

RETWEETING THE CALIPHATE: THE ROLE OF SOFT-SYMPATHIZERS IN THE ISLAMIC STATE’S SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

Halifeliğin Sosyal Medyada Paylaşımı: İslam Devleti’nin Sosyal Medya Stratejisinde İlmli Sempatizanlarının Rolü

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ABSTRACT: This research provides an overview of the evolution of the jihadist in cyberspace, focusing primarily on the impact of the emergence of Web 2.0, and the subsequent shift towards ‘lone wolf’ terrorism. The primary focus of this section is on al-Qaeda, due to its role in establishing the use of electronic medium to communicate widely jihadist messages. Therefore, by no means does this section attempt to present itself as a truly exhaustive review of the relationship between cyberspace and terrorism; however, it does provide a broad conceptual understanding of this evolving relationship. The following section provides a discussion of how IS leverages the power of social media, focusing on how the activities of soft-sympathizers create an echo-chamber which allows for IS’ messages to dominate the so-called ‘Twittersphere,’ as these messages are repeated, thus becoming somewhat normalized. This soft-power strategy, in contrast to its military campaign, can be understood as an attempt to normalize and legitimize IS’ existence. Finally, this paper concludes by offering thoughts on how IS strategy can be undermined through both governmentally organized, and grassroots campaigns of counter-messaging, aided by allies within the Islamic world and Muslim civil society.

Keywords: Islamic State, Social Media, al-Qaeda

ÖZ: Okuduğunuz bu makale siber ortamda yer aldığı şekliyle cihatçılık kavramının evrimini gözden geçirmektedir. Bu çalışma bu kavramın Çeçen savaşı döneminden gelen köklerinden bugün IŞİD tarafından sosyal medyada kullanımına kadar üç önemli paradigim değişikliğinden geçtiğini öne sürmektedir: (1) daha ilkel Web 2.0 platformları ve cihatçı forumların

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ortaya çıkışı (2) daha ileri seviye Web 2.0 ve sosyal medya platformlarının cihatçılığı yaymanın yöntemleri olarak ortaya çıkması (3) ‘yalnız kurt’ terörizmine doğru kayış. Yazar makalesinde IŞİD’in kendisine doğrudan üye olmayan, yalnızca sempati besleyerek IŞİD liderliğinin ürettiği ve izin verdiği twitlerini retweet eden muhiblerine yaslanıyor olmasının çığır açıcı olduğunu iddia etmektedir. Ayrıca, IŞİD’in kendisine resmen üye olmayan bu muhibleri güçlendirme stratejisinin siber ortamda cihatçılığın evriminde bir üst aşamaya geçiş olduğunu ve IŞİD’in böyle yaparak sosyal medya platformlarında ‘IŞİD anlatısına’ hakimiyet sağlama yoluyla kendi varlığını normalleştirmeyi ve meşru hale getirmeyi amaçladığı savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam Devleti, Sosyal Medya, El-Kaide

Introduction

On the eve of the Scottish Independence referendum, an operative from the Islamic State’s (IS) *al-Furqan* media production unit, using the Twitter handle @With_baghdadi, advised his followers that *al-Furqan* 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 UK:

“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 Malik et al., 2014).

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 to “invade [the #VoteNo hastags] with video of the British prisoner” (Malik et al., 2014). These interactions between IS operatives in Iraq and Syria, and its soft sympathizers – non-combatant supporters in the West – demonstrate the importance of these supporters to the dissemination of IS’ message. Ultimately, the support of IS by Westerners on social media strengthens the legitimacy of IS’ newly founded cali-

phate by intimating that that support for this caliphate is greater and more widespread than would otherwise be believed if the mainstream media was the only avenue informing the public on IS.

In recent months, Western governments have been growing, and continue to grow increasingly concerned about the upwards of 3,000 foreign fighters travelling from Western countries, such as the United States, Canada, Great Britain and Australia, to Iraq and Syria to swell the ranks of the IS.¹ Of equal concern is the possibility that these fighters will return further radicalized, battle-hardened, and influenced by extensive radical networks, and that they may then be more likely to commit terrorist attacks in their home countries (“Islamic State crisis,” 2014). The recent attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels – allegedly by a returned foreign fighter from Syria – seems to confirm that these fears may be founded in reality (“Brussels Jewish Museum killings” 2014). Moreover, the prospect of individuals at home becoming radicalized by online propaganda and electing to engage in ‘lone wolf’ attacks at home, such as the Ford Hood shooting, or more recently the attacks on soldiers in Canada is of similar concern for intelligence officials and policymakers.

However, while these scenarios represent serious threats which clearly must be addressed, they have largely overshadowed discussions about the role and impact of soft-sympathizers in the West in propagating IS’ message. Therefore, while recognizing the problem of radicalization of individuals at home, and that of foreign fighters, this paper will attempt to redress the current lack of exploration of IS’ social media strategy to explore the role and impact of soft-sympathizers in the Western world. Specifically, it will focus on how these supporters further disseminate IS’ messages, and what strategic function they fulfill. In order to provide an appropriate analysis of this ongoing and highly dynamic phenomena, this research provides an overview of the evolution of the jihadist in cyberspace, focusing primarily on the impact of the emergence of Web 2.0, and the subsequent shift towards ‘lone wolf’ terrorism. The primary focus of this section is on al-Qaeda, due to its role in establishing the use of electronic medium to communicate widely jihadist messages. Therefore, by no means does this section attempt to present itself as a truly exhaustive review of the relationship between cyberspace and terrorism; however, it does provide a broad conceptual understanding of this evolving relationship. The fol-

1 The figure of 3,000 foreign fighters was proposed by the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove (“Islamic State crisis,” 2014). One hundred and thirty Canadian citizens have joined ISIS according to early 2014 estimates by the Canadian Government (Public Safety Canada, 2014). In early September 2014, US defense secretary Chuck Hagel confirmed that over one hundred US passport holders were fighting for ISIS (“Hagel Confirms,” 2014).

lowing section provides a discussion of how IS leverages the power of social media, focusing on how the activities of soft-sympathizers create an echo-chamber which allows for IS' messages to dominate the so-called 'Twittersphere,' as these messages are repeated, thus becoming somewhat normalized. This soft-power strategy, in contrast to its military campaign, can be understood as an attempt to normalize and legitimize IS' existence. Finally, this paper concludes by offering thoughts on how IS strategy can be undermined through both governmentally organized, and grassroots campaigns of counter-messaging, aided by allies within the Islamic world and Muslim civil society.

1. Jihadists in Cyberspace: A Brief Overview

Poor understanding of the early history of jihadi presence online is in large part due to the fact that, by the time cyberspace began to attract the attention of security agencies and scholars, jihadist groups' use on the Internet had already proliferated (Weimann, 2006).²

Early attempts by jihadists to leverage the Internet, included the establishment of azzam.com, which is self described as "an independent media organization providing authentic news and information about Jihad and the Foreign Mujahedeen everywhere" (Awan and Al-Lami, 2009: 56). This is generally cited as the very first authentic Jihadist website. The emergence of Azzam.com, along with the Islamic Media Centre and al-neda.com, during the First Chechen War (1994-1996) and other nascent peripheral conflicts, aimed to "transmit a version of events different from that offered by the mass media from the other side of the battlefield" (Thomas, 2003: 120). Having recognized that conventional media could easily be censored or filtered by governments, (Thomas, 2003), Chechen jihadists instead turned to e-mail distribution lists to transmit their message, uncensored and unfiltered, quickly to a highly targeted audience. In other words, the Internet allowed jihadist groups to explain their actions without the constraints of traditional media, thus offsetting both censorship and condemnation (Thomas, 2003).

Whilst the jihadist presence in cyberspace remained limited until early 2000s, these websites laid the groundwork for the ascendancy of more sophisticated and interactive uses of the Internet in this century.

2 Evidence suggests that terrorist groups, irrespective of ideology, were quick to embrace the power of the Internet to pursue their strategic objectives. In fact, in 1998, fewer than half of the 30 groups designated as foreign terrorist organizations by the US State Department under the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 maintained websites. By the end of 1999, nearly all designated organizations had established an Internet presence (Weimann, 2006).

1. 1. The Emergence of Jihadist Forums

The generation of an explosion of interactive content, and the connected user participation – allowed for by the emergence of early Web 2.0 capabilities and rudimentary online forums – meant users not only passively consumed online content but also activity contributed to its creation (Warren and Leitch, 2012; Hoeren and Vossen, 2009). The increased popularity of general interest online forums coincided with increased participation in jihadist forums, with a 2005 study uncovering upwards of 4,300 active jihadist forums (Weimann, 2006).

