Islamic State propaganda and the mainstream media

Lauren Williams

February 2016

LOWY INSTITUTE
FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY

The Lowy Institute for International Policy is an independent policy think tank. Its mandate ranges across all the dimensions of international policy debate in Australia — economic, political and strategic — and it is not limited to a particular geographic region. Its two core tasks are to:

- produce distinctive research and fresh policy options for Australia's international policy and to contribute to the wider international debate

- promote discussion of Australia's role in the world by providing an accessible and high-quality forum for discussion of Australian international relations through debates, seminars, lectures, dialogues and conferences.

Lowy Institute Analyses are short papers analysing recent international trends and events and their policy implications.

The views expressed in this paper are entirely the author's own and not those of the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Islamic State's use of social media to disseminate its propaganda is generally well understood. What receives far less attention is how the group also uses the Western mainstream media to spread its key messages. Islamic State tailors the production and release of its material to the needs of mainstream media outlets and to the media cycle. The danger involved in sending Western journalists to Syria and Iraq has made the media more reliant on material produced by Islamic State. The group's propaganda is often unwittingly used by the mainstream media in ways that serve Islamic State's objectives.

Islamic State's propaganda effort is central to its ability to recruit new members, intimidate its opponents, and promote its legitimacy as a state. Countering that effort means more than just combatting it online and cancelling Twitter accounts. Counter-messaging efforts need to take place through the mainstream media as well as social media. The mainstream media also has a responsibility to treat Islamic State's material more critically, including by providing more contextual coverage of the conflict in Syria and Iraq, and using less sensationalist or polarising rhetoric when it discusses terrorism. The adoption of better standards and practices can help the mainstream media to limit the appeal of Islamic State propaganda in ways that do not detract from media independence and the public's right to know.

In 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, then al-Qaeda's second-in-command, wrote to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq: "I say to you that we are in a battle and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."[1]

For the last two decades, al-Qaeda has used the internet to disseminate its ideology, collect intelligence on potential targets, and communicate with sympathisers around the globe. Their progeny, today known as Islamic State, has taken a more direct approach. The group has used violence as a central prop in a sophisticated propaganda campaign aimed at recruiting members and sympathisers and instilling fear in its opponents. More so than al-Qaeda, Islamic State has enlisted the Western media as a chief disseminator of its propaganda. It has captured the public's attention and dominated news media.

While the exact number of foreign fighters who have joined the ranks of Islamic State is not known, it is believed around 31 000 foreign fighters have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join Islamic State or other jihadist outfits including the Nusra Front.[2] This includes roughly 120[3] from Australia, 1200 from France, and around 800 from the United Kingdom.[4] Since declaring a Caliphate in June 2014, Islamic State or its sympathisers have carried out numerous attacks on foreign targets, most recently in Jakarta on 14 January 2016, Paris on 13 November 2015, Beirut on 12 November 2015, and Ankara on 10 October 2015. It is, therefore, imperative to understand the forces generating sympathy for the group and the dynamics leading to its expansion in both numbers and reach.

A great deal of attention has been focused on Islamic State's use of social media. What is less often discussed is the way in which those social media messages and videos find their way into the Western media. Islamic State's deliberate manipulation of traditional media channels presents new challenges and ethical dilemmas for media professionals and law enforcement officials. Governments have concentrated on blocking Islamic State's social media platforms, while ignoring the role that traditional media is playing in publicising the movement's actions and helping it obtain the recognition and legitimacy that it seeks.

It is important that we understand the role of Western media in Islamic State's recruitment and propaganda strategy in order to limit the spread of its messages. Islamic State cannot be defeated using military means alone. Traditional media outlets have a responsibility and an opportunity to frame the public's interpretation of Islamic State more objectively, to expose the weaknesses of its narratives, and to take a more critical view

…it is believed around 31 000 foreign fighters have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join Islamic State or other jihadist outfits…

of its military and other claimed successes. Traditional media can also be harnessed as an effective platform for counter-messaging.

This Analysis examines how Islamic State utilises both traditional and social media in Western countries. It outlines what Islamic State is trying to achieve through its propaganda efforts and how Western governments and media organisations have responded. It also offers recommendations as to how that response can be improved in a way that protects the public's right to know while avoiding sensational coverage that furthers Islamic State's agenda.

WHAT ISLAMIC STATE'S MEDIA ARM IS TRYING TO ACHIEVE

Islamic State's media effort has a number of aims that target both sympathetic and hostile audiences. One goal is to recruit supporters. This includes individuals who might travel to Iraq and Syria to fight for Islamic State, as well as those who remain in their home countries and support the movement by raising funds or carrying out acts of terrorism. A second goal is to generate fear among its opponents, which has very specific advantages on the battlefield. A third goal is to assert its legitimacy and gain acceptance of its status as a state. None of these objectives can be achieved without widespread publicity.

The main media arms of Islamic State include the al-Hayat Media Center, the al-Furqan, al-I'tisaam and Ajnad Media Foundations, and the A'maq News Agency. Since mid-2012, the group's prodigious propaganda output has ranged from feature-length videos, social media networks, published newspapers, and a glossy magazine — *Dabiq* — through to radio programs and smartphone apps. Content has been produced in English, Arabic, Russian, Urdu, Turkish, and even Hebrew. The group has also staged made-for-media terrorist events, such as the spectacles of beheadings, which specifically target Western audiences. Al-Hayat has also produced hundreds of films, including feature-length series such as *Clanging of the Swords, Parts I, II, III* and *IV* and *Flames of War: Fighting Has Just Begun.* Other films focusing on military operations, recruitment appeals, and depictions of social order and civic governance in Islamic State territory are also prolific.

Unlike extremist propaganda videos of the past…Islamic State's videos are of a high quality.

