

The Social, the Media, and the Activism: Kony Meets World

[Beth Karlin is the Program Director of the [Transformational Media Lab](#) within the [Center for Unconventional Security Affairs \(CUSA\)](#) as well as a Research Associate at the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calit2) and a doctoral student in the School of Social Ecology at University of California, Irvine. Her research focuses on the potential and application of new media and technologies for civic engagement and social change.]

Many new trends in technology and communication are changing the landscape of civic engagement and activism. Social justice campaigns are utilizing a broad array of strategies to engage the public through new media, including online distribution, blogs and podcasts, and extensive use of social media. Although we have seen many successful new media campaigns over the past decade, none has captured the public eye like the recent Kony 2012 video released by the group Invisible Children (IC). For many people, Kony 2012 has become emblematic of the potential reach and impact of social media— 100 million views in 6 days speaks to a whole new dimension in terms of speed and scale of communication. However, the success of Kony 2012 rests, not just on the new tools of social media, but also on much more familiar and conventional forms of political activity. Though social media may have been the catalyst, it was not the only reagent in this reaction. A few considerations in the case of Kony:

Experience

Invisible Children rocketed to global fame in March 2012 with the release of the Kony film, but this was not the first film from this group... or the second - Kony 2012 was Invisible Children's 11th film. They screened their first film, "Invisible Children: The Rough Cut", in 2004 and have been releasing new films fairly regularly since 2006. A core component of their outreach model are their biannual tours, in which teams of four "roadies" travel for 2-3 months hosting community screenings in a set geographic region. Each tour corresponds with a specific film and a specific event or campaign to engage viewers. Despite the "overnight sensation" moniker, they have nearly a decade of practice releasing films and engaging youth.

Connections

Invisible Children has created a host of opportunities for viewers to get involved, not only on social media sites, but also via physical networks in local communities through clubs and groups at schools and places of worship. As a result, a high level of organizational involvement was found in our recent [survey](#) of 2,173 Invisible Children participants conducted six months prior to the Kony 2012 release. Over half reported being involved with Invisible Children through a formal organization, such as their school or place of worship. This was also reinforced in preliminary analysis of the tweet networks conducted by [SocialFlow](#), which found a core group of place-based communities (e.g., Birmingham, Pittsburgh, Oklahoma City) in where clusters of twitter activity helped spread the video significantly. These clusters of pre-existing support were vital to the spread of the Kony 2012 film.

Engagement

Kony 2012 (and all of IC's previous films) focus on an important subject, but they also (and equally importantly) tell a compelling story. Invisible Children's first film, the Rough Cut, told the story of three friends by the names of Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey, and Laren Poole who traveled to Africa in search of firsthand experience of the troubles of third world countries. The film follows their journey as they discover the "Invisible Children" of Northern Uganda and the viewer is invited to learn about the LRA and meet those affected along with them. The story is therefore one, not just of the LRA itself, but is also a journey of discovery on the part of the filmmakers.

Empowerment

Invisible Children is also careful to not tell stories just of despair and problems in their films, but also of hope and solutions. In Kony 2012, the filmmakers discuss their past successes – of successful mobilization, community building, lobbying, and concrete action on the part of lawmakers. And they compel the viewer to get involved, laying out clear and specific steps to join them in their efforts. They show young people (**just like you**) rising up and taking action. They show what has been done and what can be done. They give specific examples and strategies that seem to be effective as both an inspiration and a call to action.

These findings may assist in our understanding of the recent viral spread of the Kony2012 video. Prior to releasing this video, Invisible Children 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.