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Media jihad: What PR can learn in Islamic State's public relations masterclass

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ABSTRACT

Islamic State (IS) has been vilified for its brutality and admired for the sophistication of its media productions. This conceptual paper argues that IS media is not propaganda in the western sense but rather propagation of a minoritarian 'take' on Islam. IS media are not simply fora for the gratuitous display of violence but rather venues for rational, strategic communication designed mainly for regional consumption. Global audiences are targeted, too, but media produced for them is less voluminous than that presented to populations in IS-controlled areas and surrounding regions. While Islamic State's diverse media output is not western-style public relations, the artifice and artefacts employed in the group's "media war" are not only relevant but also noteworthy for public relations professionals.
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1. Introduction

Islamic State's relentless combat-driven rise has been fuelled by a savvy media-driven war, fought not with bullets but with bulletins, not with rockets but with reports, not with tanks but with timely theological thought-pieces. Western audiences (and many Muslim ones) are appalled at videos depicting choreographed spectacles such as beheadings, immolations and the carrying out of punishments such as stoning. Yet the high-order production skills involved in mediated bloodletting seem very effective in reaching the predominantly young Muslim target audiences, judged by both social media responses and by migration to Islamic State controlled regions. Many Western analysts see the IS performances as mere propaganda. Yet the Islamic State media output is more than this, even though some aspects of propaganda as the West knows it are discernible.

Rather, IS media should be seen as a form of outreach designed to advance the cause of an extremist religious ideology and framed as Islamic. This outreach is based on dynamic integration of messaging on multiple media platforms, along with careful communication analysis and strategizing. These and other elements, while not new to public relations practice, deserve PR professionals' attention not only because of the expertise with which they are being implemented but also because of the turbulent context in which they are being deployed. It is noteworthy that while Islamic State is an emerging politico-religious entity that wants to publicise its brutalities and its victories, it also seeks to brand itself through communication as capable of operating the infrastructure of a state, such as health and social services. Therefore, there is a breadth to the IS media output that often is not recognized. For example, issue nine of the IS online magazine *Dabiq* includes not only an article (pp. 14–19) on "Conspiracy theory Shirk (the sin of idolatry)" with a picture showing "the blessed raid on the twin

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towers in New York" but also a feature (pp. 24–26) on "Heathcare in the Khilāfah (Caliphate), with a list showing how many operations, births and scans were carried out in one month at two IS hospitals.

At a time when 'media war' is being waged not only in the Middle East but also in eastern Europe (Ukraine and Russia) it is important to pay critical attention to the communication craft in use, not only as inherently worthy of study, but also because it appropriates public relations methods and strategies. Although Islamic State-friendly scholars warn of "bewitching media" (*Dabiq 6*, p. 39) that does not stop jihadist groups such as IS from using media extensively to promote their religious interpretations, trumpet their successes and excoriate their enemies. Often, their reportage offers highly topical analyses of what westerners would call terrorist events, such as an attack on a café in Sydney, Australia. These media productions show a mature appreciation of the levers of influence, stretching beyond the voyeuristic audience for beheading videos. By making advanced use of communication techniques to help attack the foundations of liberal societies, the full panoply of Islamic State's jihadist media challenges western audiences, including public relations practitioners. IS has multiple media departments leading communication initiatives and responding adaptively to opponents' counterblasts with detailed argumentation and confronting images. With Islamic State possibly "the wealthiest terror group in history" (Lock, 2014) and well able to fund its media activities, western communicators can no longer take for granted that activist use of media will be rudimentary and therefore relatively easily countered. PR people – as well as governments, NGOs and mass media workers – should take note.

IS' media activity is salient because the quality, breadth and quantity of its implementation calls attention to some key elements vital to contemporary public relations practice. None are novel but all are important. It is their role in the deft delivery of tailored, topical messaging that renders them suitable for study, along with Islamic State's media artifice *per se* and resultant artefacts. One element, discussed below, is an emphasis on visual communication. Others are audience-sensitive framing and targeting, brought to bear in consistent messaging across a range of platforms. This involves "synchronizing activities at local, regional and international level" (Magri, 2015, p. 7, in Maggioni & Magri, Eds., 2015). Bolt comments that

> There is a tendency in the West to assume messages, such as those emanating from Islamic political groups, target either a single Western mass audience or a partisan, domestic population. But they identify and segment audiences for whom they cater messages. These are branded and delivered to diverse markets, sometimes locally, sometimes globally" (2012, p. 41).