Awan and Al-Lami (2009) attributed the move away from traditional websites, and the concurrent exponential growth of online forums, to the shifting security paradigm in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. In the months following the attacks on New York City and Washington, various groups of hackers engaged in complex campaigns to disrupt jihadist websites.³ Similarly, law enforcement agencies ramped up their scrutiny and prosecution of Jihadist online activities.⁴ This sustained assault led to the realization of the necessity of decentralizing the jihadist presence online in order to ensure the continuity of the messaging. Therefore, in an effort to counter the “systemic disruption or removal of important jihadists websites,” the transition was made from traditional websites to online forums in a conscious effort to delegate “responsibility ... to a suitable large and diffused body of anonymous web users” (Ibid: 57-58).

Despite shifting to online forums, the production of jihadist media remained highly hierarchically organized and strictly regulated. In fact, in the aftermath of the mid-2000 invasion of Afghanistan, senior leaders of al-Qaeda increasingly sought to provide readily accessible information about the organization, its membership, ideology, and strategy, in order to compensate for its reduced capability to commit successful acts of terror (Brachman, 2014). This rhetoric remained inherently one-directional, as avenues for interaction between the global following and al-Qaeda’s senior leadership were limited: messages were produced, disseminated and received, but no formal feedback mechanism was built into the process. In other words, “users on these forums were often more akin to traditional

3 Alneda.com was famously hacked and defaced with the words “Hacked, tracked and now owned by the USA” by American porn site owner Jon Messner for five days in August 2002 before the site’s administrators managed to regain control. (Awan and Al-Lami, 2009: 57). Similarly, between 2002 and 2003, the Internet Haganah, a self-described “global intelligence network dedicated to confronting Internet activities by Islamists and their supporters, enablers and apologists,” shutdown more than 600 sites it claimed were “linked to terror” (Awan and Al-Lami, 2009: 57-58). The Internet Haganah also engaged in a campaign requesting American based Internet Service Providers to shutdown sites of concerns.

4 A notable example was the arrest and subsequent extradition to the United States of Babar Ahmad, the creator of azzam.com, under the UK Terrorism Act (Awan and Al-Lami, 2009).

categories of passive media consumers that appeared inimical to the revolution in audience roles heralded by Web 2.0” (Awan and Al-Lami, 2009: 59).

1. 2. The Transition to Web 2.0

The paradigm shifted again with the emergence, and growing popularity, of increasingly sophisticated Web 2.0 platforms, namely file-sharing portals and social networking sites (Conway, 2012). The al-Qaeda Core leadership based in Afghanistan and Pakistan maintained a considerable amount of control over its narrative through its media groups, but in addition to this, al-Qaeda affiliates such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) began utilizing this new media environment to disseminate downloadable content such as magazines, video and brochures. This paradigm shift, is best embodied by the media strategy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and AQI in the interregnum between the demise of Web 1.0 and the fully-fledged Web 2.0.

The release of a thirty-minute recording by al-Zarqawi explaining who he was, why he was fighting, and providing details of the attacks he and his groups were responsible for, heralded the start of al-Zarqawi’s media offensive in early 2004 (Conway, 2012). Paul Eedle described the recording as an example of a “comprehensive brand statement” aimed at gaining brand-recognition (Eedle, 2005: 124-125) and notoriety within the jihadi community. Capitalizing on this newfound recognition, AQI released a video depicting al-Zarqawi beheading the American civilian contractor Nicholas Berg (Conway, 2012). This video, entitled *Abu Musa’b al-Zarqawi slaughters an American*, was uploaded to ogrish.com, a popular shock site, and was – as a result – viewed over 15 million times (Talbot, 2014).

In the wake of such successful propaganda campaigns, the power of video-sharing websites, such as YouTube, was increasingly recognized by jihadists as a novel arena, and an easy-to-access platform, for the dissemination of propaganda, and raising of funds for future operations. Aided by the popularity such mediums,⁵ and the fact that no Arabic language skills or high level of Internet literacy were now required to locate jihadist content, YouTube specifically rapidly became a significant platform for Jihadist groups and their supporters, fostering a thriving subculture which used it to communicate and share propaganda worldwide. A 2008 study analyzed the users’ comments on YouTube videos depicting suicide operations in Iraq, finding that the majority of viewers resided outside of the

⁵ YouTube was established in February 2005 as an online repository for sharing video content. According to YouTube, on average more than one billion users watch about six billion hours of video footage every month. Every minute, 100 hours of new videos are uploaded (Weimann, 2014: 10).

