

Unsettling Victory: Storylines of Success and Anxiety in the Coverage of the Decline of ISIS in Three U.S. Newspapers

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This study analyzed contested media narratives of the ISIS/ISIL terrorist group as it transitioned from a self-declared caliphate to a decentralized terrorist group. The study focused on U.S. newspaper coverage during 2017 as a key period of transition during which the Islamic State's territorial assets diminished drastically. Utilizing a combination of topic modeling and close qualitative analysis, our investigation analyzed changes in news narratives during the shrinking of the organization's material features and critically examined deep structures in the news coverage: How was the nature of the threat posed by ISIS (re)defined narratively in light of its territorial losses? And did this "victory" at Mosul fortify the U.S. meta-narrative around a newly vanquished ISIS? Analysis found intersecting storylines of American success and sustained anxiety about future attacks in the United States and continued struggles against ISIS. More fundamentally, these findings point to ISIS's deeply embedded influence and place in U.S. narratives as it lost its physical space yet retained an assemblage of potential global terrorist relationships that construct its imagined caliphate and expands its network.

Keywords: terrorism, narrative, discursive fields, news, topic modeling

Less than a decade after saturating public consciousness and the media with spectacles of unrelenting violence, in 2017, the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL, and Daesh, its Arabic acronym) was reduced to a shadow of its "State" incarnation and geopolitical aspirations. Following several years of heavy air bombardment and ground coalition support led by the U.S. military, ISIS lost control of the city of Mosul, the last de facto administrative capital of its caliphate and a vital structural piece of its identity as a global player with territorial control and ambitions.

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Date submitted: 2020-08-06

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The media have long been a critical part of the process through which the public interprets international events such as wars, terrorist violence, and the like. ISIS was unusual for a terrorist group, however: Most are known for secrecy, and their attacks are shocking as much for the element of surprise as for their violence (Winter, 2017). ISIS, in contrast, was highly visible and media savvy, and used its media strategy to start building its modern-day caliphate—a proto-state entity. As it captured significant territory in the Levant, it also lost stealth and found itself in a more traditional ground war in which it was systematically demolished by U.S. and allied forces.

In dominant Western political discourse, and particularly in the United States, the dismantling of the group's remaining territorial assets was offered as a watershed event that forced ISIS to relinquish its proto-state mantle—a reverse metamorphosis that instantiated a discursive shift that could reframe years of embodied terror. This disrupted ISIS's caliphate brand and identity, and with it the shared experience that gave shape and meaning to the United States and its allies' actions for years.

As it lost cities and towns, ISIS reverted to its narrative as a (much diminished) terrorist organization. This transition was in process at the time of this research project and guides the examination of emerging, and diverging, storylines that capture the rearticulation of ISIS and its perceived future threat. Our investigation analyzes changes in terrorist narratives during the shrinking of the organization's material features and critically examines deep structures in the news coverage: How was the nature of the threat posed by ISIS (re)defined narratively in light of its territorial losses? And did this "victory" at Mosul fortify the U.S. meta-narrative around a newly vanquished ISIS?

This fascinating time of transformation provides a challenging research site. This study is offered as a view of a terrorism dispositive—a mix of analytical approaches to investigate complex relations and technologies (Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer, & Thaning, 2016). The article begins with a theoretical overview that establishes the significance of narrative and counternarrative contestations, and proceeds to examine the rise of a highly mediated terrorist group, its transformation into a proto-state, and its return to a terrorist network. Applying theories of discursive fields and employing topic modeling as a methodological entry point, we examine the major issues that oriented U.S. news discourses around this media transformation of the ISIS threat.

At a time when academic, media, and popular attention has largely turned toward other forms of terrorism, often domestic, returning to this distinct moment of transformation offers an opportunity to parse victory narratives that prominently defined the U.S. discourse and justified its need to counter terrorism for close to two decades. The field of discourse is an interesting assemblage of reported actions, linguistic and relational networks, and mediated stories of massive governmental power and much less powerful human beings.

Research Context: The Rise, Fall, and Transformation of ISIS

After breaking with Al Qaeda in 2014, the Islamic State distinguished itself from other extremist organizations by proclaiming a global caliphate, not by way of a distant future ideal, but as a strategic goal and project in the here-and-now, grounded in centuries-old historical narratives. The narrative of the historic

caliphate served as a source of identity for ISIS, shaped understanding of its status, and provided direction for the future. Historical interpretations can all but command behaviors in the present when they create a future that embodies the moral obligations of the past (Hollihan & Baaske, 2016). This is the underlying logic of ISIS's story of the caliphate. ISIS asserted arguments that countered the legitimacy of current leaders from Islamic nations and began to undercut their legitimacy and authority (Williams, 2015). These arguments then recreated the story of the caliphate as the only legitimate way to bring Islam together in an Islamic nation—and described in detail across many platforms the potential and rightful power of a new caliphate's eventual victory over the infidels (generally anyone in the West and nonfollowers of the true Islamic faith).

