Exploring the Effectiveness of Social Media Activism

What KONY 2012 & Save Darfur got right and where they went wrong
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Here’s The Problem

The last fifteen years have seen the rise and fall of numerous activism campaigns started on social networks, ranging in focus from politics to poverty and receiving varied levels of success. Many have questioned whether or not social media activism is a truly viable vehicle for social action. By examining two of the earliest and most notable social media activism campaigns, I consider whether online engagement equates to long-term success as well as what the success of a social media activism campaign might look like.

KONY 2012

In 2012, nonprofit organization Invisible Children released a well-produced and film, titled “KONY 2012” on their website as well as YouTube, Reddit, and Facebook. The film was meant to draw attention to the African child soldier crisis and get officials to arrest LRA leader Joseph Kony.

Joseph Kony was never captured

What Actually Happened?

» KONY 2012 video gained over 99 million views and over 1.4 million likes on Facebook
» Invisible Children raised $28 million in 2012 to expand their operations in Central Africa
» Energy behind the movement quickly diminished as facts got distorted and criticisms of the film and Invisible Children’s presentation of the issue grew
» The LRA has yet to be dismantled

Save Darfur

In May 2007, the “Save Darfur” campaign launched as a Facebook Cause. Save Darfur had one goal: earn enough likes, shares, and donations to end genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan.

80% of Save Darfur Facebook Cause members were recruited by online friends

What Actually Happened?

» Save Darfur became a wildly popular issue worldwide for a number of years
» The Save Darfur Facebook page gained over 1,000,000 members
» Few Cause members donated or carried out any traceable social action
» Save Darfur eventually lost popularity, becoming “the genocide that people got tired of”

Is Social Media the Solution?

Social media activism campaigns have their flaws. Both Save Darfur and KONY 2012 failed to attract long-term support and engagement, especially beyond likes and shares. However, despite those failures they succeeded in starting important conversations and spreading awareness of the issue rapidly. More research is needed to explore how the strengths of social networks in spreading ideas and generating excitement can be used strategically in developing successful campaigns in the future.

References