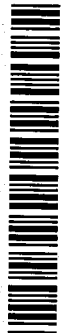


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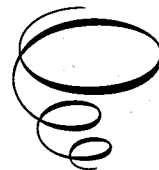
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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

SOCIAL MEDIA AND TERRORISM STUDIES:  
METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND  
OPPORTUNITIES

MOHAMMEDWESAM AMER\*

## The Participatory Web and Changes in Media Landscape

This paper presents conceptual discussions on social media and terrorism. It aims not only at mapping obstacles and barriers in researching social media and terrorism but also highlighting opportunities to face the challenges in the context of researching terrorism in social media. The growth and change of mass media communication in modern life has led to access to mass audiences and to diverse influences in almost all forms of social practice. The mass media has had and continues to have an impact on people's thoughts and constructions about subjects in either benevolent or malevolent discourses.<sup>1</sup> A broad perception is that the mass media industry functions as a powerful instrument to affect opinions in the public sphere by constructing meanings and discourses about events around people according to dominant hegemonies, ideologies, and interpretations through mechanisms and strategies of choices and processes of producing and constructing texts.<sup>2</sup>

\* The author wishes to acknowledge that this project has received funding from the *European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme* under grant agreement No [707482-MWDIR].

<sup>1</sup> Biok Behnam and Robabeh Moshtaghi Zenouz, "A Contrastive Critical Analysis of Iranian and British Newspaper Reports on the Iran Nuclear Power Program," *Systemic Functional Linguistics in Use* 29 (2008): 199.

<sup>2</sup> Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt, "The Mass Media, Democracy and the Public Sphere," *Talk on Television Audience Participation and Public Debate* (London:

KhosraviNik highlights that "media function as not only a link to reflect on what people think or believe but as a subliminal source of redefining, manipulating or creating ideologies of different types"; hence, analysis of media discourse is about the analysis of unequal representational powers.<sup>3</sup> This dynamic of impact in media and society interaction has changed with the evolution of the internet, communication technology, and digital media where people largely interact on online platforms.<sup>4</sup> Androutsopoulos argues, "In the *participatory Web era*, from the mid-2000s onwards, people draw on the infrastructure provided by blogs, social networking sites, media-sharing sites and wikis in order to both produce and consume Web content."<sup>5</sup> This infrastructure of the internet and the participatory web is not only a vital tool used to communicate on various issues but it also helps "individuals with ulterior intentions to promote violent ideologies, create havoc and spread fear amongst the general public," for instance, in the case of the so-called Islamic State.<sup>6</sup>

The development of digital media and internet has enhanced the use of a wide range of participatory, multimodal, and multimedia communication choices and practices. One form of these emerged choices is social media, which relies basically on ubiquitously accessible communication

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Routledge, 1994), 9-35; Denis McQuail, *Mcquail's Mass Communication Theory* (New York: Sage publications, 2010); Robin L. Nabi and Mary Beth Oliver, *The Sage Handbook of Media Processes and Effects* (New York: Sage Publications, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Majid KhosraviNik, "British Newspapers and the Representations of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Immigrants between 1996 and 2006," *Centre for Language in Social Life* (Lancaster: Lancaster University, 2008): 8; Majid KhosraviNik, "Macro and Micro Legitimation in Discourse on Iran's Nuclear Programme: The Case of Iranian National Newspaper Kayhan," *Discourse & Society* 26, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Siobhan McGrath, "The Impact of New Media Technologies on Social Interaction in the Household," *Electronic Culture and Social Change* (2012); Daniel Miller et al., *How the World Changed Social Media* (London: UCL Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Iannis Androutsopoulos, "14 Online Data Collection," *Data Collection in Sociolinguistics: Methods and Applications* (2012): 236.

<sup>6</sup> Jasmine Jawhar, *Terrorists' Use of the Internet: The Case of Daesh* (Kuala Lumpur: SEARCCT, 2016); Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (2015); Charlie Winter, *An Integrated Approach to Islamic State Recruitment* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2016).

technology, wireless and mobile technology, and web-based applications. Social media has become embedded and present in almost every aspect of our social life.<sup>7</sup> It has become a source of information about people and world events.<sup>8</sup> The concept of social media has been debated, as we will see in the next section.

