Articles

The Representation of Youth in the Islamic State's Propaganda Magazine Dabiq

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Abstract

The propaganda magazine of the terrorist group Islamic State (IS), entitled Dabiq, displays IS' utilization of different representations of youth to convert a new generation of jihadi fighters. This study analyzes why IS uses youth in its propaganda and what functions of discourse these representations serve. This article is a qualitative content analysis of the Dabiq magazines with direct reference to Henry Giroux's theory of the myth of childhood innocence, which portrays youths as passive victims. The evolution of representations of youth in Dabiq aligns with this myth, as the publications tend to give active and violent roles to youth in order to foster new social paradigms.

Keywords: *Islamic State; youth; children; terrorism; propaganda; Dabiq*

Introduction

The Islamic State's "media materials have steadily escalated the level of violence involving and being carried out by children, with this video being the most extreme level reached so far" affirmed Charles Lister from the Brookings Doha Center, referencing the Islamic State's video of a Kazakh boy executing two Russian spies. The Islamic State (IS), a terrorist group operating in Iraq and Syria that auto-proclaimed its caliphate in June 2014, has released various ranges of English-language propaganda pieces using children and youth in its communication strategy. This study examines the content and design of IS' propaganda to determine why IS uses youth in its propaganda and how the representations of youth provide information about the group Islamic State.

The instrumentalization of youth and children by the Islamic State in its propaganda pieces appears in mainstream media headlines and governmental coverage. The Islamic State's propaganda is described as "sophisticated" (Becker, 2014) and appealing to Western and North African youth, from jihadi brides to converted foreign fighters (Aly, 2015), who decide to join the Islamic State (Ali, 2015, 9). As the scholars Jean Pierre Filiu and Olivier Roy argued, IS attracts Tunisian and French youths at the periphery of the Middle East as they experience a generational crisis in their home country (Chambraud, 2015). Al Hayat Media Center, which is one of the media departments of the Islamic State, relays phenomena of Europeans joining IS in the digital magazine of the group, entitled *Dabiq*. In order to understand these phenomena of migration to the auto-proclaimed Islamic State, one must analyze the representation of youth in IS' English-language propaganda pieces for a Western audience.

This article analyzes how youth is portrayed and what functions of discourse this representation serves for the

group Islamic State. The hypothesis argues that IS' propaganda is innovative because it uses representations of youth and children to attract potential recruits from a Western audience and to establish its state-building project. This paper discusses this hypothesis through a qualitative content analysis of IS' magazine, entitled *Dabiq*. *Dabiq* offers a microcosm of all the representations of youth used by IS because it focuses on articles based on current events of the group, pictures taken from videos, *Mujatweets* (Becker, 2014), and other ideological propaganda pieces.

The use of youth and children as instruments of propaganda is not a characteristic specific to the Islamic State. Other non-state actors use these propaganda tools for victimization purposes. This article offers a critical analysis in Terrorism Studies about how the representation of youth in IS' propaganda is different from those used by other terrorist groups due to IS' political agenda of state building. This angle of analysis appears to be unstudied in the academic sphere and is only briefly mentioned by mainstream media.

Background: youth in the Islamic State's propaganda magazine Dabiq

Dabiq is the digital magazine series of the Islamic State. The magazine has offered long publications released by Al Hayat Media Center since July 2014 in French, German, English, Russian, and Arabic, each totaling approximately 50 pages. According to the magazine itself, the title *Dabiq* comes from a town in Northern Syria that is mentioned in a hadith as the place "where the Muslim and Christian armies will face each other" (Giles, 2014). The magazine emphasizes the Islamic State's news and "governance programs, ranging from Sharia courts to aid distribution and law enforcement" (Harleen, 2014, 3).

Dabiq in English aims to show IS' political, military, and religious programs to a Western audience. The magazine's vulgarization and explanation of the Islamic State's ideological concepts is important, since the target audience may not have any background knowledge of jihadi terms. *Dabiq*' editors use technological and media tools to offer a publication that is both pictorial and language-rich.

Moreover, *Dabiq* offers a microcosm of IS' propaganda pieces because the magazine is a condensed publication of IS' propaganda achievements, showing pictures from Al Hayat Media Center's violent videos, *Mujatweets*, and other types of videos. *Dabiq* can be considered a significant documentation of IS' propaganda strategy. The eight magazines released from July 2014 to May 2015 constitute the data set of this article. The topics of the *Dabiq* magazine, chosen by IS' media department, are primary concerns for a group that has "an holistic state building project" (Harleen, 2014, 2). Thus, the portrayal of youth in the magazine has significant functions in the engagement of the target audience.

