

War Crimes, Wristbands, and Web 2.0:
Exploring Online Justice Advocacy,
Colonialism and ‘Civilizing Missions’
through *Kony2012*

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ABSTRACT

On March 5, 2012, the advocacy organization Invisible Children released a short 30-minute film entitled *Kony2012*, on *YouTube.com*. Within days, the video had gone viral, gaining a mass global viewership. By December 2012, the video had received over 94 million views worldwide, attaining the unofficial status as “the most viral video of all time.” While *Kony2012* raised awareness about the urgency of the manhunt for Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) leader Joseph Kony and his exploitation of child soldiers in Uganda, the film generated much controversy. Commentators, both from within Uganda and beyond, raised serious questions about the oversimplified Colonial-style intervention (with its especial focus on military intervention) that the video seemed to promote. This article explores in-depth to what extent the *Kony2012* phenomenon embodies both the material and discursive legacies of colonialism. It finds that, while fostering a digital citizenship that promotes the sharing of valuable information, such online advocacy may also unintentionally reproduce and rapidly disseminate stereotypes, bias, and racism. Thus, *Kony2012* is a case study of the ways in which online media can be both productive and limiting in addressing hate and exploitation. While the *Kony2012* campaign quickly and impressively raised popular awareness of child trafficking and exploitation, it nevertheless subtly marginalized the experiences and cultural perspectives of the Ugandan people and privileged a Western-centric interventionism.

INTRODUCTION

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 . . . Who are you to end a war? I'm here to tell you, who are you not to? (*Kony2012*)

At worst, we can find our own work contributing to the very problems we hoped to solve. Humanitarianism tempts us to hubris, to an idolatry about our intentions and routines, to the conviction that we know more than we do about what justice can be. (Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue*)

In February and March 2012, the U.S.-based advocacy organization Invisible Children uploaded a 30-minute film called *Kony2012* onto several social media sites, including firstly *Vimeo.com* and then *YouTube.com*. Within six days of loading the video to *YouTube.com*, it had reached a stunning 100 million views worldwide. Thanks to a strategy of targeting celebrity "culture makers" and policy makers, the *Kony2012* video sparked a *Kony2012* movement, which drew extensive media attention and captivated social media audiences. In little over a month, the hashtags #stopkony and #kony2012 had over 12 million Twitter mentions. From status updates to rally events listings, the story of the warlord Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) guerrilla group, and his involvement in the alleged abduction of 30,000 African children largely from the region of northern Uganda had seemingly forced itself upon the (online) popular consciousness.

The stated goal of Invisible Children's campaign was to stop the Ugandan warlord's crimes against humanity, by drawing as much attention as possible to his continued atrocities. As the film's narration simply states, "The problem is 99% of the planet doesn't know who he is. If they knew, Kony would have been stopped long ago." At its core, *Kony2012* assumed the most important tool of any advocate is knowledge, and that a powerful message could move an audience from viewing a problem, to solving it.

However, criticism of this strategy quickly emerged. Some commentators such as blogger Grant Oyston (March 8, 2012) attacked the financials of Invisible Children, while others assailed the film for over-simplifying the issues and situation at hand. Commentators, for instance, expressed a "nagging sense of weird racial and colonial politics" (Read, 2012). Indeed, racial politics became a focal point of discussion both online and in mainstream media. Critics were quick to point out that the film's overall effect "subtly reinforces an idea that has been one of Africa's biggest disasters: that well-meaning Westerners need to come in and fix it. Africans, in this

telling, are helpless victims, and Westerners are the heroes” (Fisher, 2012). As Ugandan journalist Angelo Izama (2012) pointed out, “[m]any African critics are unsurprisingly crying ‘neo-colonialism!’” on grounds that the video and related campaigns disempower Ugandan voices. Izama identified the video as “just another bad solution to a more difficult problem,” and one that embodies “[t]he simplicity of the good versus evil narrative, where good is inevitably white/western and bad is black or African, . . . reminiscent of some of the worst excesses of colonial era interventions.”

The apparent simplicity of such a narrative doubtless contributed to the viral success of *Kony2012*—and when images were released on the Internet of the filmmakers bearing heavy arms while in Africa (Zennie, 2012) a chorus of critical voices, including Uganda’s largest independent newspaper suggested the photo represented “a neo-colonialist mentality where the white charity worker came off as the long-awaited savior.” Against the backdrop of human rights and war crimes advocacy, the issues of race and the nature of online advocacy came to the forefront of discussion.

