

Nov 04, 2016 by **John Robert Kelley**

The New Rules of Agenda Setting ^[1]

In a world where attention scarcity has displaced access as the new information problematic, how do you get your issue noticed? This is precisely the question that confronted Invisible Children, the international NGO that produced the viral online video “Kony 2012.” Since its release on March 5, it has been nothing short of a sensation: within two days YouTube tallied over 11 million viewings. That number tripled by the following afternoon and presently – four days after release – the number exceeds 52 million. As viruses go, they don’t move much faster than this. The 30-minute film thrusts much needed attention on the enduring atrocities of Joseph Kony, the megalomaniacal leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a guerilla group originating in Uganda. Kony’s abhorrent record, the focus of the video, includes the kidnapping of thousands of children to be used as soldiers and sex slaves. The stated aim of Invisible Children and filmmaker Jason Russell is to make Kony “famous” for his crimes and stir nations and citizens into action so that he may be brought to justice.

Humanitarianism by stealth is one way of looking at this project, and not surprisingly reactions to the video vary widely. The flood of viewings represents nothing short of a virtual flash mob circulating throughout the leading social media sites. In addition to the wild response on YouTube, the Guardian (U.K.) reported hundreds of thousands of tweets featuring the #stopkony hashtag on Twitter. A Facebook community page “Stop Kony 2012” garnered 172,000 likes in its first day of operation. Even the White House marveled at the campaign’s remarkable ripple effect, offering congratulations to “the hundreds of thousands of Americans who have mobilized to this unique crisis of conscience.” Critics consider the message of Invisible Children to be disingenuous, the product of a marginal and suspect organization exploiting a raw subject. The Ugandan Government rejects the video’s veiled accusation of complicity. Barbara Among, a journalist from the Ugandan Daily Monitor called out Invisible Children for not accurately portraying the root cause of the problem at hand, “which is inequality,” she points out. “So, it’s not presenting to people the real issues on the ground.”

Invisible Children may have to answer for its intentions and perhaps its facts. Yet it is correct in the proclamation that “the game has new rules.” “Kony 2012” makes a poignant statement about how things get done in today’s world politics. Invisible Children is not the first organization to seek the demise of Kony – evidently the State Department has been in active pursuit for over two decades. Those in the know seem rankled by the late-comer’s initiative, a thunder-stealing enterprise acting in ignorance of preceding efforts, or worse, communicating a message that nothing is being done to halt the habits of a rapacious madman. But what cannot be denied is the swiftness with which it wrested control of the global agenda and planted this obscure figure firmly into the collective conscience, an accomplishment that not even the original anti-Kony crusade can claim. The “why not us?” ethos that serves as the wellspring for this action, and the mad rush thereafter, exhibits the strength and persuasive

power of the agenda setter, one form of the new breed of diplomatic actors today.

The notion of “information power” should not be construed as absolute. As with any other form of power, the power of information lies in how one uses it. Its potential is fulfilled in the realization of gains relative to one’s starting point. The agenda setter, one piece of a four-fold taxonomy of diplomatic action to be presented in my forthcoming book *Agency Change*, is not chiefly an idea generator. Nor is the agenda setter the sole determining factor in a mass mobilization effort, nor a controller of the floodgates of information. What agenda setters do is set the priorities of global action. They carry the ideas of others to a place of high visibility so that others may learn of them and act. Like the items on a restaurant menu, the agenda for global action contains a strict set of concerns that occupy our attention, and sifts out those that do not. It changes constantly – in 1982 the agenda included nuclear non-proliferation, famine in Ethiopia and the Falklands/Malvinas War. The 2012 version is headlined with global financial upheaval, the Arab Spring and climate change.

There are sure to be disagreements over the precise placement of Joseph Kony on the global agenda during the week before the release of “Kony 2012”, but one cannot dispute his rank in the aftermath. The wonder of it all is that Kony’s ironic rise to stardom today is a direct result of one organization’s skillful attempt to place his haunting story in our minds. Any state-level action that proceeds from here will emerge from the conversation that started here.
