

Agnes Wangare Kimani, Rosalind Nyawira Macharia, and Samuel C. Kamau

Abstract

Cyberspace has emerged as a secure operational domain for Daesh, allowing for seamless communication, validation of their so-called Caliphate, radicalization efforts, recruitment, and the planning and execution of attacks. Despite the development of various counter-strategies aimed at disrupting these activities, Daesh has managed to consistently navigate around them, maintaining its covert influence over global audiences. This study delves into how Daesh has constructed its communication strategies by analyzing its communication infrastructure, propaganda techniques, visual manipulation, and distribution methods. It draws upon Manuel Castells' trilogy on network society, which underscores the significance of networks, identity, and information in today's world. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, data was gathered through the content analysis of Daesh's print and video media, alongside insights from expert practitioners. The findings show that Daesh utilizes complex language and visual manipulation, often twisting historical and religious narratives to sway its audience. Additionally, it employs a multifaceted dissemination strategy that harnesses advanced technologies and supportive networks to amplify its message and extend its global reach via secure, encrypted online platforms. In conclusion, the study asserts that the pillars of Daesh's communication strategy are ideological dominance, compelling narrative crafting, and the strategic use of technology. To effectively counter this influence, a comprehensive approach is warranted, including inundating online platforms with credible counter-narratives that challenge Daesh's ideology; revising legal frameworks to keep up with the fast-paced technological landscape that transcends borders; and promoting collaboration between security agencies and tech companies to dismantle Daesh's online presence.

Keywords: Strategy, cyber-jihad, Caliphate, countermeasures, propaganda, social media.

Introduction

The Daesh (*al Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi Iraq al-Sham* in Arabic and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in English), also known as Islamic State, is a Salafi *jihadist* militant group that follows a fundamentalist Wahhabi doctrine, which emphasises the literal interpretation of the Quran and a return to early Islam (Oosterveld et al., 2017). In 2014, a U.S.-led coalition launched 'Operation Inherent Resolve' against Daesh, which led to the loss of its territories in western Iraq and the capture of Mosul and Raqqa in 2017 (Bouzis, 2015). Daesh had to alter its *modus operandi* and move its operations to online spaces. The group has leveraged the Internet to disseminate propaganda, recruit, finance, and coordinate activities (Lakomy, 2021). It has developed a multi-faceted, relatively closed media strategy that undergoes periodic changes due to the various countermeasures (Cohen & Kaati, 2018). Additionally, Daesh employs various propaganda apparatuses to advance its agenda, which includes audio-visual, audio, *nasheeds*, bulletins, infographics, magazines, official statements, and leaflets. Daesh has also utilised social media applications that offer anonymity and end-to-end encryption to gain a global presence, such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, YouTube, and TikTok.

The group aligns its military and communication strategies with a centralised communication structure controlled at Daesh's core (Gibson, 2023). Daesh has custom-made its media productions to cater for target audiences of varying ages, nationalities, and social structures, thereby expanding its territories with a keen interest in Africa and forming alliances with clan militias (Lederer, 2022). In Africa, they have established several affiliates (*wilayats*), which include IS-Sinai, operating in Egypt and pledged allegiance in 2014; IS-Libya, which pledged allegiance in 2014, but after losing Sirte in 2016 to Libyan forces backed by the United States airstrikes it has transitioned from territorial governance to decentralised guerrilla warfare; IS-Sahel operates in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, exploiting regional instabilities to expand their influence and territorial control; IS West African Province (ISWAP), a splinter of Boko Haram operating in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Mali; IS Central Africa Province (ISCAP), formed from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and operating in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda; IS-Mozambique, split from ISCAP in 2022 and operates in Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique and IS-Somalia, which operates in the Miskaad mountain range in Puntland, Somalia, and hosts the Al-Karar office, a key financial and operational hub for the group (Hummel, 2020).

The effective deployment of communication strategies and exploitation of the online space has enabled Daesh to expand and build a strong global brand, thus continuing to pose a significant security threat. This persists against the backdrop of countermeasures designed to curtail Daesh's influence, such as

religious-based social identities enshrined in signs, images, and symbols. Additionally, Castells' notion of the 'culture of real virtuality' highlights the blurring of online and offline realities. Daesh has leveraged this blurring to create a virtual presence that extends into the real world, influencing individuals online and offline (Manuel & Gustavo, 2005). This has enabled the group to spread its ideology globally and outsmart countermeasures put in place by governments.

