

Islamist Extremism, Propaganda, And New Media: A Case Study of @Mutiaradabiq During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The activities of Islamist extremist actors are increasingly intensive during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which they are progressively active in producing Islamist narratives in cyberspace. Strategic communication is one of the techniques for Islamist extremist groups to perpetuate their influences on society through social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus this research aims to study propaganda as part of strategic communication in Islamist extremist activities during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021), primarily through Facebook @Mutiaradabiq. This research considers that strategic communication and propaganda are two interrelated communication entities. This study is qualitative research and uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a method of data analysis. This research argues that propaganda on social media worked significantly through verbal and visual discourse uploaded by Islamist extremist actor, who reveals rational connections between language use and social reality. This study found how the existences propaganda of this Facebook account can exist during the COVID-19

pandemic by; first, strategic communication emerges into instrumental propaganda at the @MutiaraDabiq performance, and second, strategic communication flourish in discourse logic at the @MutiaraDabiq account.

Keywords: COVID-19, Islamist Extremist, Cyberspace, Strategic Communication, Propaganda.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic enriches cyberspace to become a more intense contestation context for various religious communities. Align with the circumstances; extremist groups can adapt quickly to conditions of uncertainty and instability. They take advantage of this opportunity to achieve organizational goals, such as the activities of Islamist extremist groups are increasingly intensive during the COVID-19 pandemic in which they are progressively active in producing narratives in cyberspace. They consider the pandemic an opportunity since society's activities stand on the Internet. Propaganda as part of strategic communication is one of the techniques for Islamist extremist groups to perpetuate their existence on social media during the period.

The COVID-19 issues are crucial for terrorist groups to enhance the main discussion topic in their media channels. Avis argues that on this platform, al-Qaeda guides its followers in dealing with COVID-19. One of their statements is that Islam is a hygiene-oriented religion that can prevent society from pandemics.¹ Furthermore, Basit reveals that in March 2020, The

¹ William Avis, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and Response on Violent Extremist Recruitment and Radicalisation"(2020):9, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15322/808_COVID19_and_Violent_Extremism.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

Islamic State (IS) also published two topics for their weekly newsletter, *Al-Naba*, related to COVID-19. There are two points they have exploited during the COVID-19 Pandemic. For instance, when the pandemic spread to Muslim countries, they created conspiracy theories about the source of the pandemic. They blamed China, the West, Jews, and Zionists.² Ackerman and Peterson (2020) categorize these techniques as an "asymmetrical adversary in nature," which means that whatever they see as a threat, they turn it into an opportunity.³

This pandemic has changed the structure of people's lives in all sectors of society, including the economy, politics, education, and culture. With a faster rate of viral spread, most countries are implementing lockdowns to reduce the spread of the virus. They also conduct policies to close school activities, implement restrictions, limit religious activities, require social distancing and masks, and limit public spaces and facilities. This situation drives millions of people to stay mostly at home, which forces people to start fully communicating using the Internet and digital technologies.⁴ It is easy for Islamist extremists to carry out psychological attacks, spread disinformation, and create conspiracy theories on the Internet during the Pandemic since all

² Abdul Basit, "COVID-19 : A Challenge or Opportunity for Terrorist Groups?," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* (2020): 266, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2020.1828603>.

³ Gary Ackerman and Hayley Peterson, "Terrorism and COVID-19: Actual and Potential Impacts," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 3 (2020): 59–73.

⁴ Ivana Luknar, "CYBER TERRORISM THREAT AND THE PANDEMIC Ivana," in *Security Horizon* (Bitola: University "St. Kliment Ohridski," 2020), 29; Paul Isiko Alexander, "Religious Construction of Disease: An Exploratory Appraisal of Religious Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Uganda," *Journal of African Studies and Development* 12, no. 3 (2020): 77–96; M.S. Naseer, "COVID 19: Incubator for Online Extremism" 38, no. May (2020): 8.

communication relies on the online world.⁵

In Indonesia, extremist groups also observe this pandemic as a golden time to develop their strategies. Data on counter-cyber-terrorism activities of the BNPT (National Counterterrorism Agency) in October 2020 reported several activities from radical group supporters, including the ISIS group and its affiliates. ISIS in Indonesia emerged with a sophisticated strategy designed by capitalizing on vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Permono et al. (2020) argue that during the pandemic narrative built by Indonesia, ISIS followed the trend of ISIS's global report. There is a narrative rejection of government policy to close worship places, ban prayer in congregations, cancel the Hajj as one of the five pillars of Islam, calls to action, and commodify the pandemic for their cause. This study argues that Indonesian ISIS members and affiliates create and spread the narratives with a strategically rational calculation.⁷

The background above demonstrates that studies about extremist communication strategies have revealed vital issues and patterns of extremist propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic. The growing significance of online platforms has also helped the

⁵ Basit, "COVID-19: A Challenge or Opportunity for Terrorist Groups?," 266; JCAT, *Potential for Terrorists to Exploit Challenges Associated with COVID-19*, 2020; M. Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestons for Progressing Research," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 1 (2017): 77–98; B. Lee, "Countering Violent Extremism Online: The Experiences of Informal Counter Messaging Actors," *Policy & Internet* 12, no. 1 (2020): 66–87; L. S. Neo, *An Internet-Mediated Pathway for Online Radicalisaton: RECRO*. In *Violent Extremism: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice*, 2019.

⁶ BNPT, *Implementation of Cyber Counter-Terrorism* (Jakarta, 2020), 35.

⁷ Prakoso Permono, Amanah Nurish, and Abdul Muta'a, "Covid-19: Melacak Jejak Islamic State Di Indonesia Dalam Jaringan Media Sosial," *Majalah Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial Indonesia (LIPI)* 46, no. 2 (2020): 145.

speed of extremist propaganda. One of the works focuses on propaganda as strategic communication; Wilbur (2017) finds that Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) propaganda magazine Dabiq demonstrates how propaganda is inherently a form of strategic communication created by this organization to reach its goals.⁸ In line with this discussion, this study extends analyzing propaganda as part of strategic communication in Islamist extremist communication activities in social media under an interdisciplinary approach through discourse analysis to reveal an understanding of the propaganda in developing strategic communication field.

This research argues that propaganda on social media worked significantly through verbal and visual discourses uploaded by Islamist extremist actor, who reveals rational connections between language use and social reality. This study assumes that propaganda is a powerful technique of strategic communication on how instruments and processes of propaganda support and strengthen the existence of discourse that extremists distribute on social media. Exploring propaganda as part of strategic communication in-depth and exploring published posts and media content during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021 will provide an understanding of how to respond to and counter their rhetoric and actions.

