Extremes of Engagement:
The post-classical public relations of the Islamic State

1. Introduction

The importance of digital communications in the recruitment processes of Islamic extremist groups was anticipated by Hiebert (2005, p. 8) in a keynote speech at Bledcom 2004, in which he spoke of "landmines ahead" in the convergence of new technologies, public relations (PR) and democracy, with fast internet used to "revolutionize the recruiting of angry and disaffected audiences." The success of IS's recruitment communications has led to the group being labelled "masters of the digital universe" (Atwan, 2015, p. 15) and while for one scholar of extreme Islam, the claim contained a degree of hyperbole, the consensus remains that some young people in the West respond to "slick propaganda distributed online" (Mortimer, 2015, p.10). This article presents a conceptual analysis of the communications content, systems and processes used by IS to engage with young people in its recruitment outreach. The analytical component included a consideration of the elements of classical public relations – managed communication, persuasion and the building of relationships with stakeholders as defined by Bernays (1945), Grunig and Hunt (1984) and others – that are being used by IS. This line of analysis also sought to identify any innovations the group has made in its recruitment outreach that may be of wider interest to the field of public relations and the result is offered as a contribution to the emerging literature on the public relations aspects of violent extremism.

1.1 Literature Review: The Communicative Dimension of Terrorism

The communicative dimension of terrorism is a suitable theme for public relations (PR) scholarship because in definitional terms "terrorism is essentially a message" (Matusitz, 2013, p. xvii.) that depends on public relations – or at least promotional media relations – in order to gain the coverage it needs to achieve awareness. This media relations aspect was discussed in *Public Relations Review* over 30 years ago, when Rada (1985) identified the "symbiotic, if different, relationship with the mass media" of both public relations and terrorism in the way both depend upon third party coverage to achieve communicative goals. This commonality has resulted in the literature on terrorist communication adopting theoretical frames familiar to public relations scholars, such as Tuman's (2003, p. 19) model for "the rhetorical dimensions of terrorism," using language and theoretical framing similar to that of Heath (2000, p. 69) in his Aristotlean-derived perspective of public relations as rhetoric. The two elements were combined in the 2008 edited book (O'Hair, Heath, Ayotte & Ledlow, 2008) in which the authors sought to "invigorate inquiry that interprets terrorism not only as an event but also as a process that is always and already communicative and rhetorical." More recently, a 2014 special edition of *Public Relations Inquiry*

presented "a diverse range of perspectives that add considerable texture to the understandings of the complex relationships between and among concepts of public relations, propaganda and terrorism" (L'Etang, Xifra & Coombs, 2014, p. 140). This collection also raised the potential for some interchangeability of terms in the context of terrorism in the same way as in the use of the terms information, public relations and propaganda in PR history (L'Etang, 1998, p. 41; L'Etang, 2004, p. 83; Thompson, 2015, p. 246). At Bledcom 2015, Galloway (2016) added a new layer to the definitional debate with his point that "IS media is not propaganda in the western sense but rather propagation of a minoritarian 'take' on Islam" and that while the group's "diverse media output is not western-style public relations, the artifice and artefacts employed are not only relevant but also noteworthy for public relations professionals." This author accepts these preceding definitional guidelines and the related interchangeability of terms, adding that writers from outside the PR field - from terrorism studies, international relations and security fields – have used varied terms to describe the communications output of terrorist groups. Significantly, literature on terrorist communications and public relations writing on the same theme has excluded work on activism, which is quite separate from terrorism due to the political activist's emphasis on peaceful and political activity rather that violence, which is in contrast the starting point for the terrorist. This approach to the ontology of terrorist communications leads to a stance that acknowledges that while IS recruitment communications is not purely public relations, it does contain elements of public relations discourse, as defined by Quintana and Xifra (2016, p. 288).

