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INTRODUCTION

ISIS beyond the spectacle: communication media, networked publics, terrorism

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October 1, 2017: A "gunman" uses automatic weapons and opens fire on a crowd of concert goers in Las Vegas, Nevada, killing 58 persons and injuring 546 people. ISIS's claim of responsibility for the violence that killed and injured hundreds of people in Las Vegas was received skeptically and interpreted as "somewhat of a joke among the rank-and-file of the international terrorist elite" and a "sign of desperation" (Smith, 2017). If the first day of October ushered in a time that ISIS was dismissed as a joke, the last day of the month changed the narrative.

October 31, 2017: Sayfullo Saipov, an Uzbek national with permanent residency in the U.S., uses a rented truck to crush pedestrians in a bike lane in Manhattan, New York. Upon the discovery of his religious identity and his ideological affiliation with ISIS he is immediately declared a terrorist. Although authorities could find no communication between him and the terrorist group, it became clear that "ISIS's propaganda was sufficient to animate Saipov to carry out the worst terrorist attack in New York since 9/11" (Wright, 2017). As Wright (2017) reported:

> According to the ten-page federal complaint filed against him, Saipov fell under the ISIS spell by viewing some ninety ISIS-related videos and almost four thousand images on his (at least two) cell phones. He was specifically inspired by issue No. 3 of the slick online magazine *Rumiyah*, which means "Rome," an allusion to an old prophecy foretelling the fall of the infidel West.

Although the act somehow seemed small and pathetic for all the grandiose claims of ISIS, and especially given "iconic stature" of New York as a target for the terrorist group, terrorism "inspired" by ISIS and their ideology is not going to disappear anytime soon.

The essays for this collection were proposed at the height of global panic caused by ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), also known as ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and DAESH (its Arabic acronym).[1] From 2014 to 2017 the group controlled territories in Syria and across central and northern Iraq. As we write these words by way of an introduction to the collection, we received the news that forces backed by the United States in Syria liberated the city of Raqqa, the self-declared capital of the "Islamic State." The group's claim of maintaining a "state" is now only an empty symbolic gesture, even if such a gesture had the ring of credibility to it at some point. That the group never posed an existential threat to any state but managed to project a threat on a global scale

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points to its ontological status as a creature, a byproduct and an effect of an assemblage, made up of vectors of communication media, spectacles of violence, technological agency, non-human agency and processes, bodies both mortal and capable of violence, and networked and affective publics. The essays in this collection examine various dimensions of this assemblage and the discourses that contribute to its stability and its permanency.

Where to being when discussing the Islamic State and communication media beyond the spectacle? Perhaps at the most recent episodes of violence, where claims of responsibility are met skeptically and ridiculed in one case only to be followed by another episode when a "radicalized" individual appears to have followed "instructions" from online sources such as YouTube videos and encrypted channels of mobile apps (e.g. Telegram) where ISIS and its followers thrive. Speculation, im/plausibility, mis/information and the proliferation of images give us the order of the day. This state of global communication recalls Baudrillard's (1995) statement about the "sticky and unintelligible event" of the first Persian Gulf War in 1991:

> Of course, this anxious interrogation increases the uncertainty with respect to its possible irruption. And this uncertainty invades our screens like a real oil slick, in the image of that blind sea bird stranded on a beach in the Gulf, which will remain the symbol-image of what we all are in front of our screens, in front of that sticky and unintelligible event (p. 32).

In this haze, in the uncertainty, speculation, and claim-making in the aftermath of violence, lies the import of examining the link between the Islamic State and communication media. The Islamic State's prowess and presence is tied to media—digital, social, broadcast, and beyond. The past few years have spawned countless academic and talking head musings about ISIS and social media, about encryption and security, about radicalization and virality. Yet, the communicative dimensions of the conflict with ISIS are often reduced to hypodermic needle models of communication that fail to address the complexity of not only media and mediation but geopolitics as well. At issue is not just content but mode of address, platforms, vectors and the infrastructures of mediation, remediation, and premediation in which the deterritorialized arm of ISIS circulates.

In a context permeated by communication technologies through which identities and conflicts circulate, where networked publics are formed and reformed around expressions of outrage and sentiments related to them, what would going beyond spectacle entail? Is it to analyze ISIS beyond its brutal violence? Is it to get past the images that dominate our news cycles? Beyond the image itself? What sort of reckoning is required to make sense of ISIS and communication media in a way that does not play into the cyclical obsession with terror and counterterror (Giroux, 2016)? Articles in this collection offer no singular answer but a variety of approaches and methods through which to better understand the emergence and persistence of the mediated phenomenon that is the Islamic State and other such groups that owe their existence and durability to infrastructures of global communication technologies and their affordances.

