Social Media-Driven Propaganda: In the Crosshairs of the Black Flag

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Abstract

Most Americans became cognizant of the "Black Flag" in August of 2014 when the Islamic State filled Twitter feeds, Facebook, and YouTube channels with videos of beheadings, recruitment messages, Jihadist diatribes, and gruesome images. This article asserts that social media propaganda of the deed (SMPOTD) has altered Lasswell's communication model since legacy media is bypassed, and there is no ability to control the messages. SMPOTD is unregulated and allows terror groups to infiltrate social and mainstream media through meta-coverage. The First Amendment protects free speech in the United States, where only corporate terms of use permit removal of macabre SMPOTD messages. The model itself must evolve since SMPOTD may represent both the medium and the horrific message. Because of its low cost, social media propaganda may remain the sword of Jihadists in asymmetric warfare.

Keywords: Propaganda, Islamic State, Social Media, ISIS, the Black Flag, Department of State (DOS), Social Media Propaganda of the Deed (SMPOTD), Twitter.

Introduction

When Pope Pius Gregory XV formed the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith in 1622, he utilized the term to spread the Catholic faith through missionaries, far from our contemporary perception of "propaganda" (Bernays, 1928/2005). Since that time, propaganda has alternately meant control by persuasion or control by violent deeds and terror.

The reigning pontiff Francis has found himself in the bull's eye of a new virulent strain of propaganda formulated by the Islamic State (ISIS) when the cover of the ISIS English-language magazine *Dabiq* featured a photo of the Black Flag flying atop the obelisk in St. Peter's Square (Kruvilla, 2014). "We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah, the Exalted" (Failed Crusade, 2014, p. 8).

Just as the usage of the term has evolved, so have the technologies employed to produce and disseminate propaganda. New technologies also establish new media dynamics as to how propaganda circulates among audiences. With these technological and communicative dynamics in mind, this article examines how ISIS and the United States' Department of State have exploited social media dynamics in their respective propaganda campaigns. Through this analysis, I argue for a reconfiguration of the concept of "propaganda of the deed" to more adequately address the circulation and impact of propagandistic messages in the era of social media.

Background

Propaganda undoubtedly had its roots in the tendentious oratory of the pre-technology era. As technology advances so do the dynamics of the media message. The usage of propaganda and persuasion as a weapon has a long and rich military history. During the Revolutionary War, flyers were given to the British troops offering them cash to desert (Lasswell, 1927/2013, p. 167). In the World Wars, the U.S. spread its propaganda leaflets into enemy territory, this time via airplanes. This methodology is still in play today. The United States dropped 60,000 pamphlets in Iraq, and more recently, released grisly leaflets titled "Daish Recruiting Office" over Raqqa, Syria. The pamphlet shows the new recruits being fed through a meat grinder, and is one of four propaganda drops over Syria in 2015 (Brook, 2015).

When the government needed women to support the war effort in World War II, the "Rosie the Riveter" (Jowett, 1987) campaign emerged and incorporated posters, movies, and news reports. During the war, film director Frank Capra created the *Why We Fight* film series to counter the potent German propaganda machine (Rose, 2014). The Truman and Eisenhower administrations engaged radio and television to propagandize to the American people even though the government claimed Americans would not be coerced (Parry-Giles, 1996). By providing content and preferential treatment to cooperative journalists, the United States "covertly disseminated propaganda to a domestic audience" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015, p. 27). Following WWII, Dwight Eisenhower's domino theory of propaganda was directed at the American public through the Vietnam War era with the intention of priming the American public for action to avert the spread of communism ("President Eisenhower," 2013).

In his landmark study on the propaganda campaigns of World War I, Harold Lasswell (1927/2013) noted propaganda was an "ominous clang" in the minds of audiences, who were "puzzled, uneasy, or vexed at the unknown cunning which seems to have duped and degraded them" (pp. 2-3). In the 21st century, contemporary technology has similarly proliferated propaganda through social media that inundates people with the menacing

clangor of unavoidable persuasive messages. Anyone with an Internet connection may inexpensively conduct a propaganda campaign. Simple mobile applications enable any smartphone user to take photographs or videos, add commentary, and post to social media without costly or sophisticated digital editing tools bypassing legacy media and their gatekeepers. Social media networks have thus amplified the dissemination of disinformation and the resurgence of the vicious art of propaganda of the deed on an individual and a mass level.

Indeed, the Islamic State has leveraged the social media obsession of the Western culture and has become very active in social media (Rose, 2014). Where previously, media manipulation and control were integral parts of the diffusion of the message, groups may now bypass traditional communication media and bombard the social networks with violent posts turning the communication model on its ear. ISIS upped the ante in a social media-based Jihadist propaganda war that previously starred the Taliban and Al Qaeda, the latter of which "does not always claim credit for acts of violence that it commits" (Smith & Walsh, 2013, p. 313).

ISIS posts videos of beheadings, immolation, and other violence for Western consumption via social media. The organization openly declares its guilt while goading the U.S. government, attempting to extort cash and terrorize the American people. The Jihadists frantically push out horrific visual content, creating an efficient social media machine. They have developed an organizational structure with a media arm that posts in both Arabic and English creating recruitment, fear mongering, and fundraising initiatives via social media networks (Sink, 2014). The nature of these messages recalls the concept of propaganda of the deed, but with a new dimension on account of social media's unique means of propaganda dissemination.

Propaganda of the Deed

In levying their social media campaigns, ISIS uses a form of propaganda of the deed. As delineated by the 19th century Italian Duke and socialist Carlo Pisacane, propaganda of the deed (POTD) holds that ideas result from monumental deeds and that in some cases, violence is "necessary not only to draw attention to, or generate publicity for, a cause, but to inform, educate and ultimately rally the masses behind the revolution" (as cited in Hoffman, 1998, p. 4). Pisacane argued that the moralistic pedagogy of POTD could not be replaced by traditional propaganda methods (Hoffman, 1998).

Neville Bolt (2012) updated the definition of POTD as "a terrorist act of political violence aimed against state targets, sometimes populations, with the objective of creating a media event capable of energizing populations to bring about state revolution or social transformation" (p. xviii).

This is in contrast to the Department of State's method of political propagandizing to influence or control social media discussions. The form of propaganda of the deed employed by the Islamic terrorists last saw usage in the late 1800s and early 1900s by revolutionaries and anarchists worldwide (Bolt, 2012). It was widely adopted by terrorists at the start of the 21st century with the dramatic attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Indeed, the attacks on New York City were perfectly located and timed for the network morning shows; as soon as the first terrorist-navigated plane hit the towers, every media purveyor in New York City trained their lenses on the Twin Towers to thoroughly document and disseminate the most egregious act of propaganda of the deed that the U.S. has experienced on the home front (Louw, 2003).

Broadly speaking, social media have changed the traditional communication model. New communication technologies bypass the role of traditional media gatekeepers and eliminate the established role of the transmitter conduit. This reconfiguring of information flows has altered existing communication dynamics, including the dissemination of propagandistic messages. In the case of what I call social media propaganda of the deed (SMPOTD), the message and medium of Lasswell's propaganda model converge into a single entity—a social media message where the violent video or image is itself the propagandistic message. It is not simply the grisly deeds perpetrated by ISIS, as these deeds tend to occur outside of public view; nor is it simply the virality that such messages acquire via social media. Rather, it is the combination of these two crucial elements, wherein the public dissemination and depiction of the deed (as well as its impact) comes to stand for the deed itself. The notion of SMPOTD thus allows us to more accurately frame and analyze contemporary propaganda campaigns, including those of ISIS and the U.S. Department of State.

Analysis

In contrast to the earliest conceptualizations of communication, most models from the 20th century onward have taken into account the generally nonlinear nature of communication flows. However, SMPOTD lends itself to a linear presentation since the goal is persuasion and psychological effects rather than a two-way communicative exchange. Although the infrastructure of social media allows information to flow nonlinearly, the technology's unique structure also allows for a single message transmission to engender multiple effects among multiple receivers. That is, the dispersion of a single message through social media may have synchronous, yet separate, and distinct effects on two or more different mass recipients.

