SicurezzaTerrorismoSocietà

Security Terrorism Society

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL - Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies

16
2022

EDUCatt

Sommario

A comparative analysis of ISIS Channels On Telegram

Kamil Yilmaz – Farangiz Atamuradova

Dr. Kamil Yilmaz: works as a post-doctoral researcher at the Cyber Threats Research Centre (CyTREC), Swansea University. He holds a PhD in applied (political) anthropology from Columbia University and multiple master's degrees in criminal justice, international affairs, and anthropology. He is the author of "Disengaging from Terrorism: Lessons from the Turkish Penitents" (Routledge 2014) and numerous articles related to counterterrorism.

Farangiz Atamuradova[1]**:** is a Program Officer at the Research and Analysis Department. She joined Hedayah in February 2018. Prior to Hedayah, Farangiz worked at Delma Institute as a political analyst covering various regional issues. Farangiz holds a Master of Letters in Terrorism Studies from the University of St. Andrews and a Bachelor of Arts in Politics with International Studies from the University of Warwick.

Abstract

With the increased presence of social media and online messaging platforms in daily lives of individuals came the threat of its appropriation by terrorist groups to spread their narratives, recruit individuals, and serve as a communication channel among members of the group. This research focuses on comparing two Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)Telegram channels – an interactive and broadcast channel – to compare the tactics and strategies employed by the two channels. In particular, the research assesses the discursive strategies presented in both channels, especially those pertaining to the representation of the in- and out-group by the channel moderators as well as followers. The combined analysis of the posts on two ISIS-channels is beneficial for researchers, practitioners, as well as policy makers as it sheds light to how one single group employs different tactics and strategies to communicate their message, polarize followers' viewpoint, and maintain the existence of and support for the terrorist group as a whole, despite its territorial defeat.

Keywords

ISIS, Telegram, terrorism, critical discourse analysis, CDA

---

[1] Opinions expressed in this paper are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Hedayah.

1. Introduction

Terrorists' use of the Internet has been a focus of scientific inquiry for more than two decades. In recent years, however, the use of social media platforms and online messaging applications by terrorist groups has received significant attention from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. This is because these platforms and applications have become entrenched in the daily lives of civilians – and they simultaneously shape and are shaped by our experiences and expectations. Moreover, the dichotomy of agency versus structure in making sense of human behaviour is becoming increasingly blurred, as it is a process that goes *pari passu* with the rapid development of platforms and applications. All this is to say that today nobody can be impervious to the effects of the vortex created by such rapid developments. This applies to ordinary law-abiding citizens, as well as members of various terrorist organizations. While these effects manifest themselves both positively and negatively, terrorist groups seem to be adroit in adapting themselves to these developments and benefiting from the affordances they provide. Accordingly, they consistently use these tools to communicate with existing members and the world, to find new recruits, to claim their attacks, and to disseminate their messages, among other things.

In this study, we focused on two Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) channels on Telegram to explore how and why the group uses these channels on this platform. One of these channels is interactive, while the other is used as a broadcasting channel that disseminates information about ISIS attacks and other world events. The main emphasis will be placed on the contents of the texts to discover the discursive strategies by which various groups are constructed as in-groups or out-groups within these channels. In this respect, this study aims to contribute to a small body of work that combine Terrorism Studies and Discourse analysis. Deciphering these strategies has significant implications for counterterrorism efforts in relation to understanding both traditional and innovative methods of terrorist recruitment, communication, propaganda, and ideological indoctrination. To achieve these tasks, the remainder of this paper is split into four parts. The first part will focus on the relevant literature, which includes the use of Telegram by terrorist groups. The second part will provide a brief overview of the data collection and methodology used throughout this study. Through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in the third part we will present our findings by explicating what discursive strategies were used in these channels. The fourth part will conclude with final thoughts and recommendations.

2. Previous Research

There is currently an ample amount of studies that look at terrorist organizations' general use of online platforms and the ways through which they leverage it to polarize their followers. However, there is a lack of literature studying how terrorist organizations and their supporters employ various tactics and strategies to communicate through the same social media platforms. Reviewing previous literature that broadly analyses the strategic communications of ISIS, the objective here is to touch upon key factors and tactics studied to further delve into the specific narratives inside each channel. This will help to advance research and knowledge on how messaging tactics differ, even when the messaging and communication channels are from members or supporters of the same group.

2.1 Terrorist Use of Online Social Networks

The importance of the Internet and the way terrorist organizations leverage it for communicating propaganda and other related information, and as a "support mechanism" for terrorist networks is thoroughly covered in various studies and literature reviews.[2] The opportunities that the Internet created for terrorist groups to build and maintain "global support, spread their messages and recruit new members" are evident.[3] In addition to the Internet as a means of communication, the emergence of online social networks, media, and messaging platforms, as a tool of globalization that helps people across the world to communicate, was also leveraged by terrorist organizations for the same reasons. As studies show, terrorist organizations have been quick to adapt to new digital platforms and emerging technologies to achieve their goals – be it to recruit new followers, communicate between existing members, share propaganda, or to carry out the day-to-day processes by diversifying tactics and digital processes.[4]

---

[2] Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Nick Kaderbhai. (2017). "Research Perspectives on Online Radicalization: A Literature Review, 2006-2016." *VOXPol*. Accessed at: https://icsr. info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICSR-Paper_Research-Perspectives-on-Online-Radicalisation-A-Literature-Review-2006-2016.pdf.

