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Media Wars: The Caliphate Strikes Back
Islamic State's Propaganda Magazine Dabiq as a Possible
Paradigm Shift in Visual War Reporting and Propaganda

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the history and usage of war photography and propaganda according to theories of their utilisation for the establishment of national narratives in times of war. While Western media and nations alike try to establish narratives of just war without loss of innocent people and own soldiers, the newly emerged terrorist group *Islamic State* indicates a paradigm change in the approach of graphic content as part of propaganda.

As a death cult, that glorifies the gruesome deaths of their foes and the martyrdom of their own, there is a strong case to claim that their official English language magazine *Dabiq* contains graphic content as part of narratives that utilise *bare life* to support the group's narratives of desirable death.

By doing a mixed method approach of content analysis and critical visual analysis, this paper generates quantitative data on the usage of graphic content and sets it into comparison to US publications on recent wars in the Middle East. In a more detailed approach that data set is refined through critical visual analysis to analyse the graphic content and portraits of the dead as some form of advertisement for death.

In conclusion this thesis proves the claim that the *Islamic State* – opposing Western media – does not restrain from showing death and gore, but rather favours its publication for advertising purposes according to their narratives.

Key Words: Islamic State, Dabiq, Propaganda, War, Journalism, Photography, Mixed Methods, Bare Life, Habitus

Word count: 19.937

«You were not supposed to see these images. No one was.»

Christoph Bangert, *War Porn*

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I. Introduction

Media all over the world are experiencing a rapid pace in development of tools and ways of creating content as well as in transporting it to their audience. An essential part of media consumption and its evolution throughout history has been the visualisation of news. With more accessible and advanced technologies – from engraving to Instagram – the volume of visual content in media has been increasing over the decades and finally exploded once digital image capturing became affordable for the masses. Just alike general society, a similar development can be observed when it comes to the very special fields of general propaganda on the one side and terrorism on the other. Nations at war learned to adapt to new developments, how to limit free press in the field and make use of journalism's tools for their own interest. And so did terrorism: From bare pamphlets during the course of the 20th century, modern terrorists reached a level of competence in communication on which the public can easily access their glossy propaganda magazines and cinematic captions of beheadings in the realm of the self-proclaimed *Islamic State*¹. Throughout the following pages this thesis will first give a history of visual – or more narrow of photographic – war propaganda and war reporting, and its unwritten rules and principles which are followed by the majority of state and non-state participants in modern warfare since mid-19th century.²

Using this background and claiming that the *Islamic State* shows relevant characteristics to be classified as a death cult, the paper will further on list an analysis of the photographic content in *Islamic State*'s glossy English language propaganda magazine *Dabiq* which first came out in *Ramadan* 1435 (June/July 2014 CE) around the same time as the self-declaration as the true Islamic caliphate. *Dabiq* is published on a rough monthly to bi-monthly schedule and one of the group's main channels to inform outsiders about their activities i.e.

¹ Rooting from its origins under the name *al-Qaeda in Iraq*, the self-proclaimed *Islamic State* (IS) got various other names; including *Islamic State in Iraq and Syria* (ISIS) and *Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL) as and the Arabic abbreviation *Islamic State* which is used by their opponents to build a distance from the term *Islamic* as well as for the similar sound of various Arabic words with negative connotation. Throughout this paper the term *Islamic State* is used because it's the group's self-given name and therefore the most objective label even though it might be perceived as an acknowledgement of their statehood.

² Following the general direction of academic discourse on these topics, the main object of that overview will be war propaganda and photography in the realms of the so called *Western World* or by other terms the pre-1990 members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], being most countries of North America as well as Middle, Southern, Northern and Western Europe.

claim responsibility for the attacks on Paris in November 2015 or parade and execute hostages like journalist James Foley in August 2014.

Subject of its analysis will be the hypothesis that the *Islamic State*, through its glorification of death and the rejection of any mundane policies towards those called infidels, causes a paradigm shift in war propaganda and war photography. Those who aim to die for their gods and goals must not fear death and its visual evidence, and those who don't respect their enemies don't need to hide their violence. Therefore the advertisement of death becomes part of the brand's identity and narrative.

II. *Dabiq* – A new agent in the field of war reporting

«Some of the most important political photographs of the last year are propaganda photographs from a Jihadi group which by violence gained control over whole areas of Syria and Iraq. It's known that parties of war, dictators and militia are aware of the power of imagery and make use of it for their own cause, but so far they limited themselves to delivering a motif. The terrorists of the 9/11 attacks had to rely on independent media and their cameras to capture the second plane hitting the World Trade Center in New York. The members of the *Islamic State* rather produce their imagery themselves and proliferate their message through social media – without editorial filters and directly to the audience» (Dreyer 2015: 11)³

As a new and autonomous actor in the field of war reporting, the *Islamic State* not only causes question in how far it is comparable to known methods of reporting but also how Western media and nations agitate in times of struggle or in other words: How does the history of war photography, propaganda, and censorship as well as self-censorship of free media connect to the *Islamic States* effort of self-promotion through its journal *Dabiq*?

A. War propaganda, photography, and (self-) censorship

«Most of my colleagues who work in war and disaster zones have plenty of pictures like mine», Christoph Bangert concedes in his introduction to *War Porn* (Bangert 2014: 3ff), one of the most recent books on the brutality of war and its censorship in the media, before leaving the audience alone with his photographs. The German news photographer published his book in 2014 to bypass what is symptomatic for the coverage of wars since its beginning during the first *Crimean War*: *War Porn*, the visual proof for a type of violence in wars that is often perceived as too violent for the reader's eye and therefore never published. In his 2004 study of US magazines' photo content on the two latest wars in Iraq as well as the Afghanistan invasion of 2001, Michael Griffin outlines:

«As in 1991, photographs one might expect to see in wartime photojournalism – pictures of ongoing combat, images of casualties, and pictures of war dissenters – are largely missing. [...] Human injuries or death also appear in only 1.5 percent of the pictures [...] they are, without exception, bodies of foreign or enemy participants, never US soldiers. In *Newsweek*, five casualties were shown out of 894 pictures, all of them Afghan or unidentified 'allies' of Al Qaeda.» (Michael Griffin 2004: 392)

³ Due to the limited word count for this thesis, non-English sources are quoted in translation without giving the original formulation. All translations were done by the author.

Bangert – under the aspect of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* and his concept of *bare life* (Agamben 1998) – bypasses the censorship of mass media by setting up a book of unpublished photographs of death, gore and violence to make sense of the loss of life and his coverage (Bangert 2014: 4) and therefore end the dead's status of *homo sacer*.

This newly published war porn is one of the most recent but neither the first nor – hopefully – the last book which deals with visual evidence of the inconvenient casualties brought to humanity by modern warfare. The first publication of this kind has been the well-known *Krieg dem Kriege!* by German anti-war activist Ernst Friedrich which has been published in 1924 (Mason 2014) – ten years after the outburst of World War I, while *War Porn* was published around its hundredth anniversary. Within his book Friedrich collected images taken of battlefields and survivors of the war – usually showing explicit violence and mutilations. *Krieg dem Kriege!* differs from *War Porn* in the two aspects that first, Friedrich did not take the used pictures himself and second, he combined them with positive propaganda pictures (i.e.. a picture of «Papa» before leaving to the front, followed by an image of his corpse on the battlefield taken two days later (Friedrich 2015: 54f)). He therefore not just follows the idea to show what not was shown before, but produced propaganda against the government itself. This publication has been unique not only because of that times *Zeitgeist* but also because publication of photographs from the frontline was prohibited during World War I (Kellner). Only World War II would be considered as the first media and propaganda war in history, boasting whole divisions of soldiers dedicated to influential reporting from the frontlines.

Taking a leap from World War II as the first propaganda war – everything before was merely reporting of staged pictures (Sontag 2003) – «most scholars in literature conventionally focus on a few [other] major, post-1945 wars. So the main spotlight tends to fall on Vietnam, the Falklands, the Gulf Wars of 1991 and 2003, the NATO attacks on Yugoslavia of 1999 and the US-led assaults on Afghanistan following the 9/11 'terrorist' attacks in 2001» (Keeble 2009: 249) – sometimes split up in pre-war, war, and post-war periods (Tumber and Palmer 2004). In general the concept of propaganda is a reoccurring topic when it comes to research about the connection between media and war. In particular Iraq, Afghanistan and the whole *War on Terror* are commonly referred to as media wars and it is public and proven opinion that there were a lot of lies to construct a narrative of a just and necessary war (Miller 2014) – which in case of the *War on Terror* in Afghanistan had to be done in the aftermath because, differing from former wars, there has not been a narrative of

looming doom which prepared the public for battle but a somehow surprising declaration of war (Callahan, Dubnick, and Olshfski 2006). The most recent war in Iraq, on the other hand, was prepared through calculated misinformation of the public without giving the media a chance to object that narrative (Altheide and Grimes 2005). The fact that even in 2014, with the *Islamic State* on the rise, only 3% of the US-public perceived the Middle East as the greatest danger to America, somehow leads to the conclusion that the post-declaration narratives failed and the public became aware of told lies and constructed arguments for the invasion of Iraq (Stokes 2014). Regarding the misinformation in the media there are two leading opinions in social and media science about who has to be blamed for that.

One side of the medal is the way of reporting which was chosen by most Western media – the focus of most research lies on TV and print in the USA – around the war against Iraq during the early 1990s and could be called self-censorship or at least biased reporting. Not only did the large TV-stations choose mainly right-wing commentators from Benjamin Netanyahu to Dick Cheney to argue about and for war (Shohat 1991), they even further did neither hesitate to defame the Other through a construction of binaries that put Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and their followers in the corner of inferiors, monsters (Puar and Rai 2002) and sexual deviants (Shohat 1991) nor to show and repeat images that victimised the West «as priming motifs for news narratives» (Michael Griffin 2004: 397):

«In turn, terrorism has taken on an iconic, fetishized and, most significantly, a highly optical character. After witnessing the televised images of kamikaze planes hitting the World Trade Center, the home videos of Bin Laden, the internet beheading of Nicholas Berg, we were all too ready to agree with President Bush: ‘Evil now has a face.’» (Der Derian 2005)

Of course the airing of that violence came not without friction of different kinds:

«Relatively easy given is the answer if decapitations should be aired like it was done – for deterrence purposes – on e.g. the US station Fox News‘ web presence. This violates the dignity of the victim. It would be no different if the moving picture was cut just right before the execution. A pixelated still image would suffice. Some argue those scenes are easy to access online any way. However, this is about norms of responsible journalism.» (Gäbler 2015: 51)

Dignity of the dead is one of many aspects of war photography in which official censorship and self-censorship of the media perform the same action for different reasons. While Gäbler argues for the dignity of the dead for their own protection, the US government issues instructions that embedded reporters have to get a soldiers permission in advance to

take photographs of his corpse or even injuries (Filkins 2013); a request impossible to fulfil in the field, leading to no photographs of violence that could be published without getting in conflict with the government and possibly soldier's families. However, both arguments for censorship are not mutually exclusive: «The present analysis of photographic war coverage in American news-magazines lends further support to the idea that news photographs prime and reinforce prevailing new narratives rather than contribute independent or unique visual information.» (Michael Griffin 2004: 399) No matter if for dignity or rules of embedding: Some of the most powerful photographs of recent wars remain unpublished because of their graphic content for various reasons (Kamber 2013: 13).

