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A Transmedia Approach

SARA MONACI
Politecnico di Torino, Italy

The Islamic State's (IS) online propaganda has been analyzed from various perspectives aimed at defining the role of the Internet, the power of social media networks, and the main narratives processed online by terrorist organizations. Nevertheless, very little research has focused on defining IS's comprehensive media strategy. To date, IS propaganda has been defined as multidimensional or as a mix of techniques related to moviemaking and video games. In consideration of the highly sophisticated IS online dissemination activity and its impact on Western youth who are already familiar with intensive media consumption, this article explores IS propaganda through a Hollywood-style transmedia approach. I analyze, through a qualitative content analysis of the magazine *Dabiq* narratives, IS propaganda as a comprehensive transmedia strategy centered on three key assets: synergistic storytelling, imaginary world-making, and semantic triggering.

Keywords: transmedia, transmedia storytelling, terrorist narratives, Islamist propaganda, Internet, radicalization

Internet as a Communication Battleground

Media scholar David Jay Bolter (Bolter & Grusin, 2002) introduced his book *Remediation* with a reflection on the events of 9/11, describing how, for the first time in history, an audience could watch that dramatic show of terror and despair on the Web. Millions of people witnessed what was later called the most horrific show in the history of contemporary live media.

Al Qaeda terrorist activities already had quite a long history, but 9/11 tragically revealed the potential, the ambition of Al Qaeda's long-term strategy, and the idea of a "communication war" in which propaganda plays a crucial role in reaching the "hearts and souls" of the extremist Muslim world. As stated by Weimann (2006), "In 1998, fewer than half of the groups designated as foreign terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department maintained websites; by the end of 1999, nearly all these terrorist groups had established their presence online" (p. 15).

Sara Monaci: sara.monaci@polito.it

An empirical study by Precht (2007) on 242 European jihadists from 2001 to 2006 on the effects of the Internet on radicalization found that there is a correlation between jihadist websites and Internet-based propaganda and a rapid radicalization phenomenon. Braniff and Moghadam (2011) also observed that the success of Anwar al-Awlaki in creating high-quality, high-production-value content, such as *Inspire* (Al Qaeda's Web magazine), which advocates "jihad from home" and has been heavily distributed in the West, is cited as broadening the appeal of violent extremism.

The 9/11 attacks could be considered the ignition of a dramatic change of scale in propaganda strategies implemented by terrorist organizations. They also revealed the propaganda of terror as a phenomenon that is increasingly intertwined with Internet-based communication and media.

The Rise of the Islamic State Online: Various Analytical Approaches

Recently, the Islamic State (IS) has turned out to be a disrupting phenomenon in the jihadist online galaxy. The terrorist organization took its propaganda of terror to new heights of macabre rituals through the massive production and online dissemination of audiovisual contents. IS overwhelmed the media scene of terror in Europe in 2014 and 2015 with considerable online dissemination of videos, blogs, and social media profiles (Prucha, 2015; Whiteside, 2016). Only toward the end of 2015 was a decrease recorded in video contents, perhaps because of the destruction of some of IS production facilities based in Syria and Iraq following coalition airstrikes. Moreover, IS intensively produced high-quality magazines, such as *Dabiq* (Harris, 2014), named after a mythical place in Syria that represents a promised land for IS proselytes. *Dabiq*, which has been published since 2014, is available in several languages, such as Turkish, English, French, and German. People in Western countries are the intended target, particularly the so-called foreign fighters. The magazine systematically appeals to young men and women who are described as members of a Muslim brotherhood, true believers or defenders of the *Ummah* (the whole community of Muslims bound by ties of religion) in the Islamic State. The basic call to action entails the *hjira*, which means leaving their native country to join the Islamic State as their new holy homeland. *Dabiq* was recently replaced by *Rumiyah* (the Arabic word for *Rome*; Svirsky, 2016), thus referring even more explicitly to the West as an alleged land of conquest. The new magazine mirrors the former in terms of structure and content type; both are produced and released online by Al-Hayat Media Network. Along with videos and magazines released by a media organization based on the main Al-Hayat hub, a significant propaganda flow stems from social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, among others.

Stern and Berger (2015) analyzed how IS strategically used Twitter between April and June 2014 with the application "The Dawn of Glad Tidings," which enabled its users to receive up-to-date news about IS progress. The application could also take control of a consenting user's account to automatically send out tweets. Prominent official IS members and supporters signed up for and formally endorsed the app as a trusted and official source of news. The Dawn of Glad Tidings automatically sent out links to official IS news releases and media, and hashtags that the ISIS social media team wanted to promote. Although the application had been suspended by Twitter at the end of Summer 2014, the number of pro-IS accounts in 2014 and 2015 remained significant, further enriched by thousands of bots (i.e., computer software pieces that act like actual Twitter users) tweeting and retweeting specific contents. Those bots were particularly

active, for example, in retweeting IS official propaganda messages, such as the videos of beheadings and the video *Flames of War* released in September 2014 by Al-Hayat (Stern & Berger, 2015). The 55-minute video has also been deemed the first official appeal made by IS to intimidate Western governments and to engage new proselytes and fighters from the West (Svirsky, 2014).

The ISIS Twitter Census funded by Google carried out a study in partnership with the Center for Middle East Policy (U.S.) on Twitter profiles that supported the Islamic State during the period 2014–15. They analyzed 46,000 pro-IS profiles on Twitter between Syria and Iraq, and focused on 20,000 accounts to draw a general demographic snapshot of Twitter's IS population. Among the findings, the researchers observed that much of IS's social media-based success can be attributed to a relatively small group of hyperactive users in the range of 500 to 2,000 accounts, which tweet in concentrated high-volume bursts (Berger & Morgan, 2015).

