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Kony 2012: Intervention Narratives and the Saviour Subject

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Abstract

In 2012, the Kony 2012 Campaign became the most watched human rights video to date, garnering over 100 million views in just six days. The Campaign relied on easily digestible narratives that encouraged an imperialistic military-legal response to the Lord's Resistance Army's use of child soldiers in Uganda. Drawing on Mutua's (2001) framework of savages, victims and saviours, this article analyses the Kony 2012 phenomenon to illustrate how a digital campaign can validate and reproduce subjectivities and structures of domination rather than stimulate sustainable reform-based change. The article critically reflects on the use of digital technology by the Kony 2012 campaign and considers the potential for 'slacktivism' and 'clicktivism'.

Keywords

Kony 2012; intervention narratives; International Criminal Court; slacktivism.

Introduction

On 5 March 2012, a 30-minute human rights video was released online. The video called for international support to capture Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, and prosecute him for the recruitment and use of child soldiers. The video (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc) was released by *Invisible Children*, a non-government organisation founded in 2004 with the aim of highlighting the atrocities committed by Joseph Kony and the LRA. The video sought to 'make Kony famous' by presenting an emotionally engaging story that would mobilise individuals across the world. *Invisible Children* encouraged participants to act by sharing the Kony 2012 video through their social networks and with their online celebrity 'friends' via Twitter and Facebook. The video quickly became a worldwide phenomenon. Within only six days of its release, Kony 2012 received over 100 million views, making it the most watched human rights video to date (Visible Measures 2012).

To create a powerful message that elicited such a strong response, the Kony 2012 video relied upon conceptions of universal human rights and humanitarianism which view the west as powerful, morally superior saviours for the developing world (Kennedy 2002, 2004). Mutua (1996, 2001) examines how Eurocentric and western-dominated human rights discourses are reproduced through existing structures and narratives by exploring the metaphor of savages, victims and saviours. The savages, victims, saviours nexus is a three-dimensional metaphor underpinning human rights struggles that pit good against evil, and prompt intervention from the morally superior West. The metaphor is highly racialised and gendered in its construction of subjects: savages are black, masculine and barbaric; victims are vulnerable, black women and children; and saviours are white, rational, Western men. The state is often constructed as the savage 'other' for failing to control barbaric behaviour; however, as Mutua (2001: 220-221) explains, the real savage is the 'normative cultural fabric or variant expressed by that state'. Following this metaphor, victims are the powerless, innocent and vulnerable 'engines that drive the human rights movement' (Mutua 2001: 227).

Drawing on Mutua's (2001) framework of savages, victims and saviours, this article examines the dominant narratives and subjectivities that were reproduced by the Kony 2012 campaign. Kony 2012 depicted Joseph Kony and the LRA as the savages responsible for atrocities in Uganda while also showing Uganda and the broader African culture as uncivilized and barbaric. As the counterpoint to this picture of savagery, the video constructed the victims as child soldiers who are vulnerable, innocent and preyed upon by immoral and uncontrollable Ugandan warlords. The Kony 2012 campaign identified three core 'saviour' groups tasked with rescuing these victims: the International Criminal Court; the US military; and the individual 'activists' who 'liked' or 'shared' the Kony 2012 video. The video's call for US military intervention and its support of International Criminal Court prosecutions validated the increasing and highly selective use of military and judicial interventions in situations defined as international crimes. Additionally, the video's appeal for individuals to unite in the battle against Joseph Kony constructed individuals as globally-oriented 'saviours'. These savior subjects were legitimated by the rhetoric of morally superior citizens of the global north. This article seeks to render the reproduction of cultural narratives as employed by Kony 2012 more visible, explore the reinforcement of emerging narratives of international and criminal justice and military interventions, and examine the consequences of constructing 'saviours' in a digital environment that supports low-threshold activism (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010).

Invisible children, digital space and the Kony 2012 connective network

Invisible Children is an organisation founded in 2004 by Bobby Bailey, Lauren Poole and Jason Russell, three filmmakers who travelled to Uganda in 2003 in 'search of a story' (Invisible Children 2012a). As the *Invisible Children* website explains, the trio 'discovered a war in Uganda that had been going on for 20 years' and met Jacob, a former child solider who had escaped the LRA. The filmmakers promised Jacob that 'they would do everything they could to stop Kony

and end the war' (Invisible Children 2012a). The *raison d'etre* of *Invisible Children* thus became to 'spread the word about the war nobody knew about' (Invisible Children 2012a) and to use 'film, creativity and social action to end the use of child soldiers in Joseph Kony's rebel war and restore LRA-affected communities in Central Africa to peace and prosperity' (Invisible Children 2012a). *Invisible Children's* aim was to make films about Joseph Kony and the LRA in order to 'introduce new audiences to the conflict, create mass awareness, and inspire global action' (Invisible Children 2012a). The Kony 2012 Campaign was the outcome.

