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From the Selected Works of Dr. Christopher Boulton

Fall November 23, 2015

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In Defense of “Slacktivism”: How *KONY 2012* Got the Whole World to Watch¹

Christopher Boulton

In March of 2012, the Internet video *KONY 2012* swept across Facebook and Twitter racking up more than 100 million views in just six days,² making it the most viral video in the history of the Internet.³ *KONY 2012*'s stated intent was to draw attention to how Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) abducts, abuses, and forces children to fight as soldiers in and around Uganda and to inspire young activists to pressure celebrities and politicians to do whatever it takes to catch him.⁴ The backlash was swift. Critics objected not only to the facts, foreign policy agenda, and racial politics of *KONY 2012* but also to the financial priorities of Invisible Children (IC), the organization behind the campaign.⁵ Many of these objections were well-founded. IC's video oversimplified and exaggerated Kony's power (comparing Kony to Hitler when Kony's "army" only had a few hundred soldiers), called for a United States-led military intervention into an oil-rich country (sound familiar?), and cast young, mostly white teenagers as Africa's saviors (a neocolonial "White Man's Burden").⁶ IC also came under scrutiny for spending more money on making and showing movies than actually distributing direct aid to the affected region.⁷ Other critics, while sympathetic to the cause, questioned the entire approach of the *KONY 2012* campaign, dismissing the sharing of a video on social media as the epitome of "slacktivism,"⁸ a term combining the lazy connotations of "slacker" with "activist" to convey how the Internet makes political expression more convenient or, as Snopes founder Barbara Mikkelson first put it to the *New York Times* back in 2002, "the desire people have to do something good without getting out of their chair."⁹ True, *KONY 2012* made mistakes—and some of them ugly—but it also achieved something that is both difficult and important; by turning suburban teens into slacktivists, *KONY 2012* made human rights "cool."¹⁰

In one of the most trenchant critiques of slacktivism, Malcolm Gladwell quipped that “the revolution will not be tweeted,” citing the 1960’s lunch counter sit-ins of the Civil Rights Movement as the kind of high-commitment protests necessary for social change.¹¹ Although various good causes might use Face-book as a platform to increase online participation, Gladwell argued they can only do so by “lessening the level of motivation that participation requires.”¹² In other words, it is easy to get a slacktivist to click the “like” button, but it’s more difficult to get them to actually show up at a protest occurring offline, much less be willing to risk personal injury or arrest. Indeed, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) trained their Civil Rights activists to a style of nonviolent civil disobedience that expected, and at times even provoked, violent responses from racist segregationists. They knew that systemic change would provoke fierce resistance and put activists’ very lives at risk. And so while technology enthusiasts were quick to characterize more recent protests in Moldova and Iran as “Twitter revolutions,” Gladwell points out that social media did not drive or even organize the protests so much as provide a platform for Westerners to discuss them.¹³ The crux of the “slacktivist” critique amounts to this: activism only matters when people are willing to sit in, march, or generally take the time and energy to show up. But history also suggests that watching, in itself, matters even if the audience never gets off the couch.

In August 1968, thousands of students gathered in a park outside of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago to protest the Vietnam War. On the eve of the Convention, police invaded the park with fire trucks, launching tear gas canisters and swinging batons. The next day, Don Rose, press secretary for the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, was asked how to respond to the police brutality and said, “Tell them the whole world is watching, and they’ll never get away with it again.”¹⁴ Two days later, during what would later become known as “The Battle of Michigan Avenue,” demonstrators gathered in front of the Conrad Hilton Hotel, where many of the convention delegates and news media were staying. Police moved in to clear the street, beating and arresting demonstrators and onlookers alike. As the television news cameras rolled, the protestors chanted, “The whole world is watching! The whole world is watching! The whole world is watching!” And they were right. Nearly 83 million Americans saw the horrifying events unfold on their TV screens, and the bloody scenes quickly spread around the globe.¹⁵

