Kony 2012 and the Mediatization of Child Soldiers

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Although art has been engaging and inspiring audiences throughout history, new information and communication technologies have opened up a whole new set of opportunities for media to serve as an agent for social change. Social justice campaigns are utilizing a broad array of new media strategies to engage the public, including online distribution, podcasts, and social networking sites. Many are combining these new technologies with traditional movement strategies such as rallies, protests, and lobbying efforts, creating a new form of civic engagement about which little is known. The new forms of media that are emerging can involve the public as both consumer and producer and have the ability to engage individuals, communities, and societies at speeds and on scales that were previously impossible.

Mediatization refers to a sociocultural process of media influencing and being influenced by the individuals, communities, and systems in which they are embedded. Swedish media researcher Kent Asp is cited as the first to speak of this concept, defining it as a process in which "a political system to a high degree is influenced by and adjusted to the demands of the mass media in their coverage of politics." Since that time, the definition has broadened to include not only media coverage of politics, but also the increasingly inter-woven nature of media and society at large. Thus, according to Stig Hjarvard, "a theory of mediatization has to be able to describe overall developmental trends in society across different contexts and, by means of concrete analysis, demonstrate the impacts of media on various institutions and spheres of human activity."

The concept of social media has attracted a lot of the attention with regard to technology's potential for catalyzing social change. Network platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook have indeed increased the speed and scale of media circulation to levels previously unknown. From the 2008 Obama campaign to the Arab Spring to Occupy Wallstreet, social media platforms have become a fertile ground for movement development, especially with the much-coveted youth demographic.

The recent *Kony 2012* video released by the group Invisible Children (IC) is emblematic of this change and for many people represents this potential. *Kony 2012* is a thirty-minute film focused on Joseph Kony and his use of child soldiers in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) that amassed one hundred million views in six days, speaking to a whole new dimension in terms of speed and scale of communication. Much analysis has focused on Invisible Children's use of Twitter and other forms of social media in creating the viral success of this film. However, our own analysis finds that the success of *Kony 2012* also rests on much more familiar and conventional forms of political activity. While social media are key ingredients and have received much of the attention, a number of other factors help us consider the success of this particular phenomenon. Following is an analysis of four such factors, drawn from past research combined with empirical data collected over the past year on Invisible Children, that have contributed to its relative success in raising awareness and engagement for the issue of child soldiers among the public.

First, *Kony 2012* came from a seed that had been planted nearly a decade earlier and benefited from extensive pre-existing, place-based, and virtual networks reaching some five hundred thousand people. Many marveled at the ability of this organization to appear "out of nowhere" and bring such attention to this issue, but they had been slowly building a base of supporters since the release of their first film in 2004.

Invisible Children first screened their film, *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut,* in 2004 and established a non-profit organization the next year to support both the film and its intended goal of raising awareness about and ending LRA violence. A core component of their outreach model is the bi-annual tour, in which teams of four "roadies" travel for two to three months in carefully designated regions hosting community screenings. Each tour corresponds with a specific film and a specific event or campaign to engage viewers. *Kony 2012* was the eleventh such film they created. IC had also created a host of opportunities for viewers to get involved, including joining social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Vimeo, as well as joining clubs and groups at their schools and places of worship. This on-the-ground organizing encouraged people to move from affect to action and created infrastructure and networks that were not just online (virtual) and social (informal), but also within local communities (place-based) and existing organizations (formal).

As a result, a high level of social involvement was found in a survey we analyzed of two thousand one hundred and seventy-three Invisible Children participants that was conducted six months prior to the *Kony 2012* release. Over ninety percent reported speaking with others or posting about IC on the Internet, including taking to friends or family, posting on Facebook, tweeting, or sharing on a blog or website. In addition, over half also reported being

involved with IC through a formal organization, such as their school or place of worship. An analysis by SocialFlow, a media optimization software company, revealed a core group of place-based communities in which initial clusters of twitter activity helped spread the video significantly. The largest clusters identified included Birmingham, Pittsburgh, Oklahoma City, and Noblesville (Indiana), leading them to suggest that "this movement did not emerge from the big cities, but rather small-medium sized cities across the United States." These clusters of pre-existing support were vital to the spread of the *Kony 2012* film. "When Invisible Children wanted to promote this video, deploying the grass-roots support of these groups was essential."

