Invisible Children and the Cyberactivist Spectator.

By Shayne Pepper

Since its first screening in 2004, the amateur documentary *Invisible Children* has sparked an online social movement and directed vast amounts of money and attention toward the plight of former child soldiers in war-torn, northern Uganda. Through a combination of campus screenings, house parties, and streaming webcasts, the film has become a rallying point for a massive, youth-oriented humanitarian effort. The film is the endeavor of three Californian twentysomethings who documented their haphazard and uninformed trip to "do something" about the humanitarian crisis in southern Sudan. Upon arriving to find that many Sudanese had become refugees in Uganda, they discovered large numbers of "night commuters," children who, in order not to be abducted and pressed into service by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), walk several miles every night from their small villages to sleep on the floor of large buildings in the relative safety of a city. The documentarians interviewed these children who told of horrific experiences in which they were abducted from their families and made to murder civilians indiscriminately while under the control of guerrilla-warrior Joseph Kony's "resistance army." With estimates of 12,000 killed in the conflict since 1987 and over 25,000 children abducted, Kony and other members of the LRA have been charged with multiple war crimes and crimes against humanity.[1] Coupled with the nearly 1.2 million Ugandans displaced due to this conflict, Jan Egeland, former UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs has called the situation "one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world."[2]

This essay combines textual analysis of the *Invisible Children* documentary along with an examination of the ways in which the Invisible Children movement has utilized network technologies to spread awareness, raise money, and enlist individuals to join in this cause. Drawing upon previous studies of similar social movements, I will consider the Invisible Children project as a particularly unique example of "cyberactivism" in the way that it utilizes networked technologies (social networking sites in particular) and, by centering this movement

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[1] Jeffery Gettleman. "U.N. Envoy Meets With Ugandan Rebel." *New York Times* (Nov. 13, 2006). http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/13/world/africa/13uganda.html?scp=9&sq=%22northern+uganda%22&st=nyt (last accessed December 1, 2009).

[2] UN Press Release: "Head of UN Humanitarian Affairs Office Visits Northern Uganda, Says 'Deeply Shocked' By 'War Against Children' www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2003/afr750.doc.htm

on the documentary, represents a new type of cultural logic that Henry Jenkins' calls "convergence culture." Having positioned the Invisible Children project as such, I will also analyze the strategies of the film in relation to not only the formal devices used to engage the intended youth audience (through music, editing, and narrative) but also the positioning of the viewer and the filmmakers as the empowered (and networked) figures who can take very simple actions to join this activist movement and affect real change in the lives of these Ugandan children. By watching the film and taking advantage of the tactics of cyberactivism offered to them, viewers are no longer positioned to simply become more informed. They can instead become "monitorial citizens," which as I will point out, affords them a certain type of political efficacy. This essay points out the need for a multi-disciplinary approach to studying the film, and the larger cyberactivist movement of which it is a part, in order to better understand the practices of these cyberactivist spectators.

Cyberactivism- A Networked Politics

Activist movements and protests have often utilized communication technologies as part of their strategizing. From distributing flyers and leaflets to buying airtime on television or simply amplifying their anger through a megaphone, social movements have been able to harness communication technologies to further their message and recruit new individuals into their ranks. Since the popularization of the Internet, activists have been able to explore the potential of network technologies that give them a megaphone of proportions previously unimaginable.

Cyberactivism has become an umbrella term used to identify the shift of this type of politics to an online environment. Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers write, "Cyberactivism crosses disciplines, mixes theories with practical activist approaches, and represents a broad range of online activist strategies, from online awareness campaigns to Internet-transmitted laser-projected messaging."[3] Since cyberactivism could mean anything from creating a website for breast cancer awareness to hacking state department computers in China to protest human rights violations, Sandor Vegh has created useful categories in which to think about cyberactivism. He separates strategies as either *Internet-enhanced* or *Internet-based*. Vegh distinguishes the two by stating that *Internet-enhanced* strategies "are only used to enhance the

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[3] Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers (eds). "Introduction" to *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.

traditional advocacy techniques, for example, as an additional communication channel, by raising awareness beyond the scope possible before the Internet, or by coordinating action more efficiently." On the other hand, *Internet-based* strategies are "only possible online, like a virtual sit-in or hacking into target web sites."[4] Vegh also further categorizes cyberactivism into three general areas: awareness/advocacy; organization/mobilization; and action/reaction. As I will soon argue, while these categories describe the Invisible Children project quite well, these categories are also complicated in so far that Invisible Children is both *Internet-enhanced* and *Internet-based*, and arguably mixes all three of Vegh's general categories.