Even if the demonstrators could not get the Convention to adopt a peace platform, having the whole world watch helped them to publicly shame both the Democratic Party and Chicago city officials. Similarly, Civil Rights

protesters knew that nonviolent civil disobedience in the South would not be enough to convince racist shop owners to desegregate their lunch counters, but it would expose the inherent violence of Jim Crow apartheid, typically enforced in the shadows. Thus, from counter to camera to couch, the country eye witnessed crimes against humanity.¹⁶

I also can understand, on a more personal level, why *KONY 2012* went so viral so fast. When I was in high school and college, I began to learn about injustice in the world and longed to be part of a good cause. I often wished I had been alive in the 1960s so I could have joined the anti-war or Civil Rights movements. They seemed to be so clear, pressing, and righteous, culminating in bright shining moments like the March on Washington in 1964 or the National Moratorium Antiwar Demonstrations of 1970.¹⁷ Of course, I would later learn that those movements, as well as most others, were not so glamorous or exciting at the time but rather could go through many fits, starts, and long slogs of stalemate, unpopularity, and failure. But, at the time, they seemed to be so full of courageous, young, anti-establishment, and presumably “cool” people like me that I longed to have been part of the scene. I aspired to be like the charismatic leaders and was inspired by their mission to change the world. Where could I find my movement in the 1990s? Who could I follow? And could they connect me with like-minded people? Where was my Woodstock? I looked to my idols, rock bands of course, for guidance. U2 endorsed Amnesty International, a human rights organization working for the release of political prisoners, and REM backed Greenpeace, a radical environmental organization using direct action to confront polluters. These bands’ endorsements of political activism were very important to me; they made the issues relevant and, most importantly for an insecure adolescent, *popular*. So, when I organized the Amnesty International chapter at my high school, I was trying to change the world to be sure, but I was also hoping to make friends with other people like me . . . and meet cute girls who would think that I was cool, and popular, too. In short, if *KONY 2012* and the Internet had been around at the time, I’m sure I would have jumped on the bandwagon as another slacktivist ready to share the latest—and coolest—cause with everyone I hoped to impress. In that spirit, this chapter examines how *KONY 2012* used inspiration, aspiration, a glimpse of the future, and the lure of friendship to make it the type of cause that so many wanted to spread. It also defends the much-maligned practice of slacktivism as an online reboot of the more cherished protest march tradition.

KONY 2012 is inspiring. Narrator Jason Russell raises the stakes in the introduction by making historic—even revolutionary—claims. The opening sequence depicts planet Earth as seen from outer space and then, over poignant moments from YouTube and the Arab Spring, Russell declares that social media “is changing the way the world works” so that “governments are trying

to keep up,” “the older generations are concerned,” and “the game has new rules.”¹⁸ In this way, Russell winks at his target audience of young Facebook users and challenges them to seize their destiny. Russell then tells a very simple story of good versus evil, casting three characters in starring roles: Joseph Kony, warlord and kidnapper, as the villain; Jacob Acaye, escaped child soldier from Uganda, as the victim; and himself, along with his audience, as the hero that saves the day.¹⁹ After Jacob cries about seeing his brother killed, Russell promises him that he will stop Kony. Russell then invites his audience to join the crusade “because that promise is not just about Jacob or me, it’s also about you. And this year, 2012, is the year that we can finally fulfill it.”²⁰ With the main characters clearly established, the introduction closes by boiling down a very complex situation into a simple call to action: Stop Joseph Kony and “change the course of human history.”²¹ This goal is presented as both feasible and urgent, with the added bonus of narrative closure because “this movie expires on December 31, 2012.”²² Thus, like a summer blockbuster, the fate of the planet hangs in the balance as the hero races the clock to defeat the villain and avenge all his victims once and for all.

