

Kony 2012: Taking A Closer Look At The Social Media Sensation

EXCLUSIVE: CHRIS ROPER ON THE ACTIVIST ONLINE VIDEO THAT MADE GLOBAL HEADLINES & AND THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

The bare facts of the Kony 2012 video and social media campaign are simple, if staggering. As Jason Russell, the mastermind of the campaign and founder of Invisible Children, tells us in the video, "The game has new rules. But in order for it to work, you have to pay attention." And millions have paid attention. As of time of writing, there have been over 137 million views of the 30 minute video in two weeks (over 84 million on YouTube, over 16 million on Vimeo, and various numbers on other platforms such as the Invisible Children website). It's [the fastest campaign](#) to reach 100 million views (six days), beating Susan Boyle (nine days) and Lady Gaga's Bad Romance (eighteen days). The video itself was created by the charity group Invisible Children, and prominently features the film's director, Jason Russell. In the video, Russell tells us that "Its only purpose [is] to stop the rebel leader Joseph Kony."

As a successful example of using the viral capabilities of social networking and social media to push a cause, Kony 2012 is almost unrivalled. Part of the video's call to arms, as described by Russell, is the targeting of "20 Culture Makers and 12 Policy Makers", in order "to make Kony famous". "Our goal", he tells us, "is to change the conversation of our culture, and get people to ask "Who is Joseph Kony?" To this end, viewers are implored to "Above all, share this movie online", and to contact one or more of the celebrities, a process made easy by social media and the Invisible Children website. To help spread awareness, the organisation has also created Action Kits (available for a

price) that include campaign buttons, posters, stickers and the inevitable bracelets.

The tactic of featuring easy to use automatic tweets to celebrity accounts paid off handsomely, according to SocialFlow.com. There "were tens of thousands of mentions generated by users of the site and targeted at celebrity accounts. Ellen Degeneres (@TheEllenShow), for example, saw over 36,000 mentions from different users pleading her to respond to the cause. So did Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga, Oprah and Taylor Swift, amongst many others. Both Oprah and Bieber chose to respond and amplify the cause while Lady Gaga, Jay-Z and Stephen Colbert chose not to." Preliminary YouTube data indicates that the video's success is largely owing to young people. "[The video was heavily viewed from mobile phones and is most popular with 13-17 year old females and 18-24 year old males.](#)"

And who is Joseph Kony? The Guardian newspaper tells us that he is "a former choirboy from northern Uganda who leads a personality cult and militia that he calls the Lord's Resistance Army. He founded the group in the late 1980s.... The first arrest warrants ever issued by the International Criminal Court in The Hague were aimed at Kony and four of his LRA commanders, for crimes against humanity and war crimes. The 2005 indictments include charges of murder, rape, the sexual enslavement of women and girls and forcing children to fight.... When Kony's troops attack a village, they usually kill most of the adult population and abduct the children. They have been

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accused of forcing boys to kill their parents as an initiation rite. Girls are shared out among the commanders as sex slaves. The LRA has practised mutilation as a tool of terror, cutting off the lips, noses and ears of its victims." One of Kony's more bizarre beliefs, if we can even rank them, is in the literal protection provided by the sign of the cross. [He tells his child soldiers that a cross drawn on their chests in oil will render them immune to bullets.](#)

The evil of Kony is undeniable, perhaps more so because the LRA now has no discernible political aims other than the survival of the cult of Kony. But the makers of the Kony 2012 video have been criticised for, inter alia, promoting what is perceived as a violent, American solution. As Victor Ochen, the "director of African Youth Initiative Network based in Lira, the site of one of Kony's worst massacres in Uganda", put it to [The Guardian](#), "They are focusing more on an American solution to an African conflict than the holistic approach which should include regional governments and people who are very key to make this a success."

Professor Mahmood Mamdani of the Makerere Institute of Social Research in Kampala, and Professor of Government at Columbia University, warns that the millions "who have watched the Invisible Children video need to realize that the LRA – both the leaders and the children pressed into their service – are not an alien force but sons and daughters of the soil. The solution is not to eliminate them physically, but to find ways of integrating them into (Ugandan) society." Professor Mamdani also asks, of the Kony 2012 campaign: "Will this mobilization of millions be subverted into yet another weapon in the hands of those who want to militarize the region further? If so, this well-intentioned but unsuspecting army of children will be responsible for magnifying the very crisis to which they claim to be the solution."

