Pro-Islamic State Twitter Users in a Post-Suspension Era

Colby Grace
CUNY Hunter College

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds

Part of the Linguistic Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
Grace, Colby, "Pro-Islamic State Twitter Users in a Post-Suspension Era" (2016). CUNY Academic Works.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/110
Pro-Islamic State Twitter Users in a Post-Suspension Era

by

Colby Grace

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Anthropology, Hunter College The City University of New York

December 21st 2016

Thesis Sponsor:

December 21, 2016  Dr. Christina Zarcadoolas
Date  Signature

December 21, 2016  Dr. Jessie Daniels
Date  Signature of Second Reader
# Table of Contents

**Figure List:** ......................................................................................................................... 3

**Preface** ................................................................................................................................... 4

**Abstract** ................................................................................................................................. 5

**Background- Online Extremists and the Islamic State** .............................................................. 6
  - Twitter’s Counter-Extremists Efforts: ................................................................................... 8
  - The Islamic State on Twitter: .................................................................................................. 9

**Methods** ............................................................................................................................... 12
  - Regarding scholarly observation and participation on Twitter: ........................................ 12
  - Field Research Parameters: ................................................................................................. 12
  - Volume of observed Data: .................................................................................................... 14
  - Account Classification within Community Objectives: ...................................................... 15
    - Anchors ............................................................................................................................ 16
    - Producers .......................................................................................................................... 18
    - Multipliers .......................................................................................................................... 20
    - Consumers .......................................................................................................................... 22
  - Speech Acts: .......................................................................................................................... 22
    - Issue-Attention Cycle: ...................................................................................................... 23

**Findings** ............................................................................................................................... 23
  - Changing Values: Pre-Suspension v. Post-Suspension ......................................................... 23
  - Tweet content: Likelihood of getting Flagged for suspension ........................................... 24
  - Tweets as Speech Acts: ......................................................................................................... 26
    - Invitation ............................................................................................................................ 26
    - Provocation ........................................................................................................................ 27
    - Threat .................................................................................................................................. 28
    - Issue attention Cycle: ...................................................................................................... 30

**Discussion/Implications:** ...................................................................................................... 33

**Works Cited** ......................................................................................................................... 36
Figure List:

FIGURE 1: VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF NETWORK STRUCTURE AS DESCRIBED BY VIDINO AND HUGHES, 2014 10