[3] Amarnath Amarasingam, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. (2021). "How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadists Platform Migration." *CREST Report*. p. 15. Accessed at: https:// crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/how-telegram-disruption-impacts-jihadist-platform-migration/.

[4] Maura Conway, Lee Jarvis, Orla Lehane, Stuart Macdonald, and Lella Nouri. (2017). "Terrorists' Use of Internet," in *NATO Science for Peace and Security Series*. Vol. 136. (IOS Press: Amsterdam, Netherlands).; Adam Dolnik. (2007). *Understanding Terrorist Innovations: Technology, Tactics, and Global Trends*. (Routledge: New York).; and, Amarasingam, et al., "How Telegram Disruption Impacts."

In the study of how ISIS used social media to communicate their narratives, Pambayun suggests that the most prevalent mainstream social media networks leveraged by the terrorist groups were Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube; encrypted social messaging services such as Telegram were used for peer-to-peer messaging; and JustPaste.it was leveraged for content sharing.[5] Although the explicit content was strategically used by ISIS to create fear in society and gain younger adventure-seeking recruits – a large sum of the messages presented stories of human emotion, grievances, struggles, values, and motivations to construct a fake-reality that diverse groups of people around the world could relate to and sympathize with. For instance, content tends to narrate the desire to see the expansion of a Muslim empire – helping to legitimize and emphasize ISIS's slogan, "*Baqiya wa Tatamadad*," which translates to, "Remaining and Expanding."[6]

A 2020 study by Dillon et al. analyzed pro-ISIS supporters and ISIS foreign fighters on social media to compare the differences and similarities between their narratives and how they utilized content across multiple social media platforms.[7] The qualitative findings showed that five key narrative themes were prevalent in the messages that circulated on the social media websites among pro-ISIS supporters and foreign fighters: 1) threat to in-groups; 2) societal grievances; 3) pursuit of significance; 4) religion; and 5) commitment issues.[8] Furthermore, one of the messaging methods that ISIS used to reach out to communities on Twitter was to post tweets in trending or unrelated hashtags. To reach a wider array of users on social media, in this case namely Twitter, ISIS utilized these types of approaches as a part of its strategic communications framework. One of the interesting findings from the study's analysis of retweets was that majority of the retweets and engagement with posts were actually from accounts un-related to ISIS – meaning those users barely had any other ISIS-related posts on their accounts.[9]

[5] Ellys Lastari Pambayun. (2018). "The Construction of Terror Communicating of ISIS News in Social Media." *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin*. Vol. 19: 1, p. 97-116. Accessed at: https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v19i1.1490.

[6] Ibid, p. 112.

[7] Leevia Dillon, Loo Seng Neo, and Joshua D. Freilich. (2020). "A Comparison of ISIS Foreign Fighters and Supporters Social Media Posts: An Exploratory Mixed-Method Content Analysis." *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*. Vol. 12: 4, p. 268-291. Accessed at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2019.1690544. The main platforms discussed in this study were Twitter, Facebook, Ask.fm, Tumblr, and Instagram – the data collected was from January to mid-June 2015.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Majid Alfifi, Parisa Kaghazgaran, James Caverlee, and Fred Morstatter. (2019). "A Large-Scale Study of ISIS Social Media Strategy: Community Size, Collective Influence, and Beha-

According to a study by Lissaris et al., terrorist groups' communication strategy varied based on the platform used – with more open and surface-level platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube used to disseminate "public communications." Religion-abusing terrorist organizations, such as ISIS, leveraged surface web platforms to spread propaganda, recruit new supporters, and justify the group's violent actions. Conversely, many of these same terrorist groups leveraged the anonymity that the Dark Web and encrypted platforms provide to establish more discreet lines of communication which allowed them to stay undetected by law enforcement agencies and avoid content removal or account suspension.[10]

With the onset of stricter policies on terrorism-related content on Twitter and Facebook in 2014 and 2015 came a mass effort to monitor users, remove swarms of extremist content, and ban users/accounts constantly flagged for violations. These efforts forced terrorist organizations to seek haven elsewhere and re-establish communications on more private networks. At that point in time, the most convenient platform available was Telegram.[11] Moreover, in 2015, ISIS provided its followers with a ranking of various social messaging platforms and the level of 'safety' each platform offered. As per the ranking, Telegram was categorized as 'safe;'[12] however, this assessment may have changed since there have been increased efforts to take down terrorist content even on Telegram.

2.2 Terrorist Use of Telegram

Telegram became popular among and widely used by terrorist organizations, and their members and followers in 2015. As a platform, Telegram, which is a cloud-based instant messaging site,[13] provided an array of new op-

---

vioral Impact." *Proceedings of The International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*. Vol. 13, p. 58-67. Accessed at: https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/3209.

[10] Euthimios Lissaris, Georgios Giataganas, Dimitrios Kavallieros, Dimitrios Myttas, and Emmanouil Kermitsis. (2021). "Terrorist Activities in the Dark and the Surface Web." In *Dark Web Investigation*: Security Informatics and Law Enforcement. Eds. Babak Akhgar, Marco Gercek, Stefanos Vrochidis, and Helen Gibson. (Springer: Cham), p. 49-84. Accessed at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55343-2_3.

[11] Maura Conway, Moign Khawaja, Suraj Lakhani, Jeremy Reffin, Andrew Robertson, and David Weid. (2019). "Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Materials and Its Impacts." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. Vol. 42: 1-2, p. 141-160. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513984.

[12] The Counter Extremism Project. (2017). "Terrorists on Telegram." Accessed at: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/Terrorists%20on%20Telegram_052417.pdf.