It is also important to contextualize cyberactivism not just within a history of networked politics, but also with the rise of "life-style politics" more generally. This alternative type of politics is often removed from a parliamentary or legislative politics and is generally more of a grassroots movement. According to Peter Dahlgren, these type of politics "tend to be more *ad hoc*, less dependent on traditional organizations and elites mobilizing standing cadres of supporters" and the focus is often on "single issues rather than across the board social change."[5] Dahlgren cites the women's movements of the nineteenth century or the civil rights or anti-war protest movement of the 1960s as particular examples. In recent years, these examples of life-style politics may often be tied to a consumer politics such as buying sweatshop-free clothing, only eating organic or vegan food, or purchasing items connected to the (PRODUCT) RED campaign. In such examples, an individual's politics are wholly connected with their purchasing habits. As e-commerce has begun to define the way a large portion of the population uses the Internet, a certain convergence of these practices can be traced as social movements, charity organizations, and even political campaigns turn to the web for their fundraising.

The Invisible Children movement traverses these categories as it embraces a wide variety of organizational tactics and activist strategies. As the *Invisible Children* documentary began to spread via streaming video technologies such as Google Video and YouTube, a larger base of supporters was established, and, along with the use of social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, the Invisible Children movement began to expand its tactics from simply spreading

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[4] Sandor Vegh. "Classifying Forms of Online Activism: The Case of Cyberprotests Against the World Bank" in *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*. M. McCaughey and M. Ayers (eds). (London: Routledge, 2003), 72-73.
[5] Peter Dahlgren. "Foreword" to *Cyberprotest: New Media Citizens, and Social Movements*. Win van de Donk, Brian d. Loader, Paul G. Nixon, Dieter Rucht (eds). (London: Routledge, 2004), xi-xii.

the word about the film and/or contributing money to eventually assembling massive amounts of people offline in order to raise awareness and lobby Congress to take more action about the situation in northern Uganda. The movement bridged the gap between "assembling" large numbers of supporters in *virtual* space and assembling large numbers of supporters in *physical* space.

Like other well-known examples of cyberactivism (the WTO protests in Seattle or the Zapatistas for example), the Invisible Children movement utilized network technologies in innovative ways in order to, in a very short time period, radically increase the amount of attention that such a grassroots movement could have gotten before the Internet. While many social movement organizations are using the web to increase visibility or to communicate more easily to their members, the Invisible Children movement is a prime example of how newer (and specifically youth-based) cyberactivist movements utilize them in new and unique ways: not just as an advertising method, but as an environment to engage in political activity. As W. Lance Bennett writes,

> Political organizations that are older, larger, resource-rich, and strategically linked to party and government politics may rely on internet-based communications mostly to amplify and reduce the costs of pre-existing communication routines. On the other hand, newer, resource-poor organizations that tend to reject conventional politics may be defined in important ways by their internet presence.[6]

Rather than simply adapting their already existing strategies to a networked environment, cyberactivist movements like Invisible Children are making networked technologies the backbone of their strategy. Their presence can be particularly felt on social networking sites, where they have been able to amass large amounts of supporters and have created a fluid channel of communication to their broad activist base. As these social networking sites add new features, the Invisible Children movement is quick to adapt their strategies to incorporate the shifts in site design or add-on features that enable them to strengthen their hyperlinked connections with other individuals, artists, or other causes.

These sites draw users from a number of socio-economic, racial, or national groups, and in many ways, cyberactivism offers a real-world example of the type of political practices that

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[6] W. Lance Bennett, "Communicating Global Activism: Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Networked Politics" in *Cyberprotest: New Media Citizens, and Social Movements*. Win van de Donk, Brian d. Loader, Paul G. Nizon, Dieter Rucht (eds). (London: Routledge, 2004), 125.