However, works like *War Porn* deal with the general exploitation of the object and argue that a photo that was taken but never published taunts the victims (Bangert 2014) and even further, that a journalist has the duty to record suffering or else would lose any right to be on site (Bangert to Kamber 2013: 11). Bauernschmitt and Ebert compare the situation of war reporting by derivation of the famous saying of the 1980s peace movement «Suppose they gave a war and nobody came» into their interpretation: «Suppose they gave a war and nobody reports it.» (Bauernschmitt and Ebert 2015: 193) Just like Bangert, they claim that a journalist has to give sense to the deaths of victims of war by reporting it to those who are absent from the front. Even though they don't undermine Gäbler's argument to not show as much violence as possible they still promote an approach that is common within the discourse on war reporting: To assume that a photograph is able to numb the viewer is as naïve as to assume it can end a war. «War reporting can rouse, shock, and therefore influence without doubt. In best case it changes the public opinion like it happened during the Vietnam War, when the continuous exposure of the public towards horrors induced rethinking about the war.» (Bauernschmitt and Ebert 2015: 194)

Vietnam has been an exceptional war for photojournalism in various aspects. It not only showed how visual reporting – photography and the even younger medium of TV reporting – is able to influence the public, it also taught the US government a lesson on the consequences of uncontrolled media. Equipped with newly invented 35mm film cameras that allowed relative extensive coverage, «[f]rom Vietnam, photographers taught the world how to see the war. Say the word 'Vietnam' today to most people of a certain age; the image that rises is usually a photograph.» (Hamill 2013: 25) The photograph – with all its weaknesses if left alone for itself – became iconic in its function of freezing the moment in which it performs so much better than any kind of written or spoken text. About his photograph of a

self-immolating monk in Vietnam Peter Arnett says: «I had more reaction from that photograph [...] than from all the stories I had written in 1962 and 1963» (Quoted after Hamill 2013: 29) and many a colleague from the writing profession or with no previous education earned his stripes in the jungles and fields of Southeast Asia. «Sometimes, of course, the luck was bad. Human beings die in wars. Press cards are not bulletproof. But there was no censorship, and for the first time in American history, and almost certainly the last, the thing that mattered most was the truth. The elusive, frustrating truth.» (Hamill 2013: 23)

«[Photographs] had another function that was perhaps even more important: They were the verifiers. As the war became more intense, more violent, with more and more young people coming home in body bags. The domestic debate about Vietnam got nastier. The photographs were a way of showing truths beyond any reasonable doubt.» (Hamill 2013: 25)

Or in other words:

«[...] seeing an army shell a church or other historic site which is sheltering civilians is bad enough; but understanding that such an attack represents a violation of the Geneva Conventions raises it to another level of importance – elevating what may seem a routine article into a breakthrough report on a major shift in the tactics and implications of the conflict.» (Institute for War and Peace Reporting 2004: 179)

Hand in hand with those powerful images went abuse and misinterpretation:

«To Kafka it is ascribed that (he who desires to rule must speak to the eyes.) That sentence expresses chances and risks of the medium. A camera doesn't lie. The man who operates it, however, has no option but imprinting his personal attitude towards the action. No matter if choice of framing, focal length or choice of releasing the shutter – photography, cannot know objectivity. But more than 170 years after its invention that truism didn't go around, yet.» (Bauernschmitt and Ebert 2015: 127)

Professional journalists as well as scholars are aware of the lacks of photography in terms of telling stories without proper framing. As this thesis will later argue, a photograph can be true and still turn false through entanglement in propaganda. Therefore it is of uttermost importance to have people in the field and at editorial desks that are able to understand their work and its consequences: «Not he who can't read but he who can't understand photography, it is said, will be the illiterate of the future.» But must not a photographer who can't read his own pictures be reckoned as even worse? Will textual framing not become an essential part of the captured moment?» (Benjamin 2003: 64)

The misinterpretation or at least underestimation of power of images caused a struggle that made the war in Vietnam possibly the last one with a complete free press. The US forces not only underestimated the power of media but were so convinced of their own moral superiority that they issued no limits for members of the media at all. When they realised their fatal mistake it was too late and «war reporting had achieved its biggest victory.» (Bauernschmitt and Ebert 2015: 193)

However, «[a]n angry political struggle began to rage in the United States, and part of the anger from the right was directed against the media, including the relatively new medium of television. That tactic was familiar, of course. If in doubt, blame the messenger.» (Hamill 2013: 23) Since the first Daguerreotypes during the Mexican-American war in 1847 it had been a rare opportunity for journalists to cover wars without any restrictions. They had gotten their chance and the government had to pay the price for loosening its grip on the media and therefore an important agent in the creational process of national narratives in times of war.

Today, the US government tries to control public opinion by preventing imagery that shows sympathy for the enemy, or imagery that shows wounded or dead US soldiers abroad (Fahmy 2005: 148). To enforce their desired perception of following wars, the administration – which often included Vietnam veterans who had first-hand experience of the loss of control in the former war (Perlmutter 2005: 111) – not only exploited evidences for their own victimisation to build a narrative of necessity for war by e.g. sending an exhibition about the aftermath of 9/11 around the globe (Kennedy 2003), it also established a system of censorship which never before existed in those dimensions: Because «a war is just if, and only if, the harms it causes are outweighed by the goods it brings about, and if it is waged for a just cause, to just ends and by a legitimate authority» (Fabre 2008: 963), «[...] the camera must be kept away from body bags, [...] reporters must be controlled, [...] censorship is necessary for victory.» (Shohat 1991: 135) To be able to give reports from the battlefields of recent wars, journalists had to apply to be attached to a military unit – known under the term embedded journalism which was first introduced during the first Gulf War in 1991 and finally established in Iraq after 2003 caused by media protests about a lack of access to the battlefields (Buchanan 2011). Therefore – opposing to other censored wars in history (Sontag 2003) – accounts from the frontline were not brought to the public by military reporters only anymore but instead by apparently unbiased civilians. The critique is obvious; by using civil journalists the military seems to open up for the public but by embedding them to certain units it still keeps control not only over what those journalists see but also what of the seen they are

allowed to report to their home media (Butler 2009). The desire of the Bush administration to gain control over media went as far as that former foreign minister Condoleezza Rice demanded the TV-station Al Jazeera to hand over videos produced by terrorist to screen them for hidden messages and enforce censorship before airing them (Der Derian 2005) while former US minister of defence Donald Rumsfeld saw the main problem in the infamous torture pictures taken by soldiers of the US-led alliance in the prison of Abu Ghraib not in their content but the fact that they were taken (Rumsfeld 2004).

One will find a similar theory in Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* which is one of the main pieces of literature behind this thesis.

«[I]t remains as true as ever that most people will not question the rationalizations offered by their government for starting or continuing a war. It takes some very peculiar circumstances for a war to become genuinely unpopular. (The prospect of being killed is not necessarily one of them.) When it does, the material gathered by photographers, which they may think of as unmasking the conflict, is of great use. Absent such a protest, the same anti-war photograph may be read as showing pathos, or heroism, admirable heroism, in an unavoidable struggle that can be concluded only by victory or by defeat. The photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it.» (Sontag 2003)

She not only underscores the importance of photography and goes d'accord with the majority of authors who claim that the meaning of a photograph is strongly dependant on its accompanying narrative but also understands how photographs can be used to strengthen or end a narrative. Unfortunately most if not all of the works on recent propaganda and war reporting are not focussing on the pure purpose of photography and the content of photographs. However, as Sontag puts it: «In contrast to a written account – which, depending on its complexity of thought, reference, and vocabulary, is pitched at a smaller or larger readership – a photograph has only one language and is destined potentially for all» (Sontag 2003) and because the *Islamic State* aims to reach an international market with its propaganda magazine, photography is one of the central keys to deliver its message. *Regarding the Pain of Others* gives an extensive history of war photography, from the first war photographer in 1855 to the first real propaganda wars World War I and II to the hyperreal documentation of modern warfare from the perspective of the smart bomb that's hitting a shelter. Besides of the historical overview Sontag gives background knowledge of iconic pictures like General Loan, chief of police in Saigon during the Vietnam War, who shot a Vietcong fighter in front of AP

and BBC cameras, resulting in one of the best known war photographs of all time – which has been staged and therefore can't be properly understood without its framing (Sontag 2003).

War photography is tightly – as Bangert tries to explain through his book – entangled with concepts of pornography in terms of exploitation and the desire to look and be shocked. However, due to the limited volume of this thesis, pornography, aestheticisation of violence and voyeurism will not be included within this paper. However, a more extensive body of work would almost imperatively analyse aspects of pornography within *Islamic State* propaganda and communication. Likewise the consequences of technological progress on photography and a lack of iconic photographs since Vietnam (Bauernschmitt and Ebert 2015: 195) should be object of closer evaluation when it comes to a more extensive analysis of new paradigms in war photography.

B. The *Islamic State*, its death cult, and *Dabiq*

«To display the dead, after all, is what the enemy does.» (Sontag 2003) – Sontag's bold statement is common opinion in literature about the history of war photography and needs to be analysed if valid for *Islamic State* propaganda. First, the group rarely allows independent journalists' reporting from their realm (e.g. the controversial German journalist Jürgen Todenhöfer or a team of VICE News did somehow extensive reporting from the caliphate). For those free journalists,

«[a]llegedly the group issued rules [...] within the province Deir al-Sor which are not arguable. Among other things they force them to pledge loyalty to the self-proclaimed calif Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, must not publish anything without approval of the *IS* bureau of press and must not collaborate with certain news outlets like Al-Arabija, Al-Jazeera or Orient TV.» (Dreyer 2015: 11)

For their own reporting, or rather propaganda, there is – besides of the more general approach to war photography – some specific literature dealing with modern day terrorist groups, namely *Islamic State* and to a much bigger extent also *al-Qaeda*. Because one organisation grew out of the other, the literature on *al-Qaeda* propaganda can be used as a starting point to specify in the direction of *Islamic State*, even though «[n]o terror organization has been so forthright in the reporting of its strategy or aims [as the *Islamic State*].» (Celso 2014) «The propaganda demonstrates radicalisation and excessive violence. But likewise it inherits a visual language that caters towards Jihad-romanticism. [...] It establishes a worship of strength, invincibility and supreme masculinity.» (Gäbler 2015: 51p) As pars pro toto Celso and Clark as two scholars who worked on the *Islamic State* and *Dabiq*

will be used to understand the militia's concept of being a death cult and how this fact is key to answer this thesis' hypothesis that the group's way of propaganda serves as a paradigm shift.

«While bin Laden and other members of *Al-Qaeda* envisaged an eventual confrontation between the forces of good and the forces of evil, they did not anticipate that this would happen any time soon. They saw themselves as having a religious duty to oppose America and her allies and they anticipated a long struggle, which might lead to the demise of America, and perhaps, eventually, the demise of Satan. By contrast, *ISIS* see the final confrontation between Islam and its various opponents, led by Satan as an event that will happen reasonably soon. The sense that the apocalypse is fast approaching shapes much of *ISIS*'s thinking and drives much of their behaviour [...] (Clark 2015)

Most scholars who published research about the ideology of *Islamic State* agree on the fact, that at least certain aspects of it are following definitions of a (death) cult (La Palm 2014) and that it therefore doesn't need to follow the secular rules of the state it claims to be. In her comparison between al-Qaeda and the *Islamic State*, Novenario outlines the grave differences between those groups, concluding that almost a quarter of *Dabiq*'s articles until January 2016 fell into the category of intimidation, heavily publicising severe punishments and victories in battle (Novenario 2016: 8). From this hypothesis only, one can already claim that there is no need for *Islamic State* to follow common rules of propaganda like not showing too much violence or the faces of the dead (Sontag 2003).

