



The double-edged crisis: Invisible Children's social media response to the Kony 2012 campaign



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ABSTRACT

Using the ideas of social media activism and organizational learning to guide analysis, this paper explores Invisible Children, Inc.'s social-mediated response to the humanitarian crisis in Central and East Africa, the organizational crisis these responses created, and how the organization responded to these different types of crisis via social media. Key findings include describing their humanitarian crisis response as a "social experiment," Invisible Children's personalization of response on social media to their organizational crisis, and the increased transparency Invisible Children demonstrated during and after the crisis. The results of this study demonstrate how social media have the ability to play a key role in increasing awareness about an important humanitarian cause, yet can also threaten the reputation and legitimacy of the organization behind the social-mediated message.

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1. Introduction

Crises manifest themselves in multiple ways—from organizational crises to large-scale humanitarian crises. In public relations, understanding and studying crises have largely been limited to crises that occur to organizations—particularly corporations (Coombs, 1999; Heath & O'Hair, 2010). However, nonprofit organizations also need to prepare for the potential for crises that can negatively impact their reputations (Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2010; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011), particularly as new and social media allow activists to reach intended and unintended audiences across the globe (Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009). But how do social media influence the intersection of humanitarian and nonprofit organizational crises? For Invisible Children, Inc. (IC), a nonprofit organization focused on stopping the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Eastern and Central Africa, the intersection of multiple crises began on March 5, 2012. On that day it released a 30-min documentary on YouTube called "Kony 2012" to raise awareness about the humanitarian crises perpetuated by Uganda's LRA leader Joseph Kony. IC's initial goal was to receive 500,000 views within two months of releasing the video (Chalk, 2012). However, in just six days, the video received more than 100 million views, becoming the most viral video in history at that time (Wasserman, 2012). The initial positive reception of the video quickly turned negative on social media channels, including questioning the legitimacy of the organization, the efficacy of its methods, and the motivations of the filmmakers (Briones, Madden, & Janoske, 2013). In addition to credibility attacks leveled against the organization, the attacks quickly became personal

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for one of the three founders of IC, Jason Russell, whose very public meltdown shortly after the release of *Kony 2012* was captured on social media.

This study explores social media as a double-edged sword in IC's crisis response. Although the organization found that social media helped raise awareness of humanitarian crises, it also created an organizational crisis through negative comments and discussions online that prompted questions about their leadership, motivations, and financial structure. Using the ideas of social media activism and organizational learning to guide analysis, this paper explores IC's social-mediated response to the humanitarian crisis in Central and East Africa, the organizational crisis these responses created, and the organization's response to these different types of crises via social media.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Defining and communicating organizational crises*

No organization is immune to crises, which can arise from either inside or outside an organization (Coombs, 1999). Historically, crisis communication research has often focused on organizations, including their reputation, response, and the ability to continue on after the crisis (Heath & O'Hair, 2010). From this perspective, a crisis is a specific incident with a short time frame, and is spontaneous and reactive (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011).

Organizational crises are often a unique moment for an organization that entail three common characteristics: surprise (the impact is beyond initial comprehension), threat (different from the typical problems faced), and short response time (necessary to retain control) (Hermann, 1963). Because individuals or organizations may have different understandings of those three characteristics, a crisis is perceptual; if someone believes the event to be a crisis, then it is one (Coombs, 2012). Due to these differences in perception and the speed at which they can occur, crises often produce high levels of uncertainty (Ulmer et al., 2011). Most crises are unpredictable but not entirely unexpected events, and organizations should work to prepare themselves for the potential types of crises they may face (Coombs, 2012), such as natural disasters, workplace violence, product recalls, or other catastrophic events.

Organizations build their reputations with publics through both direct and indirect experiences (Brown & Roed, 2001). One challenge that nonprofit organizations in particular face is that "Americans hold an overly romanticized ideal image" of them (Carson, 2002; p.252), which can harm their ability to receive support from the public. There is often a misperception surrounding nonprofit organizations in terms of how funds are spent (Sisco, 2012). For example, after the September 11 attacks, the American Red Cross received public outcry because some donations were used for overhead costs and future preparedness endeavors rather than going directly to support victim's families (Sisco, 2012). As Sisco (2012) explained, "[i]n a crisis, if [nonprofit organizations] disappoint the public, resulting in a loss of public confidence, they risk not just their reputations, but possibly their very existence" (p.4). Because of the faith put in nonprofit organizations to operate ethically and honestly, building and maintaining trust with publics is especially important for their reputations (Sisco, 2012).

