



Mediating Islamic State

Introduction

MARWAN M. KRAIDY¹
MARINA R. KRIKORIAN
University of Pennsylvania, USA

How does the group that calls itself “Islamic State” communicate? How has Islamic State been understood and contested? This Special Section gathers emergent scholarly voices, many deploying humanistic inquiry, to probe a phenomenon that has predominantly been the province of social scientists, to explore and understand the players, patterns, and practices that have mediated Islamic State: the communicative ways in which the group has been studied, reported on, visualized, narrated, mocked, spoofed, and resisted. We use “mediation” rather than “media” to shift public discourse on Islamic State beyond the focus on technology that has characterized research on media and sociopolitical change generally, and Islamic State communication in particular. We seek to understand the historical, ideological, technological, and cultural complexity of Islamic State, meshing translocal struggles with global geopolitics. Mediation connotes a broad approach to media, which includes words, images, bodies, platforms, and the expressive capacities and meaning-making practices that communicators generate when they deploy these media.

Keywords: Islamic State, ISIS, mediation, popular culture, geopolitics

After the group that calls itself “Islamic State” cut a fiery profile in global consciousness when it blitzkrieg-ed the Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2014, it became global public enemy number one, and a boogeyman of devilish proportions in the global imagination. It is no surprise that the rise of Islamic State generated a flurry of attempts to produce knowledge about the group: wall-to-wall media coverage, myriad think-tank reports, a motley crew of talking heads that populated talk shows on screens worldwide, and a configuration of academics from international relations and political science, security studies, and media and communication studies.

How does Islamic State communicate? How has Islamic State been understood and contested? The Third Biennial Symposium of the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania sought to gather emergent scholarly voices, many deploying humanistic inquiry, to probe a phenomenon that has predominantly been the province of social scientists, to explore and understand the players, patterns, and practices that have mediated Islamic

¹ This Special Section is copublished with CARGC Press.

State: the communicative ways in which the group has been studied, reported on, visualized, narrated, mocked, spoofed, and resisted.

We opted to use “mediation” rather than “media” to shift public discourse on Islamic State beyond the focus on technology that has characterized research on media and sociopolitical change generally, and Islamic State communication in particular. Rather, we seek to understand the historical, ideological, technological, and cultural complexity of Islamic State, meshing translocal struggles with global geopolitics. Mediation connotes a broad approach to media, which includes words, images, bodies, platforms, and the expressive capacities and meaning-making practices that communicators generate when they deploy these media. From that perspective, contributions to this issue tackle popular culture as a dynamic context for meaning creation, within a framework of media and culture as formative of identity and community, and not merely as conveyors of ideas, images, and information. Grounded in CARGC’s mission to advance a global media studies that fuses multidisciplinary regional knowledge with theory and methodology in the humanities and social sciences, we hope this Special Section continues spurring critical conversations that promise a new understanding of the transnational nexus of communication, identity, and violence.

The articles included here are a peer-reviewed selection from the symposium presentations, and though these are “survivors” of a combination of peer review, regular attrition, and the vagaries of academic schedules, we are very proud that the author list of this Special Section includes several graduate students. Together, their articles suggest imaginative avenues to understand phenomena like Islamic State beyond the narrow lens of what communication scholars would call administrative research within a national security paradigm.

In “The Islamic State: Politics by Other Means?” Yara Damaj, a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, performs a critical theoretical analysis of Islamic State (IS) publications, recruitment videos, and speeches by IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, arguing that what enables IS’s reach beyond physical borders is the appeal it creates by playing on sentiments of victimhood via its rhetoric on (in)justice, (in)security, and (in)equality. By focusing on the way that IS communicates with (primarily Muslim) Euro-American audiences, she frames IS discourse as symptomatic of the present historical context of neoliberal capitalism, ultimately concluding that Islamic State’s rhetoric is at once a repudiation of and a reproduction of the status quo.

