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## Social media and terrorism discourse: the Islamic State's (IS) social media discursive content and practices

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the digital practices and discourses of the Islamic State (IS) when exploiting Social Media Communication (SMC) environments to propagate their jihadist ideology and mobilise specific audiences. It draws on insights from Social Media Critical Discourse Studies, observational approaches, and visual content/semiotic analysis. The paper maintains the complementary nature of technological practice and discursive content in the process of meaning-making in digital jihadist discourse. The study shows that digital practices of strategic sharing, distribution and campaigns to re-upload textual materials are made possible by exploiting SMC communicative affordances. As for the analysis of discursive content, the paper focuses on YouTube and highlights strategic patterns and covert references in an IS-produced flagship video. It illustrates how IS discourse constructs its envisaged in-group/outgroup by (re-)symbolising current events within historical, political and ideological conflict scenarios, i.e. the incessant resistance and legitimacy of forces of virtue vs evil. By foregrounding symbolic references to military outgroup actors, IS legitimises its own violence and projects a powerful self-identity against a (perceived) global hegemony. The paper shows how the combination of a technologically savvy operation and a resistant, anti-hegemonic narrative, embedded in a strategically framed symbolism of Islam, may resonate with global (quasi)-diasporic digital consumers.

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### Introduction: social media communication

Within the mass communication paradigm, the accumulation of discursive power is pre-supposed by the way media have exclusive, linear and top-down control over discursive materials (KhosraviNik, 2014). Participatory media are defined in terms of a core shift in the power dynamic from mass communication to the new paradigm of Social Media Communication (henceforth SMC). This new interactive paradigm calls to task the assumptions of discursive power because the communication is no longer a one-way-flow, one-to-many and controlled. SMC is an abstract understanding of the new paradigm that can be realised in a range of digitally mediated communicative spaces/ tools/ platforms under certain conditions. These conditions include: facilitating users' cooperation in the

production/ dissemination of content, the affordance of interacting with each other within the audience of a (large) group of others, and providing access to react to institutionally produced content, e.g. news articles (KhosraviNik, 2017).

SMC is not limited to specific platforms, Apps, activities or spaces but is a conceptual way of encapsulating a specific communicative dynamic in the process of production, consumption and distribution of meaning-making content wherein a wide range of participatory, multimodal and multimedia affordances may be taken up by users through various established and emerging communication technologies. SMC brings about a new power dynamic around discursive practices that can be used for counter-hegemonic narratives, political dissent and consolidation of otherwise suppressed identities etc. (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014; Sarkhoh & KhosraviNik, 2020). In the meantime, the lack of accountability, claims to grassroots authenticity and the mediated nature of interactions make SMC a suitable playground for radical, extremist and violent discourses. This is not only about the difficulties in controlling such discursive currents online, it also pertains to SMC Techno-Discursive nudges (KhosraviNik, 2018, 2019), which seem to favour counter-flow, revolutionary and anti-hegemonic claims.

As part of a larger project, this paper concentrates on how the SMC paradigm is taken up and exploited in the promotion, dissemination and legitimation of a radical Islamist discourse, i.e. that of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). This paper focuses on how the IS campaign of digital practices and content production serves to promote their jihadist ideology to mobilise specific audiences. The paper draws on and contributes to the body of literature on Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) (e.g. KhosraviNik, 2014, 2017, 2018; KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018; KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016; Unger et al., 2016), terrorism studies (e.g. Aly, 2016; Archetti, 2015; Camphuijsen & Vissers, 2012; Durmaz, 2007) and their interdisciplinary cleavages (Amer, 2020).

### **Notional considerations in SM-CDS**

There have been enlightening contributions dealing with the new challenges posed by social media communication in the broader field of Discourse Analysis and Sociolinguistics. Androutsopoulos' proposal around Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography (2008) and Herring's 'Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis' (2004) have effectively tackled the specific challenges of the new environment, i.e. how to deal with the ephemerality of digital data and the conceptualisation of critical digital linguistic methods, respectively. A working model of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) calls for a more explicit approach to case studies by combining the observational approaches of screen data, e.g. online ethnography, as well as enriching the toolkit of CDS in dealing with new meaning-making artefacts, e.g. smileys etc., where relevant (KhosraviNik, 2017). In the meantime, it is argued that the *critical* (as in socio-political critique) aspirations of CDS should now be part of a more structurally integrated approach 'by linking the online discursive practices to the socio-political context of the offline world' (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014). In other words, SM-CDS is defined as being at the intersection of *the social* (context of use in society) and *the digital* (context of use in mediation technology) (see KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018 for details).

SMC continues to develop, adopt and adapt new genres and forms of interaction and meaning-making by 'combining various channels and modalities of communication as well as integrating synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication' (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016, p. 217). Discourses are signified through a variety of textual, multimodal and practices and, as such, the argument is that the term 'meaning-making content and practices' should be used as an all-encompassing reference to what constitutes a digital discourse. In other words, *practice*, a.k.a, digital practice, is envisaged as an integral part of the meaning-making apparatus in addition to textual materials. In the CDA literature, discourse as practice 'implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it' (Wodak & Fairclough, 1997, p. 258). In an earlier take, Fairclough considers discursive practice as mediating between textual and sociocultural dimensions, which include aspects of 'text production, distribution and text consumption' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 58). It is, in other words, about considering the institutional processes, e.g. editorial operations in journalism, on top of sociocultural processes in society in the consumption and production of discourses. Such an understanding of discursive practice is tantamount to the proposals in SM-CDS around the notion of dual contextualisation, whereby critical analysis of structures of meaning-making in the SMC paradigm is viewed at two levels of ('virtual') digital media contextualisation – as a horizontal account of discursive practice, on top of a sociopolitical ('real') societal contextualisation – as a vertical account of discourse production and consumption (KhosraviNik, 2017). The digital horizontal context can account for norms of digital practice around patterns of production, consumption and distribution of meaning-making materials, including patterns of users' practices and technological meaning-making. The vertical societal context can embed the 'textual' (meaning-making materials and practices) in the industrial background of SMC media within already existing discourses-in-place.

