

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only.

MARCH 13, 2012

The Rise of the Flashpublics

My Little Kony

by JACK BRATICH

When early 20th century imagineers of the mass mind (Walter Lippman, Harold Lasswell, George Creel, Edward Bernays, among others) sought to understand and harness the power of crowds and publics via communications technologies, they couldn't have predicted the rise of social media. But no matter. These weren't prophets; they were intellectual technicians who set the stage and developed the tools for future perception managers, who then could incorporate whatever media would eventually arise.

To wit, the recent internet sensation KONY 2012. Readers are likely familiar with the phenomenon as well as the critical swarm of responses to it, and curious minds can find a good early introduction and critique [here](#). Some critics have pointed out, quite rightly, that KONY 2012 (here on in K-12) appears as a one-man crusade, a self-congratulatory expression of Jason Russell's personal journey. But Russell's missionary position doesn't explain the video's massive appeal. There is no "I" in meme, but there are (at least) two "me"s. It's the connection and circulation that matters. We can ruthlessly refute the film, but we also need to understand the very real draw it has/had with young people. I don't have a large data set on this (though someone at Invisible Children or a third party is surely running the numbers) but in my user experience, the sole sharers of the meme were current or recently graduated students from the university where I'm employed (based only on facebook posts not twitter or tumblr which were crucial to K-12's spread). As a pedagogical moment, this means not short-circuiting the outrage over atrocities or the desire for taking that emotion/information to the streets. The last thing we need to do is induce embarrassment and shame in others for their enthusiasm. Rather, let's look at what K-12 has innovated and what type of remedy is still recoverable within its poisons.

Drawing on the power of social media to mobilize sentiment and bodies (a la the Arab Spring) K-12 mutates the transnational socially-networked public opinion from a year ago in a few ways. First, it wants to turn information into action, getting US users not only to share their outrage and pass along info, but also to get out into the streets. K-12's April 20 day of action is thus reminiscent of Occupy Wall Street's meme, an information unit that also embedded a call for action complete with a date and place (more on OWS later). Second, the mutation of the Arab Spring involves the choice of target. Theaters like Egypt were presented via dramatic narratives involving classic binary characters: social media-mobilizing crowds vs. social media-blocking State despots (as I've argued [elsewhere](#), this story oversimplifies the events as they also involved the emergence of new network sovereigns). Instead of a State sovereign like Mubarak, the K-12 target is a State-defined insurgent enemy. Of course, my essay is not an apologia for Joseph Kony and his thuggish ways, nor is it a romanticization of any rebel army (which most often represent mini-tyrants in training). My point here is to note the political alignment this meme demands. K-12 is essentially a global distributed manhunt, a nascent dystopic experiment reminiscent of *Running Man* and *Logan's Run*, but now updated for a *Hunger Games* generation in which spectatorship turns into participation and intervention.

Another innovation in K-12 is in the video form itself, especially the anomalous "introduction", which I think of as a preparatory inductive technique. Regardless of the content of the rest of the video, the preface (which is also pre-face—a mask) furnishes instructions on how to *use* the video. After some slow moving cosmic images get us close to a trance state, the video shows a string of emotionally laden vid-bursts, many recognizable from recent collective cultural memory banks. In each case, the affective image power is followed by an action shot of someone clicking "share" or "send". The preface sets us up for a longer emotional ride whose conclusion is not an embodied feeling but an embodied action (must. click.). This sorcerous induction also performs a perverse shamanic gesture by revealing what it's doing to us. At the end of the preface, we are told that 1) what follows is an experiment and 2) "in order for it to work you must pay attention." In other words, lie still and keep your eye on the Joker. It's as though Criss Angel did actually disappear in one of his stunts only to be reborn as a videomaker. We even get an updated version of the hypnotist's swinging watch, now a digital countdown that simultaneously shows us how long we'll be going under and reminds us of the 24-ish urgency of the matter.

Because of these inventive combinations, I'm calling K-12 a "flashpublic". A subset of what Tiziana Terranova calls futurepublics, these are reminiscent of flashmobs, as flashpublics are designed to assemble people rapidly for an event. However, this flashcollective is specifically issue-oriented and more widely dispersed (as the eventual "meeting spot"

itself is unknown and distributed). The flash of the flashpublic is a quick mobilization of attention and sharing towards a predefined political objective. It involves what Anna Gibbs calls an “affective contagion” tied to processes that early 20th century social theorists associated with sympathy, suggestion, even mass *hypnosis*. The flash fuses the condensed time of *transduction* (sharing, sending, connecting, composing) with the time of *induction* (priming, pacing, guiding, binding), all designed to generate mental/bodily states in viewers resulting in increased suggestibility.

In other words, the flash of the flashpublic is related not just to quick time (e.g. what advertising magic does when it invokes transformation in an “instant”). It is also akin to the flashbulb or the flash grenade whose purpose is temporary blinding and stunning. As with the legerdemain so crucial to sleight-of-hand stage and street magic, we need to ask, “What does the K-12 flashpublic occlude? From what does it misdirect us?”

While there are many ideological mystifications in the flash, I would just point out one—its relationship to the Occupy movement. The K-12 video opens with a mimicry of OWS’s revival of Victor Hugo’s exclamation, “Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.” It also, as mentioned above, mirrors the call for a day of action. But this is a fun house mirror, grotesquely exaggerating the proportions of the body politic involved. Why? Because the mobilization for action is one already determined as an instrument for someone else’s goals. Eventually, all public K-12 action is to result in a deferral of action to proper authorities (the NGO Invisible Children, the governments of the US and Uganda). This should come as no surprise, as Invisible Children was one of the first (and highly touted) participants in the US State-Department-facilitated [Alliance of Youth Movements](#), even discussed in State Department staffer-cum-Google Ideas exec Jared Cohen’s press conference announcing the AYM.

So what does this “favored youth NGO status” do in its mimicry? Rather than giving people a way to shape the movement’s objectives (endemic to OWS), K-12 essentially recruits free laborers for its specific cause. Moreover, this mimicry does more than add another event to the political activist landscape—it displaces and substitutes, even pre-empts others. K-12 functions as a counter-radicalization program, no longer focused on American Jihadists, but on domestic dissenters (like anarchists classified by the FBI as one of four types of domestic terrorists). Youth are dissuaded from seeing in their own neighborhoods and local organizations the opportunity to get involved in street activism and direct action in which they also shape the goals. Instead, they are routed into a heavily pre-organized package, complete with easy heroes/enemies and a game-like scenario. Who knows—maybe by the summer they’ll develop a mobile application that not only allows uploading surveillance info on Kony, but updates the missile shooting app seen in the K-12 video by linking up to local drones who will finish off the job.

In any event, the OWS dissuasive mimicry is unlikely an intentional dimension of K-12. But like all good experiments, unintended consequences emerge and we can hope to see many Streisand effects unleashed. We’ve already witnessed a swarm of online responses and critiques, even countermemes (my fave is [TONY 2012](#), returning the meme to the true network despots and war criminals). And if flashpublics, like flashmobs, end up in practical street action, what new mutations will we see on 4/20? OWS has already demonstrated its playful inventiveness when it comes to flashmobs much to the chagrin of law-enforcement, who can only apparently respond with the plodding repression usually reserved for lumbering automatons. Maybe the US Spring begins slightly earlier than Mayday? Or maybe Anonymous, unless it’s hampered by snitches and roundups, will have an April shower. We’ve been given K-12. Perhaps it’s time for Operation Early Graduation?

Jack Bratich is Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University. He is also a zine librarian at ABC No Rio in New York City. He can be reached at jbratich@gmail.com