

Image 1: Retrieved from the Invisible Children website on December 2, 2013

The Polymedia Movement of *KONY 2012*: Humanitarianism and Millennial Activism in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand the challenges and complexities of humanitarianism and youth activism in contemporary America by focusing on a 'polymedia movement' known as *KONY 2012*. *KONY 2012* became the most viral video and humanitarian campaign to date when it was released by an American organisation called Invisible Children. *KONY 2012* presents a uniquely powerful example of current trends in social relations and an instance of how people might be motivated to associate in a future that is shaped by social media. It is a phenomenon that, therefore, warrants the attention of anthropologists. This research integrates digital and traditional ethnographic methodologies and offers an academic contribution to an anthropological understanding of viral videos and polymedia movements. It considers the important roles of community, neo-colonialism, religion, celebrity and (social) media in relation to three key foci surrounding the movement: online activism, humanitarianism and millennial youth culture. The objective of the research is to identify the social and anthropological mechanisms underpinning the *KONY 2012* phenomenon through investigative techniques including ethnography, so as to contribute to anthropological theory and knowledge and also to gain broader insight into the complicated, complex and multifarious social worlds we live in. The research found that the polymedia movement of *KONY 2012* often reinforced the same practices of child-soldiering that it sought to eliminate, by inadvertently supporting a government that employed the same tactics. Furthermore, while the movement served a key role in the community and identity of American millennials, it was simultaneously plagued by corrupt government agendas both in Uganda and the United States, as well as the neo-colonialist mentalities of external groups, including religious organisations. *KONY 2012* reveals the vast complexity of contemporary social movements, humanitarianism and online activism in the United States.

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Introduction

I. Research Overview

Joseph Kony, who has been wanted by the International Criminal Court since 2005, first took command of the rebel group known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in 1986 by proclaiming he was a 'spokesperson' of God and a spirit medium (Muth 2008). During the height of the LRA's insurgency, tens of thousands of people were abducted, raped, murdered and tortured, while hundreds of thousands were forced into internal displacement camps seeking refuge from the violence (Cakaj 2010). Kony became infamous for the kidnapping and forced recruitment of an estimated 60,000 children with the stories of atrocities and child soldiers eventually becoming the basis of Invisible Children's 2006 documentary, *Invisible Children*: *The Rough Cut*. While the documentary's release helped garner grassroots support for the issue, it was not until the release of Invisible Children's (2012) film, *KONY 2012*, that Joseph Kony gained popular international recognition (Karlin and Matthew 2012). Over several days, *KONY 2012* became the fastest growing and most watched viral[1] video to date, with over 100 million views in 204 countries. It not only led to a frenzy of mainstream media coverage and celebrity support but, more surprisingly, produced a rapid political response. For instance, it resulted in a U.S. Senate resolution to double funds dedicated to catching Kony and the deployment of American forces to the region, among various other actions.

[1]In this thesis, the historical records of *KONY 2012* are meant to reflect what was factual at the time of the video's release in 2012, rather than attempt to keep up-to-date with the ever-changing information flows of digital spaces, particularly as they relate to viral events. The term 'viral' is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as 'something that quickly becomes very popular or well known by being published on the internet or sent from person to person by email, phone, etc.'. Refer to: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/viral.

Invisible Children, dedicated to stopping the LRA since its inception, was instrumental in the film's success. Invisible Children was both a social movement and a humanitarian campaign, mainly supported by American millennials. Invisible Children defined itself as 'a social, political and global movement using the transformative power of a story to change lives' (Invisible Children 2010). The organisation also explained that 'by inspiring youth culture to value creativity, idealism and sacrifice, the movement fuels the most effective, adaptable and innovative programs in the world' (ibid). Invisible Children relied on the social cohesion of its participant community, Christianity, social media, commodity activism and the visual spectacle of humanitarian campaigning to create a highly influential organisation and movement.

The opening scene of *KONY 2012* positioned its 'clicktivist' audience within an interconnected 'global ecumene'[2] (Hannerz 1992), where they could 'encode and decode humanly meaningful statements' (Benkler 2006); a world where 'mediums' and 'messages' created global movements and digitally connected citizens could change the world (McLuhan and Powers 1989). Symbolic images from the Arab Spring unfolded to the sounds of emotionally compelling music and a relatable, simplistic narrative mystifying Kony, demanding U.S. intervention and creating a sense of digital empowerment. Some have described *KONY 2012* as an 'American fable printed on an African canvas' (Schomerus, Allen and Vlassenroot 2012), claiming that it advocated the commodification of activism (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012) or pandered the notion of the 'white man's burden' (Kipling 1899). Nonetheless, the inspirational narrative was enough to strike a chord with 'digital natives', who spend a considerable number of hours a day connected to digital technologies. It gained rapid momentum, consumed and reproduced in a complex

[2] Ulf Hannerz (1992: 4) describes the 'global ecumene' as the 'interconnectedness of the world by way of interactions, exchanges and related development, affecting not least the organisation of culture'.

exchange system where values and meanings were defined by the number of 'views', 'shares' and 'likes' gained, with 92 million views on YouTube and over 18 million on Vimeo, averaging several million views per hour during the height of the viral phenomenon. Though the present threat of Joseph Kony and the accuracy of *KONY 2012* are widely debated, *KONY* marked a pivotal point in the perception of humanitarian campaigns and social media. Questions began to be asked about how and why *KONY 2012* was produced, consumed and circulated, as well as what activism means in an era where online 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983) become part of the human experience and sense of social connectedness. Furthermore, many questioned the motives of government and military-led approaches to the region.

The research asks: How can we better understand contemporary humanitarian activism in the United States through polymedia movements, such as *KONY 2012*? The research seeks to inform an anthropological investigation of the 'polymedia movement' through a theoretical framework focused on millennial youth culture, online activism and humanitarianism. The research aims to explore the millennial community of American humanitarians that took on activist roles in the movement, as well as understand the motives of military, religious and social initiatives in Uganda. The data collection took place over one year through participant observation on Facebook and involved semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation of 142 *KONY* informants. This provided a basis from which to observe how the organisation functioned and its participants' motives and perceptions regarding their associations with each other and their intended goals. The theoretical framework of the thesis draws on Madianou's (2013) theory of 'polymedia events' and develops Madianou's theory through the creation of the term 'polymedia movement' in order to better describe and understand the phenomenon over time and space. Alongside the theoretical framing of the term 'polymedia movement', key authors

such as Brough's (2012) and Jenkins' (2012, 2013, 2016) research on online activism, as well as Chouliaraki's (2006, 2013) work on humanitarianism, offer critical contributions to the epistemological and theoretical framework. An understanding of millennials and their use of media is also explored through the academic literature (Miller 2011, 2016; boyd 2014). The interview data and participant observation of *KONY 2012*'s participants and leaders, alongside the examination of external evidence through various sources, such as Wikileaks, created an in-depth portrait of the movement. From an anthropological perspective, the *KONY 2012* phenomenon explores the power of humanitarian experiences and social connections, particularly as they are mediated through the ever-growing scale of social media. It highlights an anthropological description of neocolonialist tendencies in the digital age and the complexity of social initiatives that engage with a cyclical pattern of corruption, confusion and alleviation. The gulf between the movement's stated purpose, in regard to relieving suffering in Uganda, and what its actual purpose was as far as the participants were concerned, could be understood as related to the participants' needs and desires for community, value and purpose. From an anthropological perspective, the activists' original intentions were ultimately, and perhaps inevitably to some degree, transformed by their human nature and their needs for community and other associated goods, such as self-expression and identity. At the same time, historical patterns of global hegemony persisted within government and religiously-influenced institutional agendas under the guise of humanitarianism and terrorist prevention abroad, hidden carefully from well-intentioned activists and their idealistic initiatives. *KONY 2012* offers an interesting example as a humanitarian viral video that was used as a 'cover story' for American troops asserting and spreading control throughout the region in covert ways.

II. Thesis Structure

Chapter One contextualises the *KONY 2012* phenomenon by offering a background to

two key areas: the complex socio-political history in Northern Uganda and Central Africa, and the development of the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army. The chapter focuses on the rise of Joseph Kony and the LRA in the region and explores its relationship to Invisible Children's awareness campaign aimed at capturing Joseph Kony and stopping LRA violence. I outline the history of Invisible Children, the organisation responsible for *KONY 2012*. I examine the release of *KONY 2012*, the viral outbreak, and both mainstream media and political responses. While this chapter offers pertinent detail regarding the controversy of the film's release, the purpose of this chapter is not to go over the rhetorical narratives and debates surrounding *KONY 2012*, but rather, to contextualise the complexity of the campaign movement.

Chapter Two offers an overview of the debates surrounding the *KONY 2012* phenomenon. I discuss anthropological insights into *KONY 2012*, firstly, by looking at the literature that has sought to understand the *KONY* phenomenon. The chapter then discusses *KONY 2012* in relation to 'polymedia events', as defined by Madianou (2013). This chapter establishes the Invisible Children movement as a polymedia movement.

Chapter Three investigates digital anthropology as a methodology, including its drawbacks, and outlines the methodological literature relevant to the study. I provide a summary of my professional and academic background. I detail the research methods, looking at Facebook participant observation, semi-structured interviews and what it means to conduct a digital ethnography in the context of this research specifically. This chapter focuses on the outreach method for participants and data collection, as well as participant observation in digital spaces. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the fieldwork and interview processes. I outline research challenges and ethics, as well as research limitations and timelines.

In Chapter Four, I interweave a theoretical engagement with the research focus by exploring contemporary activism. The chapter begins by looking at the wider changes in activism and social movements in the digital era. It explores the integral role of social media within campaigns, looking at their ability to spark activism and social movements. The concept of slacktivism is highlighted. The roles of Invisible Children's activism, representation and campaigning are woven through the fabric of this chapter. Theoretical approaches to activism and social movements are discussed and connected with Invisible Children's activism. In Chapter Five, the literature of humanitarianism is addressed. The role of the humanitarian consumerism, spectator and spectacle in humanitarian campaigning are highlighted, drawing on the work of Chouliaraki (2006, 2013) and Brough (2012) in particular. I further draw comparative examples from popular humanitarian campaigns, such as Live Aid, in order to add to the discussion of *KONY 2012* (Madianou 2013; Thompson 1995). Perspectives on the representation of the 'Other', with reference to neo-colonial tendencies in humanitarianism, are discussed, alongside the commodification of humanitarianism and the use of both celebrity and visual displays in humanitarian campaigns. Chapter Six offers an understanding of millennial youth culture, or 'digital natives', through the ethnographic literature. It examines youth culture in relation to technological developments, particularly focused on the Internet and American millennials, in order to contextualise the wider culture of the Invisible Children participants.

Chapter Seven presents the background to the organisation, its leaders and the millennial participants of the movement. The chapter looks at the role that Christianity and religion more generally played in the Invisible Children organisation, as well as the varying belief systems of the participants. It offers an overview of the Invisible Children participants'

backgrounds and the organisation's demographics. This chapter explores Invisible Children in relation to the people who made up the organisation, as well as the ethos surrounding its structure and culture.

Chapter Eight demonstrates the intensive social cohesion created within the group, which reinforced its solidarity with the organisation's goals of global justice. The importance of community is stressed throughout the ethnographic data. The chapter offers an ethnographic portrait of the 'change makers' in Invisible Children. The chapter investigates the internal workings of Invisible Children by looking at the organisation's use of media and its relationship to development, recruitment and awareness campaigns. This section also details the celebrity-like identities of the Invisible Children's leaders. The recruitment, development and branding of the organisation is explored through an ethnographic lens focused on Invisible Children's supporters and their personal stories.

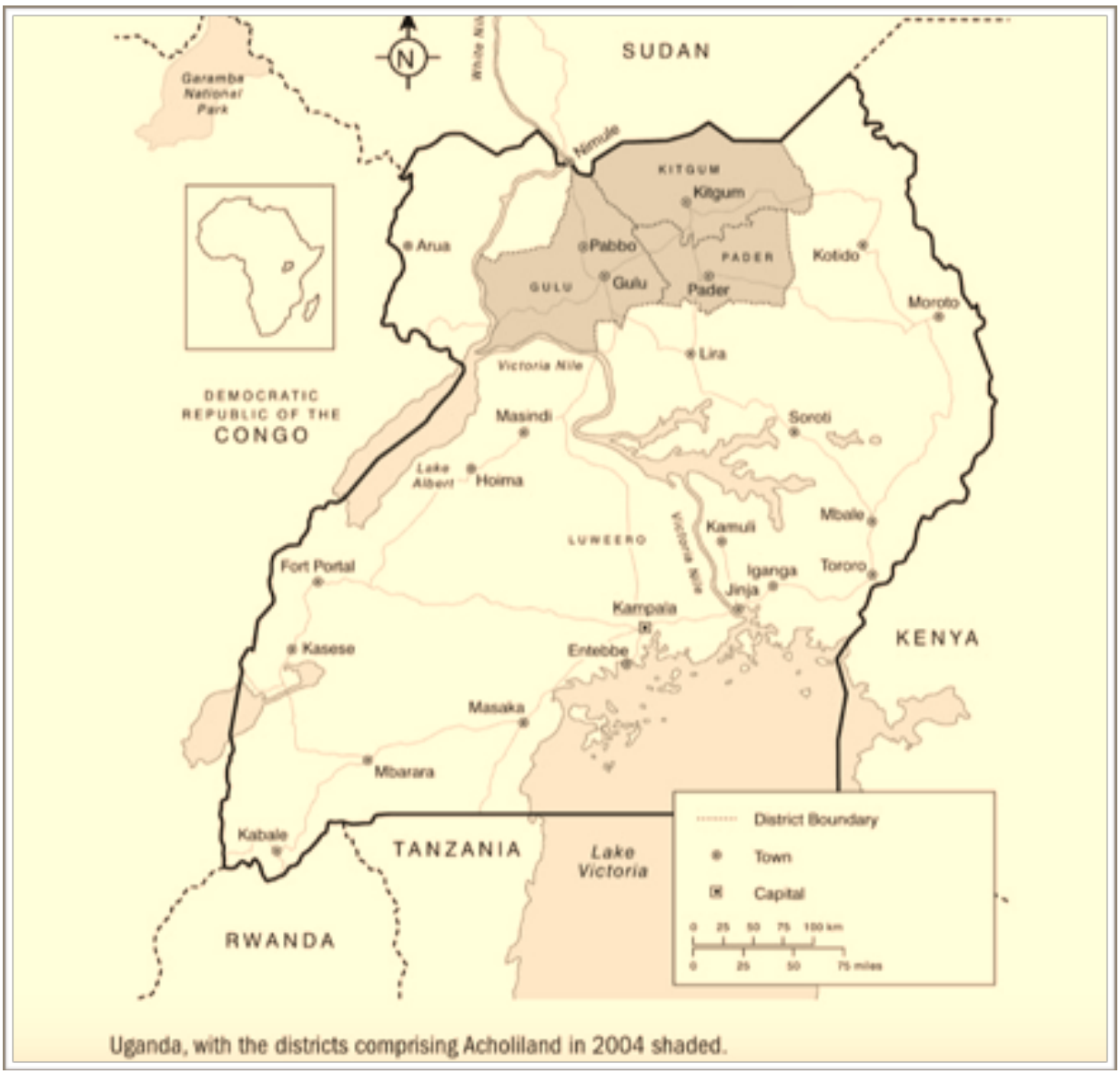
Chapter Nine discusses participant activism and the varying levels of community, participation and activism within the broader spectrum of *KONY 2012* supporters. Viral forms of activism, such as the Ice Bucket Challenge, are discussed and examined in relation to Invisible Children participants who engaged in the movements. 'Slacktivism' is reviewed as a controversial feature of social media activism, as is the idea of the 'white saviour'. The activism model for the Invisible Children organisation is discussed, which looks at the employment of visuals, performance, celebrity and a millennial youth focus. The chapter concludes with an analysis of social media-bound activism in American culture and discusses its relationship to social movements and humanitarian campaigns in contemporary society.

In Chapter Ten, Invisible Children is examined in the context of the campaign to 'save African children', acting out the 'white man's burden' (Easterly 2006). Invisible Children's

work with the Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, is explored in order to frame the complex social, political and economic background of the region. The chapter investigates the social, political and economic incentives for U.S. support in the region, based on the discovery of Wikileaks information. It examines the reasons military intervention was used in the mission to capture Joseph Kony. Invisible Children's complex relationship with Christianity is explored and the network of ties between Yoweri Museveni, Invisible Children, prominent U.S. politicians and fundamentalist Christian organisations are discussed. Finally, the chapter investigates the Invisible Children model and draws connections between celebrity, spectacle, colonialism, Christianity, political corruption and humanitarian consumerism.

Chapter Eleven offers a conclusion that illuminates *KONY 2012* as a revolutionary model for humanitarian campaigns. The larger social transformations related to the Internet are discussed in relation to *KONY 2012*. The conclusion explores the role that the millennial humanitarian ethos and values play in wider society, as well as the complexity of contemporary humanitarian campaigns and polymedia movements. The chapter closes with a discussion of the research question and findings, highlighting the insights *KONY 2012* can offer in the increasingly complex, multi-faceted world we live in.

Map of Uganda (Source: Branch 2011)



Uganda, with the districts comprising Acholiland in 2004 shaded.

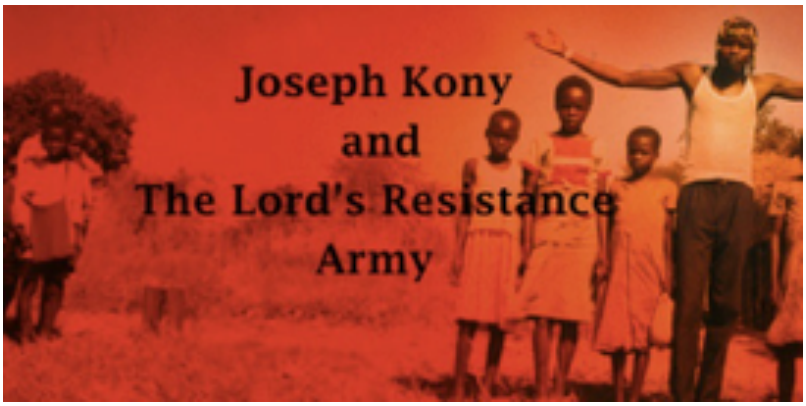


Image 1-1: Retrieved from the Invisible Children website on June 19, 2012

Chapter One: A Background to KONY 2012

The social, cultural, historical and political history of Uganda is vastly complex and beyond the scope of this thesis. However, in this chapter, I will offer an overview of the history of Joseph Kony, the LRA and Invisible Children in order to contextualise the *KONY 2012* phenomenon.

I. The History of Joseph Kony & The Lord's Resistance Army

> *The world should know this war is complex. If it wasn't complex it wouldn't have stayed for 26 years.*
>
> (Jolly Okot, Director of Invisible Children)

Uganda gained independence from Britain in 1962, after 68 years of rule. The consequences of colonialism, combined with the newly enforced political system, began to spark competition between ethnic groups over agricultural development, economic viability and military power. These ethnic tensions – mainly between the Acholi in the North and the Bantu speakers of the South – played out over the following years as the country endured a series of tumultuous coups and regime changes, which included Milton Obote's rule from 1966-1971 and General Idi Amin's notorious reign of terror from 1971–1979 (Cakaj 2011). Both regimes were responsible for targeting ethnic groups in revenge

attacks and attempting to subdue support for their political opponents. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people were murdered during Idi Amin's eight years in power, followed by Obote's 'Operation Bonanza' (1983), which left between 100,000 and 500,000 innocent civilians dead (Doom and Vlassenroot 1999a).

The current President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, spent many years waging bloody war against the country's competing regimes (e.g. Obote and Okello in the 'Ugandan Bush War') before eventually gaining control in 1986 (Allen and Vlassenroot 2010). Museveni, who led the National Resistance Army (NRA) prior to his presidency, had carried out numerous attacks targeting the Acholi in retaliation for Obote's 1983 'Operation Bonanza'. Consequently, when Museveni assumed power, he faced an immediate rebellion from armed resistance groups in the northern half of the country, who felt persecuted by Museveni and the NRA (Green 2008; Byrnes 1990). It was here, over 26 years ago, that Africa's longest running armed conflict first began.

II. The Holy Spirit Movement and The Rise of Joseph Kony

The rebellion against Museveni and his government was called the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM). It received popular support from the population in the North and was led by a woman named Alice Auma Lakwena. Lakwena, who claimed to be possessed by holy spirits and inspired by God, incorporated superstition, traditional Acholi beliefs and witchcraft into the ideological system that dominated the HSM (Vokes 2007). It was from the Holy Spirit Movement that Joseph Kony originally appeared; he began working under Lakwena as a 'political commissar' whose role it was to motivate troops (Cakaj 2010). However, it was not long before Kony claimed that he was also possessed by spirits and established himself as a spiritual figure within the HSM. Then, between 1986 and 1987, Lakwena's soldiers marched across the country, waging a rebellion against Museveni's

government (Green 2008; Byrnes 1992). While gaining some victories, the Holy Spirit Movement was ultimately defeated by Museveni's better-armed troops (U.S. State Department 2012). Kony used the disbandment of HSM forces as an opportunity to establish control, gathering the remaining members of the resistance and joining forces with another armed group from the North, known as the Ugandan People's Democratic Army, in order to create the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

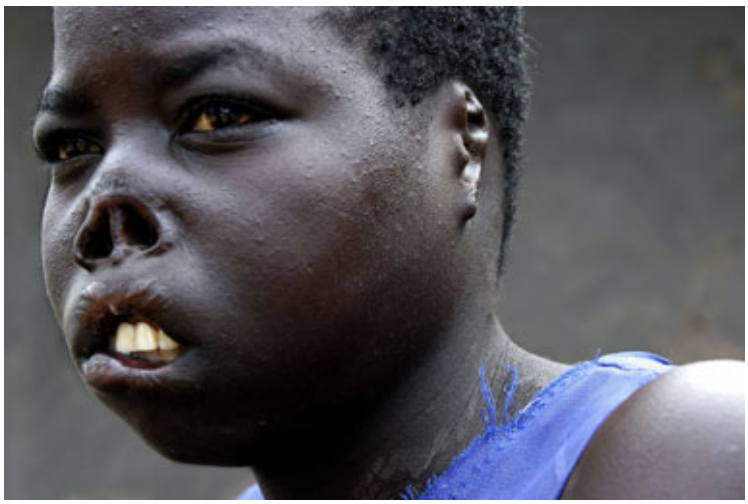


Image 1-2: Survivor of LRA mutilation
Retrieved from BBC Images on July 13, 2012.



Image 1-3: Joseph Kony and rebel group leaders
Retrieved from BBC Images on July 13, 2012.

The LRA set out on a mission to topple Museveni's government and rule Uganda according to the Bible's Ten Commandments. While Kony and his rebels initially received some support in the North, they began incorporating brutal guerrilla tactics and abducting children in order to gain strength in the region, a tactic inspired by Museveni's own National Resistance Army. Consequently, any support the LRA movement originally enjoyed quickly waned (Cakaj 2010). In 1991, Acholi government minister Betty Bigombe began 'Operation North', which consisted mainly of local tribes armed with bows and arrows attempting to combat the LRA's raids and abductions. However, the operation only angered Kony, who then increased the brutality of his force's actions: mutilating, killing and carrying out large scale attacks on innocent civilians.

In 1994, Kony agreed to enter into peace talks with Museveni, which were mediated by Bigombe. However, the negotiations eventually failed (O'Kadameri 2002). At the same time, Kony and his army began receiving support from Khartoum in Northern Sudan, as retaliation against the Ugandan government for the support they were offering to the Southern Sudanese rebels who were fighting to gain independence from the Sudanese government. With help from Khartoum, the LRA's ability to terrorize the region grew and Kony's power expanded (Prunier 2004; Van Acker 2004). The abductions and atrocities carried out by the LRA were described in one of the interviews that I conducted with Jay, a former child soldier:

> Yeah so when that thing happened, suddenly, you know, I just got this boy came and knock my head just hit my head actually. With – with, with a gun. He was telling me that I was not walking fast enough. All of the sudden, you know, I, I fall all over my blood, you know, all over my body was bleeding and was just you know, full of blood, and even right now as I talk to you, if you come next year or at the end of the year to Uganda, you will find a scar just at the back of my head that I got from the jungle. ('Jay': Male, early twenties. Interview conducted over Skype in October 2014, while the participant was in Uganda)

Jay went on to describe the impact the LRA had on his life and his family:

> Yeah then I lived with them for about two months and I experienced a lot and a lot, you know like seeing people being murdered, innocent people like […]. So they kidnapped my own dad... is really, a really sad story. And they killed him, you know, that's for […] when I was even young, I was like only 10 years. So before I was abducted, I lost my dad in the war. Yeah, not only that my cousin, the one who we grew up together, he was abducted (in 2002), but unfortunately he didn't, you know, survive the escape back home, but was killed in the war also… (ibid)

Despite the atrocities being committed and the crimes that took place against innocent civilians such as Jay and his family, in the following years, peace negotiations with Kony failed five times, with the LRA using ceasefires as opportunities to regain strength. Several military operations took place, including 'Operation Iron Fist' (2002) conducted by the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) and another that ended in the death of eight Guatemalan Kaibiles commandos, who were trained and funded by the United States, in 2006. These operations forced the LRA out of Uganda, into South Sudan and Congo's Garamba National Park (Fraser 2008). However, both operations failed to stop the violence. By 2006, LRA terror had forced 1.7 million people into internal displacement camps, where an estimated 1,000 people died each week due to malaria and AIDS (Green 2008; Cakaj 2011). The LRA had created one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, with an estimated 66,000 children reportedly kidnapped (UNICEF 2003). However:

> the LRA was not alone in committing abuses in the north. The Ugandan army has recruited children, committed torture and killings against civilians, and destroyed civilian targets. The government of Uganda also established a prolonged encampment policy, in effect moving much of the northern population into squalid camps that failed to provide adequate protection, food and sanitation services (Brown, Metzler, Root and Vinck 2012: 2).

In 2008, a final peace negotiation mediated by Sudanese Vice President, Riek Machar, in Juba seemed to offer a chance at peace, but Kony refused to sign the accord. Shortly after the breakdown of peace talks, the Ugandan government launched a joint operation with the Bush administration called 'Operation Lightning Thunder' with the objective of

destroying the LRA's bases and capturing Kony. While over 100 children were saved in the process, neither Kony nor his forces were affected and LRA reprisal attacks became more ferocious (Arieff and Ploch 2012). In the following years, between 2008 and 2011, the LRA 'killed more than 2,300 people, abducted more than 3,000, and displaced over 400,000 across the DR Congo, South Sudan and the Central African Republic' (Oxfam Report 2011).

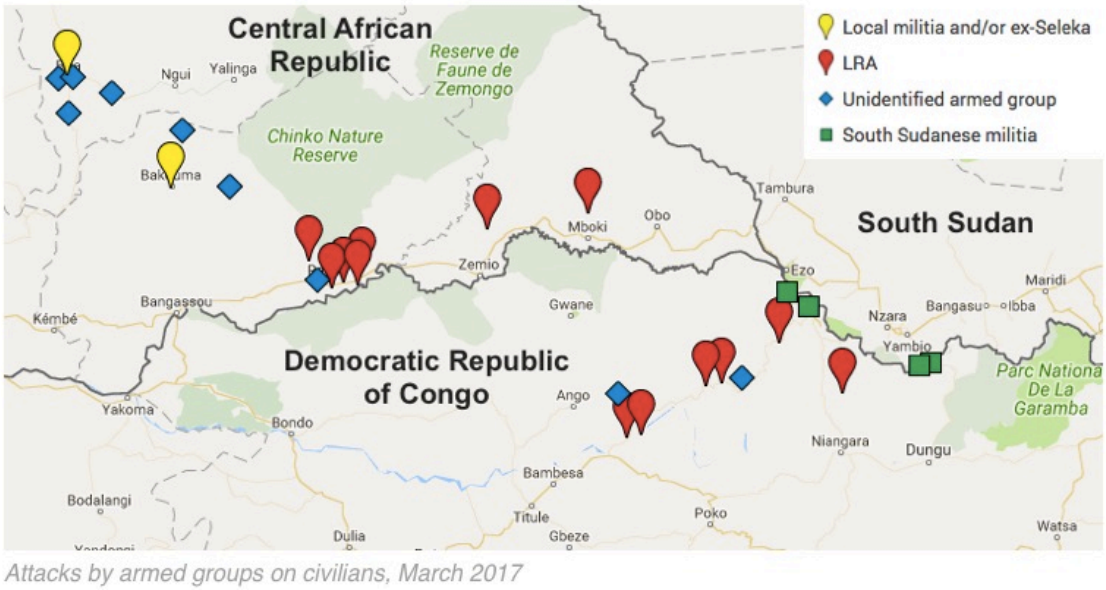


Image 1-4: Attacks by armed groups, 2017
Retrieved from Invisible Children Crisis Tracker on March 2, 2017.

Today, it is argued that the LRA remains a threat to the region despite being at their weakest point since the conflict began. The estimated 100–200 fighters who remain are scattered in small groups throughout the area and continue to displace an estimated 470,000 civilians due to violence (Arieff and Ploch 2012). However, the presence of other rebel groups, such as M23 and the Mai-Mai, make it difficult to discern the impact each group has on regional instability (*VICE* 2012). While Invisible Children's LRA Crisis Tracker reported that there were 49 deaths in 2012 due to LRA violence, specialists have highlighted the complexity of rebel group violence in Central Africa when describing armed attacks in areas where the LRA operate:

> Those killings were committed not by the Lord's Resistance Army but by one of the many Congolese militias operating in the area. In recent months, those groups have been responsible for a marked increase in violence, but in most cases, such attacks go unnoticed by international media… The lack of attention is ironic at the moment because of the sudden popularity of the *KONY 2012* video campaign (Schomerus et al. 2012).

Critics of *KONY 2012* have also pointed towards the striking contrast in levels of LRA violence compared to other death tolls around the world, for instance, the Syrian Civil War, where the United Nations estimates roughly 400,000 have died in recent years. Despite the diffusion of LRA terror in recent years and the weakened role of Kony's leadership, the U.S. government became increasingly interested in stopping the LRA. In May of 2010, Former U.S President Barack Obama signed 'The Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act' into law, which passed unanimously through both the Senate and House of Representatives (Donnelly 2012; Kavanagh 2010). Then, in October 2011, Obama deployed 100 U.S. military advisors to the region, at a price of $4.5 million per month, in order to 'train, assist and provide intelligence to help combat the Lord's Resistance Army' (Arieff and Ploch 2012). The U.S. Defense Department committed $35 million towards capturing Kony, in addition to an estimated $50 million supplied by the U.S. State Department since 2008 (Wong 2012; Arieff and Ploch 2012).

Many political analysts question whether U.S. involvement suggests an interest in the region as other great powers, such as China and Russia, carry out a 'scramble for Africa'. Former President Obama commented that the decision to deploy support to the region was in the interests of U.S. security. His official statement was elaborated on during the Committee on Foreign Affairs' hearing, 'LRA, Boko Haram, Al-Shaabab, Aqim and other Sources of Instability in Africa' (2012), which gestured towards a desire to establish an African Command in the region in order to combat the threat of various terrorist groups (Committee of Foreign Affairs Report, April 25th 2012). Prior to 2016, there were 100 U.S.

Special Forces advisors working in the region, alongside 5,000 African troops, who were deployed by the African Union. However, 'the good guys are not good because they are good, but by default, and because they are recruited to the allegedly good side' (Finnström 2012). For example, the rebel commander who carried out the 2008 'Christmas Day massacre' in Faradje, Congo, which killed 143 people, has since defected, been granted amnesty, and is silently working with Ugandan and American forces (ibid). The complexity of such political spheres in Uganda and Central Africa, as well as their relationship to the United States, will be explored in greater detail in the thesis.

III. Invisible Children: The Producers of *KONY 2012*



Image 1-5: Retrieved from Invisible Children on March 20, 2012

'We began telling true stories with our friends affected by LRA violence because we have seen that stories can change lives and inspire young people toward action'

(Ben Keesey, CEO of Invisible Children)

The Invisible Children organisation was created by three young students, Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole, who were born and raised in San Diego, California. The three students were studying filmmaking at university, but at the same time developed an interest in travel. Before deciding that they would jump on a plane to the African continent in 2003, Jason Russell took a missionary trip to Kenya and at the same time became fascinated by the story of the photojournalist, Dan Eldon, who was killed in Somalia in

1993. Dan Eldon's adventurous life and artistic journals would later play a fundamental role in the creation of the organisation – informing and shaping the culture of Invisible Children.[3] Russell stated in an interview with a journalist from *The Atlantic*: 'It (Dan Eldon's story) changed my life. I saw what it was like to look at life demanding explanation, capturing powerful stories. I think about Dan Eldon constantly' (Kron 2012). Dan Eldon, who was born in Kenya in 1970, became a well-known photojournalist, covering issues throughout Africa. Like Jason, he first attended university in Los Angeles before he and his friends decided to take various road trips across the African continent; adventures which eventually led him to document and film pressing social issues, from refugee camps in Kenya to unrest in Somalia. Although Dan Eldon was tragically killed by a mob in Mogadishu in 1993, his legacy lived on through the publication of several books, including the very one that Jason Russell gives out to his supporters.



Image 1-6: Dan Eldon in Somalia
Image retrieved from Dan Eldon website on December 1, 2015.

[3] During my last interview with Jason Russell in 2015, he gave me a copy of Dan Eldon's book, which he said was his favorite gift to give those who came by the office. Alongside the twenty or so copies Russell kept of Eldon's books, he also showed me his own personal collage-styled journals which were lined up in the bookshelf next to Eldon's work. Russell said that he hoped to turn his own journals into a similar publication one day (Russell interview, July 2014).



Image 1-7: Jason Russell in Uganda
Image retrieved from Invisible Children website on December 2, 2015.

In 2003, following in the footsteps of Eldon, the three film students from the University of Southern California, Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole, left their hometown of San Diego with hopes of traveling through Sudan to make an adventure travel documentary. Having been denied entry to the country, they headed into Northern Uganda, which was a hotbed of unrest due to ongoing conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army and its leader, Joseph Kony. Upon arriving in the city of Gulu, Jason, Bobby and Laren found themselves observing the influx of children, often called 'night commuters', who trekked for miles from their villages into downtown Gulu in order to escape LRA abductions. Struck by the issue, the filmmakers focused their cameras on the 'night commuters'. In the documentary, the camera pans the dusty night streets filled with children and Jason remarks: 'if this happened for one night in America, it would be on the cover of *Newsweek*' (Jason Russell, *Invisible Children* 2006).



Image 1-8: Bobby Bailey (front), Jason Russell (middle) and Laren Poole (rear) filming in northern Uganda circa 2003
Image retrieved from Invisible Children website on February 23, 2013.

While filming they met one young boy by the name of Jacob Acaye, who would become central to their documentary. In a particularly moving clip, Jacob recounts the story of his brother, who was brutally murdered by LRA members using machetes (*pangas)*. Jacob expresses his wish to be dead as he lived in fear on the streets of Gulu alongside other 'night commuters' in a world fraught with tragedy and despair. Moved by Jacob's testimony, Jason, Bobby and Laren promised to 'do something' about the severe human rights abuses that went largely unnoticed by the international community. On return to San Diego, they put together their film footage in order to create a documentary called *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut* (2006). The filmmakers simultaneously established the Invisible Children humanitarian organisation, which dedicated itself to its mission to 'stop LRA violence and support the war-affected communities in East and Central Africa and to empower young people to "do more than just watch, to take steps towards ending injustice"' (Karlin and Matthew 2012: 256). Invisible Children set itself on an unorthodox trajectory aimed at mixing storytelling, visual entertainment and popular culture with advocacy and

humanitarian campaigning.



Image 1-9 'Night commuters' in Gulu



Image 1-10: Bobby Bailey, Jason Russell and Laren Poole filming in Uganda
Images 1-9 and 1-10 retrieved from Invisible Children website on September 12, 2012.

Invisible Children established itself on the ground by hosting church screenings of their documentary and garnering support throughout the United States, particularly amongst the members' personal networks of Evangelical Christians. The attractive and charismatic filmmakers toured the country, holding screenings of *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut* (2006),

and performing energetic speeches, visiting roughly 10,000 schools in eight years and drawing youth to the cause through their religious ideologies and by giving teens a sense of world purpose. They helped to maintain the momentum of the movement by establishing bi-annual events, which included Displace Me, Lobby Days, Global Night Commute and Rescue Days, which called youth onto the streets to protest against the LRA. Some involved camping overnight in Washington, D.C. to address lawmakers with the support of famous advocates such as John Prendergast, while others focused on celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey. An event at Harpo Productions in Chicago caused such a stir that Bobby, Jason and Laren ended up making an impromptu appearance on Oprah's 48 million viewer television show and they were interviewed by Oprah twice to discuss their work. They also made appearances in other U.S. mainstream media, such as on Larry King Live, and gathered support from various celebrities, such as Kirsten Dunst and Kristen Bell, as well as numerous pop bands, including Fall Out Boy, Thrice and Brett Dennen (Karlin and Matthew 2012). One movement in 2009, called The Rescue, mobilised 85,000 youths to participate. In total, Invisible Children produced and screened twelve films and ran fourteen campaigns, all of which contained 'visually-arresting films, spectacular event-oriented campaigns, provocative graphic t-shirts and other apparel, music mixes, print media, blogs and more' (Swartz 2012). Within six years, Invisible Children had '90 staff on the ground in Uganda running development programs, 30 paid U.S. staff managing outreach, a fundraising apparatus that brought in almost $32 million in 2012, and a network of more than 2,000 clubs in schools and churches' (Shresthova 2012: 73).

Alongside celebrity support and mainstream media appearances, the branding and merchandising of Invisible Children became a central financial and awareness tool. Bracelets, handbags, a range of clothing, films, sunglasses, and 'action kits' were some of the many items to continuously sell out on the organisation's website, as young people

increasingly subscribed to the Invisible Children identity and fashion trends. The organisation's campaign strategy eventually paid off: after 10 documentaries, 14 official tours, various musical productions, and a cutting-edge merchandise line, they had established roughly half a million active supporters in the United States. Eighty-eight percent of their followers were under the age of 26 and many volunteered as 'roadies', travelling the country to host film screenings in order to actively participate in spreading the organisation's message (Karlin and Matthew 2012). After nearly ten years of campaigning, Invisible Children was taking in millions of dollars each year at their headquarters in San Diego. Their offices, decked out with high-tech film equipment, editing bays and studio sets, were run by an entourage of young staff members donning the organisation's apparel and impressive backgrounds.

As they flourished stateside, Invisible Children established an office in Gulu, Uganda to implement various projects that supported those affected by the conflict.[4] Projects such as MEND employed women in northern Uganda to make handcrafted bags and jewellery, while more substantial projects focused funds on radio towers in the DR Congo and Central African Republic. For example, Radio Zereda and the Early Warning Radio Network foster communications with child soldiers and send early warnings to villages of LRA attacks.[5] Alongside regional projects, the filmmakers became politically involved by joining forces with popular Ugandan political figures, even participating in the 2008 peace talks that took place between the Ugandan government and Joseph Kony.

[4] Nevertheless, there was some controversy surrounding Invisible Children's finances when it was reported that only 32% of their $8.6 million income went to direct action on the ground (Invisible Children Annual Financial Report 2012).

[5] Each Invisible Children project was supported by its own MTV-style video, for example, illustrating the stories of MEND's women against the backdrop of cutting-edge music or offering an emotional account of the success of their new radio towers at bringing child soldiers home. See: http://invisiblechildren.com/program/mend/ and http://invisiblechildren.com/program/fm-radios/.

However, once peace talks with Kony failed numerous times and the LRA's presence took on an increasingly geographically stratified space, the founders made a controversial decision to lobby the U.S. government for support against Kony. In 2009, Invisible Children began to make significant headway when they helped to introduce 'The LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act' into Congress, which former President Obama signed into law the following year. Then, in 2011, Invisible Children celebrated the success of its work when President Obama sent 100 military advisers into Central Africa in order to 'assist regional forces in the hunt for Joseph Kony' (White House Official Press Release 2011). However, despite Invisible Children's numerous social and political achievements, its co-founder, Jason Russell, feared the movement would die out unless 'the whole world' knew about Kony and the LRA's violence. Thus the journey began to create their 'best film yet', which was to be titled *KONY 2012* (*KONY 2012: Beyond Famous*). The combination of youth devotees, celebrity supporters, NGO partners and political contacts would soon become the basis for the viral film's outbreak. In essence, *KONY 2012* had its roots in a social network infrastructure built over nearly a decade, despite the commonly held belief that it appeared 'out of nowhere'.



Images 1-11 and 1-12: (left) The opening scene of *KONY 2012* on YouTube, (right) *KONY* campaign poster, mimicking the Shepard Fairey (OBEY) style used in the Obama 2008 Presidential Campaign

The poster features the portrait of Kony just in front of Osama bin Laden and Hitler, portraying them as 'the worst' in history, and a new 'axis of evil'. Images retrieved from the Invisible Children website on July 29, 2012.

IV. The Release of *KONY 2012*

> *Right now, there are more people on Facebook than there were on the planet 200 years ago. Humanity's greatest desire is to belong and connect and now we see each other, we hear each other, we share what we love and it reminds us what we all have in common. And this connection is changing the way the world works. Governments are trying to keep up and older generations are concerned. The game has new rules. The next 27 minutes are an experiment, but in order for it to work you have to pay attention…*
>
> (Opening lines of *KONY 2012*)

On March 5th of 2012, Invisible Children uploaded its thirty-minute *KONY 2012* film onto YouTube. It opened with a view of the Earth from space and Jason Russell's voice over touching music: 'Right now…there are more people on Facebook than there was on the planet 200 years ago…' positioning its 'clicktivist' audience within the centre of a symbolic narrative that painted the world as connected through social media. Short clips of stirring videos, which included a girl hearing for the first time, grandparents learning to use Skype, the Arab Spring protests and a child being rescued after the Haitian earthquake, lead into

a dramatic moment when Jason Russell's wife gives birth to their son, Gavin. Russell goes on to explain the complicated world into which his son is born by intertwining it with the story of Gulu's 'night commuters'. Using the Facebook timeline scroll, he focuses on the central figure of Jacob Acaye by visually retracing the ten years since they first met on the streets of Gulu. Jason engages the audience by weaving Jacob's story within a home video conversation he has with his then 4-year-old son, explaining the LRA's wrath and the dilemma of Kony's anonymity through a simplified 'bad guy' story to Gavin.

At the end of the film, viewers, half entertained by sweet Gavin and half enraged by the mysterious, evil figure of Joseph Kony, are urged to share the film with friends and contact Invisible Children's 'culture makers' and 'policymakers'. The 'culture makers' and 'policymakers', who included Rhianna, Justin Beiber, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Angelina Jolie, George Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, Lady Gaga, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, former US Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, were highlighted as figures able to effect social change and who had the ability to help 'make Kony famous' and 'bring him to justice' if pressured by social media users en masse. Jason Russell also asked viewers to join the *KONY* movement by taking to the streets for a protest called 'Cover the Night' on April 20th, offering a US$30 'action kit' for the event which came complete with *KONY 2012* 'pastiche' posters, bracelets, a t-shirt and stickers (Madianou 2013).

The film's emotionally potent narrative ended with a sense of global unity and citizen empowerment, laying out a simple plan for viewer 'action' and 'participation' where audiences could change the world through the simplicity of a Twitter 'tweet', YouTube 'share' or Facebook 'like'. It inspired its social media society to take part in what they called 'an experiment': 'Could an online video make an obscure war criminal famous? And if he was famous, would the world work together to stop him?' (Invisible Children 2012).

Essentially, viewers were given the opportunity to test the ability of social networks to create the kind of revolutionary change previous generations fought tirelessly to achieve.[5]

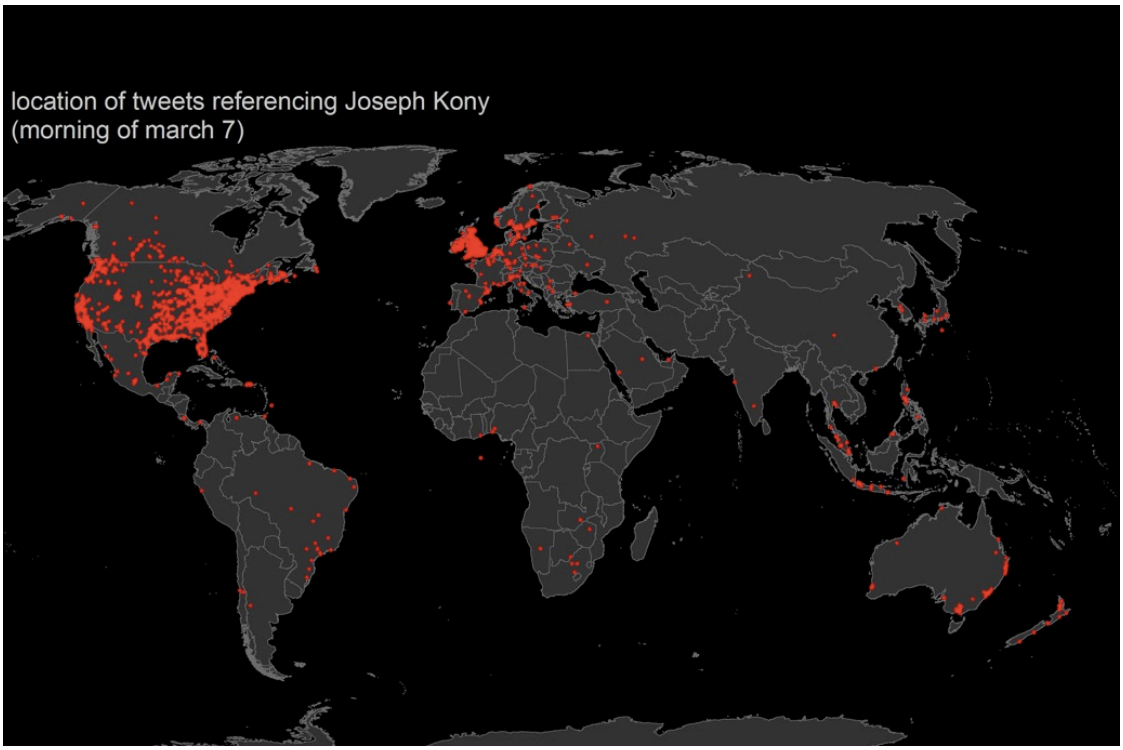


Image 1-13: Visibility of KONY 2012
'KONY's moment of visibility was both brief and largely transatlantic. This Western-centric pattern of information flow is not necessarily surprising and can be found on many other online platforms. However, given the video's relevance to East Africa, and the global diffusion of Twitter (e.g. Indonesians form the world's 6th largest population of Twitter users), we might have expected #KONY to have a slightly less clustered geography' (Graham 2012). Image retrieved from Social Flow on May 1, 2012.

V. The Viral Outbreak

According to SocialFlow, when *KONY 2012* was first posted on YouTube, social flow maps of 'shares' and views suggest the film's launch was somewhat slow, but it did begin to spread with clusters in middle America, particularly in cities such as Birmingham, Pittsburgh, Oklahoma City and Noblesville (Lotan 2012). However, 36 hours after the film

[5] 'Our great grandparents saw women fight for equality, our grandparents stopped Adolf Hitler from taking over the world and our parents fought for civil rights to declare us equal. We have been told our generation will accomplish nothing of value, but the words of others won't define us, only our actions will. We are fighting for a world where genocide and crimes against humanity cannot happen. The experiment is not over, we all have to make a decision…either we lead or we follow, but eventually everyone will all have to move… A new generation of justice, our liberty is banded together. The better world we want is coming, it's just waiting for us to stop at nothing*' (KONY 2012: Beyond Famous).*

was uploaded, *KONY 2012* was passing one million views, which was a shock to the filmmakers, who had the much smaller goal of obtaining 500,000 views by the end of the *year*. As traffic increased, the film began receiving one million hits per hour with tens of thousands per hour going on to visit Invisible Children's website. Traffic became so intense that it caused the entire site to collapse, forcing the overwhelmed staff to attempt communication with its massive audience through Tumblr. As Jason Russell states in a later interview, 'nobody saw what was coming…', with Invisible Children's social media leader remarking, 'we tipped the scale' (*KONY 2012*: *Beyond Famous*). However, it was not until Oprah began to tweet #Stop*KONY* to her ten million followers that the viral phenomenon really took off, jumping to nine million views in a day.[6] The *KONY* message spread like wildfire as other celebrities, such as Ryan Seacrest and Justin Beiber, responded to the onslaught of followers asking them to tweet #Stop*KONY* (*KONY 2012*: *Beyond Famous*). Within six days, *KONY 2012* reached 100 million views, becoming the fastest growing viral video to date.[7]

[6] Ellen Degeneres, for example, received over 36,000 requests from her followers to join the *KONY* campaign and many have called the drastic peak of views after Oprah's involvement 'the Oprah Effect'. See also Gonzalez-Bailon et al. 2011.

[7] SocialFlow offered a comparison by illustrating that it took Susan Boyle, winner of the television show Britain's Got Talent, nine days to pass the 100 million view mark and singer Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" took 18 days (Lotan 2012).

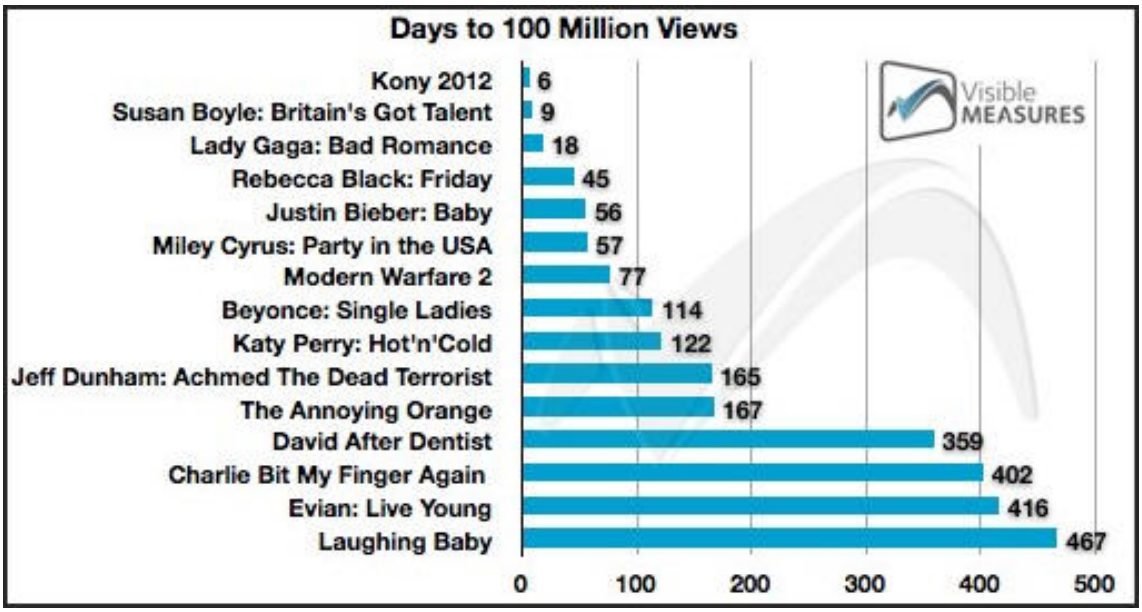


Image 1-14: Viral video viewership
Image retrieved from VisibleMeasures on December 2, 2012.

KONY progressed much as an actual viral contagion would; the outbreak reached its peak over several days, leading to a frenzy of public attention and mainstream media sensationalism. At its height, #STOPKONY was tweeted 1,200 times per *minute* on Twitter[8] and Invisible Children quickly became the most 'liked' non-profit organisation on Facebook, with 3.1 million fans (Invisible Children Year in Review 2012). Just a few days after the film was first posted, the Obama administration released an official statement praising the phenomenon. *The New York Daily News* reported Press Secretary Jay Carney's announcement: 'we congratulate the hundreds of thousands of Americans who have mobilised to this unique crisis of conscience' (Shahid 2012). By the end of 2012, 'Kony' ranked 9th in the most searched person of the year in Google, the *KONY 2012* film was awarded *TIME*'s number one viral video of the year and the Public Broadcasting Service included it amongst the 'top international events' of 2012 (Invisible Children 2012).

[8] According to Pew Research Center, 'Twitter's role was huge in getting the word out; there were nearly 5 million tweets about the video the week after it was posted online March 5' (Rainie et al 2012).

To date, *KONY 2012* has 97,031,704 views on YouTube alone, with 1,394,591 'likes' and 182,162 'dislikes' (additionally there have been roughly 18 million views on Vimeo), as well as subtitled and translated versions in Spanish, Italian, French and Chinese. According to Visible Measures, there were over 860,000 comments on the campaign. However, the viewer comments section on YouTube has remained controversially disabled. A basic YouTube search for '*KONY 2012*' yields roughly 55,700 results, with videos such as an anti-*KONY* cartoon attracting 6,283,015 views and '*KONY* Part 2 Beyond Famous' receiving about 2,541,813 views. The most commonly 'suggested' video when searching for '*KONY 2012*' or '*KONY 2012* supporters' is the video of Jason Russell's public meltdown on the streets of San Diego, which I briefly discuss below. The *KONY 2012* Facebook page has roughly 920,000 supporters, excluding its extensive regional offshoots, and the official Facebook page for Invisible Children has over 3.2 million fans. In comparison: the official Occupy Wall Street Facebook page has about 400,000 supporters.[9] *KONY* also received 3.7 million pledges from followers to actively participate in supporting efforts to arrest Joseph Kony (Invisible Children 2012).[10]

VI. Social Media Democratisation and New Digital Divides

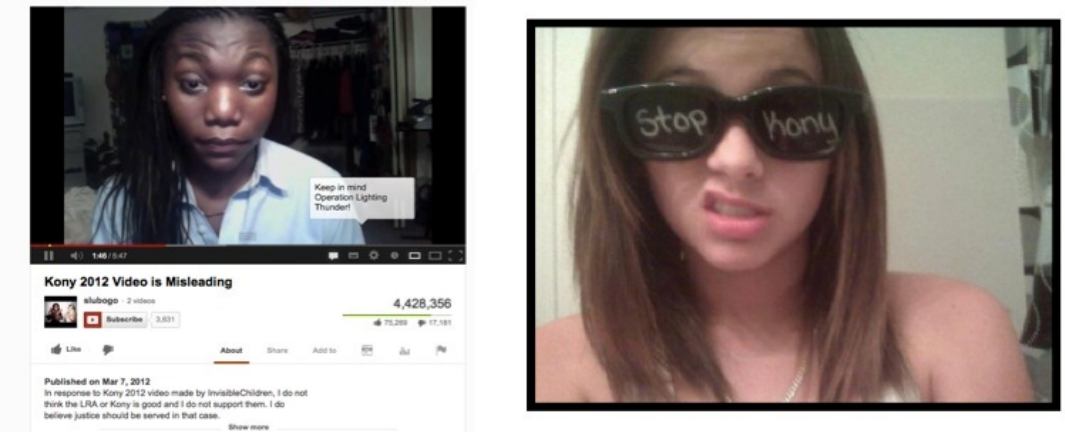
As a 'polymedia event', *KONY 2012*'s narratives were 'decentralised' and 'hierarchically organised' (Madianou 2013). In other words, the 'disintermediation' (Coleman 2005) of *KONY 2012* that bypassed 'powerful intermediaries such as media corporations and other traditional gatekeepers' created a 'democratisation of visibility' (Madianou 2013: 250-252). However, while *KONY 2012* described a globally connected world where citizens had

[9] This excludes its offshoots extending to 951 cities and 82 countries and where people participate in public spaces, such as Spain with 500,000 activists (retrieved from OccupyWallStreet.org 2014).
[10] Following the backlash of *KONY 2012*, Invisible Children announced its official closure in December of 2014.

access to voice that could change the world, it was also criticised for its exclusion of African voices; the very people discussed in the film and affected by the violence:

> His victims are not given voice—only one young man, Jacob, speaks. We are simply shown the faces of victims of the LRA, close-ups in quick alternation and then a landscape photo of them as a group. The victims and the Ugandan people appear as completely disempowered and in need of Western intervention, a problematic representation, which reproduces discredited discourses about dependency (Madianou 2013: 260).

Furthermore, *KONY 2012* revealed how new 'digital divides', or 'circumstances of inequality that characterise access (or lack of access) to resources, technological and otherwise, across much of the globe' are created and how they can determine which voices reach global communications platforms (Ginsburg 2008: 290). However, the barriers for activism and alternative minority voices in contemporary society should not be underestimated, as the *KONY* phenomenon illustrates. There are a multitude of gaps in communication access due to various restrictions, which include economic poverty, regional isolation, political oppression and a lack of technological infrastructure, to name a few.



Images 1-15 and 1-16: (Left) one of the most watched anti-*KONY* videos, called 'Kony 2012 is Misleading' with nearly 5 million views on YouTube (Right) *KONY 2012* supporter
Images retrieved from screenshots on September 1, 2013.

While the *KONY 2012* film revealed gaps in social media 'democratisation', media platforms around the world quickly followed up with their own forms of representation

and disintermediation. Al Jazeera, for example, set up 'The Kony Debate' with the words 'Uganda Speaks' advertising its project platform, which allowed Ugandans to voice their response to the film and provide a range of diverse opinions and perspectives. Other websites, such as UgandaSpeaks.com, offered similar platforms and various local film screenings throughout Uganda enabled locals to watch and address the film directly. Yet, ironically, the access to a voice that was offered to Ugandans was mediated by mass media institutions and Western organisations and, while YouTube garnered thousands of videos from viewers criticising (and supporting) the film, the majority were young Westerners, equally unfamiliar with the complexity of the film's context (Madianou 2013). Madianou also points out that 'there may have been thousands of blogs written assessing the pitfalls of the Kony 2012 campaign, but that number pales in comparison to the 100 million people who watched the original video' (Madianou 2013: 262). Furthermore, while Ugandans eventually were able to contribute to the debate and conversation, many whose voices were heard were from the educated South, particularly from Kampala, rather than from the Acholi affected region (Maasilta and Haavisto 2014). In other words, social media users may have had some voice, but the thunderous shouts of those at the top of social, political, financial, cultural and historical hierarchies may have muted the majority of those voices. While Madianou points to the possibility that 'SNS can potentially contribute to the opening up of the "space of appearance", inviting people to understand distant others and to share the responsibility of knowing' (Madianou 2013: 263), questions about whether new media has made information, representation and communication less egalitarian or more democratised are also raised.



Images 1-17 and 1-18: (left) Invisible Children activists in NYC holding a 'deliver your voice' sign. Retrieved from screenshot of *KONY 2012: Beyond Famous;* (right) Film screening of KONY 2012 in Ugandan village, where reactions to the film were mixed, according to *The Wall Street Journal* (Bariyoin and Orden 2012)

Image retrieved from Bariyoin and Orden (2012) on July 2, 2013.

The crisis of representation surrounding new digital divides in movements such as *KONY 2012* also shed light on the capacity for social media participation to create depictions of the 'Other' that often translate into the reaffirmation of stereotypes via 'colonial-esque' voices and authoritative textual and symbolic communication. *KONY 2012* was criticised for having a 'post-colonial' missionary zeal (Blattman 2012) that created racialised portraits of Africans, which were both ethnocentric and patronising. In *Anthropology Now*, Durington (2012) further argues that Westerners must face the horrific consequences of our colonial history and 'continued neo-colonialism fed by a global neoliberalism', which directly contributes to the problems faced by countries like Uganda. Durington (2012) points towards colonial histories as key sources for various tragedies, such as the Rwandan genocide, and believes that these forces 'enable someone like Joseph Kony to flourish in former African colonial states' (ibid). He also criticised *KONY 2012* for continuing the harmful representation of Africa as a continent framed by disease, conflict, famine and war

(ibid). Others warned that viral videos[11] like *KONY 2012* could act as 'dangerous propaganda' where 'moralism easily blends with militarism' and argued that there are serious implications for awareness campaigns constructed within a Western 'imperialist ideological framework' (Forte 2012). In other words, naïve social action consumerism and 'clicktivist' idealism could have the capacity to facilitate direct military interventions abroad; unlike the 'soft power' (Nye 2014) Twitter intervention by the U.S. in Iran, the *KONY 2012* social media-inspired action translated into actual 'boots on the ground'. For many, this touched frightening new territory: 'Invisible Children has now fully become part of the magical terror of global war, produced not primarily by any Africanness, but in the emplacement of global forces on the African scene' (Finnström 2012).

[11] The negative impact viral videos can have worldwide was highlighted after the anti-Muslim film, *Innocence of Muslims* (2012), sparked terrible unrest throughout the Middle East, resulting in mass protests in numerous countries where many were injured or killed. The incident has raised further interest in the power and impact of online videos.

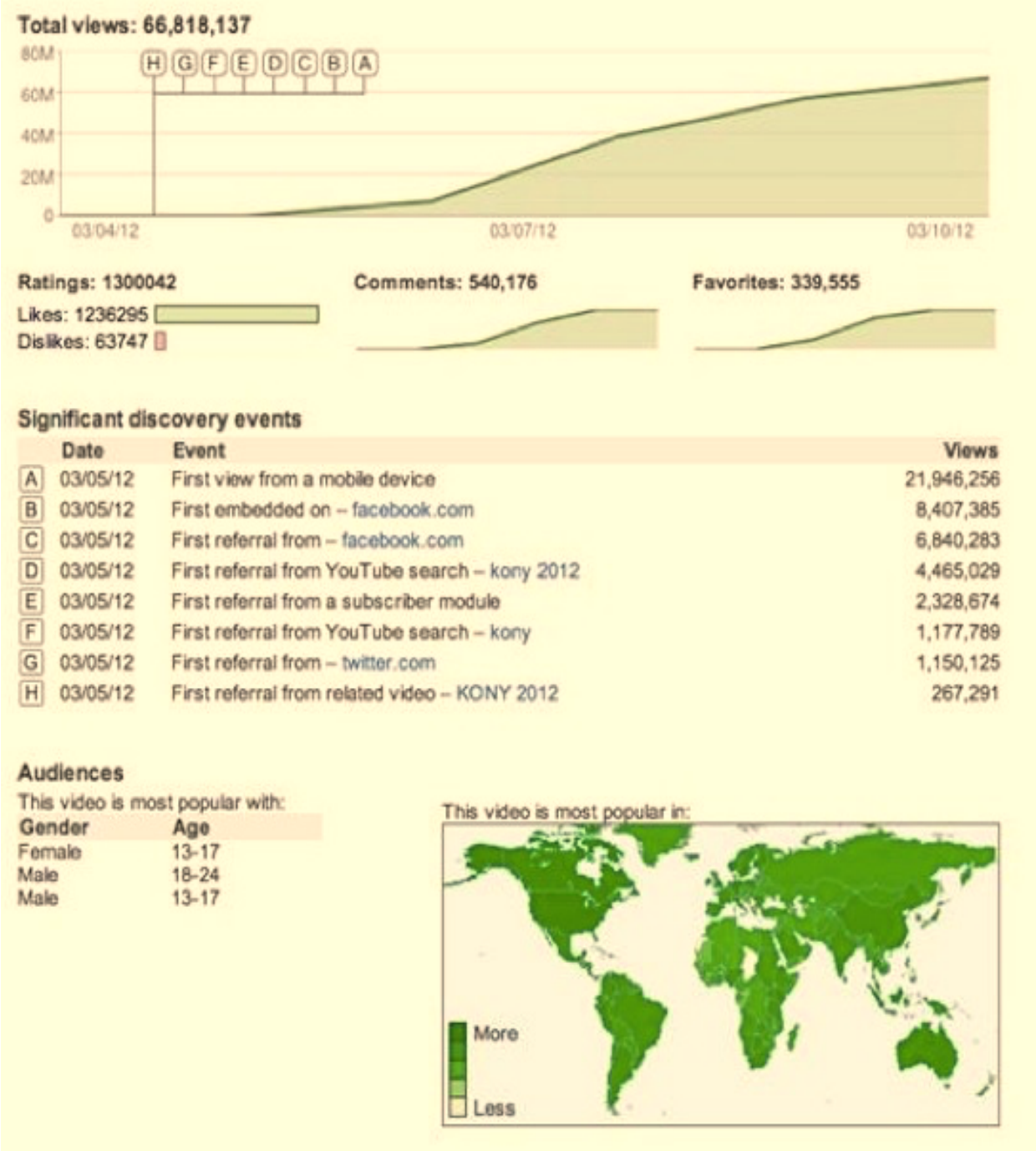


Image 1-19: How it spread: 58% shared using mobile devices, 38% Facebook, 2% Twitter, 1% Google

'About 10 percent of all the 'KONY 2012' views on YouTube have come from social media; 90 percent are from people directly searching for it, or it has been emailed or sent through an instant message, from people that you really trust to view it…Longer videos tend to get shared through more intimate channels' (Rainie et al 2012). Images retrieved from Pew Research Report on December 2, 2012.

VII. Mainstream Media and Political Responses

At the height of *KONY*'s viral popularity, mainstream media picked up coverage of the movement with positive enthusiasm. Widely respected news anchors, such as Diane Sawyer, initiated *KONY 2012* reports by painting narratives of digital idealism: 'is it possible that the most powerful army today is not military, but a collection of celebrities, students and ordinary people trying to transform human rights around the globe?' (*KONY 2012*: *Beyond Famous*). Renowned television critics, including Bill Maher, made similar statements: 'We might look back on this week as the week when everything changed for bad guys around the world who can no longer hide' (ibid). Yet, as *KONY 2012* reached its peak of admiration, the backlash was considerable.

When the mainstream media and viewers began to criticise Invisible Children's background and the film's validity, the *KONY* movement quickly became as unpopular as it was once loved. Invisible Children posted several videos defending their goals, while Jason Russell and several staff members set out on a nationwide interview tour with the major U.S. networks, from ABC to FOX News. However, on March 15th, just ten days after the film was first posted, Jason Russell was hospitalised due to 'a temporary psychotic breakdown believed to have been brought on by the pressure of the success – and criticism – of the first film', according to *The Washington Post* (Flock 2012). Jason's public breakdown, which involved him running naked through the streets of downtown San Diego, was captured on video and became the latest gossip for pop culture outlets such as TMZ, EXTRA and E! News. The incident, compounded by accusations that Invisible Children received financial support from an anti-gay Evangelical organisation, which was a touchy subject given the human rights abuses currently taking place against the LGBTQ community in Uganda, further diminished the legitimacy of the movement.

