



KONY 2012: SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

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FOREWORD

The *Kony 2012* online video campaign was a remarkable phenomenon. The video achieved more than 100 million hits on YouTube. But did the campaign ultimately succeed or fail?

Invisible Children, the organisation behind the campaign, believes it has brought much needed attention to the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army. Others tell us that there was little of the deeper engagement which a campaign like this should seek to achieve. And of course, Joseph Kony himself is still at large, evading the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court.

In this report, our focus is not on the merits or otherwise of advocating military intervention to capture Kony, but on the campaign itself. We have talked to a range of experts in the UK, US and Uganda and we consider in detail the logistics of the campaign, how and why it reached so many people, and the lessons which can be learnt for any future online campaigns.

We hope that this report stimulates a wider discussion about the potential of online campaigns. IBT always welcomes feedback, so once you have read the report please let us know your thoughts.

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INTERVIEWEES

UK/USA

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Tim Dixon, Strategist at Purpose

Ben Keeseey, CEO, Invisible Children

Liz Scarff, Digital media consultant

Emrys Schoemaker, Director and co-founder of iMedia Associates

Uganda

Barbara Among, News Editor, Daily Monitor

Apio Ann, internet user, Kampala

Richard Baguma, Secretary-General, UNA Uganda

Ahmed Hadji, Youth activist and founder of African Youth Development Link (AYDL)

Angelo Izama, journalist

Rosebell Kagumire, online journalist and editor at development website Channel 16

Arthur Larok, Country Director, ActionAid Uganda

Dr Patricia Litho, Lecturer in Communications, Makerere University

Bellinda Maria, internet user, Kampala

Victor Ochen, Director, African Youth Initiative Network

Moses Odokonyero, Northern Uganda Media Club

Ogwetta Andrew Otto, internet user, Gulu

Javie Ssozi, digital media campaigner and founder of Uganda Speaks

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The *Kony 2012* video – why did it attract so many views?**

It received more than 110 million hits and was the twelfth video the American charity Invisible Children had released but none of the others attracted this amount of attention. Accessible, simple, with a compelling narrative, it targeted an existing network of supporters and its message was finely-tuned. It had an enjoyable and simple call to action – to share it.

- **Reaction in the media** The video attracted widespread media coverage and led to a backlash against Invisible Children which responded by releasing further videos. The criticisms centred on Invisible Children's advocacy of a military solution to the Lord's Resistance Army and what was perceived as the video's neo-imperialist approach. The next step of the campaign, for supporters to gather to Cover the Night on April 20th, didn't succeed in mobilising as many people as expected.

- **Response in Uganda** Internet usage in Uganda is limited to urban areas. Radio is the most popular form of media and this was instrumental in spreading the word about the *Kony 2012* campaign. Ugandan online journalists wrote blogs about the campaign which were picked up by the international media. In turn, the Ugandan press, radio and television began to cover the story.

There was a negative response to video in Uganda because most Ugandans didn't believe the military solution would work. Other criticisms included the impression given by the video that members of the Lord's Resistance Army were still in Uganda when they left 6 years ago, its neo-imperialist approach and the lack of local voices.

- **The longer term implications** It is too early to assess the overall impact of the *Kony 2012* campaign beyond its raising awareness of Invisible Children and the LRA. However, we have now seen the potential for the internet to stimulate a global debate about an issue in a developing country. The video has also provided campaigners with an opportunity to spotlight current needs in the country, such as nodding disease. One important result of the campaign is that some Ugandans have questioned the motives and financial accountability of Invisible Children and this has extended to a scepticism about NGOs in general.

- **Lessons** Having an established network is key in making any video go 'viral' as well as having content which is accessible to the audience you are targeting. There are no longer geographical boundaries so campaigners need to take into account audiences all over the world and be prepared for critical comment and, ultimately, a loss of control. Anticipating the speed with which social media can move is crucial so campaigners aren't overwhelmed as Invisible Children were when *Kony 2012* went viral. The greatest challenge, which *Kony 2012* failed to address, is how to make content engaging while allowing for nuance and complexity.

- **The future of online campaigning** In order to avoid a potential backlash to online campaigns, organisations need to be honest and transparent and involve local people from the start. Campaigns may need different elements to appeal to different audiences. There could be links to other content for those looking for more depth and context. Campaigners need to innovate and surprise and not overwhelm supporters with too much material.

FINDINGS

When the 30-minute *Kony 2012* video went live on YouTube on March 5 2012 no one expected it would receive more than 110 million hits, least of all Invisible Children as Ben Keeseey, its CEO, openly admits, 'Our stated goal and we thought it was ambitious was to get 500,000 views of the video online by May 1st. Our most popular films previously on YouTube were in the 200,000-300,000 view count range.'

In the first 72 hours *Kony 2012* got 43 million hits. It reached 100 million views on YouTube faster than any video in history. This level of mobilisation is unprecedented.

Invisible Children is an American charity set up by Jason Russell, a film school graduate, in 2003 after visiting Northern Uganda. It has two work streams – one to mobilise the public to pressurise western governments to help end the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army and the other to protect and support communities in Africa affected by the LRA. The charity runs education projects and has helped set up an early warning radio network in the DRC and Central African Republic to help protect communities. It is a relatively small charity in comparison with many of the other organisations on the ground in Uganda but its success at advocacy with the *Kony 2012* campaign belies its size.