In “Toward a Protostate Media System: The Role of ISIS’s Content,” Kareem El Damanhoury, then a PhD student at Georgia State University, now an assistant professor at the University of Denver, analyzes the role of visual content (photographs) during a key transitional moment for Islamic State (the battle for Mosul). Defying the common understandings of the four dimensions of media systems identified by Hallin and Mancini, El-Damanhoury asserts that IS’s media products blur the line among the media, journalists, and the protostate. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study expands on the existing literature on IS media by examining visual frames and semiotics in IS’s imagery from the province of Ninawa. El-Damanhoury demonstrates that visual frames and semiotics are key tools that help sustain a protostate media system and asserts that countering IS’s protostate media system thus requires equally sustainable and creative media efforts.

In "Islamic State War Documentaries," Nathaniel Greenberg, an assistant professor at George Mason University, focuses on the group's documentaries. Tracing the evolution of the *ghazwa*, or military expedition aesthetic, in the filmmaking of ISIS and its predecessors, he explores the way in which Al-Furqan Media Foundation expanded from its origins as a documentary film unit to become one of the world's most potent vehicles of performative violence. He examines the manner in which aesthetic prerogatives, intertwined with religious mythology, served to transcend and unite disparate political factions around a common "narrative identity," one that preceded and will outlast the reign of the Islamic State caliphate. Al-Furqan Media Foundation pursues a literalist mode of interpretation, with the *ghazwa* performed live rather than predicated on an imaginary horizon of expectations.

In "Iconic Socioclasm: Idol-Breaking and the Dawn of a New Social Order," Christoph Günther, principal investigator at Johannes Gutenberg University, proposes a notion of *socioclasm* to understand IS. Islamic State articulates its claim for legitimate authority through texts, audio messages, and still and moving images. In addition, among the practices employed by Islamic State to classify "genuine" Islam and its boundaries, the destruction of cultural properties received great international attention. In this article, Günther argues that Islamic State's attacks on these properties are embedded in an all-encompassing strategy of spatial, material, ideational, and intellectual purification of the socioreligious landscape. By destroying these monuments, Islamic State targets integral elements of social identities of local and transnational communities and their individual members to build a new social framework on their ruins. Günther understands these acts as strategic socioclasm. Visualizations are part of this strategy and help render Islamic State an effective force as they support the production of mental images in the minds of both the movement's followers and adversaries, which become testimonies for the rise of Islamic State, its ideology, and actions.

In "Theologians, Poets, and Lone Wolves: Mapping Medium-Specific Epistemologies of Radicalization," Brian T. Hughes, a PhD student at American University, writes that examinations into the roots of Islamist terrorism have frequently presented the phenomenon as a result of either perverting political-religious epistemologies into distorted, caricatured fundamentalisms, or, alternatively, as a return to form, whereby a pure, root ideology/metaphysic is rediscovered. The former approach reflects a discourse rooted in print media and characterized by logical argumentation, linear chronology, and deference to the text. The latter approach reflects a discourse rooted in modes of secondary orality, which posits a font of ideal essence that precedes expression. The figure of the digitally engaged lone wolf undermines these discourses. His violent extremism appears only Islamically inflected through an accretion of contradictory mediated encounters linking representations of violence, Islam, and the lone wolf himself.

Hughes argues that a new approach and discourse should therefore emerge, specific to the hypertextual and rhizomatic qualities of multiplicity and contradiction that characterize the digitally engaged lone wolf. Such a "hypertextual discursive turn" bears a promise to provide ways to discuss the many and varied "floridities" of the lone wolf type in the digital age, which, Hughes argues, cannot be comprehended from either the epistemology of print and linear discourse or from that of secondary orality.

In "The Geopolitics of Television Drama and the 'Global War on Terror': *Gharabeeb Soud* Against Islamic State," Heather Jaber, a doctoral fellow at the Center for Advanced Research in Global

