

# Conspiracy, Anxiety, Ontology: Theorising QAnon

Pre-publication: *First Monday* (2021, Forthcoming)

Dr. James Fitzgerald  
School of Law and Government  
Dublin City University  
[James.fitzgerald@dcu.ie](mailto:James.fitzgerald@dcu.ie)

Keywords: QAnon, Conspiracy, Ontology, Social Movements, COVID-19, Extremism, Terrorism, Discourse Theory, Discourse Analysis

## Abstract

The rise of QAnon presents a number of important questions to researchers. While emerging literature provides insight into how QAnon exists online, there is a dearth of theoretical engagement with *why* QAnon exists and the conditions for its being. This paper seeks to address this gap by contextualising QAnon as an ontological phenomenon underpinned by anxiety and inquiring the identity formation strategies employed by the movement. Applying basic precepts of Discourse Theory and discourse analysis to a representative canon of QAnon content, it finds that like other formations of collective identity, QAnon is premised on interconnected dynamics of ontological fulfilment that cannot be explained away by pointing to ‘the algorithm’ or ‘madness’. Nor can it be effectively tackled by currently-employed strategies of content takedowns and de-platforming. The paper concludes with a call to explore more empathetic engagement with conspiracy adherents, arguing that until we (re)discover a more inclusive, agonistic politics, QAnon and other fantastical conspiracy movements will continue to arise and some may metastasise into violent action. New forms of resilience to (online) polarisation can be built on this principle.

## Tripcodes and Treasure Hunts: The Growth of QAnon

On 28 October 2017, a user named ‘Q’ began to post ‘highly classified US government secrets’ on 4chan’s /pol/ (politically incorrect) discussion board (see Argentino and Amarasingam, 2020). A quite notorious online space with a ‘no rules’ policy and an unwavering commitment to ‘free speech’ (see Knuttila, 2011; Nagle, 2017; Gallagher *et al.*, 2020), users of 4chan are ‘anonymous’ by default: hence the shorthand, ‘anon’. With ‘Q’ denoting Q-level clearance to access top secret, classified information in the US government and ‘anons’ denoting followers who parse this information—and wildly speculate on it—the phenomenon of QAnon as a highly complex umbrella of communally-generated conspiracy is, at its heart, a collaborative affair built on faith. Faith, of course, must be rewarded and ‘Q drops’ (posts made to 4chan/8chan/8kun by Q) provide a very modern form of consecration. Between 28 October 2017 and 8 December 2020, 4,953 Q drops set the thematic agenda for the QAnon movement, not to mention providing a neat dataset for analysis<sup>1</sup>. Taken individually, the Q drops are mostly rhetorical and often non-sensical. Early musings such as “Why did Soros donate all his money recently?” (28/10/17) and “Why is POTUS surrounded by generals?” (29/10/17) may mean little in isolation, yet these drops coalesce around specific themes, tend to leverage major occurrences in US politics and are umbilically tied to the promotion of US President Donald Trump as a modern day saviour. There is continuity within the ambiguity if one is willing to dig deep enough and the smooth adaptation of

---

<sup>1</sup> QAnon followers often consult Q drop aggregators such as [qmap.pub](http://qmap.pub) and [qanon.pub](http://qanon.pub) to keep track of Q’s pronouncements and ‘proofs’, as do less-enamoured researchers. All Q drops analysed for this paper have been taken from these sources.

QAnon beliefs to country-specific politics around the world—coupled with the speed of its spread—certainly speaks to the persuasive capacity of its canon (See Scott, 2020; Zimmerman, 2020).

So, what does Q actually say? The first caveat is that the writings of Q are likely authored by at least two individuals who share the Q tripcode(s)—that is, unique user identifiers on 4chan and other imageboards (Orphanalytics, 2020). Furthermore, QAnon is not one single conspiracy theory; rather, it re-packages a collection of classic conspiratorial tropes for a modern political and cultural age, proffering a ‘big tent’ conspiracy (Roose, 2021) that is especially noteworthy for its adaptability. Nevertheless, the core narrative of QAnon has crystallised over time (see Aliapoulios *et al.*, 2021) and can be summarised as follows: the world is run by a shadowy cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles and this cabal includes top-level democrats such as Joe Biden, Hilary Clinton, Barack Obama and George Soros, as well as a number of high-profile (liberal/democrat-leaning) celebrities including Oprah Winfrey and Tom Hanks. In addition to running a global paedophile ring, members of this cabal execute and eat their child victims to extract the chemical compound ‘adrenochrome’, which is used to keep the politicians and celebrities unnaturally young (see Roose, 2021; Wendling, 2021). US President Donald Trump is (still) the saviour and is acting to expose this cabal, although he is hamstrung by the (liberal/democrat) deep state. The moment of triumph will arrive when Trump finally succeeds in his crusade against the deep state, exposing the cabal in an event known as “the Storm”<sup>2</sup>, which ultimately ends with the mass incarceration of the paedophilic Satan-worshippers on Guantanamo Bay.

Sober engagement with the core tenets of QAnon tends to result in reflexive derision and disbelief, yet over the course of its existence, QAnon has grown from an obscure sequel to the Pizzagate conspiracy (see View, 2018) to a global phenomenon that some see as totemic of our ‘post-truth’ ontology (see Arroyo and Valor, 2020). Q adherents have not only run for US Congress (Brewster, 2020), but in the case of Marjorie Taylor Green, have been elected (see Rosenberg, 2020). Of more immediate concern, perhaps, QAnon is implicated in a number of acts of political violence<sup>3</sup> (Bellaiche, 2020; Garry *et al.*, 2021; Harrington *et al.*, 2021), with the FBI designating it a domestic terrorist threat in 2019 (see Vanderzielfultz, 2020)<sup>4</sup>. It is also apparent that many of the Capitol Hill attackers on 6 January 2021 were committed QAnon believers, including the infamous ‘Q-Shaman’ (Jacob Chansley), who breached the Senate Chamber wearing face paint, jogging pants and a pair of horns (see Gates, 2021).

Despite the growing significance of QAnon as a cultural/sociological phenomenon, most of the academic literature to date has focused on QAnon’s social media footprint and its interconnected growth online (see Pappasava *et al.*, 2021)<sup>5</sup>. Certainly, this online footprint is

---

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Storm’ is a key event in QAnon discourse. Its origins derive from a remark President Trump made on 7 October 2017 during a photo-op with high-ranking military officials: “You guys know what this represents? Maybe it’s the calm before the storm” (see John, 2020). Q’s first drop, entitled “Calm before the Storm”, arrived two weeks later.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_PIRUS\\_QAnon\\_Feb2021.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_QAnon_Feb2021.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> As this paper is going to press, the most recent FBI warning QAnon-associated violence came on 14 June 2021. Sparked by disillusionment around the failure of ‘the Storm’, the FBI points to the transformation of QAnon adherents from ‘digital soldiers’ to those engaging in real-world violence against Democrats and “other political opposition” (see Hosenball, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Much of this relates to the speed/publishing cycles in sociology, political science and international relations journals, which tends to be quite elongated. This is opposed to the publishing cycles for computer science journals, for example, which tend to be much quicker.

not to be underestimated: a number of studies point to the centrality of deeply intertwined social networks—and especially tight-knit communities—formed around QAnon, with classic platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Reddit amplifying Q drops (and ensuing discussions) to take the conspiratorial chatter to dizzying heights (Garry *et al.*, 2021). In addition, QAnon activity has exploded following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by the parallel happenings of mass dislocation and a major spike in the amount of time people spend online—time often formed around communal socialisation (see Tsao *et al.* 2021). This confluence of events has allowed for the cross-fertilisation of a number of conspiratorial communities interested in apparently disparate concerns, such as cancer-spreading 5G, anti-vaccination and uncovering the true nature of the ‘Plandemic’, which has grown the movement even further (see Spring and Wendling, 2020). A recent study from network analysis firm Graphika<sup>6</sup> puts this growth—and the relative size of QAnon—into context. In a study of 13.8k QAnon accounts on Twitter, Smith finds that this cluster alone posted 41 million tweets in 30 days between January and February 2020, rising to 62.5 million tweets in the 30 days between July and August of the same year (2020, p. 3). Mirroring the sentiments of similar research (see de Zeeuw *et al.*, 2020), Smith concedes that QAnon remains “the most dense conspiratorial network that Graphika has ever studied” (2020, p. 1), with “the volume of content produced and shared by QAnon accounts...staggering in comparison to other political communities we study” (*ibid.*, p. 3)—an admission that would be surely appreciated by QAnon’s saviour, on the grounds of both style and substance.

In sum, QAnon matters. It fascinates for obvious reasons, but the societal conditions that underpin and sustain its growth remain to be adequately theorised: we possess a substantial understanding as to *how* QAnon exists online, but this needs to be reconciled with *why* it exists and how communal identity lies at its core. This paper offers a contribution to the puzzle. It begins by examining the importance of ontological identity formation and argues that our collective transition to a more dislocated ‘second modernity’ underlines a global spike in mass anxiety. Thereafter, conspiracy theories are presented as dynamic simplifying devices that help individuals and communities to address this ontological anxiety, with anti-scientific discourses (which are also hallmarks of second modernity) particularly to the fore. It argues that while the much vaunted accelerant effect of social media (and recommender systems therein) significantly contributes to the spread of QAnon content and related falsehoods, its role must be seen as *supplementary* to underlying processes of ontological identity formation, rather than causal. The second half of the paper provides a qualitative (discourse) analysis of QAnon canon, mining into its core processes of identity formation, with an eye towards how it creates a communal feedback loop centred around an emancipatory narrative of morality and how it has attached itself to other conspiratorial narratives, such as those associated with anti-vaccination and COVID-19. It concludes by introducing empathy as a potential avenue for agonistic ‘de-polarization’, recognising that QAnon is borne of deep ontological fissures that cannot be wholly solved via classic strategies such as content takedowns and de-platforming.

### **Ontological Insecurity, Second Modernity and the Fulfilment of Lack**

There is a tendency—both historical and contemporary—to view reality as procedural and *full* at any given point in time. This is especially the case if one interprets reality from a

---

<sup>6</sup> Graphika is a very well regarded network analytics firm, which “leverages AI to reveal and study online communities”. Graphika’s services have been used for high profile publications in the likes of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Politico*, for example. See <https://graphika.com/>.

realist ontological standpoint (as the vast majority of studies do), which guides one's focus towards what is empirically present, rather than what is not. There are, however, various analytical approaches that essentially flip this assumption, alternatively arguing that ontology (that is, the basis of reality itself) is always and already pierced by a constitutive *lack* and it is the *absence* of fullness that drives collective attempts at identity formation. In this Lacanian reading, the primacy of lack dictates that:

The space of the social is...revealed as a field that can never be closed or constituted as an objective full presence: "The limit of the social must be given within the social itself as something subverting it, destroying its ambition to constitute full presence. Society never manages full to be society, because everything in it is penetrated by its limits, which prevent it from constituting itself as an objective reality"<sup>7</sup> (Stavrakakis and Howarth, 2001, p. 10)

Rather than being fully constituted, or "closed", society is always overflowed by a surplus of meaning (see Howarth, 2000, p. 103) as social agents strive to attain 'full' political identities by variously affixing to any number of 'floating' discourses. As Anna Marie Smith puts it, "[it] is only through political discourses that we experience the ways in which we are positioned within social structures" (1998, p. 57), with the result that "no individual can choose to stand outside the totality of interpretative frameworks; our fundamental dependence upon the interpretative function of discourse is written into our very human condition" (ibid, p. 57). We might say, then, that individuals—as social agents—are always already drawn to bind themselves to collective discourses that help to shape the complex symbolic orders into which they are thrust. This drive may be satiated by more profane expressions of one's place in the traditional family unit or, say, how one attempts to construct their identity in the workplace (see Harding, 2008). Quite often, however, this (Lacanian) desire is escalated to more profound, collective causes, with one's performative identity tied to a political ideology or a social movement—including those steeped in a conspiratorial lifeworld. From aligning with ideologies to joining a political(/conspiracy) movement, the existential drive is the same: the constitutive pursuit of an impossible fullness.

While a desire for 'fullness' defines identity formation in general, the speed and intensity of this pursuit will differ according to subjects' collective sense of *dislocation*<sup>8</sup>. Katarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen (2020), through Laing (1990) and Giddens (1991, 2004), dovetail with this concept by arguing that the drive for ontological fullness (or, in their specific vocabulary, security) is tied to the management of *anxiety*. Anxiety, in this reading, should be seen as a productive force in international politics. Of course, that anxiety—fundamentally based on the anticipation of future events (and simultaneously rendered through a silhouette of past occurrences)—may underpin entire political orders should not surprise any reader of 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century politics (ibid). The political imaginary of these histories has been consistently shaped by amorphous disasters yet to occur—be they nuclear explosions, mass cyber-attacks, environmental catastrophe or, indeed, a pandemic—with political epochs also defined by (Western) humanity's emergence from the *post facto* realisation of various worst-case scenarios: 'post-WWII', 'post-9-11', 'post-2007 financial

---

<sup>7</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> The political potential of dislocation is important, as is neatly explained by Aletta Norval: "Dislocation always takes place in a determinate situation: 'that is, one in which there is always relative structuration', and the continuing existence of a symbolic universe of representations. Second, a dislocated structure opens up the space for a multitude of possibilities of re-articulations which are by definition indeterminate. A dislocated structure is thus an *open structure* in which the crisis can be resolved in a variety of directions. From this it is clear that any attempt at re-articulation will be an eminently political project [emphasis added]" (1994, pp. 133-134).

crash’ and, surely, ‘post-COVID’. With mental health problems and anxiety diagnoses reaching record levels over the past decade (see Slee *et al.* 2018)<sup>9</sup> and a further peak brought about by the ongoing COVID pandemic (Yasgur, 2020), it cannot be hyperbolic to assert that we are living in especially anxious times.

It is important to note that although ontological insecurity dislocates a person’s sense of stable existence, it is always accompanied by individual and collective attempts to “devise effective mechanisms...that *control* anxiety, and make it tolerable [emphasis in original]” (Berenskotter, 2020, p. 280). These mechanisms provide what Berger and Luckmann have called a ‘stock of knowledge’ (1991, p. 13), which in helping to satiate anxiety (however temporary) render ontological security as a distinctly emotional/political desire<sup>10</sup>. The means by which this ontological desire is enacted chimes with those human, psychological needs for predictability and continuity in one’s interactions with the world (Van Marle and Maruna, 2010, p. 10), mirroring the endless personal/mental health literature that confirms the importance of routine and meaningful social interaction in keeping one’s anxieties in check<sup>11</sup>. For ontological (in)security theorists, while the need to satiate anxiety has always been present in individuals and evident within society at large<sup>12</sup>, the emotional/political desire for security has greatly accelerated since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as we continue to transition from what Giddens and Beck (see Beck, 1992; Cassell, 1993) have labelled ‘first modernity’ to our currently-experienced ‘second modernity’. As opposed to the more stable flows of self-identity in first modernity—very much embodying an Enlightenment image of constancy, scientific truth and incremental progress<sup>13</sup>—second modernity is defined far more so by *flux* and *instability*. This can be seen through various sociological shifts that have exploded onto centre-stage—be it the intensification of individualistic expression and/or the ongoing deconstruction of traditional social dichotomies, such as those classically attributed to gender and race (see Fitzgerald, 2014, p. 56)<sup>14</sup>. It is unquestionable that the growth of the internet (2.0) and the hyper-connectivity that it brings plays an integral role in facilitating these societal shifts: let us not forget that *Time* magazine declared ‘you’ as the Person of the Year in 2006 on the basis of social media connectivity and attendant possibilities for self-expression<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, with due regard to the flow of time, a longitudinal reading surely entails that social media connectivity has not driven our (post)modern insecurities in their entirety: the medium is not necessarily the message when it comes to second modernity and its encompassing desire for ontological security.

If we accept that the ever-present condition of ontological insecurity necessitates corrective moves to mitigate its attendant anxiety, then the question is *how*? Here, an initial foray into

---

<sup>9</sup> Also see “Concerns are raised over the threat of COVID-19 to mental health in Europe”, at <https://unric.org/en/concerns-are-raised-over-the-threat-of-covid-19-to-mental-health-in-europe/>.

