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A TYPOLOGY OF THE ISLAMIC STATE'S SOCIAL MEDIA DISTRIBUTION NETWORK

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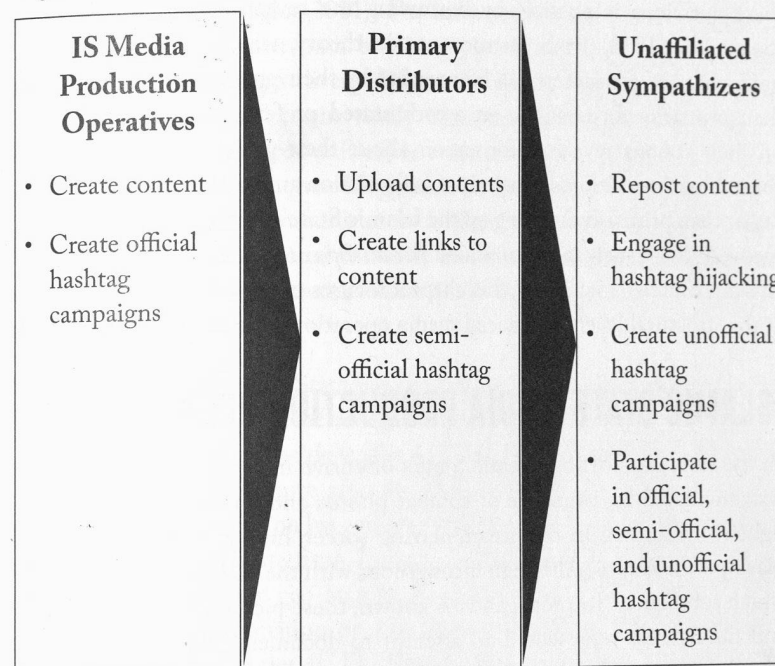
Although all sides of the Syrian civil war have used social media extensively, the use of social media by the Islamic State (IS) appears to have generated the most attention. Since taking over a third of Iraq and declaring the establishment of a caliphate in the summer of 2014, the Islamic State has fascinated and disturbed the world with its highly sophisticated and, at times, shocking media. These impressive media products aided IS recruiting efforts, helping the group draw at least 30,000 foreign fighters from 100 countries to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, including between 4,000 and 5,000 from Western countries (Norton-Taylor 2015; Schmid and Tinnes 2015; Dawson and Amarasingam 2017). This online presence assisted the group's establishment of new franchises in places ranging from Uzbekistan to Nigeria, Afghanistan and Bangladesh (Institute for the Study of War 2016), and represented the vehicle through which the Islamic State announced the establishment of its caliphate, the "annulment" of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and its declaration of war on the United States. The online presence also inspired sympathizers to commit acts of terrorism throughout the world.

Confronted with the Islamic State's initial successes — both on the battlefield and online — scholars, journalists and policy-orientated think tanks have devoted considerable attention to dissecting and understanding various facets of the IS social media strategy.¹ However, despite the volume of scholarly attention, to date, relatively little work has studied IS propaganda holistically in the context of its production and dissemination strategy.

As astutely remarked by Charlie Winter (2015), it is not sufficient to understand IS propaganda simply in terms of its high-production values and professionalism. This chapter looks beyond eye-catching cinematography to the heart of the group's media machine in order to lay out a clear typological outline of the IS production and dissemination strategy. In doing this, I focus on the three different actors involved in the process: media production operatives, primary distributors and unaffiliated sympathizers (see Figure 1).

Drawing on the theoretical tenets of social network theory, three observations about the structure of the IS propaganda distribution network are advanced. First, it is argued that despite an initial foray into user-generated content, the production of IS propaganda has been centralized into a highly vertical hierarchical and centralized structure. Second, primary distributors operate as a network organization, that is, “a loose but bounded and consciously constructed organization based mainly on leveraging the benefits of reciprocity” (Mueller 2010, 41). Last and conversely, it is advanced that unaffiliated sympathizers can best be understood as an associative cluster — “an unbounded and de-centered cluster of actors around repeated patterns of exchange or contact” who disseminate propaganda horizontally (*ibid.*), thus giving participants the liberty to choose the most appropriate techniques in each case to diffuse messages.² In other words, it is suggested that the IS propaganda machine is simultaneously vertical and horizontal. This reliance on

Figure 1



Source: Author.

a top-down approach, as well as being comfortable with bottom-up initiatives instigated by unaffiliated sympathizers who retweet, repost or adapt messages to local circumstances, allows content that is, initially, centrally controlled to reach a large audience. However, as the content makes its way vertically downward, the media production operatives lose some control of the message, and hence the narrative. In other words, while media production operatives and primary distributors do not micromanage unaffiliated sympathizers, they nonetheless exercise strategic influence.

Mapping out the typology of and understanding the structure of the Islamic State's social media networks provides important insights into the group's understanding of the power of operating in a digital environment. Indeed, as aptly noted by Winter (2017), understanding exactly how the Islamic State refined its media operations, where they came from and the driving forces and individuals behind them, is complicated by the group's operational opacity and its concern for operational and communication security.³ Although

1 For example, J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan's research (2015), along with subsequent work by Ali Fisher (2015) and Elizabeth Bodine-Baron et al. (2016) of the RAND Corporation, revealed the size of the IS social media network; Cori E. Dauber and Mark Robinson (2015), Javier Lesaca (2015) and Marco Lombardi (2015) considered the aesthetics of IS propaganda; Max Abrahms (2015) and I (Veilleux-Lepage 2015) debated the effectiveness of IS media strategy; Aaron Zelin (2015) provided a quantitative and qualitative examination of official IS media releases; and I (Veilleux-Lepage 2016a) considered dissemination strategy, arguing that the Islamic State's extensive reliance on unaffiliated sympathizers, who either retweet or repost content produced and authorized by IS leadership, represents a groundbreaking paradigm shift in the evolution of jihadism in cyberspace.