Therefore, when Invisible Children posted a follow-up film titled '*KONY 2012*: *Beyond Famous*' on April 5th in order to address the criticisms and open up about Jason's breakdown, the film received an estimated 2% of the original *KONY 2012* views, according to *Mashable* (Wasserman 2012). After the rise and fall of *KONY 2012* and the muted response of 'Cover the Night', Invisible Children began to push hard for a street protest called 'MOVE:DC', which aimed at organising 10,000 activists in Washington, D.C. to 'end the conflict' on November 17th. Despite an array of attempts to motivate supporters, the final rally numbers were unofficially reported as 'thousands', with Instagram photos emphasising the few hundred heads that dotted the audience behind an impromptu dance routine put on by Russell and his son. The march on Washington was followed by an elaborate event mirroring the level of lavishness held during presidential campaigns and involved appearances by various political leaders, musicians, artists and LRA survivors.



Images 1-20 and 1-21: (left) Journalists, politicians and political analysts discuss *KONY 2012* on *ABC News* (right) Jason Russell, producer of *KONY 2012*, being interviewed on the *Today Show*
Images retrieved from screenshots of *Today* and ABC on June 22, 2012.

Despite the negative turn in opinion from audiences and the media, *KONY 2012* received substantial and continuous support from both policymakers and international organisations. Shortly after the film's release, American Senators Jim Inhofe and Chris Coons drafted a resolution to support 'the effort of Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and the newest country, South Sudan, to stop Kony

and his Lord's Resistance Army', along with support 'for the U.S. effort to help regional forces pursue commanders of the militia group' (Arieff and Ploch 2012). The resolution passed into the House and Senate and was signed by nearly 100 Members of Congress. As Senator Lindsey Graham proclaimed in *Politico*:

> When you get 100 million Americans looking at something, you will get our attention. This YouTube sensation is gonna help the Congress be more aggressive and will do more to lead to his demise than all other action combined (Wong 2012).

Almost simultaneously, as reported by the *Congressional Quarterly*, the African Union made an official announcement that it would deploy 5,000 military troops to the region in order to support efforts to catch Kony. Further encouragement streamed in from the UNHCR, the House of Lords, the International Criminal Court, UNICEF, the European Union and the African Union Counter Terrorism Unit, as well as major NGOs including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (Donnelly 2012). News coverage of the military bases in Central Africa even revealed posters of the *KONY 2012* campaign on U.S. adviser base camp doors, in a symbolic gesture of the support the American administration would continue to offer under the new Congressional resolution. Meanwhile, Invisible Children delivered the 3,729,815 pledges it had obtained from supporters of the campaign to the United Nations headquarters, where U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice and African Union special envoy leader Francisco Madeira reiterated their support towards stopping the LRA threat. In essence, substantial political action occurred after, and despite, waning popular support for the campaign. Furthermore, the 'space of appearance' (Arendt 1958) and digital action of *KONY 2012* marked a shift in the understanding of the impact of viral videos both socially and politically.

VIII. (Mis)Information and Viral Realities

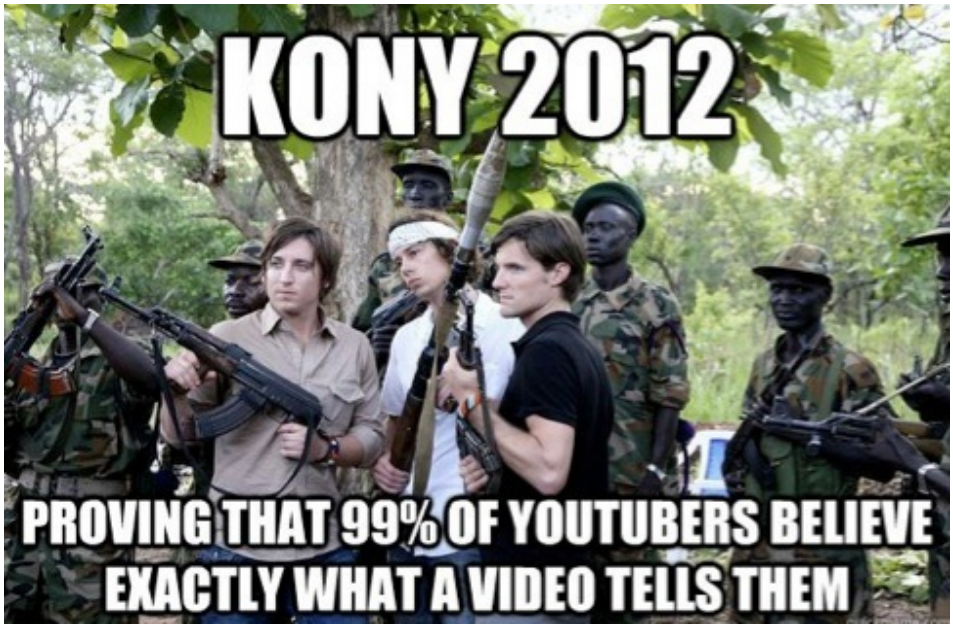


Image 1-22: Invisible Children leaders: (left) Bailey (centre) Poole (right) Russell at a peace negotiation meeting with the LRA
Retrieved from quickmeme.com on September 2, 2012.

It was not long ago that mass media determined how audiences received information on global events; if reporters did not cover the genocide in Rwanda, the average citizen was unlikely to know about it.[12] News intermediaries, with their varying biases, spins, and values, played a formative role in the circulation of knowledge. Currently, however, the production, dissemination and consumption of news and information take place largely in the digital sphere. In the United States, the Internet has become the most popular source of information and is a preferred source of news ahead of television, newspapers and radio. As social media sites have become leading news platforms, mainstream media have been

[12] This, in a sense, also reflects the history of media coverage on Joseph Kony and the LRA. During the height of the violence, international coverage of the issue was scarce. Two special reports by Oprah Winfrey, including one where she passionately described how the Christmas Day Massacres in 2008 had gone shockingly unnoticed by the international community, did little to change the conversation. It took Invisible Children a decade to move from traditional media (e.g. their original documentary *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut*) to 'spreading the message' in social media spheres, where they found new pathways for global communication opened.

forced to renegotiate their internal structures; newspaper, radio and television organisations have incorporated social media into the very core of their foundations, and 'citizen journalism' has come to play an increasingly large role in facilitating their information flows.

While *KONY 2012* is generally defined as a humanitarian campaign and polymedia event (Madianou 2013), the film was also represented and consumed as a major news event. Audiences experienced a sense of global affairs unfolding, a belief that mainstream media was not covering a critical social issue, which in this case surrounded the atrocities committed by Joseph Kony and the LRA, and a sense that now social media users were 'in the know', receiving and spreading this breaking news. *KONY*'s audience members were shaped into a global human rights committee, consuming and producing news and enacting social justice in digital spaces. This form of online participation represents a framework that had been adopted and institutionalised into a commonly shared belief system between social media users worldwide. Its inception dates back to the Iranian protests of 2009 and was grounded into a sense of actuality during the Arab Spring and Occupy Protests, as well as other online justice movements like Trayvon Martin and the One Million Hoodie March that sparked waves of protests both offline and online. Citizens who feel underrepresented by monopolising institutions such as governments and the mainstream media, reconstitute viral communicative spaces into places where citizen disintermediation is believed to have the ability to create social change; a place where social network ties act as powerfully-charged information exchange systems for sparking global action.



Images 1-23 and 1-24: Photos of Invisible Children supporters at a rally
The image on the left was reused for *KONY 2012*'s campaign film with the words 'we will fight war' written below. The protesters wear t-shirts with AK-47s printed on the front, symbolically creating the appearance of a digitally bound vigilante group fighting against social injustice. Such shots were juxtaposed against photos taken during the Arab Spring protests (Madianou 2013). Images retrieved from screen shot (*KONY 2012*: Beyond Famous). Images retrieved on July 23, 2013.

The narrative conventions of storytelling and reporting, combined with the symbolic power of photographs, have been fundamental to the domination of news and media.[13] Narrative strategies, dramatic imagery and institutional biases are consistently adopted and reformulated to stimulate viewer interest in coverage within mainstream media, as well as humanitarian campaigns such as *KONY 2012*. However, these tactics are increasingly employed in online communication, shaping ideas on information reception and discourses about social realities and the global flow of information, as well as the influence social media outlets possess in modern society. Knowledge that is built and shaped by social media lends itself to circumstances in which looped conversation networks predominate and 'our friends are our filters', as Garber (2012) described in *The Atlantic*. In other words, information funnelled through social media creates 'echo chambers' (Zuckerman 2013). This consumption of viral information was evident in *KONY 2012*. As

[13] Within the field of anthropology, news as an institution and cultural phenomenon is a significant area of study. Ethnographies of war and foreign correspondents, news organisations, the relationships between media, social knowledge and political culture, as well as the mediation and reception of news across cultural and ethnic boundaries, have been crucial to the foundation of anthropologically-situated news and journalism literature (e.g. Allen 1994; Hannerz 1992; Madianou 2005; Peterson 2003; Boyer 2010).

the Pew Research Center's report on *KONY* stated:

> Twenty-seven percent of young adults heard about it through social media such as Facebook or Twitter and another 8 percent learned about it via other Internet sources. The Internet was more than three times more important as a news-learning platform for young adults than traditional media such as television, newspapers, and radio. Only 10 percent of young adults first learned about 'Kony 2012' via traditional media platforms. However, those 50 and older were much more likely to have learned of the video from traditional sources, especially television (Rainie et al 2012).

The spread of information through social networks and expansion of the *KONY 2012* phenomenon through word of mouth amongst millennials was described by Jason Russell when he stated in an interview with *Reuters*:

> The unique thing about this movement which is really, really exciting is that it's led by the youth. It's the children... When you get older you get muddled and polluted by the way the world is supposed to work and children don't see it that way, they are like, "this just isn't right" (Kearney 2012).

At the same time, as *KONY 2012* spread through social media and its vast networks, misinformation and confusion abounded. In the tweet below, Katie Couric, one of the most prominent and respected American news anchors, who works as a special correspondent for ABC News and contributes to *ABC World News, Nightline, 20/20* and *Good Morning America,* spread the *KONY 2012* misinformation by calling on her nearly one million Twitter followers to take action against 'this horrible war in Uganda'. Even as one of the most prominent news intermediaries in the United States, Couric failed to research whether or not there was, in fact, a war going on in Uganda. Instead, she tweeted about it based on the information her 16-year-old daughter discovered in *KONY 2012*. Both the consumption ('my 16-year-old told me') and reproduction ('help #stopkony') of her 'news' information epitomises the complexity of new media spaces. The findings of Rainie et al (2012) on *KONY 2012* mirror this relationship between age groups and news consumption, as well as the relationships between information exchanges.



Image 1-25: Image from Twitter, Katie Couric's tweet
Image retrieved August 2, 2012.

The spread of misinformation was also evident in other online spaces, such as Facebook. Ben Keesey, former president of Invisible Children, uses a Facebook profile photo that highlights the work of Invisible Children to a global audience. However, the visual image that Keesey uses grossly mispresents the facts. The defection of LRA combatants, for instance, was also due to the Juba Peace Process, the decline in financial and political support from Sudan, the efforts of countless governmental and non-governmental actors, as well as the spread of remaining LRA members to the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic. Keesey's photos represent 'a blatant misreading of the conflict's dynamics in favor of a sort of misplaced narcissism', which also spreads misinformation on Facebook, as described by journalists from *The Washington Post* (Titeca and Sebastian 2014).



Image 1-26: Image captured from Ben Keesey's Facebook page on November 2, 2015
It is currently used as his Facebook profile photo, which reaches the global public. Image retrieved from Keesey's Facebook page on September 1, 2014.

The viral spread of 'news' can act as the antithesis of analysis, and the impassive consumption of media breeds environments where misrepresentation and disinformation are blurred with objectivity and truth. Bypassing barriers of information dissemination, while enabling citizens to break previous institutional constraints on the media, can give way to new manipulations of facts and fiction. In this arena, events like *KONY 2012* are commodified virally before fact checking takes place, creating concerns over social disparities, as well as the reliability, concentration, availability and exclusivity of information. Falsifications and distortions are easily lost amidst authority and legitimacy; rumours, reality, fact and fiction collide as a system of open publishing, collaboration, participation, independent editing and unmediated content distribution redefine the popular meaning of 'freedom of the press'. As Cohen and Kahne's (2012) research showed, 84% of young people interviewed about Invisible Children stated they would 'benefit from learning more about how to tell if news and information you find online is trustworthy'

(viii). In this complex news environment, information is encoded and decoded through communications and fragmented contextually in reality, making online representations and depictions of 'knowledge' difficult to contextualise as they flow across boundaries. Such news communications often leave credibility and accountability in unknown waters, as anthropologist Sverker Finnström (2012) argues:

> A most prominent feature of the Invisible Children lobby is the making and constant remaking of a master narrative; it reduces, depoliticizes and dehistoricizes a murky reality of globalized war into a completely black-and-white story.

Yet the criticisms of *KONY*'s misinformation and factual manipulations were not necessarily a testament to the creator's naivety. As Jason Russell stated in a *Reuters*' interview: 'we made it over-simplified on purpose…. Steve Jobs, you know, said "simplicity is the highest form of sophistication"' (Kearney 2012). The *KONY* producers believed that neatly packaged, simplistic and visually compelling information was the key to viral mass awareness. In other words, the simplicity required to start a global conversation and revolution, as Russell called it, outweighed the possible negative implications (ibid). Such perspectives have recently become more popular and make up many of the most common strategies for online marketing, particularly for humanitarian campaigns that employ visual displays of spectacle, performance and commodity activism (Brough 2012; Chouliaraki 2006, 2013). This is also evident in the growing trend of digital media to reduce information and opinion to short, Twitter-like texts and highly symbolic visual displays, such as 'infographics'[14] and 'memes' (Leskovec et al. 2009). However, this transformation in

[14] This trend is also evident in the growing popularity of 'infographics', which create condensed visualizations of information. Infographics were widely used in the responses to the *KONY 2012* campaign. Ironically, many of the film's criticisms were composed using the very elements opponents condemned. For example, critics who called the film 'oversimplified' expressed their argument through simplified infographics, which were employed to illustrate the complexity of the film's context, but simultaneously boxed an educated understanding into a reductionist perspective.

information dissemination and communication raises alarms when related to vastly complex issues, such as conflicts in Central Africa, particularly when they involve military intervention, as this thesis will explore.



Image 2-1: Child soldier. Image retrieved from the Invisible Children website on July 9, 2013

Chapter Two: *KONY 2012:* Literature Review and Thesis Contribution

I. Understanding *KONY 2012*

The field of human rights and development studies has offered various contributions to the *KONY 2012* phenomenon (e.g. Drumbl 2012; Gregory 2012; Hickman 2012; Karlin and Matthew 2012; Waldorf 2012) alongside some media-oriented works, such as Madianou (2013) and Nothias (2012). Most academic research articles focus on Western public engagement with humanitarian campaigns (Engelhardt and Jansz 2014; Shresthova 2016) and the portrayal of 'distant sufferers' (Maasilta and Havisto 2014) or theoretical perspectives surrounding social media and activism (Brough 2012; Wheaton 2013).

For instance, Finnstrom (2012) argues that *KONY 2012* 'conveniently reduces a very complex conflict, with northern Uganda as its historical epicentre, to a colonialist "Heart of Darkness" stereotype of primitiveness' (128). Similarly, Brough (2012) compared

Invisible Children's videos to 'humanitarian adventure and consumption, reminiscent of the imperial adventure marketed and consumed in the 19th century' (15). Madianou (2013) stated that the African victim in *KONY 2012* is portrayed 'as completely disempowered and in need of Western intervention' (259) and Finnegan (2013) argued that the majority of Invisible Children participants were considerably affluent, white females from the United States who joined the organisation due to their Christian faith, desire to feel special and need to take part in an exotic humanitarian cause to 'save Africa' (31). Likewise, Wheaton (2013) posited that Invisible Children placed the role of the supporter ahead of its campaign to help Ugandans by highlighting the lack of African figures in the film (22).

In Brough's (2012) work on transnational humanitarianism and commodity activism, she suggested that:

> The earnestness of 'real' portrayals of suffering [prevalent during most of the 20th century] is being matched with, or even supplanted by, more light hearted, postmodern pastiche and youth culture aesthetics, and glamorised or playful representations of the humanitarian donor-as-consumer (176).

Along the same lines, Drumbl (2012) critiqued *KONY 2012*'s oversimplified portrayal of child soldiers, as well as the complex issues surrounding child soldiers fighting in African conflicts. Drumbl (2012) argued that child soldiers were misrepresented in *KONY 2012* and highlighted the lack of representation of the realities of child soldiering generally. Furthermore, the portrayal of Africa by non-Africans, as well as the international news coverage of *KONY 2012* that was mediated by journalists, was explored by Nothias (2013), who commented on the lack of news coverage of the LRA prior to the launch of *KONY 2012* and the role social media played in communicating African voices.

Wheaton's (2013) research in Uganda highlighted the lack of access to technology and the digital divides that prevented Ugandan visibility to Western audiences. Wheaton (2013)

also explored Ugandan agency and the perspectives of Western intervention, as well as stereotypes of the African 'Other'. Finnegan argued, like many authors, that the neo-colonial undertones of the campaign invited young Western audiences to take on interventions in a conflict and country they knew little about (Finnegan 2013). Hickman (2012) furthered this point by arguing:

> What is missing from the film is any sustained first-hand exploration of the war itself, in the villages of northern Uganda and other places directly affected by Kony's atrocities (477).

Yet, Hickman (2012) overlooked the nearly decade-long campaign that Invisible Children had undertaken prior to the film's release. Prior to *KONY 2012*, the organization's campaigns continuously outlined the history of the war and all its complexities, albeit often simplified for younger audiences. Furthermore, Finnegan (2013)'s work focused heavily on white Western intervention abroad, but is herself a young, white female from an affluent background who runs her own non-profit organisation in Uganda. While Finnegan's sentiment is understandable and warranted, her work does fail to look objectively and practically at Invisible Children's decade-long attempt to capture Joseph Kony and the realities of the situation on the ground. For instance, it ignores the crimes and corruption committed by the UPDF, which further complicate military intervention and paths towards justice. That said, both authors highlight valid points, as Invisible Children's support of military intervention is also very complicated and morally questionable.

Shirley (2016) looked at the activism imagery of *KONY 2012*'s campaign and argued that the Invisible Children team purposely branded visual imagery in *KONY 2012* that was subversive so that individuals would 'interact with the pre-formulated anti-Kony imagery that aids in the construction, communication, and maintenance of an antipathetic political brand identity' (43). Similarly, both Madianou and Brough commented on the visual imagery of *KONY 2012*, particularly emphasising the *KONY 2012* 'Banksy' poster. They

argued that the imagery conjured up notions of the Obama campaigns and garnered support from millennial youths who connected to the artistic, controversial images. Various authors, such as Gregory (2012), Hickman (2012) and Waldorf (2012), consistently argued for a greater need to create holistic representation in humanitarian campaigns like *KONY 2012*, which would value and uphold Ugandan agency and voices, alongside the mobilisation of the wider public.

Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) argued that *KONY 2012* forced a moral responsibility towards the 'distant suffering other' as it put pressure on the 'ironic spectator' (Chouliaraki 2013). They conducted a large study amongst Dutch students and found that young people often responded favourably to Invisible Children's messages, which conjured a sense of moral responsibility in the students. This was the case even for male respondents, who were typically less engaged. However, Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) also described how the celebration of Western empowerment in the film lessened the feelings of moral responsibility, particularly in the second half of the film. At the same time, the researchers found that, despite the criticisms of *KONY 2012* and its narrative of African humanitarianism, it did not mitigate the students' sense of personal responsibility and their moral imperative to act (ibid: 18). Finnegan (2013) built on the idea of moral responsibility by suggesting that young American millennials seeking to act and address complex situations, such as the LRA and Joseph Kony, should consider partnering with African activists in order to create and sustain real social change (35). Madianou (2013) asserted that this 'personal responsibility to act' (Engelhardt and Jansz 2014) in *KONY 2012* was less an example of 'cosmopolitanism',[15] which highlights the potential of media to offer moral understanding to Western audiences, and more related to 'communitarianism',

[15] See Chouliaraki (2006); Ong (2011); Silverstone (2007); Tester (2001).

which emphasises an individual's contribution to community. Madianou posited that the *KONY 2012* video was not situated within an understanding of the suffering of others, or a moral orientation towards suffering, but instead focused on community action (2013: 261-262). For instance, she highlighted how audience members were asked to share the video with friends or band together to participate in the *KONY 2012* activism. Furthermore, Madianou suggested that Invisible Children's participants were attracted by the ability to take action, or to be perceived as taking action, through the ease of their social networking sites ('clicktivism') and the convenience of financial resourses, like credit cards. Drumbl (2012) argued against this type of 'clicktivism', unlike Gregory (2012), who viewed 'clicktivism' as a complementary form to action and activism. On the other hand, Karlin and Matthew (2012) examined the mediatisation of social justice campaigns by looking at *KONY 2012*, arguing that the challenges of compassion fatigue (Moeller 1999) in humanitarian storytelling could be overcome using new social media technologies that encourage civic engagement.

In a similar vein, Sangita Shresthova (2016) interviewed 47 Invisible Children participants and found that great strides were made in the *KONY 2012* movement, which saw youth activists engage with grassroots humanitarianism, leading to U.S. government action by sending troops into the region. Despite the failure to capture Kony, which Shresthova argued was a weakness for the campaign, she found that Invisible Children's unique approach to humanitarian engagement inspired youth in a positive way, despite the failure to create a deeper understanding amongst viewers and participants. Like Shresthova (2016), Swartz (2012) argued that Invisible Children should have aimed to inspire audiences to be more engaged with information, expanding their knowledge beyond Invisible Children's sound bites, in order to engage in active information production and sharing, even if this did not mitigate the risks it posed to their effective and fast transmedia storytelling. Swartz

(2012) emphasised the importance of 'spreadability' (Jenkins 2013) and looked at specific aspects of Invisible Children, such as their link to music, open content distribution, merchandise, fan inspiration and Christianity. Swartz (2012) argued:

> Invisible Children is able to tell a story that is mobilising but open to revision, is able to negotiate across various participant subjectivities, is both spreadable and drillable, and requires a variety of participant performances in order to persist (3-4).

However, she expanded on this perspective by arguing that Invisible Children could have achieved greater, long-lasting social change if it had not diluted information for its participants. Swartz believed that more open, engaged material in its storytelling could have led to a different result for the organisation (ibid: 22). Swartz (2012) and the various other contributing *KONY 2012* authors have each offered interesting perspectives to our understanding of the phenomenon and highlighted valid arguements related to the weaknesses and strengths of the movement, in essence highlighting how humanitarian campaigns in future could offer more nuanced, integrated frameworks for their initiatives. As this literature summary discusses, the majority of *KONY 2012* research focuses on humanitarian engagement, the portrayal of Africans in social justice campaigns, the lack of a Ugandan voice and debates around social media activism. The literature has offered interesting perspectives and highlighted new theoretical contributions to the topic; for example, Madianou's (2013) 'polymedia events' theory, which the next section of this chapter develops further, as well as Brough's (2012) work on commodity activism. However, the literature on *KONY 2012* excludes a detailed examination of the political interests in the region, with the exception of Finnstrom (2012) who touched on the UPDF's failed human rights record and pointed towards possible American interests in the region.

I have yet to locate a source that mentions the Wikileaks Global Intelligence Files, which

my research highlights. My thesis also offers empirical research on the *KONY 2012* participants through a year-long ethnographic study. Through participant observation online and interviews, the research develops an understanding of the American youth participants who were involved with Invisible Children for existential purpose, meaning and community. This thesis seeks to explore, but move beyond, attempts to restrict *KONY 2012* within a specific arguement and strive to move past criticisms of humanitarian spectatorship in order to offer a nuanced portrait of the complexity of American youth movements and humanitarian activism. It also highlights the differences between Invisible Children supporters and leaders, as well as the role of Christianity and military interests in the wider movement. This thesis further adds to our understanding of the Invisible Children phenomenon by developing the idea of a 'polymedia movement', a term which seeks to describe the complexity of *KONY 2012*. In essence, it explores how contemporary humanitarian campaigns and social media movements are used in often covert and corrupt ways to further American power abroad, while simultaneously serving a positive role for American millennials.

II. *KONY 2012:* A (Poly)Media Event

The theoretical framework of this thesis is structured around the 'polymedia movement' of *KONY 2012* and focuses on three pillars within the academic literature, which include online activism, humanitarianism and millennial youth culture. This thesis draws on Madianou's (2013) theory of 'polymedia events'[16] and Dayan and Katz's (1992) 'media

[16] In her theory on 'polymedia events', Madianou drew on another related concept called 'polymedia theory' (Madianou and Miller 2013) to develop the concept of polymedia events. Polymedia theory seeks to understand media as a 'social act … constituting that social relationship' (Madianou and Miller 2013: 183). While participants often touched on the complex social relations embedded within social media, polymedia theory, which argues for the 're-socialisation of communicative media' (ibid), is beyond the scope of this thesis and should not be confused with polymedia events or polymedia movements.

events' theory as theoretical references for the development of the idea of a 'polymedia movement'. While the literature on polymedia events is by no means extensive, Madianou (2013) developed and defined such events as occurring when:

> An event triggered by the media generates a series of reactions or related events which are played out in different media platforms. Polymedia events are unplanned, transnational and decentralised in the sense that there is no shared official or central narrative; polymedia events are marked by parallel or clashing narratives (264).

Madianou argues that polymedia events unfold in at least half a dozen platforms with decentralised, transnational narratives, as well as large scale and audience reach.

As this thesis identifies, these attributes were evident in the *KONY 2012* phenomenon. The responses to *KONY 2012*, which often came in the form of visual and textual artefacts, helped to create a 'polymedia event', as contradicting and varied conversations, videos, tweets, memes, photos, sayings and narratives flooded through the gates of every media outlet. Messages about *KONY 2012* went viral on social media sites with both formal and informal exchanges, ranging from academic experts to everyday citizens, revealing the vast and complex processes media often undergo in contemporary digital worlds (Ginsburg 1995: 8). Madianou highlighted the typical nature of *KONY 2012* as a polymedia event, describing its initial start as a YouTube documentary, which quickly led to a breadth of responses and reactions, ranging from blogs to mainstream television and news to newspapers and social media. The unfolding of the *KONY 2012* media event spanned controversy, to critiques, to conversations about ethics and humanitarianism. In essence, while starting as a simple campaign based on YouTube, it developed into a complex web of media artefacts:

> Its aftermath was so large that our understanding needs to encompass the various platforms and channels where it was analysed, dissected and re-constituted in different forms that also included the voices which were annihilated in the original film (Madianou 2013: 262).

III. Polymedia and Media Events

Madianou's (2013) theory of polymedia events was partly inspired by Dayan and Katz (1992), who developed the theory of 'media events'. 'Media events' refer to televised events, marking 'high holidays' and formal occasions, such as royal weddings, or planned events featured through mass communication (Dayan and Katz 1992: 9). 'Media Events' contrast with 'polymedia events', which are 'unplanned, transnational and decentralised' (Madianou 2013: 261). 'Media events' inspire the feeling of a 'collective identity', which is 'centralised' due to its traditional televised broadcasting (ibid).

Dayan and Katz's (1992) work, which helped to inform the theoretical approach of this research, argued that media events reflect the 'unique potential of the electronic media to command attention universally and simultaneously in order to tell a primordial story about current affairs' (1). Their argument paralleled the power and momentum behind the *KONY 2012* campaign, which harnessed mass public awareness through visually potent storytelling, emotionally compelling narratives, socio-political ideology, the depiction of global justice and an implied theme of political revolution. As Dayan and Katz argued:

> Media events strike the observer by their directorial flamboyance, by their display of visual rhetoric. They strut their arrogant monumentality, their uninhibited reliance on special effects, striking compositions, montages, and juxtapositions (ibid: 112).

This was certainly evident in *KONY 2012*, which was created and produced by highly skilled filmmakers who were not only very talented, but also equipped with high-tech editing studios and professional production teams, all of which was instrumental to the creation and success of the striking film, *KONY 2012*.

The opening lines of *KONY 2012*, which assert the connectedness of all humanity through the Internet, echo 'the enormity of this audience, together with the awareness by all of its enormity, is awesome' (ibid: 14). In *KONY 2012*, the global unity message fascinated and

connected audiences worldwide as it communicated a sense of social connection and integration wherein 'society is both as atomized and as integrated as a mass-society theorist might ever imagine' (ibid: 15). Furthermore, in *KONY 2012*, audiences were transfixed by the potential for Internet democracy to bring about social reform for the masses and bypass slow, corrupt political bureaucracy. Dayan and Katz highlighted the dissatisfaction that audiences often feel with bureaucratic inaction combined with the belief that 'people power' can create actual change: 'we can join Sadat or the Pope and change the world; the people can unite to save Africans from starvation by supporting Live Aid' (ibid: 21).

Not only did *KONY 2012* reach a record number of individuals around the world, it displayed the sheer enormity of the international community created by Invisible Children as networked teens throughout the United States helped push the viral phenomenon to record numbers within days of its release. This phenomenon compares to Dayan and Katz's description of the social networks that can develop when media events insert messages 'to atomize, to integrate, or otherwise to design social structure' as well as 'create their own constituencies' (ibid: 15). Almost overnight, *KONY 2012* appeared to change the social structure of society on a global scale by raising consciousness of the world's ability to 'atomize' through social media. In *KONY 2012*, its viral nature also demonstrated the extent of its 'constituency', which had developed over nearly a decade through Invisible Children's independent media campaigns.

Through Jason Russell's moving and motivational narration in *KONY 2012*, not only did he become the 'broadcaster doubled as the monument maker' (ibid: 91), but he exemplified how 'media events may then create and integrate communities larger than nations' (ibid: 23). This also illustrated the power of a media event to create and maintain independent communities, backed by the force of its international audience (ibid: 15), which in this case was made up of idealistic young people connected to social media and in search of social

change. Furthermore, the *KONY 2012* narrative, symbolism and powerful visuals acted as tactical tools for representation and communication in a world where digital technology now enacts cultural production and creates social networks. The act of watching and sharing *KONY 2012* induced a 'ceremoniality' of the event, which embraced the entire globe. In this sense, 'technology here allows the spirit of communitas to overcome the divisions inherent in "organic solidarity"' (ibid: 197). Dayan and Katz described how media events can act as cathartic experiences, redefine societal boundaries and allow for a moment of 'mechanical solidarity' (ibid: 196) as emotions are stirred and feelings of '*communitas*' abound. The cultural perceptions, social actions and ideological systems behind *KONY* reveal the cultural significance of such media events, which plays a role in local, national and global communities (Paterson and Domingo 2008), as well as influencing 'symbolic geography' (ibid: 165).

In *KONY 2012*, Jason Russell sought to overcome the barriers that were often placed between humanitarian appeals and Western audiences watching them. Therefore, Russell placed himself and his son in the video in order to establish a connection with American viewers and break down geographical barriers, while also including Ugandan young people such as Jacob, who could offer an understanding of the plight faced by many under Joseph Kony. Through *KONY 2012*, Russell sought to share Ugandans' 'inner feelings' while also creating an empathetic, emotional experience for viewers (ibid: 198). Yet, at the same time because 'media events affect the international image of the society in which they take place' (ibid: 201), many argued that the video simply reinforced neo-colonial values.

Dayan and Katz argued that media events could ultimately act as 'harbingers of change' (ibid: 147), which could serve to not only transform public opinion, but also create or inspire social movements. This could be seen in the *KONY 2012* event, which transformed public and political opinion by drawing viewers into an examination of their humanitarian

values and sense of global justice, eventually acting 'as catalysts to unexpected social movements' (ibid: 199–200). This was evident, not only in the significant number of activists taking part in Invisible Children's appeals, but also in the viral outcry from everyday citizens that developed around the world. Furthermore, Invisible Children's proposal to take military action in the Great Lakes region was something that had been lobbied for in Washington, D.C. for years, without significant headway being made. The media event of *KONY 2012* set into motion measurable social and political action, which was carried out in the wake of *KONY 2012* despite the many criticisms of it and Russell's breakdown. *KONY 2012* inspired mass support politically and socially for Western military intervention in an unknown war which had seen its height over ten years previously. In doing so, it proved that the organisation and action of political institutions are heavily influenced by the media and that 'some media events lead directly to social and political change' (ibid: 203). Tangible changes, in the form of Senate resolutions, significant funds to capture Kony, Congressional bills, and international action from organisations including the United Nations, were some of the many direct changes that took place after *KONY 2012,* as this thesis explores.

It is, therefore, important to frame this research within the context of Madianou's polymedia event theory, as well as Dayan and Katz's media event theory, as both offer an insightful contribution to the research framework.

I argue that, rather than a 'polymedia event' (Madianou 2013) or 'media event' (Dayan and Katz 1992), the phenomenon should be defined as a 'polymedia movement'. *KONY 2012* was embedded within a wider social movement, which consisted of 'a group of people working together to advance their shared political, social, or artistic ideas' (Merriam-Webster 2016). As this thesis explores, Invisible Children was far more than the *KONY 2012* 'event'; it had roots in a movement spanning nearly a decade. Furthermore, while

KONY 2012 was most certainly 'polymedia' in terms of its media diffusion, the Invisible Children movement was equally 'polymedia'. As this thesis reveals, the organisation's various films and events triggered the reaction of other media responses and events. For example, the original film, *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut* (2006), led to the development of other films and videos, viewer reactions on other platforms, such as social media, and large events, such as The Rescue (2009) and MOVE: DC (2012). Those events and media reactions on various alternative platforms then triggered further events and media responses, often with opposing trajectories and narratives.

Thus, I argue that the concept of polymedia events should be expanded in order to better comprehend and understand the Invisible Children phenomenon as a polymedia *movement*. Invisible Children was 'poly' not just in terms of media, but also 'poly' as a movement in the sense that the movement took on various identities, values and initiatives, whether based on Christian values, a millennial youth desire to belong, humanitarianism or neo-colonialism. For instance, as this thesis explores, this was evident in the American government's use of *KONY 2012* as a catalyst to enter the region under the guise of humanitarian aid. Furthermore, it acted as a nearly decade-long movement rather than a singular event, thus expanding Madianou's (2013) definition from polymedia event to polymedia movement. The polymedia movement surrounding *KONY 2012* was about more than just media diffusion, it illustrated the 'poly' nature of such movements, which are adopted by various individuals, groups and organizations to push often contradictory agendas, interests and belief systems, often functioning independently as a microcosm within the wider movement.



Image 3-1: Image retrieved from the Invisible Children website on October 1, 2012

Chapter Three: Methodology

I. Chapter Overview

This research was a digital ethnography (Miller and Slater 2000; Hine 2000, 2015) using multi-sited fieldwork,[17] through online and offline environments (Wilson 2006; boyd 2012; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Schneidermann 2013). The two primary research methods were participation observation in online spaces, particularly Facebook, and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were both critical aspects of the digital ethnography, as together, they created a cohesive, holistic understanding of the organisation and its participants. This was highlighted by Postill and Pink (2012) who argued that interviews and participant observation help 'refigure social media as a fieldwork environment that is social, experiential and mobile' (125). At the same time, social media sites such as Facebook represent 'only the aggregate of its regional and

[17] As boyd (2015) notes: 'Internet-only ethnographic research may have value, but as other scholars have highlighted, recognizing continuities between online and offline contexts and taking context into consideration is essential…' (83).

particular usage' (Miller 2011: 163). Thus, this ethnographic research seeks to explore the culture of humanitarian, activist millennials within the Invisible Children organisation in the United States.

I interviewed 142 men and women and collected many visual artefacts. In total, 11 of the interviews conducted were face-to-face, seven took place over Skype and the remainder were carried out through social media, largely via Facebook email messaging and instant messaging. The participants in the research were young men and women, generally ranging in age from 16–25. Invisible Children's participants were from over 45 countries around the world, although the majority of those I interviewed were from the United States.[18] The ethnographic fieldwork took one year to complete and involved observation and participation in both real and online spaces. The research involved a snowball sampling method in which Invisible Children's leaders and participants connected me with other participants. I also used a basic method of searching on Facebook for possible participants, and some visual analysis alongside participant observation, which served as a secondary tool for understanding the communication and representation of the participants.[19]

The ethnography sought to create thickly descriptive accounts of Invisible Children using qualitative data collection and interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Hine 2005; Beaulieu and Estalella 2012). Semi-structured interviews (e.g. Crichton and Kinash 2003; Garcia et al. 2009) with the founding producers of *KONY 2012* and

[18] While many of the participants in my study were American, it is difficult to define a social media-based study by its geographical borders. Some participants were raised in other countries and now live in the United States or are from other Western cultures in Europe, Australia and Canada. Yet, at the same time, the primary sources of participants were concentrated on the United States and many informants were American millennials; thus the research focuses particularly on those participants. When using the term Western, I aim to reflect more broadly North American culture and Western cultures around the world that consume and produce social media in Internet spaces.

[19] Google searches contained key phrases like: 'KONY 2012', 'Invisible Children', 'Joseph Kony' and 'LRA'.

participants from the *KONY 2012*/Invisible Children movement (including those who became disillusioned with the movement) were also employed. I conducted online participant observation, largely on Facebook, within the Invisible Children community for one year of fieldwork, with some interviews and data collection extending over a two-year period.

II. Methodology: Introduction & Literature

There are advantages and disadvantages to using a digital or virtual ethnography[20] as a research technique – an 'ethnography *in, of* and *through* the virtual' (Hine 2000: 65).[21] Whether virtual spaces overlap with the real (Ruhleder 2000), whether they are a partially restricted perception of reality (Sade-Beck 2004) or whether studies of the Internet must entail multiple field sites for ethnographic research (Wittel 2000), there are various ways of tackling the complexities of Internet-based research.[22] For example, in Beaulieu and Simakova's (2005) work on the Web's scientific databases, they focused on hyperlinks in order to understand the sources and practices of scientific databases. Rather than traversing the endless realms of the Internet's digital landscapes, they concentrated on hyperlinks and the linking configurations that made them meaningful. Similarly, in Constable's (2003) research on long-distance relationships, she not only examined the mailing lists and websites of American men who were looking for Chinese and Pilipino women to become their wives, but also visited various locations of the participants to

[20] For an introduction to online ethnographies, refer to Rheingold (1993); Bruckman (2002); Boellstorff (2008); Baym (2010); Kendall (1999); Markham (1998); Miller and Slater (2000); Jones (1999); Mann & Stewart (2000) and Hine (2000), which explore issues of authenticity, field sites, the ethnographic presence and the cross-cultural consumption of the Internet.

[21] However, Miller and Slater (2000) argue against assumptions about the concept of 'virtual' and Sprondel, Breyer and Wehrle (2011) question the difference between 'real reality' and 'virtual reality', highlighting that new media act as 'an extension of man' (ibid: 8]). Even the term 'Internet' is vastly complex, constituting of multiple interpretations of what it means under the broader definition (Morozov 2015).

[22] For instance, Leander and McKim's (2003) research on tracing adolescent 'sitings' on the Internet and boyd and Heer's (2006) ethnography of Friendster.

conduct interviews and contextualise the findings of her online work. The variation between physical and digital contexts allowed her to question her research findings and assumptions, coming to a deeper understanding of long-distance relationships online (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2008: 533). In a method that paralleled Constable's (2003) research, I was able to contextualise my online findings by traveling to the birthplace of Invisible Children and conducting face-to-face interviews with the same participants I had studied online. This allowed me to question the assumptions of online realities and their representations and shed light on the complexity of the *KONY* phenomenon and its participants. These integrated methods of Internet-based research help to create a more holistic approach to studying online realms, as well as addressing various issues and ethical questions.

Conducting an online ethnography as opposed to an offline, 'real world' ethnography has been a topic of discussion for many. In a virtual ethnography, it is 'experiential rather than physical displacement' (Hine 2000: 45) which is constructed through the ethnographer (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Amit and Rapport 2002; Baym 2010). The *KONY 2012* phenomenon contained data in constant flux, but one which could be 'time shifted so that the ethnographer's engagement can occur after the events with which they engage happened for participants' (Hine 2000: 23; see also Wheaton 2013). Hine (2000) argued that physical travel to the field is not always a necessity in Internet-based studies where the topic of study is solely Internet-related. However, many have connected the virtual ethnographic approach by bridging online and offline sites, much like the multi-sited ethnographic practices that developed in anthropological research in the 1990s (Taylor 2006). Brauchler (2009), along with Postill and Pink (2012), have posited a need to combine offline and online methods, due to the possible differences between the realities of face-to-face socialities as compared to social media socialities. For that reason, my research

involved a multi-sited method for Facebook and real-world spaces where subject and tool overlapped (Postill and Pink 2012: 3). Participant observation in present activism, social action outreach events and discourses (on or offline) were important, but past observation (for example, during the height of *KONY 2012* and in previous events such as Invisible Children's 2009 Protest March in London) was also insightful.

III. Professional and Academic Background

Having spent several years embedded in the development, production and distribution of documentaries, films and television shows, I have a thorough understanding of media ecosystems. Working with various directors, executives and media companies, such as Discovery, Ridley Scott, Participant Media, MTV and National Geographic, has given me a great deal of background insight, equivalent to preliminary research for this project. It also allowed me to understand the relationship between traditional media structures and new media technological shifts. I conducted preliminary research with Invisible Children from 2008–2010, prior to beginning the DPhil, and worked informally with Invisible Children's leader, Jason Russell, on strategies to end LRA violence and develop the organisation's programmes. I also worked with traditional film and television companies in previous years, with a focus on development and production. Furthermore, I have worked on social media campaigns that rely on various Internet platforms to inspire activist networks and mobilisations for 'social change' (for example, *AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH*, the climate change movement, *FOOD, INC.* and the sustainable organic food movement). I worked with Participant Media, a film company focused on creating social change through film and media, during the rise and fall of *KONY 2012,* and observed the ways in which large companies like Participant Media worked to harness the *KONY 2012* structural model and its viral success.

My academic background in visual anthropology has enabled me to focus on key topics pertaining to this research, such as social media, digital participation, visual methodologies and media anthropology; this offered firm theoretical and methodological foundations. This research will, therefore, involve aspects of my MSc thesis (Thibodo 2009) on the production, circulation and consumption of citizen-generated media, while simultaneously incorporating previous research on Joseph Kony and the conflict in northern Uganda. I conducted preliminary research on the LRA and child soldiers from 2008–2010 with the intent of focusing my doctoral thesis on the topic.[23] I had been familiar with Invisible Children since 2006, when I first watched their documentary, *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*. I followed the organisation's campaigns and have kept up-to-date with LRA related events in Central Africa since 2006, with their work inspiring the original focus of my DPhil research.

IV. Digital Ethnography Methodology

i. Outreach and Participant Overview

For the ethnographic research, I conducted 18 one-hour, semi-structured interviews, which included an interview with a former child soldier[24] in the LRA, the co-founder of Invisible Children/*KONY 2012*, a BBC journalist who had recently created a documentary on Joseph Kony, and several key activists from the movement. The original outreach led to 50 informal online conversations with those who were willing to partake in the research,

[23] Unfortunately, I was forced to take a leave of absence from the DPhil in 2010 and, due to health issues, conducting the necessary fieldwork in Uganda was not possible. During this time, *KONY 2012* was released and I was able to refocus my research on that aspect of the organisation, since it posed no risk to my health.

[24] The participant was not interviewed when he was a child soldier. At the time of the interview, the participant was in his early twenties. He volunteered to participate in the research and had bravely chosen to reveal the very painful parts of his past to public forums around the world. The participant gave his informed consent prior to the interview and no ethical frameworks were breached.

as well as the participation of an additional 74 informants who agreed to being 'followed', 'friended' and observed on a regular basis through social media platforms like Facebook, but were not interviewed. This was in addition to the 18 one-hour interviews; thus I interviewed 70 participants in total and observed an additional 72 who participated in the research, for a total of 142 informants. Of the roughly 500 participants who I originally contacted, an estimated 358 participants did not respond in any format. This contact involved cold emailing participants and asking if they would consider participating in the research to tell 'their story'.

The majority of participants were contacted through social media networks, primarily on Facebook, and were given an overview of my research, along with an information brochure and consent form detailing the project. The informed consent outlined the purpose of the research, set out potential risks to the participants and highlighted the sensitive nature of digital research, as well as making it clear that participation was voluntary and anonymous (Hine 2012: 15). Each individual was informed of their confidentiality and anonymity prior to an interview, communication or observation and each was given a consent form. An explanation of my role at Oxford, as well as my research goals, was included, as was the fact of my professional detachment from any organisations, including Invisible Children. CUREC guidelines were strictly followed and CUREC approval was gained before contacting participants.[25] A balance between being an impartial observer and being 'in' the group when observing and participating was explored. I had to negotiate my various roles as a Facebook 'friend', a researcher, and having had a history of supporting Invisible Children's early work.

[25] SAME/CUREC 1A/13-36.

The vast majority of informants were from American, middle-class, Caucasian culture, between the ages of 14 and 25; many were female. In this research, they are often referred to as 'millennials', who are classified as people who were born between 1982 and 2004 (Howe and Strauss 2000). However, there was variation in ethnic and religious background and, while the majority of participants were from the United States, I also observed participants from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Uganda and other countries from around the world. Alongside the central *KONY* and Invisible Children participants, my Facebook participant observations involved an in-depth focus on Jason Russell and other central members of the Invisible Children staff who helped organise and lead the participants and supporters.

Informants were contacted and observed through my personal Facebook account, which has 1,052 'friends' in the network from around the globe. This highly mobile network of international 'friends' created a foundation from which I could observe the trends, conversations, representations and communications taking place in wider culture, as well as within the Invisible Children community. Following, observing and understanding the wider 'viral' digital conversations and trends was crucial to my insight into the *KONY* phenomenon and the Invisible Children organisation. My previous presence in the Facebook community of American young people meant I was already imbedded in the demographic I was researching; I was interwoven within the network, able to connect with, participate with, and observe the informants of my research without navigating the lengthy processes of developing trust or social ties within the community. I involved myself in the interactions by sharing, liking and following the same trends then observing what occurred after my participation. This helped to highlight the values, norms and practices of Invisible Children's community members. In essence, 'doing research about social media....entails...either following or actively participating in blogs, social media platforms,

online news sites and face-to-face events' (Postill 2012: 2). For instance, I found that many of the Invisible Children participants' practices of sharing and liking paralleled other activist, social issue or cultural phenomena trending from other friend networks. This included viral movements such as the 'Ice Bucket Challenge', in which participants posted videos of themselves dumping a bucket of ice water over their head in order to raise money for research into a neurological disease.

ii. Visual Digital Artefacts and Data Collection

Photo-elicitation was not used as a research methodology, but the online observation and collection of visual images was incorporated into the wider body of work to illustrate the ethnographic descriptions and understanding of the participants. This is particularly important in online observation on Facebook, since 'the textual content is largely based on the visual' (Miller 2011: 94). When a participant spoke about a specific event visualised on Facebook or commented on a specific photograph in interview, these images were documented through screenshots and saved in a secure research data base with participant consent. Popular images that either reoccurred or made up an important part of a specific conversation were incorporated in the body of the thesis to illustrate specific points, provide examples or to add to a descriptive analysis.[26] For instance, the incorporation of visual images included the visualisation of the Invisible Children 'family' discussed in interviews and displayed on Facebook, such as group photos of the Invisible Children activists on tour or at a rally, as well as visuals that became important aspects of the

[26] This method was similarly employed in *Visualising Facebook* (2017), where Miller describes the process of looking at thousands of visual images in order to identify any repetitions or visible genres, then using specific images to highlight typicality. However, as with most digital ethnographies, findings are subjective. One of many points argued was that British participants on Facebook cared far less about their fashion/clothing in images in comparison to those he studied in Trinidad. However, my own experiences of Facebook imagery in the UK reveal that young people in the UK are particularly fashion conscious on Facebook and Instagram, while most adults with children are far less conscious of their attire. Thus, there are differences across ages and backgrounds within the UK as well, highlighting the complexity of studying visual images in various cultures.

participant observation. Other examples include Russell's, or other leaders', photographs posted on Facebook, which became key topics within the Facebook communication and commentary of the participants. A rich body of data also emerged when Invisible Children announced its official closure in December of 2014. Many Invisible Children activists took the time to reflect deeply on their experiences with the organisation, which they posted onto Facebook along with important visual memorabilia, such as their favourite photos at Invisible Children protests, meetings or international trips to Uganda. Many of the introspective posts were public postings tagging Russell and other key members of staff. This allowed me to harness a significant amount of information and also created a new contact base for possible informants who might be willing to offer interviews or allow their Facebook reflections to be used in my research. While these contemplations were overwhelmingly positive in their description of Invisible Children and their experiences of the organisation, the data collected aligned with the majority of data collected in interview and participant observation in the year-long study.

During the year-long online ethnography, I obtained social media conversations, digital images, visuals, videos and other artefacts of the movement: over 200 in total. They included Instagram photos, Facebook photos and commentary, Facebook news, YouTube videos, YouTube commentary, Tweets and blog posts, as well as mainstream media images and news articles. While the majority of artefacts were acquired from Facebook, many Facebook friends, such as Jason Russell, link their Facebook page to Instagram, and thus the bulk of visual images posted onto Facebook were often taken on Instagram and shared from both platforms. Both Facebook and Instagram, along with other social media sites, reflect interactions that are 'persistent, retrievable and durable' (Madianou 2013: 255). YouTube, the original source of *KONY 2012* views, was also a helpful source of information, despite the disabling of comments on the official video. Instagram, YouTube

and other digital sources, however, remained secondary to the focus on Facebook.

In the ethnographic research, I collected images online by taking screenshots and storing them according to category[27] in Scrivener and iPhoto. Many of the images collected were a mix of visual imagery and text, such as a photo from Facebook with the number of likes and commentary featured below. In order to filter out the immeasurable number of visuals and information produced and consumed online, I focused specifically on social media activism and the *KONY*/Invisible Children movement. These two main categories were then subdivided into other categories that reflected the themes of my research. They included: identity, community/family, activism and humanitarian campaigning. Thus, the data collected involved an eclectic mix of images, screen shots, videos, comments, likes and shares, as well as Facebook profile photos and background images. One of the primary sources of information, and one that held a breadth of knowledge, consisted of the profile photos used on Facebook by Invisible Children's participants. The profile photos, which are made 'public' by most participants so that anyone searching Facebook can view them, represent a collection of some of the most meaningful and predominant forms of identity for the individual sharing them (Tan 2011). They are showcased and presented to others in a carefully organised visual biography. In other words, they compose, compile and complete the 'self' in contemporary society (Goffman 1959).

Due to Twitter's policy of removing tweets shortly after their posting, it was difficult to obtain Twitter posts from the *KONY* movement. I archived several more recent 'tweets', but Twitter was not a primary focus. I found that, two years later, there were few Twitter

[27] I began with a basic system of categories, which included *KONY 2012* clothing, posters/signs, participant 'family' shots and protest photos. The categories became more nuanced as the research went on and spread into more detailed categories, such as specific images displaying the 'peace sign' or using specific Invisible Children catchphrases.

discussions of *KONY 2012* and the majority of Invisible Children supporters were supporting the organisation and its cause through Facebook. Twitter was seen as a platform for instantaneous, fleeting thoughts or trends, whereas platforms like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube were for less textual representation and more of a visual and textual self-representation, hence the focus on causes was reserved for the less time sensitive outlets, such as Facebook. As noted earlier, Twitter has been an integral part of various social movements worldwide, most notably the Arab Spring, with images from the Arab Spring movement featured in *KONY 2012* to inspire its participants to take action. Twitter was integral to the spread and viral nature of *KONY 2012,* which may highlight a gap in this research between data and analysis. However, the focus of my research is not how or why *KONY 2012* went viral – a topic that has already received much attention (e.g. Graham 2012)– and the majority of Twitter data would have offered insight into areas previously examined by other researchers.[28] Thus, the digital artefacts that were observed and obtained consisted mainly of Facebook profile photos, Facebook landscape photos, Facebook and some Instagram posts, Tweets, YouTube videos and Instagram photos.[29]

After collecting, cataloguing and organising the digital artefacts from *KONY 2012*, I chose the most commonly featured artefacts from the movement, which totalled roughly 50 artefacts. These images were used to help tell the story of Invisible Children and its participants, detailing their experiences, thoughts and feelings. However, some visuals were part of a larger set of themed images, such as landscape photos with Invisible Children's peace sign motto (shown below) or *KONY 2012* memes.

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[28] For a Twitter-based analysis of *KONY 2012*, refer to Mark Graham's (2012) work.

[29] I regularly checked back to see if and how social media pages had changed over time and what they predominantly represented. The visual images were categorised by content and topic.



Image 3-2: 'You are more powerful…' Image retrieved from Facebook on October 1, 2013

I found over 50 Invisible Children participants used the image 'you are more powerful than you think you are' for their background landscape photo on Facebook. This created a formative aspect of their online identity and helped structure one of the categories of images that were analysed. It was also symbolic of the ethos of Invisible Children and the underlying purpose of the organisation. These images were often produced by Invisible Children and then sent out to participants, who were encouraged to use them in social media.

Other artefacts, such as YouTube videos created by Invisible Children, were also placed in one category together. Rather than conducting an in-depth statistical analysis of the visuals in order to find those that were most popularly featured in online spaces, I took on the same practices as social media users to focus my attention on popular images. This entailed following, scrolling and experiencing the various online spaces, noting which visuals were the most reproduced, consumed and viral. Since the average social media user does not conduct their own statistical analysis to know what images are most meaningful, I believed it was important to experience and observe the visuals in the same manner as the participants in order to understand the images experientially, rather than statistically, where as Susan Sontag (2004) wrote in *The New York Times*: 'to act is to share in the community of actions recorded as images'.[30] Some of the questions asked were: What is the image of? What is its content? Who took or made it? When and why? How do other people come to have it? How do they read it? What do they do with it?' (Banks 2001: 7). The visuals in this

[30] The statistics of trends may actually show entirely different insights than what one would *experience* as a trend.

thesis act as mediums to understanding, and visualising, millennial activists and their communities.

iii. Participant Observation in Digital Spaces

Participant observation, or deep 'hanging out' on Facebook, where Invisible Children participants gathered, over a one-year period, was a critical aspect of the research. Facebook allowed me to embed in the fieldwork where I could connect and keep up with participants based on their shared connections and experiences with Invisible Children (Hine 2015: 72). Facebook was a central hub for Invisible Children's participants, not only for their activism and humanitarian communication, but also for their personal lives. Facebook became a key environment for me to understand how the participants lived, what they believed, how they expressed themselves and how they communicated their identities and understandings of the world. Over one year, I spent a significant amount of time on Facebook watching and observing the online behaviour of the participants: what they posted, what photographs they used, how they commented on their friends' posts and images and how they experienced the world. As Hine argues: '"being there" is the most significant aspect of the ethnographer's methodological orientation, since it allows for a direct, embodied experience of the field, and guards against a reliance on over-simplified second-hand accounts' (Hine 2015: 19).

In the digital era, the vast majority of American citizens are digitally connected for eight hours a day or more; thus the participant observation focused a large majority of time in digital spaces and I spent time 'hanging out' (Ito 2010) online each day. I found a balance between being a 'full participant and full observer' based on my own understanding and experiences of the fieldwork (Hine 2008: 3). Thus, on some days I would keep my Facebook page open for the entirety of the day and check back regularly every half hour from roughly 8 am to 8 pm (in order to cover several time zones), while scanning the news

feeds, following conversations, tracking the posts and images and ensconcing myself in the digital reality of the online world. On other days, I would check back periodically, using my phone as a secondary platform.[31] In each instance of online participant observation, I would track trends, following visual and textual artefacts as they moved on social media platforms. I would also 'like', share, 'friend', instant message and post online to interact and communicate with other participants. I had to negotiate my time both observing and participating in the online environment.

In the early stages of research, I tackled questions regarding my levels of engagement with participant observation. Firstly, I devised a generic email to the participants, inserting their name and some personal information each time someone was contacted in order to build a 'friend' list amongst the Invisible Children group. As participant responses came in and new 'friends' were added into my network, I began the process of participant observation. I watched what Invisible Children participants and leaders posted online, how they commented on other friends' posts, how they designed their profiles, how they communicated and what they shared. I also gathered information from participants who agreed to a friendship, but not an interview. This allowed me to obtain information through their photographs and posts on Facebook, which were generally made public. I often 'liked' or commented on their posts, while also seeking to understand their photographs and obtain further information through formal interview. At the same time, I considered my own levels of participation. How many photos should I post per day or week? How many likes or shares should I produce and consume? How many people should I contact and connect with? These questions were important during the first part of my

[31] My primary connection route was through a computer, which is a less popular method than for most digital consumers, who primarily stay connected through mobile phones.

research, which was conducted online whilst based in Oxford.

Prior to contacting possible participants, I went through a lengthy process of analysing my online Facebook profile. Any personal information I did not want users to see was removed, while I also debated how I could create an online profile that informants would 'like', or not be deterred by, that was simultaneously suitable for the research. I asked what the internal and external narratives of my own social media representation were and how that would be consumed.[32] This ethical dilemma meant that I found myself pondering over personal photos and tested the moral and ethical expectations of myself, both as a researcher and online individual. This process allowed me to examine my own auto-ethnography and look at the images I used to represent myself on Facebook in previous and current periods. I also found that participants wanted to see my face and find a human connection, rather than a generic image. For example, after contacting participants for one week using a long-distance photo of myself in the profile image where my face was not recognisable, I received no responses. I then changed the profile photo to an up-close image of myself with my husband (a 'selfie') and began receiving responses.

I started the conversations with participants by introducing my social connection with Jason Russell and the leaders of Invisible Children, which seemed to make participants more willing both to reply and to take part in the research. I found that my connection with Invisible Children leaders and other key members of the Invisible Children staff had an enormous impact on the retention rates of participants. Those I contacted placed great

[32] In order to merge into this online space, I began by updating my Facebook page. I considered using an alternative new page to contact interviewees, with a limited amount of personal information on it (specifically photos), but quickly found that participants were far more likely to respond to and agree to an interview when I used my 'normal' Facebook page. Just as the profile picture I had chosen had an influence on a viewer's response when cold-emailing and reassured participants that I was an actual person with social ties, the representation of my online network and actual page created the same sense of personhood.

emphasis on my friend list. Being 'friends' with Jason Russell or Bobby Bailey was the online equivalent of being intimate friends with a celebrity. Many responded in shock that I knew the leaders and seemed reassured about the study by the social prestige of my Facebook friend list. This may have resulted in biases in the initial stages of the research, as (hypothetically) those who revered the Invisible Children leaders were more likely to participate in the research and place their experience with Invisible Children in a positive light. Due to this possibility, I made it explicit that interviews followed research ethics guidelines, which maintained a strict level of privacy and confidentiality. I also asked participants to tell 'their own story', rather than asking them specific questions that might have resulted in predetermined or partial answers. Furthermore, I made it clear to participants that I was not an intimate friend of the Invisible Children leaders. The purpose of stating my relationship to them was to create a connection with participants and help to verify the authenticity and legitimacy of my email. The majority of participants were positive about the Invisible Children leaders and the organisation in the interviews, which may have been related to the association that was stated previously. However, many of the same participants who spoke positively about Invisible Children as an organisation, were reluctant to express positive feelings about *KONY 2012* as a specific event due the campaign's aftermath. It is likely that this was, in many ways, related to Russell's breakdown. I was able to find staunch criticisms of *KONY 2012* and Invisible Children in blogs, news articles and social media posts, but was unable to find a critic who was willing to participate in the research. Most of the participants who wanted to participate in the research did so due to their positive experience with the organisation and the desire to support its goals.

It seemed that, even online, creating a sense of intimacy was fundamental to establishing new social ties. There was something reassuring for participants who could scroll through the personal images of a stranger in order to establish a social connection. Without those

images, distrust and suspicion abounded. Furthermore, an image of myself with another human being seemed to reassure them regarding my authenticity, as did the connection with an Invisible Children leader:

> There is no automatic guarantee that potential informants will believe that the researcher is who they say they are, and considerable effort may need to be invested in creating a credible online persona (Hine 2008: 14).

I also used less formal sentence structures and more casual, conversational language in my emails to potential participants, which paralleled the linguistic norms of Facebook and other social media platforms. My efforts to integrate into the world of Invisible Children required that I rely on the southern Californian mannerisms I was raised with; this was something quite crucial and necessary to embody if I was to enter the world of Invisible Children. In one of my first emails to Jason Russell, which was sent via Facebook rather than traditional email, my husband commented that the message (which I ran past him before sending) was 'too informal'. He was hesitant over my use of exclamation marks, humorous comments and relaxed grammar and vocabulary. Yet, as I attempted to explain, this style is often reflective of the most popular and preferred style of online communication for young people, particularly in southern California where Invisible Children was based. In this new world, starting sentences with 'Dear' or a capital letter, as well as using the word 'you' instead of 'u' is not popular and is sometimes seen as 'uncool' or overly formal (McWhorter 2013). Thus, while my own loyalty to various traditionalisms kept me from using the term 'u' in my online communications, I had grown accustomed to the power and essentiality of using certain new modes of communicating online – for example, using 'Hey, Jason!' instead of 'Dear Jason Russell'.

When I addressed young people as a young person myself, the response rate increased. I found that young social media users would only begrudgingly accept the highly formal

inquiries of an older person or social media user outside their network; to them it was akin to accepting a friend request from their parent on Facebook. On the contrary, short, simple and informal inquires communicated the presence of a like-minded 'friend', to whom they could realistically respond in their short social media spasms without having to partake in the same formalities they would otherwise ignore or not have time for. I found that young people on social media simply ignored the precursors of formal research, like requests for survey participation or information sheets. Instead they responded to the interactive, the spirited, the visual and the real: they wanted to see my own personal photos and experience my life (or, in the least, the virtual 'reality' version of myself that was constructed and represented on social media). In this online community, if I had set up a dummy Facebook page, it would have led to an inevitable, swift 'unfriending'. These forms of participation led to real world connections. In many instances, I met with people in person and created friendships and social connections, which helped me to maintain a larger network of social ties (Rheingold 1993). However, many of the Facebook connections stayed in the realm of Facebook or social media. It would not be entirely uncommon for Facebook friends to have never met, or never meet, in person.

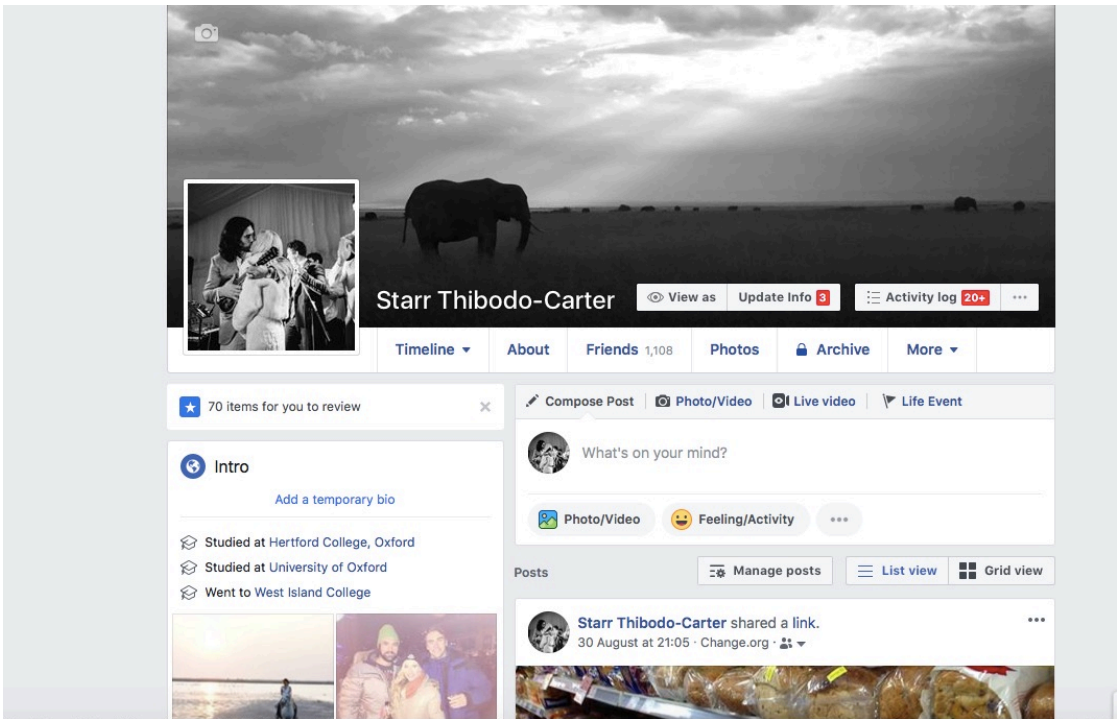


Image 3-3: Image retrieved from researcher's personal Facebook page and news feed on November 2, 2016

When Facebook users enter their home page, they are given daily news for what is 'trending' as well as news for 'friends', such as birthdays and parties, or new photo posts and updates. Updating my page with photos helped me to stay involved and carry out participant observation.

Participant observation was also conducted in San Diego, the headquarters of Invisible Children, where I spent two months in the summer of 2014, as well an additional month in the winter of 2014. No formal surveys were conducted in either location to collect specific data on social media use in each location, as this was out of the scope of my research.