Method

This study is based on qualitative research and uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a method of data analysis. Fairclough states that language can show a background of reality and the construction of reality. Language can convey meaning orally and

⁸ Douglas Wilbur, "Propaganda's Place in Strategic Communication: The Case of ISIL's Dabiq Magazine," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 11, no. 3 (2017): 209–223.

motivate someone to do something.⁹ Hence, the first step is to examine the linguistic apparatus or features of the text.¹⁰ Furthermore, the relationship between a text and reality is not a deterministic character (a direct one). Still, it is interpreted via mental models or discursive practice,¹¹ scrutinizing the texts' production, distribution, and consumption¹². So when someone produces (communicates) and consumes (interprets) text or status, they relate to the resource¹³ or mental model¹⁴ from long-term memory.¹⁵ So the second method uses intertextuality and what Fairclough calls interdiscursivity to examine how someone creates a status or text, how they deliver the status, and how the text is received (intertextuality)¹⁶. The last stage emphasizes seeing and reflecting on the discourse in the community from the national to the international level.¹⁷ The aim is to examine "explanatory connections" between language use and social realities.¹⁸

The study limits the object of study since President Joko Widodo announced the first case of COVID-19 on Monday, March 02, 2020, until December 31, 2021, when the issue has decreased

⁹ N Fairclough, "Discourse and Social Change," *Polity press* (1992): 71; Frans Wijzen, "'There Are Radical Muslims and Normal Muslims': An Analysis of the Discourse on Islamic Extremism," *Religion* 43, no. 1 (2013): 70–88.

¹⁰ Fairclough, "Discourse and Social Change," 75.

¹¹ Wijzen, "'There Are Radical Muslims and Normal Muslims': An Analysis of the Discourse on Islamic Extremism," 73.

¹² N Fairclough, *Languange and Power* (London: Longman, 1989), 71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁴ Teun Van Dijk, *Discourse and Context. A Sociocognitive Approach* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 75.

¹⁵ Fairclough, *Languange and Power*, 9–10 & 24–25.

¹⁶ Fairclough, "Discourse and Social Change," 71; Wijzen, "'There Are Radical Muslims and Normal Muslims': An Analysis of the Discourse on Islamic Extremism," 73.

¹⁷ Wijzen, "'There Are Radical Muslims and Normal Muslims': An Analysis of the Discourse on Islamic Extremism," 73.

¹⁸ Fairclough, "Discourse and Social Change," 72–80.

on average in Indonesia. In limiting the object of study, this study follows how BNPT (National Counterterrorism Agency) defines and categorizes personal accounts as Islamist extremist representatives.¹⁹ This extremist term does not represent the world's 1.5 billion Muslims globally. In this study, Islamist extremists believe strongly in Islam and aim to significantly spread "true" Islamic values through a cognitive and physical dimension that tends to be conservative and Puritan.²⁰ The data for this article is primarily sourced from the @MutiaraDabiq Facebook account.²¹ Compared to other Islamist Extremist accounts, BNPT was banned on several social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), but the @MutiaraDabiq account still exists today. This research focuses on the @MutiaraDabiq Facebook account, which has 1.009 followers (last monitored by the researcher on July 31, 2023), and this account's posts get a lot of likes, shares, and

¹⁹ Some indicators they use are: spreading intolerance, anti-NKRI (Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia), anti-Pancasila, *takfiri*, and causing national disintegration. Moreover, the accounts will be selected based on popularity and activeness on social media. PPT of BNPT entitled "*Ancaman dan Pola Propaganda Radikal Terorisme di Dunia Maya*", 2019, p. 4.

²⁰ It would be a mistake to assimilate all Islamist extremists into a unified set of specific goals. This study refers to Halverson's "extremists" definition (a contested term) as "*political actors who seek to impose an Islamist ideology through cognitive dimension or physical intimidation, coercion, and revolutionary violence against any state or civilian targets that do not share the same vision of the "true" path of Islam, which is typically ultraconservative or puritanical in nature.*" Jeffrey R et al. Halverson, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (United States: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6.

²¹ This research was conducted on social media, and the author chose Facebook for several reasons; first, Twitter has limitations in exploring data that can only be seen in the last three to four months, so this social media cannot cover the research period during the Covid-19 Pandemic from 2020 to 2021. Second, from several Instagram accounts from the Islamist Extremist account that the author got from BNPT, these accounts are mainly sourced from posts from other versions, and a few posts are self-written. Third, the author is aware of the limited time conducting research in cyberspace, so the author chooses one social media platform.

comments.²² Although this account only has around 1.009 followers, it does not mean it has no strategic communication to perpetuate its existence in cyberspace; thus, this number of followers can reveal her strategic communication.²³ Secondary data are from books, journals, annual reports, and other significant material to support each part of this research.²⁴

This research aims to understand propaganda as part of

²² There are some indications in *MutiaraDabiq's* posts demonstrating that this account is a sympathizer of the ISIS group, such as 1) the *Lailahailallah* flag that ISIS groups usually use, 2) A photo post that narrates the notion that *Al Wala' was Al-Bara'*, 3) Posts are supporting ISIS activities. Thus, it is adequate evidence that this account represents ISIS. Technically, it is not easy to cover the content from this @MutiaraDabiq account, and this research does not intend to study the whole part of this account. So this study takes several samples from related posts or discusses several issues to see how this account made propaganda as part of strategic communication during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

²³ The researcher decides to focus on the @MutiaraDabiq account. First, this account remains consistent in uploading information compared to other Islamist Extremist accounts. Second, this account has some "likes" and "shares" in some of its posts. Third, this account is held by women and focuses on women's issues, although this does not determine the possibility of responding to other problems. Fourth, this account is not personal but represents the ISIS group's account. This account does not claim itself as part of a particular organization or affiliation of specific Islamic scholars to identify themselves, but by monitoring some opinions and reports, in the description of the "like" information from the account, the data shows a connection to twenty-two extremist channels, which are representing affiliations and references, which ultimately help or support her posting. This account presents the research indicators and is sufficient to be the primary data to see how strategic communication and propaganda they created and distributed on social media amid the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020-to 2021. <https://web.facebook.com/mutiaradabiq.mutiaradabiq.9>

²⁴ In examining data, this study focuses on the writing data from her posts in the status that the @MutiaraDabiq published. This study focuses on all narrative content in status, photos, or videos. Several indicators in selecting data samples from the corpus, such as 1) the post is written, not a copy from another source, 2) the post has a uniqueness, such as discussing education during the Pandemic, LGBT issues, leaders of Muslim-majority countries, and others, 3) posts that get lots of likes, comments, and shares, 4) posts that do not discuss personal issues.

strategic communication in Islamist extremist activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2013) define "strategic communication as the practice of deliberate and purposive communication in which a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity (who are known as a corporation, government, social movement, or famous individual, et cetera.). This communication reaches set goals, such as winning the political agenda, creating positive branding, or influencing social change."²⁵ This study also assumes that propaganda through social media becomes one of the communication techniques Islamist extremist actors use to achieve their goals.

