

QAnon: A Survey of the Evolution of the Movement from Conspiracy Theory to New Religious  
Movement

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## ABSTRACT

### QAnon: A Survey of the Evolution of the Movement from Conspiracy Theory to New Religious Movement

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Disinformation and conspiracy theories have quickly developed into threats against democratic institutions, violent extremism, threats against elected leaders, and attacks on vital infrastructure. None has had a greater influence on the violent extremist community than QAnon, which emerged from the Pizzagate hoax and has developed over the past five years into a significant ideology motivated violent extremist movement. The COVID-19 epidemic has strengthened xenophobic and anti-authority narratives, many of which may have an adverse effect on national security, democratic institutions, and public health. This has contributed to its quick emergence as a significant threat actor. By spreading fake information about government actions and the virus itself online and distorting the truth to support its conspiracy theory and worldview, QAnon took advantage of the pandemic. In an effort to excuse and justify killing, some violent extremists in QAnon have accepted conspiracy theories concerning the pandemic. These tales have helped to erode confidence in both scientific knowledge and the honesty of the government. While some conspiracy theory rhetoric is a valid exercise in the right to free speech, internet discourse that is becoming more aggressive and demands for the detention and killing of particular people raises serious concerns.

This dissertation will represent an initial examination of some of the facets of the QAnon movement by examining the complex history of the QAnon as it has fluctuated and evolved, not only due to the likelihood of multiple users behind the “Q” account, but also as the sociopolitical landscape has changed since the creation of the movement. This dissertation will (1) frame QAnon as a lived religion and demonstrate that it has gone through three stages of existence: proto-QAnon, canonical-QAnon and apocryphal-QAnon. (2) It will then argue that QAnon overtly evolved into something more than a conspiracy theory but will argue in a comparative analysis that QAnon is more akin to a new religious movement, in particular a hyper-real religion. (3) Next it will examine the role of gender and women in the QAnon movement. (4) This will be followed by an examination of how the QAnon conspiracy theories have legitimized, coordinated and targeted gender based violence. (5) Will provide evidence of the nexus of QAnon and ideologically motivated violent extremism and criminality. (6) Finally, it will examine the evolution of QAnon after the January 6th insurrection, the lost of the election by Donald Trump and the disappearance of “Q”.

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## DEDICATION

*To Fiona, Amalia, Mom, Dad and Ally. I dedicate this was all to you.*

*Fiona. Without your love and support I never would have made it. In the best of times and when I wanted to quit you were there. You made all of this possible.*

*To Amalia and my future children. Never let anyone dictate what you can and cannot achieve, forge ahead with all your mind and heart, your destiny is in your own hands.*

*To mom and dad. You set me on this path early on in my life.*

*Dad. When you asked me to convince you in any request, you taught me to think critically and provide concrete evidence in everything I do. This has had an impact on me that you will never be able to fully understand.*

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## CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows

Chapter 1: Marc-André Argentino is the sole contributor to this chapter.

Chapter 2: Marc-André Argentino is the sole contributor to this chapter.

Chapter 3: Marc-André Argentino and Blyth Crawford contributed data collection, analysis and interpretation of results. All authors contributed to the draft manuscript preparation. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Chapter 4: Adnan Raja, Aoife Gallagher and Marc-André Argentino contributed to the study conception and design. M-A.A and A.G. contributed to the data collection. M-A.A. and A.R. contributed to the analysis and interpretation of results. All authors contributed to the draft manuscript preparation and all authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Chapter 5: Section 5.1 Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-André Argentino contributed to the study conception and design of the qualitative research. M-A.A contributed to the data collection. All authors contributed to the analysis and interpretation of results. All authors contributed to the draft manuscript preparation and all authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript. M-A.A is the sole contributor of section 5.2.

Chapter 6: This chapter was part of a larger publication by Marc-André Argentino, Blyth Crawford, Florence Keen, Hannah Rose who contributed to the study conception and design of the qualitative research. The QAnon section was accomplished solely by M-A.A. M-A.A contributed to the data collection. All authors contributed to the draft manuscript preparation and all authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript. Section 6.7 was part of a project between Marc-André Argentino and Sara Aniano. M-A.A. contributed to the study conception and design of the qualitative research. All authors contributed to the draft manuscript preparation and all authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript

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# INTRODUCTION: DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE: PIZZAGATE AND THE ORIGIN OF QANON?

On 4 December 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch drove from North Carolina to the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant in Washington DC. He had with him an AR-15 rifle and a .38 revolver. On the drive to the restaurant, he recorded a video for his daughters. In it, he says, “I can’t let you grow up in a world that’s so corrupt by evil, without at least standing up for you and for other children just like you” (Miller 2021). Years later, on Christmas Day 2020, Anthony Quinn Warner detonated a bomb in Nashville, killing himself and injuring eight people. In the days prior to the attack, Warner had mailed packages to several individuals containing nine typed pages and some flash drives. The writings evince a deep interest in 9/11 conspiracy theories, theories about how the moon landing was a hoax, as well as a belief that the world is secretly controlled by reptilians and lizard people (Hall and Wisniewski 2021).

On June 15, 2018, Matthew Philip Wright, a 30-year-old, unemployed Marine veteran from Henderson, Nevada,<sup>1</sup> drove an armoured truck onto the Mike O’Callaghan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge near the Hoover Dam.<sup>2</sup> Wright parked his vehicle on the southbound lanes, blocking traffic,<sup>3</sup> and stood outside the vehicle with a sign calling for the release of the “OIG Report,”<sup>4</sup> which CNN reported was an “apparent reference to the US Justice Department’s internal watchdog report on the department’s handling of the Hillary Clinton email probe.” The 568-page report had been released the previous day, making Wright’s message unclear.<sup>5</sup> QAnon

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Ruelas, "QAnon follower who blocked bridge near Hoover Dam pleads guilty to terrorism charge," *Arizona Republic*, February 11 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie K. Baer, "An Armed Man Spouting a Bizarre Right-Wing Conspiracy Theory Was Arrested After A Standoff At The Hoover Dam," *BuzzFeed News*, June 17 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Claire Stapleton and Steve Almasy, "Man who blocked traffic on Hoover Dam bridge wanted release of government report," *CNN*, June 16 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Q and QAnon influencers hyped up the OIG report in question with the belief it would reveal incriminating evidence that would bring down the Democrats. QAnon adherents were thoroughly disappointed when the report was released, as it did not contain the revelations they expected. “Q” responded to the OIG report, claiming there were multiple versions of the OIG report but the one that had the incriminating evidence was not the one that was publicly released. Will Sommer, “QAnon, the Crazy Pro-Trump Conspiracy, Melts Down Over OIG Report,” *Daily Beast*, June 19, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Stapleton and Almasy, "Man who blocked traffic on Hoover Dam bridge wanted release of government report.," *CNN Politics*, "READ: The Justice Department IG report on Clinton’s email," *CNN*, June 14 2018.

followers expected that the document would contain revelations about nefarious government actors, suggesting Wright had engaged with QAnon theories.<sup>6</sup>

The February 19, 2020, Hanau, Germany, shisha bar attack by Tobias Rathjen is a recent example of how conspiracy theories could play a role in radicalization to terrorist violence. According to a study of the attack in this publication by Blyth Crawford and Florence Keen, conspiracy narratives “indicate that Rathjen was deeply entrenched within online conspiracy communities.”<sup>7</sup>

On 6 January 2021, protestors violently breached the US Capitol with the intent of disrupting the certification of the 2020 presidential election. As a result of the insurrection, five individuals, including U.S. Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, were killed. Another 100 people were injured. According to analysis by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), thirty-one QAnon followers, as of 1 March 2021, were charged for participating in the Capitol insurrection.<sup>8</sup> However, this was not the first instance of violence of this kind. On 29 August 2020, German ideologically motivated violent extremists, QAnon supporters and anti-lockdown protesters attempted to storm Germany's parliamentary building, occupying the steps leading up to the Reichstag (Felden, Wildon, et al., 2021; Bennhold, 2020).<sup>9</sup>

The Capitol Hill insurrection, and the storming of the Reichstag, is evidence not only of the increasingly global reach of QAnon, but also of how conspiracy theories and disinformation about the pandemic have rapidly evolved into threats to democratic institutions, extremist violence, threats against elected officials, and attacks against critical infrastructure.

All of these incidents are evidence not only of how conspiracy theories and disinformation have rapidly evolved into threats to democratic institutions, extremist violence, threats against elected officials, and attacks against critical infrastructure. None of these conspiracy theories have been more impactful than that of QAnon, which emerged out of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory and has grown in five years into an important ideologically motivated violent extremist movement. Its rapid growth into an important threat actor is due in part to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated xenophobic and anti-authority narratives,<sup>10</sup> many of which may

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<sup>6</sup> Baer, "An Armed Man Spouting a Bizarre Right-Wing Conspiracy Theory Was Arrested After A Standoff At The Hoover Dam."

<sup>7</sup> Blyth Crawford and Florence Keen, "The Hanau Terrorist Attack: How Race Hate and Conspiracy Theories Are Fueling Global Far-Right Violence," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 3 (2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/hanau-terrorist-attack-race-hate-conspiracy-theories-fueling-global-far-right-violence/>.

<sup>8</sup> Michael A. Jensen and Sheehan Kane, "QAnon-inspired violence in the United States: an empirical assessment of a misunderstood threat," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2021.2013292>.

<sup>9</sup> Esther Felden et al., "As Donald Trump Exits, QAnon Takes Hold in Germany," *DW*, January 19 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/as-donald-trump-exits-qanon-takes-hold-in-germany/a-56277928>; Katrin Bennhold, "Far-Right Germans Try to Storm Reichstag as Virus Protests Escalate," *The New York Times*, August 31 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/31/world/europe/reichstag-germany-neonazi-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Graphika, "Q-Tips: Measuring the Mainstreaming of QAnon During the Pandemic," *Graphika Blog*, September 2 2020, <https://graphika.com/posts/q-tips-measuring-the-mainstreaming-of-qanon-during-the-pandemic/>; Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-André Argentino, "The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 7 (2020); Liz McQuillan et al., "Cultural Convergence: Insights into the behavior of misinformation networks on Twitter," *ArXiv* (2020); Melanie Smith, Erin McAweeney, and Léa Ronzaud, "The COVID-19 "Infodemic" A Preliminary Analysis of the Online Conversation Surrounding the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Graphika*, April 21 2020; Melanie Smith, "Interpreting Social Qs: Implications of the Evolution of QAnon," *Graphika*, August 24 2020.

directly or indirectly impact national security, democratic institutions and public health. QAnon exploited the pandemic by amplifying false information about government measures and the virus itself on the internet, manipulating facts to fit its conspiracy theory and world view. Some violent extremists in QAnon have adopted conspiracy theories about the pandemic in an attempt to rationalize and justify violence. These narratives have contributed to efforts to undermine trust in the integrity of government and confidence in scientific expertise. While aspects of conspiracy theory rhetoric are a legitimate exercise in free expression, online rhetoric that is increasingly violent and calls for the arrest and execution of specific individuals is of increasing concern.

## What is the QAnon Conspiracy?

QAnon primarily emerged through dedicated online message boards for discussing a myriad of conspiracy theories. The QAnon conspiracy emerged on Saturday, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017 on 4chan's<sup>11</sup> /pol/ (politically incorrect page) in a thread called "Calm Before the Storm," when an anonymous user signing off as "Q" stated that "Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM - 8:30 AM EST on Monday - the morning on Oct 30, 2017." This anonymous user with the screen name "Q Clearance Patriot" claimed that these series of conspiracy theories are allegedly "leaked" government and military documents, which they are posting to the online forum 4Chan.<sup>12</sup> Q's *nom-de-plume* is in reference to "Q clearance," a top-secret clearance level in the United States Department of Energy. These posts by Q are called "drops" or "crumbs" by users on the 8kun's (formerly 8chan<sup>13</sup>) QResearch board. 4Chan/8kun are comprised of a series of image-based forum boards where users have the ability to express themselves without any moderation by the platform. Most who post on these image boards do so anonymously, which is why they are called "anons." This poster since 2017 has claimed that elected representatives from the United States Democratic Party are part of a global plot and that global elites around the world belong to an underground Satanic cabal, responsible for molesting, sacrificing, and eating children to stay eternally young in order to control the world from the shadows. Further, the poster claimed that then-President Donald Trump was the only person capable of dismantling the cabal and saving the United States. Expounding these beliefs neatly, QAnon influencer Neon Revolt writes in his book *Revolution Q*:

QAnon is a high-level intelligence operation run in conjunction with the NSA and Military Intelligence, put in place by President Trump as a way to bypass the media and establish a direct communication backchannel with the people (by starting specifically with his most fervent, dedicated, and savvy supporters—the Anons), in order to overthrow an ancient cult/Cabal that had, as its goal, the complete destruction of America. Utilizing a Socratic style of writing, Q would begin slow-rolling disclosures

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<sup>11</sup> According to News Guard, which rates the credibility of news and information sites, "4chan is an anonymous— users never need to make an account or pick a username, even a pseudonymous one— image board." From a functional perspective, "it is broken up into threads where users can discuss different topics; moderation on the platform is virtually nonexistent. 4chan is rife with pornography and other posts that many would consider shocking or inappropriate, such as violent imagery and racial imagery." See "4chan" <https://www.newsguardtech.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/4chan.pdf>, accessed July 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Mike Rothschild, *The Storm Is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2021), 3-6.

<sup>13</sup> According to News Guard, "8chan bills itself as 'the Darkest Reaches of the Internet.'" Furthermore, "anyone can anonymously post text, videos, images, and other files as well as links to external websites. Content appears on 'boards,' which anyone can create." See "8chan" <https://www.newsguardtech.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/8ch.pdf>, accessed July 2020. In 2019, 8chan was used to announce deadly attacks at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand; a synagogue in Poway, California; and a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. In March 2019, as the New Zealand gunman livestreamed his rampage, 8chan allowed the grisly footage to reach millions. Subsequently, 8chan was taken down in August 2019. 8chan returned as 8kun in November 2019, with several boards dedicated to QAnon.

about these Cabal actors and their nefarious plans, as well as reframe certain incorrect, yet commonly held assumptions (and correcting lies, when fit), in order to “awaken” the people to the reality that had been hidden from them for decades.<sup>14</sup>

However, QAnon finds its origins a year prior to the “Calm Before the Storm” thread in the Pizzagate conspiracy theory. Pizzagate emerged in a volatile socio-political environment in the US. The anger and hysteria unleashed during the campaign were given a central place in websites specialized in the peddling of fake news and disinformation. The frenzy was reinforced by an extremely volatile social media environment, which compelled many individuals to embrace outrageous unsubstantiated claims and conspiracy theories about Hillary Clinton. At the height of the frenzy, the fake news sites and conspiracy theory influencers on social media inundated the web with the Pizzagate conspiracy theory.

The Pizzagate conspiracy theory claims that coded words and satanic symbols found in the hacked John Podesta emails pointed to a secret sex trafficking ring at a Comet Ping Pong in Washington DC. Pizzagate claims that Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager, along with former president Bill Clinton, had been operating the Comet Ping Pong child abuse and sex trafficking ring for years. Pizzagate came to a head in December 2016 when Edgar M. Welch traveled from North Carolina “to the popular DC pizzeria Comet Ping Pong with a handgun and an assault rifle to ‘self-investigate’ the validity of the 4chan conspiracy.” QAnon, beginning in 2017, was thus a further improvisation on the central elements of Pizzagate, retaining the central belief that a cabal of powerful elites control the world, using their power to covertly abuse children.

Q’s claim on 4chan to have special government access was not entirely novel, but rather part of a wider “anon genre” of claiming to be government officials with top-secret information. Before Q, several 4chan posters asserted they had special government access, including BigDickAnon,<sup>15</sup> FBIAnon,<sup>16</sup> HLIAnon,<sup>17</sup> CIAAnon,<sup>18</sup> HighwayPatrolman,<sup>19</sup> MEGAAnon,<sup>20</sup> and WHInsiderAnon. QAnon devotees, many of whom may be familiar with this “anon genre,” thus are familiar with Q’s apparent need for anonymity and take it as a sign of credibility. Additionally, since 2017, researchers have found proto-Qdrops (called the Lost Drops) that indicate “Q” was active prior trying to gain traction in the noise of 4chan /pol/ board, which undermines the QAnon myth.<sup>21</sup>

QAnon represents an amalgamation of virtually every popular conspiracy theory under a single interpretive frame. This is what Michael Barkun dubs a *superconspiracy*, “conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically.”<sup>22</sup> In superconspiracies, Barkun argues “event-based and systemic conspiracies are joined in complex

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<sup>14</sup> Neon Revolt, *Revolution Q* (Chicago: Salterae Publishing Co, 2019), 112.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Furber, "BigDickAnon Posts Archive," (2016). <https://paulfurber.net/bda/>.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Furber, "FBI Anon AMA Transcripts " (2016). <https://paulfurber.net/pdf/fbianon.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Anon Info, "High Level Insider," (2016). <http://hli.anoninfo.net/>.

<sup>18</sup> Unknown, "CIA-ANON 4CHAN AMA," (Pastebin, 2017). <https://pastebin.com/rN450esv>; CIAAnon, "I got forced to resign and sign some pretty spooky documents," (January 30: Archive.ph, 2017). <https://archive.ph/bTzBp#selection-793.0-793.60>.

<sup>19</sup> 4plebs, "HighwayPatrolman," (November 15, 2017). <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/search/tripcode/%21iAorFW6CWg/>.

<sup>20</sup> Rumor Mill News, "Text of MegaAnon posts on 4chan and Reddit," (2017).

<http://www.rumormillnews.com/texts/MegaAnon.txt>.

<sup>21</sup> The Q Origins Project, "How Q’s ‘Lost Drops’ Undermine the QAnon Myth," *Bellingcat*, April 22 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Second Edition ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 6.



ways so that conspiracies come to be nested within one another. At the summit of the conspiratorial hierarchy is a distant but all-powerful evil force manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors. These master conspirators are almost always... invisible and operat[e] in secrecy.”<sup>23</sup>

As a superconspiracy, QAnon brings together a multitude of conspiracy beliefs under the main “Q” narrative: illuminati, Deep State, new world order, 9/11 truthers, birthers, secret societies (skull & bones, Bilderbergers, trilateral commission, etc.), Jewish bloodletting, the Jewish question, ancient symbolism, ufology, Bavarian bloodlines, hollow earthers, reptilians, MSM (main stream media) mind control, chemtrails, the Vatican, CIA, Pizzagate, anti-vaccines, alternative health remedies, and many more. The common thread of an evil Deep State cabal of satanic pedophiles acts as the binding agent between these disparate subjects through a common thread of conspiracism—the belief that powerful hidden evil forces control human destiny. This central narrative acts as the binding agent between disparate subjects, from the murder of George Floyd to the COVID-19 pandemic, to Child Trafficking conspiracy theories, to the Big Lie. QAnon adherents are identifying everywhere powerful hidden forces secretly controlling people’s destinies.

At the behest of both anonymous poster “Q” and influential members of the movement, QAnon supporters watch out for purported secret clues from President Trump, ‘deciphering’ cryptic, often religiously charged, “QDrops” (online posts by “Q”) to learn more about the underground cabal. This deciphering process goes beyond the level of the individual. For example, Russ Wagner, an independent congregation pastor, and Kevin Bushey, a retired military officer, started hosting weekly Bible studies broadcasted on YouTube to decode the biblical language used in “Q drops,” preaching neo-Charismatic interpretations to affirm the legitimacy of their conspiracy theories.<sup>24</sup> In other words, QAnon supporters often decode these QDrops collectively.

Although Trump has never officially endorsed QAnon as an organization, he has amplified and quoted QAnon content 315 times on Twitter and over 100 times on Truth Social. Trump’s personality has clearly served as a driving impetus for the movement for several years, representing the figure to which the conspiracy is anchored. Instead of denouncing the group; however, Trump and several other prominent Republicans have circulated and praised QAnon conspiracists and their theories on social media platforms, in turn lending them legitimacy.<sup>25</sup>

Like many conspiracy theories, QAnon narratives are non-falsifiable. That is, most of its propositions rely on circular arguments and are sufficiently vague, excusing inaccurate predictions as either an intentional strategy to cause confusion, or a misinterpretation of existing QDrops by followers instead of an issue with the conspiratorial premise itself. Many QAnon supporters uncritically accept these logical fallacies. For example, prior to the 2020 presidential election, QAnon supporters claimed Trump would abolish the “Deep State” on March 4th during

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<sup>23</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Marc-André Argentino, "The Church of QAnon: Will conspiracy theories form the basis of a new religious movement?," *The Conversation Canada*, May 18 2020, <https://theconversation.com/amp/the-church-of-qanon-will-conspiracy-theories-form-the-basis-of-a-new-religious-movement-137859>.

<sup>25</sup> Alex Kaplan, "Trump has repeatedly amplified QAnon Twitter accounts. The FBI has linked the conspiracy theory to domestic terror.," *Media Matters for America*, January 11 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/twitter/fbi-calls-qanon-domestic-terror-threat-trump-has-amplified-qanon-supporters-twitter-more-20>; Alex Kaplan (@AlKapDC), "Trump, after amplifying QAnon-promoting accounts on Twitter more than 300 times before he was suspended from the platform, has returned to doing so on a different platform, Truth Social. ," May 16, 2022, <https://twitter.com/AlKapDC/status/1526208225233842178>.

“the Storm,” an apocalyptic event predicting the arrest and expulsion of the cabal members to Guantánamo Bay.

When then-President Trump later lost the election and “the Storm” did not occur as anticipated, QAnon changed the narrative to postpone “the Storm” to a later date, subsequently declaring the election results fraudulent. This stark failure to predict political events evinces the resiliency of QAnon narratives. Such failures become reasonable changes of plan that constitute part of a purported master plan, and any evidence challenging the conspiratorial premises are ignored. This is not unique to QAnon, but forms a necessary condition for any conspiracy theory to survive when it experiences prophetic failures.<sup>26</sup> Notably, what separates QAnon from other contemporary conspiracies is its ability become politically mainstream.

QAnon narratives continue to be promulgated by an ever-growing and highly influential group of right-wing American politicians, with recent research suggesting as many as 107 US congressional candidates have publicly supported the movement.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, QAnon theories have entered into mainstream political discourse with repeated, regular news media coverage. In response to the Capital Hill insurrection, motivated at least in part by QAnon conspiracies purporting election fraud, social media platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Facebook and others now censor QAnon content to minimize its spread and attendant real-world mobilizations by supporters.

Clearly, QAnon has evolved substantially since its ignominious beginnings as a fringe online community. Today, QAnon represents an established, offline political and religious movement with a shared sense of purpose, agency and belonging, combined with an overwhelming desire for social change. United by a shared belief the American way of life is under siege, QAnon supporters feel a moral duty to uncover the truth about the supposed cabal and fight back—in effect, creating a decentralized violent ideology that has materialized into a possible threat to domestic security.<sup>28</sup>

In 2022, five years following Q’s emergence, there remains no consensus on who the original Q was and who manages the account today. However, there is a fair amount of evidence that demonstrates how QAnon was mainstreamed from 4chan and 8chan. According to a 2018 NBC investigative report, the original Q post “would have gone mostly unnoticed if not for three people – Tracy Diaz, a YouTube vlogger, and 4chan moderators Pamphlet Anon, identified as Coleman Rogers, and BaruchtheScribe, a South African man named Paul Furber.” Within the QAnon research community here is a general consensus that Tracy Diaz played an instrumental role in disseminating outside of 4chan some of the earliest Qdrops.

QAnon supporters purport that their claims are empirical and do not ask that their assertions be taken at face value. The QAnon community is guided by the oft-repeated maxim, “do your own research.” Imitating source citation and evidence presentation in academic scholarship, QAnon followers regularly engage in elaborate presentations of evidence to substantiate their claims. In this vein, they often self-identify as investigative journalists or conspiracy researchers.

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<sup>26</sup> Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-André Argentino, “QAnon’s Predictions Haven’t Come True; So How Does the Movement Survive the Failure of Prophecy?,” *Religion Dispatches*, October 28 2020, <https://religiondispatches.org/qanons-predictions-havent-come-true-so-how-does-the-movement-survive-the-failure-of-prophecy/>

<sup>27</sup> Alex Kaplan, “Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2022,” *Media Matters for America*, June 2 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Amarasingam and Argentino, “The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?”

QAnon also represents a militant and anti-establishment ideology rooted in an apocalyptic desire to destroy the existing, corrupt world to usher in a promised golden age. This position finds resonance with other far right extremist movements, such as the various libertarian, militant, anti-government, white nationalist and neo-Nazi extremist organizations across the United States. This is no surprise, as the QAnon movement shares roots with conspiracy theories that have fed other anti-government movements, such as the 90's militias who feared the "New World Order," or the anti-government apocalypticism and religious fervor of the Branch Davidians.

## QAnon and COVID-19

It is impossible to study the current iteration of QAnon without taking into consideration the role of the COVID-19 pandemic. Past research makes clear that pandemics and other moments of social crisis are often accompanied by conspiracy theories.<sup>29</sup> As Imhoff and Lamberty note,<sup>30</sup> for almost all major events over the last several decades, the "official version of why these came about were confronted with various conspiracy allegations that proposed an explanation involving plots hatched in secret by powerful agents instead." The COVID-19 pandemic was no different. From the start, theories floated about whether the launch of 5G technology in China produced the virus, whether the virus was actually a bioweapon, and whether it was a political ploy to bring about a new global order.<sup>31</sup> Several important studies soon followed gauging not only the public health impact of COVID conspiracies but the broader social impact this kind of misinformation is likely to have on democratic institutions in a post-COVID world.

Daniel Romer and Kathleen Hall Jamieson conducted a national survey of 1,050 adults in the United States in the second half of March 2020, as well as a follow-up survey with 840 of the same individuals in July 2020.<sup>32</sup> They found that conspiratorial thinking has a significant impact on whether individuals took preventive measures related to the virus, and whether they are open to taking the vaccine. Significantly, they found that "conspiracy beliefs early in the pandemic continued to be related to subsequent behaviour and intentions four months later."<sup>33</sup> Tomasz Oleksy and colleagues similarly looked at whether the presence of conspiratorial beliefs impacted whether people engaged in preventative measures recommended by public health officials. Based on two studies conducted in Poland with a sample of 2,726 participants, they found that belief in general COVID conspiracies were correlated to acceptance of xenophobic policies. They also discovered that conspiracy theories arguing that governments were using COVID for nefarious purposes were positively correlated with dismissal of public health recommendations.<sup>34</sup> Other studies focused specifically on social media platforms and their role in spreading COVID-related misinformation. Daniel Allington and colleagues conducted three

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<sup>29</sup> J. W. Van Prooijen and K.M. Douglas, "Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations," *Memory Studies* 10 (2017).

<sup>30</sup> Roland Imhoff and Pia Lamberty, "A Bioweapon or a Hoax? The Link Between Distinct Conspiracy Beliefs About the Coronavirus Disease Outbreak and Pandemic Behavior," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 118 (2020): 1110.

<sup>31</sup> Marc-André Argentino and Amarnath Amarasingam, "The COVID Conspiracy Files," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, April 8, 2020 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/08/the-covid-conspiracy-files/>.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Romer and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Conspiracy Theories as Barriers to Controlling the Spread of COVID-19 in the US," *Social Science and Medicine* 263 (2020).

<sup>33</sup> Romer and Jamieson, "Conspiracy Theories as Barriers to Controlling the Spread of COVID-19 in the US," 6.

<sup>34</sup> Tomasz Oleksy et al., "Content Matters: Different Predictors and Social Consequences of General and Government-Related Conspiracy Theories on COVID-19," *Personality and Individual Differences* 68 (2021).

surveys related to social media use, conspiracy beliefs, and health-protective behaviours related to COVID among residents of the United Kingdom.<sup>35</sup> Like the previous studies mentioned here, they found a positive association between COVID conspiracy beliefs, the “use of social media as a source of information about COVID-19,” and people’s willingness to engage in protective behaviours recommended by public health officials.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, they found that people who received most of their COVID news from traditional broadcast media were more likely to adopt protective measures.

The larger sociological literature on conspiracy theories also notes how important they can be with respect to the notion of theodicy, or the question of why evil exists in the world if God is good, all-knowing, and all-powerful. Conspiracy theories permit the development of symbolic resources that enable humans to define and address this problem of evil. As Michael Barkun notes, “Not only are events non-random, but the clear identification of evil gives the conspiracist a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose.”<sup>37</sup> The essence of many COVID-19-related conspiracy theories lies in their attempts to delineate and explain evil (the pandemic and its multiple negative impacts).

In his influential work on conspiracy theories, Barkun argues that a conspiracist worldview implies a universe that is governed by design rather than randomness.<sup>38</sup> Barkun highlights three characteristics of conspiracy theories:

- 1) Nothing happens by accident: the world is governed by intentionality, there are no accidents or coincidences, and whatever happens is by design.
- 2) Nothing is as it seems: evil forces are constantly trying to deceive the world, and so what may appear as benign, is actually a cosmic threat.
- 3) Everything is connected: building on the first two characteristics, it follows that seemingly disconnected events and occurrences across human history form a seamless pattern that can be unearthed through diligent research.

The core of most COVID conspiracy theories is linked to an intentionality behind the origin, spread and duration of the pandemic (i.e., the virus was manmade, the virus was orchestrated by an elite group of individuals, or the virus is being used to control the population through quarantine and lockdown), and to secrecy behind the plans to achieve an evil goal. Thus, the conspiracy theorist is not simply engaging in mindless sleuthing, but is a warrior in an ongoing battle between good and evil. Those who believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories hold to a world view whereby humans can direct the course of history according to their own will and intentions (history is planned by elites or some malignant group/force).

There are thousands of studies looking at the causes and consequences of conspiratorial thinking, and our discussion above only scratches the surface. The QAnon worldview is particularly prone to these sorts of predictions, and many adherents eagerly anticipate earth-shattering future events that will completely change the world, from “the Storm” (a near future apocalyptic realization when members of this evil cabal will be arrested) to the “Great Awakening” (a time when the

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<sup>35</sup> Daniel Allington et al., "Health-Protective Behavior, Social media Usage and Conspiracy Belief During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency," *Psychological Medicine* (2020).

<sup>36</sup> Allington et al., "Health-Protective Behavior, Social media Usage and Conspiracy Belief During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency," 6.

<sup>37</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 3-4.

general population will come to realize that they've been lied to for decades). Years of research into millennial movements and how they survive the often-inevitable failures of these prophetic pronouncements make clear that most movements, as we outline below, can survive these failures as long as certain conditions are in place. We can easily place the QAnon phenomenon within this broader understanding of historical conspiracy groups.

## Methodology

Researching violent extremism is an expanding field. Though ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE) has been an important threat actor for decades, the recent increase in domestic IMVE incidents has attracted the attention of governments and scholars alike, which has brought an increasingly diverse range of disciplinary and methodological approaches to researching these threats. The radicalization process of violent extremists is very complex, involving a multiplicity of factors; nevertheless, research on this topic often suffers from disciplinary and methodological silos. Taking lessons learned from my experience working in government on these issues, I have taken a mixed-methods approach to studying this complex phenomenon in an attempt to keep pace with the growing range of threat actors, variables impacting them and the pace at which these ecosystems are evolving. In order to better identify and deploy strategies to understand and mitigate IMVE threat, my doctoral research will employ three methodologies depending on the component being studied: 1) digital ethnography, 2) social movement theory, 3) social media analytics. These represent the need for a mixed methods approach in gathering and analyzing primary data around unstructured transnational phenomena, like the QAnon conspiracy theory. This dissertation also includes several co-authored chapters with experts in the field bringing in their own expertise to provide a holistic analysis of the QAnon movement from various fields of expertise.

## Digital Ethnography

Performing online qualitative research can be interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary and sometimes both. As a field of research, social media research is inherently political and shaped by multiple ethical and political positions as it is socially rooted. Digital ethnography is a methodology which does not involve face-to-face interactions; rather, it is ethnography mediated by digital technologies and focuses on the use of digital media field notes and the observation of online participants in their digital ecosystem. Consequently, digital in this context stems from the methods rather than merely the target of research. In doing so, I have defined the field and the setting of my research on the basis of my research topic rather than arbitrarily or prematurely excluding one area or the other. What this implies is that my analysis has focused on the ecosystems where ideologically motivated violent extremists are engaging with each other. These ecosystems have evolved overtime as governments and platforms have imposed sanctions on these threat actors. My data gathering methods are mediated by digital technologies. As Murthy writes, "digital ethnography not only presents the possibility of the written ethnography in a new multimedia form, but it also adds a new array of data gathering methods."<sup>39</sup> He further states that "a key aspect of digital ethnography has been the attempt to represent the authentic speech act of respondents."<sup>40</sup> Some ethnographers like Clifford and Gobo might argue that

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<sup>39</sup> Dhiraj Murthy, "Digital Ethnography and Emergent Technologies," in *The Handbook of Emergent Technologies in Social Research*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 159.

<sup>40</sup> Murthy, "Digital Ethnography and Emergent Technologies," 160.

ethnography cannot be performed without meeting your subject of research face to face.<sup>41</sup> However, as Boellstorff argues the failure to realize the new and emerging context of digital ecosystems will render ethnography inaccessible in a digital world.<sup>42</sup> He states that “to demand that ethnographic research always incorporate meeting residents in the actual world for context presumes that virtual worlds are not themselves contacts, it renders ethnographically inaccessible the fact that most residents of virtual worlds do not meet their fellow residents offline.”<sup>43</sup> What Boellstorff describes in this study about second life applies to ideologically motivated violent extremists in digital ecosystems as well.

Digital technology breaks down geographical boundaries permitting the development of transnational movements and ecosystems. The majority of the threat actors in these spaces will never meet in real life; however, the relationships, friendships and emotional attachments that they will form will be real and no less salient than those that may be developed offline. The impact of inhabiting these digital spaces is also as real to these individuals as offline relationships. This is neatly demonstrated by the radicalization process itself which takes place entirely online. Both the radicalization process and the potential threat that they may become are equally real. Considering that QAnon is a conspiracy theory that was born in these digital ecosystems and posits that its entire mandate is to recruit and gather an army of digital soldiers to fight against the Deep State, digital ethnography is the best method to approach and study these individuals in their own environment. Though four years later, offline mobilization is common within the movement, QAnon started within the culture of message boards such as 4chan and 8chan. There is no offline equivalent to these realities for individuals; however, as we have seen especially since 2016, social network platforms have played an important role in mobilizing individuals to violent actions. The anonymous nature of the boards permits individuals to behave more boldly as they are afforded a certain amount of protection. The entire concept of QAnon is the anonymous nature of the figure of “Q” as well as the anonymous nature of the individuals who are part of the movement. This goes to Boellstorff's point: it is impossible to perform an ethnographic study of these individuals if it is required to meet them in an offline context. These digital ecosystems are built and maintained through the implicit notion that users will not meet each other offline; therefore, offline participant observation interviewing would not truly capture the experiences communities and interactions of these virtual worlds. Additionally, our everyday life is digitally mediated, our identities, communities, and relationships are enacted through virtual spaces.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, it is important to note that some elements of ethnographic methodologies cannot be applied to digital ecosystems inhabited by violent extremists, especially if one needs to take into consideration the safety of the researcher. There are limitations to the type of behaviours that are permitted within these ecosystems and the type of research that can be performed. To that end, my research will not focus on any form of engagement with these violent extremists as it is impossible to know what the impact may be of any interaction with them, and if it might mobilize them to offline violence. Nevertheless, long-term research and digital field work in communities of violent extremists can provide extremely important and

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<sup>41</sup> Giampietro Gobo, *Doing Ethnography* (New York: Sage Publication, 2008); James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>42</sup> Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, 61.

<sup>44</sup> Angela Cora Garcia et al., "Ethnographic Approaches to the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38, no. 1 (2009).

useful data. Observation, analysis, and membership in a community where individuals with violent extremist tendencies engage with each other is important. My research will employ not only textual data as is common in these fields of research, but will also provide important contextual cultural information about these ecosystems that will be able to contextualize the data that has been gathered.

## Social Movement Theory

For the purpose of my research, I will be supplementing digital ethnography with social movement theory, which is defined as a “sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities.”<sup>45</sup> According to Tarrow social movements are described as a “collective challenge based on a common purpose and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities.”<sup>46</sup> Social movements, are made up of political actors, as well as events linked to a broader theme that challenges or defends an existing order.<sup>47</sup> Social movements in the IMVE space can range from micro local community-based movements to transnational movements. The central movementarian elements of a sustained challenge from a collective of actors are found within excluded social groups who are attempting to protect themselves from social, political, economic, and environmental harms.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, Almeida argues that social movements are collective and sustained over a period of time, meaning that the larger the scale of the collective action, the longer the mobilizations need to endure to be considered a movement.<sup>49</sup> He further argues that to successfully prolong the mobilization process and be considered a social movement, collective actors must utilize their social relationships.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, actors often join with other groups in a social movement to extend mobilization to other regions and sectors of society.<sup>51</sup> Taking this into consideration with the fact that QAnon is a super conspiracy that absorbs other conspiracy theories within itself, the QAnon movement joins other conspiracy groups within itself over time. Additionally, social movements are often composed of groups and individuals with relatively less political and economic power, since excluded groups lack access to government and economic elites and do not have their voices heard.<sup>52</sup> This is also true for those who turn to conspiracy theories in order to understand and explain specific phenomena.<sup>53</sup> Finally, individuals and groups are motivated to mobilize as a result of real and perceived harm.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, human beings are motivated to mobilize as a result of shared grievances.

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>46</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>47</sup> Temitope B. Oriola, *Criminal Resistance? The politics of kidnapping oil workers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Paul Almeida, *Social movements: The structure of collective mobilization* (Berkeley: Social movements: The structure of collective mobilization, 2019).

<sup>49</sup> Almeida, *Social movements: The structure of collective mobilization*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Almeida, *Social movements: The structure of collective mobilization*.

<sup>51</sup> Almeida, *Social movements: The structure of collective mobilization*, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Almeida, *Social movements: The structure of collective mobilization*.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, trans. Sharon Howe (Cambridge: Polity, 2020); Joseph E. Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> Almeida, *Social movements: The structure of collective mobilization*; Marc-André Argentino, "QAnon and the storm of the U.S. Capitol: The offline effect of online conspiracy theories," *The Conversation*, January 7 2021; Amarasingam and Argentino, "The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?."

In a digital context, social movements are an important part of social media ecosystems found on Facebook, 8chan, Telegram, Parler, Gab, MeWe, and Twitter to express their demands as well as garner support.<sup>55</sup> Social movements like QAnon, that are both political and extreme, utilize a variety of tactics, which are categorized into highly conventional (petitions and letter-writing campaigns), disruptive (disinformation, targeting of political figures on social media, protests), and violent (riots, insurrections, and terrorism). Different socio-political conditions impact the types of tactics utilized by a social movement and its effectiveness in mobilizing people and achieving goals. This is important as their overall strategy involves the targeting of institutions to present their demands: local and federal government entities, law enforcement, media influencers and decision makers. Moreover, depending on the nature of the movement, a number of different targets (schools, hospitals, churches, private industry, mainstream media, etc.) may be drawn into the campaign.<sup>56</sup>

There are four widely recognized theoretical perspectives within the social movement literature: 1) collective behaviour; 2) resource mobilization; 3) political process theory; and 4) new social movement approach.<sup>57</sup> Firstly, collective behaviour, in social movements, is a by-product of rapid waves of social transformation.<sup>58</sup> Smelser wrote that radical and violent social movements are the results of strains in the social structure. Therefore, conspiracy and ideologically motivated violent extremists movement are formed due to societal imbalances “the perceived structural strain at the social level excited feelings of anxiety, fantasy, hostility, etc.”<sup>59</sup>

Secondly, resource mobilization pertains to the fact that social movements are not simply a reactionary phenomenon; rather they are a normal, and at times and essential, part of the political system.<sup>60</sup> This approach emphasizes the logic of collective behaviour, the importance of the mobilization of resources, costs and benefits of taking part in a social movement, and views collective action as a choice individuals actively and consciously make.<sup>61</sup> As McCarthy & Zald argue resource mobilization and political process theory underscore that resources and political opportunities available to aggrieved people or those who feel they are or have been aggrieved are key factors influencing individuals’ decisions to take part in collective action.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Jennifer Earl, "Technology and Social Media," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow et al. (John Wiley & Sons: John Wiley & Sons, 2019); Deana A. Rohlinger and Catherine Corrigan-Brown, "Social Movements and Mass Media in a Global Context," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow et al. (John Wiley & Sons: John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

<sup>56</sup> Almeida, *Social movements: The structure of collective mobilization*.

<sup>57</sup> Almeida, *Social movements: The structure of collective mobilization*; Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 3rd Edition ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020); David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); David A. Snow et al., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Second ed. (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

<sup>58</sup> Steven M. Buechler, "The Strange Career of Strain and Breakdown Theories of Collective Action," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Neil Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York: The Free Press, 1962).

<sup>59</sup> Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Doug McAdam, *The political process and the development of the black insurgency* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>61</sup> Charles Tilly, Louise Tilly, and Richard Tilly, *The Rebellious Century 1830–1930* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975); John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977); Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*; Snow et al., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*.

<sup>62</sup> McCarthy and Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory."



Thirdly, political process theory, according to Giugni, suggests that the success or failure of any social movement is impacted by political opportunities.<sup>63</sup> Political opportunities, the chance of a political solution to the movements grievances must exist before a movement can successfully achieve its objectives.<sup>64</sup> Pang further argues that the success of the movement depends bringing about change through existing political structures and processes.<sup>65</sup> In the context of QAnon, even with the election of their prophetic Saviour, former president Trump, and the GOP control of the House and Senate, there was the potential of a political solution if Trump could defeat the Deep State. As Oriola explains, “Political opportunity can be both a positive or negative development vis-à-vis challengers of authority and those who seek to maintain the status quo.”<sup>66</sup> Finally, the new social movement method examines the relationship between novel social movements and their wider socio-economic structures.<sup>67</sup> This perspective significant to the social order and focuses on reclaiming sovereign spaces instead of material advantages.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, these four perspectives have unique advantages when it comes to explaining social movements like QAnon, the political process theory and framing are well suited for interrogating ideologically motivated violent extremism as a social movement.

## Social Media Analytics

Digital ethnography and social movement theory will provide the qualitative framework that will outline the ecosystems and networks that will be further examined and analyzed quantitatively. Social media analysis permits researchers to unobtrusively gain insight into everyday discussions among far-right supporters.<sup>69</sup> However, social media analysis alone is not enough as the data needs to be contextualized within the cultural and socio-political environment inhabited by the research subjects. Without this contextualization analysis of IMVE social media data or vice versa, not contextualizing offline IMVE behaviour with their online behaviour, are prone to errors. Some like “Joseph Uscinski rejects the notion that believe in conspiracy theories and misinformation has become more common or widespread in recent years.”<sup>70</sup> His comments are in regards to the prevalence and significance of the QAnon movement. Uscinski focuses on his excellent work using polling data, however, by failing to acknowledge that QAnon is first and foremost an online movement, he misses opportunities to understand the essential contextual and spread characteristics of the movement. Uscinski ‘s example demonstrates the vital need for a mixed- method approach to address online conspiracies with substantial offline action.

The fundamental benefit of using social media data is that it enables for massive amounts of time-stamped data, such as postings and comments, as well as user behaviour surrounding these posts (i.e. how often users like certain posts). The Internet is particularly beneficial for

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<sup>63</sup> Marco Giugni, "Political Opportunities: From Tilly to Tilly," *Swiss Political Science Review* 15, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>64</sup> David S. Meyer and Debra C. Minkoff, "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity," *Social Forces* 82, no. 4 (2004).

<sup>65</sup> Hua Pang, "Applying resource mobilisation and political process theories to explore social media and environmental protest in contemporary China," *International Journal of Web Based Communities* 14, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>66</sup> Oriola, *Criminal Resistance? The politics of kidnapping oil workers*, 56.

<sup>67</sup> Nelson A. Pichardo, "New Social Movements: A Critical Review," *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997).

<sup>68</sup> Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Jaswinder Khattri, "Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory," *Sociological Forum* 14, no. 1 (1999).

<sup>69</sup> Jamie Cleland, Chris Anderson, and Jack Aldridge-Deacon, "Islamophobia, war and non-Muslims as victims: an analysis of online discourse on an English Defence League message board," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 9 (2017); Ofra Klein and Jasper Muis, "Online discontent: comparing Western European far-right groups on Facebook," *European Societies* 21, no. 4 (2019).

<sup>70</sup> Jose A. Del Real, "The Trump presidency was marked by battles over truth itself. Those aren't over.," *The Washington Post*, January 18 2021.

researching the prejudices and complaints of far-right groups, which are notoriously difficult to contact using traditional research methods. As part of my research into QAnon, I have collected copious amounts of social media data about the movement between November 2017 and May 2021:

- 1,760,584 Facebook posts
- 1,328,451 Reddit posts
- 54,116,206 Tweets
- 23,561 Instagram Posts.
- 1,301,612 Telegram Posts

These posts were collected after lists of accounts, pages, groups, subreddits, and channels were assessed and evaluated for their affiliation to the QAnon movement and their role in the QAnon digital ecosystems. Because data was collected directly from QAnon assets, no posts were filtered for QAnon keywords, but rather represent the everyday content and engagements found in these ecosystems. Facebook and Instagram posts were collected using Crowdtangle<sup>71</sup>, Reddit data was collected using the Pushift API<sup>72</sup>, Twitter data was collected using the Twitter API v2<sup>73</sup>, Telegram data was downloaded using the export function of the Telegram app.

IMVE related data is “easiest to collect at the moment of their creation”.<sup>74</sup> Extracting data at a later point in time presents multiple problems, as content that has been removed cannot be accessed at a later stage, and platforms have not made available to researchers a database of data that has been removed from extremist social media accounts. This is especially exacerbated in regard to hate-related content (which is important to understanding radicalization), as large social media platforms are obliged by multiple governments to remove harmful content within 24 hours after reporting. A second challenge is that the amount of data that could be scraped limited by the privacy settings of users, groups or those set by the platforms.

## Chapters

This dissertation will represent an initial examination of some of the facets of the QAnon movement. Chapter 1 examines the complex history of the QAnon as it has fluctuated and evolved, not only due to the likelihood of multiple users behind the “Q” account, but also as the sociopolitical landscape has changed since the creation of the movement. This chapter will frame QAnon as a lived religion and demonstrate that it has gone through three stages of existence: proto-QAnon, canonical-QAnon and apocryphal-QAnon.

Chapter 2 will argue that QAnon overtimed evolved into something more than a conspiracy theory but will argue in a comparative analysis that QAnon is more akin to a new religious movement, in particular a hyper-real religion. This chapter will argue that QAnon is a new religious movement, and not a cult. It will also examine a subset of QAnon called Qvangelicals, as well as dive into a QAnon church that was formed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>71</sup> CrowdTangle is a public insights tool from Facebook that helps publishers, journalists, researchers, fact-checkers and more follow, analyze, and report on what's happening across social media.

<sup>72</sup> <https://pushshift.io/api-parameters/>

<sup>73</sup> <https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/twitter-api>

<sup>74</sup> Helen Margetts et al., *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 24.

Chapter 3 will examine the role of gender and women in the QAnon movement. Women have played a central role as influencers and leaders in the QAnon movement from its inception, and gender dynamic have played a key role in recruitment and radicalization to violence. This chapter will examine how women in QAnon play a role beyond violent attacks. Women do not simply follow the men into QAnon; nor are their roles limited to raising children according to a violent ideology. In QAnon women are able to get elected to political office, influence hundred of thousands of users and commit acts of violence.

Chapter 4 will examine how QAnon conspiracy theories have legitimized, coordinated and targeted gender based violence. Since QAnon's rise to prominence, several high-profile celebrities have found themselves at the centre of the movement's conspiratorial narratives, and therefore, the focus of coordinated harassment campaigns, brigading, dogpiling, slander and hate. This chapter seeks to answer the question does coordinated harassment from QAnon adherents operate like other forms of targeted hate and harassment online, and specifically, whether vulnerable identity groups are faced with particularly egregious experiences.

Chapter 5 will examine the nexus of QAnon and ideologically motivated violent extremism and criminality. Traditionally, law enforcement, intelligence agencies and public policy attention with respect to terrorism and political violence in the West tends to focus on jihadi or far-right extremism. At first glance, QAnon appeared to present a far lesser threat to public security than other violent extremist and terrorist groups. Conspiracy theories were not traditionally part of the intelligence and law enforcement tool kit when it came to making threat assessments. Nor were conspiracy theorists considered to be a threat to individual or national security. This chapter will examine why and how people radicalized into QAnon, and the acts of violence and criminality they took. This Chapter will examine some of the early case studies of QAnon violent extremism and terrorism, as well as an empirical assessment of QAnon criminality and violence.

Chapter 6 will examine the evolution of QAnon after the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, the loss of the election by Donald Trump and the disappearance of "Q". Out of 948 people arrested and charged for the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, 109 were affiliated to QAnon. QAnon adherents were among the individuals in the front line of protesters who violently breached the Capitol Building with the intent of disrupting the certification of the 2020 presidential election. The insurrection of 6 January 2021 is a stark example of what happens when an ideological movement such as QAnon is not taken seriously, especially in the context of how it has evolved into an ideologically motivated violent extremist movement. This chapter will examine what happened to QAnon 100 days after January 6, and highlight the emergence of neo-QAnon influencers, seeking to fill in the void left by "Q" and Trump. I will also examine how, why and where QAnon migrated to after major social media platforms banned them, creating a mass exodus to alternative platforms. And finally I will demonstrate the balkanisation of the QAnon ideology and movement.

# CHAPTER 1: QANON AS A LIVED RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

The history of QAnon is a complicated one as the movement has been in constant evolution, not only due to the likelihood of multiple users behind the “Q” account, as well as the sociopolitical landscape has changed since the creation of the movement. To that end this chapter will examine the evolution of QAnon in three phases:

1. Proto QAnon: which will examine the anon genre on image boards, the precursors to QAnon, as well as the lost drops;
2. Canonical QAnon: which will examine the period when “Q” was posting Qdrops on 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun;
3. Apocryphal QAnon: will examine the period after “Q’s” last Qdrop, when QAnon fragmented and tribalized around specific influencers and when QAnon adjacent groups emerged such as -48, GhostEzra, Juan O, Savin, Devolution, Queen Romana Didulo, QAnon John, Mike Lindell, etc.

Though I argue in chapter 2 that QAnon is a new religious movement, QAnon is also a post-organizational violent extremist and terrorist movement (POVET),<sup>75</sup> meaning it is a movement that is not hierarchically structured, and the influence or direction of activity of QAnon is ambiguous or loose. This post-organizational structure is reflected within the way QAnon has evolved as a movement since its inception. To explain this three-stage evolution, I will analyze QAnon as a lived religion; whereby, QAnon should be understood via what adherents are doing or practising in a distinctive sense. QAnon is a lived religion that is participatory in nature, where one learns its doctrine, rituals, teleology, theodicy, etc., by actively engaging with the content and the milieu. Membership in QAnon is not formalized, it is rather obtained through gnosis, which QAnon adherents acquire through praxis. Additionally, as a POVET movement, QAnon is found in differing ecologies, and can be studied as a lived religion through multiple lenses. Firstly, it can be examined as an entangled practice: how religious practices are interwoven with everyday practical affairs making it impossible to think of them distinctively. Secondly, it is also possible to examine QAnon as a lived religion through established religions, both through its use of religious tropes and aesthetics, but also how pastors have preached QAnon conspiracy theories or formed home congregations around QAnon. There are also interstitial contexts to QAnon,

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<sup>75</sup> Jacob Davey et al., "A Taxonomy for the Classification of Post-Organizational Violent Extremist & Terrorist Content," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, December 9 2021, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/A-taxonomy-for-the-classification-of-post-organisational-terrorist-content.pdf>.

especially with QAnon subsets and adjacent groups linked to Pastel QAnon,<sup>76</sup> conspirituality,<sup>77</sup> the extraterrestrial QAnon community,<sup>78</sup> medbeds,<sup>79</sup> etc.

## 1.1 QAnon as a Live Religion

### 1.1.1 What is practice

If one becomes a QAnon adherent through practice within the movement and of the ideology, we need to define practice. Sociologist Theodore Schatzki defined practices as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding.”<sup>80</sup> Andreas Reckwitz, defines practice as “a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.”<sup>81</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman further elucidates that “a practice isn’t necessarily something formalized into a ritual—although it might be—but it is an array of activity. It is a cluster of actions that is socially recognizable in ways that allow others to know how to respond.”<sup>82</sup> Practice theory was pioneered by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1990s, where his work examined how practices reinforce structures of difference and inequality. Ammerman highlights that Bourdieu

“was right to say that practices always involve our habitual dispositions—how we act without thinking—and our cultural resources (ordinary things we know and skills we have). He was also right that practices are situated in a social ‘field’ that structures the existing expectations for how people will act.”<sup>83</sup>

Practice is not confined to a single social or ecological space. As Michel de Certeau argues “formalities of practice” that “traverse the frontiers dividing time, place, and type of action [...] they remain dependent upon the possibilities offered by circumstances, these transverse tactics do not obey the law of the place.”<sup>84</sup> To study QAnon as a lived religious practice “is to analyze those boundary-crossing tactics, as well as the possibilities—and constraints—offered by each set of circumstances.”<sup>85</sup> Bourdieu highlights that these boundary-crossing elements are embodied in what individuals do: in QAnon you do not learn from a book or by doing courses, but through praxis and participation in the conspiracy theory and the associated communities. Understanding practice as embodied and experienced requires us to consider how our brains arrange

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<sup>76</sup> For more on Pastel QAnon see chapter 3.

<sup>77</sup> In their 2011 articles, Ward and Voas define conspirituality as “the merging of alternative spirituality with conspiracy theories” Charlotte Ward and David Voas, “The Emergence of Conspirituality,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>78</sup> The ET subset of QAnon includes adherents who believe in the Starseed, Pleiadian or Lightweaver conspiracy theories.

<sup>79</sup> Kelly Weill, “New QAnon Conspiracy Involves a Magical Bed for Zombie JFK,” *DailyBeast*, April 22 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/new-qanon-conspiracy-involves-a-magical-bed-for-zombie-jfk>.

<sup>80</sup> Theodore R. Schatzki, “Introduction to The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory,” in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Karin Knorr Cetina, Theodore R. Schatzki, and Eike von Savigny (New York: Routledge, 2001), 11.

<sup>81</sup> Andreas Reckwitz, “Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 2 (2002): 249.

<sup>82</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 15.

<sup>83</sup> Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*, 16-17.

<sup>84</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 29.

<sup>85</sup> Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*, 17.

environmental data into cognitive models that enable us to act, frequently seemingly without thinking. Ann Swidler offers a helpful technique for identifying the environments where innovation and new practises are most likely to occur. Swidler contends that habitual patterns offer control during settled times and locations, where practices are routine and unquestionable. Everyone innately knows how to do things, so we do not need to explain ourselves. She further highlights that people must work harder to develop new patterns of practice and explain them when things become unsettled—an election that leads to political uncertainty, a pandemic, economic strife, or war, for example.<sup>86</sup>

### 1.1.2 QAnon as Religious Practice

When discussing QAnon as practice, we examine, “the patterned regularities in what people do, and we seek to understand those patterns in the context of the cognitive models and the overlapping social fields of interaction that make them meaningful and allow us to act.”<sup>87</sup> In researching the QAnon community studying it as a lived religion means observing adherents engage in religious behaviour, even when their actions seem haphazard and do not cleanly mesh with other behaviours in which they engage, or even when they are not at all believers in the strict sense of the word. When studying QAnon as practice, I had to consider how QAnon believers acquire their religious identities. In doing so, I focused on how QAnon adherents employ practices that signal that they identify with QAnon and how their ideological beliefs and behaviours are mediated through QAnon. As Ammerman states “lived religion approaches allow us to take seriously both everyday understandings of social action and the official impositions of categories on that interaction.”<sup>88</sup> She further highlights that “it is important that our study of religion encompass both direct experience of sacredness and the social institutions that construct symbols and rituals that seek to establish and maintain the transcendent connections.”<sup>89</sup> Admittedly, the definition of religion I am using, elaborated in chapter 2, inevitably encompasses concepts and behaviours that some might not typically associate with religion; however. However, those conclusions are incorrect when we are looking at lived religious practice. There is an ever-growing body of scholarship that examines conspiracy theories like QAnon as a contemporary religious practice.<sup>90</sup>

In studying the QAnon movement, it is important to understand that the embodied practices and narratives from “Q” and QAnon influencers were emotionally charged in order to evoke

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<sup>86</sup> Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review of Religious Research* 51 (1986).

<sup>87</sup> Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*, 17.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 22

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Asbjørn Dyrendal, "Conspiracy Theories and New Religious Movements," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis and Inga B. Tollefsen (London: Oxford University Press, 2016); Asbjørn Dyrendal, Egil Asprem, and David G. Robertson, "Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Religion(s): What we are Talking about, and Why it is Important," in *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religio*, ed. Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion (Leiden: Brill, 2018); David G. Robertson, Egil Asprem, and Asbjørn Dyrendal, "Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion," in *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religio*, ed. Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Benjamin E. Zeller, "Heaven's Gate, Science Fiction Religions, and Popular American Culture," in *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion (2012); Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem, *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (London: Brill 2018); Francesco Piraino, Marco Pasi, and Egil Asprem, *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories Comparing and Connecting Old and New Trends* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

emotions from adherents, which created a stronger sense of investiture in participating in the QAnon milieu.<sup>91</sup> This emotional component provided a reward to those who partook in “doing their own research” as the QAnon adage goes. My observation in chapters 1 and 2 echo the works of sociologists Penny Edgell and Robert Wuthnow,<sup>92</sup> who both highlight that the diverse manifestation of religious practice is found at the nexus of mental, emotional, embodiment and social interactions that shape an individual’s experience. In QAnon, as with other religious practices, ritual is manifest through the participation in the digital war, which is how one demonstrates membership into the movement. As there are no formal initiation rites into the QAnon movement, the only way to identify as, and be accepted as a QAnon adherent is by answer the call from “Q” and becoming a digital soldier, to help Trump and “Q” fight against the Deep State. A core concept in QAnon since its inception is that “Q,” military intelligence, and Donald Trump are in a war against the Deep State. Where the military and Trump were going to tackle the kinetic war, “Q” was playing an important role in the information war against the Deep State. The concept behind QDrops is that the Deep State is watching everything and knows about “Q” and Trump; therefore, the only way to get information out was via cryptic messages from “Q” on 4Chan/8Chan/8Kun. “Q” also promoted the dissemination and amplification of memes and disinformation, as that was the digital ammo needed to be spread to defeat the MSM controlled by the Deep State. The creation and dissemination of digital ammo is a ritualized practice called “baking bread,” which refers to the anonymous users who put together threads on the QResearch chan boards or on social media to be decoded. Those who ritualistically aggregate the threads where users attempt to decode the cryptic QDrops are called “bakers,” and those threads once completed are called “breads.” QAnon adherents who went onto mainstream platforms to spread the “decoded intelligence” from QDrops were called by “Q” and QAnon influencer digital soldiers. From the start, QAnon adherents were primed for participation to decode the military intelligence in QDrops by decoding drops and “baking loafs.” On the QResearch boards, there were links to how to Red Pill, what is the best time to post, how to make memes, MEGA links with images to use for memes, and the creation and A/B testing of memes on the QResearch board was also promoted. The memes on QResearch and QAnon milieu and the “findings” from the bread regularly became digital ammo to use against the Deep State and the media, and ultimately they were the majority of the toxic and violent content disseminated by QAnon. However, this is not how QAnon adherents perceived their development or dissemination action. Rather, like the apostles of old, they believe that they were spreading the good news and sharing the truth that needed to be heard by all in order to save the world.

Gabriel Ignatow in her study on embodied knowledge,<sup>93</sup> highlights an important dimension linked to lived religion: that of morality. Lived religion contains elements of judgments, and assessments of what should and should not happen. In everyday religious practice, there are

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<sup>91</sup> Jeremiah Morelock and Felipe Ziotti Narita, "The Nexus of QAnon and COVID-19: Legitimation Crisis and Epistemic Crisis," *Critical Sociology* 48, no. 6 (2022).

<sup>92</sup> Wuthnow *What Happens When We Practice Religion? Textures of Devotion in Everyday Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Edgell, Penny. 2012. "A Cultural Sociology of Religion: New Directions." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38:247–265.

<sup>93</sup> Gabriel Ignatow, "Theories of Embodied Knowledge: New Directions for Cultural and Cognitive Sociology?," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 37, no. 2 (2007).

assumptions that believers make about what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. A key pattern I have found in studying QAnon is how adherents shift their perception of good and evil over time. For example, a conspiracy theory circulating in the ecosystem in September 2022 is that Trump, Xi Ji Ping, Putin and Kim Jong-un are working together to take down the cabal. Generally, across our political ideological spectrums, China, Russia and North Korea tend to be seen as enemies or evil or “the bad guys” both in political and cultural depictions. What I have noted is the longer and deeper an individual is entrenched into QAnon, their perception of what is politically and culturally good has shifted over time. This is sometimes resultant from A) how the QAnon conspiracy theory has evolved over time or B) how those which QAnon opposes (democrats, the left, anyone who is the deep state, etc.) perceive these individuals as the enemy (‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend’ as the adage goes). There is also a shift in their moral compass on when they perceive violence to be justified. At this point in the movement’s ideological history, the Big Lie demonstrates to QAnon adherents that there is no political solution to ending the deep state. Qualitatively, there appears to be an increase in justifications of the use of violence. The participatory nature of QAnon is what is the most important; it is not only about believing and reading about the conspiracy theory. Participating by doing decodes, creating multimedia, going to rallies, harassing enemies, fighting the digital war, etc. is necessary. Participating adherents have more buy into QAnon, requiring them to maintain their alignment with the ideology. To that end, an inversion of their moral compass to maintain ideological alignment makes sense, as a psychological and ecosystem survival mechanism, since many have burnt bridges with their friends, families, peers, etc. due to their belief in QAnon. The fear of losing the community they have is a pressure some have expressed. If QAnon is all you have left, the moral compass inversion makes sense when examining it as a lived religion.

So what are the religious practices that QAnon adherents adopt that have been taught and ritualized, and what is the first practice that new adherents adopt when they enter these spaces? If QAnon adherents are labelled and identify as digital soldiers, they need to go through some type of basic training. This training is found at the top of every thread on the QResearch image boards (figure 1).





## 10. DIG -> MEME -> PRAY [ALL 3]

They are also provided with standard hashtags to use in posting their content so that other members of the community will amplify them “Standard Hashes #MAGA #KAG #FGNC #WWG1WGA #Q #Trump #Qresearch #45 #GreatAwakening #Anonymous.”

As Ammerman highlights, “religion as practice, then, means that we start with the patterned regularities in what people do, and we seek to understand those patterns in the context of the cognitive models and the overlapping social fields of interaction that make them meaningful and allow us to act.”<sup>94</sup> The practice of digging for crumbs of information from “Q,” creating content to be used as “digital ammo” and ritualistically doing this at specific times of day and for a minimum number of times per day is indicative of ritualize practice for these adherents. This practice usually translates in harm by creating toxic ecosystems, all the way to inspiring acts of criminality and violence. This is due to the fact that QAnon adherents perceive they are participating in a wider salvific mission to save the world. In a document called “Q” the basics shared on QResearch in 2019, “Millions have already been reached, and millions more will be in the future. Q’s posts have shown these millions what the Cabal has been doing, who is in the Cabal and how the Cabal has been controlling the world. Yet with each revelation to the public, the control by the Cabal over humanity decreases, day by day, post by post.”

QAnon adherent practices as digital soldiers signal their identification with the QAnon tradition and how it dictates their lives. Though QAnon may appear to outsiders and wacky and irrational, examining it as a lived religion requires us to take seriously their beliefs and practices as their direct experience of sacredness. We cannot judge QAnon as a religion based on whether it is acceptable, marginal or illegitimate. QAnon as a lived religious practices orient an adherent toward things that we can recognize as religious, that is because “religion” is a socially defined category and context matters. When studying a phenomenon like QAnon, taking an emic approach is important to learn from those who are active participants in the movement, so we can better understand what we are seeing, rather than imposing our, etic view; therefore, avoiding imposing our own assumptions onto the QAnon movement. Within a similar religious tradition, practices may vary, and this remains true for QAnon. Lived religious practices within QAnon milieus has changed overtime depending on ecological and socio-cultural shifts. Lived religious practices can occur in any aspect of daily life in any culture, whether or not they are recognized as such and given institutional status. It's important to keep in mind that lived religion might explain behaviours that adherents themselves classify as religious whether or not our own culture would agree. Furthermore, lived religion can be used to explain behaviours that are characterized as religious even though people do not directly and personally experience something transcendent, as a result of their affiliation with culturally accepted religious institutions, identities, and organizations. In other words, religions frequently adopt a social reality that transcends personal experience and influences the behaviours of individuals who interact within it. There are variations in praxis within QAnon depending on the time period in which one believed and participated in the movement, the platforms being used and in which ecosystem

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<sup>94</sup> Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*, 19.

they are active. Praxis is mediated via technological use, especially during the pandemic, when offline praxis was not possible. In order to reflect how QAnon has metastasized and evolved over the years, I propose that there are three forms QAnon lived practices can take entangled, established and interstitial religious practices.

Firstly, an entangled religious practice is one where “people in many societies engage in religious practices that are so highly interwoven with everyday practical affairs that it is impossible to think of them as distinct forms of social life, and they certainly are not organized into separate ‘religious’ institutions.”<sup>95</sup> This is a phenomenon that I will explore further in chapter 2, when I will argue that QAnon is what is called a hyper-real religion. For the purpose of this section, suffice it to say that QAnon is an example of an entangled practice as its religious foundation is rooted in activities or daily life; QAnon theology and ontology live alongside politics, culture and family. QAnon’s religious practices are diffuse and interwoven with all other activities in an adherent’s life, as Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar highlight “distinctive modes of acquiring knowledge about the world, characterized by a holistic approach in which the sacred and the secular can be said to constitute one organic reality.”<sup>96</sup> They argue that an African epistemology includes both material and immaterial realms—distinguishable but not separable; thus, in similar fashion, a QAnon epistemology is rooted in both the physical and digital and mediated by popular culture. For QAnon, entangled religious practices occur when “there is a high degree of overlap between religion and everyday social action that extends across a broad swath of the society or subgroup as a whole.”<sup>97</sup>

A second form of QAnon lived religious practices is when such practices exist within the context of an established religious tradition. This is a phenomenon that has occurred mostly since 2020, when QAnon was heavily mainstream from the fringes of the internet where it began, when some segments of QAnon obtained established practices when QAnon intersected with Evangelicalism, which I have called Qvangelicalism, or with the establishment of a series of home congregations that blended QAnon teaching with that of dominionism<sup>98</sup>. These are two topics that will be examined further in Chapter 2. There is another dimension to established religious practices, which is unique to QAnon in the US, where there is a merging of religious and national identity. This is what we call religious nationalism, where citizenship is intentionally linked to religious identity. In October 2022, a Pew survey found that 54% believe that the Bible should have more influence over the law than citizens and the Bible should have precedence over the law. While operating within the framework of contemporary nation states, religious nationalists surround the state with both new and traditional religious cultural activities. In these settings, we should not ignore the religious underpinnings of routine civic and political behaviour, especially when we mix in dangerous conspiracy theories like QAnon that believe the state is corrupt and the laws are flawed. Religious nationalism can be extremely contentious and at times violent when blended with QAnon. QAnon has managed to be linked to religion in the

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<sup>95</sup> Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*, 32.

<sup>96</sup> Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, "Religion and Politics: Taking African Epistemologies Seriously," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>97</sup> Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*, 35.

<sup>98</sup> According to René Holvast, Dominionism refers to “a movement among socially conservative Christians who sought to gain influence or control over secular civil government through political action. It was characterized by striving for a nation to be governed by Christians or by Christian principles. It concerned the Evangelical efforts to change public life and to make society exclusively Christian, dependent on Christians and not on social consensus.” René Holvast, *Spiritual Mapping in the United States and Argentina 1989–2005* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

US, but also to individual leaders and pastors who have been radicalized by the QAnon ideology and then pass it unto their flock.

As QAnon is a superconspiracy theory, it is not surprising that QAnon has been adapted and incorporated into interstitial religious practices. Surveys and studies on religiosity have found that there has been a steady decline in those who identify as religious, all the while seeing a rise in those who identify as spiritual.<sup>99</sup> About a quarter of U.S. adults (27%) now say they think of themselves as spiritual but not religious, up 8 percentage points in five years, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2017.<sup>100</sup> Another survey performed in 2017 by the Public Religion Research Institute sought to assess religiosity by looking at how frequently people attend religious services and how important they personally find religion. It also sought to measure spirituality by looking at self-reported feelings of being linked to something bigger than oneself. Using this analysis, they discovered: 29% are both spiritual and religious; 18% are spiritual but not religious; 22% are not spiritual but religious; and 31% are neither spiritual nor religious.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, in a Pew Research Center telephone poll conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65% of American people describe themselves as Christians when questioned about their religion, a 12-point decrease over the previous decade.<sup>102</sup> Within the setting of a decline of those identifying as religious and a rise in spiritual practices “religious authorities and institutions of all kinds are weak, and lived religious practice, where it is present at all, is more individualized, diffuse, and fluid. People are on their own to judge and select, and many opt-out. If religious practices are happening at all, they are interstitial—in the cracks.”<sup>103</sup> These spiritual practices are as broad and diverse and the conspiracy theories that make up QAnon: doing yoga, tarot reading, belief in Angels, the healing power of crystals, speaking to spirits, undertaking pilgrimages, meditation, sacred sounds, burning incense, smudging, etc.<sup>104</sup> The combination of spiritual practices and conspiracy theories is a phenomenon called conspirituality. The manifestation of conspirituality within the breath of conspiracy theories and spiritual practices is what Paula Bryce calls a *habitus of choice*.<sup>105</sup> QAnon adherents who partake in interstitial praxis can choose and change these practices to suit an individual’s needs. QAnon as a conspiracy theory acts as a coping mechanism that is reactive to an individual’s personal crises or those that are found within socio-political context. Interstitial practices can change as needed to the different situation that are impacting an individual, while maintaining a distorted coherence with QAnon conspiracy theories. It is up to each QAnon adherent to choose what to believe, which is why

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<sup>99</sup> Ronald F. Inglehart, *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing it, and What Comes Next?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Ronald F. Inglehart, "Giving Up on God The Global Decline of Religion," *Foreign Affairs*, October 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-08-11/religion-giving-god>; Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>100</sup> Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz, "More Americans now say they're spiritual but not religious," *Pew Research Centre*, September 6 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>.