Discursive practice in SMC is indeed partly about 'mediated action', i.e. the interface of users and the technological affordances provided by a specific platform at a local level; but in the meantime, the discourse is shaped by the sociopolitical societal context at the macro level. To put it bluntly, while there may be discursive practice (as in local meaning-making endeavours – the d-discourse), there is no discourse without a social level (the D-Discourse, structured knowledge systems). It is important to reiterate that 'discourse is independent of the medium, although the magnitude, penetrability, and formal aspects of its realised forms may be heavily influenced by the medium' (KhosraviNik, 2017, p. 589). This also entails that a CDS study of SMC concerns examining the D-discourse in its overall operation, of which the technological aspect is a key part. There is no essential distinction between the online and offline worlds, but there are intertextual and interdiscursive relations between these two levels of discursive practices.

Nevertheless, the technological aspect of SMC discourse processes is the main interdisciplinary outreach of SM-CDS – from a CDA literature point of view. This will lead to exploration of the way social media technologies work at the macro-industrial and operational levels and how a Techno-Discursive dynamic can be postulated (KhosraviNik, 2018). For example, there is a host of co-creators and co-consumers with endless diversification on SMC spaces; and as such, detachment of the textual product from its context of production is practically impossible. This calls for an observational turn (of some sort) in digital discourse studies in order to be able to account for users'

practices and what they do with the new discursive options at their disposal. Building on these theoretical and methodological caveats, this study not only focuses on social media meaning-making materials, but also sheds light on IS' digital practices in order to account for the integration of SMC spaces and discourse production and dissemination.

### **Social media, terrorism and discourse**

The emphasis on user-generated content in participatory web results on the reshaping of power relations contributes to what can be perceived as decentralisation processes of information and content. Klausen (2015, p. 3) highlights the decentralised nature of SMC and the volunteer-activism dynamic through content production practices, e.g. blogs as well as sharing files, cross-posting, re-tweeting etc. as a low-cost means of dissemination to wide audiences. The decentralised, fluid and fleeting nature of production, distribution and consumption processes in SMC (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018) is a fitting quality for a clandestine, ideological and violent ideology, such as that of IS. Wright and Bachmann (2015, p. 70) emphasise SMC's tempo-spatial dynamics in the chain of discourse and action and the way that tweets from one side of the globe may incite violence in an anonymous actor on the other side. One can posit that there is a technological agent in the mix in the way contemporary terrorist discourses are produced, distributed and consumed – though, not falling into a technological deterministic position.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to properly problematise the key and notorious notion of terrorism. However, it is readily understandable that it is hardly a neutral term and there are legitimate political contentions around its definition and use in various political conflicts. There are myriad caveats on how 'sociopolitical realities, religious affiliation, and cultural identification play into an individual's definition of the term' (Rausch, 2015). Obvious examples include the way the US often represents its opposing forces as terrorists as a general trend. Løvik (2008, p. 37), for example, elaborates on the political charge of terms such as terrorists, bombers and extremists, which may 'seem fairly neutral when it comes to the attribution of guilt and blame', but they are in effect understood within a discourse that frames particular regions of the world around specific ideological battles. There is agreement, though, that the nature of terrorism acts is violent, i.e. they are actions that are 'at least inherently dangerous, typically involve more than one target, and are perpetrated to initiate change whether societal, political, religious, or ideological' (Rausch, 2015, p. 28; see Amer, 2020 for further discussion of this).

Either way, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan (Friedland & Rogerson, 2009) and the Islamic State (Blaker, 2015) readily fit the description across the political spectrum. In the meantime, as contemporary movements, they have been particularly savvy in exploiting media operations. As (self-proclaimed) anti-hegemonic/ fringe movements, these groups pay particular attention to the newly afforded social media discursive power to reach a wide range of audiences at the global level (Blaker, 2015; Friedland & Rogerson, 2009).

To reiterate the crucial disclaimer of this study (and in fact SM-CDS in general), there is a host of social, political and economic contexts for discursive perception and

interpretation; and this process must not, in any way, be reduced to digital media's impact (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). The literature on terrorism and social media point in similar directions, e.g. Rogers and Neumann (2007) found that none of the radicals they interviewed were radicalised or recruited solely based on engaging with the Internet. Sageman (2004, p. 163) also argues that 'for the type of allegiance that the jihad demands, there is no evidence that the Internet is persuasive enough by itself'. Nevertheless, a crucial shift has occurred, from relying on direct personal contacts to a wider range of human contacts supported by social media. In the meantime, the notion of a network, be it digitally facilitated or not, is at the heart of such processes. Alarid (2016, p. 314) explains that an SMC space can be seen as 'an open discussion forum for vital dialogue between extremist ideas and inquisitive minds to take place in a virtual setting where infiltration is difficult'.