Donna Haraway discusses in her "cyborg manifesto."[7] In her ironic post-human model, project-oriented political participation, rather than one based on identity politics or class, might be considered the key to addressing political issues in a globalized world. In these situations, individuals from all walks of life (or location on the planet) may come together to work on a particular cause and then disband or, to use a metaphor common to these multitasking, plugged-in youth, they may simply minimize that window and work on something else. The Invisible Children project exemplifies this type of project-oriented political participation. Despite the diversity of the (young) activists in this movement, they are able to devote a portion of their time, energy, and online practices to the humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda while maintaining their ties to other political and social concerns.

Documenting the "Invisible Children" of Northern Uganda

To briefly summarize, the desperate situation in northern Uganda stems from an ongoing civil war between the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony. The LRA formed over the course of a few years in the mid-1980s with the stated mission to overthrow the Ugandan government and create a government based on the Ten Commandments. Caught in the middle of this conflict were the mostly agrarian Acholi peoples near Gulu and Kitgum in northern Uganda. When support for the LRA began to dwindle among adults, the LRA began abducting children, forcing them to join the army. The children were then forced to kill other children, fellow villagers, or even their family as tests of their loyalty. Tales of carnage involve the cutting off of lips and ears, the hacking away of limbs, and the indiscriminate murder of innocent Ugandan citizens. In his analysis of the history and tactics of the LRA, Paul Jackson writes, "[Kony's] desperation in the face of Acholi indifference in many cases, led to his turning violent on his own people. The young were abducted, because not only were they easier to indoctrinate, but Kony had given up on the adults. The youngsters were to form the core of a new Acholi identity."[8] Still today, these abducted children are torn from their

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[7] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

[8] Paul Jackson. "The March of the Lord's Resistance Army: Greed or Grievance in Northern Uganda?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 12.3 (Autumn 2002), 29-52.

homes and often beaten, mutilated, and raped if they refuse to join the LRA in their fight.[9] In October 2005, the International Criminal Court (ICC) based in The Hague, announced arrest warrants for Joseph Kony and four of his top deputies. They are charged with four counts of war crimes including "forced abduction of and sexual abuse of children" and other atrocities.[10] During the height of these abductions (between 7,000 and 10,000 were reported in 2003 alone), children would leave their villages each evening to congregate in larger cities where it was safer to sleep.[11] Fearing abduction if they stayed in their village, they made this "night commute" often walking several miles back and forth each day.

It was during the spring of 2003 that three young Americans from California (Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey, and Laren Poole) traveled to Africa in order to learn more about the situation in neighboring Sudan. During their trip, they encountered these children in northern Uganda traveling from their villages to the cities of Gulu and Kitgum and their attention turned to the children's stories. Jason Russell and Bobby Bailey had undergraduate training at University of Southern California's program in Cinema and Television and brought their video recording equipment to document the trip. The result of this trip was an hour-long documentary that attempts to tell the story of these children and raise awareness for their situation. With no conventional distribution methods available to them, they posted the "rough cut" of their film on Google Video and built a website to sell DVDs for group screenings. With the aid of streaming video and social networking sites, thousands of people (especially young people) were watching the documentary, passing it along to their friends, and adding Invisible Children to their "friends lists" on MySpace.

The documentary begins with a long take of a young Ugandan boy, walking barefoot down a dirty road carrying his belongings in a bag over his shoulder. It is dark, and only the light from the camera illuminates the child. As the camera continues to follow the young boy the

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[9] For a first-hand account from a survivor see Brown, DeNeen L. "A Child's Hell in the Lord's Resistance Army." *The Washington Post* (Wed. May 10, 2006), C10. For a compiled list of reports from organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and UNICEF, see "Bibliography" *Resolve Uganda* the http://www.resolveuganda.org/get-informed/maps-multimedia-resources (last accessed December 1, 2009)
[10] "Uganda Civil War" *Global Security* http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/uganda.htm (last accessed December 1, 2009)
[11] "Uganda- Complex Emergency: Situation Report #3, Fiscal Year 2003." *USAID* http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/countries/uganda/fy2003/Uganda_CE_SR03_07-03-2003.pdf (last accessed December 1, 2009).