[13] Rubi Acherjya Manna and Shyamal Ghosh. (2018). "A Comparative Study between Telegram and Whatsapp in Respect of Library Services." *International Journal of Library & Infor-*

portunities for terrorist organizations. While not as user-friendly and, at the time, popular as mainstream platforms like Twitter and Facebook, terrorists quickly learnt the advantages of Telegram. The platform offered encrypted services and the possibility of hosting channels that "allows hosts to 'broadcast' messages to subscribers in a unidirectional format, making it attractive to those who have a message to disseminate," as well as allowing them to monitor and restrict users.[14] Within their specific groups, Telegram users are able to chat with other users, "with each member of the group having the right to participate in the discussion."[15] Through such functionalities, terrorist groups could broaden their strategic communication and diversify it through use of the platform to have broader discussions with their followers, or to recruit new followers through polarization tactics.

As Manna and Ghosh assert, Telegram's ability to send large files like e-books, e-articles, and audio video lectures between users makes it a prime choice for sharing information and an important medium for communication amongst users without any limitations.[16] Furthermore, in a separate study conducted by Lissaris et al., ISIS was found to often use various messaging platforms to share outlinks to hidden servers or websites, for instance, links that are only accessible via the Tor browser ("the onion router").[17] Additionally, Lissaris et al. found that social media messaging services like Telegram were used as "core disseminators and bots and dedicated to the regular re-uploading of older productions."[18] These procedures helped ensure that the same information was shared on other related channels, and that even if one channel was taken down, other channels would have a chance of 'surviving.'[19]

A study by Amarasingam, Maher and Winter looked at how ISIS related channels reacted to the 2018 and 2019 Europol Action Days terrorist content takedown and elaborated on the communication strategies of the groups, as

---

mation Science. Vol. 7: 2. Accessed at: http://sbp-brims.org/2020/proceedings/papers/working-papers/SBP-BRiMS_2020_paper_17.pdf.

[14] Amarasingam et al., "How Telegram Disruption Impacts," p. 15.

[15] Ibid, p. 16.

[16] Manna and Ghosh, "A Comparative Study," in Tuja Khaund, Mainuddin Shaik, and Nitin Agarwal. (2020). "Data Collection and Sensemaking from Telegram: A Case Study of Ukrainian Political Leaders Channels and Chat Groups." *2020 International Conference on Social Computing, Behavioral-Cultural Modeling, & Prediction and Behavior Representation in Modeling and Simulation*, p. 2. Accessed at: http://sbp-brims.org/2020/proceedings/papers/working-papers/SBP-BRiMS_2020_paper_17.pdf.

[17] Lissaris et al., "Terrorist Activities," p. 49-84.

[18] Ibid, p. 52.

[19] Bennet Clifford and Helen Powell. (2019). "Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram." *Program on Extremism*. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/EncryptedExtremism.pdf.

well as their migration from one platform to another.[20] Within their study, the authors implemented Gill et al.'s conceptual framework to explain how ISIS adapted their strategy based on the restrictions imposed on their means of communication to migrate to more encrypted platforms.[21] One of the points highlighted in the conclusion of the study was that lexicon, use of particular language, and content background lures like-minded people to join groups and channels that support or hold similar worldviews and systems of beliefs.

2.3 Terrorist Content and Discourse Analysis

Researchers and scholars have examined terrorist groups' discourse, but to our knowledge there are only a few studies that combine Terrorism Studies (TS) and Discourse Analysis (DA) to study jihadist discourse. While the latter field focused on language used by other terrorist groups operating in Europe and the US,[22] much research in the field of TS employed content analysis.[23] In one notable study combining TS and DA, Lorenzo-Dus and Macdonald examined how Al-Qaeda and ISIS discursively constructed the West as an 'alien', aberrant 'other' in their online propaganda magazines *Inspire* and *Dabiq* and found that 'othering' is a key discursive strategy they use via "homogenization, suppression (stereotyping) and pejoration."[24] Our findings supports this study in the sense that jihadist groups like ISIS, just like in their online propaganda magazines, use various discursive strategies in their messaging on Telegram to define certain individuals and groups as in-group or out-group.

As demonstrated above, while a number of studies are dedicated to assessing how terrorists leverage various online magazines, social media networks and messaging platforms for their own benefits, there is not much literature or research that cross-analyses the different strategies and methods of communication among followers from the same terrorist group and its supporters.

---

[20] Amarasingam et al., "How Telegram Disruption Impacts."

[21] Paul Gill, John Horgan, Samuel T. Hunter, and Lily D. Cushenbery. (2013). "Malevolent Creativity in Terrorist Organizations." *The Journal of Creative Behavior*. Vol. 47: 2, p. 125-151. Accessed at: https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.28.

[22] See, for example, Reisgl, Martin and Ruth Wodak. (2001). *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Anti-Semitism*. London and New York: Routledge; Bowden, Zachary A. (2008). "Poriadk & Bardak (Order and Chaos): The Neo-fascist Project of Articulating a Russian 'People'." *Journal of Language and Politics* 7 (2): 231-247.).

[23] See, for example, Chertoff. Michael. (2008). "The Ideology of Terrorism: Radicalisation Revisited." *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 15(1): 11-20.; Stern, Jessica and Berger, J.M. (2015). *ISIS: The State of Terror*. London: William Collins.

[24] Lorenzo-Dus, N. & Macdonald, S. (2018). Othering the West in the online Jihadist propaganda magazines Inspire and Dabiq. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 6(1), 79-106.