2 This chapter does not purport to provide a comprehensive literature review of network theories. While the discussion here mainly relies on theoretical assets of social network theory, network theory is not a single theory. There are different variants, from social network theory to network organization theory and actor-network theory. For the network perspective of world politics, see Emilie M. Hafner-Burton and Alexander H. Montgomery (2006), Stacie E. Goddard (2009), Daniel H. Nexon and T. Wright (2007), and Nexon (2009).

3 For examples of IS efforts to ensure communications security, see Islamic State (2015b) and Islamic State (n.d.), available through Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's archive of administrative documents.

direct observation is therefore not feasible, it is postulated that answering these questions is possible by borrowing the revealed preference method (Samuelson 1948) from microeconomic theory, which proposes that the preferences of consumers can be revealed by their purchasing habits. Rather than primarily focusing on an actor's stated preferences, focusing instead on their actions reveals information about their goals, costs and resource constraints, institutional constraints, information and time. With this in mind, rather than primarily focusing on the Islamic State's own accounts of its social media strategy, such as its handbook *Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too!* (Islamic State 2015a; 2016), this chapter focuses on observable characteristics at the structural level of IS social media operations and networks.

ISLAMIC STATE MEDIA PRODUCTION OPERATIVES

In the early days of the Islamic State's offensive into northern Iraq, Twitter was inundated by a mixture of combat photos and innocuous photos of IS fighters swimming in the ocean, playing soccer, hiking, eating Nutella and playing with kittens. Although incongruous with the slick professionalism for which subsequent IS propaganda is known, these pictures taken by IS rank-and-file fighters represented an attempt to document and romanticize the daily life between battles, which is often boring and monotonous (Veilleux-Lepage 2016b). While the existence of such photographs is unsurprising (as fighters, in a variety of conflicts, have long sought to photograph their day-to-day life away from the heat of battle),⁵ what is particularly interesting is that those pictures almost entirely disappeared from the "Twittersphere" by late 2014 (*ibid.*).

This disappearance can partly be attributed to actions by Twitter, but more important, to an increase in operational security within the Islamic State. Indeed, as keenly observed by Gilbert Ramsay (2016), despite the rather widespread belief of a "virtual safe haven" in which terrorists can freely plan operations, recruit and fundraise, the internet is often a deeply hostile medium, which can threaten and hamper group efforts. Bomb-making instructions, for example, are often unreliable — in a much-publicized cyber-warfare operation UK MI6 and Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) officers successfully sabotaged the launch of the first issue of *Inspire*, replacing bomb-making instructions with cupcake recipes — or

⁴ For an excellent overview of this text, see Winter (2017).

⁵ In fact, from the onset of World War I, Kodak marketed its "vest pocket" camera as "the soldier's Kodak," a means for enlistees to take their camera to the front (Harding 2014).

they were incomplete, making it difficult to translate theoretical learning into reality (Norton-Taylor 2011). For instance, the two bombs employed during the 2006 German train bombing plot failed to detonate not only because the bomb-makers diverged from the instructions, but also because the instructions lacked certain vitally important information that limited their usefulness for novices unfamiliar with pressurized gases (Bale 2012). Moreover, as argued by Thomas Hegghammer (2014, 2), "the scarcity of non-verbal cues in digital communication facilitates deceptive mimicry, which undermines the inter-personal trust required for sensitive transactions," and thus, the level of distrust among individuals interacting online is high and direct recruitment is rare.

What is more, the Islamic State has recently seen how easily the internet as an open medium can become an operational security liability. For example, in a highly mediatized incident, the US Air Force destroyed a suspected command and control centre after an IS fighter carelessly forgot to disable the geo-tagging function on his camera (Hoffman 2015). In another incident, a Canadian woman's route from Toronto to Raqqa was revealed because she also failed to disable the geo-tagging function on her Twitter account, thus providing crucial information on the broader trends of women migrating to IS-controlled territories (CTV News 2015). Faced with these security concerns, among many others, the Security Office of the Islamic State has forcefully discouraged its fighters — foreign or otherwise — from having free access to the internet.

In addition to the group's increased awareness of the need for operational security, the crackdown on unofficial IS content can be primarily attributed to the group's deliberate and conscious media strategy aims, which led to the centralization and standardization of its propaganda in an effort to improve the IS brand. Terrorist violence can be understood both as expressive — where the violence is the goal in itself — and instrumental, meaning goal directed and relatively purposeful (Kydd and Walter 2006, 72–75). The overarching context and meaning conveyed by a violent act is therefore vitally important in the creation and distribution of terrorist propaganda. Managing violence in order to maximize both expressive and instrumental goals, as well as maintaining fidelity to these goals in the face of state interference and internal disagreement and pressures, requires particular agility in organization structure. Indeed, like any other organizational entity, a terrorist group needs some form of discipline, without which agency costs proliferate, as undisciplined members risk pursuing their own impulses or agendas to the detriment of the organization's goals.

Accordingly, various IS documents show the group's efforts to curb unofficial propaganda. For example, in an early decree, the Islamic State specifically forbids the production of unofficial propaganda: "[it is] absolutely forbidden to undertake independent efforts in working on or publishing written, audio or visual releases in the name of Islamic State on the Internet network" (Islamic State 2015b). The General Committee also attempted to curb the emergence of unofficial propaganda by banning audiovisual devices from the battlefield: "The General Committee has decided to prohibit photography with phones, cameras and other things besides them during expeditions and what concerns battles, except by the responsible media personnel authorized to document and photograph these battles, in order to prevent unregulated efforts. And violators will be tracked down" (IS General Committee 2014). These attempts by IS leadership to curb the production of unofficial propaganda can be interpreted as an attempt to entrench what Jacques Ellul (1973) calls "vertical propaganda" or, in popular terms, top-down propaganda emanating from the organization's leadership.