### Social Media Conceptions and Changes in Media Landscape

Social media has been viewed as a group of digital platforms and applications used by groups of people or individuals for their objectives.<sup>9</sup> In these platforms, people actively participate, share their opinions and experiences about issues around them. Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content."<sup>10</sup> However, social media is not limited to computer-internet-based platforms; it is also related to mobile phone technologies and apps, especially in smart phones. In their study on social media and Afghanistan, Niamatullah Ibrahim, et al. refer to "the mobile phone technologies, such as ringtones and Bluetooth because similar to social media these have been used in Afghanistan to share various content and information."<sup>11</sup>

As opposed to the linear source-message-audience flow of traditional media, KhosraviNik views social media as the communicative affordances they provide at the intersection of mass and interpersonal communication.<sup>12</sup> He further considers social media communication as

<sup>7</sup> Nick Couldry and José Van Dijck, "Researching Social Media as if the Social Mattered," *Social Media+ Society* 1, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Shadi Ghajar-Khosravi et al., "Quantifying Salient Concepts Discussed in Social Media Content: An Analysis of Tweets Posted by Isis Fangirls," *Journal of Terrorism Research* 7, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Carlsson 2010 cited in Minavere Vera Bardici, "A Discourse Analysis of the Media Representation of Social Media for Social Change-the Case of Egyptian Revolution and Political Change" (Master's thesis, Malmo University, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 53, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Niamatullah Ibrahim et al., *Social Media and Articulation of Radical Narratives in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Majid KhosraviNik, "Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (Sm-Cds)," *Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (2017): 1.

an electronically mediated communicative paradigm across any electronic platforms, spaces, sites, and technologies in which users can: (a.) work together in producing and compiling content; (b.) perform interpersonal communication and mass communication simultaneously or separately – sometimes mass performance of interpersonal communication and; (c.) have access to see and respond to institutionally (e.g. newspaper articles) or user-generated content/ texts.

McKelvey considers social media as algorithmic media that "control technologies in all sorts of media and information systems, dynamically modifying content and function through these programmed routines."<sup>13</sup> KhosraviNik elaborates on how the algorithmic regimentation of discursive content in social media technologies impacts the politics of perception and representation in the participatory web.<sup>14</sup> Milan explains that "these algorithms profile users on the basis of their behaviour and select, rank, and personalize content according to user data."<sup>15</sup> These views and others highlight a major consensus in referring social media to online platforms and applications and the enhancement of people's interaction.<sup>16</sup> In the processes there has been a change in the way they communicate, socialize, perceive, and produce information or contents basically online. The next section highlights some dimensions of the changes and shifts in social media.

The new technologies and the evolution of the internet have without doubt changed communication from a one-way process to a multi-way process. There have been drastic changes enabled by ICT and leading to new social media trends.<sup>17</sup> As a form of digital (new) media, social media have introduced new communication patterns, diversified communication content, created new forms of expression, fostered freedom of expression,

<sup>13</sup> Fenwick Robert McKelvey, "Algorithmic Media Need Algorithmic Methods: Why Publics Matter," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 39, no. 4 (2014): 598.

<sup>14</sup> Majid KhosraviNik, "Social Media Techno-Discursive Design, Affective Communication and Contemporary Politics," *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Stefania Milan, "When Algorithms Shape Collective Action: Social Media and the Dynamics of Cloud Protesting," *Social Media+ Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 3.

<sup>16</sup> Mariam El Ouiridi et al., "Social Media Conceptualization and Taxonomy: A Lasswellian Framework," *Journal of Creative Communications* 9, no. 2 (2014); Varinder Taprial and Priya Kanwar, *Understanding Social Media* (London: Bookboon, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Paul Hopper, *Understanding Cultural Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge : Polity, 2007).

and stimulated wide participation and collaboration, allowing citizens from diverse walks of life to have an opportunity to convey their views, challenge social norms, and affect societal changes.<sup>18</sup>

Social media has turned into multi-functional systems and people's role has changed from receptive to productive. KhosraviNik points out that "mass media as organized mechanisms and infrastructures for channeling communication have turned into multifaceted, multi-functioned systems with pluri-directional flows of content," especially after the quick growth and emergence of digital practices in social media.<sup>19</sup> This changes the role of people from being passive (receptive) to being positive (productive) and thus the discursive power of social media. As Jenkins et al. put it, "We are moving away from a world in which some produce and many consume media, toward one in which everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced."<sup>20</sup> In this sense, "the increase of social media usage also marks a shift from media consumers and passive observers to content creators."<sup>21</sup>

Social media includes more and multiple actors. Internet communication includes multiple actors with limited or unlimited sources as in old media, e.g. newspapers, radio. Here is a clear interaction that strengthens individual and group interests and participation.<sup>22</sup> This refers to the nature of social media as interactive, multimodal, and user-centered opposite to the unidirectional nature of message flows in traditional media.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Bardici, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Majid KhosraviNik, "Critical Discourse Analysis, Power, and New Media Discourse," *Why Discourse Matters: Negotiating Identity in the Mediatized World* (2014): 287.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Jenkins et al., *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (MIT Press, 2009), 12; Jan H. Kietzmann et al., "Social Media? Get Serious! Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 54, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Anton Törnberg and Petter Törnberg, "Muslims in Social Media Discourse: Combining Topic Modeling and Critical Discourse Analysis," *Discourse, Context & Media* 13 (2016): 134.

