



ESSAY

Manufacturing Consent in the Age of YouTube: The Case of Kony 2012

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ABSTRACT. This paper investigates to what extent the ‘Propaganda Model’, which Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky developed in their work ‘Manufacturing Consent’ (1988), applies to United States media discourses on how the US government should respond to the atrocities of the Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony. It establishes that the media in general does not sufficiently address US geopolitical and economic interests in the Central African region, the relative lack of civil rights in Ugandan society as a US ally, abuses by the Ugandan army, human rights implications of US support for Ugandan government policies, and the history of Western relations with Uganda. Instead of scrutinizing those aspects, the media highlights humanitarian concerns. By and large, these findings support the propaganda model.

Introduction

If ever a video on the internet went ‘viral,’ it is the YouTube video *Kony 2012* (Russell 2012). *Kony 2012* is an online presentation that urges public leaders to arrest Ugandan guerilla group leader Joseph Kony, the head of the militia group Lord’s Resistance Army, before 2012. The video raises awareness of Kony’s use of child soldiers and compels the US government to assist the Ugandan government in capturing Kony. The video presentation received seven million views on the internet platform Vimeo within 16 days and over 43 million views on YouTube within only 72 hours.

The 30-minute video provides an overview of Kony’s atrocities in Uganda, followed by instructions to support the campaign for his capture by sharing the video and donating to Invisible Children, which is the non-profit organization that produced the video. Furthermore, the video presents clips of the time that its director, Jason Russell, spent in Uganda, as well as conversations with his son. Through conversations with his son, Russell illustrates the injustices that Ugandan children have to endure. Russell is a new media entrepreneur who felt compelled to raise awareness of atrocities in Uganda after having taken a trip there. The video explicates Russell’s plan to compel support from 12 political decision-makers, as well as 20

notable celebrities, billionaires, and athletes who are actively supporting humanitarian campaigns around the world, to devise legislation and US government strategies for Kony's timely capture (for a summary of how the Kony 2012 video succeeded in attracting public attention and of the official and media reactions, see "Know Your Meme" 2012).

On 7 March 2012, soon after the video was launched, media outlets began commenting on how quickly the video spread. Young people not only in the United States, but also in Australia and Europe began asking for Kony's arrest through online posts, wearing Kony 2012 t-shirts, as well as donating to Invisible Children. Responses by the political establishment followed as a consequence of the proliferation of posts on social media outlets and coverage by the traditional media. For instance, on 8 March 2012, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney called the uproar for Kony's arrest a "unique crisis of conscience."

Responses to the video, however, were not exclusively positive. Many pundits commented that Invisible Children has simplified a complex conflict and left out African voices by focusing only on Western activists and the director's son. Ugandans pointed out that Kony has not been in Uganda for years. Instead, he is active in neighboring countries, for example the Central African Republic. For this reason, Ugandan and Western commentators urged against a military commitment by the United States to fight the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. Further, some investigations suggested that the charity Invisible Children spent too much money on lobbying efforts and too little to help children rehabilitate in Uganda. Images from Uganda, in which Ugandans asserted that they have been depicted as undignified victims and their conflict is being commercialized, circulated on many websites.

This paper investigates whether the "propaganda model," which Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky developed in their seminal work "Manufacturing Consent" (1988), applies to the mainstream media discourse on how the United States should respond to the atrocities of Joseph Kony. Herman and Chomsky developed the propaganda model during the Cold War, albeit during a time when the Cold War drew to a close. This paper draws on the media responses to Kony 2012 to deliberate whether the propaganda model is still valid in the 21st Century.

This question is relevant in relation to discourses on 'humanitarian interventions', which have become prominent in the post-Cold War era. The media as well as NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations) are instrumental in shaping public discussions on when Western nations should intervene in the contexts of human rights violations. This paper questions how well the US media reports on geostrategic interests of Western nations and past and present policies in regard to a country where human rights violations take place—i.e., Uganda.

