The "ISIS" Online Media War: A Construction of Ideology through Terrorism

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Abstract

Terrorism portrayal through mass media continues to be unabated and has caught the attention of the entire globe. Frequent acts of terrorism have been covered more solidly and professionally by the terrorists' organizations owing to the new technological development that has changed the structure of mass media industry. This paper seeks to examine the mass media war for the construction of an ideology on the social media by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In the process of such understanding, the paper addresses the following four questions: First, how ISIS media war was initiated, and how far it has gone. Second, what is the basic phenomenon behind ISIS media, and its objectives? Third what age groups of consumers are targeted, and how they are motivated to follow ISIS? Finally, how frequently is the ISIS manipulating the online media?

Keywords: ISIS, Media effects, Terrorism, Internet, Mass Media War, Ideology, Online Propaganda

Introduction

The new world order has not only changed the way of living and thinking but its impact is equally exhibited in the state of war. Nowadays wars are more likely to affect one's life economically, morally and mentally—unlike the old days in which the main idea was to target the head-count. With the emergence of a new era of mass media advancement and its collective effects, over the consumers' ideologies, psychology, beliefs, attitude, pattern of thinking, and myths are ultimately shaping the public's attitude by the use of theological themes to influence the public agenda (Potter, 2012). Such influences are more devastating on the public when the producer is the in-charge of media cell of terrorist organization like the ISIS. This is what actually depicted in the book titled Islamic State: According to Atwan;

"From recruitment and propaganda, to directing simultaneous military actions at great distances apart and consolidating allegiances with like-minded groups, IS has used the internet and digital communications with great skill and inventiveness, competently fending of threats from global intelligence bodies and military opponents" (Atwan, 2005).

Walker published numerous studies such as 'online terrorism and online laws' and 'Blackstone’s guide to the anti-terrorism legislation' (Walker, 2014). Also, Maura Conway have researched about cyber terrorism in her work 'Reality bytes: Cyber-terrorism and terrorist ‘use’ of the internet', 'Privacy and security: against cyber-terrorism'
Increasingly, a number of terrorists and extremist groups are also demonstrating heightened sophistication in the premeditated crafting of their appeals online (Winkler, 2014). It is now been an open secret that terrorist activities have spread online to reach popular social networking sites (Janbek, 2011). The online presence of terrorist groups has risen to an unprecedented level over the last 20 years as the Dark Web team in the year 2011 reported 14 million messages from more than 350,000 authors over 1.5 million conversation threads (Dauber, 2014). Since 29 June 2014, there has been a massive propagandistic messaging novel among terrorist groups: daily mass media bulletins, videos and photo essays – all meticulously branded – showing executions, extracts from daily life, training and military operations (Winter, 2015). ISIS goal from the very beginning was no doubt, expansionism (Boghani, 2016) and for these purposes, has been using the mass media with great innovations, competently fending of threats from global intelligence organizations and military rivals (Atwan, 2015). Israel National News noted” a great deal of ISIS’ terrorist activity and social-media activism has been designed to present it as the larger, stronger, more aggressive, more ideologically pure successor to an obsolete al Qaeda” (Hayward, 2015).

Owing to the wide variety of interactive digital platforms that ISIS has been using provide probability that groups and individuals be exposed to online propaganda that validate and reinforce their self-proclaimed sense of injustices (Neo, et. al. 2016). The child (ISIS) of Al-Qaeda has emerged as the most powerful and tactical terror organization till date with modern day combat training, equipment and above all the professional mass media production and coverage to depict their activities online. From a room with a masked man beheading a kidnapped person to a battlefield fighting the forces or a convoy blown to pieces by Improved Explosive Devices (IEDs), or rockets attack is part of an important and effective war than a long battle in the field. It is because they send messages of their furiousness besides an appeal to viewers’ sympathy by depicting their cause evenhanded and for the less privileged and oppressed.

Because of the modern digital tools, ISIS has been singularly successful at the task of constructing an ideology. Never before in history have terrorists had such easy access to the minds and eyeballs of millions (Wired, 2016). Their strategy of gaining attention and awareness for spreading fear is highly successful. It is in this backdrop that Baitullah Mehsud, the Chief of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) once said “The media war is the real war.” Further, Al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden’s deputy, is believed to have said “More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media,” (Gerges, 2005; Economist, 2007; Dauber, 2014). During the 1990s, terrorists communicated with their audience(s) by more traditional means, such as journalist interviews, fax, face-to-face propaganda and even press conferences. At the end of 1998, there was a shift in the primary strategic communications means due to technological advances and the rise of
Al-Jazeera (Wojcieszak, 2007). The Al-Jazeera television network became a channel for broadcasting their messages and Al-Jazeera would in turn provide the tapes to CNN and other international news corporations (Gendron, 2007).

