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A multimodal mixed methods approach for examining recontextualisation patterns of violent extremist images in online media

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a multimodal mixed methods approach for exploring general recontextualisation patterns of violent extremist images in online media. Specifically, the paper reports on the preliminary findings of a preliminary study which investigates various patterns in the reuse of images which appear in ISIS's official propaganda magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* by others across various public online media platforms (e.g. news websites, social media news aggregates, blogs). Using a mixed methods approach informed by multimodal discourse analysis, and combined with data mining and information visualisation, the study addresses questions such as which types of images produced and used by ISIS in its propaganda magazines recirculate most frequently in other online media over time, on which types of online media these images reappear, and in which contexts they are used and reused on these websites, that is, whether the tone of the message is corporate (formal) or personal (informal). Preliminary findings from the study suggest different recontextualisation patterns for certain types of ISIS-related images of over time. The study also found that the majority of violent extremist images used in the sample analysis appear to circulate most frequently on Western news and politics websites and news aggregate platforms, in predominantly formal contexts.

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1. Introduction

The use of online media to distribute content produced by violent extremist groups is well documented by governments, think-tanks and large corporations alike. For example, the extremist organisation which refers to itself as Islamic State (referred to here as ISIS) uses the internet and social media on a constant basis for propaganda purposes (e.g. Farwell, 2014; Veilleux-Lepage, 2014; Archetti, 2015; Lombardi, 2015; Schmid, 2015; Milton, 2016; Rudner, 2017), relying to a large extent on visual and audio-visual media to spread its message (e.g. Zelin, 2015). However, effective means for understanding and thus countering the effects of online messages produced by violent extremist groups such as ISIS are still evolving (e.g. Bartlett and Reynolds, 2015).

In order to address this issue, this paper presents the findings of a pilot study which examines the nature of images produced by the violent extremist group ISIS, and how these images are used and

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reused in publicly available online media sites (e.g. news websites, blogs, social media news aggregates, Twitter). Specifically, we investigate which types of images from ISIS's official propaganda magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are used and reused by others across different public domains, and the nature of the sites in which those images reappear.

The longer term goal is to better understand the communication strategies employed by terrorist groups in their use of text and images in their propaganda materials, and the ways in which images produced by terrorist groups are contextualised and recontextualised across different public online media sites, with a view to developing effective strategies for countering those effects. This work is complementary to existing efforts to remove online violent extremist content.¹ As explained below, the study uses a mixed methods approach, which is informed by multimodal discourse analysis (i.e. analysis of text and images), and involves using data mining and information visualisation to explore various patterns in the reuse of violent extremist images. The background to this study is discussed below in relation to ISIS's official propaganda materials

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/05/facebook-twitter-google-microsoft-terrorist-extremist-content>.

and the multimodal mixed methods approach which is adopted. Following this, some preliminary findings of the study are discussed.

2. ISIS propaganda materials

The extremist organisation ISIS produces vast quantities of media output. Although most official ISIS media releases are in Arabic (Zelin, 2015, 85), some of ISIS's media output is also in other languages to reach non-Arabic speaking audiences, particularly Western audiences, with English the most common other language used (Zelin, 2015, 89). ISIS relies on imagery to a large degree, with 88% of its media releases being visual: i.e. 63% picture, 20% video, and 5% graphic (e.g. infographics, maps, etc.) (Zelin, 2015, 94).

At the forefront of internationally oriented output to legitimise its views, incite violence and influence potential foreign recruits and supporters are the professionally produced online magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, which are published in English and a number of other languages. From July 5, 2014 to July 31, 2016, ISIS produced fifteen issues of *Dabiq*. On September 6, 2016, the first issue of a new ISIS magazine, *Rumiyah*, was released. Subsequent issues of *Rumiyah* have been released on a more or less monthly schedule since then. As no further issue of *Dabiq* has been released since the first issue of *Rumiyah* appeared it seems most likely that *Rumiyah* has replaced *Dabiq* as the organisation's pre-eminent non-Arabic propaganda magazine. Together, these magazines therefore provide a continuous stream of carefully designed, 'official' ISIS propaganda spanning almost three years, which provide a rich resource of data on how ISIS propagates its world view and values and positions itself and its 'enemies' (Wignell et al., 2016, 2017a, 2017b; O'Halloran et al., 2016a).

Online versions of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are publicly available within a few days from their release date. The material in the magazines is thus readily available for use in mainstream, social and other media outlets. While the use of ISIS-related imagery in the organisation's magazines and other forms of (online) propaganda material, such as mobile apps and textbooks for children, blog posts, videogames etc., has received attention (e.g. Kovács, 2015; Olidort, 2016; Saber and Webber, 2016; Speckhard, 2015; Zelin, 2015), other studies have largely focussed on material distributed by ISIS and supporters and on social media (e.g. Conway, 2017; da Silva and Crilley, 2016; Droogan and Peattie, 2016; Ingram, 2016a, 2016b; Milton, 2016). The large-scale use and reuse of ISIS material, particularly images, across various public media sites has not been widely researched.

Earlier studies of patterns of image and text combinations across all issues of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* provide a baseline for understanding how images are contextualised by ISIS and for what purposes (Wignell et al., 2016, 2017a, 2017b; O'Halloran et al., 2016a). The results of previous analyses suggest that some images categories tend to be closely associated with certain article types in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* to achieve particular purposes. For example, images of 'martyrs' are found in the articles 'Among the believers are men' (i.e. stories paying homage to exemplary ISIS martyrs, see Table 2) for the purposes of verifying that the 'martyr' is real, illustrating his piousness and glorifying his deeds, thus inspiring others. In the current study, we examine which images are selected for reuse across different media sites and we analyse the accompanying text in order to determine the nature of these sites.

The multimodal approach (e.g. Jewitt, 2014), where both text and the images in online violent extremist materials are analysed, offers a new perspective for terrorism studies. For example, in a qualitative study of the content of the text of *Dabiq*, Kiefer et al. (2016) propose that the magazine is one of the leading media instruments used for radicalisation, especially of Western audiences. However, they analysed only text, arguing that images just

serve to support the text and do not contain any new information. Kovács, on the other hand, argues for the importance of "the interconnection of texts and images" where "the text is often an integral part of the image and the same applies vice versa" (Kovács, 2015, 67). Both *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are multi-semiotic productions which deploy combinations of text and images to construct various aspects of ISIS's world view and agenda. It is thus assumed here that the combinations of text and images and the contexts in which they appear will be more revealing than investigations of either text or images on their own. With this in mind, the selective appropriation and reuse of terrorist images necessarily involves the study of the text which accompanies those images, and the context of the message across different media sites.

The following section outlines the theoretical foundations of the multimodal mixed methods approach adopted in this study. The approach is then illustrated by means of a case study which examines how images which appear in ISIS's magazines are recontextualised across different online media platforms.

3. Theoretical framework: a mixed methods approach

The research framework adopted in this paper integrates the qualitative social semiotic approach of Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) with quantitative methods of data mining and information visualisation to examine how images are contextualised in English language versions of the online propaganda magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* (O'Halloran et al., 2016a, 2016b; Wignell et al., 2017b), and the recontextualisation of these images in online media. As such, the study is concerned with the challenge of integrating qualitative approaches to multimodal discourse analysis with quantitative methods of data mining and information visualisation outlined by O'Halloran et al. (2016b).

Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) (e.g. see Jewitt et al., 2016) is an approach that builds on Halliday's Systemic Functional Theory (SFT) (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014) for studying the use of sign systems (in this case, language and images), where texts, interactions and events are interpreted within the contexts of situation and culture (Halliday, 1978; Halliday and Hasan, 1985). Three of the key tenets of this approach are that (a) language and other semiotic systems are viewed as resources for making meaning; (b) meaning in language and other semiotic systems is realised through choices from sets of possible alternatives; and (c) language and other semiotic resources are structured according to the functions for which the resources have evolved to serve in society. In SFT, these functions are described in terms of 'metafunctions': (a) *ideational* meaning for construing our experience and knowledge of the world (i.e. experiential meaning) and making logical connections in that world (i.e. logical meaning); (b) *interpersonal* meaning for enacting social relations and expressing attitudes; and (c) *textual* meaning for organising meanings into coherent messages. The messages exchanged in any communication system are characterised in terms of options selected from these systems.

Another key concept from SFT that informs SF-MDA is the notion that social context is modelled through register and genre (e.g. Eggins, 1994; Martin, 1992, 2002; Martin and Rose, 2007; Martin and White, 2005). Register theory describes the impact of three key dimensions on the ways language is used in context. These three key dimensions, or register variables, are conceptualised as *field*, *tenor*, and *mode*. Field describes what a text is all about (i.e. experiential meaning); tenor is concerned with the ways social relations are enacted, that is, whether the tone of a message is formal or informal (i.e. interpersonal meaning), while mode is concerned with the role language plays in discourse, that is, whether it is written or spoken, and the channelling of

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