voice of Jan Egeland, the Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs at the United Nations, calls the situation a "moral outrage" and claims that the international community has neglected the children in Northern Uganda. He says, "I cannot find any other part of the world having an emergency on the scale of Uganda with so little international attention." After setting up this sense of authority through both the uninterrupted take and the voice over, the film transitions to self-interviews by the filmmakers. The tone completely changes, as a twentysomething Caucasian male appears in the frame in a confessional style similar to that of MTV's *The Real World*. He spells out his name and begins to speak, but before he can get very far, he calls out to his friend, quizzically informing him that the red light on the camera is blinking, signaling that there is no more tape or battery left. The juxtaposition of the authoritative narration of the harrowing opening shot is in stark contrast to this apparently privileged white, middle-class figure that can't even seem to work his video camera. The soundtrack bursts to life with rock music by the band Switchfoot, and we begin to watch small excerpts from the three filmmaker's videotaped confessionals. The tone is light, and is at times very self-deprecating. As Bobby begins to wax poetic about how "media shapes the way we view our life" and how "in a sense, media *is* life," a small light bulb effect appears over his head, pointing out that the boys are self-aware enough to know that their insights into our media culture are not to be taken as self-important pontification. They are not positioned as authorities; they are presented as regular people like the assumed viewer.

They go on further to admit that while one of them has been to Kenya before, the other two have not traveled. They label themselves as naïve, first-time filmmakers attempting to "tell the story of… find the truth" about the humanitarian crisis in southern Sudan. This slip of words is telling, as the documentary walks a fine line between attempting to "tell the story" of these indigenous Africans and "finding the truth." They begin their trip saying, "None of us knew what we were doing. We just opened our lens wide and tried to capture what we were seeing." The film suggests that in the age of cheap digital cameras and instant distribution deals (i.e. YouTube, blogs), the untrained citizen can become an eyewitness, documentarian, and amateur journalist – no special skills needed, just a willingness to open their eyes and document. The film begins to document their misadventures in a playful way. One review writes,

> At first, like excited frat boys, they filmed themselves – killing a snake emerging from its hole, getting sick, dancing, marveling at the African landscape. Then one night, they stumbled upon children sleeping in a town square. "We were going to Sudan because of

the genocide," says [Bobby] Bailey, "but our host took us to a refugee camp in northern Uganda. Then a vehicle gets bombed in front of us. We say, 'What's going on?' She says we are in the middle of a war. We say, 'What war?' Then she took us to the city and we saw thousands of kids sleeping, lying down with blankets without their parents." Cameras rolling, they began asking the children questions.[12]

That these filmmakers literally stumble upon the humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda while attempting to document the genocide in Sudan, speaks not only to the filmmakers' own naiveté, but also how these situations in Africa are so little-understood by the American public at large. These conflicts, civil wars, and acts of genocide happen in countries with unfamiliar names that most Americans can't even begin to locate on a map.

This first section of the documentary, which focuses on the adventures of the filmmakers, performs several tasks. First it works to have the viewer identify with the three filmmakers. Through their confessional tone and light mood, they grab our attention and our sympathy, and also our forgiveness for their naiveté. Second, unlike the rest of the film, the first part of their trip to southern Sudan and northern Uganda feature the filmmakers in the frame quite often. The film suggests that with minimal resources, knowledge, and ability they were able make it to these places to document what is going on, ostensibly allowing the viewer to think that they to might also be able to take such action. As Lutz and Collins write about the practice of including Western photographers in *National Geographic* photos,

> They may allow identification with the Westerner in the photo and, through that, more interaction with, or imaginary participation in, the photo…. Most obviously, the pictures of Westerners can serve a validating function by proving that the author was there, that the account is a first-hand one, brought from the field rather than from library or photographic archives."[13]

Here as well, the images of the filmmakers in the frame, first engaging in silly misadventures and then in real danger from patrolling LRA convoys, establish their first-hand account and works to eliminate the distance between the viewer and the situation in northern Uganda.