Others have criticised the self-aggrandisement of Jason Russell, and Ugandans themselves, according to Al Jazeera, see the video as a "foreign, inaccurate account that belittled and commercial-

ized their suffering." According to the Wall Street Journal, a group screening the video "suspended showings in northern Uganda after angry viewers pelted members with stones and callers to radio stations objected to the portrayal of victims in the conflict. As the group, the African Youth Initiative Network, did a live translation of the film narrative into the local Luo dialect, an estimated 35,000 people began jeering. Some threw rocks at the screen and group members, who pulled the plug on the video." The group "[suspended future showings.](#)"

Some have questioned the use of funds by the charity and its relationships with some evangelical Christian groups. (The movement didn't emanate from big cities, "[but rather small-medium sized cities across the United States. It is heavily supported by Christian youth, many of whom post Biblical psalms as their profile bios.](#)")

According to [The Guardian](#), "the non-profit's financial statements show that only 32% of the \$8.6m it spent last year went to direct services. Meanwhile Foreign Affairs magazine has accused the organization of 'manipulat[ing] facts for strategic purposes.' Charity Navigator has given Invisible Children a two-star rating in accountability out of a possible four."

[Radhika Coomaraswamy](#), the UN secretary-general's special representative for children and armed conflict, "believes the Kony2012 digital campaign would have better served the interests of child soldiers in Uganda had it focused on raising funds for reintegration programmes rather than pressing for the eponymous Ugandan warlord's capture.... We would prefer the focus on the children and the funding going to the children, rather than focusing purely on a military solution. We think, absolutely, that Kony should be arrested and sent to the ICC. But how we get him is crucial to us, because a lot of Kony's fighters are children."

Perhaps the best way to understand the multiple and contested ways in which the video has been, and will be, interpreted, and why it's had the tremendous impact it has, is by the juxtaposition of three related

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video scenes. The first is from Kony 2012 itself, the second a video response by a supporter of the movement, and the third, amateur news footage shot serendipitously on the streets of San Diego.

First, a clip featuring Jason Russell, an energetic, slim man who typifies the blonde Californian look, interviewing his young, toddler son (introduced, revealingly, as "This is my son Gavin. And just like his dad, he likes being in movies."). Gavin is also blonde, and dressed in a black and red striped jersey. "What do I do for a job?" Russell asks Gavin. "You stop the bad guys from being mean". And, "Who are the bad guys?" ask Russell. Gavin thinks about it. "Um... Star Wars people!"

Secondly, a clip from a video made by former porn actress, Bree Olsen. She's also famous for being one of actor Charlie Sheen's two "goddesses" who lived with him during his infamous meltdown that got him fired from the television show Two and a Half Men.

The video shows Olson writhing in a variety of provocative poses on a beach and in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo, and perched on rocks in a skimpy dress - all juxtaposed with shots of mutilated victims of the Lord's Resistance Army. The most horrifyingly inappropriate image is of Olson posed sexily in a bikini in the mud. There's a close-up of her face, lips parted and painted red. She pouts at the camera in approved porn star style. There's a smear of mud on her cheek. We cut from this to a close up of a child whose nose and ears have been hacked off, and lips mutilated. Apparently, we are supposed to make a link between Olson's beauty being smeared by the streak of mud, and this child being tortured.

The third clip is from a video shot by a passerby. It shows Jason Russell, naked, prancing manically up and down a street in San Diego, and pounding his hands on the pavement. He swears, and rants about the devil, the Apple iPhone, and its digital assistant, Siri. Russell's wife, Danica (who appears in Kony 2012, giving birth to their son Gavin), [released a statement](#) saying that

"The preliminary diagnosis he received is called brief reactive psychosis, an acute state brought on by extreme exhaustion, stress and dehydration. Though new to us, the doctors say this is a common experience given the great mental, emotional and physical shock his body has gone through in these last two weeks."

The first example above, of Russell's son Gavin equating the Lord's Resistance Army with the villains from the movie Star Wars, points directly at the mechanism around which Invisible Children is mobilising. It's the classic tale of good versus evil, of identifiable baddies and unquestionable goodies, of superheroes rushing to the rescue. It's the same impulse that led to the christening of the 2003 invasion of Iraq as "Operation Iraqi Liberation". Kony 2012 attempts to configure its supporters, and potential supporters, as fighters for a simple justice, a comprehensible justice. This is one of the ways they've harnessed the inherent power of social media, that impulse that people on the networks have to share, and to share in, communal endeavour without nuance.

An early Invisible Children claim of success, made in a self-congratulatory section of the Kony 2012 video, was convincing Barack Obama and the U.S government to send 100 combat-equipped U.S. forces to Uganda to help regional forces, namely Uganda, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, capture or kill Joseph Kony and his senior leaders. "After eight years of work," Russell tells us, "The government finally heard us."