The Kony 2012 video sought to present the Ugandan conflict in an emotionally engaging format that globally publicised the atrocities committed by Joseph Kony and the LRA. *Invisible Children* strategically used social media to broadcast their video and increase awareness of their cause. In just one week, the Kony 2012 video received over 100 million views (Visible Measures 2012); far exceeding the group's more modest aim of reaching 50,000 online views. This success was achieved through *Invisible Children's* engagement with a social media culture of 'likes' and 'sharing'.[2] The Kony 2012 video also involved an offline aspect: it asked individuals to sign a pledge, order the $30 Kony 2012 bracelet and action kit, and donate money to the *Invisible Children's* cause. The goal of online awareness-raising was thus supplemented by this material support, along with a planned 'Cover the Night' event (organised for 20 April 2012), which tasked individuals with plastering Kony 2012 posters across cities around the world.[3]

Modern activists, like those found in the Kony 2012 campaign, are transnationally connected and technologically equipped. Information and communications technology (ICT), such as smart phones, personal computers and email, provide the medium for heightened connectivity while increasing the ability of individuals and groups to organise (Shirky 2008). Developments in these digital spaces are fashioned and supported by a digital culture. This concept – the combination of digitality and culture – is neatly summarised by Charlie Gere (2008) in his book *Digital Culture*:

> To speak of the digital is to call up, metonymically, the whole panoply of virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media and global connectivity that constitutes much of our contemporary experience. It is to allude to the vast range of applications and media forms that digital technology has made possible, including virtual reality, digital special effects, digital film, digital television, electronic music, computer games, multimedia, the Internet, the World Wide Web, digital telephony and Wireless Application Protocol … From this it is possible to propose the existence of a distinctive digital culture, in that the term digital can stand for a particular way of life of a group or groups of people at a certain period in history … Digitality can be thought of as a marker of culture because it encompasses both the artefacts and the systems of signification and communication that most clearly demarcate our contemporary way of life from others. (Gere 2008: 15-16)

Within spaces of digitality, social action is encompassed in an ethic of transcendence and fluidity. It is no longer a question of whether or not activists will engage with digital technology but to what extent, making the digitality of action a key quality of modern forms of awareness raising and resistance.

The Kony 2012 Campaign illustrates the increasing use of digital technologies to raise awareness and support while signifying a connective action network. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) present an approach to understanding modern forms of collective action coupled with the use of digital space. The authors suggest a personalised and pluralist network perspective of *connective* action that recognises ICT and digital media platforms (Facebook, Twitter) as mobilisers that associate networks of autonomous individuals. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 752-753), 'this connective logic, taking public action or contributing to a

common good, becomes an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships'. What was once considered a combined endeavour of group-based action is now modified to include personalised expressions outside the realm of *collective* action. Individuals are not so much collectively dependent in their efforts anymore; this is so because of the affordances offered by a well-equipped connective network that customises and personalises the field of operations.

The term personalised action can be defined as involving the 'presence of cues and opportunities for customisation of engagement with issues and actions' along with 'the relative absence of cues [including action frames] that signal ideological and definitional unanimity' (Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 772). The increase in personalised digital technologies, along with the erosion of the *need* for group-based collective action, enables individuals to 'define issues in their own terms and to network with others through social media, thus distributing the organisational burden among participants' (Bennett and Segerberg 2011: 773).

This is exemplified by *Invisible Children's* strategy of encouraging 'activists' to target 20 'culture makers' (including Oprah Winfrey, Ryan Seacrest, Justin Bieber and George Clooney) and 12 'policy makers' (including Condoleezza Rice, George Bush and Bill Clinton) via social media and urge them to share and support the Kony 2012 video. This strategy mobilised participants not only to 'like' information via Facebook and 'retweet' messages via Twitter, allowing them to become part of a trend, but also to personalise their messages and engagement with the Kony 2012 Campaign. This digital trend facilitated the rapid spread of the Kony 2012 video across the globe as high profile personalities with large online followings (Facebook and Twitter) jumped on the Kony 2012 'bandwagon'. For example, Oprah Winfrey (more than 22 million Twitter followers) tweeted: 'Thanks tweeps for sending me info about ending #LRAviolence. I am aware. Have supported with $'s and voice and will not stop'. Ryan Seacrest (more than 12 million Twitter followers) similarly tweeted: 'Was going to sleep last night and saw ur tweets about #StopKony...watched in bed, was blown away. If u haven't seen yet: [gives website address]' (Goodman and Preston 2012).