REASONS FOR THE VIDEO'S SUCCESS

It's accessible The *Kony 2012* video is the eleventh video Invisible Children has produced and none of the others has prompted this level of response. It is slick (it reportedly cost \$1 million to make), engaging, demonstrating all the high production values and narrative structures of a movie rather than a documentary. Karina Brisby is Director of Shiftlabs, an Oxfam project that works to increase innovative campaigning for better public engagement. She says: 'It's not like a documentary. It is more like an action adventure film where you have a central hero. They go off to solve a problem; there are challenges along the way. There's a different level of emotional engagement, but also the techniques they use are very effective – so when they're talking to Jacob the small boy for the first time they change the sound, they put echo on what he's saying and subtitle it as well. That was done really well so it connected with people in a way that a normal video that is based on logic and facts doesn't. It was all based on emotion.'

It's simple The video also spoke to people in their own language, not 'development speak.' Kate Bussman, a journalist and social media coach, says: 'It worked because it spoke to them in a way they understand and a way they speak to each other. It was not patronising.' The video's message was simple and not contextualised for which Invisible Children has been criticised but this was one

of the reasons why it was so engaging according to Tim Dixon, a former political speechwriter and senior fellow at the campaigning organisation Purpose. He says: 'So often you have a conflict between the policy people and the communication people ... the experts want to preserve the complexity of an issue when they are engaging a large audience. The reality is that you cannot do that. It doesn't mean you have to lie but you have to crystallise and condense an issue and that is a genuinely hard thing to do. I don't think Invisible Children did it right. I think there are a lot of criticisms about the white saviour complex that are absolutely spot on. You have to try to take on board all the concerns of all the experts while still making a campaign work. If you listen too much to the experts and there is too much complexity, you will never engage a mass audience.'

It's compelling The film is highly personal unlike many videos produced by campaigning organisations and NGOs. Benjamin Chesterton, co-founder of digital production company Duckrabbit, believes its narrative appeal partly comes from its personal approach, 'The thing about the Invisible Children film is that the guy really believes it, it's really authentic to him, whatever anyone thinks about him... he is really passionate about this and that is what comes across and very rarely do NGOs allow individuals within their organisations to become so powerful as spokespeople.'

Why was it so successful at engaging a young audience which is traditionally hard to reach?

It targeted a pre-existing network The video initially attracted students and young people in the United States who, Invisible Children says, were its primary audience. It was promoted prior to its launch with emails, tweets to their 50,000 followers and Facebook entries for their 400,000 fans. Invisible Children's supporters, many of whom were already established on Twitter (such as Vans Warped Tour who has 180,000 followers), began passing on the message. Research carried out 5 days after the launch showed that 23% of people aged 18-29 had watched the video in America.¹ Invisible Children conducts 3,000 screenings a year across the States and the organisation's followers already knew them and were loyal. Ben Keeseey says this was a key ingredient to its success: 'The thing we had was individuals who had a personal connection with Invisible Children because we had come to their school, we had come to their community and over the last 7 years we have done about 10,000 screenings to 3 million individuals.'

The message was finely-tuned Not only were Invisible Children's followers loyal, the campaign also had a finely-tuned message. Tim Dixon recognises how well Invisible Children refined its message: 'They know this audience well and they have had years to hone their argument – when you have done the same presentation

‘It connected with people in a way that a normal video that is based on logic and facts doesn’t. It was all based on emotion.’

Karina Brisby, Director, Shiftlabs

over and over again, having watched this in politics, you get very attentive to the part of the story that works best, the things that evoke a response, the way to give a story a sense of immediacy.’

THE VIDEO MOVED BEYOND YOUNG PEOPLE

At its peak there were 25,000 tweets referring to Kony every 10 minutes. 66% of the tweets supported the campaign.² Social Flow, the first company to devise social media optimization technology, used Twitter to chart the rise of the video. They found that there were geographical clusters of support even before the video was launched, especially around Birmingham, Alabama. According to Social Flow, ‘This movement did not emerge from the big cities, but rather small-medium sized cities across the United States.’

While the primary audience was young people it gradually shifted about 5 days after the launch to an older audience according to Kate Bussman: ‘What it did was it made the kids go to their parents and ask who this Kony guy was. And their parents didn’t know either. Their parents then went to look up to see who Kony is. And then what you saw happening was the demographics, such as they are available on YouTube of the video itself, went from being very young people under 25 to being over 25s and much older males which was really fascinating. There are very few people with teenage kids who don’t know about Kony in America where it took off.’ According to YouTube the video is currently most popular with: females aged 13-17, males aged 45-54 and males aged 18-24 in that order.

A simple and enjoyable call to action Having been emotionally engaged and believing they could do some good as individuals, supporters were asked to complete a very simple action – to share the video with friends. They didn’t have to commit money or time, they simply had to tell their friends about it. Then they were asked to tweet 20 celebrities and 12 policy makers – merely a matter of clicking on a box with a person’s face on it on the Invisible Children website. 9 celebrities chose to support the cause and the take-up increased exponentially. Of those celebrities Oprah has 11.9 million followers on Twitter and Justin Bieber, who appeals to this age group perfectly, has 23.2 million followers. When Oprah tweeted the day after the launch viewings rose from 660,000 to more than 9 million. Karina Brisby from Shiftlabs believes fans enjoyed being able to interact with their icons and so the call to action was not a chore: ‘It was not only sharing with friends but also with online celebrities... people like sending things to celebrities on Twitter, it’s like “I’m talking to this person”. They made it really easy to, let’s say, talk to Lady Gaga. It’s an easy ask to do but it’s also an enjoyable ask to do. It’s not something NGOs do a lot – like send this message to a particular celebrity because that gives the power to the celebrities.’