2.2. *Defining and communicating humanitarian crises*

Humanitarian crises are either singular events or a series of events that pose a health or safety threat to a community or group of people (Humanitarian Coalition, n.d.). Within public relations research, humanitarian crisis efforts are most commonly discussed in relationship to natural disasters (e.g., Chen, 2009; Jeong, 2010), manmade disasters (e.g., Littlefield, Reiersen, Cowden, Stowman, & Feather, 2009), or complex geopolitical events (e.g., Hwang & Cameron, 2008; Storie, Madden, & Liu, 2014).

Both traditional and social media play a role in publicizing human suffering and facilitating "global compassion" by exposing pictures and stories of distant victims of civil wars, genocides, and other types of violence against civilian populations (Höjjer, 2003; p.19). While humanitarian organizations use media to garner support for their causes and raise awareness of issues, there is a tension between increased visibility and the public's skepticism toward a mediated morality—also called "compassion fatigue" (Vestergaard, 2008; p.471). In many cases, the crises that humanitarian organizations communicate about are geographically far removed from the target audiences of their messages. Media increasingly play a role in defining relationships with a global "other" (Kogen, 2009; p.63). A common narrative in humanitarian crisis discourse targeted toward Western audiences is that of the "heroic savior," with the presumption that the international community is largely absent from the humanitarian violence until that community arrives to save the day (Benedicto, 2005; p.105). Although a gross oversimplification and glossing over of such crises, this narrative serves as a powerful device for many activist campaigns that mobilize international audiences and decision-makers (Benedicto, 2005).

New technologies are revolutionizing the shape and substance of humanitarian activist campaigns as a form of crisis response, although many traditional elements of activist campaigns are still utilized, and sometimes enhanced, through new technologies. For example, Amnesty International (AI) has adopted new technologies in developing human rights campaigns. Many AI supporters continue to handwrite and mail appeals as part of campaigns, although the organization has adopted e-mail appeals, text messaging, and social media as crucial parts of its advocacy campaigns (Lebert, 2003). In a case study of ONE, a campaign against extreme poverty and AIDS, Tatarchevskiy (2011) argued that while organizations use Web 2.0 in campaigns to make activism convenient and standardized, the audience participates in visual labor that creates

and represents an online community that legitimizes the organization and campaign. Social media are increasingly used as a tool for aid agencies involved in humanitarian relief efforts (Cooley & Jones, 2013).

2.3. Social media activism and crisis communication

As defined by the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* (2011), social media are “Web-enabled applications that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites” (p.1). Although social media is often heralded as a silver bullet for raising awareness about different issues, Cooley and Jones (2013) examined the difficulty that relief organizations were having in raising adequate funding for the famine in Somalia through those platforms. Using Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) model to examine the limitations of social media as a social change agent to manage the crisis in Somalia, Cooley and Jones (2013) found that the sheer scope and recurrence of the crisis were factors that impeded public support from reaching the level of other crises, including the Asian tsunami. Additionally, Cooley and Jones (2013) argue that the image of starving African people has become common to Western audiences, causing clear compassion fatigue, and potentially impacting constraint recognition and limiting the ability of media to raise funds.

Additionally, social media are changing the expectations of crisis management for organizations (Bates & Callison, 2008; *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Research confirms the increased and sustained attention publics may give social media during disasters (Fraustino, Liu, & Yin, 2012). Formentin, Bortree, and Fraustino (2012) examined communication during the first month of a large, public university’s organizational crisis, finding that individuals rapidly responded to posts made by official spokespersons on the university’s Facebook page.

Although social media are increasingly playing a role in crisis response strategies, social media can also quickly spread misinformation during a crisis, making it difficult for organizations to control their narratives (Stephens & Malone, 2009). When something goes viral within social media, that item is seen as both highly and continuously spread amongst individuals, usually within a very narrow window of time (Mckee, 2010). The concept of spreadability becomes important here, leading to catch phrases such as “if it doesn’t spread, it’s dead” (Jenkins, 2009; p.1). Viral can also indicate the total number of individuals who have seen the content, but there is no real consensus on how many individuals must view something for it to be considered “viral” (Andrews & Murakami, 2011), although it is known that content that evokes strong positive or negative emotion is more likely to go viral (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Beyond sharing information, individuals use social media to engage with content or organizations more directly. Organizations can attempt to control what is shared by monitoring social media channels, but publics often add to and adapt the messages presented to express their own thoughts and ideas (Kent, 2010). This ease of sharing and use can, however, cause information overload among publics (Bucher, 2002). Yang, Kang, and Johnson (2010) note that online crisis information is essentially narrative, which enhances public engagement and makes the public more willing to both accept the discussion of the crisis put forth by the organization and help spread the good word of the organization. In some instances, organizations can be forced to respond to non-crises that become crises because of social media. For example, Domino’s Pizza was forced to launch a crisis response to a hoax perpetuated through social media that threatened organizational legitimacy (Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012).

