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„The Digital Caliphate: The use of propaganda in DAESH communication operations to legitimise, radicalise and recruit“

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The media is the most powerful entity on Earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power, because they control the minds of the masses.

- Malcolm X

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Acronyms and Definitions.....	1
1 Introduction and Background.....	2
1.1 Introduction to Research and Methodology	2
1.1.1 <u>Research Question</u>	3
1.1.2 <u>Methodology</u>	3
1.1.3 <u>Overview</u>	3
1.2 Introduction to DAESH	4
1.2.1 <u>Significance of a name</u>	6
1.2.2 <u>Rise of the Media Extremist</u>	8
1.2.3 <u>Human Rights in Context and role of Freedom of Religion</u>	9
Relationship of DAESH and Islam	9
Interpretation of Human Rights	14
Conclusion.....	14
2 The Digital Jihad: Terror in the digital age	16
2.1 DAESH Communication Operations.....	16
2.1.1 <u>Introduction</u>	16
2.1.2 <u>Video Production</u>	17
2.1.3 <u>DAESH Narratives</u>	19
2.2 Winning the Propaganda War?	24
2.2.1 <u>Introduction</u>	24
2.2.2 <u>DAESH Communication Operation Strategy</u>	25
Social Media	25
Contribution of Mainstream Media	29
DAESH's <i>Dabiq Magazine</i>	31
2.2.3 <u>Power of Propaganda: an effective strategy?</u>	34
2.3 Conclusion	36
3 Radicalisation and Recruitment.....	37
3.1 Introduction.....	37
3.2 Significance of online presence in Radicalisation and Recruitment ..	37
3.3 Normalising the Radical	39
3.4 Recruiting Foreigners.....	41
3.4.1 <u>The Stories of Jake Bilardi and El Shafee Elsheikh</u>	44
Jake Bilardi, Australia	44
El Shafee Elsheikh, United Kingdom	46
3.5 Conclusion	48

4	Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment	50
4.1	Introduction	50
4.2	Current Responses	50
4.3	Mainstream media	54
4.3.1	Introduction	54
4.3.2	Critical Analysis	55
	US Perspective	56
	International Perspective	63
	Conclusion	68
4.3.3	Analysis of Interview responses	69
	Introduction	69
	Interview Questions	70
	Naomi O’Leary, United Kingdom & Ireland	70
	Koen Vidal, Belgium	72
	Conclusion	75
4.4	Conclusion	75
5	Extremism and Freedom of Expression	77
5.1	Introduction	77
5.2	Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RSS)	78
5.3	Conclusion	83
6	Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA)	84
6.1	Introduction	84
6.2	Instability in the MENA Region	84
6.3	Rethinking the Western strategy	85
6.4	Psychological Manipulation	87
6.5	Mainstream media and the HRBA	88
6.6	Conclusion	89
7	Conclusion	91
	References	94
	Abstract	102
	Abstrakt	103
	Appendix of Evidence	104
	Interviewee: Naomi O’Leary	104
	Interviewee: Koen Vidal	106

Acronyms and Definitions

Acronyms

DAESH	al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wa al-Sham
• ISIS • ISIL • IS	- Islamic State of Iraq and Syria - Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant - Islamic State
ICCPR	International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Definitions

Caliph	A political and religious leader of a Caliphate, considered a successor to the Islamic prophet Muhammad. His power and authority is absolute. ¹
Caliphate	An Islamic State, led by a Caliph. ²
Jihad	Holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious duty; a war fought by Muslims to defend or spread their beliefs; the spiritual struggle within oneself against sin. ³
Islamophobia	The fear of the religion of Islam, including those who practice it.

¹ A. Chandler, 'What is an Islamic Caliphate and why did ISIS Make one?', *The Wire*, 30 June 2014, <http://www.thewire.com/global/2014/06/what-is-an-islamic-caliphate-and-why-did-isis-make-one/373693/>, (accessed 14 July 2016).

² *ibid.*

³ Merriam Webster Dictionary.

1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction to Research and Methodology

The idea for this thesis arose following the Paris Attacks in November 2015, which caused the majority of the Western world to condemn the violence and offer support to the people of France. However, many also questioned why both mainstream and social media reacted differently to a similar terrorist attack in Beirut that occurred 24 hours prior; when Facebook created an insignia of the French flag, failing to create its Lebanese counterpart; when notions of Islamophobia started becoming a normal occurrence. Many people from the non-Western world were outraged at the mainstream media's blatant disregard for the attack in Lebanon in comparison to the overwhelming media attention allotted to France in the aftermath of the Paris Attacks. This was due in large part to normal human behaviour, whereby tragic events are viewed differently depending on how close to us they are geographically and emotionally. Additionally, another aspect that became clear was that DAESH's proclivity for manipulation and propaganda was a main part of their strategy.

Clearly a tactical decision to execute two attacks by recruits from the Middle East and Europe a day apart, DAESH was able to create mayhem, paranoia and incite rage. However, it also emphasised and reiterated that DAESH represented a new form of terrorism. The use of their own media, the manipulation of mainstream media, the use of propaganda, the brutality of the acts, the radicalised attackers, the control of the mainstream broadcast, and the statement of authority all pointed towards a path of terror previously unknown.

As a human rights defender, I wanted to better understand the role of media in DAESH's success. More specifically, I intended to research and analyse how DAESH media functioned in conjunction with their propaganda strategy, and in correlation with Western mainstream media. DAESH communication operations, I quickly found out, cover an extensive network of various media, and the bulk of their strategy revolves around the propaganda of legitimisation, radicalisation and recruitment.

1.1.1 Research Question

In what ways has the use of manipulation and propaganda in DAESH communication operations helped the organisation legitimise their human rights violations, as well as radicalise and recruit foreigners?

In order to fully articulate DAESH's *communication operations*, the following terms will be used interchangeably: media, media strategy, media operation, media network, communication strategy, communication network and communication operation network.

It is important to note that for the purpose of this thesis, the human right violations committed by DAESH will focus on the use of their communication operations and not directly analyse the violations they have committed with respect to right to life.

1.1.2 Methodology

DAESH is a relatively young phenomenon, and as such the amount of academic literature surrounding the topic is limited. Despite this, the amount of information pertaining to DAESH is extensive, though it remains primarily in the public domain. The principal methodological tools used throughout the thesis are discourse analysis and the interpretation of international standards regarding human rights.

Additionally, in order to gain a better understanding of how mainstream media reacted, adjusted and understands DAESH communication operations as they function today, primary research was conducted through select interviews with mainstream media journalists.

1.1.3 Overview

The remainder of this chapter will cover the introduction to DAESH as well as analyse their rise to power through the use of media extremism, the power of their name and brand, and finally the introduction to the notion of Islam through extremism in the context of freedom of religion.

Chapter 2 will analyse the research surrounding extremism in the digital age, and through DAESH's extensive communication operations, I explore the narratives used in their propaganda strategy. Here, the contributions of social media, their own

communication operations and mainstream media are investigated, along with how DAESH use different tactics and strategies to target specific audiences.

This leads directly into Chapter 3, which covers radicalisation and recruitment, the importance of their online community and the ways in which DAESH targets vulnerable youth by brainwashing those susceptible.

Chapter 4 analyses the possibilities of combating radicalisation and recruitment by addressing the responses currently in place, critically dissecting the role mainstream media have in these efforts, and gaining a perspective of mainstream journalists and their understanding of DAESH communication operations.

Extremism and Freedom of Expression is covered in Chapter 5, where an in-depth look at one of DAESH's main opposition groups is taken. *Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently* (RSS) has been able to showcase the realities of life on the group through their own modest communication operations, while simultaneously being targeted by DAESH who were (and remain) determined to silence the voices of those in their opposition.

Chapter 6 takes a collective look at the conclusions drawn in the previous five chapters and offers alternative approaches for hindering DAESH. These include the Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA), the importance of understanding the relationship between psychology and human rights, and the role, I argue, mainstream media can and should play as human rights defenders.

Finally, an overall conclusion that ties in all the sections is drawn in Chapter 7.

1.2 Introduction to DAESH

In the spring of 2013, roughly two years following the start of the insurgency and subsequent civil war in Syria, citizens noticed the introduction of a new entity to the city of Raqqa.⁴ This group drove vehicles with the words '*Islamic State of Iraq*' emblazoned on the sides and immediately began replacing all revolution flags with new

⁴ *BBC News Presents: Islamic States' most wanted: ISIS take over (Part 1)* [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwGm0s2b3N4&index=1&list=PLS3XGZxi7cBX5GE4jXnF9bvF4C801cul3>, (accessed 3 May 2016).

black ones⁵ that were imprinted with what would later be known as the '*Black Standard*'.⁶

This swift and rapid introduction of '*The Islamic State of Iraq*' into Syria created an unprecedented opportunity for the group to capitalise on the political upheaval and use it to their advantage. One such advantage was the obliterated media landscape, a by-product of Assad's regime and its belief that the world did not need to know the situation of the conflict or how it was unfolding within Syria's borders. This created the groundwork for '*The Islamic State of Iraq*' to infiltrate, overtake and establish themselves before officially broadcasting their whereabouts, intentions or strengths.

Over a year later, in June 2014, the renamed '*Islamic State of Iraq and Syria*' released a statement declaring themselves as the '*World Caliphate*'.⁷ It did not take long for '*The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria*' to become known simply as '*ISIS*' in the media and consequently around the world. The group, led by self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, took the release of this statement as an opportunity to rebrand their name once again to the '*Islamic State*' or, '*IS*'.⁸ A more detailed account of the progression of their name can be found below, however for the purposes of this thesis work, the United Nations (UN) approved moniker DAESH will subsequently be used.⁹

Mere weeks following this declaration, Al-Baghdadi was first seen addressing a crowd in Mosul's largest mosque, supposedly citing Holy Text and appealing to the notion of statehood, brotherhood and Allah.¹⁰ The world watched as DAESH infiltrated and

⁵ *BBC News Presents: Islamic States' most wanted: ISIS take over (Part 1)* [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwGm0s2b3N4&index=1&list=PLS3XGZxi7cBX5GE4jXnF9bvF4C801cul3>, (accessed 3 May 2016).

⁶ H. J. Ingram, 'The strategic logic of Islamic State Information operations' *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 6, 2015 p. 742, Available from Taylor & Francis online (accessed 4 May 2016).

⁷ A. B. Al-Baghdadi, 'DAESH Statement', [web blog], June 2014, http://myreader.toile-libre.org/uploads/My_53b039f00cb03.pdf, (accessed 4 May 2016).

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ B. Ki-Moon, Secretary General's Remarks at the Security Council Open Debate on Victims of Attacks and Abuses on Ethnic or Religious Grounds in the Middle East', 27 March 2016, *United Nations New York*, [United Nations website], 2016, <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=8497>, (accessed 4 May 2016).

¹⁰ *ISIS Leader Caliph Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi First Appearance [English Subtitles]* [online video], 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMvKneiNwMc>, (accessed on 3 May 2016).

twisted the idea of Islam and began using religion as a way to legitimise inflicting further harm, causing destruction and the violation of human rights.

DAESH's speed and efficiency was met with awe, fascination and horror. In order to finance this extensive operation DAESH began robbing local banks.¹¹ Additionally, they began seizing large quantities of weapons provided to the Iraqi military by the United States (US).¹² DAESH quickly started to radicalise and recruit people from all over the world, and then began demanding the legitimisation of their cause in the larger global context. Media outlets aided the exponential rise of DAESH, both mainstream and those operated by the group itself. Their unprecedented use of all forms of media draws attention to everything they do, every attack they take credit for and suggests a more sophisticated form of extremism, one that the rest of the world is desperately trying to better understand, control and ultimately destroy.

1.2.1 Significance of a name

The group's constantly changing moniker significantly contributes to the air of mystery surrounding DAESH. While in other contexts this type of indecisiveness would constitute a sign of weakness and disorganization, it arguably speaks to the opposite in DAESH's case. Every time the name changes it suggests that the cause is growing both in magnitude and in strength. As mentioned above, when DAESH first entered Syria, the group was known as '*Islamic State of Iraq*,' and after overtaking what they deemed to be enough of the country, they decided to add Syria to their title to illustrate how quickly they were able to expand operations. Immediately following that adjustment, media organizations created the abbreviation and '*ISIS*' (unfortunately) became a household name. This was a crucial time as '*ISIS*' quickly evolved to '*ISIL*,' to better articulate '*Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*,' the region DAESH soon believed they had conquered.

Mainstream media now had a choice between '*ISIS*' or '*ISIL*,' a decision made even more complicated after DAESH Leader Al-Baghdadi came forward exclaiming the

¹¹ VICE NEWS: *The Spread of the Caliphate: The Islamic State (Part 1)* [online video], 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsCZzpmbEcs>, (accessed on 3 May 2016).

¹² *ibid.*

creation of the '*Islamic State*.' To call DAESH the '*Islamic State*' would be akin to legitimising the human rights abuses they conduct on a daily basis, as well as recognising their call to be identified as a State.

Some media organizations such as the Vienna-based International Press Institute (IPI) have managed to circumvent this obstacle. When referring to DAESH, staff use '*Islamic State group*,' a choice, which according to IPI Director of Advocacy and Communications Steven M. Ellis, is twofold. First, it includes the name with which they self identify and second, the addition of the word '*group*' de-legitimises the implied notion of statehood DAESH is trying to seek.¹³ Other organisations such as Al Jazeera and BBC have decided to use '*ISIS*' and '*ISIL*' interchangeably in their media coverage. For the purpose of this thesis, the group shall be referred to as DAESH to avoid any false representation of statehood that could be implied with the use of '*Islamic State*.'

The name DAESH, *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wa al-Sham*, is the literal translation of '*Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*' in Arabic. At times it is stylized as DAISH, DAIISH or Da'Esh and all such interpretations have been met with disdain from the group itself.¹⁴ The use of acronyms is not a traditional custom in that region causing the use of such a word to create an undesirable intersection between English (Western) and Arabic-speaking worlds. The use of DAESH imposes a certain restriction to the strength of the group, as it rightfully indicates the users unwillingness to cooperate with the wishes of the extremist organisation.

The UN made a clear choice to address DAESH in that manner at a Security Council Open Debate held in New York City on 27 March 2015. It was here that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon referred to the group as DAESH in his statements.¹⁵ Prior to this development, the UN had been using the acronym '*ISIL*' and placing '*ISIS*' and DAESH in parenthesis.

¹³ S M. Ellis, email, 3 May 2016.

¹⁴ F. Irshaid, 'Isis, Isil, IS or Daesh? One group, many names', BBC News, 2 December 2015, Available from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27994277> (accessed 5 May 2016).

¹⁵ B. Ki-Moon, Secretary General's Remarks at the Security Council Open Debate on Victims of Attacks and Abuses on Ethnic or Religious Grounds in the Middle East', 27 March 2016, *United Nations New York*, [United Nations website], 2016, <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=8497>, (accessed 4 May 2016).

Part of the responsibility held by mainstream media organisations, that want to be taken seriously as news providers, is to create content of credibility and high quality. The overall goal of reporting is to ensure that the depiction of events is clear, articulate and easily understood. United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland based journalist Naomi O’Leary suggested that two key aspects of editorial policy regarding such issues, as in this case the name, would likely be “*to use a term that is widely understood, and to be as neutral as possible in reporting.*”¹⁶ I maintain, however, that the headline also has to be provocative and attention-grabbing enough to draw the reader in.

Arguably, the use of DAESH does not evoke the same feeling as ‘ISIS’ does; I myself struggled with the decision to use DAESH throughout the thesis. Ultimately, the deciding factor came down to the group's insistence of being called ‘Islamic State,’ and my desire to refrain from legitimising their cause in any way. DAESH both clearly articulates the group in question, while not catering to the demands of the group itself.

1.2.2 Rise of the Media Extremist

Simultaneously mesmerising and horrific, the exponential rise to power by DAESH came at the hands of their communication operations. Never before has there been such an emphasis on social media than with DAESH, which has utilised them to spread hatred, implant fear, and condone violence. The notion of extremist social media can be directly linked to DAESH, and a more detailed account of this undertaking is discussed in Sections 1.2.2 and 2.2.2. However, the use of media platforms in general among extremist groups predates DAESH.

Take for example Al-Qaeda, a group that spent many years utilising the technology of the day while spreading their message and creating the desired “*clash of civilisations,*”¹⁷ similar to that of DAESH. Marc Lynch discusses the media landscape of the Arab world after the introduction of Al Jazeera, including the dominance the news organisation had among Arabs due to the “*antipathy toward American foreign*

¹⁶ Interview with Naomi O’Leary, Vienna, 3 May 2016.

¹⁷ M. Lynch, ‘Al-Qaeda’s Media Strategy’ *The National Interest*, vol. 1, no. 83, 2006 p. 51, Available from Jstor (accessed 3 May 2016); S. P. Huntington, *Class of Civilizations and the remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1998.

policy”¹⁸ in their narrative, a narrative that Bin Laden successfully imitated and exaggerated in order to gain mass appeal among the Arab population. The media landscape quickly expanded, as did Al-Qaeda’s media presence. The effect was double-edged. On one hand there was a sufficient “*diversity of opinions on the air that implicitly and explicitly challenge[d] Al-Qaeda’s goal of imposing a single political vision on the Arab world.*”¹⁹ Alternatively, it did not completely eradicate Al-Qaeda’s presence, in-so-much that competition meant that even if media platforms like Al Jazeera did not post an Al-Qaeda video, it would be posted by a competitor and thus still consumed by the public.

Today, however, the landscape has changed and developed even further. Media organisations are no longer given the choice of airing a video that DAESH produces, because the video in question will be uploaded on social media the exact moment DAESH chooses to share it. This poses a problem as their brand of extremism is entirely within their control. With the click of a button, a video depicting an execution via decapitation is sent around the world with the hopes that it is seen over and over and attains millions of views.

1.2.3 Human Rights in Context and role of Freedom of Religion

Relationship of DAESH and Islam

From restrictions placed on citizens in cities they have managed to overtake, to execution-style murders they film and distribute for public consumption, human rights discourse is apparent in just about every calculated decision DAESH makes. Following the systematic attack of religious minorities by DAESH, the European Parliament drafted a resolution on 4 February 2016 that expressed,

*“[I]ts strong condemnation of the so-called “ISIS/DAESH” and its **egregious human rights abuses**, which amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes, within the meaning of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and that action should be taken for it to be recognised as genocide*

¹⁸ M. Lynch, ‘Al-Qaeda’s Media Strategy’ *The National Interest*, vol. 1, no. 83, 2006 p. 52, Available from Jstor (accessed 3 May 2016).

¹⁹ *ibid* p. 53.

by the UN Security Council; is extremely concerned at this terrorist group's deliberate targeting of Christians (Chaldeans/Syriacs/Assyrians, Melkites, Armenians), Yazidis, Turkmen, Shi'ites, Shabaks, Sabeans, Kaka'i and Sunnis who do not agree with their interpretation of Islam, as part of its attempts to exterminate any religious and ethnic minorities from the areas under its control."²⁰

After analysing DAESH's actions, it can be suggested that such behaviours amount to violations of human rights. The difficulty, for the purposes of this thesis, is to better understand the role of the media extremist with respect to human rights violations. The task, here, is questioning whether or not manipulation and propaganda filtered through DAESH media are enough to be considered human rights violations. With constant forms of media propaganda and manipulation, the question becomes: At what point does an act become an infringement of a right, and further at what point does an infringement become a violation?

The concrete foundation of the European Parliament resolution implies that DAESH's dominance and aggression constitute varying degrees of violations, with each subsequent attack being considered far worse than the previous one. How then is DAESH able to use their media agenda to further the cause, legitimise their human rights violations as well as radicalise and recruit?

One way DAESH has been attempting to legitimise their human rights abuses has been by justifying their actions through Islam and Allah. This legitimisation speaks to the idea that they believe in their freedom of religion to inflict this type of brutal treatment onto others. The unfortunate outcome for the Western world was the ignorant and false association of the religion of Islam with the extremist group DAESH. Following the March 2016 Brussels Attacks, for which DAESH claimed responsibility²¹, there was a

²⁰ European Parliament Resolution (2016)0051, *Systemic mass murder of religious minorities by ISIS*, (2016/2529(RSP)) (4 February 2016) available from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2016-0051+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN> (accessed 10 May 2016).

²¹ C. Boyle, S. Chad and C. Knoll, 'The Hunt is on for Brussels Bombing suspect; Islamic State warns of more, worse attacks', *Los Angeles Times*, 23 March 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-brussels-airport-explosion-20160322-story.html>, (accessed on 2 May 2016).

renewed²² surge of negative correlation between Muslims and extremism. Take for instance a tweet issued by the head of a UK-based talent agency which stated,



Picture 1²³ Source: Matthew P. Doyle, Twitter

The significance of this powerful form of stereotyping is considerable. To begin with it generalises that over one billion people are in some way connected, involved or behind this act of terrorism; additionally, it encourages DAESH to keep instigating attacks in order to create polarising situations between Muslims and the rest of the world.

After releasing the Tweet (shown above), its author, Matthew Doyle received substantial backlash, which underlined the insensitivity displayed in both his actions (in confronting the woman in question) and his decision to publicise them. While the silver lining is arguably that people around the world stood up against Doyle's blatant Islamophobia and that he was charged with "*inciting racial hatred*" by UK authorities,²⁴ the fact that he felt compelled enough to share this misguided thought speaks to a larger paradigm. There are many who do not Tweet the way Doyle did but still believe in the direct link between Islam and the extremism exhibited by DAESH, and it is to them that the rest of this section is directed.

²² Anti-Islam rhetoric was especially commonplace following the attacks of 11th September 2001.

²³ C. Doyle, [online photograph], twitter.com/matthewdoyle31 (accessed on 4 May 2016).

²⁴ L. Crossley, 'Talent agency boss, 46, is charged and held in custody for 'inciting racial hatred' over tweet about quizzing a Muslim woman over the Brussels terror attacks', *Daily Mail Online*, 25 March 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3509332/Talent-agency-boss-46-allegedly-posted-controversial-tweet-Brussels-terror-attacks-charged-inciting-racial-hatred.html>, (accessed on 2 May 2016).

DAESH does not represent the Muslim world – the Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, stated in mid 2014 on Vatican Radio that “[DAESH] has nothing to do with Islam, and has committed crimes that cannot be tolerated,” and further suggested that the principles of Islam call for “justice, kindness, fairness, freedom of faith and coexistence,” none of which DAESH represents.²⁵ Their use of religion is nothing more than a well-strategized attempt at initiating a war of the Western world versus the Muslim world, a concept that is often reiterated by Al-Baghdadi himself, who in 2014 stated,

“[T]he world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy(sic) – the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin²⁶ everywhere, and the camp of the jews(sic), the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the jews(sic).”²⁷

In fact, DAESH’s success in facilitating this line of thinking culminated in non-Muslim Westerners equating DAESH human rights violations as the standard, and that “[ISIS] is faithfully following Islamic norms of war,”²⁸ rather than a twisted interpretation of Islam. The author, Dagli is opposed to the idea that DAESH represents Islam and emphasises exactly how harmful such an attitude would be to the religion and people as a whole. The answer to DAESH’s hold of Islam is purely factual. As outlined in his article, Dagli explains that the Quran is roughly the same length as the New Testament and comprised of subtle and multifaceted questions regarding legality, morality and metaphysics. In addition to this, there are also the “*hadīth, or records of sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad, which run into dozens of volumes spanning literally hundreds of thousands of texts, each on average a few sentences long.*”²⁹

²⁵ H. A. Hassaballa, ‘This Muslims haven’t condemned ISIS? Think again’ *Beliefnet*, 2014, <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/commonwordcommonlord/2014/08/think-muslims-havent-condemned-isis-think-again.html>, (accessed on 2 May 2016).