First, this paper provides a summary of Herman and Chomsky's "Manufacturing Consent." Second, it explains the relationship between Western countries and Uganda as well as Uganda's human rights record. Third, it assesses to what extent US media coverage of US policies toward Uganda conform to the propaganda model and accounts for the realities of the history of US-Ugandan relationship and the Ugandan human rights record.

Manufacturing Consent: The Propaganda Model

In countries where the state regulates the media and persecutes journalists, censorship is a tangible phenomenon. By contrast, it is much more difficult to observe censorship

where the media is privatized and formal censorship is prohibited by law, especially when the media periodically exposes wrongdoing and corruption by governments and businesses and actively fashions itself as a beacon of free speech (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 1).

Notwithstanding the constitutional framework of the US media, which proscribes governmental censorship, there are significant filters in the US media which, as Chomsky and Herman explicate, determine the content of media coverage. Following the argument of Chomsky and Herman, “the mass media of the United States are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, and without significant overt coercion” (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 306).

Not only the state, but also the market is capable of censoring media coverage. In the 1980s, when Chomsky and Herman formulated the propaganda model, more and more media outlets became integrated into the market. The process of market-integration was accelerated by a “loosening of rules limiting media concentration, cross-ownership, and control by non-media companies” (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 8). In other words, more and more big companies like General Electric began owning media outlets such as TV stations and newspapers. Chomsky and Herman assert that newspapers became more and more dependent on advertising as a result of the influence of the corporate world on the media. For example, those newspapers with fewer advertising revenues would become more expensive and thereby lose out on the market. According to the propaganda model, many firms will discriminate against media outlets that are ideologically critical against corporations. Thus, the ‘radical press’ is structurally disadvantaged in a media-system that is market-driven. As a consequence of market-pressures, most journalists are bound to feel compelled to ‘sanitize’ programs (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 16-17).

For all these reasons, “the mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest” (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 18). To avoid libel lawsuits, which have proliferated together with conservative media watchdogs in the 1980s, the media oftentimes treats information provided by governments and businesses as factual. According to Herman and Chomsky, media outlets reproduce information provided by public relations officers because of their fear of libel lawsuits. The Pentagon, for instance, has a public relations office that employs thousands of officials (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 19).

Being objective means drawing from ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ sources – for example, government officials, former government officials, think tanks, academics, and consultants (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 25). If foreign conflicts are covered, then ‘expert knowledge’ is drawn from foreign government officials and think tanks associated with interests of the foreign government, if a friendly nation or ally is concerned. On the other hand, if a conflict between a local populace and a government that qualifies as an ‘official enemy’ is covered, then expert knowledge is drawn from refugees, dissidents and other populations that suffer from state coercion and violence. Of course, in the 1980s any association with the Soviet Union would make a government an ‘official enemy.’ Similarly, anticommunism serves as a control mechanism in domestic debates (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 29). Chomsky and Herman point out that liberals and progressives were oftentimes accused of being pro-communist, and thereby as dangerous for property-owners and detrimental to geo-strategic interests of the US.

To illustrate the propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky compare the media coverage of the assassination of Jerzy Popiełuszko, a priest who was murdered by the Polish police in the Soviet sphere of influence, and the assassinations of priests in Latin American countries that are in the US sphere of interest. *The New York Times*, *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek* provided detailed coverage of the assassination of Popiełuszko (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 38). The assassination of El Salvadorian archbishop Oscar Romero, on the other hand, did not receive such extensive coverage. Drawing from this example, Herman and Chomsky refer to ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ victims (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 37). Victims are ‘worthy’ if they have been persecuted by governments that are ‘official enemies’ of the United States. If they have experienced violations committed by governments that are allied with the United States or the US government, they are deemed ‘unworthy victims’ who, according to Herman and Chomsky, receive scant media coverage.

In the Popiełuszko case, the media covered details on the horrendous murder (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 42). In addition, the media asked who was responsible for the murder of Popiełuszko at the top governmental level (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 43-44). The media appropriately asked what Moscow knew about the Popiełuszko assassination.

