Daesh and Social Media Platforms

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INTRODUCTION

Known for the use of propaganda to get its message across, Daesh has succeeded in the utilization of technology. Suffice it to say that, “the way today’s Islamist extremists use the internet is fundamentally different to the antiquated approach of Osama Bin Laden’s Al Qaida, which saw it primarily as a means of communication between different terror cells.”¹ Through the mastery of messaging on social media platforms, Daesh have increasingly become a refined terrorist organization. Daesh growth in terms of numbers, influence, and territory is largely due to the ability of members to adapt to prevailing methods of communication. The productions of CDs, DVDs, posters, flyers, and web related content, have excelled the terrorist organization.

“What started as an adept approach using social media has turned into a phenomenon, as Daesh demonstrates it prowess in attracting new recruits through the production of slick videos with a variety of themes.”² The videos were originally targeted at Muslims in the Middle East, but Daesh shifted the message to appeal to larger groups of supporters. “In the process, Daesh has become skilled at integrating dichotomies to broaden its appeal, for example, portraying itself as both “ruthless killers” but also “just like everyone else.”³

They also market and release their materials in multiple languages; including mainstream languages for more popular areas. “In mid-2014 they commenced the publication of a magazine called Dabiq, in quite a few languages as to target many markets. This magazine was focused on establishing the legitimacy of ISIS and its goal of creating their own caliphate while encouraging

Muslims to immigrate to the area.”

This publication is also easily accessed online in a variety of formats.

Overall, Daesh have relied heavily on social media platforms, and thus far, they have been dramatically successful. The purpose of the current article is to examine the terrorist organizations, and their use of social media. The following sections will analyze five specific aspects of this topic: their goals and how exactly they aspire to achieve them; the development of the organization through the use of social media, the message that they hope to convey to their audience; the target audience(s) of the Daesh; and recommendations to counter terrorist communications through social media platforms.

**TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS:**

**POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS & ECONOMIC PURPOSES**

To achieve important goals in the twenty-first century, terrorism has been a progressively potential way for organizations to gain momentum for political, religious, or economic purposes. Political groups include the PKK in Turkey, the ETA in Spain, Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, Shining Path in Peru, the former IRA in Northern Ireland, and rogue states (i.e. Iran and North Korea) who “abide only by their own rules and engage in illegal or criminal activities. Through nuclear businesses or secret sales of missiles, for example, they finance themselves and increase

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their leverage in the international arena." Religious groups include organizations, such as Al Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah. Examples of terrorist organizations that seek economic power include non-state actors, such as cartels, mafias, and syndicates. They are typically involved in prostitution, drugs, weapons, gambling, and other illegal activities. All of these groups persist in violent actions to convey a message, manipulating a target "(audience[s]), turning it into a target of terror, a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought. (Schmid and Jongman, 1988)

Moreover, Daesh have been considered a religious group, but further analyzing their goals, the intentions of this particular group goes beyond religious objectives. "If the issue at stake is a territory or the demand for autonomy, as is often the case with separatist factions, a compromise through negotiations might be achieved, but dialogue is extremely difficult to establish with religious fundamentalists such as Islamist radical movements. Their purpose is to spread or enforce their system of beliefs in specific territories. Their demands are often far beyond what can reasonably be accepted such as the restoration of the caliphate, a pure Islamic state made of the entire community of the believers, from Morocco to Pakistan or the

removal of all Western forces from the Muslim territories (with the suppression of the state of Israel) and the restitution of formerly Muslim lands (including parts of Spain).”

Guy Olivier Faure refers to these terrorist organizations as “Absolute terrorists” because their actions are “non-instrumentalist, a self-contained act that is completed when it has occurred and is not a means to obtain some other goal” (Zartman, 2006, p. 2).

WHY DAESH?

Similar to Voltaire’s statement that the Holy Roman Empire was, ‘neither holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire’, the “Islamic State” is neither a representation of Islam, nor a State. For this reason, the terrorist organization will be referred to as Daesh in the following article.