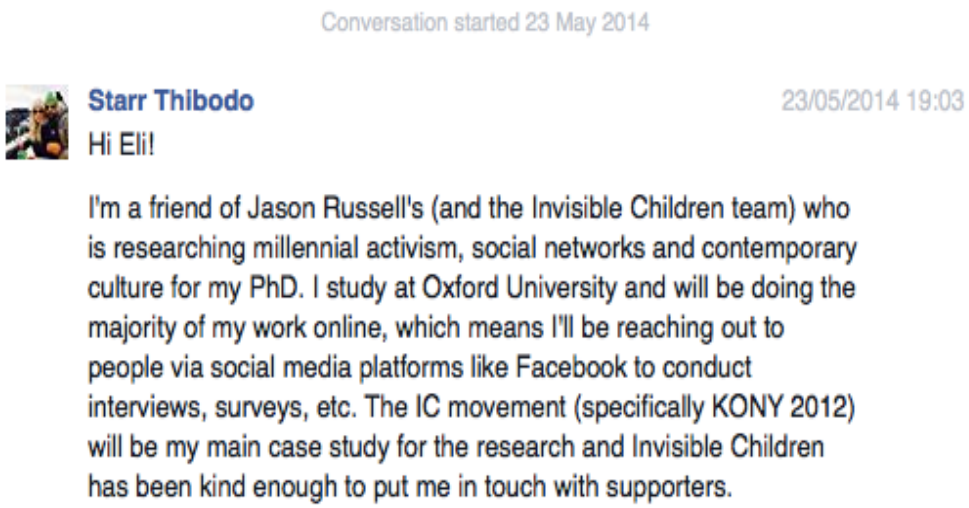


Image 3-4: Image retrieved from personal Facebook account on July 22, 2014
In the initial stages of my research, I contacted roughly 300 people, mostly via Facebook, about the possibility of conducting interviews. Many wrote return emails and were excited about the research, allowing me to access their Facebook profiles online for viewing, while others agreed to semi-structured interviews either through Skype, in person, Facebook or email. This image captures a portion of an email sent in the Facebook inbox. I communicated via Facebook using email and instant messaging with many participants (Mann and Stewart 2000; Markham 1998).

iv. Fieldwork

As previously noted, my fieldwork consisted of spending roughly eight hours a day on Facebook and other social media sites, looking at posts, photos, friendships, as well as communicating and interacting with informants. For example, this entailed commenting on friends' posts, liking their photos and communicating via messaging.[33] I went online in a way that paralleled how the majority of young users in my research went online: logging on throughout the day, using it for distraction, boredom, 'compare and despair', the twinge many described as a 'need to connect' or 'fear of missing out' (FOMO), to find out what others are doing, or to simply message friends and communicate within the social network.

[33] Only one participant chose to communicate via email rather than Facebook: a PhD student at a university in California. The person preferred email because it was easier for him to reply to my questions and carry out a semi-structured interview via email when he was at the university lab doing research; it was less about preference and more about professional convenience. All other participants preferred to communicate through Facebook.

This allowed me to understand and explore the online worlds and identities of Invisible Children's participants, to follow how they behaved and see how they communicated online. Images, like the one shown below, were popular sources of conversation and commentary on Facebook. The image features Invisible Children leader, Jedidiah Jenkins, with actress Sophia Bush. The photo has 495 'likes'. Many Invisible Children followers commented on, liked and shared the image with others in their community. The image represented the celebrity-like culture of the leaders and the power the organisation had to make a difference in wider society.

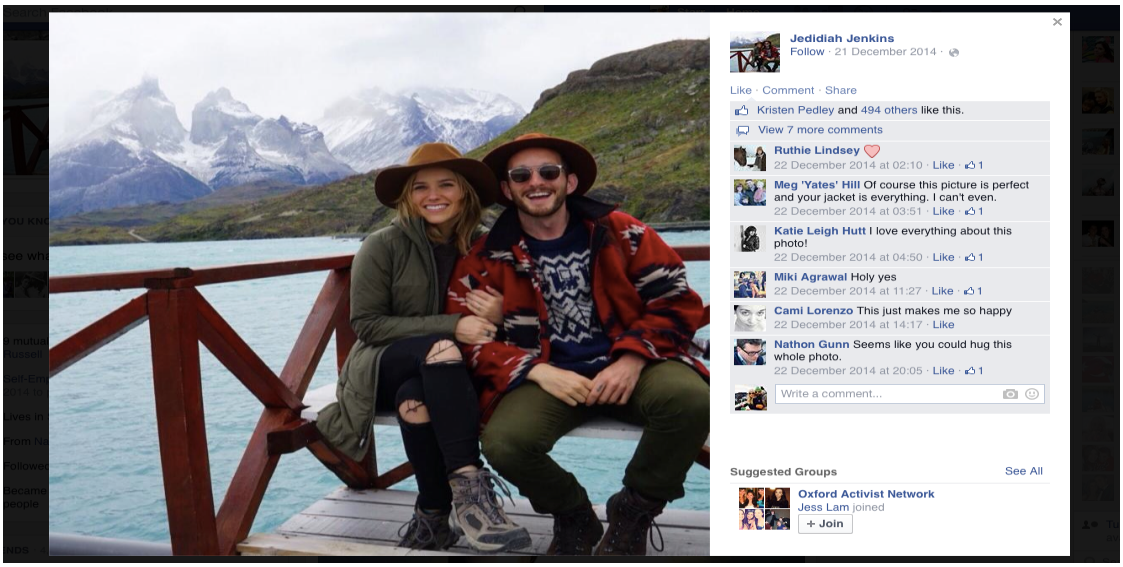


Image 3-5: Jedidiah Jenkins with celebrity Sophia Bush. Image retrieved from Facebook on January 20, 2015

I simultaneously followed other online social movements as they spontaneously went 'viral'. For example, during the Ice Bucket Challenge, I followed the Invisible Children participants who were nominated and observed how that created an online system for social exchanges.[34] During the year-long ethnography, I also observed other movements

[34] During my participant observation, I was nominated to do a 'No Makeup Selfie', as well as to perform the 'Ice Bucket Challenge'. I found that the social pressures of performing these viral sensations were considerable. However, after much consideration, I decided to leave my participation at its normative level,

such as 'We are all…', which began in the Arab Spring and moved through various movements from Occupy Wall Street to Trayvon Martin to Charlie Hebdo and Ferguson. I found that nearly every Invisible Children participant I followed had been involved in at least one of these movements. Most popularly, Invisible Children participants nearly unanimously had an Equal Marriage Rights symbol from California's Proposition 8 amongst their profile photos, as well as a hashtag visual from 'Bring Back Our Girls'. However, my research lacked Christian participants, who may or may not have shared the same ethos. The participants were often involved in social movements by posting online or showing symbolic imagery online in their Facebook profile photos or posts.

v. Fieldwork Challenges

Research limitations included: 1) a limited sample population; 2) retrospective interviews based on past experiences; 3) participant observations post *KONY 2012;* 4) the restrictions of online observation, so that we must ask what would a study have revealed if I had been able to carry out participant observation at the height of Invisible Children in their offices and tours? 5) many participants of strong Christian faith did not respond to requests for interviews[35]; 6) the number of participants I could conduct participant observation with in online spaces was also limited by the number of participants who agreed to be a part of the research; and 6) some participants had open pages with unrestricted, public photographs and information, but the ethics of using such information was highly limiting.

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which involved occasionally posting photos, as well as daily 'likes' and messaging. I found there was much controversy surrounding these viral trends and I wanted to keep my participant observation at a healthy medium where I did not risk the possibility that the participants I was researching would take offence and 'defriend' me in the midst of the research. In the end, I had to return to my own values and practices – in my own personal space, I would have never performed the rituals of these specific viral trends, thus in the end I decided I did not want to over-perform in online spaces when it was not critical to my research or could offend the cultural ethos of my Invisible Children digital 'tribe'.

[35] While I found no specific reasons for why they were less likely to respond, it may have been related to the media's criticism of the Christian links attached to the organisation.

The original research design outlined a more holistic portrait of interviewee backgrounds, but the final sample contained fewer Christian participants, which other research demographics have highlighted as a key basis for Invisible Children's cultural base. I was also unable to interview Invisible Children's co-founder, Laren Poole, and decided not to use the material from interviews with Invisible Children's co-founder, Bobby Bailey, due to privacy constraints.


THE GLOBAL INTELLIGENCE FILES

On Monday February 27th, 2012, WikiLeaks began publishing *The Global Intelligence Files*, over five million e-mails from the Texas headquartered "global intelligence" company Stratfor. The e-mails date between July 2004 and late December 2011. They reveal the inner workings of a company that fronts as an intelligence publisher, but provides confidential intelligence services to large corporations, such as Bhopal's Dow Chemical Co., Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon and government agencies, including the US Department of Homeland Security, the US Marines and the US Defence Intelligence Agency. The emails show Stratfor's web of informers, pay-off structure, payment laundering techniques and psychological methods.

Uganda: Reasons for the U.S. Deployment in Central Africa
Released on 2012-10-10 17:00 GMT

Email-ID	4277140
Date	2011-10-18 23:28:50
From	noreply@stratfor.com
To	allstratfor@stratfor.com

Uganda: Reasons for the U.S. Deployment in Central Africa

Stratfor logo
Uganda: Reasons for the U.S. Deployment in Central Africa

October 18, 2011 | 2108 GMT
Reasons for the U.S. Deployment in Central Africa
BEN SIMON/AFP/Getty Images
Ugandan soldiers search the Congolese jungle for Lord's Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony
Summary

Image 3-6: Image retrieved as a screenshot from The Global Intelligence Files on Wikileaks. The image shows an example of the data used in the research

Another research setback was the discovery of Wikileaks material in the final stages of my research. The Wikileaks information discovered was collected from The Global Intelligence Files, particularly information dated in 2011 or earlier and released in 2012 on Wikileaks. The Global Intelligence Files were first published on February 27th, 2012.

Information from the files contained over five million e-mails from the 'global intelligence' company Stratfor, based in Texas. The e-mails date between July 2004 and late December 2011. The emails uncover the inner workings of Stratfor, highlighting what Wikileaks calls the 'web of informers, pay-off structure, payment laundering techniques and psychological methods' used by governmental agencies, such as the US Department of Homeland Security, the US Marines and the US Defence Intelligence Agency, as well as corporations including Bhopal's Dow Chemical Co., Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman.[36] Statfor served as an intelligence service as well as an intelligence publisher, providing highly sensitive information and top-secret intelligence to both corporations and governments. As this thesis will explore, sensitive material relating to the intentions of the United States in deploying troops to capture Kony and other political, economic and social incentives were unearthed. Prior to the discovery of this material on Wikileaks, only small hints or conspiracy theories pointed in this direction.

While a detailed discussion regarding the history, nature, impact and intentions of Wikileaks is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth highlighting that Wikileaks, a 'networked fourth estate' (Benkler 2013) is credited as a key inspiration to the Arab Spring and other social movements (Alvarez 2011; Giri 2010; Bachrach 2011; Saleh 2013). As Saroj Giri put it in *Mute*, WikiLeaks 'challenged power by challenging the normal channels of challenging power and revealing the truth' (Giri 2010). However, others, such as Chossudovsky (2010) from *Global Research*, have argued that: 'Wikileaks' close collaboration with big corporate media and the "redactions" raise serious doubts over whether

[36] Wikileaks defines itself as 'a place where documents that shed light on powerful governments or corporations anywhere in the world, or, in the case of the climate scientists' emails, on a matter of enormous global public concern, could be aired' publicly (Benkler 2013: 317). Refer to Benkler 2013 for detailed overview and discussion of Wikileaks. Refer to: https://wikileaks.org/the-gifiles.html to view The Global Intelligence Files.

information is actually flowing freely'. While Wikileaks information has remained globally consequential, it is difficult to verify the information through academic studies or other official channels. Wikileaks remains ethically, legally and factually controversial and has been criticised for outsourcing its verification processes to journalistic institutions, such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Der Spiegel*. Due to the top secret nature of many of the Wikileaks political documents, they are nearly impossible to verify. However, Wikileaks' material has been sustained, with its findings creating significant global impact (Benkler 2013).

Another drawback to this study, as with most digital ethnographies, is that social media is individualistic in nature. It is, therefore, difficult to have a contained, on-the-ground environment from which to observe and immerse oneself in this society; it is transient, elusive, and entirely bound to the individual and their interpersonal communication with others. In other words, it is nearly impossible to observe in physical spaces as an anthropologist without looking over the shoulder and stealing the phones of every passing participant.

vi. Interviews

Interviews were a key aspect of the research. Much literature is dedicated to the drawbacks and benefits of using interviews, particularly online interviews, as well as the methods that produce successful interviews. For example, Bampton and Cowton (2002) examine the use of email, or e-interview, as an interview method, while James and Busher (2006) explored issues such as authenticity and credibility in online interviewing, ultimately highlighting the positive aspects of the web-based methodology. Similarly, McCoyd and Kerson (2006) discovered in their work that stigmatised or dispersed groups were more likely to be included in online interview methods, such as email. Kazmer and Xie (2008) look at semi-structured interviewing using face-to-face; telephone; email; and instant messaging, while

James and Busher (2009) explore methodological issues related to online interviewing, but believe online interactions are embedded in everyday life while offering various solutions to possible methodological challenges.[37] Dowling (2012: 291) found that her online interviews were 'richer and fuller' in comparison to her face-to-face interviews. However, Malta (2012) cautioned that email interviews might be more formulaic and less honest if participants attempt to construct a specific portrait of themselves in carefully worded responses.

Interviews can allow research to include in-depth conversations with participants, often ranging between friendly and formal in order to gain insights into specific topics from a different perspective to that of participant observation. Interviews can complement, but not replace, participant observation (Hine 2015: 115). Interviews are 'driven by the interviewer's agenda' and can contain leading questions due to, often unconscious, inherited biases and presuppositions. For that reason, Hine (2015) argues that ethnographies of the Internet should not choose interview methodologies in order to receive the best answers, but to build an ethnographic understanding and habitation of the field (79). Boyd's (2015) research illustrated similar sticking points; she highlighted the hesitation for young people in moving from MySpace to formal interviews, as well as the ways young people were less likely to respond to interviews generally in comparison to adults. Boyd candidly stated that some young people found her original approach 'creepy'. This research similarly adjusted methods of researching due to generational cultural shifts.

The medium of interviews is also important and various researchers have argued that participants can be more truthful or revealing online. For example, Miller (2011: 48, 86) discovered in his research that 'people are much more ready to say things, personal things,

[37] For further work on interviews refer to Salmons (2012).

reflective things, deeper things about themselves, on Facebook than in everyday life'. He argued that Facebook, rather than allowing someone to hide, can often enable someone to be more true to themselves than they are in day-to-day society (Miller 2011: 50). Miller highlighted the awkwardness most people feel in the presence of others, particularly strangers, and the uncomfortable nature of exposing their words and actions publicly. He argued that Facebook can serve as a technological 'buffer', allowing people to find and create new friendships without the delicacy required in other social situations (Miller 2011: 165) That said, he also highlighted the constant exposure of Facebook and the lack of privacy that entails participation (Miller 2011: 49). Other research, such as Orgad's (2005) work on breast cancer, found that while online and offline (face-to-face) interviews produced different narratives, neither revealed a more truthful, well-rounded or consequential account. Boyd argued that ethnographic interviewing should not focus on protocol or structure, but rather function as an experience of understanding the informant, what they think and how they feel about the world. Rather than attempting to coerce specific answers through pre-determined questions, the ethnographer should attempt to understand the person's experiential nature and understanding holistically (boyd 2015: 92–93).

When contacting participants for interviews, I called on them to tell 'their story'. The goal of the semi-structured interviews and email conversations was to allow for a narrative, or their story, to develop. In other words, I sought to harness their experience, rather than just opinions or facts. As the participants recounted[38] their experiences and stories, a colourful canvas developed. However, the retrospective nature of the interviews and Facebook conversations equally presented challenges. Most participants were enthusiastic

[38] For works on oral history, refer to: Abrams (2010); Perks and Thomson (2006); Thomson (2011).

about their experiences with Invisible Children and recalled them as transformative. It is difficult to discern whether interviews conducted at the height of their campaigning would have produced contrasting or varying opinions to those expressed in this research. That said, their memories and experiential recollections of Invisible Children are of great importance to the understanding of the organisation and its movement; as much, if not more, than those that could have been collected in previous years. Furthermore, while the retrospective nature of the interviews gave the participants an incentive to reflect eagerly on its positivity, they equally had the opportunity to condemn it or express themselves negatively given the intense criticism surrounding *KONY 2012* at the time of interviews.

When emailing participants who gave consent for the research, the interviews focused on their lived experiences both as part of the Invisible Children community and as individuals generally. Some were semi-structured where necessary and provided participants with a basic set of questions (e.g. 'how did you get involved with the organisation?', 'where are you from?') while other interviews were unstructured and asked participants to simply 'tell their own story'. This format was often used when interviewing participants through Facebook messaging and email. Participants seemed to enjoy the opportunity to write from an autobiographical perspective, expressing what they felt and describing their life experiences. I often received answers about their views on social media, world change, pressing global issues, American culture, *KONY* and the LRA, their family and friends, college and future goals, their background, as well as more central questions related to *KONY 2012*, for example, when they first viewed the documentary or participated in an event. I asked them to tell their story, whether in the context of *KONY 2012* or not, and found that the interconnections were often instructive. I discovered that while some questions were important to structure the interview, an open-ended and less structured method worked best. I discovered that more open requests to hear about 'their story' led

to higher response rates and deeper ethnographic insights. Many detailed, at length, personal descriptions of their cultural surroundings, and these stories have become central elements of the ethnographic literature in my research. Thus, while I originally questioned whether the ethnographic technique might inhibit strong bonds, it seemed that the distance of online interviewing often made participants more comfortable and able to share personal information.

The participants shared their stories of depression, loneliness and relationship difficulties, which I am unsure would have been shared in one-hour semi-structured interviews as readily or openly. Many studies have paralleled this understanding that online communication can allow participants to communicate emotionally in a more free and expressive manner (Weinberg et al. 1996; Salem, Bogar & Reid, 1997; Greist, Klein and Van Cura 1973). Thus, 'the tendency to disclose more to a computer is an important ingredient of what seems to be happening on the Internet' (Wallace 1999: 151) and there is a 'coming out on the Internet' that often takes place (McKenna and Bargh 1998: 682). Due to the delicate and intimate nature of many of the conversations that took place, ethics and duty of care were critical and I carefully followed CUREC research guidelines and privacy agreements.

vii. Short-Term Traditional Fieldwork

Conducting extensive fieldwork and participant observation at the Invisible Children headquarters was not very feasible after the backlash against *KONY 2012*, and the subsequent closing of their offices. Several years earlier, observation at the Invisible Children headquarters would have offered an interesting insight into the functioning of this unique non-governmental organisation (NGO). However, because Invisible Children considered themselves a media company, gaining access to information would have been difficult and non-disclosure agreements would have been difficult to bypass, making the

publication of research nearly impossible. This, compounded by the issues surrounding *KONY 2012*, would have been too difficult to allow participant observation fieldwork at the headquarters. At the time of my fieldwork and most recent interview with Jason Russell, Invisible Children had cut nearly all of their staff, downsized their offices and moved locations, and were struggling to achieve the revenue they once had prior to the rise and fall of *KONY 2012*. Since then, Invisible Children have closed their San Diego offices entirely. Thus, a brief phase of research entailed traveling to California, where the Invisible Children headquarters were located. I spent two months immersed in the area, speaking with Invisible Children supporters from Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego County. I conducted interviews at the Invisible Children headquarters for a brief period of time and met with Invisible Children supporters to conduct face-to-face interviews.

V. Research Ethics

Ethics are a critical component of all online social science research because 'if our identities in cyberspace are extensions of our off-line identities, they must be afforded the same ethical consideration as they would be given in the off-line world' (Murthy 2011: 184). Thus, an understanding of ethics with regard to conducting online ethnographies was an important aspect of my research (Bruckman 2002; Buchanan 2004). I took into consideration the challenges of virtual research when flows of information and consumption are wide and complex, as well as how to protect privacy (Sveningsson 2004; Bechar-Israeli 1995; Mortensen and Walker 2002).

As part of the ethical and research framework, I had to constantly face my own biases, judgements and interpretative limitations. Reflexivity has long been a crucial aspect of anthropological research (Clifford and Marcus 1986), but a reflexive approach requires a constant re-checking of inherent biases and a deep understanding of how the research

process can influence what and how a researcher understands. I also relied on Markham's (1998) ethnographic writing to focus on the auto-ethnographic aspect of the research, which required reflexivity and a close examination of my experiences as an ethnographer. Markham looked at her own role in the research and personal experience of going online. She reflected on her role in the methodological approach and the various ways in which the Internet can become a way of being and experience of the world. I also reflected on the practical and ethical problems of conducting research online, relying on various ethnographies such as Paccagnella (1997) and Lee and Min (2004).

Ethics are particularly complex in Internet-based research. In digital research, they require a continual reflexive approach. Rather than a stringent, pre-determined process, the complexity and constantly changing conditions of the Internet necessitate a flexible and reflective perspective. The 'moral panics' of privacy (Debatin et al. 2009; boyd 2006) can create situations where researchers are 'curbed by state and institutional authorities concerned with the legal issues of data protection, yet simultaneously, they study a world in which the prophylactics of privacy are being steadily removed and the most private parts are being waved in public' (Miller 2011: 173). Furthermore, Miller (2011) argued that young people often create greater degrees of privacy by making themselves more public (66). Similarly, Jenkins (2018) posits that young people today have different ideas about privacy, notions of sharing and unique ideas about the disclosure of public and private information. He highlighted that 'privacy is not an absolute' and outlined the line between privacy and visibility. Boyd similarly argued that privacy has less to do with control over information and more to do with how, what and where you release information: 'being able to dictate the terms in which your information is used is central to the way this generation understands privacy' (Jenkins 2018).

In a digital ethnography, research ethics raise questions about the definition of informed

consent, as well as what is considered private or public (Paccagnella 1997; Kozinets 2002). Many researchers have argued that ethics need to be re-examined and understood alongside the quickly changing technological developments in order to protect both researchers and participants (Murthy 2011).[39] This is interlinked with the difficulties of obtaining informed consent and understanding the difference between public and private domains in a 'changing social fabric' (Beer and Burrows 2007; Frankel and Siang 1999). It is also compounded by the issue of 'lurking', otherwise known as researching anonymously (or pseudonymously), which also presents various challenges. Therefore, as an ethnographer, I leaned on CUREC guidelines in order to understand when and how to obtain consent, how to understand privacy issues and how to be informed about representation and permission. Prior to conducting research, I informed participants of my presence, rather than 'lurking' and collecting information without informed consent. This is also known as 'electronic eavesdropping' (Wilson 2002) and has been a recent topic of concern in digital research. In each instance, when I contacted participants, I described my research and offered more detailed information in the form of brochures and pamphlets, along with the consent form.

Data protection was vital and participants were informed of their right to privacy. However, privacy has become more complicated in online spaces, where data is user-generated and where the lines between public and private are blurred. I obscured all data that I collected as part of my online observations and content analysis. I removed identifying information from all digital material. When I use screen shots of profiles and participant photographs in this thesis, they are modified (using iPhoto) to erase identifying information. Even when online information is made public, I work to remove the identities of the participants that

[39] Refer to Association of Internet Researchers (2018): https://aoir.org.

I interview or observe. The names and details of participants have been changed to protect their anonymity. I took additional precautions to protect this anonymity by creating additional pseudonyms for the participants in the text if interview quotes, photographs or social media posts risked any level of identification. The ethics of publishing visual materials were considered and the importance of informed consent was fully grasped (Pink 2001: 212).

The participants were given a right to anonymity despite their voluntary personal exposure of information. In that sense, online ethics were undetermined to some extent and it was important that I established trust and transparency with the participants since confidentiality is not as explicit (Snee 2013). For instance, in theory, even when the participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity and information, a Google search of their interview, comment, visual or Facebook post could possibly retrieve the same content and reveal their actual identity. As an example of the ways this material could be used to breach their privacy, on Facebook, a photo can be made available to one person, a set of people or everyone ('public'), but it can also exclude certain 'friends' or 'friends of friends' if the participant wishes. However, as a researcher I was aware that even when informants are apparently actively publishing in public spaces, it was critical to be sensitive to the expectations and privacy of the online participants (Markham and Buchanan 2012). This is particularly important since most online interactions are traceable and visible to the public (Madianou 2013: 255). Therefore, in this research, all participants were given pseudonyms, except for the founder of Invisible Children, Jason Russell. Due to Jason Russell's public profile, the interview with him was considered to be an elite interview. It was conducted in a professional capacity in which his anonymity was not preserved. Jason Russell and the Invisible Children team were given consent forms and information on the research prior to the interviews. Jason Russell suffered from a highly publicised breakdown

in 2012, shortly after the film's release. As Russell explained in a (2012) interview with *Oprah*, he suffered from a one-time issue due to 'extreme exhaustion, stress and dehydration', which was brought on by the stress of *KONY 2012* criticism. Jason Russell is a highly intelligent and thoughtful person of sound mind and no research ethics were compromised.

It was imperative that I asked, with each online publication, how public the medium or message had been made. I also had to check with participants about its re-publication and public distribution, as well as the sensitivity of the information. The process in itself was difficult at times due to the fluidity and flux of online spheres, and many participants were not always diligent about checking their information flows or following up with requests or questions. Most participants were ambivalent about the consent form. It is therefore no surprise that the issue of privacy in online worlds has recently become a topic of great debate (Lovejoy et al. 2009), with many Facebook participants posting and reposting about issues of online privacy. By joining social media, many have already accepted the lack of privacy it entails; therefore, the republication of their personal information seemed less pertinent to their daily lives once it was already 'out there'. The culture of privacy in American society has changed dramatically with the advent of social media: participants have made their lives socially public and with that the issue of what is made private becomes a challenging debate for researchers.

The issue of authenticity, whether in relation to the researcher or the participants involved, was also important to consider and take into account when contacting members of the online community (Turkle 1995; Paccagnella 1997; Carter 2003; Hine 2000). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I depended on the already existing networks of Facebook friends and the visual biographies of participants (including myself). Relationships with key members, such as Jason Russell, were crucial, as were the online images that made

individuals identifiable and relatable.

The semi-structured interviews for this research also presented ethical challenges. For example, when I interviewed 'Jay' via Skype, who was a former LRA child soldier abducted in his early youth by LRA combatants, I immediately felt a sense of discomfort when the horrific traumas of his childhood were made public. However, Jay had been volunteering to tell his story to public audiences around the world prior to our interview and it was clear that Jay had created a narrative that allowed him to retell the story to observers. He had also gone on tour with Invisible Children in the United States in previous years, telling his story to schools and audiences across the country, and it seemed I was listening to a speech he had given on various former occasions.[40] I worried at the start of his interview that the horrific events he was put through were exploited for Americans who could take in his story in the same way that they would take in the entertainment suspense of a Hollywood film. I was also concerned that my interview with him might reflect the voyeuristic undertones of the *KONY 2012* film, where the American audience could observe the tragedies of the 'Other' at a distance (Sontag 2003). It felt necessary for me to make it clear to Jay that we did not have to discuss his childhood, his time with the LRA or even *KONY 2012*. I felt it was important to make the interview very open-ended where he could discuss what he felt was significant, rather than what I, as an observer and researcher, felt was the focus. Once it was clear that the interview had no forced agenda, the conversation became very fluid; he expressed a desire to share the story of his childhood and told many stories, ranging from the horrors he experienced during his time under the brutal rule of the LRA, to the excitement of his trip to the United States.

[40] Invisible Children had also sponsored Jay's education and he was able to graduate from college with the help of one of their initiatives.

It seemed Jay felt comfortable speaking with me and asking me questions in return, so that the interview turned into a conversation and our interaction created a quick friendship. We spoke about rugby, Oxford, San Diego and the things Jay wanted to show my husband and me if we ever came to Uganda. Our Skype conversation then led to a WhatsApp, Facebook and email friendship where we exchanged comments on photo posts and emails. The combination of social media communication meant I was able to push past the American privileged position as an outside observer of his suffering; we instead created a friendship where communication became more about present day experiences. When Jay posted on Facebook about a recent family tragedy or posted a photo of a traditional wedding in Gulu, I was able to comment, like and create an exchange. Likewise, when I posted photos, Jay became one of the first to reply.

I gave small gifts to some informants, such as Jay, who I knew spent valuable time talking to me and who had to pay for either Internet access or mobile phones in order for us to speak, or who travelled to an interview location. No gift was more than 10 USD. In one specific instance, Jay had to use his telephone and was charged a fee, which I covered the costs of along with his time. I also began interviews with questions that placed both parties in a position of relatedness by connecting with each person, showing interest in their lives, speaking of our connections to one another, explaining my background and asking questions about their background.

My interview with Jason Russell presented similar challenges due to his 2012 'breakdown' and the criticisms of *KONY 2012*. Thus, during my second meeting with Jason at their new offices, we hugged upon our greeting, rather than shaking hands or exchanging a formal 'hello'. We spent the first twenty minutes of the interview not speaking about *KONY 2012* or Invisible Children initiatives; instead we spoke about our personal lives, our families, our own wellbeing, and our recent health struggles. As a researcher, his personal challenges

had no relevance to my purpose for interviewing him, though the discussion of the difficulties surrounding the fallout from *KONY 2012* did end up highlighting various issues with social media and contemporary culture. In the interviews with Russell, he was philosophical, honest and insightful; it appeared to me that he had the kindness and charisma to drive a youth movement and also that his 2012 mental health issue had been a localised incident.

A common theme in the interviews, which will be evident to readers in the upcoming ethnographic chapters, is the use of the word 'like' in the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the language was not 'corrected' or altered in any way for the publication of the thesis. The use of the word 'like' is deeply engrained in the vocabulary and way of speaking for many young millennials in the United States, particularly in California where 'it was quasi-ironic in *Scooby Doo* by 1969, and self-satirising by the time that Frank Zappa and Moon Unit deployed it ('Like, totally') in their 'Valley Girl' song in the early 1980s. It was then a part of the 'Californianization of American youth-speak' (Hitchens 2010). For this reason, I felt it was important to leave their authenticity and cultural specificity intact.

VI. History of *KONY 2012* and Research Timeline

March 5, 2012 Invisible Children posts *KONY 2012* on YouTube, and it quickly goes viral after several celebrities, including Rihanna, Justin Bieber, and the Kardashians spread the word.

March 8, 2012 *KONY 2012* hits the 35-million-viewer mark.

March 9, 2012 The Obama administration joins Oprah Winfrey and other luminaries in throwing its support behind the video.

March 11, 2012 Reports suggest that Invisible Children is funded by Christian foundations that are strong supporters of creationism and anti-gay movements.

March 14, 2012 Ugandans throw rocks at a screening of *KONY 2012* in the town of Lira.

March 15, 2012 Jason Russell, the co-founder of Invisible Children, suffers a breakdown.

March 24, 2012 African Union responds.

March 28, 2012 *KONY 2012* nears the 86-million-viewer mark on YouTube.

April 20, 2012 Cover the Night takes place.

January 1, 2013 DPhil research on *KONY 2012* begins.

May 2013 CUREC approval received.

December 2013 Interviews and participant observation begin through 2014.

Summer and early winter 2014 Interviews and observation conducted at IC HQ in San Diego, face-to-face interviews with Jason Russell and key supports takes place.

December 2014 Invisible Children announces closure of HQ, additional interviews and participant observation take place due to birth of new conversations, posts and photos. Discovery of Wikileaks information occurs.

Image 3-7: History of Invisible Children. Image retrieved from Wikimedia on January 7, 2013

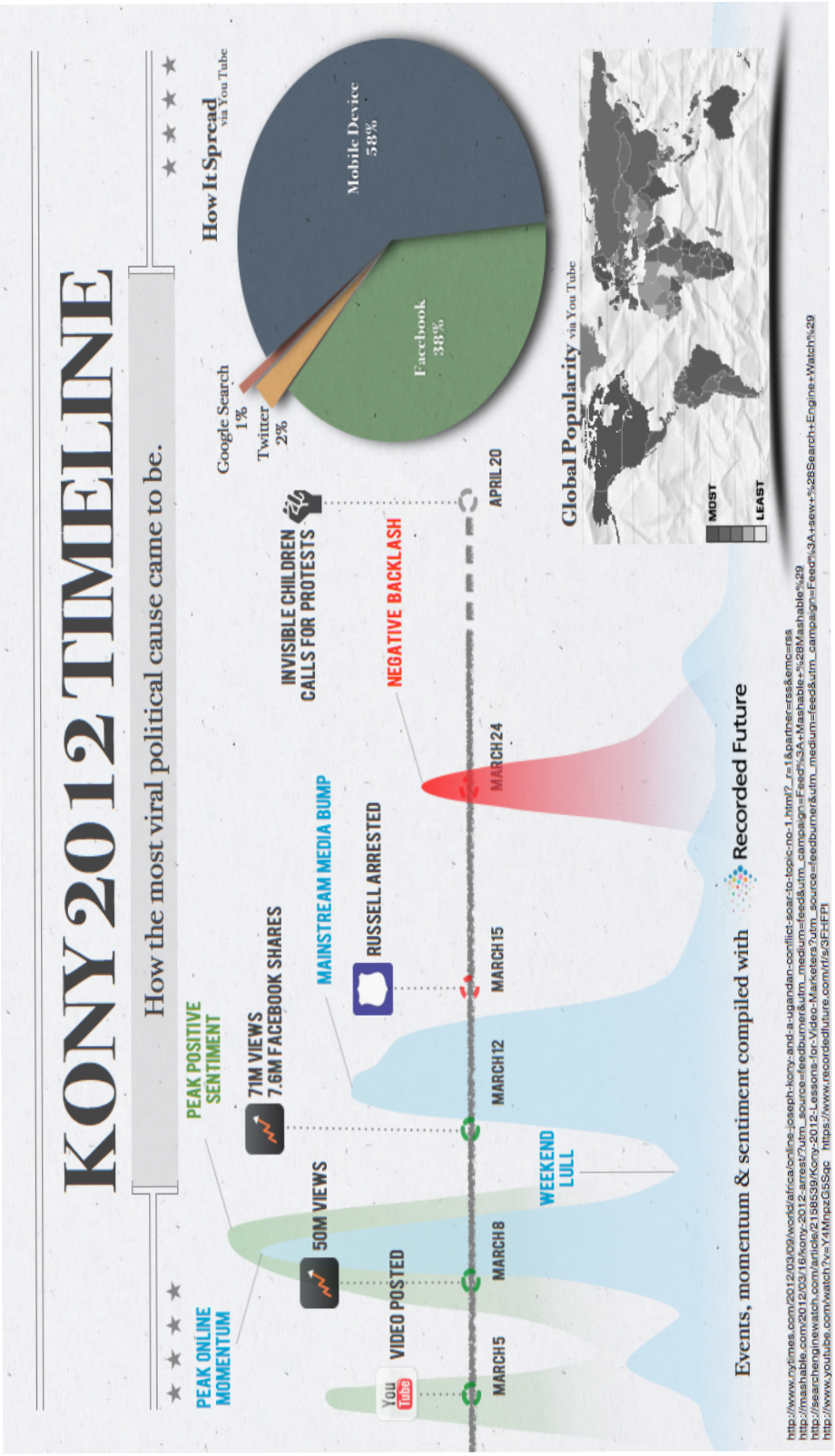


Image 3-8: Timeline of KONY 2012. Retrieved from The Huffington Post
Created by RecordedFuture and retrieved on December 2, 2012



Image 4-1: Image retrieved from the Invisible Children website on June 2, 2016

Chapter Four: Activism in the Age of Social Media

The Internet is not a passive medium, on the contrary, it challenges conventional structures for organizing social movements, encouraging the undoing of hierarchical and centralized communications in favor of more decentralized and distributed organizational structures.

(Varnelis 2008: 167)

Contemporary activism is inextricably bound to social media. The model for using social media to create and sustain various forms of activism and social movements[41] was popularised by the 'Green Revolution' and the 'Arab Spring', which were some of the first large-scale movements[42] in which social media became a key component of the popular belief in Internet based democratised 'people power' and social change. The Arab Spring

[41] For literature on social movements and digital mobilisations refer to: Melucci (1996); Castells (2001); Juris (2008); Rheingold (2002); Shirky (2009); Morozov (2011); Coleman (2005); Postill (2008, 2011); Costanza-Chock (2008); Sreberny and Khiabany (2010); McInerney (2009); Bräuchler (2005); Tenhunen (2008); Carty (2010); Benson (2007); Chadwick (2006).

[42] Social movements advocate for issues such as human rights, animal rights, politics, environmental conservation, autonomy or justice. They involve 'the construction of the spaces for representation changes with each cohort of claimants' (Nash 2005: 9) and 'the growing autonomy sought by participants' (ibid: 22).

was quickly followed by the Occupy Wall Street movement and other Occupy movements, which combined traditional activism, such as sit-ins, marches and boycotts, with forms of contemporary activism, such as the use of social media.[43] These new forms of activism, 'Internet activism' or 'online activism' are defined as 'those forms of social and political activism that rely heavily on social media technologies for their growth and maintenance' (Postill 2009). Whether it was Trayvon Martin, *KONY 2012*, Je Suis Paris, Marriage Equality, The Ice Bucket Challenge, Bring Back our Girls or Black Lives Matter, participants readily represented and participated in the movements they felt passionate about through social media.

Interpersonal experiences and interactions often take place as textual narratives and citizen-produced visuals are employed in the digital global landscape, and it is these interactions that have acted as catalysts for the recent trends in the globalization of protest, social movements and forms of activism. This was particularly evident in *KONY 2012*, which became the most viral video to date, and brought new attention to the power of viral videos and social media to raise humanitarian awareness, funds and create legislative change. *KONY 2012* came to represent a transformation in how humanitarian campaigns are conducted and implemented to create forms of activism and social change. In essence, Invisible Children and its activists came to represent a culture composed of peer-to-peer networks, 'indicating that the Internet may become a more powerful gateway for people formerly on the sidelines to become local, even global activists' (Varnelis 2008: 183).

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[43] 'The Occupy Wall Street protests that spread in a month from New York to over 80 countries and 900 cities around the world might not have succeeded without the inspiring models of the Arab Spring or the indignados in Spain, or the worsening economic conditions that provoked anger among increasing numbers of displaced individuals' (Bennett and Sergerberg 2013: 754).

I. New Media and Movements

The relationships between mobile media (Horst and Miller 2006; Tenhunen 2008), social media (Gershon 2010; Miller 2011), and political engagement (Juris 2012; Postill 2012; Gerodimos 2012) are increasingly of interest to social science researchers who explore the correlations between digital media participation and other participatory practices, such as online (and offline) activism.[44] Of the various new areas of focus within digital anthropology, political activism and social movements have become some of the most prominent due to recent global events such as the Arab Spring[45] and the Occupy movements. As Mirca Madianou (2013) notes, social media are deeply embedded in our understanding of social movements today, from the Green Revolution in Iran (2009) to the Occupy movements (2011), despite some research which highlights scepticism regarding social media's impact (Morozov 2011; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). Madianou (2013) believes there are reasons to suggest that social media do play a transformative role in contemporary forms of activism (Papacharissi and de Fatima Olivera 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). However, scholars also emphasise the importance of on-the-ground, face-to-face networks and personal relationships within those movements (Lim 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). For that reason, many recent studies have focused on social movements and online activism. For example, Harlow's (2012) work in Guatemala looks at how Facebook pages and social media videos prompted an online justice movement to spread

[44] Ethnographic approaches to research on digital media often focus on specific groups or social media platforms (Miller 2011; Boellstorff 2008; Postill 2006; Eickelman and Anderson 2008) or the anthropology of social change (Postill 2012). Topics such as blogging, political activism (Ginsburg 2008; Juris 2008; Postill 2011); geek/hacker subcultures (Coleman 2005a); online journalism (Bird 2010; Boyer 2010); 3D and virtual environments (Boellstorff 2008) and everyday life (Postill 2009) are building a foundation for an anthropological understanding of these spheres.

[45] While much of the popular focus has been centred on the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements, it was the 2009 protests in Iran, known as the 'Green Revolution', that became the first movement to receive international attention, sparking interest from governments and organisations around the world regarding social media's 'power' (Shirky 2009).

into the streets, and Al-Rasheed's (2012) research examines the role of the Internet in Saudi Arabia's public protests. While some argue that 'current scholarship… suggests that young people are rarely addressed as political agents...' (Jenkins 2016 et al.: 47), youth involvement in activism has become increasingly based on shared interests. For example, political life, which includes volunteering, protesting, voicing political opinions and community problem-solving, has often developed from simple, online, non-political activities (Kahne, Lee, and Feezell 2011: 2).

Since young people often report feeling excluded from traditional forms of institutional politics (Banaji and Buckingham 2013), a reimagining of politics and 'transmedia mobilisation' (Constanza-Chock 2010) can occur to create social and political change.[46] Manuel Castells (2008) maintains that the interests of elites and their complex networks dominate public space. He reasons that room in public spaces must be carved out for everyday citizens – for activism, voice and deliberation – not just through the Internet but in public life generally, in order to offset the existing hierarchies (10). This argument was furthered by Jenkins et al. (2016) who claims that young people, in their 'imagining communities',[47] are battling against the constructs of the mass media and are not accepting the current constructs, but instead, are reconstructing them through networked communities (37). Many anthropologists, such as John Postill, now focus on social media activism, which is, in essence, those forms of political and social activism that rely on social media for their development and maintenance, by focusing on contemporary protests in Western countries, such as Spain's Indignados movement (Postill 2009). It is, further, no surprise that American young people often make deliberate choices about how to bring about social change. For instance, many young people are turning towards educational or

[46] 'People's voices only count if their bodies matter' (Couldry 2010: 130).
[47] Reference to 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983).

social channels rather than focusing on governmental or electoral mechanisms, in the belief that they may address challenges on a voluntary or cultural level (Jenkins 2016 et al.: 9). Thus, an understanding of young people as expressive and empowered individuals (Bennett 2008a: 2), alongside the importance of 'voice' (Couldry 2010) in civic action and public life, is becoming important to social science research.

II. Social Media Activism

Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers.

(Susan Sontag 2003: 90)

The 2009 Green Revolution in Iran marked a new era in which social media was employed as a tool to ignite, facilitate and grow social movements. In December of 2010, just before the inception of the Occupy movements, the Arab Spring had taken hold in Tunisia. In September of 2011, the Occupy Wall Street protests descended on Zuccotti Park, next to New York's Wall Street financial district. The movement began when, just a month before, the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* called on readers to 'Occupy Wall Street', 'but had really just floated the idea on the internet, along with some very compelling graphics, to see if it would take hold' (Graeber 2012: 1). The models used in the Arab Spring and the Green Revolution protests were adopted by 'the 99%' protesters while employing the power of social media.[48] As well as its use as a communication tool, social media became part and parcel of social movements, both online and on the ground (Papacharissi and de Fatima Olivera 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). As Jenkins (2018) outlines, many contemporary social movements can be seen as products of a globally networked society, where activism

[48]For further works on social media and social movements, refer to: Gerbaudo 2012; Hussain and Howard 2012, 2013; Lim 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Tufekci 2014; Fuchs 2012; Morozov 2011; Salvatore 2011.

is networked and spreads rapidly from one platform to the next, allowing messages to be duplicated and enacted for protests.

Herrera (2012) comments, in her research on Egyptian protesters, that 'their exposure to, and interaction with, ideas, people, images, virtual spaces, and cultural products outside their everyday environments led to a substantial change in their mentality and worldview' (343). In essence, social media began to play an important role in how people came together with shared values and united goals to create social change.[49] Similarly, Noam Chomsky, in an interview with *Democracy Now* (2012), highlights how the Occupy movement in the United States facilitated solidarity amongst social groups. Chomsky describes how supportive communities, with shared cooperation and space for deliberation, came together in ways that were previously quite rare. He argues that American culture has, for many years, emphasised individuality over solidarity, but posited that movements like Occupy show a coming together of society (Goodman 2012).

Miller (2011) similarly offers several examples of how Facebook helped communicate and facilitate various forms of activism in Trinidad, and highlighted Kirkpatrick's (2010) work, *The Facebook Effect,* in order to argue for the impact Facebook has had in various protests. Miller suggests that Facebook will eventually act as another medium for 'facilitating political action rather than a tool for the revolutionary transformation of politics' (189). Miller also describes how the instantaneous global communication of the Internet allows for citizens to make fun of politicians in Trinidad, despair over the devastation of Haiti, examine the American presidency or expose corruption. Miller detailed the ways in which

[49] While it is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that various forms of online activism predated these more popular movements. They include the Zapatista movement (1994), the World Trade Organization protests (1999), La Farc protests (2008), Wikileaks (2010) and Moveon.org (1998), to name a few.

social media can help to declare street protests, express opinion, highlight corporate greed and break down institutional or cultural biases (Miller 2011: 70). Bennett and Sergerberg (2012) similarly describe digital activism as 'connective action', which they define as a digitally mediated, fast-growing, flexible in focus and personalised form of action, comparing it to more traditional forms of activism that were more rigid in structure, focused on specific slogans and frameworks. They argue that these new forms of action lead to surprising success, as noted in various movements like the Arab Spring, the Indignado and Occupy[50] (Bennett and Sergerberg 2012: 742).

Many prominent activists and media scholars have analysed the effectiveness, implementation and spread of various social movements worldwide (Tufekci 2014; Lim 2013; Morozov 2009b). These new activism models have undoubtedly had a significant impact, whether 'strengthening established democracies, countries in transition, and authoritarian regimes alike' (Palfrey and Gasser 2008: 223), which is evident in various movements ranging from the Arab Spring to *KONY 2012*. Other recent movements in the United States, such as Black Lives Matter and the Women's Marches, were similar to *KONY 2012* in the sense that they were American based, but accrued support from around the world. Gould (2009) argues that embodied emotions are a critical component to the achievement of a successful movement, while Ahmed (2004) examines the relationship between emotion, language and bodies, which have the ability to mobilise audiences as they circulate in social spheres. Pedwell (2014) critiques the romanticised idea of empathy and argues that, rather than serving as a tool for social justice, it reinforces colonial hierarchies and powerful elites within corporate and political spheres, using examples

[50] The controversy and confusion surrounding the election of Donald Trump, and the role of social media in his campaign, came too late for consideration in the thesis, but Russia's role in the U.S. elections and the related Internet power struggles would offer interesting insights with regard to digital democratisation.

ranging from Nike sportswear to the Obama campaign (Engelhardt and Jansz 2014: 6). As this research explores, this duality was also reflective of the Invisible Children movement.

While Invisible Children values centred around the idealism of connection and global humanity, Chouliaraki (2013) describes the transformation in charitable campaigns where 'doing good' for humanitarian causes was a selfless act, to the 'emergence of a self-orientated morality, where doing good to others is about "how I feel"' (Chouliaraki 2013: 3). Furthermore, Chouliaraki examines how recent developments in new technologies have contributed to 'self-oriented morality'. She posits that while digital technologies have allowed media users to move from consumer to producer, digital medias also allow users to render solidarity with vulnerable others as producing emotional tweets on Twitter, consuming the social media message of a favourite celebrity of accessing a Facebook link (Chouliaraki 2013: 56). In the same vein as Chouliaraki, Evgeny Morozov (2011) criticises social media activism as an attempt to impress one's friends rather than a considered, genuine concern for social issues (186). While Chouliaraki's argument certainly has merit in the Invisible Children movement, it is difficult to distinguish Invisible Children participants as acting from a perspective of either authentic or inauthentic engagement. Even if participants described their participation during interviews in a way that could be interpreted as inauthentic or superficial, their participation may have *felt* authentic and meaningful to them. My research findings disagreed with Morozov more directly: Invisible Children activists were not compelled by 'impressing friends' in the interviews or participant observation, but motivated by connecting and creating a deeper meaning, or a sense of life purpose. Many participants described a feeling of 'bowling alone' (Putnam 2000) before joining the ranks of Invisible Children and having a great sense of life purpose after participating with the movement. Furthermore, while Chouliaraki (2013: 76) argues that appeals like *KONY 2012* might 'be mobilising a momentary activism but do so at the

expense of cultivating a deeper understanding of why humanitarian action is important', it is complicated to discern each participant's deeply personal emotions regarding humanitarianism amongst wider campaign approaches and values.[51] That said, there is no doubt that the Invisible Children movement as a whole was oversimplified and consumption-driven, based on Pallotta's[52] (2013) market-driven principles and capitalist techniques.

Technologically mediated online worlds offer new forms of engagement for young people, which integrate with millennial youth lifestyles. While some argue that youth political participation is lower in certain Western democracies, there are signs that young people can participate politically and socially through new media environments that shape political activism and social spheres (Loader 2007). Palfrey and Gasser outline the role of the Internet in youth engagement as a medium, not a message. They posit that the Internet is helping to facilitate civic action and engagement, arguing against assumptions that engagement occurs entirely online (Palfrey and Gasser 2008: 230). Furthermore, activism is becoming both individualised and collectivised. Many argue that the assumption that young people are politically apathetic overlooks new forms of engagement, which often surpass traditional forms of participation and activism in democratic institutions, largely due to digital forms of engaging. However, this 'techno-enthusiasm' (Selwyn 2004) should be countered by the fact that 'the internet is not, yet, "the answer" to young people's disengagement, though it may develop the skills and literacies required for engagement'

[51] While Chouliaraki is raising a valid point, I did not feel that the social research methods employed in this research allowed for complex psychological judgements regarding how the participants felt or and an understanding of how selflessness can be comprehended beyond what a participant might state in an interview or answer in a survey, or how they might act in a specific observational setting influenced by the researcher's perspective and presence.

[52] Russell marked Pallotta's (2013) work on the profit principles of charity as a key contributor to Invisible Children's financial framework and philosophy. Pallotta has argued that non-governmental organisations should be able to function like a for-profit company.

(Livingstone et al. 2007: 32). Furthermore, the idealism of e-democracy is offset by powerful, elite institutions and interests that undermine deeper forms of youth engagement (McChesney 2000; Graber 2004; Mansell, 2004; Livingstone, Couldry and Markham 2007). Some believe that the contribution of social media to social movements verges on hyperbolic (Olorunnisola and Martin 2013).

At the same time, as Noam Chomsky recently discussed, contemporary social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, reflect several key elements of social change.[53] They include the changing of discourse and the creation of new communities, which serve as a model for democratic participation, cooperation, solidarity, mutual support and public discussion (Chomsky 2012). This 'constituting of a new sphere of politics' (Giroux 2009) highlights the quickly changing social media landscape (Miller and Slater 2000) wherein models for action can be specifically employed in online spaces as a unifying and communicatory tool. Furthermore, these new forms of political and civic participation reflect non-institutionalised, non-hierarchical and informal digital networks (Bennett 2008b; Ito et al. 2010; Jenkins et al. 2006; Kahne, Lee and Feezell 2011), which aim to alter existing power relations (Brough and Shresthova 2012).

The transformative power of new media in networked societies entails the ability to create new forms of political engagement and social movements. For example, Olsson's (2008) research draws on interviews with youth activists and highlights the political significance of external and internal forms of networking, while Ito et al. (2010) examine how 'connected civics' (Ito et al. 2010) in the form of action that is personalised, yet collective,

[53] The 'changing paradigms and forms of politics in social movements' (Edelman 2001) have also been studied by social scientists, such as Casas-Cortés 2019; Edelman 2001, 2005; Nash 2005. This also includes new social movements (Melucci 1980), as well as transnational activism (della Porta and Tarrow 1995).

can represent constructive forms of engagement in political activism (Bennett and Sergerberg 2011). Ito and her colleagues discovered 'friendship-driven' and 'interest-driven' forms of youth participation in online spaces (Ito et al. 2010). This difference in participatory forms was developed further by Kahne, Lee and Feezell (2011), who found that interest-driven participation leads to higher rates of civic behaviour, such as volunteering and political activism. Invisible Children, in this instance, could be considered to be both 'interest' and 'friendship'-driven.

Various other studies have similarly looked at the influence of digital media on social movements.[54] For instance, Harlow (2012) explores Guatemalan Facebook pages and videos that inspired an online social justice movement, which eventually moved offline and into the streets of Guatemala. Such forms of 'transnational social activism' (Cunningham 1999) create a sense of 'participatory culture' (Burgess and Green 2009). 'Participatory culture' can be described as 'a set of ideals for how these social practices can facilitate learning, empowerment, civic action and capacity building' (Jenkins, Ito and boyd 2016: 183). Furthermore, Bennett and Segerberg (2013) argue that 'connective action' can transform social movements through the sharing of personalised social media output aimed at civic engagement, policy change and media impact (58). This creates a 'convergence culture' (Jenkins 2006) of activism where old and new media converge. Similarly, Bennett and Segerberg argue that inclusive forms of a collective identity, such as the 'I am the 99%' meme, are critical aspects of contemporary activism. Memes offer a powerful tool for young people engaging in politics. However, the framing and re-framing

[54] The study of social movements can be found in various works, such as della Porta (2005) and Nash (2005). In the anthropological discipline, ethnographers, such as John Postill, have written works on Internet activism (2009). Others have focused on marginalised groups and indigenous activism while some researchers, such as Juris (2008), have looked at anti-globalisation activism or the globalisation of protest (Cronin 2006).

of 'good citizenship' (Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson 2016) in memes can empower young activists through the lens of a networked identity or draw criticisms of slacktivism. Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson's research reveals how memes critical of *KONY 2012* portrayed young people as naive, lazy and ignorant, which may have hindered their political participation, as participants felt ridiculed by meme creators in public spaces.

III. Activism and 'Slacktivism'



Image 4-2: Images mocking 'slacktivism'
Retrieved from Tumblr on July 3, 2014.

One of the most common critiques of contemporary activism relates to the 'slacktivism' tag attached to social media-based movements; 'slacktivism' could be described as activism that makes the individual feel good without having much social or political impact. While new forms of participatory politics allow young people to creatively employ already established online behaviours as fans, consumerists and participants and 'deploy this popular cultural capital as starting point for political action' (Jenkins, Ito and boyd 2016: 157), many argue that forms of 'slacktivism' have suppressed meaningful activism. For instance, Morozov (2009a, 2011), who has looked at technological determinism and authoritarian regimes in relation to online activism, argues that online activism is often a form of 'slacktivism', a view echoed by Kristofferson (2014) and Rotman et al. (2011). On the one hand, many argue that digital media allow young people to employ online platforms

for meeting up with friends, socialising and exploring their selves or sense of civic engagement, as well as topics of interest (Ito et al. 2010). Others posit that social media fail to create the kind of change evident in traditional grassroots movements where real sacrifices were made. As Gladwell (2010) wrote in *The New Yorker*: 'we are a long way from the lunch counters of Greensboro' (1). However, as Jenkins (2016) points out, Gladwell's argument is based on an unfair comparison of platforms and movements. He states:

> A fairer comparison might have been between today's Twitter revolution and the telephone revolution of the 1960s, since we know that Martin Luther King, Malcom X, and other black leaders used the telephone as a key tool for coordinating activities among other black church leaders, freedom riders, and a range of other dispersed sets of supporters' (Jenkins 2016: 23)

Alongside Gladwell's (2010) critique of 'slacktivism' as being low-risk compared to traditional forms of activism, Drumbl believes the *KONY 2012* campaign and other forms of slacktivism highlight 'short attention spans and a limited shelf life' (Drumbl 2012: 484). Zuckerman (2013), on the other hand, pushes for a more nuanced portrait of contemporary activism. He argues there are 'thin' and 'thick' types of civic engagement in these new forms of activism, which can range in impact and meaning. For instance, he posits that Occupy Wall Street was a 'thick', but also largely symbolic, form of activism. He believes that voting is the most 'thin', but also the most impactful, form of civic engagement.[55] Similarly, Zuckerman explores how events like Occupy Sandy[56] could be seen as a form of 'thick' engagement, since food distribution centres were set up to help those affected by the hurricane (Zuckerman 2013). He also explains the Million Hoodie March, which was both 'thin' and symbolic, but led to actual impact:

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[55] For literature on political campaigns and voting refer to: Hara (2008); Cornfield (2005) Howard (2005); Smith and Rainie (2008).

[56] Occupy Sandy was a relief effort set up to help those affected by Hurricane Sandy, which hit the eastern United States and Caribbean in 2012.

> That said, it is possible for engagement that is thin and symbolic to have effects: the Million Hoodie March for Trayvon was chiefly a symbolic and attention-gathering act, but likely had significant impact on bringing Trayvon Martin's killer to justice… (ibid)

Zuckerman's theory parallels Morozov's in arguing that 'thin' civic engagement can sometimes be a form of 'slacktivism' (Morozov 2009a). Forms of 'thin' engagement, or 'slacktivism', are closely linked to the changing of Facebook profile photos for various causes, as was evident with *KONY 2012* supporters. Critics often describe such actions within movements, such as *KONY 2012,* as forms of 'slacktivism' because they involved purchasing action kits, video sharing, and social media posting, but failed to engage with deeper, more impactful traditional forms of activism that have defined major historical transformations, such as American civil rights (Christensen 2011; Morozov 2011).

Chouliaraki created the term 'technologization of action' to describe when action is 'commodified, reduced to a click' (2010: 117). This form of activism is highlighted by Banet-Weiser and Lapsanksy (2008) who studied the RED campaign, which was an HIV/AIDS relief campaign that served as a type of 'lifestyle activism'. Participants were able to purchase specific RED branded goods, labelled with youthful, catchy branding, in order to offer philanthropic support for HIV/AIDS work in Africa. The RED campaign paralleled Invisible Children, which focused heavily on forms of lifestyle activism to fund its various campaigns, such as the extensive clothing and accessory line featured year-round on the Invisible Children website. However, as Bratich (2012) describes, the *KONY 2012* movement excelled in its straightforward, solution-oriented approach, which could bypass some of the barriers of other movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, which were fluid and had less goal-focused calls to action.[57] Furthermore, the Invisible Children and *KONY*

[57] 'Action has to be understood in the context of engagement, normally consisting of three analytical dimensions: understanding/awareness; talk; and action' (Madianou 2013: 253).

2012 movement produced significant legislative change in the U.S., and Invisible Children participants took part in countless traditional forms of activism, such as protesting in Washington, D.C. Thus, I would argue that, as a whole, the Invisible Children movement was a form of 'thick' engagement, but *KONY 2012* was largely a form of 'thin' engagement. Thin forms of engagement included purchasing the 'action kit' and 'liking' or sharing the *KONY 2012* film without actively participating in any of the movement.[58]

Zuckerman (2012) uses the example of Invisible Children to describe a new form of activist participation that is motivated by passion and the need for participants to feel personally involved in social change. Zuckerman (2013) describes the need for participants to see the impact they are having in civic action. He further highlights the ways this could be destructive for African development and security, since capturing Joseph Kony was not necessarily a priority for Ugandans in 2012. He argues that 'it will become the norm, not the exception' for political and social activism to rely on social media, whether through crowdfunding, advertising, lobbying or fundraising (ibid). This is similarly illustrated by Shirky (2009), who states that social media allow people to congregate, organise, communicate and mobilise in online spaces, which will have an impact on politics and activism. This viewpoint was further developed by Shresthova, who argued that 'clicktivist critiques simplify our understanding of the political life of American youth' (2016: 71–72). Shresthova (2016) engages with the idea that youth today are more likely to be affiliated with cultural and social activities, rather than traditional institutional politics. For that reason, activist groups such as Invisible Children are often able to help young people find

[58] Similarly, while the Ice Bucket Challenge was criticised for being a 'slacktivist' campaign with 'thin' engagement, it did manage to raise $100 million dollars in 30 days and contributed to a significant breakthrough in ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) research (Woolf 2016). While the *KONY 2012* campaign did manage to raise millions, the organisation's use of donation money, along with its contribution to placing U.S. troops in the region, was heavily criticised.

their civic voice by engaging with the issues and interests they care about, particularly in popular and participatory cultures.

Research conducted by Cohen and Kahne (2012) also counters assumptions about 'slacktivism'. They found that digitally connected young people were more likely to be civically minded and politically engaged, as well as exposed to a diversity of political opinions. Cohen and Kahne's (2012) research on participatory politics suggests that young people who engage with the Internet are more likely to participate in political and social issues, as well as a diversity of opinions and viewpoints. However, the research, which followed over 2,500 young people through various Californian school districts, also found that 34% had no engagement with political opinions at all, whether diverse or not. This complex media environment is summed up by Durington (2012), who explains how exposure to global issues does not have a mutually exclusive relationship with direct action. Instead, he outlines how media saturation can sometimes create an environment where people 'believe that "someone else is taking care of it" in a more profound and troubling way' (104).

Contrary to Shirky's (2009) optimistic view of participation in internet-based democratic spaces, Tufekci (2014a) argues, using the Arab Spring in Egypt as an example, that it is not always easy to identify the ways in which movements can be sustained for effective change or how that change can be measured. That said, various studies, such the work done by as Margetts et al. (2015), reveal how social media mobilisations *do* succeed. Margetts et al. (2015) outline how, often, they are volatile and unmaintainable, and eventually fail to succeed, while others 'give rise to huge mobilisations—even revolutions' (ibid: 1). Regardless of their successes or failures, access to digital media has transformed communications and representations on local and global scales, thus changing the face of

activism in an electronically contracted world [59] (McLuhan 1964: 11–12). Such advancements in communication technology have vastly altered media ecosystems and the social worlds surrounding them (Postill 2012). Furthermore, campaigners and participants are less dependent on traditional mass media institutions and other gatekeepers in order to communicate and organise (Madianou 2013: 258). This was reflected in the *KONY 2012* narrative, which said: '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'. The film urged viewers to capture Kony in order to prove that 'the world we live in has new rules' where global citizens 'see each other and can protect each other', bypassing the control and power of elite institutions and government control. At the end of *KONY 2012*, Russell emphasises that 'technology that has brought our planet together is allowing us to respond to the problems of our friends. We are not just studying human history. We are shaping it'.

In the *KONY 2012* script, Russell highlights the idea of a 'global village' (McLuhan 1964), which could turn the 'system upside down' and bypass traditional media corporations or political influences. This action becomes synonymous with the ways young people go online in a manner that is integrated with their daily lives and social worlds: it is interactive, non-hierarchical, peer-to-peer and based on the development of civic action through one's own beliefs and interests (Miller et al. 2016). This form of 'participatory politics' can be understood as a 'cultural shift in the relative prevalence of circulation, collaboration, creation, and connection', which is transforming 'the cultural context in which people

[59] The idea that mass media dominates public information, opinions, communications and representations is not new to anthropology (Madianou 2005c; Wright 2002). Mass media has historically overpowered minority voices, shaped public views and played a significant role worldwide. Refer to: Spitulnik 1993; Askew and Wilk 2002; Ginsburg et al. 2002; Rothenbuhler and Coman 2005; Peterson 2003; Madianou 2005c; Wright 2002; Lutz and Collins 1993; Zelizer 1990, Turner 2002; Wilson et al. 2008; Michaels 1986; Ginsburg 1991, 1995; Ruby 2000.

operate' (Cohen and Kahne 2012: vi). The idea of participatory politics is further developed on by Jenkins et al. (2016) in *By Any Media Necessary*, which examines how new forms of political and social activism have developed through 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2006a), creating a dynamic political engagement amongst young people in the United States. Jenkins (2012a) offers the example of The Harry Potter Alliance, which has over 1,000 participants who actively engage in political and social issues through various campaigns. Similarly, Banaji and Buckingham's (2010) study of youth and civic engagement explores the social, political, economic and cultural influences that impact young people's online participation. In their largely European-focused study, they concluded that institutions should adapt to digital worlds where young people have embraced a participatory culture.

Alongside the concept of participatory culture, academics also consider the impact of storytelling, which acts as an important aspect of contemporary activism. Invisible Children often described themselves as 'storytellers'[60] and, as they illustrated, transmedia storytelling acts as a 'catalyst for collective identity formation and mobilisation' (Brough and Shresthova 2012: 55), as well as an important form of media in contemporary social networked social movements (Costanza-Chock 2011: 115). Jenkins (2012) defines transmedia storytelling as an entertainment experience with multiple layers of distribution and channels. Transmedia storytelling involves storytelling over numerous media platforms, while employing a range of media formats. It consists of low entry barriers, informal or peer-to-peer mentorship, artistic creation and community cohesion (Brough and Shresthova 2012: 26). Transmedia storytelling places emphasis on the notion of 'world building' where various groups and individuals collect, share, create and compile

[60] In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Russell argued that Jesus Christ was the 'ultimate storyteller' (Kron 2012), but also stated that he believes: 'Story is the most powerful thing we possess. Story leads to awareness. Awareness leads to attitude change. Attitude change leads to action. Never say "it's just an awareness campaign"' (ibid).

information across media (Swartz 2012: 2). This is similar to the form of storytelling created by Invisible Children, in the sense that the constant spreading, evolution of and engagement with Invisible Children's various storytelling media allowed it to grow and gain ground over time, which ultimately helped to initiate and sustain its social movement (Swartz 2012). The bewitching nature of the Invisible Children movement involved magnetic, emotional and personalised ways of media storytelling, combined with cutting edge filmmaking and charismatic, youthful leaders, as well as their practical and symbolic engagement with social media and millennial youth culture.