Specifically within activism, social media can foster both individual and collective participation, creating a perceived norm of perpetual participation in a cause: “Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube create new contexts for activism that do not exist in old media” (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012; p.483). A discussion of how traditional versus social media was used during the Occupy Wall Street movement found that the framing available through the multiple alternative public screens on social media lead to alternative frames being used to spread messages, which is helpful for activists looking to expand understanding in a public (DeLuca et al., 2012).

There are concerns to be aware of when using social media to spread messages, however. Anger and other negative emotions caused by a crisis can increase negative word of mouth, which will more easily spread online (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Publics can also use this additional negative word of mouth to engage in unplanned ideas of attribution, increasing negative understandings of an organization over time (Schwarz, 2012). Additionally, an information vacuum in social media is likely to be filled with inaccurate content (National Research Council, 2011), and while changing that information or perception is possible, it also requires more time and monitoring than an organization may have available during a crisis (Keelan, Pavri, Balakrishnan, & Wilson, 2010; Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, & Anthony, 2010).

2.4. Organizational learning

Regardless of the type of crisis communicated about by an organization, crisis communication requires not a “rehearsal of routines but rather reflection on actions and decisions taken” by an organization (Palttala & Vos, 2011; p.314). After a crisis has occurred, people are often interested in forgetting what happened, which can make moving forward or learning from the crisis difficult, particularly when there are political or organizational factors in play (Birkland, 2009; Palttala & Vos, 2011). Learning after a crisis is helpful in that it can help an organization with evaluation, analysis, and decision making, allowing for the improvement of crisis management in the future (Palttala & Vos, 2011). Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) note that learning “is a perspective that encourages organizations to develop a shared vision that fosters a willingness to adapt

or evolve in response to their environment” (p.79). These ideas, taken together, provide support for adding organizational learning as an ongoing aspect of the crisis management process (Veil, 2011).

The learning that occurs for one organization in a crisis can also be used by other, similar organizations to avoid crisis situations or to understand how to act or not act in similar situations in the future (Beebe, 2004). Crises can be a “lightning bolt” that will shock “organizational systems out of complacency” (Veil & Sellnow, 2008; p.78). It is possible that the bigger the shock, and therefore the bigger the following change, the more an organization has learned from the event (Huber, 1991). Learning in this way can indicate the identification, sharing, and analysis of errors, all of which are then used to change an organization’s operating procedures (Popper & Lipshitz, 2000). Using research-based or commonly known best practices can provide an organization with one clear way to identify errors or potential mistakes (Veil & Sellnow, 2008).

Organizational learning can be understood from complexity theory and Piaget’s (1950) two basic types of learning: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation involves incorporating new material into old or already present schemas and worldviews; accommodation requires one to change their worldview or schemas based on new experiences, both with others and with the environment. This willingness to change and learn is a major factor in helping organizations succeed in a crisis situation (DeGeus, 1997). These two factors can further be expanded by thinking about learning loops, which help either maintain a system’s stasis or change (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). Single-loop learning involves “finding and correcting factors that prevent the organization from meeting its objectives” (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; p.74). Double-loop learning allows for the learner or organization to question the assumptions behind the decisions made or processes followed. Triple-loop learning is more complicated yet, “analogous to expert knowledge” with a focus on “structural patterns, both at the cognitive level of mental maps and at the organizational level, as it attempts to discern configurations and organizational designs” (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; p.74). A complex system would operate within triple-loop learning, looking to identify and learn from patterns and using them to develop expertise (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008).

When it comes to building organizational learning, no matter the loop, experience is seen as the most effective platform, as it allows for clear and easy adaptation (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). This experience also allows for either assimilation or accommodation, and for the organization to take its new information and use it to create new patterns and more effective future crisis communication. Additionally, Megginson (1996) would recommend that organizations look for a balance between more informal action learning and deliberate reflexivity. That balance, along with a willingness to see patterns and move out from previous expectations or experiences, can allow an organization to learn and grow effectively, even and especially during times of crisis.

3. Research questions

This study seeks to build upon and expand understandings of crisis communication, particularly the role that social media play in different types of crisis response. In particular, it seeks to further explore social media activism and organizational learning through the lens of Kony 2012 and IC. To that end, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ1:** What role, if any, did social media play in IC’s humanitarian crisis response?
- RQ2:** What role, if any, did social media play in IC’s organizational crisis response?
- RQ3:** How, if at all, did social media facilitate IC’s organizational learning?

