WORKING PAPER

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Invisible Children: Transmedia, Storytelling, Mobilization

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A transmedia approach allows Invisible Children, a humanitarian organization that constitutes itself largely through media, to tell a story that is mobilizing but open to revision, is able to negotiate across various participant subjectivities, is both spreadable and drillable, and requires a variety of participant performances in order to persist. In that it is transmedia story designed by professionals to provoke a particular kind of action from a highly engaged audience, Invisible Children resembles some of the entertainment industries' attempts to harness fandom, and although Invisible Children is motivated by social justice rather than profit, it faces similar tensions and could be subject to similar critiques as these commercial transmedia systems. Invisible Children might avoid this by embracing modes of fannish engagement that produce deeper wells of collective intelligence and open up the content world to unauthorized performances. These practices might inspire factionalism among supporters or threaten the cohesiveness of the story world, but they also might allow Invisible Children to effect greater and more long-lasting social change.

Introduction

Invisible Children[1] is a non-profit founded in 2005 by friends Jason Russell, Bobby

Bailey, and Laren Poole. Its mission is to use "film, creativity, and social action to end the use of

child soldiers in Joseph Kony's rebel war and restore LRA-affected communities in central

Africa to peace and prosperity." Although it has recently extended services into the Congo, its

efforts have long been focused on Uganda. Invisible Children constitutes itself as an organization

through multi-platform media production. "We are story tellers," proclaims its *About* page, "We

make documentaries about war-affected children in east Africa and tour them around the world."

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[1] Methodological note: This article primarily relies on media analysis of Invisible Children media, authorized and unauthorized. This close reading was augmented by interviews with Invisible Children participants that were conducted by the author and other members of the Civic Paths research group at USC as part of a larger on-going research project. In addition, preliminary findings were presented to Invisible Children staff and their feedback was incorporated.

Perhaps anticipating skepticism, the next heading finishes the thought, "But our work goes far beyond storytelling." For Invisible Children, raising awareness through media production is not an ancillary activity. Circulating stories among North American audiences is as critical to its mission as its direct aid efforts in Africa.

The "Movement," as Invisible Children calls its US-facing work, includes visually-arresting films, spectacular event-oriented campaigns, provocative graphic t-shirts and other apparel, music mixes, print media, blogs and more. To be a member of Invisible Children means to be a viewer, participant, wearer, reader, listener, commenter of and in the various activities, many mediated, that make up the Movement. It is a massive, open-ended, evolving documentary "story" unfurling across an expanding number of media forms.

Jenkins (2007) defines transmedia storytelling as a process in which "integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience," and, "ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story." It involves an emphasis on "world building" rather than plot or character-driven narratives, multiple points of entry for differently engaged audiences, co-creation and collaboration across various professional and fan sites of production, and collective intelligence, as audiences become "hunters and gathers," collecting and sharing information across media. Transmedia storytelling is not just about new media, although it often makes thorough use of it. In fact, in order to best understand the concept, it helps to have an expansive notion of the word "media" as any channel through which new meaning or information is added to the larger story-- be it a piece of clothing, an action figure, or a live in-person performance.

In some ways, most mobilization today already happens across multiple media channels--

that is, trans-media-- even if it does not make a coordinated attempt to tell a story (see Aday, et al, 2010). Communication about mobilization will happen where communication about everything else does, and today, that means across a variety of platforms, old and new, technologically-mediated or otherwise. Indeed, Costanza-Chock (2010, p 115) calls "transmedia mobilization[2]" the "key strategic media form for an era of social networked social movements." In order to support activity in this media environment, strategists and scholars have begun to explore how movements can strategically work across media. Producer and consultant Srivastava, (2009), for example, has developed a framework for "transmedia activism" that encourages social change organizations to use "multiple entry points [that] allow donors, activists, partners and audiences to have a comprehensive and coordinated experience of a complex issue."