### **The Islamic State (IS): between state and media operations**

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), is known in Arabic as Daesh/ Da'ish, i.e. *al Dawla al Islamiya fi al Iraq wa al Sham*, since its creation in 2003. Subsequently, ISIS rebranded itself with the more auspicious name of Islamic State in 2014 (Walli, 2015). This strategic referential move towards historical reclamation is a key point in understanding the geopolitical nature, ideological aspirations and ambitions of the group. In addition to its projected naming strategy, IS is distinguished in terms of its ability to sustain itself economically, its globalist and apocalyptic ambitions, foreign personnel (i.e. 18,000 foreign fighters from over 90 countries<sup>1</sup>) and its highly influential worldwide social media campaigns, practices and promotions (Liang, 2015, p. 2). IS' media operations have been multi-layered, including 'news bulletins in English, Arabic and Russian on its al-Bayan radio network' providing an overview of its activities, and it discusses topics such as suicide attacks and military combat (Ali, 2015, p. 11).

The Social Media Communication dynamic has evidently played 'a crucial role in IS' promotion of legitimacy discourses at the global level' (Blaker, 2015, p. 4). Winter (2016) provides an overall picture of IS media operations, which comprise agencies, including the al-Himma Foundation, al-Furqan Foundation, al-I'tisam Foundation, al-Hayat Media Centre, Ajnad Foundation, al-Bayan Radio and A'maq News Agency. These work across several offices in different locations in Syria, Iraq etc., producing propaganda content and multimedia materials (see Jawhar, 2016, p. 34), but IS has largely focused on social media with a particularly sophisticated virtual online communication strategy (Becker, 2014; Haq, 2014). This includes a range of popular 'social media apps and file-sharing platforms; most prominently Ask.fm, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, PalTalk, kik, viber, JustPaste.it, and Tumblr' (Klausen, 2015, p. 1). In the same vein, Jawhar (2016, p. 73) records findings that 'much of Daesh's [IS's] presence online is via the exhaustive use of social media platforms particularly Facebook, Twitter and Telegram'. According to an internal assessment of the US State Department, IS' 'violent narrative – promulgated through thousands of messages each day – had effectively trumped the efforts of some of the world's richest and the most technologically advanced nations' (Mazzetti & Gordon, 2015). Berger and Morgan's (2015, p. 2) research estimated that between 4 October and 27 November 2014, there were around 46,000 Daesh (IS) accounts on Twitter alone.

## The approach and the case

Social Media Critical Discourse Studies maintains that the analysis of digital discourses pertains to (various forms of) content as well as digital practices. This stipulates that mediation technology itself has an agentive role in discourse formation, genre styling and consumption (KhosraviNik, 2019). Drawing on insights from Androutsopoulos (2013), an SM-CDS understanding entails a focus on screen-based data and practices, as distinct from (a) analysing content in isolation and (b) focusing on the ethnographies of participants rather than discourse-oriented visible practices. As per the postulation in SM-CDS, digital users are social actors and members of a pre-existing society rather than being merely part of a virtual community of digital agents shaped solely by technological affordances. They are members of both offline and online communities. This is also to ascertain that SMC and the technologies of the participatory web are, and do, more than acting merely as a repository of textual data. To fulfil the criteria, the study employs systematic observation, following guidelines around digital ethnography, followed by the analysis of typical multimodal meaning-making content on YouTube. In the meantime, observation forms a backdrop against which textual materials are identified and sampled.

An initial examination of IS' materials, distributed across social media platforms, shows that IS data are undisclosed, sporadic and divided (for a detail list of the sources and distribution of terror data, see Amer, 2020). General observational exploration has focused on the main platform of YouTube and the way agents, on-record/ off-record accounts, supporters and sympathisers engage in the production, dissemination and modification of materials. It has been argued that SMC spaces afford access to invaluable bottom-up 'logged' data, which is of high relevance to various CDS topic (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2018). Nevertheless, at the intersection of dealing with hugely sensitive materials, and the impact of (national and international) security operations and various levels of cooperation and involvement of SMC platform owners, what remains is anything but simple logged data and materials. SM-CDS discourages the separation of meaning-making content and immediate processes of production and consumption. Hence, within a general qualitative observational approach, practices and content are explored together.

Against such a backdrop, we gained an overall sense of availability and spread on the YouTube platform through keywords and tag searches. The query words used included 'Islamic State' (and all its associated names), 'Iraq', 'Syria' and 'martyr'. These have been investigated in both English and Arabic, including Arabic transliteration into the Latin alphabet, e.g. Daesh داعش, Uma أمة, Shahada, شهيد. The observational phase, expectedly, involved various levels of data-cleaning, as similar terms would have been used in other topics and discourses. This, in turn, reflects both the complexity of the situation, in terms of both tracing as well as distinguishing a 'terrorist' discourse from several other discourses in which some of these keywords may be used (see also Conway & McInerney, 2008).

The digital ethnography phase provided a general account of key users' accounts and dissemination networks on YouTube, i.e. popular accounts/ YouTube channels/ other social media platforms, as well as access to their content and cross-platform spread. This observational phase provided the entry circumstances around active channels,



some survival strategies and, broadly speaking, the dynamic of the platform, agents/ sympathisers and regulatory/ digital crackdown practices. This is in line with SM-CDS goals in accounting for 'both communicative activities and the semiotic artefacts produced through such activities, i.e. both products and processes taking place around these products' (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 6).

