Social organisations must establish sustainability. Central mechanisms for social organisations to achieve sustainability include the recruitment of new members and retention of existing members. In the past, this was done largely in person and through public marketing campaigns using communications media (print and electronic).

The rapid growth and impact of the so-called ‘Islamic State’ (IS) illustrates characteristics of successful recruitment and retention strategies that are dependent on effective use of social media. This includes Twitter, Facebook, social networking sites, chat rooms and other electronically mediated forms of communication.

A central element of such efforts is the creation and dissemination of successful narratives regarding the motives of IS and the logic of opposing established government regimes. Such approaches highlight the role of “reputational violence”, a central focus of narratives created by IS. Reputational violence establishes the credibility of the new organisation as it attempts to become institutionalised and thus sustain itself.

Such narratives are used both within the group as well as between it and other groups. The goal of such narratives is to weaken and destabilise ties to existing governments and forms of legitimacy to generate support for the beliefs, mission and actions of a new regime.

Dr. Maura Conway (DCU) and Dr. Scott Decker (ASU) are studying the online recruitment and retention processes used by IS. This is done through monitoring and analysing recruitment strategies in social media. Specifically, they have examined online recruitment narratives to identify key themes, including reputational violence. They are comparing the results of these analyses to online recruitment strategies used by other groups involved in crime, particularly street gangs. IS illustrates the role of social media in 21st century conflicts.

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