<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Gerhards and Mike S. Schäfer, "Is the Internet a Better Public Sphere? Comparing Old and New Media in the USA and Germany," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 1 (2010): 145.

<sup>23</sup> Majid KhosraviNik and Johann W. Unger, "Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media: Power, Resistance and Critique in Changing Media Ecologies," *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (2016): 211.

Social media has changed the communication processes and information access. Social media gives the opportunity to share information, ideas, news, ideologies, discourses, etc. on local, regional, and international levels or at various degrees of them. Information can be now accessed, gathered, and examined by many online engines (e.g., Google), applications on cell phones, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. This has shortened the distance of communication and given the people opportunities to discuss news and issues easily.<sup>24</sup> The change of media communication to social media has led to a change of media content flow and distribution processes from "certain privileged producers to ordinary consumers."<sup>25</sup> Kaplan and Haenlein outline that the emergence of social media has enhanced a participatory communication, catering to the flow of messages from many-to-many, and together with the concept of 'user-generated content,' Web 2.0 has given rise to social media.<sup>26</sup>

In social media, there is no authority for editors, as we observe in mainstream media—such as newspapers, TVs, and radios—and editors do not filter information streamed or posed on social media platforms. People share whatever they want at the time they want in the way they want. However, this has changed to some extent. In the same vein, Berger and Morgan clarify that "while there are legitimate debates about the bounds of free speech and the complex relationship between private companies and the public interest, some have argued against suspending terrorist social media accounts on the basis that suspensions are not effective at impeding extremist activity online."<sup>27</sup>

In the light of these changes and shifts of mainstream media to social media, there is a change in the communication practices and patterns presented by social media. Social media has made some affordances to its practitioners and transfers audiences from receptive roles to productive roles—from viewers to (co)creators of contents on social media platforms. The importance of social media can be seen in the light of the interplay between the social media platforms and applications on one hand and terrorism on the other in the mobilization of people to join certain radical, social, and political or terrorist movements.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 206-07.

<sup>26</sup> Kaplan and Haenlein.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathon M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The Isis Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of Isis Supporters on Twitter," *The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World* 3, no. 20 (2015): 2.

### Terrorism Definitions and Context in Media and Communication

The term 'terrorism' is vague and problematic, as we will see in this section. In its etymology, the term terrorism from Latin *terrere* means "frighten", and the French suffix *isme* signifies "to practice."<sup>28</sup> Each one defines terrorism from a certain aspect. "Socio-political realities, religious affiliation, and cultural identification play into an individual's definition, creating difficulties in expression within universally understood terms."<sup>29</sup> As such, the term 'terrorism' is considered and applied variously according to multiple ideological and political interpretations and objectives, which are different from one another, and to the target audience. For example, the Syrian government refers to rebellions or revolutionary actions that seek changes in the current political regime as terrorism, while opposition parties consider the actions as inevitable to revolution and patriotism and they are regarded as actions of justice and the fight for freedom. The Palestinian Islamic movement Hamas considers its military actions as patriotic and heroic acts of resistance against the Israeli occupation of Palestine while these actions are viewed as terroristic in the eyes of Israel. On the other hand, Israel views its actions against Palestinians as defensive, but Palestinians and their supporters see the killing of Palestinians as terrorism. These examples bring to light whether terrorism is defined by actions and performances of terror or if it also has to do with the individuals doing those actions and what kinds of groups are involved. Context matters. In this vein, terrorism is multifaceted and perceived and defined respectively.<sup>30</sup> There are, however, different definitions in the relevant literature.

The U.S. Department of Defense (2012) defines terrorism as "the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to implant and spread fear so as to coerce or politically influence

<sup>28</sup> J. Walli, "The Psychology of Detachment and Hyperreality: Analyzing Isis Propaganda," *Department of Media and Journalism* (2015): 11.

<sup>29</sup> Cassandra Rausch, "Fundamentalism and Terrorism," *Journal of Terrorism Research* 6, no. 2 (2015): 28.