Indeed, although often created by various media bodies, since the late 2014, IS media products appear to be centrally directed, following certain standards in quantity, content and production, in order to achieve uniformity and recognizability (Veilleux-Lepage 2016b). For example, a survey of IS multimedia banners announcing the release of new audiovisual products unveils six distinctive features commonly present in such products: the title of the release; the date of the release; content preview or images from the production itself; the logo of the IS media office of the province releasing the production; an icon identifying the type of production — whether it is a video, a photo album or audio recording, for example; and a hashtag that either is specific to important productions or refers more generally to IS releases (Benjamin 2016). This degree of uniformity and recognizability of IS products has nearly eliminated the need for unofficial pro-IS content created by supporters of the group — a common practice among other jihadi organizations, which rely on fan-based production and translations (Benjamin 2016). Instead, the Islamic State relies almost exclusively on in-house productions. While relying almost exclusively on in-house media operatives and eschewing or discouraging fan-based productions might seem counterproductive, doing so has provided the Islamic State with some important advantages: its official content is more easily recognizable as "genuine" and, possibly most important, its messaging can be tied more tightly to changing organizational policies and aims.

The strategic benefits for a jihadist group eschewing fan-based production are best articulated in a 2006 policy paper entitled *Media Exuberance*, published by the al-Qaeda associate al-Boraq Media, which sought to curtail the proliferation and production of unattributed jihadist media, arguing that such low-quality, unapproved and amateur content undermined the credibility of jihadist media and diverted attention from official sources (Kimmage 2008, 5). Indeed, the Abbottabad documents are striking in that al-Qaeda's leadership appears not only mindful of the difficulty of message control, but was deeply concerned about the risk of its message being distorted by both its critics and overzealous supporters online.⁶ This supports the assumption that al-Qaeda's leadership appeared to support jihadist use of the internet to spread the ideology, but wanted concrete steps taken to ensure that those conducting such activities were qualified to do so responsibly.

The Islamic State appears to have heeded al-Qaeda's lessons to limit the production of propaganda to those qualified to do so, and in-house IS media production operations have spearheaded a style of proliferating propaganda messaging unique among terrorist groups. This media output can be roughly divided into four major categories: audio products including radio broadcasts, the quality of which has been compared favourably to Western radio stations such as National Public Radio, and which covered a wide spectrum of issues, ranging from religious programs and nasheed (works of vocal music that is either sung a cappella or accompanied by percussion instruments, which frequently refer to themes such as war and fighting) and news bulletins; visual products, including pictures, banners and infographics, illustrating facts and statistics; texts, primarily including online magazines (such as *Dabiq*, later renamed *Rumiyah*, *Dar al-Islam*, *Konstantiniyye*, and *Istok*) but also including internet bulletins as well as declarations and statements

6 For example, while Bin Laden appeared to have some positive comments regarding online fora, writing that "the wide-scale spread of jihadist ideology, especially on the internet, and the tremendous number of young people who frequent the jihadist websites [represents] a major achievement for jihad" (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point 2012, 3), his praises are limited to the medium itself and its potential to facilitate engagement with the wider audience, rather than the content itself. In fact, Bin Laden appears to have heeded the concerns raised by Adam Gadahn, who claimed that "As for the jihadi forums, it is repulsive to most of the Muslims, or closed to them. It also distorts the face of al-Qaeda, due to what you know of the bigotry, the sharp tone that characterizes most of the participants in these forums" (ibid., 4). This letter prompted Bin Laden to ask Abu Abd al-Rahman Atiyya and "Shaykh Abu Yahy" — presumably Abu Yahya al-Libi — to "write some articles and provide advice to those working in the jihad media in general to include the author partisans to the mujahidin on the internet" (ibid., 14). Moreover, Bin Laden proposed running all the recruits who arrive in Pakistan through "a quick training course that is heavy on ideology," to ensure they are "distinguished and capable" as recruiters, and then "send (them) to (their) country to conduct specific missions like inciting for jihad over the internet" (ibid., 43).

posted on the web, which usually have the same high technical quality. Lastly, but arguably the Islamic State's most influential and successful output, audiovisual products such as execution recordings that "proliferated instantly over the Web, reaching millions of Internet users, and thus becoming the greatest success in the history of cyber jihad" (Lakomy 2017, 42-43), battle footage, "documentaries," interviews and reports clearly designed to imitate the outputs from mainstream news networks, and *nasheed*, music videos that frequently resembled the best American and Western European pop stars' productions (ibid.). It is worth noting that all this material, whether videos, photo essays or magazines, is distributed both online and offline.

As of December 2016, the production of these outputs is the task of Islamic State's 10 central media units, the two most important of which are Mu'assasat al-Furqān (the al-Furqān Media Foundation) and Markaz al-Ḥayāt l-il-Ḥlām (the al-Ḥayāt Media Center), 21 wilayats (provincial) media offices based in Syria and Iraq, and an additional 23 "distant" media offices based in 12 other countries or regions, namely Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, the Caucasus, Egypt, Libya, Pakistan, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, West Africa and Yemen, totalling 54 media offices.

In addition to al-Ḥayāt and al-Furqān, other IS media producers also include Mu'assasat al-Itisam (al-Itisam Media Foundation), which tends to produce off-the-battlefield interviews with jihadists; Wakālat Amāq al-Ikḥbāriyyah (Amaq News Agency), the output of which is primarily in-battle footage and short news reports, both text and video, published on the encrypted mobile app Telegram. Amaq News Agency functions much like an official news agency might inside a totalitarian state, with news alerts, articles and videos taking on the trappings of mainstream journalism, with "Breaking News" and "Exclusive" headings and reporters trying to appear "objective," toning down the jihadist hyperbole used in official IS releases. Another producer is al-Furat I-il-Ḥlām (Furat Media Center), whose output has largely consisted of non-Arabic language videos aimed primarily at recruiting Russian-speaking militants, both from the Russian Federation, in the North Caucasus in particular, and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, especially Central Asia. In the summer of 2016, Furat Media Center launched the *al-Fatihin* newspaper in Indonesian, targeting residents of Southeast Asia (the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Thailand). The Maktaba al-Himma (Himma Library) publishes short pamphlets, typically between two and eight pages long, containing a single illustration on the front page and written in accessible Arabic.

The most distinctive characteristic of the pamphlets is their intent, which is to consolidate control over the local population through the promotion of IS policies. Finally, *Sahifat al-naba'* (al-Naba) reports relevant news on Twitter. The Islamic State also runs two radio stations, Idha'at al-Bayan (al-Bayan) and Idha'at al-Tawhid (al-Tawhid), which began broadcasting religious content such as prayers and recitations, along with a daily news bulletin in Arabic and several other languages including English, French and Russian in the territories under its control in 2014. In addition, Mu'assasat Anjad (Ajnad Media Foundation) specialises in creating and broadcasting jihadi nasheeds, chants songs, and Islamic vocal music.

The al-Furqān Media Foundation⁷ is the Islamic State's oldest media branch for the production of propaganda. Established in 2006, al-Furqān essentially serves as the official media bureau for the Islamic State, producing official statements from the organization's leadership, a status in part confirmed by the fact that it produced the 2014 video of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivering a sermon in a Mosul mosque, and all his subsequent media appearances. The al-Furqān Media Foundation is also responsible for the production of "The Beheading Series."

The al-Ḥayāt Media Center,⁸ on the other hand, is a relatively new arm of the Islamic State aimed broadly at Western audiences, having been established in May 2014. Among its productions, the Islamic State's online magazine *Dabiq*⁹ — later *Rumiyah* — is undoubtedly al-Ḥayāt Media Center's most mainstream product, following the template established by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's widely distributed multilanguage online magazine entitled *Inspire*, whose ideologically driven material with pragmatic instructional

7 The literal transliteration of *Furqan* is "standard, criterion," or "arbitrator" for judging the difference between truth and lies, but the word is also a name for the Qur'an.

8 *Ḥayāt* translates to "life" and is often linked to a passage in the Qur'an calling people to respond to the "call of that which gives them life."

9 *Dabiq* is a town located in north Syria and is mentioned in a *Hadith* (6924), which describes events of the Malahim (Armageddon), where the greatest battle between Muslims and the crusaders will take place before the Messiah returns (Saltman and Winter 2014). Although it is worth noting that some advanced Koranic Studies experts regard this interpretation as a reductive take on a very complex *Hadith*, the jihadist group has capitalized on this narrative (Maggioni 2015, 71). In fact, al-Zarqawi had stated (before he was killed by a US missile strike in 2006) that "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heart will continue to intensify — by Allah's permission — until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq" (as quoted in ibid.). This sentence appears above the index of each issue of *Dabiq* released thus far. Moreover, the executioner of Peter Kassig also references *Dabiq* in the now infamous video of Kassig's beheading, stating, "Here we are, burying the first American Crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive," while the severed head of Kassig is shown on camera (as quoted in ibid.).

and skill-building content sought to foster a do-it-yourself approach to terrorism (Lemieux et al. 2014). Available in many languages including English, Albanian, French and German, each issue of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* deals with “key themes, strategic exploits and ideological constructions, as well as speeches from [IS] leaders” (Saltman and Winter 2014, 39) and contains powerful photographic imagery of the Islamic State’s military and state-building endeavours such as images of wounded Iraqi Security Force soldiers, the distribution of food and water by IS fighters in regions under its control, victorious parades of militants in invaded cities, the destruction of Shiite and Sufi shrines, and the execution of prisoners and members of religious minorities (Styszynski 2014). The content of these online magazines is evocative and aims to spread a very precise message — which can both engage the reader and stimulate curiosity — in order to enlarge the potential readership. In this way, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* target readers who are already interested in political Islam but not necessarily already convinced jihadists. These online magazines attempt to skillfully “educate” the reader on the caliphate’s aims, projects and accomplishments (Veilleux-Lepage 2016a).

Broadly speaking, the al-Ḥayāt Media Center and al-Furqān Media Foundation serve different purposes. Al-Ḥayāt Media’s content focuses on recruiting and centres on the utopian ideals of the “caliphate.” It is primarily, although not exclusively, geared toward a young audience that is already interested in or feels emotionally sympathetic toward the conflict occurring in Syria and Iraq (Saltman and Winter 2014, 38). The al-Furqān Media Foundation, on the other hand, serves as a means for intimidation and the dissemination of threats; its target audience is, primarily, anyone hostile to the Islamic State. However, it is important to recognize that this distinction is not completely unambiguous, nor is the production of IS propaganda entirely limited to these two outlets.

Despite the ostensible distinction between al-Ḥayāt and al-Furqān’s targeted audiences, all their products are filmed and edited in a consistent manner. More important, both media production groups employ the same recurring tropes or themes. Having examined media products produced by both al-Ḥayāt and al-Furqān, Winter (2015, 22) identified the following six themes.

Brutality appears in videos depicting executions, including “The Beheading Series” and other depictions of atrocities and human rights abuses serving to convey both vengeance and supremacy.

Mercy is a narrative closely connected to the idea of repentance before God and the Islamic State itself. Enemies of Islamic State, including enemy fighters, civilians and former government employees, are forgiven for their past transgressions, provided they wholly reject their previous allegiances. This narrative is regularly featured in tandem and intertwined with brutality, presenting the IS’s foes with a stark choice: resist and be killed or willingly submit, recant past beliefs and be rewarded with mercy (ibid., 24).

Victimhood appears in the portrayal of Sunni Muslims’ continued victimization at the hands of the West and “apostate” regimes. Footage of the aftermath of coalition airstrikes, images of dead or dying children, often juxtaposed with an act of brutality such as the execution of alleged “spies” in retribution, are intended to drive home the notion of the victimization of Iraq’s Sunnis, as well as justify the Islamic State’s retributions.

