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### “Kony 2012”-- A Successful Awareness Campaign

In 1987 Joseph Kony formed the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and launched an insurgency against the Ugandan government. Kony and the LRA soon gained notoriety for their brutality and violence. LRA fighters attacked villages, killing adults and kidnapping children. Boys were forced to fight for the Lord's Resistance Army and girls were raped. The conflict gained the attention of media and journalists throughout the world and humanitarian organizations soon expressed concern. However, despite the many war crimes and human rights violations committed by Kony and the LRA, most people in countries other than Uganda were unaware of the conflict. All that changed with the Internet release of the video, “Kony 2012,” by the United States based charity Invisible Children. “Kony 2012,” narrated by filmmaker Jason Russell, told the story of the LRA's brutality against children. Russell asked viewers to take action to bring about the arrest of Kony by the end of 2012. The half-hour video went viral. As of January 2013, it had over 96 million views (Invisible Children).

Even though the video was clearly popular and its message reached many people worldwide, critics argued that “Kony 2012” was inherently flawed and presented a simplistic, stereotyped, and ethnocentric view of the African conflict, instead of encouraging viewers to learn more. Critics also argued that the film promoted a form of political activism for the truly lazy where viewers were given the naive idea that all they had to do was click on an icon, sign a petition, or post a sign to bring a warlord to justice. However, I argue that the film was a success in raising awareness about an important conflict. The same factors that made the “Kony 2012” video a huge success among its target audience of American youth with limited interest in politics also created the video's failures and controversies. The film's simplifications and focus on its American narrator allowed the filmmakers to connect with their American and Western European target audiences. While the film's request that viewers share the video, display posters, and contact government officials seems very

simple, and perhaps naïve, taking these actions did create worldwide awareness of Kony and his brutal army and did build a community of activists.

Prior media coverage of the conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan government may have been more complete and realistic in describing the complexities of the war, but this coverage did not impact an audience outside of a small, politically informed group. The “Kony 2012” video presents a simplistic view of the conflict in Uganda that ignores many of the war's political and diplomatic complexities, and perhaps reinforces stereotypical views of Africa. But a simple message is sometimes more clear and effective than a complex one. The video used one child, Jacob, to represent the story of all the children victimized, or living in fear of the LRA. While Jacob's experience might not be representative of all the LRA's victims, it is easier for us to relate to the story of one individual. Jacob's story appeals to our emotions. When he says he doesn't want to go on living if things don't change, the viewer can clearly see the need for action. Then Russell, the narrator, tells viewers how they can take action. While the actions are simple, they are actions that most people could easily do. The video does focus on an idealistic, but ultimately unsuccessful goal – the arrest of Kony by the end of 2012. Although the goal was unmet, the video is successful in making viewers aware of the LRA problem and prompting many to take some action.

I contend the video's simplifications and omissions, while flaws, were necessary for the film to be successful in raising awareness of the conflict among American youth. Although the film has a stated goal of causing the arrest of Joseph Kony, there is a clear, but not as explicitly stated goal--raising awareness of the conflict. At about 13 minutes into the video, Russell states that “It's obvious that Kony should be stopped. The problem is 99% of the planet doesn't know who he is. If they knew, Kony would have been stopped long ago.” (Invisible Children). The trade-off between providing detailed information and an uncluttered message was on the mind of the creators of the documentary and their affiliates. Speaking of Invisible Children's work on the film, Michael

Poffenberger, the executive director of Resolve, a group affiliated with Invisible Children, said "They created this initial film that took off, and they have been connecting with an audience. . . you can't present a documentary that appeals to the human rights professional crowd and also gets viewed by 30 million people . . . There's a trade-off that you have to accept and make very carefully." (Rozen). The video's simplifications allow for a variety of emotional appeals that would not be possible in a more academic treatment of the war.