Russell, who once described IC as “the Pixar of human rights stories,”²³ is tapping into a long, successful narrative tradition in Hollywood described by Matthew Hughey in his book *The White Savior Film*.²⁴ In this genre, the white hero acts as a bridge character for white audiences—entering a hostile territory populated by people of color, making a sacrificial rescue, and ultimately completing a journey of self-discovery. In *Cry Freedom*, Denzel Washington plays Stephen Biko, the slain anti-apartheid activist, but the film is really about Kevin Kline’s white journalist character who befriends Biko and risks his family’s life to liberate black South Africans from white rule. Willem Dafoe’s FBI agent rescues African-Americans from the KKK in *Mississippi Burning*. Kevin Costner goes native and sacrifices himself for the Sioux in *Dances with Wolves*. Tom Cruise goes to Japan, learns martial arts, joins the rebellion, defeats the ninjas, and ends up as *The Last Samurai* standing. Clint Eastwood defends his Hmong neighbors in *Gran Torino*. *Avatar*, much like *Dances with Wolves*, features a white protagonist who goes native, sacrifices himself for the Navi nation and, to top it all off, gets reincarnated as their leader. Sandra Bullock literally picks up a black football star on the side of the road in *The Blind Side*. *The Help* stars a white woman who discovers the stories of black maids, publishes a book, and goes to New York while the maids stay home. Other examples of the white savior film include *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Glory*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Amistad*, *Blood Diamond*, and *Cool Runnings*.²⁵ The point here is that Russell’s audience has already been well-trained to identify with bridge characters, so casting himself surely helped inspire his white Western audience to embrace the film and its mission to save other African children like Jacob.

KONY 2012 is aspirational. The video targeted—and was, in turn, endorsed and re-tweeted by—famous celebrity role models such as Oprah Winfrey, Justin Bieber, Angelina Jolie, Bill Gates, Rihanna, Ryan Seacrest, Nicole Richie, Diddy, and the Kardashian sisters.²⁶ This exposure helped distribute the video to a wider audience while building its credibility as a popular cause. In addition to fame, the campaign embraced rebellion—another aspirational value of youth culture—by co-opting the street art tactics portrayed in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, a documentary nominated for a 2010 Academy Award.²⁷ Ostensibly directed by the anonymous and widely celebrated street-artist Banksy, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*'s opening credit sequence presents a montage of young people—often wearing hoodies or kerchiefs over their faces—sneaking around at night to glue up posters, spray on stencils, and paint graffiti onto buildings, bridges, tunnels, traffic signs, and other urban public spaces. Most of the sequence occurs after dark—echoing the song's refrain that “Tonight, the streets are ours”—and culminates in a young man escaping two pursuing police officers by scaling a wall and disappearing into the shadows.²⁸ As the narrator explains,²⁹ street art began as a local and ephemeral phenomenon, but “with the arrival of the Internet, these once temporary works could be shared by an audience of millions” such that street art would become “the biggest countercultural movement since punk.”³⁰ As an example of one of the first street artists to cross over into the mainstream, *Exit Through the Gift Shop* introduces Shepard Fairey and his “Obey” campaign:

NARRATOR:

One day, Shepard would be famous for transforming the face of an un-known senator [Barack Obama] into a universally recognized icon. But, even back in 2000, Shepard was the world's most prolific street artist. Shepherd's experiment with the power of repetition went back to 1989 and an image based on 1970s wrestler Andre the Giant. Combining Andre's face with the command to “Obey,” Shepherd had already clocked out over a million hits around the world.³¹

FAIREY:

Even though the Andre the Giant sticker was just an inside joke and I was just having fun, I liked the idea of the more stickers that are out there, the more important it seems, the more people want to know what it is, the more they ask each other and it gains real power from perceived power.³²

Towards the end of *KONY 2012*, Russell adapts Fairey's tactics when he sets up the problem that IC's version of street art will solve: Kony is invisible, so the best way to stop him is to make his image so ubiquitous that Americans will notice, care, and pressure the United States government to locate and arrest him. The theory is that all the negative publicity will make Kony "world news" by "redefining the propaganda we see all day, every day, that dictates who and what we pay attention to" over a montage of billboards, magazine ads, and television commercials.³³ And what better way to propose *KONY 2012*'s countercultural alternative to consumer passivity than by including a clip (cleverly taken out of context to suggest an endorsement) of street art's patron saint?