War is another theme of media products; these feature the group’s military gains, depictions of training camps, parades featuring heavy artillery, tanks and armoured vehicles, along with martyrdom operations. Moreover, IS propaganda, in particular propaganda created by the Wakalat al-Amaq media group, routinely produces footage of front-line fighting, delivered in almost real-time by the media group’s “embedded war journalists.” Winters suggests that these military displays are intended to feed into the idea of the Islamic State as a real state with real armed forces (ibid., 26). Moreover, this content also serves an important tactical purpose, instilling fear in hostile forces, raising fighters’ morale and presenting its supporters and sympathizers with a skewed understanding of its success, thereby enabling the organization to obfuscate the realities on the ground.

Belonging is emphasized by depictions of *istirāḥat al-mujāhidīn* — fighters relaxing with tea and singing with each other. The narrative of brotherhood in the caliphate is one of the most powerful draws to new recruits, especially those from Western states (ibid., 26-27). The carefully branded camaraderie that foreign fighters are absorbed into upon their arrival to IS-held territories is particularly prevalent in most of the foreign-language videos produced by al-Ḥayāt Media Centre.

Utopianism, the idea of a utopian caliphate, is prevalent in IS propaganda as the establishment of a caliphate represents a unique selling point for the organization. By declaring and re-establishing a caliphate, the IS asserted itself as above all other jihadist groups, as the utopia-in-becoming that they all aspire to create. This narrative is what I (Veilleux-Lepage 2016a, 45) refer

to as the “imagery of...state-building activities.” The aim of these depictions is the advancement of the notion of the Islamic State as a legitimate state in order to gain long-term support of the local populace. This is of critical importance to the IS in its attempt to socialize the Muslim world to the ideas and values of the Islamic State.

More recently, another theme has emerged within IS products: *baqiya* (remaining) is the notion that the Islamic State will endure despite its significant setbacks. As it teeters on the brink of territorial defeat, its media operations have adapted and seemingly prepared for a caliphate-less future where the Islamic State has lost control of its physical territories and populations. Indeed, although a great deal of speculation and attention is currently being devoted to the prospect of foreign fighters returning en masse to their home countries as a result of the group’s territorial defeat — a dire portent which has not yet materialized¹⁰ — the impact of the IS’s loss of territories on its social media output and strategy has received relatively little attention. The newly emerging IS propaganda casts the loss of territorial control in Syria and Iraq as unimportant, simply a setback in its preordained journey to eventual victory. For example, *nasheeds* recently released by Ajnad Media Foundation, such as *Dawlati Baqiya* (My State Is Enduring) and *labbu al-nida’* (Heed the Call) contain defiant replies to those who believe that the Islamic State’s tactical setbacks signal the group’s demise. Tactical defeats are also routinely framed as glorious martyrdom operations that highlight the bravery and the commitment of IS fighters. For example, four months before his death, Taha Subhi Falaha (known as Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami), the official spokesperson of the group, published the following message: “Do you think victory is achieved by killing one or more leaders? Do you believe that defeat means losing a city or land? Oh America, you could be declared victors and the mujahedeen losers only in one case: the moment you succeed in removing the Quran from the hearts of Muslims” (as quoted in Votel et al. 2017).

Moreover, recent IS propaganda demonstrates an effort to adapt its narrative to continually portray a strong, prosperous and vibrant caliphate, continuing to promulgate the previously mentioned notion of utopianism, even if this involves rewriting the rules or redefining success. As previously alluded to,

¹⁰ Although the alarming scenario in which the Islamic State deliberately resorts to an escalation of attacks against civilians in the West in order to uphold the illusion that the group is still on the offensive appears credible, as a result of the strings of attacks in European cities since 2015, Europol (2017) reported that the number of failed, foiled or completed attacks had been following a downward trajectory since 2014.

IS propaganda has gone to extensive lengths to project a new utopia of peace and harmony with simple and straightforward rules, a recovered righteous caliphate to which Muslims worldwide could migrate, attracting doctors and nurses, engineers, mothers and teachers. In some ways, near total territorial loss, and potentially post-territorial loss propaganda has been carefully curated to present the caliphate as a model or a blueprint for future actions. In many ways, the legacy of the caliphate can be arguably more compelling than the real thing.

The recurrence of similar narratives suggests a single director or a small group who possess extremely sophisticated skills and are familiar with editing, writing and cinematography techniques, drawing from both contemporary film and video game production. The sheer volume of official content, along with the internalization of the production process and IS control over release of materials has given the Islamic State exclusivity over much of the news coming from its territories. Thus, IS official standardized productions are one of the only sources of information and content available to the pro-IS audience. This assessment is supported by an internal IS document, allegedly written by an IS administrator, and uncovered in December 2015 by IS researcher and online archivist Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. The document purportedly depicts an international “blueprint” of IS administrative activities, including its media operations. Detailed in the document is the existence of “one media foundation,” called al-Mu’asasat al-Um (The Base Foundation), “branched out within multiple pockets” to promote ISIS ideology and activities (as quoted in *The Guardian* 2015). This body presumably reports directly to the IS *shura* (advisory council). This central office is likely the same *Dirwan al-Islam al-Markazi* (The Central Media Office) that ISIS identified in a July 2016 video that described the organization of the caliphate (SITE Intelligence Group 2016). *Al-Mu’asasat al-Um* “define[s] the priorities of publication and broadcasting as well as media campaigns,” according to Tamimi’s source.

PRIMARY DISTRIBUTORS

Roughly speaking, the distribution of IS digital propaganda resembles its distribution of offline media. Offline, IS propaganda is distributed via *nuqat i’lamiyya* (media points), makeshift propaganda offices that are sometimes as rudimentary as shipping containers or mobile homes equipped with projectors, printers and plastic chairs. These media points serve as open-air cinemas for official IS media outlets and satellite publishing houses for its propaganda (Islamic State 2015c; 2015d). They also serve as distribution

centres for IS digital propaganda stored in physical mediums. For example, video and audio files are burned onto compact disks for wider distribution within the territories under Islamic State control.¹¹

Digitally, once the material is produced and ready for distribution, a suitable and reliable online platform allowing users to upload information anonymously (a digital media point, for lack of a better term) must first be found before the links to these productions can be shared on social media and on top-tier jihadi fora (Collier 2015). The main concern for the primary distributors is finding a platform that will permit their content to remain accessible long enough for it to be retrieved by secondary distributors, who will in turn copy the content and distribute it further, to the point where the dissemination will not be affected by the removal of the original content. As such, although IS propaganda is regularly removed from major social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, sites such as Internet Archive and Liveleaks for videos, and JustPaste.it or PdfSR.com for text or photo series, have become the favourite platforms on which to host jihadi content as a result of their privacy provisions and relatively lax terms of use (Benjamin 2016).