<sup>30</sup> Omar Lizardo, "Defining and Theorizing Terrorism: A Global Actor-Centered Approach," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 14, no. 2 (2008); Luke Johns, "Terrorism: A Definition and Analysis," *E-International Relations Students* (February, 2014), <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/02/09/terrorism-a-definition-and-analysis/>; Alexander Spencer, "Questioning the Concept of 'New Terrorism'," *Peace, Conflict and Development* (2006).

governments and/or citizens in the pursuit of goals that are usually political."<sup>31</sup>

The U.N. Security Council, drawing on international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism in its Resolution 1566 (2004), referred to terrorism as

criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.<sup>32</sup>

The European Union defines terrorism for legal/official purposes in Art.1 of the Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism (2002). This provides that terrorist offenses are certain criminal offenses set out in a list comprised largely of serious offenses against persons and property which, given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or an international organization when committed with the aim of seriously intimidating a population or unduly compelling a government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic, and social structures of a country or an international organization.

The Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism views terrorism as

Any act or threat of violence, whatever its motives or purposes, that occurs in the advancement of an individual or collective criminal agenda and seeking to sow panic among people, causing fear by harming them, or placing their lives, liberty or security in danger, or seeking to cause damage to the environment or to public or private installations or property or to occupying or seizing them, or seeking to jeopardize national resources.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> William E. Gortney, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (United States: Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication, 2012), 241.

<sup>32</sup> "Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004) on Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts," United Nations and the Rule of Law, <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/blog/document/security-council-resolution-1566-2004-on-threats-to-international-peace-and-security-caused-by-terrorist-acts>.

<sup>33</sup> James J. F. Forest, *Intersections of Crime and Terror* (London: Routledge, 2013), 111.

In the light of these definitions there seems to be a consensus on a clear and widely recognized definition. "As universally accepted, terrorism is socially constructed with the use of violence to create panic, intentionally aimed at civilians and non-combatants targets, for political, religious, and ideological reasons, to gain ultimate publicity for the cause of the terrorists."<sup>34</sup> The above-mentioned conceptions present terrorism as violent and criminal acts against civilians, one or more targets, conducted by an individual or a group.

Terrorist attacks, and terrorists themselves, have largely been investigated by media practitioners and journalists. In this vein, one can posit that the media can be a major source of information about terrorism and terrorist organizations and their actions, both local and international.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, terrorists use the media to publicize their opinions and ideologies and market themselves to a wide range of audiences. Matusitz considers terrorism "a communication process. It is disseminated through public communication and publicized through mass communication."<sup>36</sup> He further explains that "terrorism is a communicative act because it is aimed at a very large audience beyond the direct targets". For this interaction between media and terrorism, I refer to a definition of mediatization of terrorism presented by Stańco-Wawrzyńska as "a process, in which terrorism yields its autonomy, becomes dependent on mass media in realisation of its basic and essential (central) functions and is permanently shaped by an interaction with media."<sup>37</sup>

Such a definition reveals that the relationship between media and terrorism is complex.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, Rivera sees the relationship as

<sup>34</sup> Walli, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Spencer, "Lessons Learnt. Terrorism and the Media," *Wiltshire: Arts and Humanities Research Council Polaris Publishing House* (2012); Marjolein Camphuijsen and Esther Vissers, "Terrorism and the Mass Media: A Symbiotic Relationship?," *Social Cosmos* 3, no. 1 (2012); Danny Schechter, *Media Wars: News at a Time of Terror* (Lahman: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Peter van der Veer and Shoma Munshi, *Media, War, and Terrorism: Responses from the Middle East and Asia*, vol. 41 (Hove: Psychology Press, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication* (Newbury Park: Sage, 2012), 35.

<sup>37</sup> Alicja Stańco-Wawrzyńska, "Terrorism and Media—An Interactive Modelling of a Message: The Research Framework," *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 46, no. 1 (2017): 9.

<sup>38</sup> See Jean Paul Marthoz, *Terrorism and the Media: A Handbook for Journalists* (UNESCO Publishing, 2017); Paul Wilkinson, "The Media and Terrorism: A Reassessment," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 2 (1997).

symbiotic.<sup>39</sup> The objectives of the terrorist groups on social media can be summarized, but not limited, to gaining legitimacy; respect and sympathy; publicity and a recognition of motives. In this context, the media coverage of terrorist attacks and actions can be seen in various contributions to terrorists' objectives:

1. (Re) place/position of news about terrorist attacks as the first or highest level in the agenda-setting of major news broadcasts worldwide.<sup>40</sup>
2. The celebrity and popularization of terrorist organization by focusing on certain terrorist persons.<sup>41</sup> For example, Al-Qaeda as an organization has been widely linked with Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar.
3. "Spectacularization" of terrorist attacks.<sup>42</sup>

Such media contributions to terrorism can possibly lead to increasing attention to terrorist and violent actions in the mass media. Stańco-Wawrzyńska claims that "terrorists wish to gain media attention, and they aim at presenting their message to as wide as possible range of recipients — they not only consider a place and a schedule of the event, but they also choose a suitable form of it. These actions enable them to get more media attention to acts of terror."<sup>43</sup>

With the advancement of technological development and digital media, it could be said that terrorism has taken new dimensions and advantages in mediation, publicity, and popularity. Terrorism is not isolated from the technological evolution and the development of media and social media as such. The changes in the mainstream media landscape have advanced the circulation of terrorism. The publicity surrounding horrifying and violent actions on social media means they are spread around the world. "The use

<sup>39</sup> Javier Delgado Rivera, "The Symbiotic Relationship between Western Media and Terrorism," *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs* (2016); Peresin Anita, "Mass Media and Terrorism," *Medij. istraž* 13, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>40</sup> Stańco-Wawrzyńska, 329.