FIGURE 2: LEFT- NETWORK MODEL AS DESCRIBED BY VIDINO AND HUGHES, 2014. RIGHT- NETWORK MODEL BASED ON MY FINDINGS 16

FIGURE 3: SCREEN SHOT OF TYPICAL ANCHOR ACCOUNT ACTIVITY 17

FIGURE 4: SCREEN SHOT OF PRODUCER ACCOUNT SHOWING TWEET OF SUSPENSION NOTIFICATION 19

FIGURE 5: SCREEN SHOT OF TWEETS TYPICAL OF PRODUCER ACCOUNT 20

FIGURE 6: SCREEN SHOTS OF TYPICAL MULTIPLIER ACCOUNT WITH RETWEET ACTIVITY 21

FIGURE 8: TWEET CONTENT GROUPED BY COMMUNITY OBJECTIVES 25

FIGURE 9: SCREEN SHOTS OF INVITATION SPEECH ACTS 27

FIGURE 10: SCREEN SHOTS OF PROVOCATION SPEECH ACTS 28

FIGURE 11: SCREEN SHOT SHOWING TEXT-ONLY TWEETS AS THREAT SPEECH ACTS 29

FIGURE 12: SCREEN SHOTS OF THREAT SPEECH ACTS. ALL IN THE WAKE OF THE 7.14.16 NICE, FRANCE ATTACKS 29


FIGURE 14: DOWNS, 1972 ISSUE ATTENTION CYCLE MODEL 31

FIGURE 15: MODIFIED DOWN’S IAC TO ILLUSTRATE SPEECH ACT PROGRESSION AND INTERRUPTION DUE TO ACCOUNT SUSPENSIONS 32

FIGURE 16: MODIFIED DOWN’S IAC TO ILLUSTRATE CYCLE OF ACCOUNT SUSPENSION AND REENTRY VIA ANCHOR 33
Preface

My personal interest in terrorism studies began just prior to my enlistment in the Army National Guard. Over the course of my six years as an Infantryman, my understanding of the combatant perspective grew. I absorbed anything and everything related to terrorist organizational structure, ideology, and tactics. However, it wasn’t until I took a position as a Forensic Anthropologist at the NYC Office of Chief Medical Examiner that I gained a far more intimate and profound perspective on just how damaging an act of terror can be. For a little more than a year I held the title of World Trade Center Anthropologist. I worked towards the continued identification of remains of victims from the September 11th, 2001 World Trade Center attacks. I dedicated myself to bringing closure to the families of the victims and found a profound sense of purpose in the rare moments I was able to do so. Having to confront this immense loss of life on a daily basis, I would often wonder at the growing support for groups like Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab and the Islamic State being vocalized across social media. And so, I shifted my focus from the militant extremists to the keyboard warriors that have become a vocal minority on the Internet. Quite quickly, I found myself studying the unprecedented success of the Islamic State’s propaganda machine and just how far their reach extends into the western household.
Abstract

The Islamic State has the most effective propaganda campaign of any terror organization to date. This success is directly related to their younger generations of membership [5,2] who grew up communicating on websites like MySpace, Facebook, Youtube, Twitter and interfacing within countless other gaming and content sharing applications. It is this influx of 20-somethings that are ultimately responsible for making “ISIS” (hereafter referred to as IS) a household name. The terror group has, at various times, had a substantial presence on many popular social media platforms. No website has garnered more attention for its perversion by IS than Twitter. Over the past few years, there has been an increasing amount of pressure placed on private companies to curtail the pro-IS users and their extremist content. Most companies have updated their user codes of conduct and reporting procedures. In mid-2014 Twitter began a campaign to crackdown on users that were spreading extremist content [3]. So far, these waves of account suspensions have, on the whole, been largely ineffective [5]. The following study aims to understand, from the perspective of an Internet Ethnographer, why it is that’s Twitters efforts to silence these users has been largely unsuccessful, and if possible, how could Twitter’s success in this endeavor be improved. To do so, I first look at the network structure and community objectives of pro-IS Twitter users. Thereafter I frame their tweets as Speech Acts [14] and track those Acts along Down’s Issue-Attention Cycle [6]. My research demonstrates that if Twitter should want to more effectively disband the pro-IS presence, they’ll have to direct their suspensions towards the glue that binds them together within the pro-IS community and not just the accounts that make the most “noise.”
Background- Online Extremists and the Islamic State

As more and more people gain access to the Internet and access to each other via social media, connecting with like-minded users has never been easier [13,17,18]. A 2009 study by Stevens and Neumann coined the term “echo chamber” when referring to the use of Internet communication by extremist groups [15].

“...It provides a comparatively risk free way for potential recruits to find like-minded individuals and network amongst them, enabling them to reach beyond an isolated core group of conspirators… It creates a new social environment in which otherwise unacceptable views and behavior are normalized. Surrounded by other radicals, the internet becomes a virtual echo chamber in which the most extreme ideas and suggestions receive the most encouragement and support.” [15]

Echo Chambers create a virtual mob-mentality that allows extreme viewpoints to grow. Prior to web-based publishing, the spread of propaganda was limited to the financial and geographical constraints that come with the printing and distributing physical, print copies and what they could push through the regulations of mainstream radio and television. With the advent of Internet forums and chat rooms, these groups were able to reach a far larger audience with less censoring. Up until the early 2000’s, extremist echo chambers were mostly limited to dedicated Internet chat rooms and forums [4,13,17]. The extremist groups’ access to potential recruits and their groups’ visibility exploded with the emergence of social media sites like Myspace, Facebook, and Youtube. Prior to this point recruitment efforts limited to individuals that actively sought out these dedicated websites.

Now, due to the increased visibility that comes with social media, potential recruits are continually exposed to extreme ideologies without seeking to initiate contact. Previously, an individual that was susceptible to radicalization required motivation and conviction to seek out
like-minded peers. While many extremist groups have effectively used social media to recruit and connect membership, none have attracted more attention for doing so than the Islamic State.

In 2003 IS rose out of Al-Qaeda-in-Iraq and emerged as a more violent and indiscriminate terror organization. IS executed a string of successful military campaigns that brought them into neighboring Libya and Syria. IS’s push through the region was unwaveringly brutal [7]. Much of the Islamic State’s senior leadership was initially recruited from the ousted Saddam Husain government and military. Many of whom were removed from their posts in the immediate aftermath of Iraq’s regime change. This enabled a high degree of tactical capability, which was quickly matched by acquisitions of modern military equipment seized by IS forces [8]. Even at their peak of land occupation, IS’s greatest strength has always been their ability to attract new membership. In 2006, IS declared the area under their control to be the Caliphate, a religious declaration, asserting absolute power and authority. This declaration provided religious significance to their cause, and thus offered more appeal than just the promise of a land holding [1,5,9].