Other studies have focused mainly on social media networks involved in the foreign fighter recruitment process. Carter, Maher, and Neumann (2014) especially analyze the role of the so-called facilitators, spiritual guides who are not directly involved in terrorist organizations or in recruitment logistics, who nevertheless exert their ideological influence and pressure to support the cause of IS. Klausen (2015) remarks that regarding Twitter, a considerable flow of posts from foreign fighters in Syria does not directly reach followers in Western countries, but is controlled and retweeted either by terrorist organizations in the insurgent zones or by Europe-based organizational accounts associated with the banned British organization Al Muhajiroun and particularly with the London-based preacher Anjem Choudary. This reveals how, by exploiting an articulated and scattered network of social media disseminators and facilitators, locally produced propaganda could reach a potential global audience through network virality and pervasiveness.

Violent Islamist propaganda has also been analyzed in terms of narratives (Kassels, 2010; Schmid, 2014), which are considered strategic assets in addressing public opinion for "winning the hearts and minds" (Al Raffie, 2012, pp. 14–15) of the jihadist audience. A narrative can be considered a "coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories" (Halverson, Corman, & Goodall, 2011, p. 14). These stories are so deeply ingrained in cultural frameworks that they are an essential part of people's identities and "who they are" in any given cultural setting. Within jihadist extremist narratives, it is possible to differentiate between four distinct, although not mutually exclusive, narrative layers that can be identified by studying statements and texts of individual terrorists and extremist organizations. The following narrative layers can be identified by applying these categories to modern jihadist terrorism.

A *political narrative* can be discerned that concerns themes such as the crimes of the West and its supported proxies, the global suppression of certain (religious) minorities, and the inequitable distribution of income, welfare, or land. Violent extremists succeed in telling a very persuasive, politically subjective story, often without aspiring to be part of the political solution themselves.

Second, extremists use a *moral narrative* by continuously portraying concepts, such as liberal democracy, freedom of speech, and gender equality, as unachievable, hypocritical Western ideals; they emphasize that these so-called liberties have only resulted in the moral degradation of Western societies

(where they refer to the moral decay bred by the propagation of sexual promiscuity, the replacement of God's sovereignty and laws by that of the people, the growing indifference bred by individualism and the neglect of family, the destruction of youth by the distribution of drugs and alcohol, etc.).

Third, *religious discourse* is employed to further delegitimize the West and advance the perception that fighting against the immoral West is a just cause; jihadi terrorists often successfully use a persuasive theological argument that sanctions the use of violence against enemies of Islam, an argument they claim to be globally valid and an individual duty of every Muslim. Muslims are thus being forced to choose sides: If you do not approve of the scriptural narrative as described, you apparently oppose it and, therefore, do not prove yourself to be a good Muslim.

Finally, a *social, heroic narrative* is also part and parcel of jihadist extremist narratives. Jihadists use this type of narrative to exploit feelings of social exclusion among young men and women in a global culture of celebrities. They present jihadism and the struggle against the West as the perfect fulfillment of their yearning for adventure, heroism, glamour, and admiration by emphasizing romantic notions of a brotherhood of arms and exciting life in the camps.

Giving due consideration to IS's highly sophisticated messaging and its impact especially on Western youth has further emphasized the need for this research approach as stated by Beutel et al. (2016) and for recommendations issued by the European Radicalization Awareness Network[1] also in relation to counternarrative policies.

IS Media Strategy: Research Methodology

The increased number of foreign fighters in 2014 and 2015 (Barrett et al., 2015; Vidino, 2014), especially among young Europeans, reveals the need to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of IS propaganda. IS's online communication has been analyzed in terms of "use of social media," main narratives, and audiovisual content analysis. To date, few contributions have focused on media strategy used by IS and how it exploits different media platforms, audiovisual contents, and synergies among various media assets to enhance its messages. IS propaganda has been quite simply defined as "multidimensional" (Ingram, 2015, p. 730) or as a "mix of techniques at the crossroad between movie-making and videogames" (Maggioni & Magri, 2015, p. 87). Especially when we consider a Western young audience that is already accustomed to rich, sophisticated, and differentiated media consumption, it is important to also analyze the overall media strategies deployed by IS to maximize the outcome. According to the analysis presented in this article, IS pursues a comprehensive transmedia propaganda strategy aimed at amplifying the reach of messages presented in *Dabiq* through synergic relations with multiple online contents, such as videos released on various websites, *nasheed* (vocal music that carries Islamic beliefs), Twitter hashtags, and so on.

My hypothesis is that IS's online propaganda is based on a transmedia strategy; precisely, different media contents are not just different channels of distribution of the same message, but each

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[1] https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en

medium is chosen for its specific aesthetic and communicative features in a transmedia communication strategy in which each medium "can do what is does best" to maximize the narrative impact. *Synergistic storytelling* is the key concept that describes this strategy. Textual content in *Dabiq*, for example, can be used to process an analytical description of IS's claim of a currency of its own, as in the article "The Currency of the Khilafah" in *Dabiq* 5, and videos are studied to highlight with a suggestive and explanatory approach the benefits of the return to the gold dinar in the context of a comprehensive narrative related to IS as an economic organization based on Islamic principles (e.g., *zakah*) and the return to a mythical past of fairness and flourishing trade. With use of different media, IS propaganda effectively builds an imaginary story world, a visual system of references that reinforces the messages through an emotional impact. Both visual and storytelling synergies are very efficiently integrated by the semantic triggers that allow the right comprehension and engagement of the targeted audience.