<sup>41</sup> Chris Rojek, "Celebrity," *Wiley Online Library* (2001),

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781118989463.wbeccs036>;

Olivier Driessens et al., "Personalization According to Politicians: A Practice Theoretical Analysis of Mediatization," *Communications* 35, no. 3 (2010).

<sup>42</sup> Stańco-Wawrzyńska, "Terrorism and Media—An Interactive Modelling of a Message," 330

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



of communications media by terrorist organizations is not new, but the technological tools available in recent years has affected the nature of their activities and thereby changed the nature of the perceived threat they pose.<sup>44</sup> The social media affordances have eased the ways and styles of disseminations and distributions of terrorist materials

### Interplay between Social Media and Terrorism: The Case of the Islamic State

The availability and affordances of social media can be seen as tools with which to spread terrorism. The development of new technologies plays a major role in facilitating the roles of the terrorists, the radical movements to mobilize their ideas and the recruitment of new people and true believers.<sup>45</sup> Niglia, Al Sabaileh, and Hammad state that "the internet has created a portal in which access to videos and images of the extremist organisations is instant."<sup>46</sup> In this way, social media is a tool that spreads unacceptable views and ideas to "people who would not otherwise be reachable using conventional methods." Further Niglia, Al Sabaileh, and Hammad explain that social media "provide connectivity, virtual participation and an echo-chamber for like-minded extremist views."<sup>47</sup>

Terrorists use the internet to disseminate their ideology, appeal for support, spread fear and alarm among their foes, radicalise and recruit new members, provide instruction in tactics and weapons, gather intelligence about potential targets, clandestinely communicate, and support terrorist operations.<sup>48</sup>

Klausen demonstrates that

<sup>44</sup> Adam Hoffman and Yoram Schweitzer, "Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (Isis)," *Strategic Assessment* 18, no. 1 (2015): 71.

<sup>45</sup> Alessandro Niglia, Amer Al Sabaileh, and Amani Hammad, *Countering Terrorism, Preventing Radicalization and Protecting Cultural Heritage: The Role of Human Factors and Technology*, vol. 133 (IOS Press, 2017); Maura Conway, Lee Jarvis, and Orla Lehane, *Terrorists' Use of the Internet: Assessment and Response*, vol. 136 (2017); Janis Just, *Jihad 2.0: The Impact of Social Media on the Salafist Scene and the Nature of Terrorism* (Anchor Academic Publishing, 2015); Séraphin Alava, Divina Frau-Meigs, and Ghayda Hassan, *Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media: Mapping the Research* (UNESCO Publishing, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> Niglia, Al Sabaileh, and Hammad, 133.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Jenkins 2011, cited in Just, *Jihad*, 40.

the jihadist insurgents in Syria and Iraq use all manner of social media apps and file-sharing platforms, most prominently Ask.fm, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, PalTalk, kik, viper, JustPaste.it, and Tumblr. Encryption software like TOR is used in communications with journalists to obscure locational information.<sup>49</sup>

This section discusses the interplay between social media and terrorism, mainly how terrorist movements/groups use social media. I refer briefly to the Islamic State as a case study. This paper is part of a bigger project on social media and terrorism.<sup>50</sup>

IS is a very active user of social media. They use every possible means to disseminate their materials and exploits social media platforms, e.g., video-sharing sites YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and Ask FM, and mobile apps, e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram.<sup>51</sup> With the variety of produced and disseminated materials all over social media platforms and mobile apps, one can posit that IS's messages, contents and materials can become distorted or shapeless. However, Winter claims that "despite the scale of the operation, the underlying strategic message of its propaganda is tightly controlled."<sup>52</sup> IS disseminates religious edicts, battlefield updates, and specific threats through official platforms that can reach sympathizers and new audiences via social media (TRAC 2014). IS's social media propaganda has been successful. Liang states that in such a way, "today, IS has brought cyber jihad to a whole new level, evolving from static websites, chat forums, and online magazines to making efficient use of today's interactive and fast-paced social media platforms."<sup>53</sup> Hoffman and Schweitzer suggest that IS's primary innovation on social media is "its role in transforming ISIS from yet another Islamic fundamentalist terrorist organization into a global brand name that features prominently in the public discourse in the West, as well as in the Muslim world."<sup>54</sup>

The variety and the speed of circulation of IS's materials have not only attracted scholars across disciplines but also challenged research

<sup>49</sup> Klausen, 1.