With the caliphate at the core of its identity, the group expanded its territory across Syria and Iraq, with the city of Mosul as its final administrative and economic base. The organization's propaganda efforts accelerated to match its material gains: At its peak in 2015, ISIS was distributing a vast array of high-production materials in print and online, targeting both local fighters and adherents, and audiences in Western countries. ISIS drew supporters to its caliphate narrative, and estimates showed approximately 31,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq, including more than 12,000 from 81 other countries and 2,500 from Western states ("What Is 'Islamic State'?", 2015). Extending beyond the reach of the historical empire, it framed its growing numbers and military victories as a bold takeover—not only of the Levant, but also of the world.

In the U.S. context, ISIS stories in the news and social media quickly became compelling to many audiences in large part because of their performative characteristics—blood, gore, violence, and a level of cruelty not often seen on the public stage. ISIS branded its carnage with highly staged, stylized videos of extreme violence, including beheadings, crucifixions, mass shootings, and, famously, the immolation of a Jordanian pilot in a steel cage (Stern & Berger, 2016). At the same time, ISIS constructed appealing narratives for potential supporters and recruits. In a study of ISIS official propaganda online in 2015, researcher Charlie Winter (2017) identified mercy, belonging, victimhood, war, and utopia as dominant themes. Together these comprised a videographic and organizational brand that presented ISIS as a viable and appealing civilian state in line with its global caliphate. The strategy revolved around three axes: "a coherent narrative that is at once positive and alternative; comprehensive, rejection-based counterspeech operations; and the launching of occasional, carefully calibrated media 'projectiles'" (Winter, 2017, p. 3). In short, ISIS constructed a story of a better future, was ready with counternarratives to opposing arguments, and commanded public attention with strategically timed and highly visible atrocities.

The mounting loss of territorial assets and administrative capacity after its peak in 2015 forced ISIS to recalibrate its communication efforts. The output of official propaganda plunged, and the thematic focus shifted to adjust to, and deflect from, the group's reduced control and power. The caliphate so central to ISIS's narrative was reframed as one of ideological commitment rather than territorial control. Previously dominant themes of state building and utopian government were supplanted by an emphasis on narratives of warfare and victimhood:

An urgent sense of injustice underpins the Islamic State ideology. . . . Its Victimhood propaganda tells a story of existential and excessive warfare in which Sunni Muslim civilians are said to be the principal targets. The very idea of victimization thereby serves as a strategic legitimizer for the Islamic State, a facilitator of its ideology. (Winter, 2018, p. 111)

The overall trend in this period was one of retrenchment as ISIS turned its attention to shoring up core supporters and presenting a continued threat to the West through those who had been radicalized but were no longer, or had never been, in the Islamic State.

Mediated Battlefields

In the context of terrorism, narrative and framing take on a heightened force. Terrorism is concretely manifest in physical violence, but its more sustained power and impact is achieved through narratives that shape meaning in the public mind. Indeed, terrorism is distinguished from other forms of security and militarized threats largely through this symbolic, narrative function: Victims of attacks are not the exclusive or ultimate target, but are used as a disposable means to advance a narrative argument in pursuit of a broader sociopolitical end.

Simultaneously, the construction of terrorism as a grand evil is expedient in creating a community of opposition joined together in the war on terrorism, “[invoking] a new order, in which the world is imagined, framed and divided into those social actors who support terrorism and those who are ready to fight against it” (Erjavec & Volčič, 2007, p. 124). The dichotomy that emerges, terrorist and savior, is considerably more complicated and pliable than generally understood and deeply embedded in historical use, the reproduction of political power, and local understandings.

The term coalesces around terror, and studies locate the origin of the concept in France, or ancient Greece, or from early Rome in Latin—with uses in English emerging during the first Irish rebellions (see Hoffman, 2017). As Fine (2010) and many others have noted, the concept of political violence was, early on, differentiated both diachronically and geographically/spatially. The uses of threats and violence evolved across time and space and acquired new parameters, such as separating legitimate war actions from terrorism directed at civilians/noncombatants (Sageman, 2017). Whether violence is permissible or prohibited under particular circumstances is yet today under constant renegotiation as a dialectic of legitimacy that depends on the current assessment of power structures and vulnerabilities. The naming of actions and their underlying ideologies as “terrorism” both enables and constrains opinions and responses (Winkler, 2006).