Another important aspect of Invisible Children's campaign was the 'spreadability' and 'drillability' of its story (Jenkins et al. 2012b). In *Spreadable Media,* Jenkins et al. (2012b) highlight the difference between the distribution and circulation of media, the former being controlled corporately and the latter being a more hybrid system made up of individuals and groups within the wider industry. 'Spreadability' ultimately describes 'media circulation' (2012b: 3) that increases in social value and economic worth through spreading. It entails media[61] content that is employed to initiate participation and the spreading or sharing of material. Spreadability allows participants to shape and frame the material and can be used to inspire and initiate forms of activism and political engagement. For instance, Jenkins (2012b) uses the Susan Boyle video from the UK television show *Britain's Got Talent* as an example of a form of spreadability that allows users to engage with content while also focusing attention on a specific topic or cause. Spreadability can also be used to increase civic engagement and motivate political participation. 'Drillability' (Mittell 2009) works in conjunction with 'spreadability'. Drillability encourages audiences to engage with materials

[61] Swartz (2012) defines 'media' within transmedia storytelling as any format or artefact that acts to create new meaning or information within a more expansive story, which could range from a clothing item, to an action figure or performance.

through long-term participation with the story, moving past the initial point of connection or contact to develop a deeper sense of meaning, or relationship, with the media. Raising awareness is in large part dependent on the spreadability of the message, whereas drillability harnesses learning opportunities past the initial point of connection, but both are key components to the success and endurance of a cause (Swartz 2012: 11) Furthermore, Jenkins (2009a, 2009b) argues that drillability and spreadability contribute towards 'transmedia storytelling' (ibid). Swartz (2012) describes how the Invisible Children movement served as an excellent example of transmedia storytelling, as its campaigns were both spreadable and drillable. The organisation created its own media, which was easily spread and shared, but also engaged with viewers in a way that allowed for long-term engagement with their work using watchable, free videos alongside various other pop culture media and consumer goods. However, Swartz (2012) suggests that Invisible Children placed greater emphasis on spreadability than on drillability. Swartz (2012) offers examples of the structures of information within Invisible Children in which participants were encouraged to engage with specific, pre-designed information packages and narratives from the organisation, rather than it asking young people to investigate and understand the issues in Uganda in depth (Jenkins and Shresthova 2012c). Zuckerman (2012) similarly argues that oversimplifying the political and historical context of Uganda for the benefit of making the campaign consumable to the masses could have negative consequences.[62]

In conclusion, it is clear that online activism in contemporary society is very complex, but offers exciting avenues for social science research. The Invisible Children movement can be viewed as a mosaic of components, as this thesis explores. It could not be distinctly

[62] As Zuckerman (2012) argued: 'If we want people to pay attention to the issues we care about, do we need to oversimplify them? And if we do, do our simplistic framings do more unintentional harm than intentional good? (1).

categorised as slacktivism or traditional activism, and consists of elements of transmedia storytelling, participatory culture, spreadability and drillability; in essence, it exemplifies the dramatically changing and multifarious ecosystem of humanitarian campaigning and contemporary activism.

IV. Visual Media in Contemporary Activism and Social Movements

> *Images are everywhere. They permeate our academic work and our everyday lives. They inhabit and inspire our imaginations, technologies, texts and conversations. As mobile media become increasingly ubiquitous images are embedded in the digital architectures of the environments we move through in our everyday routes. The visual is therefore inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures and societies...*
>
> (Pink 2001: 1)

Visual media are ingrained in the cultural meaning and social function of contemporary society, whether through serving symbolic political purposes for the American president, as public relations tools for the latest Hollywood celebrity or acting as a cultural mechanism for university students with Facebook profiles. Visual media, in essence, act as both medium and method for the human experience. In the field of visual anthropology, visuals have been studied in terms of the relationships between people and visuals, both as images and objects, as well as in terms of exchange, commodification, history, identity, commemoration and remembrance. In the early 1990s, anthropology took a 'visual turn' (Mitchell, 1994; Banks and Morphy 1997; Banks 2001; Pink 2001). Since then, visuals have been explored as mediums for self-exploration, theatrical language, social belonging, testimonies of person-hood, symbols of status and wealth, and social cohesion (e.g. Edwards 2001, Poole 1997). The cross-cultural importance of visual forms has been exemplified in various ethnographies, such as Pinney's (1997) research on colonial and post-colonial photographic practices in India, as well as Abu-Lughod's (2005) research on soap operas in Egypt, and Wendl's (2001) ethnographic research on the importance of

visuals in Ghana. Ethnographic research has shown that 'all visual forms are socially embedded' (Banks 2001: 79), highlighting their sociality, as well as the social significance of their materiality. 'Photographs are both images *and* objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience' (Edwards 2004: 1; Ginsburg 1995; MacDougall 2005; Pinney 2011; Edwards 1992). Once used as a scientific tool to create racial categories 'images of exotic peoples' became 'factual evidence' and helped in the 'creation of the "Other"', with such pictures now playing a role in creating ethnographic documentation (Poole 1997: 110). As pioneering ethnographic filmmaker and visual anthropologist David MacDougall argued: 'For the colonisers as well as for the colonised, a concept of purity and impurity was an underlying principle of social segmentation. Manipulating human categories reinforced the colonisers' sense of difference as well as their sense of power' (1997: 280).

Within the Invisible Children organisation, visual media were fundamental to the development, recruitment, humanitarian campaigning and activism of the movement, as well as to the social lives of the participants involved. Invisible Children's visual media, which included film, social media, Internet marketing and digital photography, were used to galvanise support for the organisation, educate supporters about the humanitarian campaigns and market a youth movement in American society that eventually spread across the globe. 'As commodity activism grows, so too does humanitarian consumption, fueled by and marketed through an increasingly prolific, complex visual culture' (Brough 2012: 176).

As the importance of digital worlds and social media has grown in recent years, so has the importance of visuals, which have become integral to contemporary society. Visuals often symbolise, contain and empower specific ideologies, with various mobilisations being powered by images (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2013: xix). For instance, during the Arab

Spring, visuals including pictures and videos of crowded squares of people protesting against government corruption acted as symbolic references for the growing wave of discontent. Beginning in Tunisia, the protests quickly spread and visual images of protesters in Egypt's Tahrir square, Puerta del Sol in Spain, and Zuccotti Park in the United States appeared across the global consciousness. The visuals of the movements, whether photographs, videos or other medias, acted as 'vivid tools of "countervisuality"' (Mirzoeff 2011) that sparked the 'roaring grassroots political participation of hundreds of thousands people to the silent decisions taken in government and corporation buildings by small groups of politicians and managers' (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2013: xi). As a result, 'The spectacle … is not an ensemble of images; it is a social relation between people mediated by images' (ibid).

Symbolically and politically saturated images influence our understanding of the world and how we give it meaning, particularly in a world that is increasingly visual. In the digital worlds of activism, visual media have the ability to take on various participatory roles, creating symbolic messages, acts, justifications and ideological expressions. In contemporary society, this type of visual warfare has been evident in various protests, such as the 2017 Women's March, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter and *KONY 2012*. In these visuals played an important role in constructing mobilising narratives and creating 'collective identities' of 'networked publics' (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2013, Cronin 2006; Polleta 1998; boyd 2010). In *KONY 2012,* 'the visual image brings an immediacy to human rights issues more than any other medium could hope for' (Durington 2008), which overcame 'compassion fatigue' and 'de-emotionalisation' for many viewers (Moeller 1999; Madianou 2013). As Norbert Mao, former Ugandan Presidential candidate, stated in response to *KONY 2012*: 'Let the academics go and write their academic papers … but this one grabs you by the gut and shakes you until you're

forced to pay attention … that's the essence of awareness' (*Kony 2012: Beyond Famous*). This, in many ways, reveals how visual media content and the portrayal of suffering play a role in spectator action and emotional engagement (Chouliaraki 2006, 2008; Madianou 2013). In *KONY 2012,* the aesthetics of visualisation, as well as the seemingly democratised platform, created a sense of immediacy and intimacy for viewer participation. The producer of *KONY 2012*, Jason Russell, later remarked:

> If you just report the facts and statistics of a war people can't relate so they turn it off, they don't watch it. For *KONY 2012* we decided to put myself and my son and our relationship with Joseph into the movie…in hopes that it would bring the story home (*MOVE* 2012).

It is, therefore, not surprising that, as Leddy (2013) stated in *The Harvard Gazette*: 'Social justice campaigns seldom work through data-driven appeals to the intellect, so nonprofits often appeal to emotions'. Many advocacy campaigns 'provoke emotional responses' and offer a multi-sensory channel of communication using their 'nondidactic' nature to 'resonate with aspects of people's lived experiences', often through visual appeals (Hicks and Levine 2007: 74).

With the expansion of technological communications, visual media have become both individualised and collectivised for social movement mobilisations, activism and campaigning. In one moment, visuals may construct and represent the shared beliefs and values of a movement's participants, serve functional roles for creating knowledge, or establish relationships and modes of cohesion. In another, they may undergo dramatic renegotiations for oppositional actors and counter movement contagions. This has been evident throughout many contemporary activist movements since images of protesters often become crucial aspects of discontent that inspire the spread of movements. For example, during the Arab Spring, the Tunisian fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, became the symbolic image of the protests. Photographs of him taken before, during and after his

self-immolation created a martyr for the movement and his images dominated protests in the streets, as well as online. The visuals of Bouazizi, often including graphic images of his immolation, underwent various transformations online to become paintings, cartoon sketches, YouTube videos or simply photographs decorated with symbolic graphics, such as the Tunisian flag. This was also evident in Egypt when the graphic visuals of a 28-year-old Egyptian man, Khaled Said,[63] who was beaten to death by police, became global signs of discontent. Said's image was used by protesters to create 'moral shock' and became a key symbol of the movement (Olesen 2013: 3). For *KONY 2012*, the Obama 2008 campaign's Banksy-like stylised HOPE image, was reproduced and re-contextualised as a way to symbolise the genre of a millennial youth grassroots movement in the US. (Madianou 2013). As Shepard Fairey, artist and creator of the Obama HOPE poster, says in the film:

> A lot of people feel powerless to communicate their ideas, they think that 'I'm not a corporation, I don't own my own magazine, news station, I just don't have any say' but seeing as what I've done, I think it's empowered a lot of people to realize that one individual can make an impact. I mean I actually want to demystify and say 'here are these really simple tools, go out…and rock it' (*KONY 2012*).

The 'simple tools' of Fairey's ideology embodied individual empowerment and anti-authority activism through their symbolic images. In that sense, it is evident that the visual media of activism and social movements often wage mediatised wars using photographs, videos and digital narratives, which are used to reinforce community bonds, shared beliefs or discontents and create motivations for mobilisation and activism.

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[63] 'The horrifying cell phone photograph taken by Said's family at the morgue and uploaded on the web became a key visual injustice symbol in the protests that toppled the Mubarak regime in early 2011. The moral and emotional power of the post-mortem photograph was amplified in important ways by often appearing juxtaposed with a photograph of Khaled Said before his death, in which he appears as a handsome, sympathetic embodiment of Egypt's young urban middle class' (Olesen 2013: 5–6).



Images 4-3 and 4-4: (Left) Obama 2008 Presidential Campaign Poster created by OBEY street artist, Shepard Fairey. Image retrieved from Campaign website (Right) KONY 2012 activists during their 'Cover the Night' protest
(Image was created by the Invisible Children organisation to inspire such 'action' – these are their 'actors'). Images retrieved from Invisible Children on September 2, 2012.



Images 4-5, 4-6 and 4-7 (Left) *KONY 2012* 'Banksy' poster with Joseph Kony in front of bin Laden and Hitler (middle) a recreation of Fairey's infamous OBEY poster for anti-Trump supporters (Right) Fairey's visual creation for the 2017 Women's March

While traditional forms of activism persist, as seen in the recent Occupy Wall Street protests, many civilians are turning to visual and digital media platforms in order to share perspectives, values and beliefs (Hjorth and Hendry 2015; Gibbs, Nansen and Carter 2015; Cruz and Meyer 2012). Such new practices become part of everyday behaviours and norms,

offering modes of cohesion and shared values in a converging socio-cultural system where real and digital spaces overlap. However, the increasing prevalence of visuals can lead to an abstraction of meaning, particularly since the symbolic, multifaceted layers encompass a variety of meanings, both in digital and temporal locations. Visual elements of digital communication can reinforce representations or act as independent expressions.

Social scientists are simultaneously looking at the role of visual media in various social movements, alongside the ways in which visuals are used as tools in activist movements (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2013).[64] Doerr, Mattoni and Teune (2013) present the claim that the importance and presence of visual images in social movements is not new. They highlight that: 'activists articulate visual messages, their activities are represented in photos and video sequences, and they are ultimately rendered visible, or invisible, in the public sphere' (ibid: xi). The importance of visuals in social movements is reiterated by Juris (2012) who studies both the Arab Spring and Occupy movements in depth. Juris discusses the transformative impact of visuals in the various movements, which eventually sparked media attention and increased popular support, saying 'The widespread circulation of images from the Arab Spring continued to spark the intense feelings of solidarity, political possibility, and agency that ultimately led to the occupation of Wall Street…' (ibid: 1).

The visual symbolism of networked identities, community cohesion and 'people power' has been adopted across diverse contexts. For example, the re-appropriations and visualisations of the Arab Spring that symbolise social media generated empowerment have become topics of interest in social science research and have been employed throughout various other movements, such as *KONY 2012* and the Occupy movement. When activists

[64] 'Photographs, film, and images have received relatively limited systematic attention within the mainstream of social movement studies. This is surprising considering how historically they have often played key roles in various forms of political activism' (Olesen 2013: 4).

'imagine themselves as active political agents' (Jenkins 2016: 29), they often employ visuals and medias alongside their participation. Furthermore, 'visual injustice symbols' (Olesen 2013) help to inspire and carry the action of the movement. Images are produced and evoked by social movements themselves, whether planned or accidental, as well as being consumed and adapted by external audiences (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2013: xi). Visuals, in that sense, became imperative to the social realities and meaning-making of movements.[65] Visuals are unaffected, instantaneous, shocking, funny, haunting, infuriating, provocative and heart-breaking. Viewers connect with documentation that could have been captured or created by *any* person in *any* hometown, someone 'just like you and me', rather than a third-party news institution or someone 'out there' existing beyond immediate emotional reality (Olesen 2013).[66]

While visual medias, such as protest posters, pictures and videos, serve as tools for communication and shared opinion, memes often serve as a 'moral police' in online spaces (Miller 2015). Memes are employed by activists in various movements, including the Occupy movement or *KONY 2012,* which are used to embody voice, discontent or shared opinion (Jenkins 2018). The authentic representation and power of images can exercise

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[65] In *Doing Visual Research,* Mitchell (2011) further highlights that 'even the tools and products of visual research (cameras, photographs, digital images) are objects and things' (Mitchell 2011: 6). The process of looking within, externally and through the visual was explored by Ruby who argued that 'the study of images alone, as objects whose meaning is intrinsic to them, is a mistake method if you are interested in the ways people assign meaning to pictures' (Ruby 2000: 5). In essence, visuals are 'social actors', as their influence on the social realm moves far beyond representational; 'objects, including photographs, are therefore not just stage settings for human actions and meanings, but integral to them' (Edwards and Hart 2004: 4). Visuals play a vital role in social relations online and offline, historically and presently – they are social tools highlighting social worlds. Visuals connect and exemplify social messages, which include values, relationships and biographies, and are represented in numerous forms of material and social existences. They contain both technical and physical plasticity, as well as a variety of presentational structures. In essence, visuals act as social instruments (Banks 2001: 179) Furthermore, since visual images are easily portable, they can create new values and meanings over space and time. In essence, visuals are crucial to our sociality, whether for humanitarian campaigns, social movements, activism or everyday life, particularly with the advance of social media (Hjorth 2007; Pink 2011; van Dijck 2009; Ito and Okabe 2005).

[66] 'Commercial and public mass media no longer have a monopoly over the visual representation of protest …. Activists, but also their sympathetic audiences, easily become visual producers through practices of the remediation and remixing of visual materials about protests.' (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2013: xv)

control in political and social arenas. Memes, for instance, can either act to publicly inspire or shame participants. This was, in essence, the novel appeal of viral social media for global audiences, who could now engage in social and political affairs through an entirely new platform. These 'artefacts of engagement' (Clark Schofield 2016) not only include photos, but also messages and other media elements that symbolise political engagement. Many activists rely on SnapChat, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram to spread and express their discontent and movement goals. Thus, 'by delving into the stock of collective memories, images appeal to a collective identity that may help activists to create political opportunities where institutional roads seem blocked' (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2013: xxi). The 'artefacts of engagement' or 'visual injustice symbols' also often include gestures or forms of fashion, both of which embody and carry messages for protesters. For example, activists might wear specific clothing, masks, symbolic items or other adornments to communicate their affiliation with the cause, as well as serving as demonstration tactics (ibid: xiv). This was well illustrated by the Occupy movement in the United States, which employed 'Guy Fawkes' stylised masks taken from the film *V for Vendetta* to symbolise the movement. Furthermore, the enormous outpouring of images over a short period of time led to the fast spread of images through websites and other social media platforms, which ultimately 'supported the diffusion of a complex counter- narrative on economic and labor issues' (ibid: xvi). In the Invisible Children movement, symbolic t-shirts, posters, social media, films and merchandise formed a key aspect of their activism and awareness, as this thesis discusses. Thus, visual media elements in movements and forms of activism have raised questions about how new media technologies might be shaping the structure of social movements, as well as civic activism generally.



Images 4-8, 4-9 and 4-10: (left) Symbolic message of dissent from the Arab Spring; (right and below) Occupy Wall Street, demonstration and infamous Adbusters 'call' to action in a visual poster





Image 4-11: Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring in Egypt
Images retrieved from Al Jazeera on July 1, 2012.

Furthermore, visuals have become important in online activism within social media networks, which is evident in various acts such as the changing of a Facebook profile photo to support a specific cause where 'to act is to share in the community of actions recorded as images' (Sontag 2003: 2). This was evident in the *KONY 2012* movement, as well as in various corresponding viral social movements. My participant observation revealed that Invisible Children supporters commonly displayed other forms of online activism or supported causes through their Facebook pages. One popular campaign that the participants showcased was a rainbow filter to support Equal Marriage rights. The Invisible Children participants acted to voice their belief in marriage equality through the symbolism of the rainbow, yet, as Zuckerman commented: 'It's one thing to measure how many millions of Facebook users changed their profile photo to the logo of an equality campaign, and another to determine whether those profile changes led to change in public acceptance of equal marriage rights' (Zuckerman in Gordon and Mihailidis 2016: 65). While it is

difficult to measure what kind of impact Invisible Children's participants made through their support of equal marriage rights on Facebook, the visual images acted in relation to the growing global support of the movement. Furthermore, a 2015 study revealed that *KONY 2012* was 'one of the first internet-era examples of "emergent opinion-based social identity"' (Thomas et al. 2015). In other words, *KONY 2012* was found to have paved the way for other hashtag campaigns, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #NotOneMore, because it created an identity for a group based on shared belief rather than an 'inborn characteristic' (356).



Image 4-12: Facebook 'photo filters' are often used by participants to communicate support regarding a specific social issue, such as the 2015 Paris Attacks or Equal Marriage rights
Images retrieved from Facebook on June 5, 2016.



Image 4-13: Jason Russell and family attend the Women's March in San Diego
Retrieved December 2, 2017 from Russell's Facebook profile.

As social and humanitarian movements became interlinked with social media, the social media 'trending' of various movements and campaigns became part of popular culture, so that the consumption and sharing of a specific movement or campaign has come to help define its value and success. This was evident with *KONY 2012*, where, within the Invisible Children organisation, digital media practitioners negotiated the voice and space of wider communication landscapes. However, as *KONY 2012* illustrated, while social media can organise and create new networks, the traditional ties and everyday practices enacted to create and maintain communities were still important to activism and creating social change through movements and campaigns. There is often a misconception of Invisible Children and *KONY 2012*, which evades or discredits the role of nearly ten years of on-the-ground networking in religious and social communities, as well as in grassroots activism. As *KONY 2012* illustrated, on-the-ground networks with traditional forms of activism and tightknit communities are just as important to new forms of activism and social movements (Lim 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). At the same time, *KONY 2012* and various other contemporary movements equally highlight the importance of visuals and new media in the growth and maintenance of movements.



Chapter Five: Humanitarianism and Invisible Children

The Western humanitarian narrative and its visual culture have, throughout modern history, been imbricated in the material practices of Christian evangelism, colonialism, Cold War politics, international development, neocolonialism, neoliberalism and commodity capitalism

(Brough 2012: 177)

Invisible Children branded itself as a new approach to humanitarianism. Humanitarianism, which is defined as 'philanthropically funded sectors concerned not only with crisis response but also with alleviating poverty and violence' (Brough 2012: 190), has undergone various transformations in recent decades. The general idea of humanitarianism developed in the 18th century through the broader culture of colonialist empires 'where 'the Western "self" was reified as civilized and the non-Western 'Other' as primitive and in need of paternal rule or saving' (ibid: 177). Within this colonialist culture, narratives of civilization in relation to primitivism depended on the visual construction of narratives 'the distant, "primitive", "uncivilized" or suffering "Other" is enacted in relation to "progressive" Western culture, which served 'to legitimate discourses and practices of colonialism,

capitalism and early humanitarianism' (ibid: 177). Colonialism played a critical role in creating and maintaining the idea of the 'Other', which represented primitiveness and exoticism (Said 1994; Nussbaum 2001; Haskell 1985). At the same time, as Fitzgerald (2001) argued, colonialism was interlinked with early humanitarian work since the 'pain and suffering of others' offered 'matchless evangelistic opportunities' (ibid: 120-121). In that sense, 'as part of the pedagogic apparatus of the West at the age of imperialist expansion', it objectified the 'Other' in its racism and voyeurism, 'whilst simultaneously raising awareness of the injustices of suffering that eventually led to the abolition of slavery' (Chouliaraki 2013: 47). Humanitarianism, for much of the 20th century, was embedded in the Cold War narrative, which focused on the idea of development and progress, while at the same time configuring the West as the 'guarantors of freedom, progress, peace and poverty reduction while constructing the 'third world' as needing protection and development' (Brough 2012: 178). Non-governmental organisations and humanitarian campaigns, in that sense, are often cited as having developed after the institution of the Red Cross (1862), as well as the League of Nations and the United Nations (1919 and 1945) and grew from the 'post-Cold War collapse of ideologies' (Chouliaraki 2013: 9).

Between 1970 and 2010, humanitarianism underwent three large developments, which included the instrumentalisation of aid; the change in grand narratives; and the move towards the technologisation of communication (Chouliaraki 2013: 1–2). At the same time, aid agencies underwent dramatic developments between 1985 to 1995, expanding by 150 per cent. By comparison, aid agencies in the United States went through an even larger phase of development, with numbers rising from 167 to 267 from 1980 to 1990 and that number doubling from 267 to 436 between 1990 and 2000 (Chouliaraki 2013: 6). Rozario (2003) argued that humanitarianism in America was 'a creation of a sensationalistic mass culture' (481). The rise of humanitarianism led to the 'iconography of suffering', growing

from 'the evangelical legacy', which created missionary work that provided both international infrastructure, testimony and aid (Brough 2012: 177–178). In that sense, 'humanitarian solidarity is informed by a morality of altruistic benevolence, which had both Christian and secular roots' (Chouliaraki 2013: 11). This fostered the development of the imagined 'Other' where Africa, for instance, became heavily linked to the imagery and text representing it in humanitarian campaigns, ultimately becoming the imagined Africa.

The imagery of suffering often involved photographic campaigns that featured negative images of starving, emaciated children (Calhoun 2008; Bethnall 1993; Chouliaraki 2013). The early campaigns that displayed 'negative' imagery were criticised for being dehumanising (ibid), as well as leading to viewers experiencing 'compassion fatigue' (Moeller 1999), feeling 'miserable and guilty' or having a sense of 'shame' from the images (Cohen 2001: 194, Ahmed 2004). This led to the development of more 'positive' imagery, which featured photographs of smiling, happy faces. However, these images were also accused of 'glossing over the misery of suffering' (Lidchi 1999; Smillie 2012; Chouliaraki 2013: 54). This was evident in the Biafra Famine (Campbell 2011), which was seen as a 'negative' appeal (ibid: 58). The images from the Biafra famine featured starved and emaciated children, which were 'fetishized' (Hall 1997: 223–79), as well as supporting the 'colonial gaze' (Hall et al. 1997; Silverstone 2007; Pinney 2011) where 'the sufferer remains passive, unaware, quasi-human' (Choularaki 2013: 58). However, this began to change by the late 20th century when American humanitarianism sought to lessen the distance between 'real' human suffering and the American donor public. For instance, organisations such as Save the Children and World Vision employed images of sponsored children to cultivate donations (Brough 2012: 178). Chouliaraki (2006; 2008) has argued that spectator engagement and action depend on how suffering is represented through the media. For that reason, Madianou (2013) further argues that the representation of suffering through

social media today must not only focus on content, but also 'the wider network architectures which contribute to shaping users' engagement and potential action' (251).

Many humanitarian campaigns today are denounced for their 'commodification of solidarity' (Nash 2008), as well as their 'ironic spectatorship', which 'explicitly situates the pleasures of the self at the heart of moral action' (Chouliaraki 2013: 4). Such appeals include the United Nation's World Food Programme ('No Food Diet' appeal, 2006), Amnesty International ('Bullet. The Execution', 2006) and Oxfam ('Be Humankind', 2008), as well as more recent campaigns including *KONY 2012* (Chouliaraki 2013: 65, Bennett 2003). Chouliaraki (2013) argues that there needs to be an 'epistemic shift' where 'doing good to others is about our common humanity and asks nothing back', instead of the self-oriented morality where 'doing good' is about 'how I feel', which currently manifests in 'the confessions of our favourite celebrity, the thrill of the rock concert and Twitter journalism' (3–4). Brough (2012) argues that the growth of capitalist commodification also fuels 'humanitarian consumption', which is interconnected with the rise of commodity activism 'through an increasingly prolific, complex visual culture' (174–176). Invisible Children employed a similar aid model to the one used in the Live Aid concerts, wherein spectacles for aid became like rock concerts, complete with celebrity appearances, media coverage and spectacular onstage displays of visual performance. Yet, like many appeals, the suffering 'Other' often remained vulnerable while the concerts flourished.[67] Therefore, while aid is often positioned within the ethos of the 'empathetic civilization' (Rifkin 2009), humanitarian campaigns have become increasingly consumer-driven and often place more

[67] The 'poster child' for the Live Aid concert recently stated in an interview with *The Guardian*: 'For me, personally, Live Aid has done nothing. I am branded as the symbol of Live Aid due to the image of the 1980s. My stories are well documented and have reached the skies. But I live underground. The state I am in at this moment is miserable. I do not have a job and I cannot support my family on my own' (Sebsibe 2015).

emphasis on the spectacles than on the cause, which clearly has adverse consequences for those in need. For that reason, it is:

> Critical to acknowledge that the pop-culturizing of humanitarianism and its open consumption may further subject the sector to market pressures and steer much-needed resources towards media production (rather than beneficiaries) in an effort to cater to the ever-changing aesthetic and technological trends of US donors and to evade 'compassion fatigue' (Brough 2012: 188)





Images 5-1 and 5-2: Live Aid, July 1985
Images retrieved from Live Aid Google images on July 24, 2016.

In humanitarianism, the 'Other' is often set in contrast to its 'white saviours' (Said 1978; Cole 2012), while also constructing the identity of the donors in the West through visual media (Brough 2012: 179). This was demonstrated by Rosemary Hicks and Jodi Eichler-Levine (2007), who looked at how the Save Darfur Coalition campaign revealed 'their Americanness by assuming the identities of powerful saviors' (ibid: 179–180). This 'American exceptionalism' (Chomsky 1979) in the visual media campaigns of

humanitarianism has developed alongside the advent of digital technology, as well as the capitalist consumer culture surrounding it. Chouliaraki suggested the two concepts of the 'technologization of action' and the 'de-emotionalisation of the cause' (Chouliaraki 2010: 117). The 'technologization of action' refers to the simple proposals for actions, evident in *KONY 2012*, which involve 'clicktivist' techniques (ibid: 118). The 'de-emotionalisation of the cause' refers to the reduction of morality and sentiment in appeals for action through technological and aesthetic campaigns (ibid). Chouliaraki argues that such appeals become 'post-humanitarian' and ultimately act as a 'perpetuation of a political culture of communitarian narcissism' (Chouliaraki 2010: 119), where action and engagement are rendered 'meaningless' (Madianou 2013: 253).

Chouliaraki (2010) has argued that the 'mediation of suffering' represents the politics of media in humanitarianism and in its power to create action (Brough 2012: 179). This position privileges 'witnessing publics' (McLagan 2006) in stark contrast to various other 'people categories' (Fujiwara 2005), such as 'refugee' or 'child soldier', in order to gain sympathy and worthiness (Brough 2012: 179). The 'mediation of suffering' also entails the branding and consumption of campaigns through 'commodity fetishization' (ibid: 178). This often involves the consumption of commodities as forms of aid donation, which was evident in the *KONY 2012* campaign specifically, since it relied heavily on its merchandising line for fundraising and participation. Furthermore, when humanitarian suffering is mediated through social media, it allows social media participants to feel they are taking action online by relying on consumerist approaches and credit card transactions (Madianou 2013).

Brough (2012) has argued that today's philanthropy involves more than just stylish media and commodity humanitarianism; 'it is about adventure and spectacle' (Brough 2012:

180).[68] This was reiterated by Bono, one of the stars of Live Aid, in a *Vanity Fair* interview, when he said: 'I want people to see the adventure of Africa … to bring some sex appeal to the idea of wanting to change the world' (ibid: 180). Brough's argument was echoed by Daley (2013), who criticised *KONY 2012* and other advocacy campaigns that emphasise celebrity support and adventurist appeals, such as United to End Genocide. Daley (2013) argues that such campaigns seek to mobilise young people on international issues using simplistic, militaristic, capitalist-driven, self-centred spectacles and conservative politics, while at the same time 'claiming to be transcending politics' (Daley 2013: 387). Daley's argument is even more alarming since donor countries that are placed in positions of power and privilege control the vast majority of the resources involved, along with their dispersal; therefore, they are more likely to direct aid towards their own priorities so that 'the least fortunate (are) getting the least attention' (ibid). Aid organisations are often prone to emphasising their own cultural, social and political priorities, which become forced cultural assimilations, forgetting that: 'any question of the form "what is to be done?" demands first of all an answer to the question "by whom?"' (Ferguson 1994: 181). This often leads to errors in aid and can have damaging effects on the countries receiving aid. This was demonstrated by Cooley and Ron (2002), who used three case studies to show how poor project implementation created harmful results for those in need. Furthermore, as Polman (2010) argues, accountability for mismanagement by aid organisations is low; 'no aid worker or aid organisation has ever been dragged before the courts for failures or mistakes, let alone for complicity in crimes committed by rebels or regimes' (Polman 2010: 106). This was evident in various atrocities, such as those of Rwanda (1994), Biafra (1970) and Congo (1993–2003). The issue of mismanagement and Ferguson's (1994) question of 'by

[68] While the anthropology of humanitarianism is still early in its development, recent works include: Minn (2007); Benthall (1991); Fox (1995); Redfield (2005); Mosse (2005).

whom' was asked by Invisible Children when they implemented a new motto for the organisation: 'If not us, then who? If not now, then when? Who are you to end a war? I am here to tell you – who are you not to?' (Invisible Children 2017). This ethos and strategy limited the consultation, involvement and empowerment of Ugandans in the process. In many ways, Invisible Children failed to think critically about how the organisation could best serve the region in need. At the same time, they also empowered the millennial spectator and 'white saviour' as the key elements 'saving' the African 'Other', while often implementing faulty programmes within the region, as this thesis explores.

The next chapter contextualises the Invisible Children participants by exploring the background of their youth culture and the key role that the internet and new technologies played in that cultural development; both were also key to the organisation's approach to activism and humanitarianism.



Chapter Six: Youth Culture and Digital Media

On the one hand, the internet is thus a tool for extending our self-images…a graphic materialization of former invisible discourses and a performative iteration of our already existing lifeworlds and social milieus. On the other hand, this performance is constantly influencing our way of experiencing and speaking about the 'real world', thus modifying our everyday lifeworld, in which the new media already is an integral part.

(Sprondel, Breyer and Wehrle 2011:16)

I. The Rise of the Internet Age

In 1991, the World Wide Web was made public, with straightforward browsers becoming available shortly after. In the late 1990s, Internet portals, search engines and e-commerce made their debut. Social networks and blogs became available not long after in the start of the new millennium (Palfrey and Gasser 2008: 4). Today, social media sites[69] and the

[69] 'We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site' (boyd and Ellison 2007: 210).

Internet[70] play important roles in the belief that 'as electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village' (McLuhan 1964: 11–12). There is little doubt that digital communications are playing a role in worldwide social change, deconstructing and constructing new communities of mobilisation, representation and power relations on both local and global scales (Couldry 2012; Tarrow 2013).[71] 'In this 'participatory culture' (Burgess and Green 2009) citizen participation on the international stage gives way to a growing global consciousness, which has the potential to influence how we interact, what we know, how we construct reality, how we produce self-representations and how we create meaning and value. In other words, 'no part of the world, no human activity, is untouched by the new media' (Livingstone 2009: 1).

The presence of civic actors in the production and consumption of media and information communications is renegotiating social, cultural and political landscapes (Castells 1996).[72] In the 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983) of contemporary society, the average person with access to digital technology has the ability to function in a simultaneous, interactive, multi-dimensional world. With the number of social media users now passing 2.6 billion worldwide, we are not only more interconnected with our personal social worlds, but also with the international community (Statista 2018). Jenkins (2018) has highlighted how today's participatory culture has grown from hundreds of years of struggle by everyday citizens to obtain the means to both produce and consume media. Similarly, Yochai

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[70] 'The Internet is the institutionally sustained space of interaction and information storage developed since the early 1960s. The Internet only became an everyday phenomenon through the World Wide Web protocols that link hypertext documents into a working system that were conceived by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, launched in 1991, but only began to enter everyday use in 1993–4' (Couldry 2012: 2).

[71] Works on 'digital democracy' and the controversies of cyber worlds include: Gladwell and Shirky 2011; Wellman 2012; Turkle 2011; Castells 2010; Morozov 2011; Benkler 2006; Hindman 2010; Howard 2011; Dutton 2008a, 2008b.

[72] Refer to issue of privacy online (Marwick and boyd 2011; Marwick, Murgia-Diaz and Palfrey 2010); the construction of identities on the Internet (Aouragh 2011), and democracy (Marwick 2007; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; della Porta 2012).

Benkler has argued that cultural production, whether evident in activism, religion, education, government or non-governmental makers, contains various layers and occurs through countless producers (Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2018). Many researchers highlight the rich cultural worlds in specific digital communities, such as Boellstorff's (2008) research on Second Life, based on which he argued that virtual worlds are 'robust locations for culture', while others argue that the Internet has negative consequences for society, making its citizens more prone to alienation, depression, isolation and institutional control.[73] Yet, as Buckingham (2008) has highlighted, the Internet is not the first technological development to raise such concerns. Buckingham describes how the telephone was once seen as a disruptive attack on intimacy and relationships, but is now praised as facilitating various forms of business, democracy and personal life for citizens around the world (11). Miller et al. (2016) outlined various misconceptions of the Internet, particularly regarding issues such as education or misguided generalisations around work, relationships and commerce.[74] For example, they highlighted the complexity of understanding offline and online relationships by showing how, in places such as rural China, Brazil and Trinidad, online spaces can actually help foster new relationships or deepen already established social connections within communities, rather than hinder them.

Social media is increasingly incorporated into political, social and cultural institutions, whether it is former U.S. President Barack Obama asking citizens to 'tweet their Senators' regarding new legislation, or viral videos such as the 'Harlem Shake' and 'Gangnam Style' inspiring millions of video reproductions worldwide.[75] Henry Jenkins has described such

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[73] For examples, refer to: Carr (2011); Turkle (2011); Morozov (2011).

[74] 'Yet, at the same time as producing a breadth of opportunities, ranging from communication to participation and education, digital media users are equally exposed to countless things that society disapproves of, and often they are interconnected' (Livingstone 2009: 170).

[75] Social media platforms often ebb and flow in popularity or become used for specific purposes. For

technological changes through the idea of 'convergence culture' (2006: 2).[76] Ito (2008) built on this concept by exploring the idea of 'networked publics', which describes how new forms of communication allow citizen to communicate in non-hierarchical, vertical and horizontal manners in complex networks. Ito argues that publics can produce, consume, dispense and react to knowledge or shared cultures through various social exchanges and new media outlets (Ito in Varnelis 2008: x). Such fluid exchanges in digital communications continuously influence the social and cultural realities of the world we live in today. In other words, it impacts cultures, and most immediately it constantly morphs popular culture (Bird 2010). As Ito (2008) argues, technologies are 'embodiments of social and cultural structures', which are appropriated and incorporated into social and cultural entities in various manners (xiii).

Recent changes in digital communications have a deep anthropological significance. Space and time expand and contract in such a way that the economy of information is altered. Consequently, citizen access to communications can simultaneously fuel terrorist propaganda, challenge political ideologies, reinforce social and cultural movements, allow the spread of (dis)information and increase global awareness of current events. Thus, the commoditisation of digital media on a mass scale shapes transnational cultures and both visual and textual forms of information-sharing. For instance, Benkler (2006) views decentralised networks of communication as critical to the transition from an industrial economy to a networked information economy and believes coordinated, individual action has a significant role to play in changing social, cultural and political spheres (3). All the

example, one participant explained that Facebook is used for connecting, Twitter for communicating and Instagram for visual 'showing off'.

[76] Jenkins defines 'convergence culture' as a place 'where old and new media intersect, where grassroots and corporate media collide, where the power of the media producer and the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways' (Jenkins 2006: 2).

same, the Internet is often marked by continuous uncertainties (Couldry 2012: 12).

Miller states that social media should not be understood as platforms for posting, but instead contextualised by the content posted on those platforms (Miller et al. 2016: x). This argument is supported by earlier research conducted by Miller (2011). For example, in *Tales from Facebook,* Miller argued that 'from an anthropological perspective, it could be said that there is no longer any such thing as Facebook. There are only the particular genres of use that have developed for different peoples and regions' (x). His ethnographic research on the use of Facebook in Trinidad explored how relationships are cultivated or destroyed on Facebook, alongside how it can act as a vehicle for those suffering from disabilities and illnesses, as well as how it entangles users in scandal or breaks privacy boundaries. In essence, Miller's (2011) research detailed how social media platforms like Facebook work to form, sustain and define communities, but also act to devastate privacy. However, he remains positive about the impact of the shared experience of humanity, which he believes enhances friendships, informs knowledge and fosters concern for others (ibid: 23–24).

II. 'Digital Natives'

For many American millennials today, their lives are as much virtual as they are physical, with social media playing an increasingly important role in their day-to-day social lives. This was evident in the research on Invisible Children's participants. For instance, a few informants stated:

> I'm on Facebook 24-7, Instagram and Twitter… Most of them I just have, but the top ones I'm like on multiple times a day. I am, a hundred percent. I have to have my phone on me at all times. I always get mad at I'm like 'you don't have your phone on you' whatever. ('Barbie': white female, early twenties. Participant was from the Midwest but lives in southern California. Interview conducted on Facebook in July 2014)

> If I'm walking somewhere even for my car to a place, I'm on my phone. That's terrible like I say it now, if I know it, and it is, it's I think it is

> terrible like I totally get that. It's – people are glued to it. Absolutely glued to it. Like it's … It's crazy. And I'm not bashing them cuz I'm totally one of them but, oh it's absolutely crazy. ('Chelsea': white female, early twenties. Participant was studying at university. Interview conducted on Skype in June 2014)

> You don't really get to see everything around you because you're [sitting] on your phone. ('Skye': white female, early twenties. Participant was just finished her college education. Interview conducted on Facebook in May 2014)

> Sometimes when I go to friends' houses for dinners now they have to collect phones in baskets and then give them back to people at the end of the night. They may not be having as much of a conversation with those right in front of them.... ('Rachel': female in her early twenties. Participant studying at university. Interview conducted on Facebook in May 2014.)

Contemporary social media and various other Internet platforms are quickly developing into 'primary "institutions"' for young people,[77] replacing the once popular places for hanging out, such as local streets, malls or home environments (Ito et al. 2010: 347).[78] Furthermore, as boyd (2010) argues, many teenagers in contemporary society are dependent on the sociality provided by the Internet, so that 'losing access to social media is tantamount to losing their social world' (boyd in Ito et al. 2010: 79). These 'digital natives', who are defined as those born after 1980 who have the access and skills to use digital media (Palfrey and Gasser 2008), are heavily reliant on the Internet and social media for nearly all the information that is relevant in their lives (ibid: 4–6, 289). While Jenkins (2018) argues that the rhetoric surrounding 'digital natives' focuses on how media impacts on young people, rather than what young people do with media, other research, such as boyd's (2014), has focused on how the "'core activities"[... –]chatting and socialising, engaging in self-

[77] Various studies view 'children and youth as actively constructing their social and cultural worlds, not as innocent victims or passive recipients of media messages' (Ito et al. 2010: 9).

[78] "'Hanging out", "messing around" and "geeking out" describe differing levels of investments in new media activities in a way that integrates an understanding of technical, social, and cultural patterns' (Horst in Ito et al. 2010: 36).

expression, grappling with privacy, and sharing media and information – are here to stay' (8).[79]

'Digital natives' often use technology as a way to connect to a wider community; thus, social media becomes not just a form of 'time suck' (Miller 2011: 80) but simultaneously offers the 'co-presence of another person' (ibid: 74). For that reason, understanding the socio-cultural dynamics of global media trends is crucial, in that the constant innovations and re-creations of production styles and ways of reception represent forms of cultural knowledge and help to constitute interpersonal relationships. This is particularly true given that Miller and Slater (2000) describe the Internet as something that exists only through each individual's use. The media no longer has a direct or causal relationship with media consumers, making the flows of communication more diffuse and disjointed while remaining inextricably interlinked. Furthermore, it requires that we watch and understand the complex diversity of media usage in contemporary society, viewing the young people who use it not as 'becomings', but as 'beings' who are engaged, empowered social actors who should not be judged simply by their 'projected futures' (Buckingham 2008: 19).

These 'beings' (Buckingham 2008) are also increasingly interconnected with visual culture; it is a visually bound way of understanding and connecting with the social world and one that is often communicated and consumed via social media. It is estimated that three hundred million photos are uploaded onto Facebook every day, with visual images accounting for 93% of online interaction and participation[80]. The visual culture surrounding social media often raises discussions of personhood and identity, which have

[79] 'Through social media, teens reveal their hopes and dreams, struggles and challenges [...]It simply mirrors and magnifies many aspects of everyday life, good and bad' (boyd 2014: 212).

[80] Refer to: https://gizmodo.com/5937143/what-facebook-deals-with-everyday-27-billion-likes-300-million-photos-uploaded-and-500-terabytes-of-data.

developed from earlier anthropological discussions of personhood (Mauss 1985; Geertz 1973), as well as raising more contemporary topics, such as performativity (Butler 1988, 1990) and non-representational theory (Thrift 2007)[81]. For example, 'self-fashioning'[82] (Greenblatt 1980) has become prevalent in online spaces, where visual media act as symbols of wealth, status, personhood, identity, social belonging and one's autobiography. 'Self-fashioning' is, in essence, a term developed by Greenblatt (1980) to explain the ways in which a person's public and private identity, or persona, is created based on the social standards of that time. 'Self-fashioning' images are often used as 'profile pictures' on platforms such as Facebook in order to represent and communicate the users' various symbolic identities (Edwards 2004: 14). The photographs are sometimes shared with thousands of friends and followers, acting as a 'looking glass self' (Cooley 1902) which becomes a permanent aspect of the user's social life (Miller 2011: 171).

In that sense, the digital sphere can act as an extension of one's identity into virtual reality, as well as offering a method to formulate and manage the outside world. Since Goffman (1959), academics have perceived and understood personhood and identity as something that undergoes continual restructuring, presenting and performance. Goffman created a distinction between the 'front stage' and 'back stage' identity, arguing: 'we are all just actors trying to control and manage our public image. We act based on how others might see us' (1959: 22). Goffman's theory has since been developed further by other social scientists,

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[81]Mauss argued that the concept of the self consisted of a cumulative social history of our 'selves' dating back to early civilization and that each society's understanding of the 'self' is deeply connected to their social organization (Carrithers, Collins and Lukes 1985). Similarly, Gell (1988), through his understanding of distributed personhood, argued that while 'agency is crucial to being a person, this capacity is not situated in the agent itself, but has to be constantly generated through a network of relationships' (Langer 2010: 86).

[82] '… There appears to be an increased self- consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process' (Greenblatt 1980: 2).

such as Sherry Turkle (1995), who views computer screens as projections of our dramas[83] and social lives (26). She highlighted the frames and roles common throughout human behaviour. Miller built on this idea by arguing against a 'truer or less true self', instead pointing towards a performative self with roles that vary 'with different degrees of attachment and distance' (Miller 2011: 177). This was also evident in *Why We Post* (2016), in which Miller et al. posited that, rather than strictly forms of self-aggrandising and personal narcissism, selfies can sometimes act to represent or communicate group feelings or sentiments (Miller et al. 2016: xvi). Among other critical topics related to social media,[84] the authors also argued that while social media can create pressure for people to appear happy in online spaces, it also allows users to visualise and communicate their desires *for* a happy life. For instance, in industrial China, photographs of 'princess' bedrooms and Cinderella ball gowns reveal aspirations for women, while men often post photos of female fashion models sprawled across the bonnets of luxury cars. In essence, 'visual images also allow them to convey emotions, when they might not feel especially confident or articulate either in textual posting or speaking' (Miller 2016: 158). This parallels Miller's (2011) research in Trinidad, which described how posting photos acted as a form of online accessorising, highlighting the individual's most desired commodities, places and people (Miller 2016: 44). In essence, while social media platforms such as Facebook can appear as

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[83] Marwick and boyd (2011) argued that 'drama' could be differentiated from 'bullying' in online spaces. 'Drama' 'allows teens to distance themselves from practices which adults may conceptualize as bullying. As such, they can retain agency - and save face - rather than positioning themselves in a victim narrative. Drama is a gendered process that perpetrates conventional gender norms. It also reflects discourses of celebrity, particularly the mundane interpersonal conflict found on soap operas and reality television' (1).

[84] Miller et al. (2016) conducted ethnographic research on social media using nine field sites around the world, which included Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy, Trinidad and Turkey, and argued that social media is 'as integral to everyday life in the same way that we now understand the place of the telephone conversation as part of online life and not as a separate sphere' (x). Miller et al. (2016) argued for four trends in social media: scalable sociality, 'in which an increasing number of social media platforms can be aligned with the diversity of the social groups to which we might want to relate' (206), the movement towards social media communication ubiquity across geographical populations, content transcending the platform by which it is communicated (207–208) (as well as ubiquity in user age range) and lastly, 'the more individuals live within culturally imposed constraints on communication, the more a new technology may mean that what was previously forbidden now becomes possible (210).

simple forms of 'self-fashioning', they can also act as 'a vehicle to discover and explore one's self' (Miller 2011: 178–179). As this research explores, the Invisible Children participants used social media to highlight their humanitarian identity, communicate with others and, most importantly, connect with the world around them.

III. Youth Culture in California and the USA

Few studies of contemporary Californian youth culture are available, particularly relating directly to the demographics of this research, with the exception of Bucholtz's (2012) research on Californian youth slang and various non-academic insights highlighting aspects of popular youth culture (Nessel 2017). Academic literature on youth culture in America, as a wider geographic focus, tends to examine disaffection, rebellion, ethnic or subculture groups and multicultural integration. The disaffected and non-white are highlighted against a sweeping and assumed portrait of normative, white, youth culture (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist and Edin 2016; Gaines 1998; Milner 2013). In that sense, current literature offers an intricate description of specific social groups or subcultures within the United States, but the complexities of wider American youth cultures are restricted unless explored in relation to other socio-cultural themes, specifically those related to social media and new technologies. Many contemporary global studies have, for example, highlighted youth culture in relation to the Internet and digital technologies, as well as young people's digital lives. However, such research sometimes tends to view millennials in relation to labels, for example 'digital natives', focussing on the impact of new media on young people, rather than on how young people are using this media (Jenkins 2018), while other studies have delved deeply into the cultural lives of young people and their media practices (e.g. Ito et al. 2010).

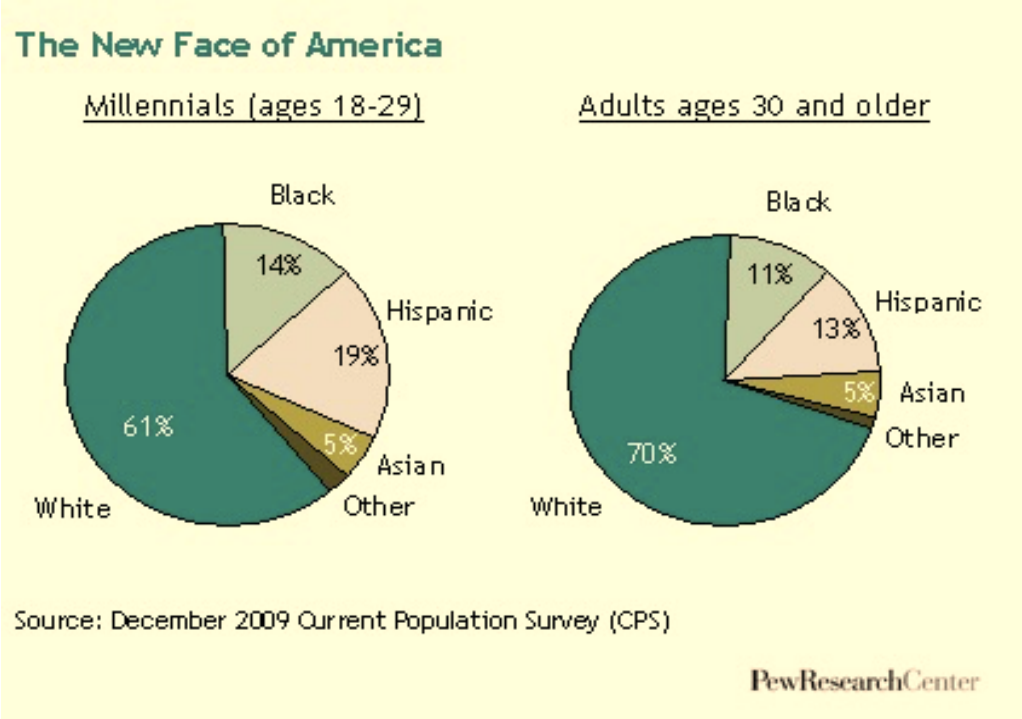


Image 6-1: 'The New Face of America'
Source: Pew Research Center

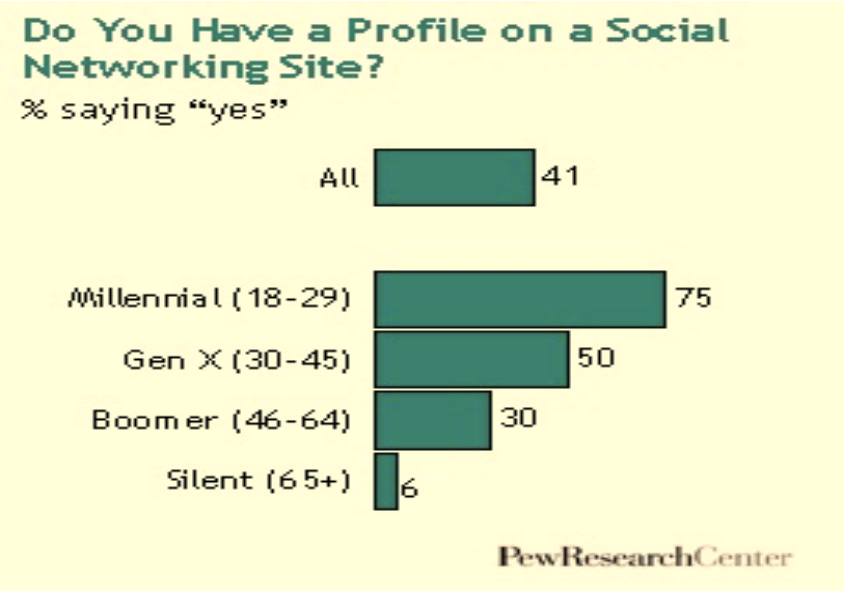


Image 6-2: Social networking site use
Source: Pew Research Center

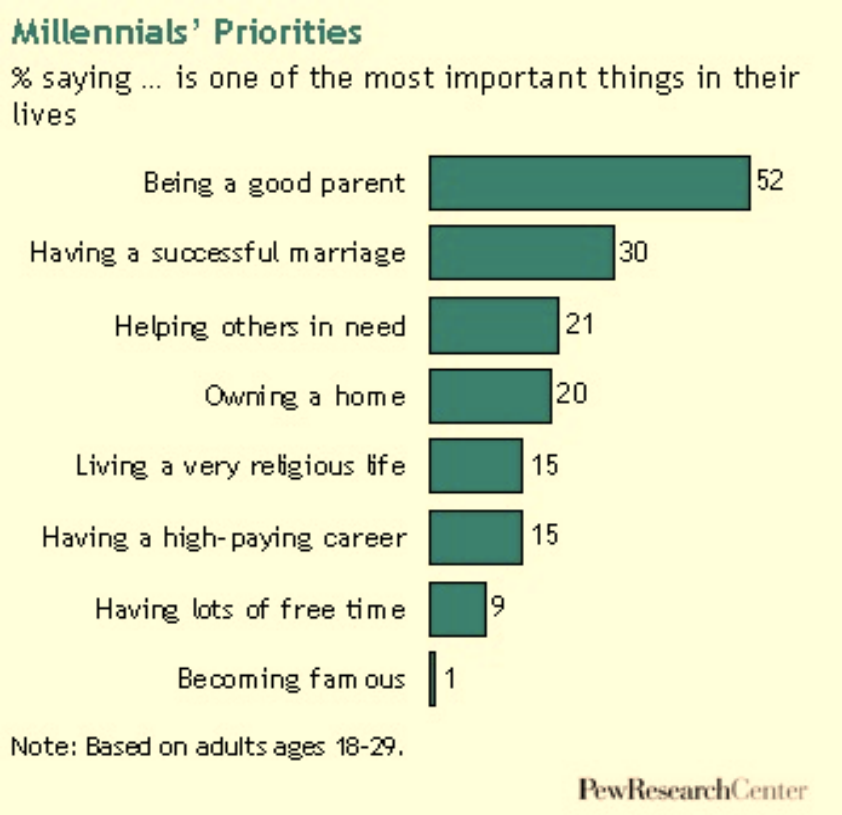


Image 6-3: Millennials' priorities
Source: Pew Research Center.

Early studies of young people in the United States tended to concentrate on 'problem' youths or ethnic minority groups. For instance, Brake's *Comparative Youth Culture* (1985) focuses on the sociology of youth subcultures in Britain, the United States and Canada. Brake looked specifically at delinquency, radicalism and bohemianism within various subcultures, such as mods, rockers, skinheads, black ghetto culture, hippies, political militants, female groups and religious cults. Even so, Brake did highlight that youths have often been misunderstood and categorised as a 'vague structural monolith' rather than a 'complex kaleidoscope' (Brake 1985: vii). He further argued that subcultures: '…arise as attempts to resolve collectively experienced problems resulting from contradictions in the social structure, and that they generate a form of collective identity from which an individual identity can be achieved outside that ascribed by class, education and occupation' (ibid: ix). While the Invisible Children participants were not a subculture of radical or

delinquent youth, Brake's description of the development of subcultures mirrors the underlying principles found in the formation of the Invisible Children community, as this thesis explores. Millennials are also the common focus of pop culture books with empowering titles such as *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown* (Taylor and McKellar 2014), which emphasises the 'reshaping' and 'taking over' of America by millennial youth. Other contemporary ethnographic literature has focused on specific groups within the United States, such as technology professionals in Silicon Valley (English-Lueck 2002), conservative evangelicals and Christian rock music groups (Luhr 2009) or specific subcultures such as retro punk and pin-up girls (Moore 2010).

While literature on American millennials exists, it is often limited to popular reports that offer generalised insights into the population as a whole. For example, popular literature or press often describe it as the 'Look at Me' generation, which is self-absorbed, impatient, self-important and disloyal (Hill 2008; Howe and Strauss 2007; Jacobson 2007). Other common depictions of millennials highlight their positive attributes, which include teamwork, the acceptance of diversity, technological prowess and creative thinking (Howe and Strauss 2000; Tapscott 1998; Zemke, Raines and Filipczak 2000). Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) describe the various ways millennials, born between 1979 and 1994 (Smola and Sutton 2002), have been depicted in such universal terms (1). While such descriptions offer a limited perspective of the overarching characteristics of Invisible Children's youth participants, Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) simultaneously highlight how generalised statements lack an understanding of the nuances of each young person as a unique individual. Many texts and studies on millennials offer sweeping generalisations aimed at summarising the values and norms of an entire generation, rather than delving into personalised or ethnographic details of the young people being analysed. For example:

> Millennials — the American teens and twenty-somethings who are making the passage into adulthood at the start of a new millennium — have begun to forge theirs: confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and open to change. They are more ethnically and racially diverse than older adults. They're less religious, less likely to have served in the military, and are on track to become the most educated generation in American history (Pew Research Center 2010).

Howe and Strauss (2000) argued that millennials would represent a generation that 'is going to rebel by behaving not worse, but *better*' (67). However, as Jenkins (2018) argues 'it is too soon to make lifelong generalisations about who millennials are, what they value, what their personality type is…' (1). Jenkins uses the example of the Baby Boomer generation of the 1960s, which would have once been defined by their obvious 'counter-culture and campus protests' of the time, but fifty years later have taken on different identities and traits. Jenkins (2018) explains that the millennial focus on media literacy[85] as a definitive generalisation lacks a focus on what millennials are doing with that literacy.

In the ethnographic literature,[86] danah boyd (2014: 7) describes how the connection of contemporary youth to the Internet, which is now normative, would have once been viewed as a subculture. She argues that, by the mid-2000s, social media sites such as MySpace, Twitter and Facebook, have become integral aspects of contemporary social worlds. Over the course of eight years, boyd explored how teens in the United States engaged with social media; she suggests that social media allows teens to connect with, participate in and create what she calls 'networked publics' (boyd 2014: 5; boyd 2010). Furthermore, she argues that: 'social media – far from being the seductive Trojan horse –

[85] Jenkins (2018) further argues that we cannot assume that all millennials have had equal access to new technology and, thus, assume their media literacy: 'Not all millennials, even in the industrialized West, grew up with easy access to networked computers, high speed bandwidth, mobile technologies, or game systems. So a key concern here is that the language we use to talk about millennials or digital natives is not sufficiently attentive to the diversity and inequality in the ways different young people access and learn through these various new media platforms and practice' (1).

[86] Refer to Horst (2009); Ito et al. (2010); Gershon (2010); boyd (2007).

is a release valve, allowing youth to reclaim meaningful sociality as a tool for managing the pressures and limitations around them' (boyd 2014: 95). She further notes that social media allows young people to explore and express 'their hopes and dreams, struggles and challenges' (212), while also reflecting and magnifying 'many aspects of everyday life, good and bad' (ibid). Boyd's description of American youth culture and its relationship with new technology corresponds to the sentiments of the Invisible Children participants in my research. Many participants described the 'good' and 'bad' aspects of social media, as well as its function in maintaining and creating friendships and social networks. For example, a few participants stated:

> Like Instagram pictures,[87] it's like a shove in your face. Like you have a lot of likes like, you win, like oh my life's cooler, it's like I've the most of, you know, you didn't post on Instagram about it, did you even go, like things like that. You know, oh did you really go camping, you didn't post some like super artsy picture of scenery. ('Beatrice': Female in her early twenties. The participant was studying English in her final year at Chapman. Interview conducted face-to-face in July 2014.)

> My friends post a photo on Instagram and it could be just like the one their friend posted, where their life looks so great and so amazing and like they are just living the dream, and if they don't get the same amount of likes, like 15 instead of 30, they are so upset. It's so weird. ('Lucy': white female, late teens. Participant aimed to study biology. Interview conducted on Facebook July 2014)

> I just ran a half-marathon on Sunday. And at the end of it I was like, how many people here are just running this so at the end they can post an Instagram picture saying they did it. Did I post one? Yes I did but I was like, what if I didn't, what if no one knew that I did this, like would I still want to do it? … you check in on Facebook, you post a picture, you tweet about it whatever… ('JuJu': white female, early twenties. Participant had just finished her college education. Interview conducted face-to-face in August 2014)

> I think people are kind of losing touch with a personal side of them, it's

[87] Russell similarly stated: 'We are hardwired for connection…our neocortex is so large, we crave sociability. We need the dopamine fix of the Instagram likes. (Imitating someone looking at their Instagram page) "Ugh, only *twelve* (audience laughing). I'm going to delete the photo so no one sees it."…it's a drug. We are craving it.' (Russell 2015).

> all, all for the social media attention rather than, you know that's what makes you as cool if you get a lot of attention on social media and stuff like that. Like compliments on social media that raises you up, and bullying gets you down… I think that the younger generation is someone… you know doesn't like your picture, whatever, says you're ugly, whatever, fat, that hurts… it really breaks my heart, cuz you can use it for such good. ('Jane': white female, early twenties. The participant was studying in her final year of university. Interview conducted on Facebook May 2014)

In essence, the participants' everyday lives were mediated by social media, whether in important life events or everyday practices. The participants also represented a 'complex kaleidoscope' (Brake 1985: vii) of backgrounds and personalities, rather than a homogenous subculture. They were, in essence, a diverse group of American millennials, who, as Jenkins (2018) argues, should be 'defined by more than their relationship to digital technology' (1). Jenkins (2018) accurately details the adversity and complexity of the American millennial generation, which is not just defined by the Internet, but also the 9/11 attacks, the anxieties of terrorism, privacy limitations, racial profiling, political partisan gridlock, Barack Obama's presidency, immigration conflicts and movements that include Black Lives Matter. The American millennial generation, he argues, is more likely to embrace LGBTQ rights issues, sits on the forefront of demographic shifts, transitions towards a mixed cultural background and has an increased awareness of wealth inequalities through movements such as Occupy and the Bernie Sanders presidential primary campaign. He also described how millennials have witnessed the Arab Spring movements, with their 'short term success and long-term failure to transform governance in the Middle East, again, representing movements heavily shaped by the participation of youth in those countries and observed closely by young people elsewhere' (ibid). In essence, while Jenkins believes that new forms of media are shaping youth culture and entertainment in a participatory culture, he argues that the millennial generation in the United States has been shaped culturally by more than just new technology. This was also evident in the Invisible

Children community, as this thesis explores, which relied on the power and production of digital media, but also represented a complex kaleidoscope of millennial American youth, whose culture was diverse, variable and shaped by various internal and external forces.



Chapter Seven: Invisible Children Millennials

I. Introduction

The Invisible Children organisation is grounded in the roots of Southern California's culture, since that is where the organisation's leaders, Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole, were born and raised. San Diego, a quintessential 'California Dream' town, is a city steeped in history, which looks more like a dreamy scene from a Beach Boys song with its white sandy beaches and prominent surf culture. San Diego stands as a liberal alternative to the United States' more conservative areas, like the 'Bible Belt' of middle America, but has a mixed demographic of Republicans, Democrats, Liberals and Conservatives. It is a place with Christians and agnostics, Catholics and Jews and a variety of ethnic groups.[88] The young people from San Diego, who include the leaders of Invisible Children and many of their supporters, mostly grew up in the suburban towns of San

[88] The most prominent group is the White community (47.5%), but the Hispanic community follows it closely, making up 32.7% of the population. Refer to: http://www.dof.ca.gov/Forecasting/Demographics/.

Diego county, which are full of 'tract homes',[89] kids skateboarding on the pavements and high school students posting 'selfie' photos on Instagram. For most San Diegans, including the Invisible Children leaders, preparatory and high school are social and relaxed. Often, young people, with their tanned skin, flip flops and trucker caps, ditch class to meet friends at the best local Mexican food joint and spend the afternoons lying on the beach. Many young people in San Diego find that California has been the limit of their global travel and become deeply rooted in their surrounding community.

While San Diego has a variety of religions, Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole grew up within a tightly knit Evangelical Christian community. Jason Russell's family, in particular, were heavily involved in their church and led Christian musical productions around the country. Like many raised in a church setting in the U.S., those who grew up in the church tended to stay in the church and regular church attendance, which include Bible studies, youth groups and Sunday worship, was a normative part of daily life.[90] This is the culture from which Jason, Bobby and Laren first took flight, deciding to leave San Diego in search of adventure in unknown places, a choice that eventually landed them in northern Uganda during the height of LRA violence. When they founded the Invisible Children organisation shortly after their trip, Jason, Bobby and Laren managed to bridge the gap between non-profits and youth culture in contemporary American society with their fashionable merchandising, cool videos and youthful culture. In many ways, Invisible Children embodied what it was to be a southern Californian and implemented that branding across the United States and, eventually, the world.

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[89] Tract housing is a type of housing development where small, similar homes are built on a large area of land.

[90] For further detail on Christianity and contemporary religious culture refer to: Elisha (2011); Bandak (2014); Feher, Lawson and Gray (1997); Balmer (2014); Meyer (2008).

II. The Participants and Leaders

The leaders of Invisible Children made up a small portion of the organisation and were described as cool and charismatic by participants. They included Jason Russell, Ben Keesey, Laren Poole, Bobby Bailey and Jedidiah Jenkins. Alongside the central leaders were lead participants who worked in the Invisible Children head office in San Diego or the office in Uganda. The lead participants were also key fundraising supporters, who were often spread out across American towns and universities. For example, Chapman University, which is a private Christian university in California where I conducted interviews, was the strongest fundraising college connected to Invisible Children and had several key lead participants. The wider Invisible Children participants and activists either had long-standing connections with Invisible Children, for example, had worked as 'roadies' or attended rallies in Washington D.C., or had connected with Invisible Children on a short-term basis during the rise and fall of *KONY 2012*. The long-term participants had often experienced isolation in high school or had felt they did not belong in their community prior to finding Invisible Children. However, many of the followers were also typical American teens, searching to find a sense of identity and meaning in their lives. The leaders of Invisible Children, who were described by participants as handsome, inspirational and compassionate, became mentors to the participants and took on a celebrity-like reputation.



Image 7-1. Front, left to right: Jason Russell, Laren Poole and Bobby Bailey with Invisible Children participants in a video
Image retrieved on December 4th, 2014.

III. Participant Demographics

The participants in this research were almost all 'Generation Y' young people, who are often referred to as 'millennials' (Howe and Strauss 2000). The majority of participants were in their late teens to early twenties, mainly between the ages of 16 and 25 with the exception of the Invisible Children leaders, such as Jason Russell, who were in their early to mid-30s. Two of the participants interviewed were younger than 20: one female from the Netherlands was aged 16 and another male from the United States was aged 16. Both participants were 13-14 years of age when they became involved with *KONY 2012* and 16 years of age when the interviews took place. The vast majority of Invisible Children participants were Caucasian and many were female. I interviewed one participant in his late 30s to early 40s: a white, male, Christian high school teacher who became involved on behalf of his students. However, he had also volunteered with Invisible Children before becoming a teacher.