But contrary to the germane journalistic rigor that the media exhibited in the Popiełuszko case, there is no systematic investigation of what Washington knew about the assassination of Archbishop Romero. Washington is generally not depicted as equally complicit in its client state’s crimes as Moscow in the crimes of its satellite states, even though the US has helped installing and supported several dictatorial regimes in the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America.

Likewise, coverage of foreign elections tacitly supports US foreign policy interests. While the US media critically evaluated the Sandinista elections in Nicaragua, the US media were all praises for the elections in El Salvador and Guatemala which are both US’ state allies. Contrary to the media coverage, Latin American election observers described the Nicaraguan election as “a model of probity and fairness” (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 140). On the other hand, in El Salvador and Guatemala there was an upsurge of state-sponsored terror, including public showing of mutilated bodies, which intimidated the population on the eve of the election. Hence, intimidation was a cause for large voter turnout. The media never adequately contextualized this large voter turnout: “Nevertheless, in exact accord with the propaganda line of the state, the U.S. mass media found the large turnouts in these countries to be triumphs of democratic choice, the elections legitimizing, and ‘fledging democracies’” (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 141). By and large, the media failed to rigorously examine, compare and contrast the conditions in which elections in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua took place. Otherwise, El Salvador and Guatemala would not have been hailed as “new democracies” while Nicaragua was condemned as an international pariah.

Herman and Chomsky concede that the US media do not prohibit controversy. In this respect, it is different than the media in autocratic states. During the Vietnam War, for instance, many journalists questioned the wisdom of the US presence in Indochina. As a consequence, conservative pundits claimed the US “lost the war” through a media that acted “excessively democratic” and exposed the public to the misguided war effort in Southeast Asia (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 169-170).

Chomsky and Herman do not question that criticism of the Vietnam War was possible, especially as the possibility that the US would win the war eroded more and

more. Rather, they claim that positions that were critical of the war needed to stay within a parameter of what was accepted criticism:

A propaganda model leads to different expectations. On its assumptions, we would expect media coverage and interpretation of the war to take for granted that the United States intervened in the service of generous ideals, with the goal of defending South Vietnam from aggression and terrorism and in the interest of democracy and self-determination. With regard to the second-level debate on the performance of the media, a propaganda model leads us to expect that there would be no condemnation of the media for uncritical acceptance of the doctrine of U.S. benevolence and for adherence to the official line on all central issues, or even awareness of these characteristics of media performance. (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 169-170)

Chomsky and Herman contrast the coverage of the Vietnam War with the coverage of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The Western media was condemnatory in regards to the Soviet invasion. *The Economist*, quite appropriately, wrote “an invader is an invader unless invited in by a government with some claim to legitimacy” (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 176).

Western reporters covered the war from the perspective of the rebels defending their territory from foreign attack. In the coverage of the Vietnam War, on the other hand, the point of view of refugees and peasants were ignored. The media immediately deconstructs Soviet pronouncements (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 176). Abuses by invading Soviet forces were documented by Western reporters. In comparison, there was little outrage when Cambodia, a third country, was massively bombed. The media ignored the perspectives of the victims of aerial bombings. Similarly, the connection between the bombing of Cambodia and the later rise of the Red Khmer was dismissed. The atrocities of the Red Khmer were represented as if they happened in a historical vacuum.

Above all, “the search for ‘opposing viewpoints’ as things went wrong was also extremely narrow, limited to the domain of tactics – that is, limited to the question of ‘whether the policy enunciated worked,’ viewed entirely from the standpoint of U.S. interests, and with official premises taken as given” (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 178).

Western-Ugandan Relations

Idi Amin and the West: Idi Amin and the United Kingdom

In October 1970, a coup d'état by general Idi Amin ended the rule of Prime Minister Milton Obote, who spent time at a Commonwealth summit in Singapore during the time of the coup. Idi Amin would become infamous for his extraordinarily brutal reign, which was marked by ethnic cleansings, extrajudicial killings, and erratic outbursts of violence. It was assessed that he was responsible for the deaths of over 100,000 people between the years 1971-1975 (Hutton and Bloch 2001: para 2).

