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The Vigilante Network?

"Kony 2012" has snowballed into a video watched by millions across the globe, in a short amount of time. USHA M RODRIGUES explores how social media is quickly taking on new roles.

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Kony 2012 – the latest buzz on social media sites. A short film spurring people to make Joseph Kony of Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) famous so policy makers would act to capture him has hit the internet waves. [More than 77 millions have viewed the film](#) so far – many viewers like it, and others do not. Those who want to join the campaign to capture Kony and his mates, join the campaign by clicking their mouse on the "Like" button on their computing device or donating a few dollars, while others show their disapproval of the way the campaign is turning Kony into a celebrity. [Some have raised question marks](#) about the creators of the film and their organisation [Invisible Children's](#) administrative efficacy. But, what is clear is that a lot of people, generally who can access the internet, are talking about Kony 2012 campaign with the help of social media networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and others.

The film is appealing to [the younger generation to join the campaign to save children in Uganda and elsewhere](#) where untold atrocities are carried out against the powerless. In that sense it does use the power of the media, in the case social media to involve the tech-savvy generation. And, as more people talk about Kony 2012, journalists and media commentators can no longer ignore it, they have to cover the issue as well. Almost every news media outlet has led with the Kony 2012 story in the last few days, recognizing its popularity on the internet, and the buzz it has created on the social media networking sites.

The Kony 2012 film and campaign has been criticised for a 'white' person's impression of what has been happening in some of the African countries and how perpetrators of violence go unpunished. It is also criticised for its call for a solution from the point of view of a white community instead of the victims, [who do not understand how making a criminal famous will bring justice for them?](#) The campaign cannot solve the heartache and hardship of the victims and their communities.

The advocacy of simple proposition: good v/s evil also raises questions about the efficacy of social media as a means to make people aware of complex real life situations in various parts of the world, and [a need to simplify issues to get netizens' attention.](#)

The news media is criticised for their simplistic on-the-spot current affairs focused news reports about real life issues, which are often quite complex and multi-faceted. The same criticism can be raised against social media, where internet users' interaction with each other and the issues can be quite superficial. A click of the mouse on 'Like' or 'Dislike' button here and there, and a comment on the latest issue on a blog and a news site, is what many of us do in our busy life – multi-tasking as we work, drive and talk. Instead of a few journalists and commentators knowing and commenting on current issues, we are all experts on all issues, we all have an opinion about a lot of issues and like to express that by liking and writing on our favourite web site.

Suddenly, tall claims about social networking sites and their value in social and political movements would seem too tall to be realistic. In 2011, [commentators noted the pivotal role Facebook and Twitter played in the Arab Uprising including the Egyptian revolution](#), by providing a platform for planning protest and sharing news in real time. [For Syrian activists, social media remains a means to tell the world their side of the story](#) against the Assad regime's tactics to suppress their demands.

Academics, scholars and commentators continue to debate the role of social media in socio-

political movements. One of the most talked about contrasts in view is between Dr Clay Shirky, Professor of New Media at New York University, who argues that [social media can be used as a critical tool for fostering participation, sharing information, social engagement and mobilisation of loosely coordinated publics](#), and Malcolm Gladwell, who argues in *The New Yorker* that [social media may actually undermine social movements and social change by creating weak ties and contributing to chaos and a lack of direction and strategy](#)

The underlying reasoning is that social media networking in terms of sharing tweets, Facebook chats, and witnessing visuals of local events on YouTube are not sufficient to build a foundation of strong activism; this requires deep social bonding and common ideological purpose among the masses to bring about social (and political) change. The counter argument is that real potential of social media lies in supporting civil society and the public sphere, which will produce change over years and decades.

As this debate continues, many news media have recognised the importance of social media as a significant source of information, and as a platform to engage with their audiences at home or elsewhere in this world. As was the case during the Iranian protests in 2009, when the government cut off mobile phones and the internet, and banned international and Iranian media from covering the protests, [international news coverage heavily relied on user-generated content](#)(emails, phone calls and messages from Twitter and Facebook). A similar case can be made for the coverage of natural disasters and issues at domestic level, where social media networking seems to have become a part of the social and political landscape ([India Against Corruption](#) and [ipaidabribe.com](#)).

Many news media organisations have appointed Social Media Editors, and a team of staff, to mine the social media networks and promote their programs via YouTube and Facebook. As Associate Press' Manager of Social Networks and News Engagement, Lauren McCullough says, her team [looks for articles, tips and eyewitness reports to complement the work being done by AP reporters when news breaks](#). This is yet another stage of transition for mainstream news media, transforming from print and broadcast media into a multi-platform industry, particularly following the path set by their audiences who increasingly want to receive their slice of news from friends, their own networks and news media on whichever media device they can access at any particular time (newspaper, mobile phone, radio, television or their iPad).

1



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