<sup>101</sup> Art Raney, Daniel Cox, and Robert P. Jones, "Searching for Spirituality in the U.S.: A New Look at the Spiritual but Not Religious," *Public Religion Research Institute* November 6 2017, <https://www.prii.org/research/religiosity-and-spirituality-in-america/>.

<sup>102</sup> Pew Research Centre, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," *Pew Research Centre*, October 17 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

<sup>103</sup> Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*, 42.

<sup>104</sup> Casper ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual: Turning Everyday Activities into Soulful Practices* (New York: Harper One, 2020); Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*; Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>105</sup> Paula Bryce, *The Monk's Cell: Ritual and Knowledge in American Contemplative Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

practice not only depends on when someone was part of the QAnon movement, but also where in the world they are and what is happening at any given movement. This has led to innovation and adaptation of spiritual practices and conspiracy theories, that did not necessarily exist before QAnon.

David Hall contributed to the concept of lived religion and identified three elements of lived religion, helpful in understanding QAnon not only as what people believe but how they act out their beliefs. Hall highlighted that lived religion is defined as a way of recognizing the discrepancies that frequently emerge between official doctrine or behavioural guidelines, and what adherents of a religion or actually “do.”<sup>106</sup> Like any traditional religious actors in response to regulating, systematic, or formalized constructions of what constitutes their ideology, QAnon adherents adapt, appropriate, resist, or improvise their ideological system (from Q or influencers). For the remainder of this chapter, I will break down these processes to investigate how the relationship between the official (QDrops) and the unofficial (influencers and rank and file adherents’ interpretations) is constantly negotiated. The practice of lived religion is a way of recognizing that religious actors behave in predictable ways. Practice is not aimless or random, but rather takes on a structure or shape that we commonly refer to as “ritual.” What is important for QAnon is what happens inside the spaces that have been officially designated as approved sites for “religious” practice: i.e., QResearch board on 8chan where all the decodes and baking took place, the digital ecosystems influencers control, Trump rallies, protests against government official and law enforcement, etc. What is also important is how QAnon adherents ritualize and practise their belief outside of canonical QAnon spaces like Pastel QAnon (see chapter 4), -48,<sup>107</sup> Devolution,<sup>108</sup> or other QAnon adjacent spaces. The rituals that take place outside or on the outskirts of QAnon space are important. Lived religion is about the framework of meaning that is embedded within any given practice. Meaning making is key to QAnon belief as the conspiracy theories that make up QAnon act to explain what is happening in the world and offers an easy answer. Lived religion is a way to understanding QAnon as particular, local, variable, and otherwise shaped by specific cultural, social, political, material, and other contexts of human experience, rather than as a *sui generis* universal phenomenon. This last point is extremely important when exploring QAnon outside the US and examining QAnon post “Q” and Trump. Groupuscules centred around one or many influencers have become the new norm of QAnon ritual and religious practices. This also provides a lens as to better understand why QAnon adherents believe what they believe (though it may appear ridiculous to outsiders) and what do they act on their beliefs, at times violently or in ways harmful to society. To close this chapter, I will break down QAnon into three distinct periods: proto-QAnon, canonical QAnon and apocryphal QAnon.

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<sup>106</sup> David Hall, *Lived Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>107</sup> David Gilbert, "The QAnon JFK Cult in Dallas Is Tearing Families Apart," *Vice News*, November 2022 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qjb8mv/qanon-jfk-cult-tearing-families-apart>; Steven Monacelli, "They're Too Extreme for QAnon — and Right at Home at Trump's Rally," *Rolling Stone*, January 16 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-rally-qanon-jkf-conspiracy-1286053/>.

<sup>108</sup> Mike Rothschild, "Why Devolution is quickly becoming the future of the QAnon movement," August 12 2021, <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/devolution-qanon-patel-patriot/>.

## 1.2 Proto-QAnon

QAnon, was not born *ex nihilo*, rather it has several foundations that played a key role in laying the groundwork for QAnon to flourish and sustain itself: 1) Pizzagate, 2) the anon genre of LARPing (live action role-playing is when participants play a particular character or act out a role) and, 3) the lost “Q” drops. These elements represent stepping stones that were used to pave the way for the QAnon movement. As was mentioned in the introduction, the origins of QAnon can be traced back to a year prior to the “Calm Before the Storm” thread in the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, which arose in a turbulent sociopolitical context in the United States. The campaign’s outpouring of rage and hysteria was given prominent placement on websites specializing in the dissemination of fake news and disinformation. The dissemination of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory was fuelled by an extraordinarily volatile social media climate, which drove many people to believe absurd unfounded accusations and conspiracy theories about Hillary Clinton. Fake news sites and conspiracy theory influencers on social media flooded the web with the Pizzagate conspiracy theory at the height of the excitement. According to the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, coded language and satanic symbols discovered in intercepted John Podesta emails indicated a covert sex trafficking operation at a Comet Ping Pong in Washington, DC. According to Pizzagate, Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager, as well as former President Bill Clinton, ran the Comet Ping Pong child abuse and sex trafficking operation for years. Edgar M. Welch flew from North Carolina to the popular DC pizzeria Comet Ping Pong with a revolver and an assault weapon to ‘self-investigate’ the validity of the 4chan conspiracy in December 2016. It is from the ashes of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory that QAnon emerged. It was both something familiar (preserving the central concept that a cabal of strong elites rule the world and use their position to covertly harm children) while also being different, whereby a government insider was providing intelligence directly from the US military and then President Donald Trump.

This is where the “anon genre” or LARPing comes in as the QAnon movement combines the anon genre with the remnants of Pizzagate. In this context, LARPing is when someone pretends to be someone they are not. It can include lying on social media or the internet. LARPing is defined in this chapter as someone pretending to be a well-placed source with classified information about current events, which they then leak to anons on image boards. This digital role-playing dates to web 1 bulletin board system (BBS), the most famous of which was John Titor. Titor (aka TimeTravel\_0) pseudonymously posted on the Time Travel Institute BBS claiming to be a time traveller and soldier from 2036.<sup>109</sup> Titor at the time made both vague and specific predictions regarding apocalyptic events that would occur in the future (nuclear war, civil war, bovine disease, etc.); however, his inconsistent explanations and inaccuracy of his predictions were ultimately the demise of his character. Social media continued to provide an environment for this genre to thrive, particularly on image boards like 4chan. “Q” was not an

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<sup>109</sup> "Jon Titor's First Post," Time Travel Institute, 2000, <https://bbs.timetravelinstitute.com/topic/752-time-travel-paradoxes/#comment-7600>.

original concept within the genre itself, as there were others who posted before him claiming to be some type of government insider.

Between July 2<sup>nd</sup> and October 17, 2016, an individual claiming to be a “high-level analyst” in the FBI with intimate knowledge about the inner workings of the Clinton case, was posting on 4chan. This user was posting at the same time as the Pizzagate conspiracy theory was unfolding, therefore being a product and responding to the same sociopolitical environment in the US. Rather than dropping cryptic information like “Q” did, FBIAnon<sup>110</sup> offered insight in the form of an AMA (ask me anything). FBIAnon in answering the Q&A would provide tidbits of information that they were sharing anonymously as they were under a gag order and could face prosecution. Similar to QDrops, there is a sense of urgency and secrecy attached to this, bringing in consumers of this information and have them participate in the covert plot. Several elements of what FBIAnon would post, would have found its way into Qdrops. This is likely due to the fact that the first “Q” was familiar with the anon genre, and borrowed from those who came before them; whereas QAnon adherents would attribute these similarities to the veracity of the information that was posted on 4chan, feeding into the larger mythos.

High Level Insider (HLI) was another anon who posted on 4chan responding in an AMA format<sup>111</sup> between July 10, 2016, and March 4, 2017. Unlike FBIAnon, HLI’s conspiratorial narratives were chaotic. A large amount of HLI’s posting was about the difference between the historical figure of Jesus and the divinity of Jesus. The individual was aware of popular culture references to gnostic texts that deviate from canonical teaching about Jesus and integrated some of those elements in their posting. HLI also discussed historical conspiracy theories like the Newton - Leibniz calculus controversy, which claims that “essentially, Newton was a fraud put forth by British intelligence to recapture the interest and admiration of the moderately intellectual class.”<sup>112</sup> What is interesting about HLI vs the other LARPer’s posting pre-Q, was that they were not ardent-Trump supporters. The environment at the time on 4chan was saturated with content related to the Trump administration; nevertheless, HLI managed to stand out among the others not due to the political content they posted about, but rather due to their skill in spinning conspiracy theories to a wide audience.

We can find a similar trend to FBIAnon in the posting of White House Anon,<sup>113</sup> who was posting in July 2017 and claimed to be a White House insider provided information by providing breadcrumbs of information to those who read their thread on 4chan. White House Anon explained things like the “slingshot theory,” which was a technique used by Trump to keep the media perpetually off balance, and the “ring of fire theory” which was a technique the Clinton’s used to cover their criminal offences by making them appear so heinous, wild and unhinged that they would only be perceived as a conspiracy theory rather than reality. Concepts from White

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<sup>110</sup> "FBIAnon AMA," 2016, <https://paulfurber.net/pdf/fbianon.pdf>.

<sup>111</sup> "High Level Insider archive," 2017, <http://hli.anoninfo.net/>.

<sup>112</sup> Unknown, "High Level Insider archive."

<sup>113</sup> "Archive of WhiteHouseAnon posts on 4chan," 2017,

<https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/search/subject/KEK%20WILLS%20IT%21%20GET%20IN%20HERE%2C%20WHITE%20HOUSE%20ANON%20WAS%20RIGHT/order/asc/>.

House Anon would again be adopted by “Q.” /pol/ was at least curious enough to want to hear more -- or some members were.

Another key proto-QAnon figure was that of MegaAnon who posted between May 23, 2017, until January 14, 2018, on 4chan and Reddit. Unlike the other posters, we can assume MegaAnon gender and that she was likely a woman as the user posted pictures of her feet on /pol/. MegaAnon was the most successful of the proto-QAnon figure on 4chan in terms of audience size and duration of activity. Her posts differed in style from the others as they are not AMA style, and they are not cryptic like the posts from “Q,” rather she is speaking from her pulpit as an insider, preaching to her audience on /pol/. However, the language and structure of her posts echo that which “Q” will begin to post in October 2017. Like “Q,” MegaAnon integrated key elements of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, while being more overtly antisemitic in discussion: “[they] are THE SAME CORRUPT AS FUCK (((DEEP))), who'd also illegally, traffic, groom, torture, sexually abuse, rape and murder CHILDREN (on top of all the other corrupt shit they do), for profits and power. Nothing more, nothing less. EVERYTHING that's fucked up with this country and world is perpetuated, instigated, manipulated, facilitated, orchestrated, operated, concealed, and financed by the same (((deep))) pile of shit.”<sup>114</sup> MegaAnon and “Q” overlapped in their posting activity for a few months on /pol/; early on MegaAnon appears to be on board with what “Q” is posting and doing, especially as he is able to communicate in the language of /pol/ more effectively than she can. Further, unlike “Q,” she decided to embed herself into the history of the LARPer and the genre linking all of them together in a larger web of actors giving information to anons:

Here's what's sad... it's not a fucking LARP y'all and by the time it's over, you're going to realize EXACTLY how much time and effort people have been putting into this board, to give you the truth. Some of us, for MONTHS. Most of us have admitted we aren't daily /pol/ posters. We know this. It doesn't make us a shill or a LARP. It makes us people purposefully coming here, with a specific goal. I told y'all about Trump's willingness to extend a hand and make deals with those he was willing to work with and salvage from the “swamp”, to include “deal making”/“negotiating” with Congress, our departments and agencies, the ME, Russia, China, etc. months ago. I told you about SR, Awan's, Manafort would walk, Tony would be indicted (and it will be confirmed soon), etc. since May. I've sat back and watched all these “QAnon” posts because frankly, brah is on point. I haven't personally felt compelled to post at all. He's doing a fantastic job. If anything, I've realized what kills me in here, is my wall boards of detailed paragraphs but alas, I'm not a writer. QAnon is breaking down a ton of detail in a more /pol/-friendly format. So, enjoy the breadcrumbs y'all. You're not being larped, you're being leaked to. Great job cracking the /pol/ post formatting, Q. You're super effective and 100% accurate.

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<sup>114</sup> "MegaAnon Archive," 2018, <http://www.rumormillnews.com/texts/MegaAnon.txt>.



MegaAnon acknowledged “Q” and their content at several occasions; however, “Q” never once acknowledged MegaAnon.<sup>115</sup>

However, as time passed and “Q” began to gain traction on 4chan, MegaAnon began to turn on “Q” and by the end of November she stated that “NO “Q” after 10/31 is legitimate”<sup>116</sup> and went on to claim that “Q” was a Soros-Antifa-Obama false flag.

The final element of proto-QAnon is what the Q Origins Project has called the lost drops, which, “are so called because they are not acknowledged as ‘canonical’ Q drops — meaning the posts by Q that are presented on all or almost all Q drop aggregators.”<sup>117</sup> The Q Origins Project found 13 posts that were made by “Q,” which were not part of the canon aggregated by the community: “six from October 29, 2017, placed between canonical drops 5 and 6; five from October 30, 2017, nestled between canonical drops 13 and 14; and two from November 1, 2017, between drops 33 and 34.”<sup>118</sup> These lost drops were made at the early stage of “Q” posting on 4chan, and there was not even a QAnon movement yet, there was no specific “Q” board, nor were there any aggregators; rather, the account was just another LARPer among many other active at the time. I agree with the analysis done by the Q Origins Project. In these lost drops, “Q” behaved more like just another anon rather than an individual with top secret government clearance. As Q Origins states,

this dissonance makes sense in light of the fact that this was only the second day of Q’s activity, and whoever was writing these posts hadn’t quite found the right persona yet. The content is appropriate for Q, but the behaviour is that of a run-of-the-mill anon, which suggests that the author was in fact a run-of-the-mill anon acting as they usually did.<sup>119</sup>

These drops were never included in the canon for unknown reasons, though they are posted at the same time as other canonical drops. What is of note in examining QAnon as a lived religion, is that the canonical construction of the movement was decided by those who practised and participated in the movement. Early influencers and aggregators of early QDrops either missed these, chose not to include them, or determined it was the work of an imposter. Nonetheless, these early writings, as well as the anon genre and the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, all played a role in paving the way for the establishment of the QAnon movement.

## 1.3 Canonical QAnon

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<sup>115</sup> RumormillNews, "MegaAnon Archive."

<sup>116</sup> RumormillNews, "MegaAnon Archive."

<sup>117</sup> QOriginsProject, "How Q’s 'Lost Drops' Undermine the QAnon Myth," *Bellingcat*, April 22 2021, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2021/04/22/how-qs-lost-drops-undermine-the-qanon-myth/>.

<sup>118</sup> QOriginsProject, "How Q’s 'Lost Drops' Undermine the QAnon Myth."

<sup>119</sup> QOriginsProject, "How Q’s 'Lost Drops' Undermine the QAnon Myth."

Canonical QAnon refers to the 4953 drops the multiple “Q” posted between October 27, 2017, and December 8, 2020. These are referred to as canonical as they are the drops that are accepted as genuine, and were included into the “Q” aggregators, forming a canon of QAnon scripture. What marks this period in the QAnon movement is though the absence of a clear leader, the information provided by “Q” acted as a guiding force for the community and held them together. The movement was also reactive to what then President Trump tweeted and how that could be correlated to QDrops, as well as by the individual QAnon influencers who dictated their own segment of the ecosystem. “Q” is to be understood as the oracle which provided insightful council and prophetic predictions, as the QDrops were believed to contain precognitions of the future inspired by military intelligence. Then President Trump was the prophet, with whom “Q” was in contact, Trump acted as an intermediary and cryptographic key that interfaced with the anons through his Twitter account, in order to deliver messages that would be used to unlock the hidden messages found within the QDrops.

### *1.3.1 QAnon pre-COVID-19 Pandemic*

Canonical QAnon was first centralized on 4chan between October 28, 2017, to November 1, 2017, until the first “Q” stated that 4chan had been infiltrated and compromised. At which point all “Q” boards were migrated to another image board called 8chan. On November 19, 2017, the /cbts/ (calm before the storm) board was created and was used by what I call the second “Q” until January 6, 2018, until it was “compromised,” and “Q” was unable to use their tripcode. A tripcode is a password that has been hashed, allowing a user’s identity to be recognized without the need to store any user information. The user on an imageboard once logged in has a tripcode linked to all their posts. I suspect that the user(s) behind “Q” lost their password and access to their “Q” only board. This forced the creation of a new board called /thestorm/ on January 5, 2018 which was used until January 8, 2018, after about 40 threads. This board was put out of use due to infighting between the board admins and “Q.” On January 8, 2018, /qresearch/ was created which is to this day the main board used by QAnon adherents. On March 28, 2018, “Q” created /patriotsfight/ which was the private board “Q” used at the time. During these early periods of QAnon, 8chan acted as the central hub of activity for much of the existence of the movement as that is where “Q” was posting and giving away military intelligence. Further, “Q” had a clear order for their followers “no outside coms,” which means that “Q” would never post outside of 8chan, and anyone claiming to be “Q” outside the site would be an imposter. Furthermore, early QAnon practice was about the decoding of the QDrops and discovering the secrets found within them. Early primary sources I collected describe “Q” as “a team of high-ranking officials within the Trump administration who post information to awaken the public to sensitive and important events or happenings that the media may or may not report on to provide insider context.” The goal of these cryptically worded statements and questions were meant to lead anons on the boards and the public to question and research insider information, presidential policies, events, and strategies.

What is important to note about this early period in the existence of QAnon is that it was first and foremost a movement that was created online, and for the first half of its existence, involved purely online activities, as offline criminality and violence pre-2020 are extreme outliers. The purely online dimension of QAnon is significant vs other new religious movements or

conspiracy theories, as it really had no offline dynamics in its initial activities. What changed overtime was that the cryptic messages were not only about political events, but took on a more esoteric note when it focused more on what the Cabal was doing. In time, the attention shifted away from political conspiracy theories and a purely US focus, to “Q” having the aim to reveal who controls the world, how they control it, and what is being done to stop it through digital soldiers. By mid-2018, QAnon influencers and adherents began to lean on the idea of anons as being digital soldiers. Instead of waiting for an eschatological event – “Great Awakening” or the “Storm” mentioned by “Q” – adherents must help accelerate the eschatological events to come. The “Great Awakening” occurs when someone decides and deciphers the meaning of QDrops, it is a description of the process of radicalization. What was added ideologically in 2018 is that the “Great Awakening” can also happen when deciphered drops are “shared” with the rest of the public. We can see this in the drastic increase in QAnon related terms versus other years. By doing a boolean search of QAnon related terms<sup>120</sup> in Crimson Hexagon, I pulled 54,116,206 entries from October 1, 2017, until February 2, 2020. I selected the top 10 hashtags each year to see the evolution in usage and volume of the 10 hashtags used by QAnon to spread disinformation as can be seen in table 1.

TABLE 1: Top 10 QAnon Hashtags by Year

Row Labels	2017	2018	2019	2020	Grand Total
#DarkToLight			980,000.00	120,000.00	1,100,000.00
#FollowTheWhiteRabbit	590,000.00				590,000.00
#GreatAwakening		4,400,000.00	1,600,000.00	160,000.00	6,160,000.00
#Hannity	81,000.00				81,000.00
#KAG			1,600,000.00	340,000.00	1,940,000.00
#MAGA	280,000.00	7,900,000.00	4,700,000.00	330,000.00	13,210,000.00
#PedoGate	73,000.00				73,000.00

<sup>120</sup> wwg1wga OR qanon OR followthewhiterabbit OR qsentme OR thestormiscoming OR thegreatawakening OR greatawakening OR weareQ OR fallofthecabal OR wherewegoonewegoall OR stormiscoming OR stormisuponus OR QAnon2019 OR qanon2020 OR wwg1wga worldwide OR trusttheplan OR adrenochrome OR qarmy OR pedogate2020 OR qanonworldwide OR qarmyworldwide OR darktolight OR sheepnomore OR patriotsawakened OR thestormisuponus OR calmbeforethestorm OR thestorm OR wearethenews OR "where we go one we go all" OR "where we go 1 we go all" OR "the great awakening" OR QPatriot OR thestormishere OR "we are the news" OR pizzagate OR spygate OR qthestorm OR digitalsoldier OR wearethenewsnow OR deepstate OR epsteinisland OR pedowoodisreal OR adrenochrome OR starvemoloch OR pizzagateisreal OR qanon8chan OR qanonus OR qanonarmy OR thesepeoplearesick OR sheepnomore OR pedowood OR pedogate OR taketheoath OR pervywood OR outofshadows OR outoftheshadows OR fallofcabal OR pedo OR paedophile OR paedophile OR lolita OR lolitaexpress OR epsteinisland OR "little st james" OR paedophilia OR pedos OR pizza OR pizzagate OR savethechildren OR savethechildren OR saveourchildren OR savethekids OR endhumantrafficking OR riseupforchildren OR Abramovic OR pedophilic OR wayfair\* OR wayfairchildtrafficking OR satan OR satanic OR satanist OR satanists OR illuminati OR "spirit cooking" OR weiner OR "child sex" OR pizzagte OR "sex trafficking" OR "child trafficking" OR "human trafficking" OR "pineal gland" OR "human sacrifice" OR frazzledrip OR satanicritualabuse OR "satanic ritual abuse" OR MKUltra OR thesepeopleareevil OR thesepeoplearesick OR wayfairgate

#Q	130,000.00	2,100,000.00	2,200,000.00	280,000.00	4,710,000.00
#QAnon	1,000,000.00	23,000,000.00	12,000,000.00	1,300,000.00	37,300,000.00
#QArmy		1,800,000.00	1,600,000.00	110,000.00	3,510,000.00
#TheGreatAwakening		2,500,000.00	1,700,000.00	200,000.00	4,400,000.00
#TheStorm	340,000.00	1,700,000.00			2,040,000.00
#TheStormIsHere	130,000.00				130,000.00
#TheStormIsUponUs	73,000.00				73,000.00
#Trump	65,000.00	1,300,000.00			1,365,000.00
#Trump2020			1,300,000.00	280,000.00	1,580,000.00
#WeThePeople		2,200,000.00			2,200,000.00
#WWG1WGA		8,200,000.00	10,000,000.00	1,100,000.00	19,300,000.00
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2,762,000.00</b>	<b>55,100,000.00</b>	<b>37,680,000.00</b>	<b>4,220,000.00</b>	<b>99,762,000.00</b>

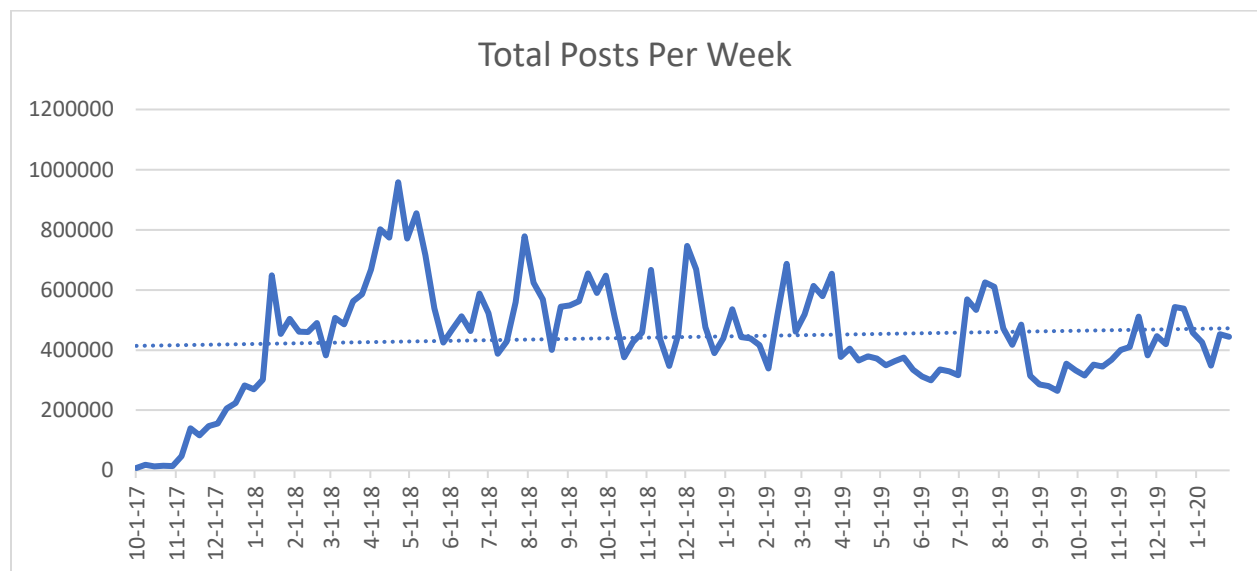



Figure 2 QAnon posts on Twitter per week between October 1, 2017, until February 2, 2020

In 2018, we see the time when QAnon decided that they needed to actively spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, and not only try and unlock the secrets “Q” was revealing to them. Figure 2 shows the spike in activity above the trend line of the overall collection, but also an average activity above of what can be seen in 2019 and 2020. Twitter is the platform of choice

for QAnon, as it is the public square where political activity takes place. “Q” dictated time and again that Twitter is where the digital war will take place. Therefore, QAnon adherents need to create “meme ammo” based on QDrops and decodes to raise awareness about the Great Awakening. By the end of 2018, QAnon was proactively participating in non-state actor information operations posting memes, side by sides (to show through open-source reporting what the crumbs mean) and qproof deltas (to show Q and President Trump’s connections and similar thought processes) on mainstream platforms as part of the digital war.

Statement by Donald J. Trump, 45th President of the United States of America

The latest pleading from Special Counsel Robert Durham provides indisputable evidence that my campaign and presidency were spied on by operatives paid by the Hillary Clinton Campaign in an effort to develop a completely fabricated connection to Russia. This is a scandal far greater in scope and magnitude than Watergate and those who were involved in and knew about this spying operation should be subject to criminal prosecution. In a stronger period of time in our country, this crime would have been punishable by death. In addition, reparations should be paid to those in our country who have been damaged by this.



Testimony by some historians via their interviews (History of Bucks County, by W.W.H Davis, 1905 and J.H. Battle, 1887) indicate that the first Durham boat was built by Robert Durham on the river bank near the mouth of the cave at Durham, circa 1730, but all of this is hearsay evidence that has been passed down via the generations. Robert Durham was stipulated to be a boat builder by trade in certain papers left by B.F. Fackenthal Esq., a native of Durham who indicated that he was told by his grandfather that Robert Durham worked at the Furnace when the first boat was built. But, there is no hard evidence for any of this.

President Trump "mistakenly" calls John Durham "Robert."


The Durham boats used in the late 1700's were built by Robert Durham

The first post by Q with an image featured a Durham boat and contained a typo: a missing letter "D."

John Durham was sworn in as US Attorney for Connecticut on October 28th, 2017, the same day Q first posted.

The painting showed Washington crossing the Delaware River where he landed in Trenton New Jersey.

The day the discovery was made by @elenochie, President Trump was holding a rally in Terenton, New Jersey



#105

JDLKD-8382KDJZdAZ73 01  
YTRR-aRb73 0100-JQE195  
CZTA68-KDHG-[ t]

CASTLE ARRIVAL GOOD  
BLUE METAL

Jun. 12 2018

1 Day later

POTUS\_Schedule  
@POTUS\_Schedule

Wednesday, 13 June 2018  
06:10:32 #POTUS #Motorcade Arrival the #WhiteHouse secure area

"Good to be back at the castle! No time for rest and relaxation, we must continue to serve the American people."

3:46 AM - 13 Jun 2018

#Qanon "THIS IS NOT A GAME" #QProofs  
Qanon.pub

Figure 3 on the left is an example of a "side by side" and on the right an example of a "qproof delta"

By 2018, part of identifying and belonging to QAnon went beyond simple gnosis, they believed that each revelation from the Qdrops they shared about the Deep State Cabal, would decrease day by day and post by post the control that the Cabal held over humanity. Though QAnon activity on Twitter slowed down in 2019,<sup>121</sup> QAnon was primarily an online phenomenon, their core ideological tenets were still that Trump & QTeam were taking care of the kinetic conflict & anons fought the information war. Early documents demonstrate the mysticism and heroism that motivated adherents, “we the American people acted in accordance with this ideal by electing President Trump to renew our government and Q, through the Great Awakening, is enlightening We the People about what the enemies of the people have done, are doing and will do to fight

<sup>121</sup> Slowdown in posting was primarily due to a few long absences by “Q” in 2019 and the fact that 8chan was shut down between August 2019 and November 2019 due to a series of mass shootings and terrorist attack in Christchurch, Poway, El Paso, and Baerum, all of whom were radicalized on 8chan and posted their manifestos to the site. When 8chan re-emerged as 8kun in November 2019, so did “Q.”

this historic change.”<sup>122</sup> It is important to highlight that violence on behalf of QAnon adherents was not part of the messaging through 2019; rather, “Q” had repeatedly asked adherents to be the “calm before the storm.” This language and these concepts that have drastically changed in the period from 2020 to 2022. It is also important to highlight that there was a new “Q” that appeared by the end of 2019. By then QAnon was on a sharp decline and was seeing its audience base shrink. But the pandemic saved the movement by revitalizing it with new conspiracy theories and new followers that were funnelled toward QAnon.

### *1.3.2 QAnon during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

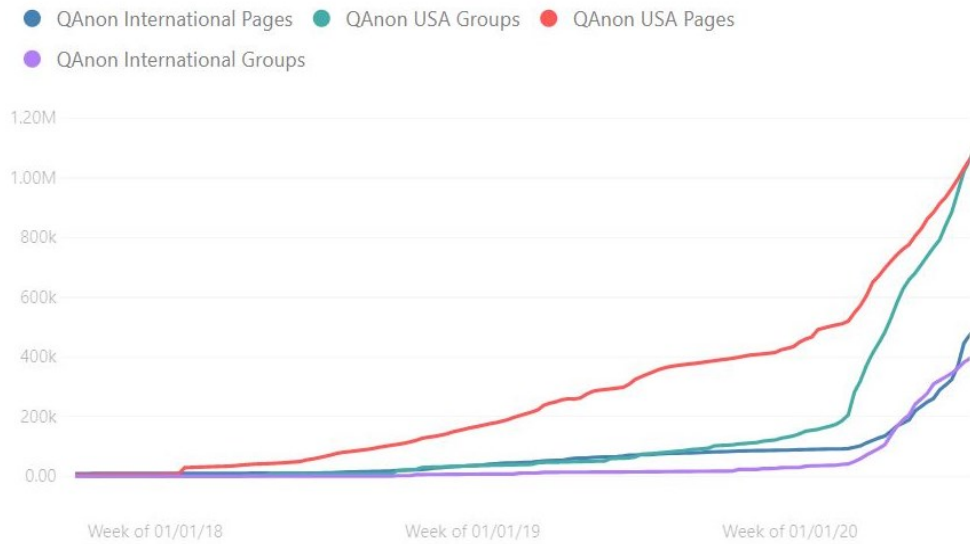
Although COVID-19 emerged during the canonical period of QAnon, the pandemic transformed QAnon, both mainstreaming the movement and growing their audience. As Imhoff and Lamberty note,<sup>123</sup> for almost all major events over the last several decades, the “official version of why these came about were confronted with various conspiracy allegations that proposed an explanation involving plots hatched in secret by powerful agents instead.” What I found in QAnon during this time period is that the pandemic and measures taken by the government to limit disease spread have contributed not only to the unprecedented rise in conspiracy theories, but also to the merging and blending of different conspiracies. There is probably no better example of this than the QAnon movement, which grew in popularity partly because it rode the wave of COVID-19 related conspiracies after March 2020. In 2020, as a reaction to the public health measures QAnon began moving offline as part of larger societal protests and rallies. There is an interesting reversal: when at a time overall internet activity increased, a movement that was created fully online and existed fully online, moved offline. The larger sociological literature on conspiracy theories notes how important conspiracy movements can be with respect to the notion of theodicy, or the question of why evil exists in the world if God is good, all-knowing, and all-powerful. Conspiracy theories permit the development of symbolic resources that enable humans to define and address this problem of evil. As Michael Barkun notes, “Not only are events non-random, but the clear identification of evil gives the conspiracist a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose.”<sup>124</sup> The essence of many COVID-19 related conspiracy theories lies in their attempts to delineate and explain the evil caused by the pandemic and its multiple negative impacts. The core of most QAnon COVID conspiracy theories is linked to an intentionality behind the origin, spread and duration of the pandemic (i.e., the virus was manmade, the virus was orchestrated by an elite group of individuals, or the virus is being used to control the population through quarantine and lockdown), and to secrecy behind the plans to achieve an evil goal. Thus, the QAnon adherent is not simply engaging in mindless sleuthing, but is a warrior – not only a digital one – in an ongoing battle between good and evil.

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<sup>122</sup> Posted in an unnamed and untitled PDF found on 8chan in November 2019.

<sup>123</sup> Roland Imhoff and Pia Lamberty, "A Bioweapon or a Hoax? The Link Between Distinct Conspiracy Beliefs About the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak and Pandemic Behavior," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2020).

<sup>124</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 4.



COMBINED TOTAL PAGE LIKE GROWTH > 02/02/20 - 08/07/20

> PAGE LIKES: **3.12M** | GROWTH: **+3.11M** | % GROWTH: **+7,016.64%**

NAME	TOTAL	GROWTH	% GROWTH
QAnon Internatio...	501.2K	+492.7K	+5784.80%
QAnon USA Groups	1.11M	+1.11M	+1.00%
QAnon USA Pages	1.10M	+1.10M	+22081.78%
QAnon Internatio...	406.1K	+406.1K	+1.00%

Figure 4 QAnon group and page membership as of August 8, 2020

As the pandemic began to spread around the world, so did conspiracy theories about the virus. And QAnon theories about the virus, as well as QAnon ideology more broadly, flowed closely behind. This time, though, they were not relegated to the fringe image boards of 8kun and the digital battlefield on Twitter but were being pushed on other mainstream platforms like Facebook and Instagram. This is a key shift in QAnon as the pandemic’s duration and the public health measures employed went lasted longer than initial reports from both the media and experts. QAnon adherents merged and absorbed other movements that had presences offline, leading QAnon adherents to move beyond their digital soldering. QAnon adherents now held to a worldview whereby they could direct the course of history according to their own will and intentions. The turning point for QAnon’s mainstreaming was March 2020, when the US and many other nations closed their borders to control the spread of COVID-19. Taking a close look at the data related to QAnon Facebook pages, it is clear just how much QAnon grew during this

period.<sup>125</sup> Between March and August 2020 membership in QAnon Facebook groups and pages grew by a staggering 7,016% (figure 4).

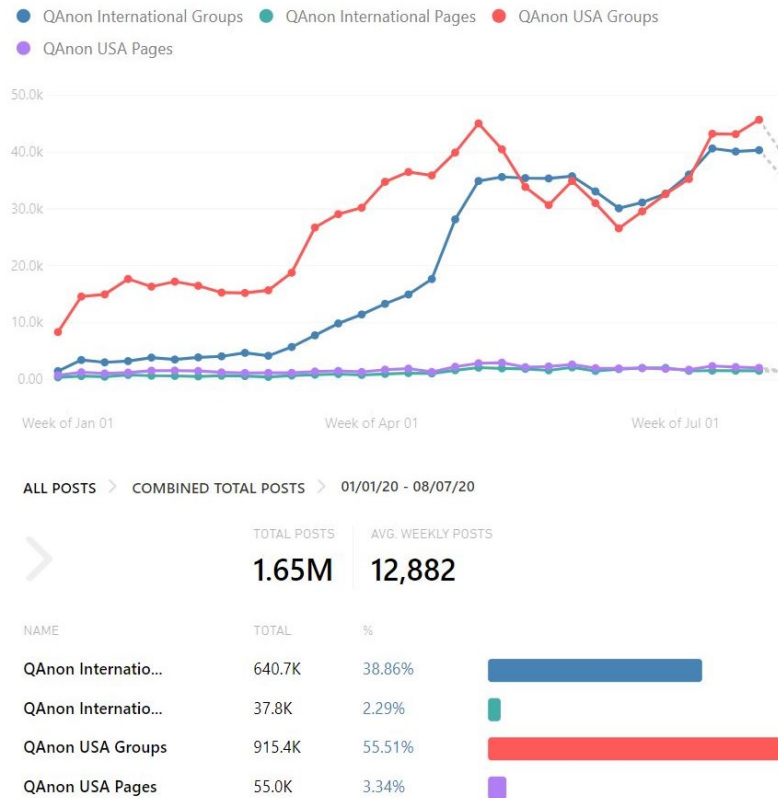


Figure 5 QAnon group and page posts as of August 8, 2020

I collected Facebook data from 406 QAnon and QAnon aligned Facebook groups and pages. In another graph, we can demonstrate that QAnon groups prior to March 2020 had approximately 220,600 members, whereas QAnon pages had a total of 558,800 likes. By 7 August 2020, QAnon groups had approximately 1,516,100 members and QAnon pages had 1,610,200 likes (see Figure 5). Not only did group membership increase, but levels of engagement within these groups and pages grew drastically after March 2020. There are similar patterns of behaviour with respect to the number of posts, whereby posting increased following the March 2020 border closures in the US, and the dramatic impact of COVID in Spain and Italy in March and April. Posts between March 2020 and August 2020 accounted for 65% of all QAnon posts ever made on Facebook.<sup>126</sup> With respect to overall activity, posts on international group pages were almost as high as the US-based groups following the impact of COVID and the prolonged lockdowns (see Figure 5). This also immediately followed the growing anti-lockdown movements in

<sup>125</sup> The data was collected using Crowdtangle, a social media analysis tool owned by Facebook. It provides an aggregate count of group membership, therefore, if a user would join 50 of the QAnon groups or pages identified by the authors, this user would be counted 50 times. Therefore, this provides a measurement of the mainstreaming of the QAnon movement on Facebook, rather than a real count of unique members.

<sup>126</sup> Posts on Facebook were collected between October 27, 2017, and August 8, 2020.



Europe. It is important to highlight that based on a qualitative assessment of the groups and pages that were collected at the time, QAnon was blending and taking over other conspiracy-minded movements and ecosystems. However, in turn, these groups impacted the composition of QAnon. QAnon latched on to the anti-mask, anti-vaccine, anti-lockdown movements as well as groups who believe that COVID-19 is a hoax. What all of these ideas have in common is they are inherently anti-establishment and anti-government. These groups also have in common frequent offline mobilization, which added another dimension of QAnon praxis: it is not sufficient to be a member only of the digital army, but adherents must also physically participate by adopting the QAnon aesthetic and moving offline, protesting with signs that had QAnon slogans, or wearing QAnon shirts, hats, bumper stickers, etc.

Additionally, the mainstreaming of QAnon into the American political arena occurred during the 2020 US election cycle, which was significant. Reporter Alex Kaplan noted that 2020 was the year “QAnon became all of our problem” as there were 107 U.S. congressional candidates who publicly showed support for QAnon.<sup>127</sup> This was a further shift in QAnon, where they were more than digital soldiers, more than protesters, but were now an electoral base that was being leveraged by political candidates. This gave them a reason to practise their beliefs by participating in the political arena and going to rallies in support of QAnon candidates.

Lastly, 2020 was the year that former President Donald Trump finally gave QAnon what it always wanted: respect. Since the start of the pandemic, Trump recognized the QAnon community in a way its followers could have only fantasized about when the movement began in 2017. For QAnon adherents, Trump is perceived as a messianic figure, playing a central role in QAnon’s prophetic belief that he will lead them to victory over the Deep State, as well as usher in a promised golden age of peace and prosperity. Therefore, when Trump acknowledges QAnon by repeatedly boosting or quote tweeting them, adherents perceived this as if Trump was sending them coded messages in response to significant events. Not only did this reinforce belief for QAnon adherents, but reporters, who were not on the QAnon or extremism beat, created a Streisand effect, bringing QAnon further into the mainstream due to Trump boosting QAnon during his presidency.

Violent extremists’ movements have historically relied on crises to scale and QAnon is no exception. In the latter period of QAnon in 2020 and 2021 there were several crises for QAnon, not only due to the pandemic impacting everyone, but also that Trump lost political power. Crisis provides violent extremist movements a sense that radical action is immediately needed. Between 2017 and 2019, there were 13 instances of QAnon violence and criminality. In 2020 there were 33. In 2021 there were 93 instances of violence and criminality, 78 of which are linked to January 6. By December 2020, “Q” was no longer posting, and Trump has lost. QAnon was recognized as a national security threat by governments around the world, and they were no longer welcomed on mainstream social media platforms, including Twitter, which was the main arena for the digital war. Thus in 2021, QAnon entered a period where the influence and

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<sup>127</sup> Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2022."

direction of the movement moved away from what the drops, “Q” and Trump said, and it now solely relied on what QAnon influencers said and believed.

## 1.4 Conclusion Apocryphal QAnon

The period post “Q,” following Donald Trump as president and following the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, marks what I call the apocryphal period of QAnon. This is a period of volatility for the QAnon movement, not only due to lack of leadership, but also due to an early 2021 scramble to find a new home, as mainstream platforms had removed QAnon accounts in a coordinated fashion from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok. There was an initial move to Parler, a Twitter clone, that was growing quickly with the political right, until it got hacked and user information was leaked, making it unattractive to users. Gab, a Facebook clone, was another alternative, but it did not have the technical infrastructure to accommodate the droves of new users trying to signup, which led to the site getting DDoS'ed<sup>128</sup> by all those who were deplatformed after the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>. QAnon, ultimately settled on Telegram, where the community grew and diversified. Praxis for QAnon returned mostly to its online roots following mass arrests of QAnon adherents present on January 6<sup>th</sup>. This period is marked by a clear deviation from what would be deemed “canonical” QAnon beliefs and practices that were dictated by “Q,” and the image board culture that was foundational to the movement. The Big Lie played a key role, however, in maintaining some form of cohesion within the ecosystem throughout 2021. Furthermore, in the absence of “Q,” QAnon influencers new and old stepped in to fill in the void. This is a topic that I explore further in Chapter 6, but here are some key elements relevant to QAnon as a live religion.

First, the oldest network of QAnon influencers formed a coalition under the name “We the Media.” These 38 individuals decided to come together to salvage QAnon post January 6<sup>th</sup> and post-Q in a telegram channel, which would act as the *de facto* source for authoritative QAnon information. This was and still is the closest to canonical QAnon in terms of content and praxis. “We the Media” channel grew to over 200,000 members. Most of these QAnon influencers administering the channel also created their own Telegram channels, where they posted their own brand of QAnon content and interpretation on socio-political events in the US and abroad. This content would also be forwarded in the “We The Media channel,” which was the main way content was curated, giving a sense of authority and continuity from the canonical period. These individuals gathered followers from the tens of thousands to over 100,000 followers. These channels had also associated chats where QAnon adherents would be able to engage with the influencers themselves, as well as other followers. This is where the praxis that occurred on 8kun now took place. Praxis also returned to an early form of QAnon, as it was about finding evidence to support the new conspiracy theory, that the election was stolen from Trump (aka The Big Lie). However, the element of digital warfare took more of a secondary role, as there was no more mainstream battlefield on which to post. They were now relegated to their own ecosystems. This

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<sup>128</sup> DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) is a type of cyber attack in which a large number of computers, often infected with malware, are used to flood a targeted website or server with traffic, overwhelming it and causing it to crash and become unavailable.

was, however, central to apocryphal practices as rank-and-file QAnon adherents built their own communities creating many smaller channels. There, they develop relationships with others in the movement and engage in their own cultural practices. This had two important side effects: 1) QAnon adherents began to merge and form relationships with more extreme actors and ecosystems already established on Telegram, leading to QAnon break-off groups that were more violent; 2) we saw the birth of neo-QAnon influencers who quickly rose to fame, but not simply telling followers to hold the line and wait for “Q” and Trump, but by creating new conspiracy theories for QAnon adherents to consume, find hope in and act upon. In Chapter 6, I will look at some of these neo-QAnon influences, such as Sidney Powell, Lin Wood, GhostEzra, Romana Didulo and Negative48. Each of these individuals garnered large followings and their influence at times rivalled that of the “We The Media” coalition.

Actors like Romana Didulo and Negative48 were actually able to gather a key group of followers and adherents who tied themselves to them offline. Romana Didulo has over 70,000 followers on Telegram and has an entourage of a few dozen who have been travelling around Canada pretending to be the mobile government of the Queen. Didulo has inspired her Canadian fans to take real-world action. They are acting in fake government roles, they have submitted hundreds of “cease and desist” notices requesting that all operations relating to the pandemic be ceased by businesses, governments, and law enforcement. They have organized themselves into small, localized communities to send out their demands via registered mail and email. Every day, the “Queen of Canada” posts a prayer to her channel and repeated every day. Her followers pray to her for help, as following a prosperity gospel model where their faith in Romana Didulo and “Q” will provide material and financial success. Didulo and her community have prosperity practices where she will ask for donation to pay for someone’s groceries, or medical bills or rent, she will collect the money and give it to the cause she was promoting, but will also keep the extra money raised to enrich herself.

Negative48, also known as Michael Protzman, has gathered a large following of QAnon adherents in Texas to await the return of John F. Kennedy. Similar to Didulo, Negative48 had followers stay with him for over a year, praying and waiting for the prophesied return. He rose to fame as a QAnon influencer through his use gematria (a numerological system in which Hebrew or Greek letters are substituted for their corresponding numbers, allowing those who use it to draw links between seeming disparate events, names, and phrases) to find meaning in QDrops and other conspiracy theories. Praxis in this case is rooted not only in the individual followers use of gematria, but also in the predictions Negative48 makes himself, which determines what his followers will be doing on any given day.

QAnon moved into its fifth year in 2022. As a lived religion, it has taken on a multiplicity of forms. This is not only the result of old and new influencers staking their claim of the QAnon pie, but also a reflection of how QAnon is no longer mostly centred on 8kun and Twitter, but cross dozens of platforms due to the large-scale QAnon ban on mainstream platforms. Each platform has forced QAnon to adapt to the architecture and functionality of where adherents have found themselves. What has not changed over 5 years is that there is no initiation ritual into QAnon. Membership is affirmed by participating in the ecosystem, by practising and living

QAnon in everyday life, even to the detriment of an individual's relationship with their friends and families. As QAnon continues to fragment without "Q" and Trump as President, we will continue to see a diversification of QAnon praxis. QAnon as a lived religion will continue to be the only way an individual truly adheres to the ideology.

# CHAPTER 2: IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND Q.

## 2.1 Are We Dealing with a New Religious Movement?

Over the past year, QAnon has captured the news media's attention more than ever as the group started to move their activities from online chat boards into the real world. With increased public attention, political commentators, expert and lay, increasingly refer to QAnon as a "cult." This chapter explores, in a comparative analysis, whether QAnon scholars should classify the movement as a "cult" or a "new religious movement."

### 2.1.1 What are Cults and New Religious Movements?

In an attempt to disassociate new religions and religious movements from the pejorative connotations of the term "cult," scholars generally prefer the more neutral terms "new religion" or "new religious movement" (NRM) to describe emerging fringe religious groups.<sup>129</sup> The term "cult" initially served as an extension to the famous Weberian church-sect typology, offering a new analytic concept to distinguish the traditional (albeit socially deviant) beliefs and practices of sects from the radically reformed, deviant beliefs and practices of cults. During the "cult scare" across the United States in the 1960s and 70s, the term was increasingly employed as a social weapon to reinforce the claims that all religious movements deemed "cults" are violent and manipulative, with a charismatic ringleader preying on the emotionally weak through deception, brainwashing and/or fraud.<sup>130</sup> While it is true that some former cult members describe their participation as one born from deception and maintained through indoctrination, this is not the case for all members, nor should it be portrayed as such.

Unorthodox new religious movements painted with the same brush undermines members' rationality, agency, and freedom of religion. Oftentimes, determinations that a group is a "cult" depends on the degree of deviance the it exhibits from "normalized" norms. Whether or not the group is accused of brainwashing (itself a debunked concept) or scamming its members, these standards misrepresent reality and gratuitously diminish legitimate, perhaps strange, religious experiences and practices.<sup>131</sup> New religious movements grow out of a desire to fulfil spiritual needs and maintain themselves by regularly satisfying the needs of their members. Converts were already susceptible to certain beliefs or worldviews, but for a wide range of reasons, may have struggled to articulate or felt uncomfortable in their previous environment to express such ideas before joining an NRM.

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<sup>129</sup> Jane Dillon and James T. Richardson, "A politics of representation analysis of social construction of the term 'cult'" (Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, 1991).

<sup>130</sup> James T. Richardson, "Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative," *Review of Religious Research* 34, no. 4 (1993).

<sup>131</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending cults the sociology of new religious movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Despite the best efforts of many religious studies scholars, there is no “one-size-fits-all” definition or classification of cults. It should also be noted that groups considered “cult-like” vary depending on the context. The problem arises, in part, from the diversity of NRMs. In other words, scholars have been unable to identify a singular set of definitional characteristics that apply to all NRMs. Normative NRM definitions seek to identify a set of mandatory characteristics to establish a “norm” that distinguishes NRMs from other forms of religions.<sup>132</sup> However, these sorts of definitions are often problematic as they are too specific to be useful, and they generally lack impartiality by imposing value judgments within the criteria. Thus, many of these “normative” definitions construct NRMs as inherently problematic or dangerous, resulting in the stigmatization or dehumanization of NRM members.<sup>133</sup> That said, identifying shared characteristics amongst a set of NRMs, though limited, can be fruitful for cross-case comparative analysis. However, defining and classifying various cults exclusively on their shared characteristics has proven insufficient, failing to adequately account for and reconcile the diversity facing those same groups.<sup>134</sup>

Another significant difficulty in classifying new religious movements is their tendency to fluctuate and adapt over time. Studies have found that some NRMs tend to adopt similar modes of membership and organization as sects and churches as these groups grow.<sup>135</sup> Definitions proposed by the anti-cult movement are also not helpful, as Dawson states, for two reasons: there is a value judgement associated with NRMs that is not present when judging other religions, and, relatedly, they leave a variety of other religious groups unclassified. For the purposes of this chapter, though, there remains a need to settle on some definitional parameters or typologies to make sense of QAnon comparatively.

For Dawson,<sup>136</sup> NRMs share at least a few characteristics:

- (1) They are more concerned than churches or sects with meeting the needs of their individual members;
- (2) They lay claim to some esoteric knowledge that has been lost, repressed, or newly discovered;
- (3) They offer their believers some kind of ecstatic or transfiguring experience that is more direct than that provided by traditional modes of religious life;
- (4) Unlike established faiths, they often display no systematic orientation to the broader society and usually are loosely organized; and
- (5) They are almost always centered on a charismatic leader and face disintegration when the leader dies or is discredited.

Dawson readily notes that his typology does not necessarily apply to some of the more infamous NRMs, such as the Church Scientology or Krishna Consciousness. Instead, he suggests some of these groups have moved into other categories along the church-sect-cult continuum.

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<sup>132</sup> Dawson, *Comprehending cults the sociology of new religious movements*.

<sup>133</sup> Eugene V. Gallagher, “Cults” and “New Religious Movements,” *History of Religions* 47, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>134</sup> J. Gordon Melton, “Perspective: Toward a Definition of “New Religion.”,” *Nova Religio* 8, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>135</sup> Dawson, *Comprehending cults the sociology of new religious movements*; Gallagher, “Cults” and “New Religious Movements.”

<sup>136</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, “New Religious Movements,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2006), 374.

Using the mode of membership and the consequent form of NRMs' social organization as a guiding criterion, scholars Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge furthered divided NRMs into three categories: audience cults, client cults and cult movements.<sup>137</sup> Audience cults, they argue, are the least organized but the most prevalent in North America. These are not formal organizations but function as "loosely structured events at which individuals lecture and distribute literature about a variety of esoteric, mystical, eccentric, and occult topics." UFO enthusiasts, flat-earth believers, and New Agers fit in this category. Next, client cults are movements that most closely resemble "the relationship between therapist and patient," where the "services of the cult leader or leaders may become highly organized, but little effort is made" to bring these clients into the broader movement. Many of the followers of these kinds of NRMs may remain members of different and more established religions but use the relationship with the leaders for specific needs like remembering past lives, meditation, or healing traumatic memories. Finally, according to Stark and Bainbridge, cult movements represent "full-fledged religious organizations that attempt to satisfy all the religious needs of converts" and seek to convert others and grow the organization.<sup>138</sup> Examples of cult movements include Raelians and Krishna Consciousness.

### 2.1.2 Is QAnon a New Religious Movement?

There are many ways to connect religion and conspiracy theories, as both are "typically seen as involving specific patterns of thought and ideas, and that both relate in complicated ways to social power."<sup>139</sup> Belief in QAnon conspiracies has many similarities with religious belief, epistemologically, psychologically, or socially. Epistemologically, religion and conspiracy theory discourse share a common function: both permit the development of symbolic resources that enable humans to define and address the problem of evil. In this vein, Stephen O'Leary writes that defining the problem in conspiracist and religious contexts is not about secular evidence, but about theodicy.<sup>140</sup>

At a psychological level, as Uscinski and Parent state, "conspiracy theories are essentially alarm systems and coping mechanisms to help deal with threats."<sup>141</sup> Conspiracy theories and religions can both be frightening, as they magnify the power of evil and offer a dualistic struggle between light and darkness. Simultaneously, both may provide reassurance to their adherents as they present a world that is meaningful, not arbitrary. The assimilation of threatening events into a religious or conspiratorial scheme offers meaning from chaos by conjuring something to fight against: "Not only are events nonrandom, but the clear identification of evil gives the conspiracist a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose."<sup>142</sup> For both religions and conspiracy theories, this struggle against evil offers a path to salvation, whether personal or societal. Finally, at a social level, belief in QAnon helps create an in-group identity and maintains group cohesion by attributing evil deeds and effects to an out-group while providing adherents with feelings of individual existential importance. Religious communities

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<sup>137</sup> Dawson, *Comprehending cults the sociology of new religious movements*; William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, "Client and Audience Cults in America," *Sociology of Religion* 41, no. 3 (1980).

<sup>138</sup> Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 29.

<sup>139</sup> Robertson, Asprem, and Dyrendal, "Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion."

<sup>140</sup> Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>141</sup> Uscinski and Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*, 130.

<sup>142</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 4.

similarly produce us vs. them dynamics, as members often share beliefs about cosmology and morality.

QAnon, however, differs in an important way from the traditional world religions. As will be discussed in the next section, QAnon filters its understanding of “ultimate concern” by assembling a bricolage of elements from popular culture. The centrality of popular culture in QAnon narratives distinguishes it from the traditional world religions. As such, the current iteration of the QAnon movement is better understood as a new religious movement.

For example, when “Q” posts a new drop, adherents interpret it by juxtaposing it with old QDrops or tweets from Trump to collectively decipher its meaning, in a type of QAnon literary criticism. Following this, they create canonical and apocryphal multimedia and propaganda for others in the community to consume or expand upon. Moreover, “Q” themselves will reference or adapt community-created material in following QDrops. Therefore, popular culture, user-generated content regarding QDrops, forms the basis for the ideological beliefs and rituals of the QAnon movement. These dynamics of interrelated consumption and production have material consequences for an individual’s personal engagement with the movement: “contemporary expressions of religion are likely to be consumed and individualized, and thus have more relevance to the self than to a community and/or congregation.”<sup>143</sup> This feature of QAnon recalls characteristics 1 and 4 in Dawson’s definition of new religious movements.

Let us place QAnon in the context of Dawson’s five characteristics of NRMs:

**(1) More concerned than churches or sects with meeting the needs of their adherents:**

QAnon adherents are offered an interpretive scheme that assimilates confusing life and political events into a relatively simple grand narrative, that of a global pedophilic elite. For example, political events interpreted as losses, such as Trump’s loss in the 2020 election, can be reinterpreted simultaneously as evidence of nefarious actors who rigged the election, as well as part of a broader, longer-term plan by Trump to overthrow the cabal. As described, these processes of meaning making are profoundly social for members of QAnon, as they rely on videos, tweets, posts, and memes to collectively work towards meaning. Accordingly, QAnon also meets social needs for many members, by creating a close-knit sense of community oriented around this secret knowledge.

**(2) Claiming esoteric knowledge that has been lost, repressed, or newly discovered:**

The central feature of QAnon narratives is that followers are being let in on secret military operations via posts by ‘Q.’ In fact, the moniker “Q” refers to the designation for high-level security clearance in the United States. Moreover, followers use other forms of esoteric knowledge, such as intelligence techniques, kabbalah symbolism, gematria, cryptography and gnosis, available only to “true” decoders, to gain access to what “Q” is trying to tell them. QAnon members also believe the esoteric knowledge posted by “Q” is being actively repressed by members of the cabal, who seek to cover up their operations.

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<sup>143</sup> Peter B. Clarke and Peter Beyer, *The World's Religions: Continuities and Transformations* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 489.



**(3) Offering believers an ecstatic or transfiguring experience that is more direct than that provided by traditional modes of religious life:**

The knowledge offered by “Q” to followers ostensibly results in a radical transformation in their ability to accurately perceive reality. Again, the concept of getting ‘red-pilled,’ a term borrowed from *The Matrix* to describe the moment where non-believers become believers and finally understand how the world works, represents a transfiguration of the self by way of new knowledge. Similarly, the oft referred ‘Great Awakening,’ a moment in the future when all the knowledge gathered by “Q” and adherents will be verified and lead to mass conversion, speaks to the epistemological, psychological, and social transformations of QAnon adherents (“[The Extremist Medicine Cabinet: A Guide to Online ‘Pills’](#)” 2019). Finally, references to the ‘Storm,’ mentioned by “Q” and its followers, refers to the apocalyptic moment in which the ‘Deep State’ will be destroyed, and ‘Q,’ along with Donald Trump, will usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity free from the influence of a global satanic cabal.

**(4) Displaying no systematic orientation to the broader society and usually loosely organized:**

As a movement, QAnon is amorphous by nature as there is no leader or hierarchy in a traditional sense. Instead, “Q” acts as an oracle sharing the secret knowledge necessary for decoding information, while Trump serves as a messianic figure that would bring about salvation. The movement’s closest form of leadership has been from influencers in the movement who have gained authority due to their longevity or capacity to interpret QDrops. Since 2020, Republican politicians have shown their ability to influence and amplify QAnon narratives, but they do not act as leaders, nor do they provide any type of guidance for the movement.

**(5) Centered on a charismatic leader and faces disintegration when the leader dies or is discredited:**

This feature is where QAnon is different from other NRMs. As noted, the movement has no official “charismatic” leader, despite the group’s affinity for “Q” and Trump. While “Q” served as the main distributor of top-secret information since 2017, he has not posted since December 2020. Further, Trump himself has never explicitly associated himself with QAnon, so it is difficult to assign the “charismatic” leadership role to him. Furthermore, following Trump’s repeated allegations of election fraud on Twitter, the former president was banned from the platform. In effect, this has limited his capacity to amplify QAnon narratives and communicate support for the movement. Despite all of this, QAnon as a movement remains active. Influencers continue to promulgate conspiratorial narratives for adherents, filling the gap left by “Q” and Trump. Relatedly, followers hold onto hope that “Q” will return to posting, and that Trump will return to power at a later time.

Finally, QAnon adherents have 4953 QDrops to which they can turn and use to reinterpret current and future sociopolitical and geopolitical events. These drops have turned into a quasi-sacred text, representing an authority for determining whether a current event was predicted by “Q” as part of the “plan.” Even without the presence of a leader, these drops act as sacred text that can be interpreted alongside new political and social developments.

### 2.1.3 Conclusion

Notwithstanding the fact that QAnon began as a fringe convergence of conspiracy theories, the evolution of the movement has reached a critical point. As a movement, QAnon is no longer confined to dark corners of the internet, nor is it contained within the United States. In a matter of three years, QAnon has transformed into a potentially violent, extremist religio-political ideology, with no signs of the movement slowing down. The evolution of QAnon clearly meets Lorne Dawson's five characteristics of a new religious movement. Furthermore, it shares many features with other religious movements, with apocalypticism, good-evil dualism, and sacred texts. By classifying QAnon as a new religious movement as opposed to dismissing it as a mere conspiracy theory, we gain significant insight into the movement, its followers, and its goals. In other words, understanding QAnon in this way allows us to take it seriously as a movement with potentially wide-reaching ramifications. Regardless of how absurd some of QAnon's narratives may appear to those outside the movement, members of the group genuinely believe its narratives to be true. This belief poses significant threats to national security, public health (with respect to rampant COVID-19 vaccine conspiricism) and democracy at-large (as evidenced by the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection).

Having classified QAnon as a new religious movement, we can begin to employ analytic frameworks to quantify and qualify QAnon as a social problem worthy of review. There is a legitimate danger in prematurely dismissing QAnon as a simple conspiracy theory, particularly given the overwhelming evidence that QAnon has already produced ideologically motivated extremist violence. By using existing scholarly tools and frameworks that describe the complex dynamics of new religious movements, we can be more prepared to address the potentially far-reaching social and political consequences QAnon poses.

But what type of new religious movement is QAnon? In the next section I will be arguing that QAnon should be understood according to Adam Possamai's concept of hyper-real religion.<sup>144</sup> This classification allows for a more robust analysis of the complex dynamics that animate QAnon. QAnon believers borrow frequently from pieces in popular culture, such as famous films, to produce systems of meaning that explain their world, despite their artificial or fictional origins. In complex, intertwined loops of digital media production and consumption, QAnon followers co-create new interpretations of unfolding political events or QDrops, and with references to popular culture. I will argue that these dynamics distinguish QAnon from the traditional world religions and other new religious movements.

## 2.2 QAnon as a Hyper-Real Religion

In the June 2020 issue of *The Atlantic*, Adrienne LaFrance offered her readers a deep dive into the QAnon movement. The article argues that when surveying QAnon, we are not only examining a conspiracy theory, but we are also observing the birth of a new religion (LaFrance, 2020). LaFrance underscores this argument by highlighting QAnon's apocalypticism, its clear-cut dualism between the forces of good and evil, the study and analysis of QDrops as sacred texts, and the divine mystery of 'Q.' Since its inception, almost no attempt was made to gain any

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<sup>144</sup> I would like to thank Martin Geoffroy, director of the Centre de formation sur les intégrismes religieux, les idéologies politiques et la radicalisation (CEFIR), for pointing me to Possamai's work on hyper-real religion.

interpretative framework of what QAnon is, as the media has fixated on the movement's worldview connected to conspiracy theories. However, there is an important need to move beyond this simplistic understanding of the movement. Over the past 5 years I have found that 237 QAnon adherents have committed violent acts of criminality globally since the inception of the movement, 78 of these adherents committed crimes during the Capitol Hill insurrection on January 6, 2021. Adrienne LaFrance's article on QAnon makes clear that the movement and its believers demand to be taken seriously. Her piece acts as a springboard to ask the question: can the QAnon conspiracy theory be considered a religion? The initial reaction of many to the QAnon conspiracy theory is to discredit or mock it and its adherents. It is important, however, to note that the movement's adherents firmly believe in the theories—even to the detriment of their families and communities. Therefore, in an effort to better understand the QAnon movement as it continues to grow and evolve as an ideologically motivated extremist movement, I will put forward that the current iteration of QAnon would better be perceived as a “hyper-real religion,” which is “a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life.” Hyper-real religion is a term coined by sociologist Adam Possamai to describe a concept rooted in Jean Baudrillard's work on hyper-reality and simulacra. Hyper-real religion is based on the premise that pop culture<sup>145</sup> shapes and creates our actual reality, with examples including, but not limited to: Matrixism, Church of All Worlds, Jediism, etc. As a movement in a constant state of mutation, QAnon clearly blurs the boundaries between popular culture and everyday life. Applying the notion of hyper-real religion permits scholars to move beyond the conspiracy theory elements of QAnon and take the movement seriously, and understand why its members incorporated QAnon into their worldview and their online/offline behaviors.

What this means is that technology and the marketplace of ideas have inverted the traditional relationship between the purveyors of religion and the consumers of religion. Thus, we see religious doctrinal authority (that is, those who can contribute to the religion's teaching) being created by popular culture.<sup>146</sup> This chapter will explore what QAnon is, how it is a hyper-real religion and provide case studies from influencers in the QAnon community, as well as from what I have dubbed the QAnon Ekklesia.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> John Storey defines popular culture as “It is mass-produced for mass consumption. Its audience is a mass of non-discriminating consumers. The culture itself is formulaic, manipulative (to the political right or left, depending on who is doing the analysis). It is a culture that is consumed with brain-numbed and brain numbing passivity.” (Storey, 2018: 8) Storey relies on earlier work on popular culture by John Fiske who defines popular culture as “a site of struggle, but, while accepting the power of the forces of dominance, it focuses rather upon the popular tactics by which these forces are coped with, are evaded, or are resisted. Instead of tracing exclusively the processes of incorporation, it investigates rather the popular vitality and creativity that makes incorporation such a constant necessity. Instead of concentrating on the omnipresent, insidious practices of the dominant ideology, it attempts to understand the everyday resistances and evasions that make that ideology work so hard and insistently to maintain itself and its values. This approach sees popular culture as potentially, and often actually, progressive (though not radical), and it is essentially optimistic, for it finds in the vigour and vitality of the people evidence both of the possibility of social change and of the motivation to drive it.” (Fiske, 1989: 20)

<sup>146</sup> QAnon content is mass-produced for mass consumption by an amorphous mass of non-discriminating consumers. As described by Storey QAnon content is formulaic, manipulative and consumed with brain-numbed and brain-numbing passivity. Ideological authority of the movement is rooted in the mass-produced and mass-approved content. The community determines what is doctrinal, with the help of the figure known as “Q” and QAnon influencers. Though the mass is what ultimately decides and at times goes against what “Q” or QAnon influencers have tried to determine what is doctrinal.

<sup>147</sup> In February 2020, a home congregation ministry called Omega Kingdom Ministry launched an online ministry to recruit members to their movement where QAnon acts as a biblical hermeneutic.

## 2.2.1 QAnon and Popular Culture

There are many ways to connect religion and conspiracy theories as both are “typically seen as involving specific patterns of thought and ideas, and that both relate in complicated ways to social power.”<sup>148</sup> When discussing QAnon, I already proposed that it is a new religious movement, following Dawson’s model. I would further add that QAnon should be understood *as religion* as is proposed by Robertson, Asprem and Dyrendal, which implies the focus is on the similarities QAnon has with religious belief: either epistemologically, psychologically, or socially.<sup>149</sup> The discourse of religion and conspiracy theories are linked by a common function: both permit the development of symbolic resources that enable humans to define and address the problem of evil. Conspiracy theories act as human alarm systems and function as a coping mechanism to help deal with what an individual perceives as a threat. Therefore, conspiracy theories, like religions, can be frightening, as they magnify the power of evil and conceptualize a dualistic struggle between light and darkness; nevertheless, they are both also reassuring, as they present a world that is meaningful rather than arbitrary and often hold up a promise of salvation. “Not only are events nonrandom, but the clear identification of evil gives the conspiracist a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose.”<sup>150</sup> Consequently, as a religious belief, QAnon helps create in-group identity and maintaining group cohesion by attributing evil deeds and effects to an out-group, while providing to adherents a worldview that provides them with existential importance or providing worldviews that make issues of existential importance.

QAnon filters its understanding of “ultimate concern” through popular culture and some aspects of American evangelicalism. The QAnon cosmology (how the world and universe appear, what it looks like, its characteristics, and types of creatures that populate it) and the QAnon anthropology (ideas about human beings, their origin and destiny) are rooted in conspiracy theories, historical facts, and mythical history from film and popular culture. As such, Terry Gilliam’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is recommended by QAnon followers as evidence of the effects of Adrenochrome,<sup>151</sup> *The Matrix* is used to frame the choice to either be a part of the Great Awakening or to remain “asleep”; and the slogan “Where We Go One, We Go All” is from the film *White Squall*, whose official YouTube trailer’s comments section is filled with QAnon followers (the top-rated comment, with over 5,000 up-votes, reads “Thumbs up if Q sent you here”). The prophetic figure of the movement, known only as ‘Q,’ also regularly references movies in their QDrops, which plays a central role in meaning making for the movement as demonstrated in figure 6. Since its inception in 2017, QAnon has evolved beyond a simple conspiracy theory, through its mainstreaming into popular culture, in the media and on the political scene.

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<sup>148</sup> Robertson, Asprem, and Dyrendal, "Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion," 3.

<sup>149</sup> Robertson, Asprem, and Dyrendal, "Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion."

<sup>150</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 4.

<sup>151</sup> Brian Friedberg, "The Dark Virality of a Hollywood Blood-Harvesting Conspiracy," *Wired*, July 31 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-the-dark-virality-of-a-hollywood-blood-harvesting-conspiracy/>.

