

Social media and the Islamic state: Can public relations succeed where conventional diplomacy failed?

Ella Minty

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The *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL), formerly called the *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* (ISIS) or—in ISIL-critical Arabian countries—داعش (*Daesh*), was not a state under international law but a pseudoreligious terroristic organization located in Northern Syria and Northern Iraq; however, ISIL operated worldwide, performing deadly attacks against “giaours.” ISIL was a theocracy based upon the idea of a Sunni-Islamic Wahhabi caliphate. Similar to one of its antecedents, *al-Qaeda*, and to other jihadist groups, ISIL made and makes use of digital media (Atwan, 2015), especially social media, for its public relations (PR) and for recruitment (Gates & Podder, 2015). In addition, it digitally published the English-language magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* as part of its strategic communication (Kling, Ilhan, Stock, & Henkel, 2018).

1 | SUMMARY OF MINTY’S BOOK

Is it possible to defend terroristic organizations such as ISIL through PR, distributed via social media? This is the leading question of the book by the PR practitioner Ella Minty. David Landsman, in his foreword, states that Minty’s “conclusion is that traditional stuffed-shirt diplomacy is not up to the task and must be complimented, if not replaced, by social media-savvy PR specialists who can appeal to the contemporary currency of emotion” (p. IX). Landsman seems to be certain that social media-based PR outperforms military actions to keep us safe from terrorism. PR is “about public emotions, behaviours, change,” Minty states and adds that social media “speaks with masses;” diplomacy “speaks with governments. If they join their forces, they will succeed in tackling the new forms of “PR-savvy” extremism at their core” (p. XII).

Minty’s short book is organized into an introduction, five chapters, and an afterword, completed by a comprehensive

bibliography and an index. In the Introduction, the author discusses the relations between diplomacy and social media, whereby “social media can support but not replace a foreign policy strategy” (p. 2). She stresses the importance of symbolism as a tool for diplomats. Terrorists of ISIL make use of PR, especially on social media channels. “ISIS’ extensive online presence is coupled with the superior quality of their media productions, with the planned use of soft focus, slow fades, colour saturation, superimpositions and carefully layered soundtracks” (p. 4).

With the help of its social media strategy, ISIL trains and nurtures its followers and fighters in their home countries and controls massacres such as those in Paris, Nice, London, etc. Chapter 1 is a literature review on ISIL’s use of social media. For Minty, ISIL (or ISIS or IS) is a “brand,” and ISIL’s members are “employees.” “Any respectable organization puts its employees first and uses these employees to further the credibility and recognition of its corporate values, missions and ethos—as if taken from a textbook on best practice PR, ISIS did just that” (p. 13). The PR of terroristic organizations plays with emotions and with the hope of overreactions in the aftermath of deadly attacks. Social media is not only a means for strategic communications but also for recruitment of new “employees.” “Social media is ISIS’ most powerful recruitment platform,” and thousands of Westerners fighting alongside ISIL in Syria and Iraq “are a reflection of ISIS’ smart use of Twitter and Facebook. The live nature of these two social media platforms enabled ISIS to reach disillusioned Westerners and provide them with a sense of community” (p. 13).

In chapter 2, Minty treats the Internet, and especially social media, as 21st-century challenges. For governments, social media may amplify their information dissemination “to ensure that all segments of society are reached, and information is timely received” (p. 15). However, governments have found that a simple presence on social media is not sufficient as active participation in online debates is

the “critical factor” (p. 18). In 2017, Twitter was used by the heads of states and governments of 173 countries; in addition, social media played active roles in information intermediation in the Arab Spring and when the Ghaddafi regime in Libya was overthrown (p. 21). And, not to forget, President Trump makes heavy use of Twitter. For Minty, “social media platforms have surpassed the other means of public communication such as newspapers, periodicals, television and radio—the people, the influencers, the extremists and the non-government actors can all be found in one location: on social media” (p. 24). With the help of social media, it is possible for any organization to build echo chambers of like-minded people—as did ISIL. “(I)t was social media that proliferated ISIS’ call to arms; and it was social media that gave the rise to a new form of jihad” (p. 24). On social media, ISIL’s successes in the jihad became celebrated: videos show children hunting bound captives before killing them, and others show war prisoners killed by drowning or beheading. Such “symbolism” of ISIL’s strategic communication was “very powerful, aimed at frightening the world’s democracies” (p. 27). For ISIL, the concrete victims are not that important, but the general effect of a terroristic act is as it has a stark impact across the audience (see p. 28). ISIL pursued two goals, namely, to recruit fighters and to intimidate the international community. To reach those goals, ISIL ran its own media center and a special Arabic-language app called “Dawn of Glad Tidings.” To motivate its fighters to perform their dangerous and perhaps deadly jobs, one of ISIL’s recruitment videos asked, “You only die once, why not make it martyrdom” (p. 33).

