Unthinkable to Acceptable:
How Stories can Make Controversial Ideas More Mainstream

Though it has recently fallen on difficult times, The Islamic State is a brand of Islam that styles itself as the new caliphate. IS fights for the liberation of the Sunni faithful and claims to be the leader of the world’s Muslim population. Westerners and others who oppose IS have used a good deal of ink trying to explain what gives this group its power to engage the imagination—is it the extreme violence it uses on the battlefield or is it the fact that they have boldly claimed a new caliphate and that it is obligatory for the world’s Muslims to support them? This paper argues that the power of IS comes from the stories it tells. These stories are assessed according to the paradigm of Jim Signorelli’s StoryBranding, which explains how stories can become powerful tools of persuasion that create loyal, committed followers that make lasting brands.

Keywords: branding, caliphate, Islamic State, ISIS, marketing, terror, violence.

Introduction

Since declaring itself a caliphate in June 2014 (Ford, 2016), the movement known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in the press, has drawn the attention of nations around the world because of its boldness and rapid territorial and philosophical expansion. Although the group has had reverses on the battlefield and lost a good deal of its land, observers note the group seems to continue even when ISIS does not prevail on the battlefield (Vick, 2016).

The self-proclaimed caliphate has been reduced to a handful of villages in the Syrian desert, but the "virtual caliphate" fights on, a diminished but still formidable presence focused on rallying the group's followers in the face of crushing military defeats. (Warrick, 2018a, para. 5)

From where does this growth—or sense of growth—come? It comes from the narrative IS has created and communicates to its prospective members. IS has a sophisticated, professional storytelling arm that uses historic images, sleekly produced video, and social media to reach out to people in order to sell them on the IS brand (Von Drahle, 2015; Byman, 2016; Tome, 2015). This is in stark contrast to earlier groups similar to IS. These groups allowed the media to shape and carry its message, often releasing grainy videos or audio for the media to use (Bloxham, 2011). This did not allow these groups to extend their reach in the way that IS has due to the fact that these groups were unable to control their own story (Brooking & Singer, 2016). IS can. The ease and portability of modern media technology that allows information to be created and released quickly is a new thing that is helping the movement develop an international brand.

(ISIS) was originally built around seasoned veterans of the Iraqi insurgency, who were joined by a new generation of millennial recruits. A…study by the New...
America Foundation found that the average age of Westerners who travel to join ISIS is 24—they’ve grown up with Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Working together, these battle-hardened jihadists and social media media savvy recruits have developed a loose framework that turns social media into a potent weapon of war…What ISIS has discovered—the very weird, effective new way of war—is not a novelty or a one-time thing. ISIS may have been the first to wield this potent mix of social media, terror and war, but it will not be the last. (pp. 60-61)

ISIS has created the template of war-as-unfolding-individual-story, and the stories are creating adherents who may travel to them or who may decide to remain where they are to carry out the group’s mission because they resonate with the IS story (Calabresi, 2015-2016). This new template is different from traditional propaganda efforts, because the mode of communication is not one-to-many, trying to evoke emotion that creates a group feeling without any real ability for that group to communicate with the source of information (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). Instead, the new template is focused more on single prospects who hold particular worldviews or who harbor certain feelings about the interplay between nations, governments and religion (Phillips, 2014).

Connecting to individuals in this way is not just something that happens by chance. It is part of a process that marketing expert Jim Signorelli (2014) calls StoryBranding. This study will examine the IS communication effort to show how they are using the aspects of StoryBranding to extend their power by connecting to individual prospects who are willing to identify with the group’s story and adopt it as a part of their personal identity.

**StoryBranding**

The StoryBranding process has six main steps that help bind an individual to an organization, idea or product. The six are The Backstory, the Brand’s Inner Layer, the Brand’s Outer Layer, the Obstacles, the Prospect’s Outer Layer, and the Prospect’s Inner Layer (2014). Each of these adds up to a portion of the overall brand story that IS tells, and at each level the prospect is drawn more deeply into the story.

The Backstory provides a prospect with a sense of where the brand has been and where it is today. This is also the place where the brand will differentiate itself from any other brands that are similar to it (2014). This includes important historical points in the brand’s history and providing a sense about what the goals of the brand may be for the future. This level provides the context for everything the brand is and does.

The Brand’s Inner Layer is essentially the soul of the brand, which is much deeper than a mere mission statement. Here, a brand states what foundational belief it promotes, and if it has an archetype that it connects with then this is the place that it is set forth. (Archetypes will be discussed shortly.) This meaning comes from the top of the organization (not via focus groups), and it sets forth this "sense of self" directly (p. 90).
Signorelli says that in order to succeed, the inner layer has to be authentic to what the brand actually is. This makes the brand the hero of its story—the person or thing that resolves the tension that is created through the brand’s backstory. If the brand can be seen as the best way to resolve the tension it stands a good chance to win over prospects who feel or accept the same tension. Heroes win supporters in the same way because they are seen as champions who triumph over obstacles, allowing people to affiliate with a winner.