<sup>50</sup> The project is entitled *Media Warfare and the Discourse of Islamic Revival: The Case of the Islamic State (IS)*.

<sup>51</sup> Christina Schori Liang, "Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda," *GSCP Policy Paper*, no. 2 (2015); Hoffman and Schweitzer, "Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (Isis)"; Winter, *An Integrated Approach to Islamic State Recruitment*.

<sup>52</sup> Winter, 9.

<sup>53</sup> Liang, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Hoffman and Schweitzer, 72.

methodologies and theories. In this context, this next section highlights the methodological challenges that I am facing in analyzing the IS's social media practices as a part of the project mentioned above. One of the challenges is the data collection basically from YouTube as a social media platform, as we see in the following section

### Challenges and Research Operationalizations

This section is structured by first describing the variety of social media data produced by IS and second by the procedures that I follow in collecting data from the YouTube platform. Third is to demonstrate the challenges and fourth sub-section proposes procedures to face the challenges.

There are varieties of terror data. The IS produces different types of materials and contents. These are widely circulated and disseminated over social media platforms. IS's materials include, but are not limited to, instant messaging, high quality movies, online magazines, etc. IS produces and circulates materials written mainly in Arabic "though the group's multilingual repertoire is expanding."<sup>55</sup> The IS Media Centre, established in 2014 (known as al-Hayat), produces a digital magazine called Dabiq. It is published in English, German, Russian, and French to target Western audiences.<sup>56</sup> Another IS media outlet is called Mu'assassat al-Furqan (Foundation of Al-Furqan). It produces and releases videos such as those showing the beheadings of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and David Haines.<sup>57</sup> Winter demonstrates that "every day, Islamic State propagandists circulate more than 38 units of official propaganda—videos, photo reports, da'wa materials, posters, magazines, radio programs, news bulletins and so on."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Winter, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Bill Gertz, "New Al Qaeda Group Produces Recruitment Material for Americans, Westerners," *Washington Free Beacon* (2014).

<sup>57</sup> Erin Marie Saltman and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2014).

<sup>58</sup> Winter, 9.

### Data Collection Procedures

The focus of the current project is primarily on YouTube videos released or produced by the IS.<sup>59</sup> In collecting YouTube videos published, released or uploaded by IS or its members, I searched all IS-related materials on YouTube using the following keywords: Islamic State, Iraq, Syria, nation, and martyr. The first search used the English words while the second search used the Arabic words in Latin and Arabic alphabet Daesh, داعش, Uma, أمة, Shahada, شهيد. These keywords are fairly basic terms that possibly occur to any researcher interested in publications produced or released by terrorists and jihadists. This study aims to observe all YouTube materials in English and Arabic published by the IS; in other words, to collect all information that can be possibly collected when identifying YouTube channels or videos that post, distribute and disseminate IS's videos. The steps involved are as follows:

- Search the YouTube website for IS channels and accounts
- Check when the group(s) was created and if it has been removed
- Identify the accounts subscribing to the specific channels determined in the sample and check their activities. This does not mean each subscriber is supportive of the channel. Activities include sharing, distributing, arguing the contents of the videos, interaction with other actors, etc. This could also include the situation facets proposed by Herring and Androustopoulos: "friending and likings."<sup>60</sup> In the case of YouTube channels, it is joining, liking, commenting, sharing, tagging, editing, and cutting parts of 'original' long videos into small parts. These social media practices, which can produce discourse(s) jointly among social actors, reflect "in part, new affordances made available by new communication technologies."<sup>61</sup>

The audience and groups of terrorist movements' *virtual* fighters, sympathizers, supporters, proponents, etc. cannot be ascertained or counted. In a network of social media platforms, some users get engaged

<sup>59</sup> The project is entitled 'Media Warfare and the Discourse of Islamic Revival: The Case of the Islamic State (IS)'

<sup>60</sup> Susan C. Herring and Jannis Androustopoulos, "Computer-Mediated Discourse 2.0," *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis 2* (2015): 130.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

intensively in supporting specific movements while others prefer to observe or avoid disclosing their information and sympathy. Klausen clarifies that

website managers in back offices integrate the twitter feeds of frontline fighters with YouTube uploads and disseminate them to wider audiences. These back-office managers are often wives and young female supporters. It makes little difference if they are working from Raqqa or from Nice. It may be that as phone and Internet access deteriorate on the ground, the insurgents are relying on disseminators outside the war zone to spread their messages.<sup>62</sup> Neumann demonstrates that "according to ICSR's latest estimate, the total now exceeds 20,000 – of which nearly a fifth were residents or nationals of Western European countries."<sup>63</sup>

