



The Islamic State's Propaganda Enterprise: Terrorism's Most Dangerous Domain

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The Islamic State's Propaganda Enterprise: Terrorism's Most Dangerous Domain

Anna McKinnon Jones

A Thesis in the Field of International Relations
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

This thesis explores the Islamic State's intent and capacity to distribute recruitment and radicalization propaganda to Western audiences. Using an integrative research method to collect and analyze available information on this topic, this thesis offers synthesized findings on the strategy and effectiveness of the Islamic State's targeted propaganda campaign. These findings contend that the Islamic State is organized and purposeful in the way it distributes propaganda to Westerners, and that the Internet is the most influential method of dissemination for Western-targeted content.

An analysis of the Media Division's structure and functions reveals the centrality of propaganda to the Islamic State's mission. As an essential function of the organization, media operations are both heavily regulated and prioritized, producing a propaganda campaign unparalleled in its scope and efficacy. The success of this campaign is accomplished using a multitude of channels, messages, and mediums, which Islamic State media operatives skillfully manipulate to reach receptive audiences. Using this method of carefully constructing and circulating propaganda to engage desired audiences, the Islamic State effectively utilizes the Internet to target potential Western sympathizers. Westerners are influenced by propaganda from the Internet more than any other channel used for disseminating targeted content.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The Islamic State's meteoric rise to prominence on the global stage in 2014 revolutionized the phenomenon of terrorism in more ways than one. In the decades prior, highly coordinated, large-scale attacks resulting in mass casualties was the form of terrorism publicly considered to be a primary threat to United States national security (Avdan & Webb, 2019). Major societal institutions throughout the nation, from politics to pastimes to public transportation infrastructure, were altered in an effort to mitigate such attacks (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, et al., 2004). As a result of the shared trauma endured from the infamous events of September 11, 2001, the collective psyche of United States citizens harbors a deeply entrenched fear that anyone, anywhere, at any time could be the victim of a deadly terror strike (Marshall, et al., 2007).

However, the Islamic State completely transformed the threat landscape of terrorism in the United States with their unprecedented ability to produce and disseminate a uniquely sophisticated and technologically advanced quality of media propaganda content (Celso, 2020). This propaganda created a gateway to the greatest threat that terrorism poses to U.S. citizens today: recruitment and radicalization (Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, & Moreng, 2016).

The emphasis on recruitment and radicalization rather than large-scale attacks is indicative of the Islamic State's shift in its over-arching goals toward expansion and

longevity of the organization and its ideology (Zelin, 2014). There is a constant need to radicalize and recruit new members into the organization to offset the fact that terrorism is an inordinately hazardous workplace environment (McCue, 2017). The rate at which the Islamic State successfully recruits and radicalizes U.S. citizens to fulfill this goal has created a novel and complex challenge for U.S. national security: the need to deradicalize and rehabilitate (Bergen, Schuster, & Sterman, 2015). Effectiveness of deradicalization and rehabilitation efforts are negligible in comparison to how effective recruitment and radicalization is not only in the United States, but universally (Schmid, 2013). For all intents and purposes, once an individual has been radicalized they will remain a threat to U.S. society and national security with no feasible avenue for reintegration (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). This issue of increasingly frequent permanent radicalization along with the ceaseless expansion of the Islamic State's membership and message can both be traced back to the effectiveness of their propaganda (Burroni, 2018). Demystification of the Islamic State's propaganda machine is the key to building effective deradicalization and rehabilitation programs, and to halting their radicalization and recruitment efforts (Milton, 2016). A thorough understanding of the mechanisms behind Islamic State propaganda will equip the United States to disrupt, dismantle, and ultimately defeat the organization and its ideology.

Although Islamic State terrorist organization and its activities have been researched and written about extensively by scholars and journalists over the past decade, some aspects of the organization's operations are more heavily focused upon than others. Because of this, the body of related academic knowledge and literature is dramatically skewed toward these popular topics. The field of study surrounding the Islamic State is

largely characterized by investigations and analyses of violent militant attacks and the high-profile leaders within the organization who execute them (ISIS News - CNN, 2022). This focus is understandable, even warranted, but the sensationalism of the topic of attacks seems to have eclipsed much of the enthusiasm for and interest in research on other aspects of the field. These other, less popular aspects, such as bureaucratic structure and hierarchy of the organization, methods of finance, local community engagement, and internal education curricula, are integrally valuable to the study of the Islamic State as a whole (Kelly et al., 2017). Without the data and insights that only in-depth research explorations into topics akin to the aforementioned can provide, the methods, motivations, and mechanisms of the Islamic State enterprise would remain a mystery. And thus, policy makers and leaders would be left lacking the necessary information not only to engage and defeat the terrorist perpetrators, but also to protect their own constituents and the other innocent targets of the Islamic State. Although most of the attention given to the research field of Islamic State terrorism is focused on the duration and aftermath of successfully executed attacks by the organization, it is, in fact, the findings of lower-profile research that have the potential to predict and prevent these tragedies. Each new discovery and connection that is made by researchers to explain the inner workings and operations of the Islamic State network becomes an additional tool which can be used to disrupt, dismantle, and ultimately defeat the organization. This is the gap in the study of the Islamic State that this thesis will attempt to fill.

Research Questions

For the reasons outlined above, I decided to focus my research efforts on the following questions:

- What technologies or information channels did the Islamic State use to distribute propaganda? And subsequently,
- Which of these channels appeared most effective in connecting with Western audiences and had the greatest impact?

Thesis Overview

Chapter I provides a brief introduction to the Islamic State's shift in focus to expansion and longevity, reflected by their change in impact from large-scale militant attacks to recruitment and radicalization. Research into this recruitment and radicalization is warranted to understand the inner workings of the Islamic State as well as predict and prevent further recruitment and subsequent attacks. Therefore, this thesis will strive to (a) determine what methods the Islamic State used to distribute propaganda and (b) evaluate which method is most effective in connecting with and impacting Western audiences.

Chapter II outlines the findings, emphasizing the variety of information channels used by the Islamic State to carry out recruitment and radicalization. This includes propaganda produced through text, audio, image, and video formats, with an emphasis on video and image-based propaganda. Propaganda disseminated through Internet channels, rather than film, print, or radio, is most effective for targeting Western audiences.

Chapter III describes the methodology used to inform the findings presented in Chapter II. These methods include the framework of Integrative Research Review (which guided this thesis project), Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset, jihadology.net used for qualitative data, and consultation of academic

literature. The chapter discusses the limitations that exist in conducting research in the field of terrorism studies.

Chapter IV summarizes the findings of relevant literature related to the media division of the Islamic State, specifically its structure, reach, governing directives, and value. The chapter emphasizes the centrality of the media division within the Islamic State organization and the value that this division holds in Islamic State operations.

Chapter V continues the discussion of the Islamic State's media division by analyzing its messaging strategy. I outline the purpose of the propaganda, namely longevity and expansion, then summarize the major themes of Islamic State propaganda, including War, Victimhood, Utopia, Brutality, Mercy, and Belonging. The chapter details the primary target audiences of Islamic State propaganda as outlined by scholars, including Westerners, local communities, and youth.

Chapter VI details the dissemination of the Islamic State's propagandist messages, analyzing the communication mediums and channels of distribution as briefly discussed in Chapter II. Chapter VI emphasizes the role of the Internet as the most accessible and effective, but not the sole, distribution channel for Islamic State propaganda.

Chapter VII highlights the importance of the reception, the audience, of Islamic State propaganda. By highlighting the data available from first-hand accounts of terrorists, this chapter pinpoints the essential role of the Internet in the recruitment and radicalization of Westerners given its global reach and use of the English language in the dissemination of Islamic State propaganda.

Chapter VIII describes the implications of the research, including providing valuable insights into the targets and strategies of Islamic State propaganda. Long term implications include contributing to the formation of a detailed profile of individuals at risk of being effectively radicalized and recruited into the Islamic State's organization, and the development of deradicalization methods and programs as a viable weapon with which to battle the Islamic State and other extremist organizations.

Chapter IX concludes the content of this thesis project by summarizing the unique role of the Internet in the Islamic State's effective propaganda distribution and ultimate goal of recruitment and radicalization.

Chapter II

Findings

The findings of this thesis are detailed in this chapter. The methods, evidence, and discussion of these findings are found in subsequent chapters.

Finding 1. The Islamic State Produces Propaganda in Text, Audio, Image, and Video Formats

This finding is a partial answer to my research question on the Islamic State's use of technologies and information channels in its propaganda distribution strategy.

Identifying the mediums in which the media division is capable of producing propaganda content indicates the technological sophistication of the enterprise. As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, the propaganda formats were not produced at an equal rate, indicating that a hierarchy of emphasis is placed on content. Table 1 shows a table originally produced and published by the Islamic State in 2015 for its own internal purposes. It shows the organization's record of the type and frequency of content produced between October 2014 and October 2015 (Whiteside, 2016). The catalogued data indicates an overwhelming emphasis on the primarily visual mediums of video and image. The same is apparent, but on a smaller scale, in Table 2, echoing the prioritization of video and image-based propaganda by the Islamic State.

Table 1. Islamic State Internal Report on Propaganda Formats, 2014-2015.

Media Source (type, location)	Videos	Audio	Nasheed (religious songs)	Koranic Recitations	Magazines	Photo Reports	Images
Wilayets (all, provincial media outlets)	710					1787	14000
Al Furqan Media (video focus, central)	7	6					
Al Hayat Center (foreign language, central)	15		13		18		
al Ajnad (audio, central)			45	99			

Source: Joscelyn, 2015, as cited in Whiteside, 2016.

Table 2. Media Releases by Medium, Week of April 18-24, 2015.

Medium	Number of Releases
Picture	77
Video	24
Graphic	6
News Report	6
Radio and PDF	6
Radio	2
Statement	2

Source: Zelin, 2015, p. 89.