4. Method

We sought answers to the research questions through a qualitative content analysis of a sample of publicly available social media information, including 16 blog posts, 200 tweets, and 239 Facebook comments. In addition, all four videos put forth by IC related to Kony 2012 (one each in March, April, and October 2012, and one in March 2013) were analyzed, as well as the video of Jason Russell’s exclusive interview with Oprah about his public meltdown (also in October 2012). A qualitative content analysis methodology is appropriate for this study because this method of analysis helps uncover in-depth understandings and meaning-making surrounding the responses to the Kony 2012 video, as well as IC’s response (Berg, 2009; Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

4.1. Sampling

In order to capture the pivotal events between the initial release of the Kony 2012 video and the one-year anniversary of the video, a series of unique sampling processes was employed. The initial response to the video was analyzed in a previous study (Briones et al., 2013) and informed the results of the current study. A second sampling frame was used, which included data between October 7, 2012 (the air date of Jason Russell’s exclusive interview with Oprah) and one week later, October 14, 2012. The final sampling frame includes March 5, 2013, the one-year anniversary of the Kony 2012 video and the release date of Invisible Children’s “What Happened to Kony 2012” video, and the social media coverage throughout that day and the following week, concluding on March 12, 2013.

4.1.1. Blog posts

A total of 16 blog posts dated from October 7, 2012 to April 4, 2012, and March 5, 2013 to March 12, 2013 were analyzed. Blog posts were gathered through a systematic search of the top 10 blogs for world politics and the top 10 blogs by U.S. politics according to [Technorati \(2013\)](#), which was the method employed in the previous study ([Briones et al., 2013](#)).

4.1.2. Twitter

The social media search engine [Topsy.com](#) was used to gather tweets related to the Kony 2012 video. Topsy is to date the largest searchable index of Twitter data, and filters results based on either relevance or newest/oldest. Since there were specific dates necessary to search, the default filter became “relevance,” a concept determined by Topsy and never defined. Search terms used included “Kony,” “KONY,” “Kony2012,” and “KONY2012.” Search results were filtered to only include English language tweets. The top 100 tweets were sampled from October 7, 2012 until October 14, 2012, and another 100 tweets were sampled from March 5, 2013, until March 12, 2013.

4.1.3. Facebook comments

Facebook comments on the IC Facebook page were also collected. These 239 comments were in direct response to the posting of the “What happened to Kony 2012” video on IC’s Facebook timeline on March 5, 2013.

4.1.4. Videos

The videos used for the analysis were retrieved from the Invisible Children website and were viewed by the research team. The four Kony 2012-related videos were analyzed, as well as Jason Russell’s exclusive interview with Oprah. These videos ranged in length from approximately eight minutes to 31 min.

4.2. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted via a grounded theory approach developed by [Glaser and Strauss \(1967\)](#), where the constant-comparative method was used to determine themes that emerged from the data. Analysis began with line-by-line open coding to identify initial emergent themes, followed by axial coding to merge themes into various categories ([Corbin & Strauss, 2008](#)). The researchers then met frequently as a team to ensure consistency across codes/categories, to revise codes/categories accordingly, and to collectively determine selective codes that would serve as the final results of the study. Emergent concepts and themes were discussed, as well as what conclusions could be drawn from data analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Social media and humanitarian crisis response

Several themes emerged regarding the role of social media in IC’s response to the humanitarian crisis, including the *connecting a global audience*; *tapping into key influencers*; *instigating and amplifying*; and a *social experiment*.

5.1.1. Connecting a global audience

The Kony 2012 documentary opens with the assertion that “[r]ight now there are more people on Facebook than there were on the planet 200 years ago. Humanity’s greatest desire is to belong and connect. And now we see each other. We hear each other. . . We share what we love and it reminds us what we have in common” ([Invisible Children \(Producer\), 2012a](#)). This narration occurs over footage of people using new technology to connect with each other, including a series of popular YouTube videos, from a toddler learning to ride a bike to a 29-year-old woman hearing sound for the first time. The beginning of the Kony 2012 Part I documentary does not even address the humanitarian crisis. It instead sets the stage for the importance of global connection, which is now being facilitated through social media.

Even after the initial Kony 2012 video backlash that led to the organizational crisis, the organization continued to focus its messaging on the role that social media plays in this connection. In the MOVE documentary, during which IC staff reflect on the Kony 2012 experience, filmmaker Jason Russell explains the reason for IC’s social-mediated story approach: “If you just report the facts and statistics of a war, people can’t relate. So they turn it off. They don’t watch it” ([Invisible Children \(Producer\), 2012d](#)). Through documentaries shared via social media, IC is able to connect faces and names to the crisis. In Ben Keeseey’s CEO response video, he explains that “we do all of that because we believe in the face-to-face connection. We believe that that’s when human beings look at each other in the eye, and say ‘let’s impact this together,’ that has a powerful effect” ([Invisible Children \(Producer\), 2012c](#)).