■ Literature review

▲ Evolution of communication strategies

Means of communication have continually evolved from cave paintings to text written on parchment to the Internet age and the emergence of social media. The development of technology and digital space has been transformative, leading to the democratisation of the media, placing individuals in control of content and distribution, and eliminating dependency on media organisations and governments (Reed, 2022). Terrorist groups have quickly adapted to new technologies, leading to sophistication in propaganda and professionalism in media operations and the deployment of effective strategic communication approaches. After the 9/11 attacks, terror groups shifted their communication infrastructure by establishing communication companies, producing high-quality publications, and using strategic communication as a weapon equal to military operations (Bockstette, 2009).

▲ Strategic communication

Strategic communication involves synchronising information across the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, leading to an understanding of the target audience, identifying channels, and promoting ideas through the conduit (Tatham, 2008). Messaging tactics, audience evaluation, distribution approaches, consistency, adaptability, and credibility are critical elements in strategic communication. Terror groups have exploited strategic communication elements to further their agendas; hence understanding how these elements are manipulated sheds light on the dark art of propaganda employed by Daesh.

▲ Daesh communication strategies

After the 9/11 attacks, there was a shift in the communication infrastructure for terror groups as they started owning media houses and publication companies to produce and disseminate propaganda (Mohamedou, 2017). They produced content to legitimise the *Caliphate* and build a strong brand, a strategy which became an essential tool for radicalisation and recruitment. These terror groups were able to reach out to large audiences and thus realised that strategic communication forms a weapon equal to conventional armed forces. Daesh published its first media item on 5 July 2014, which featured the Friday sermon by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declaring himself *Caliph* Ibrahim (Lakomy, 2021). Their focus then was on near-enemy rather than far-enemy and believed a physical *Caliphate* would attract

other regions to join them. However, with multiple defensive security operations, Daesh lost its physical foothold, prompting a transition in its operations to the virtual realm, which presents a more insidious and lethal threat (Gambhir, 2016).

Messaging tactics are pivotal in shaping perception, influencing decisions, and achieving predetermined objectives. In strategic communication, for messages to have a lasting impact on the targeted group, they should incorporate visual elements, have emotional appeal, exploit the power of storytelling, be consistent, and be timely (Volk & Zerfass, 2018). Daesh has used some of these tactics to effectively deploy their propaganda, attract followers, and create a perception of strength and invincibility.

▲ *Narrative formulation*

Additionally, at the center of Daesh's strategic communication messaging tactics is the formulation of narratives that provide alternative meaning, define social realities, create an Islamic utopian world, build identities, identify crises, and provide solutions (Kadivar, 2020). Most of Daesh's narratives constitute a web of ideological and political ambitions, and psychological manipulation that lure their target audiences to their camps. The group distorts the interpretation of Islamic teachings to legitimise actions and create a façade of divine endorsement and religious righteousness. These narratives are sometimes formulated by combining historical events, symbolism, mythology, and religious scriptures to create an illusion of credibility (Reed & Dowling, 2018). Narratives aid in the creation of a powerful ideological bond among followers, motivating them to commit to the propagated cause. Daesh narrative formulation is a strategic weapon that leverages the potential of a network society, constructing resistance identities as theorised in Manuel Castell's trilogy theory on power, identity, and a connected society (Manuel & Gustavo, 2005). Comprehending Daesh's narrative formulation strategies is essential for crafting effective counternarratives that appeal to the motivational triggers of targeted audiences.

▲ *Visual propaganda*

Moreover, in strategic communication, visual images, including infographics, religious symbols, maps, and icons, are utilised to simplify and summarise information. These visuals serve multiple purposes: ultra-violent images elevate the perceived emotional threat; logos establish brand authenticity; infographics indicate information credibility; graphic images turn the online spaces into terror sites; images of children perpetuate the group's lasting threat; and propaganda of the deed encourages revolution (Winkler et al., 2021). Daesh visual propaganda is becoming a strategic tool for ideological mobilisation and identity creation in a networked world, as described by Castell's trilogy theory (Castells, 2011). Understanding Daesh's image strategy is fundamental in devising a comprehensive and targeted approach to counter its influence and inform counternarratives.

▲ Target Audience

Target audience identification and analysis are crucial in strategic communication to determine people's expectations, triggers, attitudes, and cultures to customise propaganda messages to suit motivational needs. Daesh's propaganda campaigns usually contain multiple narratives to cater to varying audiences with emphasis on its packaging, release time, language used, and distribution channels (El Ghamari, 2017). These propaganda texts emotionally manipulate different target audiences to elicit immediate action. For instance, in Daesh's spaces, women and children are seen as a sign of continuity and have been highlighted in their propaganda materials as critical elements of the *Caliphate* (Cohen & Kaati, 2018). Daesh manipulates its audiences through segmented messaging, identity formulation, and emotional manipulation, reflecting on the core dynamics of Castell's trilogy theory.