IS accounts and channels are suspended or removed by YouTube administrators. The search on YouTube for IS's channels shows that 79 IS YouTube Channels were shut down by YouTube administrators. Once we click on any of the links of the channels, we find this sentence "This account has been terminated for violating YouTube's Community Guidelines."<sup>64</sup> Some videos had been available on YouTube and researchers or scholars were able to access these videos but because of the YouTube's policies, these materials were removed. For example, Al-Tamimi (2013) accessed a YouTube video on April 8, 2013, but this video has since been removed.<sup>65</sup> The observation shows that YouTube has removed IS videos for violating its guidelines.

The observation shows that IS uses Google Drives that include publications and materials, as is the case with an archive created by an account called 'Abu Al-dardaa Al-Masri' on 29.05.2017 and 30.05.2017. However, the observation shows that some Google Drives request permission for access. IS materials have been traced and tracked by an

<sup>62</sup> Klausen.

<sup>63</sup> Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence* 26 (2015).

<sup>64</sup> "Policies and Safety," YouTube, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/intl/en-GB/yt/about/policies/#community-guidelines>

<sup>65</sup> See note 7, <http://www.meforum.org/3697/islamic-state-iraq-al-sham;> "Announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham: Speech by the Commander of the Believers Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, May God protect him," uploaded on April 8, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HPQxA3catY>, accessed August 31, 2013.

*ambiguous* user named "Shiner." The IS Hunter account states that "11. Utilizing Cropped videos & logo replacement for IS video."<sup>66</sup> This website included IS clips on targeting places. Also, one example video from this channel shows IS fighters burning an already dead man's face.<sup>67</sup> Such observations challenge what Winter stated in his paper:

At the time of writing, for example, there are official propaganda channels operating in no less than nine languages, from Arabic and Turkish to German and Italian, and news bulletins are circulated like clockwork in Arabic, English, Turkish, French, Uyghur and Russian (and occasionally in Bengali and Bosnian, too). All official materials—which are invariably produced by one of Islamic State's 48 propaganda units—are uniformly branded with homogeneous iconography and shared anashid (jihadist chants), something that implicitly, and misleadingly, reinforces the organisation's claims that it's a contiguous, centrally planned "state."<sup>68</sup>

Searching the YouTube website using the keywords specified above shows that there are no clear or obvious accounts for any channels or publications produced by IS members or sympathizers at the time of our search and observation (March 2018). This could relate to a voluntary change or deletion of IS accounts' names to avoid suspension or removal. Collier shows that "although ISIS propaganda videos are regularly banned from major social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter for their violent content, which includes beheadings, ISIS often uploads its videos to sites like Liveleaks, Pastebin, and the Internet Archive, where users are allowed to upload information anonymously."<sup>69</sup>

These videos are then shared through social media networks by ISIS supporters so even if they are deleted from major sites, they are still accessible to interested audience members. YouTube administrator policies pose a challenge in collecting data published by the IS. A search of keywords, in English, limiting the results only to videos by YouTube filter, shows 6,250 results.

As far as this project is concerned, all these results have been reviewed to exclude all materials that were not published by IS or its supporters.

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJpiMYz2HXuUbxrfQrDJ3wQ/videos> (site discontinued).

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHobc7silWE> (site discontinued).

<sup>68</sup> Winter, 9.

<sup>69</sup> Collier cited in William H. Allendorfer and Susan C. Herring, "Isis Vs. The Us Government: A War of Online Video Propaganda," *First Monday* 20, no. 12 (2015): 14.

This means that the observation does not include news reports made by news agencies, for example, *VOX*, *ICSVE*, *lectures by academics* or others, press conferences, *mocking materials of jihad or IS*, *songs praising the fight against IS*, *songs*, etc. The examples for each type of video mentioned are available but this information is retracted as it comprises sensitive materials that should not be disseminated. As an example of such exclusion, I refer to a news report/documentary called "The rise of ISIS" by VOX News. This report discusses in six minutes the historical background of the Islamic State. The remaining materials ( $n = 4$ ) are, in one way or another, in favor of IS ideologies, actions, and martyrdom and include videos calling for and praising individual or group martyrs and explicit calls to jihad and martyrdom.<sup>70</sup>

The search of keywords in Arabic, but in the Latin alphabet, and limiting the results only to videos by YouTube filter, shows 1,050 results. These materials are basically reports or documentaries on IS. The search of the keywords in Arabic, and limiting the results only to videos by YouTube filter, shows 11,000 results. Here the observation of these materials shows that there are no IS sources. Most of materials are published on the Iraqi interior conflict, Shia vs. Sunni Muslims. However, this is not a part of the analysis.