<sup>10</sup> “[I]f anxiety is a feeling of discomfort, even ‘terror’, the knowledge put in place to control anxiety generates a feeling of comfort—a sense of epistemological peace” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, p. 280).

<sup>11</sup> Needs, no less, that social media companies have targeted as a means to increase user engagement and time spent on their platforms.

<sup>12</sup> Berenskotter (2020), for example, traces this dynamic from Ancient Greece, through biblical times right up to present day.

<sup>13</sup> And always “towards some final or ultimate balance or order” (Heaphy, 2007, pp. 5-6).

<sup>14</sup> Calhoun, parsing Beck, argues: “This ‘second modernity’ is ‘reflexive’ in several senses including (a) growing efforts to try to guide it, and (b) greater consciousness of the larger patterns on the part of ordinary people – who for example not only mix more across lines of cultural difference but are consciously aware of this and often explicitly affirm the virtues of such mixing, and who recognize the existence of a global community of fate” (2010, p. 610).

<sup>15</sup> See <http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/0,28757,2019341,00.html>.

the analytical framework of Discourse Theory—which focuses on the discursive production of political and social identities—is useful. While Discourse Theory is quite notoriously opaque and jargon-heavy, its core thesis on identity formation as an ontological process (as already introduced above) can be distilled into two, interlocking steps<sup>16</sup>. The first step is to identify an outside antagonistic force(/Other) that is responsible for blocking the realisation of one’s “full” identity:

All identities and all values are constituted by reference to something *outside them*, which has the character of a subversive margin preventing the possibility of an ultimate fixity...Th[is] *antagonistic force* is held responsible for the blockage of our full identity, and this permits the externalization of our constitutive lack as subjects to the negating Other, which thus becomes the positive embodiment of our self-blockage ([Žižek 1990]: 253). As a result our political actions will tend to be guided by the illusion that the annihilation of the antagonistic force will permit us to become the fully constituted ‘we’ that we have always sought to be.” [emphasis added] (Torfing, 1999, pp. 6-7, p. 129).<sup>17</sup>

The second step is to construct a chain of equivalence around a series of discursive nodal points: a sequential narrative that groups together various disparate components into a simple over-arching claim, or series of claims, designed to erase the antagonism assigned as responsible for blocking the realisation of ‘full’ identity. A necessary addendum: without a constitutive enemy against whom to build a *chain of equivalence*, the links of the chain would simply dissolve, leaving a set of unconnected claims floating in the public discourse and, effectively, a host of (ontological) identities unfulfilled.

By definition, the identity-formation process outlined in Discourse Theory can be recognised across a broad range of political movements. In the case of Green movements, for example, we find a series of demands that draws a thematic equivalence through disparate factors such as the reclaiming of cities streets from cars, the melting of the icecaps, energy consumption linked to large-scale AI experimentation, and so on<sup>18</sup>. The very same process of identity formation can also be ascribed to other far less legitimate political actors: from al Qaeda and the Islamic State—who draw an equivalence between historical utopias, legitimate self-defence and a ‘right to self-determination’ (with the US/West as an antagonistic Other; see Fitzgerald, 2014)—to adherents of QAnon who—as will be shown—draw equivalences through anti-science, anti-establishment and pro-child protection narratives, premised against a shadowy cabal of global(ist) paedophiles. With these foundational dynamics in mind—that is, ontological insecurity, anxiety control and identity formation—let us turn to examine how conspiracy theories fit into the equation.

## Conspiracy Theories: Psychology and Society

Conspiracy theories are routinely denounced as irrational, pathological and the exclusive remit of gullible dupes (see Cassam, 2016)<sup>19</sup>. Yet, as exercises in radical doubt, conspiracy

<sup>16</sup> These steps will be applied to an analysis of QAnon’s canonical discourse later in the paper.

<sup>17</sup> “[An] antagonism is seen to occur when ‘the presence of [an] “Other” prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution.” (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 10).

<sup>18</sup> The antagonistic Other is most often ascribed to polluting corporations, self-interested political authorities and/or the capitalist system of production as a whole.

<sup>19</sup> Cassam argues that ‘epistemic vices’ are typically equated with negative intellectual traits. These include “gullibility, dogmatism, prejudice, closed-mindedness, and negligence” (2016, p. 159). Outlining how these traits may be *a priori* associated with one’s belief that 9/11 was an ‘inside job’ (and incorrectly so), Cassam walks us through the following scenario: “Because he is gullible, dogmatic, closed-minded, cynical, prejudiced,



theories are powerful touchstones for populations that have become disillusioned with modern political processes, and their impact is growing (see Oliver and Wood, 2014). In the US—the effective ground zero for QAnon—conspiracy theories have always been quite prevalent: in 2000, for example, over 50 percent of citizens believed that the government attempted to cover up the JFK assassination, while over 80 percent believed that the government knew more about extra-terrestrials than they were prepared to admit (see Knight, 2000). In 2016, a poll at Chapman University found that over 50 percent of Americans believed that the government had covered up key information about 9/11 (“What Aren’t They Telling Us”) while in 2020—as polarisation intensified to an apex—over 70% percent of Republican voters agreed that allegations of systematic fraud have made them question Joe Biden’s presidential election victory over Donald Trump (Zhou, 2020). Similar trends of popular conspiracism have been identified globally, including in Europe (Pfeifer, 2021), South America (Roniger and Senkman, 2022), Southeast Asia (Swami *et al.*, 2020) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Ouattara and Århem, 2021). In whatever way new conspiracies become manifest in public discourse, their popularity can be quite pervasive. ‘True’ conspiracies such as the Watergate scandal in 1972 have helped to sow reflexive suspicion against the government among many Americans (see Aupers, 2012), while culturally, the likes of the *X-files*, the *Matrix* (ibid) and, today, much material discussed on the phenomenally popular *Joe Rogan Experience* podcast—such as Bob Lazar’s two hour interview on the inside story of Area 51<sup>20</sup>—helps to inculcate a conspiratorial mindset as a (sub-)cultural mode of critical thought, affirming the truth to be “out there”, if only one knows where to look. This diffusion of conspiracies across media is significant, as various studies show that individuals’ habitual motivations to find patterns in their environment (and in otherwise random occurrences) helps to explain why those who tend to strongly believe in conspiracies also tend to believe in paranormal and supernatural phenomena, and vice-versa (see Dieguez *et al.*, 2015). Essentially, the draw of conspiracy theories is not derived from the content *per se*, but from their function as powerful reasoning mechanisms that provide “broad, internally consistent explanations that allow people to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradiction” (Douglas *et al.*, 2017, p. 539).

The underlying function of conspiracy theories as dynamic simplifying devices has direct ramifications for the ability to ‘neutrally’ evaluate complex information and competing hypotheses—that is, the very basis of what one might consider ‘sound’ judgement, or what Stanvoich has labelled, ‘epistemic rationality’ (2016). Indeed, conspiracy adherents, who tend to seek cognitive closure, habitually “‘seize’ upon early information and quickly ‘freeze’ on the judgments that it implies” (Webster and Kruglanski, 1997, p. 139). This epistemic shielding effectively guards the individual against future information that might meaningfully challenge previously held assumptions. In shrinking one’s parameters to evaluate competing perspectives, conspiracy adherents therefore exhibit greater *judgemental confidence*, rendering what would normally be seen as subjective positions as something more so approaching objective fact. A combination of all these factors manifests in what Goertzel

---

and so on, he ignores important evidence which bears on his questions, relies on unreliable sources, jumps to conclusions and generally can’t see the wood for the trees. The fact that this is how he goes about his business is a reflection of his intellectual character. He ignores critical evidence because he is grossly negligent, he relies on untrustworthy sources because he is gullible, he jumps to conclusions because he is lazy and careless. He is neither a responsible nor an effective inquirer, and it is the influence of his intellectual character traits which is responsible for this.” (2016, p. 164). Cassam’s point is that this assumption simplifies deeper epistemic dynamics and incorrectly reduces the intellectual capacity of those believing in conspiracy theories to redundancy, or, indeed vice. A much deeper engagement with the epistemological process of conspiracy belief is therefore required.

<sup>20</sup> Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEWz4SxfyCQ>.

(1994) called a monological belief system: “belief systems closed on themselves, in which each conspiracy belief reinforces others, buttressing a general assumption that the world is orchestrated by sinister forces” (Klein and Nera, 2020, p. 123)<sup>21</sup>.

Socio-psychological insights into conspiracy theories, such as the above, may be *relatively* new, but it is important to recall that conspiracies are not modern innovations. Rumour-spreading, myths, gossip and folklore are all examples of inter-related phenomena that occur on the same conceptual plane as conspiracy (Bangerter *et al.*, 2020) and conspiracies have been identified as far back as ancient Egypt (Montserrat, 2002) and Greece (Roisman, 2006). Nonetheless, their form *has* changed over time: conspiracies in the Middle Ages, for example, generally focused on an exotic Other that resided ‘outside society’ (such as the Illuminati, Freemasons and secret societies of the Templar Knights; see Knight, 2000). These conspiracies of ‘secure paranoia’ have steadily given way to conspiracies of ‘insecure paranoia’, however, moving further away from this neat ‘self/other’ delineation to a far more protean vision in modern times:

For the post-1960s generation, [paranoia has] become more an expression of inexhaustible suspicion and uncertainty than a dogmatic form of scaremongering...popular conspiracism has mutated from an obsession with a fixed enemy to a generalized suspicion about conspiring forces...to a far more insecure version of *conspiracy-infused anxiety* which plunges everything into an infinite regress of suspicion [emphasis added] (Knight, 2000 in Aupers, 2012, pp. 24-25).

Here, we see two key sociological shifts around conspiratorial thinking that tie directly into our previous discussion on ontological insecurity. First, the dilution of the *antagonistic force* from a relatively identifiable Other to an amorphous threat that resides in the shadows of society makes the category of ‘the enemy’ extremely malleable—something that QAnon leverages very successfully in its canonical discourse. Second, the trajectory of ‘insecure paranoia’—and its explicit association with anxiety—aligns with the notion that ontological insecurity has become much more prominent in second modern societies. Given that Knight published his study in 2000 (before 9/11 gave popular conspiracism an intense jolt (Wood and Douglas, 2013)), then continuing along this trajectory should see a hardening of the conspiratorial mind-set in popular culture and politics to today, as second modernity becomes more deeply embedded (for now) and mass anxiety animates the political and cultural vocabulary of our times. A consultation of the burgeoning literature on conspiracy theories not only confirms that this is the case (see Bulter and Knight, 2020), but suggests that *anti-scientific sentiment* functions as an essential node for networked conspiratorial doubt, thriving as it does on an ecology of fake news and viral falsehoods that have become all too familiar.

### **Viral Falsehoods: Agency, the Algorithm and the Epistemological Hinge of Anti-Science**

In a study sampling cultural attitudes among Canadian undergraduates, Rizeq *et al.* show that anti-science beliefs are cognitively tied to paranormal beliefs and conspiracy beliefs, and vice-versa (2020); that is, anti-science acts as an effective epistemological hinge for other forms of conspiratorial thought (see Van Zoonen, 2012). Of course, anti-scientific sentiment is nothing new; it has persisted as long as science itself and as with conspiracism, it too is

---

<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, as Gill and Rotweiller (2020) have noted, this process has direct overlaps with psychological antecedents to violent extremism—a dynamic relationship that the literature is only now beginning to seriously unravel (see Bhui and Bhugra, 2020) and a puzzle made all the more consequential by the Capitol Hill riots/attacks on 6 January 2021.



seen to accelerate in times of deep social crisis (Dunbar, 1995). In a sign of our times, academic communities in the natural sciences have begun to report on this phenomenon of late with increasing alarm. Studies on the dangers of anti-scientific falsehoods being spread by far-right actors have appeared in specialist journals such as *Microbes and Infection* (see Hotez, 2020), for instance, and in a pre-COVID editorial of the high-profile *Physician's Weekly* (January 2020), the causal malaise attributed to rising and more readily-expressed anti-scientific sentiment is laid bare:

There has been a rise in many forms of science-rejection, ranging from vaccine hesitancy and refusal, antithesis to research investment, and legislation that would encourage factual-relativism. Unless this course is reversed, we can expect the future to include a return of basic diseases such as cholera, typhus, and yellow fever, as well as a reversal of the gains in reducing population morbidity and mortality of the last 2 centuries. (The Growth in Magic: Anti-Science Behavior Is on the Rise & Gaining Ground)<sup>22</sup>

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen this phenomenon shift further into the mainstream. Conspiracy theories have interlocked with a rise of anti-scientific sentiment and fake news, combined with a huge increase in the amount of time individuals and communities are spending online (see Wolf, 2020). That the very first COVID conspiracy theories were based on the explicit rejection of peer-reviewed scientific research (such as work that uncovered the origin of the virus (Andersen *et al.* 2020) and studies confirming the efficacy of face masks (see Leung *et al.*, 2020)) is indicative; so too the fact that organised disinformation campaigns have spread through viral means (such as memes) and across multi-nodal social media networks designed to incentivise the rapid transfer of content (see van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2020).

Thinking ontologically for a moment, this growth in anti-scientific sentiment can *also* be located in the transition from first modernity to second modernity (see Forman, 2007). Recall that the constancy and sense of linear progression that is definitive of first modernity has its roots in the philosophical traditions of rationalism and scientific-led epistemologies (*ibid.*). Second modernity has promoted a creeping rupture of this stable, 'scientific' core of truth in some quarters, effectively opening an epistemological vacuum that presents ample opportunity for the growth of self-assured—and yet anti-scientific—systems of interpretation far less tied to classic notions of objectivity. Indeed, this effect has become so intuitively recognisable that a complex concept of ontological and epistemological instability—"post-truth"—has arguably slid into the modern lexicon with consummate ease. Of course, the degree to which social media is *directly* causal of post-truth ontology is a matter of debate. Hannan, for example, argues that social media *is* a post-truth ontology, serving as the incubation site for trolling behaviours that have spilled out into mainstream politics and legislation (2018, p. 215). While I fundamentally disagree that social media is causal of post-truth politics, there is no question that it plays an important role in *accentuating* the falsehoods and conspiratorial foundations of movements such as QAnon, who are post-truth

---

<sup>22</sup> As societies edge towards an uncertain post-COVID future, anti-vaxx sentiment—which is, fundamentally, an anti-scientific discourse in action—becomes a much more mainstream threat, given its capacity to directly affect collective immunity and ultimately, morbidity, on such a massive scale. Philosophically speaking, then, we occupy quite a precarious space in which the virality of conspiracy theories (fundamentally driven by anxiety) is directly pitted against one of high points of the scientific enterprise in COVID vaccines—the very means by which societies might *transcend* this anxious moment.

constructs *par excellence*<sup>23</sup>. The nature of this contribution—and its effects on personal agency in particular—requires to be briefly unpacked.

We know that mass media plays a key role in exacerbating contentious debates around various scientific controversies (see Aykut *et al.* 2012), but the growth of user-generated content, which has proliferated rapidly in line with the growth in social media, has been a game-changer. As Van Dijck (2009) has argued, social media ‘users’ tend to be conceived as more active consumers (or prosumers) of media than previous generations—content amplifiers in a democratised digital landscape. Furthermore, it’s well established that users’ sense of self-agency is tied to their status within online communities (see Albrechtslund, 2017), mirroring classic formations of social agency that we’ve seen replicated in ‘offline’, communal settings (see Trapnell and Paulhus, 2012). The avalanche of false news online that has peaked variously since 2013 greatly *exacerbates* this reciprocal relationship between falsehoods and user-generated, autobiographical journeys of epistemological discovery (a hallmark of second modernity). In the first paper to comprehensively explore how ‘true’ and ‘false’ news spreads online, Vosoughi *et al.* (2018) provide some essential insights by tracing *rumor cascades*<sup>24</sup>. First, they identify politics as the largest rumor category (c. 45k cascades), followed by urban legends (c. 32k cascades). Second, falsehoods categorically reach more people than the truth; indeed, “[i]t took the truth about six times as long as falsehood to reach 1500 people and 20 times as long as falsehood to reach a cascade depth of 10” (ibid, p.3). Third, the authors estimate that falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted/shared than the truth (ibid, p. 4). And finally, *novelty* has a strong effect on false news diffusion, not only because when information is novel, it is more valuable for individual decision-making, but from a social perspective, “it conveys social status on one that is ‘in the know’ or has access to unique ‘inside’ information” (ibid, p.4).