There is a rich body of work by critical scholars interrogating the political expediency and journalistic ambivalence around the perpetual and preemptive priming of the American public to amorphous “terrorist” threats (e.g., Aradau & van Munster, 2012; Giroux, 2016; Grusin, 2010; Massumi, 2005). Zelizer (2016), for instance, identified the persistence of “Cold War Mindedness” in journalistic coverage that she extends to the Islamic State, as evidenced by “acts of compliance, deception, stereotypy, black-and-white thinking, polarization, simplification, and demonization that produced a worldview with distinct characteristics” (p. 6062). Ditarych (2013, 2014) argues that scholars need to better understand the discourses of terrorism and attend to differences in the ways cultures and states articulate the narratives of terrorists and terrorism, especially the discourses of developing versus developed nations. His analysis highlights the framing of stories—of order versus chaos, good as opposed to evil, and powerful compared with struggling nations. He suggests that the alarmist rhetoric found in many analyses by the U.S. intelligence community, also identified

by Sageman (2017) and Stampnitzky (2013), is focused by their attention to spectacles such as the attack on Israeli Olympians and finds this somewhat unique within terrorism studies.

Ditrych (2013) argues that terrorism in its current discursive frame is global. The significance of the global turn is related to secrecy and conspiracy; these networks include many types of relationships (in a Foucauldian sense of a dispositive), such as groups that are countering the terrorists, the media, social media, and a multiplicity of large and small states that coalesce to counter threats that are not bound to place or nation.

Stampnitzky (2013) makes a different argument and locates the discursive frame of hysteria about future attacks within the growing industry of self-referential terrorism experts who feed on each other's research at the growing number of terrorism conferences. She argues that the discourse of the American intelligence community is amplified by members of the media, who expand the number of voices concerned about future terrorist attacks and opportunities for counterterrorism interventions. Indeed, critical scholarship has demonstrated the complexity of counterterrorism discourse. Just as the construction of terrorism depends on whether violence is allowable, counterterrorism proves a powerful and convenient justification for antidemocratic political maneuvers and securitized control:

The terror of the spectacle appeals to a sense of unity, whether racial, nationalistic, or market-based, and, in doing so, downplays matters of politics and power while pointing to a utopian future as a basis for unity and consent . . . the spectacle of terrorism emerges as a central force in shaping antidemocratic social relations forged in a culture of fear and death and also in legitimating the very connection between terrorism and security. (Giroux, 2016, p. 6)

The result is a tense entanglement, with terrorist and counterterrorist interests competing and intersecting in the struggle to control the frames and narratives that give meaning to events. For ISIS, this has been an existential battle, constituting its very identity and legitimacy and determining its ability to recruit and retain followers; for the United States, this struggle over narrative limits and organizes political attention and social relations (Giroux, 2016). These narratives also determine the range of policy options, given, as Chowdhury and Krebs (2010) noted, that "policy alternatives at odds with underlying discourses are not socially sustainable" (p. 127).

In this context, mass media are particularly significant as a "master forum" (Ferree, 2002, p. 10) in which the struggle to control meaning plays out among competing actors. Although the landscape has been complicated by the use of social media to either bypass media gatekeepers or force their attention, legacy news media retain a uniquely influential role in simultaneously reflecting and shaping public discourse:

Because of the mass media's limited carrying capacity, selection processes create an inevitable distortion of discursive fields. In this way, the mass media is not a democratic forum but a prism that communicates the contours of discursive fields to the public and the civil society organizations that inhabit it. (Bail, 2012, p. 860)

Here the concept of the discursive field offers a useful theoretical lens through which to contextualize media narratives in the “broader enveloping contexts in which discussions, decisions, and actions take place” (Snow, 2007, p. 402). As the “dynamic terrain where meaning contests occur” (Steinberg, 1999, p. 748), the discursive field shapes the wider contours of the narrative terrain in public discourse, delineating acceptable boundaries of inclusion or exclusion and establishing the grounds for mobilizing ideas, beliefs, and action. The concept has been frequently applied to the study of social movements (e.g., Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2008; Steinberg, 1999), but its emphasis on a collective construction—or shared refrain—in the diagnosis, categorization, and corresponding calls to action around a topic has particular relevance to discourses around terrorism. Consider Snow’s (2007) definition of discursive fields:

Such fields emerge or evolve in the course of discussion of and debate about contested issues and events, and encompass not only cultural materials (e.g., beliefs, values, ideologies, myths and narratives, primary frameworks) of potential relevance, but also various sets of actors whose interests are aligned, albeit differentially, with the contested issues or events, and who thus have a stake in what is done or not done about those issues and events. (p. 402)

Within the narrative battlegrounds of discursive fields, dominant discourses appear; in this, there are also parallels to indexing theory’s proposition that news content typically mirrors the bounds of discourse set by political elites (Bennett, 1990). Approaching news content through the lens of discursive fields also brings attention to master storylines that persist through the changing iterations and political manifestations of a topic. These metanarratives structure and legitimize knowledge and meaning through a master frame (Lyotard, 1984; Somers, 1995)—in the case of the war on terror, one built on sustained anxiety of a persistent lurking threat.

