

THE ISIS MEDIA NETWORK AND THE ACTIVITIES OF CYBER JIHADISTS

МЕДІАМЕРЕЖА ІДІЛ ТА ДІЯЛЬНІСТЬ КІБЕРДЖИХАДИСТІВ

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Abstract. *The article examines the directions of the ISIS media strategy. It is shown that, unlike other terrorist groups, ISIS has formed media organizations responsible for the preparation and dissemination of thoughtful propaganda content, including turning social networks from a simple tool into a multifunctional weapon and becoming a skilled, literate Internet user.*

The military intervention of the US-led coalition forces in Iraq, the overthrow of the Saddam regime, and the subsequent “Arab Spring” revolutions in the Middle East weakened and collapsed state structures in a number of countries in the region, including Iraq and Syria. During the turbulent changes that occurred during these processes, radical Islamist forces, in particular the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL), joined the struggle to replace the corrupt former regimes that had lost the support of the population and seize power. ISIS used the resulting social injustice, economic inequality, and political pressures to spread its ideology and achieve its main goals.

There was the multilingual ISIS media center Al-Hayat, responsible for propaganda content, the Al-Furqan and Al-Itisam film studios, which produce Islamic songs (Nasheeds) Al-Ajnad, as well as the Al-Bayan radio station, which broadcasts propaganda programs on the territory of the caliphate.

ISIS has professionally used Facebook, Twitter, mobile apps, and chat rooms, published reports on its activities on various platforms, and broadcast ideological messages, propaganda videos, and instructions. It has broadcast high-quality propaganda films on various video platforms in order to attract young people from different countries of the world, and has organized forums by creating closed discussion platforms among individuals inclined to radical ideology. A group of hackers under the brand of ISIS also formed on the Internet, which acted as a special unit of the so-called Cyber Caliphate organization.

The dissemination of professionally edited videos, high-quality photographs and symbolic messages by ISIS using digital technology allowed it to form the visual power of the “caliphate” and gather thousands of supporters.

Keywords: *ISIS, Al-Hayat Media Center, Al-Furqan media Agency, Al-Bayan Radio, Cyber Khalifat*

Анотація. *У статті розглядаються напрямки медіастратегії ІДІЛ. Показано, що, на відміну від інших терористичних груп, ІДІЛ сформувала медіаорганізації, відповідальні за підготовку та поширення продуманого пропагандистського контенту, зокрема перетворення соціальних мереж з простого інструменту на багатофункціональну зброю та перетворення на кваліфікованого, грамотного користувача Інтернету.*

Військове втручання сил коаліції на чолі з США в Ірак, повалення режиму Саддама Саддама та подальші революції «Арабської весни» на Близькому Сході послабили та розвалили державні структури в низці країн регіону, включаючи Ірак та Сирію. Під час бурхливих змін, що відбувалися під час цих процесів, радикальні ісламістські сили, зокрема «Ісламська держава Іраку та Леванту» (ІДІЛ), приєдналися до боротьби за заміну корумпованих колишніх режимів, які втратили підтримку населення, та захоплення влади. ІДІЛ використала

отриману соціальну несправедливість, економічну нерівність та політичний тиск для поширення своєї ідеології та досягнення своїх головних цілей.

Існував багатомовний медіацентр ІДІЛ «Аль-Хаят», відповідальний за пропагандистський контент, кіностудії «Аль-Фуркан» та «Аль-Ітісам», що випускають ісламські пісні (Нашиди) «Аль-Адждад», а також радіостанція «Аль-Баян», яка транслює пропагандистські програми на території халіфату.

ІДІЛ професійно використовувала Facebook, Twitter, мобільні додатки та чати, публікувала звіти про свою діяльність на різних платформах, транслювала ідеологічні меседжі, пропагандистські відео та інструкції. Вона транслювала високоякісні пропагандистські фільми на різних відеоплатформах, щоб залучити молодь з різних країн світу, та організовувала форуми, створюючи закриті дискусійні майданчики серед осіб, схильних до радикальної ідеології. В Інтернеті також сформувалася група хакерів під брендом ІДІЛ, яка діяла як спеціальний підрозділ так званої організації «Кіберхаліфат».

