Beyond #Kony2012

Atrocity, Awareness + Activism in the Internet Age

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Preface

This book is for those who know a little about Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army, and want to know more.

Invisible Children's Kony 2012 has become the most viral video ever. Concerned citizens around the world, from middle school students to celebrities like Oprah and Justin Bieber, watched the film and shared it with their friends. It has now been viewed more than 87 million times.

That success was soon met by a critical backlash. Critics nearly as varied as the campaign's supporters pointed out that Invisible Children was offering an oversimplified, even misleading narrative. They faulted the campaign for failing to provide a context for the LRA conflict, and pointed out that the video portrayed Africans as either helpless victims, or heartless killers.

This book is both a collection of that criticism, and a constructive response to it. The authors each wrote a short essay offering information that they felt was missing from the video, or explaining how they thought the campaign could be improved.

The first several chapters provide historical and po-

litical context. Adam Branch, Daniel Kalinaki, and Ayesha Nibbe explain the roots of the conflict, and how it has persisted for so many years. Alex Little and Patrick Wegner discuss various attempts to end the conflict through peace negotiations, ICC arrest warrants, and military operations, and why they have not been successful.

Later chapters consider the ethics and effectiveness of awareness campaigns like Kony 2012. Jina Moore and Glenna Gordon draw on their experiences as journalists to critique the video's portrayal of Africa and the people who live there. Rebecca Hamilton, Laura Seay, Kate Cronin-Furman, and Amanda Taub examine the weakness of "awareness" advocacy. Alanna Shaikh explains the ethical dangers of bad aid work. Teddy Ruge offers a different view of Africa, as a place of dynamic innovation instead of violence and helplessness. And youth activist Sam Menefee-Libey describes his frustration with the tone and substance of the campaign meant to target his generation.

– Amanda Taub, April 20, 2012

Armchair Critics Respond

Kate Cronin-Furman and Amanda Taub

First came the video. Then came the backlash. Then came the backlash-to-the-backlash. Except that Invisible Children and its supporters didn't just rally to defend their oh-so-very-viral video, they challenged its critics' standing to express an opinion on it in the first place.

One particular insult kept popping up: that those who questioned the campaign were just "armchair critics," inferior to the brave activists who were taking "real" action and raising awareness of a serious problem. The most prominent articulations of the argument appeared in the *New York Times* opinion pages. On March 12th, Roger Cohen wrote that he backed Invisible Children co-founder Jason Russell over his "armchair critics," because "he's put his boots on the ground and he's doing something." Two days later, Cohen's colleague Nicholas Kristof echoed his thoughts, referring to criticism of the Kony 2012 cam-

paign as "the sneering scorn of do-nothing armchair cynics." Similar sentiments could be found across the internet, on blogs, and in the comments sections of Kony-related articles.

Why should this be such a common defense of a campaign that is, itself, targeted towards the couch-dwelling masses? People who watched the video and shared it on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr hardly had "boots on the ground" in Central Africa. Why is it that mobilizing to change policy with no information or context beyond a youTube video should be considered unassailably praiseworthy, while offering a different perspective based on deeper knowledge and experience is the act of an "armchair cynic"?

The answer, we believe, lies in the conviction that moral authority requires a particular type of engagement with the suffering of others. Specifically, the eye-opening discovery of injustice, followed by the decision to risk life and limb to help. And awareness campaigns, with their focus on the personal narratives of these "white saviors," offer a way for the folks at home to cloak themselves in borrowed moral superiority.

In this essay, we suggest that this type of advocacy is ineffective, and even harmful. The heroic central role is not available to those whose nationality, gender, or

poverty prevents them from performing acts of self-sacrifice in order to put their "boots on the ground." By focusing only on those who can, it privileges the already-privileged. Moreover, it demands a simplified narrative that is focused on "raising awareness" at home, and elides the details of how that awareness will translate into change overseas. At the very least, this risks wasting supporters' time. At worst, it encourages them to back policies that can cause serious harm, without understanding, or taking responsibility for, the consequences.

Armchairs vs. Heroes

The Kony 2012 campaign, like other awareness campaigns, is enthusiastically pro-armchair. Its goal is to motivate the heretofore-uninformed denizens of Facebook and Tumblr to change the world by speaking out against Kony and his atrocities. If their voices are important enough to be the focus of a multi-million dollar awareness campaign, how can Invisible Children or its supporters suggest that experience "on the ground" is a prerequisite for a credible opinion?

Additionally, most critics of the Kony 2012 campaign are not "armchair" anything. Rather, they are Ugandans, aid workers, journalists, survivors of LRA atrocities, and researchers who have lived in the region and

are experts on the LRA. Boots can't get much more "on the ground" than that. Dismissing these individuals' concerns as "sneering scorn" reveals a belief that only certain opinions are worth listening to. By deriding critical voices as "do-nothing armchair cynics" whose input is less credible than that of the Kony 2012 filmmakers, Kristof and his pals are suggesting that expertise comes from emotional engagement and personal risk-taking, not from knowledge or practical experience.