This latter finding, in particular, chimes with a similar desire for reciprocal ‘in-group’ confirmation among ‘in the know’ conspiratorial communities (see Douglas *et al.*, 2017; 2019), which can motivate users to spread these insights not only among each other, but to also incubate polarising narratives against Others—such as against immigrants and ethnic minorities—that are more readily spread to external, non-involved groups (Jolley *et al.* 2020). In more technical terms, greater levels of communal integration translates to higher degrees of homophily<sup>25</sup>: if the political vocabulary of a group is built on falsehoods, then naturally, these falsehoods will spread more rapidly than ‘truth’. In addition, the acceleration of falsehoods across online communities is quite often led by small numbers of individuals. These individuals can creatively leverage existing sentiment and instantly recognisable hashtags (such as ‘#buildthewall’ and ‘#lockherup’) to generate *new variations of familiar content* (see de Saint Laurent *et al.*, 2020), thus satiating the consumer while helping to grow a thriving online community of believers/followers<sup>26</sup>. When the high prevalence of bot

---

<sup>23</sup> I would say, rather, that conspiracy theories have interlocked with a rise of anti-scientific sentiment and fake news, which combines with a huge increase in the amount of time individuals and communities are spending online—the influence of social media slots into this matrix, rather than creates it.

<sup>24</sup> “A rumor cascade begins on Twitter when a user makes an assertion about a topic in a tweet, which could include written text, photos, or links to articles online. Others then propagate the rumor by retweeting it. A rumor’s diffusion process can be characterized as having one or more cascades, which we define as instances of a rumor-spreading pattern that exhibit an unbroken retweet chain with a common, singular origin... The number of cascades that make up a rumor is equal to the number of times the story or claim was independently tweeted by a user (not retweeted).” (Vosoughi *et al.* 2018, p. 1).

<sup>25</sup> For a neat overview on the origins and evolution of homophily, see Kossinets and Watts, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> “[T]he creative uses we evidenced (at least for part of the broader online community discussing immigration) are prefaced on generating variations rather than sticking to the original formula. These variations might not

accounts that “promote political conspiracies and divisive hashtags alongside COVID-19 content” (Ferrara, 2020) is factored into the equation, the divisive potential of this (post)modern ecology of untruth would appear to be more potent and perhaps novel. Yet, from a communications perspective, this ecology is not necessarily so *new*. The convergence of self-communication and mass-communication (Castells, 2013)—which underpins the basis of social media—represents an *evolution* of classic forms of networked community building, not a revolution (see O’ Callaghan *et al.*, 2015, p. 473). Thus, the degree to which one can isolate the algorithmic hand of falsehood-accelerating mechanisms such as recommender systems to be *directly* causal in pathways of extremism and polarisation is not immediately clear<sup>27</sup>.

Scholars are currently grappling with this problem. The original purpose of these recommender systems, arising in the mid-1990s, was to help users navigate the vast mounds of data available in the World Wide Web and to *more accurately* forecast what that user would purchase/consume based on past behaviour. This guiding principle of accuracy was steadily diluted over time, however, as recommender systems were re-primed to hook users into compulsive online browsing and extended periods of platform engagement, acting as “a trap for capturing fickle users” (Seaver, 2019, p. 430). This shift led to concerns over the capacity of algorithmically-created ‘filter bubbles’ to effectively overpower the agency of users; that is, to propel them down extremist rabbit holes. Early literature cautiously supported this hypothesis. O’ Callaghan *et al.*, (2015), for example, found that consumers of extreme-right content on YouTube were directed ‘down a rabbit hole’ of reinforcing (extremist) content within a few short clicks, while recommender systems were also implicated in the ease of forming Jihadi communities on Twitter (Berger, 2013)<sup>28</sup>. Less careful analyses outwardly assumed that both radicalisation to violent extremism and journeys through the filter bubble were neatly linear, and so it made intuitive sense for some commentators to speak about the ‘extremist swamp’ on YouTube and how “[r]ecommendation algorithm[s] can lead online viewers up the radicalisation pathway” (Mullaly, 2019). Subsequent literature has pared into the structural power of recommender systems in more detail, finding that filter bubbles are not nearly as prevalent as originally assumed (see Haim *et al.*, 2017). In fact, current research “lean[s] towards filter bubbles not being a problem” (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch, 2020, p. 3), with “most of the empirical studies suggest[ing] that they either do not exist or are very weak” (ibid). As a result, it is becoming increasingly clear that users’ *choices* play a much more important role in whether one opts to *proceed* down ‘rabbit holes’ and/or to move through filter bubbles, thus directing the conversation further away from the popular, reductive notion that recommender systems possess a unique power to compel individual agency beyond all control, especially when it comes to ‘online radicalisation’ (see Reed *et al.*, 2018). And so, in the current state of play, we know that: a) algorithms play a role in compelling online behaviour, but; b) the degree to which it *causes* radicalisation towards extreme positions cannot be extricated from the

---

bring the user popularity, but they are likely to attract attention and, through following and retweets, to build community. The final, surprising conclusion coming out of studying malevolent creativity on social media might be exactly this: that creative expression can sacrifice individuality, in the context of Twitter, on the altar of achieving togetherness.” (de Saint Laurent *et al.*, 2020. P. 78).

<sup>27</sup> It is for this reason that digital anthropologists have taken a keen interest in recommender systems not just as algorithmically-determined simplifying devices, but as ontology-generating social forces.

<sup>28</sup> Also see O’ Hara and Stevens, 2015.

complex societal configurations in which individuals find themselves (neatly recalling one of the course assumptions of Discourse Theory)<sup>29</sup>.

Recent literature on conspiracy theories appears to support this hypothesis. Taking aim at the agency-reductive concept of ‘virality’, Simona Stano is worth quoting at length:

[T]he wide spread of conspiracy theories in contemporary mediascapes can be seen as an uncontrolled contagion that, thanks to both the permeability of culture and the agency of memes, has increasingly affected social discourses. Exactly as with other viral texts, conspiracy theories would have therefore progressively ‘infected’ the Internet, hence finding larger consent among its users. However, this view is problematic, since it attributes to Web-users a passive role and represents them as infected objects of an external action (that of the viral content), rather than as active subjects. In other words, virality theories suggest the reductionist idea that messages are totally and unconditionally accepted by their receivers (2020, p. 485).

Stano ultimately concludes:

[T]he forms of ‘online conviviality’ (Varis, Blommaert 2014) brought about by the Web 2.0 have made ‘social trust’ emerge and become the base of a number of narratives whose verification transcends any reference to proven facts, and rather relies on other narratives (Perissinotto 2016; cf. Erdmann 2016; Madisson 2016). From such a perspective...conspiracy theories can be conceived as *a symptom of a larger problem* embedded in the infrastructure of current communication systems, that is to say, the so-called ‘post-truth’ era [emphasis added] (2020, p. 493).

Stano’s perspective offers quite a neat rebuttal of Hannan’s position on social media being ontologically radicalising in and of itself and furthermore, it adds weight to the view that even as algorithmic functions mature, we need to pay due consideration to the formative role of agency and meaning-making in (ontological) identity formation. In effect, if the algorithm is to be implicated, we might conclude that its role is not to directly ‘radicalise’ individuals, but to present to them a rich tapestry of (often false, often anti-scientific) information, by which individuals can choose to weave their own versions of social agency and (post)modern identity—the very hallmark of second modern autobiography. Conspiracy theories are but streamlined repositories for these choices, offering at once the promise of community, individuality and an almost bulletproof sense of belonging. As we will see, the canonical discourse of QAnon has manipulated this dynamic quite brilliantly.

### **Forging a Community, Satiating Anxiety: Identity Formation in the Canonical Discourse of QAnon**

To this point, I have outlined the ontological underpinnings that determine processes of collective identity formation, focusing not only on the productive capacity of anxiety but also on how online ecologies that accelerate exposure to falsehoods feed (into) the persuasive power of contemporary conspiracy. Similarly, I have highlighted how anti-science functions as a key epistemological hinge for conspiracy, sowing as it does a reflexive suspicion of authority and a performative rejection of ‘first modern’ fundamentals. In this section, I engage a discourse analysis of QAnon content to highlight these dynamics while providing some key insight(s) into how the movement actively constructs itself as a bastion for “*real*”

---

<sup>29</sup> To recall Smith, “no individual can choose to stand outside the totality of interpretative frameworks; our fundamental dependence upon the interpretative function of discourse is written into our very human condition” (1998, p. 57).

truth, positions itself as a totem of morality<sup>30</sup> and has successfully cross-fertilised with other conspiracy narratives, such as those associated with anti-vaccination and COVID-19.

Towards this end, it is important to recall the core processes of (ontological) identity formation from earlier in the paper, which proceed via two simultaneous and interlocking steps. First, the assignment of an *outside antagonistic force/Other* responsible for the blockage of a ‘full’ identity. Second, the formation of a *chain of equivalence*, a sequential narrative that groups together disparate components into a simple over-arching claim, or series of claims, designed to ultimately erase/transcend the antagonistic Other. In order to inquire these moves in the canonical discourse of QAnon, close readings of the entire Q drop dataset and a number of core publications, memes and videos<sup>31</sup> that parsed this content were engaged, with a qualitative ‘search and snowball’ approach (see, for example, Noy, 2008) applied to: a. content aggregator resources used by the QAnon community (such as qanon.pub and qalert.app); b. writings and multimedia content produced by high profile QAnon influencers regarded as authoritative sources in the communities; and c. QAnon content variously posted to Gab, 8kun and Reddit. This section is intended to be illustrative of the core principles of (ontological) identity formation rather than an exhaustive interrogation of QAnon discourse: a greater task for another day. If you’d like to read extended passages of discourse that inform this section, the reader is invited to follow the endnotes<sup>32</sup>.

### *Beyond Good and Evil? Moral Depravity and the Antagonistic Other*

In order to establish an antagonistic Other as a key reference point, it’s incumbent on various QAnon messengers to underline the legitimacy of Q: the very person/people responsible for identifying ‘the enemy’ and uncovering their crimes. Often, the first step is to explicitly reference the vague nature of Q’s drops and to spin this breadcrumb approach as an empowering communal mechanism—an invitation for QAnon followers to “do your own

---

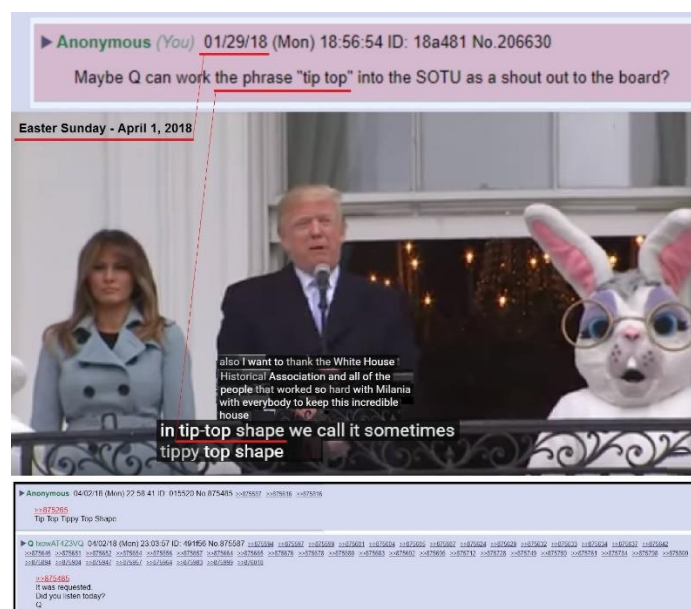
<sup>30</sup> In so doing, I align with the primary task of discourse theorists which is, per David Howarth, “to describe the ways in which the identities of agents are *blocked*, and to chart the different means by which these obstacles are constructed in antagonistic terms by social agents [emphasis added]” (2000, p. 105). I am also subscribing to an interpretation of structure and agency that is common among discourse theorists: “[D]iscourse theorists stress the historical contingency and ‘structural impossibility’ of social systems, and refuse to posit essentialist conceptions of social agency. Instead, agents and systems are social constructs that undergo constant historical and social change as a result of political practices. Indeed, a major task of the discourse theorist is to chart and explain such historical and social change by recourse to political factors and logics.” (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 6).

<sup>31</sup> In particular, these include the high-profile videos *Out of Shadows* and *The Plandemic*. Worthwhile steers can also be located in influential QAnon publications, such as this list found in Rock *et al.*’s *A User’s Guide to the Great Awakening*: “1. **This Video Will Get Donald Trump Elected** Published 24 October, 2016. This video hints at The Great Awakening. We will reference this video multiple times in this book. 2. **Q - The Plan To Save the World REMASTERED** A video created by Twitter and YouTube user Joe M11 that originally appeared on 25 June 2018, masterfully summarizing The Great Awakening 3. Articles by **Martin Geddes** on The Great Awakening12, one of which is published in this book 4. **qmap.pub**, a listing of Q drops that are referenced in this book 5. Articles by **Neon Revolt** on The Great Awakening14, a QAnon researcher who successfully bridged knowledge from QAnon drops to the masses [emphasis in original]” (2020, p. 20).

<sup>32</sup> This method of discourse analysis is based on the notion that the author should show a suitable amount of discourse, through which they have attempted to draw their conclusions. For a more thorough outline of this rationale, see Fitzgerald, 2014.

research”<sup>33</sup> and “expand your thinking”<sup>34</sup>. Of course, these breadcrumbs would mean little in isolation; Q’s true legitimacy lies in their direct connections with US President Donald Trump and their ‘plan’, which is to be trusted at all times<sup>35</sup>. By means of confirmation, QAnon influencers (such as SerialBrain2) employ bespoke tools—such as ‘the Matrix Time Stamp Method’—to interpret the proximity between Q drops, Trump tweets and real world events as ‘proof(s)’ that Trump is listening to Q, and vice-versa. An early passage from the prominent (and Amazon best-seller; see Tiffany 2019) *An Invitation to the Great Awakening* neatly captures these dynamics, accompanied by an example of how a ‘proof’ is constructed:

As long as Q has been posting, Anons on the boards have been taking those posts, combining them with tweets by POTUS along with news and real world events, in order to create proofs. Proofs are our evidence, our argument of fact that establishes the validity of these posts. The number of proofs you can create from the variety of posts, tweets, future news and world events is staggering. Although Q’s first post has yet to be proven true, many more crumbs have been dropped in its wake that have been. These crumbs, taken by other Anons and arranged into pictographic memes have given us the body of evidence required to establish, with statistical certainty, the legitimacy of the anonymous Q (SpaceShot76 and Redpill78, 2019, p. 14).



**Figure 1:** ‘Q proof’ demonstrating collaboration between Q and Donald Trump<sup>36</sup>.

Over time, QAnon followers have traced ever stronger links between Trump and Q, believing that the US President regularly accessed the Q tripcode(s) to communicate with his followers. This is evident in Q drop #533, for example, signed “GOD BLESS YOU AND GOD BLESS THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. 4, 10, 20”, with ‘4, 10, 20’ a cipher for DJT:

<sup>33</sup> “Read between the lines re: MSM ‘LEFT’....Research for yourself. Trust yourself. No one ‘news’ location will provide unbiased content. #WakeUp #FactsMatter You are the news now. Q” (Q drop #2785).

<sup>34</sup> “Learn double meanings. News unlocks MAP. Why is STEEL so important? Expand your thinking...Q” (Q drop #850).

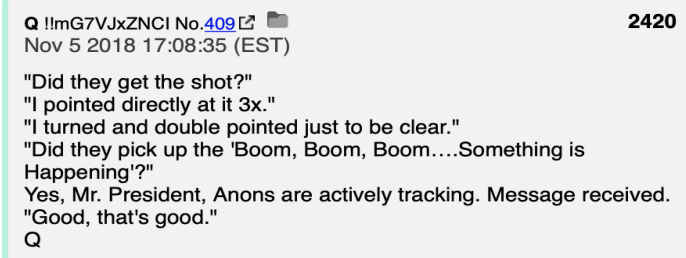
<sup>35</sup> “We have everything. How can we use what we know? How do you ‘legally’ inject/make public/use as evidence? What are you witnessing unfold? Trust the plan. Q” (Q drop #1181).