We argue that ethnographic observation of digital discursive fields forms a backdrop against which to select text samples as well as a host of valuable findings around relevant digital practices. The project's digital ethnography phase involved the recording of dynamic interactions with calculated judgements on practices as well as self-descriptions. As per recommendations around online ethnography, e.g. Androutsopoulos (2006, p. 425), in a case where direct interactions with participants are not envisaged, 'researchers will have to rely on self-descriptions'. This pertains to a detailed record of the practices of certain users, channels and content disseminated, with meticulous attention paid to dates, numbers of views, shares, comments and other digital meaningful practices.

Observational information constitutes the digital context of the content produced as well as the institutional belonging and ideological stances of producers and disseminators. It also provides crucial insights into digital manipulation strategies adopted by the group to safeguard information, e.g. certain channels may not have subscriber information available, either because they did not have any subscribers or because they did not disclose such information (see Klausen et al., 2012, for a similar observation). Observational self-description also pertains to close checks on accounts and subscriptions to specific channels, along with an array of digital activities, including sharing, distributing, tagging, hashtags, commenting, debating, the content of videos, interaction with other actors etc. This includes situation facets as proposed by Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015, p. 130), including friending and likes. In the case of YouTube channels, these are joining, liking, commenting, sharing, tagging, editing and repurposing parts of an original text, i.e. quicker and strategic dissemination via short snippets of a video. These are all part of meaning-making practices in sustaining, consolidating and constructing discourse(s) across an emerging networked public, which reflects new discursive affordances (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015; KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014). In other words, these function as part of foregrounding and backgrounding processes in discursive practices with effects on agenda-setting, priming and pairing.

In the meantime, we also argue in favour of archiving the observed content and materials as part of a digital record by taking into consideration the nature of the discourse under investigation, media companies' policies to remove any violent materials, as well as the involvement of the security authorities (see Amer, 2020 for this specific case). This operation provided us with a good body of archived content in addition to an ethnographic record of the digital practices around it. This fulfilled the aspirations of CDA to analyse meanings in context (Wodak & Fairclough, 1997) – both local/ technological and global/ social, i.e. a double contextualisation thesis (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). As an analysis of discursive content, this study focuses on the content and themes of videos that have been produced and released exclusively by IS' al-Hayat Media Center. The decision to limit the sample strictly to al-Hayat videos was made for two reasons. First, the sheer amount of relevant content that can be found online is staggering (Zelin, 2015) and some form of down-sampling is indispensable. Second, this study



is particularly interested in propaganda aimed primarily at Western audiences, and al-Hayat is IS' media branch specifically responsible for such communicative outreach.

## **Analytical discussion: digital and textual practice**

### ***Digital practice***

The observational period of the project was from January to March 2018. This involved both quantitative calculations as well as identifying, cleaning and collecting relevant content. At a specific point in time, i.e. 8 January 2018, a keyword search in Arabic in Latin transliteration, e.g. Daesh داعش, Uma أمة, Shahada, شهيد, returned 1,050 results while the same keywords in Arabic returned 11,000 results. These search hits were primarily reports or documentaries on IS by news agencies of various sorts. Some materials favoured IS ideologies, actions and martyrdom and includes videos calling for and/or praising individual or group martyrs, as well as explicit calls for jihad and martyrdom.

To narrow down the sample, specific YouTube search filters were applied to the available materials. The sample was then narrowed down to video content (rather than texts and inscriptions uploaded as videos), i.e. videos between 4 and 20 min long. There were many very short clips which were reworkings of larger videos uploaded with various intentions and contexts. The practice of re-entextualisation of larger videos was part of our observational findings with a strategic application. But as for the content, we decided to focus on fuller versions of the videos. Further down-sampling was conducted as part of data-cleaning, i.e. focusing on videos pertaining to IS and circumstances directly around it. The next phase was to exclude all videos created by any news agency, institution etc. other than IS media outlets or their known associates. This included many news reports by, for example, VOX and ICSVE; lectures by academics/ pundits, press conferences of relevant officials/ government figures, spoof videos on jihadism and/or IS, video songs promoting the fight against IS etc. As part of this process, examples of each category type were classified and collected, along with all the details of digital traces including numbers of views, shares, tags etc. After this procedure, the final archived of 'cleaned' content on YouTube was 140 videos in both Arabic and English. That is, videos which were (a) officially claimed by IS or we could reasonably assume they were produced by IS or recognised associated sympathisers, (b) were not too long or too short, (c) did not belong to any other discourses e.g. Islamic teaching, Palestinian struggle etc.

The overall picture emerging from the observation of digital practices reiterated the claims around IS' sophisticated and up-to-date use of social media communication spaces and techniques. Given the security threats, the fleeting nature of digital materials and the principled approach of the study to stick to 'screen data' analysis, the job of distinguishing an institutional member from various shades of digital sympathisers of Islamic State proved to be very difficult at both technological and ideological levels. While a range of avid to occasional sympathisers may be involved in the dissemination and consumption of some marked discursive content, as far as digital practices are concerned, vetting users individually is analytically unimportant as the job of consolidating the discourse is done, i.e. the practice is virtually identical across the range of digital users involved. As Ibrahimi et al. (2015, p. 23) show, 'a significant number of social media users may occasionally share certain content of militant organisations without any

active and long-term commitment to their broader goals and ideologies', but this is in fact a main advantage provided by the SMC environment, i.e. that political content may potentially go viral via users who may not be serious about the politics involved. This is precisely what institutional content producers aim for in the production and dissemination of content. This speaks to the role of a techno-discursive dynamic in the of various digital political discourses concentrating on hate and Self and Other bifurcation, and a key challenge in dealing with violent discourses. As we will see in the textual analysis section, IS capitalises on such a techno-discursive opportunity by positioning itself at the crossroads of an 'attractive' Islamic narrative and digital enhancement techniques. Such a techno-discursive advantage helps IS to have a global appeal within labyrinths of 'collapsed (audience) contexts'; from on-record, jihadist fighters to inquisitive, second-generation European Muslims, to witty Western 'playbour-ists'.