ISIS is a fundamentally mediated phenomenon, even if "it" was born out of specific geopolitical formations, and much of what we know about the group, we know through communication media. Yet the media to which the Islamic State is intricately tied is often accompanied by the adjective "Western." In 2010, commentators responded to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's *Inspire* magazine with shock. It looks Western, it is "slick," and it speaks "our" language. Today, ISIS propaganda is met with similar commentary. The idea that the enemy might be like us, or exploit our media, is part of

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contemporary counterterrorism discourse (Szpunar, 2018). It is worth remembering that Baudrillard (2003) pointed out long ago that terrorists and counter-terrorist authorities do share affinities in their approaches: they "have assimilated everything of globalism and modernity, without changing their goal, which is to destroy that power" (p. 19).

Such expressions of disbelief that individuals outside the Global North might know how to use communication technologies or the grammar of audiovisual communication tell us more about the writers and their assumptions than the individuals who deploy media technologies in the Global South. However much modified in various contexts, the adeptness with which any group utilizes global media should perhaps not be so surprising in the age of global mediascapes and technoscapes. However, beyond the militarization of media in statements that claim that "they" have taken over "our" media, there is much to learn about media and ISIS through examining their relationship.

The epistemological view underpinning such thinking is captured to a large extent by Barbie Zelizer's notion of "Cold War Mindedness." She examines how both U.S. media (commercial and start-up) and ISIS propaganda share a journalistic style. "Cold War Mindedness" is a mode of reportage characterized by an uncritical dependence on media in the face of a conflict in which much remains unseen. She deploys a comparative approach in her study that examines how U.S. media and ISIS media cover each other. Her analysis reveals the re-emergence of a "Cold War Mindedness" in journalism practice that is shared between these adversarial media. This style frames the conflict in a simplistic us/other binary, is part and parcel of "invisible war," and is built upon an assumption that equates media's reach with its impact or effect. The use of an us/other binary reveals that while the two media systems compared here are vastly different (i.e. one an arm of a quasi-state, the other an assemblage of commercial enterprises and networks), each participates in constructing a divide that one cannot cross, conscripted into the service of structuring conflict. In contrast to the hyper-visibility usually ascribed to ISIS, Zelizer argues that much of the conflict remains unseen, with any information gaps filled in through phantasmagorical, speculative, and imaginative registers. Along the same lines, the equation of media reach and impact underwrites the narratives of a battle for "hearts and minds," which provides a proxy gauge through which to assess which side of the binary is "winning." Zelizer does not suggest that the conflict does not inflict very real casualties, only that it is also fought on the plane of the informational at which journalism relies on very predictable modes of representation.

Rebecca Adelman also engages that epistemological view, as she examines a shared mode of informational war, namely, infographics. Adelman argues that infographics are used by "Western" media as a technology through which to locate and contain the phantom enemy of the war on terror. ISIS uses the same technology to preclude this diffusive function; its utilization of infographics communicates a calculating and able adversary, who—and Zelizer also points to this—does not seem so "other." Adelman starts her piece with a provocative question: What would 330 suicide car bombings look like? In relation to ISIS, it is a query that might bring to mind scenes of horror. Yet, Adelman, like various authors in this collection of essays, moves away from the violent and analyzes a seemingly more banal form of mediating violence: the infographic. Exploring the output of both ISIS and Western news media, Adelman identifies the unassuming infographic as a technology for "managing excess and unthinkability" that is integral to war efforts. For Western media, the infographic locates the phantom enemy, reducing its threatening

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nature by aiding its intelligibility; by placing the enemy, one might control it. However, ISIS weaponizes this sanitizing technique simply by incorporating it in its activities. In its use, ISIS reinforces anxieties concerning its viral ability to use media for its own ends.

In general, ISIS, "Western" news media, and other actors all operate within the same global media architecture. Through the lens of Situationist theory, Marwan Kraidy explores ISIS spectacles and the potential of counter-spectacles of satire produced by various Arab publics. Identifying the discursive connection between fear and fun, which binds ISIS and its adversaries, Kraidy argues that ISIS's diffuse spectacles present an aptitude to exploit global media architecture that precedes contemporary anxieties about "fake news." He utilizes Situationist theory to explore ISIS's use of non-violent spectacle in order to maintain power and presence. He also explores the potential of utilizing counter-spectacles against ISIS. Relying on the critical thought of Guy Debord, Kraidy makes sense of ISIS's concentrated spectacle, those used to consolidate rule within a given territory, through a productive comparison to similar practices utilized by Bashar al-Assad and Saddam Hussein. In ISIS's productions, its Caliph, al-Baghdadi, plays the role of the dictatorial personality. The group's concentrated spectacle is not only reinforced by violent images of meting out punishment but also by illustrating the "good life" within the territory of the Islamic State and its administrative prowess (e.g. in minting the Dinar). Kraidy also asserts that ISIS's "success," i.e. its position as the world's contemporary existential threat, replacing al-Qaeda, depends much on its ability to exploit the global media infrastructure. Therein, Kraidy finds not just fear as the driving force of ISIS's diffuse spectacles but also fun—militants pose with cats, complain about the lack of a particular brand of candy, and recite poetry. Similarly, various parties have created ("fun") satires of ISIS and therein Kraidy positions the conundrum of combating ISIS. In effect, the spectacle and counter-spectacle are not distinguished through fear and fun, but both inhabit a plane in which they are inextricably linked, circulating in global media networks.

That link and the conditions of its existence are addressed in the contribution by François Debrix and Ryan Artrip. They too attribute the aptitude to exploit global media to the fungibility of reality and non-reality that characterizes global media and the global networked infrastructure that make it all possible. They take this one step further and suggest that the continued tendency to demand that meaning be assigned might lead to the exhaustion and implosion of the very system of mediation on which ISIS and its adversaries depend. In contrast to narratives of ISIS's inhumanity and placement outside of the world system, Artrip and Debrix situate ISIS directly within global processes of circulation and mediation. By outlining the regulatory and productive potentials of contemporary media processes—focused not on truths, but simulation, saturation, circulation, fungibility, virality, up-votes, likes, etc.—the authors illustrate the vulnerabilities that allow ISIS to effectively circulate its own images. They end with the provocative proposition that the never-fading demand to assign meaning to the meaningless (or that which is beyond representation), ISIS's spectacles, as its own kind of terror, could bring about the implosion of the very system on which ISIS depends. Here, ISIS has perfected "Western" modalities of meaning to the point of bringing about their downfall.

However, this environment is not made up of simply news media, entertainment media, ISIS, and other purveyors of propaganda. Integral to the system is what Matt Sienkiewicz calls an "interpretive tier" that acts as an intermediary by obtaining and translating documents internal to the Islamic State. The documents, which reveal infighting within its

ranks, not only serve to disrupt the narratives of the Islamic State but also those of Western media that reinforce and support governmental counterterrorism discourse. Here Sienkiewicz explores the intersection of open source journalism and counter-terrorism. Focusing on the case of Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, Sienkiewicz examines the disruptive function of journalists who fall within the "interpretive tier." These journalists work within a black market in which ISIS's internal documents are traded and sold. They have, at times, exclusive access to such documentation and develop the skills with which to distinguish between authentic and fake documents (created for profit). In gathering and analyzing ISIS documents this interpretive tier reveals the infighting, dissent, and contention within ISIS's operational and governance structure. Such revelations not only disrupt ISIS's own narrative but those of Western media that uncritically reflect counterterrorism discourse. Using textual analysis and interviews with Al-Tamimi, Sienkiewicz situates this disruptive work in a complex web of entanglements which include the global media structure and the organizations that fund the work of the interpretive tier. His contribution is yet another interrogation of the epistemological universe in which ISIS and its adversaries engage each other.

In the cycles of mediation and remediation (and premediation), the insight that ISIS exploits global media structures, is adept at producing spectacles, and appropriates "Western" tropes is not to be taken in the vein of counter-terrorism discourse. Rather, the authors point to the idea that the frame of ISIS as an existential threat from without needs to be re-read as a product of these very systems. For Friedrich Kittler (2012), states create their own terrorists. "State" here has two meanings: the geopolitical state and the global media environment. Thus—and without taking a deterministic position—rather than marveling at the barbarians at the gate, the insights of these papers help us understand just how global media infrastructures facilitate ISIS's style and, just as important, how ISIS's media practice reveals much about "our" cultures of mediation and contemporary spheres of conflict, more generally.

In this context, one way to grapple with ISIS and conflict on a global scale is to think through the implications of the arguments made in this collection of articles for the conditions of geopolitics at the present conjuncture. Among the approaches that highlight such implications in international relations and allied fields is what Connolly (2013) characterizes as "new materialism." He defines this approach as:

> the most common name given to a series of movements in several fields that criticize anthropocentrism, rethink subjectivity by playing up the role of inhuman forces within the human, emphasize the self-organizing powers of several non-human processes, explore dissonant relations between those processes and cultural practice, rethink the sources of ethics, and comment on the need to fold a planetary dimension more actively and regularly into studies of global, interstate and state politics (p. 399).