Unlike extremist propaganda videos of the past, which were often unsophisticated productions featuring terrorist leaders making long and boring sermons, Islamic State's videos are of a high quality. They use cinematic production techniques, Hollywood-style special effects,[5] 'immersive' video game-style media,[6] and dramatic, apocalyptic narratives to draw the viewer's attention and secure media coverage. The material is available online and disseminated on social media through a network of supporters on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Ask.fm, Kik, and Tumblr. It is from these social media sites that material is often picked up by mainstream media outlets.

Islamic State deploys various forms of marketing techniques to recruit members and sympathisers. Recruitment and propaganda videos typically focus on three main narratives: persecution, utopianism, and brutality.[7] Often the propaganda videos incorporate all three narratives.

Persecution narratives feature prominently in Islamic State propaganda. Islamic State has capitalised on disgruntlement among Sunni Muslims in the Middle East, who it argues are suffering at the hands of 'Nusayri apostates', a derogatory term used for Iranian-affiliated regimes in Syria and Iraq. Islamic State's propaganda material also tries to tap into any resentment among Sunnis living in the West. Their videos often portray Muslims, and particularly children, being killed as a result of coalition air strikes in Syria and Iraq. In other cases they attack Western values and appeal to a Sunni Muslim sense of identity and purpose by using images and messages of camaraderie and brotherhood. Religious edicts issued by Islamic State authorities are also used to deliver messages of duty and obligation to help build Islamic State's self-styled Caliphate.

Increasingly, Islamic State's recruitment videos portray daily life in the Caliphate in idealised terms, promoting an image of a perfectly functioning society where Muslims live happily in accordance with their Islamic principles. These videos frequently show happy children, effective governance, sophisticated infrastructure (such as hospitals), and agricultural production. Often these utopian videos will include testimony from Western recruits who detail the benefits of their new-found home in a bid to entice educated professionals to Islamic State's ranks. Australian pediatrician Tareq Kamleh, who left Australia to work as a doctor with Islamic State in the Syrian city of Raqqa, is one example. In a 15-minute video recorded in what appeared to be a state-of-the-art hospital, Dr Kamleh extolls the virtues of life in the Islamic State and encourages other doctors to join.[8] The video depicts a sense of normalcy, cleanliness, and peacefulness far removed from the war zone imagery commonly featured in past Islamic State videos.

Another category of propaganda videos focuses on Islamic State's achievements on the battlefield and presents an exaggerated sense of its strength and success. Images of dead Syrian soldiers and militiamen, military parades, training camps, artillery, and battlefield scenes work to raise the morale of sympathisers, excite adventurists, and intimidate opponents. The intention is to present an image of an ordered and formidable state with successful military, political, social, and economic institutions.

Videos that emphasise the brutality of Islamic State towards its adversaries, particularly the carefully constructed execution videos, attract the most attention and serve multiple objectives. Among sympathetic audiences, the videos are intended to capture the imagination and gratify susceptible and violence-prone individuals, and promote an image of triumph and invincibility. They reinforce the

Recruitment and propaganda videos typically focus on three main narratives: persecution, utopianism, and brutality.

narrative of persecution by promoting the idea of divine and sanctioned retribution against the 'unbelievers' who have waged a war against the true Islam. Among hostile audiences, the videos demonstrating the group's brutality are aimed at intimidating local populations and discouraging dissent.[9] They are designed to spark outrage and elicit responses from international opponents.

Islamic State dedicates greater production expertise and resources to videos depicting the execution of Western captives, recognising the added currency such videos have in the international media.[10] Nevertheless, the videos showing the execution of Arab or Muslim captives also play an important role in Islamic State propaganda. The video depicting the burning of the captured Jordanian pilot Muadh al-Kasasbeh, released in February 2015, is a prime example of a video serving multiple propaganda objectives, aimed at both supporters and opponents. The shock value of a new form of execution assured widespread coverage, provoking outrage in the international media. The video was packaged in a five-minute 'documentary' that included an interview with the pilot before his death. His role in the coalition air campaign against Islamic State was interspersed with graphic images and special effects depicting Muslim victims of the coalition campaign. The video was carefully timed, its release coming shortly after news that Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait had joined the coalition. In response, Jordan stepped up its involvement in the anti-Islamic State campaign, drawing the country deeper into the conflict in Syria, and executed two Islamic State-linked jihadists.[11] The UAE, meanwhile, suspended its role in the coalition air strikes.[12]

All material disseminated by Islamic State is tightly controlled.

All material disseminated by Islamic State is tightly controlled. Content is branded with the Islamic State logo and the group has recruited skilled media professionals from the West to assist in the dissemination of its propaganda in multiple languages. It has also used some of its captives for that purpose. British journalist John Cantlie is believed to have been captured in February 2015 and 'employed' as an English-speaking 'news reporter' covering Islamic State, presumably under duress. He has fronted stories providing an exaggerated account of Islamic State military victories and exploits.[13] Following the death of Mohammed Emwazi, the UK national dubbed 'Jihadi John', in November 2015, Islamic State placed a balaclava-clad militant with a British accent in the same role. That individual, believed to be Siddhartha Dhar, was broadcast overseeing the execution of five accused spies and mocking UK military operations in Syria. An added advantage of using English (and more recently French) spokespeople is that they can develop a celebrity status among Islamic State supporters.

HOW THE MEDIA COVERS ISLAMIC STATE

To achieve its objectives of attracting recruits, instilling fear, and asserting its legitimacy as a state, Islamic State needs publicity. Its brutality and violence are tied to this end. The act of terrorism is first and foremost an act of communication.[14] But while Islamic State has developed its own means for communicating its propaganda, it relies on Western media reporting to amplify its message.

