“Who are you to end a war? I am here to tell you, who are you not to?” said Jason Russell in his “Kony 2012” video. The video is one of 300 uploaded to YouTube.com by a group called the Invisible Children, a non-profit, social activist organization that aims to end the use of child soldiers in Joseph Kony’s rebel army, whose members are abducted from their beds and forced to kill their parents, to mutilate and murder civilians, and to surrender their bodies.

Russell’s video chronicles the Invisible Children’s Kony 2012 initiative which endeavors to make famous Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), one of many rebel groups operated from northern Africa. The Kony 2012’s initiatives involve media, advocacy, and development programs.

Kony 2012’s ultimate goal is to find and arrest Joseph Kony who, according to Global Security, “believed that he was a prophet sent from God to purify the people of Uganda and to create a bastion of peace.” Kony means to do this through destruction and mutilation. His authoritative power stems from his military background and extremist religious beliefs as well as his creation of the Uganda Christian Democratic Army, which later became the LRA.

Since Russell’s video was uploaded to YouTube on March 5, it has gone viral. Over 100 million people have viewed it online and the numbers of viewers increase at the highest rate in history, according to Time magazine and The New York Times.

The video suggests that in making his face familiar, there will be added pressure on the government to maintain American support in Uganda toward finding and arresting Kony. In turn, the cruelties of the LRA’s child armies will be stopped.

In the video, a boy named Jacob, Russell’s friend and a victim of the rebel war, discusses the way in which children must literally run for their lives. Jacob comments on how it is better that his brother is dead. Russell quotes, “Where you live shouldn’t determine whether you live.”

The U-Mary community is not isolated from the Kony 2012 publicity. Out of 165 U-Mary students polled, only 28 were unaware of the movement. Ninety-seven of the 137 students who were aware supported it.

The surprising statistic was that only 47 students out of the surveyed group had any sort of prior knowledge of the LRA or had done any kind of background research after seeing Russell’s “Kony 2012” video. Over half of these students stated that their background research consisted entirely of watching the video.

Others reported hearing about it on Facebook or hearing dialogue around campus among fellow students. Haleigh Erickson stated, “For as much as I know about it, I am in support of it,” and Austin Wald said “I haven’t watched the video, but I’ve heard of it.” The on-campus survey goes to show that the U-Mary community is very aware, even when the details are not yet fully fleshed out.

Cory German, a U-Mary student, said, “It happened more than a decade ago. Why are they bringing it up now?” and Chantel Ehli raised a similar question when she said, “It’s been around for so long, so why now?” The Invisible Children initiated the Kony 2012 movement nine years ago, but the massive abundance of recent hype has been inspired by Russell’s video alone.

Many of the surveyed students reported participation in debates or classroom discussions. Dr. Mark Springer, the Associate Professor Political Science, chose to discuss the movement in his classes. He remarked that students are aware of it, mostly because of the sharing on
Facebook, but his concern is about the amount of history and background that is present in students’ awareness. Springer was surprised that many of his students have not watched the entire video. “I think that’s where the overall understanding of what the issues are is kind of lacking,” Springer stated, “They get that he is a bad guy and he does these things to these kids, but what should the response be? How do we deal with that? Does this happen elsewhere?”

Springer felt this issue was relevant in his courses because students were able to dig deeper into this issue through classroom discussions. “It made them think about the broader, global implication,” Springer said, whose students’ general responses were that Kony has indeed committed serious crimes. His students were, however, worried about the United States’ involvement as they learned about the already extended nature of the American military and the very specific viewpoint that is represented in the “Kony 2012” video. “That background information is important to understand because if you just take that video at face value, you could be easily misled. What I’m hoping as an educator is that they take away from it is to question multiple angles of the story and get all the information,” Springer said.

One student in particular had a very specific connection to the movement. Wendy Irion, a student at U-Mary, has friends who have lived off and on in a village in Uganda for the past few years. Irion did not report her friends having said anything specifically about the Kony 2012 movement or the LRA, but, because of their experience with mission work, Irion’s friends encouraged her to become aware of the situation that surrounded the people there. “They said it was really important that they encouraged the people to be strong in their political standings and not be afraid to voice their opinions, which is somewhat dangerous over there, especially for them because when you’re from America and you’re a white female that’s younger its really dangerous,” Irion said.

