Revolution-in-a-Box: A Reexamination of KONY2012 as Orthopractical Propaganda

The *KONY 2012* video is a story with a narrative arc that resembles a feature film. The video is an example of a mixed-genre media artifact and blends techniques from different styles film; the perspectives of documentary film-making, the pacing and imagery of action films, a storyline that blends an Avengers-style superhero team-up film with the emotional highs of feel-good movies about disadvantaged youth. According to Hickman (2012) the film employs an “everything-but-the-kitchen-sink” approach and uses several different documentary “modes”. He finds that the film is poetic in its cinematography and script, participatory in that it shows interactions between Russell and several organization and individuals, expository in the way it shows graphic scenes from Uganda, and reflexive in the way that Russell speaks about the purpose of the film directly to the viewer. However, he finds that the film does not employ an observational mode and lacks, “any sustained first-hand exploration of the war itself, in the villages of northern Uganda and other places directly affected by Kony’s atrocities” (p. 477). The film starts with a promise Jason Russell made to a Ugandan child named Jacob that he would get help for Jacob and return to Uganda. The video shows how Russell gathers the forces of good to go to rescue Jacob and the other Ugandan children threatened by Kony.

Symbolically, the film sets up a contrasting binary between Uganda, its people, and Kony on one hand, and America, Russell’s life, and Russell himself on the other. For example, there is a duality between Jason Russell's son, Gavin, and his nourishing

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home environment in middle-class America, and Jacob, the Ugandan boy who fled from Kony’s LRA. Uganda is a kind of shadow world of Jason’s life, and Jason’s counterpart in that world is the villain of the story, Joseph Kony.

In the film Uganda is portrayed as a hellish world where, unlike Russell's son Gavin, children live in constant fear and insecurity. Kony is the villain of this story and he is portrayed as the source of evil in Uganda, and must be defeated if the children of Uganda are to have the kind of lives that Gavin enjoys. In the film Jason Russell is the protagonist but he is not necessarily the hero. In a way, the heroes of the video are the American youth who will join forces with Russell to convince the US government to intervene in Uganda in order to “stop Kony”.

While the video shows images of child refugees, child soldiers, and Kony's army, the LRA, except for excerpts of interviews with Ugandan associates of IC, the viewer is presented with virtually no other images or information about Uganda except those relating to Kony and his crimes. What the viewer is presented with is the typical representation of Africa and Africans as “black, masculine and barbaric; victims are vulnerable, black women and children; and saviours are white, rational, Western men,” and “The state is…constructed as the savage ‘other’ for failing to control barbaric behavior” (p. 99).

Five minutes and 57 seconds into the film, Jason Russell exclaims that, regarding the situation in Uganda, “If that happened one night in America, it would be on the cover of Newsweek” (Invisible Children, 2012). At four minutes and 40 seconds, a uniformed Ugandan man appears from out of the shadows and orders Russell to stop

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filming an interview with Jacob. The purpose of these images is to elicit a sense of guilt and urgency from the target audience who, according to Fitzgerald (2013), is largely young, affluent, White-American, and female. As mentioned above, propaganda is “partitioned”, or targeted towards certain demographics and segments of the population, in much the same way that consumer goods are and these affluent American youth are the target audience for this film. The images of suffering, poverty, and state censorship are intended to motivate the viewer to join the campaign to “Get Kony”.

Musically, visually, and in terms of overall aesthetics the video are clearly marketed towards post-millennial American youth. The video and online campaign materials are quite inclusive and do not only show White youth but also include images of children of various ethnicities. This multi-racial/multi-ethnic inclusion gives the campaign a much broader appeal. But the use of racist imagery and “White Savior” logic demonstrates that this is simply a veneer of inclusion and the film makers’ understanding of racial inclusion, much like their understanding of the complex political situation in Uganda, is shallow. The presence of youth of color in the campaign is similar to the “inclusive” marketing campaigns carried out by companies such as Italian clothing manufacturer The Benetton Group’s “United Colors of Benetton” campaign (Barela, 2003; Tinic, 1997) .