This study argues that strategies are employed when propaganda as part of strategic communication emerges in the discourse dimension. Picard (1993) stated, "Propaganda is a form of communication that attempts to persuade or manipulate opinions or actions of an individual or group toward political, religious, military, economic, or social ends."²⁶ Thus, this study assumes that propaganda is the most powerful technique of strategic communication among Islamist extremists.²⁷

²⁵ D. R. Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass, "Strategic Communication – Pillars and Perspectives of an Alternative Paradigm," *Organisationskommunikation und Public Relations*, no. 2008 (2013): 74; K. Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Vercic, D., & Sriramesh, "Defining Strategic Communication," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 3–4.

²⁶ R. G. Picard, *Media Portrayals of Terrorism: Functions and Meaning of News Coverage* (Ames: IA: Iowa state univeristy press, 1993).

²⁷ Thoroughly, Jowett & O'Denneal (2012) examine 10- the step plan of propaganda analysis concerning this issue. In this study, the author uses several step plan of propaganda analysis to analyze the prominent instrumental propaganda patterns of ISIS strategic communication, which are the identification of the ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign, identification of the target audience, understanding of media utilization techniques, and analysis of unique technique to maximize the effect. Jowet, G.S & O'Denneal, 2012, pp. 290–306

Consequently, to get comprehensive information, one must complete the analysis. The more element analysis answers more it shows the propaganda that terrorists are spreading, although this is not always possible.²⁸ Furthermore, it examines how instrumental propaganda and discourse logic at the @MutiaraDabiq account as part of strategic communication.

Result and Discussion

Strategic Communication on Instrumental Propaganda at the @MutiaraDabiq performance

Islamist extremist actors have a concrete plan, strategy, and communication strategy. The author uses the term Instrumental Propaganda as the title of this section, which includes "*advocacy activities that seek to influence opinions, decisions, and actions.*" The meaning of propaganda in this research focuses on the communication process- specifically on the purpose of the process: *Propaganda is a deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.*²⁹ Hence, Islamist extremists can move to defeat the enemy in the act of terror and even focus on mental attacks. They do not work

²⁸ In line with this discussion, Wilbur (2017) also argues that propaganda can reach three strategic communication functions; first, propaganda transfers signs to audiences who understand and are familiar with relevant, normative, and cognitive aspects such as behavior guidance, statements, symbolic manipulation, and other innovative communication techniques. Second, propaganda is a communication platform to distribute common understanding regarding legally establishing rules, norms, and cognitive structures. Third, propagandists can use a co-opting strategy to reconstruct new practices, models, and mental apparatus, creating a system based on collective interests and a common understanding. This technique can also collaborate with other groups to develop new patterns sourced from shared interests and values that provide mutual benefits. Wilbur, "Propaganda's Place in Strategic Communication_ The Case of ISIL's Dabiq Magazine," 213.

²⁹ Jowet, G.S & O'Denneal, 2012, pp. 8–17

spontaneously, but they work rationally and systematically.

This study examines how this account was *knitting homogenous ideology* through several dimensions, including the set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors in which this account signifies and dictates the norms for society as a rule for daily activities. This research explores the ideology in the posts (status, photos, and videos) at the @MutiaraDabiq account that may represent events in the past, current frames of reference to the values system, and future goals and objectives, or the event which reproduce and transform the structures. In supporting this level, propaganda as strategic communication concerns how language creates meaning and is produced and distributed to the target audience.

Malcolm et al. (2008) coined four elements for the practice of strategic communication in the context of communication theory: 1) the Aristotelian bridge of rational information, which works on a cognitive process that "moves particulars to their generalizations," 2) the phenomenological bridge that embraces the feelings, experiences, and intuition of audiences from the story in the past, 3) the narratives bridge connects with followers in a similar understanding on particular context theme, or text, 4) the dialogical bridge as a forum for interacting through communication channels that influence habits, attitudes, and loyalties.³⁰

This account in video characters creates a shared understanding from particular issues to generalizations to bridge rational information. The @MutiaraDabiq account posts videos from several sources to support and develop a shared

³⁰ Susan B. Malcolm, H. Curtis McDaniel, and Jeremy Langett, "Philosophical Bridges for IMC: Grounding the Practice," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 2, no. 1 (2008): 21–27.

understanding of an issue. The author uses several sample video screenshot posts this account posts, such as issues about disobedience, rejection of the West, veils, monotheism, women, families, sick people, and videos about prayer pearls. Several videos aim to support the narrative, such as the video posted on November 19, 2020, which examines that filming or going to the cinema is part of immortality. One of the narrative fragments from the video is like "do not enter into sins such as listening to music, seeing women who are not Halal, and getting mixed up," which aims to organize a common understanding of the interaction between men and women.

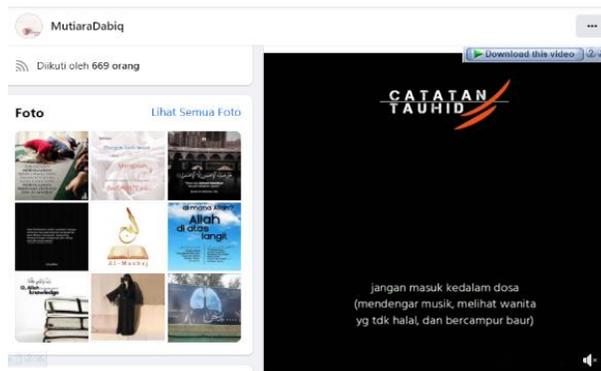


Figure 1. Sample of @MutiaraDabiq on November 19, 2020

This account also emphasizes the phenomenological bridge through a narrative that Islam started from a few people who preached, which eventually spread throughout the world, so even if it was only her or a few of her followers who conveyed her *da'wah*, it was not a problem. Thus, from this first post, she reveals how this account reconstructs her post plans so that what she will convey becomes different from the general preacher.³¹ Fairclough

³¹ Furthermore, in the description section, this account states that this account is an account of offerings for someone who is tireless in fighting so that they can still provide benefits. On the other hand, this account does not provide information on place of work, education, or place of residence. The profile photo of this account is narrated by QS. Muhammad: 19 reads "So know (knowledge),

stated that discourse as an ideological practice constitutes, naturalizes, sustains, and changes the signification of the world from diverse positions in power relations.³² For instance, on June 21, 2020, this account saw that the *Ummah* faces many challenges, so this account suggests focusing on meeting and working together on this attack. The first attack, this account states that "The attack came from the power of the *Thaguts* (government) in collaboration with the *Fikrah* attack (ideology)." This account also uses the passive word "colonized," which embraces Indonesian citizens' feelings and experiences. In the second attack, this account also relates the form of the naturalization of meaning to the statement, "Prostitution, rainbow flags, and all forms of illicit relations are not considered a symbol of cultural and civilizational progress." These attacks encourage this account invites her followers to focus on fighting attacks instead of focusing on differences in the Muslim community.