As practiced by ISIS, asymmetric warfare involves a strategy of employing social media networks to trumpet horrific violence and offset the Islamic State's comparatively weaker military position in contrast to the

West. In doing so, ISIS is attempting to morph from a group of terrorists into a structured organization, as evidenced by their production of a professional looking magazine and a corporate-style annual report which contains a page chronicling the numbers and methods through which they have killed and maimed prisoners in the previous year (Simpson, 2014).

Propaganda Levied by the Department of State

The United States government has also navigated the propaganda waters, publishing social media postings of violent drone strikes, bombings of ISIS military assets, and the targeting of ISIS leaders along with a YouTube video of airstrikes on ISIS-held oil sites. In fact, as of 2010, the Department of State (DOS) Handbook states that social media platforms are key components in the Department's conduct of foreign policy (U.S. Department of State, 2010, 5 FAM 791 Scope sect. b). In December of 2013, the DOS launched "Think Again Turn Away", an English language, multi-platform social media campaign with a presence on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and YouTube (Katz, 2014).

The "Think Again Turn Away" Twitter account has 23,200 followers and has made 8,479 tweets as of this writing. In 2014, the Department of State typically posted tweets only a few times a day; at other times, upwards of a dozen messages are posted. For example, there was an uptick in the time around ISIS execution of Western journalists in 2014. In October of 2015, the Department of State often tweeted 30 or more times on several days. Some of these tweets are made to counter jihadist messages and recruitment of Americans, and often include links to news stories or other tweets messages that bolster the DOS' initiative. For example, one tweet provides a link to the government's @Rewards4Justice Twitter page that offers viewers a way to earn cash by informing on terrorists. By their very design, typical posts on "Think Again Turn Away" encourage interaction and engagement through the campaign's multiple media platforms (Tomlinson, 2014).

An initial message in the Think Again Turn Away campaign came in the form of "Welcome to ISIS Land," a satiric take on an ISIS recruitment video. Posted in August of 2014, this video incorporates grisly ISIS footage along with the following script:

> Run Do not walk to ISIS Land!
> Come over for as Syria is no longer for Syrians and Iraq is no longer for Iraqis.
> Where you can learn useful new skills for the Ummah!
> Blowing up mosques!
> Crucifying and executing Muslims!
> Plundering public resources
> Suicide bombings inside mosques!
> Travel is inexpensive
> Because you won't need a return ticket! (U.S. Department of State, 2014)

The apparent goal of this recruitment video may be interpreted as an effort to convince Americans not to become foreign fighters or lone-wolf terrorists through consideration of the atrocities perpetrated by the Islamic State (Tomlinson, 2014). The English version of the parody has had over 876,000 views and the Arabic version over 39,500 as of this writing.

Although successful in terms of its reach, "Welcome to ISIS Land" and the broader "Think Again Turn Away" campaign drew some criticism within the U.S., with some experts calling the campaign "embarrassing," questioning its efficacy as a counterterrorism initiative (Miller and Higham, 2015). Some critics went further to argue that the "Think Again Turn Away" propaganda campaign provides credence to the Islamic State by acknowledging and giving exposure to their violent messages. There is also a question as to the validity of the DOS's anti-recruitment activities as only about 100 Americans have become foreign fighters, though many fear the impact and influence of SMPOTD on disaffected American youths who may become homegrown terrorists (Hegghammer, 2013).

The Department of State (DOS) has stepped up its social media campaign by continually retweeting stories that corroborate its position. In a story picked up from the British *Metro* news outlet and directly tweeted by the Department of State, a British father says his son should be executed for beheading soldiers as shown on an ISIS video (Willis, A.). The DOS uses the government agency seal in their social media posts referred to as "branding" in social media section of the U.S. Department of State Foreign Affairs Manual (2010, 5 FAM 791.2).

John W. Williams proposed a model to study terrorism as a form of communication. In doing so, he explores an intermediate channel that understands violence as a medium and allows for an immediate receiver and a secondary victim (Williams, n.d., p. 5). Williams (n.d.) contends that terrorism occurs simultaneously on the interpersonal and mass levels (p.6). This concept correlates with how thinkers such as Pisacane (as cited in Hoffmann, 1998) and Bolt (2012) have understood propaganda of the deed. Further, Williams' (n.d.) notion of violence as medium has strong resonance with the impact of ISIS' gruesome murders not only on an interpersonal level, but also through the fear that these acts instill in Western citizens on a mass level.