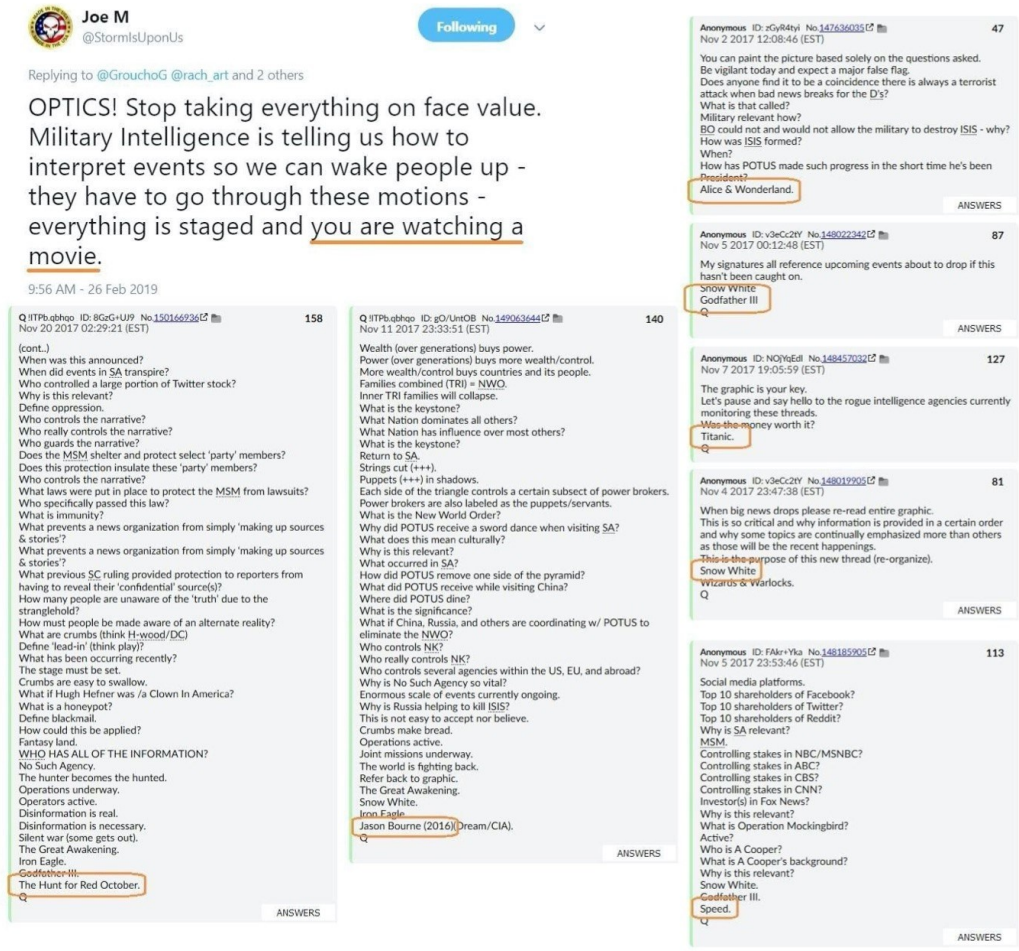


Figure 6 QAnon Influencer Joe M sharing Qdrops referencing popular Films that “Q” deemed important

In *Simulacra and Simulation*,<sup>152</sup> Jean Baudrillard posits that western culture appears to be dominated by simulations where the distinction between object and representation, thing and idea are no longer binding. Mark Poster writes “Baudrillard posits a world constructed out of models or simulacra which have no referent or ground in any "reality" except their own. A simulation is different from a fiction or lie in that it not only presents an absence as a presence, the imaginary as the real, it also undermines any contrast to the real, absorbing the real within itself. Instead of a "real" economy of commodities that is somehow bypassed by an "unreal" myriad of advertising images, Baudrillard now discerns only a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs.”<sup>153</sup>

As Baudrillard described it in the eighties, the fusion of “the social” in media today generates a world of simulations which is immune to rationalist critique. From this theory of hyperreality, sociologist Adam Possamai posited his notion of hyper-real religion Possamai specifically

<sup>152</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>153</sup> Mark Poster, "Introduction," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 6.

describes the realm of interaction of hyper-real religions: spiritualities with significant popular culture content. As Danielle Kirby explains about hyper-real religions:

Generally speaking, beliefs such as Jediism, Matrixism, or various Paganisms tend to exemplify this type of spiritual behaviour, most notably in that they take popular cultural artefacts and integrate them into a spiritual framework. However, implicit in this model is the construction of the spiritual seeker as consumer and/or audience member, receiving the text in a kind of secularized parallel to more traditional religious revelation, albeit received in these cases from the creators of media content rather than a deity.<sup>154</sup>

Given the parallels between conspiracy theories and religion,<sup>155</sup> QAnon as a hyper-real religion is not an odd concept. David Chidester in his book *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*, argued that popular culture is not only permeated by religion, but popular culture essentially embodies the characteristics and roles of faith by their mutual mimetic play method. Both religion and pop culture play with what it means to be human and to be part of a community, to possess a body, and to have desires.<sup>156</sup> Both are “an arena of human activity marked by the concerns of the transcendent, the sacred, the ultimate—concerns that enable people to experiment with what it means to be human.”<sup>157</sup>

QAnon can be viewed/analyzed as a hyper-real religion, whereby its adherents consume and construct meaning from QDrops, redefining themselves in society. QAnon adherents are not passive readers, however, they are also content creators who generate memes, videos, texts, music, films, and social media content, which in turn feeds and generates ‘Q.’ “This new vernacular culture encourages broad participation, grassroots creativity, and a bartering or gift economy. This is what happens when consumers take media into their own hands.”<sup>158</sup> An example of this is when “Q” posts a new drop, QAnon adherents interact with it and interpret it, they refer to old QDrops or Tweets from the former president to discover its meaning. From there they create YouTube videos, Twitter threads, Facebook posts, blog posts, livestreams, memes, etc. for others in the community to consume and expand upon. Additionally, “Q” itself will reference or adapt community created material to the next drops. This echoes Possamai who explains that hyper-real religions provide inspiration for believers/ consumers “contemporary expressions of religion [which] are likely to be consumed and individualized, and thus have more relevance to the self than to a community and/or congregation.”<sup>159</sup> The QAnon movement was born of a conspiracy theory, which posits that a “Deep State” cabal— of satanic pedophile global elites—responsible for all the evil in the world, and combines to it Christian millennialism, New Age self-transformation, political populism and pop culture. Since its inception, the media has fixated on the movement’s worldview connected to conspiracy theories; however, there is an

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<sup>154</sup> Danielle Kirby, "Occultural Bricolage and Popular Culture: Remix and Art in Discordianism, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple," in *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion (2012), 41.

<sup>155</sup> Dyrendal, "Conspiracy Theories and New Religious Movements. "; Dyrendal, Asprem, and Robertson, "Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Religion(s): What we are Talking about, and Why it is Important. "; Robertson, Asprem, and Dyrendal, "Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion."

<sup>156</sup> David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: university of california Press, 2005), 1-10.

<sup>157</sup> Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*, 1.

<sup>158</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 136.

<sup>159</sup> Clarke and Beyer, *The World's Religions: Continuities and Transformations*, 489.

important need to move beyond this simplistic understanding of the movement. The insurrection of January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 is a stark example of taking an ideological movement like QAnon seriously especially in the context of how the movement has evolved into an ideologically motivated extremist movement.

Entrenched in American socio-political culture, QAnon is affected by the significance of American Christianity.<sup>160</sup> QAnon is in principle a conspiracy theory, that has adopted and integrated Christian elements into forming its unique worldview. Theologically, QAnon is rooted in some aspects of American evangelicalism, the religious right and neo-charismatic movements developed in the 1970s and 1980s—specifically theology involving a worldwide cabal that controlled governments and aimed to control the freedoms of people through technology, medicine, and liberalism.<sup>161</sup> Additionally, QAnon has reworked elements of the Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) panic (aka “satanic panic”) that originated in the U.S. in the 80s. SRA was the belief that a global network of elites was breeding and kidnapping children for the purposes of pornography, sex trafficking, and Satanic ritual sacrifice.

## 2.2.2 Qvangelicals

The conspiracy narratives of QAnon mesh well with the more evangelical elements, which already resonate strongly within the socio-political environment of the United States. Philip Gonzalez has examined how fundamentalists and neo-charismatics in the United States are seeking to eventually replace democratic pluralism with a theocracy,<sup>162</sup> while Anna Merlan showed how conspiracy theories find resonance with an American population in light of the socio-political environment.<sup>163</sup> As social polarization increased throughout 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the US election, the erosion of trust in the government has created a fertile ground for conspiracy theories the Christian and political right as Merlan and Gonzalez cover in their works. The idiosyncratic combination of religion, politics, and American apocalypticism highlights the bricolage of conspiracy theories described by Michael Barkun.<sup>164</sup> This apocalyptic, anti-democratic and anti-establishment desire of a segment of the United States population finds resonance with QAnon, who are also seeking to replace the “Deep State” and impose their own golden age. However, it goes beyond just the United States. QAnon adherents see that the world is at war with an invisible enemy, the apocalyptic battle between the forces of good and evil, which can refer simultaneously to the invisible “Deep State” and a larger spiritual battle between good and evil. This further fits within the prophetic narrative QAnon adherents have been driving since 2017.

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<sup>160</sup> Mark A Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001); Mark A. Noll, *One Nation Under God?: Christian Faith & Political Action in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>161</sup> Susan Friend Hardin, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); Matthew Avery Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Boston: Bedford, 2013); Randal Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010); John Weaver, *The New Apostolic Reformation: History of a Modern Charismatic Movement* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2016); Philippe Gonzalez, *Que ton règne vienne : des évangéliques tentés par le pouvoir absolu* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2014).

<sup>162</sup> Gonzalez, *Que ton règne vienne : des évangéliques tentés par le pouvoir absolu*.

<sup>163</sup> Anna Merlan, *Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and Their Surprising Rise to Power* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019).

<sup>164</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 15-38.

Based on the Twitter social media analytics I have conducted, the biblical reference to Ephesians 6:10-18 was the most shared verse among QAnon adherents between July 2018 and July 2020, having been shared 59,217 times.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. (Ephesians 6:10-18)

This biblical passage took on a whole new meaning during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic—for QAnon as well as certain evangelical communities and pastors—given the verse's apparent condemnation of governments. QAnon's reaction to the pandemic used the language of spiritual warfare, especially when addressing conspiracy theories surrounding 5G,<sup>165</sup> ID2020,<sup>166</sup> Event 201,<sup>167</sup> “vaccines and the Mark of the Beast,”<sup>168</sup> HR 6666,<sup>169</sup> etc. At times “Q” uses the Bible as

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<sup>165</sup> One of the most prominent theories in this cluster is the idea that the launch of 5G in China is the source of the coronavirus. The conspiracy theory is that 5G is a 60-gigahertz wave which, according to one post on Telegram, “prevents oxygen transfer from your lungs to red blood cells creating ‘flu like symptoms’. 5G towers give radiation poisoning or electromagnetic hypersensitivity”. According to Full Fact, the initial rumours claimed that Wuhan was the first Chinese city to roll out 5G in August 2019 as a beta test, and 5G was launched on November 1 across China. As the launch of 5G in China coincided with the appearance of COVID-19, the conflation of the two contributed to broader anti-establishment and anti-government narratives.

<sup>166</sup> ID2020, or the Digital Identity Alliance, is a 501c3 non-profit funded by a diverse range of foundations and corporate sponsors — including Microsoft and the Gates-funded vaccine non-profit GAVI — that provides grants for practical research into the real-world application of digital identities. One of these projects was the “quantum dot tattoos in vaccines” that could be used to identify the immunization status of infants. This project is that birthed the COVID-19 conspiracy theory, which claimed Bill Gates wants to microchip the world with the coronavirus vaccine.

<sup>167</sup> According to the events website “The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in partnership with the World Economic Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation hosted Event 201, a high-level pandemic exercise on October 18, 2019, in New York, NY. The exercise illustrated areas where public/private partnerships will be necessary during the response to a severe pandemic in order to diminish large-scale economic and societal consequences.” See Center for Health and Security, “Event201”, <https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201/>, accessed July 2020. This event has been used by conspiracy theorists (QAnon among them) to craft a narrative that the release of COVID-19 was planned by Bill Gates and other *Global Elites* in an attempt at controlling the global population.

<sup>168</sup> One example cited is that of pastor Ronnie Hapton who stated “They’re gonna come up with a vaccine and in that vaccine everybody is gonna have to take it ... and inside of that vaccine there’s going to be some type of electronic computer device that’s gonna put some type of chip in you and maybe even have some mood, mind-altering circumstances ... and they’re saying that the chip would be the mark of the beast.”

<sup>169</sup> The conspiracy theory here is that H.R. 6666 — the COVID-19 Testing, Reaching, And Contacting Everyone (TRACE) Act — is a “basis” for a purported “tracking project” by Bill Gates. The bill outlines a \$100 billion fund to be managed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to fund contact tracing efforts across the country. Some QAnon believers and Evangelicals perceived the ominous 6666 as a reference to the mark of the beast in the Book of Revelation, as demonstrated by this QVangelical podcast (QAnon Evangelicals). See JD Rucker, “HR 6666, the TRACE Act, is as bad as it sounds and could actually become law” <https://noqreport.com/2020/05/12/hr-6666-the-trace-act-is-as-bad-as-it-sounds-and-could-actually-become-law/>, accessed July 2020.



a hermeneutical lens to explore and explain the maligned forces in the conspiracy narratives of the movement. “Q” also has adopted the language of spiritual warfare. René Holvast stated that spiritual warfare is the “concept of a dualistic war between good and evil. It may also refer to a movement among evangelicals with a special interest in one or a few of the many forms of expression of this concept.”<sup>170</sup> John Weaver further writes that “while technically spiritual warfare is a concern of all evangelical Christians, the doctrine is much more emphasized in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles than elsewhere. Within these circles, the belief that demons are literally battling Christians (or sometimes angels) is common.”<sup>171</sup> In his drops regularly citing Ephesians 6:10-18 (the armor of God), “Q” has also referenced 2 Thessalonians 3:3,<sup>172</sup> Psalm 46:1,<sup>173</sup> and Matthew 6:13.<sup>174</sup> The language of spiritual warfare has found resonance with QAnon followers in the US and Canada in particular, as well as in some parts of Europe and Australia.<sup>175</sup>

David Hayes, who is a Christian author better known as the “Praying Medic” on social media, is “one of the leading proponents of the QAnon conspiracy theory and his videos promoting and explaining QAnon’s cryptic postings have racked up hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube.”<sup>176</sup> Hayes has a massive social media following with 370,000 followers on YouTube and Twitter and has also been retweeted by former President Trump.

Hayes uses QAnon as an apocalyptic hermeneutic. In a 2019 Periscope stream,<sup>177</sup> Hayes claimed that Christians will have to reconsider their interpretation of the End Times, as former President Trump is on the brink of establishing an actual utopia on earth. He goes on to state that “if Trump manages to get rid of the Deep State, the Rothschilds, George Soros, and all of the people that are funding wars, then if Trump manages to destroy this globalist agenda, he is going to destroy the New World Order.” He further states that “I think Trump’s presidency should make every person go back to the Bible and read the prophetic books—Daniel, the book of Revelation—and get a different understanding because if [Trump] takes down the Deep State, if he destroys the globalist agenda, if he gets rid of the Rothschilds and all of these corrupt people, we have a completely different system.”

In his analysis of QDrops, Hayes regularly portrays the battle between QAnon and the “Deep State” as QAnon battling against Satanic forces, which he characterizes as spiritual warfare. In example, Hayes in a March 14<sup>th</sup> (year?) YouTube video<sup>178</sup> discusses how he has the capacity to tell demons to go away by “exercising authority & commanding them to leave.” He further goes on to say that “like Peter did with his mother when she was sick, you can exercise authority over

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<sup>170</sup> René Holvast, *Spiritual Mapping in the United States and Argentina, 1989-2005: A Geography of Fear* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 6.

<sup>171</sup> Weaver, *The New Apostolic Reformation: History of a Modern Charismatic Movement*, 12.

<sup>172</sup> But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.

<sup>173</sup> God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

<sup>174</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one

<sup>175</sup> More secular societies such as France, Quebec, Germany, Japan, Korea, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Czech Republic have found less of a resonance with the language of spiritual warfare.

<sup>176</sup> Kyle Mantyla, “Dave Hayes: Trump Is Locked in a Literal Fight to the Death With the Deep State,” *Right Wing Watch* 2019, <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/dave-hayes-trump-is-locked-in-a-literal-fight-to-the-death-with-the-deep-state/>.

<sup>177</sup> Prayingmedic “An Avalanche of Information Is Coming” June 1, 2020 Periscope live stream, <https://www.pscp.tv/w/1ZkJzrWrdaoJv>, accessed July 2020.

<sup>178</sup> Prayingmedic, “Supernatural Saturday March 14, 2020 - The Not So Audible Voice of God”, March 14, 2020 YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHT-uJOJIHI>, accessed July 2020.

a disease like this virus (i.e., COVID-19) and command it to leave.” In this video he equates the virus to the “spirit of pain” which is why it can be exorcised with prayer. In this video but also on his social media at the same time, Hayes used this theological framework to promote a narrative that QAnon adherents “should not fear the disease”, and that QAnon adherents may not be affected by COVID-19 as this is spiritual warfare and only those who have not been chosen by God will be affected by this disease.

Mark Taylor—the so-called firefighter prophet—is another example of a QAnon influencer who not only uses the language of spiritual warfare and apocalypticism, but also uses QAnon as a hermeneutical device. Mark Taylor, about whom Liberty University made a movie in 2018, is an ardent believer in the QAnon conspiracy theory. On March 9, 2020, Mark Taylor appeared on Monday Spiritual Smackdown with host Christopher McDonald<sup>179</sup> to speak about the coronavirus. In the video Taylor states that “This is what this show was designed to do from the very beginning from the onset was to educate people, to get people up to speed as to where God was going with this and so now we are getting into the heat of the battle here guys we’re coming to the heat of this thing.”<sup>180</sup> Taylor perceives his ministry as a means of equipping his followers to (a) bring about social change for the kingdom of God and (b) prepare them for the harvest (a cleansing). This fits squarely into the QAnon theology, which in Taylor’s case blends QAnon popular culture with his “dominionist” beliefs.

Taylor’s explanation in the video would indicate that he perceives the “battle” and “fight” as both spiritual and physical. On March 10 (year?), Andy Beshear—Kentucky’s Democratic Governor—argued for abortion clinics to stay open during the COVID-19 pandemic. Taylor in response stated “Here is proof of why the demonic DS [Deep State] wants to keep the abortions going at this time. They have to have sacrifices to empower their God Baal for the fight ahead. Make no mistake this is a spiritual battle of epic and historic proportions. We will win!”<sup>181</sup> For Taylor there appears to be very little distinction between “God is in control” and the oft-used QAnon maxim “Patriots are in control,” and there is even less distinction between God’s plan, the plans of ‘Q,’ and Trump’s plan. Mark Taylor has even called Donald Trump a prophet<sup>182</sup> “who has such a high level of discernment” and he is gifted with many prophetic gifts “who is ten moves ahead of everyone”. Ultimately, all these plans are for the realization of the Kingdom of God on Earth. Whether this new golden age is secular or heavenly, the end will be achieved apocalyptically through “Q” and Trump.

### 2.2.3 A Case Study in QAnon as a Hyper-Real Religion: QAnon Ekklesia

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<sup>179</sup> Christopher McDonald and Mark Taylor, “Monday Spiritual Smackdown With Mark Taylor - Coronavirus, The Markets, And Oil- REPLAY” *The McFiles Network*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwAkj7t4mkM>, accessed July 2020.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. Author’s transcription from the YouTube video.

<sup>181</sup> Mark Taylor, “Twitter Post”, March 20, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200605115923/https://twitter.com/patton6966/status/1241047353215406083>, accessed July 2020.

<sup>182</sup> RightWingWatch “Twitter Post”, June 17, 2020 <https://twitter.com/RightWingWatch/status/1273261929105154049>, accessed July 2020.

There is also evidence of a formalized QAnon religion, where for QAnon adherents, the Bible is used to explain QAnon conspiracy theories and, in turn, these same conspiracies are used as to interpret the bible. This is the case for Omega Kingdom Ministries (OKM), which I have dubbed the QAnon church. OKM is part of a network of independent congregations (or ekklesia) called Home Congregations Worldwide (HCW);<sup>183</sup> the spiritual adviser for HCW is Mark Taylor, the so-called firefighter prophet. Though they have been around for some time, the QAnon church surfaced online in February 2020 when OKM started offering online sessions on Zoom called “eQuipping the Ekklesia,” which are now livestreamed on YouTube each Sunday because of the movement’s growth. According to the pastoral leader, Russ Wagner, eQuipping the Ekklesia is rooted in Acts 20:20 where Paul met with the elders of the ekklesia and said, “you know how I have taught you in public meetings in your homes and I have not held back anything from you to help you grow.”<sup>184</sup>

Based on the teachings of OKM and the products offered on the HCW website, they are theologically rooted in Dominionism — a theology that believes countries, including the United States, should be governed by Christian biblical law – and QAnon.<sup>185</sup> When first visiting the HCW websites (which hosts Omega Kingdom Ministries), it has the hallmarks of home congregations that are widespread across the US. What the websites present is a veneer of evangelicalism with hints of its association to QAnon. It is in watching the OKM videos that you realize the hermeneutic is that of QAnon. On its website, HCW references the Seven Mountains of Societal Influence.<sup>186</sup> Seven Mountains utilizes the language of “Dominionism.” Its goal is to attain sociopolitical and economic transformation through the gospel of Jesus in what it calls the seven mountains or spheres of society: religion, family, education, government, media, entertainment, and business.<sup>187</sup> This blends QAnon’s apocalyptic desire to destroy society controlled by the “Deep State” with the need to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The OKM services exhibit the following elements: (1) the first hour is dedicated to a Bible study—whereby the Bible is used to interpret QAnon conspiracy narratives; QAnon has become a hermeneutical lens through which to interpret the world; (2) following the Bible study, Russ Wagner’s pastoral partner Kevin Bushey (a Retired Navy colonel) spends the next 60 minutes performing a “Q military intelligence update,” where he presents the congregants with the most recent news in the QAnon world, using QAnon teachings to interpret biblical passages or prophecies.

As Russ Wagner states at the start of each service “the objective of eQuipping the Ekklesia is to open people’s eyes and help them wake up,” this process is referred to as *red pilling* in QAnon. The red pill, a reference taken from The Matrix films, is the most basic of pills, and it can refer to almost any kind of political awakening. Additionally, Bushey and Wagner aim at training

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<sup>183</sup> Home Congregation Worldwide, “Website”, <https://homecongregations.org/>, accessed July 2020.

<sup>184</sup> This is the verbatim statement that Russ Wagner makes at the start of most of the online streams, for the sake of clarity the author has included the NIV verse “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.”

<sup>185</sup> The resource page of Home Congregations Worldwide links to the QAnon documentary *Fall of the Cabal*, links to QAnon “red pilling” videos on YouTube and an *Edge of Wonder* series on “The Deep State Cult”. QAnon plays a central Theological role in OKM.

<sup>186</sup> Home Congregation Worldwide, “The Seven Mountains of Societal Influence,” <https://homecongregations.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Seven-Mountains-of-Societal-Influence.pdf>, accessed July 2020.

<sup>187</sup> Archive PDF, shared on their now deleted website, by Omega Kingdom Ministry about the seven mountains of societal influencer <https://archive.org/details/omega-kingdom-ministry-the-seven-mountains-of-societal-influence>

congregants to form their own home congregations and grow the movement. Currently, they claim to have forty coaches that have an “Ekklesia” of their own, as well as overseas headquarters in Australia, Cambodia, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany & Japan.<sup>188</sup> OKM instructs their adherents to stop listening to any media — even Fox News — because they are all “Luciferian.” What OKM provides instead is a road map to QAnon radicalization comprised of QAnon YouTube channels for the congregation’s daily media diet, the QMap website that lists new QAnon drops and conspiracy theories and a list of QAnon influencers/researchers/journalists to follow.

Most of these adherents are not new to the concepts of “Dominionism” or home congregations, but they are new to QAnon. To introduce them to QAnon, for the first 13 weeks of their services, OKM used the documentary *Fall of the Cabal*—a film by Dutch QAnon conspiracy theorist Jane Ossebaard—as part of their liturgical material. Russ and Kevin ask their followers to watch a part of the documentary prior to each Sunday, used as the background to explain part of QAnon and supplemented with biblical teaching, with the purpose of introducing new adherents to QAnon. Wagner and Bushey also leverage Mark Taylor’s prophecies to confirm that QAnon is part of God’s plan, as stated by Wagner in a March 29 (2020?) service: “Here is my view what is happening in the Q movement, [*QAnon*] is the Plan of God. Mark [*Taylor*] has said so even his prophecies and Q drops are coming right along Mark’s prophecies and are realizing prophecy, it’s not just ‘the plan’ but it is the plan of God.”

In the Passover service on April 5, 2020,<sup>189</sup> Wagner leverages the Passover story that occurs in the Old Testament to explain what is happening in April with the COVID-19 pandemic according to QDrops.<sup>190</sup> Wagner and Bushey interpret the biblical concept of the Passover from the lens of “Q” using QAnon tropes. As the April 5, 2020 Bible study progresses, the narrative shifts further towards QAnon conspiracies and ending with direct quotes of QDrops.<sup>191</sup> At times QAnon conspiracies are what drive the Sunday services. The April 26, 2020 meeting was inspired by adherents who had been asking about the biblical validity of “Project Looking Glass,”<sup>192</sup> and concerned with whether the Bible says anything about time travel. Adherents were asking this question, as it is a topic mentioned in QDrop 3585<sup>193</sup>. QAnon influencers and the community of adherents had interpreted the Qdrop to mean that former President Trump and Q-team had access to time travel through “Project Looking Glass” and this was how they were able to stay ahead of the “Deep State”, as they know what will happen in the future. For those who were part of OKM, they were concerned about the biblical validity of time travel, which in turn could have put in doubt the credibility of “Q” for this community. This is something that Bushey and Wagner had to address in their weekly service. In the Bible study section,<sup>194</sup> Wagner claims there is a biblical foundation for time travel citing biblical passages from 1 Kings 18:45-46,

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<sup>188</sup> Home Congregation Worldwide, “Overseas Training Centers,” <https://homecongregations.org/meet-our-team/overseas-training-centers/>, accessed July 2020.

<sup>189</sup> Omega Kingdom Ministry, “Passover II,” April 5, 2020, <https://omegakingdomministry.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Passover-II.pdf>, accessed July 2020.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid. Slides 3, 4, 7, 9.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid. Slides 13, 16, 17.

<sup>192</sup> Conspiracy theory about a type of technology that the government own which permits time travel.

<sup>193</sup> See Qdrop 3585 <https://8kun.top/qresearch/res/7307489.html#7352963>

<sup>194</sup> Omega Kingdom Ministry, “Is Time Travel In The Bible? & Bending The Timeline”, April 26, 2020, <https://omegakingdomministry.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Time-Travel-The-Bible.pdf>, accessed July 2020.

Ezekiel 40:1-4, Acts 8:39-40 and Revelation 4:1-4.<sup>195</sup> In the Q military intel portion,<sup>196</sup> Bushey begins with the “biblical foundation” of time travel,<sup>197</sup> then adherents are plunged into the QAnon rabbit hole and propaganda. Adherents are not spoon-fed with easy to digest conspiratorial narratives; rather, they are shown full QAnon infographics, QDrops and YouTube videos to reinforce the content presented to them (figure 7).

Additionally, like many religious organizations, OKM also runs outreach ministries. In a May 10, 2020 service, Wagner announced that OKM launched a *Home 4 Kids*<sup>198</sup> ministry and is currently raising funds for a location called Reclamation Ranch. Wagner describes this Reclamation Ranch as a safe place for children rescued after being held underground by the “Deep State.” Children at risk is an ongoing theme in many QAnon conspiracy theories, and OKM is looking to adopt, foster and rescue children who have been through satanic ritual abuse at the hands of the “Deep State.” To achieve its goal, OKM had initially planned to use their Reclamation Ranch to house all the rescued children and provide them with the spiritual and psychological healing they needed to rehabilitate them from their demonic ritualistic abuse. Weeks prior, on April 19, 2020, Russ stated that OKM were looking for home social workers, mental health experts, and schoolteachers as they do not want these rescued kids in the public education system. Homeschooling was their preferred approach as public institutions “is where they get brainwashed into socialism, and anti-American thinking like transgenderism.”

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid. Slides 4, 5, 6, 7.

<sup>196</sup> Omega Kingdom Ministry, “Q Analysis- Week of April 19-26, 2020,” April 26, 2020, <https://omegakingdomministry.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Q-Analysis-4-26-20.pdf>, accessed July 2020.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. Slides 4, 5.

<sup>198</sup> According to their website “Omega Kingdom Ministry Homes 4 Kids foster care vision is to provide training required by states in the United States, US territories and the Nations. Our ministry is ordained to provide faith-based training to parents ministering to abused kids in Christian based settings for spiritual, physical, mental healing and socialization.” Omega Kingdom ministries, “Welcome to Home 4 Kids,” <https://omegakingdomministry.org/homes4kids/>, accessed July 2020.

**QAnon Researcher posted:**

The infographic is a complex web of interconnected text and images. At the top, it reads "Through the Looking Glass - Alice Portal - The Living Moon" with a URL to "theivingmoon.com". Below this, it states "8 Feb 2008 - CERN the European Organization for Nuclear Research, is one of the ... The Large Hadron Collider is a large physics project buried 100 metres underground." This is linked to "42 is the MASONS # & pyramid angles" and an image of a pyramid. Other sections include "Iron filings experiment using magnets & sound" with an image of an eye and a maze, "POPE revealing Stargate wormhole secret" with an image of Pope Francis, and "CERN & its secret tunnels extend under Switzerland and France, FISA is code for the STARGATE used to reach MARS". A central text box explains that when a stargate is activated, one can travel "ONLY ONE WAY" during the connection, similar to a telephone call, and that return travel is achieved by dialing the Earth stargate's number. It also mentions that matter can be de-materialized by sound waves and re-materialized elsewhere. At the bottom, it shows "EARTH GATE" and "MARS GATE" with a "3.2 SECOND journey" and a "forced narrative" that an activated stargate opening looks like "swamp GAS".

**Researcher is connecting PLG with Portals, stargates, wormholes, space/time travel, CERN, and more**

**Our Disclaimer:** We don't claim full knowledge of the universe, we dig for crumbs of truth, read God's Word, and ask for discernment. You should do the same...

**Additional Resources:**

**John in God's Time Traveling Machine:** <https://youtu.be/F8Fad1shUm0>

Figure 7 An example of a QAnon infographic decoding QDrops used in an OKM service

After meeting with their lawyers, however, Russ stated that OKM were changing their trajectory from the foster a care plan:

“What we are looking at right now is that a church in the USA is allowed to have a home for kids for abused kids (maximum of 6) that are being cared for by the church. For example, I have a church home, I have 6 kids in that home. Since it falls under OKM I do not have to report to my city, county, state or to the federal government because it is a church entity and a right under the 1<sup>st</sup> amendment<sup>199</sup> to do this. Other members under

<sup>199</sup> The legal precedent OKM lawyers are referring to is the case of Ex Parte Roloff V. Texas in 1974., Supreme Court of Texas Decision,

OKM can open up their home for up to 6 kids and be under the umbrella of OKM. This saves us [OKM] from having to meet the requirements for training, education, inspections, etc. to have a state licensed facility. With this being under the covering of OKM none of this is required.”

This means OKM is planning to have willing home congregations under their banner take in up to 6 kids that “have been saved from Deep State luxuriance ritualistic abuse”. The objective of *Home 4 Kids* is to rehabilitate and educate them in the “Ekklesia” fashion without the knowledge or supervision of the US government. For OKM, QAnon teachings have not only blended into its rituals and theology but also into its ministries, as they seek to rehabilitate children which “Q” and former President Trump will be rescuing from the “Deep State.”

## 2.2.4 Conclusion

When considering the QAnon theology present in OKM, but also in Qvangelical milieus, one could make the argument that a QAnon theology is not only influenced by pop culture, but is in fact, deeply rooted in the conception of religion within a hyper-real world. Some might argue that a hyper-real religion is not “real” religion because it is invented, but scholars of religion do not validate or discredit claims of what constitutes “true” religion, because it is true to the people we study. QAnon is about community building, as Amarnath Amarasingam has highlighted, participating in online communities “tends to foster an increased connection to other members of the online community while also solidifying one’s membership in it. As Barkun notes, ‘The validation that comes from seeing one’s beliefs echoed by others provides a sense of connection for otherwise isolated individuals.’”<sup>200</sup> This chapter sought to highlight what QAnon adherents do when dealing with religious beliefs, rather than try to validate the religious message or experience. Religious ideas become routinized over time as believers construct a religion. Therefore, all religions, hyper-real ones included, are socially constructed. QAnon is blatantly invented as it openly uses aspects of popular culture, media, entertainment, American evangelicalism, and conspiracy theories as its basis, which have been organically developed across time and space by a community of believers.

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate the development of QAnon from a conspiracy theory to a hyper-real religion, and how the QAnon religion has “religious” consequences and behavioral impact in the real world. By framing QAnon as a hyper-real religion, this can offer insight on how to analyze and report on the movement, which is critical for journalists, scholars, media outlets, and decision-makers who take QAnon seriously. The year 2020 has highlighted how QAnon is a public health threat,<sup>201</sup> a threat to national security (as will be discussed in

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“Ex parte Roloff,” *Supreme Court of Texas* 510 S.W.2d 913 (1974), <https://law.justia.com/cases/texas/supreme-court/1974/b-4462-0.html>, accessed July 2020.

<sup>200</sup> Amarnath Amarasingam, "Baracknophobia and the Paranoid Style: Visions of Obama as the Antichrist on the World Wide Web," in *Network Apocalypse: Visions of the End in an Age of Internet Media* ed. Robert Glenn Howard (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 117.

<sup>201</sup> Marc-André Argentino, "QAnon conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic are a public health threat," *The Conversation Canda*, April 8 2020, <https://theconversation.com/qanon-conspiracy-theories-about-the-coronavirus-pandemic-are-a-public-health-threat-135515>.

Chapter 4, and a threat to democratic institutions.<sup>202</sup> Additionally, the mainstreaming of QAnon into popular culture has shifted the balance of power and supported the evolution of the movement from simple conspiracy theory to hyper-real religion. As Travis View stated on PBS's *The Open Mind*: "we're living in an age where conspiracy theories are promoted at the highest levels of power, when it wasn't that long-ago conspiracy theories were the pastime of the powerless."<sup>203</sup>

One core activity of QAnon is the attempt to delineate and explain evil; it is about theodicy, not facts. QAnon offers its adherents comfort in an uncertain—and unprecedented—age as the movement crowdsources answers to the inexplicable. QAnon becomes the master narrative capable of simply explaining various complex events and providing solace for modern problems: a pandemic, economic uncertainty, political polarization, war, child abuse, etc. The result is a worldview characterized by a sharp distinction between good and evil. The movement accomplishes this by purporting to be empirically relevant. That is, they claim that QDrops are testable by the accumulation of evidence about the observable world in fighting evil. Those who subscribe to QDrops are presented with elaborate productions of evidence to substantiate QAnon's claims, including source citation and other academic techniques. However, their quest for decoding QDrops masks a deeper concern: the more sweeping a conspiracy theory's claims, the less relevant evidence becomes—notwithstanding the insistence that QAnon is empirically sound. At its heart, QAnon is non-falsifiable. No matter how much evidence journalists, academics, and civil society offer as a counter to the claims promoted by the movement, belief in QAnon as the source of truth is a matter of faith rather than proof.

Rather than asking questions like, *how can people believe in QAnon when so many of its claims fly in the face of facts?* Researchers should be instead asking, *what are QAnon adherents doing with their belief system?* QAnon believers have committed acts of violence in response to the movement's conspiracy theories. Elected officials or those campaigning for political office have campaigned on a QAnon platform or have leveraged its adherents as a constituency and electoral pool. Those studying and reporting on the movement need to move beyond viewing it as a mere conspiracy theory; QAnon has grown beyond that. We are and have witnessed the birth of a hyper-real religion. QAnon as a belief system only appears to be dependent on Donald Trump's presidency and his ability to remain in power. Whether we will be speaking of future or former President Trump, the figure known as "Q" will likely fuel the movement for a long time to come.

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<sup>202</sup> Marc-André Argentino, "QAnon conspiracy theory followers step out of the shadows and may be headed to Congress," (The Conversation Canada), July 8 2020, <https://theconversation.com/qanon-conspiracy-theory-followers-step-out-of-the-shadows-and-may-be-headed-to-congress-141581>; Will Sommer, "GOPers Are Trying to Recruit QAnon Voters And Using This YouTube Show to Do It," *The Daily Beast*, July 16 2020; Alex Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for state legislatures in 2020," *Media Matters for America*, July 27 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/here-are-qanon-supporters-running-state-legislatures-2020>; Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2022.," Alex Kaplan, "Multiple people seeking to run state elections are connected to QAnon," *Media Matters*, August 16 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/multiple-people-seeking-run-state-elections-are-connected-qanon>; Alex Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2022," *Media Matters*, June 2 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/here-are-qanon-supporters-running-congress-2022>; Alex Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for governor in 2021 and 2022," *Media Matters*, August 19 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/here-are-qanon-supporters-running-governor-2021-and-2022>.

<sup>203</sup> Travis View, "The Cult of QAnon," interview by Alexander Heffner, *The Open Mind*, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/video/the-cult-of-qanon-zvxtct/>.



“Q” will continue to claim special insights, knowledge, and frame things for QAnon adherents in terms of their enemies’ alleged ambitions.

No matter the outcome and what the future may hold, in categorizing QAnon as a hyper-real religion rather than a decentralized grouping of conspiracy theorists, it provides an analytical framework to quantify and qualify QAnon-inspired acts of violence as ideologically motivated violent extremism. By considering QAnon as a hyper-real religion, it becomes possible to frame how the movement has found resonance not only within the American electoral system, but with populists around the globe. By framing QAnon as a religion—in particular, a hyper-real religion—we create a framework that helps us better study, report and understand QAnon.

## 2.3 QAnon and the Failure of Prophecy

Core to the QAnon belief is that “Q” along with a team of white hats<sup>204</sup> from military intelligence were working with former-President Trump to take down the “Deep State.” Therefore, “Q” had access not only to military intelligence, but also to military technology like “Project Looking Glass” (wormhole technology which permits time travel). Consequently, “Q” and Trump were believed to have access to the best possible information about the present and the future. This is why many of the QDrops are styled as predictions, “Q” being the oracle speaking on behalf of Trump and the military intelligence. All of these were folded into QAnon’s apocalyptic and millenarist worldview. Even long after the last QDrop, QAnon adherents and proselytizers still turn to these “drops” into a form of canonical text which can be reinterpreted in light of present events, echoing the interpretations of other sacred texts in religions around the world.

Inevitably, QAnon prophecies have failed, beginning with the first QDrop which predicted the arrest of Hillary Clinton in October 2017. Out of 4953 QDrops, which contains hundreds of prophetic predictions, none ever came to fruition. Nevertheless, the QAnon movement and its ideology have survived and thrived through the failure of prophecy, not only through the reinterpretation of predictions each time, but also by the creation of new prophecies adapted to changing geo- and sociopolitical events that take place at the time of the prophecy’s failed realisation. This is an important feature of the movement which cannot be overlooked.

Many adherents of the QAnon worldview eagerly anticipate earth-shattering future events that will completely change the world, from “the Storm” (a near-future apocalyptic realisation when members of this evil cabal will be arrested) to the “Great Awakening” (a time when the general population will come to realise they have been lied to for decades). Years of research on millennial movements and how they survive the often-inevitable failures of prophetic utterances has revealed that most movements remain if certain criteria are met. This is the case with QAnon as well.

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<sup>204</sup> Term used to differentiate between a good and a bad hacker.

### 2.3.1 Surviving the failure of prophecy

With the prophetic role played by “Q” and its QDrops, it is unavoidable to point to a the classic work by social psychologists published in 1956: *When Prophecy Fails*.<sup>205</sup> In the book, Festinger and his colleagues provide readers with an account of a small religious group they call “the Seekers,” whose leader, Marion Keech (a pseudonym), predicted the destruction of the entire United States in a great flood on December 21, 1955.

The Seekers, for their part, would be saved from this destruction by aliens who were communicating with Keech telepathically. On December 21, as midnight came and went with no spacecraft, many of the members wept and sat in disbelief. Keech then received a message from the aliens: the apocalypse had been called off. As Festinger and colleagues write, “This little group, sitting all night long, has spread so much goodness and light that the God of the Universe spared the Earth from destruction.”<sup>206</sup>

This last message was exactly what the group needed to hear. While common sense would predict that the organisation would disintegrate and the leader would be abandoned and humiliated in the face of such a clear prophetic failure, this is not what happened. The last word sent to Keech persuaded the Seekers that their efforts had not been in vain; rather, it was their forethought and devotion that had rescued humanity from the apocalypse.

From this case study of the Seekers, Festinger developed what he called the theory of cognitive dissonance. Simply put, the theory claims that individuals are uncomfortable having contradictory beliefs and ideas at the same time, and they are motivated to alleviate this discomfort. It is worth noting that Festinger is not implying that minimising discomfort is a priority. It is not something we want to happen; it is something that will. As Joel Cooper put it, “Festinger’s insistence that cognitive dissonance was like a drive that needed to be reduced implied that people were going to have to find some way of resolving their inconsistencies. People do not just prefer eating over starving; we are driven to eat. Similarly, people who are in the throes of inconsistency in their social life are driven to resolve that inconsistency. How we go about dealing with our inconsistency can be rather ingenious. But, in Festinger’s view, there is little question that it will be done.”<sup>207</sup>

After December 21, the Seekers did something counter-intuitive: they began proselytizing. They sought external confirmation to reinforce their new feeling of consistency after the initial cognitive dissonance was eased by the belief that their efforts had saved the planet. Something that is also found in QAnon.

It is important to note that *When Prophecy Fails* has faced some criticism for its methodology, but as Lorne Dawson points out in *When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists*: “on the whole the record shows that Festinger et al. were right to predict that many groups will survive the failure of prophecy. Why they survive is another matter. The reasons are much more complicated

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<sup>205</sup> Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2009).

<sup>206</sup> Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails*, 169.

<sup>207</sup> Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: 50 Years of a Classic Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 3.

than *When Prophecy Fails* implies.”<sup>208</sup> The challenge with *When Prophecy Fails* is that it is shrouded in ambiguity methodologically; Dawson further highlights that “(f)or some scholars the issue at stake is quite specifically whether groups whose prophecies have failed try to convert others to their beliefs to resolve their dissonance. For others the focal point is more broadly how groups whose prophecies have failed simply survive by whatever means.”<sup>209</sup> Festinger and his colleagues placed a lot of emphasis on proselytization as a key mechanism by which cognitive dissonance is reduced following prophetic failure. But research over the last several decades has added at least two more strategies: rationalization and reaffirmation.

Rationalization is now seen by researchers as the most important factor in whether a group survives prophetic failure. Groups can do this in at least four ways:

1. **Spiritualization:** the group states that what was initially thought of as a visible, real-world occurrence *did happen*, but it was something that took place in the spiritual realm.
2. **Test of Faith:** the group states that the prophecy was never going to happen but is in fact a test of faith: a way for the “divine” to weed out true believers from those unworthy.
3. **Human Error:** the group argues that it is not the case that the prophecy was wrong, but that followers had read the signs incorrectly.
4. **Blame others:** the group argues that they themselves never stated that the prophecy was going to happen, but that this was how outsiders interpreted their statements.<sup>210</sup>

Reaffirmation is the third technique, and it is one that has been utilised by numerous groups in prior studies. In this method, the group dismisses prophecy’s failure and reinforces the group’s value, the advantages of membership, and the significance of their journey on the road to truth.

According to Lorne Dawson, the body of research on failure of prophecy notes that these three strategies are most successful when at least six conditions are present:<sup>211</sup>

1. **In-group social support:** If the desire for and dedication to these methods is shared by others, the urge to proselytize, justify, or reaffirm will, more often than not, take the sting out of a failure of prophesy.
2. **Decisive leadership:** A leader’s rapid, confident, organised, and inventive response is critical to a movement’s survival when faced with the failure of prophecy. As the unique charisma of certain leaders is particularly important in the emergence of prophetic movements, the abdication of such charisma is deadly to these movements. All may be lost if the leader looks to hesitate in befuddlement in the face of failure.

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<sup>208</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, "When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview " *Nova Religio* 1 (1999): 61.

<sup>209</sup> Dawson, "When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview " 61.

<sup>210</sup> Amarasingam and Argentino, "QAnon’s Predictions Haven’t Come True; So How Does the Movement Survive the Failure of Prophecy? ."

<sup>211</sup> Dawson, "When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview " 63.

3. **Sophistication of ideology:** the failure of a prophecy(ies) is unlikely to have a major influence on a group's integrity if specific prophecies are anchored in a wider and more sophisticated collection of beliefs that shape a reasonably complete worldview, sense of mission, and collective identity. This is also due to the fact that the movement will have the ideological resources to quickly create convincing rationalisations. A wider and more rooted repertory of millennial hopes and anxieties may always be submerged inside the current failure.
4. **Vagueness of prophecy:** the prophetic predictions are kept vague enough to be rationalized away, and therefore, safeguard against the possibility of failure.
5. **Ritual framing:** Both the process of preparing for the apocalypse and the process of successfully rationalising a prophetic failure are crucial. The effective ritualization of end-of-the-world occurrences is critical to a group's survival, as rituals are used to not only rationalize the failure but also purify the believers and reaffirm the value of the group.
6. **Organizational factors:** Adaptive methods chosen by organisations and their ability to cope with prophetic disconfirmation are definitely influenced by a variety of organisational variables. Prophetic failure will have varying effects on different types of organisations or networks.

Below are some case studies to show how QAnon followers have coped with the failure of prophecy, as well as to point out that similar mechanisms may be used by followers if additional prophecies fail in the future.

### 2.3.2 When JFK Jr. Did Not Return

John F. Kennedy Jr.'s plane crashed off the shore of Martha's Vineyard in July 1999, killing him and two other passengers. Kennedy's and his fellow passengers' corpses were discovered five days later in the Atlantic Ocean. This is the version of events that most people believe to be correct. In the world of QAnon, however, things went a little differently: JFK Jr. escaped an assassination attempt by the so-called "Deep State" and would soon return to exact revenge and aid Donald Trump in his struggle against a worldwide conspiracy of satanic paedophile elites responsible for all the world's evil.

The fact that JFK Jr. did not appear at a Trump rally on Saturday, October 17, 2020,<sup>212</sup> is just one of many QAnon "prophecies" which has not materialised: Hillary Clinton has not been arrested, high-profile elites have not been killed or sent to Guantanamo Bay, the tens of thousands of

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<sup>212</sup> Mikael Thalen, "QAnon followers are convinced Trump is bringing out JFK Jr. at Saturday rally," *Daily Dot*, October 17 2020, <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/qanon-jfk-jr-trump/>.

sealed indictments have not been released,<sup>213</sup> and the promised Golden Age has not arrived. Despite all of this, the movement persists.

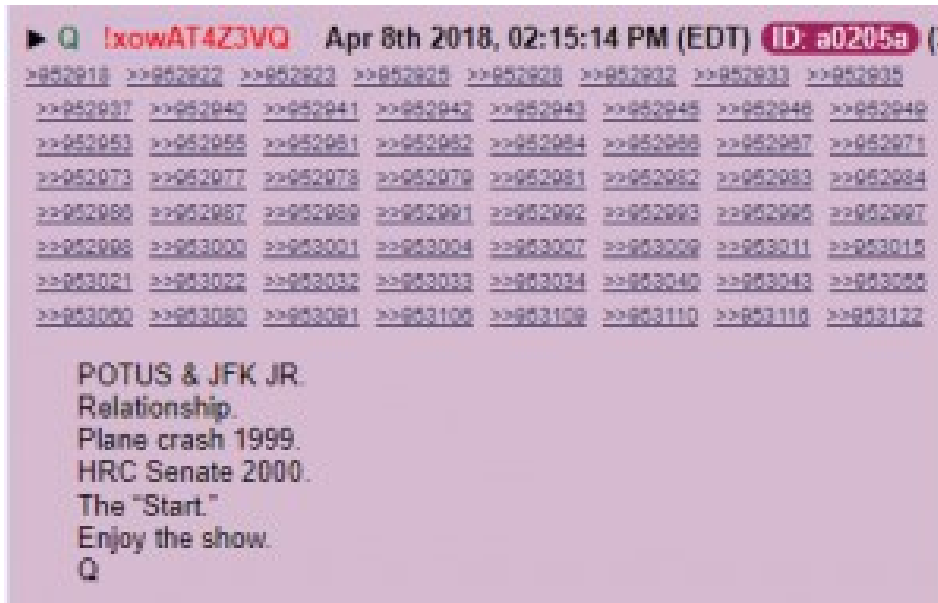


Figure 8 Screenshot of Qdrop 1082, from the 8kun board where “Q” posts (the string of numbers are Q’s previous messages he is replying to), hinting at a link between JFK Jr.’s plane crash in 1999 and Hillary Clinton’s run for Senate in 2000.

In 2018, QAnon followers began to believe that ‘Q,’ whose identity is still unknown, was JFK Jr. himself, following QDrop 1082 (see figure 8), an allusion to the Clinton body count conspiracy,<sup>214</sup> a conspiracy theory emerged in April 2018. Then came another QDrop containing a 1956 memo from the CIA’s public website. Although the CIA paper had nothing to do with the Kennedys, it did mention “guided missiles.” For QAnon followers, this was a suggestion from “Q” that JFK Jr’s plane was shot down with a guided missile. It was done to pave the way for Hillary Clinton’s political career, which began a year after the plane disaster with a candidacy for the United States Senate. While this theory makes no logical sense, considering the fact JFK Jr. was not a politician and never seriously considered becoming one, QAnon adherents believed that the Clintons and the “Deep State” considered him to be a threat worth killing to secure Hillary Clinton’s political career.

<sup>213</sup> QAnon Anonymous, *Episode 47: Sealed Indictments feat Popehat AKA Ken White*, podcast audio, QAnon Anonymous2019, <https://soundcloud.com/qanonanonymous/episode-47-sealed-indictments-feat-popehat-aka-ken-white>.

<sup>214</sup> A decades-old political conspiracy theory, which claims that Bill and Hillary Clinton have quietly had killed people who possessed incriminating evidence about them.

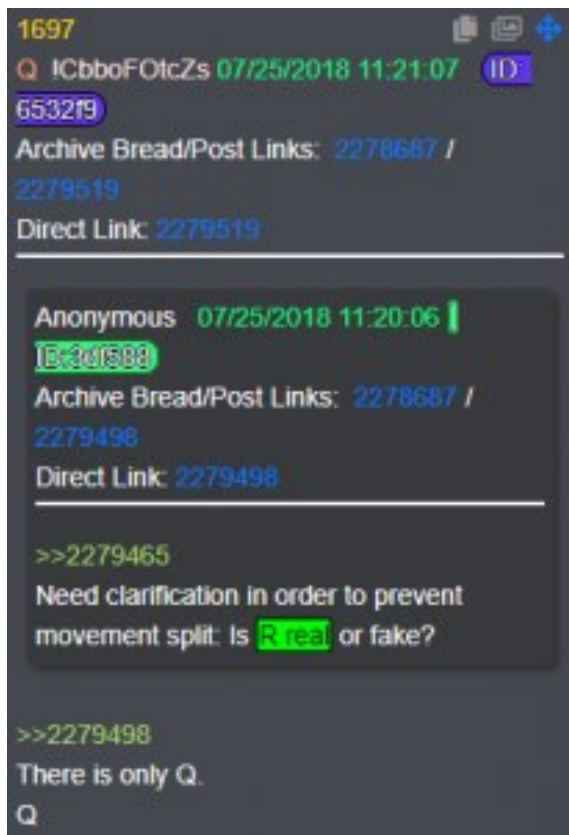


Figure 9 Screenshot of Qdrop 1697, from a Qdrop aggregator Where “Q” repudiates “R.”

The JFK Jr. conspiracy theory gained traction in July 2018 when after a 20-day hiatus between Q posts, an anonymous user known only as ‘R’ began writing in the same style as “Q” about the great fight between the QAnon patriots and the “Deep State.” According to ‘R,’ JFK Jr. was working with Trump to destroy the “Deep State.” “Q” never responded to the allegations made by ‘R,’ but on July 25, 2018, in an 8Chan Q&A, “Q” categorically denied that JFK Jr. was alive (figure 9).

The QAnon community was greatly divided as a result of this. *The Fall Cabal*, an important QAnon documentary, even claims that JFK Jr. is still alive, and that “Q” is only spreading deception to protect ‘R.’ Despite the appearance of two additional QDrops stating that “Q” is not JFK Jr. and that he is clearly deceased, some QAnon members remain unconvinced.

So why has this conspiracy perdured among QAnon adherents, they, who usually latch on religiously to the words of “Q”? As a superconspiracy, QAnon has borrowed from the notion that JFK Jr. is alive and will come out soon, which is a continuation of the belief that his father, President Kennedy, was killed by the “Deep State.” This may be observed in certain QAnon adherents’ beliefs that JFK Jr. is coming to avenge his father’s death. Those who have been victimised by the secret puppet masters of conspiracy theory mythology will receive ultimate justice, according to QAnon. Furthermore, these QAnon members appear to be attracted inexorably to the traditional metaphor of a son reappearing to avenge his father’s death.

In QAnon Telegram chats, after JFK Jr. did not return as predicted on October 17, 2020, the response was varied, but largely fell into the “human error” and “blame others” categories discussed above.

QAnon adherents stated that the JFK Jr. conspiracy theory was a "Deep State" plot that was put in motion to discredit QAnon and the work they are doing. As one post noted: “Anons have gone way off base and they’re using it to make us look stupid. I personally prefer to stick with 3 years’ worth of hard evidence of government corruption and malfeasance on every level...things we CAN prove.” Another post made a similar point, noting, “Q spells it out very clear...stick to info in the drops...They cannot attack the information, because it’s all correct... But they can attack Anons who stray from the dropped content...then they use the faulty and unsubstantiated claims by Anons to discredit Q...” (Figure 10)

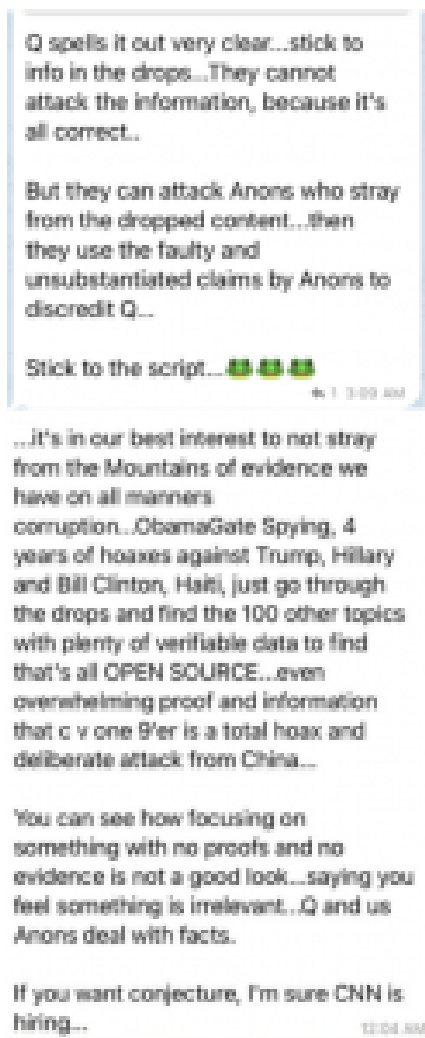


Figure 10 Screenshots from QAnon Telegram Channels reacting to the failure of the JFK Jr. prophecy.

In other words, some followers had wandered from the path of truth and were now dabbling in notions that were harming the cause, according to devotees. This argument was intended to emphasise the true believers' dedication to “Q” and to “genuine” QDrops. This is what QAnon

members believe to be “gospel,” based on three years of proof. In other cases, it was even suggested that the QAnon members who were promoting the JFK Jr. conspiracy theory were “Deep State” stooges. Overall, there was a strong desire for a reaffirmation of the movement, the cause, and a return to their original source of inspiration: the QDrops.

What is interesting in the case of the JFK Jr. conspiracy theory is that it goes against the explicit statements made by ‘Q.’ Elements of the movement chose to ignore what “Q” wanted them to believe. This is a result of a key feature of the hyper-real dimension of QAnon, where there is a feedback loop between QAnon adherents and influencers, who are themselves content creators, and the ‘Q.’ QAnon adherents take their beliefs into their own hands, develop their own “gnosis” and understanding of the QAnon ideology to believe, and this especially when they have in-group social support, without necessarily having the backing of ‘Q.’ It is important to note that “Q” is not necessarily the leader of the movement in the traditional sense, but rather a prophetic figure passing on information to adherents. Therefore, the overall vagueness of QAnon conspiracy theories and the ritualistic behavior of “baking bread” QDrops to discover their secret meaning will supersede at times anything “Q” might say. As mentioned in Chapter 1, QAnon adherents believe that they are in an information war against the “Deep State,” and as digital soldiers fighting in an information war, disinformation is both a weapon used by “Q” and the white hats, as well as by the “Deep State.” From their perspective, “Q” is using misdirection in the story of JFK Jr., so that QAnon can confuse the enemy in the war. The independence offered by the hyper-real ideology of QAnon takes some authoritative power from “Q” and gives it to adherents themselves.

### 2.3.3 The Failed Election and Secret Inaugurations

Since the inception of QAnon, Donald Trump played a prophetic and messianic role for the movement. His election to the presidency was key to the “military intelligence” operation against the “Deep State” in which QAnon believed. Every failed prediction that “Q” made was simply brushed aside by adherents as either they misinterpreted the messaging from “Q” and Trump, or that Trump pulled the plug to stay ahead of the “Deep State.” Being in the seat of power, was also important to QAnon winning the war against the “Deep State.” It was, therefore, crucial to the movement that Trump won for them to continue to fight against the “Deep State” as the golden age had yet to arrive. Donald Trump’s 2020 loss to Joe Biden was probably the greatest failed prophecy the QAnon movement had known. Yet, the movement did not disappear overnight, they did not wither away. Rather, the movement continued to gain momentum, largely due to the “Big Lie,” the disinformation intentionally spread by the Trump administration and ideologically motivated extremist movements that there was massive electoral fraud.

#### *2.3.3.1 The First Failed Inauguration of Trump*

Following the electoral loss, QAnon influencers and adherents were proselytizing hopeium<sup>215</sup> to explain how “the plan” will come to fruition, even though Donald Trump lost the election. Of

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<sup>215</sup> Used to reference QAnon adherents crafting of news conspiracy theories as they cling to unreasonable or unfounded hopes to explain how their prophecies have not failed.



note, “Q” last posted on December 8, 2020; therefore, after that date, the QAnon movement was largely guided by influencers and political powers that sought to leverage the movement.

It is important to reemphasize that QAnon adherents believed that Trump was not running for just another 4-year election in 2016; rather, Trump was approached by military intelligence to run for the presidency and his entire win has been and still is a military operation. Adherents believed that the start of the plan was for Trump “to drain the lower swamp” in the first 4 years. The swamp is composed of every industry: banking, movie, pharmaceutical, food, etc.; everything controlled by the “Deep State.” Trump, however, has handled most of the lower swamp during his 4-year presidency. Why have there been no arrests in the first term of the presidency? QAnon influencers created a conspiracy theory stating that Barack Obama, before leaving office, signed an executive order to pardon anyone of any crimes they committed prior to Trump coming into office. No one was therefore held accountable when Trump took office. The main enemies of QAnon could not be tried for their crimes prior to the Trump presidency (Hillary Clinton’s email scandal, Clinton Foundation scandal, FISA spying on the Trump campaign). These could only be tried for crimes committed after Trump was in office. Therefore, new crimes had to be discovered. For the past 4 years, the military with Trump and the QTeam have been collecting evidence and catching “Deep State” actors committing crimes.

After the January 6, 2021 insurrection on Capitol Hill, Trump made this statement on the following day: “there will be a smooth, orderly transition of power.” QAnon focused on the fact that there was no mention of Joe Biden in what Trump said in his speech. This was understood as the realization of the plan and their coming golden age; the end of democracy.

As one QAnon influencer put it, “We are transitioning from the defunct USA Corp to the Republic (not Biden). Trump will not technically get a ‘second term’ as he tweeted, ‘won’t be at the Inauguration Day in January’.” What did this mean to QAnon? This meant there was not going to be an Inauguration Day. This was the last recorded term of a president who served in the “American Corporation.” What QAnon adherents were referring to are conspiracy theories from the “pseudolaw”<sup>216</sup> movement.

As the inauguration of Joe Biden drew closer, various influencers in QAnon were looking for evidence of their prophetic realisation. One influencer interpreted the jacket worn by Melania in her final address as “no signal texture.” (See Figure 11)

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<sup>216</sup> Pseudolaw is a collection of legal-sounding but false rules that purport to be law, employed by groups including the Detaxer, Sovereign Citizens and Freemen-on-the-Land movements.



Figure 11 screen cap from a QAnon telegram Channel on January 19.

This meant that all communications would be shut down. Trump would use the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS) or Global Broadcast System (GBS) to announce the insurrection act and military take over of the US, the long promised 10 days of darkness.<sup>217</sup> An important source of this particular narrative was from a “General Hyten” Telegram channel (he is the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the U.S. Air Force). The account was fake; however, the person posting as the General was writing in a similar fashion to ‘Q,’ warning about the upcoming use of the EBS. Though it was easily recognized as fake, within 15 hours of its creation the Telegram channel had racked up 114,000 subscribers (making it one of the top 10 most popular channels at the time in the QAnon ecosystem). The account had been labelled as fake by QAnon influencers, as there is a longstanding tenet within QAnon which state that there are no communications from “Q” or QTeam outside of 8kun. As with the JFK Jr. conspiracy theory, a subsection of the QAnon movement believed what was being shared, to justify what was happening and explain why their prophecy had not failed.

Furthermore, Melania’s speech took place on January 19, which is another important day in QAnon prophecies: National Popcorn Day, which is linked to a QDrop from January 2018. (Figure 12)

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<sup>217</sup> 10 days of darkness during which the cabal’s depravity would be revealed and mass arrests would begin, including of notable liberals like Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and George Soros.



Figure 12 Qdrop 562 about National Popcorn Day

As part of the “plan” for inauguration day, QAnon adherents expect(ed?) that January 20, 2021 would be the big declassification, when all the sealed indictments of “Deep State” operators would be unsealed and those who have already been tried and executed by the QTeam would be revealed to the world. Those who have not yet been arrested or tried will have their crimes revealed; this will lead to a mass awakening of the world. Additionally, QAnon influencers promoted narratives, shared images and video evidence that Joe Biden had been arrested or killed, that he now had a body double, or even that a CGI Joe Biden that would be speaking on inauguration day. Some stated that one should look for an ankle monitor, or anything that may indicate Joe Biden was being controlled by the QTeam and Trump. Yet why has Biden not yet been arrested yet for treason? According to QAnon influencers, Joe Biden “needs to take the oath and be sworn in for the treason to be completed.” This type of constitutional and legal witchcraft is often used by QAnon to keep “pushing the goalpost” of their failed prophecies.

Spiritual warfare is another tool used by QAnon influencers to explain why prophecies are not coming to fruition (See Figure 13). The role of Evangelicalism in QAnon US is primordial and cannot be separated from it as discussed earlier with the role of Qvangelicals.

Father God, I pray for all the patriots on this channel that you will give each of them peace. I pray for a steadfastness and a calm to surround these patriots and their families today and tomorrow. I pray this same thing for patriots all over this Nation and the world. We know that you are in control God, and we know that President Donald Trump has been raised up and appointed by you to be used as a hammer of justice against these evil globalists who worship Satan. Fill our President with strength, resolve, and supernatural power. Protect him. Guide him in wisdom. Protect his family. Protect and empower our military and the good patriots in the National Guard and law enforcement. We ask you to intervene tonight or tomorrow Father and give this Nation four more years of President Donald J. Trump. Expose the evil deeds of these globalists. Bring justice to the victims. Bring down the globalists! Show us Your power in these days ahead Father God! This Nation and this world needs you once again. I pray this in Jesus' name.

*Figure 13 Prayer written by a QAnon influencer on Telegram, January 20, 2020.*

Apocalypticism, millenarianism, spiritual warfare are all key elements of QAnon in the US. It is a behavioral driver of many of the adherents and it will play a role in sustaining the movement when prophecies continue to fail. Prayers, like the one shared in figure 14, echoes the biblical text of Revelation 14:3–5, when the seer refers to the 144,000 witnesses. Anons perceive themselves as the selected few who have been awakened and will bring the world through the upcoming tribulations; after this, they will lead the world.

Guess which group of people are the most prepared for whatever comes their way. Yep..... us anons who have been dragged through the mud since the beginning.

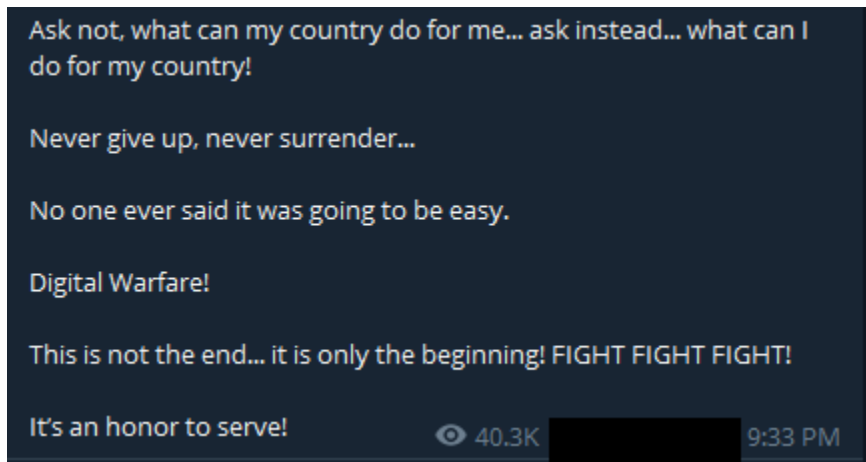
Whatever happens tomorrow, we will use discernment and spread it to whoever needs to hear it. Our purpose in life goes beyond the Declas / Arrests / Destruction of the Old Guard.

We represent the front lines of patriots who will be the leaders when all the dust settles. For now, we have to keep pushing no matter what.

We represent truth and God knows that.

*Figure 14 an apocalyptic prayer from a QAnon influencer on Telegram on January 20, 2020.*

Meaning making is not difficult when you created 4953 prophetic statements over the past 3 years. Something will eventually make sense in the eyes of adherents. When Joe Biden was sworn in without an EBS or GBS broadcast, without any arrests or realized prophecies, QAnon adherents continued to look for a sign of hope or a sign from the QTeam. It is not about how QAnon adherents can believe in things that fly in the face of facts; rather, it is what they do with this belief. At its heart, QAnon is rooted in the idea they are digital soldiers engaged in an infowar (Figure 15). As seen on January 6, 2021, they are not against the possibility that this war can also be battled offline.



*Figure 15 call to action from a QAnon influencer on Telegram on January 20, 2020*

Some in QAnon seemed to believe that Trump kept the nuclear codes, even after he leaves the White House and moves back to Mar-a-Lago (Figure 16). For them, this was proof that he was to remain president and would be installed on March 4, 2021.

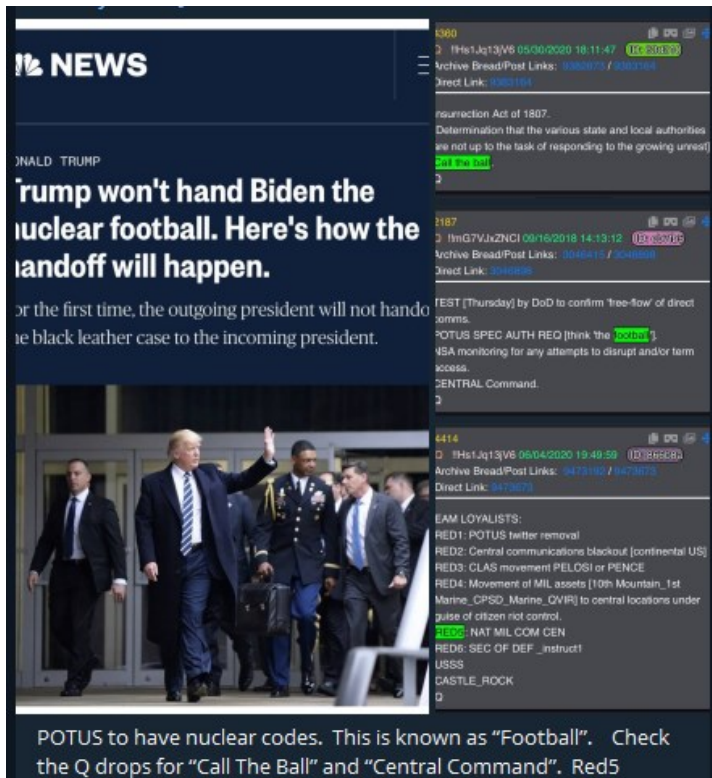


Figure 16 QAnon influencer, proselytizing a new conspiracy theory to explain that the prophecy has not yet failed.

### 2.3.3.2 The Second Failed Inauguration of Trump

When the January 20, 2021 upheaval did not come to fruition, the narrative for QAnon influencers was not that they lost the election; rather, they believe that Trump dismantled the Banking Act of 1871 from England. The US is going back to being a Republic and Trump will be the first president of the new republic with the Constitution fully intact. QAnon adherents are borrowing heavily from the “pseudo law movement” for this particular conspiracy theory.

The “pseudo law movement” believes that in 1871, Congress passed, and President Grant signed the District of Columbia Organic Act into law. The Act repealed the municipal charters of the Cities of Washington and Georgetown and established the government of Washington DC as a federal territory. Significant portions of the Act of 1871 are no longer in effect; for instance, the Home Rule Act in 1973 made changes to the DC government and created local governance with much more power to handle the day-to-day affairs of the district. For years, it has been a common refrain in “pseudo law” narratives that the Act of 1871 transformed the United States government into a corporation, and therefore, by their logic, the US corporation’s rules are not laws and not legally operative. This narrative is used by the “pseudo law movement” to explain why laws are not applicable to them. Now that QAnon followers do not want the laws about elections and succession of power to apply to Donald Trump, they are trying to claim the laws under which he lost are invalid. In the minds of QAnon adherents, Donald Trump will not only

overturn the invalid “corporately-administered” election but go on to abolish the United States Corporation and reinstate the original United States Constitutional government, as it was intended to exist by the Founders.

This was to happen on March 4, 2021; the start date for a new president until it was changed in 1933. Why do QAnon adherents believe all of this? In his January 7 speech Trump said: “Our incredible journey is only just beginning.” QAnon obviously latched on to that statement. This provides hope to their movement. The military and the QTeam have thought of everything; QAnon prophecies have not failed. Because the inauguration date for QAnon adherents was March 4, 2021 and not January 20, Joe Biden was never sworn in as president: Donald Trump is still in power. When Trump left with the nuclear codes to Mar-A-Lago, there was an official announcement of martial law, and a legitimate military government was put in place on January 20. An official announcement for the arrest of Biden, 355 Congressmen and 109 Senators, was made on January 24 and 25 and arrests were made on Sunday, January 31 at 4:35 p.m. EST (10:35 p.m. GMT). This was announced on the dates mentioned above to all US citizens and global new agencies. Though as was expected by the military government governing America, Trump, and the QTeam, this official news was 100% censored by mainstream media, so the average citizen is unaware, except for QAnon adherents.

This was all part of the plan, as was the “inauguration” of Biden. The military government permitted the media to commit high treason by censoring official communications from the legitimate government regarding measures of national security. Because of this treason, the American constitution states that the military government can take control of all media outlets guilty of terrorism at any time. Before March 4, 2021, the military government was going to reveal to the world the coup attempted by Biden and the “Deep State” and was to broadcast his arrest. The military government was also to release evidence of the plots perpetrated by the “Deep State,” the Democrats and China to create a false global epidemic to overthrow and destroy the economy of the real American government.