Method

To scope this research, we selected three dominant, traditionally elite U.S. newspapers—*The New York Times* (NYT), *The Washington Post* (WaPo), and *Los Angeles Times* (LAT)—from which to collect full-text articles. Research has shown intermedia agenda-setting effects between elite newspapers and television news (Lim, 2006; Reese & Danielian, 1989) and local newspapers (Protess & McCombs, 2016; M. Roberts & McCombs, 1994), and specifically between NYT and international news (Golan, 2006). With intermedia agenda setting in mind, these three newspapers represent elite media from both coasts and the center of government in the U.S. media landscape.

LexisNexis and ProQuest were used to gather articles. Searches spanned January 1 to December 31, 2017, and included the search terms “Islamic State,” “ISIS,” “ISIL,” and “Daesh” to account for the multiple names used for the organization. The search yielded 3,156 articles (NYT: $n = 1,424$; WaPo: $n = 1,210$; LAT: $n = 522$). Topic modeling was conducted on the corpus using MALLETT, an open-source textual analysis program developed by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (McCallum, 2002). MALLETT has been used in studies examining newspaper data (e.g., Nelson, 2010; Yang, Torget, & Mihalcea, 2011) and for disparate research

topics such as predicting depression and neuroticism among college students (Resnik, Garron, & Resnik, 2013) and identifying noisy optical character recognition (Walker, Lund, & Ringger, 2010).

Topic modeling uses algorithmic logic to detect recurring clusters of co-occurring words, providing insight into patterns of underlying topics within a corpus, effectively uncovering the “hidden” structure in a collection of texts (Maier et al., 2018). For large collections of text like the news articles analyzed here, topic modeling “enables us to organize and summarize electronic archives at a scale that would be impossible by human annotation” (Blei, 2012, p. 78). We do not further explore the technical aspects of topic modeling here, but refer interested readers to works such as Blei (2012), Blei, Ng, and Jordan (2003), Blei and Lafferty (2006), Reisenbichler and Reutterer (2019), and Maier and associates (2018) for more complete explanations. We acknowledge the benefits and challenges afforded by latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA), based on Bayesian statistics, which was used in this study and remains the most widely used algorithm in topic modeling. Top words excluded from analysis included articles, pronouns, and conjunctions from a standard list of common words provided in MALLET, as well as words reflecting the corpus sources, such as “Post,” “Angeles,” and “news.” The collection was examined using LDA, setting the number of topics, K , at 20, 15, 10, nine, eight, and seven for comparisons. Three researchers examined the output including the top words as well as visualizations from MALLET output using a publicly available Excel program (Hoover, 2018). Additionally, a sample of news articles with the highest proportion of each topic was examined by the researchers to determine the distinct interpretability of each topic, examine its underlying concepts, and assess semantic validity (Quinn, Monroe, Colaresi, Crespin, & Radev, 2010). Following this iterative process of assessing LDA output, we determined that the model with nine topics provided the most consistent qualitative interpretation of topics through an assessment of coherence and stability.

As Maier and colleagues (2018) note, the combination of an inductive approach with quantitative measurements makes topic modeling well-suited to exploratory and descriptive analyses, but concerns about reliability and validity remain. Indeed, as its popularity grows, topic modeling has been subject to potent critique, particularly of a “buckets of words” logic that does not account for the order of words and other critical contextual information (Meeks & Weingart, 2012, para. 1). Advocates of the method point to its ability to identify the discursive architecture of a large corpus of documents that would otherwise be unfeasible, but also caution that deep familiarity with and analysis of the corpus are of paramount importance for rich and meaningful results (Mohr & Bogdanov, 2013). Researchers have addressed concerns related to reliability and validity with a range of tools, including the development of novel statistical models (e.g., Chuang et al., 2015; Mimno, Wallach, Talley, Leenders, & McCallum, 2011). In this article, we recognize the exploratory advantages of topic modeling as an entry point rather than a stand-alone interpretive method. The words in the list produced by LDA were therefore used not as rich interpretative data in themselves, but as a preliminary framework to identify broad topics that structure the overall corpus. Exemplar articles from each topic cluster became the subjects for in-depth qualitative analysis. Using topic modeling to shape the selection of articles also addresses the concern that texts can be strategically selected to fit an argument (Baker et al., 2008; Stubbs, 1994, 1997). Baker and associates (2008) point to the power of corpus linguistics—of which LDA is a method—to assist in identifying representative texts for use in qualitative analysis. We employed an approach similar to that used by Törnberg and Törnberg (2016), who combined LDA topic modeling with critical discourse analysis to study Islamophobic and antifeminist discourse online. This analysis provides a useful synergy of “overview and structure, which are hard to extract with the *naked eye*, with sensitivity for linguistic nuances

