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Morality, Media and Memes: Kony 2012 and Humanitarian Virality

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This essay looks at the Kony 2012 campaign, which emerged as a response to the ongoing violence perpetrated by Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, and how this campaign went viral on social media. The essay focuses on the use of networks and images by Invisible Children, the charity behind the Kony 2012 campaign, to "go viral" and whether humanitarian virality is a positive or negative status for NGOs to achieve. Firstly, however, it is important to outline the context of the crisis in Uganda.

Context of the Crisis: Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army

The Lord's Resistance Army, which Joseph Kony leads, have been active in Uganda since 1988 (Al Jazeera, 2014). Seeking to establish a system of governance based on the biblical "Ten Commandments", Kony's group are known for their use of child abduction as a political strategy in the hope of achieving their aims (ibid). In addition, the LRA also practice torture on unarmed civilians, destroy communities and use the children they have abducted as child soldiers (The Atlantic, 2011). Although Kony and his group had gained occasional media attention throughout their existence, they did not achieve mass coverage until the Kony 2012 campaign. The group behind this campaign was a San Diego-based non-governmental organisation called Invisible Children (IC).

This small NGO's stated aim was to convince the U.S. government to track down and arrest Joseph Kony. In reality, however, their aim was to "get 500,000 views of the film during 2012" (The Guardian, 2015). Instead, the campaign's launch film garnered 100 million views in the six days following its publication (ibid). In other words, the campaign went viral.

It is the notion of virality that I examine in the rest of my essay. Kurasawa (2019:399) calls this specific phenomenon, that of an NGO campaign going viral, "humanitarian virality". This essay considers how Kony 2012 achieved humanitarian virality and whether this phenomenon is something to be replicated or avoided.

Humanitarian Virality: Networks and Images

Before we analyse Kony 2012, it is important to establish exactly what humanitarian virality is. The notion of virality refers to "the potentially multiplicative spread of content through the ecosystem as [people] receive the content and are motivated to share" (Mills, 2012:163). Kurasawa innovatively applies this concept to the realm of humanitarian NGOs, arguing that humanitarian virality is reliant on both the networked structure of social media and a compelling use of visual media (2019:401). This section thus follows the structure of Kurasawa's analysis, focusing on how the use of networks and images made Kony 2012 a viral campaign.

On April 5th 2012, the Kony 2012 film was launched on YouTube. The campaign targeted 20 "culturemakers" and 12 "policymakers" via their website, where "clicking on any of the celebs' photos automatically crafts a tweet directed at the Culturemaker [or Policymaker], complete with the Kony 2012 web address and two related hashtags" (New York Magazine, 2012). The targeted public figures, who received these tweets from everyday citizens, subsequently shared or retweeted the film. This attention gained via social media led people worldwide to share and retweet the

Morality, Media and Memes: Kony 2012 and Humanitarian Virality

Written by Nathan Olsen

link to the film and join Facebook groups relating to the campaign (ibid). The culturemaker/policymaker strategy was the primary approach through which Invisible Children hoped to go viral, and it is a strategy that was very effective in achieving its aim (Madden et al., 2016:42-43). The campaign's use of social media also incorporated the hashtags #Kony2012, #StopKony and #CoverTheNight (the name of the show of solidarity that Invisible Children planned for the 20th April) and utilised a variety of merchandise (Mashable, 2013; LSE, 2012).

In terms of attention, the campaign was a success. The YouTube video was, at the time, the fastest to ever reach 100 million views and there were over 5 million tweets about the campaign within a week of its launch (The Guardian, 2012). The remarkable virality of the campaign also led to increased coverage from the international print media, thus perpetuating the attention that the campaign received (Maasilta and Haavisto, 2014:467). Madianou (2013:262) attributes the success of the campaign to this relationship between social media and traditional media: "Kony 2012 is a typical polymedia event...it started as a YouTube documentary... [and] generated a plethora of blogs, online discussions, newspaper articles, television and radio reports". Madianou (ibid) thus argues that the success of the campaign was determined more by the reaction it created than Invisible Children's own social media support. Yet, IC's existing network did play a role – as Karlin and Matthew (2012:256) emphasise, "Kony 2012 came from a seed that had been planted nearly a decade earlier and benefited from extensive pre-existing, place-based, and virtual networks reaching some five hundred thousand people". Without such support, the Kony 2012 campaign would never have gone viral as it would not have achieved the initial social media reaction necessary for it to gain momentum. Social networks were thus vital to the virality of Kony 2012 in terms of both the initial, momentum-building support it required and sustaining the ongoing reaction.

It is important to note that this campaign centred around the launch film; the campaign went viral because the video went viral. Harsin (2013:266) writes that the campaign film is "polished" and "moving" and succeeds by seeking to "transform viewers into active citizens". Bal et al. (2013:204) further this point by arguing that "the message of Kony 2012 was that simply by forwarding the video on, and educating others about Kony, people could make a difference in the world". Thus, Kony 2012 was the epitome of humanitarian virality – notionally helping people far away by spreading a simple message over social media. Gregory (2012:465) ascribes the simple and optimistic narrative of the video to the fact that its primary audience was teenagers in America and other Western countries. A complex, fact-filled campaign would have been less likely to catch this demographic's attention and therefore would have been less likely to go viral.