5.1.2. Tapping into key influencers

Social media are discussed as an important mechanism through which to respond to a humanitarian crisis because of their ability to tap into key influencers. In the Kony 2012 Part I documentary, IC lays out its strategy for raising awareness of the humanitarian crisis in Eastern and Central Africa and making Joseph Kony famous. In particular, the documentary explains that “[w]e are targeting 20 culture-makers and 12 policymakers to use their power for good. Let’s start with the 20 culture-makers. Celebrities, athletes, and billionaires have a loud voice, and what they talk about spreads instantly” ([Invisible](#)

Children (Producer), 2012a). IC calls out the influence of Oprah specifically in a blog post, saying, “there were many factors in KONY 2012 going viral, including the Oprah effect. The film had 66,000 views on March 5th. When Oprah tweeted about the film to her 10 million followers the next day, the view count skyrocketed to 9 million” (Porter, 2013; p.1).

Additionally, youth are more broadly empowered as key influencers through social media. The documentary explains that “[w]e have reached a crucial time in history where what we do or don’t do right now will affect every generation to come” (Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d). By visually showing interaction and engagement among youth of the world, largely facilitated through social media, Kony 2012 posits that “[n]ow we can taste freedom and older generations are concerned” (Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d). Influence is not solely tied to celebrity. It is tied instead to the ability to connect, which youth are positioned as uniquely qualified to do in this era of social media.

5.1.3. Instigator and amplifier

The Kony 2012 Part II video further details the organizational reasoning for using social media to tell the world about this humanitarian crisis. IC’s social media manager Noelle West says that “[b]ecause the world wasn’t treating it like the emergency it was, we decided to change our tactics and go bigger” (Invisible Children (Producer), 2012b). She continues that “2012 was just the year we were all chips in committed to making sure the world knew about this man and this situation” (Invisible Children (Producer), 2012b). IC chose to use social media to raise awareness, and Kony 2012 was able to make that substantial impact.

5.1.4. Social experiment

In reflecting upon the “Kony 2012” documentary as a response to the humanitarian crisis in its Part II video, IC refers to its approach as a social experiment. Additionally, in IC’s “What happened to Kony 2012?” one-year anniversary documentary, the narrator explains that Kony 2012 “was an experiment to see if the world would unite and care about crimes committed by Joseph Kony” (Invisible Children (Producer), 2013).

However, within this concept of experimenting with ways to raise awareness, there was concern that focusing solely on Joseph Kony as a tactic was problematic because it neglected other important issues. In the one-year anniversary documentary of Kony 2012, the narrator says that “the sad thing is that Kony is not the only bad guy in the world. There is a hundred others. And because we didn’t create a huge video, well nothing is going on and no one knows about it” (Invisible Children, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Another Twitter user highlights the transient nature of social media: “OK, OK, y’all don’t wanna help me look for Kony OR go to Trayvon’s trial but we DEFINITELY still tryin’ to help rebuild Haiti though, right?” (@dmanthetruth, 2013) Furthermore, Twitter user @petrickkk (2013) tweeted that “Y’all forget about Trayvon Martin, kony, Troy Davis & Tookie yet or y’all still tryna get ‘justice.’”

5.2. Social media’s role in the organizational crisis and crisis response

In terms of how social media played a role in Invisible Children’s organizational crisis response, several themes emerged from the data. These themes include a “tsunami” response; conversation changer; personalization of response; battling and avoiding criticism; and lack of impact of the campaign.

5.2.1. “Tsunami” response

The MOVE video described the influx of attention on Kony 2012 as a “tsunami. . .we didn’t see coming, we just turned around and we were all underwater” (Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d). Posts from other social media channels showed that IC was inundated with media coverage and attention from the masses that simply caught the organization off guard. As MOVE stated, “Our website wasn’t built to maintain 35,000 concurrent viewers at one time” (Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d). The IC team was overwhelmed to the point that they were unsure of how to proceed. They stated:

The only thing we could communicate through was Tumblr, so you’re not going to see information about every single thing that we do from a Tumblr. That was, I think, was the beginning of the conversation turn from this is the greatest thing on the planet to ‘what the hell is this?’ (Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d).

In his interview with Oprah Winfrey (2012), Jason Russell also discussed the overwhelming response to Kony 2012. As he told her, “I’m very defensive and sensitive when it came to our work. And I could do it on a one on one basis, but then it turned into ten million people.”

Although unprepared for the level of response it received, IC was able to use social media to demonstrate how successful it was in its efforts to stop Kony and the LRA. In the MOVE video, it names some of its achievements, such as: “All of this international tension really culminated when the world woke up to the news that Caesar Achellam was captured by the Ugandan military,” and “Jason was invited to be the first ever person to testify about his personal experience with the LRA in front of the United States Senate” (Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d).