FAIREY:

A lot of people feel powerless to communicate their ideas. They think that, "Okay, I'm not a corporation. I don't own my own magazine or news station. I just don't have any say." But seeing what I've done, I think it's empowered a lot of people to realize that one individual can make an impact. I actually want to demystify and say, "Here are these really simple tools. Go out and rock it!"³⁴

Russell then declares that "rock it" is "just what we intend to do" as the video soars over a crowd of young people in red *KONY 2012* T-shirts raising their arms in a synchronized peace symbol salute. As the soundtrack blasts "I can't stop," and another group of teens runs through a parking garage, Russell explains that IC is prepared to distribute "hundreds of thousands of posters, stickers, yard signs, and flyers" with Kony's image so that "all of these efforts will culminate on one day, April 20th, when we cover the night." Young people from all over the world will "meet at sundown and blanket every street in every city till the sun comes up" so that, the next day, everyone will "wake up to hundreds of thousands of posters demanding justice on every corner."³⁶ This is a big, bold claim, but the imagery backs him up. In a sequence reminiscent of the opening of *Exit Through the Gift Shop*,³⁷ *KONY 2012* predicts what the night of April 20th will look like with images of young people running around at night, putting up posters, unfurling banners, throwing flyers off a bridge, dashing across bridges, jumping over road flares, and ducking through tunnels. And while the sense of deviance and transgression through petty vandalism is palpable on-screen, especially when a young man stands in front of a mirror and menacingly pulls a kerchief up over his nose, there is little danger off-screen because *KONY 2012* was posted to YouTube on March 5th, 2012 (a full month before "Cover the Night"), so this sequence was a carefully staged pre-enactment—a music video of rebellion—shot well in advance of the actual poster-bombing event.

Thus, beyond fame and rebellion, there may be still a third aspirational aspect of *KONY 2012*: Showing viewers a future vision of themselves. I came to this idea by way of two research projects analyzing print advertisements; the first looked at how ads for designer children's clothing so often pose the young models as very serious "adults" staring straight into the camera. I argued that this offered mothers—the target of the ad—a foretaste of their children's future success.³⁸ The second project extended this theory through audience research and found that mothers tended to view the child models in the ads as their own, then imagine how other mothers might judge the children's clothing and, by extension, their own performance as mothers. In other words, when regarding these images in the ads, the mothers in my study donned virtual goggles to audition the gaze of other mothers in a kind of vicarious dress rehearsal.³⁹ Similarly, by pre-enacting "Cover the Night," *KONY 2012* made a future promise through a vicarious gaze—this is, what you will look like through others' eyes: running around a big city at night with a bunch of your friends to change the world. Selfie meets self-importance.

Which, at last, brings us to the lure of friendship. In addition to inspiration and aspiration, *KONY 2012* also got "the whole world to watch" by promising social connections—both immediate and international. The video explains that each campaign "action kit" includes two bracelets ("one to keep and one to give away") with unique ID numbers that participants can input online to "join the mission to make Kony famous" and "geotag your posters and track your impact in real time."⁴⁰ Participants can post and share their pictures with hashtags to join and connect with their peers putting up posters in other parts of the world. On the more local level, the video is full of young people congregating together in groups. Whether assembled in tight formation wearing matching *KONY 2012* merchandise or running around outdoors and having the time of their lives, the youth are shown in relationship with each other having fun in public—which is both inspirational *and* aspirational.

Of course, it's ironic that such an active vision of hundreds of young participants taking to the streets was passively watched by millions more who stayed indoors. Yet, at the same time, this is the very beauty of slacktivism—its ability to use the Internet to connect causes to marginalized supporters. In this way, friendships can be formed across divides of distance and levels of interest/commitment. It's important to remember that even in the heyday of the anti-Vietnam War movement, there were plenty of people who showed up to the demonstration to get drugs, meet the opposite sex, or just watch; for a time, it was trendy, stylish, and even aspirational to be against the war.