Establishing his own credibility as an expert on the region, Kristof notes: "I've been held at gunpoint in Central African Republic and chased through the Congo jungle by a warlord whose massacres I interrupted." This story echoes the Invisible Children founders' tale of their group's origins: They stumbled upon the conflict in northern Uganda during a summer filmmaking trip in 2003 when the LRA attacked the car in front of theirs, and subsequently decided to forgo the comforts of the developed world and commit themselves to helping the LRA's victims.

While bravery and self-sacrifice are admirable, this brand of credibility-establishment isn't available to everyone. Kristof is lauded for a commitment to investigative journalism that doesn't flinch from threats to his personal safety, but female journalists who find themselves in similarly dangerous situations meet

with very different reactions. Consider the case of Lara Logan. When the CBS reporter was sexually assaulted while covering the protests in Egypt last year, variations on the theme of "what was an attractive blonde woman doing there?" were a common response. Not only was there a conspicuous absence of praise for her bravery in pursuing an important story in a difficult context, many reactions denied her agency entirely, asking "Why did her editor send her to such a dangerous place?"

Likewise, being a westerner, male or female, offers certain protections even in highly dangerous environments. As George Packer memorably wrote in 2009, "it's always the fixer who dies." The list of local drivers, interpreters, and journalists who have lost their lives in situations from which the western reporters they were assisting managed to escape is heartbreaking. There was Sultan Munadi, the *New York Times* fixer who died in Afghanistan during a British Special Forces raid intended to rescue him and *Times* reporter Stephen Farrell. Farrell survived. And Ajmal Naqshbandi, the Afghan fixer who was working with Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo. Naqshbandi was beheaded, Mastrogiacomo eventually released. In 2011, in Syria, driver Mohamed Shaglouf was murdered at a checkpoint by Qaddafi loyalists. The four journalists in his car - the

New York Times' Anthony Shadid, Stephen Farrell, Lynsey Addario, and Tyler Hicks - were kidnapped and eventually released.

Local human rights workers who facilitate the efforts of international NGOs face similar risks. While researchers from New York or London headquarters can rely on the backing of their embassies to assist them if arrested or expelled, local activists can hardly turn to the government whose violations they are publicizing for protection. The stakes are simply higher when you are protesting from within than from abroad.

We are not suggesting that Western journalists or researchers put their own safety ahead of their local colleagues. Nor do we believe that the "boots on the ground" narrative intends to privilege the voices of "brave" men over "foolhardy" women, or "self-sacrificing" foreigners over "compromised" locals. But scratch the surface of the attack on the critical response to Kony 2012, and you'll find an implicit assumption that only certain voices should be permitted to speak. That's the tricky thing about privilege - you don't notice it when it's yours.

For our part, we are more than happy to cop to being armchair critics. Unlike the founders of Invisible Children, we have never set off for "Africa" with a carload of video cameras, looking for people to

save. This is not due to apathy. We just don't think that our status as privileged Americans gives us the ability to "save" anyone. Nor have we ever been held at gunpoint by warlords whose massacres we've interrupted. It is a source of pride for us that, when we are working in dicey environments far from home, we take care with our own safety and the safety of those who help us. And we don't think being similarly cautious or reluctant to enact the role of white savior should render anyone else's opinions irrelevant and non-credible, either.

The Trouble with Awareness Campaigns

The hissing about upholstered seating, like all ad hominem attacks, ignores the substance of the critiques. No one is saying that the Kony 2012 campaign is flawed because Joseph Kony is an awesome guy who should be left in peace to maim and murder as he pleases. Rather, the critics have pointed out that the shortcomings of the campaign may lead to real harm.

The policies that Invisible Children advocates have potentially dire consequences. The campaign calls for the United States to support the Ugandan government militarily, but gives no indication of the risks of such

a policy. There is no mention of Museveni's troops' violence against the Acholi civilian population or the fact that forcible internment of the population in IDP camps resulted in far more deaths than Kony's attacks ever did.

Applauding Invisible Children's enthusiasm, Kristof excused their over-simplification of the situation with the LRA, explaining that: "Complexity is, er, complicated." This statement echoes Kristof's defenses of his own work. Challenged for printing the name and photo of a 9-year-old victim of rape, he responded that his actions were appropriate because it was "the only way to raise the issue on the agenda." Asked why his columns about Africa so frequently focus on "whites in shining armor," he suggested that American readers can't be convinced to care about far-off crises unless they have a white protagonist to identify with.

While all that may be true, the complexity-stripped, savior-focused awareness campaign also appeals to followers precisely because it is oversimplified. By removing any reference to potential negative consequences, and centering themselves around pure, self-sacrificing savior figures, awareness campaigns offer their followers a buffer between "doing something" about mass atrocity, and the consequences that "something" might lead to. This is an attractive proposition: get all the benefits of refusing to stand

by and do nothing, without any accountability for stepping up and doing something that might have potential negative consequences.