There was controversy about the March 4<sup>th</sup> conspiracy theory, after it garnered attention for the media and researchers. Following the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, the FBI released a bulletin on potential protests and gatherings being planned for March 4<sup>th</sup>. QAnon influencers, quickly turned away from this conspiracy theory when it caught the attention of law enforcement, and they claimed it to be a false flag created by Antifa and the “Deep State.”

This was like when “Q” denounced the JFK Jr. conspiracy theory, and QAnon went along with it. Many in the QAnon community endorsed the March 4<sup>th</sup> inauguration conspiracy theory, saying they were done waiting for “Q” and the QTeam. Many found reasons to support the March 4<sup>th</sup> conspiracy citing, for example, the price increase of hotels in DC on that day. For some QAnon adherents, the price increase at the Trump Hotel for March 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, was a sign that the hotel might be the location of this inauguration. Ultimately, March 4<sup>th</sup> came and went without Trump being inaugurated, without any arrests, without the prophecy being fulfilled, and yet, QAnon still thrives and survives.

### 2.3.4 The Future of QAnon: What Happens After Multiple Failed Prophecies?

One of the main questions QAnon researchers with which they had wrestled after the election was how the movement would carry on after the loss. With President Trump being seen as the savior of the republic in the White House, one poised to usher in the collapse of the “Deep State,” his defeat in the election could have understood as the ultimate failure of prophecy. As such, the theoretical framework presented above is important to keep in mind, as well as the socio-political climate. The “Big Lie,” narratives of electoral fraud, voter recounts and audits, all play into the hands of QAnon. Any doubt of the legitimacy of the election play a role in circumventing any failed prophecy. Nevertheless, even with all of this, QAnon adherents have been able to deal with the cognitive dissonance presented by the electoral loss.

The failure of a prophetic event to occur may be seen by an outsider as a proof of the group’s evident weakness. This is common with the media and mainstream perception of QAnon. Outsiders have already determined that the group’s worldview is incorrect, which is why they are outsiders. Academic literature on the failure of the prophecy states that the failure creates dissonance among devoted believers, a scenario in which the legitimacy of one’s accepted belief system is challenged with intense feelings of dejection and sadness at the time. The occurrence tests the faith of the community and jeopardises social relationships within the group.

The nonbeliever, who has already decided that the group’s religion is insufficient for him or her, sees only one reasonable course of action: quit the group and its worldview. However, it is not that simple for an insider who has formed social bonds and shaped their worldview around an ideology. The QAnon adherent has a strong desire to overcome the dissonance, so he or she collaborates with other members of the group to offer numerous options for bridging the gap between belief and reality. The vagueness of QAnon conspiracy theories and predictions made by “Q” play well into this reality. In the face of dissonance, those who adhere to QAnon beliefs can rely on the larger framework of the ideology, on the unfalsifiable ideas that form the foundation of their ideology, as QAnon beliefs are not rooted in facts, but faith in “Q” and Trump. It is from the ideological framework of QAnon that adherents reconfirm and reconstruct their core beliefs and reevaluate their situation in this setting. As Melton writes:

“The failure of a predicted event to happen generally shocks believers to some extent. Disappointment is real, as is the threat to the group survival. The non-occurrence of the expected event cannot be denied. Life cannot return immediately to the norm enjoyed prior to the non-event. Some means must be found to reaffirm the validity of the group and the truth of its beliefs. Some action must be taken to repair the social fabric torn in the prophecy's failure. At such moments groups tend to turn inward, as much as their environment will allow them, and engage in processes of group building.”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> J. Gordon Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation: what really happens when prophecy fails," *American Studies* 26, no. 2 (1985): 25.



QAnon adherents and influencers will regularly return to the QDrops or statements made by Trump, to engage in reinterpretation of the “drops” to find out where errors were made, so that they can find out when the prophecy will truly take place. This aspect of “baking” is a community’s building exercise, which strengthens the movement, even though “Q” no longer posts, and Trump is no longer in power. The sacredness of the “QDrops” implies that they have not been properly interpreted and that the prophecy has not failed, but adherents have.

Some social psychologists who have researched the link between failed prophecies and extremism have come up with several interconnected conclusions.<sup>219</sup> In their analysis, they have highlighted some important factors, as it relates to movements like QAnon. Failed prophecies lead to frustration. Uncertainty following a failed prophecy also leads to ideological zeal,<sup>220</sup> and identity uncertainty of adherents leads to extremism.<sup>221</sup> The need for cognitive closure following a failed prophecy contributes to groups turning inwards and is linked to personality traits that can lead individuals or the movement to more extremist views.<sup>222</sup> Influencers or those with a leadership role utilise the movements uncertainty to solidify their power, especially in the absence of key figure like “Q” and Trump.<sup>223</sup> Moral certainty in their mission in bringing in their promised golden age by defeating the “Deep State” adds to potential QAnon violent extremist activities by removing the victims of violent acts from moral consideration.<sup>224</sup>

The field of sociology of religion has also pointed to the relationship between religious fanaticism and failed prophecies, particularly in the context of fringe movements and the escalation towards violent extremism. Following violent incidents involving NRMs in the 1990s, academics wondered what drove the Branch Davidians, the Order of the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, and Heaven’s Gate to commit collective suicide or acts of mass violence, and offered detailed case studies which examined the failure of prophecies.<sup>225</sup> Others in their attempt to identify and differentiate between causative variables or ideological types, compared instances of established frameworks and typologies.<sup>226</sup> Historical case studies from white power movements,

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<sup>219</sup> Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock, *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

<sup>220</sup> Roger Giner-Sorolla, Bernhard Leidner, and Emanuele Castano, "Dehumanization, demonization and morality shifting: Paths to moral certainty in extremist violence," in *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty*, ed. Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock (2012).

<sup>221</sup> Hogg and Blaylock, *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty*.

<sup>222</sup> Giner-Sorolla, Leidner, and Castano, "Dehumanization, demonization and morality shifting: Paths to moral certainty in extremist violence."

<sup>223</sup> Giner-Sorolla, Leidner, and Castano, "Dehumanization, demonization and morality shifting: Paths to moral certainty in extremist violence."

<sup>224</sup> Giner-Sorolla, Leidner, and Castano, "Dehumanization, demonization and morality shifting: Paths to moral certainty in extremist violence."

<sup>225</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2000); Jean-François Mayer, *Les mythes du Temple solaire* (Geneva: Georg, 1996); James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Benjamin E. Zeller, *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); John Walliss, *Apocalyptic Trajectories: Millenarianism and Violence in the Contemporary World* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004); Catherine Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

<sup>226</sup> David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton, *Cults, Religion and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Dyrendal, Asprem, and Robertson, "Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Religion(s): What we are Talking about, and Why it is Important.;" Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2018); Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence*.

the Mormons, the Peoples Temple and Nazism provide example of precedents and sources of comparison.<sup>227</sup>

Minority religions and other ideological groups frequently find themselves in opposition to public authorities and interest groups – ideologically, theologically, morally, or socially – and this opposition can lead to feelings of insecurity, pressure, persecution, and a loss of control over the group's future. When it comes to conspiracy theories, as Barkun,<sup>228</sup> Butter,<sup>229</sup> Cassam,<sup>230</sup> Dyrendal *et al.*,<sup>231</sup> and Neiwert<sup>232</sup> write, what matters is how groups perceive dangers and those working against them, rather than whether such threats or agents are real. The perceptions of persecution, the perception of enemies, the perception of suffering is more significant than actual attitudes or attacks, though the latter can be equally distressing.

Knowing all of this, in October of 2020 I had written about potential courses of action for QAnon if Trump lost on election day.<sup>233</sup> A Biden win for QAnon supporters likely meant that Trump's failure is a significant missed chance to free imprisoned children and preserve the country – one that must not be given up without a struggle. While it seems reasonable to think that the loss of Trump would force many of these people to quit the movement, scholarship has led me to believe this was very improbable. Biden's triumph will be strong evidence for QAnon supporters that the "Deep State" has won the battle but not the war, and that they will now have to fight harder than ever before since their friend in the White House is gone. Following the Trump loss, the struggle against the "Deep State" was framed as a larger war against the forces of evil, one that began before Trump and will continue after he leaves office.

Analysing the warning times ahead and after the November 2020 election, the spectre of bloodshed was also a possibility. The prospect of violence relied on how Trump reacted when he lost the election. Some of the polarisation he enabled may have been quelled if he had politely conceded victory to Biden, delivered a speech uniting the country, and began a peaceful transition of power. However, based on his actions since taking office, and his action after the loss, it became clear that Trump would be incapable of rising above the circumstances and put the country ahead of himself. Some QAnon supporters may have simply wished to keep the information battle going, while others may have taken Trump's failure as proof that there was no democratic way to fighting the "Deep State," and violence would become the only choice. January 6<sup>th</sup> was a clear example of the potential violent impact of failed prophecies, as QAnon followers undertook an urgent campaign to bring about the arrest of supposed corrupt elites, celebrities, and the "Deep State" as a whole. Walliss makes this important point: "real violence [...] can result from imagined opposition and perceived persecution as much as from actual

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<sup>227</sup> Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*; Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*; Stephen Hunt, *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>228</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*.

<sup>229</sup> Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*.

<sup>230</sup> Quassim Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

<sup>231</sup> Dyrendal, "Conspiracy Theories and New Religious Movements."

<sup>232</sup> David Neiwert, *Red Pill, Blue Pill: How to Counteract the Conspiracy Theories That Are Killing Us* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus, 2020); David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (New York: Verso, 2017).

<sup>233</sup> Marc-André Argentino and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Q-Pilled: Conspiracy Theories, Trump, and Election Violence in the United States," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, October 29 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/q-pilled-conspiracy-theories-trump-and-election-violence/>.

external pressures.”<sup>234</sup> This belief was made possible by disinformation pushed by Donald Trump, Sydney Powell, Lin Wood and Ron Watkins, saying that the former president won an overwhelming victory and will retain the presidency. Additionally, they are still pushing the idea of treason on the part of Pence and the Congress who certified a fraudulent election.

The failure of prophecy is critical for understanding how QAnon’s identity was impacted and how it motivated their beliefs and actions after these failures. Individuals perceive and feel uncertainty, but flourish within the social and cultural life of their community. They often characterize outsiders and their intents through the means of conspiracies, dualistic oppositions, and victimization.

Another impact of the failure of prophecy was factionalism and infighting. Following the loss of Trump and the continued absence of ‘Q,’ groupuscules of QAnon adherents were formed around specific trusted influencers of QAnon inclined politicians and media figures. Some followers were siphoned off into other movements and groups, continuing their activism in ways that became loosely tied to QAnon. There has been a growth of QAnon adjacent movements, as well as QAnon adherents simply joining forces with groups that are more ideologically motivated violent extremist in nature.

The path forward for QAnon followers is unclear. Their rise to mainstream visibility depended heavily on the current political climate, with the President of the United States amplifying their message and refusing to denounce them in public. Their faith is not in America, it is not in Democracy; rather, it is in Trump and ‘Q.’ Their ultimate objective is to destabilize democratic institutions run by the “Deep State.”

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<sup>234</sup> Walliss, *Apocalyptic Trajectories: Millenarianism and Violence in the Contemporary World*, 245.

# CHAPTER 3: PASTEL QANON

Important progress has been made in the field of security studies and counter-terrorism in regards to applying a gendered lens to the process of radicalization; however, there is still room for improvement. For example, despite evidence of women's lengthy involvement in terrorism, there remains skepticism and a lack of historical understanding among counterterrorism experts and policymakers about the role of women and gender. Most nations in the group of seven, with the exception of Canada, do not even consider gendered based analysis or the role of gender in peace and security. As a result, descriptions of women's participation are solely used to explain "women and terrorism," rather than to enlighten the field and process of radicalization. Women play an important part in radical and violent extremist movements; however "political violence is frequently considered exceptional—perhaps because a smaller percentage of women are members, and a smaller percentage than men carry out violence in terrorist"<sup>235</sup>.

However, in the case of QAnon, women play an important role not only in the perpetration of acts of violent extremism, but they also play a key role as leaders and influencers. It is important to consider the role of women in ideologically motivated violent extremist movements beyond violent attacks. Women do not simply follow the men into an extremist group; nor are their roles limited to raising children according to a violent ideology. As Seyward Darby writes in her book *Sisters in Hate*, "the gaps in knowledge mean that journalists, politicians, and concerned observers too often rely on flawed assumptions—for instance, that white nationalism is the province of "angry white men" intent on being seen and heard."<sup>236</sup> It is not simply flawed assumptions that become central to the way gender dimensions of IMVE are understood, but how normative representations of gender identity and patriarchal stereotypes frame both our understand of this issue, and how it represents itself in the IMVE space. Although men are the most well-known IMVE preachers or perpetrators of bombings, shootings, and demonstrations of the power of IMVE movements, the involvement of women in any extremist movement must also be investigated. In the last two decades, there has been a significant growth in the number of female supporters of IMVE, as well as the formation of several female-focused organizations, movements and ecosystems.<sup>237</sup> Women are not immune to IMVE or radical ideologies as seen by the significant surge in the number of female IMVE adherents. In a 2018 report Elsa Gutsche found that women are particularly vulnerable to xenophobic, racist, and anti-Muslim sentiments vs. males, and they are as prone to ingroup-outgroup

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<sup>235</sup> Lindsey A. O'Rourke, "What's Special about Female Suicide Terrorism?," *Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (2009).

<sup>236</sup> Seyward Darby, *Sisters in Hate American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism* (New York: Little, Brown and Company 2020), 16.

<sup>237</sup> Heike Radvan and Carmen Altmeyer, "Overlooked and underrated: women in right-wing extremist groups in Germany," *Open Democracy*, September 2 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/overlooked-and-underrated-women-in-rightwing-extremi/>.

thinking as the men, according to the study.<sup>238</sup> Similarly, a study done in 2016 found that women were marginally more prone to empathize with “new right attitudes” and had a substantially larger predisposition to prioritize the rights of native European males.<sup>239</sup> In recent years women are often seen leading protest marches and serving as the public faces of far-right social media initiatives. As Kathleen Blee concludes in her work white nationalist recruiting operations are increasingly targeting women.<sup>240</sup> The growing extensive participation of women in IMVE movements has aided in the mainstreaming and normalizing of these movements. Female influencers across various social media platforms, as well as offline, have helped IMVE causes garner millions of views and mainstream media attention, and these figureheads are becoming increasingly important in the transnational dimension of IMVE, using their influence and public image to market IMVE ideologies to audiences across the world. Despite the rising prominence of women in IMVE milieus, gender remains a contentious subject.

This is especially true for QAnon as women are actively radicalizing others into movements by using their influence, perpetrating acts of violent extremism, fundraising, organizing and mobilizing adherents offline and running for political office, while openly supporting QAnon. Beyond the extensive publicity given to Congresswoman Greene for her support of QAnon and other conspiracy theories, female supporters have gotten little attention, whilst male supporters have received fair, glib, or naive coverage. In comparison to the involvement of males, there has been a dearth of in-depth reporting—both positive and negative—on the women of QAnon; despite the fact that women have played a key part in QAnon from its inception.

Tracy Diaz played an important role in mainstreaming QAnon when she pushed the movement from more obscure forums like 4chan and 8chan to her popular YouTube vlog.<sup>241</sup> Liz Crokin, meanwhile, was instrumental in getting QAnon material to the Make America Great Again and alt-right audiences early on.<sup>242</sup> Two women played a crucial role in the early mainstreaming of QAnon from the obscure fringes of the internet. In other instances, along with their male colleagues, some women have become authoritative influencers, leaders, and decoders of “Qdrops,”<sup>243</sup> guiding others along different radicalization pipelines. Others, such as DeAnna Lorraine and Amazing Polly, helped disseminate viral disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>244</sup> while Sidney Powell helped distribute voting fraud misinformation and boosted the

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<sup>238</sup> Elsa Gutsche, *Triumph der Frauen - The Female Face of the Far Right in Europe*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2018), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/dialog/14630.pdf>.

<sup>239</sup> Andreas Zick, Daniela Krause, and Beate Küpper, "Rechtspopulistische und rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland," in *Gespaltene Mitte – Feindselige Zustände: Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2016*, ed. Andreas Zick, Daniela Krause, and Beate Küpper (Dietz, 2016).

<sup>240</sup> Kathleen Blee, "Ethnography of the Far Right," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>241</sup> Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins, "How three conspiracy theorists took 'Q' and sparked Qanon," *NBC News*, August 14 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-n900531>.

<sup>242</sup> Ryan Smith, "Former Chicago gossip columnist Liz Crokin is now a star among far-right conspiracy theorists," *Chicago Reader*, April 6 2018, <https://chicagoreader.com/blogs/former-chicago-gossip-columnist-liz-crokin-is-now-a-star-among-far-right-conspiracy-theorists/>.

<sup>243</sup> The posts Q makes on 4chan, 8chan, or 8kun; which are reposted on social media and aggregator sites

<sup>244</sup> Argentino, "QAnon conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic are a public health threat."

#StopTheSteal<sup>245</sup> movement and Big Lie<sup>246</sup>. The most popular and influential QAnon documentary “Fall Cabal” was created by a woman – Janet Ossebaar.<sup>247</sup> Furthermore, 97 candidates vying for office in the 2020 US election supported or endorsed QAnon, with 37 of them being women. Only two women, Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert, were elected to Congress from this group.<sup>248</sup> Finally, 27 of the 101 QAnon supporters who have committed ideologically driven crimes in the United States were women, according to START report.<sup>249</sup>

Women in QAnon have not only served as influencers and leaders, but they have also played a major part in the formation of numerous QAnon groups with distinct radicalization pipelines, spanning many platforms, and producing distinctive danger vectors. These main danger vectors will be discussed in four sections because to the substantial and intricate nature of women's involvement in QAnon:

1. Pastel QAnon: how influencers on Instagram who have leveraged their aesthetics and branding to reach out to new groups unfamiliar with QAnon by softening the QAnon worldview.
2. The women of QAnon and political campaigning: the role of women who campaigned for Congress in the United States while simultaneously advocating or embracing QAnon ideology on social media
3. The women of QAnon as influencers and leaders: how QAnon women have used digital mediums to become significant characters in the movement and radicalizers
4. Gender Based violence and QAnon: A study of gender-based violence in the QAnon movement using the case studies of famous women targeted by the QAnon movement.

This chapter will attempt to fill a research gap about women's roles in QAnon. This is critical not just for identifying possible danger vectors from new and growing extremist threats inside QAnon, but also for shaping the kind of policies that governments and platforms establish. Even though men are the primary actors in many ideologically motivated violent extremist movements such as QAnon, policies must consider the role of women in these movements, not only to ensure that potential threats are not overlooked, but also to fill policy gaps that exist regarding IMVE and gender.

### 3.1 Pastel QAnon

On July 21, 2020, Twitter Safety declared that they would be taking a tougher stance against “behavior that has the potential to lead to offline harm,”<sup>250</sup> and that they would no

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<sup>245</sup> Ewan Palmer, "Sidney Powell's Ties to QAnon Movement Explained," *Newsweek*, December 3 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/sidney-powell-qanon-voter-fraud-lawsuits-georgia-1552050>.

<sup>246</sup> The big lie refers to passages in Mein Kampf, where Adolf Hitler accused Jews of spreading lies about how the German army performed in World War I. The word was coined by Trump detractors as an attempt to warn about the poisonous nature of his electoral falsehoods. Historian Timothy Snyder, author of "On Tyranny," used it in the wake of the January 6 insurrection. "The idea that Mr. Biden didn't win the election is a big lie". Brian Stelter, "Experts warn that Trump's 'big lie' will outlast his presidency," *CNN*, January 11 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/11/media/trump-lies-reliable-sources/index.html>.

<sup>247</sup> Argentino, "The Church of QAnon: Will conspiracy theories form the basis of a new religious movement?."

<sup>248</sup> Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for state legislatures in 2020."

<sup>249</sup> Michael Jensen and Sheehan Kane, *QAnon Offenders in the United States*, START (College Park Maryland, September 2021), <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/qanon-offenders-united-states>.

<sup>250</sup> Twitter Safety (@TwitterSafety), "We've been clear that we will take strong enforcement action on behavior that has the potential to lead to offline harm. In line with this approach, this week we are taking further action on so-called 'QAnon' activity across the service.," Twitter, July 21, 2020, <https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1285726277719199746>.

longer offer QAnon material in trends, search results, and would look to ban QAnon URLs on the site.

- Twitter classified QAnon as a coordinated harmful activity which refers to “groups, movements, or campaigns that are engaged in coordinated activity resulting in harm on and off of Twitter.”
- Twitter considered coordination as “detectable techniques of platform manipulation to engage in the artificial inflation or propagation of a message or narrative on Twitter” or “refers to on- or off-Twitter coordination among a group of people to amplify or propagate a specific message.”
- Twitter further adapted their policy to include three types of harm: physical, psychological, and informational. on paper the platform had created the tools that they need to appropriately deal with QAnon, however the execution was not the best.

On 19 August 2020, Facebook updated their policies to address movements and organisations tied to violence,<sup>251</sup> to address the growing threat posed by QAnon and similar movements. Facebook took an iterative approach to their new policy, an adjusted the way that they approach dealing with QAnon month by month as they analyzed the data they received from their methods and in consultation with experts.

- Their initial approach in August was to impose restrictions to limit the spread of content from Facebook pages groups and Instagram accounts that were associated to QAnon; additionally, Facebook would remove pages, groups, and accounts were they identified discussions of potential violence or when they used bell language or symbols to inspire individuals to mobilize to violence. Similar to Twitter their initial steps was to limit recommendations, reduce ranking in newsfeeds, reduce search ability, limit and review related hashtags on Instagram, prohibit the use of ads and monetization tools, as well as prohibit fund raising.
- In September. They started downranking content from pages in groups that were restricted, which means that users will see content from these pages and groups further down into their newsfeed.
- In October they leverage the redirect method for those searching QAnon content “when someone searches for terms related to QAnon on Facebook and Instagram, we will redirect them to credible resources from the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), the academic research network of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism. This is the latest expansion of our Redirect Initiative to help combat violent extremism and will direct people to resources that can help inform them of the realities of QAnon and its ties to violence and real-world harm.”
- As the US election approached, and QAnon’s behaviour escalated offline, Facebook removed “3,000 Pages, 9,800 groups, 420 events, 16,200 Facebook

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<sup>251</sup> Facebook, "An Update to How We Address Movements and Organizations Tied to Violence," news release, August 19, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/08/addressing-movements-and-organizations-tied-to-violence/>.

profiles, and 25,000 Instagram accounts for violating our policy against QAnon.”

What Twitter, Facebook and YouTube failed to realize was that QAnon adherents are not the type of extremist and terrorist actors their policies were meant to address. QAnon is not a top-down group, but a bottom-up movement. Moreover, QAnon ideologically is a spectrum, and the movement is formed of groups, which range from non-violent, to militant, to violent extremists. Thus simply banning their content doesn't work, especially as they are reacting not only to what “Q” was saying, but also to what they would “decode” from anything Donald Trump said or did. For QAnon adherents they believe that they are in an information war against the Deep State, their objective is to spread QAnon related information. As digital soldiers, as with real soldiers, they expect that they would have to sacrifice their digital accounts in this war. For them when Twitter, Facebook or YouTube took down their accounts or content, it reinforced their beliefs that they were correct, the deep state was being affected by what they were doing online, and they're leveraging their power and influence to have platforms silence QAnon. Digital platforms, especially Twitter, were the main “battleground” for QAnon adherents because that was the platform where Donald Trump was the most present. Failing to clearly understand the ideology behind QAnon is one of the biggest flaws in the attempts to regulate QAnon. Taking a whack-a-mole approach and banning accounts, only raises their credibility rather than in one fell swoop taking them all off the platforms.

Following these policy changes and their effect on QAnon's ability to distribute misinformation and attract new members, the QAnon movement sought to hijack "left-wing" hashtags on Twitter to get around their new regulations. Because of their awareness-raising drive, at the time of the takedowns by Twitter and Facebook, QAnon took over the hashtag #SaveTheChildren,<sup>252</sup> which was trending. As a result, of the mindset of a QAnon digital soldier, the QAnon worldview has infiltrated new digital ecosystems and radicalization pipelines, that were not the traditional purview of QAnon. In particular, QAnon gained popularity on Instagram, where some anti-child trafficking and anti-child sexual exploitation activists and fund raisers were active. The QAnon content was given a softer Instagram aesthetic (figure 17) , as a result, I coined the term Pastel QAnon to describe the occurrence. Therefore, my definition of Pastel QAnon refers to a network of female influencers that began on Instagram and has now spread to other platforms (MeWe, Telegram, Parler, Gab, etc.). Many started their careers as lifestyle bloggers, fitness instructors, diet influencers, esoteric spiritualists, or alternative healing advocates. The "Pastel" alludes to the distinct appearance and branding that these influencers gave their pages, and hence QAnon, by using social media templates such as Canva. Canva is a popular choice for Instagram influencers who want to build a brand. Canva was eventually utilised to soften the QAnon messages that were communicated on these sites, which might be subtle or not. The QAnon content is sometimes not in the photographs, but in the statement that goes along with the post. Albums are another

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<sup>252</sup> Kevin Roose, "How 'Save the Children' Is Keeping QAnon Alive," *The New York Times*, Sept 28 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/28/technology/save-the-children-qanon.html>.



branding technique that is utilised to keep a page's appearance while also serving as a decoy for people who aren't followers or are simply browsing the page. The QAnon material is sometimes tucked away in a few photos in the albums. These influencers' style and branding softens QAnon's propaganda, which is based on Chan culture and images. The Pastel style is diametrically opposed to the “raw” QAnon material seen on 8kun. The Pastel QAnon network builds new recruiting and radicalization pipelines into female-dominated environments by softening QAnon messages. QAnon hashtags and propaganda were not plastered on every post these influencers shared; rather, it was distributed throughout their other content and brand.

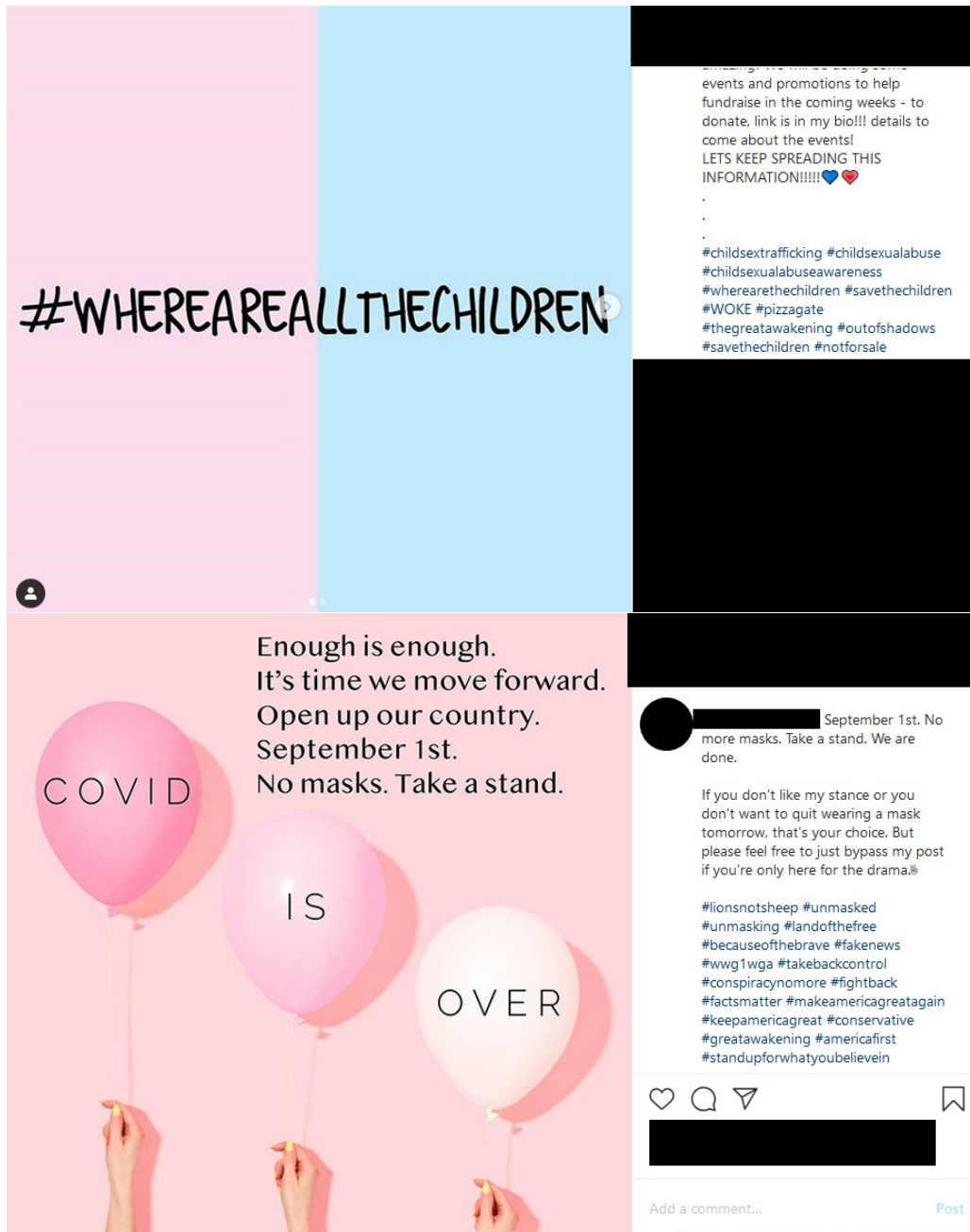


Figure 17 Screen captures of Instagram influencers in the Pastel QAnon community September, 2020.

The following is a breakdown of the kind of accounts observed in this research, based on a sample of 76 influencers in the Pastel QAnon community (with a total of 2,700,000 followers):

1. There's multi-level marketing QAnon, which is made up of Instagram influencers who developed their first companies via MLM schemes such as Arbonne, Tupperware, essential oils, unusual salts, camel milk, and so on.
2. There's esoteric QAnon, which consists of Instagram influencers that developed their careers on Gnosticism, yoga, crystals, 5th dimension spirituality, tarot reading, mediumship, belief in angels, light-weavers, or the Galactic Federation.
3. Lifestyle influencers QAnon is made up of women who created their brands as Instagram fitness trainers, fitness models, and lifestyle coaches, and then used their influence to radicalise their followers to QAnon propaganda.
4. Alternative healing QAnon is made up of Instagram influencers who created their image as mommy bloggers by promoting natural parenting, exotic diets, anti-vaccine sentiment, or alternative medicine and remedies, and who now add QAnon propaganda to their medical deception.

The platforms' initial attempt to regulate QAnon, as well as QAnon's hijacking of #SaveTheChildren and the anti-child trafficking propaganda associated with #SaveTheChildren, which radicalized these influencers, morphed into #SaveOurChildren, when they realized that Bill Gates and George Soros had donated to the organization. This led to global protests<sup>253</sup> against child trafficking and played an important role in sustaining the Pastel QAnon community through its early growing pains.<sup>254</sup> Female QAnon influencers also helped link Pastel QAnon with the larger QAnon community. Pastel QAnon altered its storylines to promote QAnon misinformation pertaining to the 2020 US general election to that purpose.<sup>255</sup>

Because of all of these elements, Pastel QAnon had a significant part in radicalising not just other women, but also a younger audience who had never heard of QAnon until the summer of 2020. Because the QAnon influencers are protective of their brands—which, in many instances, took years of hard work to build—they promoted QAnon misinformation and storylines through Instagram stories and the page highlight tool. As they shared and promoted QAnon videos like “Fall of the Cabal” and “Out of Shadows,” as well as postings from QAnon influencers, their Instagram stories create a picture of women who have been totally pilled on QAnon. What my study reveals is that underneath the soothing colours and branding comes the QAnon we all know, complete with bigotry, medical/COVID misinformation, and violence.

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<sup>253</sup> Shayan Sardarizadeh, "What's behind the rise of QAnon in the UK?," *BBC*, October 13 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-54065470>.

<sup>254</sup> Roose, "How 'Save the Children' Is Keeping QAnon Alive.,"; Christophe Haubursin, "The Instagram aesthetic that made QAnon mainstream," *Vox*, October 28 2020, <https://www.vox.com/videos/2020/10/28/21538763/save-the-children-qanon-instagram>.

<sup>255</sup> Rachel E. Greenspan, "Trump's description of QAnon as being 'against pedophilia' follows its insidious takeover of the 'Save the Children' movement," *Insider*, October 16 2020, <https://www.insider.com/qanon-save-the-children-pedophilia-sex-trafficking-paranoia-2020-9>.

What's concerning is how swiftly Pastel QAnon expanded, and how these influencers were able to not only retain, but even build their brands—promoting an extreme ideology like QAnon had no detrimental affect on their brands.

Using Instagram data made accessible by Crowdtangle I measured the community's growth from the start of the pandemic in March 2020 to September 2020. I selected 76 accounts that were the most influential in the Pastel movement based on their followers counts, the recirculation of their posts in Instagram highlights, stories, reshares or cross platform sharing, the viewer counts on their Instagram Lives, and if they created/adapted QAnon content to their audience rather than simply amplifying it. In total these 76 accounts had accumulated 2,700,000 followers during the collections period, which is an increase of 160% or 1,600,000 followers, according to Crowdtangle (figure 18).



Figure 18 Crowdtangle Graph of follower growth for Pastel QAnon influencers.

Follower increase saw three spikes: A) first one occurred between 15 March and 18 April 2020 which coincides with the start of lockdown measures related to the pandemic, B) the second one occurred between 31 May to 6 June 2020 which coincides with the viral QAnon/anti-vaxx documentary Plandemic, and C) the third and largest one occurred

between 5 July to 29 August 2020 when QAnon took over #SaveTheChildren and networked itself within what would become the Pastel QAnon movement. (Figure 19).

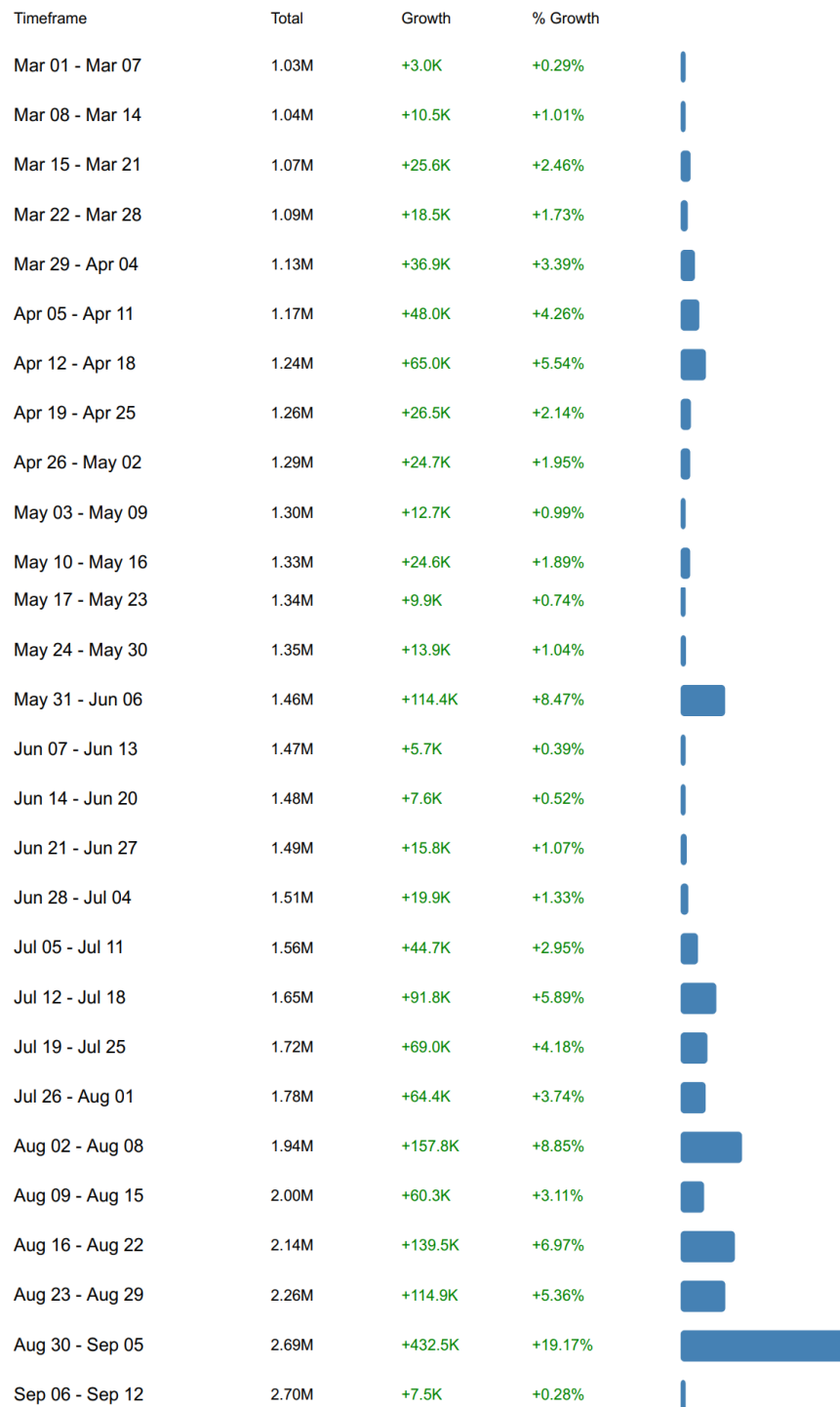


Figure 19 Crowdtangle calculation of Pastel QAnon influencers followership growth between March and September 2020.

The fourth spike of 432K followers that occurred between 30 August to 5 September 2020 is due to the creation of new accounts following the QAnon account bans by Instagram. Influencers were able to promote each other's accounts on alternative platforms, as well as via other QAnon Instagram influencers not affected by Instagram takedown efforts. The increase in followers within the Pastel QAnon community demonstrates a potential causal relationship between socio-political, geo-political and popular culture events as the peak and valleys in the data aligns with events that the QAnon movement reacted to. The birth of the Pastel QAnon movement, led to these 76-influencer gaining over 1,000,000 in 5 weeks, which moves away from the growth trendlines for these influencers prior to being radicalized into QAnon.

The combination of QAnon, anti-lockdown, anti-COVID, and anti-vaccine disinformation shared by these accounts was advantageous to their branding and overall growth of these women's platforms as they were able to maintain their existing aesthetic, while also expanding their narratives (and by extension their products) to a wider audience. We can see this by taking a look at not only their growth in followers, but also in the timing of the growth in the interactions with the social media content. During the collection period of 03/01/20 to 09/07/20 these accounts shared 22.1K posts averaging 770 a week (figure 20), these 22.1K posts had garnered a total of 21.04M interactions (figure 21).

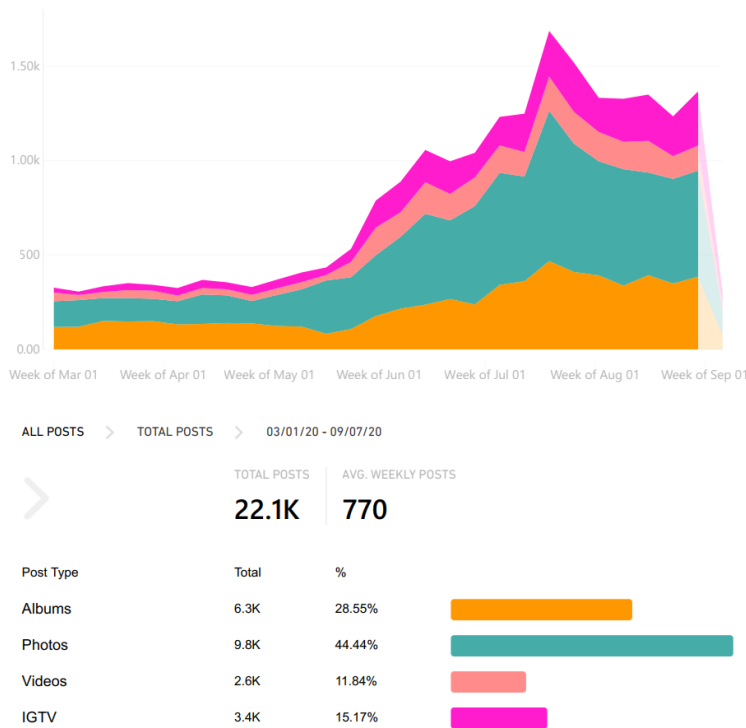
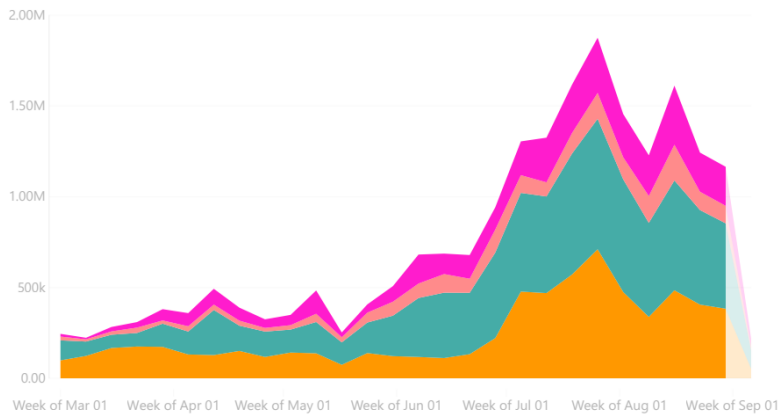


Figure 20 Crowdtangle calculation of Pastel QAnon influencers posting patterns between March and September 2020.



ALL POSTS > TOTAL INTERACTIONS > 03/01/20 - 09/07/20

TOTAL INTERACTIONS: **21.04M** | AVG. WEEKLY INTERACTIONS: **731.3K** | WEEKLY INTERACTION RATE: **4.74%**

Post Type	Total	%
Albums	6.83M	32.47%
Photos	8.72M	41.43%
Videos	1.94M	9.24%
IGTV	3.55M	16.86%

Figure 21 Crowdtangle calculation of Pastel QAnon influencers post interaction rates between March and September 2020.

In figure 21, we see that interactions begin to taper off but did not return to a pre-#SaveTheChildren threshold, rather the community had to be taken down by Facebook in October. We can also see that the week of 17 May is when these accounts initially became more active which aligns with the increase in lockdown measures in the US, as well as the virality of the Plandemic documentary<sup>256</sup>. Though, a simple viral video may seem superfluous, it is important to highlight that Crowdtangle data shows that an important feature of this community is the significant role videos play. There were 12,300 posts with videos that had garnered 76.84M views (figure 22). Of note, videos gain in prominence around the week of 21 June when platforms began to introduce more friction between QAnon and platform users. For some in the community videos and IGTV are a way to avoid the measures that were put in place by the platforms. Videos of popular documentaries in the QAnon ecosystem like Plandemic, Fall Cabal, Out of Shadows, were regularly clipped and shared via Instagram videos or on live streams.

<sup>256</sup> Sheera Frenkel, Ben Decker, and Davey Alba, "How the 'Plandemic' Movie and Its Falsehoods Spread Widely Online," *The New York Times*, May 20 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/technology/plandemic-movie-youtube-facebook-coronavirus.html>.

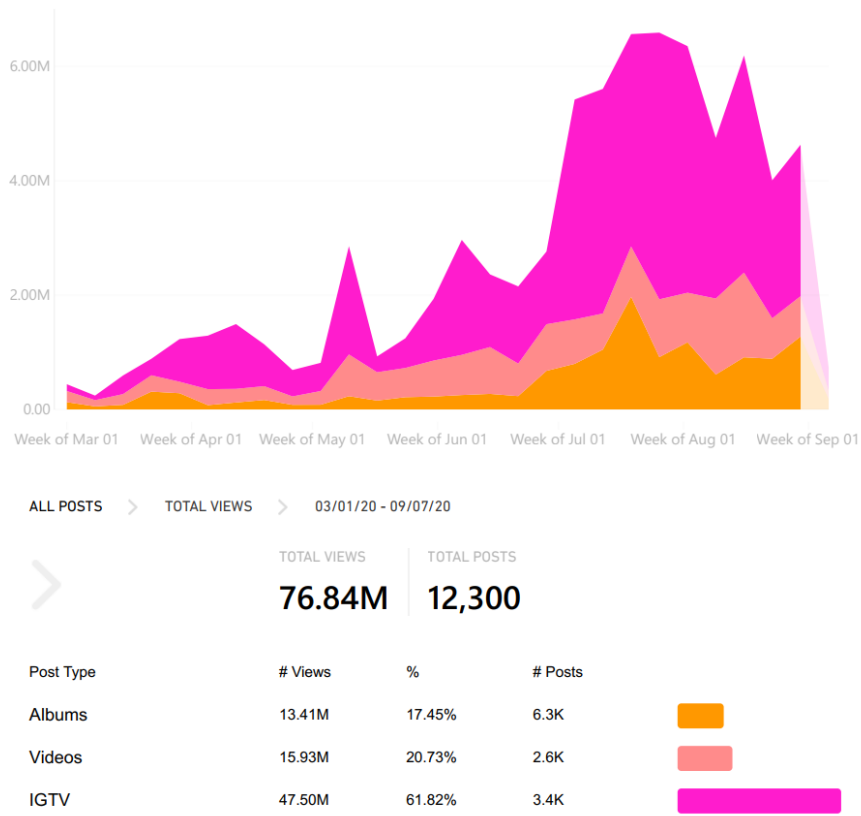


Figure 22 Crowdtangle calculation of Pastel QAnon influencers album, video and IGTV views between March and September 2020.

The Pastel QAnon community also use Instagram stories and highlights, to circumvent platform policies when they shared content related to QAnon. So following actions taken by Instagram to remove QAnon content form the feeds, the influencers adapted and were able to curate QAnon content in aw ay that made it more difficult to enforce Facebook policies, as well as make it more difficult for researchers and reporters to investigate and gather appropriate data. For a few weeks it was a net win for Pastel QAnon influencers, until the platforms finally took more decisive action ahead of the 2020 US election.

According to a qualitative review of these testimonies, the bulk of these women established their followings and businesses before being pilled on QAnon. They had considerable power over individuals who sought their spiritual, health, fitness, and business counsel. As a result, most of these accounts do not seem to have interacted with one another before to June 2020, and most of these accounts had no QAnon material previous to 2020. In addition to Facebook and Twitter's actions against QAnon in June and July 2020, viral child trafficking conspiracy theories such as The Wayfare conspiracy

theory<sup>257</sup>, the revival of Pizzagate on TikTok<sup>258</sup>, and anti-COVID and vaccine conspiracy theories created new networks of individuals, who came from disparate ecosystems, which merged in light of their consumption of this content. All of this came together in August 2020 when QAnon accounts hijacked #SaveTheChildren, when QAnon accounts and narratives came into contact with Instagram influencers championing the save the children campaign. Furthermore, many of these users were already anti-vaccine and did not think COVID-19 was as dangerous as the media claimed. As a result, they were already a part of a conspiracy and misinformation ecosystem.

In reality, outside of the pure QAnon accounts, various radicalised Instagram accounts have contributed their branding, aesthetic images, militant and organised campaigning, and networks to QAnon (which are fairly large and unradicalized). This has led to the emergence of new influencers who have used their anti-child trafficking themes to translate QAnon myths and conspiracies to their 2,700,000 followers. In some situations, you could tell right away what these accounts think, but in others, you wouldn't know until you followed them and watched their highlights, lives, and tales to see whether they were QAnon or QAnon-affiliated accounts. Others employed branding and aesthetics to disguise QAnon content, or they used third-party technologies like Linktree to publish links that were previously blocked by Facebook and Instagram, amid their connections to business partners or their own online stores.

A comparison of QAnon SaveOurChildren Facebook groups, shows that there is a similar trend in data between Pastel QAnon and Save the Children. In an analysis of 37 groups, we can see that the growth in the membership of these QAnon SaveOurChildren Facebook groups (figure 23 and 24), matches with the July spike in followers for pastel QAnon influencers (figure 19.) What is interesting is that the creation of these groups occurred rapidly and matched the behavior of Pastel QAnon influencers; a few pages that existed prior to July 2020 (figure 24), rebranded in July 2020 to profit from the momentum of the hijacking of #SaveTheChildren. There are also similarities in the data, in regard to the increase in post counts (figure 25) and in the way that users interacted with the content (figure 26). When comparing figure 21 and 25, supplemented with a qualitative assessment of these communities, it is possible to conclude that the momentum of the take over of #SaveTheChildren likely lead to a change in user posting behavior due to the emotionally charged nature of the topic itself, as well as the perception that the platforms were trying to silence efforts to raise awareness about child trafficking as some users in these groups were not aware they were consuming QAnon content.

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<sup>257</sup> Rachel E. Greenspan, "How the Wayfair human-trafficking conspiracy theory grew out of QAnon," *Insider*, July 13 2020, <https://www.insider.com/wayfair-human-trafficking-conspiracy-theory-tied-to-qanon-2020-7>.

<sup>258</sup> Cecilia Kang and Sheera Frenkel, "'PizzaGate' Conspiracy Theory Thrives Anew in the TikTok Era," *The New York Times*, June 27 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/27/technology/pizzagate-justin-bieber-qanon-tiktok.html>.



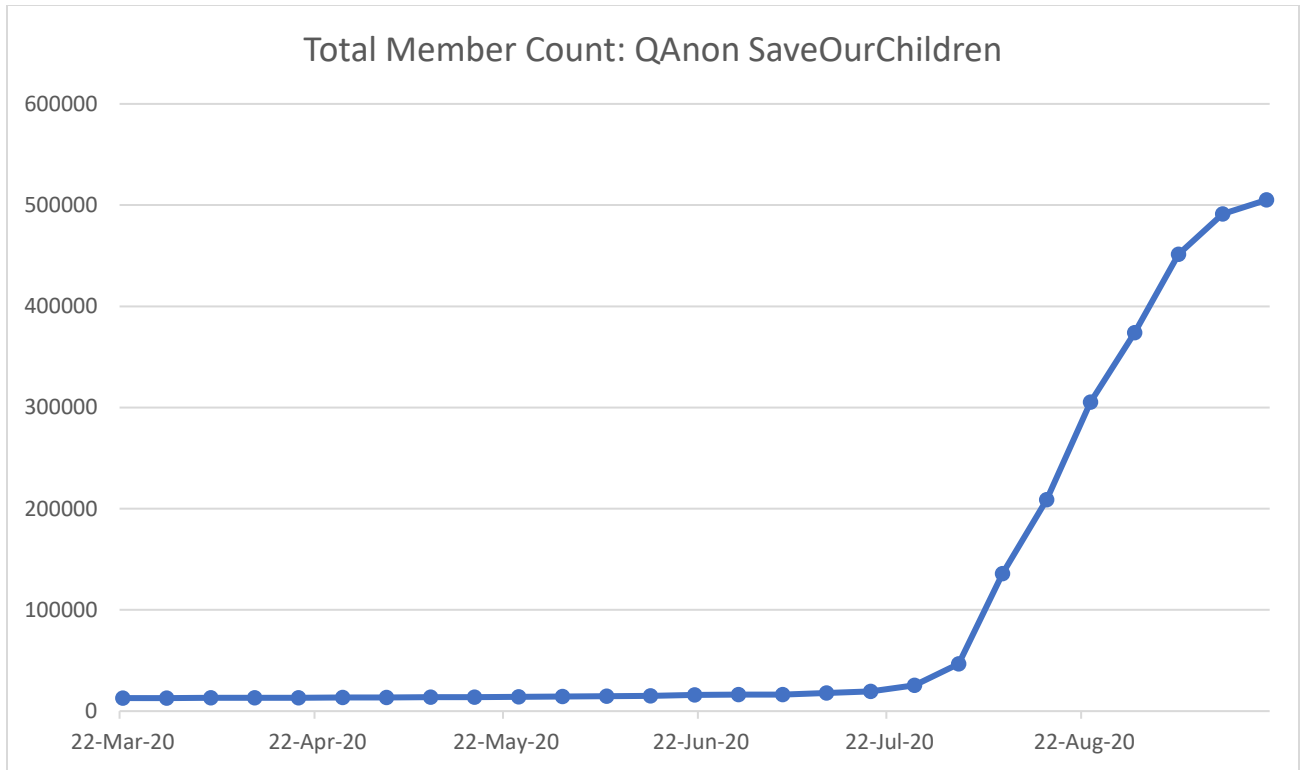


Figure 23 Membership count of QAnon SaveOurChildren groups, data collected via Crowdtangle between March and September 2020.

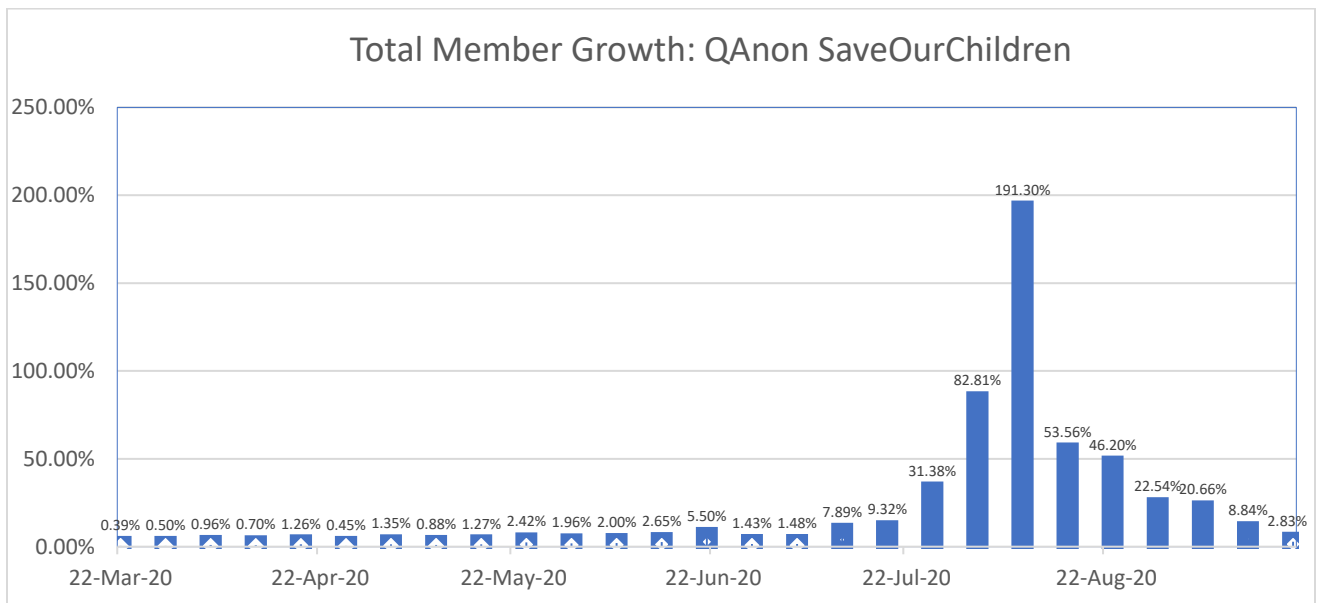


Figure 24 Membership growth of QAnon SaveOurChildren groups, data collected via Crowdtangle between March and September 2020.

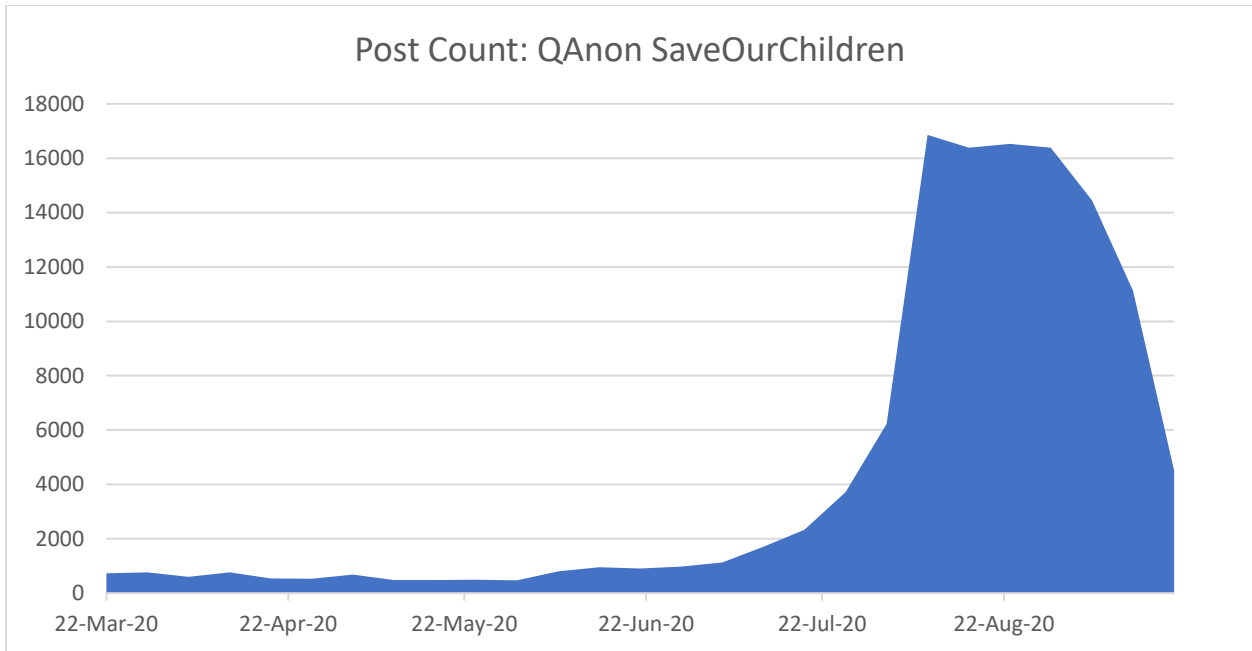


Figure 25 Post count of QAnon SaveOurChildren groups, data collected via Crowdtangle between March and September 2020

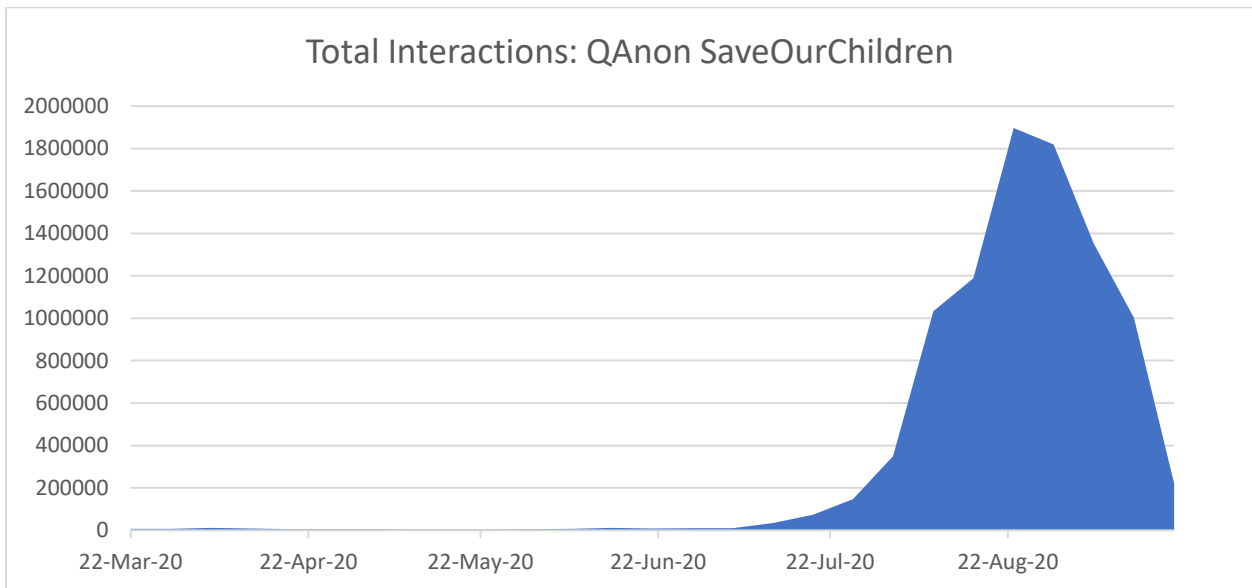


Figure 26 Post count of QAnon SaveOurChildren groups, data collected via Crowdtangle between March and September 2020.

Date	Sum of Total Member Count	Sum of Total Member Growth	Sum of Total Interactions	Sum of Interaction Growth	Sum of Interactions Per Post	Sum of Comments	Sum of Shares	Sum of Total Reactions (including Likes)	Sum of Photo Interaction Rate	Sum of Link Interaction Rate	Sum of Status Interaction Rate	Sum of Facebook Video Interaction Rate (excluding Live)
22-Mar	12891	0.0039	7315	0	10.03	1229	2124	3962	5%	12%	3%	6%
29-Mar	12955	0.005	7661	0.0473	10.01	1555	2152	3954	7%	11%	4%	6%
05-Apr	13080	0.0096	11231	0.466	18.59	1297	5961	3973	7%	25%	3%	12%
12-Apr	13171	0.007	9101	-0.1897	11.96	1477	3231	4393	8%	15%	6%	13%
19-Apr	13337	0.0126	6114	-0.3282	11.2	940	2662	2512	7%	14%	8%	7%
26-Apr	13397	0.0045	5603	-0.0836	10.51	1106	1320	3177	11%	9%	3%	9%
03-May	13578	0.0135	5558	-0.008	8.16	948	1796	2814	8%	9%	2%	10%
10-May	13698	0.0088	4162	-0.2512	8.56	813	1031	2318	8%	7%	2%	7%
17-May	13872	0.0127	4148	-0.0034	8.68	819	1028	2301	9%	7%	3%	4%
24-May	14208	0.0242	4766	0.149	9.55	684	1840	2242	8%	7%	5%	8%
31-May	14487	0.0196	6258	0.3131	13.29	1037	2334	2887	18%	6%	6%	11%
07-Jun	14777	0.02	7048	0.1262	8.84	1074	1746	4228	8%	5%	5%	12%
14-Jun	15169	0.0265	10854	0.54	11.43	1796	3518	5540	8%	11%	8%	7%
21-Jun	16004	0.055	8669	-0.2013	9.58	1551	2726	4392	7%	8%	6%	6%
28-Jun	16233	0.0143	9607	0.1082	9.79	1822	2675	5110	8%	8%	4%	5%
05-Jul	16474	0.0148	10365	0.0789	9.2	2151	2766	5448	8%	6%	6%	6%
12-Jul	17773	0.0789	34827	2.3601	20.38	6662	7577	20588	17%	12%	13%	6%
19-Jul	19430	0.0932	72788	1.09	31.25	16601	16576	39611	23%	18%	19%	8%
26-Jul	25528	0.3138	147419	1.0253	39.63	25228	36096	86095	22%	20%	15%	10%
02-Aug	46667	0.8281	349989	1.3741	56.23	36646	163216	150127	13%	26%	9%	4%
09-Aug	135947	1.913	1032822	1.951	61.26	173140	318113	541569	7%	5%	4%	2%
16-Aug	208759	0.5356	1188833	0.1511	72.53	195936	362651	630246	6%	3%	3%	2%
23-Aug	305199	0.462	1896971	0.5957	114.78	301857	778172	816942	7%	4%	4%	1%
30-Aug	374006	0.2254	1819691	-0.0407	111.07	358161	599809	861721	5%	3%	3%	1%
06-Sep	451275	0.2066	1352780	-0.2566	93.66	341609	342123	669048	3%	2%	3%	1%
13-Sep	491187	0.0884	1001921	-0.2594	90.03	385728	243851	372342	3%	1%	4%	0%
20-Sep	505091	0.0283	220673	-0.7798	48.9	68442	46523	105708	2%	1%	1%	0%

Figure 27 Pivot Table of QAnon SaveOurChildrens groups, data collected via Crowdtangle between March and September 2020.

In sum, we can assume that the data collected indicates at least a correlation in the data between the takeover of #SaveTheChildren narratives by QAnon as can be highlighted by figure 27, as well as the graphs above. A qualitative analysis would lead me to believe that there is causation between these two incidents. Consequently, Pastel QAnon as a case study, offers some insight into how IMVE movements like QAnon can rapidly latch on to new audiences and be adapted to varying audiences, aesthetics and gender norms<sup>259</sup>. As Blee highlights “Gender also is highly significant on the macro level: far-right parties and movements employ highly gendered messages and ideologies. Yet, the use of gendered messages and ideologies varies across the far-right.”<sup>260</sup> Of particular note from this specific segment of the QAnon community, though they are actors who have mobilized online, for the most part they are not violent, though some were active participants in the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection. Pastel QAnon acts as a good exemplification of the spectrum of harm that QAnon can pose, especially during a pandemic, as Pastel QAnon influencers played a crucial role in spreading disinformation that poses a public health threat, as well as spread disinformation that is a threat to democratic institutions.

Furthermore, participating in QAnon does not appear to negatively impact the brand or clout of these influencers. Rather they saw growth in followers, and post interactions. This possibly lead to monetary benefits as most of these influencers had their own shops and links to accounts to receive donations. Though it is the same extremist ideology, pastel QAnon did not receive the same type of scrutiny from the media and the platform as the more visually anti-Semitic and extremist QAnon content due to the softening of the QAnon narratives and aesthetic. The light colours and manipulation of the core QAnon tenets to fit their audience base created new radicalization pipelines for QAnon. However, this reality creates new challenges for existing counter-terrorism and countering radicalization to violence tools, which need to be adapted. Furthermore, Pastel QAnon is a segment of QAnon where prevention and intervention would be valuable as the majority of the content falls within the awful but lawful category of digital content. These individuals had social media clout and are inherently trained and skilled in social media marketing and PR, specifically on how to maintain a certain image online no matter what you are selling, as many influencers often do. Some were even verified by the platform prior to getting radicalized into QAnon, this influence carried over into their QAnon conversion, making them powerful vectors of radicalization, but also important individuals for intervention efforts.

The policies of both platforms and governments need to take into consideration the gender dimension of extremist movements like QAnon. In the case of Pastel QAnon, this community presents new radicalization and these initial radicalization pipelines are important in prevention efforts, as women play an important role in QAnon-related violence and criminality, which cannot be overlooked. Though pastel QAnon is a woman dominant segment of QAnon, the QAnon movement is gender inclusive beyond this community subset and women play an important role in disseminating and creating

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<sup>259</sup> Various gender norms whether it be male stereotypes or female stereotypes, each can be leveraged for this purpose.

<sup>260</sup> Kathleen Blee, "Where Do We Go from Here? Positioning Gender in Studies of the Far Right," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21, no. 4 (2021): 421.

QAnon propaganda in their role as political figures as well as they leverage conspiracy theories to build up their careers.

## 3.2 QAnon Women in Politics

Women in QAnon are more than social media influencers, in some instances, they are also players in the political arena, while a few have even attained public offices. QAnon is more than just a violent extremist threat, but it is also an important threat to democratic institutions, which can erode trust in significant political institutions and processes. Therefore, this section will look at how many women have run for office since 2020 while advocating or backing QAnon. It will analyze the many methods in which they mobilized support for QAnon throughout their electoral campaigns, as well as the numerous narratives that coalesced around them.

QAnon made its official political debut in the United States in the 2020 election, with women at the vanguard of the campaign. While former President Donald Trump has been accused of implicitly endorsing<sup>261</sup> or approving<sup>262</sup> support for QAnon in the past, according to Alex Kaplan, 107 people ran for office in the US general election with links to the conspiracy theory, 37 of them were female.<sup>263</sup> After participating in primary elections or meeting other qualifications to be included on the ballot, 16 of these female Q-supporting candidates qualified to be on the November general election ballot. Twelve of the 16 candidates were Republicans vying for Congress; two others ran for Senate, one as a write-in candidate and the other as a candidate for the Delaware Independent Party. This means that just over one-seventh of the record 94 female Republican Congressional candidates in the 2020 election<sup>264</sup> expressed some level of public support for QAnon. Furthermore, Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Lauren Boebert of Colorado were the only two Q-supporting candidates to win Congressional seats. At the state legislature level, Kaplan identified 10 individual working as public servants two of which were women<sup>265</sup> in 2020, and out of the four QAnon adherents running in state legislature elections in 2021 two of them are women.<sup>266</sup> The participation of QAnon adherents in the political arena, does not seem to be slowing down, as Kaplan's tracking of the 2022 congressional races has already identified 47 congressional candidates (34 of which ran for congress in 2020 and lost) who have embraced QAnon 15 of which are women<sup>267</sup>; finally, of the seven QAnon adherents running for governor in 2022, two of them are women<sup>268</sup>.

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<sup>261</sup> Amanda Holpuch, "White House says Trump doesn't know of QAnon, despite his tacit endorsement," *The Guardian*, August 23 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/23/donald-trump-qanon-conspiracy-theory>.

<sup>262</sup> Katie Rogers and Kevin Roose, "Trump Says QAnon Followers Are People Who 'Love Our Country'," *The New York Times*, August 19 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/us/politics/trump-qanon-conspiracy-theories.html>.

<sup>263</sup> Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2022."

<sup>264</sup> Kelly Dittmar, "The 2020 primaries are over. Here's what you need to know about the record numbers of women nominees.," *Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics* 2020, <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/election-analysis/post-primary-analysis-women-2020>.

<sup>265</sup> Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for state legislatures in 2020."

<sup>266</sup> Kaplan, "Multiple people seeking to run state elections are connected to QAnon."

<sup>267</sup> Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2022."

<sup>268</sup> Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for governor in 2021 and 2022."

These figures are critical. Not only have women traditionally been underrepresented in politics<sup>269</sup>, but they are also often restricted to supporting positions in extremist movements<sup>270</sup>, which is a misconception,<sup>271</sup> due to their connection with the group being understudied<sup>272</sup>. As a result, the large number of female leaders in the QAnon extreme movement is both unique and noteworthy. Therefore, rather than focusing on a causal relationship between an essentialist understanding of gender and a politicized understanding of IMVE, this section will consider the role of gender plays in shaping QAnon both conceptually and in practice. IMVE and QAnon are gendered, but not necessarily in the manner that “women's” involvement in it can be attributed to some generic motive.