Some mimicked the opinions of their rock-star role models. Others were radicalized by an inspiring speaker. Still others just wanted to “Tune In, Turn On, and Drop Out.” *KONY 2012* takes a similar “big tent” approach by dipping into the IC archives to compile a highlight reel of past events to persuade its young viewers to “cover the night” with an updated, decentralized protest march united online by Instagram. Even if someone only watched—and did nothing else—they still got the message loud and clear: the human rights scene is a cool place to be and to be *seen*.

In Fact, much of *KONY 2012*'s meteoric rise on social media was due to IC's already existing friendship network, built up over the previous eight years. First formed in 2004 after the completion of *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*, IC debuted that film on a national tour to high schools and college campuses in 2006 and then organized the Global Night Commute, with an estimated 80,000 people in 130 American cities walking to their city centers and sleeping outdoors to show support for young Ugandan “Night Walkers” who do the same to avoid capture by the LRA.⁴¹ In 2009, IC organized “The Rescue,” a 100-city international event across ten countries where participants “abducted” themselves and politicians and celebrities such as Rep. John Lewis and Oprah Winfrey came to “save” them.⁴²

IC's first legislative victory came in 2010, when President Obama deployed 100 U.S. advisors through the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act. Then, just a month after the launch of *KONY 2012*, Obama extended the mission. And while far more people might have watched *KONY 2012* than actually answered its call to action (only a few thousand showed up for “Cover the Night”),⁴³ things still got done. That November, IC hosted “Move DC” with thousands of volunteers joining actors from the television shows *Glee* and *Breaking Bad* to march to the White House and demand an end to LRA violence. The following January, Congress authorized a five million dollar reward for information leading to Kony's capture. That summer, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, spoke at IC's Fourth Estate Summit. All in all, over the course of 10 years, IC's numbers are impressive: \$32 million dollars raised; five million students educated about the LRA through 13,000 screenings of 12 different films; 400,000 activists attending 8 international awareness events; 3,000 in-person congressional lobby meetings; and the passage of two bipartisan bills through the U.S. Congress.⁴⁴ And, yet, by the end of 2015, Joseph Kony was still at-large.⁴⁵

Despite its mixed results, IC's *KONY 2012* remains a compelling case study of both the promise and limitations of slacktivism. If we measure the campaign by either taking attendance at its signature event or its promise of closure through the timely capture of a notorious

war criminal, then it clearly failed. However, Russell's "white savior" bridge character still managed to mobilize millions of young, largely white, Americans—typically thought to be too self-involved to care about world affairs⁴⁶—to consume and spread a story about the plight of black children in a far-off land. And, unlike so many other activist documentaries, *KONY 2012* did not only preach to the converted. Rather, it managed to capture the attention of teenagers, that most elusive of demographics, by reframing a complex issue as an urgent, timely, and righteous cause with a clear cast of villains, victims, and heroes. It also used tactics that tapped into young aspirations; associating famous celebrities with the cause added glamour and social acceptability, co-opting the rebellious cache of street art made earnest activism more transgressive, and showing young people future visions of themselves made fighting the good fight look a lot like having fun with friends.

