Patterns of Communication within an Islamic Fundamentalist Organization

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Abstract

Communication represents a fundamental pillar of human civilization. In my academic paper, I focused on illustrating an anti-example of this pillar. My academic research illustrates the extremist and radical shape of communication. The Islamic State represents for me the most pertinent empirical content with which I can work, its structure, design and content being the most relevant for my academic research. ISIS was a group built upon the extremist form of communication.

I have chosen this topic because of its main features: volatility, universality, novelty, consistent informational foundation, and authenticity. The main objectives of this research paper are the analyze the incommensurable capacity of communication and speech in metamorphosing mental and ideological maps, observing the effects of this communicational determinism within social, economic, military, political and religious spheres, and identify the causality of communication, its components and the usage of all these factors within the process of forging religious fundamentalism and combatting and eradicating such anti-examples. Using qualitative methodological tools: content analysis, speech analysis and case study, I managed to offer answers to my research questions, observing how an Islamic fundamentalist organization succeeded to shape ideological maps only by creating and adapting communicational patterns to its utopic ideas and desiderates. Such an academic analysis exhibited the incommensurable power of communication and its powerful effects regarding constructivism.

Keywords: *communication, rhetoric, religious fundamentalism, Islamic State, mental metamorphosis*

Introduction

Out of the desire to understand a phenomenon that communication specialists avoid discussing, I chose to analyze a rather sensitive and volatile topic. Therefore, I chose a general theme, but reinterpreted in a particular way, which would give it authenticity.

The geopolitics of the Middle East is strongly linked to military, religious or economic discrepancies. From the Sykes-Picot agreement to the Peace Spring operation, from the Intifada to the 6-Day War or from the fall of Saddam Hussein to the Arab Spring, the Middle East has been a volatile scene of economic and political instability, insecurity as well as a sense of inferiority to the West. All this led to a growing sense of Arab nationalism that would consolidate around a core of Islamic revivalism. However, all these phenomena that culminated in the embrace of a strong religious feeling ended up metamorphosing, under the tutelage of a questionable religious hermeneutic, into a diverse Islamic religious fundamentalism, divided between Shia or Sunni branches. This Islamic fundamentalism has been and continues to be the basis of fundamentalist-religious organizations that flaunt their mode of action and communication in an ostentatious shade of terror. Therefore, my research topic focused on the analysis of communication practices within the Islamic State fundamentalist organization.

Theoretical Framework

The chosen topic is a sensitive one and needs to be handled carefully but, from my point of view, it represents the most eloquent phenomenon that illustrates how communication should not be used. With this theme, I do not come with the intention of glorifying forms of barbarism, but I come with the intention of better understanding these forms of anti-examples that should not be followed or imitated. Incidentally, I chose to present an anti-example because this type of concept tends to be avoided, but almost always remains imprinted in the reader's mind. This influence is because, in general, brutality has hereditarily made its way into man's consciousness, to the detriment of sensibility.

I come up with the proposal to understand the reasons why these entities have caused so much harm and what we should do to eradicate such forms of social or communicational action. That is why I want to present the phenomenon of the Islamic State. This phenomenon

clearly illustrates how communication can redefine societies and human lives. In the elaboration of this research, I presented the qualitative analysis of how ISIS has influenced the mass media, the religious code, the dress code, the language and the norms of political, military or cultural communication. All these palpable structures arose as a result of communication practices specific to radical-Islamist rhetoric, rhetoric that I subjected to examination with the help of certain tools of rhetorical analysis and with the help of communication theories. Furthermore. the relevance of communication within this group is also generated by the short period in which ISIS was born, matured and declined. In our case, we can talk about global Islamic fundamentalism that spread at the speed of light, only with the help of a well-defined communication around some clearly defined objectives and a well-targeted audience.

The main qualitative research method I used is content analysis. Thus, the analysis of these aspects within the Islamic State was carried out with the help of rhetorical concepts such as Aristotelian rhetoric, dramatic rhetoric and the narrative paradigm, also with the help of contemporary theories of communication, as well as the symbolic convergence of Ernest Bormann but also with the help of symbolic interactionism. If these interdisciplinary tools, from rhetoric, semiotics and pragmatics have served as the theoretical framework of the work, the empirical content was based on the speeches of *Abu Bakr al Baghdadi* (Kamolnick 2017, 53), of the spokespersons of the group, as well as on the lines of communication of the media entities of the State Islamic.

Methodology

The case study I chose to analyze has at its center a rather sensitive and volatile topic. In general, such phenomena are analyzed from the point of view of causality, a causality that feeds into spheres such as economy, politics, diplomacy or the military sphere. Even though these aspects are analyzed and dissected with extremely high frequency, I wanted to try to analyze such an organization from the point of view of communication causality. The main research objective was to try to demonstrate the immeasurable capacity of the power of communication and the power of discourse to metamorphose entire mental and ideological maps. Does the communication act have the power to form the basis of a phenomenon like the Islamic State? Can extremist discourse alter entire cultural and ideological maps? Can shared fantasy create fanatical groups focused on utopian and lucid goals? I tried to answer all these

questions to understand such phenomena analyzed from the perspective of communication sciences. All the questions that revolve around the primary research objective are also ignition frames for the hypotheses that accompany this primary research objective.

So, the main hypothesis is based on the fact that the main ways of communication within an Islamic fundamentalist organization (The Islamic State) are generated by a strong concept of symbolic cohesion that takes on a strong religious nuance. If this first part of the hypothesis reflects a reality we have heard perhaps, it should be noted that the hypothesis would be incomplete if we did not refer to its extensions. This convergent symbolism that is characterized by the religious dimension cannot metamorphose into a communication product like the Islamic State if it does not come into direct contact with various nuances of communication. The hypothesis says that everything starts from an exacerbated symbolism, masked in a religious portrait, which would not be palpable or comprehensible if it did not adopt in its structure a rhetoric appropriate to the context but also other communication theories through which to consolidate, to develop and reach a climax. The main hypothesis represents in my work a starting element, an ignition element, which served as my starting point in the content analysis. The analysis, as a whole, is much more comprehensive and aimed to observe a snowball phenomenon, which, by accumulating details and dissected concepts, represented a complete, complex and comprehensible study.

I mention that my paper had several hypotheses because no hypothesis can exist independently of the other. We can admit a compromise and say that the main hypothesis can be divided into distinct branches, branches that are in direct connection with the ideational core. The hypothetical snowball concept has a plausible framework, but I believe that this framework is not sufficient to help us understand the totality of realities that diverge and converge from and toward the core. So, to try to get a pertinent answer that will confirm whether I have achieved or failed to achieve the research objective, I tried in this case study to run a qualitative analysis that strengthened my credibility, legitimacy, relevance and plausibility of the research topic. Through a qualitative approach to the communication practices within the Islamic fundamentalist organization Islamic State, I tried to investigate the totality of communication valences that are inherent in such a phenomenon, especially from the point of view of causality. The main qualitative analysis method we used was content analysis. We put special emphasis on the detailed analysis of the speeches of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the most representative leader

of the Islamic State. The in-depth analytical study of his speeches, especially the analysis of his speech in 2014, from the Al Nuri mosque in Raqqa, when he declared the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, represents an extremely valuable information base. The dramatic nuances, the enumeration of Aristotelian-type arguments, the establishment of an Islamist narrative perspective, the cultivation of the feeling of guilt but also the generation of common realities focused on utopian ideals represent nuances of Baghdadi's speech. In addition, we applied the technique of content analysis not only to Baghdadi's speeches but also to other forms of communication that came from the space of the Islamic State. Press statements of ISIS spokesmen, but also confessions of jihadists strengthened my analysis. The qualitative tool for the analysis of an Islamist discursive body is the main tool I used. However, this tool is not a composite element of simple construction. The content analysis we used is composed of diverse and complex branches of the communication analysis sphere. Tools of rhetorical analysis, analysis of mass communication but also analysis of symbolic convergence were those elements that helped me to create the main research technique, an extremely complex content analysis that in turn analyzes a phenomenon just as complex.

Results

The results I have achieved are very interesting and diverse, illustrating the complexity of communication and its patterns within an Islamic fundamentalist organization. The results confirmed my hypothesis regarding the fact that the main ways of communication within an Islamic fundamentalist organization (The Islamic State) are generated by a strong concept of symbolic cohesion that takes on a strong religious nuance. More, after analyzing the empirical content with the qualitative theoretical tools, I have gained pertinent answers to my main research questions, which governed the essence of my academic analysis.

The main results revolve around the core of mental metamorphosis via communication. The Islamic State succeeded to achieve partially, yet dazzling, its ideological goals. Its utopian ideas commenced coming to reality via the power of communication and via the power of handling professionally the potential power of communication. By understanding the mechanisms and the potential of communication and applying these to its target public, The Islamic State succeeded to forge vast mental and ideological maps which metamorphosed into a bloody and cruel modern Islamic Caliphate that would govern a huge territory in the Middle

East, controlling the lives of almost 9 million people and ravaging the world with suicide bombings, mass executions, endless warfare and ethnical cleansings.

To understand this anti-example of communication, my results can be divided into 3 main parts that can explain the emergence of this phenomenon and the patterns of communication within an Islamic fundamentalist organization.

First of all, the core of this phenomenon is represented by the symbolism of communication and its power to trigger the chain effect of this brutal phenomenon of communication. The Islamic State succeeded to forge and initiate its ideological product by reinterpreting the Aristotelian rhetoric from a fundamentalist religious perspective. By this, the organization used 3 types of Aristotelian discourses: "*forensic, political and epidictic*" (Griffin 1997, 390). From the political discourse that embraced a demagogical pattern in achieving the ideological purposes, the Islamic State used fervently the forensic and the epidictic discourse to embolden and nourish its ideological patterns. By linking the forensic discourse to the transcendental vision of life, focused on the religious perspective portraying Allah as the ultimate judge, the divine factor would bear the complete responsibility in shaping the forensic pattern of communication. Furthermore, the same religious component would embody the other communicational rhetorical pattern concentrated around the epidictic discourse. By extolling the verbal, ideological, or material achievements of Islamic State's members "Allah's lawyers" (Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi's speech at the proclamation of the Islamic Caliphate. Raqqa, June 29, 2014) and by blaming all the other factors opposing the movement, the organization succeeded to converge its communicational actions into a bold epidictic product that represented a core element of the organization's line of action. Moreover, the fundamentalist organization handled the reinterpretation of Aristotelian rhetoric to hit its ideological targets by using the concepts of *logos, ethos and pathos* (Griffin 1997, 391). The terrorist organization struggled the touch every level of the human perception filter, by reinterpreting and by adapting the 3 types of rhetoric arguments to its ideological content and public. The logic was represented by the arguments portraying the Islamic State as the sole organization protecting and fighting for the *Ummah*, the only organization that could protect the Muslim community and the only entity that could defeat all the enemies of this community. Ethos and pathos were 2 different rhetorical arguments. From the ethical perspective, the organization emphasized the fundamental role of every *mu'min* (believer) (Sansarian 2000, 64) to support the jihad against the *kafirin*

(disbelievers) (Sansarian 2000, 64). The communicational pattern portrayed this ethical argument (based on *Sunna* and *Sharia*) as a collective moral duty and the only deontological and moral way to live and act in this *Dunya* (world) (The Koran, 2015, Ayat 20). Finally, the ethos pointed straight to the hearts of the supporters of ISIS. The jihad, the struggle for defeating the disbelievers and implementing the Islamic Caliphate was madly driven by the transcendental motivation, the mortification towards Allah and by the idea of achieving Jannah (paradise) in the afterlife, only by joining the catharsis process embodied by jihad. The *Akhira* (afterlife) (Maqsood 2003, 38-39) played a huge role in shaping the rhetorical ideas promoted by The Islamic State, when using the ethos of the discourse. The concept of the radical enthymeme (focused exclusively on the idea that the mu'minun (believers) are the ones loved by Allah and the disbelievers are the ones who will be severely punished by Allah) was the last element to enclose the circle of Aristotelian rhetoric, reinterpreted via the tools of Islamic fundamentalism. The enthymeme is "the most powerful form of argumentation" (Aristotle 1991, 392) and in our case, the radical enthymeme ends with the idea that Allah loves the believers and they will eventually succeed in their jihad.

Secondly, the fundamentalist organization used dramatic rhetoric as another main communicational pattern to achieve its objectives. This rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalism, inspired by Kenneth Burke shaped the discourse of ISIS, consolidating its communicational product and emboldening its ideological actions. The dramatic rhetoric of the Islamic State is based on a sense of common identification. Both the speaker, Baghdadi, and his audience suffer from the same problems. Through common identification, the speaker promotes Islamic homophily as the only chance to repair and avenge all the injustices that those who have suffered have been subjected to. The consubstantiality of both the language and the actions of the group brought to the stage a massive growth of followers of the ideology, which spread globally.

ISIS and its leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi used the dramatic pentad concept, adapted to radical Islamic purposes to electrize its line of communication and action. The most representative dramatic rhetorical act used by Baghdadi is his first speech, in 2014, in the Al Nuri Mosque, where he proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate. His act was one of tremendous dramatic intensity. In the first part of the speech, Baghdadi used some religious aspects through which he presented the importance of Allah but also some Koranic

philosophical-religious concepts. After he began to initiate the direction of radical rhetoric that is based on divine will, Baghdadi began to resort again to the technique of collective self-victimization, declaring that Muslims are being killed every day by infidels and that they must fight back. Victimized, individualized, personalized, intimated, dramatized and exaggerated speech is a form of dramatic rhetoric through which Baghdadi tried to achieve his goals. The personal call, intimacy, the divine scolding and the exaggeration of potential dangers represented dramatic instruments through which symbols, metaphors or all figures of speech constituted a palpable, comprehensible, credible discursive foundation for those who assimilated it. Aided by elements of nonverbal communication such as mimicry, gestures, but also intonation or voice inflections, Baghdadi managed to have a great impact on his audience.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was the main agent of dramatic rhetoric, an orator with legitimacy, in the eyes of his audiences, an orator who fulfilled all the criteria to occupy this position, having the necessary training and talent, charisma, personality and attributes necessary for the rhetorical act. Finally, the stage and the objective. from the point of view of Islamist rhetoric, the stage was not only placed in a physical space but the discourse was intensively promoted on the virtual stage. The online environment has been the Islamic State's main stage, a stage that has gone global, a stage through which the organization has reached a global audience. Promotion on YouTube, Twitter, through publications, TV stations or jihadist websites (Dabiq, Rummyiah, Dar al Islam, etc.) represented advantages of dramatic rhetoric. Last but not least, Baghdadi achieved his goal, succeeding to attract almost 300 thousand followers and establishing a Caliphate that controlled a territory larger than the United Kingdom and with a population of 9 million people.

Additionally, the other element of dramatic rhetoric used by ISIS is the concept of guilt. Guilt is seen as being a cause induced by factors external to the subjects. ISIS followers do not accept blame for the situation they find themselves in, instead choosing to look for a scapegoat to place the blame on. In our case, the whole extremist discourse is one of polarization, of the type - *we are good / they are bad* -. This form of blame polarization is a method of dramatic rhetorical communication through which the Islamic State tried to exploit some existing realities in the Arab world and tried to distort them through discourse, giving them other communicative forms. Inciting hatred toward the West, towards Americans and Europeans is a nuance of dramatic rhetoric whereby the feeling of guilt is attributed to entities external to

the subject. In the view of the Islamic State, the main culprits for the precarious situation of Muslims are "Western infidels, those who daily attack the values" (Abu Musa (Islamic State Spokesman) statement to Vice News). However, the believers are not absolved of guilt either, but ISIS comes up with the subtle form of speech by which it says that the only fault of Muslims is that they do not react and do not fight to protect their brothers.

The third component of the results is based on the narrative paradigm and the symbolic convergence. After all, the symbolic convergence of Bormann and the Symbolic Interactionism of Mead represent the main communicational patterns that stood at the foundation of ISIS and that triggered this whole phenomenon. These two theoretical concepts of symbolical communication emphasized the importance of communication in forging a palpable product, inspired by words, ideas and thoughts. Islamic State took birth from utopic ideas and converged with the help of symbolism and symbolical communication. By promoting ideas in collectives, by individuals, the phenomenon of radical communication grew bolder. Simple ideas became arguments. Arguments became opinions. Opinions became attitudes. Attitudes became actions and actions became behaviors. This is how ISIS was born. A simple utopic idea of an Islamic Caliphate became a reality for almost 9 million people in the Middle East and a threat to the whole world, everything commencing from a simple communicational product, shaped and developed with different communication tools.

The Islamic State is built and developed on a rhetorical paradigm of narrative, of story. It is the story that binds everything together, the story is the binder that completes the rhetorical act of ideologizing and radicalizing. The Islamic State does three things discursively. The first thing is to provide rhetorical syntax. The second is to construct discursive semantics, and the last and most important thing is to conceive active, mobilizing discursive pragmatics.

The Islamist ideologues within the Islamic State managed to tell a story with meaning, a story with pathos, a persuasive story that leads to massive mobilization of the audiences they reach. If the opinion and the attitude are the first elements touched by the Islamic rhetorical act with the help of the Aristotelian rhetorical and dramatic instruments, the last phase, that of behavioral modification and action is strongly determined by narrativism. On the one hand, the narrative is a symbolic action made up of facts or words that have a strong meaning for those

who interpret or live them. On the other hand, the paradigm is how individuals look at a thing through a similar vision, even if the interpretations may differ, however slightly.

The line of communication of the Islamists manages to cultivate a personal meaning for each sympathizer, emphasizing the role of each in the story. Basically, in the view of Islamists, every member is extremely important to build the story

From the narrative point of view, Islamists see logos not only a rational way of perceiving the world but also a unique way of reinterpreting one's perception, the logos being "a thinking via story" (Griffin 1997, 414). If the militants of the Islamic State base their actions on Sharia law, they also build their own story based on this symbol. The Islamic State began building the story by dramatizing recent realities within the Arab world. The wars started by the Westerners, the economic destruction of the Arab cultural world, as well as the assault on the Islamic religion, represented the main elements of the first narrative concept. The feeling of hatred towards the West and the desire for self-affirmation through values specific to the Arab world led to the definition of a story based on the fight for freedom. Self-determination was not an independent concept but was defined by opinion leaders and people of political influence who sought to revive Arab nationalism. However, the narrative rationality of the Islamic State was different from what was intended. Baghdadi took the story even further and developed it by going back to the heyday of Islam. He emphasized the former glory of the Islamic Caliphates. What Baghdadi did was build a story in reverse chronological order. He departed from the present and returned to a glorious, mythicized past. Further, Baghdadi reinforced his story even more strongly by presenting the victories of the Prophet Mahommed.

The results between words and deeds made the difference in the narrative fidelity also. The rapid expansion of the organization and its short-term victories represented further legitimacy and collective trust for Baghdadi, who managed to bring about an organizational cohesion and order through which he was able to co-opt so many members. The fidelity of Baghdadi's story was based precisely on desperation. The story metamorphosed into a promise of salvation from absolute destruction. It struck a chord and the audience's response was extremely positive. In the end, we had the extension of radical narativism, which stood between fact and fiction.

Baghdadi represented the myth itself, being considered the direct descendant of Prophet Mohammed. The Global Caliphate was the other part of the myth, the revival of *Islam's Golden Age* (Saliba 1994, 256-257*)*. The foundation on which the Islamic State was built is a foundation focused on a creative interpretation of some events, due to a rhetorical or psychological need. The two main pillars on which this foundation was formed were those of the finite and the infinite. The finite was represented by completed facts, facts that belong to the past, facts that can no longer be modified in any way. Instead, infinity is similar to future and potential. In the initial phase of ISIS, the conclusion of a symbolic convergence was based on exactly these two stages. First, the Islamists initiated their symbolic process by enumerating and identifying elements of past facts that directly affected them. Then, the symbolic convergence was defined by the transition from the past to the future, from the impossible to the possible. The possibilities offered by the future were the basis for the formation of the Islamic State. Overcoming the tragic facts of their past and radical metamorphosis into a future full of possibilities were intensely communicational themes that formed the basis of the organization's symbolic convergence. In an early phase, the future creators and participants of the Islamist project would focus their ideology on a politics of catharsis that acquired vindictive and barbaric valences.

Conclusions

The present work represents a novel approach to a complex communicational phenomenon. In essence, the approach I used was a qualitative one, with content analysis as its core. The qualitative tool I used was composed precisely of the foundation of communication theories and rhetorical concepts. The entire approach was constructed in such a way as to have a theoretical relevance and homogeneity to gradually and progressively trace the elements and concepts that underpinned this approach. In the empirical part, the approach metamorphosed and aimed at an extremely volatile case study, in the present case analyzing the communication methods existing within an Islamic fundamentalist organization, namely the Islamic State.

We have observed how the Islamic State terrorist organization used techniques and procedures inherent in the rhetorical space and the sphere of communication to adapt its communication methods to its audiences, but also formulate clear objectives that would be achieved with the help of highly persuasive communicational techniques. This discursive body

is extremely complex and extremely well structured. From a theoretical point of view, the process of communicational mobility and conceptual construction is based on a symbolic form of interaction (the theory of symbolic convergence and the theory of symbolic interactionism). To evolve, the discursive act needed solid elements on which to base its action. From building a communicational and ideological base focused on Aristotelian rhetoric, the Islamic State has forged an entire ideological product based on logical, ethical and emotional arguments, but also other Aristotelian concepts. Sharia, Sunna but also the distinction between Dunya and Akhira represented true ideological centers that generated an extremely strong impact. Dramatic rhetoric and the narrative paradigm represented two other steps of the organization's communicational pyramid. From the heterogeneous nuances of the concept of guilt to the cultivation of a rhetorical concept of a fanatical story, the ideologues of the Islamic State have successfully managed to progress doctrinally. Last but not least, the symbolism of communication and the totality of the factors surrounding this symbolism represented a central core through which Baghdadi and his acolytes managed to exploit existing realities and convert them into a mythicized form, placed in a concept extremely pregnant with an Islam of Glory but also in a concept of prophetic revivalism. Logical, ethical or emotional arguments constitute the theoretical substance of the discursive act. However, to give maximum performance, the rhetorical communication needed a touch of rhetorical drama and also a touch of the narrative paradigm. These two rhetorical conceptual spheres gave vivacity to the discursive act and gave words the ability to metamorphose into concrete actions that have extremely strong effects.

I hope that I have been able to present to you in a relevant and persuasive way that I have achieved the research objective that I set out for myself, but also that I have confirmed the main hypothesis of the study. From the analytical perspective, I believe that the Islamic State fundamentalist organization has succeeded in metamorphosing entire mental and ideological maps through the use of the power of communication and directing it towards the goals it has proposed. However, even if the ideological mechanism worked extremely well, in the end, the whole structure collapsed. Despite this, mentally, the Islamic State remains a highly viable target in Islamic extremist circles. The phenomenon is extremely unstable and extremely difficult to analyze from the point of view of its evolution or its continuity. One thing is certain, however: The Islamic State represents a clear counter-example by which we can demonstrate the immeasurable power of communication, especially when communication is understood and

those who cultivate it know how to develop it and how to direct it. In addition to this fact, one more thing is certain: The Islamic State represents a dark period of history, being a bloody shadow of a macabre phenomenon that will leave deep wounds for many years to come. My academic research is perfectible and my recommendation is that this analysis can represent the basis for future academic research based on anti-examples of communication. The main purpose why I recommend that such communicational phenomenon should be analyzed via the academic sphere is the fact that such communications are very dangerous for society, from several points of view. Such research can help us understand the dangers that communication possesses when it is misunderstood and misused. Further academic research on such topics could prevent the emergence of potentially dangerous entities that could emerge from communication. This is why, it is utterly important to give attention to such subjects, being extremely cautious of how a tiny message could become a humongous wound for a society.

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