<sup>36</sup> Available at

<https://qanon.pub/data/proofs/01b6f3c7b899e31528bf3355bd28f666957ecd7490ec8263a2ce562602ffaeb3.jpg>, accessed 2 April 2021.



Donald J. Trump<sup>37</sup>. Elsewhere, Trump has actively fed the impression of collaboration by retweeting QAnon accounts<sup>38</sup> and at one point publicly describing QAnon followers as people that “seem to like me” and “people that love our country” (Lucy, 2020). Q has even pulled the curtain back on their collaboration by providing tantalising snippets of conversations with the President. Drop #2420 (Figure 2) offers a neat, verbatim exchange:





Q !ImG7VJxZNCI No.409   2420  
 Nov 5 2018 17:08:35 (EST)  
 "Did they get the shot?"  
 "I pointed directly at it 3x."  
 "I turned and double pointed just to be clear."  
 "Did they pick up the 'Boom, Boom, Boom....Something is Happening'?"  
 Yes, Mr. President, Anons are actively tracking. Message received.  
 "Good, that's good."  
 Q

Figure 2: Q drop #2420<sup>39</sup>.

With the Q/Trump legitimacy strongly established, their identity as a righteous bulwark against the tyranny of the cabal helps to maintain a neat self/enemy dialectic that animates the entire QAnon discourse. The cabal is the mirror image of Trump and Q: elitist<sup>40</sup>, manipulative<sup>41</sup>, enemies of the people<sup>42</sup>, but much more than that, their formidable status is underlined by their protean form and perplexing array of implicated actors:

The elite class of bad actors that are currently active in human affairs defies easy definition. They are amorphous coalitions of powerful persons and institutions. The institutions can include royalty, business, government, religions, charitable organizations, foundations, societies, crime syndicates, etc. The things that all of these bad actors have in common are accumulation of power and actions that intend harm upon the non-elite classes of citizens (Rock *et al.*, 2020, p. 21).

The scale of this struggle arguably necessitates two discursive moves: first, the need to make sense of an unseen enemy; and second, a suitably epic sense of purpose designed to overcome a centuries-old foe<sup>43</sup>. On the first task, the narrative thread of paedophilia becomes one of the

<sup>37</sup> As time passed, drops signed off as ‘Q+’ were identified as direct communications from Trump.

<sup>38</sup> See Brewster and Ray, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> All Q drops have been sourced from qanon.pub; the database has been confirmed as accurate and accessible as of 6 April 2021.

<sup>40</sup> “Are you ready to hold the political elite [protected] accountable? Q” Q drop #4945

<sup>41</sup> “The Cabal is a word fraught with fear. Sometimes called the Illuminati, the New World Order or even the Global Elite, it refers to a secret faction working inside our governments with an agenda for world domination and the destruction of humanity. To become aware of their programming, we must empower ourselves with awareness free from their crafted agendas” (I Am Because We Are, 2018, p. 427).

<sup>42</sup> “WHY IS PELOSI HOLDING THE [2] ARTICLES OF IMPEACHMENT? How do you introduce the TRUTH about what happened to the PUBLIC? What 'value' might exist by attempting to BLOCK 'PUBLIC' testimony/hearings? Would educating the public through the Senate prior to Barr/Durham/Huber release(s) be important? Narratives are created and pushed to prevent the public from discovering the TRUTH. ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE. Q” (Q drop #3742).

<sup>43</sup> As QAnon influencer NeonRevolt explains in *Revolution Q: The Story of QAnon and the 2<sup>nd</sup> American Revolution*: “Buckle up, because this is where things start to sound crazy. For centuries, the world has been ruled by an ancient and secret death cult. Throughout my intensive study about who these people are, how they function, and how they retain their power, I’ve come to call this group, simply, the Cabal. The Cabal is a hierarchical organization that, at its core, is Satanic in origin. We’ll get in to the specifics in a later chapter, but the short of it is that they are an occult group that leverages institutions like banking, media, governments, as well as blackmail, pedophilia, human sacrifice, and even cannibalism in order to achieve their goals. Nothing is off the table, so long as it accumulates power for themselves. They’ve embedded themselves in the halls of

most powerful weapons at Q's disposal<sup>44</sup>. Leveraging a classic moral panic (see Critcher, 2008), casting the enemy as a global collective of child abusers engaged in sex trafficking allows for QAnon believers to rally around an almost universal moral cause, while also permitting Q to sync back to the very real history of powerful institutions and individuals—such as the Catholic Church and Jeffrey Epstein<sup>45</sup>—who have been implicated in very real child abuse. From Netflix<sup>46</sup>, to Hilary Clinton<sup>47</sup>, to the Pope<sup>48</sup>, this (a)moral deprivation effectively tightens the feedback loop between Q and the anons, reminding us (*ad naseum*) that ‘everything is connected’:

North Korea was especially used as a hub for endless human trafficking, supplying children to the world's elites for abuse, torture, and murder. Q tells us that the Cabal refers to North Korea as a “garden,” that is... a place where “flowers” are grown and harvested. When asked why, in his controversial presidential portrait, Obama was depicted as sitting in a garden, Q would respond across two posts, in no uncertain terms:

---

power all over the world, and use whatever means they have at their disposal to retain that power. The depths of evil in which they are willing to engage reveal their fundamental depravity. And the insidious thing about them is that, just like snakes in the grass, they are experts at hiding in plain sight. Many, if not most of the people who will be arrested and tried are all members of the Cabal.” (2019, Chapter 1).

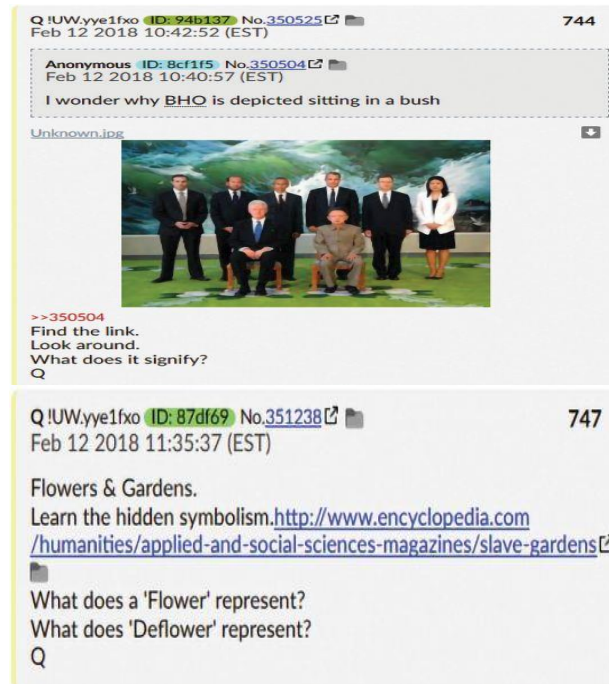
<sup>44</sup> A recent report from Garry *et al.* shows that, for example, of a poll of 53 QAnon users on Telgram, 44% identified ‘save the children’ as at least one of the main reasons they decided to follow Q (2021, p. 186).

<sup>45</sup> “Possible Epstein was a puppet **[not the main person(s) of interest]**? Financed by who or what **[F]** entities? 1. **[Primary]** gather blackmail on elected pols, dignitaries, royalty, hollywood influencers, wall street and other financial top level players, other high profile industry specific people, etc. 2. Feed an addiction **[controllable]** Maxwell family background? Robert Maxwell history **[intel, agency, wealth, [CLAS 1-99]]**? Sometimes it's the people in the background that are of greater significance. Q [emphasis in original]” (Q drop #4565).

<sup>46</sup> After outlining how former US National Security Adviser Susan Rice “now sat on Netflix’ board”, NeonRevolt submits: “Coincidentally,” Netflix started to aggressively push pedophilic normalization in so many of their series—from Big Mouth, which featured cartoon nudity of underage characters, to Desire, a foreign film which featured a slow motion sequence of a child masturbating, and the new, edgy, ‘Satanic’ reboot of Sabrina the Teenage Witch, in which execs wanted to feature a graphic orgy scene involving adult actors playing underage children. There was also Baby, a series which glorified underage prostitution, and Girl, a film about a transgender boy (that is, a boy with an untreated mental issue that makes him believe he is a girl) in which that actor, aged fifteen, is filmed with full frontal nudity. I’m sure there are other examples I could give that demonstrate, yes, Netflix really is trying to advance an agenda of pedophilic normalization, but some of you may be asking ‘Why?’ Are you really sure you want to know that answer? We’ll get to it later.” (2019, Chapter 5).

<sup>47</sup> “How many people in DC does Clinton have dirt on? How many people in DC does Clinton have **[had]** on payroll? Dark secrets. Q” (Q drop #4819).

<sup>48</sup> Originally quoting and earlier drop revealing insight into a Catholic Church abuse scandal, Q elaborates: ““The Holy See is the universal government of the Catholic Church and operates from Vatican City State, a sovereign, independent territory. The Pope is the ruler of both Vatican City State and the Holy See. The Holy See, as the supreme body of government of the Catholic Church, is a sovereign juridical entity under international law. "<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3819.htm> Wealth? Power? Sanctuary against criminal prosecution? Recipe for ..... Q” (Q drop #1950).

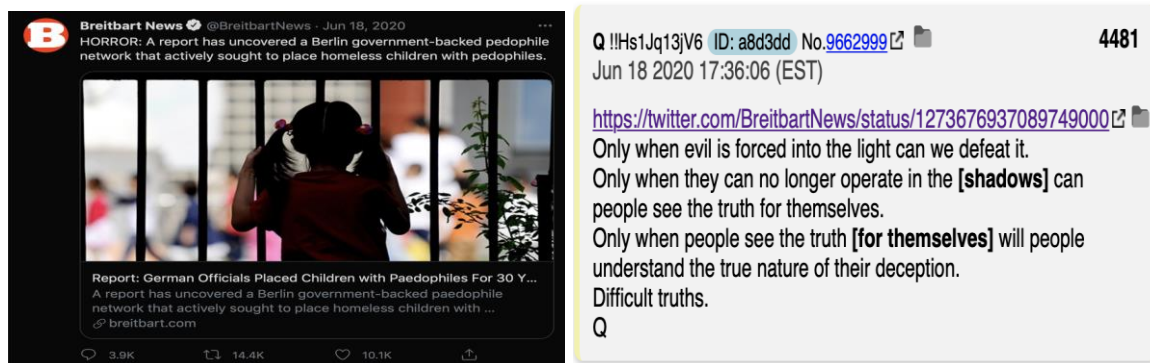


(NeonRevolt, 2019, Chapter 5).

**Figure 3:** Q drop #744 in NeonRevolt, 2019.

**Figure 4:** Q drop #747 in NeonRevolt, 2019.

Ultimately, defining the cabal by means of Satanism and paedophilia allows Q to elevate its struggle to the grandest moral dichotomy of all; a Manichean struggle between good and evil, which in the vernacular of QAnon, is repeatedly construed in terms of light and darkness. Serving a dual function, not only does this darkness define individual members of the cabal—from paedophilic Hollywood actors<sup>49</sup> to morally depraved Antifa protestors<sup>50</sup>—it constitutes the current state of the world that can only be overcome by a ‘great awakening’, the process through which believers discern the ability to see the truth for themselves:



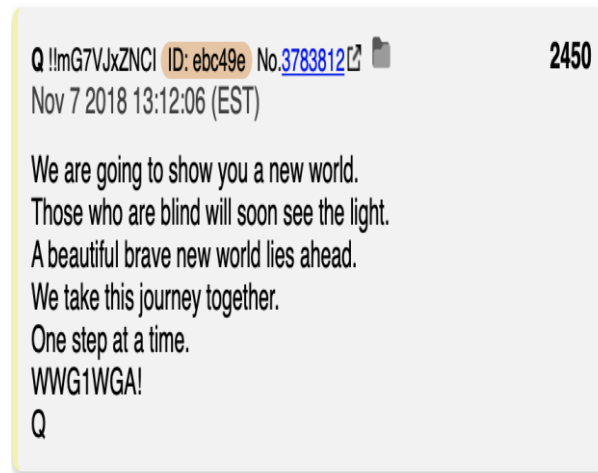
**Figure 5:** Snapshot of tweet quoted in Q drop #4481.

**Figure 6:** Q drop #4481.

<sup>49</sup> See Q drop #288.

<sup>50</sup> See Q drop #1741.

In the end, it is the *darkness* of the cabal that constitutes the *outside enemy* rather than the cabal itself. Popular (and well researched) analyses of QAnon that settle upon the Storm as the conspiracy’s endgame (see Rahn and Patterson, 2021) are, therefore, not quite correct. The Storm is simply a prelude to the final (true) purpose of QAnon, which is to lead its followers out of darkness and towards the emancipatory, (ontological) fulfilment of light—a hazy afterlife of sorts when all of humanity can enact its capacity to do good and to ultimately become whole:



**Figure 7:** Q drop #2450.

“I want [to] come out and say ‘hey, it doesn’t have to be like this; we *are* good people’, humans are good and we can make the world a better place because the money and technology to make the world a better place is there. It’s just been covered up or been controlled for so long, that it’s time for it all to come out. And maybe I’m the catalyst for something better.” (Smith, 2020, 1:15:28-1:16:47)<sup>51</sup>.

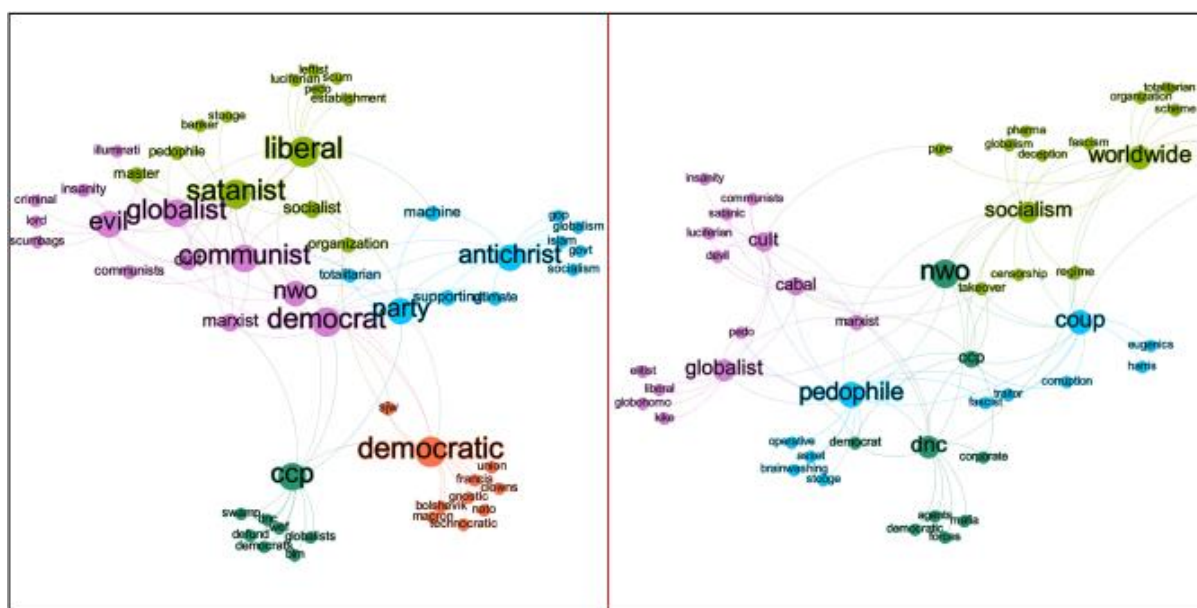
#### *Expanding the Chain: QAnon, anti-vaccination and the seismic push of COVID-19*

In essence, all conspiracy theories are applied *chains of equivalence*. They draw connective threads through a series of wild claims and (re)package them into a neat, referential whole. They are, by design, amenable to the absorption of new, reinforcing narratives to tauten the strength of the chain. The cross-fertilisation of QAnon and anti-vaccination communities is born of this process, with both communities sharing similar thematic frameworks and, in many cases, content (see Dickinson, 2021). The anti-vaccination (or, anti-vaxx) movement is very well established, of course, (see Blume, 2006) and has built much of its sceptical legitimacy over time by mixing ‘true’ examples of big pharma misadventure and adverse vaccine outcomes with objectively false information, thereby replicating the basic formula of most effective conspiracy theories<sup>52</sup> with a splicing of anti-science. Formed around “moral

<sup>51</sup> Smith continues: “What does the media look like in the future? Well, to me, what I would hope is that it’s not filtered. I would love to build a platform or build some sort of system where artists could connect directly to the audience. I want to build products and tell stories that bring humanity together; that bring compassion, that bring love, that bring forgiveness. That bring inspiration and courage back to the audience without having the influence of violence or gratuitous sex or gratuitous death...because those are things and image that get stored in our psyche and in our soul and I don’t think that’s the way this earth was intended to be.” (2020, 1:16:47-1:17:37).

