

The Response of, and on, Twitter to the Release of Dabiq Issue 15

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1 Introduction

The so-called Islamic State (IS) has a sophisticated media strategy (Winter 2017), an important part of which has been its English-language online magazine *Dabiq*. Launched in July 2014, a total of fifteen issues of *Dabiq* in the two years that followed. These issues were disseminated in a variety of ways, including archive sites (Bodo and Speckhard 2017), web forums and file-sharing networks (Gambhir 2016), the dark web (Stacey 2017), and even via an attempt to sell the freely available magazines for profit through the online retailer Amazon (Masi 2015). One of the most important forums for dissemination, however, was the social media platform Twitter (Bodo and Speckhard 2017; Gambhir 2016; Cunningham, Everton and Schroeder 2015; Shaheen 2015).

Released in July 2016, the theme of *Dabiq* issue 15 was ‘Break the Cross’. After referring to a number of attacks that had occurred in the preceding weeks, the issue’s foreword called on ‘pagan Christians’, ‘liberalist secularists’ and ‘sceptical atheists’ to ‘recognize their Creator and submit to Him’. In addition to regular features, including ‘Among the believers are men’ and ‘In the words of the enemy’ (which, in this issue’ focussed on Pope Francis), and advertisements for other IS media, issue 15 contained an 18 page feature article, also titled ‘Break the Cross’. Arguing that the Bible does not display the three hallmarks of a true divine text, the article discusses the doctrine of the Trinity, whether Jesus was crucified, and whether Paul’s New Testament teachings are authentic (repeatedly stating that Paul was a known liar). It then seeks to establish the authenticity of the Prophet Muhammad, before asking Christians rhetorically: ‘O People of the Scripture, follow the truth from your Lord, whom you claim to love. Would you follow your parents and ancestors if you knew they were walking into a fire?’ and concluding ‘Know well that our fight will continue until you are defeated and submit to the rule of your Creator, or until we achieve martyrdom. Allah has made our mission to wage war against disbelief until it ceases to exist, as he has ordered us to kill all pagans wherever they are found’.

Drawing on an original dataset, in this article we examine the response to the release of *Dabiq* issue 15 on Twitter. We examine the response in two respects: first, the response from Twitter itself, in terms of suspension activity; and, second, the response from other users, in terms of their engagement with posts disseminating the new issue. Before presenting our findings, we begin by offering an overview of our methodology.

2 Methodology

Dabiq issue 15 was first made available online on 31 July 2016. From this date, to the end of 24 August 2016, all Twitter posts mentioning the term ‘dabiq’, and the associated user data, were collected using Cardiff University’s ‘Sentinel’ research tool.¹ From this data, the first *Dabiq*-mentioning post from each distinct user was extracted, as was the user’s profile data at the time of the post. The initial dataset thus covered a number of computer-generated variables, including the text of the tweet, the date and time at which it was posted, any links contained within it, the account name, the language in which the account was created, the date of creation and the number of followers. The account status (extant/suspended/deleted) at the end of the data collection period was also recorded.

Over the 25 days of data collection, a total of 11,586 distinct user accounts posted 58,056 *Dabiq*-mentioning tweets or retweets. 573 of these accounts had been suspended by the end of the data collection period.

The first round of data analysis consisted of quantitative analysis of the overall dataset, supplemented by a careful reading of a (computer-generated) random sample of the data from 1000 accounts. Following an iterative, data-driven approach, a number of coding categories were then constructed based on this reading. These included: the presence of (positive or negative) statements about specific political figures/institutions or religions within the user’s profile; the mood of the captured post; any specific references to IS, jihad or terrorism within the user’s profile or the captured post; and the type of account (e.g., personal, journalist, official news feed). In the second round of analysis, these codes were applied to specific subsets of user accounts from within the larger dataset. These were as follows:

- The original random sample of 1000 accounts
- Arabic language accounts [n=292]
- Suspended accounts [n=573]
- Accounts subsequently closed by the user [n=70]
- Accounts whose first post was unlinked to any other [n=2356]
- Accounts whose first post was not a retweet [n=3271]
- Accounts whose first post was not a retweet and also contained a link [n=1621]

¹ For the purposes of this study, Sentinel functioned only as a repository of structured data supplied by the Twitter Streaming API.

The third round of analysis consisted of comparative analysis between these subsets and either the whole dataset or the random sample of 1000. In this article, we focus on the findings pertaining to two of these subsets: the accounts that had been suspended by the end of the data collection period; and, the accounts whose first post was not a retweet and also contained a link.

3 Suspended accounts

It is helpful to begin by setting out the relevant parts of Twitter's suspension policy:

Any accounts and related accounts engaging in the activities specified below may be temporarily locked and/or subject to permanent suspension.

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 (Twitter 2017).

Twitter insists that it has applied this policy rigorously. In a press release issued in August 2016, it stated:

We strongly condemn [terror attacks] and remain committed to eliminating the promotion of violence or terrorism on our platform ... [Our work in the past six months] brings our overall number of suspensions to 360,000 since the middle of 2015. As noted by numerous third parties, our efforts continue to drive meaningful results, including a significant shift in this type of activity off of Twitter (Twitter 2016).