Certainly, Invisible Children uses similar strategies as those detailed by Costanza-Chock and Srivastava. What makes Invisible Children innovative, however, is their use of narrative. Although Costanza-Chock describes transmedia mobilization as creating a "social movement 'world'" for the purpose of "strengthening movement identity," like Srivastava, his description of media use focuses on tactics and tools rather than aesthetics or affect, the mechanics but not the poetics. In this sense, he accurately labels the processes he describes "transmedia mobilization." Invisible Children, because of its emphasis on narrative, can be more accurately described as "transmedia *storytelling* mobilization." This strategy offers important advantages for mobilization. Invisible Children is able to tell a story that is mobilizing but open to revision, is

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[2] In this paper, I have decided, where appropriate, to follow Costanza-Chock's lead and use the word "mobilization" over "activism." Through conversations with activists and community organizers, Costanza-Chock found that many had moved toward "mobilization" in part because it implies an entire community that is mobilized rather than an individual "activist" (personal communication, 2011).

able to negotiate across various participant subjectivities, is both spreadable and drillable, and requires a variety of participant performances in order to persist.

Jenkins (2009) has suggested the Harry Potter Alliance-- a group of fans who extend themes from the Harry Potter content world in order to effect social change-- as one example of such transmedia storytelling mobilization. In some ways, Invisible Children is an even clearer example because it was *born* transmedia. There is no one property at the center of Invisible Children's Movement, no clear separation between fictional content world and lived experience. Although certainly part of an emerging set of groups that mobilize around shared media experiences, Invisible Children is distinct from the Harry Potter Alliance and other groups that fall under the broad category of "fan activism" because it is not built on existing fan communities or engagement with an existing content world.

However, there is a divide between professional and nonprofessional producers of this story, between those who get to decide what becomes part of the Invisible Children "canon" and those who do not. In that it is a transmedia story designed by professionals to provoke a particular kind of action from a highly engaged audience, Invisible Children resembles some of the entertainment industries' attempts to harness fandom. Although Invisible Children is motivated by social justice rather than profit, it faces similar tensions as these commercial transmedia systems and could be subject to similar critique. Invisible Children might avoid such criticisms by embracing modes of fannish engagement that produce deeper wells of collective intelligence and open up its content world to unauthorized performances. These practices might threaten the cohesiveness of the Invisible Children story, but they might also ignite broader participation, deeper investment, and greater opportunity for action.

A Mobilizing and Revisable Transmedia Story

Much Invisible Children media features its origin story, which centers on the transformational experience of founders. In a transmedia story, new assets expand or provide new perspectives on the world, not simply adapt it to new media forms. As it unfolds across time and media, the story allows the organization, through the metonym of its founders, to mature while adjusting to changes in the global geopolitical landscape.

As recent graduates of the University of Southern California, Jason Russell and Bobby Bailey, together with Laren Poole (then still an undergraduate at the University of California - San Diego), traveled to Africa in search of "adventure" and "a story" about which to make a documentary. As seen in the film[3], although excited, the friends are also scared, as they tell the camera in reality television-style confessionals. To describe their initial boredom, adjustment to travel, and general naivete, the *Rough Cut* depicts the friends killing a snake and vomiting (unrelated events) in gross-out detail worthy of the stunt-oriented reality show *Jackass*.

But everything is changed when they, through Ugandan Jolly Okot, learn about the plight of the night commuters, children who are forced to leave their families in the villages and huddle together, essentially homeless, sleeping where ever they can in the cities in order to avoid being kidnapped and turned into child soldiers by the Lord's Resistance Army, a militia led by Ugandan Joseph Kony. The friends meet and interview Ugandan boys, particularly focusing on one, Jacob, who becomes their close friend. Moved by what they learn from their new friends, the founders undergo a transformation-- depicted in exhilarating shots of driving through African landscapes-- and learn that although "there is a mind-numbing hurt and fear in Africa," there is also "an unexplainable freedom and strength that will forever inspire any who are chosen to go

3 Later titled *Invisible Children: The Rough Cut* but usually referred to as *Rough Cut*

there." They "make a promise to a friend," Jacob, "to end a war." From this, Invisible Children was born. The founders returned to the United States and finished their documentary, then toured the country showing it to groups of American young people. This was manifest in the first Invisible Children campaign, the *Global Night Commute*, in which 80,000 people in 126 cities slept out of doors to "make a visual call to end night commuting in northern Uganda."