«*Dabiq* in particular is used by the IS to attract recruits, frighten opponents, and discredit jihadist rivals. [...] Many *IS* fighters are motivated by apocalyptic themes. Jihadist social media is keenly interested in the «prophetic method» and the advent of the end times.» (Celso 2014) It is therefore not clear if the leaders truly believe in their own messages and scholars seem to strongly disagree in this point. While Celso claims that «*IS* rationally crafted war strategy, its slick media campaigns, its acquisition of key resources should not mask its utopian ideological thrust» (Celso 2014) and Galloway sees a well elaborated propaganda concept that seeks for common values to build its ultra-violent Sunni Jihadi narrative on (Galloway 2016), Clark – as further elaborated later on – sees a clear distinction between propaganda and the concept behind *Dabiq* since he has the understanding that the leaders of the *Islamic State* truly believe in their magazine's messages (Clark 2015). However, due to recent attacks in Beirut and Paris or various threats in Germany, not all of the research on *Islamic State* ideology, behaviour and propaganda is up to date. In particular Clark's claims about their long term goals and death cult behaviour:

«Because *ISIS* expect the final confrontation with Satan to happen relatively soon, they are not nearly as focussed on opposing America as are *Al Qaeda*. *ISIS* sees it as their religious duty to oppose all of the allies of Satan, whether these be Americans, Europeans, Israelis, Shiite Muslims, or Sunni Muslims who resist the expansion of the *Islamic State*. They are also disinclined to accept conventional accounts of relations between international powers, and are much more inclined than *Al Qaeda* to see the various allies of Satan as conspiring with one another.» (Clark 2015)

Nevertheless, with or without a shift in ideology over the course of recent months and year, all authors – as well as the ones outside of the discourse on *Islamic State*-specific propaganda – agree on the fact, that an understanding of ideology and its communication is necessary to understand and counter the terrorists' narrative. «By better studying the written media of *ISIS* and *Al Qaeda*, counterterrorism experts can create a strong and nuanced counter-narrative to challenge Islamic extremist media» (Habib 2015), or as Clark puts it:

«To enable successful prediction of the behaviour of apocalyptic religious groups that come to believe that the apocalypse is imminent you would need detailed knowledge of their apocalyptic beliefs and motives, as well as detailed knowledge of the ways in which the leadership of the organisation in question were planning to respond to the apocalypse.» (Clark 2015)

Celso on the other hand draws a line between propaganda and the contents of *Dabiq* since the messages are apparently not what *Islamic State* wants its opponents to believe but what they actually consider to be truth (Celso 2014) – as the next chapter will show, this is a necessary premise to produce propaganda. This small note underscores the methodological problem of not being able to understand the true motives of the *Islamic State* but merely doing interpretations. Clark even goes as far that he not only predicts the possibility of a change of content towards less radical messages – which will be analysed within this thesis and is also mentioned by Celso – but even claims that Western understanding of *Islamic State* propaganda is futile in a sense that only Sunni scholars could influence their apocalyptic understanding of Islam:

«In the meantime, if the leadership of *ISIS* can be persuaded that what they see as signs of the impending apocalypse are not really such signs, then they will be less likely to increase the levels of violence that are already present along the borders of the Islamic State, and less likely to act in unpredictable and potentially catastrophic ways. This is not a task that this author, or any other secular Westerner, can undertake. The only people who have any

realistic chance of persuading the leadership of *ISIS* that the apocalypse is not really approaching are Sunni Muslim theologians.» (Clark 2015)

However, two scholars who did research similar to this thesis are Max van Meegeren who worked on the representation of orientalist clichés in *Dabiq* (van Meegeren 2015) and Sofie Scheerlinck who did critical visual analysis on *Visuals of Violence* in Iraq and Afghanistan (Scheerlinck 2009). Furthermore there are few works on the representation of women in *Dabiq* and *Inspire* (Huey 2015) and *Dabiq* alone (Nacos 2015). Even though they include graphic content analysis, they are of no more use due to their different scope on the magazine. Regarding the following chapter on this thesis' methodology, Clark furthermore mentions one of the main deficits of the intended research because «[i]t is impossible for outsiders to really know if *ISIS*'s leaders really do mean what they say, but we should take what they say very seriously anyway.» (Clark 2015) The problems of not being able to communicate with *Dabiq* editors will be mentioned in the next chapters as well. On a final note on methodology the article *Empirical Assessment of al Qaeda , ISIS , and Taliban Propaganda* by Skillicorn (2015) needs to be mentioned in which only the language of the various Islamic propaganda media is analysed but which gives very detailed information on their methods of comparison.

III. Inversing *Orientalism* to kill the Other

«[M]any social actors, especially those who belong to various fractions of the dominant class, think that the press is too serious a matter to be left to journalists.» (Champagne 2005: 49) Therefore, *Dabiq*, as well as other media published by the *Islamic State's* *ALHayat Media Center*, are what van Meegeren calls the theatre of terror⁴ (2015: 37): professionalised media campaigns with «strikingly high production quality» (Becker 2014) and orchestrated by the leadership itself. Because «[w]ho owns and controls access to historical images – and, consequently, to some of the chief ingredients of history – has become an urgent, weighty issue made all the more so by the commercialization and privatization of digital archives» (Tucker and Campt 2009: 2)⁵, those campaigns aim at no less than attacking the balance of power between the *West and the Rest* (Hall 1992: 276) or even further a complete inversion of the classic binary scheme of *Orientalism* (Said 2003). The *Islamic State's* propaganda builds up the group's identity through a narrative of inversion of the concept of the West against the Other into *IS* against the Other which now becomes the West – *White Man's Burden* turns into a proclaimed holy duty to fight the infidels and enemies of the faith turn into victims of violence. The whole concept of their propaganda – indicating towards this thesis' hypothesis – is a construct of negativisms against their foes, opposing the positivist approaches in Western media (Simons 2016). As Stuart Hall (1992: 279) outlines, that concept of utilising differences to the Other is a basic process during the acquisition of a national identity and just like within the discourse from a Western perspective, the *IS* outlets deal with an unequal situation of power from which they draw the fuel for their narrative (Hall 1992: 294).

The weapon of choice to proclaim that binary narrative is propaganda because particularly within societies and times that are moulded by negative experiences people are

⁴ As the term theatre implies, *IS* propaganda is probably staged to a certain unknown but probably high amount. The aspect of fake news is not included in this thesis because it falls in the category of context not content. For the analysis of graphic content it is of no high relevance if an execution was staged or dead children were placed in ruins.

⁵ Bill Gates caused some debate in early 2016 when he sold his photo agency *Corbis* – one of the largest archives of photography in the world – to a Chinese media company. Among many famous and iconic photographs distributed by *Corbis* is one particular set of files that gave many a doubt about the sale: *Tank Man*, the photographs of a man standing in front of a line of tanks during the infamous *Tiananmen Massacres* of 1989, an event that until today has been negated by the Chinese government. Even though not all photographs of that event belong to *Corbis* and therefore «[t]hese photographs will not disappear» (Laurent 2016), many within the industry expressed their concern about selling those photographs to China, a country infamous for its censorship.

open to simplistic answers to lessen their sorrow (Arendt 1973). Klaus Arnold (2003: 63) notes that the term propaganda is commonly used without a precise definition and more likely labels everything that is perceived as public relation work in a pejorative way. «Convincing others of an opinion and therefore developing a collective opinion which in turn allows collective action, fulfils an essential function in social constructs.» (Arnold 2003: 64) Among the various perspectives and interpretations that are given by Arnold there is one aspect that particularly fits to describe *Islamic State* communications. According to his analysis of Western discourses on propaganda, it creates a myth that eliminates every deviation from its teachings and is finally totalitarian in its claims and consequences. It is unlikely to find a group that represents those traits more than an organisation that claims to be the only valid representation of a deity on Earth.

However, propaganda must be built on true facts; its lies only develop through its framing and interpretation according to its intended narrative (Arnold 2003: 67ff). The absolute claim of truth in consequence is a fundamental characteristic of propaganda and – Foucauldian interpretation of social mechanisms in essence – reproduces itself: The root of propaganda must be true and since its outcome is perceived as the only true interpretation it generates itself – with the limitation that a photograph for itself can never be true without framing:

«Our ability to interpret images is limited by our senses. Because we perceive time as a series of moments, we instinctively assume that this image represents an instant. This is as true as it was in 1838 when Samuel Morse saw the image⁶ and was shocked by the emptiness of Paris. By capturing a view that is beyond the limits of our senses, the image reveals an alternate truth in which static objects are isolated from objects in motion.» (Felton 2016: 4)

Furthermore, Kari Andén-Papadopoulos says about the truth of photography that:

«On the one hand, because of their perceived status as unmediated ‘windows’ on the world, photographs have served to guarantee the objectivity and truth-value of news reporting. On the other hand, defined as a ‘purely visual’ medium, photographs have been assigned to the non-reflective realm of simplistic sensations, perceived as a threat to the journalistic new institution with its roots in the rationalist Enlightenment. Hence, the news images have traditionally been regarded as subjugated illustrations, incapable of telling stories or

⁶ ”Boulevard du Temple”, commonly labelled as the first photograph of a human being, due to its long term exposure made the moving masses in the street become invisible and only a single shoe polisher who been standing still for long enough can be made out in the photograph.

articulating complex ideas, except by parasitical dependence on verbal reporting.» (Andén-Papadopoulos 2008: 7)

In consequence, taking photographs as *Dabiq*'s true core which builds but at the same time is built by the framing narrative of the accompanying texts, the analysis for a paradigm shift gives ground to understand how the *Islamic State* understands and executes propaganda.

However, even though propaganda is perceived as being a tool foremost used by totalitarian regimes it is likewise used within democratic states during times of war (Arnold 2003: 73) and therefore does not necessarily bear a negative connotation.

A. Facing violence and violators

Photographs therefore don't tell narratives but confirm them. The photograph validates what texts claim. The reasons why this verbal reporting and its validation has to be clean, has to conform to a public narrative of just war in Western policy, are obvious. Regarding *Krieg dem Kriege* Kurt Tucholsky writes: «No author, not even the most gifted, can outplay the power of images.» (Wrobel 1926: 312) Proper used images can therefore give national – and a nation is what *Islamic State* leaders perceive themselves as – propaganda a huge turn towards favouring war and even inconvenient pictures can be ignored for a while as World War I and II showed. «Many Germans in the 1920s and 30s came to believe, despite the horrific photographs, that the war had embodied the noblest and most exhilarating aspects of human life; and specifically that warfare represented the ultimate in technological modernity and moral freedom.» (Mason 2014) And yet according to Philip Smith's theories in *Why War* the consumption of too much graphic violence could still change the public opinion that a war is just or even necessary into an apocalyptic one that doesn't support the continued warfare anymore (Smith 2005) – just as the USA experienced it during the Vietnam War and during their recent years in Iraq. This change of public opinion can be caused by two different types of images. One kind are the infamous pictures of dead soldiers arriving in their home country sealed in metal coffins. Those pictures influence the gain-loss calculation which is done to justify a war. The second and more complicated kind of images are those of the suffering enemy. Publishing pictures of victims of our own violence interferes with our framing of the deviants we are fighting – e.g. Bin Laden who personified the murder of several thousand people during 9-11 – and suggests they don't deserve that amount of violence (Sontag 2004). It becomes even worse if the killed people are non-combatants or even children. However, «[m]ost people of any nation value the lives of their people more than the lives of the Other.» (Fahmy 2005: 148) And even though e.g. the infamous photographs from Abu Ghraib caused

vocalised discomfort with the war and its consequences Andén-Papadopoulos calls it «evidently simplistic» to assume they caused a shift in public perception but rather «evoked and helped crystallize an already existing political discourse critical of US foreign policy.» (Andén-Papadopoulos 2008: 14) What concerned the public more than the torture of prisoners of war was their discrepancy with the national narrative of just war and even worse – similar to Donald Rumsfeld's interpretation – the fact that US soldiers, their own kind, were able to «lift a camera in the face of such degradation, without the least sign of compunction, and even derive pleasure from the work at hand.» (Andén-Papadopoulos 2008: 15)

B. Making use of the bare life

So why does Susan Sontag claim it's only the enemy who shows off the dead? To start from the scratch one has to understand the term of *war porn* and how it is used. According to Christoph Bangert, «[h]orrific images have the ability to shock and dehumanize, just as pictures of sexual pornography do. [...] Call it war porn, if you like. I believe that it is impossible to avoid the dehumanizing elements in horrific images entirely, just as it is impossible to avoid the exploitation-of-the-subject-dilemma, at least to a certain extent.» (Bangert 2014: 4) Those associations are also common in Susan Sontag's extensive writings on photography, in particular in her theories about the sexualisation of the Abu Ghraib photographs. (Sontag 2004) In a certain way their perception of gory photographs of torture and war correlates with Giorgio Agamben's concepts of *bare life* and the *homo sacer*. By living in an area of war, humans – civilians in particular – turn into *homo sacer* in the eyes of their enemies because they live in a realm where the sovereign can and will not guarantee human rights until the war is over. (Agamben 1998) Officially most nations around the globe fight their wars according to the Geneva Conventions which grant certain rights to combatants and civilians alike. In reality there are several limitations to this concept like terrorist groups which don't play by the rules or the plain impossibility to protect civilians during a bombing. In conclusion there are several cases during wartimes in which humans can't count on having any of their promised rights left. They therefore become what Agamben calls *bare life*; the human being which was stripped of everything but its mere life. When killing those people one cannot – directly – be punished for it as far as he is not accused of war crimes – and even then he is not necessarily to blame. What journalists like Bangert and the *Islamic State* alike are doing is breaking a social rule. They publish those photographs of the dead and tortured, and give in some way sense to the suffering of the pictured people. They show what the general public would rather not know and not see. According to Agamben they turn the *homo sacer*'s former *bare life*, through its death and by publication as proof; into *zoē politikē*

(political life) by – in their role as the fourth estate or propaganda machinery – throwing it into the political discourse (Agamben 1998).