Saying "I support a military operation to capture Joseph Kony because I believe the long-term benefits of assassinating or capturing him are sufficiently great that they outweigh the consequences of this policy, which will almost certainly include massive reprisal attacks against civilians, and the deaths, in battle, of LRA members who were conscripted into the group against their will" is a morally defensible position. However, that defense is not an easy one: it requires acceptance of the consequences of such a policy, and acknowledgement that they may well be tragic.

Contrast that with the pledge that Invisible Children asks Kony 2012 supporters to sign, which calls on world leaders to "provide the African Union effort with the logistical support needed to arrest Joseph Kony and his top commanders and protect civilians." Informed readers will realize that this policy is the same one as in the previous paragraph. But the targets of Kony 2012 and other awareness campaigns are not, for the most part, informed. (By definition, such campaigns target the unaware.) And this statement offers no clues about the potential consequences of an AU mission to arrest Kony. Its language is unthreatening. "Arrest" sounds uncontroversial - in the

United States, police officers arrest people every day. There is no indication that achieving Kony's arrest would probably first require a military defeat. And the reference to protecting civilians makes it sound like that is an equal goal - or perhaps even the primary goal - of the AU force, when in fact it is a 5000-strong military brigade tasked with eliminating the LRA.

A supporter who signed this pledge without any of that background information, therefore, would enjoy an enviable position. By following the instructions of Invisible Children's merry band of hipster heroes, who have proven their worthiness by leaving the comforts of southern California to put their boots on the ground in central Africa, supporters get to share in their moral legitimacy. But the awareness campaign's simplified narrative protects them from accountability for the consequences of the policies they're advocating for. How could they be morally responsible if no one told them about the risks?

Viewed in that light, it's easy to see why simple campaign narratives - be a good guy, like Jason Russell, by helping him fight the bad guy, Joseph Kony! - are so appealing. But their appeal does not mean that they are a good idea.

This is not to suggest that awareness raising is never a productive activity. Awareness campaigns are well-

suited to combating injustices that arise from problematic public sentiment. For instance, public education projects aimed at decreasing HIV/AIDS stigma can directly improve the lives of HIV-positive individuals. A reduction in stigmatization will cut down on the harassment they face and improve their ability to secure employment and access public services.

Awareness campaigns can also be effective in cases where injustices are perpetrated by an actor who is vulnerable to pressure. This keys into the "naming and shaming" mechanism employed by non-governmental organizations against abusive governments, which assumes that violator governments care about their reputation. If public opinion can be mobilized to censure human rights violators, and/or to convince other governments to punish them, awareness can directly contribute to change.

But the situation with Joseph Kony and the LRA is different. Here, the abuses (including abduction, rape, torture, and slaughter of vulnerable civilian populations in central Africa) are committed by actors who don't care how many people know what they've done. Consequently, the actors most capable of halting LRA atrocities are invulnerable to public pressure. They can't be shamed.

In situations like this, where injustices are perpe-

trated by actors whose incentives can't be affected by pressure, the avenue for public awareness to produce change is through impact on external actors. Because they aren't directly responsible for the violations, external actors have a more limited ability to halt them. At the very least, they must act to alter the status quo, rather than simply ceasing the violations, as the perpetrator could do.

External actors' options are constrained. They can try to directly incentivize perpetrators to stop offending, or they can attempt to incapacitate them. But, for the reasons noted above, 100 million college students don't throw their weight behind a campaign calling for international actors to recognize that although it's unpalatable, bribing brutal warlords into good behavior may be the quickest route to civilian protection. Instead, they mobilize behind simpler messages: Arrest this monster. Stop at nothing.

Thus, in cases where violations are committed by actors who can't be pressured, awareness raising campaigns necessarily take a simplified, law enforcement approach to complex political problems. Hence, the Kony 2012 campaign aims to pressure the U.S. to commit more resources towards Kony's capture and trial, while ignoring the determinants of the original conflict. Other awareness campaigns have followed a similar script. The anti-conflict minerals campaign

for peace in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo asks external actors to restrict militias' funding sources, but doesn't concern itself with their underlying incentives to fight. Save Darfur demanded that the ICC indict President Omar al-Bashir, but did not address how ICC involvement might negatively impact the pursuit of peace in the region.

Measuring campaign success in YouTube hits and t-shirt sales not only risks confusing increased awareness with successful activism, it demands dangerous over-simplifications that ignore the potential negative consequences of advocacy decisions. Focusing on heroic "white saviors" as a hook to draw the interest of previously-unengaged Western audiences exacerbates these problems. Responsible activism does not shirk accountability for its harms while seeking credit for its successes. Ethical advocates do not insist that others have no right to speak.

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