What was the answer of international politics and diplomacy? “The international community has failed yet to identify, agree and deploy an inclusive approach and narrative that is powerful enough to sway ISIS’ followers and counteract their online dominance” (p. 34). Consequently, chapter 3 makes the failure in public engagement a subject of discussion. “Has the international community forecast ... attacks?” and “Has the international community grasped the complexity of ISIS’ internet knowledge and cyber-crime potential?”, with both questions leading to the answer “No it hasn’t” (p. 42). An ISIL-affiliated hacker group was able to attack (with a denial-of-service attack) about 20,000 French websites 1 week after the deadly Charlie Hebdo attacks. “The evidence against the international community’s ability to counteract extremism ... is disheartening” (p. 52). In chapter 4 (“Discussion and Analysis”), Minty deepens the description of ISIL’s strategic communication on social media and calls this strategy cultural and political jamming. “ISIS used both political and cultural jamming to create a disruption in public behaviour” (p. 56)—cultural jamming to alter the behavior of its recruits in the direction of ISIL’s ideology and values

and political jamming to sharpen the global awareness on ISIL’s activities in the hope of influencing global change and of destabilizing Western countries. In chapter 5 (“Conclusions”), much attention is paid to diplomacy. “The fate of nations and bilateral relations is no longer dependent on personal encounters between heads of state—it is dependent on the perception of the general population” (p. 64). ISIL occupied the empty space left by Western diplomats and politicians on social media. “While ISIS had a very clear on-the-ground presence in Iraq and Syria, with various cells spread across Europe, Africa and Central Asia, ISIS’ stronghold was and still is the World Wide Web: the place where conventional diplomacy, international relations and diplomatic conventions have failed to gain ground” (p. 70). In her Afterword, Minty tried to answer her central question, “Can public relations succeed where conventional diplomacy failed” (p. 71)? Her answer is a cautious “yes;” however, diplomats and politicians have to learn from ISIL. “A propaganda strategy can only be counteracted by deploying the same mechanism that created that strategy to begin with—in ISIS’ case, that includes a wealth of psychological value-based triggers underpinned by state-of-the-art visual and audio supports” (p. 76).

How can we counteract terrorists? In the United Kingdom, there exists the National Cyber Security Center, Europol established an Internet Referral Unit, and NATO members have signed a Cyber Defense Pledge (pp. 41f.). In the United States, we observe several means to defend the country from terroristic attacks, such as military actions, work of intelligence services, and new juridical and bureaucratic structures (such as the Homeland Security Act or the Patriot Act and the installation of the Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism). These means were partly created in response to al-Qaeda’s attacks on September 11, 2001. However, ISIL is not al-Qaeda (Cronin, 2015). All “classical” methods of fighting against terroristic organizations need a supplement or even a replacement. Minty correctly emphasizes the use of social media channels by diplomats and politicians. Therefore, we are in need of evidence of the social media information behavior of ISIL and its audience.

2 | MINTY’S WORK IN THE CONTEXT OF INFORMATION SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Minty’s book is not intended to be a scholarly information science study but a PR-orientated political science or media studies publication with the potential to inform an information science and technology audience. It is a good

starting point to study the social media activities of terroristic groups and the counteractions of diplomacy with the means of information science. When working empirically, we have to distinguish between social media posts by terroristic organizations (here, ISIL) and posts on those organizations.