Brands may also embrace an archetype to support the hero. Archetypes may also be used in place of a brand’s backstory if that story lacks tension that needs a resolution. These archetypes are The Purist (one who is wholesome, ethical and virtuous); The Pioneer (an individualist who seeks adventure and, in that, freedom); The Entertainer (a fun-loving free spirit who lives in the moment); The Conqueror (noble and meets adversity head-on, relentless, resilient, and confident); The Wizard (seeks to change the ordinary into the extraordinary, embraces mystery, thrill and novelty); The Protector (puts others first, compassionate and generous); The Seducer (romantic, intimate, strong sex appeal); The Imagineer (an innovator and dreamer who wants to creatively express his vision of the world); The Emperor (the boss who exerts authority over others); The Rebel (unsatisfied with the status quo, protects self-expression); The Source (the all-knowing provider of knowledge and expertise); and The Straight Shooter (no pretense and no nonsense, friendly and informal) (pp. 102-113). The best brands know what their inner layer is and they do not shy from it, understanding that they will attract some prospects and turn away others. Brands that embrace StoryBranding do not try to be all things to all people.

The Brand’s Outer Layer is an explanation of the brand’s unique advantages and benefits. The important thing is that this explanation has to fit tightly with the inner layer so there is consistency of conviction (the inner layer) and how it publicly speaks of itself (2014). This is sometimes done by developing an I Am/We Are statement that sets forth a clear sense of the benefits of the brand.

The next step is assessing the obstacles that impede an individual from affiliating with the brand. These obstacles can take on a variety of disguises. Some of them are external obstacles, such as culture, economics, consumer attitudes, and public perception (2014). Other obstacles are internal, the politics of the organization, logistical issues, and competition from similar brands. StoryBranding considers these things, but it also looks at obstacles a bit differently.

StoryBranding wants to move people past simple awareness of the brand and knowing reasons for its general superiority to a personal affiliation with the brand. The first obstacle in StoryBranding is developing brand function awareness. Essentially, brands have to let people know that they exist. Once this is accomplished, the prospect moves to the second obstacle—knowing why the brand is superior (2014). This means that a prospect has some awareness of the things that make the product better than competing offerings.

The third level obstacle that StoryBranding seeks to overcome a lack of association with the brand. Signorelli describes this as "the confidence obstacle"
(p. 151) because the goal is to move people to develop positive associations with
the brand. These associations should be strong, not mere assent. Once people have
a confidence in the brand—a certainty that it is what it says it is and does what it
says it will do—it becomes easier for a prospect to develop affiliation with the
brand.

Affiliation is the fourth obstacle to be overcome. Once there is confidence in a
brand, people will be more easily moved to resonate/affiliate with it. To get here,
Signorelli writes

To be achieved, affiliation has to be felt by the prospect. Resonance cannot be
forced...To get through the obstacles to making a strong Level IV connection the
things the brand stands for (the inner layer) must link with the things that the
prospect considers to be personally important. It must represent an important
human value that the prospect readily identifies with. (p. 153)

The fifth step in StoryBranding is to define the Prospect’s Outer Layer. This
requires having a sense of the descriptive attributes that define the prospect—
things like the demographics. Along with this, a brand also has to know the most
functional needs of the prospect (psychographic measures such as respect, honor,
happiness, peace, and so forth) so that it can frame these needs for the prospect. It
is also vital that the functional needs identified by the brand are consistent with the
brand’s outer layer.

The final step is identifying the Prospect’s Inner Layer. Just as the prospect’s
outer layer has to be consistent with the brand’s outer layer, the prospect’s inner
layer has to be consistent with the brand’s inner layer. At this stage, the brand
should define the prospect’s most functional need and speak to it. This functional
need is the core of the prospect, and if it matches the core of the brand it often
follows that a Level IV connection—affiliation with the brand—develops, making
the prospect and the brand one in a practical and emotional sense. Brand affiliation
is the ultimate goal, but it all begins with a story that is properly constructed.
Signorelli (2014) says

Clothe truth in a story in order to make your truth real for others. Good stories
don’t point a finger at us while telling us how to think and feel. Rather, they invite
us to think and feel for ourselves...successful brands don’t rely solely on facts,
they want us to know about their products. They place a good deal of emphasis on
"clothing the truth." Specifically, they promote their product claims by wrapping
them in the "clothing" of the causes they support and in life causes their audience
can identify with. (p. 33)

Scholars Samuel Perry and Jerry Mark Long (2016), in their study about how
IS convinces people to embrace martyrdom, have found IS engages in this
StoryBranding practice. Their approach does not command or in any way
imperatively state that one must become a martyr. Instead, one is invited to be
great and to leave a story of honor behind for others to follow, and the way to do
this is to become a martyr.