From the onset, IS has worked hard to promote a counter narrative to that which is reported by the mainstream media. Through the use of propaganda, their counter-narrative paints a picture of the Caliphate as a Heaven on Earth. There are two main goals for the counter narrative. The first being to either entice potential recruits to relocate to the Caliphate or take it upon themselves to carry out lone-wolf attacks. IS has had a great deal of success in the recruitment of foreign fighters due to the organizations investment in their propaganda department. The second goal of the counter narrative is to discredit mainstream reports of their failures or ineptitude. By carefully choosing information, images, and videos to share, IS provides the idea that the IS agenda is a righteous one and that the rest of the world endeavors to
portray them as the bad guys. This suggestion of conspiracy can be a compelling motivator to those susceptible to radicalization [1,5,16]. IS’s propaganda department has produced a staggering amount of content, with production ranging from blockbuster quality to the raw, unedited and often-unforgiving reality of cell phone footage. While much of the official IS sanctioned propaganda begins its distribution with established media outlets sympathetic to their cause, it isn’t until the content is picked up and shared by social media users that the visibility of said content increases at an alarmingly exponential rate [15,21].

**Twitter’s Counter-Extremists Efforts**

Twitter has always strived to provide a balance to allow freedom of speech while also fostering a space free of hate and intimidation. Since Twitter was released in 2006, they have been continually refining their tactics to remove extreme and violent content from their platform. Twitter’s code of conduct has several rules and two that consistently apply to the accounts in question for this study [10].

Twitter Rules:

- **Violent threats (direct or indirect):** You may not make threats of violence or promote violence, including threatening or promoting terrorism.

- **Hateful conduct:** You may not promote violence against or directly attack or threaten other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or disease. We also do not allow accounts whose primary purpose is inciting harm towards others on the basis of these categories [10].
In 2013 twitter added a feature where users could report harassment. The alerting system enabled users to report abusive content for review [10]. This action is known as “Flagging.” Once a tweet has been flagged, Twitter will review and suspend an account if the user is deemed to have been in violation of their rules. This is the current method in controlling IS on Twitter because with each account deletion, the user must start from scratch with a new account.

The past couple of years have seen crackdown after crackdown by social media companies to curtail the use of their platforms for the spread of extremist content. Many have updated their reporting procedures to allow users to FLAG content as being specifically extremists, and thus marking it as a higher priority for removal. Twitter has directed considerable resources at accessing and removing accounts flagged as in violation of the above mentioned rules as well as seeking such account on their own. Twitter did report to have suspended some 125,000 accounts within the year 2015 that were engaged in terrorism related content [11]. This claim though has not been publicly substantiated evidence of the offending accounts. So, without an open accounting of just how many of those were duplicate accounts and/or wrongfully targeted, an accurate assessment of their efforts remains beyond our grasp. Despite Twitter’s self-reported success, the pro-IS presence on their platform persists.

**The Islamic State on Twitter**

Lee Berger, working with the Brookings Institute, has shown the effects of Twitter’s own crackdown on extremist content on the pro-IS community. While the overall number of sympathetic accounts included in their study was 20,000, the core membership, comprised of dedicated users, is likely between 2,000 to 5,000 [3]. Berger and colleagues have shown the diminishing returns that Twitter’s waves of account suspensions have had on community
membership are measurable. The core group of supporters remains as vocal as ever, if only more insular. So, on the whole, the suspension campaign has been largely inconsequential.

A study out of The George Washington University’s Center on Extremism titled “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa” looked specifically at American pro-IS twitter users [20]. Their study focused on the connection between Twitter, radicalization, and attempts to act on behalf of IS. Their depiction of the network structure is based on the flow of content depicted in Fig. 1.

![Visual representation of network structure](image)

**Figure 1: Visual representation of network structure as described by Vidino and Hughes, 2015 [20]**

As such, the accounts that created content new to Twitter were labeled as “Nodes” and placed at the center. The accounts that predominately just retweeted from the Nodes are labeled as “Amplifiers” and situated as propagating outward from the nodes. Lastly, the accounts that did
not tweet extremist content, but rather, announce the return of suspended users were labeled as “Shoutouts.” Vidino and Hughes point out that Shoutout accounts have assumed a crucial role in maintenance of the pro-IS Twitter community.