The media are very well suited for the purposes of terrorists as communication is at the heart of terrorism (Janbek, 2011). The digital platform is awash with communiqués from terrorist groups commending their own success and denouncing rivals (Economist, 2007). Several theories concerning characteristics – or capabilities – of the media explain part of this phenomenon. The theory of framing states that the way a news item is selected, sequenced and presented can have an influence on how it is interpreted or understood by the audience (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Potter, 2012). Obviously, terrorists like to be on their audiences’ minds, and preferably in a way that is as positive as possible. The prime achievement of Al Qaeda on 9/11 was not just killing people, rather it aimed to terrify the millions who were exposed to the reports and images of the attacks (Janbek, 2011). To quote Economist, "Shoot everything; as a good advice for fighters. Be aware that every frame you shoot is as good as a missile fired at the enemy" (Economist, 2007). This is what ISIS is doing to control the minds of their followers besides targeting those who are oppressed and want to break the chains with media campaign. They also upload videos of rivals which give birth to fear and chaos.

The main goal of the media propaganda of ISIS is to convey to show no mercy to those who go against them through their act of furiousness. The second aim is to portray their cause as fair to attract followers and lastly to motivate people against the west and their allies by showing them as oppressors. Terrorist organizations now have sophisticated techniques of war and the media is the main tool of it, as it expands rather than reduce their rhetoric. What we consume are mass media world away from reality and that too have some effects on us (DeFleur, 1989). Simply the mass media cultivation has reached to the height that no gun or weapon has ever made chaos of the level that it has done in the past few decades with the advancement and globalization of world. In short, the handy video camera has now become an integral tool of insurgency as the AK-47 or the RPG rocket launcher (Economist, 2007). Al Qaeda also used media but to a very limited extent whereas ISIS has taken the war to a whole new level.

The trend of media war was set by Al Qaeda with the videos of beheading and attacks on different convoys of army troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, Al Qaeda published a magazine also named as INSPIRE which would share the ideology of Al Qaeda and their war against the West. But with the emergence of ISIS the public relationship department of this terror organization has gone far beyond any other terrorist organization. Al Hayat Media group is well known for pursuing the propaganda of ISIS and sharing their messages, videos of violence and attacks, songs of their cause and motivational messages which appeal to others to join them in their war against the west (Becker, 2014). If they
had to sell any kind of Islamic governance ideology or extremists ideas, if they are advertising their campaign the need arise for a good medium and easy access to it by the majority which is provided by media and ISIS know very well how to use it.

The two major focuses of ISIS are on spreading chaos with attacking the West and then showing it to the whole world to increase their fear in the heart of a common man. Beheading, killing and bomb blasts are not the inventions of ISIS but the technique to provide it to the world to watch is definitely the invention of ISIS, it all started from the Croatian hostage iv beheading in Egypt on August 12, 2015 and after that videos with that kind of violence and torture from ISIS are aired on weekly basis and nobody can come up with an idea to control them. Due to these techniques (show of might) ISIS followers are increasing but this has made ISIS enemies more concerned and this is the only thing that unites Iran & Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Assad regime in Syria. The point somehow important to mention can be that different governments have used all there might to eradicate terrorist organizations only to face the new ones, if ever noticed one terrorist organization banishes and another pops up to replace them.

“Muslim countries are mostly the victims of ISIS because they provide followers when Muslims are tricked. These ISIS messages from Islamic ideology appealing them to join the just cause which in reality is not, that’s why Muslim countries have found a coalition against ISIS and also the West has done the same when US-UK joined the propaganda war and made a digital media intelligence center which would control ISIS media war” (Alfarsi, 2015).

While some countries with even a trace of ISIS on social media closes that account. Kinetic warfare has been left behind with this clashing media war. The terrorists group continues to inspire many people, which prove the notion that they are using the media to their utmost advantage. The terrorist group has increased their number and by October 2015, nearly 30,000 militants from more than 100 countries have joined to become foreign fighters with "Islamic State" (IS) in Syria and Iraq (Schmid, 2015). Recently the organization has suffered some territorial loses, but it still holds control over an area equal to the size of Britain, where it has links in Afghanistan, Egypt, Nigeria, Tunisia and Yemen. It has left Al Qaeda way behind in online media techniques that was having an experience of 20 years in terror business. The style of the self-declared Caliphate, whether in dress, speech or cruelty, is what potential jihadists everywhere now aspire to.

Problem statement

How ISIS has emerged as an organization well known through mass media, and what techniques are used to construct and disseminate its ideology and their online propaganda to the fore?
Objectives of study

This study is conducted to achieve the following objectives

1. To understand the ISIS foundation of media and its advancement.
2. To know the basic phenomenon behind ISIS media establishment.
3. To identify the age of and the modus operandi of the organization for motivating the target group.
4. Understanding the frequency of ISIS online media operation?

Research questions

1. How ISIS media war was initiated, and how much it has gone?
2. What is the basic phenomenon behind ISIS media, and its objectives?
3. What age group of consumers are targeted, and how they motivate them to follow them?
4. How frequent is the ISIS online media manipulation?

The study addresses the social media usage for the construction of ideology for ISIS media war, and the answer to these questions will help understand the notion under discussion.

Discussion

Research question 01:

*How ISIS media war was initiated, and how far it has gone?*

After pledging allegiance to Al-Qaeda, Washington now has to worry not only about American arms getting into the control of al Qaeda-linked groups but also about them reaching the Islamic State group (Banco, 2015). ISIS has been working under the shadow of Al-Qaeda who was fond of using traditional tactics and strategies to put its fear in the heart of its enemies and that is why an end was put to it, however ISIS learnt from the fate of Al-Qaeda and used a different approach to make its mark. In 2004, it opened its wings gradually and started taking control until June 2014; in which it emerged as the most feared and tactically-sound terror organization to ever have established on earth. By announcing Al Baghdadi as the *caliph* and working under the so called Islamic *Shariah* they took control of key cities of Iraq, and then moved towards Syria where they took control of the key territories and building there base camps to control the land. But this
time they not only used force they were equally using media propaganda to raise the locals and other people against the government and the rebels, but all these media propaganda needed a place where it can be spread to all the world, for which Al-Hayat media center was established in spring of 2014 to give a platform to the organization to launch its propaganda campaign to the fullest. This center holds latest Hi-Tech equipment where skilled professional ISIS recruits use them to broadcast their messages, videos, and the magazine *Dabiq* (Bereznak, 2015). Analyzing the impact of wartime propaganda objectively, the US political scientist came to the conclusion “when all allowances have been made, and all extravagant estimates pared to the bone, the fact remains that propaganda is one of the most powerful instrumentalities in the modern world (DeFleur, 1989). This is not the only center; there are more than 20 different media franchises in the region under control of ISIS and each gets cues from the Headquarter but has room to create some of their own attention grabbing material for the locals according to the needs of the locality. This selectiveness, experts say, ISIS roughly have 40 groups in 16 countries that have extended support or allegiance. It has formally recognized nearly 20 *wilayats* in nine countries (Boghani, 2016). Al Hayat media center is considered as the main headquarter for the media propaganda uplift but the branches are also planting the same seeds in localities by examining the needs. In a recent interview, Areef Ali Nayed, Libyan ambassador to the UAE, while addressing the journalists said

“the Islamists have the same strategy of media as that of McDonalds, where your appetite is created, made to be fulfilled only by McDonalds, and also you prefer McDonalds over others. The Islamists are very good at rebranding; they have learnt it from the best and learned very well. This is how they took the methodology, standards and propaganda materials” (Bereznak, 2015).

The recruits at the media center are always posting videos and messages on different social media websites. Due to this huge volume, the headquarter cannot maintain the track of all those that is why guidelines are distributed amongst the branches to follow those guidelines and post video and messages.

“From the very beginning ISIS members would send pictures to twitter”. The purpose was not only showing the violence and rage but to make others follow. Some friends sitting in groups eating pizza, playing video games, or watching television might think of them as fighting for a just cause. They are targeting the audience and mostly young viewers where they portray the place as pleasant, the same language as they speak to grab their attention. In September 2014, Anjem Chaudhry, posted audience-based marketing tweets which was “10 facts from ISIS that everyone should know”. One of them was:

“700$ awarded to every newlywed couple as a gift”(Brezenek, 2015). These kinds of appeals grab the attention of young and energetic youth who want to have a bride and also money. Even a large number of the group's fighters joined
for reasons having little to do with religion; according to a defector from the group that The Daily Beast's Michael Weiss interviewed in Istanbul, Turkey (Bender, 2015). Senior IS leader Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani acts as spokesperson for Al Hayat media group and also its public face but the real strategist are behind the curtain and not surely on frontlines either. The script given to the spokesperson is not what he made by himself but what was handed over to him. “Just like all the other media campaigns the star is not the person usually who write the script but is someone behind the camera” (Brezenek, 2015).

ISIS media campaign became notoriously famous on the day when an American journalist was beheaded and the HD scripted video was sent all over the world. At first it was not so famous but the spamming links on social networks like Facebook, twitter and YouTube persistently opening the link again and again made it infamous work of ISIS where the president of United States Barak Obama said “the conscience of the entire world”, ISIL has no ideology of any value to human beings", "ISIL speaks for no religion" (The Washington Post, 2014). The online media war has reached to the level as had been depicted by Hollywood director, Frank Capra in a series of propaganda films for US war efforts. Frank later remarked as in quotes;

“It scared the hell out of me. It fired no gun, dropped no bombs, but as a psychological weapon aimed at destroying the will to resist, it was just as lethal” (Rose, 2014).

It is the case with ISIS and its online media onslaught amidst distribution of violent propaganda across the world. The earlier terror organizations used to upload their data to a password protected web forum from where it was transferred then to individuals. The problem with those forums was that most of them would be spied upon and were shut down immediately. However, nowadays the videos and messages would share from one single user to thousand others members and it will go on like it, and there would not be a single post but hundreds of them.

That is how ISIS turned to twitter and Facebook and its grasp on online media became more firm. If Al-Hayat wants to release a video they do it by sending it to hundreds of their Internet-savvy supporters who share it further until it attract the attention of international audience. Such kind of followers and techniques has led ISIS to become a very lethal terrorist organization.

Research question 02:

What is the basic phenomenon behind ISIS media, and its objectives?

The number of recruits in ISIS has been, in one way or other, deprived of their normal lives and the recruiters of ISIS took advantage of their situation changing their grief into
anger to be taken out on those who are against ISIS. Nevertheless, the stories of these recruits were not kept secret, which motivated others to filmed and then aired through Al-Hayat media center to different websites. Its broadcasts invariably carry logo or a fluttering black-and-white ISIS flag in the top corner of the screen. It records programs in several languages (Rose, 2014). The idea behind doing this propaganda is to give a message to let other people know that the group is fighting for the suppressed and weak which help increase the number of people willing to join them.

If ISIS would not have used media, it would be known to a very limited number of people and even less would join them, and mostly common citizen would have hardly watched their videos of violence and no one would fear their existence, but the ISIS strategist had foreseen this aspect and so created a media outlet so strong that would put doubts in the mind of every person with their messages and videos whether they are wrong or right?

“The two basic objectives behind ISIS media propaganda are to show their cause as just and recruit more and more people from around the globe by showing videos of ISIS members going to hospitals and markets and keeping check on everyone to be treated equally and showing ISIS recruiters offering prayers in midst of war and telling them the life inside ISIS that is appealing to their emotions to join them. While on other videos of violence such as beheadings and bomb blasts are shown to create fear among their opponents. The latest trend is to spread stories of their violent acts showing their potency” (Hamza & Riley, 2012).

Research question 03:

What age-group of viewers are targeted, and how they are motivated to follow ISIS?

ISIS target teenagers and young men to join the cause through their motivational messages and display of valor in the field. The audio-video messages along with the magazines are translated into different languages and spread in the respective countries like English, Dutch, Italian and Arabic etc., to make it easy for them to understand the message in it. The majority of viewers of social media are youth who lack a real sense of maturity and easily bent on different issues. The IS shows the life their fighters as full of excitement and pleasant experiences. Unlike the traditional terrorist who would live in caves and eat different shrubs and vegetables, IS soldiers live in normal apartment enjoying good food, and family life. All these techniques are used to attract the attention of viewers to join the organization. One recent example can be taken from the Boumeddienne another appearance in Syria for a couple of pages Q&A in the 2nd edition of the magazine Dar al Islam. This magazine is in French, which disseminate the propaganda in France. This is the same tactic used which was earlier used by Vanity Fair which once put Ricky Martin on their front cover to increase the Spanish fan-following.
If ISIS would have taken part in real campaign they might have won different awards for their work (Adams, 2015).

“ISIS is searching for legitimacy” means providing for inhabitants living under its control. By publicizing the violent acts of terrorism through online videos, the ISIS demonstrates its desire and ambitious goal of "ideological purity" (Schouela, 2016). They are trying to portray their activities as legitimate because this would boost the number of followers. But the precision given to the minute details is not done by some common recruit but surely by some art director behind the camera that cares about the logo, issue number and illustrations. These details are kept in order to attract people and grab their attention and sometimes pictures are posted on internet to be edited by some random viewers and whoever best designs the pictures and logos are awarded through online transfer, which is a technique of recruiting, a trend of online job for internet geeks. ISIS believes that money and power are the two offerings they have in return for those who join them”. Young girls are reportedly being offered as brides for ISIS Jihadi fighters after being groomed online (Dearden, 2014). Moreover, everyone loves to have power and money and especially teenagers who are energetic and these two weapons if not controlled can be very lethal.