1.2 The Seriality of Islamic Terror Groups

The Islamic State emerged from a 30- year heritage of formation, mergers and offshore franchising of violent groups in Africa and the Middle East. Al Qaeda was first exponent of a style of terrorism that went beyond the 1960-1980 classical era of regional or ideological groups recruiting locally and undertaking terrorist acts primarily in that locality, such as the Basque separatists ETA and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In contrast, post-classical terrorist groups adopted a global outlook, emphasised propaganda of the deed, interaction with global media infrastructures such as satellite television and the internet, and a transnational approach to recruitment (Wieviorka, 2007, p. 92). By 2000, the era of global terrorism was well entrenched with a focus on attacking the US and the West - the far enemy in Osama bin-Laden's terms (Gerges, 2005). The attacks were delivered by transnational actors who were at home in countries including Belgium, France, Germany and "the England of Londistan and its mosques where the most radical speechifying went unchecked" (Wieviorka, 2012, p. 55).

After US forces began a wholesale withdrawal from Iraq between 2007 and 2012, Al Qaeda in Iraq under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi emerged as the dominant force in the ensuing insurgency. The violence culminated in what has been described by one US State Department adviser as the "blood year" of 2014 (Kilcullen, 2016), in which the re-named Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) under the leadership of the Iraqi cleric Abu Bakr al-Bagdadhi (operating separately from Al Qaeda's central command) began a murderous rampage through Northern Iraq that culminated in the seizure of Mosul, the country's second-biggest city. IS was swift to breach the border with Syria and soon controlled much of eastern Syria from its self-proclaimed capital, Raqqa. At the end of 2015, IS dominated an area the size of Britain and "its recruiting prowess now dwarfed that of Al Qaeda, a group with 20 years more experience in the terror business. The style of the self-declared caliphate, whether in dress, speech or cruelty, is what wannabe jihadists everywhere now aspire to" ("The propaganda war", 2015).

1.3 Research aims

Against this background of existing work on the communicative dimension of terrorism and the Islamic State's development, this project sought to shed light on IS recruitment communications through an institutional analysis of the public relations systems used to propagate its recruitment messages. IS recruitment communication is an extreme example of public relations as applied social science and persuasion, that "motivates an individual or group to a specific course of action by creating, changing or reinforcing opinions and attitudes" (Bernays, 1923, p.24) to the extent that recruits are persuaded to kill and die themselves for the cause. This investigation attempted to place IS recruitment communications within existing theoretical categorisations such as persuasion and symmetrical communications, as defined in Grunig and Hunt's (1984, p. 22) four models of public relations, as well as consider how its efficacy has been derived from new approaches. More broadly, the article aimed to offer reflection on how IS has extended the boundaries of public communication and suggests that some aspects of its template for post-classical public relations may be applicable to other spheres beyond terrorism.

2. Methodology

The core methodology was a contemporary history approach to investigate IS's recruitment communications by applying the historical institutionalist frame to research the messages of IS and the mechanisms of support that distributed them. Historical institutionalism is particularly well-suited to political, campaigning and state-like organisations, however, the currency of the object of the investigation and the geopolitical and legal barriers to access in the Islamic State led to

adoption of a mixed research approach deploying two supplementary methodologies in order to understand the effects of IS propaganda operations

2.1   *Historical institutionalism*

Variants of the research approach based on historical institutionalist theory have appeared in critical public relations projects (see Fredriksson, Pallas and Wehmeier, 2013; Frandsen and Johansen, 2013 and others in the neo-institutionalism special section of *Public Relations Inquiry* in May 2013) as well in public relations history projects (Sandhu, 2015; Bentele and Wiesenburg, 2016). Beyond public relations, the research methodology based on historical institutionalist theory has been widely adopted in politics and the social sciences because of its focus on the "symbol systems, cognitive scripts and moral templates that provide frames of meaning" (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p. 947). The role of the agents (such as leaders and supporters) in internalising and transmitting these scripts (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p. 946) and the changing relationship between ideas, agents and audiences over time made this approach relevant to the study of IS. Historical institutionalism has been advocated as a "valuable addition to the communication scholar's theoretical toolbox" by Bannerman and Haggart (2015, p. 2) and their sequential methodology, as summarised below, was used to organise this project:

1.   Select the institution for study and time period. (Islamic State from June 2014-June 2016).

2.   Identify the institutional ideas. (The core ideology and messages of IS).

3.   Identify agents/actors. (IS leaders and communications actors)

4.   Identify supporting mechanisms. (IS PR institutions and distribution systems).

5.   Identify overall institutional effects. (The communications and recruitment effects).

2.2   *Discursive institutionalism*

Because of the orientation of this project to recruitment communications, a secondary methodology of discourse analysis, or more specifically discursive institutionalism, was deployed to identify and unpack IS's styles and genres of language, using Fairclough's terms and definition of discourse as a particular view of language "as an element of social life which is closely interconnected with other elements" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3). Discursive institutionalism aligned the institutional and public relations discourse elements of the investigation in a methodologically coherent manner that accounted for the way IS actors (such as the group's leaders, publishers and members) "use language and symbols to structure their environments through discourse practices or language systems" (Atkinson, 2008, p. 361). The further refinement by Atkinson (2008, p. 284)

that language can be used to "represent connectedness to a particular discourse community or set of beliefs" through use of an appropriate "discourse kit" was also relevant to the consideration of IS. This frame was used to interpret styles of rhetoric and genres of language, such as the focus on statehood, the use of street language and the use of Arabic terms form the Koran to describe core ideological propositions such as *hijrah, kalifah* and *jihad.*

Step five is the identification of the institutional recruitment discourse behind the recruitment propositions of IS and the mechanisms that led to its propagation. Methodologically, this involved seeking out evidence in the form of recruitment literature in English and textual elements in both primary material produced by IS, including its *Dabiq* magazine, the *Islamic State Annual Report* along with material posted or re-posted on social media by IS media institutions. In analysing the recruitment materials, the content analysis approach deployed by Baines and O'Shaughnessy (2014, p. 169) on Al Qaeda's communications output was adopted to consider the artefacts at the content, propaganda and semiotic levels

2.3 Background interviews and review of court transcripts

In order to consider and assess the institutional effects in step six, secondary texts such as media coverage and court records of prosecutions of IS recruits (containing verbatim statements and cross-examinations) from the UK's Crown Prosecution Service were reviewed to identify to what extent the core messages and styles of language of IS's institutional discourse fed through into the recruitment communications and its effect on recruits. In addition to interpretive analysis of court records, interview transcripts from broadcast interviews, personal accounts published in media sources and ten interviews conducted by ethnographic film-makers with extremists and those they have tried to recruit. The author also held background discussions with two UK-based Imams who have worked on anti-extremist projects and two lawyers who have worked on UK court cases involving violent extremism prosecutions linked to IS in the UK courts.

The Islamic State's institutional identity: A nomenclature of claim

The foundation of the Islamic State's recruitment appeal is the messianic naming (or corporate identity in public relations terms) of the institution itself that makes a series of strategic claims. There is a communicative efficiency in the two-word nomenclature of claim, "Islamic State," that simultaneously asserts the group's Islamism, statehood and the proposition of a caliphate *(kalifah)* for the global Muslim community *(ummah)*. This three-way strategic claim was made concrete in June 2014 when IS secured Mosul, Iraq's second city and advanced with an operational momentum reflected in its slogan of "hold and expand". The literalism of the name Islamic State combines

inclusion and exclusion in a divisive way that intensifies the value of belonging to the group for Muslims while simultaneously annexing those not involved. Interestingly, a former public relations professional, UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, recognised the power of the naming strategy ("David Cameron criticises BBC for use of Islamic state", 2016) and started using the term *Daesh* in late 2015 because "British Muslims are appalled by Daesh…these people are not Muslims" (HC Deb. 2 Dec 2015). While Cameron's aim of distinguishing between mainstream Islam and the politicised extremism of IS may be well-intentioned, it is not accurate to claim that jihadi recruitment messages have no association with the religion as any "total dismissal of the (puritanical) Islamic identity of the groups does not stand up to scrutiny" (El-Badawy, Comerford & Welby, 2015, p. 15) and is rather at the heart of the ideology IS uses to target recruits.

