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The Electronic Digitisation of ISIS: Building a Multi-media Legacy

By Remy Mahzam

Synopsis

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)'s ubiquitous cross-channel connectivity in the social media sphere enables its continuous engagement with its transnational audience, sustaining its online relevance, strong reputation and competitiveness in an increasingly digitised world.

Commentary

THE ELECTRONIC digitisation of the extremist identity of ISIS has been made effective through its frequent injection of videos, incessant release of periodicals and downloading of visual reports in multiple languages, eventually building up a digital compendium that will remain accessible for future generations for reference. ISIS has realised the importance of digital channels to engage its supporters and drive conversation since the start of its military expansion in July 2014.

Similar to a business strategy, the need to digitise the real world so as to retain a competitive advantage in an increasingly commoditised environment remains a strategic imperative. Al-Hayat Media, the official media channel of ISIS, operates in an organic manner overseeing several other media divisions such as Wilayat Ninawa, Al-Anbar, Baghdad, Fallujah, Al-Furat, Ad-Dijlah, Kirkuk and Ar-Raqqah and empowering each province to provide unique updates pertaining to its own developments. The videos produced by Al-Hayat pay tribute to fighters in the battlefield while offering a sense of realism to the online audience.

Media re-distribution strategy

Al-Hayat often relies on its online 'fanbase' in closed chat-groups or forum who will

look out for the most recent release of videos, media statements and periodicals. The data will then be pushed across various social media spheres like Twitter, Facebook and Google+ so that it would continue to be accessible through many sources.

The value of ISIS' digital engagement therefore can be measured not just from the absolute number of likes or shares generated from the original posting but through the multiple platforms on which the posting is made available for download and redistribution. An ISIS video would probably have an online lifespan of a few hours on YouTube before it is flagged as abusive and taken down. However, when the content is shared through video hosting sites like Internet Archive (archive.org) or Sendvid (sendvid.com), the original file can be downloaded and re-distributed on other platforms for later viewing.

Alternative messaging platforms and future of magazine

After efforts to clamp down on ISIS-linked social media accounts increased, ISIS online supporters have found alternatives to Facebook and Twitter to spread the messages. Content publishing platforms which do not request registration like JustPaste.it and Dump to allow quick-note sharing without the hassle of authenticated sign-up.

Major shifts in the publishing domain and print media and the significance of reader relationship in this generation provide an impetus for ISIS to thrive on cost-effective digital publications. ISIS' time-sensitive online magazine, *Dabiq* has rendered various translations, with directed messaging targeted at Russian, Turkish, French and even Bahasa Melayu audience, offering carefully crafted narratives that will shape the future of its political significance.

Dabiq's increasing online influence can be felt with the introduction of two new foreign editions *Исток* (*Istok*) in the Russian language released in May 2015 and *Konstantiniyye* in Turkish, released in June 2015. The French division of Al-Hayat has to date published its sixth issue of *Dar Al-Islam*. The magazine's multi-lingual offerings show an attempt to direct its strategic messaging to specific audiences in their respective mother-tongues.

Virtual Wilayat

The introduction of *Istok* magazine reflects ISIS' acknowledgement of the growing influence of Russia's North Caucasus militants who have made *bai'ah* (pledge of allegiance) to Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi. ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani even declared the newly established Wilayat Qawqaz as part of the caliphate's territorial expansion outside Syria and Iraq.

Wilayat Qawqaz has also introduced its own media channel responsible for the release of videos and media statements representing the voice of pro-ISIS supporters from the North Caucasus republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia. The addition of *Istok* and Wilayat Qawqaz's media channel enabled ISIS to gain more control over how it is perceived

online while at the same time safeguarding its virtual identity from being misrepresented by counter-narratives endeavours.

ISIS' Turkish magazine *Konstantiniyye* is aptly named after Istanbul's Turkish title for Constantinople, hinting at a possible caliphate takeover of the city either on a territorial or ideological dimension.

Media Jihad – videos, music and hashtags

Growing support from the Malay-speaking pro-jihadi community is evident with the availability of Bahasa Melayu versions of Dabiq and translated ISIS videos. Backdated issues of Dabiq as well other ISIS media paraphernalia are available as a package WinRAR and WinZip download over online file sharing platforms such as Dropbox and Google Drive. These translated resources appeal to ISIS' Katibah Nusantara audience in the recruitment of new fighters from Southeast Asia.

Ahmad Muhammady, the Political Science and Islamic Studies lecturer from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), noted that the trend of spreading ISIS propaganda in Bahasa Melayu was penetrating deeper into the country's social fabric affecting mostly youth. The endeavour to translate ISIS resources is being perceived as a form of media jihad, leading to the formation of media operations teams providing the vital link between the real battlefield and the virtual world.

Recent issues of Dabiq show video highlights showcasing the selected ten videos produced from various ISIS provinces. Crafted hashtags such as #return_of_the_gold_dinar and #daulah_alkhalifah are created to optimise search on these videos in Twitter.

Nasheed or religious chants celebrating Islamic State are also available as an MP3 download in multiple languages. Originally in Arabic, these spiritual anthems are used as soundtracks on ISIS videos offering moral encouragement and powerful mental stimulant to listeners.

ISIS's attempt to digitise its own identity by providing a comprehensive multi-media resource online reflects a far-sighted strategy to increase its digital metabolism, in an effort to boost viewership, following and ultimately support. Any counter-messaging initiative will prove ineffectual if this electronic compendium of resources is allowed to grow and eventually building a digital heritage for future generations to access.

Remy Mahzam is an Associate Research Fellow with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