As this illustrates, the shift to connective action is attributed to outcomes in the digital space (that is, mobile technology, Web 2.0, and so on); therefore, the Kony 2012 Campaign is not considered here as a social movement proper but as a self-organising connective action network. This is based on our observation that Kony 2012 did not espouse a social movement identify or vocabulary; that is, it did not exemplify: a collective identity based on networks of interaction; shared solidarity; action on conflictual issues; or action taken outside institutional mechanisms (cf Diani 1992). The opening lines of the Kony 2012 video state that the campaign is an 'experiment' to see how society's increasing online connections can be used to spread ideas and garner support for social change across the world (Invisible Children 2012a). *Invisible Children's* experiment exemplifies the increasing influence connective networks have in shaping social action.

Savages, victims and saviours: Reinforcing intervention narratives

In achieving widespread online popularity and visibility, the Kony 2012 video relied on devices that ensured that the story of Joseph Kony and the LRA had emotional and moral resonance while providing motivation for individuals to support the cause. The video sought to explain the Ugandan conflict in a contained and easy to understand manner. To do this, *Invisible Children* relied on binary depictions of good and evil; as CEO Ben Keesey explains, '[t]here are few times where problems are black and white. There's lots of complicated stuff in the world, but Joseph Kony and what he's doing is black and white' (Straziuso and Muhumuza 2012). This narrative over-simplifies the situation in Uganda,[4] and produces a one-dimensional understanding of a complex situation (Kennedy 2004).

The narrative device of Jason Russell, who explained the Ugandan situation and Joseph Kony's crimes to his angelic five-year-old son, increases these over-simplified constructions of conflict and violence. In the video there is no reference to the broader causes of violence in Uganda, including social structure, historical tensions, the complicity of the west, and the involvement of a host of actors in perpetuating the violence to achieve a range of political ends. The video places sole responsibility for the widespread violence and atrocities in Uganda on Joseph Kony, denying the wider contexts of the conflict and the participation of the Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, and his Ugandan army in the violence (Allen 2006). The Ugandan government has also been implicated in violence in the neighbouring nation of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Mullins and Rothe 2008b), yet none of these complexities are evident in the Kony 2012 video. We argue that the emphasis on brevity and clarity facilitated the success of the Kony 2012 video in an online space.

Invisible Children relied on simplistic narratives to achieve moral resonance and visibility in a connected digital world. These narratives were underpinned by the metaphors of savages, victims and saviours that order the human rights project (Mutua 2001). As Kennedy (2004: 14) highlights, '[t]he human rights vocabulary makes us think of evil as a social machine, a theater of roles, in which people are victims, violators, and bystanders'. Perpetrators of human rights violations are often constructed as barbaric 'savages' through the images of 'blood-thirsty third world despots and trigger-happy police and security forces' (Mutua 2001: 225). Savages are often depicted as belonging to a black, dark or non-western race and are characterised as barbaric and primitive, as is exemplified by descriptions of the Rwandan genocide and reports on the use of machetes in frenzied attacks that typified a barbaric African culture (Mutua 2001).

In the Kony 2012 video, Joseph Kony is identified as the perpetrator of violence in Uganda and is portrayed as barbaric and evil, with photos of him flashed across the screen alongside images of him with the thousands of children he allegedly abducted. Kony's innate evil is reinforced through narration: 'he has an army, takes children from their parents, gives them a gun and makes them shoot other people. He makes them do bad things' (Invisible Children 2012a). Kony is shown as primitive in scenes where he is dressed in informal, mismatched army attire, talking and laughing casually with his rag-tag army in the Ugandan jungle. These images are immediately contrasted with images of a professional American army who are carefully examining maps and formulating strategies to capture Joseph Kony. This contrast is highlighted in dialogue that explains how the Ugandan army needs help to hunt and catch Kony: 'they need technology and training to track him in the vast jungle, that's where the American advisors come in …' (Invisible Children 2012a). Here, Kony is likened to a wild animal that must be tracked and hunted down by the apex hunter from the west. This juxtaposition of the savage human rights violator is contrasted by the image of a victim who is powerless and in need of help from outside intervention in order to overcome victimisation. Victims are often described as hordes of 'nameless, despairing and dispirited masses' or as marginalised, destitute, poor and helpless (Mutua 2001: 229). The video constructed 'ideal victims' (Christie 1986) through its depiction of poor and desperate Ugandan children sleeping in abandoned buildings in an attempt to escape Joseph Kony. Kony was cast as an evil and savage African warlord who preyed upon these innocent and defenceless children causing instability and violence throughout Uganda. Images of young children holding weapons and young girls surrounding Kony (alluding to girls as wives of war) further highlighted the violation of childhood innocence.