This story, easily recounted by almost everyone interviewed, is a foundational tale for all Invisible Children participants. It contains four values that fuel the Invisible Children content world. First, the founder's performances as naive but earnest inspires participants to rely more on their conscience than their knowledge to lead them to do the right thing. Second, the resilience and joy despite hardship that are presented as "inherent" in Africa form a spirit of jubilant dedication, working hard but having soul-nourishing fun. Third, as the participants in the *Global Night Commute* demonstrate, Invisible Children hinges on the possibility of leveraging the privilege and visibility of young people in America to bring aid to other young people who, by a seeming accident of history, lack even basic privileges and have thus been rendered invisible. And fourth, it emphasizes that service to the cause should take whatever form the individual can offer: the founders didn't know what to do, so they did what they do best, make a film. These precepts, formed in the founding myth, create the basis for the Invisible Children content world.

Transmedia storytelling enables Invisible Children to change over time. It also allows the content world to be under revision while maintaining a core set of myth and meaning. Although the rash good intentions of the founders, as depicted particularly in *The Rough Cut*, is an important guiding structure in the Invisible Children content world, it is modulated and revised by later media, particularly the film *Tony*.

As is common in transmedia narrative, individuals often appear in multiple contexts, and

their mere image provides additional information for more engaged viewers. Tony-- a Ugandan who was introduced as a friend of Jacob in the *Rough Cut* -- is first seen as a night commuter, sleeping in a wet basement-like room and studying by candlelight. He asks the founders "not to forget about him," which is in turn framed as an injunction, a cliffhanger and call to action, to viewers. A few years later, an older Tony is next seen in his own film, part of the Bracelet Campaign, a series of short films each telling the story of a Ugandan whose life has been impacted by war and improved by the work of Invisible Children. This provided attentive viewers with a backstory and a update on Tony, as well as with another injunction to stay tuned to the story and to keep supporting the cause.

At the opening of *Tony*, Laren Poole is seen addressing the graduates of the University of California - San Diego, the institution he dropped out of to start Invisible Children. He reflects on his growth-- the film shows a variety of ridiculous hairstyles he has sported over the years-- but takes on a less cavalier tone when he begins to tell a previously untold story from a past trip to Uganda. Jolly Okot is being shown looking directly at the camera, talking in stern tones about Western arrogance and paternalism. After the success of the *Rough Cut*, the founders returned to Uganda and were reunited with Tony. He is older, a teenager, and seems to be just half-a-life-stage behind the young filmmakers. They allow Tony and friend, Johnson, to live with them at their house in Uganda, depicted in a humorous montage as something like a cross-cultural frat party.

Then, the police show up. It turns out that Tony and Johnson's parents don't know where they have been, and the boys have been skipping school. The founders are taken to the station, accused of kidnapping at worst and at the least denying Tony and Johnson their education-- the very crimes they see themselves as fighting against-- and threatened with jail. The police ask, *Do*

you think you're so rich that you can just save everybody? In America, would you let minors come to live with you without asking questions about school or their parents? The film does not cast blame on Tony and Johnson, who, though they get a stern but loving lecture from Jolly Okot, are depicted not as troublemakers but as ordinary teenagers. The founders are chastened, and they reflect on their arrogance and ignorance in confessionals. The film suggests a change in the organization, "a new chapter," one of maturity and self-reflection. The bold optimism still persists, but it is tempered by greater reflection.

This new chapter is also marked by a response to changes external to the organization. As *Tony* depicts, due to relative peace in northern Uganda, Invisible Children has shifted much of its efforts to the Congo, where it plans to raise money to build radio towers, search and rescue teams, and rehabilitation centers. This change might seem like a discontinuous rupture because the movement has been so strongly identified with Uganda, but because it is framed in relation to emotional growth for the founders, Tony, the organization, and the region, narrative cohesion is maintained. By allowing a new transmedia artifact to revise those that came before it, the organization itself can grow while enabling continuity.

Multiplicity Across Participant Subjectives

Transmedia storytelling allows for multiple points of entry for differently engaged audiences. Jenkins (2009) describes how multiplicity in transmedia storytelling affords parallel or alternative worlds, as in the case of multiple Spider-Man universes. He writes, "comics publishers trust their fans to sort out not only how the pieces fit together but also which version of the story of any given work fits within." A related dynamic occurs as Invisible Children negotiates between a variety of participant audiences. Many members of Invisible Children,

including its founders, are Christian. For many faith is a major motivator for their interest in social justice. Film screenings are often hosted by youth pastors or Christian youth groups and held in churches.

