

## Why I think the Kony 2012 Campaign Is Wrong

I think the [Kony12](#) campaign is wrong. It is wrong in content, tactics, strategy, ethics and politics. The Invisible Children organisation may well be doing some good work in East Africa, but this media effort is wrong. And it's not just the wrong means to a good end, it's a negative in itself. They should stop it or change it.

[UPDATE: I am writing a much longer research paper on the future of the public sphere that cites Kony2012 as a case study – you can [read an extract here](#)]

The one good thing to come out of it is a healthy debate about humanitarian communications, something that [Polis](#) and my [Department](#) have been [researching](#) and [discussing](#) with NGOs and academics for years.

I won't go through all the detailed arguments which other people have made much better than me. I trust these people's views more than an American film-maker. They can be boiled down to these main charges (please click on the links for details arguments):

1. The campaign [misrepresents reality](#) – in other words, it distorts the truth for its own ends. Kony is not in Uganda. The issue is much more complicated and the use of American force may make it worse.
2. The campaign [reinforces the idea that 'the West' \(or just America really\) must 'save' Africa where people are helpless victims of Evil Men](#)
3. It is [misguided](#) – this is not a good target – there are worse current human rights offenders and he is a spent force
4. It will distract from real problems and disappoint people who have signed up. If it fails will people trust human rights campaigns in the future?
5. It [shows how social media makes bad messages](#) more effective. (The response from the StopKony camapaign shows how social media can also have a very good corrective function)

What intrigues me is how very intelligent, compassionate people respond to these criticisms by defending the campaign, despite its faults. Yes, they say, it does misrepresent and it probably is wrong-headed, but wow! Look at all that awareness being raised! Even my five year old daughter knows about Kony now!

Likewise, journalists who have been covering the story for years respond with [a mixture of despair and envy](#) at the ability of this campaign to take the issue to a mass audience.

This is bizarre. The means do not justify the ends. Bad means can actually make things worse. Here's why.

Firstly, it's wrong to lie. I expect that Invisible Children does good work in Africa and that Russell honestly wants to promote human rights. I don't think this campaign is just about raising money for him, although statements like this do indicate a massive ego and a [megalomaniacal personality](#):

*"I am going to help end the longest running war in Africa, get Joseph Kony arrested & redefine international justice. Then I am going to direct a Hollywood musical. Then I am going to study theology & literature in Oxford, England, and then move to New York to start "The*



Academy" – which will be a school where the best creative young minds in the world attend."

But it is wrong to ignore inconvenient facts. A degree of simplification is vital, but to reduce human rights to a man-hunt is to turn the truth into something else.

Compassion is not finite. People will still care about other issues, even if this campaign does not deliver. (And I am pretty sure it won't succeed except in its own terms of raising money and 'awareness') But there is a deeper damage done by disappointment revealed by the research done by my LSE colleagues. Alongside the generosity of many, cynicism is growing about the constant demands of NGOs and campaigners and their use of slick marketing. The price will be paid in the future as real engagement suffers.

The damage done by reinforcing stereotypes of Africa will have an impact beyond this campaign. It will perpetuate the myth that Africans can't sort their own problems out and that they don't really share political ideas such as human rights.

The damage done by pretending that solutions are simple means that the public won't give the long-term backing for the legal and political policies that produce sustainable rights.

The damage done to the idea of collaborative campaigning. This is clactivism at its worst. Pay \$30 for a campaigning kit – buy the bracelet and the t-shirt! No commitment there really. And the original film encourages the narcissistic idea that this campaign is about how You feel, about how euphoric you will be when you join this campaign, how clever and compassionate your little boy is. This isn't empathy, this is self-indulgence.

So I am very grumpy about this. I believe in marketing. I realise that complex issues have to be told in accessible ways (I have spent a whole journalistic career doing precisely that). But there comes a point where you distort things too much and reinforce negative feelings and ideas.

Will it bring some people to more awareness and activism? Possibly, but it will also waste a lot of time and effort. Yes, it's a very effective piece of marketing. But so what? If you want to engage people in sustainable activism and real change you have to be honest with them. Every NGO wants to reach a mass audience for its issue, but it's impossible for everyone to care about everything all the time.

I think it's better to target fewer people with realistic messages that have viable and progressive outcomes. Social media is a brilliant way to do that. The mixture of personalisation, peer recommendation, and participation on social networks is a great way to connect people to issues. Social media is wonderful at helping us to find people who are most likely to want to engage and then to give them the information and channels to act. But if the messages are wrong, then the medium won't work. Just because the power of media means it's possible to make people aware of something, with a wrong message, doesn't make it the right thing to do.

For a different point of view and a [defence of the campaign click here](#)

Other good articles critiquing the campaign:

[African Reactions To Kony12](#)

[Why The Kong 2012 Video Could Be Damaging For Uganda](#) (quotes LSE Uganda Expert)

If you really want to know researched facts and analysis about Kony and the Lords Resistance Army and Uganda check out the work of [Tim Allen](#) and [Mareike Schomerus](#) and especially their book [The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality](#)

Here is an excellent feature on the issue by the [BBC Radio 4 World Tonight](#)

Lots of links to other articles on this issue at  [@\\_ariaana's blog](#)

Here is film-maker Jason Russell [in his own words](#)

Here is [a critique of the campaign](#) by another NGO that works with children in conflict

And [a funny video](#) that sums up my criticism.

Postscript:

One interesting academic aspect is how the Kony 2012 campaign fits into what my colleague [Prof Lilie Chouliaraki](#) calls ‘post-humanitarian communications.’ By that she means the kind of campaign marketing that uses clever new media techniques to stress the role of the supporter rather than the cause. Instead of showing you the victim or talking about the issues, it focuses in on how you feel about being ‘engaged’ or ‘active’. You can read [Prof Lilie’s Chouliaraki’s Post Humanitarian Communications paper here](#).

If you are interested in keeping in touch about these issues and want to get information about the events and research by Polis, then email us at [polis@lse.ac.uk](mailto:polis@lse.ac.uk) and ask to be put on our email newsletter.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science