I carried out a qualitative content analysis based on narrative identification on 14 issues of the English version of *Dabiq* available online. I focused on a particular narrative that could be defined, according to the above categories, as an economic policy narrative that concerned such themes as the global oppression imposed by the Western capitalistic finance system and the inequitable distribution of income, welfare, or land. This narrative reveals both IS's condemnation of the Western financial and banking system, which is deemed responsible for plundering Middle Eastern resources, and also emphasizes a number of equity principles in the caliphate (e.g., zakah) as the "holy pillars" of IS's economic policy. This kind of narrative appeared as an article and a video link in five issues of *Dabiq*, and the contents were also related by an articulated system of semantic reminds and references. I analyzed this storytelling reference system with the transmedia approach explored in detail in the following sections.

Transmedia Storytelling

Transmedia is a relatively new concept in media studies. It has been discussed by semioticians Scolari (2009) and Lemke (2009), sociologists Morreale and Bertone (2015) and Andò and Leonzi (2014), and media designers Phillips (2012) and Giovagnoli (2013), although perhaps the most comprehensive and significant interpretation has been by Jenkins (2006). To describe Hollywood's corporation strategies aimed at creating new nonlinear narrative trends, Jenkins wrote,

> A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. (p. 95)

Centered on popular Hollywood movies such as *The Matrix* or *Fight Club*, Jenkins's contribution reveals important trends also in the creation of contemporary media narratives, emphasizing the development of complex storytelling structures organized on different media platforms with a specific goal, namely, to engage a dispersed audience of people with different dedicated contents (video, texts, social mobile media contents) disseminated by all media available. Along with fiction, more recently a nonfiction

transmedia field has emerged especially in relation to documentaries (O'Flynn, 2012), serious gaming (Morreale & Bertone, 2015; von Stackelberg & Jones, 2014), and social online campaigns, such as the "Red Nose Day" campaign in the United Kingdom (Freeman, 2016b). According to Freeman (2016b), nonfiction transmedia could be referred to the concept of *infotainment*—a mix of information and entertainment aimed at engaging the audience across multiple media platforms through an extensive use of social media and storytelling strategies based on real facts or events. Compared with fiction transmedia, nonfiction tends to "generate impact on the public sphere" (Freeman, 2016b, p. 95)with a pragmatic call to action aimed at raising funds, engaging people for an active commitment in their communities, or influencing their opinions in the context of political election. A common *ethos* (i.e., the complex of tradition, social values, and habits) shared by the targeted community is the premise for an effective transmedia strategy. Such charity campaigns as Red Nose Day or the initiative #Bring Back Our Girls following the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls by IS affiliate Boko Haram in Nigeria[2] are based on shared values at the national level as well as on common human rights such as the universal right to education and gender equality. The campaigns want to generate impact on the public sphere, raising awareness of dramatic events or social issues that affect many people's lives.

Both fiction, such as the Hollywood movies cited, and nonfiction transmedia products have a tendency to maintain internal linear consistency in all media platforms, such as the movie, the video game, or the online video. At the same time, they exploit each media content through social network sites that allow the audience to interact with the main content (e.g., through hashtags) without altering its own particular linearity or consistency.

According to transmedia strategies, the IS house organ *Dabiq*, by means of hashtags and online videos promoted in the magazine, provides further content and media platforms with which individuals can interact. Starting from a particular element of the narration presented in the magazine (e.g., hashtags or as link to a video), IS could enrich, multiply, and spread different posts related more or less closely to the main one. That was also the main strategy deployed by the application The Dawn of Glad Tidings, which had the specific role of amplifying the reach of messages spread by Twitter.

To maximize the impact of its message, *Dabiq* propaganda had to, however, maintain the coherence of its propaganda message while engaging a wide audience through social network sites. How could IS ensure that the "right" narrative would be understood among different platforms and audiences with the same impact? How could the spreadability (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) of the message and its consistency be optimized at the same time?

IS's Transmedia Strategy: Key Concepts for Propaganda Analysis

To analyze IS's strategy, I introduce three main concepts processed from various contributions to transmedia studies: synergistic storytelling, the art of world-making, and additive comprehension and engagement.

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[2] http://www.bringbackourgirls.ng/

Synergistic storytelling is deemed the strategy of framing one single narrative through different media content and online platforms, maintaining at the same time overall coherence and continuity among different contents. With regard to media corporations, it refers to the development of franchises, such as *The Matrix* or the TV series *24* based on a movie, normally the main content and a number of Web videos, video games, and multiple comics issues (Jenkins, 2006). In this extensive choice, the users can find narrative elements that lead them from one medium to another following a nonlinear kind of narrative. This is also common in IS's propaganda in which, for example, *Dabiq* could be considered the main media platform—the tent pole (Davidson, 2010)—that is able to present the main issues and key topics, which are subsequently dispersed and reframed through multiple online videos, Twitter hashtags, *nasheed*, and so on.