“…Although they tweet little substantial content, shout-out accounts tend to have the largest followings in the Twitter landscape and therefore play a pivotal role in the resilience of the ISIS’s Twitter community. While American ISIS accounts are suspended with some frequency, these suspensions have become a badge of honor and a means by which an aspirant can bolster his or her legitimacy.” [20]

By the Shoutouts reconnecting a large number of followers to a user returning from suspension, the damaging effects of suspension are quickly negated. Suspensions have now become an integral part of the community [20]. Since the most extreme accounts get suspended the fastest, the number of suspensions a person accumulates now reflects the persons credibility and commitment within the IS community. One such boastful return from suspension can be seen in Fig. 2 where the Twitter account’s current username is denoted as being the 12th iteration. The same user’s previous account was denoted as being the 11th iteration, as can be seen in the screenshot tweeted by the returning user as proof of his return from suspension, also within Fig. 2. It is the action of adopting the suspensions into the community value system that becomes a defining characteristic of this study

I consider this critical shift in this IS community’s response to Twitter’s censorship serves as a demarcation between the “Pre-Suspension Era” and the “Post-Suspension Era.” The “Post-Suspension Era” refers to early 2015 to the present and is characterized by a shift in community values that will be described in the Findings section of this study. The time preceding and during Twitter’s initial waves of suspensions, which started mid 2014, can be considered the “Pre-Suspension Era.” It is during this time that, based upon initial research into the groups’
presence on Twitter, the pro-IS network structure was based on content propagation [3,20]. See Fig. 1

Twitter’s current method of curtailing the pro-IS presence on their platform is a hold over from the Pre-Suspension Era and thus ineffective in the Post-Suspension Era, where community structure and objectives have shifted away from prioritizing content propagation. What follows is my assessment of the major shifts within pro-IS community and what implications they have for those that wish to combat the extremists’ continued presence on Twitter’s platform.

Methods

Regarding scholarly observation and participation on Twitter

The advantage afforded to the Internet Ethnographer, is that the impact of the ethnographer’s presence can be regulated depending upon their research goals. The format of archived interactions that is the hallmark of most major social media platforms is ideal for nonintrusive observation. While one does need to create a Twitter account to gain access to others’ Twitter feeds and follower/following lists, this can be done anonymously. Furthermore, by not interacting directly with any of the observed accounts, all observations and archiving of activities occurred outside of the realm of observer-participation [13, 18].

Field Research Parameters

My research was conducted over a 3-month period in which I monitored a sub group of pro-IS Twitter users within the larger community. The Twitter accounts in question were selected using the following criteria.
The first step in my research required that I locate accounts tweeting about the Islamic State.

The keywords I used to search for the initial accounts were:

- Al amriki – used to identify an individual as being of American origin
- Sawla – Arabic word for “state.” Used as shorthand for the Islamic State
- Shami – Arabic word for “Syrian”
- Muhajir- Arabic word for “immigrant.” Used to refer to foreign fighters
- Umm – Arabic word for “mother”
- Bint – Arabic word for “daughter”
- Abu – Arabic word for “father”
- “IS” – Acronym for Islamic State

Previous researchers have made note of keywords reoccurring in tweets of Twitter users sympathetic to IS’s agenda [2,3,20]. The majority of accounts that I observed using these keywords were non-Arabic speakers. The act of incorporating these Arabic keywords into predominately English tweets likely served as a mechanism by which the users self-identified with their desired community [17]. Simply put, the use of the seemingly out of place keywords is meant to be noticed. I took advantage of this action and used it to initiate my search for Twitter users sympathetic to the IS cause.

The distinction, as outlined by Berger [3], then had to be made between accounts that were either:

1. Engaged in support of ISIS activity:
   i. Only puts out tweets aligned with ISIS directives.
   ii. Account must also have at least one follower showing active support of IS.
2. Anti-ISIS:
   i. This does not mean anti-extremist. Account may belong to a supporter of a rival Islamic extremist group.
3. Neutral:
   i. This includes media outlets that are reporting on content beyond the scope of ISIS activity and do not explicitly endorse the Islamic State.
4. Account run by Twitter Bot:
   i. These accounts are programmed to put out a high volume of content much faster than can be done manually.
   ii. Twitter Bots can be used to output all tweets for an account or to supplement an account run by an actual user. They are recognizable by the rapid tweeting of duplicate content.

In order for a Twitter account to be considered part of the pro-ISIS Twitter community, it had to participate in at least one of the two community objectives.

1. The creation and/or spread of propaganda:
   i. Propaganda being text, images, video, or link to website that explicitly supports themes adherent with the Islamic State’s known addenda.

2. The maintenance of community membership:
   i. Providing a known access point for reentry to community network for users returning from suspension or announcing the return of a fellow community member.

