The Islamic State's Use of Social Media: Terrorism's Siren Song in the Digital Age

Adam Hoffman

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Islamic State is its extensive use of social media and its presence on social media. The organization's meteoric rise to global awareness in the summer of 2014 was accompanied not only by its conquest of vast territories in Iraq and Syria, but also by an impressive and well-planned, multilingual campaign on social media. This campaign, which included video clips, images, stylish magazines, Islamic chants (*nasheeds*), and widespread activity on Twitter, transformed the terms ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the organization's original name) and Islamic State from the labels of a small and brutal jihadist organization established after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 to a brand synonymous with global terrorism and Salafi Islam, familiar to every household in the West and the Arab world. Indeed, it was through its extensive and sophisticated activity on social media and the production of Hollywood-quality, horrific video clips that the Islamic State and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, became the new face of Islamic terrorism in the twenty-first century.

The Islamic State is not the first terrorist organization to exploit the internet and other technological tools of the Information Age. Al-Qaeda, founded by Osama Bin Laden in the late 1980s, already made extensive use of the internet,[1] while al-Shabaab, a Somali organization, began using Twitter in English as early as 2011.[2] Yet the use of these platforms never constituted a key feature of either organization's media strategy.

According to a comprehensive study by the British Quilliam Foundation, Islamic State propaganda has radically changed the nature of Salafi jihad media activity by abandoning the principle of operational security, typical of earlier terrorist organizations, for dynamism. The essential change lies in

the fact that the Islamic State now generates propaganda that can tailor and tell a story that will touch or horrify, depending on the particular audience.[3] This use of social media has enabled the Islamic State to present its narrative independently of traditional media (print, television, and radio), and to design the image it would like to see reflected in global public opinion. While in 1998 Osama Bin Laden had to announce the establishment of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders in the Pan-Arab newspaper *al-Quds al-Araby* and rely on al-Jazeera to broadcast his speeches, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Islamic State has been able to use social media, an open communications channel accessible to all, to produce and distribute hundreds of propaganda films and other media products to a vast audience without the restrictions and censorship imposed on traditional media. Indeed, the Islamic State's massive presence on social networks as well as its use of official production departments demonstrates that it is taking far greater advantage of these technological opportunities than any other non-state actor operating in cyberspace.

The Islamic State's Modus Operandi on Social Media

Several key media offices are responsible for producing and distributing the Islamic State's propaganda content. The al-Furqan and al-I'tisaam agencies produce Arab language films, the al-Hayat Media Center is in charge of films and publications for a Western audience, and al-Ajnad issues *nasheeds*. The Islamic State also runs a radio station named al-Bayan, which broadcasts propaganda in the territories of the Islamic caliphate, and a news agency that reports relevant news on Twitter. In addition to these important agencies, each province (*wilaya*) within the Islamic State has its own local media office to film and distribute videos and "photographed reports" about current events in its area.

According to a study published in August 2015, the local media agencies in the provinces are responsible for 78 percent of the Islamic State's media output.[4] The decentralized structure of key media agencies, combined with local media offices, account for the high volume and frequency of the Islamic State's publications: the study found that the various agencies generate an average of 18 media products a day.[5] This structure allows the Islamic State to create an impression of continual activity on a global scale (or at least one that extends beyond its core territories, i.e., Iraq and Syria), and

to demonstrate to its supporters that its forces are making steady progress toward building a caliphate and waging war on its enemies.

The principal innovation in the Islamic State's media strategy, as compared to that of earlier terrorist organizations, lies in its exploitation of social networks for spreading propaganda. Indeed, these networks, especially Twitter, constitute its main channels of communication. According to a comprehensive Brookings study of March 2015, supporters of the Islamic State operate at least 46,000 active Twitter accounts at any given moment;[6] senior American officials estimate that the organization generates 90,000 tweets per day.[7]

In addition to their massive public presence on Twitter, Islamic State supporters use "innocent" hashtags (content categories that correspond to a given subject), that is, ones unrelated to the organization or any other terrorist activity, in order to maximize the exposure to the Islamic State's messages in the general discourse on social media. They have thus used hashtags associated with the World Cup in 2014, as well as the referendum in Scotland, to distribute their videos and tweets among the general public.[8] This "hashtag hijacking" causes users who are not necessarily Islamic State supporters to transmit its propaganda, which is thus relayed to a Twitter audience of millions. Such use of Twitter, which takes optimal advantage of social media's decentralized structure and relies on the Islamic State's online supporters to distribute and promote its official propaganda, is unprecedented in the history of terrorist organizations.[9]