C. Journalists – rendering narratives or breaking the habitus

Now, why is this concept of *bare life* important to understand the common self-censorship or propagandistic use of photographs containing *war porn*? Photographs of victims of war first prove Agamben's theory wrong that *bare life* only exists because a state of exception by the sovereign becomes durable (Weber 2012) in form of termination camps like those established by the German Reich – Agamben's common example (Agamben 1998). In areas of war it is clearly present without the environment of camps like that or the often mentioned and younger examples of Abu Ghraib. (Caton 2006) By reminding the viewer of the existence of *homo sacer* the images intervene with narratives built up by politicians and military which usually contain the idea of surgical warfare – or in the content of *Islamic State* propaganda either the infidels who deserved or the martyrs who earned their death – and therefore an absolute minimum of killed innocent – more commonly called collateral damage. The *homo sacer* does – according to those narratives – not exist.

«But there's one problem: these pictures are non-fictional, unlike the ultra-violent Hollywood movies we so readily consume or the gruesome video games we play. They document and interpret real events. How can this work possibly be meaningless or insignificant? How can we refuse to acknowledge a mere representation – a picture – of a horrific event, while other people are forced to live through the horrific itself?» (Bangert 2014: 5)

From here on the theory of narratives connects with the concepts of framing on different levels and in two directions. Pictures taken by journalists or soldiers are taken as proof of what happened in the battlefield. Only a photograph – and in times of digital manipulation sometimes even this is not enough – is considered as an undeniable evidence for the happening justice or injustice (Reid 1994). They therefore turn the journalists into agents, participating in the construction of war narratives – in one way or the other and even without being controlled by governments their habitus is strongly steered by others: «Economic censorship, which occurs through the paper's sales, is stronger and much more merciless. It is anonymous and can appear legitimate to many: if the paper doesn't sell, or sell enough, whose fault is it but that of the journalists themselves, who don't know how to interest their readers?» (Champagne 2005: 51) Unfortunately, the most journalistic operations are usually the least profitable and graphic content not only scares away audience but also advertisers

resulting in economic control of journalism's habitus which finally leads to the necessity of niche publications like *War Porn* to give public to the dead. (Champagne 2005: 52)

The profession's habitus becomes important for the understanding of censorship because «photographs cannot tell stories. They can only provide evidence of stories, and evidence is mute.» (Gourevitch and Morris 2009, 148) To build a story, it needs a narrative. Without explanation, the dead body one sees is just a dead body and nothing more. Only additional information added by a narrative text put it into context and make the viewer realise its message; this is the second level of framing.

The first level of framing already starts by taking the picture itself. What works like *War Porn* and *Krieg dem Kriege* reveal is how violence exists and is never shown to the public. But – besides of the mentioned fact that without documenting evidence a crime never happened – how can the public be sure that – if a camera was present – the photographer first took a picture at all and second did not exclude necessary information. It lies in the very definition of a photographic image that it has a framing. By choosing angle, time, format and other details of it the photographer decides how his picture shows his object and therefore possibly affects the audience.

Which consequences can one draw for the role of journalists within the framing of propaganda from these approaches to photography as part of narratives? «The dead body – on the battlefield, in the tomb of the unknown soldier, in the collective memory, even on the movie screen – is what gives war its special status. This fact can be censored, hidden in a body bag, air-brushed away, but it provides, even in its erasure, the corporal gravitas of war.» (Der Derian 2005) By speaking of self-censorship the photographer or editor reaches a status of freedom of choice which turns him into an agent in the discourse over war. Several aspects become important for his behaviour in this system: Journalists should play the role of the fourth estate. They are supposed to correct misbehaviour of their government through unbiased reporting. Judith Butler claims that this kind of work is impossible in general but during the reporting of war in particular. (Butler 2005) Each photographer brings his own habitus, has his own framing of what he expects – built up by images he consumed on his own before arriving at the scene, comparable to Mitchell's work about the World Exhibition in Paris (Mitchell 1991) – and therefore produces in consequence only a certain framing which always excludes information and aims for a certain purpose (Butler 2005) – be it on purpose or by accident.

«When dealing with graphic photographs, the context of the new, self-censorship, personal ethics, and audience expectations are active ingredients in the election process.» (Fahmy 2005: 152) Ignoring the fact that even an embedded journalist could – just because he has the power to do so – publish pictures which are inconvenient for his government (or e.g. the advertisement sells of his media) there are several other reasons why he might decide to keep a picture in his archives. US-media that were publishing pictures of coffins arriving from the frontline were denounced by the public. «[A]lthough journalists normally would not run violent visuals that my violate public norms, they may sometimes feel – such as in the case of war – that it is acceptable to run controversial content to tell an important truth.» (Fahmy 2005: 151) They did their job properly – even found a way of showing violence without going graphic – but what they showed was not conforming to the national narrative. Furthermore they attacked the narrative and the framing the public had for its own. Showing dead soldiers to a war euphoric public is an impossible narrow turn in narration and didn't even work out after publication of strong images like those from Abu Ghraib. «Pictures of war should not only show us what bodies look like. They should educate us about absurdities, the accidents and pointless killing,» (Mason 2014) and most important they show who we are by documenting what we are able to do to others. (Butler 2005)

Shahira Fahmy (2005: 151) shows up several studies that prove that US editors – even though they follow their general habitus of appealing to governments, advertisers and audience – usually don't follow coherent governing rules on which photos are acceptable to be published and which aren't. Besides of not being consequent in their role as gatekeepers, many journalists within those findings made decisions on ground of political orientation and personal opinions on explicitness instead of traditions of newsworthiness or quality. One thing they all have alike is a fear of being wrong: «'Hey, if this is such a hot story, how come AP or the *Washington Post* doesn't have it?' [...] The editors don't want scoops. Their abiding interest is making sure that nobody else has got anything that they don't have, not getting something that nobody else has.» (Crouse 1972: 9ff) Reporting aside the mainstream and therefore risking to report wrong is considered jeopardising a reporter's professional standing (Donsbach 2004: 139) and highlights the importance of their habitus – minor aberrations from common reporting are what feeds variety within the media but the more professional and successful a news outlet grows, the more it has to obey the rules of its profession to not sacrifice its stand (Champagne 2005). In consequence «[o]ften, identical photographs appear in more than one publication. Also, the pictorial coverage [...] tends to fall into a narrow

pattern of repetition, with a small number of photo genres compressing the range of visualization available to news consumers.» (Michael Griffin 2004: 391)

Susan Sontag closes *Regarding the Pain of Others* with the fact that the «dead are supremely uninterested in the living». (Sontag 2003) A picture can't help the dead, can't change their narrative, they already lost everything. Though, it might prevent further deaths, but «[s]ome say, 'What's the point of showing these things? We know that wars and disasters are horrible events.' But are we really aware of just HOW horrible they are? Yes? Why are we so shocked by these pictures, then?» (Bangert 2014: 3) And even if those pictures are still shocking – which Sontag doubts in her earlier book *On Photography* but revises later (Butler 2005) – they are still only part of a new anti-war narrative and a new framework. Just like the visitors of the World Exhibition in Paris never saw the real Cairo, will the reader of a newspaper in Europe never understand the cruelties of war by looking at a photograph (Sontag 2003). «[I]n an age of Info-terror one begins to wonder just how profound and lasting these image-effects truly are. [...] The Abu Ghraib images shocked us but have yet to cause any heads to roll.» (Der Derian 2005)

D. A new habitus

This chapter has outlined the roles of *bare life* and habitus for journalists' decisions on proliferation of graphic content and has shown how those interpretations can contribute or damage a state's framing of conflict and official narratives. And even though journalists like Christoph Bangert try to break their profession's habitus by publishing their works outside of the journalistic sphere and even though a majority of embedded journalists in recent wars in the Middle East did not complain about any governmental censorship at all: Journalism's habitus works within the frame of its society and has to appeal to officials as well as to own ideals and the rules of a free market. So if even professional and independent journalists work within and towards the fulfilment of the narratives of their culture (Michael Griffin 2004: 399), how far does *Islamic State* propaganda – as it is not independent and unbiased – go in promoting its own perceptions of reality?

Of course *Dabiq*'s framing differs from that of Western journalists. The *Islamic State* narrates a tale of a just fight against infidels – a fight that is supposed to be as violent as possible to secure a proper afterlife for the own death, and foes who quiver in fear. It doesn't follow markets nor the weak stomachs of their audience but just their need to construct through propaganda a reality in which it is the only credible instance (Arnold 2003: 74). And therein they root their habitus of advertising violence to humiliate their foes and glorify their

actions in the field while Bangert outrages about Western ignorance in the face of *bare life*: «But people who tell me they can't look at my pictures make me angry [...] Deep inside I'm screaming at the top of my lungs, 'You can't look at my pictures? Well, try harder! You softy first-world whiners! Wake up! Those are real people! If you can't stomach it, get the hell off this planet! You HAVE TO look at it!.'» (Bangert 2014: 2ff) Photographs that are true and lies at the same time are used by both.

IV. Approaching *Dabiq*

The majority of literature on war photography and propaganda focusses on the development of mainly Western media throughout the last 160 years since the Crimean War. Following that stream of thought this thesis has so far drawn a picture of how the media as well as fighting groups and nations gave publicity to their ways of warfare throughout history. Photography has been introduced as a tool of reporting and propaganda during named war in the mid of the 19th century but was not fully developed and used until WW II. Vietnam finally was the first war with independent reporting (Sontag 2003) and usage of 35mm cameras which lay foundation to modern photojournalism (Bauernschmitt and Ebert 2015). The next step after highlighting the sometimes different, sometimes similar mechanics between propaganda and journalism is to analyse the contents of *Dabiq* as journalism done by a self-proclaimed state. At the end of that analysis this thesis aims to validate the claim that the *Islamic State*'s characteristics of a death-cult and terrorist organisation lay ground to a paradigm shift in photographic propaganda on warfare.

A. The subjectivism of propaganda research

In terms of a leading research philosophy, since it is analysing *Dabiq* magazine as a tool of communication, this thesis has to stick to the common communication studies approach of Post-Positivism. This is due to its connection to war reporting which is highly depending on the reporter's subjective view on the scene that lies out in front of him but also due to the given definition of propaganda which sees need of truth in its core but then gets altered to support a certain narrative.

While looking at an objective world, a world which is defined by natural laws, a world which can be understood by numbers, rules and big data, the outcome of events is always depending on subjective actions of its smallest parts and gears. Positivism deals with such a world and sees a theory's purpose as generating hypothesis that can be tested and explain the world (Bryman 2012: 28). To a certain extent, this is the aim of this thesis. However, since a scholar is always embedded in certain narratives it is difficult to research propaganda in a way that is free of any values. Positivism itself can therefore be no option except for being the root of Post-Positivism which connects the philosophies of Interpretivism and Positivism (Bryman 2012). This paradigm has been described and can be defined as Positivism that is open to be challenged. Or in other words: Positivism's true world can be influenced and shaped by a single individual's actions which therefore need to be included in any further analysis.