In order to appeal to youth the film includes of-the-moment cultural artefacts with which young people would be familiar. For example, during the section of the film that introduces IC's plan to launch the “Cover the Night” guerilla marketing campaign on April 20, the music of electronic music producer Flux Pavilillion plays in the background. Flux Pavillion creates music in the genre known to most young Americans as "EDM"

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(Electronic Dance Music), which had exploded in popularity around the time of the video. The use of this particular style of music shows that the filmmakers understand their audience well and have strategically fashioned the film to appeal to this audience's sensibilities.

The film also heavily exploits the American concept of youth as a time of rebellion and participation in social causes. The film feeds back to its audience images of themselves as a powerful source for revolution and social change. The entire KONY 2012 campaign can be seen as a commodification of popular conceptions of radical left revolution. The images of youth running through urban environments while spray-painting political slogans on concrete, the red and black color scheme—traditionally the colors associated with Communism and the left—and the $30 "action kit" are clear examples of the appropriation of radical imagery in order to lend the campaign an aura of “radical chic”.

The "action kit" could be purchased from the IC website and contained bracelets, t-shirts, bumper stickers, and buttons branded with the logos and colors of the *KONY 2012* campaign. An IC advertisement for the kit declares: “People will think you're an advocate of awesome with this official Action Kit. Since KONY 2012 is a yearlong campaign, you can decorate yourself and the town all year long with this one-stop shop” (Kennedy, T. M., Middleton, J. I., & Ratcliffe, K., 2017, p. 97). The "action kit" is a “revolution-in-a-box”, an off-the-shelf “solution” borne of a consumer culture in which identities are formed through purchases. It represents revolution as a brand, as a lifestyle, but not as a means of actual challenging the dominant institutions of society. Such branding and commodification are not unique to the KONY 2012 campaign. Other

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politically-orientated campaigns that targeted youth with slick branding and marketing will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Review of Literature Concerning KONY 2012

The KONY 2012 video and campaign immediately drew interest and scrutiny from journalists, activists, and researchers. Many considered it a perfect example of clicktivism, or what Evgeny Morozov (2009) calls “slacktivism”. The failure of the Cover the Night event to generate the same general enthusiasm as the online video has been explored by Goddard, Hall, Lala, McGarty, Stuart, and Thomas (2015), who ask: “Are online mobilization and traditional socio-political action qualitatively different phenomena that need to be explained in different ways, or are they aspects of the same thing?” (p. 356). In order to answer this question, they explore whether online and traditional mobilization phenomena have the same psychological underpinnings and explore the nature and function of social identity in modern forms of social action. Their study found support for the idea that movements like KONY 2012 operate by creating a sense of solidarity amongst those who share similar opinions about justice and the way the world should be that crosses social categorical group boundaries. The researchers did not find, however, evidence that participation in the campaign was dependent on some type of “global identity”.

These findings are corroborated by Finnegan (2013a) who interviewed 60 Invisible Children student activists and employees. Finnegan found that Invisible

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Children was “very successful in mobilizing affluent, Christian, and largely female activists to ‘save Africa’ from itself” (p. 31). Finnegan found that most IC activists were affluent and aware of their privilege, and, as a result, probably felt some guilt about the discrepancy between their own lives and those of the Ugandans portrayed in the video. One activist she interviewed admitted that participating in the campaign afforded her “an attractive way to get involved, and…a sexy way to get involved” (p. 33). Finnegan concludes that Invisible Children offered its mostly affluent, White female supporters “an easy, non-contentious form of activism that does not threaten the students’ futures”, nor directly challenge existing institutions and authorities; as one male activist said, Invisible Children are unlike anti-WTO protestors in that they want to “work within the system” (pp. 33-34).