This article explores how an online advocacy campaign surrounding an at-large war criminal came to ignite such controversy, and in doing so, highlights both the potential and perils of a viral advocacy movement. Specifically, this discussion explores how the Internet can be used to promote social causes and galvanize large online communities (including ending hate) while at the same time may also foster a “pornography of violence” in which a Western-centric audience may gaze into and appropriate the “developing world” as a site of titillation (Redding, 1998, pp. 13-14). In such a situation, the victims of such violence are rendered objects of cruelty; a representation that not only recirculates misinformation about the realities of Africa but also itself embodies racism. Or, as one commentator noted, “*Kony2012* and the debate around it are not about Uganda, but about America. Uganda is largely just the stage for a debate over the meaning of political activism in the U.S. today” (Branch, 2012). As such, this article argues that while social media sharing has a tremendous potential to foster a digital citizenship that allows for valuable debate and expression, users must also be especially conscious that the technology, as with any tool for communication, can easily replicate and restate colonialist scripts and other forms of dangerous, discriminatory discourse.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Exploring Post-Colonialist Intervention and the “Pornography of Violence”*

In analyzing human rights advocacy with a view to illuminating depic-

tions and assumptions about race, this inquiry draws on an abundant literature that suggests power is tethered to knowledge and social structures, and furthermore that this relationship can be exposed by examining the rhetoric involved. We draw upon the rich tradition of postcolonial scholarship—specifically critiques of both development and international human rights advocacy—as well as the emerging literature on race and the Internet. At its core, this article draws upon claims that there must be critical awareness and acknowledgement of “racism of the past and its legacy” because it remains “noticeable in an unequal world, and continue[s] to entangle or ensnare individuals through structures of development and create a platform for the relations between them” (Loftsdóttir, 2009, p. 7). Given the far-reaching cultural legacies of both colonialism and neocolonialism, it is perhaps inevitable that racist attitudes borne from traditions of social stratification still “reverberate in the postcolonial moment, long after the Empire has been dismantled” (Kapur, 2005, p. 22). Discourse surrounding human rights and development, then, is certainly not immune to traces of both past and present racism and social stratifications.

Many existing studies of human rights intervention and development projects acknowledge that such practices are about power and remain tied in many ways to colonialist structures (Loftsdóttir, 2009, p. 6). While most development and human rights literatures and actions do not focus on race, emphasis is often placed on culture. Furthermore, “the relations between colonizer and colonized were re-worked into those between developer and developing” (Kothari, 2006, p. 12). Much as colonialist narratives focused upon the white man as a civilizing force, the new rhetoric of development too often suggests the need for a civilizing force in order to address poverty and violence. Even the post-Cold War evolution of the label “Third World” now clearly delineates a hierarchy between the Developed and the Developing; there is a crucial assumption that there are some who “are less developed than others” (Kothari, 2006, p. 13). Loftsdóttir (2009) observes that these “underdeveloped peoples” are generally the formerly colonized, who are still shaped as needing assistance (p. 4).

Distinctively Amerocentric and Western Eurocentric interventionist ideologies toward the African continent have been shaped not simply through “economic muscle and technological might,” but also through discursive means; that is, through the “power to define . . . what is real and what it means to be human” (Sardar, 1999, p. 44). Development and the implementation of human rights involve the twin Western-identified ideas that there is a pathway from the traditional to the modern, and that a failure to advance along this path marks some cultures as inferior and therefore in need of support and assistance from the more “modern” states. The markers of underdevelopment and lack of progress are not just economic, but

integrally also deviant or deficient—including gross violations of human rights, often in the form of violence. This conceptualization of development implies both “progress and perfectibility” (Tucker, 1999, p. 4).

In framing development in such a way, Africa is constructed as a “symbol of cultural inflexibility, political dysfunction and underdevelopment” and the “third world as black, poor and tribal, and as a wasteland of limited resources” (Kothari, 2006, pp. 11, 13). Violations of economic and social norms, including human rights, require a humanitarian, “civilizing,” and usually Western force to intervene in order to protect the vulnerable. The existing literature well-acknowledges the construction of Black men as prone to violence and mayhem, while suggesting that those in African nations experience systemic violence, the result of which is to engage in a persistent, frequently homogenizing, “Orientalist discourse” that paints Africa as “the dark continent” (Kothari, 2006, p. 12).

Integrally, the media—including social media—is awash with images and stories of African poverty and violence. One of the most prominent examples is the “Save Darfur” campaign on *Facebook.com*, which has by most measures shown to be largely ineffective despite being the largest such social media campaign of its kind (Lewis, Gray, Meierhenrich, 2014). A “pornography of violence”—a glorification of violence in consumer culture—has emerged in which “civilized” people condemn such violent acts, but continue to have their interest “pricked” by it and therefore “neurotically almost, [they] work obsessively, impossibly, to avoid contaminating [themselves]” (Redding, 1998, pp. 13-14). Victims of violence become dehumanized commodities (ibid, pp. 15-21), driving a market in human rights advocacy that results in what has been labeled “the White-Saviour Industrial Complex” (Cole, 2012). As much as calls to end violence are universally acknowledged, there remains a push-and-pull that implicates audiences with a “pathologic compulsion to look at scenes of torture and murder” (Huppaufl, 1997, p. 4), where scenes of violence in Africa come to be “emotionally arousing” in ways that seek condemnation but simultaneously require our interest and gratification (Russell, 1993, pp. 3-12).