THE REACTION – PRESS, CELEBRITIES, NGOS, BLOGGERS

As soon as the video was launched there was widespread media coverage on all platforms, both in America and internationally. For a number of our interviewees the fact that the story of the LRA had hit the headlines because of the video was considered a positive outcome. Barbara Among, News Editor of the *Daily Monitor* newspaper in Uganda, was pleased this happened: ‘The good thing is that it has raised awareness outside Uganda. For me as a journalist who covered that war for 8 years the awareness was not as big. The impact this has created is bigger than the impact that my stories created for 8 years. It has got everyone talking about it. For me also it gives the International Criminal Court more ground now to really come after these people. It puts some kind of pressure on them to go after him and he’s either arrested and taken to The Hague or killed. That is the positive point to it.’

Backlash As the debate developed, however, coverage of *Kony 2012* and its apparent success led to a backlash against Invisible Children. This media coverage was key in raising its profile even higher.

Some interviewees have suggested that NGO criticism was partly inspired by a perception that the people who run Invisible Children are ‘the new kids on the block’ and don’t follow protocol. Invisible Children doesn’t work in collaboration with other international NGOs and perhaps this is partly why it had less support from the NGO community than it might have had otherwise. It launched the video the day before International Women’s Day, stealing the ‘development’ limelight and frustrating many other international NGOs.

Criticisms – policy The main criticism of the video was due to Invisible Children’s policy for a military solution to the conflict. For most NGOs working in Uganda and Central Africa supporting military action is not an option they will consider. Many abductees are still held by the LRA and could be injured or killed in attacks. Kony has always responded to military attacks with harsh reprisals and up until now military action has not been successful, so why should that change?

Other criticisms The video was criticised for its neo-imperialist approach, showing a white man going to save Uganda, for being misleading because it suggests that members of the LRA are still in Uganda when they actually left in 2006, for giving the impression that Invisible Children is the only NGO working on the ground in Uganda on this issue and for being over-simplistic and not providing any context or history for the current situation. The selling of t-shirts depicting Joseph Kony’s image was criticised for being insensitive; one journalist compared it to the selling of t-shirts with Osama Bin Laden’s face on them. Invisible Children’s financial priorities and transparency were questioned

leading to a wider debate about its credibility as an NGO.

Reputational cost Emrys Schoemaker, Director and co-founder of iMedia Associates, says that Invisible Children's approach was unusual as it appeared to have no fear of losing credibility: 'Invisible Children have been almost universally slammed by any thinking body and therefore there'll be a recoil from this approach. You have to be controversial, you have to speak to those triggers people have to get noticed and because they were really passionate about the message the chances of their campaign going viral were much higher. Most organisations couldn't run the risk of having their brand damaged like this. You could argue that Invisible Children didn't care and they just wanted to get the message out and they were prepared to put everything on the line to get their message across. They weren't risk averse whereas campaigning organisations usually can't afford to put their brand on the line.'

Despite the all the negative comments about the video people weren't deterred from viewing and signing up to the campaign. Benjamin Chesterton puts this down to Invisible Children's strong grassroots network: 'It didn't backfire because what Invisible Children have done very well is that they got themselves a massive audience that they have connected with. That audience will dismiss a lot of the backlash anyway. A backlash makes their position stronger because the critics are the enemy. If the enemy lashes out that can be very good for your audience. I think it built their audience.'

INVISIBLE CHILDREN'S RESPONSE

Invisible Children hadn't anticipated such a huge response. None of the organisation's earlier videos had attracted such public or professional interest. Ben Keesey says they were taken completely by surprise. He jokes: 'When we went into *Kony 2012* our PR department consisted of 1 intern... We have been struggling to get everything properly, quickly and accurately out to the public in a way which is digestible, especially considering that the traffic related to the film actually burned out our website – we had to rebuild it on a new platform... and we had to get a whole new email service because so many people wanted to be in touch with us that our email system couldn't cope. One of our service providers that looks after our database shut our account down because they thought we were getting cyber-attacked. So it was a dual challenge of not only struggling to respond to the media but making sure the technology infrastructure was appropriate for the size of audience we had – to this day we're still working on it.'

The organisation put out an official written response to the immediate criticisms on March 7th on tumblr and released a less-polished short video presented by Ben Keesey on March 12th.

His approach in the video, like Jason Russell's, was very personal. He explained his reasons for being with Invisible Children as a personal mission, and responded to the criticism. *In launching Kony 2012 our intention was to share the story of Joseph Kony with new people around the world but in the process there have been a lot of questions about us... It's been difficult to hear the criticisms.* He explained Invisible Children's mission and its method of connecting people to it by using compelling movies. He also addressed one of the main questions about Invisible Children – their finances – and explained how they allocated funds and stressed that they were completely transparent in their accounting.

The video ended with another call to action *We do not have the monopoly on the truth but there is one thing that everyone agrees on is that Joseph Kony should be stopped. The effort to stop the LRA needs to be huge.* Although the video was a defence of Invisible Children's work, they still managed to use it as an opportunity to ask for support for their cause.