Ben O'Loughlin's contribution effectively brings ISIS back to the orbit of realpolitik and geopolitics. He considers what tactics might be useful in countering ISIS propaganda in an age he calls the "Iconoclash." The Iconoclash is an environment in which conflict involves a tit-for-tat exchange of images: the beheading video, the drone strike, the angry cleric, etc. O'Loughlin argues that what makes ISIS particularly adept in its own iconoclasm is the religious modality that they have effectively appropriated. As a countermeasure, O'Loughlin sees hope not in illustrating how ISIS is not really about Islam. Rather,

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more effective, he argues, might be a strategy that highlights ISIS's own "secular realpolitik" found in its compromises with Turkey; in one instance ISIS gave free passage to Turkish troops and refrained from destroying what the group itself considers to be forbidden idols. O'Loughlin suggests that highlighting ISIS's realpolitik is not only about showing the complexities and compromises of operating a state but revealing how this actively goes against the "religious" principles that underpin the modality within which it has been able to exploit the Iconoclash.

In his contribution to this collection, Charlie Winter has created an archive of ISIS media output and thus provides a longitudinal account of the group's activity. Winter compares media output by ISIS in two distinct moments: mid-2015 and early 2017, the latter a time in which the Islamic State had lost about 30% of its territory. Winter reveals an important connection between geopolitics and ISIS media output, in that the destabilization of the Islamic State's territorial strongholds is correlated to a decrease in the volume of media production, the increased centralization of production, and a shift in thematic composition from utopianism and state-building to warfare and denial. Denying its geopolitical precarity, Winter argues that posturing and display become increasingly important to ISIS in maintaining its brand. Winter and O'Loughlin, in discussing posturing, display, and branding, effectively provide a context for the readers that exposes where prevailing epistemological views bump up against geopolitics and re-territorialization of various kinds on the global stage.

One of ISIS's achievements is that it is part of the news cycle. Most any public act of violence is met with speculation about whether or not it is an act of terror. Much of this is due to the fact that ISIS tells "us" either what we already know or what we want to hear. A quick perusal through *Dabiq* or *Rumiyah* and one can read therein a clash of civilizations narrative in which ISIS embraces the violent, vengeful adversary that seeks to usurp "Western" culture (ISIS uses this modifier just as often and problematically as any news report or academic article). It is the key frame for Western news stories as both Zelizer and Sienkiewicz point out. However, ISIS's position in the terror news cycle points to the importance of appearances and display. While ISIS's presence goes beyond brutal violence, which various authors in this collection stress, it is certainly the case that much of the attention ISIS has garnered has been the result of its violence. Lilie Chouliaraki and Angelos Kissas provide a typology of the functions of horror in this context.

Drawing on the work of Cavarero (2009) that distinguishes terrorism from horrorism, Chouliaraki and Kissas theorize the communicative logic of ISIS's death spectacle in terms of "regimes of horrorism" (grotesque, abject, and sublime horror), as experienced by distant spectators. Going beyond the literature in strategic communication and political communication, they explore how ISIS addresses the world through specific aesthetic practices. These practices invite a range of moral responses and in doing so articulate a specific ethico-political project that, borrowing from Murray (2006), they call thanatopolitics (i.e. "the use of death at the service of political life"). Chouliaraki and Kissas show dominant hierarchies of grievability are subverted in favor of thanatopolitics in the process of fusing Western and non-Western genres and narratives in the operation of horrorism. One of the advantages of their approach is that, by deploying the analytics of horrorism, they can address death in ISIS's videos not as an element of religiosity but as a deployment of Western cultural forms and secular rationalities. Ultimately, they show how ISIS unleashes on its worldwide spectators a "spectacular thanatopolitics" that,

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through the savaged body, renders their dedication to death into the new "norm of heroic subjectivity."

Mutilated bodies, infographics, various depictions of utopia, all circulating through various channels of global media, inflected by shared modes of journalistic, visual, and aesthetic practice and expression, trading in fear and fun, reality and nonreality, terror and horror, affected by the (mediated) boots of geopolitics, these are the many entangled vectors through which the ontological status of ISIS is revealed. It is within the interstices and connections laid out and suggested by the contributions in this special issue that ISIS's visual brutality is squared with its less violent claims—for example, that it constitutes a "transnational multiethnic state" that moves beyond racism in a way that America never could.[2] However, as stated earlier, the contributions to this collection do not offer a uniform or a singular approach, method or theoretical perspective. To the contrary, they offer a range of approaches, analytics, and theoretical orientations to problematize various aspects of the context in which a phenomenon like ISIS exists and to which it speaks and contributes. We invite our readers to engage these contributions, especially for the insights they offer for communication studies, media theories, and rhetorical criticism.

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Notes

1. For the sake of convenience this collection of essays refers to this group by its commonly known names as "ISIS" or "IS."
2. Limitations of space prevent us from a more comprehensive treatment of terrorism and media, especially with respect to discussions of Muslim identity, racialization, and politics of representation. For an example of such a discussion see Semati (2010).

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