The art of world-making entails the development of complex audiovisual and textual storytelling based on the repetition and redundancy of aesthetic items, such as symbolic images, songs or soundtracks, and textual references or characters, which provide the users with a coherent imaginary world among different media platforms. For instance, in the popular TV series *24*, the dominant countdown is a common element that is easily recognizable, and in the story world of *The Hunger Games*, the symbols of the different tribes are recurrent throughout the transmedia narrative (Giovagnoli, 2013). Also *Dabiq* and media-related contents recursively present visual symbols, for example, IS's black flag, images of the foreign fighters' heroic brotherhood, or John Cantlie's reports[3]; technical features, such as the first-person take, the dominant red-orange-black color grade typical of popular video games such as *Call of Duty*,[4] or even the background *nasheed,* which reinforce the dramatic impact of visual sequences that largely contribute to the creation of a complex and consistent IS popular mythology.

Additive comprehension and engagement are crucial aspects of transmedia storytelling, whose objective is to organize multiple contents and media to engage the audience more effectively by triggering a particular semantic approach. Semantic triggers are based on Lévy's (1997) interpretation of media products as "cultural activators"—complex systems of semantic reminders that offer the audience multiple levels of interpretation and entertainment. Various elements can be identified within cultural activators at a narrative and semantic level. They could be defined as "triggers," which could be either symbolic items or explicit references to other media contents dispersed in the story world. They invite the user to explore all of the different available media, seeking further hints to better understand the topics. Engagement is then the effect of a cooperative interpretation approach. It refers to the textual pragmatism approach theorized among others by Eco (1979), who states that readers could infer from the text what the text

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[3] John Henry Cantlie (born 1970) is a British war photographer and correspondent who was kidnapped in Syria with James Foley, executed by IS, in November 2012 and remains a hostage. He had previously been kidnapped in Syria in July 2012, but was rescued a week later. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Cantlie

[4] *Call of Duty* is a first-person shooter video game franchise. The series began on Microsoft Windows, and later expanded to consoles and handhelds. Several spin-off games have been released. As of April 2015, the *Call of Duty* series has sold more than 175 million copies. Sales of all *Call of Duty* games topped US$10 billion. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Call_of_Duty

does not explicitly say. They could fill the semantic gaps and relate what is written to the intertextuality dimension from which the same text takes origin and into which it will merge. In this case, readers are actually encouraged to elaborate their own semantics. The hidden author is, of course, suggesting the right semantics by means of multiple triggers, such as the inclusion of verses from the Koran among the images or referring to authoritative comments of Western testimonials, as noticed in multiple IS videos.

DABIQ *Synergistic Storytelling*

The online magazine *Dabiq* can be considered the transmedia tent pole: "An important media experience which supports a number of other different media related experiences. . . . The main media product develops a fan base which moves along different media to explore the entire storyworld" (Davidson, 2010, p. 65). The magazine is probably the most popular online source or, at least, the most significant in terms of quality standards and also for the exhaustive analysis of topics discussed. It is also available in several languages, namely, English, German, French, Turkish, and its contents are especially oriented toward a global audience, the *ummat islamiyya* (Ummah). Fourteen issues have been released online starting from 2014, just after the proclamation of the caliphate. Each issue counts 40–80 pages, with high-quality professional layout, images, and, starting from Issue 9, references to Internet videos produced by the various IS districts or *wilayat*.

A transmedia structure first appears in Issue 9. A full page describes *Nasheed*, a channel dedicated to video and multimedia contents in different languages, also with references to Arabic Twitter hashtags. Issue 9 presents a playlist of the most significant 10 videos documenting the ongoing battle between IS and its opponents in the different *wilayat*. The titles of the videos are also used quite often as hashtags in Twitter conversations. Videos focus on IS fighters and their achievements in the battlefield; images enhance the courage of IS fighters with exemplary stories that are especially appealing to the Western audience. Reports of heroic struggles against the infidels and a call to action for potential foreign fighters in the West are the main narratives of the terror playlists.

The second important transmedia structure appears in Issue 10 associated with the narrative of IS as an economic organization based on Islamic principles (e.g., zakah) and on the return to a mythical past of fairness and flourishing trade (economy narrative). Compared with the moving images of heroic battles, this narrative has gained much less attention especially by Western media focused on the morbid rituals of hostage beheadings. Much has been written about the shocking images that disrupted the sense of media reality with the mise-en-scène of death. This narrative that, at least in Western perception, radically went beyond the edge of what is visible and what is not has been called "death on air" (Ricucci, 2016). Nevertheless, the analysis reported here outlines that the economic policy narrative is not only very popular in *Dabiq* but also presents a significant transmedia storytelling structure according to the key concepts mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Storytelling IS Economy, Part I: Transmedia Synergies Around Zakah

Framing the economy narrative into different media contents and platforms is an important aspect of *Dabiq* transmedia strategy as long as overall coherence and continuity are maintained for its