²⁶ Fighters of Jihad.

²⁷ Al-Baghdadi, 2014; Ingram, 2015, p. 271.

²⁸ C. K. Dagli, ‘The Phony Islam of ISIS’, 2015, <http://traditionalhikma.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/The-Phony-Islam-of-ISIS-by-Caner-Dagli.pdf>, (accessed on 2 May 2016).

²⁹ *ibid.*

When DAESH cites Holy Text, in reality they have painstakingly poured over the *hadith* in order to find a sentence, concept or idea that actively supports their position. These sources used by DAESH are not the faithfully transmitted accounts of the Prophet Muhammad,³⁰ considered to be the basis of the Quran, and their interpretation as a source of Islam is unrepresentative of the actual religion, as DAESH ignores all scripture that does not support their mentality of inflicting harm. In reality, DAESH is not speaking to the literalism of Islam, but rather the exact opposite,

*“What distinguishes the interpretive approach of groups like [DAESH] from others is not its literalism (Sufis are indeed the most “literal” of all such interpreters of the Quran) but its narrowness and rigidity; for the adherents of [DAESH], the Quran means exactly one thing, and other levels of meaning or alternate interpretations are ruled out a priori. This is not literalism. It is exclusivism.”*³¹

During the Holy month of Ramadan, this year, two violent attacks were attributed to DAESH.³² The first was an attack on the 29th of June on the airport in Istanbul (Turkey),³³ and the second was a suicide bomb on the 4th of July in Baghdad.³⁴ With these two attacks, DAESH seem to have attempted to further the divide within Islam between Sunni and Shia, and they have chosen to justify attacks against Muslims in this context.

Additionally, DAESH orchestrated *“the destruction of ancient shines and temples in the world heritage site at Palmyra and the beheading of its devoted 82 year-old custodian, archaeologist Khaled al-Assad.”*³⁵ It should also be noted that, in their early days DAESH initiated a *“cultural and historical cleansing”* operation in order to identify

³⁰ The Quran is based on the testimonies of the Prophet Muhammad, whereas the *hadith* can be written by anyone.

³¹ C. K. Dagli, ‘The Phony Islam of ISIS’, 2015, <http://traditionalhikma.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/The-Phony-Islam-of-ISIS-by-Caner-Dagli.pdf>, (accessed on 2 May 2016).

³² ‘Istanbul Ataturk airport attacked: 41 dead and more than 230 hurt’, *The BBC*, 29 June 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36658187>, (accessed on 11 July 2016).

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ M. Tawfeeq, ‘Baghdad bombing kills at least 200; ISIS claims responsibility’, *CNN*, 4 July 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/02/middleeast/baghdad-car-bombs/>, (accessed on 11 July 2016).

³⁵ A. B. Atwan, *Islamic State: the Digital Caliphate*, London, Saqi Books, 2015, pg. xii.

“sites for culling.”³⁶ Operated by a unit called Kata’ib Taswiyya (settlement battalion), “the unit razes to the ground any mosques, churches or, invariably, shrines that have been built over tombs; such places may attract devotees to pray in them, thereby creating polytheism,” which is most denounced in Islam.³⁷ This suggest that DAESH does not operate for Allah, or for the benefit of the religion of Islam, but rather for their own interpretation of Islam, including their belief in fighting against all other strands of religion, including the ‘*kufr*’ within Islam itself, specifically the Shia and Westernised Sunni.

Interpretation of Human Rights

Both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) Article 18, as well as The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) Article 18, address the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.³⁸ While the UDHR interpretation outlines the rights of all human beings to change religion and manifest such belief in teaching, practice, worship or observance, the ICCPR interpretation, which came almost two decades later, goes slightly farther. The text prohibits manifesting religion through propaganda and selective teachings that would impair the person’s freedom.³⁹ Additionally, it does not provide a basis of interpretation that suggests one religion supersedes all others, nor does it imply religions are unable to co-exist.

Conclusion

DAESH’s use of religion is a very well-executed attempt at creating a divide, and manipulating the Western world into turning to Islamophobia. The irrational fear of a group of people based on the actions of supposed Muslims feeds into DAESH’s overall goal of pinning everyone against Islam. The goal of this thesis is not to over analyse the role of religion within DAESH, but it would be ignorant to continue without addressing the connection and reiterating the complete lack of substance in assuming DAESH’s

³⁶ D. MacEoin, *Gatestone Institute International Policy Council*, [website], 2014, 2016, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4973/destruction-middle-east-antiquities>, (accessed 21 July).

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 10 December 1948, Art. 18 [Hereinafter UDHR].

³⁹ UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 16 December 1966, Art. 18 [Hereinafter ICCPR].

agenda is religious rather than political. DAESH's insistence of feeding the Western world with exaggerated and misinformed interpretations of Islam requires that this discussion be a common theme throughout the thesis. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the debate surrounding DAESH and human rights is an extremely logical one.

2 The Digital Jihad: Terror in the digital age

2.1 DAESH Communication Operations

2.1.1 Introduction

Through the use of media hubs, DAESH's central leadership is able to manipulate, influence and spread their message across the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA), as well as the rest of the world.⁴⁰ In addition to roughly 35 smaller, local offices, DAESH is equipped with six media foundations, centres, radio stations and agencies that function as respective headquarters, the most notable being the *al-Hayat Media Centre* and the *al-Furqan Foundation*.⁴¹

The *al-Hayat Media Centre* is responsible for the creation and distribution of the *Dabiq Magazine* while the *al-Furqan Foundation* produced the “*Clanging of Swords*” video series.⁴² Essentially, DAESH's “*communication strategy aims to persuade all Muslims that battling to restore a Caliphate is a religious duty.*”⁴³ With specified communications geared toward various target audiences, along with ever-increasing forms of communication, DAESH has successfully been able to spread the ‘*Call of the Caliphate*’ through their ability to adapt their communication operations accordingly.

Through the use of social media and file sharing platforms such as Ask.fm, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, PalTalk, kik, viper/viber, JustPaste.it, and Tumblr⁴⁴, DAESH is creating a hierarchy of levels necessary to establish control. While the main communication hubs are responsible for producing primary sources of material, including magazines, newsletters, video series, communiqués and recruitment videos the social media hubs are to be used “on the ground.”

⁴⁰ C. Winter, *The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy*, Germany, The Quilliam Foundation, 2015, p. 14, Available from: <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf> (accessed on 10 May 2016).

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Ingram 2015, p. 732.

⁴³ J. P. Farwell, ‘The Media Strategy of ISIS’, *Survival Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 56, no. 6, 2014, p. 49.

⁴⁴ J. Klausen, ‘Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2015, p. 1.

This tactic allows DAESH militants, fighters and everyone else to contribute to the narrative, depicting daily life in DAESH strongholds, the negative outlook of the Western world and additionally the strong belief in and justification of their cause. Images of foot soldiers *“eating Snickers bars and nurturing kittens....aim to communicate the message that, while strictly Islamic, [DAESH] stands for promoting the welfare of people, not murdering them.”*⁴⁵

A more detailed look into the content of the communication operations, including manipulation and propagandist tactics are discussed further in the next section. However, it becomes increasingly clear that their ability to utilise technological advances in such ways arguably surpasses the abilities of past extremist groups.

2.1.2 Video Production

Less than two months following Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's declaration of the 'Caliphate,' DAESH released a video entitled *“A Message to America”* on YouTube.⁴⁶ The video, four-and-a-half minutes in length, called attention to a number of crucial details: images of President Barack Obama declaring the US-led airstrikes against DAESH in Iraq, the British-accented English of the DAESH militant on camera, the orange jumpsuit clad man on his knees, the brutal decapitation of an American journalist.⁴⁷

The importance of all of this goes beyond simple imagery. It spoke to the nature and capabilities of the group, and suggested that DAESH's communication operations were unlike any extremist group of recent history. The fact that the video begins with Obama's speech initiating US-led airstrikes against DAESH suggests that everything that follows is a direct consequence to that decision by the United States. The British-accented DAESH militant became an instant pseudo-celebrity when mainstream media organisations from around the world dubbed him 'Jihadi John.' The Anglicised name was due in large part to his English accent and less so with authorities' initial inability to accurately identify him. The presence of a likely Westerner in support of the cause

⁴⁵ Farwell, 2014, p. 50.

⁴⁶ C. J. Carter, 'Video shows ISIS beheading U.S. journalist James Foley', *CNN*, 20 August 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/19/world/meast/isis-james-foley/> (accessed 10 May 2014).

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

was an extremely tactical and strategic decision. It created the notion that “Islamists are all around.” Finally the man clad in the orange jumpsuit, identified as journalist James Foley, brings associations of Guantanamo Bay and American prison films.

The video was stitched together, suggesting it was filmed in separate takes, and depicted Jihadi John towering over James Foley (Pic. 2), who read a message to the camera stating that his “*real killer*” was America. The scene cuts out, and the next image is of Foley’s decapitated body.⁴⁸



Picture 2⁴⁹ Executioner Jihadi John with journalist James Foley (in orange)

Though quickly deleted from YouTube, the video was picked up by multiple shock sites such as BestGore and LiveLeak, as well as multiple sites used mainly for illegal downloading, such as Pirate Bay, and therefore garnered an audience. DAESH was able to incite fear, panic and curiosity, as well as take advantage of mainstream media. While this was hardly their first execution video, it was the first one that received such widespread attention, underscoring the power DAESH had with operational communication tactics. They were able to control every aspect of the video and expand their target audience. By cutting out the exact moment of decapitation, DAESH ensured the video could be used by news media and their message consequently “*reached audiences around the world.*”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ R. Callimachi, ‘Militant Group Says it Killed American Journalist in Syria’, *New York Times*, 19 August 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/20/world/middleeast/isis-james-foley-syria-execution.html?_r=0, (accessed 10 May 2014).

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Fawell, 2014, p. 50.

Additionally the familiarity of the militant's accent was enough to evoke feelings of fear and paranoia as "*the slaughterer also represented the image of a neighbour.*"⁵¹ The final scenes show Jihadi John and Steven Sotloff, another American journalist dressed in the same orange jumpsuit as Foley. Viewers' attention alternates between the two men, as Jihadi John warns Obama directly to cease all airstrikes against DAESH in Iraq or Sotloff will suffer the same fate of decapitation.⁵² Less than one-month later, Sotloff's execution video was uploaded by DAESH.⁵³

DAESH communication operations have expanded over the years, and the most important aspect to highlight is that video messages only represent a small portion. In fact, DAESH has built a high functioning information/communication operation with which they are harnessing their capabilities and capitalising on the technologies of the day.

2.1.3 DAESH Narratives

In the relatively short two-year span, DAESH communication operations have intrigued scholars. Very few books have so far been written on the subject in spite of the substantial amount of information; academics have taken to journals instead as articles are less time consuming than books, and are likely published sooner.

Australian National University Research Fellow Haroro J. Ingram has written articles in multiple journals dedicated to the information operations of DAESH. '*Three traits of the Islamic State Information warfare*' and '*The strategic logic of Islamic State information operations,*' in particular, dive into the traits Ingram believe to be the most crucial in DAESH's strategy.

"The use of multidimensional, multi-platform approach that simultaneously targets 'friends and foes' to enhance the reach, relevance and resonance of its messaging; the synchronisation of narrative and action to maximise operational

⁵¹ G. Siboni, D. Cohen and T. Koren, 'The Islamic State's Strategy in Cyberspace', *Military and Strategic Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2015 p. 128.

⁵² R. Callimachi, 'Militant Group Says it Killed American Journalist in Syria', *New York Times*, 19 August 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/20/world/middleeast/isis-james-foley-syria-execution.html?_r=0, (accessed 10 May 2014).

⁵³ 'Steven Sotloff: U.S. Journalist murdered by IS', *BBC News*, 2 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28871702>, (accessed 10 May 2016).

and strategic 'effects' in the field; and the centrality of the [DAESH] 'brand' to its entire campaign."⁵⁴

The following year, Ingram would argue that, *"the overarching purpose of [DAESH] information operation campaign is to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of audiences via messages that interweave appeals to pragmatic and perceptual factors."*⁵⁵

Thomas Elkjer Nissen, of the Royal Danish Defense College, argues that there is a *"centralised narrative"* within DAESH messages, especially those found on social media. On one hand they produce *"images and accounts of mass-graves, beheadings and seized territory"* and on the other, they provide *"'hearts and minds'- like imagery,"* that depict *"social activities like delivering food to combat areas and other community work and [DAESH]'s love of cute kitten."*⁵⁶

One of the more extensive undertakings of DAESH communication operations and propaganda was conducted by Charlie Winter, and published under the Quilliam Think Tank based in Germany in July 2015. Winter articulates his theory that DAESH was able to utilise communication operations to *"distil its unprecedented Jihadist brand into six key narratives: brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopia."*⁵⁷ He dissects each narrative and analyses the ways they have collectively enhanced DAESH's brand, power, and reach and ultimately underlines how these narratives intersect each other under the larger umbrella of communication operations. He suggests that:

*"At an accelerating rate over the last year, [DAESH] has systematically set about creating an absorbing, comprehensive and easily accessible image of itself, one that saturates the Internet and, by its very prevalence, is the lifeblood of its momentum narrative."*⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ingram, 2014 p.4.

⁵⁵ Ingram, 2015 p. 729.

⁵⁶ T.E. Nissen, 'Terror.com – IS's Social Media Warfare in Syria and Iraq', *Military Studies Magazine*, vol 2, no. 2, 2014 pg. 2.

⁵⁷ Winter, 2015 p.5.

⁵⁸ *ibid* p. 41.

When conceding that DAESH was able to capture international media unlike any other terrorist group before it, Winter underlines that it was a carefully crafted task that,

*“was the outcome of a branding strategy, delivered by the meticulously planned production of propaganda and cultivation of a uniquely challenging network of disseminators. Its messaging confounds Western attempts to understand the organisation as there has been nothing like it before.”*⁵⁹

The choice of language throughout Winter’s profile of DAESH constitutes a very clear respect for the sophistication of their communication operations.

Earlier in 2015, Siboni, Cohen and Koren articulated their belief that DAESH’s unique strategy combined two interrelated elements, namely *“extensive use of the social media on one hand and extreme and savage cruelty on the other.”*⁶⁰ While the authors provide a comprehensive overview of both elements, the article fails to thoroughly dissect the magnitude of either. Social media constitutes one part of the DAESH’s over media strategy, and while it is vital to their success, it is not the largest section. The use of the words *extreme*, *savage* and *cruelty*, though completely legitimate from a human rights perspective, do not encompass the in-group interpretation, most specifically the members unwavering belief in jihad as they understand it, the ‘*Caliphate*’ or the legitimisation of their actions.

In order to better understand how relevant DAESH communication operations are, it is important to further analyse the six narratives that helped Winter confirm his hypothesis. In 2015, *“an average of three videos and more than fifteen photographic reports circulated per day.”*⁶¹ Additionally, radio news bulletins are produced regularly and *“broadcast in multiple languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, English, French and Russian.”*⁶² This speaks to the all-encompassing nature of DAESH communication operations and highlights their desire to spread their message across the world.

⁵⁹ *ibid* p. 9.

⁶⁰ Siboni et al, 2015, p. 127.

⁶¹ Winter, 2015, p. 12; produced by provincial propaganda units

⁶² Winter, 2015, p. 12; Delivered by Idha’at al-Bayan

Winter's narratives of *brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopia*, address directly the worldwide message DAESH is propelling. **Brutality** in many ways is directed toward any active or potential opponents, with the bonus of it negatively affecting people around the world.⁶³

*“Every time an execution is carried out, documented and publicised, it serves as a reminder of the group’s self-proclaimed supremacy and its ability to exact revenge on behalf of Sunni Muslims against the Crusader-Shi’ite-Zionist conspiracy mounted against them.”*⁶⁴

Essentially, the use of brutality is important throughout their communication operations as it *“intimidates enemies, warn[s] local populations of the punishment associated with espionage or dissent, provoke[s] outrages from the international media and cause[s] knee-jerk responses from hostile policy makers.”*⁶⁵ This narrative is shared with Farwell who states explicitly that *“images of gore, beheadings and executions are intended to intimidate opponents,”*⁶⁶ and often juxtaposed with more natural, daily life images of snacks or kittens, mentioned throughout.⁶⁷

Mercy, though often connected to brutality, represents a form of propaganda that depicts those who respond to *“istitāba, or appeals for repentance,”*⁶⁸ and often alludes to the will and strength of jihad. The classic mercy narrative includes videos of sworn enemies joining DAESH, lovingly welcomed in by the jihadists they were unsuccessfully attempting to combat.⁶⁹ Mercy highlights the willingness to change to the “righteous” path of the ‘*Caliphate*.’

Victimhood can be summarised by *“the Sunni Muslims’ victimisation at the hands of a perceived global war on Islam.”*⁷⁰ The images and stories surrounding the brutal treatment of Sunni Muslims emphasises the much-needed justification for the actions

⁶³ Winter, 2015, p. 23

⁶⁴ P. Bergen, ‘Jihad 2.0: social media in the next evolution of terrorist recruitment’, Full Committee Hearing, Testimony for the US Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Government Affairs, 7 may 2015.

⁶⁵ See ‘Healing of the believers’ chests’, al-Furqan Foundation, 3 February 2015.

⁶⁶ Farwell, 2014, p. 50.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Winter, 2015, p. 24

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

DAESH commits, and while “*governments and journalists never fail to condemn [their] atrocities*”⁷¹ and human rights abuses, DAESH uses victimhood as an attempt at legitimisation.

The **War** narrative is arguably the most straightforward as images of war, depicting soldiers, discipline and organisation “*are intended to feed into the idea that [DAESH] is a ‘real’ state with a real army*”⁷² further strengthening their brand through the use of their communication operations.

The narrative of **Belonging** is vital to DAESH’s media strategy as it aids in facilitating the idea of acceptance, brotherhood and the importance of the new ‘*Caliphate*’.⁷³ Belonging will be discussed in greater detail below as it ties directly with DAESH’s use of propaganda and again in Chapter 3 as it relates to successfully recruiting Westerners.

Finally, the **Utopianism** narrative encompasses the previous five narratives and creates the “*idea of the utopia- ‘Caliphate,’*”⁷⁴ where they are no longer just envisaging the ‘*Caliphate*’ but rather enacting it as well,⁷⁵ according to Winter.

The individual and combined use of these narratives is vital to the function and success of DAESH’s communication operations. Whether intricately shot video messages, magazine articles, or informal communiqués, DAESH is currently successfully controlling the narrative surrounding their cause. They have created content and committed atrocities in such a way that “*it leverages urgency and religio-political legitimacy with one another such that the imperative to act - whether the ‘act’ in question is joining, disseminating propaganda, or carrying out an attack - is as pressing as possible.*”⁷⁶

However, many mistakes are being repeated by those who have declared themselves against DAESH, namely the lack of properly understanding the size and magnitude of

⁷¹ Winter, 2015, p. 9.

⁷² *ibid* p.26.

⁷³ *ibid* p. 27.

⁷⁴ *ibid* p. 28.

⁷⁵ *ibid* p. 29.

⁷⁶ *ibid* p. 31.

DAESH's communication operations and the assumption that their motivating factor is politically irrational.⁷⁷ On the contrary, DAESH's agenda is not driven by "*bloodlust and barbarity.... [an idea] that has only been compounded by alarmist reporting.*"⁷⁸ Rather, the precise logic around the justification of their cause, combined with their extensive, expansive and highly functioning media strategy, suggests that the world outside DAESH is attempting to understand it "*based on a tiny portion of its messaging, the bulk of which tends to go unnoticed.*"⁷⁹ Essentially, the rest of the world is attempting to understand the whole, while not being exposed to the larger picture, which greatly overestimates the assumption of DAESH's irrationality.

2.2 Winning the Propaganda War?

*"Islamic State's precipitous rise has provoked a resurgence of mainstream interest in jihadist propaganda."*⁸⁰

2.2.1 Introduction

The use of propaganda has been depicted throughout history in a multitude of different ways, from advertisements of bikini-clad women eating burgers, to politicians misleading the public with false promises, appeals to patriotism and constructed ideas that echo concepts such as "Uncle Sam Wants You!" Scholars argue that DAESH has been extremely sophisticated in their use of propaganda, so much so that it is responsible for the "*group's appeal to the tens of thousands of people from over 90 countries who have gone to join it thus far.*"⁸¹ FBI Director James Comey believes that DAESH's "*propaganda is unusually slick.*"⁸²

This idea raises the question, how is DAESH capable of such deep seeded propaganda so as to make their human rights violations look not just appealing to vulnerable youth, but also justified. In the same way that DAESH is breaking ground in their use of

⁷⁷ *ibid* p. 9.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² K. Sullivan, 'Three American teens, recruited online, are caught trying to join the Islamic State', *The Washington Post*, 8 Dec 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/three-american-teens-recruited-online-are-caught-trying-to-join-the-islamic-state/2014/12/08/8022e6c4-7afb-11e4-84d4-7c896b90abdc_story.html?tid=hybrid_1.1_strip_1, (accessed 22 June 2016).

technologies, social media and so on, so to do scholars have to break their inclinations to compare and contrast DAESH with their predecessors,

*“It becomes clear that assessing [DAESH] propaganda with past models of jihadist messaging is a mistaken approach; its media strategy, based as it is on a system of incentivised and democratised dissemination, is a marked departure from the norm, and one that is unique to its time.”*⁸³

2.2.2 DAESH Communication Operation Strategy

The strategy of DAESH communication operations, the success with which they have been able to function so far, are entwined with their use of propaganda. Every move, Post, Tweet, publication or video is heavily filled with varying degrees of propaganda, and no communication platform goes unmonitored by the group leaders.

Social Media

Take for instance the use of social media, and the associations it draws to Generation Y, who predominately use it (in the Western world and context). Now between the ages of 18 and 35, these are children of such exponential advances in technology that another's anecdote is not truly real or accessible to them unless it is associated with pictures that unequivocally verify its authenticity. The unfortunate drawback of social media is that it creates a pseudo-reality of sorts, whereby a person shows the absolute greatest and most fulfilling aspects of their life, in order to be validated with 'likes' and comments depicting admiration, love, support and most favourably, jealousy.

DAESH militants have been able to successfully recreate this formula, due mostly to their ability to focus on what they deem to be the best aspects of their lives. They avoid publishing pictures depicting killings or torture, rather directing those video messages to the Western world, their target audience. Instead DAESH focuses the social media propaganda on publishing heart-warming pictures of young men laughing, weapons intersected with fluffy kittens, food and any other picture-forms of the 'idealistic Caliphate' they are attempting to depict.⁸⁴

⁸³ Winter, 2015, p.9.

⁸⁴ H. Lewis, 'Winning the Propaganda War', *New Statesmen*, November 2015.

DAESH's tactic to gear different platforms toward different audiences seems to have resulted in the fact that the majority of Westerners tend to remain ignorant of their strategy, brand and capabilities thereby missing the bigger picture of DAESH communication operations. DAESH has been able to use *“social media to gain attention of mass media and strategic audiences to amplify and control its messaging in support of its narrative in order to recruit and [radicalise] followers.”*⁸⁵

This appeals to DAESH as it means none of their audiences are subjected to the entirety of their media strategy, allowing them to retain certain mystery. Additionally it contributes to the misinformation and sensationalism that occur among mainstream media organisations that condemn DAESH actions. These mistakes are part of the reason DAESH is winning the war on propaganda. DAESH's social media strategy,

*“displays an understanding of the importance of having a single goal (the Caliphate) and a common purpose. It also shows an understanding of how to exploit user experience and visual media (infotainment) in order to gain attention and engage their followers and other strategic audiences in an emotional way – for good (cats) and bad (beheadings). At the same time they manage to construct their ‘self image’ in a way that supports their narrative. Simultaneously, they disrupt their opponents messages, in order to position [DAESH] and their ‘brand’ amongst other jihadist factions in the Middle East.”*⁸⁶

In today's world where the smartphone has the capabilities of being more powerful than a 1980's media agency, DAESH is thriving. Prior to the invention of social media applications, the responsibility to articulate world news fell into the hands of journalists or editors, who then addressed the story how they deemed appropriate. In many ways the line between journalist and citizen journalist has been blurred, as sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram provide platforms to those who want to be heard. This has become vital in places where DAESH is known to operate. The various conflicts across the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) have eradicated the media

⁸⁵ Nissen, 2014 pg. 2.

⁸⁶ *ibid* pg. 2.

landscape, and social media journalism has prevailed.⁸⁷ The obvious drawback to this is the lack of neutrality⁸⁸ on the part of the writer and DAESH operatives have utilised this to their advantage by joining the discussion.

By posting pictures on Instagram of cats, with the hashtag *#CatsOfJihad* among other relatable or envy-inducing images, DAESH foot soldiers *“are showing off because they want to prove to their friends - some of whom are in the West - that joining [DAESH] is fun.”*⁸⁹ DAESH leave the more serious discussions to the more serious media platforms, whereas social media is a collective of propaganda filled pictures and jokes that create a virtual relationship, which is used in similar ways to those who use social media in the West.

For example, one DAESH fighter tweeted *“Praise be to Allah, who gave Twitter to the Mujahideen”*⁹⁰ *so that they may share their joys and not have to listen to the BBC, al-Arabiya, al-Jazeera.”*⁹¹ Westerners who have grown tired of biased and politically swayed news media could arguably write similar Tweets, though less radical in nature. This correlation has created the opportunity for DAESH to become very successful in the world of social media because they are aware of how the average person uses it and they succeed in emulating it.

Social media platforms have a difficult time, in general, controlling not just DAESH but all radical, hate inciting groups. *“The problem lies in the global nature of social media, the reliance upon self-policing by users to identify objectionable content, and the fact that many of those banned simply open a new account and continue posting their hatred.”*⁹² Steve Stalinsky, executive director of Middle East Media Research Institute says that Facebook has, so far, shown the best practice *“at removing content”* related to

⁸⁷ H. Lewis, ‘Winning the Propaganda War’, *New Statesmen*, November 2015.

⁸⁸ While not all mainstream journalism can be considered ‘neutral’ (to be highlighted in later sections), here I imply that it should be, and that social media citizen journalists do not tend to be.

⁸⁹ I. Steadman, ‘Why terrorists tweet about cats’, 18 June 2014 <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2014/06/why-terrorists-tweet-about-cats> (accessed 10 May 2016).

⁹⁰ Fighters of Jihad.

⁹¹ I. Steadman, ‘Why terrorists tweet about cats’, 18 June 2014 <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2014/06/why-terrorists-tweet-about-cats> (accessed 10 May 2016).

⁹² J. Greenberg, ‘Why Facebook and Twitter can’t just wipe out ISIS online’, *Wired Business*, 21 Nov 2015, <http://www.wired.com/2015/11/facebook-and-twitter-face-tough-choices-as-isis-exploits-social-media/>, (accessed 20 July 2016).

DAESH, or terrorism and hate.⁹³ In comparison, Twitter had more than 46.000 accounts (both active and inactive) attributed to DAESH members between September and December 2014.⁹⁴

However, Twitter's stance "*became more aggressive when images of journalist James Foley's beheading spread on social media,*"⁹⁵ and they began suspending all accounts associated with DAESH. This proved successful, as the suspensions "*helped to keep the size of the network 'roughly flat,'*"⁹⁶ and even if users created new accounts, the number of followers drastically decreased, which limited "*the reach of their propaganda and recruiting.*"⁹⁷ In fact, Twitter has updated their 'terms of use' on their website to suggest the company:

*"Condemns the use of Twitter to promote terrorism and the Twitter Rules make it clear that this type of behavior, or any violent threat, is not permitted on our service. As the nature of the terrorist threat has changed, so has our ongoing work in this area. Since the middle of 2015 alone, we've suspended over 125.000 accounts for threatening or promoting terrorist acts, primarily related to [DAESH]."*⁹⁸

Social media platforms like Facebook, Google and Twitter "*continually restrict [DAESH] operations by shutting down accounts and profiles that are in violation of the companies' 'terms of use.'*"⁹⁹ However, DAESH makes tactical and strategic attempts to avoid this by "*constantly developing their strategy and platform use to evade censorship, avoid deception and detection by for instance using Twitter's spam-algorithms in order to keep information flowing.*"¹⁰⁰ DAESH has been able to create and spread propaganda specifically targeted for social media, entice disseminators to continuously digitalise their material, as well as circumvent social media platforms' 'terms of use' through algorithms and in many ways, sheer persistence. This

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ Email conversation, Ian Plunkett, Twitter, 19 April 2016.

⁹⁹ Nissen, 2014 pg. 6.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

combination implies that the use of social media has been crucial in their attempts at legitimising their cause, as well as radicalising their recruits (to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3).

Contribution of Mainstream Media

An interesting parallel can be drawn here, as the use of propaganda is not limited to DAESH's attempts at legitimisation, but also can be found in the Western media's attempts at DAESH's de-legitimisation. While DAESH has come to realise lighter, happier, youth-focused images posted from smartphones are highly effective in their propaganda war, the opposite is true for those fighting against DAESH and everything they stand for. Media organisations and government leaders all seem to focus their attention on the images of brutality, cruelty and vengeance, which can be categorised as the root of the DAESH cause. Very little, if any airtime or words are allocated to DAESH's attempt at humanising their cause.

DAESH is adept at juxtaposing the images afforded to the public from mainstream media sources, which "*almost always depict them as inhuman monsters, as nihilists, as members of a death cult.*"¹⁰¹ In fact, their proclivity toward highly realistic propaganda-filled media is clear when analysing that the notion of terror only plays a small role in the overall strategy. Their use of terror is strategic and matched only by their ability to instil notions of Statehood, civil infrastructure, or the plausible safety of living under their "functional" authority.¹⁰² By ignoring this aspect of DAESH's propaganda and media strategy, mainstream news media is facilitating a one-dimensional discussion that provides further ammunition for DAESH to question Western media bias.¹⁰³

On Friday the 13th of November 2015, DAESH orchestrated a simultaneous attack in various areas of Paris. Forever cemented as the Paris Attacks, the suspects were responsible for killing 130 people through a series of suicide bombings and mass shootings that occurred at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis in addition to concert

¹⁰¹ H. Lewis, 'Winning the Propaganda War', *New Statesmen*, November 2015.

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

venues, cafés and restaurants across Paris.¹⁰⁴ The news media from all over the world flocked to Paris to underscore the magnitude of the situation, to condemn the actions undertaken by DAESH, and to assess the collective shock of terror in a city beloved worldwide. Unfortunately, the day before, on the 12th of November 2015, DAESH conducted an attack in a Beirut suburb, inhabited mostly by Shia Muslims, killing approximately 43 people, which did not garner even a fraction of the attention.¹⁰⁵ The lack of any Beirut-related news following the Paris Attacks sparked controversy in all parts of the world, as people, in particular with roots or ties to the Middle East, started denouncing that Western media showed their bias by only focusing reports on cities that represent glamour and sophistication, while ignoring Middle Eastern cities. Furthermore, many suggested that the lack of proper media coverage analysing explosions in MENA countries meant these regions are worth less airtime and that the innocent lives lost in Beirut are worth less than the lives of those taken in Paris.

The fundamental goal of DAESH was achieved. While mainstream media did in fact publish articles and call attention to the attacks that occurred in Beirut, the reality is that the magnitude and location of the events in Paris took precedence, as DAESH targeted multiple locations and the attackers in question were all EU citizens who had spent time in Syria before returning to Europe.¹⁰⁶ This created a situation where many people who were unable to avoid a news program, news site or social media platform without hearing about the Paris Attacks, were left wholly ignorant about the attack that took place in Beirut the day prior.

To add to the situation, within hours of the Paris Attacks, Facebook created a filter of the French flag that could be placed over one's existing Profile Picture to show support and solidarity with the people of Paris. The idea was to spread love and compassion to

¹⁰⁴ S. de la Hamaide, 'Timeline of the Paris Attacks according to public prosecutor', *Reuters*, 14 Nov 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-timeline-idUSKCN0T31BS20151114#h8KRqimXftutLeR3.97>, (accessed 16 May 2016).

¹⁰⁵ A. Barnard and H. Saad, 'ISIS claims responsibility for blasts that killed dozens in Beirut', *The New York Times*, 12 Nov 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/13/world/middleeast/lebanon-explosions-southern-beirut-hezbollah.html?_r=1, (accessed 16 May 2016).

¹⁰⁶ I. Traynor, 'EU minister orders tighter border checks in response to Paris Attacks', *The Guardian*, 20 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/20/eu-ministers-order-tighter-border-checks-in-response-to-paris-attacks>, (accessed 16 May 2016).

those who lost friends or family in the attacks. In contrast to the outpouring of empathy, people took to their status to condemn Facebook for creating an insignia with the French flag, while completely ignoring the events that occurred in Beirut, and not simultaneously creating another with the Lebanese flag. The psychological impact of this was felt as it amplified the ‘us-versus-them’ mentality that DAESH is attempting to manifest. DAESH perfected their strategy of taking advantage of chaos in-so-much that governments are unable to protect or defend sports stadiums, concert venues, restaurants or cafés in the same way they are expected and equipped to protect airports.¹⁰⁷

One aspect that is seen throughout various scholarly articles is that their propaganda strategy has significantly increased since the declaration of the ‘*Caliphate*’, with their branding becoming more complex and standardised. Winter suggests that “[DAESH’s] propaganda machine is subject to constant evolution”¹⁰⁸ and with every evolution, their speed and efficacy surrounding the material is tightened accordingly. Essentially, “the reach and speed with which [DAESH] releases its communiqués...allows it to shape the information environment and forces its opponents into a perpetually reactive cycle,”¹⁰⁹ forming to fit the necessary mould.

DAESH’s *Dabiq Magazine*

One way in which DAESH has been able to shape the information environment and exploit the Internet through their communication operations is with their *al-Hayat Media Center*-produced *Dabiq Magazine*, available in PDF online.

“[DAESH] regularly puts out a glossy propaganda magazine aimed at recruiting jihadists from the West. It is sophisticated, slick, beautifully produced and printed in several languages including English.”¹¹⁰

One key aspect of The Clarion Project, whose website hosts all issues of *Dabiq Magazine*, is the importance of understanding the opponents ideology. The project promotes dialogue while challenging extremism and suggests that by providing a safe

¹⁰⁷ ‘Terrorism’, *NPR Hidden Brain*, [podcast], iTunes, 2016, (accessed 16 May 2016).

¹⁰⁸ Winter, 2015, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ Ingram, 2014, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ *The Clarion Project*, [website], 20 September 2014, <http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq> (accessed 10 June 2016).

platform for the magazines to be analysed, they can also be critiqued in an open manner.¹¹¹

Each issue of *Dabiq Magazine* is artfully published, with vivid images and carefully crafted articles. The pages are lined with enticing quotes, with the whole publication organised within a table of contents. The latest issue, published sometime in the first quarter of 2016, following the Brussels Attacks that occurred in March, is 68 pages in length and covers a multitude of concepts and ideas. One of the main forms of propaganda in this issue is, interestingly, directed at Western Muslims. It is the belief of DAESH that the world is split into two factions, on the one hand the “righteous” path of Islam, and on the other, the disbelievers, or ‘*kufr*,’ who identify with all other religions and so called crusaders.

This issue went to new lengths, further demonising Muslims who were born in, raised in, or identified with the Western world, who additionally considered themselves to follow the path of Allah. According to DAESH, this parallel is unacceptable: “*How can Muslims living in the West who claim to have surrendered themselves to Allah, completely accepting His rule alone, stand idly as these imāms of kufr continue to spread their poison from atop their pulpits?*”¹¹² The first article in the issue immediately begins with propaganda, where references to children dying at the hands of crusaders (the Western States), is balanced with the call that to be a true Muslim, you must renounce and repent your Western connections in order to fulfil your duty to Allah and subsequently to DAESH, or else face repercussions.

*“One must either take the journey to dār al-Islam, joining the ranks of the mujahidin therein, or wage jihad by himself with the resources available to him (knives, guns, explosives, etc.) to kill the crusaders and other disbelievers and apostates, including the imāms of kufr, to make an example of them, as all of them are valid – rather, obligatory – targets according the Shari’ah, except for those who openly repent from kufr before they are apprehended.”*¹¹³

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² *Dabiq Magazine*, issue 14, 2016, p. 17.

¹¹³ *ibid.*

DAESH's logic is extensively flawed, as a significant portion of their brand, tactics and strategy live in the digital world a concept DAESH, in their quest to return to the first 'Calipate,' does not support.

*"It is paradoxical, of course, that a group whose expressed aim is to take the world back to the 'Righteous Caliphs' (the first generation of Muslims) should be so dependent on the most sophisticated and modern technology; but in war people use every weapon at their disposal."*¹¹⁴

Interestingly, a section of this issue covers the notion of human rights that DAESH looks at with scepticism and antipathy as the use of the term is under quotations. "Human Rights" do not belong to the *'kufr'*.¹¹⁵ *"Part of the pagan democratic religion is what has been labelled in this era as "human rights," including the "right" to commit apostasy, devil-worship, sodomy, and fornication."*¹¹⁶ DAESH is suggesting that the lives that Christians, Jews and Western Muslims lead are tantamount to grave sins according to Allah.¹¹⁷

One of the most intriguing sections of this particular issue was a pseudo-opinion editorial piece supposedly written by John Cantlie entitled *'The Blood of Shame'* that covers the reason for his captivity with DAESH. Cantlie, a war photographer and correspondent,¹¹⁸ was captured in November 2012 along with James Foley and remains captive today. Since then, DAESH has used Cantlie in seven videos that formed the *"Lend me your ears"* series to highlight the unfavourable hostage policy implemented by both the US and the UK, both States that, until recently, opposed meeting ransom demands as it illegally amounted to *"funding terrorist organisations."*¹¹⁹

This supposed opinion editorial is part of a series of signs of Cantlie since the final *"The Blood of Shame"* video was uploaded at the end of November 2014. He also

¹¹⁴ Atwan, 2015, p. 2

¹¹⁵ Dabiq Magazine, issue 14, 2016, p. 36

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ T. Wyke, 'British ISIS hostage John Cantlie appears in new propaganda footage from inside Mosul one year after his last video appearance', *The Daily Mail*, 19 March 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3499795/British-ISIS-hostage-John-Cantlie-appears-new-propaganda-footage-inside-Mosul-one-year-video-appearance.html>, (accessed 10 June 2016).

¹¹⁹ Dabiq Magazine, issue 14, 2016 p. 52.

appeared in a propaganda video in March, this year, “*criticising US-led coalition for bombing a media kiosk*” in Mosul.¹²⁰ The op-ed piece focuses on US and UK hostage policy and the recent change in the United States that now allows for prisoners’ families to arrange an exchange for financial means. While there is no proof that the article was actually written by Cantlie, or if his name was used as a diversion for a possible ghostwriter, it becomes clear that DAESH propaganda and communication operations are expansive and cover a multitude of levels.

2.2.3 Power of Propaganda: an effective strategy?

From films, to magazines, to social media posts, there is not one aspect of communication that DAESH has been unable to strategize to their advantage. In addition to the online publications, such as *Dabiq Magazine*, and the various videos from executions to recruitment and the unlimited world of social media, DAESH also produces “*brief messages via channels such as ‘Mujatweets’ - short videos promoting a particular aspect of life in [DAESH] controlled areas (such as functioning markets) or an event (for example, Eid celebrations*”¹²¹),”¹²² which are then often supplemented with informal messages from DAESH members.¹²³

It has to be noted that while fear sells – as seen time and time again in media reports that focus on attacks, terror threats and death tolls – “*propaganda that focuses on ‘everyday’ life in the ‘Caliphate’ rarely makes it into mainstream press due to its subject matter; disengaged publics are not interested in [DAESH] administrative efforts.*”¹²⁴ One such Mujatweet episode was conducted in Raqqa, where a restaurant worker was interviewed and stated that “*business was good under [DAESH] and that occupational health and hygiene inspections were working well.*”¹²⁵ This depiction of normal life is arguably much more potent than images of brutality, which are easily and

¹²⁰ T. Wyke, ‘British ISIS hostage John Cantlie appears in new propaganda footage from inside Mosul one year after his last video appearance’, *The Daily Mail*, 19 March 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3499795/British-ISIS-hostage-John-Cantlie-appears-new-propaganda-footage-inside-Mosul-one-year-video-appearance.html>, (accessed 10 June 2016).

¹²¹ Celebrations that occur around the year, for example to commemorate the end of Ramadan, or Ibrahim’s willingness to sacrifice his son for God; Correspond to specific dates.

¹²² Ingram, 2014, p. 5.

¹²³ *ibid.*

¹²⁴ Winter, 2015, p. 32.

¹²⁵ Ingram, 2014, p. 8.

quickly condemned.¹²⁶ The most shocking aspect pertaining to the way in which DAESH propaganda is disseminated is that “*individuals seeking to help the [DAESH] cause through media activism,*”¹²⁷ conduct the majority of the transmissions but who are not members. These dedicated admirers are enthralled with DAESH and actively seek out material and propaganda to circulate.¹²⁸

Nissen agrees, and suggests that there is not just a top-down approach in DAESH’s narrative, but also a bottom-up initiative (focused on the disseminators) and concludes a four-level strategic narrative:

*“**Top level** element consists of [DAESH]’s own twitter account and other social-media platform accounts where most video is uploaded centrally. **The second level** consists of regional or provincial accounts posting both live reports from strikes (words and images) and localised messaging (live feeds and live streaming). **The third level** consists of individual fighters that post updates about their experiences on what is to appeal as personal accounts. **The fourth level** is more or less outside the control of DAESH media “management” and consists of sympathisers and supporters (the disseminators) either re-tweeting or re-posting [DAESH] content.”*¹²⁹

DAESH sought out sympathising individuals to conduct the disseminating aspect of their strategy. “*In the age of the 24 hour news cycle and social media, ‘non-exposure’ is not just unrealistic, but wholly unachievable. [DAESH] propagandists have recognised this vulnerability and continually exploit it.*”¹³⁰ In order to function at the level that they do, it became necessary to delegate and this tactical decision expanded their audience due in large part to these unofficial members who are able to disseminate propaganda to tens of thousands of people in all corners of the world.¹³¹

By creating these various forms of messaging, DAESH communication operations “*provide supporters with a competitive system of meaning – i.e. an alternative*

¹²⁶ Winter, 2015, p. 32.

¹²⁷ *ibid* p. 35.

¹²⁸ *ibid* p. 36.

¹²⁹ Nissen, 2014 pg. 5.

¹³⁰ Winter, 2015, p. 42.

¹³¹ *ibid* p. 36.

perspective of the conflict and its actors to that perpetuated by its opponents."¹³² The opponents in question are arguably mainstream media organisations more so than political enemies. The mainstream media organisations have been, for the most part, unknowing participants in DAESH's media strategy.

*"The important thing is how you react to DAESH media. DAESH made a media trap and all of the Western media fell in it. They know the fears and images that the Western media is hungry for, so DAESH give it and the media spreads it."*¹³³

2.3 Conclusion

As mentioned above, the images, which the mainstream media prefer to represent are the brutal, cruel and violent aspects of DAESH, because that is what Westerners are likely going to read or watch. The abuse and violation of human rights cause anger and outrage, and the hope of DAESH is that it leads to an, 'us-versus-them' mentality. This is their desired outcome since it could isolate Muslims from other Westerners, and offers DAESH an opportunity to invite these marginalised members of society to join their group, brotherhood and cause.

In a short time-frame, DAESH has managed to *"give its audiences the perception of an accountable and transparent authority,"*¹³⁴ while mainstream news media have been unable to encapsulate the whole of DAESH's information communication strategy but rather to a large degree fallen hostage to what DAESH is offering, thereby strengthening the power of their brand. The use of propaganda is the cornerstone of DAESH's successful communication operations and key to their goal of legitimising human rights abuses, radicalising Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as well as recruiting those from around the world who want to join their cause.

¹³² Ingram, 2015, p. 730

¹³³ Ingram, 2015, p. 746; interview conducted by Ingram with a senior producer from a Syrian opposition radio station, December 2014.

¹³⁴ Ingram, 2014, p. 7

3 Radicalisation and Recruitment

3.1 Introduction

This chapter takes a closer look into the tactics DAESH use in order to radicalise and recruit. By analysing the significance of their online presence and the ways in which they attempt to legitimise their human rights violations, it becomes clear how damaging their influence can be. The psychological games, the propaganda-filled media strategy and their ability to normalise the radical all lead to the recruitment and brainwashing of Westerners.

3.2 Significance of online presence in Radicalisation and Recruitment

Radicalisation and recruitment are vital parts of DAESH's brand and in many ways, their perceived success. Their ability to consistently legitimise human rights abuses and violations stems from a combination of their inclination to persuade and intimidate, as well as a very intricate media strategy. DAESH has quickly become a worldwide phenomenon mainly due to their communication operations, which give them the possibility of manipulating susceptible, isolated, usually young and vulnerable people into fighting – what DAESH describes as – jihad.¹³⁵

In the last five years (coinciding with the start of the Syrian civil conflict), DAESH has managed to convince more than 22.000 fighters into joining their ranks in the Middle East.¹³⁶ While their tactics can be considered crude, the level of success they have achieved in their radicalisation and recruitment efforts is astonishing. Do not misunderstand this statement, I do not wish to praise or condone DAESH's manipulation techniques or violations, but rather highlight the effectiveness and ease with which they are able to recruit Westerners, as outlined below.

The importance of the online community is two-fold. First, DAESH has created an extended “familial” connection that encourages the execution of various tasks, and

¹³⁵ *Who does ISIS work for?*, [online video], 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_1914317121&feature=iv&src_vid=Ef4TkZBxuy0&v=I33dO021lx8 (accessed on 16 June 2016).

¹³⁶ I. Richards, ‘Flexible capital accumulation in Islamic State social media’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol.1, no. 1, 2016, p 1.

creates an environment that provides understanding as well as a feeling of security or safety.

*“Attention has to be drawn to the potency of [DAESH] engagement on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, where well-calibrated narratives highlighting Muslim persecution abroad, religious duty and the prospect of adventure have been surprisingly effective.”*¹³⁷

The recruits from around the world work together, *“leveraging the latest communication technologies,”*¹³⁸ in order to stay ahead and continue on their global path of jihad.