But Invisible Children is not a Christian organization, has no proselytizing mission, and welcomes members and supporters of all faiths. Because Invisible Children's approach is transmedia and thus narratively expanionist, it can make polysemic appeals across participant groups. When roadies screen at churches, they tend to present the films in a way that will resonate with Christian audiences. Phrases like, "have a heart for Africa" or to be "blessed" or "called" take on particular meaning as they are decoded by these audiences. Many interviewees thus described *themselves* and their drive for involvement in Invisible Children as Christian, but described the organization itself as welcoming to but not exclusively based in faith. Because of its polysemic, transmedia approach, what might be expected to be a particularly divisive issue is negotiated with seemingly surprising ease.

Another way to understand how Invisible Children manages its relationship to faith is through its use of music-- a productive medium for intertextuality and juxtaposition, as in a soundtrack or a playlist. Music is a big part of Invisible Children. The organization has a music blog, booths at music festivals, and a long list of "artist ambassadors." In many cases, music and music celebrities are used to raise awareness or funds, but music is also circulated as an important source of pleasure and inspiration. Many interviewees describe the use of music in the films as key to their power. When the LRA Disarmament Bill passed, a major milestone for the organization, the main *Invisible Children* blog featured a "This Bill Just Passed!" playlist to help members "dance out [their] feelings" of happiness[4]. As in the films, everyday life in Invisible

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4 http://blog.invisiblechildren.com/2010/05/a-this-bill-just-passed-dance-party-playlist/

Children is scored by a powerful soundtrack.

Invisible Children uses music to negotiate secular and Christian subjectivities. At least one interviewee became aware of Invisible Children through the advocacy of Christian rock band Switchfoot. In the Invisible Children "soundtrack," Christian bands are played alongside secular music, as well as artists like Sufjan Stevens and Tyrone Wells, who are best described as mainstream indie musicians who just happen to be Christian. This intertextual dialogue reflects an ecology of taste that is at ease with both Christian and secular media-- and Christian and secular subjectivities[5].

Spreadability and Drillability

Spreadability, the focus of Jenkins et al's (forthcoming, 2012) book, refers to the extent to which media can be engaged with and shared in a way that increases its economic value and social worth. They contrast spreadable media's ability to "circulate" with "distribution," a model in which "movement of media content is heavily—or totally—controlled by the commercial interests that produce and sell it." Spreadability, instead, is "an emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways." Mittell (2009) offers "drillability" as a corrective but complementary characteristic. He writes, "Spreadable media

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[5] It is less clear to what extent Invisible Children can appeal to those outside of this somewhat limited taste community, particularly its Ugandan beneficiaries. It has long-emphasized the essential similarity, even interchangeability, between the two groups. After all, it encourages the former to use their own visible bodies in solidarity with the latter, who have been systematically made invisible, and its foundational myth hinges on a "promise to a friend." There is not enough space to fully do justice to this topic here. For a fuller discussion of the visual culture of Invisible Children and the contradictions of transnational humanitarianism, see Brough, 2011.

encourages horizontal ripples, accumulating eyeballs without necessarily encouraging more long-term engagement. Drillable media typically engage far fewer people, but occupy more of their time and energies in a vertical descent into a text's complexities." By putting the two terms in conversation with each other, Jenkins (2009) suggests that transmedia storytelling will likely have both properties working dynamically to engage audiences.

In transmedia storytelling mobilization, both spreadability and drillability can refer to the way the movement structures access to information about the cause and the organization itself. The extent to which the group "raises awareness" is largely dependent on how spreadable their message is. Drillability, on the other hand, describes the learning opportunities that exist beyond initial contact with the message. Both features are necessary for newcomers to become advocates of the cause.

Invisible Children makes information about itself and its work in central Africa very easy to share while at the same time allowing groups and individuals to personalize its meaning, amplifying spreadability. One way it does this is through fairly open content distribution. Although screenings where roadies show Invisible Children films to school and church audiences play a big role in the Movement, DVDs of the 9 major films are available for purchase and have, at various times, also been available for free, streaming online or on YouTube. Each purchase of the *Rough Cut* comes with two DVDs, one to keep and one to share. Invisible Children does not explicitly use Creative Commons licensing, but it does practice and encourage the free exchange of its materials, stating on the FAQs section of its website:

> *We at IC make every effort to spread the word about the plight of those in northern Uganda, and we realize that having access to "Invisible Children: Rough Cut" is vital to helping this movement grow. As we pass the torch to you, we ask you use the documentary and Invisible Children logo responsibly—only to raise awareness and benefit Invisible Children, Inc.*

and:

> *We want everyone to have FREE access to "Invisible Children: Rough Cut." Be creative and make your screening unique. The only thing we insist is that you don't charge for admission.*

Similarly, Invisible Children takes pains to enable its staff, volunteers, roadies, and other representatives to give accurate information about central Africa and its work there. One intern was careful to correct herself when she said, "war torn," replacing it with, "impacted by war." Roadies in particular cite being equipped with information that would allow to them to speak confidently in any crowd as a particularly valuable part of their training. This information is often dispersed in short, quotable chunks, making it easier to spread in a way that seems particularly effective for the college and high school aged audiences who may have little, if any, prior exposure to the history of central Africa.

Providing drillable wells of knowledge does not seem to be as much of a priority for Invisible Children. Its blog does feature, at least monthly, a "Peace and Conflict Update" on current events in central Africa, but the official description of the history of the war in northern Uganda, a main tab on its website, is less than 1,200 words long, and this information tends to be repeated rather than augmented across media.

In some circumstances, inadequate drillability can undermine Invisible Children's otherwise powerful transmedia story. This is true, for example, when a critic, claiming to be Ugandan, makes comments in multiple Invisible Children blog posts suggesting that Jolly Okot, now the director of Invisible Children's direct aid programs and featured heavily in many of the films, has compromising political ties to the Ugandan government and the LRA. A curious Invisible Children supporter, wanting to drill deeper into these claims, is thwarted from enacting questions across media because the link to the profiles of the Uganda-based staff is broken and

has been "Coming Soon" for many months. Because Invisible Children is more focused on enabling spreadability than drillability, it relinquishes opportunities to more thoroughly and credibly describe the good work it is no doubt doing.

This lack of intentional drillability is further exacerbated by cultural and technological asymmetries between the way the Ugandan and American representatives of Invisible Children share data about themselves in unofficial ways across the Internet. For example, even for the most savvy transmedia navigators, finding any information online one way or the other about Jolly Okot's actual political history is very difficult. However, simply by clicking through a series of links or performing a quick search, any interested party can find a personal blog in which a high-ranking member of the American Invisible Children staff makes a joke that, especially in a low-context medium, might be seen as racially insensitive. The lack of drillable information about the leaders in Uganda and the excess of it about those in America equally undermine the credibility of the organization.

It may seem like a violation of privacy to even locate this content, but privacy norms are certainly in flux broadly in American society and even more so with regard to an organization that constitutes itself through a transmedia documentary practice in which leaders are living the story. For example, one roadie interviewed stated that she kept two Facebook profiles, one for Invisible Children and one for her personal life, mostly because she didn't want her friends and family to be inundated by Invisible Children supporters while she was on tour. Transmedia storytelling mobilization organizations must structure meaningful, accurate, drillable stories or at least set clear norms about what "real life" information is in play in the "nonfiction" stories they are trying to produce.

Invisible Children might also take a cue from modes of fan practice that generate deep

wells of information. Mittell (2009) recounts the "particular sense of pride" he felt as a contributor and leader on the fan wiki Lostpedia. He describes the "ludic narrative logic" of *Lost* which generated "a mode of television engagement encouraging research, collaboration, analysis, and interpretation." The Invisible Children story world, with its many personalities, events, and locales, is rich with drillable opportunities that might be channeled toward on-going, persistent collective intelligence challenges. To date, Invisible Children has included elements that encourage some drillable play into their campaigns and blogs, hiding "easter eggs" on campaign materials, for example, but none that could lead to a project as complex as Lostpedia.

With fan wikis as a model, an Invisible Children wiki could provide space for aggregating knowledge and questions about, for example, life in central Africa and the organization's work there. Unlike the bounded universe of even the most expansive fiction, the real world is infinitely drillable. Invisible Children's challenge, then, might be to nurture the encyclopedic impulse among its members and direct it in ways that might directly benefit its work. Such proliferation of detail by non-staff participants would meaningfully expand its content world.