The majority of participants interviewed became involved with Invisible Children around the age of 16; participants described being in high school when they first heard about Invisible Children or saw the documentary during a screening at their church or school. Therefore, those interviewed for the research who were now in their 20's had often been involved with Invisible Children for a significant period of time, including a few who had participated since Invisible Children was founded in 2004. Of the 142 informants, two were of African descent (and included a former child soldier from Uganda), two were Jewish, one was agnostic and the rest were from either white, Christian or unknown, mixed backgrounds. However, many Christian participants did not respond to request for interview. Some agreed to be followed or friended on Facebook. The majority of participants were middle-class and, while the bulk of participants were from the United States, I also interviewed a small handful of participants from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Uganda. There was some, but limited, variation in ethnic and religious background. The majority of long-term supporters of Invisible Children were from the United States. However, *KONY 2012* participants extended globally and were from over 45 countries around the world.

While extensive statistics on the Invisible Children 'family' are not entirely clear, one survey suggested that 76% were female, nearly 47% were between the ages of 20 and 25, and nearly 48% were in college (Invisible Children 2009). The former Director of Public and Media Relations, Jedidiah Jenkins, commented that, overall, the demographics of Invisible Children's youth supporters lacked the diversity the organisation desired (Shresthova 2009; Karlin, Murphy and Ahu 2014). While my research cannot verify or refute the statistical demographics suggested, I did find that the demographics of my research participants mirrored those statistics. The majority of people I interviewed were female, most were in college or taking on some form of higher education and nearly all were between the ages

of 20 and 25. Grasping the economic background of the participants was difficult to some extent due to the nature of my fieldwork as a digital ethnography: it was not always obvious what socioeconomic background the participants were from based on their Facebook or social media pages. However, of the 142 informants, no participants alluded to extensive financial hardships and nearly all described middle-class family backgrounds. Those I interviewed face-to-face or through Facebook came from middle-class, suburban backgrounds. Interestingly, there seemed to be some internal competition for fundraising status based on socio-economic backgrounds and participants often mentioned one fundraising participant specifically by name, who had raised the largest amount of money for Invisible Children due to her family's wealth and elite business connections. However, this was not the norm; most participants were from moderate backgrounds rather than highly affluent ones and I did not interview or observe anyone who came from an extremely privileged background.[91] These were young people who grew up in suburban houses in suburban towns.

The Invisible Children participants whom I interviewed and observed were moderate and well-meaning millennials with strong religious and/or social values. They were consistently involved with social media and liberal in their social views. While it was difficult to discern the political parties that most participants affiliated themselves with, Invisible Children as an organisation was unbiased politically and this seemed to reflect the values of their participants as well. This was best represented in the *KONY 2012* poster, which showed

[91] Finnegan (2013) argued that: 'Invisible Children activists tend to live in communities with considerable financial resources, and in affluent families. Most are aware of their privileges. Jenny, a recent college graduate, said: "I just don't feel comfortable going through my life, living my life as if those things aren't happening. I just don't feel like I have a right to live a normal life if other people aren't"' (Finnegan 2013: 31). However, the participants I interviewed were not of considerably affluent backgrounds, but are best described as middle class. According to the Pew Research Center, the middle class in the United States is defined as household with an income that is two-thirds to double the U.S. median household income: incomes ranging from $41,869 to $125,608.

the Republican and Democratic parties' symbols with the words 'one thing we can all agree on'.



Image 7-2: 'One thing…' Retrieved from Invisible Children website on December 1, 2012

Participant Profiles

Fourth Estate Summit attendees came from a wide array of backgrounds. A total of 1315 summit people attended - nearly a third were from California but participants came from 17 different countries and 47 states. The 119 educators are described in the educator experience chapter; the remaining 1193 millennial participants are described below.

Variable		%	Variable		%
Race	White	82%	Political Ideology	Liberal	36%
	Hispanic/Latino	9%		Moderate Liberal	28%
	Pacific Islander	5%		Middle of the road	23%
	African American	3%		Moderate Conservative	10%
	Native American	1%		Conservative	3%
Religion	Catholic / Christian	52%	**Education**	Less than high school	21%
	Agnostic	34%		High School	20%
	Atheist	7%		Some college	38%
	Jewish	3%		Associates Degree	6%
	Buddist	3%		Bachelor Degree	14%
	Muslim	1%		Graduate Degree	1%
Gender	Male	20%	Age	14-17	20%
	Female	80%		18-22	58%
				23-28	22%

Further reflecting the social nature of the event is the fact that most participants came with others. 10% marked two types of friends, family or acquaintances and 3% marked that all types of company were present. 300 Invisible Children clubs had at least one member in attendance, with 525 total club members at the Summit.

Image 7-3: Fourth Estate Summit statistics retrieved from Karlin, Murphy and Ahu (2014: 12)

The statistics reflect an Invisible Children Fourth Estate Summit participant profiling conducted in 2013 at UCLA.

IV. Invisible Children Supporters

Finnegan (2013: 31) described the Invisible Children core group of supporters when he said: 'the majority are young, I would say 14–15 to 23–24 year-old girls, who are white, who have been raised in suburbia, who are Christian, who have enough disposable income[92] to donate or buy stuff … that is the organisation's "core"'. Yet, in my research, the Invisible Children participants were not necessarily a specifically distinguishable subculture of American society; instead they often came from various backgrounds, ethnicities, classes, races and socio-political perspectives. Some were deeply religious, others atheists. Some were nerdy, while others were sorority sisters. Some came from very wealthy backgrounds, while others were raised modestly. Yet, at the same time it is safe to say that many were white females in their early twenties or teens, and some were Christian. What the participants shared was a unique bond over the Invisible Children's mission to stop the LRA, alongside its community driven focus on millennial youth and global humanitarianism. Thus, it would be difficult to classify the participants as a specific subculture or group; rather they should be more broadly described and understood as American millennials. However, by contrast, the Invisible Children leaders tended to belong to a new type of Evangelical Christianity. As mentioned previously, Russell came from a family background of Christian drama and theatre. The other leaders were similarly embedded within a new form of Christianity that involves rock bands, skinny jeans, alternative, liberal beliefs and a cool, hip Christian community. Predominantly, the Invisible Children leaders presented as good-looking, well-dressed, cool Christians. The

[92] Finnegan used this information to support his statement: 'In the organization's Schools for Schools program, a student from Pace Academy in Atlanta, Georgia raised $16,000 in 2009. A high school in Newport Beach, California, where the median family income is $145,000, raised $44,000. In January 2010, through Facebook, Invisible Children raised $1 million in a single week. With their well-heeled networks, Invisible Children activists have the capacity to raise lots of money' (Finnegan 2013: 32).

Invisible Children participants, on the other hand, came from a broad range of backgrounds, but identified as millennial youth deeply connected to technology and the idea of community and purpose.

The majority of participants in this research were American millennials growing up at the start of the twenty-first century in a world where Facebook and social media flourished; they are perhaps distinguishable from previous generations through their deep connection with technology. The participants were contemporary American youths who frequented Starbucks, grew up with *Harry Potter*, texted faster than they could write and were raised in a kind of pop-culture, social media saturated environment, as described here by Malikhao and Servaes:

> Eight- to twenty-somethings in the US spend more than 50h in front of a screen each week. That is more than a regular working week. The TV shows they watch, video games they play, songs they listen to, books they read, text messages they send and websites they visit are an enormous part of their lives, offering a constant stream of messages about families, peers, relationships, gender roles, sex, violence, food, values, clothes, and so on (2011: 66).

The participants often knew the latest celebrity news, followed the most recent music trends and were largely raised in suburban settings throughout the United States. As a whole, the participants thrived in a technologically-induced state of being, yet sought more traditional forms of friendship, communication and community through organisations such as Invisible Children. They enjoyed the fast-paced lifestyle their phones and Internet allowed them, but were also searching for greater meaning in society. They thrived in the social connection, but also resented the social pressure of social media. New forms of technology enabled cultural participation (Palfrey and Gasser 2008) for most participants, who often echoed the sentiment that 'either technology will liberate us or it will enslave us; either it will expand our potential or it will reduce us; either it will revitalize our social and cultural life or it will take us all to hell' (Banaji and Buckingham 2013: 3). In essence, in

interviews, participants echoed what Banaji and Buckingham describe as the 'binary logic' used to define the relationship debate between youth and social media; young people are perceived either in terms of complete integration with or total isolation from new media. The participants of Invisible Children represented a more moderate portrait of youth's relationship to media, and a complex one. They described it as good and bad, happy and sad, productive and destructive.

V. Invisible Children Leaders

Invisible Children's leader, Jason Russell, was raised as an Evangelical Christian in San Diego. After travelling to Kenya in 2001 with an Evangelical Christian organisation, which aimed to spread the word of Christ using dramatic theatre, Russell remarked in an interview with *The Atlantic*: 'I didn't like what we were doing, I didn't like spreading the gospel in this way. All the Kenyans I met, they didn't need faith, their faith was stronger than mine' (Kron 2012). While Jason Russell and other Invisible Children staff members did not hide their faith, it was less openly advertised on their website and films. As Jason Russell stated: 'It was too delicate of a choice to put the cross on our website, or to put a fish on the website because, you're honestly dealing with the truth …. You're dealing with the creator, and so to make a brand around that, and to have money flow in and out around that idea felt cheap' (ibid). However, a video recording of Russell amongst a Christian audience was decidedly religious and carefully tailored to the audience's belief system:

> Coming in January we are trying to hit as many high schools, churches, and colleges as possible with this movie. We are able to be the Trojan Horse in a sense, going into a secular realm and saying, guess what? Life is about orphans, and it's about the widow. It's about the oppressed. That's God's heart. And to sit in a public high school and tell them about that has been life-changing. Because they get so excited. And it's not driven by guilt, it's driven by an adventure and the adventure is

God's.[93]

However, most speaking engagements with Russell left religious preferences out of the conversation completely. On the Invisible Children website, they carefully explain their religious association in a Q& A which says: 'Is your organization a Christian organization?', with their response stating:

> No. The three filmmakers believe in Christ, but do not want to segregate themselves in any way. They believe that this story is not theirs to own/brand. They strongly believe that every person needs to hear this story regardless of race, religion, gender or culture. Invisible Children is about invisible children, and is not exclusive to people who believe what the filmmakers believe. It's about the 'orphans, the widows, the hungry, and the oppressed.' It's about children that are born into a horrific situation, with no voice. For further insight, read anything Brian McLaren (no relation), or Donald Miller writes (Invisible Children website 2013).

As reported in *The Atlantic*, the two authors mentioned, Brian McLaren and Donald Miller, are Christian theologians closely associated with the Emerging Church movement based in the United States (Kron 2012). The Emerging Church movement considers itself a Christian movement that practices the ways of Jesus within postmodern society. Brian McLaren was considered by *Time* magazine to be one of the most influential evangelicals in the United States and Donald Miller previously sat on former President Barack Obama's White House taskforce on family values. Some argue that:

> The Emerging Church has no formal organization, no single leader, and no uniform code of belief. It's part of a larger Generation-Y of disillusioned youth looking for a cooler, more accessible brand of Christianity for the 21st century' (ibid).

In many ways, the philosophy surrounding Invisible Children mirrored that of the Emerging Church. However, other Christian organisations, such as the Christian

[93] The audio was recorded in a 2005 Christian conference in San Antonio. It can be found at: https://www.truthwinsout.org/blog/2012/04/24004/.

Community Foundation, have helped fund Invisible Children in previous years and many were also associated with the Foundation Fellowship, a global Christian organisation that contributed to Uganda's 2009 anti-homosexuality bill (ibid).

Various journalistic and academic articles have argued that Invisible Children as an organisation was 'heavily supported by Christian youth, many of whom post Biblical psalms as their profile bios', according to SocialFlow (Lotan 2012). Lotan (2012) conducted an analysis of the participants who acted as core activists in the *KONY 2012* network and discovered that the most common words in their Twitter bios included 'Jesus', 'God', 'Christ', 'Life', 'Love', 'University', and 'Student' (ibid). However, during my research, I did not find that participants used very many religious terms or images on their Facebook profiles. Instead, it was more common to see photographs symbolising support of marriage equality or a specific humanitarian initiative they were interested in. This is not to say that the majority of supporters were not Christian, as demographic research shows a large portion of supporters who were Christian, but it does reveal the deeper complexity of their religious beliefs and social media representations (ibid). It also reflects the vast array of participants; those I interviewed were often from California rather than the 'Bible Belt'. Another study of the Christian participants could lead to different findings.

In this research, only a small number of Christian supporters agreed to be interviewed or friended on Facebook. In the interviews, only two participants openly mentioned the words 'God' or 'Christianity'. One participant stated openly in an interview conducted over Facebook that:

> My worldview plays a huge role in my support of IC. I remember myself before I knew Christ. If I wasn't a Christian, I wouldn't care about suffering, and I definitely wouldn't feel inclined to try and make the world a better place. ('Barry': Participant was a male, roughly 35 years of age, working as a high school teacher in the Midwest. Interview conducted over Facebook in June 2014)

Barry felt that his Christianity is what made him a humanitarian and, without those religious beliefs, he would not 'feel inclined to try and make the world a better place'. Another participant explained the role of religion in his participation with Invisible Children, as well as how the organisation went on to impact on his life decisions, including his enrolment into a PhD program. The participant offered a playful story about his recruitment into Invisible Children, which was inspired by his affection for a 'cute girl'. He eventually became passionate about the movement and told me:

> …Since I was kind of thinking this was where I was supposed to be/where God wanted me... Along the way, I realised a lot about myself and 'came into my own skin' as it were, really deciding that I enjoy being with people. ('Jared': Participant was from California, in his late twenties, white and male. Interview conducted over email in August 2014)

This was the only time that Jared mentioned the word 'God' in the interviews, but it was clear he was spiritually inclined towards Christianity and believed that God led him to become involved with the organisation. Since the majority of supporters were from Christian backgrounds in the movement, one Jewish participant noted her surprise to find other Jewish participants at a Fourth Estate[94] Summit:

> I'm also, I'm Jewish, whatever…And I remember at the Fourth Estate, - Jason's definitely very spiritual, and like they're all pretty spiritual and stuff like that, but a couple of people in my like just immediate group, we're all split off into little like, whatever, like little groups, and three of us are Jewish, and I was like, oh I thought I was the only one. I mean he does – not preach, that's not the right word, but I mean, religion is a big part of a lot of their lives, and that's not a problem, but it's kind of nice to know like they're not going to throw it upon you like 'oh only Christians can help, only Christians can make a difference'. You know it bugs me when people only, you know, care because the Church cares, or it has to do with their religion. ('Sam': Jewish female, early twenties studying in her final year at university. Interview conducted face-to-face

[94] Traditionally (and popularly) the Fourth Estate actually refers to the press and news media. It is unclear why Invisible Children chose to refer to their humanitarian ideology using a term more widely understood as the news media. For a detailed history and description of The Fourth Estate, refer to Shresthova (2016): 78-81 and Karlin, Murphy and Ahu (2014), as well as: http://invisiblechildren.com/program/fourth-estate-summit/.

in July 2014)

Interestingly, Sam's frustration over the ideology that 'only Christians can help' seemed to directly counter Barry's argument that: 'If I wasn't a Christian, I wouldn't care about suffering'. Sam also described Russell as 'very spiritual', but appreciated Russell's openness to other religions and perspectives. While none of the participants in this research directly commented on any conflict over religious views with other participants, many of the interviews hinted at the difficulty of negotiating different values and belief systems. For instance, another participant described this in a very interesting light when she said:

> …The biggest challenge for me on this tour was the fact that I was now touring the Southeast… home to the Bible Belt…it is essentially the most religious region of the United States and is known for being very conservative in their beliefs. The thing that was most frustrating to me was the comparison of roadies to missionaries. IC makes it a point to say we are non-denominational, and I worked alongside a people with a huge variety of religions (between my two internships I lived/worked with Christians, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, Ba'hai, Protestants, and atheists). I personally was raised without religion… but I think a majority of the people we encountered assumed we were religious, simply because we were advocating for people in several African countries, with most people knowing at least one person who took a missionary trip to an African country. My other teammates were all religious to some extent so this didn't bother them as much, but my big problem came from people assuming I was interning for IC because I felt 'called to do it' ('Amber': Female, early twenties from Boston. She had just finished university. Interview conducted over Facebook in April 2014)

Amber noted that she volunteered with participants from a variety of religious backgrounds on her roadie tours with Invisible Children and expressed the complex connections the organisation had as a whole with missionary and Christian ideologies. Her experiences of working in the 'Bible Belt' of the United States further outlined the broad range of cultural values that Invisible Children supporters interacted with and negotiated, particularly those related to missionary Christian ideologies. In my participant observation of Facebook, I found that some participants mentioned 'God' in their public posts after the closing of the Invisible Children offices. Some participants stated their 'calling' in

greater detail in their public Facebook posts, which usually tagged other participants in the post along with Jason Russell. This was in contrast to Christian participants' receptivity to interviews. One participant symbolically posted a photograph of an African baby wrapped in a white blanket on Facebook and wrote:

> I remember the exact moment God told me this mission would forever be a part of my life. Jason, I am moved by the human being you are, your unwavering commitment, enthusiasm, words and love. Listening to you speak over the years has always immediately transported me back into my purpose, with correct sight, no matter how off path I felt. The community you allowed God to create through you is truly remarkable and a permanent staple. We will all work to carry this torch. I hope we all have reunions and mission alongside each other in years to come ('Nadine': Early twenties, white female living in Los Angeles, California. Facebook post in January 2015)



Image 7-4: Baby wrapped in white blanket. Image retrieved from Nadine's Facebook post on January 5th 2016

Nadine described what she believed was a community created by God, described her Christian calling and the inspiration of Jason Russell, as well as her desire for more missions in the future. While this viewpoint was not commonly expressed in the research, Nadine's post offers an insight into the unseen Christian community of the organisation.

At Invisible Children events, the founders often had religious leaders and celebrities speak to participants. Bob Geldof and Tom Shadyac, for instance, were two supporters of

Invisible Children, and friends of Jason Russell, who often came to events like The Fourth Estate Summit. Tom Shadyac is a Hollywood director who has produced popular films, such as *Ace Ventura* (1994), *Bruce Almighty* (2003). Shadyac also directed the spiritually centred movie, *I Am* (2010) and is a self-described 'Jesus freak'. According to an article in *The Atlantic*, he has given Invisible Children nearly $1 million in previous years for their various programmes (Kron 2012). Bob Geldof, who famously called Jesus 'a pain in the ass', is also said to be religious by Invisible Children participants. One participant described what it was like having such leaders come to the event:

> Tom Shadyac came in and he kind of talked a little bit religiously. And then we had Bob Geldof come talk and he was so cool… he's obviously, he's a super religious guy… Bob Geldof…but yeah he's super religious and stuff and he was talking about…It's love, that's what changes everything, that's what's most important, it's all about love. It doesn't matter like where you come from. They did – Jason talked a little bit – he talked more about like spiritual stuff and they did mention God and stuff like that, they talked a little bit religiously and how like religion had shaped them, but it was in no way trying to like convince us, it was just his personal views, and they made it very clear which was good. And I know Bob Geldof is super – he's definitely super religious, I know him and Jason are pretty like – Jason after his breakdown, Bob was the only one he like allowed in his house and stuff, and he helped him through it so I know they're religious. ('Flutie': white female, early twenties, non-Christian. The participant was from Chapman University. Face-to-face interview in July 2014)

As the participant explained, the speakers and Invisible Children leaders did not push a specific set of religious beliefs onto their participants, but instead spoke about the idea of universal love in such speeches. However, at the same time, Russell, Geldof and Shadyac made their personal religious beliefs clear to Invisible Children supporters and addressed their audiences with Christian perspectives and storylines, which had a clear impact on the ethos and direction of the organisation. In one interview, Russell stated:

> Bobby, Laren and I [the co-founders of Invisible Children] all have a faith and we share it whenever we can or whenever we're asked…And so we do speak at churches or we do get to share our faith. Let's make it just like personal and have the faith element be a bridge when, you

> know, we feel God is moving people's lives...And there are times, you know, I just say, I am going to pray, you know, even at Invisible Children and, you know, but it's not a requirement (Finnegan 2013: 33).

Thus, the leaders clearly believed in Christ and employed their religious values in both the strategies and platforms of the organisation. Yet, at the same time, the participants felt supported regardless of their faith, or lack of faith. In the upcoming chapters, the covert role evangelical Christianity played within the organisation will be explored in greater detail.

VI. Online Presentation

Through the participant observations on Facebook, I also found that Invisible Children's leaders took on a more specific unanimous identity of the cool, humanitarian Christian hipster. They often wore the latest fashions, such as flannel shirts with cuffed jeans and fedora hats, donning bohemian and bespoke identities, both on social media and within the Invisible Children community. Many joked about Jason Russell's perfect Californian tan and stunning blonde hair, as well as Laren Poole's highly fashionable attire and Bobby Bailey's charismatic coolness. Their online profiles were perfected through a perpetual display of spectacular photographs, seemingly reflecting highly admirable and desirable identities, or qualities from their external (off-line) world. The participants expressed awe at their beauty, social connections and personal lives in the comments. While the majority of Invisible Children participants were a varied group of teenagers and early twenty-somethings, perhaps lacking the cool attire and hip identity, the participants aspired to and relied upon the Invisible Children clothing line and their relationship with the leaders in order to achieve a more humanitarian, fashionable identity. This was evident in a comparative visual analysis of the Facebook photos of Invisible Children's participants and leaders. The participants had many unedited, un-curated photos of themselves with friends. Image 7-5 below represents the most common type of visual, with participants standing together and smiling at the camera with an Invisible Children event backdrop. The

participants stand unassuming and playful, often holding peace signs and wearing Invisible Children t-shirts, bandanas and bracelets.

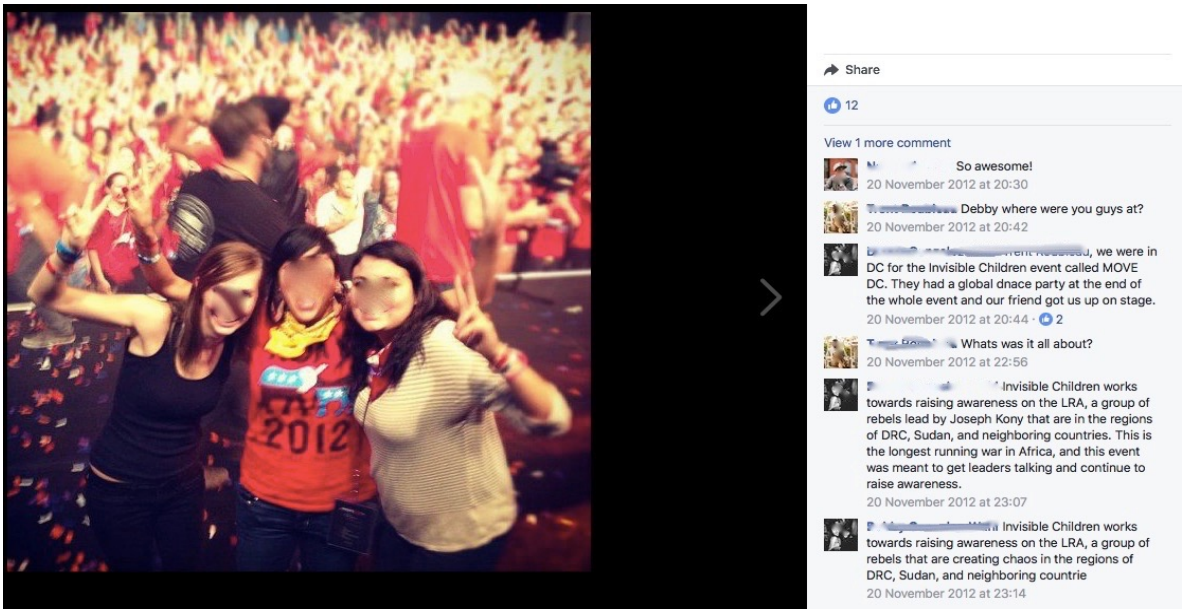


Image 7-5: Retrieved from Facebook

On the other hand, Invisible Children leaders had more dramatically impactful visuals. They were often in the same quantity as the participants, but differed in both quality and presentation. The images were highly mediated, often professionally achieved and contained a celebrity-like display. This is illustrated below in Image 7-6, retrieved from the user's Facebook profile, where an Invisible Children leader stands posed and perfectly dressed, as if modelling for a fashion magazine. The Invisible Children leaders often used more discreet symbols of the organisation in the images, if any at all, as this photograph displays through a subtle nod to the Invisible Children cross-body leather satchel, created by the leaders for one of their more high-end designs. Poole's photo contrasts with the participant's image above in its aesthetics and professionalism. One could be for a fashion magazine, the other for a teenager's bedroom collage.



Image 7-6: Invisible Children founder and leader, Laren Poole wearing a MEND bag. Image retrieved from Poole's profile photo on Facebook

Poole's visual imagery was synonymous with the type of cool, youthful attitude achieved by many celebrities in this new trend: one's personal images do not have the unedited flaws of general images, but instead seem highly structured, filtered and perfectly edited, as if for the glossy pages of a magazine. As one participant in the research stated: 'Instagram is for image, Twitter is for communicating and Facebook is for connecting with people' (Suzanna K., Facebook interview in June 2014). In summary, the leaders of Invisible Children were a self-contained, elite society, with carefully curated social media accounts, celebrity connections and sought-after physical appearances. The participants, on the other hand, ranged in class, looks, ethnic backgrounds, religions, fashion, education and age; they were millennials bonded by a humanitarian cause and a desire to have meaning within society. Many of the Invisible Children participants used images of *KONY 2012* or Invisible Children as their background profiles, or images like the one below.

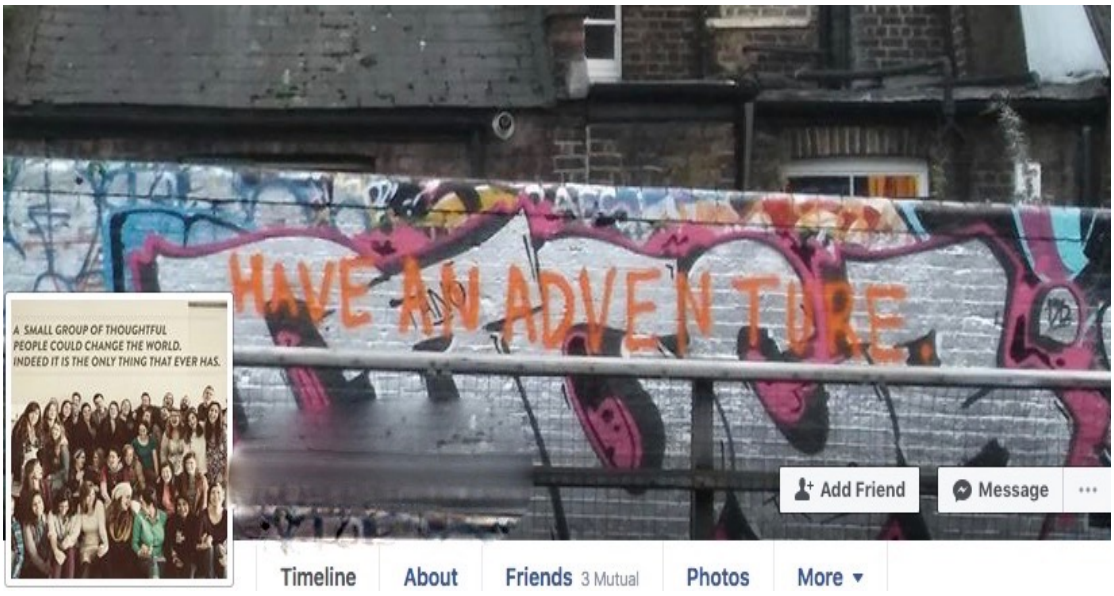


Image 7-7: Participant profile retrieved from Facebook
The profile photo shows the slogan 'a small group of thoughtful people could change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has'. The background image states: 'have an adventure'.

VII. The Participants: Backgrounds

This sections offers a description of ten participants in order to offer an insight into the various backgrounds of the Invisible Children participants who took part in this research. The selected participants were key contributors to the research. In order to protect the anonymity of the selected participants, different psydoneums have been created for the background descriptions in order to hide details that could be linked to various interviews or observations.

HOLLY

Holly was a Caucasian female in her early twenties. She was agnostic and came from the East Coast. Her parents were still married and worked as teachers. With short brown hair and a 'no nonsense' attitude, she told me all about her travels along the Bible Belt whilst volunteering as a roadie with Invisible Children. Like many Americans, Holly never had the financial means to travel internationally, so her time as a roadie helped to fundamentally

shape her early experiences as a young adult. During my year of fieldwork, Holly's friend from Invisible Children passed away. She posted a photograph on Facebook, which showed herself, her friend and another Invisible Children participant at an Invisible Children evenst. Holly was wearing an Invisible Children bandana that said 'our liberty is bound together' and her deceased friend stood smiling next to her. Holly used the photograph and online space so that fellow participants could express their experiences with, and feelings about, the individual, creating a place to honour, reflect and create support. It also allowed friends to grieve and express their loss to supporters in their network. Many commented on the post, which was then 'liked' and (re)commented on. The same photograph was simultaneously reused in other spaces on Facebook, where it was reposted as a profile picture and shared on friends' walls. The post 'tagged' roughly fifty individuals who were in the network of the deceased member. The visual 'tagging' of individuals also helped create social cohesion where a networked community could come together in one space, which came in the form of a visual image. The visual object was, thus, remembered and commemorated, allowing the person's 'legacy to live on forever,' as one Facebook friend communicated to the immeasurable quantity of digital participants. Holly's commentary is below the photo. At the time of writing, Holly was working in marketing on the East Coast.



Image 7-8: Image retrieved from Holly's Facebook

> I can barely breathe as I type this, so here I go. Susanna, the short time we had together brought us incredibly close. Sisters. Best friends. Soul mates whatever you want to call it. I miss and love you forever. You will be forever in my heart as the true warrior for peace and justice you were and still personify. I love you to Pluto and back. We may not get to hangout or talk anymore, but you will always be my sister. I love you. …A few months ago today, the world lost an incredible human being, activist, sister, friend and wanderer. There's not many days that go by where I don't think of you and the impact you've made, and are still making today. I miss you, I love you, and your legacy will live on forever.

WRIGHT

Wright was a Caucasian male in his early twenties from the South. He was a graphic designer and photographer. During the research, Wright was living in a capital city in the Deep South and did wedding photography, as well as graphic design for various companies. He had a twang of Southern country in his Facebook photos, but often matched his cowboy hats with pink t-shirts and skinny jeans. He admired the James Thurber character, Walter Mitty, loved travelling and often posted about political issues, such as the drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan or the American presidential elections. Wright told me in an

interview: 'A worldview defined by borders is outdated', which is a catchphrase used by Invisible Children. Wright was anti-Trump and voted for Hillary Clinton. During my year-long participant observation on Facebook, he often changed his profile photo in solidarity with social or political issues, such as the Paris attacks in 2015 or equal marriage rights. He stated on his Facebook page that he loved cereal, *The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter*, and had raised money for various non-profit organisations, including Charity Water and Invisible Children. Like many of the Invisible Children participants, Wright first learned about Invisible Children through a friend while in high school. He initially began supporting the organisation by buying merchandise while in high school, but lost touch with them in his early years at college. Later, he found out through a friend that Invisible Children was hiring a graphics designer. He applied for two internships and began working for the movement as a graphics designer. He said in an interview, 'I spent six months helping to visually support the amazing cause and stories of Invisible Children, helping with print, web and blog assets, photo shots. Being involved in the creative department with a world-changing non-profit really set my career path on using my skills and talents to really change the world around me for the better' (Wright 2015).

KAYSHA

Kaysha was a South Pacific Island-born American who worked for a non-profit organisation, which ran a globally-focused activism network aimed at changing the world. Like Invisible Children, the organisation called on participants 'to be part of something bigger than yourself'. Kaysha lived on the East Coast and was in her early twenties. Like many of the other participants, she posted photos on Facebook that often showed her experience as a roadie (for example, the tour bus on a long road, or the participants standing together in front of a local tourist attraction) and posted photos of *KONY 2012* or other Invisible Children campaigns. Her personal photos were not 'cool' or 'perfect',

but full of various shots of group work and friends. Her 'selfies' were silly, rather than serious-faced. Kaysha had a very warm and bubbly personality and her Facebook photos always contained ear-to-ear smiles with friends and family, as well as with her work friends. For instance, there were often photos of groups at a volunteer project where all participants were wearing matching t-shirts that signified the specific project (beach clean-up, for example). Kaysha became interested in Invisible Children while in high school and volunteered as a 'roadie', travelling around the United States screening the documentary and selling merchandise. Kaysha was very global- and civic-minded in her interviews. She did not seem to place emphasis on her Facebook friend network or the visual appearance of her online spaces. Throughout the interviews, she seemed dedicated to creating world change and her humanitarian goals. Kaysha was clearly popular amongst Invisible Children supporters and was very active in on-the-ground activism and protests.

MAYA

Maya was from Europe and was one of Invisible Children's leading fundraisers in Europe during the height of the movement (before *KONY 2012*). She has one brother and currently lives in Europe. In her interview, she described her mindset when she first learned about Invisible Children from a friend as a high school student:

> I had just turned 16 and although interested by global issues and politics, I was convinced I would end up going into the public sector, working for the European Union, the United Nations or some section of the government in my country of origin. Since then, my interest in global issues has only grown, but my interest in the public sector started being replaced by an interest in the non-profit sector.

When I first met Maya on Facebook, she had long, brown hair and was a beautiful, fresh-faced young girl. I was able to watch Maya grow up over a year on Facebook as she cut her hair to a short bob, pierced her nose and changed her Facebook profile photo to an image of herself looking cross-eyed into the camera with her tongue out. Her friends

commented on the photo saying 'she did it' and it was clear Maya was finding herself as a strong feminist in her early twenties. She developed from a high school supporter of Invisible Children to a UN-bound college student over that year. Maya was close to her parents and went to private school in her European country of origin. She stopped supporting Invisible Children after the rise and fall of *KONY 2012*.

AMY

Amy was a Kappa Kappa Gama sorority sister at university in California. I met her in the midst of her final year as a college student. We met at Starbucks for an interview in southern California. She also participated in my online year-long observation and at the time of writing is still my Facebook 'friend'. Amy was very open and friendly, and she spoke to me candidly like an old friend rather than as a stranger in an interview. She had long, wavy hair and a freckled, sunny smile. Her parents were always involved in activism and told her that she had attended a demonstration on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco when she was just a toddler; a story that she loved hearing after finding activism as part of her own identity. She became involved with activism after hearing about Invisible Children at her university and subsequently became involved with other movements, including the Ice Bucket Challenge and the 2017 Women's March. To date, her Facebook photos are still full of friendly, candid shots with friends; one such photo shows them attending the 2017 Women's March in San Francisco donning symbolic pink, cat-eared hats. Another shows her with her friends at the DC March for *KONY 2012*, holding a *KONY 2012* sign and wearing the red *KONY* t-shirt, as well as a matching bandana. She is interested in becoming a biologist and, at the time of writing, works for a genetic screening company.

CHRISTINA

Christina was a blonde, Caucasian female in her early twenties who studied English at

university. We first met in California for an interview over coffee in a Starbucks. She also participated in my online observation and is still a Facebook 'friend'. Christina is a Christian and her faith helped inform her passion for humanitarian work and the *KONY 2012* movement. She was the president of the Invisible Children club at her university and won a fundraising competition that allowed her to travel to Gulu, Uganda with Invisible Children. It was easy to see how Christina found herself in a leadership position at Invisible Children's college campus group – she was driven and a natural, confident leader. Like Amy (with whom she was friends from the campus group), she was smiley, energetic and friendly. She was well aware of the 'white saviour' issues embedded in humanitarianism and spoke openly about her conflicting feelings regarding the organisation. On one hand, she felt the culture of Invisible Children, with its globally minded humanitarianism, had shaped who she was today. On the other hand, she disagreed with their approach in *KONY 2012* and seemed uncomfortable about where the organisation was heading. Christina was originally from California and was very close with her family and friends. Many of her Facebook photos revealed her travels and aid work in Uganda, as well as her support for the *KONY 2012* movement. At the time of writing, she was working as a teacher in southern California.

ELLA

Ella was a late twenties female from northern California. She now runs a production company that makes inspirational films for businesses. She went to university in the Midwest and coached volleyball. In interview she stated, 'I'm in love with Invisible Children' and spoke about the importance of the millennial generation, interpersonal connections with others, and our sense of community as human beings. She has dreadlocks, loves Alicia Keys and is a proud supporter of the LGBT community. At the time of writing, she was about to marry her long-term girlfriend. She worked as a roadie for Invisible

Children in 2012.

SHAYLA

Shayla was a twenty-year-old female from the East Coast who went to private school and eventually became Invisible Children's most elite and successful fundraiser for the organisation. Shayla was one of the only participants who attended meetings with the leaders rather than fellow participants. Many of the other participants interviewed mentioned her name and stated that she consistently won all of Invisible Children's fundraising competitions due to her father's wealth and business connections. Shayla later started her own non-profit focused on LRA abductees and their reintegration into society. Shayla studied peace and post conflict resolution at a university on the East Coast and had a very close relationship with the leaders of IC, particularly Jason Russell and Jedidiah Jenkins. Unlike the other participants I interviewed and observed online over the course of my fieldwork year, the visual and digital analysis of her photos (as well as Facebook behavioural practices) bore similarities to the leaders of Invisible Children. She had a multitude of Instagram perfected images portraying her youthful and adventurous humanitarian identity. Like the Invisible Children leaders, her photos had a professional appearance and depicted a chic, bohemian identity amidst a Ugandan backdrop, as displayed below.



Image 7-9. Image retrieved from Shayla's Facebook and Instagram
The image was titled 'day job'. The photo states: 'GIRLLLL what's stopping you? I'm still coming into my voice. Fighting for who I am and who I am becoming'. Comments from friends stated things like 'flawless' or 'Badda$$ w class and a nice ass💋'.

MJ

MJ was a Caucasian female in her early twenties from the Midwest. She went to university in the Midwest and was heavily involved with Invisible Children after learning about them through her church. MJ was a conservative Christian who was raised in a large Christian family rooted in Midwest tradition. She had the friendliness of the Midwest in her attitude towards others and was passionate about humanitarian work, having been on several missionary trips to Africa. In her interview, MJ focused on the plight of child soldiers and the Invisible Children's mission to capture Joseph Kony, as well as her commitment to doing God's work. MJ married her high school sweetheart in her early twenties and now has two children.

GRANT

Grant was a liberal, Caucasian Christian from the Midwest who moved to California to study at university. Grant was tall and lanky with a friendly smile. He seemed to have many

friends at university and was involved in various on-campus organisations and groups. He was interested in social issues, as well as social theories and the social sciences. Grant participated in the Invisible Children movement several times in a casual way, and he stated that he was 'coaxed by friends'. After many passive encounters with the movement, he took on a greater interest in their work and volunteered as a roadie. Grant's participation with Invisible Children eventually shaped his research topic at university. When last interviewed, he was studying for his PhD.



Image 8-1: Retrieved from Invisible Children on January 2, 2015

Chapter Eight: The Change Makers

Invisible Children represents a microcosm of activist millennials (Howe and Strauss 2000; Keeling 2003) who felt connected through community and a deep sense of purpose. This chapter investigates the internal development of the Invisible Children by looking at the organisation's use of media storytelling and recruitment, as well as the celebrity-like identities of the Invisible Children leaders and the cult of personality surrounding Jason Russell. The recruitment and development of the organisation are explored through the lens of Invisible Children supporters and their personal stories. The importance of the

Invisible Children brand within the organisation is also examined. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the Invisible Children 'change makers' and outlines the complexity of the organisation's internal and external worlds.

I. The Film and Emotional Connection

Invisible Children began with a story. It was a film and a powerful narrative that captured audiences with its cool, youthful glow, energetic music[95] and trendy media. The message emphasised 'we belong to one another' and it captured the essence of twenty-first century Americans searching for belonging and connection in an era of digital disconnection (Invisible Children 2015). As one participant stated:

> I think people who watched the film really did connect with the narrative that we are all connected on this planet…it was about something more we are all searching for…like to be a part of something…. ('Jane Anne': Female, early twenties, studying at university in her final year. Interview conducted over Facebook in September 2014)

Most participants, like Jane Anne, described the initial connection they felt to the Invisible Children films and the transformation they underwent to become 'change makers' for the movement, which connected them to a greater cause. Another participant also described how the simple narrative and comprehensive steps towards actions allowed participants to feel they could create change and be inspired into activism:

> I thought it was very moving. It gave lots of detail and insight onto the issue that was going on. And I think people who watched the film it showed how we can help the project and try to not only spread lots of awareness but stop what was happening. ('Jones': The participant was a 16-year-old, white male from San Diego, California. Interview conducted over Facebook and Skype in April 2014)

[95] In their Global Night Commute Musical, Invisible Children leaders sing: 'We're on a mission, put Uganda deep inside your mind. It needs attention and a dance to make it sparkle and shine…. We are here to change the world'. To view, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hB1UbbjxNLQ.

The film's emotional storyline and clear steps for action allowed younger participants, such as Jones, to feel empowered and able to participate in the cause. Younger participants in particular felt that the film gave a vibrant message and thorough explanation of the conflict's history, which allowed them to feel both encouraged and informed. This feeling was reinforced by other participant interviews, which described the culture of the organisation and the ways in which Invisible Children galvanised young people towards action. For example, one participant described Invisible Children and the ethos of the organisation in a Facebook post where they asked their social media friends to explore and join the movement:

> We are creating a culture of young people that are lifting each other up. Encouraging one another to pursue the dreams we had when we were all kids. All the dreams are different but we are using the same vehicle to get there and we have to help each other. We are a movement of young people forgetting fear and accepting fate, relinquishing problems and embracing challenges. Join us, join our movement. ('Cynthia': Participant was a female, in her early twenties from California. Facebook post in January 2014)

Cynthia called on other Facebook friends to join the movement, which she described in compelling, emotional terms as a community where young people join together to pursue dreams and help others in need. Her post was followed by several photographs of her activism with the organisation, where she often held up the peace sign next to friends and wore a stack of Invisible Children bracelets. Her images and posts reflected a bohemian, humanitarian identity, where she was both an adventurer and activist, whether in photographs of her marching on Washington, D.C. or in Gulu, Uganda[96] at the Invisible Children office.

[96] Gulu is a town in northern Uganda where Invisible Children have kept a central office. It is also the location where the documentary *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut* was filmed. At the time of the filming, Gulu was full of 'night commuters', or children escaping LRA violence.

In many ways, the Invisible Children philosophy paralleled that of Dan Eldon, who believed that 'the journey is the destination' and wrote about 'safari as a way of life' – two themes that were used specifically by Invisible Children (Eldon 1997). Their films did more than help facilitate the creation and maintenance of a specific community; the Invisible Children organisation took the art of filmmaking and the philosophy of their 21st century youth following one step further by reinforcing their followers' sense of identity, agency and empowerment. They not only used social media to grow their connections and awareness, but also created something akin to a club where members could feel a sense of purpose, inspiration and connection. One participant commented on how 'well put-together' the films were, stating that Invisible Children 'are so on their social media game' and that the organisation inspired viewers to 'connect' through social media posts and films that were 'meaningful'. She went on to state:

> I mean Jason's all about like stories or whatever his whole life. I think it's true, they do – they make it into a story, not just like facts, facts, facts, facts, facts, cuz that'll bore you and that and like they say a lot, no one wants to care like a […] song in the background of like you know, puppies, whatever, no one wants to watch it cuz it makes you sad. You want to be inspired and that's a big difference, it's not like oh my gosh this is happening, like feel guilty, you're not doing anything, it's like, wow, they make it…empowering… ('Mary Louise': The participant was a female in her early twenties studying at university. Face to face interview in August 2014)

Mary Louise described the portrayal of suffering in most humanitarian campaigns (Chouliaraki 2006), which evokes feelings of sadness in viewers. She explained traditional humanitarian campaigns in contrast to Invisible Children's initiatives, which were upbeat, exciting and focused on empowering entertainment and adventure. Mary Louise told me that their methods of engagement inspired her to become involved through their ability to connect with young audience members and engage with the idea of creating deeper meaning for them. Invisible Children was the new non-profit in this respect – creating a supportive, social community rather than a formal, hierarchical and unemotional

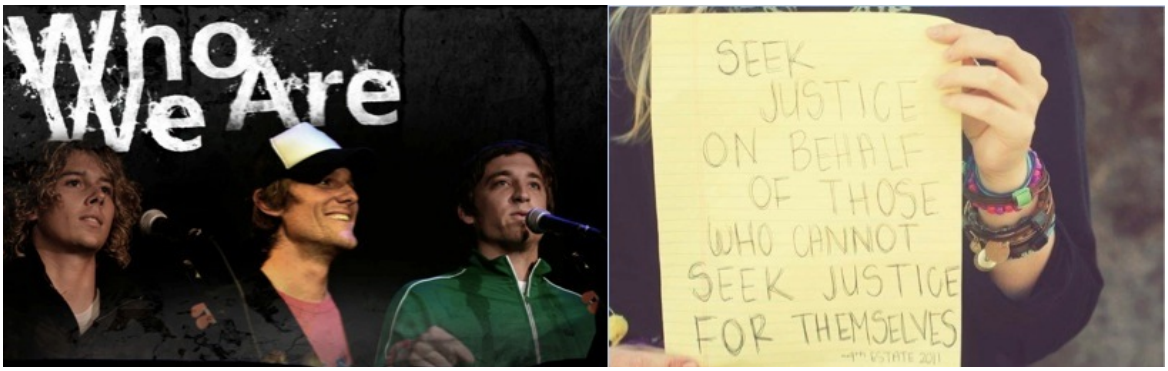
foundation. Another participant explained this in an interview when she said:

> I feel like I'm connected with them I feel like – they really, they see me as an equal which is awesome…I think that's important that they do connect with the clubs it's not just like raising money for some you know, like, you know random figurehead or you know…I don't want to like bash other organisations at all, but like you know if I give money to the Red Cross, if I give money to somewhere else like, I don't really know who's taking it in, who's processing it, where it's going to….('Tiona': Participant interview conducted over Skype and Facebook in June and September 2014. Female, early twenties, from the Midwest)

As Tiona described, the organisation connected its participants, not only to the cause but also to one another. Invisible Children's ability to create an egalitarian atmosphere and family-like environment was appreciated by the participants. In addition to their incorporation of interpersonal relationships, the intiatives were personalised, seemingly transparent and individually engaging so that participants did not just feel they were giving money to be used in unknown ways. Their employment of powerful media in this model was described by another participant who stated:

> I think every organisation should use things like Invisible Children has: using film and multimedia and social media the way they do. And Invisible Children found a way to relate to people like us, to people in our age group. I wondered if it was also because these guys are good looking (laughing…) like if it was ugly middle-aged men would they have the same type of following…('Skye': Participant was in her early twenties and just finished her college education. Facebook interview conducted in May 2014)

In the interview, Skye not only highlights the importance of their powerful storytelling and media prowess, but also offers a forthright perspective of Invisible Children's leaders who, she says, would 'not even remotely have the same effect' if they were not handsome, compelling and young, like Russell, Bailey and Poole. These qualities of Invisible Children, which included inspiring media and charismatic leaders, became key factors in their recruitment and development, as the organisation not only learned how to use media to tell a compelling story, but also harnessed the leaders as celebrity-like figures.



Images 8-2 and 8-3: (left) from left to right: Laren, Jason and Bobby speaking at a school film screening. (right) Invisible Children supporter holding a sign, which reads: 'Seek justice on behalf of those who cannot seek justice for themselves'
Both images were retrieved from the Invisible Children website on November 11th, 2014.

II. Celebrity

Social science literature on celebrity culture seeks to understand the definition, development and processes that make up celebrity culture (Driessens 2014, 2013b, 2013a; Van Krieken 2012; Rojek 2012; Epstein 2005; Evans 2005). Marshall (2006: 6) argues that:

> As phenomena, celebrities intersect with a remarkable array of political, cultural, and economic activities to a threshold point that it is worth identifying the operation of a *celebrity culture* embedded in national and transnational cultures (original emphasis).

Within the Invisible Children movement, the celebrity culture surrounding Russell and the other founders can be understood as a form of 'niche' celebrity (Giles 2000) or 'subcultural' celebrity (Hills 2006, 2002). In essence, while Russell and the other leaders were relatively unknown outside the Invisible Children community before *KONY 2012*, they remained well-known within the specific fan culture,[97] while also possibly circulating in more mainstream fan communities (Busse and Gray 2011).

Within the Invisible Children community, creating celebrity leadership was an important

[97] For literature on fan culture and fandom, see Jensen (1992); Turk (2014); Hills (2002); Jenkins (2010).

element for maintaining social cohesion, performing identity and growing the organisation. It helped reinforce their popularity with young people in the United States, who looked to Jason Russell and leading members as mentors with a celebrity-like status. Jason Russell, in particular, led the organisation as a celebrated leader who had celebrity friends to back up his social status within the community. In other words, it facilitated the construction of celebrity capital in a celebrity-oriented society where culture emphasises the impact and power of celebrity (Van Krieken 2012; Driessens 2013a; Epstein 2005). This was described by one participant who stated:

> I think all the people following IC and working with them definitely have a sense of awe of Jason, Bobby and Laren for what they did, like wow everyone really just thinks highly of them and admires them. Maybe not like a celebrity crush but just admires them. A lot of NGOs just don't have that extra 'something' that they need to really do well… ('Morgan': female, late teens who planned to attend university. Interview conducted over Skype in November 2014)

Morgan emphasised the idea of the three founders of the organisation being celebrity-like figures who helped drive the movement through their charisma, contrasting Invisible Children with other non-governmental organisations that lack a youthful spark with charming leaders. Another participant told me that Russell and Invisible Children CEO Ben Keesey were both 'big names' in the movement, which became more like a family community:

> You know, Jason Russell, Ben Keesey, [….] they're big people, they're big names, and they make you feel like you're just one of them. They're just - you're equals, you do just as much as they do, and I think that makes it such an amazing organisation, cuz you feel like you're really making a difference. Just the atmosphere, their personalities... you know, trying to end this war. It's like a lifestyle, almost. It's a home, it's a family, you know, and I just - I love that. You know, it's a whole another part of me, not just an organisation I support, I think…they call him world changers and stuff, that's what they call us... ('Andressa': The participant was a female, early twenties, studying English. Face to face interview in August 2014)

Andressa shed light on the methods used by the organisation to create a family and lifestyle

for its participants. Andressa further explained the humanitarian and activist identity that developed through involvement, as participants became 'world changers' or 'change makers', who could make a difference through the tight-knit community of the organisation. Another participant described the 'celebrity aura' that surrounded its leaders, particularly for teenage participants. She recalled meeting the leaders for the first time at the age of 16 and reflected that she and her friends thought it was 'so cool'.

> We took … me and my friend took pictures with Bobby and we thought it was just like oh, the most, um amazing thing in the world, like we were really inspired, we were super, super inspired …. It was like for us, definitely like, kind of like a celebrity aura around them (Bobby, Jason and Laren)… ('Marnie': African American, early twenties and studying as a graduate student. Face to face interview conducted in August 2014)

Most other participants, many of whom joined the ranks of Invisible Children around the age of sixteen after *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut* (2004) was screened at their school or church, felt a similar sense of wonder over the leaders of the organisation. This was also evident in the participant observation on Facebook, where many participants posted photos of themselves with the leaders, expressing their excitement about meeting them in person. In the participant observation, some also posted photos simply of the leaders like Russell, celebrating them as inspirational figureheads or celebrity crushes.



Images 8-4 and 8-5: Invisible Children follower photos
Images retrieved from Facebook on August 3, 2014.



Images 8-6: (left) From Jason Russell's Facebook page, photos of US Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Powers, Hollywood film director Tom Shadyac and celebrity actress Sophia Bush. The image has nearly 700 'likes'

Image 8-7: (right) Photograph of Tom Shadyac and Sophia Bush in a 'selfie' with Invisible Children leader Jedidiah Jenkins. It has nearly two hundred 'likes'

Images retrieved from Facebook on May 15, 2014.

In Image 8-4 above, a newly recruited Invisible Children supporter is shown with Jason Russell. The comment section tags 20 people and contains numerous comments about the participant's excitement over being photographed with Jason. The image next to it (8-5) shows the same participant during the *KONY 2012* campaign as he poses with other Invisible Children and *KONY* participants using drawings and imagery of the movement. The new friendships created in the Invisible Children 'family' are evident in the commentary and visual symbolism. Similarly, in Image 8-8, the photograph shows key members of the Invisible Children community, including the three founding filmmakers, in front of popular television show host Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Studios. The image, which is titled 'The Crew', was captured during one of their activist events, where they camped out in front of Oprah's studios for a week and appeared live on her show. The comments include: 'what an unforgettable adventure and validation of faith in our cause that week was', 'best week of my life', and 'I will never forget the Rescue or Displace Me or GO! Or Uganda … learning that I can do something for justice'. The visual image is used to express the shared experience of the participants, as well as representing and reinforcing their shared sense of meaning, value and community.



Image 8-8: Invisible Children leaders and followers at Harpo Studios
Image retrieved from Facebook on June 4, 2013.

Often, the Invisible Children leaders would also share photographs of themselves with celebrities, such as famous singers or actresses, which further deepened the feelings of reverence the participants expressed. In the image below, Invisible Children leader Jedidiah Jenkins shared an Instagram post with two celebrities on a trip to Uganda and Rwanda. The caption states:

> Memories Monday. I can't believe it was four years ago I went to Uganda and Rwanda with the most amazing group of kindred creatures. It feels good to know if I died today I would be happy and content with the years I've had (Jenkins 2014).

This deepened the sense of celebrity admiration and embodied the Dan Eldon-like adventurist profile that the Invisible Children leaders used as inspiration and branding. In the image below, Jedidiah Jenkins and two other key leaders embody their celebrity-like identities as they pose in a casual friendship photo with Hollywood stars on a trip through Uganda and Rwanda. Leaders such as Jenkins thus became celebrities by proxy, while other leaders, particularly Russell, who stared in the films, became 'niche' (Giles 2000) or 'subcultural' celebrities (Hills 2006).



Image 8-9: Three key leaders of the Invisible Children organisation, including Jedidiah Jenkins, with Hollywood actresses: Kristen Bell and Rachel Bilson
Image retrieved from Instagram on March 10th, 2015.

III. Connecting to Millennial Youth



Image 8-10: (left to right) Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole on their first trip to Africa
Image retrieved from the Invisible Children website on November 13, 2014.

The creators of Invisible Children felt that they understood the complicated lives of

adolescents in the United States. They believed that young teens across the country were searching for meaning, purpose and a place where they could explore their passions and discuss their struggles. Jason Russell regularly advocated for mental health in his speeches by discussing his struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts as a teenager, and revealing his awkward adolescent years, when he felt out of place in society. In one Instagram post he shared an image of himself, which supported an organisation called To Write Love on Her Arms,[98] which stated in the caption:

> I wish I had an honest friend like @jamietworkoweski in high school with a life saving organisation like @twlohs because I was super depressed and at times contemplated taking my life. I wish someone had told me then, 'no one else can play your part' (Russell 2014).



Image 8-11: Retrieved from Jason Russell's Instagram on July 22, 2014

Many participants were compelled by the emotional honesty of Invisible Children's leaders and connected with their narratives about the difficulties of 'finding who you are' as a teen

[98] 'To Write Love on Her Arms is an American non-profit organisation which aims to present hope for people struggling with addiction, depression, self-injury and thoughts of suicide while also investing directly into treatment and recovery.' See: https://twloha.com.

in contemporary society. One participant wrote a public letter to Jason Russell on Facebook, which described how Jason's open discussion of bullying and suicidal thoughts inspired and connected him to the Invisible Children organisation. The participant also mentions Dan Eldon's philosophy of 'safari as a way of life', referring to it as his 'bible now' and describes how his time with Invisible Children inspired him take on more civic engagement 'thanks to the confidence boost' of the organisation. He stated in his letter:

> Dear Jason, Although we have never formally met, never shaken hands, or held a conversation, you have defined my life in ways that are beyond my ability to count. You did not just do this for me, but this is how the bulk of Invisible Children supporters feel, I'm sure. To be able to capture someone's interest, their attention, and their heart, is what I strive for every time I pick up my pen and paper to tell a story….This was an organisation I could relate to. Here was this non-profit leader speaking about his battle with bullying, suicidal thoughts, and how to build a life worth living, all things I have dealt with frequently, and I was hooked. 'Safari as a Way of Life' is my bible now. All thanks to that genuine man who was standing on the stage before me. ('John': Public Facebook post to Jason Russell in January 2015. The participant is an early twenties, white male from Illinois)

The complex existential questions that encompass the struggles of adolescence were key elements that drew many young students to the movement. Every participant interviewed expressed a wish to be a part of something larger than themselves. As one participant summed it up in a caption below a photo of himself at an Invisible Children rally: 'it was an honor to be a part of something bigger and better than myself' ('Larry': Facebook post of a participant who was a male in his late teens from the Midwest). Other participants described themselves as 'lost' or 'zombies' before they joined Invisible Children, saying that Invisible Children helped them 'come alive' and was the 'most important experience' of their life. This was particularly prevalent amongst participants who acted as roadies and travelled throughout the United States to create awareness for the movement in classrooms and churches. In interview, Russell explained how Invisible Children acts to fill a void amongst American millennials trapped in a media-saturated environment:

> There's never - is ever enough to fill that void, the only thing that I think helps to fill that void is helping others and seeing your life inspire or manifest in someone else's (Jason Russell interview in San Diego, CA – July 2014).

Russell and the other Invisible Children leaders aimed to create a community where young people felt inspired in their personal lives, as well as inspired to create change in the lives of others. Many young participants enacted this ethos by becoming roadies. As Swartz (2012) argued: 'to be a roadie is to become an embodied character into the world of Invisible Children' (16). Invisible Children's film, *Tony,* which aired in 2011, explored the intense bonds developed amongst 'roadies' and the importance of their family-like communities that would last a lifetime. *Tony* starts out focusing on a Ugandan child, Tony, who features in the original Invisible Children documentary, *The Rough Cut* (2004). As a child, Tony was displaced from the war and living on the streets of Uganda when he met Jason, Bobby and Laren. In the film, one roadie, Nate, becomes the transitional focus due to his tragic death while visiting Tony on a trip to Uganda. Towards the end of the film, Invisible Children's co-founder, Laren Poole, is shown sitting at the Invisible Children headquarters roundtable with Jason Russell and other key staff. Poole laments: 'I think Nate was motivated by a sense of trying to find his purpose. Meeting Tony, it gave him a face and a name to that purpose' (ibid). *Tony* then reveals a journal entry from Nate, which was written just after the end of the Legacy tour, before his death:

> What is my life? ... I have had an experience like no other and have come out rich. I have a massive international family now as well. I have come to find myself the past year and a half. I left the East Coast broken with no direction, and am coming back a new man ready for any challenge to come my way (*Tony* 2011).

Nate's journey entry summed up the same sentiment revealed by many in the interviews, Facebook posts and participant observations. The movement gave its followers an identity and direction, as well as a sense of purpose and belonging. On one hand, Invisible Children was a humanitarian organisation dedicated to seeking justice for the 'invisible children' of

Uganda, while on the other hand, they were acting as a youth-led club where young people could explore their existential purpose through humanitarianism and activism, alongside feeling included within a community.

A puzzling aspect of Invisible Children's 2011 documentary, *Tony,* was that Nate was killed in a bomb explosion at Kyadondo Rugby Club while watching the World Cup Final. The attack killed 74 civilians. While the film confirms that the attack was carried out by al-Shabaab, which is linked to al-Qaeda, Laren Poole continues to argue throughout the film that the LRA is the most dangerous terrorist group in Africa. The film contradicts itself by showing footage of displacement camps being removed and Ugandan civilians returning to normal life as Kony's LRA disperses into the depths of the jungle in Central Africa, yet makes no mention of other terrorist organisations or rebel groups that were actively undertaking extreme acts of violence throughout the region. Instead, the film offers a vigil for Nate, who tragically lost his life, by arguing that his life's purpose to end the LRA was met when Obama signed the LRA Disarmament Act later in 2010. Nate's brother stated at his funeral service:

> He died doing the ministry that brought him the most joy. We know that Nate's heart and his life was for the people of Uganda. Many people live their whole lives hoping to make some sort of impact and with just 25 years, Christ blessed him with a heart for the oppressed and because of that this touched lives in the US and Uganda (*Tony* 2011).

No connection was made between the wave of attacks carried out by al-Shabaab and the growing threat of Islamic terrorist organisations. Instead it seemed a happy coincidence that Obama dedicated substantial funds to capturing Kony just a month after the al-Shabaab attacks, as the LRA's threat faded into small-scale food looting in tiny villages. While Kony starved in the jungle with fewer than 100 fighters, Invisible Children finally felt as if they had accomplished something significant when politicians in a Congressional

hearing[99] offered moving speeches about the '*perhaps* most wanted man in Africa' (Rep Ed Royce, Republican, 40th District, Fullerton, California) and making Ugandan children 'visible' by passing the Act (Rep Susan Davis, Democrat, 53rd District, San Diego, California).

IV. Recruiting the Movement

Many of the Invisible Children supporters were recruited and attracted to the organisation through middle and high school[100] presentations, which were conducted by Invisible Children roadies, who were volunteers who dedicated their summers to living in Invisible Children vans and traveling across the country to give talks about and screenings of the documentary, *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut*. Often, the roadies would stay with volunteering families in the area, many from local church or school groups. One participant, Sarah Jane, told me about the 'incredible feeling' of being 'constantly welcomed by total strangers and then leaving with new family members', which she said restored her faith in humanity. The roadies then sold merchandise after speaking in classrooms and churches, aiming to recruit new students to join the ranks of Invisible Children and take on fundraising. One participant described her life on tour as being 'like Groundhog Day':

> For 10 weeks straight; a constant stream of leaving a host home, driving to a middle or high school, unpacking the van, setting up the merch, giving a presentation, speaking in individual classrooms, holding an after-school meeting, breaking down the merch, packing the van, driving to a university, unpacking the van, setting up the merch, giving a presentation, breaking down the merch, packing the van, and driving to the next host home, eating and sleeping when possible. It's definitely a crazy life, but it is also one of the most rewarding things I have ever done. ('Sarah Jane': Early twenties female from the Midwest studying in

[99] Refer to: https: https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/house-resolution/583.

[100] In the United States, middle school has students ranging from 11-15 and high school students range from age 15-18.

college. Interview conducted over Skype in May 2014)

Many participants, including Sarah Jane, stressed the critical importance of roadie tours. One participant explained to me that, while large events such as Displace Me and The Rescue[101] were helpful for the movement, the fundamental spreading of awareness about the organisation to gather support was down to roadie tours and word of mouth. Many participants were invited to a screening by friends at their church or school, and one participant, Rachel, stressed that Invisible Children had a strong support base mainly due to their strategy of interpersonal networking ('Rachel': The participant was 20 years old and female, studying at university). Another participant posted a photograph on Facebook of her time on tour as a roadie, stating in the caption:

> A year later and this amazing crew I came to know as my family for six months is still changing my life. I still hear stories of the memories we shared, the people we inspired, and the altogether beautiful insanity we undyingly strived to achieve. When the LRA ends. When Joseph Kony is captured. And when peace is restored in Central Africa, I will be with my family and celebrating joyously and thoroughly over the time we spent making the world a better place for everyone. ('Butty': late twenties from California. Her Facebook profile photos contained several photos supporting marriage equality, Human Rights Watch and TOMS shoes. Interview conducted on Facebook in November 2014)

Like many other interviewees and participants, Butty considered Invisible Children to be like family. She reflected fondly on her time with the organisation, which she felt was life-changing and involved working to make the world a better place.

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[101] Displace Me was a nationwide event hosted by Invisible Children on April 28, 2007. In 15 cities across the United States, 68,000 individuals came together to raise awareness about the situation of the displacement camps in northern Uganda… Invisible Children's third event was international: The Rescue asked attendees to 'abduct themselves for the abducted' until they were publicly rescued by a media mogul. Rescuers included Oprah Winfrey, Kristen Bell, Sen. James Inhofe and Rep. John Lewis (Invisible Children 2014). There were 85,000 attendees in 10 countries and 100 cities. Refer to: http://invisiblechildren.com/program/international-events/.



Image 8-12: 'A year later…' Image retrieved from Facebook on August 1, 2014

Those who viewed *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut* reacted to its emotionally potent narrative and described how the film screening led to their participation. Often, the participants told me that they were shocked to learn about the conflict after the film screening and would state that they felt a divide between themselves and the young people in Uganda due to their privileged position as 'Westerners'. In the passage below, Jessica, a student in her early twenties from the American Midwest, describes her first screening of the film when she was a teenager and how she felt it influenced her life:

> I remember the film ending, the lights coming back on, and seeing my mom and sister wipe away tears. I knew I should be crying too, but I very distinctly remember feeling so angry that I had never heard about this conflict on the news, I never learned about it in school, and child soldiers were hardly ever something people were worried about, that I could hardly move from my seat…I decided that night that IC was a cause I needed to support, because nothing else had ever hit so close to

> my heart. As a Westerner I'm sure it's obvious that none of my family members are even remotely close to being directly affected by this conflict, but I had never been presented with something that impacted me this much. ('Jessica': Interview conducted through Q&A conversation on Facebook in November 2014)

The powerful connection many young people felt after the film screening often evoked an urgent need to become involved with the organisation. This entailed raising money, sharing the film with friends and family, or becoming a roadie. Many, including Jessica, mentioned the incentives for those who raised the most money for Invisible Children. Incentives often included the opportunity to have their name aired on the radio in Uganda and throughout Central Africa, where radio was used to encourage former combatants to leave the LRA. Other awards included winning a trip to Uganda, where participants could stay in Gulu, or the creation of a special celebratory page on Invisible Children's website so participants could be 'made famous' and memorialised for their fundraising work. Many of the participants whom I interviewed or had informal contact with through Facebook had taken on considerable levels of participation and activism for Invisible Children. In one of the Facebook posts published after Invisible Children announced its official closing, a participant described her time with Invisible Children as a roadie, working 15-hour days, often without sleep, and gaining 15 pounds for what she believed was 'a cause bigger than ourselves':

> …Over two and a half years I worked harder than I ever had in my life as I toured the US to raise awareness and funds for the ending of the conflict. 3 tours. 21 states. 80+ host homes. 15 hour works days, sleepless nights, and an extra 15 pounds were just a few of the things I scored. My teammates and I stood on stages across the country speaking to thousands of people about a conflict around the world that involved people I'd probably never meet. We did this because we believed that all human life is precious no matter where that life is. We believed in a cause bigger than ourselves. ('Jill': Participant was in her mid-twenties, from the East Coast and had just finished her college studies. Public Facebook post in January 2015.)