These supporters also developed a set of skills and competencies based on this engagement. Survey participants reported increases in communication, organizational, and leadership skills. Reported communication skills included an increased ability to communicate both informally with peers and in more formal settings, such as public speaking, as well as increased skills in listening to and working with others and fostering community. They also reported gains in specific organization skills, such as event planning, fundraising, and problem solving, as well as leadership skills, including taking initiative, increasing self-confidence, and standing up for what they believe in. Specific responses such as "it made me my own person, and gave me confidence to believe I can change things in this world" and it "improved my ability to take initiative, voice what I believe in, confront people about social issues, and speak for those who don't have a voice" suggest that IC did not just leverage existing capacity but also worked to develop it actively through its programming.

Second, *Kony 2012* and all of their previous films targeted a very specific audience. Although supporters come from all ages and walks of life, IC has intentionally focused on youth from its inception. They report a dual mission to "stop the LRA violence and support the war-affected communities in East and Central Africa [and to] empower young people to 'do more than just watch,' to take steps towards ending injustice." Survey results indicate the majority of supporters are quite young, with over eighty-eight percent of respondents under twenty-six years old.

Through bi-annual tours focused largely on schools, significant social media presence, popular musical artist partnerships, national events, and appearances on national television shows, IC conducts a wide array of outreach that targets youth. Approximately half of IC's screenings each tour are presented to school groups including middle school, high school, college, and university level. Survey data revealed that the most frequent source of exposure to IC was through such screenings. Over a third of respondents reported learning about IC through a screening at their school, place of worship, or community organization. In addition to screenings from IC tours, many reported IC films and content integrated into course curriculum, ranging from

sociology to "current issues" to African-American and Latin-America history classes, contributed to how they learned about IC.

IC also has intentionally targeted and worked with celebrities and opinion leaders who are likely to appeal to youth. The organization has a band relations office that works directly with musicians to coordinate their campaign efforts with the bands' tours, record releases, and even video production. They also work to gain exposure through popular television shows, like *Veronica Mars*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *Oprah*. Survey results indicate that this has indeed been effective, with many participants reporting exposure to IC through television shows as well as music bands such as Fall Out Boy, Thrice, and Brett Dennen. Responses include seeing "A photograph of Kristen Bell wearing an IC shirt on Google" or "Fall Out Boy's music video I'm Like a Lawyer" or receiving "a copy of Rough Cut at a Third Day concert in New York City."

Branding is another feature of IC that is not associated with many other documentary films or child soldier nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). They sell films, apparel, bags, bracelets, stickers, pins, and "action kits" for their various events, through their website, at screenings, and/or at local events, including merchandise booths at concerts. Several survey respondents mentioned wearing IC apparel, buttons, and stickers as a way to spread the message to others, and being exposed to IC through seeing this apparel on others; as one participant responded, "at work I wear my Invisible Children pin proudly and bracelets and explain to everyone." This branding facilitates identity formation for participants. It enables them to "wear" their involvement, which in turn strengthens their commitment. IC emphasizes this through many of their products. As they describe on their website, "MEND is Invisible Children's fashion brand designed to seam a personal connection between products, their creators, and you." Although many NGOs have recognizable logos and some even distribute stickers or shirts, this extensive use of branding is unique in the non-profit community.

T hird, the films that IC produces have been successful in captivating and engaging their audiences. *Kony 2012* and all of IC's previous films focus on an important subject, but they also, and equally importantly, tell a compelling story. IC's first film, *Invisible Children: the Rough Cut*, told the story of three friends—Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey, and Laren Poole—who traveled to Africa in search of firsthand experience of the troubles of third world countries. Denied entrance into Sudan, their original target subject, they stumbled upon the story of the LRA and the many children in Northern Uganda affected by the ongoing violence. The film follows their journey as they discover these "invisible children" and the viewer is invited to learn about the LRA and meets those affected along with them. Hence the story is not just about the LRA but also a journey of discovery on the part of the filmmakers.

First-person narrative is often a successful way to reduce "psychological distance" between the viewer and the subject. Liberman and Trope define psychological distance as "a subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self, here, and now" and break it down into four categories: temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical. In simple terms, information of low psychological distance is more tangible. It deals with the here and now, and is given to the person addressed with high certainty. The IC story is told in a way that makes it not just about child soldiers and not just about the three filmmakers, but about all of us. The reason they are telling the story of child soldiers so well is because it is a story about themselves as well; it is a story of Americans opening our eyes to what is going on in Africa. The filmmakers are not experts chastising us; they are our peers taking us on a journey with them.

