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Invisible Children and the rise of young Africa, at least online

By Bernard Tabaire ([email the author](#))

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Kony 2012 raced through social media into the stratosphere in record time. The reaction was immediate – using the same social media. Led, roughly speaking, by journalist-cum-blogger-cum-social media junkie Rosebell Kagumire, Ugandans, and indeed other Africans, mixed it up.

The other Ugandan quick off the blocks was the journalist Angelo Izama. Then there were some really brilliant takes by the Ugandan-born social media strategist TMS “Teddy” Ruge and the Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole. All these people’s take was disapproving. Many others from different parts of the world – especially the West – joined them.

Of course, there were many, maybe the majority of the millions, who loved the film, even in Uganda. Journalist Muhereza Kyamutetera for one. He kicked off a firestorm on the wildly active Facebook group page dedicated to Ugandan journalists.

Either way, Invisible Children had inadvertently roused more than those interested in seeing Joseph Kony in handcuffs. Those who care about black Africa – especially black Africans themselves – are revved up.

Soon enough, Invisible Children was on the defensive on points ranging from the film’s techniques to its facts and the organisation’s spending ways. The Invincibles were not all that after all. Changing the course of history, apparently, ain’t no easy business.

But, finally, here we are – in the twenty-first century. Africa is pushing back in real time on (somewhat) equal platform. Everyone is free to define and redefine Africa in his or her own image. That definition, however, shall no longer go un-interrogated. Swiftly and robustly. The fight is fully joined.

Gone are the days when people like Joseph Conrad, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Joyce Cary and hundreds others, plus revered Western cultural institutions such as The Economist (hey Hopeless Magazine!), would say whatever they fancied about us and would go unchallenged for ages until a lonely Achebe or Raufu Mustapha or Paul Zeleza stepped forward.

In the place of book-length responses contained in heavy-sounding titles like Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism, today’s Africa, mostly under 35, is responding in 140 characters and doing so with panache.

(To her credit, Ms Kagumire posted a video critique of Kony 2012 on YouTube as an immediate response.) If social media is where the world “that matters” is playing at, the “world that matters less” is ready and willing to go there to play as well. As ICTs become more affordable, the continent’s people are primed to take the world on more than ever.

It has been a long time coming. The decline of the African academy – not that it always existed to defend Africa, but at least it always exhibited a higher level of awareness as a result of lived, and not merely studied, experience – partly because of interference by governments that feared centres of learning for their contrarian ways (former President Mbeki concedes the point) allowed for Africa to be mischaracterised without challenge even for decades. The way it is done is sometimes galling.

It is common at respectable western universities to hear non-African academics, even very well meaning ones, begin their serious seminar presentations thus: “I just returned from Uganda last evening.” That supposedly is enough to imbue the presentation, after just two months of fieldwork in the said Uganda, with infallibility.

Those who mention the country of research interest are a rarity. Most simply say: “I just returned from Africa last week.” Africa is a country. Yeah. The Africa-is-a-country formulation is the type of stupidity that Africans are dismantling, most times using humour, on social media. As they should.

Should anyone doubt Africa’s new resolve, he or she should ask not just Invisible Children, but CNN too. Days after the Kony 2012 madness peaked, CNN characterised a bomb blast in Nairobi as the eruption of violence. Kenyans could have none of the rubbish. Using Twitter, mainly, they denounced CNN and demanded an apology. CNN pulled the whole thing in record time and offered something of an apology.

Well, it is game on. And the course of history may just be changed, for real, while we are at it.

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