In case of this thesis' research on *Dabiq* and journalism in general, one can claim that of course news happen in an objective way. An event has occurred and a media outlet reports it. There is no interpretation of that event being untrue since even propaganda roots in a piece of truth. This being said; whatever the outlet or the journalist interpret into that news is highly subjective. Even further, one could of course argue that some news events might not happen without the presence of a journalist. This is particularly an issue for news that are generated with the intention of manipulating the truth. The earlier mentioned example of Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Vietcong prisoner in the streets of Saigon was staged due to the presence of Western journalists at the scene. «Because eventually only the presence of reporters can cause acts of violence and endanger human life, just like it is able to prevent from it.» (Bauernschmitt and Ebert 2015: 204)

However, one of the main criticisms of journalism is that there is no way to transport a message or do reporting without involvement of subjective experiences and own opinions that are framing the news. Facing this aspect – as already mentioned in the literature review – photography might be the most vulnerable way of reporting since it gives an illusion of transporting not only a picture but a moment of reality, captured and frozen in time in its pure truth. Only awareness of photography's limits, media literacy and a good dose of common sense will make the consumer reflect upon the role of the photographer since

«Western war news photographs are interpretations of what photographers see in conflict zones; and [...] their interpretations and subsequent visual framing of news events are in turn influences by a long history of Western visual interpretations inevitably informed by the West's – and Christianity's historically dominant status on the world stage.» (Scheerlinck 2009: 15)

In particular, what he/she decided to include or leave out of the photo itself. What kind of photos he/she takes, how he/she composes them, and how the photo editor back home places them in their layout.

Dabiq focusses on events happening in the realms of Iraq and Syria in the areas that are governed by the terrorist militia *Islamic State*. This coverage might be defined as news by those receptive of their points of view or propaganda by others. However, since *Dabiq* is the *Islamic State*'s official magazine for their foreign language audience, it can easily be labelled as propaganda. Therefore, *Post-Positivism* is a suitable paradigm because it addresses the framing of objective events as propaganda with a true core through the subjective lenses of *Dabiq*'s reporters and the subjective eyes of their audience. What happens in the realms of the

Islamic State is certainly – through the definition of propaganda – true. But what kind of message the *AlHayat Media Center* forges out of those true events is highly subjective and therefore distorting the truth which would lie within Positivism. Obviously, the same philosophy is valid for the last 160 years of war reporting and not the final key to answer the research question, if *Dabiq* changed the game of propaganda, but it gives way to a possible approach of that issue.

B. Research Strategy

With Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* and Bangert's *War Porn* as a starting point, there has been done a short but in depth overview of how war photography developed, and has been used by mainly Anglo-American media since the first Crimean War. This general overview outlines the uses, limits and intentions of war propaganda as well as war reporting that is perceived as <neutral>. Rooting in that perceptions and background, the actual research of this thesis focussed on so far 14 released issues⁷ of *Dabiq* and their photographic content as a case study through a mixed method of content analysis and critical visual analysis on the *Islamic State's* propaganda (Creswell 2013) that aims to give quantitative and qualitative data on the terrorist organisation's approach to graphic photography and the treatment of death.

According to the thesis' hypothesis, the content analysis aims to validate the claim that the *IS's* style of propaganda is new to international warfare and changing known patterns of propaganda by analysing the contents of *Dabiq*, the *Islamic State's* own English language magazine. Merging that content analysis with critical visual analysis (derived from critical discourse analysis) will then give a deeper insight into the reasoning for certain photographs within the content of *Dabiq*. In consequence this thesis relies on a mixed method approach with a quantitative focus to generate true data with a perspective on possible subjective influences according to Post-Positivism (Bryman 2012: 632).

Of course publications by terrorist groups are nothing new in modern warfare. However, the former literature review has shown that they are not only more professional in their publication of content than *al-Qaeda* or other groups⁸ but also pursue other goals and therefore deserve a closer look.

⁷ Reference day: 30th of April 2016.

⁸ Similar Jihadi magazines besides of *Dabiq* are i.e. *Inspire* which is allegedly published by *al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula* and *Al-Risalah* which is allegedly published by *Jabhat al-Nusra*. Both magazines are not

An *a priori* interpretation of *Dabiq* is the fact that the *Islamic State* regularly uses its media channels to verbalise its hatred against a majority of states around the globe. It is therefore to expect, that the earlier mentioned concepts of inversion of the concept of the *West and the rest* through the intimidation of foes, glorification of own dead and abuse of the *homo sacer* is a reoccurring theme within the magazine.

C. Research Methods and Data Analysis Plan

Besides of its status as an official governmental media outlet there are further reasons for the decision on *Dabiq* as a case study on the *Islamic State*'s approach to propaganda and visual war reporting: As one of the organisation's main media products for their Anglophone audience it is easily accessible online and has a clearly distinct audience of foes and foreign sympathisers. According to the earlier definitions of propaganda in this thesis it can easily be labelled as such while under the cover of being a journalistic product. To understand *Dabiq* therefore implies to understand the organisation's intentions, self-perception and methods to promote their narrative of being the true representation of God on earth and to shape their and their foe's image in their favour.

The corpus or data set for the following analysis contains all 14 issues of *Dabiq* that were published between the first issue in summer 2014 and the 30th of April 2016 as the reference day for this thesis. It is published by the *Islamic State* institution *AlHayat Media Center* and has been collated through clarionproject.org, «an independently funded, non-profit organization dedicated to exposing the dangers of Islamist extremism while providing a platform for the voices of moderation and promoting grassroots activism.» (Clarion Project 2016)

only presented in a less professional and extensive way of volume, layout and content – sometimes even giving the impression of a magazine for computer games – but are also published less frequently with *Inspire* listing 14 issues being released between 2010 and 2015 and *Al-Risalah* listing two issues from July and October of 2015.

Issue and cover title	Publication date (CE)
Dabiq 1: <i>The Return of the Khilafah</i>	5 th of July 2014
Dabiq 2: <i>The Flood</i>	27 th of July 2014
Dabiq 3: <i>A Call to Hijrah</i>	31 st of August 2014
Dabiq 4: <i>The Failed Crusade</i>	12 th of October 2014
Dabiq 5: <i>Remaining and Expanding</i>	22 nd of November 2014
Dabiq 6: <i>Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan: A Testimony from Within</i>	30 th of December 2014
Dabiq 7: <i>From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone</i>	12 th of February 2015
Dabiq 8: <i>Shari'ah Alone Will Rule Africa</i>	30 th of March 2015
Dabiq 9: <i>They Plot and Allah Plots</i>	21 st of May 2015
Dabiq 10: <i>The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men</i>	13 th of July 2015
Dabiq 11: <i>From the Battle of al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions</i>	9 th of September 2015
Dabiq 12: <i>Just Terror</i>	18 th of November 2015
Dabiq 13: <i>The Rafidah: From Ibn Saba' to the Dajjal</i>	19 th of January 2016
Dabiq 14: <i>The Murtadd Brotherhood</i>	13 th of April 2016

Table One: Analysed issues of *Dabiq*

Subject of the following content analysis is the visual content of the magazine without illustrative photographs, screenshots of the group's video content and illustrations of any kind (i.e. maps or graphics) or in other words: The news and documentary photography issued by the *Islamic State's* official propaganda magazine.

The generated data will put the *Islamic State's* photographic propaganda in an historical and cross-cultural context to validate the hypothesis that they challenge known patterns of propaganda and war reporting due to their own kind of narratives that involve negativism towards their enemies and glorification of death. To generate the data, the collected photo content of *Dabiq* will be coded and analysed in form of a combined content analysis and critical visual analysis to generate quantified data on the usage of explicit photography among other categories as well as a qualitative approach to the generation of power and narratives through visual discourse.

Content analysis is the method of choice to generate quantitative data on certain themes without regard of their particular context. Since the quantitative approach of this thesis is purely about generating numbers that can be put in comparison to usage of graphic content in Western media, content analysis is the most obvious method to go for; there is no need to

analyse deeper meanings of *Dabiq*'s photographs because the main hypothesis claims that graphic content is used as a tool for the institutionalisation of the group's narratives.

However, the qualitative approach of critical visual analysis is added due to the analysis of propaganda and therefore «advertisement» (Schroeder 2006) as well as the general claim that photography as discourse is used to establish a Foucauldian «generative mechanism». The analysis seeks to explore the reasons and consequences of the claimed paradigm change in war photography (Bryman 2012: 537). Quantitative and Qualitative methods are therefore combined in an attempt of explanation (Bryman 2012: 633).

Through the content analysis it will be possible to understand how much graphic content is published at all in *Dabiq* and how those numbers work when put in comparison to former studies like those of Michael Griffin on US media coverage during the latest wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkans (Michael Griffin 2004, M. Griffin and Lee 1995). Within these studies Griffin and his colleagues took photographs from the three weekly news magazines *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report* published during the early periods of *Operation Desert Storm* in 1991, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Weekly news magazines were chosen for their characteristic as being a kind of filtered news, only picturing what has been important that week and opposing every day coverage which also includes minor news and false alerts (Michael Griffin 2004). By also using the method of content analysis, they coded the photographs within the magazines for their content just like this thesis intends to do with *Dabiq* and therefore deliver reliable numbers of the usage of graphic content in Western war reporting.

For the extent of graphic content, the coding manual will use Shahira Fahmy's definition as a point of orientation:

«[There are] two ways to identify graphic imagery. The first is close-up versus long shots. A close-up image of a violent act is more graphic than a long shot of that same act. For example seeing the image of a body from far away is not as graphic as seeing a close-up of the dead person's face. Second the degree of physical alteration to the victim. For example, in portraying a body, in a nongraphic image the victim may lie with his or her eyes shut; in a graphic image, the victim may be lying in a pool of blood.» (Fahmy 2005: 148)

However, since the hypothesis of this thesis claims that there is more presence of dead in general and since Michael Griffin also counts the dead in general and not only very graphic

content, this thesis uses a more broad definition for its category of *Graphic content* as will be explained later on.

By generating quantitative data on graphic content within *Dabiq* it will be possible to show up differences or similarities with how photography has been used by media in wars of recent decades in particular, leading to a verification or falsification of the hypothesis that the *Islamic State's* characteristics and narratives led to a paradigm shift in how propaganda and war reporting can be done. The critical visual analysis then, simultaneously seeks to explain the motivations for that claimed paradigm shift.

1. Issues and advantages of content analysis

Even though content analysis as a tool of communication studies and according to Post-Positivism is the best method to generate quantifiable data for comparison to other media it comes with the minor issue that due to human coding and possible differences between how individuals would categorise a photograph, there should be at least a second person involved in the process to guarantee a certain amount of intercoder reliability (Macnamara 2005: 10). Due to the thesis regulations this requirement can obviously not be fulfilled which has to be kept in mind. However, i.e. interviewing, surveying, audience studies or ethnographies of the producers of *Dabiq's* material are not only impossible due to the terroristic background and therefore accessibility to the editorial staff but would also rather aim more at a qualitative understanding of them as media producing individuals than the medium and its content itself. Instead of more in depth methods, which would allow an extensive look at the issue but due to the limitation of this thesis could only deal with a small sample size, the method of content analysis generates a data set from the whole available corpus of released *Dabiq* issues, resulting in sound data on contents and trends within the publication. As a deductive method – linking the given corpus to a hypothesis through the generation of data – the content analysis serves to validate one or more hypothesis. In case of this thesis it does so by taking the bare content – photographs in this case – without context – e.g. accompanying text or layout choices – putting it into categories and giving quantitative results – valid numbers on how much explicit content *Dabiq* publishes.

The qualitative approach for explanatory use then becomes necessary because «[c]ontent analysis by definition emphasizes content at the expense of context, and turns a blind eye to the fact that the photograph is a sign with its own highly complex means of signifying» (Anden-Papadopoulos 2008: 9), and therefore lack understanding of underlying reasoning for its results.

Even further, Andén-Papadopoulos points out that «methods of quantification are insensitive to visual conventions that can invest a single image with considerable power while the category of pictures with the largest frequency may make little impact.» (Andén-Papadopoulos 2008: 9) For that reason there critical visual analysis is implemented to mine qualitative value from the content analysis' quantitative results.

However, as history shows, the photographs that – taken for their own – are usually perceived as the most powerful in times of war are those of violence. In the end that's one of the main reasons why governments fear those images. Therefore, besides of Andén-Papadopoulos' critique it is reasonable to set focus on the quantitative analysis of violence in photographs; even a small photograph of i.e. an execution gains importance by just being violent enough to weight out against more dominant placed photographs of other content.