Jill offered a detailed portrait of her experiences as a roadie, completing three tours,

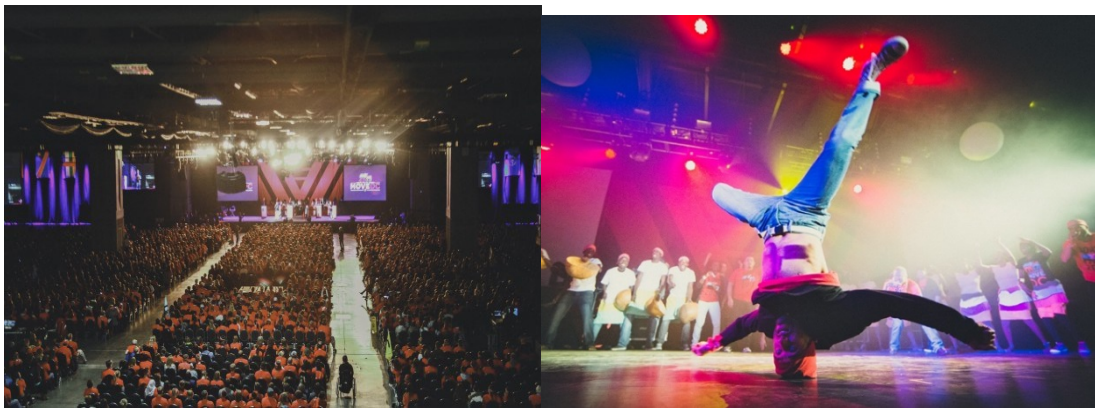
travelling to 21 states and staying at over 80 host homes. The dedication shown and long hours worked by roadies such as Jill reflected a genuine commitment to the cause and the Invisible Children values of global humanity and justice. In another interview, a participant described the family-like environment she found when she began to volunteer for Invisible Children and travelled to Washington. D.C., to participate in their rally, MOVE D.C:[102]

> I became obsessed with the cause, all of the people in the club, and all of the other supporters and activists I had learned about. I decided to go to MOVE D.C. with my club, and it was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. Being a part of something so much bigger than myself means so much to me now. I've learned how much people can actually do to try and fix problems in other parts of the world. Along with the cause, the passion of everybody involved with IC is contagious. I love the organisation and I feel like it's one, big family working to really make an essential change. ('Whitney': The participant was in her early twenties, studying Chapman University. Interview conducted over Facebook in July 2014)

Whitney reflected on her time at MOVE D.C. as a moving experience that both empowered and inspired her as a young activist. Like many participants, she described the feeling of being part of something bigger than herself and understood herself as a change-maker amongst the many other change-makers of the movement.

[102] For more information on the MOVE D.C. event in Washington, D.C. or to read about the experiences of participants, refer to: https://invisiblechildren.com/blog/2012/11/26/movedc-an-alumni-perspective-2/.





Images 8-13 to 8-16: Over 10,000 young activists joined the MOVE D.C. campaign in Washington, D.C.
Images retrieved from the Invisible Children website.

V. Community

> *The self is a cultural construct which expresses the shared understanding within a community about what it means to be human.*
>
> (Cushman 1990: 599)

In the interviews with participants, their idea of the Invisible Children community, or 'family' surfaced consistently. Hepp (2012) brought forth the idea of 'communitization', coined to identify the process of community building. This term could be used to describe the emotional bonding that participants experienced as roadies, on tours, fundraising or at activist events, which ultimately formed and grew a tight-knit community. While the various definitions and detailed discussions of the concept of 'community'[103] are outside

[103] See also Bell and Newby (1972); Macfarlane (1977); Clark (1973).

the realms of this thesis, it is worth mentioning that, in a media culture, 'ways of making sense *of the world* that work primarily *through*, or in reliance on, media', can develop and form various communities, as was evident with Invisible Children (Couldry 2012: 160, original emphasis; Hepp and Couldry 2009). Furthermore, Macfarlane (1977) describes how 'the belief that stable and tightly knit "communities" have existed in the past and still survive in distant lands is an important one for highly mobile industrial societies' (631). The concept of community was arguably first discussed at depth in the works of Tönnies (1887). At the time, many felt traditional values were being undermined, and traditional forms of community were being lost. German sociologist Max Weber defined community when he explained:

> 'Community' refers simply to 'a sense of belonging together'… Since the term is often very loosely applied either to a place or to a collection of people, it is necessary to insist that . . . community is defined by nothing more or less than this subjective state. The sense of belonging together typically combines both affective and cognitive components, both a feeling of solidarity and an understanding of shared identity (1978: 40).

However, anthropologists Amit and Rapport (2002: 13) argued that the notion of community is 'too vague, too variable in its applications and definitions to be of much utility as an analytical tool'. Murphree (1994: 403) also explained that communities should not be defined in 'monolithic' terms without differentiation, positing that 'they contain categories of people distinguished by age, sex, interest, and power. Nor do they exist in a political or economic vacuum; they are linked in various ways with the larger society that surrounds them'. Whether 'community' represents a togetherness of the past (Tönnies 1887) or whether it acts as form of solidarity or functions to serve idealistic ways of thinking, the idea of community has withstood scientific evaluation and 'is a concept of always positive evaluation and evocation, whose usage expresses and elicits a social group and a social environment to which people would expect, advocate or wish to belong'

(Macfarlane 1977: 631–32). Nisbet (1953: 11) similarly highlighted the reoccurring theme of an individual throughout history, who feels uprooted and therefore struggles to find meaning, searches for friendship and 'some kind of moral community'. The Invisible Children participants reflected these sentiments when they described their desire to belong to something 'bigger than themselves' and have deeper meaning within a community.

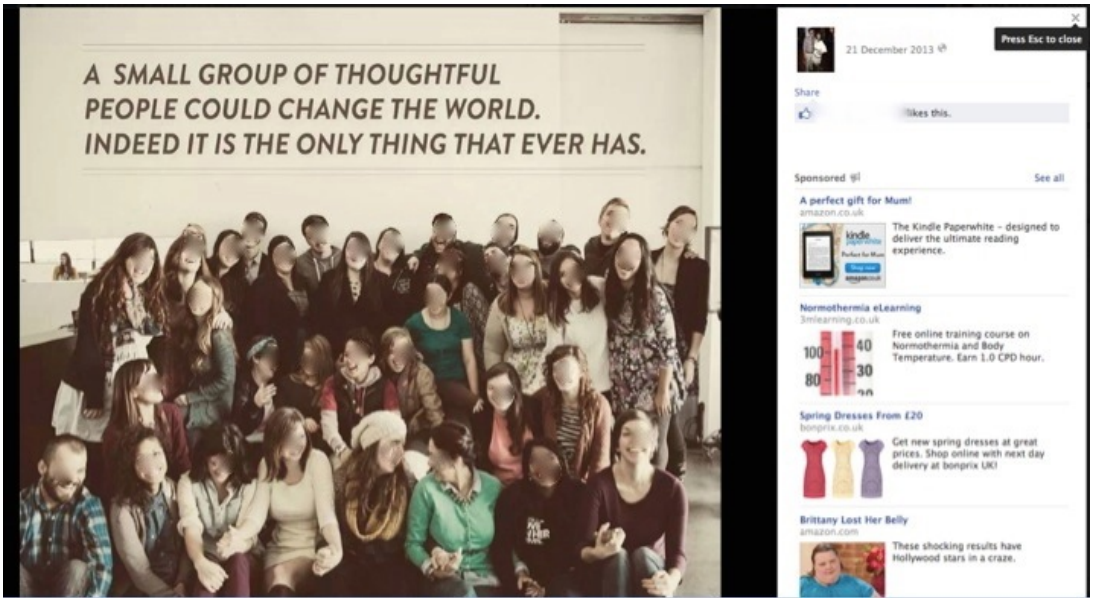


Image 8-17: 'A small group of thoughtful people…'
Image retrieved from Facebook on February 26, 2015

Participants often described their experiences of the community at Invisible Children as life-changing; for them, the Invisible Children environment was full of adventure and their lives before Invisible Children conjured up feelings of being lonely and lost. One participant said that he was 'trying to stay afloat' in high school before finding Invisible Children and said that, once involved with the organisation, he was 'soaring'. He described his time at a small Invisible Children conference in San Diego, summarising the sentiment shared by so many during the interviews in a powerful description. The participant, George, was struggling with high school and experiencing feelings of depression as a 14-year-old adolescent searching for friends and meaning. His time with the Invisible Children offered him the community and purpose he was striving to find. He described a Fourth Estate

Summit in San Diego, California, which invited 30 'elite activists' to join:

> I was just trying to stay afloat, but then all of the sudden, I was soaring. The next four days were the best of my life—we laughed, cried, swam fully clothed in salty ocean surfs. We watched the sunset and sunrise, lived with each other, and spoke of a better future for our world. There was amazing food, campfires, speakers and incredible memories made. We explored. We lived. By the end of the four days, we were distraught to say good-bye. To spend four intimate days with your best friends and biggest inspirations is something that would fill anyone with oxygen and the strength to continue fighting. ('George': Public Facebook post in January 2015. Participant was in his teens, white, and from the Midwest)

As George and the other participants express, the participants felt that Invisible Children was more than just a non-profit organisation. Invisible Children acted as a community for young people, which was about more than children in Uganda; it was about shaping and creating a culture for young people in the United States. Invisible Children served as a foundation for global justice and activism, but also as a channel for self-development and discovery amongst millennial youths searching for community. The organisation operated on both macro and micro levels: facilitating awareness and change for social issues, but also acting as an empowering society for American youth. For this reason, it was evident that Invisible Children had an enormous impact on its participants, just as the participants had a considerable influence on the organisation. In a closing statement of one of the interviews, a participant explored how Invisible Children changed after the rise and fall of *KONY 2012,* arguing that the organisation was 'as strong as ever', but believed that the viral effect of *KONY 2012* had changed the global awareness of the movement and, therefore, its internal world. Even so, she ultimately felt the cause would remain 'the secret club-like entity it was prior to *KONY 2012'* ('Jackie': The participant was female, in her early twenties, studying in her final year of university. Face to face and Facebook interviews conducted in July 2014 and February 2015).

When the organisation announced that it was officially closing its headquarters in San

Diego, many of the Invisible Children supporters began to post final messages to the organisation on Facebook, detailing their belief in the cause and deep connection to the group. One participant in particular expressed how he felt his resolve was tested during the *KONY 2012* controversy, but his loyalty to the organisation remained grounded. In his moving closing statement, he spoke of his time working with Invisible Children as the happiest years of his life. He believed Invisible Children was the most important experience of his life and offered him a greater sense of freedom than anything else he had encountered:

> During *KONY 2012*, my reputation as I had understood it to be was altered. I'd chosen a side and many of the people I cared for most were decidedly not on it. The culture we live in rarely supports putting down your word 100%. We flip-flop and change our minds, but the moment I realised that I didn't need anyone's approval to fully live my life was groundbreaking. I was going to choose a side and stick to it no matter hell or high water. Being 'all-chips-in-committed' for the first time in my life was exhilarating. During my time at Invisible Children I was a full-time volunteer. I was living out of a van. I had no paycheck, no health insurance, and I was surviving on host-home coffee and granola bars. But I was happier during those years than I've ever been because I'd found something I believed in with all my heart and there is a certain freedom of the soul that comes when you're flat broke, but doing something that matters. ('Jake': Participant was a white male in his early twenties from the East Coast. Facebook post in December 2014)

Jake, along with many other participants who agreed to be 'friended' on Facebook and followed as part of my participant observation, offered closing statements about the organisation after the official announcement. In Jake's heartfelt posts, he painted a portrait of his life as a humanitarian activist, living out of a car with no health insurance and surviving off granola bars, but 'happier in those years that I've ever been' because he had found something he believed in and a community to belong to. Another participant offered this statement on Facebook: 'I will love these people forever. The lessons learned and my time at Invisible Children changed the trajectory of my life. I could go on and on but it wouldn't do it justice' ('Joe': Facebook Post in December 2014. White male, late teens,

from California). Jason Russell encouraged Invisible Children members to find themselves, to 'dream big', to speak out about their fears and insecurities, to question social norms and think outside the structure of society,[104] in an ethos that proved very appealing to struggling adolescents in American culture searching to find themselves and their role in wider society. One participant described himself before finding Invisible Children:

> The Fourth Estate had made me feel alive… it was like I was a zombie until I learned about IC - I was 13 so I learnt like 3 or 4 years ago and it shook my soul made me feel alive. ('Ben': Public Facebook post in January 2015. Male, late teens, from the Midwest).

As Ben states, the long-term participants of Invisible Children and *KONY 2012* were part of what they referred to as a 'family' and a 'lifestyle', as well as 'world changers'. While their stories were very moving and emotional, the dedicated members of Invisible Children did speak less about their concern regarding the citizens of Uganda and more about their belief in the organisation, which made them feel empowered, alive, focused, connected and understood. In a Facebook post, one participant stated:

> Invisible Children pushed me to step into things I thought I could never do. (Like stand on stage in front of 600 people and hold a live Q&A when I was TERRIFIED of public speaking). I grew up believing that I couldn't do certain things, but Invisible Children pushed me into the uncomfortable, and when I said 'yes' to that, I grew up. How will we ever know what we can accomplish if we never get out of our comfort zone? 'Jump First, Fear Later' is a slogan that we crazies lived by and it still challenges me today. ('Jillian': Participant interview conducted over Facebook in November 2014. Female, early twenties, from the Midwest)

Jillian explained how the organisation helped her to push past her own limits, making her feel empowered and self-confident. Using the slogan: 'jump first, fear later', she described

[104] Invisible Children would often create their own inspirational quotations, which they then put on their website or used as specific catchphrases in speeches that encapsulated the ideals of the organisation. For instance: 'You are more powerful than you think you are'; 'Only the ideas we live have any value'; 'Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try'; 'Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference'; 'A worldview bound by borders is outdated' and 'Your life is bigger than your best dream for it' (Invisible Children 2012). These catchphrases would often be used on participants' Facebook profiles.

how she grew and developed as a person through her experiences in the movement. Another participant posted a photo on Facebook of the MOVE D.C. campaign in Washington, D.C., which she titled: 'We Belong to Each Other'. The participant went on to reflect on the 'historical, game changing, life-saving, moving weekend alongside more than 10,000 people from 60 different countries marching towards justice', which she argued was a 'monument in history'. The participant, Carrie, explained in the Facebook post that 'some may call it the wrong decision, we will say it is the only way', referring to the backlash of *KONY 2012*. She then stated that she felt 'so lucky to be standing beside so many loving, inspiring people, celebrating the human connection and moving with passion, dedication, commitment and a desire to make a difference', with a closing post emphasising her belief that: 'anger grows tired, but friendship does not' (The participant was in her mid-twenties and a white female from the East Coast who was very active in Invisible Children rallies and had an Invisible Children related photograph in nearly every profile photo on her Facebook page). In essence, the participants believed in the 'human connection', as Carrie described, that the organisation helped to facilitate. They established a Dan Eldon-like philosophy of adventure, often repeating the Invisible Children catchphrase 'jump now, fear later' and believed that the organisation gave them a sense of self-empowerment, identity and connection. While many of the participants may have lost interest in activism during *KONY 2012*, the general consensus that developed as the organisation ushered in a new era of closure was one of faith, friendship, happiness and empowerment. The participants of Invisible Children went through several stages of participation within the organisation; to begin, on-the-ground activism prevailed; later, after the release of *KONY 2012*, activism ebbed and flowed in murky waters with little involvement, and, in the end, the participants' love for the organisation was what remained as it closed its doors once and for all.

Invisible Children became a community where members were always welcomed despite the personal struggles many felt in identifying with and connecting to the social networks around them. At the same time, the organisation nurtured self-discovery and self-confidence. Participants were accepted into a group, which focused not only on humanitarian campaigning, but also how personhood and sociability could be located within the group. In other words, participants may have joined Invisible Children less for the cause and more for the community, as well as the sense of empowerment Invisible Children instilled in their followers. This was summarised by one participant, who described her life with Invisible Children in a public Facebook post, just shortly after the organisation closed:

> 5 years ago I said yes to something that unbeknownst to me would change everything. That yes enforced the fact that all lives matter and boundaries do not. That yes taught me to use my voice, even when it was shaking. That yes taught me to live such a full life that I crave adventure and risk. That yes taught me to love deeply and without reserve, and that community makes life's heights burst with joy and cushions the lows. That yes taught me that I am braver than I believe and stronger than I seem. Dear Invisible Children, we are braver and stronger than we can imagine. Forever glad to be one of us. ('Laney': Participant was in her mid-twenties from California. Facebook post in December 2014)



Image 8-18: 'You are more powerful…' Image retrieved from Facebook on October 1, 2013
I found over 100 Invisible Children participants who used the image 'You are more powerful than you think you are' for their background landscape photo on Facebook.

Laney summed up the sentiment commonly communicated in the interviews: the Invisible Children community 'makes life's heights burst with joy and cushions the lows' for its participants. Laney described how the organisation taught her to use her voice and have a global perspective of humanity. It became clear through the participant observation and interviews that Invisible Children's strength was in the creation of an activist community of youths who learned to trust in themselves and care for others. Thus, the concept of community became a key aspect of the research and paralleled Weber's (1978: 40) definition of community as a 'sense of belonging together' with 'feeling of solidarity and an understanding of shared identity'. Participants consistently reiterated this message in public posts on Facebook, as well as interviews. One participant said in a comment on Facebook: 'We are so so so blessed to be surrounded by people that make us feel like we belong' ('Valerie': The participant was a white female in her early twenties, who previously worked at Invisible Children in San Diego. Comment retrieved from Facebook in March 2014).



Image 8-19: The Fourth Estate. Images retrieved from Facebook on November 2, 2014
Invisible Children participants hold up a notice saying 'I am the Fourth Estate' while displaying their friendship.



Image 8-20: 'I believe in…' Image retrieved from Facebook
The Fourth Estate came to embody the ethos of the Invisible Children community. The landscape photo in the background was created by Invisible Children and used by many participants.

The shared identity of Invisible Children surrounded the ethos of 'The Fourth Estate', which was described by the organisation as: 'We believe in the equal and inherent value of all human life. We believe that a worldview bound by borders is outdated and that stopping injustice anywhere is the responsibility of humanity everywhere' (Invisible Children 2011). The Fourth Estate was a summit created by Jason Russell and the founding members of Invisible Children in order to facilitate youth activism and civic engagement. Each year, the organisation would host a Fourth Estate summit, with their largest being held at UCLA in 2011, attracting 1,500 activists from 27 countries. The average age of the attendees was 16 and the participants raised $820,000 for civilian protection in Central Africa. Speakers at the conference included celebrities and political leaders, such as former United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Powers, and Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Luis Moreno-Ocampo. The conferences included live music, dance performances, movies, speeches and interactive programmes, which aimed to inspire young people to find themselves and take part in the world around them. The summit could have rivalled events like the Academy Awards with the level of professionalism and performance, as Invisible Children spared no expense to make the Fourth Estate a

memorable production. Jason stated in the Fourth Estate summit video: 'Once you've been among us, you'll never really be anywhere else. The Fourth Estate stays with you…because it is you…' (ibid).



Image 8-21: Samantha Powers speaks at the Fourth Estate summit at UCLA

Retrieved from the Invisible Children website on July 4, 2014.

At the Fourth Estate summit in 2011, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Powers, spoke to the Invisible Children supporters and describing the primary message of Invisible Children and *KONY 2012*. Powers argued that 'social media gives us an unprecedented means for connecting people who are taking action in one country with those in another, and for enabling us all to talk with millions of our global neighbors in real time', ultimately linking global justice to the power of social media, as evident in other movements like the Arab Spring (Fourth Estate summit 2011). Powers went on to urge viewers to 'look out for the dignity of individuals' (ibid), which was a sentiment echoed by many participants. For instance, one participant, Elizabeth, said: 'my social values are the strongest in terms of this organisation, because I value making the world a better place for

those who are struggling' (early twenties, female, from San Diego. Interview conducted through Facebook in June 2014). In another interview conducted at Chapman University, an Invisible Children supporter described the family-like atmosphere of the Fourth Estate summit in 2014. She felt that often other university students or friends could not understand the organisation, particularly after Jason Russell's breakdown: 'like whatever, congrats you care about kids in Africa', but stated that when she went to the Fourth Estate summit she felt she was with like-minded individuals who understood the cause and the ethos of Invisible Children. As with other participants who were interviewed, she went on to express the importance and power of the experience, which involved emotional bonding. In the interview, she told me how they would often talk, 'till like 1 or 2 am' about how and why they got involved and how it had changed their lives. She explained: 'You know we all share the same views [and vision] as Invisible Children…' ('Serena': The participant was a female in her early twenties studying at Chapman University. Face to face interview conducted in July 2014). As Serena explained, the summit focused largely on the discovery of millennial identity and purpose, rather than the socio-political climate in the region surrounding Kony and the LRA. The summits emphasised youth engagement, activism and community, while the participants almost entirely focused on their 'sense of belonging together', 'feeling of solidarity', belief in global justice and the development of the participants' self-esteem (Weber 1978). These themes were also highlighted by Karlin, Murphy and Ahu (2014) who conducted interviews with Fourth Estate participants during the summit at UCLA; they found that participants who attended the Summit increased their self-confidence, commitment to global justice and sense of social connection. My research confirmed these findings, as the participants in this research largely focussed, in both interviews and social media, on the development of their self-confidence and identity, their dedication to global justice and humanitarianism, and their passion for the Invisible Children community, with the connections that it created.



Image 8-22: 'Do more than just watch' t-shirts. The Fourth Estate Summit at UCLA

Retrieved from the Invisible Children website on April 9, 2014.

VI. The Branding of a Movement

On their Invisible Children website, the organisation defined itself by saying: 'Invisible Children is not just a charity, but a group of people choosing to live differently' (Invisible Children 2012). In essence, the founders strove to create a community of youth activists who believed in social change and global justice, while also building a lifestyle brand of humanitarian adventurers. According to *The Atlantic*, this was further described when the organisation advertised: 'Invisible Children wants to be attractive to anyone from any background, period. We want to build loyalty around a lifestyle brand' (Kron 2012: 1). In many ways, Invisible Children could be described as exactly that: a lifestyle and a brand. As one participant noted, Invisible Children members could identify other participants based on their Invisible Children merchandise, such as bracelets and tee shirts. The identity of an Invisible Children member involved trendiness mixed with volunteerism and social

justice values, and this combination allowed Invisible Children participants to like they were a part of something. The participants were part of a youth subculture[105] dedicated to activism, social justice and global adventure. This was described by another participant:

> Pre-*KONY 2012*, being a supporter of IC was like being in a secret club. It was always so cool to randomly run into someone wearing a reed bracelet or an IC shirt, because you knew exactly where they got it and what it meant. ('Blair W': The participant was 20 years old and female, studying at university. Face to face interview in August 2014)

In this instance, commodity activism was not the only factor at play; buying and wearing Invisible Children merchandise was not only about the act of making a consumer purchase as a form of humanitarianism or charity, it was also about performing and symbolising a certain identity in a way that fitted in with the Invisible Children group (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012; Brough 2012).

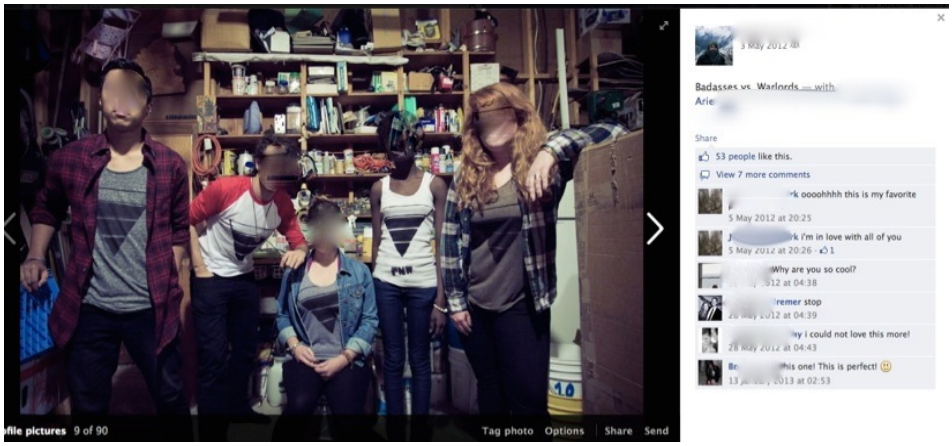


Image 8-23: Photo from Facebook. Image caption states: 'Badasses vs. Warlords' Retrieved on February 16th, 2014.

[105] For more detailed literature on youth subcultures, refer to: Kehily (2007); Roche et al. (2004); Brake (1985); Mesch and Talmud (2010).



Image 8-24: Participants wearing the Invisible Children clothing line
Retrieved on February 16th, 2014.

The Invisible Children leaders all harnessed a 'cool' factor, according to participants, and the celebrity culture surrounding leaders like Jason Russell was evident in the organisation's merchandising and 'self-fashioning' (Greenblatt 1980). Once they became involved with the organisation, followers often took on the same identity as the leaders by purchasing Invisible Children merchandise and following the trends of the leaders. If an Invisible Children participant caught a glimpse of a stranger wearing an Invisible Children bracelet or clothing item, a social bond was immediately created based on their shared belief in and value of the community, as well as the uniqueness of their humanitarian identity. The trendy fashion of the organisation's brand was predominant in the Invisible Children offices when I visited and was displayed by all employees. The visual identity in online (and real) spaces symbolised and communicated the Invisible Children's sense of group belonging and cultural ethos. With a merchandise line at hand, the organisation called on Invisible Children activists to engage with larger audiences and shake the establishment by taking part in sit-ins at the doorstep of former President Barack Obama and television host Oprah Winfrey. The participants used their clothing and other Invisible Children items to help raise awareness. Alongside traditional forms of activism such as contacting government representatives, participants were also encouraged to change Facebook profile photos to an activist-led 'selfie'. Many participants on Facebook held up the peace sign

wearing their Invisible Children shirts and bracelets. This was often done with a serene face, imploring the world to reflect on the global matters of today, while confirming their own empathy for the 'Other' as a global humanitarian and 'world changer'. Thus, while the Invisible Children community ebbed and flowed between real and online spaces, it was bound to a unique social community based of shared ethos. In many ways, they shared a belief in the idea of a society of vigilantes spanning distant lands and pursuing global justice.







Images 8-25 and 8-26: Images showing IC merchandise at a rally

Retrieved from the Invisible Children website on September 16th, 2015.

VII. The Change-Makers

Invisible Children and its *KONY 2012* campaign were, in part, about the need for a human connection among its millennial participants. The organisation's structure facilitated this connection and allowed a culture of quasi-familial connections to flourish. The participants in this research expressed a need to be a part of something bigger than themselves, as so many of the participants explained using that specific phrase. The research found that the social networks of individuals were the pinnacle feature of the movement. I consistently discovered that individuals claimed that they longed to be a part of a group, to be understood, to find themselves, to have a place in wider society without feeling disenchanted with their futures or identities. Invisible Children gave them purpose, meaning, support, encouragement and value. In many ways, participants needed *KONY*, more than *KONY* needed them. For instance, one participant posted a Facebook tribute to Invisible Children, highlighting the 7 years that she had 'poured her energy, time, money and heart' into the organisation. The participant described how Invisible Children had 'enveloped' her and 'call me one of their own'. She went on to say:

> The extraordinary humans at Invisible Children were not the first to tell me to dream big, but they were my constant cheerleaders – when everyone else said 'not possible', they said 'we believe in you' and 'your life is bigger than your best dream for it'. (Kenisha. Participant Facebook post in January 2015. Participant was a female in her early twenties from California)

Kenisha described how the organisation helped her to develop self-esteem and agency, particularly when other support networks around her doubted her abilities. Another participant wrote to Jason specifically in a public Facebook post. She posted a short letter to Jason with a photo of herself crying. The participant, a bi-gendered female in her mid-twenties from California, wrote a heartfelt note to the Invisible Children leader saying:

> Jason, you've always known how to make me cry. But more importantly, you've known exactly how to inspire, empower, and teach me to change

> my life, and the lives of others, for good. ('Spencer': Facebook post in December 2014)

In Spencer's post, along with many others, it was clear that Jason Russell in particular had an impact on the participants. Russell showed many young people that despite their backgrounds, their fears and their insecurities, young people around the world could be capable of changing their lives and becoming who it was they desired to be. As he often said in speeches: 'your life is bigger than your best dream for it' (Russell 2012). Russell, along with the other Invisible Children leaders, gave the participants a sense of purpose, as well as a sense of empowerment. The participants often made philosophical closing remarks about Invisible Children that described this. For instance, Shandra wrote a public letter to Invisible Children thanking them for teaching her to 'question boundaries' and challenge herself. She went on to thank them 'for teaching me that teammates are family' and that 'you can survive hell if you hold on to the ones next to you'. She showed gratitude to the organisation for:

> Teaching me to work hard and dance even harder. For teaching me that sometimes a hug, a beer at Pete's and a 2AM conversation in the garage is the best remedy. For these reasons and more I'll always love you. ('Shandra': Participant was 20 years old from Texas and was at university. Facebook post in January 2015)

Shandra felt that the organisation helped her to push past her own limitations and boundaries, as well as to have faith in her community. She described the camaraderie and life experiences that became transformative. Another participant gushed on Facebook that the organisation had changed her life, describing her passion for the friends she made while working with them:

> My life is changed forever and I love you all so much...Thank you so much to those who have donated or prayed for the mission of Invisible Children. Jump first, fear later. Stop at Nothing. ('Allegra': Facebook post in December 2014. Participant was a 21-year old white female from California).

Both Allegra and Shandra express how they felt Invisible Children had a unique impact on their lives. Many members often reiterated the same specific catchphrases, like Allegra, which communicated the ethos they learned. Their unique experiences of hard work, adventure and bonding were described by many as the most important, influential experiences of their lives. The participants who were active within the organisation left with renewed life perspectives and identities, which were philosophical, existential and empowered:

> Find your passion, run with it, let it consume your soul like a raging fire and let that passion drive you to be better and love bigger. Stop at nothing to achieve this. Don't wait for the right time, there never will be a right time. ('Kiara': Participant in her early twenties from the South. Facebook post in December 2014)

Kiara felt that Invisible Children lit a fire within her soul and drove her passion for humanitarianism, friendship and community. Another participant, Florence, reflected on Facebook that she once believed 'the best moments in life were the biggest ones'. She went on to describe that her time with the organisation taught her to 'search for joy in the normal' – the small moments in life:

> Take a 10 minute break at work to learn a new dance, or better yet, climb through a fence at a rest stop in the middle in North Dakota and wait to be surprised with the beauty you'll find. ('Florence': Facebook post in December 2014. Participant was 22 years old from Arizona and was at university)

The emotional connection that participants shared with one another and with the Invisible Children organisation as a whole was powerful. Many of the participants seemed emotionally dependent on the organisation and very distraught after the announcement of its closing. The extent to which many participants looked to Invisible Children as their family and home environment was compelling and moving. Another participant expressed her feelings in an emotive Facebook post where she described Invisible Children as her 'rock' when she made several difficult transitions through high school and various colleges.

The participant, Tatum, said she had found 'some of her best friends in the entire world' at the organisation and described it as 'the most amazing experiences of my life'. Tatum explained that the organisation taught her about herself, and the world, and went on to post:

> You guys helped me find my passion and I honestly don't know how to express how thankful I am for the opportunities I've had since this all started. So many doors opened and so many connections made that I never would have even thought possible. I have so much love for Invisible Children…. ('Tatum': Facebook Post in Janurary 2015. Participant was in her mid-twenties, white female from the Midwest)

Tatum also described her last engagement with Invisible Children's commodity activism in the post when she stated that she had just purchased her 'last t-shirt ever' from the organisation. Yet, she also insinuated the far deeper meaning behind Invisible Children merchandise, which embodied the branding of their humanitarian identity and community ethos.



Image 8-27: 'Change-makers'. Image retrieved from Facebook on August 23, 2015.
The participants of the Invisible Children organisation and the Fourth Estate movement often referred to themselves as 'change-makers' and 'family'.

In contemporary society, where 'everyone is always having their attention divided between the world of people [they're] with and this "other" reality' (Turkle 2011: 1), Invisible Children tapped into the disenchantment of American youth in order to provide relief from feelings of confusion and isolation. As Jason Russell described previously, young people feel they are connected to everyone and everything at all times in this new digital era, yet at the same time functioning 'alone together' (Turkle 2011). Many of the participants were searching for value and meaning in an instantaneous generation that paradoxically contained highly fractured dynamics in human relations alongside highly connected ones. In this environment, Invisible Children provided a new connection. As the Invisible Children Director of Public & Media Relations, Jedidian Jenkins, argued: 'it isn't a charity, it's a relationship' (Invisible Children 2012). The Invisible Children leaders were creating an organisation that wasn't just about the individual or the cause, but also the community as a whole. This was described by Jason Russell in a recent interview with *Relevant* magazine when he stated:

> I know technology connects us, but in the end, we're very, very social. Already, millennials are seeing the limitations social media brings. Yeah, we're all connected and we feel cool about it and we love this tool. But more than anything, we want to see each other and be in a place that's like the real human touch. And that's what Invisible Children has constantly and consistently been about. (Russell 2014)

Russell's argument was deeply applicable to the Invisible Children participants and resonated with the community members, which was about humanity and the human connection. One participant also described the experience the organisation offered in a Facebook post just shortly after the organisation announced its closing:

> In a world like ours, it can be very easy to become discouraged and cynical about mankind and where our world is headed. We are surrounded by such negative news, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It's not hard to feel as though we're drowning in it all. And believe me, I was on the same boat for a long time. I'd been sucked into a destructive

> cycle of feeling inspired very quickly, but never actually acting on this newfound passion, and then falling out of the inspiration just as quickly. Over and over this happened, and I was quickly disheartened all the time about my lack of action. But this isn't a story about my failure, no. This is a small tribute to the people and organisation and ethos that helped me come alive. ('Jerry': Facebook post in December 2014. Participant was a male in his early twenties from Nevada)

As Jerry highlights, the majority of Invisible Children participants claimed that the organisation's community helped dispel despondency over belonging and life direction. They also enjoyed the sense of purpose that came with working on a humanitarian issue, which they said refocused their personal issues onto a greater cause that made them feel connected to their own humanity, and more importantly, the world around them. This was expressed by another participant in a public Facebook post when she described how she felt as a millennial in the supposedly 'me me me' generation:

> Invisible Children leaves a legacy of hope, passion, drive, justice, peace and action. Invisible Children has been a fundamental tool in telling the world that the millennial generation—my generation—isn't the 'me me me' generation. They've proven that youth worldwide are informed, inspired and willing to take action and demand justice. They've proven that war can be stopped peacefully. There is so much to celebrate and I consider myself extremely lucky to have been a part of it. ('Bethan': Facebook post in January 2015. The participant was a white female in her early twenties from the Alabama who was in college)

Bethan argued against negative perceptions of her millennial American generation and instead describes her generation as activists and humanitarians who are informed and inspired to create social change. As one Invisible Children employee stated after the closing of their offices: 'The world is getting some of the greatest dreamers, doers and shakers added to it every day and I know the story ahead of you is the kind history books write about' ('Aislin': Invisible Children employee in her early thirties from California). Another participant called the organisation: 'a movement that inspired a generation' ('Taj': participant in his early twenties from the Midwest).

As this chapter has explored, Invisible Children did, in fact, inspire a generation of young

people. Swartz argued that:

> To be a member of Invisible Children means to be a viewer, participant, wearer, reader, listener, commenter of and in the various activities, many mediated, that make up the movement. It is a massive, open-ended, evolving documentary 'story' unfurling across an expanding number of media forms (2012: 2).

Similarly, Kligler-Vilenchik et al. (2012) found that there were three critical aspects to the Invisible Children participants' experiences. Their 'shared media experience', sense of community, and desire to help others by creating social change were highlighted in the various interviews they conducted, which paralleled my research findings. A survey conducted six months prior to the release of *KONY 2012* by Karlin and Matthew (2012) pooled 2,173 Invisible Children supporters and reported specific participant responses regarding their participation in the Invisible Children movement: 'it made me my own person, and gave me confidence to believe I can change things in this world' (Karlin and Matthew 2012: 257). While the organisation's purpose was to end LRA violence in Central Africa, it became equally about a community of American millennials who were searching for value and significance in an increasingly complex technological world. For the organisation and its participants, Invisible Children was not just a polymedia event (Madianou 2013), it was a state of being, a religion unto itself. Invisible Children created a (poly)movement that was diverse not just in terms of its media diffusion, but also expansive in its widespread meanings, trajectories and applications. Invisible Children's focus on the community of American millennials was one of several microcosms functioning within the wider (poly)movement and, as this thesis explores, often contradicted or functioned independently of other microcosms within the movement, such as the military initiatives focused on control of Central Africa.



Image 9-1: Image retrieved from the Invisible Children website on January 1, 2013

Chapter Nine: Participation in Activism and Social (Media) Movements

This chapter offers an ethnographic insight into *KONY 2012*, looking specifically at how Invisible Children participants viewed themselves as humanitarian activists and participated in the Invisible Children movement, as well as *KONY 2012* and other social media linked movements or campaigns. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what *KONY 2012* and Invisible Children highlight in the new era of digital activism, humanitarian campaigns and social movements.

I. Invisible Children: Participation in Online Campaigns

Howard and Jones (2004) argue that citizen access to the Internet and its corresponding technologies has vastly altered global realities, both politically and socially, around the world. This was demonstrated in *KONY 2012* when, in March of 2012, Diane Sawyer, an American television presenter for ABC News, asked on her nightly show if *KONY 2012* represented 'a new way to move the world to action?'. In essence, Sawyer was asking if the

KONY 2012 movement marked a transformative, radical version of activism where people sitting at homes on their computers could change the lives of people elsewhere in the world through the click of a button or a social media post. The *KONY 2012* model of activism and humanitarian campaigning has become increasingly popular across various movements, ranging from #Occupy to the 'We are All…' movements that rely progressively on Internet based social action to inspire and coordinate activism. They often employ exciting visuals, powerful music and emotionally potent narratives to trigger sentiments, encourage action and represent specific values or practices. The digital component of activism and awareness in various forms of campaigning has become fundamental to their success. The more viral the campaign is, the more participation is received.

Participant observation for this research revealed that Invisible Children participants were often involved in various online awareness campaigns. The most popular uses of the photo filters amongst Invisible Children supporters observed through participant observation on Facebook were for Marriage Equality,[106] using the rainbow photo filter, and for the Paris Attacks of 2015, by employing the French flag photo filter. However, participants were also involved in other forms of online and traditional activism, particularly with various Invisible Children campaigns such as Zero LRA, as seen in Image 11, as well as 'Bring Back our Girls', as seen in Images 14–15. Most participants participated in The Ice Bucket Challenge and were active in online petitions, as well as the sit-ins for Invisible Children in areas like Washington, D.C. The Invisible Children participants I observed and interviewed had an average of 15 photos specifically relating to the Invisible Children ethos or a particular social issue, such as environmentalism, gender equality or animal rights.

[106] Most participants were likely unaware that Invisible Children was funded by several Evangelical, anti-gay organisations. The Invisible Children leaders were less involved in displaying support for marriage equality on social media.

Traditional forms of activism mainly took place through Invisible Children's organised events, while widespread forms of activism often occurred through forms of Internet activism, such as online petitions, viral fundraising and social media posts. As one participant stated in an interview:

> *KONY* was huge in getting people to realise that online activism can happen. Yeah, it's much different and people call it lazy activism, it's a lot more individualistic and it's more about the click of a button or a donation but it's amazing how things are changing… ('Juanita': mixed background, female in her early twenties studying at university in Texas. Skype interview in April 2014)

As this next section explores, Juanita's description of 'lazy activism', better known as 'slacktivism', was a central criticism of the movement, but also a key aspect of participation and awareness.



Images 9-2 and 9-3: (Left) Invisible Children participant displays support for Equal Marriage (Right) Invisible Children participant displays support for the Zero LRA campaign
Images retrieved from Facebook on November 1, 2015.





Images 9-4 and 9-5: Examples taken from various Invisible Children participants' Facebook photos. The last photo (bottom right) is a catchphrase from Invisible Children, which is shown here on a participant's t-shirt: 'your life is bigger than your best dream for it'
Images retrieved from Facebook on November 16, 2015.

i. The Ice Bucket Challenge: Employing 'Slacktivist' Techniques

The Invisible Children leaders had the ability to harness and co-opt fleeting Internet fads and viral sensations. This was particularly evident with the Ice Bucket Challenge, which became a regular point of discussion for the participants. The participants compared the activism techniques of the Ice Bucket Challenge to *KONY 2012* and, at the same time, the organisation used the Challenge to support their awareness methods. As an organisation, Invisible Children supported the Ice Bucket Challenge and created a parallel campaign for it, which was used to lay the groundwork for their belief in the power of social media-based campaigns and the ethos of awareness campaigns. They released an official statement supporting the Ice Bucket Challenge and stated:

> Here at Invisible Children, we believe wholeheartedly in the power

> social media has to create real change, with real people, in the real world. Technology has provided us with new means of communication to discuss the issues facing our world, and we are excited to see this global language grow. And as recently as May 2014, we aren't the only ones; Merriam-Webster has officially added the term hashtag to the English language dictionary. Times are changing, people, and it's about time we listen up. (Invisible Children 2014)



Image 9-6: '#icebucketchallenge…' Image retrieved from Invisible Children on July 2, 2015

Invisible Children's public support of the Ice Bucket Challenge involved the publication of three specific reasons why the organisation believed social media movements were important, and worth investing in, for millennial followers. Firstly, they argued for a philosophical understanding of power in numbers, highlighting the ease of taking action with friends and using collaboration as a key aspect of supporting and growing campaigns. Secondly, they contended that greater levels of awareness are associated with higher rates of fundraising, using the example of The ALS Association, which brought in $80 million after the Ice Bucket Challenge compared to the $2.5 million it made the year before. They also pointed to *KONY 2012*, which raised $26.5 million. Thirdly, Invisible Children explained that 'mass awareness moves mountains', which described the possibilities for global change that become viable through social media campaigns that go viral, further using the LRA bill, signed into action by former President Obama shortly after the film's release, to offer an insightful example (ibid).

Much like the traditional forms of activism, participants described their online activism as being far more complex than support for a specific cause. Instead, their online activism practices often had more to do with social relations and participation, or performance, within their social network. In essence, many described how viral campaigns have simultaneously become tied to various forms of social obligation and sociality. This was evident in The Ice Bucket Challenge, where the social practice of performing the challenge became a critical aspect to participating in one's social network. As one participant stated in an interview:

> People get involved in the Ice Bucket Challenge out of guilt. I donated but I didn't do it, it was so easy to just donate ten dollars with everything just right there and you just click but doing the whole challenge…I don't know…. everyone does it because they feel guilted into it. There is a lot of unconscious social pressure. ('Anya': Female in her early 20s. Facebook interview in December 2014. She was from New York, but now lives in California)

Many participants described how the Ice Bucket Challenge acted to represent their closest social ties within their largest networks of Facebook friends. The challenge became like an exchange system for participants, where they could perform a humanitarian or activist identity while also exploring and displaying their friendship network. This was described by one participant in an interview when she stated:

> You nominate people you think are going to hate doing it. And if you aren't nominated you feel left out, it's like a popularity contest. I got nervous when all of my friends had been nominated and I hadn't - I was so hurt when I thought I was *their* closest friend, but *they* didn't nominate me… why did they nominate HER?! ('Skye': Female in her early twenties, just finishing her college education. Interviewed through Facebook in December 2014)

Later in the interview, the participant suggested I use the nomination system for myself as a way to 'stay in touch' with family and friends. She also described a frustration with friends in her network who used the Ice Bucket Challenge to display their body and 'show off'. The Ice Bucket Challenge, in that sense, symbolises the narcissistic turn in humanitarian

and awareness campaigning as it has moved into digital spaces, acting as a wet t-shirt contest for disease fundraising. The 'good cause' element made it outwardly appear less narcissistic, but simultaneously allowed the narcissistic tendencies to be disguised, celebrated, and openly exploited. Participants also described the important element of social interaction that took place in the challenge, with some participants describing it as something 'fun' to do with others and describing a sense of connection that was communicated through the sharing process. One participant compared it to the Invisible Children model, stating:

> It's interesting for Invisible Children and for you know these organisations kind of catching on – like they did have trouble getting people to donate until now, until people wanted something to do especially if it's involved with social media, people want to… like do something online and put themselves online … It makes it fun. ('Klara': Early twenties, studying English at university. Interviewed through Facebook in November 2014)

I also observed this participant post her Ice Bucket Challenge on Facebook and select several of her closest friends to perform the challenge. The participant published a lively video of herself dumping recycled water over her head then screaming from the cold as she laughed and called out to her friends to donate. Another participant described the importance of 'doing something' and being involved in social networking while funding or supporting a specific cause:

> I mean yeah, sure you can donate ten dollars a month and that's awesome, not putting that down at all, that's great, I mean, Invisible Children always makes you feel so involved and stuff like that, and I feel like you can just donate money, but people want to do like something, people want dance-a-thons or you know, walk… you're doing something ('Rachel': The participant was 20 years old and female, studying at university. Interviewed in December of 2014 through Facebook and Skype)

This participant also posted a video of herself on Facebook performing the Ice Bucket Challenge and selecting several friends to also make the videos. She also posted about her

donation to the cause. Similarly, one participant described a feeling of wanting the donation and participatory model to be interactive, highlighting how it creates deeper meaning:

> It makes it more meaningful. And to ask other people to do it and to see your friends' videos and chat with.. yeah it's a lot more fun and meaningful, I guess. ('Jane': Female in her early twenties, studying in her final year of university. Interviewed through Facebook in December 2014)

Jane's Facebook activity was synonymous with her enjoyment of participating in specific events or causes through social media, as well as real world spaces. She often posted about rallies, fundraising events or humanitarian causes. Jane also took on the Ice Bucket Challenge and was involved in Invisible Children's activism, both online and offline. Many participants, including Jane also described the general frustration they felt regarding those who criticised their participation in viral movements such as The Ice Bucket Challenge or *KONY 2012*. Participants often felt they were given little opportunity to participate in anything without external criticism and social scrutiny. This was described by one participant when she said:

> Oh my gosh the Ice Bucket Challenge destroyed me… I was like I understand we're in a drought, so be creative… like people just want to find something wrong because they feel guilty that they're not helping… because that way they will try to feel less guilty about it and it bugs me. That's the same with Invisible Children…think of the small little organisations trying to catch literally the worst world war in the world. Yeah it's going to be kind of hard, like, so, no it frustrates me. ('Mazzie': Female in her early twenties studying biology. Face to face interview conducted in July 2014)

This participant also changed her profile photo on Facebook after the Paris attacks to show solidarity with France through the Facebook French flag filter. She then felt criticised by Facebook friends and posted an article titled 'Support for Paris Does Not Mean You've Forgotten Everyplace Else' and wrote:

> We should not make others feel bad for what they choose to support. I understand that terrible things are happening all over the world. Take

> this time to educate others on these different issues versus tearing them down for supporting Paris during this time (ibid).

This sentiment was echoed when another participant described their frustration with the 'slacktivist' criticisms surrounding various online campaigns, including *KONY 2012* and the Ice Bucket Challenge. She stated:

> The second anything somewhat good that's like really trying to do something, people just have to find a way to shut it down. ('Svetlana': late teens female from the Midwest hoping to attend college. Interview conducted on Facebook in September 2014)

Svetlana and Mazzie both expressed anger over the blanket criticism they felt they received from *KONY 2012* and the Ice Bucket Challenge. Svetlana felt both movements represented an individual's unique right and freedom to participate, without judgement, just as individuals have the freedom to choose not to participate. This social backlash from online participation took place with both The Ice Bucket Challenge and *KONY 2012*. Another participant described this as being an issue of the culture in her wider society. She described an incident when someone confronted her for having a KONY 2012 sticker on her computer and asked if she was embarrassed to still support the cause after Russell's breakdown. The participant said she spoke openly with the stranger and explained the situation with the LRA and the organisation's mission, which eventually convinced the person and they 'realised something new'. She went on to explain:

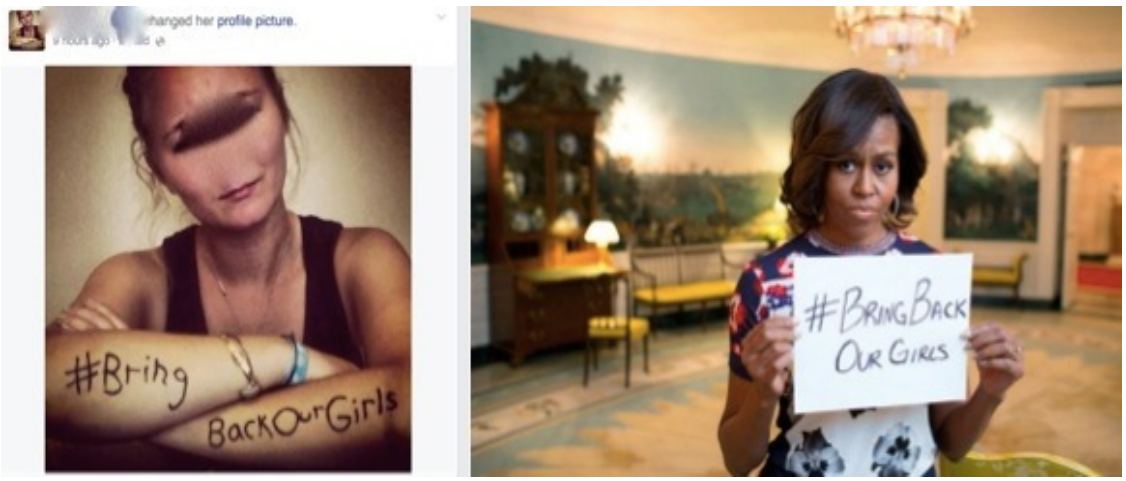
> But then with all these campaigns there's an enormous fall out…the criticism about water wasted for one (Ice Bucket Challenge) or with *KONY* ('Annie': Participant was in her early twenties. She was a white female studying in California. Face to face interview in August 2014)

When we met for the interview, the Invisible Children sticker still sat proudly on her laptop and her Facebook page contained several profile images and landscape photos of Invisible Children causes, such as Zero LRA and *KONY 2012*. Annie, like many of the participants, felt that many new forms of activism are more easily criticised than supported, as evident

in the *KONY 2012* meme shaming shown in image 9-7 (Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson 2016). Annie expressed the challenges and critiques communicated by others and the ease with which people judged their participation, particularly after Russell's breakdown, rather than seeking out a deeper understanding or feeling open to participating in new forms of activism.



Image 9-7: A meme posted by an Invisible Children participant, with the comment: 'to reinforce everything we said last night'
The meme was in reference to an Invisible Children meeting held at amongst an IC college group in order to discuss the backlash against *KONY 2012*. Such memes also acted as 'moral police', shaming those who participate in online activism (Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson 2016). Image retrieved from Invisible Children participant Facebook post on July 4, 2013.



Images 9-8 and 9-9: #BringBackOurGirls was another movement that went viral and was popular amongst Invisible Children participants
#BringBackOurGirls was a campaign aimed at rescuing the 276 female students who were kidnapped by Boko Haram in April 2014. The campaign was backed by former First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, and popularised on social media, as well as through celebrity endorsements. Image 9-8 features an Invisible Children activist. Images retrieved from Facebook and BBC on June 5, 2015.

While participants felt there were criticisms and controversies around the *KONY 2012* campaign, as well as other social media inspired campaigns, they also believed Invisible Children harnessed social media in a powerful way and had a positive influence on their lives generally. They often described the ways in which it contributed to their involvement in traditional forms of activism and humanitarian campaigning. One participant stated:

> I have gotten more involved with political issues and am actually taking action to make change and am constantly looking for ways to improve my immediate as well as distant community. It had a massive outreach. And it gave a lot of NGOs and campaigns the idea that this could be done through social media. ('Jackson': Participant was from California and studying in Los Angeles. He was a white male in his early twenties. Facebook interview in September 2014)

Jackson not only became more involved with his community, but also took a great interest in politics, highlighting Invisible Children as the catalyst to his participatory transformation. Many participants also often commented that they felt the organisation helped them create a community where they felt connected and found meaning in creating change. One participant stated:

> Everyone in the IC network on campus is pretty close and we are all connected to each other in one way or another. And we have done a lot of activism events too, like going downtown to Orange with just tons of people. It's been amazing. ('Lisa': Participant was from San Diego and studying at university. She was a female in her mid twenties. Facbook interview conducted August 2014)

As Lisa described, the participants from Chapman University developed a deep connection and commitment to one another through their time at Invisible Children. Lisa described the various events and traditional forms of activism undertaken by the group, as well as the feelings of community that developed through 'connected civics' (Ito et al. 2015). Another participant described the emotion behind being involved in on the ground activism with Invisible Children at a rally in Washington, D.C:

> A few moments after that I started to see people's heads pop over the

> hill, and then all of a sudden there was nothing but a sea of people wearing red *KONY 2012* shirts. It was without a doubt one of the coolest things I have ever seen---thousands upon thousands of people taking over the streets of Washington, D.C., passing the White House and ending up at the Washington Monument, all to show their desire to end this conflict and bring peace back to the region ('Ashley': Participant was in her early twenties and from Kansas. Interview on Facebook in October 2014)

Ashley painted a powerful portrait of Invisible Children activism in Washington, D.C., describing the deeply emotional experience of participating in the movement. While some participants shyed away from discussing their Invisible Children activism after the backlash of *KONY 2012*, Ashley excitedly described the sea of t-shirts that to her symbolised the strength of their generation's hope for social change. Ashley also used an image from the Washington, D.C. protest as her profile photo on Facebook to symbolise its significance. In the photo, her and a few friends are standing in front of the Washington monument in their *KONY 2012* t-shirts with red bandanas, smiling and holding up peace signs. Another participant described the empowerment she felt from activism within Invisible Children, combined with her observation of other movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street:

> And when we have done campaigns and contacted our local politicians and things you don't realise how easy it all actually is…. like something gets done, a new bill gets passed and you realise wow it is really possible to make change. I followed the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street too and I think there's a much more positive future with social media to make change. ('Imani': Facebook interview in October 2014. Participant was living in Los Angeles and attending film school. She was in her mid twenties)

Imani described a strong sense of empowerment through social media, explaining the socio-political transformations she witnessed, as well as the development of her own agency. Imani's landscape photo on Facebook also read 'you are more powerful than you think you are', which was a popular slogan used by many Invisible Children participants. Such long-term supporters of Invisible Children were often heavily involved in activism

and connected to the Invisible Children community both on and offline, acting as a form of 'thick' engagement (Zuckerman 2013). On the other hand, very few *KONY 2012* participants who were not previously Invisible Children supporters took part in forms of traditional activism, such as sit-ins and protests. Those participants were more likely to feel a momentary compassion for the campaign and post about or share the video on their social media profile through 'thin' engagement (ibid). However, the practices of online activism, such as the changing of Facebook profile photos to support a specific cause, were popular methods of participation across the spectrum of participants.



Image 9-10: Invisible Children slogan
Image retrieved from Invisible Children website on November 9th, 2015.



Image 9-11. Facebook caption: 'Enthusiasm for making a difference. I don't hate it. Here are the super supporters'
Image retrieved from Invisible Children on Facebook April 10th, 2015. The photo was taken in Washington, D.C. at the Cover the Night event.

The long-term participants of Invisible Children were not 'slacktivists' who worked solely online or congregated socially; instead, the supporters seemed highly connected to social media and digitally fluent, but simultaneously fully ensconced in the activism of Invisible Children. As well as the countless sit-ins in Washington, D.C., many took on months of door-to-door fundraising in schools and neighbourhoods and were heavily involved in both the team-building and development of the organisation. For example, in 2006, Invisible Children had 80,000 volunteers in 125 cities around the world conduct a 'Global Night Commute', where activists slept in parks and public spaces to raise awareness of Uganda's child 'night commuters'. In 2008, during 'The Rescue', they had 85,000 participants, including popular television show host Oprah Winfrey and various U.S. representatives, conduct another peaceful protest to raise awareness of LRA violence and demand that the US government take action to arrest Joseph Kony (Invisible Children 2015). It was clear to see how, after over ten years, Invisible Children had created a large network of Invisible Children supporters around the country who were digitally connected

and who socially embodied the ethos of the group (Graham 2012). One participant, who was 14 years old at the time of his involvement, described his experience of taking part in activism and felt inspired not only taking part, but seeing others in his city also participate. However, he also described the mixed reactions to the film, which were 'good and bad' – he felt viewers were shocked and interested, while others felt it was a scam:

> My mother posted a picture on Facebook of me holding a poster up and people talked about how horrible it was for me to be 'brainwashed' into the idea of it ('Jones': Interview conducted over Facebook in April 2014. The participant is a 16-year old, white male from San Diego, California)

Jones' dedication to 'Cover the Night' was exemplary amongst the participants whom I interviewed for this research. After his activism at the 'Cover the Night' event, he began to get bullied on Facebook by Invisible Children sceptics, but he remained determined in his belief in the organisation. He described the evening in our interview when he said:

> Me, my mother and my mother's boyfriend went around our city all night on the 'Cover the Night - 2013'. We drove around putting up posters everywhere, like everywhere. While doing so we saw other people putting up posters on sides of stores, near streets, etc. It was very exciting, and fun to help the KONY 2012 project even though we were only spreading awareness. ('Jones': ibid)

However, while most Invisible Children participants were traditionally deeply involved with activism within the organisation, their drive to stay active for rallies and Invisible Children events began to dwindle after the rise and fall of *KONY 2012* and Jason Russell's subsequent breakdown. One participant, a young female teenager from the Netherlands, described her lack of involvement in the 'Cover the Night' event, which was organised as the pinnacle night of activism after the release of *KONY 2012*. She explained:

> A certain sense of excitement I felt upon first seeing the video had largely faded away over the weeks that followed the video's release. I wanted to trust the video, which I remember had impacted me upon first watching it and recognized that the video would never have gotten the attention it did had they given every little detail of the LRA's actions

> and history but subconsciously I did turn a little sceptical. ('Camilla': Interview conducted over Facebook and Skype in November 2014)

While this participant had been a leading activist for Invisible Children for several years, who ran the organisation's groups throughout Europe and who was even showcased by the organisation on their website as a star activist, she openly stated in her interview that her passion had 'faded away' after the film's release. The participant described how she felt disconnected from the movement due to its American focus and expensive shipping costs for the 'Action Kit' and also detailed the underlying scepticism that overpowered her desire to be involved. This was evident in other interviews as well. For instance, another participant, Barry, described what it was like working with students in the classroom setting after *KONY 2012*. He told me that his students were already familiar with the organisation due to his prior class lessons on the LRA and that, after the release of *KONY 2012*, 'everyone was talking about it'. Barry explained how the excitement of *KONY 2012* broke down barriers between groups and helped to transcend 'all the boundaries that kids put between themselves'. However, he told me that, in the midst of the momentum, Russell's breakdown occurred and 'all the energy went away' ('Barry': Male, roughly 35-40 years of age, working as a high school teacher in the Midwest. Facebook interview conducted in June 2014). What Barry explained was essentially the extent to which Invisible Children needed a charismatic leader like Jason Russell to keep the participants' 'energy' alive. Without a belief in Jason and what he stood for, many young people across the country simply lost their desire to support the organisation and belief in 'something bigger than themselves'. This was reaffirmed by another participant:

> At the time, Like I remember watching it, like being so naïve the first time, I didn't understand any of it. But I – I was so shocked that I didn't know. This thing has been going on and this man is doing all this and I had no idea. I'd heard about, you know, you know, Iraq and all these other places and Afghanistan and the Middle East and all these other issues, and I'm like - but this – and you always think 'oh starving kids in Africa' and are being you know super naïve about it. And then Jason

> had this breakdown … it was kind of like 'oh that's cool that they're doing it' but I'm not, didn't end up getting involved. ('Sam': Face to face interview conducted in July 2014. The participant was Jewish and in her early twenties studying at university)

Sam was also heavily involved with and supportive of the organisation. However, after Jason's breakdown, her involvement with the 'Cover the Night' event diminished and she began to question the organisation. Many participants described this contradictory battle: on one hand, they believed in and loved the organisation, which made them feel empowered and gave them a sense of security and belonging, yet, on the other hand, they felt that the organisation's goals became somewhat disbanded after Russell's breakdown, alongside the overall cricisim of *KONY 2012*.

II. Recruitment and Campaigning

Invisible Children placed emphasis on social media and participant involvement to create change since their inception, often recruiting people at a young age through school film screenings and fundraising. This was described by one participant, who argued that the recruitment of young people was the key to the organisation's long-term activism and humanitarian campaigning:

> I think at a younger age you need to teach them, like well there are – there are still problems in the world, nothing's perfect yet. Like you take a stand now, because if you start when you're 12 years old, you know, raise money from your neighborhood, put on I don't know, a lemonade stand, if you start then and start on your passion, then you can really carry it when you're older because you've been working at it, I think ('Cindy': Female, early twenties from Arizona, studying at university. Face to face interview in July 2014)

Cindy described how youth involvement in activism or social efforts can lead to higher retention rates for adult participation in political and social spaces. Cindy also described her parents' activist efforts when she was a child and the interest it sparked in her own engagement. Cindy supported various causes on Facebook through photographs, posts

and links to articles or events, including Bring Back Our Girls and Zero LRA, as well as Marriage Equality. Alongside emphasis on incorporating young people, participants stated that social media involvement was a critical aspect of their fundraising, recruitment, humanitarian campaigning and activism. The various Invisible Children campaigns, such as Zero LRA, relied heavily on the use of Facebook and other social media platforms for fundraising and awareness. The Invisible Children participants used Facebook, in particular, to stay in touch with other participants, as well as potential donors, and regularly posted images and updates for the campaigns. One participant described this process when she said:

> Posting images and things to my Facebook page is definitely a huge help when it comes to spreading awareness to my family and friends. Social media allows you to reach a huge amount of people at once, so for me to post a fundraising link or an update from IC about a group of returnees, was much easier than individually telling every friend or family member what I was up to. ('Amanda': Facebook interview in August 2014. Participant was from the Midwest and in her early twenties)

Amanda wrote to me through Facebook and described her participation in Invisible Children's various activities. She highlighted the network of friends she had built who either were directly involved or had an awareness of the organisation through her participation. Amanda pointed out the drawback of mass communication, which she said was impersonal but also a 'lifesaver' and noted its ease, spreadable impact and 'connective action' (Bennett and Sergerberg 2012). Many participants like Amanda relied on social media, particularly Facebook, to raise awareness for the organisation. Another participant stated:

> Facebook is a great way to share my activities with my family, even if it was just a picture of my team and I at some local activity with our host family; something that technically has nothing to do with IC… within my small FB community, a lot of good came from using social media. ('Rene': Interview conducted through Q&A conversation through Facebook in November 2014. She was a white female in her late teens applying to colleges)

Rene described her usage of Facebook and argued that it was crucial to the recruitment, awareness and fundraising for the organisation. Another participant supported this strategy for using Facebook when he stated:

> I feel that the news for Kony and spreading the word for it is made much more easy (especially nowadays) when it can be passed around much more quickly online. ('Matthew': Facebook interview in April 2014. The participant was in his twenties and from Colorado)

However, one participant from Europe explained her feelings of disillusionment with Invisible Children's mission and its various techniques. She described the process of fundraising for the organisation through social media and felt that their campaigns could have used funds for better purposes:

> I believe in Zero LRA, I support IC's mission statement. I love the innovation of IC's team and think much of its power lies in that, but I also had a little bit of a hard time with the 'perks' one could claim throughout the IC campaign. They shipped things over here on several occasions – an IC pin and bracelet, an example of a flyer and a hardcover book 'Forty Chances' – and every time I couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt, realising that money was definitely better of being spent on things other than overseas shipping costs. ('Camilla': Interview conducted over Facebook and Skype in November 2014. The participant was a teenager from the Netherlands)

Camilla described the technologising and commodification of action (Chouliaraki 2010) in the interview. She felt the organisation's campaign direction had made it increasingly difficult to raise funds and she personally began to question the organisation. Camilla also explained how Invisible Children merchandise was shipped internationally to her as part of her reward for leading the cause in Europe, instead of dedicating those funds to Uganda. While Camilla detailed how Invisible Children had inspired her to become an activist and influenced her university degree focus, she was not the only one to struggle with recruitment and activism after *KONY 2012*. Often, participants detailed what it was like going to schools to recruit new participants, which became increasingly difficult after the rise and fall of *KONY 2012*. One participant described the challenge of fundraising after

the controversy surrounding Jason Russell and the *KONY 2012* campaign:

> The biggest challenge this time was apathy, as a lot of students saw *KONY 2012* as a fad of sorts, and since it was no longer on every social media site, it wasn't at the forefront of their mind…('Matthew': Male, early twenties from Colorado. Interview conducted over Facebook in April 2014)

Attempts to communicate the need for continual support lessened as the Invisible Children participants faced increasing resistance. Another participant similarly detailed what it was like hosting school functions after *KONY 2012*. The participant, Amanda, felt inspired by the organisation's ability to change the minds of the individuals they spoke to despite the cynicism and dwindling support. She told me how she was approached by a teenage boy after their school presentation who said 'all my friends said you were going to come and show us some pictures of sad African kids and then ask for our money, and then keep all of it for yourself'. The participant said the presentation had convinced the teenager otherwise and he vowed to continue supporting the cause since:

> Everyone thinks we're lazy, but now I can tell people we helped pass a bill that is working to end a war in Africa. I've always thought teenagers can change the world, and now I know they can ('Amanda': Facebook interview in August 2014. Participant was from the Midwest and in her early twenties)

As Amanda highlights, while most long-term supporters of Invisible Children grappled with challenges and criticisms post-*KONY 2012*, many remained consistent in their beliefs about the power of young people to create social change as millennial activists.[107] However, public support for the cause continued on a downward spiral.

