

# The Functions and Value of the Media Caliphate

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Brief Analysis

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The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has a much more effective online media program than its jihadi neighbors and predecessors: it recruits and radicalizes supporters while provoking and terrorizing enemies. Yet there is a significant gap in our understanding of where ISIS' media fits into its overall strategy as a proto-state. I provide a snapshot of ISIS' views on media production by analyzing two of its publications: "Media Man, You Are a Mujahid Too" (June/July 2016) and "Why Should I Destroy the Satellite" (February/March 2016). In these texts, ISIS lays out the hierarchy, functions, and audiences of its media, but does not prescribe visual or stylistic content. Furthermore, coordination between media producers is not emphasized, suggesting that ISIS prefers these producers to remain relatively autonomous, rather than completely controlled.

## "Media Man, You Are a Mujahid Too"

### Religion and Bureaucracy

On first glance, "Media Man" treats media production as integral to ISIS' cause, placing it in equal esteem to the military side of operations. Media is not simply supplementary, but just as important as physical violence and territorial seizure; in fact, the text goes so far as to compare IS' media campaign to the Prophet's (PBUH), pointing out that he "made use of poetry as a form of media and used poems like Qauis Ben Shamas to raise Muslims spirits through poetry."

Accordingly, the text proclaims that the 'media Emir's' [prince/commander/head] jurisdiction is holy, thereby delegating those subordinate to him as necessarily pious: "The media Emir is the one who is responsible for distributing tasks and therefore if you obey his orders you obey God and if you disobey him you disobey God." Here, media production appears to be directly controlled by some (or multiple) appointed authority – a hierarchy of at least three levels (God, Emir, and producer), legitimated by Islamic discourse.

The text does not, however, describe who appoints the Emirs or how, although this most likely falls under the Shura Council's jurisdiction. Moreover, this lack of information implies that ISIS is not concerned with the appointment of Emirs in a post-ISIS world, suggesting that no authority outside of ISIS' bureaucracy has the appropriate mechanisms to establish 'authentic' Emirs in a post-ISIS world. Reading the text with this limited bureaucratic information in mind, the Emir is merely one step away from God, making the producer only two steps away. Thus

the archetypes of the media producer and the soldier are intimately intertwined as a singular religious phenomenon within a bureaucratic hierarchy.

### **Enemy and Audience**

In addition to religious references, the text employs an 'us versus them' dichotomy: "Whatever makes infidels angry, makes believers happy." This aphorism implies that media should specifically focus on targeting the enemy, i.e. terrorizing, provoking, or coercing. Yet the full message is more complex, as ISIS media is not only oriented towards the enemy: the text also maintains that a 'media professional' should be working to encourage sympathizers to fight and support jihad as well. Potential supporters can be the primary targets, while the enemy can constitute the "secondary" audience.

ISIS appears to understand that media may affect secondary audiences in addition to its primary target -- indeed, their videos are characterized by the ability to oscillate seamlessly between violently alienating one demographic while resonating with another. For example, the Jihadi John series was clearly marketed to, and in part, functions to terrorize, Western audiences. But the video also inspired a wave of jihadi sympathizers to join ISIS and represented a new standard for jihadi media producers -- with regard to production techniques such as costumes, cinematography, and CGI. In other words, this manipulation of primary and secondary targets is a vital aspect of ISIS' decision making, allowing their shocking execution videos to antagonize Westerners on the one hand, while garnering social and material capital on the other.

### **Functions, Identity, and Culture**

Media, then, has several interrelated functions according to the text, which all fit into this constructed political dichotomy: it can provoke the enemy, expose schemes, balance the propaganda war, and inflict a defeat of morale before a military operation even takes place. But, at the same time, media can inspire and raise "the spirit of the nation [the Islamic State]," help achieve victory in the physical sense, provide an alternative source information to the mainstream consumer, and reclaim the 'Islamic' values erased by the 'Western intellectual invasion.' Media, then, serves two simultaneous functions: aiding ISIS' military interests through psychological terrorism or recruiting supporters. Whether it is interpreted as antagonistic or sympathetic is up to the viewer.