KONY 2012 – PART II: BEYOND FAMOUS

Invisible Children's next video, *Kony 2012 – Part II: Beyond Famous*, was released on April 5th. Like *Kony 2012* this is a highly polished film with music and creative editing. Invisible Children had planned to release this second video in the autumn of 2012 but they brought that forward and went into production within days of *Kony 2012* going viral. Ben Keesey says: 'In the part two film the core purpose was to explain the creation of the campaign – where did this come from – because there was such intense debate and also in some ways to show what's the point – to go from awareness to action. Because the film went so viral so fast we had to change that sequence from being a couple of months down the road to a couple of weeks down the road and even that felt too long.' So far *Kony 2012 – Part II* has had 2,261,777 hits on YouTube. It directly responded to the criticism levelled at the first film: it is far more measured, including many more local African voices, making it clear the war has moved from Uganda to Central Africa, it explains how overwhelmed staff were at Invisible Children but also stresses how much they have achieved. It highlights that there are other NGOs on the ground and that local leaders must be involved in the campaign to stop Joseph Kony. It ends, like the other videos, with a call to action – encouraging viewers to ask their leaders to support their effort and to come out to Cover the Night on April 20th. *We will turn this digital revolution into something more and show the world who we really are. We believe that the human connection extends across the world but starts from across the street. Our liberty is bound together.* As Ben Keesey himself points out, the second video was inevitably less popular than the first because it was less simple, 'If you want to make a comparison of styles – the way you make a documentary determines the viewership. *Kony 2012*

‘Most organisations couldn’t run the risk of having their brand damaged like this. You could argue that Invisible Children didn’t care and they just wanted to get the message out.’

Emrys Schoemaker, Director, iMedia Associates

vs. *Kony 2012 Part II*. Just look at the style of the first film and the view count and style of the second film and the view count. That was intentional – we made the second film for a different audience.’

COVER THE NIGHT

300,000 people registered for Cover the Night but on April 20th they didn’t materialise in huge numbers. Karina Brisby suggests that this failure was due to a number of factors: ‘Cover The Night was 6 weeks away from the original date the video came out. They didn’t really communicate on a regular basis to people during that time. They definitely weren’t able to keep that momentum going. When Cover the Night came around people were a bit embarrassed that they had been sucked into it. It feels like an online hysteria... “I have to be part of it”. When people have a little distance from that, they feel embarrassed. Similar to the Diana-factor when people became hyper-emotional about something.’

Invisible Children has recently released another video giving supporters a new action which is to go to the UN in June to present the 3.8 million pledges to their campaign. They also put out a diary date which is November 3rd when they say *this movement will unite like never before* but do not give any more detail than that. 2012, they say, is the year of justice – don’t miss it. This is a short video – only 1 minute 33 seconds long but is edited sharply to music and like their other videos has high production values.

THE RESPONSE IN UGANDA

Having discussed *Kony 2012* with social media specialists in the UK and USA, just under three months after its launch IBT conducted a research trip to Uganda to gauge the impact of the video campaign there. We also wanted to understand how far campaigners in the West should in future take into account the views of people in developing countries who feature in their campaigns.

INTERNET ACCESS AND MEDIA USAGE

Mobile phones Whether you use a mobile phone or the internet in Uganda is largely an issue of socio-economics. Mobile phone usage has exploded across Uganda as it has in many African countries. 38% of people had a mobile subscription in 2010 according to the World Bank. Mobile phones are cheap, costing as little as 25,000 shillings (£6.50). It costs 9p a minute to make a call, 13p to charge up your phone if you have no electricity.

Internet Internet usage in Uganda is concentrated in the urban centres, especially around the capital Kampala. 12.5% of the population are estimated to have access to the internet via computers. 63% of users are aged 15-24 and men are twice as likely to go online as women. Most people access the internet on

a computer with a 3G modem stick because domestic fixed line telephones are rare. For those who don’t have a modem there are internet cafés which are popular in urban centres. It costs 13p for 15 minutes to go online in an internet café. There are relatively few internet cafes outside Kampala and other urban areas. In Kitgum, a town central to the former conflict, there is only 1 internet café with 4 computers. There are other limitations on using computers and the internet, especially in rural areas, because instructions are often in English and most of the content on the internet is in English. While many people in Uganda speak English it is not universally spoken.

Facebook Zero Some people access the internet on their phones but not many download videos because it is expensive, difficult to view on a phone and very slow to stream. One of the most popular services on mobile internet in Uganda is Facebook Zero which is a free Facebook service available from some service providers. Facebook has 410,260 users in Uganda and its following is rising rapidly. Businesses have been set up on mobile Facebook. Dr Patricia Litho, who lectures in communications at Makerere University, says there is a lot more to Facebook in Uganda than messaging your friends: ‘Facebook is growing but still mostly among the younger people. There are so many ways people are using Facebook in Uganda now. People are using the site a lot to sell things as you would with ebay – not a lot of Ugandans have facilities to pay electronically. Using Facebook a lot of people are setting up online shops together with mobile money on the internet.... And social functions like weddings, before people used a lot of SMS, but now they are using Facebook.’

Other media The most popular forms of media in Uganda are radio and TV. 82% of Ugandans have access to a radio and 95% of them say they listen regularly³. There are 280 radio stations, many of them in local languages, and a number of national TV stations. NTV, the most popular national TV station, runs bulletins from Al Jazeera at the beginning and end of each day. Many local radio stations carry a BBC World Service bulletin at various times throughout the day. There are national and local papers, the most popular of which are *New Vision*, the government paper, and *Daily Monitor*, an independent paper which has the most popular website in Uganda with 1 million hits a day.