The film has been accused of promoting a form "slacktivism" wherein the American audience is given a feel-good message that they have the power to take a brutal murderer and war criminal off the battlefield just by posting banners and posters that resemble the emblems of a political campaign (Bailyn). However, this aspect of the film appeals to deep emotional and psychological needs, which improves the video's effectiveness as a vehicle of awareness. While unrealistic, the focus on the capture and arrest of Kony gave viewers a seemingly easy to strive for goal. The fact that the goal was concrete and specific, the arrest of Kony, made the video more persuasive because it would be clear when the goal was achieved. This goal also allowed the formation of a movement and an associated community.

The video repeatedly tells the audience that the "Kony 2012" campaign and Invisible Children's past work are part of a powerful movement and a strong community. At 15 minutes in, the video begins to go over the history of Invisible Children's work on the issue. At 17 minutes in, the video tells viewers that hundreds of thousands are with the movement and shows members of Congress giving their support. United States House of Representatives member Susan Davis states that "These young members of the Invisible Children organization know that no child should live in fear of being abducted or killed." (Invisible Children). The video gives viewers an opportunity to join this movement, thereby appealing to their self-interest by offering them a feeling of belonging, social recognition, personal growth, the ability to take actions with social value, and accomplishment. The documentary thereby satisfied the Madison Avenue dictum that a good

advertisement should tell viewers what's in it for them.

“Kony 2012” viewers are called on to make Kony a household name by sharing the video, posting “Kony 2012” posters, stickers and yard signs. They are asked to demand that the U.S. government take action and told awareness of Kony is necessary to make government officials act on the LRA problem. The posters, T-shirts, and stickers that were a mainstay of the “Kony 2012” campaign gave it a hip and slick look and feel that appealed to the youth target audience of the campaign and helped build a sense of community. Poster posting may not have been the most effective activism and volunteerism campaign, but it was something easily done and posters did create awareness. Working on the campaign with other and sharing progress reports online did build a community.

The video does evade a thorough discussion of the severe ethical, political, practical, and legal issues involved in conducting a humanitarian intervention capable of ending the Lord's Resistance Army's reign of terror. However, this simplification was critical to the success of the film. The “Kony 2012” video portrays Kony as a crazed cult leader conducting violence at random for seemingly no reason and for no objective. It does ignore the complicated ethnic and political history that would allow such a brutal leader to appear and thrive. At about 11 minutes into the video, Russell claims that "As if Kony's crimes aren't bad enough, he is not fighting for any cause, but only to maintain his power. He is not supported by anyone..." (Invisible Children). The video ignores the multiple manifestos and pamphlets that have been produced by the LRA that detail the group's political objectives. These objectives have included multiple demands that relate to ethnic issues and calls for the formation of a religious state in Uganda (Allen 43). The beginning of this war came during political chaos that occurred in the aftermath of a 1986 revolution that ended in the overthrow of the Ugandan president. The current LRA conflict mirrors many of the same ethnic divisions as the previous Ugandan war. Kony claims to be a blood relative of Alice Auma Lakwena, a religious leader who led an armed group that opposed the new Ugandan government (Allen

25-37). Kony eventually gained support from the government of Sudan, which was later withdrawn as the LRA became notorious for brutality. The “Kony 2012” film focuses on the atrocities conducted by one individual, Joseph Kony. This narrow focus on one warlord and his crimes gives a simplistic view of the war in Uganda. But the focus on Kony, without the details of past wars and ethnic conflicts, doesn't distract the viewer or take away from the video's goals. It also gives emotion to the film's story. It shows viewers the face of pure evil and helps the creators of the documentary paint the story of the conflict as one of good versus evil, and criminal versus enforcer of the law. This focus and lack of reflection on complexities makes it quickly clear to the audience who is on the side of good and who is on the side of evil. Additionally, a film that gave full recognition to all complexities would have run the risk of being a “my eyes gloss over” film that would not appeal to anyone but the already well informed. What appeals to the political scholar will not appeal to the average Joe. Hollywood has figured out long ago that audiences like stories of good and evil, not complexity. The viewers of a Star Wars film will very quickly realize that Darth Vader and the Empire are on the side of evil, just as the viewers of “Kony 2012” will realize that the Lord's Resistance Army is on the side of evil. “Kony 2012” is, in fact, quite clear that Kony is fit to be a Hollywood villain. Starting nine minutes into the video, there is a dialogue between Russell and his son, Gavin. Russell asks Gavin to explain what his dad does for his work, even though Russell has never explained this to Gavin previously. Gavin responds by saying, “You stop the bad guys from being mean.” Russell then asks, “Who are the bad guys?” Gavin's first guess is “Star Wars people.” (Invisible Children).