ISIS offers potential adherents the opportunity [emphasis added] to enter into
a narrative that specifically recapitulates Islamic history and develops a
compelling new identity based on that history. That powerful inducement speaks
to those who believe themselves dislocated from their own cultural
milieu...sometimes as a result of this alienation, many jihadists find individual
identities within the constitutive, instrumental and mythic appeals found in ISIS
messaging. (p. 1)

Before moving to the assessment of IS’s overall StoryBranding, the reader
will notice several aspects of Signorelli’s steps in the comment of Perry and Long.
There is the backstory, where prospects are invited to take part in the narrative
spun by IS. This is followed by the IS inner layer where they promise a new
identity for those who are faithful, even to death; and the IS outer layer promises a
role—and ultimate glory—in the history of the culture that has rejected them, thus
showing the culture they did not recognize courage and truth; the prospect’s outer
layer is the functional need of recognition and purpose, which fits with the offer
made by the IS outer layer; and the inner layer of the prospect (recognition and
purpose) connects to the IS inner layer that promises a new identity and new hope
for those who are faithful enough to join with IS.

StoryBranding the Islamic State

The Backstory

When it comes to an organization’s backstory, there has to be verifiable
history in the myths in which the group attires itself. In the case of IS, its
backstory is not about its actual origins in the late 1990s (Bilger, 2014;
Gartenstein-Ross & Jensen, 2015; Byman, 2016; Kavalec, 2015), it is about the
prophetic myths they have appropriated and molded into a story.

Robert Rowland and Kristen Theye (2008) point out that terror organizations
and the actions they undertake are are fundamentally rhetorical in nature. Because
of this truth, the backstory IS has crafted to send out into the world is carefully
sourced, closely connected to well-known aspects of Islamic history, and looking
forward to a time when the mostly corrupt state of present Islam is redeemed and
made pure again so that the return of the Mahdi (the end-of-times redeemer of
Islam) can take place and usher in a period of peace (Chua, 2015).

The first step in this plan came when IS declared itself a state under the
leadership of Caliph Ibrahim (Ford, 2016). By taking this step, Ibrahim Awwad
Ibrahim-al-Badri had to prove that he fit the Islamic prophecies that claim the End
Times will be ushered in by a man descended from the Prophet Mohammed.
Pointing to his nom de guerre—Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Quraishi—he made his
case.

This name ties to well-known Islamic history on three levels. The original
Abu Bakr was the closest friend of Mohammad, and Abu Bakr was the first caliph.
Bakr is widely considered the one who put Islam back on the "straight path of
early Islam" (Ford, 2016, p. 17). The middle name al-Badri selected—al-
Baghdadi—potentially resonates because the goal of IS is to revive the caliphate
and rule from Baghdad as the pure Abbasid caliphs did during the "golden age and
building boom…an era of historic significance and pride that Muslims have for this period of history, " and the name is also a message that the city will ultimately be theirs (p. 20). The last name, al-Quraishi, was selected because Mohammed was from the Quraish tribe (p. 19). Supporters of the IS leader have given out a genealogy that allegedly proves Baghdadi is descended from Mohammad, even though his real name and place of birth (Samarra) is public record (p. 18).

Symbolically, IS also advances under a black flag, which has long been considered a prophetic symbol of Islam’s advance in the world (Gunther, 2014). In one iteration of its English-language magazine, IS has shown its flag flying over well-known buildings and parts of the world, such as the Vatican (Dabiq, 2014).

As such, the black flag, a recurrent motif in jihadist images, is heavily charged with meaning: The black banner is connected to a prophetic tradition, which according to the renovators of “genuine” Islam would arise and bear the black flags that would led them to a final victory against the rule of tyranny and restore justice. (Ford, 2016, pp. 41-42)

This flag serves as a symbol that a purer form of Islam will rise and reclaim the religion’s past glory, which is the glory of Islam’s founding when it was pure and undefiled. IS is the group that takes the challenge seriously, even going so far as to kill fellow co-religionists who do not join with them.

Islamists regard the Quran and (the sayings of Mohammed) as God’s will and believe that most of the countries that call themselves Muslim are far from adhering to them. Those countries that fail to implement Muslim law are instead seen as corrupt, guided by leaders who have defiled themselves through contact with with non-Muslim nations of the West. Consequently, IS believes that reordering society in accordance with the God-given tenets revealed in the Quran and the (teachings of Mohammed) is the antidote for the moral bankruptcy of Western society. (Kibble, 2016, p. 29)

The forward-looking message IS sets forth in its stories is that it is helping to purify the religion—and the world—for the Islamic eschaton, though J.Y. Chua (2015) wonders if "the Islamic State’s propaganda is motivated by a genuine belief that the end-times are imminent, or if it is a convenient tool for indoctrination" (p. 8).