Middle East and North Africa, with the largest percentage located in the United States (Conway and McInerney). This led to the conclusion that Jihadist media was now “spreading far beyond traditional Jihadist websites or even dedicated forums to embrace, in particular, video sharing and social networking – both hallmarks of Web 2.0 -- and thus extending their reach far beyond what may be conceived as their core support base in the [Middle East and North Africa] region to Diaspora populations, converts, and political sympathizers” (Conway and McInerney, 2008: 10).

The dissemination of jihadi messages outside of dedicated forums was, nonetheless, not entirely welcomed by all jihadist media organizations. A case in point is Al-Boraq Media’s September 2006 publication of a detailed policy paper entitled *Media Exuberance*, which sought to curtail the proliferation and production of unattributed Jihadist media. They feared that unpolished and unprofessional content by “scattershot individuals posting jihadist media materials without the sanction of a recognized” jihadist media group undermined the credibility of Jihadist media and diverted attention from official sources (Kimmage, 2008: 5).

1. 3. The Shift Towards ‘DIY Terrorism’

Despite the aforementioned opposition from some jihadist media groups, al-Qaeda strategists, such as Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, nonetheless quickly recognized the importance of the decentralization of their operations. Notably, in 2004, al-Suri penned his *Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*, in which he decried the hierarchical model of al-Qaeda as outdated and vulnerable, espousing instead the advantages grassroots leaderless resistance (Bousquet, 2011; Michael, 2013). Al-Suri’s strategy of individual jihad, best illustrated by the activities of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Another highly important paradigm shift, largely dependent on the power of the Internet, occurred with the 2010 AQAP launch its widely distributed English-language online magazine titled *Inspire*, which encouraged individual jihad against Americans and Westerners (Michael, 2013). With slick production values and graphics, *Inspire* mixed ideologically driven material with pragmatic instructional and skill-building content in an effort to fostering a do-it-yourself approach to terrorism (Lemieux et al., 2014). Moreover, this emphasis on a do-it-yourself ethos targeted at an English-speaking readership is an “especially interesting development in *Inspire* that set it apart from other examples of the al-Qaeda propaganda” (Lemieux et al., 2014). Through a section entitled *Open Source Jihad*, *Inspire* attempted to increase the motivation of individuals in the West, while

lowering skill-based barrier that had previously hampered individuals attempting to carry out successful terrorist attacks. For example, one issue detailed how to conduct a random shooting in a crowded restaurant, while another instructs readers how to weld blades to the front of a pick up truck to “mow down the enemies of Allah”⁶ (Michael, 2013: 55).

The production of *Inspire* magazine is, in many ways, the incarnation of the strategic vision of Anwar al-Awlaki, a popular,⁷ American born, on-line cleric affiliated with AQAP whose sermons were widely distributed on YouTube. Al-Awlaki is also credited with inspiring a number of terrorist plots and attacks.⁸ According to Brain Jenkins (2011), Al-Awlaki and *Inspire* led to a fundamental shift in al-Qaeda’s strategy from organizationally-led jihad, towards do-it-yourself terrorism. Similarly, Jarret Brachman (2014) claims that al-Awlaki and AQAP made do-it-yourself terrorism, and its participants, the focus of their media efforts, rather than conceptualizing al-Qaeda’s sympathizers as merely an audience. A change in the nature of terrorism, whereby terrorist organizations such as AQAP can motivate and empower individuals to commit acts outside of any chain of command, according to Bruce Hoffman (2010), represents a change in the nature of terrorism itself.