A total of 360,000 suspensions in roughly a year is equivalent to approximately 1,000 per day. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that our dataset included just 573 suspended accounts (roughly 23 per day). In this regard, we offer three observations.

First, the extract from Twitter's suspension policy above uses the term 'promoting terrorism'. Whilst issue 15 of *Dabiq* sought to promote terrorism, it seems clear from our findings that tweeting or retweeting a direct link to this terrorism-promoting publication is not in itself deemed sufficient to constitute the promotion of terrorism for the purposes of invoking the Twitter Rules. Instead, Twitter seemed to discriminate between *Dabiq*-disseminating accounts on the basis of the tone and objective of the

account and the content that it posted. Just eight (1.4%) of the 573 accounts within our dataset that were suspended were identified as being critical of IS, with a further 20 (3.5%) classed as factual. Of the remaining accounts, 496 (86.6%) were sympathetic to IS (and it was not possible to categorise the other 49, principally due to the ambiguity of their wording). So, Twitter appears to be willing to have terrorism-promoting content accessible on its platform, as long as those disseminating this content are not themselves promoters of terrorism.

The number of suspensions within our dataset is noteworthy for a second reason: it indicates a relatively low level of IS activity on Twitter. As recently as 2014, it was estimated that there were between 46,000 and 70,000 IS supporter accounts on Twitter, and that on average these were tweeting 133,422 times per day (Berger and Morgan 2015). Since then, Twitter has clamped down on the use of its platform by IS supporters, as indicated by its press release above. Research into the impact of this clampdown has found that it was effective in significantly reducing IS activity on Twitter (Berger and Perez 2016; Bodine-Baron et al 2016; Bolton 2016). Our findings offer further support for this conclusion. At the time of the publication of issue 15, *Dabiq* was the flagship English-language IS publication.² The fact that IS was only able to rally a few hundred accounts to promote and disseminate issue 15 suggests that its ability to operate impactfully on Twitter has been greatly diminished.

Third, the account creation dates and number of followers of the suspended accounts in our dataset are also indicative of IS's diminished ability to operate on Twitter. Of the 573 suspended accounts, 490 (85.5%) were created in the third quarter of 2016, i.e., just weeks prior to, or following, the release of issue 15. In addition to being young, these accounts had low follower levels, as Table 1 shows.

	Suspended accounts	Overall dataset
Lowest number	0 (69 accounts)	0 (112 accounts)
First quartile	5	109.75
Median	26	399
Third quartile	86.5	1424
Highest number	1511	1105832
Mean	81	2769

Table 1: Number of followers, suspended accounts and overall dataset

² No further issues of *Dabiq* have been published in the last nine months. Since September 2016, it appears to have been replaced by a new online magazine, *Rumiyah*.

The suspended accounts' median number of followers was just 26 (compared to a figure of 399 for the dataset as a whole). More than three-quarters of the suspended accounts had fewer than 100 followers. And, in addition, these accounts had all been suspended by the end of our data collection period (24 August 2016). These findings thus support Twitter's claim, made in August 2016, that its 'response time for suspending reported accounts, the amount of time these accounts are on Twitter, and the number of followers they accumulate have all decreased dramatically' (Twitter 2016).

4 Externally linking original posters

A search for *Dabiq* issue 15 using Twitter's built-in search feature will not return any results from accounts that have been suspended or deleted by the account holder. Similarly, any such search will not return content from extant accounts that has been removed by the account holder. Beyond this, however, any content from an extant account that has not been removed by the account holder will be searchable. In this section, we therefore explore the content relating to *Dabiq* issue 15 that remains searchable on Twitter, and offer two observations.

First, in spite of the suspension activity outlined above, issue 15 of *Dabiq* remains accessible on Twitter. Within our dataset, there were a total of 1621 accounts whose first post about *Dabiq*: (a) contained original content (i.e., was not merely a retweet); and, (b) included a link to an external site. Of these, a total of 1370 (84.5%) remained extant at the end of the data collection period. Across these 1370 accounts, a total of 778 distinct links were identified. Analysis of the most common 100 of these links reveals that: (a) 39 of them either linked directly to issue 15 of *Dabiq*, or to a site from which it could be accessed; and, (b) one of these 39 links was included in the tweet posted by 250 of the 1370 extant accounts. Moreover, the actual number of extant accounts whose post included either a direct link to *Dabiq* issue 15 or a link to a site from which it could be accessed is likely to be significantly higher than 250, since our analysis was limited to the 100 most common links. In particular, our count does not include unique URLs that appeared only once in the dataset. In many instances, these unique URLs will have been generated by a URL shortener in order to subvert detection mechanisms.

The other 61 of the 100 most common links were almost exclusively links to news items and blogs. Whilst these did not provide a direct link to *Dabiq* issue 15, they frequently offered a glimpse into the magazine's contents. Many contained the magazine's front

cover as well as quotes, screenshots or other content from within its pages. Some also pointed out to readers that it is straightforward to obtain a copy of the magazine.