It’s also interesting to note how campaigners use the media in Uganda to spread their messages. Arthur Larok, Country Director of ActionAid in Uganda, says that they use radio, live drama, face to face meetings, music, SMS and appearances on TV and in the press to get their messages out but which medium they use depends on the audience. Youth activist Ahmed Hadji, who has just launched the *Imagine Uganda* campaign to engage young people with the future of Uganda, echoes this view – but stresses that because

his audience is young he also uses the internet and Facebook.

KONY 2012 IN UGANDA

From the media data available it is clear that not many people in Uganda have access to video online and therefore are unlikely to have watched *Kony 2012* and its sequels but this hasn't prevented the campaign from having a significant impact.

News cycle The news cycle in Uganda is heavily influenced by the international press. Angelo Izama is a journalist and blogger who was quoted in the international press following the release of *Kony 2012*. 'People asked me to write my blog so they could quote me in their pieces; then as people realised not everyone was happy about the video, this thing started acquiring a life of its own... sometimes writing for a foreign publication is a more direct way of communicating with Ugandans. Here the press always cover what foreign papers say. But also if your issue is positioned externally the likelihood of you catching attention is higher because the government is sensitive to external opinion.' He says the news stream often comes from the international press to the local Ugandan press, then the radio stations pick up the stories and finally television follows on.

Ugandan backlash A group of dedicated online journalists and bloggers in Uganda responded fast to the release of the video. Rosebell Kagumire put up her own video on YouTube and it has been quoted widely in the press. So far her video has had 605,722 hits. She is critical of *Kony 2012*: 'My major problem with this video is that it oversimplifies what is going on in Northern Uganda for millions of people and makes out a narrative that is often heard about Africa about how only people outside this continent can help. But that is not true. There are local initiatives to end this war. We have seen these stories a lot in Ethiopia. This video puts one bad guy against the good guys and again we are the mighty West trying to save Africa and I have a problem with that because that is the same narrative we have seen for centuries and in this 21st century we ought to see something different.'

These bloggers as well as representatives of local NGOs were interviewed by international media organisations such as Al Jazeera, CNN, the BBC, the *LA Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*. Arthur Larok of ActionAid spoke to *The Guardian* soon after the release of the video, before he had even seen it: 'They were lucky I hadn't watched it before I gave that interview because I would have been more angry. It was out of context with reality.'

As part of the backlash other people in Uganda started producing their own videos for YouTube. One group made a video called *Visible Children* which has had 21,488 hits on YouTube. It uses the

same high production values of *Kony 2012* and is skilfully made but it presents an alternative view of Uganda – wildlife, people working to rebuild their lives and positive images we don't usually see in the media. Another group of young journalists and bloggers in Kampala set up an organisation called Uganda Speaks. They made a video called *A Life without Kony* (5,117 hits) and have aggregated all their blogs onto one page to increase their impact. In America a teenage girl of Ugandan origin posted a video called *Kony Video is Misleading* and it's had 4,851,237 views to date.

Online videos and international media content were picked up by the local print media, TV and local radio stations and the debate on the ground increased. TV and radio played clips from the video and had phone in's and studio discussions.

Ugandan screenings Screenings of the video were held in Lira and Gulu, two of the Northern Uganda towns central to the former conflict. Thousands of people attended these screenings and there was a negative response with a riot breaking out in Gulu which led to an end to the screenings.

Invisible Children didn't design the video to raise support in Uganda but to raise awareness among young people in the USA; from previous experience the organisation didn't anticipate there would be a problem with this approach. Barbara Among from the *Daily Monitor* believes this criticism has had a negative impact on the campaign: 'The reaction inside Uganda had an impact on the Invisible Children campaign because if you are advocating for a country and then that country comes up and says this is not what we need, it was negative for them. I don't think they expected that the Ugandan government or citizens would come up and go against what they were preaching.'

CRITICISMS OF THE VIDEO IN UGANDA

Sexed up Richard Baguma, Secretary-General of the UNA in Uganda, complains that the film was inaccurate and insensitive to local people: 'I thought the video was sexed up – made very accessible and this war is a forgotten war, so Invisible Children say they are discovering this and bringing it to the world. "We are amazing, great magnanimous guys..." The most interesting thing was the reaction inside Uganda which was intriguing. The first negative reaction I heard was in Lira at the public screening. It has been difficult to find a person with a positive reaction to the video. From what I have heard it is an oversimplification of a complex situation.'

Timing Most interviewees in Uganda questioned the timing of the video. Apio Ann, a 25 year old from the North who lives in Kampala, watched the video and her reaction was typical: 'I thought this should have been done 10 years back, not now, because it doesn't depict

‘It does speak to the reality that we can have a global conversation even if it is a very simple, reductive one. The question is whether it’s only possible to have a simple global conversation.’

Benjamin Chesterton, Director, Duckrabbit

what is happening in Uganda now. The picture now is totally different. If it had been done 10 years back it would have made more sense. Why would someone do this now? It was almost like a lie.’ Ahmed Hadji from Kampala echoes her concerns, ‘If you look at the video it wouldn’t resonate with a young person who has grown up in Gulu because it doesn’t show the need that is there now. The video doesn’t even show there is need for maternal health, primary health care. Those are critical issues. It focusses on Kony but there are more problems than that and for the past 6 years this individual has not been there.’

Lack of local voices Another criticism was the lack of local voices in the film. Barbara Among says, ‘The story that Jacob told in the video is from 2003 when Invisible Children first came to Northern Uganda when there were night commuters... he told this story but his story was overshadowed by Jason Russell’s story and his three year old son. He presented himself as the hero who has come to save the people... they know what they want, they know what they’ve gone through, they know it all, they’ve experienced it, they are the better people to tell this story. Let them tell the story and let them make their appeal.’