2.4 Competitive System of Meaning

Studying ISIS's tactics on messaging and communications with its followers, Haroro Ingram coined the concept of "competitive system of meaning," which "acts as a lens through which supporters are compelled to perceive and judge the world."[25] Ingram further asserted that "these powerful mental models – or perhaps more accurately a network of mental models – are designed to fundamentally shape its audiences' perception by strategically leveraging and interplaying identity, solution, and crisis constructs via a combination of narratives and imagery."[26] Evaluating ISIS's communication through the concept of "competitive system of meaning" allows us to dismantle the group's tactics and to explain how through establishing a reputation as a 'trusted' source of information, ISIS was able to leverage its status to form new "meanings" for their followers. As stated by Pambayun, "[for ISIS] trustworthiness is a decisive factor to ensure the persuasive communication."[27] As a result, through such manipulation of information, ISIS could easily instil their divisive categorization between the in-group and out-group and mobilize it in an advantageous manner. Similarly, the "competitive system of meaning" has been leveraged as a framework to assess how ISIS was internalizing and normalizing ideas among its followers through educational material used by ISIS in Iraq.[28]

3. Methodology

3.1 The Rationale

This research was part of a broader project titled "Comparative Analysis of Islamic State and Atomwaffen Division Activity on Telegram" conducted by colleagues from Swansea University's Cyber Threat Research Centre (CYTREC) and seconded colleagues from various institutions including Moonshot, Swansea University, Hedayah, and University of North Carolina,

---

[25] Haroro J. Ingram. (2016). "Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility & Behavioural Change," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*. Vol. 7: 9, p. 4. Accessed at: http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2016.1.12.

[26] Ibid. p. 4.

[27] Pambayun. "The Construction of Terror Communicating of ISIS News in Social Media." p. 114.

[28] Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova, Lilah ElSayed, and Muna Chung. (2021). "Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree: Establishing a System of Meaning Through ISIS Education." *The ISIS Files*. Accessed at: https://www.hedayahcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Planting_the_Seeds_of_the_Poisonous_Tree__Establishing_a_System_of_Meaning_ThroGMXh_ISIS_Education.pdf.

Chapel Hill. For this sub-project, the research examined two ISIS-related Telegram channels that used different tactics to communicate with their followers. Among these channels, the Channel X acted as an interactive platform for followers to hold discussions, namely over the specific issue of so-called "Muslim struggles;" while the Channel Y was used to broadcast information, seeking to establish itself as a legitimate source of current affairs and news covering world events. Moreover, the Channel X is ISIS sympathizers, who are not formally speaking on behalf of the group; whereas Channel Y is different – it is not user-generated content as such. It is hard to know what the relationship of the channel administrator to the ISIS leadership is – but it is not intended to be understood as being user-generated content. So, to some extent, the difference in their strategies and methods is not surprising. The following comparison will assess the narratives used within the two channels and the way certain elements, such as the in-group, ineligible in-group and out-group, were established throughout the communications.

3.2 Ethics

Before embarking on the data collection, the project received institutional ethics approval. In order to safeguard the welfare of the research team, the entirety of the data was collected by Open-Source Intelligence Analysts at Tech Against Terrorism and then transferred to the research team via a secure file transfer service. For additional security and privacy protection, the collected data was not shared with individuals outside of the project team and no channel names are identified in this paper.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection took place from 30 July 2021 to 12 September 2021. Since Tech Against Terrorism has a policy of non-engagement with channel administrators, the dataset was limited to public channels and private channels with publicly available join-links. For a channel to be considered an ISIS channel, the channel had to have a pro-ISIS slant and meet one or more of the following four criteria: (1) it posted official ISIS content (such as claims of attacks, video/photo propaganda, or *nasheeds*); (2) it published unofficial pro-ISIS media that praised the group and its efforts, and/or promoted its ideology; (3) the channel administrator published official ISIS content or content in support of ISIS on another platform; and/or, (4) the channel was promoted by ISIS on other platforms.

Given the significant disruption experienced by ISIS channels on Telegram, data were extracted daily throughout the collection period. The chan-

nels were downloaded using Telegram's built-in channel download feature and all datasets were extracted in HTML format. Telegram's export chat history function was also used to export all other available data, including photos, videos, voice messages, video messages, stickers, GIFs, and files. Although data collection commenced on 30 July 2021, for both Channel X and Channel Y it was possible to collect posts from an earlier date (20 May 2021 and 15 June 2021 respectively). As of September 2021, both channels were live.

4. Findings

The analysis of the two channels is based on qualitative techniques. We will particularly delve into the 'content' (i.e., 'narratives') of the messages posted in these channels by focusing on three specific discursive strategies commonly used in CDA, namely: i) referential-nomination strategies, ii) perspectivation, framing, and discourse representation strategies; and iii) intensifying strategies. The determination of these three strategies was a semi-inductive process that was informed by two textual analysis techniques: word clouds (Figure 1) and topic-modelling (Appendices 1 and 2). The former is based on the frequency of words, which helps researchers understand what the text generally looks like. The latter, topic-modelling, exemplified by Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), is a practical tool for discovering groups of words that often appear together in documents.[29] By revealing clusters of co-occurring words through various algorithms, topic modelling allows researchers to uncover the latent themes in large datasets of text.[30] In a nutshell, we employed these two techniques at the beginning of the research and determined the issues discussed in the channels which were represented by unigrams (words) in the word cloud and topic-modelling figures. We then looked at each individual item in the texts to understand the context in which they appeared. After reading and rereading these, we were able to categorize the items based on the aforementioned discursive strategies.

