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When Digital Diplomacy Gets Misused: The ISIS Case [1]

How did ISIS manage to recruit so many citizens and residents of advanced Western democracies to fight in the deserts of Syria and Iraq? How did the group exploit a subset of public diplomacy, specifically digital diplomacy, to lure thousands of Eurocentric nationals and residents to join their cause? What cautionary lessons can be learned by public diplomacy practitioners? This article examines how ISIS used emerging digital diplomacy techniques to target vulnerable youth in Eurocentric countries, convincing them to relocate to the Middle East and fight for their cause.

The ideology of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) originated from a small Al Qaeda offshoot in Iraq in the early 2000s, formed to counter the U.S. military presence in the region. The group re-mobilized and expanded its activities in 2011, during the Syrian Civil War. By mid-2014, ISIS had overrun Iraqi and Syrian forces, controlling roughly a third of both countries, an area roughly the size of England.

In June 2014, ISIS declared a global caliphate and appointed a leader over the worldwide Muslim community. The group then imposed a rigid interpretation of Islamic law, which led to mass killings, executions, rape, slavery, and widespread displacement.

What was more surprising, however, was ISIS's use of digital diplomacy to promote its ideology and recruit fighters from Eurocentric and Western countries. Estimates suggest that approximately 30,000 foreign fighters from 85 countries joined ISIS, many of them from advanced Western democracies. Additionally, around 550 women and girls were also lured from these Eurocentric countries to join ISIS on the frontlines.

Despite many of these recruits being troubled youth, ISIS demonstrated an effective use of digital diplomacy. They targeted potential recruits without coercion, leveraging digital platforms to craft and distribute their message in a highly efficient way. ISIS made use of digital outlets to entice thousands of Europeans and North Americans to travel to ISIS-controlled territories in the Middle East.

Digital Diplomacy as a Subset of Public Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy is the use of digital tools and platforms to achieve diplomatic goals. This encompasses a wide range of activities, including audience mobilization, communicating diplomatic affairs, disseminating foreign policy objectives, and managing the international reputation of a nation or actor.

At its core, digital diplomacy involves using the internet for communication, public diplomacy, and engaging foreign audiences. This may involve employing digital tools to tailor messages that steer the audience toward a desired diplomatic objective. Micro-sociological strategies are also integral to digital diplomacy, utilizing data-driven trends, predictive analysis, and targeting tools. These techniques allow international actors to analyze user behavior and create responsive content that aligns with their public diplomacy goals.

Professor Corneliu Bjola of Oxford University identifies five key principles for effective digital diplomacy:

1. Listening

2. Prioritizing

3. Hybridization

4. Engagement

5. Adaptation

In practice, digital diplomacy requires balancing security with openness, addressing ethical concerns, pursuing inclusion, managing cybersecurity issues, and adapting communication to globalized audiences, with a strong sensitivity to human rights. These principles ensure that digital diplomacy is used to achieve public diplomacy goals in a manner that is both efficient and responsible.

How ISIS Abused Digital Diplomacy

During the early 2010s, the Syrian Civil War gained significant attention as part of the broader Arab Spring. ISIS stood out due to their rapid territorial gains in Iraq and Syria. Unlike many other militant groups aligned with major blocs in the so-called "Islamic Cold War," ISIS was not officially affiliated with a larger coalition. This isolation allowed them to act autonomously, raising funds and expanding their activities without external constraints.

As a result, ISIS's digital diplomacy campaign had substantial funding and attracted many volunteers, particularly those disillusioned with established state institutions. ISIS's messaging centered on an apocalyptic vision of the caliphate, presenting it as the ultimate fulfillment of history. They selectively used religious texts to justify their claims.

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Digital diplomacy, as ISIS practiced it, was highly effective because it created a two-way communication channel. They promised recruits the opportunity to reshape history, which appealed to many vulnerable individuals. ISIS built social media cells at a time when digital platforms lacked robust oversight. Their content focused on appealing, selective narratives that downplayed the brutality of their actions, showcasing a more attractive and idealized image.

This created a sense of "fear of missing out," making people feel as if joining ISIS was a unique chance to change their lives and contribute to something grand. The average foreign ISIS fighter was older than local recruits—typically about five years older—suggesting they were individuals who struggled to integrate into mainstream Western society.

ISIS microtargeted individuals who felt alienated from the broader system. High levels of unemployment, exclusion, and marginalization among youth from minority backgrounds in Europe made them especially vulnerable to recruitment. These individuals often felt disconnected from the opportunities provided by their societies, and ISIS exploited this discontent through tailored digital messages.

Informal agents, such as friends in mosques or local communities, also played a crucial role. These agents shared ISIS content and facilitated the movement of recruits to Turkey, where they were connected with ISIS operatives who would help them cross into ISIS-controlled areas.

The ISIS recruitment videos, often set to music and showcasing messages of empowerment, were highly effective at drawing in youth from Eurocentric countries. These videos were shared across social media, often by well-meaning but naïve Westerners, further amplifying the group's reach.

While ISIS ultimately failed to establish a lasting nation-state, the group's use of digital diplomacy remains highly effective. Despite the group's defeat, many of their social media accounts remain active, and attacks in Eurocentric countries continue to be inspired by ISIS propaganda shared on digital platforms.

Lessons from the ISIS Case

ISIS's abuse of digital diplomacy was driven by several key factors: (1) capitalizing on their trending status, (2) creating selective, compelling social media content, (3) microtargeting vulnerable individuals, and (4) exploiting systemic failures in Western countries' approaches to diversity and inclusion. This culminated in an efficient social media strategy that appealed to disillusioned youth in Eurocentric countries.

Although ISIS employed unethical tactics in their use of digital diplomacy, their success underscores the power of digital diplomacy. When applied responsibly, digital diplomacy can be a powerful tool for positive engagement. However, it remains largely underutilized.

Digital diplomacy offers immense potential for promoting destinations, branding states, and advancing foreign policy in an ethical manner. To do so effectively, international actors must embrace the principles of listening, prioritizing, hybridization, engagement, and adaptation. Furthermore, they must remain sensitive to ethical concerns such as security, human rights, and transparency.

The lessons learned from ISIS's misuse of digital diplomacy can serve as a reminder of the power and responsibility inherent in digital communication. With the right approach, digital diplomacy can be a force for good in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation on the global stage.