ISLAMIC STATE ONLINE PROPAGANDA

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Abstract: The Islamic State use of social media and its social media presence have become the 21st century main terrorist threat. The organization reached a meteoric rise worldwide by its impressive and well-planned multilingual social media campaign which included videos, pictures, magazines, Islamic nasheeds, and the widespread use of social platforms, especially Twitter and Telegram. Thus, the Islamic State transformed itself into a global brand synonymous with terrorism and Salafist Islam.

This paper will analyze the Islamic State online strategy and discourse in general as well as its strategic goals, target audience, and related social media to underline the professional and calculated social media information campaign of the Islamic State, which resemble very much to political PR campaigns.

1.Introduction

The possibilities offered by Internet and its social media platforms as well as technological developments and their accessibility for any audience of users have created unlimited opportunities for extremists to disseminate information.

Analyzing the latest radicalization processes in Western states, we notice a change: they do not need so much time to develop, as in the past, and their main target is represented by young people who are quickly attracted by Jihadist propaganda due to the fact they are in search for a confirmation of their ideas which they find it in materials posted by terrorist groups on Internet[1]. Until now many experts said there was no certain causality relation between social media and radicalization. On the other hand, the latest development in the way the Islamic State is constructing its complex online propaganda represents a proof that is not the case any more.[2]

Organizations such as the Islamic State (IS) use media to target vulnerable young people and stimulate radicalization with smart craft messages and videos. Thus, terrorists aim to induce irrational fears among people in order to promote their goals and influence decision makers. In the absence of the Internet and its various social media platforms, the impact of these groups would be limited to a small group of people.

2.IS *Modus Operandi*

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[1] D. Weggemans, E. Bakker, P. Grol, *Who Are They, and Why Do They Go?,* p. 103; Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD), *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands: Swarm Dynamics and New Strength*, June 2014; R. Coolsaet, What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?, in *Egmont Paper* No 75 (2015), p.8

[2] I. von Behr, A. Reding, C. Edwards, L. Gribbon, *Radicalization in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism*, Brussels: RAND, 2013, p. 18, available at: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.html.

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Social media represents an important platform for the disseminating IS propaganda worldwide and attracting supporters or followers. To that end, the group has developed a true "online propaganda machine", aiming at ensuring the fact that their messages provide the ideal image of good governance, justice and a new beginning. One can not underestimate that the IS ideological call to action attracts more and more followers "motivated" to commit acts of violence in their country of origin or elsewhere.

Although online propaganda is gaining ground, traditional recruitment methods, such as sending letters to prisoners or organizing meetings at mosques are still used, but they are accompanied by social media campaigns. These propaganda products have some specific features: the group uses mostly video recordings detrimental to text messages, take advantage of the linguistic knowledge of its members to translate its statements into European languages in order to increase their area of accessibility, and uses music into his messages to resonate with Western culture.

IS large presence on the network and the fact that it is supported by a significant number of members with technical and linguistic skills are evident. In this regard, the group strives to attract members and competent IT talent to support the "machine" propaganda.

Unlike video recordings, propaganda used by terrorist groups in the past, which often represented simple and unsophisticated products depicting terrorist leaders while claiming sermons, the Islamic State's videos, disseminated on social networks, are of high quality, their techniques being similar to film production, with special effects in the style of Hollywood, video games, and dramatic subjects to attract the attention of the target audience and to secure media coverage.

IS, more than any other terrorist entity, became known by its skills in using social networking, especially Twitter, which became a tool for promoting its propaganda and warning about its enemies. JMBerger and Jonathon Morgan analyzed the group practices on this network and concluded that, between September-December 2014, at least 46,000 Twitter pro-IS accounts were created. They analyzed 20,000 such accounts to bring attention to the modus operadi of the group. Although many of these accounts have no declared connection with the leadership of IS, the authors identified at least 79 accounts that could be "officially" considered as belonging to IS. According to the study, many of those pro-IS accounts did not benefit of great visibility, 73% of messages being pursued by less than 500 users.[3]

Lately it has become clear that the Islamic State is constantly developing different strategies to quickly react to current developments. An example to that end is the creation of Twitter Glad Tidings app called The Dawn. It provides IS supporters the latest news about the group creating also a synchronized campaign on Twitter via user accounts that can instantly transmit in cyberspace thousands of tweets controlled by one or two media managers.