These images essentialise victimhood and perpetuate stereotypes based on gender, race and age. Drumbl (2012) highlights that representation of child soldiers as young Africans abducted and forced to wield weapons, as upheld by Kony 2012, is at odds with the reality of the use of child soldiers around the world. More often child soldiers are older, aged 15 years and above, voluntarily enroll, do not carry weapons and are not directly implicated in atrocity (Drumbl 2012). Kony 2012's depiction of young girls also emphasises the gendered understandings of conflict that are perpetuated through human rights discourses. Such discourses use

stereotypical views of women as innately peaceful and cast them solely as victims (Orford 2002). Images of young girls holding heavy weapons thus are doubly shocking as women and children become twice victimised because of their gender and age (Mutua 2001).

In Kony 2012, images of desperate victims are strengthened by the inclusion of the personal narrative of Jacob who recounted his experience of witnessing his brother's murder. The inclusion of Jacob's story is held as the exemplar of the plight of the nameless masses, providing a more vivid illustration of victimhood. Throughout the video there is a notable lack of Ugandan voice and experience, with the telling of Jacob's story the only inclusion of a Ugandan voice. This reinforces the highly racialised role of Ugandans as savages and victims because Ugandans are afforded no power to explain the complexities of the situation or provide culturally appropriate solutions, leaving the superior West to intervene with civilised examples of military and judicial prowess. Kony 2012 entrenches the international hierarchy of race, colour and gender because military intervention and international law, the latter based on masculinst foundations (Charlesworth 1999; Orford 2002), are presented as the only solutions. Race and gender stereotypes are thus combined, which reflects Spivak's (1999: 131) description of the human rights project as 'white men ... saving brown women from brown men'.

The valorisation of international intervention is facilitated through the construction of the ideal victim (Christie 1986) which mobilises anger against human rights violators and provides moral clarity about evil and innocence. The savages and victims metaphor constructs the need for a saviour who takes the form of the human rights actor and the entire human rights enterprise. The metaphor of the saviour is premised upon the moral superiority of the west and reflects the two intertwining characteristics of Eurocentric universalism, and Christianity's missionary zeal (Mutua 2001). Orford (1999: 695) similarly explores the saviour identity illustrating the 'hero' role that the international community plays in intervention stories stating: 'the international community plays the role of the masculine, active hero, while states targeted for intervention occupy the position of the secondary, passive victim'.

The western world and the US in particular were depicted as the saviours of the Kony story. At the end of the video we see the US sending in military support and technology to help the 'primitive' Ugandan army track down Kony in the vast and savage Ugandan jungle. These scenes employ the saviour metaphor by constructing Ugandans as primitive and in need of rescue by the strong, experienced and morally superior US. Similar saviour references feature throughout the documentary as US activists declare: 'we are demanding justice'; 'we are going to do everything that we can to stop them. We are going to stop them'; 'we [are] committed to stop Kony and rebuild what he has destroyed'; 'if we succeed we change the course of human history' (Invisible Children 2012a). The presentation of the pre-formulated solution of military intervention helped produce a sellable, easy to digest message capable of achieving an empathetic response from a wide audience. As Jason Russell stated, 'no one wants a boring documentary on Africa ... maybe we have to make it pop and we have to make it cool ... we view ourself [sic] as the Pixar of human rights stories' (Kron and Goodman 2012). *Invisible Children* explained their solution-driven strategy, stating:

> There are a lot of good documentaries out there that paint a well-told story about something that's wrong with the world. But ... they rarely presume to propose an answer; they just beautifully articulate the problem. And we hate that ... What we did was paint moral clarity and provide direct action steps (Jefferson 2012).

The presentation of a clear solution to the identified problem was galvanising and the focus enabled many people to connect with the documentary, giving it 'spreadability' (Gregory 2012).