In the Fall of 2012, a picture of President-elect Barack Obama with the caption "Four more years" became the most popular tweet in the history of Twitter. That record held for almost two years until Ellen DeGeneres snapped a selfie onstage at the Oscars with some fellow celebrities (Jennifer Lawrence, Channing Tatum, Meryl Streep, Julia Roberts, Kevin Spacey, Bradley Cooper, Brad Pitt, Lupita Nyong'o, and Angelina Jolie). DeGeneres' tweet smashed Obama's record in a mere 33 minutes. An obvious lesson to draw here is that celebrities are more popular than politicians. One might even conclude that this proves Twitter to be a trivial venue, unfit for politics or, as Gladwell put it, revolutions. But after taking a closer look at what made *KONY 2012* the kind of viral video that so much of the world chose to watch, I would like to suggest another moral to this story. The most popular tweet, by far, is a "selfie" of a *group*. Think about that. People love watching groups that they'd like to join, but deciding not to get up out of your chair and climb on to that particular stage does not make you a slacker; it makes you a watcher who is inspired, aspiring, and longing to build meaningful friendships. Russell understood this sensibility and his *KONY 2012* manifesto is a masterclass in adolescent wish fulfillment; teachers, parents, mentors, and, yes, even activists, should watch and learn.

NOTES

1. This chapter was written with support from The University of Tampa Dana Foundation grant. This version also includes corrections that the publisher accidentally omitted from the print version.

2. Invisible Children, *KONY 2102*, accessed January 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sq>.
3. Sam Sanders, *The "Kony 2012" Effect: Recovering from a Viral Sensation*, accessed January 2, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/people/349243304/sam-sanders>.
4. Invisible Children, *KONY 2102*.
5. Teju Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," accessed January 2, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.
6. Invisible Children, *KONY 2102*.
7. Sanders, *The "Kony 2012" Effect*.
8. Tom Watson, "The #StopKony Backlash: Complexity and the Challenges of Slacktivism," accessed January 2, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/tomwatson/2012/03/08/the-stopkony-backlash-complexity-and-the-challenges-of-slacktivism/>.
9. Barnaby Feder, "They Weren't Careful What They Hoped for," *New York Times*, accessed January 2, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/29/nyregion/they-weren-t-careful-what-they-hoped-for.html>.
10. Amy Finnegan, "The White Girl's Burden," *Contexts* 12 (1) (2013): 30–35.
11. Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," *The New Yorker*, accessed January 2, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-3>.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Laura Washington, *The Whole World Was Watching*, accessed January 2, 2014, http://inthesetimes.com/article/3876/the_whole_world_was_watching."
15. Ibid.
16. James A. Colaiaco, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Paradox of Nonviolent Direct Action," *Phylon* 47.1 (1986): 16–28.
17. Ibid.

18. Invisible Children, *KONY 2102*.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Jessica Testa, "Two Years After KONY 2012, Has Invisible Children Grown Up?" Accessed January 2, 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jtes/two-years-after-kony-2012-has-invisible-children-grown-up#.hxO7rVj0A>.
24. Matthew Hughey. *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).
25. Ibid.
26. Testa, "Two Years After KONY 2012."
27. Banksy, *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (DVD) (London, England: Paranoid Pictures, 2010).
28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Invisible Children, *KONY 2102*.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.

37. Michael Renov, *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 203. In one of the footnotes of his book *Theorizing Documentary*, Renov defines “pre-enactments” as “visions of what could be, presented in a documentary format.”

38. Chris Boulton, “The Mother’s Gaze and the Model Child: Reading Print Ads for Designer Children’s Clothing,” *Advertising & Society Review* 10.3 (2009).

39. Chris Boulton, “Don’t Smile for the Camera: Black Power, Para-Proxemics and Prolepsis in Print Ads for Hip-Hop Clothing,” *International Journal of Communication* 1.1 (2007).

40. Invisible Children, *KONY 2102*.

41. Testa, “Two Years After KONY 2012.”

42. Invisible Children, International Events, accessed January 2, 2014, <http://invisiblechildren.com/program/international-events/>.

43. Rory Carroll, “Kony2012 Cover the Night Fails to Move from the Internet to the Streets,” accessed January 2, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/21/kony-2012-campaign-uganda-warlord>.

44. Invisible Children, Homepage, accessed January 2, 2014, <http://invisiblechildren.com>.

45. Testa, “Two Years After KONY 2012.”

46. Pew Research Center, “Politically Apathetic Millennials,” accessed January 2, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/politically-apatetic-millennials/>.

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