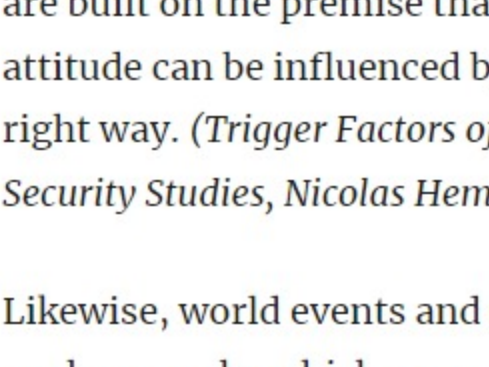


The Virtual Caliphate: Daesh and Their Use of Social Media (First published 2 May 2016)

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The Islamic State, widely known by opponents as Daesh, has proved itself to be an innovative organisation skilfully using technology and inventive methods to manipulate users of social media and compelling global news networks to run their stories. The methods they employ to radicalize without physical contact and the relationship between individual radicalization and the consumption of extremist material which, by its very nature involves a complex mix of variables, continues to evolve. Consequently, a detailed examination of the Virtual Caliphate is beyond the scope of this paper and the following is intended as a brief introduction to the subject.



According to Hemelin, attitudes are part of the brain's associated networks; people interact with the environment based on how they perceive and interpret it. This is, people form an internal (cognitive) map of their external (social) environment and these perceptions rather than objective external reality determine their behaviour. Persuasive media messages, in this case social media, are built on the premise that behaviour follows attitude, and attitude can be influenced by the right message delivered in the right way. (Trigger Factors of Terrorism: Social Marketing as a Tool for Security Studies, Nicolas Hemelin, Al-Akawayn University, Morocco)

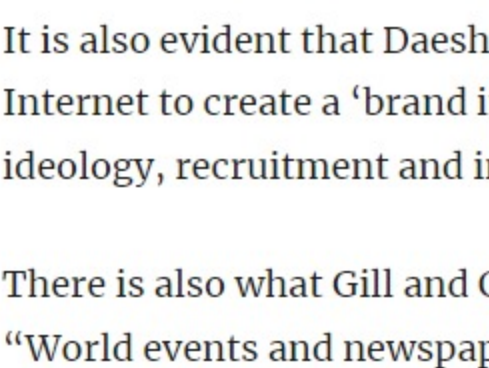
Likewise, world events and social issues, both real and imagined, are beacons by which a person forms a cognitive map of one's environment from which an interpretation of reality is formed. Furthermore, in the case of extremist narratives of hate and retribution, these do not act in a vacuum, they must be accompanied by supporting ideas to reinforce the belief so the target audience becomes detached from reality.

The technically astute and media savvy Islamic State's (Daesh), official messages on social media are supported by several thousand sympathizers and followers, called 'fan boys', who regularly re-circulate official content from Daesh propagandists. In the case of Twitter, to greatly increase the coverage of their extremist messages a hashtag campaign was organised. This simply entailed hijacking popular hashtags such as those related to major sporting events to promote links to extremist websites where anyone can anonymously post messages and upload images. Daesh also created their own app, 'Dawn of Glad Tidings' to efficiently tweet messages to followers.

Although the accounts of extremist organisations continued to be closed and their material removed from social media platforms, this group, like other extremist movements, remain flexible and resilient. After an account has been closed other accounts are created and quickly publicized via various links and websites. ISIS also maintains a large number of backup accounts and continues to identify more social media platforms to increase their digital presence.

An estimated 10 million people live in Daesh occupied territories (BBC Islamic Group Crisis and maps, 27 April 2016) which is a closed world with no journalists or independent observers. The only source of information for the world's media originates from the Daesh media center called Hayat which has offices throughout the occupied areas and is controlled by the Media Council. Different areas of propaganda are managed by different departments within the Council and before being released all communications are structured to meet a variety of requirements. This includes ensuring the global media use their content so their messages and visual images gain access to millions of homes. Official communications from Daesh is greatly supplemented by unofficial material uploaded to social media and websites by their supporters.

The glossy and professionally produced Dabiq magazine, which is translated in English, French and German and is available via the Internet, is thought to be written by professional journalists in occupied areas who were given the option of either working for Daesh or be killed.