[29] Yuening Hu, Jordan Boyd-Graber, Brianna Satinoff, and Alison Smith. (2014). "Interactive Topic Modelling." *Machine Learning*. Vol. 95, p. 424. Accessed at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10994-013-5413-0.

[30] Anton Törnberg and Petter Törnberg. (2016). "Combining CDA and Topic Modeling: Analyzing Discursive Connections Between Islamophobia and Anti-Feminism on an Online Forum." *Discourse & Society*. Vol. 27: 4, p. 401-422. Accessed at: https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0957926516634546.

Figure 1 – *Wordclouds*

Channel X	Channel Y

As shown in Figure 1, most frequently used words in the Channel X, as evidenced by the size of the words, are: *Muslim, Allah, Islamic, state, fighter, Christian, Congolese army, village, killed, caliphate, soldier* and so on. Leveraging other existing "hashtags" is what we call 'concept hijacking,' as it is employed as a tactic to use existing ideas to push forward their own narratives. The greater portion of the channel's content was related to ISIS's activities/attacks against Christians in West Africa (see words like *Congolese, army, West Africa, Christian, killed, attack, ituri, etc*), in Iraq (see the word Nineveh) and in Afghanistan (Taliban). In the Channel Y, most frequently used words include *local, source, village, region, reported, targeted, killing, Mozambique, Nigerian, Nigeria, force, soldier, army* and so on. It's important to note that the words *Islamic, state* or *ISIS* do not appear in the corpus; instead, we observed that a majority of posts contained words like *iswap* (Islamic State West African Province) or *iscap* (Islamic State Central African Province). In a nutshell, Channel Y seems to be dedicated to amplifying ISIS attacks especially in Africa, but also in the Middle East, by portraying itself as a legitimate news reporting outlet.

4.1 Discursive Strategies

For the purposes of this research, the term 'discourse' is defined, in the most abstract sense, as "an analytical category describing the vast array of

meaning-making resources available to everybody."[31] Discursive practices, on the other hand, may have ideological effects in terms of helping, for example, the production and reproduction of unequal power relations between "social classes, women and men, and ethnic groups."[32] It is the main purpose of CDA to clarify these aspects of discourse as social practices that are otherwise opaque and not easily visible. One manifestation of such practices can be detected in political discourses that function in ways that "naturalize certain statements as self-evident."[33] For this reason, CDA helps individuals to be critical about this naturalization and recognize their misconception of real situations produced by the ideological effects of constructed discourses.[34] Another important aspect of discourse is linked to using various linguistic indictors in a strategic way to construct in- and out-groups, which are deemed to be essential for "political (and discriminatory) discourses in all kinds of settings."[35] One of the most important and commonly used settings in recent years has been social media – especially since it seems to be in strong competition with traditional media outlets (i.e., 'the fourth estate') for its instrumentalization of control and domination on a global spectrum, as well as in communication strategies of terrorist organizations.

In the CDA literature, the construction of in- and out-groups implies the use of *strategies of positive self-presentation* and the *negative presentation of others*. There is also minimizing the in-group's negative traits (as well as emphasizing their positive ones) and minimizing the out-group's positive traits (as well as emphasizing their negative ones). This research primarily focused on three types of discursive strategies that are all involved in positive self- and negative other- presentation:
1. Referential and nomination strategies;
2. Perspectivation, framing and discourse representation strategies; and,
3. Intensifying strategies.[36]

---

[31] Ruth Wodak. (2011). "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *Continuum Companion to Discourse Analysis*. Eds. Ken Hyland and Brian Paltridge. (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group), p. 39.

[32] Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis," p. 40.

[33] Norman Fairclough. (1989). *Language and Power*. (London: Longman).

[34] Kamil Yilmaz and Alper Sozer. (2015). "17/25 December Graft Probe in Turkey and Understanding Erdogan's Invincibility: A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)." *Security, Terrorism and Society*. Vol. 1: 1, p. 55-79.

[35] Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis," p. 46. In addition, construction of in- and out-groups chimes with the concepts of 'boundary formation,' 'boundary activation' and 'boundary deactivation,' which refers to us-them distinction between two political actors. For more information, see: Dough McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. (2001). *Dynamics of Contention*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[36] Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis," p. 49.

These discursive strategies underpin the justification/legitimization of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the constructions of identities. The breakdown of these strategies is presented in Table 1 below. The next couple of pages will explicate each strategy by providing several examples from our dataset.

Table 1 – *Discursive Strategies*

Channel X			Channel Y		
Discursive Strategies	Count	%	Discursive Strategies	Count	%
Referential/nomination	17	13.7	Referential/nomination	2	0.4
Framing/Discourse Representation	77	62.1	Framing/Discourse Representation	492	98.6
IS's strength & relevance	50	40.3	IS's strength & relevance	376	75.4
Plight of Muslims	27	21.8	Legitimation	114	22.8
Intensifying	71	57.3	Intensifying	492	98.6
Posts with text	124/255	49	Posts with text	499/805	62

4.2 Referential and Nomination Strategies

According to Wodak, *referential and nomination strategies* are used in constructing in-groups and out-groups by way of various categorization devices such as "memberships categorization; biological, naturalizing and depersonalizing metaphors and metonyms."[37] In the given assessment, these strategies were more visible in Channel X than Channel Y, given that around 13.7 percent of posts in the former contained referent terms about the out-group, whereas only a few instances of this strategy (0.4 percent) appeared in Channel Y(see Table 1).