### 3.2.1 Narratives of Female Electoral Candidates who are Firm Supporters of QAnon

A number of female politicians were adamant in their support for QAnon, with some, such as Republican Senate candidate Jo Rae Perkins of Oregon, acknowledging that her frequent endorsement of QAnon was both a component of her campaign strategy and a sincerely held personal opinion.<sup>273</sup> Throughout her campaign, Perkins was likely one of the most ardent Q supporters, often commenting about the conspiracy. Perkins also

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<sup>269</sup> Saskia Brechenmacher, "Tackling Women's Underrepresentation in U.S. Politics: Comparative Perspectives From Europe," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 20 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/20/tackling-women-s-underrepresentation-in-u.s.-politics-comparative-perspectives-from-europe-pub-75315>; UN Women, "Facts and figures: Women's leadership and political participation," *UN Women*, January 15 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>; Razan Masad, "The struggle for women in politics continues," *United Nations Development Programme*, March 13 2020, <https://www.undp.org/blog/struggle-women-politics-continues>.

<sup>270</sup> Julia Billings, "People, Not Pawns: Women's Participation in Violent Extremism across MENA," *US AID*, September 2015, [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE\\_RESEARCHBRIEF\\_PEOPLENOTPAWNS.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE_RESEARCHBRIEF_PEOPLENOTPAWNS.pdf).

<sup>271</sup> Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, "'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, May 2015, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/till-martyrdom-do-us-part-gender-and-the-isis-phenomenon/>; Imtashal Tariq and Laura Sjoberg, "Women and Violent Extremism: Concepts and Theories," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* (2021). <https://oxfordre.com/criminology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264079-e-683>.

<sup>272</sup> Julia Santucci, Regina Waugh, and Hallie Schneir, "Gender and Right-Wing Extremism in America: Why Understanding Women's Roles is Key to Preventing Future Acts of Domestic Terrorism," *Just Security*, March 5 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/75068/gender-and-right-wing-extremism-in-america-why-understanding-womens-roles-is-key-to-preventing-future-acts-of-domestic-terrorism/>.

<sup>273</sup> See video archived by Media Matters <https://www.mediamatters.org/media/3845226>.

released a video of herself repeating an “oath” (figure 28) to become a “digital soldier” of



Figure 28 Screen cap of the video Joe Rae Perkins posted to her official Twitter account reciting the QAnon oath accompanied by QAnon hashtags and slogans.

QAnon on June 27, 2020, which Q had pushed followers to do in a Qdrop days before.<sup>274</sup> Perkins, in fact, reacted to the invitation to take the oath barely three days after Q released the guidelines, making her one of the oath's early adopters and the first QAnon candidate to do so. This fast answer to Q's call for fealty distinguishes her as one of the most ardent QAnon supporters in the race. Furthermore, only four of the political

<sup>274</sup> Jo Rae Perkins (@PerkinsForUSSen), "Jo Rae Perkins US Senate Nominee, Oregon - honored to #TakeTheOath, as one of the thousands of #DigitalSoldiers #PerkinsForUSSenate #Oregon #SaveOurRepublic #WWG1WGA," Twitter, June 27, 2020, [https://web.archive.org/web/\\*/https://twitter.com/PerkinsForUSSen/status/1276778441082167296](https://web.archive.org/web/*/https://twitter.com/PerkinsForUSSen/status/1276778441082167296).

candidates who backed Q took the oath, three of them were women: Perkins, Darlene Swaffar of Florida<sup>275</sup>, and Catherine Stonestreet Purcell of Delaware<sup>276</sup>.

Catherine Purcell was one of the few QAnon candidates who did not run as a Republican despite her strong support for the conspiracy. She instead campaigned for Congress as a member of the Delaware Independent Party. Despite, her running as an independent, she regularly showed strong support for former President Trump. Purcell's radicalization path looks to be emblematic of the newest generation of QAnon adherents that were radicalized in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic, the death of George Floyd and a revival of the Pizzagate/Child trafficking/Satanic Panic narratives that have been amplified by QAnon.<sup>277</sup> She reveals in a YouTube video<sup>278</sup> that she first found QAnon while investigating human sex trafficking on social media, and that she has never been to 8kun, the chan site where “Q” publishes directly, which she incorrectly believes is housed on the “dark web.” Purcell, like many younger QAnon followers, tends to follow updates from other QAnon influencers on more mainstream social media channels, where Qdrops are ‘decoded’ and diluted further by other theories and misinformation. This distinguishes Purcell from early QAnon supporters, who were mostly limited to chan sites and other more esoteric corners of the Internet before to the conspiracy theory's fast expansion in 2020.<sup>279</sup>

While most of Purcell’s public remarks related to QAnon stem from some of the more obscure claims made by the QAnon conspiracy community, child abuse and child sex trafficking were certainly among the most common narratives espoused by female QAnon candidates. This is Key as Purcell decided to throw her hat into the political arena, as other female congressional candidates, due to QAnon’s “appropriation of language and themes traditionally used to raise public awareness of child trafficking, such as the campaign work of Save the Children and other international NGOs.”<sup>280</sup> For example, Mykel Barthelemy, a Georgia congressional candidate, posted a meme on her Facebook page suggesting that child slaves will be freed soon as a consequence of the QAnon campaign (figure 29). Bathelemy then used the same account to promote the conspiracy theory<sup>281</sup> that Hillary Clinton was involved in a child sex ring, both narratives are central to the QAnon ideology.

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<sup>275</sup> Alex Kaplan (@AlKapDC), "Darlene Swaffar, a QAnon-supporting congressional candidate in Florida, a few days ago tweeted a video of herself taking the QAnon oath. She is the 3rd known congressional candidate to do so, alongside candidates in Hawaii & Oregon. ," Twitter, August 2, 2020, [https://web.archive.org/web/\\*/https://twitter.com/AlKapDC/status/1289957265609388039](https://web.archive.org/web/*/https://twitter.com/AlKapDC/status/1289957265609388039).

<sup>276</sup> "Elect Catherine," 2020, accessed September 2021, <https://electcatherine.com/>.

<sup>277</sup> Aoife Gallagher, Jacob Davey, and Mackenzie Hart, *The Genesis of a Conspiracy Theory*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (July 24 2020), <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-genesis-of-a-conspiracy-theory/>.

<sup>278</sup> Catherine Stonestreet (Catherine Stonestreet), "Catherine Stonestreet Purcell for US HOUSE of REPRESENTATIVES Delaware at large," October 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sB4rp0hwaTY>.

<sup>279</sup> Gallagher, Davey, and Hart, *The Genesis of a Conspiracy Theory*.

<sup>280</sup> Ciaran O’Connor et al., *The Boom Before the Ban: QAnon and Facebook*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (December 18 2020), <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-boom-before-the-ban-qanon-and-facebook/>.

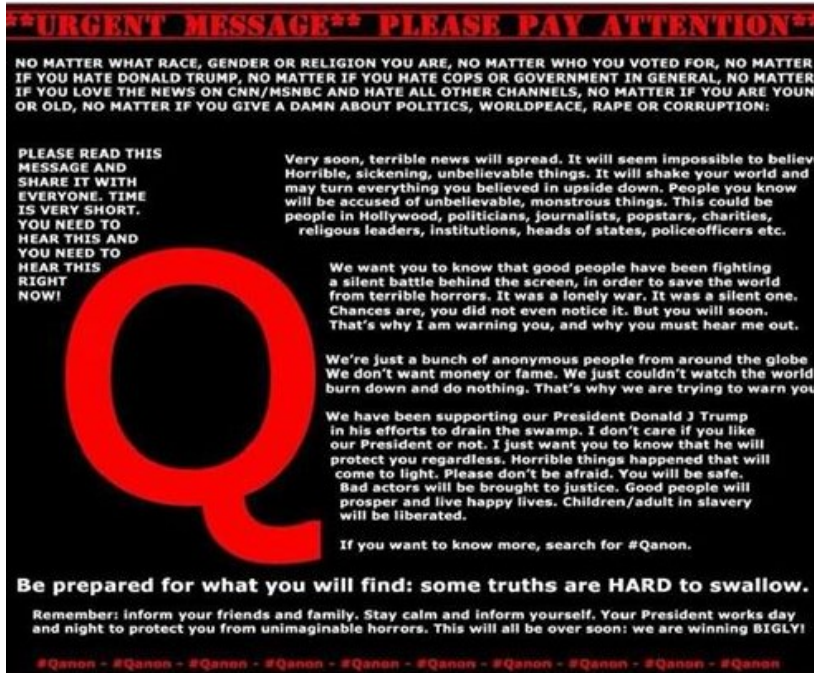
<sup>281</sup> The fake story she shares is form a known disinformation site called Your News Wire which was central to the inception of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory.





Mykel Barthelemy

January 7, 2018 · 🌐



👤 Rob Qui ▸ QAnon QClearance 4chan 8chan + related articles

January 7, 2018

Is everything going to go down before Trump gives his state of the union? Sure looks like it! Let's pray this evil cabal gets a mortal wound!

Figure 29 Screen cap of Mykel Barthelemy's official Facebook Page where she shared multiple QAnon memes as far back as 2018.

Additionally, as mentioned in chapter 1, some QAnon followers believe that a cabal of paedophilic elites are torturing and collecting in order to traffic “adrenochrome.” Adrenochrome is never expressed openly in Qdrops; however, it is central to the hyper-real ideology, as it is mentioned in key films amplified by “Q” and QAnon influencers. Due to the community’s active role in “decoding”, though not canonical to Qdrops, Adrenochrome has become a common narrative among QAnon adherents. Adrenochrome is featured prominently in QAnon documentaries like Fall Cabal and is regularly mentioned in the more extreme<sup>282</sup> QAnon propaganda. Adrenochrome is also featured in the most antisemitic QAnon propaganda<sup>283</sup> as it finds its roots in the antisemitic Russian conspiracy theory the Elder Protocols of Zion.<sup>284</sup> These extreme narratives and their antisemitic roots, did not stop Texas Republican Congressional candidate Catherine Carr

<sup>282</sup> Tarpley Hitt, "How QAnon Became Obsessed With ‘Adrenochrome,’ an Imaginary Drug Hollywood Is ‘Harvesting’ from Kids," *The Daily Beast*, August 14 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-qanon-became-obsessed-with-adrenochrome-an-imaginary-drug-hollywood-is-harvesting-from-kids>.

<sup>283</sup> ADL, "QAnon’s Antisemitism and What Comes Next," *ADL*, September 21 2021, <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/qanons-antisemitism-and-what-comes-next#banned-from-most-social-media-believers-migrate-to-telegram>.

<sup>284</sup> Friedberg, "The Dark Virality of a Hollywood Blood-Harvesting Conspiracy."

to tweet several times about adrenochrome<sup>285</sup>, saying that the Democratic party has established a paedophile network to farm Adrenochrome. Many of Carr's tweets echoed Catherine Purcell's accusations that China and Russia were the primary perpetrators of child trafficking.

What these examples highlight are that female QAnon candidates found the conspiratorial assertions about child sex trafficking to be especially poignant. The women who were staunch fans of QAnon ran for office in the hopes of becoming more than just “digital soldiers”; the final objective of their campaigns was to be elected in order to aid former-President Trump and the Q-Team in their battle against the Deep State. The fact that this is a nonviolent type of mobilisation is crucial. These people were radicalised online and went on to run political campaigns in order to promote QAnon's ideological goals. Women in QAnon have been consistently mobilised for both nonviolent and violent activities, demonstrating that they do not merely play supporting roles in the movement, but rather act with force and impact. These candidates may not constitute a direct danger to democratic institutions, but they do pose a threat to democratic institutions. Furthermore, by attaining political capital and positions of authority, women who are staunch followers of QAnon might serve as a catalyst for future acts of extremist violence.

### 3.2.2 Narratives of Female Electoral Candidates who are Ambivalent Supporters of QAnon

Not all of the contestants were as enthusiastic about the plot. A few candidates seemed to keep their involvement with the conspiracy to a minimum or were simply more into the conspiracy theories that are adjacent to QAnon, but participated in similar ecosystems, others might have downplayed their adherence to QAnon fearing that being labelled a “QAnon candidate” might jeopardize their electoral prospects. Elizabeth Felton, a Florida congresswoman who only officially embraced the QAnon theory after losing her primary election in August 2020, was one such candidate. Prior to the primary, Felton's public involvement with the QAnon conspiracy was limited to (at most) three videos on her TikTok account<sup>286</sup>, in which she warned viewers to be wary of the mainstream media and encouraged them to investigate claims made by American conspiracy theorist Cathy O'Brein in a video that featured the word “Pizzagate”<sup>287</sup> on screen. Notably, she did not use the hashtag “Q” in any of her videos at the time, as this was a time when TikTok was attempting to stop the spread of QAnon. As highlighted by Ciaran O'Connor “TikTok has introduced measures to combat the spread of QAnon content across its platform,

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<sup>285</sup> cathycarrgcac (@cathycarrgcac), "Don't worry about it after they vaccinate the children the children will be gone and well the ones that make it they will be sacrificed a million children a year or sacrifice to adrenochrome and that is a legal drug but they want to make your guns illegal.," Twitter, September 10, 2021, <https://twitter.com/cathycarrgcac/status/1436337523895279616>; cathycarrgcac (@cathycarrgcac), "With everybody there we could easily have the Continental convention sand many states and take care of this bull crap we could also correct a lot of things like getting rid of adrenochrome making pedophilia a federal crime and also making election fraud a federal crime.," Twitter, December 31, 2020,

<https://twitter.com/cathycarrgcac/status/1344774624534552576>; cathycarrgcac (@cathycarrgcac), Twitter, 2020-2021, [https://twitter.com/search?q=%22adrenochrome%22%20from%3Acathycarrgcac&src=typed\\_query&f=live](https://twitter.com/search?q=%22adrenochrome%22%20from%3Acathycarrgcac&src=typed_query&f=live).

<sup>286</sup> Elizabeth Felton (@elizabethfelton8), TikTok, July 20, 2020,

[https://www.tiktok.com/@elizabethfelton8/video/6855446244693642501?lang=en&is\\_copy\\_url=1&is\\_from\\_webapp=v3](https://www.tiktok.com/@elizabethfelton8/video/6855446244693642501?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v3).

<sup>287</sup> Kang and Frenkel, "'PizzaGate' Conspiracy Theory Thrives Anew in the TikTok Era."

including the banning of popular hashtags. These have, however, proved inadequate, and through simple techniques such as alternative hashtag spellings, users are continuing to promulgate conspiracy theories of the most extreme kind.”<sup>288</sup> O’Connor further highlights that “in late July, following Twitter’s action against thousands of QAnon-associated accounts, TikTok banned popular Q hashtags like #QAnon, #WWG1WGA, and #Adrenochrome”<sup>289</sup>, which combined with her electoral campaigning likely explains why there was no use of QAnon language in the post at the time, but was included in a veiled way within the video.

This conclusion is based on the fact that since losing the Florida primary on August 18, Felton has frequently released videos openly mentioning the QAnon conspiracy and has used the “Q” hashtag 18 times. In these more recent TikToks, Felton claims that “powerful pedophile cabals”<sup>290</sup> encourage transgender youngsters to take puberty blocking hormones as part of their gender confirmation process, that the 6 January insurgency was a hoax and false flag<sup>291</sup>, and promotes other theories common with QAnon adherents. Although Felton may have simply become more radical since losing the primary election, the fact that she has expressed increasingly open support for QAnon on social media since her political defeat suggests that she may have been hesitant to fully endorse the conspiracy in the past for fear of harming her political campaign and/or avoiding social media regulation of content.

Similarly, Angela Stanton-King, a Republican Congressional candidate in Georgia with one of the highest social media followings of all of the QAnon candidates, looked to be actively involved in the QAnon group while vehemently denying her affiliation with the conspiracy. Stanton appeared to be one of the most outspoken Q-supporting candidates, using hashtags co-opted by the QAnon movement on social media such as “#SaveOurChildren” and accusing Democrat politicians of using US tax dollars to “kill and dismember babies,”<sup>292</sup> one of the more extreme claims believed by devout QAnon supporters. When asked about her involvement with QAnon, Stanton-King repeatedly denied it, claiming dubiously<sup>293</sup> that she simply used QAnon-affiliated hashtags to reach a

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<sup>288</sup> Ciaran O’Connor, “TikTok Fails to Stop the Spread of QAnon Conspiracies on its Platform,” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, October 16 2020, [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/tiktok-fails-to-stop-spread-of-qanon-conspiracy/](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/tiktok-fails-to-stop-spread-of-qanon-conspiracy/).

<sup>289</sup> O’Connor, “TikTok Fails to Stop the Spread of QAnon Conspiracies on its Platform.”

<sup>290</sup> Elizabeth Felton (@elizabethfelton8), TikTok, March 21, 2021,

[https://www.tiktok.com/@elizabethfelton8/video/6942196866763197702?lang=en&is\\_copy\\_url=1&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1](https://www.tiktok.com/@elizabethfelton8/video/6942196866763197702?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1).

<sup>291</sup> Elizabeth Felton (@elizabethfelton8), “#elizabethfelton #maga #magamillionmarch #fakenews #firecongress2022 #stopthesteall #patriots #Q #fairelections #lawandorder #staged #wherewego #news,” TikTok, 2021,

[https://www.tiktok.com/@elizabethfelton8/video/6915028101101636869?lang=en&is\\_copy\\_url=1&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1](https://www.tiktok.com/@elizabethfelton8/video/6915028101101636869?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1).

<sup>292</sup> Angela Stanton King (@theangiestanton), “Regardless of who the Democrats put forth to speak on their behalf never forget that they want to use our tax dollars to kill and dismember babies,” Twitter, August 19, 2020,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210228234657/https://twitter.com/theangiestanton/status/1296036322143014914>.

<sup>293</sup> In a statement, Angela Stanton-King, the Republican candidate in Georgia’s strongly Democratic 5th Congressional District, stated that a post on Instagram linked to a QAnon video that starts, “This would explain why they worked so hard to make us hate him...” was just questioning the movement. She further clarified that her usage of QAnon hashtags in tweets did not imply that she was a member, saying that she used a variety of hashtags to broaden her exposure on social media. Jim Anderson, Nicholas Riccardi, and Alan Fram, “Colorado candidate is latest in GOP linked to QAnon,” *Associated Press*, July 2 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-politics-ap-top-news-religion-campaigns-e21311e35e7063834222942a1702211b>.

large audience on social media, and on another occasion, claiming that she “[didn't] know anything about QAnon”<sup>294</sup> before storming out of an interview.

It's worth noting that, at the time Stanton-King was campaigning, mainstream social media platforms were seeking to control QAnon, which is why, as indicated above, supporters of the conspiracy used the hashtag “#SaveTheChildren” to try to avoid 'censorship' and having their postings deleted. Stanton-ambiguous King's acceptance of QAnon was most likely a similar effort to avoid being banned from social media sites while still signalling her support for the story to the larger QAnon group. Indeed, Stanton-King represents a number of female candidates who tried to 'have it both ways' during their Congressional campaign by publicly expressing their support for the conspiracy to their online followers while also attempting to distance themselves from the conspiracy in order to protect their political legitimacy. Other candidates, like Tricia Flanagan, who ran for US Senate in New Jersey, seemed to use this technique as well, by avoiding publicly backing QAnon yet implying their belief in the conspiracy to potential voters online.<sup>295</sup>

Finally, Stanton-King was candid about her personal experience as a victim of child sexual abuse throughout her political campaign, alluding to it as one of the events that drove her to run for Congress on her now-defunct Instagram account. When she spoke on the QAnon conspiracy at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2021, she also said that her own experiences as a victim of assault meant that she was willing to look into the QAnon conspiracy's claims of sexual abuse. These reasons are likely representative of one of the worst truths of the QAnon conspiracy, which is that it may resonate especially strongly with sexual assault survivors.<sup>296</sup> This is supported by a START study from 2021<sup>297</sup>, which looked at a group of 31 QAnon members who had committed crimes in the United States before or during the Capitol insurgency. According to the survey, 41% of the people in this sample were radicalized after witnessing a horrific occurrence.<sup>298</sup> It emphasizes that 75 percent of the mothers in this group were radicalized after a family member or romantic partner physically or sexually assaulted their kid. “These women seem to have been driven to the QAnon conspiracy

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<sup>294</sup> Guardian News (Guardian News), "Angela Stanton King, who is working to help Donald Trump win Black voters, walks out of an interview with the Guardian after questioning over her views on the QAnon conspiracy theory. Asked whether she believed the retailer Wayfair was involved in a global pedophilia conspiracy, she says: 'You know they are. You saw it. You watch the news just like I did'," YouTube, October 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOguy8lo1w>.

<sup>295</sup> Tricia Flanagan (R-NJ) For U.S. Senate (@NewDayForNJ), "Desciple: @TheTruDisciple MoreDesciple Retweeted Tricia Flanagan (R-NJ) For U.S. Senate 'We are with you... Please carry on the fight... Bless you... The Great Awakening..#WWG1WGAWORLDWIDE' Tricia Flanagan (R-NJ) For U.S. Senate @NewDayForNJ The scariest words a neighborhood can hear— “Public safety threat released in your community” I'm the only U.S. Senate Candidate in NJ who stands with #ICE & I'm...' Tricia Flanagan (R-NJ) For U.S. Senate @NewDayForNJ Replying to @TheTruDisciple 'God bless you...ThanQ'," April 4, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200405143550/https://twitter.com/NewDayForNJ/status/1246463861059919872>.

<sup>296</sup> EJ Dickson, "Why Sexual-Abuse Survivors Are Getting Sucked Into QAnon," *Rolling Stone*, November 18 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/qanon-sexual-assault-save-children-conspiracy-theory-1090992/>; Lorna Bracewell, "Gender, Populism, and the QAnon Conspiracy Movement," *Frontiers in Sociology* 5, no. 615727 (2021); "QAnon: What the Viral Conspiracy Theory Can Teach Us about the Mainstream Sex Trafficking Debate," *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*, no. Forthcoming (2020), [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3893981](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3893981).

<sup>297</sup> Jensen and Kane, *QAnon Offenders in the United States*.

<sup>298</sup> Jensen and Kane, *QAnon Offenders in the United States*.

theory because of a narrative that presents adherents as crucial protagonists in the battle against child abuse and sex trafficking,” the report continues.<sup>299</sup> However, this 75 percent finding by START, while interesting, is a bit different than survivorship sentiment and community engagement. Targeting children and child abuse/sexual violence and the outrage that surrounds it can still comfortably fall in the heteronormative and conservative ideological understand of the role of men/women, sexuality and most importantly deviant behaviour. This can be done without strong allusions to non-normative or feminist ideas around gender and patriarchy and sexist beliefs. This is particularly crucial to remember when analyzing women's role in the conspiracy, since women are overrepresented as victims of sexual assault<sup>300</sup>, and rape conviction rates remain very low<sup>301</sup> when compared to other crimes<sup>302</sup>. While QAnon has a broad range of supporters from all demographics, understanding the attractiveness of the conspiracy to survivors of sexual abuse will be crucial to comprehending many women's support for it. The potential appeal to sexual assault survivors is a unique and potentially concerning finding in the analysis of Pastel QAnon. Its also worth noting, sexual assault survivors are often let down by institutions like the justice system and police/criminal investigative institutions – a view they have for very legitimate reasons. This likely makes them feel as though institutions that others have trust in are untrustworthy and require change. This sounds like a more reasonable version of what might easily translate to these survivors, who have fallen into QAnon: the institutions that have failed them are part Deep State they are corrupt, it is in their advantage to not deal with sexual assault survivors or child sexual exploitation as it is part of the adrenochrome harvesting process. The leap between their frustration at the institutions that have failed them and the explanation provided by the QAnon conspiracy theory is not so far off and makes sense that a vulnerable and traumatized individual would go from the former view to the latter with QAnon. This is a significant element that cannot be fully covered in this dissertation; however, it is a topic that would require additional investigation in the future with a proper investigation with survivors who were attracted to the QAnon ideology.

An analysis of the narratives of formal electoral candidates illustrates the significance of recognizing the conspiracy's attraction to women and how this may be leveraged to generate popular support (mainly by Republicans). Although not all candidates have been vociferous and open in their support, some of the female candidates running for Congress in 2020 have used more subtle signaling to the larger QAnon group online as an effective technique. Narratives about child sex trafficking, for example, should be understood since

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<sup>299</sup> Jensen and Kane, *QAnon Offenders in the United States*.

<sup>300</sup> Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women*, U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs (2000), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf>; Shana Conroy, *Police-reported violence against girls and young women in Canada, 2017*, Statistics Canada (December 17 2018), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54981-eng.htm>; Tjaden and Thoennes, *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women*; Laura Savage, *Intimate partner violence: Experiences of young women in Canada, 2018*, Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics (May 19 2021), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00009-eng.htm>.

<sup>301</sup> Sarah-Jane Lilley Walker et al., "Rape, inequality and the criminal justice response in England: The importance of age and gender," *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 21, no. 3 (2021), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1748895819863095>; Eliza A. Lehner, "Rape Process Templates: A Hidden Cause of the Underreporting of Rape," *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 29 (2018), <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlf/vol29/iss1/5/>.

<sup>302</sup> CPS, *CPS data summary Quarter 4 2019-2020*, The Crown Prosecution Service (July 3 2020), <https://www.cps.gov.uk/publication/cps-data-summary-quarter-4-2019-2020>.

they may have some connection with individual followers' personal experiences of sexual assault. Understanding women's positions within QAnon extremism will be critical, since the danger of the conspiracy looks to be persisting, despite several blows to the QAnon movement since Donald Trump's presidential loss. Multiple female candidates have already declared their plans to run for office again<sup>303</sup>, and many more are now vying for seats in regional municipal elections<sup>304</sup>, making it quite probable that a big number of QAnon candidates will reemerge in the upcoming US Congressional elections.

The significance of women in driving QAnon into the official political realm was underlined in this research of the narratives of QAnon women vying for office, and it was emphasized that understanding women's involvement within QAnon extremism would be vital in combating the conspiracy's continuing development. The following part will look at the political careers that women have started and how they utilize their positions to promote the QAnon conspiracy. In the examples of Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert, it will look at how women became Congresswomen, political figureheads in the case of Sidney Powell, and professional conspiracy theorists in the case of DeAnna Lorraine Tesoriero. The QAnon theory entrenched itself as part of the American political scene in 2020 and 2021, and began to play a role in the worldwide political environment in 2021, with women playing a key role in making the conspiracy a household brand.

### 3.2.3 QAnon Congresswomen

Lauren Boebert of Colorado and Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia are the most notable QAnon women in politics, with Lauren Boebert of Colorado and Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia being the only QAnon-supporting candidates standing for Congress in 2020 who were successful in obtaining their seats. Both Boebert and Greene showed mixed support for QAnon throughout their campaigns, at first seeming to embrace the theory or using it to attract to a larger audience but subsequently denying their support. Throughout her campaign, Lauren Boebert avoided openly identifying as a QAnon fan and has said<sup>305</sup> that she does not believe in the conspiracy theory. During an appearance on the “Steel Truth”<sup>306</sup>, a QAnon YouTube program, which has pushed the conspiracy theory, she seemed to urge support from QAnon supporters. She stated on the program that she was “quite acquainted” with the Q movement and that, although it was “more [her] mother's thing,” she hoped the conspiracy was true since it would indicate “America is growing stronger and better, and people are reverting to conservative beliefs.” Similarly, Boebert appeared on Patriot's Soapbox,<sup>307</sup> a very popular QAnon YouTube program, for QAnon devotees that has a live stream of people continually exchanging conspiracy ideas. While

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<sup>303</sup> Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2022."; Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for governor in 2021 and 2022."

<sup>304</sup> Kaplan, "Multiple people seeking to run state elections are connected to QAnon."

<sup>305</sup> Keagan Harsha, "Colorado primary winner Lauren Boebert meets President Trump, distances herself from QAnon," *Fox 31 Colorado*, July 6 2020, <https://kdvr.com/news/politics/colorado-primary-winner-lauren-boebert-meets-president-trump-distances-herself-from-qanon/>.

<sup>306</sup> Right Wing Watch (@RightWingWatch), "We can now add Lauren Boebert to the ever-growing list of QAnon supporters who are running for Congress. .", Twitter, May 18, 2020, <https://twitter.com/RightWingWatch/status/1262395371696816135?s=20>.

<sup>307</sup> Will Sommer, "GOPers Are Trying to Recruit QAnon Voters And Using This YouTube Show to Do It," *The Daily Beast*, July 16 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/gopers-are-trying-to-recruit-qanon-voters-and-using-patriots-soapbox-to-do-it>.

Boebert was cautious to avoid directly endorsing QAnon, her presence was undeniably a signal to the QAnon community. Greene, on the other hand, who has previously shown support for a variety of conspiracy theories<sup>308</sup>, looked to be more intimately involved with QAnon, even writing about it and promoting its ideology on a conspiracy theory news site<sup>309</sup>. Greene was a member of QAnon as early as November 2017, according to QAnon researcher Travis View.<sup>310</sup> During her Congressional campaign in 2018, she also explicitly referenced Q drops on her Facebook page<sup>311</sup>, a distinction that sets her apart from subsequent adopters of the conspiracy who may not interact directly with Q's writings.

Greene has also alleged that Seth Rich, a Democratic National Committee employee who was assassinated in 2016, was executed by MS-13 gang members working undercover for the Obama administration (figure 30).<sup>312</sup> The bogus accusation arises from QAnon members misinterpreting early tweets by Q citing the gang as suggestions that the Democrats were using MS-13 as undercover hitmen to execute political opponents. This indicates that not only was Greene an early subscriber of the conspiracy theory, but she was also deeply embedded in the QAnon network, addressing more esoteric portions of the theory than her fellow Congressional candidates throughout her campaign.

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<sup>308</sup> Daniel Funke, "What Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene has said about election fraud, QAnon and other conspiracy theories," *Politifact*, February 2 2021, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2021/feb/02/what-rep-marjorie-taylor-greene-has-said-about-ele/>.

<sup>309</sup> Marjorie Taylor Greene, "Publication List," *American Truth Seeker* 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180215143403/http://americantruthseekers.com/author/elizabeth-camp/>.

<sup>310</sup> Travis View (@travis\_view), "Marjorie Taylor Greene was involved in QAnon early. In November 2017, just a month after the first Q drops, she posted a 29-minute long Facebook Live video. In it, she repeatedly praises Q. "Q is a patriot. We know that for sure. But we do not know who Q is.," Twitter, 2021, [https://web.archive.org/save/https://twitter.com/travis\\_view/status/1345780109261811712](https://web.archive.org/save/https://twitter.com/travis_view/status/1345780109261811712).

<sup>311</sup> "Picture of Marjorie Taylor Greene directly quoting Qdrops," 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/media/3846101>.

<sup>312</sup> Eric Hananoki and Alex Kaplan, "GOP-backed House candidate Marjorie Taylor Greene: The Obama administration used MS-13 to assassinate Seth Rich," *Media Matters*, August 13 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/seth-rich-conspiracy-theory/gop-backed-house-candidate-marjorie-taylor-greene-obama-administration>.

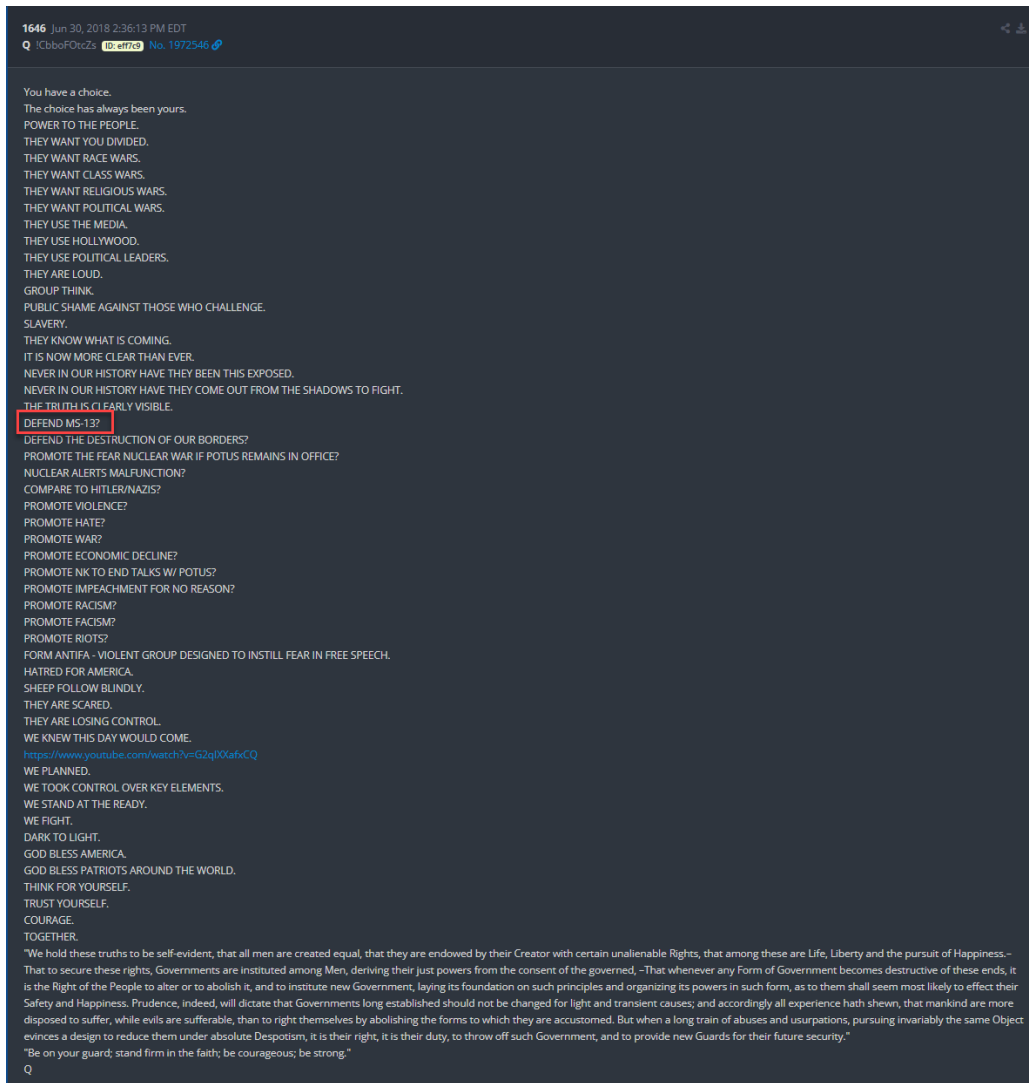


Figure 30 Screen cap of the June 30, 2018 Qdrop referencing MS-13 that was Quoted by Marjorie Taylor Greene.

Indeed, Greene seemed to support QAnon many times throughout her campaign, using hashtags associated with the theory on her social media profiles and apparently promoting “Q” on Twitter<sup>313</sup> and Greene also “has posted a series of tweets supporting QAnon, including one” since removed “encouraging her followers to write her with questions so she can ‘walk you through the entire thing,’” according to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Greene sought to disassociate herself from her status as a QAnon supporter in August 2020, stating that she had abandoned the theory after “discovering disinformation.”<sup>314</sup> This assertion, however, seems to be untrue, since Greene continued

<sup>313</sup>Jim Galloway, Greg Bluestein, and Tamar Hallerman, "The Jolt: When industry and neighborhoods mix, trouble often follows," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 2 2019, <https://www.ajc.com/blog/politics/the-jolt-when-industry-and-neighborhoods-mix-trouble-often-follows/L8ZzpatPYdC2utJzcvj1vM/>.

<sup>314</sup> Marisa Schultz, "Marjorie Greene, controversial Georgia Republican, says she's not a QAnon candidate," *Fox News*, August 14 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/marjorie-greene-georgia-gop-says-shes-not-a-qanon-candidate>.



to interact with the conspiracy theory (figure 31) after reportedly abandoning her support, and has subsequently labelled Q as a “source” packed with “patriotic passion”<sup>315</sup>.



Figure 31 Screen cap of Marjorie Taylor Greene engaging with a key QAnon influencer after claiming she no longer believed in it after the 2018 midterms.

Both Greene and Boebert have promoted several conspiratorial theories since commencing their time in Congress, including the rekindled “Stop the Steal” conspiracy<sup>316</sup>, in which Greene was one of the most prominent proponents, claiming that Donald Trump won the 2020 election<sup>317</sup>. The theory has been connected to both QAnon and as one of the primary themes that fueled the insurgency on January 6th.<sup>318</sup> Greene has also accepted a slew of other conspiracy theories, saying that President Biden used his position as Vice President to stop Ukrainian authorities investigating his son, Hunter, by

<sup>315</sup> Josh Roe, "GA Congressional candidate Marjorie Greene talks about masks, race, QAnon and more," *ABC News Channel 9*, July 30 2020, <https://newschannel9.com/news/election/full-interview-with-north-georgia-congressional-candidate-marjorie-greene>.

<sup>316</sup> Dinesh D'Souza (DineshDsouza), "Incoming Republican Congresswoman Says She Will Stand Up for Conservatives on January 6," Rumble, December 30, 2020, <https://rumble.com/vcaqj-incoming-republican-congresswoman-says-she-will-stand-up-for-conservatives-.html?mref=23gga&mc=8uxj1>.

<sup>317</sup> Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection," *Just Security*, February 10 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>.

<sup>318</sup> Ryan Goodman and Justin Hendrix, "January 6 Clearinghouse," *Just Security*, November 2 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/77022/january-6-clearinghouse/>.

filing articles of impeachment<sup>319</sup> against him. Following an official investigation, the charges were thoroughly debunked, but they remain popular talking points among hard-line Republicans and the QAnon movement. Greene also continues to interact with members of QAnon, as though she wants to capitalise on the conspiracy community's support by gently signalling her pro-QAnon supporters. Greene recently shared a video her staff created that included Facebook comments from supporters who praised Greene for “clearing the swamp” and exposing the “deep state,”<sup>320</sup> two important catchphrases utilised by QAnon followers.

### 3.2.4 Women as Political Figureheads

Sidney Powell, a former lawyer for Trump<sup>321</sup>, is one of the most notable women on the political scene who has publicly endorsed the QAnon conspiracy, apart from the women who ran for Congress on a QAnon platform. Her close relationship to the previous president, as well as her support for QAnon narratives and conspiracy theories, made her an instant celebrity in QAnon circles in 2020, irking older QAnon influences she eclipsed. Powell continues to be important in QAnon and conspiracy theory circles even after President Biden's inauguration. Powell was a member of Trump's legal team and represented Michael Flynn, Trump's former national security adviser<sup>322</sup>, who also supports QAnon and notably swore the “digital soldier oath”<sup>323</sup> as part of his Independence Day festivities on July 4, 2020. Powell gained to fame after the November 2020 US election, when she developed a legal case against Joe Biden and the Democrats, claiming they did not win the election. In an interview with Fox Business, she referred to the case she was putting together as a “Kraken”<sup>324</sup> that, if revealed, would show Biden had not won the election legitimately. Under the hashtag #ReleaseTheKraken, QAnon members, Trump supporters, and conspiracy theorists all bolstered Powell's argument in favour of the legal challenge to the election results.<sup>325</sup> Powell's argument fueled a widely held conspiracy notion that Trump would be inaugurated on January 20th, rather than Biden. Powell made unsubstantiated charges of voter fraud and repeated misinformation about voting equipment used in the election in court filings submitted as part of her complaint; not only were the claims lies, but the documents were riddled with grammatical errors, referenced locations that do not exist, or included districts where

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<sup>319</sup> Marjorie Taylor Greene, H.Res.57 - Impeaching Joseph R. Biden, President of the United States, for abuse of power by enabling bribery and other high crimes and misdemeanors., (Congress, 2021).

<sup>320</sup> Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene (@RepMTGreene), "The support for my Articles of Impeachment against President Joe Biden is incredible!! As I always say, it's people over politicians. Thankfully the people have my back, and that's what matters most!," Facebook, January 22, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1156721521449966>.

<sup>321</sup> Joe Walsh, "Who Is Sidney Powell? Meet Trump's New Top Conspiracy Theorist.," *Forbes*, November 20 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joewalsh/2020/11/20/who-is-sidney-powell-meet-trumps-new-top-conspiracy-theorist/?sh=6fa1cb761f9d>.

<sup>322</sup> BBC, "Michael Flynn: Trump pardons ex-national security adviser," *BBC*, November 26 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55080923>.

<sup>323</sup> Marshall Cohen, "Michael Flynn posts video featuring QAnon slogans," *CNN*, July 7 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/07/politics/michael-flynn-qanon-video/index.html>.

<sup>324</sup> Reality Check team and BBC Monitoring, "The Kraken: What is it and why has Trump's ex-lawyer released it?," *BBC*, November 28 2020.

<sup>325</sup> Jack Brewster, "How Sidney Powell's 'Kraken'—Pushed By QAnon—Went From Cable News To Trump Mainstream," *Forbes*, December 8 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2020/12/08/how-sidney-powells-kraken-pushed-by-qanon-went-from-cable-news-to-trump-mainstream/?sh=1113ec89609d>.

voter fraud occurred in other regions.<sup>326</sup> She specifically reiterated the assertion made by Ron Watkins<sup>327</sup> – a former administrator of 8chan and 8kun and the son of the site's owner, Jim Watkins – that the Dominion voting system was used to rig the election, and that foreign influence from China, Venezuela, and Iran helped Biden win. What occurred here, was Powell leveraged her political power and position to not only amplify QAnon conspiracy theories, but also relied on that information to inform her legal documents. Though ridiculous, this behavior poses a real risk to democratic institutions, as Powell gave voice in legal institutions to conspiracy theories, and platformed as experts various conspiracy theorists to support her “case”. Had she been more successful, there could have been significant impacts on democratic institutions, which could have led to a political coup.

Powell has featured on well-known QAnon-affiliated streams many times<sup>328</sup>, communicated with or retweeted QAnon influencers<sup>329</sup>, and utilised QAnon allusions in her tweets, in addition to promoting narratives from, or associated with, QAnon and representing both Trump and Flynn. Powell quickly became a QAnon favourite as a result of all of this. Powell launched a Telegram channel after being banned from Twitter in January 2021 for breaking the site's Coordinate Harmful Activity policy<sup>330</sup>, which now has 483,000 users and has become a key conduit for “neo-QAnon” information. However, the damage had already been done by the time she was banned, particularly considering the role her falsehoods and court proceedings played in promoting the Big Lie.

Political actors like Powell and Flynn, were crucial to the survival and growth of QAnon, after “Q” stopped posting in December 2020. In a study done by the German Marshall Fund (GMF), in the first quarter of 2021, verified account on Twitter shares of links to misleading sites fell.<sup>331</sup> In doing an analysis from before the pandemic in 2019 throughout 2020, they found that verified accounts shares of disinformation and conspiracy theories grew, peaking in the fourth quarter of 2020 with the Big Lie. The majority of those shares, according to their analysis came from a few prominent influencer accounts, including Donald Trump, Lin Wood, and Sydney Powell, all of which were suspended in the aftermath of the January 6 events.<sup>332</sup> Between the fourth quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, verified account shares of links to False Content Producers declined by 66 percent (from 17 million to 5.8 million), while shares of links to Manipulators fell by

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<sup>326</sup> Politico provides several examples of court filings and affidavits used by Powell and her team for the Kraken case in this summary of her cases CZach Montellaro and Kyle Cheney, "Pro-Trump legal crusade peppered with bizarre blunders," *Politico*, December 3 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/12/03/sidney-powell-trump-election-lawsuit-442472>.

<sup>327</sup> Drew Harwell, "To boost voter-fraud claims, Trump advocate Sidney Powell turns to unusual source: The longtime operator of QAnon's Internet home," *Washington Post*, December 1 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/12/01/powell-cites-qanon-watkins/>.

<sup>328</sup> Karim Zidan, "Sidney Powell Headlines 'Make America Free Again' Virtual Summit," *Right Wing Watch*, March 18 2021, <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/sidney-powell-headlines-make-america-free-again-virtual-summit/>.

<sup>329</sup> Donie O'Sullivan, "Sidney Powell is a beacon of hope to sad Qanon supporters," *CNN*, November 24 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/24/business/sidney-powell-qanon/index.html>.

<sup>330</sup> Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny, "Twitter bans Michael Flynn, Sidney Powell in QAnon account purge," *NBC News*, January 8 2021.

<sup>331</sup> Adrienne Goldstein, "Engagement with Deceptive Sites on Facebook and Twitter Dropped in the First Months of 2021," *German Marshall Fund*, May 25 2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/engagement-deceptive-sites-facebook-and-twitter-dropped-first-months-2021>.

<sup>332</sup> Goldstein, "Engagement with Deceptive Sites on Facebook and Twitter Dropped in the First Months of 2021."

56 percent (from 30 million to 13 million).<sup>333</sup> GMF found that the deplatforming of key actors like Powell played a key role in this reduction.

I describe Powell as neo-QAnon since she neither directly interprets Q-drops nor is fully engaged in the QAnon philosophy, but she has amassed a following of conspiracy theorists and Trump supporters who consume QAnon-related stuff. For example, she was a keynote speaker at the “For God and Country Patriot Roundup” event in Dallas on Memorial Day, which is organised by a well-known QAnon influencer and his wife<sup>334</sup> and caters to the QAnon-adjacent hard-line MAGA audience<sup>335</sup>. She was joined by Michael Flynn. Powell also spoke at the right-wing “Health and Freedom Conference” in Tulsa in April, which resulted in the burning of Covid masks<sup>336</sup>. Powell has garnered criticism for some QAnon followers depending exclusively on her postings to interpret QAnon information, since she has eclipsed many of the older, more established QAnon influencers in terms of notoriety. Other influencers ultimately fought back against this critique, implying that Powell is an ally of the QAnon group, but that her word on interpreting Q material should not be taken as gospel after some internal conflicts within the conspiracy community. Although several QAnon influencers see the information she shares on social media as fictitious, the rank and file of the group, as well as those who are QAnon-adjacent, continue to look to her for optimism that the election results will be reversed. Powell is still perceived as an anti-government figure in Trump's supporters' circles, according to them. Because of Powell's position of authority as a lawyer and her closeness to people in power, as well as the fact that she seems to act without consequence, the material she publishes on social media should be considered a possible threat vector. Powell has surged forward, sustaining the QAnon mythos and continually promoting fresh conspiracy ideas, when other earlier QAnon influencers have stalled in their narratives and aspirations, especially following Biden's inauguration. This has resulted in an increase in her fan base as well as her impact. Sidney Powell must be recognised as one of the female figureheads at the very vanguard of the political QAnon movement, having made a career inside the political QAnon arena.

### 3.2.5 A Career in Conspiracy

Finally, the female QAnon Congressional candidates who have sought to establish official careers within the far-right internet media environment should be cautioned. Nevada Republican Congressional candidate and American actress Mindy Robinson, who has hosted the online Conservative talk show and blog “Red White and F You”<sup>337</sup> since 2018, was one of the contenders in the 2020 Congressional campaign who had already

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<sup>333</sup> Goldstein, "Engagement with Deceptive Sites on Facebook and Twitter Dropped in the First Months of 2021."

<sup>334</sup> Jacob Vaughn, "A QAnon Power Couple Is Behind the For God & Country Patriot Roundup," *Dallas Observer*, April 6 2021, <https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/a-qanon-couple-is-behind-the-for-god-and-country-patriot-roundup-at-dallas-hotels-12003194>.

<sup>335</sup> Jacob Vaughn, "A QAnon Convention Is Coming to Town. Some Dallasites Want it Canceled.," *Dallas Observer*, March 30 2021, <https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/two-dallas-hotels-are-slated-to-host-a-qanon-convention-some-want-it-canceled-12000364>.

<sup>336</sup> Gustaf Kilander, "Conservative conference with prominent QAnon supporters to close out with Covid mask-burning event," *Independent*, April 17 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/conservative-conference-mask-burning-ceremony-b1833218.html>.

<sup>337</sup> Mindy Robinson (Mindy Robinson), "Red White and F You: Unapologetically Patriotic! Announcement," YouTube, May 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykEYwAuOurI>.

created a reputation for herself in this sector. Robinson has a small social media following and has propagated conspiracy theories regarding election fraud<sup>338</sup>, media bias<sup>339</sup>, and Pizzagate<sup>340</sup> on the related site. One candidate, in particular, seemed to want to use her pro-QAnon Congressional candidacy to re-establish her reputation in the far-right media environment. DeAnna Lorraine Tesoriero, a Republican candidate, was a “red-pill dating counsellor”<sup>341</sup> on the New Right Network's podcast “Make Love Great Again.” Prior to her bid for Congress in California's 12th district, she had been active in the fringe right as an advocate of the Men's Right's Movement<sup>342</sup>, which fought alleged “discrimination against men.” Tesoriero began posting about QAnon on social media in August 2018, making her one of the conspiracy's early adopters. She also played a key part in spreading the “film your hospital” social media campaign in 2020, which urged followers to video hospitals that seemed empty from the outside to suggest that the coronavirus outbreak was a fake.<sup>343</sup> Lorraine repeatedly tweeted about QAnon and repeated QAnon phrases throughout her political campaign, eventually attracting the attention of Alex Jones, host of the infamous far-right conspiracy theory multimedia outlet “InfoWars.” While she was ambiguous about her support of QAnon in an interview with *The Daily Beast*<sup>344</sup>, Lorraine repeatedly tweeted about QAnon and repeated QAnon phrases throughout her political campaign, eventually attracting the attention of Alex Jones, host of the infamous far-right conspiracy theory multimedia outlet “InfoWars”.

Lorraine started hosting Infowars in September 2020<sup>345</sup>, after losing the California primary. She was able to disseminate a great deal of disinformation in her new role. She advocated the far-right “Reset” conspiracy theory<sup>346</sup>, the idea that coronavirus vaccines included “microchips” to monitor worldwide population members, the false allegation that Michelle Obama is a transgender woman<sup>347</sup>, and a slew of other QAnon-affiliated theories as a host. In other instances, QAnon candidates were able to leverage their

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<sup>338</sup> Mindy Robinson, "America Demands Answers About Blatant Election Fraud and it's Media Censorship," *Red White and F You*, November 7 2020, <http://redwhiteandfyou.com/america-demands-answers-about-blatant-election-fraud-and-its-media-censorship/>.

<sup>339</sup> Mindy Robinson, "Facebook is Flagging Posts as “Fake News” That's True," *Red White and F You*, July 14 2020, <http://redwhiteandfyou.com/15017-2/>.

<sup>340</sup> Mindy Robinson, "Part 2: In Defense of Everything: Deflect, Attack, Lie, & Silence to Keep Pizzagate Money Flowing," *Red White and F You*, January 28 2019, <http://redwhiteandfyou.com/part-2-in-defense-of-everything/>.

<sup>341</sup> HoneyBadgerRadio (HoneyBadgerRadio), "Talking with Deanna Lorraine, the Red Pill Dating Coach, on her first experience with the International Conference on Men's Issues, taking her first steps in the MRM, and how her work is being adapted to help women take a more "men's issues" approach in dating.," YouTube, August 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqCGh361Yko>.

<sup>342</sup> Debbie Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4 (2017), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1097184X17706401>.

<sup>343</sup> Elise Thomas, "Coronavirus denial spreading on social media," *Australian SDstrategic policy Institute*, April 15 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/coronavirus-denial-spreading-on-social-media/>.

<sup>344</sup> Will Sommer, "MAGA Heads Have a New Scheme: Running for Congress," *The Daily Beast*, September 16 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/laura-loomer-joey-salads-saladino-and-more-right-wing-media-personalities-flood-into-house-races>.

<sup>345</sup> Kyle Mantyla, "New Infowars Host DeAnna Lorraine Defends Alex Jones on Sandy Hook," *Right Wing Watch*, September 2 2020, <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/new-infowars-host-deanna-lorraine-defends-alex-jones-on-sandy-hook/>.

<sup>346</sup> Ciaran O'Connor, "The Spread of the “Great Reset” Conspiracy in the Netherlands," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, February 23 2021, [isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/the-spread-of-the-great-reset-conspiracy-in-the-netherlands/](https://isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/the-spread-of-the-great-reset-conspiracy-in-the-netherlands/).

<sup>347</sup> Alex Bollinger, "Rightwing pundits are now saying Michelle Obama is a trans woman with “a swinging you-know-what”," *LGBTQ Nation*, August 21 2020, <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2020/08/rightwing-pundits-now-saying-michelle-obama-trans-woman-swinging-know/>.

support for conspiracies into greater engagement with the far-right media landscape, as she proved as a broadcaster. Lorraine's triumph, however, was fleeting, as she was dismissed from Infowars in late December 2020 (figure 32). DeAnna Lorraine's ability to reach an audience seems to have been severely harmed by her departure from Infowars and her permanent ban from Twitter. While she has continued to work on media projects related to the so-called "MAGA Movement," her attempts have not been successful.



Figure 32 Screen cap of DeAnna Lorraine Tesoriero on Parler stating she was let go from InfoWars

In conclusion, the US 2020 elections for political office was the first time that women became a significant political force in favour of QAnon. Most crucially, two women who believe in – or have at least shown sympathy for – an ideologically driven violent extremist ideology now hold seats in the United States House of Representatives, one of the world's most powerful political platforms. It is impossible to overestimate the significance of this. Their presence in the House of Representatives, and, by extension, the campaigns of other female Congressional candidates, proves that women are prepared to mobilise offline in a non-violent manner for radical ideology. Not only are two women who follow the radical QAnon ideology in positions of political power and influencing policy, but their positions in Congress also have the ability to legitimise QAnon in the eyes of new potential believers. As a result, they may have some impact in radicalising people towards QAnon. Greene and Boebert are also likely to have some mobilising power among established QAnon followers, whom they – notably Greene – continue to

signal from their elected posts. Other women, such as Sidney Powel, who stand beside Green and Boebert, bolster their ability to legitimise the conspiracy. Powell, in particular, has emerged as one of the most influential voices among hard-line MAGA neo-QAnon fans, with a large following. Her work as a member of Trump's legal team, as well as her apparent closeness to the former president, has cemented her place as one of the most powerful female figures in the QAnon political arena. Finally, DeAnna Lorraine Tesoriero's (temporary) success as an InfoWars presenter demonstrates the simple ebb and flow between the QAnon sphere and the larger far-right social media ecosystem, as well as women's potential impact in both. Overall, women have played a key role in QAnon's political mainstreaming, and Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert have cracked the glass barrier for female ideologically driven radicals by being publicly elected Congresswomen. Their electoral victories, together with the high-profile political careers of other women linked to the conspiracy, demonstrate both the critical role women play as leaders within QAnon and the possible threat the conspiracy presents to the US democratic system's credibility. Their presence in the House of Representatives is likely to encourage additional QAnon candidates, both female and male, to run for office in the next election. Understanding women's participation, motivations and roles played within the conspiracy is a crucial first step in properly comprehending the many risks presented by QAnon becoming a part of American and worldwide affairs.

# CHAPTER 4: HOW QANON CONSPIRACY THEORIES LEGITIMIZES COORDINATED AND TARGETED GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

Women play important roles in IMVE movements<sup>348</sup> across the board<sup>349</sup> and as it was noted in the previous chapter

“Women play an important part in radical and violent extremist movements; however, since men carry out the majority of violent attacks, women as extremist actors are often overlooked. Women do not simply follow the men into an extremist group; nor are their roles limited to raising children according to a violent ideology. Women also take part in violent operational activities, as well as actively radicalising others into movements by using their influence.”

Women play an important role in QAnon since the movement’s early days. Therefore, the gender dynamics for adherents are unique and notable in the context of QAnon as compared to other ideologically motivated violent extremist movements.

IMVE movements have also shown themselves to be perpetrators of gender-based violence (GBV) and harassment<sup>350</sup> often targeting those they see as representing a perceived threat to patriarchal norms and privileged status of the dominant identity group (race, ethnicity, religious, class, gender/sexuality, etc.). It is also understood that gender-based violence, harassment,

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<sup>348</sup> Proponents of ideologically motivated violent extremism are driven by a range of influences rather than a singular belief system. IMVE radicalization is more often caused by a combination of ideas and grievances resulting in a personalized worldview that is inspired by a variety of sources including books, videos, online discussions, and conversations. The resulting worldview often centres on the willingness to incite, enable or mobilize to violence. These individuals and cells often act without a clear affiliation to a specific organized group or external guidance, but are nevertheless shaped by hateful voices and messages online that normalize and advocate violence. <https://www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/publications/2020-public-report.html>

<sup>349</sup> Marc-André Argentino et al., "Far From Gone: The Evolution of Extremism in the First 100 Days of the Biden Administration," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalization*, April 30 2021, <https://icsr.info/2021/04/30/far-from-gone-the-evolution-of-extremism-in-the-first-100-days-of-the-biden-administration/>.

<sup>350</sup> Lydia Bates, "Patriarchal Violence: Misogyny from the Far Right to the Mainstream," *Southern Poverty Law Centre*, February 1 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/01/patriarchal-violence-misogyny-far-right-mainstream>.



sexism and misogyny is not just a function of men targeting women, and that women can participate and perpetuate this type of violence, through supporting misogynistic and patriarchal systems, as well as through internalized sexism.<sup>351</sup> What a closer examination of cases like QAnon and gender-based analysis of IMVE movements may tell us, is whether there is any difference or notable insights into how groups like QAnon engage in targeted harassment, and how gender-based violence may or may not manifest itself in their targeted harassment.

The QAnon ideology rests on the belief that they are at war with the deep state and wealthy, prominent elites who they believe to be complicit, if not outright engaged in nefarious and horrendous acts of corruption, manipulation and child exploitation. These elites often include: politicians, celebrities, wealthy members of society, media members, etc. In this war, the perceived stakes and crimes legitimize QAnon adherent's harassment and demonization of individuals at the centre of these narratives and myths.

Since QAnon's rise to prominence several high-profile celebrities have found themselves at the centre of these conspiratorial narratives, and therefore, the focus of coordinated harassment campaigns, brigading, dog-piling and general targets of – at times persistent – slander and hate. This has led researchers who examine the digital information ecosystem to ask whether QAnon's coordinated harassment operates like other forms of targeted hate and harassment online and, more specifically, whether vulnerable identity groups are faced with particularly egregious experiences, as is often the case, building off of existing institutional forms of violence. This chapter assess the role of gender-based violence (GBV) against prominent celebrities targeted by the QAnon community.

This chapter will examine six case studies in the form of six celebrity figures, all of whom at one time or another have been targets of the QAnon community and victims of hateful and disparaging narratives. The case studies paired celebrities into three sets to provide insight into how differently this form of harassment and targeting manifests through a gendered analytical lens. In this report we examine those celebrities who were of particular significance to the QAnon communities conspiracy theories in late 2019 and in to 2021: Chrissy Teigen, Tom Hanks, Ellen DeGeneres, Anderson Cooper, Jussie Smollett and Oprah Winfrey.

For this chapter I collected upwards of 9 million posts and mentions across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. A qualitative assessment of the harassment campaign showed that the most prominent type of harassment came in the form of brigading individual targets with accusations and slanderous mentions of paedophilia, often with graphic and disturbing language in their accusations (e.g. including references to rape, abduction, etc.). Other forms of hate were still present, albeit in lower volumes, but generally operated secondarily, often representing an important contextual form of hate related to their identity group.

Gender-based, racist and anti-LGBTQ hate and rhetoric were present in the dataset. The analysis presented below will indicate that there was often increased volume in all forms of harassment and hate targeting women in each of the case study pairs. This highlights a concerning trend in GBV research, emphasizing that even in cases where identity-based hate is less prominent than

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<sup>351</sup> Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

expected, harassing behaviour like brigading and targeted hate of other forms are still, on balance, a greater concern for women online. It is also clear that race plays a further amplifying role, with women of colour noting more direct GBV hate, as well as the compounding impact of troubling racist tropes present in the data. More in-depth analysis is required to understand the racial dynamic of hate and harassment of this type, specifically.

Key incidences and events trained the online communities attention onto celebrities implicated in conspiratorial narrative (i.e. flashpoints). These unrelated negative stories allowed the QAnon community to adapt the incident to their existing toxic narrative and allow the community to leverage these moments, increasing the volume of harassing posts, mentions and activities. Further, narratives and framing of individuals through this prism of good and bad, those empowered to harass as an act of social good, and those labelled deserving of harassment and demonization due to their perceived guilt, are powerful tools. Once an individual is labelled and perception is hardened in narratives about this alleged role in paedophilia conspiracies, a baseline of demonization is created. They act as markers and guidelines for who should be targeted, what their “crime” is, and therefore coordinate informally (and at times formally) how the community should act. It legitimizes targeted hate and harassment, and provides a built-in justification for any concomitant racist, sexist, homophobic or GBV.

United by a shared belief the American way of life is under siege, QAnon supporters feel a moral duty to uncover the truth about the supposed cabal and fight back— in effect, creating a decentralized violent ideology that has materialized into a possible threat to domestic security.<sup>352</sup> Often mentioned, but under analyzed is how QAnon adherents believe they are in an information war against the deep state, which has led to brigading, harassment campaigns, defamation and slandering of various individuals in positions of power and prominence: politicians, journalists, academics, actors, singers, the wealthy, etc. To that end this chapter will seek to how and in what way are prominent and influential women targeted by QAnon facing hate and harassment, and is there anything unique, notable or distinct about the way that they are being targeted?

## 4.1 Gender Analysis Gaps in the Study of the QAnon Movement

Research on hate and harassment online, and particularly gender-based harassment has brought much more insight into how this functions as a problem in the digital ecosystem, as well as the true lived experience of those targeted. Much of this discussion around definitions, concepts and the frameworks for analysis are still being negotiated amongst the research community, with terms like *gendered cyberhate*, *gendered e-bile*, *cyber violence against women and girls (VAW or VAWG)*, *gender-based violence online*, and *gender-based targeted harassment* all having

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<sup>352</sup> Amarasingham and Argentino, "The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?."

been used in various literature<sup>353</sup>. Unfortunately, platforms have also been unable to develop sound definitions for what constitutes gender-based harassment<sup>354</sup>.

What is well understood is that harassment online, particularly gender-based targeted harassment, has profound impacts on those being targeted, the choices they make online, and also those who witness this harassment. Abuse of this type that flies under the threshold for significant legal or policy action has shown to push women to “censor themselves online by avoiding certain topics, softening their opinions, limiting their participation”<sup>355</sup> all in an effort to avoid online harassment<sup>356</sup>. Misogynistic behaviour, particularly when intersecting with other forms of systemic abuse leveraged by harassers (racism, ableism, anti-LGBTQ+, etc.) functions in coordination with acts of targeted harassment to amplify hostility and threat. Misogyny online is in this way no different, in disciplining communities and individuals into patriarchal status quos.

One of the most troubling and traumatic aspects of this type of harassment is the extended and persistent experience faced much more often by women than by men. In fact, many forms of targeted gender-based harassment extend over long periods, sometimes years. This persistence does not account for the general ongoing abuse, hate and harassment faced by women and gender-diverse individuals (particularly women of colour) when online.

In this case the QAnon conspiracy theory acts as a marker of who targets are and what type of hate and harassment they should face, defining the parameters and baseline for their abuse through the construction of conspiratorial narratives. Gender-based harassment attacks the targets credibility and status and communicates to the wider public, in this case other QAnon adherents, that this individual is immoral, corrupt or otherwise unfit as an upstanding member of society (e.g. likely criminal), and therefore worthy of dog piling, brigading and coordinated harassment<sup>357</sup>.

There are challenges in studying gender-based violence, with a movement like QAnon, especially ahead of the Presidential Elections in 2020. To remove as much emotional bias, and variations in behavior due to a large political event, we chose to focus on non-political (i.e. celebrity, and therefore not political in an official capacity) actors targeted by QAnon. These individuals were selected based on their prominence in QAnon conspiracy theories and their appearance in Qdrops, as well as multimedia content created by QAnon adherents. They also represent a common trope in QAnon conspiracy theories, which is that they are seen as elite, powerful and famous. Furthermore, it is important to select gender pairs for the purpose of comparison in this study. To that end, two celebrities who were targeted the most by QAnon

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<sup>353</sup> Mai El Sherief et al., "Hate Lingo: A Target-Based Linguistic Analysis of Hate Speech in Social Media" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the Twelfth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media California, 2018); Emma A. Jane, "Feminist flight and fight responses to gendered cyberhate," in *Gender, Technology and Violence*, ed. Marie Segrave and Laura Vitis (London: Routledge, 2017); Nina Jankowicz et al., "Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online," *Wilson Center*, January 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online>; Amanda Lenhart et al., "Online Harassment, Digital Abuse, and Cyberstalking in America," *Data & Society*, November 21 2016, [https://www.datasociety.net/pubs/oh/Online\\_Harassment\\_2016.pdf](https://www.datasociety.net/pubs/oh/Online_Harassment_2016.pdf); Marie Segrave and Laura Vitis, *Gender, Technology and Violence* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>354</sup> Jankowicz et al., "Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online."

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.* p.6

<sup>356</sup> Lenhart et al., "Online Harassment, Digital Abuse, and Cyberstalking in America."

<sup>357</sup> Jane, "Feminist flight and fight responses to gendered cyberhate," p.8; Jankowicz et al., "Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online."

were selected (Chrissy Tiegen and Tom Hanks), two African Americans were selected to examine the role of racial terms (Oprah Winfrey and Jussie Smollett), as well as two members of the LGBTQ community to examine for anti-LGBTQ narratives (Anderson Cooper and Ellen Degeneres).

These case comparisons were not meant to be perfect mirrors of one another, nor were they meant to represent ideal comparative test cases as if done in a vacuum. Rather, they represented a useful method of understanding the particular dynamics of gender-based violence engaged with by the QAnon community, including how targeted hate and harassment manifests across men and women, while considering intersectional identity impacts.

As noted above, these individuals were selected based on their prominence in QAnon conspiracy theories and their appearance in Qdrops. A preliminary assessment was made for each case to determine how their role in QAnon conspiracy theories and the harassment they may face might look at scale. Once selected the cases were analysed looking at their mentions within QAnon conversations across three social media platforms - Twitter, Facebook, Instagram.

We developed an approach to identifying hateful and offensive terms targeting subjects using a lexicon derived from previous research on the detection of hate online<sup>358</sup>. Davidson et al. (2017) employs a lexicon built from Hatebase.org<sup>359</sup>. This lexicon was taken as a starting point, the terms were updated based on previous research and a preliminary assessment of the information environment, being careful not to overcorrect for this particular study<sup>360</sup>. The purpose of this lexicon was not to adapt it to the QAnon information space specifically, but to determine whether we could identify hateful and offensive language from more standardized approaches in our dataset. See appendix for the full list of terms.

It is important to also recognize that hate and harassment are distinct and at times overlapping concepts that must be considered as such, and generalized and directed hate as sub-categories also operate and manifest differently<sup>361</sup>. For this reason, a hate lexicon was used to automate and scale the identification of any hateful and offensive terms directed at each of the actor-case studies, with a secondary analysis done manually to identify: a) false positives/negatives of the lexical application; and b) identify forms of harassment that were not identified by our automated analysis. This analysis identified the abundance of posts referring to our case studies as paedophiles. This resulted in the building of a second set of terms to specifically identify this form of harassment<sup>362</sup>.

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<sup>358</sup>Thomas Davidson et al., "Automated Hate Speech Detection and the Problem of Offensive Language" (paper presented at the The 11th International Conference on Web and Social Media, Montreal, 2017).

<sup>359</sup><https://hatebase.org/>

<sup>360</sup> Davidson et al., "Automated Hate Speech Detection and the Problem of Offensive Language."; Genevieve Gorrell et al., "Race and Religion in Online Abuse towards UK Politicians: Working Paper," *arXiv preprint*, no. arXiv:1910.00920 (2019), <https://arxiv.org/abs/1910.00920>; Binny Mathew et al., "Hate begets Hate: A Temporal Study of Hate Speech" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the Association for Computing Machinery on Human-Computer Interaction, 2020); Sherief et al., "Hate Lingo: A Target-Based Linguistic Analysis of Hate Speech in Social Media."

<sup>361</sup> Sherief et al., "Hate Lingo: A Target-Based Linguistic Analysis of Hate Speech in Social Media."

<sup>362</sup> (pedo\* OR paedophile OR paedo OR paedophile OR pedophilic)

## 4.2 History of Case Studies' Harassment by QAnon

### 4.2.1 Tom Hanks

The root of the QAnon conspiracy theory asserting *Tom Hanks is a paedophile* dates back to claims made by Sarah Ruth Ashcroft, a leading celebrity of the satanic ritual abuse (SRA) community. In December 2017, Ashcroft tweeted<sup>363</sup> an accusation of Tom Hanks being a paedophile and hinted that he had abused her. In July 2018, Ashcroft expanded on these claims, saying that she had been purchased by Tom Hanks at the age of 13<sup>364</sup> and used "for sex as a disassociated mind controll doll". None of these allegations are true, however the claims she made were enough for QAnon decoders to dig into Hanks and within a week the conspiracy theory spread widely on Twitter, in QAnon subreddits and on YouTube, where the top results displayed on the platform after searching Hanks' name accused him of being a paedophile<sup>365</sup>. After Hanks caught COVID-19 in March 2020, new iterations of the conspiracy theory emerged, some claiming he was suffering from a shortage of adrenochrome, while others alleged he had been arrested on paedophilia charges in Australia<sup>366</sup>.

### 4.2.2 Chrissy Teigen

Similarly to Tom Hanks, Chrissy Teigen has faced ongoing coordinated harassment and abuse from the QAnon community since the movement's early days. The attacks against Teigen were spearheaded by QAnon influencer Liz Crokin, who tweeted a number of claims about both Teigen and husband John Legend being involved in child abuse and/or paedophilia in December 2017<sup>367</sup>. The harassment continued when Teigen and Legend's names were included on fake flights logs allegedly belonging to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein<sup>368</sup>. The extent of the targeted and ongoing harassment campaign led to Teigen blocking<sup>369</sup> over one million Twitter accounts in consideration of her and her family's safety. Teigen eventually left Twitter for a short time in March 2021 citing the abuse and hatred she was subject to on the platform<sup>370</sup>.

### 4.2.3 Ellen DeGeneres

During the COVID-19 pandemic, QAnon began spreading multiple claims that the coronavirus was a government operation that was being used as cover for the mass arrests of the "cabal" of

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<sup>363</sup> Archived tweet <https://archive.fo/bJDpZ>

<sup>364</sup> Archived tweet <https://archive.fo/knken>

<sup>365</sup> Ben Collins, "YouTube search results for A-list celebrities hijacked by conspiracy theorists," *NBC News*, July 30 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/youtube-search-results-list-celebrities-hijacked-conspiracy-theorists-n895926>.

<sup>366</sup> Reuters Staff, "Fact check: Tom Hanks is not wearing an ankle monitor, post stems from conspiracy claims," *Reuters*, July 28 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-tom-hanks-ankle-monitor-idUSKCN24T2AZ>.