But while ISIS' alternative media appears valuable because it supplements military campaigns, its unique aspect is the ability to reconstitute ISIS' cultural, social, and religious values. This is an important prerogative for ISIS, which holds that the enemy currently wields enormous influence over the hearts and minds of relatively small populations all over the world: "The Zionists, the Safavids, and the secular enemies have realized that invading hearts is more successful than invading territories and enslaving people." In other words, because the enemy started --and was winning-- a cultural 'identity war,' it is the media producer's job to combat this invasion. This side of media production allows ISIS to impact the ideas and beliefs of a huge swath of individuals -- be they supporters or opponents -- by 'reclaiming' knowledge production. In effect, ISIS' media allows supporters and members of the organization to associate themselves with something fundamentally different from more mainstream categories of identity.

The text certainly delineates the functions, goals, and even the bureaucratic basis of media, but it does not indicate how these goals are met through the visual content of the media. This implies that ISIS media production operates with relative autonomy -- especially with regard to the physical production of videos and the construction of scenes.

### **"Why One Should Destroy the Satellite": The Paradox of Style**

"Why One Should Destroy the Satellite," however, indirectly speaks to this issue. Regarding IS supporters' imperative to destroy satellite dishes, the text--a treatise of around two-dozen prescriptions concerning media more broadly--states:

Because [of the] addiction of watching infidels by the image that they display, beautify and make better, *[we] can inherit imitation of them [in] no way*. The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: “He who imitates any people (in their actions) is considered to be one of them.”

One would assume that this point would apply to the imagery of ISIS media itself: if the ISIS media producer were to imitate the enemy’s media, he would be just as culpable in the blasphemy and apostasy of the infidels. In fact, ISIS media is distinct from other jihadi media in its increase in the imitation of Western media; it usually even extends (and innovates) these tropes. IS media is replete with CGI, dramatic reconstructions, conscious choreography, and careful camera work.

But rather than calling this contradiction “hypocrisy,” ISIS demonstrates a level of ideological adaptability for the sake of practicality. Jihadi media has a long history of co-opting Western media tropes. While this may simply be a consequence of global technological advances, many jihadi leaders and ideologues such as Osama bin Laden and al-Zawahiri recognized the power of adopting certain Western-valence visual shortcuts in order to convey a certain message more effectively to a large and dispersed audience. By absorbing western media tropes (such as newsroom aesthetics, dramatic reenactments, and ‘high-tech’ CGI animations) while explicitly decrying western media and seeking to destroy it, ISIS, much like it’s jihadi predecessors, is co-opting contemporary tools of knowledge production in an effort to reclaim it.

## **Conclusion**

If ISIS were to suffer complete territorial defeat, its media program will be able to sustain the ideological agenda by continually impressing ideas onto the constituency of Islamic State supporters. ISIS’ media production will be extremely difficult to stifle since small cells of individual supporters could still emulate the current styles of ISIS’ media while performing most of the essential functions laid out in these texts without the need for a legitimate media Emir.

However, we would expect to see major contention on the issue of authenticity, as new Emirs would not be able to go through the legitimization process currently in place. Unless ISIS establishes a legitimization process for appointing media Emirs without the need of territory, its influence will greatly diminish. Therefore, media production in a post-ISIS Middle East will survive, but it will be subject to internal debate amongst the online jihadi community, who will dispute the authority of media producers. ISIS, however, will probably take these precautionary measures, drawing from past experiences of online control by their jihadi counterparts – namely, al-Qaeda.

Within these texts, we see that ISIS has a sophisticated understanding of how primary and secondary audiences can work. These texts also reinforce the media’s value and functions while establishing bases for a simple bureaucratic chain of command. More importantly, by antagonizing and recruiting simultaneously, ISIS is reclaiming knowledge production. This means that ISIS can carve out a sphere of influence, imprinting ideas onto its constituency by providing alternative interpretations of events, religion, and ideology. While this runs parallel to its territorial conquest, it is also an end in itself that can have real-world effects on the success of the state-building project. To them, it is clear that a state cannot be maintained through physical control over territory alone, but discursive control over its population as well.

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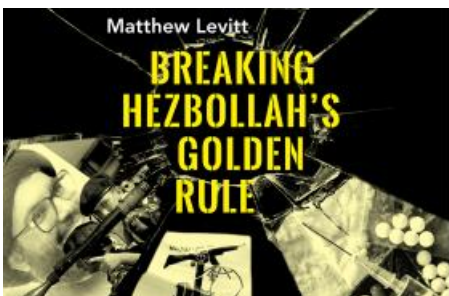
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