Finding 2. The Islamic State Distributes Propaganda Through Film, Print, Radio,
and Internet Channels

The Islamic State’s propaganda is disseminated through one or more channels of film, print, radio, and Internet. These channels are the means by which propaganda content is consumed by an audience:

- Film channels include highly produced and edited so-called “feature films” (Winter, 2018, p.107), documentary-style videos portraying life in the Caliphate, film reports of military operations, and videos of graphic violence (Winter, 2017).
- Print channels include newspapers, magazines, religious texts and interpretations, books, and instructional documents (Child, et al., 2021; Winter, 2018; Winter, 2017; Zelin, 2015).
- Radio channels include operations reports read by announcers, speeches and interviews with important figures, and permissible music in the form of internally produced *a capella nashīds* (see Figure 1) (Zelin, 2016).
- Internet channels that distribute propaganda to online audiences include websites, chatrooms, and social media platforms (Awan, 2017).

Finding 3. The Islamic State Produces Propaganda Specifically Targeting
Western Audiences

The al-Hayat Media Center is an official branch of the Islamic State’s central media division dedicated to the production and dissemination of propaganda specifically for Western audiences (Macnair & Frank, 2017). The mere existence of this entity proves the Islamic State’s intention to reach the West with its messages. Al-Hayat accomplishes this via circulation of an English-language magazine named *Dabiq* (see Figure 2), and visual propaganda containing both implicit and explicit appeals to Western viewers (Ingram, 2017; Ingram, 2015) (see, for example, Figures 3, 4, and 5).



Figure 2. *Dabiq* Magazine.

Source: Zelin, posted to jihadology.net in 2014.

New article from Shaykh Abū Basīr al-Ṭarṭūsī: "America and the Group [The Islamic] State 'Dā'ish'"

Posted on August 8, 2014 by [Aaron Y. Zelin](#)



Click the following link for a safe PDF copy: [Shaykh Abū Basīr al-Ṭarṭūsī — "America and the Group \[The Islamic\] State 'Dā'ish'"](#)

To inquire about a translation for this article for a fee email: azelin@jihadology.net

📍 Iraq, United States, Shaykh Abū Basīr al-Ṭarṭūsī, The Islamic State

Figure 3. Article Referencing the United States, from the Islamic State.

Source: Zelin, posted to jihadology.net in 2014.

al-Furqān Media presents a new video message from The Islamic State: "A Message To America"

Posted on August 19, 2014 by [Aaron Y. Zelin](#)

NOTE: There is no video uploaded to this post. This is just being posted for archival purposes so individuals know when it was originally released.



[No video attached]

📌 Syria, United States, al-Furqān Media, The Islamic State

Figure 4. Video Message Directed to the United States.

Source: Zelin, posted to [jihadology.net](#) in 2014.

New video message from The Islamic State: "Reality of the American Landing – Wilāyat Kirkūk"

Posted on October 30, 2015 by [Aaron Y. Zelin](#)



[Video redacted, post created for historical record of when it was released]

To inquire about a translation for this video message for a fee email: azelin@jihadology.net

📍 Iraq, Wilāyat Kirkūk, United States, The Islamic State

Figure 5. Video Message Referencing the United States.

Source: Zelin, posted to jihadology.net in 2015.

Finding 4. The Internet is the Most Effective Propaganda Dissemination Channel
Utilized By the Islamic State to Target Western Audiences

Online channels are the most accessible both for the Islamic State media operatives disseminating propaganda and for audiences in the West viewing propaganda. The geographic and language barriers that exist between the Islamic State and the West are able to be circumvented through online propaganda dissemination.

Chapter III

Framework and Methodology

This thesis project was conducted as an integrative research review. With this framework as a guide, an original methodology was created for the research process used to arrive at the findings detailed in Chapter II.

Integrative Research Review Framework

Integrative research is defined as “a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020, p. 1278). This approach differs from more commonplace social science research methodologies of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses are useful frameworks for representing respective qualitative and quantitative data, in the form of standalone, self-contained products. Their rigid regulation helps cultivate an impression of empirical reliability, which the social sciences have been belittled for lacking by the media and by academics in the natural and physical sciences (Auspurg & Brüderl, 2021; Gutting, 2012; Hanlon, 2022).

However, the strict impartiality required by systematic reviews and meta-analyses creates two major weaknesses: information overload and insight suppression. The integrative research analysis methodology provides a solution to these limitations while maintaining its evidence-based integrity.

Two approaches, commonly used dichotomously in social science investigations, converge to form the basis for the integrative research framework: “critical analysis” and “creative synthesis” (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020, p. 1284). The balanced duality of an analytic framework used in conjunction with an innovative framework is what defines the integrative methodology. Elsbach and van Knippenberg (2020) summarize the relationship nicely:

Critical analysis involves careful examination and critique of the extant literature, with an eye toward identifying themes, patterns, relationships, and gaps in understanding. Creative synthesis, in contrast, involves integrating existing frameworks with insights gained from the critical analysis to formulate a new perspective regarding the topic (p. 1284).

True to its name, the integrative research methodology integrates the data analysis methods of systematic reviews and meta-analyses with the explanatory methods of theory or experimental studies.

Essential components of integrative research reviews lie within specific boundary conditions. These boundary conditions serve as a mechanism to strictly define the scope of study as well as the guidelines for selecting qualitative and quantitative data to include in the synthesis. This thesis includes boundary conditions for three categories: timeframe, theory/framework lenses, and source characteristics. However, in general, precise boundary conditions vary from study to study depending upon the justification for the research.

Methodology

The methodology for this thesis was designed using the integrative research review framework, discussed in the previous section, to answer the two main research questions of this thesis:

1. What technologies or information channels did the Islamic State use to distribute propaganda?
2. Which of these channels appeared most effective in connecting with Western audiences and had the greatest impact?

Boundary Conditions

The content and data used to formulate answers to these questions were rigorously scrutinized according to two boundary conditions.

Timeframe: First, all of the materials that were analyzed and synthesized to answer the research questions have publication dates that fall between 2013 to 2020—the correlating timeframe to duration and immediate aftermath of the territorial caliphate claimed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. This interval was chosen as a representation of the Islamic State enterprise at the height of its recruitment and radicalization capabilities. Abundant research was conducted and published about the Islamic State’s endeavors during that time, showcasing the grip that the novel group and its unparalleled propaganda machine had on the world. Furthermore, by emphasizing the level of sophistication and innovation of the Islamic State enterprise in this way, reasonable insights can be made into the group’s aspirations and potential to return as a leader in terrorism innovation if given the opportunity. This boundary condition was set in part to impress a healthy wariness of underestimating the Islamic State, especially when it comes to propaganda.

Although immaterial to the synthesis and analysis processes in this thesis, it should be noted that the boundary conditions for timeframe apply specifically to the sources of research used to answer to the stated research questions. Additional sources that do not meet the timeframe boundary conditions have been referenced in other capacities throughout this project.

Source Integrity: The second boundary condition ensures the credibility of the data used in the collection and analysis processes. Given the nature of the integrative research approach, the analytic framework must maintain its validity in order for the synthesis framework to produce reliable insights. This caveat is addressed through the implementation of a boundary condition that restricts all sources used for this thesis to a high standard of repute. The referenced material was limited to primary, academic, and news sources.

Analysis

Adhering to the timeframe and source integrity boundary conditions, an analysis of relevant information was conducted to determine the Islamic State's intent and capacity to target Western audiences. As dictated by the integrative research review framework, the information gathered in this initial analysis phase was subsequently synthesized and used to inform the findings presented in Chapter II.

I used a tiered approach to the information collection process for this study, beginning with the most restrictive datasets and gradually expanding the scope until the remaining sources no longer met the stated boundary conditions. The most relevant and reliable dataset identified for this topic was a dataset called the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) from the National Consortium for the Study

of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland. The PIRUS open-source dataset

contains deidentified, individual-level information on the backgrounds, attributes, and radicalization processes of over 2,200 violent and non-violent extremists who adhere to far right, far left, Islamist, or single issue ideologies in the United States covering 1948-2018. (START, 2018)

Even though it is the most relevant quantitative database for this study, the PIRUS dataset had several limitations, such as the specification of the United States setting and the term “radicalization.” Synthesis of this data in context will be discussed fully later in this chapter.

The next source analyzed for this study is also a database, but with qualitative content. *jihadology.net* is described by its creator and administrator, Aaron Zelin, as “a clearinghouse for jihādī primary source material, original analysis, and translation service.” Zelin contributes immensely to the field of terrorism studies, and several of his publications are referenced later in this thesis. Note, however, that *jihadology.net* has been used as a primary-source database only for purposes of this research. Access to *jihadology.net* is restricted given the nature of the site’s contents, and academics are permitted to have an account by providing a reasonable justification for retrieving the content. Because it is being used as a catalogue of primary-source propaganda material and not a potentially partial perspective piece, the synthesis involving *jihadology.net* will be on the topic of its sources rather than the website itself. Other primary sources for this thesis were identified through references in other literature and traced back to its origin to confirm authenticity.

The academic literature consulted for this research consists of journal articles and reports. Journal articles came from credible, peer-reviewed journals relevant to the field

of terrorism studies, such as *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Journal of Strategic Strategy*, and *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. Reports on primary data were written by experts in the field for academic institutions such as the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, Foreign Policy Initiative, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, and the Brookings Institute.

News sources such as CNN, Fox News, CBS, and *The New York Times* are the least reliable sources consulted for this research given the lax credibility and accuracy standards for published information in comparison to academic sources. As such, news sources have not been used as the sole or primary evidence for any findings in this research project; they are used only for supporting evidence and context.

Synthesis

To inform this project I manipulated the dataset to contain only pertinent variables, removing all confounding relationships to cleanly visualize the available data on the Islamic State and propaganda content. Figures 6 through 11 show how the PIRUS data was explored. The primary sources on jihadology.net were located by searching the catalog of propaganda content first for media from the Islamic State, and then for media relevant to the United States within the category of the Islamic State.

Using the primary source information from PIRUS and jihadology.net, I was able to compare, contrast, and evaluate the credibility and relevance of the journal articles and reports as I collected sources to inform the findings of this thesis. By comparing, contrasting, and evaluating all of the sources from the analysis process, I was able to contextualize the information and ultimately craft a more accurate dataset to answer the specific research questions of this project.