<sup>367</sup> Archive of deleted tweet

[https://web.archive.org/web/20171231043429if\\_/https://twitter.com/lizcrokin/status/947295972861779968](https://web.archive.org/web/20171231043429if_/https://twitter.com/lizcrokin/status/947295972861779968)

<sup>368</sup> Adrienne Dunn, "Fact check: Several celebrities are falsely linked to Jeffrey Epstein's flight logs," *USA Today*, July 30 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/07/30/fact-check-teigen-degeneres-oprah-not-epstein-flight-logs/5494709002/>.

<sup>369</sup> Cydney Henderson, "'Worried for my family': Chrissy Teigen blocks 1M Twitter accounts linking her to Jeffrey Epstein," *USA Today*, July 15 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/celebrities/2020/07/15/chrissy-teigen-blocks-twitter-accounts-linking-her-jeffrey-epstein/5446655002/>.

<sup>370</sup> While Teigen notes abuse on the platform as a reason for her decision to leave Twitter, it is not possible to make the determination that this was due strictly or predominantly because of the harassment via QAnon community. However, it can be fairly stated that her experience of harassment via the QAnon community is part of her overall experience as a woman of colour harassed and the target of abuse on the platform.

paedophiles. This conspiracy theory was widely debunked<sup>371 372 373</sup>. Nevertheless, Ellen DeGeneres was one of the individuals that QAnon claimed to be on house arrest after a picture of her at home with bunched up sweatpants was used as “evidence” of an ankle monitor<sup>374</sup>. As a consequence of this, and the negative media attention Ellen received throughout 2020, DeGeneres has been targeted and harassed by QAnon adherents believing she is a paedophile. During a QAnon protest on Hollywood Blvd and Vine, on August 22nd, DeGeneres’ star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame was vandalized with the word “pedo” written over it.

#### 4.2.4 Anderson Cooper

Anderson Cooper has been featured in QAnon conspiracy theories since early 2018. Cooper has been targeted, not only because of his role as a CNN news anchor, but due to being a descendant of the wealthy Vanderbilt family. Within QAnon ecosystems, claims circulated about Cooper working with the CIA while studying at Yale and being a participant in Operation Mockingbird, an alleged CIA operation that recruited journalists to spread propaganda during the Cold War. He is often seen as the face of the Deep State’s information operation by covering up child trafficking and pushing the CIA’s agenda. Conspiracy theories about Cooper and the Vanderbilts are also mentioned in the popular QAnon propaganda film ‘Fall of the Cabal’.

#### 4.2.5 Oprah Winfrey

Similar to claims made about Ellen DeGeneres, Oprah Winfrey was also the target of the QAnon-inspired conspiracy theories alleging that COVID-19 was being used to cover up the mass arrests of elites. On March 18th 2020, QAnon and Oprah began trending on Twitter after a conspiracy theory circulated claiming that she was arrested and her house was being raided by police after they found secret tunnels with children under her house. The “Oprah Raid” went viral after being amplified by both QAnon followers and non-QAnon accounts. The fall out of the viral Oprah narrative was impactful enough for Oprah to make a public statement debunking the claims<sup>375</sup>.

#### 4.2.6 Jussie Smollett

Following the filing of a false police report in January 2019 after Jussie Smollett claimed he had been the victim of a hate-crime attack, Smollett became a key figure in another conspiracy repeated by QAnon adherents. This conspiracy theory centered around a belief that democrats or the “leftist-elites” had helped orchestrate the hoax. These claims were bolstered by that fact that, after the attack was initially reported by Smollett, but before it became known by police it was staged, the US Senate passed Bill S.488, making lynching a federal crime. The bill was introduced by Senator’s Cory Booker and Tim Scott, and Vice-President (former Senator)

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<sup>371</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/06/18/fact-check-ellen-degeneres-oprah-winfrey-others-not-house-arrest/5333585002/>.

<sup>372</sup> McKenzie Sadeghi, "Fact check: Ellen, Oprah, many others are not under house arrest for child sex trafficking," *USA Today*, June 18 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/06/18/fact-check-ellen-degeneres-oprah-winfrey-others-not-house-arrest/5333585002/>.

<sup>373</sup> Samantha Putterman, "Bogus conspiracy about Obama, others wearing house arrest monitors spreads online," *Politifact*, June 18 2020, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/jun/18/facebook-posts/bogus-conspiracy-about-obama-others-wearing-house-/>.

<sup>374</sup> Archive Facebook post <https://archive.fo/6C2G3>.

<sup>375</sup> Antonia Noori Farzan, "‘NOT TRUE’: Oprah Winfrey debunks bizarre QAnon conspiracy theory spreading across the Internet," *Washington Post*, March 18 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/18/oprah-winfrey-qanon-conspiracy/>

Kamala Harris. This resulted in a cacophony of different conspiracy theories claiming the senators were involved in manufacturing the incident to increase support for the bill. One of these theories falsely claimed that Kamala Harris was Smollett's aunt<sup>376</sup>.

## 4.3 Methodology

### 4.3.1 Facebook and Instagram Data Collection

Using historical datasets gathered through CrowdTangle, researchers collected posts from QAnon affiliated Facebook Pages and Groups and Instagram accounts, with posts dating from October 2017 - August 2020.

#### **Posts per Platform**

Instagram: 310,122

Facebook Groups: 7,727,877

Facebook Pages: 908,056

These posts were then searched for keywords and phrases mentioning each of the six case studies - Tom Hanks, Chrissy Tiegan, Ellen DeGeneres, Anderson Cooper, Oprah Winfrey, and Jussie Smollett. See appendix for the list of terms searched. Due to the large number of posts made by QAnon Facebook Groups, we selected the month with the most posts mentioning each individual as our period of analysis. This resulted in three datasets for each case study - one each for Facebook pages, Facebook groups and Instagram posts.

In order to understand the abusive terms being used to describe each of our case studies we then searched each of the datasets for the hate terms and paedophile-related terms. Facebook pages and Instagram posts were searched across the entire timespan of the dataset (see table 1).

### 4.3.2 Twitter data collection

For the Twitter analysis, in order to identify the analysis period, searches were performed for mentions of Tom Hanks, Chrissy Teigen, Ellen DeGeneres, Anderson Cooper, Oprah Winfrey and Jussie Smollett within QAnon conversation (see appendix for query) between October 2017 and October 2020, yielding over 160000 mentions. The month in which mentions of each individual was the highest was chosen as the analysis period (see figures 33 and 34).

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<sup>376</sup> Mollie Bryant, "Were Cory Booker and Kamala Harris part of Jussie Smollett's hoax?," *Big If True*, September 19 2019, <https://www.bigiftrue.org/2019/09/19/were-cory-booker-and-kamala-harris-part-of-jussie-smolletts-hoax/>.

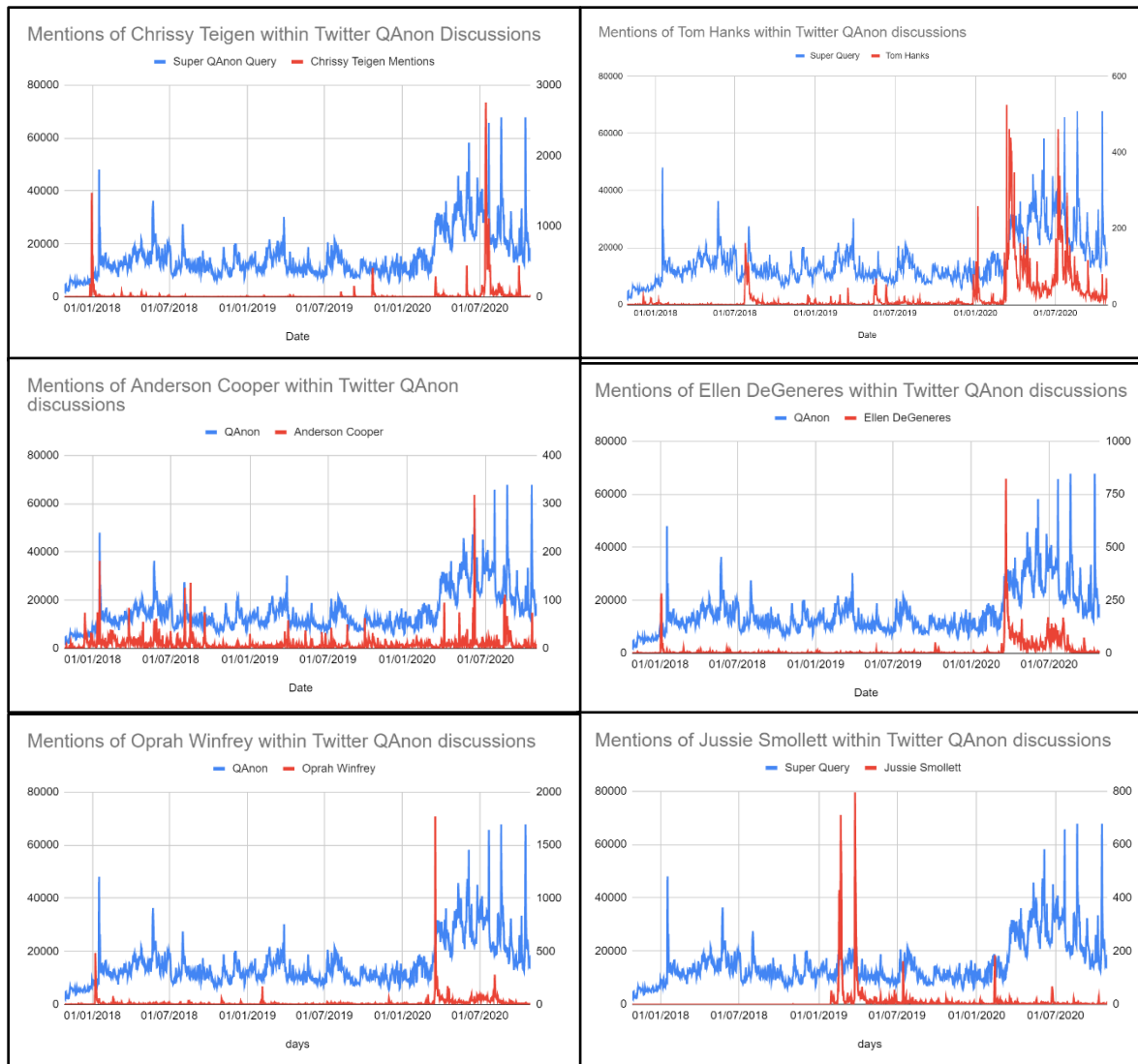


Figure 33 Mentions of each of the case studies in QAnon conversation between October 2017 and October 2020

Search queries (see appendix) were performed to collect all mentions of each individual on Twitter across each analysis period. QAnon-related boolean searches were then built for each individual to extract the relevant QAnon mentions for each (see Appendix). For example, the word ‘typewriter’ was included in the Tom Hanks QAnon query, #cancelteigen was included in Chrissy Teigen’s QAnon query. Extracting specific QAnon mentions allowed us to determine how much Twitter conversation about each individual consisted of QAnon mentions.



<b>Case Study</b>	<b>Facebook Groups</b>	<b>Facebook Pages</b>	<b>Instagram</b>	<b>Twitter</b>
Tom Hanks	12/03/2020 - 12/04/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	28/02/2020 - 28/03/2020
Chrissy Tiegan	01/07/2020 - 01/08/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	04/07/2020 - 04/08/2020
Ellen DeGeneres	07/07/2020 - 07/08/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	08/03/2020 - 08/04/2020
Anderson Cooper	14/07/2020 - 14/08/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	22/05/2020 - 22/06/2020
Oprah Winfrey	15/03/2020 - 15/04/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	04/03/2020 - 04/04/2020
Jussie Smollett	26/03/2019 - 26/04/2019	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	30/10/2017-19/08/2020	12/03/2019 - 12/04/2019

Figure 34 Time periods analysed for each case study and dataset

### 4.3.3 Identification of abusive language

For the purposes of this project, abusive language was identified by using Hatebase’s database as a starting point, building on this database through our own research, and compiling a list of terms and phrases relevant to this project. This list contains subsets of words relevant to racial, sexual, and gender based abuse (see Appendix for the full list).

Some of the keywords in this list captured posts that did not contain abuse directed at our individuals of interest. For example, the keyword “slave” was intended to identify racial abuse directed at the Black community; however, many of the posts identified referred to QAnon narratives of child slavery and ritual abuse instead.

In addition to this set of abusive keywords, we searched our data for posts containing keywords relevant to paedophilia (see Appendix for query). This was done to allow us to analyse how the QAnon community discusses and targets individuals that have become relevant to the conspiracy theory.

Are these individuals the target of abuse from QAnon believers? Is this abuse based on an individual’s gender, sexuality, and/ or race? Or are these individuals abused on the basis of being accused as paedophiles?

## 4.4 Findings

### 4.4.1 Twitter findings

	<b>Chrissy Teigen</b>	<b>Tom Hanks</b>	<b>Ellen DeGeneres</b>	<b>Anderson Cooper</b>	<b>Jussie Smollett</b>	<b>Oprah Winfrey</b>
Total mentions	419174	413728	154481	94472	365955	160084
QAnon mentions	10.20%	1.50%	2.50%	0.67%	0.55%	5.90%
Paedophile mentions	53%	36.90%	26.50%	18.40%	8.72%	17.40%
Hate mentions	5.20%	3%	2.70%	5.30%	2.50%	4.40%
<i>Anti-LGBTQ</i>	2.70%	1.60%	12.30%	3%	25.50%	1.40%
<i>Violence</i>	39%	42.60%	30.20%	47%	25.50%	40.20%
<i>General hate</i>	26%	29%	19.80%	15.60%	29.40%	19.60%
<i>Anti-Black</i>	1.30%	5%	1.90%	9.40%	4%	16.70%
<i>Anti-White</i>	0.10%	0%	0%	3.10%	0%	0%
<i>Anti-Asian</i>	0.50%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Anti-Arab</i>	0	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Anti-Semitic</i>	0.63%	2.20%	0.93%	9.40%	9.80%	5%
<i>Anti-Latino</i>	0	0	0	0%	0%	0
<i>Female abuse</i>	32.30%	12.60%	30%	15.60%	5.90%	19.10%
<i>Male abuse</i>	0.05%	0%	0%	0	0%	0
<i>Paedophile terms (within hate)</i>	53.60%	54%	33.30%	28.10%	33.30%	23%

Figure 35 Breakdown of the type of abuse identified relating to each case study in Twitter mentions

#### *Tom Hanks Vs Chrissy Tiegen*

In the periods analysed, Twitter data reveals that 10.2% of Chrissy Teigen mentions on Twitter contained references to QAnon, while only 1.5% of Tom Hanks mentions contained QAnon

references. Where 53% of Chrissy Teigen QAnon mentions contained references to paedophilia; this number was 36.9% for Tom Hanks. 5.2% of Chrissy Teigen QAnon mentions contained words associated with hate, whereas 3% of Tom Hanks QAnon mentions were classified as containing hate references.

The most common category of hate references used in mentions of both Teigen and Hanks were those that referenced violence. These terms were most commonly used to describe supposed crimes committed by both Hanks and Teigen, as opposed to threatening them. Furthermore, keywords associated with female hate or abuse accounted for 32.3% of Teigen’s hate mentions with the majority of these words directed at Teigen. Terms categorized as ‘general hate’ were present in 26% of Teigen’s hate mentions and 29% of Hanks’. The most-commonly used word was ‘idiot’, which was used to describe QAnon followers’ beliefs in the accusations against both Teigen and Hanks as opposed to using the word to describe the individuals in an abusive manner. Anti-Semitic words and phrases were used more than three times more against Hanks’ than Teigen

### Tom Hanks

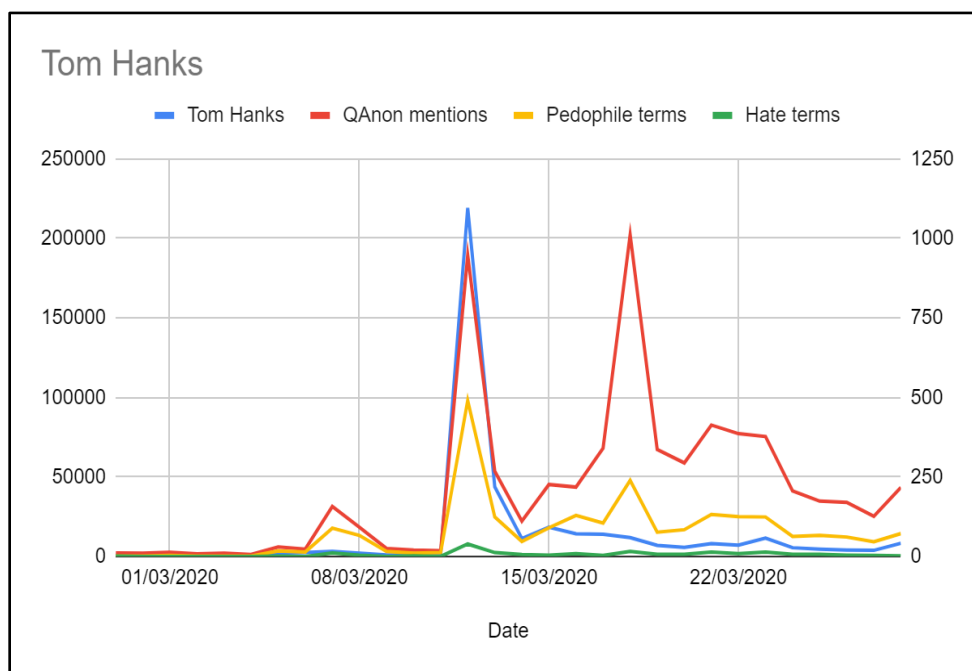


Figure 36 Mentions of Tom Hanks related to QAnon, hate and paedophilia (right axis) in relation to all mention of Hanks (left axis)

Taking a closer look at Tom Hanks, 1.6% (3 mentions) contained references to anti-LGBTQ hate terms with just one of these being relevant. 42.6% (77 mentions) of hate mentions contained references to violence, particularly rape, which was featured in 82% of those mentions. These mentions imply Hanks’ guilt of the crimes as opposed to wishing the crime on him<sup>377 378</sup>. 29% (53 mentions) of hate mentions contain general hate terms, namely the use of the term ‘idiot’,

<sup>377</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wWi4W>

<sup>378</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/ExFd9>

mentioned in 55% of them. Interestingly, besides three posts<sup>379</sup>, all mentions of the word ‘idiot’ were used to describe the QAnon community’s growing belief in Tom Hanks’ alleged sex crimes<sup>380</sup>. 5% (9 mentions) of posts contained anti-Black terms, the most prominent of which was the use of the word ‘nigga’, which had three distinct uses - to describe those who believe in QAnon, as a conversational term not referring to any particular person or group, and as a term to describe Tom Hanks, alongside threats. In general, these terms were not used to express anti-Black sentiment. No anti-white, anti-Asian, anti-Arab hate mentions. A total of 4 posts (2.2%) containing anti-Semitic references were found, referencing the ‘jews’ or ‘globalist’ forces<sup>381 382</sup>. Use of terms associated with female abuse accounted for 12.6% (22 mentions) of hate mentions. 30% of these were directed at QAnon believers, while 26% were referring directly to either Hanks, his son, or his wife. 54% of hate terms also contain references to paedophilia

Figure 7 shows that the spikes referencing Tom Hanks, QAnon and paedophile occur simultaneously and are linked to specific events of importance within the QAnon community, such as when Tom Hanks got COVID and when he got a Greek passport. Following incidents where QAnon claimed Hanks was a paedophile, the posts mentioning paedophilia do not return to their pre-event levels, but rather stabilize to a constant until the next event. Once the label has been applied to an individual, how that individual is perceived creates a baseline level of demonization. This perception in the community makes the individuals, in this case Tom Hanks, easier to demonize and target with harassment.

### Chrissy Teigen

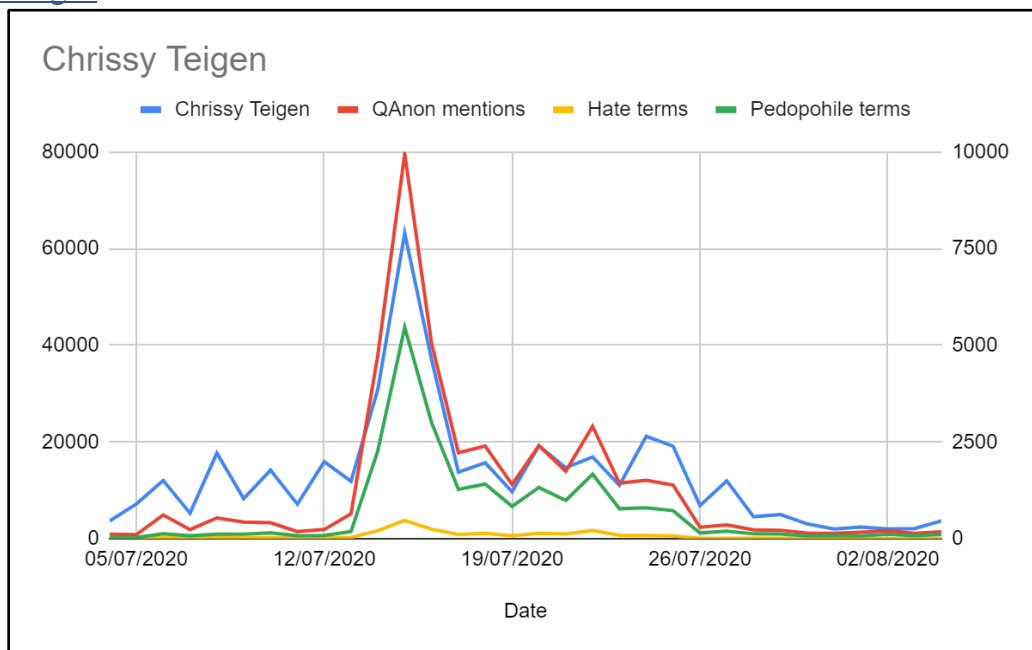


Figure 37 Mentions of Chrissy Teigan related to QAnon, hate and paedophilia (right axis) in relation to all mention of Teigen (left axis)

<sup>379</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/5GCZh>

<sup>380</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/pWo4r>

<sup>381</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/yX598>

<sup>382</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/sH75Y>

When breaking down the hate mentions for Chrissy Teigen 2.7% of these terms contain anti-LGBTQ references; 17% of these anti-LGBTQ terms were used to describe John Legend as gay<sup>383 384</sup>. Moreover, 14% of the posts contained anti-trans speech suggesting Teigen is a Thai “ladyboy”<sup>385 386</sup>. 15% were pushback to the abuse against Teigen, implying that they were in fact closeted gays<sup>387</sup>. 39% of hate terms contain references to violent assault and/or rape with these mentions mostly implicating Teigen in the crimes of rape and murder, as opposed to wishing those crimes on her<sup>388 389</sup>. A further 26% of hate terms contained general hate references, with 71% of these containing the word ‘idiot’. The term was used in a number of distinct ways - the first being quotes of a tweet sent by Teigen herself in which she refers to the online abuse<sup>390</sup> saying: “I cannot f\*\*king STAND you idiots anymore and I’m worried for my family.” The second is use of the term directed at her in an abusive manner<sup>391 392</sup> and the third is the use of the term directed at those giving Teigen abuse<sup>393 394</sup>.

1.3% of hate mentions contained anti-Black keywords, with 21% of these directed at either Teigen or Legend as a form of abuse<sup>395 396</sup>. 0.1% of hate mentions contained anti-white keywords, with just one of these posts amounting to a form of abuse<sup>397</sup>, although directed at QAnon believers. 0.5% of hate mentions contained anti-Asian keywords, notably, the use of the term ‘pancake face’ as an Asian slur against Teigen, which made up 45% of these mentions<sup>398 399</sup>. 0.63% of hate mentions contained anti-Semitic references, with 71% of these referring to Teigen and her purported involvement in a “globalist” or Jewish conspiracy theory of world domination<sup>400 401</sup>. 32.3% of hate mentions contained keywords associated with female abuse, with 81% of these containing the word ‘bitch’<sup>402 403</sup>, 9.4% containing the word ‘cunt’ and 5.5% containing the word ‘whore’<sup>404 405</sup>. This category is by far the largest example of targeted hate directed at Teigen, as opposed to the use of words to describe outside elements. 0.05% of mentions contained references to male abuse, but were not directed at Teigen. Finally, 54.6% of QAnon mentions contained references to paedophilia

This final number is not surprising as the entire harassment campaign around Teigen was founded on the conspiracy theory that she and Legend were fleeing to Tokyo to avoid

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<sup>383</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/GSFCE>  
<sup>384</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/VMEQJ>  
<sup>385</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/4jXF6>  
<sup>386</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/JHVAo>  
<sup>387</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/YjbJ6>  
<sup>388</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/McG0F>  
<sup>389</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/f0FsN>  
<sup>390</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/KwOoa>  
<sup>391</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/r1RMW>  
<sup>392</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/5wwpF>  
<sup>393</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/nyuFO>  
<sup>394</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/rI8IA>  
<sup>395</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/XrUe1>  
<sup>396</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/agzrH>  
<sup>397</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/VKf9q>  
<sup>398</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/gzIUc>  
<sup>399</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/FaoiR>  
<sup>400</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/L1sXS>  
<sup>401</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/JkGNM>  
<sup>402</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/zHb1w>  
<sup>403</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/PDQgh>  
<sup>404</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/bBgg2>  
<sup>405</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/jKxML>

paedophilia charges. The long term sustained harassment of this campaign however has had severe impacts on Teigen and her family. Ultimately in 2021 Teigen left Twitter for a period of time, due to the harassment.

### *Ellen DeGeneres Vs Anderson Cooper*

In the periods analysed, 2.5% of Ellen DeGeneres mentions on Twitter contained references to QAnon, while only 0.67% of Anderson Cooper mentions contained QAnon references. 26.5% of DeGeneres' QAnon mentions contained references to paedophilia<sup>406</sup>. This number was 18.4% for Cooper. 2.7% of DeGeneres' mentions contained words associated with hate while 5.3% of Cooper's QAnon mentions were classified as containing hate references. Anti-LGBTQ words were used in 12.3% of DeGeneres' hate mentions, with more than one-third of these containing directed abuse towards her. Just 3% (note, this is just 1 mention) of Cooper's mentions contained anti-LGBTQ words directed towards him. Keywords associated with violence were the most commonly used of hate words, with these being used to describe alleged crimes of both Cooper and DeGeneres, as opposed to threatening them

### Ellen DeGeneres

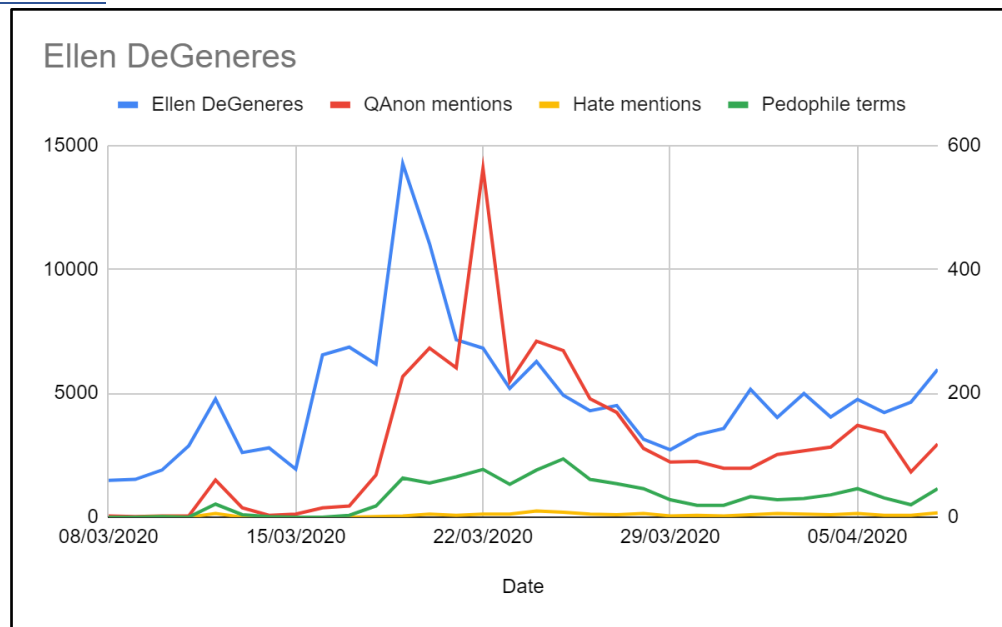


Figure 38 Mentions of Ellen DeGeneres related to QAnon, hate and paedophilia (right axis) in relation to all mention of DeGeneres (left axis)

12.3% of the hate terms targeting Ellen DeGeneres used anti-LGBTQ hate terms, with 38.5% of these containing direct abuse targeted towards DeGeneres<sup>407 408</sup>. 30.2% of hate mentions contained references to violence, with 75% of these containing the word rape, used to describe alleged crimes committed by DeGeneres, as opposed to threats against her<sup>409 410</sup>. 19.8% of hate

<sup>406</sup> (pedo\* OR paedophile OR paedo OR paedophile OR pedophilic)

<sup>407</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/LifQ4>

<sup>408</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/jzBqk>

<sup>409</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/0t0Jo>

<sup>410</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/diFV4>

mentions contained general hate terms. 38% of these were terms used to attack QAnon followers and beliefs<sup>411 412</sup>. Anti-Black terms were mentioned in 1.9% of hate posts, with only 50%<sup>413</sup> constituting the use of the term against DeGeneres, but not in a hateful manner. Whereas, 0.93% of mentions contained an anti-Semitic references<sup>414</sup> which refers to the ‘globalist’ elites being battled by Trump. 30% of hate mentions contained keywords associated with female harassment and abuse, with 87.5% of these consisting of the word ‘bitch’. 33.3% of hate mentions also contained references to paedophilia.

Anderson Cooper

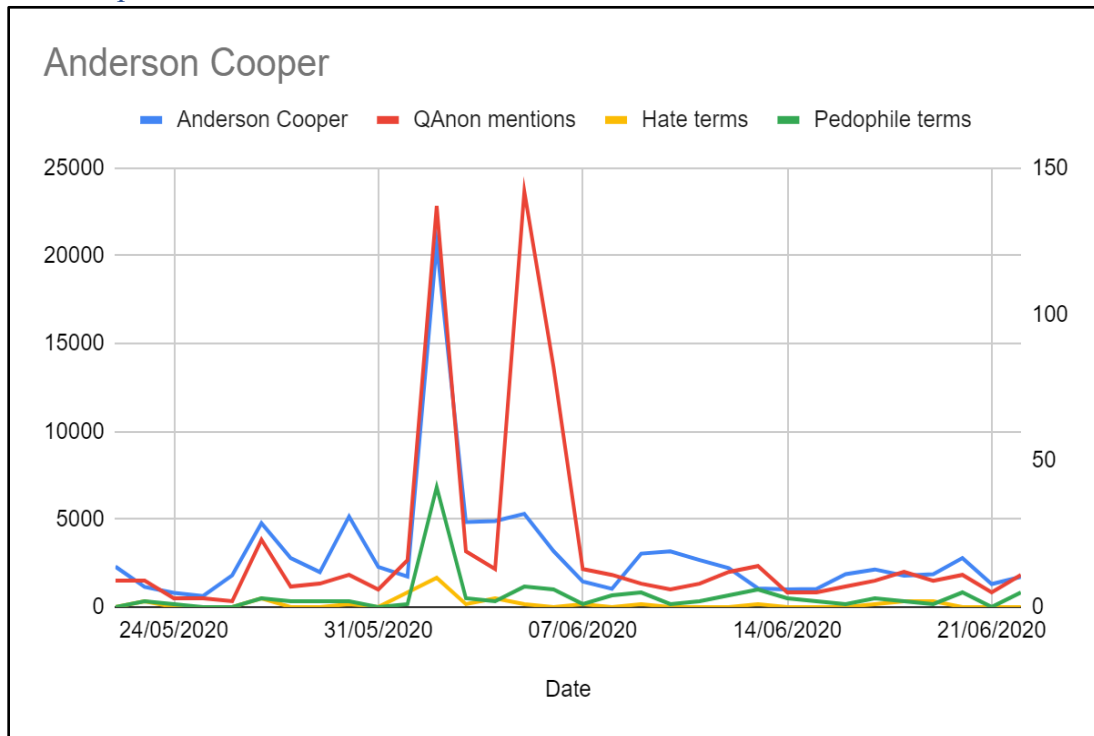


Figure 39 Mentions of Anderson Cooper related to QAnon, hate and paedophilia (right axis) in relation to all mention of Cooper (left axis)

Though also part of the LGTBQ community only, 3% of the hate content targeting Anderson Cooper contained anti-LGBTQ terms. One particular mention<sup>415</sup> directed hate both at Cooper and the entire LGTBQ community. 47% of hate mentions contained keywords associated with violence, 78.5% if which used the term ‘rape’. Interestingly, the majority (72%) of mentions of the word rape, actually accused Donald Trump of the crime through his association with Jeffrey Epstein<sup>416 417</sup>. 15.6% of mentions contained general hate terms, with 60% of these directed at Cooper, calling him a savage<sup>418</sup>, and idiot<sup>419</sup>. 9.4% contained anti-Black keywords, the most

<sup>411</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/3dYhP>  
<sup>412</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/rbp4G>  
<sup>413</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/uodg5>  
<sup>414</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/3GYmJ>  
<sup>415</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/Payul>  
<sup>416</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/FEz6i>  
<sup>417</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/cTgER>  
<sup>418</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/pJHkD>  
<sup>419</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/cU17X>

common of which was the use of the term ‘nigga’. This was found to be used by Black users on Twitter to refer to Cooper, while accusing him of sex crimes against children<sup>420</sup>. 3.1% contained anti-white terms<sup>421</sup>, however this was not used against Cooper and instead was used when discussing the ethnicity of the Comet Ping Pong shooter. 9.4% (3 mentions) contained references deemed anti-Semitic. One of these was irrelevant, while the two remaining were references to ‘globalist’ forces<sup>422 423</sup>. Terms associated with female abuse were present in 15.6% of ‘hate’ mentions. 40% of these were uses of the word ‘cunt’ to describe Cooper<sup>424 425</sup>.

### *Oprah Winfrey Vs Jussie Smollett*

In the periods analysed, 5.9% of Oprah Winfrey mentions on Twitter contained references to QAnon, while only 0.55% of Jussie Smollett mentions contained QAnon references. 17.4% of Winfrey’s QAnon mentions contained references to paedophilia<sup>426</sup>. This number was 8.72% for Smollett, the lowest of any individual. 4.4% of Winfrey’s mentions contained words associated with hate while 2.5% of Smollett’s QAnon mentions were classified as containing hate references. Winfrey’s mentions contained the largest number of phrases associated with anti-Black discourse, however, these were not used in a derogatory or abusive way against Winfrey.

### Oprah Winfrey

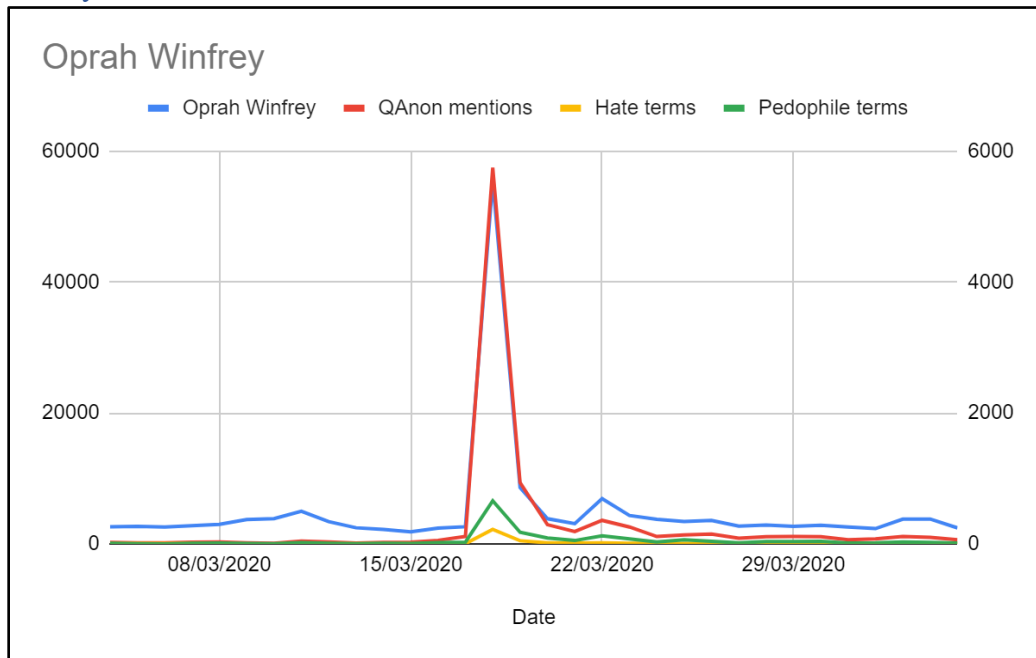


Figure 40 Mentions of Oprah Winfrey related to QAnon, hate and paedophilia (right axis) in relation to all mention of Winfrey (left axis)

<sup>420</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/IU2V0>  
<sup>421</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/WB7SE>  
<sup>422</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/1XzbT>  
<sup>423</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/1XzbT>  
<sup>424</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/G4zuV>  
<sup>425</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/TTeHB>  
<sup>426</sup> (pedo\* OR paedophile OR paedo OR paedophile OR pedophilic)



When analyzing Oprah's hate mentions, only 1.4% contain anti-LGBTQ keywords, with just one<sup>427</sup> of these mentions using it in a derogatory way directed at Oprah. Four of these posts implied intolerance towards the LGBTQ community, without targeting a certain person<sup>428 429</sup>. 40.2% of mentions contained words related to violence. 100% of these mentions contained the word 'rape' or 'rapist'. 54.7% of these mentions contained mentions of one or more people, accusing Oprah of guilt by her association with them (Harvey Weinstein<sup>430</sup>, Jeffrey Epstein<sup>431</sup>, David Geffen<sup>432</sup>, John of God<sup>433</sup>, Peter Nygard<sup>434</sup>). 19.6% of mentions contained general hate keywords, the most common of which was the use of the word idiot, which made up 62% of mentions. 90% of mentions containing the word 'idiot' were using the word to describe belief in QAnon<sup>435 436</sup>. Just 9.7% were used by QAnon followers to refer to people not believing the claims about Oprah<sup>437 438</sup>. 16.7% contained anti-Black keywords, with 82.9% of these consisting of uses of the word 'nigga'. The word was used as a casual reference and colloquial replacement for the word 'people'. 5.5% of mentions contained anti-Semitic keywords: 61.9% of these used the word 'jews' in a derogatory fashion<sup>439 440</sup>. It is worth noting that 84.6% of these posts were an identical spam-like post<sup>441</sup>, repeated through the data set. Further, 23.8% used the word 'globalist', all of which were used as an insulting term, with two mentions using the word directly against Oprah<sup>442 443</sup>. Finally, 19.1% contained female abuse words, with use of the word 'bitch' making up 82.5% of this sample. 82.3% of the mentions containing the word 'bitch' were used to refer directly to Oprah<sup>444 445</sup>.

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<sup>427</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/iZmJY>

<sup>428</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/4g2HS>

<sup>429</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/y7GaH>

<sup>430</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/sJ2IU>

<sup>431</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/Uo9Qs>

<sup>432</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/YBzmk>

<sup>433</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/J0jcC>

<sup>434</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/sSv9x>

<sup>435</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/pWo4r>

<sup>436</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/H4ST6>

<sup>437</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/70WnO>

<sup>438</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/CRzOD>

<sup>439</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/jlRe0>

<sup>440</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/UPsLZ>

<sup>441</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/wxwrG>

<sup>442</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/GNThT>

<sup>443</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/TCyuz>

<sup>444</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/3cpLc>

<sup>445</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/IMopi>

## Jussie Smollett

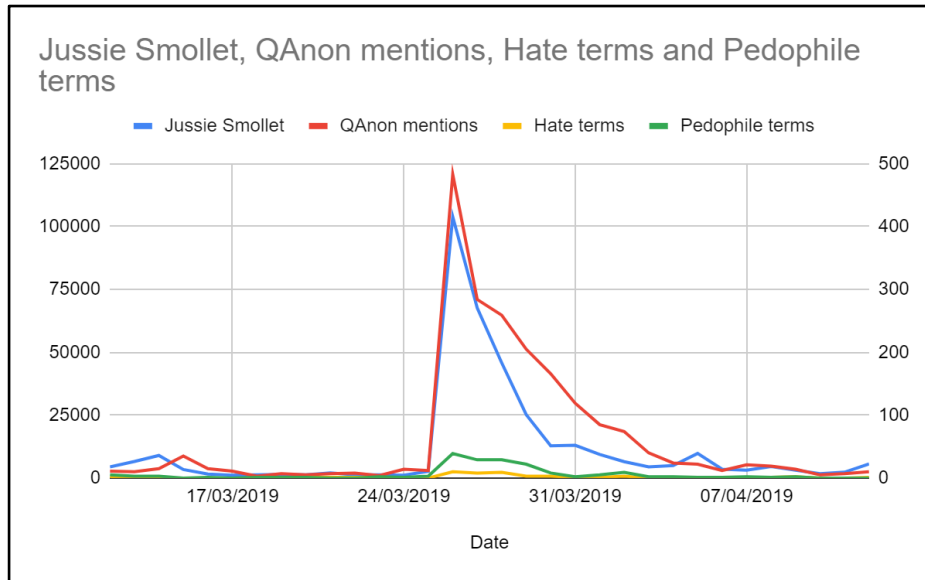


Figure 41 Mentions of Jussie Smollett related to QAnon, hate and paedophilia (right axis) in relation to all mention of Smollett (left axis)

Jussie Smollett stands at odds with some of the other case studies. In the analysis of his hate mentions, 25.5% of them contained references to anti-LGBTQ terms, with 38.5% of these mentions using anti-LGBTQ terms to attack Smollett. For example, in this post<sup>446</sup> Smollett is referred to as a ‘fag’ and in this<sup>447</sup> he is called a ‘racist gay pedo’. Anti-LGBTQ terms were also used to imply that because Smollett is gay, he will not face prosecution for his crimes<sup>448 449</sup>. 25.5% of hate mentions contained references to violence, however only 30% of these referred to Smollett and these questioned whether he had been the victim of, or, was guilty of rape<sup>450 451</sup>. The remainder of references using violent terms referred to people other than Smollett, including Bill Cosby<sup>452</sup> and Harvey Weinstein<sup>453</sup>. 29.4% of hate mentions contained references to general hate, with one third of these using the word ‘idiot’ to directly refer to Smollett<sup>454 455</sup>. 4% of hate mentions contained references to anti-Black keywords one of which used it as a racist dog whistle. Anti-semitic keywords were present in 9.8% of hate mentions, with 80% of these using the term globalist<sup>456 457</sup>. 5.9% contained terms associated with female harassment and abuse, with just one of these<sup>458</sup> (out of 3) using the word ‘bitch’ directly against Smollett. 33.3% of hate mentions contained references to paedophilia, however, only one mention<sup>459</sup> used the term to

<sup>446</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/fzMcr>

<sup>447</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/gjH8M>

<sup>448</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/91YBw>

<sup>449</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/4IHcY>

<sup>450</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/dnoiF>

<sup>451</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/2D27n>

<sup>452</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/wr1zV>

<sup>453</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/JgGMB>

<sup>454</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/K9Z3K>

<sup>455</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/K9Z3K>

<sup>456</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/hiuFq>

<sup>457</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/t69R6>

<sup>458</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/wip/Ymlcd>

<sup>459</sup> Archive of deleted tweet <https://archive.vn/gjH8M>

refer to Smollett with the majority of uses referring to other people including Michael Jackson and R Kelly.

## 4.4.2 Facebook and Instagram

Facebook presented an analytical challenge, as researchers had access to the original posts, however, they did not have access to the comments on these posts, which are crucial to analyzing the type of behaviour identified in this report. Similarly on Instagram comments were not available in the data the researchers had access to, which is crucial to this type of analysis.

Furthermore, on Instagram, stories (temporary posts available for 24 hours) and highlights (versions of stories saved by a user) are not available as a data source for qualitative analysis. Therefore, qualitative assessment of Facebook and Instagram posts about the individuals were performed as part of this research.

### 4.4.2.1 Facebook

A key feature of harassment on Facebook is within the comment sections of a specific post. What we found in our research was that a user in a QAnon group or page would post a link from mainstream media, or a meme, or a specific picture related to an event from the news or geopolitical event, which was then attributed to one of the targets mentioned in our research. Most of the harassment or violent language would take place in the comment sections. This behaviour would not always be obvious based on the post, whereby the individual was mentioned. This provides a challenge when it comes to the quantitative analysis of the information that is found, as there is limited access to comment data.

Thus, based on a qualitative assessment of these posts, one of the key elements that we found was that:

A) harassment of violence took place as a flashpoint (in the sense that if something critical would occur, it would make the news and this individual would be targeted). This was particularly the case with Ellen DeGeneres, Jussie Smollett, and Oprah Winfrey. Following an incident that made the news these individuals would be targeted for a burst of time and then it would die out. There would be a low level of activity that would continue for an indeterminate period of time as they would be recycled in various memes or news stories however this was not a continued effort of harassment.

B) In the cases of Tom Hanks, Anderson Cooper, and Chrissy Teigen, the type of harassment that these individuals experience was more prolonged. All three of these individuals featured prominently in core QAnon mythology as highlighted above. Though there are peaks of intense activity and key periods of harassment for these individuals, we see that the sustained harassment occurs longitudinally, even though the reason for harassment and the type of harassment evolves with the movement. Over time these individuals, as well as others, have found themselves on a list of individuals “Q” or QAnon adherents believed to have been arrested, or killed, or sought for arrest by white hats and those associated with Q and President Trump. If these popular individuals are featured on this list and are already the targets of QAnon’s harassment architecture, anyone else that is found on that list is guilty by association of the same atrocious crimes.

Within the data collected by the researchers thanks to Crowdtangle, we have found that lists of individuals as targets featured prominently in the harassment behavior that we have researched. One of these lists featured a number of individuals that are core to the QAnon conspiracy theory and others that are adjacent to it. What we found is that these individuals by association to be more popular enemies of QAnon on this list would also be the target of harassment and hate. It is important to highlight that this type of harassment does not meet the threshold for action according to the current iteration of Facebook's policies. However, this type of long term sustained harassment is a form of violence.

A key feature that makes harassment difficult to identify on Facebook, and other platforms, is how some of this content is embedded in images or memes. Individually a meme or the text, might not get flagged, but in aggregate and combined with a flashpoint they can be very harmful, especially if the language found in the image is only known to insiders of the community.

Though there are key individuals that are targeted for a flashpoint incident, more often than not the type of harassment that we see from QAnon is sustained over a long period of time. To that end the harm does not always happen immediately, but will occur due to the longevity of the campaign. Additionally, an individual that is high profile might have resources available to them to combat or deal with some of the pressures of being harassed at this level; however, the average individual who may be the target of harassment does not have the tools or capacity to deal with it. By the time the platforms do act, the damage is already done.

#### *4.4.2.2 Instagram*

Instagram provides its own threat vector when it comes to analyzing harassment from QAnon. The more obvious way to harass an individual is to target them directly on their posts; this is something that we have seen specifically with our current case studies. However, there are other ways to harass and target these individuals and that is by feeding an ecosystem that will amplify a narrative or a sentiment of hate towards these individuals. What we mean by this is that Instagram provides insular networks and communities whereby similar individuals sharing similar ideologies and beliefs can come together. What we see is that the harassment of someone like Chrissy Teigen occurs on a daily basis in the way that these individuals talk about the person without necessarily tagging them. So we have seen that QAnon influencers on Instagram, especially in the pastel QAnon community, have been able to target Chrissy Teigen by mentioning parts of the QAnon conspiracy about her within their stories or in their Instagram highlights. These elements are not necessarily visible to a wider public unless you are following these individuals on Instagram and clicking on their stories or their highlights. Nevertheless, they do create a culture of harassment that is fomenting over a long period of time, which then creates a perception of the target individual within the wider QAnon community. It further augments in-group out-group dynamics making Chrissy Teigen, or others, a pariah and a target for their harassment. This creates a challenge not only for researchers because there is no way to necessarily measure the reach and impacts of stories and highlights but also it's very difficult to measure the networks on Instagram which makes it quite difficult to get an idea of what the potential harm may be. The way that Instagram functions does provide a way to soften the image of the message even though it may use violent language and to that end the harm can be done especially during a flashpoint. Where there is a sentiment of hate towards individuals that's built

over a period of time which is then released in a single moment creating a more violent type of reaction than it would have been without this wider environment.

## 4.5 Discussion

The data highlights that the use of hate language and harassment by QAnon users is predominantly linked to the fact that QAnon has labeled these individuals as paedophiles, rather than their traditional characteristics (gender, race, sexual orientation) that would make them a target of hate and harassment.

Conspiracy theories serve two functions: 1) they demonize the groups of alleged evil conspirators and 2) they idealize the groups that are targeted by the evil conspirators. Therefore, QAnon adherents project onto those who are associated with the deep state or are labeled as paedophiles, characteristics which QAnon adherents refuse to recognize in themselves. In doing so QAnon adherents can label themselves as victims of an evil global plot, and thus unburden themselves, as well as put a positive spin on their own problematic characteristics.

As Michael Butter writes

“If someone rejected Barack Obama as president because he was black, and was bent on preventing Hillary Clinton from succeeding him because she was a woman, they exposed themselves, quite rightly, to accusations of racism and sexism. If they saw Obama and Clinton as puppets of the New World Order, on the other hand, they could shrug off such criticisms, at least in their own minds.”<sup>460</sup>

The same goes for QAnon adherents, they justify the hate and harassment they spread, as they do not perceive their targets as innocent, but rather they are paedophile collaborators of the deep state. Compounded to this is the societal perception of paedophiles culturally. In a 2017 study Imhoff and Jahnke performed a study on the punitive attitudes against paedophiles; the results of the study showed that participants expressed stronger punitive attitudes when the paedophile label was present.<sup>461</sup> Not only are we already culturally primed to negatively perceive anyone labeled as a paedophile, but this scapegoating and dehumanization is compounded due to the central ideological belief of QAnon.

Additionally, the fantasy that QAnon adherents are fighting against paedophilia, because the deep state prevents governments from stopping these acts, helps to shape and QAnon warrior myth. This fantasy enables an expression of righteousness, a sense of superiority (over those blind to the evil the deep state commits), and contributes to the unconscious assumption that the hate and harassment that QAnon adherents are targeting individuals with contributes to the greater good of society and humanity. Though, the label of paedophiles, or the association of celebrities (with various conspiracy theories about them being secret paedophiles), falls outside of the existing body of research and platform or government policies regarding hate and harassment, the data analysed for this project appears to indicate that this phenomenon cannot be overlooked. This slow dehumanization creates initial pathways for further radicalization and

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<sup>460</sup> Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*, 71.

<sup>461</sup> Roland Imhoff and Sara Jahnke, "Determinants of Punitive Attitudes Toward People with Pedophilia: Dissecting Effects of the Label and Intentionality Ascriptions," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 47 (2018), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-017-1048-8#citeas>.

potential actors of violence. The insurrection of January 6, is a stark reminder of the potential offline impact of online conspiracy theories.

The cognitive and emotional implications of the paedophile label cannot be ignored: labeling the other as a paedophile leads frequently to an Angry emotional reaction. As Van Doorn, Zeelenberg and Breugelmans wrote Anger is an intense negative emotion, which can lead to negative behavioral tendencies<sup>462</sup>. Research has shown that when a person is being victimized (i.e. children as victims of paedophiles) can lead people to feel angry<sup>463</sup>. Further research has also shown that when someone is angry about someone(s) being disadvantaged they are more likely to want to help fix that disadvantage<sup>464</sup>. This cognitive behavioral pattern is what can be demonstrated by QAnon targeting and brigating those they perceive as elites victimizing children, but also why the QAnon co-opting of save the children lead to massive mobilization around the globe. These narratives push individuals to act to what they perceive as the source of children being victimized. As Kurt Braddock highlights that “if an anger appeal is designed to motivate target audiences to do something, those audiences must believe that (a) they are able to perform some sort of behavior that will alleviate their anger, and (b) the behavior being recommended would be effective.”<sup>465</sup> At its core QAnon is structured around the concept that anons are fighting in a digital war against the deep state and its elites. To that end harassment, brigading and the dissemination of propaganda are their weapons of choice. By targeting elites, they perceive are paedophiles, anons feel like they are “participating” in the digital war and actually achieving some sort of victory. This participation not only gives them a sense of accomplishment, but also gives them an outlet to satisfy their anger.

This type of behavior from QAnon is not limited to gender-based violence, but also likely plays a role in how ideologies like QAnon, can pose a threat to democratic institutions. The same mechanism was likely at play as QAnon amplified the “great reset” and dominion voter fraud conspiracy theory, especially when these are amplified by individuals in positions of power.

The challenge presented by the findings, is that this content falls between existing legal and policy frameworks. What the data points to is the content predominantly falling into the harm category rather than explicitly violent category. The type of harm found in the targeting of influential women, is that the narrative fantasies presented by QAnon, could turn to offline violence. Importantly, the long-term harassment and brigading of these individuals can have significant psychological and emotional impacts, leading individuals to pull out of specific social media platforms to protect themselves, as was done by Chrissy Teigen in light of her harassment by QAnon and Pizzagate conspiracy theorists. This also highlights the negative implication on social health, where individuals may decide to self-censor or limit opportunities to engage in spaces freely, changing both their opportunities, and experience, as well as the overall dynamic of spaces meant ideally to be inclusive and representative. Though there is a consistent flow of

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<sup>462</sup> Janne van Doorn, Marcel Zeelenberg, and Seger M Breugelmans, "The Impact of Anger on Donations to Victims," *International Review of Victimology* 23, no. 3 (2017), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0269758017710819>.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.; Nichola J. Raihani and Katherine McAuliffe, "Human punishment is not primarily motivated by inequality," *Biology Letters* 8 (2012), <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsbl.2012.0470>.

<sup>464</sup> Gerold Mikula, Klaus R. Scherer, and Ursula Athenstaedt, "The Role of Injustice in the Elicitation of Differential Emotional Reactions," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24, no. 7 (1998), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0146167298247009>.

<sup>465</sup> Kurt Braddock, *Weaponized Words: The Strategic Role of Persuasion in Violent Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 170.

hate and harassment towards these individuals, it does intensify when they are labelled as a paedophile. Though our case studies demonstrate online harmful content, the paedophilia narrative has led to multiple incidents ([here](#) and [here](#)) of offline violence, or offline mobilization ([here](#) and [here](#)).

Though, with influencers as examined in this case study, are easy markers for the type of harmful harassment and brigading, this can also be scaled down to the average individual. Though they likely fly under the radar of social media platforms, the potential harm toward an average netizen can be greater especially as they do not have a fan base to support them, nor do they have the visibility for platforms to act quickly. To that end the policies of social media need to consider the potential risk of this type of harm and develop policies and mitigation strategies targeted towards these issues, beyond censorship or banning.

## 4.6 Conclusion

In this study, these six celebrities found themselves caught at the centre of conspiracy narratives that accused them of child exploitation without any legitimate proof, leading to incidences of coordinated and targeted hate and harassment that not only showed moments of overwhelmingly high activity aligned with unrelated media events, but in several cases a prolonged baseline of harassment. Several notable insights emerge when considering this form of harassment through the lens of gender-based violence and misogyny.

### 4.6.1 Gender-based violence, misogyny, and racism

Markers of gendered harassment and hate traditionally found in online GBV analyses such as abusive language and threats, while present, were eclipsed by abusive and violent language in the form of accusations. Through a GBV lens we recognize that while the discourse is unique in this context, patterns of volume and prevalence of brigading harassment show gender still acts as a determining factor in who is targeted more often and more consistently.

Teigen's case is perhaps the best example of the critical role of GBV and misogyny in targeted harassment and abuse of women celebrities in this study, evidenced in quantitative and qualitative analysis. When examining Teigen's Twitter mentions, while total mentions are at levels similar to the comparison case, Hanks, QAnon-related references are 10x higher for Teigen. DeGeneres and Winfrey show similar results, though lower in magnitude. And while brigading and violent language in the form of unfounded accusations is one type of harassment faced disproportionately by women in this dataset, as noted above, abusive language was still present.

Female abuse terms showed to be significant proportions of the percentages of the overall terms in datasets when looking at women in the case study (Teigen - 32.2%, DeGeneres - 30% and Winfrey - 19.1%). In a number of cases, this abuse was specifically directed at the individual. This form of misogyny also extends to some LGBTQ-identifying members in our case study, most notably Smollett, who had similar terms used in mentions, though at much smaller percentages compared to the three women.

One additional finding that requires more in-depth examination is the nature of indirect abuse targeting individuals linked to celebrities. This form of indirect abuse, by "association" (in some cases this association was dubious and based on a discriminatory conspiracy – see: Smollett and VP Harris narrative) highlights the nature of GBV as being undeterred by boundaries, absence or lack of

involvement. Qualitative content analysis showed VP Harris, Hanks' wife, and Cooper's mother were all referenced to low degrees. Each was referenced disparagingly and were seen as complicit and fair game in the community's harassment, albeit indirectly.

Finally, the results highlighted that race is also a compounding factor, with Teigen and Winfrey facing the highest volume of mentions and the discrepancy between Smollett's experience of anti-LGBTQ mentions in comparison to others. This emphasizes that people of colour, and women of colour in particular, face intersecting and compounding forms of hate and harassment due to embedded and systemic racism. This context is an important consideration in our analysis as insights here lean more on behaviour than overtly abusive language and terms, at times.

Finally, we cannot ignore the continued use of anti-Semitic tropes as constant baseline hate present throughout the dataset. While at low levels, it is worth considering that this is once again a racist theme in hateful content that finds a place in most all conspiratorial discourse, and this analysis was no different.

#### 4.6.2 Coordinated harassment by conspiratorial communities

A notable finding in this report is the method by which harassment of targeted celebrity figures occurs: through coordinated narrative framing, sharing of target lists and brigading. The collective use of each of these techniques is the prolonged, persistent, and concentrated harassment and targeted hate directed at and about celebrities.

Narrative framing is a powerful tool in justifying and legitimizing coordinated hate in this. This type of framing creates clear markers for good and evil actors (good being the members of the QAnon community, and evil being the elites engaging in child exploitation, according to them). This essentially gives followers a road map for who is the target of their harassment, and why it is justified for the "greater good" to engage in, effectively, mob justice targeting these celebrity figures. These conspiratorial narratives also create a culture of harassment, fomenting hate and hardening perceptions of targeted celebrity figures. This allows the community to use unrelated negative media events about the celebrity as further "evidence" and thus can be adapted to the existing narrative, thereby creating flashpoints for increased harassment campaigns.

Narratives are not the only form of guidance and road-mapping of harassment for the QAnon community. By way of Crowdtangle data, we noted the presence of lists in posts indicating targets for the community circulating on various social media sites.

Finally, the ability to coordinate and engage in brigading through narrative framing and lists allows this type of harassment to be sustained and persistent, and not be encumbered by platform boundaries. Across three mainstream social media platforms, we observed similar results in terms of content and behaviour that indicates harassment and violence experienced by the celebrity is difficult to escape by simply shifting into new digital spaces.

Further research and greater access to data is required to fully understand the extent to which GBV, brigading, and coordinated harassment can impact the experience of individuals online. Platforms must consider that, while more information will aid in better understanding the phenomenon, access to supportive resources and mechanisms to prevent and mitigate abuse of this type are critical, particularly as pertains to the form of hate and harassment that falls below legal or policy thresholds. Unfortunately, this type of abuse if directed at average users with smaller audiences and fewer support infrastructures



than celebrities, will be more vulnerable, and will have insufficient means to mitigate the detrimental effects on their life and person.

## 4.8 Appendix

### HATE TERMS (FULL QUERY)

(dyke OR dykes OR faggot OR faggots OR fags OR fag OR homo OR homos OR queer OR queers OR fag OR "batty boy" OR "batty boys" OR "batty men" OR "batty man" OR "chi chi man" OR "chi chi men" OR cocksucker OR cocksuckers OR fagbag OR fagbags OR fagdick OR fagdicks OR fagshit OR fagshits OR fairy OR fairies OR gay OR "gender bender" OR gaylord\* OR homintern OR lesbian OR lesbians OR sissy OR pansy OR sodomite OR poof OR poofter OR bugger OR brownie OR fudgepacker OR "rug muncher" OR shemale OR ladyboy OR "fucking gay" OR "gay ass" OR cock OR raped OR rape OR rapist OR "be killed" OR "kill yourself" OR "kill all" OR "kill you" OR "fuck outta here" OR "fuck u talking" OR "fuck you too" OR "fucking hate you" OR "is a fucking" OR "you a lame" OR "you fuck wit" OR gimp OR gimps OR goober OR goobers OR gypo OR gypoes OR gypos OR gypped OR gypsy OR gypsy OR "half bred" OR "half breed" OR "half breeds" OR idiot\* OR mutt OR pussy OR pussies OR retard\* OR tard OR tards OR twat OR twats OR "beat him" OR "butt ugly" OR "hate all" OR inbred OR inbreeds OR savages OR slave OR blacks OR nigger OR niggers OR coon OR nigga OR niggas OR "jungle bunny" OR "spear chucker" OR coon OR coons OR Africoon OR Africoons OR americoon OR americoons OR ape OR apes OR "aunt jane" OR "aunt jemina" OR "aunt jemina" OR "aunt sally" OR "aunt mary" OR "banjo lips" OR "black barbie" OR "black barbies" OR "bix nood" OR "bix noods" OR "black invader" OR "black invaders" OR "blue gum" OR "blue gums" OR bootlip OR bootlips OR "bounty bar" OR chinig OR chinigs OR "cocoa puff" OR "cocoa puffs" OR darkey OR darkie OR deminigger OR deminiggers OR ghetto OR jigga OR jiggabo OR jiggaboo OR jiggaboos OR jigger OR kneegrow OR kneegroes OR "lawn jockey" OR "lawn jockey" OR monkey OR monkeys OR mosshead OR mossheads OR "mud person" OR "mud persons" OR "mud duck" OR "mud ducks" OR nigress OR picaninny\* OR picaninnies OR "race traitor" OR "race traitors" OR nappyhead OR negro OR nig OR nigga OR niglet OR nigglet OR wog OR wogs OR "brown invader" OR colored OR "trailer trash" OR "white ass" OR "white boy" OR "white person" OR "white trash" OR hillbilly OR hillbillies OR honkey OR honkeye OR honkie OR honkies OR honklet OR honklets OR squarehead\* OR whitey OR whitie OR whiteys OR whities OR wigga OR wiggas OR chink OR chinks OR "bamboo coon" OR "bamboo coons" OR buckethead OR bucketheads OR chinig OR chinigs OR "curry muncher" OR "curry slurper" OR "curry stinker" OR gook OR gookette\* OR gookie OR gookies OR gooklet OR gooklets OR gooks OR gooky OR lemonhead\* OR pancake OR "pointy head" OR "pointy heads" OR ricepicker\* OR "slant eye" OR "slant eyes" OR slit OR slits OR slopehead OR slopeheads OR squinty OR squinties OR zipperhead OR zipperheads OR zippohead\* OR zip OR "diaper head" OR "diaper heads" OR jihadi OR jihadis OR muzzie OR muzzies OR muzzy OR raghead\* OR "towel head" OR "towel heads" OR "allah akbar" OR "6 gorillion" OR "six gorillion" OR goyim OR globalist OR globalists OR goy OR hebe OR hebes OR hebro OR heeb OR heebes OR holohoax OR hooknose OR hooknosed OR hooknoses OR ike OR ikes OR ikey OR iky OR jew OR jews OR jewbag OR jewbags OR moch OR mochs OR mock OR mockey OR mockie OR mockies OR mocks OR mocky OR moxie OR moxies OR moxy OR yid OR yids OR ziojew OR zionazi OR zionazis OR zog OR wetback OR wetbacks OR "bean bandit" OR "bean bandits" OR beaner OR beaners OR "bans and cans" OR spic OR cunt OR bitch OR bint OR bints OR bitches OR feminazi OR feminazis OR kunt OR scag OR scags OR skag OR skags OR slag OR slags OR slut OR sluts OR whore OR whores OR hoe OR cocksucker OR cocksuckers)

## **HATE TERMS (CATEGORISED)**

**ANTI-LGBTQ** - dyke OR dykes OR faggot OR faggots OR fags OR fag OR homo OR homos OR queer OR queers OR fag OR “batty boy” OR “batty boys” OR “batty men” OR “batty man” OR “chi chi man” OR “chi chi men” OR cocksucker OR cocksuckers OR fagbag OR fagbags OR fagdick OR fagdicks OR fagshit OR fagshits OR fairy OR fairies OR gay OR “gender bender” OR gaylord\* OR homintern OR lesbian OR lesbians OR sissy OR pansy OR sodomite OR poof OR poofter OR bugger OR brownie OR fudgepacker OR “rug muncher” OR shemale OR ladyboy OR “fucking gay” OR “gay ass” OR cock

**VIOLENCE** - raped OR rape OR rapist OR “be killed” OR “kill yourself” OR “kill all” OR “kill you”

**GENERAL HATE** - “fuck outta here” OR “fuck u talking” OR “fuck you too” OR “fucking hate you” OR “is a fucking” OR “you a lame” OR “you fuck wit” OR gimp OR gimps OR goober OR goobers OR gypo OR gypoos OR gypos OR gypped OR gypsy OR gypsy OR “half bred” OR “half breed” OR “half breeds” OR idiot\* OR mutt OR pussy OR pussies OR retard\* OR tard OR tards OR twat OR twats OR “beat him” OR “butt ugly” OR “hate all” OR inbred OR inbreeds OR savages OR slave

**ANTI-AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK** - blacks OR nigger OR niggers OR coon OR nigga OR niggas OR “jungle bunny” OR “spear chucker” OR coon OR coons OR Africoon OR Africoons OR americoon OR americanoons OR ape OR apes OR “aunt jane” OR “aunt jemina” OR “aunt jemina” OR “aunt sally” OR “aunt mary” OR “banjo lips” OR “black barbie” OR “black barbies” OR “bix nood” OR “bix noods” OR “black invader” OR “black invaders” OR “blue gum” OR “blue gums” OR bootlip OR bootlips OR “bounty bar” OR chinig OR chinigs OR “cocoa puff” OR “cocoa puffs” OR darkey OR darkie OR deminigger OR deminiggers OR ghetto OR jigga OR jiggabo OR jiggaboo OR jiggaboos OR jigger OR kneegrow OR kneegroes OR “lawn jockey” OR “lawn jockey” OR monkey OR monkeys OR mosshead OR mossheads OR “mud person” OR “mud persons” OR “mud duck” OR “mud ducks” OR nigress OR picaninny\* OR picaninnies OR “race traitor” OR “race traitors” OR nappyhead OR negro OR nig OR nigga OR niglet OR niglet OR wog OR wogs OR “brown invader” OR colored

**ANTI-WHITE** - “trailer park” OR “white ass” OR “white boy” OR “white person” OR “white trash” OR hillbilly OR hillbillies OR honkey OR honkeye OR honkie OR honkies OR honklet OR honklets OR squarehead\* OR whitey OR whitie OR whiteys OR whities OR wigga OR wiggas

**ANTI-ASIAN** - chink OR chinks OR “bamboo coon” OR “bamboo coons” OR buckethead OR bucketheads OR chinig OR chinigs OR “curry muncher” OR “curry slurper” OR “curry stinker” OR gook OR gookette\* OR gookie OR gookies OR gooklet OR gooklets OR gooks OR gooky OR lemonhead\* OR pancake OR “pointy head” OR “pointy heads” OR ricepicker\* OR “slant eye” OR “slant eyes” OR slit OR slits OR slopehead OR slopeheads OR squinty OR squinties OR zipperhead OR zipperheads OR zippohead\* OR zip

**ANTI-ARAB** - “diaper head” OR “diaper heads” OR jihadi OR jihadis OR muzzie OR muzzies OR muzzy OR raghead\* OR “towel head” OR “towel heads” OR “allah akbar”

**ANTISEMITIC** - “6 gorillion” OR “six gorillion” OR goyim OR globalist OR globalists OR goy OR hebe OR hebes OR hebro OR heeb OR heeb OR heeb OR holohoax OR hooknose OR hooknosed OR hooknoses OR ike OR ikes OR ikey OR iky OR jew OR jews OR jewbag OR jewbags OR moch OR mochs OR mock OR mockey OR mockie OR mockies OR mocks OR mocky OR moxie OR moxies OR moxy OR yid OR yids OR ziojew OR zionazi OR zionazis OR zog

**ANTI-LATINO/HISPANIC** - wetback OR wetbacks OR “bean bandit” OR “bean bandits” OR beaner OR beaners OR “bans and cans” OR spic

**FEMALE ABUSE** - cunt OR bitch OR bint OR bints OR bitches OR feminazi OR feminazis OR kunt OR scag OR scags OR skag OR skags OR slag OR slags OR slut OR sluts OR whore OR whores OR hoe

**MALE ABUSE** - cocksucker OR cocksuckers

### **PAEDOPHILE TERMS**

(pedo\* OR paedophile OR paedo OR paedophile OR pedophilic)

### **TOM HANKS**

**Tom Hanks query:** ("tom hanks" OR tomhanks OR hanks)

**Tom Hanks QAnon query:** (wwg1wga OR QAnon OR followthewhiterabbit OR qsentme OR thestormiscoming OR thegreatawakening OR greatawakening OR weareQ OR fallofthecabal OR wherewegoonewegoall OR stormiscoming OR stormisuponus OR QAnon2019 OR QAnon2020 OR wwg1wgaworldwide OR trusttheplan OR adrenochrome OR qarmy OR pedogate2020 OR QAnonworldwide OR qarmyworldwide OR darktolight OR sheepnomore OR patriotsawakened OR thestormisuponus OR calmbeforethestorm OR thestorm OR wearetheneews OR "where we go one we go all" OR "where we go 1 we go all" OR "the great awakening" OR QPatriot OR thestormishere OR "we are the news" OR pizzagate OR spygate OR qthestorm OR digitalsoldier OR wearetheneewsnow OR deepstate OR epsteinisland OR pedowoodisreal OR adrenochrome OR starvemoloch OR pizzagateisreal OR QAnon8chan OR QAnonus OR QAnonarmy OR thesepeoplearesick OR sheepnomore OR pedowood OR pedogate OR taketheoath OR perywood OR outofshadows OR outoftheshadows OR fallofcabal OR pedo OR paedophile OR paedophile OR epstein OR lolita OR lolitaexpress OR epsteinisland OR "little st james" OR paedophilia OR pedos OR pizza OR pizzagate OR savethechildren OR savethechildren OR saveourchildren OR savethekids OR endhumantrafficking OR riseupforchildren OR Abramovic OR pedophilic OR wayfair\* OR wayfairchildtrafficking OR "obama thing" OR satan OR satanic OR satanist OR satanists OR illuminati OR "spirit cooking" OR weiner OR "child sex" OR pizzagte OR "sex trafficking" OR "child trafficking" OR "human trafficking" OR "pineal gland" OR "human sacrifice" OR frazzledrip OR satanicritualabuse OR "satanic ritual abuse" OR MKUltr OR thesepeopleareevil OR thesepeoplearesick OR wayfairgate OR humantrafficking OR childtrafficking OR sextrafficking OR wayfairtrafficking OR typewriter OR typewriters OR

