

Abstract summary

Experts suggest Twitter is not a typical social network, with its topological characteristics making it more akin to a broadcast medium – comprising of a unique playing field of mass media, evangelists, and grassroots contributors (Cha, Benevenuto, Haddadi, & Gummadi, 2012). Dissecting Twitter’s affordances of anonymity, identity, and spreadability through differential association theory, statistics, and academic reports on digital community and identity, we explore how the terrorist organisation ISIL have been able to adopt and adapt to virtual networks such as Twitter to expand and employ their strategies. We argue that Twitter has provided extremist groups the opportunity to grow exponentially whilst also allowing for them to influence their media portrayal and narrative for their own strategic benefit.

Twitter: A platform for community development

The development of Web 2.0 and its participatory nature has seen a great shift in the way media is developed and consumed, with social networking platforms such as Twitter now moving to the forefront of this communicative evolution. However, experts suggest Twitter is not a typical social network, with its topological characteristics – only 22% follows are reciprocal (Jackson, 2010) and 10% of public users make 90% of the platform’s Tweets (Solis, 2009) – making it more akin to a broadcast medium comprising a unique playing field of mass media, evangelists, and grassroots contributors (Cha, Benevenuto, Haddadi, & Gummadi, 2012). This broadcast-like nature of Twitter has resulted in it becoming a social network where engaging in news and current affairs has become one of its key uses (Rosenstiel, Sonderman, Loker, Kjarval, 2015), with studies showing that 71% of Americans on Twitter use it for news-related content (Cooper, 2019). This trust in Twitter as a contemporary news platform alongside its plethora of affordances, including anonymity, spreadability, and versatility allows for a unique communication network. However, Twitter’s functions can allow for extremist groups and terrorist organisations such as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) to strengthen and grow their communities, using the social network’s identity and community-building features to recruit members whilst also adopting its broadcast-like nature to spread its propaganda.

Anonymity and identity as strategy

Social media platforms like Twitter have been a relatively safe and secure place for people to explore and develop their identity as well as find a community in which they can belong. A key reason for contemporary audiences' utilisation of such networks for identity formation is due the anonymity they provide, with research showing that this affordance plays a decisive role in the fact that "the willingness to disclose information is significantly higher in the context of computer-mediated communications than in face-to-face settings" (Misoch, 2015, p. 535). In the context of Twitter specifically, it is suggested that its absence of a real-name policy has made the platform a popular social network for users to share and access information without being identifiable (Peddinti, Ross, & Capos, 2017, p. 84), a claim that is supported through studies that have found that at least one-quarter of the Twitter population chooses to keep some level of anonymity, with sensitive Twitter communities (marijuana, Islamophobia, gay/lesbian) having the largest percentage of anonymous accounts (Peddinti, Ross, & Capos, 2017, p. 85). However, whilst Twitter's communicative anonymity can prove cathartic for its users, allowing them to feel more comfortable in disclosing ideas, emotions, and thoughts that they would not necessarily discuss in the 'real' world, it is this aspect of the platform that also provides communities the opportunity to negatively utilise and manipulate the network for their own benefit.

With Twitter's functions allowing for its users to ultimately be whoever they wish to be, the platform becomes an opportunity for identity construction and development. Through anonymity, no one has to know the real identity of a user, allowing them to hide their unwanted, stressful features (e.g. low self-esteem, anxiety, physical appearance, social standing) and shape themselves into an identity of which that they believe others will accept and approve (Dogan & Colak, 2016, p. 180). This online identity is greatly influenced by those whom the individual interacts with in their online community, a phenomenon that can be related to the theory of differential association – explained as a situation in which individuals with a whom a person associates, and who supply definitions both favourable and unfavourable to deviant behaviour (Freiburger & Crane, 2008, p. 312) – this theory can help in dissecting ISIL's success through mediums like that of Twitter. Although differential association has existed pre-Internet, theorists have suggested the Internet has proved

significantly more effective in building such influential relationships, especially when taking into consideration the lack of prior attachment to 'real' world groups alongside consistent feelings of isolation a lot of Web-reliant users have (Freiburger & Crance, 2008, p. 313). This reality allows for organisations like ISIL to easily use Twitter to grow its audience of sympathisers, coaxing impressionable and lonely users with propaganda, tempting them with an opportunity of purpose and meaning, as well as a community. This propaganda is often strategically adapted to suit specific demographics, including videos featuring British fighters glamourizing and encouraging young men to join their fight (made for a Western-specific audience) (Awan, 2017, p. 138), and Tweets "urging all young Muslims to migrate to [ISIL]-controlled territory" (Ozeren, Hekim, Elmas, & Canbegi, 2018, p. 118), where they can truly live under Islam law, as well suggesting it is their religious duty to protect their faith (made for a universal Muslim audience) (Ozeren, Hekim, Elmas, & Canbegi, 2018, p. 118); as previously mentioned, although each example is constructed for varying demographics, each makes a promise of purpose and community to the susceptible virtual audience.