Theoretical framework: representation of youth and children in the media

This article discusses theories of representation of youth and children in the media, especially in propaganda pieces. In this article, the term "children" refers to anyone from 0 to 12 years old and "youth" indicates anyone from 12 to 24 years old, as defined by Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Williard (Mazzarella, 2004, 228).

The qualitative content analysis of the representation of youth and children in *Dabiq* is based on the works of Henry Giroux, Mike Males, and Marina Warner, which discuss the myth of childhood innocence. Indeed, Henry Giroux stated that youth is a social construct imposed by adults (Giroux, 1996, 12). Adults consider that "both childhood and innocence reflect aspects of a natural state, one that is beyond the dictates of history, society, and politics" (Giroux, 2000, 2). Similarly, Marina Warner explains the myth of childhood innocence by stating that youths are "innocent because they are outside of society, pre-historical, pre-social

instinctual creatures of unreason, primitive kin to unspoiled nature" (Giroux, 2000, 5). However, as Giroux argued in *Stealing Innocence*, "childhood is not a natural state of innocence, it is a historical construct" (Giroux, 2000, 5). This myth perpetuates a dialectic relationship between how adults think about children and how children view themselves. In a globalized world dominated by capitalism and consumer society, this myth of childhood innocence has evolved: children are marketed as commodities instead of as mere objects (Giroux, 2000, 14). This myth of childhood innocence perpetuates the imbalance of power between adults and youths (Males, 1999).

The coding frame of this article highlights the extent to which IS portrays children and youth along the myth that marks children and youth as "innately pure and passive" (Giroux, 2000, 5). Moreover, Hartley argues that young people are powerless over their own image and that they are represented in ways that make them comparable to a "colonized people, perhaps the West's last colony in discursive terms" (Mazzarella, 2004, 233). Since the Islamic State advocates against Western values and anti-colonialism, it is interesting to analyze how IS portrays youth. Keeping Hartley's statement in mind, it appears that IS uses propaganda in an attempt to emancipate the "West's last colony."

Overall, this article analyzes whether Giroux and Males' theories of the myth of childhood innocence appear in the Islamic State's propaganda through passive roles, victimization tools and material commodity figures, or if the Islamic State has tried to implement its own paradigm for youths' roles and representation.

Methodology: Qualitative Content Analysis

Bernard Berelson defined content analysis as a "systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding" (as cited in Stemler, 2001). Content analysis is a relevant methodology for analysis of IS' representation of youth because its coding frames highlight the important concepts that the studied group also wants to highlight in its communication. The inferences made in this content analysis show IS' strategies, ideology, and relations of power, because discourse and society maintain a dialectic relationship in which discourse shapes and is shaped by society.

The content analysis is qualitative because youth and children are not the main themes of IS' propaganda. 165 inferences of nouns related to youth and children have been observed out of 155660 words in the eight *Dabiq* magazines. Thirteen pictures representing youths and children also constitute the data set in order to offer a visual content analysis.

The words "child" (7 inferences), "children" (65), "young" (21), "youth" (21), "boy" and "boys" (4), "girl" and "girls" (8), "son" and "sons" (45), "daughter" and "daughters" (4), and "lion cubs" and "lions" (5) have been coded in the *Dabiq* magazines. Emergent coding was the method chosen to establish categories following preliminary examination of the data (Stemler, 2001). First, the words were analyzed in context, and the counted nouns or adjectives were either direct objects or referred to the subject of their sentence. Nouns or adjectives were defined as "active" if they functioned as the subject of the sentence or if the following verb was in the active form. On the other hand, counted nouns or adjectives were defined as "passive" if they were indirect objects in the sentence or if the following verb was in the passive form.

Secondly, the coding of these nouns and adjectives linked them to one or more of ten overarching concepts: victimization tool, object and material commodity, slavery, showcase of IS' social and institutional rules, generational building, glorification of the group, out-group derogation, recruitment tool, threat the enemy, and youths as perpetrators of violence. The author and another undergraduate student at Georgetown

University have done this coding process in compliance with the reliability requirement of the coding (Weber, 1990, 12).

Concerning the visual content analysis, thirteen pictures have been analyzed based on the position of the image on the double-page, the color and contrast, the roles (active/passive) of youths in the picture, and youths' facial expressions and their placement within the picture (foreground/ background).

Qualitative Content Analysis Results and Discussion

The results of this qualitative and visual content analysis allow discussion of the initial hypothesis, which emphasized the use of youth and children as tools to fulfill IS' long-term political project of building a new society. The following chart offers an overview of the coding frames found in all references to youth in the *Dabiq* magazines.