Once this work is done, the documentary shifts its focus to the Ugandan children as they tell their stories of abduction and abuse, shifting the viewer's identification as well in order to produce affect. The bulk of the remaining film is made up of tight close ups and medium shots of

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[12] DeNeen L. Brown. "A Child's Hell in the Lord's Resistance Army." *The Washington Post* (Wed. May 10, 2006).

[13] Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins. *Reading National Geographic*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 203-204.

children and adults describing the atrocities that have taken place, recounting personal narratives of their own abductions or relaying the experiences of their friends and loved ones. The camerawork is often handheld and even shot from floor-level as it interviews children sleeping in a cramped crawl space in the damp and dark basement of a hospital. The filmmakers continually try to avoid any type of distanced, authoritative documentary style that would situate the viewer as simply a passive observer. Rather, the filmmakers (and particularly the voice-over of Jason Russell) keep the film conversational, talking directly to the imagined viewer.

Later in the film, the children's first hand accounts are told in voice-over as drawings made by the children illustrate the scenes that they describe.[14] Rather than relying on actual footage of these atrocities taking place, the viewer sees drawings made by abducted Acholi children as they recount their horrific experiences. The viewer is able to hear from the children first-hand what they have gone through. One child says, "I was so scared because I see people's arms and legs being cut off. I thought this would be done to me because they do bad things to those who are arrested and abducted. I tried to protest and ask for mercy but they still went ahead and beat me until nightfall." As the child tells of his abduction, we see drawings of armless people covered in blood and a rebel soldier with a machete. As the images change to drawings of rebel soldiers marching, the soundtrack swells with the sounds of boots marching. The sounds turn to screams and gunfire as the drawings depict a village being raided and the people slaughtered. These scenes, some of the most emotionally charged in the film, continue as more children describe humiliating acts they were made to perform for the pleasure of the LRA.

As the scene concludes, one boy says, "I have witnessed these deaths with my own eyes. What does the government think? Do they think this is right?" The image track changes to scenes from inside a hospital, and former child soldiers are singled out in the frame with text stating their name, age, and how they were affected by the war. Some have been blinded, some raped, and others have lost limbs. Throughout this scene Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" grows in intensity, and we hear the lyrics, "It's time we stop, hey, what's that sound? / Everybody look what's going down" as these scenes are inter-cut with still images of Ugandan parents and children protesting in the street, holding signs, and pleading for an end to the abductions and violence. The rest of the film's narrative literally turns into a plea for action as

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[14] The practice of having the children narrate their own story has become one of the central ways in which this conflict has been related to western audiences. See Faith J.H. McDonnell and Grace Akallo. *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda's Children*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2007).

the adults and children in the community appeal directly to the filmmakers, and to the American government, to take notice of the atrocities being committed in their country.

Labeled a "rough cut," the film has not been released theatrically, causing the majority of screenings to happen on home televisions or computer screens or in group settings such as a classroom or church. The end of the film is a direct and simple call for activism: it gives the audience something particular they can do through the website. In this case, the viewer is asked to use their creative capacity to spread the word about the situation in northern Uganda and to donate money to the Invisible Children cause. This is a trend that can be seen more and more even in theatrically released films such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and even fictional films like *Syriana* (2005) where the end of the film offers a website link for more information on how to join a social movement related to the film.[15] This exemplifies what Henry Jenkins calls *convergence culture*. He defines convergence culture as "the situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them."[16] This does not simply mean that the *Invisible Children* documentary is available on multiple platforms and can be viewed in a number of environments (though each of these cases are true); instead, convergence culture describes the logic of the Invisible Children movement and perhaps describes cyberactivism more broadly. In the case of Invisible Children, convergence culture can describe a situation where a spectator is never just a spectator, but is instead an active (or activist) component in the process of forming a social movement. The spectator is positioned in such a way that viewing the film is only the first step.[17] Now that the spectator has the information learned in the film, the film prescribes particular actions that one might take – visiting a website, donating money to the cause, linking to the film on a social networking site, etc. In an interesting combination of savvy packaging and viral marketing, even the purchase of a DVD from their official website comes with a secondary copy of the DVD tucked away in a paper sleeve inside the DVD case, calling on the viewer/purchaser to pass one copy along to someone else so that

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[15] See *Participant Media* www.participantmedia.com or *Take Part* www.takepart.com for examples of social movement websites partnering with, and even producing, films. Other examples include *Fast Food Nation* (2006), *The Kite Runner* (2007), and *Darfur Now* (2007).