[Figure] A conceptual model of the recruitment communications system of the Islamic State used to engage with young people online.

3. Core Islamic State ideology

4.1 Migration

The core ideology of the Islamic State combines themes of religion, history and prophecy with recruitment outreach offering the immediate prospect of a new and agreeable community for Muslims. Migration to the Middle East from the land of unbelievers is part of mainstream Islamic doctrine and a message carried to extremes by IS which puts migration at the heart of its recruitment communications. A 2015 article in its English-language magazine *Dabiq* explicitly made the case for coming to the caliphate:

> 'Now with the presence of Islamic State, the opportunity to perform *hijrah* from *darul-kufr* to *darul-Islam* (the land of Islam) and wage *jihad* against the Crusaders is available to every Muslim as well as the chance to live under the shade of the *Sharia* alone. ("The extinction of the grey zone", 2015)

"Come Forth to Your State" is the banner on several IS web sites such as Halummu (2016, but since suspended) and the recruitment appeal for leaving the West has been the portrayal of Muslims in general and Sunni Muslims in particular as underdogs and victims of racism. This central recruitment message appears frequently in in-house publications that show fighters sharing comradeship, such as issue 11 of *Dabiq* which captioned a photograph of Asian and Arab fighters as illustrating *wala and bara* (loyalty and disavowal) in the caliphate in contrasted with racism in America ("Wala and bara versus American racism", 2015)

4.2 The establishment of a caliphate

The *khalifah* messaging has several dimensions, which draw on historical and prophetic aspects of Islam to appeal to recruits while excluding non-believers (*kuffirs*). A typical call for the caliphate to be left to prosper was made by Mohammed Emwazi, the IS fighter known as Jihadi John, in the *Message to America* video, that was released online on 19 August 2014 to Youtube (since deleted) to accompany the execution of American journalist James Foley:

> You are no longer fighting an insurgency. We are an Islamic army and a state. Any attempt by you, Obama, to deny the Muslims their rights of living safely under the Islamic caliphate will result in bloodshed. ("James Foley: Islamic State militants behead reporter, 2014")

Assurance that IS has the capability of running the new caliphate is part of its recruitment appeal. This focus on the run-time phase of the caliphate has included state-of the nation type addresses, such as that given by IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in November 2014, when he told an audience: "Your state is well and in the best of conditions. Its advance will not cease" (Walt, 2015). These pronouncements are supplemented by the annual *Islamic State Report* publication which presents a utopian view of the caliphate and is targeted at potential recruits (Al-Hayat Media Center, 2014).

4.3 The quest for holy war and martyrdom

In order to add urgency to the recruitment messaging, while the *kalifah* is presented as an idealised haven for Muslims, it is also depicted as under threat of attack from enemies in the West and locally. This *faux defence* narrative is used as the excuse for waging holy war and in appeals for recruits. *Jihad* is mentioned 41 times in the Quran and IS recruitment communications cite these texts in its calls for young men to fight to protect women and children in the caliphate, as well as mounting pre-emptive strikes against the West. Recruitment videos are often accompanied by vocal anthems (*nasheeds*) recorded without musical instruments (which are prohibited by IS), which combine outreach to recruits with inspiration for activists, as illustrated in this extract published by Ajnad Media in 2014, which stresses the humiliation of Muslims in the material world of the West compared with the nobility of *jihad* in the caliphate.