Hutton and Bloch (2001: para 1) assert that the coup d'état was engineered by outside interests, particularly from the UK, because of Obote's nationalization campaign. Obote wanted to take 60 per cent interests in all foreign and Ugandan-Asian owned businesses. In Uganda, huge British financial, industrial, and agricultural interests were at stake due to the policies of Obote. Inspired by Pan-Africanist discourses and ideologies, Obote wanted to reduce the influence of the

British. His 'Common Man's Charter' and plans to nationalize 30 British companies were particularly unwelcome in London (Hutton and Bloch 2001: paras 4, 5).

The first task of the British was to choose an opportune replacement for Obote. Amin seemed like a superb choice. In British circles, Amin was known as a man who was "a little short on the gray matter" and "intensely loyal to Britain" (Hutton and Bloch 2001: para 8). He was held in fond memories for his services as a non-commissioned officer in the British colonial regiment. Some claim that relationships with Amin were cultivated since 1966. Plans for the overthrow of Obote became more concrete when Obote articulated his nationalization plans in 1969 (Hutton and Bloch 2001: para 9). About 700 British troops arrived in neighboring Kenya a few days before. It took the UK government exactly one week to accept the legitimacy of the government of Amin. The hastiness of the acceptance of Amin surprised the US government.

Idi Amin and the United States

The US and Israeli governments also had presence and interests in Uganda, especially through their respective intelligence agencies, Mossad and the CIA (Hutton and Bloch 2001: para 5). The US provided economic aid and Israel trained Ugandan troops. The US was supportive of the Israeli engagement with Uganda. At that time, there was fear that Israel might become diplomatically isolated. Thus, Israel's push to form diplomatic relations with African countries was welcomed. Allegedly the Israeli military had cultivated support to Amin for some time prior to the coup.

The late 1960s were the heyday of the CIA's efforts to undermine governments whose ideologies were anti-Western and who could, if only hypothetically, become part of the Eastern bloc (Hutton and Bloch 2001: para 24). The US was already closely aligned with the governments of Kenya, Ghana, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Nigeria, and wanted to expand its power into Uganda. The Amin coup was similar to the one against the Pan-Africanist Nkrumah in Ghana in 1966. Nkrumah was also overthrown when he went abroad. There are allegations that the CIA actively supported the Nkrumah coup (Hutton and Bloch 2001: para 25).

Amin was notorious for his violent purges of members of the armed forces. In July 1978, the columnist Jack Anderson discovered that ten members of Amin's trusted circle were trained in the International Police Academy in the Washington suburb of Georgetown. The CIA-run academy was responsible for training police personnel from all over the world. Three of the Ugandans were trained at a graduate school that was also run by the CIA called International Police Services Inc. The US stationed a police instructor in Uganda shortly after the coup. Despite the controversy, weapons were exported into Uganda – for instance, American Bell helicopters were delivered in 1973 (Hutton and Bloch 2001: 46-47).

The Rule of Yoweri Museveni and US Foreign Policy

Yoweri Kaguta Museveni has ruled Uganda since January 1986. Museveni was involved in a war that toppled Amin, and would eventually end his rule in 1979 (for a reading of the history of Museveni's rule, see Musinguzi 2001). Museveni was criticized for his involvement in the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, even though he brought stability to most of Uganda and presided over one of the most effective worldwide campaigns against HIV-AIDS. Initially, Museveni was lauded as

a new breed of an African leader who would lead the continent into a new democratic era. In recent years, however, international and national activists have questioned his democratic credentials. Before the 2006 election, he abolished presidential term limits. Moreover, Museveni began harassing and prosecuting Uganda's domestic opposition. For example, in May 2011 security forces attacked opposition leaders in Kampala, Uganda's capital, with fire hoses that drenched in pink-colored liquid, dying their clothes and skin. When the protest against rising food prices cumulated into a protest against the country's president, security forces began arresting and shooting on protestors. The protests only died down when Museveni put the main opposition leader, Kizza Besigye, under virtual house arrest (Allen 2001: para 1). Museveni also amended the constitution to deny suspected rioters and 'economic saboteurs' bail, once they had been imprisoned.