Finnegan (2013b) argues that Invisible Children’s KONY 2012 campaign is a part of a

> Noncontentious form of activism for privileged young Americans that is unlikely to lead to sustainable social change in Africa or the United States because it sponsors a narrative in which Africa remains an object to be manipulated by outsiders instead of a dynamic context with talented and knowledgeable actors, compelling ideas, and potential resources (p. 137)

Finnegan performed ethnographic fieldwork with IC activists in Uganda and the United States. The fieldwork was carried out in two phases, during which Finnegan interviewed forty-eight people involved with IC. Through the many interviews and time spent observing IC operations in the US and in Uganda Finnegan concludes that, “In the end,

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Invisible Children's efforts are much more about the privileged young American participants and their journeys of identity than real sustainable social change in Africa," and that the KONY 2012 campaign reinforces the trend of U.S. militarism and imperialism on the African continent, represented by the establishment of the AFRICOM by President George W. Bush in 2007.

Attempting to explain the appeal of Ugandan tragedy to Western audiences, Edmonson (2012) conjectures that, whereas the problems of South Sudan or the Congo are too extreme, and those of Kenya and Tanzania are too tame, those of Uganda are within a Goldilocks "just right" level of tragedy such that keeps Westerners interested without shocking them too much. Edmonson ponders the reasons why KONY 2012 does not delve into the actions of Joseph Kony's LRA in neighboring countries such as Congo and the Central African Republic which are more current and more devastating that the LRA's activity in Uganda.

Harsin (2013) approaches the video and its viral phenomenon from a Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies (CCCS) framework, asking "WTF was KONY 2012?", Harsin argues that no theory has sufficiently explained the online viral success of the video yet its subsequent failure to mobilize masses in the "Cover the Night" event (beyond alluding to the well-publicized mental breakdown of IC co-founder Jason Russell). Harsin posits that the KONY 2012 viral phenomenon offers scholars of CCCS a chance to create the "digital age equivalent" of David Morley's (1986) landmark *Family Television* study. Harsin also explores the importance of affect, emotional contagion, and social media and conjectures that recent work on mirror neurons might be helpful in explaining the bandwagon effect seen in phenomena like KONY 2012.

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Harsin suggests that KONY 2012 could be a powerful example that would allow a return to thinking about ideology after a turn in towards cultural populism in Critical Theory that "romanticized the audience-agent as resistant to hegemony", but failed to understand that "resistance was not really politics, especially when it was reduced to reading text against the grain" (p. 268).

Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) explore the moral pressure the Kony video exerted on viewers and how the media and online backlash mitigated its effects. The authors discuss the ability of Invisible Children to overcome a "post-humanitarian" "crisis of pity" which has caused a heightened suspicion of towards the authenticity and representations of suffering. In the post-humanitarian period humanitarian organizations focus on branding and shift from challenges to political structures towards more apolitical, issue-specific appeals (p. 471). The authors performed an email survey of 204 participants in which only two had not heard of the KONY 2012 campaign. The authors conclude that the success of the KONY campaign is a result of IC's focus on individuals—Jason Russell, his son, and the Ugandan boy Jacob—rather than on the complex political situation within Uganda; Russell stands as an intermediary between the largely Western audience and the Ugandan turmoil portrayed in the video. The authors conclude that this is how IC was able to circumvent the problem of what Chouliaraki (2013) calls the "Ironic Spectator", an ambivalent figure who is both skeptical to moral appeals yet open to offering help.

Archer-Brown, Bal, Hall, and Robson (2013) use a theory of viral marketing to analyze the Kony 2012 video in order to help marketers better understand how to use YouTube and other such platforms to spread their messages. They use Mills' (2012)

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SPIN framework— spreadability, propagativity, integration and nexus—to analyze the KONY 2012 phenomenon and to compare the viral spread of the KONY 2012 video to the infamous video of Invisible Children co-founder Jason Russell's mental breakdown. Rejecting the idea that all viral marketing is simply web-amplified word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) they use a definition of viral marketing from Mills (2012), defining viral marketing as:

> The strategic release or seeding of branded content into the socially networked online consumer ecosystem, followed by the potentially multiplicative spread of the content through the ecosystem as hosts (consumers) receive the content and are motivated to share the branded content with other consumers (p. 203)

This definition of viral marketing is preferable to the WOMM definition since it recognizes that a viral phenomenon is self-propelled, exponential, and based on an artifact (like a video) rather than on information alone.

