

ISIS and Innovative Propaganda

Confronting Extremism in the Digital Age

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In the wake of the horrific Paris terror attacks in November President Obama declared, “ISIS is the face of evil [and] our goal is to... destroy this barbaric organization.” (White House, 2015) Global leaders and organizations have echoed this call to arms. Yet it has been more than a year since the fall of Mosul and ISIS is not significantly weakened. In his statement to the G20 President Obama outlined the United States’ military, diplomatic, and counter-error strategy for containing ISIS. This approach is failing because it does not adequately challenge ISIS’s propaganda machine. Although the President acknowledged ISIS is “very savvy when it comes to social media, and able to infiltrate the minds of... disaffected individuals around the world” there has been no comprehensive counter-messaging response from the West.

Despite ISIS’s brutality, they have recruited thousands of people from advanced democracies. Recent intelligence reports estimate that over 4,500 citizens have defected from Europe and the United States to join ISIS since 2011.(Schmitt & Sengupta, 2015) Many of these people know little about Islam, are disillusioned with society, and are searching for a sense of meaning. The Islamic State’s recruiting techniques are unlike those of any other terrorist organization since they have adapted their propaganda to the digital age. ISIS uses centralized propaganda to prey on a target’s weak sense of identity and social networks to disseminate their message. Twitter accounts sympathetic to ISIS use themes of purpose and camaraderie among jihadists to attract isolated Western youths. Visually and emotionally appealing videos and magazines depict a utopian society where all Sunnis are prospering. The astonishing success of these methods requires governments to adapt to the cur-

rent digital environment, rather than recycle counter-messaging tactics of the past.

There are several challenges to developing an effective policy response to ISIS propaganda. First and foremost is the ungoverned and loosely regulated nature of social media. Although it is possible to shut down individual Twitter accounts affiliated with terrorist organizations, they often reappear within hours under a slightly different account name. While the hacker collective Anonymous boasts of suspending 20,000 ISIS-related Twitter profiles, (RT International, 2015) these users will simply create new accounts. Second, the media airing “news-worthy” propaganda assists ISIS. The gruesome execution video of American journalist James Foley circulated with the help of CNN and the BBC, rather than ISIS agents. Finally, governmental agencies have lost the fight over messaging with ISIS. Although many groups are dedicated to counter propaganda, ISIS has thousands of social networking accounts and media specialists who have crafted a more effective recruiting campaign.

Counterterror organizations can work with motivated private stakeholders and third parties to blunt the effectiveness of ISIS propaganda and stem the tide of recruits from Western countries. These initiatives should focus on three major objectives:

Restricting communication channels. ISIS has a dominant position on social networks that allows them to easily communicate with potential recruits. Any social media counter-offensive will not succeed without community policing of social networks. Citizens should be encouraged to report ISIS related accounts and tech companies should be pressured to more aggressively suspend these users. This initiative should

aim to create a grassroots movement that can keep up with the thousands of ISIS sympathizers online. This will allow government agencies to focus on more complex outlets, such as shutting down apps and accounts made by ISIS.

Delegitimizing the central messages of the propaganda. ISIS media presents a utopian society where recruits can find meaning. Counter-messaging should focus

on describing the reality of the situation, with an emphasis on the stories of defectors and refugees fleeing the Islamic State.

Supporting at-risk youths who are likely to be targets. Many Western recruits follow similar patterns of isolation from society. Improving outreach on a personalized basis can offer these people an alternative to *jihad*.

Understanding ISIS Propaganda

ISIS's propaganda machine differs from previous terrorist organizations in its sophistication, content, and distribution mechanisms. ISIS has two divisions dedicated to propaganda, Al-Hayat Media and Mu'assassat al-Furqan. The former focuses on recruiting and presenting an idyllic society, while the latter focuses on spreading fear. (Saltman & Winter, 2014, 38) These organizations have a prominent role within ISIS. According to one defector, "The media people are more important than the soldiers and their monthly income is higher." (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015) This bureaucracy includes many former tech and news employees who are adept at video editing and graphic design. While the top media boss is a 36-year-old Syrian named Abu Amr al-Shami, there are several Westerners near the top of the hierarchy. (Talbot, 2015) Multiple reports reference an American in charge of editing

several key videos. (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015) Until his death former German rapper Deso Dogg played a key role within Al-Hayat Media. (Talbot, 2015)

This wealth of foreign talent means that ISIS has more media capability than Al-Qaeda and its affiliates ever had, and this is reflected in the high production value of ISIS propaganda. In sharp contrast to the grainy videos of Osama Bin-Laden, ISIS disseminates Hollywood style, hour-long movies about life in the Caliphate and the victories of the Islamic State. John Cantile, a British news hostage that was taken prisoner, hosted many expose-style programs about life in the Caliphate. The ISIS magazine, *Dabiq*, is visually impressive and is filled with articles written by Westerners. ISIS has even developed several original nasheeds, or jihadi songs, that play in the background of videos. (Schatz, 2015)

Appealing to Potential Recruits

ISIS propaganda in the West targets 16-25 year olds who are isolated from their societies and who do not have a strong sense of identity or purpose. (Callimachi, 2015) (Yan, 2014) They often know little about Islam or have learned about religion from ISIS operatives. A recent study identifies four themes ISIS uses to attract recruits: Urgency, Agency, Authenticity, and Victory. All Sunni Muslims are called to come fight immediately to prevent

the slaughter of their religious brothers at the hands of the infidels. They are told that they will have an impact, that they are fighting for the only legitimate Muslim State, and that their actions will lead to victory. (Fernandez, 2015) Viewers feel that they are needed and have an obligation to fight for ISIS. Potential recruits are shown a sense of purpose and identity that they did not have before. If they come to the Caliphate then their life will have

meaning. Recruits may discount the barbarity of ISIS as a necessary evil to create a utopian society. Many defectors explain their rationale for joining ISIS along these lines. One thought he was going “to help in a humanitarian sense the people of Syria” and another wanted to live under strict Islamic law and accepted the stoning of adulterers. (De Freytas-Tamura, 2015) They only prepared to leave once they realized ISIS was very different than the propaganda.

This image of purpose is supplemented by the theme of camaraderie among the soldiers of the Islamic State. ISIS goes to great lengths to illustrate the multi-ethnic background of its members. The first issue of *Dabiq* contains pictures of jihadists from many backgrounds embracing each other and huddling together like sports players before a game. (The Clarion Project, 2014) Several videos showcase Western recruits discussing the great friends they have made in the Caliphate and the acceptance of foreigners in their society. With these messages ISIS emotionally appeals to its target demographic by offering an accepting and inclusive community. ISIS operatives will often chat online or Skype with potential recruits for hours, offering them the hope of friendship they do not have at home.

Rather than emphasizing religious altruism, which Western recruits may not engage with, ISIS propaganda focuses on utopian living and the exploitation of women. Instead of preaching abstinence from sex before marriage and alcohol, ISIS gives viewers an image of the good life. One movie, entitled *Five Star Jihad*, “depicted life for Islamic State fighters as lavish, with access to hillside mansions, gleaming SUVs and swimming pools overlooking the group’s conquered terrain.” (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015) ISIS media discusses religion, but there is a much larger focus on adventure, community, and personal power, once again appealing to the lonely Westerner. There is also a clear emphasis on the foot soldier and the purposeful

life they can live in the Caliphate rather than the leaders. ISIS gives “the world access, willingly, to the daily lives of jihadists” and humanizes them in the process. (Saltman & Winter, 2014, 43) Most importantly, the propaganda is shown as inclusive to Sunni Muslims of all nationalities. Foreigners have no barrier to entry and can rise up the ranks as quickly as Arabs.

To reinforce these themes, ISIS portrays women in two different ways based on the intended audience of the messaging. For propaganda aimed at women, they are described as “jihadi brides,” participating in the al-Khansaa police brigade and carrying AK-47s. (Ali, 2015) Unlike the Taliban, which hid women from all propaganda and confined them to the home, ISIS media “emphasize[s] themes of sisterhood and belonging—and highlight[s] the role of marriage and family.” (Talbot, 2015) Women in ISIS, such as UK defector Asqa Mahmoud, reach out to others on social media encouraging them to travel to the Caliphate in order to fulfill their duty, contribute meaningfully to the Caliphate, and to actively participate in *jihad*.

The propaganda aimed at males gives a much more accurate image of how women are treated and exploited in ISIS territory. Magazine articles promote the idea of sexual *jihad*, which argues that men are allowed to relieve sexual tensions so they can fight more effectively. Although sex before marriage is impermissible under normal circumstances, a highly controversial Fatwa attributed to Wahhabi cleric Sheikh Mohamad al-Arefe in 2013¹ authorized this behavior during times of *jihad*. (Ali, 2015) ISIS has used this to legitimize sexual slavery and abuse in the territory it controls. One particularly graphic *Dabiq* article boasts of selling captured Yezidi women and girls as young as nine into sex slavery. (Ali, 2015) Such material appeals to lonely, sexually frustrated young males who are ISIS’s target audience.

¹Some sources, including the report I use in this paper, link the concept to Sheikh Mohamad al-Arefe during the unrest in Tunisia in 2013. He has denied issuing the Fatwa.

Digital Age Innovations

A Quilliam foundation report lists three major areas of innovation: the global dissemination of threat, decentralized messaging, and the development of new software. (Saltman & Winter, 2014) Social networks allow ISIS sympathizers to distribute propaganda more efficiently than previous terror groups were able to. At the peak of Al-Qaeda's prominence, operatives could only air their videos through the Al-Jazeera network or specific webforums. This meant that they could only disseminate videos to a limited audience already looking for terrorist propaganda. Today, an ISIS member on Twitter can hijack a thread on unrelated trending topics. For example, during the 2014 World Cup ISIS users tagged their tweets containing videos with #brazil.2014. (Saltman & Winter, 2014, 40) This gave them access to a global network of casual Twitter users who were simply browsing for sports updates. The affordability of smartphones and proliferation of social networking means millions of people could see this information. ISIS even dominates more traditional media outlets. The sheer brutality of ISIS videos often makes them "newsworthy" material for Western networks. When these news channels continuously play and analyze execution videos, such as that of James Foley, it only increases the audience for ISIS's propaganda. Although most people will be repulsed by these videos, a few will be receptive and may be influenced to join ISIS.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the ISIS propaganda machine is its use of social media to rapidly spread its message. In 2014 ISIS created the Al-Battar media battalion, which was "designed to push ISIS propaganda," "coordinate hash-

tag campaigns," and "castigate ISIS opponents." (Fernandez, 2015, 19) In addition, there are many sympathetic "fan-boys" outside ISIS territory that distribute videos online and directly message potential recruits. Between these two groups there are as many as 3,000 users that have the capability to produce as many as 90,000 tweets a day. (Fernandez, 2015, 7) ISIS can flood targets with messages and the sheer volume makes it hard for governments to keep up. Since the "fan-boy" accounts originate from outside the Caliphate, airstrikes have a limited effect on limiting media distribution. Reports from soldiers are instantaneously uploaded and sent across networks, leading to "profound success in intimidating, recruiting, and fundraising." (Saltman & Winter, 2014, 41) Whereas previous terror groups needed rigid structures to distribute propaganda, ISIS has taken advantage of technological advances to create a flexible and decentralized system that is constantly being updated.

To further streamline operations ISIS has developed new software, an unprecedented move for a terrorist organization. The most prominent innovation, a Twitter app called "Dawn of Glad Tidings," allows users to post tweets without manual input. (Saltman & Winter, 2014, 41) The Al-Battar battalion designs the tweets and the app coordinates them based on a timing mechanism to avoid detection by algorithms. This app was available on the Google Play store until it was removed, and was "responsible [for] posting almost 40,000 tweets in a single day as IS marched into Mosul." (Saltman & Winter, 2014, 41) Even when ISIS sympathizers are away from their devices, their accounts continue to update at a prolific rate.

Existing Counter-Measures

Governments and independent organizations have implemented several programs

to counter ISIS propaganda but have had very limited success. Many of these focus

on delegitimizing ISIS and presenting an alternative narrative.

In the United States, the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) has released several videos aimed at discrediting ISIS. “Think Again Turn Away,” a similar program run by the state department, has been called an embarrassment by counterterror experts and does not have source credibility. (Singal, 2015) In the UK, the “Prevent” program aims to curb non-violent extremism. Under this initiative, schools need to identify vulnerable² children and since 2012 over 2,000 students have been sent to the government’s anti-radicalization program. (Ministry of Justice, 2012) (Khaleeli, 2015) Critics argue that this program is too inva-

sive, leads to racial profiling, and turns teachers into spies. (Khaleeli, 2015) Ironically, Saudi Arabia claims to have one of the more successful programs in the Al-Sakinah campaign, which is run by an independent NGO that is supported by the government. This online service matches Islamic scholars with users on jihadi websites vulnerable to radicalization. (Casptack, 2015) After this initial contact, participants are sent to a rehabilitation clinic, and their families are financially compensated. This program boasts a remarkable 90% success rate³ with those that enter counseling. (Casptack, 2015) Yet Saudi Arabia remains one of the largest terrorist recruiting grounds, and the government continues to fund many extremist groups.

Policy Challenges

ISIS’s innovative propaganda presents multiple policy challenges that will require Western counterterror agencies to adapt to the digital age. The primary obstacle to effective policy is the ease of access to social media. If a Twitter account is suspended, an individual can just open a new one. Filtering and blocking profiles manually is a time costly endeavor with almost no results. The Quilliam Foundation tracked several ISIS related accounts and found that many suspended accounts reappeared within days with a slightly different handle. (Saltman & Winter, 2014, 42) Surprisingly, these accounts were quickly able to re-gain their followers by instructing them to search for similar usernames⁴. One user was blocked twenty times and his twenty-first account still has 20,000 subscribers. (Saltman & Winter, 2014, 42) Anonymous, the hacker collective, recently declared war on ISIS and reported 20,000

ISIS-related Twitter accounts. While this makes for a good headline and adds some extra work for ISIS sympathizers, it does not seriously hamper their ability to disseminate propaganda via social media.

Counter-messaging programs have struggled to match the quality of ISIS content. “Welcome to the “Islamic State” land”, the most viewed US anti-propaganda video, seems like an amateur production made on iMovie and was mocked by comedian John Oliver. These agencies have little funding and staff and cannot compete with ISIS. The US CSCC has a meager \$5 million annual budget, a staff of fifteen, and access to 350 State Department Twitter accounts. (Miller & Hingam, 2015) ISIS has hundreds of people working in its media division and thousands of social media profiles. Up to this point governments have lacked the required talent to create high quality videos or to

²The UK government website specifies 22 factors that may induce someone to join a terrorist group. Many of these categories are vague, such as a desire for political or moral change, relevant mental health issues, and a desire for status.

³The program claims that 90% of participants are de-radicalized and rejoin society. This number may be so high because many potential recruits never entered counseling. These figures are all reported by the center and are thus difficult to independently verify.

⁴For example, an account would reappear with an extra letter or number in the handle.

beat ISIS at its own game.

The final major policy challenge is reaching potential recruits with these messages. Since many of these individuals are disillusioned with their societies, it will be difficult for government agencies to appeal to them on an emotional level. Videos with the State Department seal, such as the widely-viewed “Welcome to the ”Islamic State” land,” which sarcastically displays brutal ISIS videos in an effort to scare away recruits, do not have credibility among people who distrust the government. (Miller & Hingam, 2015) Even the efforts of Islamic

clerics have had a minimal impact. While almost all prominent Muslim religious leaders have publicly denounced ISIS, this has failed to slow their recruiting efforts. (Fernandez, 2015, 14) These approaches may have failed to connect because they are impersonal. ISIS operatives speaking directly to recruits on social media for hours will have more influence than distant figures of authority. Once these people believe they are friends with jihadists, they will likely ignore blanket messages. More personalized rehabilitation that is tailored to the profile of each at-risk individual is necessary.

Policy Recommendations

A multifaceted approach is required to respond to ISIS’s sophisticated propaganda machine. Governments and counter-terror organizations must destabilize ISIS’s system of messaging, delegitimize their propa-

ganda, and reach out to at-risk individuals. These strategies must adapt to the nature of social media and the global appeal of the Islamic State. I recommend the following policies:

Taking ISIS Offline

ISIS enjoys unprecedented dominance in social media that has led to ease of distributing propaganda. A combination of community policing, cooperation with tech companies, and selective airstrikes will hamper ISIS’s ability to attract recruits.

As discussed earlier, efforts to suspend social media accounts linked with ISIS have largely failed due to the public nature of these platforms. This current response is frustrating ISIS, but it has a minimal long-term impact once new accounts are created. However, the effort to identify suspicious accounts has been limited to small, dedicated groups of hackers (Cottee, 2015) or resource-constrained government agencies. Encouraging a larger proportion of the social media community to participate in this effort will lead to more success. Facebook and Twitter already allow any user to report a suspicious account, and both sites prohibit threats of violence and other abuses. (Altman, 2014) It does not take a skilled hacker to recognize and re-

port an account that is distributing ISIS materials. This will allow companies to focus on reviewing and suspending suspicious profiles, rather than looking for them. Billions of people are active on social media. If even a small percentage of them are watching for suspicious accounts, this will limit ISIS’s ability to distribute propaganda.

To supplement this community policing, tech companies should be encouraged to utilize existing software to autonomously identify ISIS-related accounts. One such program is PhotoDNA, a service currently used by Facebook, Twitter, Google, and others to track down photos of child pornography. PhotoDNA “tags” offending images with a unique ID that allows computers to remove similar photos without the intervention of humans. (Burgett, 2014) This minimally invasive service only runs through metadata of images without searching through personal inboxes. (Burgett, 2014) Tech companies should expand the scope of PhotoDNA to

identify accounts that share ISIS propaganda videos and images. Once a database of this content is assembled it will be easy to begin reporting users. Most importantly, this process will be able to keep up with the fast pace of social media because it does not require human identification of accounts. This algorithm will be able to track down new accounts once they post a video with the same ID as ISIS propaganda.

Cyber-policing will be most effective if paired with surgical airstrikes on high-level ISIS media operatives. Recent airstrikes have killed German rapper Deso Dagg, a high ranking operative in the Al-Hayat me-

dia division, (The Guardian, 2015) and Junaid Hussein, a leader in ISIS's hacking division. (Post, 2015) Although ISIS will be able to replace these people, killing high value targets will severely delay, if not disrupt, the capacity of ISIS to develop propaganda. At some point ISIS will run out of skilled developers. The threat of airstrikes alone will force high-ranking officers into hiding, further hindering this process. Any air strikes should be highly selective and seek to avoid civilian casualties. The urban setting of ISIS's media headquarters complicates this but does not make it impossible. Strikes should target convoys and rural areas to minimize collateral damage.

Improving Counter-messaging

Efforts by governments to provide an alternate message to ISIS propaganda have not been successful because they do not match the content, volume, and emotional appeal of ISIS media. With their comparative lack of talent, counter-messaging agencies cannot hope to match the quality of ISIS videos. Instead, they should emphasize the stories of defectors and the truth about life in the Islamic State.

The most viewed counter-propaganda videos are sarcastic, emotionless, and do not focus on creating a compelling narrative to oppose ISIS. (Fernandez, 2015, 15) This is a flawed approach since it fails to understand the psychological profile of most Western recruits, who are isolated, emotional and idealistic. They are drawn to ISIS since they believe it will give them purpose and meaning, and they are unlikely to trust State Department officials arguing otherwise.

Governments should use the stories of ISIS defectors to reach potential recruits. The stories of defectors will be credible and relatable, will appeal on an emotional level, and most importantly will dispel false ideas about ISIS. 58 defectors, nine of them from the West, have gone public with their stories. (De Freytas-Tamura, 2015) Almost all

of them left once they became disillusioned with ISIS. Governments should focus their messaging on these stories to delegitimize the utopian image of ISIS with voices that have experienced the Caliphate first hand.

An alternative communication policy should focus on personal interventions with at-risk individuals. If ISIS has established direct contact with someone, they are unlikely to interact with counter-propaganda. The only way to reach them may be through direct messaging. This would be modeled in a similar fashion to the Al-Sakinah program in Saudi Arabia that matches potential extremists with Islamic experts. Online users that have been reported as potential targets will be paired with a counselor who can answer questions about Islam and discuss the true nature of ISIS. It should also incorporate efforts by smaller organizations to de-radicalize people over the Internet. For example, the London think tank Strategic Dialogue ran experiments "in which it found people at risk of radicalization on Facebook and tried to steer them away." (Talbot, 2015) Although the sample size was small, this individualized approach could have more success than broad, de-personalized messaging campaigns.

Helping Those at Risk

Most people who join ISIS from the West are not making a well-informed decision, though there will always be a small percentage of hard-liners that truly believe in what ISIS stands for. They leave isolated lives in developed societies for a barbaric state because they are influenced by false ideas and a misguided sense of purpose. Based on the stories of defectors, we know that many are desperate to leave ISIS once they realize its true nature. (De Freytas-Tamura, 2015) Community outreach can eliminate the reasons why most people join

ISIS, namely isolation and a search for meaning. Once at-risk individuals are identified online, there must be offline efforts to reintegrate them into society. Connecting them to ISIS defectors and former targets can provide networks of assistance. Local leaders, such as imams, and family members can contribute to this process. Existing de-radicalization programs for returning defectors, such as peer-to-peer counseling, should also be extended to these potential recruits.

Conclusion

Governments have been unable to stop the flow of ISIS recruits from Western countries. Understanding the innovations and appeal of ISIS propaganda is the first step to developing a successful counter narrative. Unlike previous extremist groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS has exploited social media and other digital age technology to effectively spread their message. This propaganda emphasizes purpose and camaraderie that potential recruits lack at home. By utilizing social networks and preying on a lack of identity in recruits, ISIS has developed an unparalleled messaging operation. Successful responses to this propaganda should take ISIS accounts offline, delegitimize the promise of utopia in the Caliphate, and improve outreach to at-risk individuals in developed countries.

The policies I suggest raise critical questions of the ethics of surveillance and censorship of the Internet. While an in

depth discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, policy makers should take several ideas into account when debating this issue. First, such measures should be as minimally invasive as possible. The right to privacy should not be unnecessarily violated. The PhotoDNA software I discuss fits this criterion by tagging offending media without searching personal inboxes. Similar initiatives should strive to balance the privacy of citizens with the value of the knowledge obtained. Second, questions of censorship should be publically debated with the goal of reaching a consensus. If we can establish child pornography guidelines, a similar set of laws can be reached with regards to extremist propaganda. Stopping ISIS's propaganda machine is a crucial priority for Western governments. However, if these important issues are left unsolved we risk undermining our fundamental rights in the process.

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