One of the main observable patterns of practice is relentless campaigns of re-uploading materials and publications by a network of supporters and sympathisers. A search on YouTube for IS channels shows that there have been 79 recognised Islamic State YouTube Channels. Almost all of these have been closed down by YouTube's administrators, presumably in liaison with relevant state security organisations. Despite their removal, once the videos have been uploaded the cycle of use and re-use can never be fully contained across both popular/ public/ known SNSs and niche/ less or unknown/ member-only SMC spaces. This transient dynamic of availability does not mean a lack of access, as these videos continue to be available for downloading, storing and re-surfacing on official SMC platforms. A sizable number of such videos have, for example, been captured and archived online by digital activists at certain intervals. Evidently, measures to exploit anonymity plays an obvious role in these endeavours, from deep technological cover (geo-locations, networks and content) to strategic chosen account names, i.e. names referring to historical Muslim fighters (e.g. *Abu Jaafar Hamza*) and heroic pseudo-names (e.g. *Tiger of the Islamic State*).<sup>2</sup>

Digital practice observation also indicates that IS effectively uses links to Google Drives that archive materials. Links and instructions to access archives are often provided as comments on re-uploaded videos. These videos are often titled, tagged and promoted, e.g. via the use of certain keywords etc. to become easily searchable by curious and intended digital users seeking such content – even though the accounts may be short lived. Finding a relevant Google Drive is possible by a rather simple search, until it is removed or blocked by Google administrators. A (formerly active) case in point is a major archive created by an account called 'Abu Al-dardaa Al-Masri' on 29–30.5.2017. This Google Drive requires permission from the creator. When one clicks on Get Access request, an automatic email is sent to the owner of the drive, who then decides whether to grant permission or simply ignore the request. This particular archive for example contained a list of folders for materials from News Reports and Visual Publications to individual Photos under a title which marks a religiously important calendar reference, i.e. Shaaban (Table 1).<sup>3</sup>

### **Textual analysis: healing believers' chests<sup>4</sup> شفاء الصدور**

A main thrust for a more specific Social Media approach to CDS (in respect of CDS literature) is to emphasise the importance of understanding and integrating the specific

**Table 1.** Sections of The Archive in the fourth week of the month of Shaaban.

Arabic	English
أخبار مهمة	Important News
إصدارات مرئية	Visual Publications
التقارير المصورة	Image Reports
الصور الفردية	Individual Photos
صحيفة النبأ	Al-Nabaa (News) Newspaper
مكتبة الهمة	Al-Himma (Mettle/Intention) Library

communicative dynamic of the Social Media Communication paradigm. This inevitably leads to some form of observational/ ethnographic analysis of the field as (initial) part of the discourse analysis. The point is to validate the rich body of information on digital discursive practices as the immediate technological context impacting on and contributing to the meaning-making operation (e.g. shape, penetration, message, foregrounding, backgrounding, topicalisation, framing etc.) of the analysed text. Nevertheless, the other parameter for SM-CDS (in respect of the literature in Media and Communication Studies) is to show the contribution of doing discourse analysis on the acquired meaning-making content. A SM-CDS understanding is to account for *discursive content* as well as *digital practices*. In advocating for more attention to be paid to the digital/ local context of meaning-making, we argue that practice is part of discursive analysis because it functions similarly to various rhetorical, textual and linguistic devices and techniques. This does not go as far as dismantling the connection between digital users and wider social contexts, i.e. undermining the bearing of discourses in real life. While the meaning-making operation of digital users is technologically complicated and needs to be accounted for, it is, nonetheless, part of the wider context of production, distribution and consumption of discourses. This indicates that the analysis should go beyond mere description of practices and get into the dynamic of sense-making in the relevant discourse community. It must also be acknowledged that the balance between the two is not always a clear-cut measure. Depending on one's disciplinary background (e.g. coming from Linguistics or Media Studies), the degree of focus on practice or discourse may vary. In comparison to such descriptive (Media Studies) literature (e.g. Berger & Morgan, 2015), we intend to show what CDS can offer to the field via critical analysis of discursive content as a crucial level of persuasion and legitimation. In the previous section we gave some insights into the digital practices around this discourse. In the following section we attend to textual analysis in parallel with insights from multimodal analysis.

The central tenant in multimodal CDA is that various modalities are at work in constructing, representing and legitimising a discourse. Following on from that, this example also draws on insights from Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) Visual Content Analytical Framework (VCA). VCA elaborates on various levels of visual framing in stance-making and representation, including Denotative Systems, Connotative Systems and Ideological Representations. VCA is yet another way of tackling the core questions in CDS, e.g. to show *what* discursive mechanisms are adopted in the realisation of an ideology and *how* such loaded content is encoded to create and enforce the ideology and *why* (KhosraviNik, 2010, p. 3). As such, it respectively pertains to What question categories, e.g. who and what is being represented, How questions, e.g. which symbols and signs, metaphors or other systems of stance-making are at

work, and Why questions, e.g. what are the overall visual arguments around de/legitimacy of Self and Other.