Users in Channel X used referent-nomination terms like *infidel*, *crusader*, *atheist* and *communist* about non-Muslims in general, as well as Chinese people and the Chinese government, all of which invoke indelibly negative memories among Muslims around the world. More importantly, negative representations of the out-group went beyond non-Muslims in Channel X – it also included various Muslim people and states, which the channel depicted as being 'infidels.' For instance, regarding the recent victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan, one user posted a photo with the following message: "The Victory of the Taliban (American) and they are engaged behind the rostrum. God

[37] Ruth Wodak, (2001). The discourse-historical approach. In *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 63-94). SAGE Publications, Ltd. Accessed at: https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020.

help Taliban's (American) victory. Here they already preaching behind a Shia minbar." Here, the user not only other-ed the Taliban by associating it with the word 'American,' but s/he also presented the Shia as an out-group, even though Shia is a recognized sect of Islam. The subsequent example about a depiction of Shiites in Channel X is more telling, as one user's caption under a photo had said: "Taliban members join the Shiah and offer their condolences at one of the Husayniyyat during the month of Muharram. Allahumma ihdeehum ila siratika al mustaqeem." The last sentence in the quote reads in English as "May God lead them to the straight path," which implies that Shiites are not on the right path, or that they are simply deviants. Another example was related to the ISIS-Khorasan attack at Kabul airport on 26 August 2021, which resulted in the death of 12 American servicemen and 60 Afghan civilians. One user in the channel wrote: "the blood of the infidels mixed with the blood of their dogs, the Taliban," – thereby, othering the Taliban more explicitly. In these examples, Shiites and the Taliban are viewed as part of the out-group, or as what Berger called the "ineligible of the in-group,[38] and presented as such. Using the "competitive system of meaning" we can see how leveraging some information, such as the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, the group discussions present a narrative to categorize the in- and out- group.

In the Channel Y, the use of referent-nomination terms to define the out-group was almost non-existent. It appeared only in a small number of posts, in which the strategy was used indirectly by quoting the spokesperson of the ISIS Al-Qurashi, with the user saying:

> He talked about fighting the Kharijites and their leader Shekou, who was killed and blessed in the pledge of allegiance to those who repented from joining Shekou and joined the ISIS and recommended that they eliminate those who remained if they did not repent.

Here, the word Kharijites means 'seceders' or 'those who exit the community,' for their belief that it was forbidden to live among those who did not share their views, and those who disagreed with their position were deemed apostates deserving of capital punishment.[39] As such, 'Kharijite' is perhaps one of the most profound predicates that jihadist extremist groups use to label certain Muslims as part of the out-group, or as mentioned above, ineligible to be among the in-group. On the other hand, the fact that referential-nomi-

[38] J.M. Berger. (2021). "A Paler Shade of White: Identity & In-group Critique in James Mason's Siege." *RESOLVE Network*. Accessed at: https://doi.org/10.37805/remve2021.1.

[39] Tamara Sonn and Adam Farrar. (2009). "Kharijites." *Oxford Bibliographies*. Accessed at: https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0047.xml.

nation strategies were not used directly in Channel Y had to do with their conspicuous efforts to portray themselves as a legitimate pseudo news agency.

4.3 Perspectivation, Framing and Discourse Representation Strategies

In the observed posts, both channels used another strategy called *perspectivation, framing and discourse representation*, by means that "speakers express their involvement in discourse and position their points of view in the reporting, description, narration, or quotation of relevant events or utterances."[40] Once again, the use of this strategy in Channel X was direct and tended to revolve around framing the channel's discourse toward pro-ISIS narratives; whereas it was indirect and tailored more towards discourse representation in Channel Y. To specify, 62.1 percent of the posts in Channel X used this strategy, which was split up into two categories: messages around the promotion of ISIS's strength and relevance (40.3 percent) and messages related to the perceived plight of a specific group of Muslims (21.8 percent). In Channel Y, this strategy was used in 98.6 percent of the posts and manifested itself also in two ways: messages around the promotion of ISIS's strength and relevance (75.4 percent) and messages around the portrayal of the channel as a legitimate news outlet – legitimation (22.8 percent). (See Table 1). To better contextualize, one user in the Channel X said the following over the recent victory of the Taliban:

> #Taliban. They announce their fake victory but they are back to square one, after the Islamic State came out to them from where they did not count, amid their fortifications at Kabul Airport. But this time the flavor was different thankfully. The blood of the infidels mixed with the blood of their dogs, the Taliban. This is a small part and the sweetness has not yet begun.

In saying this, the user not only expresses his own point of view but also glorifies violence, belittles the enemy (i.e., 'infidels' and the 'Taliban'), and threatens to commit future attacks – thereby framing the discourse in such a way that the ISIS narrative is still powerful and the Taliban's victory is doomed to be ephemeral. The same user also posted a similar message about an ISIS attack in Central Africa stating:

> Central African State. By the grace of God Almighty, the soldiers of the Caliphate ambushed two trucks of unbelieving Christians, in the village of (Ofai) in the (Ituri) region yesterday, as they targeted them with machine guns, which led to their burning and the killing of one of the Christians, praise be to God.

[40] Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis," p. 49.

Phrases like "By the grace of God Almighty,' and 'praise be to God,' were referents for the glorification of the attacks and clearly demonstrated the user's own point of view in the ISIS's discourse which seeks to amplify the "strength" of the group on Telegram.