**Research question 04:**

*How frequent is the ISIS online media manipulation?*

The online presence of ISIS has expanded its influence beyond the battlefield. Foreigners from the center seeking to join suggest that its online efforts are paying off well (Combating Hate: International Extremism & Terrorism, 2014). According to twitter statistics the presence and activity of ISIS as of fall 2014 found that approximately 200,000 tweets and retweets per day were generated (Twitter presence of ISIS as of Fall 2014, 2014). Mark Zuckerberg in his interview to media admitted that "combating hate speech and online terrorist activity has become a concern for social media—primarily Twitter and Facebook" adding, though the Facebook and Twitter tried to limit the reach by suspending accounts and removing posts again their efforts are slow compared to how quickly new issues pop up (King, 2016). A demographic snapshot of ISIS supporter presented by Berger and Morgan (2015) on Twitter revealed that from September through December 2014, they used at least 46,000 Twitter accounts. ISIS and their propaganda around the globe is share on different social networks like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Tumbler etc. IS has a swift technique of dissemination with its number of supporter’s social media accounts which starts with continuous posting of videos and picture again and again and ends with the same.
ISIS was in need of something which once posted can reach CNN in minutes and that’s how they started using Twitter for direct contact with the world and the news channel now not needed to send and risk the lives of their journalist for sake of information but rather wait for the different Twitter accounts to get the latest news from the most notorious terrorist organization. Not only in production skills but the group looks after their social networking sites with equal importance. Alberto Fernandez, who ran the State Department’s counterterrorism communication department unit before joining the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), states that ISIS follower, holds more than 50,000 accounts of Twitter. These accounts are spread all over the Middle East and certain parts of Europe that is why they are having different languages according to the locality in which respective language is spoken. In addition, these accounts post one message or video in different forms at one time on all the accounts across the whole world (The Propaganda war, 2015).

**Conclusion**

With the passage of time ISIS has become one of the deadly terrorist organization and their online propaganda is the tool of their war against their enemies. From beheading a person and filming in HD with perfect focus lens to blowing to pieces the ancient heritage, cultural monuments or convoys of soldier, showing the social work or portraying a common man fed up of his government; posted on social networks sites. All these media propaganda techniques are well planned tactics to promote their ideology and legitimacy in highly professional way to exhibit their cause as just; but all these are done by their constant media offensive that is grasping more and more attention with the passage of time. Increasing the number of recruits in short span of time, all mainly because of their continuous efforts through media campaigns to grab the attention of majority. The fighters appearing in videos, the uniform they wear, the color of their uniform and logos, the script to be spoken and every other detail has been taken care of because that’s how they grab attention of the audience. Moreover, they have learnt it from all the big brands who sell their products by appealing to their buyers through different propaganda campaigns as they know this war cannot be won through military force and political means alone; it is as much a war of information, mass media usage and propaganda that is currently fatally imbalanced to the advantage of Islamic State (Winter, 2015). ISIS has been manipulating the minds of teenagers with different packages they offer like money, power, wives etc., via digital media. In the present era of technological advancement and mass media development the digital mass media is the most effective medium to carry content to every part of world hence manipulate and change the situation bringing even unpredictable behaviors. Taking advantage of the powerful tool the ISIS
has sophisticated media equipment and expertise that has given them unprecedented online access to people and target where they promote their propaganda to the fullest.

Endnotes

i The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and by its Arabic language acronym Dāʿish, is a militant group.

ii Quoted in Economist as Mr. Zawahiri himself once put it in an intercepted letter to Zarqawi.

iii The new media branch follows ISIS's general media strategy. Not to be confused with the Arab newspaper Al-Hayat, Al Hayat Media is specifically aimed at non-Arabic speakers, particularly younger viewers, and its output is closer to mainstream broadcast standards than anything else Islamic extremism has yet produced (Rose, 2014).

iv The Islamic State (IS) militant group says it has beheaded a Croatian hostage Tomislavsalopek following the expiry of 48-hour deadline demanding release of female Muslim prisoners from Egyptian jails.

v James Foley was beheaded by the Islamic State militants. On this act, the US President Obama spoke at a news conference in Martha's Vineyard saying groups like IS have "no place in the 21st century."

vi Hayat Boumeddiene: Paris attack terrorist's widow.

References


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