> A life of humiliation no, I am not content with it.
> But love of death in glory is an aspiration.
> And indeed death is in the path of Jihad. (Al-Tamimi, 2015)

5. The recruitment messages of the Islamic State

5.1. Money and comfort

A compelling proposition in the taxonomy of narratives used for recruitment is the offer of housing in the Islamic State, a job and pay of up to $500 a month, which is more than three times the rate of other rebel groups and an attractive offer to young people who may struggle to find fulfilling work in the West (Cambanis, 2014). This financial security makes the decision to journey to Syria easier, particularly if funds are made available to assist with travel costs. IS's spending power in Syria means that recruits wage holy war in a state of relative comfort that was described by Iftekhar Jaman, a former call centre worker in the UK, as "5-star jihad", a moniker echoed in recruitment videos showing the 5-star hotel in Mosul captured by IS.

5.2 Power and kinship

The starting point for engaging recruits is a message of empowerment and a sense that IS can offer inclusion to outsiders, including victims of racism. A barrister in the UK with experience of several extremist trials, described one male defendant as a chronically lonely young man who became withdrawn following the divorce of his parents and had been vulnerable to online recruitment approaches (Anon, 2015a, personal communication). Initial recruitment appeals prey on these types of vulnerabilities in young people and stress the prospect of kinship, in which the terms brother and sister are used to indicate fictive kin. IS's message of empowerment is a shrewd appeal to Western Muslims, who often feel unwelcome as a 17-year old English woman explains:

> If we look at the media there is lot going on around Islamophobia At a young age when you are vulnerable and have all this Islamophobia and racism around you and so they feel like they do not have a future and they feel they are not welcome – and so that attracts them to it (IS). (Butt, 2015)

5.3. Adventure and ultraviolence

Evidence from criminal trials confirms that some recruits have an interest in violence, guns) and may have criminal pasts (Proto, 2015). Recent recruitment outreach does seem to target a less religious group of hard core sadistic adventurers and thrill seekers. According to Belgian counter terrorism specialist, Rik Coolsaet, IS is "a new outlet for deviant behaviour" in a "no future atmosphere," while Mohamed Azaitraoui, a Muslim counsellor in Brussels has described the recruitment appeal as a "delectable myth" that offers salvation in Syria and allows then to play out a fantasy wargame in which they are invincible Rambos. (de Carbonnel, 2015)

5.4 Sexual Opportunity

By encouraging marriages between volunteers from overseas, providing captive wives and sex slaves, joining IS offers sexual opportunities, adding to an already compelling recruitment package of accommodation, cash, camaraderie, status and the excitement of battle (Ali, 2015). The writer and comedian Shazia Mirza has captured the sense of sexual excitement among women leaving Britain for IS.

> These ISIS men, as barbaric as they are, they're hot. They are macho, hairy, they've got guns, they're exciting. They are the One Direction of Islam. They are pop stars, pinups and sex symbols, and these repressed, rebellious, horny teenage girls fancy them, so they buy themselves a one-way ticket to Syria for some halal sex and no guilt because Allah approves. It's not radicalisation it's sexualisation. (Mirza, 2016, p. 22)

Imran Khwaja was a bodybuilder and British jihadi who appeared in Islamic State recruitment videos holding human heads and went on to fake his own death but was arrested on return to Dover. Whilst in Syria, Khwaja wrote to friends in West London requesting cocoa butter, toothpaste, soap and condoms in order to take full advantage of his "war booty" (Davies, 2015).

6. The Islamic State media system

IS recruitment messages and their distribution are controlled by the Islamic State Institute of Public Information (ISIPI), in a media system that combines digital public relations, in-house publications and social media promotion. Until his death in August 2016 following a US air strike, Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, a Sheikh of the Islamic State and the group's spokesperson, oversaw this "horribly imaginative propaganda machine that magnifies the menace" of IS ("Unfriended," 2015). The production and distribution of different types of visual and verbal content is undertaken by a range of affiliate media centres, with Al-Hayat being the best known in the West for its English language videos, while Al-Furqan fulfils a similar role in the Arab world, producing output in Arabic. This media distribution infrastructure consists of multiple twitter feeds - estimated at 46,000 in one study (Morgon & Berger, 2015) - to publicise video content by passing on links to the various servers hosting publications and videos. IS has built apps to make it easier to follow its recruitment outreach such as the Dawn of Glad Tidings Arab language app and an Android app for the group's online al-Bayan radio that enable automatic re-tweeting of content using hashtags as well as automated Twitter Bots or robot programmes. IS supporters undertaking this work are several layers below the central command levels of its digital PR operation and these