((kids OR children) AND (rape OR raped OR kill OR killed OR eat OR ate OR rapist OR murder OR murderer)))

## **CHRISSY TEIGEN**

**Chrissy Teigen:** ("chrissy teigen" OR chrissyteigen OR "chrissy teigan" OR "chrissy tiegan" OR "chrissy tiegen")

**Chrissy Teigen QAnon mentions:** (wwg1wga OR QAnon OR followthewhiterabbit OR qsentme OR thestormiscoming OR thegreatawakening OR greatawakening OR weareQ OR fallofthecabal OR wherewegoonewegoall OR stormiscoming OR stormisuponus OR QAnon2019 OR QAnon2020 OR wwg1wgaworldwide OR trusttheplan OR adrenochrome OR qarmy OR pedogate2020 OR QAnonworldwide OR qarmyworldwide OR darktolight OR sheepnomore OR patriotsawakened OR thestormisuponus OR calmbeforethestorm OR thestorm OR wearthenews OR "where we go one we go all" OR "where we go 1 we go all" OR "the great awakening" OR QPatriot OR thestormishere OR "we are the news" OR pizzagate OR spygate OR qthestorm OR digitalsoldier OR wearthenewsnow OR deepstate OR epsteinisland OR pedowoodisreal OR adrenochrome OR starvemoloch OR pizzagatisreal OR QAnon8chan OR QAnonus OR QAnonarmy OR thesepeoplearesick OR sheepnomore OR pedowood OR pedogate OR taketheoath OR pervywood OR outofshadows OR outoftheshadows OR fallofcabal OR pedo OR paedophile OR paedophile OR epstein OR lolita OR lolitaexpress OR epsteinisland OR "little st james" OR paedophilia OR pedos OR pizza OR pizzagate OR savethechildren OR savethechildren OR saveourchildren OR savethekids OR endhumantrafficking OR riseupforchildren OR Abramovic OR pedophilic OR wayfair\* OR wayfairchildtrafficking OR "obama thing" OR satan OR satanic OR "spirit cooking" OR weiner OR "child sex" OR pizzagte OR cancelteigen OR "sex trafficking" OR "child trafficking" OR "human trafficking" OR "pineal gland" OR "human sacrifice" OR frazzledrip OR satanicritualabuse OR "satanic ritual abuse" OR MKUltra OR thesepeopleareevil OR thesepeoplearesick OR wayfairgate OR humantrafficking OR childtrafficking OR sextrafficking OR wayfairtrafficking OR ((kids OR children) AND (rape OR raped OR kill OR killed OR eat OR ate OR rapist OR murder OR murderer)))

## **ELLEN DEGENERES**

**Ellen DeGeneres query:** ("ellen degeneres" OR "ellen de genereas" OR theellenshow OR "ellen de generes" OR ellendegeneres)

**Ellen DeGeneres QAnon query:** (wwg1wga OR QAnon OR followthewhiterabbit OR qsentme OR thestormiscoming OR thegreatawakening OR greatawakening OR weareQ OR fallofthecabal OR wherewegoonewegoall OR stormiscoming OR stormisuponus OR QAnon2019 OR QAnon2020 OR wwg1wgaworldwide OR trusttheplan OR adrenochrome OR qarmy OR pedogate2020 OR QAnonworldwide OR qarmyworldwide OR darktolight OR sheepnomore OR patriotsawakened OR thestormisuponus OR calmbeforethestorm OR thestorm OR wearthenews OR "where we go one we go all" OR "where we go 1 we go all" OR "the great awakening" OR QPatriot OR thestormishere OR "we are the news" OR pizzagate OR spygate OR qthestorm OR digitalsoldier OR wearthenewsnow OR deepstate OR epsteinisland OR pedowoodisreal OR adrenochrome OR starvemoloch OR pizzagatisreal OR QAnon8chan OR QAnonus OR QAnonarmy OR thesepeoplearesick OR sheepnomore OR pedowood OR pedogate OR taketheoath OR pervywood OR outofshadows OR outoftheshadows OR fallofcabal OR pedo OR paedophile OR paedophile OR epstein OR lolita OR lolitaexpress OR epsteinisland OR "little st

james" OR paedophilia OR pedos OR pizza OR pizzagate OR savethechildren OR savethechildren OR saveourchildren OR savethekids OR endhumantrafficking OR riseupforchildren OR Abramovic OR pedophilic OR wayfair\* OR wayfairchildtrafficking OR "obama thing" OR satan OR satanic OR satanist OR satanists OR illuminati OR "spirit cooking" OR weiner OR "child sex" OR pizzagte OR "sex trafficking" OR "child trafficking" OR "human trafficking" OR "pineal gland" OR "human sacrifice" OR frazzledrip OR satanicritualabuse OR "satanic ritual abuse" OR MKUltra OR thesepeopleareevil OR thesepeoplearesick OR wayfairgate OR ((kids OR children) AND (rape OR raped OR kill OR killed OR eat OR ate OR rapist OR murder OR murderer)))

## **ANDERSON COOPER**

**Anderson Cooper query:** ("anderson cooper" OR andersoncooper OR AC360)

**Anderson Cooper QAnon query:** (wwglwga OR QAnon OR followthewhiterabbit OR qsentme OR thestormiscoming OR thegreatawakening OR greatawakening OR weareQ OR fallofthecabal OR wherewegoonewegoall OR stormiscoming OR stormisuponus OR QAnon2019 OR QAnon2020 OR wwglwga worldwide OR trusttheplan OR adrenochrome OR qarmy OR pedogate2020 OR QAnon worldwide OR qarmy worldwide OR darktolight OR sheepnomore OR patriotsawakened OR thestormisuponus OR calmbeforethestorm OR thestorm OR wearethenews OR "where we go one we go all" OR "where we go 1 we go all" OR "the great awakening" OR QPatriot OR thestormishere OR "we are the news" OR pizzagate OR spygate OR qthestorm OR digitalsoldier OR wearethenewsnow OR deepstate OR epsteinisland OR pedowoodisreal OR adrenochrome OR starvemoloch OR pizzagateisreal OR QAnon8chan OR QAnonus OR QAnonarmy OR thesepeoplearesick OR sheepnomore OR pedowood OR pedogate OR taketheoath OR pervywood OR outofshadows OR outoftheshadows OR fallofcabal OR pedo OR paedophile OR paedophile OR epstein OR lolita OR lolitaexpress OR epsteinisland OR "little st james" OR paedophilia OR pedos OR pizza OR pizzagate OR savethechildren OR savethechildren OR saveourchildren OR savethekids OR endhumantrafficking OR riseupforchildren OR Abramovic OR pedophilic OR wayfair\* OR wayfairchildtrafficking OR "obama thing" OR satan OR satanic OR satanist OR satanists OR illuminati OR "spirit cooking" OR weiner OR "child sex" OR pizzagte OR "sex trafficking" OR "child trafficking" OR "human trafficking" OR "pineal gland" OR "human sacrifice" OR frazzledrip OR satanicritualabuse OR "satanic ritual abuse" OR MKUltra OR thesepeopleareevil OR thesepeoplearesick OR wayfairgate OR ((kids OR children) AND (rape OR raped OR kill OR killed OR eat OR ate OR rapist OR murder OR murderer)))

## **OPRAH WINFREY**

**Oprah Winfrey query:** oprah OR "oprah winfrey" OR oprahwinfrey

**Oprah Winfrey QAnon query:**

(wwglwga OR QAnon OR followthewhiterabbit OR qsentme OR thestormiscoming OR thegreatawakening OR greatawakening OR weareQ OR fallofthecabal OR wherewegoonewegoall OR stormiscoming OR stormisuponus OR QAnon2019 OR QAnon2020 OR wwglwga worldwide OR trusttheplan OR adrenochrome OR qarmy OR pedogate2020 OR QAnon worldwide OR qarmy worldwide OR darktolight OR sheepnomore OR patriotsawakened OR thestormisuponus OR calmbeforethestorm OR thestorm OR wearethenews OR "where we go

one we go all" OR "where we go 1 we go all" OR "the great awakening" OR QPatriot OR thestormishere OR "we are the news" OR pizzagate OR spygate OR qthestorm OR digitalsoldier OR wearthenewsnow OR deepstate OR epsteinisland OR pedowoodisreal OR adrenochrome OR starvemoloch OR pizzagateisreal OR QAnon8chan OR QAnonus OR QAnonarmy OR thesepeoplearesick OR sheepnomore OR pedowood OR pedogate OR taketheoath OR pervywood OR outofshadows OR outoftheshadows OR fallofcabal OR pedo OR paedophile OR paedophile OR epstein OR lolita OR lolitaexpress OR epsteinisland OR "little st james" OR paedophilia OR pedos OR pizza OR pizzagate OR savethechildren OR savethechildren OR saveourchildren OR savethekids OR endhumantrafficking OR riseupforchildren OR Abramovic OR pedophilic OR wayfair\* OR wayfairchildtrafficking OR "obama thing" OR satan OR satanic OR satanist OR satanists OR illuminati OR "spirit cooking" OR weiner OR "child sex" OR pizzagte OR "sex trafficking" OR "child trafficking" OR "human trafficking" OR "pineal gland" OR "human sacrifice" OR frazzledrip OR satanicritualabuse OR "satanic ritual abuse" OR MKUltra OR thesepeopleareevil OR thesepeoplearesick OR wayfairgate OR ((kids OR children) AND (rape OR raped OR kill OR killed OR eat OR ate OR rapist OR murder OR murderer)))

## **JUSSIE SMOLLETT**

**Jussie Smollett query:** (jussie OR smollett OR jussiesmollett\* OR "jessie smollett" OR "jessie smolett" OR "jessie smollet")

**Jussie Smottett QAnon query:** (wwg1wga OR QAnon OR followthewhiterabbit OR qsentme OR thestormiscoming OR thegreatawakening OR greatawakening OR weareQ OR fallofthecabal OR wherewegoonewegoall OR stormiscoming OR stormisuponus OR QAnon2019 OR QAnon2020 OR wwg1wgaworldwide OR trusttheplan OR adrenochrome OR qarmy OR pedogate2020 OR QAnonworldwide OR qarmyworldwide OR darktolight OR sheepnomore OR patriotsawakened OR thestormisuponus OR calmbeforethestorm OR thestorm OR wearthenews OR "where we go one we go all" OR "where we go 1 we go all" OR "the great awakening" OR QPatriot OR thestormishere OR "we are the news" OR pizzagate OR spygate OR qthestorm OR digitalsoldier OR wearthenewsnow OR deepstate OR epsteinisland OR pedowoodisreal OR adrenochrome OR starvemoloch OR pizzagateisreal OR QAnon8chan OR QAnonus OR QAnonarmy OR thesepeoplearesick OR sheepnomore OR pedowood OR pedogate OR taketheoath OR pervywood OR outofshadows OR outoftheshadows OR fallofcabal OR pedo OR paedophile OR paedophile OR lolita OR lolitaexpress OR epsteinisland OR "little st james" OR paedophilia OR pedos OR pizza OR pizzagate OR savethechildren OR savethechildren OR saveourchildren OR savethekids OR endhumantrafficking OR riseupforchildren OR Abramovic OR pedophilic OR wayfair\* OR wayfairchildtrafficking OR satan OR satanic OR satanist OR satanists OR illuminati OR "spirit cooking" OR weiner OR "child sex" OR pizzagte OR "sex trafficking" OR "child trafficking" OR "human trafficking" OR "pineal gland" OR "human sacrifice" OR frazzledrip OR satanicritualabuse OR "satanic ritual abuse" OR MKUltra OR thesepeopleareevil OR thesepeoplearesick OR wayfairgate

# CHAPTER 5: QANON AND IDEOLOGICALLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE AND CRIMINALITY

Traditionally, law enforcement, intelligence agencies and public policy attention with respect to terrorism and political violence in the West tends to focus on jihadi or far-right extremism. At first glance, QAnon appeared to present a far lesser threat to public security when I first began to research the movement. Conspiracy theories were not traditionally part of the intelligence and law enforcement tool kit when it came to making threat assessments. Nor were conspiracy theorists considered to be a threat to individual or national security. This, however, changed in May 2019 when an FBI bulletin noted, it is probable that “anti-government, identity based, and fringe political conspiracy theories, very likely motivate some domestic extremists, wholly or in part, to commit criminal and sometimes violent activity”<sup>466</sup>. The FBI went on to note that conspiracy theories “very likely encourage the targeting of specific people, places, and organizations, thereby increasing the likelihood of violence against these targets”.<sup>467</sup> What were once ideas that used to live and die in the dark corners of the internet are now making their way into the mainstream, pushing people to commit violent acts, and also impacting their overall commitment to democratic society. This is affecting the way government policy is being shaped with, CSIS in their 2020 and 2021 annual reports stated that “ideologically motivated violent extremism activity has been fueled by an increase in extreme antiauthority and anti-government rhetoric often rooted in the weaponization of conspiracy theories.”<sup>468</sup> In his annual report, the director general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation stated that “Online radicalisation is nothing new, but COVID-19 sent it into overdrive. Isolated individuals spent more time online, exposed to extremist messaging, misinformation and conspiracy theories.”<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>466</sup> FBI, Anti-Government, Identity Based, and Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories Very Likely Motivate Some Domestic Extremists to Commit Criminal, Sometimes Violent Activity, (FBI Phoenix Field Office, 2019).

<sup>467</sup> FBI, Short Anti-Government, Identity Based, and Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories Very Likely Motivate Some Domestic Extremists to Commit Criminal, Sometimes Violent Activity.

<sup>468</sup> Government of Canada, CSIS Public Report 2021, (2021); Government of Canada, CSIS Public Report 2020, (2020).

<sup>469</sup> ASIO, Director-General's Annual Threat Assessment, (2022).



QAnon has contributed to the radicalization and mobilization of 237 people to notable criminal acts or acts of violence globally.

Over four years of analysis of QAnon instances of criminality and violent extremism, QAnon has evolved from an emerging threat to national security, to one that is established. The COVID-19 pandemic and the events of January 6 in the US and the storming of the Reichstag in the Summer of 2020, kidnappings, murders, threats against elected officials and attack against critical infrastructure demonstrate that QAnon is a national security threat that cannot be downplayed. QAnon is not a movement that has an organizational structure found within the jihadi or far-right landscape. QAnon represents a novel challenge to public security as there are no clear leaders, but there are influencers who dictate what to believe and how. The vast majority of QAnon adherents are non-violent, nor would they participate in criminal activities. However, from the perspective of scale there are likely more QAnon adherent than there are ideologically motivated violent extremists of other flavors. What I have argued previously, and what is the concern of nation states seeking to combat the threat posed by conspiracy theories like QAnon is that the internet allows for a “crowd-sourcing” effect wherein conspiracy theory followers themselves shape a given theory by presenting information that supplements, expands, or localizes its narrative. This effect appears particularly salient with QAnon, where followers are directed to take interpretation and action into their own hands, rather than at the explicit direction of the anonymous user “Q” behind the movement. QAnon is thus markedly different from other far-right extremist groups and jihadi groups, as it lacks both a clear organizational structure and a centralization of interpretive duties.

QAnon represents a militant and anti-establishment ideology rooted in an apocalyptic desire to destroy the existing, corrupt world to usher in a promised golden age. This position finds resonance with other IMVE movements, such as the various militant, anti-government, white nationalist, and neo-Nazi extremist organizations. QAnon followers share roots with conspiracy theories that have fed other anti-government movements, such as the 90s militias that feared the “New World Order,” or the anti-government apocalypticism and religious fervor of the Branch Davidians.<sup>470</sup>

## 5.1 Examples of QAnon and Violent Extremism

This section will provide a sample summary of criminal cases with a nexus to violence involving QAnon followers to highlight the variety of actors and motivations, as well as how the QAnon ideology has contributed to radicalization to violence and elucidate how conspiracy theory narratives tacitly support or legitimize violent action. To note, since this sample of case studies,

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<sup>470</sup> John R. Hall, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe and Japan* (Oxford: Routledge, 2000).

there were 26 incidents of QAnon criminality, that number in November 2022 has reached 237, all of which is too numerous to cover in this dissertation.

### 5.1.1 Edgar Maddison Welch

Edgar Maddison Welch, a then 28-year-old from Salisbury, North Carolina, entered the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C., on December 4, 2016, with an AR-15 rifle and .38 revolver<sup>471</sup> to potentially attempt to free children he believed might be trapped in the building as part of a sex-trafficking ring.<sup>472</sup> Welch, a volunteer firefighter with two children,<sup>473</sup> had a criminal record for incidents involving minor drug possession and driving under the influence of alcohol in 2007 and 2013, respectively.

Welch entered Comet Ping Pong with his AR-15 visible, causing employees and patrons to flee, to search for evidence of child trafficking.<sup>474</sup> Finding none, he shortly thereafter surrendered himself to the police on scene.<sup>475</sup> Welch also admitted that there was a loaded shotgun and ammunition in his car.<sup>476</sup> An FBI affidavit notes that, “the evidence from Welch’s cellphone also suggest that Welch attempted to recruit at least two other people to join him,” though he was unsuccessful.<sup>477</sup>

Evidence found on Welch’s cellphone indicates he watched several YouTube videos describing the ‘Pizzagate’ conspiracy theory in the days preceding his confrontation.<sup>478</sup> Upon arrest, Welch corroborated that he had heard ‘news’ reports that there was a child-sex trafficking ring in Comet Ping Pong restaurant.<sup>479</sup> Law enforcement found as evidence that Welch had visited a number of YouTube channels related to Pizzagate. According to the affidavit, Welch texted his girlfriend stating that Pizzagate was making him sick. Evidence would appear to indicate that the conspiracy theory was having a psychological and emotional impact on Welch as time went on. Welch was in communication with at least two other friends and was discussing via text message about taking direct action. In one message in the affidavit where he was messaging a friend about taking action, he described it as “Raiding a pedo ring, possibly sacraficing [sic] the lives of a few for the lives of many. Standing up against a corrupt system that kidnaps, tortures and rapes babies and children in our own backyard... defending the next generation of kids, our kids, from

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<sup>471</sup> Justin Holgate, *USA v. Edgar Maddison Welch*, (2016).

<sup>472</sup> Holgate, Short *USA v. Edgar Maddison Welch*.

<sup>473</sup> Keith Alexander and Susan Svrluga, "Alleged 'pizzagate' gunman's parents 'stunned' by news," *Chicago Tribune*, December 13 2016, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/ct-alleged-pizzagate-gunmans-parents-20161213-story.html>.

<sup>474</sup> Holgate, Short *USA v. Edgar Maddison Welch*.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*

ever having to experience this kind of evil themselves[.] I'm sorry bro, but I'm tired of turning the channel and hoping someone does something and being thankful it's not my family. One day it will be our families. The world is too afraid to act and I'm too stubborn not to[.]”<sup>480</sup> On December 4, 2016, as Welch was driving to commit his act of violence, he recorded a video for his family where he stated to his two children that “I can’t let you grow up in a world that’s so corrupt by evil without at least standing up for you and for other children just like you.”<sup>481</sup> Welch was radicalized by the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, but appears to have been motivated by a perceived sense of urgency and duty to protect his children from a perceived evil. This key element will be a corner stone of many QAnon acts of criminality and violent extremism.

Welch was charged with federal and local weapons violations and pleaded guilty to a federal charge of interstate transportation of a firearm and ammunition and a D.C. charge of assault with a dangerous weapon.<sup>482</sup> He was sentenced to four years in prison in June 2017, with three years of supervised release following his term in prison.<sup>483</sup> Welch has now been released from prison and has expressed regrets about his actions but maintains elements of the Pizzagate theory are true.

### 5.1.2 Michael Lewis Arthur Meyer

Almost exactly a year and a half after Welch’s confrontation at Comet Ping Pong, and seven months into the existence of QAnon, 39-year-old Michael Lewis Arthur Meyer and his organization, Veterans On Patrol, were on patrol in Tucson, Arizona on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018 when they located a homeless camp, located on a Cemex concrete plant, that they believed was a site used for child sex trafficking.<sup>484</sup> Meyer livestreamed a walkthrough of the camp on May 31<sup>st</sup> on Facebook alleging it was a child abuse camp, which received over 650,000 views over the week following.<sup>485</sup> In June 2018, he livestreamed walking through an empty ranch house, claiming it showed evidence of child abuse.<sup>486</sup> He was arrested on July 8<sup>th</sup> for a charge of trespassing, and then returned to the Cemex plant.<sup>487</sup> There, he occupied a tower for nine days before his arrest on July 22<sup>nd</sup> for the occupation of the tower and an unrelated assault charge.<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> Geneva Sands, "Pizzagate' gunman recorded 'goodbye' video message to his family," *ABC News*, June 23 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/pizzagate-gunman-recorded-goodbye-video-message-family/story?id=48235100>.

<sup>482</sup> U.S. Attorney’s Office District of Columbia, "North Carolina Man Pleads Guilty to Charges In Armed Assault at Northwest Washington Pizza Restaurant," *Department of Justice*, March 24 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/pr/north-carolina-man-pleads-guilty-charges-armed-assault-northwest-washington-pizza>.

<sup>483</sup> U.S. Attorney’s Office District of Columbia, "North Carolina Man Sentenced to Four-Year Prison Term For Armed Assault at Northwest Washington Pizza Restaurant," *Department of Justice*, June 22 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/pr/north-carolina-man-sentenced-four-year-prison-term-armed-assault-northwest-washington>.

<sup>484</sup> Matthew Gault, "“#QANON Conspiracy Theorists Are Hunting for ‘Child Sex Camps’ in the Arizona Desert," June 7 2018, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/zm8ww8/qanon-conspiracy-theorists-are-hunting-for-child-sex-camps-in-the-arizona-desert](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/zm8ww8/qanon-conspiracy-theorists-are-hunting-for-child-sex-camps-in-the-arizona-desert).

<sup>485</sup> Ishmael N. Daro, "Claims Of A ‘Child Sex Camp’ In Arizona Are Fueling The Latest Conspiracy Theory," *Buzzfeed News*, June 6 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ishmaeldaro/how-a-homeless-camp-in-arizona-became-a-child-sex-camp>.

<sup>486</sup> Tay Wiles, "Conspiracy theories inspire vigilante justice in Tucson," *High Country News*, September 12 2018, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/50.17/politics-conspiracy-theories-inspire-vigilante-justice-in-tucson>.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

Meyer is known for his involvement in the 2014 Nevada and 2016 Malheur Wildlife Refuge standoffs, though he is reportedly the only person to be kicked out of both militia groups and has poor relationships with both movements.<sup>489</sup> He also is known in the community for organizing several campaigns to provide shelter, food, and militia protection for homeless veterans.<sup>490</sup> Meyer's claims about a child sex-trafficking camp were picked up by various far-right organizations, including *InfoWars*, as well as by QAnon forums.<sup>491</sup> Though it appears Meyer did not initially develop his claim about the camp based on QAnon, he thanked QAnon community members for their engagement in several videos and posted a link to the QAnon 8chan imageboard.<sup>492</sup> Also, some of those who were with Meyers as part of his entourage during this incident were QAnon believers.<sup>493</sup> Hours after his arrest on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Veterans On Patrol Facebook group posted that Trump was aware of local law enforcement trying to coverup his discovery of the child sex camp, which they linked to Jonathan Rothschild and the Clintons, consonant with QAnon narratives.<sup>494</sup> Meyer is an example of the overlap between sovereign citizen or pseudolaw movement and QAnon, which is a common trend among several cases of QAnon violence and criminality.

On July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019, police responded to a call of Meyer emptying water containers on private property. Meyer more recently has damaged water containers from the non-profit organization Humane Borders, convinced they were part of a cross-border sex trafficking ring run by George Soros and the Clintons.<sup>495</sup> Meyer was then arrested on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and was charged with burglary, theft and, criminal damage.<sup>496</sup>

### 5.1.3 Matthew Philip Wright

On June 15, 2018, Matthew Philip Wright, a 30-year-old, unemployed Marine veteran from Henderson, Nevada,<sup>497</sup> drove an armored truck onto the Mike O'Callaghan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge near the Hoover Dam.<sup>498</sup> Wright parked his vehicle on the southbound lanes, blocking traffic,<sup>499</sup> and stood outside the vehicle with a sign calling for the release of the "OIG Report," which CNN reported was an "apparent reference to the US Justice Department's internal watchdog report on the department's handling of the Hillary Clinton email probe." "Q" and QAnon influencers hyped up the OIG report in question with the belief it would reveal

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<sup>489</sup> Gault, ""#QANON Conspiracy Theorists Are Hunting for 'Child Sex Camps' in the Arizona Desert."

<sup>490</sup> Tim Steller, "Pedophilia conspiracist arrested for stealing, damaging water tanks meant for migrants," *tucson.com*, August 6 2019, [https://tucson.com/news/local/pedophilia-conspiracist-arrested-for-stealing-damaging-water-tanks-meant-for-migrants/article\\_0fa9bf80-a32d-5bf3-914c-a19d172c60a0.html](https://tucson.com/news/local/pedophilia-conspiracist-arrested-for-stealing-damaging-water-tanks-meant-for-migrants/article_0fa9bf80-a32d-5bf3-914c-a19d172c60a0.html).

<sup>491</sup> The Goldwater, "Veterans' Rights Group Discovers Possible Child-Trafficking Camp In Arizona," *InfoWars*, June 4 2018; Wiles, "Conspiracy theories inspire vigilante justice in Tucson."

<sup>492</sup> Gault, ""#QANON Conspiracy Theorists Are Hunting for 'Child Sex Camps' in the Arizona Desert."

<sup>493</sup> Wiles, "Conspiracy theories inspire vigilante justice in Tucson."

<sup>494</sup> Salvador Hernandez, "A Man Pushing A 'Child Sex Camp' Conspiracy Theory Has Been Arrested For Trespassing," *Buzzfeed News*, July 23 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/salvadorhernandez/a-man-pushing-a-child-sex-camp-conspiracy-theory-has-been>.

<sup>495</sup> Steller, "Pedophilia conspiracist arrested for stealing, damaging water tanks meant for migrants."

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*; Tim Steller, "Steller column: Border extremists laughable but pose incitement danger," *tucson.com*, August 10 2019.

<sup>497</sup> Ruelas, "QAnon follower who blocked bridge near Hoover Dam pleads guilty to terrorism charge."

<sup>498</sup> Baer, "An Armed Man Spouting a Bizarre Right-Wing Conspiracy Theory Was Arrested After A Standoff At The Hoover Dam."

<sup>499</sup> Stapleton and Almas, "Man who blocked traffic on Hoover Dam bridge wanted release of government report."

incriminating evidence that would bring down the Democrats. QAnon adherents were thoroughly disappointed when the report was released, as it did not contain the revelations they expected. “Q” responded to the OIG report, claiming there were multiple versions of the OIG report but the one that had the incriminating evidence was not the one that was publicly released.<sup>500</sup> The 568-page report had been released the previous day, on June 14, making Wright’s message on June 15 unclear.<sup>501</sup> However, it is clear that Wright like many QAnon followers expected that the document would contain revelations about nefarious government actors, suggesting Wright had engaged with QAnon theories. After a 90-minute standoff with police, Wright drove away, refusing to stop for law enforcement until he drove over tire strips and came to a stop.<sup>502</sup> Upon arrest, law enforcement found in his vehicle two assault-style rifles and two handguns, 900 rounds of ammunition, and a flashbang device.<sup>503</sup>

Following his arrest, Wright wrote letters to senior government officials and politicians, as well as a letter to President Trump. In the letter to the president, Wright used the term the “Great Awakening” and “For Where We Go One, We Go All” both key terms and concepts in QAnon.

Wright was charged with obstruction of a highway, endangerment, unlawful flight from law enforcement, misconduct involving a weapon, and terrorist acts.<sup>504</sup> He later pleaded guilty to making a terrorist threat (designated as non dangerous), an aggravated assault charge, and fleeing from law enforcement under a plea agreement with prosecutors, but the court recently rejected the agreement for delivering too lenient of a prison term.<sup>505</sup> In June 2021 Wright was sentenced to 8 years in prison for making a terrorist threat and fleeing law enforcement.<sup>506</sup>

#### 5.1.4 Anthony Comello

While Wright’s actions received some media coverage, Anthony Comello’s alleged murder of mafia leader Frank (Francesco) Cali, a senior member of the Gambino crime family, garnered massive national attention. On March 13, 2019, Comello, a 24-year-old from Staten Island, New

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<sup>500</sup> Will Sommer, "QAnon, the Crazy Pro-Trump Conspiracy, Melts Down Over OIG Report," *The Daily Beast*, June 19 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/qanon-the-crazy-pro-trump-conspiracy-melts-down-over-oig-report>.

<sup>501</sup> Politics, "READ: The Justice Department IG report on Clinton’s email.," Stapleton and Almas, "Man who blocked traffic on Hoover Dam bridge wanted release of government report."

<sup>502</sup> Baer, "An Armed Man Spouting a Bizarre Right-Wing Conspiracy Theory Was Arrested After A Standoff At The Hoover Dam."

<sup>503</sup> Ruelas, "QAnon follower who blocked bridge near Hoover Dam pleads guilty to terrorism charge."

<sup>504</sup> Rio Lacanlale, "Henderson Man’s Motives in Standoff Near Hoover Dam Still Murky," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 16 2018, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/henderson-mans-motives-in-standoff-near-hoover-dam-still-murky/>.

<sup>505</sup> Richard Ruelas, "Plea deal rejected for QAnon follower who drove armored vehicle onto bridge near Hoover Dam," *AZCentral*, June 1 2020, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2020/06/01/plea-deal-rejected-matthew-wright-qanon-bridge/5274943002/>.

<sup>506</sup> Richard Ruelas, "QAnon follower sentenced to nearly 8 years in prison for standoff near Hoover Dam," *AZCentral*, January 4 2021, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2021/01/04/qanon-follower-matthew-wright-sentenced-hoover-dam-bridge-standoff/4134612001/>.

York, allegedly shot and killed Cali outside his family home.<sup>507</sup> Comello, who lived with his parents in Staten Island at the time, worked periodically in construction.<sup>508</sup>

The month before the incident, Comello entered a federal courthouse in Manhattan, requesting the arrest of Nancy Pelosi and Mayor Bill de Blasio.<sup>509</sup> The next day, February 22, 2019, Comello was spotted at the Gracie Mansion, the official mayoral residence, asking officers to arrest high-profile Democrats, including Maxine Waters, Adam Schiff, and Nancy Pelosi.<sup>510</sup> On March 13, 2019, Comello allegedly drove to Cali's family home, rang the doorbell, and engaged in a conversation with Cali. Comello allegedly then pulled out a 9mm pistol and shot Cali several times.<sup>511</sup> Comello was charged with one count of murder, criminal possession of a weapon, and assault.<sup>512</sup>

In his first court appearance on March 18, 2019, Comello wrote a large "Q" in pen on his palm alongside several phrases suggesting support for President Trump, such as "MAGA Forever."<sup>513</sup> In a submission to the court, Comello's lawyer, Robert Gottlieb, stated that Comello did not drive to Cali's house intending to kill him, but to perform a citizen's arrest as he believed Cali was part of a purported deep state.<sup>514</sup> Gottlieb claimed Comello shot Cali after he resisted the 'arrest' and that Comello believes he is "Trump's chosen vigilante."<sup>515</sup>

Following President Trump's election in 2016, Comello reportedly became more interested in far-right conspiracy theories, and later became obsessed with QAnon.<sup>516</sup> Gottlieb maintained this QAnon obsession led to Comello's February 2019 quest to perform citizen's arrests.<sup>517</sup> Gottlieb submitted evidence to the court that Comello was posting about far-right conspiracies on his Instagram account, and engaging with QAnon accounts.<sup>518</sup> According to Gottlieb, Comello came across posts that alleged the New York mafia was part of a purported deep state alongside the Democrats.<sup>519</sup> Four days following his arrest, Comello confessed to the NYPD that he believed

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<sup>507</sup> William K. Rashbaum and Ali Watkins, "What We Know About the 24-Year-Old Accused of Killing Frank Cali, a Gambino Mob Boss," *New York Times*, March 17 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/17/nyregion/anthony-comello-frank-cali.html>.

<sup>508</sup> Ali Watkins, "A Conspiracy Theorist, Anthony Comello, and a Mystery Motive in Gambino Murder," *New York Times*, March 22 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/22/nyregion/gambino-comello-mob-boss.html>.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*; Bobby Allyn, "Lawyer: Shooter Wasn't Trying To Kill A Mob Boss. He Was Under 'QAnon' Delusion," *NPR*, July 22 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/22/744244166/shooters-lawyer-he-wasn-t-trying-to-kill-a-mob-boss-he-was-under-qanon-delusion>.

<sup>511</sup> Rashbaum and Watkins, "What We Know About the 24-Year-Old Accused of Killing Frank Cali, a Gambino Mob Boss."

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>513</sup> Watkins, "A Conspiracy Theorist, Anthony Comello, and a Mystery Motive in Gambino Murder."

<sup>514</sup> Ali Watkins, "He Wasn't Seeking to Kill a Mob Boss. He Was Trying to Help Trump, His Lawyers Say," *New York Times*, July 21 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/21/nyregion/gambino-shooting-anthony-comello-frank-cali.html>.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>518</sup> Timothy Johnson, "Alleged QAnon-inspired murdered was obsessed with Fox News," *Media Matters*, July 22 2019, <https://www.mediamatters.org/sean-hannity/alleged-qanon-inspired-murderer-was-obsessed-fox-news>.

<sup>519</sup> Watkins, "He Wasn't Seeking to Kill a Mob Boss. He Was Trying to Help Trump, His Lawyers Say."

the mafia had been infiltrated by the CIA and that the government was spying on him.<sup>520</sup> On June 3, 2020, Comello was deemed mentally unfit to stand trial and was ordered to be transferred to an Office of Mental Health facility for examination.<sup>521</sup>

### 5.1.5 Eduardo Moreno

Just over a year after Comello's alleged murder of Cali, 44-year-old train engineer Eduardo Moreno, allegedly derailed a train in San Pedro, California, on March 31, 2020, to draw attention to the nearby USNS Mercy naval ship and the government's response to COVID-19.<sup>522</sup> The USNS Mercy was stationed in San Pedro to treat COVID-19 patients.<sup>523</sup> Moreno allegedly derailed the train by refraining from breaking near the end of the track, causing the train to smash through several fences before coming to rest near the USNS Mercy.<sup>524</sup> In post-arrest interviews with the FBI, he claimed derailing the train was not preplanned.<sup>525</sup>

It initially appeared, based on court documents, that Moreno was inspired in part by QAnon theories. This was confirmed to be true later reporting by *Vice*, which reported that Moreno acted the way he did because he had a psychotic episode and "he was all spun up by too much caffeine and too much time online studying QAnon".<sup>526</sup> Court documents note that in post-arrest interviews, Moreno stated that "they are segregating us and it needs to be put in the open."<sup>527</sup> The court filing notes that, "Moreno is suspicious of the U.S.N.S. Mercy and believes it had an alternative purpose related to COVID-19 or a government takeover."<sup>528</sup> Furthermore, many of Moreno's comments following his arrest appear to be related to QAnon. "Q's" first post about COVID-19 was on March 23, one week before Moreno allegedly derailed the train; which would indicate a rapid escalation, radicalization and mobilization to violence. "Q" in that post states that China developed the virus to harm President Trump's presidency and ensure Joe Biden wins the next election.<sup>529</sup> On March 28, 2020, Q claimed "[t]hey [the Cabal] want you [the American people] divided" by religion, sex, political affiliation, and class so "you pose no threat to their control."<sup>530</sup> Moreno's comments to the LAPP (Los Angeles Port Police) after his arrest

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<sup>520</sup> Ali Watkins, "Accused of Killing a Gambino Mob Boss, He's Presenting a Novel Defense," *New York Times*, December 6 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/06/nyregion/gambino-shooting-anthony-comello-qanon.html>.

<sup>521</sup> Frank Donnelly, "Alleged mob-boss killer found mentally unfit to stand trial," *SILive.com*, June 3 2020, <https://www.silive.com/news/2020/06/alleged-mob-boss-killer-found-mentally-unfit-to-stand-trial.html>.

<sup>522</sup> Christopher Weber, "Feds: Engineer intentionally derailed train near Navy hospital ship," *Washington Times*, April 1 2020.

<sup>523</sup> Brianna Sacks, "A Man Admitted To Trying To Crash A Train Into The USNS Mercy Over Coronavirus Suspicions," *Buzzfeed News*, April 1 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/briannasacks/man-derailed-train-mercy-ship-los-angeles>.

<sup>524</sup> Douglas Swain, "Statement of Probable Cause A. Moreno Derails Train at the Port of Los Angeles Near USNS Mercy," *U.S. Department of Justice*, April 1 2020.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>526</sup> Matthew Gault, "Man Inspired by QAnon and Hopped Up on Caffeine Purposefully Derailed Train," *Vice*, April 15 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7kb38q/man-inspired-by-qanon-and-hopped-up-on-caffeine-purposefully-derailed-train>.

<sup>527</sup> U.S. Attorney's Office Central District of California, Train Operator at Port of Los Angeles Charged with Derailing Locomotive Near U.S. Navy's Hospital Ship Mercy, (2020).

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>529</sup> See Qdrop 3896 <https://8kun.top/qresearch/res/8536771.html#8537514>

<sup>530</sup> See Qdrop 3905 <https://8kun.top/qresearch/res/8600308.html#8600954>

that “they are segregating us and it needs to be put in the open” appear to be referencing drop 3905.<sup>531</sup> Moreno also claimed “the whole world is watching,”<sup>532</sup> quite similar in phrasing to another Q post on March 28, 2020, which begins, “the entire world is watching.”<sup>533</sup> Finally, according to an LAPP affidavit, Moreno admitted to derailing the train to “wake people up,”<sup>534</sup> similar to Q’s repeated references to the “Great Awakening”—a mass realization about the truth of the world<sup>535</sup>—which Q also posted about on March 28, 2020.<sup>536</sup> These connections made by the authors, however, are speculative, and more information is needed to confirm if Moreno had any relationship with QAnon. On April 1, 2020, the In December 2021, Moreno plead guilty to one count of committing a terrorist attack and other violence against railroad carriers and mass transportation systems<sup>537</sup>, and was sentenced to three years in prison in April 2022<sup>538</sup>.

### 5.1.5 Jessica Prim

To better explicate the threat QAnon poses to public security, I decided to dig in greater detail, into the radicalization to violence of Jessica Prim. Prim, a 37-year-old exotic dancer from Peoria, Illinois, was arrested in New York City on April 29, 2020, after driving onto a pier with a car full of knives.<sup>539</sup> Prim was charged upon arrest with possession of marijuana and 18 counts of criminal possession of a weapon. She also livestreamed her two-day trip from Illinois to New York City where she shared several QAnon and Pizzagate conspiracy theories and in it threatened to kill Joe Biden (without making it clear when or where) for his supposed involvement in a ‘deep state’ sex trafficking ring, in line with QAnon narratives. Prim had attempted to get close to US Naval ship USNS Comfort, a hospital ship sent to New York City for treating COVID-19 patients, in an echo to the Moreno attack on the USNS Mercy west coast of the US. However, Prim had mistaken USS Intrepid, a former aircraft carrier, for USNS Comfort. QAnon influencers and adherents had baked a conspiracy from Qdrops that the USNS Comfort was being used to rescue children from the “Cabal.” According to her social media posts and video livestreams I archived, as she headed to New York City, Prim alternated between believing this and that the children may be being held hostage on the ship.

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<sup>531</sup> Swain, "Statement of Probable Cause A. Moreno Derails Train at the Port of Los Angeles Near USNS Mercy."

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

<sup>533</sup> Qdrop 3907 <https://8kun.top/qresearch/res/8600308.html#8601061>

<sup>534</sup> Swain, "Statement of Probable Cause A. Moreno Derails Train at the Port of Los Angeles Near USNS Mercy."

<sup>535</sup> Ibid.

<sup>536</sup> See Qdrop 3906 <https://8kun.top/qresearch/res/8600308.html#8601001>

<sup>537</sup> U.S. Attorney’s Office Central District of California, San Pedro Train Engineer Pleads Guilty to Terrorism Charge for Intentionally Derailing Locomotive Near U.S. Navy Hospital Ship, (2021).

<sup>538</sup> U.S. Attorney’s Office Central District of California, Former San Pedro Train Engineer Sentenced to 3 Years in Prison for Intentionally Derailing Locomotive Near U.S. Navy Hospital Ship, (2022).

<sup>539</sup> WMBD News, "Peoria woman facing drug, weapon charges after confrontation with NYPD officers; says ‘I’m the Coronavirus,'" *WMBD News*, May 2 2020; Bryan Rolli, "Women arrested with car full of knives after threatening Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton," *Daily Dot*, April 30 2020.



What stands out with this case is the rapidity with which Prim radicalized to violence. From her first contact with QAnon propaganda on April 9, 2020—based on her Facebook posts—20 days passed until she made threats of offline violence while in transit to New York City. Prim first started posting about QAnon in a closed Facebook group named Pizzagate Investigations Worldwide. On April 9, 2020, she replied to a post in the group, and on April 14, she shared the link to the QAnon “documentary” *Out of Shadows*<sup>540</sup> to the page. Prior to April 9, 2020, there is no evidence Prim was familiar with or interacting with QAnon content. Her social media feeds from 2016 onward do not provide any evidence that she engaged with Pizzagate conspiracy content, or the Comet Ping Pong attack in December 2016. Upon reviewing Jessica Prim’s social media postings I found that she did not post regularly about domestic politics on her social media prior to April 2020.

How did an individual who only recently discovered QAnon apparently radicalize to violence so fast? Her hours of livestreams, which are a rich source of personal information, suggest some possible answers. Radicalization is an individual process, and as such, some anecdotes Prim recounts in her videos indicate what may have made her vulnerable to radicalization to QAnon-related violence. Since 2012, Prim has regularly posted content related to missing children, child abuse, and arrests of child abusers. This is very likely central to her susceptibility to QAnon narratives that feature a global sex-trafficking ring. Her social media content and livestreams reflect the significance of this narrative in her conversion to QAnon ideology. It is unclear what caused Prim to spiral out of control in the twenty days preceding her arrest. One element, however, emerges in a Facebook video she posted on April 28, 2020, at 12:35pm: her relationship with QAnon, she stated in the video, began when one of her clients recommended she watch *Fall of the Cabal*, a QAnon documentary by Dutch conspiracy theorist Janet Ossebaard. In this livestream, Prim claims this video motivated her to research Pizzagate, and later, QAnon. Prim’s first Facebook post about QAnon being on the Pizzagate Investigations Worldwide page is consistent with this claim. Her sharing of the link to the QAnon documentary *Out of Shadows* is consistent with this hypothesis, as the documentary also focuses on QAnon claims about a global child sex trafficking ring. Since she began radicalizing into the QAnon ideology, Prim has posted about a wide range of related conspiracy theories regarding sex trafficking rings and the supposed Deep State government’s tyrannical attempts to control its population.

In my review of the statements she made in her livestream and Facebook posts, Prim also apparently believes that she is the “whore of Babylon” mentioned in the Book of Revelation, and

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<sup>540</sup>Tarpley Hitt, "Inside 'Out of Shadows': The Bonkers Hollywood-Pedophilia 'Documentary' QAnon Loves," *Daily Beast*, August 6 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/inside-out-of-shadows-the-bonkers-hollywood-pedophilia-documentary-qanon-loves>. Alex Newhouse and Mike Donnelly, "Far-Right Communities are Pushing a Q-Anon Film," *Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism*, April 15 2020, <https://rpubs.com/alexnewhouse/outofshadows>.

is apparently convinced she has a role in bringing about the ‘storm’ that Q promises.<sup>86</sup> Further, Prim claims she *is* the coronavirus (what this means is unclear) and that President Trump speaks to her directly in press conferences and over social media. A document Prim posted on her Twitter account, which has since been deleted, reveals she was diagnosed with a “brief psychotic disorder” following her arrest on April 29, 2020. She indicates in her social media postings and livestreams that she had experienced significant trauma and appears to have been in crisis at the time of her arrest. In her apparent turmoil, it appears Prim latched on to QAnon, especially its child sex trafficking ring conspiracy. In the livestream from the day of her arrest, she repeatedly claimed that she cannot sit at home while children are suffering in her view because of former Vice President Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton. It is highly likely that QAnon conspiracy theories radicalized her to an apparent desire to commit violence, in light of the trauma that made her vulnerable.

Less than three weeks elapsed between Prim’s first QAnon post and her arrest. In this brief period, Prim went from watching online child trafficking conspiracy documentaries to offline violence-threatening behavior. Prim is a fascinating case study of how ideologically motivated violent extremist communities and ideologies can radicalize vulnerable individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that conspiracy theories and fringe movements are especially dangerous in times of social upheaval and could pose a public security threat.

## 5.2 Larger Trends in QAnon Criminality and Violent Extremism

As part of my research into QAnon, I have collected and compiled a dataset of 237 instances of QAnon violence and acts of criminality. The data is a combination of my own, combined with the data Michael Jensen *et al.* compiled about QAnon offenders in the United States,<sup>541</sup> which we have exchanged and combined with each other over the past two years. Unlike the dataset built at START, I have included incidents of QAnon violence and criminality that have occurred globally since Pizzagate, while following the same format and model as my colleagues at START.

To be included in the dataset, an individual must have:

1. Espoused ideological beliefs that are related to the QAnon and/or Pizzagate conspiracy theories
2. Committed a criminal act that resulted in their arrest, indictment, or death.
3. There must be evidence in reliable sources to support the conclusion that the individual’s criminal act was related to their participation in the QAnon movement.<sup>542</sup>

What this means for inclusion into the dataset is if offenders who publicly supported QAnon and claimed that their criminal acts were intended to harm the “Deep State” or save victims from sex trafficking, for example, they were included in the data even if they did not expressly mention

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<sup>541</sup> Jensen and Kane, *QAnon Offenders in the United States*.

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*; For this research I removed the first criteria in the START requirements, which stated that the person must have radicalized in part or in full in the United States, as I have been look at QAnon globally.

“Q” when committing their crimes.<sup>543</sup> Alternatively offenders who supported QAnon but committed offences with no clear link to the conspiracy theory, such as drug use offences, were omitted from the dataset.<sup>544</sup> The criminal act or act of violence had to be motivated by the QAnon ideology. The data used in this chapter are comprehensive of crimes committed until November 1, 2022

According to the data that I collected, there have been 237 QAnon supporters who have committed ideologically motivated crimes in the globally since 2016 (figure 42). Out of the 237, 109 of these individuals were arrested for their participation in the insurrection on Capitol Hill in

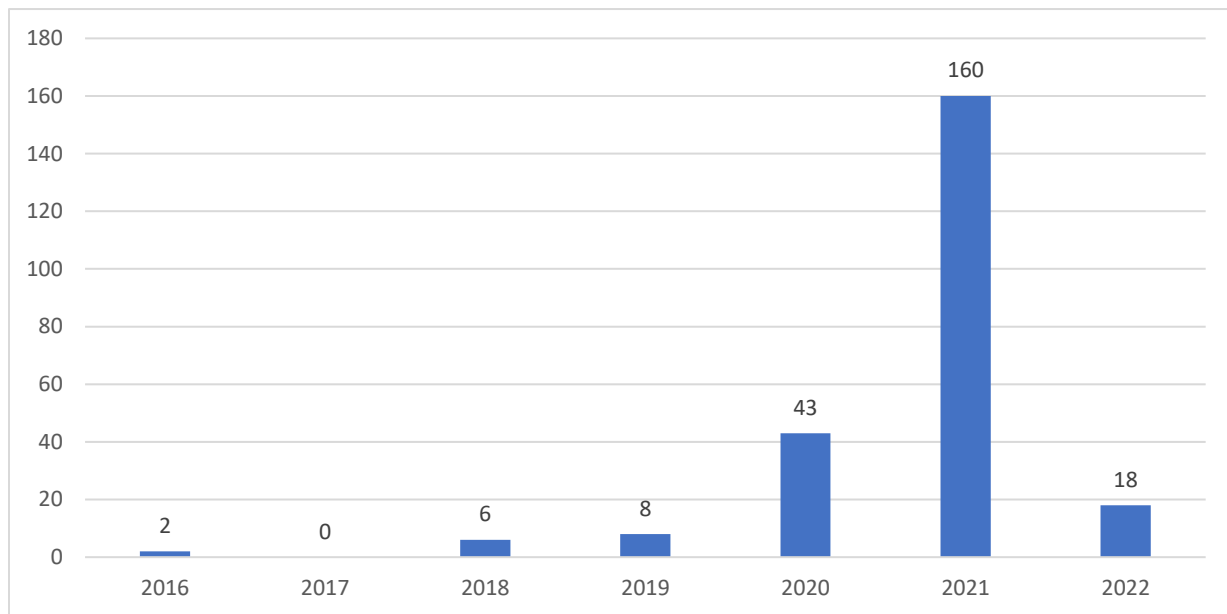
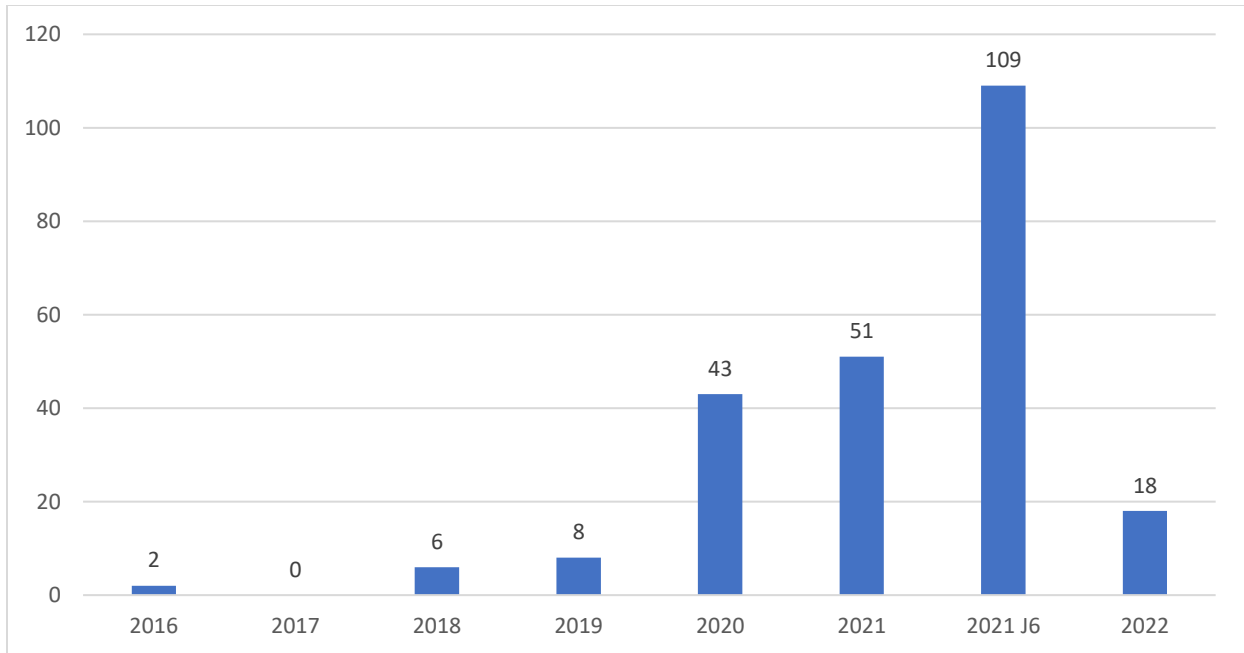


Figure 42 Count of QAnon ideologically motivated acts of criminality and violence annually

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<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid.



*Figure 43 Count of QAnon ideologically motivated acts of criminality and violence annually, with January 6 separated as a value*

January 2021 (figure 43). This means that, excluding the attempted coup of January 6, there have been 128 non-coup QAnon related incidents. These incidents have occurred in ten different countries: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Netherland, New Zealand, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and United States (figure 44). As a conspiracy theory and movement that started in the United States, it is not surprising to see that 47.6% of the criminal acts and violence occurred in the US. Canada comes in second with 15.6% and the Netherlands come in third with 13.2%. Of note about the transnational dimension of these 128 QAnon inspired acts, is that the data indicates that all transnational incidents related to QAnon occurred after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (figure 45), which played a major role in revitalizing and growing the

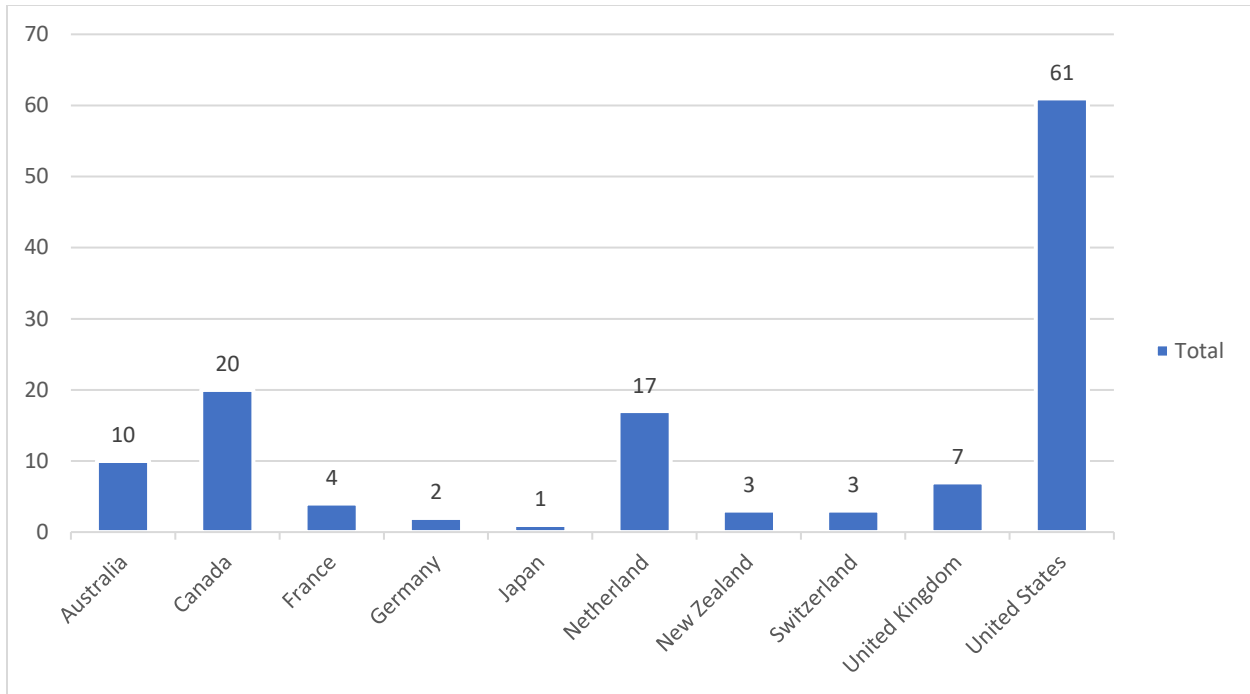


Figure 44 Number of incidents of QAnon ideologically motivated criminality or violence by country (excluding J6)

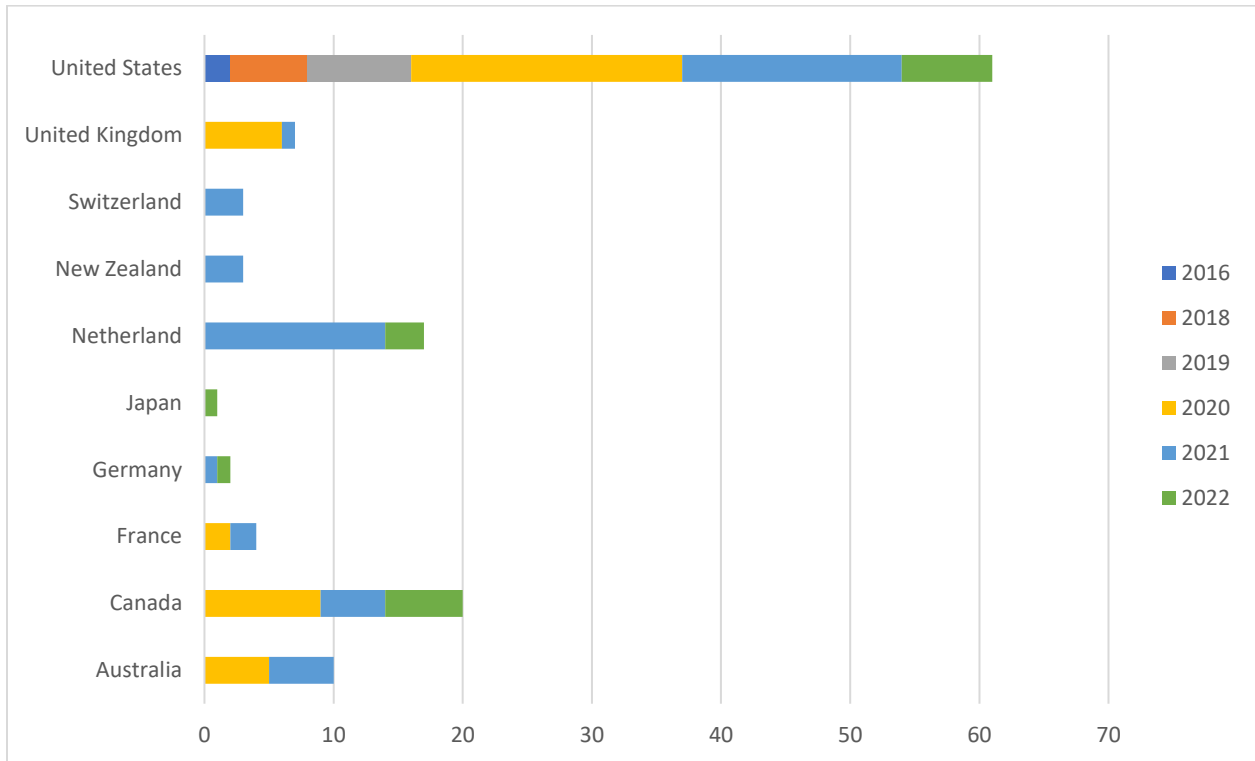


Figure 45 Number of incidents per country broken down by year (excluding J6)

QAnon movement into what it is today. Even within the United States, 73.7% (54 out of 61) of all acts of violence and criminality occurred after the start of the pandemic. As this data

indicates, the pandemic was an ideological driver of 52.6% of the acts of QAnon between 2020 and 2022 (figure 46).

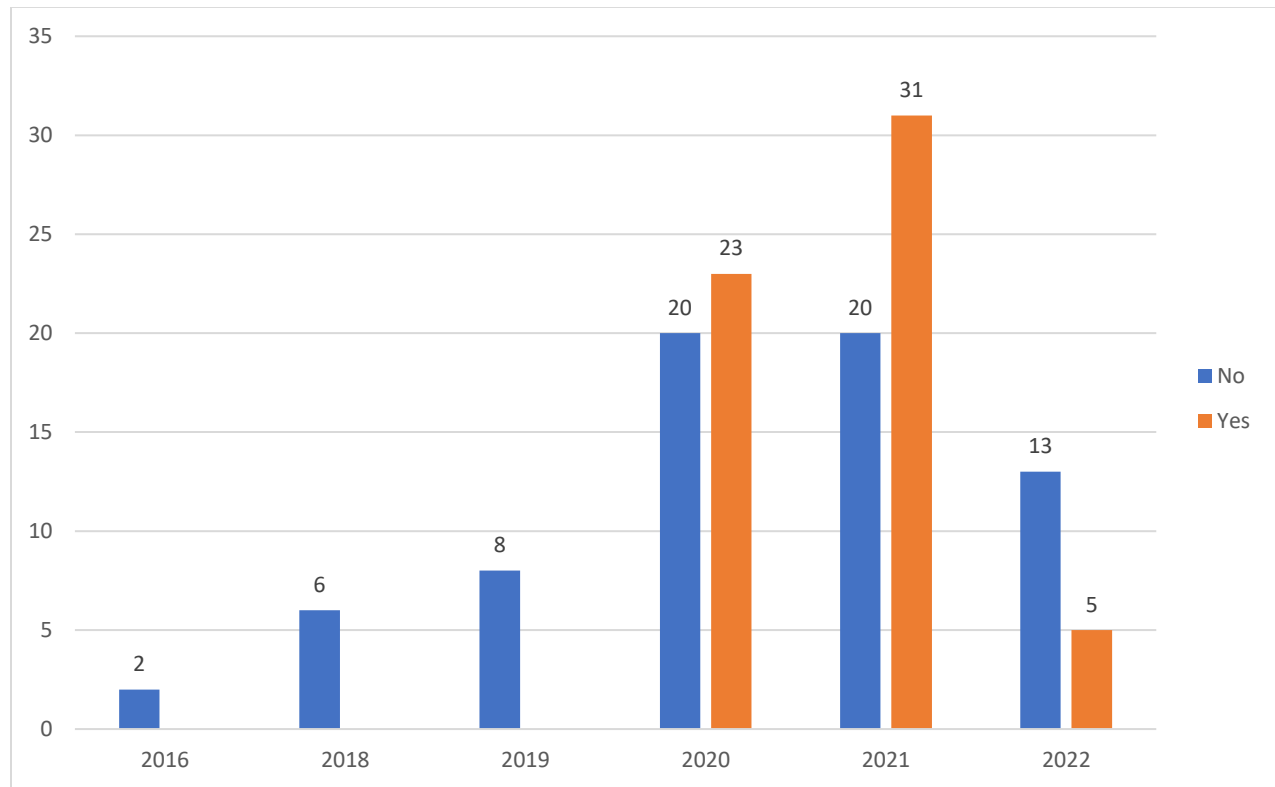


Figure 46 QAnon incidents of criminality and violence that are linked to COVID-19 grievances or conspiracy theories (excluding J6)

From a causal perspective, as discussed throughout the dissertation, the pandemic played a role in mainstreaming QAnon, increased the number of adherents, and increased the dissemination of their propaganda. The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI)<sup>545</sup> conducted a survey to examine how many Americans believe in the main tenets<sup>546</sup> of the QAnon conspiracy theory and found that “the share of Americans who believe in the main tenets of the QAnon conspiracy movement has increased slightly over the past year from 14% in March 2021 to 18% in March 2022.”<sup>547</sup> The survey further found that “the share of Americans who completely reject QAnon beliefs has steadily declined from 40% of Americans in March 2021 to 30% in March 2022.”<sup>548</sup>

<sup>545</sup> Ian Huff, "QAnon Beliefs Have Increased Since 2021 as Americans Are Less Likely to Reject Conspiracies," *PRRI* 2022, <https://www.prii.org/spotlight/qanon-beliefs-have-increased-since-2021-as-americans-are-less-likely-to-reject-conspiracies/>; PRRI Staff, "Understanding QAnon's Connection to American Politics, Religion, and Media Consumption," *PRRI*, May 27 2021, <https://www.prii.org/research/qanon-conspiracy-american-politics-report/>; PRRI Staff, "The Persistence of QAnon in the Post-Trump Era: An Analysis of Who Believes the Conspiracies," *PRRI*, February 24 2022, <https://www.prii.org/research/the-persistence-of-qanon-in-the-post-trump-era-an-analysis-of-who-believes-the-conspiracies/>.

<sup>546</sup> Their three tenets are: “1) The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation. 2) There is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders. 3) Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.” I would here highlight that I Disagree with their third tenet, as that is not something unique to QAnon, but reflective of a wider ideological dimension of ideologically motivated violent extremists in the United States and does not qualify as a tenet of QAnon. As the numbers show, QAnon violence, though numerous, is still a fringe reality considering the likely scale of individuals directly adhering to the movement and those adjacent it.

<sup>547</sup> Huff, "QAnon Beliefs Have Increased Since 2021 as Americans Are Less Likely to Reject Conspiracies."

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, there is a potential that QAnon acts of violence not motivated by grievances related to the pandemic itself, have a link to the mainstreaming effect the pandemic had on QAnon, especially when looking at the time between radicalization into QAnon and mobilization to acts of criminality and violence. When looking at all 237 incidents (figure 47) the

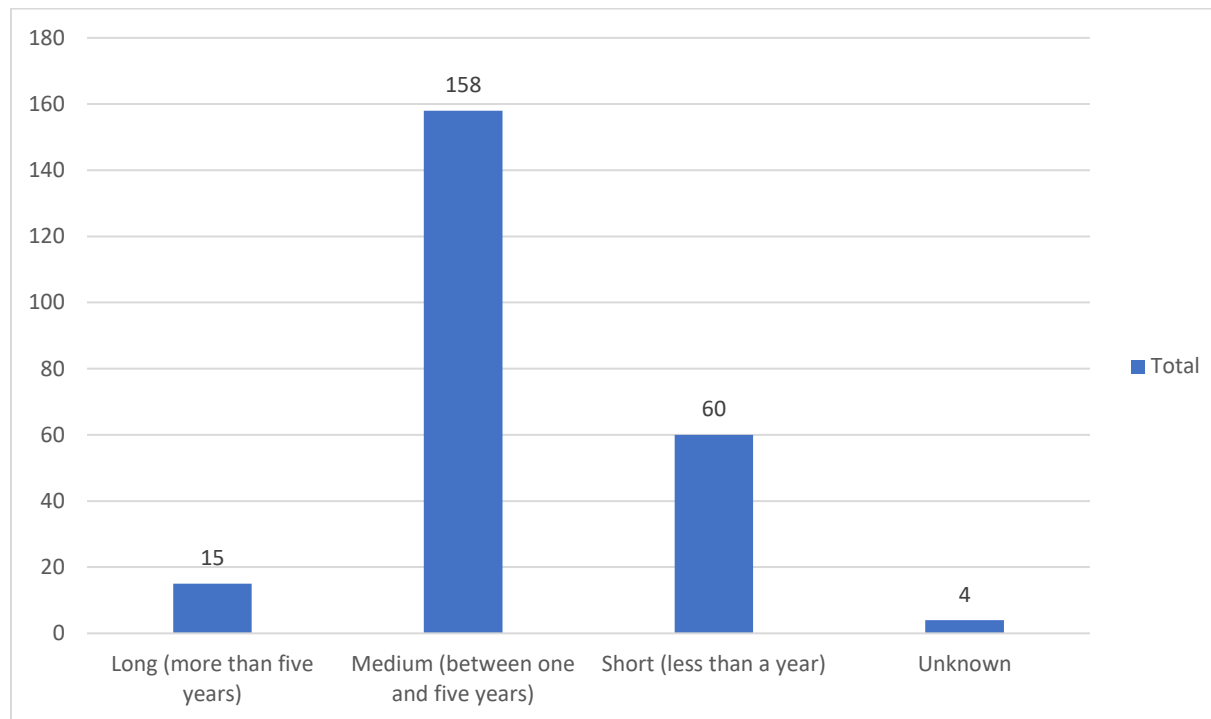


Figure 47 Time between radicalization and mobilization of all 237 incidents of criminality and violence.

data shows us that 66.67% who mobilized to criminality did so between one and five years of getting into QAnon, with another 25.31% doing so in less than a year. A key feature of QAnon is how quickly mobilization occurs. Qualitatively looking at the court records and publicly available data, most radicalized and mobilized in under 2 years, which fits squarely within the time frame of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most of the criminal acts committed by QAnon adherent did have a violent dimension to them (figure 48). Using the PRIUS definition, the violent label refers to if an “individual actively participate in ideologically motivated operations/actions that resulted in casualties/injuries or clearly intended to result in casualties/injuries (but failed), or were they charged with conspiracy to kill or injure but were interdicted in the plotting phase.”<sup>549</sup> A large part of these stems from those arrested for their actions in the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection. As figure 49 shows, 2020 demonstrated a large increase in QAnon related violence, which likely stemmed from a combination of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as acts of violence against government institutions or elected officials in relation to the 2020 US federal election.

<sup>549</sup> Gary LaFree, Michael Jensen, and Sheehan Kane, "Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) Codebook," *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*, October 2018, <https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/files/research/PIRUSCodebook.pdf>.