As mentioned earlier, in Channel Y this strategy manifested itself mostly as discourse representation. Discourse representation refers to "the language used in a text or talk to assign meaning to groups and their social practices, to events, and to social and ecological conditions and objects."[41] In this view, the implicit role of the language in social life is that "meaning is not embedded in the reality that is perceived but rather that it is construed by linguistic representation."[42] What we saw in Channel Y is that the channel first tried to represent itself as a legitimate news outlet by maintaining neutral language, seemingly distant from the content of the messages that it disseminated – the channel owed its successes, to a great extent, to this strategy. Given that Channel Y's accounts have been active for a long time, the channel's success was apparent on Telegram, as well as other platforms like Twitter and Facebook – notwithstanding the fact that almost 90 percent of the channel's content is about ISIS attacks in various regions around the world, namely in the African continent. The following example, which is the only message in the channel that shows the author's involvement in the discourse, however, clearly reveals the real opinion of the channel administrators about ISIS as a terrorist organization, even though they make enormous efforts to be seen as a legitimate news platform:

> "#Mozambique. The commander of the Rwandan army deployed in Cabo Delgado province is called "Innocent Kabandana", a war criminal notorious for causing crimes inside and outside Rwanda. *I think IS militants (ISCAP) love this breed*:)" [Emphasis added].

4.4 Intensifying Strategies

Both channels have consistently used intensifying strategies, which "help to qualify and modify the epistemic status of a proposition by intensifying the illocutionary force of utterances."[43] In other words, these strategies are an important aspect of presentation in terms of sharpening the narratives,

---

[41] Norman Fairclough. (1989:1995); Teun van Dijk (2002), cited in Anita. L. Wenden. (2005). "The Politics of Representation: A Critical Discourse Analysis of An Aljazeera Special Report." *International Journal of Peace Studies*. Vol. 10: 2, Autumn/Winter, p. 90. Accessed at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41852931.
[42] Wenden, "Politics of Representation," p. 90.
[43] Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis," p. 49-50.

both real and constructed ones. Moreover, the intensification strategies can be used in at least two ways: 1) intensifying quantitatively, which means that an argument is uttered repetitiously; and 2) intensifying qualitatively, which refers to making a seemingly convincing fallacious argument and sharpening it when one is expected to tone it down."[44]

In Channel X, 57.3 percent of the posts contained intensifying strategies (see Table 1), which were most visible in users' narratives related to a specific group of Muslims, which was done both quantitatively, by repeating similar messages regarding the reported number of deaths, and qualitatively, by increasing the emotional weight of those narratives. The qualitative aspect of intensification was undergirded by attaching one or more visuals, such as photos, audios, or videos relating to the topic. The main issue at hand is the idea of 'concept hijacking,' i.e., the exploitation of the plight of specific Muslim groups around the world in this channel to promote and glorify ISIS by amplifying pro-ISIS messages and narratives.

In Channel Y, we observed this strategy in 98.6 percent of the messages (see Table 1), mostly in the form of quantitative intensifying in that, messages featuring ISIS attacks in different countries and regions were shared repeatedly to project an image of the group as a still-relevant, all-powerful, and ubiquitous force in the world, especially in Africa and the Middle East. Considering that almost 90 percent of the messages in the channel were about ISIS attacks or activities that could be seen in any ordinary news outlet, using the intensification strategy in this way may also have contributed to the channel's success in portraying itself as a legitimate source of information – especially among members, followers, and even supporters of ISIS.

5. Conclusion

This research analysed the content of two ISIS-related Telegram channels – an interactive channel (Channel X) and a broadcasting channel (Channel Y) – to assess the similarities and differences in the strategies employed to communicate its narratives to followers. While numerous studies have been conducted on the use of various social media and messaging platforms, there was not enough literature available on assessment of the different channels or accounts used by the same group on these platforms. Assessing the content of the messages, there were clear examples of how the group could be leveraging various options and opportunities provided on Telegram to maximize their communication tactics and further establish their narratives through

---

[44] Toning down in political discourse falls into the category of 'mitigation strategies,' which can be considered as the opposite of 'intensification strategies.'

either more overt categorization of the in- and out- group, or subtler messages that reinforce the same divide. The qualitative analysis of the content helped us to derive the three strategies used by the channels in their messaging. Assessment of these strategies shed some light on how these groups use specific language choices to polarize the wider population and instil the given categorization among their followers. The two channels used different approaches in reinforcing their narratives through either the viewpoints and posts shared by followers (Channel X) and selective news postings that, while allowing it to establish itself as a legitimate source of information, tactically embedding ISIS-leaning discourse in seemingly generic posts (Channel Y). Finally, both channels strategically intensified the narratives quantitatively or qualitatively. Channel X users and moderators repeated similar messages in different instances to attract more attention to the issue, while also intensifying the messages separately through use of sentimental language and attached images and videos. For Channel Y, this was done through frequent reposts of the ISIS attacks around the world, implicitly intensifying the presence of a group, which in reality is viewed to have grown weaker since the fall of its physical stronghold in Iraq and Syria. Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations are summarized below:

5.1 Recommendations:

- Continue to analyse strategies employed by various terrorist groups across online platforms. Having continuous studies on how terrorists operationalize online spaces will shed light on their operations and will help inform decisions on the best ways of identifying the threat online as well as how to best approach it.
- Assess terrorists' changing online narratives and how these are used for different purposes. Leveraging frameworks such as "competitive system of meaning" will help shed light on how terrorists use facts coupled with their interpretation of situations to build their own narratives. Understanding of the narratives put forward by terrorist groups and how they are used to create a new set of "meanings" and "values" for their followers is important not only for preventative work, but also for deradicalization initiatives.
- Leverage collaborations between academics, practitioners, and policy makers to collectively assess content taken down from platforms such as Telegram to allow for a multidimensional assessment of the information. As shown through this project, such approaches will allow for a holistic analysis of information, producing well-developed recommendations for future research and policies, which in return can be used to produce responses to the use of online platforms by terrorist of different background.
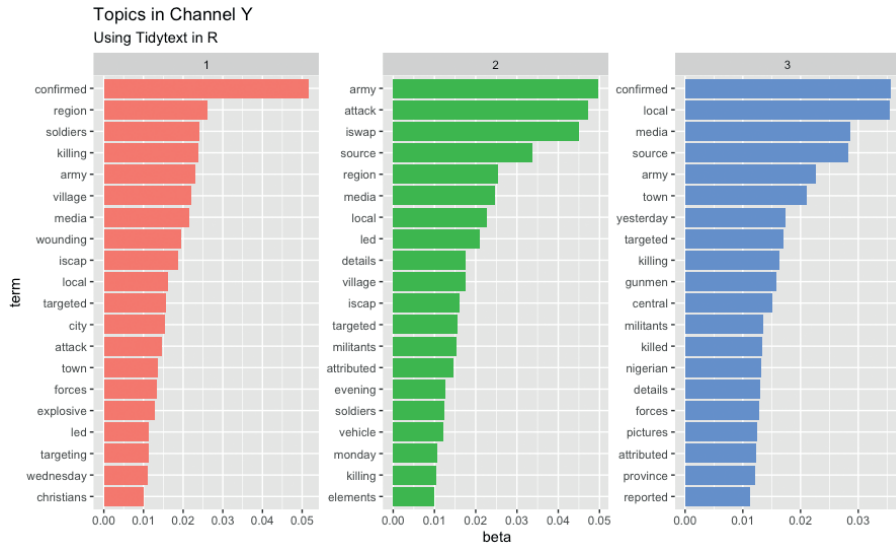
Acknowledgments:

Appendices

Appendix 1: Topics in Channel X

Topics in Channel X
Using Tidytext in R
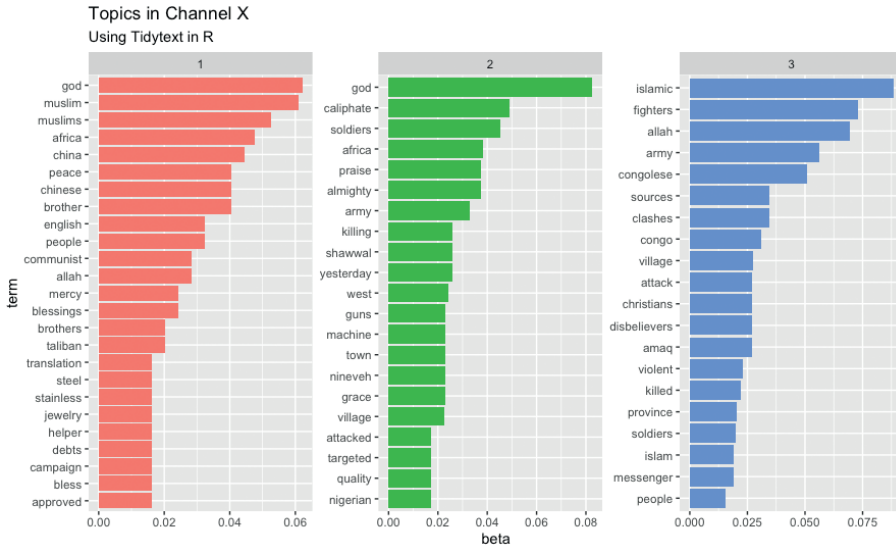
Appendix 2: Topics in Channel Y

Topics in Channel Y
Using Tidytext in R

La Rivista semestrale *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società* intende la *Sicurezza* come una condizione che risulta dallo stabilizzarsi e dal mantenersi di misure proattive capaci di promuovere il benessere e la qualità della vita dei cittadini e la vitalità democratica delle istituzioni; affronta il fenomeno del *Terrorismo* come un processo complesso, di lungo periodo, che affonda le sue radici nelle dimensioni culturale, religiosa, politica ed economica che caratterizzano i sistemi sociali; propone alla *Società* – quella degli studiosi e degli operatori e quella ampia di cittadini e istituzioni – strumenti di comprensione, analisi e scenari di tali fenomeni e indirizzi di gestione delle crisi.

Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società si avvale dei contributi di studiosi, policy maker, analisti, operatori della sicurezza e dei media interessati all'ambito della sicurezza, del terrorismo e del crisis management. Essa si rivolge a tutti coloro che operano in tali settori, volendo rappresentare un momento di confronto partecipativo e aperto al dibattito.

La rivista ospita contributi in più lingue, preferendo l'italiano e l'inglese, per ciascuno dei quali è pubblicato un Executive Summary in entrambe le lingue. La redazione sollecita particolarmente contributi interdisciplinari, commenti, analisi e ricerche attenti alle principali tendenze provenienti dal mondo delle pratiche.

Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società è un semestrale che pubblica 2 numeri all'anno. Oltre ai due numeri programmati possono essere previsti e pubblicati numeri speciali.

Euro 20,00

9 788893 350419