Our second observation concerns the tone of the content posted by these externally linking accounts that remain extant. As Figure 1 below shows, the content posted by just over one-half of these accounts was critical in tone. So, even though these users expressed opposition to IS and *Dabiq* magazine – often in emotive terms – they nonetheless included a link, either to a news item or blog or to a copy of the magazine itself. 25% were factual in tone – simply reporting the fact that the new issue had been released – and for 22% of accounts it was not possible to discern the mood, often because the wording of the post was ambiguous. Just 1% of the accounts expressed sympathy for the message of *Dabiq*.

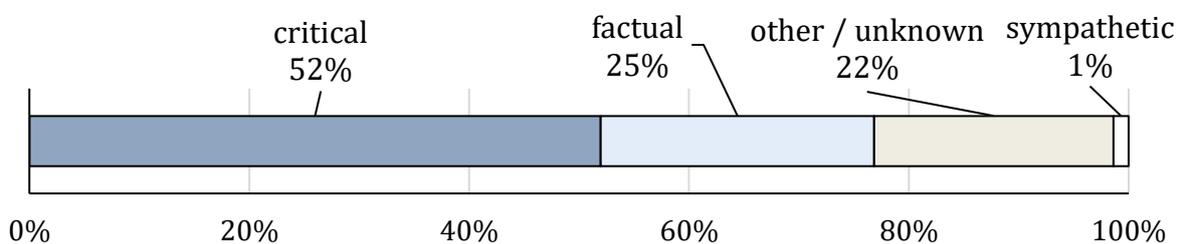


Figure 1. Qualitatively coded mood of the first post from holders of an extant account and whose first post contained original content and linked to external content.

Table 2 shows the most common political and religious statements found within the profile descriptions of the 1370 extant accounts that posted original content including an external link. The most common type of political statement was pro-Trump (6.1%), followed by pro-Israel (4.2%), whilst the most common type of religious statement was pro-Christian (10.1%). This latter finding reflects the specific focus of this issue of *Dabiq*: ‘Break the Cross’. It was also evident that there was an inter-relationship between these three types of statement, with a number of account holders self-identifying as Christians who supported Trump and/or were pro-Israel.

Most common political statements		Most common religious statements	
Pro-Trump	6.1%	Pro-Christian	10.1%
Pro-Israel	4.2%	Anti-Islam	3.4%
Anti-Clinton	1.8%	Pro-Atheism	1.9%
Pro-Liberal	0.7%	Pro-Islam	1.7%

Table 2: Account profiles, most common political and religious statements

Lastly, three-quarters of the posts from these 1370 accounts were in the English language, which is unsurprising given that *Dabiq* is an English-language publication. More unexpected is the finding that the remaining 25% spanned a total of 26 different languages, the most common being French, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish (5%, 5%, 3%, 3% and 2% respectively). It is noteworthy that none of these languages originate from areas that are under the control of IS.

5 Conclusion

It is sometimes asserted that efforts to suppress terrorism-promoting accounts on social media face an insurmountable difficulty: the fact that when one account is closed, users can simply create another, then another, and then another. However, research by Berger and Perez (2016) has shown that this whack-a-mole problem has been overstated. Finding that 'Returning accounts rarely reached their previous heights', they concluded: 'suspensions typically had a very significant detrimental effect on these repeat offenders, shrinking both the size of their networks and the pace of their activity' (ibid, 9). Our study offers further support for this conclusion. The suspended accounts within our dataset, which were overwhelmingly supportive of IS, were largely very young accounts with relatively low numbers of followers, and were suspended before they gained much of a following.

Our findings point instead to a different challenge. The number of IS sympathisers that were proactively trying to disseminate the new issue of *Dabiq* was relatively small. However, there were more than twice as many other, non-sympathiser accounts that also posted links to the new issue or discussion of it. Moreover, these accounts were still extant at the end of our data collection period. Plus, the total number of accounts that posted tweets and retweets about the new issue was nearly 20 times greater than the number of sympathiser accounts that were suspended. And that's just the number that tweeted or retweeted; there will be many more who saw these tweets and read them without posting anything. In short, the IS sympathisers who disseminated issue 15 of *Dabiq* caused a fairly small splash; it was others that caused the ripples to travel a long way.

We conclude by identifying an area for further research. It is well-documented that *Dabiq* seeks to 'Other' the West by employing an us versus them discourse (see, e.g., Ingram 2016; Lorenzo-Dus et al 2017). In the light of this, it is concerning to us that the predominant response on Twitter to *Dabiq* issue 15 from non-sympathisers was not only to increase awareness of the new issue, and even provide a direct link to a copy, but also to engage in a similarly 'Othering' discourse. Whilst further content analysis

needs to be conducted to assess the extent to which this concern is empirically justified, there is a danger here that by responding in kind oppositional voices risk exacerbating already-existing tensions and reinforcing the very divisions that IS seeks to generate and exploit in its recruitment efforts.

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