Qualitative Content Analysis of The Representations of The Youth in The Dabiq Magazine

references coding frame	young (21)	youth (6)	child (7)	children (65)	boy/boys (4)	girl/girls (8)	son/sons (45)	daughter/ daughters (4)	Total (%)
Passive role	9	2	5	38	2	2	18	3	49,3
Active role	8	4	2	19	2	6	9	1	31,8
Victimization tool	1	0	1	20	1	0	4	0	16,8
Object / Material commodity	0	0	5	13	1	0	4	0	14,4
Slavery	0	0	4	5	6	5	0	0	12,5
Recruitment tool	2	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	4,4
Perpetrator of violence	4	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	4,4
Generation building	0	0	0	6	1	1	1	0	5,6
Showcase of IS' social and institutional rules	7	1	6	9	0	7	8	1	24,4
Threat the enemy	0	0	0	3	0	7	8	1	11,9
Glorification of the group	5	1	0	5	1	0	8	0	12,5
Out-group derogation	1	1	1	22	0	0	5	0	18,8
Not relevant	4	0	0	8	0	0	19	0	19,3

Table – Qualitative Content Analysis of the Representation of Youth in the Dabiq Magazines

The myth of childhood innocence

The content analysis of the *Dabiq* magazine confirms that the myth of childhood innocence is still the dominant aspect of the use of youth and children for the Islamic State. Indeed, children and youth have passive roles in half of the studied references (47,9% of the cases) while they have an active role in 33,9% of the cases (the other 18,8% of cases remain irrelevant). The representations of youth and children in passive roles, as weak or victimized, and as objects or commodities all align with the myth of childhood innocence.

1. Youth and children as victimization tools

Weakness or victimization appears in 16,4% of the references to youth and children. Children are represented as victims of the Western intervention against the Islamic State in order to raise sentiment and frustration within the target audience. Four pictures displayed in *Dabiq* show the heads of dead children, victims of bombings. The violent pictures are also included in the discourse through expressions such as "the US has killed women, children, and the elderly" (*Dabiq* Issue 3, 2014, 2) or "the massacres taking place in Gaza against the Muslim men, women, and children" (*Dabiq* Issue 2, 2014, 2). These two examples illustrate how Dabiq portrays children and youth as victims in order to influence its Western audience.

2. Youth and children as material commodities

The myth of childhood innocence is also fulfilled by the representation of youth and children as objects and material commodities in 13,9% of the references. Indeed, youth and children are seen as material commodities next to the words "wealth" and "weapons," such as in the sentence "they assist the Islamic State with their wealth, their sons, their men, their weapons" (*Dabiq* Issue 1, 2014, 6). Similarly, "Islamic State soldiers" possess children like objects that one can transport from one place to another in "a caravan of vehicles transporting the families (women and children) of Islamic State soldiers" (Dabiq Issue 4, 2014, 41). Youth and children are possessed by adults through pronouns or through the theme of slavery, which occurs in 11,5% of the total references.

3. Youth, children and slavery

The theme of slavery is mostly used to threaten the enemy's youth, as seen in references to the enslavement of girls from the Yazidi community. Six out of the eight references to the word "girl" have an immediate link to the theme of slavery and, more particularly, to the enslavement of girls. In seven cases this is to threaten the enemy, showing IS' social rules with regard to the captivation of its enemies. The materialization of girls is noticeable because they are seen as objects through slavery, and, in six cases out of eight, girls play an active role by "giving birth" or "buying their mother" (*Dabiq* Issue 4, 2014, 16). Similarly, the leitmotiv used by the Islamic State to threaten the enemy is to "sell [the] sons at the slave market" (*Dabiq* Issue 4, 2014, 7, 16, 36). The significant frequency of the theme of slavery highlights IS' social and institutional rules, which allow the enslavement of women and children.

A showcase of IS' social and institutional rules

The Islamic State uses the concept of childhood innocence and the enslavement of children to show its view of social and institutional rules and legitimize its long-term political project. The representation of youth and children highlights the way the group IS sees institutions such as education, justice court and health care. Few pictures and articles from *Dabiq* show adults, and the few who are shown are usually paternalistic men helping orphans and children that suffer from disease. There are also pictures of children smiling and reading an enlightened Koran (*Dabiq* Issue 7, 2015, 82). The Islamic State's discourse and visual contents representing youth show its ambitions to build a cohesive state through the imposition of social rules and institutions.