Stories on Islamic State consistently rank highly on lists of the most read and most viewed news items.[15] Islamic State often trends on global search engines. The dramatic and often brutal nature of the footage that the group publishes, the mystique surrounding the young Western men and women it has been able to draw into its ranks, the dramatic advances and redrawing of borders, along with the portrayal of the group by some Western leaders as the 'number one evil of our time' interests audiences.[16] The Islamic State group has become unavoidable for even a casual news consumer.

This saturation coverage also helps Islamic State to achieve a stature it does not deserve, and helps it to recruit new members and instil fear in its adversaries. Unwittingly, the Western media has become an accomplice to Islamic State's aims. Indeed, the process is somewhat self-perpetuating: driven by fear and fascination the public demands ever more news on the group and its activities.

As audience demand has increased, so too has the Western media's reliance on Islamic State material as a primary source. Because of the dangers involved in reporting from Syria and Iraq, mainstream media outlets are no longer willing to send journalists into the region.[17] As a result, media outlets have become dependent on videos and images produced and released by Islamic State. Consequently, Islamic State has been able to exert significant control over the way in which it is depicted. There is almost no way to verify the information first-hand, meaning reports about Islamic State often rely on material released by the group itself.

Moreover, the group has been highly effective in silencing dissenting voices, killing journalists and activists critical of its rule.[18] The absence of credible voices questioning Islamic State's authority means there is little accurate information available on the reality of life inside its territory.[19]

As one news editor noted to the author, the decision to use Islamic State-produced material is driven by the absence of ground reporters and the easy availability of high-quality broadcast material produced by Islamic State.[20] Television news broadcasters face a particular challenge in this respect. Islamic State releases 'made-for-television' products that are easily accessible and attractive to Western media outlets. Images and videos have high production values. The group uses stylistic devices

Stories on Islamic State consistently rank highly on lists of the most read and most viewed news items.

and editing techniques that make 'grabs', overlay, and still photographs quick and easy to assemble and republish.

Islamic State has also proven adept at tailoring its media releases to Western news cycles. High-impact videos demonstrating the group's brutality are often released after military setbacks in order to steal attention from potentially negative coverage, or during lulls in other international news in order to ensure Islamic State dominates the headlines. This indicates a carefully considered public relations strategy and a keen understanding of how to maximise exposure.

The appetite for Islamic State news has also frequently resulted in the publication of threats or boasts made by foreign fighters without any apparent news value. Self-serving tweets or Facebook posts from foreign fighters have become news stories in themselves. While it may be newsworthy when an Australian foreign fighter dies, or reveals his involvement in a war crime, or is connected to a terrorist plot, other news stories are often little more than 'Australian jihadist tweeted'. For example, the *Daily Mail* has made multiple stories out of an Australian Jabhat al-Nusra fighter posting a video of himself firing a gun.[21] Other outlets have treated the creation of a Facebook page by an Australian Islamic State member as news. This type of coverage could boost Islamic State recruitment, because it makes becoming a foreign fighter a guaranteed path to fame.

The inability to adequately verify information has in some cases resulted in Islamic State propaganda being reported as fact.

The inability to adequately verify information has in some cases resulted in Islamic State propaganda being reported as fact. For example, in testimony to the US House of Representatives in October 2015, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies referred to Islamic State's claim to have taken over the Libyan city of Derna. A number of media outlets reported uncritically that the group controlled the city whereas in fact the movement merely had a presence in the city. It took many days for this mistake to be corrected.[22] Similarly, several news agencies reported a claim that Islamic State had developed a nuclear weapon.[23] The claim was based on a single source, a lone Islamic State supporter boasting on Twitter after publication of the claim in the Islamic State's own *Dabiq* magazine. The claim was later debunked.

HOW THE MEDIA IS RESPONDING

As the threat from Islamic State has evolved, so have media practices in dealing with the group. News editors and broadcasters have become aware of attempts by Islamic State to manipulate their outlets and some have adopted in-house policies to mitigate the propaganda objectives of Islamic State-produced material.[24] Media outlets have responded to this manipulation in three main ways: flagging the material as propaganda; omitting graphic content that may cause harm and offence; and refusing to broadcast specific threats against Western countries.

Nonetheless, editorial policies have largely been ad hoc and to date there is no standard set of guidelines on how to cover and report on terrorist activities. Moreover, most media outlets have commercial imperatives and the reality is that sensational news about Islamic State sells newspapers and advertising. The resulting tension is not always resolved in favour of the public interest, as news outlets continue to publish sensational, dramatic, and terrifying content.[25]

In France, television broadcasters have adopted a policy of marking or 'tagging' any Islamic State material as 'propaganda' in almost all instances. Logos and text identifying the material as Islamic State-produced are blurred or edited out in an attempt to avoid promoting the group further. Governments have advised news outlets in the United Kingdom, France, and Australia to adopt the derogatory acronym 'Daesh' to describe the group, although this is not always practiced.