Поширення ІДІЛ професійно змонтованих відео, високоякісних фотографій та символічних повідомлень за допомогою цифрових технологій дозволило їй сформувати візуальну силу «халіфату» та зібрати тисячі прихильників.

***Ключові слова:** ІДІЛ, Медіацентр «Аль-Хаят», Медіаагентство «Аль-Фуркан», Радіо «Аль-Баян», Кіберхаліфат*

Introduction. One of the most important components of ISIS' activities has been its skillfully developed media strategy, including a wide presence on social media. The rapid spread of information about ISIS around the world and the group's sudden fame resulted not only from the conquest of vast territories in Iraq and Syria, but also from a well-planned multilingual media campaign, including social media. The campaign included the release of videos, photographs, memorable magazines and Islamic songs (nasheeds), as well as active Twitter activity. ISIS's social media activity has transformed the small, violent jihadist group that emerged after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 into a symbol of an organization leading a global "jihad" against "infidels". Thanks to their extensive social media activities, ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi have become the new face of international terrorism in the 21st century.

ISIS was not the first terrorist organization to use the Internet and other technological tools in its activities. Thus, since the 90s of the last century, Al-Qaeda and other active terrorist groups have been using the Internet. However, the use of the Internet and various mobile applications has never been a key tool in the media strategy of these terrorist organizations. However, unlike other terrorist groups, ISIS used social media, which is an open communication channel accessible to everyone, and its media strategy was fundamentally different from other terrorist organizations in both quality and productivity. Therefore, studying the ISIS media network and propaganda methods through this network is of theoretical and practical importance.

The formation of the religious-ideological foundations of ISIS's activities is examined in a historical context, and the pillar elements of the ideology that turned its inhuman crimes and barbarities into the norm of life are analyzed.

It is shown that the ideology of ISIS was formed mainly on the concepts of Salafi jihadism, takfirism and caliphate. It is emphasized that the ideological foundations of ISIS are based on Salafi jihadism, which is the most radical form of Salafism. In this context, it is shown that one of the main principles of Salafism is considered to be tawhid (monotheism), bid'ah (rejection of innovations) and loyalty to the caliphate.

It is noted that ISIS ideologists interpret the concept of tawhid with a harsh approach towards other sects and trends. They further radicalize the ideas of the ideologists of radical religious thought, presenting the concept of jihad as not only a defensive, but also an offensive activity. ISIS limits jihad to violence and acts of terrorism, and considers peace and diplomacy to be "weakness". It is emphasized that the ideology of ISIS, which is one of the main elements of its ideology, allows it to declare individuals and any community "infidels" and to legitimize the use of violence against them from a religious point of view. ISIS claims that it is the duty of true Muslims to declare everyone, including Muslim state leaders, various sects, and even moderate Muslims, as infidels and to declare them infidels. ISIS quotes the Quran and hadiths in order to justify its claims and violent actions from

a religious point of view, and manipulates religious texts by removing them from their historical and social context. At the same time, they do not accept the views of traditional Islamic scholars and sectarian diversity.

The research mainly uses methods of comparative analysis and source analysis, as well as political analysis. During the analysis, reports of international organizations and scientific articles are used as the main sources of information; in addition, information obtained from reports of various governmental and non-governmental organizations is analyzed in a comparative manner.

The main purpose of the study is to study the media strategy of ISIS.

Main Results of the Research. First, significant attention has been paid to social media as a tool for mass mobilization and building a global audience. Research shows that ISIS has effectively utilized platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to rapidly disseminate information and engage supporters. In particular, the viral nature of content and the organization's ability to act faster than traditional media are emphasized (*Ajbaili, 2014*). Empirical evidence confirms the scale of digital support and the complex network structure of content distribution, which facilitates the radicalization of users (*Berger and Morgan, 2015; Klausen, 2015*).

Second, a number of authors examine propaganda as an element of ISIS's strategic and institutional activities. These studies emphasize that information activities were integrated into the process of quasi-state building and served as a mechanism for legitimizing power, attracting resources, and attracting foreign fighters (*Barrett, 2014; Farwell, 2014*). Additionally, the synchronization of military action and digital communications has been noted, allowing for the demonstration of successes in real time (*Vitale and Keagle, 2014*).

