

Maria Mahdessian  
MA Design Research

With the fast-growing technology and social media channels, we have not only observed positive advances but also their negative impacts. In today's digital world and with the expansion of communication channels such as Youtube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, 4Chan,

Telegram, WhatsApp, and others, Islamist and right-wing extremist groups spread violent and extremist ideologies without any difficulties. My master research project, which I will discuss below, is under the umbrella of VIRAL (Violent Imagery Rhetoric Analysis Lab) is an interdisciplinary research group, which investigates communication design of Islamist and European right-wing extremist groups through different fields of research such as design, anthropology, criminology and peace and conflict. VIRAL will research into the affect techniques of extremist groups as well as of organizations that work on prevention and de-radicalization of young adults. The goals of this project is to develop proposals for the communication design strategies of counter and alternative narratives in an attempt to demobilize supporters of extremist groups in Europe. This project is located at Bern University of Applied Sciences at the Bern University of the Arts (HKB) and the Department of Social Work of the Bern University of Applied Sciences. The VIRAL research team consists of Prof. Dr. phil. Arne Scheuermann, who is the co-director of this research and Prof. Dr. crim. Jachen C. Nett, Co-Leader Project Manager in this research, and Eliane Gerber, who is the project coordinator and also a fellow MA Design Research student, and myself.

In the light of the above, my master research consists of analyzing the self-representation of Islamist organizations, specifically that of Daesh, meaning that understanding the affect techniques used in their communication design strategies. The “affect technique” in its turn means the intentionality of elements used while aiming to communicate a certain message through a certain medium in order to reinforce a certain emotion in the target audience or to persuade the latter. This aspect could assist in better understanding of the organization’s the sociological propaganda which could result in a long-term penetration and is more organic and facilitates the production of unofficial but on-message material by the organization’s supporters, who draw inspiration from the “unofficial” content published by members of the group (Charlie Winter 2015, 20), and the political propaganda, which is more direct and official than the latter (Charlie Winter 2015, 19). Moreover, in terms of medium, my research focuses on Daesh’s self-representation through the analysis of photographs themselves published in their online magazine as well as their social media channels. Finally, my research question is the following: “Which affect techniques does Daesh use in its communication design in order to mobilize young adults?”

My research has an interdisciplinary aspect to it, meaning that in order to understand Daesh’s narratives, which include affect techniques used, and reasons why they represent themselves the way they do, and the artifacts, the material legacy, and the ideological message behind them. And in order to understand these, it is crucial to have an understanding and knowledge

of Islam, social and cultural anthropology as well, in order to gain information on the norms and values of different Muslim communities, different schools of Islamic theology in order to understand what is authentic and what is a hoax - it is important to note that due to the accessibility of the Internet and social media and their effortless communication ability, accessibility to wrong information is also made highly possible. And if the target audience such as a marginalized youth lack the proper religious knowledge and education, then manipulation is materialized (Virginie Andre et al. 2015, 307-308).

In my research, I am expecting to analyze the photographs of Daesh through methodological triangulation. As a first research method, I am applying the Panofsky method of analysis, which is a qualitative analysis through the understanding and interpretation of meaning in visual representation. According to Panofsky, the study of art objects and photographs can be separated into three levels. The first level is pre-iconographic analysis, which is the formal, natural and factual descriptions of what is seen such as the colours, the content, and the format seen without any speculations. Consequently, as my first research step, I applied the pre-iconographic analysis by implementing a quantitative analysis of the photographs of Daesh in their online English language magazine Rumiya (issues 1 to 13) by recording quantitative data through keywords. To discuss this in details, I added keywords for each image in terms of artifacts/things seen in each photo as well as photography composition. To add, each photograph is tagged with its keywords in order to facilitate searching for keywords and identifying the frequency of each artifact and composition techniques. It is important to note that all artifacts in a photo are tagged including mundane ones such as "Adidas running shoes". Furthermore, the keywords are alphabetically added in an Excel sheet in order to allow accessing the keywords and the number of times each keyword is used in photos. Subsequently, the second level of the Panofsky method that I will move towards, is iconography, which is to decode the content by questioning what the elements in each picture mean taking in consideration the context, history, audiences, framework of society. Therefore, I will be reflecting on the finding of this analysis through the decoding of the elements in the photographs. This step will be finalized by the end of May 2018.

Afterwards, I will restart the process but this time by comparing Rumiya analysis and findings to Daesh's other magazines such as Dar al-Islam (French language), Constantinople (Turkish language), and Istok (Russian language). It is worthy to note that depending on my findings, I will decide whether to analyze all three mentioned magazines or to stop at one or two more magazines apart from Rumiya. If the analysis results in more finding, then I would continue but if it does not result in new findings, then I will stop at one additional magazine.

