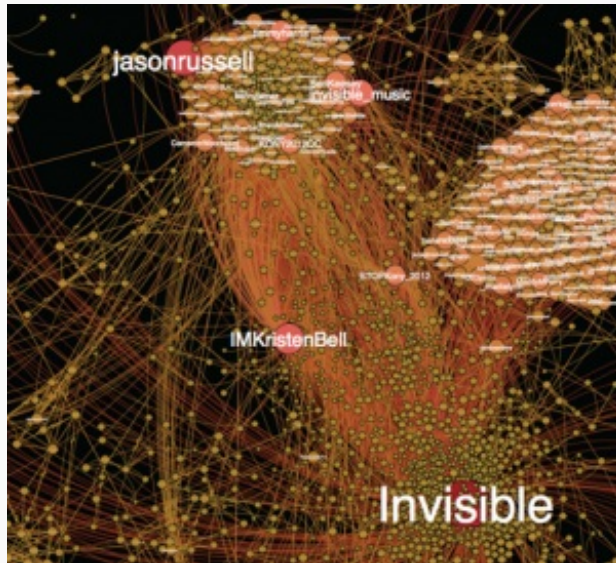


How did Kony2012 Go Viral and Should We Copy It?

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/04/20/how-did-kony2012-go-viral-and-should-we-copy-it/

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The Kony Network by Socialflow

In this short draft extract from a much longer paper I argue that what made #Kony2012 go viral was not the slick content or the Invisible Children brand – it was its focus on networking as an end in itself.

The pre-existing network created by Invisible Children's offline campaigning first propelled it forward. Analysis of the first 5,000 people to retweet the #Kony2012 hashtag on Twitter shows that they were clustered around a few southern US cities. [Analysis of the tags](#) associated with those people retweeting showed terms such as 'Jesus, God, Christ, University, and Student'. These were precisely the people Russell had been aiming at in his previous offline outreach and exactly the kind of young people with a propensity to network online.

However, what helped it to reach 100 million views quicker than even Susan Boyle was probably its incorporation of networked media agency and what social media marketing

analyst Gilad Lotan calls "attention philanthropy tactics." The video makes a series of appeals for action. These were in addition to more conventional requests for money and registration which do not appear until 23 minutes into the film.

From the start the video adopts an almost millenarian ideology that claims that the viewer is at a 'crucial time in history' because 'technology allows us to respond to the problems of our friends' and that all we have to do to 'fight war' is to 'make him [Kony] visible'. It even sets a deadline. It foregrounds evidence of people already being active in a very euphoric, uplifting way.

Cleverly, it goes further by asking the viewer to help Invisible Children to target celebrities and politicians – people who are visible and who make things visible. This astute focus on using its supporters to engage celebrities through social media was highly effective. One approving tweet from the massively popular American radio DJ Ryan Seacrest reached 6.5 million of his fans: "Was going to sleep last night and saw ur tweets about #StopKony... watched in bed, was blown away."

The video makes an action proposition that is itself based on networking. The call for agency is to network, to join a global demonstration ['Cover The Night'] on April 20th when the world's cities will be covered with posters and stickers urging yet more networking. 'Awareness' becomes an end in itself for the campaign. It makes the classic advocacy argument that if you want powerful people to act then first you have to make the issue known to them. You do that by making it known to the public: "To care they have to know".

These tactics are not unique to Kony2012. We can never know for sure why this campaign went so rampantly viral and another similar one might not. It could have something to do with a specific mixture of youthful American religiosity and social networking or even US campus culture. It may be that I am right [to criticise the campaign as practically and ideologically dangerous](#) and that it will not have significant, let alone long-term effects. Dramatic Network Exploits like Kony2012 may be inherently unstable and transient.

However, as a case study of media agency, Kony2012 offers us ways to understand aspects of the Networked

Public Sphere and it may be that more credible and sustainable effects are possible. In terms of media agency it does seem that the key was its resolute focus on using the networking impulse of network users to leverage the content and its relatively small existing resource.

This is a short draft extract from a longer paper looking at how changes in the public sphere will effect the ability of journalists and NGOs to communicate international issues around development and human rights. It was commissioned by the International Broadcasting Trust and will be published in full in the autumn.

You can read [another extract here on Kony2012](#)

You can read my full analysis of Kony2012 [here – Why I think Kony 2012 Is Wrong](#)

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