Not only do the IC films reduce psychological distance, they manage to do something that few, if any, other films about child soldiers have done—they make us feel good. IC is careful to not tell stories just of despair and problems, but also of hope and solutions. Framing refers to the process of selecting specific details of a message and increasing their salience. It is an area where filmmakers have great control over the message they are sending.

One form of framing in film is to engage a specific emotional response. Film has many unique ways of eliciting emotions—through narrative, visual imagery as well as sound and camera editing. Not only can the story itself elicit emotion, but the film can also present scenes in artistic and meaningful ways, playing music to lighten mood or using handheld cameras to enhance suspense. Issue-based and documentary films are noted for evoking negative emotions in viewers (such as guilt, sadness, anger), but IC is notable for its use of positive emotion as well. Issues such as child soldiery cannot be sugarcoated, but engagement can be strengthened by pairing negative with positive moments. Scenes with Ugandan youth dancing to hip hop music and showing off their surroundings in a take on *MTV Cribs*, for example, serve to lighten the mood of the film and provide much-needed relief from the heaviness of the subject matter.

Entman suggests four primary functional frames in film: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. It is crucial to present, not only a compelling "problem," but an array of solutions viewers can realistically act upon. The IC films focus not just on the problems, but the solutions. They show young people ("just like you" as the subtle message) rising up and taking action. They show what has been done and what can be done. They give specific examples and specific strategies that seem to be effective as both an inspiration and a call to action. In *Invisible Children: the Rough Cut* film, for example, a scene of a young boy breaking down and crying over his deceased brother is juxtaposed with another that emphasizes the uplifting resilience of the Ugandan youth. And in *Kony 2012*, the filmmakers discuss their past successes—of successful mobilization, community

building, lobbying, and concrete action on the part of lawmakers—and then compel the viewer to get involved, laying out clear and specific steps to join them in their efforts.

Finally, Invisible Children did not just raise *awareness* about the issue of child soldiery, but they actively promoted *engagement* by identifying a specific task for the audience, or desired behavioral response, and by creating infrastructure to support the desired behavior. IC focuses each bi-annual tour around a "campaign" that provides clear and specific behaviors for the viewer. Generally, the fall campaigns focus on fundraising and the spring campaigns focus on a single event (usually held on a Saturday in late April), including Displace Me, Lobby Days events, and the campaign 25 where people were asked to not speak for twenty-five hours in honor of the twenty-five-year war and were given dog tags and notepads to communicate with others about what they were doing. IC staff, interns, and volunteers, both at their headquarters in San Diego and throughout the world, work for months preparing for each event, securing locations, speakers, and performers.

For the *Kony 2012* video, they asked viewers to assist them with a very specific goal—make Kony famous. They provided many options for the viewer to assist with this goal: first, to share the video via social networks; second, to tweet or message their favorite celebrity or policymaker; third, to buy an action kit and spread the word with t-shirts, posters, and stickers; and fourth, to join them on April 20 for their Cover the Night event.

Another key point regarding engagement for IC is the bi-directionality of communication flows between the organization and its supporters. For IC, engagement with viewers is not one-way (filmmaker to viewer), but two-way. They use their films to create a dialogue and they also provide infrastructure for ongoing conversation. For *Kony 2012*, they specifically targeted and asked their followers to contact a list of twenty "culturemakers" (including Oprah, Lady GaGa, Ryan Seacrest, Justin Bieber, and Rihanna), enabling them to message these celebrities with a single button on their website. And after the release and initial responses to the film, much of which was critical, IC kept the line of communication open and provided constant updates to supporters and critics in the form of blog posts, Facebook and Twitter updates, and responded to critiques quickly and decisively in both text and video on their website as well as countless press appearances. The organization's leadership did not evade or ignore any issue or criticism. Instead they invited dialogue and communication. Their internship and roadie program, which brings sixty-four young people to San Diego twice a year for three-month stints working for IC, also serves to empower and include young people in the development and growth of the organization.

These findings may assist in our understanding of the recent viral spread of the *Kony 2012* video. The Kony 2012 movement was not just about social

media; it was about debate, deliberation, communication, connection, participation, and empowerment. Prior to releasing this video, IC had nearly a decade of experience building a network of engaged, connected, and empowered individuals, and then deployed these individuals with a specific and simple task—make Kony famous. And that they did. What happens next is up to all of us.

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