Any accounts observed to break from these objectives by tweeting content in opposition to or unrelated to the extremist ideology were not included as active participants in the community.

**Volume of Observed Data:**

Once a Twitter account was determined to be of sufficient merit for inclusion in my study, I set about logging said account’s activity. On a daily basis, I would check in on each of these accounts to make note of any new activity from the day prior. This includes tweeting activity such as original tweets, retweets, and any comments that were associated with them. The fluctuation between the accounts’ “follower” and “following” lists were recorded. The last two observations were of particular interest whenever an account was found to have been suspended and subsequently have to rebuild their community connections.

The frequency with which each account was active on the web platform varied greatly. Some would be consistently tweeting, retweeting, commenting on tweets, and/or making new
“following” connections 24/7. Others though, would only be active during certain hours of the day or only a few days a week. During the 3 months span in which I recorded the account activity of pro-IS Twitter community members, I logged consistent data over that span for 12 accounts, culminating in approximately 8,000 tweets in all. It is on these 12 accounts that I based my findings. In addition, I logged the activity of another 20 accounts that did not maintain a regular presence within the 3-month span. This secondary set of data served only to reinforce the themes that I was seeing in my primary data set.

**Account Classification within Community Objectives:**

Community members that can be considered active participants were placed within three distinct categories. These are “Anchors,” “Producers” and “Multipliers.” The titles I’ve assigned are based on those given by Vidino and Hughes [20] study with *one key distinction*. During the Pre-suspension Era (prior to mid-2014) content propagation was the top community goal. I argue that in the now Post-Suspension Era, content propagation has taken a back seat to membership maintenance. As such, I’ve reordered the Network structure to reflect this change and reassigned the titles of these agents to better fit the Post-Suspension Era. The difference can be seen in Fig.2 where the colors correspond to the same types of accounts but the names and order differ to illustrate the structure of the network.
These new agent titles and characteristics are as follows:

**Anchors**

In order to quickly regain access to the content that joining the community brings, a returning user will seek out a known constant. I call that constant an **Anchor** and its utility is in its ability to avoid suspension. Anchors do not tweet content that is in violation of Twitter’s Code of Conduct. Predominantly, the content that is being tweeted by Anchors is religious in nature. An example of this type of content can be seen in the top left screenshot of Fig. 3, where the banner image of the profile page is an excerpt from religious text. Tweets will contain images with a quotation taken from a religious text, or a meme that extols the virtue of adhering to a righteous path, but none of the tweets go so far as to overtly support the Islamic State. If the majority of their tweets were taken as a representation of the whole, Anchors would not appear to be more than a source of theological inspiration. However, this is not actually the case. An Anchor will announce the return of a suspended user by “tagging” the newly created account.
The account’s username is preceded by the “@” symbol, which acts as a hyperlink to the account. The “tag” is typically accompanied by the request for other community members to “Support” or “Follow” the returned account. This action of announcing returned accounts is known as a “Shoutout.” All of this can be seen in Fig. 3 below.

Figure 3: Screen shot of typical Anchor account activity

When a community member has their account suspended and creates a new one, they will seek out an Anchor account for two reasons. The first reason being to receive a public acknowledgement, and thus announcement, of their return via a shoutout. The second is to access their “Follower” list. The true resource of an Anchor account is in its “follower” list. Returning
accounts will elect to follow an Anchor and in doing so make themselves visible to others via the Anchors follower list. This list does not require the Anchor account’s approval to be added to it. This is significant because it means that the list is a fluid reflection of community membership. As members’ accounts are suspended, their profiles are removed from the list automatically. Once they’ve returned and elected to follow the Anchor account, they are back on the list and immediately visible to anyone looking to see who the Anchor account’s followers are. This is an ideal and expedient method for locating like-minded individuals. Often, the Anchor will reciprocate and elect to follow that account back, thus strengthening their connection.

**Producers**

While the anchors connect users to each other, it is the Producers that generate the majority of text, images, videos, and hyperlinks. Producers tweet content in support of the IS agenda. Many of these tweets are images or videos sourced directly from IS’s official propaganda department. Others are amateur video or images taken by ground forces within the ranks of IS.

