

UNDERSTANDING ISIL MESSAGING THROUGH BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

By generating propaganda that taps into individuals' emotional and cognitive states, ISIL is better able motivate people to join their jihad.

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Last week, in what was a historic moment for a presidency bent on "ending all wars," President Obama announced to the American people that the U.S. would be entering Iraq and Syria to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). For a group that was largely unheard of only a year and a half ago, how did ISIL displace al Qaeda as the preeminent terrorist threat to the U.S.? Neuroscience can help shed light on why ISIL has become the "go-to organization for young jihadists."

ISIL is demonstrating a deliberate and carefully constructed media strategy that arguably would give Edward Bernays, the seminal theorist of propaganda, a run for his money. As a New Republic article highlighted last month, ISIL's outreach strategy spans all forms of media communication. ISIL has harnessed the power of social media, exploiting platforms such as Twitter and YouTube, to share its jihadist message. Much like a corporation or government, ISIL utilizes individuals, or press officers, whose job is to coordinate their narrative. Furthermore, ISIL's English-language magazine, *Dabiq*—which is named for the town in which the prophet Muhammad prophesied that the West and Muslims would battle in the wake of the apocalypse—has been leveraged as a tool to attract new Western recruits. Given how effective ISIL messaging has been, one must wonder what is it about their narrative that is so compelling? Can behavioral science help explain the draw of ISIL's media campaign?

ANGER IS OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH A DESIRE TO CHANGE THE STATUS QUO, TO "'MOVE AGAINST' ANOTHER PERSON OR OBSTACLE BY FIGHTING, HARMING, OR CONQUERING IT." ANGER HAS THE ABILITY TO PROFOUNDLY SHAPE A PERSON'S POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING, AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT CAN THEN MOTIVATE A PERSON TO PUT THAT DECISION INTO ACTION.

In a article for Scientific American, Jeremy Hsu notes that "people accept ideas more readily when their minds are in story mode as opposed to when they are in an analytical mind set.... Such immersion is a state psychologists call 'narrative transport.'" Victoria Romero, a leading neuroscientist, has observed that narrative transportation has a dramatic effect on cognitive and emotional processing. Narrative transport amplifies the sharing of emotions with story protagonists and it also increases an individual's cognitive load, thereby decreasing their ability for critical thought. Moreover, Geoff Kauffman and Lisa K. Libby have found that narrative transportation, from a propagandist standpoint, will heighten an individual's identification with the worldview of the story characters, thus diluting the salience of their own opinions.

For ISIL this has profound implications. A careful reading of a recent issue of *Dabiq* shows that it seems to exhibit the hallmarks of such neurological narrative transport methodologies. *Dabiq* uses well-known stories, such as that of the Great Flood, to help transport its readers. Both of *Dabiq*'s "The Flood" two main feature stories use protagonists to drive home their intolerant message—that death awaits all those that worship "false prophets." By calling for Islamic worship and jihad throughout the story, ISIL is constantly conditioning its readership. ISIL's narrative devices are clearly intended to provoke an emotive response. Each story features a righteous protagonist that is ridiculed by the populace. Invariably, the ignorant masses suffer Allah's judgment. In this particular case, Allah's purge of the "non-believers" in the Great Flood is presented as a mere historical foreshadowing of the punishments ISIL plans to mete out on 21st-century "infidels."

In a 2003 study led by Harvard University's Jennifer Lerner, a group of experimental social psychologists asked a nationally representative sample of U.S. residents to read a news story about celebrations in some areas of the Arab world following a U.S. terrorist attack. The story was designed to elicit anger. Lerner then asked the participants a series of questions about their preferences for U.S. policy in the region. Those that were in a state of anger supported harsher policies against suspected terrorists. This method of emotive pre-conditioning is one the defining traits of ISIL's communications strategy. Perhaps even more relevant to the understanding of ISIL's messaging is a 1989 study led by a Dutch psychologist, Nico Henri Frijda. Frijda found that anger is often associated with a desire to change the status quo, to "'move against' another person or obstacle by fighting, harming, or conquering it." Anger has the ability to profoundly shape a person's political decision-making, and, more importantly, it can then motivate a person to put that decision into action.

In essence, ISIL's media strategy revolves around two key neurological components. In the first instance, ISIL is utilizing narrative transport in order to prime their readership to become receptive to their messaging. ISIL then seeks to trigger violent emotional responses through the use of Manichean narrative devices, with the hope of successfully modulating the readers' decision-making.

ISIL's rise as a terrorist organization can largely be imputed to their successful recruitment campaign. The Central Intelligence Agency recently estimated that there are 20,000 to 30,000 ISIL fighters, including 15,000 foreign fighters—2,000 of which are Western-born and -educated. At the root of any recruitment campaign is the ability to convince individuals to join your cause—to align their decision-making with your own. By generating propaganda that taps into individuals' emotional and cognitive states, ISIL is better able motivate people to join their jihad.

Notwithstanding diversities in culture, religion, or education, neurological processes are the same the world over. As Nicholas Wright and Karim Sadjapour have pointed out, "there is no orientalism of the brain: The fundamental biology of social motivations is the same in Tokyo, Tehran, and Tennessee." By placing evocative narratives at the very heart of their messaging, ISIL is able to generate a powerful emotional response that fuels hatred and violence. Isn't it time for the West to generate its own counter-narrative?

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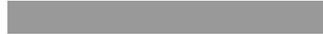
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