<sup>52</sup> The movement had reached dangerous heights pre-COVID: the WHO identified anti-vaccination sentiment as one of the top 10 threats to global health in 2019 (“10 Threats to Global Health in 2019”) and the ecology of social media has been implicated. Mirroring the findings of Vosoughi *et al.* (2018), for example, an analysis of

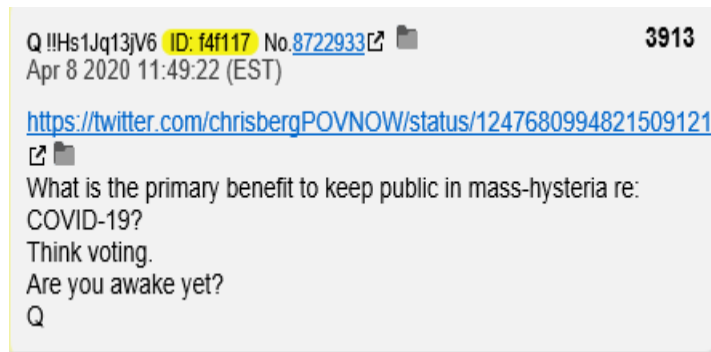
outrage and structural oppression by institutional government and the media” (Smith and Graham, 2019, p. 1310), one might argue that anti-vaccination communities have long been primed for a potential merger with QAnon: all that was missing was a seismic push.



**Figure 8:** A topic network for the term “NWO”, per Ross et al., 2021, p.8.

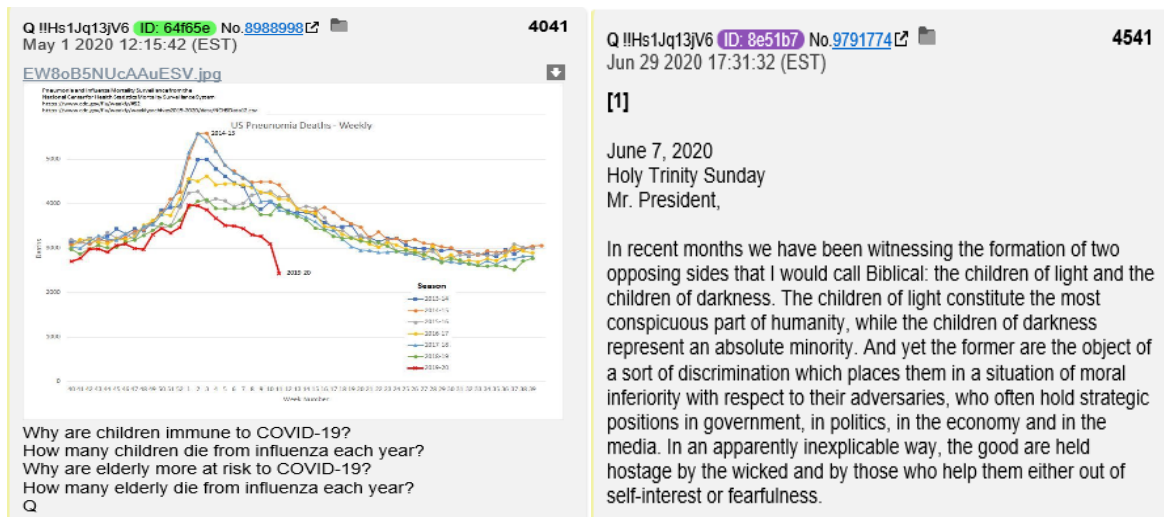
1,300 Facebook pages during the 2019 measles outbreak found that anti-vaxx pages increased by 500%, compared with a rise of 50% for pro-vaccine pages (Johnson *et al.* 2020).





**Figure 9:** Q drop #3913.

With the dye cast towards the protection of Trump, Q proceeded to build a COVID narrative around pre-existing themes, effectively adding links to a *chain of equivalence* that had been established over the previous two-and-a-half years. One notes in particular the foregrounding of children, accompanied by familiar themes such as the overarching tension between darkness and light:



**Figure 10:** Q drop #4041.

**Figure 11:** Q drop #4541.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had a massive effect in mainstreaming QAnon<sup>56</sup> and perhaps the most significant driver in the early days came not from Q themselves, but from the release of the Plandemic movie. A 26-minute video originally uploaded to Vimeo on 4 May 2020, the Plandemic garnered 8 million views in just over a week and became an instant mainstay of YouTube channels and Facebook pages dedicated to anti-vaccination and conspiracy before being eventually removed (Frenkel, Dekker and Alba, 2020; Hatmake, 2020). It is premised on challenging the accepted science of the pandemic and spotlights ‘whistle-blower’ scientist Dr. Judy Mikovits, who proceeds to make a series of (debunked) claims (see Funke, 2020). These include: Dr. Antony Fauci and Bill Gates stand to gain

<sup>56</sup> The report “Q-Tips: Measuring the Mainstreaming of QAnon During the Pandemic” (2020), for example, not only shows a wholesale mainstreaming of QAnon concepts, but also shows how this has been achieved by solidifying already existing social media networks online.



financially from ‘mandatory vaccination’<sup>57</sup>, Italy’s early wave of COVID-19 deaths was actually caused by the flu vaccine<sup>58</sup> and mask-wearing actively damages the immune system, thus increasing an individual’s risk of death from opportunistic infections<sup>59</sup>. Similar to the structure of established QAnon narratives, Mikovits’ testimony is built around the need to emancipate ourselves from the nefarious influence of shadowy elites (the constitutive enemy), as “if we don’t stop this now, we can not only forget our Republic and our freedom, but we can forget humanity, because we’ll be killed by this agenda” (Plandemic, 2020, 00.03.52-00.04.02). Within a day of its release, prominent QAnon channels—such as the Chasing the White Rabbit Facebook page, 25,000 followers—endorsed the Plandemic movie as ‘essential viewing’ (Frenkel *et al.*, 2020), while its central narrative persists within QAnon communities<sup>60</sup>, over 15 months later:

The current strain of contrivances aren’t life-saving miracles; but instruments of genocide and a pretext to vaccine passports and Orwellian control to be exerted over the world’s populations. Ages 0 to 19, 99.997% survival rate / Age 20 to 49, 99.98% survival rate / Age 50 to 69, 99.5% survival rate / Age 70 and up, 94.6% survival rate. Those numbers are about the only believable thing from an agency with a vested interest in vaccines, and maintaining the fear that masks evoke; and that without, wouldn’t exist at all, were it not for the propaganda spun by the mainstream media and governments worldwide. (AntiGlobalisasi, 2021).

Beyond the direct significance of the Plandemic movie, the Qanon/anti-vaccination pastiche that steadily developed in 2020 continues to be seen in offline settings. Signs and placards at anti-lockdown protests routinely reference variations of ‘scamdemic’ and ‘forced vaccines’ and while many of these signs do not *explicitly* reference QAnon, variations of child protection themes are both common and indicative (see Spring and Wendling, 2020).

---

<sup>57</sup> Interviewer: “If we activate mandatory vaccines globally, I imagine these people [including Bill Gates and Anthony Fauci] stand to make hundreds of billions of dollars that own the vaccines.” Mikovits: “And they’ll kill millions, as they already have with their vaccines. There is no vaccine currently on the schedule for any RNA virus that works.” (Plandemic, 2020, 00.09.39-00.09.59).

<sup>58</sup> Interviewer: “I wanna know why Italy was hit so hard.” Mikovits: “Italy has a very old population, they’re very sick with inflammatory disorders. They got, at the beginning of 2019, an untested, new form of influenza vaccine that had four different strains of influenza, including the highly pathogenic H1N1.” (Plandemic, 2020, 00.15.36-00.16.15).

<sup>59</sup> Mikovits: “Wearing the mask literally activates your own virus. You’re getting sick from your own reactivated coronavirus expressions and if it happens to be SARS-COV2, you’ve got a big problem.” (Plandemic, 2020, 00.20.29-00.20.40).

<sup>60</sup> As an anon puts it on 8kun’s */qresearch* (5 March 2021), “The governments around the world are complicit. This goes way beyond Trump, as this was planned long before. I DO think Trump triggered the early release though. Right before the release of the virus Trump had gone up against the big pharma cartel, remember? They fastracked the Plandemic to use as election weapon, because they had to get him out. Coincidence the great Green Reset was waiting for release as soon as the western economies were devastated, no. I think we can all see now, this virus was not accidentally released.” ([https://sys.8kun.top/search.php?search=Plandemic&board=qresearch&captcha\\_text=eepepe&captcha\\_cookie=nbzxztezsjypwfkiirk](https://sys.8kun.top/search.php?search=Plandemic&board=qresearch&captcha_text=eepepe&captcha_cookie=nbzxztezsjypwfkiirk)).



**Figure 12:** Snapshot of protesters with signs detailing slogans familiar to the anti-vaccination and QAnon vernacular (in Spring and Wendling, 2020).

Ultimately, QAnon influencers and followers have weaponised the COVID-19 pandemic to expand the *chain of equivalence* amid a unique opportunity to ‘redpill normies’ (see Dickinson, 2021’)—the process by which non-believers are exposed to conspiratorial content to steadily bring them into the fold<sup>61</sup>. This outreach has been met with considerable success, as QAnon narratives become more mainstreamed and readily absorbed (Dickson, 2020; de Zeeuw *et al.*, 2020). The effects of this normalisation can be seen, for example, in how QAnon has become embedded in various *non-conspiracy* networks, such as wellness communities, that are similarly built around cultures of alternative thinking and proto-spirituality (see Greenspan, 2020). Once again, the emotive hook of child protection in the face of dark forces appears to the fore; indeed, QAnon adherents have been acutely aware of this narrative power, in one instance hijacking the Save Our Children movement and reframing a genuine campaign to prevent child trafficking into something much more sinister (see Roose, 2020). The words of wellness influencer Krystal Tini (147k Instagram followers)—one among many within yoga, wellness and spirituality communities who began to share QAnon content following the onset of the pandemic (see Nelson, 2021)—ring familiar, as she proffers one more link for the *chain*: “I’m not promoting QAnon theories...I support finding truth. I support saving children from violence and sexual abuse. If that makes me a Q supporter, then I guess I am on the right side of what is best for humanity.” (Chang, 2021)<sup>62</sup>.

### **Agonism and Empathy: How to solve a problem like QAnon?**

<sup>61</sup> The strategic use of memes is a well-discussed topic in QAnon circles. The popular Qalerts.app aggregator—and other fora—contain meme making tools for users while there’s a dedicated chapter on ‘The Power of Memes’ in *QAnon: An Invitation to the Great Awakening*. As the author Liberty Lioness frames it, “When the media is controlled by those who oppose you, you cannot assume that your message will be delivered accurately or on a timely basis-or delivered at all. This is one of the reasons that President Trump tweets and why QAnon posts on 8Chan. You might argue that these have become the people’s media by default. However, without the power of network television or a chain of newspapers, WWG 1 WGA uses the power of memes that can spread ideas like wildfire across the Internet.” (2019, p. 105).

<sup>62</sup> For a more detailed outline of QAnon and wellness communities, see <https://twitter.com/MAArgentino/status/1303053412456640518>.

The mainstreaming of QAnon—and its association with violence—presents a fundamental challenge to states and tech companies alike, with no easy answers. Most strategies to address QAnon are focused on tackling disinformation—the typically-assumed lifeblood of conspiracy. A recent Brookings Institute report, for example, recommends combating disinformation ‘using data-driven methods’ and the establishment of a non-partisan public-private partnership (Paresky *et al.*, 2021), but the most significant pushback to date came in mid-to-late 2020 when Facebook and Instagram (Frenkel, 2020), Twitter (Conger, 2020) and YouTube (Solsman, 2020) engaged in mass takedowns of QAnon accounts and associated content in an effort to disrupt—if not cripple—the movement. Politically, this move reflected concerns about extremist discourses in the run up to the 2020 US Presidential election (see Sanger and Perlroth, 2020). More substantially, it reflects an internet policy landscape in which sweeping technological solutions are often applied on the basis of expediency (see Kyza *et al.*, 2020)<sup>63</sup> and a tacit assumption that a reduction in extreme(ist) content should translate to an overall reduction in extreme(ist) behaviour and, ultimately, violence (see Kundnani and Hayes, 2018).

The long-term efficacy of such policies remains squarely up for debate. In the first instance, we know that mass takedowns have a strong debilitating effect on online social networks and their ability to post further content (Conway *et al.* 2019, Nouri *et al.* 2020). On the other hand, explorative research indicates that takedowns may also funnel ‘extreme communities’ towards more ‘extreme spaces’ online, resulting in a hardening of belief systems (Pearson, 2018; Gaudette *et al.*, 2020). Owing to the latter, the explosive growth of alternative digital ecosystems—such as on Gab, Voat and Parler—since the 2020 US Presidential election (see Brandt and Dean, 2021)<sup>64</sup> has solidified a niche (alt-) online landscape where QAnon followers not only congregate in large numbers (see Garry *et al.*, 2021), but do so in a space that is typically beyond the reach, and desire, of normies<sup>65</sup>. In the case of Gab, for example, this Twitter-like platform (especially popular with the far-right) has always branded itself as a space for unfettered free speech and minimal content moderation; hate speech has flourished as a result, with anti-Semitism, anti-black racism and anti-feminism particularly to the fore (Jasser *et al.*, 2021, pp. 8-9). Unsurprisingly, QAnon narratives of conspiracy and paedophilia have grown substantially in these spaces (ibid) and the recent pivot of prominent QAnon influencer GhostEzra<sup>66</sup>—whose popularity exploded following his (enforced) migration from Twitter to Telegram—to outright and sustained anti-Semitism is (rightly) raising alarm at the prospect of equivalential discursive chains formed around a toxic combination of QAnon conspiracy and established far-right narratives (see Argentino, 2021b). Recall that *chains of equivalence* are premised on the (impossible) erasure of an *antagonistic* Other—a struggle that binds collective identity to powerful political causes. Far from offering a digital panacea,

---

<sup>63</sup> As Kyza *et al.* summarise, the requirement for expediency not only reflects the fast-moving nature of our social media landscape, it also reflects the natural limits of how quickly important content moderation decisions can be made: “While policy-making includes slower paced decision-making, it also often includes the need for quicker decision-making to respond to smaller or larger crises. In a large crisis situation, in particular, it is important to respond quickly and accurately, hence the participants’ recommendations for automating some of the verification processes to validate sources, filtering out unwanted information and reducing information overload.” (2020, p. 16).

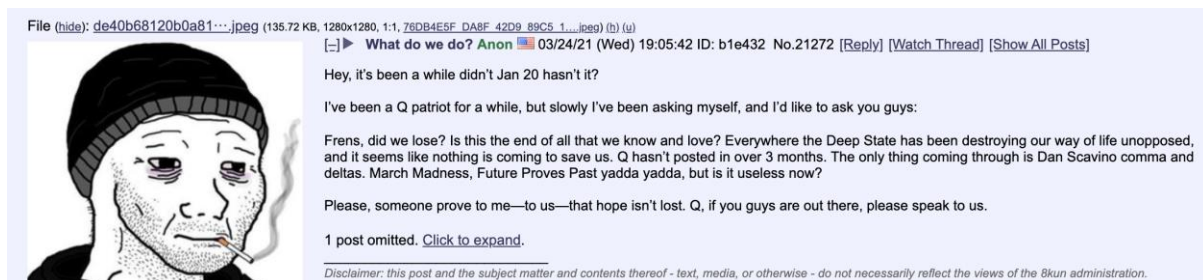
<sup>64</sup> As Brandt and Dean (2021) report, Gab submitted that it was gaining upwards of 10,000 users per hour in the aftermath of the 6 January Capitol Hill attacks and the de-platforming of its rival platform, Parler.