The author examines each character's post in the narrative bridge relating to ideology. Martha Cooper (1989) stated that ideology reflects a "world view that determines how arguments will be received and interpreted. The common sense of the world view provides the basis for determining what is good, bad, right, wrong, and so forth".³³ Fairclough also emphasizes that "relations of power and ideologies shape discourse, and the constructive effects discourse has upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief, neither of which is normally apparent to discourse participants."³⁴ These two arguments reflect three characters' narrative content: da'wah, motivational, and story

that there is no god (worthy of worship) but Allah."

³² Fairclough, "Discourse and Social Change," 67.

³³ Martha Cooper, *Analyzing Public Discourse* (IL: Waveland: Prospect Heights, 1989), 162.

³⁴ Fairclough, "Discourse and Social Change," 12.

Suheri

forms.

These three categories of narrative content tend to be standard narratives and become the common sense of the worldview in the following ways: First, Narrative Dakwah; some sample narratives that connote da'wah such as; an invitation to follow the morality of the *Salaf*, the repentance of a sinner, discussing *Roja* and *Khouf*, an invitation to increase *Ishtigfar*, the wisdom of delayed prayer, prohibiting showing off, avoiding envy and *Hasad*, letting go of other people's difficulties, *halal* and *haram* food, do not forget to give charity and others. Second, Motivational Narrative; some sample narratives with motivational dimensions, such as; postings on December 9, 2020, this account motivates someone presenting to stay *Istiqomah* in the path of truth. In addition, posted on July 9, 2020, this account creates a status that reveals how challenging the patient is at Camp Al-Hawl³⁵ and others. Third, narrative Story; several narrative samples with story dimensions, such as there are many stories from Muslim figures at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, such as Fatimah, 'Aisyah, Abu Bakr, Prophet Yusuf, Prophet Ayyub, Sitti Hajjar, Siti Maryam, stories about Shaykh Ibn Wahab, the story of the Prophet Moses, the level of Fudhail bin Lyadh's repentance, and others.

This study argues that this account targets most women by *persuading women to psychology*. The target audience is people specially selected by this account, depending on their effectiveness. However, it is possible that the male group also follows and actively responds to posts from this account. Jowett & O'Denneal stated propaganda messages produced for audiences

³⁵ The Hawl camp is a refugee camp on the southern outskirts of the town of al-Hawl in northern Syria, close to Syria-Iraq border.

must benefit the propagandist.³⁶ In the status character, this account uses specific calls to its followers, which indicates that women are the target of this account. This account calls out with a familiar impression like *sahabat muslimah, shaliha, dear shaliha, ukhty fillah, akhwaty, umahat, dan saudari*. These calls are a way to grow engagement with her followers. In addition, this account also uses calls *ikhwan wa akhwat rahimakumullah*. In status character, there are also emoticon styles that this account uses. This account makes creative posts using emoticons with nuances of female dimensions, such as flower emoticons, hearts, hugs, et cetera.



Moreover, this research argues that a system of rewards and punishments is one technique used by this account to attract public attention and broader public engagement. Jowett & O'Denneal stated that propaganda of the dead works when a non-symbolic act has existed for its symbolic effect on an audience.³⁷ This strategy attracts positive coercion, which reveals that messages can control responses from the audience.³⁸ It can be seen in the Give Away event that this account was created, in which the winners were women. This account made a giveaway (GA) in 2021 three times in April, July, and December, which did not happen in 2020. So this method has become a method to maintain engagement with its followers since this account became active in 2020. This account and her husband are on the committee selecting the Giveaway (GA) winners.

³⁶ Jowett, G.S & O'Denneal, 2012, p. 296

³⁷ Jowett, G.S & O'Denneal, 2012, p. 301

³⁸ Kelly Page Werder, "A Theoretical Framework for Strategic Communication Messaging," in *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*, ed. A. Holtzhausen, D. R., & Zerfass (New York: Routledge, 2015), 273.

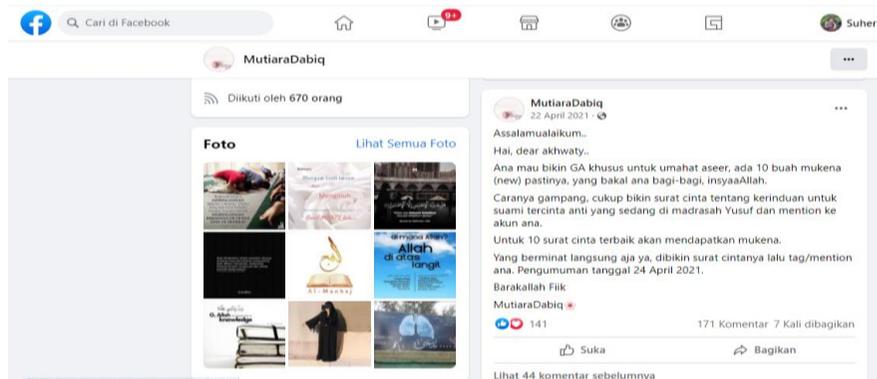


Figure 2. Sample of @MutiaraDabiq on April 22, 2021

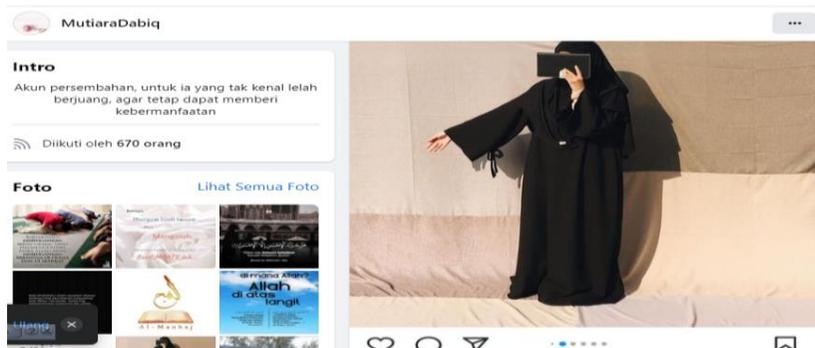


Figure 3. Sample of @MutiaraDabiq on December 12, 2021

This study also explores propagandist techniques beyond the textual meaning by *escalating verbal and visual engagement*. Monaci (2017) categorized ISIS activities as synergistic storytelling, meaning the actor maximizes every media tool to get a meaningful and significant impact message they created.³⁹ With the growing presence of technology, Jowett & O'Denneal (2012) also argues that modern propaganda applies to all containers contained in media. Such as visual images or iconic labels (such as