[16] Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 282.

[17] One might consider *Invisible Children* to be one long advertisement for a website and movement rather than the typical website as an advertisement for a film. Upon arriving at the website, a list of five things that "you" can do to help are listed: "1.Watch the film; 2.Get Educated; 3.Have a screening and spread the word; 4.Shop/support the kids; 5.Join schools for schools." www.invisiblechildren.com.

they might also get involved in the movement. The inside of the DVD case details a list of things that the individual can do to support the cause. They are rhetorically situated as already being part of the movement and are told, "Upon possession of this DVD, you join us with the following responsibilities: 1)Host a house party; 2)Raise the dough $; 3)Log on and pass DVD on." In no less than five places on the DVD packaging materials, variations of the same instructions are listed. The text on the booklet even reads, "Invisible Children: A Movement By You," and then has a numbered list of blank lines for people who come to the house parties to write their name. Through all of these tactics, the spectator is never simply a spectator. The spectator interacts with the film, additional videos, and other informational material in a variety of environments, online and offline, as these various media platforms work together to expand the spectator's involvement. It is this type of spectator positioning, that of a cyberactivist spectator, that I wish to consider now.

Social Networking and the Cyberactivist Spectator

Now that we understand the history of the *Invisible Children* documentary film and of the conflict itself, we can begin to see how the film sparked a movement through their official website, streaming video sites such as Google Video and YouTube, and social networking sites such as MySpace, and Facebook. [18] What began with (and is still centered around) the *Invisible Children* rough cut, has morphed into a cyberactivist network of substantial proportions. As of October 4, 2009, the social networking sites alone tally over 119,000 Facebook friends and over 140,000 MySpace friends. Each of these 140,000 MySpace friends has linked to the official Invisible Children MySpace profile, as both a promotion of the movement and a badge of their own inclusion, often placing Invisible Children in the prime spot of their "top 8" which is viewable to anyone who clicks on the individual's MySpace profile. The Invisible Children YouTube page lists nearly 4,600 subscribers and over 1,012 friends with nearly 90,000 channel views.[19] These sites not only link to a streamable version of the film for the spectator to watch,

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[18] Official Website: www.invisiblechildren.com The film can be viewed at:
Google Video: http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=3166797753930210643; and
YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/user/invisiblechildreninc (last accessed December 1, 2009)
[19] These figures were recorded as of October 4, 2009. The official Invisible Children MySpace profile can be accessed at www.myspace.com/invisiblechildren. The official Invisible Children facebook profile can only be linked to from within the site. Additionally, there is also a "Cause" application page on Facebook

but it also involves them in the expansion of the movement by allowing them to embed video clips, banners, and other hyperlinks on their own websites or social networking profiles. In total, this creates an environment where their online presence is always actively promoting the social movement even if they are not logged on at the time. Additionally, the Invisible Children website is itself a resource hub where individuals may buy a copy of the DVD, donate money to the organization, petition legislators, and generally become more informed about the situation in northern Uganda.

With numbers as high as these, it is clear that the Invisible Children network of activists maintain a substantial presence in popular online environments, but from the initial release of the documentary in 2004 to its current status in 2009, the movement has made tremendous strides in organizing massive offline events, gathering mainstream media attention (including that of CNN anchor Anderson Cooper), and rallying the support of political figures.[20] Through its use of cyberactivist tactics, its youth-oriented aesthetic, and the public image of its young filmmakers, the movement has come to be largely known as one driven nearly entirely by high school and college-aged individuals. By enlisting popular culture figures such as the rock band Fall Out Boy, indie-folk artists such as Denison Witmer and Sufjan Stevens, and even having their organization become a major plot point in the television series *Veronica Mars*, the Invisible Children movement has been able to enlist young people who would not be normally inclined to involve themselves in activist organizations. These are not just celebrity endorsements that play on the Invisible Children websites. Fall Out Boy, already incredibly popular among the youth demographic, incorporated specially produced informational videos to be played on the giant screens on their stage during their 2007 arena-tour of the United States, introducing untold thousands to the cause. Additionally, the music video for one of their singles was filmed in Uganda and enlisted the help of Invisible Children to promote the cause.