The third area of research concerns the analysis of ideological content and narrative strategies. Researchers demonstrate that media products such as the magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* form a coherent system of meanings based on religious, apocalyptic, and heroic *narratives* (*Ingram, 2016; Welch, 2018*). These texts function as strategic communication tools aimed at constructing legitimacy and identity.

A separate body of work is devoted to the technological and cyber aspects of ISIS's activities. This examines cyberattacks, the use of secure communication channels, and the transformation of cyberspace into an arena of asymmetrical confrontation (*Bat Blue, 2015; Sengupta, 2017*). In parallel, the professionalization of media production and the activities of specialized media centers are analyzed (*Kingsley, 2014; Winter, 2015; Zelin, 2015*).

Finally, researchers note the adaptation of marketing and cultural strategies, including the use of pop culture elements and "digital seduction" mechanisms to attract young people (*Hoffman, 2016*). The multi-layered nature of propaganda, including both centralized and decentralized forms of user-generated content, is also emphasized (*Khawaja and Khan, 2016*).

Despite the significant contributions of these studies, several limitations remain in the literature. Most studies either focus on specific aspects (e.g., social media, ideology, or cyberthreats) or are descriptive. As a result, a comprehensive discourse analysis that simultaneously considers the linguistic, pragmatic, and social functions of ISIS digital content remains underdeveloped.

Thus, a research gap exists in the absence of an integrative approach to studying ISIS's digital discourse as a multifunctional system combining elements of propaganda, identity, ideology, and strategic communication. This article aims to fill this gap by analyzing discursive strategies and their functions within a unified theoretical model.

ISIS's main media outlets. Several media outlets were responsible for the production and distribution of ISIS propaganda content. Al-Furqan and Al-Itisam produced films in Arabic, the Al-Hayat media center produced materials in English, German, French and Russian aimed at Western audiences, and Al-Ajnad produced Islamic songs (Nasheeds). The multilingual structure of the Al-Hayat Media Center provided a wide range of media materials to attract potential foreign recruits. One of his products, in particular, was a series of short propaganda videos in HD known as "Mujatwits", which showed various aspects of daily life in the "caliphate", from the battles in Iraq and Syria to Western fighters expressing their joy at joining ISIS. The Al-Hayat Media Center also provided English subtitles for videos released by other ISIS agencies such as Al-Itisam and Al-Furqan. ISIS also had an al-Bayan radio station, which broadcast propaganda programs on the territory of the "caliphate" (*Hoffman, 2016*). Al Bayan radio station broadcast daily news from Mosul

and propaganda materials in modern Arabic for those who did not have access to mobile phones or the Internet. These programs were also uploaded to YouTube and streamed via Twitter to expand audience reach. Each program began with Islamic songs (Nasheeds) in Arabic praising ISIS. (*Khawaja and Khan, 2016, p. 115*).

The Al-Hayat Media Center also published an online magazine called The Islamic State Report (ISR). The magazine published articles about the benefits of living in the “caliphate”, as well as about ISIS activities and programs. The magazine often contained photographs and interviews with militants and residents describing how they enjoyed the prosperity of the “caliphate”. ISIS also published a six-page PDF newspaper called Islamic State News (ISN), which contained images and brief propaganda commentary in English about various events of the day. (*Barrett, 2014; Khawaja and Khan, 2016, p. 115*).

To recruit new ISIS supporters, he also published the electronic magazine Dabiq from 2014 to 2016, which was an expanded version of the online magazine Islamic State: Reports and contained more detailed texts in English. It resembled the popular English-language magazine Inspire, published by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and known for its basic instructions for terrorists. Dabiq included lengthy comments on Islamic texts to give religious legitimacy to the actions of ISIS, and encouraged any attempts to join the “caliphate”. In 2016-2017, ISIS replaced Dabiq with the English-language magazine Rumiya, which was published in English and aimed at an English-speaking audience. (*Welch, 2018*).