Participant Performances

Although Invisible Children does not have a clear "mothership" property, the primary sites of worldbuilding are the films and the campaigns. Documentation of these activities provides raw material that is cycled back into the production of new films and spread across other media. But there would be nothing to document without the people who participate in the campaigns, attend screenings, and start clubs. However, not all the performances necessary to fuel the Invisible Children content world have the same opportunity to become part of its

narrative canon.

Campaigns, designed and organized by staff, provide the greatest opportunity for non-staff performances to enter into the content world. Some, like the *Global Night Commute* have been rather spectacular and coordinated. The recurring *Schools4Schools* campaign-- in which Invisible Children clubs at schools raise money for schools in Uganda and compete to win a "trip of a lifetime," an all expense paid trip to Uganda-- is more open-ended. Members from American schools in each regional cluster that raise the most money and from the school with the "top creative idea" for fundraising are invited. Individual school efforts are profiled and creative idea videos are shown on the Invisible Children official blog, but those members who travel to Uganda are further invited into the content world.

Go (2008), the second film produced by Invisible Children, featured the experiences of three *Schools4Schools* winners as they traveled to Uganda. As Brough (forthcoming 2011, p 15) argues, the events depicted in *Go* do constitute a form of "humanitarian adventure and consumption, reminiscent of the imperial adventure marketed and consumed in the 19th century," but they also represent a desire to collaborate on the story of the movement, to have one's performances included in the transmedia content world.

Transmedia narratives afford participants various modes of engagement. They may enter *into* the content world -- as visitors to The Wizarding World of *Harry Potter* theme park are invited to do. They may also pull content from the world into their own everyday lives -- taking a replica of Hermoine's Time-Turner necklace home from the theme park, for example. Jenkins (2009) describes these categories as "immersive" and "extractable," respectively.

Perhaps the concept of immersiveness, defined strictly, is not as relevant to transmedia storytelling mobilization as it might be to fictional worlds that can be extended into theme parks,

museums and other spatial transmedia extensions. However, it can be used to describe the extent to which the organization affords immersive involvement. For Invisible Children, this opportunity is available primarily to Uganda trip winners, staff, interns, and roadies.

Roadies are particularly important to the transmedia story because they travel across the United States in vans, showing the most current Invisible Children film to school and church groups. The roadie experience lasts about 5 months, almost all of which is spent "on tour." Roadies are unpaid but raise $1500 in preparation for their experience and incur very little expenses while on the road, as they usually stay with hosts at each screening. In addition to speaking to large groups, showing the films, and holding question and answer sessions, they make their own screening schedules, sell merchandise, manage inventory using professional sales software, and load and unload the van. In the last couple of years, each team has had one Ugandan roadie who shares how his or her life has been affected by war and helped by Invisible Children. In general, roadie teams live in very close quarters, work very long hours, and emerge with intense bonds. The immersiveness of the roadie experience is emphasized by interviewees who report a sense of re-entry shock upon ending their experience and coming back to "ordinary life."

The process of selecting roadies is highly competitive and those who are chosen become closely linked to the official content world. The roadie performance is not limited to presentations given at screening events during the tour. Rather, the daily lives of roadies are documented and circulated throughout the organization as videos, images, and blog posts - some of which provides raw materials for the production of future video and print materials. To be a roadies is to become an embodied character into the world of Invisible Children.

Equally important is Invisible Children's wide array of extractable media for use in

everyday life. A major component of Invisible Children is this apparel or "merch": trendy graphic t-shirts, pins, hoodies and the like, as well as the bracelets and bags handmade by Ugandan women. At one level, this "merch" can be seen, as it is by Brough (2011), as a form of lifestyle activism that turns consumption into an act of self-authoring. Similarly, Banet-Weiser and Lapsanksy (2009) describe how the RED campaign, an example of "lifestyle activism," links the purchase of specially-branded goods to HIV/AIDS relief. Like Invisible Children, RED focuses its philanthropic efforts on Africa and describes itself as "crazy" and "revolutionary." Banet-Wieser and Lapsanksy show how RED offers up a form of "consumer activism" that brings social action into compatibility with neoliberal capitalism and depoliticizes and obscures the social structures and historical trajectories that led to the HIV/AIDS crisis. By purchasing a RED t-shirt or iPod, consumers can assuage guilt about consumption and demonstrate their support of a good cause without ever learning anything.

       What is most interesting about Invisible Children apparel, however, is how it functions as extractable extensions of the story. Johnson (2007) describes the way items from transmedia fictional worlds accelerate the "seepage of virtual, diegetic spaces into the tangible realm of the everyday" (72). He writes, "these extensions of the multiplatformed television property invite fans to make their closets and workspaces into overlapping sites of the everyday and the hyperdiegetic" (72). With Invisible Children, nearly all items are designed to elicit questions and require explanation. Most interviewees who talked about the merch emphasized that they provided a trigger for conversations. Because the meaning of most of the apparel is not self-evident, it creates a gap to be filled in by the wearer, who is prepared with information about the cause, the movement, and their own relationship to it. When asked about her Invisible Children bracelet, for example, one interviewee gave information about the bracelet-making social

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entrepreneurship program but also about Roseline, the person profiled in the attached DVD, who was born with HIV/AIDS, a disease that kills close to 100,000 Ugandans each year.

A particularly controversial shirt, created for the *Rescue* campaign, stated in big letters "i heart the LRA" and then in smaller letters, "*90% of the LRA are abducted children. Come to THE RESCUE." This intentionally provocative shirt provided a rich text for members of Invisible Children to explain their complicated perception of the situation in Uganda. Of course, the shirt's provocation relies on others knowing what the LRA is, being sufficiently curious about what the wearer "hearts" or getting close enough to inquire about abducted children.

By thinking about the way that apparel functions as a form of extractable media, made for use in the everyday lives of participants, it can be understood strategically as part of a larger transmedia story and as more than just consumer activism. A more recent shirt comes with 3D glasses and says, "Do More Than Just Watch" in 3D letters. This shirt, especially if paired with the 3D glasses, serves as conversation starter, but it also shows a certain self-consciousness about the spectatorship inherent in a media-based activism organization.

Even though Invisible Children provides immersive and extractable means for participating in the content world, these activities are often prescribed and authorized by staff. In this way, they are not unlike transmedia efforts deployed by commercial media. The goal of commercial ancillary content models has ostensibly been to offer highly engaged fans the opportunity to drill into or creatively augment the story world. Although these models offer opportunities to "participate," they also place boundaries upon this participation. For example, Scott (2009) describes Scifi.com's *Battlestar Galactica Video Maker Toolkit*, a website on which fans could access episode video files with which to make remixes. The footage offered consisted of mostly action sequences which were of limited use to the *Battlestar Galactica* fan vidder

community. FanLib, a for-profit fan fiction site, provides a similarly problematic example. As Hellekson (2009) describes, FanLib attempted to commodify fan fiction in exchange for opportunities to meet producers and other prizes that held little value in the fan community. Hellekson emphasizes that "outside attempts made to reconfigure the field of value in such a way as to attempt to control the community component without the community members' cooperation" will be met with extreme resistance and ultimate collapse. "Fan communities," she writes, "clearly cannot be constituted by anyone other than the fans themselves."

In some ways, Invisible Children similarly structures the participation of its members. For the *25* campaign, for example, participants pledged to remain silent for 25 hours to spread awareness about 25 years of war in Uganda and raise funds to support Invisible Children's humanitarian work. Invisible Children produced kits that included step-by-step instructions for all aspects of the campaign, a t-shirt to wear on the appropriate day, a template for writing a letter to a political leader, and a set of cards explaining participants' silence to teachers. While the action kit enabled a powerful, coordinated, and consistent demonstration, it provided little room for deliberation or even customization by non-staff participants. The prize offered to top fundraisers, a trip to Uganda with Invisible Children, resembled some of the prizes offered by commercial transmedia campaigns such as visiting film sets or meeting a show's screenwriters. Like professional producers, Invisible Children staff members use access to the sanctioned content world as a reward and act as gatekeepers by curating the performances that can become part of that content world.