Not only were the suggested actions made by the campaign easy to follow and pass on, but the explanation of the situation in Uganda was also made accessible and understandable. Meriläinen and Vos (2014:248) argue that the video was particularly effective due to its overly simplistic framing of Joseph Kony as evil and the Western activists campaigning against him as good. Along with the networked nature of social media activity, this othering of Kony helped to rally the solidarity of those involved with or enthused by the campaign (Gould, 2014:208). The narrative of good and evil was also parodied by social media users questioning the simplicity of the campaign but who nonetheless created memes which spread the campaign message (Shirley, 2016:56).

This section has demonstrated that the combination of reliable social media support, organic reactions to the film and a compelling yet simplistic visual narrative made Kony 2012 a viral sensation. In the next section, we consider how the simplicity necessary to achieving humanitarian virality undermined the positive effects of the Kony 2012 campaign.

Is Going Viral Good?

Having examined how the Kony 2012 campaign went viral, it is equally important to ask whether humanitarian virality is a status to be achieved or a trend to be avoided. This is crucial to the social media strategies of NGOs as it defines precisely what they should or should not be trying to do. We have so far seen the extent of Kony 2012's success in terms of views, likes and shares. However, it is equally important to look at whether the process of making a campaign viral does more harm than the awareness raised by the campaign does good.

As noted in the previous section, at least some of the participants in the Kony 2012 phenomenon were aware of the

Morality, Media and Memes: Kony 2012 and Humanitarian Virality

Written by Nathan Olsen

campaign's shortcomings regarding the complex nature of the crisis in Uganda (Shirley, 2016). Once the campaign went viral, however, these shortcomings were magnified. Within the first week of the video's success, numerous print media sources condemned the dishonesty and oversimplification of the campaign (Andacht, 2014:217). Writing for the Huffington Post, the Director of the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OUSFDA) heavily criticised the Kony 2012 campaign, arguing that "global institutions have been seized with this issue for years" and that "focusing international political will on a manhunt detracts from engaging with the region's deeper development and security challenges" (Huffington Post, 2012). This shows us that Invisible Children's campaign was fundamentally misguided in terms of its core aim and served as a distraction from practical solutions rather than improving the situation.

Importantly, the Director of OUSFDA concluded that "there is also a vital lesson about the importance of getting the message right, rather than just getting the message out" (ibid). The importance of getting the message right is demonstrated by the reaction to local screenings of the Kony 2012 film in Uganda, where scenes of violence occurred as a consequence of what the local people saw as an unfair and harmful portrayal of the situation they were living through (National Post, 2012). Indeed, much of the criticism targeted at Invisible Children and the Kony 2012 campaign surrounded the narrative of White Saviours rescuing native people from issues that would supposedly never occur in their own countries (The Atlantic, 2012). As Bex and Craps (2016:34) powerfully argue, Invisible Children's entire campaign was symptomatic of the "White Saviour Industrial Complex". By perpetuating the narrative that an African country needed White people to come and save them, the Kony 2012 campaign did more harm than good to the supposed recipients of their generosity. Despite the fact that IC raised \$30 million dollars and generated so much attention, Joseph Kony is still active (NPR, 2014). Meanwhile, the campaign exacerbated Western perceptions of Uganda as an impoverished country run by warlords (Hershey and Arttime, 2014).

The humanitarian virality that Invisible Children achieved with the Kony 2012 campaign was unprecedented at the time and has not been replicated on such a scale since. This is for a good reason – the vast majority of NGOs are unwilling to simplify crises to the extent that Kony 2012 did. NGOs and charities face a choice between changing their messaging in the hope of gaining further media attention or accurately portraying crises and not being as popular. The humanitarian sector is primarily focused on victims of crises not the advocates of such victims (Barnett, 2018:314). For Invisible Children to present the crisis in Uganda as they did was therefore irresponsible, as their campaign fundamentally did not improve the situation and potentially exacerbated it (Channel 4, 2012). The process of turning an admirable cause into a viral sensation appears to remove the normal ethical concern or sensitivity that humanitarian organisations should prioritise. We should consequently be critical of future campaigns that replicate the viral status that Kony 2012 was able to achieve. If such a campaign existed that was able to rival the success of Kony 2012 whilst maintaining the ethical standards of the humanitarian sector as a whole, then it would be worth revisiting the concept of humanitarian virality. Until then, we should treat Kony 2012 as an example of how not to do humanitarian campaigning.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated both how Kony 2012 went viral and why humanitarian virality is not a desirable goal for humanitarian NGOs to achieve. In order to go viral, Invisible Children used emotive images and social networks to spread their message. In doing so, however, IC simplified the ongoing crisis in Uganda and utilised a problematic and dangerous narrative centred around White Saviours. Although Kony 2012 raised awareness of the Ugandan crisis and Joseph Kony's crimes, the way in which Invisible Children campaigned did more harm than good.

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Morality, Media and Memes: Kony 2012 and Humanitarian Virality

Written by Nathan Olsen

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Morality, Media and Memes: Kony 2012 and Humanitarian Virality

Written by Nathan Olsen

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