This ability to convince recruits to fly to Syria or Iraq – or more recently to stay in their Western cities in order to facilitate and launch terrorist attacks – is a cornerstone of DAESH’s strength. In many ways, if these stationary recruits are caught, the sheer amount of them around the world suggests that DAESH leaders, based in strongholds such as Raqqa, are met with little to no repercussions. In fact, governments tend to place a certain amount of responsibility on individuals who are of age.

Second, DAESH, *“regards the struggle over popular opinion as essential and complementary”* to their media strategy.¹³⁹ In fact, DAESH thrives on creating chaos, whether by creating disputes or else with their terrorist plots as previously outlined. The question then, becomes, was recruitment an individuals choice and should they therefore be held responsible? In order to analyse this accurately, it is vital to understand the nature of consent as opposed to the nature of informed consent, as well as transparency and the ways in which DAESH manipulate in order to hide the reality of the situation both on the ground and abroad. Does DAESH hold responsibility, under the notion of human rights, for manipulating the individuals they have managed to recruit?

¹³⁷ T. Aistrophe, ‘Social media and counterterrorism strategy’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, p.1.

¹³⁸ *Who does ISIS work for?*, [online video], 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_1914317121&feature=iv&src_vid=Ef4TkZBxuy0&v=I33dO021lx8 (accessed on 16 June 2016).

¹³⁹ Cohen et al, 2015, p.130.

3.3 Normalising the Radical

Referring back to Winter's narratives, the ideas of *utopia* and *belonging* are essential to begin the process of '*normalising the radical*.' At this point, DAESH attempts to legitimise their actions by fabricating the realities of the environment resulting in the violation of the basic human right of freedom of information, subsequently interwoven in the UDHR Article 19, as well as the ICCPR Article 19, where both cover freedom of expression.¹⁴⁰

All people are entitled to receive and impart information, but it carries duties and responsibilities. However, DAESH twists the truth, emphasises the deaths of Sunni Muslims at the hands of Western forces, while highlighting supposedly peaceful daily life in DAESH strongholds, and creating connections through the use of religious appeal. DAESH is manipulating the content of what is released in order gain the consent of supporters by suggesting it is the duty of all Western Muslims to join their brothers and sisters in the fight for recognition and Islam. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi suggests that the "*migration to the house of Islam is a duty*,"¹⁴¹ that must be met in order for one to be considered a real Muslim and part of the brotherhood.

The connection between brotherhood (belonging) and duty (obligation to reach utopia) is explained effectively with Wilfred Edward Satter Owen's words "*Dulce et decorum est Pro patrai mori*" which translate from Latin to "*It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country*."¹⁴² While the notion of statehood, in DAESH's interpretation, extends outwards to the (Sunni) Islam faith (along with their envisioned '*Islamic State*'), the idea that one might die for this cause becomes one of the enticing factors that pulls recruits toward this revolution.

Psychologist Scott Atran discussed the impulse to radicalise in an *NPR Hidden Brain* podcast on terrorism, which also covered DAESH extremism and recruitment. He

¹⁴⁰ UDHR Art. 19; ICCPR Art. 19.

¹⁴¹ A. Peresin and A. Cervone, 'The western muhajirat of ISIS', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2015, vol.38, no. 7 p. 495.

¹⁴² *Who does ISIS work for?*, [online video], 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_1914317121&feature=iv&src_vid=Ef4TkZBxuy0&v=I33dO021lx8 (accessed on 16 June 2016).

argued that the impulse to join DAESH does not differ from the impulse to join any other type of revolution. In fact, DAESH has strategically been able to evoke feelings of transcendence and self-sacrifice, two components that human beings need to experience, even intermittently, in order to feel needed, wanted and part of something greater. It is this vulnerability that DAESH taps into when trying to convince potential recruits to join.¹⁴³

Additionally, there is a strategic power DAESH creates by letting the Western world, including mainstream media, focus on the religious divide. As mentioned above, the role of religion has been paramount in DAESH's brand, but both Atran and I argue that its purpose is merely secondary to hidden psychological forces.¹⁴⁴ In fact, the mainstream media's focus on religion has in many ways benefited DAESH. Take for instance the two extremes in Western viewpoints when discussing the relation between Islam and extremism. On one hand there are those who strongly believe that the two are linked, interwoven and inseparable. It is this side of the spectrum that might argue, *"Even if you can prove that not all Muslims are terrorists, it is clear that all terrorists are Muslim,"* and have spoken out against Muslims through hate speech directed both toward the ones in their schools, cities and countries, but also those currently struggling to seek refuge in less dangerous environments.

The other end of the spectrum holds the members of society who are of the mentality that Islam, as interpreted by DAESH and other extremist groups, is in no way indicative of the religion. This side believes that DAESH's interpretation of Islam is misguided and misrepresentative of the religion as a whole, and because of this it is their duty to oppose those who think otherwise. I argue that DAESH has embraced this opposing dialogue regarding religion as a way of *'normalising the radical.'* By focusing the airtime they receive from mainstream media on the rights and wrongs of Islam, they have benefited by taking the perfectly normal concept and construct of religion, and radicalising it. This, in turn, has provided them the opportunity to reverse the notion to *'normalising the radical'*, through images of unity and solidarity, and the *'us-versus-*

¹⁴³ 'Terrorism', *NPR Hidden Brain*, [podcast], iTunes, 2016, (accessed 16 May 2016).

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

them' mentality. In no stronger way have they succeeded in 'normalising the radical' than through the recruitment of Westerners to their cause.

3.4 Recruiting Foreigners

When news of Westerners joining DAESH ranks or becoming martyrs for the cause makes headlines in the Western world, it raises the question, "*What motivates a person to do something so barbaric and nihilistic?*"¹⁴⁵ The answer, however, is not as clear-cut as the question. Various factors contribute to recruitment and DAESH has created an environment where they are able to manipulate each one in order to gain control.

As outlined in an *NPR Hidden Brain* podcast on terrorism, recruitment is often targeted to disenfranchised, outcast and marginalised people with DAESH willing and able to target them on a psychological level. "*Flames of War*" is a 55-minute feature, produced by DAESH and distributed by the *al-Hayat Media Centre*.¹⁴⁶ It captures the intricate and detailed lengths DAESH go to in order to present a very specific picture that legitimises their actions, calls for brotherhood and solidarity amongst Sunni Muslims and finally, resembles "*the 1934 propaganda film produced in Nazi Germany by Leni Reifenstahl entitled 'Triumph of Will.'*"¹⁴⁷

The feature begins with an English speaking voice articulating how the West has been a key proponent of propaganda. Calling it the "*dark force*," the narrator suggests that Western aggression "*bore life*" to a force that would completely change the political landscape of the Middle East. This force was the establishment of DAESH [called '*Islamic State*' in the video] "*nourished by the blood of the truthful Mujahidin to unite the Ummah under one call, one banner, one leader,*"¹⁴⁸ drawing undeniable comparisons to Adolf Hitler's 1935 speech, "*Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer.*"¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Flames of War*, DAESH Al-Hayat Media Centre [online video], 2014, http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=5c2_1411222393, (accessed 19 June 2016).

¹⁴⁷ Cohen et al, 2015, p. 131.

¹⁴⁸ *Flames of War*, DAESH Al-Hayat Media Centre [online video], 2014, http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=5c2_1411222393, (accessed 19 June 2016).

¹⁴⁹ *Hitler's Speech Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*, [online video], 1935, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xtdqp30dJIE>, (accessed 19 June 2016).

Scenes of President George W. Bush emphasising how the US prevailed in Iraq and the subsequent exit strategy outlined by President Barack Obama provide the introduction and justification as the narrator's voice suggests that these politicians, with the help of mainstream media, have fabricated these statements, to which his voice becomes louder and an echo is heard as he exclaims "*They lied!*"¹⁵⁰ Within the first two minutes of the feature, several key propaganda tools are used. The quality of the film is such that the images of battles, slowly fading to news clips, are seamless; singing in Arabic can be heard in the background, with a slight nod toward chanting, suggesting approval of the events unfolding, or even an attempt to lure the audience into a possibly hypnotic state. As the narrator's voice fades the music becomes louder and vice-versa; there are subtle calls to religion. While DAESH does not try to hide its desire to connect religion and extremism, they do so in a subtle way where the audience is not fully aware of how many references were made; the belief that the West influenced the necessity for DAESH to operate, as Assad's regime soldiers, as well as Western Intervention started a war against the Sunni Muslims by degrading the Sunni's and suggesting the end of jihad.¹⁵¹

Moving forward, the feature frequently puts a special focus on a group of men, where one reads supposed Holy Text with English subtitles spread across the bottom of the screen. Very early on in the video the DAESH militant articulates,

*"Are you satisfied with the life of this world rather than the Hereafter? But what is the enjoyment of worldly life compared to the Hereafter except a very little? If you do not go forth He will punish you with painful punishment, and will replace you with another people, and you will not harm Him at all. And Allah is over all things competent [At-Tawbah: 38-39]."*¹⁵²

This calls attention back to the notion that part of the draw to join DAESH is the possibility of dying for a greater cause. DAESH creates this appeal by suggesting that by becoming a martyr, your identity and name live on within the pages of history, as someone who died for the greater good of Allah and Islam.

¹⁵⁰ *Flames of War*, DAESH Al-Hayat Media Centre [online video], 2014, http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=5c2_1411222393, (accessed 19 June 2016).

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*

¹⁵² *ibid.*

One overarching goal of DEASH in the feature is to imply that Allah is on their side. The anger, violence and brutality they inflict on their opposition is only the energy that Allah has chosen to channel through them. The punishment is directed at those who are against Allah, and more importantly the victory goes to those who embrace Him. Images of laughing, happy people fill the screens as the narrator suggests that “*Allah also opened up the hearts of the civilians to [DAESH’s] state and they became its adamant supporters.*”¹⁵³ The narrator then begins analysing the “*severe media attack against [DAESH]*” as the stepping-stone to legitimising the human rights violations occurring in the feature. The specific use of language is significant, as it strives to evoke empathy from the audience. “*The full fledged multi-pronged assault against [DAESH] fighters and their families,*” attempts to humanise the tactical decisions of the group and paints them in the light of protectors of what is “good” and “righteous.”¹⁵⁴

In the final ten minutes of the feature, “*Flames of War*” attempts to discredit the character of those fighting against DAESH. The screen is filled with a mixture of slow-motion and real time scenes, combined with shots taken from different angles, to highlight the production value and once again legitimise the violence, calling reference to Hollywood films that use powerful action sequences that glorify violence. Furthermore, there are close up images of opposition militants, where the narrator belittles their existence as cowardly, without foundation, weak and praises their executions, which are edited as slow motion segments.¹⁵⁵ DAESH militants carefully show the identification cards of the fallen opposition soldiers to the camera, in the hopes of unveiling their names for watching family members. This blatantly violates not just the right to life (via the act of killing), but also right to privacy for the families of the individuals killed at the hands of DAESH, but identifying those killed.

The final three minutes forgo the narrator in place of a DAESH militant, dressed in military fatigues and a headscarf covering everything except his eyes. He speaks in North American English, indicative of either the United States or Canada and explains the purpose and necessity of aiding DAESH. In the background, a few men can be seen

¹⁵³ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Cohen et al, 2015, p. 131.

digging trenches, and the audience soon discovers that these Syrian men previously belonged to the 17th Division of Assad's Army prior to DAESH's takeover of their base, near Raqqa.¹⁵⁶ The final images of the feature depict the likely North American DAESH militant and other DAESH operatives shooting the Syrian men in the back of their heads, their bodies falling into the pre-dug graves, in a show of dominance.¹⁵⁷

DAESH's use of propaganda has amplified their success and because of this, it is not only found in feature videos that have been directed, produced and edited for content and quality. As alluded to previously, part of their recruitment technique is realised online, through the help of their extended network around the globe. *"Terrorists exploit the Internet to create and disseminate propaganda, recruit new members...Without a communications ability, terrorist organisations cannot effectively organise, execute attacks, or spread their ideology."*¹⁵⁸

3.4.1 The Stories of Jake Bilardi and El Shafee Elsheikh

The following stories serve the purpose of revealing how DAESH manages to recruit Westerners and how they individually target the person through communication operations, both online and through verbal propaganda messaging, in an effort to maximise the possibility of recruitment.

Jake Bilardi, Australia

Jake Bilardi was an Australian citizen, recruited by DAESH in the summer of 2014, a few months shy of his eighteenth birthday.¹⁵⁹ Less than a year later, in March 2015 Bilardi followed through with an ultimately unsuccessful suicide mission in Ramadi, Iraq killing only himself. Within a few short months the young, troubled youth from

¹⁵⁶ R. Mauro, 'ISIS releases 'Flames of War' feature film to intimidate West', *The Clarion Project*, 21 September 2014, <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/isis-releases-flames-war-feature-film-intimidate-west>, (accessed 14 July 2016).

¹⁵⁷ *Flames of War*, DAESH Al-Hayat Media Centre [online video], 2014, http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=5c2_1411222393, (accessed 19 June 2016).

¹⁵⁸ Aistrophe, 2016, pg. 1.

¹⁵⁹ O. Crowcroft, 'Iraq: Isis claim Ramadi suicide bomber was Australian teen Jihadi Jake Bilardi', 11 MARCH 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iraq-isis-claim-ramadi-suicide-bomber-was-australian-teen-jihadi-jake-bilardi-1491532>, (accessed 4 June 2016).

Victoria was christened Abu Abdullah al-Australi and had traveled half way across the world to fight jihad.¹⁶⁰

Jake's father, John Bilardi sat down for an interview with Australia's 60 Minutes, just one week following his son's death.¹⁶¹ He expressed sadness and heartbreak over his son's demise, even empathy as he tried to comprehend Jake's emotional state while driving in the car packed with explosives toward his imminent death. The conversation shifted to Jake's responsibility for his own actions and his choice to walk down the path of martyrdom. The interviewer suggested Jake's depictions of DAESH and his new life were euphoric and that it seemed he finally felt accepted, to which John scoffs and replies "*Yeah, 'cause they made him feel like he was accepted.*"¹⁶²

Dubbed Jihadi Jake by the media outlets, Bilardi was a troubled young man with a history of psychological problems, who always had difficulties making friends. His father's desire to conduct the interview stemmed from his belief that the onus fell on him to take responsibility for his son's actions. "*He obviously needed help, and as a parent I was not able to give that to him.*"¹⁶³ Jake exhibited difficulties from an early age, craved attention and showed an affinity toward using weapons, all of which are clear signs of psychological issues. Following the divorce of his parents, Jake lived with his mother until her death. Upon reconnecting with his father, Jake opened up and disclosed that he had converted to Islam, a decision that John says "*came out of the blue,*" as both he and his late ex-wife identified as atheist.¹⁶⁴

While it was initially believed that Jake's radicalisation and recruitment occurred in the mosque he started frequenting, the reality of his situation suggests that it actually happened online, through DAESH communication operations. The DAESH propaganda videos that Jake viewed deployed the themes of acceptance and brotherhood, which he strongly desired. He had become more hostile leading up to his recruitment as well

¹⁶⁰ *Life of Islamic State Suicide Bomber Behind the scenes Breaking News* [online video] 2016,. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htBqt7pWXj4>, (accessed 4 June 2016).

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

¹⁶² *ibid.*

¹⁶³ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*

as overly interested in the political situation of the Middle East. It is likely that his aggressive attitude began after he connected to hardline DAESH recruiters, the result of which concluded in him applying for a passport before his subsequent disappearance in August 2014.¹⁶⁵ The tragedy of this situation includes the possibility that Jake left Australia with the belief that he was going to take part in a noble cause of creating a pure Islamic state. Many propaganda videos had clips “*designed for the purpose of influencing public opinion by showing scenes of food distribution, medical treatment, and charity.*”¹⁶⁶ In reality, as highlighted in the interview, what he found was a group of thugs and criminals.

The images of brutality are reserved for the Western enemies, while the recruits are subjected to propaganda videos that depict adventure, joyful faces and a version of utopia. However, one aspect that is rarely addressed with potential recruits is the inevitable reality shock once they arrive in DAESH strongholds. Once recruits arrive, they are not allowed to leave if they express concerns over the deceptive techniques used to entice them to join. Those brave enough to voice their opinion are deemed disloyal and those willing to risk desertion are executed if caught.¹⁶⁷

DAESH appeals to youth by focusing on the aspects of glory and adventure in their missions. Their overall goal is to be part of something great and to change the world in some way, an idea which greatly appeals to marginalised, outsiders who long to experience any form of camaraderie and friendship. DAESH preys on those with personal frustrations and twists their circumstances into a larger set of factors in order to persuade them to deal with the root causes of their depression, namely the state of the world.¹⁶⁸

El Shafee Elsheikh, United Kingdom

For the recruits, once their identities fuse with that of DAESH there is a psychological switch that occurs, and a ‘*fight or flight*’ mentality takes over. Their belief in DAESH’s

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*; O. Crowcroft, ‘Iraq: Isis claim Ramadi suicide bomber was Australian teen jihadi Jake Bilardi’, 11 MARCH 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iraq-isis-claim-ramadi-suicide-bomber-was-australian-teen-jihadi-jake-bilardi-1491532>, (accessed 4 June 2016).

¹⁶⁶ Cohen et al, 2015 p. 133.

¹⁶⁷ ‘Terrorism’, *NPR Hidden Brain*, [podcast], iTunes, 2016, (accessed 16 May 2016).

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*

presented ideology becomes so strong they become immune to societal pressures because their intentions are “good” and “righteous” by DAESH’s standards. It is for this reason that parental pleas are usually unsuccessful in the fight against radicalisation, as the potential recruits do not see an exit strategy at this point in the recruitment process. The scope of their belief is bigger than themselves and they inherit a sense of invincibility from DAESH that is difficult to shed.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, the instinctual reaction to cognitive dissonance, should the recruited have any, is quickly dealt with through self-deception.¹⁷⁰

This mentality presented itself in British citizen El Shafee Elsheikh who was born to Sudanese parents, was the middle child of three boys and became radicalised while living in West London. His childhood hobbies of “*tinkering endlessly with engine motors, bicycle parts, and old computers*” translated well into his engineering studies.¹⁷¹ In 2012, Elsheik joined DAESH’s ranks and became one of the four ‘Beatles’ responsible for beheading 27 hostages on camera.¹⁷² His first introduction to radical Islam came at the hands of Hani al-Sibai, a West London preacher and known al-Qaeda affiliate.

Elsheikh attended the mosque where al-Sibai preached, and after a short period of time his mother, Maha Elgizouli became aware of his allegiance. Her divorce from Elsheikh’s father prevented her from attending the mosque to better understand the content her son was being subjected to, but her instinct overwhelmingly guided her to confront her son about his affinity toward al-Sibai’s message. While Elgizouli’s oldest son, Khalid was serving a prison sentence, her youngest, Mahmoud was also radicalised. The trigger of her middle child’s radicalisation came after his marriage to an Ethiopian girl living in Canada, who was unable to obtain a visa to move the UK

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ S. McLeod, *Simply Psychology*, [website], 2008, <http://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-dissonance.html>, (accessed on 21 July 2016).

¹⁷¹ J. Bradely, ‘My Son the ISIS Executioner’, *Buzzfeed*, 23 May 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/janebradley/my-son-the-isis-executioner?utm_term=.bowoJnZwk#.ub6wdPagpK, (accessed 20 June 2016).

¹⁷² *ibid.*

permanently.¹⁷³ Elsheikh then began to subject his younger brother to the messages that overtook his own consciousness.

Before long, both of her sons had made their way into Syria, where in 2015 Mahmoud died while fighting for DAESH. Elsheikh, on the other hand had become one of the media dubbed '*Beatles*', which included Executioner Jihadi John. The '*Beatles*' would gain notoriety after beheading 27 hostages on film. This type of publicised brutality became a bonding agent for the "brothers" while simultaneously terrorised the opposition.¹⁷⁴ Their mother remains shocked. Their radicalisation occurred so quickly, over the period of a few months and still confuses and saddens Elgizouli, who does not recognise the sons she raised.

Her attempt at saving Mahmoud, while on a trip to Sudan, where she confiscated his passport, failed. In the hopes of limiting his ability to travel, Elgizouli brought his British passport to the British Embassy in Sudan, who promptly returned it to Mahmoud. It was at this point that Mahmoud travelled into Syria through Turkey, where he later died in combat.¹⁷⁵ Elgizouli's grief is paralysing and the speed with which she lost her sons still remains inconceivable. She sees Mahmoud as a victim, but when confronted about the actions of her middle child, El Shafee Elsheikh, "*she shakes her head and says: That boy now is not my son. That is not the son I raised.*"¹⁷⁶

3.5 Conclusion

It is important to note that, "*[DAESH's] use of global media plays a significant role in the process of individual participation of jihad, of both women and men from the West, by fulfilling three functions: radicalisation, recruitment and identity formation.*"¹⁷⁷ This speaks about DAESH's abilities, since without identity formation, radicalisation and recruitment would not have been as successful. Without appealing to the desire of belonging, friendship, identity and individuality, neither Bilardi nor Elsheikh would

¹⁷³ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ 'Terrorism', *NPR Hidden Brain*, [podcast], iTunes, 2016, (accessed 16 May 2016).

¹⁷⁵ J. Bradely, 'My Son the ISIS Executioner', *Buzzfeed*, 23 May 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/janebradley/my-son-the-isis-executioner?utm_term=.bowolJnZwk#.ub6wdPagpK, (accessed 20 June 2016).

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Peresin and Cervone, 2015, p. 503.

have been as easily recruited. The use of social media has been exceptionally important for DAESH as a “*platform constituting a significant level enabling the organisation to recruit broad support among the young radical Muslims in their countries and in the West, while delivering focused messages.*”¹⁷⁸ Focused, targeted, propaganda riddled messages made their way to thousands of minds across the world at the hands of DAESH.

Are these young recruits to be held responsible for their actions? Or can DAESH be held responsible for the brainwashing and manipulation they subject onto the vulnerable? There is validity in recognising the shared responsibility; however, the fact remains, that through the violations of the right to life, the freedom from torture, the right to privacy and the right to information, DAESH militants are (still) managing to manipulate potential recruits into joining their cause. DAESH was and continues to be the main instigator. This definitively makes DAESH responsible through the notion of human rights.

¹⁷⁸ Cohen et al, 2015, p.135.

4 Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment

4.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter focused on analysing the strategies DAESH uses to radicalise and recruit foreigners through – inter alia – the legitimisation of human rights violations, as well as a cautious attempt at better understanding the logic behind DAESH tactics, strategies and actions, this chapter will primarily focus on the Western response. It will highlight the current responses to combatting legitimisation, radicalisation and recruitment, and look at how (in)adequate they are in their efficiency. The second half of this chapter will critically analyse both the role of mainstream media have as a whole in addition to the voices of select mainstream media members.

4.2 Current Responses

The discussion surrounding radicalisation and recruitment has, primarily, been split into two schools of thought. The first considers the dangers of Islam and suggests that the religion itself is barbaric, archaic and DAESH is an accurate representation of it. The second understands the complexities of the situation and acknowledges the psychological variables that lead to radicalisation and recruitment, as well as the stigmas associated with mental health. Unfortunately, neither of these approaches accurately understands the importance of DAESH communication operations to the overall success of DAESH's brand.

Following the official video introduction of DAESH as the '*Islamic State*', their communication operations have only strengthened and expanded, with the West effectively complying with DAESH's strategy. As previously mentioned, DAESH thrives on generating chaos and wrecking havoc around the world, with the ultimate goal of political overreaction. By attempting to instigate Western governments into hasty action, the most common of which being a rejection of Islam, DAESH is still able to operate digitally and spread the message of jihad.