The selected IS textual content here is a video production about the Jordanian pilot who was seized by IS after crashing his jet near IS' self-proclaimed capital of Raqqa in Syria in December 2014 during a military operation. A statistical account of the original launch of the video is not available now, but the video was admittedly the most widespread IS video at the height of their propaganda and (arguably) power. It has been aired (in parts) by various major news agencies and viewed by huge numbers of Western and Middle Eastern audiences. It is in both Arabic and English with interchangeable subtitling addressing Western 'Kafirs' as well as regional 'traitors/ collaborators'. The video enjoys sophisticated production employing state of the art cinematic and technological techniques and reflects on contemporary experience in creating promotional material, e.g. in its use of audio-visual punchlines in its narration. The video is officially recognised and labelled as a product of the Al-Hayat Media Centre, which is the official outlet for IS propaganda. The release of the video sparked widespread anger globally (Ali, 2015, p. 11).

Soon after capturing the pilot, IS featured an elaborate interview with the pilot under the title: *The capture of a crusader pilot*, in IS' widely published magazine *Dabiq* (Issue 6). A few days before releasing the video, IS launched a digital ode to attract attention to the digital launch of the video. The 22-minute-long video appeared online in February 2015, under the title: *Healing the Believers' Chests*. In the course of about 18 min, the video presents an elaborate account of IS' ideological and political reasoning for executing the pilot. The video is replete with footage of politics in action and current affairs, e.g. Western politicians' visits, TV interviews, speeches which form the background to the running narrative.

At the denotative level, the macro-narrative and main categorisation is about the presence and arrangements of social actor groups as Self and Other, i.e. IS vs a cluster of regional, global and ideological Others. To a large extent, the video is devoted to an IS in-group audience's perception of the crisis and capture of the pilot, who is represented as a symbol of the spiteful Other. The Self is comprised of the narrator, IS fighters, children and community, i.e. ordinary people. The Other is comprised of a range of real and symbolic powerful actors including Jordan (as the enemy combatant in cahoots with *Kafirs/ disbelievers*) e.g. the Jordanian pilot, soldiers, King Abdullah II, the US including Barack Obama, American army etc. and the Western journalist and news anchor, Charlie Rose.

The video makes systematic references to places which are stand-in symbols for the actors involved, e.g. military bases, battlefields, training camps for Self vs the White House, modern airports, sleek TV studios (where King Abdullah is interviewed by Charlie Rose) as the Other. There is strong emphasis on war-ridden areas in Syria and Iraq to depict the military might of the Self. In fact, the most extensive and key denotative emphasis is the very act of war, i.e. jihad in its modern form and its ideological stand-off from the Other. This is strategically perused by overwhelming repeated references to various details of war-zone contexts, e.g. training camps, warships, horses, military jeeps, aircraft, uniforms, explosions, destroyed houses and neighbourhoods etc. This also includes symbols, e.g. a red carpet, the flag of Jordan merged with rockets fired from the middle of the country, orange suits, IS fighters' uniforms, flags of Israel and Jordan, map of Palestine, rocket-launching etc.

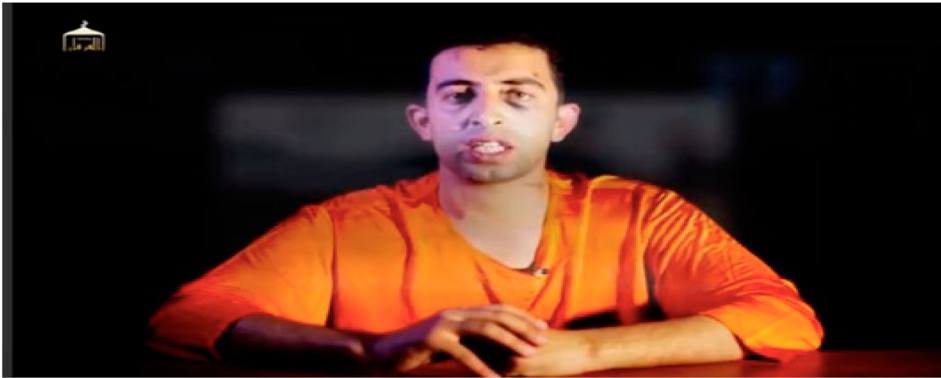
Apart from the narration, the visual production provides an ideologically framed story of the events which embed explicit visual stance-taking. The video opens with an interview with King of Jordan, emphasising his cordial relationship with the US (shaking hands with Obama), supporting the air strikes against IS (endorsing the pilots) and his support for the American-led anti-IS coalition. The negative Other presentation of the king is built on established negative perceptions of America as the mainstream/ ultimate enemy, a force of evil and the source of *taghut* – roughly translating as ‘apostate’. The notion is visually emphasised by a range of denotative and connotative references. e.g. shaking hands with American politicians and pilots, American red carpet, press conference with Obama (see [Image 1](#)) etc. Most of these references are juxtaposed with immediate references to war, conflict and destruction in the region. The sharp contrastive editing denotes the US as the enemy of Muslims (responsible for destruction, *Abu Ghoraib* prison torture, invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and interference in Yemen, Syria, Somalia etc. The political undertone of editing graphic images of American/ Western atrocities perpetrated by the anti-IS coalition aims to reinforce the legitimacy of IS’ existing political order in protecting its citizens and the borders of its proclaimed state. This legitimacy extends to what is to come for the Jordanian pilot as a stand-in member of this opposing coalition.

