

Strategies Sectors | **Culture & Society**

The Islamic State Brand: Marketing and Communicating the New Jihadism

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In the months that followed the seizure of the Iraqi city of Mosul by the so-called Islamic State – henceforth referred to as ISIS – the world became the jihadist organization's captive audience. Both before and after the group declared itself a caliphate in June 2014, the international community found itself looking on aghast as, on an almost weekly basis, videos emerged in which Western hostages were executed, impossible demands made and ultraviolence routinized. This was no coincidence; after months of ascendancy and consolidation in Iraq and Syria, the organization had made a tactical decision to set about provoking the international community by breaking globally accepted ethical and moral norms – enslaving women, executing civilians, using chemical weapons and indoctrinating children – and brazenly boasting about it.

Even after an international coalition of some 60 states was formed to destroy it, ISIS continued to plunge into uncharted territory of brutality, circulating videos of mass beheadings, immolations, and drownings, to mention but three instances of its snuff propaganda. As a result, high-definition images of summary executions and amputations have become mainstream visual motifs of the global jihad, with tabloid news outlets across the world on perpetual standby to cover (and transmit) the latest

ISIS atrocity, often directly streaming it online to an audience of thousands.¹

While brutality is undoubtedly the aspect of ISIS' outreach that receives the most media coverage, it forms only a tiny proportion of the group's political messaging, most of which focuses on conveying either its aggressive military activities or millenarian state-building exercise. Once again, this is deliberate, something borne of a carefully devised media strategy that is all too often overlooked.

Of late, ISIS' online information monopoly has been contested by governments, social media corporations and activists. However, much long-term damage has already been done. Indeed, until recently, the ISIS news agenda was almost entirely guided by the fancies of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's media team. In an attempt to understand how and why this came about, the following paragraphs present a brief exploration of the virtual infrastructure and tactical thinking that underpins ISIS' branding campaign.

Infrastructure

The ISIS propaganda machine, while, superficially, giving the impression of flexibility and range, is extremely centralized and entirely unspontaneous. Composed of 36 provincial media offices, three national outlets, six central foundations, and at least four 'autonomous' propaganda channels, the apparatus operates in a carefully synchronized, choreographed manner.² Producing as many as 38 media events each day – videos, photo reports, radio pro-

¹ "Beheading for practicing 'magic': ISIS releases its latest horrific video as it executes two 'sorcerers' in Libya in front of a baying crowd," *Mail Online*, 7 December 2015; "ISIS releases chilling video of English-speaking child beheading hostage and threatening America," *The Mirror*, 4 February 2016.

² See infrastructural diagram, Charlie WINTER, *Documenting the virtual 'caliphate'*, London: Quilliam, October 2015, 16. www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf

grammes, news bulletins, theological pamphlets, chants, and magazines – the propagandists are unrelenting in their productivity.³ What's more, their operations are multilingual, with media being released daily in as many as six languages, from Arabic and Turkish to English and French.

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Behind this infrastructure, there is a meticulous strategy at work, as detailed in an illuminating ISIS planning document obtained and translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi in December 2015. According to the document, which is entitled "Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State," the provincial media offices, which are "affiliated with the [provincial] governor himself and in coordination with the military and security official in its region," are charged with "covering the military operations[,] as well as services facilities, implementing sharia rulings and the course of life."⁴

Complementing their efforts are the auxiliary, 'autonomous' outlets, which specialize in "tracking military and services coverage [...] *without there being in the name of the foundation or its symbol something to directly link it with the Islamic State*" (own emphasis added). These outfits are clearly intended to have an air of independence about them and, in some cases, like that of the A'maq Agency, they go to great lengths to avoid using jihadist terminology in order to maximize their appeal.

Underpinning the above two communications prongs is 'the Base Foundation,' the ISIS media team's corporate headquarters, which is charged with defining "the priorities of publication and broadcasting as well as the media campaigns." The Base Foundation is "directly affiliated with the Diwan al-Khalifa [office of the caliph] or Majlis al-Shura [advisory council] of whoever so represents them." That its central propaganda

node is afforded a direct line to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is testament to the media's centrality to ISIS.

Narrative

A comprehensive study of ISIS propaganda conducted by the author in the Islamic month of Shawwal, 1436 (17 July to 15 August 2015) demonstrates the complexity and measured distribution methodology of the caliphate narrative.⁵

Of the 1,146 media events released in the space of those 30 days, 53% depicted civilian life in the ISIS caliphate – children in schools, overflowing mosques and markets, beautiful sunsets and so on. 37% of the content was overtly military in nature and intended to demonstrate the allegedly unstoppable momentum and professionalism of the ISIS *mujahidin*. 7% of the time, the ISIS propagandists played upon the victimhood narrative – an oft-repeated motif of jihadist media – by disseminating graphic images of the aftermath of airstrikes. The remaining 3% of the content was devoted to the themes of ultraviolence, brotherhood or mercy.

While it should not be assumed that propaganda output in the month of Shawwal is exactly the same as propaganda in the month of, say, Muharram, the key trends remain the same – bar some marginal, short-term fluctuations, civilian utopianism and military exploits are consistently at the heart of the ISIS narrative. Ultraviolence, while it is certainly present, is far from ubiquitous, as the dominant media narrative on the organization suggests. Instead, it is just a small, albeit potent, part of the caliphate brand.

Regularity

The flood of ISIS media is sustained throughout the daylight hours (according to Mosul time) by an officially assigned dissemination team, a group of individuals (presumably in the caliphate territories) that uploads content and circulates links across closed communication channels like Telegram. In quick succession, these links are transmitted by self-ap-

³ WINTER, *Documenting the virtual 'caliphate,'* 3.

⁴ Abu Abdullah AL-MASRI, "Principles in the administration of the Islamic State," trans. by Aymenn Jawad AL-TAMIMI, "The Isis papers: a master-plan for consolidating power," *The Guardian*, 7 December 2015.

⁵ WINTER; *Documenting the virtual 'caliphate.'*

pointed media activists onto public-facing platforms like Twitter, WordPress and Tumblr. In this manner, ISIS is able to circumvent the possibility of its official disseminators being suspended or, worse, identified. Volunteer supporters are there in their hundreds, if not thousands, to bear the brunt of the risk on their behalf.

Because they operate on a constant, unrelenting basis, the ISIS propagandists are able to flood the Internet with the caliphate brand. Instead of contributing to the public discourse on a piecemeal basis, the ISIS media team expend great effort to saturate the airwaves with a refined narrative of what life in the caliphate is like. For sympathetic onlookers, this content normalizes the idea of the jihadist caliphate and, when taken in aggregate, frames it as a practicable, even desirable, alternative to the status quo. For recruiters, it serves as an evidence base with which they can prove millenarian claims and dispel counter-narratives as spurious rumours.⁶

As Ellul notes, regularity and consistency of political messaging contribute to the intellectual encirclement of the consumer of propaganda such that they can become 'another person,' and find themselves obsessively seeking 'rigorous, exciting, active expression' of their beliefs. ISIS' propaganda operates to this exact end, as testified by the persistence of its virtual supporters.⁷

Concluding Remarks

For years, ISIS' propagandists have been able to advertise their organization however, whenever and wherever they desired. In so doing, they have been able to attract recruits and donors, dictate the international media agenda and oust al-Qaeda from its position at the symbolic forefront of the global jihadist movement. Even though it is facing a greater information challenge than ever before, counter-ISIS information operations remain structurally stymied from success – government sponsorship is too risk-averse, and cross-coalition narrative coordination is all too often obstructed by incompatible national agendas.

For ISIS, perception matters as much, if not more, than fact. If it is able to appear triumphant from the outside, it is able to benefit from new recruits and donors. Furthermore, if it does this over a long period of time, it can hasten the emergence of new norms. After two years, for example, its iteration of the Islamic caliphate has already become a household concept, as have its leaders and motifs; tens of thousands have travelled to join it (and continue to do so) from across the globe; and millions have observed its most abhorrent crimes. Much of the damage its outreach efforts have already wrought is irreversible.

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That being said, it remains the case that, if its branding ability is meaningfully undermined, there will be significant operational implications for the group. In recent months, the online landscape has become increasingly inhospitable for the ISIS propagandists. Twitter, for example, has devised what seems to be a sustainable, effective strategy with which to suspend propagandising accounts, while Facebook has become heavily involved in facilitating the viral spread of counter-narrative campaigns. Largely because of efforts like these, ISIS outreach has been forced to shift onto more obscure social media platforms that, while they may be better encrypted, are not as easily accessible. As the social media landscape continues to become more inhospitable, ISIS will be coerced into adapting its information war doctrine, presenting a window of opportunity for the international counter-ISIS coalition that must not be squandered.

⁶ See Amarnath AMARASINGAM, "What Twitter really means for Islamic State supporters," *War on the Rocks*, 30 December 2015.

⁷ Jacques ELLUL, *Propaganda: the formation of men's attitudes*, 1965, trans. by Konrad KELLEN and Jean LERNER, New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1973, 104.