and implicit and symbolic meanings, which may not be visible for the *automatic eye*" (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016, p. 417; emphasis in original).

For this analysis, topic modeling was combined with a close reading of the 10 top articles for each topic. Each article was read by three members of the research team, annotated, and discussed in relation to the topic modeling results and insights, with reference to relevant research. The dominant discourses among the top articles for each topic were assessed for commonalities that could provide insight into underlying narrative structures and tensions. To provide some context from the wider media landscape beyond the three newspaper sources, we also referred to broader media trends using the MediaCloud Topic Mapper, an open-source platform for analyzing media ecosystems developed by the MIT Media Lab and Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. The platform provides a searchable archive of stories from more than 50,000 media sources, along with built-in tools to analyze patterns in coverage (H. Roberts et al., 2021).

Topic Modeling Results

Regarding the broader landscape of media attention and coverage of ISIS, insight from MediaCloud shows a high overall presence of ISIS-related stories in mainstream media throughout 2017, with the group receiving daily mentions across multiple stories and sources. The episodic, event-driven nature of news coverage is also evident, with high-profile incidents such as terror attacks in Europe driving spikes in attention. Notably, both MediaCloud and our newspaper data set indicate an overall downward trend in media attention in the second half of the year, following the retaking of Mosul.

Through inductive examination, the nine LDA topics were examined as concepts that could be organized into higher order categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). We identified three topic clusters—topics that can be grouped according to shared thematic focus: (a) military-security, (b) national political, and (c) social-cultural. Two topics, both heavily oriented around controversies of the Trump presidential administration, clustered around U.S. domestic political affairs and highlighted the politicized nature of the issue. The third category, social-cultural, is not, strictly speaking, a cluster, consisting of just one of the nine topics, but it was sufficiently distinct to warrant identification and labeling. The top 10 words for each topic in the clusters are presented in Table 1 (military-security cluster), Table 2 (national political cluster), and Table 3 (social-cultural cluster). The Dirichlet parameter is roughly proportional to the overall portion of the collection assigned to a given topic.

Military-Security Cluster

The military-security cluster, not surprisingly, focused on various aspects of military and geopolitical conflict involving ISIS.

Table 1. LDA Topic Model of Military-Security Cluster.

Topic	Battle for Mosul	U.S. combat operations	Europe terror attacks	Regional political conflict	Syria conflict	Global reach
Dirichlet parameter	0.20	0.18	0.18	0.14	0.13	0.14
Top topical words	islamic state forces iraq iraqi city mosul militants fighters isis	military afghanistan u.s. forces american afghan troops officials taliban war	attack police people attacks killed islamic state terrorist london terrorism	iran saudi united arabia iraq state states israel qatar kurdish	syria syrian turkey russia united russian states war state government	state islamic rights government egypt group president christians islam human

Battle for Mosul

This topic was anchored around targeted attention on the battle to reclaim Mosul from ISIS by the U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi forces. It is one of the most cohesive topics in the corpus, with significant overlap in content among the top articles, which resonate with one another in nature and tone.

U.S. Combat Operations

This topic centered on U.S. military operations in the Middle East and Africa, with attention to high-profile and politically contentious incidents of military deaths. U.S. military strategy and progress against terrorist organizations was a key focus, and ISIS was routinely mentioned as the enemy of U.S. troops.

European Terror Attacks

This was another cohesive topic, with the top articles focusing on terrorist attacks carried out by sympathizers, members, or supporters of ISIS in the UK, Belgium, and Spain. Predictably, this topic peaked immediately following specific terror attacks, sharply declined, and then sharply increased again with each new attack.

Regional Political Conflict

This topic was heavily oriented toward foreign policy, with an emphasis on Middle East politics, history, and relationships with allies and opponents. Several top articles focus specifically on the Kurdish independence referendum in Iraq—a good example of regional politics affecting the U.S. fight against ISIS.