Among the platforms employed by IS primary distributors to host their content, San Francisco-based Internet Archive (archive.org) has become the most important. The free, easy-to-use and versatile non-profit digital library, whose stated mission is to provide “universal access to all knowledge” through free public access to collections of digitalized materials, including websites, software applications/games, music, movies/videos and nearly three million public-domain books, has historically been used by various jihadi groups to host content. For example, many al-Qaeda affiliates, including al-Shahab Media Company, have traditionally opted to upload their content on archive.org (Zweig 2015, 94–95). Moreover, Shumoukh al-Islam, the important jihadi forum, instructed its readers to use Internet Archive to upload jihadi materials, providing a detailed step-by-step guide on how to upload material onto the site. Likewise, IS media distributors are known to operate numerous Internet Archive accounts, each of which either specializes in a particular geographic area or stems from a particular IS media production group (Benjamin 2016). These numerous accounts upload IS content in a number of different formats and qualities in order to increase its accessibility and ensure that the content can be viewed across multiple devices and regardless of internet connection speed.

¹¹ This can be observed in, for example, Islamic State (2015e; 2015f; 2015g).

Apart from being free and easy to use, Internet Archive's appeal to jihadi groups can be largely attributed to its lack of content moderation. Whereas since 2016 YouTube significantly increased its efforts to remove IS videos flagged and reported by users, the Internet Archive platform does not contain any flagging mechanism. In fact, users must follow a lengthy and counterintuitive process to report material hosted on the site: users must email the administrators a link to the offending item along with a description of the problem (Khayat 2015). The proliferation of IS content on archive.org is further exacerbated by permissive terms of use. According to its website, archive.org operates under the guidelines set out by the Oakland Archive Policy for Managing Removal Requests and Preserving Archival Integrity. This policy states that under the Library Bill of Rights, “Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval,” and therefore, when faced with “third party removal requests based on objection to controversial content (e.g. political, religious, and other beliefs),” “archivists should not generally act on these requests” (as quoted in Khayat 2015). Moreover, archive.org's terms of use warn users that “Because the content of the Collections comes from around the world and from many different sectors, the Collections may contain information that might be deemed offensive, disturbing, pornographic, racist, sexist, bizarre, misleading, fraudulent, or otherwise objectionable,” and informs them that they are “solely responsible for abiding by all laws and regulations that may be applicable to the viewing of the content” (ibid.).

Once primary distributors have uploaded new IS content onto a public hosting service, they then seek to disseminate the content to the secondary distributors primarily via the use of social media, notably Twitter and, increasingly, Telegram, a mobile phone messaging app. Above all, primary distributors seek to stabilize the distribution process by centralizing the data location and the go-to distribution spot. These centralized repositories are the main avenue for unaffiliated sympathizers to obtain the material.

The means employed by primary distributors to reach unaffiliated sympathizers on Twitter have evolved since late 2014 from profile-centric networks coalesced around specific users toward message-centric networks coalesced around content (Kluver and Manly 2016, 33). This shift can be in part attributed to Twitter's attempt to disrupt IS networks by suspending IS accounts through user reports of violent content. Faced with such a crackdown, hashtags have become a critical part of the Islamic State's successful dissemination of its material to circumvent account suspension by providing a fixed point in

cyberspace for reconnecting with a particular network. For example, while Twitter has routinely suspended accounts associated with al-Ḥayāt Media Center, its content can still be easily found under the al-Ḥayāt Media Center's hashtag *#كفرم_أى_حل_إل_ع_إل_إل*. In fact, each initial posting of IS multimedia content on Twitter includes basic information such as the title, date, the media production office that released it and, usually, a few relevant hashtags. Moreover, for every major IS release, a new hashtag is created and used; all other productions are released with existing generic IS hashtags relating to their content and to the IS media office that produced and released them. For example, the hashtag *#متى_رفن*, which roughly translates to “When will you migrate?” emerged in conjunction with a warning in *Dabiq* against those seeking to leave the caliphate for Western countries and a barrage of propaganda videos targeting refugees and telling them to join the caliphate instead of fleeing toward the “xenophobic” Europe (ibid.).

In response to Twitter updating the language of its stance on abusive behaviour to include statements “threatening or promoting terrorism” and its subsequent crackdown on IS accounts, the Islamic State's primary distributors diversified their distribution platforms and began embracing mobile phone app Telegram (Bloom, Tiflati and Horgan 2017). This adoption of new platforms in response to crackdowns is not a recent phenomenon. For example, in 2013–2014, Facebook was a relatively popular means of reaching unaffiliated sympathizers — until the company decided to enforce stricter policy and ban hundreds of users. Telegram is a free cross-platform encrypted messaging service developed by Pavel and Nicolai Durov (the founders of the Russian social networking site VK) after several run-ins with Russian intelligence services (Hamburger 2014). Citing Edward Snowden as one of the founders' main inspirations, the service was originally created to provide a safe place to quickly send files and messages without interception from government intelligence services (Murdock 2016). Aside from its security features, such as self-erasing messages and relatively robust encryption, Telegram also uses a novel feature, channels. Channels are a tool for broadcasting messages to an unlimited number of subscribers either by invitation from the channel's administrator or by following a public URL.