Negative publicity The video has resulted in negative publicity for Uganda, a country which is keen to promote tourism. Arthur Larok of ActionAid suggests the negative impact goes beyond tourism. ‘I heard someone suggest there was a programme that a particular donor cancelled and took it to Ethiopia because of the image of Uganda, a country in conflict. Every Ugandan will feel aggrieved. If you ask “Is this the image of Uganda?” Totally not, not even the North. That comes at a cost – the international image of the country was really hit by this video.’

Ugandan Government response All the online activity on YouTube and Twitter had an impact within Uganda, notably on the government. At first it seemed to approve of *Kony 2012* because it shone a spotlight on the LRA issue but on March 17th Prime Minister Amama Mbabazi released his own YouTube video. Moses Odokonyero who runs the Northern Uganda Media Club in Gulu, says it is the first time he has seen the government post a video on YouTube in this way: ‘When the bloggers and journalists started criticising this video that’s when the government came out and said this is misrepresenting Northern Uganda. They did so after 2 weeks. The government did so in response to public reaction. Even the government is beginning to recognise online users as a significant voice because government departments are beginning to open Twitter and Facebook accounts since *Kony 2012* was released. They are now recognising the power of the internet.’

Chinese whispers The lack of access to view the video online, especially in rural areas, led to people commenting on the video without having seen it which in turn led to ‘Chinese whispers’. Victor Ochen Director of local NGO the African Youth Initiative Network says, ‘They’d heard on the radio about *Kony 2012*. They were saying he’d been arrested, money was being sent to help in Northern Uganda, Kony was coming back. All of these were word of mouth rumours started by coverage of the video.’

In an attempt to find out how far the video had penetrated outside the urban districts we visited Kitgum Comprehensive College which is in the area affected by the war. It’s a secondary school with 1,866 students. We conducted a poll and out of those present 5 claimed to have seen the video, 43 said they owned a mobile phone, 24 had access to the internet, 50 had access to TV and everyone listened to the radio. Reflecting a similar trend, most adult interviewees in Kitgum had only heard about the video through word of mouth or on the radio. Only one had viewed it.

THE LONGER TERM IMPLICATIONS

It is too early to assess the overall impact of the *Kony 2012* campaign beyond it raising awareness of Invisible Children and the LRA conflict. There are funds in the pipeline from the US government which have yet to be approved and the African Union announced on March 23 it was sending 5,000 soldiers to join the hunt for Joseph Kony, which may or may not be direct outcomes of the campaign.

Online global debate One positive outcome cited by a number of interviewees is that through the online debate which raged around *Kony 2012* we have seen one of the first global online dialogues – between people in Uganda and those in the West. Emrys Schoemaker sees real potential in this development: ‘It does speak to the reality that we can have a global conversation even if it is a very simple, reductive one. The question is whether it’s only possible to have a simple global conversation.’ Benjamin Chesterton is optimistic: ‘The thing that I loved about it was it was the first time that Ugandans were getting up on YouTube and saying why they thought it was rubbish. This is the most significant thing because the conversation is very important.’

In Uganda this online conversation is also perceived as a positive outcome of the video. Arthur Larok says: ‘The value of the internet in closing the gap between us and the North is a benefit without a question. If we are talking about how to transform Uganda from where it is now and we are debating such matters online I would be happy. For example nodding disease; can we have a discussion about this? That for me would be a useful discussion, I can go online and make a contribution on how to resolve this problem. We are

trying to do that here but no one in the UK media cares about that.'

Spotlight on current needs Nodding Disease is affecting communities in Northern Uganda in the region which was traumatised by the war. Local campaigners and bloggers have been trying to draw attention to this crippling fatal disease since 2006 but up until now they haven't been able to get significant support for their campaign. However, in response to *Kony 2012*, they were able to shine a spotlight on it as one of the issues which does need attention. Angelo Izama was one of the first to refer to it after the launch of *Kony 2012*: 'I tweeted the Prime Minister saying, "Are you tracking this nodding disease?" and he sent me back a message saying "What is this nodding disease?'. Until nodding disease was trending alongside Kony as a Northern Uganda issue the government response had been very slow.'

Backlash against NGOs Some Ugandans have questioned the motives and financial accountability of Invisible Children and this has extended to a scepticism about NGOs in general. Bellinda Maria, a student from Kampala, says, 'I watched *Kony 2012* and what they are doing is good but I think at some point they are doing it for their own personal gain... someone was saying they make millions of dollars but are they really focussing on the Kony thing?'. Ogwetta Andrew Otto, a 23-year old in Gulu, was concerned by what he had read on Twitter, 'One thing that society is saying is that these victims whose photos are being taken are not even being helped by Invisible Children'. Rosebell Kagumire believes that this has raised scepticism about NGOs in general in Uganda, 'It is because when you see during the war there were thousands of NGOs in Gulu to help but when the actual work came to be done, when the war ended and people wanted to get their lives back, there were only a few people left.'

Dr Litho from Makerere University says it has led to questions about whether NGOs really have the interests of their beneficiaries in mind, 'It has generated many other sentiments about other projects that haven't worked.... that NGOs use people in Africa for their own selfish ends.'

IS AWARENESS ENOUGH?