The screenshots included in Figures 4 and 5 show the typical activities after a Producer account was reestablished following a suspension. Common practice is for the returning user to use the same username with the number of suspended accounts at the end. In this case, “TheSandMan011” was suspended and returned with as “TheSandMan012.” More often than not, the first tweet from a returning account will be a screenshot of their prior suspension notification. This can be seen below. All of these were tweeted within minutes of the account being reestablished.
Figure 4: Screen shot of Producer account showing Tweet of suspension notification
Once content is created and tweeted by a Producer, the content is most often spread via retweet. These accounts do not tweet out content of their own creation. Rather, they “retweet” content from other users. Accounts that primarily only retweet the content produced by another are labeled as “Multipliers.” As the name suggests, these accounts are responsible for the exponential spread of content throughout the community. Multipliers are spread throughout the community. The frequency with which Multipliers retweet varies greatly. Some accounts were active daily, retweeting at regular intervals throughout. Others were only active during specific hours each day and others still were only active every few days. However, when active on the website, multipliers would almost always release numerous retweets at a time, sharing the content that appeals to them the most while browsing that shared by others.
Figure 6 shows a typical Multiplier account and two of its retweets that were shared back to back. While the images appear to be very similar, the messages being conveyed are actually quite contrasting in terms of their intent. The image on the left was retweeted with the intent to
inspire confidence and fear in the ability of IS to carry out devastating attacks. It is a display of their power. The image on the right was retweeted with the intent to instill doubt in the righteousness of the Western Coalition’s cause. This interplay of context and intent will be explored at a later point when discussing tweets as speech acts (see fig. 6).

Consumers

There exists a fourth type of account, Consumers. While consumers are a clear presence in the community, they are, by their very nature, a passive one. A consumer does not tweet or retweet pro-ISIS content, but does maintain connects to others that do. It should be noted that their presence does, however slightly lend itself to community maintenance by being a “link.” For the purpose of this study, I do not include Consumers as active participants. This is because they cannot be confidently identified as sympathizing with ISIS. Many owners of Consumer accounts claim to be scholars or unbiased observers just looking for “news.” This places Consumers at the periphery of the network, rendering them non-essential towards the community objectives.

Speech Acts:

A tweet, at its most basic form, is collection of 140 characters. A speech act though, needn’t be more than a word or, given sufficient context, even an image or video clip qualifies as a speech act. Knowing this, the possibilities for potential speech acts are innumerable. For the sake of discussing the circulation of tweet content for this study, I’ve grouped tweets into three types of speech acts: Invitation, Provocation and Threat. The defining characteristics by which I was able to judge a tweet’s content for placement within a speech act category is explored at length in the Findings section of this paper. That said, the foundation of Speech Act Theory as a
framework in discourse analysis comes from John Searle’s exploration into illocutionary acts [14].

**Issue-Attention Cycle:**

I implemented Down’s 1972 Issue-Attention Cycle when analyzing the path the three types of speech acts took within the pro-IS Twitter Community [6]. The five-stage model, which can be seen in its original form in Fig. 12 and in its modified forms in Fig. 13 and Fig. 14, serves as an excellent illustration for how Twitter’s account suspension campaign influences the propagation of community content. While initially aimed at describing the peak and subsequent waning of public interest of popular news coverage in the early to mid 1970’s, the framework continues to be applicable, even in the era of social media studies.

**Findings**

**Changing Values: Pre-Suspension v. Post-Suspension**

I assert that there are two priorities of community participation: content propagation and Membership maintenance. During the Pre-suspension Era, content propagation was the top community goal. I argue that in the now Post-Suspension Era, content propagation has taken a back seat to membership maintenance. The value to Anchor accounts was first noticed by Vidino and Hughes but was not considered significant enough to effect a change in their interpretation of network structure [20]. I found that in the time since their study, community values have shifted to incorporate the account suspensions as a path to validation within the group, community maintenance holds greater import than ever. While the dissemination of pro-IS content is still a priority, I found that the effort to maintain a network with which to share that content took precedent. As such, Anchor accounts are central, not only to community
maintenance, but also in the process by which accounts seek to gain notoriety. To put it another way, it is not enough for an account to share extremist content and be suspended. In order to gain validation within the pro-IS Twitter community, an account holder must also return to the community, recognizable as belonging to the previously suspended account and then repeat the process. The greater the number of successive suspensions and returns stand as a marker of defiance’s and thus allegiance with the IS agenda. This process of rinse and repeat would be nearly impossible to do efficiently, and at such low cost to high reward ratio, without Anchor accounts.

**Tweet Content: Likelihood of Getting Flagged for Suspension**

Having established the importance of the membership maintenance network structure, I now turn my attention towards the tweets being created, tweeted, retweeted and ultimately catching the attention of Twitter authorities targeting these accounts for suspension. As mentioned earlier Producer accounts are responsible for introducing the majority of tweet content into circulation. While the Multiplier accounts do occasionally send out a tweet of their own creation, the distinction is one of frequency.