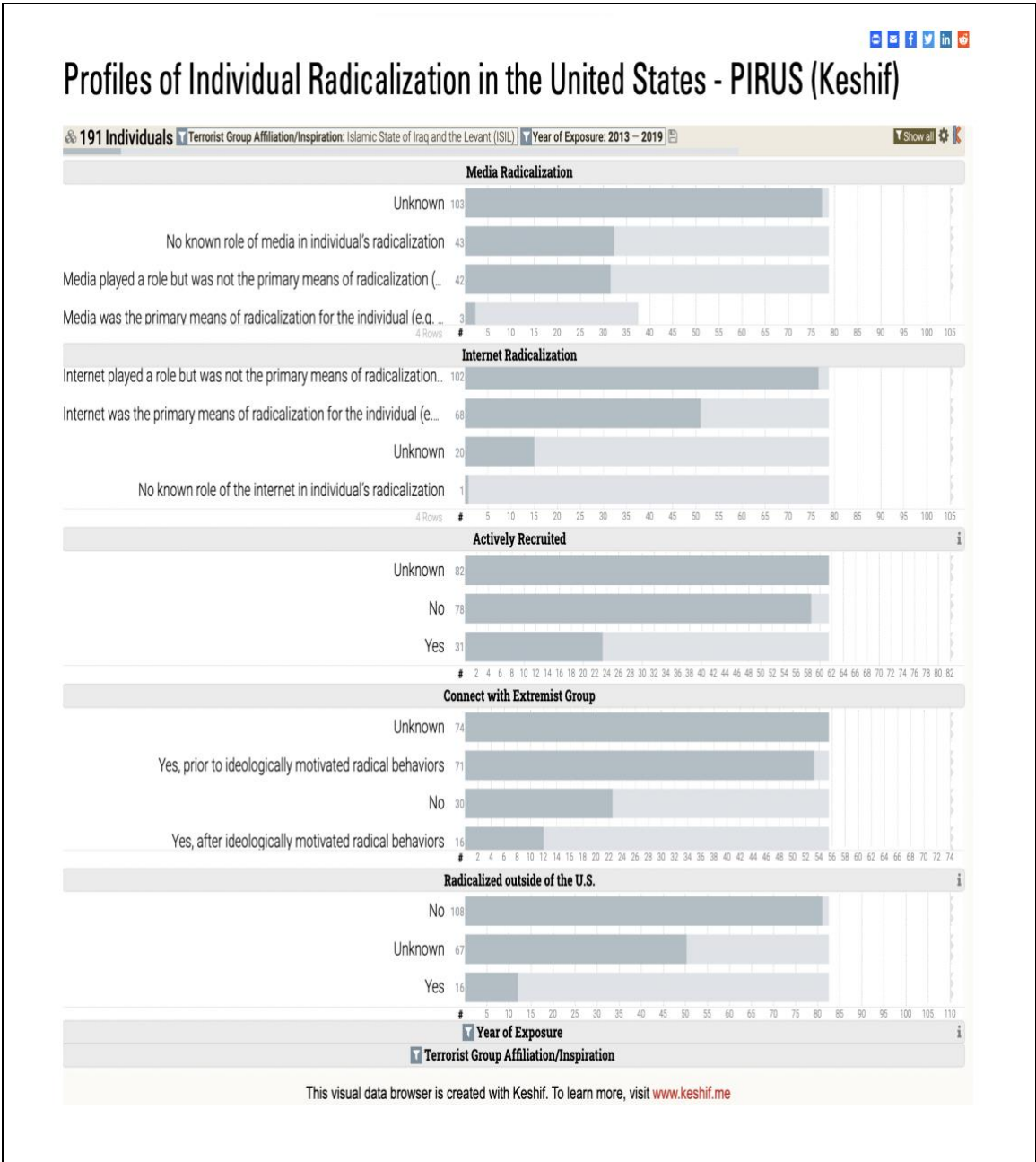
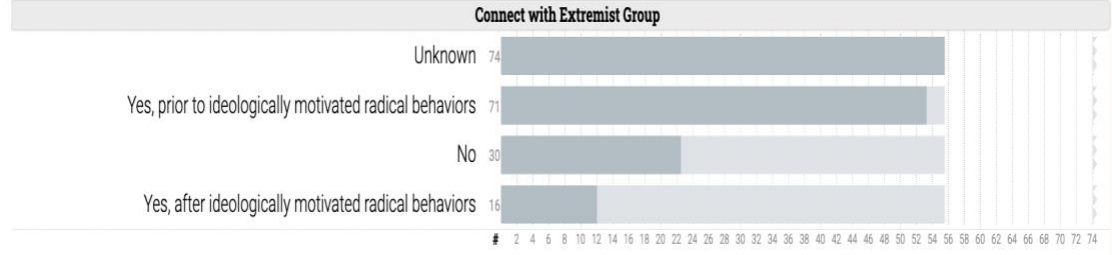
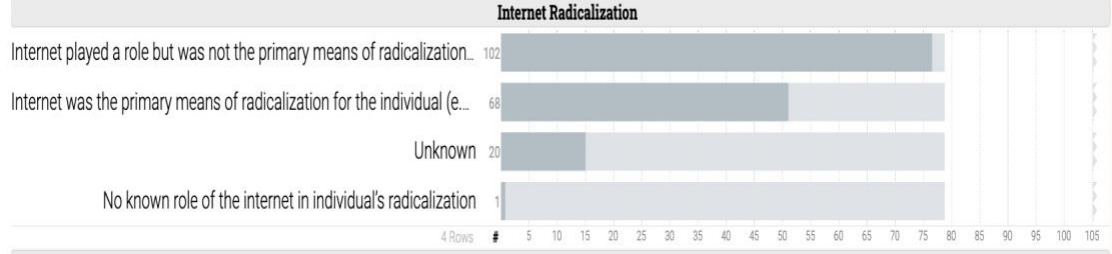
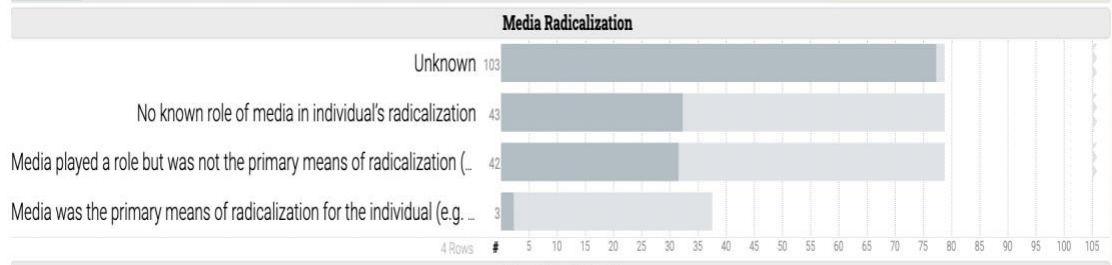


Figure 6. Media Radicalization, Internet Radicalization, Actively Radicalized, Connect With Extremist Group, and Radicalized Outside the United States Variables.

Source: PIRUS, START, 2018.

Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States - PIRUS (Keshif)

191 Individuals | Terrorist Group Affiliation/Inspiration: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) | Year of Exposure: 2013 - 2019 | Show all



Year of Exposure | Terrorist Group Affiliation/Inspiration

This visual data browser is created with Keshif. To learn more, visit www.keshif.me

Figure 7. Media Radicalization, Internet Radicalization, Actively Radicalized, and Connect with Extremist Group Variables.

Source: PIRUS, START 2018.

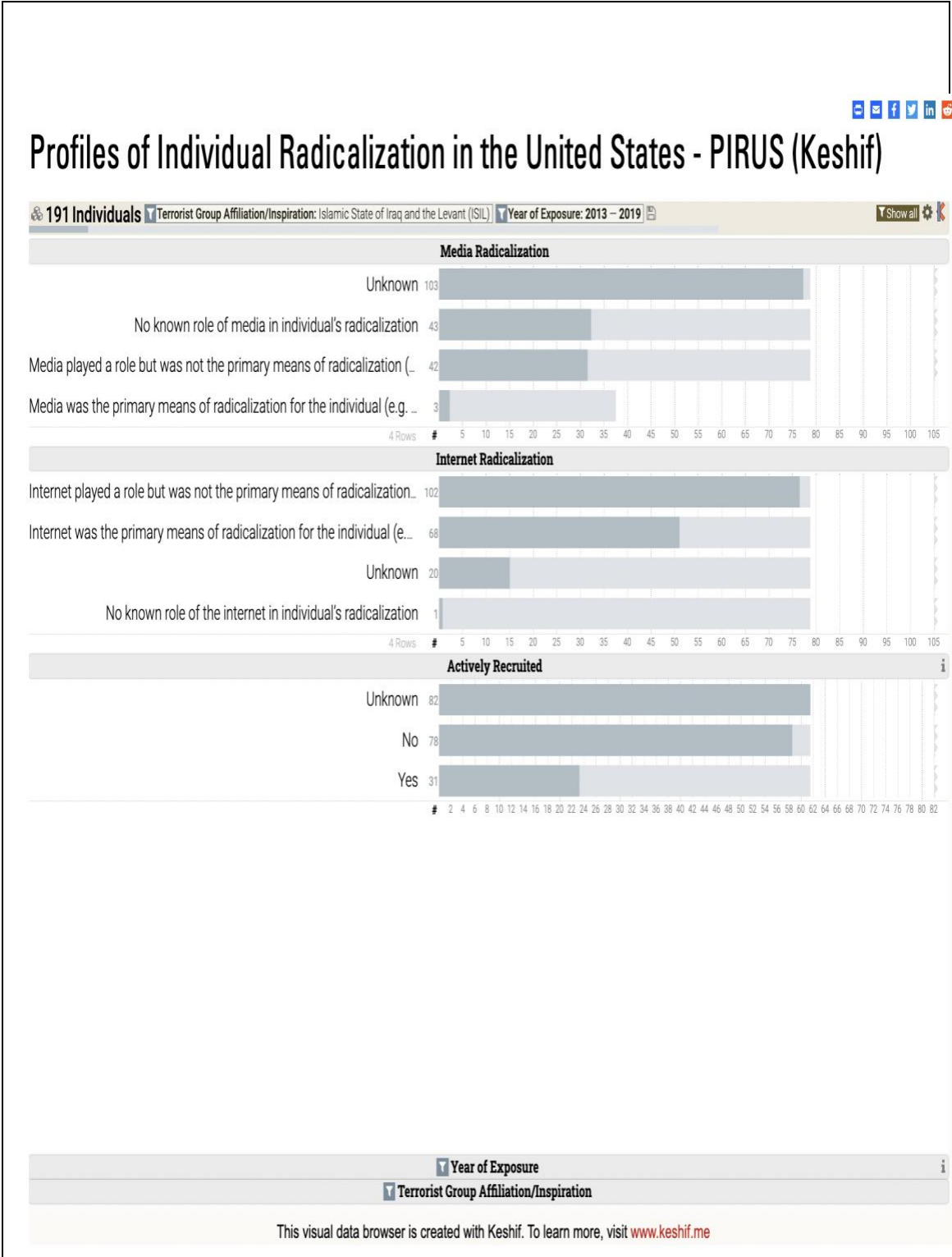


Figure 8. Media Radicalization, Internet Radicalization, and Actively Radicalized Variables.

