Promoting terror to a digital other:
The terro-media system of Islamic State

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Project aims

To conceptualise the digital media system and institutions used by Islamic State for the promotion of its ideas using institutional-level study (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Bannerman and Haggard, 2015).

To explore the duality of Islamic State’s digital media system - messages, visualities and distribution – as an appeal to the digital other.
The communicative dimension of terrorism

• Communication of terrorism:
  Alleged symbiotic interdependence of media and terrorism (Rada, 1985; Clutterbuck, 1981; Schmidt and Graaf, 1982 and which is contested (Wieviorka, 1988)

• Terrorism as communication:
  A process that is communicative and rhetorical (Heath, 2008: Matusitz, 2013)

• Communication as terrorism:
  Reflected in preventative strand of law enforcement against communicative crimes, such as consuming web content, seen as part of a digital terro-media system.
Digital visuality of post-classical terrorism

- Initial spatial grandeur of acts of terror and resulting visuality was replaced - in the case of AQII, AQAP and IS - with smaller scale spatial enactment and increased rhetorical component

- Smaller form performative digital visuality of violence – more intimate spectacles of terror breaching media reporting boundaries/norms - for global distribution through social media
The digital other

Condition for digital otherness arose from real world factors:

- **Social.** Racism and religiosity of identity, e.g. in the UK - from “Paki” to Muslim (Warsi, 2017), from curry to securitisation, from benign spirituality to centres of hate preaching

- **Political.** Strident racialisation in politics, e.g UKIP

- **Legal.** Terrorism Act 2000 and 2006 created communicative crimes of “possessing “ or “collecting” information “of a kind” that could provide assistance to someone (else) to commit a terrorist act

- **Quasi-legal:** Sanctions without challenge under CT apparatus, including Extremism Analysis Unit, Prevent Delivery Unit for “non-violent extremism” views contrary to “British values”.
The digital other

• From 2014, a media mythology/orthodoxy emerges of a black box of digital media communications that takes young people from the streets of West Yorkshire, West Midlands and East London to Syria.

• The distribution or sell-side of the digital other is presented as incomprehensible except to insiders such as IS who are “masters of the digital universe” (Atwan, 2015:15).

• It is extreme and massive, deploying “vast numbers of digital fighters” (Cohen, 2015: 53) to sustain the terro-media system on the dark web.
“A huge proportion of them use social media.” (Jones, 2014).

“He spent a lot of time in his room playing computer games.” (Clifford, 2015).
ISLAMIC STATE

1. Nomenclature of claim
2. “Hold and expand” slogan
   (baqiya wa tatamaddad)

1. Hijrah (Migration)
2. Kalifah (Caliphate)
3. Jihad (Holy war)

Recruitment Narratives

- Money & comfort
- Power & kinship
- Adventure & ultraviolence
- Sexual opportunity

Strategy, Operations and Identity
Core IS Ideology
Recruitment Message Origination
Verbal Channel:

Rhetoric of inclusion and kinship versus experience of exclusion (as others in West)
Visual Channel:

1. Rhetoric of empowerment, statehood, dignity - and revenge for exclusion and humiliation - via digital artefacts of fear.

2. Encouraging to sympathetic audience and terrifying to the disengaged.

3. Digital spectacles of division and separateness
JUST TERROR

LET PARIS BE A LESSON FOR THOSE NATIONS THAT WISH TO TAKE HEED...
Differential ways of seeing
The repeated events of Syrians and Libyans dying on the shores of Turkey, Libya, and Italy, or even on the highways of Austria, is one that should awaken the heart into reflecting upon the issue of hijrah.

[Indeed, those whom the angels take [in death] while wronging themselves – [the angels] will say, “In what condition were you?” They will say, “We were oppressed in the land.” The angels will say, “Was not the earth of Allah spacious enough for you to emigrate therein?” For those, their refuge is Hell – and evil it is as a destination. Except for the oppressed among men, women and children who cannot devise a plan nor are they directed to a way – For those it is expected that Allah will pardon them, and Allah is ever Pardoning and Forbearing [An-Nisa: 97-99].

