Kony2012 and the digital challenge to the public sphere (new research paper)

Click, give, act?

This is a short early draft extract from a much longer paper I am writing for the International Broadcasting Trust on the future of the 'public sphere' in the digital age. In other words, how does our ability to communicate about international issues around development, human rights and justice change in the Internet era? In this short extract I look at the viral Kony2012 video camapign as a challenge to mainstream media – in a similar way that I analysed WikiLeaks as a harbinger of media change in my new book about news in the networked era.

One of the most interesting reactions to the unprecedented success of the Kony2012 online video campaign was from envious mainstream media journalists. Veteran foreign correspondents like Lindsey Hilsum, the International Editor of ITN's Channel 4 News were impressed that in less than one week the relatively tiny Invisible Children organisation could garner 105 million views for a 30 minute long video about human rights abuses in northern Uganda. It seemed almost as if traditional broadcasters were conceding defeat to their digital rivals in the battle to bring difficult international issues to a mass audience:

> "…none of the articles…I or a hundred other journalists who have covered Uganda over 25 years has reached the people this video has reached. OK, it may not be accurate. It may use out-of-date figures. But it's struck a chord we have never managed to strike. What wouldn't we do for an audience of 30 million? I think we could learn something from them about how to get a message across, and how to talk to a generation that has stopped bothering to read newspaper and watch TV news."

The video raised millions of dollars for the Invisible Children 'not for profit' organisation through the sale of a 'campaign kit' consisting of bumper stickers, a badge, bracelet and an action guide. The organisers promise to take the campaign offline with a global demonstration. [April 20th 2012].

The video meant that at least 100 million people were now aware of the atrocities committed by Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army. Millions more have had the issue brought to their attention by the subsequent media coverage and discussion in social networks.

Luis Moreno-Ocampo the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), who was featured in the video, welcomed it as a force that might bring justice closer:

> "The Invisible Children movie is adding [the] social interest that institutions need to achieve results. Invisible Children will, I think, produce the arrest of Joseph Kony this year"

Much of the awareness about the video was amplified by the debate it provoked. Immediately upon its release there was a counter campaign online that critiqued the motives, methods and aims of the campaign. Much of this was 'unofficial' as individuals on the various social networks voiced their reservations. It even turned into a rival viral #StopKony campaign.

One of the leading voices was Grant Oysten, a teenage student in Nova Scotia, whose blog was one of the first to counter Invisible Children's aims and methods:

> *"Is awareness good? Yes. But these problems are highly complex, not one-dimensional and, frankly, aren't of the nature that can be solved by postering, film-making and changing your Facebook profile picture, as hard as that is to swallow. Giving your money and public support to Invisible Children so they can spend it on supporting ill-advised violent intervention and movie #12 isn't helping."*

'Official' responses from human rights and media professionals, experts and activists were equally critical, (including one I wrote saying the campaign was 'wrong in content, tactics, strategy, ethics and politics' .).

Many African voices were also raised to condemn the campaign, like Ugandan journalist Angelo Opi-aiya Izama:

> *"The simplicity of the "good versus evil", where good is inevitably white/western and bad is black or African, is also reminiscent of some of the worst excesses of the colonial era interventions. These campaigns don't just lack scholarship or nuance. They are not bothered to seek it."*

Mainstream media then tentatively reported the debate. It was clear that they were struggling to work out what the story was. Was this another 'Gosh look what the Internet Can Do!" narrative? Or should they focus on the policy debate around the merits of campaigning for a US-backed military manhunt? Lurking behind the mainstream media coverage was Lindsey Hilsum's ambivalence about a humanitarian media project that had achieved dramatic impact but with debatable means and aims.

Whatever its intrinsic merits, the Kony2012 phenomenon proved one thing. It may be an extreme case study, but it showed the power of the Internet – especially of social networks combined with a relatively old-fashioned kind of emotional film-making – to create a self-sustaining, citizen-propelled tidal wave of messaging.

It was especially effective with the group that conventional news media finds hardest to reach – the young. Only rarely can conventional broadcasting command this kind of mass attention in such a short period. Usually it takes a major event such as a World Cup Final, a disaster like 9/11 or, on a national scale, an entertainment like the X Factor. It may well be that the debate around Kony2012 helped generate the interest – although that was not planned and the organisation did not take part in it.

The Kony2012 case study seems to suggest that the way the public sphere works has changed.

This is a short draft excerpt from a much longer paper looking at the changing nature of the public sphere in the digital age being written for the International Broadcasting Trust. More snippets to follow…