Currently, there is a global coalition against DAESH, referred to as Counter-DAESH, led by the US and includes an additional 58 governments as well as the European

Union. A joint statement issued on 3 December 2014 outlined the strategy that the coalition has prepared to face in order to defeat DAESH and included,

- Supporting military operation, capacity building, and training;
- Stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters;
- Cutting off DAESH access to financing and funding;
- Addressing associated humanitarian relief and crises; and
- Exposing DAESH's true nature (ideological delegitimisation)¹⁷⁹

In reality, this declaration was drafted in the early days of DAESH's call of the 'Caliphate,' when their communication efforts were intriguing and potentially worrisome, but not necessarily expected to grow exponentially. Unfortunately, this lack of foresight underestimated the power of their media strategy and how, by completely ignoring it in the Counter-DAESH mandate, the hopes of significantly hindering DAESH drastically decreased.

Today, the discussion on how to attack DAESH is on-going, with very little consensus. The territories they have accumulated are filled with innocent people, who have spent many decades suffering from various oppressive systems. Thus, the use of airstrikes can have negative repercussions, though it has not prevented their occurrence. In fact, "*no real lessons have been learned about why direct or indirect military interventions by the United States and its allies in the Middle East over the last century have all only exacerbated violence and accelerated state failure.*"¹⁸⁰ The US and Britain initially began flying drones over Iraq, which in August 2014 expanded into the US commencing airstrikes on DAESH targets located there.¹⁸¹ Despite the airstrikes, the United States refrained from sending their ground troops into ground combat, instead

¹⁷⁹ 'Joint Statement issued by partners and the Counter-ISIL coalition Ministerial Meeting', 3 December 2014, [US Department of State website], <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/234627.htm>, (accessed 22 June 2016).

¹⁸⁰ P. Cockburn, 'ISIS is a symptom, not the cause, of Middle East's disintegration', *The Nation*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/isis-is-a-symptom-not-the-cause-of-the-middle-east-disintegration/>, (accessed 1 July 2016).

¹⁸¹ A. Pfeffer, 'Iranian Jet seen attacking ISIS targets in Iraq', *Haaretz*, 1 December 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.629473>, (accessed on 23 July 2016); 'Obama outlines plan to target IS fighter', *Al Jazeera*, 11 September 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/obama-strike-wherever-it-exists-2014910223935601193.html>, (accessed 23 June 2016).

opting to send Special Forces to aid in training exercises.¹⁸² By mid 2016, upwards of fourteen countries had executed airstrikes against DAESH in both Iraq and Syria.¹⁸³

Unfortunately, disagreement and clashes exist amongst the States combating DAESH as well, due in large part to the geopolitical climate between certain states in question. First the Soviet Union and then Russia have been supporting the oppressive Assad regimes in Syria for decades. Russian President Vladimir Putin shares the Western world's animosity toward DAESH. Even though the common enemy is DAESH, the political and tactical decisions have, thus far, been vastly different between the key players, namely the Counter-DAESH Coalition on one side, with Putin and Assad on the other.

This poses a problem, as attacking DAESH without a unified front becomes highly ineffective. Relations between the US and Russia are already strained over Ukraine (among other issues), along with Obama's refusal to conduct any political business with Assad, the leader of an oppressive regime over the Syrian people.¹⁸⁴ Tensions escalated further, when Russian airstrikes seemed to target Assad-opposition groups that were supported by the US-led Coalition, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and not DAESH exclusively.¹⁸⁵ This development enraged the Western world and emphasised that the enemy of the enemy is not necessarily a friend.

Recently and under great pressure from Washington, a number of steps were taken to establish cordial ties. The US signed a Nuclear Agreement with Iran, which lifted sanctions set in place against the Middle Eastern State in early 2016 and effectively made Iran an international player again. Moscow was able to successfully get through to London and Washington to include Assad in the solution-making process, now

¹⁸² *ibid.*

¹⁸³ 'Obama outlines plan to target IS fighter', *Al Jazeera*, 11 September 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/obama-strike-whenever-it-exists-2014910223935601193.html>, (accessed 23 June 2016).

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ T. Perry and L. Hoang, 'Syrian rebels to Russia: Stop bombing us', *Reuters*, 26 October 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0SK0QR20151026>, (accessed 23 June 2016).

comprised of the West, Russia and Iran.¹⁸⁶ However, it is still far too early to make predictions on the success of these endeavours.

Another problem facing the Western coalition, is the notion that terrorist organisations like DAESH are *“too weak to win, but too strong to lose.”*¹⁸⁷ The geopolitical demise of MENA states, at the hand of “Western backed opposition movements,” created a paradigm where the media began using terms such as *“failed state”* to describe Libya, and arguably (now) Syria, where Western coalitions attempted to *“seize power with the support and military intervention of Washington and NATO, and proved too weak to impose their own central governments.”*¹⁸⁸ This gave Islamic movements the opportunity to take over. However, *“while these religious groups were strong enough to oppose the governments, they generally have not proven strong enough to replace them.”*¹⁸⁹ Essentially, neither DAESH nor the Counter-DAESH Coalition has been able to effectively establish a fully functioning government in Syria (among other struggling MENA States). Even though this suggests that DAESH is not as strong as they claim, it arguably also highlights the lack of strength and effective cooperation amongst States in the Western context, as well.

Finally, the West have not fully anticipated the aftereffects of what having reclaimed as much as 40% of DAESH territories in Iraq and up to 20% in Syria can have in the global context.¹⁹⁰ While considered successes in their own right, the loss of physical territory has shown DAESH’s *“increased emphasis on bombing civilian targets,”*¹⁹¹ and will place even greater importance on their communication operations, which can continue functioning all over the world. *“If the [DAESH] state falls, especially to an*

¹⁸⁶ Atwan, 2015, p. IX.

¹⁸⁷ P. Cockburn, ‘ISIS is a symptom, not the cause, of Middle East’s disintegration’, *The Nation*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/isis-is-a-symptom-not-the-cause-of-the-middle-east-disintegration/>, (accessed 1 July 2016).

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ P. Engel, ‘ISIS is increasingly relying on this brutal tactic as it loses territory in the Middle East’, *Business Insider Deutschland*, 17 May 2016 <http://www.businessinsider.de/isis-suicide-bombings-iraq-2016-5?r=US&IR=T>, (accessed 1 July 2016).

¹⁹¹ *ibid.*

outside invasion force, the short term to medium term result will likely be a wave of terrorist attacks,”¹⁹² that can be organised in the digital ‘Caliphate.’

The current Western responses fail to recognise the damage that has been inflicted on that region specifically in the last few decades. In addition, DAESH seems to hold power over both their own media brand and communication operations, as well as that of mainstream media. This type of control or manipulation over the media, to instigate and disseminate propaganda, misinformation and brutality, also has the power to decide the outcome of the global war against DAESH.

4.3 Mainstream media

4.3.1 Introduction

DAESH’s ability to control not just their communication operations, but also to steer the Western discourse into the direction of their choice, is a large part of their unprecedented brand of extremism. Previous sections addressed the calculated and targeted decisions regarding DAESH’s media strategy and the effects such actions have had on the Western world. Aside from the destruction and devastation left in the wake of so many brutal and senseless attacks, a key strategic development for DAESH occurred when they were able to manipulate the content of mainstream media from afar. DAESH managed to find a way to spoon-feed Western media the kind of “news” that persuaded them into covering stories of brutality, terror and death. DAESH was able to focus the discussion on the intersection between radical Islam and extremism, by initiating the ‘us-versus-them’ dialogue, to varying degrees of success.

Unfortunately, this path has created a paradox whereby, in many ways, the mainstream Western media have played into DAESH’s hand and purported the discussion around Islamophobia. By no account do I suggest that all mainstream media are guilty of this, but the nature of media is such that sensationalised, fabricated and demonising stories are more likely to get higher traffic online than their neutral counterparts. The very

¹⁹² E. Graham-Harrison, ‘ISIS loss of ‘caliphate’ could fuel terror attacks abroad’, *The Guardian*, 22 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/22/isis-loss-of-caliphate-fuel-terror-attacks-abroad>, (accessed 1 July 2016).

foundation of news journalism is founded on the slogan “*If it bleeds, it leads.*”¹⁹³ “*The media is often perceived as giving priority to negative aspects in its reporting of conflicts, with a suspicion that they do this consciously because it ‘sells better.’*”¹⁹⁴ DAESH has been able to navigate this concept along with the Western discourse and has instigated a cycle of narratives for mainstream media to repeat indefinitely.

4.3.2 Critical Analysis

Theoretically, mainstream media are supposed to convey information in a neutral, objective, concrete, timely and efficient manner. While many news media platforms attempt to do just that, the reality of the media landscape in 2016 is that sensationalist reporting has overtaken neutrality, particularly emphasising the idea of radical Islam and extremism. Media organisations such as the BBC, Al Jazeera and advocacy organisation IPI focus on the core of the story and while bias may occasionally arise, the crux of the reporting is done in a way that is comprehensive and fact-based.

Alternatively, the on-going political showdown around the presidential elections in the United States has damaged the media environment. Residents, as well as people across the globe, particularly the youth population, are more inclined to get a better understanding of the political and global climate from late night news comedy shows with anchors such as Trevor Noah, Seth Meyers and Samantha Bee. Though their objective is satirical comedy, they are able to explain and critically analyse situations in thought provoking ways. In comparison, mainstream news media organisations have succumbed to mediocre, openly biased, as well as embellished reporting. With networks such as FOXNews, which makes no attempt at hiding their partisan views and spurs fear and misinformation; CNN, where the quality of the journalism differs wildly from story to story, anchor to anchor and the political climate of the day; and ABC News that toes the line between neutrality and ignorance, it is not surprising that the lack of proper media coverage initiated the shift toward late night comedy news shows for substantive and all encompassing information.

¹⁹³ Personal communication, Nenad Sebek, 3 July 2016, Vienna.

¹⁹⁴ D. Reljić, *The News Media and the Transformation of Ethnopolitical Conflicts*, Berlin, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2003, p. 3.

US Perspective

Take for instance the onslaught of media coverage over the mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida in the early hours of the 12th of June 2016.¹⁹⁵ Mass shootings have unfortunately become commonplace in the US, and more than 140 gun-related incidents (both mass and isolated) have occurred since the beginning of 2016 alone.¹⁹⁶ There has been a shift in the way US news media organisations cover each tragedy. Taking into account DAESH's desire to create a divide between Muslims and the rest of the world, it is interesting to note the comparisons made between perpetrators of colour, who have generally been labelled "*radical Islamic terrorists*," as opposed to Caucasian perpetrators, who are often labelled as suffering from "*mental health issues*."¹⁹⁷

The Orlando gunman, Omar Mateen was a citizen of the United States whose parents emigrated from Afghanistan in the early 1980's prior to his birth. He had been a person of interest to the FBI since 2013 and had a history of domestic violence,¹⁹⁸ yet this combination did not prevent him from purchasing both a handgun and a semi-automatic rifle.¹⁹⁹ Once again the United States found itself sandwiched in a debate between gun control and gun safety on one side, and those adamant about retaining the second amendment right, inciting intolerance and spewing misinformation about radical Islamic extremism, on the other. While many dissertations can be written about the controversial notion of controlling the second amendment right to bear arms, the point of this example with respect to DAESH communication operations, is straightforward. Whether by accident or on purpose, DAESH stumbled across another opportunity to create a divide between Muslims and the rest of the world, highlighting the inability of cooperation through media.

¹⁹⁵ 'Rage and Desperation', *Al Jazeera*, 13 June 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2016/06/rage-desperation-orlando-160613084920901.html> (accessed 17 June 2016).

¹⁹⁶ *Gun Violence Archive*, [website], 2016, <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting> (accessed 17 June 2016).

¹⁹⁷ *Race and Meaning of Terror*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/fusionmedianetwork/videos/1447254475300526/?pnref=story>, (accessed 17 June 2016).

¹⁹⁸ R. Ellis, 'Orlando Shooting: 49 Killed, shooter pledged allegiance to ISIS', *CNN*, 12 June 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/>, (accessed 17 June 2016).

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*

In the immediate aftermath of the Orlando shooting, news media were quick to call it a “terrorist attack,” “international terrorism” and “terror act” while displaying visuals of Mateen labelling him a “domestic terrorist.”²⁰⁰ Ties with radical Islam quickly began to surface after it was uncovered that Mateen placed a call to 911 immediately after the initially fatal attack, during the two-hour window he held hostages, and pledged his allegiance to DAESH.²⁰¹ Articles began surfacing with headlines linking Mateen with DAESH and reignited a call for stronger legislation to prevent the immigration of Muslims into the US.

Compare that to the shooting that occurred on the 15th of June 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina where gunman Dylann Roof opened fire on The Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, proclaiming his intention to ignite a race war as he used a handgun to kill nine of the twelve people inside. In the aftermath of the shooting, the United States Department of Justice debated classifying the act as *terrorism* or a *hate crime*, ultimately deciding on the latter.²⁰² ABC News anchor Bryan Pitts began a broadcast outlining the tragic events that unfolded in South Carolina, calling it a “historic hate crime” and referring to Roof as “a disturbed young man.”²⁰³ Roof, a 22-year old Caucasian man, is then seen being escorted into custody and images of Major Joe Riley calling Roof an “awful person, a terrible human being,” but never labelling him a “terrorist.”²⁰⁴

Weeks before he finished hosting *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart spoke of the Charleston massacre questioning “[t]he disparity of the response from when we think people that are foreign are going to kill us, and us killing ourselves.”²⁰⁵ He further emphasised that “[i]f this had been what we thought was Islamic terrorism.....we invaded two countries

²⁰⁰ *Race and Meaning of Terror*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/fusionmedianetwork/videos/1447254475300526/?pnref=story>, (accessed 17 June 2016).

²⁰¹ R. Ellis, ‘Orlando Shooting: 49 Killed, shooter pledged allegiance to ISIS’, *CNN*, 12 June 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/>, (accessed 17 June 2016).

²⁰² *Charleston Shooting Suspect: What we know about Dylann Roof*, [online video], 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yC4PZZw_Bw, (accessed 17 June 2016).

²⁰³ *ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*

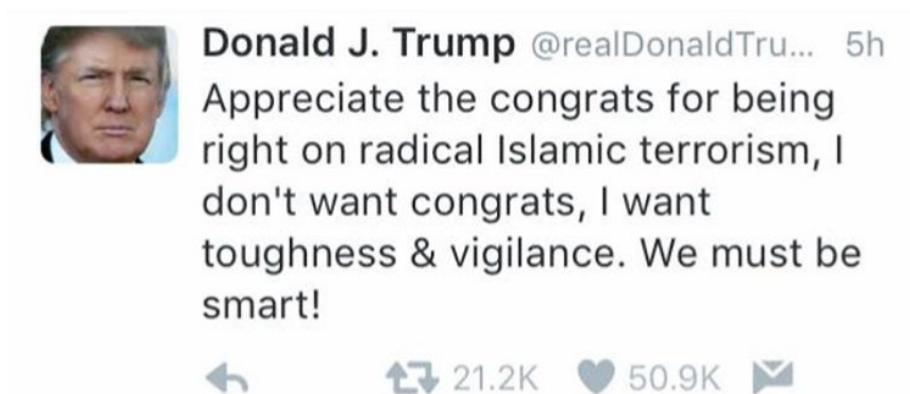
²⁰⁵ *The Daily Show – Charleston Church Shooting*, [online video], 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjzrvRKv6KS>, (accessed 21 June 2016).

and spent trillions of dollars and thousands of American lives....all to keep Americans safe, we'll torture people to keep Americans safe [from external threat],"²⁰⁶ suggesting that this form of domestic terrorism, perpetrated by Caucasians is not accepted as terrorism. The media culture in the US seems to be distinguishing perpetrators based on colour and Mateen, as an Afghan man, was immediately labelled a terrorist, with media calling the incident domestic terrorism instead of a hate crime against the LGBTIQ2 community. While I do not dispute the attack as an act of terror, the compelling urge of mainstream media to sensationalise stories, twisting and exaggerating facts, is detrimental to the function of media in a free, democratic society, in much the same way that not labelling the shooting a hate crime is detrimental to the LGBTIQ2 community of Orlando.

Mateen had a history of violence, made frequent intolerant remarks toward the LGBTIQ2 community and while he supposedly expressed allegiance to DAESH, the FBI investigations against him did not produce enough evidence to establish a clear connection to any extremist group.²⁰⁷ While DAESH sympathisers have praised the attack on various online jihadi forums, the group itself has not claimed responsibility for the incident. The reason behind this could be two fold. First, it might be assumed that an entity like DAESH, who immediately admitted to orchestrating the Paris Attacks, would not hesitate to claim responsibility in this situation, had they been the masterminds behind it. However, another valid possibility includes their desire to increase confusion and anti-Islamic rhetoric by not confirming or denying responsibility. DAESH chose to watch the media frenzy surrounding the event unfold, as videos and reports emphasising Mateen's connection to radical Islam and DAESH all of which pointed toward the desire for a divide between Muslims and the rest of the world.

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*

²⁰⁷ R. Ellis, 'Orlando Shooting: 49 Killed, shooter pledged allegiance to ISIS', *CNN*, 12 June 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/>, (accessed 17 June 2016).



Picture 3²⁰⁸ Donald Trump, Twitter

In the midst of a turbulent US election cycle, Republican Nominee Donald Trump held a press conference to voice his self-aggrandising and fear-mongering opinion (Picture 3, above), as well as to offer symbolic support to the LGBTQ2 community,²⁰⁹ a community that is incidentally regularly marginalised by the very party he represents.²¹⁰

*“A radical Islamic terrorist targeted a nightclub, not only because he wanted to kill Americans, but in order to execute gay and lesbian people. We need to respond to this attack as one united people with force, purpose and determination, but the current politically correct response cripples our ability to talk, think and act clearly.”*²¹¹

Implying that terrorism and Islam are synonymous, he further suggests that Mateen was born in Afghanistan and that the only reason this tragedy occurred is due to the easily accessible immigration policy that allowed him and his family entrance into the country, along with associations to a radical ideology in Islam.²¹² Trump’s argument is false; Mateen was born in New York State and reports quickly surfaced that he was not a practising Muslim, according to acquaintances.²¹³

²⁰⁸ D. Trump, [online photograph], twitter.com/realDonaldTrump (accessed 20 June 2016)

²⁰⁹ *Donald Trump Speech After Orlando Attack*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygIDdXEpPnk> (.accessed 18 June).

²¹⁰ The GOP has fought against marriage equality for homosexual couples; has recently introduced new public bathroom legislation that targets and discriminates against transgender people

²¹¹ *Donald Trump Speech After Orlando Attack*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygIDdXEpPnk> (.accessed 18 June).

²¹² *ibid.*

²¹³ R. Ellis, ‘Orlando Shooting: 49 Killed, shooter pledged allegiance to ISIS’, *CNN*, 12 June 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/>, (accessed 17 June 2016).

In fact, in the aftermath it was uncovered that Mateen regularly frequented the club in question, drinking in excess and engaging in conversation with men he met on gay dating apps.²¹⁴ Arguably, Mateen was unable to come to terms with his own sexual orientation, which coupled with his history of abuse and spoken prejudices against the LGBTIQ2 community warranted a closer look into the state of his mental health. Instead, mainstream media chose to focus on the authenticity of his citizenship with insensitive and sensationalised headlines (Picture 4, below).



Picture 4²¹⁵ USA Today, Twitter

In the face of the tragedy, not all news media chose to incite fear, however, organisations are more likely to focus on segments, statements or videos that create visceral reactions, whether in agreement or disagreement. This type of news media is viewed on a loop and manifests a society that starts to reiterate, repeat and believe.

MSNBC Anchor Rachel Maddow asked an important question on her show in early June 2016 while analysing the effect Trump's actions and speeches have on the public. Suggesting there is political consternation over whether or not "*we get inured*"²¹⁶ when

²¹⁴ *Again? Again*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t88X1pYQu-I>, (accessed 17 June 2016).

²¹⁵ USA Today, [online photograph], twitter.com/USAToday (accessed 18 June 2016).

²¹⁶ *Hillary Clinton clobbers Donald Trump with his own words*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SofYfZ2a1Tk>, (accessed 19 June 2016).

the status quo is a repetition of frequent and ridiculous statements, suggesting his displays no longer shock the general public.²¹⁷ *“Does nothing seem too idiotic, or dangerous, or blatantly racist anymore? How do you make it sink in to voters that he really, truly has proposed all of this stuff?”*²¹⁸ Maddow then focused on the way Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton fought back Trump’s rhetoric with his own words, by repeating *verbatim* things he has said in the past, to general amusement from the crowd. The reason this appeal worked at the time is indicative of the fact that she did not create an exaggerated caricature of Trump to get the reaction from the crowd, instead she focused on using his own words against him, which as Maddow puts it, *“is politically deadly.”*²¹⁹

In spite of the attempt to highlight Trump’s weaknesses, including a lack of any concrete or plausible policies, there was still a great deal of damage that he was able to inflict with his inflammatory rhetoric, suggesting that, *“[a]ccording to some research, 99% of people in Afgan support oppressive Sharia law.”*²²⁰ To begin with, the research he refers to is not substantiated and in the second instance he incorrectly refers to Afghanistan as *“Afgan.”* The magnitude of his rhetoric is such that there is *“some evidence that the long-term effects of the ‘language of hate’ can be highly deleterious even in established democratic societies.”*²²¹ Unsurprisingly, all of his statements helped him achieve his goal of rousing Islamophobia, revolving the conversation around radical extremism and eliminating necessary discussion around gun control and mental health.

The idea that the consuming public has become *“inured”* is not implausible. News anchors like Rachel Maddow make attempts at underscoring the problematic nature of Islamophobic messages, but more often than not the voices that are heard the strongest and loudest belong to a group of comedians who attempt to poke holes in the politics of

²¹⁷ *ibid.*

²¹⁸ *ibid.*

²¹⁹ *ibid.*

²²⁰ *Donald Trump Speech After Orlando Attack*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygIDdXEpnk> (accessed 18 June 2016).

²²¹ Reljić, D., ‘The News Media and the Transformation of Ethnopolitical Conflicts’, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, Berlin, 2003 p. 3.

the day, using humour as a tool. In fact, their coverage of world politics is often more encompassing than that found on news media programs, which tend to be burdened with bias. To fully understand the importance, it is vital to critically analyse their contribution to the narrative.

In the wake of the Orlando shooting, late-night shows such as *Late Night with Seth Meyers* and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* refused to take part in the discourse against Islam and Muslims, instead choosing to focus on what they believed to be the crux of the matter with Meyers stating, “*Whether the shooter was a homophobe, mentally ill, a terrorist inspired by [DAESH], or all three, what allowed him to kill so many people was his gun.*”²²² Bee emphasised the response from policy makers who dodged questions about reforming gun laws, instead choosing to offer thoughts and prayers to those stricken by the events.²²³ Both Bee and Meyers praised the love and support shown in the city by residents, including Muslims who were fasting during Ramadan and waited for hours to donate blood to the victims, finally condemning those spreading bigotry and misinformation in the aftermath. With clips of FOXnews Live reporters making statements suggesting, “*We better wake up and smell the falafel,*”²²⁴ as well as motions to patrol Muslim neighbours to prevent radicalisation; fear is drawn at every opportunity.