Examples of the cyberactivist movements branching out to offline events are a key component to many social movements. Bennett writes, "An inseparable mix of virtual and face-to-face communication defines many activist networks, and contacts in these networks may

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dedicated to Invisible Children. As of April 2008, it reports to have nearly 450,000 members devoted to the cause donating a total of nearly $20,000 from this application alone.
[20] See Anderson Cooper "Old Horrors, Young Victims" (Feb 23, 2006) *Anderson Cooper CNN Blog* http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/anderson.cooper.360/blog/2006/02/old-horrors-young-victims.html (last accessed December 1, 2009)

range far from activists' immediate social circles if they can be sustained in terms of the cost and scale offered by digital communication applications."[21] In the case of Invisible Children, this wave of cyberactivism has resulted in events such as the Global Night Commute, the Displace Me Event, the lobbying of Congress, and the Schools For Schools program which rebuilds schools for children in northern Uganda, all of which brought together individuals that had no other connection to one another than their involvement in this network of activists. The Global Night Commute occurred on April 26, 2006, and was an event where nearly 80,000 people in 130 cities and seven countries reenacted, a trek similar to those that Ugandan children would make in order to travel to large cities in order to sleep in relative safety. People took to the streets to walk to a designated location and slept there overnight, pledging their support to the Ugandan children who make the same walk each night out of fear of the LRA. The similar Displace Me event took place on April 28, 2007, and 68,000 people turned out in fifteen cities in order to raise awareness for the estimated 1.5 million Ugandans who are displaced in camps. This large-scale event saw several videotaped messages from Ugandans broadcast to the crowds. Even First Lady Laura Bush taped a video, thanking them for their commitment and informing them of the desperate conditions facing the displaced Ugandans.

Unlike other cyberactivist movements, namely the WTO protests and the Zapatistas, this is not a revolutionary group that wishes to subvert government processes. Rather, the Invisible Children movement calls upon the U.S. government to take action within the standard channels of increasing the U.S. aid budget to Uganda or pressuring the Ugandan government to engage more fully with the peace process. This movement also differs from events such as Live8 or Live Earth, which were heavily sponsored by corporations and were heavily laden with consumerist messages. What money does flow through the organization is (outside of organizational costs) used to better the situation of the inhabitants of northern Uganda. The Schools for Schools program alone has raised over $1.5 million, and the movement as a whole has had revenue of over $7 million.[22]

Clearly, cyberactivist movements are not limited to online activity, and the Invisible Children movement has, over recent years, even increased their support on the ground level in northern Uganda. Originally, groups of teens would sign on for trips to Uganda to help in

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[21] Bennett, 129.
[22] Invisible Children Financial Report (Fiscal Year, 2007).

whatever way they could. These trips were not as organized as their most recent endeavors and speak to the growth that the movement has experienced. More recently, strategically organized trips have been arranged where candidates are selected by their level of commitment and skills that they are willing to put to use, and these trips are part of much larger efforts that work in tandem with organizations led by indigenous Ugandans. These outreach efforts have included tutoring and mentoring relationships, teacher exchanges, and, of course, the rebuilding of schools for the Ugandan children. While the movement began in an energetic but haphazard way, the recent incarnations have been far more organized and planned while retaining the youthful energy and aesthetic that has continually defined the project.