ISIS' Propaganda of the Deed

The U.S. now endures an incessant diet of SMPOTD messages (beheadings, immolation), which at once act as the message, the primary medium, and the deed. ISIS's SMPOTD carnage focuses audiences on the prospect of impending terrorism and plays on the premise that "civilian moral would crack under the strain of perpetual fear" (Lasswell, 1927/2013, p. 199). This stream of ISIS' propaganda messages is delivered through various social media platforms in a deliberate and strategic man-

ner. ISIS leaders send their violent messages to over 6,000 select supporters who passionately post to social media, some over a hundred times a day (Berger, 2015). Thus, while ISIS' propaganda messages emanate from a centralized source, they are dispersed by thousands of social media agents across a number of platforms in an effort to maximize impact.

Yet ISIS has not solely relied upon social media structures. The Islamic State further demonstrated their media savvy in the creation of the Android application The Dawn of Glad Tidings. This app facilitated the spread of ISIS' propaganda, helping "to circulate more than 40,000 tweets in recent days" (McElroy 2014, p. 2). Initiated in April of 2014, The Dawn of Glad Tidings App exploited the Twitter accounts of those who elected to receive ISIS news, in turn using those accounts to disseminate propagandistic messages. As news of the app spread, Google quickly removed The Dawn of Glad Tidings from its Play app store (Berger, 2014).

This was not the only case of attempts to restrict the flow of ISIS messages through U.S.-based social media platforms. As a result of ISIS' posting of graphic images and videos of beheadings, Twitter began an aggressive campaign to suspend accounts distributing ISIS messages (Berger, 2015). Other social media outlets followed suit, implementing mechanisms to restrict the Islamic State's ability to spread propagandistic messages on their respective platforms. YouTube allows users to flag videos that are violent, threatening, or hateful. British police cyber specialist and social media companies cooperate to remove over a thousand posts a week (Malik et al, 2014). A Facebook spokesperson said that they established a policy five years ago that does not permit groups or any person to "promote terrorism or share graphic content for sadistic purposes" (Risen, 2014, p. 3). Risen also reports that some social networks have given governments "trusted flagger" status. France, the United Kingdom, and Germany outlaw hate speech online, and the French made the majority of the requests to eliminate Tweets in the second half of 2013 according to *U.S. News and World Report* (as cited in Risen, 2014). Even these policies have not been quietly accepted, however. In October of 2014, Twitter CEO Dick Costello told the *New York Post* that his staff received threats from ISIS on Twitter after they started suspending their accounts (Kelly, 2014, as cited in the *New York Post*).

In response to the social media account suspensions, ISIS revised its approach to engaging social media by hijacking popular hashtags of events with widespread interest such as news stories about natural disasters, political unrest, or sporting events (Malik, 2014). By incorporating these hashtags into tweets with links to beheadings and other propaganda messages, ISIS was able to effectively circumvent Twitter's censorship of targeted accounts. The unrest in Ferguson provided an example of such hashtag hijacking. ISIS tweeted that Ferguson protesters should join Islam

Figure 1*.Screenshot of ISIS video of Islamic State school teaching children to fight and kill. (ISIS, 2015).*

(Itkowitz, 2014), and ISIS would send fighters to help in the struggle in Missouri (Hussain 2014).

U.S. citizens have used a similar strategy in retaliation, appropriating hashtags initiated by the Islamic State to instead subvert the tags into anti-ISIS messages. A notable example of this counter-propaganda developed in response to ISIS' #AmessagefromISIStoUS campaign. The initial propaganda messages in this campaign included a video of American journalist James Foley in an orange jumpsuit (a reference to the garb of Muslim prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay), followed by his beheading (Callimachi, 2014). The Jihadi propagandists disseminated the social media video using various identities and hijacking other hashtags as their gore was removed from social media. In adopting the #AMessagefromISIStoUS hashtag (SassyInfidel, 2014), U.S. citizens retorted with messages that were often belligerent, crude (Patrick, 2014), occasionally humorous, and usually nationalistic with many images featuring a menacing bald eagle or U.S. troops offering to hasten the jihadists journey to the virgins.