<sup>65</sup> We would also do well to remember that QAnon was born in the more obscure spaces on the Internet; none more so than 4Chan.

<sup>66</sup> At the time of writing, Ghost Ezra has 339,000 subscribers to his Telegram channel and is viewed as one of the most prominent influencers of the movement, following a meteoric rise in the aftermath of the 6 January Capitol Hill attacks. (see Palmer, 2021; Argentino, 2021a; Argentino, 2021b).

content takedowns enacted by a newly *antagonistic* ‘Big Tech’—who have also been vilified by Donald Trump on this basis (see, for example, Shalvey, 2021)—may just help to *expand* a binding sense of injustice, hardening “a community of grievance in the face of perceived techno-social persecution” (Jasser *et. al.*, 2021, p. 13) and ultimately constricting meaningful opportunities for reasoned, agonistic debate.

In many ways, communal cohesion in the face of ‘techno-social persecution’ might help to sustain a movement that (especially since January 2021) remains quite dislocated. At the time of writing, Q’s last drop came in 8 December 2020; it contained a single link to a pro-Trump mash-up—set to ‘We’re Not Gonna Take it’ by Twisted Sister<sup>67</sup>—conjuring the aesthetic of a farewell tour in more ways than one. As President Biden was sworn in and Donald Trump exited the stage with no mass arrests, nor any hint at the Storm, QAnon believers were left reeling and strangely unanchored. In one Telegram channel with over 18,400 members, doubts began to mount; one user writing: “It’s obvious now we’ve been had. No plan, no Q, nothing” (Menn *et al.*, 2021). In the months since, more and more expressions of doubt have appeared on 8kun and other dedicated spaces, as a façade normally defined by total conviction begins to crack:



**Figure 14:** Post to 8Kun’s /qpatriotresearch board, 24 March 2021<sup>68</sup>.

The key articles of faith (Q, Trump and ‘the plan’) that sustained QAnon remain in considerable flux and without this top-down guidance, followers’ attempts to (re)invigorate the movement appear increasingly desperate. Post-Q ‘proofs’ have taken on a noticeably amateurish hue: attempts to link the grounded Ever Given container ship to the Clinton Foundation (transporting children in the containers) arguably stretches the limits of possibility, even for QAnon (see Rouan, 2021)<sup>69</sup>, and after the ‘code’ “;l;;gmlxzssaw” appeared on the US Strategic Command Twitter account on 29 March 2021, small pockets of QAnon believers began to desperately read into its significance. It transpired that the code was typed by a small child banging on the (momentarily) unattended keyboard of the Command’s Twitter manager working from home (Belam, 2020)<sup>70</sup>.

It is easy, and tempting, to laugh at those who follow QAnon and to ridicule a belief system that appears so outrageous to neutral observers. It is similarly easy to write individuals off as

<sup>67</sup> All the same, Shayan Sardarizadeh (@Shayan86) outlines how this innocuous drop demonstrates the power of Q at that time: “Within hours of the Q drop linking to it, the video has gone from 24,000 views to 210,000. And the channel, which only has one video, has added 6,000 new subscribers. Anons from the US, the UK, Germany, Canada, Spain, and other countries are leaving comments.” (<https://twitter.com/Shayan86/status/1336488667200819203?s=20>).

<sup>68</sup> Available at: <https://8kun.top/qpatriotresearch/res/21272.html>, accessed 3 April 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Available at: <https://twitter.com/janbobrowicz/status/1379559086543548418?s=20>.

<sup>70</sup> Surreal as these examples are, we are reminded of the FBI’s warning of frustrated QAnon ‘digital soldiers’—who feel they can “no longer trust the plan”—and may pivot towards offline violence (see Hosenball, 2021).



having simply ‘lost their minds’ and remaining beyond help, cast aside to wallow in their self-built forts of ‘critical thinking’ while the rest of us bleat like sheep. Yet, perhaps a more empathetic—and less polarising—outlook is required. There is substantial evidence to show that QAnon is tearing friendships and families apart (see Jackson, 2021; Jaff and del Real, 2021)<sup>71</sup> and people are desperate to understand not only how this has happened, but how they might convince loved ones to ‘come back’—a tacit desire, surely, for empathetic understanding. There is more, too, than meets the eye with regard to those involved in the US Capitol siege. Court records of QAnon followers arrested for involvement shows that 68 percent had received mental health diagnoses (as opposed to 19 percent among all Americans), while among the QAnon actors with criminal records, 44 percent “experienced a serious psychological trauma that preceded their radicalization, such as physical or sexual abuse of them or of their children” (Moskalenko, 2021). Anxiety diagnoses were especially to the fore in this subset (ibid)—a coincidence, perhaps, but more likely, an indicator of societal and psychological fissures that remain to be fully understood.

Empathy has meaning in ontology too. If we are serious about ‘tackling’ QAnon, then it is essential to look beyond networked formations in online spaces—and how to destroy them—and focus more substantially on its conditions of emergence. The starting point along this process must be a recognition that “the very condition of possibility of the formation of political identities is at the same time the condition of impossibility of a society from which antagonism can be eliminated.” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 5); that is, QAnon is not an *outlier* in contemporary political processes, it is borne of them. Long recognising the silo-ing effects of antagonistic politics, Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2005, 2013) argues strongly for the (difficult) need to shift to *agonistic* formations of democracy, in which “the crucial issue...is how to establish [an] us/them distinction, which is constitutive of politics, in a way that is compatible with the recognition of pluralism.” (2013, p. 7). The question, then, becomes not how to reach a *compromise* with antagonistic forces or to be fully inclusive (that is, consensus without exclusion)<sup>72</sup>; it is neither to “eliminate passions or to relegate them to the private sphere in order to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere” (ibid, p. 9), as takedown policies arguably do. The real task lies in ‘sublimating’ those passions “by mobilizing them towards democratic designs, by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives.” (ibid); that is, to expand the inclusive, democratic horizons of participation within our societies before those passions can metastasise into hateful and potentially violent conspiracy. Understanding why countless individuals have affixed themselves to the wild narratives of QAnon—as a blatantly antagonistic Other—resonates far beyond traditional notions of ‘radicalisation’ and reflexive denunciations of ‘madness’: it tells us something about the stratified nature of a modern, antagonistic politics in which so many people have *chosen* to be outsiders in an attempt to bring the system down; or indeed, to elect those promising to act on their behalf (see Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

The key now is to discern how, or indeed *if*, an empathetic politics of inclusion is possible, particularly when—as it with classic antagonisms of “terrorism” (see Mouffe, 2005), the values (and violence) espoused by QAnon are anathema to the very idea of liberal democracy. This is a task that goes far beyond QAnon. When QAnon ‘dies’—as it surely will—it will be replaced by a similar antagonism that reflects anew the politics and anxieties of our time. We will not be able to explain it away by pointing at ‘the algorithm’, nor will we

---

<sup>71</sup> A substantial compilation of stories from those describing the effects of ‘losing’ friends and family to QAnon can be found at: <https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/>.

<sup>72</sup> The hateful, anti-Semitic speech discourse of Marjorie Taylor Greene (see Edmondson, 2021), for example, simply cannot be welcomed in a meaningfully liberal, democratic society.

erase its presence by hobbling online footprints as they take shape. Ultimately, acceptance of this precept might constitute a new form of resilience to (online) polarisation; that is, to accept the inevitability of antagonism while recognising the need for a more empathetic, agonistic politics and the mammoth effort that this will entail. The next step is to determine what this might look like in reality.

**About the author:** Dr. James Fitzgerald is Assistant Professor of Terrorism Studies at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University.

**Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank the organisers of this special issue and all those who provided feedback on earlier drafts, including colleagues in the School of Law and Government. Particular thanks go to @QOrigins and @Shayan86, who were gracious with their time and extremely helpful.



## References

“10 Threats to Global Health in 2019”, at <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>, accessed on 26 June 2020.

AntiGlobalistasi [@AntiGlobalistasi], 2021, 5 July. “FEMA: The Best Way To Prepare for Hurricanes Is By Getting The Covid Vaccine,” *Gab*, at <https://gab.com/AntiGlobalistasi/posts/106528908720726564>, accessed 5 July 2021.

M-A. Argentino, A. Amarasingam, 2020. “Q-Pilled: Conspiracy Theories, Trump, and Election Violence in the United States,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (29 October), at <https://icct.nl/publication/q-pilled-conspiracy-theories-trump-and-election-violence/>, accessed 2 January 2021.

M-A. Argentino [@\_MAArgentino], 2021, 17 June. “At this point GhostEzra is the first QAnon influencer who has gone full neo-nazi. He's moves beyond blending Antisemitism with QAnon narratives, but is fully pilled on ZOG narratives. GE is probably the most dangerous QAnon influencer with his 330k followers consuming this stuff.” *Twitter*, at <https://twitter.com/MAArgentino/status/1405338751363059716>, accessed 20 June 2021.

M. Aliapoulis, A. Papasavva, C. Ballard, E. De Cristofaro, G. Stringhini, S. Zannettou, J. Blackburn, 2021, in print. “The Gospel According to Q: Understanding the QAnon Conspiracy from the Perspective of Canonical Information,” *arXiv preprint*, arXiv:2101.08750.

S.C. Aykut, J.B. Comby, H. Guillemot, 2012. “Climate change controversies in French mass media 1990–2010,” *Journalism Studies*, volume 13, number 2, pp.157-174. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2011.646395>, accessed 19 August 2020.

A.M.B. Albrechtslund, 2017. “Negotiating ownership and agency in social media: Community reactions to Amazon’s acquisition of Goodreads,” *First Monday*, at <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7095/6161>, accessed 18 December 2020.

K. G. Andersen, A. Rambaut, W. I. Lipkin, E.C. Holmes, R. F. Garry, 2020. “The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2. *Nature medicine*, volume 26, number 4, pp. 450-452, at <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0820-9>, accessed 14 December 2020.

C. Arroyo and J. Valor, 2020. “How the post-truth world led to QAnon,” *Media Matters Blog* (18 September), at <https://blog.iese.edu/the-media-industry/2020/09/18/how-the-post-truth-world-led-to-qanon/>, accessed on 14 February 2021.

S. Aupers, 2012. “‘Trust no one’: Modernization, paranoia and conspiracy culture,” *European Journal of Communication*, volume 27, number 1, pp.22-34. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0267323111433566>, accessed 4 December 2020.

A. Bangerter, P. Wagner-Egger, S. Delouvé, 2020. “How conspiracy theories spread,” In: M. Butler and P. Knight (editors). *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, New York: Routledge, pp. 206-218.

J. A. Bargh, 1994. "The four horsemen of automaticity: Awareness, intention, efficiency and control in social cognition," In: R. S. Wyer and T. K. Srull (editors), *Handbook of Social Cognition*, Lawrence Erlbaum, at <https://philpapers.org/rec/BARTFH>, accessed 6 December 2020.

Beck, U. 1992. *Risk Society: towards a new modernity*. London: Sage Publications.

M. Belam 2021. "US military account's gibberish tweet prompts viral mystery," *The Guardian* (30 March), at <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/mar/30/us-military-account-gibberish-tweet-viral-mystery>, accessed 31 March 2021.

J. Bellaiche, 2020. "Assessing the threat of QAnon violence," *Global Network on Extremism & Technology* (15 June), at <https://gnet-research.org/2020/06/15/assessing-the-threat-of-qanon-violence/>, accessed 5 January 2021.

P. Berger, and T. Luckmann, 1991. *The social construction of reality*. London: Penguin Books.

J. M. Berger, 2013. "Zero Degrees of al Qaeda: How Twitter is supercharging jihadist recruitment", *Foreign Policy* (14 August), at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/08/14/zero\\_degrees\\_of\\_al\\_qaeda\\_twitter](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/08/14/zero_degrees_of_al_qaeda_twitter), accessed 7 December 2020.

F. Berenskoetter, 2020. "Anxiety, time, and agency," *International Theory*, volume 12, number 2, pp.273-290. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000111>, accessed 30 July 2020.

K. Bhui and D. Bhugra (editors), 2020. *Terrorism, Violent Radicalisation, and Mental Health*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

S. Blume, 2006. "Anti-vaccination movements and their interpretations", in *Social science and medicine*, volume 62, number 3, pp.628-642. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.06.020>, accessed 2 October 2020.

E. Bozdag, 2013. "Bias in Algorithmic Filtering and Personalization," *Ethics and Information Technology*, volume 15, number 3, pp. 209–227. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-013-9321-6>, accessed 15 November 2020.

D. Brandt D, G. Dean, 2021. "Gab, a social-networking site popular among the far right, seems to be capitalising on Twitter bans and Parler being forced offline. It says it's gaining 10,000 new users an hour," *Business Insider* (12 January), at <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/gab-reports-growth-in-the-midst-of-twitter-bans-2021-1?r=US&IR=T>, accessed 25 May 2021.

J. Brewster, 2020. "'The Storm Is Here': GOP House Candidate Tweets QAnon Rallying Cry After Trump Retweets Her," *Forbes* (7 August), at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2020/08/07/the-storm-is-here-gop-house-candidate-tweets-qanon-rallying-cry-after-trump-retweets-her/?sh=26239554f591>, accessed 9 January 2021.

- R. Brewster and S. Ray 2020. "Trump Repeatedly Boosts QAnon On His Way Out The Door," *Forbes* (9 December), at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2020/12/09/trump-repeatedly-boosts-qanon-on-his-way-out-the-door/?sh=7663c19b3a91>, accessed 3 April 2021.
- M. Butler and P. Knight (editors), 2020. *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Routledge.
- C. Calhoun, 2010. "Beck, Asia and second modernity," *The British Journal of Sociology*, volume 61, number 3, pp.597-619. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01328.x>, accessed 2 April 2016.
- Q. Cassam, 2016. "Vice epistemology," *The Monist*, volume 99, number 2, pp. 69–80. doi: 10.1093/monist/onv034, accessed 3 February 2021.
- P. Cassell, (editor) 1993. *The Giddens Reader*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- M. Castells, 2013. *Communication power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- C. Chang, 2021. "The Unlikely Connection Between Wellness Influencers and the Pro-Trump Rioters," *Cosmopolitan Magazine* (12 January), at <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/health-fitness/a35056548/wellness-fitness-influencers-qanon-conspiracy-theories/>, accessed 4 April 2021.
- "Concerns are raised over the threat of COVID-19 to mental health in Europe", at <https://unric.org/en/concerns-are-raised-over-the-threat-of-covid-19-to-mental-health-in-europe/>, accessed on 26 November 2020.
- K. Conger, 2020. "Twitter Takedown Targets QAnon Accounts," *The New York Times* (21 July), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/21/technology/twitter-bans-qanon-accounts.html>, accessed 9 December 2020.
- M. Conway, M. Khawaja, S. Lakhani, J. Reffin, A. Robertson, A., D. Weir, 2019. "Disrupting Daesh: Measuring takedown of online terrorist material and its impacts," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, volume 42, number 2, pp.141-160. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513984>, accessed 2 February 2020.
- C. Critcher, 2008. "Moral panic analysis: Past, present and future," *Sociology compass*, volume 2, number 4, pp. 1127-1144. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2008.00122.x>, accessed 7 September 2020.
- C. De Saint Laurent, V. Glaveanu, C. Chaudet, 2020. "Malevolent creativity and social media: Creating anti-immigration communities on Twitter," *Creativity Research Journal*, volume 3, number 1, pp.66-80. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2020.1712164>, accessed 4 December 2020.
- V. Della Sala, 2018. "Narrating Europe: the EU's ontological security dilemma," *European security*, volume 27, number 3, pp.266-279. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2018.1497978>, accessed 2 September 2020.