Syria Conflict

This topic was cohesive, with ample content crossover among articles. All top articles focused on the Russian-negotiated cease-fire in the Syrian civil war and the implications for the fight against ISIS.

Global Reach

This topic relates to the expansion of the ISIS network. Top articles depicted struggles between Muslims and Christians in different parts of the world, from the southern Philippines to Indonesia to Egypt.

U.S. National Political Cluster

Two topics in this cluster were heavily oriented around controversies of the Trump administration and U.S. domestic political affairs, highlighting the politicized nature of the issue.

Table 2. LDA Model of the U.S. National Political Cluster.

Topic	Trump and Russia controversies	U.S. immigration policy
Dirichlet parameter	0.32	0.21
Top topical words	trump president house administration white obama states trump's united policy	united states state law order security ban court rights government

Trump and Russia Controversies

Articles in this topic centered on critiques and controversies related to President Trump's relationship with Russia. The biggest peak in coverage for this topic—indeed, of all topics in the data set—occurred when it was reported that President Trump shared classified intelligence concerning ISIS with Russia.

U.S. Immigration Policy

This topic centered on contexts in which ISIS has been cited as justification for U.S. immigration policy. Two primary issues anchor the topic: President Trump's executive order travel ban aimed at Muslim-majority countries, and U.S. citizens being detained based on suspicions of having terrorist ties.

Social-Cultural Cluster

The third category, social-cultural, consists of just one topic, but was sufficiently distinct to warrant identification and labeling. This was one of the most diverse and least cohesive topics, with top articles relating to culture (with stories about food, music, and art) and referencing ISIS in broad terms—often touching on the terrorist organization only in passing.¹ Without specific anchoring events, the topic coasted at a relatively low level throughout the year, with few distinct peaks and lulls.

Table 3. LDA Model of the Social-Cultural Cluster.

Topic	Social-Cultural
Dirichlet parameter	0.31
Top topical words	people years time world country back war family life good

Discussion

The LDA results expose the basic building blocks of narrative structure around ISIS. The topic clusters reveal the underlying architecture of the discursive field, marking the categories and contours of discourse about and against ISIS. Each cluster gestures to a branching storyline as the media production and dissemination teams built on latent structures to interpret events and impose order and meaning on ISIS. Taking the discursive field perspective, we consider who has a stake in these structures and how they define issues and crises, and delineate possible avenues of action in response. More specifically, because discursive fields establish the bounds by which victory—or failure—is measured, we examine how these constructions defined success and its stakes.

We begin with an assessment of who was driving the narrative—who, in effect, had power in establishing how ISIS was defined, interpreted, and confronted? Results affirm that much ISIS coverage was reactive and event-driven, reporting and responding to official government policy, statements, and military actions. Militaristic and security-oriented topics were prominent. Likewise, analysis in MediaCloud indicated that the most frequently cited in ISIS-related content were high-level military and political actors

¹ The possibility of the socio-cultural cluster including boilerplate content unrelated to the substantive content (Maier et al., 2018) was considered, but was determined not to be the case based on the document-cleaning process and qualitative assessment of sample articles.

and institutions, such as NATO, the Pentagon, Donald Trump, Bashar al-Assad, and Vladimir Putin. In this military-security storyline, success was defined primarily in material terms: territory, casualties, weapons, and attacks. Events deemed newsworthy and significant were likewise indicators of success or failure—for instance, in coverage of a drone strike that killed an ISIS leader:

[Abu] Sayed's death marks another setback for the terrorist group in Afghanistan. U.S. and Afghan forces have been pummeling Islamic State positions in eastern Afghanistan for months in an effort to dislodge the militants from the craggy peaks and remote valleys of Nangahar and Kunar provinces. In April, a team of 50 U.S. Army Rangers and 40 Afghan commandos assaulted a hamlet in Achin, a district of Nangahar province, killing Abdul Hasib, Sayed's predecessor as commander of ISIS in Afghanistan, and roughly 30 other militants. Eight months before Hasib was killed, Hafiz Saeed Khan, the Islamic State's leader in Afghanistan prior to Hasib, was killed in a U.S. drone strike. (Gibbons-Neff, 2017, para. 3)

In another storyline, the battle for Mosul served as a climax:

The jihadis have steadily lost ground over the eight months of the Mosul offensive. They are now contained in one square mile of what was once Islamic State's Iraqi capital, which the group took in a blitz offensive more than three years ago. The group's defeat in Mosul is more than symbolic. Not only would it have lost all of its major urban centers in Iraq, but the loss also would signify the beginning of the end of its crumbling "caliphate." (Bulos, 2017, paras. 3–4)