Along with the US army, the International Criminal Court (ICC) is also presented as a saviour for Uganda because the video strongly supports prosecution of Joseph Kony by the ICC. The

narrator, Jason Russell, states: 'in 2002 when the Court was first started their job was to find and demand the arrest of the world's worst criminals' (Invisible Children 2012a). The nobility of the ICC as a saviour is supported by statements from the former Chief Prosecutor of the Court, Luis Moreno Ocampo: 'Kony is the first guy indicted by the ICC ... we needed to plan how to arrest Kony. The only way to stop Kony is to show that we're going to arrest you' (Invisible Children 2012a). The narratives of the Kony 2012 video parallel the Court's ideologies of justice, fairness and equality, and assist with the construction and reinforcement of the ICC through enduring representations of savages, victims and saviours.[5]

There are several worrisome implications associated with the strategies adopted by *Invisible Children* and the solution that they proffer. By presenting US military action and international criminal prosecution by the ICC as the best (and only) solution, the Kony 2012 campaign reinforced the narratives of savages and saviours that in turn shape the structure of international society and reproduce a geopolitics where powerful western countries can engage via humanitarian intervention. This intervention is presented as impartial and benevolent as the rule of law is invoked to criminalise particular actions while justifying intervention, thus entrenching the identities of heroes and villains or savages and saviours as an ordering principle for international society. Human rights narratives are legitimised by international law and international criminal justice which adds the process of criminalisation of the savages, a process which reinforces the uneven landscape of global relations.

The use of prosecution and rule of law narratives obfuscate the political and strategic nature of intervention and present international prosecution as axiomatic and unproblematic. This is particularly troublesome as the rule of law narrative and the legitimising force of international criminal justice is increasingly being used alongside military intervention. While it may not be a new phenomenon, the merging of both military action and international law, defined as 'muscular humanitarianism', is intensifying and increasing and is operating under the rubric of the responsibility to protect (Orford 1999, 2011). The Kony 2012 Campaign bolstered these narratives by urging US military intervention in Uganda to catch Joseph Kony and support the ICC's attempt to prosecute Joseph Kony in The Hague. Both the US and the ICC were able to use these narratives to intervene in Uganda in ways that were meaningful and useful to their strategic interests. For example, the US capitalised on the wave of support for intervention in Uganda to establish a military presence in the African region (Branch 2012). Following *Invisible Children's* initial campaign, the US sent troops to Uganda to help the Ugandan government find Joseph Kony.[6]

At the same time, the ICC is able to connect with and use the Kony 2012 campaign to further its visibility and credibility as an emerging institution on the international stage. Ocampo claimed that 'the video mobilised the world and that the viral strategy and campaign to make international criminals famous could assist in the fight for international justice' (Holligan 2012). The Kony 2012 video closely aligned with the ICC's narrative of ending impunity, stopping and preventing violence, and helping victims through international prosecutions. In particular, the focus of the Kony 2012 video on the use of child soldiers legitimated the ICC's current focus on child soldiers. In Uganda, widespread crimes have occurred and have been committed by a variety of actors. The parochial account given by the Kony 2012 campaign aligns with the ICC's narrow investigations and prosecutions in Uganda. The ICC was thus able to feature in and use the Kony 2012 video to legitimise its actions and validate its model of selective prosecutions which are also underpinned by the savages, victims and saviour metaphor.

The Ugandan government is presented as both a savage country through depictions of Kony and the LRA and a victim country through images of a primitive army and impotent government which are unable to control the crimes of the LRA. These subjectivities do not afford power to the Ugandan people but rather reinforce an international order based on strong, powerful, saviour states, and weak, defective victim/savage states. This narrative does not acknowledge

the strategic nature of the Ugandan government which has itself used international intervention to achieve its own interests.[7] Uganda's referral of the situation to the ICC focused exclusively on crimes committed by the LRA (Government of Uganda 2003), meaning the government's crimes remain unrecognised in the international community. In this way, Kony 2012 further legitimates the Ugandan government by casting them as victims who are incapable of controlling the LRA. Simultaneously, the state of Uganda is also 'savage', for in the savage, victim, saviour metaphor of the human rights project the state is 'depicted as the operational instrument of savagery' (Mutua 2001: 202).

Slacktivism and the global saviour subject

The Kony 2012 video exemplified the capacity and scale of digital technologies and online connectivity in an age where 'most of the barriers to group action have collapsed and without those barriers, we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done' (Shirky 2008: 22). The Kony 2012 Campaign lowered involvement thresholds, preventing participants from deviating too far from everyday life practices or investing too much time, energy or resources to participate. This form of 'low-threshold activism' does have its consequences such as sustaining the digital divide, loss of newness, weak network ties, and limiting the effects of involvement (cf Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010).

The presentation of a simplified version of events in Uganda, along with pre-formulated solutions, restricts opportunity for activists to engage in actual reform. Activists' voices, in the form of 'clicks of support', are instead used to bolster the rhetoric of *Invisible Children* and sustain the organisation's *modus operandi* of creating flashy awareness-raising videos. *Invisible Children* reaped significant funds from the Kony 2012 Campaign and proceeds have gone into funding other videos and awareness-raising activities (Invisible Children 2012b). However, focusing solely on awareness raising results in superficial engagement with problems, a limited understanding of complex issues, and solutions that have minimal impact.

