White Noise: Hearing the Disaster

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‘how everything turns away/Quite leisurely from the disaster’
— W.H. Auden, ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’

‘The disaster is related to forgetfulness.’
— Maurice Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster

Invisible Children’s Kony 2012 campaign was lambasted in various corners as yet another incarnation of human rights as ‘white man’s burden’—or what the Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole calls the ‘White Savior Industrial Complex’ (Cole, 2012; see Mackey, 2012). There’s no question that Kony 2012 smacks of missionary zeal and traffics in some tired tropes about Africa. But having worked in Rwanda several years after the genocide, I can’t help thinking we should be less worried about the white man’s burden and more worried about his indifference.

When my former boss at Human Rights Watch, Alison Des Forges, lobbied President Clinton’s National Security Adviser to do more to halt Rwanda’s genocide, he told her she needed to ‘make more noise’ (Power, 2002: 377). Only public pressure would influence the Administration’s (pusillanimous) policymaking. The problem then, as now, is how to make noise that the public and politicians don’t tune out as just more white noise.

Kony 2012 made a lot of noise. It prompted 100 million people and prominent US politicians to engage with an issue that had been crowded off the policy agenda and television screens by, frankly, more severe and pressing disasters (like Syria). How did that happen? Part of the answer lies in the way that Kony 2012 repackages humanitarianism as commodity activism, human rights militancy, and clicktivism.

From Pity to Pixar

The Kony 2012 video looks more like an episode of ‘America’s Most Wanted’ than a children’s charity appeal. In this, it reflects the shift in human rights and humanitarian appeals from realism to postmodern mash-ups, spectacles of suffering to spectacular happenings, and sufferers/

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beneficiaries to activists/donors (Brough, 2012). As the Kony 2012 filmmaker declares:

No one wants a boring documentary on Africa. Maybe we have to make it pop, and we have to make it cool. We view ourselves as the Pixar of human rights stories. (Kron and Goodman, 2012)

The Pixar analogy is apt given all the film’s tie-ins: bracelets, t-shirts, and ‘action kits’.

Kony 2012 exemplifies ‘commodity activism’: ‘the branding and consumption of humanitarian projects – and the humanitarian identity – as products’ (Brough, 2012: 178).\(^1\) The focus is on producers and consumers of humanitarian products rather than the eventual beneficiaries.\(^2\) So it’s no surprise then that the voice and agency of northern Ugandans is largely absent from the initial video (see Cole, 2012).

In his sympathetic critique of Kony 2012, Sam Gregory from WITNESS calls for storytelling that amplifies the dignity and agency of rights-holders (Gregory, 2012; see Gregory, 2006: 198–202).\(^3\) Responding to critics, Kony 2012’s follow-up video mostly features Ugandan voices. But that sequel didn’t come close to going viral. This suggests there’s a very real trade-off between local voices and global reach.\(^4\)

**From Pity to Prosecution**

While it’s easy to caricature the video’s sentimental ‘bridge character’ – the film-maker’s five-year-old cherubic son – that misses what makes the campaign different. Kony 2012 dispenses with the sad-eyed African poster-child and puts up ‘Wanted’ posters for Joseph Kony instead. Prosecution replaces pity.

Invisible Children represents a younger generation of humanitarian agencies that embrace a muscular human rights fundamentally at odds with the classic humanitarian virtues of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. It clearly takes sides, blaming Kony for the suffering of northern Uganda’s children and supporting Ugandan and American military efforts to capture Kony.\(^5\)

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2 Irene Seu (2010: 453) found that audiences didn’t care ‘whether agency is attributed to the sufferer’ because they focus on the human rights messenger rather than the sufferer.

3 For similar, though less nuanced, critiques of Invisible Children’s earlier films, see Schultheis, 2008: 35 and Smith, 2009: 164.

4 WITNESS’s targeted ‘narrowcast’ videos are not easily scaled up to appeal to mass audiences.

5 Like the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, the Kony 2012 campaign ignores the war crimes committed by the Ugandan government and military (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Mamdani, 2012).
The Kony 2012 campaign is human rights on steroids. First, it swaps ‘naming and shaming’ for ‘naming and arresting’. Both videos give top billing to the International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor who says in the first that ‘the only way to stop Kony is to show him, hey, we’re going to arrest you’ (Invisible Children, 2012a; see Invisible Children, 2012b). Second, it presents Kony as a legitimate target for US military intervention. The video takes credit for the deployment of 100 military advisors to help capture Kony. Finally, Kony 2012 brings together international justice and military intervention – something that started with Milosevic and culminated with Qaddafi. Remarkably, it directs this pitch to an American audience sceptical of the ICC and skittish about another Black Hawk Down.