The Islamic State's capture of the northern Iraqi city in June 2014 capped the group's efforts to seize control of large swaths of territory it would come to describe as its caliphate. Three years on, the loss of the city would represent a near-fatal blow to its territorial pretensions. (Loveluck & Salim, 2017, para. 5)

Indeed, this was the storyline that the Trump administration would go on to promote, with declarations of total victory and the decimation of the Islamic State. Declining media attention in the second half of the year following major military and territorial losses by ISIS would seem to communicate this version of success as defined in primarily militaristic terms. Concurrently, however, there is evidence of media pushing back against a narrow instrumentalist lens; almost all top articles reviewed paid conscious attention to civilian deaths and destruction, noting, for instance, that "the streets are littered with the bodies of slain militants as well as civilians" (George, 2017, para. 14), and "it is the civilians trapped inside who are expected to bear the brunt of the hostilities" (Bulos, 2017, para. 14).

Moving from the military-security discourse to the domestic political cluster reveals further challenges to such narratives or metrics of success. Rather than focusing outwardly on ISIS as an external threat, these topics were trained inwardly on domestic political processes. Closer analysis of top articles in these topics indicates that they were anchored around fraught topics of politicized anxiety, especially controversies around President Trump's leadership and policies. Sharp points of anxiety related to President

Trump sharing classified counterintelligence data related to ISIS with Russia and his travel ban targeting Muslim-majority countries.

Significantly, the Trump administration, and not the immediate security threat of ISIS, was the primary subject of anxiety in this cluster. The following excerpt, for instance, appeared late in a LAT article headlined, "Comey Memo Says Trump Asked Him to Drop FBI Investigation of Michael Flynn":

Trump himself, in brief public comments during a joint appearance with Erdogan at the White House, suggested that his "very, very successful meeting" with the Russians had been intended to enlist their help in battling Islamic State in Syria. "Our fight is against ISIS," he said. . . . To date, however, Russia's military efforts in Syria have been in support of the government of President Bashar Assad and against Syrian rebels fighting it, not in alliance with the U.S.-backed campaign against Islamic State. (Bierman & Tanfani, 2017, paras. 29–30)

The elusiveness of the war on terror, continuing long after President George W. Bush's infamously premature declaration of "mission accomplished" in 2003, has entrenched consciousness of terror as an expedient cover for ulterior political motives alongside fears of terrorist violence itself. Concerns about government overreach, infringements on privacy and civil liberties, and self-inflicted wounds on American society under the banner of counterterrorism have long been a feature of public discourse about terrorism. Here, this kind of internalized anxiety was attached to specific domestic political figures and events, complicating the military-security storyline of battlefield victory abroad with critique and anxiety at home. Indeed, in many articles in this cluster, ISIS was mentioned only briefly—an uneasy backdrop for wider political anxiety and mistrust.

Likewise, a more diffuse, generalized anxiety was in evidence in the social-cultural topic. Unlike other topics, no single event, theme, or voice anchored attention; rather, it was a loosely connected web of stories with ISIS as an undercurrent that occasionally surfaced and was continually processed in all matter of social-cultural life, from film and music festivals to sporting events. Indeed, this is perhaps the most striking evidence of how widely and deeply ISIS has become embedded in American social consciousness; it appears as a persistent undercurrent and cultural referent well beyond the conventional bounds of security-related terrorism coverage.

In a 2016 analysis of Islamic State media, Zelizer (2016) observed, "Islamic State mimics the cues by which the global flow of news, largely led by U.S. media, tends to unfold," suggesting that "the minds behind Islamic State's media apparatus are not as far from the longstanding platforms of the U.S. media landscape as assumed" (p. 6080). Now in the context of the group's decline, we still find evidence of a persistent mutuality: Embedded echoes and reflections of ISIS's own propaganda narratives are notably evident in the discursive field. The narratives converge; they become mutually reinforcing while ostensibly positioned as opposites. The U.S. "counter" narrative actually bolsters—and to a significant extent relies on—the ISIS narrative, and vice versa. The respective valence and interpretation of events were in fundamental opposition, but in terms of defining the bounds of the discursive fields, the alignment is striking: Military-oriented U.S. narratives of victory reinforced ISIS's own narrative of victimhood and war, as did

political controversies, like President Trump's travel ban, that reflected broader religious and cultural hostilities. Simultaneously, the diffuse, generalized anxiety and persistence of ISIS across contexts aligned with a narrative of ISIS's ideological power surpassing its territorial strength.