The core promises of the Islamic State’s apocalyptic argument are as follows: the world as we know it will come to an end; the present conflict in Syria represents the beginning of the end times; the Islamic State is on the right side in this dualistic battle between good and evil; and, because they are in the right, joining Islamic State guarantees salvation. (p. 8)

Though IS clothes its truth in an Islamic dress, it also sets forth a message for those who are disenchanted with their life and surroundings who may not be moved by strong religious arguments. In the Muslim community there is a respect and honor for the so-called strong horse, the person who fights and perseveres (Gartenstein-Ross & Jensen, 2015). IS, through its rhetoric and its action, is provides an appeal to those who feel disenfranchised.

Many may hark to the group’s dynamism—it’s actually fighting, not drifting, as many Muslims say their global community has been doing since the last
acknowledged caliphate was abolished at the close of World War I. When he established his caliphate in June 2014 ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s call to arms appealed to the sense of aggrievement that has bedeviled Muslim politics since: "So rush O Muslims and gather around your (caliphate), so that you may return as you once were for ages, kings of the earth and knights of war. Come so that you may be honored and esteemed, living as masters with dignity." (Vick, 2015, p. 14)

With these messages—a return to truth and dignity; becoming masters of their own fate; creating the conditions for the End of Days; being winners; and getting on the right side of history—IS establishes its context and the parameters of its brand story. But the question still looms: what is IS? What do they claim themselves to be? It is to this question that we now turn.

IS’s Inner Layer

In the context of StoryBranding, the inner layer consists of what the organization believes about itself (Signorelli, 2014). The inner layer has nothing at all to do with that people think of or say about the product. The inner layer exists "…for the purpose of arriving at an authentic story, meaning that the management, not the voice of the consumer, should determine what the inner layer is comprised of and that it should reflect genuine, rather than synthetic, values" (p. 89).

Military experts and communication scholars such as David Kibble (2016), Theresa Ford (2016) and J.Y. Chua (2015) point out the ways in which IS fails to live up to its religious claims. But inconsistent or not, the inner layer reflects how the organization sees itself and believes what it is in substance. IS sees itself as a religious entity that is reclaiming Islam and embracing historic truth; promoting faithfulness and boldness in Islam; with the ultimate goal of bringing glory to God and gaining glory in the world.

IS’s self identity, according to scholar Luis Tome (2015), is based in large part on reclamation of the faith. He says this represents the largest part of the group’s identity.

Islamic State…wants the Islamic community to return to “pure” ancestral practices, making a clear separation between the true believers and the unbelievers, who are considered to be apostates or infidels. They view themselves as the defenders of the original Islam that the Prophet Muhammad and his companions preached, and they consider that Islam is now under attack by the infidels. (pp. 119-120)

Picking up on this theme, Christoph Gunther (2014) writes that the attack on Islam means IS’s actions cannot be defensive, they must be offensive. IS believes today’s Muslims are “under siege and they have to actively fight back in order to renovate the Islamic mission” (p. 42). Though western nations see IS as an aggressor, IS believes they are fighting western corruption in their attempt to return Islam to a more authentic place, which ties directly to the IS use of historic names and images.
The group’s claim for genuineness is connected to the claim for the Prophet Muhammad’s spiritual and physical heritage. This notion...is signified by the black flag and the second part of the writing on it...whose upside down writing order is explainable by its deliberate resemblance to the Prophet’s seal. Using the seal in this way symbolically transfers the Prophet’s authority as a political and religious leader upon the Islamic State of Iraq. (pp. 46-47)

As a self-declared state and keeper of historic truth, the things the group says through its local leaders and media outreach allow it to set the parameters for what it means to be a faithful Muslim—even when these actions are not in clear accord with the Quran. As opposed to being a problem for IS, the things it defines as true (but that cannot be defended scripturally) make it appear strong and bold and help clothe the movement with a sense of honor.

Flagrant acts of barbarity bestow on them a moral legitimacy; in the eyes of the local public, these ragtag groups and their fanciful reenactments of precolonial purity represent acts of moral reclamation. Unlike their vastly corrupt governments whose leaders placate the international community for fear of losing the aid packages with which to pad their private fortunes, these groups stand apart...Western horror represents not moral pressure to change a local practice, but rather the affirmation of its purity and rightness. (Zakaria, 2015, p. 24)

All of these ideas represent the core of IS. From these convictions, the group communicates its messages to its potential prospects. This communication happens through the organization’s outer layer, which is the face it puts forth to the public. In order for these messages to be effective, they have to connect with the inner layer. Successful messages in StoryBranding do not bring into existence something that does not exist. It taps into and amplifies what already exists within its prospects. As Signorelli (2017) writes: "The best stories agree with what the audience already believes" (p. 36).

**IS’s Outer Layer**

The backstory of the brand provides the context for all the actions the brand takes. The inner layer is the convictions the brand holds. The outer layer is the plots and/or themes the brand deploys in order to clothe its convictions in truth (Signorelli, 2014). Some of the themes IS uses will be familiar from some of what was detailed under the Backstory. It is also at this phase that the brand story of an organization or product begins to take shape.

According to communication scholars Megan Hastings and Kenneth Rogerson (2016), the best stories are focused but not prescriptive. In a paper that offers some suggestions about how to contest IS stories using social media, they are critical of western efforts to undercut the IS brand story because the message typically amounts to a direct statement that terrorism is bad. Even direct attempts to destroy the networks that carry the ISIS message do not win the day, as a recent attack against the group’s media center in Amaq show (Warrick, 2018b).
The mixed success of the Amaq takedown effort reflects the challenges and frustrations faced by governments worldwide as they try to stop violent extremist groups from using the Internet to recruit and radicalize. While the Islamic State has been defeated militarily in Iraq and Syria, the group's online empire — its "virtual caliphate" — has shown remarkable resilience, producing, with few interruptions, a steady barrage of propaganda videos and communiques, despite cyberattacks, territorial losses and the deaths of dozens of top officials and technicians in its media division. (para. 5)

IS’s effort is much stronger and more powerful, they say, because it is "flexible and has a more compelling narrative" (Hastings and Rogerson, 2016, p. 22). The flexibility comes from the variety of media IS uses and the various stories they tell to prospects.

One of the stories is the evocative story of the Gray Zone. This story connects to the inner layer value of purity. As IS sees things (and sets forth the story), there is a vast Gray Zone that is made up of societies where true religion and false religion exist together.

The gray zone turns out to be IS’s term for any society in which Muslims and non-Muslims coexist. It sounds simple because it is. IS sees the world as black and white and abhors the middle group—the gray zone—where everyday life is lived. (Vick, 2016, p. 6)

True Islam, IS claims, cannot be restored until a time comes when people take a side for the right and true or against it (Chua, 2015). In order to help individuals see how the right and true is advancing, IS has adopted a number of images and symbols to mark their mental territory. We have earlier mentioned the use of the black flag, which is an apocalyptic symbol that marks the advance of IS and truth. Within this territory—and through the internet—nasheeds are often used to help reinforce the group’s message and stories. Ford (2016) explains that nasheeds are a form of Islamic devotional music that would be roughly similar to contemporary Christian music. These chants are effective in getting the message into the memory of the listener because songs and lyrics are easier to remember than words alone (Mitchell, 2013). They also drive home the themes IS wants people to remember.

The reason this works so well is due to the lack of knowledge of their religion among many Muslims. In the first IS iteration of a sleekly produced English-language magazine (which went by the title of Dabiq, named after the city where Islamic scholars believe the final battle of good against evil will take place), they write that many adherents to the faith "...are ignorant of their religion and they thirst for those who can teach them and help them understand it" (Kalifah, 2014, p. 11). This is the brand as hero of its story that was mentioned earlier. In the case of the inner layer convictions and the outer layer stories, the answer to the problems that IS sets forth in its simple way is that support for or affiliation with them will bring a positive resolution to the tensions they feel.

On social media, IS operates on several levels. On one hand, they reassure people within their territory that life is normal by announcing the opening of public buildings and showing the services they offer to people. Some of it is an offshoot of western social media silliness—such as "Cats of Jihad," which allows
fighters to pose with their cats and weaponry (Brooking & Singer, 2016). This shows that IS is not just angry and dangerous but that it can have fun too.

The success of these stories flows from the simplicity with which they are told. There is a Gray Zone, there is normalcy within the IS state, there is benevolence as those who desire to know the truth are taught it, and there is a reason that Islam is not now great—it is being undermined by those who do not believe. The power in stories like this is that they invite people to apply them to their personal experience—as Signorelli (2014) says "...stories intend to sell us something. Whether it's to demonstrate the importance of love, courage or freedom, some human value always underlies the reason a story is told. But the beauty of stories is that they reveal truth; they don't hit us over the head with it" (pp. 4-5).

Obstacles

As brands strive to make disciples of their prospects, there are always obstacles that have to be overcome. IS is no different. As they strive to gain adherents and create a caliphate, they face challenges. Some of these are external—such as the resistance from the West and from Muslims who do not agree with their interpretation of the Quran (Shahi, 2012). Some are internal, such as infighting due to scarcity of resources as a result of the decline in oil prices that funded most of their war effort (Browne, 2016; Warrick, 2018a).

In StoryBranding, obstacles are whatever gets in the way of converting people to a sense of resonance with the brand. Resonance is not simply intellectual agreement, it is a feeling that a prospect develops for a product or organization (Signorelli, 2014). As the previous section demonstrates, IS has gone to some lengths to separate itself from the typical terror organization. It wants to show a normally functioning state that has many of the challenges of a functioning state, but that can deliver on its promise to create a true Islamic utopia (Kavalec, 2015).

Signorelli sets out four main obstacles that brands have to overcome in order to get to the point where a prospect feels resonance. In the case of an organization like IS, the feelings of the people who are unpersuadable are not taken into account. They are focusing on the people who are open to the story they are telling (Walt, 2015).

IS has already gotten past the first obstacle—a lack of product function awareness (CBS News, 2016). Signorelli (2017) says the purpose at this level is to make people aware of the primary function of the brand. Generally speaking, IS is a known brand because of its primary goal, which is to wage jihad. It has also gained general awareness for most of its various personas—maker of war, oil broker, state actor, and so forth (Trofimov, 2016).

At the second level, a brand has to establish some sense of what makes it superior to its competitors. In the places where it held land, IS told a different story that connected to its conviction to restore Islamic society and culture. IS tells
this story by focusing on topics like the environment and healthcare, in addition to other projects.

IS claims it has committed itself to caring for the land in the territory it occupies. *Time* magazine reports that, in Mosul, citizens can be fined for failing to dispose of their trash properly (Cambanis & Collard, 2015). If citizens refuse to pay the fines, they can be detained (2015). These environmental efforts are in keeping with its mission of practicing a pure, redeemed form of Islam. Although the Quran instructs all Muslims to care for the environment, many Islamist groups—such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, and Hamas—have failed to carry out the dictates of the Quran. (Yildirim, 2016). In this, IS distinguishes itself from other Islamist factions because they give off the sense they are true believers, down to the faith’s smallest points.

Additionally, IS has gone to great lengths to provide healthcare for its members and for those living under its regime. In June 2015, IS began calling for Westerners—especially medical personnel—to join their cause (Vogel, 2016). Approximately 30,000 men and women left their home countries to serve as health care providers for IS that year, and "a small but alarming number" of them were doctors or medical students from the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Israel (Vogel, 2016, p. 177). Though the reasons for Westerners joining IS are varied, many are attracted by IS’s utopian ideals. Thus, some Western recruits view IS as promoting a "social justice" agenda (Vogel, 2016, p. 178). CNN reports that IS issues also birth certificates, runs maternity wards, and has mobile vaccination clinics (Shubert, 2015).

This is one thing that distinguishes ISIS from groups like the Taliban, which forbids vaccinations. Polio is a problem in Pakistan because the Taliban believes the vaccines are a forbidden substance. The Taliban forbids all female education. But ISIS allows girls to go to school, albeit in a segregated environment. (Schubert, 2015)

IS also conducts complex fund-raising operations and runs construction companies that develop infrastructure in cities like Raqqah and Mosul (Berti, 2015).

According to Lorne Dawson, codirector of the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society, "only about 10%" of IS’s social media content is concerned with warfare (qtd. in Vogel, 2016, p. 178). That means the other 90 percent of IS’s social media is devoted to nonviolent causes and campaigns, such as environmentalism and healthcare. IS reinforces the idea to its prospects and local critics that it is not just a backwater terrorist organization of cave-dwellers, but a reputable organization dedicated to a just cause.

The third obstacle is the confidence obstacle. At the first two levels, people can make a simple mental connection, but here emotions begin to become involved (Signorelli, 2014). Thinking back to the previous section, the "Cats of Jihad" social media presence and the stories that report on the normalcy of life under IS governance is an attempt to develop a third level connection with a prospect. At this level, a prospect makes a positive emotional association with the brand. This level creates a bit of the halo effect for a brand, where the other things
it connects to are viewed positively. This is seen in the outreach to recruit fighters, where IS tries to show how much better life is with Islamic State when compared with their home nation (Trofimov, 2016).

Tunisia’s functioning democracy remains an exception: Arab Spring revolutions elsewhere have either turned into civil wars, as in Syria, Libya or Yemen, or were crushed by re-established dictatorships, as in Egypt. Yet even in Tunisia, popular disappointment is spreading, said Moncef Marzouki, a human-rights activist who served as democratic Tunisia’s first president from 2011 and until the end of 2014. While the country’s Jasmine Revolution ushered in democracy, it failed to spur economic growth or curb rampant corruption, he said. “Why do we have educated people, people with jobs, who go to ISIS?” wondered Mr. Marzouki. “It’s not the matter of tackling socioeconomic roots. You have to go deeper and understand that these guys have a dream—and we don’t. We had a dream—our dream was called the Arab Spring. And our dream is now turning into a nightmare. But the young people need a dream, and the only dream available to them now is the caliphate.” (para. 8-10)

With a positive emotional attachment driven by circumstances, the fourth level connection can take place. These are the people who resonate with a product to the point where they personally identify with it. To paraphrase what was quoted earlier in the paper, this happens when the brand taps into a belief that the prospect considers personally important—and that the prospect readily identifies with.

IS has vocally and digitally proclaimed its message and its name to the point that, around the world, smartphone apps, magazines, and condominiums with the name ISIS have had to spend millions of dollars rebranding or suspending use the acronym despite claiming it years before the group in some cases (Boiko, 2014). With a handful of annual reports, glossy magazines that were published through 2017 (Warrick, 2018a) and hundreds of Twitter channels all around the internet, ISIS has gone far beyond the obstacles of brand awareness and comprehension. It seems everyone knows ISIS, what they are about, and how to connect to them if they wish to do so.

As with the brand’s inner layer, the obstacles have to be wrapped into a communication strategy that answers or somehow overcomes these obstacles. Doing this is not always as complicated as it may sound, as we will see as we look into the next step in StoryBranding—the prospect’s outer layer.

**Prospect’s Outer Layer**

The outer layer of the prospect consists mostly of the traditional measures marketing and advertising use—demographics and a flat definition of the individual (Signorelli, 2017). IS has adopted an integrated communication effort. It does not merely communicate within the area where it dominates, it also reaches out, providing communication in English and other languages in order to project power (Vick, 2016).
In the Middle East, IS is the voice of the Sunni Muslim (Byman, 2016). The IS inner layer and interpretation of Islamic teaching flows from Abu Bakr, the original Sunni (Ford, 2016). As such, IS looks to consolidate its power first in these areas of the Middle East and those areas that are Sunni controlled. This group is their primary local audience. However, in eliminating the gray in Islam, IS has slightly hampered its ability to persuade prospects to embrace the brand. The Islamic State’s decision to declare a caliphate and demand that all Sunnis swear allegiance to the caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was deeply divisive and a number of tribal sheikhs refused to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi. (Gartenstein-Ross & Jensen, 2015, p. 108)

As we will note with the IS outreach to the West, the group acts as the hero who can come to the aid of Muslims who are unhappy with their lot in life (Trianni, 2015; Zelin, 2014). Rather than attempting to solve this dissatisfaction through governmental means, IS offers a different approach. IS follows al-Qaeda’s precedent in challenging the most foundational principles of today’s global order, in which political authority is institutionalized in a universal system of sovereign nation states, rather than anchored in a common system of religious authority. The vision of a revived caliphate may present to Westerners as an absurd totalitarian fantasy. But it taps into a deep disaffection with a world order that an angry minority of Muslims regard as the product of Western imperialism, designed to keep the Islamic community estranged from and God and from one another, as well as a hostage to a toxic Western secular modernity. (Phillips, 2014, p. 496-497)

In the West, the IS story attempts to "crowdsource jihad," as Calabresi (2015-2016, p. 50) terms it. The group actively works social media to extend its brand, attempting to move prospects through each of the obstacle levels to affiliation.

This effort appears to be working, according to Holly Yan (2015). In her assessment of who is responding to the IS message, she notes that about 3,500 Westerners have joined with the group. Roughly 200 of those are Americans (Berlinger, 2015). Generally speaking, IS puts forth messages that aim to connect with those who feel disconnected from Western culture.

French authorities categorize volunteers from France as disaffected, aimless and lacking a sense of identity or belonging. This appears to be common across most nationalities and fits with the high number of converts, presumably people who are seeking a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. (Barrett, 2014, p. 17)

In this way, IS is also engaged in a soft war, looking back to the earlier statement that the work of terror groups is foundationally rhetorical in nature. They are engaged in a contest against the Western narrative that satisfaction comes from freedom and individuality.

As these actors seek to construct and communicate narratives about their place in the world using new media, contestation becomes inevitable as they seek to establish positions in the international system as they seek to shape the behavior of other actors. The contestation occurs along…a spectrum of persuasion. (Hastings & Rogerson, 2016, p. 4)
This persuasion often takes the form of grandfallos, drawing people into a shared community or identity based on ephemeral definitions (Kavalec, 2015). As IS recruiters troll for prospects who have a light connection with their physical community, they strive to draw these individuals into an online world that is shaped by IS philosophy.