News outlets in the United Kingdom and Australia omit or blur more graphic or violent content. However, the justification for this complies with standard practices to avoid potential harm and offence, rather than mitigate potential propaganda value. ABC News, BBC News, France 24 and other major broadcasters use selected frames that do not show the moment of death to avoid unnecessary offence to the victims' families and to preserve the dignity of victims in death. In the case of the beheading of James Foley, most news outlets chose to publish screen shots of the Islamic State video release, *A Message to America*, omitting the image of Foley with a knife to his neck before the moment of death, citing the need to inform without causing unnecessary trauma.[26]

However, there were some exceptions. The *New York Daily News*, for example, published a photograph on its website which, although pixelated, showed Foley's decapitated head resting on his back. In the case of the video of the Jordanian pilot burned to death, Fox News was the only mainstream media outlet to publish the video in full. In a statement, Fox News executive editor John Moody said that:

> "After careful consideration, we decided that giving readers of FoxNews.com the option to see for themselves the barbarity of Islamic State outweighed legitimate concerns about the graphic nature of the video."[27]

Still, as media outlets have become more aware of the intent behind Islamic State's videos, many have started to exercise even greater restraint by showing less of the material or reporting on the act itself without using images from the propaganda clips.[28] *The Guardian* has adopted in-house policies regarding publication of Islamic State propaganda material. These include: not using video and avoiding pictures that glamorise the perpetrator; only using closely cropped still pictures of the hostage(s) from the video and using them downpage in the web article to avoid it appearing on fronts; and where possible using a picture of the hostage(s) in another context rather than in captivity.[29]

…editorial policies have largely been ad hoc and to date there is no standard set of guidelines on how to cover and report on terrorist activities.

Despite such efforts to be more discriminating in the use of Islamic State's material, there are still ways in which the media continues to help promote Islamic State's propaganda objectives. Even if they do not show them in their entirety, media reporting of videos often directs readers or viewers to the original online source, giving it a wider currency. Editing 'moment of death' content in Islamic State videos does not necessarily reduce the dramatic impact of these videos. The testimony from victims, the ideological sermons of the executioner, and the sense of foreboding created by the knowledge that viewers know what is about to happen can have as much of an effect on audiences as the actual violence itself.

The media is also typically less selective and discriminating in its use of videos that focus on the idealised nature of life in the Caliphate, given their less graphic nature. For example, the propaganda video depicting Australian doctor Tareq Kamleh urging other Australians to join Islamic State as nurses, doctors, and civil servants was run in full by many media outlets without tagging the material as propaganda or disclosing its source.[30]

It might be argued that the impact of the widespread coverage of Islamic State by the Western media is balanced by the typically negative portrayal of the group. But this too can work in Islamic State's favour. Describing the group as 'barbaric', 'brutal', or 'sick' helps Islamic State's objective of instilling fear in Western audiences. Nor does simply condemning the group's violence restrict its appeal to individuals at risk of radicalisation. In fact, it may even contribute to legitimisation of the group and glorification of its image.[31] For those already sympathetic to the group, condemnation of Islamic State and its philosophy may only serve to harden their beliefs and reinforce their marginal social identity. It will also reinforce their tendency to seek alternative narratives through social media and other more radical avenues.

This should not be mistaken as an argument in favour of a less condemnatory treatment of Islamic State by the Western media. But what is certainly needed is a more critical view of Islamic State's claims and propaganda. Media reports that reflect the reality of life under Islamic State rule are more likely to dissuade would-be recruits from joining the group than simple, lurid condemnations.[32] In this case, using greater reporting of the views of defectors and returnees can play an important role. However, in the United Kingdom, France, and Australia there is limited scope for these voices to be heard given the threat of returnees being arrested, prosecuted, and jailed on return under counterterrorism laws.[33] Faced with prosecution for their involvement in the war, there is little incentive for defectors to speak out. Australian counterterrorism police have stated that there is potential value in using defectors and returnees through the media to dissuade other would-be jihadis from joining.[34]

…there is potential value in using defectors and returnees through the media to dissuade other would-be jihadis from joining.

There is also disproportionate coverage of violence committed by Islamic State as opposed to violence committed by the regime of Bashar al-Assad and his allies. In the first six months of 2015, the Assad regime killed more than six times the number of Syrians than Islamic State, yet the majority of these crimes went unreported.[35] A simple Google search of news results reveals more than double the number of hits for 'Syria ISIS' than for 'Syria Assad'. Media outlets have said that the routine nature of Assad's crimes make these deaths less newsworthy.[36] But this risks feeding a perception among Muslims that Western governments and Western media are collaborating in a campaign against Sunni Muslims.

GOVERNMENT AND CORPORATE RESPONSES

In accordance with Margaret Thatcher's famous statement, in relation to the IRA, that "we must starve terrorists of the oxygen of publicity", governments are now moving to try to prevent Islamic State messaging from reaching the public. Along with media self-regulation, governments and corporations have censored social media and attempted to silence journalists in the interest of national security. But while government and corporate responses have tended to focus on social media, there has been little in the way of regulation, or self-regulation, of the press.

Social media corporations have responded to the emergence of Islamic State by working with governments to suspend the accounts of Islamic State supporters on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and other social media sites. In August 2014, Twitter CEO Dick Costolo announced that any users who shared graphic images relating to the beheading of James Foley would have their account suspended.[37] And while Twitter has not publicly released the number of accounts suspended each day, reports suggest the figure could be upwards of 2000 accounts per week.[38]

Europol also recently launched a special taskforce, the European Union Internet Referral Unit, tasked with shutting down accounts and removing extremist propaganda from social media.[39] In 2010, the United Kingdom opened the Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit that works with company partners to remove content from the internet that glorifies or incites acts of terrorism.[40] The British Army has created a special unit to conduct non-lethal warfare against Islamic State with a focus on combating its online narratives.[41]

For every [social media] account that is suspended, new or repeat accounts pop up.

The effectiveness of these efforts is questionable. For every account that is suspended, new or repeat accounts pop up. Between September and December 2014, 46 000 Islamic State supporters (each with an average number of 1000 followers) were not only active on Twitter, they were more active than the average Twitter user.[42] Accounts that are shut down are reopened quickly under new names, gaining more followers and even acquiring a degree of added

Efforts to curb Islamic State's use of the mainstream media have also varied in their effectiveness.

legitimacy and celebrity among followers for the very fact that they have been deemed an enemy of the West.[43]

Efforts to curb Islamic State's use of the mainstream media have also varied in their effectiveness. The UK Parliament has moved to strengthen media watchdog Ofcom's powers to take action against broadcasters who air extremist content. Under the new laws, Ofcom will be empowered to vet news and documentary material that could be deemed to be inciting hate, and prevent extremist material making it to air. The bill has raised concern that the new powers threaten editorial independence and fundamental freedoms of expression.[44]

Any government effort to limit Islamic State's appearance in the mainstream media will, however, be undermined by the inflammatory rhetoric that political leaders have sometimes used in relation to the group. Former Australian prime minister Tony Abbott described Islamic State as a 'death cult', telling a summit meeting in June 2015 on countering violent extremism that "Daesh is coming if it can for every person and every government with a simple message: submit or die".[45] Britain's David Cameron has described the group as an "existential threat" to the British way of life.[46] Speaking about Islamic State in such terms not only helps to keep it in the media but helps Islamic State to instil fear in its audiences. It also grants the group a significance that it really does not deserve.

Similarly, rhetoric that appears to link Islam or the broader Muslim community with Islamic State's acts of terror reinforces key elements of the group's propaganda. Such rhetoric can have a polarising effect, damaging relations between Muslims and the non-Muslim community. Islamic State preys on feelings of alienation in Western society. Divisive rhetoric reinforces those feelings of alienation and feeds into Islamic State's "'grand narrative' according to which the West has embarked on a war against Islam and — by extension — a 'war against all Muslims'".[47] Islamic State anticipates the shock and horror that its attacks and videos provoke, as well as the public debates surrounding freedom of speech, censorship, and the right to offend that follow. This contributes to a reductive and binary 'us versus them' ethos that pits freedom of speech against all Muslims in a way that benefits Islamic State.[48] Anything that reinforces alienation among target audiences will make Islamic State's work easier.

Increasingly there is recognition of the importance of not reinforcing Islamic State's rhetoric. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has warned about the dangers of hyping or lending credibility to the Islamic State strategy and of becoming "amplifiers of their wickedness and significance".[49] A former head of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, Sir Richard Dearlove, has argued that governments and the media have blown the threat out of proportion, arguing that Islamic State fighters were getting more coverage than in "their wildest dreams".[50] It is still too

early to judge what impact these calls will have both on the rhetoric and reporting of Islamic State.

COUNTER-MESSAGING

Placing limits on Islamic State's ability to get its message out on social media or in the mainstream media will have mixed results at best. A key part of any effort to respond to Islamic State's propaganda, therefore, has to be counter-messaging.

This is still an experimental area and the effectiveness of current measures is difficult to evaluate. However, there is already some evidence to suggest that conveying the reality of life under Islamic State and hearing from more 'legitimate' voices in the community may have a more powerful effect in repudiating Islamic State messaging and dissuading would-be radicals from joining the group than simply shutting down these voices.

In the United States, the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) has been established within the State Department to coordinate and amplify counter-messages to extremist propaganda that resonate with those who might be attracted to Islamic State messaging. The unit has launched a number of campaigns aimed at exposing the harsh realities of the war. In September 2014, the State Department launched the 'Think again, turn away' Twitter campaign, which mimicked and mocked Islamic State messaging with images of dead jihadis and highlighted Islamic State atrocities. The most controversial release in the series was a video, *Welcome to Islamic State Land*, which depicted graphic images of Islamic State atrocities, including severed heads and prisoners shot at point blank range.[51] The video received close to one million views on social media.[52] The campaign focused on countering the Islamic State message that Muslims were being slaughtered by the West and by the Assad regime by showing that Islamic State was also killing Muslims.[53]

The London-based anti-extremism organisation Quilliam Foundation launched a new social media campaign, #notanotherbrother, in July 2015. The campaign includes a YouTube clip aimed at members of the Muslim community who may be vulnerable to Islamic State messaging, providing a counter-narrative to the utopian propaganda of Islamic State.[54]

In Australia, the government has allocated $21.7 million to undermine extremist propaganda by reducing access to extremist material online and empowering community and civil society voices that combat terrorist narratives.[55] The Australian Defence Force has started a pilot program, a Twitter handle @Fight_DAESH, which describes its goal as "correcting false information disseminated on Twitter by DAESH and its sympathisers", to debunk messages promoting Islamic State successes.

In Australia, the government has allocated $21.7 million to undermine extremist propaganda.

There are challenges for any counter-messaging campaign efforts. Often the counter-messages cannot compete with the more dramatic, shocking, bloody content that Islamic State produces and that is attractive to media outlets.[56] Meanwhile, messages that appear to come from government channels have less resonance among at-risk individuals.[57] One of the greatest challenges has been the significant absence of mainstream clerics prepared to speak publicly to counter the message of those promoting intolerant visions of Islam. But the problem does not only lie at the feet of Muslim community leaders. As one prominent Australian Muslim community representative noted to the author, there is also a disabling lack of trust between governments, police and the press, and the local Muslim populations.[58] One reason that Muslim leaders have been unwilling to speak to the media is the view that this would simply reinforce the tendency of the mainstream media to equate Islam and Muslims with terrorism.[59]

There are also some practical challenges that limit the effectiveness of any counter-messaging campaign. The West's military campaign in Iraq and Syria has focused on Islamic State and other terrorist groups. But many Sunni Muslims share Islamic State's antipathy towards regimes in Syria and Iraq, even if they don't share the group's ideology. This makes it difficult to counter Islamic State's messages that the West has effectively sided with these regimes. This is reinforced by the media's tendency to focus on military actions over other types of activity. As one UK official complained to the author, despite allocating more than 600 million British pounds in humanitarian aid and development to Syria, "positive stories" have failed to garner international media attention, while "anything Islamic State does gets reported".[60]

HOW SHOULD THE MEDIA RESPOND?

The rise of Islamic State and its sophisticated propaganda machine presents real challenges for media professionals, media organisations, and governments. In the digital arena, where the network of Islamic State's online supporters continues to expand, attempts to completely silence this network will continue to fail. Likewise, in societies that still value press freedoms, a complete media blackout on all Islamic State activities is neither desirable nor achievable and risks curtailing the very media freedoms, a pillar of the democratic system, that Islamic State takes aim at.

It is unreasonable to expect news media to stop reporting on Islamic State entirely…

It is unreasonable to expect news media to stop reporting on Islamic State entirely; after all, the public has a right to know details about the threat the group presents. However, media reporting of Islamic State needs to strike a balance between keeping the public informed and gratuitous coverage. Careful consideration needs to be given to what the media reports and how.

In 2004, the Australian Press Council developed advisory guidelines for the use of religious terms in headlines. The Council advised against the constant linking of Islam to terrorist groups, which can contribute to the lack of trust that exists between the media and the Muslim community in Australia. An expanded set of guidelines should, however, also be adopted in the face of the new threat posed by Islamic State. These should include recommendations on the use of Islamic State-supplied material and the terminology used to describe it. Guidelines on the reporting of suicides aimed at discouraging other people from taking their own lives, and encouraging them to seek help, could be adapted to reporting of terrorism, particularly with regard to reports on people leaving the country to join Islamic State.[61]

As it stands, Islamic State propaganda continues to be reported as a reliable source, meaning susceptible recruits will digest it as Islamic State intends. As a matter of ethical practice, media outlets should exercise extreme caution when reporting Islamic State activities and cease publishing any material, including all photos and videos, that was purely produced for the purposes of propaganda. They should treat Islamic State material in the same way they would treat broadcast images or video handouts from public relations firms. Television broadcasters in particular should find alternative means to illustrate their stories about Islamic State activities. At the very least, broadcasters and publishers should tag propaganda material as such.

The need to exercise greater care in dealing with Islamic State's propaganda efforts does not just rest with the media, however. Political leaders and community representatives also need to be careful that their rhetoric does not do Islamic State's work for it. This is important in and of itself. But it is also important in terms of the media's treatment of the group. The way that people speak about Islamic State also affects how the media report on it.

As our understanding of Islamic State's recruitment methodology has evolved, governments are increasingly turning to preventative approaches to radicalisation. Harnessing counter-messages that repudiate invalid and exaggerated claims by Islamic State has been central to these efforts. To date, however, these efforts have been hindered by the fact that counter-messages from government sources have little resonance with at-risk individuals and little appeal to the media.

The role of the media as a platform for counter-messaging has so far been underutilised.

The role of the media as a platform for counter-messaging has so far been underutilised. When Islamic State claims are made, intelligence material provided by governments to the media could help to debunk them, helping the press to verify and provide greater context in its coverage. To do this, however, a lot more work will need to be done to build trust between the media and government on these issues. It will mean, on the one hand, a greater willingness and transparency on the

part of government agencies to share information on Islamic State with the media. But it will also require, on the other hand, media to have faith in the accuracy of the information that is being provided to them.

Defectors and returnees from Islamic State are a growing phenomenon, and their stories can be used as a powerful tool in the fight against the group. Disillusioned fighters and those who can testify about the harsh reality of life under Islamic State can help to undermine the legitimacy of Islamic State's religious and military claims. Governments can assist in getting these messages out by providing defectors and returnees with opportunities to speak out about their experiences and removing legal disincentives to going public. Closer coordination between the media and law enforcement agencies could work to this end. Rather than attempt to silence these voices, it is important to harness the mainstream media as a platform for debate and an opportunity to contradict and repudiate Islamic State narratives, as well as to assess the responses of governments.

Defectors and returnees from Islamic State are a growing phenomenon, and their stories can be used as a powerful tool in the fight against the group.

CONCLUSION

Islamic State has a clearly defined strategy to manipulate the Western media to serve its propaganda objectives. It seeks to enlist the media to help it disseminate its key messages. Because of the dangers of sending its own reporters into Syria and Iraq, the media has become dependent on Islamic State material. The newsworthiness and shock value of Islamic State's acts mean it will continue to command coverage and attention. Political leaders, community representatives, and media outlets that talk up the threat posed by Islamic State also help the group to achieve its propaganda goals. In particular, inflammatory reporting about the Muslim community in the context of terrorism has also had a polarising effect, reinforcing Islamic State's messages.

There are a number of things that can be done, however, to limit the effectiveness of Islamic State's propaganda campaigns. This includes more thoughtful and responsible use of Islamic State publications and videos by the media and the use of less sensationalist and divisive rhetoric by political leaders and media representatives. Greater effort also needs to be put into counter-messaging. In this regard, using defectors or disillusioned returnees to communicate the reality of life in Islamic State's so-called Caliphate holds particular promise offering Islamic State real competition in the shaping of its image.

NOTES

[1] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "ODNI Releases Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi", Press Release, 11 October 2005; English translation of letter: http://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english.pdf.

[2] The Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq", December 2015, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

[3] These figures come from the Australian Attorney-General's Department, although the Department does not specify whether foreign fighters are engaged with Islamic State or other groups. About a dozen Australian fighters are believed to be engaged in fighting against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

[4] Peter R Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s", International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 26 January 2015, http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/; Jason Groves, "1,500 Britons Have Fled to Join ISIS in Syria — and 800 Have Successfully Got In, Hammond Admits", *Daily Mail*, 16 January 2016, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3402379/1500-Britons-fled-join-ISIS-Syria-successfully-got-war-torn-state-Foreign-Secretary-admits.html.