As a result, non-Africans, usually Westerners (and specifically Americans and Europeans), are positioned as the most knowledgeable, powerful, and therefore most able to intervene. The result is a dichotomy that bolsters the power of those already holding disproportionate power, and to restate, as Said observed, that Westerners are “rational, peaceful, liberal, logical” (Kapoor, 2002, p. 650). Such a positioning justifies interventions by “modern” societies directed at remedying the backwards traditions of the lesser developed, because these act as “an impediment to advancement” (Sardar, 1999, p. 45). Such interventions may involve direct engagement in the form of hard power (e.g., military intervention), exercise of soft power (e.g.,

social and economic influence), or both. The Internet has become central to soft-power strategies. The idea that the Internet in general, and social media in particular, spreads Western democracy has been well explored in the media and culture literatures, and therefore is central to understanding contemporary post-colonial traces; a literature we now turn to explore.

B. *Web 2.0 and Online Advocacy*

On various levels, both popular media and academic literature often frame the Internet as free and equal, “a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity” (Barlow, 1996). An assumption in this literature, as well as *Kony2012*, is that the online world produces “netizens,” who populate the Internet developing it as a space and resource for other users and humanity at large (Hauben, 1995).

While the notion of neutral, or value-free, technology has become an increasingly popular subject of scholarly interest, much of the literature on Web 2.0 applications, such as blogs, social networks, wikis, and mash-ups, argues that in fact “we make our technologies, and they, in turn, shape us” (Turkle, 2011). Even acknowledging this reciprocity of influence, the tools themselves are not always as value-neutral as they might seem. This is because a tool, through its use, can contribute to shaping our purposes and, furthermore, that tool can, in fact, contain an ideological bias (Postman, 1993).

What is more, the dispersion of digital technology, including Web 2.0, does not provide a universally similar benefit to all, and the ability to access the Internet and mobile applications is not universal. The uneven distribution of technology (including access and usage) creates a “digital divide,” wherein a lack of physical connection or resources leaves certain individuals disconnected and, therefore, in many ways disempowered as a result of income, age, education and race (NTIA, 1995; NTIA, 1998; NTIA, 1999; Cooper, 2002). Studies conducted mostly in the U.S. suggest that members of poor communities of color have significantly less access to online technologies (Martin & Robinson, 2007; Compaine, 2000). Disparate technological access has a two-fold effect: less-connected populations become disempowered while the already-privileged voices of those on the more fortunate side of the digital divide are further empowered (see, e.g., analysis of Hurricane Katrina in Crutcher & Zook, 2009).

Likewise, rather than offering the possibility for egalitarianism with respect to information and online advocacy, the disparity in access to the tools needed for this type of advocacy allows for certain constructions of evil and hate to arise; the people without, or with lesser, access to these

tools are left without similar ability to counter these constructions and offer constructions of their own. Thus, while the initial literature on race and the Internet suggested that technology could offer a way to overcome discrimination and conceal one's identity (Kang, 2000, p. 1153), the new literature suggests many inequalities are reproduced by and within cyberspace itself in an ever-evolving manner. "While Internet use may hold out the possibility of emancipation, we must at the same time be aware of how it might create new mechanisms of suppression" (Slevin, 2000, p. 109). Such suppressive mechanisms can manifest both in overt and less overt, often impliedly, racist depictions online.

As Dahlgren (2004) cautions, "there are clear threats to the civic potential of the Internet, and it certainly cannot be seen as offering any 'quick fix' for democracy" (p. 6). Recent policy commitments by platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to limit harmful and hateful speech serve as acknowledgement that the Internet's "openness" holds the potential for dissemination of discriminatory speech, but demonstrate the work that can be done to contest such speech through Web 2.0's own values and commercial commitments. Interestingly, while announcing their hate speech policy, Facebook also argued that "We've also found that posting insensitive or cruel content often results in many more people denouncing it than supporting it on Facebook" (Levine, 2013). In as much as Web 2.0 (and the Internet more broadly) can disseminate hate, it can also help to create and shape new responsibilities both online and beyond.

Online advocacy has become a powerful tool and is facilitated actively by many Web 2.0 platforms. However, research evidences that well-funded online organizations often act as gatekeepers in deciding what is an important social issue online (Maratea, 2008). Independent and issue-oriented websites receive far less traffic than corporate-owned online media campaigns. For example, a 2012 Pew survey of U.S. online news consumption indicated that large, corporate-controlled news sites constituted the overwhelming majority of sources ("Cable Leads the Pack as Campaign News Source," 2012). Elite discourses therefore circulate and are restated, reformed, and imbued with further power online. While as Shirky (2011) suggests, "the more promising way to think about social media is as long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere. . . as an important input to the more fundamental political freedoms," we must be aware of its capacity to replicate structures and stratifications.