The video focuses on Russell and his typical American experiences so much so that it would be difficult to tell that the film is about a conflict in Africa, just from its first five minutes. The first four to five minutes of the film tell the personal story of Russell. The film's focus on its American narrator and on Africa as a home of war and violence has led to accusations of ethnocentrism and accusations that the film reinforces stereotypes of Africa and its population. However, the focus on

the American narrator of the film allows the filmmakers to create ethos, or a reputation for the narrator, and by extension Invisible Children. It also allows the filmmakers to pull at the heartstrings of the audience. The film tells its viewers that there is a real, typically American person with a family and a story behind the charity that is asking for your time and money. This real American was even able to convince prominent congressmen from both parties to share his concern and even convinced the president to take action. This fact is emphasized in the campaign's logo, a donkey and an elephant coming together. The focus on the narrator also allowed a connection to be made to the mostly American audience by presenting the film's message through someone like them. There are many documentaries that will allow you to hear Africans tell their stories of war and violence. None of these, however, have gone viral or have been watched by 96 million viewers. One reason may be that Americans find it harder to relate to their stories. They didn't convince viewers to take the time to listen. "Kony 2012", on the other hand, presents the African conflict through the filter of an American narrator-- someone American viewers can relate to. Russell, and the youth that participate in his group, are presented as about as similar to the audience as possible. This made it more likely that the audience would see something they could relate to in the presentation of the issue and thereby be hooked into taking action.

The focus on the narrator was also used to introduce other individuals in a powerful way. Russell introduces the audience to Jacob, a Ugandan teenager living in fear of being abducted by the LRA after his brother was killed by the army. Russell makes a personal commitment to Jacob to do everything possible to bring Kony to justice. Jacob is used during the film as a personification of the wrongs that occurred. This allowed the filmmakers to employ the "Mother Teresa Effect" whereby charities and advertisers can make their message more persuasive by focusing on one helped individual. The Mother Teresa effect refers to the ability of charitable appeals that focus on the story of an individual to be more effective than appeals that focus on generalities and statistics, even though these statistical arguments may be more logically valid. Although the focus on the

narrator subjected the film to criticisms of ethnocentrism, the narrator-centric nature of the film opened the door to many effective appeals and made the film more likely to persuade its non-expert audience.

Speaking of Invisible Children and Russell's work on "Kony 2012", Cameron Hudson, former director of African Affairs on the 2005-2009 United States National Security Council, stated "If their aim is to raise awareness, they have done that in spades." (Rozen). Although "Kony 2012" has become controversial, the film could not have had the success that it did while fulfilling the desires of its critics. The same factors that made the "Kony 2012" video a huge success also created the film's failures. Ethnocentric or not, the focus on the film's narrator and his American life allows the film to better connect with its audience, establish credibility, and springboard to emotional appeals. Ignoring the greater political context of the war, and LRA leaders other than Kony, allowed the filmmakers to paint a simple good versus evil story that would energize the audience and spark them to action. The focus on Kony and his crimes furthermore provided the audience with a simple, easily stated goal to strive for-- his arrest. Finally, the simplicity of the story meant that the message didn't get lost in detail. It wasn't just another my-eyes-glaze-over documentary about Africa. The campaign of posters and stickers promoted in the video was criticized for promoting "slacktivism", but it too was critical to the success of the film. It did give people something they could easily do, a way to participate, and take action. It also created a community that appealed to viewers' need for belonging and community. While these actions haven't secured Kony's arrest, they have definitely created awareness of the LRA problem. Ultimately, this is the film's greatest success. The millions that watched the video became aware of this serious conflict. They took action to make others aware and called on the U.S. government to take action. Additionally, they may have exposed millions who never watched the documentary to its message. Being aware of a problem is the first step in solving it and that is why "Kony 2012" is successful, despite its many flaws.

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