Rasūlullāh ﷺ said, “Allah ﷻ does not accept any deed from a mushrik after he accepts Islam until he departs from the mushrikin and goes to the Muslims” [Reported by an-Nasā’i and Ibn Mājah on the authority of Muāwiyyah Ibn Hayyān].

Although the obligation of hijrah is clear, a mistake is regularly committed by claimants of Islam, and that is in choosing their destination for “hijrah.” They always choose the lands of the Christians for their destination. But after the establishment of the prophetic state, hijrah was to al-Madīnah not al-Habashah. And during the Umayyad and ‘Abdār rule, hijrah was to the lands of the khilāfah not Rome and Constantinople. And with the revival of Islam’s implemented somewhere, it is not Dārul-Islām” [Akhām Aḥl adhi-Dhimmah]. This is evident, as the Sahabah did not consider the lands overcome by the false prophets or the resistance against zālih to be anything but dārul-harb. The fuqahā’ after them did not consider the lands ruled by the Tā’īr or ‘Ubaydī rulers to be Dārul-Islām, for although these rulers claimed Islam and ruled by some of its laws, they committed apostasy by abandoning some of its laws or teachings. Accordingly, moving to the lands of Al Sahul or the Sahwīn is not hijrah, as the rulers of these lands – in addition to them allying with the crusaders and apostates against Islam – abandon and resist many of the laws of the Shari’ah. There is no wāla’ and bāna’ there except on a nationalist basis.

Sadly, some Syrians and Libyans are willing to risk the lives and souls of those whom they are responsible to raise upon the Shari’ah – their children – sacrificing many of them during the dangerous trip to the lands of the war-waging crusaders ruled by laws of atheism and indecency. Although most of these families leave from dārul-kufr – Sahwah, PKK, or regime territory – to the crusaders’ lands, the possibility of families leaving the Khilāfah for America or Europe in pursuit of the Dunyā is a matter that should bring locus to the ruling of abandoning Dārul-Islām for dārul-kufr.

Therefore, it should be known that voluntarily leaving Dārul-Islām for dārul-kufr is a dangerous major sin, as it is a passage towards kufr and a gate towards one’s children
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Recruitment Narratives

Money & comfort
Power & kinship
Adventure & ultraviolence
Sexual opportunity

Media & Distribution System
Islamic State Institute of Public Information – Abu Mohammed al-Adnani

Verbal Content
- Dabiq magazine
- Radio
- Dawn of Glad Tidings radio app.
- Ajnad Media Foundation nasheed or anthems

Visual Content
- Al-Hayat Media Center videos
- Al-Furqan Media Center videos
- Al-Ittihad Media videos

Audiences
Disengaged
Sympathetic
Committed

Scan & listen
Empathise & engage

Engage
Customised to individual interests

Action
Migrate to caliphate to wage holy war

Online automation, algorithms and personal engagement with potential recruits

Strategy, Operations and Identity

Recruitment
Core IS Ideology
Message
Recruitment Origination
Mesage
Packaging and Distribution

Recruitment
Communications and Process
Conclusion and Implications

• The duality of IS media system differentially targets uncommitted/disengaged and sympathetic audiences.

• The aim is to generate fear, alienation and suspicion in uncommitted and inclusion, power and sense of success in sympathetic and committed audiences.

• IS rhetoric annexes aspects of otherness imposed on Muslims in the West (racism, legal constraints and securitisation) and exploits the zone of the digital other for strategic gain in its emphasise on irreconcilable separateness between the uncommitted audience and the audience that is sympathetic and committed to IS.
Conclusion and Implications

• IS digital rhetoric encourages internalisation of self-image of the stigma of otherness in young Muslims (in terms used by Wolfgang Lipp in *Sociology of Deviance*, 1977) and offers redemption via paternal charisma of IS leadership or heroic charisma of action.

“A person can very well build up their identity by actively adopting the very features that are normally viewed as marks of culpable outsiderhood. This self stigmatization is the source of all charisma.”