For these and other reasons, the supposed neutrality of the Internet appears to be a dubious proposition. Perhaps it is more likely the case that the Internet is a tool used for what Heidegger (1954) famously called "human" activities. As such, it presents a unique site for studying and disrupting hegemonic understandings of violence against racial minorities, for

transforming the way historically marginalized groups are treated, and for challenging this treatment. It is in light of such recognitions about the possibilities and limits of Web 2.0 for ending racial discrimination that we approach *Kony2012*.

II. ANALYSIS: THEMES AND ISSUES IN *KONY2012*

As noted in the Introduction, *Kony2012* attained an unprecedented level of viral success, dominating the online media landscape from the week following March 5, 2012. The film sought to address the fact that, although the International Criminal Court had indicted him in 2005 on charges that included crimes against humanity, Joseph Kony had managed to evade arrest and continue to commit unlawful acts without consequence. The premise of the film was simple: Kony would continue in this fashion until the world knew his face and until the U.S. and the Western world staged an intervention in the Ugandan region to facilitate Kony's arrest. Several themes emerged in the production: social interaction and democracy; invisibility; impunity; impetus; and advocacy for action coupled with a sense of urgency (i.e., the campaign would "expire" on December 31, 2012). Each of these themes are analyzed in the sections that follow.

A. *Social Interaction and Media as Building Democracy*

Kony2012's first image is that of the global: an image that gives way to text headlined by the (unattributed) Victor Hugo quotation: "NOTHING IS MORE POWERFUL THAN AN IDEA. . . WHOSE TIME HAS COME. . . WHOSE TIME IS NOW." A narrator's voice then accompanies a montage of images of people around the world doing everyday things with technology, including using a mobile phone, emailing photos, and sharing links to video streaming sites. The narrator suggests that:

[T]his connection is changing the way the world works. Governments are trying to keep up. . . Now we can taste the freedom. . . The next 27 minutes are an experiment. But in order for it to work, you have to pay attention.

These initial few scenes set out the video's main concept: that social media can be used to produce a widespread social movement that demands bringing a person to justice while improving the lives of persons whom many viewers do not know and will never actually meet. At its core, the production aims to foster a sense of digital closeness, to make "us" feel like a global community who share a common mission. The sequence seeks to

emphasize our roles as netizens, encouraging us to explore our sense of belonging (Hauben, 1995).

Centrally, the sequence inspires a sense that viewers are connected as well as responsible (Hauben, 1995). The film seeks to reshape space, place, and identity (i.e., to adopt the language of geographers) to drive a revolution to “change the course of human history,” as the film proclaims—a radical transformation—in thinking. We are encouraged to conceive understandings, rights, and duties as naturally and properly moving across borders. Implicitly with this globalized communication, there is a sense of universalism, especially of norms such as human rights. While it appears that the universalization of certain norms, including human rights, is a positive force, there remains a potential for a new form of colonialism to emerge subtly in response to human rights issues.

Kony2012 projects a type of colonialism in that Anglo-American dominance is assumed throughout the documentary. For instance, English is the sole language used in the production, and the film was not released in other languages during March 2012. Likewise, throughout *Kony2012* there is a prolific use of subtitles to aid specifically American English-literate viewers to understand the accents of Jacob Acaye, Ugandan politicians Santo Okot Lapolo and Norbert Mao, as well as ICC chief prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo. At one point, the filmmaker asks Jacob “You go to school here. That’s why you know English so well?” Such comments suggest a lack of appreciation of Ugandan history and culture, including the fact that even after the end of colonial rule, English has continued to be one of the official languages of Uganda. Thus, despite a supposedly global campaign to find Kony, in this and other ways it is clear that the target audience for *Kony2012* is largely Anglophone or English-speaking, and perhaps even specifically American.

However, the effect of the aforementioned comment is not just to convey a clear Western, English-speaking worldview that guides the project, but also to silence Ugandan voices behind voiceovers and subtitles that blunt the raw emotion and tone of what is said by survivors. Indeed, the voices of the local are secondary to the voices of Americans, who speak for them or direct what they can say and how it should be said. When the filmmaker’s friend, Jacob, speaks, for example, it is almost entirely in question-and-answer form, with the narration serving to direct the course of Jacob’s “testimony.” Jacob’s own voice and flow of emotion is lost behind Russell’s continued interjections. The film does not allow for the multiplicity of voices of Kony’s victims, and Kony’s acts are shaped by their personal relevance to one American’s friend. This point in particular was a prominent source of criticism, and some African advocacy experts have urged that such interventionist approaches “must be willing to use their

media to amplify African voices, not simply their own” (Araia, 2012). As well, the film overlooks larger impacts on, and actions by, Ugandans and local peoples. For instance, the Ugandan Army is discussed solely with regard to American training and funding programs, while the Ugandan Army’s own troubling history of human rights abuses and practices are ignored.