The Daily Show with Trevor Noah has produced many spot reports that deal with Islamophobia and prejudices, including one segment, which highlighted the ignorance of US citizens who believe the so-called dangers of radical Islam. *The Daily Show* correspondent, Hasan Minhaj, an American Muslim, did an interesting exposé on “*Confused Islamophobes*” that were targeting their hate rhetoric toward American Sikhs instead. An integral component of the Sikh religion is the Turban, which US citizen Waris Ahluwalia suggests has been the reason for his consistent secondary

²²² *The Orlando Shooting: A Closer Look*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTi40ekUcV8>, (accessed 21 June 2016).

²²³ *Again? Again*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t88X1pYQu-I>, (accessed 17 June 2016).

²²⁴ *The Daily Show: Confused Islamophobes Target American Sikhs*, [online video], 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RskvZgc_s9g, (accessed on 21 June 2016).

screenings at airports. “People assume that Sikhs are Muslims, and that is primarily an issue because Sikhs are an independent religion.”²²⁵

In an attempt at underscoring the lack of information in US citizens’ prejudices, Minhaj went to the streets to ask a diverse sample of people if they knew what a Sikh was. Armed with four pictures including a bird, binoculars, a Sikh man and children playing hide-and-go-seek, Minhaj asked New Yorkers to point out the Sikh, with the majority pointing toward the bird or children.²²⁶ In a target group meeting, Minhaj spoke with American Sikhs who are harassed daily on the basis of the colour of their skin and their choice to wear a Turban. “*The Turban is what makes us a target,*” and while Minhaj jokingly suggests that the solution would be taking it off, Ahluwalia points out that “*[the] Turban is part of my religion, it’s part of my faith, it represents what I believe in, the values that I hold dear and true. Those values are Sikh, those values are American.*”²²⁷ Yet, it does not prevent members of the Sikh community from being shouted at, and called “[DAESH]!” by fellow citizens. Ahluwalia then brings attention to that main problem in the country suggesting, that those who think for themselves and do not defend innocent people, especially those who practice other religions, are part of the problem, are part of the reason why Islamophobia is spread so easily and rapidly.²²⁸

International Perspective

Equally important to discuss is the international media perspective when it comes to DAESH. As a starting point, the *War on Terror*, which then-US President George W. Bush began in the aftermath of 9/11, was one of the catalysts²²⁹ that created DAESH.²³⁰ Following the 2001 and 2003 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively, the emphasis then filtered into Libya and most recently into Syria. Unfortunately, in many

²²⁵ *ibid.*

²²⁶ *ibid.*

²²⁷ *ibid.*

²²⁸ *ibid.*

²²⁹ Additionally, the Arab Spring, as well as the conflict in Syria (triggered by a drought) played a part in the creation of DAESH.

²³⁰ P. Cockburn, ‘ISIS is a symptom, not the cause, of Middle East’s disintegration’, *The Nation*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/isis-is-a-symptom-not-the-cause-of-the-middle-east-disintegration/>, (accessed 1 July 2016).

instances the root cause was generally reported as the sectarian clash between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Al Jazeera was established in late 1996 and by 1999 became a 24-hour broadcaster.²³¹ Over the last two decades it has expanded its operations all over the world, and currently provides extensive programming such as video programme *UpFront* hosted by Mehdi Hasan that explores various discourses of the day. Following the November 2015 Paris Attacks Hasan, on his programme, chose to question the *War on Terror* and the damage it created. He spoke with the former head of UK counterterrorism at MI6, Richard Barrett, as well as a leading Muslim scholar and former advisor to the White House, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf about the implications the *War on Terror* had on the rest of the world and the societal desire to operate under notions of Islamophobia.²³²

Hasan draws attention to the incorrect idea that DAESH violence and chaos developed out of the age old conflict between Sunni and Shia, when in reality it can be traced back to various political conflicts over the last few decades, which had less to do with a piety and more to do with political power struggles.²³³ He argues, “*this Sunni/Shia narrative is just a by-product of lazy, simplistic, and clichéd journalism, which allows Western governments to avoid responsibility for the mess they created in Iraq.*”²³⁴ In fact, “[w]hatever their faults, Saddam [Hussein] and Libya’s autocratic ruler Muammar Qaddafi were clearly demonised and blamed for all sectarian and regional differences in the countries they ruled,”²³⁵ especially following their deaths, without acknowledging the role Western states played in the outcome.

Barrett suggests that “*the whole point of terrorism is to force people off the fence... force them to take sides. You’re either with those people, or you’re with us and that*

²³¹ ‘A Decade of Growth’, *Al Jazeera*, 1 November 2006, <http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2006/11/2008410115625813175.html>, (accessed 21 June 2016).

²³² *What is behind ISIL’s attacks?*, [online video], 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2015/11/isil-attacks-paris-151120132834566.html>, (accessed 21 June 2016).

²³³ *ibid.*

²³⁴ *ibid.*

²³⁵ P. Cockburn, ‘ISIS is a symptom, not the cause, of Middle East’s disintegration’, *The Nation*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/isis-is-a-symptom-not-the-cause-of-the-middle-east-disintegration/>, (accessed 1 July 2016).

*polarisation of society is important [to DAESH].*²³⁶ This mentality is evident in the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims that DAESH is trying to increase further. The ‘us-versus-them’ mentality can also be seen in the broader context with DAESH’s desire to create a war between Muslims and non-Muslims.

According to Barrett, tactical moves, similar to those conducted by Iraqi Forces to regain territory, could be orchestrated by opposition state militaries, with the aim of weakening and crippling DAESH’s power, ultimately sending them underground. The problem arises, however, when tackling the ideology that DAESH stands for and thrives on. This belief in the “righteous” path is a psychologically rooted concept that has also influenced their altered interpretation of Islam. This mentality will likely take generations to tackle and eradicate, due mostly to the digital footprint left behind for any and all DAESH or DAESH-like sympathisers to adopt and disseminate.²³⁷

Scholar Sheikh Hamza Yusuf articulates that DAESH’s influence is not widespread and does not represent the vast majority of Muslims, 10 million of which live in the United States. Of these 10 million, approximately 200 have been identified and classified by the FBI as having been radicalised, calling them a security concern. Nevertheless, what is often not disclosed is that the 200 so-called jihadists also include Muslims travelling to Syria to join opposition groups, some of which are supported by NATO States. Furthermore, Sheikh Yusuf mentions that among the 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide, those that represent DAESH are statistically insignificant in number for the rest of the world to extrapolate that Islam is a ruthless religion.²³⁸

However, Hasan then suggests that people turn on their televisions and are bombarded with headlines depicting “*groups all over Africa and The Middle East beheading and butchering men, women and children in the name of Islam, with the biggest group calling itself the Islamic State,*” stating that this type of media awareness is negative PR

²³⁶ *What is behind ISIL’s attacks?*, [online video], 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2015/11/isil-attacks-paris-151120132834566.html>, (accessed 21 June 2016).

²³⁷ *ibid.*

²³⁸ *ibid.*

for Islam.²³⁹ Unfortunately, Hasan tries to place the blame completely on Western media and fails to recognise that it was DAESH, not mainstream media, that chose the name ‘Islamic State’ and to use phrases such as “*In the name of Allah*” or “*Allahu akbar*” to justify murdering and torturing those who oppose them, as well as destroying towns and cities.

In response, Sheikh Yusuf condemns DAESH’s use of Islamic scripture, while acknowledging that the role of religion in this century belongs to individuals’ interpretation. Mainstream media, politicians and anti-Islamist call of a reformation of the religion, however, he argues that it already is in one.

*“In the past [Muslims] have lived peacefully [with Christians, Jews etc], protected one another. This is the first time in Muslim history where atrocities have been committed against minorities. We are living in a time where Islam is whatever you say it is. For this reason we cannot say that DAESH has nothing to do with Islam, but rather that it is motivated by scripture that DAESH militants have decontextualized to comply with their actions.”*²⁴⁰

While I agree with Sheikh Yusuf’s suggestion that today Islam is interpreted individually, history does not support his suggestion that atrocities have not been committed in the name of Islam before. Evidence suggests that all religions, at various points throughout history, have filled the role of oppressor, in some capacity. Take for instance the 30-year religious-based civil unrest in Northern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics.²⁴¹ Even Islam has transitioned through different ‘Shia-versus-Sunni’ narratives that have included varying levels of bloodshed in Pakistan and Iraq, among other states.²⁴² Even still, with the Western world largely ignoring Middle Eastern oppression, whether for a political purpose or occasional and unintentional ignorance, young Western Muslims are becoming increasingly frustrated. The messages DAESH is able to convey via their communication operations are of a romanticised ‘Caliphate’, and Sheikh Yusuf acknowledges that they have been able to do so successfully.

²³⁹ *ibid.*

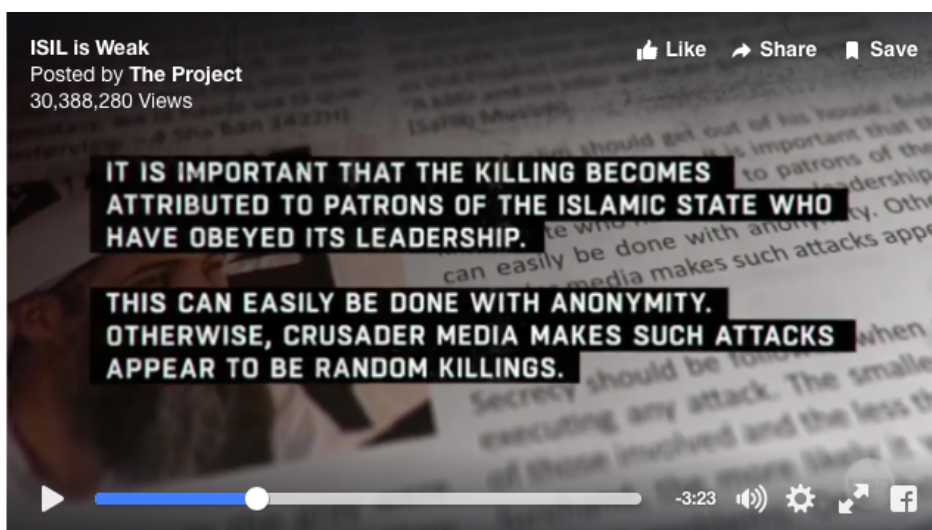
²⁴⁰ *ibid.*

²⁴¹ B.A. Robinson, *Religious Tolerance: Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance*, [website], 2012, http://www.religioustolerance.org/curr_war.htm, (accessed 28 July 2016).

²⁴² *ibid.*

Referring back to the bombing in Beirut that was largely overshadowed by the Paris Attacks, the lack of adequate media attention and representation for the Middle East created a situation whereby, especially young people, become frustrated and lack proper means of expressing their outrage in conducive and appropriate ways. This hindrance opens the possibility for demagogues to manipulate the emotions and mental faculties of youth, who are desperately trying to be heard and understood.²⁴³

Australian anchor Waleed Aly, one of the hosts of *The Project*, addressed his concrete concerns following the Paris Attacks suggesting that DAESH is “weak.”²⁴⁴ DAESH legitimised the attack by releasing a statement, “[a] group of believers from the Soldiers of the Caliphate set out targeting the capital of prostitution and vice, the lead carrier of the cross in Europe, Paris.”²⁴⁵ Aly suggests that DAESH, in an effort to seem stronger than they actually are, takes credit for all attacks on Western soil, even the ones they did not orchestrate, including the attack on Canada’s parliament or the Sydney siege.²⁴⁶



Picture 5²⁴⁷ Waleed Aly, *The Project*

²⁴³ *What is behind ISIL's attacks?*, [online video], 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2015/11/isil-attacks-paris-151120132834566.html>, (accessed 21 June 2016).

²⁴⁴ *ISIL is weak*, [online video], 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/shamisivasubramanian/waleed-aly-powerful-speech-following-the-paris-attacks-is-a?utm_term=.nulZwz3GQR#.du6Do59d8p, (accessed 23 July 2016).

²⁴⁵ *ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *ibid.*

DAESH wants the rest of the world to assume their ranks are increasing and their power is unyielding. *“Every time an attack happens and they do claim it, they become headline news around the world,”* and avoid the reality of their situation that *“the land they control has been taken from weak enemies; they have been pinned down by airstrikes; or that [in November 2015] they lost a significant part of their territory,”* because they do not have the capacity to hit back against western combat aircrafts.²⁴⁸

DAESH is not strong or large enough to properly defend themselves against military intervention, so instead they manipulate and create scenarios that force Western citizens or their governments to react in anger. Aly suggests DAESH’s intention is to create a hostile global environment. *“They want to start World War III... to have societies in France and here in Australia to turn on each other, to turn against the Muslims in our countries.”*²⁴⁹ He emphasises the increase of attacks on Muslims in Europe, the US and in Australia following the Paris Attacks and states unequivocally that *“we all need to come together... because it’s exactly what [DAESH] doesn’t want,”* further stating that if *“you are preaching hate, you’re helping [DAESH], if you’re spewing Facebook comments against Muslims, you’re helping [DAESH].”*²⁵⁰

Conclusion

The role of media in the face of extremism is multifaceted. As evidenced above, media organisations can contribute to the story in various ways, some more positively than others. However, it is clear that the media communication resonates with viewers. The importance of this is significant, as society today is largely dependent on communication networks to deconstruct extremist media, which can be filtered through a plethora of technological channels. Whether or not this responsibility *should* fall on the media networks, is still up for general debate. However, I argue that from a human rights perspective, the mainstream media should be held to a certain standard in order to combat the DAESH communication operations that expel propaganda filled videos, magazine articles, Tweets and so on.

²⁴⁸ *ibid.*

²⁴⁹ *ibid.*

²⁵⁰ *ibid.*

If the mainstream media are responsible for further instigating hateful rhetoric that leads to ‘us-versus-them’ discourse, can it not then be said that mainstream media contributed to DAESH’s propaganda strategy? Whether it is Waleed Aly encouraging a united front, Hasan Minhaj fulfilling duties of both comedian and advocate, Trump facilitating anti-Islam discourse, or DAESH manipulating youth through propaganda, it is clear that communication media, news media and media strategies have a resonating ability. *“Media communication is the fastest way of overcoming special and temporal boundaries in the building of national identities.”*²⁵¹ Unfortunately, this concept works both ways, in that success can be achieved by those spreading positive, peaceful messages just as much as it can by those doing the exact opposite.

4.3.3 Analysis of Interview responses

Introduction

In an effort to better understand the roles and responses of Western media, interviews were conducted with two journalists, both of whom have reported on DAESH in some capacity. Naomi O’Leary and Koen Vidal were asked the same questions, and the analyses of the interviews can be found in detail, below (full answers attached in Appendix of Evidence). The opinions expressed by both belong to the journalist in question, and do not necessarily represent that of the media organisation(s) for which they work.

Unfortunately, two interviews do not constitute a sample large enough to extrapolate a general opinion amongst journalists. I did contact various news media organisations, as well as journalists from around the world, however the response rate was small indeed. It should be noted that O’Leary hails from Ireland (covering UK news) and Vidal from Belgium (covering Belgian and worldwide news) and their addition to this chapter was important for the overall picture of how mainstream media contribute, analyse and report on DAESH. Both interviews were interesting and drew many parallels, however, the answers varied and therefore deserved to be included, regardless of sample size.

²⁵¹ D. Rejić, *Killing Screens: Media in Times of Conflict*, United Kingdom, Central Europe Review – The European Institute for the Media, 2001, p.40

Interview Questions

1. Can you briefly explain your initial reaction to DAESH when they first emerged; what were your thoughts on the way they address the media?
2. Most mainstream media outlets still use the terminology ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State. Arguably there is a certain amount of power in a name. Is there a specific reason Islamic state is still being used internationally when some argue it further legitimises their cause with the use of the word state?
3. When you first started covering DAESH, what were the difficulties you faced (in terms of what to cover) and has that changed at all?
4. Their communications operation networks have grown extensively over the last two years, has the way you cover DAESH changed to adapt to this growth?
5. How difficult is it to properly report on the situation without offering them a larger platform with which to recruit and radicalise?
6. In your opinion, is what DAESH is doing an abuse of human rights?
7. In your opinion, is DAESH currently posing a danger to freedom of expression?
8. Are the international media doing a good job covering DAESH? What could be improved?
9. One of their strengths is forcing mainstream media to take notice of their activities, which leads to additional media attention and extends to notions of Islamophobia. In your opinion, has DAESH succeeded in establishing a clash of civilisations through the use of their communications operations?

Naomi O’Leary, United Kingdom & Ireland

Agence France-Presse (AFP) covering U.K. and Irish News, previously with Reuters²⁵²

Naomi O’Leary initially began reporting on DAESH “*as they became an issue for British foreign policy.*” Though her brief was not the Middle East or DAESH, the group’s media strategy became apparent to her following “*the killings of the two US citizens, James Foley and Steven Sotloff,*” the detainment of British hostage David Haines, and the domestic media focus on the identity of the British accented DAESH militant dubbed ‘Jihadi John.’

²⁵² Interview with Naomi O’Leary, London, 3 May 2016; references this whole section, full interview in the Appendix of Evidence.

When asked for her opinion on the actions of DAESH, more specifically their human rights violations, O’Leary said, *“anyone who deprives another human of life is breaching Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”* She also notes that videos of beheadings are generally uploaded *“through indirect channels, and reporting on them requires a process of verification usually through experts on the region and by checking with the British foreign office.”* However, in many cases, the material in question spreads so rapidly, that journalists are unable to verify it quickly enough. Additionally, she stated her reluctance to watch videos depicting such violence, including but not limited to killings, which can pose a dilemma when required to report on one.

O’Leary described how the group managed to gain media attention as follows:

“It was clear to me at the time that the group had managed, whether accidentally or through a deliberate strategy, to put themselves into a powerful position in terms of media coverage. They had control over information that would be major news on its release – the fate of hostages – and they were able to gain publicity for their organisation by the release of this information.”

While the core of DAESH’s media strategy has further developed (to include a variety of platforms), in many instances O’Leary suggests that there has been *“a transparent attempt to get more media coverage through shock.”* DAESH is not the first and will hardly be the last extremist, terrorist organisation that a) attempts to seek attention through violence, or b) uses the mainstream media for an agenda. However, part of standard journalistic training is how to analyse *“the motives of people who provide information or are a source of news, assess what is newsworthy, and then report it with as little bias as possible.”*

One aspect of DAESH’s strategy that was not lost on O’Leary was the way they manipulate situations. Release of information pertaining to, for example, the state of hostages, was an excuse to gain attention and notoriety. *“In my view, the group was successful in communicating certain key information about itself: namely its existence, its name as ‘Islamic State’ or a variant, and an impression that it was violent and ruthless.”*

She continues by suggesting that, their brand was partly created and advertised by, *“recognisable aspects of the videos, in particular the orange jumpsuits worn by the hostages.”* Furthermore, O’Leary states that, *“the use of ‘Islamic’ in the name of the group worked to communicate the group’s identity through the media by stealth, as most reporting would not give prominence to the group’s verbal justifications for their actions.”* Part of my analysis of DAESH suggests that they use any means necessary for the legitimisation of their cause. While O’Leary does not draw the same conclusion, I argue that her testimony supports the view that DAESH’s insistence of being called ‘Islamic State’ was born out of necessity as much as desire.

In order to attempt to legitimise their many human rights violations, DAESH needed the mainstream media, which they could manipulate enough to focus on them, and even as far as to have some mainstream media instigate anti-Islamic rhetoric, but certainly not enough to outright justify their cause. Therefore, her testimony would support the argument that the use of ‘Islamic State’ justifies DAESH’s cause enough (in their own eyes), so that any type media attention benefits their organisation.

Koen Vidal, Belgium

*De Morgen covering Belgium and the world, Lecturer University of Brussels*²⁵³

Koen Vidal’s initial take on the emergence of DAESH was that of both expectation, given the geo-political climate and surprise, given their full force entrance in June 2014.

“With the radicalisation of the global opposition in Syria and Iraq, you knew something was coming, but when they emerged with such cruelty, cruel images, executing Iraqi soldiers in high numbers and high jacked Assad’s opposition, we have to admit it came as a surprise.”

When discussing the difficulties of covering DAESH, Vidal spoke to the universal hindrances of conflict zones and highlighted the security risks of travelling as a journalist to cover a story in either Syria or Iraq. While you might be able to enter certain areas, the risk is enormous because journalists, humanitarian aid and any other Western connections are not welcome. *“If they catch you, they ask for money in*

²⁵³ Interview with Koen Vidal, Vienna, 30 June 2016; references this whole section, full interview in the Appendix of Evidence.

exchange for your freedom, or they take your life.” Another drawback of reporting on DAESH is the lack of quality sources on the ground, leaving journalists limited to informal contacts. Time and energy have to be invested in order to assess who is reliable as well as if and how they show bias.

In general, however, one of the hardest aspects of being a journalist is the tone of neutrality journalists are expected to present. For example, the attacks in both Paris and Brussels had an overwhelming *“impact on the social and political climate of Europe. Journalists should always be aware that their information could add to this tense climate and polarisation. Well informed, balanced and moderate reporting is crucial.”* How do you expect journalists based in these cities to react neutrally when their homes and lives are attacked? Vidal suggests that while it is emotional, *“you have to do your job and stick to what is right.”* In many ways Vidal agrees with the idea that the media risk to influence a *‘clash of civilisations’* between Muslims and non-Muslims and *“if we don’t take care, it will be there in more generalised ways.”*

Essentially he means that journalists, as professionals analysing an event, would be irresponsible if they added fuel to the anti-Islamic rhetoric by creating confusion between terms such as terrorist, radicalised young adult, migrant and refugee. A journalist’s job is to make an attempt at *“being moderate, using the right words, making clear distinctions between migrants and refugees, terrorists and Muslims and should politicians blur the lines, it is their job to be critical of them.”*

Vidal also stresses the danger journalists face in the context of freedom of expression, suggesting that *“freedom of expression is not in [DAESH’s] dictionary, and their mission is to destroy it.”* He compares DAESH media propaganda to that of RTLM hate radio station that operated in Rwanda in 1993 and 1994 and catalysed the genocide that occurred. The radio station in question could not be considered an independent media organisation, in the same way that DAESH propaganda strategies are not independent.

Both RTLM and DAESH propaganda media were established to create a violent state by *“spreading the message of DAESH, which is violence and goes against human rights.”* RTLM radio manipulated people into killing others, in the same way that DAESH

manipulates recruits, through eclectic propaganda schemes, into carrying out suicide attacks in cities around the world. He suggests that in the Rwandan situation, a targeted airstrike directed at the lone radio headquarters, would have eliminated the problem and drastically decreased the amount of casualties. To which I remarked that part of my analysis of DAESH communication networks is the lack of response against them, specifically by the West. A more comprehensive understanding and attack of DAESH's media hubs would drastically diminish their recruitment possibilities and could harm them enough for military intervention to complete the task.

However, Vidal is cautious about this, as the case in Rwanda occurred more than 20 years ago, when the level of technology was considerably lower and the location had been pinpointed to one building. Today, with the extensive digital world, DAESH has created a "*technological war*." With their communication operations largely in cyber space, the same strategy used in Rwanda would be ineffective, as DAESH has made sure their communication operations are not restricted to one building, or area. Although this information is already known, put in this context, I argue that it highlights the importance and size of DAESH communication operations and reiterates their ultimate sophistication. By remaining mainly in the digital world, their recruitment, radicalisation and propaganda material can be disseminated and accessed anywhere on the planet.