[107] In order to increase enthusiasm after *KONY 2012*, Invisible Children invited its activists to take on creative fundraising techniques and highlighted the most successful participants who were praised on their site for being leaders of social change..

III. The 'Slacktivists' of Invisible Children

It is important to distinguish two groups within the *KONY 2012* support base: the long-term Invisible Children activists and the temporary *KONY 2012* participants who 'liked', 'shared' or gave a one-time donation to the cause. A leading participant from Chapman University who helped run her university's Invisible Children group described this distinction to me:

> There is definitely a big distinction between the people on campus who are involved in the movement and who have a very strong sense of community around the campus and with their friends and the people who posted online and forgot about it the next day… ('April': Christian, female in her early twenties studying at university. Facebook interview in October 2014)

As April described, there was a difference between those who simply 'liked' or 'shared' the *KONY 2012* film when it first came out and the participants who had spent nearly ten years immersed in on-the-ground activism. Most long-term activists expressed their frustration with the short-term participants, who cast a long shadow of 'slacktivism' onto the work of Invisible Children's supporters.[108]

Invisible Children's participants felt that social media activism was the most effective form of activism in the age of the Internet. They expressed an understanding of the accusation of 'slacktivism' and felt that their long-term, on-the-ground participation in the movement was overshadowed by the viral *KONY 2012* campaign, which was largely a 'slacktivist' experience. This was expressed by a participant who posted about 'slacktivism' and the organisation's movement. On a Facebook post, she described Invisible Children's early use

[108] April also outlined the smaller groups and cliques within the organisation that developed, as well as the hierarchy in Invisible Children based on who generated the highest amount of revenue in fundraising. As mentioned previously, this may have had more to do with the participant's social class, as the participant who raised the most money for the organisation did so through elite family business connections.

of media and how they 'opened the eyes of the younger generation to see the world'. The participant explained the impact of Invisible Children's philosophy and activist culture, which she felt was demonstrated through their various tours and medias, but argued:

> Slacktivism is something we have never endorsed. Clicking a link or liking a status was never meant to be the end of the story. But the introduction to a new story, where a worldview defined by borders is outdated. ('Sydney': Facebook post in March 2014. The participant was in her early twenties and female, from the South)

However, other participants equally argued that the global awareness that was created, albeit slacktivist in some ways, was more important. One participant described this when he pointed towards movements like Ferguson, with it's use of hashtags, and also highlighted the key role of the slackitivist techniques often inherent in social media, which were important in the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. The participant went on to say: 'you need awareness to have activism' and believed that 'there's a much more positive future with social media to make change' ('Bill': The participant was in his early twenties from California. Facebook interview in September 2014). Bill, in essence, touched on how Invisible Children paved the way for other hashtag movements, such as Ferguson, through 'opinion-based social identity' (Thomas, McGarty et al. 2015). He also explained simply, but profoundly, the complexity of slacktivist critiques, when online activism is often intended to act as a precursor for 'thick' forms of engagement and participation. Other participants explained how the organisation inspired them to become politically and socially minded:

> It has really been amazing and has made such a HUGE impact on my life. I have gotten more involved with political issues and am actually taking action to make change and am constantly looking for ways to improve my immediate as well as distant community. ('Joseph': early twenties white male from the Midwest. Facebook interview in October 2014)

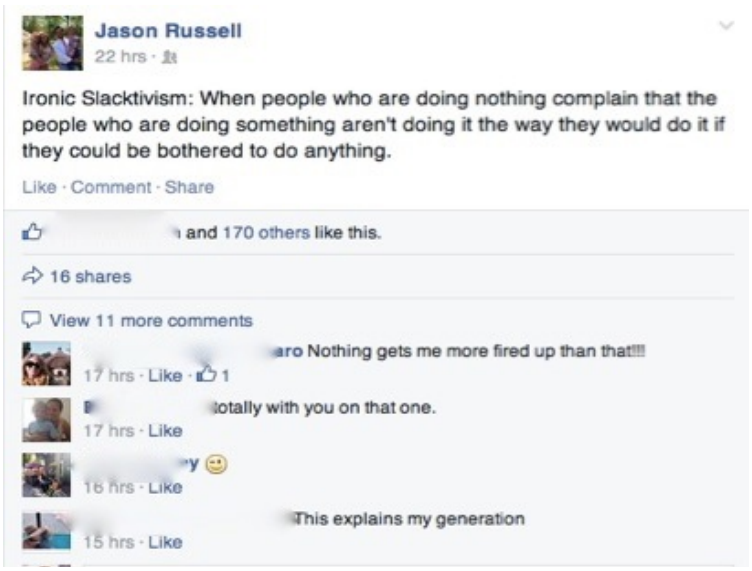


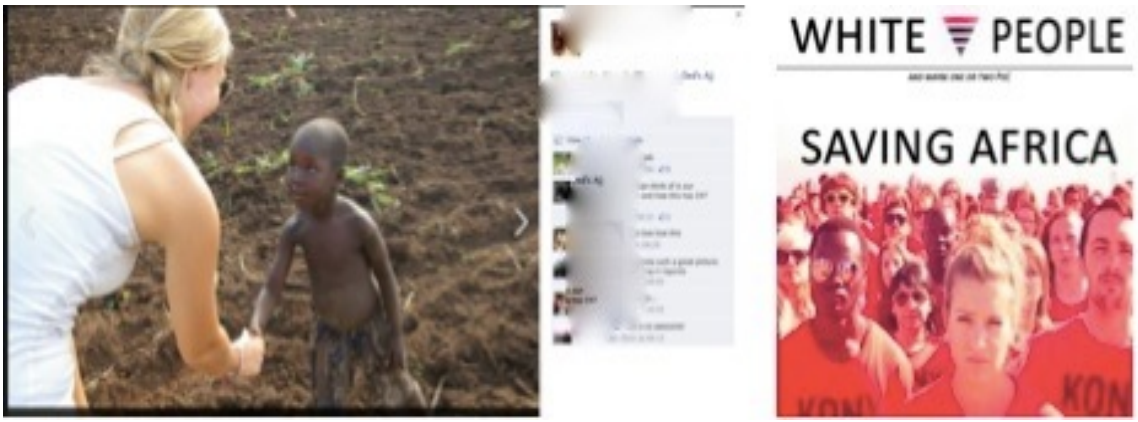
Image 9-12: Jason Russell's post about 'slacktivism'
Russell posted: 'Ironic Slacktivism: When people who are doing nothing complain that the people who are doing something aren't doing it the way they would do it if they could be bothered to do anything'. Someone commented on the post 'This explains my generation'. 171 people 'liked' the post. Image retrieved from Facebook on November 9, 2015.

One participant expanded on the controversy of online activism by describing a belief that her generation differed from previous generations in that activism was a part of daily life for most millennials. She described the various ways social media is employed for campaigns and explained how activism had evolved from her parents' generation. Belinda believed that social media activism was changing the way the world worked and making social change more viable:

> My parents have never really been involved in activism; it's really just our generation that has taken things to a new direction….but when they saw what we were doing they got really involved too; they were like wow this is amazing actually. ('Belinda': Early twenties and studying in San Diego as a graduate student. Facebook interview in November 2014)

In essence, many of the millennial Invisible Children activists felt very positive and idealistic about their ability to create social change and felt uniquely empowered to do so despite the criticisms surrounding *KONY 2012* and its 'slacktivism' on social media.

IV. The White Saviour

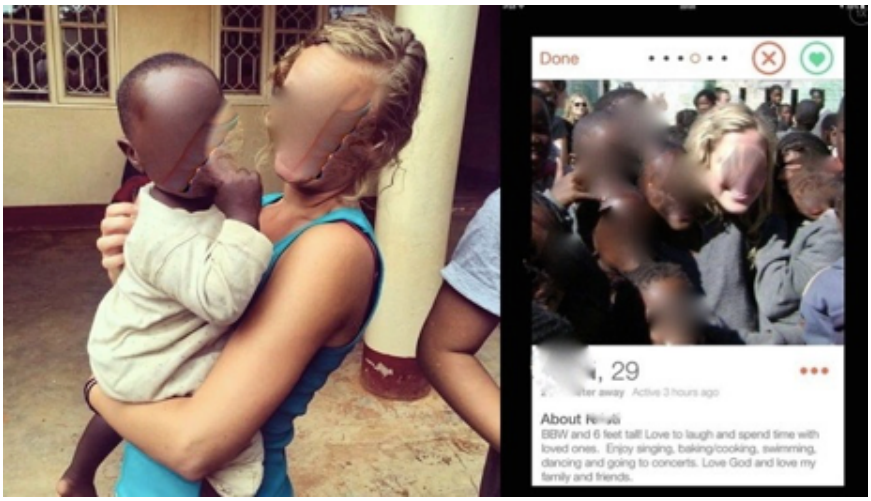


Images 9-13 and 9-14. (Left) Facebook image posted by an Invisible Children participant, showing her doing volunteer work in Uganda. (Right) Image retrieved from Tumblr on December 1, 2014. The image conveys a popular criticism of *KONY 2012*

The visual representation of humanitarian aid work was popular amongst Invisible Children's participants, particularly on Facebook. Many participants displayed images of themselves conducting volunteer work in Africa, which often involved posing with African children in rural areas or next to newly built schools. Such humanitarian social media images, usually taken during an aid or school trip, reinforce the stereotype of the 'Other' and raise questions about the 'spectatorship of suffering' (Chouliaraki 2013) in humanitarianism and the aid industry. Often, the visual images from their humanitarian aid work were used to raise awareness within their social media community and express their support for Invisible Children. However, it has been argued that the popular imagery of impoverished African children is often used to draw in Western spectators and create emotional immediacy and action through campaign spectacles, attempting to combat compassion fatigue in a way that commodifies the 'Other' (Chouliaraki 2013; Brough 2012; Sarukkai 1997; Wright 2014). It further raises criticisms about the 'White Man's Burden' (Kipling 1899; Easterly 2006) and postcolonial tendencies in American humanitarianism to view Africa as a series of suffering images. For example, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag argued that postcolonial Africa:

> …exists in the consciousness of the general public in the rich world – besides through its sexy music – mainly as a succession of unforgettable photographs of large-eyed victims, starting with figures in the famine lands of Biafra in the late 1960s to the survivors of the genocide of nearly a million Rwandan Tutsis in 1994 and, a few years later, the children and adults whose limbs were hacked off during of the programme of mass terror conducted by the RUF, the rebel forces of Sierre Leone (61–62).

Sontag argued that these images reinforce stereotypes and that 'these sights carry a double message. They show a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired. They confirm that this is the sort of thing which happens in that place' (ibid: 71). Furthermore, the 'Other' is 'regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone … who also sees' (ibid: 71–71). The controversies surrounding contemporary humanitarianism are explored in more detail in the remaining chapters. Currently, it is worth considering the images as artefacts, which have the ability to represent past events, information and postcolonial ways of thinking (or seeing) in new online, social media spaces.



Images 9-15 and 9-16: (left) Invisible Children participant in Uganda (right) Humanitarians of Tinder
Images retrieved from Facebook and 'Humanitarians of Tinder' on November 2, 2014.

While the participants I interviewed unanimously spoke about Joseph Kony as 'evil' and reiterated that he must be arrested, only one participant, Jay, spoke about the situation in Uganda with a holistic understanding of the region's complex history of unrest. From the Acholi region of Uganda, Jay faced severe hardship when he was abducted by the LRA for

several years. When discussing Joseph Kony, he stated:

> As per my side, I say Kony has done a lot of atrocities against innocent people of northern Uganda including children, youth, women, men and elders by rape, mutilation, robbery and massive murder. Much as he was guilty for all those atrocities, to some extent, he was right because the government of Uganda led by Yoweri Museveni Kaguta who is the current president of Uganda since 1986 was neglecting the people of the North (Acholi) and that is why Kony started his rebellion in order to rescue his people (Acholi). ('Jay': Interview conducted over Skype in October 2014 while the participant was in Uganda. He was a male in his early twenties)

Jay's understanding of the conflict is situated in his knowledge of the situation in the region, which was vastly complex. However, I discovered that many of the Invisible Children participants, even those high in the ranks of the organisation, often had very little information about the complexities of the conflict, with the exception of co-founders like Jason Russell and Bobby Bailey. Many participants travelled across the United States for roughly six months with former child soldier, Jay, who stated that Kony 'started his rebellion in order to rescue his people', yet not a single participant seemed aware of this. In the interviews, with the exception of the founders, I found answers to be unclear and less informed about the conflict. This included an interview conducted with an academic who had completed several research projects on Invisible Children. When asked about the conflict and general information about the region, the academic stated it was not her field, despite acting as a lead advisor and board member for the organisation, which included advising to send U.S. troops to the region. In this sense, the lack of knowledge regarding the LRA and the conflict in the region represented a top-down lack of awareness. When asked about the LRA, Joseph Kony and the conflict in the region, one lead participant of Invisible Children said that she 'did not have the facts', but that she 'had a lot of opinions'. In other words, she felt deeply passionate about the cause, but realised she was also not entirely informed about it:

> I think some people are, and there's definitely levels of passion….But

> for the most part at least on my end, like I wouldn't feel personally… I would not feel that confident like going in and giving a lecture on like all the politics, cuz I would have like no idea. I'm sure other people would, but I would call them like a middle tier type of thing, I feel pretty confident, I know what's going on with the LRA and what Invisible Children's doing, but …I just have a lot of opinions, I don't really have facts on me but… ('Eugena': The participant was a female, in her early twenties, studying in her final year of university. Skype interview in November 2014)

Eugena acted as the president of her university's Invisible Children club and was a key leader in their fundraising events. Despite this, Eugena's response was not uncommon: many participants felt deeply passionate about the movement, its culture, ethos and community, but had a limited understanding of the conflict they were attempting to stop. Rather than nuanced answers, I received generalised statements that seemed to describe a simplistic story of good versus evil where the participants served as heroes to invisible populations. For instance, another participant posted on Facebook about her hope to have Joseph Kony arrested, the thought of which gave her an 'incredible feeling':

> When he is caught, I will revel in knowing that I had the chance to help put an end to something so horrific! I just want to continue to thank you guys for allowing me to be a part of this and to help as much as I can. You guys are the American Dream and truly something remarkable and the world we live in now needs more people like you!! ('Tara: Facebook post in June 2014. Participant was from the Midwest in her mid-twenties)

Tara was enthusiastic about capturing Kony, outlining a world where organisations such as Invisible Children could act as officers of global justice. The majority of participants simply believed in the Invisible Children catchphrase that 'global injustice anywhere is the responsibility of people everywhere' (Invisible Children 2012). One participant summed up this ethos when he said:

> The through line to all of my memories and everything I did while at Invisible Children, and everything that everyone who still works there does, is this: we believe in something bigger than ourselves. We believe that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. ('Shad': Facebook public post in December 2014. He was a male, early twenties,

from Illinois)

Only one participant mentioned that, upon joining the organisation, she had a confused identification with the 'white saviour going into Africa', which she eventually realised and shared openly as problematic:

> At the time, I was drawn to the idea of being a 'white savior' going in and saving the kids from Africa. Once I became more involved in this organization in particular, I learned how to move out of my privilege and into a stronger space of meaning and compassion. It has really been amazing and has made such a HUGE impact on my life ('Blair': Face to face interview in August 2014. The participant was a female in her early twenties studying at university)

Sentiments about the 'white savior', or 'the white savior industrial complex' (Cole 2012), where participation acts as a 'big emotional experience that validates privilege' were also evident in the ways some participants spoke about 'Africa' and their time there. For instance, one young woman I interviewed was compelled to take action by creating her own non-profit organisation in Uganda after screening the Invisible Children documentary. In her blog, she described her upcoming move to Uganda stating: 'This little blonde lady is packing up and heading off to the motherland' ('Kim': early twenties, white female from California. Blog post from October 2011). She later said: 'Here we are truly loved' when describing her experience of driving down the dirt roads of Uganda, where children waved at her as she passed. Referring to the African continent as her 'motherland' revealed the ways in which many young participants, particularly those with Christian missionary values, enacted a neo-colonial mentality over the African 'Other', where they felt 'truly loved' and admired as the 'white saviour'.

Most commonly, participants of the research described their brief trips to Uganda after becoming involved with Invisible Children and offered statements about how the trip inspired and changed them:

> I was inspired to go to Africa after I attended my first Invisible Children documentary viewing. I wept. It broke me. I went to Africa shortly after in 2012. It changed my life & rocked my world. I even felt moved to donate my Invisible Children shirt to someone in need…as an act of symbolism. ('Jericha': Early twenties, female from the South. Interview conducted through Facebook in November 2014)

Jericha felt the donation of her Invisible Children t-shirt to a Ugandan made up an important part of her 'voluntourism' and her interview highlighted the fragile line between adventure travel and the spectatorship of suffering, as described by Chouliaraki (2013). Other participants were inspired by the film and took action by travelling to Uganda through educational programmes or other volunteer-based initiatives. One participant stated:

> Seeing this film shattered my reality and helped cultivate my passion for working alongside people in Uganda. Since 2008, I have been back to Uganda six other times. Each summer I have had the privilege to co-lead service trips for high school and college students. These trips provided the participants with the opportunity to complete a hands-on service project and to also witness the ground projects as a whole… ('Sarah Jessica': early twenties from California, but currently living in Uganda. Facebook post from January 2013)

While it is difficult to know what sort of change was created from these participant-led initiatives and programmes in Uganda, the example serves to demonstrate the complexity of viewpoints expressed by the participants: some informed, some passionate and some well-meaning, but others possibly harmful, since the 'confluence of practices, processes, and institutions that reify historical inequities…. ultimately validate white privilege' (Anderson 2013: 39).

The majority of Invisible Children supporters interviewed were from white backgrounds and many were affiliated with Christianity, including the founders of the organisation. However, while Invisible Children had a large Christian base, few practising Christians responded to requests for interviews. In this research, only two of the participants interviewed were of African descent, with one of these two participants expressing mixed

feelings about Invisible Children.[109] In one of the interviews, a participant described how she initially felt enamoured by the movement and the feeling of being unique as one of the only non-white participants:

> Like, we did a sleep-in in DC…at the time it was like a really big deal for us, and that was probably my first experience on a personal level with any kind of large-scale activist um, type thing … and being mixed race … this thing that was like part of our identity that made us separate from the group but also like was something that we could hold onto I guess. ('Marnie': African American, early twenties and studying in San Diego as a graduate student. Face to face interview in August 2014)

The participant went on to describe the sit-ins as being 'mostly white people' and argued 'it's just like this huge extension of white privilege' (ibid). Upon reflection, she felt her early activism with Invisible Children was fraught with inconsistencies and contradiction. She described this in our interview when she said:

> It was like activist depression, like it just became disillusion and like you know, going on these like fucking acid trips and like paying for you know … like just trying to get money to pay for travel and having breakdowns where they were like, you know 'we're never going to end genocides', like 'this is not going to be the year we end genocide, this all sucks', I'm like, no, how much of this is you, like, your fucking liberal helplessness at like, you know, at your fucking 20 year old angst channelling itself… (ibid)

Marnie described the complex feelings that came along with being a young person with good intentions who is trying to make a change, but who, at the same time, becomes ensnared within a self-fulfilling cycle focused on the American millennial rather than those in need. The participant argued that the fundraising trips and awareness tours were akin to humanitarian 'voluntourism', as described by Zakaria (2014) in *Al Jazeera*. The concept of 'voluntourism' was a particular problem for a movement like Invisible Children where

[109] The other participant of African descent also expressed mixed feelings about Invisible Children and *KONY 2012*, but as a former child soldier, he was sponsored by the organisation and received funding from them. Therefore, his feelings were less explicit and more focused on the overall Ugandan reception of *KONY 2012*.

participants competed to raise money in order to win trips to Uganda. This also highlights a growing trend amongst millennials in areas like the United States where young people travel to foreign countries for the purposes of humanitarian aid, but are found to spend much of their time building unsafe structures and taking 'selfie' photos with local children (ibid). The rise of celebrity humanitarianism, evident with celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Bono, has popularised the symbolism of aid work and is discussed in the following chapter. As the popularity of celebrity humanitarianism has grown, young people in the United States increasingly use photos taken of their 'aid work' travel as visual symbols of value and prestige in online spaces of social media. This trend has become so prevalent that there are campaigns to raise awareness of the issue, for example in Images 9-17 and 9-18, and popular websites, like Humanitarians of Tinder, now mock Tinder users that use humanitarian selfies as their dating advertisement.



Image 9-17: (left) The poster for the 'Africa Doesn't Need Dumb Volunteers' video campaign

Image 9-18: (right) An article in the satirical newspaper 'The Onion' highlighting the use of humanitarian work as symbolic capital on Facebook and social media

Images retrieved December 2, 2014.

Alongside the humanitarian 'voluntourism' that took place under the auspices of Invisible Children, the commodification of activism was prevalent in the *KONY 2012* campaign. This was specifically evident in the campaign when it sold 'action kits' to participants to

help them take part in protests, along with their extensive merchandising line of Invisible Children items, such as t-shirts, bracelets, bags and sunglasses. This was described by Marnie as being akin to a 'political campaign' when she described her opinion of *KONY 2012* and its 'action kits':

> There were like pins and stuff, like they made it like this um, this almost look like this political campaign thing, it was ridiculous…(ibid)



Image 9-19: Invisible Children activists wearing IC merchandise at the Fourth Estate summit, UCLA, 2013
Image retrieved from Invisible Children on December 15, 2015.

The 'commodity activism' (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012) of the *KONY 2012* campaign was described by Brough (2012) as being a form of 'fair vanity' that 'acknowledges self-interest and personal discovery in the encounter with the other' (188). Brough (2012) argued that:

> Cause-branding clothing lets us wear our humanitarian identity on our sleeve or wristband, and we can now collect our causes as Facebook "friends", amassing philanthropic social capital (176).

In essence, the humanitarianism of the Invisible Children activists was consumerist and narcissistic, but also positivist and idealist. The Invisible Children organisation branded itself as a movement of wanderlust humanitarians whose participants could seek out adventure while helping others. In the organisation, participants could feel connected to

one another and filled with purpose, escaping the disintegration of communities and the manic consumption of social media. The organisation's campaigns acted as 'an adventure travel advertisement', which focused on the Invisible Children supporters, while Ugandans were used to simply achieve a 'humanitarian experience', or what have been called 'humanitarian autobiographies' (Brough 2012: 183). As Brough (2012) argued, 'the humanitarian experience is one of finding oneself through the encounter with the (suffering) Other' (Brough 2012: 183). The campaigns involved an adventure through the imagined Africa where white millennials could seek out exciting journeys in humanitarian crises. In that sense, as described in *The Atlantic*: 'the White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege' (Cole 2012). The voyeuristic journey to help the 'Other' was reflected by the organisation's commitment to Dan Eldon. Eldon, a leading inspiration for Russell's vision, once said:

> Once one has been to these challenging terrible places, they're always strangely drawn back…because there's nothing that can compare to seeing the raw reality of the basic human need for survival. It disgusts and inspires (Eldon 2011).

Alongside the adventure, Invisible Children brought in new recruits by making participants feel inspired, rather than guilty or forced into offering support, and combined their campaigns with 'pop culture spectacle' where the portrayal of suffering others 'is being matched with – or even supplanted by – more light-hearted, postmodern pastiche and youth culture aesthetics, and glamorized or playful representations of the humanitarian *donor-as-consumer*' (Brough 2012: 176). These spectacles included elaborate concerts, which involved live music, dancing and celebrity appearances, cool merchandise and clothing and youthful, artistic graphics, as was evident with the Banksy-inspired *KONY* posters. The spectacle of the 'spectacular' (Hesford 2011; Kapoor 2013) communicates solidarity through the aid and pity of the suffering Other, while also perpetuating global inequality (Cheney 2015: 8) since 'the use of catchy imagery does ... risk the perpetuation of

hegemonic gazes and beliefs' (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2013: xv).

While *KONY 2012* was meant to act as an entry point for participation, Cheney (2015) has argued that the slogan, 'jump first, fear later', deliberately discouraged Invisible Children participants from creating a deeper understanding of the situation in Uganda and the history of the war. This approach was further encouraged by slogans such as: 'Don't study history; make history' (Invisible Children 2012). In essence, such slogans told audiences that understanding the complexities of the issue would simply delay necessary actions. The organisation focused on simplifying the issues, using both the campaign and its visual branding to create tidy definitions of 'need' and 'solution' in order to fashion a successful movement (Brough 2012: 178). Furthermore:

> Activism itself was reduced to spectacle in IC, as youth involvement was highly 'stage-managed', with consensus and participation achieved through omission and depoliticization (Kapoor 2013: 110).

This was detailed by Cheney (2015), who explained that interns were 'expected to be unequivocally on board' and argued that the organisation 'targeted inexperienced youth' who became 'self-governing subjects rather than resisting the status quo' (Cheney 2015: 9–11).

In my research, I discovered that Invisible Children members had a moral sentiment about changing the world, but very little knowledge of the specific region and its history. Like well-groomed politicians, the activists paused on difficult questions about the historical, socio-political details of the region and answered with the same popular engrained catch-phrases that came to define Invisible Children generally: 'We want to have zero LRA'; 'We won't stop', 'We are making history'; 'If not us, then who?'; 'Jump first, fear later'; 'Our life is bigger than our best dream for it'. Often, when asked about the history of the LRA or

Museveni, they responded by saying that they would 'have to ask Jason about that'.[110]

This lack of knowledge echoes and reiterates 'familiar missionary and colonialist narratives', when Invisible Children participants did not question the history or circumstance of the conflict, but saw their journey there as an 'adventure' to save Africans 'from themselves' (Brough 2012: 183). My research confirmed Brough's argument, as the majority of Invisible Children supporters, whilst well-intentioned, reported a belief that their lives were personally changed by Invisible Children and spoke more about themselves than the Ugandans they were 'missioned' to 'save'. In their efforts, they 'dehistoricized, essentialized and exoticized Africa' (Brough 2012: 184) and failed to communicate the progress Ugandans had made to end the conflict, as well as the positive changes attained in Uganda since the conflict. This reinforced 'the West's hegemonic relationship with the subaltern Other' (Brough 2012: 188). Furthermore, 'young Africans were repeatedly framed as Kony's victims, in need of rescue, and devoid of broader histories or agency' (Finnegan 2013a: 35). This was reiterated by Wheaton's research on *KONY 2012* when she interviewed Ugandans about the film. One Ugandan stated:

> They are dependent on suffering in Africa! There is always going to be something to feed, it may be about survival for them rather than us (Wheaton 2013).

Few participants in this study mentioned colonialism, but one of the few African American interviewees did mention what she saw as commodity branding in Invisible Children humanitarian campaigns, as well as 'voluntourism' that becomes 'an extension of a lot of colonialism' (Marnie interview). She explained that her time with Invisible Children highlighted troubling 'tropes... the missionary stuff, the colonial like explorer stuff' where

[110] However, in contrast to the participants, I found that the organisation's leaders (specifically Jason Russell and Bobby Bailey, with whom I spoke in depth) were very knowledgeable about the history of the region and the complexity of the conflict.

aid agencies were targeted with the task of taking African nations from 'point A to point B…' (Marnie ibid). She went on to describe 'colonial explorer humanitarianism' as a 'recreation of the white man's burden' where non-profits organisations and aid agencies force development on the 'Other', and representations of Africa are constructed by outsiders (ibid). In a similar interview, BBC producer and journalist, Christine, argued:

> You get these good hearted… not always, but good hearted people you know, that haven't really studied the environments that they're going into, and they're imposing their value systems on them...and they're not really sitting back and listening and just facilitating [dollars], facilitating expertise, but letting people they work with dictate what they need, it's sort of this top-down approach. I think that that's really ineffective (Skype interview in March 2014).

The construction of the 'inferior' and 'Other' (Said 1978: 2) reflects the historical roots of colonialism and imperialism, which 'views Africa as a missionary and aid destination to alleviate the "white man's burden"' (ibid). Particularly as the Wikileaks information will highlight, humanitarianism often becomes controversially intertwined with neo-colonialism[111] (Sartre 1964; Chomsky 1979). Africa's history of foreign exploitation dates back to the era of imperialism and colonisation, ranging from King Leopold of Belgium's abuse of the Congo to the rapacious acquisition of precious resources by multinational corporations and governments throughout the continent. The United States government particularly has a long history with the continent, from the slave trade, to propping up corrupt dictators, to the exploitation of uranium to build the atomic bomb during World War II, as well as the illegal diamond trade and the hunt for precious oil and minerals

[111] The term neo-colonialism was first coined by Nkrumah (1966: 1), who explained it as: 'the result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment, under neo-colonialism, increases, rather than decreases, the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world. The struggle against neo-colonialism is not aimed at excluding the capital of the developed world from operating in less developed countries. It is aimed at preventing the financial power of the developed countries being used in such a way as to impoverish the less developed'.

taking place today (Williams 2018; Chomsky 2005; Seborer 1974; Barongo 1980).

While Invisible Children did attempt in 2009 to transform itself away from being a 'self-righteous charity invasion', its attempts to do so seem stunted. The only visible attempt was a singular and brief admission in one of its videos, *Give Peace a TRI* (2009):

> We decided to go out and listen instead. *Really* listen. And the needs of the needy soon became the desires of friends…But it did not end there; our once self-righteous charity invasion was transformed into an exclusive and ferocious quest for justice.

However, in this 'ferocious quest for justice' the voice, opinions and needs of the Ugandans were lost. Instead, attention was focused on the spectacle of visual media displays and humanitarian consumption for American youth (Brough 2012). Russell was deeply concerned with the millennial ideals of hope and justice and expressed this in our interview:

> For me, the biggest heartbreak would be the loss of a generation's hope and idealism ... after a while it starts to erode, you're feeling like well, is change possible, like is, like can the world actually make a difference? (Russell interview 2014).

Russell believed capturing Kony would unlock the potential for millennials to feel that social change and global justice was possible. He believed that, if Invisible Children failed to capture Kony, that generation would lose its hope. However, the focus seemed to centre around how the organisation could best serve millennials in the United States, rather than Ugandans. Justice for millions of Ugandans who suffered directly from the conflict was not mentioned as 'the biggest heartbreak'. Clearly Russell did care about stability and peace in the region,[112] but somewhere along the way, the focus on American millennials may have

[112] 'Stopping injustice anywhere is the responsibility of humanity everywhere, and this is indeed what the basis of international aid should be. The world needs to adopt an attitude which sees each human life as inherently equal, and once this occurs, real strides in the right direction will occur with regards to international aid' (Invisible Children 2015).

taken precedence.

V. The Invisible Children Model: A Revolutionary Model for Activism?

Many have argued that, at the height of its success, Invisible Children represented the most powerful millennial-led movement in America. The Invisible Children model for activism, fundraising, awareness and humanitarian campaigning was unconventional in its structure and style: it was controversial in its approach, but also successful amongst young American millennials who connected to its narrative, branding and understanding of millennial youth ideology. This was supported by a participant who stated:

> The fact that the entire organisation was being represented and essentially run by young people gave me actual proof that not only did my voice matter, but it had power ('Lily': Interview conducted on Facebook in August 2014. She was in her late teens from the East Coast and entering university)

Lily appreciated the youthful staff and leaders of the organisation, while others felt inspired by their approach to millennial empowerment. One participant offered a statement about their powerful model when he said:

> For many of us, IC was a standard of the new non-profit. They had somehow bottled up everything right and cool about giving a shit and through that inspired a generation of young people to think past themselves and participate in a global conversation. ('Tom': Public Facebook post in December 2014. The participant was in his early twenties, male, from New York)

What Russell and the other leaders 'bottled up' was described in an interview with *Time* magazine, when Russell called the organisation: 'Netflix meets the Peace Corps meets Comic-Con' (Shresthova 2016: 85). In my interview with Jason Russell, he described Invisible Children's model as 'going around the system' and outlined an alternative method of developing a non-profit model that was established in the earliest stages of the organisation's inception. Russell described how Invisible Children learned to 'go around

the system' after Sundance Film Festival refused the rough cut of their original film. They decided instead to show the film in schools, colleges and churches, stating that they have now shown the film 14,000 times to over 5 million people directly and received roughly 75 million dollars in donations (Russell interview 2014).

Jason went on to compare their model to other foundations and organisations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Beats by Dr Dre. In our interview, he explained that the Gates Foundation had recently paid him as a consultant to share Invisible Children's tactics and ways of inspiring young people to action. He described the differences between Invisible Children and the popular models used by such organisations when he said:

> They're exactly opposite from us. Like we have no money, they have more money than God, you know like, we have a movement, they don't. We go really fast, they go slow. We're driven by like inspiration and creativity; they're driven by statistics and like numbers. (ibid)

Russell essentially summed up why Invisible Children came under such fire: by going 'fast' they often overlooked the creation of a deeper understanding for both the organisation and its followers. The organisation reached impressive levels of success due to their emphasis on emotion, creativity and popular culture, in contrast to organisations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which employ extensive scientific research and methodological approaches to their initiatives. While most non-governmental organisations are bland and safe in their approaches, Invisible Children's genius is reflected in their lucid understanding of what it means to brand and market a movement. When most organisations were employing the faces of emaciated children as their method of public outreach, Invisible Children harnessed the power of a Hollywood film and mixed it with a movement that blended cool youth culture, festival-like events and enticing branding that made its millennial followers excited to be a part of the group. Jason also described

their grassroots approach to fundraising and development, which placed emphasis on small donations from millennial supporters, rather than focusing on obtaining large grants from external companies or large foundations.[113] However, after the controversy of *KONY 2012*, he suggested that they would soon be looking to broaden their donation base. In the interview, he told me that 85% of all Invisible Children donations came from young people giving small sums, such as 20 dollars. However, he also warned the organisation would be facing 'growing pains' as they learned to change once the 'war' was over.

Russell went on to describe the importance of entertainment within their various humanitarian campaigns, which played a critical role in recruitment, fundraising, awareness and activism. Having grown up in a theatrical home environment, Russell infused the organisation with the same dramatic, lively, show-like energy of the visual performance he was raised with. For this reason, Invisible Children became well-known for having a variety of events, inspired by Russell, that he described as blending TED talks, music festivals and film festivals into a pop music concert. The largest of these events were the Fourth Estate summits in 2011 and 2013. Russell explained how he felt he was at his best during events like the Fourth Estate summit, when he was able to access his love of live performance, public speaking and theatre. Russell said he and the Invisible Children team made 50 original film pieces for each event and described what he called the incredible, profound task of inspiring and connecting youth.

[113] To some extent, it is unclear exactly how democratised their fundraising base actually was, since they did receive money from large organisations.



Image 9-20: The Fourth Estate summit. In this image, Russell bears a striking resemblance to one of his humanitarian idols, Bono
Retrieved from Invisible Children on December 15, 2015



Images 9-21 and 9-22: Photos from 'The Fourth Estate' summit
Images retrieved from Invisible Children on December 15, 2015.

The Fourth Estate summits embodied the pinnacle of Invisible Children's success, with their celebrity guest speakers and elaborate concerts featuring well-known bands, performers and political leaders like Samantha Powers. However, while their social media, spectacular events and grassroots approach helped them achieve success in the initial years of campaigning, Jason also stated that the criticism of *KONY 2012*, along with Jason's personal breakdown, had put pressure on the organisation. Just before our interview, Russell said they had cut over 60% of their staff due to issues with fundraising. While Jason seemed positive in our interview that the organisation had 'turned the corner', Invisible Children officially announced it would be closing its offices in December 2014, just a few

months after our meeting.[114]

Of all the Invisible Children activist spectacles of performance and visual display, the *KONY 2012* movement was by far the greatest, as it produced the most activism, both through social media and on-the-ground participation. This is likely why the *KONY 2012* campaign reportedly cost an estimated 2.8 million dollars. Director of Communications, Noelle West, stated that it created more opportunities and awareness in that one movement than in the other eight years combined. While the film became unprecedented in its ability to foster online and offline participation in a specific humanitarian campaign, as well as serve as tool for activism, its visual nature and narrative de-historicised and oversimplified the issue, painting a portrait that was 'black and white'. In other words, while the simplified narrative and emotional storytelling, combined with effective visuals, resonated with millennial American youth viewers, the persuasive combination also played a role in the campaign's downfall. As Zuckerman (2013) described, the success of the *KONY 2012* experience came from the point where young people engaged in the film viewing and took on the suggested tasks of buying bracelets, putting up posters and sharing the film. However, in that experience Zuckerman (2013) argues that Invisible Children failed to deepen the knowledge of their recruits. Thus, when criticism of the film surfaced, the participants lacked sufficient understanding and information to fall back on (ibid). At the same time, Invisible Children failed to prepare for the Ugandan responses to the film and the questions many would have about the lack of African voice or agency in the movement. This issue was touched on by a former LRA abductee in an interview about the Acholi

[114] According to *The San Diego Union Tribune*, Invisible Children raised 2 million dollars between 2014 and 2015 and continued to pay several people, including Jason Russell, who made an estimated $140,000 in 2015, along with Ben Keesey, who was paid $98,000, and a few other key staff members, such as Noelle West, whose salaries were roughly $55,000 each. Another $34,000 was paid to 'disqualified persons' (McDonald 2016).

response to *KONY 2012*. He described what occurred at the *KONY 2012* film screening in Gulu, Uganda, where one person was killed and others were injured. Ugandan viewers felt angry at seeing mainly white Americans in the film, which they argued was exploiting their suffering and failed to represent the Ugandan people, as well as the history of the atrocities:

> So that that day, I came, and also like participated … after *KONY 2012* …. after Jason has done all those crazy things … there were a lot of, you know like chaos caused by local communities because they expected … that the film was about the history of the war. They expected to see their fellow friend and family being killed, they, you know the atrocities made by Joseph Kony … Because it was advertised over the radio that 'you come and see the atrocities you know committed by Joseph Kony!' … ('Jay': Former child soldier in the LRA. Participant interview conducted over Skype while the participant was in Uganda in October 2014)

The Ugandan reaction to the commodification of *KONY 2012* was so volatile in some areas that one person was killed during a screening in Northern Uganda. Jay went on to describe the scene when he said:

> Unfortunately, yeah... It was uh it was a real battle....there was a lot of, you know, rival, there was a lot of riot from the local community because they were like why? You know, this American man is just playing with the …trying to play with our you know mind that you know *Kony 2012* is like a video you know in the past we – we thought of seeing like people being killed, people being murdered, you know? There was one, one, one body lost. Yeah. One…person was killed in that riot. (Jay. ibid)

Similarly, a BBC producer, Christine, who had spent time filming a documentary in Northern Uganda, described the complex nature of the film's reception in the region:

> Certainly the Ugandans that I spoke to, they either had no clue about this video. Or were really quite incensed by it, feeling it was sensational and didn't represent the true story…. people were wondering, both in Uganda and NGOs abroad where the money went.... So what they are perceiving is that other people are getting rich on their story and they're angry by that. ('Christine': Skype interview in March 2014)

While Ugandans criticised the film, Russell likened the *KONY 2012* criticism to the

iconography surrounding the message of Jesus Christ, who had a simple message that was interpreted in various ways by various groups. This comparison was illuminating, not only of Russell's personal beliefs, but also regarding the extent to which the conflict was oversimplified and, in some ways, Christianised:

> And it was like Kony 2012 became like nothing, no one agreed on […] You know I really was like thinking about that but, iconography of Jesus and how like all in all the story was pretty simple, it was just like I … I want you guys to love each other, and I want you to love your enemy…. (Russell interview 2014)

For these various reason, *KONY 2012* was criticised for having a 'post-colonial' missionary mentality (Blattman 2012), which created racialized portraits of Africans that were 'ethnocentric', 'patronising' and reinforcing of colonial approaches towards humanitarianism, as decribed in *The Atlantic* (Rosen 2012). *KONY 2012* also revealed how new 'digital divides' are created and can determine which voices reach global communications platforms, as well as showing how power dynamics can enforce neo-colonial forms of humanitarianism (Ginsburg 2008: 290). For instance, while Ugandan activists launched a website called 'Uganda Speaks' to regain agency and representation after *KONY 2012*, its reach was relatively small in comparison to Invisible Children's campaign. The crisis of representation surrounding new digital divides in events like *KONY 2012* also shed light on the capacity for citizen participation, whether limited or non-existent, to create depictions of the 'Other' that often translate into the reaffirmation of stereotypes via 'colonial-esque' voices and authoritative textual and symbolic communication. Furthermore, it calls into question the ethics of humanitarianism and humanitarian actions (Harding 2012; Madianou 2013: 249).

In essence, in Invisible Children's millennial idealism, an understanding of any African voice or empowerment was lost. The narrative of the 'Other' persisted in a neo-colonialist tone amidst an organisation where Christian missionaries were common supporters. While

Invisible Children intended to be a humanitarian inititative, its humanity became more focused on the American millennials than on the Ugandans who were subject to the atrocities.

Invisible Children set out to create a new model for humanitarian organisations, which rebelled against the spectacle of suffering seen in most humanitarian campaigns. It drew support by connecting with millennials, who bonded with their ideology and branding, and relied on small donations from supporters by implementing extensive visual performances, both through films and activist events. It utilised concerts, celebrities and elaborate displays to connect performance, entertainment and consumerism with their humanitarian campaigns while inspiring and connecting millennial youth through its community and existential messages of inspiration, empowerment, identity and purpose. However, in this process, the 'invisible children' remained invisible and the African 'Other' endured as a shadow to the organisation's millennial youth focus.

VI. 'PHONY 2012'

The lack of Ugandan voice and representation in the film compounded criticisms of the facts presented in the film, which spiralled out of control on social media as viewers increasingly questioned whether or not *KONY 2012* was a 'scam'. While the film garnered unprecedented support and awareness through social media, the spread of misinformation after its release became rampant and ultimately damaged the hopes for fresh millennial activists to join the movement. Russell explained what this was like for Invisible Children in our interview, when he described it as 'taking a bag of feathers and throwing them into the wind'. Russell said he relied on the words of Dr. Zacharias, who is a well-known Evangelical Christian apologist and author of various Christian books. Dr. Zacharias borrowed from Winston Churchill's famous statement to argue that the 'truth is

surrounded by a bodyguard of lies' and Russell used this quote to decipher the complex processes that played out after *KONY 2012* in the media and elsewhere when fact and fiction were confused. Russell went on to state that doubts even circulated within the walls of Invisible Children, and some employees questioned their own work and the validity of the movement. He also described the ways in which other videos, particularly those criticising the *KONY 2012* campaign on YouTube, went viral and exacerbated the spread of misinformation. This was particularly evident when a YouTube video was released by a young girl in Canada who claimed that Joseph Kony was dead. Russell outlined how the 19-year-old girl created a video from her bedroom laptop claiming: 'My parents are from Uganda, and Joseph Kony is dead, he's been dead for a long time' (Russell interview 2014). The video garnered over 4 million views after it aired on a CNN primetime report with the correspondent, Anderson Cooper. Russell described the organisation's outrage, which was 'a total lie', highlighting that 'ten countries and institutions would not be hunting down a dead guy', but went on to explain that in the age of the Internet 'a 19-year old can say whatever she wants from her bedroom and have millions of people believe it' (ibid).

Russell also detailed his own lack of credibility because he was a 'white kid' and described the ways false information spread on the Internet, as well as mainstream media, without the regulation of journalism that predated the age of social media and its viral power. For example, in explaining how 'journalism is totally dying' he described how radio host Rush Limbaugh went on the air after former President Barack Obama sent troops to Uganda. Russell described Limbaugh's headline, which went something like: 'Obama invades Uganda to kill Christians', which was corrected shortly after. All the same, he lamented the number of clicks Rush Limbaugh's sensational headline received and the confusion that ensued (ibid). In summary, what Russell described was a contemporary world of online activism where views and likes help to determine the overall success and the level of

awareness created in various campaigns, which can, at the same time, feed sensationalist reports and spread misinformation. It is this cycle that fuelled the rise and fall of *KONY 2012* and helped to shape the activism and participation, or lack of it, to follow for Invisible Children. Ironically, while social media activism helped make Invisible Children, it was also what helped break it.

VII. Chapter Conclusion

Noam Chomsky (2017) argues that social change is the result of concerned citizens and activists who work tirelessly to create change, building the base for popular movements. In contemporary activism, active participation is often blurred with social media. As communication technology changes, we change, and as we change, how we use communications technology changes. This ultimately transforms the ways we participate in society and take on activist roles. The transformations in media ecology therefore coincide with new types of movements, and movements with new media platforms give way to new practices and norms, as well as to ways we experience social change in contemporary social worlds. This was demonstrated by Invisible Children and its *KONY 2012* campaign, which revolutionised the model for humanitarian campaigning in the digital age. It combined grassroots activism with social media and implemented a unique form of cutting-edge branding and campaigning using visual media. While the focus of their campaigning was lost in the process and it failed to create a holistic portrait of both the conflict and those involved, it did signal a wider change in the way activism, social movements and humanitarian campaigns function in the digital era.

As this chapter explores, Invisible Children's participants were involved in various forms of online and offline activism. The young activists participated in various other movements, such as the Ice Bucket Challenge, and expressed both their belief in the power of social

media to facilitate change, as well as their frustration with slacktivist critiques. Some participants also highlighted the damaging effects of the white saviour complex, commodity activism and voluntourism, which acted as challenging aspects of the Invisible Children movement. The chapter also examined the development of Invisible Children as a revolutionary model for non-governmental organisations through their embrace of millennial youth culture, powerful filmmaking, social media prowess, unique community identity and exciting events, which essentially made activism fun for American millennials. At the same time, the campaign's lack of depth also sparked the spread of misinformation and a general lack of understanding or the incorporation of a Ugandan voice and agency. Invisible Children's genius was in their mobilisation of American youth and in the harnessing of an activism brand that rallied young people to action, rather than in their actual initiative to capture Joseph Kony in the polymedia movement surrounding *KONY 2012*.



Image 10-1: Jason Russell, founder of Invisible Children, in Uganda
Image retrieved from Invisible Children on November 2, 2013.

Chapter Ten: Humanitarianism in the Digital Age

This chapter begins by discussing how humanitarian campaigns are increasingly interconnected with media such as film, performances, merchandise branding and social media. Specifically, it examines the implementation of celebrity and commodity humanitarianism, as well as the use of Christian ideologies to drive the movement. The chapter also looks at the complex relationship between humanitarian campaigns and military interventions, specifically highlighting U.S. incentives for capturing Joseph Kony and their connection to resources and power in the region, as well as to fundamentalist Christian charities. Finally, the chapter discusses Invisible Children as a revolutionary charity model embedded within a complex culture of consumerist aid, Christianity and an

industrial military complex reminiscent of colonialism.[115]



Image 10-2:. A visual history of philanthropy and humanitarianism, as described by Invisible Children

The historical background is simplified into three categories: colonisation, assistance and humanitarian aid. Live Aid is featured in the image. Retrieved from Invisible Children on July 31, 2014.

[115] In interview, Russell described the state of humanitarianism, which he believed was stuck between the journalistic approach of describing issues and the actions of humanitarian campaigns that fail to go beyond donation: '…like yeah it's fucked up, okay, what are we going to do, what can you do about it and giving the audience tangible solutions, even beyond just donations, like what they can do' (Russell interview 2014).

I. *KONY 2012* and Humanitarian Campaigns

Today's 'theatre of humanitarianism' has its roots in the 1958 photojournalism images of the poor in India, George Harrison's 1973 rock concerts to stop the Vietnam war and Live Aid's 1985 campaign for the famine in Ethiopia. These historical events were followed by Audrey Hepburn's 1988 UNICEF advocacy and the celebrity humanitarianism that followed suit, as well as the Biafra famine's 1968 journalism reports (Chouliaraki 2013: 48). Live Aid (1985), which was created by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure and confirmed Bono as a major star, became a specific source of inspiration for the Invisible Children campaigns. Geldof was a personal friend of Jason Russell's and helped inspire Russell's model for creating a 'theatre of humanitarianism' (ibid).[116] The organisation's various films, events and visual spectacles, social media artistry, merchandise and hip media graphics helped grow a following for the organisation's humanitarian campaign, as well as its nearly decade long social movement. Invisible Children was able to transform the LRA crisis into a millennial youth movement that blended humanitarian campaigning with contemporary popular culture. In essence, as Brough (2012) argues, while the history of humanitarianism was once 'heavily entrenched in the iconography of suffering' (176), today's humanitarianism could be described as consumerist, commodity activism supported by elements of popular culture where humanitarian aid is professionalised and shaped by (social) media, both in form and function.

The leaders of Invisible Children considered the organisation as functioning simulatenously as both a humanitarian organisation and media company. The majority of funds were thus allocated to media campaigns and events, which were aimed at recruiting

[116] Invisible Children orchestrated large events, such as the Global Night Commute, which could be seen as a 'participatory spectacle' (Duncombe 2007: 174) or 'dream on display' (Brough 2012: 1).

young people, raising money and creating awareness within the United States.[117] Their unique programme model was described by Jason Russell in an interview with *Buzzfeed*:

> We are not these other organizations that do amazing work on the ground. If you want to fund a cow or you want to help someone in a village... you can do that. That's a third of what we do (Testa 2014).

As a result, they contributed less to programmes[118] in Uganda that could benefit those affected by the LRA. Instead, the majority of Invisible Children's on-the-ground work was centred around the United States and its millennial youth followers. One participant described how she felt she benefited from the programmes focused on the United States:

> It was truly a transformational experience in the sense that I learned a lot about the challenges facing the non-profit sector and about the wide range of things people my age can do to already delve into solving these problems. I loved their youth-oriented approach and realised that, although they are criticised for 'spending their money making videos', this is the only way to get the word out, and without the word being out no change occurs ('Margie':. The participant was in her late teens, white, female and preparing for university. Facebook interview in November 2014).

Margie believed their media and U.S. based focus were both crucial to spreading awareness and creating change. Cheney (2015) argues that Invisible Children's strategy was 'highly seductive to upper middle-class white adolescents' who believed their experiences with the movement were 'self-transforming'. Cheney describes the historical trend surrounding 'narcissism for humanity', using examples ranging from the 1985 hit song 'We are the world', which raised fund for the Ethiopian famine and contained the lyrics: 'We're saving

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[117] According to *Buzzfeed*: 'By mid-2012, Invisible Children had nearly $26.5 million in revenue and $17 million in net assets. By mid-2013, the organisation had $4.9 million in revenue (their lowest since 2005) and less than $6.6 million in assets. Sixty-five employees in the San Diego office became 29. Two floors of a building became one. About 130 staffers in Africa – 95% of them from the region – became 108' (Testa 2014.)

[118] Invisible Children programmes in Uganda included: Schools for Schools, LRA Crisis Tracker, MEND, Livelihood Program, Legacy Scholarship Program, FM Radio, Early Warning Radio Network and Rehabilitation Center.

our own lives', to 'the society of the spectacle' which persists in today's initiatives, as is evident with Invisible Children (Cheney 2015: 9). On one hand, the organisation initiated an encouraging change in millennial youth values by advocating global justice and attracting young Americans to a cause that represented an ethical approach to humanity worldwide. On the other hand, some argue that the idea of global justice was simply reduced to marketing catchphrases by the organisation, which consistently focused on the American 'local' rather than the African 'global'. This was evident in Invisible Children's Uganda-based programme, MEND, which employed women affected by the LRA to create 'stylish, high-quality bags while providing advanced training in tailoring, finance, and personal development to the women it supported' (Invisible Children 2013). In reality, the MEND programme made a modest contribution to the wellbeing of Ugandans and those affected by the war. The cost of the programme was a significant deficit to the organisation, but was implemented out of personal desire on the part of the organisation's leaders, who simply liked the bags and thought they were a nice addition to their merchandising line (Anonymous interview 2007). Invisible Children's impact on the ground in Uganda was also described by BBC producer, Christine, when she said:

> There's a lot of questions around the services that Invisible Children have said that they have offered in northern Uganda. My understanding is that they did put up a radio station, but there's very little else. (Interviewed on Skype in June 2014).

According to *Buzzfeed*, the only years when Invisible Children contributed more money to programmes in Uganda than the U.S. were 2009, when $750,000 more went to Uganda, and 2013, post *KONY 2012*, when $7.8 million was allocated to Uganda, with just $4 million spent that year in the United States (Testa 2014). Expenses for the U.S. programmes included film production, awareness and school tours, as well as lobbying, while Uganda based initiatives included scholarships, programmes like MEND, teacher exchanges and the radio network, but generally speaking funds were more widely available

for U.S initiatives 'by anywhere from $50,000 to $1.7 million' (ibid).

Invisible Children did contribute to some change in Uganda. They used helicopters to drop defection fliers and launched an LRA Crisis Tracker, which used high-frequency radios to broadcast LRA movements and attacks (Invisible Children 2013). Their website stated that in 2013 they had 401 students enrolled in a legacy scholarship programme and 4,025 adults enrolled in the village loans and adult literacy programme (ibid). In the interview with Russell, he described their contribution to resolving the conflict:

> Of all the like thousands of people we've known and impacted, we've seen like incredible results. When we started it was like close to 3000 fighters, now there's like less than 200? And you know, educating all the students that we've had and rehabilitation centre and schools and like all the defection programs are working, we're closer than ever (Russell interview 2014).

However, Russell forgets to mention that Invisible Children was not the only organisation working towards resolving the conflict in the region. While they contributed towards change, they also often misinformed supporters by taking full responsibility for the progress, when in reality countless other organisations, Ugandan citizens, politicians and human rights activists were involved.

II. Commodifying Uganda

The consumerist approach to the *KONY 2012* campaign angered Ugandans, who felt that the organisation had commodified and profited from their suffering. For instance, there was criticism of the *KONY 2012* t-shirts and the branding of Joseph Kony's face as the focus of the campaign. Many offered the parallel of Osama bin Laden, stating that it would be unacceptable to wear a t-shirt with bin Laden's face on it in the United States. T-shirts, bracelets and posters with the face of Joseph Kony upset many affected by the war, who felt that *muzungos* (white people) were financially gaining from their suffering. Invisible

Children's 'commodity activism' (Brough 2012) involved a focus on fundraising through the merchandising of bracelets, t-shirts and other items, alongside a simplification of the conflict's history and the creation of entertainment through film. This was defined by an Invisible Children participant when she described commodity activism as 'a transference of energy instead of me needing to do something' ('Marnie': Early twenties, African American. Face to face interview in August 2014). The participant likened the *KONY 2012* model to other campaigns, such as Darfur Now, whose leaders, including John Prendergast,[119] were supporters of Invisible Children and helped to contribute to the campaign's success. Marnie outlined the controversy of the Darfur t-shirts, bags or bracelets, which were sold under the guise of awareness creation when, in actuality, the donors were 'basically paying for them to have billboards or TV commercials…It's fucked up.' (ibid). The popularity of these new types of campaigns in contemporary humanitarian models has been described by various scholars. For instance, there has been an exploration of the trend towards charity commodification (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012) or affirmative governmentality (Kwon 2013) in various forms of activism (Cheney 2015: 8). In the case of Invisible Children, Brough (2012) and Cheney (2015) have suggested that young millennials with disposable incomes were eager to belong to the identity of 'humanitarian', and thus, the purchasing of an Invisible Children or *KONY2012* t-shirt signified the 'commodification of a humanitarian identity itself' (Brough 2012: 178–79; Cheney 2015). Participants could purchase an identity of empathy and humanitarianism through the consumption of various merchandise items and feel empowered to create global social change through their millennial participation (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014).

[119] John Prendergast is an American human rights activist, founder of the Enough Project and former Director for African Affairs at the National Security Council. He worked with Invisible Children in order to create legislative change for the LRA.

III. Celebrity Humanitarianism

Chouliaraki (2013) argues that celebrities have engaged with 'the moral imperative' of the suffering 'Other' since the 19th century. Chouliaraki cites the participation of Hollywood celebrities and rock stars as being 'barely a generation old' within the environment of humanitarian aid, describing the shift from their positions as the 'powerless elite' to the key roles held today by many celebrities within the United Nations and internal non-government organisations (Chouliaraki 2013: 78). Celebrity humanitarianism became globally popular when the actress Audrey Hepburn became the UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador from 1988 to 1993. She was followed by Angelina Jolie, who acted as Ambassador from 2001 to 2012. Similarly, the unique partnership of Bono and Bob Geldof in the 2005 G8 Summit popularised celebrity-led aid drive Live 8 (celebrating the 20th anniversary of Live Aid in 1985), which involved concerts used as 'ceremonial politics', as described by Dayan and Katz (1992). These events became what Dayan and Katz (1992: 26) referred to as 'conquest', where 'rare events, both in occurrence and in effectiveness' use 'heroes of a new sort' to initiate action and ignite public support (Chouliaraki 2013: 106–107). Chouliaraki argued that this shift represents a transformation not only in the 'governance of poverty', but also 'the premises of public action in the West' (ibid).

Invisible Children relied heavily on celebrity endorsement from its inception. Russell, along with the other founders, spent time in the celebrity culture of Los Angeles while at the University of Southern California studying film. The filmmakers found celebrity friends early on and used those connections to sustain and grow the movement. Celebrities such as Kristen Bell, Pete Wentz, and Rachel Bilson were a few of the many early supporters of the organisation. They often attended rallies and wore Invisible Children merchandise, such as t-shirts, in public places to help draw attention to the cause. Russell, who originally wanted to become a Hollywood filmmaker, instead mastered the art of humanitarianism

by learning from Geldof's displays of visual spectacle and pop culture performance. Russell had his own filmmaking desires, but found a route to those dreams by revolutionising the way humanitarian campaigns function in twenty-first century American culture. Compared to earlier organisations such as Oxfam, Invisible Children transformed the global concept of the non-profit industry. After the release of *KONY 2012*, whether the Gates Foundation or the Skoll World Forum, aid organisations from around the world wanted to understand and acquire Invisible Children's campaign model (Karlin interview 2014). Russell saw that traditional forms of humanitarian campaigning that tapped into donor guilt and sadness often failed to work, so he instead harnessed the power of celebrity, spectacle, adventure and a cool millennial youth ideology to spark a global movement.

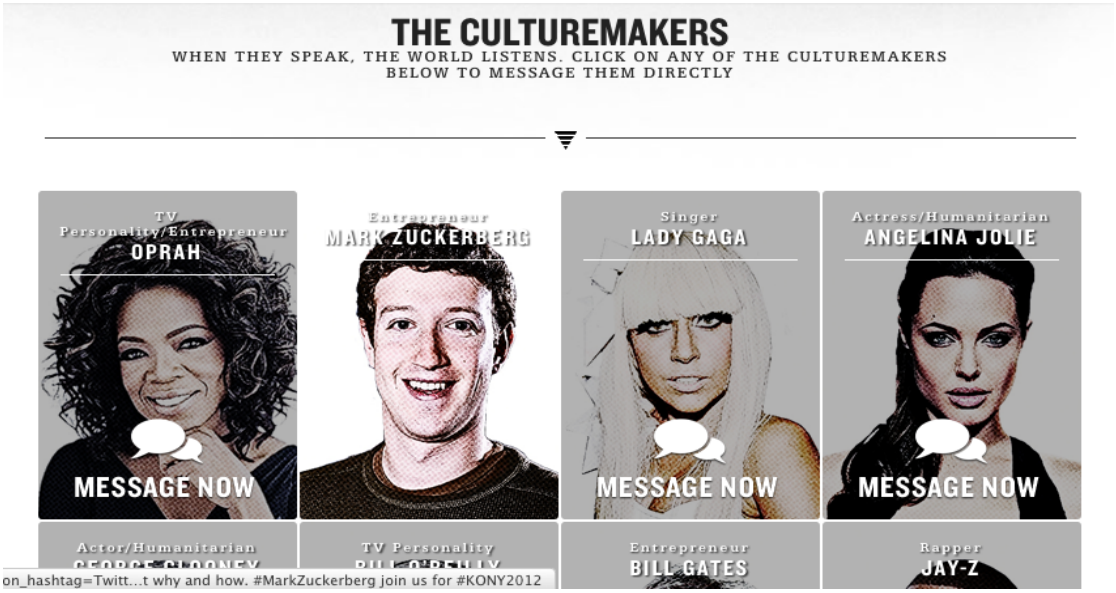


Image 10-3: KONY 2012's list of policymakers and culture makers
Images retrieved from Invisible Children on July 9, 2015.





Image 10-4: (left) Kristen Bell (right) and Kirsten Dunst (left) at 'The Rescue' for Invisible Children in Los Angeles, California

Image 10-5: Jason Russell with (right to left) Rachel Bilson, Kristen Bell and Laren Poole
Images retrieved from Invisible Children on August 4, 2014.

This form of 'celebrity diplomacy' (Cooper 2007) became a critical component of the *KONY 2012* campaign. Invisible Children focused on celebrity support as a way to capture the world's attention, leaning on celebrities including Oprah Winfrey to drive and amplify the movement.[120] At the end of the *KONY 2012* film, they asked viewers to 'take action' by contacting a specific set of 'culture makers' and 'policymakers', whilst referring to the participants as 'change makers' who could enable the movement to take place. Celebrity 'culture makers' included Bill Gates, Lady Gaga, Angelina Jolie, Jay-Z and Taylor Swift. *KONY 2012* simultaneously targeted various policymakers, such as former Secretaries of State Condoleezza Rice and John Kerry, former American Presidents Bill Clinton and

[120] Celebrities including Oprah Winfrey, Rihanna, Justin Bieber, Ryan Seacrest, Nicole Richie, P Diddy, and the Kardashian sisters all tweeted their support for *KONY 2012*.

George W. Bush, as well as former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon. This type of humanitarian campaigning was described by Cooper (2007): 'celebrities have considerable opportunities not only to formulate but to sell their initiatives, targeting not only to the public but to selective state leaders' (7). Invisible Children understood that celebrities and world leaders can use their voice and Western appeal to maximise awareness and use their privilege to highlight common humanity (Magubane 2008). In essence, celebrities and leaders are able to amplify 'the voice of the distant sufferers on the world stage' (Chouliaraki 2013: 86).



Image 10-6: Culturemakers and Policymakers. Source: Invisible Children website, Janurary 1, 2014.

Critics of celebrity humanitarianism argue that the celebrities and consumers are seeking to engage with natives' of the past and relive colonial heritage. While many celebrities seek

to create positive social change through their humanitarian campaigns, some argue that engaging with the charisma and drama of celebrity personas, or the enticing 'warm and fuzzy' emotions that entail certain consumerist branding of aid campaigns selling 'messages of solidarity', 'may deprive us not only of the voice of vulnerable others, but also of moral discourse that would link vulnerability to justice' (Chouliaraki 2013: 19). Kapoor (2013) has argued that celebrity humanitarianism not only legitimises, but also promotes and upholds, neoliberalism, capitalism and global inequality. Critics such as Banet-Weiser (2012) issue cautionary warnings that Invisible Children's efforts lead to commodification and extend political values for social change into uncertain political realms. However, others, such as Shresthova (2016), believe that 'the opposite could be true - that these efforts involve a highjacking of the vast publicity apparatus to spread political messages that might not otherwise be heard' (89). At that same time, Kapoor (2013) highlights that celebrity humanitarianism simply aggrandises the celebrity brand, rationalises global inequalities and is fundamentally depoliticising, despite its pretensions to 'activism'; it contributes to a 'post-democratic' political landscape, which appears outwardly open and consensual, but is in fact managed by unaccountable elites (1–2).



Images 10-7 and 10-8: (Left) Angelina Jolie during a UNICEF trip. (Right) Madonna adopts a child from Malawi
Humanitarian images become a form of media currency, which may represent the desire to fetishize the 'Other' in the digital age. Images retrieved from Face of Malawi and UNICEF on July 10, 2014.

In the interviews with Invisible Children supporters, the complexity of celebrity humanitarianism was expressed. One participant described how many young people in the United States support a cause simply based on their love of the celebrity, rather than an understanding of 'what they're doing':

> Sophia Bush is like a major woman crush of mine, it's a problem. …If Justin Bieber for Pencils of Promise. He posts one day 'everyone donate 10 dollars', a thousand - at least a thousand people – I mean they're only 13, but 'Mom we want that' - like One Direction like any of them post [….] – these kids probably don't understand what they're doing, but they follow blindly, you can really get a word out, I think. ('Laney': Participant was in her mid-twenties from California. Facebook interview in December 2014)

Laney gushed about her celebrity crushes, who included Kristen Bell, a key supporter of the organisation, as well as other popular celebrities such as Justin Bieber. She explained how initiatives set up by celebrities garnered enormous support from fans and seemed unaware of the contradictions in her criticism and celebration of celebrity endorsements. Another participant described the power of celebrity culture and its impact on aid work:

> Especially these influential people, everyone follows them, you can connect with these people … I think it makes it seem less intimidating, because I follow them on Instagram and Twitter, I follow all these famous people whatever, but I think the way that they can use it, like you can just get such a positive word spread out... ('Janette': The participant was 20 years old and working in the South. Facebook interview in June 2014)

The participant expressed enthusiasm for the social change possible in the hands of the celebrity figure, while also highlighting the powerful voice used through social media platforms to spread messages. Similarly, one participant described how global change could take place if the actor Zac Efron set up a charity kissing booth:

> if [….] or Zac Efron have just like a kiss booth for charity again, every problem in the world would be solved, like everyone would want to do it....their parents tell them about it they're not going to care, but if they see their favourite celebrity tweet about it, like oh that's a bit cool then.