Invisible Children differs in a few important respects from attempts to repackage and monetize fan practices. First, because the content world of Invisible Children is a nonfictional account of shared activism, there is no a clear boundary between audience-participants and staff

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producers. This ambiguity leads to a second key distinction. Unlike some commercial producers, Invisible Children staff are not trying to corral a community whose investment in and knowledge of a fictional world likely exceeds and predates their own. Invisible Children staff are seen as legitimate leaders of the community, grassroots organizers whose participation became professionalized. In the Invisible Children "field of value," the opportunity to meet staff or have one's ideas incorporated into the canon *is* rewarding. It is seen as an opportunity to play a bigger role in the Movement, to effect social change and inspire others.

Crucially, Invisible Children is motivated by social change, not profit. The desire to exert control over the content world emerges at least in part from sensitivity to the challenges of transnational advocacy. After all, encouraging privileged American youth to creatively and fearlessly raise funds and awareness for central Africa may produce well-intentioned but offensive or at least unsubtle material. The stakes for ensuring that its overall message is appropriate, spreadable, and coherent take on a moral imperative.

However, just because a group has a humanitarian mission does not mean that it creates the conditions for participants to learn about or have a say in how that mission is carried out. Even though staff members have legitimacy in the community, they still act as gatekeepers who offer clearly defined and limited opportunities to act. Invisible Children is currently exploring ways to develop non-staff leadership through an activism training summer camp called *The Fourth Estate*. The extent to which these non-staff leaders will be able to influence the Invisible Children content world remains to be seen. If participants in *The Fourth Estate* are issued talking points and trained to moderate remix contests reminiscent of the *Battlestar Galactica Video Toolkit*, the event may simply shore up a divide between staff producers and audience-participants. However, if they are mentored to substantively contribute in the same way the

founders themselves did-- by doing what they do best and are most passionate about-- it may significantly strengthen and diversify the Movement, even at the risk of incoherence to the transmedia story.

Conclusion: "Beliebers" and fan base wars

Although Invisible Children is not a fan activism organization, there is the sense among staff that at least some Invisible Children supporters can be considered "fans" of Invisible Children media. However, as an Invisible Children staff member explained in a meeting, "Our fans are more like Justin Bieber fans than Harry Potter fans." Whereas the politics of "traditional" fandom have been marked by a creative and, most importantly, critical engagement with mainstream texts, Invisible Children fandom, like that of "Beliebers"[6] is marked by an almost audacious lack of cynicism. This is a mobilizing mode of fandom, one that aligned with Invisible Children's value system, which emphasizes action over questioning.

Invisible Children seems to have not yet experienced what De Kosnik describes as "war between fan bases." Typically, fandom is understood as a collective that facilitates creativity around and mobilizes support for its shared object of interest. However, as De Kosnik describes, sometimes factions within fandoms come into deep contention over those objects. De Kosnik uses the idea of fan base war to write about the schism between supporters of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton during the 2008 Democratic party presidential primaries. As Clinton supporters became the "marginalized fandom," some bitterly rejected the Democratic party entirely.

Although De Kosnik praises emotionally-charged fan-like politics as "a step in the right

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6 "Beliebers" refers to Justin Bieber fans, who are defended against those who would mock "mainstream" tastes in this Invisible Children blog post
http://blog.invisiblechildren.com/2011/02/we-are-beliebers-and-heres-why/

direction-- away from apathy and toward participation," she is also concerned with what happens

in the aftermath of a fan base war, particularly when these conflicts have such high stakes. "Fan

base wars do not often end amicably, with both sides metaphorically shaking hands over a battle

well fought," she writes. Although De Kosnik warns of "the danger of endless fragmentation and

splintering that can never truly coalesce or coagulate into unity behind a specific political

program," she has hopes that, through fannish investment, politics may lead to "the proliferation

of differences that will results in a richer liberalism, a society of greater dimensions, and more

fully realized democracy." Perhaps because of its uncynical, "Belieber"-like mode of fandom,

Invisible Children has been insulated against this kind of in-fighting. The drawback of this stance

is that it may be unprepared to deal with such tensions should they arise[7].

Creating more opportunities for participants to make Invisible Children's content world

their own might dilute the coherence of its transmedia story or twist it away from the staff's

vision, but by becoming more like a fandom-- more drillable, more open, more deliberative--

Invisible Children might aspire to effect greater and more long-lasting social change.

Acknowledgements

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7 Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, a similar problem is facing Obama fandom at the
moment, whose dominance has sunk at the time of writing. Invisible Children could also face
marginalization if it too finds that the audacious hope storyline has run its course.

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