ISIS is targeting a younger crowd, and attempting to appeal to that market through its affinity for online gaming. For example, in the Islamic State's YouTube adaptation of *Grand Theft Auto 5* (*GTA5*), the opening frame offers teens and children the opportunity to play Jihadists in real life A message embedded into the game reads, "Your games which are producing from you, we do the same actions in the battlefields!!!" (Tassi, 2014). Some have speculated that ISIS may have "modified" *GTA 5* for use to train Islamic children to fight. "It is unclear if they are using *GTA 5* to demonstrate 'games coming to life' or if ISIS is was claiming they've developed a modded version of the game as a training tool. It is not a long stretch" (Tassi, 2014). If they release a modded game on the Internet, it may be adopted widely by disenfranchised youths.

In a different method of youth targeting, ISIS released a video of young children being trained to fight and kill at school. Figure 1 is a screenshot from one such Islamic State video, wherein youngsters recite "We are going to kill you…slaughter you" (ISIS, 2014).

The message of murder continues on social networks and is particularly vitreous in the ISIS *Dabiq* magazine where followers are instructed to attack in every country in the alliance against ISIS and that they should not be affected by "analysis paralysis" and give up on imperfect attack plans.

> He should be pleased to meet his Lord even if with just one dead kāfir's name written in his scroll of deeds, as the Prophet (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) said, 'A kāfir and his killer will never gather in Hellfire' [Sahīh Muslim]. (Final Crusade, 2014, p. 44)

Former CIA officer Patrick Skinner addressed the power that ISIS wields via social media, and questions the Department of State's ability to effectively counter ISIS' messages. With ISIS using approximately 16,000-20,000 individual accounts worldwide, Berger similarly argues that ISIS has support online that results from "a calculated campaign that would put American social-media marketing gurus to shame" (Berger, 2014, p. 6).

Skinner said that Twitter is perfect for the "angst-ridden" ISIS posts directed at youths. He said the U.S. State Department attempts to employ reason in Twitter posts, and may be ignored by their target audience (Curry, 2014). It appears that the DOS counterattack on ISIS propaganda may not be reaching its mark. However, Arie Kruglanski, a professor of Psychology at the University of Maryland, found that some Islamic militants perceive the horrific violence of SMPOTD messages as a sign of cruelty and less devotion to the Muslim faith (Kavanaugh, 2015). Kruglanski says that exposition of a "flawed impure ideology…is a potential weakness that should be used in counter-radicalization and in counter-messaging against them" (Kavanaugh, 2015, para. 8). The Kruglanski premise may add validity to the "Think Again Turn Away" social media campaign, though its overall efficacy remains to be seen.

Conclusion

As with earlier applications of communication technologies for propagandistic purposes, social media propaganda of the deed fundamentally alters the communication model. Lasswell (1927/2013) wrote that when the government attempts to influence its people, it controls the media (p. 202); that control disappears when social media is de rigueur. This latest version of SMPOTD challenges our existing understanding of the propaganda construct because there is no filtering of content until after it appears on social media and is consumed by some. This latest iteration of SMPOTD is un-

regulated and allows terror groups to infiltrate social and mainstream media through meta-coverage. It thus becomes imperative to revise our notion of how deeply SMPOTD impacts the communication model. Complicating matters, control of the SMPOTD is virtually impossible in a society that values the First Amendment right of freedom of speech.

Because of the low cost of social media propaganda, it seems that in the near future, horrific murders will be the "clickbait" of choice for Jihadist groups to terrorize their enemies (Kavanaugh, 2015, para. 5) and compete in asymmetric warfare. The jury is still out on the conduct, morality, and effectiveness of the U.S. social media campaign.

Bernays (2005) wrote that propaganda is here to stay and that intelligent people must understand that it is a tool to be used to "help bring order out of chaos" (p. 168). It is doubtful that this version of SMPOTD meets Bernays expectation unless we assume that the POTD is the chaos, and the goal of the U.S. Department of State's social media propaganda is to reestablish a civil, social order.

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