Many commentators have criticised the increasing ease of online political participation and have adopted the term 'slacktivism'[8] to designate particular forms of political behavior characterised as 'feel-good', 'easy' or 'lazy' digital activism (cf Morozov 2009a). Slacktivism can be thought of as 'low-risk, low-cost activity via social media, whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity' (Rotman et al. 2011: 280). Along with this 'feel-good' sensation, slacktivism provides users with an enhanced sense of political efficacy. However, users are generally limited in generating reform or influencing decision-makers. For Morozov (2009b), slacktivism is evident 'where our digital effort makes us feel very useful and important but have zero social impact'.

Halupka (2014: 115-116) identifies clicktivism as including, among others, 'online petitions, content sharing, [and] social buttons (for example, Facebook's "Like" button)'. Through participation in slacktivism, it is considered that the very act itself signals '… the end-rather than the beginning-of our engagement with a cause …' (Morozov 2009b). Gladwell (2010) is critical of slacktivism and digital activism more generally, highlighting how such activities rely on loose ties and foster weak connections as opposed to strong personal connections characteristic of traditional face-to-face interactions. This often leads to a lack of resolve from activists to confront entrenched norms and practices (Gladwell 2010). By encouraging participants to simply click a 'like' button, slacktivism fails to inspire 'with the kind of emotional fire that forces a shift in public perception' (McCafferty 2011: 18). In due course, it is thought slacktivism may replace traditional forms of political participation (cf Christensen 2011). In a similar vein, White (2010) draws attention to the promotion of widespread yet shallow engagement with issues driven by the logic of consumerism. Under the logic of clicktivism, social change is marketed as a brand by using strategies of advertising and market research which in turn has the effect of passive social engagement (cf White 2010). As a result, slacktivism can be '… seen as potentially

damaging to the quality of civic and political life as they distract citizens from making more meaningful and important contributions' (Skoric 2012: 77).

Brough (2012) describes Kony 2012 as exemplifying commodity activism, because it involves the branding and consumption of humanitarian projects. *Invisible Children* succeeded in motivating individuals to participate in the movement because little time, effort and resource were demanded. Through association with the humanitarian savior identity and the Kony 2012 brand, individuals understood themselves to traverse borders and solve global problems across expanded and deterritorialised connections. Yet it is predominately western global elites and those with the capacity to engage with digital technologies which hold the privilege of the morally superior, global saviour. The 'feel good' factor associated with online participation is increased in the 'age of great exhibitionism' (Keen 2012) where identity is formed via online platforms. Participation in Kony 2012 meant being part of a worldwide phenomenon, an appealing prospect for affirming the subjectivities of actors as heroes, who are locally and globally engaged.

The heroic or 'feel good' factor associated with slacktivism is a major part of the attraction of digital activism. Christensen (2011) points out that digital activism is more effective in making participants feel good about themselves than in achieving political goals. In this sense, digital action serves to increase awareness of situations but achieves limited practical outcomes aside from confirming the heroic identity of those who participate. The Kony video reinforced this subjectivity by depicting young activists as heroes to mobilise their support. For example, in the video, Jason Russell declares: 'who are you to end a war? I am here to tell you – who are you not to?' (Invisible Children 2012a). Further, inspirational cries for action galvanised support, as Jason Russell declared: 'we are not just studying human history, we are shaping it' and 'the better world we want is coming, it's just waiting for us to stop at nothing'. These types of messages ensure that the emotional and affective sentiment is captured and internalised by participants (Conradson and McKay 2007). As this illustrates, the construction of activists as heroes relies on the savages, victims and saviours metaphor, as the passive victim in the narrative reaffirms the importance of those who identify as a heroic figure (Orford 1999). These narratives augment biographies of caring and help relieve the 'white girl's burden', or equally the 'white man's burden' (Izama 2012a), of affluent consumer activists residing in the developed world (Finnegan 2013).

There are others, however, who are unconvinced by the dismissive arguments charged against clicktivism. Halupka (2014: 116) suggests that current research 'continues to describe clicktivism in broad terms, failing to effectively establish what it does, and does not, involve'. From this position, primary appraisals of the term have circumscribed clicktivism to a 'mode of online engagement', while neglecting the 'specific form of online action'. Halupka (2014: 124-125) offers a method to better recognise the Cause and Object of digital activism.[9] The result is an improved comprehension of clicktivism 'as a political action, separate from the campaigns that it supports'.