[5] For some examples of what makes Islamic State videos 'Hollywood-style', see Cori E Dauber and Mark Robinson, "ISIS and the Hollywood Visual Style", 6 July 2015, http://jihadology.net/2015/07/06/guest-post-isis-and-the-hollywood-visual-style/.

[6] Amanda Rogers, "The Strategic Success of ISIS Propaganda", lecture, Georgia State University at Madison, 20 October 2014.

[7] Charlie Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy", Quilliam, July 2015, http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf. Winter identifies six main narratives that include the additional narratives of mercy, war, and belonging.

[8] See Patrick Hatch, "Australian Doctor Tareq Kamleh Appears in Islamic State Propaganda Video", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 2015, http://www.smh.com.au/national/australian-doctor-tareq-kamleh-appears-in-islamic-state-propaganda-video-20150425-1mt603.html.

[9] Charlie Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy".

[10] Interview, Amanda Rogers, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 20 January 2016.

[11] Richard Spencer, Ruth Sherlock and Magdy Samaan, "Blow to Anti-Isil Coalition as United Arab Emirates Stops Air Strikes", *The Telegraph*, 4 February 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11390166/Blow-to-anti-Isil-coalition-as-United-Arab-Emirates-stops-air-strikes.html.

[12] Ibid.

[13] See John Cantlie, "Inside Ayn Al-Islam (Kobane)", www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZ7hf4m0sI0.

[14] Alex P Schmid and J de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (London: Sage Publications, 1982).

[15] Interview, Richard Spencer, *The Telegraph*, London, 21 June 2015.

[16] Interview, Michel Scott, Head of Foreign Service, TF1, Paris, 16 June 2015.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Lauren Williams, "Assassination of Third Syrian Journalist Raises Fears of Islamic State in Turkey", ABC News, 30 December 2015, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-30/journalist-assassination-blamed-on-is/7058996.

[19] The Soufan Group, "The Deadly Cost of Speaking Out Against Extremism", INtelBrief, 2 February 2016, http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-deadly-cost-of-speaking-out-against-extremism/.

[20] Interview, Michel Scott, Head of Foreign Service, TF1, Paris, 16 June 2015.

[21] See Taylor Auerbach, "The Aussie 'Jihadi': Home-grown 'Terrorist' Laughs and Fires his Machine Gun from a Bombed Out Building in Syria — Alongside His New Friend Dubbed the 'British Bin Laden'", *Daily Mail*, 2 June 2014, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2645695/Sydney-jihadist-Ahmed-Shaheed-III-laughs-fires-machine-gun-bombed-building-Syria-alongside-UKs-bin-Laden.html#ixzz413m4miPo; and Geoff Chambers, "Ginger Jihadist Abdullah Elmir Back on Facebook Radar Boasting of a Terrorist's Life of Freedom", *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 February 2015, http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/ginger-jihadist-abdullah-elmir-back-on-facebook-radar-boasting-of-a-terrorists-life-of-freedom/story-fni0cx12-1227216586934.

[22] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Radicalization: Social Media and the Rise of Terrorism", House Testimony, Hearing before the US House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security, 28 October 2015, https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/10-28-2015-Natl-Security-Subcommittee-Hearing-on-Radicalization-Gartenstein-Ross-FDD-Testimony.pdf.

[23] Lora Moftah, "Does ISIS Have a Nuclear Weapon? Islamic State Supporter Claims Militants Have Dirty Bomb", *International Business Times*, 12 December 2014, does-isis-have-nuclear-weapon-islamic-state-supporter-claims-militants-have-dirty-1731890.

[24] Interview, Michel Scott, Head of Foreign Service, TF1, Paris, 26 June 2015; Interview, John Danisewski, Associated Press, 21 July 2015.

[25] Brigitte Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon and Robert Shapiro, *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[26] Sydney Smith, "How Media Covered James Foley Beheading: NYPost's Front Page Like Death Porn", commentary, iMediaEthics, 20 August 2015, http://www.imediaethics.org/how-media-covered-james-foley-beheading-nyposts-front-page-like-death-porn-commentary/.

[27] Tara McKelvey, "Fox News Explains Why it Showed Jordan Pilot Video", BBC News, 5 February 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-31013455.

[28] Interview, Francoise Champey-Huston, France 24, Paris, 16 June 2015.

[29] Chris Elliot, "Coverage of ISIS Videos Should Be About News and Not Propaganda", *The Guardian*, 11 January 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/11/coverage-of-isis-videos-should-be-about-news-not-propaganda.

[30] ABC News, "Australian Doctor Joins Islamic State, Appears in Promotional Video", 26 April 2015, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-26/australian-doctor-joins-islamic-state/6422294.

[31] Josh Levs and Holly Yan, "Western Allies Reject Islamic State Leader's Threats Against their Civilians", CNN, 23 September 2014, http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/22/world/meast/isis-threatens-west/.

[32] Aaron Zelin, "Foreign Fighter Motivations", Statement submitted for the conference "Taking the Fight to ISIL: Operationalizing CT Lines of Effort Against the Islamic State Group", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2 February 2015.

[33] Peter R Neumann, "Victims, Perpetrators, Assets, The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors", International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, Kings College London, September 2015; Lauren Williams, "The Pointlessness of No Return for Foreign Fighters", *The Saturday Paper*, 22 August 2015, https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/law-crime/2015/08/22/the-pointlessness-no-return-foreign-fighters/14401656002279.

[34] Interview, Detective Superintendent John O'Reilly, Commander Counter Terrorism and Special Tactics Operations, NSW Police, Sydney, 20 April 2015.

[35] Hugh Naylor, "Islamic State Has Killed Many Syrians, but Assad's Forces Have Killed More", *The Washington Post*, 5 September 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/islamic-state-has-killed-many-syrians-but-assads-forces-have-killed-even-more/2015/09/05/b8150d0c-4d85-11e5-80c2-106ea7fb80d4_story.html.