Source: PIRUS, START 2018.

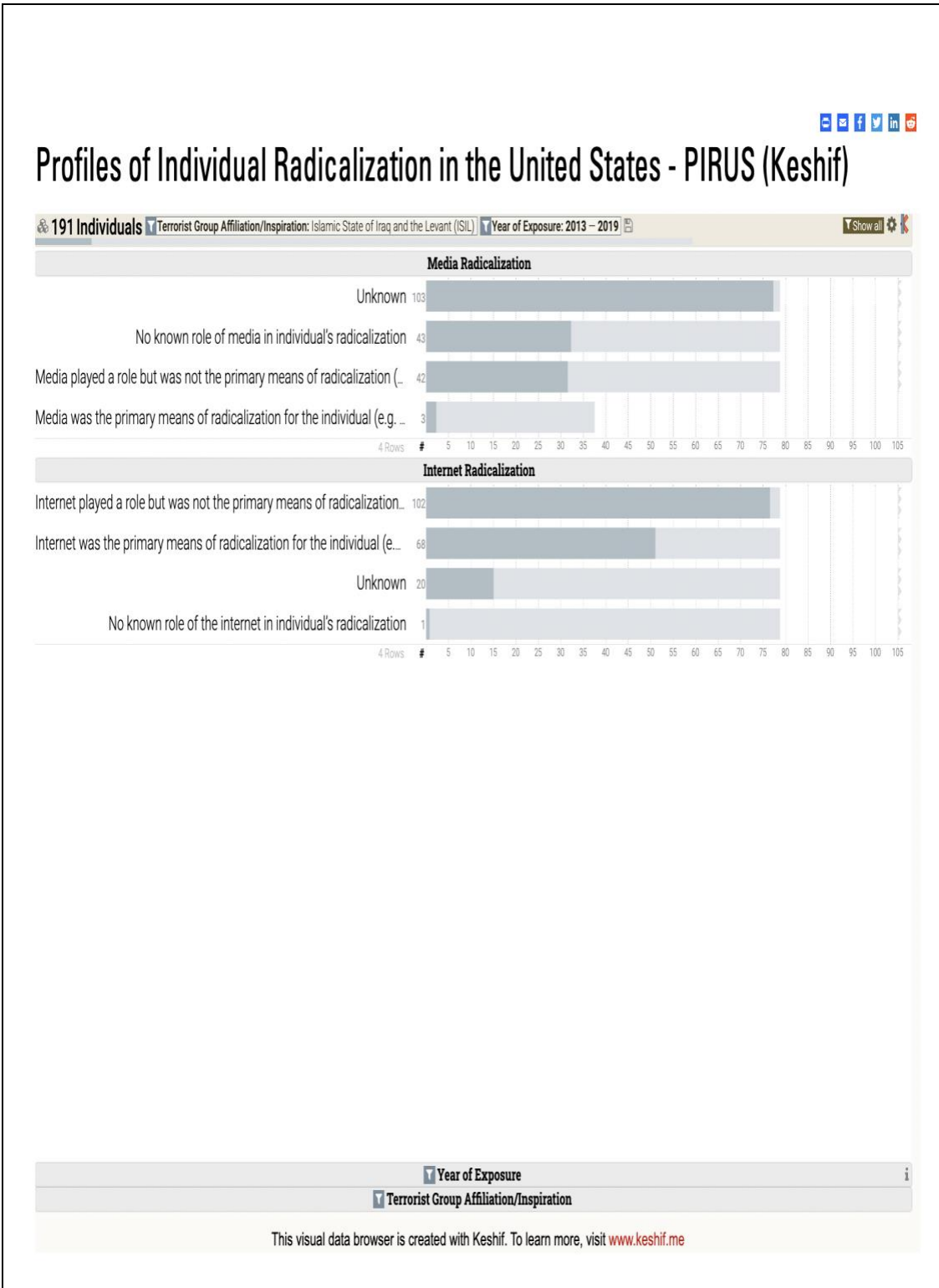


Figure 9. Media Radicalization and Internet Radicalization Variables.

Source: PIRUS, START 2018.

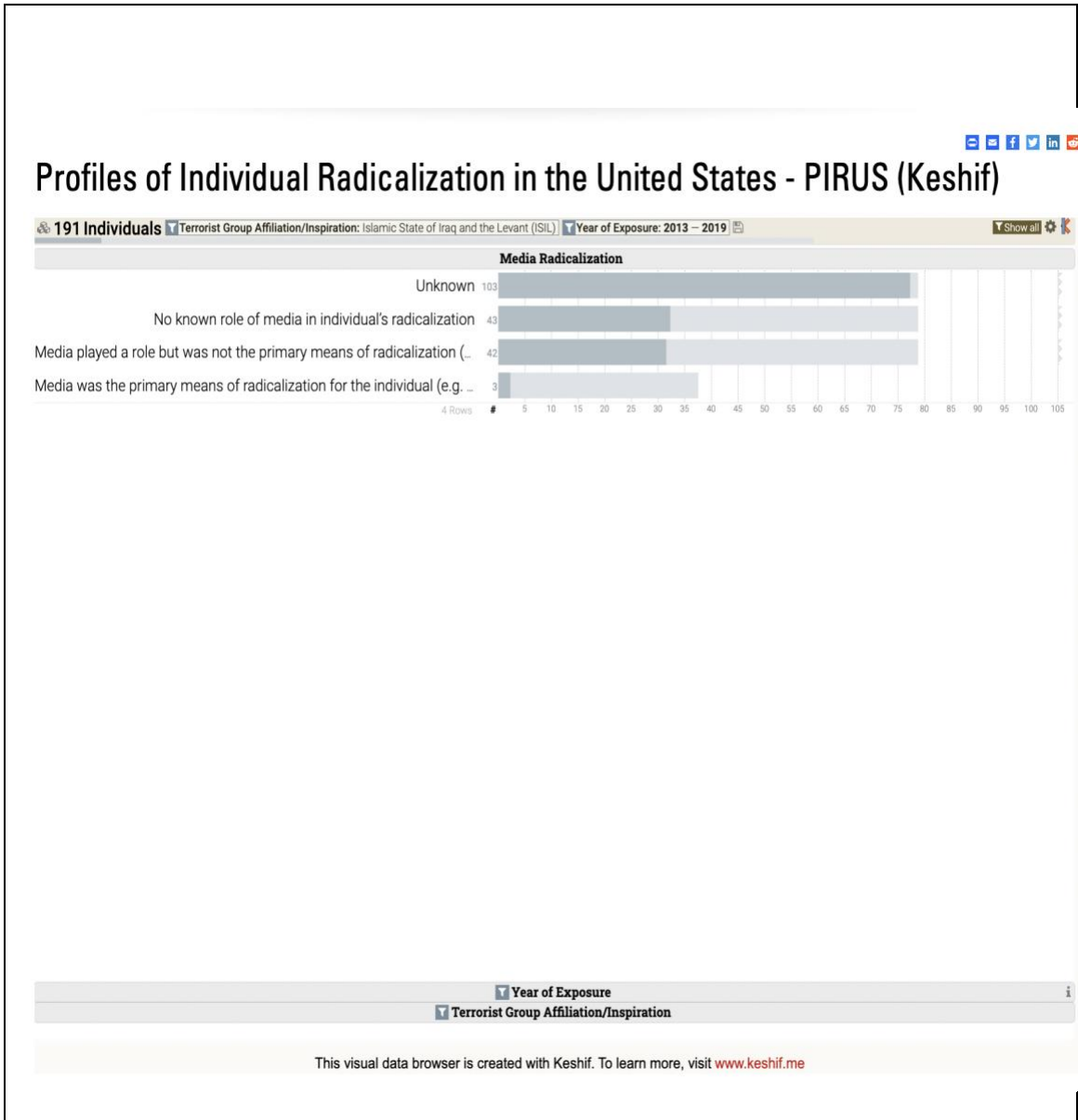


Figure 10. Media Radicalization Variable.

Source: PIRUS, START 2018.

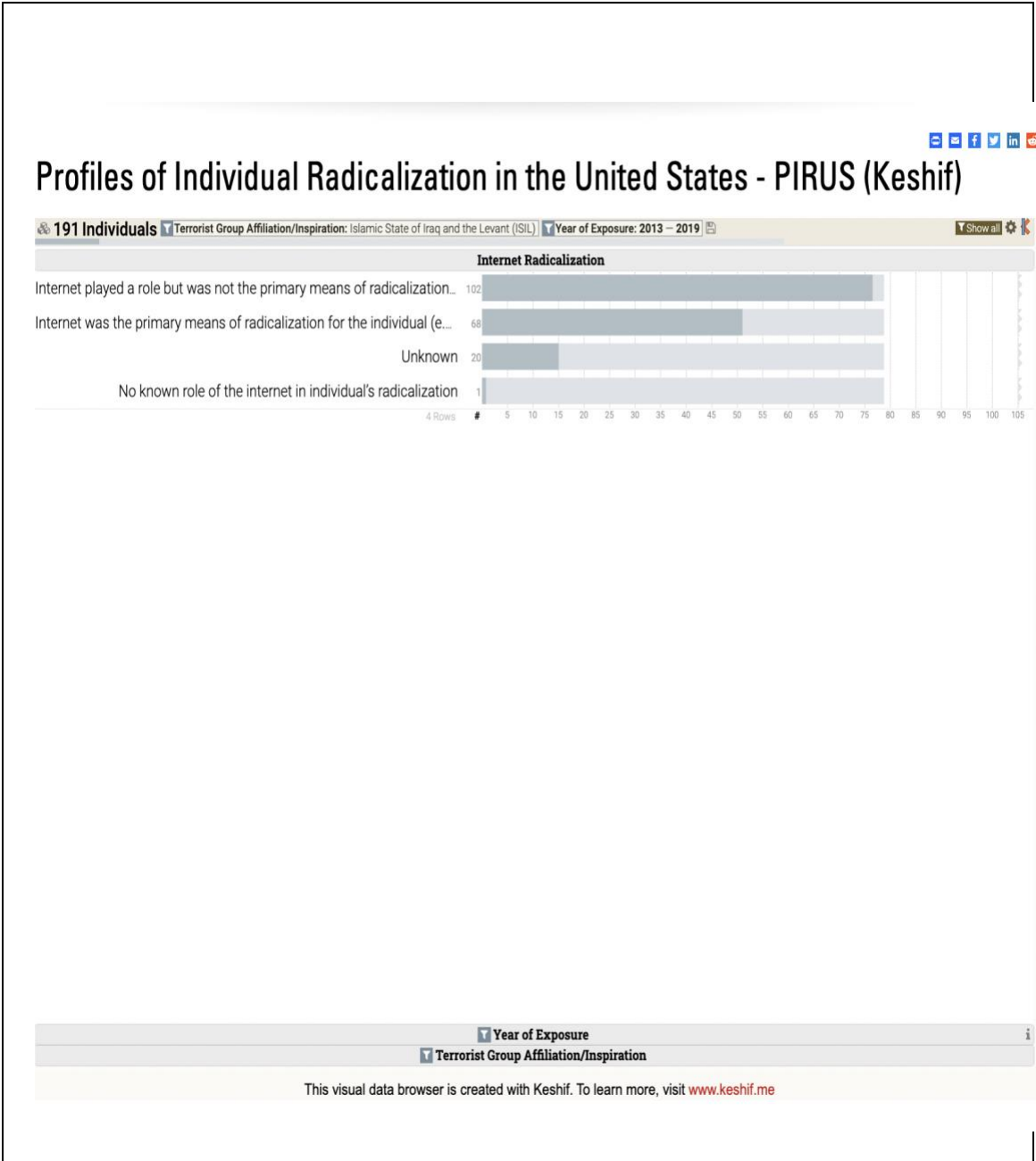


Figure 11. Internet Radicalization Variable.

Source: PIRUS, START 2018.

Limitations

There are several limitations that apply to the broad field of terrorism studies as a whole. The collection of primary data is extraordinarily difficult for a number of reasons:

- It is difficult and dangerous to interact with active members of the Islamic State.
- This limits the collection of information to members who have been captured or claim to have defected.
- Former members have a massive incentive to lie or provide incorrect information given their association with such a prolific terrorist group.

Therefore, I have utilized primary data that is available through reports and databases like jihadology.net. No novel data has been collected, given the above limitations.

Chapter IV

Media Division

The Islamic State’s media division is well understood by researchers. Its structure, reach, governing directives, and value to the larger organization have all been researched by scholars and governments since its inception. The relevant literature for each of the aforementioned topics are reviewed below and referenced throughout the remainder of this thesis.

Structure

The media division of the Islamic State has a rigid bureaucratic operational structure. Daniel Milton identifies and examines this structure in detail in his 2016 report, “Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State’s Media Efforts.” He cites the Islamic State’s own internal documents as he lays out the hierarchy within the “Diwan [Ministry] of Media” stating: “The multi-level media structure can be thought of as a pyramid . . . creating a coherent, bureaucratic structure to accomplish its media goals effectively” (Milton, 2016, p. 5).

This interpretation is corroborated by a similar, if simplified, diagram produced by the Islamic State and reprinted by Milton in a subsequent publication in 2018. This primary-source diagram (translated and shown in Figure 12) was distributed in a pamphlet titled “Organizational Structure of the Media Office,” containing “detailed organizational diagrams and lists of responsibilities for how the local media offices

should be structured and run” (Milton, 2018, p. 8). This pamphlet goes so far as to stipulate the formation of four departments within every local media office with clearly defined responsibilities and even titles.

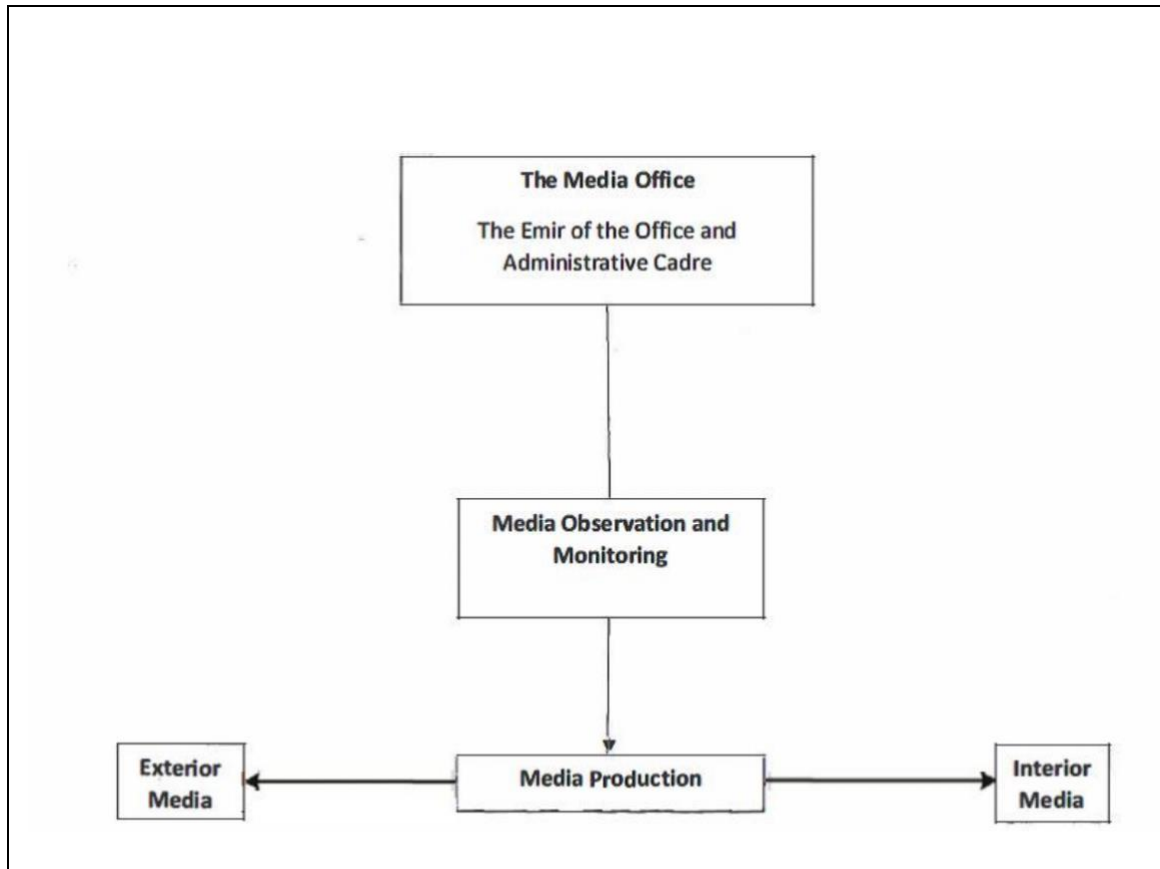


Figure 1: Translated Diagram of Local Media Bureau Structure

Figure 12. Organizational Structure of the Media Office.

Source: Milton, 2018.

Reach

As described in previous sections, the media empire of the Islamic State has a strict and defined bureaucratic hierarchy. This structure allows for extensive delegation from the top down. In fact, such delegation is not only allowed but is mandated in the

governing directives for the media division, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section. Per the directives and in alignment with the operational structure, a system has been created within the media enterprise to increase and streamline the production of propaganda to reach as many targets as possible. Khawaja and Khan (2016) describe this phenomenon as “maximum audience with minimum cost and time” (p. 104). This policy is achieved by a highly regulated diaspora of 33 media bureaus in various locales with specific assignments to create or translate propaganda that appeals to a specific target audience (Milton, 2016).

Governing Directives

The media operations of the Islamic State are the subject of intense oversight, given their importance to the organization and their massive global presence. This oversight takes the form of both documents and individuals, setting the agenda of every aspect of the media enterprise from production to editing to dissemination. The documents, such as the aforementioned “Organizational Structure of the Media Office,” contain specific instructions to be followed by media operatives of the Islamic State. Handbooks entitled “The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid” and “General Guidance and Instructions” are handed to media operatives to ensure that all media production is “carefully choreographed, edited, and distributed” (Milton, 2018, p. 7).

Centralization of the media enterprise is exemplified in the structural hierarchy of the media operations. Production of each media propaganda product is evaluated by a series of media operatives and supervisors until it is determined that the correct messaging has been reached (Whiteside, 2016). The Media Monitoring Committee is

responsible for directing all aspects of the media enterprise, from large-scale decisions down to minute details (Whiteside, 2016).

Media operations are central to the group's operations as a whole. Not only do they serve the purpose of recruitment and radicalization, but they also are considered in the planning of terrorist attacks and events. According to Whiteside (2016), “. . . terror planning has gone hand-in-hand with the group's extensive propaganda operations” (p. 21).

Value

The Media Division and its immense influential power were envisioned early in the existence of the terrorist organization by leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Whiteside, 2016). Zarqawi saw the value of mass communication and made the conscious decision to prioritize media operations—specifically propaganda—in his own organization (Whiteside, 2016). He saw other jihadist groups' success using increasingly polarizing content and realized how the untapped market of the Internet could magnify such content to new heights (Whiteside, 2016). The special relationship between the leadership of the Islamic State and the media division continued beyond Zarqawi, ensuring that the media division is at the center of all Islamic State enterprises (Whiteside, 2016).

