

# The New York Times

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The Lede

The New York Times News Blog

## Lessons Learned From #Kony2012

By Jennifer Preston

March 15, 2012 11:58 pm

@Invisible #askICanything Can you help explain/clarify the anger we're seeing in this reaction video from Uganda?  
[youtube.com/watch?v=rU\\_1jn...](http://youtube.com/watch?v=rU_1jn...)

— Hayley Wood (@hayleywood13) March 15, 2012

After releasing a video that now counts 100 million online views about Joseph Kony's brutal tactics as leader of the Lord's Resistance Army in central Africa, Invisible Children is responding to tough questions about its organization and its approach – on Twitter and in another video.

Calling for Mr. Kony's arrest for abducting children and forcing them to become soldiers, Invisible Children's video titled, Kony 2012, has captured more online views faster than any other video, beating Susan Boyle's audition on "Britain's Got Talent" to become the Internet's most explosive viral video.

Gilad Lotan, vice president at Social Flow, the "social media optimization" company, analyzed the data and explained the story with graphs and charts about how it rocketed around the world.

With the stunning success, critics have been questioning the eight-year-

old group's finances, its relationships with some evangelical Christian groups and its projects on the ground in Uganda. They have also voiced concerns that the 30-minute film, created primarily for its core audience of U.S. high school and college students, fails to address the complex politics in the region or fully explain that Uganda pushed out Mr. Kony years ago.

In Uganda, screenings of the video were suspended after people expressed first confusion and then anger over the film, reports Malcom Webb for Al Jazeera. He noted that many people saw it as a "foreign, inaccurate account that belittled and commercialized their suffering..."

At the South by Southwest Interactive conference in Austin this week, #Kony2012 came up multiple times in discussions at various panels about advocacy and social media. And there were at least two pop-up sessions at which people debated the merits of the campaign, asking what do 70 million plus views mean, and posted shared notes from one of the sessions on a Google doc.

Despite the criticism, my colleague, David Goodman, reports, leaders of several nonprofit and advocacy organizations say there are valuable lessons to be learned from Invisible Children organization's simple message and its use of social media to engage so many people about a longstanding problem in Central Africa.

In a telephone interview, Ben Keeseey, chief executive officer of Invisible Children, said the questions have been hard for the organization's leaders to hear, but they are determined "to be as transparent as possible."

"Clearly, the response on balance has been overwhelmingly positive," said Mr. Keeseey. "What we are working on now is to speed up the pivot of the campaign from awareness into action. We thought the awareness piece would take until at least April 20. Now, with this huge viewership, we are trying to translate all this excitement into action."

Mr. Keeseey appears in the Kony response video to explain the group's mission. He describes how the group seeks to raise awareness about the Lord's Resistance Army by making films, as well as support schools and scholarships on the ground in Uganda. "Our goal has always been the same," he says, speaking directly into the camera. "It has always been one thing: To stop the violence of the LRA and to help restore the war-affected communities."

As he walks viewers through the organization's finances, he explains that travel expenses, for example, are not for fancy hotel rooms but for the vehicles and other costs to cover bringing the group's films to show and discuss at 3,000 high schools and college campuses around the country.

During the interview, Mr. Keeseey said the organization was taken aback by the video's viral success. No one expected 100 million views within 10 days.

"The goal was 500,000 online views for the year," he said. "We were hoping to get to 200,000 by May 1. Those goals felt aggressive."

What would Invisible Children do differently beyond being better prepared to help its audience translate their emotions and excitement into action?

"We tapped into something that is so much bigger than we thought," said Mr. Keeseey. "We tapped into the consciousness of the youth of the world. I wish we had been more prepared to think of this as a global movement. And that we had the infrastructure in place to pivot to action more quickly, wherever people live in the world."

He said the group would be announcing on its Web site specific steps that individuals can take to help the war-torn communities and schools.

Meanwhile, he is answering the questions posted on Twitter, in his

stream and in blog posts and video.

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