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Terror.com - IS's Social Media Warfare in Syria and Iraq

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Terror.com - IS's Social Media Warfare in Syria and Iraq

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Like other non-state actors, for a while now the terrorist organisation Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria has employed a social-media strategy in order to advance their strategic objectives. At the moment, however, IS seems to be more successful in their on-line activities than other similar organisations. This article looks at just how IS uses social media strategically as part of its armed activities in Syria and Iraq.

Introduction¹

To an increasingly higher degree terrorist organisations today use the internet and most notably social-network media to create the effects they desire through a series of on-line activities. These activities, designed to support their kinetic activities, include information collection (intelligence), target selection, propaganda, recruitment and fundraising, to name a few. They are facilitated by dissemination of interlinked stories (words and images) that support their narrative. To a very high degree this is also the case for the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq today. IS activities in the crises in Syria and Iraq are merging, as lately confirmed by their proclamation of the Caliphate or the “Islamic State” in late June 2014. A part of IS activities is their on-line propaganda activities aiming at advancing their narrative. Just how they are doing this from a cross-media and narrative perspective is an interesting case-study, throwing light on their strategy, overall narrative, strategic (information) objectives, target audiences (TA) and associated social-network media use. From this emerge the contours of a very elaborate and professional social-media information campaign which resembles modern cross-media marketing or political PR campaigns.

Social Media Strategy

From a strategy point of view, IS has employed social media to gain the attention of mass media and strategic audiences, amplify and control its messaging in support of its narrative in order to recruit and radicalize followers, deter their opponents and raise funds. Amongst other things, this strategy displays an understanding of the importance of having a single goal (the Caliphate) and a common purpose. It also shows an understanding of how to exploit user experience and visual media (infotainment) in order to gain attention and engage their followers and other strategic audiences in an emotional way – for good (cats) and bad (beheadings). At the same time they manage to construct their “self-image” in a way that supports their narrative. Simultaneously, they display an understanding of how to disrupt the opponent’s narrative and on-line activities by exploiting their opponents messages, in order to position IS and their `brand` amongst other jihadist factions in the Middle East.

The strategy also builds on the notion of “Force Multiplication” through the use of social media in

order to make IS seem more powerful than it may actually be. Part of this is done to create large volume of on-line output to assure visibility among strategic audiences, as well as gaining mass-media attention and thereby further exposure of their message. This also serves the added purpose of creating the impression of a large mass of followers, in turn creating social proof or fake peer endorsement, potentially leading to even more “real” followers. Amongst other things this is achieved through the use of “disseminators”; individuals who although not officially affiliated with IS spread their tweets and other postings to their thousands of followers.²

Another dimension of this strategy is to rely on these “disseminators” using hashtags crafted to look like grass-root initiatives exploiting “astro-turfing” techniques, in some cases also hijacking existing hashtags, and thereby lending third-party credibility to the narrative. IS also utilises techniques normally associated with political campaigning, e.g. by sounding out possible support through feed-back on potential ideas, terms and graphics. This can also be viewed as a form of both target-audience analysis and pre-testing of products (both messages and images) in support of the campaign.

IS Strategic Narrative

In terms of the strategic narrative, the creation of a Caliphate marking the return to the original version of Islam including the introduction of Sharia law is essential to IS. “Muslims everywhere, they say, are besieged by everyone else. Muslims suffer these abuses because they have not been sufficiently rigid, literalistic and merciless. The restoration of a “caliphate” is a religious duty – as are the draconian laws and vicious terrorism – that the Islamic State practices. It presents a diagnosis for real and imagined Muslim woes and a prescription: to embrace its assault on Syria, Iraq and, eventually, all other Muslim states. (...) The Islamic State offers the vision of a utopian Muslim universalism in an undifferentiated and gigantic caliphate across the Islamic world, without distinctions among individuals except their degree of zealotry”.³

This is a centralised narrative, but a diversity of voices is used to spread the interlinked stories and messages supporting it. There are, however, some apparent contradictions in the narrative when looking at some IS messages. On the one hand you find images and accounts of mass-graves, beheadings and seized territory with deterring messages like “oppose us and we will behead you or crucify you” embedded in them.⁴ But on the other hand you also find “hearts and minds”-like imagery and messaging depicting social activities like delivering food to combat areas and other community work and IS’s apparent love of cute kittens (on pictures of small arms). This can be seen as cheap tricks or clichés to brand themselves as anything but monsters; but also as a historical reference to Huraira (a companion of the prophet) who is known for being fond of cats,⁵ underlining, and still supporting the overall narrative, the message that IS fighters are humans but will pursue their opponents with a vengeance.