- E. Dickson, 2020. "What Is #SaveTheChildren and Why Did Facebook Block It?," *Rolling Stone Magazine* (12 August), at <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/savethechildren-qanon-pizzagate-facebook-block-hashtag-1041812/>, accessed 7 February 2021.
- T. Dickinson, 2021. "How the Anti-Vaxxers got Red-Pilled," *Rolling Stone Magazine* (10 February), at <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/qanon-anti-vax-covid-vaccine-conspiracy-theory-1125197/>, accessed on 10 March 2021.
- S. Dieguez, P. Wagner-Egger, N. Gauvrit, 2015. "Nothing happens by accident, or does it? A low prior for randomness does not explain belief in conspiracy theories," *Psychological Science*, volume 26, pp. 1762–1770. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615598740>, accessed 3 October 2020.
- J. van Dijck, 2009. "Users like you? Theorizing agency in user-generated content," *Media, culture and society*, volume 31, number 1, pp.41-58. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443708098245>, accessed 2 June 2019.
- K.M. Douglas, R.M. Sutton, A. Cichocka, 2017. "The psychology of conspiracy theories," *Current directions in psychological science*, volume 26, number 6, pp. 538-542. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>, accessed 7 December 2019.
- K.M.Douglas, J.E. Uscinski, R.M. Sutton, A. Cichocka, T. Nefes, C.S. Ang, F. Deravi, 2019. "Understanding conspiracy theories," *Political Psychology*, volume 40, pp. 3-35. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>, accessed 20 March 2019.
- R.I.M. Dunbar, 1995. *The trouble with science*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- C. Edmondson, 2021. "Greene's Holocaust Comparisons Cause New Headaches for G.O.P.," *The New York Times* (25 May), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/25/us/politics/greene-holocaust.html>, accessed 28 May 2021.
- K.D. Ersche, T.V., Lim, L.H. Ward, T.W. Robbins, J. Stochl, 2017. "Creature of Habit: A self-report measure of habitual routines and automatic tendencies in everyday life," *Personality and Individual Differences*, volume 116, pp.73-85. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.04.024>, accessed on 18 October 2020.
- K. Faasse, C.J. Chatman, L.R. Martin, 2016. "A comparison of language use in pro-and anti-vaccination comments in response to a high profile Facebook post," *Vaccine*, volume 34, number 47, pp.5808-5814. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2016.09.029>, accessed 23 October 2020.
- E. Ferrara, 2020. "What types of COVID-19 conspiracies are populated by Twitter bots?," *First Monday*, volume 25, number 6, at <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/10633/9548>. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i6.10633>, accessed 15 November 2020.
- J. Fitzgerald, 2014. Between the lines: 'Al Qaeda' 'Islamic Extremism' and the authorship of critique. PhD thesis, Dublin City University at <http://doras.dcu.ie/20238/>, accessed 20 April 2019.

P. Forman, 2007. "The primacy of science in modernity, of technology in postmodernity, and of ideology in the history of technology," *History and technology*, volume 23, number 1-2, pp.1-152. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07341510601092191>, accessed on 15 October 2020.

S. Frenkel 2020. "Facebook Removes 790 QAnon Groups to Fight Conspiracy Theory," *The New York Times* (19 August), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/technology/facebook-qanon-groups-takedown.html>, accessed 2 November 2020.

S. Frenkel, B. Decker, D. Alba, 2020. "How the 'Plandemic' Movie and Its Falsehoods Spread Widely Online," *The New York Times* (20 May), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/technology/plandemic-movie-youtube-facebook-coronavirus.html>, accessed 24 January 2021.

Funke, D. 2020. "Fact-checking 'Plandemic': A documentary full of false conspiracy theories about the coronavirus," *Politifact* (7 May), at <https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/may/08/fact-checking-plandemic-documentary-full-false-con/>, accessed 21 March, 2021.

G. W. Gauchat, 2008. "A test of three theories of anti-science attitudes," *Sociological Focus*, volume 41, number 4, pp. 337-357. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2008.10571338>, accessed 12 November 2020.

A. Gallagher, J. Davey, M. Hart, 2020. "The Genesis of a Conspiracy Theory: Key trends in QAnon activity since 2017," *Institute of Strategic Dialogue*, at <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Genesis-of-a-Conspiracy-Theory.pdf>, accessed 19 December 2020.

A. Garry, S. Walther, R. Mohamed, A. Mohammed 2021. "QAnon Conspiracy Theory: Examining its Evolution and Mechanisms of Radicalization", *Journal for Deradicalization*, number 26, pp. 152-216. At <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/437>, accessed 5 April 2021.

A. Gates, 2021. "Influencer extremism: Q-Shaman expanded his brand at the Capitol attack," *DFRLab*, at: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/influencer-extremism-q-shaman-expanded-his-brand-at-the-capitol-attack-244107f58e4>, accessed 19 March 2021.

T., Gaudette, R. Scrivens, G. Davies, R. Frank, 2020." Upvoting extremism: Collective identity formation and the extreme right on Reddit," *New Media & Society* (online first), pp. 1-18. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1461444820958123>, accessed 5 May 2021.

A. Giddens, 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

A. Giddens, 2004. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

T. Gillespie, 2014 "The Relevance of Algorithms," In T. Gillespie, P. Boczkowski, K. Foot (editors), *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 167–94.



T. Goertzel, 1994. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology*, volume 15, number 4, pp. 731–42. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791630>, accessed 5 July 2020.

R. E. Greenspan, 2020. "Lifestyle influencers are using COVID-19 to spread QAnon conspiracy theories: 'I truly believe I owe it to my audience to be more for them during this turning point in our culture'," *Lifestyle Magazine* (15 May), at <https://www.insider.com/lifestyle-influencers-using-covid-19-to-spread-qanon-conspiracy-theory-2020-5>, accessed 14 January 2021.

M. Haim, A. Graefe, H. B. Brosius, 2017. "Burst of the filter bubble?," *Digital Journalism*, volume 6, number 3, pp 330–343. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1338145>, accessed 20 November 2020.

J. Hannan, 2018. "Trolling ourselves to death? Social media and post-truth politics," *European Journal of Communication*, volume 33, number 2, pp. 214–226. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0267323118760323>, accessed 5 December 2020.

N. Harding, 2008. "The 'I', the 'me' and the 'you know': identifying identities in organisations. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, volume 3, number 1, pp. 42–58. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/17465640810870382>, accessed 21 March 2021.

R. Harrington, M. Hall, S. Gould, A. Haroun, J. Shamsian, 2021. "More than 250 people have been charged in the Capitol insurrection so far. This searchable table shows them all," *The Insider* (25 March), at <https://www.insider.com/all-the-us-capitol-pro-trump-riot-arrests-charges-names-2021-1>, accessed 4 April 2021.

T. Hatmaker, 2020. "Platforms scramble as 'Plandemic' conspiracy video spreads misinformation like wildfire," at [https://techcrunch.com/2020/05/07/plandemic-video-judy-mikovits/?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAKLfrz5h8cTQocrled5\\_bLqTj4O9Zjx0dcflW9C1pV\\_LEz9\\_PG4tO2xfL7\\_2wPYpGI5M95CsyhfVnBYb5oGCnK8ZdirrtLOSCN1kLJxF9t23LE7lh-pOn3jf43X4dsiORJSZfpnG14NWBoSaIWJxSxdzYFGVLTToCXeh2sm\\_i9shd](https://techcrunch.com/2020/05/07/plandemic-video-judy-mikovits/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAKLfrz5h8cTQocrled5_bLqTj4O9Zjx0dcflW9C1pV_LEz9_PG4tO2xfL7_2wPYpGI5M95CsyhfVnBYb5oGCnK8ZdirrtLOSCN1kLJxF9t23LE7lh-pOn3jf43X4dsiORJSZfpnG14NWBoSaIWJxSxdzYFGVLTToCXeh2sm_i9shd), accessed 6 December 2020.

B. Heaphy, 2007. *Late modernity and social change: reconstructing social and personal life*. London: Routledge.

M. Hosenball, 2021. "FBI warns that QAnon followers could engage in 'real-world violence'", *Reuters* (15 June), at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/fbi-warns-that-qanon-followers-could-engage-real-world-violence-2021-06-14/>, accessed 15 June 2021.

P.J. Hotez, 2020. "Anti-science extremism in America: escalating and globalizing," *Microbes and Infection*, volume 22, number 10, pp. 505–507. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.micinf.2020.09.005>, accessed 9 October 2020.

D. Howarth, 2000. *Discourse*. Open University Press.



- D. Howarth, A.J. Norval, Y. Stavrakakis (editors) 2000. *Discourse theory and political analysis: Identities, hegemonies and social change*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- J. Jackson, 2021. "Talking to Members of 'QAnon Casualties,' a Reddit Support Group for Those Who've 'Lost' People to Conspiracy," *Newsweek* (3 February), at <https://www.newsweek.com/qanon-casualties-reddit-community-1565501>, accessed 4 April 2021.
- G. Jaffe and J. A. del Real, 2021. "Life amid the ruins of QAnon: 'I wanted my family back'", *The Washington Post* (23 February), at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/conspiracy-theories-qanon-family-members/>, accessed 2 April 2021.
- G. Jasser, J. McSwiney, E. Pertwee, S. Zannettou, 2021. "'Welcome to #GabFam': Far-right virtual community on Gab," *New Media & Society* (Online First). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F14614448211024546>, accessed 29 June 2021.
- A. John, 2020. "Satanism and sex rings: How the QAnon conspiracy theory has taken political root," *Los Angeles Times* (15 July), at <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-07-15/qanon-conspiracy-theory-congressional-candidates>, accessed 12 October 2020.
- N.F. Johnson, N. Velásquez, N.J. Restrepo, R. Leahy, N. Gabriel, S. El Oud, M. Zheng, P. Manrique, S. Wuchty, Y. Lupu, 2020. "The online competition between pro-and anti-vaccination views," *Nature*, volume 582, pp.230-233. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2281-1>, accessed 12 January 2021.
- D. Jolley, R. Meleady, K.M. Douglas, 2020. "Exposure to intergroup conspiracy theories promotes prejudice which spreads across groups," *British Journal of Psychology*, volume 111, number 1, pp. 17-35. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12385>, accessed 5 September 2020.
- J. Kaiser, and A. Rauchfleisch, 2020. "Birds of a Feather Get Recommended Together: Algorithmic Homophily in YouTube's Channel Recommendations in the United States and Germany," *Social Media + Society*, volume 6, number 4, pp. 1-15. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2056305120969914>, accessed 5 September 2020.
- C. Kinnvall, I Manners, J. Mitzen, 2018. "Introduction to 2018 special issue of European Security: 'ontological (in) security in the European Union'," *European security*, volume 27, number 3, pp. 249-265. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2018.1497977>, accessed 5 September 2020.
- C. Kinnvall, and J. 2020. "Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: thinking with and beyond Giddens," *International Theory*, volume 12, number 2, pp.240-256. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297192000010X>, accessed 25 July 2020.
- G., Kossinets, D.J. Watts, 2009. "Origins of homophily in an evolving social network," *American journal of sociology*, volume 115, number 2, pp.405-450. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1086/599247>, accessed 12 June 2020.

L. Knuttila, 2011. "User unknown: 4chan, anonymity and contingency," *First Monday*, volume 16, number 10. doi: <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3665>, accessed on 11 August 2020.

O. Klein and K. Nera 2020. "Social Psychology of Conspiracy Theories", in M. Butler and P. Knight (editors), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, New York: Routledge, pp. 121-134.

A.W. Kruglanski and S. Fishman, 2009. "The need for cognitive closure," *Handbook of individual differences in social behavior*," In M. R. Leary and R. H. Hoyle (editors), *Handbook of individual differences in social behaviour*, The Guilford Press, pp. 343–353.

P. Knight, 2000. *Conspiracy culture: From the Kennedy assassination to the X-Files*. New York: Routledge.

A. Kundnani, A. and B. Hayes, 2018. "The globalisation of countering violent extremism policies," *Undermining Human Rights, Instrumentalising Civil Society*. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, at [https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/the\\_globalisation\\_of\\_countering\\_violent\\_extremism\\_policies.pdf](https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/the_globalisation_of_countering_violent_extremism_policies.pdf), accessed 6 April, 2021.

E.A., Kyza, C. Varda, D. Panos, M. Karageorgiou, N. Komendantova-Amann, S. Coppolino Perfumi, S.I.H. Shah, A.S. Hosseini, 2020. "Combating misinformation online: re-imagining social media for policy-making," *Internet Policy Review*, volume 9, number 4, pp.1-24. doi: doi:10.14763/2020.4.1514, accessed 4 March 2021.

R. D. Laing, 1990. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. New York: Penguin Books.

E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, 2001. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (second edition). London: Verso.

P.J. Leman, and M. Cinnirella, 2013. "Beliefs in conspiracy theories and the need for cognitive closure," *Frontiers in Psychology*, volume 4, article 378. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00378, accessed on 4 October 2020.

N. H., Leung, D. K. Chu, E. Y. Shiu, K.-H., Chan, J. J. Hau, B. J. McDevitt, H - L. Yen, Y. Li, D. K. Ip, J. M. Peiris, 2020. "Respiratory virus shedding in exhaled breath and efficacy of face masks," *Nature medicine*, volume 26, number 5, pp. 676-680. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0843-2>, accessed 2 January 2021.

J. Lemons, 2016. "Vaccine controversies," *CQ Researcher* (19 February), volume 26, pp. 169-192, at <http://library.cqpress.com/>, accessed 5 January 2021.

S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt, 2018. *How Democracies Die*. Crown.

Liberty Lioness, 2019. "The Power of Memes," in WWG1WGA 2019, *QAnon: An Invitation to The Great Awakening*. Relentlessly Creative Books, pp. 105-120.

- C. Lima, 2021. "Twitter boots Trump," *Politico* (8 January), at <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/08/twitter-suspends-trump-account-456730>, accessed 22 February 2021.
- I. Lowrie, 2018. "Algorithms and automation: an introduction," *Cultural Anthropology*, volume 33, number 3, pp.349-359. doi: <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.3.01>, accessed 17 November 2020.
- O. Marchart, 2007. *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- M. Marchlewska, A. Cichocka, M. Kossowska, 2017. "Addicted to answers: Need for cognitive closure and the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, volume 48, number 2, pp. 109-117. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2308>, accessed 12 September 2020.
- F. van Marle and S. Maruna, 2010. "'Ontological insecurity' and 'terror management' Linking two free-floating anxieties," *Punishment & Society*, volume 12, number 1, pp.7-26. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474509349084>, accessed 25 October 2018.
- J. Menn, E. Culliford, K. Paul, C. Monahan 2021. "'No plan, no Q, nothing': QAnon followers reel as Biden inaugurated," *Reuters* (20 January), at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-biden-qanon-idUSKBN29P2VO>, accessed 20 January 2021.
- D. Montserrat, 2002. *Akhenaten: history, fantasy and ancient Egypt*. New York: Routledge.
- S. Moskalenko, 2021. "Many QAnon followers report having mental health diagnoses," *The Conversation* (25 March) at <https://theconversation.com/many-qanon-followers-report-having-mental-health-diagnoses-157299>, accessed 25 March 2021.
- M. Mostafa, C. Hewage, S. Thorne, 2021. "Trump is building a social media platform – but keeping it online will be a challenge," (24 March) *The Conversation*, at <https://theconversation.com/trump-is-building-a-social-media-platform-but-keeping-it-online-will-be-a-challenge-157712>, accessed 28 March 2021.
- C. Mouffe, 1993. *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso.
- C. Mouffe, 2005. *On the Political*. London: Routledge.
- C. Mouffe, 2013. *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically*. London: Verso.
- U. Mullally, 2019. "How YouTube can suck you into an extremist swamp," *Irish Times* (9 September), at <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/una-mullally-how-youtube-can-suck-you-into-an-extremist-swamp-1.4011517>, accessed 20 January 2021.
- A. Nagle, 2017. *Kill all normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*. John Hunt Publishing.

