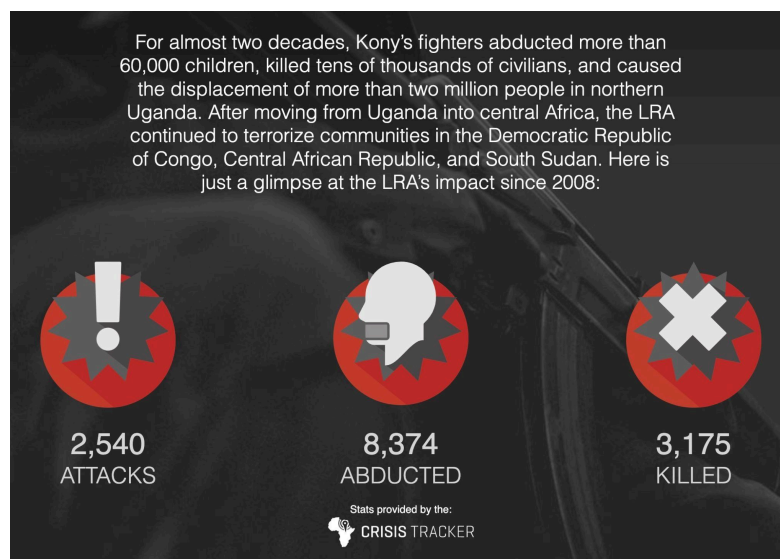Stats provided by the:
CRISIS TRACKER

Figure 5. *Statistics on attacks in Africa*

Their pathos appeals deal with the display of unjust suffering. Although they have much

evidence of change in Africa, they still post statistics about the children and civilians being

captured or murdered. A section of the website called "The Challenge" states, "For almost two

decades, Kony's fighters abducted more than 60,000 children, killed tens of thousands of

civilians, and caused the displacement of more than two million people in northern Uganda."

This shows the viewer that what they're fighting is unjust. They use harsh words like kill, attack,

abduct, exploit, trauma, and fear (see Figure 5). These are all words that evoke unwanted

feelings and make the viewer sympathetic towards the tens of thousands of people that are experiencing this daily. They also make sure it is known that children are being victimized, as it is hardwired in human brains to want to do everything possible to protect a child. Ultimately, it draws righteous humans into the fight.

They also post calls to action often around their web page as a pathos appeal. spotted on the bottom of the "Our Values" section and reads, "you have a role to play." This actively gets the righteous human more involved in the process. They have already seen the wrongdoings and evil taking place, now they know they have a chance to make a difference. Similar phrases are at the bottom of almost every page, reminding the user that they should help. However, this only comes in the form of donating money. They use hyperbolic phrases like, "peace is possible, with your help," and "we can save lives" to stir the emotion of the viewer. They will then believe their contribution is special and more than just money, but in reality they are only helping monetarily.
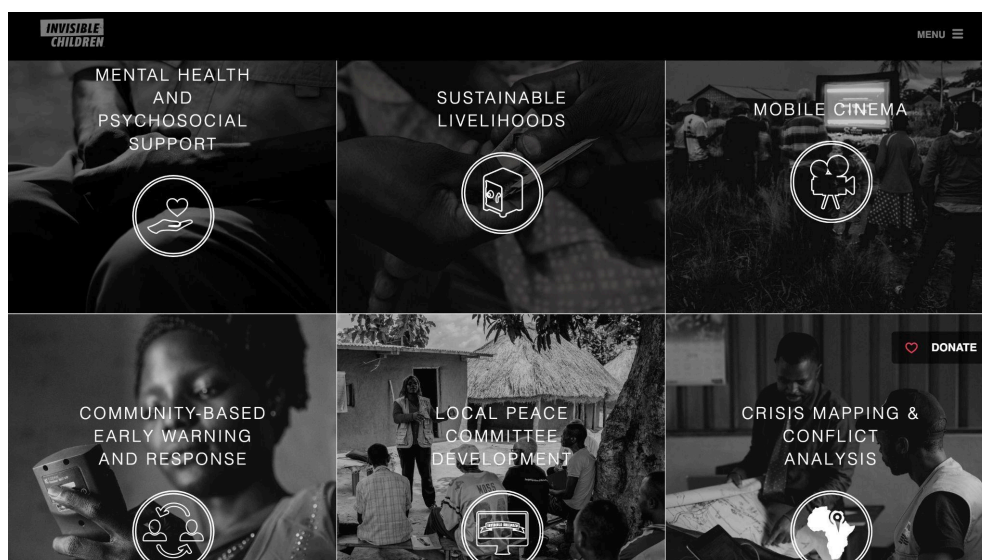

Figure 6. *The "Our Work" section of the website*

Their logos appeal is mostly done with a display of statistics. The "Our Work" section of the website contains multiple subsections (see Figure 6). These include categories such as mental health, sustainable living, crisis mapping, early response, etc. Each displays evidence of the effect they are having on the villages of Africa. A viewer will come into the site and think, "okay this is all great, but why am I donating my money and what does it actually do?" The website makes sure the viewer can fill in these enthymematic gaps by displaying exactly what their money is going towards and statistically how it is affecting the people in need. All of the subsections in "Our Work" are organized so that someone who cares about a specific piece of their impact can find that and follow the statistics. For example, if one is more interested in crisis mapping, they can view the statistic for that specific discipline. However, if one is interested in the rehabilitation project, they can go to that subsection and see their impact there. This way, a volunteer can logically know that their donations are actually being used to help the Africans in need.

Figure 7. *Section of the website titled "The Challenge"*

The first part of Hermagoras' stasis theory of what to look for in a piece of rhetoric is the facts or conjecture. Invisible children puts this section just under the home button on their web pages side menu, showing its importance. They name this section "The Challenge," but it is really just the facts. The top of this page states, "safety is everything." This is the first eye-catching fact (see Figure 7). Many people take safety for granted, but have been in unsafe situations and remember what it's like to be uncomfortable. Behind this resides an image of a man holding a gun. Already, the reader can gather that someone's safety is in danger because of gun violence, so they know that there is a problem. This thought is confirmed when the next part of the section states, "Neglected communities in places like Central Africa live with the daily threat of violence from multiple armed groups." They also add that people are not the only beings at risk, and these groups also poach animals to fund their terrorism, which incites emotion in people who care for wildlife. They double down on these statements with horrible recent statistics, showing that this is still a problem in Central Africa. However, they wrap up this section with a paragraph about their mission. They state, "It is possible for families in Central Africa to live free from violence and exploitation." This shows the viewer that despite the hopelessness of the situation, something can still be done to accomplish peace.

The definition of this issue is not covered in their website because to any sympathetic human being it is essentially an enthymeme. Their argument is: "someone is killing a lot of people and animals in Africa so you should help." They skip the logical step that killing people is not something any human should condone. However, this also leaves a blank space in someone's mind who isn't trying to become involved in foreign affairs. There is still a lingering question of, "well if this is happening in Africa and not my country then why should I care?" Invisible

Children is relying mostly on their pathos appeal to make someone emotional about the lives lost or unjustified bullying of a large number of people. I find this ineffective because they really have no other reason to be doing this other than creating a safe community for people that the donor has never met. It is mostly geared towards humanitarians in this way.

This also plays into the third stasis which is the seriousness of the issue, specifically whom might it affect. The viewer knows that the issues presented are affecting the people of Central Africa, but that may not be important to them. There are, of course, people that believe all of humanity should live in a safe and prosperous environment. However, in capitalist America, we tend to disregard the wellbeing of the peoples of other countries frequently, especially Africa and the Middle East. We give money and food, but the average American is not too concerned about foreign troubles that don't involve themselves. What they should do, instead of assuming the seriousness of the issue will speak for itself, is find a scenario in which the situation affected the western world. This usually works in getting the people with the real money fed up. How it stands now is that the issue affects the Central African villages and will continue to do so until they get enough security to track and ward off attackers.

We work to raise general awareness of mental health, symptoms of trauma, and positive coping methods through radio programs, door-to-door campaigns, and group training sessions.

Training Community Counselors

We train local volunteers to provide basic mental health support that does not require specialist intervention and to refer those experiencing more severe symptoms of trauma to Invisible Children psychologists and other specialists. Volunteers are equipped with tools for providing Psychological First Aid, peer support, and basic stress management strategies.

Providing One-on-One Trauma Counseling

Trained Invisible Children psychologists partner with local health centers, hospitals, and civil society to provide specialized care to people experiencing severe symptoms of trauma.

Self Reporting from Communities

We collect data on intercommunal violence from a variety of sources, primarily local partners and affected communities themselves. This allows for more timely and accurate data collection in isolated areas. It also ensures that affected communities themselves are empowered to tell their own stories, identify sources of violent conflict, and develop solutions.

Missing Persons Database and Returnee Reunification

Invisible Children maintains one of the only databases of missing persons in this region who have been abducted by armed groups and have not returned from captivity. This is an important tool for understanding the impact of armed groups on local communities. This database also supports our work to reunite former child soldiers and other armed group escapees with their families.

Invisible Children's conflict mapping and analysis covers the border region between eastern Central African Republic (CAR), northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and South Sudan.

Figure 8. *Plan of action on training therapists*

Figure 9. *Plan of action on reporting*

The final stasis they display is their plan of action. Their plan of action varies depending on the subsection that the viewer chooses to explore. For example, if one is to look in the mental health subsection, their plan is to train therapists to provide counseling to those affected by the chaos (see Figure 8). If one is to look in the crisis mapping section, they will see that they are having communities report their attacks and create a missing persons database (see Figure 9). It is also important to look into who is backing this project, which is the CEO Lisa Dougan. Her ethos is backed up by the fact that she has 14 years of experience in the field of protecting communities from violence. She may not be the authority that people are looking for when it comes to protecting villages from violence. Most viewers would be looking for someone with a little more political pull when it comes to foreign affairs, and not just a human rights businesswoman.

Overall, the Invisible Children website is working towards a rhetorical representation that works in riling up the people emotionally to donate to their cause. Their largest issue, that has been apparent in their past as well, is ethos. Personally, I would not donate to their website because I have doubts in their leadership. In that respect, they still have a ways to go in representing themselves persuasively.

Works Cited

About. Invisible Children. (2017, February 14). Retrieved April 14, 2023, from

https://invisiblechildren.com/