



UPDATE ON THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

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ISIS' Use of Social Media as a Propaganda Machine

INTRODUCTION

1. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continues to pose a significant security threat today. ISIS has claimed responsibility for many terrorist attacks, including the 2021 Kabul airport attack, which resulted in the deaths of over 180 people. ISIS makes use of such attacks to spread its ideological messages and to recruit new followers through the use of propaganda.
2. Throughout history, 'propaganda' has been used as a political tool. Britannica defines propaganda as the "systematic effort to manipulate other people's beliefs, attitudes or actions by means of symbols (words, gestures, banners, monuments, music, clothing, insignia, hairstyles, designs on coins and postage stamps)".
3. Propaganda is a constructed narrative, a tool used to portray a skewed, often glorified and one-sided perspective of an issue. It allows users to put out messages that help further their cause. This makes propaganda a useful tool for extremist groups, such as ISIS, who leverages the power of social media platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, TikTok and YouTube, to disseminate messages to a global audience, recruit followers and incite violence.

IMPLICATIONS OF ISIS' PROPAGANDA

Global Reach of Social Media

4. ISIS has recognised the benefits brought about by social media and has exploited it to the fullest. ISIS has set up a dedicated media network and a series of affiliated channels to disseminate videos, images, newsletters, Islamic chants (nasheeds) and ideological messages globally. Such widespread reach via social media has allowed ISIS to attract followers and sympathisers from many countries, furthering their strategic communication and international recruitment goals.

5. A prominent example is the Amaq News Agency which is the main media house of ISIS. Amaq is responsible for the communications put out by the central authority of ISIS. This becomes the template for ISIS-affiliated terror groups to follow as they branched out and formed cells worldwide. Amaq is active on messaging platforms like Telegram, where bite-sized 'news' articles highlighting significant achievements are published to facilitate sharing on other platforms. By so doing, ISIS subtly shapes the perception and thinking of its followers of the cause and beliefs it is advancing.

6. ISIS's target audience includes vulnerable, impressionable youths and those who are already sympathetic to the broader Salafist-jihadist cause. According to *RAND*, a US think tank, ISIS' strategic use of social media demonstrates the resourcefulness of the organisation, as it has successfully recruited an estimated 40,000 foreign nationals from 110 countries to join the group. These people may have little in common with Salafist ideology but were looking for meaning and purpose in life. The messages from ISIS resonated with some of its audience who were disillusioned with society and had a weak sense of identity.

7. ISIS uses multiple media forms to package its intended messages. For example, 15 professionally edited online versions of *Dabiq*, an IS magazine series from 2014–2016, featuring a total of 159 different articles and other unique informational items were created. This was supplemented by *Al-Naba*, a weekly newspaper published by the Central Media Office of ISIS. In one instance, the doctored contents of the front page of *Al-Naba* contained taglines warning readers of counter-propaganda campaigns created by Daeshgram, a collective of Iraqi hackers who packaged anti-ISIS content. The *Independent UK* reported that the fake *Al-Naba* cover showed a photoshopped picture of ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi surrounded by female dancers and a spoof editorial on a fictional ISIS team competing in the World Cup.

Figure 1: A fake version of Isis’s weekly ‘*Al-Naba*’ newsletter circulated by Daeshgram.



Source: *The Independent UK*, 11 July 2018

8. ISIS also recognise the importance of customising content for different audiences. *Rumiyah*, a magazine which focused on analysing the effectiveness of terror attacks and social media statistics, was translated into multiple languages in order to disseminate the messages to nationalities beyond the Arabic-speaking Muslims. The content were also adapted to resonate with different groups – from individuals with different backgrounds, to disaffected youth and women or other specific demographics – making their messages more appealing and relatable.

Terrorist Propaganda and Video Games

9. It has also become increasingly popular for terrorist groups to utilise video games as an instrument for spreading propaganda. As shooter games are popular among youths, groups like ISIS create ‘bespoke games’ with propaganda infused missions, designed for players to go through ‘dry runs’ of battles and terrorist raids. This is to entice players to emulate the game in real life. Game chat rooms are another avenue for the dissemination of messages, and a recruiting ground for terror groups.

10. Terror groups have also used ‘Gamification’ as a channel to recruit and train new members. Gamification allows the player to simulate real events through gameplay, or modify off-the-shelf games to create their own versions of simulated terror. For example, in the game “Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2 (2009)”, the player posed as an undercover CIA asset infiltrating Russian terrorist Makarov’s cell. ‘Call of Duty’ – the name of the popular franchise, was modified to convey the message that it is the Muslim’s duty to engage in a holy war and similar to the games, the holy soldiers would be able to come back in the afterlife.

Figure 2: A doctored photo created as a parody of the ‘Call of Duty’ game franchise.



Source: Concentric, 17 March 2019

Use of Emotionally Charged Content

11. ISIS is observed to create emotionally charged content to evoke strong reactions through the use of videos. These videos often feature gruesome acts of violence including the executions of prisoners, as well as scenes of camaraderie and purpose. In one instance, a high-definition video featured the gruesome execution of David Haines, a British aid worker who was abducted in March 2013. The video ended with a challenge to former British Prime Minister David Cameron, to stop the conflict with ISIS.

12. Often, these videos are carefully curated to illicit reactions. In this case, the video was intended to stir sentiments amongst the UK population to pressure the UK government to stop fighting ISIS as the UK was a member of the international coalition *Operation Inherent Resolve*.

Figure 3: Islamic State video showing the beheading of David Haines.



Source: Reuters, 12 September 2014

13. ISIS wanted these videos to create uproar in the West and psychologically pressure the families of those who were captured to lobby their nations to stop fighting ISIS.

14. ISIS has an army of bots used to spread messages and propaganda. For example, an account belonging to a fan of the pop singer Justin Bieber was hijacked. The fan's account was used to post numerous terrorist propaganda with the hashtag '#JustinBeiber'. This made their content available to users who searched for that hashtag. Social media platforms such as TikTok have undertaken efforts to removed ISIS accounts responsible for posting propaganda videos. Even as these accounts were removed and permanently banned, it is difficult for social media platforms to enforce the space and prohibit organisations like ISIS from creating more bots and new accounts. This is a common issue faced by all social media platforms.

Conclusion

15. Governments and social media platforms have recognised the danger and potential threat of ISIS's social media activities and have implemented various countermeasures. This includes the removal of extremist propaganda, suspending or banning accounts and implementing algorithms to detect and block such content. Such efforts have limited ISIS' reach to some extent. The European Commission passed the Terrorism Content Online Regulation in June 2022, which states that 'terrorist content must be taken down within one hour after it is identified online.' A removal order can be sent to hosting services (which includes social media platforms) to request that they remove the highlighted material. As of the second quarter of 2023, Facebook has removed 13.6 million pieces of terrorist content. However, it is challenging to obtain full compliance to the legislation as social media platforms generate revenue through an advertisement-based business model.

16. ISIS has demonstrated the power of social media as a propaganda machine. Their adept use of these platforms allow them to disseminate their message, attract global followers and incite violence. Countering this threat requires a multi-faceted approach, involving government intervention, social media companies, technology companies and civil society efforts to foil the extremist narrative and protect vulnerable individuals from radicalisation. The case of ISIS and its use of social media is a stark reminder of the need for constant vigilance in the digital age, as extremist groups continue to evolve their tactics and exploit the digital space for malicious aims.

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CONTACT DETAILS

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