5.2.2. Conversation changer

IC’s message was spread virally through social media channels, showing the power of these tools and the ability to increase awareness about issues in Africa. As the MOVE video stated, “It worked. It got people talking about an issue” (Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d). The Huffington Post saw IC’s follow-up efforts as “an attempt to highlight its undeniable success

in spreading a message” (2012), and “Foreign Policy Passport” claimed that IC can “legitimately claim to have shifted the debate on this issue” (2013).

Because the sentiment surrounding Kony 2012 changed so rapidly from overwhelming support to intense criticism of the campaign, social media proved to be a conversation changer that worked to shift the tone. As the MOVE video claimed, “The conversation changed from Joseph Kony and the children who were victims of the war to who is this nonprofit, who is this filmmaker” (*Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d*). Social media helped shift the focus of the public from the issues occurring in Africa to IC’s seemingly questionable business practices, resulting in severe scrutiny that was even further exacerbated with Russell’s public meltdown. As the MOVE video explained, “It [Jason’s breakdown] gave people such an easy excuse to not have to deal with the reality of the LRA” (*Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d*).

5.2.3. Personalization of response

The nature of social media allowed IC to personalize its responses to critics on various channels, allowing it to give very individualized answers to comments it was receiving on its pages. This was especially evident on Facebook, where it wrote responses such as the following: “Hi Ashanti Nacole, not sure which part is the ‘fake tail stuff’ but we’d love you to check out some of the very real results since KONY 2012 went online. Peace is a journey. Justice is a promise. <http://spr.ly/KONY2012one-year-anniv/>” (*Invisible Children, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c*), and Jonny, We have been working to bring a permanent end to LRA violence since 2003. While KONY 2012 gained international attention it was just a one part of the work we do. You can find more info on our programs here: <http://invisiblechildren.com/program/defection-fliers/> and in regards to your misguided comment about KONY 2012 being a ‘money scam’ you can view our financial here: <http://invisiblechildren.com/financial/> (*Invisible Children, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c*).

This personalization was also a double-edged sword for the organization as Jason Russell became targeted on social media channels, resulting in a very public meltdown. Rather than a faceless organization, Russell’s prominence in the Kony 2012 video left him vulnerable to personal attacks on social media. As the *Huffington Post Impact (2012)* claimed:

While Russell may not remember all of the details of his breakdown, much of America certainly does, and videos of the incident quickly spread across on the Internet. . . Jason Russell would probably have been content to be known simply as the founder of Invisible Children and the creator of the “Kony 2012” film. . . but after a very public meltdown in which he wandered naked in the streets of San Diego. . . he’s become known for something else entirely.

The various blog posts that covered this event showed how one person can become victimized through social media, shifting the attention from the cause at hand to the leader of the organization. As Jezebel (*Baker, 2012*) described: “Russell’s not exactly sure what went wrong, but he does know that he was a victim of the media—and Invisible Children’s new campaign focuses more on Russell’s hardships than on those of Africa’s ‘invisible children.’”

Analyzing social media channels further shows that Russell took the criticism of IC very personally. As the MOVE video mentioned, “The questions we were getting not only were they questions about our organization but it was also extremely personal, especially for Jason. . . They were not criticizing Invisible Children by then. I was seeing them criticizing Jason” (*Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d*).

Russell himself described the inner turmoil he was facing in his exclusive interview with Oprah Winfrey (*2012*):

I should have been listening to my loved ones. I should have surrendered Kony 2012 and Invisible Children to the people at large and to my colleagues. I should have slowed down, let go. And instead I chose to keep pushing and keep pushing.

5.2.4. Battling/avoiding criticism

Social media was also used as a vehicle for IC to battle criticism, as the majority of negative comments were found on the online space. IC was clearly aware of the negative effects of social media and the viral nature of the proposed message, as the MOVE video claimed, “There’s never been a war online like this ever. What you do to anyone who starts to get big? You go after them and you try to expose them” (*Invisible Children (Producer), 2012d*).

IC attempted to make peace with its critics through its videos and claims of transparency and honesty about its business practices. Ben Keesey made this especially clear in the CEO Thank You video (*Invisible Children (Producer), 2012c*):

For many people, they just learned about IC a couple days ago, through the Kony 2012 movie. And if that’s the case, if all you see is 29 minute movie, and then you try to go to our website, and it doesn’t exist because the traffic crashed it, so you’re not seeing any information about our programs, you’re not understanding that this has been going on for a long time. I think, I understand why a lot of people are wondering, is this just some slick, kind of fly-by-night sort of slacktivist thing? When actually, it’s not at all. It’s actually a really, it’s connected to a really deep, thoughtful, very intentional and strategic campaign. So because of that, we want to give you as much content as possible. Fully transparent, from top to bottom.