Such colonialist overtones are immediately apparent, leading some Ugandan journalistic commentators to suggest that the film is made into a dangerously oversimplified narrative of good versus evil, wherein “good is inevitably white/western and bad is Black or African” (Izama, 2012). Like colonial era interventions, the local population is depicted as too incompetent to represent themselves and therefore the more able, more powerful, Western influence must speak and act for them. It is in this sense that the premise of the film reveals the issues at stake in a digital citizenship: it implies that there are those who lack the resources to use the Internet to its full potential themselves—often those who are the worst off in traditional global politics will remain “invisible”—and conversely those who are best able to harness its power for the global good.

B. *Rendering the Invisible Visible*

The concept of invisibility is explored throughout the film. As suggested by the name of the organization, Invisible Children, behind the film, many of those affected by Kony’s activities have largely been unseen. This idea is played out through contrasting imagery of the filmmaker’s son and Jacob’s story. Immediately after the opening views of the global community, the film shifts to a sequence of home movies, which act to reveal this contrast in experiences. The implicit purpose of the initial set of scenes is clear: that the children of Uganda have not received adequate attention. Further to this is the implicit suggestion that these children would have received greater attention and assistance if the same were to take place under the watchful eye of Americans. For example, Russell at one point states, “If that [kidnapping of white children] happened one night in America, it would be on the cover of *Newsweek*.”

Izama’s (2012) observation of the good-versus-evil narrative is clear here, as Americans presumably would do better. Notably, there is an implication that trafficking and abuse of children would receive greater, more effective responses if these occurred in a way that Americans could see. However, Russell’s statements seem ill-informed and overly simplistic, given that child slavery and sexual servitude occur in the U.S. and other countries daily.

Still, Russell’s statement highlights a prevailing American outlook and

indeed the dominance of Russell's worldview. Russell explains the situation through his lens, to personalize his narrative, and in the end it is of course the task of the audience to keep in mind that all documentary creations, political or otherwise, inevitably contain traces of the creator's worldview. Yet a balance should be struck between a compelling personal narrative and one that might "deliver more sophisticated, nuanced, and respectful narratives that recognize capturing Kony is a collective responsibility" (Araia, 2012). *Kony2012* fails to strike this balance.

Following Russell's discussion of his own personal history, the film returns to Jacob and Russell engaged in an interview. A brief summary of the interview will help illustrate an example of *Kony2012*'s Westernist perspective. In one of the film's most poignant moments, Jacob tells Russell "it is better when you kill us" and that he wishes to meet his murdered brother in heaven. Russell promises to Jacob "we are going to do everything that we can to stop them." Russell then explains that has spent the past nine years working to keep this promise and informs the audience that it is no longer just about him and Jacob, but that "it's also about you." With an increasing sense of urgency he suggests that "this year, 2012, is the year that we can finally fulfill it. . . . And if we succeed, we change the course of human history."

The screen returns during this statement to the image of a spinning globe, as we are given a deadline of December 31, 2012 when the film "expires." The effect is to create an emotional closeness, such that we are already in fact tied to this promise: "We can finally fulfill it." The sense is, therefore, not that Jacob's experiences and plight matter in and of themselves. Rather, it is that Russell's own commitment that creates the universal obligation; Russell's promise itself becomes the focus of the narrative. The emphasis is not on Jacob's experience of trauma and the courage of his witnessing. Instead, his testimony is woven together with Russell's narrative of how and why the promise was made. The film therefore does not bear witness to atrocity and grant voice to those who have experienced trauma; it merely perpetuates a form of advocacy that seeks to end impunity in, and on, Western terms. The result of this focus on Western norms and responses is to render Jacob and the other child soldiers inaudible "victims"—objects of violence—who are best spoken for, rather than being survivors with a voice. While raising Western awareness is the initial concern of the film, as Russell states "now we know what to do." Yet the crucial work of translating that awareness into ending impunity has been clearly restated as a Western task, thus demanding Western voices.

C. *Ending Impunity*

The film raises the issue of impunity numerous times throughout, at one point matter-of-factly stating, “It’s obvious that Kony should be stopped.” After Jacob’s interview, the film turns to images of members of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and its leader, Kony, followed immediately by scenes in which Russell attempts to explain the crimes to his own son, Gavin. An overview of Kony’s activities is then provided, citing Kony’s history of kidnapping over 26 years, forcing girls to be sex slaves and boys to be soldiers (who are caused to kill and mutilate, even their own parents). Images of child soldiers, of children being abducted, and of victims mutilated effectively present the stark, sobering reality of the terrible plight. We are told that Kony has done this to over 30,000 children, and that Jacob was one of these children.

Despite photographs emerging of Russell’s journeys to the region and his rather controversial choice to pose with guns (Flock, 2012), the film itself does not depict Russell engaging with the variety of individuals he obviously met in Uganda. *Kony2012* does not provide the testimonies of on-the-ground non-profits, locals, or survivors, many of whom have subsequently come out criticizing the video and indicating their desire to speak for themselves. Ugandan Journalist Rosebell Kagumire summarizes the difficulty of speaking for Ugandans, suggesting:

How you tell the stories of Africans is much more important than what the story is; because if you are showing me as voiceless, as hopeless [then] you have no space telling my story. You shouldn’t be telling my story if you don’t believe that I also have the power to change what is going on (2012).

Encapsulated in this statement are a number of salient criticisms of the film’s structure. In suggesting the children are not only invisible but also voiceless, the film fails to attend to their status as survivors. According to Russell’s depiction, the children firmly are victims whose bodies have been brutalized at the hands of Kony and his army; yet without Jacob, we have no other voices of corroboration. While it is possible that children who have survived atrocities may not speak on film or publicly about their memories for any number of reasons (e.g., consciously or unconsciously blocking out traumatic events as part of the very act of survival), there is also a failure on the part of the filmmaker to draw on other forms of ‘voice’ such as art and literature to depict the experiences of survivors.

This absence is particularly notable in light of well-publicized UN “creative peacebuilding” projects in the region. These projects produced

vast amounts of art by survivors of child soldiering, with the art itself acting both as therapy and as a mechanism to give a voice to survivors of the violence. According to UN Fine Art Goodwill Ambassador Ross Bleckner, the importance of the creative peacebuilding process for survivors is that they are able “to create something that they can be proud of, and which can help them on the arduous path to restoring their dignity and sense of self-worth” (Kennedy, 2009). *Kony2012* notably fails to draw on this powerful resource or to produce similar projects of memory directed at healing as well as advocacy. As a result, the focus that emerges from the film is that advocacy prevails over empowerment.

However inadvertent the focus on American intervention may be, and with due acknowledgement that the film’s technical and aesthetic shortcomings may reflect greater challenges and constraints typical in creating such a film, *Kony2012* is not a film about solidarity. Rather, it speaks for the Ugandans through an American voice that disempowers the Ugandan community. While the film raises global awareness of a human rights atrocity of which most Westerners had little or no knowledge of prior to its release, the failure to actively engage the Ugandan community in any proposed solution leaves room to question the cultural sensitivity of any interventions. Notably, screenings of *Kony2012* in Uganda were met with strong reactions. The nonprofit organization African Youth Initiative cited one audience member:

If you care for us the victims, you will respect our feelings and acknowledge how hurting it is for us to see you mobilizing the world to make Kony famous . . . It was very hurtful for victims and their families to see posters, bracelets and t-shirts, all looking like a slick marketing campaign, promoting the person most responsible for their shattered lives (“Uganda’s Reaction to Kony 2012”).

Indeed, a telling moment halfway into the film features a crowd of U.S. college student advocates, loudly chanting: “We’ve seen these kids. We’ve heard their cries. This war must end! We will not stop. We will not fear.” At the same time as the film successfully empowers a youthful, U.S.-targeted audience, it also implies that Africans remain as voiceless, incapable actors.

Kony2012’s main assumption—and that of Invisible Children as an organization—is that by making Kony famous he can be brought to justice; this point is made explicit several times throughout the film. But “recent history . . . has made one thing clear: making a war criminal famous is only half the challenge” (Gibb, 2012). Consider the example of Omar al-Bashir, the President of Sudan, whose crimes are well-known and subject to an ICC

indictment. Bashir is seemingly insulated from prosecution through an on-going failure by other African states to arrest and extradite him when he travels to their jurisdictions. Again, any failure is displaced onto Africans, and thus the film provides an overly simplistic view of international and domestic U.S. politics. Okwir (2012), himself an LRA survivor, questions whether advocacy focused on “sounding the war drums” truly speaks for the victims of the LRA conflict. Through paying little attention to the African Union, regional bodies, and domestic politics in Uganda and surrounding countries, the film overlooks the multiplicity of actors capable of interjecting. The film constructs the U.S., despite its repeated objections to the ICC, as the most capable global actor to bring Kony to justice.

Unfortunately yet through no necessary fault of his own, the filmmaker’s choices demonstrate a lack of understanding of both the ICC’s politically contested position and serve as an example of the ways in which many Western audiences tend to misunderstand, or understand in a simplistic sense, the African community as a whole. Although this film has successfully and impressively raised awareness of the human rights atrocities in Uganda, questions arise whether it has also done harm if, as we are suggesting, it diminishes rather than strengthens the power of Ugandans. Commentators such as Kate Cronin-Furman and Amanda Taub (2012) question whether the less visible harm is that such projects may “absorb resources that could go toward more effective advocacy, and take up rhetorical space that could be used to develop more effective advocacy.”

Yet, we contend, the film itself is not the problem. As further elaborated below, *Kony2012* is but one example of a general U.S. orientation toward Africa that perpetuates a notion in which development and human rights are best implemented through externally-imposed private, military, and legal intervention rather than through community empowerment and capacity building. Indeed, it is the continued deferral of acting *for* rather than acting *with* Ugandans that troublingly situates the film as a continuation of prior colonial scripts.