The results of data mining and observation indicate that due to the nature of social media and the participatory web and the transient fleetness and anonymous affordances of social media, it is practically impossible to trace specific sets of videos to any formally known IS group, institution or body. It is necessary to specify, observe, record, and locate sources of data, i.e., central propaganda organs/outlets like social media platforms or sources from where we can get data about IS. The source could be a social media platform like Facebook, Twitter or YouTube; online forums, either protected by password or open for public; mobile apps, peer-to-peer (Kik, Surespot, Telegram etc.), etc. Androutsopoulos suggests that observational data may [...] be used to provide guidance for further sampling.<sup>71</sup> Systematic observation forms a backdrop against which to select text samples. I argue that observation of the participatory platform is the first phase to get access to the important texts or materials as they happen and the way they happen to audiences, not as static set of texts. Focusing on

<sup>70</sup> M. Conway and L. McInerney, "Jihadi Video & Auto-Radicalisation: Evidence from an Exploratory Youtube Study," Retrieved August 16, 2010, <http://doras.dcu.ie/2253/>.

<sup>71</sup> Jannis Androutsopoulos, "Potentials and Limitations of Discourse-Centered Online Ethnography," *Language@ Internet* 5 (2008): 7.

online archives that gather publications and materials published by groups or their supporters is part of the affordance and availabilities on the web. However, these archives do not show how the materials are used, distributed, gathered, or disseminated on social media platforms. In case there is no way to find specific accounts to collect certain types of data, for example, videos, pictures, texts, etc., I suggest focusing on certain genres of data.

The first step is to specify the genre of target data, e.g. videos, hashtags, pictures, or users. This step aims at determining the genre/type of the data to be collected according to the research questions and objectives. In CMC, Androutsopoulos distinguishes between CMC as 'text' or 'place' which are proposed by Milner.<sup>72</sup> He suggests that "CMC as text focuses on the vast archive of written language provided by the Internet. It implies a tendency towards screen-based data, a view of digital modes as containers of written language, and a preference for etic (researcher-oriented) rather than emic (participant-oriented) classifications and categories." He further explains that "a 'CMC as place' perspective might approach digital communication as a social process and CMC environments as discursively created spaces of human interaction, which are dynamically related to offline activities." He also distinguished between screen-based and user-based data collection in new media sociolinguistics. Screen-based data is produced and collected online by participants. User-based data is prompted by the researcher's activities and produced through their contact to CMC users. In relation to the current project, there is a focus on collection of distinct types of data, i.e., materials published by IS as they happen on social medial platforms.

It is essential to build and refine an archive/caveat of data gathered from certain social media platforms. Building an archive of all information gathered regarding YouTube videos or social media data is laborious. Since IS data is subjected to security control and website administrators, all data is to be saved and stored on the computer, and YouTube postings or posted pages should be saved as a PDF on the computer as well.

Content from social networking sites can be saved in PDF files, or relevant portions can simply be copy-pasted. Besides these more or less simple techniques, large portions of screen data can be *mined* by means of web

<sup>72</sup> Androutsopoulos, 4.

crawlers, application program interfaces (APIs), customised scripts or other resources.<sup>73</sup>

Also, all commentaries accompanying YouTube videos (if there are any) or social media posts can be downloaded by YouTube comment scraper or other possible software chosen by the researchers.<sup>74</sup> This step specifies and identifies certain YouTube channels, videos and other social media data. A clear notice about radical YouTube channels is that they are removed by YouTube administrators according to their contents. Thus, it is assumed that radicals take into consideration such policies and make their accounts unaffiliated.

### Conclusion

This paper discussed the main theoretical conceptualizations on communication studies and social media, terrorism studies and the interplay of these two through an analysis of IS. It presented the theoretical context of social media and terrorism research by focusing on conceptions on defining social media and terrorism and showing the interplay between the two sides. It explained the variety of terror data and procedures followed when collecting 'terror' data from social media. This explanation was followed by demonstrating certain challenges: 1) specifying the audience or co-creators, 2) YouTube policies, and 3) examining accounts for IS channels, members and sympathizers. The paper also presented opportunities to face the challenges: specifying and observing sources and certain genres of data and refining archives. The paper argued that an observatory approach is an essential step in researching terrorism on social media. This helps researchers specify the genres of data and the groups or platforms they want to focus on. This should be determined in relation to research questions and objectives.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> YouTube Comment Scraper, 2015, <http://ytcomments.klostermann.ca/>

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