audience. As mentioned, the economy narrative transmedia structure appears in *Dabiq* 10, titled "The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men" (June–July 2015/Ramadan 1436). Page 49 is, in fact, entirely dedicated to advertising the online video *And They Give Zakah*.[5] In this 35-minute high-quality content, IS explains one of the pillars of its economic system. *Zakah* is, in fact, a form of alms giving and religious tax in Islam. As one of the five pillars of Islam, zakah is a religious obligation for all Muslims who meet the necessary criteria of wealth. The explanatory goal of the video is obtained through two rhetoric strategies: The first is to give voice to citizens, dealers, and shop owners of IS as witnesses of a functional and fair system of wealth distribution, and the second is achieved through effective use of infographics and data that give details about the specific value of different forms of zakah. The conceptual premise of the narrative is that zakah is a duty for all Muslims. Nevertheless, the video explains with a clear explanatory and sober approach how this principle is fairly implemented by IS in its controlled territories. Along with the video, the magazine page also refers to Arabic hashtags on the topic. The function of social media references, such as Twitter hashtags in a transmedia strategy, is focused on audience engagement. Twitter, in particular, is one of the favorite social network tools because it provides proselytes with the opportunity to access contents posted online in relation to a specific hashtag or topic and to easily and efficiently spread other posts by retweeting them to broader networks of followers (Klausen, 2015). The use of hashtags becomes a first line of engagement, which starts *Dabiq* as the tent pole of the narrative and is oriented to Twitter followers; it is also a second trajectory that starts from Twitter posts and brings the audience from the hashtags back to the magazines. In both cases, media contents could exist independently from one another, but, at the same time, they establish synergic mutual relations. This simple content flow from *Dabiq* to the video and then to hashtags and the reverse clarifies a basic synergistic storytelling strategy. The main narrative is framed through three different media contents, namely, textual advertisement in *Dabiq*, online video, and Twitter posts related to the hashtags, which can be accessed and experienced by an audience scattered worldwide.

Storytelling IS Economy, Part II:
Transmedia Synergies About The Return to the Gold Dinar

Issue 11 of *Dabiq* (August–September 2015/1436) shows a more complex synergistic storytelling strategy that develops around the video *The Dark Rise of Banknotes and the Return of the Gold Dinar* presented as the incipit of the magazine. The video is introduced in a full page along with the English hashtag #return_of_the_gold_dinar and is available online in a short version[6] produced by Al-Furqan Media and a long version[7] branded by Al-Hayat. The video enriches and rearranges the same key topics of two articles that were previously published in *Dabiq* 5 and later in *Dabiq* 6.

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[5] Available at http://jihadology.net/2015/06/17/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-and-they-gave-zakah/

[6] Short version is 5 minutes, 25 seconds. Available at http://jihadology.net/2015/10/11/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-dark-rise-of-banknotes-and-the-return-of-the-gold-dinar/.

[7] Long version is 55 minutes. Available at
https://ia801302.us.archive.org/5/items/TheRiseOfTheKhilafahReturnOfTheGoldDinar_201509/The%20Rise%20of%20the%20Khilafah%20-%20Return%20of%20the%20Gold%20Dinar.mp4

In *Dabiq* 5, Remaining and Expanding (October–November 2014/Muharram 1436), the article "The Currency of the Khilafah" explains IS's need to have its own currency:

> In an effort to disentangle the Ummah from the corrupt, interest-based global financial system, the Islamic State recently announced the minting of new currency based on the intrinsic values of gold, silver and copper. This initiative is a significant step towards shifting the Ummah away from the usage of currencies that are no longer backed by any precious metals, and whose values are constantly manipulated by the central banks of their respective nations. (p. 18)

The article underscores that IS opposes the global financial system based on the dollar as the primary currency in the oil market, and claims a return to a traditional system in which money value corresponds to precious metals, such as gold, silver, and copper. The new metal coins will be the currency of the Islamic State and their symbols will be inspired by doctrinal contents. In *Dabiq* 6, Al Qaeda of Waziristan: A Testimony From Within (December–January 2015/Rabi al–Awwal 1436), the same topic is further explored in the article "Meltdown" authored by John Cantlie. However, the most detailed and comprehensive visual explanation of both articles is found in the 55-minute online video *The Rise of the Khilafah: Return of the Gold Dinar*, which can be considered a proper movie. It is a documentary about the doctrinal premises and arguments that justify the need, claimed by IS, to go back to an economic system based on gold and silver coins and that also complies with the laws of the Koran.[8] The video, divided into two parts—a brief introduction and a main chapter—is the most comprehensive presentation of the ideological interpretations of contemporary political economy and financial system produced by IS's propaganda. Sequences include and emphasize some of the key topics already presented in *Dabiq* and reframed through different media contents. The first part is "The Legacy of the Prophetic Methodology." The key topics presented in this brief introduction unfold as follows: precisely IS's mission to "purify the earth" according to the "guiding book and the heading sword"; the definition of enemies, who correspond to Americans and Jews responsible for sustaining a "capitalist and financial system of enslavement underpinned by a piece of paper called the federal reserve dollar," which they impose on the rest of the world; the celebration of the global jihad carried out by "men firm like stones," including 9/11 terrorists, who successfully attacked the "hearth of the evil empire." This is followed by the representation of the American invasion of Iraq, and the report of the thousands of victims and the huge amount of money wasted on this war. The first arguments are a prelude to the core message, the fifth part of the short introduction, precisely, the rise of the caliphate portrayed as "the promises of the Prophet now unfold." In this context, the caliphate is depicted as the natural outcome of the prophetic methodology, as its necessary and natural consequence. The final sequence focuses on Al Baghdadi's images associated with the promise of purifying the earth and with the elicitation of the main principles of the sharia, the return of the head (beheading), the zakah, the *jizya* (tax required from non-Muslim people), and, most important, the return to the gold dinar "as the Khilafah surges in the financial sphere."