Individual users are not the only adoptees of Twitter who are able to employ its anonymity and identity features to influence perceptions of themselves. ISIL itself has been able to manipulate its depiction on social media to assist in the organisation's narrative and media portrayal, political scholar Jytte Klausen explaining, "Twitter was being used by Isis members to create an illusion that the group was more powerful than it actually was" (2015, as cited in Awan, 2017). This idea is further reiterated through American jihadist Omar Hammami's declaration: "The war of narratives has become even more important than the war of navies, napalms, and knives" (Cottee, 2015, as cited in Al-Rawi & Groshek, 2018, p. 3). With one of the key purposes of ISIL's Twitter strategy to gain sympathisers that in turn will strengthen the group's power, the jihadist group uses social media to twist previous perceptions of them constructed through mainstream media – the jihadists favouring a 'them vs. us' narrative, with ISIL placed as the hero. To do this, ISIL uses its Al Hayat Media Centre to produce and manage a major portion of its terrorist propaganda consisting of media pieces "depicting ISIL as fighters with a 'moral conscious', showing them helping civilians, ... visiting injured comrades in hospital, and offering children sweets" (Awan, 2017, p. 139), with these images and videos often accompanied by motivational and powerful written copy which aims to appeal to Twitter's youth audience (Awan, 2017). As originally mentioned in the introduction, Twitter ultimately acts a media network

comprising of contributors of varying backgrounds, skills, and knowledge, however, as suggested by computer science researcher Judith Donath, the ambiguity of identity in the virtual world is disembodied and ambiguous, these limited identity cues then often result in people accepting at face value a writer's claims of credibility (1996). This understanding has allowed for groups such as ISIL to navigate Twitter in a way that allows for their propaganda to infiltrate spaces shared with legitimate information and media sources, in turn deceiving members of Twitter's virtual community whilst gaining a myriad of global supporters.

Jihad 3.0

The already mentioned functions and affordances of a platform such as Twitter as both a social and broadcasting network, has provided terrorist groups with an opportunity to utilise the Web to have direct influence on the contemporary media, in turn influencing their portrayal within mainstream media. This Web-based strategy was first adopted by, and continues to be used jihadist groups to strength media and political momentum. 'Islamic' terrorism or also known as 'Jihadist' terrorism, is categorised by experts as 'new' terrorism and is "marked by different motives, actors, sponsors, and greater lethality" (Keene, 2011, p. 360). For groups such as ISIL and its predecessor Al-Qaeda, these new motives and actors see a greater reliance on the adoption of contemporary communicative technology for their message to directly access a global reach. Founded in 1988 by Osama Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda was a pioneer in the utilisation of the Internet's offerings to achieve greater power and success, in particular, taking greater control of the terrorist group's narrative portrayal in both local and international media. Documents have been uncovered from Bin Laden reaffirming Web media's prominence in Al-Qaeda's tactics, stating "media occupies the greater portion of the battle today... It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90 percent of the total preparation for the battles" (as cited in Al-Rawi & Groshek, 2018, p. 3). This reality of 'new' terrorism has led to scholars arguing that there is an interdependent relationship between terrorism and media, as these groups "thrive on the oxygen of publicity" (Wilkinson, 1997, as cited in Al-Rawi & Groshek, 2018, p. 2), a relationship that has seen terrorist groups flourish with the development of social media platforms in the Web 2.0 era. As explained by political scholar Jytte Klausen (2014), "social media has changed the dynamic fundamentally... [eliminating]

terrorists' dependency on mainstream media, reversing the relationship by making mainstream media dependent on the *jihadist*-run social media" (p. 4).