> ('Annie': Participant was in her early twenties. She was a white female studying in California. Face to face interview in August 2014)

The participant stated frankly Zac Efron could solve 'every problem in the world' due to his celebrity persona. However, the complicated world of celebrity fame was expanded on by Russell's personal experience during *KONY 2012*. He described this in our interview when he stated:

> I had everyone in the world literally worshipping at our feet, because of the millions of views. It wasn't like 'how can we help end the war', it wasn't like anything about the children, it was like 'how did you get this video to go viral?' I'm just thinking like, do you know that children are literally [...] faces are being cut off, we're not talking about that? And so I felt like, what a sick world we live in. (Russell Interview 2014)

He went on to outline his empathy for celebrities who struggle in the public eye, describing the lack of 'humanity' in celebrity idealism, as well as the commodification of the celebrity as an object, when he said:

> I for the first time realise the pain of Lindsay Lohan and Justin Beiber and Sarah Palin, because when you're famous, everyone has the permission to say whatever they want about you, and have total disregard for your humanity...they literally think you're just like an object or some kind of icon... (Russell interview 2014)

In essence, what he described was a complex dynamic in which celebrities are deified and treated as 'objects' or 'icons' by the public. He argued that, paradoxically, celebrities are stripped of their humanity whilst also being made responsible for humanitarian campaigns. They become both unaccountable and responsible. At the same time, the 'Other' is commodified for photo-ops with celebrities on humanitarian aid tours and used as symbolic status in donor countries, while also acting as 'icons' or 'objects'. In the age of the Internet, this cyclical commodification of the 'Other' – both celebrities and the recipients of aid – is exacerbated on digital platforms where the consumption and production of the 'Other' can function in a complex system that is unregulated and de-historicized.

This was specifically evident in the *KONY 2012* campaign, which flourished and floundered in its use of the celebrity and suffering 'Other' for commodification and consumption. Furthermore, in the 'good' vs. 'evil' story, Invisible Children was branded as a sexy adventure, which would take participants on an exciting journey through Africa led by young, good-looking and charismatic heroes. Ultimately it would endow the participants with a sense of humanitarian empathy and world purpose, like the many celebrities they culturally worshipped. This was reiterated by a participant who stated:

> I don't know, their whole thing was like making this, for lack of a better word, this very sexy movement, like they had like celebrity spokespeople, or like celebrities that were like their models. ('Marnie': Early twenties, African American. Face to face interview in August 2014)

One must ask what the broader implications might be of needing celebrities such as Justin Bieber to catch a warlord in Africa, as well as what effect the impulsive consumerism of humanitarian campaigns might have on society more generally. If the U.S. government was able to use the *KONY* campaign as a proxy move to enter Africa, as this chapter will explore, one must question the responsibility projected onto (and assumed by) celebrities to publicly support and understand complex global issues and their various campaigns. On reflection, celebrity humanitarianism falls under an ethical spotlight, and questions emerge, not just for the sufferers, but for all, including celebrities, who become entangled in the consumerism of humanitarian campaigning.



Image 10-9. At an Invisible Children rally, activists hold up the banner: 'we are shaping human history'. This image was also used in the *KONY 2012* film.

IV. The Fog of Humanitarianism

The Invisible Children founders believed in the moral order of Rifken's (2009) 'empathetic civilization' and successfully communicated the altruism of humanitarian aid and human rights to its viewers (Chouliaraki 2013: 3). However, critics argued that the organisation framed the conflict as a simplistic dilemma that needed straightforward and one dimensional solutions. This was evident in the slogan to 'capture Kony', which failed to include a deeper understanding of the nuances related to the conflict. The technological determinism in the *KONY 2012* narrative simplified social change by painting, through its powerful visual storytelling, a world where the Internet could create global democracy in order to bring Kony to justic. In their narrative, *KONY 2012* played out like a Hollywood film where good would triumph over evil. This was expressed by one of the participants, who compared Joseph Kony to the Hollywood film character, 'Dr Evil' (from the 1997 movie *Austin Powers*):

> I think that there's something so American about this like hero villain dynamic like, you know, trying to make this person this villain um…

> and like we … we wanna be the hero so we need our villain, right, like, like Joseph Kony equals like Dr Evil… ('Marnie': ibid)

This simplistic method of storytelling was backed by global political leaders, such as Samantha Powers, who gave participants a sense of trust in the movement and reinforced the 'good vs. evil' narrative in their own work,[121] on which the Invisible Children organisation thrived. However, Invisible Children, in turn, argued that a simplistic, commodified and visual narrative was also the only way they could inspire Americans to engage with their campaigns. After more than ten years of campaigning, Invisible Children understood what it meant to make the movement 'accessible' to millennials: something that could be quickly 'liked', 'shared' or grasped, rather than something with complex depth (Bruns 2008; Murthy 2011). Simplification and the removal of historical context drew in viewers to the story and offered an 'entry point'. Invisible Children Director of Communications, Noelle West, explained this in an interview with *Buzzfeed*:

> We've always simplified the issue down to a very understandable, non-academic, non-complex issue, which is offensive to some academics because they think you're trivializing it. But for us, that is just the entry point. We're trying to attract people into this issue but make it accessible for them. '*KONY 2012'* was not trying to be a very P.C., well rounded, in-depth piece (Testa 2014).

As West explains, the organisation believed in frank, straightforward and simplified forms of engagement to initiate viewer support, which would draw in participants who could join the cause without confusion or despondency. However, the lack of depth became a problem with actual engagement, particularly when it involved support of militarisation.

[121] In *A Problem from Hell* (2002), Samantha Powers constructs the same 'good vs. evil' narrative about the history of the conflict in Rwanda between 'the bad guys and the good guys' when 'obviously it's far more nuanced than that, but it also obfuscates the British and American role in training...' (Dr A Interview 2016).

V. The Complication of African Politics

This model for humanitarian campaigning became complicated, particularly because the efforts of the *KONY* campaign indirectly supported Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. This embroiled participants in complex African politics through the simplification of the *KONY 2012* narrative and the goal of militarisation. While *KONY 2012* spoke of the importance of digital democracy, it failed to mention that Museveni had notoriously banned the use of Internet and social media during the run up to his various 'elections'[122], as described by *The Guardian* (Kavuma 2016). Museveni's state censorship of the country's Internet communications vastly contradicted the idealistic imagery of digital democratisation evident in the *KONY 2012* campaign. Despite this, the money raised for the campaign was aligned with support for Museveni's government.[123] This was even more complicated due to Invisible Children's reliance on Yoweri Museveni's military, the UPDF (Uganda People's Defence Force), in order to capture Joseph Kony.[124] Museveni and the UPDF not only contributed to Ugandans remaining in internal displacement camps (IDPs) during the height of the violence, but also failed to alleviate their suffering, setting off what eventually became a full-scale humanitarian crisis.[125] Museveni was then able to argue that

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[122] Museveni banned social media ahead of 2016 elections and jailed his main opponent, Kizza Besigye.

[123] In 2012, Wikileaks released another Invisible Children cable that outlined Invisible Children's action of tipping off the Ugandan government regarding the location of a former LRA combatant whom Invisible Children was supporting in rehabilitation. This person, Patrick Komekech, was arrested for attempting to overthrow Museveni, according to *Foreign Policy* (Keating 2012).

[124] Invisible Children's official statement, however, is: 'None of the money donated through Invisible Children ever goes to the government of Uganda. Yet the only feasible and proper way to stop Kony and protect the civilians he targets is to coordinate efforts with regional governments.' (Invisible Children 2012). They also stated: 'Invisible Children does not defend any of the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Ugandan government or the Ugandan military (UPDF). Any international support to the UPDF should be conditioned on the UPDF improving its human rights record. International attention focused on the UPDF in its counter-LRA activities will be a step towards ensuring that human rights abuses are reported and the perpetrators held accountable' (ibid).

[125] The internal displacement camps reflected a divide between the ethnic north (Acholi) and south of Uganda.

the internal displacement camps were a direct result of LRA violence, thereby relieving himself of any responsibility for his government's role in the conflict (Branch 2010: 157). In essence, the UPDF is well-known for committing the same types of crimes committed by Joseph Kony and the LRA, but President Museveni has consistently denied these crimes.[126]

The International Criminal Court, which remains a key ally for Invisible Children in the effort to capture Joseph Kony, was described as 'a bunch of useless people' by Museveni during his most recent 2016 inauguration speech, according to an article in *The Guardian* (Kavuma 2016):

> The Ugandan President pointed out that the event meant that Africa no longer cared about the ICC and that it had dumped it altogether, describing the court as a political tool used to serve the interest of the states of hegemony.

Amongst the list of attendees at the ceremony was Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court, and is, furthermore, known for being a key supporter and military supplier of the LRA and Joseph Kony. This was communicated in the classified Wikileaks cables that came from various high-level meetings between American leaders and President Museveni. The cables contain information from Jendayi Elizabeth Frazer, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, heading the Bureau of African Affairs in private meetings with President Museveni:

> The President also stated his belief that Kony was a proxy of the Khartoum Government. Museveni dismissed the demands for political power by the diaspora that backed the LRA. He argued that northern Ugandans were represented at all levels of government. Museveni stated that behind all of this is Sudan, Sudan, Sudan, Sudan. He said that even

[126] The atrocities committed by Museveni and the UPDF have been further detailed in a recent documentary, *A Brilliant Genocide* (2016). Available at https://abrilliantgenocide.com/.

> if the Khartoum Government could not supply the LRA at previous levels, he believed it was in constant touch with the LRA and smuggling supplies (Wikileaks 2007).



Image 10-10: Omar al-Bashir attended Museveni's recent 2016 inauguration ceremony despite being wanted by the ICC. Al-Bashir is wanted for war crimes in Darfur
Image retrieved from Global Voices on July 24, 2016.

In essence, the Global Intelligence Files cable exposed the layers of corruption and complacency embedded within the Ugandan government and their complex relationship with members of other regimes, such as Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, as well as their disregard for the International Criminal Court whose task it is to capture Joseph Kony. As many have argued, it is possible that Invisible Children's participation in the political complexities of the region may have further contributed to the corruption and destabilisation of the Great Lakes region (Cheney 2015: 9–11). Finnegan (2013) argues that *KONY 2012* not only solicited feelings of entitlement from naive American millennials to involve themselves in global politics and foreign conflicts, but also normalised an atmosphere where Western hegemony could control and undermine Africa governments. In essence, while Invisible Children set out to 'tell a great story' and alleviate the suffering they witnessed in Northern Uganda, their mission became ensconced within the intricacies of the region's historical, political, social and economic issues. As the organisation's simplistic

mission unravelled into a complex web of contradictory ideals and corrupt politics, they may have contributed to the very issues they aimed to resolve. As Blattman (2012) argues, the saviour attitude not only pervades aid failures, but also military interventions.

VI. Terrorism and Military Intervention

In 2008, U.S. President George W. Bush dispatched advisers to train Ugandan troops. This was the start of a financial relationship between the United States and Uganda, which was established in order to support regional military efforts to capture Joseph Kony and other LRA leaders. In 2009, U.S. Congress passed the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act, signed into law in 2010 by former President Barack Obama. The 2009 act labelled Joseph Kony and the LRA as terrorists, alongside other groups including Al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab, despite the vast differences in the groups' methods and threat levels, particularly given the lack of threat that the LRA poses to the United States. The bill also launched a programme to 'share satellite intelligence with Kampala and to boost the Ugandan military's capabilities with equipment like RQ-11 Raven miniature unmanned aerial vehicles and helicopters' (Wikileaks/The Global Intelligence Files 2011). The act simultaneously funded the deployment of 100 American Green Berets, many of whom had been on previous tours of duty in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to Uganda, South Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) in order to aid the Ugandan Army in its ongoing fight against the LRA. In October 2011, the U.S. anti-Kony mission, codenamed 'Operation Observant Compass', was launched after years of lobbying by human rights advocates, including Invisible Children. President Obama recommitted troops in 2014 by sending an additional 150 military advisors and several U.S. aircraft to the region.

Roughly $800 million was spent over a six-year period in the hunt for Joseph Kony. Today,

there are an estimated 80 armed fighters remaining in the jungle, down from 2,500 at the height of the LRA's strength in the 1990s. Scattered across extremely remote jungles in Kafia Kingi, spanning three countries on the borders of Central African Republic, South Sudan and Sudan, their primary focus is on survival rather than attacks. Conflicting information is released by non-profits like Invisible Children, alluding to a 95% reduction in LRA crime, while other reports outline 500 abductions and 104 attacks in the Central African Republic in 2016 (LRA Crisis Tracker 2017). However, due to other rebel groups such as Seleka, it is hard to differentiate between acts of violence in the region and judge which might be the work of the LRA (Human Rights Watch 2018). Furthermore, some attack reports include events like: 'He looted sugar, a box of batteries, salt, pots and a box of unknown contents' (LRA Crisis Tracker 2016). Nonetheless, locals are worried about the withdrawal of military troops and the risk of Kony's return, but Sudanese authorities do not permit U.S. advisors or African Union troops to operate in Kafia Kingi, according to *VICE* (Kleinfeld 2017). For that reason, many believe that the mission to capture Joseph Kony in the remote jungles of Central Africa has become an 'albatross', as described in *Stars and Stripes* (Vandiver 2016). Furthermore, the rise of terrorist groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Islamic State in Libya caused AFRICOM's General David Rodriguez to question the efforts and the allocation of funds (ibid).



Image 10-11: 'We will fight war'. Image retrieved from Invisible Children on October 5, 2014

In an interview with *VICE* magazine, Donald Bolduc, the U.S. Army general who ran the Special Operations Command in Africa (SOCAFRICA) up until his recent retirement, explained his belief that the challenges in Africa could create a threat for the United States that surpasses threats from conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. In interview, he argued that the challenges include the expansion of illicit networks, terrorism and terrorist havens, the subversion of government control and rebel recruits, as well as a steady stream of resources for those recruits. For that reason, U.S. Special Operations Command increased overseas deployment from 1% of U.S. Commandos in Africa in 2006 to 17% in 2016 (Vandiver 2016; Turse 2017). According to *VICE*, in recent years, Africa has had the highest number of special operations personnel in the world with the exception of the Middle East, with special operations forces deployed in at least 32 African nations in 2016 (Turse 2017). While U.S. officials stress that the United States is not at war with any country in Africa, ongoing and expanding operations are attempting to thwart the development of more terrorist and extremist groups along the lines of al-Shabaab in Somalia, as well as other so-called 'grey zones'. SOCAFRICA's 2016 list of nearly 50 terrorist groups in Africa

included al-Qaida, ISIS, Ansar-al-Sharia, al-Murabitun, Boko Haram, the Lord's Resistance Army and al-Shabaab. In 2017, Bolduc reported that attacks from violent extremist organisations (VEOs) in Africa had jumped from 100 per year to 2,000 and have been 'some of the most lethal on the planet' (Turse 2017).

To add to the complexity of Invisible Children's relationship with militarisation, at the time of writing, one of the original Invisible Children founders, Laren Poole, and the former Director of Operations, Adam Finck, both work for Bridgeway Foundation, which hires private military contractors to train Uganda's army, as reported by *Foreign Policy* (Gauvey 2017). The charity division of Bridgeway offered Invisible Children initial seed funding of $135,000[127] to get an early warning system off the ground, which today uses high-frequency radios[128] to track rebel movements across 61,000 square miles of the Congo and Central African Republic. Invisible Children works closely with the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) and U.S. African Command (AFRICOM), as well as the United Nations Peacekeepers, who all rely on the radio programme's data. Bridgeway estimates that it has spent roughly $12 million between 2010 and 2015 on its counter-LRA strategies and provides both helicopter and bush plane transport for UPDF military officers, who admit they prefer Bridgeway's transport to that offered by former President Barack Obama's military troops. Yet, according to *Foreign Policy*, 'by March 2010, Bridgeway was also financing what looked increasingly like a private war against the LRA — and Invisible Children's fingerprints were evident on these more overtly militaristic initiatives' (Gauvey 2017). Between March 2011 and January 2012, Bridgeway and Poole organised to bring in

[127] Bridgeway states it has given Invisible Children an additional $500,000 over the past several years.

[128] These radios have also become invaluable to local Congolese in remote villages, who appreciate the connectivity in areas devoid of any public services - they are often vital in communicating information ranging from rebel attacks to medical emergencies.

Eeben Barlow and his company STTEP International[129] to train hundreds of Ugandan troops. Eeben Barlow is:

> a veteran of the Civil Cooperation Bureau, South Africa's apartheid-era covert government military unit that carried out assassinations. After the end of apartheid, Barlow had earned some renown as founder of the private military contractor Executive Outcomes, which fought in civil wars in Sierra Leone and Angola and was fictionalised in the 2006 film *Blood Diamond* (ibid).

As reported by *The Telegraph*, Barlow is also renowned for fighting a secret war against Boko Haram in Nigeria with STTEP's private armies (Freeman 2015). While it is unknown whether STTEP International is still operating the region, 2017 reports announced that President Donald Trump was closing the $100 million a year effort to capture Kony and UPDF forces were being re-stationed to areas like Mogadishu, Somalia.

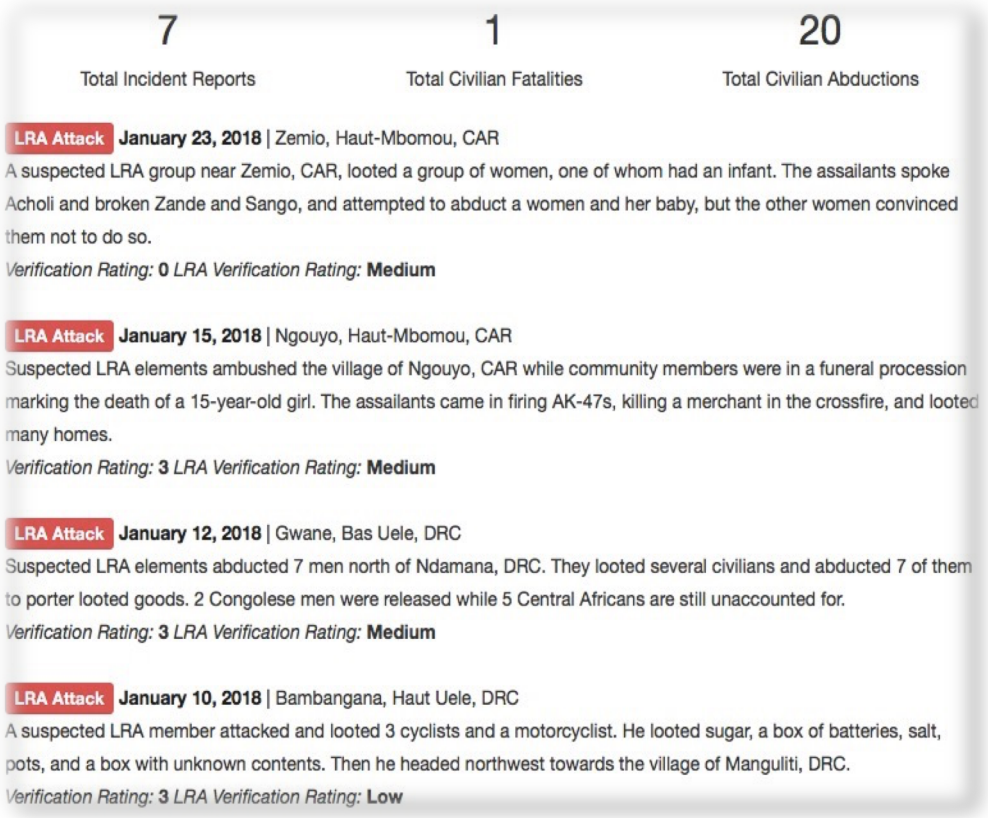


Image 10-12: LRA Crisis Tracker Report retrieved Jan 31 2018

[129] Refer to:http://www.sttepi.com/default.html.

VII. The American Affair with Africa

Some research has highlighted the political undercurrents of *KONY 2012*, for instance, Fisher's (2014) work on Western 'crisis decision making' and African agency, as well as Branch's (2011) research on how human rights interventions tend to further violence and undermine democratic processes. Branch's research on the war in Northern Uganda argues that *KONY 2012* overlooked the corruption and complicity within the Ugandan government, as well as the dangers of militarisation. He described the situation by stating that 'international intervention, I believe, not only failed to bring about positive change, but also *prevented* such change from occurring, and, at times, it directly and destructively enflamed, enabled, and prolonged the war, displacement and civilian suffering' (Branch 2011: 4). Developing this point further, Finnegan (2013) has shed light on the domestic objectives of AFRICOM and the United States government, which he believes seeks to counter China's increasing control over oil and other natural resources in the region, thus outlining the complex relationship between humanitarian campaigns and socio-political systems, wherein militarisation can be employed for polarised objectives.

However, while Finnegan (2013) suspected covert political agendas were at play in the *KONY 2012* phenomenon, there was no evidence to sustain the argument at depth. In reality, while globally minded millennials and organisations such as Invisible Children attempted to stop Joseph Kony and the LRA, the United States was quietly using the humanitarian campaign as a strategy for entering the region. However, this was not confirmed until the discovery of the Wikileaks cables, which openly state the U.S. objectives for entering the region on the back of the movement:

> In reality, the deployment has little to do with Kony. Instead, the move is about improving regional security, strengthening U.S.-Ugandan bilateral relations and Obama's attempts to shore up support from his

> political base. Both Kampala and Washington stand to benefit from the deployment of U.S. forces in Central Africa (Global Intelligence Files 2011).

Kapoor (2013) argued that this is a part of the 'disaster capitalism complex'[130], which entails 'helping provide emergency humanitarian relief, alongside multilateral and UN agencies, but also military and peacekeeping forces, private security firms, and policing' (Kapoor 2013: 107).

The Wikileaks cables leaked from Stratfor stated that the hunt for Kony was used as a proxy strategy for the American government, which allowed their military forces to enter Uganda and securitise the region under the spectacular banner of American exceptionalism, seeking global justice and humanitarian aid, whilst reinforcing global control of resources and power. The U.S. entry into Uganda appeared to be more about competing with China and India over oil on Lake Albert, as well as positioning themselves in key regions for military and political control both at home and abroad. Statfor also points to former President Barack Obama's desire to garner support from his political constituents, as well as to improve relations abroad. This argument has been paralleled by others, such as Branch (2012), who argues that *KONY 2012* offered a reason for the United States government to justify military expansion in Central Africa. These incentives were also highlighted in the interview with 'Dr A'.[131] Dr A. noted the growing economic weight of China in the region, as well as the need for the United States to compete with that power by securing Eastern Congo for its key minerals and strategic allies, notably President Museveni and Rwandan President Paul Kagame ('Dr A.': Skype interview in May 2016). Dr A. also highlighted that 'there's no shortage of nefarious armed groups in the region

[130] A similar term has been coined by Naomi Klein (2007).

[131] 'Dr A.', whose name has been changed due to the sensitive nature of the discussion, works for the World Bank.

that one could target' and questioned the basis on which the decision was made to hunt for Joseph Kony in particular. He argued that the reason can sometimes be as 'fickle as the fact that there was advocacy groups pushing it and there's a correlation between what those advocacy groups are pushing and U.S. interests' ('Dr A.': ibid). In the interview, Dr A explored the incentives for President Museveni:

> For Museveni having the LRA out there has been of enormous utility … It's also Darfur, it's Somalia, he's able to leverage security cooperation in order to lend himself a level of impunity from scrutiny for autocratic behaviour that others in the region aren't necessarily afforded. He's adept at playing these global actors (ibid).

Dr A. used the example of a dam that Museveni built, which was financed entirely from China rather than the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. He described Museveni's engagement with global actors such as China, particularly with regard to global economic trade agreements, as 'unusual', since, in other circumstances, a country would have 'consequences for engaging in terms of those kinds of trade with alternative global economic patrons' (ibid). Dr A. further described Museveni's key geographical position, which essentially allows Uganda to fight a war with Somalia on behalf of the United States. Dr A. explained how Museveni often came under scrutiny, particularly after the release of a 2003 Human Rights Watch report that outlined the abuses carried out by the UPDF.[132] The report also pointed towards abuses by armed groups that were supported by Museveni and Salim Saleh.[133] Museveni threatened to pull out all of his troops, including his African Union peacekeepers from Somalia and Darfur, if the Ugandan government was mentioned in the reports. In the end, 'he got his way' (ibid).

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[132] For information on the atrocities, human rights violations and political corruption from UPDF, refer to: Weber's (2003) Human Rights Watch report.

[133] General Salim Saleh is a high-ranking military officer in the Uganda People's Defence Force, the armed forces of Uganda. He is also President Yoweri Museveni's brother.

In another interview I conducted with BBC producer, Christine, she described the climate on the ground in Uganda during the filming of their BBC documentary. She stated that local people felt that:

> The Americans can't send peacekeepers into Somalia anymore, but Uganda does it on their behalf. So there's some strange relationships between Uganda and the Americans… the ruse of hunting for Joseph Kony to really should have their presence there for business reasons, not for him. And that Uganda also has oil now too ('Christine': Skype interview in March 2014).

In Christine's interview, she detailed the hauntingly accurate 'conspiracy theories' surrounding Joseph Kony and the political climate, highlighting the often 'overlapping beliefs' about why Joseph Kony had been allowed to roam free, citing the Chinese and mining interests in the region, Sudan and al-Bashir's protection of Kony, as well as the use of Central Africa as a corridor for the Americans. She stated: 'we wish we had explored this in the film, but that was not what the BBC commissioned' (ibid). Christine described the distaste in the region for the *KONY 2012* film, which people felt was sensational and created unwanted attention, but also highlighted the popular perception that the U.S. troops used the film as 'as an excuse to gain a presence in mineral rich Central African nations where they had been kicked out' (ibid).[134] However, these statements were most powerfully confirmed in The Global Intelligence Files released by Wikileaks. One classified cable, in particular, outlines the facts specifically:

> In particular, the United States would like to counter China and India, which already are well-situated to benefit from East African Community (EAC) trade, in which Uganda plays a key role. (Uganda's Lake Albert basin is home to 2.5 billion barrels of oil, and the neighboring DRC is the world's leader in copper deposits, with notable diamond, iron ore and bauxite deposits). Additionally, South Sudan is quickly moving toward EAC membership, a move that could over the next decade

[134] At the time of her interview, while I felt the information pertinent and fascinating, I decided against using the material in the thesis due to lack of evidence and the controversy of discussing 'conspiracy theories' without credibility or factual information. The discovery of The Global Intelligence Files changed that.

> provide Juba an alternative oil export route. Museveni has championed Chinese investment, especially in his country's oil sector, but his military cooperation with Washington has given the United States more resonance in continuing its approach into Uganda and East Africa. By deploying troops into Uganda, the United States, which has simultaneously increased its sphere of influence in Tanzania and Rwanda through large aid projects, can continue to assert itself in the region, aiming eventually to usurp the favorable Chinese business environment in the region (The Global Intelligence Files 2011).

The Global Intelligence Files expanded on the benefits of U.S. interest in the region, which allowed former President Barack Obama's to increase his political support base in the United States, since he received criticism over his lack of African aid, as well as his overall limited focus on the international stage. The files stated: 'sending troops to Central Africa to help in the fight against a rebel militant force allows Obama to show his support for African stability' and went on to explain: 'The capture of Kony, while largely symbolic, would be a low-cost foreign policy win ahead of the 2012 presidential election' (ibid). The report claimed that former President George Bush's activity in the region made it difficult for Republicans to criticise Obama's deployment, since he would be 'trying to finish the job' (ibid). Furthermore, the Statfor report argued that the deployment of troops could be used as leverage to 'create a sphere of influence for regional trade' since Uganda has 'considerable mineral and energy resources', as well as acts as a 'regional hub' for key ports like Mombasa, Kenya, Dar es Salaam and Tanzania (The Global Intelligence Files 2011).

The cables also went on to note the complicated relationship between the oil industry, corruption in Museveni's government and the power plays within the Ugandan Parliament. The cables highlighted the criticism Museveni faced from Ugandan Parliament over oil corruption. It described how several of Museveni's top advisers were asked by Parliament to step down over corrupt oil agreements with China and explained: 'The U.S. advisers first and foremost will enhance the intelligence collection capabilities of the Ugandan

security forces, which could enable Museveni, who already controls a strong internal security apparatus, to maintain internal oversight of his political opponents in Parliament' (The Global Intelligence Files 2011). The cables also detailed the United States' interest in regional military strategies, since the deployment of American troops gave the United States greater access to combating security threats, particularly al- Shabaab in Somalia. The report explained: 'No country has supplied more troops for the African Union Mission in Somalia than Uganda' and went on to state: 'the U.S. deployment can thus be seen as a display of Washington's gratitude to Museveni for his country's efforts in Somalia' (ibid). The cables also described their regional incentives for combating al Shabaab and monitoring South Sudan under the guise of its LRA search, particularly due to the key access that Uganda provides for northern Kenya and, by extension, Somalia. The Statfor report also highlights the importance of monitoring Sudan 'where Sudan's ruling party historically has supported the LRA as a bulwark against Uganda's - and therefore the United States' - influence in Sudan' (The Global Intelligence Files 2011). Thus, while Invisible Children can hardly be held accountable for the complicated, covert ways their campaigns were used by the United States government and other global forces, the Wikileaks cables do reveal the hidden incentives for deploying troops in the region and supporting efforts to capture Kony, which may have had little to do with capturing Joseph Kony. The culture surrounding the Christian evangelical beliefs of Invisible Children, which reflected a missionary ideology, may have simply played into U.S. government strategy.



Image 10-13: Russell speaks to roadies and staff, kicking off a tour at San Diego's Mt. Soledad Veterans Memorial on Sept. 17, 2013
Photograph by Sam Hodgson for *BuzzFeed*.

VIII. The Christian Connection

Invisible Children was indirectly tied to fundamentalist Christian organisations and charities, as well as to fundamentalist right-wing politicians and their powerful lobbying officials. Russell, who cited Jesus Christ as his motivator for the organisation, received support from anti-gay, creationist organisations, such as the National Christian Foundation, Christian Community Foundation, and ProVision Foundation. According to a report in *The Atlantic*, he also had support from pro-Christian families such as the Caster Family, the Terry & Rosann Douglass Foundation, as well as Christian billionaire, Philip Anschutz (Kron 2012).[135] Furthermore, many senior officials at Invisible Children, including national

[135] 'The National Christian Foundation, which has provided Invisible Children with more than $600,000 over the years between itself and subsidiaries, according to figures from financial statements gave $817,000 in 2008 alone to Ed Silvoso. An evangelical minister in California, Silvoso works closely with Julius Oyet, a prominent Ugandan Bishop and leading advocate for Uganda's notorious anti-homosexuality bill. 'In 2006, Invisible Children received roughly $10,000 from an Emerging church in Santa Barbara. In 2007, it received $10,000 from a foundation that emphasises faith spirituality, $20,000 from a foundation that

tour coordinators, lead graphic designers, the director of ideology, Jedidiah Jenkins, on-the-ground African programmes officers, finance offers, communication staff, all of the founders, as well as most of the Board of Directors, were followers of the Christian faith. One member of the Board of Directors, Rich McCullen, is the founder and lead pastor at a pro-LGBT Christian church in San Diego, which Russell and other members often attend (ibid.).

While the Invisible Children founders never attempted to hide their Christian faith from supporters, it is less well-known that long-term Senate supporters who aligned themselves with Invisible Children did so for a variety of personal incentives, which included religious beliefs and lobbying initiatives. For instance, Republican Senator Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma, author of the notorious anti-climate change book, *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future* (2012), was a major supporter of the organisation. Senator Inhofe is a Presbyterian who notoriously said 'I am a Jesus Guy' and 'I have a heart for Africa' (Kron 2012). Senator Inhofe receives the majority of his campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry.[136] Inhofe spoke at Invisible Children rallies, such as The Rescue, and was featured as a key representative for the campaign in *KONY 2012*.[137] In that sense, *KONY 2012* had a 'Christian evangelical element in that members of Congress who see their roles in an evangelical spirit felt a special responsibility to address the atrocities committed by Joseph Kony' (Hendrickson 2015: 154). In particular, The

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focuses on the relationship between science and spirituality, nearly $10,000 from a Christian media organisation, and $5,600 from a Catholic performing-arts high school. In 2008, it received $5,000 from a Christian rehabilitation ministry that includes sexual orientation struggles. It received $6,000 from a Christian philosophy ministry and nearly $80,000 from an American Christian charity in Uganda that helps orphans.' (Kron 2012).

[136] This information was retrieved from Open Secrets, Centre for Responsive Politics which tracks money in U.S. politics and its effect on elections and public policy. Refer to: https://www.opensecrets.org/politicians/summary.php?cid=N00005582.

[137] 'Apart from the political access provided to NGOs in this case, a high degree of NGO coordination between Invisible Children, RESOLVE Uganda, and the Enough Project helped to consolidate the political pressure that could be placed on Congress' (Hendrickson 2015: 154)

Fellowship Foundation, a staunch Christian organisation which performs African ministry work across the continent and considers itself a Christian fraternity with countless politicians and U.S. Congressman as members, was a connection for Invisible Children (ibid). Both Senator Inhofe and Ugandan President Museveni are members of the Fellowship, which is also known as 'The Family', with Yoweri Museveni acting as 'the Family's "key man" in Africa' (Sharlet 2008).

When President Yoweri Museveni rose to power in 1986 he quickly became The Fellowship's most prized recruit. Meanwhile, Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK), the organisation's 'point person for Africa', cultivated special relationships with the political elite throughout Africa, particularly with the presidents of Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. Between 2003 and 2004, The Fellowship budgeted $70,000 for Inhofe's travel to Uganda alone. Museveni also notoriously worked with The Fellowship in 1997, alongside a leading thinker in energy deregulation, Dennis Bakke, who is also the former CEO of the electrical power company, AES. The Fellowship and Museveni brokered a no bid deal for on a $500-million dam, close to the source of the White Nile. These waters are considered sacred by Uganda's 2.5-million–strong Busoga minority, but the dam was built despite enormous protest from the both locals and the World Bank, who believed it would actually increase the price of power for the poor (ibid). Inhofe and The Fellowship also played a key role in supporting Uganda's 2009 anti-homosexuality bill (Sharlet 2010).

While it is no great secret that government officials, corporations and private organisations have a long history of corruption and exploitation, the issue raised here is that on 'at least two of Invisible Children's programs have involved collaboration with The Fellowship and its members' (Kron 2012). By 2007, both Invisible Children and The Fellowship were announcing to staffers that they had partially merged Invisible Children's developing school and mentoring programme in Uganda with The Fellowship's Ugandan educational

and leadership training system. The Fellowship's system aims to 'raise up a cadre of elite, Jesus-centered leaders who will transform their nation along "Biblical" lines — with one apparent objective being the categorical elimination of homosexuality', according to *The Huffington Post* (Besen 2012). The Educational Director for The Fellowship's Ugandan leadership training schools, Paul Lukwiya, has also travelled with Invisible Children leaders and spoke at their 2007 rally in Seattle (ibid). Paul Lukwiya is featured in the 2009 Invisible Children video, 'Legacy Fund/ Schools for Schools'. However, while Invisible Children has been funded by other homophobic Christian charities, such as the National Christian Foundation,[138] and *KONY 2012* was supported by a large number of Christian young people,[139] the organisation was also supported by liberal, pro-gay organisations and individuals, such as Oprah Winfrey, who donated $2 million to Invisible Children. It is unclear whether supporters such as Winfrey were aware of Invisible Children's connections to right wing fundamentalist Christianity.

On the Invisible Children website, they openly supported marriage equality and stated: 'gay rights are indeed human rights', explaining that they were also against the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda (Invisible Children 2012). Furthermore, the participants interviewed in this research unanimously supported LGTB rights. Invisible Children's

[138] In *The Atlantic*, Kron (2012) explains that the National Christian Foundation is known for its 'persecution of LGBT people in Uganda' and 'homophobic religious doctrine'.

[139] The article in *The Huffington Post* argues: '*KONY 2012* was 'heavily supported by Christian youth, many of whom post Biblical psalms as their profile bios', according to SocialFlow. An analysis of the users in these core activist networks found that the most common words in their Twitter bios include 'Jesus', 'God', 'Christ', 'Life', 'Love', 'University' and 'Student'. (Kron 2012). Furthermore, 'In May 2007, Invisible Children's CEO Ben Keesey, and IC's Development Director Chris Sarette submitted an application, which identified Invisible Children as a "ministry", asking for support from the Barnabas Group, a politically far right-wing Christian non-profit which helps cutting edge stealth ministry evangelizing efforts that target Jews and Muslims, youth, Hollywood, and even apartment dwellers around the globe' 'the Barnabas Group is dedicated to evangelizing, fighting LGBT rights, and advancing Christian supremacy worldwide' (Besen 2012).

awareness of this anomaly cannot be confirmed or denied. However, the complex dynamic between The Fellowship, Senator Inhofe, President Museveni and Invisible Children highlights a historical trend where American Christians have found purpose in Africa, from humanitarian aid to religious preaching and conversion to political corruption and regional dominance. While Jason Russell and Invisible Children leaders were focused on the principle of global justice and the campaign to capture Joseph Kony, political desires for resources and power became the underlying forces in the mission to end LRA violence. As Dr A. stated:

> There are plenty of superficial, ostensibly well-intended advocacy groups out there that have a very elementary understanding of the issues that they're engaging in....What they're doing is advancing the realist U.S. interest abroad as opposed to doing what civil society is supposed to do ('Dr A.': Skype interview in May 2016).

This failed understanding has been projected onto many humanitarian campaigns, which ironically lose their humanity in the attempt to gain it. This was evident in the complexity of *KONY 2012*, which reinforced 'colonial organisation' (Mudimbe 1988). Mudimbe argued that there are three keys to colonial organisation:

> The procedures of acquiring, distributing, and exploiting lands in colonies; the policies of domesticating natives; and the manner of managing ancient organisations and implementing new modes of production. Thus, three complementary hypotheses and actions emerge: the domination of physical space, the reformation of *natives*' minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective (Mudimbe 1988: 2)

One could surmise that Invisible Children did exactly that: it facilitated the United States' military expansion into the region, which then facilitated the control of resources. Invisible Children encouraged Christian missionaries to 'domesticate' Uganda into becoming a Christian society, while reinforcing the representation and commodification of the 'Other'; furthermore, it implemented new 'modes of production' through failed programmes and colonising structures that sought to control the politics, religion, social structure and

economics of Central Africa, as well as funding private military control of the region. Today, the U.S. is still attempting to assert power over Africa's resources and citizens, just in more covert and complex ways, as the polymedia movement of *KONY 2012* illustrates. In many ways, culture is what took advantage of the participants, the founders and the Ugandans. This includes the culture of imperialism and colonialism embedded in the religious upbringing of Jason Russell and the other founders, the culture of capitalism and spectacle embedded in the humanitarian campaigning of the 21st century and the culture of racism and neo-colonialism embedded in humanitarianism, foreign policy, religion and international relations. The organisation's dream was one of shared humanity and social change, but ultimately they were subverted by the same colonialism, religiosity, militarism and corruption that originally contributed to the conflict. In doing this, they played a role in the social, religious, economic and political depravity that deeply affects the region today.



Image 10-13: Jason Russell at the Invisible Children headquarters in San Diego

Source: Testa (2014), *BuzzFeed*

When Invisible Children closed its doors in 2015, its CEO, Ben Keesey, announced: 'the beauty is that [the drop in LRA crime] hasn't been funded by big corporations, that hasn't been funded by big foundations, that has not been driven by political elite, that's been driven by the people' (Invisible Children website 2015). However, while the polymedia movement was steered by millennials, it was also powered by big foundations, big corporations and political elite. As a polymedia movement, this chapter explores how the poly nature of the movement encompassed often contradictory or independently functioning forces, which circulated and thrived as microcosms within the larger microcosm of the organisation. The corrupt government agendas, colonial forces and Christianity were key microcosms within the wider movement, not only due to their ability to steer the course of the movement, but also due to their contradictory natures, which went against so much of what Invisible Children stood for and so much of what its milleniall followers believed they were fighting for.

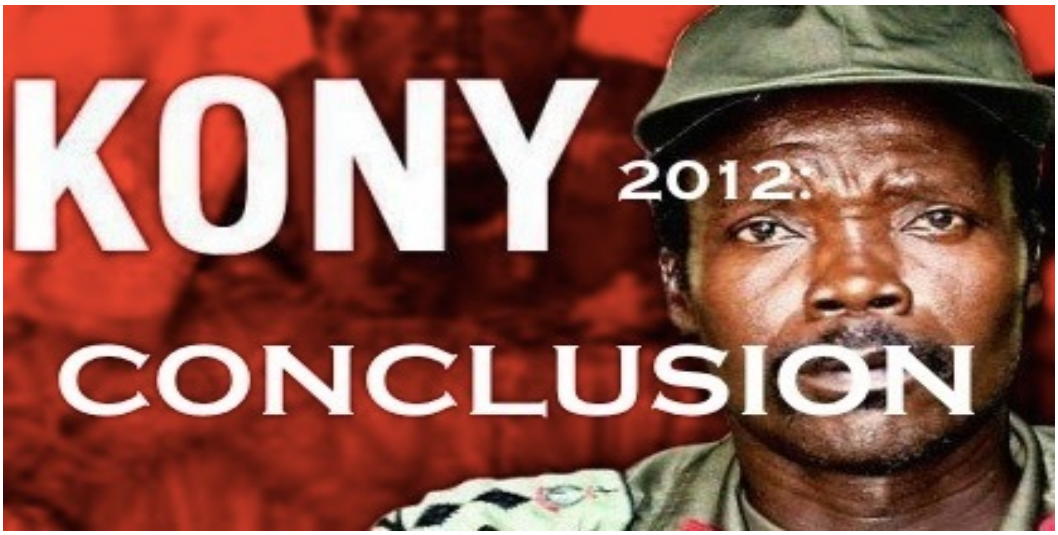


Image 11-1: Image retrieved from Invisible Children on September 9, 2013

Chapter Eleven: Conclusion

I. The End of the Affair?

In August of 2016, the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) announced that it would begin 'withdrawing from the military offensive against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels in Central African Republic (CAR)', as reported by *Reuters* (Biryabarema 2016). The UPDF had been the only military force actively searching for Joseph Kony and the LRA. According to *Daily Monitor*, the UPDF general stated: 'We are still talking to our American partners and CAR government to see if we can train a force to replace us' (Kasasira 2016). In so many words, this meant that the hunt for Kony had officially ended and 2,000 military personnel were withdrawn from the region at the end of 2016 (Biryabarema 2016).[140] As the UPDF retired its forces in the region, some argued that the LRA were stepping up attacks. According to the LRA Crisis Tracker, there were 151 attacks, 17 fatalities and 569

[140] However, that is not to say that the United States has left the region entirely. The presence and location of American military forces in the region is difficult to determine.

abductions in 2016 across the DRC and CAR. In 2018, 160 attacks were reported, with 12 fatalities and 333 abductions. However, the verification rating for these attacks is often low and various other rebel groups operate within the region. At the time of writing, Joseph Kony and his few remaining fighters are reported to be surviving on the illegal ivory trade and have poached over 100 elephants in Garamba National Park, according to *Daily Monitor* (Ocungi 2018). Furthermore, while the conflict continues outside of Uganda, Northern Ugandans are still struggling.[141] Victims of the LRA often feel stigmatised and struggle to fund education and housing, while Kony's leaders receive generous amnesties, which include homes, financial aid and schooling.

After Yoweri Museveni's 2016 're-election' and Invisible Children officially closing their doors in the United States, the future of Joseph Kony and the LRA seems uncertain. However, Invisible Children have stated that they will continue to operate some programmes from their office in Uganda before finally handing over their Ugandan efforts to partner organisations. In a 2015 interview with Christian magazine, *Relevant*, Russell stated: 'I feel like Kony won' (Huckabee 2015). Meanwhile, Ugandan youth, ever more connected to social media, are rising up against Museveni's rule. According to *Africa News*, this new movement, led by Uganda's vocal legislator and singer, Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine,[142] seeks to create democratic change in Uganda (Mumbere 2018). Wine recently announced at a conference in Washington, D.C.: 'We want the American taxpayer to know that the American taxpayer is funding this. The military equipment we are supplying to Uganda is being used in a war of terror against Uganda's

[141] This is compounded by the surge of child soldiers being used in the region for the South Sudanese government. South Sudan has historically been supported by Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, and was devastated by Joseph Kony at the height of LRA violence (Migiro 2016).

[142] Wine was recently imprisoned and tortured by Museveni's forces and recovered in the United States. His driver was brutally murdered when forces stormed Wine's vehicle. Wine has been vocal against Museveni's regime and plans to run for presidency.

citizens' (ibid). In essence, Museveni's U.S. backed dictatorship is now on the rocks as Uganda's youth find strength in their connection and hope for democracy. The future of government corruption and undemocratic leadership is in a state of flux as the millennials of Uganda unite in the fight for democracy. At the same time, Invisible Children's millennial Americans are moving forward with their lives, with the organisation's influence making up part of their lived experience and world perspective. In opposition to the forces of millennial youth around the world are forces seeking to control and influence the resources and cultures of various countries on both local and global scales.



Images 11-2 and 11-3: 'I feel like Kony won'. Retrieved from *Relevant* magazine on July 24, 2016

II. Understanding the Phenomenon

This research has sought to ask: how we can better understand contemporary humanitarian activism in the United States through polymedia movements like *KONY 2012*? Russell's vision for the future of humanitarianism was one where participants could 'have a blast' while 'helping child soldiers'. There is something profound about his vision: where global unity and helping others is not 'sad' or 'downtrodden', but is instead inspirational, community-driven and enlightening (Russell interview 2014). Invisible Children set out to create a new model for humanitarian organisations, which rebelled against the spectacle of

suffering seen in most humanitarian campaigns, with negative imagery and appeals focused on rousing guilt or sadness. It was a theatrical film, an extravagant performance and a visual creation that took participants on an adventurous journey by empowering millennials to find themselves. The organisation drew support by connecting with millennials who bonded with Invisible Children's ideology and branding, and relied on millennial supporters by implementing extensive visual performances, films and activist events. It used concerts, celebrities, hip merchandise and elaborate visual displays to connect performance, entertainment, youth culture and consumerism with humanitarian campaigns. At the same time, it inspired and connected millennial youth through its community and existential messages of inspiration, empowerment, identity and purpose. In essence, Russell's vision was both a narcissistic approach to humanitarianism that focused on the millennials' personal pursuits of happiness and adventure, and a revolutionary transformation in humanitarianism that approaches the sadness and fear of global issues with a positive, unbendable drive towards creating a global community for social change. Invisible Children was not just a humanitarian campaign, but a social, poly(media) movement that expressed itself as a 'global ecumene' (Hannerz 1992). Invisible Children brought together 'transnational activist networks' (Edelman 2001), which 'cast the goals of movements in ever more universal terms' (Nash 2005: 1).

In *KONY 2012*, Russell called on citizens around the world to test their connectivity and defy the imperialist power of governments and media institutions. He asked viewers to help re-write the rules of society's social structure; to change the dynamics of interaction between human beings, to push new forms of communication and agency, to capture freedom and create a new mind set where humanity is united in its connectivity and power. The emotional narrative of *KONY 2012* synthesised the millennial desire to create a system of global unity and democratisation, where aggregate communities could work together to

create social change. With its Hollywood celebrity endorsements, emotionally potent visual narrative and consumerist appeals, it spoke to millennials and offered a spectacular humanitarianism. Yet, at the same time, the organisation emphasised the agency of Western millennials rather than Ugandans and celebrated the idea of action mediated by social media (Madianou 2013).



Image 11-4: Invisible Children catchphrase: 'without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community'
Retrieved from Invisible Children on December 15, 2014.

In this process of shaping the millennial idealism of global connection and justice, the 'invisible children' remained invisible and the African 'Other' endured as a shadow to its millennial youth focus. In essence, in their millennial romanticism, an understanding of African voice and empowerment was lost, while the narrative of the 'Other' persisted in a neo-colonialist, missionary tone. While Invisible Children was intended to be a humanitarian campaign, its humanity became more focused on the American millennials than on the Ugandans who were subject to the atrocities. Furthermore, the simplification of the conflict in *KONY 2012* ignored the vast array of causes, which included the exploitation of minerals and oil, ethnic tensions, foreign military intervention and land

disputes. The simplification of the conflict and the focus on American millennials increased the support for Museveni, 'the dictatorial and kleptocratic leader of Uganda' (Zuckerman 2012).

Essentially, while Invisible Children was a productive and successful organisation for millennials and served a worthy purpose within its American youth community, it is debatable whether the organisation had a positive impact in Uganda or whether it fell victim to neo-colonial tendencies and thus contributed to further harm. While the organisation raised awareness of the LRA and Joseph Kony, the programmes created to better the lives of Ugandans paled in comparison to their American endeavours. Furthermore, the United States' military actions in the region only reinforced the incentivised methods for obtaining control over political, economic and social affairs in Central Africa. Today, the aftermath of the conflict in Central Africa persists. Furthermore, while Invisible Children and other aid organisations have attempted to help those in need, *KONY 2012* left many in the region feeling that their suffering had been commoditised in order to give meaning to millennial youth in America. The Invisible Children cause provided happiness that its American millennial participants felt they could not find elsewhere in their social surroundings. However, the happiness and wellbeing of others, particularly Ugandans, was lost amidst the millennial search for an adventurous inner peace.

Ultimately, Invisible Children was a product of its environment and history, from Russell's upbringing in Christian theatre to the political climate within American culture, which was plagued by corruption and misanthropy disguised as philanthropy. In essence, this thesis explores the neo-colonialism embedded in humanitarianism; the complex changes to activism taking place in the United States, particularly due to the rise of social media in a millennial youth culture; the rehearsed mentality of Christianity; and the role of top-secret government agendas in foreign conflicts and aid, which could be summarised as attempts

to exploit and control Central Africa. Ironically, while Invisible Children initiatives supported Museveni in their desire for social justice and sought to empower American millennials, it is now the millennials of Uganda who are seeking change for their country through new leadership, which they hope will enact real democracy and carry out tangible change through social justice. That said, while Invisible Children focused on the United States as the epicentre of power for creating change in Uganda, they were also only reflecting the realities of global hegemonies. At present, the United States' international sphere of influence is vast and, as this thesis shows, is eager to use humanitarian campaigns, or any other means including viral videos, to further its reach and control abroad. Even Bobi Wine, who has attempted to challenge Museveni's role as president, was recently in Washington, D.C. seeking support from U.S. politicians for his candidacy. Thus, while it is easy to criticise Invisible Children for its ethnocentric campaign initiatives and emphasis on American participants, in actuality, the wider governmental infrastructure and historically-influenced culture should be the focus of critical analysis and critique. Furthermore, while Invisible Children's campaigns were certainly narcissistic and a 'celebration of (Western) publics' (Madianou 2013: 259–260), the academic judgements of non-governmental organisations like Invisible Children fail to consider the large sacrifices that humanitarian organisations feel they must make in order to strive towards mass awareness and action. Invisible Children has likely helped to revolutionise the idea of global justice and humanitarianism in the age of digital media, but that has been overshadowed by critiques, since, as Brough argues: 'they are creating a space for idealism that works within the context of postmodernism and neoliberalism, which is precisely its promise and its peril' (Brough 2012: 188).

Yet, maybe what the world needs as we reach alarming levels of crises, from climate change to nuclear threats, are empowered people who have hope and belief in creating change. In

many ways the ethos of Invisible Children echoed Henry Jenkins (2018) who stated:

> Before you can change the world you have to be able to imagine what a different or better world looks like. You have to be able to imagine what the process of change is, to imagine yourself as a civic and political agent capable of making change. You have to have a sense of an imagined community that you're a part of, a collective larger than yourself that is capable of being mobilised towards political goals. You often need some sense of empathy, or concern for people whose realities are different from your own.

Whether American or African, maybe we need to start somewhere. Maybe Russell and the others knew their method lacked perfection, but also knew it was a start. Their radical reconfiguration of humanitarian campaigning sparked a youth movement amongst American millennials who felt empowered to tackle global issues, while at the same time captivating the hearts and minds of millions around the world. While it was bound to neo-colonialism and neo-capitalism, it sparked the essence of change, and change must start somewhere.

This research found that *KONY 2012* was appropriated, consumed and reproduced by various entities simultaneously, often serving more than one role for various groups at the same time. These microcosms within the polymedia movement often functioned independently of one another, or acted against one another. For the participants, *KONY 2012* defined their group identity and humanitarianism. It acted as a community and revealed media as being central to humanitarian campaigning and social movement activism in digitally mediated spaces. For the Invisible Children organisation, *KONY 2012* symbolised the idealism and hope for social change that Russell and the other founders believed in. The organisation created a way of life and state of being for its community of the 'Fourth Estaters', who believed in an interconnected, global humanity. Invisible Children made it cool for millennials to be activists in a movement and also created a sense of family and empowerment for the participants. On the other hand, as a polymedia

movement, Invisible Children's campaigning was deeply embedded in neo-colonialism as religious, lobbyist and government groups appropriated the film's message for covert and corrupt agendas. For governments in the U.S. and Uganda, the organisation's initiatives served a unilateral purpose that allowed military, social and economic incentives to be enacted under the guise of humanitarian aid and social justice. In essence, *KONY 2012* performed as aid, activism, humanitarianism, commodification, Christianity, community, political leverage and visual display. *KONY 2012* had various, often opposing, social lives, purposes, values and uses: it was, in essence, a poly movement.

Invisible Children's case sheds light on the complexity of humanitarian campaigns and their movements in the digital age of online activism, which can work for and against governments, be implemented for and against citizens around the world and serve various purposes for social, religious and political institutions. *KONY 2012* also illustrated the intricate complexities of new media: it was neither democratising nor imperialist and it assumed the same roles reflected in the societal structures from which it was appropriated. This thesis weaves together a web of interconnected factors to provide a story of Invisible Children and humanitarian campaigns in the age of polymedia. It illustrates how humanitarian campaigns, social movements and activism function in contemporary society. The ethnographic research examined the complexity and confusion surrounding Invisible Children and *KONY 2012,* which often represented contrasting social, political, economic and religious ideologies, and perhaps became colonialism dressed up as humanitarianism. At the same time, it played a positive role in the lives of thousands of millennial Americans.

The thesis also contributed to an anthropological understanding of activism, humanitarianism and millennial youth culture in the United States, which is bound to social media. The Invisible Children phenomenon could be understood as a multi-dimensional ripple effect, which penetrated through space and time and contained different layers of

consciousness and realities. The realities of Invisible Children's leaders, the millennial participants, international corporations, non-governmental organisations, American and African governments and religious groups involved in the shaping and trajectory of the organisation were at once digital, political, social and cultural. The ripple effect began with a drop of water, which developed from the condensation of the complex socio-cultural realities of the leaders' upbringing and prior historical events. As a drop of water, Invisible Children was vastly complex and composed of various entities, with its ripple effect contributing to the structure, trajectory and power of events, on both local and global scales, as well for the various groups involved.

III. Thesis Overview

The goal of this research was to inform an anthropological understanding of the *KONY 2012* phenomenon through an investigation into the millennial youth culture, online activism and humanitarianism surrounding the movement. Interviewing 142 *KONY* informants and conducting one year of participant observation on Facebook provided a basis from which to observe how the organisation functioned and its participants' motives and perceptions regarding their associations with each other and their intended goals. The theoretical framework of the thesis drew support from Madianou's (2013) theory of *KONY 2012* as a polymedia event, alongside key authors such as Brough's (2012) and Jenkins' (2012, 2013, 2016) research on online activism and Chouliaraki's (2006, 2013) work on humanitarianism. An understanding of millennials and their use of media was also explored through the academic literature (Miller 2011, 2016; boyd 2014). The research examined external evidence through various sources, such as Wikileaks, to better comprehend the complexity of humanitarian activism in the contemporary culture of the United States.

In Chapter One of this thesis, I offered a brief introduction and contextualised the *KONY 2012* phenomenon by focusing on the complex socio-political history in northern Uganda and Central Africa, as well as the development of the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army. I also outlined the history of the Invisible Children organisation. Chapter Two engaged with an overview of the *KONY 2012* phenomenon by discussing anthropological insights into *KONY 2012* and establishing the Invisible Children movement as a polymedia movement. In Chapter Three, I described the methodology for the research, which was a digital ethnography in real and cyber spaces. I detailed the research methods, focusing on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, research limitations and ethics. In Chapter Four, I engaged with the theoretical literature on activism and social movements. I explored the wider changes in social activism and social movements in the digital era. In Chapter Five, I discussed the literature on humanitarianism, offering perspectives on the representation of the 'Other', with reference to neo-colonial tendencies in humanitarianism, as well as the commodification of humanitarianism and the use of both celebrity and visual displays in humanitarian campaigns. Chapter Six created an understanding of millennial youth culture through the ethnographic literature. I also examined youth culture in relation to technological developments, particularly focused on the Internet, in order to contextualise the wider culture of the Invisible Children participants. Chapter Seven offered an ethnographic portrait of the organisation, its leaders and the millennial participants of the movement. The chapter looked at the role that Christianity and religion played in the Invisible Children organisation, as well as the varying belief systems of the participants. It highlighted an overview of the Invisible Children participants' backgrounds and the organisation's demographics. Chapter Eight explored the Invisible Children participants, who were often called 'the change makers', in depth through the ethnographic findings. It explained how, in joining the Invisible

Children 'family', participants were found, and became visible, purposeful and a part of 'something bigger than themselves'. The chapter also investigated the internal development of the Invisible Children and celebrity-like identities of the Invisible Children leaders. After situating the cultural context of the participants in Chapter Eight, Chapter Nine went on to look at how the activism of Invisible Children's participants was interconnected with their sense of community within the organisation and practices through social media. It argued that Invisible Children was not reinforcing 'slacktivism', but reacting to the culture, which emphasised the participants' reaction to visually and emotionally compelling, as well as commodity-driven, campaigns that encouraged social media and merchandise consumption. Chapter Ten went on to look at the spectatorship of the suffering 'Other' and the complicated dynamics of humanitarianism. Invisible Children's work with Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, was explored in order to frame the complex social, political and economic background of the region. The chapter investigated the social, political and economic incentives for U.S. support in the region, based on the discovery of Wikileaks information. It examined military intervention in the mission to capture Joseph Kony. Invisible Children's complex relationship with Christianity is explored and the network of ties between Yoweri Museveni, Invisible Children, prominent U.S. politicians and fundamentalist Christian organisations are discussed. The chapter investigated the Invisible Children NGO model and drew connections between celebrity, spectacle, colonialism, Christianity, political corruption and humanitarian consumerism. In essence, the chapter revealed the complexity of humanitarian campaigns in the era of digital media, exploring hidden connections to political elites and big corporations, as well as powerful organisations. In this thesis, I have argued that *KONY 2012*, as a polymedia movement, functioned as a cultural, social and political campaign in contemporary American society, serving opposing agendas and playing various roles

simultaneously. Such media movements have the ability to persuade, communicate and transform social relations.

IV. Polymedia in the Digital Age

From a wider perspective, this thesis touches on the importance of media in everyday interactions, as well how they play an increasingly powerful, complex, role in political, economic, cultural and social worlds. As the viral video of *KONY 2012* illustrates, media are tools for propaganda and power, as well as democratisation and communication. The intellectual paradigms that seek to explain digital media communication and its impact adopt various perspectives: some focus optimistically on cultural flows, equality of voice and positive social impacts, while others view such communications as a form of cultural homogenisation and hidden Western imperialism. A more holistic viewpoint must consider the grey areas within the dichotomised opinions, since digital democratisation has both positive and negative cultural and social impacts, which *KONY 2012* illustrated as a 'polymedia movement'.

From an anthropological perspective, access to digital media has transformed communications and representations on local and global scales.[143] Such advancements in communications technology have vastly altered media ecosystems and the social worlds surrounding them (Postill 2012). As citizens have become increasingly involved in the political and poetical nature of communication, the paradigms that describe media monopolisation are being re-evaluated. The combination of worldwide technological

[143] 'The Internet, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook have reconstituted, especially among young people, how social relationships are constructed and how communication is produced, mediated, and received…State power no longer has a hold on information, at least not the way it did before the emergence of the new media with its ability to reconfigure public exchange and social relations while constituting a new sphere of politics' (Giroux 2009: 1).

developments and evolving social practices have both internally and externally pushed media into more complicated, multi-platform and fluid institutions that are digitally-bound and hierarchically fractured. In many communities, the development of digital media has shifted the monopolies of media control, allowing the production, circulation and reception of media to spread across a vast range of spheres. Furthermore, as people take on new intellectual and creative roles within media, they act for a variety of purposes, which include: socio-political activism, journalism, social awareness, cross-cultural engagement, political engagement and interpersonal communication. Digital media have social, political and economic consequences, necessitate (or facilitate) cross-cultural communications and can act as catalysts for social knowledge and information transformation on various scales. They are thus also imperative to our foundations for making meaning in the world. At the same time, media-saturated environments reinforce the idea that 'our experiences and possibilities are visualised and narrated for us in ways that promise greater choice and control and deliver the opposite, generating intense anxiety that further fuels the process of individualisation' (Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016: 57). Furthermore, new media often lack the transparency needed to 'contribute to our ability to grasp accurately the conditions under which we, and those around us, live' (Couldry 2012: 210).

KONY 2012 depicted the Internet as a platform for social change, which empowered the voiceless and disenfranchised, while inspiring a shared belief in the idea of the digital global village. However, it also represented new hierarchies and power relationships in its digital divides. Furthermore, it illustrated how political, religious and corporate structures can utilise polymedia movements for their own interests, while also instilling a false illusion that allows citizens to believe in their own agency within social media platforms and their networked communities. In this research, I discovered that it was a misconception to believe that U.S. government action to capture Joseph Kony was in response to public

demands. Instead, *KONY 2012* became a form of double propaganda, where the narrative of 'people power' created a citizen mobilisation to capture Kony, while that same narrative reinforced existing political powers on a geopolitical scale. Underneath the banner of humanitarianism and millennial activism, private interest groups aligned with government incentives and reinforced the very existing control loops that *KONY 2012* sought to deflect.

This thesis offers a cautionary warning and a sign of hope: on one hand, it highlights that social media cannot in itself be used as a saviour of democracy. In fact, the global elite of corporations and politicians will continue to use covert methods to control and manipulate on global scales. They will use seemingly democratic forces to maintain control over populations and resources. *KONY 2012* offers an interesting example as a humanitarian viral video that was used as a 'cover story' for American troops asserting and spreading control throughout the region in unofficial and secretive ways. In that sense, in the age of the Internet, 'modern states are vast media laboratories where variously positioned social agents deploy a range of old and new media to pursue (or resist) social change' (Postill 2012: 11), as the various forces of this thesis explore.

KONY 2012 also shed light on the stark contrast between access to media and communication in Uganda compared to the United States. The voiceless and 'invisible' of Uganda remained that way, while millennials in the United States assumed power over the Internet as a democratising agent, which could act within their humanitarian agenda. Furthermore, the message of democratisation of the film's narrative was used in a profound and troubling way. This was reflected in the *KONY* 2012 narrative, which said: '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' (*KONY 2012*). *KONY 2012*'s narrative went on to argue that social media is changing that structure and empowering citizens around the world to create change. However, the initiative helped to

define a new era where social media could create a winning story for political powers on a global scale, while also telling citizens that they were the ones in control of those decisions. While media in this case acted as the political and social space where power was negotiated (Castells 2007), those spaces also acted in opposing terms simultaneously.

On the other hand, this thesis reveals the enormous capacity of young people who are willing to commit themselves to changing the world and who believe in global justice. The majority of Invisible Children activists were millennials, who were anything but apathetic about society, as common stereotypes of their generation might suggest. Instead, they were driven, in search of deeper meaning, and seeking to better, not only their own society, but *all* societies around the world. The *KONY 2012* phenomenon exemplifies how millennial actors have adopted innovative media that inspire fluid communities, encompass various identities and entail processes and practices for creating digitally-bound products for social participation. Yet, while Invisible Children contributed to revolutionising a culture of American millennials into youth activists, simultaneously they may also have reinforced the corruption and unrest that they sought to repair in Central Africa. From an anthropological perspective, the *KONY 2012* phenomenon explored the power of humanitarian experiences of community and social connection, particularly as they are mediated through the ever-growing scale of social media. It highlighted an anthropological understanding of neocolonialist mentalities in the digital age of humanitarianism and the complexity of social initiatives that engage with a cyclical pattern of corruption and alleviation. The gulf between the movement's stated purpose, in regard to relieving suffering in Uganda, and what was apparently its actual purpose as far as the participants were concerned, could be understood as related to the participants' needs and desires for community, value and purpose. From an anthropological viewpoint, the activists' original intentions were ultimately, and perhaps inevitably to some degree, transformed by their human nature and

their needs for community and other associated goods, such as self-expression and identity.

KONY 2012 mobilised a social network and created a successful movement, both online and in the streets, thus embodying a new media landscape where our perception of what it means to have global citizenship and take on social action is restructured. At the same time, political and religious forces renegotiated the *KONY 2012* narrative and its mission, in order to better serve their own interests. This sheds light on the complexity of polymedia movements, which can be widely viewed as democratising agents for social change, while simultaneously being driven by powerful social and political actors with alternative agendas.

The political impact of *KONY 2012* does not only reflect the power of social media to create social change, but also shows how social media could be used in future to galvanise forces for special interest groups with political and economic agendas. At the same time, *KONY 2012* symbolised the growing force within a generation of millennials from around the world who seek to pursue social change with the help of, and belief in, the global connection created by social media and digital technologies. In that sense, digital media may not have single-handedly changed the game for contemporary social worlds, but have instead made the structures of that game vastly more complex.

In this era of the digital information revolution, *KONY 2012* can tell us something important about American culture in the 21st century. Russell was right: '….to think that still, a documentary about a warlord in Africa is the most viral film of all time… is kind of beautiful' (Russell interview 2014). Maybe *KONY 2012* was beautiful, but beautiful in its chaos and complexity. At present, there are communities of people around the world connected by common beliefs who struggle for social justice against larger forces, as Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring and various other movements have illustrated. This reflects wider transformations in society as citizens employ new media, which are changing

the ways people think and what they believe they can fight for, whether in social movements, activism or humanitarian campaigning, as the polymedia movement of *KONY 2012* exemplifies.