globally-dispersed advocates disseminate the radical message and convert people cause in their role as "Islamic State's echo chamber" (Cohen, 2015, p. 53).

6.1 Verbal and Visual Content

The core ideology is the foundation for the verbal content which works alongside the visual aspect of IS recruitment communications. Violent videos of beheadings are widely understood to be the main media output of IS much more of the visual output adopts a public information style that promotes the workings of the proto-state, showing banks, courts, oil trading and health services. IS makes regular references to readily recognisable elements of Western visual culture in its recruitment outreach in order to provide easy access points to their messaging. Some sequences of video, such as the fast-moving scenes of violence from the hour-long *Flames of War* film, make reference to video games, such as *Grand Theft Auto*, with the inference that recruits will be participating in the real version of an exciting computer game. The visual grammar of IS video results in a specific aesthetic that blends video games, music video and rap culture in a way that appeals to young recruits and is "semi-professional and probably done by young people who have studied media or film somewhere" according to one film-maker (Macrae, 2016).

Recruitment communications & process

7.1 Scanning and listening

The first stage of IS's recruitment process is a phase of intense listening coupled with an understanding of the recurring issues troubling young people. The Islamic State is skilled at identifying sad and angry young people by scanning social media for posts, likes and affinities which can be used to make an initial link. Recruiters seek out different personality types based on keyword searches of social media profiles and the likes given to the characters of TV shows and video games. Dounia Bouzar, an anthropologist who works with France's Ministry of the Interior claims that "show differing utopias to young people," according to Bouzar, who has seen appeals based on computer games such as the *Assasin's Creed* and *Call of Duty,* as well as characters from the *Lord of the Rings* (Mevel & Labbe, 2015).

This intense level of micro-segmentation to build an affinity with a potential recruit may seem laborious but automated search tools accelerate the process and, despite the devious nature of this online grooming, the initial approach is often notable only for its casual style:

> I was on Twitter and I guess went into it like that. I guess my Snapchat must have been on my Twitter bio and they contacted me on that. It was not really as clichéd as people think it was. It was not a "hey come join us" type thing. It was more of a "Hey sister. How are

you doing? Are you well? *InshAllāh,* (God-willing). All these things. It was like a conversation with your friend. It was like a normal thing.   (Anon, 2015b)

7.2 Engagement

Once a potential recruit is engaged, some IS recruiters swiftly move to a phase of almost constant communication, passing on instructions and exhortations in an intense verbal bombardment. Hundreds of hours can be spent in Skype conversations and other online dialogue to build an intimate connection, which can overwhelm young recruits. One Imam reported to the author that target recruits he has counselled typically report 12-20 hours or more per week of contact time invested by online recruiters. These recruitment approaches rarely start with radical Islamism and focus instead on the idea of sisterhood, adventure, building a new society in which you will belong and be valued as a Muslim.

7.3 Action

Once the online relationships is established - or has been moved to real-world meetings in support groups - and is friendly and supportive, it becomes easy for discussions to progress to the idea of travelling, especially if the initial flight to Turkey is funded by IS. The instantaneous and fast-paced nature of social media can contribute to overcoming barriers that to outsiders may seem momentous and linked fundamentally to ideology, but such speed is a technologically deterministic feature of online media for activities such as dating and the same level of acceleration can be observed in transcripts of online exchanges between IS recruiters and potential targets.