2. Setting up the coding manual

For objectivity-intersubjectivity – the insurance to have an objective approach to the study if done by different subjects – every content analysis should be founded on an a priori design by setting all variables without a previous analysis of the material (Neuendorf 2002: 11). It is therefore necessary to set reasonable themes for which the corpus will be scanned during the coding process (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

As Michael Griffin states in his essay on US magazine photographs through the Gulf Wars in 1991 and 2003 and the Afghanistan invasion of 2001:« While the presence of photographers with invading military units resulted in more pictures of troops in action and more pictures of Iraqis caught in the <chaos of war>, overall patterns of photo coverage did not drastically change. The same picture categories that predominated in 1991 were the largest in 2003.» (Michael Griffin 2004: 397) The intention for the coding manual was therefore to use Griffin's and Lee's study on the first Gulf War as a point of orientation (M. Griffin and Lee 1995) on which themes and categories to use. They had analysed the three weekly magazines *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report* during the ten week period of *Desert Storm* and sorted the related photographs into 40 categories (i.e. single soldiers and group of soldiers of all involved parties, arsenal, wartime civil life, prisoners of war of all involved parties, civil and military leaders). A widely overlapping codebook improves the chance to do a direct comparison between the numbers in US and *IS* reporting to validate the claim that the *Islamic State* made graphic content and what this thesis will call *Parading the dead* an essential part of its propaganda. Including the other categories at the same time aims to prove that the general direction of photographic propaganda does not differ from what the West does,

supporting the case of certain narratives underneath the surface of war reporting and propaganda. Since the volume of this thesis has by no means the capacity to get close to 40 categories of coding, there had to be done some necessary cuts. Since the main point is to prove that the *IS* utilises violence in photographs for their narratives, the first mandatory category had to be *Graphic content*. As mentioned before, the definition for graphic content is broader than it was done by Fahmy, since the presence of dead is the more determining factor. Therefore, every photograph that shows a dead or assumable dead person falls into the category of being graphic. A second important category for the following critical visual analysis is the theme of *Parading the dead*. Photographs sorted in this category are those which show no people who are in fact dead but were not during the time when the photograph was taken (i.e. portraits of martyrs or the images of journalist James Foley before his beheading). Identifying those persons asked for a contextual approach, looking at the photograph's captions and placement next to graphic content of the same persons. The two main head categories in Western media according to Griffin are *political leaders* which this thesis will more broadly define as *influencers* (i.e. in general every person that is portrayed and not a martyr and groups of people that are not soldiers, civilians, or religious scholars) and various aspects of military life. The military will be one single category, containing everything from soldiers behind the frontline and on duty to active battle but also include paramilitary units like the *Islamic State's* police forces. Remaining categories are civil life, destruction (i.e. bombed cities) and miscellaneous photographs that don't fit into a certain category. Detached from Griffin's study design and due to the religious background of the group it seemed necessary to include a category on religious symbolism, life and duties.

That category as well as the para-military character of *IS* society turned out to be problematic during the coding process since the categories of civilians, religious content, and (para-)military content overlapped or were at least not clearly distinguishable in some cases. This problem would be solved through introduction of a second coder and therefore intercoder reliability. In consequence the numbers of the non-graphic and non-*Parading the dead* photographs are just used to give a general idea of comparison and are not completely sound. However, the important categories of *Parading the dead* and *Graphic content* will give reliable number due to the contextual character of the first and a the total and prioritised of the latter.

Since the coding manual was set up before approaching the material it was intended to keep it clear of any influence by the factual material. However, since *Dabiq* is not completely

unknown and quoted by international media from time to time, it is not reasonable to assume complete ignorance of its contents although most citations in other media come along without reproduction of graphics and therefore only give a vague idea of what imagery would be to analyse. In particular the category of *Parading the dead* was influenced by prior knowledge since photographs like those of James Foley as well as the group's martyrs have been published in other international media before.

Important parts of the coding manual are the two steps before applying the main categories: In cases of photographs that might have been digitally altered (i.e. Dabiq 1:10ff)⁹ the file has to be coded as not-photographic according to the manual. Similar goes for screenshots (i.e. Dabiq 7:67) and of course visual content like maps and illustrations (i.e. Dabiq 9: 20).

However, since many photographs (i.e. Dabiq 1:12ff) could not be ruled out as clearly illustrative without an extensive analysis of their context, only those photographs that were not used as mainly a background picture (i.e. 1: 38) were coded as illustrative while every other true and unaltered photograph was included into the full corpus. The intention behind that decision is to rather end up with a more extensive corpus and therefore smaller numbers on the important categories of *Graphic content* and *Parading the dead* than having a small corpus and therefore ending up with artificially blown up relative numbers for those categories.

3. Critical visual analysis

The chosen categories for the content analysis focus on expected themes within *IS* communication, mainly the promotion of community within their group through religious values, an emphasis on their leaders, martyrs, foes and the military. However, all other groups except those for graphic content and *Parading the dead* only serve the purpose to generate data in comparison to Michael Griffin's results to highlight, that *IS* propaganda constitutes of the same photographic themes as US war reporting with the exception of the presence of death due to a different role of it within their narratives. The two important categories regarding violence, however, are in need of a more detailed analysis.

⁹ No actual photographs from the content of *Dabiq* or any other terrorist publication will be reproduced within this thesis due to the fact that the magazines show explicit graphic content including close ups of burned children and the decapitation of hostages. Since the various issues of *Dabiq* are easily accessed online it will be no problem to look up the contents of this analysis if there should be need to do so.

«The cumulative effect of images that propose similar interpretations might create what Foucault has termed ‹regimes of truth› - beliefs a society comes to value as true due to their socio-political and economic construction and perpetuation through institutions socially endowed with power, e.g. those involved in news production.» (Scheerlinck 2009: 16)

As Scheerlinck highlights, discourse and power are invariably linked (Scheerlinck 2009: 15). Therefore, the second part of this thesis' leads to a mixed methods approach with a quantitative focus (Bryman 2012: 632) by adding qualitative critical visual analysis to the two mentioned categories. Originating from communication studies and advertising analysis, critical visual analysis aims to put visual themes into contextualised groups that perform to build identities through their historical grown narratives (Schroeder 2006: 303). As part of the content analysis, the groups of *Graphic content* and *Parading the dead* will be sorted into the sub-categories according to who the dead was. The three options for that sorting are *Members of the Islamic State* and *Infidel fighters according to the Islamic State narrative*, i.e. foreign soldiers, apostate Sunni Muslims, other rebel groups but also Western journalists like James Foley. The third group contains civil victims like non-fighting inhabitants of *IS* realms and the Western world but also hostages.

By doing the critical visual analysis, those sub-categories will serve as a starting point to do a contextual analysis of the photographs according to the method's approach to advertising. Through the content analysis, the photographs will be sorted into groups according to their content (Schroeder 2006: 305) to point out how these images as discourses are used to maintain power through ideological properties (Scheerlinck 2009: 15).

4. Possible ethical¹⁰ concerns within the research and data

Of course the whole core of this paper is about various forms of ethics and their interpretation for the use of narratives. From what governments perceive as good moral and therefore easy to sell or not to sell to their public, to journalists weighing up national interests against their professional ideals and the limits of what their audience is willing to consume before they shut their eyes: Propaganda has always been about making the public believe into being part of the Good and the ideal of journalism has always been about doing good by controlling governments. However difficult these various aspects of ethics within this paper's content already are, the whole ethical discourse so far – just like the majority of journalism

¹⁰ Within this work the term ethic will be used as *Moralphilosophie*, the philosophy of morals or ‹good customs according to social rules›.

and propaganda – has been done within Western societies. Bringing in the *Islamic State* as a non-Western actor adds the factor of cultural difference to that ethical discussion:

«All individuals have a moral outlook about what is right and wrong that guides their behaviour. This moral outlook is shaped by individuals' experiences and interactions and the specific moral beliefs held are inevitably individual [...]. Nevertheless society has a large amount of agreement on specific moral *principles* about right and wrong (such as justice and fairness) even though there is considerable disagreement about the application of these principles to particular circumstances and contexts.» (Wiles et al. 2008)

According to Rose Wiles et al. (2008), this rule can of course already be applied within a mono-cultural society. However, since propaganda is coined strongly by binary perceptions and the fight against the Other, ethical challenges and differences become more obvious and relevant. If – as this paper aims to validate – the *Islamic State* introduces a paradigm change in war and propaganda photography by using violent images, it would be inevitable to compare Western perceptions of moral with those of the terrorist organisation. After all – according to their characteristics of a death cult – i.e. the public exhibition of a martyr's death could be considered as a boosting factor for the support for the fighting troops by those at home instead of undermining the will to fight as it would be in the West.

Regarding ethical concerns that relate to this thesis' research itself, there is not much to be aware of. Doing content analysis and critical visual analysis on photographs lies within the realm of visual research – with visual data being defined as photographs, film and video images (Wiles et al. 2008) – which in comparison to other fields of research is a rather young method due to photography being a technology of recent times. Rose Wiles et al. (2008) name four main categories of visual research, namely <found data>, <researcher created data>, <respondent created data>, and <representations>, and since this thesis analyses public accessible photographs and no interaction with respondents it can clearly be labelled as <found data>. In consequence the ethical aspects of respondent interaction don't need to be considered during the research. Neither were objects or participants lured into being photographed or photographed without consent nor were they cheated into handing out any kind of data with wrong expectations or assumptions as it might happen with other social research in the field. However, one has of course to be aware of the materials that the editors of *Dabiq* are using throughout their magazine are of unknown origin. Neither photographers nor any members of their editorial staff are named as it would be common praxis in a regular press publication. In consequence without contact to the staff it is impossible to say if the people – and in particular

the dead – pictured in the photographs gave their permission to be published within *Dabiq* – as it would be mandatory i.e. for journalists embedded with US forces. Likewise the consent of the photographer with the use of his work can not automatically be assumed. Discussing these ethical uncertainties is a small aspect of the bigger issue to do academic work on terrorist propaganda.

By discussing *Dabiq* as a phenomenon of propaganda and journalism, this thesis not only makes the terrorist group's thoughts, work and ambitions understandable for outsiders but even more it makes them accessible. Even without reproducing examples of the corpus of graphic content, it – just by discussing it – gives publicity to terrorist propaganda. It therefore not only draws public attention to those photographs and messages but also might indicate and strengthen the claim of importance that is expressed by the *Islamic State* on a regular base.

Finally, one purpose of the excessive evaluation of propagandistic influences in Western media is the attempt to avoid the outcome of this thesis taking a political side. Since social research often tends to take sides (Bryman 2012: 150) it is imperative to be aware of the various intentions and processes behind news from all parties to produce a reliable outcome of this study. However, this paper is of course not free of bias since it is written in the context of encountering the *Islamic State* as a terrorist organisation that is opposing and attacking the Western world and what is perceived as its values.

5. Technical Aspects

The technical process of the access and analysis of *Dabiq*'s photographs was realised through the use of digital photography tools, mainly the database and editing software *Adobe Photoshop Lightroom*. After splitting the *Portable Document Format* (PDF) files of the analysed *Dabiq* issues – which are freely and easily accessible on various online sources – into single paged files and then into the more editable *Tagged Image File Format* (TIFF) the single pages were added to the *Lightroom* database. Within the database they were coded and tagged after the following criteria:

Through the use of the database's "keep or discard" selection tool and further options to rate a file with zero to five stars and assign one of five colours to it, *Lightroom* allows to assign one of those 13 different shortcuts to a file and after doing so directly opens the next photograph. Since each coding option is assigned to a different key on the keyboard, *Lightroom* offers one of the fastest ways to work through large numbers of files. After one coding step is completed, every temporary code can be picked to show the corresponding files

and assign the proper code tag from the manual to those groups. Afterwards the temporary markers can be removed, a filter can be applied (i.e. only show y1 photos to start step d)) and the process starts over until the end of the coding schedule is reached. *Lightroom*'s options to sort its database according to all its various coding and tagging options, enables the user to get the numbers of files with any possible combination of codes which then can be transferred into *Excel* or other programmes to visualise the data and calculate relative numbers from there.