Strategic Information Objectives

From the narrative and the associated messages it appears that IS's strategic objectives of the social media campaign are:

- Setting the international media agenda in order to gain attention and visibility of their message(s).
- Controlling the narrative (initially rather than gaining territorial control, which they only have limited manpower to achieve).
- Countering western, Shia Muslim (rival jihadist factions) and regime "propaganda" against IS.
- Contrasting themselves with other jihadist factions and project themselves as more powerful than they presently are.
- Connecting supporters in on-line networks.
- Recruiting new members and supporters.
- Intimidating and deterring opponents (Iraqi/Syrian soldiers and civilians as well as rival jihadist factions).
- Demonstrating capabilities and coherent command-and-control structures.
- Raising funds.

Target Audiences

IS seems to have at least six strategic audiences:

- Sympathisers and supporters (gain and maintain support).
- Potential recruits (especially disenfranchised youth in the West in order to mobilize support and recruit "foreign fighters" to come to Iraq and Syria).
- Donors.
- International media (gain attention).
- Local audiences in Iraq and Syria (to include Iraqi soldiers and civilians and other rival jihadist factions).
- Wider international community (to include the 'Umma').

Use of Social-Network Media

The use of social-network media also indicates that they are relying on both a top-down approach as well as being comfortable with bottom-up initiatives (disseminators). You can therefore identify four levels of on-line activities. All four levels use the centralised strategic narrative as the framework (or direction and guidance) for their use of images and messages in the different social-media platforms supporting their propaganda activities. The content is therefore initially very coordinated, but as it makes its way either vertically downwards or is re-tweeted, re-posted or adapted to local circumstances and networks, the content changes. This results in some loss of control of the message, and hence the narrative.

The top-level element consists of IS's own Twitter account and other social-media platform accounts

where most video is uploaded centrally. These video clips appear very professional and in many cases resemble Hollywood-style productions. They make use of a number of techniques, including slow-motion sequences and first-person-shooter like graphics. IS does, however, also use other and much simpler yet still violent videos.

The second level consists of regional or provincial accounts posting both live reports from strikes (words and images) and localised messaging, in some cases including live feeds and live streaming.

The third level consists of individual fighters that post updates about their experiences on what is to appear as personal accounts. These are more personal, emotional and therefore appealing to for example young potential recruits.

The fourth level is more or less outside the control of IS media “management” and consists of sympathisers and supporters (the disseminators) either re-tweeting or re-posting IS content or their user-generated content (UGC) based on the authorized IS messaging. Sometimes this is translated into the local language, including western languages.

The platforms used are most notably Twitter, including an (Android and apple) app called “The Dawn of Glad Tidings” (this has apparently been closed now) to promote IS messages and images and the use of hashtags and links⁶, Facebook profiles, Instagram and YouTube accounts and the Skype-like platform Viber. These platforms originate at the top-level, and at lower levels links are used to connect to content. IS is also using links to selected outside articles and images from respected news outlets that support their message or overall narrative in order to gain further credibility.

Some message and content production is also crowd-sourced/crowd-distributed (and translated). This indicates IS has access to highly skilled multi-media designers and state-of-the-art software (such as Adobe applications like InDesign, Photoshop etc.) The bottom line is that when it comes to the strategic utilisation of social media, IS seems to be in the lead at the moment although they are increasingly challenged at their own game.

What Challenges Them?