The Islamic State's reliance on the decentralization of the internet is not incidental, but rather part of a deliberate strategy to spread its messages and maintain its online presence in the long term. An official e-book issued by the Islamic State likened its decentralized presence on social media to its physical activity:

> The Islamic State's Online world is similar to its practical real life world, in that everything is decentralised….The Islamic State's content (videos, ebooks, social media accounts) are scattered all around the internet. Just like the different provinces of the Islamic State are scattered in different locations. Each province has its own responsibility in creating its own videos and social media accounts to share its successes. By decentralising everything from the core leadership, even if a province fails

> online or offline, the leadership and overall Khilafah (Caliphate)
> leadership project is still safe and can grow elsewhere.[10]

The Islamic State's decentralized activity on social media thus enables it to continue spreading its message and complicates counter efforts to block its propaganda.

The Effects of the Islamic State's Social Media Activity

The main result of the Islamic State's widespread activity on social media is its rising influence throughout the world and its successful self-marketing as a global brand. This brand presents the ideology behind the caliphate as the "pure" Islamic utopia that necessitates cruel warfare against its enemies, but ensures social justice, proper administration, and a righteous and authentic religious and moral life for its faithful. While Western audiences are for the most part familiar with the brutality depicted in the horrific films produced by the Islamic State, the idea of utopia that the organization is selling on social media is extremely attractive to new recruits. Its seductive power is evident in the vast number of foreign combatants (over 25,000 according to an official UN report) who have joined the Islamic State – the largest documented number of foreign fighters ever to join a conflict anywhere.[11]

Social media's latent potential for spreading propaganda and recruiting operatives has led a few researchers to dub it the "radical mosque" of the current decade – a favored site for recruiting volunteers and spreading the ideology of various jihadist organizations.[12] While the number of foreign combatants joining Islamic States forces is the most alarming statistic for Western and Israeli security services, the attraction is not limited to young men seeking to become soldiers. In contrast to al-Qaeda and other jihadist organizations, which presented a model of elitist struggle and therefore appealed to a very specific segment of the population, the Islamic State presents itself as a comprehensive cultural project and a home for Muslims around the world. As specified in Arabic in one particular propaganda film, its goal is "to arouse the Islamic *umma* [the global community of believers]."[13] The Islamic State thus calls on Muslims from all over the world "to make *hijra* ["migration," the term used for the transformative journey made by the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622] to its territory,"[14] and uses social media as a main channel to spread its message and attract recruits from diverse backgrounds. Thus, for example, one finds three

women from the UK leaving their husbands and traveling to Syria with their children to join the Islamic caliphate, or a young American couple from a small town in Mississippi – a high school honors student and a psychology major – trying to reach Syria for the same purpose.[15] These and many other cases reveal how the siren call of the Islamic State has sounded its ideology far beyond the battlefields in Iraq and Syria in order to draw into its world people who, despite lacking a Salafist jihadi background, are exposed to the Islamic State's propaganda via social media and lured into supporting it, both ideologically and in practice.

The Need for a Competing Narrative

Understanding the nature of the Islamic State's decentralized activity on social media can help in the formulation of effective solutions for dealing with this phenomenon. Naturally, many countries are disturbed by the Islamic State's widespread use of social media. Robert Hannigan, director of Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), a British intelligence organization dealing with electronic intelligence, has described the internet and social networks as "the command and control networks of choice for terrorists and criminals."[16] Other politicians have demanded that the accounts of Islamic State supporters on Twitter and other social networks be closed.

Technological solutions of this type, however, are either very difficult or impossible to implement, due to the decentralized nature of the flow of information through social media channels and a limited control over its content. Whenever an IT company manages to close the account of an Islamic State supporter, a new one surfaces a few minutes later under a different name. Moreover, once social media companies began closing thousands of accounts linked to the Islamic State, supporters began using hashtags to transmit new announcements and propaganda to the general public via Twitter. Unlike personal accounts, which can be blocked and suspended, content hashtags are very difficult to delete. In short, simply closing the accounts of Islamic State supporters is of limited value and merely a partial solution to the Islamic State's exploitation of social media.

