

Example of essay on moral panic and the kony 2012 phenomenon

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



The advent of the Internet age has changed the face of social activism forever. No longer is social activism marked by marches or rallies; today, information is shared in the form of images or video, spread virally from one form of social media to the next. Such was the case with “ Kony 2012” the video created to shed light on the actions of Joseph Kony. “ Kony 2012” became a viral video, spreading across the United States and around the world faster than Invisible Children, the charity that created the film, could ever have imagined.

The “ Kony 2012” film was notable for a number of reasons, but perhaps most notable was its appeal to celebrity culture. The Invisible Children non-profit organization set goals to receive support from twelve celebrity icons that they believed formulated popular culture and social belief (Invisible Children 2012). The expansion of the “ Kony 2012” film was due, in part, to participation in the dissemination of the film by a number of the Invisible Children-targeted celebrities. These celebrities acted in all the ways that the Invisible Children group hoped they would-- they helped spread the message and encouraged others to do the same, pushing the film into viral viewing within a very short time of its release (Invisible Children 2012).

Young states that there are some fundamental conditions under which a moral panic can arise. Young states that the moral panic arises when mass media creates a frenzied uproar over some incident in popular or current culture; Young writes that a moral panic occurs when there is “ [a] plethora of knowledge in the news but merely of an atomized individual, selected in terms of one particular trait, caught at one moment” (Young 2011). Young’s moral panic, then, could not exist in a society that has intimate and varied

knowledge of its constituents. It is a symptom of a large, anonymous, amorphous group of people living together, combined with the readily available information promoted and disseminated by mass media.

A moral panic can be compared to a shark's feeding frenzy. Once a piece of information is available to the masses-- the metaphorical blood in the water-- the media descends upon the information, tearing it asunder and roiling the waters. This frenzy is exactly what can be seen in the case of Joseph Kony and the "Kony 2012" film.

It is first important to note that Joseph Kony has done, and continues to do terrible things in Africa. He came to power in the early 1990s, and is responsible for the deaths, abductions, and disappearances of innumerable people (Atherton 2012). However, it was not until 2012 when most people in the United States were made aware of his existence, and with this knowledge, became enraged by it. The response of the United States to the "Kony 2012" film was irrational and disproportionate, fulfilling one of Young's (2011) key points about a moral panic.

The sudden emergence of the "Kony 2012" film into social media was rife with spontaneous social action. Individuals who had no knowledge of African politics or political struggles suddenly saw themselves pitted against a warlord of epic proportions. However, the actions taken against Kony fall distinctly into the category of moral panic that allows the viewer to moralize on a topic that is sensational and morally upright. Young refers to this phenomenon as the "intimacy of reproduction" (Young 2012). By focusing on the sensational and the extreme, the nuances of a situation and the true causes and effects are ignored by the masses, and actions cannot be taken

to alleviate the true underlying problem.

The mass media, in the weeks and months following the reveal of the “Kony 2012” film, began to sensationalize the warlord. CNN’s Karimi (2013) writes, “African warlord Joseph Kony and his struggling militia are poaching elephant ivory across central Africa to get funds for weapons, ammunition and food, a report says.” CBS writes, “In the end, it was information from people who knew him that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden. It will be the same for African warlord Joseph Kony” (“Hunting African Warlord Joseph Kony” 2013). Likening Joseph Kony to Osama bin Laden serves two purposes: first, it links the warlord with a widely reviled figure in American popular culture. Next, it also serves to turn Kony into the “other”-- in the post-9/11 American society, Osama bin Laden and his followers were effectively “other-ized” by the media. The comparison to bin Laden, then, subtly but inextricably links Kony and bin Laden in the minds of the American people. There are many inconsistencies in the reports given on Joseph Kony in mass media today. Some of these inconsistencies are due to poor information retrieval from Africa, but some of the inconsistencies are due to extreme sensationalism of claims by mass media in an effort to otherize the perpetrator-- in this case, Joseph Kony. Young (2011) uses an example of drug mules and drug trafficking to demonstrate how the American media tends toward the irrational, and the demonization of Kony at the expense of true discourse on the topic of the problems in Africa is another symptom of this systematic irrational rationalization. In addition, the massive response to the “Kony 2012” film is another symptom of a moral panic; Young (2012) states that the disproportionate response to a social or moral ill is also a

hallmark of moral panic (Young 2012). While the threat to the United States and its citizens is low, the amount of outrage over the actions of the African warlord were disproportionately high. This is especially true for the amount of attention the film garnered on social media and from high-profile celebrities.

There is no doubt that Joseph Kony has committed atrocities in the name of religion, but he is hardly the only warlord to do so-- he is not even the only warlord in Africa to do so. However, the "Kony 2012" film effectively created a moral panic which the American media and general public gleefully participated in. The power of the moral panic is in its ability to pit the moral righteousness of the individual against an "other"-- in this case, a morally corrupt, religiously-corrupt warlord who exploits children in Africa. For all the media response to the "Kony 2012" video and the Joseph Kony story in the wake of the release of the video, there seems to be no further attempts that have been made to capture or bring the warlord to justice (George 2013). Indeed, US and African forces have both stopped their searches for Kony, and have temporarily abandoned their attempts to bring Kony to justice in the International Criminal Court (George 2013).

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