Tweet content within this community is varied in its type and specific message. It is though, always in keeping with the Islamic State’s agenda. The majority of tweets being created and passed about by community members contain text accompanied by an image or video clip. The purpose of which often extends well beyond endorsement of the larger agenda. My initial observations led me to categorize tweets based on community objectives. The nuances of possible tweet content and intentions are immense. I’ve attempted to provide a summary of the most common in Fig. 6 below. The gradation in the chart below from light to dark indicates the likelihood the content being flagged for account suspension, with the dark being the most likely.
At the most basic level, tweets containing images, videos, or a link to the same get the most attention, from all concerned parties. Tweets containing only text tend to go unnoticed. That said all accounts output a combination of them all and usually in quick succession. This activity increases the accounts visibility and risk of suspension.

Figure 7: Tweet content grouped by Community Objectives
Tweets as Speech Acts:

In assessing a tweet’s likelihood of getting an account flagged for suspension, I found that framing them as speech acts was the most helpful [14]. While this is a more general approach, it is more than sufficient for understanding how far a tweet can circulate before its users’ are suspended, and thus removing the conduit by which the tweet may travel.

Invitation

Tweets that qualify as an invitation speech act are those that directly recruit new membership via “Shoutout” or as simple as a declaration of the righteousness the IS agenda. Ultimately they are offering a counter narrative to mainstream media and thereby inviting others to join the “right” side of the conflict. An invitation can also be as subtle as tweeting one of the many venerated images, or “Avatars,” that are used most frequently. They are much the same as those used in profile images or banner photos. Common among them are lions, kittens, green birds, and cloaked riders on horseback. Also frequently used are tweets celebrating the elevation to martyrdom of slain ISIS fighters, many of who are often participants of suicide missions. The famous Internet cleric Anwar al Awlaki is a preferred Avatar. Examples can be seen in fig. 7.
Figure 8: Screen shots of Invitation Speech Acts

**Provocation**

Tweets that were categorized as a provocation speech act are aimed at eliciting a sense of persecution against IS members. These often present as hyperlinks to news article that describes the incarceration of a suspected IS sympathizer. Additionally, video and images of destruction and casualties caused by Assad Regime attacks on Syrian civilians and opposition forces alike. The casualties of Syrian civilians are propagated as being a consequence of Western intervention in the region. Building collapses from air strikes are tweeted frequently.
Threat

Threat speech acts are by far the most widely produced and circulated of tweets. Because of the larger context within which the Islamic State resides, this is the most inclusive speech act category. IS is, at its core, a threat. Their intent is to disrupt and destroy everyone and everything that does not conform to the rigid ideology [9,19,21]. So, included within this category is everything from tweets containing overt threats to tweets as subtle as standalone image of an iconic landmark or person known to be in opposition to the terror group. The later, becomes a
threat speech act by the context of the image having been tweeted by a self-identified IS sympathizer.

Figure 10: Screen Shot showing Text-Only tweets as Threat Speech Acts

Figure 11: Screen shots of Threat Speech Acts. All in the wake of the 7.14.16 Nice, France Attacks
Figure 12: Screen shots of Threat Speech Acts. All in the wake of the 7.14.16 Nice, France Attacks

Issue attention Cycle:

Keeping these speech act categories in mind, I’d like to now turn attention to the life span of each speech act within the community. In order to do so, I’ve used Down’s Issue Attention Cycle (IAC) to illustrate the circulation of content within this Post-Suspension Era community [6]. Looking at Down’s original model (Fig. 12), an issue (what I call content) moves through the five stages: 1-Preproblem stage, 2-Alarmed Discovery and Euphoric Enthusiasm, 3-Realization of the cost, 4-Decline in Intensity of interest, 5-Post-Problem Stage.
Figure 13: Downs, 1972 Issue Attention Cycle model [6]

Within the world of social media, Twitter specifically, the parallels between Down’s depiction of media coverage and Twitter users sharing content are effectively the same. My implementation and adaptation of the IAC takes inspiration from a 2009 study that demonstrated how the public’s interest in terrorism events usually never passed beyond the 3rd stage, as new events would reignites interest [12]. My use of the IAC found that a typical tweet, not in violation of Twitter’s user agreement, will be produced and propagate exponentially as other retweet it. Eventually the retweets decline as new content takes its place. However, this isn’t always the case within the pro-IS Twitter community. Account suspensions regularly interrupt a tweet’s progression along the IAC by removing the conduit by which tweets travel, the account. To understand this interruption, I tracked tweets as speech acts along the IAC.