Then, I will move from Daesh to its rivals' magazines such as al-Qaeda's "Inspire" English magazine; then again, the finding of each magazine analysis will dictate whether I move on to analyzing another magazine or not. I anticipate to finalize this comparison process by the end of July 2018.

The final step of the Panofsky method that I will incorporate in my research is iconology, which is the gathering information and solidifying my knowledge about the society in which the artifact under analysis, such as a photograph by and of Daesh, was produced in while possibly comparing it to other images such as photographs and posters from popular culture and others. For example, some photographs are inspired by comic books cultivating armed heroes such as a jihadist photograph adapted from a Marvel Universe drawing of The Punisher, which is a popular character and famous for his violent vigilante campaign against organized crimes. In this case, the designer or the photographer resorts to the familiar symbolism of the comic character to reimagine a jihadist as a hero in a both menacing and unmistakable way in order to be relatable and attractive to young men engaged in popular culture on the Internet (Ostovar 2017, 98). Moreover, possible questions to ask in this level could be: "What might the role of this photograph have been in society? How is it situated in society? What does this photograph tell us about the society this picture has been made in?" It is noteworthy to mention that this step communicates characteristics that the producer of the photograph may not have consciously been thinking about. And through the knowledge of the world and the connection of artifacts and cultural codes in the photograph, this level allows to reveal underlying "basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work" (Panofsky 1972, 7). For Panofsky, this level or step is the "ultimate goal of iconology" (Panofsky 1972, 9). I expect to conclude this final step of the Panofsky method by the end of August 2018.

Additionally, at the start (September 2018) of the new academic year of 2018-2019, I plan to begin with the second research method through which I will use the Visual Rhetorics analysis method, which is the qualitative analysis of visuals from the perspective of persuasion methods that aim to have an effect on the target audience in order to understand the affect techniques used by ISIS. In "Rhetoric in the Visual Arts", Enchelmayer states that in a rhetorical sense, the designer of a specific visuals of rhetoric must have specific goals, message, and ideas to transmit for those who would view them in a fast and efficient way (2009, 61). A good example of this could also be the photograph inspired by The Punisher character of Marvel Universe.

Eventually, after completing the analysis of the photographs used in ISIS's online magazine, I would also analyze photographs Daesh members post on social media (photographs of the organization and also its members only - not its victims, except if in the photograph there is a member and a victim) such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

As stated earlier, due to the interdisciplinary of my research, in parallel to the above research activities stated, I am also acquiring knowledge on Islam, in order to try to have a better understanding of what is misinformation of Islam in the digital world and what terrorist organizations are aiming to transmit - it is important here to note that I certainly do not mean that Islam transmits hate and encourages terror. Since February 2018, I have been taking a course on the 'socio-anthropological approach to terrorism: religious doctrine and (anti) social practices' in Université de Lausanne that will last until end of May 2018. During this course, I have gained knowledge about how Muslim leaders play an important role in their communities in the Western hemisphere, where second-generation immigrant youths feel disconnection between their religion and the country they live in especially in a secular country such as France, where after many terrorist acts there has been rising tension towards Muslims and what is interesting is the fact that the media plays a major role in lighting the flames on this tension. Therefore, a Muslim leader plays an important role in guiding the youth towards inward-oriented Islam focusing on tolerance, actions, open-mindedness towards others and allowing interpretation of Islamic texts rather than outward-oriented Islam which focuses on the minimal and literal comprehension of the Islamic texts.

Along with the photographic analysis, and acquiring knowledge about Islam, I am also gaining information through other publications as the current state of knowledge that could potentially guide me in my research, and expand the library of literature to serve me as references. Some of the useful publications that I will turn to are (but not limited to):

- "Branding Terror: The Logotypes and Iconography of Insurgent Groups and Terrorist Organizations" written by the authors Arthur Beifuss, who has researched extensively on Islamic activism and terrorism and was formerly a counter-terrorism analyst for the United Nations, and Francesco Bellini, a graphic designer who has created the branding identity of various companies and cultural institutions. This book is a comprehensive survey of the visual identity of major terrorist organizations around the world. Each organization's entry contains its branding (the symbolism, colours, and typography of its logo and flag), a brief description of its ideology, leadership, mode of operation, and a

concise timeline of events. Terrorist organizations are not different from other organizations or corporations in their use of branding but in the contrary to the latter the branding of terrorist organizations is understudied (2013).

- “Al-Qaida par l’image. La prophétie du martyr” by the author Abdelasiem El Difraoui, who is a political scientist, economist, and documentary director and producer. In this book, El Difraoui explains the evolution of the Great Jihadist Story and its audiovisual production of the last three decades. This book also redirects the mythology of Islam to create a new one in which the cult of martyrdom plays a main role through which Bin Laden is elevated to the rank of a prophet. Moreover, from the analysis in this book, it emerges that Al-Qaida succeeded in creating photographs and symbols that are recognized today by many believers and followers and are used and could continue to be used as inspirations for future generations (2013).
- Edited by Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists” is a book that explores the jihadi cultural practices rather than the usual attention given to the operations and doctrines of these groups by using primary sources in which the authors examine the daily life of members of the radical Islamist terrorist organizations and show the aesthetic culture they embraced such as poetry and music (2017).
- “The Islamic Imagery: Visual Motifs in Jihadi Internet Propaganda” is a report that analyzes Islamic imagery associated with political Islam, especially produced by radical Muslim groups. This report claims that the production and distribution of visual propaganda through jihadi imagery produced and distributed by jihadi Organizations have a distinct genre. Moreover, the authors regard jihadi imagery to be the principal medium for communicating and diffusing jihadi ideas while playing with religious and cultural experiences of their target audience (Brachman et al. 2006).
- The “Rhetoric of the Image” is an essay by the French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician, in which he provides an analytical system of signs that convey a certain message in a photograph to interpret an image. To add, Barthes explores the different types of messages by deconstructing a Panzani advertisement, which are first, the linguistic (the caption and the title) consists of two types of message. The first type is the denoted (non-coded, literal) message, which the literal meaning of the label on

a product that is displayed in the photograph, for example, the name of the company, Panzani, on the spaghetti pack, the tomato representing simply a tomato without any cultural representation - and the second is the connoted (symbolic, cultural) message - the sociocultural and 'personal' connections drawn from written text; for example, the colours red, white, and green signify Italy and to add the Italian word "Panzani" connote Italianicity. Also, the close proximity of the items in the advertisement signify that Panzani provides home-made meals. (Barthes 1977).



As mentioned in the beginning, the goals of the VIRAL project is to develop proposals for the communication design strategies of counter and alternative narratives in an attempt to demobilize supporters of extremist groups in Europe. Similar to this goal, there already exists the "Counter-Narrative Toolkit", which is website created in response to the spread of violent extremist content on the Internet. This freely available toolkit was created as a basic guide in order to help anyone or any organization create "credible counter-narrative messages" without any prior knowledge of or experience with counter-narrative campaigning (Tuck and Silverman 2016, 2). (More information on how this works will be added)

Another inspiration is the Google Cloud Vision application programming interface which enables developers to analyze the content of images and to moderate offensive content; Through the detection of objects, faces, and text in the image, Google Cloud Vision can classify images into categories (<https://cloud.google.com/vision/>). (I will also possibly add a comparison of my own observations and with that of Google Cloud Vision)

Furthermore, the VIRAL research team is hoping to collaborate with other research teams from around Europe such as from the University of Mainz, a team who is working on "Jihadism on the Internet: Images and Videos, their Appropriation, and Dissemination". This interdisciplinary research team, which includes researchers from social and cultural anthropology, media and film studies, as well as Islamic studies, examines how jihadists communicate and investigates to which extent their audience interacts with these communications. Moreover, the webpage of this research team states that they will use ethnographic and new digital methods from the humanities and cultural studies. They will also be analyzing jihadi video and images as well in order to explore the intentions of the producers of these media. And they will also look into the usage and interpretations of these visual media not only in the online world but also in the offline one. To add, based on the outcomes, the goal of this research is also to develop communication strategies for countermeasures. (<http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/eng/2899.php>). Another possible collaboration would be a research team in University of Cologne (I miss some information about this research team - will come later). And a third possible collaboration would be with a research team from the Vienna Observatory for Applied-Research on Terrorism and Extremism. (More information on this might come but for example the website of the Vienna team has not been working for some time, so I don't know what information to put, I only

information from what I have heard in the research team in HKB) (**Question:** do I need to have this part in this paper ?)

As a conclusion, the goal of my research is to provide institutions and organizations with first efficient tools to identify affect techniques and second persuasion techniques in order to design counter-and alternative narratives. This phenomenon of communication through the digital world is fairly recent and we have to yet come up with effective ways to tackle these narratives.

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