For the traumatized children of war-torn regions, the message might be: join us and kill your enemies before they kill you. For the disaffected loner in a European or American suburb, it might be the fellowship of a movement of strong Muslims. For a history-minded dreamer it might the promise of restored Islamic greatness. (Von Drahle, 2015, p. 54)

Just as the IS narratives are flexible, so are the approaches to their prospect’s outer layer. Reports show that people from about 90 nations have been drawn to IS, which makes it a more internationally diverse unit than the one that is fighting against it (Lederer, 2015). But since the ability to travel to join with IS has been greatly restricted

...a growing number of them have been urged to wage jihad in their homelands. "If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman or any of his allies," an IS spokesman announced last year. "Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife or run him over with your car." (Von Drahle, 2015, p. 54)

The tight fit between IS’s inner layer, outer layer and the prospect’s outer layer achieves what brands typically hope for—a consistent, well-tailored message that results in a regular flow of like-minded prospects who have set aside or minimized the various obstacles the brand faces so they can move toward the fourth level, affiliation.

Prospect’s Inner Layer

It may seem as if connecting to the prospect’s outer layer represents victory for a brand. But it does not, because the ultimate goal is not merely to share an idea in common with a person or a brand. The final goal is to develop shared values that add up to identifying with a brand. This identification takes the form of a similar world view, life priorities, values, and aspirations (Signorelli, 2017).

J.Y. Chua (2015) writes that the IS narrative that appeals to Muslims frustrated by being marginalized by their governments and by more powerful nations also appeals foreigners, though for slightly different reasons.

Many foreigners who join Islamic State are seeking to reconcile the contradictions of secular society—the data of life—with Quranic visions of the good life—the model for life. Hence, joining the apocalyptic struggle of the Islamic State is an attractive option. (p. 10)

The fact that a story can appeal to two different individuals who are operating within very different contexts is evidence that IS has crafted a powerful, flexible narrative, but not so powerful that it is a one-way street. There is room within the narrative for people to hear the case IS makes and to apply that case to their
personal beliefs and context. The response to the story is not mandated by IS, but it is implied, helping the prospect make his or her own decision. This makes the decision the prospect’s, and we tend to embrace and build our identity around the decisions we believe we freely make because we tend to strive for internal consistency in beliefs that we publicly affirm (Cialdini, 2008).

Once internal consistency rises, the belief or series of beliefs that we try to make consistent becomes our hermeneutical grid. It is through this grid that we begin to interpret the things around us, and this, in turn, colors our view of the world.

The act of influencing others and winning them over requires some counterintuitive actions. The "Cats of Jihad" social media project is one attempt to lighten things up so the message does not become gloomy or oppressive. But IS does other counterintuitive things. For example, an IS recruiter on Ask.FM’s website discussed the best beard oils and published memes such as the photo of him and his brother in combat gear with the text "This is our Call of Duty, and we respawn in Jannah" emblazoned across (Segall, 2014). These softer touches put a human face on a brand that others are trying to brand as inhuman. For someone who is being converted to a level IV connection with a brand, the counter message about the inhumanity of IS is not in accord with that they have seen from the organization. The result is that they tend to see the message that does not fit with their experience as affirmative evidence that the group is being persecuted by opponents (Kibble, 2016). When one’s tendency is to defend a brand in this way, it is solid evidence that an individual has developed resonance with it.

**Conclusion**

The success of IS in the area of communication is due to the quality of the stories it tells. Thanks to the work of earlier terror groups, IS has been able to consolidate dissatisfaction with nations like Russia, the United States, the leadership vacuum following the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq into a series of stories that resonated with a reasonable minority of people from all over the world (Moutot, 2016).

A number of military analysts and communication scholars misapprehend the power of IS’s communication efforts. They believe the group’s power is in cynically telling lies to gullible people or that their power comes from being first to colonize social media and short form video for purposes of jihad.

Neither of these takes into account two important facts. The first is that IS is telling the truth as it sees it. This is not to say the group is virtuous and telling the full truth. IS fully believes the things it is doing and their assessment of the facts is their identity.

The second key fact is that the power of their story comes from the conviction this truth contains (Signorelli, 2014). It is consistency and conviction presented confidently that connect with individuals who have ideas, feelings or experiences that resonate with all or part of the brand’s story. If IS’s actions and words were
inconsistent, the actions would undermine the words. But no matter how barbaric
their actions may be, IS has been consistent in how they speak about these actions.
This consistency flows from conviction.

It is also the quality of their story that draws people in. Sleek videos that are
often like movie trailers and stories that bear the hallmarks of professional
scripting and editing draw an audience (Perry & Long, 2016).

Muslim and Western nations that wish to counter conviction-driven stories
can only do this by telling stories of their own. These stories have to contain an
element of hope in them. Though their world is often dark, the stories IS has told
contain glimpses of a positive dream. Potential suicide bombers talk about the
 glory that awaits them in heaven, and the wonderful stories of bravery others will
tell about them after they die (2016). Recruits are encouraged to take a hand in
honoring God by fighting wherever they are (Petroff, 2015).

All of these attributes have allowed IS to build a worldwide brand that may
endure despite its present reduced state, at least until a more compelling narrative
is set forth that can discredit their story (Warrick, 2018a).

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