The American response to Museveni's violent intimidation of protestors has been lukewarm. The government was merely asked to act "civil" (Kaufman 2011). A response to similar acts by Mugabe of Zimbabwe, which is a pariah state in the international system, would have surely elicited a stronger response. The tepid response may reflect Washington's geopolitical and economic interests in the region, which might include access to Uganda's resource. This assertion might be supported by reports according to which Exxon is interested in buying a share in Uganda's oil. In the words of intelligence analyst Corbett (2012: para 1) which are published on an open source intelligence website: "When oil executives announced the discovery of the largest onshore oil reserves in the Lake Albert region of Uganda in July 2009, the landlocked, oft-neglected [sic] East African nation of Uganda went from relative obscurity to a key partner for multi-national oil conglomerates."

Uganda has a strategically important location in the region. It receives aid from the US government (Hearn 1997: 2). The aid is both military and civilian. The civilian aid aims at recovering the healthcare and agriculture in conflict-afflicted Uganda's Northern regions (Anyangwe 2009). Uganda is an important US proxy in locations such as Sudan and Somalia (Corbett 2012: para 8). The LRA Bill (S1067, HR2478) would legitimate the US government to intervene in Uganda to apprehend Joseph Kony. The interest in Kony, which initially was raised by humanitarian groups, has existed before the video about him went viral. A decision by Obama to deploy troops into Uganda coincided with the discovery of oil and revelations that Ugandan politicians have accepted bribes from multinational oil companies (Corbett 2012: para 3).

Not only the United States, but also China is very involved in a continent that has phenomenal economic growth rates (i.e., with some countries growing at a rate of eight per cent per year), potential for future export markets, and untapped resources (Bernard 2012). Some commentators refer to a new 'scramble for Africa'. In February 2012, the newly-appointed Chinese Ambassador to Uganda, Zhao Yali, announced a program to improve ties to Uganda, including the implementation of tariff free exports, investment in transportation projects, power generators, and infrastructure (Corbett 2012: para 4). China is known for its massive construction projects in Africa (Center for Chinese Studies 2006: 7).

Intelligence analyst Corbett suggests that the Kony video has been of convenience to economic and geopolitical planners in the US:

But now, just as China makes its overtures toward Uganda to gain a potential toehold in the region and access to the as-yet-untapped oil wealth, a new video about Joseph Kony has suddenly gone viral online, having been viewed 10s of millions of times in just a week, and changing the focus of the American foreign policy debate toward greater US

military involvement in oil-rich Uganda. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it suggests that the only way to capture Kony is to maintain an American military presence in the region... What the film's well-meaning supporters, many of them youth activists rallying behind a political cause for the first time, don't realize, is that the Kony film, whether wittingly or not, is accomplishing what years of Pentagon propaganda could not muster: public support for an expanded American military role in Africa. (Corbett 2012: paras 5-8)

The emerging geostrategic role of Africa, which is important for an understanding of the context of policies in regard to the continent, is reflected in US plans for a unified military command for Africa called Africom. In 2006, former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld began establishing a committee to advise on its planning and implementation. Its mission statement reads that it intends to "strengthen our security cooperation with Africa and create new opportunities to bolster the capabilities of our partners in Africa" (Corbett 2012: para 9). Proponents point out the importance of US support for regional security missions in the midst of failed states, while opponents assert Africom serves to consolidate a permanent US presence on the continent. African heads of state thus far have lacked enthusiasm for the project and minimized cooperation.

Anglophone Uganda is a reliable Christian partner within a region that is rife with Islamic movements. Partially for this reason, domestic conservative Christian groups in the US, for example 'The Family,' engage themselves in Ugandan politics. Ugandan politicians have close ties to groups in the US that claim that homosexuality can be cured. These groups have been inspired to enact a bill according to which homosexual acts would be punished by execution. A global outcry and pressure – including by the US government, which announced that it would make the rights of homosexuals a condition of aid (Ssegawa 2011) – led to a withdrawal of the bill. Nonetheless, behind closed doors the bill has circulated back into parliamentary circles (Badash 2011). According to recent reports, the Ugandan parliament is scheduled to pass the bill before the end of 2012 (Muhumuza 2012).

Moreover, allegations have been made that the Ugandan army commits human rights abuses in its pursuit of the Lord's Resistance Army, Kony's brutal militia. For example, it is alleged that the Ugandan military pressured children who were released and captured from the Lord's Resistance Army to fight for the national armed forces. Children under the age of 15 served in so-called Local Defense Units, even though the Kony 2012 campaign endorses financial and political investments into the Uganda army and the staff of Invisible Children allegedly has ties to the Uganda government (Keating 2012). In the words of the Child Soldiers Global Report 2008, which explicates the dangers of policies that escalate military action (para 2):

Armed conflict between government forces and the opposition Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda continued between 2004 and early 2006. The government's strategy of pursuing a military solution to the conflict contributed to humanitarian suffering and abuses against the civilian population.

The Propaganda Model and Kony 2012

To assess whether the propaganda model is relevant for the coverage of Kony 2012, I examined ten media outlets that reach a wide audience to investigate whether they reported about six aspects of the contemporary situation in Uganda and its relationship with the West, especially the United States. More specifically, I investigated whether the articles from the ten media outlets reported on the following aspects: (1) US geopolitical interests in the Central African region, for example with

regard to Africom; (2) US economic interests in the region, for example the existence of large supplies of oil as well as economic competition with China; (3) the relative lack of civil rights in Ugandan society; (4) abuses by the Ugandan army; (5) US support for Uganda government policies and the human rights implications of US policies towards Uganda, for example sending military advisers and equipment to the country; and (6) the history of Western relations to the country. I learned about these aspects by researching them outside of the mainstream media, for example on an open-source website by intelligence analyst Corbett.

The ten news outlets I examined were ABC News, CNN, *The New York Times*, NBC (San Diego), *The Washington Post*, Fox News, MSNBC, *The Huffington Post*, CBS This Morning, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Mostly I investigated the first relevant article that came up when I searched for the name of the news outlet as well as Kony 2012 in the search engine website Google. The articles had to address the situation in Uganda to some extent to be considered for analysis. In general, I did not analyze articles that addressed a second video by Invisible Children that responded to criticisms of the first video (Invisible Children 2012). Whether the ten news outlets mentioned the aforementioned aspects is depicted in the graphical representation below.

Omission of important facts about the autocratic nature of the Ugandan regime as a US ally, the history of Western nations in promoting autocratic governance in the country, and geopolitical and economic interests in the region would indicate that the propaganda model is of relevance in the coverage of the context of the Kony 2012 video. After all, these would be omissions that would contradict a narrative of the United States and Western countries as champions of human rights and democracy in the region. On the whole, the Kony 2012 video presents United States military engagement as a solution to the grave problem of the existence of the Lord's Resistance Army and its horrific human rights violations in Northern Uganda.

Newspaper outlets did not report about many of the critical aspects of Ugandan politics and human rights record as well as Uganda's relationship with the West in general and the United States in particular (see Table 1). There was, for instance, not one mention of the geopolitical and economic interests the United States has in the region. Instead of the aspects of Ugandan politics and Uganda's relationship with the West that I was looking for, newspaper outlets mostly reported on other issues. For example, CNN-US asked in its headline whether Kony 2012 created "the wrong buzz." Can a "foreign travesty against humanity" (CNN 2012: para 5) be stopped through a "slick Hollywood production" (CNN 2012: para 8)? ABC summarized the terror that the region endured because of Kony and his militia and announces that Obama will send 100 military advisors. ABC did not mention human rights implications of US-Ugandan military cooperation.