As a result of this paradigmatic shift, online jihadist activity came to have standing in its own right. A 2012 article on electronic jihad, posted on the leading jihadist forums al-Fida and Shumukh al-Islam, stated that:

“[A]ny Muslim who intends to do jihad against the enemy electronically, is considered in one way or another a mujaheed, as long as he meets the conditions of jihad such as the sincere intention and the goal of serving Islam

6 A similar tactic, minus the blades, was employed in the West on at least three occasions: In 2006, Mohammed Taheri-azar injured nine people with a sports utility vehicle on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Spencer, 2010); On 22 May 2013, a British Army soldier was run over with a car before being stabbed and hacked to death by two converts to Islam in the southeast of London (The “Return to old-style terror,” 2013).; and more recently, a Canadian soldier was killed and another one injured after being deliberately struck by a car driven by a convert who had previously expressed a desire to travel to Iraq to fight with ISIS (Woods, 2014). This tactic embodies the essence of ‘do-it-yourself’ terrorism, as it “offers terrorists with limited access to explosives or weapons an opportunity to conduct a homeland attack with minimal prior training or experience” (FBI, 2010).

7 A 2009 British government analysis of YouTube found 1,910 videos of al-Awlaki, one of which had been viewed 164,420 times (Weimann, 2014). Similarly, in 2008, his popular lecture *Constants on the Path of Jihad* was available on ummah.com, a mainstream site that received at the time approximately 48,300 visit per month from the US alone (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2011).

8 Al-Awlaki is believed to have been in contact with at least two of the 9/11 hijackers. He is also credited with inspiring or directing a number of other terrorist attacks: the failed 2008 Times Square bombing; the 2009 shooting inside the Fort Hood military base; the failed 2009 “underwear bomber;” and a failed 2010 bombing attempt involving a parcel bomb hidden inside a printer in the cargo hold of a passenger jet (Weimann, 2014). Moreover, Roshanara Choudhry, a Muslim student jailed for attempting to murder British MP Stephen Timms in May 2010, claimed that she was radicalized after listening to Awlaki’s YouTube videos (Weimann, 2014).

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” (Awan et al 2011: 56). Given the belief that participation in indirect jihad is seen as both a required and effective form of resistance and participation in current times, the call for electronic jihad inevitably did not remain unanswered in the wake of the Syrian Civil War.

2. The Use of Social Media by IS

As highlighted by Lewis (2014), the military victory of IS represents only one part of the equation in establishing its caliphate. The key battle for IS is not solely military and achieved by violence, but also includes the formation of “the practical basis of a society” (p. 11-12). In order to achieve this social objective, IS relies on the dissemination of its message to foster support both domestically and abroad through a uniquely effective social media strategy.

Although all sides of the Syrian Civil War have adopted the use of social media, the use of social media by IS appears to have generated far more attention, and consequently has been more successful than others. In addition, whilst various terrorist organizations, such as AQAP and Al Shabaab, have maintained Twitter accounts since 2010, they often did so as a secondary means of communication. The bulk of content was instead available on extremist forums, featuring downloadable content such as magazines, videos and brochures. In contrast, the distribution of information almost exclusively on Twitter, has allowed IS to quickly reach a large audience. Therefore, the dissemination of its ideology, and the advancement of its long-term objective, namely the legitimization of the consolidation and expansion of territory, has occurred more successfully than it might otherwise have done (Friedland, 2014).

In order to frame its message, IS has developed a range of exceptionally professional and sophisticated communication and social media initiatives that are exceptionally easy to access and highly attractive to their audiences. On 5 July 2014, IS media group Al-Hayat Media released in numerous different languages (including Albanian, English, French, and German) the first issue of its online magazine *Dabiq*,⁹ a publication reminiscent of

9 Dabiq is a town located in north Syria and is mentioned in a hadith describing events of the Malahim (Armageddon) where the greatest battle between Muslims and the crusaders takes place. In other words, Dabiq represents a story of Muslim unity against the Romans (Saltman and Winter, 2014)

Inspire magazine (Cambhir, 2014). Each issue reaffirms “key themes, strategic exploits and ideological constructions, as well as speech from [IS] leaders” (Saltman and Winter, 2014; 39). In addition, they also contain powerful photographic imagery of IS’ military and state-building endeavors 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). Similarly, IS produces high-quality videos, which have thus far included *The End of Sykes-Picot*, *The Flames of War*, *The Clanging of the Swords I-IV*, and *Upon the Prophetic Methodology*, which romanticize the daily lives of IS fighters. Punctuated with cinematographic effects, such as instant replays and slow-motion shots, these, often feature length, videos “appear to be something from a Hollywood action film or a video game” (Vitale and Keagle, 2014: 9).

The development of a highly sophisticated media strategy which relies upon the decentralized nature of social media, particularly Twitter, has allowed for the mass dissemination of IS’ multitudinous products. While content is created under the direct guidance of IS strategists, dissemination relies upon sympathizers at the grassroots level. Therefore, the message of IS’ communications remain strategically unified despite dissemination being ‘crowd sourced.’ This extensive reliance on soft-sympathizers either re-tweeting or re-posting content produced and authorized by IS leadership has “no clear precedent” (Barrett, 2014: 51). For example, on the day Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Caliphate, IS began circulating pictures of his speech before a video of the speech was uploaded several times on YouTube. The links to these YouTube videos were then uploaded on the widely popular file sharing website justpaste.it prior to being Tweeted by IS to tens of thousands of sympathizers. These sympathizers, in turn, re-tweeted the links and more importantly, copied and uploaded links to, and the video itself, using various different accounts. These new links were then added to justpaste.it and Tweeted again, in a repetitive manner (Barrett, 2014). This strategy, aimed at gaining maximum exposure and overcoming YouTube’s attempt to suppress IS propaganda, has shown its efficiency on many occasions. Another pertinent example of this strategy in action, showing “the ease” and “speed with which IS is able to spread its message” (Barrett, 2014: 52), is that of the film *Flames of War*. After two days of having been uploaded, one randomly selected page – amongst dozens of others promoting the video – had recorded 18,034 views within just a seven-hour timeframe.

Moreover, to further its strategy of crowd-sourced dissemination, IS affiliates developed an Android application called *The Dawn of Glad Tiding*¹⁰ to enable users to keep up with the latest news about the activities of the Islamic State. Vitaly, the application also allows IS' main 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 Tiding* first went into wide use in April 2014, but reached an all-time high of almost 40,000 tweets on the day IS marched into Mosul (Vitale and Keagle, 2014).

In addition, IS sympathizers also routinely engage in systematic 'hashtag hijacking,' manipulating Twitter to magnify IS' message. Hashtag hijacking involves the repurposing of popular and/or trending hashtags by adding those hashtags into unrelated Tweets as a means of infiltrating conversations. In order to increase the visibility of their messages, IS sympathizers co-opted World Cup hashtags such as #Brazil2014 or #WC2014, and, as mentioned earlier, hijacked Tweets relating to the Scottish Independence referendum (Vitale and Keagle, 2014). Utilizing popular and trending hashtags in conjunction with IS' own hashtags such as #theFridayofsupportingISIS, #Thought_of_a_Lone_Lion and #AmessagefromISIStoUS, increases the exposure of the message. This strategy allows for a message which has effectively been crafted by only a handful of IS propaganda agents to be disseminated by thousands of sympathizers in order to reach millions of Twitter users. In fact, in the period between 17 September and 17 October 2014, the activities of IS supporters resulted in 4.1 million Retweets (Barrett, 2014).

2. 1. Implications of IS' Social Media Strategy

Although there is nothing new in violent extremist groups quickly adopting new technology, what has hardly any precedent is the breadth of the communication strategy implemented by IS. Not only does IS use new technology to create the content which it releases, it also utilizes new technologies innovatively in the dissemination of that content. This strategy has, until now, been only sparsely covered in terrorism study literature. That being said, communications scholar Henry Jenkins' (2006) notion of convergence culture provides a useful theoretical framework to analyze the impact of IS tactics.

10 *The Dawn of Glad Tiding* was available through the Google Play store prior to its removal for violating Google's terms of service.

According to Jenkins (2006), convergence culture whereby “old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (p. 2), is not a technological change. Rather, it is the embodiment of a social change where media consumers no longer passively consume material, but also engage in the creation of virtual communities, combining their collective intelligence and resources to achieve a defined purpose. The fundamental innovation of IS’ media strategy is this exploitation of the collective resource which is its Western followers.

