

In relation to trolling, one of the first studies that examined it was conducted by Donath on Usenet groups.³⁸ Also, Hardaker provides several definitions for trolling and classifies it into different types based on four main features: aggression, deception, disruption, and success. In relation to this study, two categories are more relevant. The first one is called thwarted/frustrated impoliteness, which refers to the malicious intent of a message, but its intention is frustrated or thwarted by the receiver either because (s)he is not offended, so no action is taken (frustrated), or because it is countered by, for example, “sarcasm, contempt, amusement, or suchlike” (thwarted). The second type is called genuine, malicious, or strategic impoliteness, which successfully achieves its goal in offending the receiver(s).³⁹ Further, Bishop discusses two types of trolling: flame trolling and kudos trolling. The former refers to vitriolic comments that are not intended to be humorous, unlike the latter type. Again, the overlap between the two terms is obvious here. Bishop also classified people who troll others into different types,⁴⁰ yet none of the classifications he offered could be applicable to this study on mediated terrorism.

In all cases, trolling seeks to create an argument, entice others into endless discussion, or hijack a discussion.⁴¹ In other words, trolling is meant as a distraction from the main online discussion in the forum or platform by diverting attention to another issue which is mostly irrelevant.

Similar to trolling, there is no agreement on a unified definition of flaming, but it usually “consists of aggressive or hostile communication occurring via computer-mediated channels.”⁴² Indeed, flaming is similar to trolling, but the language is usually harsher, more personal and is far more aggressive since it contains insults, obscenity, swearing, and curses,⁴³ especially if the topic relates to religion.⁴⁴

Whether trolling or flaming, ISIS sympathizers run what is called “disseminator’ accounts” on social media, especially Twitter, which “lend moral and political support to those in the conflict.”⁴⁵ It is also known as the Swarmcast model in communication studies; “once content is produced and released, it is often the distributing network of media mujahideen, rather than the original producer, that ensures continuing content availability.”⁴⁶ This model suggests that sympathizers gather like a swarm of bees or birds that always re-organize themselves and are ready to engage and attack at any given time. In the following section, a discussion is made on ISIS’s media techniques.

ISIS communication strategy

ISIS employs a communication strategy that is based on highlighting certain appeals. Haroro J. Ingram identified three media strategies followed by ISIS: “the use of a multi-dimensional, multi-platform approach that simultaneously targets ‘friends and foes’ to enhance the reach, relevance and resonance of its messaging; the synchronisation of narrative and action to maximise operational and strategic ‘effects’ in the field; and the centrality of the Islamic State ‘brand’ to its entire campaign.”⁴⁷ In this regard, the high number of ISIS recruits indicates that ISIS is still successful since one of its most important appeals being employed is its professed link to a conservative version of Islam (*salaf* or pious predecessors). This claim is used as a marketing tool by ISIS as its members insist on utilizing the black banner which was originally used by Muslims when Islam first emerged. Further, the group’s name itself is meant to sound Islamic (ISIS), or later abbreviated as the Islamic State (*Tandheem Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiah*). Third, there is

an ongoing flow of information from cities controlled by ISIS, showing that the group intends to rule in a utopian way that is allegedly reminiscent of early Islam, especially in relation to highlighting religious duties and obligations.⁴⁸ The above claims are all meant to brand ISIS as a purely Islamic group,⁴⁹ so any attack against its members is regarded as an attack against Islam itself. For example, ISIS's *Dabiq* magazine refers to anyone that fights the group as an enemy of Islam, infidel, or apostate. In an article on Abū Sinān an-Najdī, who was killed in his attack on the Āl Salūl Emergency Task Force in Saudi Arabia, the writer pledges revenge against Saudi security forces: "By Allah! You will not enjoy safety and security, and you will not have a comfortable life as long as you wage war against Islam and the Muslims and remain as tails of the West, which plays around with you as it pleases. Your coalition with the Majūs [pejorative for Shiites] and the Crusaders against Ahlus-Sunnah [Sunnis] in Iraq and Shām is the biggest witness against you."⁵⁰ Further, ISIS repeatedly portrays itself as "the protective vanguard for the world's Sunni Muslims,"⁵¹ while the theme of victimhood in the sense that Muslims, especially Sunnis, are victims of world powers is prominent in ISIS's promotional materials.⁵² Indeed, equating the group with Islam and the Sunni faith is one of the appeals that drives some devout Muslims to join this criminal organization.