▲ Media Conduit

Using a credible conduit is vital in ensuring that the message reaches the target audience and achieves the desired outcome. Terror groups have established and resourced several media houses producing print, audio, and visual content to aid in their communication agendas. Daesh established the *Al-Furqan* Institute for Media Production as its official media in 2006 (Kirazoluğu, 2020). Over the years, security agencies have conducted operations targeting Daesh media assets and personnel. For instance, *Operation Glowing Symphony* of 2016 crippled the group's media outfit. However, the group regained its media foothold through its networked virtual community, achieving its goals in the shadows of the Government's counterterrorism efforts, hence the need to understand its current media architecture.

▲ Social media applications

Social media applications offering anonymity, wide audience reach, and end-to-end encryption are preferred by Daesh in their communication. They have utilised applications such as Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok to achieve a global appeal. These applications offer chat rooms and channels to accommodate large group communications, as well as guarantee the anonymity of participants (Weimann & Vellante, 2021). With the threat morphing to online spaces, governments and social media application companies have collaborated toward content moderation and monitoring of radical groups. However, Daesh has been able to circumvent the countermeasures in place and continues to communicate with its supporters via online spaces, hence the need to evaluate Daesh's communication approaches.

▲ Research gap

Previous studies focused on a specific platform, target audience or image front. Ingram (2018) evaluated Daesh English magazines for 2014-2017 and its implication on CT-CVE strategic communications. Al-Rawi (2018) analysed how Daesh has

exploited video games to spread its agenda. Mia (2019) assessed Daesh's use of Telegram platform for its propaganda. The current study sought to holistically examine Daesh's strategic communication approaches i.e. infrastructure, propaganda techniques, visual manipulation tactics, and dissemination strategies to inform countermeasures adaptable to the Kenyan context.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach and a case study design, utilising online data from *Jihadology.net* and *substack.com* for the text and video analysis of Daesh communication approaches. The research approach and design provided a rich contextual insight into Daesh's multi-layered communication strategies embedded in narrative formulation, target audience segmentation, and dissemination strategies. The data sources included *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazine, the *Al Naba* Newsletter, and videos from various *wilayats*. Experts' insights were gathered through face-to-face in-depth interviews with security practitioners in Nairobi with over five years of experience in Daesh-related operations. These data sources reflect Daesh's self-representation, ideological framing, and strategic messaging from its media arm for different periods, and triangulating it with expert insights for analytical depth.

The study employed a purposive sampling design, which ensured that specific artifacts illustrating the group's strategic communication approaches were analysed. Online media was disproportionately sampled due to differences in production quantity, and inclusion and exclusion criteria. Samples were selected based on special events e.g., religious events, and anniversaries. For instance, a media production would be analysed if it was produced just before or after a religious event like Christmas. Table 1.1 below summarises the sample size for each media production. Primary data was collected using code-sheet content analysis for Daesh's media products based on the research objectives, while an interview schedule was used to collect data from security practitioners exposed to Daesh's operations for at least five years. Secondary data was collected from published journal articles on Daesh's communication strategies. Code-sheets were pretested using 10% of the sample size, and an internal review was done on the interview schedule to ensure questions were not ambiguous and could effectively address the objective.

The data collected was cleaned, and the gridding process was undertaken manually in a table, where emerging sub-themes were collated to form a central theme that aided in assigning meaning to the data based on research objectives. Permission to conduct research and ethical clearance were obtained from the university and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Further, the respondents' consent, safety, anonymity, and confidentiality were maintained during the research process.

TABLE 1 ▲ The estimated target population of Daesh media

S/N	Media	Frequency	Target population	Sample size
1	Al-Naba	52 per year	52	12
2	Dabiq	15 Issues	15	6
3	Rumiyah	12 Issues	12	6
4	Videos	On-demand	6	6
5	Expert reviews	-	5	5
	Total		90	35

Findings

Print media evaluated included twelve Al-Naba newsletters, five Dabiq, and six Rumiyah magazines. Also, six videos from Daesh core, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Nigeria, and Afghanistan *wilayats* were analysed, and five in-depth expert interviews were conducted.

Daesh communication infrastructure

In-depth interviews revealed that Daesh media are structured as a federal system with the core providing *wilayats* with goals and narrative focus, while each *wilayat* has authority over its local operations regarding recruitment, training, and targets of attacks. The media offices for the *wilayats* provide the core with local media items to be used for official media production. The media department works closely with the *Shura* council, is well-resourced with professional personnel and modern equipment, and conducts skills enhancement training through online supporters. The media ecosystem demonstrates a networked insurgency, as stipulated in Castell's theory that adapts to local contexts while maintaining a global strategic outlook, where legitimacy is earned not through territorial governance but through symbolic dominance.

It was also revealed that, for ease of management and coordination, several *wilayats* are grouped in regional offices, which include the *Al-Karrar* office based in Somalia, which controls activities for the IS-Somalia, Mozambique and DRC; the *Al-Furqan* office which manages activities across West Africa and the Sahel including ISWAP, IS-Libya, and IS-Sinai; *Al-Saddiq* Office coordinates activities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and the Philippines; *Al-Farooq* office in Turkey oversees cells in Europe and the Caucasian *wilayat* (Chechnya/Georgia/Russia/Ukraine).

Data collected indicated that each *wilayat* has a media office that provides media effectively address of activities conducted within its jurisdiction to the regional offices for transmission to the Daesh core for publicity and propaganda through

official media houses. The official audio-visual media associated with Daesh include *Amaq* news agency, established for breaking news by a Syrian journalist, Baraa Kadek aka Rayan Meshaal, who was killed in 2017; Al-bayan Radio; *Al-Furqan* Media Foundation, and *Al-Itsam* Media that has productions in English, Arabic, and French. The print publications include the *Al-Naba* newsletter, *Dabiq* magazine, and *Rumiyah* magazines.

The print media analysed were structured in sections that appeal to different target audiences. *Dabiq* magazine has 15 issues produced between 2014 and 2016 with 44-68 pages; the cover page title and image represent the magazine's theme, highlighted in the article section. The magazine has the following sections: 'Foreword' highlights significant attacks or call for *Jihad*; 'Article' contains the main story; 'Statement' has excerpts from official communication; 'Feature' carries the main story; 'Report/news' highlights operations from *wilayats*; 'Wisdom' provides advice; 'Among the Believers Are Men' encourages martyrdom, 'In the Words of the Enemy' cites statement about Daesh by government officials; 'Sisters' is dedicated to women; 'Special' has articles by John Cantlie, a British journalist who was kidnapped in 2012.

Rumiyah published 13 issues of 38-48 pages from 2016 to 2017. Issues 2, 4, and 6 displayed their table of contents on the cover page and carried no title, whereas issues 8, 10, and 12 included both a title and table of contents on the second page. In the magazine, 'Foreword' introduces the main stories; 'Article' covers religion, victories, and counter-narratives; 'Interview' provides accounts of field commanders; 'Sisters' targets women; 'Shuhada' provides martyrs' biographies; and 'News' provides military and covert operations.

Al-Naba is a 12-page newsletter in Arabic, produced every Thursday since October 2015 by Dawin Media. Its title describes attacks and casualties, and the second page features an infographic depicting attacks globally. The editorial and article sections provide religious teachings and counternarratives, while the news sections highlight combat operations from different *wilayats*.

Video production has been decentralised and is carried out by *wilayats* on a need basis but are popularised by Daesh core. For instance, *Wilayat Somalia*, West Africa, and Sahel videos were publicised in *Al Naba* newsletter issues 375, 379, and 383. *Wilayat Khorasan*'s video indicated a shift in communication strategy from ideological rhetoric and religious zeal to sophisticated exploitation of geopolitical alliances to advance the agenda. They are against Muslim countries aligning with Western powers who are accused of debt-trapping them.

Daesh propaganda techniques

Daesh's propaganda has exploited language manipulation, appeal to religion, and counternarrative techniques. The media analysis showed that Daesh uses the glittering generalities technique to provide positive labels to supporters (*lion of Sham, great warriors*) to ensure commitment to the course. Derogatory words to describe enemies (*cow-worshipping Hindus, Murtaddin, impure Rafidah, apostates, filthy Christians, hypocrites, enemies of Allah*, etc.) to dehumanise their enemies and justify violence against them. Additionally, figurative language provides contextual meaning, especially while encouraging martyrdom missions. Castell's theory reveals how Daesh exploits these propaganda techniques by shaping meaning not through truth but through emotional resonance and manipulation of networked society. For instance, in Figure 1 below, Daesh supporters are referred to as 'brothers in din' while their enemies are referred to as 'filthy ones'.

FIGURE 1 ▲ Excerpt from Rumiyah magazine No. 2, page 3 (October 2016) on how Daesh describes its enemies

"A Message to the Kuffar: We say to you, O filthy ones, 'Indeed, we are disassociated from you and from whatever you worship other than Allah. We have denied you, and there has appeared between us and you animosity and hatred forever until you believe in Allah alone.' By Allah, peace and security will only be wishes for you, especially when you've taken it upon yourselves to fight and oppress the true Muslims. You expect to live in peace while you kill us and fill your prisons with our brothers and sisters? Know that the Islamic State soldiers are everywhere and by Allah, we will take revenge. Even if it takes a while, we will take revenge."

After addressing the filthy Kenyan government – may Allah hasten the conquest of Kenya for the Soldiers of the Khilafah in Somalia – the sisters  addressed their brothers and families, saying:

"To our brothers in din: Get ready and march forth towards Jannah as wide as the heavens and earth."

"To our families: We know you'll be shocked by our act, but know that Allah and His Messenger and jihad in His cause are more beloved to us than you and ourselves."

"The meeting place is Jannah."

"Your sisters: Umm Maysarah, Umm Ma'bad, Umm Sa'd."

The media analysis also established that Islamic ideologues and Quranic verses are used to support or refute arguments. Ibn Taymiyyah's (1263-1328) teachings against innovation in religion, encouragement of *Jihad*, and *Takfir* have been extensively employed in Daesh productions. Further, Daesh conducts campaigns against other Islamist factions such as Al-Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood, and Kurdistan Workers

Party (PKK) highlighting deficiencies and disparities in ideologies. The other radical Islamist groups are accused of not being true followers of Allah's teachings, collaborating with security agencies, embracing nationalism and democracy as well as worshiping *Iblis*, a fallen angel who was disobedient to Allah.

The media analysis revealed that Daesh employs historical narratives to strengthen its propaganda by connecting the current crisis to past religious struggles. The technique aims to discourage isolated views of events but depicts them as part of an ongoing historical struggle. The historical narrative supports the call for a solution, creates an 'us vs. them' ideology by emphasising the origin of conflict, and justifies actions. Daesh has referenced Prophet Muhammad's ancient battles, like the Battle of Badr, the Battle of the Trench, and the Battle of Uhud, to give credibility and legitimacy to action.

Biographies of martyrs have been used in Daesh production as a source of inspiration, showcasing their lives leading up to their dedication to Allah, their journey to martyrdom, and the rewards awaiting them in *Jannah* (heaven). Dabiq magazines had an article series titled 'Among the Believers Are Men' that provided biographies of their martyrs, giving religious meaning to their sacrifice, transforming them into role models, and encouraging others. Additionally, martyrs often use dreams as a sign of divine revelation preceding operations.

FIGURE 2 ▲ Excerpt from Dabiq magazine No. 14 page 6 (April 2016): Biography of martyrs to encourage others for martyrdom missions.

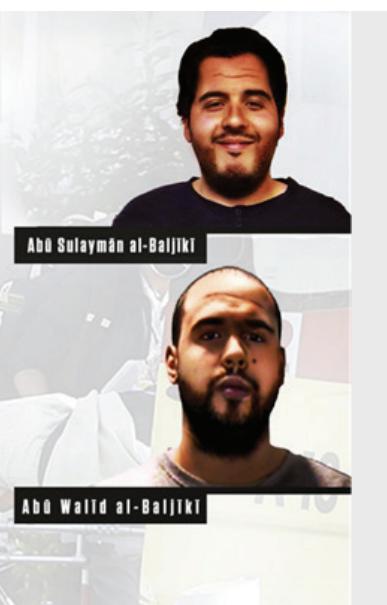
Ibrāhīm al-Bakrāwī (Abū Sulaymān al-Baljikī)
Brussels Airport Istishhādī

Abū Sulaymān was known for his bravery and generosity before and even more so after he was guided by Allah. While incarcerated, he followed the news about the atrocities against the Muslims in Shām. Something clicked and he decided to change his life, to live for his religion.

After he was released from prison, he quickly joined his brother Khālid, began buying weapons, searched for lodging, and made plans. It is firstly due to Allah and then to Ibrāhīm and his brother that the raid in Paris took place.

Khālid al-Bakrāwī (Abū Walid al-Baljikī)
Metro Station Istishhādī

A man of strong character, a natural leader, Khālid was guided while in prison after having a vivid, life-changing dream. He saw that he was alongside the Prophet ﷺ fighting the disbelievers. Narrating his dream, he said, "It was a vision. After hearing the last verse of al-Fātihah recited in a loud voice, I saw the Prophet ﷺ on a horse in battle, a distance away. The vision took me beyond the battlefield. I saw myself as an archer shooting arrows at the enemy. I would shoot, take cover, then shoot again." He narrated other details of the dream and said, "I then woke up, back in my prison cell."



Abū Sulaymān al-Baljikī

Abū Walid al-Baljikī

Furthermore, Daesh employs storytelling to craft a heroic image of themselves, narrating tales of success and progress in *wilayats*. They present events with a positive bias by interviewing field commanders detailing their distorted reports of

their supposed battlefield successes in operational areas.

Daesh employs a counternarrative strategy by offering an alternative perspective to official statements and government policies. In Dabiq, the section 'In the Words of the Enemy,' Daesh reinterprets government statements and positions itself as victorious. Daesh also selectively cites Quran verses to challenge the ideologies of other religious sects and emphasise the superiority of their beliefs.

FIGURE 3 ▲ Excerpt from Dabiq magazine No. 14, page 52 (April 2016): Daesh counternarrative against non-negotiation with terrorist policy.



■ *Daesh visual manipulation tactics*

Daesh productions feature sophisticated and visually appealing graphics, including high-quality infographics in print and visual content. Infographics condense essential texts such as religious teachings, attacks, and counternarratives. Attack infographics convey a sense of war and brutality through blood-like writing, fire imagery, and emphasis on numbers with impactful fonts. Religious infographics are appealing, with smooth colour palettes to create an aesthetically pleasing presentation.

FIGURE 4 ▲ Excerpt from Rumiyah magazine No. 4, page 14 (December 2016): Daesh infographic design for war and brutality.



FIGURE 5 ▲ Excerpt from Rumiyah magazine No.8, page 37 (April 2017) Daesh infographic design for religion.

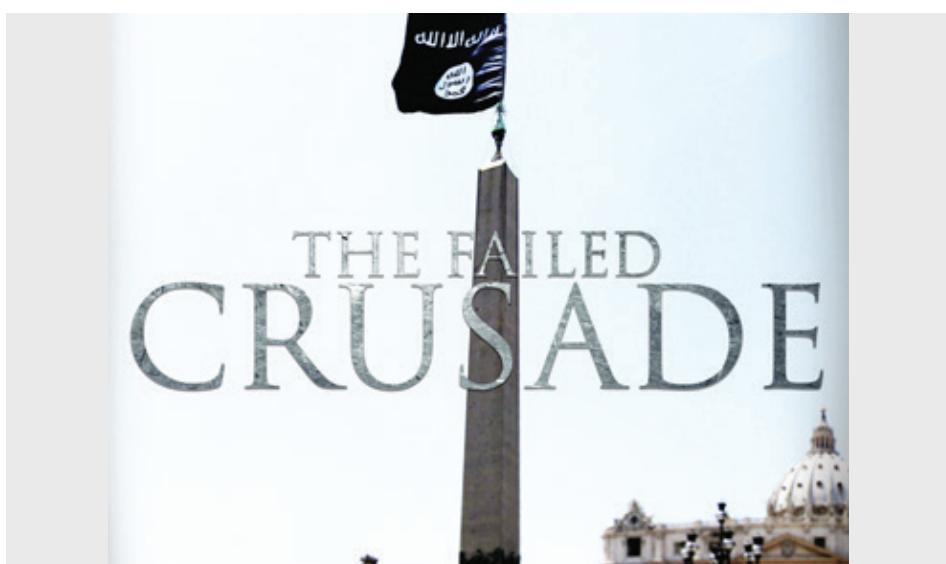


Images are used in Daesh productions to serve various purposes: graphic images depict victory against the government and instill fear in adversaries; attacks on women and children evoke a victimhood narrative, promoting a call for revenge; and non-graphic images win over the population. Additionally, Daesh utilises signs and symbols rooted in Islamic teachings to convey messages. The common symbols are the smiling face of a martyr to symbolise entry into *Jannah*, the lifting of one finger for *tawhid* (the oneness of Allah), the *Daesh* flag on St. Peter's Basilica to symbolise triumph over other religions, a flock of birds and camels in the desert to indicate *hijra*, sunrise/sunset over Mosul signifies the divine and the afterlife, children in *Jihad* depict continuity. These symbols connect with historical narratives, signify unity, and establish a group identity and purpose. Castells' theory unpacks how Daesh's visual manipulation techniques are at the core of its power projection agenda, by creating networked identities, sustaining social mobilisation, and popularising legitimacy that rivals a conventional state authority.

FIGURE 6 ▲ Excerpt from Al-Naba Newsletter No. 391, Page 4 (May 2023): Lifting of one finger-tawhid to symbolise the oneness of Allah.



FIGURE 7 ▲ Excerpt from Dabiq Magazine No. 4, Page 1(October 2014) Daesh flag on St. Peter's Basilica indicates triumph over other religions.



Daesh dissemination approaches

Despite the countermeasures, respondents indicated that Daesh uses a secure multi-platform approach to achieve its dissemination goals. Platforms are selected based on end-to-end encryption and the ability to have channels and chat rooms. The respondents further indicated that Daesh prefers applications from Russia, like Telegram, and China, like TikTok, because they are not monitored compared to those from Western countries. Respondents also highlighted that unpopular applications such as OK, Element, dating, shopping, gaming, and prayer applications are preferred by Daesh. The group's dissemination strategy exemplifies Castells' networked insurgency, where symbolic power is held and distributed through digital networks.

Initially, Daesh posted their productions on YouTube, but after it was policed, they moved to social media apps like Telegram, Imo, and OK.... they keep evolving with the technology, and currently, almost all of them are on TikTok. (Respondent 1)

The respondents indicated that the Daesh's distribution structure is organised into three levels: Daesh core, which produces official communication; the *wilayats*, which provide media items to the core; and support groups, which amplify Daesh core messages and make the group remain relevant. Respondents also indicated that support groups run hashtag (#) campaigns, such as a campaign against the burning of the Quran in Sweden in early 2023, as propaganda about how the West views Islam, and in June 2023, a hashtag campaign about their role to encourage others.

Additionally, respondents reported that support groups have a critical role of vetting individuals for private channels, translating productions, and mirroring websites by using multilingual alphabets to avoid content moderation. They distribute media items on Dtube, an encrypted alternative to YouTube, and they also use GETTR, a free speech network that substitutes mainstream social media. Further, respondents revealed that Daesh has an online repository that stores data and can be retrieved after a content takedown.

We have keyboard warriors who aggregate items from the surface and moderated web, invite 'vetted' persons to their dark web channels, and translate productions to different languages. Recently, a media campaign called 'Knights of Translation' focused on translating Daesh productions into Kiswahili and Somali.... Daesh also mirrors websites; thus when authorities pull down a website, the mirrored site comes up with different kinds of phonetic digits and the Greek alphabet. (Respondent 5)

Discussion

Daesh strategically employs propaganda techniques, like manipulating language with religious justification, to make events more appealing to achieve a skewed narrative that supports their ideologies. The teachings of religious ideologues like Ibn Taymiyyah have been selectively quoted/misquoted in their propaganda to justify actions, rationalise violence, as well as identify enemies. Maghribi et al.'s (2023) study demonstrates that citations of Ibn Taymiyyah's teachings are incorrect and characterised by politicisation of Daesh's agenda. Daesh reprogrammed Ibn Taymiyyah's teachings into networked ideological engineering, embedded across platforms, adaptable to local grievances, and generating a global impact, as explained in Castells' networked society. Also, Daesh conducts defamation campaigns against other radical Islamists and religious groups' beliefs, while portraying itself as the bearer of a superior ideology. This has enabled the group to develop an appealing propaganda narrative with perceived religious backing that is resistant to counternarratives, hence, sustaining its influence.

Moreover, biographies of martyrs have been used in Daesh's productions to ascribe new meaning to death and encourage suicide missions amongst its followers. In their productions, Daesh has incorporated biographies of martyrs in a bid to encourage such missions and have used figurative language to contextualise their messages. For instance, the group asserts that 'the fear of fire (hell) and the promise of heaven should distract a martyr from the fear of explosives, as the shortest path to pleasing God is taking one's life for His sake.' The findings align with Nanninga's (2018) research that the biographies showcase inspiring narratives of exemplary Muslims who, through sacrifice, become role models. This has led to heightened suicide missions and lone-wolf attacks globally, thus reversing the counterterrorism efforts aimed at minimising the threat posed by Daesh.

Daesh employs a dynamic and intricate media strategy that evolves with technological advancements and countermeasures. Their adaptability in utilising digital spaces effectively has allowed customisation of content for diverse audiences and enabled the group to maintain a global presence. This corresponds with Amarasingam's (2021) analysis that Daesh is responsive to communication and technological needs, incorporating real-world technological developments without sacrificing quality. Further, the decentralised nature of the support groups makes Daesh media resistant to shutdown as they download and share content in secure applications, thus sustaining its influence globally. Manuel Castells' theory posits that power in the modern era depends on communication networks that construct new identities and have nodes that transcend traditional geographical and political boundaries, hence hard to take down.

In addition, Daesh crafts high-quality visual aids to support its propaganda such as graphic images to instill fear, photos of *mujahidin* praying while on the battlefield as a demonstration of being religious, and snapshots of children participating in *Jihad* to encourage such acts. Infographics are also used to summarise main texts and to provide an appealing combination of words, images, and numbers to summarise primary texts and reinforce critical themes with precise and prominent wording. This corresponds with Baele's (2019) analysis that visual aids bind a group's communication tactics, creating a profound propaganda experience. Through visual propaganda, Daesh has been able to create a lasting perception of itself in the targeted audiences' minds, thus building a strong brand that is hard to destroy. Daesh visual propaganda exemplifies Castells' view of a networked society, where power is exercised through control of symbolic flows, adaptation and resonance across digital nodes.

Further, Daesh's multilayered dissemination network utilises secure online communication, exploiting tech companies' competition for secure and encrypted platforms. Telegram is their preferred material-sharing platform, while TikTok is favored for short clips and videos. The findings align with Weimann's (2019) argument that *Jihadist* groups prefer using social media as it offers secure spaces and is a tool for authentication. The group also takes advantage of its networked support groups and self-appointed media activists to obtain technical support on encryption, online security, and hacking, as well as to amplify its productions. Daesh's dissemination strategy borrows from Castells' view of leveraging decentralised yet networked online platforms to create an online *Caliphate*. The multilayered dissemination strategy has proven to be effective in prolonging the presence of Daesh propaganda in online spaces, thereby outmaneuvering existing countermeasures.

Nevertheless, governments continue to work tirelessly to ensure countermeasures are in place which revolve around content takedown, awareness-raising programs, and the development of counternarratives. Governments have been able to achieve this by collaborating with technology companies in the development of artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithm tools to detect and remove radical content. The United Kingdom was the first to launch a strategy to disseminate counternarratives and block access to harmful content, and introduce awareness-raising initiatives, while the United States conducted counternarrative propaganda through the Global Engagement Center (GEC) (Macdonald et al., 2019). However, Daesh has countered the measures in place by coding their communications with emojis and using multilingual alphabets as well as third-party applications. Therefore, more needs to be done to counter the complex Daesh's communication strategies, that continue to outsmart government measures to curtail it.

Further, the legal structures remain outdated, finding it difficult to keep pace with the rapid advancements in technology, allowing Daesh to take advantage of the gap to advance its agenda. Lakomy (2023) noted that it took time before law enforcement realised that terror groups had moved their communications online, thus having to play catch-up with legislation. Also, the legislative process finds itself entangled in the complexities of balancing privacy, freedom of speech, and human rights, amidst concerns of overlapping jurisdictions. This has given Daesh a window to continue operating in the online space as they exploit challenges in the legal framework.

Conclusion

The study concluded that strategic communication is essential for Daesh to achieve its objectives. The group has crafted its communication by formulating narratives based on religious and historical views, making the legitimisation of actions easier. Daesh's successes are not merely a function of territorial control; they are rooted in the mastery of narrative formulation within digital networks as stipulated by Castells' theory. This has enabled the group to sustain its recruitment drive, remain vibrant, and challenge counterterrorism efforts.

The advancement of technology and the availability of numerous secure social applications are key components of Daesh's communication strategy. This has enabled the group to influence vast audiences effectively with minimal detection from security agencies. Daesh has leveraged a networked society as stipulated in Castells' theory, to create a virtual *Caliphate* that is resistant and adaptive to countermeasures. Even in the absence of a physical *Caliphate*, the group has effectively expanded its online presence, creating a virtual *Caliphate* that poses a significant global threat.

The Daesh multifaceted communication approach has enabled the group to reach a wide array of targeted audiences of varying motivational drivers, ages, genders, cultures, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds. They have crafted their narratives to appeal to different audiences, to use multiple social applications, and to combine audio, visual, and print media to achieve varied effects. Further, Daesh has decentralised its dissemination strategy through support groups, thus making its communication immune to content moderation strategies.

A challenging balance exists between regulating online spaces and preserving privacy, freedom of expression, and human rights. Further, increased regulation prompts Daesh to adopt alternative communication methods, complicating security agency efforts. Additionally, global inconsistencies in defining radical content lead to varied content moderation procedures across different countries.

Recommendations

Combating Daesh's narrative online involves saturating digital platforms with positive and credible messages that counter and undermine its propaganda through influential voices. Credible community voices can be used to amplify counternarratives to Daesh propaganda on multiple platforms. This will help stimulate critical thinking among the populace and break the echo chamber effect by introducing diverse opinions that can challenge Daesh propaganda.

Daesh exploits the competition between tech companies to provide the market with secure and encrypted applications to advance its interests. Hence, collaboration between tech companies and security agencies is crucial to ensure that key media personalities who run the digital insurgency and the location of electronic assets, are uncovered to cripple their online presence.

The evolving technology landscape challenges the legal framework aimed at countering Daesh's communication. There is a need to update these frameworks constantly and implement international agreements-backed by the United Nations-which is crucial in addressing the global nature of *cyber-jihad*.

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