In a US context, Lee and Hsieh (2013) investigate the effects of slacktivism (signing an online petition) on activism (civic participation). The outcomes of their study indicate that when civic participation (that is, donating to a charity) is consistent with slacktivism (that is, petition signing) participants will continue to be reliable and donate to charity, demonstrating a consistency effect (Lee and Hsieh 2013). Alternatively, when slacktivism was not observed, participants in fact donated more to an unrelated charity, demonstrating a moral balancing effect (Lee and Hsieh 2013). What Lee and Hsieh (2013: 9) highlight is that 'slacktivism in general may help subsequent activism, regardless of how many people actually choose to participate in the slacktivism'. Similarly, a recent study by Christensen (2012) found that slacktivism does not contribute to findings of political and civic detachment, inactivity, or lack of political competence as a result of online activism.

Reflecting on the slacktivism nature of Kony 2012, we witness that the *Invisible Children's* Campaign provided more than a simplified and passive engagement with a particular phenomenon. With international debate and criticism directed towards *Invisible Children's* seemingly parochial promotion of Kony 2012, it in fact expanded discussions beyond Joseph Kony and the LRA. The amount of attention given to the video enveloped the Ugandan and US governments as well as the African Union (AU) into the fray, all of which supported the effort, leaving open the possibility for criticism (Su and Besliu 2012).[10] This in turn expanded space for interrogation of the actors and institutions involved. Beyond *Invisible Children's* promotion of Kony 2012, the campaign itself also engendered a type of personalised, user-generated analysis of the matter. The result was an evaluation of the historical context of the LRA in Uganda by inspired participants who conducted their own investigation. Further, by questioning suitable forms of intervention in Uganda, this personalised inquiry also examined the role of the ICC. Most importantly, it also enabled participants to directly engage with Ugandan and African perspectives (cf Brown et al. 2012). What this establishes, in the context of Kony 2012, is that, far from the harms associated with 'low-cost', 'low-risk', 'lazy' and 'feel good' digital activism, slacktivism processes actually expanded awareness, stimulated debate across temporal and spatial boundaries, and developed nuances of deeper issues present in Uganda and the international community.

Despite these mobilising discourses, the Kony 2012 Campaign essentially endeavored to engineer subjects to uncritically consume narratives and solutions that reinforced their subjectivity as a global hero-activist. This lack of in-depth and balanced knowledge delivered by Kony 2012, coupled with its simple and appealing solution, led for the most part to uncritical examination of a situation in Uganda while appealing to the status quo. Kony 2012 reinforced the problematic subjectivities and structures that shape muscular humanitarianism, based on selective judicial and military intervention, and served to reproduce it. Activists were not encouraged to use their agency in a reflexive manner while reform was dependent on the consumption of the brand, rather than the desire to understand the problem. As a result, activists were productive in maintaining hegemonic narratives and structures of domination. Gladwell (2010) summarises the concern: 'The instruments of social media are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient. They are not a natural enemy of the status quo'.

It is clear to see how the charges of slacktivism can be levied against the Kony 2012 Campaign. *Invisible Children* sought to garner widespread online support which was quantified by the number of YouTube views, Facebook 'likes' and (re)Tweets achieved. *Invisible Children* explicitly sought to empower young people to use the digital medium to participate and support by sharing and liking their video. To encourage this type of participation they used the logics of digital culture and connective action, emphasising the transformative potential of social media. The central refrain was that 'humanity's greatest desire is to belong and connect', and that 'right now, there are more people on Facebook than were on the planet 200 years ago' (Invisible Children 2012a). As Kron and Goodman (2012) highlight, the video 'clearly tapped into a vein of youthful idealism that the authorities the world over have been struggling – and failing – to comprehend and keep up with'.

Moving beyond the advantages of digital activism and, in turn, slacktivism, on political and civic engagement, Skoric (2012: 86) rightfully warns that the peril of slacktivism lies in its '… misperception that these digital activities [slacktivism] directly lead to actual political or social changes, and thus may lull citizens into an illusion that such activities are not only effective, but also preferable to the methods of traditional activism'. What we suggest, then, is that the Kony 2012 Campaign juxtaposed humanitarian interventionism along status quo narratives thus reproducing normative structures of domination. However, at the same time, it also raised awareness of the atrocities committed by the LRA and galvanised some critical discussion of the international response by the ICC, US, Uganda and AU. Without the reach and engagement of

Kony 2012, the latter would otherwise be unfamiliar. Nevertheless, the question of whether it is justified with the pleasures of the former remains. For the purpose of our argument, participants are not observed as simplified and indolent consumers of the Kony 2012 brand *per se* but regrettably limited in their repertoires of action for change through the medium in which it is presented.

