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Why KONY 2012 is Bad Public Diplomacy ^[1]

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There has been much discussion recently about social media and the potential role websites such as Facebook and Twitter can play in bringing about actual change in the real world. Individuals the world over constantly share their experiences, feelings, thoughts, and motivations via these online forums and it hasn't taken long for groups to try to use these networks to unite people under various banners and causes. In early March 2012 the international non-profit organization, Invisible Children (IC), did just that and began an awareness raising campaign to bring African warlord, Joseph Kony, to justice.

Joseph Kony is one of the most vilified rebel leaders in the world and is accused of kidnapping countless children in northern Uganda and neighboring countries. He then turns girls into sex slaves and boys into killers. His so-called Christian movement, the Lord's Resistance Army, has terrorized villagers in at least four countries in central Africa for nearly 20 years and killed tens of thousands of people. Kony has been wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court since 2005. However, Joseph Kony was not widely recognized until March 5, 2012 when Invisible Children released a 29 minute video. This short movie, KONY 2012 became viral with more than 112 million views in just one week. Invisible Children describes itself as a "global community of young people that galvanizes international support to bring a permanent end to LRA violence through mass awareness campaigns and strategic advocacy efforts." Members are dedicated to making Kony a household name and bringing him to justice. The video was ideal for sharing via social media on Facebook and Twitter and everyday citizens and celebrities shared the video with followers all over the world.

While introducing Kony to many for the first time, the video also spurred a flurry of questions about Invisible Children's intentions, its transparency, and whether the social-media frenzy it created was too little, too late. Beyond criticisms surrounding the organization's spending and accusations of oversimplification, more serious, pertinent issues were raised by a number of critics.

Ben Affleck, in a thoughtful blog in *The Huffington Post*, explained that "the next step after awareness is action," which is exactly where the video, KONY 2012, falls short. Raising awareness is certainly a difficult task but the work cannot stop there. Organizing a "day of action" through cities in the U.S. and Europe and showing Kony's face is not enough to combat the atrocities committed in Central Africa for decades. While Invisible Children and other NGOs have been conducting on-the-ground activism in Uganda for years, KONY 2012 is not a call to action beyond the act of purchasing an action kit, sharing a video, and clicking "Like" on Facebook. Providing assistance to citizens in Africa to take back control over their own futures is where the real solution lies. Any approach that does not consider this aspect is severely misguided. This public diplomacy mandate touches on another criticism leveled against KONY 2012, that of the "White Savior Industrial Complex" where Africa is merely a backdrop for Western egos to be projected upon. The video can be seen as a fantasy of

heroism where a “nobody” from the Western world can be a godlike savior in Africa. This is not to say that Americans and other Westerners don’t have a role in this crisis, but instead of merely raising awareness, Western activists and diplomats must conduct effective public diplomacy which involves partnerships with Africans that gives them agency and the necessary resources and support to solve their own problems. With the right resources and help, it is a much more effective solution to have Ugandans bring Kony to justice than Americans.

The goal of public diplomacy is to communicate and engage in a meaningful and mutual way with foreign publics. Now non-state actors such as Invisible Children have the ability to do just that. However, with the democratization of information sharing, thanks to new media tools, comes great responsibility. Social media is an excellent tool for bringing together different stakeholders, in this case Invisible Children and its supporters, but there also needs to be more than just raising awareness for real change to occur: raising awareness is a noble cause but it is not enough.

Invisible Children’s campaign has proven that social media can be used to spread an idea to all reaches of the world but the danger lies in assuming that social media campaigns alone have the power to bring about concrete changes. Social media present an exciting dynamic in the international arena but it must be coupled with an effective public diplomacy strategy to bridge the say-do gap.

Marissa Cruz-Enriquez is a graduate of USC's Master in Public Diplomacy program. Her research interests include digital diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and international security. She is interested in pursuing a career with the federal government.