The name Daesh, according to France24, is a "loose acronym" for "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham). The name is commonly used by enemies of ISIS, and it also has many negative undertones, as Daesh sounds similar to the Arabic words Daes ("one who crushes something underfoot") and Dahes ("one who sows discord"). The current article will refer to this specific terrorist organization as the Daesh for this reason.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Daesh development of using social media has surpassed that of other terrorist organizations that have come before. Their ability to use a variety of platforms to spread their message and recruit members to their group is demonstrated by a wide array of recent news articles, as well as scholarly research. “It was the birth of a media model that has been transformed, expanded and redefined to a science over the course of years by the group that would eventually spring from the ashes of the American occupation-ISIS, a jihadist army so brutal and out of control that it was officially disavowed by al Qaeda.”11 Already equipped with weapons technology and revenues to support their operations, Daesh members continue to explore new methods to reach targeted audiences throughout the world.

Michael Glint, author of Can A War With ISIS Be Won, explained:

- They regularly use Twitter by creating hash tag campaigns, tweeting about trending campaigns and distributing their materials amongst users who follow them. It is noted that they use social media more than any other jihadi group and thus has a very coordinated presence on the internet. Twitter attempts to shut down any accounts that are associated with the group but as Twitter shuts it down ISIS then recreates them and continues posting. Due to Twitter’s continuous attempts ISIS has started branching out into other social media outlets. In addition to social media, they have tried to release videos that target the Muslim youth. It was reported in 2014, that these initiatives caused two youths from India to join the group and this prompted India to put thing in place to prevent their youngsters from being associated with ISIS.12

Still, terrorists are improving their sophistication and abilities in virtually all aspects of their operations and support. “The aggressive use of modern technology for information management,

communication and intelligence has increased the efficiency of these activities.”

Weapons technology has become more increasingly available, and the purchasing power of terrorist organizations is on the rise. “The ready availability of both technology and trained personnel to operate it for any client with sufficient cash allows the well-funded terrorist to equal or exceed the sophistication of governmental counter-measures.” The purpose of Daesh propaganda is to incite a response from its audience. As Dan Caldwell and Robert E. Williams explain in *Seeking Security in an Insecure World*:

- Because terrorism is a form of psychological warfare that seeks to spread fear, terrorist organizations have used the Internet to disseminate images calculated to shock viewers. Grotesque videos of the beheadings of American and foreign workers captured by insurgents in Iraq and Pakistan were posted on the Internet to make them available to audiences worldwide. More generally, terrorists have gone online to seek publicity and to disseminate propaganda. Virtually all of the world’s major terrorist groups have active websites with information related to their organizations and causes. Typically, these websites attempt to justify their reliance on violent methods and to recruit supporters. The videos provided by Daesh members commonly recorded decapitations, firing squads, crucifixion, and other methods of execution. “The videos were distributed physically on DVDs in Iraq, but they became an Internet phenomenon. Unlabeled online file repositories were linked to by members of jihadist message boards, and the videos were passed around the Web, violence porn with a mission to intimidate and enrage. They succeeded.”

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Jihadists have figured out how to use social media to make an impact, even though their numbers are minuscule in comparison to the overall user base, with Islamic State, more commonly known as ISIS or ISIL, [Daesh] leads the way. It’s highly organized social media campaign uses deceptive tactics and shows a sophisticated understanding of how such networks operate.\(^\text{17}\) Daesh members are the first generation of terrorist organization members that grew up using social media; therefore, they are more knowledgeable than that of past terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda.

In a recent discussion, The Heritage Foundation hosted Daniel Cohen from the Institute for National Security Studies who discussed the Daesh’s influence in social media. During his discussion he noted that this particular terrorist organization uses six main media platforms; video, community forums, publications, social media, merchandise, and gaming.\(^\text{18}\) The host explained the shift in the Daesh message from the Muslim world to the Western world; in order to engage a larger group of devotees. Cohen also noted that ISIS began creating their videos, aimed at a global audience around April or June of 2014. The purpose of the films that


the Daesh have been creating is specifically for recruiting, propaganda, and psychological warfare. Shortly thereafter, the message became much more about independence, and also had a materialistic “selling-point” to joining the organization.

Most recently, Ahram Online, an English-language news website published by Al-Ahram Establishment (Egypt’s largest news organization, and publisher of the Middle East’s oldest newspaper), stated that, Daesh supporters, “launched a social media network that imitates Facebook and Twitter, in an apparent bid to garner more support for the jihadi organisation.” The first social media network for Islamic State supporters," reads an opening message on the website's homepage, adding that the site is still in its initial stages, and calling for supporters to share its address online. The new network has not yet attracted many users, with most posts dating from the last four days.”