One really interesting interpretation Vidal shared was the idea of power within a name. While I argue that the use of '*Islamic State*' gives DAESH a certain amount of power, and even could be seen as a way to legitimise their ideologies and human rights violations, Vidal takes the case further. While he agrees that there certainly is power in a name, he suggests that, within Europe, when news media organisations use '*DAESH*', '*ISIS/ISIL*' or '*Islamic State*,' the public opinion shows that these three terms are met with negative association and most people are against the phenomenon of DAESH. Essentially, "*you do not encourage people to support DAESH when you call them any of these names*." Vidal believes that there is no other terror organisation that connotes the same negative associations from the name alone and while "*the use of 'Islamic*

State' is their most important tool to attract support in Europe, as well as other parts of the world, the general opinion is negative, and that will not change."

Conclusion

Regardless of the fact that the number of interviews was not large enough to be representative of the wider media landscape, the thoughts, opinions and general understanding of DAESH communication networks that both Naomi O'Leary and Koen Vidal have, are exceptionally interesting. The voice of journalists is vital in the fight against DAESH. Journalists make a living analysing, interpreting and reporting on situations. It is their job to understand and explain to the public at large *what* is actually going on, *who* is involved, *where* it is occurring, *when* it happened, *why* it happened and finally, *how* it started and/or is able to continue. It is for this reason, and in light of the influence they hold, that I argue journalists *should* act as defenders of human rights, however a more in-depth look will be taken in Chapter 6.

4.4 Conclusion

The role that media plays in combating legitimisation, radicalisation and recruitment is staggering. In fact the power of media is such that,

*"If reports about tension and conflict are issued in a genuinely free and independent manner and presented in a fair and balanced way, they can indeed help to overcome conflict in that they will serve to educate the public, allowing their readers and listeners to form independent opinions."*²⁵⁴

Unfortunately, the opposite is true and *"biased manipulative reports can all too easily accelerate and intensify the crisis,"*²⁵⁵ as evidenced by some media outlets, particularly in the US. The importance of acknowledging the power media communications hold is vital for the combating efforts against DAESH to succeed. The current responses lack the critical understanding of how mainstream media and DAESH communication operations influence DAESH's success.

²⁵⁴ Reljić, D., 'The News Media and the Transformation of Ethnopolitical Conflicts', Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, Berlin, 2003 p. 9.

²⁵⁵ *ibid.*

The two interviews, conducted with O’Leary and Vidal, support (to varying degrees) my evaluation of the sophistication within DAESH’s communication operations. Western governments need to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how DAESH use their own communication operations, as well as manipulate the mainstream media, in order to then incorporate this understanding into their Counter-DAESH strategy in a more concrete manner.

5 Extremism and Freedom of Expression

5.1 Introduction

An interesting contradiction that arises with extremism revolves around the notion of freedom of expression. Found under Article 19 of the UDHR (1948) as well as Article 19 of the ICCPR (1966), both stipulate the right to opinion without interference, the right to expression, the right to information, the right to impart information, including religious information.²⁵⁶ However, the articles also hold certain limitations to this classical freedom right. A person is not allowed to arbitrarily yell “*Fire!*” in a movie theatre, unless the threat actually exists. Similarly, this right does not include hate speech, and therefore it is unwise to use the right to freedom of expression as an excuse to conduct such practices. Finally, it is hypocritical to limit the right to freedom of expression of others, while simultaneously trying to claim that right yourself.

The notion of freedom of expression has been exploited in many instances in association with DAESH. Their use of social media to disseminate propaganda and start the radicalisation and recruitment process is well known, albeit most probably not well analysed. The restrictions set in place by social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter seem to be at least partly effective and these platforms operate under their respective guidelines and suspend accounts linked to DAESH or terrorism and hate as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, many people are still not satisfied with the collective efforts of social media platforms. Critics argue that more could be done to prevent DAESH members from using social media to spread terror-inspired and hate-filled propaganda that some suggest could be “*likened to child pornography*,”²⁵⁷ which would immediately be removed if uploaded to any social media platform. On the other hand, “*free speech activists worry that if government officials encourage policing certain kinds of speech that [it] veers uncomfortably close to censorship*.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ UDHR, Art. 19; ICCPR, Art. 19

²⁵⁷ J. Greenberg, ‘Why Facebook and Twitter can’t just wipe out ISIS online’, *Wired Business*, 21 Nov 2015, <http://www.wired.com/2015/11/facebook-and-twitter-face-tough-choices-as-isis-exploits-social-media/>, (accessed 20 July 2016).

²⁵⁸ *ibid.*

Of course, censorship is undesired in democratic societies, but as mentioned above, there are certain restrictions that are associated with freedom of expression. However, Jillian York, Director of the Electronic Frontier Foundation's International Freedom of Expression, states that "*while it's true that companies can restrict speech as they see fit, it doesn't mean that it's good for society to have the companies that host most of our everyday speech taking that kind of power.*"²⁵⁹ Although I agree that social media platforms should be used to promote freedom of expression and that company officials should not interfere with general content, I find the idea that DAESH is claiming their own "freedom of expression" unfounded.

The messages that DAESH communicates to the world, through various media platforms such as video, radio, print or sermon, go against the very nature of the right to freedom of expression. As the majority of the rhetoric falls into the category of hate speech, it would be irresponsible and dangerous to say DAESH is simply voicing their opinion. Such an interpretation would assume a total ignorance of the atrocities they have committed in conjunction with those opinions. Concurrently, while trying to make sure only their voices, opinions and ideas are heard by the communities they overtake, the potential recruits they subject to radicalisation, or the world they intend on dividing, they are also attempting to limit and eradicate the voices of those in direct opposition to their brand and cause.

5.2 Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RSS)

One of the most valuable sources of on the ground information and the unveiling of human rights abuses committed by DAESH, comes from a group that named themselves *Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently* (RSS) and is run by young citizen journalists. Born out of a necessity to counter the supposed acceptance of DAESH in Raqqa by its citizens, and the completely obliterated media landscape in Syria, these young men decided to fight back against not just Assad's oppressive regime, but also against the powers that made Raqqa DAESH's stronghold.²⁶⁰ Comprised of eight

²⁵⁹ *ibid.*

²⁶⁰ *BBC News Presents: Islamic States' most wanted: ISIS take over (Part 1)*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwGm0s2b3N4&index=1&list=PLS3XGZxi7cBX5GE4jXnF9bvF4C801cul3> (accessed 23 June 2016).

teenagers at the time of creation, RSS began during protests of Assad's regime in an effort to show the world that Raqqa was not willing to comply with an oppressive government and by March 2013, government forces lost control of the city predominately to the Free Syrian Army along with "*a loose coalition of Islamic groups*."²⁶¹ Once '*Islamic State of Iraq*' entered Raqqa and began their own version of an oppressive regime, RSS vowed to rebel against them as they had the Syrian government.²⁶²

In the autumn of 2013, approximately six months following their occupation of Raqqa, DAESH held a pseudo-diplomatic meeting with the activists in the city.²⁶³ Under the supposition of answering their questions, DAESH militants set their weapons aside and photographed the 107 media members and activists alike. "*This is when they knew who's with them and who's against them*."²⁶⁴ The ploy presented DAESH with a great deal of power, as those who spoke out against them were eventually either shot, "*or had to swear allegiance if they wanted to stay in Raqqa*."²⁶⁵ In spite of the danger associated with continuing to rise against DAESH, these teenagers instead embarked on a graffiti campaign around Raqqa writing slogans such as "*Down with [DAESH]*." This outraged DAESH, though they "*wouldn't publically acknowledge the existence of a group of citizen journalists*," instead choosing to target RSS's ring leader Hamoud, who was arguably the most outspoken, offering a substantial financial reward for information leading to his capture – dead or alive.²⁶⁶

With the most prominent leaders of RSS forced to leave due to safety concerns, less conspicuous members stayed and were able to recruit others to relay details about life in Raqqa under DAESH control to those now situated in Turkey. Hamoud and Aziz, based in Turkey, began a blog exposing "*not just [DAESH] violence but their everyday incompetence*." However, following the capture of a twenty year-old member traveling

²⁶¹ *ibid.*

²⁶² *ibid.*

²⁶³ *BBC News Presents: Islamic States' most wanted: Resistance (Part 2)*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5i5ZPWivA4&index=2&list=PLS3XGZxi7cBX5GE4jXnF9bvF4C801cul3>, (accessed 23 June 2016).

²⁶⁴ *ibid.*

²⁶⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *ibid.*

with RSS material and his immediate death at the hands of DAESH militants, the young men realised that this was DAESH's intention to wage war against the group.²⁶⁷ Without the use of weapons, a tactical decision of RSS, it quickly became clear that the only way to fight them was *"to do it online [through the] campaign."*²⁶⁸ By using DAESH's own tactics against them, RSS began hindering the dissemination of their propaganda, by contradicting images of happiness and safety under DAESH command, with the realities of life in Raqqa. RSS's ability *"to publish evidence of a city in chaos, puncturing the myth of a glorious 'Caliphate',"* is a feat that deadlocks DAESH and prevents them from executing control on the group of young adults.²⁶⁹

In an effort to highlight the abuses inflicted on citizens of Raqqa by DAESH, RSS was able to illustrate the accurate story that included lack of electricity and water, hospital closures, and in the instance of a functioning hospital, RSS was able to underline that it was *"always dedicated to [DAESH] operatives."* The young men were effective in uncovering the truth of DAESH's occupation of Raqqa, and did not sit idly by as their towns were destroyed under the pretence of a new world order. Aziz, one of the founding members suggested that, *"a group like [DAESH] who did all these terrible thing in the world, and they couldn't stop some teenagers,"*²⁷⁰ while using DAESH's own tactics against them.

After the arrest of hundreds of Raqqa civilians who "liked" the RSS Facebook page, DAESH changed tactics and began blackmailing their prominent members again, in the hopes that they would affect and halt the group's opposition by targeting family members. After the murder of two RSS sympathisers, as well as a video depicting the point-blank execution of Hamoud's father, he turned to Twitter to post, *"They did not kill anything except our fear,"* in an effort to underscore their intention to continue the online fight against DAESH.²⁷¹

²⁶⁷ *ibid.*

²⁶⁸ *ibid.*

²⁶⁹ *BBC News Presents: Islamic States' most wanted: IS fight back (Part 3)*, [online video], 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8KDldAoDMU&list=PLS3XGZxi7cBX5GE4jXnF9bvF4C801cul3&index=3>, (accessed 23 June 2016).

²⁷⁰ *ibid.*

²⁷¹ *ibid.*

Prior to the RSS campaign, any information regarding Raqqa was controlled by DAESH and therefore included propaganda material. This quickly shifted when RSS began publishing online, contradicting the material uploaded by DAESH.²⁷² This caused a certain amount of anger and desperation throughout DAESH ranks, which led to them to eliminate Internet access in Raqqa, in the hopes of preventing this information from reaching the rest of the world.



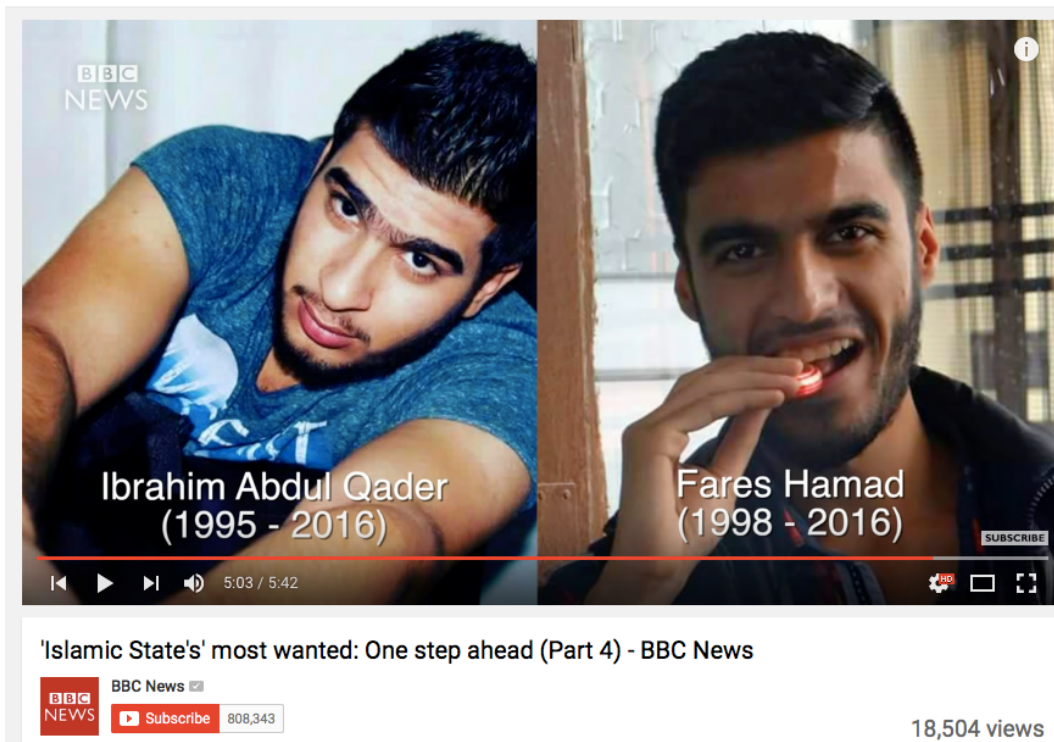
Picture 6²⁷³ BBC News Video Series, Part 4

RSS members were able to devise a secret method of communication between the undercover reporters working inside Raqqa, and the main members of the group operating in Turkey. Quickly following this development, DAESH began threatening RSS with images of the young men in Turkey, in an effort to showcase their power and potential to inflict harm. One of the more devastating ways they attempted to hinder opposition voices, was when an old acquaintance arrived in Turkey and moved in with two RSS supporters for a period of two months, before betraying them to DAESH. Following their horrific deaths, it was discovered that the acquaintance in question had been a DAESH operative all along that was enlisted to help track down RSS members.²⁷⁴

²⁷² *BBC News Presents: Islamic States' most wanted: One step ahead (Part 4)*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPn2scOP3HE&list=PLS3XGZxi7cBX5GE4jXnF9bvF4C801cul3&index=4>, (accessed 23 June 2016).

²⁷³ *ibid.*

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*



Picture 7²⁷⁵ BBC News Video Series, Part 4

DAESH then released a video showcasing the severed heads of the two victims (pictured above), with the caption, “*May every apostate know that he will be slaughtered silently.*”²⁷⁶ Regardless of the efforts made by DAESH to take control of RSS and the members, including brutal executions of members, family and friends alike, they were unable to stop the online campaign against them. However, as days passed, DAESH was able to get closer and closer to members, who decided to join Hamoud and Aziz in Turkey. Hours before his scheduled departure to Istanbul, journalist and activist Naji al-Jerf, who became an encouraging and supportive father-figure to the young men operating RSS, was shot three times, and later died in hospital.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*

²⁷⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *BBC News Presents: Islamic States' most wanted: Hidden and unbeaten (Part 5)*, [online video], 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPIWHZ6eTyU&list=PLS3XGZxi7cBX5GE4jXnF9bvF4C801cul3&index=5>, (accessed 23 June 2016).

5.3 Conclusion

Today, the group still operates in hiding across Europe. However, the unfortunate reality is that “*death started to be a normal thing*” for them, and news of a natural death is met with shock and awe. Members are “*motivated by the fact that by staying alive, we can make [DAESH] suffer more.*” All targeted members of RSS express desires of death by gunshot instead of torture.²⁷⁸ The sad reality, where this is a 20-year-olds wish, is likely inconceivable to young adults who grew up outside of conflict zones, who did not need to become the voice of their generation in the fight against brutal regimes. For these young men, their online presence has been able to thwart DAESH throughout the years, but it came at the price of becoming desensitised to their surroundings.²⁷⁹ Therefore, it can be deduced that the only aspect of freedom of expression that can be associated with DAESH is their infringement and violation of this right against those in their opposition.

²⁷⁸ *ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *ibid.*

6 Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA)

6.1 Introduction

Is military intervention, including airstrikes, a logical strategy to use against DAESH? In the two years since DAESH established itself as a true threat to both Western and MENA societies, it seems the countless airstrikes have not been able to eliminate the terror organisation. Even though it could be argued that reclaiming territory from DAESH, through airstrikes or ground combat, is likely to increase the violence and brutality of DAESH globally, it is still a vital aspect of what needs to occur in order for the Counter-DAESH Coalition to succeed.

With evidence suggesting DAESH operates with the overarching goal of igniting politically hasty overreactions,²⁸⁰ why then is the West essentially complying? Can the West effectively bomb its way to victory? Is it wise for Western states to consider an allegiance with Russia and by extension Assad, in order to defeat DAESH? How important are communication operations in defeating DAESH? In this section I argue the need for a more human rights focused component in the Western response. By infusing a Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) the possibility of detrimentally hindering DAESH becomes possible.

6.2 Instability in the MENA Region

Under *Current Responses* I highlight the series of events that orchestrated the creation of DAESH, including Western governments involvement in creating instability within the MENA States. So far, the Counter-DAESH Coalition has not accurately invoked the social scientific concepts of understanding causes and consequences of human rights violations, understanding factors and structures leading to change, or providing tools for change management and reform, all of which are vital to the HRBA.²⁸¹ Military intervention was able to pinpoint and target a drone that not only eliminated Executioner Jihadi John, but also created the opportunity for Iraqi forces to reclaim the

²⁸⁰ *What is behind ISIL's attacks?*, [online video], 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2015/11/isil-attacks-paris-151120132834566.html>, (accessed 21 June 2016).

²⁸¹ *ibid.*

city of Ramadi.²⁸² However, military intervention is not always either that precise or effective. As long as states opposing DAESH are not able to work together, as a collective unit, DAESH will continue expanding their communication operations, and consequently they will continue increasing their membership. The potential loss of physical territory from future military interventions will not be enough to stop DAESH, when a substantial portion of their communication operation, including propaganda disseminators, as well as strategic tactics live in the digital world.

The West will not be able to bomb its way to victory against DAESH, or even the influence they hold, without resolving the geopolitical conflicts unfolding in the Middle East and Northern Africa today. Without a functioning replacement government for Syria (specifically, and in the broader context for Yemen, Libya and so on, as well), simply achieving a military victory over DAESH would be fruitless. The mentality, brand, ideologies and brutality of DAESH would eventually reappear in another variation if Syria were left in its current condition.

6.3 Rethinking the Western strategy

Had the Counter-DAESH Coalition properly anticipated the colossal advantage DAESH communication operations would have in their efforts of propaganda dissemination, legitimisation, radicalisation and recruitment, they could have created a more all-encompassing strategy. DAESH has been able to navigate the use of their communication networks in such a way that the creation of the digital '*Caliphate*' could be considered their most successful endeavour.

DAESH's power and sophistication is evident within the digital jihad they established online as well as the propaganda machine they have been able to steer. Through meticulously planned psychological and manipulative strategies, DAESH has been able to successfully radicalise and recruit. While not all propaganda, manipulation, radicalisation or recruitment occur online, the majority certainly has some media or communication network component to it.

²⁸² E. Graham-Harrison, 'ISIS loss of 'caliphate' could fuel terror attacks abroad', *The Guardian*, 22 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/22/isis-loss-of-caliphate-fuel-terror-attacks-abroad>, (accessed 1 July 2016).

Essentially, DAESH was able to effectively develop a strategy to tailor specific propaganda for different audiences. The ability to pinpoint the content of the message to the psychological needs of the audience is what makes DAESH's communication operations so sophisticated and differentiates them from other extremist organisations. It is vital the Counter-DAESH task force acknowledge that in order to "*stop the flow of foreign terrorist fighters*,"²⁸³ the coalition should also target DAESH's media operations and hinder their ability to produce videos, magazine articles, radio shows, or have an online presence with which to manipulate people into joining. By eliminating the ability for them to Tweet, Post, Instagram, or promote their hate speech filled propaganda, the success of their operation would suffer systematically and without the ability to replace recruits who die for their cause, DAESH itself would eventually collapse.

DAESH has succeeded in many ways with the sophisticated use of their communication operations. By tailoring their media strategy accordingly, they have uncovered new possibilities of legitimisation, radicalisation and recruitment for other groups to emulate. This is evident throughout history and in this context specifically, can be seen in the progression of extremism exhibited from the Taliban, through Al-Qaeda and currently, DAESH. Though the Taliban and Al-Qaeda still exist, the same ideologies can be pinpointed within each group, which would seem to suggest an evolution from one group to the other. Additionally, DAESH have learned from the mistakes of their predecessors, namely placing the entirety of their cause and success on one leader. "[DAESH] leader al-Baghdadi has kept a low profile, avoiding self-promotion or becoming the kind of figurehead whose demise would precipitate the implosion of the organisation – as was the case, in retrospect, with Osama bin Laden."²⁸⁴

Unfortunately, the lack of political coherence between DAESH opponents hinders the possibility of attacking DAESH in such a way that the very ideologies they have built their brand on begin to waver. Currently, the responses set in place against DAESH fail

²⁸³ 'Joint Statement issued by partners and the Counter-ISIL coalition Ministerial Meeting', 3 December 2014, [US Department of State website], <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/234627.htm>, (accessed 22 June 2016).

²⁸⁴ Atwan, 2015, p. xii.

to consider the importance of the HRBA, which encompasses human rights from various perspectives and attempts to utilise a lens through which normative and social scientific concepts hold the same weight and importance.²⁸⁵ DAESH opposition forces have already acknowledged the normative concepts such as human rights norms and standards in conjunction with the various human rights violations DAESH has committed to warrant such reactions from the rest of the world. The social scientific concepts, on the other hand, have not been addressed in the same manner, and as such have subsequently limited the success of the Western Counter-DAESH strategy.

6.4 Psychological Manipulation

Human rights from the psychological perspective are also vitally important to the notion of dismantling DAESH. DAESH's ability to successfully manipulate the psychological needs and desires of vulnerable people, through the use of their propaganda filled media, has greatly contributed to the recruitment efforts. In order to understand DAESH's radicalisation and recruitment strategy, it is important to understand how the human being is addressed in psychology. First, there is a reflexive consciousness, or self-awareness; next, the human person is an interpersonal being that evolves in relation to others.²⁸⁶ From the humanistic perspective, Maslow suggested humans need a hierarchy, where they can self-actualise and fulfil one's own potential, love, belonging, safety and security, as well as to feel worthwhile.²⁸⁷

They were able to devise a plan that would target potential recruits on a psychological level. Through the use of the communication operations DAESH was able to help recruits achieve all of these most primal needs. In order to combat DAESH radicalism effectively, Western governments need to provide opportunities for vulnerable potential recruits to achieve these needs through more constructive methods. If governments continue ignoring the susceptibility of those suffering from psychological problems, or mental health issues, DAESH-like ideologies will continue to infiltrate those young, vulnerable minds, creating bigger, stronger, more potent versions of DAESH.

²⁸⁵ W. Suntinger, 'Human Rights from an Interdisciplinary Perspective', University of Vienna, October 2014.

²⁸⁶ G. Weber, 'Psychology and Human Rights', University of Vienna, 7 October 2014.

²⁸⁷ *ibid.*

Destroying their headquarters and reclaiming territory will hinder DAESH only so much. The ideology and brand live eternally in the digital 'Caliphate', accessible to anyone. Propaganda videos, tactical strategies and the like can be found in the digital world and influence a new (susceptible) generation to expand the message and continue the digital jihad.