This service is attractive to jihadists for several reasons. First, it provides relative anonymity, as a channel only displays the total number of subscribers to other users without disclosing their usernames. Second, users can forward content they find on channels to other Telegram users, thus quickly heightening the dissemination of content. Third, the messages on the channels are transmitted in a single direction, thereby eliminating the possibility for counter-messaging and disruption of a content's feed, strategies that are used extensively on

Twitter to counter extremist propaganda. As such, soon after the introduction of Telegram's channels services in late September 2015, IS primary distributors created several channels on Telegram to share their content with thousands of followers. For example, in the aftermath of the 2016 Brussels bombing, IS primary distributors used Telegram in order to encourage their followers to disseminate IS content using specific hashtags, such as *#Brusselsattacks* and *#Brussels*, along with pre-scripted messages “*Attendez-vous à plus de bombes, plus de morts!*”¹² and “*Nous allons tous vous tuer avec des couteaux, des mitrailleuses et des bombes!*”¹³ Finally, Telegram's application program interface (API) allows the Islamic State to create a series of bots¹⁵ — special accounts designed to automatically spread messages — to reach a greater audience. Even though Telegram has begun to shut down jihadi accounts and channels, IS primary distributors are still currently using Telegram as a means for distribution, switching to private accounts and to closed channels instead of open ones.

According to Mia Bloom, Hicham Tiflati and John Horgan (2017, 4), Telegram serves as a meeting place where IS propagandists serving as “proxies for the organization whose goal is to reproduce the content and disseminate the material as widely as possible,” can share IS content with those who are “seeking information” and “those who want to engage more fully with the terrorist group.” Across the IS channels observed by Bloom and her collaborators, two observations were made to support the argument that primary distributors operate online as a loose but bounded and consciously constructed organization based mainly on leveraging the benefits of reciprocity. First, Bloom, Tiflati and Horgan observed that particular posts or news items could be posted instantly across dozens of channels, leading them to determine that that administrators were using bots to simultaneously post content (ibid., 6). Second, the same administrators were managing multiple channels, posting

12 Translation: “Expect more bombs, more dead!”

13 Translation: “We will kill you all with knives, machine guns and bombs.”

14 I would like to express my gratitude to J. Faraday for uncovering and sharing these Telegram messages.

15 The most notorious bot software employed by the Islamic State's primary distributors was the Android application called *The Dawn of Glad Tidings*, available through the Google Play store before its removal for violating Google's terms of service. *The Dawn of Glad Tidings* enabled users to keep up with the latest news about the activities of the Islamic State. Vitaly, the application also allows the main IS communication branch to send Tweets periodically from the accounts of everyone who has installed the application, thereby flooding social media with IS propaganda without triggering Twitter's spam-detection algorithms (Berger 2014). *The Dawn of Glad Tidings* first went into wide use in April 2014, but reached an all-time high of almost 40,000 tweets on the day the Islamic State marched into Mosul (Vitale and Keagle 2014). Although the application had been suspended by Twitter by the end of summer 2014, the number of pro-IS accounts in 2014 and 2015 remained significant, further enriched by thousands of bots (that is, computer software pieces that act like actual Twitter users) tweeting and retweeting specific content.

materials simultaneously and engaging with each other, leading Bloom, Taflati and Horgan (ibid.) to conclude that there is a significant degree of centralization in Islamic State's hierarchical media network.

UNAFFILIATED SYMPATHIZERS

The most innovative aspect of Islamic State's use of social media (and possibly the most under studied) concerns the crucial role of unaffiliated supporters. These unaffiliated supporters serve to further disseminate content, which represents a clear shift away from the highly organization-centric model advanced by al-Qaeda toward one where unaffiliated sympathizers can interact with and, to some extent, shape propaganda content in real time by actively participating in its dissemination, contributing to the organization(s) whose messages they convey (Veilleux-Lepage 2016a). Thus, while content is created under the direct guidance of IS media operatives and initially distributed by primary distributors, the mass dissemination of the content relies upon sympathizers at the grassroots level. This extensive reliance on unaffiliated sympathizers either retweeting or reposting content produced and authorized by IS leadership has "no clear precedent" (Barrett 2014, 51) and thus can be seen as a ground-breaking paradigm shift in the evolution of jihadism in cyberspace (Veilleux-Lepage 2016a).

This reliance on unaffiliated sympathizers was clearly exemplified on the day Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of "the Caliphate": the Islamic State's primary distributors began circulating pictures of his speech before a video of the speech was uploaded several times on YouTube in 2014. The links to these YouTube videos were then uploaded on the widely popular file-sharing website justpaste.it by primary distributors before being tweeted by them to tens of thousands of unaffiliated sympathizers. These unaffiliated sympathizers, in turn, retweeted the links and — more important — copied and uploaded links to the video and the video itself, using various accounts. These new links were then added to justpaste.it and tweeted again (Barrett 2014). This strategy, aimed at gaining maximum exposure and overcoming YouTube's attempt to suppress IS propaganda, has shown its efficiency on many other occasions.

In order to reach a wide audience, IS sympathizers routinely engage in systematic "hashtag hijacking," manipulating Twitter to magnify the IS message. Hashtag hijacking involves the repurposing of popular and trending hashtags by adding those hashtags into unrelated tweets as a means of infiltrating conversations. For example, on the eve of the 2014 Scottish Independence referendum, a

primary distributor for the IS's al-Furqān media production unit, using the Twitter handle @With_baghdadi, advised his followers that al-Furqān would soon be releasing a new video. The video, entitled *Lend Me Your Ears*, showed kidnapped British photojournalist John Cantlie discussing British foreign policy and his captivity. Within minutes of being uploaded to YouTube, another propaganda operative, identified as Abdulrahman al-Hamid, asked his 4,000 Twitter followers to inform him of the highest trending hashtags on Twitter in the United Kingdom: "We need those who can supply us with the most active hashtags in the UK. And also the accounts of the most famous celebrities. I believe that the hashtag of Scotland's separation from Britain should be first" (as quoted in ibid.). Replies from his followers advised using #andymurray, #scotland, #VoteNo, #VoteYes and #scotlandindependence when retweeting the video in order to raise the video's profile and exposure (as quoted in Malik et al. 2014). Al-Hamid urged his followers to "work hard to publish all the links," while @With_Baghdadi asked his followers to "invade [the #VoteNo hashtags] with video of the British prisoner" (as quoted in Malik et al. 2014). IS sympathizers have also co-opted World Cup hashtags such as #Brazil2014 or #WC2014 in order to increase the visibility of their messages (Vitale and Keagle 2014). More recently, unaffiliated distributors also hijacked hashtags associated with popular social movements in the United States such as #BlackLivesMatter, along with hashtags related to high-profile personalities ranging from politicians to journalists to TV personalities and musicians such as One Direction and Justin Bieber. These popular and trending hashtags are used in conjunction with the Islamic State's own hashtags such as #theFridayofsupportingISIS, #Thought_of_a_Lone_Lion and #AmessagefromISISToUS, in order to increase the exposure of the message (Veilleux-Lepage 2016a).