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[8] Available at http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/09/economist-explains-1

The second part of the movie (same title), "The Rise of the Khilafah: Return of the Gold Dinar," entirely focuses on the economic narrative, which expands on the development of an economy based on trade in ancient times; the necessity of establishing a standard currency to exchange goods, such as gold; and the rise of the banking system in the West in modern times, and contemporary financial institutions, such as the U.S. Federal Reserve, responsible of imposing a structure of global inequalities especially on Middle Eastern countries. This part is extremely authoritative and pedagogic. It provides multiple figures and explanatory infographics, which reframe topics already introduced in *Dabiq* articles. The video visually translates the contents of the articles; for instance, the concept of preserving the Ummah from the evil global financial system is found in the articles.[9] The condemnation of the United States and Israel for fostering a global banking system—the evil empire—that exploits Muslim countries' resources is repeatedly reported in all of the different sources. It appears in the incipit of "Meltdown" and is previously mentioned in *Dabiq* 5. Cantlie's article is, for example, a complex and detailed description of the financial system shifting from gold to the dollar currency after World War II, and again with Nixon's economic measures in 1971. It presents an extremely refined analysis, with a negative perspective, of the economic consequences in terms of deflation, U.S. dominance on the global oil market, and interdependence among the economies of Western countries. The topics are neither easy nor accessible for people with an average education, but then the video reframes them into plain concepts and images.

What we see in action is a complex transmedia storytelling strategy (see Figure 1). The synergy among different media contents functions to create a supportive interpretation system for the final user, a system that combines rational and argumentative manipulation of the text with the moving and evocative images of the video. *Dabiq* remains the tent pole as the access point of a broader transmedia storytelling narrative, which is framed through textual articles, online videos, and Twitter conversations identified by hashtags. Indeed, each medium does what it does best to engage the audience.

The Art of IS World-Making

How could complex transmedia storytelling have an impressive impact on a wide fragmented audience? Media aesthetics play a key role on individual perception achieved through forms of both textual and visual expression. With reference to the latter, the videos analyzed are relatively far from the shocking images of beheadings or war reports. In the *Zakah* content, for example, it is worth noticing the use of infographics with detailed figures related to the different values of goods in IS's system (livestock, cattle, wheat, etc.). Moreover, the storyteller uses very plain language to lead the audience from one topic to another. Another aspect is that light colors (white, green, yellow) dominate the scene, whereas in the other video, black and red are prominently used. The same catalog of colors is used in *Dabiq* articles that refer to the same topics.

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[9] "Shifting the Ummah away from the usage of currencies that are no longer backed by any precious metals, and whose values are constantly manipulated by the central banks of their respective nations" (*Dabiq* 5, "The Currency of the Khilafah," p. 18).
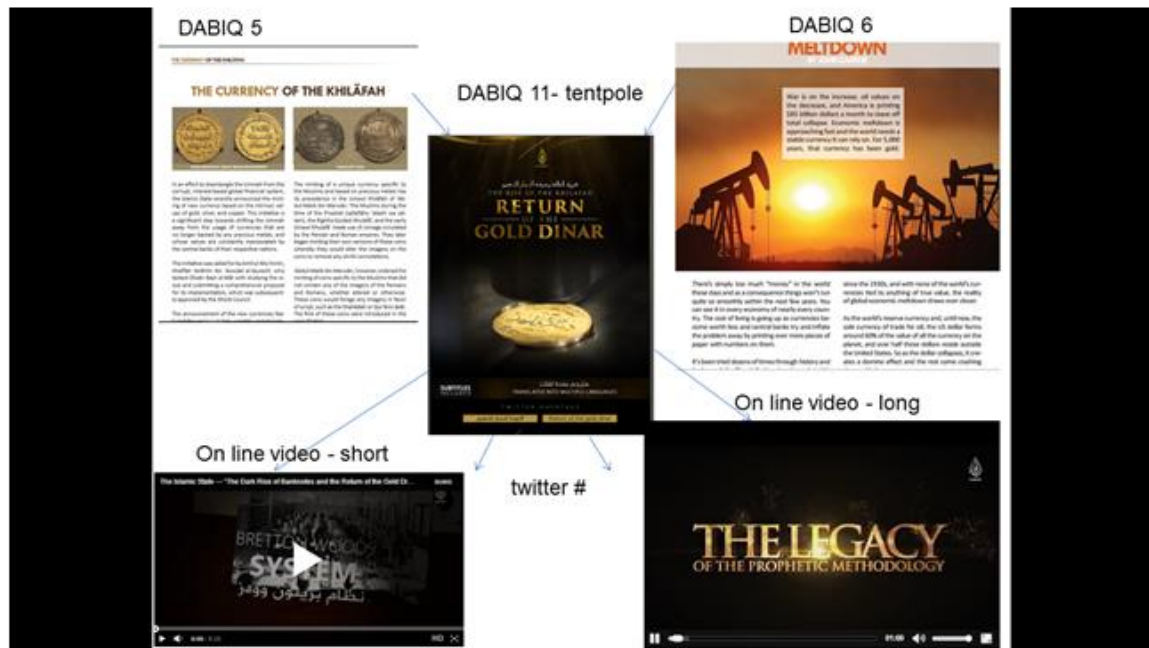
Figure 1. Synergistic storytelling: Economy narrative. Source: Dabiq,
*Issues 5, 6, 11 (*http://www.jihadology.net/category/Dabiq-magazine/*).*