There are several categories of Twitter accounts - official news accounts, unofficial news accounts, regional accounts, and individual accounts – and all are used to achieve the objectives of the group.

Another network used is YouTube, which monthly attracts around one billion unique users. More than 6 billion hours of videos are viewed every month. A study presented at the 2008 European Conference on Information Security and Intelligence brought to the attention of the public the fact that 50% of jihadists videos refer to the

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[3] J.M. Berger, J. Morgan, The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper No. 20, March 2015, p.56, available at: http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf

importance of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, 30% are about suicide attacks, and 20% contain educational messages on Islam. Youtube has become a platform increasingly attractive, its visual impact being very strong, and that is the reason why some records become viral on the Internet.[4]

Although Twitter remains the most important tool used by IS for online recruitment, the group also uses other platforms like Instagram, where the presence of its members is more informal, most users posting pro-IS images. Many accounts denounce Western intervention in Syria, but few contain specific hashtags and images showing support for the Islamic State.

Terror is so disseminated in real time being presented through graphics, audio and video messages or postings with strong emotional impact. By using the social networks, IS propaganda reaches a younger audience, most often naive and vulnerable, active in the online environment. Precisely this activity facilitates its access to a wide range of harmful products that represent the baseline ground for the subsequent radicalization of supporters.

3. Countering IS

Worldwide efforts have been made to prevent the spread of the Islamic State messages and to try to stop their reach to the public. The response of governments and corporations focused on preventing the use of networks, meaning they have suspended the accounts of dozens of supporters on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and other platforms.

The counter measures implemented by governments and international organizations can be classified into two types of measures: repressive and soft. The repressive measures are focused on denying access to extremist propaganda disseminated by terrorist organizations and their supporters. The main method used to that end is to block sites and prohibit message or communication and it is accompanied by the prosecution of those who propagate the radical content.

In August 2014, the chief executive of Twitter, Dick Costolo, announced that anyone who distributes pictures of the beheading of James Foley would have his or her account suspended. Despite the fact that the company did not make public the number of accounts suspended a number of experts have estimated that it amounts to 2,000 weekly.[5] Facebook spokesman Andrew Souwall said that any profile, page or group would be deleted if it was considered to be associated to a terrorist organization, informing that "there is no place for terrorists on Facebook".[6]

There were also adopted other official measures both at national level and international one. Thus, Europol launched a special working group, the European Union Internet Referral Unit, in charge of closing the accounts and removing extremist propaganda messages from the network.

In Europe, best example in the field is the United Kingdom (UK). It set up the Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit which collaborates with corporate partners in order to delete the messages on the Internet that incite to terrorism or praise various forms of violence, and British army created a special unit to carry non-lethal warfare against the Islamic State focusing on countering online messages.

The US State Department opened the Center for Countering Strategic Communications. This unit launched a large number of campaigns aimed at presenting the harsh realities related to war. In September 2014, the State Department launched the Twitter campaign "Think again, step away" which presented the Islamic State atrocities and parodied messages and images of jihadists killed. Another example is the video

[4] *www.gcsp.ch/download/2763/72138*
[5] http://www.lowyinstitute.org/files/islamic-state-propaganda-western-media_0.pdf
[6] http://www.wired.com/2015/11/facebook-and-twitter-face-tough-choices-as-isis-exploits-social-media/

recording "Welcome to the land of the Islamic State", in which there were inserted graphics with crimes committed by IS. The video registered millions of views on network.

Australian defense forces have also launched a pilot program - @Fight_DAESH - whose stated purpose is to correct the false information disseminated on Twitter by the Islamic State and its sympathizers.

A similar approach was adopted by UK with its @UKAgainstDaesh Twitter account. Like the US efforts, this campaign aims to undermine the credibility of the Islamic State's propaganda by weaving counter-narratives into other information retweeted from Coalition partners, NGOs and journalists.

States measures alone cannot have success. In order to have results they must be accompanied by civil initiatives that would include all kinds of actors. Thus, London organization Quilliam Foundation launched in July 2015 #notanotherbrother campaign on social networks, seeking to counter the Islamic State propaganda. This included a video aimed to reach to the Muslim community that could be vulnerable to IS messages.