Although this new social media network is very recent, from other Daesh successes in social media, this further illustrates their ability to continue to perpetuate propaganda by paralleling the Western worlds advanced technologies.

An example of the successfulness of Daesh propaganda is described in The New York Times article entitled “Children, Caged for Effect, to Mimic Imagery of ISIS”, which states that,

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“broadcast specifically to frighten and manipulate, the Islamic State’s flamboyant violence consumes the world’s attention while more familiar threats, like the Syrian government’s barrel bombs, kill far more but rarely provoke global outrage.” Allocating knowhow to avenues and pathways of entertainment and communications that are typically enjoyed by younger generations of people throughout the world is a surefire way for Daesh to reach its target audience(s).

TARGET AUDIENCE(S)

According to Albawaba News, “ISIS’s recruitment effort has been two-pronged; focusing on adults as well as children. In May 2014 Syria Direct—a non-profit journalist organization—reported that children younger than 18 were spotted at checkpoints, while another teenager under the age of 17 was involved in the bombing of the Bab Al-Salam Syria–Turkey border crossing. According to a report by the Syrian Human Rights Committee, at least 800 children under the age of 18 have been recruited by ISIS.” They have employed various methods, through the use of social networks, and other technologies, to recruit from a widespread of audiences.

One of the techniques that they have used to recruit younger members is video-gaming, a popular leisure activity, which Daesh have taken full advantage of; in order to excite children with virtual bloodshed. “Terrorists are also using new technologies to recruit in even more novel

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and unique ways. This includes a thriving video game industry targeting Muslim youths, which focuses on the themes of waging violence. In the popular game Ummah Defense, for example, a virtual warrior has the vicarious thrill of taking on the American military; Israeli settlers, and of course, “killer robots.” The ramifications of violence in video games have been further exploited by Daesh members.

By mimicking games created by corporations, altering specifics based on their brand of violence, Daesh released, “a video showing the game, which appears to be a modified version of 2004 crime hit Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, which sold 27.5 million copies around the world,” on the video-sharing site YouTube, in September of 2014. “The jihadi problem is fueled by low youth employment, corruption, lack of opportunities, identity crisis, and social injustice. Young girls are often revolting against a family in which they are misunderstood or a society in which they don't feel appreciated.” Daesh members use their weaknesses against them to draw them into their group. This audience consists of people from all parts of the world. In their video entitled, “The Islamic State”, members that were recruited from Great Britain, Kenya, and Denmark speak to the camera, appearing to be candid minded with smiles on their faces; inviting people to their caliphate.

Also, Daniel Cohen noted at his discussion at the Heritage Foundation that Daesh uses networks to attract women that, “is something similar to like speed-dating, to recruit woman and to find a wife for someone in ISIS.”

In social media, ISIS also uses many other sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, and Cohen presented percentages of positive responses on these two particular platforms as of two months prior to his presentation; the United States had twenty four percent in positive responses to Daesh posts, comments, and other content. Several other countries ranged from thirty to fifty percent. In the Muslim world, females are targeted to become brides of Daesh members. “It’s not dissimilar ... in terms of disinhibiting them, creating a rapport, building trust, creating this environment of secrecy: ‘You don’t tell your parents, you can trust me,’” she said.” Among the hundreds that have taken the bait, “many are second- or third-generation immigrants who do not have the religious education to question what they are being told about Sharia and practices, experts said. They are drawn to Syria by a sense of religious obligation, concern about the suffering inflicted on Muslim civilians in the country’s civil war, as well as a desire for adventure and purpose (i.e. the romance of marrying a fighter).”

In various videos that they have uploaded to YouTube, members of Daesh have argued in opposition of marriage and family life. They stated that they do not have time for family because of their dedication to the cause that they are fight for; which illustrates the falsifying and contradictory nature of their recruitment through propaganda.