V. Results and discussion

The 14 issues of *Dabiq* that have been published until the 30th of April 2016 contain a total of 1.404 graphic elements as defined by this thesis. Out of those 1.404 elements, 340 were dismissed as not being photographic. On a side note it is to mention that out of those 340 elements 295 were screenshots of *IS* video propaganda; highlighting the importance of real life coverage for the group's media and their narrative. A further 28 photographs were dismissed as illustrative according to the coding manual's definition, leaving a number of 1.036 photographs in total that were considered as the main corpus for the content analysis. After sorting these files into the eight given main categories and calculating their relative distribution, the following numbers emerged:

	Total numbers	Percentage ¹¹
Graphic content	68	6,56%
Parading the dead	121	11,58%
Military content	269	25,97%
Influencers	252	24,32%
Civil society	139	13,42%
Sacral content	49	4,73%
Detraction	95	9,17%
Misc	43	4,15%

Table Two: Total and relative numbers of photographs in *Dabiq*

An assuring aspect of these results is the fact that only less than 5% of the corpus did not fit in any of the seven main categories and ended up as *Miscellaneous* – hinting towards a suitable coding manual and a much focussed approach within *IS* propaganda to communicate certain themes and goals. The content of *Dabiq* shows some strong similarities to what Michael Griffin analysed within US magazines: Both sides put a large emphasis on the demonstration of military power and the portraits of leaders or influencers. While US political leaders, Afghan/enemy leaders, non-combat troops and US weapon arsenal made up about a half of Griffin's corpus on the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the categories of *Military content* and *Influencers* together constitute roughly 50% of *Dabiq* magazine's content. Those numbers give an excellent outline of similarities between Western reporting and terrorist propaganda. As Figure One shows, the visualisation of that data makes the focus on military content and *Influencers* in *Dabiq* even more obvious than the sheer numbers:

¹¹ Totals may not equal 100% because of rounding off.

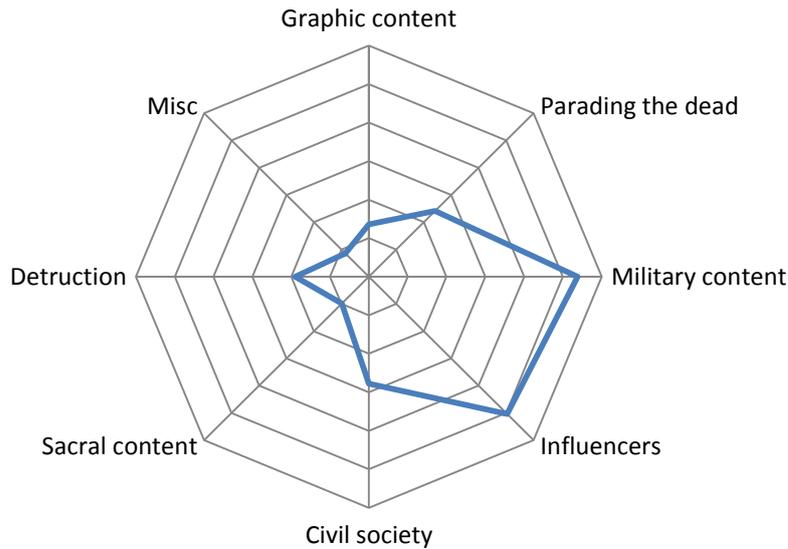


Figure One: Total distribution of categories of photographs within *Dabiq*

However, the important categories for this thesis and the comparison to Griffin's studies are – as stated before – the ones containing *Graphic content* and *Parading the dead*. These categories together make up 18,24% of the corpus – with graphic content alone contributing 6,56% – leading to the conclusion that this thesis' claim is indeed true: The *Islamic State* openly shows more graphic content than it is common within Western media.

While Griffin had only found about 1,5% of the 2001 Afghanistan coverage to contain «[h]uman injuries or death» (Michael Griffin 2004: 392), in *Dabiq* more than four times more photographs in relation contained dead or dying people – excluding basic and non-lethal injuries, and dead in coffins. Even further, while Griffin found no dead US soldiers in US media (Michael Griffin 2004: 392), the *Islamic State* openly boasts about their fallen fighters. About one fifth of the photographs containing violence shows *IS* fighters that died in battle or during suicide missions (e.g. Table Three). Within the group of *Parading the dead* the number of «not dead yet»-photographs of fighters increases up to about 55%, clearly with the intention of strengthening the group's narrative of the good martyr's death in the name and will of God. One can clearly draw a parallel here to the «regime of truth» that generates martyrs by advertising them, and Bauernschmitt and Ebert's argument of the uncovered war. Because what's the worth of a martyr's death if the brothers in faith don't learn about it? Surprisingly unsuitable for that narrative is the exceptional small amount of religious content. While there is a single photograph of civilians or soldiers praying and performing religious duties from time to time, part of the 49 sacral photographs showed Jewish and Christian sites of worship like the Vatican and the Western Wall. Therefore – at least regarding *Dabiq* – there is not too much Islam in the *Islamic State* and its narratives so far.

The more detailed analysis of the two relevant categories under the aspect of sorting the content of the photograph into the categories *Islamic State*, *Other fighters*, and *Civilians* leads to the distribution given in Table Two:

	Islamic State		Other fighters		Civilians	
	Relative	Total	Relative	Total	Relative	Total
Graphic content	20,59%	14	39,71%	27	39,71%	27
Parading the dead	54,55%	66	29,75%	36	15,70%	19

Table Three: Total and relative¹² distribution of photographs within the categories *Graphic content* and *Parading the dead*

The graphic comparison between the two main categories in Figure Two visualises the strong emphasis of *Dabiq* on documenting their own martyrs with more than half of the photographs picturing later martyrs for their cause. A much smaller emphasis lies on parading their foes and hostages before their execution or death in battle while dead civilians roughly make up 15,7% of the category. However, the Distribution of *Graphic content* shows a small amount of restraint in showing their own dead with only 20,59% of their graphic content showing dead members of the group.

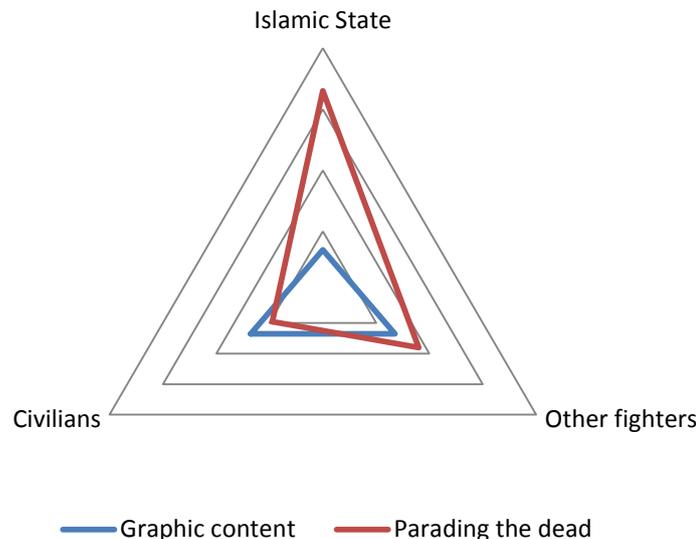


Figure Two: Comparison of total distribution of sub-categories within *Graphic content* and *Parading the enemy*

While Griffin and Lee found not a single photo of Iraqi prisoners of war (POW) published during operation *Desert Storm* in 1991, *Dabiq* literally advertises some of their Western POWs; namely the Norwegian Ole Johan Grimsgaar-Ofstad and the Chinese Fan Jinghui who both were shown as for sale in issue 11 in autumn 2015. Photographs of both being executed were included into issue 12.

¹² Totals may not equal 100% because of rounding off.

However, the general content of the *Civilians* sub-category of *Graphic content* and *Parading the dead* needs some further analysis and explanation: While journalists were coded as *Other fighters* due to their association with what the *Islamic State* labels as *Crusaders*, civil Western hostages like the two men from Norway and China are of course coded as *Civilians*. The problem with that categorisation, which makes a comparison by bare numbers between these two groups difficult, is the assumed intention behind the photographs. While graphic photographs of civilians usually contain Sunni victims of the so called *Crusaders* or Shiites, this group of people was almost not present within the category of *Parading the dead*. Therefore, while the differentiation of civilians and fighters made sense for graphic content due to different narratives that were supported, the groups could be put together for the analysis of *Parading the dead* since they contain the same subjects – foes of the *Islamic State* – just at different *modi* of being alive.

Finally, Steve Clark’s claim of the *Islamic State* adapting to *Realpolitik* by small steps of deradicalisation (Clark 2015) cannot be confirmed through the methodological approach of this analysis of *Dabiq*’s photographic content. As the following figure and table show, there has not been any explicit tendency within *Dabiq* so far, to show violence to a smaller or bigger extent.

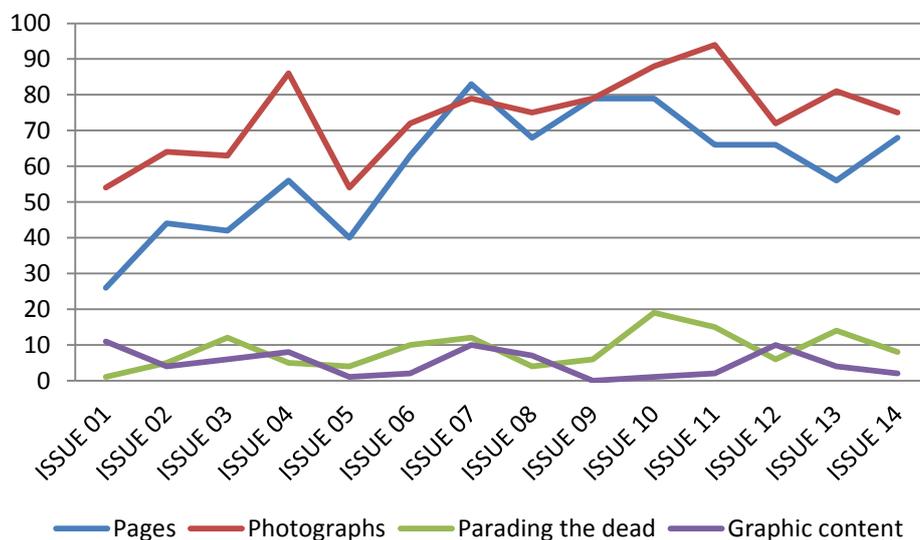


Figure Three: Total amount of pages, photographs and photographs containing *Graphic content* and *Parading the dead* over the course of 14 issues of *Dabiq*

However, while the number of pages per issue has increased a lot and just like the amount of total photographs per issue as well shows a positive trend since the first publication in 2014, the amount of published violence has not increased by a correlating factor. The relative amount of violent photographs is therefore indeed shrinking but it has to be analysed

yet, if such a change can be considered as an indicator of a change in politics due to the low total amount of graphic photographs in general. Decapitated humans are no eye candy after all – no matter if there are five or six photographs of it.

	Islamic State	Other Fighters	Civilians	Islamic State	Other Fighters	Civilians
ISSUE 01	1	3	7	0	0	1
ISSUE 02	1	3	0	2	1	2
ISSUE 03	0	6	0	1	11	0
ISSUE 04	0	4	4	0	5	0
ISSUE 05	0	1	0	2	1	1
ISSUE 06	0	2	0	1	8	1
ISSUE 07	2	3	5	3	8	1
ISSUE 08	5	1	1	4	0	0
ISSUE 09	0	0	0	6	0	0
ISSUE 10	0	0	1	18	0	1
ISSUE 11	0	1	1	6	1	8
ISSUE 12	2	2	6	4	0	2
ISSUE 13	3	0	1	14	0	0
ISSUE 14	0	1	1	5	1	2

Table Four: Total distribution of *Graphic content* and *Parading the dead* over 14 issues of *Dabiq*

A closer look at the distribution of photographs over the released issues, however, shows the strong connection between *Dabiq*, its photographs, and the narratives of the *Islamic State* which it aims to support. Figure Four shows the total distribution of those photographs and includes two significant peaks for the issues 10 and 13. Those issues have been released after the attacks on Paris in November 2015 and those on France, Tunisia and Kuwait in June that year. Within those issues the terrorist group claims responsibility for those attacks and advertises their narrative of God’s fighters against the infidels. Since martyrdom is an important part of the *Islamic State*’s narrative, the high numbers of photographs showing the dead in those issues is due to them being praised as dead for the greater good – again with the argument, of what use a martyr’s dead would be, if nobody knew about it. While it stays arguable if all the dead that are pictured in *Dabiq* fall into the category of *homo sacer* – the martyr, i.e. is less likely *bare life* since he mostly voluntarily choses his own death but due to his religious motivation could still be considered a *homo sacer* – this is clearly the *Islamic State*’s way of utilising their deaths by turning them into *zoē politikē* for the generation of a propagandistic truth and their narrative against the Other. By doing so, they aim to refill their ranks with new martyrs through feeding a narrative of a useful and honoured dead in the name of God.