Conclusion

Kony 2012 illustrated the 'dark side' of the commodification of humanitarian action (Kennedy 2004) and the danger of promoting oversimplified 'Pixar' like productions. The distorted messages and pre-fabricated solution to the complex situation in Uganda resulted in a reinforcement of passive activist subjectivities. The documentary was a one-dimensional, esoteric representation of a complex and long-standing conflict in Uganda where emotive visualisations hailed empathetic responses. *Invisible Children's* use of the savages, victims and saviours metaphor was driven by a desire for impact and spreadability in a digital age where easily-digestible narratives render complex situations and messages more understandable and engaging. Oversimplification arose from the heavy reliance on existing narratives and hegemonic templates of violence and human rights, and it was these narratives told so effectively that captured so many activists in the digital space. This meant the video achieved widespread attention yet lacked meaningful insight into the real actors and causes of injustice in Uganda (Izama 2012b), and consequently provided limited critical insight into options for effective change (Gregory 2012). The Kony 2012 Campaign reinforced existing subjectivities based on cultural templates of savages, victims and saviours and maintained western-liberal narratives by coupling militarism and institutional criminal justice as responses to Joseph Kony, while encouraging activists to passively adopt the role of hero. In doing this, the video legitimated and cemented the increasing reliance on muscular humanitarianism and the blurring of military and judicial intervention as the dominant structure for international society.

As the struggles in Uganda illustrate, while intervention narratives play out on the international stage, local governments and actors are able to selectively engage with these narratives to achieve their strategic interests at the local level. The desire of *Invisible Children* to present moral clarity through the rendering of such a complex and long-standing conflict into a simple story of good and evil provided an appealing basis for mass engagement with the issue. Yet *Invisible Children's* presentation of a pre-formulated solution provided little room for individuals to question the forces that maintain the framework of international society, let alone the problematic pattern of international intervention. The Kony 2012 Campaign did not stop the physical violence of the LRA; at the time of writing, Joseph Kony remains at large and the LRA continues to perpetrate violence in Uganda and neighbouring countries (United Nations 2013). The campaign also perpetuated the symbolic violence of western hegemony by reinforcing the metaphor of savages and saviours that underpins the uneven international order.

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[2] Facebook's 'like' and 'share' options are defined as social buttons which enable users to communicate and express their opinions, while at the same time forwarding information to other users (cf Halupka 2014).

[3] The 'Cover the Night' event fizzled out (Garber 2012) and went relatively unnoticed, eclipsed by the massive online success of the Kony 2012 video.

[4] Violence, political turmoil, war, and conflict have plagued Uganda since its independence in 1962 (Allen 2006). This violence has been caused by constant political coups and insurgencies from rebel groups struggling for political power over the past two decades (Mullins and Rothe 2008a: 129).

[5] These narratives are also reflected in other documentaries that highlight human rights abuses and call for international criminal justice responses. For example, the documentary *The Reckoning: The Battle for the International Criminal Court* (2009) presents the ICC as the saviour of countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who are represented as primitive and uncivilised. The film depicts the violence in the DRC through scenes that shows groups of marauding rebels, led by rebel-leader Thomas Lubunga, yelling and waving crude weapons while pillaging helpless communities (Handmaker 2011). As Handmaker (2011: 104) highlights, the implications of the film is clear 'without the ICC, the Congo would descend ever further into barbarism and despair'.

[6] Some commentators have cited recent discoveries of large oil deposits in Uganda as the real reason the U.S. established a military presence in Uganda (Branch 2012; Curtis and McCarthy 2012).

[7] For example, Museveni and the Ugandan government engaged with the ICC in a bid to neutralise their political opponents, the LRA, while increasing their international profile as allies of the west (Branch 2007; Nouwen and Werner 2011).

[8] This article considers the term clicktivism as a component part of the larger slacktivism conceptualisation. The terms are used interchangeably.

[9] According to Halupka (2014: 120-121), the Cause 'denotes those factors that influence a decision to act', while the Object 'refers to content created in an online environment'. For example, a user will post a link of a newspaper article to a Facebook group (Cause) while another's interaction with it ('re-sharing') becomes the Object. It is important to note that such action (Cause/Object) is politically motivated and found within the 'scene' of the context.

[10] The U.S backed military initiative drew heavy criticised from commenters, while Uganda is seen promoting economic development and tourism during a time of crisis (Su and Besliu 2012).

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