The two-pronged approach to recruiting members from both the Muslim world and the Western world has gained an exponential amount of media attention. There has also been a

\footnotesize{26 ISIS' Influence on Social Media. Performed by Daniel Cohen. USA: The Heritage Foundation, 2015. Film.
sufficient amount of criticism regarding news channels in the United States of America, and coverage of Daesh social media. As Daniel Wagner suggested in an article entitled *What the Islamic State Is Teaching the West About Social Media*:

- The dual appeal of individualism while being part of a larger group gives Daesh the ability to manipulate peer pressure, especially among younger recruits, as an incentive to become part of 'the cause'. As more people from a more diverse range of countries join the ranks of Daesh, the group's 'cheerleaders' are increasing exponentially. The western media is, ironically, greatly assisting the cause by dutifully broadcasting Daesh's videos to its own brethren -- ironically, including such outlets as Fox News -- generating some unlikely new devotees. This is part of what accounts for so many of the young westerners seeking to join the organization. If the western media did not play along, many of these western recruits may not even know what Daesh is. Doing so is like giving an unintended seal of approval for those who do not know better.  

Overall, it has been debated whether this coverage is actually negative or positive for the terrorist organization; a predominant source for contention amid media outlets and critics. Regardless, social media has been a key component to recruiting their target audiences throughout the world; as Daesh has continued to spread across Syria and Iraq.

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THE MESSAGE

“The best thing to do would be to kill any French or American infidel or any of their allies . . . if you cannot [detonate] a bomb or [fire] a bullet, arrange to meet alone with a French or an American infidel and bash his skull in with a rock, slaughter him with a knife, run him over with your car, throw him off a cliff, strangle him, or inject him with poison. Don’t stand by, helpless and abject. . . . If you are incapable of this, burn down his house, his car, his business or his field. And if you are incapable even of this – then spit in his face.”

~ Abu Muhammad al-Adnani

Through the use of social media platforms, spokesmen of the Daesh commands followers of the terrorist organization’s radical ideals to rid the world of what they consider to be infidels and apostates; that is, anyone who does not join their ranks, even those practicing Islam outside of Daesh. Since the inception of the terrorist organization’s social networking strategy, Daesh posts have also increased in frequency, along with aggrandizing the content. For example, in reference to Daesh (ISIL)’s Spring 2014 Offensive, Jytte Klausen explained that, “after the insurgents moved into Iraq, the content became increasingly gruesome. In April “Abu Daighum al-Britani,” a British fighter with ISIL, used Twitter to circulate a screenshot made using Instagram of himself holding a severed head. By August, Twitter had served up stills from videos of ongoing beheadings, severed heads on fence posts, rows of crucified men hung on crosses on a platform in a dusty town like an image from a bad movie, and even a picture of a seven-year-old Australian boy holding a severed head offered to him by his father.”

Daesh had initially targeted young, poor Muslim males as recruits. Through emphasizing anti-establishment and conservative credentials, they appealed to those who felt disenfranchised.

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“For young men living on the margins of society, with no job and little or nothing to lose, joining Daesh gave their lives meaning and enabled them to fight their perceived oppressors.”

Yet, now Daesh has shifted their message to appeal to a broader audience. “The organization has gradually shifted both the focus of its targeted recruits and its messaging in order to draw in a larger pool of devotees. Its more recent videos have changed the focus away from the 'unfamiliar', individualism, and anonymity.”

In addition, social media has also been broken down into specific categories, in a recent article. As Klausen notes, based upon a, “classification scheme derived from previous analyses of the content of jihadist online forums”, five categories of content on tweets. She stated that, “The primary content of the messaging was the focus. Coders were told to summarize the primary meaning of the specific tweet—whether a picture or a text—and were allowed to code only one category.”

A trial test was also conducted to ensure that all of the coders were consistent in categorizing the tweets. Klausen’s test concluded that the coding decisions were the same in more than four out of five times. The five categories included “Religious Instruction”; “Reporting from Battle”; “Interpersonal Communication”; “Tourism”; and “Threats Against the West”. Of course, the most memorable tweets have been those that feature threats, violence,
and condemnations of what they consider their enemy. Members of Daesh often threaten to rape Western women, slaughter entire families without hesitation, and takeover the White House; all in the name of *Allah*.

Withal, when the message is directed as the West, videos capture the carnage most effectively. “It is difficult to properly convey the magnitude of the sadistic violence shown in these videos. Some featured multiple beheadings, men and women together, with the later victims forced to watch the first die. In one video, the insurgents drove out into the streets of Iraq cities, piled out of a vehicle, and beheaded a prisoner in full view of pedestrians, capturing the whole thing on video and then driving off scot-free.”