In addition to the central media structures mentioned above, in each of the provinces (wilayats) ISIS had its own local media departments, which were engaged in the production and distribution of video and photo reports on current events in the province. According to a study published by Aaron Y. In August 2015, the A'mak news agency, Al-Bayan Radio, Al-Hayat Media Center, Al-Furqan Media Center and the Sharia Committee represented only 22% (or 27 out of 123) of the information disseminated. At the same time, the remaining 78% of official publications came from provincial media. This suggests that in 2015, ISIS had a more decentralized media system than two years earlier. The decentralized structure of the main central media agencies, combined with local media offices, ensured a large volume and frequency of ISIS publications. This structure allowed ISIS to create the appearance of continuous activity on a global scale and demonstrate to its supporters that its forces are steadily moving towards creating a “caliphate” and waging war against its enemies (*Zelin, 2015, p. 88*).

ISIS and social media. The main innovation in the ISIS media strategy compared to previous terrorist organizations has been the widespread use of social media for propaganda. Indeed, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, mobile apps, chat rooms, social networking sites, etc. have provided ISIS with a wide range of platforms to attract new recruits. ISIS has used social media as an important tool to promote its brand. By publishing videos and photographs depicting the execution of victims, the organization sought, on the one hand, to present itself as brave, and on the other, to impress the audience. On social media, ISIS was presented as the only moral force fighting against the immorality and brutality of the West, and posters depicting Western brutality were posted to this end. The ISIS media strategy positioned itself as a true follower of the faith, a supporter of social justice and an avenger of the suffering of others.

The benefits of social media for ISIS became apparent on July 4, 2014, when photos of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who publicly declared his status as “caliph” for the first time, appeared on Twitter even before the full video of his speech was uploaded to YouTube. As a result, most major international news agencies continued to report on the creation of the so-called “caliphate”. In his speech, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called on Muslims around the world to join ISIS. In particular, he called on highly qualified Muslims - doctors, judges, engineers, computer specialists and hackers - to go to Iraq and Syria or join jihad from their countries. Facebook Instyle spread this message online through a free, unregulated group of people with popular accounts on Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook, and other social media platforms. ISIS controlled an army of bloggers, analysts, and other writers who monitored global social media. Most of them operated anonymously and were based far beyond Iraq and Syria, in the Persian Gulf and North Africa. These bloggers posted tweets with links to videos, which are usually very effective, and then shared them on social media (*Barrett, 2014; Terror Goes Cyber:..., 2015*).

ISIS used social media to spread its materials as quickly and widely as possible. For example, in April 2014, ISIS launched a special Android application in Arabic called Dawn of Good News, also known as Fajr al-Bashar or Shubh, to create and send out mass tweets (Kingsley, 2014). Between April and June 2014, an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 people downloaded the app to track the progress of ISIS and receive the latest news about its activities. On the day of the capture of Mosul by ISIS, about 40,000 messages were sent through the app (*Khawaja and Khan, 2016, p. 115*).

In addition, ISIS militants conducted hashtag campaigns on Twitter. Hundreds, if not thousands, of ISIS fighters tweeted certain hashtags at certain times of the day, making them appear on the @ActiveHashtags account, which posts the most popular hashtags on Twitter in Arabic on a daily basis. These campaigns allowed ISIS militants to distort the results of a popular account and attract an additional audience (*Ajbaili, 2014*).

In addition to Twitter and Facebook, ISIS militants have also taken over *Ask.FM* and *Instagram*. *Ask.FM* was aimed at teenagers and served as an online recruitment platform. Anyone who wanted to join ISIS could ask their questions anonymously through this platform. The group posted photos on the social network Instagram. On this platform, foreign fighters shared personal stories or details of their daily lives. Among the many photos of weapons or the aftermath of the fighting were photos of jihadists enjoying food and adapting to life on the front lines (*Vitale and Keagle, 2014*).

ISIS has also used various online communication apps such as Skype, Signal, WhatsApp, and SnapChat. These applications were typically used for more confidential forms of communication. Another opportunity for ISIS was the FireChat messenger, which allowed them to communicate without an internet connection.

ISIS hacker group. There was also a group of hackers operating on the Internet under the brand of ISIS, which was a special unit of the so-called “Cyber Caliphate”. The Cyber Caliphate organization included the hacker division of the Islamic State, the AnonGhost electronic jihad terrorist group, and others. The aim of these groups was to hijack, damage, or hack major media, government, commercial, and educational websites, as well as steal and temporarily control social media accounts and spread their messages. Damaged or hacked websites were usually accompanied by images of ISIS fighters with black flags and the phrase “hacked by the Islamic State”. In particular, after the terrorist attacks in Paris in January 2015, 19,000 French websites were subjected to cyber attacks.