On the other hand, ISIS also releases favorable images by showing its charitable side, such as helping elderly people or organizing life in the cities they control. Some also show fighters relaxing, swimming, eating, and playing with cats.⁵³ According to a study conducted by Voactiv on ISIS's promotional materials for about a one-month period, 45% of the materials posted online are focused "on its efforts to build and sustain the caliphate."⁵⁴ The study also found that only 2% of the materials posted targeted the West, in comparison to 4% on Libya that recently witnessed a growing ISIS presence. James Farwell claims that these "warmer images aim to communicate the message that, while strictly Islamic, ISIS stands for promoting the welfare of people, not murdering them."⁵⁵ Yet this is not the only message ISIS wants to communicate, as the main intention behind releasing such positive images is to give the impression to the outside world as well as to the people they control that the group is strong and resilient as it is not affected by the ongoing military operations against its fighters. Further, some recruits seek thrilling experiences and adventure and regard ISIS as the "hippest"⁵⁶ and "sexiest jihadi group on the block."⁵⁷ Bennhold observes that some young ISIS recruits come "from a world in which . . . Islam is punk rock. The headscarf is liberating. Beards are sexy."⁵⁸ Other reports on "pop jihadists" in Europe fit this category, and they are defined as "Muslim youngsters who flirt with terrorist symbols" with the use of social media.⁵⁹

Finally and most importantly, ISIS uses propaganda and misinformation which are based on disseminating its ideology to as many people as possible and in various languages. President Obama revealed some of ISIS's strategies in a speech delivered in February 2015: "The high-quality videos, the online magazines, the use of social media, terrorist Twitter accounts—it's all designed to target today's young people online, in cyberspace."⁶⁰ Aside from the different tools that circumvent Internet censorship, ISIS and its affiliates and sympathizers use Al-Hayat, Al-Furqan, and Al-Ethar media centers, which function as their centralized Information Ministry. These different media centers use social media outlets like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook besides certain websites, radio stations, the Clanging of the Swords promotional videos, and its *Dabiq* magazine to disseminate their ideology.⁶¹ The *New York Times* is accurate in

describing ISIS media strategy as Jihad 3.0⁶² due to its highly sophisticated media campaign that involves the use of “multidimensional propaganda,”⁶³ high-tech filming, and editing equipment.⁶⁴ The term is originally derived from Web 3.0, which developed from Web 2.0. According to Manuel Castells, this new phenomenon refers to “the cluster of technologies, devices, and applications that support the proliferation of social spaces on the Internet thanks to increased broadband capacity, open source software, and enhanced computer graphics and interface, including avatar interaction in three-dimensional virtual spaces.”⁶⁵ Indeed, ISIS is making full use of different technologies that are not confined to social media, especially Twitter, but extend to video games, hacking by its Cyber Caliphate Army, apps, and the Dark Web.

According to an ISIS follower, the group uses a few centralized Twitter accounts that “tweet official statements and news updates” as well as provincial accounts run from the provinces ISIS controls, “which publish a live feed about [local] Isis operations.”⁶⁶ In addition, there are ISIS “jihobbyists,”⁶⁷ fan clubs, or followers and sympathizers, for it is estimated that ISIS has about 46,000 Twitter accounts that are sympathetic to or supportive of the group, which are mostly based in Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia,⁶⁸ prompting the EU to commission the European Law Enforcement Agency, Europol, to block ISIS access to social media.⁶⁹ This decentralized communication method makes it challenging to counter ISIS messages,⁷⁰ though it can offer some security benefits like disclosing valuable information about the location of some ISIS fighters.⁷¹ According to Berger and Morgan’s study on ISIS Twitter accounts, 73% of the followers selected Arabic as their main language followed by 18% English and 6% French, “a finding that tracks to some extent with the distribution of Western foreign fighters.”⁷² In fact, the Arabic language has long been one of the fastest growing languages on Twitter, with more than 2 million tweets posted every single day.⁷³

Other media platforms are actively exploited by ISIS. In April 2014, ISIS “introduced an Android app, called ‘The Dawn of Glad Tidings,’ which leverages Twitter users’ accounts to share ISIS-related tweets.”⁷⁴ It was only recently that ISIS moved to another social network called “Diaspora” and other lesser known networks and websites like Friendica, Quitter, Justpaste, Ask.fm, Soundcloud, and Mixlr after its Twitter accounts were blocked.⁷⁵ In terms of online influence, it seems that ISIS has a wide network of followers and/or sympathizers that exist not only in the Middle East region but that extend to North America and Europe.⁷⁶

It is important to note here that the shocking beheading and killing images and videos that are disseminated by ISIS are meant to create awareness about the group and its activities similar to the shock advertising techniques used by some commercial corporations which are well documented in previous scientific research.⁷⁷ This is another persuasive strategy as ISIS attempts to brand itself as a savage group that is defending Islam against the infidels, represented by anyone that fights them. In this regard, social networking sites are mostly used to attract attention and entice possible victims, after which other communication technologies are used, especially mobile services like Viber, Surespot, WhatsApp, FaceTime, Kik, Skype, and Telegram.⁷⁸ In brief, the different platforms used and media strategies followed by ISIS that seem to complement each other indicate that this group is waging a new Jihad that goes beyond what Web 2.0 offers, making it far more effective than traditional terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda.