Jihadi Digital Natives

P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking

"You can sit at home and play Call of Duty or you can come here and respond to the real call of duty…the choice is yours."

It would be an unusual slogan for any army, much less the fanatical forces of the Islamic State. But Junaid Hussain was an unusual recruiter. As a stocky Pakistani boy raised in Britain, he was what one would call a nerd. In the underground world of hackers, he was cool. "He had hacker cred," one of his old acquaintances recalled. "He had swagger. He had fangirls." Hussain was also reckless—and he got caught. In 2012, at the age of 18, he was jailed for breaking into the emails of an assistant to former British prime minister Tony Blair.

In prison, Hussain was transformed into a holy warrior. He became consumed with radical beliefs, and when his sentence was up, he fled to Syria, becoming an early volunteer for the jihadist group that would eventually become ISIS. He also took a new online handle, "Abu Hussain al-Britani," and posted a new profile picture of himself cradling an AK-47.

The rifle, though, was only a prop. The weapons that were far more valuable to ISIS were his good English, his swagger, and his easy familiarity with the Internet. He helped organize the Islamic State's nascent "Cyber Caliphate" hacking division, and he scoured Twitter for potential ISIS recruits.

Hussain's online persona was infused with charm, pop culture, and righteous indignation. He persuaded hardened radicals and gullible teenagers alike to travel to Syria. It was a striking contrast to how Al Qaeda, the predecessor of ISIS, had bolstered its ranks. The original members of Al Qaeda had been personally known and vetted by Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants. Indeed, the name "Al Qaeda," translated as "the base," had been taken from the name for the Afghan mountain camps where they'd all trained together. By contrast, some 30,000 recruits, urged on by Junaid Hussain and his team of recruiters, would travel from around the world to join a group that they'd never met in person.

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Hussain also reached out to people who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State but never left home. He recruited at least nine ISIS converts in the United States who would later be killed or arrested there. From thousands of miles away, Hussain served as a bizarre mix of leader, recruiter, and life coach. In one case, he directly organized a shooting at a Texas community center by two self-proclaimed "soldiers of the Caliphate." "The knives have been sharpened," Hussain bragged on Twitter scarcely an hour before the attack began. "Soon we will come to your streets with death and slaughter!"

Becoming, in effect, a super-spreader of the terror virus, Hussain achieved celebrity status. He even took a wife—a British punk rock musician in her early 40s, whom he met online. But his growing fame also made him infamous in U.S. military circles. By 2015, the 21-year-old Hussain had risen to become the third most important name on the Pentagon's "kill list" of ISIS leaders, ranking only behind the group's self-declared caliph and its top battlefield commander.

Ironically, it was Hussain's nonstop Internet use that enabled his execution. The hacker formerly known as "TriCk" was reportedly tricked into clicking a link that had been compromised by British intelligence. His web use allowed him to be geolocated and dispatched by a Hellfire missile fired by a drone.

Medieval Cyber Revolution

In the case of Junaid Hussain can be seen the wider paradox of the Islamic State. When ISIS first seized global attention with its 2014 invasion of Mosul, many observers were flummoxed. The word of the day became "slick." Indeed, terrorism analysts Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, in their 2015 book *ISIS: The State of Terror*, found "slick" was used more than five million times online to describe the Islamic State's well-doctored images and videos. How could a group of jihadists from a war-torn corner of the world be so adept at using all the tricks of modern viral marketing?

The answer was grounded in demography, and made almost inevitable by social media's wildfire spread. On the one hand, ISIS was a religious cult that subscribed to a medieval, apocalyptic interpretation of the Koran, as William McCants explains in *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (2015). ISIS was led by a scholar with a Ph.D. in Islamic theology, its units commanded by men who had been jihadists since the 1980s. On the other hand, it was largely composed of young millennials. Its tens of thousands of eager recruits, most

drawn from Syria, Iraq, and Tunisia, had grown up with smartphones and Facebook. The result was a terrorist group with a seventh-century view of the world that, nonetheless, could only be understood as a creature of the new Internet.

"Terrorism is theater," declared RAND Corporation analyst Brian Jenkins in a 1974 report that became one of terrorism's foundational studies. Command enough attention and it didn't matter how weak or strong you were; you could bend populations to your will and cow the most powerful adversaries into submission. This simple principle has guided terrorists for millennia. Whether in ancient town squares, in colonial wars, or via ISIS's carefully edited beheadings, the goal has always been the same: to send a message.

If there was any great difference between the effectiveness of the Islamic State and that of terror groups past, it wasn't in the brains of ISIS fighters; it was in the medium they were using. Mobile Internet access could be found even in the remote deserts of Syria; smartphones were available in any bazaar. Advanced video- and image-editing tools were just one illegal download away, and an entire generation was well acquainted with their use. For those who weren't, they could easily find free online classes to take ISIS supporters in just a few sessions "from zero to professionalism," as a group called Jihadi Design advertised.

Distributing a global message, meanwhile, was as easy as pressing "send," with the dispersal facilitated by a network of super-spreaders beyond any one state's control. This was the most dramatic change from terrorism past. Aboud Al-Zomor was one of the founders of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad terror group and a mastermind of the 1981 assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, which was intended to trigger an Islamic revolution. Thirty years later, in an interview with NBC's chief foreign correspondent Richard Engel, he wondered if, had social media been around at the time, the entire plot might have been unnecessary. "With the old methods," the aged killer explained, "it was difficult to gather so many people with so much force." Back then, it took a dramatic, high-profile death to seize public attention. Now all you needed was Facebook and YouTube.

Viral Jihad

Viral marketing became the Islamic State's greatest weapon. A ghastly example could be seen in August 2014, when the American journalist James Foley was murdered on camera as he knelt in the Syrian sand. The moment was carefully choreographed to maximize its distribution. Foley

was clothed in an orange Guantanamo Bay–style jumpsuit, the symbolism clear to all. His black-clad killer spoke English to ensure his message was understood beyond the Middle East. Unlike the videos of killings done by earlier groups like Al Qaeda, the clip was edited so that the image faded to black right as the knife was pulled across Foley's throat. The video ripped across the web, propelled by pro-ISIS social media users—including some 60,000 Twitter accounts that ISIS had carefully prepared in advance—and the wisdom of America becoming involved in a third war in the Middle East in a single generation was put to the crucible. Soon the U.S. air campaign against ISIS intensified and crossed over into the conflict raging inside Syria.

Following the video's release, there was initial puzzlement as to why the brutal ISIS militants hadn't made it even more gruesome. Why had the clip faded to black right as the execution began? Some news outlets unwittingly provided the answer when they linked to the full video. Others filled their stories with dramatic screengrabs of Foley's final seconds, each piece ricocheting onward with more shares and comments. The imagery was disturbing, but not too disturbing to post. Even as terrorism experts and Foley's own family members urged social media users, "Don't share it. That's not how life should be," images of Foley in his orange jumpsuit blanketed the web. One aspiring politician, running for a U.S. House seat in Arizona, even incorporated the clip into her campaign ads. ISIS was using the same tactics that Russia's information warriors would later use in the 2016 U.S. election, and following what any good digital marketer now knows: Why shoulder all the hard work of spreading your message when you could count on others to do it for you?

Whenever the attention of global audiences ebbed—as it did when ISIS began to run out of Western hostages—the self-declared caliphate turned to ever crueler displays, akin to how the best online celebrities, ranging from Taylor Swift to Donald Trump, have learned to continually raise the stakes by feeding their followers a diet of surprises. There were videos of prisoners executed by exploding collars or locked in burning cars. One set of prisoners was trapped in a cage and submerged in a pool, their drowning captured by underwater cameras. The Islamic State also used social media to encourage audience engagement. "Suggest a Way to Kill the Jordanian Pilot Pig," ISIS-linked accounts asked of supporters following their capture of a Jordanian fighter pilot. He was burned alive.

Like any savvy marketer (and Russian sockpuppets), ISIS also sought to hijack trending hashtags and inject itself into unrelated stories. "This is our football, it's made of skin #WorldCup," bragged one ISIS supporter's

tweet, accompanied with a gruesome image. ISIS soon elbowed its way into trending topics as disparate as an earthquake in California (#napaearthquake), and a question-and-answer session with a young YouTube star (#ASKRICKY).

By networking its propaganda, ISIS pushed out a staggering volume of online messaging. In a 2015 report by the counter-extremism think tank Quilliam, terrorism analyst Charlie Winter counted nearly fifty different ISIS media hubs, each based in different regions with different target audiences, but all threaded through the Internet. These hubs were able to generate over a thousand "official" ISIS releases, ranging from statements to online videos, in just a one-month period. Each then cascaded outward through tens of thousands of ISIS-linked accounts on more than a dozen social media platforms. Such "official" voices were then echoed and supplemented by the personal accounts of thousands of ISIS fighters, who, in turn, were echoed by their tens of thousands of "fans" and "friends" online, both humans and bots.

The Islamic State didn't simply use the Internet as a tool; it also lived there. In the words of Jared Cohen, director of Google's internal think tank, ISIS was the "first terrorist group to hold both physical and digital territory." This was where all the accumulated ISIS propaganda resided; where ISIS fighters and fans could mingle; the perch from which it could track and manipulate global opinion; and, important to the future, the locale from which the group could fight on even after it lost its physical turf.

The price of this online presence was real—and deadly. In Iraq, over 26,000 civilians would be killed by the group; in Syria, the deaths were literally incalculable in the chaos of the civil war. Beyond the self-declared caliphate, a new recruiting pool of lonely and disenchanted people—a third of those arrested in the United States lived with their parents—fell into the subterranean world of ISIS propaganda, steered toward murdering their own countrymen. Some did so with the help of ISIS taskmasters ("remote-control" attacks), while others did so entirely on their own ("lone wolves"). In the United States, twenty-nine-year-old Omar Mateen called 911 to pledge his allegiance to ISIS in the midst of slaughtering 49 people in an Orlando nightclub. As he waited to kill himself, he periodically checked his phone to see if his attack had gone viral.

A Branding Success

In the West, ISIS's mix of eye-catching propaganda and calculated attacks was designed with the target's media environment in mind.

Each new attack garnered unstinting attention, particularly from partisan outlets like Breitbart, which thrived on reporting all the most lurid details of ISIS's claims, stoking outrage and raking in advertising dollars. Similarly, the militants' insistence that their actions were in accordance with Islamic scripture—a stance opposed by virtually every traditional scholar of Islam, as William McCants noted in a 2015 *Vox* interview—was parroted by this same subsection of far-right media and politicians, who saw it as a way to bolster their own nationalistic, anti-Islamic platforms.

ISIS militants had internalized another important lesson of the social media age: Reality is no match for perception. As long as most observers believed that ISIS was winning, it was. On the battlefields of Libya and Iraq, it concealed its losses and greatly exaggerated its gains. Far away, it could take credit for killings it had nothing to do with—such as the 2017 Las Vegas massacre and a mass murder in the Philippines—simply by issuing a claim after the fact.

Soon ISIS had so penetrated the popular imagination that *any* seemingly random act of violence across Europe or the United States brought the group immediately to mind. Daniel Benjamin, a former U.S. counterterrorism official, argued that mental health had ceased to factor in to discussions of Muslims who committed violent crimes. "If there is a mass killing and there is a Muslim involved," he concluded, "all of a sudden it is by definition terrorism."

By successfully translating its seventh-century ideology into social media feeds, ISIS proved its finesse in what its supporters described as the "information jihad," a battle for hearts and minds as critical as any waged over territory. It did so through a clear, consistent message and a global network of recruiters. It also did so through a steady rain of what it called media "projectiles," online content intended to "shatter the morale of the enemy," or sometimes simply to troll critics. In the process, ISIS did more than establish a physical state; it also built an unassailable brand. "They have managed to make terrorism sexy," a corporate branding expert told *Foreign Policy* in a 2015 piece that likened ISIS to a modern-day Don Draper, the Sixties ad man of *Mad Men*.

ISIS's legacy will live on long after the group has lost all its physical territory, because it was one of the first conflict actors to fuse warfare with the foundations of attention in the social media age. It presented a model that is in no way unique to terrorism or the Middle East. Indeed, anyone—digital marketers, conspiracy theorists, Internet celebrities, politicians, and national militaries—can and does employ it.

Whatever or wherever the conflict, the tools that ISIS used to grab attention, and grab power, are the weapons that win at "likewar"—the battle to hack not merely the networks, as in "cyberwar," but the people on them. And, for that very reason, they won't be going away anytime soon.