Irion’s friends worked with orphans in Uganda who were very much affected by the rebel groups, but “For them it’s kind of the normal way of life,” Irion said. Irion’s friends enjoyed the people of Uganda, but the political unrest was prevalent. “They said the people over there are really great, it’s just the government is in shambles pretty much so the people really want to voice their opinions,” Irion said, “It’s challenging though, especially with how things are set up there, how it’s just a smaller kind of village and it’s not very united.”

Irion supported the people of Uganda, saying “No one needs someone like that in control where it’s harmful to the people.” Irion had not seen Russell’s “Kony 2012” video, but reported seeing a similar video in the past that was also directed by Invisible Children. She said, “You can really see the damage it can do when the wrong person is in charge of things so as many people that can support it as possible would just be a great thing.”

Critics argue primarily against the group’s motives, financial practices, and support of the Ugandan army. In an MSNBC NewsNation broadcast Toure, a journalist and an MSNBC contributor, states, “We can be critical or nuance about the Stop Kony movement slash video and still think that Joseph Kony is a horrible person and should be stopped. Those are two separate things.”

Toure comments on the emotional manipulation of Russell’s film, claiming it deemphasizes the reality of the situation. Stacey Johnson, a U-Mary student, reported “I support raising awareness, just not necessarily how they are doing it if everything in the video is not entirely factual.”

Irion also reported having an indirect encounter with an escapee from Rwanda whose family was killed. He ended up in a refugee camp and eventually made it to the United States. “He came to North Dakota and his story was really inspirational,” Irion said, “He walked
however many miles at a really young age and was crawling across the ground at night to make sure he wasn’t seen.”

Many of the movement’s critics claim that the video is wrong in making Kony out to be the only bad guy in the world while cruelty of the same nature is happening in many other places around the world as well. “There’s definitely a lot more going on than just that, but he’s definitely a big problem,” Irion said.

Toure claims that there is no pressure to remove the American advisors in Uganda. “They’re going to be able to respond to the charge of slacktivism, of promoting that, of giving people this thing that they can worry about and care about and tweet about and facebook about and thus feel like, I have done something. No you haven’t actually done something,” Toure said, “That’s not sitting in. That’s not marching. That is not the old school activism that actually makes changes. It’s like, if we bang this gong, somebody somewhere will do something. That’s not enough.”

The term “slacktivism” is a colloquialism coined through the combination of “slacker” and “activism,” alluding to the illusion of being a part of something when no real activity is actually performed. Toure raises the question of whether the change for which Kony 2012 gathers its massive populations is relevant and meaningful and that hearing Invisible Children’s response to critics in this awaited film by the group would be valuable.

Besides the group’s motives, critics also raise questions of the group’s spending trends. According to MSNBC, 80% of funds go toward “group expenses” (quotation MSNBC’s). These group expenses could include work that is performed on the frontlines, such as building schools; supporting the international community of group members; and funding the awareness campaign. Critics wonder whether the money spent on these advertising campaigns could be put to better use.

On Tuesday, March 13, Ben Keesey, co-founder and CEO of Invisible Children, released a response video in which he thanks supporters and responds to criticism. He claims, “It’s about bringing awareness via media and advocacy.”

The mission of the Kony 2012 movement focuses making Joseph Kony famous in order to find and arrest him. Russel says, “It’s obvious that Kony should be stopped. The problem is that 99% of the planet does not know who he is. If they knew, Kony would have been stopped long ago.” The caption to Russell’s video, as seen on the Kony 2012 website, reads “Kony 2012 is a film and campaign by Invisible Children that aims to make Joseph Kony famous, not to celebrate him, but to raise support for his arrest to set a precedent for international justice.”

The way the Invisible Children utilize their donations and funds is recorded in spending reports that are available for public viewing on their website. Thus, supporters have the ability to research real data if the time and effort is spent in research. It is this kind of information that allows people to form independent opinions on this point of discussion.

Financial and activist support of the Invisible Children supports the mission of the Kony movement, which consists mainly of raising awareness through the use of media and advocacy initiatives such as their Cover the Night event on April 20th which invites communities to hang posters and pictures in the streets.

On the other side of the movement are those who are not in support and those who choose to support the cause through alternative means of charity. This does not mean that all non-supporters are against Kony’s arrest and/or international justice. To some, who are just as entitled to a personal opinion, supporting the Kony 2012 movement is not the same as supporting an end Joseph Kony’s and the LRA’s brutality.
“I really want them to think. I always tell my classes that I don’t care which direction your opinion takes you – if you like it, you don’t like it, you support something, you don’t support something. I just want you to formulate your opinion based on some evidence that you’ve generated,” Dr. Springer said, “That’s the best way to make the decision.”