

Mere Duplication or Original? ISIS Ability to Adapt Propaganda to Different Target Audiences

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Abstract :ISIS's ability to recruit new members and spread its message has been widely attributed to its prolific production of propaganda items and its ability to adapt its message based on target audience. We tested these two hypotheses by analysing magazines published by ISIS central media in three languages (English [Dabiq] , Turkish [Konstantiniyye] and French [Dar al-Islam]) in two one-month periods in 2015 and 2016. To see how far the terrorist organization could generate original content in different languages instead of translations, we conceived a pre-trained deep learning model that measured similarity between articles in magazines, leveraging a sentence-based approach. In order to test ISIS ability to adjust message based on target audience, we further conducted qualitative content analysis. Our deep learning model test results showed, except for re-publication of one article in the second period, ISIS was in fact able to publish discrete propaganda items. The results of the qualitative content analysis showed ISIS was successful in differentiating thematic coverage of its propaganda content for English-, French-, and Turkish-speaking audience.

Keywords: Daesh, ISIL, magazine, translation, propaganda, similarity check

Introduction

ISIS, also named as the Islamic State or Daesh, has become notorious for its effective use of propaganda in its efforts to recruit new members and promote its ideology (Philips, Bucci, Florance, Dale, & Brookes, 2014; Johnson, 2015; Barrett, October 2017; Lister, 2014; Singer & Brooking, 2018; Sultan & De Landtsheer, 2019). Scholars have noted that massive propaganda has been central to the group's strategy (Milton, 2016), serving to bolster its legitimacy (Anfinson, 2021; Frissen, Toguslu, Van Ostaeyen, & d'Haenens, 2018; Boutz, Benninger, & Lancaster, 2018; Ubayasiri, 2021), recruit new members (Lakomy, 2021), and spread its message of terror and violence (Venkatesh, Podoshen, Jason, Rabah, & Glass, 2020).

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While much of this propaganda is distributed online through social media and other digital channels (Mitts, Philips, & Barbara F., 2022), ISIS has also been prolific in terms of producing print propaganda items such as magazines, pamphlets, and posters (Zelin, 2015) alongside a range of materials ranging from children's books (Engel, 2016) to textbooks on Arabic literature, history and physical preparedness (Olidort, 2016).

Several studies have examined the extent of ISIS's print propaganda output. For example, a study by Aaron Zelin that provides a snapshot for the totality of ISIS official media productions in a sample week in 2015 (from April 18 to April 24) shows that out of 123 total media outputs 88% were visual (63% picture, 20% video, and 5% graphic) whereas only 12% were textual (2% statement, 5% news report, 5% pdf). In terms of linguistic distribution, 8 of the items were in English, 5 in Russian, 4 in Kurdish, 2 in French, 1 in Urdu and the remaining 103 in Arabic. Accordingly, 78% of its media outputs came from provincial-level media operations whereas the remaining 22% came from central media (2015).

Due to the breadth of ISIS official media releases, Zelin's article provides insight into the general share of print propaganda material within overall ISIS media production. Yet, it only provides a picture of the status in April 2015. Both Milton and Winter argue the number of ISIS propaganda outputs decreased as the organization fell from power in time (Milton, 2016). Winter's study comparing number of propaganda items released for one week randomly selected in late summer 2015 and one week in January 2017 shows a decline by nearly 50 % in numbers. Accordingly, 892 unique items were released in 2015 whereas this number decreased to 463 in 2017. In 2015, the share of central media outlets within overall media releases was only 16, the remaining 84% coming from 29 provincial media offices. The share of central media rose to 41 percent in 2017 due to decline in number (only 22 remaining) and productivity of the provincial media offices (2018). This means, despite ups and downs of ISIS and resulting decline in provincial media output due to loss of territory, its central media outlets have been relatively prolific.

ISIS's "*communication strategy is comprehensive, cohesive, and multi-dimensional*", and textual propaganda has played a key role as in its "*full spectrum propaganda*" (Ingram, 2020, p. 20). The organization has instrumentalized especially the magazines to impose its worldview and ideology, and relaying its message to both ingroups and outgroups. The fact that four different volumes of ISIS' Dabiq magazine were sold over Amazon to the Western readers for a period of time in 2015 testifies for the terrorist organization's obsession to communicate its core messages to outer world (BBC News, 2015).

In the book they edited in 2019, Baele et al. indicate ISIS central media office has published 7 different magazines in English, French, Russian, Turkish and Arabic between August 2012 and 2019 (2019, p. 89).