Figure 1

Graphical Representation on whether six critical contextual aspects of Kony 2012 have been mentioned by ten media outlets

News Outlet	US geopolitical interests in the region	US economic interests in the region	Relative lack of civil rights in Ugandan society	Abuses by the Uganda army	US support for Ugandan government policies adverse to human rights, human rights implications of US policies	History of Western relations to Uganda
<i>ABC News</i> (7 March 2012)						
<i>CNN-US</i> (12 March 2012)						
<i>New York Times</i> (21 March 2012)						
<i>NBC San Diego</i> (31 March 2012)			X			
<i>Washington Post</i> (12 April 2012)						
<i>Fox News</i> (9 March 2012)					X	
<i>MSNBC</i> [from <i>King 5 news</i>] (20 April 2012)						
<i>Huffington Post</i> (25 April 2012)			X	X	X	X
<i>CBS This Morning</i> (9 March 2012)						
<i>Los Angeles Times</i> (29 April 2012)				X	X	

Branham and Kelly of the *New York Times* urge that “[t]he voices of affected individuals and communities should be at the center of this swelling chorus of opinions. If they were, perhaps the clamor of criticism could quiet long enough to hear what is being asked of humanitarians, academics, policy makers, and global citizens” (CNN 2012: para 2). Further, Branham and Kelly describe that the deaths

occurring in Uganda “are not only from direct violence, but from water-borne illness, malaria, and a profound destruction of the healthcare infrastructure. For every one immediate tragedy of execution or abduction by the LRA, there are untold stories of people fighting a quieter fight – struggling against the pervasive and insidious effects of instability” (CNN 2012: para 10). They do not, however, give detail on policies and the history that lead to this instability.

NBC San Diego, which was the first NBC station that came up in my Google search, detailed the protests of a local activist group against the Museveni regime, without mentioning the US support for Museveni. The Washington Post describes that the interest for the hunt for Kony has died down since the video went viral. It interviews the director of programs of ‘Invisible Children.’ Further, it mentions the deployment of 100 military advisors, but no abuses by the Ugandan army. Fox News focused on the cruelties of Kony and his militia. Considering the reputation of Fox News as ‘hawkish’, it is surprising that the article also mentions a warning about the prospects of a military intervention by a doctoral student who investigated the local conflict:

“While their intentions are good, it’s quite dangerous because they make no mention of the fact that someone will have to use force to apprehend Kony,” Jack McDonald, a doctoral candidate and research associate at King’s College’s Department of War Studies in London told FoxNews.com. “People will get hurt trying to bring him to justice and it will likely be the local nationals.” [Fox 2012: para15]

MSNBC features a report by Seattle’s King 5 news, which questions whether a movement that exists merely online can produce real change. Furthermore, it gives details of US involvement in strengthening local forces in hunting down Kony, but does not mention human rights implications. The report mentions the bipartisan support that exists in Washington, D.C. for hunting down Kony.

The Huffington Post had, by far, the most critical coverage, although it failed to mention US economic and geopolitical interests in the region. It mentions the bill that persecutes and would execute gays in Uganda. Further, it describes that the International Criminal Court has charged Uganda for human rights abuses and systematic looting in the Congo while Uganda pursued its hunt for Kony (Huffington Post 2012: para 7). The article even quotes a UN Mapping report that suggests that the Uganda military may have been complicit in acts of genocide in the Democratic Republic of Congo (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2010, in Huffington Post 2012: para 9).¹ Further, the article describes that the Ugandan police and military forced 20,000 Northern Ugandans from their land and burned much of it. The brutal crackdown of Museveni against his opponents is mentioned as well (Huffington Post 2012: para 10). The article also mentions that the Ugandan army—the UPDF (Uganda’s People Defense Force)—violently forced hundreds of thousands of Northern Ugandan Acholi tribe members into internment camps beginning in 1996 (Huffington Post 2012: para 11). In addition, it details how locals who have suffered severely from the violence of the Lord’s Resistance Army believe that the *Invisible Children* movie depicts victims of Kony in an undignified manner. Moreover, Ugandans take issue with the ‘militarized’ approach to the conflict and assert the video is guilty of ‘warmongering’ that will not constructively solve the conflict. According to the report, the Ugandan police dispersed a demonstration against the movie. One person reportedly died, dozens were injured (Huffington Post 2012: paras 19-25).

CBS News discusses the expenses of the charity and whether the video will only be “a fad” or have a lasting impact. The *Los Angeles Times* critiques the “White Savior

Industrial Complex.” The paper paraphrases critiques that mention that young American campaigners pay “scant attention to the atrocities committed by the Ugandan military (which they support in the hunt for Kony) or the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, including attacks on civilians” (para 9). Further, the *Los Angeles Times* quotes Deibert (2012), whose analysis also informed the piece in the *Huffington Post*:

Deibert wrote that, after a failed attempt to get Kony not long ago (supported by U.S. advisors), the warlord’s army counterattacked against villages in Congo, resulting in the death of hundreds of people and the kidnapping of 100 children. ‘What is the system of protection that Invisible Children advocates for communities such as these, put in the line of fire by the military operations the group advocates?’ Deibert asked.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has been an attempt to investigate whether the propaganda model is still relevant in the 21st century. Certainly, many of its preconditions have not changed. The mass media, for instance, is still owned by big corporations. In the future it would be interesting to assess to which extent Islamophobia as well as rhetoric as regards the War on Terror replaced anticommunism as a control mechanism, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. For future analysis, it would also be interesting to see whether new media platforms, such as blogs or twitter, adhere to the confines of the propaganda model. This paper has investigated media outlets that are under the influence of traditional gatekeepers such as the foreign policy establishment and corporate interests. I specifically sought out critical information to counterbalance official narratives.

Even though some media outlets mentioned critiques of Ugandan and American policies, my study suggests that the media generally do not pay sufficient attention to the human rights implications of US policies, the relative lack of civil rights in Uganda, abuses by the Ugandan army, US support for the Ugandan government and the history of Western-Ugandan relations. Critique of Kony 2012 as a campaign was pervasive. Critiques of Ugandan-US cooperation, US military assistance, and the Ugandan human rights records, as well as a historical contextualization of current events were much rarer even though some of these aspects were mentioned.

My study indicates that criticisms are constrained and mostly fit into the confines of the propaganda model, especially since US economic and geopolitical interests are not mentioned once in any of the articles. Some critical remarks about the outcomes and ripple effects of potential military actions, for instance, are represented in the sample. What is missing is a critical investigation of why the US is already present in the Uganda conflict. Information on the historical context is lacking. It is taken as a given that the US will act in the interest of human rights, even if articles concede that US actions may have unintended consequences. The new ‘Scramble for Africa’ and competition with Chinese and Islamic elements as well as the establishment of Africom and how it relates to US policies and interests towards Uganda, for instance, are not mentioned.

The intent of this essay is not to question the authenticity and genuineness of the Kony 2012 producers and of journalists. The Kony 2012 producers have raised awareness of a very important human rights issue, though they are not mindful of the Western-Ugandan relationship, Ugandan abuses and the US role in the region. Kony 2012 inspired young people, who were otherwise unconcerned about African civil wars, to act on behalf of war victims. Some of the journalists that were investigated in

this study raise vitally important questions about the representation of non-Western suffering by Westerners, the integration of African voices into the coverage of African conflicts and the commercialization of conflict coverage.

Nonetheless, journalists must become equally critical towards geopolitics and the policies of US allies such as Uganda. After all, policy actions such as the Amin coup, the enforcement of economic interests and Western support for factions in Central Africa—which have not been sufficiently investigated and made public by the media—are one of the reasons the region is as destabilized and provides a breeding ground for the likes of Kony. As Westerners, we need to have an honest reckoning about our engagement with Central Africa if we share the interests of the makers of Kony 2012 to contribute to sustainable solutions to the suffering and abuses that have crippled Uganda and the wider region for too long.

Note

1. The Uganda government vigorously rejects UN Mapping assertions that its military may have been implicated in acts of genocide in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the words of Ugandan Foreign Affairs Minister Sam Kutesa, “[t]he draft report under reference is a compendium of rumours, deeply flawed in methodology, sourcing and standard of proof” (Ugandan Correspondent 2012: para 2).

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