In-group celebration and out-group derogation

Active roles given to youth in *Dabiq* either refer to a common enemy, which represents an out-group derogation (18,2% of the studied references), or to the glorification of the group, which represents an in-group celebration (15,2% of the studied references). Concerning the concept of out-group derogation, the "sons" of the enemy or "the youth of the Jews" (*Dabiq* Issue 2, 2014, 21) always have an active role in order to legitimize the group's stance. Similarly, the celebration of the group invokes a representation of youths as heroes in spiritual or military terms, further legitimizing the activities of the group. The magazine also makes links between youth and the broader community of "the generous ummah", (*Dabiq* Issue 3, 2014, 4) which is the community of believers, in order to build a sentiment of imaginary community that transcends all other belongings.

Use of youth as a recruitment tool

Paradoxically, the qualitative content analysis highlights that the use of youth as a recruitment tool is not the most important framework of the representation of youth in *Dabiq*. Indeed, 4,2% of references to youth directly aim to recruit the Western target audience, fostering migrations to the Islamic State and urging Westerners to join the ranks of the Islamic State. However, recruitment tools in propaganda are also noticeable through representations of youth and children as perpetrators of violence or as ways to emphasize the building of a new society in the auto-proclaimed Islamic State.

1. Youth and children as perpetrators of violence

The content analysis of IS' discourse shows that the Islamic State displays youth and children as perpetrators of violence in 7,3% of the studied references. This finding could be seen as a minor result. However, this representation of youth and children can be observed in issues beginning with the fifth magazine, specifically in the issues 7 and 8 of *Dabiq*. This is a significant evolution that can also be observed in other videos released by Al Hayat Media Center in the same time period. Indeed, the Islamic State is creating more and more videos displaying youth and children as child-soldiers learning how to fight or killing their enemies, from the video of the Kazakh boy to the videos of schools of boys in military uniforms. This evolution is also noticeable in *Dabiq*, where the visual content analysis highlights that four out of thirteen pictures displaying youth and children show child-soldiers perpetrating violence. *Dabiq* Issue 8 features a full article entitled "Cubs of the Khilafah", in which young boys are killing IS' "enemies" (*Dabiq* Issue 8, 2015, 20-21). Indeed, there are five references to "lions" ("lion cubs", "young lions", "ashbal"), which are a metaphorical concept that emphasises IS' goal of raising a generation of violent and impulsive individuals. This portrayal of young people having an active role in IS' violent enterprise showcases the group's views on education and the next generation of jihadists.

2. A long-term political goal to raise the next generation of jihadi fighters

The Islamic State has a clear political goal of a holistic state building project that would establish a global caliphate. IS has a different approach from other jihadi groups because it wants to implement a long-term political project that appears attractive to European youths as they experience a generational crisis. The qualitative content analysis of *Dabiq* shows that 8,5% of the references to youth and children foster generation building in the auto-proclaimed caliphate. As an example, some of the articles call the target

audience to "rush to the shade of the Islamic State with your parents, siblings, spouses, and children" (*Dabiq* Issue 2, 2014, 2). This goal of building a new society encompasses a range of other concepts that have been discussed previously, because generation building is intertwined with recruitment tools, glorification of the group and the showcase of IS' social and institutional rules in order to legitimize its long-term political project. This idea of sustainability can be illustrated by the leitmotiv "if we do not reach it that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it" (*Dabiq* Issue 4, 2014, 7, 16, 36).

The idea of generation building is displayed in images of children swinging on a swing set after an article about the "hijrah" and "the path" to migrate to the Islamic State. Children are portrayed as innocent while pointing to "Allah," and the picture leads the viewer to believe that the children are enjoying their childhood (*Dabiq* Issue 1, 2014, 20).

Conclusion

The representation of youth and children in the magazine *Dabiq* gives a significant understanding of IS' propaganda and communication tools. Far from Al Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine, which focuses mostly on encouraging a Western audience to engage in lone-wolf attacks on the West, *Dabiq* tries to be the key reference for the Islamic State's policies and activities. The Islamic State uses youth to explain life in its auto-proclaimed caliphate, from its institutions (education and slavery) to its social policies (social care and healthcare). In order to recruit a Western target audience, IS displays children in ways that foster state building and glorify the group.

Though the Islamic State's portrayal of youth and children has mostly the same perspective of childhood innocence as other terrorist groups, a significant evolution is noticeable in the last two magazines. The Islamic State empowers youth with an increase in active roles, especially violent ones. This idea of youth as perpetrators of violence is a characteristic of the Islamic State, illustrating its new social paradigms and making it the main jihadi group that portrays children using violence themselves.

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