2. Media jihad

As it battles on the ground, IS advances its media strategies with a constant on- and off-line output merging pre-modern religious ideology with 21st Century communication management. It has become known for its execution videos, where producers of a "theater of cruelty" make calculated use of "soft focus, slow fades, color saturation, superimpositions and carefully layered soundtracks" (Ibish, 2015, para. 11). The goal is to intimidate enemies and to show supporters victories over "apostates" and "atheists" (Zelin, 2015, p.5). However, Western viewers recoiling in shock might not realize that "the beheadings are part of. . . IS media products. . . created and communicated according to a consistent strategy" (Lombardi, 2015; p. 98). The strategy guides a "media jihad" or war (Lombardi, 2015; p.98) targeting both local and international audiences. It complements an on-the-ground, battlefield-based "offensive jihad" (Baghdadi, A., cited in Bunzel, 2015; p.10).

In fact, Islamic State sees itself as engaged in a conflict that is more than merely physical: "It is a psychological war made of texts, images, iconographies that the organization intends for widespread distribution" (Magri, 2015, p. 7, in Maggioni & Magri (Eds., 2015).). A key aim is to craft "the perception of invincibility" (al-'Ubaydi, Lahoud, Milton, & Price, 2014, p.86), because a message of victory "legitimizes ISIS" among potential fighters (Lewis, 2014; p. 12). Such strategic, cause-related messaging is relevant to public relations because of its persuasive intent. Therefore, this paper examines the IS media offensive, using both Jowett's and O'Donnell's (2012) 10-step framework for propaganda analysis and core Islamic concepts. Jowett and O'Donnell's plan is designed for analysing propaganda rather than religious ideology, which is the essential character of Islamic State's media content. However, in a thin field of recently elaborated potential methodologies, it stands out for its clarity and adaptability. In applying Islamic concepts the paper seeks to avoid positioning Islamic State's media activity purely within a western schema, although the author acknowledges that as a European, he inevitably approaches the subject with cultural filters.

3. Jowett and O'Donnell's analytical framework

Jowett and O'Donnell (2012) point out that their

> schema makes it difficult to study propaganda in progress because the outcome may not be known for a long time. On the other hand, to study propaganda in progress enables the analyst to observe media utilization and audience response directly in actual settings (p. 290).

This paper, therefore, is an "in progress" study of how IS uses media and elicits desired audience responses. The 10 steps are

1. The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign.

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2. The context in which the propaganda occurs.
3. Identification of the propagandist.
4. The structure of the propaganda organization.
5. The target audiences.
6. Media utilization techniques.
7. Special techniques to maximize effect.
8. Audience reaction to various techniques.
9. Counterpropaganda, if present.
10. Effects and evaluation (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012, p. 290).

For reasons of space, counter-propaganda is considered out of scope for this paper, although both the US (via the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications) and the UK are working to confront IS messaging. Material under some headings is limited because the topics are considered to be particularly important for future research.

Islamic State's carefully crafted and multi-platform communication campaign is founded on a clearly articulated ideology.

3.1. The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign

Despite perceptions that many IS behaviours are at odds with the views of most Muslims, and the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon's opinion that IS "should more fittingly be called the 'Un-Islamic Non State" (Ban Ki-moon, 2014, para. 8) Islamic State's actions and the rationales for them are unapologetically aligned with a hardline jihadi Salafist view of the religion (Bunzel, 2015; p.7). As Livesey (2005, para. 2) notes, "Salafism is an ideology that posits that Islam has strayed from its origins... Arguing that the faith has become decadent over the centuries, Salafists call for the restoration of authentic Islam as expressed by an adherence to its original teachings and texts". Bunzel notes that "Salafis view themselves as the only true Muslims" (2015, p. 8). Through jihad or struggle, understood as military action, Salafi jihadists – harking back to the great Caliphate which reached its apogee in the 1200s – "wish to extend the Muslim world so that all of humankind can live under its umbrella" (2005, para. 6). As Bunzel (2015) points out, Jihadi-Salfism "is predicated on an extremist and minoritarian reading of Islamic scripture that is also textually rigorous, deeply rooted in a premodern theological tradition, and extensively elaborated by a recognized cadre of religious authorities" (p. 7).

It is, therefore, not the "narcissistic death cult" that Johnson (2015, para. 4) describes; its violence is strategic as well as sadistic, by western standards. Moghadam argues that Salafi-jihadism is more akin to an ideology than a religion, and is therefore distinct from Islam the religion. However, he concludes that it is a *religious* (emphasis added) ideology "because it invokes religion in three ways. First, it describes itself and its enemies in religious terms... Secondly, Salafi-jihadists describe their strategy and mission as a religious one... Finally, they justify acts of violence with references drawn selectively from the Qu'ran" (Moghadam, 2008, para. 18). All three attributes of a religious ideology in Moghadam's terms are demonstrably present in IS' media productions. For example, as Plebani and Maggiolini point out, in defining who counts as an enemy, jihadist groups including IS employ a "selection of references in the Holy Sources... limited exclusively to those passages that support and justify their armed and political struggle" (2015, p. 34). However, it is not only the religious rationale that counts: there is an important cultural linkage as well. As Günther (2014) identifies, jihadists in the Middle East are able to "connect their ideas, norms and beliefs to the cultural memory of their recipients. They employ symbols and semantics that gain effect through re-connection to the religious and cultural heritage" (p. 35). In this articulation of an immanent reality offering both spiritual and tangible dimensions, religious symbolism is central, running throughout the framing of IS messaging. As Branca (2015, p. 22) points out, "The very black flag of the new caliphate is connected...to the one that True Believers will raise as the Final Judgment approaches to 'hand it to the Messiah' in the decisive confrontation between good and evil forces". The symbolism extends to beheading videos which, Perlmutter (2014) argues are "inherently symbolic", serving to "function as both strategic and psychological operations" (para. 7).

IS' media productions have something in common with western notions of propaganda, such as exploiting bandwagon effects (Marlin, 2002; p. 106), as exemplified in the online magazine *Dabiq*'s claim that "This (Islam) is the religion to which victory was promised" (in al-Qarawee, 2015, p. 164). However, the output – including the violent videos – is in essence a form of outreach, framed as Islamic, aimed at propagating the group's ultra-conservative Salafi jihadist views and demonstrating their successful implementation. It therefore subsumes western-style propaganda into a particular religio-political agenda, political because an important theme is the structuring of a state which is an idealized home to which all Muslims should migrate if at all possible. Marlin (2002) defines propaganda as "the organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgment" (p. 22). IS certainly wants to use communication to affect beliefs and actions. But it does so by exploiting shared values as well as through other lures such as the attraction of adventure and the prospect of belonging to a community helping to bring in an idealized Islamic society. Further, to argue that IS achieves its communication objectives simply through suppressing or circumventing message recipients' rational judgments might be unsound, given evidence that many Islamic State media outputs are carefully, and strategically, planned to key in to thoughtful analysis. For example, Lewis (2014), speaking of *Dabiq*, comments that "the religious argumentation in this magazine is rigorous and comprehensive, indicating that ISIS has been preparing its narrative, with the help of Islamic scholars, to withstand religious counter-arguments over time" (p. 10). Lewis also asserts that local IS messaging has been rigorous (2014, p. 10). The rigour

is not just about ensuring that arguments are robust: in Islamic contexts, information is not seen as a commodity but rather, conveys a moral and ethical imperative (Mowlana, 2007; p. 294).

In the West, propaganda was religious long before it became political (Briggs, A. & Burke, P., 2005, in Bolt, p. 34). As Marlin (2002, p.53) notes, "when Christianity became politically powerful, what was religiously praiseworthy translated into political points". The original European idea of spreading the faith, encapsulated in the 17th Century founding of the Sacred Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* (Benigni, 1911 finds analogies in the Islamic practices of *tabligh* and *da'wah*, although tabligh goes further, emphasizing duty and obligation. Tabligh means "propagation" (Mowlana, 2003; p. 306)). Literally, da'wah means "inviting" and focuses on both educating non-Muslims about Islam and teaching Muslims about aspects of the faith (Abu Ammar, 2001, paras. 8–9). Lewis (2014) asserts that IS has been engaged in da'wa since 2013. In a study of Islamic State news releases between 18 April and 24 April, 2015, Zelin (2015) separates da'wah releases from those on other topics, such as military and governance subjects. In the period he studied, 10 releases were coded as da'wa and 58 as military (2015, p. 3). However, he also expresses a broad view of what constitutes da'wa, referring to Islamic State's "da'wa campaign of calling people to join its cause, instituting its conservative social agenda through its hisba [moral policing] office, and providing services through its governance apparatus (2015, p. 4). This wide perspective of da'wa provides a basis for viewing IS media work as a form of da'wa or tabligh.

Although the concept of tabligh (propagation) is reminiscent of the original western notion of propaganda, as focused on spreading the faith and political doctrines (Marlin, 2002; p. 15), Islam goes further. While Christian outreach, for example, could be considered a form of invitational discourse, tabligh carries implications of required behaviour on the part of all Muslims, wherever they might live, regardless of national borders. For example, in an audio address, the IS caliph, Abu Bakr-al-Baghdadi, stated, "O Muslims in all places. Whoso is able to emigrate to the Islamic State, let him emigrate. For emigration to the Abode of Islam is obligatory" (2014, cited in Bunzel, 2015, p.32). Therefore, although some of the features of western notions of propaganda are readily discernible in IS' communication, such as "bandwagon and inevitable victory" (*Propaganda Techniques*, n.d., para.9) it is at its core about a religious message whose ramifications are not distant and abstract but being outworked in practical ways now. As Baghdadi stated in 2014, addressing Muslims everywhere, "*today* (emphasis added) you have. . . a state and caliphate that will renew your dignity and strength, that will recover your rights and your sovereignty" (cited in Bunzel, 2015, p. 41).

3.2. The context in which the propaganda occurs

The Islamic State media campaign builds on earlier messaging by Al-Qaida and other groups: it has not emerged only recently. In fact, the multiple IS media products have jihadist communication antecedents stretching back at least to 2004 (Maggioni, 2015, p.57, in Maggioni & Magri, Eds., 2015). But there are key differences in strategic orientation between Al-Qaida and IS, reflected in their media productions. For Al-Qaida, "any thought of a caliphate is far in the future" (Imonti, 2015, para.19). However, for Islamic State, as mentioned above, "the caliphate is not just a future dream; it is real and now" (Imonti, 2015, para. 5; see also Jabareen, 2015; p.54). As a result, building the caliphate is a central theme in IS messaging whereas Al-Qaida media deal with more immediate concerns, such as the Palestine question (Khan, 2014). Other less fundamental differences provide a contrast between Islamic State and Al-Qaeda media. Al-Qarawee notes, for example, that "videos put forward by the IS tend to be filled with rank-and-file members whom potential recruits find much more relatable than AQ's videos full of leadership figures giving speeches" (2015, p. 4). According to Shroder (2015), IS' high production values act as an initial lure:

> In contrast to Al-Qaida's videos, which were shot on shaky handheld cameras, IS uses sound design, special effects, rehearsed sequences and multiple-angle scenes, as well as high-tech 5D cameras and professional editing teams. The sensational videos take the viewer directly inside the war being waged by IS, much in the same way a video game or action movie would. This has allowed IS to situate themselves. . . in a way that is entirely unencumbered by traditional communication strategies – particularly those that would rely exclusively on mainstream media to spread their message (paras 9–11).

The broader context for examining this phenomenon is the role and nature of communication in Islamic society. Mowlana (2003; 2007) is a useful guide. He points out that "facts by themselves do not have meaning in Islam but, once placed in a proper social structure, constitute information leading to knowledge" (2007, p. 285). He argues that tabligh (propagation) is not the same as "the general concepts of communication, journalism, propaganda and agitation commonly used in contemporary literature" (2007, p. 286). In contrast to propagandists who "do not need to be believers in an ideology or a doctrine" those engaged in propagation as understood in Islam are disseminating and diffusing "some principle, belief or practice. . . tabligh means the increase or spread Mowlana states that 'journalism as a production, gathering and dissemination of information, news and opinion is an extension of tabligh in its broadest sense' (2007, p. 287). And propagation requires "group feeling", as theorized by Ibn Kaldun (1336/1957) who saw communication as a social institution which grew according to the need of the community (Mowlana, 2007; p. 289).

Mowlana goes on to relate tabligh to the concept of *tawhid*, which he describes as a theory "which implies the unity, coherence and harmony between all parts of the universe" (2007, p. 290). Under this principle, he writes,

> another fundamental ethical consideration in *tabligh* becomes clear: the destruction of thought structures based on dualism, racialism, tribalism and familial superiority. The function of communication order in Islamic society. . . is to break idols, to break the dependence on the outsiders, and to set the *ummah* or community in motion toward the future. Thus one of the important functions of *tabligh* is to destroy myths [which] may include "power", "progress," and "modernization" (2007, p. 290; italics in the original).

Mowlana identifies two other principles relevant to tabligh. One is the individual and collective responsibility Muslims have to guide one another on "commanding to the right and prohibiting from the wrong" (2007, p. 290) and preparing the next generation to follow Islamic precepts. This applies especially to

> individuals and institutions who are charged with the responsibilities of leadership and propagation of Islamic ideals [including] all the institutions of social communication such as the press, radio, television, and cinema as well as the individual citizens of each community (2007, p. 291).

The other is the concept of *ummah* – an Islamic community which "transcends the notion of the modern nation-state" (2007, p. 291). Tabligh's role is to propagate, disseminate and maintain the value system of the ummah (2003, p. 311). On this basis, both da'wa and tabligh are apt descriptions of what Islamic State seeks to do. Its aims do include destroying antithetical thought structures, by various applications of force if need be as well as through media, and sustaining and strengthening the values of its Salafist-jihadist community through communication that articulates a new social contract based on uncompromising application of its interpretation of Islamic law.

3.3. Identification of the propagandist

In Jowett and O'Donnell's framework (2012), this is about the source of the propaganda – which is not always clear, although in the case of IS, there is no doubt – except for the activities of those who re-distribute Islamic State material. While notorious for brutalities, IS is also recognized as demonstrating mastery of strategic communication through co-ordinated messaging across multiple message platforms in order to attract "different audiences for the same purpose: strengthening the jihad" (Lombardi, 2015; p. 104). Its media activities are often described as "sophisticated" (Farwell, 2014, para. 3). For example, in less than a month it moved from producing eight-page news reports to publishing the high quality, 40-page English-language online magazine *Dabiq*, incorporating the sections that had appeared in previous publications (Milton, 2014, p. 53, in Maggioni & Magri, Eds., 2015). Islamic State's media output is abundant. For example, Zelin (2015) counted an average of 18 media releases a day in the week 18–24 April, 2015.

3.4. Structure of the propaganda organization

Central organization of IS' media output is handled by the Ministry of Media, which operates through four divisions, each of which has a different brief. Each Islamic State province (33 of them as at April, 2015) also has "its own regional media bureau, all of which can produce and distribute their own content" (Milton, 2014, p. 49, in Maggioni & Magri, Eds., 2015). However, according to Zelin (2015), "a disproportionate amount of content" originates in Iraq and Syria, a fact at odds with the impression IS wishes to create of being "active and conducting different types of operations in a wide variety of locations" (p. 2). With online content, there is a multiplier effect from the activities of sympathizers (known as "disseminators") who re-post and transmit material to their own networks (see Milton, 2015, p. 50, in Maggioni & Magri, Eds., 2015).

3.5. Target audiences

IS media's ability to tap into religious and cultural predispositions is highly influential among target audiences (mainly disaffected young Muslim men and women). For example, Perlmutter, arguing that "ritual beheadings have been prevalent throughout Islamic history and are theologically prescribed and communally sanctioned" (2006, para. 1), says that beheading videos

> have particular appeal to young Muslim men who view the violence as vengeance against perceived oppression and offenses [against] Islam and to young Muslim men living in Western countries who feel marginalized. . . Many of these young men have become desensitized to violence through videogames which often involve graphic decapitation of enemies (2014, para. 7).

The power of IS media to motivate its audiences has led to the group being described as "the most effective, most inspirational, and most powerful manifestation of Violent Extremism we have ever seen" (Nagata, 2014; p. 1, capitals in original). That assessment comes not from a casual observer but from a United States Major General, Michael Nagata, who at the time of writing is the Special Operations commander for the Middle East. He talks about the "intangible" power that DA'ISH (an acronym of IS' full Arabic name) projects, with "its ability to persuade, its ability to inspire, its ability to attract young men and women from across the globe, and its ability to create an image of unstoppable power and spiritual commitment" (Nagata, 2014; p. 1). Nagata concedes not only that DA'ISH opponents are demonstrating "significant weakness and vulnerability" in confronting this intangible power, but goes so far as to say that "we do not yet fully comprehend that

which we are contesting (2014, p. 1). This is true despite the fact that Islamic State has a history prior to the 2014 proclamation of a caliphate: it was founded in 2006, initially as part of Al-Qaida, before being disowned by the latter in February, 2014. While it shares ideological constructs with Al-Qaida, IS has a different strategic focus. AQ prioritizes the fight against the 'far enemy' – the United States and the West – whereas IS valorizes combatting the "near enemy" in its region, without forgetting the far one. It is, however, able to represent its regional advances as emblematic of a wider prospect of victory. As Plebani and Maggiolini comment (2015, p. 30). "In this context communication and media-fed psychological warfare become strategically important because they allow IS to bring the clashes in Iraq and Syria to an international plane" Mirroring this local/international perspective, and referring to jihadists generally, Maggioni notes they have "understood that systematically producing information was the way to achieve legitimation with their local audience as well as with global jihadism" (2015, p. 60., in Maggioni & Magri., Eds., 2015). This media emphasis is not new: in 2007, referring to Usama bin Ladin, then US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates quoted Kishore Mahbubani with some frustration, asking "How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest communication society?" (cited in Milton, 2014, p. 46, in Maggioni & Magri., Eds., 2015).

3.6. Media utilization techniques

One pervasive element is Islamic State media is visual communication. In a study of releases for the week 18–24 April, 2015, Zelin (2015) calculated that 88% were visual, a fact that accentuates Allen's point (2012, para. 1.) that "communication has become a visual art". As Bolt notes, "Fast-moving, self-propelled imagery is transforming insurgency" (2012, p. 1), especially Islamic insurgency, which sees itself as "in a battle and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media" (Al-Zawahiri, 2005, in Bolt, 2012; p. 2). Images of what westerners would view as barbarism and IS sympathizers as justified elimination of enemies can be described as "Propaganda of the Deed" (POTD) – the idea that terrorist attacks need to be visibly impressive to gain attention (Dugdale-Pointon, 2001). Bolt calls POTD "an image-based weapon aiming to guide viewers towards messages, focusing attention amid a welter of competing information. Photographic images fix time. So does the moving picture" (2012, p. 114).

Another technique is framing. Islamic State continually weaves together reportage and commentary that portray ineluctable advance and destruction of enemies, who are derided in language designed to discredit and dehumanize them (Zelin, 2015, p. 5). As Magri points out, "Communication lies in the DNA of this organization, regardless of technological savvy and familiarity with the times and rituals of the media" (2015, p. 6; see also Lombardi, 2015; p.83). This is true not only internationally but also within the fluid boundaries of the caliphate itself. Much of the output targets local audiences, whether friends or foes; in the latter's case, "Islamic State's most obvious purpose is to sow fear" (Ibish, 2015, para. 8). In fact, "there is very little that happens within the territory controlled by the IS that does not have a media component to it" Milton (2014, p. 75, in Maggioni & Magri, Eds., 2015). According to Al-Qarawee, IS' "most sophisticated and diverse discourse is the one targeting local populations in the territories under its control"... [the discourse centers on] "legitimizing the rule of ISIS and presenting at as a model of an 'Islamic State' that represents the aspirations of the population" (2015, p. 148). Ibish (2015, para. 7) is sceptical of the extent to which IS wants to win over public opinion: he characterizes Islamic State as a "resolutely vanguardist organization [that] seeks to violently impose a new reality on the populace, not to win the hearts and minds of a majority". While the degree to which IS seeks through media to broaden its support base may be debatable, it is inarguable that localized governance-related communication is extant, including offline elements such as DVDs of videos, hard copies of IS writings, fliers, and even big screens in parks to show videos (Milton, 2014, p. 54, in Maggioni & Magri, Eds., 2015). However, as far as the West is concerned, Islamic State-controlled areas are largely "information black holes" (Reporters without Borders, 2015). Access for outside analysts is difficult if not impossible and local journalists must work within strict rules, the first of which requires them to swear allegiance to the IS Caliph, al-Baghdadi (Allawi, 2014). Therefore, in addition to documents posted online by IS itself and its sympathizers, a western-based study such as this one must rely on secondary sources, including publicly available military assessments, academic analyses, social media and other reports, usually citing Middle East sources. While all IS media is produced in Arabic, Western analysts focus on more readily accessible material such as the English-language *Dabiq*. Yet, as Zelin found (2015, para.2), only a relatively small proportion of Islamic State's considerable media output is released in other languages (English material accounted for only 6.5% of the content in his study).