D. *Advocacy for Action*

The focus on advocacy is made explicit when the film details the activism process that Russell and his friends encountered when they returned from Uganda to the U.S. The film shows various Washington, D.C. interviews and meetings, while Russell himself details that the U.S. government does not like to become entangle in conflicts in which it has no national security or financial interests. The film then shows how Invisible Children sparked a grassroots global community to come together to work on the issue, to bring hope to the people of Uganda. A Facebook group member-

ship counter repeatedly flashes on screen to show the ever-growing number of supporters, interspersed between photos of action groups and advocates. Viewers are shown how this global community, through their giving of funds and their time, has rebuilt schools in Uganda, created jobs, and established an early warning radio network. Next, the film provides a montage of politicians who make statements on Kony, before the scene changes to the Invisible Children offices where Russell tells us of a victory in October 2011: the sending of 100 U.S. military advisers to Uganda to bring about the arrest of Kony. To emphasize that the job is not complete, a communiqué flashes on-screen; a young boy who escaped Kony tells of how Kony is changing tactics, as he knows the Americans are after him. Russell tells how this change has made it even harder to capture Kony. To compound that sense of urgency, U.S. Senator Jim Inhofe then returns to the screen and tells viewers “it’s got to be 2012.” The Prosecutor for the ICC follows, informing us that action is needed from “everyone.”

Kony2012 thus plays on a sense of “White Man’s Burden”—specifically, “a notion that persons of European descent inherit a quality of guilt for their ancestors” inclination for slavery and colonialism, requiring an activist response to finally correct the situation by “saving Africa” (Bowie, 2012). In this sense, the film does not create a new social climate or discourse, but instead draws on many existing scripts about “never again.” At one point the film states, “when we heard about injustice, we cared, but we didn’t know what to do. Too often we did nothing.” The implication of who “we” are is clear. While such rhetorical appeals may be valuable for reiterating messages on how inaction can further violence, such an approach is nevertheless problematic, as Russell again advocates interventionism that empowers Americans—both private actors and the State—to do something *for* Ugandans, not *with* them.

The *Kony2012* campaign directs a plan toward Americans and their government leaders, without acknowledging past or present African efforts, including those in concert with the international community, to address child soldiering. What is more, the action points proposed in the film, which Russell provides as clear actionable steps to be completed by U.S. citizens, do not include any suggestions for ways in which Ugandans and other affected African nations could be part of the solution.

Using a series of projector screens, in the film Russell details scene-by-scene the steps needed to bring about Kony’s arrest, stating that troops must find him, which in turn requires the political impetus of Americans telling their government to keep their troops on the ground, which even more basically requires that everyone, everywhere, must know who Kony is. To do this, Russell details the “20-12” plan, which targets 20 culture makers and 12 policymakers. Images of the relevant persons are flashed

on-screen, including pop stars, athletes, and billionaires with the stated goal of “redefining the propaganda we see all day, every day, that dictates who and what we pay attention to.” The aim, according to Russell, is to make Kony infamous. To do this, Russell details that we should:

1. sign a pledge to show support;
2. buy a bracelet and action kit; and
3. sign up for the TRI campaign to donate and join the army for peace.

Russell then declares April 20, 2012 the day to “cover the night,” when activists will plaster thousands of posters all over the world with the aim of “demanding justice on every corner.” Finally, the film’s viewers are told to share the link to the movie, which it is restated is “free,” as well as the link to *Kony2012.com*. The overall effect of such a strategy was to “raise awareness about the issue of child soldiery, [and] actively promoted engagement by identifying a specific task for the audience” (Karlin and Matthew, 2012). By motivating consumers and empowering them with information, the film appeals with the promise that through such actions, those who take action will be able to bring about progress and arrest Kony.

The film makes this point overtly in the last scene, with a restatement that Facebook and other social media are creating a global community, in which the power (and responsibility) now lies with the many, thereby reaffirming the concept that the Internet spreads democracy (O’Reilly, 2005; Shirky, 2011). Russell suggests that bringing about the arrest of Kony “will prove that the world we live in has new rules, that the technology that has brought our planet together is allowing us to respond to the problems of our friends.” Viewers are told that a better world is coming, but that it is “just waiting for us to stop at nothing.” Finally, the film pans out back to the global sequence at the start of the film and more text flashes up telling us again that:

NOTHING IS MORE POWERFUL THAN AN IDEA WHOSE TIME
HAS COME. NOTHING IS MORE POWERFUL THAN AN IDEA
WHOSE TIME IS NOW. NOW.

Contrary to inspiring motivated action, however, one common strain of criticism levied against *Kony2012* is that the film actually promotes ineffectual “slacktivism.” Web-based, pseudo-activism is encouraged, according to some, which may amount to nothing more ‘than clicking computer keys’ (Davis, 2012).

While the Kony2012 “Cover the Night” campaign involved some real-world action, it largely focused upon “sharing” and wearing Kony-branded promotional tools like bracelets and stickers. Although such actions might

raise a general sense of awareness through encouraging Facebook “friends” to repost, there was, as Gladwell has noted, a propensity for such social media to continue to breed weak action because “weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism” (2010). Drawing upon the work of researchers such as sociologist Mark Granovetter (2003) in suggesting that this new form of connectedness relies on thousands of distant links between Facebook “friends”—many of whom are at best acquaintances and certainly not close friends—online advocacy may only be effective in bringing about slight changes, and not the levels of social activism and galvanizing movements of the 1960s through events such as sit-ins (Gladwell, 2010).