Regarding empirical studies on social media activities by ISIL, it is very problematic to cover ISIL's posts. When a pro-ISIL post is published, it lasts some days or even only some hours, and the post is blocked and the account terminated. A tweet with a critical video of a military operation in Nangarhar (Figure 1) was deleted some days after publication. Accordingly, ISIL shifted its focus from social media (such as Facebook, YouTube, Justpaste.it, TikTok, and the previously heavily used Twitter) to messaging services (as, in this chronological order, Telegram, TamTam, and recently Hoop). There is hardly a chance for information scientists to collect complete empirical data sets from messaging services or from blocked social media accounts.

It is much easier to find social media posts on ISIL. We want to show only some examples from information science to give suggestions for further research. Bodine-Baron, Helmus, Magnuson, and Winkelman (2016) conducted a study on supporting (searching for “The Islamic

State”) and opposing (searching for “Daesh”) tweets in the Arabic-speaking Twittersphere. They found that the total number of ISIS opponents outnumbered supporters six to one, but “ISIS supporters routinely outtweet opponents, as they produce 50 percent more tweets per day” (Bodine-Baron et al., 2016, p. 11). Ruhrberg, Kirstein, Habermann, Nikolic, and Stock (2018) conducted a macro-level sentiment analysis on posts with the hashtag #ISIS on Twitter and found that, on average, no country in the world tweets with positive sentiment. Overall, a negative attitude in the tweeting world prevails regarding ISIL (mean sentiment -0.8 with a standard deviation of 0.4 on a scale from -5 to $+5$). In a study on the content of tweets in consequence of the attacks on Charlie Hebdo in 2015, Ilhan and Fietkiewicz (2017) analyzed the hashtags of (German) posts and found that the top three topics were #CharlieHebdo, #JeSuisCharlie, and #Pegida (a German anti-Islam movement). For English-language tweets, Fietkiewicz and Ilhan (2017b) found very interesting values for retweets and likes on tweets about terroristic attacks: concerning Charlie Hebdo (Paris, January 2015), on the second day after the attack, most retweets and likes became published followed by a decrease in numbers in the following days. Both the later Paris attacks (November 2015) and the Brussels attacks (March

#صور - قوات أمريكية خاصة على الارض رفة الجيش الأفغاني أثناء قصفهم وعملياتهم العسكرية في #ننجرهار

مليشيات طالبان أعلنت أنها سيطرت على المنطقة، مما يؤكد أن المليشيا عبارة عن صحوات للأمريكا وتقاتل تحت دعم الطيران الأمريكي

Translate Tweet



FIGURE 1 Tweet with video on a U.S. special forces' operation in Nangarhar, Afghanistan. Source: Twitter, November 22, 2019 [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

7:08 PM · Nov 22, 2019 · Twitter for Android

2016) led to a peak only on the first day after the attack (relatively many retweets and likes for the Paris attacks tweets but only few for the Brussels attacks tweets) and then to a decrease to nearly zero on the next day. There is a clear decline of audience's attention to ISIL's attacks from Charlie Hebdo to Paris attacks to Brussels attacks and an increasing lack of interest concerning terroristic attacks. Fietkiewicz and Ilhan (2017a) could also show that there are different national patterns concerning retweets of posts on the three terroristic attacks (high retweetability values for the United States, medium-sized value for the United Kingdom, and low values for Germany). Kling et al. (2018) identified three thematical trends in the content of ISIL's magazines, namely, (a) ISIL has stopped calling for their target audience to travel to IS-controlled territories, (b) ISIL promotes violence in the recruits' home countries, and (c) a wider spectrum of political or ideological enemies are portrayed in ISIL's strategic communication.

3 | OUTLOOK

Is it really desirable for politicians and diplomats to bank heavily on social media? The tweeting behavior of Donald Trump and his team especially gives rise to doubts as there is always the danger of misinformation, fake news, echo chambers, and filter bubbles (Zimmer, Scheibe, Stock, & Stock, 2019). Will social media-based diplomacy end up in a "politics of debasement" (Ott, 2016, p. 59)? Will it be diplomacy, or rather demagogy, to publish repeated phrases on Twitter, for instance, "Do Nothing Dems," "crooked Hilary," or "witch hunt?" A positive aspect of Minty's book is to provoke tasks of information science to empirically describe, to analyze, and to criticize social media information behavior (Zimmer, Scheibe, & Stock, 2018) of terroristic organizations such as (the meanwhile defeated) ISIL, of diplomats, of politicians, and of demagogues.

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