

Powerful Propaganda: KONY 2012

By Renee Hobbs

It was the most-watched YouTube viral video of all time. Launched on March 5, 2012, the KONY 2012 campaign encouraged viewers to participate in a youth uprising. Using tweets, rallies and posters, people who watched the video were encouraged to speak out to the U.S. government to increase efforts to help find and capture Joseph Kony, the Ugandan warlord who recruited child soldiers through violent abductions.

Developed by filmmaker and activist Jason Russell and his group, Innocent Children, the YouTube video attracted more than 120 million viewers in just one week and generated \$32 million dollars in donations.

Why was it so successful? The KONY 2012 video used four powerful propaganda techniques: it activated strong emotions, responded to audience needs & values, simplified information & ideas, and attacked opponents by creating an “us-vs-them” mentality. It reached a wide audience because hundreds of thousands of young people felt emotionally connected to this organization and this cause. As they shared the video with peers through Facebook and social media, the KONY 2012 campaign was a very good example of a powerful propaganda campaign for an important global issue. But the public response to propaganda cannot be controlled, and sometimes the consequences of the use of propaganda can be both beneficial and harmful.



Technique 1: Activate Strong Emotions

Propaganda plays on human emotions to direct audiences toward the desired goal. The KONY 2012 video takes viewers on an emotional roller coaster. Viewers feel a sense of curiosity, caring, love, anger, empowerment, humor, inspiration, sadness, hope, and even pride. Research has shown that information and events are more memorable when they are attached to a strong emotion. The filmmaker understood how to psychologically tailor messages to activate people’s emotions in order to create strong emotions that suppress critical thinking.



Technique 2: Respond to Audience Needs & Values

Effective propaganda conveys messages, themes, and language that appeal directly, and many times exclusively, to specific and distinct groups. KONY 2012 was directed to teenagers and young adults. It appealed to them through flattery, acknowledging how they use social media to document every part of their lives and connect to people all around the world. The video activates a sense of idealism by suggesting small, well-coordinated actions can make a big impact on politicians. The video communicates generational solidarity by suggesting that Western teenagers can help African teenagers. The campaign also capitalized on our fascination with celebrities like Justin Bieber and Oprah Winfrey. By creating messages that appeal directly to the needs, hopes, and

fears of teenagers and young people who want a better future for their own children, KONY 2012 became more personal and relevant to the target audience.

Technique 3: Simplify Information & Ideas

Successful propaganda tells simple stories often using storytelling, metaphors, imagery and repetition. In KONY 2012, the filmmaker is the hero of his own story. As he explains the situation in Uganda, it makes it very simple because he's literally explaining it to his 5-year old son. Facts and opinions are used very strategically, as propaganda may use accurate and truthful information, or half-truths, opinions, lies and falsehoods. Using the power of language and imagery, this film takes a complex global issue and, using a simple label, turns it into a brand: KONY 2012.

Technique 4: Attack Opponents

Propaganda can serve as a form of political and social warfare to identify and vilify opponents. In KONY 2012, the villain is Joseph Kony. Attacking opponents also encourages "either-or" or "us-them" thinking. But this video isn't just about attacking Joseph Kony. It puts the viewers on a pedestal, positioning them as heroes, by activating feelings of collective pride. Towards the end of the film, Russell says: "We have reached a crucial time in history, where what we do or don't do, right now, will affect every generation to come. Arresting Joseph Kony will prove that the world we live in has new rules... we are not just studying human history-- we are shaping it."

The frenzy of public attention that KONY 2012 received was phenomenal. But public response to propaganda cannot be controlled. Ultimately, the massive amount of media attention also brought strong criticism of Jason Russell and the activist strategies of his non-profit group, Innocent Children. He was accused of over-simplifying and distorting the facts of the situation in Uganda, positioning white Westerners as the saviors to rescue the Ugandan people from their own political leaders and civic problems. There were questions about how his organization used the money they received. Shows like *South Park* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* offered a cynical, satirical perspective on the activism. The large volume of personal attacks Russell faced from his critics contributed to his mental breakdown, which instead of activating sympathy, led to further public humiliation. Still, non-profit activists all over the globe learned much from the KONY 2012 case. They recognized that the skillful use of film and social media can be powerful even though consequences of the use of propaganda can be unpredictable.



2.2

Can You Identify Propaganda Techniques in KONY 2012?

Instructions: After reading and viewing, give examples of the four different propaganda techniques used in the film.

KONY 2012

View: <http://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/rate/697>

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Respond to Audience Needs and Values

Simplify Information and Ideas

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