Formed in 1999, ISIL was originally an allegiant of Al-Qaeda and began to find independent prominence in 2011 during growing instability in Iraq and Syria. Although the group is infamous for the instigation of several major international terrorist attacks within the last decade, specialists claim the "most confounding aspect of ISIS is the organisation's unprecedented ability to capitalise on social media to further its efforts" (Brooking & Singer, 2016, as cited in Lieber & Reiley, 2016, p. 48). Being dubbed by experts as Jihad 3.0 (Al-Rawi & Groshek, 2018, p. 2), the jihadist organisation's complex media campaigns that incorporate the use of professional graphics, high-tech videography, and skilled branding, employs a variety of Twitter's affordances, including its functions of anonymity and spreadability, to regain control of the terrorist organisation's narrative, spread its propaganda, and grows its community of sympathisers.

Crowdsourced propaganda

ISIL, unlike Al-Qaeda, understands the importance of creating a strategy and campaign that focuses on the global masses rather than a select few elite figures and communities. One of the key online written works that helped in establishing the ideological foundations of ISIL placed a great emphasis on this new approach, expressing a need for a media division "whose purpose is to communicate what we want to say to the masses and focus their attention on it, even if this requires exposing the group to danger that is comparable to the danger of a military operation". On Web 2.0 media platforms, especially Twitter, the power is generally with the people, thus meaning the "role of media politics is to gain [people's] sympathy, or at the very least neutralise them" (Naji, 2004, as cited in Al-Rawi & Groshek, 2018, p. 3). However, ISIL's Twitter strategy does not stop at just recruiting sympathisers for support, the group also takes advantage of the platform's participatory nature to establish a complex network of both active and passive jihadist propagandists to further spread the ISIL message, a strategy that has ultimately resulted in the group's biggest success.

As ISIL's social media tactics became more apparent to Western democracy, security restrictions and privacy implications lessened the group's direct stronghold over their

Twitter community, however the platform's networking affordances has allowed for the jihadist group to easily outsource their media operations to their willing followers. Klausen explains that Twitter's lateral social environment is the perfect environment for such outsourcing tactics, the decentralised functioning allowing for ease of participation and sharing ideas; this low-cost means of dissemination through cross-posting and retweeting is also more resistant to policing than previous strategies (2014, p. 3). If willing, ISIL's followers are provided the opportunity to partake in a "social media literary crash course" (Al-Rawi & Groshek, 2018, p. 4), training the users in whom to follow and block on Twitter, how and what to retweet, and how to employ the use of the Dark Web and VPNs for added privacy. Adding to the previously mentioned incentive of 'belonging', ISIL also assures some users 'divine' rewards for their endeavours, as well as entrusting select users with exclusive information and media to distribute to the online community (Koerner, 2016). As explained by author Brendan I. Koerner, some supporters within ISIL's Twitter community have been able reach positions of significant authoritative and influential power, using their social networks to generate excitement in virtual spaces and consequently allowing the Islamic State to maintain a degree of influence over its crowdsourced partners (2016).

When summarised by researchers, ISIL's Twitter strategy is ultimately focused on "spamming and disseminating news on its military achievements, uttering threats against its enemies as well as attacking Shiites" (Al-Rawi & Groshek, 2018, p. 9), all of which is seemingly outsourced to their digital recruits to perform – yet this tactic has seen significant success for the jihads. Experts explain that in Web 2.0, "reporting is no longer restricted in the domain of the official media... [therefore, amateur media] is then able to easily convince and mislead audiences as to the reality of the situation" (Keene, 2011, p. 362). This reality combined with statistics conveying that Internet users rely on such factors as professionalism of design and usability to judge a source's reliability rather than the author's identity and credentials (Warnick, 2004, p. 262), has resulted in a digital environment where well-designed terrorist propaganda prevails over traditional fact media. Evidence of this reality is made apparent when viewing key mainstream depiction of ISIL, media broadcasters mostly utilising fear-mongering media (execution videos, hostage interviews, Islamic State flag) that was originally released by the jihadists' virtual network with this specific intent of potential virality and media attention.

Conclusion

Social networks support the free development and interaction of new and emerging communities, no matter the community's intention, whether good or bad. The integration of jihadist propaganda and influence across a public and familiar Web platform such as Twitter makes apparent the possible dangers of interacting and consuming within a Web network community that relies heavily on participatory culture. Through exploring ISIL's adoption and utilisation of Twitter's affordances of identity and community establishment, global communication, and media broadcast influence to expand their community and power, this considerably negative aspect of the connective nature of social networks is uncovered. The succeeding impact that ISIL's Web actions then have over mainstream broadcast media also conveys the implications of Twitter users' utilisation of the social platform, in which anyone with an account can contribute and publish, as a reliable source of news and social commentary.

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