3.7. Special techniques to maximize effect

As Bolt points out, "frequently, the terrorist act is planned dramaturgically with precision, rendering it primarily strategic. For POTD to become a fully fledged act of communication requires viewers. A tank that explodes under insurgent fire is a military tactical strike. But place a camera before it, and it becomes strategic POTD" (2012, p. 3). As Imonti (2015) comments, referring to IS, "the ritualized killing of prisoners is theatre; and a theatrical performance requires an audience" (para. 13). He adds: "We are all being made participants in this theatre of the grotesque; and that is precisely what is intended by the use of mass communications" (2015, para. 24). Bolt describes pictures as "images triggering crystallised messages that resonate with popular memories of grievance with popular memories of grievance and injustice... hence POTD acts as a lightning rod for collective memory" (2012, p. 7). According to Bolt, Propaganda of the Deed "becomes a communications tool that unlocks a set of assumptions in the population. It is akin to political marketing in the way it employs techniques of resonance and

symbolic association with different constituencies" (2012, p. 7). As Bolt notes, "The virtual dimension of imagined [Islamic] community and shared values merges with actions on the operational battlefield. The virtual hosts the war of images, words and ideas in a contest of strategic narratives (2012, p. 19). However, despite the speed of contemporary digital communication, 'message control. . . is weakened as audiences receive and transmit emotive images between themselves, investing them with enthusiasm, inciting shared values, inviting collective action' (2012, p. 8). POTD can also be a form of gaining 'market share' in the constellation of terrorist groups (Bloom, 2005, in Bolt, 2012; p. 18)) as it detonates the equilibrium formed by the grip of existing narratives (Bolt, 2012; p. 79).

In targeting this communication, IS reaches beyond traditional media whether in the west or elsewhere. As Bolt (2012) points out: "The more the Digital Revolution has made inroads into our lives, the less pivotal the journalist has become. . .yet the interconnection of all media. . . means messages and their condensed form – images – increasingly find a way to their targets" (p. xxiv). In his book, *The Violent Image* (2012), Bolt "privileges the Propaganda of the Deed [POTD], that is the representation of political violence as a still or moving picture, over the local, military effect of slaughtering combatants and non-combatants" (p. xxiv). What IS does is to combine both, displaying images of death and destruction which must be ratcheted up to the ever-more spectacular because "mass communications require a constant flow of new dramas to keep the attention of a fickle audience that has numerous other choices to satisfy a craving for distractions" (Imonti, 2015, para. 14). These "dramas" exert a powerful pull: as Bolt contends, "the Propaganda of the Deed translates messages into dramatic images only to be converted back into ideas" (2012, p. xxv). So influential the result that, "insurgents treat the images of their violence no longer as peripheral to their objectives but as a new strategic operating concept" (Bolt, 2012; p. xxv).

Such centrality could not have been achieved in earlier eras even if the images existed. The 19th century saw the birth of the Propaganda of the Deed in anarchist bombings, a revolutionary tactic aimed at bringing down Western states (Bolt, 2012; p. 1). However, this episodic violence failed because it could not "manage the process of message control and media diffusion" (Bolt, 2012; p. 2). It was "unable to convey a sustained message and explain how using violence could deliver a better society" (p. 50). In contrast, present-day POTD, is now "an act of political violence with the objective of creating a media event capable of energising populations to bring about state revolution or social transformation" (p. 2) and to rouse them "to articulate latent, passive or sometimes active desires (p. 12). Bolt points out that

3.8. Audience reaction to various techniques

It appears that there is no scholarly study of this yet, although the reaction of sympathizers, through their social media activity in particular and also in emigration to the IS-controlled regions, points to effective persuasion. For westerners, violent videos not only shock but also elicit a certain sort of fascination with unfolding horror. This area would be a productive zone for further inquiry.

3.9. Counterpropaganda, if present

As mentioned above, discussion of efforts to counter Islamic State media output are under way but not discussed here, for reasons of space. The counter-ISIS media effort would also warrant future research.