6.5 Mainstream media and the HRBA

Finally, the role mainstream media holds is important considering "*the International Federation of Journalist (IFJ) remains convinced that the media can not only help to defuse conflicts, but also that it is uniquely positioned to encourage coexistence and co-operation between people of different origins.*"²⁸⁸ Instead of encouraging the anti-Islamic discourse and the "*reprehensible role in the reinforcement of nationalism and hatred,*"²⁸⁹ I argue that mainstream media should instead emphasise human rights for all men, women and children by increasing "*the pressure on political decision-makers to act*"²⁹⁰ with a HRBA in mind. As demonstrated by DAESH's successful propaganda and manipulation techniques, media are vital in disseminating their tactics. Without this power over media, DAESH would not be as influential.

Some mainstream media have also been able to influence audiences with negative (and false) representation of Islam and Muslims, while other mainstream media have worked at analysing and reporting the facts, emphasising the devastating conditions DAESH has created and urging humanitarian action to be taken to help the victims. I argue that mainstream media that spew anti-Islamic rhetoric not only play into DAESH's tactics and strategy, but also allow certain injustices to occur, like prejudice against another religious community. This further suggests that such media should be held responsible for the possible interracial and interreligious hate which they could incite via their rhetoric. Hence, as a key player in the fight against DAESH, the mainstream media should be held at a higher standard and aim to become a defender of human rights.

²⁸⁸ D. Reljić, 'The News Media and the Transformation of Ethnopolitical Conflicts', Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, Berlin, 2003 p. 4

²⁸⁹ D. Rejić, *Killing Screens: Media in Times of Conflict*, United Kingdom, Central Europe Review – The European Institute for the Media, 2001, p.40

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*

Unfortunately, not all mainstream media organisations strive to achieve the title of human rights defender. Opinions on this topic differ, with many of the belief that this responsibility should not be placed on mainstream media. However, the fight for human rights has been, and continues to be, rife with hypocrisy. Countries publically addressing and criticising the state of affairs in other regions of the world are themselves guilty of various human rights infringements or violations. Acknowledging this reality is important, as it can be the foundation upon which better decisions are made. The mainstream media, created to report on various political stories including human rights abuses committed by DAESH, can escape the role of hypocrite by actively striving to avoid sensationalising, twisting, demonising or “*selling*” stories. This type of reporting amplifies the rhetoric and indulges in DAESH’s propaganda strategy.

As a defender of human rights, I believe there should be certain obligations and responsibilities that the mainstream media are expected to maintain, in order to assist our societies in defeating DAESH. The role mainstream media play is paramount to this victory. By remaining divided, the media will be in constant conflict, with some broadcasters calling for peace, unity and partnership, and the other side attempting to win against DAESH and others simultaneously out-casting an entire religion, people and culture in the process. While many news media organisations already make thoughtful and poignant decisions to present the facts in an unbiased and honest manner, many are still struggling to fully grasp the power they hold. Mainstream media should strive to be a voice for the “greater good” and as such become defenders for the rights of those being oppressed.

6.6 Conclusion

The Human Rights Based Approach should be seen as an aid to the current responses being conducted in the fight against DAESH. In no way should it be suggested that the HRBA replace Counter-DAESH strategies, however, by infusing the ideas and concepts into pre-existing tactical measures currently underway, the possibility to effectively reduce DAESH’s power and abilities would greatly increase.

The current Western response lacks accountability of the involvement in and to a certain extent responsibility of, the current geo-political environment of MENA. At the same time, Western Alliance have underestimated the persuasive manipulation of DAESH communication operations to the West's own detriment. DAESH's ability to use psychologically triggered propaganda, target messages to different types of audiences and even influence mainstream Western media into furthering their cause, through sensationalised, twisted and radical Muslim-focused discourse, illustrates the level of DAESH's sophistication.

The HRBA would help acknowledge that DAESH will not cease to exist in the current MENA climate; add a strategic focus on hindering DAESH's communication operations; properly understand the psychological triggers that influence vulnerable people; and finally, help establish mainstream Western media as a defender of human rights as opposed to an (at times) unintentional ally to DAESH. Therefore, the infusion of a Human Rights Based Approach is paramount in order for the Western coalition to move forward and succeed in their endeavour of destabilising this extremist organisation.

7 Conclusion

As the final sections of this thesis came to a conclusion, DAESH took responsibility for yet another attack, this time in Kabul, Afghanistan on the 23rd of July 2016,²⁹¹ once again ensuring that people around the world either went to sleep, or else woke up to information pertaining to the group. For the last two years, DAESH has maintained a steady level of media attention from the mainstream media, hardly a full week passing before a new attack occurs, or a new theory about them develops. Currently, with their physical locations diminishing at the hands of Iraqi forces, DAESH has now been *“stepping up attacks worldwide.”*²⁹²

While counter-DAESH forces in the Middle East and North Africa have managed to reclaim territory, a significant part of DAESH’s strategy, including their communication operations, responsible for radicalising and recruiting people, live predominantly in the digital world. Their proclivity for using propaganda and manipulation tactics has been a cornerstone for their success. Additionally, they have utilised technology very skilfully, targeting different mediums for specific audiences, in conjunction with specified propaganda goals.

DAESH has also benefited from some mainstream medias hateful rhetoric against Islam and Muslims. The notion of Islamophobia has spread and in many ways has become a normalised concept, leading to an ‘us-versus-them’ mentality. DAESH sees this as advantageous because marginalised, outcast and susceptible youth are their main targets for radicalisation and recruitment. This negative association with Islam leaves Westernised Muslims in between two worlds; one side being the Western world, willing to turn their backs on them, while on the other, DAESH providing incentive for them to join in the hopes of waging jihad against those that outcast them. DAESH believes that it is the duty of all Muslims to join them to fight against the ‘*kufir*’ (disbelievers), who they argue includes people that practice other religions, atheists and even Muslims who do not adhere to their brand of Sunni Islam.

²⁹¹ S. Visser and M. Popalzai, ‘ISIS claims Afghanistan explosion that kills dozens’, *CNN*, 24 July 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/23/asia/afghanistan-explosion/>, (accessed on 24 July 2016).

²⁹² *ibid.*

The evidence presented also points to a detailed understanding of human behaviour and psychology that DAESH has been able to manipulate successfully. However, this psychological understanding goes farther than the people they have radicalised or recruited. DAESH also understands how to deal with the Western world, in that they decide what videos, images or stories filter to the mainstream, that then create clashes and disagreements. The result being that the society that says they want DAESH eliminated is the same one that prolongs media coverage pertaining to the group. This in turn makes DAESH seem larger, stronger and more powerful than they actually are.

The starting point of this thesis was to analyse the ways in which propaganda and manipulation in DAESH communication operations has helped them legitimise their human rights violations, as well as radicalise and recruit. However, the research process seems to suggest that the goal of legitimising human rights violations is secondary to the use of propaganda and manipulation tactics in the radicalisation and recruitment process. Coupled with their affinity to violate freedom of religion and freedom of expression, DAESH has truly created a digital '*Caliphate*' with members and sympathisers around the world.

It is for this reason that infusing a Human Rights Based Approach into the counter-DAESH mandate is paramount. Currently, there is a lack of general understanding of DAESH's communication operations, as well as their ability to appeal to recruits on a psychological level. Chapter 6 highlighted the necessity of using DAESH's own successful tactics against them, which could be achieved with a Human Rights Based Approach. It also becomes important for all citizens, who believe in human dignity and human rights for everyone, to understand how all forms of media can influence and exaggerate situations. News pertaining to DAESH is vital and necessary, however, alarmist reporting should be avoided by both media professionals and viewers as well.

While some might argue that this analysis gives far too much credit to the group's communication operations, it is vital to accurately identify the problem before it can be solved. As it stands, there is certain sophistication in DAESH's communication operations and use of propaganda, which has led to their successful radicalisation and

recruitment strategy. While the intention of this thesis was not to praise DAESH's ability and proclivity for propaganda and media, equally detrimentally would be to completely ignore it, which largely seems to have been the case so far.

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Abstract

Within the short timeframe of a few months, a new terrorist group managed to solidify its presence in the Middle East in order to begin radicalising and recruiting foreigners to fight jihad and declare an overarching goal of creating a purely *Islamic State*. DAESH quickly established their brand and a media strategy, and became known worldwide for the high production value of their communication operations just as much as for their savage cruelty. The use of media has become vital to their overall success as a terrorist organisation. Through targeted propaganda strategies, DAESH has managed to appeal to marginalised foreigners. While the populations of the Western world, largely opposed to DAESH, receive videos of beheadings and barbarity, potential recruits are inundated with images of state building, charity work and brotherhood. Concurrently, DAESH has managed to utilise the mainstream media landscape in order to further facilitate anti-Islamic rhetoric and intensify the air of mystery surrounding the organisation. Through sophisticated use of technology, as well as a detailed understanding and exploitation of human behaviour and psychology, DAESH has managed to establish themselves as one of the most adept terror organisations, due in large part to the successful intersection of their communication operations with targeted propaganda strategies.

DAESH/ISIS/ISIL – Human Rights – Radicalisation and Recruitment – Freedom of Expression – Freedom of Religion – Propaganda – Media – Mainstream Media – Communication Operations – Terrorism

Abstrakt

Innerhalb eines relativen kurzen Zeitraums von wenigen Monaten hat es die terroristische Gruppierung DAESH geschafft ihre Präsenz im Nahen Osten zu festigen. Durch effektive Propaganda wurde ein Radikalisierungsprozess eingeläutet, mithilfe dessen internationale Kämpfer für einen Jihad rekrutiert werden konnten, um ein islamistisches Kalifat auf den syrischen Schlachtfeldern und im Norden des zerfallenen Iraks auszurufen. Mitverantwortlich für diese Entwicklung ist die neue Implementierung und Nutzung von sozialen Medien und Propaganda. Die effektive und neuartige Nutzung ebendieser wurde schnell zu einem wichtigen Bestandteil für den Erfolg der Terrororganisation. Durch gezielte Propagandastrategien schaffte es DAESH gezielt junge Menschen am Rande der Gesellschaft für ihre Zwecke einzubinden. Während der „Westen“ gezielt mit verstörenden Aufnahmen von Hinrichtungen und barbarischen Akten verunsichert werden soll, schafft es DAESH potentielle Rekruten mit Bildern vom Aufbau eines islamischen Staates und Wohltätigkeiten und Brüderlichkeit für sich zu gewinnen. Gleichzeitig hat die Terrororganisation es bewerkstelligt Teile der Medienlandschaft indirekt für sich zu vereinnahmen, indem anti-islamische Rhetorik in der öffentlichen Debatte Einzug hält, was wiederum zu einer gewissen Mystifizierung der Organisation führt. Durch die professionelle Nutzung moderner Medien und mit gutem Verständnis für menschliches Verhalten und die menschliche Psyche hat es DAESH geschafft zu einer der stärksten und einflussreichsten Terrororganisationen zu avancieren.

DAESH/ISIS/ISIL – Menschenrechte – Radikalisierung und Rekrutierung – Meinungsfreiheit – Religionsfreiheit – Propaganda – Medien – Mainstream Media – Kommunikation – Terrorismus

Appendix of Evidence

Interviewee: Naomi O'Leary

1. Can you briefly explain your initial reaction to DAESH when they first emerged; what were your thoughts on the way they address media?

I cover British and Irish news and first began to deal with the group in my journalism as they became an issue for British foreign policy. At this point they had carved out areas of control in Syria, and their power in the region was a consideration in a long-running debate over whether Britain should join a bombing campaign in response to the civil war. My work was not focused on the Middle East or the development of this group specifically, so the group's media strategy did not become apparent to me until 2014 with the killings of the two US citizens James Foley and Steven Sotloff. At that point, the group's actions became a major focus of domestic news in Britain, in particular because the life of a British hostage, David Haines, was threatened, and because of the appearance in the videos of a man who spoke with a British accent. He was dubbed 'Jihadi John' by the British press and his possible identity became a news issue. At that point we were poised to report the issue of further beheading videos. These were not sent directly to media and tended to be filtered through indirect channels online, so reporting on them required a process of verification -- usually through experts on the region and by checking with the British foreign office. It was clear to me at the time that the group had managed, whether accidentally or through a deliberate strategy, to put themselves into a powerful position in terms of media coverage. They had control over information that would be major news on its release -- the fate of hostages -- and they were able to gain publicity for their organisation by the release of this information. In my view, the group was successful in communicating certain key information about itself: namely its existence, its name as "Islamic State" or a variant, and an impression that it was violent and ruthless. In my view, particularly important in its establishing a 'brand' were the instantly-recognisable aspects of the videos, in particular the orange jumpsuits worn by the hostages. This was an astute choice because it evoked Guantanamo and hinted at a justification for their actions. This visual cue along with the use of "Islamic" in the name of the group worked to communicate the group's identity through the media by stealth, as most reporting would not give prominence to the group's verbal justifications for their actions.

2. Most mainstream media outlets still use the terminology ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State. Arguably there is a certain amount of power in a name. Is there a specific reason Islamic state is still being used internationally when some argue it further legitimises their cause with the use of the word state?

The issue of what name to use to refer to a group in reporting is not one made by individual reporters but by editorial policy. I know that in the news organisation I work for and certainly in others there has been debate about what name to use for the group. I can't shed light on the justification for what name is used as I was not part of the decision-making process. I would observe however that there are two factors that I imagine are particularly important for a news agency considering a policy on this issue: one is to use a term that is widely understood, and another is to be as neutral as possible in reporting.

3. When you first started covering DAESH, what were the difficulties you faced (in terms of what to cover) and has that changed at all?

Personally, I am very reluctant to watch videos or look at images that show extreme deliberate violence. This has led to a dilemma for me because at times I have had to report the content of a video, but did not want to watch the video. Another challenge was that the material would spread very fast and become widely known faster than we were able to verify it.

4. Their communications operation networks have grown extensively over the last two years, has the way you cover DAESH changed to adapt to this growth?

This isn't something of which I have been aware. My reporting is focused on British news, and the group has not been at the top of the news agenda from my perspective since the killings of David Haines and Alan Henning in 2014. I do not believe the actions of the group which led to media coverage initially are infinitely replicable. The group has since released videos which were a transparent attempt to get more media coverage through shock. One example I remember was a video which reportedly involved a child killing people (I did not see the video myself). Because the child was thought to be British, the release of the video was reported by some British media. In this case, I did not report on the video. Most reporting on the group now is handled by our journalists in the region and to my knowledge they assess developments more from the perspective of what might affect the conflict in the region.

5. How difficult is it to properly report on the situation without offering them a larger platform with which to recruit and radicalise?

News organisations deal every day with groups and individuals seeking a platform. Part of the training of a journalist is how to assess the motives of people who provide information or are a source of news, assess what is newsworthy, and then report it with as little bias as possible. In my view journalists are very aware that many people would like to use them for an agenda. Attempts to seek attention through violence unfortunately are far from uncommon and have a long and varied history. This group has used that tactic in numerous ways with varying degrees of success.

6. In your opinion, is what DAESH is doing an abuse of human rights?

No need to ask my opinion, anyone who deprives another human of life is breaching article three of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

7. In your opinion, is DAESH currently posing a danger to the notion of freedom of expression?

I am not an expert on this group per se, but have just reported on it when it became an issue in British news. From my understanding and my reading of reporting on the regions where the group has power, it has a very intolerant policy towards freedom of expression.

8. Are the international media doing a good job covering DAESH ? What could be improved?

The term “international media” encompasses an enormous and hugely varied range different sorts of news organisations. No doubt the quality of reporting varies between them.

9. One of their strengths is forcing mainstream media to take notice of their activities, which leads to additional media attention and extends to notions of Islamophobia. In your opinion, has DAESH succeeded in establishing an Us-v.-Them divide through the use of their communications operations?

I think this question might be best answered in a scientific way through data such as opinion polling on attitudes towards Islam, which might be discoverable online. To my knowledge data in the UK indicates a rise in reported attacks attributed to Islamophobia, though it is not clear how much this is affected by a rise in reporting itself. From my personal perspective, the acts claimed by the group which have had the greatest impact on public awareness have been attacks within Europe, particularly in Paris in November 2015. In this attack, it was not clear to me that the group’s communications operations had a major role. I would not be at all surprised if there has been a polarising effect since the group began targeting people from Europe and the United States, but it would be difficult to gauge how much of this can be attributed to the group’s communication operations.

Interviewee: Koen Vidal

1. Can you briefly explain your initial reaction to DAESH when they first emerged; what were your thoughts on the way they address the media?

I was surprised and not surprised, not surprised because in months before, they had emerged and it became big media story, in addition to the radicalisation of the global opposition in Syria and Iraq, so you knew that something was coming but at the same time when they really emerged with such a big military success, such cruelty, cruel images, executing Iraqi soldier in high numbers, I think we have to admit it came as a surprise. We didn’t expect Assad’s whole opposition would be high-jacked by DAESH. If you recap the discussion within EU but also the US, whether we should arm the opposition, more and more echoes and warning started coming in to take care of who you send arms to, and it became more complicated. When DAESH really got into the program, the general discussion (on arms) was over. Coalition thought it was too risky and public opinion didn’t support it anymore.

2. Most mainstream media outlets still use the terminology ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State. Arguably there is a certain amount of power in a name. Is there a specific reason Islamic state is still being used internationally when some argue it further legitimises their cause with the use of the word state?

In a way you’re right. On the other hand I think that really most media in Europe, including my newspaper, when they use DAESH or ISIS/ISIL the complete public opinion with three terms is against the phenomenon, against the movement. I don’t think you encourage people to support DAESH when you use one of the three terms.

The general mood in Europe and US is so negative to the movement. I hardly know of a terror organisation where the image is this negative. In a way you're right Islamic State is their most important tool to attract people in the Middle East and Europe and other parts of the world. General opinion, however, is so negative toward the phenomenon, you won't change people's minds about it.

3. When you first started covering DAESH, what were the difficulties you faced (in terms of what to cover) and has that changed at all?

Most important think, and it hasn't change in the last 2 and half years, is the security situation. First you can travel to parts of Syria and Iraq, and if you want to report in areas where DAESH is occupying its a hostile environment for journalists, and also to humanitarian organisations. You're not welcome at all and the risk is enormous. I've been to the Congo, where there was risk but there were some rules and you can limit your risks. Where DAESH occupies, the risk is enormous, and if they catch you they ask for money or take your life. My second point- It means you are dependent on indirect sources, and that takes time to know which sources are reliable, which ones are biased, in what ways they are biased, and it involves different approach, including how you contact with sources, because it is limited on the field, its not just emails, it's the informal contact that gives you information.

4. Their communications operation networks have grown extensively over the last two years, has the way you cover DAESH changed to adapt to this growth?

I think DAESH networks are interesting as a journalist, you can write two or three stories to inform the public on how sophisticated they are. For example, two weeks ago I wrote a story about the influence of DAESH on women who are recruited through social media. It's interesting but it's not a story of good information, or explains how sophisticated they are. Much more important is the Syrian diaspora, and moderate opposition in Europe. There I can meet people and make distinctions of good sources and sources that are not so well informed and disconnected from people in the field. There I find interesting information. DAESH networks are interesting as a journalistic phenomenon and should be reported on, however, as a source it is not so relevant because it's an eclectic phenomenon of propaganda, and not a journalistic source. It's interesting and has to be described but can't be used as a source, its too contaminated.

5. How difficult is it to properly report on the situation without offering them a larger platform with which to recruit and radicalise?

First of all, I think what is much more important if you look at DAESH maximising its influences is some of the spotlight television—in a country like Belgium, the 2nd or 3rd generation migrants, differ from 1st who are largely still connected with channels that have noting to do with Belgium or Europe, which is usually fine, however the news angle is focused on the middle east, again it's not a bad thing, but it might overload you with warnings, and could have an influence, or else the news of Middle East could be biased. If I look at mainstream media, of course you can make the news and war in Syria more sensational than it is, but I think mainstream media like BBC, CNN, and al Jazeera are doing a good job, but the war in Syria is exceptionally violent and

sensational in nature and you don't have to add a lot to make it a good story. It is a good story. It might have an impact on some people who are considering to fight for DAESH but much more important is the spotlight media and the more radical ones.

6. In your opinion, is what DAESH is doing an abuse of human rights?

Yes of course, definitely, it's not disconnected with their main objectives and I would compare it with radio RTLM in Rwanda, it was a hate radio that operated in 1993/4 and catalysed the genocide, it spread violence and was propaganda channel, and created a violent state which made the genocide expand from the capital, city size to national size. And I would compare the propaganda of DAESH with Radio RTLM, it's violent, it's not an independent media organization, it's a propaganda channel, its not a media organization and it doesn't have a journalistic objective, it has an objective of creating a violent state in Iraq and Syria and spreading the message of DAESH which is violence, so yes, it's creating violence and goes against the idea of HR, of course.

7. In your opinion, is DAESH currently posing a danger to freedom of expression?

Its again free of expression, 100% its been killing journalist, killing civilians. If you look at Charlie Hebdo, freedom of expression is not in their dictionary, it's their mission to destroy it. I would make the same parallel with Rwanda, when the genocide was over, people asked why didn't the Belgium's and French not just bomb the news room of radio RTLM, and I would agree because they were pushing people to kill as many people as possible. They should have bombed the radio station, because they knew where it was. I don't accept DAESH propaganda and I don't accept that they call themselves journalists or a media organisation.

8. Are the international media doing a good job covering DAESH? What could be improved?

Refer to answer to Question 5.

9. One of their strengths is forcing mainstream media to take notice of their activities, which leads to additional media attention and extends to notions of Islamophobia. In your opinion, has DAESH succeeded in establishing a clash of civilisations through the use of their communications operations?

I would say that yes, the clash of civilisations is there and if we don't take care it might be there in a more generalized way. I don't think the direct link is there to media operations; the tension between communities is because of the attacks. If we take Europe, the attacks in Paris and Brussels has an enormous impact on the social climate and politics of Europe. The Impact of the attack is much bigger, and of course the media reporting is part of that, all the media reported on the Paris attack it made it even heavier. How much should we report on major attacks on our capitals and it's difficult to ask media to report with a restraint in that case. Also important as a journalist it's important to stay calm. It's of course emotional, for me I am living in Brussels, and they attacked my life, but at the same as a journalist time you have to do your job and stick to right work, If you add to the confusion between terms like terrorists, radicalised young people, migrants, refugees, it's not ok. As a journalist you have to try to analyse,

understand, be moderate, use the right words, make the distinctions between migrants and refugee, and you should be critical to the politicians, and if they use the wrong words, you should report on it. Be aware of human rights, and you shouldn't lose sight of that.

One remark: I agree it's important to try to control DAESH media and propaganda, and I make the parallel with Rwanda, however there it was much easier, because everyone knew the building, there was only one room, and now it's a different era. I agree with the principle that we should try to control but it's not always easy to do so. With DAESH we don't know where the media hubs are. It's more difficult to track down. For example, one Facebook group of radical people was put out of the media by European or US governments, but then same people created another Facebook group. Today technology differs greatly from the 90's; it's a different Technological world. I'm just trying to think practically how we should do it; it's not that simple. It's also linked to a very complicated geopolitical situation in general. I think Facebook is doing good job trying to control them, but if you look at the Russian equivalent, there is much more room for these groups to grow, and you have to go to them to control the situation. However it's a complicated relationship between the US and Russia, and Europe and Russia.