7. Discussion

The analysis and model of the Islamic State's recruitment communications provides a stimulant for theorising about the ways in which IS is an extremist example of the broader emergence of a post-classical style of public relations that features five commonalities: a mixed repertoire of approaches; the rhetoric of certainty and division; computational and data-driven PR; online engagement and advocacy by supporters; a performative dimension to public communication.

In the terms of existing PR taxonomy, IS deploys the template of classic Grunigian managed communications, but instead of fitting one of the typologies, it adopts a mixed communicative repertoire of all four approaches and supplements this with additions which bring modernity and efficacy. The classical elements include the propaganda of the press agentry in one-way distribution of public information, persuasion plus manipulation in the two-way asymmetrical communications and then the mutual understanding shown in the symmetric recruitment outreach. All levels of this classically-derived communication show a public relations approach in the segmentation of

messages for different stakeholders. The divisive rhetoric of IS is also post-classical in the way it is unconcerned with promoting dialogue or contributing to a fully functioning society as envisioned by Heath (2000). Instead, rhetoric is used to dominate, to convey certainty about the cause and to divide society. In particular, the rhetoric of IS seeks to divide the Middle East from the West, Shia Muslims from Sunni Muslims, Muslims living in the West from non-Muslims, in a way that undermines what IS has called the "grey zone" of multiculturalism.

Beyond these variants of classical public relations, IS has embraced digital marketing, data-analytics and search engine optimisation. Together, these tools deliver a computational form of public relations that uses algorithms and the optimisation of digital content to search online audiences, identify their interests, and then deliver messages to them directly. These extensions of process and technology are another feature of post-classical public relations and illustrate the diverse repertoire of techniques used by IS. Moreover, this multiplicity of approaches reflects the multidimensional nature of IS - as terror group, state and Islamic welfare operation - and the multiple propositions it offers to recruits. The use of transnational digital communications technology has been a key enabler of IS and skilful deployment of limited resources has enabled IS to generate what Maher (2015) has called a "carefully curated asymmetry of fear".

The online public relations value chain that generates this asymmetric advantage starts with the creation of digital artefacts of terror that are designed to cause outrage, such as the notorious early videos of Western fighters beheading Western hostages such as James Foley in August 2014 and the burning alive of captured Jordanian airline pilot, Moaz al-Kasasbeh in February 2015. The choreography of these incidents, with Orange jumpsuits used as reminder of the humiliation of Muslims in Guantanemo Bay, along with the soundtracks of Islamic chants and rhetorical declarations or war on the West is evidence of a media-aware performative dimension to IS's visual communications. In the terms of performance studies theory, the decisions about what to include and what to leave out renders these artefacts as performance (Phelan, 1992, p. 31) and rather than live and natural recordings, the films are deliberately "mediatized" (Auslander, 2008, p. 56) as part of the group's communications management. IS has recognised that beyond the terror of the act of murder itself, widespread attention and impact can be generated through exaggerated dramatisation in which terrorists are performers in specially-designed media spectacles. That is to say, it is not enough just to be a terrorist and deliver acts of terrorism. In post-classical public relations, these realities are choreographed and performed in order to render them compelling enough to be shared for maximum communicative effect as digital performative artefacts

In considering its approach to managed communications, IS has combined message control with a digital liberalism in encouraging freedom in the use of social media that goes beyond two-way communication and embraces advocacy by its supporters. This mix of control of the core message (based on the strong ideological message structure) is balanced with freedom for a fragmented network of supporters to distribute existing material (through re-tweeting, for example). For fighters in the Islamic State itself, there is the opportunity to create their own digital content that communicates their personal experience of IS in their own national register and language, creating a truly global outreach. In classical PR, such uncontrolled advocacy might be considered a problem but for IS, it has been an asset enabling a vocal minority to achieve asymmetric effects. So while web tools such as Google Analytics go some way to enabling micro-targeting of recruits, this approach becomes realistic to execute through the efforts of supporter advocates who are willing to spend time both seeking out potential recruits and building an online relationship, leading to the decision to commit to action in some form, whether that be travelling to Syria or other involvement.