Overall, ISIS has demonstrated a significant increase in its cyber capabilities, as evidenced by its increasingly diverse and successful online strategy. In particular, on April 9, 2015, a cyber-Caliphate carried out a cyberattack on the popular French news channel TV5Monde, as a result of which 11 TV5Monde channels were unavailable for several hours. The company’s social media accounts were hacked, the website did not work, and employees could not access their emails. Hackers gained control of social media accounts and posted messages in support of ISIS and documents purporting to reveal the identities of French soldiers fighting against ISIS. A message on the hacked TV5Monde Facebook page read: “French soldiers, stay away from the Islamic State! You have a chance to save your families, take this chance. The cyber Caliphate continues its cyber jihad against the enemies of the Islamic State” (*Terror Goes Cyber, 2015*). The ISIS cyberattack on TV5Monde has become unprecedented in the history of television.

In April 2016, several ISIS hacker groups joined together under the name United Cyber Caliphate (OKH). The United Cyber Caliphate includes the Cyber Caliphate Army, the Ghost Caliphate Section, the Sons of the Caliphate Weapons, and Kalashnikov E-Security.

Within six months of its formation, the United Cyber Caliphate conducted cyber operations, recruited new followers, and provided them with security advice on how to avoid detection and carry out terrorist operations.

In early February 2017, ISIS-linked hackers attacked several websites of the UK National Health Service. Hackers known as the “Tunisian Fallagi Team” attacked six websites three weeks earlier, replacing them with graphic images of the war in Syria. They claimed that the attacks were a response to Western interference in the affairs of the Middle East. The hacked websites displayed the message “Stop killing people in Syria”, followed by hashtags such as #Op_Russia and #save_aleppo. It was reported that the Tunisian terrorist group, along with the Global Islamic Caliphate and the DZ

Command System, conducted coordinated operations in support of ISIS. It was also reported that in January 2017, these groups carried out a cyberattack on the Barts Health Trust, a large hospital trust that manages four hospitals in East London. The trust was forced to disconnect from the system after a cyberattack compromised the confidential files of thousands of patients (Sengupta, 2017).

Conclusions. Thus, unlike other terrorist groups, ISIS has proven its ability to skillfully use the Internet, turning social networks from a simple tool into a multifunctional weapon. The ISIS media strategy is, first of all, more consistent and modern. The range of ISIS media strategy ranges from news production to writing educational materials, resulting in high-quality propaganda. The main leitmotif of this propaganda was to create a “gap between the past and the present situation of Muslims”, emphasizing that this gap underlies “the anger and insults that have fueled political violence in the Middle East”. ISIS has made full use of the concept of “electronic jihad” to achieve its goal and has been able to develop well-structured and comprehensive information operations that have become a key feature of its militancy.

The comprehensive and large-scale use of ISIS’s cyberspace capabilities came as a surprise to the international community. Thus, the international community was not prepared for the fact that a terrorist organization would spread its militancy using the capabilities of the global network and thus wage war on social networks. This meant that the fight against ISIS, in addition to military responses, also required a special social media strategy, and international counterterrorism measures had to adapt to new threats from social media.

ISIS has made excellent use of modern information technology to carry out its propaganda on a global scale and has been able to reach millions of people through social media and digital propaganda. To achieve its goals, ISIS published reports on its activities on Twitter and Telegram platforms, broadcast ideological messages, propaganda videos, and instructions. ISIS has released high-quality propaganda films on YouTube and other video platforms to attract young people from around the world, and has created closed discussion platforms and organized forums among those inclined to radical ideology.

ISIS’s use of digital technology to broadcast professionally edited videos, high-quality photographs, and symbolic messages has allowed it to project the visual might of the “caliphate” and attract thousands of followers. ISIS makes extensive use of emotional manipulation to spread its ideology and recruit supporters through social media and digital propaganda, using images of suffering victims to incite feelings of hatred and revenge among potential recruits.

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