Although IS’s narrative and messages are simple, they resonate because they are coherent, idealistic and fill a void. But most of all, they promise, and appear to deliver, tangible and striking political and military successes so far. They are, though, increasingly challenged in the social-network media sphere! With the Foley beheading video, their social media advantages are being challenged. Their messaging and distribution of the video was opposed by many on-line services, especially on Twitter by private individuals (initially), then by governments warning against re-tweeting and other sharing, and later by corporate Twitter decisions when the on-line service arbitrarily started a campaign against the re-distribution of the video (by removing tweets and suspending accounts) and actively tried to identify and close IS’s Twitter accounts. This forced IS to move their activities to other social-network media platforms like Diaspora.⁷ It is, however, only a temporary obstacle as IS social-media posts

uploaded on other networks will find their way back into Twitter, e.g. through “disseminators”, and IS will also open new Twitter accounts.

Both Iraqi and Syrian as well as western intelligence services also target IS social-media (propaganda) sites and have allegedly taken some of them down. Once this happens new ones pop up very quickly, though; hosted on a different server. According to the Canadian ‘Citizen lab’⁸, however, not all IS sites, or supportive sites, in Iraq are targeted. Some are, perhaps intentionally, left functional even though the Iraqi government severely restricted average Iraqis’ access to the internet and cut off social media and video sharing sites as a response to IS operations in Mosul and Tikrit during May 2014. This could indicate a gain – loss calculation being carried out by the Iraqi intelligence services in a desire to rather collect information and track users than cutting off messaging.⁹

When made aware of violations by users, Twitter and Google continually restrict IS operations by shutting down accounts and profiles that are in violation of the companies’ “terms of use”. IS tries to meet these challenges through constantly developing their strategy and platform use to evade censorship, avoid deception and detection by for instance using Twitter’s spam-algorithms in order to keep information flowing. But also by having followers post IS content on their own accounts and by having “disseminators” distribute content.

A more overall view on IS’s social-media campaign, comparing it with other actors in the arena, reveals that they might be good at it and they apparently have a sound strategy for their utilisation of social media. They cannot, however, rely on the social-media campaign alone. In order to create the desired effect, they will have to continuously match their words with deeds and not only through significant, but yet still limited, terrorist activities, but through gaining mainstream traction in the Umma. In a conflict-framework perspective, IS are early adopters of the social-media technology and the cross-media approach and the informational advantages it affords them. But the question remains whether they can maintain this advantage as they are increasingly challenged (both on- and off-line) at their own game by the regimes in the Middle East, Western intelligence services and their rival jihadist factions that do not agree with their proclaimed Caliphate.

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This article is a case-study from a forthcoming monograph, by Thomas Elkjer Nissen, on “*The Weaponisation of Social Media*” and how social-network media affect the characteristics of contemporary conflicts.

Further readings:

Based on an earlier version of this case-study have been published in September 2014 in the Royal Danish Defence College’s online military studies magazine “Contemporary Conflict”.

Endnotes

1 Based on an earlier version of this case-study have been published in September 2014 in the Royal Danish Defence College's online military studies magazine "Contemporary Conflict".

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Richard Byrne Reilly: Iraq cracks down further on social media – but leaves ISIS-affiliated web sites alone. <http://venturebeat.com/2014/06/23/iraq-cracks-down-further-on-social-media-but-leaves-isis-affiliated-web-sites-alone/> (Accessed 26 JUN 14)

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2 Mark Townsend: Jihad in a social media age: how can the west win an online war? <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/23/jihad-social-media-age-west-win-online-war> (Accessed 24 AUG 14)

3 Hussein Ibish: <http://ibishblog.com/2014/08/09/isis-and-its-success-narrative-must-be-broken/> (Accessed 27 AUG 14)

4 Nicole Matejic: How ISIL have weaponized Social Media in Iraq. <http://www.infoopshq.com/case-study-isil-weaponized-social-media-iraq/> (Accessed 10 JUL 14)

5 Alice Speri: ISIS Fighters and Their Friends Are Total Social Media Pros. <https://news.vice.com/article/isis-fighters-and-their-friends-are-total-social-media-pros> (Accessed 30 JUN 14)

6 J. M. Berger: How ISIS Games Twitter. In The Atlantic. 16 JUN 14. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/>

7 Diaspora is a decentralised network storing data on private servers which cannot be controlled by a single administrator. Not even the platform creators can remove content from the network as they don't control the independent servers hosting the content.

- 8 <https://citizenlab.org>. (Accessed 27 JUN 14)
- 9 The Intelligence "gain – loss" analysis is pivotal to on-line counter-propaganda activities.