Over time, the Invisible Children website, MySpace profile, and YouTube page have expanded to include a number of videos describing their new projects and updates on the situation in northern Uganda. Each of these videos continue with the youth-oriented aesthetic present in the Invisible Children documentary, despite being created by a new team of professional filmmakers and publicity teams. In a promotion for a new feature-length documentary about the Schools for Schools program (released in late-2008), a song by M.I.A. called "Paper Planes" soundtracks the video. Similarly, in the TRI: Invest In Peace video, The National's "Fake Empire" sets the mood. By incorporating popular indie-rock music, using a fast-paced editing style, and highlighting the central role of young people in the videos, the Invisible Children movement continues to draw upon a particularly hip sensibility to inspire young people to get involved. These efforts signal to the viewer that this is a movement that is designed to speak to them and include them in efforts to affect change in the world. This aesthetic is, in some ways, a defining principle of politics online, which can be seen, for example, in the Will.i.am produced video titled "Yes We Can," which supported President Barack Obama's presidential campaign. Here as well, a youth-oriented aesthetic is meant to appeal to those who may not be political junkies. This aesthetic, when combined with the short length of YouTube clips, fits perfectly with a viral promotional campaign on social networking sites frequented by young people.

Conclusion: The Political Efficacy of the Monitorial Citizen

While not everyone can take a trip to Uganda to document the terrible situation, network technologies have allowed average citizens to become aware of humanitarian crises and affect

real change. Cyberactivist movements like Invisible Children are symptomatic of a much larger shift in our cultural and political landscape, allowing everyone with a personal computer and an Internet connection to become what Michael Schudson calls a "monitorial citizen." He writes, "A monitorial citizen scans (rather than reads) the informational environment in a way so that he or she may be alerted on a very wide variety of issues for a very wide variety of ends and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways."[23] The idea of monitorial citizenship allows us to reconsider the political efficacy of something like Digg.com or even YouTube where users can, with the simple click of a thumbs up or thumbs down rating, propel a little-known story to the top of a list or the front of a homepage where millions of people from around the world might encounter it in their daily web browsing. The rise of micro-loan agencies such as Kiva.org have brought the economic situations of individuals, families, and businesses in developing nations within the direct reach of those who wish to do something to help but do not want to simply send money to a blanket cause. These technologies update the old tradition of getting a picture of the child you are helping by sending only pennies a day, and now transforms the relationship into one of more immediacy and mutual dialogue.

As the three filmmakers in the Invisible Children documentary demonstrate, even naive young-adults can, with a video camera and a free streaming service, inform hundreds of thousands of people about an issue that might have been ignored by mainstream media, or worse, glossed over by a viewer who becomes desensitized to genocide or other humanitarian crises when they are simply represented as charts and numbers. Where theatrical documentaries have, so far, not devoted time to this subject, and news reports like *60 Minutes* have given it very little attention, it is clear that the users of Web 2.0 (through streaming video, social networking sites, or other technologies centered on user-generated content) are picking up the slack, documenting this atrocity, and mobilizing to make a difference.[24] For the young activist who watches Invisible Children for the first time and wants to learn more, it is not to CNN or the NBC Nightly News that they will likely turn. Rather, it is YouTube that offers several clips of individual reporters interviewing rebel leader Joseph Kony. When one searches for "Uganda genocide" on Google,

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[23] Michael Schudson, "Changing Concepts of Democracy." *MIT Communications Forum*, http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/schudson.html (last accessed December 1, 2009).

[24] There is a new documentary in post-production titled *The Children's War* that appears to have been filmed during the same time as *Invisible Children*. Like the three young filmmakers responsible for *Invisible Children*, a young filmmaker who graduated from University of Texas, Austin directs this film.

the first few links are to student papers and online social movement websites *not* to government documents or international news media portals.

As Henry Jenkins writes, "Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways."[25] In a time where films are simultaneously released on multiple delivery platforms and lines between different types of media blur, the notion of convergence culture helps us to make sense of our media landscape. When bloggers can break a political news story before major news outlets, homespun videos can become journalistic pieces on CNN's iReport, and YouTube videos are at just as at home on your computer screen, cellular phone, or your television, it makes sense that activist documentaries would take advantage of the new distribution opportunities afforded to them. When these new delivery systems are coupled with the incredible power offered by the user-generated content of Web 2.0, their political efficacy increases and cyberactivist movements like Invisible Children are there to make use of them. Where once upon a time, the act of watching a documentary and subsequently engaging in direct political action may have been quite distanced from each other, cyberactivist spectatorship marries the two, often making them inseparable.

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[25] Jenkins, 2.