The message that Daesh attempts to instill in their target audience is to fear, hate, and act aggressively towards non-members of Daesh. Meeting the requirements for all three parts of the definition for terrorism by the Intelligence Community, which, “is guided by the definition of terrorism contained in Title 22 of the US Code, Section 2656f(d)”:

- The term "terrorism" means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.
- The term “international terrorism” means terrorism involving the territory or the citizens of more than one country.

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The term “terrorist group” means any group that practices, or has significant subgroups that practice, international terrorism.  

It's ability to use technology has been what has set it apart from groups in the past. Although they are advanced in the use of social media platforms to spread terrorism across the globe, the terrorist organization itself is not original or interesting whatsoever.

COUNTERTERROSIM IN SOCIAL MEDIA

RECOMMEDATIONS

In recent years, terrorism has relocated itself. Not concerning a specific place on the map, but it has strategically positioned itself on the internet; into social media platforms. As Martin Van Creveld suggested in Technology and War:

- Regardless of the state of technological development reached by society at large, it must be recognized that there exist today, and probably will continue to exist in the future, some states, some groups, and some people who are not content with the existing state of affairs or, indeed, with any conceivable state of affairs. Determined to use force in order to change the status quo, they will employ whatever means are available at the time. Even assuming that such people, such groups, and such states can forever be deterred from the full-scale strategic use of nuclear weapons in pursuing their ends, there is no lack of scenarios for the limited-theater use of nuclear weapons, small and large.

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assuming no such use takes place, and that the balance of terror will continue to spread as it has during the last few decades, it will presumably always be possible to find some places and circumstances where, albeit at perhaps great risk of escalation, conventional warfare can proceed as of yore.\textsuperscript{40}

Technological advances will continue to establish new methods for terrorist to utilize in order to spread its message. The recent movement on social media platforms illustrates the rapid emergence of terrorist organization activity on the internet with a completely radical way to communicate and recruit members to the group. J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan analyzed various aspects of Daesh Twitter accounts, concentrating on their support system, their location and personal information, and participation in, “its highly organized online activities.”\textsuperscript{41}

Furthermore, on “March 2015, The ISIS Twitter census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter” was published by the Brookings Institution. Among the key findings, the authors stated that from September through December 2014, there were an estimated 46,000 or more, Twitter accounts that were used by supporters of Daesh (though all the accounts were not active at the same time); the majority of supporters were located in Syria and Iraq, and hundreds of supporting accounts sent tweets with location metadata embedded; almost one out of five of the supporters preferred English as their primary language while using Twitter (the remaining three preferred Arabic); each account that supported Daesh on Twitter had an average of one thousand followers, and these accounts were considerably more active than non-supporting users; a minimum of one thousand accounts were suspended by Twitter.


within the timeframe (September-December 2014); and the success of Daesh social media can be widely attributed to a “relatively small group of hyperactive users, numbering between 500 and 2,000 accounts, which tweet in concentrated bursts of high volume.” These hyperactive users consist of a large number of followers on Twitter. Although Twitter has diligently worked to close accounts, Daesh members open new accounts at the same, or even faster speeds. With the growth of social network platforms, the ability for Daesh, as well as future terrorist organizations to benefit from their development can only be fathomed.

Lastly, as for exactly how Syrians, Iraqis, neighboring states, as well as the United States of America is going to counter the issues posed by Daesh members, there are many possibilities. “Iraq and the US have systems in place to coordinate security and intelligence activities. It is because of this they are trying diplomatic approaches to work in ways to limit the actions of these militants.” The U.S. has also created its own twitter accounts which aim to counter messages posted by members of the terrorist organization. The accounts are targeted at informing followers of the inaccuracy and falsity of Daesh tweets. As J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan recommended, “social media companies and the U.S government work together to devise appropriate responses to extremism on social media. Approaches to the problem of extremist use of social media, Berger and Morgan contend, are most likely to succeed when they are mainstreamed into wider dialogues among the broad range of community, private,

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and public stakeholders." In respect to how proceeding actions may cause negative consequences on the overall abilities for the general public to remain free to access and communicate through social media platforms, Berger warns that, ““any approach to social media policing needs to include some consideration of our multipolar world. In our fight against terrorism, we do not wish to create precedents and authorities that would empower tyrants and repressive movements with tools to silence legitimate dissent.”

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