The video manages to sugar-coat the ICC’s multilateral cosmopolitanism in American exceptionalism (America as super-cop). The video ends with the narrator proclaiming that ‘The better world we want is coming, it’s just waiting for us to stop at nothing’ and calling on viewers to ‘join our army for peace’ (Invisible Children, 2012a). Kony 2012 offers a militant and millenarian version of human rights. Such triumphalism is deeply problematic, but it’s a whole lot more galvanizing than pity.

From Passivity to Clicktivism

In 1993, Richard Rorty famously claimed that ‘it has become much easier for us to be moved to action by sad and sentimental stories’ (1994: 134). The 1994 Rwandan genocide knocked that Whiggish wishfulness sideways. It also made clear the fateful gap between sentiment and action.6 As Susan Sontag later put it, ‘compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers’ (2003: 90).

The Kony 2012 video is very self-aware about translating compassion into action. Over a montage of images from the Holocaust and Rwandan genocide, the narrator-film-maker states:

It’s hard to look back on some parts of human history because when we heard about injustice we cared but we didn’t know what to do. Too often, we did nothing. But if we’re going to change that we have to start somewhere, so we are starting here, with Joseph Kony, because now we know what to do. (Invisible Children, 2012a)

Now, ‘we know what to do’ to stop injustice: use the ICC and military intervention. But that requires public support which means getting the public to know, care, and act. To accomplish that, the campaign uses old and new advocacy tools to make Kony famous: postering on billboards and posting on social media, targeting policymakers and tweeting celebrities.

6 A new research project explores this gap by investigating ‘how people respond to messages about suffering’ (Seu et al., 2012).
For all its celebration of social media, *Kony 2012* still shares the ‘old-fashioned Enlightenment faith’ that ‘if only people knew, they would act accordingly’ (Cohen, 1996: 541). Still, the new clicktivism has one decided advantage over the old activism: it shortens the gap between knowing and acting, thus giving less time for ‘implicatory denial’ to interpose itself. The *Kony 2012* video invites viewers to act immediately by sharing the video, signing a pledge, contacting policymakers and celebrities, and ordering the ‘action kit’. All it takes are a few clicks.

It’s easy to dismiss clicktivism as slacktivism. Malcolm Gladwell (2010) huffs that ‘Facebook activism succeeds ... by motivating [people] to do the things [they] do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice.’ That asks too much. The clicks made in response to the *Kony 2012* video created an issue, made Kony news, put pressure on policymakers, and formed a virtual cosmopolitan community (Hudson, 2012; Kron and Goodman, 2012; Sawyer, 2012). Still, the challenge lies in converting online ‘cheap participation’ into offline, sustained participation (Darnton and Kirk, 2011: 28–9) – as was demonstrated when participation in the ‘Cover the Night’ event did not match expectations raised by the video’s viral success (Carroll, 2012).

**Conclusion**

Irene Seu has usefully dissected our everyday resistance to distant suffering. Following Stanley Cohen’s lead, she examines ‘how audiences “do denial”’ when confronted with human rights appeals (Seu, 2010). Seu shows that audiences ‘neutralize’ Amnesty International’s appeals through three, shared repertoires of denial that enable them to morally justify their passivity – to themselves and to others.

The first, ‘the medium is the message’, focuses on the attributed manipulative function of the appeal. The second, ‘shoot the messenger’, attacks the sender of the appeal. The third, ‘babies and bathwater’, questions in various ways the validity of the action recommended in the appeal. (Seu, 2010: 443)

These same repertoires are evident in many of the criticisms levelled against *Kony 2012* as well as the *Schadenfreude* that greeted the film-maker’s very public meltdown. That risks reinforcing the public’s sceptical consumerism towards human rights appeals as well as their moral apathy towards distant suffering. Instead, we should be celebrating – and replicating – *Kony 2012*’s promotion of ‘active and attentive publics’ (McLagan, 2005: 223) willing to make (short-term) political noise in response to human rights and humanitarian disasters.

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7 Cohen (2001: 211) defines ‘implicatory denial’ as ‘arguments, reasons or rationalizations for not responding sympathetically to distressing information’.
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References