**Invitations** are not typically in violation of Twitter's code of conduct. As such, they have a better chance of moving through all five stages. More often than not, these tweets are not exciting enough to garner enough attention to make it to stage two of the IAC. Fig. 15 shows this Speech Act going through all five stages.
**Provocations** and **Threats** will often include graphic imagery or contain official IS symbols, such as their flag. This type of speech act attracts the most attention from fellow users and has no trouble gaining enough retweets to progress into stages two and three. At the same time however, they are usually grounds for account suspension.

Twitter’s ongoing account suspension campaign targets accounts that are actively tweeting content of a graphic or violent nature [10]. Within this community that includes nearly all speech acts that get enough attention to progress to the middle stages of the IAC. That means that Twitter is interrupting the IAC at these stages, before users have had enough time to lose interest in the content. See Fig. 15.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 14: Modified Down’s IAC to illustrate Speech Act progression and interruption due to account suspensions**

This interruption, by way of account suspension, forces users to start anew and gain access to the community via the pre-established Anchor accounts. Once this happens, these users engage in the same speech acts that got them suspended in the first place. Subsequently, they are
suspended again and again. All the while gaining more validation as community members by racking up more suspensions. This unending cycle is illustrated in fig. 14 below.

![Figure 15: Modified Down’s IAC to illustrate cycle of account suspension and reentry via Anchor](image)

**Discussion/Implications:**

While Twitter’s current suspension campaign does interrupt the flow of content along the IAC, it does so at the peak of attention or just thereafter. This is hardly a disruption at all considering the suspensions have the unintended effect of reinvigorating the offenders to return and repeat the cycle again. When pro-IS community objectives shifted to incorporate account suspensions as a means to validation, they not only rendered Twitter’s efforts ineffective, but actually made value of them. Twitter is unintentionally participating in the community value system by providing a mechanism by which members gain notoriety among their peers.

Despite this, Twitter continues its Pre-Suspension Era tactic of targeting the Producers and Amplifiers for suspension. This policy of only suspending the accounts of the users who are engaging in threats and or provocations along the 2nd and 3rd stages of the IAC is less than
optimal for disbanding their community. If Twitter decides to disband this community, they’ll need to go after the Anchors instead. By focusing their efforts on identifying and suspending the Anchor accounts, they are removing a central pillar of the community. Membership maintenance is the top community objective and that objective is almost entirely dependent on the Anchor as a reliable point of reentry. The removal of Anchors destabilizes the community, making it exponentially more difficult to rebuild connections between users. Once it takes a user a longer time to connect their new account with others, the less likely they are to build a large enough network to effectively participate in the second community objective, content propagation.

Now, it is worth mentioning that there could be a number of legitimate reasons for Twitter to not target Anchor accounts and thus willfully allow the pro-IS community to maintain its presence. The first being that Twitter is an inherently inclusive social media platform. One of their greatest strengths and to what they owe much of their success is the fact that they allow their users to tweet and retweet controversial information. Twitter has always been an invaluable resource for real-time reporting from locations that were previously closed to the majority of people. If Twitter were to go after the Anchor accounts, they would be over extending their own authority by suspending accounts that are not in implicit violation of their codes of conduct. They could amend their user agreements, but even that sets a very dangerous precedent for a company that thrives on free speech.

The second reason for Twitter’s current lack of effectual action is a matter of intelligence value. While many of the pro-IS users are nothing more than keyboard warriors operating behind their Smartphone and otherwise living peaceably within society, there is still another portion of pro-IS Twitter users that may have information of value. Intelligence agencies, private and federal, no doubt keep a close eye on these users. Even if the content of their tweets are benign,
the information attached to those tweets may be useful, such as the geo-location coordinates of where the tweet was produced. So, there exists a delicate balance between letting the community operate too freely so as to inspire or recruit new members and giving them just enough room to make a mistake, offering valuable insight into potential threats.

Both of these points aside, the fact remains that if Twitter wants to more effectively disrupt and dismantle the vocal pro-IS presence on their website, they could do it. To effectively stop the spread of offensive Speech Acts along the Issue Attention Cycle within the pro-IS community, they need only direct their suspension efforts at the Anchors. In doing so, the community’s top objective of membership maintenance would be made immeasurably more difficult. Community members attempting to return from suspension would need to seek out other members manually and in much smaller groups over a longer time. Membership maintenance would become too costly a task for most and then network would shrink, divide and subdivided into smaller cliques, effectively disrupting community objective number two, content propagation. When you strip them of their ability to quickly rebuild their community after a suspension, they are left without an audience, speaking into the void.
Works Cited