In addition to using technological means to combat this phenomenon, a competing narrative based on Muslim and Middle East voices – the Islamic State's main target audience – must be presented on social media. Recent initiatives appear to be moving in this direction. In July 2015, for example, a new center in charge of digital communications against the

Islamic State, the *Sawab* (Arabic for the "correct" or "proper" path) Center, was established as a joint venture between the United States and the United Arab Emirates.[17] The Quilliam Foundation has also launched a social media campaign entitled "Not Another Brother," in order to emphasize the human cost that the enlistment of young Muslims to the Islamic State inflicts on the Muslim community in the UK.[18] The highlight of the campaign is a video clip featuring a British recruit to the Islamic State imprisoned in Syria, who expresses remorse at having joined the organization and urges others to avoid making the same mistake.[19]

In addition to these important online initiatives, which present alternative Muslim voices and expose the atrocities of the Islamic State, the military campaign against its physical existence and expansion must continue. Islamic State propaganda sells continual victory and never-ending warfare against a broad array of enemies to its supporters and the general public. Steady defeats on the battlefield, however, will undermine the attractiveness of this message, and make it difficult to recruit new members. A combined effort on social media and the "real world" is the best way to influence potential recruits and combat the Islamic State's siren call, which has been sounded for more than a year on social networks.

Notes

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2   Alex Altman, "Why Terrorists Love Twitter," *Time*, September 11, 2014, http://time.com/3319278/isis-isil-twitter/; Will Oremus, "Twitter of Terror," *Slate*, December 21, 2011, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technocracy/2011/12/al_shabaab_twitter_a_somali_militant_group_unveils_a_new_social_media_strategy_for_terrorists_.html.
3   Charlie Winter, "The Virtual Caliphate: Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," Quilliam, 2015, p. 4, http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf.
4   Aaron Y. Zelin, "Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 88, http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/445/html.
5   Ibid.
6   J. M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census," *Analysis Paper* No. 20, Brookings, March 2015, p. 7.

7   Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Intensifies Effort to Blunt ISIS' Message," *New York Times*, February 16, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/17/world/middleeast/us-intensifies-effort-to-blunt-isis-message.html?_r=0.

8   Heather Marie Vitale and James M. Keagle, "A Time to Tweet, as Well as a Time to Kill: ISIS's Projection of Power in Iraq and Syria," *Defense Horizons* 77, no. 1 (2014), http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/defensehorizon/DH-77.pdf.

9   Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, "Retweeting the Caliphate: The Role of Soft-Sympathizers in the Islamic State's Social Media Strategy," Conference paper, presented at the 6th International Symposium on Terrorism and Transnational Crime, Antalya, Turkey, December 4-7, 2014, http://goo.gl/Cb7MdH.

10   *The Islamic State,* e-book, 2015, p. 80.

11   Edith M. Lederer, "UN Report: More than 25,000 Foreigners Fight with Terrorists," *AP*, April 2, 2015, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/cec52a0dbfab4c00b89bc543badf6c20/un-report-more-25000-foreigners-fight-terrorists.

12   Winter, "The Virtual Caliphate," p. 7.

13   al-Furqan Media, "Upon the Prophetic Methodology," July 2014.

14   al-Hayat Media, *Dabiq* 3, September 2014.

15   Hassan Hassan, "Three Sisters, Nine Children, One Dangerous Journey to the Heart of Isis. What is the Lure of the Caliphate?" *The Guardian*, June 21, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/21/three-sisters-nine-children-what-is-the-lure-of-the-isis-caliphate; Richard Fausset, "Young Mississippi Couple Linked to ISIS, Perplexing All," *New York Times*, August 14, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/15/us/disbelief-in-mississippi-at-how-far-isis-message-can-travel.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=first-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news.

16   Robert Hannigan, "The Web is a Terrorist's Command-and-Control Network of Choice," *Financial Times*, November 3, 2014, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/c89b6c58-6342-11e4-8a63-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3QhKyjb33.

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19   "NotAnotherBrother," *YouTube*, August 3, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjIQ0ctzyZE&list=PLyCnHE3hqgntzaUH-S_36IfNZowpzUF8e&index=1.