Despite the Islamic State's outlier status as a violent extremist group, the five common elements of post-classical public relations can be observed beyond terrorism settings in aspects of public communication in Western society during the time frame under study here (June 2014-June 2016). Although the political contexts are entirely different and there was obviously no terrorist action involved, some nationalistic political communications has deployed elements of post-classical public relations. For example, the level of certainty and conviction in the rhetoric of Donald Trump of the Republican Party, Nigel Farage of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Geert Wilders of the Dutch Party for Freedom and Marine Le Pen of the French National Front is closer to the high conviction rhetoric of IS than many conventional political parties. One long time Trump watcher, the US journalist Graydon Carter has described the President's communications style as combining "ignorance and certitude" (Carter, 2017, p.53). Social media posts that seemed designed to cause outrage were a feature of what the head of the Leave.eu campaign Aaron Banks described as the "guerrilla war" campaign he fought using "the power of social media" (Banks, 2017, p. xxvi). In considering the performative element, it is significant that several of the political entrepreneurs to emerge in the last two years share experience of mass media, either as performers in reality television (Donald Trump), talk radio (Nigel Farage) or television comedy (Brexit campaigner Boris Johnson and Italian Beppe Grillo of the Five Star Movement), which helps explain why they are skilled at the performance of politics in ways that sustain media attention.

Conclusions and limitations

Although digital media and online social networks are important to IS's recruitment system, analysis of criminal cases coming to trial suggests that the strongest social network of all remains family and friends. Both the evidence from prosecutions (Crown Prosecution Service, 2016) and media accounts of young people still in Syria included cases of recruits who were known to each other before they travelled together to the caliphate, sometimes as man and wife, as brothers and sisters or as friendship groups. Based on a profound understanding of the different factors that lead to disengagement among young Muslims in the West, IS deploys an integrated system of recruitment communications that combines elements of public relations, social media marketing, digital content production and online messaging. The record of government-backed attempts to use a public relations approach in counter-measures, such as the UK Home Office's attempts to promote "moderate Islam" and "social cohesion", have not been well-received among the target Muslim communities, who rightly resent being the object of a process of state-backed and media-supported securitisation. So in the current context of unconvincing countermeasures to IS recruitment messages and suspicion of government–backed initiatives in the USA, UK and other Western countries, there is potential for public relations techniques to be deployed in developing an improved understanding of the concerns of young people before designing communications outreach. In particular, a more thoughtful approach to stakeholder analysis could encourage campaigns that confront the feeling among young Muslims that they are positioned in Western society as outsiders who pose a threat to the majority, rather than a minority who seek to engage with the mainstream.

The author aspired to a balanced and holistic perspective based on a broad spread of evidence but has been limited to material translated by extremist groups themselves for circulation in English or translations by monitors of extreme Islamic groups. While this approach made sense as the article focussed deliberately on the recruitment outreach in English to young people in the West, these remain a minority and so the article overlooked Arabic content used to recruit the bulk of IS fighters from Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and other Middle Eastern countries, as well as Arab-speaking North Africa.

Future work would be welcome on critiques, additions and refinements to the conceptual model of IS recruitment offered here, along with broader studies that map out the communications system of the Islamic State in its totality. Empirical testing of the model against the actual experience of recruits would be most valuable in precisely mapping the points and routes of engagement, but the dangers associated with fieldwork in Syria remain unsurmountable, online

research has validity issues and the potential research pool of returning fighters remains in low numbers. The concept of a post-classical style of public relations and the five elements derived from the Islamic State's communications outreach needs more development at the theoretical level. Similarly, while the five characteristics derived here - a mixed repertoire of approaches; the rhetoric of certainty and division; computational and data-driven PR; online engagement and advocacy by supporters; a performative dimension to communications – seem viable on initial review in relation to populist political communications, they require field testing against more case studies of public relations and political communications to confirm their wider applicability.

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