³⁹ S. Monaci, "Explaining the Islamic State's Online Media Strategy: A Transmedia Approach," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 2846–2857; Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 39.

pictures, symbols, graphics, colors, filmed, televised, and Internet representation, books, pamphlets, and newspapers), and verbal innovations (such as information, slogans, and emotional arousal techniques) have the power to influence audiences.⁴⁰ Moreover, this study examines several indicators of the media utilization technique in this account in the following ways:

First, in the status character, some slogans are displayed as prefixes & suffixes in every post in this account. This account always uses several prefixes and suffixes in every position, such as jargon or slogans delivered. 1) In some of its posts, this account always uses the suffix *Allahu'alam* (God knows better). It is to show that the knowledge of this account is limited in this topic, thus giving the impression of a humble attitude. It is a technique to influence the audience's cognition in receiving this post. 2) This account also uses the phrase **note to myself** at the end of posts as a technique not to judge others, but this is a way to entice the psychology of its followers that they are not the object of this post. Second, in character photos, there are some innovations that this account has made. The @MutiaraDabiq account has a characteristic for choosing images that complement the posts. This account uses exciting photos such as flowers, fruits, landscapes, books, rings, cartoon photos of a woman wearing a hijab, couples in cartoons, pictures on walls, and others, which of these photos have narration in Indonesian, Arabic, and English, and some do not have narration. Some narrations contained in images are fragments of the Qur'an and hadith.

⁴⁰ Jowet, G.S & O'Denneal, 2012, p. 298; Rothenberger, 2015, p. 487

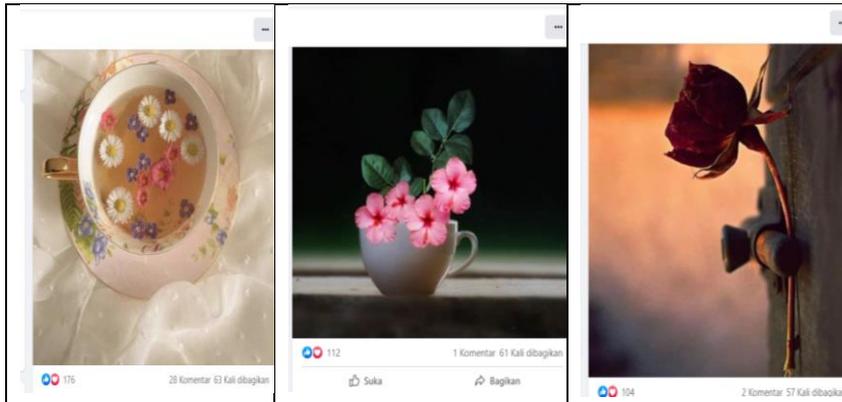


Figure 4. Sample of @Mutiaradabiq on September 03, 2020

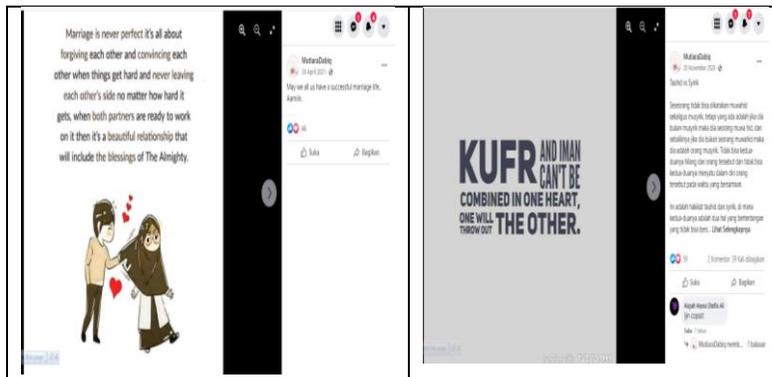


Figure 5. Sample of @Mutiaradabiq on November 20, 2020

Jowett & O'Denneal (2012) argues that modern propaganda uses all the apparatus available in the media to transfer persuasion, such as "press, radio, television, film, the internet, email, iPods, telephone, fax machine, direct mail, posters, meetings, rallies, door-to-door canvassing, handbills, buttons, billboards, speeches, flags, street names, monuments, coins, stamps, books, plays, coins, strips, poetry, music, rituals, museum display, sporting events, cultural events, company reports, libraries, and awards and prizes." The following characteristics show their targets must see,

understand, remember, and act upon propaganda.⁴¹ However, it is undeniable that propaganda is a complex technique that is difficult to limit.

This study reveals how this account uses methods *driving rationality through source credibility, opinion leader, and language usage*. Source credibility is one of the contributing factors to bringing about change. The audience or society is selective in choosing and following specific figures to gain knowledge and direction. Jowett & O'Denneal (2012) emphasize that expert opinion can create legitimacy for changing and controlling information. They argue that another issue must be built on the previous source when someone understands it. In the description of the "like" information from the account, the report shows a connection to twenty-two channels, such as; Dar At-Tawhid (Performance is dedicated to spreading quotes, fatawa, videos, articles, and the sayings of Ulama Rabaniyin from the past and the present such as Shaykh Ahmad Musa Jibril who is a Palestinian-American Islamic radical preacher, cleric, Syeikh, and imam). This section shows this account's affiliations and references, which ultimately help or support her posting.

Furthermore, in character status, this account cites and posts other sources such as posts from social media, websites, or publishing poetry from Indonesian writers. This account copies and reposts posts from other accounts, for instance, on June 9, 2020, & June 8, 2020. In addition, this account also copied the thread from Twitter from Ibnu Hamid's Performance, which was previously shared by this channel and was reflected in the post on October 6, 2020. This account also explains why he copied the September 20, 2020, position. This account also quotes poetry

⁴¹ Jowet, G.S & O'Denneal, 2012, p. 296

from Sapadi Djoko Damono⁴², an Indonesian writer who quotes books or novels related to stories about Adab or issues about women or takes references using Wikipedia and Indonesian mass media. This account also invites his followers to download a "pdf" of Ibn Hanif regarding sharia with the 'free knowledge' narrative in status character. It becomes strategic indirectly to ask followers to follow this account's referrals.