As a result of the *Kony 2012* video there is now a far greater awareness of the LRA and Joseph Kony but many interviewees questioned whether simple awareness is enough. Are campaigns such as *Kony 2012* likely to engender deep engagement and political change or are they simply a moment in time when awareness is heightened and there is no direct impact on the issues they aim to address? Most campaigners agree that successful campaigns need a concrete goal and actions which lead to real change. For Ben Keesey at Invisible Children, the fact that young people in the West had become engaged en masse with an international

issue means the campaign has been a success in one respect, 'Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of young people around the world are having conversations about international justice in their high school cafeterias. That shouldn't be taken for granted. Young people who don't normally talk about their role as a citizen of the world, what role should they have when there are individuals carrying out crimes against humanity, what is the role of western powers and military force and the difficult ethics that are behind all these questions? Those are very valuable things for young people who don't normally talk about them to discuss.' Invisible Children wants action as well – for Western governments to mobilise to help bring an end to the war with the LRA and alleviate the suffering of those affected by it. Whether bringing an end to the LRA will bring peace to the region remains to be seen and this is one of the crucial questions for many international commentators and Ugandans alike.

Many interviewees, especially those in Uganda, referred to the Darfur campaign when talking about *Kony 2012*. They view the Darfur campaign as a failure and believe *Kony 2012* could go the same way. They are hopeful that the video will at least raise funds which are then directly used to support those affected by the war and that therefore something good will have come from it.

LESSONS

There is no doubt that Invisible Children created an online phenomenon the like of which has never been seen before. Although perhaps not originally intended as such, it has ended up being a global campaign which attracted far higher numbers than most NGOs can engage on a national level. High production values, a compelling story based on one person's mission and a single goal were instrumental in capturing a mass audience.

Making a video go viral Having an established network to call upon and understanding your supporters is a strategy Invisible Children used well. Digital media consultant Liz Scarff who has worked with many UK NGOs often feels frustrated because people don't realise how hard it is to make a video go viral, 'I think a lot of people think that if you put something on YouTube it is going to go viral. It's not that straightforward. There are many layers you have to put in place to make something go viral. It really irritates me because you don't make a viral video – the film that you make may go viral if it has all of the right components and you hit that sweet spot but actually doing that is actually much harder than people think. What works is good storytelling and understanding your audience. It is also having a very clear campaign ask.'

An end to geographical boundaries The response to *Kony 2012* has highlighted many aspects of online campaigning which make it more

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Dr Patricia Litho, Makerere University

complex than traditional campaigns. The fact that geographical boundaries no longer exist if you are campaigning online can lead to a backlash according to Dr Litho, ‘Geographical boundaries don’t exist anymore. Fine, Ugandans weren’t the target audience but must you misrepresent Uganda just because they are not the intended audience? So if no Ugandans saw it, if they didn’t complain about it, that would be OK? Maybe people using the media should have that at the back of their mind. It’s no longer that the people in such and such a country will not have access so we can say whatever we want.’

Accepting a loss of control When your campaign is online, you have to recognise that you cannot control the ensuing conversation which for many organisations is a problem. Javie Ssozi, digital media campaigner and founder of Uganda Speaks says, ‘Social media has a bunch of issues that you have to consider before you say anything. You have to be very authentic, you have to have integrity and accepting everyone’s opinion must be part of your campaign. You must be willing to take whatever comments come up.’ Emrys Schoemaker thinks that being controversial to attract a large audience is too risky for many organisations to consider: ‘Campaigning organisations can’t afford to put their brand on the line. They’ve got too many other things they are working on. What would happen to all the beneficiaries that Aunty Mildred’s £5 a month contributes to if Aunty Mildred hears that Oxfam has got the issue on Somalia wrong or the drought, or whatever, then suddenly that £5 dries up and a school in Soweto or whatever closes down. So there is a huge reputational question.... It speaks to some of the complexities of campaigning in an age when reputations can be broken very easily.’

Anticipating how local people will respond Benjamin Chesterton believes the Ugandan criticism of Invisible Children was the most damaging element of the campaign, ‘The most significant shift was when Ugandans started saying “this is rubbish, this is not fair, this is a bad representation.” For me this is more interesting than anything else because I think when that happens everything starts to shift because you can’t ignore that – you have to engage with it.’

The pace of social media Social media can move very fast and this presents its own challenges. Kate Bussman says: ‘When you look at these numbers it is easy to see how quickly they curve upwards and how quickly they fall. All of a sudden everyone wants to know about it. If somebody came across the Kony video even a week late and went into school and tweeted about it, their friends are more likely to have seen it sooner than that. So it means that it’s more and more important to be ahead of the game and it’s always important to kids to be trendy – that is what fashion is about – so social media makes these things happen at a much faster rate. Capitalising on that when it does take off is really important, ‘keeping the monster fed’. You need

to keep putting new stuff out there which Invisible Children did.’ Ben Keeseey says that this was one of the greatest challenges for Invisible Children, ‘In hindsight if we could have done it all differently we would have had both of those videos right there up front so that when so many people had seen the film and said “what can we do?” we could have had even more tangible action steps beyond Make Joseph Kony Famous. And that gap was one of the many things that contributed to people questioning whether the campaign was serious, was it just a shallow thing that’s not going to have an impact. We were just scrambling to say “no absolutely not, we’re just a little behind because this has moved faster than anything we could have imagined.” ‘

Making complex stories engaging One of the most contentious issues is how to make content engaging, without oversimplifying it, and whilst providing context. Most interviewees agree that this is one of the greatest challenges for campaigners and one which the Kony 2012 video has failed to address. Development messages tend to be complex. How can we engage while also reflecting nuance? Benjamin Chesterton doesn’t believe this is a problem: ‘In any group of people you have people who don’t care, people who do it for the wrong reasons, you’ll get some who become engaged. It’s this idea which is ridiculous that everything should be nuanced. Where do you start in life? You start with kids’ books. You start with simple things. Some of those young people who watched that film will become engaged; then they will look at the criticism and they will start becoming engaged in a different way. For some it may be the spark to do really interesting and important things in their lives.’