5.2.5. Lack of impact of the campaign

Finally, the social media conversation that occurred around Kony 2012 calls into question the actual impact of the campaign, as many users discussed the lack of action the campaign has spurred. This was especially evident on channels that are more personal in nature, namely Facebook and Twitter. Twitter comments regarding the actual impact of Kony 2012

included the following: “I just want ppl to remember that at one point during this year they supported KONY or whatever.” (@Noblowalotofos, 2013), “RT @TheRealKCross: Did They Ever Catch Kony? Or Did He Ever Exist?” (@oliviacjenks, 2013), and “@ASH_ZachyG and its just gonna be another trend like adalia rose or kony. A real problem that people will forget about in a week” (@velezchristian, 2013). One tweet by @corbinmacklin (2013) described a major issue surrounding the campaign: “Therein lies the rub: Will you try to ‘Stop Kony’ with RTs or will you get on the ground and DO something?” These issues existed for the organization even one year later.

5.3. Social media and organizational learning

When it comes to organizational learning, IC had a major “lightning bolt” (Veil & Sellnow, 2008; p.78) of a shock to its ways of acting prior to releasing the Kony 2012 video, as seen in themes of *altering the approach* and *increasing transparency*.

5.3.1. Altering the approach

IC did alter some of its approaches after the initial video; *Huffington Post Impact* (2012) notes that the MOVE video “demonstrates what the organization learned from its critics. . . [and] responds quickly to changing circumstances.” Foreign Policy Passport concurs, noting that “there’s some evidence that the group has listened to criticisms of the original” video. One of the main changes the organization made was decreasing the prominence of Jason Russell in subsequent films. Although Kony 2012 included a very heavy focus on Jason Russell and his son, the subsequent videos minimized the focus on Russell.

5.3.2. Increasing transparency

This learning is also evident in the video that IC’s Chief Executive Officer Ben Keesey created to discuss the organization’s financial policies, which were coming under fire. He notes that the organization wanted to be “as transparent as possible, and answer some of those questions” (*Invisible Children (Producer), 2012c*). There is also a discussion within this video of how long it can take to mobilize people behind a cause, and how the search for Kony has been ongoing for 26 years.

However, exactly what IC learned from the initial Kony 2012 video is never made explicitly clear. Ben Keesey talks about how he and Jason Russell do not have the “monopoly on truth,” and how they’ve “learned a ton,” but there is no discussion of what, exactly, they learned, or how they put that learning into practice beyond being more willing to answer questions (*Invisible Children (Producer), 2012c*).

Within any discussion put forth about what the organization has or has not done to help the cause move forward, there is also a discussion of how the focus for both the organization and its supporters should continue to be “to stop the violence of the LRA permanently, and help restore the war-affected communities” (*Invisible Children (Producer), 2012c*). Jezebel (Baker, 2012) points out that this is, perhaps, a minor impact: “Sure, more people are aware that Joseph Kony exists. . . But soundbites about ‘awareness’. . . don’t actually equal action—or, at least, they haven’t yet.”

6. Discussion

How humanitarian and organizational crises are communicated about matters. The fact that Kony 2012 became, at the time, the most viral video in history in only a few days demonstrates the power of social media, and how these channels can help increase awareness about a humanitarian campaign. IC’s efforts with social media helped publicize issues that are happening abroad, in order to evoke compassion and support from viewers in other countries such as the United States, mobilize action, and move toward policy change (Höijer, 2003; Kogen, 2009).

Although social media can certainly work to spread the message of a campaign like Kony 2012, these channels have shown that they can also create an organizational crisis, by way of spreading misinformation and rumors about matters such as internal business practices (Stephens & Malone, 2009). In the case of IC, the responses surrounding Kony 2012 spread so rapidly that the organization was unable to retain control of their original, intended message. Because so many of the responses were increasingly negative, the organizational legitimacy of IC was threatened, and the organization was forced to take action and launch its own crisis management practices (Veil et al., 2012). When an organization focused on raising awareness about a humanitarian crisis faces an organizational crisis, more than the organization’s bottom line is at stake: there are very real implications for potential policy interventions and public support for specific issues.

Unlike an organizational crisis, which the literature defines as focused on a specific incident and bounded by a short time frame (Ulmer et al., 2011), a humanitarian crisis, such as the one occurring in Central and Eastern Africa, may last for decades. The temporal dichotomy between a humanitarian crisis and an organizational crisis is interesting, particularly as the two intersect. In many ways, the organizational crisis helped to raise awareness about the humanitarian crisis. Because IC’s main interest was to raise awareness about the humanitarian crisis, the negative coverage of the organization achieves the same end goal as positive coverage; however it severely damaged IC’s reputation in the process. Although the specific organization is marred, information about the humanitarian crisis is still disseminated even in the midst of the organizational crisis. While not advocating for manufactured organizational crises as a humanitarian crisis communication strategy, the fact that the organizational mission revolves around a humanitarian crisis may change the perception of the organizational crisis.

