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Media jihad: What PR can learn in Islamic State's public relations masterclass

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ABSTRACT

Islamic State (IS) has been vilified for its brutality and admired for the sophistication of its media productions. This conceptual paper argues that IS media is not propaganda in the western sense but rather propagation of a minoritarian 'take' on Islam. IS media are not simply fora for the gratuitous display of violence but rather venues for rational, strategic communication designed mainly for regional consumption. Global audiences are targeted, too, but media produced for them is less voluminous than that presented to populations in IS-controlled areas and surrounding regions. While Islamic State's diverse media output is not western-style public relations, the artifice and artefacts employed in the group's "media war" are not only relevant but also noteworthy for public relations professionals.

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1. Introduction

Islamic State's relentless combat-driven rise has been fuelled by a savvy media-driven war, fought not with bullets but with bulletins, not with rockets but with reports, not with tanks but with timely theological thought-pieces. Western audiences (and many Muslim ones) are appalled at videos depicting choreographed spectacles such as beheadings, immolations and the carrying out of punishments such as stoning. Yet the high-order production skills involved in mediated bloodletting seem very effective in reaching the predominantly young Muslim target audiences, judged by both social media responses and by migration to Islamic State controlled regions. Many Western analysts see the IS performances as mere propaganda. Yet the Islamic State media output is more than this, even though some aspects of propaganda as the West knows it are discernible.

Rather, IS media should be seen as a form of outreach designed to advance the cause of an extremist religious ideology and framed as Islamic. This outreach is based on dynamic integration of messaging on multiple media platforms, along with careful communication analysis and strategizing. These and other elements, while not new to public relations practice, deserve PR professionals' attention not only because of the expertise with which they are being implemented but also because of the turbulent context in which they are being deployed. It is noteworthy that while Islamic State is an emerging politico-religious entity that wants to publicise its brutalities and its victories, it also seeks to brand itself through communication as capable of operating the infrastructure of a state, such as health and social services. Therefore, there is a breadth to the IS media output that often is not recognized. For example, issue nine of the IS online magazine *Dabiq* includes not only an article (pp. 14–19) on "Conspiracy theory Shirk (the sin of idolatry)" with a picture showing "the blessed raid on the twin

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towers in New York” but also a feature (pp. 24–26) on “Heathcare in the Khilāfah (Caliphate), with a list showing how many operations, births and scans were carried out in one month at two IS hospitals.

At a time when ‘media war’ is being waged not only in the Middle East but also in eastern Europe (Ukraine and Russia) it is important to pay critical attention to the communication craft in use, not only as inherently worthy of study, but also because it appropriates public relations methods and strategies. Although Islamic State-friendly scholars warn of “bewitching media” (*Dabiq* 6, p. 39) that does not stop jihadist groups such as IS from using media extensively to promote their religious interpretations, trumpet their successes and excoriate their enemies. Often, their reportage offers highly topical analyses of what westerners would call terrorist events, such as an attack on a café in Sydney, Australia. These media productions show a mature appreciation of the levers of influence, stretching beyond the voyeuristic audience for beheading videos. By making advanced use of communication techniques to help attack the foundations of liberal societies, the full panoply of Islamic State’s jihadist media challenges western audiences, including public relations practitioners. IS has multiple media departments leading communication initiatives and responding adaptively to opponents’ counterblasts with detailed argumentation and confronting images. With Islamic State possibly “the wealthiest terror group in history” (Lock, 2014) and well able to fund its media activities, western communicators can no longer take for granted that activist use of media will be rudimentary and therefore relatively easily countered. PR people – as well as governments, NGOs and mass media workers – should take note.

IS’ media activity is salient because the quality, breadth and quantity of its implementation calls attention to some key elements vital to contemporary public relations practice. None are novel but all are important. It is their role in the deft delivery of tailored, topical messaging that renders them suitable for study, along with Islamic State’s media artifice *per se* and resultant artefacts. One element, discussed below, is an emphasis on visual communication. Others are audience-sensitive framing and targeting, brought to bear in consistent messaging across a range of platforms. This involves “synchronizing activities at local, regional and international level” (Magri, 2015, p. 7, in Maggioni & Magri, Eds., 2015). Bolt comments that

There is a tendency in the West to assume messages, such as those emanating from Islamic political groups, target either a single Western mass audience or a partisan, domestic population. But they identify and segment audiences for whom they cater messages. These are branded and delivered to diverse markets, sometimes locally, sometimes globally” (2012, p. 41).

2. Media jihad

As it battles on the ground, IS advances its media strategies with a constant on- and off-line output merging pre-modern religious ideology with 21st Century communication management. It has become known for its execution videos, where producers of a “theater of cruelty” make calculated use of “soft focus, slow fades, color saturation, superimpositions and carefully layered soundtracks” (Ibishi, 2015, para. 11). The goal is to intimidate enemies and to show supporters victories over “apostates” and “atheists” (Zelin, 2015, p.5). However, Western viewers recoiling in shock might not realize that “the beheadings are part of... IS media products... created and communicated according to a consistent strategy” (Lombardi, 2015; p. 98). The strategy guides a “media jihad” or war (Lombardi, 2015; p.98) targeting both local and international audiences. It complements an on-the-ground, battlefield-based “offensive jihad” (Baghdadi, A., cited in Bunzel, 2015; p.10).

In fact, Islamic State sees itself as engaged in a conflict that is more than merely physical: “It is a psychological war made of texts, images, iconographies that the organization intends for widespread distribution” (Magri, 2015, p. 7, in Maggioni & Magri (Eds., 2015)). A key aim is to craft “the perception of invincibility” (al-Ubaydi, Lahoud, Milton, & Price, 2014, p.86), because a message of victory “legitimizes ISIS” among potential fighters (Lewis, 2014; p. 12). Such strategic, cause-related messaging is relevant to public relations because of its persuasive intent. Therefore, this paper examines the IS media offensive, using both Jowett’s and O’Donnell’s (2012) 10-step framework for propaganda analysis and core Islamic concepts. Jowett and O’Donnell’s plan is designed for analysing propaganda rather than religious ideology, which is the essential character of Islamic State’s media content. However, in a thin field of recently elaborated potential methodologies, it stands out for its clarity and adaptability. In applying Islamic concepts the paper seeks to avoid positioning Islamic State’s media activity purely within a western schema, although the author acknowledges that as a European, he inevitably approaches the subject with cultural filters.

3. Jowett and O’Donnell’s analytical framework

Jowett and O’Donnell (2012) point out that their

schema makes it difficult to study propaganda in progress because the outcome may not be known for a long time. On the other hand, to study propaganda in progress enables the analyst to observe media utilization and audience response directly in actual settings (p. 290).

This paper, therefore, is an “in progress” study of how IS uses media and elicits desired audience responses. The 10 steps are

1. The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign.

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