Briones, Janoske, and Madden (2016) explore social media as a double-edged sword that both helped IC's cause and caused trouble for the organization. The authors found that social media allowed IC to spread its message quickly but that it also allowed for criticism and negative feedback to inundate the organization. Their study found that several factors contributed to the meteoric success of KONY 2012, including: connection to a global audience, tapping into key influencers (celebrities and policy-makers), and IC's ability to bring a new issue to global awareness.

In the wake of an announcement by Invisible Children that due to falling donations and revenue the organization would have to cease operations by the end of

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2015, Cheney (2015) examines the lasting effects Invisible Children and the KONY2012 campaign might have on future international youth activism. Cheney notes that while most people over the age of 30 had probably never heard of Invisible Children, the NGO had been actively building up a network of activists and disseminating materials such as their pre-KONY 2012 documentary, *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut*. Cheney, like Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) sees the KONY 2012 video as an example of "spectacular" or "ironic" spectatorship that operates on a politics of pity while perpetuating global inequality. Cheney also echoes the critique that KONY 2012 was a "post-humanitarian" commodification and corporatization of activism. Cheney explains that the "distinction between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like IC, and businesses, is…increasingly blurred," and that this blurring was a conscious strategy on the part of IC (p. 9). According to Cheney, the KONY 2012 campaign was successful in part because it operated on a politics of fear, and that IC had "built an anti-intellectual organizational culture" in which members prided themselves on "at least doing something" about problems in Uganda.

Sebastian and Titeca (2014) examine the failure of the KONY 2012 campaign and Invisible Children's eventual reduction of activities using an all-too-appropriate private sector business model. The authors mention the influence on Invisible Children's leaders of the ideas of entrepreneur-philanthropist Dan Pallotta. Pallotta, who also was a member of IC's advisory board, argues that charities should be run according to private sector principles. Pallotta advocates "multiplication philanthropy"[1], the idea that

[1] https://hbr.org/2012/02/multiplication-philanthropy

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charities should employ “market-based models [that] prioritize surplus-centered risk and large investments in personnel as a way of generating the largest possible return on their investment”. Sebastian and Titeca argue that, under the sway of this paradigm, IC made “Dubious, exaggerated, and sometimes incorrect casual relations and information…in order to simplify the conflict and inflate Invisible Children’s role in stopping it”. The authors note that, ironically, KONY 2012, which was intended to increase IC’s audience and extend their influence, actually led to the failure of the organization’s operations since the exaggerations presented in the video generated criticism and a backlash that interfered with IC’s fundraising efforts at their huge national tours, one of their chief sources of revenue.

Ellul

Ellul breaks with previous theorists who concentrated on how propaganda works to change the belief system or ideology of individuals. He says that this was true of older propaganda in the 19th century but is no longer true of the new propaganda. He introduces the concept of “orthopraxy” to explain the way propaganda works today:

> if the classic but outmoded view of propaganda consists in defining it as an adherence of man to an orthodoxy, true modern propaganda seeks, on the contrary, to obtain an orthopraxy—an action that in itself, and not because of the value judgments of the person who is acting, leads directly to a goal, which for the individual is not a conscious and intentional objective to be attained, but which is considered such by the propagandist. The propagandist knows what

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> objective should be sought and what action should be accomplished, and he maneuvers the instrument that will secure precisely this action (p. 27)

Modern propaganda operates to create “orthopraxy”, or the readiness to participate in activity unreflectively. In order to achieve orthopraxy a change in the deeply held beliefs of the individual is not necessary. As a result, a person may participate in actions with which he disagrees in light of his own ideology. Ellul says that participation need not be active but can also be passive when a person supports or encourages an activity. He uses the example of fans at a sports game. Even though they do not actually participate in the playing of the game their cheers of encouragement are a form of participation. Orthopraxy is one of Ellul’s most intriguing concepts and the move toward orthopraxy is important for understanding both the vision of propaganda offered here and the KONY 2012 phenomenon.

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