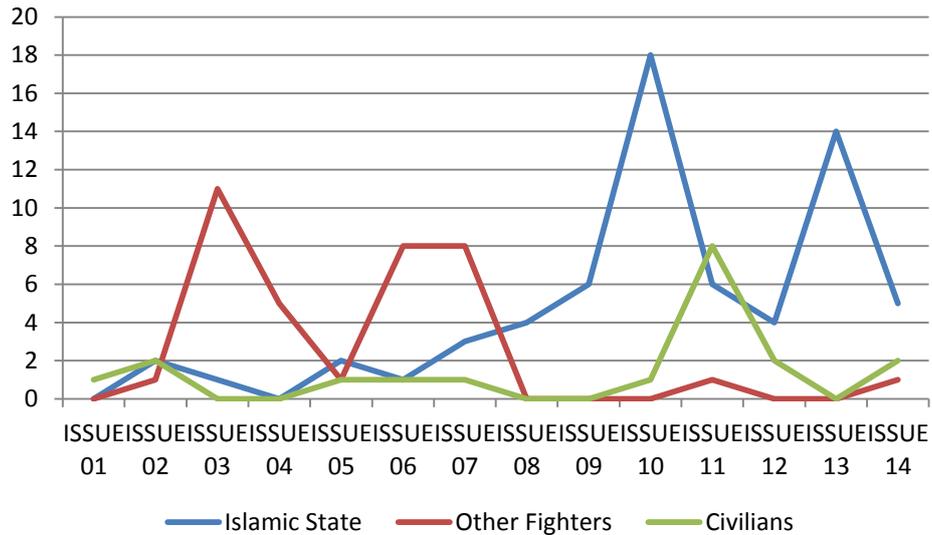


Figure Four: Total distribution of photographs *Parading the dead* over 14 issues of *Dabiq*

This interpretation of peaks in the number of certain photographs in single issues, however, might be misleading in other cases. The last peak of civilian deaths in Figure Five i.e. is due to several perspectives on the executed men from Norway and China. Their deaths may fit into the narrative of being merciless with foes and the various perspectives of the dead are most certainly picked to emphasise the bloody consequences if future ransom demands are not fulfilled. At the same time the photographs lay ground for another narrative of governments abandoning their people in fear of the *Islamic State*. But: Both narratives and the images are not related to response to a specific event and more of a rather random outburst of graphic violence.

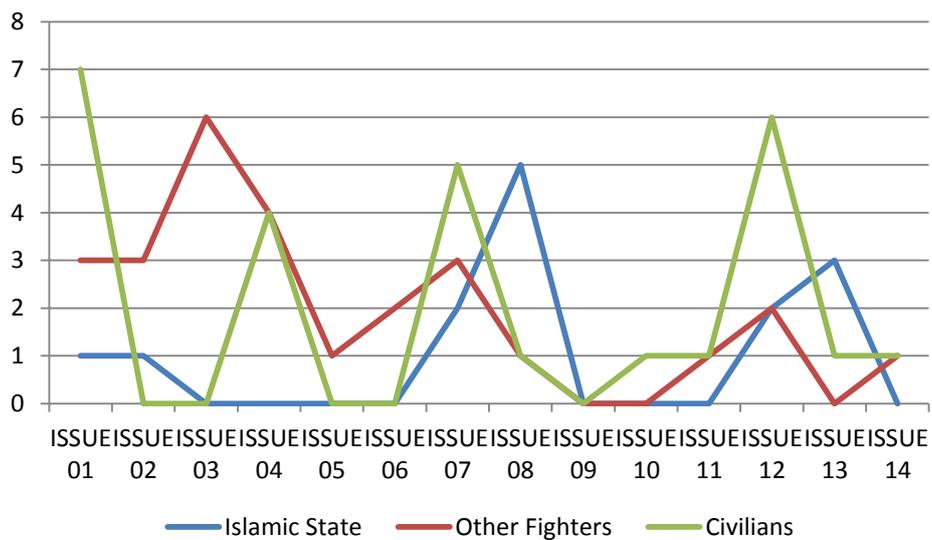


Figure Five: Total distribution of *Graphic content* over 14 issues of *Dabiq*

They are, however, tools of propaganda. So while the peaks of martyr photographs are rather a regular response of a news magazine to daily events in the realm of their coverage,

the coverage of hostages and their following executions falls clearly under <advertising> or in a Foucauldian way: The propaganda generates itself through the reporting of events. With no publicity in *Dabiq* there would be no use in killing hostages and showing their dead bodies. The critical visual analysis therefore proves that *Dabiq* openly pursues and supports the narratives of the *Islamic State*'s leadership and fulfils therefore the earlier mentioned criteria of propaganda.

What these Figures and their interpretations show is the flexibility of the *Islamic State* in its usage of propagandistic tools. As van Meegeren points out in his analysis of orientalist stereotypes within *Dabiq*; the *IS* media officials choose where to apply or not apply common clichés according to their perceived usefulness for their narrative. The narrative of the savage from the desert, serving as a soldier of God is favoured within their graphic language as long as it helps their case of promoting fear among their enemies. Then, as soon as it deals with civil issues and messages towards their followers, the message focusses on being soldiers of peace for a greater good and against Western imperialism (van Meegeren 2015: 37).

Similar can now be said about the use of graphic and parading content in the magazine. While a parade of martyrs is usually connected to extensive strikes of the terrorist group and therefore some kind of paying off for the duties of the dead to fulfil a narrative of glory through death and simultaneously refill the ranks, other cases are just random placement of violence to support the general lingering narrative of hostility and rather generate new or propaganda instead or just reporting them. Therefore, *Dabiq* applies but bends the common idea of Orientalism and the Other by countering the balance of power between itself and the West with its own professional approach to use of modern media for their cause (van Meegeren 2015: 39).

Even though, the bare numbers of graphic content within *Dabiq* already validate this thesis' hypothesis that the *Islamic State* changed the paradigm of propaganda and war photograph to support their narrative, it becomes even more obvious through the critical visual analysis: Not only does the *AlHayat Media Center* openly show dead people in close ups, with some of the photographs they even go as far as showing what would never make it to any serious media outlet around the world due to unnecessary and gory content. Among those photos are burned victims of bombings, shot martyrs with their eyes still open, and in-progress executions (i.e. *Dabiq* 4: 50ff, *Dabiq* 7: 6ff, *Dabiq* 8: 20). The few cases in which the magazine published pixelated photographs, there is a high chance, that the anonymization has been done before the outlet got hold of the photographs. This is indicated by the fact, that

those files usually show victims of attacks in the Western world, i.e. the attacks in Paris from winter 2015, and that those photographs were taken without permission from Western journalists.

VI. Conclusion

Throughout the former pages, this thesis has claimed and proven, that the *Islamic State* through its media outlet *AlHayat Media Center* distributes propaganda in support of its own narratives, including those of being merciless fighters for the cause of Islam, victimising civilians to strengthen a case against the so called *Crusaders* and those of the desirable death as a martyr. Further on, the thesis validated the main hypothesis that – during the creation of propaganda to support their narratives – changes the rules of war and propaganda photography by not only parading the dead but also showing multiple times more graphic content than Western media and in a more violent account than even Christoph Bangert's *War Porn* was able to do. Through their use of those photographs, they abuse the *bare life* of victims of war to turn the *homo sacer* into *zoē politikē* and therefore driving tools of their propagandistic narratives of both, the evil West, slaying innocent Sunni Muslims, and the honourable soldiers of God, killing of infidels without any traits of mercy.

Through fulfilment of this own propaganda – being ruthless and merciless with enemies of their institution and their faith – the *Islamic State* and *Dabiq* also double as a tool of propaganda for their enemies media: What the self-proclaimed *Islamic State* perceives as a demonstration of its just and rightful actions against *Crusaders* fulfils a Western perception of the Other as blood thirsty savages without any reason and humanitarian ideas. Of course *Dabiq* serves as the terrorist group's own tool to not only reverse power structures with the West but also to build up own perceptions of the West as the Other. And so, while the *Islamic State* uses its propaganda channels to build and promote their own narrative, simultaneously they partially feed their opponent's narrative. As van Meegeren said, *Dabiq* only uses orientalist clichés where they help the purpose of IS propaganda to intimidate their foes. However, these aspects of cliché conformity are exhaustive enough to underscore Western perceptions of the *Islamic State* as cruel terrorists without any respect for the common sense of the so called free world. IS propaganda therefore, through being what it is, becomes the object and tool of Western propaganda.

A more in-depth critical visual analysis like that by Sofie Scheerlinck on Western propaganda photography is almost imperative in context of the results off this paper. Knowing about *Islamic State*'s death cult characteristics and their approach to violence in photographs, a critical and qualitative analysis of their photographs could line out more details and backgrounds about motifs as well as cultural and political narratives since in the end, this thesis's findings can by far be neither complete nor extensive. Aspects that need further analysis are i.e. a more detailed qualitative differentiation between *IS* and Western media, possible importance of placement and size of photographs within *Dabiq* as Griffin analysed it in US media, and a closer look at possible trends of propaganda as they were predicted by Steven Clark. Another imperative question for further research on the issue of terrorist photo-propaganda is the one if there can even be a comparison at all; are

terrorists using the same themes and photographic tools as Western photographers or is that kind of comparison between photographs a one way track?

Finally, «[t]o display the dead, after all, is what the enemy does», is what Susan Sontag said about photography in times of war. And yes, that is exactly what they do – but not that simple. To sum up this thesis, it is to say that the propaganda of the *Islamic State* is no different to what was done before but in fact their paradigm changed: «To die and kill for their cause, after all, is what the good do.» And they don't repulse from showing off their goodness. By breaking Sontag's rule for their own propaganda, they confirm it for their enemies'.

VII. Appendix

A. Coding process

1. Coding schedule

- ∴ Issue
- ∴ Page
- ∴ Type of visual
- ∴ Usage of photograph
- ∴ Content
- ∴ Aggressor
- ∴ Victim
- ∴ Identification

2. Original coding manual

a) *Issue*

I_n (I01, I02, I03, ...)

b) *Page*

P_n (P001, P002, P003, ...)

c) *Type of visual*

y1 Is a photography

n1 Is not a photography, i.e. manipulated photography, drawings, graphics, screenshots

d) *Usage of photography*

y2 Documentary usage, i.e.. reportage, news photography

n2 Other usage, i.e. background images, illustrational, out of context

e) *Content*

GRAPHIC Graphic content, i.e. executions, openly displayed dead

PARADE Parading the dead, i.e. portraits of Martyrs, pre-execution portraits of hostages

MILITARY Military content, i.e. soldiers at the front, weapons, soldiers behind the lines,
battles

INFLUENCERS Portraits and groups, i.e. political and military leaders, interviewees

CIVIL Civil life of any kind

SACRAL Sacral duties, symbolism, religious scholars

DESTRUCTION Consequences of violence without human loss, i.e. bombed cities

MISC Any photograph that doesn't fit former categories

f) Victim

IS2 Victim is a representative of the *Islamic State*

O2 Victim is a member of a party opposing the *Islamic State*

N5 No Victim

YV Victim is identifiable

3. Adapted coding manual

d) Usage of photography

y2 Supportive usage, i.e. reportage and news photography, illustrational photographs

n2 Not identifiable photographs, i.e. backgrounds for texts, too faded out

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