



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 041/2012 dated 13 March 2012

Kony 2012: Potentials and pitfalls of social media

By Joel Ng

Synopsis

A viral video produced by the non-profit group Invisible Children has had remarkable success in astonishingly quick fashion, and offers lessons on how to execute a viral publicity campaign. Yet the story it tells and the solutions it seeks are simplifications that may lead to bad policy decisions.

Commentary

A SLICK, well-produced video, titled “Kony 2012”, has become an overnight sensation on the Internet. It features Joseph Kony, Ugandan leader of the notorious Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group originating in Uganda but now operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan. The video has become an object lesson on the complex dynamics of social media, attracting over 50 million views just three days after it was posted. The 30-minute film has not only garnered a flurry of comments online, but drawn attention to the organisation behind the film, Invisible Children, and its depiction of the conflict.

The video opens with the stark words “Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come,” and then invites the viewer on an experiment for the next 27 minutes, asserting that “humanity’s greatest desire is to belong and connect.” From these global memes, it introduces us to the filmmaker and his son, segueing into a distinctly local story about another boy, Jacob, one of thousands of victims of a terrible conflict in northern Uganda. From this device of the terrified child, it moves to tell the story of the evil man behind the terror, Kony.

Criticisms

Finally, the film shares its projects in the conflict-affected areas and its advocacy efforts in the US and elsewhere, and urges people to make Kony famous, so that political pressure can be brought to support the military efforts to hunt him down. The video is emotive, engaging, touching and inspiring in equal parts, well-produced and strongly on message throughout. But it also simplifies the story and the solution.

Almost as soon as the video was released, websites sprang up criticising the group. Its finances were scrutinised, its programmes were questioned and the perceived egoism of the filmmakers lambasted. Pictures of Invisible Children staff posing heavily-armed alongside South Sudanese soldiers were dug up, building a counter-portrayal of them as naive thrill-seekers with questionable objectives.

An article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine noted that the group (among others): “have manipulated facts for strategic purposes, exaggerating the scale of LRA abductions and murders and emphasising the LRA's use of innocent children as soldiers, and portraying Kony – a brutal man, to be sure – as uniquely awful, a Kurtz-like embodiment of evil.” A large part of the criticism stems from their support for the US AFRICOM mission in Uganda, assisting in military operations in the DRC and CAR to stop the LRA.

The questions against the group's finances (caused by their enormously successful fundraising model) are unlikely to fatally undermine their organization. For all the accusations that their resources are thinly used on the ground in Uganda, DRC or CAR, the technical critiques of non-profit finance are unlikely to have staying power.

Social media and objectivity

However, the real damage may be in their messaging. As media professionals, they wanted to tell an effective story. To do so, they narrowed the “bad guy” to a singular figure of evil, Joseph Kony, comparing him to Hitler and other notorious killers of history. That simple message was effective: Celebrities such as Rihanna and Justin Bieber tweeted to ask their followers to spread the word. But in depicting a simple story with celebrity-like focus on a single person, Invisible Children grossly over-exaggerated Kony's impact, and largely relied on footage of children suffering from before 2005 because that had the most dramatic impact.

The LRA today is a small force comprising several hundred soldiers and non-combatant porters, sex-slaves and children. It operates in a region nearly the size of France, but is only one of a large number of militia groups that have taken advantage of the general lawlessness in CAR and DRC to exploit the rich mineral wealth in the area through violent means. In this context, Kony is a smaller player in a vastly more complex and volatile region than the attention to him warrants.

Root Causes

It follows too, that stopping Kony is unlikely to solve the roots of the problem – the region will remain unstable with or without him. Kony's right-hand man, Vincent Otti, was killed (by Kony himself, allegedly) years ago, and several others have surrendered, but that did little to stop the group's renewal of violence after peace talks stalled in 2008. Furthermore, Invisible Children want Kony arrested by Ugandan and US forces and then tried by the International Criminal Court (ICC), something that is unlikely to happen given the Ugandan government's antagonism towards the ICC and the US' lack of accession to the Rome Statute of the ICC.

For those of us who have worked in northern Uganda, there is sympathy and indeed some admiration, for the efforts and ideals of Invisible Children. But there is much more apprehension about the way they understand the conflict, the solutions they are seeking, and their omission of other organisations doing immensely important work on the conflict. Unfortunately, considerable amounts of the buzz they created are about their organisation itself. It is an instructive lesson about the potential and pitfalls of social media today.

Joel Ng is an associate research fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. He worked on civilian protection issues in northern Uganda from 2005–2007 during a peak in the LRA's operations in the country.