Indeed, in April 2012, international media reported on the general lack of participation in “Cover the Night.” Furthermore, the failure to arrest Kony by the film’s December 31, 2012 “deadline” left many questioning the campaign’s lasting impact. Both in the U.S.—the hub of the campaign—and around the world, the campaign failed to drive anything more than awareness. As of 2014, long after the film’s deadline, Kony remained at large. While one achievement of the film is that the international media continues to follow the case, one researcher reflected recently upon the local impact: “[m]aybe 2 percent of the entire Acholi population even knew about that film, and of that percent, very few cared. The international arena is not so important” (Storr, 2014). This article, along with many commentators from 2012, notes that the film actually did harm by failing to empower the region’s victims and survivors. Commentators noted that there was little effect felt on the ground, where it has been most needed (Harding, 2012). More troubling still is the suggestion of longer-term effects that continue to haunt daily Ugandan life:

[I]f left unacknowledged, these hurts can fester. If they’re allowed to turn toxic, painful stories from people’s lives have the potential to become dangerous, by threatening to tip Uganda’s decades-long cycle of violence into a new revolution (Storr, 2014).

Specifically, *Kony2012*’s depiction of the U.S. military as central to ending Kony’s impunity and saving Uganda’s invisible children overlooks the complexity of transitional justice and memorialization processes, which often focus on productive and healing practices (Steele, 2006). This kind of glaring oversight, and the assumptions and ignorance which underpin it, has led commentators to argue that *Kony2012* may unintentionally “do more harm than good” (Harding, 2012).

However well-intentioned, the film echoes the “Save Darfur” Campaign of a decade earlier, which commentators found unfortunately promoted a “stereotype of Africa as a black hole of disease and death” (Iweala,

2007). The unintended racial undertones of *Kony2012*'s message for advocacy and intervention, both in light of history and the intervention proposed, do not pay sufficient attention to Africa's needs and strengths, but instead focus on what at least some Americans *think* Africa needs and consider its lack of strengths. The impact of such colonial-inflected thinking has reverberated throughout the continent for centuries now, and many say it has created more and new problems in the region, including the perpetuation of the very human rights violations that interventionists have sought to extinguish.

CONCLUSION

Clearly well-intentioned advocates have sought to create impetus for justice and bring to an end a regime of dire human rights violations. Yet this article has sought to show how a Western-centric interventionism embodied in a filmmaker's worldview actually reproduces many colonial scripts which themselves have widely fostered oppression.

In many ways, the claims made in *Kony2012* ask us to act to extend our reach and "civilize" the situation, using the supposedly democratic forum of the Internet, specifically through Web 2.0 and social media. This civilizing mission is most readily apparent through the plot and narration of the film itself. Jason Russell, a wealthy American male, presents us with what he has done and then advocates for what we, collectively, should do. Uganda's children, therefore, do not come to be formed or presented as fully-developed people. Rather, they emerge as a rhetorical device for Russell's purpose of explaining his worldview and project.

In focusing upon Russell, one important and likely unintended, effect of *Kony2012* is to displace and render invisible the significant work done and led by Ugandans. The slogans and products of the *Kony2012* campaign are attention-grabbing marketing and inarguably succeeded in drawing widespread attention to the case. However, they fall short of directing people to start thinking about realistic long-term solutions to a complex problem. More pertinently, they do not expound the views and wishes of the people whom they are supposedly seeking to make visible.

Against the backdrop of *Kony2012* as a prominent example, it is necessary to exercise due caution about the capacity for Web 2.0 to bring about mass change or to "change the course of human history." While Web 2.0 may hold a tremendous capacity to expand our worldview, in looking at *Kony2012*'s embedded colonialist aspects, it is in many ways clear that Web 2.0 can just as easily embody history, even repeat and disseminate harmful discourses. As we continue to experience an ever-evolving awareness of Web 2.0 as a platform for hate, we have been less aware of its

potential to reproduce scripts that dehumanize and demonize in other ways, through oppression and conveyance of more subtle forms of discrimination. Users of Web 2.0 should be mindful to ensure that they do not project existing repressive views, as these views may easily be shared and amplified with the masses. Indeed, as we witness the emergence of debate sites and knowledge sharing forums, such as *Change.org*, which offer positive interactional mechanisms designed to enlighten and to empower, we should exercise caution to ensure that these mechanisms and activities do not bring with them unintended acts of hate and oppression.

Perhaps, then, the lasting impact of *Kony2012* is underscoring the importance of including the multiplicity of voices—in an open online democratic forum—to truly empower those who survive oppression, as well as those who wish to act *with* them, rather than *for* them.

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