3.10. Effects and evaluation

Through its media co-ordination, IS has created a 'brand ecosystem' presenting itself "as the one truly incorruptible force that can avenge the grievances of Muslims everywhere" (Shroder, 2015, paras 30–31). The idea of a brand ecosystem recognizes that brands are the result of cultural as well as managerial concepts, and subject to myriad influences (Bergvall, 2006; p. 166). As Ibish (2015, para. 12) points out, in declaring Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi its new caliph or leader, IS was mining "the reservoir of collective Muslim memory" of previous golden times in Islamic civilization: for example, the first caliph, or successor, to the Prophet Muhammad was also named Abu Bakr. The notion of incorruptibility relates to Islamic State's ideological roots in a form of Sunni Islam "concerned with purifying the faith" (Bunzel, 2015; p. 8), as illustrated in the second issue of IS' online magazine *Dabiq*. It features on pp. 14–17 "pictures of the destruction of shi'i shrines and tombs and the like because they represent shirk, blasphemy, the worshipping of other(s) (gods) than Allah"(de Ruiter, 2015).

> Such images underscore the group's desired positioning as guardians of a faith cleansed from doctrinal innovation and the pollution of western influences. Long-term effects of this framing and themes linked with it, such as the building of an idealized state, are yet to be felt. Yet there is sufficient data to support an interim conclusion that Islamic State's media war is being conducted in a way that is exemplary for public relations in its skill, its synchronization, its ability to sustain consistent messaging for diverse audiences and platforms.

4. Conclusion

Neither Western analysts nor Muslim commentators, including jihadis, have seen a group like Islamic State before, relentless not only in its approach to the battlefield but also to the conflicts of the media arena, especially online. IS has been described as "the first terrorist organization to use the internet efficiently to spread its ideology and recruit followers

in the region and abroad" (Cohen, 2016; abstract). Of course, many organizations, including those with a religious agenda, use a variety of media to communicate their messages, encourage adherents and draw in new followers. For example, the Roman Catholic Church's Pope Francis has been called a "master communicator" who operates nine Twitter accounts, all in different languages, and has successfully changed perceptions of the church (Thompson, 2015). Nor is Islamic State the only jihadist group to publish a magazine and to seek to harness media to its purposes. One example is the Global Islamic Media Front, which publishes a magazine called *Al Risalah*, an Arabic name which means "a letter" (Magazine-by-the-mujahideen-of-shaam-al-risalah-issue-1., 2015, p. 3).

A more long-standing example is Al-Qaida – but IS material appears to eclipse that of Al-Qaida not only in production values but also in the range of its content. Al-Qaida's *Inspire* magazine offers not only articles from the "AQ Chef" such as "How to make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom" (Read, 2010) and "Designing a timed hand grenade" (*Inspire 14,* pp. 71–81) but also a step-by-step guide to carrying out "assassination operations" (*Inspire 14,* pp. 65–71). This emphasis on discrete attacks is consistent with Lister's assessment (2016, p. 2) that Al-Qaida affiliates "are now playing a long game" focused on "unstable and repressed societies". In contrast, while IS has "consistently maintained a localist focus" to help take control of territory and impose Sharia law, Islamic State has also sought to expand internationally through a system of provinces (Zelin, 2014: provinces are regions where groups have made a religiously binding pledge of allegiance). According to an analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, Harleen Gambhir, "The goal is that through. . . regional affiliates and through efforts to create chaos in the wider world, the organization will be able to expand, and perhaps incite a global apocalyptic war" (cited in Yourish, Watkins & Giratikanon, 2016, para.7). Islamic State's *Dabiq* attests to this sweeping political, military, and religious perspective. The most recent issue at time of writing, issue 13, not only carried reports on IS operations in 22 regions (*Dabiq 13*, pp.14–19) but also detailed theologically-based advice to widows of those martyred (shuhadā') in the fight against Islamic State's enemies (*Dabiq 13*, pp.24–26). Western observers, including public relations practitioners, would miss the point if they simply dismiss IS' output as propaganda. Islamic State sees itself as expanding a religio-political entity that is able to justify its actions through mediated theological argumentation as well as arresting images. The rationales are religious; the reach of their communication, extensive both regionally and internationally. Perhaps the most compelling lesson for public relations is the power of a cause deeply embedded in religious and cultural associations to recruit international talent, including communication talent, to its banner, to the dismay of less committed ideologues in opposing camps.

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