In recent years, even non-state actors have become very active in this domain. For example, the Anonymous organization has declared online war to the Islamic State, posting messages on Twitter in which the organization's goal was declared to be to "freeze IS". After the January 2015 terrorist attacks at the headquarters of the French newspaper Charlie Hebdo, Anonymous hackers launched an online campaign against IS entitled #OpISIS. Its purpose is to identify sites and social network accounts related to IS and to disable them.

Part of this campaign, in March 2015, Anonymous published a list of usernames for 9,200 Twitter accounts it believed being related to IS. In order to elaborate that list, Anonymous worked with other groups of hackers like GhostSec and CtrlSec. The list did not contain e-mail addresses or other data and it was distributed by an activist whose Twitter account was XRSone. The same user posted a few days later, another list with over 20,000 Twitter accounts which claimed to be related to SI. That new list provided information such as ID number, username, and number of followers, account status, and account creation date. At the same time, Anonymous released a video in which it warned that SI members would be treated as "a virus".

Deleted accounts are opened again under other names, gaining more followers and even a higher level of legitimacy and celebrity because they are considered enemies of the West. Others argue that the presentation of reality under the leadership of the Islamic State and the testimonies of legitimate members of the community could have a stronger affect than countering messages and closing accounts on networking. [7]

Even if Twitter, Facebook and Youtube are suspending the accounts of the Islamic State members and supporters, they vehemently fight back by creating new ones or by sending highly emotionally violent messages. An example to that end is the request made by IS jihadists to kill Twitter employees: Your virtual war against us will generate a real war against you. [8]

All these campaigns face a number of significant challenges. Often the messages can not compete with the dramatic, shocking, bloody content produced by the Islamic State nor with its attractiveness to the media.

3. Conclusion

[7] Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands, Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Jihadism on the Web: A breeding ground for Jihad in the modern age*, January 2012, p.15, available at: https://www.aivd.nl/publish/pages/2401/het_jihadistisch_internet_eng.pdf

[8] www.gcsp.ch/download/2763/72138

ISLAMIC STATE ONLINE PROPAGANDA

A better understanding of the 21st century communication is essential. Strategic communication and counter narrative are becoming the main instruments in countering terrorist propaganda, and the battlefield is online.

Nowadays, social networks have become a kind of "online mosque" where everything takes place: presentation, recruitment, motivation. What previously happened within traditional mosques was transferred to the online space and amplified, since the target audience was not limited to dozens or hundreds of people, but to millions of users, many of them sensitive to the messages posted by the extremist group.

In their approach to recruitment, destabilizing and inducing the "values and the "truth" of their struggle in the minds of others, the terrorists aimed at inducing a new form of reality in the minds of target audience which would be the "only reality" for religious, political or criminal (and often a blend of all) reasons.

Some experts have questioned the effectiveness of the approaches adapted by governments. For example, removal of content from the Internet (so called "blocking strategy") has limited effect because it is very easy to set up new sites unknown to authorities. As a result of these measures, in the case of online accounts of IS, their number decreased significantly, although other new accounts were created later, which do not use the "#ISIS" hashtag and no longer presents the same extent with horrifying images from executions. For efficiency, this method should be applied not only to the open sites, but also to different communication platforms.

Taking into account the large worldwide number of people who wants to join the group, the situation become more critical and requires the adoption of pro-active stances to counter this phenomenon and an increased collaboration between state structures and private sector To that end, governments should engage and support more authentic, credible and relevant messages rooted within the Muslim community which appear to be more effective.

References:

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[3] Gabriel Weimann, New Terriorism and New Media. Washington, DC: Commons Lab of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2014;

[4] Ghaffar Hussain, Erin Marie Saltman, *Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and How to Counter it*, Quilliam Foundation, May 2014, available at http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jihad-trending-quilliam-report.pdf;

[5] I. von Behr, A. Reding, C. Edwards, L. Gribbon, *Radicalization in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism*, Brussels: RAND, 2013, p. 18, available at: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.html.

[6] M.Sageman, (2008) *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 48–50;

[7] Rik Coolsaet, *What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?*, in Egmont Paper No 75 (2015), p.8