Fundamentally, IS recognizes that the majority of Western supporters will never engage in kinetic actions such as terrorist acts in their homelands, or fighting abroad. Instead, IS utilizes these supporters for the purpose of disseminating information and propaganda relating to their cause. Arguably, not requiring Western supporters to engage actively in terrorist acts, allows IS 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 notion of jihobbyists. Brachman (2008) contends that the rise of Web 2.0 allowed individuals who have largely driven their own radicalization without direct assistance, training, or support “to move forward the Jihadist agenda” (p. 19)

In addition to increasing the exposure of IS’ message, these disseminators also seek to move forward this jihadist agenda by aiding IS to gain recognition and acceptance. In other words, they are actively engaged in an attempt to normalize IS’ narrative. IS media strategy can be understood in terms of soft power projection. While some of IS’ propaganda is clearly aimed at intimidating Western audiences with depictions of atrocities and human rights abuse, these intimidation tactics have been punctuated with imagery of genuine state-building exercises. These images include the depiction of IS’ engagement in administrative functions. Particularly relevant examples include: the enforcement of sharia law through the establishment of a religious police force; the establishment of religious schools; the distribution of food; and reconstruction projects (Lefler, 2014). 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 IS in its attempt to socialize the Muslim world to the ideas and values of the Islamic State.

In order to socialize its global Muslim audience, the mass dissemination of IS’ carefully crafted message seeks to dominate the narrative. The cre-

ation of an echo chamber amplifies and reinforces its messages through transmission and repetitions whilst also drowning out competing views. In order words, by ensuring that its narrative is louder than that of its opponents, IS' sophisticated use of social media creates an impression of large legitimate online support, which exceeds the actual reality. Whilst videos of beheadings and other atrocities have gained tremendous profile, possibly more important is the positive narrative created by IS videos which depict a unified community where pious men police the streets eliminating drugs and making sure everyone prays together. This offers a sharply idealized contrast to most states in the Middle East, where aging autocrats are seen to preside over irredeemably corrupt and stagnant governments, and can arguably be seen as IS' greatest success.

Despite IS' impressive social media strategy, its narrative remains vulnerable to challenges. Echo chambers are typically present within closed systems, such as online forums, which are hermetically sealed from divergent perspectives. However, Twitter in itself is not a closed-system. As such, whilst any open system may be open to domination by a series of 'loud noises', this domination of narrative is only temporary and can be challenged by various competing views, which in this particular case weaken the 'absoluteness' of IS' message. Among these challenges the satire from within Muslim world has been particularly effective in slowly eroding the absoluteness of the IS narrative. For example, the *Burn the IS Flag* campaign, seemingly started by Muslims outraged by the actions of IS, has been trending on Twitter under the hashtags #BurnISISFlagChallenge and #BurnISIS. Based on the *ALS Ice Bucket Challenge*, the movement features people posting photos and videos of themselves burning IS' banner and then challenging their friends to follow suit (Palmer, 2014). Similarly, the US State Department's launch of a tough and graphic counter campaign, uses IS' own images of barbaric acts against fellow Muslims in propaganda which counters IS' narrative. The corner stone of this counter-campaign is a video entitled *Run – Do Not Walk to ISIS Land*, which tells potential recruits that they can learn "useful new skills" such as "blowing up mosques" and "crucifying and executing Muslims," in a sarcastic attempt to illustrate the appeal of joining IS, whilst also offering an alternative to IS' seductive message (Logiurato, 2014).

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, IS relies on a global network of disseminators to promote its material. Instead of a single source acting as the monolithic voice of the organization, multiple messengers collaborate to communicate its message thus lending the appearance of authenticity and wide acceptance. It also creates a huge problem for the people attempting to curb the spread of ISIS's messages. Blocking multiple offending users as they pop up become a challenge, and squashing violent statements on Twitter brings up questions regarding free speech that are as yet unanswered. Moreover, relying exclusively on the administrators of social media platforms to effectively limit the spread of IS ideology through account closures and suspensions is unreliable at best. In this era of instantaneous global communication it is, for the most part, futile to close or suspend accounts unless this is nested within a wider, comprehensive anti-propaganda effort designed to neuter IS domination of the narrative.

Perhaps the biggest mistake in the 'War on Terror' was the belief that the destruction of Al-Qaeda's training camps and leadership would lead to the demise of the group, its affiliated movements, and its ideology. In the same way that Islamic State's land grab is impressive, if shocking, the group's online actions have been even more deeply troubling. The pervasiveness of its ideology and message means that defeating the group will require more of Western governments than a simple military response in Iraq, or even elsewhere in the Middle East: the message itself needs effective counter-acting as well. Western countries need to use an integrated, coordinated, and synchronized approach, with support from allied countries in the Islamic world and Muslim civil society more generally, in order to accomplish such a goal.

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