As Snow (2007) observed, "The stream of events that flows or cuts through any particular discursive field can quickly affect its shape and relationships among the relevant set of actors" (p. 402). ISIS can reassert itself in the narrative by manufacturing events such as the dramatic attacks in Egypt; Manchester, England; and Indonesia, which are covered in U.S. media. Even if such attacks are more sporadic, a territorially weakened ISIS may not be matched with a corresponding drop in media attention, but might instead produce a slow decay curve that continues to spike around events—suggesting that the group's brand, strategic communication skills, and narratives retain symbolic power and resonate beyond its current material limitations. And for those in Europe and Africa, the news is rife with accounts of terrorist attacks by ISIS affiliates and surrogates (e.g., Boko Haram, Al Shabab, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara), which have not slowed their bombing or stopped kidnapping children and are still releasing beheading videos to help destabilize governments in West and Central Africa (Warner, O'Farrell, Nsaibai, & Cummings, 2020).

ISIS has also demonstrated a capacity to stretch and evolve its storyline of victory into a virtual caliphate of the mind or heart that is no longer premised on a territorially grounded proto-state (Bloom & Daymon, 2018; Winter, 2015). The caliphate imaginary has proved highly adaptable in the mediated discursive space, trading military limitations for the power of rebellion against the infidels, drawing on the resources carried by historical characters and narratives. This is supported by a recent study that found that a majority of ISIS supporters interviewed following the loss of territory had not lost faith in ISIS—they felt that the social and spiritual benefits were consistent with their values, including *jihad*, and worth the costs (Massé, 2020).

Although ISIS has created discursive space for a dynamic definition of success, our findings indicate that even given the complicated circumstances of terrorism, U.S. media definitions of victory maintained a persistent throughline: eradication. And because "discursive fields are limits, as well as tools . . . which grant success or failure to mundane meaning-making" (Spillman, 1995, pp. 140–141), this fundamental asymmetry combines with American susceptibility to securitized anxiety to perpetuate a persistent, low-level anxiety that sustains the market for ISIS counternarratives and responses. In the face of ISIS's substantive decline, this would-be culminating moment of "victory" against the terrorist organization that had long represented the great evil in the war on terror instead produced an overarching story of perpetual, simmering threat.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although topic modeling provides significant advantages in analyzing the underlying structure of a corpus of texts, like any methodology, its limitations merit consideration. We addressed many shortcomings of topic modeling outputs by incorporating close qualitative analysis of representative articles to add granularity and nuance to the interpretation of topics. An iterative process of discussion and refinement among the authors was used to reach agreement in the definition and analysis of topics. We also compared

our LDA results and interpretations to MediaCloud data to confirm coherence with broader trends in the media landscape beyond three elite English-language newspapers. However, they cannot fully “stand in” for a hybrid media system with varied sources and platforms, including social media, which together act as an assemblage of actors, systems, discursive fields, and technologies instantiating public narratives and meaning (Chadwick, 2013; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Thus, future research should analyze how bottom-up discourses on social media reinforce, resist, and, at times, transform mainstream media narratives. Finally, given that our analysis focused on 2017 coverage as a key moment of transition, it would be instructive to examine the continued reconstruction/disruption of discursive fields of terrorism following 2017. Challenges to the Trump administration’s victory narrative, for instance, increasingly emerged from the military and government allies in subsequent years, including a Pentagon report in 2019 that warned of an ISIS resurgence in Syria (Browne, 2019) and a bipartisan critique of President Trump’s sudden withdrawal of support from Kurdish allies against ISIS (Hubbard, Savage, Schmitt, & Kingsley, 2019).

Conclusion

For years, ISIS’s territorial ambitions and caliphate narrative distinguished it from other terrorist organizations as it dominated the Western public imaginary with spectacular acts of violence. The ISIS threat, in turn, was a key anchor point for U.S. and allied activities, providing coherence and justification for the terrorism counternarrative and actions. The defeat of ISIS in Mosul marked a turning point in the military struggle, and media attention began to shift as other conflicts came calling. What is notable is that even after the substantive turning point at Mosul, the narratives of this transition remained rooted in the same discursive ground, reifying ISIS as an archetypal enemy in the U.S. fight against terrorism. The intersecting cultural and political narratives that generate this finding are complex: colonial hegemony and racist attitudes, a journalistic tendency to polarize, terrorist experts perpetuating terrorism, and the continual transformations of terrorist groups in the Levant (recall that ISIS emerged from Al Qaeda). And ISIS has a steady supply of supporters, given the unchanged material conditions of war, poverty, limited educational opportunities, and a persistent lack of jobs. Even following its territorial decline, ISIS looms large in these systems of meaning, engaged in a seemingly perpetual transformation, poised for an ever-unsettled battle.

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