- L. J. Nelson, 2021. "California's yoga, wellness and spirituality community has a QAnon problem," *Los Angeles Times* (23 June), at <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-06-23/covid-adds-to-california-yoga-wellness-qanon-problem>, accessed 25 June 2021.
- A. J. Norval, 1994. "Social Ambiguity and the Crisis of Apartheid," in E. Laclau (editor), *The Making of Political Identities*, London: Verso, pp. 115-137.
- D. O'Callaghan, D. Greene, M. Conway, J. Carthy, P. Cunningham, 2015. "Down the (white) rabbit hole: The extreme right and online recommender systems," *Social Science Computer Review*, volume 33, number 4, pp. 459-478. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439314555329>, accessed 7 June 2015.
- Neon Revolt, 2019. *Revolution Q: The Story of QAnon and the 2<sup>nd</sup> American Revolution*. Available <https://books.apple.com/ie/book/revolution-q/id1486353689>, accessed 12 February 2021.
- C. Noy, 2008. "Sampling knowledge: The hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research," *International Journal of social research methodology*, volume 11, number 4, pp.327-344. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701401305>, accessed 15 February 2017.
- L. Nouri, N. Lorenzo-Dus, A.L. Watkin, 2020. "Impacts of Radical Right Groups' Movements across Social Media Platforms—A Case Study of Changes to Britain First's Visual Strategy in Its Removal from Facebook to Gab," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, pp.1-27. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1866737>, accessed 6 March 2021.
- K. O'Hara, and D. Stevens, 2015. "Echo Chambers and Online Radicalism: Assessing the Internet's Complicity in Violent Extremism. Policy & Internet," volume 7, number 4, pp. 401–422. doi: 10.1002/poi3.88, accessed 15 September 2020.
- J. E. Oliver and T. J. Wood, 2014. "Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style (s) of mass opinion," *American Journal of Political Science*, volume 58, number 4, pp. 952-966. doi: 10.1111/ajps.12084, accessed 28 August 2020.
- Orphanalytics, 2020. "Style analysis by machine learning reveals that two authors likely shared the writing of QAnon's messages at two different periods in time," (21 December), at <https://www.orphanalytics.com/en/news/whitepaper202012/OrphAnalyticsQAnon2020.pdf>, accessed 13 January 2021.
- S. Ouattara and N. Århem, N., 2021. "Fighting Ebola in the Shadow of Conspiracy Theories and Sorcery Suspicions," *Cahiers d'études africaines*, number 241, pp. 9-39. At <https://www.cairn.info/revue-cahiers-d-etudes-africaines-2021-1-page-9.htm>, accessed 22 February 2021.
- E. Palmer, 2021. "Hugely Popular QAnon Telegram Account Goes on Antisemitic Tirade," *Newsweek* (21 May), at <https://www.newsweek.com/qanon-ghostezra-antisemitism-telegram-1593592>, accessed 6 June 2021.
- A. Papasavva, J. Blackburn, G. Stringhini, S. Zannettou, E. D. Cristofaro, 2020. "Is it a Qoincidence?: An Exploratory Study of QAnon on Voat," Proceedings of 30th The Web Conference (WWW 2021), at <https://arxiv.org/abs/2009.04885>, accessed 21 January 2021.

P. Paresky, A. Goldenberg, D. Riggleman, J. N. Shapiro, F. Farmer Jr. 2021. "How to respond to the QAnon threat," (20 January), *Brookings Institute*, at <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-to-respond-to-the-qanon-threat/>, accessed 16 February 2021.

E. Pearson, 2018. "Online as the new frontline: affect, gender, and ISIS-take-down on social media," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, volume 41, no. 11, pp. 850-874. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1352280>, accessed 4 April 2018.

H. Pfeifer, 2021. "Conspiracy theories during coronavirus pandemic in Europe," *DW* (18 February), at <https://www.dw.com/en/conspiracy-theories-during-coronavirus-pandemic-in-europe/a-56617752>, accessed 3 March 2021.

"Q-Tips: Measuring the Mainstreaming of QAnon During the Pandemic," 2020. *Graphika Blog* (2 September), at <https://graphika.com/posts/q-tips-measuring-the-mainstreaming-of-qanon-during-the-pandemic/>, accessed 3 February 2021.

W. Rahn, D. Patterson 2021. "What is the QAnon conspiracy theory?" *CBS News* (29 March), at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-is-the-qanon-conspiracy-theory/>, accessed 29 March 2021.

A. Reed, J. Whittaker, F. Votta, S. Looney, 2018. "Radical Filter Bubbles Social Media Personalisation Algorithms and Extremist Content," at [https://www.rusi.org/sites/default/files/20190726\\_grntt\\_paper\\_08.pdf](https://www.rusi.org/sites/default/files/20190726_grntt_paper_08.pdf), accessed 10 June 2019.

C. Rock, A. van Delft, A. Lovejoy, 2020. *A User's Guide to the Great Awakening: How citizens worldwide can help guide their societies to long-term peace and prosperity*. The Empowered Citizen Institute.

J. Rizeq, D.B. Flora, M.E. Toplak, 2020. "An examination of the underlying dimensional structure of three domains of contaminated mindware: paranormal beliefs, conspiracy beliefs, and anti-science attitudes," *Thinking & Reasoning* [in press], pp.1-25. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13546783.2020.1759688>, accessed 19 May 2020.

J. Roisman, 2006. *The rhetoric of conspiracy in ancient Athens*. University of California Press.

L. Roniger and L. Senkman, 2022 (forthcoming). *Conspiracy Theories and Latin American History: Lurking in the Shadows*. London: Routledge

K. Roose, 2020. "How 'Save the Children' Is Keeping QAnon Alive," *The New York Times* (28 September), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/28/technology/save-the-children-qanon.html>, accessed on 5 October 2021.

K. Roose, 2021. "What is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?," *The New York Times* (4 March), at <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>, accessed on 21 March 2021.



- M. Rosenberg, 2020. "A QAnon Supporter Is Headed to Congress," *The New York Times* (3 November), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/03/us/politics/qanon-candidates-marjorie-taylor-greene.html>, accessed 28 November 2020.
- A. R. Ross, M. Modi, P. Paresky, L. Jussim, A. Goldenberg, P. Goldenberg, D. Finkelstein, J. Farmer, K. Holden, D. Riggelman, J. Shapiro, J. Finkelstein, 2021. "A Contagion of Institutional Distrust: Viral Disinformation of the COVID Vaccine and the Road to Reconciliation, at <https://networkcontagion.us/reports/a-contagion-of-institutional-distrust/>, accessed 15 March 2021.
- C. Rossdale, 2015. "Enclosing critique: the limits of ontological security," *International political sociology*, volume 9, number 4, pp.369-386. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12103>, accessed 13 June 2020.
- R. Rouan, 2021. "Fact check: No evidence of Hillary Clinton link with ship stuck in Suez Canal, trafficking," *USA Today*, at <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2021/03/26/fact-check-no-evidence-hillary-clinton-suez-canal-vessel-linked/7014647002/>, accessed 3 April 2021.
- A. Rupa, 2020. "Trump spent his holidays retweeting QAnon and Pizzagate accounts," *Vox* (2 January), at <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/2/21046707/trump-qanon-pizzagate-retweets>, accessed 3 March 2021
- D.E. Sanger and N. Perlroth, 2020. "As Election Nears, Government and Tech Firms Push Back on Russia (and Trump)," *The New York Times* (20 October), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/20/us/politics/election-hacking-trump-microsoft-cyber-command.html>, accessed 2 February 2021.
- F. van Schalkwyk, J. Dudek, R. Costas, 2020. "Communities of shared interests and cognitive bridges: the case of the anti-vaccination movement on Twitter," *Scientometrics*, volume 125, number 2, pp.1499-1516. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-020-03551-0>, accessed on 12 January 2021.
- M. Scott, 2020. "QAnon goes European," *Politico* (23 October), at <https://www.politico.eu/article/qanon-europe-coronavirus-protests/>, accessed 3 December 2020.
- N. Seaver, 2019. "Captivating algorithms: Recommender systems as traps," *Journal of Material Culture*, volume 24, number 4, pp. 421-436. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1359183518820366>, accessed 4 November 2020.
- SerialBrain2, 2019. "Decoding and Deciphering Q," in [WWG1WGA 2019](#), *QAnon: An Invitation to The Great Awakening*. Relentlessly Creative Books, pp. 51-92.
- K. Shalvey, 2021. "Donald Trump attacks Big Tech during a meandering speech, in which he accused Silicon Valley firms of ruining the US and demanded their 'monopoly' be broken up", *Business Insider* (6 June), at <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-attacks-big-tech-accuses-silicon-valley-ruining-country-2021-6?r=US&IR=T>, accessed 7 June 2021.



- A. Slee, I. Nazareth, N. Freemantle, L. Horsfall, 2021. "Trends in generalised anxiety disorders and symptoms in primary care: UK population-based cohort study," *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, volume 218, number 3, pp. 158-164. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2020.159>, accessed 2 April 2021.
- A.M. Smith 1998. *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary*. London: Routledge.
- M. Smith (director), 2020. *Out of Shadows* [film]. Mike Smith Productions.
- N. Smith, and T. Graham, 2019. "Mapping the anti-vaccination movement on Facebook," *Information, Communication & Society*, volume 22, number 9, pp.1310-1327. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1418406>, accessed 2 February 2021.
- J. E. Solsman 2020. "YouTube bans QAnon conspiracy videos that target a person or group," *CNET* (15 October), at <https://www.cnet.com/news/youtube-bans-qanon-conspiracy-theory-videos-that-target-a-person-or-group/>, accessed 8 January 2021.
- Spaceshot76 and Redpill78, 2019. "When Will it Become Mathematically Impossible?" In WWG1WGA, *QAnon: An Invitation to The Great Awakening*. Relentlessly Creative Books, pp. 13-30.
- S. Stano, 2020. "The Internet and the Spread of Conspiracy Content," in M. Butler and P. Knight (editors), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, New York: Routledge, pp. 483-496.
- K. E. Stanovich, 2016. "The comprehensive assessment of rational thinking," *Educational Psychologist*, volume 51, number 1, pp.23-34. doi: <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/00461520.2015.1125787>, accessed 18 September 2020.
- B. J. Steele and A. Homolar, 2019. "Ontological insecurities and the politics of contemporary populism," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, volume 32, number 3, pp. 214-221. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1596612>, accessed 29 August 2020.
- V. Swami, H. S. Zahari, D. Barron, 2020. "Conspiracy Theories in Southeast Asia" in M. Butler and P. Knight (editors), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, New York: Routledge, pp. 638-647.
- K. Tiffany, 2019. "How a conspiracy theory about Democrats drinking children's blood topped Amazon's best-sellers list," *VOX* (6 March), at <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/3/6/18253505/amazon-qanon-book-best-seller-algorithm-conspiracy>, accessed 26 July 2020.
- C. Timberg and E. Dwoskin, 2021. "With Trump gone, QAnon groups focus fury on attacking coronavirus vaccines," *The Washington Post* (11 March), at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/11/with-trump-gone-qanon-groups-focus-fury-attacking-covid-vaccines/>, accessed 3 April 2021.
- J. Torfing, 1999. *New Theories of Discourse. Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek*. Cornwall: Blackwell.

P. D. Trapnell and D. L. Paulhus, 2012. “Agentic and communal values: Their scope and measurement,” *Journal of personality assessment*, volume 94, number 1, pp.39-52. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2011.627968>, accessed on 3 September 2020.

S-F. T. Tsao. H. Chen, T. Tisseverasinghe, Y. Yang, L. Li, Z. A. Butt, 2021. “What social media told us in the time of COVID-19: a scoping review,” *The Lancet Digital Health Review*, volume 3, number 3, pp. 175-194. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500\(20\)30315-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500(20)30315-0), accessed 21 March 2021.

“The Growth in Magic: Anti-Science Behavior Is on the Rise & Gaining Ground,” 2020, *Physician’s Weekly* (22 January), at <https://www.physiciansweekly.com/the-growth-in-magic-anti-science-behavior-is-on-the-rise-gaining-ground/>, accessed 9 February 2021.

E. Tian, 2021. “The QAnon Timeline: Four Years, 5,000 Drops and Countless Failed Prophecies,” (29 January), at <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2021/01/29/the-qanon-timeline/>, accessed 4 February 2021.

K. Tyko 2021. “President Trump blocked from posting to Facebook, Instagram 'indefinitely,' at least through end of term,” *USA Today*, at <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/2021/01/07/facebook-trump-instagram-social-media-accounts-block-indefinitely-zuckerberg/6580221002/>, accessed 31 March 2021.

J. W. van Prooijen and N B. Jostmann, 2013. “Belief in conspiracy theories: The influence of uncertainty and perceived morality,” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, volume 43, number 1, pp. 109–115. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1922>, accessed on 1 July 2020.

V. Vanderzielfultz 2020. “Conspiracy Theory Trends: QAnon,” *Homeland Security Digital Library* (4 August), at <https://www.hsdl.org/c/conspiracy-theory-trends-qanon/>, accessed 20 March 2021.

S. Vosoughi, D. Roy, S. Aral, 2018. “The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, volume 359, issue 6380, pp.1146-1151. doi: [10.1126/science.aap9559](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559), accessed 9 June 2019.

D. M. Webster and A. W. Kruglanski, 1997. “Cognitive and social consequences of the need for cognitive closure,” *European review of social psychology*, volume 8, number 1, pp.133-173. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779643000100>, accessed 23 April 2019.

M. Wendling, 2021. “QAnon: What is it and where did it come from?” *BBC News* (6 January), at <https://www.bbc.com/news/53498434>, accessed 5 February 2021.

“What Aren’t They Telling us,” at <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2016/10/11/what-arent-they-telling-us/>, accessed 20 October 2020.

M. J. Wolf, 2020. “How Covid-19 Has Transformed the Amount of Time We Spend Online,” *Wall Street Journal* (7 August), at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-covid-19-has-transformed-the-amount-of-time-we-spend-online-01596818846>, accessed 28 November 2020.

M. J. Wood, and K. M. Douglas, 2013. “‘What about building 7?’ A social psychological study of online discussion of 9/11 conspiracy theories,” *Frontiers in Psychology* (8 July). doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00409>, accessed 16 June 2020.

J. C. Wong and J. Carrie, 2020. “Down the rabbit hole: how QAnon conspiracies thrive on Facebook,” *The Guardian* (25 June), at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jun/25/qanon-facebook-conspiracy-theories-algorithm>, accessed 19 November 2020.

Q. Wong and J. E. Solsman, 2020. “Facebook, YouTube and Twitter struggle with viral Plandemic conspiracy video,” *CNET* (8 May), at <https://www.cnet.com/news/facebook-youtube-twitter-viral-plandemic-conspiracy-video/>, accessed 2 December 2020.

WWG1WGA, 2019. *QAnon: An Invitation to The Great Awakening*. Relentlessly Creative Books.

B. S. Yasgur, 2020. “COVID-19: ‘Record’ Spike in Internet Anxiety, Panic Queries,” *Medscape* (26 August), at: <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/936352>, accessed 4 November 2020.

X. Yuan, and A. T. Crooks, 2018. “Examining online vaccination discussion and communities in Twitter,” In *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Social Media and Society*, pp. 197-206. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3217804.3217912>, accessed 23 September 2020.

D. de Zeeuw, S. Hagen, S. Peeters, E. Jokubauskaite, 2020. “Tracing normification,” *First Monday*, volume 25, number 11. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i11.10643>, accessed 4 January 2021.

L. Zhou, 2020. “Vox poll: 73 percent of Republican voters are questioning Biden’s victory,” *Vox* (18 November), at <https://www.vox.com/2020/11/18/21573145/poll-trump-election-fraud-allegations-republican-voters>, accessed 2 December 2020.

M. Zimmerman, 2020. “QAnon’s Rise in Japan Shows Conspiracy Theory’s Global Spread,” *Bloomberg* (29 November), at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-29/qanon-s-rise-in-japan-shows-conspiracy-theory-s-global-spread>, accessed 5 December 2020.

L. van Zoonen, 2012. “I-Pistemology: Changing truth claims in popular and political culture,” *European Journal of Communication*, volume 27, number 1, pp. 56-67. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0267323112438808>, accessed on 2 September 2020.