As IC worked to learn from the fallout of the Kony 2012 video and the accompanying social media discussion, it ended up showing its audience a classic example of Piaget’s (1950) assimilation learning. It incorporated the new material, the conversation on blogs and Twitter and videos, and it responded to it by talking about what it has “always” done (*Invisible*

Children (Producer), 2012c). IC's emphasized how the organization has "always" been transparent, and argued that if you wanted the information on its finances or its mission or anything else, all you had to do was go to the website and find it. Gilpin and Murphy (2008) would classify this phenomenon as single loop learning, where the organization identifies and changes the things it had done in the past that kept it from meeting its goals. IC tried to be more open by creating additional videos to show people where the information they were seeking existed, and then reminded them of its overarching goal: to catch Joseph Kony, no matter what. IC wanted to help people know and understand the problems with Kony and the LRA, and on that front, as Jezebel noted, they succeeded (Baker, 2012). More people do know who Joseph Kony is, and why he should be stopped. But when it came to IC learning from social media responses and dealing with the criticism from their publics, the organization simply noted that engaging people takes time, and it will tell us everything we need to know.

In this way, IC used social media in ways reminiscent of Popper and Lipshitz's (2000) discussion of organizational learning as an analysis of errors. It saw where people noted errors, and tried to provide the information it thought would help people see how IC's mission was the best way to proceed. IC did not focus on following research-based best practices (Seeger, 2006), and instead worked in ways that made sense in order to get IC out of the organizational crisis. In order to justify this general and non-research based approach, IC referred to the Kony 2012 campaign on its website as a "social experiment," which does nothing to legitimize its actions or increase the faith it might inspire in others. IC was looking to use social media as a way to engage the hearts and emotions of a vast public, but in doing so, it missed expressing the complexities of an international humanitarian issue. Sharing stories through persuasive, and pervasive, social media channels allowed IC to reach unprecedented numbers of people, but it also allowed those unprecedented numbers of people the time and space to comment on the campaign, the organization, and the goal of stopping Joseph Kony. Future, similar public relations campaigns should learn from IC's experience, noting just how little control any organization has over public opinion and action. Nonprofit organizations, especially, should be prepared for their finances to be part of the discussion; for the actions of their board members and leaders to be placed under scrutiny; to learn how quickly another heartwarming story might come along and engage people, so it is best to learn as much as you can from campaigns like Kony 2012 before putting something out for consumption.

IC believed that by going "all chips in" (Invisible Children (Producer), 2012b) on the Kony 2012 video, they would be able to reach people, to reach the young publics, the cultural and policy makers, the people they knew they needed to reach in order to build a connection and spread the reach of their story. IC is an organization of storytellers—using the story of Kony, and of the children harmed from his actions, was always the plan for how to help people connect to the cause, how to draw them in and believe Kony was a man that must be stopped. However, when IC's own goals and resources for the campaign were quickly surpassed, and under the intense power of social media scrutiny, the conversation changed. IC was no longer fully in charge of that conversation, and the focus of the conversation went from Kony's atrocities to IC's financial statements, IC was unprepared. They tried everything they could to draw attention back to the story they wanted to tell, of the very real humanitarian crisis they were trying to solve, but by that point attention had shifted: people were now more interested in the organizational crisis that was forming and shifting right before their eyes. Not taking into account the complexity involved in meeting organizational goals via a social media campaign that unexpectedly went viral proved detrimental to IC, and brought about a significant confluence of humanitarian and organizational crises.

7. Limitations and future research

One of the primary limitations of this study was its reliance on social media to understand the organization's crisis response rather than conducting interviews with IC staff at headquarters. Although many of the videos include interviews with the leaders of IC, the documentaries are still a crafted representation of the organization that limits us to what the organization edited into the video. In-depth interviews may have allowed for a different understanding of the crisis.

Although academic literature does not confirm the impact of that selective editing, future research should seek to understand the role that social media plays in shaping both domestic and foreign policy decisions, including how the United States acts and interacts with the African countries impacted by Joseph Kony's actions. The power to express opinions and show support for issues has been democratized through social media. However, linkages between social media and real-world policymaking need to be further explicated. If socially mediated activism is shown to have real policy implications, the legitimacy of such efforts could be increased.

8. Conclusion

Invisible Children worked to get their message of stopping Joseph Kony out to the public, and had one of the most successful YouTube videos of all time as a result. However, its lack of clarity and organizational learning both before and during the worldwide discussion of their Kony 2012 video lead them to experience an organizational crisis while trying to raise awareness of a humanitarian crises. This article has discussed those crises, and provided suggestions on ways Invisible Children may have been able to prevent them, which may also prevent other nonprofit organizations from facing the same social media fate in the future.

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