The video then moves on to flaunt the prowess of the IS army by emphasising the pilot’s distress at the time of capture and emphasising his imprisoned status, showing the iconic orange jumpsuit and him in a cage later. The same trend is emphasised by the way the pilot is framed when giving an interview/ confession, i.e. frail, with traces of injury to his face and a facial expression of fear and distress ([Image 2](#)).

There is also a lot of emphasis on the aftermath of pilots’ air strikes. This footage includes struggles to save civilian casualties from the debris, which are cinematically edited into views of bombs from in-flight computers and then back to child casualties. All these visual manoeuvres are edited into the pilot’s testimony, a.k.a. confession. The visual representation works closely with the linguistic content and ideological manoeuvres in support of the overall argument that IS stands against the US/Western crusaders and their allies in defending Muslim territories and communities.



**Image 1** . Joint press conference of King Abdullah and President Obama during the king’s visit to the USA.



**Image 2** . The captured Jordanian pilot in an orange jumpsuit giving an ‘interview’.

Imprisonment in an orange outfit has symbolic relevance for IS, Taliban and the like. It has come to symbolise defeat and humility for jihadi fighters since the iconic images of Guantanamo Bay prison became quintessential to represent Muslim prisoners of war. Lamothe (2014) elaborates on this aspect of Jihadi activism and maintains that ‘the use of the orange garb dates back at least a decade and demonstrates militant anger at the United States continuing to hold detainees without a trial after capturing them in its war against Islamist extremism’. IS in particular is known to use a similar orange colour for its prisoners, especially Western hostages, to counteract the powerlessness represented and reclaim the icon as semiotics of jihadi power and ruthless revenge.

IS pays ample attention to children and youths in its propaganda as an instrument to represent its connection with ordinary people and future perspective. The emphasis on ‘childhood innocence and the enslavement of children’, as Christine (2016, p. 2) maintains, is about reiterating IS’ regime of power, its long-term political project and its ‘ambitions to build a cohesive state through the imposition of social rules and institutions’ (ibid., 5).

In a related manoeuvre, the video flaunts the power, seriousness and awe of the IS army in avenging the striking *kafirs* and their allies by presenting a well curated, ceremonial and graphic execution of the captured pilot. The pilot is walked in slow motion in front of a long line of fighters/ jihadists in full military gear and balaclavas (see Image 3). The fighters’ masked faces reflect elation and wonderment. Such visualisation implies denotations of power, organisation and determination for severe and ‘just’ punishment of a traitor. The iconic IS jihadi fighters in balaclavas convey the identity and attitudes of ‘unknown soldiers of Islam’ standing hand in hand in their fight or spread across the globe anonymously. It conveys an attitude of acting selflessly, full-heartedly and anonymously (with no claim to modern wants of fame and money) in protecting and maintaining the perceived Islamic faith and community. This anonymity covers several representational and practice intents: the secretive nature of global jihad, protection of fighters’ identification, clandestine recruitment, and the power of IS as a uniquely organised but hidden army. It pertains to the projection of fearful IS, who can be anyone, anywhere at any time, i.e. ‘a large, disciplined, and powerful organization’ (Kraidy, 2017, p. 1202).

This procession to execution is also juxtaposed with cut-in images of civilian casualties, pilots, aircraft, destruction, pulling out survivors from shattered buildings and debris reiterating the running background of the event (execution) happening in front. The





**Image 3.** The pilot walking in front of a line of IS jihadi fighters in balaclavas.

scene ends with the brutal burning alive of the pilot with gruesome details. The deliberate and meticulous curation of the execution, live on camera, is an example of IS's main media strategy to inflict maximum horror, shock and attention by, in Kraidy (2017, p. 1203) terms, 'creating infectious cultural forms that circulate globally, attract attention, and diffuse the effect of terror'. The video intends to make a strong threatening statement to deter what IS assumes to be collusion with the *Kafir* enemy, i.e. 'Muslims siding with the enemy'. This is clearly reiterated by the fact that a list of names and photos of wanted 'crusader pilots' appears on the screen with a prize.

In addition to cinematic techniques, the video makes use of various connotative visual clues for further multimodal scaffolding of the main argument. This includes, for example, a number of rather crude visual metaphors, such as the flag of Jordan getting merged with the Israeli flag, connoting deep military (and by extension ideological) cooperation and partnership between Jordan, Israel and the USA. A key visual metaphor of the video is the appearance of a horse-riding sword-waving soldier in historical attire (Image 4) amidst the modern warfare and context. This is to make an intertextual reference to early Islam and Muslim wars fought and won by the Prophet Mohammed and his followers (*Sahaba*). It is also a reference to the Crusades and the upper-hand prowess of the Islamic Caliphate at that time. The visual of horse and knight (taken from the 2005 Hollywood movie *Kingdom of Heaven*<sup>5</sup>) integrated amidst modern and heavy military machines, such as tanks, reflects on the centrality of IS' discursive strategy to adamantly echo historical doctrines and medieval conflicts in constructing and representing its self-identity.

This video is one of the most telling examples of the macro-legitimatory argument put forward by IS systematically across various forms and events. That is, IS is the legitimate, powerful, modern force of Islam defending and expanding the Islamic caliphate against the invading, occupying, modern forces of non-believers, i.e. the US and its regional and global allies. The brutality is constructed as a legitimate reaction and a sign of power and determination. This steering argumentative scheme is pursued in every event and situation with varying degrees of detail. This emphasis on power, legitimacy and discipline also constitutes the main strategy to mobilise and recruit potential fighters and/or sympathisers across the world.