[36] Interview, Michel Scott, Head of Foreign Service, TF1, Paris, 16 June 2015.

[37] Siraj Datoo, "Twitter to Suspend Accounts of Anyone Tweeting Graphic Images of Journalist's Alleged Execution", BuzzFeed News, 20 August 2014, http://www.buzzfeed.com/sirajdatoo/twitter-to-suspend-accounts-of-anyone-tweeting-graphic-image#.oeRzDkYJNJ.

[38] Rick Gladstone, "Twitter Says it Suspended 10,000 ISIS-linked Accounts in One Day", *The New York Times*, 9 April 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/10/world/middleeast/twitter-says-it-suspended-10000-isis-linked-accounts-in-one-day.html?_r=0.

[39] Kevin Rawlinson, "EU Plans New Team to Tackle Cyber-terrorism", BBC News, 12 March 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-31851119.

[40] David P Fidler, "Countering Islamic State Exploitation of the Internet", Council on Foreign Relations, Cyber Brief, June 2015, http://www.cfr.org/cybersecurity/countering-islamic-state-exploitation-internet/p36644.

[41] "British Army Unveils 'Twitter Troops' for Social Media Fight", Channel 4, 31 January 2015, http://www.channel4.com/news/british-army-military-social-media-unit-twitter-troops.

[42] JM Berger and Jonathan Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census", The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper No 20, March 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf .

[43] Amarnath Amarasingam, HuffPost Live, 20 August 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com.

[44] John Battle, "Pre-vetting Broadcast News for Extremism Threatens Freedom of Speech", *The Guardian*, 29 June 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jun/29/pre-vetting-broadcast-news-for-extremism-threatens-freedom-of-speech-ofcom.

[45] Alicia Wood, "Abbott Opens Terror Summit with Warning that ISIS is Coming with a Simple Message: Submit or Die", *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 June 2015, http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/abbott-opens-terror-summit-with-warning-that-isis-is-coming-with-a-simple-message-submit-or-die/story-fni0cx4q-1227392743957.

[46] David Cameron, "Cameron: Combat 'Appalling Radical Narrative' of IS", *Best of Today*, BBC Radio 4, 29 June 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02vwhq0.

[47] Peter Neumann and Brooke Rogers, "Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, King's College London, December 2007.

[48] See Waleed Aly, "Waleed Aly Hits Out at ISIS over Paris Attacks, Calls them Weak", http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/tv/tv-shows/walked-aly-hits-out-at-isis-over-paris-attacks-calls-them-weak/news-story/e884afd6dd7781d6f7a105b321ca5d2d.

[49] Malcolm Turnbull, "Magna Carta and the Rule of Law in the Digital Age", speech to the Sydney Institute, 7 July 2015, http://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/speech-to-the-sydney-institute-magna-carta-and-the-rule-of-law-in-the-digit. See also Malcolm Turnbull, "Australia and the United States: New Responsibilities for an Enduring Partnership", Address to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 18 January 2016, https://www.pm.gov.au/media/2016-01-18/australia-and-united-states-new-responsibilities-enduring-partnership.

[50] Richard Norton-Taylor, "Islamist Terror Threat to West Blown Out of Proportion — Former MI6 Chief", *The Guardian,* 8 July 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jul/07/islamist-terror-threat-out-proportion-former-mi6-chief-richard-dearlove.

[51] Greg Miller and Scott Higham, "In a Propaganda War against ISIS, the US Tried to Play by the Enemy's Rules", *Washington Post*, 8 May 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-propaganda-war-us-tried-to-play-by-the-enemys-rules/2015/05/08/6eb6b732-e52f-11e4-81ea-0649268f729e_story.html.

[52] Interview, Alberto Fernandez, Vice-President of the Middle East Media Research Institute, 18 July 2015.

[53] Ibid.

[54] See https://notanotherbrother.wordpress.com/.

[55] Attorney General for Australia, Senator the Hon George Brandis QC, "Role of Governments in Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorist Propaganda", Opening address of the ministerial meeting at Australia's regional summit to counter violent extremism, 12 June 2015, https://www.attorneygeneral.gov.au/Speeches/Pages/2015/SecondQuarter/12-June-2015-Role-of-governments-in-countering-violent-extremism-and-terrorist-propaganda.aspx.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Eric Schmitt, "US Intensifies Effort to Blunt ISIS' Message", *The New York Times*, 16 February 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/17/world/middleeast/us-intensifies-effort-to-blunt-isis-message.html.

[58] Interview, Jamal Rifi, Sydney, 23 April 2015.

[59] Interview, anonymous imam in Paris, 30 November 2015, and interview, Jamal Rifi, March 2015.

[60] Interview, UK Home Office employee, London, 25 June 2015.

[61] Brigitte L Nacos concluded in her article "Revisiting the Contagion Hypothesis: Terrorism, News Coverage, and Copycat Attacks", published in *Perspectives on Terrorism, Terrorism Research Initiative*, Vol 3 (2009), that media figures prominently in both tactical and inspirational terrorism contagion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Williams is an Australian freelance journalist based in Turkey. She is the former Middle East Editor at *The Daily Star*, Lebanon, and the former Managing Editor of *Forward Magazine*, Syria. Before moving to the region she was a staff reporter at *The Daily Telegraph*, Sydney. She has reported from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar for *The Telegraph* UK, *The Guardian*, Al Jazeera English, USA Today, ABC News, *The Saturday Paper* and *The National*, among others.

Lauren Williams
laurendailywilliams@gmail.com

Lauren Williams

LOWY INSTITUTE
FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY