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Invisible Children: Advocacy and Accidental Viral Marketing

Jeff Aulgur and Ruth Bernstein

In March 2003, Jason Russell, Laren Poole, and Bobby Bailey, three young amateur documentary filmmakers, traveled to Africa in search of a story. The trip resulted in the founding of Invisible Children, Inc. (IC), a nonprofit organization with a mission to increase public awareness of the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Central Africa, and its leader, Joseph Kony. In 2004, the three filmmakers released the documentary film *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*. The trio screened viewings of the movie around the world to raise awareness of the LRA's practices in the hopes that Joseph Kony would be brought to justice (NCDD, 2008; Schwartz, 2014).

In 2006, Invisible Children facilitated Global Night Commute, a reported 125 city event which saw 80,000 youth sleeping in city centers to raise awareness of, and solidarity with, children in Uganda who walked at night to avoid capture by the LRA (Invisible Children, n.d.; Schwartz, 2014). Annual revenues quickly increased for Invisible Children. Between 2008 and 2011, the group held steady with yearly income between eight and \$13 million (Schwartz, 2014).

In March 2012, Invisible Children released a 30-minute film that described the LRA's exploits and promoted the capture of Joseph Kony. The organization initially posted the film to Vimeo where it garnered limited interest. Once posted to YouTube on Monday, March 5, the film went viral (Wilson, 2012) and three days later, the viewership later exceeded 40 million views. Over 100 million people viewed the film in six days as it became the fastest-growing viral video at that time. The video had an immense reaction among high school and university students in the United States. A Pew poll conducted shortly after the release of the film indicated that 58% of young adults in the U.S. were aware of the video (Schwartz, 2014).

The overwhelming response to *Kony 2012* came with a personal cost to co-founder Jason Russell. On March 15, 2012, Russell was arrested and detained for psychiatric evaluation after appearing naked during a public meltdown on a San Diego street (Harris, 2012). *TMZ* broadcasted a video of Russell's episode, which also went viral.

The *Kony 2012* video received immediate scrutiny, including accusations of exaggeration, incomplete fact checking, inconsistent political statements, inappropriate support for the military, and an overemphasis on costs at the expense of charitable giving (Marketing Week, 3/15/2012). When the film was released, Joseph Kony had not been in Uganda for six years, and the membership of the LRA was not 30,000, but in the hundreds (Curtis & McCarthy, 2012; Keating, 2012). The 30,000-membership figure represented the number of children abducted by the LRA over a 30-year period. *Foreign Affairs* criticized the organization before the film's release for manipulating the facts and emphasizing the LRA's use of innocent children for its gain (Schomerus, Allen, & Vlassenroot, 2011).

Public documents indicated that in 2011, Invisible Children spent 32% of its \$8.6 million in revenues on direct programs, with the remainder supporting staff salaries, travel, and film production (Oyston, 2012; Ritson, 2012). At the time of the video's release, Charity Navigator awarded IC only two of four stars for transparency and accountability, primarily for the lack of an external audit (Wilson, 2012). Interestingly, within Uganda, the non-governmental organizations felt Kony was no longer a relevant concern. The NGOs and the government, instead, were working a basic infrastructure needs such as rebuilding, education, sanitation and public health. (Curtis and McCarthy, 2012).

Before the release of *Kony 2012*, Invisible Children received the majority of its funding from the sales of T-shirts, DVDs, and modest donations from presentations to high schools and

colleges in the United States. The events became problematic for IC after the film's release, as audiences' increasingly challenged the veracity of the film and Invisible Children's use of monies raised (Titeca & Sebastian, 2014). In 2013, the organization's total revenue dropped to \$5.5 million, and by 2015 it struggled to raise \$300,000 to fund targeted advocacy work in Washington, D.C. (Schwartz, 2014).

By 2017, Invisible Children transformed its effort against the LRA from awareness to action. Invisible Children currently supplies civilians with high-frequency radios to collaborate "closely with the U.S. Africa Command the Uganda People's Defense Forces, and the United Nations peacekeepers, all of whom rely on the radio program's data in the hunt for Kony" (Gauvey Herbert, 2017, para. 4).

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the key lessons around governance of this case study?
 - a. What was the responsibility of the Board of directors in this case?
2. What went wrong? Where did the fault lie?
 - a. Was it a failure of imagination, of planning and implementation, of management, of leadership, or accountability?
3. What is the purpose of Invisible Children? Is advocacy its primary mission or is it secondary, done to support mission achievement? What are the social realities or problems that the organization seeks to solve, alleviate, or otherwise address? Were the strategies adopted successful in addressing those issues? If not, what should have been done?
4. What was the impact of advocacy activities on achieving or supporting the mission?
 - a. Does it appear that the organization had an advocacy or public policy strategy?
 - b. Did engaging in advocacy positively or negatively impact the ability of Invisible Children to fundraise?

- c. Could you argue that some of the advocacy activities were more focused on marketing or public outreach?
 - d. Did Invisible Children succeed or fail in terms of using advocacy to achieve their goals?
5. What were the advantages of using social media? Disadvantages?
 6. What lessons can be learned from this case that can be applied to other nonprofit organizations?

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