This study should identify the opinion leaders and examine how propagandists appeal to their status and influences. This account changes the names of the character's references in the status character. One technique this account uses is to change the name of the top extremist group leader she has referred to in his post by combining his name with a number. It is a way to avoid monitoring Facebook or security authorities in Indonesia. Examples of renaming that this account made include Shaykh Turki B1n'4li (Shaykh Turki Bin'ali), a scholar affiliated with ISIS, ISIS's chief religious advisor. This account replaces the abbreviation of IS (Islamic State) by using the number fifteen to become 15, this account changes the word Khilafah to kh1lafah, and the phrase mujahideen becomes mujah1din.

This account uses language to sharpen an issue or to discredit opponents. Jowett & O'Denneal (2012) emphasize that language symbols influence the audience to follow their interpretation or association with the signs.⁴³ Fairclough also emphasizes that discourse has a dynamic relationship with reality through a

⁴² Penyair bilang, "Aku ingin mencintaimu dengan sederhana dengan kata yang tak sempat diucapkan kayu kepada api yang menjadikannya abu Aku ingin mencintaimu dengan sederhana dengan isyarat yang tak sempat disampaikan awan kepada hujan yang menjadikannya tiada"

MutiaraDabiq 

⁴³ Jowett, G.S & O'Denneal, 2012, p. 303

language that signifies existence to emerge or construct meaning.⁴⁴ For instance, this account performance uses two or three languages in one utterance. This account mostly speaks Indonesian, but she sometimes switches to English, Arabic, or Sundanese and reverts to Indonesia. For instance, Sundanese is reflected on December 17, 2020, posting, "*Haturnuhun Pisan yah kana perhtosanana. Baktos ti mutiaradabiq*".⁴⁵ She sometimes uses words or phrases that reveal mixing and blending languages. This account uses a different vocabulary in its posts in the status character. In some posts, this account also uses Arabic and English as a second language. This account also uses Arabic to replace certain words, such as *Umahat* (mothers), to make its status seem attractive. Nevertheless, Arabic terms are inappropriate in some posts when used in specific contexts.

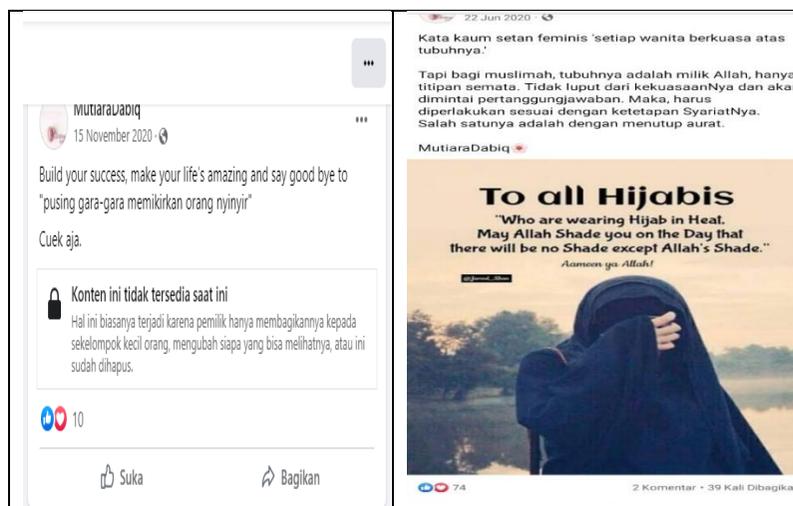


Figure 6. Sample of @MutiaraDabiq on November 15, 2020, & June 22, 2020

⁴⁴ Fairclough, "Discourse and Social Change," 42.

⁴⁵ Thank you very much for your attention. Greetings from mutiaradabiq.

Moreover, Jowett & O'Denneal (2012) emphasize that propaganda can connect emotional language and presentations.⁴⁶ For instance, on October 9, 2021, this account argues that Islamic law exists in an Ideal country. This account carries out commodification in which documentation and reporting are a form of preaching about the beauty of Islam in the Ideal country. They are concerned about supporting people with low incomes, loving each other, and the people who are disabilities. Moreover, this account completes its post with a photo with the caption "Ideal state apparatus documents the provision of compensation (zakat and alms) to Mustahiq" to strengthen the clarification of documentation and report from the compensation distribution agency.

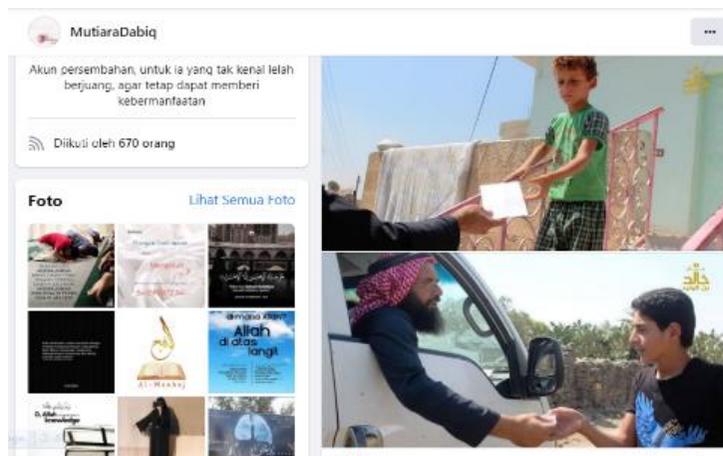


Figure 7. Sample of @MutiaraDabiq on October 9, 2021

Strategic Communication on Discourse Logic at the @MutiaraDabiq account

This study argues that the communication strategies of Islamist extremists can be considered under propaganda discourse. In this section, the author uses discourse logic as the title, referring

⁴⁶ Jowet, G.S & O'Denneal, 2012, p. 304

to "reasoned discourse on ideas and values with the goals of reaching shared understandings."⁴⁷ Picard (1993) stated that "propaganda is a form of communication that attempts to persuade or manipulate opinions or actions of an individual or group toward political, religious, military, economic, or social matters." Ellul also states that:

"Modern propaganda aims no longer to modify ideas but to provoke action. It is no longer to change adherence to a doctrine but to make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action. It is no longer transforming an opinion but arousing an active and mythical belief".⁴⁸

These arguments above reveal that propaganda is the most extreme form of strategic communication. Islamist Extremist accounts may manipulate the environment to create crowded conditions to achieve a more homogeneous effect through group norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors derived from group membership. In line with the discussion, Wilbur (2017) argues that propaganda can reach three strategic communication functions, which are; 1) Propagandist transfers signs to audiences, 2) Propaganda becomes a communication platform, and 3) Propagandists can use a co-opting strategy.⁴⁹

First, this study concludes that the @MutiaraDabiq account presents any signals in its propaganda, such as behavior guidance on women's issues and rules on how to behave to conspiracy

⁴⁷ Gregory, "Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications: Cultures, Firewalls, and Imported Norms," 39.

⁴⁸ J. Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Mens' Attitudes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 6.

⁴⁹ Wilbur, "Propaganda's Place in Strategic Communication_ The Case of ISIL's Dabiq Magazine," 213.

theories. On behavior guidance for Muslim women, The @Mutiaradabiq account builds shared meaning on several women-related problems. For instance, on July 4, 2020, this account created a new purpose beyond the *niqab* and *hijab*. This account is also completed with ambivalence, meaning to emphasize new importance. This account understands that meaning results from the construction of different arguments. Fairclough (1992) concludes that discourse can be categorized as power relations. So discourse is a suggestion to construct meaning and an instrument of power.⁵⁰ It was reflected in a post on October 14, 2020. This account reveals another argument for a new importance beyond the *niqab* and *hijab*. She standards the morals in Islam on how one interacts with fellow human beings and follows obedience to Allah's commands, one of which is related to the *hijab* and *niqab*.

This account also refers to the translation of the Qur'an QS. Al-Ahzab: 59, as horizontal intertextuality states: "O Prophet, say to your wives, your daughters and the wives of the believers: Let them extend their headscarves all over their bodies" to emphasize the obligation of the hijab. In agreement with this, Fairclough (1992) argues that the relationship between intertextuality and hegemony has power. He stressed that intertextuality reveals how the text's productivity can transform prior text and reconstruct the status quo to emerge a new meaning.⁵¹ This reference serves as legal evidence to emphasize the obligation of the hijab and reject

⁵⁰ M. Foucault, "Social Security," in *Michael Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. L. D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 159–177; Teun A Van Dijk Fairclough, N, Ruth Wodak, "Discourse as Social Interaction," *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction 2* (1997); Fairclough, "Discourse and Social Change"; Von Stuckard, *Discursive Study of Religion: From States of the Mind to Communication and Action.*, Method & T., 2003.

⁵¹ Fairclough, "Discourse and Social Change," 102.

the arguments about the hijab from infidels and *Zindiq* groups.

This account rejects the conspiracy theories spreading in the community regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, showing this account's open and critical thinking in responding to conspiracy theories. On July 14, 2021, this account repeated the words "*kuffar*" and "plague" six times as a refusal that this epidemic was created by the *kuffar* group. This account expressly states that this COVID-19 outbreak is a creation of Allah by repeating this word four times and completing it with the ambivalence of meaning in the statement "Don't we see that Allah is showing His power to humans" to emphasize that humans do not have absolute power. This account also uses a metaphor in the statement, "Human reason is not a fingernail compared to the breadth of His knowledge," which display that humans have no power comparable to God. Fairclough (1992) argues that metaphors affect cognitive systems, beliefs, and behavior. He also emphasizes that "*when we signify thing through one metaphor rather than another, we construct our reality in one way rather than another.*" Thus, this account uses metaphors to refuse the conspiracy theories that lead to associating relations with Allah.

Second, this stage represents a communication platform of this account as a representative of ISIS encountering the negative label and how this account refuses to follow leaders who do not apply Islam as a whole. Concerning this discussion, Harmon (2008) made categories of techniques that terrorists use to gain sympathy from the public⁵², which is; to create or further a sense of societal dislocation, fear, and even anarchy, and discredit, diminish, or destroy a particular government and replace it with another. On July 18, 2020, this account used issues related to

⁵² C. C. Harmon, *Terrorism Today (2nd Ed.)* (London, England, & New York: Routledge, 2008), 39.

violence perpetrated by America, Zionist Israel, and colonialism against Muslims to recall and maintain shared memories. It is also a way to discredit the cleric's position categorizing ISIS as a *Khawarij* group. This account also uses naturalization meaning and metaphor to organize the Ulama as not a credible scholar. In this sample, this account uses new terms unfamiliar to most people, such as *Ahluts Tsughur*.

Moreover, on July 23, 2020, this account used posts in the form of dialogue as an innovative form to counter the negative side of the ISIS group from its outsiders to reveal that what they are doing is the right thing. This account has also been renamed a group (rewording) to disrespect this group (*Salafi* to *Talapi*). Fairclough (1992) argued that rewording (relexicalization in his term) develops new wordings as a new alternative in opposition to the existing system.⁵³ Moreover, this account also uses the paraphrase of "Shaykh Al-Baghdadi" combined with numbers to become "*Shaykh Al B4ghdadi*," not to be tracked in the monitoring system of Facebook and Indonesian authorities.

The author uses several samples to reveal how this account refuses to follow leaders who do not apply Islam as a legal norm. This account rejects the leadership of several Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, Turkey, and Arabia. Concerning the Indonesian context, on January 6, 2020, this account counters the opinion of Salafi groups (whom she considers "Salafi claimers") who encourage obedience to the authorities by referring to the story of Iman Ahmad, who did not rebel against Caliph Al-Ma'mun. This account categorically rejects this opinion and the compliance of Imam Ahmad, which is equated with the obligation to obey the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) regime. In this post, this account reified the word "*kafir*" as an

⁵³ Fairclough, "Discourse and Social Change," 194.

attitude that rejects one letter in the Qur'an, rejects one law, and even rejects the Qur'an and Islamic law as a source of direction in life, but instead chooses the rules of democracy, nationalism, and the colonial legacy of the Criminal Code.

Concerning the leadership of the Turkey President, the author also uses a sample representing this account to refuse the negative label of ISIS. On July 13, 2020, the @Mutiaradabiq account countered the *Kuffar* label to the IS (Islamic State) group. This account takes Erdogan (Turkiye president) as an example of the *Kuffar* Stooge category. This account gives several reasons, such as rejecting the caliphate, adopting secularist ideas, and accepting the LGBT community. So this account categorizes Erdogan as a Western henchman who inherits their culture, beliefs, and civilization. So, people or groups who organize IS as *kuffar's* henchmen; this account is categorized as *taqlid* and stupid people. Concerning the leadership of Saudi Arabia, on July 17, 2020, this account also resisted the opinion of Saudi clerics (*Lajnah Daimah*), who have shared considerations on fighting ISIS policies. This account creates the naturalization, stating that "America has massacred Muslims in various parts of the country." So, this account asks for proof of the tough stance of the Saudi clerical council, even if it is just a "curse" to America for this incident. Some of the arguments above show that this account rejects the attitude of modern Saudi Arabia.