**Image 4.** A knight riding a horse and holding a sword.

Broadly speaking, in its visual representations of Self and Other, IS serves its interests by making persuasive moves and argumentative claims based on a certain body of ‘old knowledge’ (Van Dijk, 1998), e.g. the eternal conflict between Islam and the West and the projection of a modern version of a caliphate as a central camp for the Islamic side. Fighting against *taghut*, i.e. ‘apostates’, is a key ideological macro-argument in this war which can simply be applied to any person, group, country or community which is not considered part of the in-group. The in-group/out-group fault line is around the obvious lines of faith, i.e. non-Muslims, but it also includes Muslims of different sects, or in general Muslims who do not endorse IS. In fact, IS’ extreme Self and Other dichotomisation and uncompromising projection constitute a core element of its identity as a strong, unrelenting, determined army of ‘true faithful believers’. All the linguistic and multimodal resources of meaning-making in this video contribute to and support such an understanding. The analysis shows that the video is not just a depiction of wanton violence meant to terrorise the general public, it is also an indictment, an attempt to lay out the case to justify its actions and promote a resonating IS identity to its target audience and sympathisers.

## Conclusion

The analysis maintains that the potential resonance of discourses of jihadism in the case of IS is best explained at the intersection of digital and political levels, i.e. the ways in which new digital spaces of meaning-making across SMC have been taken up to propagate a socio-ideological discourse with roots in history, geopolitics and conflict on the ground. The observational account of the study reflects how IS members and/or supporters make use of the new communicative affordances in sharing, disseminating and re-distributing relevant content as well as forming chains of invisible networked publics. It also speaks to the way reliance on potential for virality and appealing to wider casual audiences is integrated in the quality and characteristics of the content produced by IS. By concentrating only on screen data and practices, the study has paid particular attention to the way a digital network of members/ supporters continues to circumvent the security organisations’ efforts to curb the spread of propaganda. In the meantime, the core

network is actively mobilised in providing the force to create a snowball effect for the videos to go viral, hence the research on various layers and types of context. It is argued that part of the problem is linked to the structural design of SMC technologies and the way the new mediation technology is meant to liberalise access to the production, distribution and consumption of discursive materials – in contrast to the gate-keeping regimentation practices of the so-called ‘old’ media. This is in line with Jawhar’s (2016, p. 76) claim that the ‘utilisation of social networking platforms has greatly contributed to the success of reaching out to the targeted individuals’. It can be argued that the specific techno-discursive structure of SMC together with the blurred boundaries between what can constitute a crime vs freedom of expression (or religious freedom) turns the digital context into a very ambivalent and effective platform for the dissemination of extremism.

In the meantime, the discursive power of IS Jihadi discourse is also about the nature of the identity constructs around projected jihadism. It is about the way certain religious, historical and political perceptions are forged into an imagined community which is to be formed through rings of boastful violence and defiance along the lines of a very explicit stand-off between the Self (the virtue, the rightful, the faithful) and Them (the evil, the *taghut*, the bully). A critical advantage for IS is its strategic oscillation appeal across various layers of audiences via the range of content produced, i.e. from pure Islamic teaching materials to hardcore terrorist operations manuals. It is this critical oscillation within the faithful that is strategically taken up and capitalised on by jihadi groups. IS, in particular, has been the most effective and successful articulation of this strategic spectrum of vagueness. Examining the visual representation of Self and Other constructs highlights the denotative systems in the video produced by IS, addressing its in-group audience’s perception of the crisis by symbolising the captive pilot in a wider geopolitical and ideological scenario, i.e. the resistance and legitimacy of forces of virtue against sinister evil. By making symbolic references to military Other actors, IS effectively legitimises its own violence and projects a powerful Self-identity against the perceived global hegemony.

In light of the analysis of social media practices and visual content, the paper sets forth IS’ sophisticated and up-to-date use of social media communication spaces and mostly successful propaganda in recruiting young members from around the world (as also explored by Blaker, 2015; p. 1; Rosiny, 2016, p. 15) by emphasising the key strategies around the projection of a religious and political identity against a backdrop of historical conflict. Showing that not only is IS a well organised, well planned, powerful state defending Muslims and working towards the ultimate goal of constructing an Islamist State, but that its uncompromising, violent, horrid actions are justified in the face of the enemy’s atrocities and invasion.

In regard to the research approach, this paper insists on the need to adapt and adopt research tools and classic notions to make the transition towards a inter disciplinary framework in response to the developments in mediation technologies. Given the current auspicious nuanced techno-discursive interactions, there is not much control of discursive resources, which in turn highlights the need for reconsideration in doing CDS on social media discourses. This would entail moves for less de-contextualised data analysis, the incorporation of more observational techniques, more attention to technological agents and specific attention paid to a global understanding of meaning-making.

## Notes

1. According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (February 2015).
2. The authors retract various bits of digital information in discussing accounts and archives here and elsewhere to avoid indirect promotion of them.
3. Shaaban is the 8th month in the Islamic calendar and is considered one of the meritorious months, with particular instructions in the Sunnah.
4. <https://video.foxnews.com/v/4030583977001/#sp=show-clips>
5. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0320661/videoplayer/vi2492727577?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_vi](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0320661/videoplayer/vi2492727577?ref_=tt_ov_vi)

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