Communication at Annenberg–Penn, and CARGC Director Marwan M. Kraidy examine the television program *Gharabeeb Soud (GS)*, which aired on the Saudi-owned media channel MBC in May–June 2017. Described by MBC as part of a global campaign to counter the group that calls itself Islamic State (IS), *GS* focuses on the lives of women IS recruits. Analyzing *GS*'s funding, production, intertextuality, genre, and reception, this article articulates the show as a form of entertainment-education at the intersection of Saudi domestic policy, U.S. foreign policy, and MBC's transnational market considerations. Jaber and Kraidy find that the show operates strategically to counter the IS narrative, rhetorically to suture Saudi and U.S. agendas, and discursively and affectively in its focus on women. Further, *GS* highlights the limitation of intentionality in constructing strategic popular communication as the program crosses a red line through its melodramatic portrayal of traumatic, real-world events. By reconsidering the literature on entertainment-education, building on scholarship on the geopolitics of popular culture, and pairing the genre of melodrama with geopolitics, Jaber and Kraidy identify a depoliticization and individualization of violent radical Islamism emblematic of the neoliberal turn in global media industries. They conclude that analyzing a text like *GS* enables the mapping of geopolitical and affective forces that impinge on state policy, which, by attempting to promote national agendas, spawns transnational commodities.

In "Collaborative Media Practices and Interconnected Digital Strategies of Islamic State (IS) and Pro-IS Supporter Networks on Telegram," Michael Krona, an assistant professor at Malmö University, Sweden, argues that no previous organization has managed to execute such a widespread and sophisticated model for producing and distributing propaganda as Islamic State (IS), relying on digital participation from supporters on a global scale. In 2015, IS and its supporters started using the encrypted application Telegram. On pro-IS channels, supporters are currently managing virtual communities in which an ideological bolstering and recontextualization of official propaganda are apparent on a daily basis. Through a digital ethnographic approach and covert observation of IS's official and supporter channels on Telegram for six months in 2017, Krona presents findings on what characterizes the symbiotic relationship between official IS channels and supporter (pro-IS) channels and content. He discusses the conjunctures and collaborative media practices and affordances surrounding official and supporter channels on Telegram as manifestations of contemporary digital warfare. In addition, Krona provides a wider theoretical understanding of IS's use of Telegram as an expression of a participatory media culture in which the contemporary relationship between the IS's central organization and its supporters constitutes a significant shift in modern online terrorism.

In "Islamic State and *Game of Thrones*: The Global Between Tradition, Identity, and the Politics of Spectacle," Bashir Saade, lecturer in politics and religion at the University of Stirling, writes that the gruesome videos circulated on most media platforms by the organization that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) have prompted a heated debate about the "Islamicity" of the organization, centered on how serious IS actors were on getting their "interpretations" right. Saade argues that if any act of "interpretation" or of understanding of "religion" has been transformed by the various technological and ideological developments of the past two centuries, Salafi understanding of a mythical past and imagining of history outside a "lived" tradition, marries itself conveniently with the way the latest audiovisual technology manifest itself to an audience, especially in consecrating a culture of speed and "eventual" rupture. This relationship leads to a "collapse of meaning," while leaving room for an overflow of "graphicness." Saade draws parallels between these practices and those of recent TV shows, such as *Game of Thrones (GoT)*, in reimagining a "medieval

era” that serves as a schema for addressing contemporary concerns, arguing that *GoT* explains “hyperreal” aspects of IS cultural production—for instance, through the imagining of a medieval universe as a historical juncture that is “secularized,” which enables an exploration of whether IS is subservient to a global audiovisual culture that has helped the collapse of meaning in IS’s notion of “Islam.”

In “Islamic State and Women: A Biopolitical Analysis,” CARGC doctoral fellow Mohammed A. Salih and CARGC director Marwan M. Kraidy seek to understand the type of power wielded by Islamic State (IS), based on IS’s own writings and images. Focusing on IS’s views and treatment of women, they conduct a textual analysis of IS’s online English-language magazine *Dabiq*. Interpreting their findings through a theoretical framework combining the work of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe on biopolitics and necropolitics, they theorize IS’s gendered biopolitical power. Salih and Kraidy assert that IS is obsessed with microregulating all aspects of Sunni Muslim women’s lives, imposing a strict dress code and a regime of gender segregation and ensuring women’s subjugation to men in the private and public domains. However, for non-Muslim Yazidi women, IS’s sovereign power manifests itself in the subjection of captured Yazidi women to a “state of exception,” reducing their lives to its bare biological minimum. Salih and Kraidy’s comparative analysis of IS’s treatment of Sunni and Yazidi women enables us to identify shifts and overlaps between biopolitical and necropolitical power, concluding that IS’s reactionary wielding of sovereign and disciplinary power against women helps explain the group’s uncompromising worldview of self and other.