The virtual world

Daesh and other VE narratives found on social media and various websites cover a number of separate themes which may be woven together in order to appeal to a certain audience or to encourage an appropriate emotional development. This is essential for the successful engagement and radicalization in virtual space which differs from real-world face-to-face radicalization. According to Von Behr, whose research is based on the conviction of 15 extremists, "the Internet affords more prospect for radicalization... [the internet] was a key source of information, communications and propaganda for their extremist beliefs... [it] also provided greater opportunity than offline interaction to confirm existing beliefs..."

Research conducted by et Al, in 2014, found that after sampling 199 lone actor terrorists, 35 percent of the sample virtually interacted with a wider network of activists and 46 percent learned aspects of their attack methods through virtual sources. They also found that 65 percent of al-Qaeda inspired actors were significantly more likely to learn through virtual sources.

Forms of virtual interaction include: reinforcing prior beliefs, seeking legitimacy for future actions, disseminating propaganda and providing material support for others, attack signalling, and attempts to recruit others (Gill and Conway, 2015). Forms of virtual learning include, ideological content, opting for violence, choosing a target, preparing an attack and overcoming hurdles.

It is also evident that Daesh and other terrorist movements use the Internet to create a 'brand image' to assist them in marketing their ideology, recruitment and influencing media coverage.

There is also what Gill and Corner call, 'Current Problem Factors,' "What events and newspapers provide the heads-up about the dangers of the world and opportunities related to one's degree of concern towards world events..." and these concerns are exploited through the use of appropriate narratives. (What are the Roles of Internet Terrorism? - Measuring online behaviors of convicted UK Terrorists, Paul Gill, University College London, Maurs Conway Dublin City University, 2015)

The full spectrum of narratives produced by Daesh is large: some are interrelated and link various secular and religious beliefs, whilst others provide 'evidence' supporting the extremist's views.

Common themes include: sociological and political, agitation and integration, extreme violence, mercy, victim and blame, war/Jihad; utopia democracy and apocalyptic.

Sociological and political narratives

Sociological narratives, which are often used in tandem with political narratives, may include poetry, visual images and 'personal' stories to help maintain the illusion of Daesh's self-styled caliphate being a democratic utopia. Whilst the political narratives may be paired with tactical and strategic narratives promoting emigration to the Caliphate; attempts to sell the belief of being the duty of all Muslims to support the Caliphate and the need for the birth of children for the Caliphate to grow, prosper and provide the next generation of jihadists known as 'cubs.'

Strategic Narratives

Strategic narratives have long-term goals and seeks to establish and maintain the organisational line of ambience (Quillan Foundation). The content may appear largely mundane and insignificant: stories and visual images of children playing in the streets, various social events, shrines being destroyed; western style clothes, make up and western consumer goods being burnt. As well as further enforcing the 'message of utopia, it is also designed to project the image of the 'Islamic purity' of the Caliphate and rejection of western values and culture.

Agitation and Integration Narratives

Agitation narratives are intended to encourage passive supporters to become active members of the organisation. Active membership includes the recruitment of foreign fighters or joining their support structure as technicians, logistics specialists, being responsible for organizing safe houses and documents etc. Integration narratives are designed to encourage loyalty to the system of beliefs promoted by Daesh. Again, Agitation and Integration narratives are often paired or work in tandem for optimum effect on the target audience.

Rational and Irrational Narratives

Rational and irrational narratives are frequently used to distort facts (disinformation) and are mainly used as persuasive tools to reinforce the message of the movement's superiority and the image of a utopia which must be defended at all costs. Furthering the synthesis of lies, exaggerations and facts are essential for the survival and growth of Daesh and its caliphate. None of the various themes are discrete elements within the narrative strategy: sociological, political, rational and irrational narratives may be used separately or in combinations to spoon-feed their selected audience.

Extreme Violence

Extreme violence may be regarded as the vanguard element of the various narratives which encourages beliefs such as vengeance; supporting the self-proclaimed 'Islamic' superiority of Daesh and justifying revenge on behalf of all Sunni Muslims against the Christian-Jewish crusaders and other unbelievers. Within the long list of unbelievers, we also find Sunni Muslims who refuse to follow the organisation's religious ideology and world views. As with all narratives and propaganda strategies the content and structure is often tailored for specific purposes.

In November 2014, the Daesh media centre produced a video that documented the execution of three members of the Syrian Army and this was intended for a different audience than the one in which Japanese journalist Kenji Gatto was killed. The video of the barbaric execution of Kenji Gatto contained the caption "A Message to the government of Japan". We have also frequently seen executions of alleged spies as part of a terror tactic to discourage dissent from the population under Daesh control in Iraq and Syria.

The promotion of extreme violence is also used for the self-gratification of supporters; to intimidate enemies; and to provoke outrage from the global media to ensure further publicity opportunities.

Mercy Narratives

Mercy narratives often work in tandem with extreme violence and are connected with repentance to God and Daesh. An example often quoted is the April 2015 video entitled "From Darkness to Light". Here we see captured combatants from the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Syrian Army who were all former enemies of Daesh. The carefully orchestrated and professionally edited video shows them reneging their former 'Islamic' beliefs and swearing allegiance to Daesh. According to this propaganda video, Daesh is compassionate and will forgive their enemies if they follow the 'true' path of Islam and swear allegiance to Daesh and the Caliphate.

Victim Narrative

Victim narratives designed to encourage paranoia is a constant theme and a powerful recruiting tool. This promotes the belief of the global war to destroy Islam and this narrative and propaganda tools are often used alongside extreme violence. For example, Jordanian pilot, Mudh al-Kasabeth who was burnt alive shows the binary opposites of victim and extreme violence.

On 3 February 2015, Daesh produced the video "Healing of the believers Chest" the words 'healing' and 'believer' are positive words which suggest beneficial treatment! However, this is the title of the video documenting Mudh al-Kasabeth standing in a steel cage before being doused with petrol and burn alive. Shortly after the Jordanian pilot was engulfed in flames, footage of coalition airstrikes was faded in before showing dead children 'allegedly' killed during the airstrikes. This video was intended to reinforce the justification narrative, and to remind its audience of the legitimacy of retaliation and the duty of all Muslims to join jihad. The caption at the end of the video, "What is the ruling on burning Kafir until he dies, Office of Research of Fatwas, 20 January 2015," was intended to provide religious justification for the murder.

War Narratives

Such narratives are intended to create and sustain the illusion of power, military discipline, valour; and feeding the idea that Daesh has a 'real' army, which further adds to the illusion of a 'real' nation state or caliphate. War narratives are also a powerful tool for recruiting foreign fighters.

Utopian Democracy

The Utopian building narrative promotes social well-being, brotherhood, sisterhood; the multi-ethnic makeup of the caliphate which embraces all colors and nationalities without prejudice and their claim, "all are equal under the Islamic State". Daesh propagandists and their supporters take every opportunity to promote the false image of an idyllic and harmonious life under their rule. We see a constant stream of emotive stories of happy families which reinforces the myth of equality and a common identity for all Muslims living in the Caliphate. 20-year-old Aqsa Mamood, (aka Umm Layth) who was slowly radicalized by reading extremist articles and posts online in her bedroom in the UK, is believed to have played a major role in recruiting many women from the west. As well as being a prolific blogger she also engaged in debates on Twitter and gave advice on how to join Daesh. British sisters, Zahra and Salma Halane, through social media became role models for others to join Daesh. These female groomers promoted the Utopian image of nice houses, friendship, good husbands and a shared common identity.

Through careful branding and a continuous marketing campaign the Caliphate which was created by Daesh and is said to have been 'ordained by God' is, for many of its supporters, inseparable from the Umma (world community consisting of all Muslims) and is the unique selling point on social media. As the majority of Daesh supporters have never visited the so-called caliphate and their only knowledge is based on the propaganda version or, to be more accurate, a 'Cyber Caliphate', and Daesh remains popular, this may be seen as further evidence of the persuading influence of their narratives which alter and reinforce beliefs and attitudes.

Apocalyptic Narratives

The apocalyptic narrative: the continued war between good and evil and those dedicated to jihad having God and the angels on their side, remains a powerful motive for joining the ranks of the jihadists and a willingness to die for the cause. This approach also allows extremists to add additional enemies against Islam as they see fit.

Whilst western governments continue to rely on military options to address Daesh and other violent extremists and neglect the urgent requirement to employ counter-narratives which work in conjunction with a variety of other soft power options, global jihad will continue to grow.

Further reading on narratives and soft power can be found on the Narrative Strategy blog which is the public platform of a coalition of scholars and military professionals involved in the non-kinetic aspects of counter-terrorism, irregular warfare, and social conflict. <http://www.narrative-strategies.com/>

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