The Islamic State's reliance on unaffiliated sympathizers to disseminate its propaganda is undoubtedly rooted in the understanding that the majority of its supporters will never engage in violent kinetic actions such as terrorist acts in their homelands or fighting abroad. Instead, the Islamic State utilizes these supporters for the purpose of disseminating information and propaganda relating to its cause. Arguably, not requiring Western supporters to engage actively in terrorist acts allows the Islamic State to garner the participation of these supporters without asking them to cross moral boundaries they might not feel comfortable crossing. This perfectly embodies Brachman's (2019, 19) notion of Jihobbyists, which he defines as: "an enthusiast of the global Jihadist movement, someone who enjoys thinking about and watching the activities of the groups from the first and second tiers but generally they have no connection to al-Qaida or any other formal Jihadist groups. And it is unlikely they will ever actually do anything that directly supports the movements."

Brachman contends that the rise of Web 2.0 allowed individuals to drive their own radicalization without direct assistance, training, or support “to move forward the Jihadist agenda” (ibid.). In other words, online jihadist activity came to have standing in its own right, and is seen by some as an acceptable alternative to kinetic actions to advance the cause. For example, a 2012 article on electronic jihad, posted on the leading jihadist fora al-Fida and Shumukh al-Islam, stated that “any Muslim who intends to do jihad against the enemy electronically, is considered in one way or another a mujahed, as long as he meets the conditions of jihad such as the sincere intention and the goal of serving Islam and defending it, even if he is far away from the battlefield” (as quoted in Weimann 2014, 4).

Similarly, Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Salim’s *39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad* extolled “performing electronic jihad” as a “blessed field which contains much benefit” (as quoted in Awan 2011, 56). The sanction given to electronic jihad was particularly important in assuaging the cognitive dissonance for individuals who wish to advance the jihadist cause but are unable or unwilling to partake in actual conflict, by providing them with a vindictory rationale for this alternative and, because of such statements, a now entirely legitimate mode of action (Veilleux-Lepage 2016a).

As previously mentioned, while a considerable amount of work has been dedicated to identifying the shape and size of the Islamic State’s social media network, few scholars have focused on the attributes of unaffiliated sympathizers. Some generalizations can, nonetheless, be made. First, tweets by unaffiliated sympathizers are typically retweeted between five and 20 times, suggesting that unaffiliated sympathizers reach a small audience and achieve relatively limited redistribution, and are instead coalesced around key nodes, which represent accounts of primary distributors and other prolific unaffiliated sympathizers. These unaffiliated sympathizers therefore instead rely on other means, such as hashtag hijacking, to reach those outside their existing networks. Second, the majority (approximately 80 percent) of these accounts have fewer than 1,000 followers. This finding is consistent with research conducted by S. Benjamin (2016) that found that, out of 3,000 accounts that distributed links to a specific IS production within a few hours of its release, 2,370 accounts had fewer than 1,000 followers. Last, unaffiliated sympathizers tend to follow a mixture of other unaffiliated sympathizers and high-impact accounts (defined as having more than 100,000 followers) such as journalists and scholars, in the hope that the followers of high-impact accounts, along with others within their communities, will be exposed to IS messages. Moreover, the majority of unaffiliated sympathizers’ followers are other unaffiliated sympathizers themselves. This suggests that the

networks of unaffiliated sympathizers are relatively small and insular, suggesting that unaffiliated sympathizers can indeed be best understood as an associative cluster disseminating propaganda horizontally.

CONCLUSION

The Islamic State’s media strategy allows for a message that has been crafted by a handful of IS propaganda agents to be disseminated by a few primary distributors, who in turn can reach thousands of unaffiliated sympathizers, and therefore millions of Twitter users. By means of a conclusion, this chapter offers four short considerations on countering some of the different actors involved in the process.

First, given the highly centralized nature of IS media production, which is most likely spearheaded by a handful of well-trained, technologically savvy and talented individuals, IS media production efforts would be very sensitive to the removal of these individuals. Although research by Jenna Jordan (2009) and Robert A. Pape (2003), among others, on “leadership decapitations”—the strategy of killing the leadership of a terrorist group in hopes of destabilizing it—has been met with a great deal of skepticism regarding its efficacy and morality, it is undeniable that targeting IS media producers would deprive Islamic State of a group of individuals with a rare and valuable skill set. This strategy appears to have been adopted by the US-led coalition, which recently targeted, among others, the founder of Amaq in the eastern Syrian province of Deir al-Zor (Reuters 2017).

Second, although there is some anecdotal evidence (Berger and Perez 2016) that banning social media accounts is an effective way to curtail the activities of unaffiliated sympathizers, relying solely on social media companies to combat the spread of extremist material on their platforms not only raises questions regarding free speech, but would also give these companies the power to control public knowledge and discourse. Given how Twitter has become a global political force during events such as the Arab Spring, conveying real-time information and coordinating actions, such proposals would diminish some of the democratic power of social media, which stems from the fact that it is unedited, for better or for worse.

Third, and on a related note, none of the so-called “lone wolf” attacks in Western countries were perpetrated by individuals who were actively involved in disseminating IS propaganda. In fact, it may well be that distributing jihadist material is an alternate mode of participation for individuals who

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