The very common topic of condemnation of the global financial system is an important aspect that is visually depicted in the long version of the online video *The Rise of the Khilafah: Return to the Gold Dinar.* The picture portrayed is very dramatic in the first part ("The Legacy of the Prophetic Methodology"), with a wary combination of Hollywood action-movie style and a pedagogic register. The audience is first puzzled by the systematic shift from present time to a fictional past in which warriors with swords and iron helmets are fighting in the desert. Especially during the first seven minutes, the fast path of sequences mixes a historical tale with a more recent past, with the 9/11 strike, the U.S. army in Iraq, the IS battles, and, at last, the rise of the *khilafah* (caliphate; see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Mixing realities in the online video The Legacy of the Prophetic Methodology. Source: **https://ia801302.us.archive.org/5/items/TheRiseOfTheKhilafahReturnOfTheGoldDinar_201509/The%20Rise%20of%20the%20Khilafah%20-%20Return%20of%20the%20Gold%20Dinar.mp4**

Here, the background *nasheed* emphasizes the escalation of IS assaults while the storyteller's voice stresses the emphatic resonance of the images. The long take on IS fighters also reframes and reinforces already introduced visual symbols of IS men riding horses in the desert, the weaving black flag, and the *sharia* principles, such as the return of the head (beheading), the zakah, the jizya, and the return to gold as the main currency. The various key topics narrated by the storyteller and visual symbols are edited in a combination of sequences filmed during the ongoing military operations in the Middle East and scenes probably taken from Hollywood historical movies. The blurred boundaries between fiction and reality, between a present condition and a mythical past, confuse the levels of storytelling, compelling the audience to focus on images and lose their critical approach. The same goal is pursued by articles published in *Dabiq*, although the textual medium makes it more difficult to mix the various storytelling levels. The text follows a sequential structure, and semantic gaps may be more visible in an article than in a movie, especially when the sequences are so well edited.

The redundant and misleading combination of different levels of storytelling and aesthetic styles reveals an ideological presentation of facts designed to conceal the objective complexity of the contemporary economic and financial realm. The narrative of *The Rise of the Khilafah: Return of the Gold Dinar* is more a celebration of a mythical past rather than the presentation of a new economic organization.

Semantic Triggers at Work, Part I: References to the Koran

A transmedia narrative scattered among different platforms and contents seems more complex to comprehend than a single text or an online video. Nevertheless, the goal of a transmedia strategy is accomplished when the audience explores the entire story world through its multiple platforms and aesthetic dimensions. This also optimizes engagement in the sense of cognitive involvement to exploit opportunities for proselytism or even recruitment. To achieve this goal, every single component should give the audience an added value in terms of either aesthetic experience or additive comprehension of the story world. As we saw in the previous section, synergies and redundancy of visual symbols and key topics in IS narratives are very powerful tools; nevertheless, other elements that function as semantic triggers

can guide the audience through the transmedia story world. Those elements are, for example, the verses of the Koran, which support the contents of *Dabiq* and also the analyzed video.

The semantic triggers in action can especially be followed in the video *The Rise of the Khilafah: Return of the Gold Dinar.* The structure of this part is modular. Each module is introduced by one or more verses of the Koran followed by a visual explanation and an ideological interpretation of the verses. The first verse is 7:85 and is about the concept of value according to Allah, followed by a historical report describing the shift from a system based on exchange of goods to a system based on gold as the main value exchange. The verse legitimizes IS's concept of genuine value to create an efficient and standardized goods-exchanging system based on gold and silver. This interpretation is then finalized to condemn the Western financial system based on banknotes as a tool of enslavement for the people. Moreover, 16 minutes after the beginning of the video, Verse 35:33 appears: "[For them are] gardens of perpetual residence which they will enter. They will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold and pearls, and their garments therein will be silk." The comments emphasize that the value of gold is a reward for true believers and will even be transferred to *Jenna* (Paradise) as their ornament. Here, the message is that gold is not merely a good or an object of greed but also a blessed reward for those who endure the jihad.

The economic analysis is always intertwined with doctrine because the premise of the entire discourse is that "the return to gold" is not an economic option, but a necessary consequence of what is written in the Koran; it is Allah's helpfulness. An interesting point is that the reference to verses is suspended in the core part (28:00–38:00) when the video focuses on the key topic of the global banking system tied to "interest" and its rise from European banks in the Middle Ages, reaching its peak in today's U.S. Federal Reserve System. Next, Verse 2:279 appears toward the end of the video (38:43), and reaffirms Allah's condemnation of interest as an act of a "sinner disbeliever." Then, the video once again celebrates IS as the legitimate actor to reintroduce the gold dinar system and the only one in charge of controlling oil plants in its territories. This sequence is followed by IS's celebrations with foreign fighters among people in the new caliphate and by a final evocative song in karaoke style that exalts the virtues of true believers.

The work of semantic triggers unfolds with verses from the Koran acting as the premises for contents that are visually explained further on, and also the premises for what the audience will comprehend through the addition of more media content. There can be neither comprehension nor engagement without the legitimacy provided by the Koran to deeds presented in the video sequences. "The Legacy of the Prophetic Methodology," which is embraced and represented by IS, would be meaningless without references to the verses. Verses enlighten the events presented in the video and also in *Dabiq*. They provide the audience of believers with the fundamental key of interpretation and sense of engagement based on the common faith. In this sense, they are semantic triggers, which lead the readers to additive comprehension across the transmedia story world.

Semantic Triggers at Work, Part II: The Testimonial

Another very powerful semantic trigger is John Cantlie's authorship of many articles in *Dabiq*, and also his presence in many videos. He is also the author of the analyzed article "Meltdown." John Cantlie's presence works very differently from the Koran verses: He represents the opinion of a Western citizen who supports the cause of IS from within. His presence in Syria and Iraq is, in fact, documented by several online videos, the most famous being the *Lend Me Your Ears* series.[10] Cantlie's role is supporting, with detailed arguments and in a journalistic style that differs entirely from the doctrinal tone of *Dabiq* articles, some key issues of IS reports against Western countries. He is the IS spokesperson who appeals to the United States and the United Kingdom to pay ransom for hostages, as appears in *Dabiq* 4, in an article published after James Foley's execution, or also in the articles "If I Were the U.S. President Today" (*Dabiq* 5) and "Paradigm Shift" (*Dabiq* 8) in which he claims a change of attitude toward IS should be considered by his enemies as a legitimate state and not just a terrorist organization. Both in this case and in "Meltdown," Cantlie appeals especially to individuals in Western countries to embrace the IS cause by exploiting arguments and rhetorical elements typical of Western journalism. Semantic triggers here work very differently from the Koran verses. If the latter are aimed at "true believers" who cannot legitimate any IS action without the validation of the holy book, in "Meltdown," Cantlie uses rational arguments and facts related to the political global economy to reinforce the representation of an imminent and inevitable collapse of the U.S. financial system based on the dollar. Moreover, the additive use of Cantlie's opinions and contributions over multiple *Dabiq* articles and online videos make him an authoritative voice and a recognizable representative of Western opinion. Cantlie's statements work—in IS's story world—as semantic triggers designed to add elements of comprehension and to enrich Western Muslims's interpretation of the cause of IS.

Conclusions

Could the transmedia storytelling approach be useful to investigate IS's propaganda strategy? As other scholars have analyzed, transmedia could be a useful category to describe political communication strategies deployed by Western governments in the last century: for example, the Roosevelt administration' intervention on the Superman story world that turned a comic character into a national moral hero (Freeman, 2016a) during the Second World War, or even before the transmedia campaign set up by the U.S. Committee on Public Information to encourage young men to join the Army in the First World War in 1918 (Benson, 2012).

In 2014 and 2015, IS shocked Western media with the cruelty of its contents and the pervasive outreach of its narratives. Even if it is not the first time that a terrorist organization spreads its propaganda through consumer media—Al Qaeda, for example, extensively used videotapes and Internet

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[10] After disappearing for almost two years following his second abduction in late 2012, Cantlie resurfaced on September 18, 2014, in a video posted by the IS in the first episode of a multipart series entitled *Lend Me Your Ears*. As of February 2015, IS had released a total of six videos in the *Lend Me Your Ears* series. https://leaksource.info/2014/09/18/islamic-state-hostage-uk-journalist-john-cantlies-lend-me-your-ears-video-series-DABIQ-articles/

blogs during the 1990s (Lynch, 2006)—IS shows an extraordinary network of media production and a storytelling strategy never experimented before. What is more astonishing is communication's huge impact: Almost 30,000 foreign fighters joined the IS army during 2013–2015; 5,000 of them were European youngsters, second- and third-generation immigrants, European-born citizens, and many were people converted to the Muslim faith (Barrett et al., 2016). Obviously, the IS transmedia propaganda impact must be considered with other factors (e.g., social marginality, attitude to crime, etc.) as a driving force to push people to embrace the jihadist cause. Nevertheless, IS online narratives are commonly considered as having a pivotal role in turning a Salafist Muslim into a radicalized foreign fighter. Is the Hollywood-style engagement or the appeal to the global Islamist community—the Ummah—to take part in a real war the successful feature of IS transmedia strategy? Is there a substantial difference in IS strategy between the fictional and the nonfictional political narrative? I am afraid that those two aspects cannot be separated, especially in relation to IS's goal to launch a call to action to a global Ummah that should ideally reconnect the local level of Muslim tribes with that of the diasporic communities all around the Western countries: the people who live in 1439 of the Islamic calendar with the one living in Western urban areas such as London or Paris. IS transmedia strategy is a mix of the Western imaginary enhancing the reading of the Koran as the fundamental knowledge shared by the global Ummah.

As Jenkins (2006) writes, transmedia is not entirely new, especially with respect, for example, to cultural processes in the Middle Ages, when for illiterate people

> Jesus was not rooted in a book but it was something you encountered at multiple levels in your culture. Each representation (a stained glass-window, a tapestry, a psalm, a sermon, a live performance) assumed that you already knew the character and his story from someplace else. (p. 119)

Nowadays, IS propaganda offers digital literate people and even illiterate ones the opportunity to access a new kind of story world established on a re-edited version of Islamist culture and sense of belonging. On a narrative level, IS transmedia storytelling is a complex story world that is accessible to different people for different reasons and with different levels of comprehension. This strategy is very well planned and systematically deployed by skilled experts with a deep knowledge of the most recent and performative storytelling techniques targeted at digital natives and adult media users all over the world. This strategy also has political repercussions because IS is launching a call to action to the entire Sunni Muslim community. It is trying to build a wide and differentiated sense of grievance and despair against the West portrayed as the worst enemy. Even if IS's strategy is Hollywood style, its goal is not at all fictional because it is founded on a global, shared religious and political ethos based on the Koran: Its objective is to maximize the impact on the public sphere.

Further studies should focus most on the sociological aspects of the use of transmedia to deeply analyze the performance, comprehension, and engagement processes deployed by different actors. Millennials would be an interesting field of empirical analysis with respect to recruitment strategies of terrorist organizations and radicalization processes.

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