The best example of how valued the media division is within the larger Islamic State organization is the fact that future caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was first recruited to work in the editing branch of Islamic State propaganda (Whiteside, 2016). According to Whiteside (2016), “the continuity of highly educated spokesmen with impeccable Salafi pedigrees had proved to be a constant with this movement, a characteristic that remains to this day” (p. 11). Furthermore, the media division has been dubbed the

“Special Operations” of Islamic State, indicating its value and centrality to the movement as a whole (p. 23).

Conclusions

The structure, reach, governing directives, and value of the Islamic State’s media division all have been well-delineated by prior research. Each factor is essential to understanding the impact of the propaganda enterprise in the context of the entire Islamic State organization. The centrality and value of the media operations in the structure of the Islamic State is proof of the importance of a thorough understanding of the media division in the ultimate defeat of the organization.

Chapter V

Messaging Strategy

The strategy used by the Islamic State to propagate their ideology is comprehensive, intentional, and extremely effective (Whiteside, 2016). The propaganda produced by the media division serves a multitude of purposes for the growth and perpetuation of the organization and its ideology. These purposes and the methods by which they are achieved are discussed in this chapter. The following is an overview of the current body of literature pertaining to those topics and the foundation of knowledge they provide.

Purpose of Propaganda

To fully understand the objectives of Islamic State propaganda, they must be considered within the context of the large-scale objectives of the organization as a whole. The ultimate purpose of the Islamic State, and the central pillar of the group's unique ideology, is bringing about the Day of Judgement (Brüggemann, 2016). This foundational tenet drives every aspect of the Islamic State enterprise as it aggressively endeavors to trigger the Day of Judgment by manufacturing the conditions that the *Qur'an* states will signal the end of time (Stowasser, 2002). This ideological interpretation is particularly extreme, even in comparison to al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and other notable Salafi-Jihadist terrorist organizations that subscribe to the same core philosophy.

Further, the aberrant addition of being divinely obligated to incite the end of the world compels the urgency that marks Islamic State's forceful pursuit of the traditional Salafi-Jihadist objective: to establish a global caliphate by physically conquering the entire modern world and reverting civilization back to the values, beliefs, and practices of the time in which the Prophet Muhammad lived (Brüggemann, 2016). Such vehemence, often in the form of extraordinarily violent and coercive tactics, is what sets the Islamic State apart from its terrorist peers as a formidable threat to international peace and security. Their relentless pursuit of the global caliphate objective by all means necessary is expressly denoted by the organization's official motto, "Remaining and Expanding" (Dabiq, 2014, p. 22–23). By "Remaining and Expanding" as an organization, the Islamic State will advance their military and governance strategies to accelerate the fulfillment of the conditions in the Day of Judgment prophecy. However, without "Remaining and Expanding," the Islamic State regime would cease to exist, its unique ideology would be lost, and its apocalyptic objective would never be achieved. This rationale underpins the remainder of this chapter, which details how the Islamic State uses propaganda to facilitate regime preservation.

The objectives of Islamic State propaganda is determined through one of two methods: (1) through primary-source evidence in the form of direct communication from within the organization itself, containing explicit information about media operations; and (2) through an analysis of the propaganda content produced by the Islamic State to identify key messages or target audiences.

The Islamic State's unparalleled use of propaganda as they first rose to prominence in 2014 brought them global notoriety as they began disseminating their

ideology on a mass scale (Wilson Center, 2019). The level of sophistication and sheer volume of content released by the Islamic State’s media branch, the Diwan of Central Media, before and during the establishment of the self-proclaimed caliphate in Iraq and Syria, was entirely unprecedented (Milton, 2018, p. 2). But, even without taking into account the cutting-edge quality and mass-level quantity, Islamic State propaganda content was, and continues to be, particularly notable because of its strategic purpose. The leaders of the Islamic State are keenly aware of how valuable the Diwan of Central Media’s vast scope of ability and influence is to regime preservation (Winter, 2020, p. 40). Media production operatives are valued just as much, if not more, than their militant counterparts (Almohammad & Winter, 2019, p. 11). Therefore, just as an organized and comprehensive strategy exists for military operations, there is a formal strategy which details the objectives of the Islamic State’s media efforts (Whiteside, 2016, p. 22). Each of the objectives that follow ultimately serve the existential purpose of regime preservation, as discussed above.

Legitimize

Legitimization is an integral objective of the Islamic State’s overarching propaganda strategy (Khawaja & Khan, 2016, p. 107–109). Legitimizing themes are found in varying degrees throughout most of the content produced by the Diwan of Central Media and serve various niche purposes within the Legitimize category. However, this section focuses on those themes that are found most frequently and conveyed most explicitly, and how these themes of legitimization advance the previously

identified existential purpose of the Islamic State: “Remaining and Expanding” (Dabiq, 2014, p. 22-23), or regime preservation.

Charlie Winter speaks to the prominence of legitimizing efforts in his 2018 article *Apocalypse, Later: A Longitudinal Study of the Islamic State Brand*: “Much of what Salafi-jihadists do—whether it is terrorism, warfighting, or governance—is a communicative endeavor geared toward winning credibility in a world of scarce supporters” (pp. 104-105). Although this statement is a generalization about the broader Salafi-Jihadist movement, the Islamic State is far from the exception to Winter’s statement. Credibility (or at least the appearance of credibility) is essential to the legitimization efforts of the Islamic State because it underpins all other aspects of the organization. Any obvious deficiencies in credible authority could threaten the Islamic State’s influence and power. Lack of credibility in doctrines or discourse could lead to misinterpretation, skepticism, or denial of the ideology. Lack of credibility in founders, prophets, leaders, or spokespeople can call into doubt the message they preach or disenfranchise the sincerity of the organization that backs them. Lack of credibility in military campaigns can advertise weakness to competitors and lead to defeat.

Recruit

The Islamic State’s ability to “Remain and Expand” is entirely determined by the success of new member recruitment efforts. Without radicalizing and recruiting new terrorists to advance toward its objectives, the organization would dwindle and weaken until there is no one left.

Recruitment is the most well-known objective of the Islamic State propaganda enterprise. It is of great importance and concern to the Islamic State as well as to the enemies of the Islamic State given the impact it has on the capacities of the organization. “Remaining” is contingent upon the success of recruitment efforts, let alone “Expanding.”

The Islamic State’s objective of membership growth is extremely common throughout their propaganda content and is well-documented (Whiteside, 2016). It is presented in different ways depending on the audience to which the content is targeted. Recruitment of foreign fighters is one very effective methods used, as Winters (2018) notes: “. . . to establish a more international presence for itself through the direction and inspiration of overseas terrorist operations” (p. 107).

Haroro Ingram (2015) uses the term “glocal” to describe the target audience of Islamic State propaganda, meaning a combination of global and local viewers (p. 729). The success of the Islamic State recruitment propaganda campaign can be attributed in large part to a media strategy designed “to reach [a] maximum number of audience with minimum cost and time” (Khawaja, et al., 2016, p. 104). There is also particular emphasis on the recruitment of young people (McCue, 2017). The preference for this demographic is an attempt by the Islamic State to offset the inordinate workplace casualty rate that terrorism has.

Threaten

Propaganda that threatens is produced by the Islamic State for a number of reasons. It is used to “magnify the effects of its battlefield successes [and] minimize the

consequences of its failures” (Milton, 2016, p. IV); “intimidate adversaries” (Winter, 2018, p. 104); and “defend against adversarial attacks” (Winter, 2020, p. 42).

Frame

The most subtle of the propaganda objectives is constructing a narrative of life in the Islamic State that appeals to the viewer (Milton, 2018). These narratives cannot be categorized as outright fabrications, but they often feature calculated themes which toe the line of deception (Whiteside, 2016). A prominent feature of this type of propaganda is content designed to “shape perceptions,” “manipulate cognitions,” and “direct behaviors” (Winter, 2020, p. 38), each of which is done by facilitating “in-group and out-group identity formation” (Whiteside, 2020, p. 132).

Major Themes

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, the Islamic State media division incorporates distinct correlating themes into its propaganda content. Winter has led the effort to understand and categorize these themes with several publications of his own and inspired additional exploration by other researchers in the field. Most notably, Winter’s 2018 article, “Apocalypse, Later,” and his 2020 piece with co-authors Hararo Ingram and Craig Whiteside, “Media Jihad,” have been referenced in many publications and were instrumental in formulating this thesis.

The themes most commonly identified throughout Islamic State media propaganda were War, Victimhood, and Utopia. Winter has identified three additional themes: Brutality, Mercy, and Belonging (Winter, 2018). These themes are how Islamic State propaganda appeals to target audiences. Each theme invokes a particular sympathy,

which in turn engages audiences with additional propaganda messaging from the Islamic State. This increased exposure to propaganda materials can be rationally assumed to increase the likelihood of radicalization. Case studies of such instances will be discussed in Chapter VIII.

Target Audiences

The body of literature on audiences targeted specifically by Islamic State propaganda is integral to this thesis project. It is through identification of specific target audiences that channels of dissemination are traced. There is a general consensus among academics that there are a few audiences that are targeted by Islamic State propaganda. The most common of these are Westerners, local communities, and youth (Fahmy, 2020; Gartenstein-Ross, 2016; Ingram, 2020; Khawaja, 2016; Morris, 2020; Winter, 2018).

These target audiences are reflected in the formats and channels of Islamic State propaganda. For example, an emphasis on visual propaganda, such as videos and images, indicates an intention for the content to be consumed by non-Arabic-speaking audiences. Moreover, the production of ultra-violent visual propaganda is preferred by Western audiences.

Conclusions

The Islamic State produces propaganda for four main reasons: to legitimize, to recruit, to threaten, and to frame. These serve the ultimate goal of the organization, which is regime preservation and the proliferation of Islamic State ideology. The messaging strategy for accomplishing these four purposes is to portray the six major themes: War, Victimhood, Utopia, Brutality, Mercy, and Belonging. Each of these themes aid in

enhancing the appeal of Islamic State propaganda to target audiences, mainly Westerners, local communities, and youth, as identified by scholars. For purposes of this thesis, propaganda geared toward Westerners is the focus.