Tim Dixon says we can learn from *Kony 2012*: ‘This is why we need creative people who can try to bring these things together and actually advance people’s understanding while also engaging them in compelling stories. To be fair to the Invisible Children folks, it’s not an easy thing to do at all. They’ve actually shown you can do a really compelling story for a larger community; the challenge now is to learn the lessons from Kony and do it with integrity and apply all those new tools but do it in a way which enlarges people’s understanding and engage in meaningful ways to tackle issues of poverty, the big things we need to engage with. That’s hard but that’s the job.’

THE FUTURE OF ONLINE CAMPAIGNING

So what are the solutions to the issues which arose out of the *Kony 2012* campaign? How can campaigners provide context while keeping messages simple enough to engage a mass audience? How can organisations protect their reputation in an online world? How does society avoid the risk of social media fatigue and how can we replicate the reach of the *Kony 2012* campaign?

Honesty In order to protect your reputation in an online world

most interviewees agreed that there is a greater need for honesty and integrity. Digital campaigner Javie Ssozi is optimistic: 'Many international organisations that have the capacity to do online campaigns have learnt a lot from the *Kony 2012* video. They have learnt to be more honest, they have learnt that with social media you can probably choose to hide the facts in your campaign but someone else will point them out and that will backfire on you and then dealing with that will become much harder so you have to spend more resources, you will have to defend your position and eventually in the process you will lose supporters.'

Local involvement Most interviewees recognise the need to involve local people in order to avoid a backlash against your campaign and ensure its success in practical terms. Youth activist Ahmed Hadji thinks this local involvement is crucial for the ultimate success of *Kony 2012*: 'Somehow somewhere if the question of Kony is to be resolved it requires the involvement of the policy makers in Uganda. If you look at the content of the video it indicates that the solution to Kony must be a solution from outside Uganda but the Ugandan government has to be involved in the process. Victor Ochen from Lira believes that local voices are crucial, 'The lesson to learn if we are doing other campaigns is that it's important to have community connections. Mostly people aim to raise resources and funding. You need to maintain a community connection when doing advocacy. You need to amplify the voices of the community in order for them to come on board.'

Different campaigns for different audiences One solution to the problem of including local voices as well as people we can relate to from the West is to devise different campaigns for each audience. Liz Scarff says you need to approach each constituency individually: 'What social media has done is diversified the audience down into a million of different niches that sit everywhere globally and even if you have a core campaign message, you need to have some creative mechanism that will help you reach different facets of that community that sit out there in the different social channels. You need to think how do we tweak our campaign ever so slightly to make it work for YouTubers or mums or Ugandans?'

Ways of achieving deeper engagement Liz Scarff has a potential solution: 'I think if you are clever about how you do it, you can have a film that tells you the top line of a story but if this is an online campaign you can also work in hot links so that if someone wants to read the whole backstory about Kony and where he has come from they can. You weave that through your whole narrative of the campaign. If you want to just click and sign a petition you can or if you want to go deeper you can too. I think in a lot of campaigning that isn't made available

to people in a nice, neat package in an accessible way.'

Keep innovating Tim Dixon says that in order to achieve campaigning success we need constantly to innovate and surprise to gain attention: 'I think the critical agent in *Kony 2012* was the viral tactic of getting the celebrities to send it round. That was really smart. There'll always be diminishing returns on doing the same thing in the future so it's always about trying innovation and finding out new ways of getting something round like that.'

Be selective Benjamin Chesterton warns against over saturating the market with campaigns which will lead to social media fatigue: 'I don't think NGOs have an understanding and respect for audiences and they don't value properly social networking in the way they should. So if you are just banging out press releases all the time without understanding what is important and what's not, you are just a complete turn off to people. In the social media sphere you just create noise and people are trying to get away from noise. They are trying to decide whose information they want to receive. So NGOs need to be careful.'

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Ben Keesey is hopeful that the campaign will have positive outcomes on the ground, 'We are working on our future plans in terms of the funds that have come in. We understand totally that folks in the communities in Northern Uganda should expect when organisations are sharing their story in a public way that they should respond with appropriate programmes on the ground – we appreciate that this is a very appropriate expectation that we are going to deliver on. Now our job is to continue to connect as many supporters out there that still want to contribute – let's try to connect this to on the ground results. At the end of the day I am comfortable with the public judging Invisible Children on our work: are communities affected by the LRA more protected in a year from now or are they no longer facing LRA violence or are post conflict communities more supported? At the end of the day that's what we will be judging and reflecting on.'

Endnotes

1 Pew Research Centre, Young Adults and Media, The viral *Kony 2012* Video, March 15, 2012

2 Social Flow, <http://blog.socialflow.com/post/7120244932/data-viz-kony2012-see-how-invisible-networks-helped-a-campaign-capture-the-worlds-attention>

3 Audiencescapes: <http://www.audiencescapes.org/country-profiles/uganda/communication-habits-demographic-group/age/age-228>