Third, this study found that this account creates new rules, norms, and cognitive systems to supplant undesirable existing ones. It appears in the ideology paradigm, education issues, and women's guidance. In the ideology paradigm, On September 15, 2020, this account created twice reproduced the existing order of the Enlightenment era. First, this account reveals the Enlightenment era in the Islamic and Western worlds. This account uses naturalization, meaning that "the era of enlightenment in the

Islamic world was when Imam Ibn Wahab brought the idea of renewal so that the people would return to monotheism and the *Manhaj* of the *Salaf*." This account uses creative texts characterized by ambiguities of reality and ambivalence of meaning. This account tries to get the meaning potential of words that aim to destroy and restructure common understanding.⁵⁴ This account also argues that several pieces of evidence emphasize Imam Ibn Wahab as a role model in the modern Islamic world, as Imam Ibn Wahab succeeded in stopping and directing the public from all activities in the form of *Shirk*, such as worship of graves and all TBC activities (*Tahayul*, *Bid'ah*, and *Khurafat*).

This account considers that the enlightenment brought by Shaykh Ibn Wahab is the source of the beginning of "modern monotheism," similar to the Renaissance era on the European continent, which became the beginning of modern Western life. Second, this account discredits the value of enlightenment in the West. This account states, "The West rules the world after leaving the darkness of church dogma to another darkness, namely secular and materialistic life. Nevertheless, they call it enlightenment." Therefore, this account argues that Muslims will be in power if they reach enlightenment by returning to the Qur'an and Sunnah purely and comprehensively.

In contrast, on July 21, 2021, this post revealed how this account has flexibility attitude toward Western production. This account is against everything related to ideology originating from the West; on the contrary, this account accepts all modernization from the West. This account discusses the challenges currently being faced by Muslims. One is the Western world's influence, which has dominated every aspect of life, from ideology to technology. This post shows how flexible this account is when

⁵⁴ Ibid., 187.

encountering reality.

On September 9, 2020, in educational issues, this post naturalized the meaning of modern slavery for Muslims under the curriculum. Some indicators that support this statement are: first, the world of education makes people compete to pursue titles or world titles to become provisions for life. This point makes the Muslim generation enslaved by modern standards. This account assumes that world knowledge has turned into orientation to become an essential provision. Still, on the other hand, they have become negligent with the understanding of *Deen* (religion), which is the fundamental provision.

Moreover, on September 10, 2020, this account assesses that school holidays amid the COVID-19 pandemic save children from *kufir* doctrines such as nationalism, democracy, secularism, and pluralism. This account also uses the naturalization of meaning in the statement, "It is no secret that curriculum and education are now one of the most powerful weapons for brainwashing Muslims," to emphasize that education is a way to eliminate loyalty to Islam. This account provides an example by using the rewording of "*kufir* doctrines" with "nationalism, democracy, secularism, pluralism, and P5" as doctrines that have damaged the loyalty of the younger generation to Islam.

Lastly, this account tries to form a standard understanding norm or value of behaving toward the opposite sex or men regarding women's behavior issues. On December 21, 2020, this account stated, "The best women are those who do not see men and are not seen by men." This status is a type of naturalization of meaning, in which she decides or limits the purpose of the phrase "best women." Some indicators of postings, such as status and photos, show that this status transfers a standard norm for a Muslim woman. Moreover, on September 3, 2020, this account reified the

phrase "Muslim women" by asserting that "the more closed she is, the better for her." This account also reified "*Jahiliyah* women" by classifying it as "an open and Westernized lifestyle." Thus, the version indirectly refines the character of Muslim Women and *Jahiliyah* women. The indication of reification of meaning also comes from the explanation that "Muslim women have their lifestyle and principles that come from Sharia rules." Again, on June 22, 2020, this post seeks to reject the understanding of feminist groups. There is a rewording of the word feminist to become "feminist demon," which creates new meaning for this community.

Conclusion

This research argues that propaganda on social media worked significantly through verbal and visual discourse uploaded by Islamist extremist actor, who reveals rational connections between language use and social reality. This study believes that propaganda is a powerful technique of strategic communication on how instruments and processes of propaganda support and strengthen the existence of discourse that extremists distribute on social media. Based on a Critical Discourse Analysis of the contents of @MutiaraDabiq, the ISIS Facebook account, during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study found several patterns of ISIS propaganda as part of strategic communication. This study found that the @MutiaraDabiq account has deliberate and purposive communication activities through propaganda instruments (visual, quotes, or other religious rhetoric) and discourse logic to achieve its strategic goals.

This study argues that the @MutiaraDabiq account manipulates the cyber environment to create crowded conditions to achieve a more homogeneous effect through group norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors. Some of the propaganda patterns as

part of strategic communication this account uses; 1) the @Mutiaradabiq statement presents any signals to audiences who understand and are familiar with relevant, normative, and cognitive aspects in its propaganda, such as behavior guidance on women issues, rules on how to behave to conspiracy theories and ideology guidance. 2) This account promotes views on changing institutional prescribed rules, standards, and mental forms. This account also shows much resistance to society's established system and norms, so creating something new to support its mission or goals in some posts is necessary. It reflects how this account becomes a representative of ISIS encountering the negative label and how this account refuses to follow leaders who do not apply Islam as a whole. 3) This study found that this account creates new rules, norms, and cognitive systems to support undesirable ones. It appears in the ideology paradigm, education issues, and women's guidance.

Furthermore, through discourse analysis, this study found that this account not only uses three patterns to distribute the propaganda as part of strategic communication but also complements and builds propaganda content in activities in social media through discourse strategy (language practice); several dominant patterns of Islamist extremist propaganda in discourse strategy to understand Islamist propaganda, such as; 1) Ambivalence meaning is a technique that this account uses in creating and constructing discourse with encountering reality that is not in accordance with their principles by creating a new reality that is in accordance with the organization's goals, 2) Naturalization meaning is a method that this account uses when fixes an ideas, principles, or understanding that are different from the existing system in the society, 3) Reification is a method that this account uses for reproduction or modification of identities, relations, and ideas that exist in the society, 4) Rewording is a way

that this account uses to produce a new word that becomes alternative from the society system, 5) Metaphor is a technique that this account uses to renew reality in another form, 6) Intertextuality and inter-discursivity are ways that this account uses to build arguments by borrowing stories, texts, or cite from other different discursive formations.

Lastly, in one of the studies that became the fundamental work in extremist strategic communication, Wilbur (2017) also found that Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) uses Dabiq (an online propaganda magazine) as a form of media to facilitate strategic communication in achieving organizational goals. In line with this research, this study analyzes propaganda as part of strategic communication in Islamist extremist communication activities on social media (Facebook) through discourse analysis. This study found that to understand Islamist extremist propaganda activities not only through patterns when they distribute the propaganda as part of strategic communication but also through propaganda content in social media which is equipped and built in a comprehensively discursive strategy. Some of these discourse strategies reveal that the propaganda of Islamist extremist actors on social media worked significantly through verbal and visual discourses.

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