Chapter VI

Dissemination

The distribution strategy for the Islamic State's propagandist messages is technologically sophisticated, operationally adaptive, and systematically detailed. At every stage of the process, from ideological conception to audience interaction, the propaganda product is shaped to appeal directly to its nuanced target audience. In addition to tailoring the message itself the Islamic State manipulates both the mediums of communication and the channels of distribution as they disseminate their propaganda content to target audiences.

Communication Mediums

Islamic State propaganda content is produced in several different formats (see Table 2). Text, audio, image, and video mediums are all employed in varying capacities throughout the Islamic State's catalog of propaganda (Ingram, 2017; Whiteside, 2016). The format of propaganda is a key factor that the Islamic State's media division must consider as they disseminate their content through the channels discussed below. Some formats are more limiting than others. Text propaganda such as *Qur'an* scripture, transcripts of important speeches or printed letters from Islamic State leaders, and even Op-Ed commentary pieces written by members, is disseminated through magazines and the Internet (Whiteside, 2016). Audio propaganda is able to be disseminated through film, radio, and the Internet. Image propaganda is also disseminated through film,

magazines, and the Internet. Video propaganda is disseminated through film and the Internet, as highlighted earlier in Table 1.

Channels of Distribution

Dissemination of the content is what weaponizes Islamic State's propaganda. While creation of the content exemplifies the technologically advanced capabilities of the organization and conveys an intent to expand their ideological reach, the propaganda is rendered useless if it does not reach an audience. The Islamic State leadership and media operatives are well aware of this caveat and have utilized a sophisticated distribution strategy to ensure that their messages have optimal influence.

This propaganda dissemination strategy centers around targeting. As discussed in Chapter V, the ultimate objective of the Islamic State's propaganda is to aid in their quest of "Remaining and Expanding." The logistics of this objective are far more complex than the surface-level perception of simply reaching a "maximum number of audience[s] with minimum cost and time" (Khawaja & Khan, 2016, p. 104). Instead, the media division engages a relatively complex form of decision calculus to ensure that each propaganda product will be maximally influential to the maximum number of people possible. This decision calculus decides the target audience, the available routes of dissemination, and the variations of content mediums, ultimately determining the best method to reach the most people within the identified target audience. All of these careful considerations enable the Islamic State to essentially reverse engineer propaganda to maximally appeal to any audience they choose. Both the message of the propaganda and the way that

message is delivered are tailored to each specific target audience (Gartenstein-Ross, et al., 2016).

The propaganda distribution channels used by the Islamic State are film, magazines, radio, and the Internet. Each channel can be used to distribute varying combinations of the content formats discussed above, but the Internet is by far the most utilized. It can disseminate propaganda content in text, audio, image, video, or multimedia formats with a few keystrokes (see Tables 3 and 4). The other distribution methods are comparatively very limited in their abilities to reach niche audiences.

As a dissemination tool, the Internet has clear advantages and very few disadvantages. The route of the Internet to distribute propaganda has two major advantages. The characteristic of the Internet that puts it leagues above any other distribution channel is its ability to reach both extremely broad and incredibly niche audiences. The structure and operations of the Internet are unlike any other method of communication before it in terms of interaction with an audience. Nearly paradoxically, the scope of the Internet is so broad that niche spaces are created out of necessity.

Table 3. Internet Channels Used by Terrorists.

Comparisons of Online Communication Across Ideologies				
	<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Communication Methods				
E-mail	-0.544 (0.808)	1	0.501	0.580
Forum	1.345 (0.701)	1	0.055*	3.839
Chatroom	-0.296 (0.924)	1	0.748	0.744
Other	0.748 (0.614)	1	0.223	2.112
<i>Constant</i>	-2.327 (0.281)	1	0.000	0.098
Communication Outlet				
Cell	0.090 (0.713)	1	0.900	1.094
Other terrorists	0.013 (0.674)	1	0.985	1.013
Other radicals	-1.205 (0.594)	1	0.043**	0.300
Other nonradicals	-1.286 (0.731)	1	0.083*	0.281
<i>Constant</i>	-0.155 (0.968)	1	0.873	0.857
Instrumentality of Communication				
Cell preparation	-0.150 (0.642)	1	0.815	0.861
Reinforcing prior beliefs	-0.883 (1.337)	1	0.509	0.414
Seeking legitimization for actions	0.645 (1.040)	1	0.535	1.906
Disseminating propaganda	-1.881 (0.552)	1	0.001***	0.152
Providing material support	20.369 (10702.953)	1	0.998	—
Attack signaling	-0.557 (0.865)	1	0.519	0.573
<i>Constant</i>	-20.087 (10702.953)	1	0.999	0.000
<p><i>Notes.</i> +<i>B</i> value = extreme right wing more likely to demonstrate. -<i>B</i> value = Islamist more likely to demonstrate. — = <i>Exp(B)</i> not computed because of size. *<i>p</i> < .05. **<i>p</i> < .01. ***<i>p</i> < .001.</p>				

Source: Gill et al., 2017.

Table 4. Frequency of Internet Channel Utilization.

Types	Types of engagement	No of cases
Videos	Extremely dangerous and are used to show online beheadings and online media campaigns.	66
Chatrooms	Using chatrooms or message forums and boards to engage with wider audiences.	21
Websites	The use of visual and written material to depict Isis in a positive light.	12
Images	Use of visual and written communications depicting a 'them vs us' war type mentality and culture. This is also done through the use of leaflets and handbooks.	78
Web links, retweets, likes and hashtags	The use of social media to reaffirm and create normalised behaviour.	96

Source: Awan, 2017

While the Internet is the most accessible and effective distribution method to reach Westerners, it is not the only way the Islamic State disseminates propaganda. Distribution centers in Islamic State-controlled areas are established to spread the group's media propaganda to local audiences: "As well as screening its films, they served as satellite publishing houses at which propaganda was printed and circulated" (Winter, 2017, p. 15). Media content distributed through these centers included newspapers, magazines, picture brochures, operation claims, religious texts, infographics, posters, billboards, and video content including recorded speeches, documentary-style films, and scripted interactions between Islamic State leaders and local communities (Winter, 2017).

Radio is the simplest model of a distribution channel as this thesis defines it. It is an intermediary tool which connects propaganda content with an audience. The propaganda content available for distribution through a radio channel is limited to an audio format, which means operational reports are typically read aloud by broadcasters and permissible *a capella* music called *nashīds* is played (Winter, 2015, p. 12). In

addition to the limitation of content mediums, the radio channel has a clear limitation of scope, with its audience restricted to the geographic area shown in Figure 13.

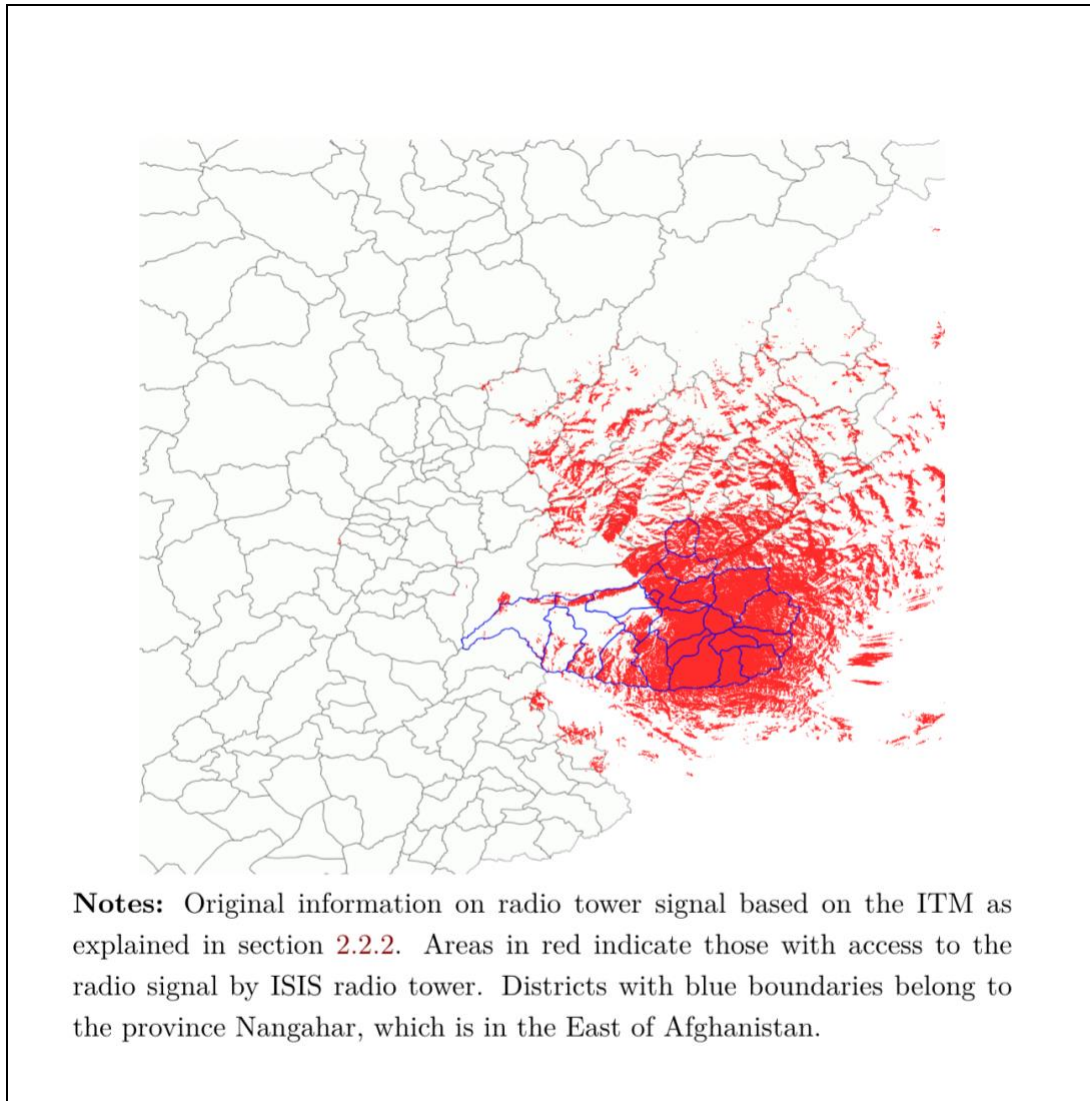


Figure 13. Radio Propaganda Dissemination.

Source: Child et al., 2021.

Conclusions

The Islamic State disseminates propaganda using a particularly strategic method which includes the use of multiple communication mediums or formats, and media propaganda such as audio, image, video, and text. These various mediums are then applied to the production of propaganda, which is ultimately disseminated through one of four channels: film, magazines, radio, and the Internet.

The dissemination channel often determines the target audiences available to be reached by the Islamic State's messages. Each channel has specific limitations regarding its scope, with radio being the most restricted and the Internet being the most broadly applicable. Because of its wide scope, the Internet is the most effective and accessible channel of dissemination utilized by the Islamic State to reach Western audiences.

Chapter VII

Reception

The Islamic State places a great deal of importance on their propaganda distribution strategy, going so far as to reverse engineer the propaganda they disseminate to have the qualities they believe will resonate the most with their desired audience. While the strategic process is certainly worth examining, it is not the central pillar of the Islamic State's recruitment and radicalization endeavors. Often lost as the forest among the trees of propaganda analysis, the audience is the only reason to study propaganda at all.

Arguments for the importance of the distribution process (see Chapter IV) can logically be applied in a similar manner as justification for the ultimate importance of the audience. Without an audience, propaganda would not merely be less pervasive or less effective; with no one to persuade, it would be entirely futile.

Table 5. Video Propaganda Dissemination.

	Summary Statistics				
	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Videos	236474	1.91	2.48	0	12
Videos (religious)	236474	0.00	0.05	0	1
Videos (violence)	236474	1.37	1.95	0	9
Videos (state capacity)	236474	0.33	0.69	0	4
Binary: Videos	236474	0.64	0.48	0	1
Popular Videos	236474	0.03	0.18	0	1

Source: Child, et al., 2021 .

Table 6. Local Propaganda Dissemination.

	Summary Statistics				
	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Age	349350	34.95	12.45	18	99
Male	349350	0.62	0.48	0	1
Binary: Education	349350	0.43	0.50	0	1
Binary: Pashtun	349350	0.42	0.49	0	1
ISIS Arrival Approved	130519	11.10	20.98	0	100
ISIS Respects Traditions	129447	9.15	19.90	0	100
Local Propaganda	87575	0.61	0.97	0	4
Black Flag	87423	0.22	0.42	0	1
Night Letters	87109	0.10	0.30	0	1
Publication	87290	0.18	0.38	0	1
Radio Broadcasts	87177	0.12	0.32	0	1

Source: Child et al., 2021.

First-Hand Accounts: Terrorist Interviews and Case Studies

Although I am cognizant of the limitations that come with first-hand accounts from terrorists themselves, data from interviews is the best indicator available for how online propaganda is received by audiences. Brown (2021) states: “Some studies, for instance, posit that online radicalization is becoming the most prevalent pathway to radicalization, with the Internet serving as the most common vehicle for radicalization across ideological groups” (p. 19). This quote from *Violent Extremism in America: Interviews with Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization* interprets data from the PIRUS database on the role that the Internet played in the radicalization of extremists across America. This study looked at the same database specifically for individuals recruited by the Islamic State. The study determined

that the Internet played a role in the radicalization of 190 out of 191 individuals radicalized by the Islamic State between 2013 and 2019 (refer back to Figure 12).

In the case study of Colleen LaRose, also known as “Jihad Jane,” it was determined that her radicalization was based entirely on her use of the Internet to interact with propaganda materials. The author of this case study, Caroline Joan S. Picart (2015), states:

Social media serves to create a loose virtual community of radical mentors and likeminded extremists, who provide resources, support, and communication, thus furthering the individual’s conversion to radicalization, and strengthening imagined ties to this loose, virtual community. (p. 360)

This finding is corroborated by a May 2008 report by the U.S. Senate Homeland Security Committee, which found that the Internet is increasingly important in the radicalization of Western individuals (Picart, 2015). It far surpasses other propaganda dissemination channels in its ability to connect potential recruits with ideology that may radicalize them.

The Internet provides many platforms on which Islamic State propaganda can be accessed by Westerners. As in the case of LaRose, social media is a common route for propaganda dissemination. Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg (2020) note that “passive viewing of videos posted mostly on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter by ISIS” were the most meaningful influencers of men joining the Islamic State movement (p. 98). For recruiting Western women, “ISIS used a specific recruitment strategy, namely, using women as online recruiters and glamorizing the ISIS lifestyle, even developing online magazine articles specifically targeting them” (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020, p. 100).

The sources of radicalization influence determined in Speckhard and Ellenberg’s (2020) article using interviews of ISIS members are further detailed in Table 7.

Table 7. Sources of Radicalization Influence.

Influence	Men Mentioned	Women Mentioned	Men Average Score	Women Average Score
Spouse/Partner Influence	2.2%	55.3%	0.05	1.85
Parent Influence	3.8%	15.8%	0.11	0.43
Sibling Influence	6.6%	5.3%	0.20	0.14
Extended Family Influence	9.9%	5.3%	0.29	0.11
Friend Influence	35.7%	13.2%	1.03	0.35
ISIS Recruiter Influence	25.3%	7.9%	0.77	0.24
Preacher Influence	19.8%	0%	0.57	0.00
Internet Recruiter Influence	10.5%	18.4%	0.31	0.58
Passive YouTube Influence	24.7%	13.1%	0.75	0.36
Passive Facebook Influence	11.6%	7.9%	0.34	0.24
Passive Twitter Influence	5.5%	7.9%	0.16	0.26
Passive WhatsApp Influence	1.6%	2.6%	0.04	0.09
Passive Telegram Influence	1.6%	0%	0.03	0.00
Passive Other Internet Influence	1.1%	0%	0.03	0.00
Mainstream Media Influence	19.2%	10.5%	0.54	0.28
Prison Influence	5.5%	0%	0.15	0.00

Source: Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020.

In addition to the effective role of the Internet in disseminating propaganda, the fact that the propaganda is in English allows the Islamic State to appeal directly to Western audiences without the impediment of geographic or language barriers. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford (2020) emphasize this in their explanation of the Islamic State’s inordinately successful propaganda campaign in the United States. Their conclusion was based on an examination of 204 American ISIS-related cases. The authors found:

Small-scale, closed, and decentralized recruitment networks, the use of digital communications technologies, and the prominence of English-speaking jihadist ideologues all helped the Islamic State bridge the gap and reach thousands of Americans. (p. 12)

Conclusions

Interviews and case studies of terrorists radicalized by Islamic State propaganda reveal that the Internet is the primary distribution channel accessed by Westerners influenced by the efforts of the Islamic State's media division. Whether the propaganda is disseminated through social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, or through online recruiters glamorizing the ISIS lifestyle, the Internet plays an effective and crucial role in engaging Western civilians with the Islamic State's ideology.

Moreover, the Internet's global reach allows Islamic State propagandists to target English-speaking audiences with propaganda in their own language. This removes substantial geographic and language barriers posed by propaganda disseminated through other channels.

Chapter VIII

Implications and Future Research

Discovery of the propaganda dissemination channel of the Internet being used by the Islamic State to reach Western audiences informs efforts to combat the Islamic State in their mission to ultimately establish a worldwide caliphate. Understanding the importance of the Internet to the cause of the Islamic State allows for a more nuanced technique to be developed for the ultimate defeat of the organization. Propaganda is the primary tool used in the radicalization and recruitment campaign of the Islamic State and if tactics to lessen the effectiveness of this campaign are developed it would effectively result in a decapitation strike against the organization. Without an effective source of recruitment, the Islamic State would cease expanding and its defeat would become inevitable. With the media division's centrality to the organization as a whole, effective countermeasures would essentially cut the head off the snake.

My hope for this research is that the evidence will ultimately answer the aforementioned research problem and have wide-reaching implications in the field of counter-terrorism, regardless of the content of the conclusions drawn. The large-scale, hyper-detailed synthesis and analysis of the available source content will ideally provide valuable insights into the targets of Islamic State propaganda and the combination of propaganda content and target characteristics, which result in successful radicalization and recruitment into terrorism.

It is my hope that the conclusions offered in this research will contribute to the formation of a detailed profile of individuals who are most at-risk for being radicalized and recruited into the Islamic State's organization, while also highlighting the underlying reasons for their increased susceptibility. Once a reliable profile, or collection of profiles, exists, it will be much more feasible to pinpoint the exact aspects of radicalization that are effective; once the process of radicalization is intimately understood, deradicalization methods and programs will become viable weapons with which to battle the Islamic State and other extremist organizations.

Future Research

The field of terrorism studies would greatly benefit from future research that is able to circumvent the limitation of collecting primary data given the dangerous circumstances of interacting with active terrorists. Solving this problem of credibility would progress the field significantly and allow scholars to inform policy and military decision making much more accurately, thus taking away terrorism's primary threat of the unknown.

Further analyses of propaganda content in an effort to determine which themes appeal to specific target audiences would aid in the construction of helpful profiles and allow authorities to intervene before individuals are irreversibly radicalized. Moreover, further insight into predisposing characteristics that place individuals at an increased risk of recruitment and radicalization is essential for the creation of useful profiles for the identification of sympathizing individuals. Such future research, combined with this thesis project's findings on the importance of the Internet to the Islamic State's

propaganda enterprise, would inform the development of effective de-radicalization programs for individuals who have been victimized by recruitment effort.

Chapter IX

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to answer these two research questions:

1. What technologies or information channels did the Islamic State use to distribute propaganda?
2. Which of these channels seemed most effective in connecting with Western audiences and had the greatest impact?

Through the integrative research review process, I found that propaganda content in the formats of audio, image, video, and text are disseminated through the channels of film, magazines, radio, and the Internet. Of these, the Internet is the most effective and accessible channel of propaganda dissemination used by the Islamic State to target Western audiences. Through the Internet, the Islamic State is able to remove the geographic and language barriers that normally exist between Westerners and the propaganda content produced by the media division. This globalized reach is unique to the Internet in comparison to other information channels at the Islamic State's disposal, making it the most available to Western individuals.

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