Detractors of U.S involvement have criticised it on grounds that it provides military assistance to countries, like Uganda and South Sudan, who have themselves used children as soldiers. Jo Becker, child rights advocate at Human Rights Watch, [points out](#) that "Countries that keep using child soldiers aren't going to get serious about ending the practice until they see the US is serious about withholding the money.... These military aid waivers show a lack of leadership and a disregard for US law."

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The second video clip cited above, featuring porn star Bree Olson, can be seen, on one level, as a gross exploitation of a cause to garner personal publicity. But it's also a (perhaps unwitting) deconstruction of some of the key elements of the Kony 2012 campaign. At one point, the pneumatic Olson tells us that "Right now, you're watching a video of me outdoors in California, interspersed with pictures of the effect Joseph Kony had on the people of Uganda. I put the two together because I know a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. The Kony 2012 documentary runs on the same principle. It's nice packaging on something that wouldn't be an inherently fascinating topic to that many people otherwise."

It is, of course, a grotesquerie worthy of Antonin Artaud, an absurdity worthy of Thomas Pynchon, this mashup of soft porn and hard tragedy. It does, however, highlight - perhaps unwittingly - the pleasure that Jason Russell evinces in doing good. It also underlines the disquieting contention made by both Russell and Olson - that the world, or America, to use the elision they sometimes fall into, cannot feel empathy unless they're entertained.

This isn't the first time Russell has put forward this idea. In a bizarre 2006 Invisible Children dance video, which tells the tale of Russell's attempts to get cynical schoolchildren interested in the cause, Russell sings "We're on a mission to put Uganda inside your mind. It needs attention and a dance to make it sparkle and shine." He also does some remarkably twee ninja dance moves, which are guaranteed to make any young person instantly hostile. [Do yourself a favour and watch the video.](#)

Of course, who is to say Russell and Olson are wrong. If you want the fickle, motile world of social media to like, retweet, favourite and disseminate your work, you have to offer entertainment. The fact that this demeans, belittles, and over-simplifies the causes you're trying to promote, seems to be the price many choose to pay.

There's also the irresistible bait of doing something within a community, and exert-

ing the power of community. In the video, Luis Moreno Ocampo, Prosecutor in the International Criminal Court, tell us "We are living in a new world, Facebook world, where 750 million people share ideas, not thinking in borders. It's a global community, bigger than the U.S."

As Russell says, "It's always been, that the decisions made by the few with the money and the power, dictated the priorities of their government, and the stories in the media. They determined the lives and opportunities of their citizens. But now, there's something bigger than that. The people of the world see each other. And can protect each other. It's turning the system upside down, and it changes everything."

The third video clip cited above, which shows Russell's "meltdown", as the media is terming it, brings our cycle of ego, charity, and the role of social media in creating celebritydom full circle. It also reveals the double-edge of the sword of social media. The same immediacy that allowed Kony 2012 to go viral allows Russell's indiscretions to become public almost immediately.

It also points to the extreme pressure (Russell's wife assures us that drugs and alcohol played no part in his breakdown) that social media can bring to bear. Perhaps most tellingly for students of social media, it hints at the fact that, once you've complicated the binary truths that lend themselves to 140 character tweets, and to the simplified, mythopoetic narrative that Kony 2012 offers its viewers, you're confronted with a complexity that can lead to the sort of breakdown displayed by Russell.

Where next for Kony 2012? Quite what effect the video of Russell's breakdown will have on the campaign is open to question. Celebrities like Rihanna, who had indicated a willingness to help with the cause, might be a little more reticent to be associated with Russell. Conversely, this display of human frailty might make people eager to rise above it, and focus on the cause's central goal of eliminating Joseph Kony. Again, this will be a test of the tensions within social media. If the community mobilises

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around Russell, it will once more, as with Kony 2012 itself, demonstrate the power to alter the cause of events.

There's been a surge in the establishment of support groups in the U.S. and globally, and a resolution of support for the groups' aims has been introduced in the U.S. Congress. According to Russell, "All these efforts culminate on April 20, when we cover the night. This is the day when we will meet at sundown, and blanket every street, in every city, until the sun comes up." The group aims to distribute more than a million posters in the U.S., bearing the Kony 2012 logo.

As the [United Nations' Radhika Coomaraswamy](#) has said, "the campaign pushed for, and has resulted in, a lively debate. There are issues about the simplistic paradigm and other things that the actual campaign raised, but it has resulted in a lot of awareness."

In the video, Russell says, "Our goal is to change the conversation of our culture." In this, the video has succeeded. One can't help feeling, though, that ultimately the Kony 2012 campaign is more a victory for the power of social media, than for the fight for human rights.

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