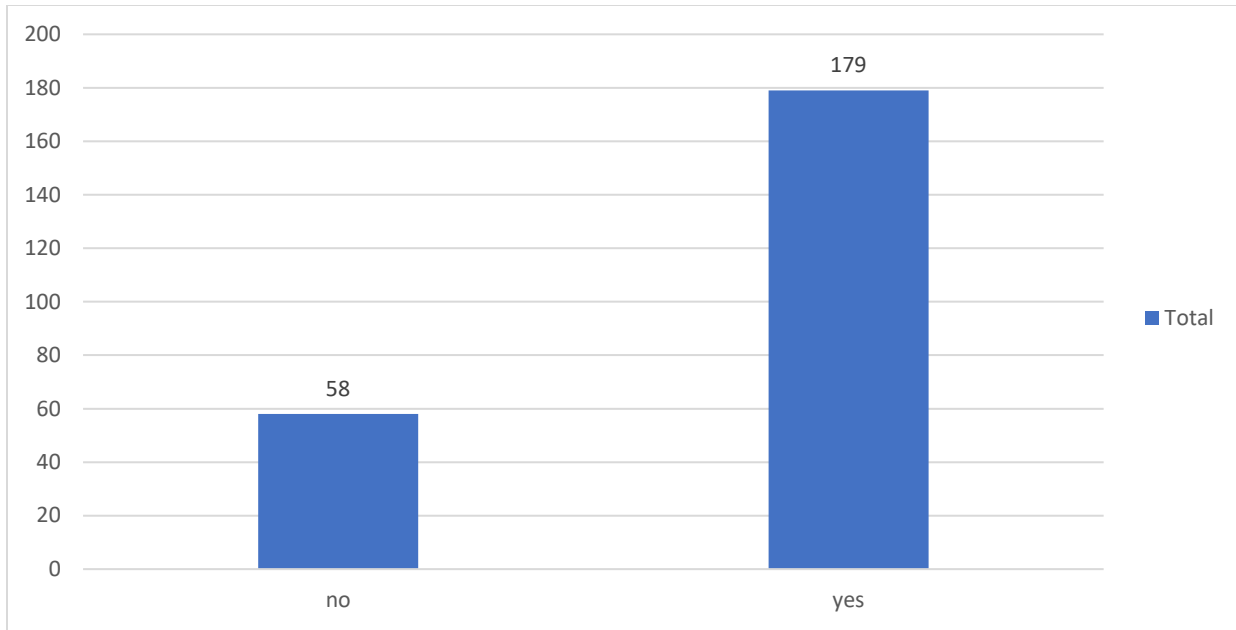


Figure 48 Count of criminal acts committed by QAnon adherents that had a violent dimension to it

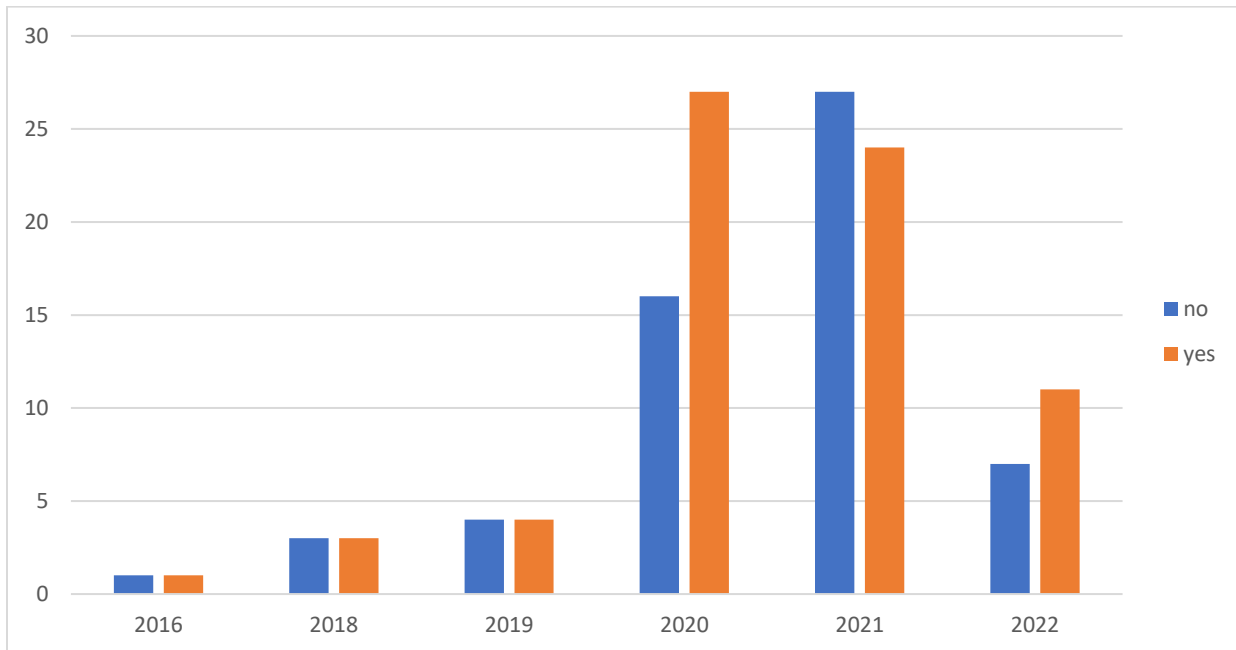


Figure 49 comparison of incidents of criminality per year, comparing the count of violent vs nonviolent crimes, excluding the events on January 6th

It is important to highlight that, COVID-19 was an important factor in mobilizing people to action alongside conspiracy theories about election fraud. This compounding factor played into the grievances of several QAnon adherents who believe that not only was the pandemic fake and being used to control the population, but it was also being used to prevent people from voting and caused the election to be stolen from Donald Trump. Election grievances are reflected in the 109 QAnon adherents arrested on January 6<sup>th</sup>, along with other QAnon adherents who undermined voting. One example is Sean Troech, who was a mail carrier for the United States



Postal Service and was arrested for discarding undelivered mail in Mount Oliver, Pennsylvania as he promoted the belief that mail-in ballots would lead to widespread fraud in the upcoming election. Another example occurred at of the Philadelphia Convention Center, where the 2020 Presidential election votes were being counted. Antonio Lamotta and Joshua Macias were driving a Hummer filled with automatic weapons while displaying QAnon signs. They were arrested on weapons-related offences. Authorities believed that the men intended to attack the facility to halt the counting of votes. Both men were accused of interfering with elections and violating gun laws. After being freed on bond, Lamotta and Macias were subsequently arrested for participating in the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection.

The large number of QAnon arrests are for participation in the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection is significant as QAnon makes up 11.5% of all those that have been arrested and charged (109 were QAnon adherents out of 948 arrested and charged). January 6<sup>th</sup> highlights that QAnon does not only pose a threat as a radicalizing and mobilizing force of individual threat actors, but that the QAnon ideology can lead to mass coordinated mobilization to violence. Additionally, the threat posed by QAnon is that to democratic processes, as QAnon adherents sought to interfere with the certification of the election. Also the government as a target (including elected officials, public servants, government buildings) accounted for 42.9% (55 of 128) of all acts of criminality and violence (figure 50).

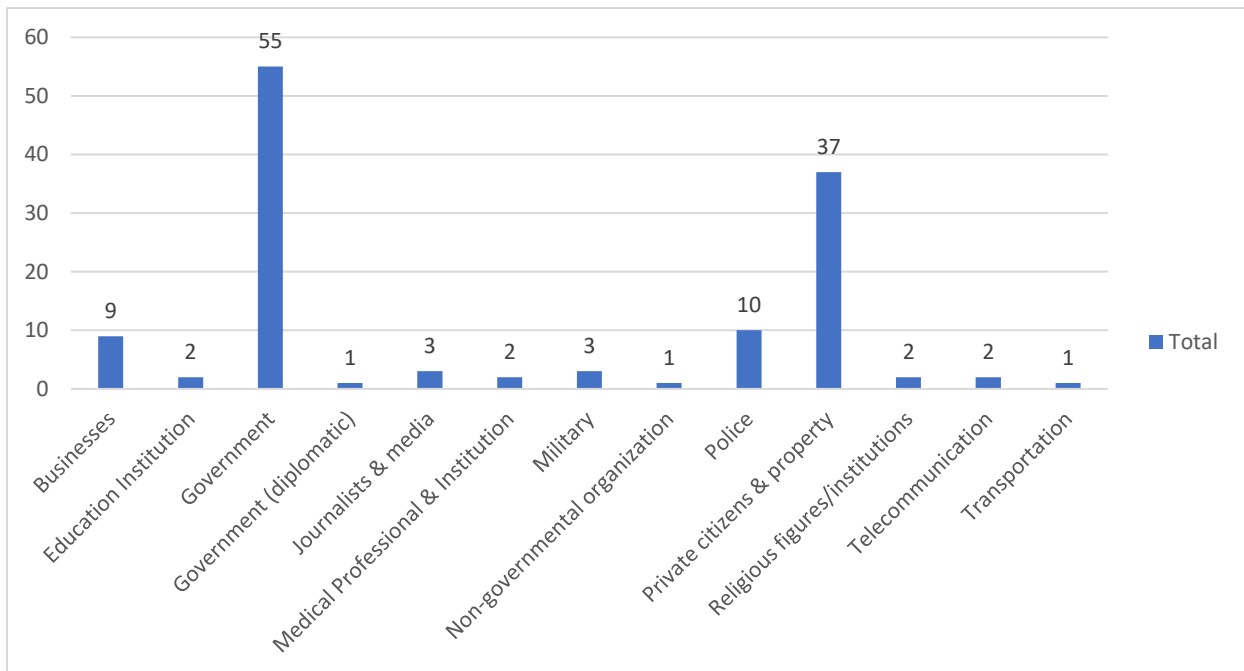


Figure 50 Targets of QAnon acts of violence and criminality

Out of the 37 incidents that were targeting private citizens and property, the data shows that young children were one of the primary targets of QAnon violence. 8 of the 37 instances of violence against a private citizen was kidnapping, whereby QAnon adherents sought to kidnap their own children from another parent, or to kidnap their children who were made wards of the state in foster care. QAnon parents involved in kidnapping plots were also members of the pseudo law community or collaborated with individuals who are part of the movement to commit

the kidnappings. The combination of legal conspiracy theories, as well as the combination of the QAnon conspiracy theories about child trafficking and abuse by the “Deep State” make for a potent concoction. In the court records of those arrested, all the QAnon adherents claimed what they were doing was to save their children from the “Deep State;” in other words, the state had taken their children to abuse them. For example, Cynthia Abcug was arrested for plotting to kidnap her son from foster care in Parker, Colorado.<sup>550</sup> Abcug, who had been radicalized online by the QAnon conspiracy theory, began appearing on fringe YouTube channels, claiming that Child Protective Services was involved in the trafficking of children.<sup>551</sup> Soon after, Abcug began communicating with a QAnon follower, who was a member of the pseudolaw community, who reportedly helped her plan the abduction scheme.<sup>552</sup> In another instance authorities arrested Sarah Stanley on charges of custodial interference in Moulton, Alabama.<sup>553</sup> Stanley reportedly fled with her son after a judge in Idaho issued a writ of assistance and ordered Stanley to allow the child’s father visitation.<sup>554</sup> Reciting a common QAnon claim, Stanley said that the family courts are involved in widespread child trafficking and that she fled to protect her child from the state.<sup>555</sup> On social media, Michael Lewis Arthur Meyer claimed that he was helping to hide Stanley and the child from authorities through his organizations, Veterans on Patrol and Walking of the Forgotten Ministry.<sup>556</sup> As discussed in section 5.1.2, Meyer has several previous arrests for QAnon-inspired crimes in Arizona but was not charged for aiding Stanley.

In a series of 4 other QAnon related crimes, 6 children were murdered and another 3 injured by their parents. The killings were motivated by the belief in QAnon conspiracy theories. For example, Liliana Carrillo was arrested on suspicion of killing her three children in Reseda, California.<sup>557</sup> Police apprehended Carrillo in Tulare County after she reportedly crashed her car, stole another vehicle, and led them on a long-distance chase. According to court records and news reports, Carrillo admitted to killing her children to protect them from their father, who she believes is involved in a child sex trafficking ring that is located in Porterville, California.<sup>558</sup> Carrillo had reportedly become fixated on QAnon-style conspiracy theories about child sex trafficking, and she told police that she is “solely responsible” for the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>559</sup> As with the kidnapping examples, the death of the children was done in order to protect them from a greater harm that would befall them at the hands of the “Deep State.” Other child-focused QAnon crimes focus instead on protecting the world from specific children. Matthew Taylor

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<sup>550</sup> Brittany Shammass, "A mother teamed up with QAnon followers to kidnap her son from protective custody, police say," *Washington Post*, January 8 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/crime-law/2020/01/08/mother-teamed-up-with-qanon-followers-kidnap-her-son-protective-custody-police-say/>; Colleen Slevin, "Colorado mom guilty of Qanon kidnapping conspiracy," *Associated Press*, August 26 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/colorado-child-abuse-kidnapping-conspiracy-3bc189e15617f843c1e098d9e9aa28a7>.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>553</sup> Nate Eaton, "'They're in a cult.' Father fights to see his toddler son as mother refuses to say where they are," *East Idaho News*, March 3 2022, <https://www.eastidahonews.com/2022/03/theyre-in-a-cult-father-fights-to-see-his-toddler-son-as-mother-refuses-to-say-where-they-are/>.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>557</sup> Matt Hamilton and Richard Winton, "Mother unraveled in depression, QAnon-style conspiracies in months before she killed 3 kids," *Los Angeles Times*, April 17 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-04-17/mother-unraveled-in-depression-qanon-style-conspiracies-in-months-before-she-killed-3-kids>; KGET News, "Los Angeles woman admits to killing her three children in jailhouse interview," April 15 2021, <https://www.kget.com/news/crime-watch/exclusive-los-angeles-woman-admits-to-killing-her-three-children-in-jailhouse-interview/>.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*

Coleman confessed to killing his two children after taking them from their home in Santa Barbara, California and driving them to Rosarito, Baja California, Mexico.<sup>560</sup> According to the criminal complaint filed in the United States District Court for the Central District of California, Coleman told law enforcement agents that he had been “enlightened” by conspiracy theories related to QAnon and the illuminati, and believes that his wife possesses “serpent DNA.”<sup>561</sup> He told federal agents that he had to kill his children to prevent them from becoming “monsters.”<sup>562</sup> Coleman has been indicted in Federal court on two counts of foreign first-degree murder of United States nationals.<sup>563</sup>

The age breakdown is interesting as well, as the QAnon offender tends to be older than the average actor in the PRIUS database. According to my data (figure 51), the average age of a QAnon offender is 44, whereas the average offender in the PRIUS database is 35.<sup>564</sup>

Furthermore, QAnon offenders have a larger amount of women, than the average offenders in the PRIUS database, where 30% of QAnon offenders are women (figure 52) vs. 11% in PRIUS.<sup>565</sup>

As chapter 4 highlighted, women play an important role in the QAnon movement as influencers and leaders, which also translates not only into gender specific conspiracy theories, but also likely plays a role in garnering a larger pool of women as part of the movement.

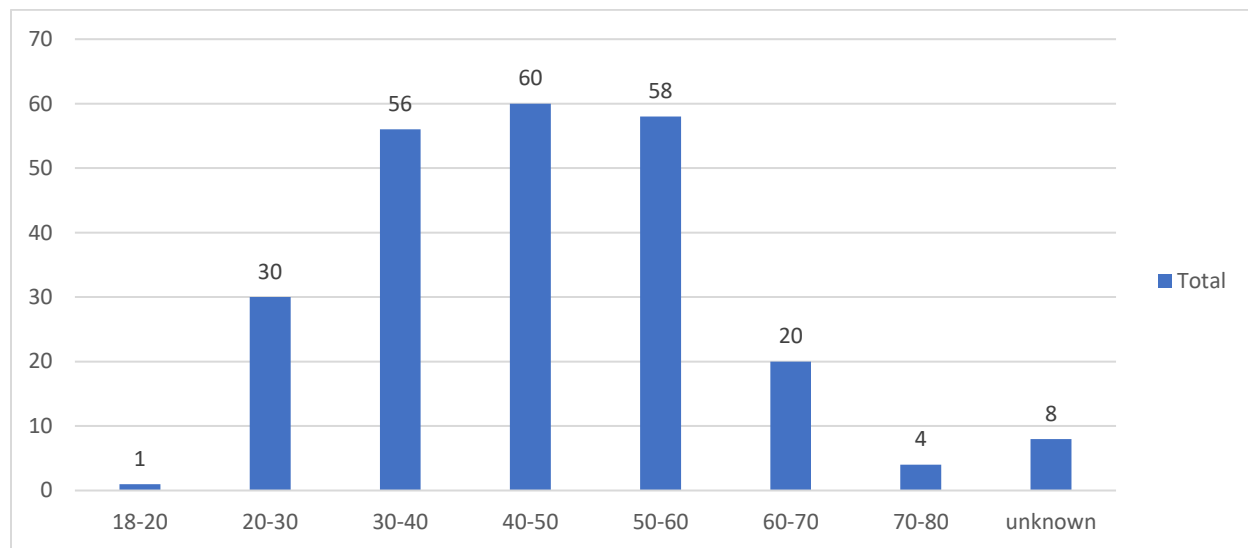


Figure 51 Age range of QAnon offenders

<sup>560</sup> David Gilbert, "A Year After QAnon Surfer Killed His Kids, Members of His Church Fear More Violence," *Vice News*, August 15 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/contributor/david-gilbert>; Doha Madani, Andrew Blankstein, and Ben Collins, "California dad killed his kids over QAnon and 'serpent DNA' conspiracy theories, feds claim," *NBC News*, August 11 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/california-dad-killed-his-kids-over-qanon-serpent-dna-conspiracy-n1276611>.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*; U.S. Attorney’s Office Central District of California, Federal Criminal Complaint Charges Santa Barbara Man with Murdering His Two Young Children in Baja California, (2021); U.S. Attorney’s Office Southern District of California, Santa Barbara Man Indicted in San Diego for Killing his Children in Mexico, (2021).

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>564</sup> Jensen and Kane, "QAnon-inspired violence in the United States: an empirical assessment of a misunderstood threat."

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*

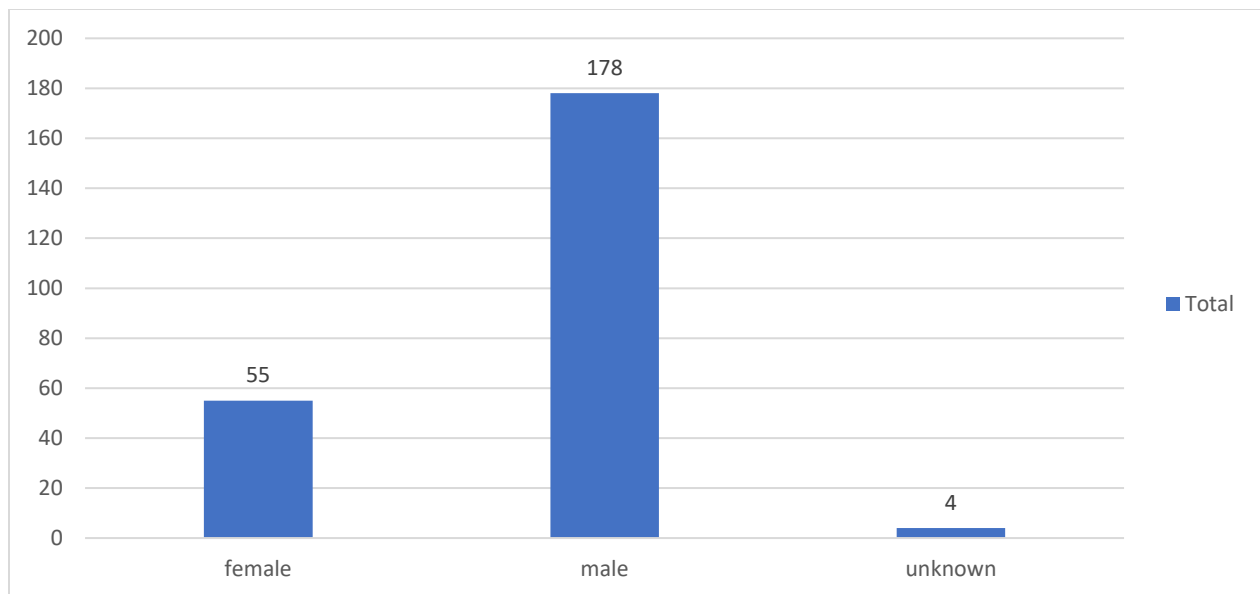


Figure 52 Gender breakdown of QAnon offenders

As Jensen and Kane found in their own data analysis of QAnon in the US,

“QAnon offenders come from diverse backgrounds, our data suggest that they often share a set of characteristics that distinguish them from other types of extremist offenders in the United States. When compared to extremists from other ideological milieus, QAnon offenders tend to be older, are more often married, and are more likely to be the parents or legal guardians of children when they commit crimes. Moreover, the QAnon-inspired offenders that we tracked in our data were comparatively better educated than other types of domestic extremists.”<sup>566</sup>

Their US data and my international data on QAnon crimes highlights that most offenders have attended college, were employed, married, had children, all of which “criminologists generally agree that these types of protective factors help steer people away from the most serious forms of crime, including violence.”<sup>567</sup> However, most of the violent QAnon offenders in my data displayed these supposed “protective” characteristics, which is indicative of QAnon having a different behavioural impact on adherents, than other violent extremist ideologies.

## 5.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to contextualize the QAnon ideology and its role in radicalizing several individuals to acts of criminality or violent acts. The qualitative case studies and the quantitative data, particularly evinces the role the QAnon ecosystem plays in radicalizing and mobilizing uniquely vulnerable individuals with experiences of trauma or mental illness and the consequent threat QAnon could pose to public security.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid. p. 10

<sup>567</sup> Ibid.

Since its inception almost no attempt was made to gain any interpretative framework of what QAnon is as the media has fixated on the movement's worldview connected to conspiracy theories; however, there is an important need to move beyond this simplistic understanding of the movement. It is important to contextualize the QAnon ideology and its role in radicalizing 237 individuals to alleged high-profile criminal or violent acts. Drawing upon Barkun's model of conspiracy belief<sup>568</sup>, it is therefore possible to suggest that QAnon adherents who are supporters of a number of isolated conspiracy theories, which, when compounded, may have influenced their broader sense of paranoia and anti-establishment mindset. The material consumed by QAnon adherents could possibly elucidate aspects of their radicalization, as the conspiracy theories espoused by them, and other conspiracy theories rely on the rejection of the mainstream explanation for their own and the demonization of the other. The overlap between QAnon adherents who have been radicalized to violence, with online conspiracy communities suggests that the influence of QAnon attack may be felt in spheres beyond those traditionally associated with ideologically motivated violent extremists. These adherents' deep involvement in online conspiracy theory communities and subsequent attack evinces the potential for future instances of larger-scale violence motivated by QAnon.

Moreover, QAnon continues to gain traction in American popular culture. For example, in 2020 QAnon followers have absurdly alleged on social media that Oprah Winfrey, Ellen DeGeneres, and other celebrities are under house arrest for their participation in child sex trafficking rings. These posts have circulated widely online, with some celebrities even responding to the allegations.<sup>569</sup> QAnon is not destined to remain on the periphery of political discourse either. CNN reported that former national security adviser Michael Flynn posted a video on July 4, 2020, which showed him and a group repeating an oath of office before saying the common QAnon phrase, "Where we go one, we go all." The post also included the hashtag #TakeTheOath, apparently referencing a social media trend by QAnon users from earlier in the week.<sup>570</sup> Flynn's lawyer Sidney Powell told *The Washington Examiner*, "The slogan comes from an engraved bell on JFK'S sailboat—acknowledging the unity of mankind. The oath is obvious—the federal oath in support of our Constitution. He wanted to encourage people to think about being a citizen. Don't read anything else into it."<sup>571</sup> Further, as reported by Alex Kaplan at Media Matters, 107 candidates who ran for Congress in 2020 appear to have expressed some degree of support for QAnon<sup>572</sup>, and Marjorie Taylor Greene<sup>573</sup>, a QAnon follower running for a

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<sup>568</sup> Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*.

<sup>569</sup> Sadeghi, "Fact check: Ellen, Oprah, many others are not under house arrest for child sex trafficking."

<sup>570</sup> Cohen, "Michael Flynn posts video featuring QAnon slogans."

<sup>571</sup> Jerry Dunleavy, "Michael Flynn recites oath of office using slogan associated with QAnon," *Washington Examiner*, July 5 2020.

<sup>572</sup> Alex Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2020," 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/here-are-qanon-supporters-running-congress-2020>.

<sup>573</sup> According to reporting from Media Matters in 2018, Greene posted on Facebook about an "awesome post by Q." See "Marjorie Taylor Greene Facebook QAnon2," Media Matters. She has posted the QAnon slogan on Facebook (see "Marjorie Taylor Greene Facebook QAnon 1," Media Matters) and on Twitter (see "Marjorie Taylor Greene Twitter QAnon 2," Media Matters), the latter in response to a tweet defending the legitimacy of "Q" where she also wrote, "Trust the plan" (another catchphrase QAnon supporters use). Greene also has tweeted the QAnon-connected hashtag "#GreatAwakening" to far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. She has also appeared in a video where she discussed following QAnon, calling "Q" a "patriot" and "worth listening to." See Travis View, "Marjorie Taylor Greene, candidate for congress, also happens to be a QAnon follower," Twitter, June 6, 2020. According to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Greene "has posted a series of tweets defending QAnon, including one"—now deleted—"encouraging her followers to massage her with questions so she can 'walk you through the whole thing.'" Jim Galloway, Greg Bluestein, and Tamar Hallerman, "The Jolt: When industry and neighborhoods mix, trouble often follows," Atlanta Journal-Constitution, August 2, 2019.

Georgia seat in the House of Representatives, won the Republican nomination as well as the general election. Lauren Boebert refrained from ever directly identifying as a QAnon supporter throughout her campaign and has claimed that she does not follow the conspiracy theory. However, she seemed to encourage support from QAnon believers during an appearance on the “Steel Truth”<sup>574</sup> show what has promoted the conspiracy theory. On the show, she confirmed that she was “very familiar” with the Q movement, and that, although it was “more [her] mom’s thing,” she hoped the conspiracy was real as it would only mean “America is getting stronger and better and people are returning to conservative values.” Similarly, Boebert also appeared on ‘Patriot’s Soapbox’<sup>575</sup>, a highly popular YouTube show for viewers who are incredibly invested in QAnon, and which shows a live feed of viewers constantly sharing theories about the conspiracy at all times. While again, Boebert was careful never to explicitly endorse QAnon, her appearance was undoubtedly a signal to the QAnon community. QAnon supporters are having an increased impact on mainstream discourse in the United States, as there are already 19 congressional candidates who have embraced QAnon who are running for congress in 2022.<sup>576</sup> With this mainstreaming, as well as the impending presidential election that seems likely to only increase QAnon’s salience, an increasing frequency of criminal or violent acts by QAnon supporters is likely, as key political and media figures embrace and leverage the movement.

QAnon supporters continue to have an increased impact on mainstream discourse in the United States. With this mainstreaming, as well as continued political turmoil in the US that seems likely to only increase QAnon’s salience, an increasing frequency of criminal or violent acts by QAnon supporters seems possible, even likely. While the aforementioned criminal acts seem largely motivated by QAnon, only Matthew Philip Wright and Eduardo Moreno have been charged with a terrorism offense.

However, the threat to public security that QAnon presents is not exclusive to the movement and the cases described above, but rather, is representative of broader currents in the American information landscape. The increased consumption and circulation of misinformation on social media, as well as its negative consequences, is evinced especially by QAnon, but its effects on public safety are not limited to it. The emergence of future (related or unrelated) conspiracy theories that may be effective at radicalizing individuals to terrorist violence should thus not be ruled out as threats to public security.

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<sup>574</sup> Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2020."

<sup>575</sup> Sommer, "GOPers Are Trying to Recruit QAnon Voters And Using This YouTube Show to Do It."

<sup>576</sup> Kaplan, "Here are the QAnon supporters running for Congress in 2022."

# CHAPTER 6: QANON AFTER JANUARY 6<sup>TH</sup> 2021

Over the months prior to Joe Biden’s inauguration, former President Donald Trump and lawyers Sidney Powell and Lin Wood,<sup>577</sup> as well as conspiracy theorist Ron Watkins,<sup>578</sup> all actively inflamed QAnon apocalyptic and anti-establishment desires by promoting voter fraud conspiracy theories. While QAnon has often been dismissed as “crazy people on social media,” adherents were among the individuals in the front line of protesters who violently breached the Capitol Building with the intent of disrupting the certification of the 2020 presidential election. According to my data, 109 QAnon followers were charged with participating in the Capitol insurrection as of November 2022.

The insurrection of 6 January 2021 is a stark example of what happens when an ideological movement such as QAnon is not taken seriously, especially in the context of how it has evolved into an ideologically motivated violent extremist movement. Consequently, due to the role of QAnon followers on 6 January, major social media platforms banned QAnon, creating a mass exodus to alternative platforms. What has taken place is a balkanisation of the QAnon ideology and movement to the platforms where adherents have found refuge. The mass deplatforming and the absence of “Q” since their last post on 8 December has i) created communities where QAnon influencers have banded together to maintain canonical QAnon narratives and ideologies in the absence of Q; ii) given rise to new influencers in the neo-QAnon movement; iii) given rise to old influencers in the movement; and iv) provided the opportunity for QAnon to merge with other movements. The two largest QAnon communities presently are found on Telegram and Gab. The following sections of this report will discuss each of these trends.

## 6.1 We the Media

“We the Media” is the main Telegram Channel for QAnon. It is administrated by 38 influencers in the QAnon movement, who are highlighted in figure 53. The channel was created on 9 January, 2021 and grew rapidly as QAnon adherents could not find a stable home on Parler or Gab, “their prior homes following QAnon takedowns on the main platforms. Figure 54 shows how “We the Media” grew rapidly throughout February and plateaued at the start of March. As of December 2022 it boasts 217,094 members. The associated Telegram chat has 14,415 members. This channel has become the central source of “canonical” QAnon narratives in the absence of “Q.” “We the

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<sup>577</sup> “Trump Weighed Naming Election Conspiracy Theorist as Special Counsel”, *The New York Times*, 19 December 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/19/us/politics/trump-sidney-powell-voter-fraud.html>; Ryan Grenoble, “Who Is Lin Wood, The Pro-Trump Lawyer Spewing Conspiracies About Lizard Squads?”, *HuffPost*, 4 January 2021, [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/who-is-lin-wood-trump-tweets\\_n\\_5ff335d7c5b6e7974fd514c1?ri18n=true](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/who-is-lin-wood-trump-tweets_n_5ff335d7c5b6e7974fd514c1?ri18n=true)

<sup>578</sup> Rachel E Greenspan, “Trump continues to promote conspiracy theories from a rapidly rising QAnon star”, *Insider*, 15 December 2020, <https://www.insider.com/trump-shares-voter-fraud-conspiracy-theories-of-qanon-star-ron-watkins-2020-12>

Media” is larger than any of the Facebook groups to have existed. The community is healthy, with channel members regularly commenting on posts and the chat is also very active with a few thousand posts a day.

Jordan Sather	Anonymous Patriot	Julians Rum	Operation War Room	Resignation Anon	bullionbitcoin bs
Little Mel Q	StormyPatriot Joe	BrunoBarks	inglover13TH GENPATRIOT	BlueSkyReport	World Line Zero Report
Pepe Deluxed	Techno Frog	Gunf46Mem es	Danielle_MAG A	Liz Crokin	Tribunal Watch
The Kate Awakening	We The Memeier	MikeBravoDude	SSGQ	Mike Smith “Crux”	
RedPill78	Pepe Lives Matter	X22 Report	Forecast 432Hz	EyesOnQ	
World Wire News	Qtime Network	Midnight Rider	Red.Pill.Pharmacist	Eye Drop Media	
Qtah_17	AQP13526	InevitableET	Redpillbabe	TommyG Patriot	

Figure 53 List of admins of the We The Media telegram Channel



## Subscribers

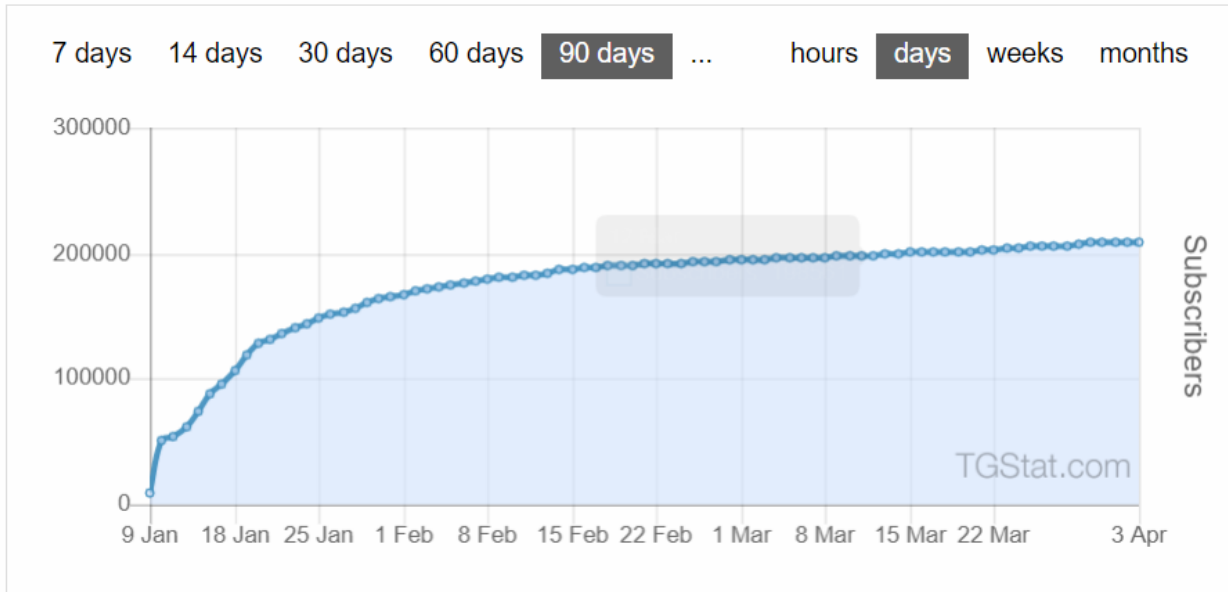


Figure 54 Growth of the We the Media Telegram channels following the 6 January insurrection. Data provided by TGStat.

As figure 55 shows, the channel ordinarily reaches 2,600,000 views a day. Views do not necessarily imply engagement, though it does indicate that the content is shared, on average, to 150 different channels.

## Views

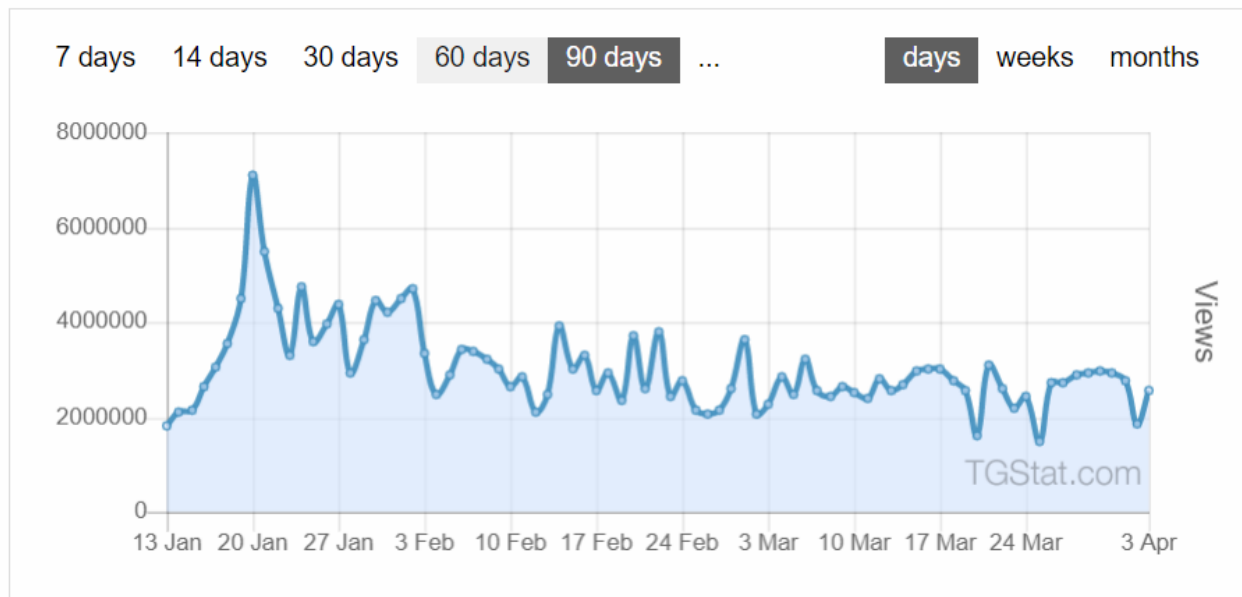


Figure 55 We the Media Telegram channels views following the 6 January insurrection. Data provided by TGStat.

Most of the “We the Media” administrators also have their own QAnon channels and chats separate from this main channel. Though most do not have the same following as they did on Twitter, these channels still have between 20,000 and over 200,000 members in them. American-based QAnon

influencers were able to maintain and sustain a community post-deplatforming, not only by creating a super-channel with a large number of known influencers, but also by maintaining their individual brands of QAnon decoding and geopolitical interpretation. What is most important is that rank-and-file QAnon adherents have also found a way to build their own communities by creating many smaller channels, where they are developing relationships with others in the movement.

It should be stressed that it is difficult to tell how many users in the QAnon channels are still active since the Biden inauguration, as most users are likely to uninstall Telegram or not use it rather than delete their accounts. However, the basic security settings in Telegram are set to delete an account if it is not used for six months; after that period we may see a drop in membership in QAnon channels. Also, it is impossible to know how many members are actual QAnon adherents, as opposed to trolls from ‘Terrorgram,’<sup>579</sup> or journalists, academics and law enforcement agents. This is a phenomenon present in any analysis of extremist Telegram communities. However, QAnon channels are much larger than other IMVE channels on Telegram. As a result, it is very likely that the majority of users are actually adherents or interested in QAnon content.

The growth of American QAnon on Telegram presented an opportunity for the international QAnon community (mostly German, French, Italian, Israeli, Dutch, Belgian and British), which has had a home on Telegram for over two years, to intersect and engage. The growing transnational connection between QAnon communities on Telegram is significant and may present a new threat vector as these communities evolve over time.

## 6.2 Neo-QAnon influencers

Sidney Powell and Lin Wood rose quickly to fame in QAnon circles, as both former Trump lawyers were openly QAnon supporters. Their proximity to the former president and support for QAnon narratives and conspiracy theories made them immediate stars in QAnon circles, while also irking QAnon influencers they overshadowed. These two individuals will continue to play an influential role in QAnon and conspiracy theorist circles. Powell was part of Trump’s legal team and represented Michael Flynn – who is also a QAnon supporter and was at the centre of many QAnon conspiracy theories.<sup>580</sup> She rose to prominence as she built a case that Joe Biden and the Democrats did not actually win the election. Powell called that case a “Kraken” that, when released, would demonstrate Biden had not won the election legally.<sup>581</sup>

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<sup>579</sup> Terrorgram refers to a network of Telegram channels used by ideologically motivated violent extremists who support the use of terrorism and violence to achieve their goals of taking down the government and political order to replace it with one of their own. This network is multifaceted and is formed of multiple actors and ideologies. This network gained popularity for praising the Christchurch attacker.

<sup>580</sup> Jackie Flynn Mogensen “To Celebrate the Fourth, Michael Flynn Posts a Pledge to Conspiracy Group QAnon” *Mother Jones*, 5 July 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/07/to-celebrate-the-fourth-michael-flynn-posts-a-pledge-to-conspiracy-group-qanon/>

<sup>581</sup> BBC News “The Kraken: What is it and why has Trump’s ex-lawyer released it?” 28 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-us-2020-55090145>



Figure 56 Sidney Powell's Twitter profile prior to its Twitter ban.

QAnon adherents, Trump supporters, and conspiracy theorists amplified Powell's case under the hashtag #ReleaseTheKraken in support of the legal campaign to challenge the election results. Powell's case played an important role in feeding the conspiracy theory that Trump would be inaugurated on 20 January rather than Biden. The unfounded claims she made in her court documents were of voter fraud,<sup>582</sup> disinformation about voting machines – in particular that the Dominion voting system was used to steal the election (a conspiracy theory amplified by Ron Watkins)<sup>583</sup> – and claims of foreign interference, in which China, Venezuela and Iran helped Biden to win.

Powell has appeared multiple times on well-known QAnon-affiliated streams and engaged with or retweeted QAnon influencers and used QAnon references in her tweets.<sup>584</sup> As such, Powell rapidly became a QAnon favourite.

After being banned from Twitter in January 2021 for violating the site's Coordinate Harmful Activity policy, Powell created a Telegram channel, which currently has 483,000 members and is

<sup>582</sup> Reality Check team, "US election 2020: Fact-checking Trump team's main fraud claims", *BBC News*, 23 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-55016029>

<sup>583</sup> Drew Harwell, "To boost voter-fraud claims, Trump advocate Sidney Powell turns to unusual source: The longtime operator of QAnon's Internet home", *The Washington Post*, 1 December 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/12/01/powell-cites-qanon-watkins/>

<sup>584</sup> Donie O'Sullivan "Sidney Powell is a beacon of hope to sad QAnon supporters" *CNN Business*, 24 November 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/24/business/sidney-powell-qanon/index.html>

a central hub for “neo-QAnon” content.<sup>585</sup> Powell is described as neo-QAnon as she is not an individual who interprets QDrops (the anonymous messages posted by the figure known as “Q”) or is enmeshed deeply in the QAnon ideology. However, she has built a following of conspiracy-minded IMVE actors and Trump supporters, who consume QAnon-adjacent content. As she has surpassed many of the older, established QAnon influencers in terms of prominence, Powell drew criticism about how some QAnon adherents were relying on her posts to interpret QAnon content.

Ultimately, influencers pushed back and implied that Powell is an ally but her interpretation of QDrops should not be taken as gospel truth. Although her content is perceived as apocryphal by QAnon influencers, the rank and file and those who are QAnon adjacent still turn to her today for hope about the election results being overturned, or because Powell continues to be an anti-government voice in Trump-supporting circles. Her position of power as a lawyer and her proximity to those who were in power, as well as the fact that she acts without consequences, continue to make her narratives potential threat vectors.

Lin Wood was brought into Trump’s legal team following a recommendation by Powell. QAnon-supporting congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene also hired Wood to represent her.<sup>586</sup> He also temporarily represented Kyle Rittenhouse, and announced that he would be using the hashtag #FightBack, which was the campaign to raise bail money for Rittenhouse, to expose “fraud in the November 3 election.”<sup>587</sup> Wood rose to QAnon fame following Biden’s victory as part of the legal team challenging the election results. However, his high profile and controversial clients had already given him a positive reputation and influence among QAnon adherents. Wood was and remains an open QAnon adherent: for instance, in his Twitter bio he displayed the QAnon hashtag #WWG1WGA (Where We Go One We Go All).

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<sup>585</sup> Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny “Twitter bans Michael Flynn, Sidney Powell in QAnon account purge” *NBS News*, 8 Jan 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/twitter-bans-michael-flynn-sidney-powell-qanon-account-purge-n1253550>

<sup>586</sup> Matthew Rosenberg, “A QAnon Supporter Is Headed to Congress”, *The New York Times*, 5 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/03/us/politics/qanon-candidates-marjorie-taylor-greene.html>; EJ Dickson, “Is Marjorie Taylor Greene Becoming the New Face of QAnon?”, *Rolling Stone*, 27 January 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/marjorie-taylor-green-congress-qanon-1119742/>

<sup>587</sup> James Hill, “Controversial attorney withdraws from Kyle Rittenhouse criminal case, launches new fundraising appeal”, *ABC News*, 7 December 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/controversial-attorney-withdraws-kyle-rittenhouse-criminal-case-launches/story?id=74545504>



Figure 57 Lin Wood's Twitter profile prior to takedown.

Between the announcement of the election results and the inauguration of President Biden, Wood shared and amplified QAnon narratives and influencers, and created and promoted disinformation about the election results that was shared and amplified by Trump. Prior to being removed from Trump's legal team, Wood tweeted that Mike Pence would be executed by firing squad for treason if he did not play the "Pence Card." This post refers a QAnon conspiracy theory that combined with Sovereign Citizen<sup>588</sup> conspiracy theories regarding the interpretation of the constitution, whereby the vice president had the capacity to overturn the election results through unfounded constitutional and senatorial powers. Wood also promoted the conspiracy theory that Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts and other powerful individuals were being blackmailed "in a horrendous scheme involving rape & murder of children captured on videotape," and that the blackmail was being carried out by the hacking group 'Lizard Squad'<sup>589</sup> (figure 58). Following this incident, a former member of Lizard Squad reached out to one of our authors to confirm that this was not the case, and that Lizard Squad is no longer active, stating "we had literally no involvement in what that Lin Wood person is posting."

After the mass deplatforming of QAnon, Wood ended up losing his Twitter account. Like many others, he started a Telegram channel. Wood currently has 833,000 members making it the largest QAnon Telegram channel. Within a week of creating it, Wood had 484,000 members and within a month he was at 800,000, which shows there are substantial numbers of people who will follow

<sup>588</sup> "Sovereign citizens believe that they — not judges, juries, law enforcement or elected officials — get to decide which laws to obey and which to ignore, and they don't think they should have to pay taxes. Sovereigns are clogging up the courts with indecipherable filings and when cornered, many of them lash out in rage, frustration and, in the most extreme cases, acts of deadly violence, usually directed against government officials." <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/sovereign-citizens-movement>

<sup>589</sup> Lizard Squad was a hacking group, mainly known for their claims of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks which primarily sought to disrupt gaming-related services.

him to different platforms. This is highly significant as it means that Wood, a neo-QAnon influencer, has a larger platform on Telegram than the combined platform of 38 of the original QAnon influencers who make up the “We the Media” channel.



Figure 58 Lin Wood’s conspiracy theory about Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts and other powerful individuals were being blackmailed “in a horrendous scheme involving rape & murder of children captured on videotape”.

There are several reasons why Wood has managed to establish such a vast platform. First, like Powell, he speaks not only as a lawyer but from the position of being part of Trump’s legal team. As Trump is a central figure in the QAnon conspiracy theory, access to the former president gave Wood a large boost. More importantly, after Trump’s electoral loss, much of the QAnon community was left reeling, as they had taken inspiration from the conspiracy and felt sure that Trump would be re-elected. Following the election, “Q” also went silent and has not posted a single drop since November 2020. This left many supporters worried and potentially considering leaving the conspiracy behind. Simultaneously, mainstream platforms began purging QAnon content from their sites.<sup>590</sup> In the wake of the election many established QAnon influencers reassured adherents to be patient and wait out the series of events which were unfurling.

In contrast, Wood instead continued the QAnon narrative by making up new evidence, crafting new conspiracy theories, promoting the voter fraud narrative and claiming access to whistle blowers and insider information. All of these are things that QAnon adherents crave, especially in the absence of “Q.” This kept the QAnon narrative constantly evolving rather than stagnating. At the time the established influencers were rehashing the same conspiracy theories and reeling from the series of failed predictions, the ban from mainstream platforms and the lack of guidance from “Q.” Wood told QAnon adherents that they had not lost and that there was hope that Trump would be made president. He promoted new conspiracies about the global cabal and child trafficking. As a QAnon adherent himself, he was able to gauge what other adherents want to hear and made full use of this to boost his profile among the conspiracy community.

<sup>590</sup> Blyth Crawford “QAnon and the 2020 US Election: What Trump’s Loss Means for the pro-Trump Conspiracy” *ICSR*, 2020, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ICSR-Insight-QAnon-and-the-2020-US-Election.pdf>

After 6 January, “We the Media” toned down its narratives, distancing itself from the more far-fetched narratives in QAnon circles. Wood, however, did not shy away. He shared more radical narratives and ideas. Like an algorithm that shares more extreme content to keep users hooked, Wood indulged in extreme and far-fetched QAnon narratives to get adherents hooked on his message, rather than telling them to slow down or that the movement needs to unwind.

Both Powell and Wood have established themselves as neo-QAnon influencers; these are actors who need to be monitored over the next few months as they may act as indicators of how QAnon will evolve in time. Without the influence of “Q,” and with the original influencers toning their content down, Powell and Wood will have behavioural impacts on the QAnon movement and other conspiracy theorists. Already the voter fraud narratives have played an important role in the 6 January insurrection, of which Wood and Powell were key promoters. Their future actions will potentially continue to act as potential threat vectors.

### 6.3 The Return of Gab

Gab is an alternative social media platform launched in 2016 by Andrew Torba, and has historically attracted a relatively small userbase of far-right actors.<sup>591</sup> Since the inception of QAnon, Gab has been a hub for QAnon users who have been deplatformed from Facebook and Twitter. However, Gab’s QAnon community remained quite small. In October 2020, the membership in QAnon groups was 142,300. However, as of March 2021, membership in these same groups was 643,000, an increase of 352%. In the aftermath of 6 January, Gab saw an influx of users banned from major social media platforms. Web servers could not keep up with the new traffic, which led to Gab servers shutting down. During a critical moment of IMVE actors seeking a new home, Gab could not keep its doors open and potentially missed out on a large number of new users. Initially QAnon influencers had found a home on Parler and Gab, but the difficulties these sites faced in the wake of 6 January ultimately led to Telegram becoming the main home for QAnon.

Nevertheless, a QAnon community formed on Gab after the site was able to stabilise. This community was bolstered by Gab founder and CEO Andrew Torba’s alignment with QAnon narratives and tropes.<sup>592</sup> Some influencers did not move to Telegram or were not invited to become moderators in “We the Media;” they remained on Gab. This has led to an increase in infighting and a balkanisation of the QAnon community.

The community on Gab is more insular and American-centric than QAnon on Telegram. The Gab QAnon community is primarily American, with some presence from other English-speaking QAnon communities from Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Therefore, the transnational dimension of QAnon plays a less important role on Gab, which would indicate that QAnon threat vectors would be mostly homegrown.

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<sup>591</sup> Justin Vallejo “What is Gab? Inside the fast-growing Twitter competitor that has become a refuge for Trump and his supporters” *Independent* 6 February 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-gab-account-what-is-it-b1798516.html>

<sup>592</sup> According to Alex Kaplan from Media Matters for America “The CEO of Gab appears to be flat out supporting QAnon now. It comes as he has been encouraging QAnon supporters to join the platform as the conspiracy theory faces crackdowns on other platforms.” <https://twitter.com/AIKapDC/status/1321551548925812737>

## 6.4 QAnon symbiosis and mutation

QAnon content is mass-produced for consumption by an anonymous body of non-discriminating consumers. Not all consumers of QAnon conspiracy theories are QAnon adherents. The narratives have mass appeal to a segment of the population. QAnon content is formulaic, manipulative and consumed by an audience unlikely to question its verifiability. The movement's ideological authority is rooted in this mass-produced and mass-approved content, though it is consumers who ultimately decide what is of importance and how it is to be interpreted, especially in the absence of "Q." This is what also makes QAnon narratives attractive to a diverse audience of violent and non-violent extremists. According to a report from START on 23 March, twelve of the 66 QAnon offenders of ideologically motivated crimes had known ties to other extremist movements; five of these twelve individuals carried out successful plots in the US.<sup>593</sup>

As social polarisation increased throughout 2020 due to the pandemic and the US election, the erosion of trust in government created a fertile ground for conspiracy theories among the Christian and political right. The idiosyncratic combination of religion, politics and American apocalypticism is what highlights the bricolage of conspiracy theories described by Michael Barkun.<sup>594</sup> This apocalyptic, anti-democratic and anti-establishment desire of a segment of the US population permits the growing intersectionality of QAnon and other IMVE actors, who are also seeking to replace the Deep State/Corrupt Government/Zionist Occupied Government and impose their own golden age.

The community-building observed on Gab and Telegram is central to the long-term viability of QAnon communities on Telegram, Gab and other alternative social media platforms. There is often a focus on the narratives and conspiracy theories stemming from the movement, which means that a key element is frequently overlooked: why is QAnon important to these individuals? In brief, it gives them a sense of community. This is not a new phenomenon in extremist movements; indeed, Amarasingam has previously highlighted the importance of community to Islamic State supporters on Twitter.<sup>595</sup>

## 6.5 QAnon and its growing incorporation of Sovereign Citizen Narratives

Following the election loss on 3 November and the growing amount of conspiracy theories and disinformation about electoral fraud, QAnon adherents started looking into various ways the constitution, courts or Senate could play a role in overturning the election results. One of these viral QAnon conspiracy theories was initially created in a prepping<sup>596</sup>/sovereign citizen Telegram channel. A QAnon influencer subsequently amplified this in "We the Media" (figure 59).

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<sup>593</sup> "QAnon Offenders in the United States", START

<sup>594</sup> Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 2013: pp.15–38.

<sup>595</sup> Amarnath Amarasingam, "What Twitter really means for Islamic State supporters", *War on the Rocks*, 30 December 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/what-twitter-really-means-for-islamic-state-supporters/>

<sup>596</sup> "[Preppers] Are a subculture of Americans across political lines preparing for the breakdown of civilization, off-the-grid living, food shortages and natural disaster...the popularity of such conferences almost certainly stems from several causes: uncertain political times, a presidential campaign that exposed toxic tensions dividing the country on fault lines of race and class, and worries about the environment."



The conspiracy theory proceeds as follows. First, 4 March is an important date: the US constitution originally went into effect on 4 March 1789 and, until 1933, presidents were inaugurated on 4 March. However, according to the theory, in 1871 the United States became a corporation rather than a country, one that was owned by the banking industry (in particular, the City of London). Returning the United States to being a country, a number of steps were posited: first, Trump was required to step down as president. Then the military would become guardians of the nation and break all ties with the US being a corporation. Finally, Trump would be again sworn in as the 19th president on 4 March, because, the conspiracy goes, the last “real” president was Ulysses S Grant, the 18th president. This conspiracy borrows deeply from the Sovereign Citizen movement. While this may appear odd to many outside observers, the mainstream virality of this conspiracy theory led Reuters to fact-check the story after a Canadian QAnon YouTube influencer posted a video reading this Telegram post in Figure 10.<sup>597</sup> Following the inauguration of Joe Biden, this YouTube vlog reached a million views before being removed from the platform. However, the video remained widely shared on alternative video-sharing platforms and subsequently received 124,000 views on BitChute and 66,000 on Rumble.<sup>598</sup>

Ultimately, because of the potential threat of QAnon adherents coming to DC in response to the conspiracy theory, the US government deployed 5,000 National Guards and Capitol police and stated it had intelligence of a militant group that was potentially willing to breach the Capitol Building on 4 March.<sup>599</sup> The FBI was also on alert for potential threats from militant groups on 4 March, and the House of Representatives shut down for the day considering the potential threat.<sup>600</sup> To restate the importance of this: a QAnon conspiracy theory forced the posting of national guards, had Capitol police, DC police and the FBI on alert and forced Congress to shut down. Even though 4 March was another failed QAnon prophecy and the events it predicted, of course, did not come to fruition, supporters still posed a threat to democratic institutions and wasted valuable resources from the intelligence community and law enforcement.<sup>601</sup>

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Ryan Lenz, “The New Bazaar: Survivalist ‘Prepper’ Conferences are Again Serving as Waypoints in the Traffic of Conspiracy Theories”, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, April 24 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/04/24/new-bazaar-survivalist-%E2%80%98prepper%E2%80%99-conferences-are-again-serving-waypoints-traffic-conspiracy>

<sup>597</sup> Reuters Staff, “Fact check: No evidence to support QAnon claims of mass arrests, military takeover, illegitimacy of Biden’s presidency or Trump’s return to power”, *Reuters*, 22 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-qanon-military-theories-idUSKBN29R1ZA>

<sup>598</sup> Kaleigh Rogers, “QAnon Has Become The Cult That Cries Wolf”, *FiveThirtyEight*, 26 March 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/qanon-has-become-the-cult-that-cries-wolf/>

<sup>599</sup> “Capitol Police say intelligence shows militia group may be plotting to breach the Capitol”, *The Washington Post*, 3 March 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/capitol-police-march-4-threat/2021/03/03/32a24e86-7c42-11eb-85cd-9b7fa90c8873\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/capitol-police-march-4-threat/2021/03/03/32a24e86-7c42-11eb-85cd-9b7fa90c8873_story.html)

<sup>600</sup> Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny, “D.C. police, FBI on alert ahead of QAnon’s ‘true Inauguration Day’”, *NBC News*, 2 March 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/dc-police-fbi-alert-ahead-qanons-true-inauguration-day-rcna331>; Mark Katkov and Scott Neuman, “House Cancels Thursday Session After Police Warn Of Possible Attack On Congress”, *NPR*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/03/973310942/capitol-police-warns-of-another-possible-right-wing-attack-on-congress>

<sup>601</sup> Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-André Argentino, “QAnon’s predictions haven’t come true; so how does the movement survive the failure of prophecy?”, *Religion Dispatches*, 28 October 2020, <https://religiondispatches.org/qanons-predictions-havent-come-true-so-how-does-the-movement-survive-the-failure-of-prophecy/>

A Peaceful Transition is coming. Trump will NOT be Sworn in as the 45th President of the United States on January 20.

Trump WILL take office as the 19th President of the United States on March 4 2021.

Let me explain: You believe you live in a nation called United States of America.

This Nation hasn't existed since 1871, when this country ceased to be a Nation and became a corporation belonging to the City of London (every time you see an American flag with Gold Fringe and Gold Tilt attached to it, it represents the Corporation, NOT the country).

This is the reason you can never make progress financially. This is why the Law always seems to be against the average Citizen, while the Rich and the Elite literally get away with murder (and worse things).

If Biden, Harris, Pence, Pelosi, etc are arrested for their crimes before January 20th, there will be no one to assume the Presidency.

Since Trump has not been certified as the Presidential winner by Congress, he cannot remain President.

If there is NO PRESIDENT on January 20th, the corporation known as the United States of America will be Dissolved. The Military will be the Guardians of the Nation during the Transition.

People will then have irrefutable proof that the Election was Stolen by Foreign Entities and that Trump was chosen by a Landslide.

Trump then assumes the Presidency as the 19th President of the United States (the last President elected before America became a corporation was Ulysses S. Grant).

Now, I really don't know all the details involved in this. Just know the end goal has always been the destruction of that 1871 corporation and the return of America to the people like the democratic republic it always intended to be.

The next month and a half will be Chaotic. Make sure you have plenty of food and water!

Comply with the National Guard and United States Marine Corp. They took Oath to the Nation, not the Corporation, the Act of 1871. Be vigilant!

Pray. Your Nation has returned to you.

Figure 59 Example of Sovereign Citizen & QAnon overlap

This is a key threat vector with QAnon: its unpredictability. QAnon adherents have posed a threat to public safety, public health, critical infrastructure and democratic institutions since the start of the pandemic alone. Though Q will potentially never post again, QAnon – or whatever the conspiracy will metamorphosise into in the coming months and years – will continue to pose a threat. This is not only because conspiracy theorists, apocalyptic and anti-government activists will seek out new avenues to distribute their message, but also because QAnon is and has been merging with more extreme and violent movements that inhabit the alternative media spaces into which QAnon adherents were forced.

## 6.6 Discourse analysis of QAnon's growing overlap with IMVE actors

A more frequent occurrence since the mass deplatforming of QAnon from mainstream social media platforms is the overlap between QAnon and IMVE actors found on Telegram. When QAnon was deplatformed and adherents could not find a stable home on Parler or Gab, they turned

to Telegram. At the time, they believed this would be temporary. However, it has lasted longer than anticipated. Individuals on Terrorgram were excited about the large pool of new potential recruits joining their digital ecosystem.<sup>602</sup> Chatter on Terrorgram as of 11 January was about “red-pilling and recruiting normies [indoctrinating average people into extremism],” as well as what they called “Parler and Twitter refugees.”<sup>603</sup>

Examples of threat actors seeking to recruit newcomers into further extremism are shown below in extracts from various conversations which took place across extreme Telegram channels. In some instances, the conversation was geared towards guiding Parler and Twitter refugees towards chats that ‘are good for patriots’ e.g. “We need people to go into this chat of normies: [https://t.me/\\*\\*\\*\\*\\*](https://t.me/*****) And then start another conversation about chats that are good for patriots, to which we post this chat: [https://t.me/\\*\\*\\*\\*\\*](https://t.me/*****).”<sup>604</sup> These chats were part of a wider network of IMVE actors, though it was not obvious what the content of these chats were to the newcomers. These are not isolated incidents as there were several different threat actors who were discussing ways to recruit and radicalise them: “Parler refugees are in [https://t.me/\\*\\*\\*\\*\\*](https://t.me/*****) Everybody move in, to slowly and subtly redpill. People are getting banned for being too obvious. These are our baby brothers and sisters and they need help to see the light.”<sup>605</sup> It is also important to note that women were singled out as targets of recruitment by these threat actors: “We need to share our wisdom with the normies. Give them breadcrumbs and see if they want more. The hardest ones to recruit are the women but if we can get them on our side they will be the most ardent supporters. We might not be able to rid ourselves of the n\*\*\*\*\* just yet but we can certainly expose the nose.”<sup>606</sup>

In other instances, IMVE actors were not shying away from the content or ideological leaning of their communities: “Hello Twitter/Parler refugees. If you are new to Telegram, here is a list of Nationalist and Patriot channels to follow. These people will help you understand what is happening and why. [list removed] If you are new to Telegram here is some general advice: 1) Do NOT use your real name/ photo, 2) Do NOT dox yourselves (Leftists and feds roam around these chats), 3) Hide your phone number. To do this: Settings -> Privacy and Security -> Phone Number -> Nobody.”<sup>607</sup> In some instances, threat actors decided to openly show their racist, antisemitic and accelerationist motivations to newcomers in the hope to recruit them: “Welcome to all my new Twitter and Parler refugees N\*\*\*\*\*, Hitler did nothing wrong, The holocaust was a lie, There are no political solutions, Voting will not remove them, You all have a lot of catching up to do.”<sup>608</sup>

The dynamics on Terrorgram have changed following the election, as threat actors have risen from the extremist Terrorgram ecosystem to mingle in the spaces that were occupied by the

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<sup>602</sup> Terrorgram is a network of neo-Nazi accelerationist channels. “This network, which fuses the glorification of political violence with a distinctive hyper-stylized visual aesthetic, consists of a small network of channels that share memes glorifying an apocalyptic race war, instructions for 3D-printing weapons, extremist literature and manifestos, and video recordings of white supremacist terror attacks that have been removed from other platforms.” Hannah Gais and Megan Squire, “How an Encrypted Messaging Platform is Changing Extremist Movements”, Southern Poverty Law Center, 16 February 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/16/how-encrypted-messaging-platform-changing-extremist-movements>; Cassie Miller, “‘There Is No Political Solution’: Accelerationism in the White Power Movement”, Southern Poverty Law Center, 23 June 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/06/23/there-no-political-solution-accelerationism-white-power-movement>; Jakob Guhl and Jacob Davey, “A Safe Space to Hate: White Supremacist Mobilisation on Telegram”, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 26 June 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/a-safe-space-to-hate-white-supremacist-mobilisation-on-telegram/>

<sup>603</sup> Post made in a violent extremist telegram channel discussing how to recruit or mobilize QAnon adherents to violence.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid.

<sup>607</sup> Ibid.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid.

conservative, MAGA, QAnon, Parler and Twitter refugees. Although the initial impetus for this was the potential pool of recruits, Terrorgram actors have begun integrating themselves a bit more into the publicly available IMVE ecosystems on Telegram. All the while, IMVE actors composed of conservative, MAGA, QAnon, Parler and Twitter refugees have sunk deeper into more extreme ecosystems.

An equilibrium has formed whereby Terrorgram now has a much larger potential audience and appears to be posting with more regularity. However, some of those who were deplatformed have begun sharing more extreme narratives as there is no moderation or censorship taking place, allowing them to show their true colours. In QAnon circles, some adherents have looked for a more goal-oriented cause to which they can attach their conspiratorial mindset. This has resolved into QAnon hybrids such as QAnon Proud Boys, QAnon Oath Keepers, QAnon III%, QAnon fascists, QAnon Boogaloo, QAnon White Nationalists, QAnon Great Replacement, QAnon and Traditionalism, and so on, meaning that factions of each of these movements have somewhat infused with QAnon ideology. This is a threat vector to keep an eye on, as I note with Amarasingam:

“QAnon has already led to several acts of violence and the time between radicalisation and mobilisation can be very short with cases measured in days. If more individuals with greater organisational skills and operational acumen seek to pursue QAnon’s agenda, it could eventually lead to more significant threats to public security and become a more impactful domestic terrorism threat.”<sup>609</sup>

The Capitol insurrection and the storming of the Reichstag are evidence not only of the increasingly global reach of QAnon, but also of how conspiracy theories and disinformation about the pandemic have rapidly evolved into extremist violence, attacks against critical infrastructure and threats to democratic institutions and against elected officials.

As QAnon continues to grow in salience transnationally and networks continues to form with more violently inclined threat actors, QAnon and other conspiracy-minded threat actors will continue to pose a novel threat not only from the perspective of violent extremism, but also to critical infrastructure, public health and democratic institutions.

## 6.7 QAnon and Beyond: Analyzing QAnon Trends a Year After January 6

For some, the electoral loss of Donald Trump and the disappearance of the figure known as “Q” marked the beginning of the end of the QAnon movement. As the year drew to a close, some Americans had assumed or hoped that the worst of the past 4 years was behind them, or that a page could be turned with a new administration, more widespread COVID vaccine availability, and a fresh opportunity for social and economic progress. Keen-eyed reporters, analysts, and researchers were not of the same opinion. The election results were still being disputed,<sup>610</sup> and results were not accepted by half the population due to unfounded claims of electoral fraud and

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<sup>609</sup> Amarasingam and Argentino, “The QAnon Conspiracy Theory”

<sup>610</sup> Justin Hendrix, Nicholas Tonckens, and Sruthi Venkatachalam, "Timeline: Rep. Jim Jordan, a Systematic Disinformation Campaign, and January 6," *Just Security*, August 29 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/77852/timeline-rep-jim-jordan-a-systematic-disinformation-campaign-and-january-6/>.

disinformation being amplified by politicians, extremists and conspiracy theorists.<sup>611</sup> #StopTheSteal went viral once more, but this time it was more than a digital expression of frustration, but a real national security threat in the making.<sup>612</sup> In a recent investigation ProPublica found that “Facebook groups swelled with at least 650,000 posts attacking the legitimacy of Joe Biden’s victory between Election Day and the Jan. 6 siege of the U.S. Capitol, with many calling for executions or other political violence.”<sup>613</sup> As the new year rang, some Americans were preparing to travel to DC for a political protest. On January 6<sup>th</sup> they gathered to hear Former President Donald Trump speak. Not long after, the crowd began milling on Capitol Hill, and at 14:15 it was reported that the Capitol was breached. On January 12<sup>th</sup>, the large tech platforms banned Donald Trump and purged QAnon, along with other groups and movements that participated in the insurrection, from their platforms.

A year on from January 6<sup>th</sup>, how has QAnon adapted and evolved, in light of the disappearance of “Q” and the electoral loss of Donald Trump? I will highlight three different neo-QAnon influencers who have emerged and attempted to replace the leadership provided “Q” and their disparate ideologies and ecosystems. I will also examine how QAnon has adapted their use of social media in 2021.

### 6.7.1 QAnon is not dead

Ultimately, while some incorrectly speculated QAnon was dead or dying,<sup>614</sup> the movement continues to pose a national security threat in the US and abroad, as the data in chapter 5 shows, remaining a threat to democratic processes and a threat to public health. 2021 was the year QAnon showed that it could survive without Trump acting as President or “Q.” Though QAnon viewed Trump as a messianic and prophetic figure, his electoral loss did not lead to the end of the movement. What is important to highlight as part of the survivability element is, as explained in Chapter 1, QAnon is a participatory ideology. It does not require an official leader, nor is there any official initiation; thus, as long as there are those willing to participate in the conspiracy theory, the movement and ideology will live on. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the role played by human greed. QAnon is a movement that has a lot of people trying to make money, and it has people seeking fame, attention and political power by promoting it. Finally, as I highlight in chapter 2, as an ideology that plays a role in providing a form of theodicy to adherents, QAnon continues to have adherents seeking comfort in it. QAnon has survived the failure of its prophecies multiple times, and QAnon will continue to do so.

Mike Rothschild wrote about the QAnon influencer “Patel Patriot” behind the “Devolution” conspiracy theory who emerged and gained prominence in 2021.<sup>615</sup> Rothschild stated that “Patel Patriot, a run-of-the-mill MAGA supporter who was so devastated by Trump’s loss that he

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<sup>611</sup> Center for an Informed Public et al., “The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election,” *Election Integrity Partnership*, March 2 2021, <https://www.eipartnership.net/report>.

<sup>612</sup> DFRLab, “#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection.”

<sup>613</sup> Craig Silverman et al., “Facebook Hosted Surge of Misinformation and Insurrection Threats in Months Leading Up to Jan. 6 Attack, Records Show,” *Pro Publica*, January 4 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hosted-surge-of-misinformation-and-insurrection-threats-in-months-leading-up-to-jan-6-attack-records-show>.

<sup>614</sup> Virginia Heffernan, “Column: Reports of QAnon’s death aren’t exaggerated,” *LA Times*, June 11 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210611103646/https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-06-11/qanon-jan-6-ron-watkins-sidney-powell>.

<sup>615</sup> Rothschild, “Why Devolution is quickly becoming the future of the QAnon movement.”

invented a hopelessly complex conspiracy theory called “Devolution” to explain that Trump actually still had power over a military government, and was exercising it through executive orders, secret communications, and continuity of government documents.”<sup>616</sup> In his investigation, Rothchild found out that “while GhostEzra did little to monetize his following, Patel (revealed as South Dakota resident Jon Herold) quickly made tens of thousands of dollars selling subscriptions to the Substack page where he unveiled new “Devolution” posts and livestreams.”<sup>617</sup>

2021 was the first year with no new “QDrops” since the emergence of QAnon. It was also the first year that social media companies harshly cracked down on QAnon content, banishing QAnon adherents to alt-tech platforms. Despite that, 2021 was clearly QAnon’s most impactful year, gaining institutional clout, spawning dangerous splinter cults, and fueling far right narratives that undermine democracy. Though QAnon lost Donald Trump in the White House, they did gain two congresswomen: Lauren Boebert of Colorado and Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, both women who gained popularity via their endorsement of QAnon before and during the electoral campaigns, as was discussed in chapter 4. Though both tried to distance themselves from the movement after the violence of January 6, both congresswomen act as an amplifier for QAnon and QAnon adjacent conspiracy theories about the election results, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further, QAnon found that they still have other elected officials and political players as allies. A QAnon influencer known as “QAnon John” helped organize the “For God & Country Patriot Roundup” in Dallas, Texas, which took place from May 28 to 31, 2021. QAnon devotees spent at least \$500 per ticket to see QAnon luminaries such as Sidney Powell and General Michael Flynn speak. But “Patriot Roundup” also featured the appearance of mainstream Republican politicians. The event was attended by Texas GOP Chairman Allen West, U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert and Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller.<sup>618</sup>

Within the QAnon community, the voter fraud and #StopTheSteal disinformation campaigns were significant and volatile. It is important to note that the Arizona audit was very significant to the QAnon movement, post January 6. The former Overstock CEO Patrick Byrne, the main funder of the fruitless Arizona audit, praised the QAnon community and regularly associates with QAnon figures.<sup>619</sup> The Arizona auditors hired Austin Steinbart, an influencer who claimed to be “Q” from the future, to help. Moreover, the “audit” was led by Cyber Ninjas CEO Doug Logan, a “stop the steal” advocate who retweeted Ron Watkins.<sup>620</sup> Ron Watkins, former 8chan administrator and whom some believe was acting as “Q” in the final days, made an appearance at the Mike Lindell’s “cyber symposium,” an event where Lindell claimed he would present evidence of election fraud. But even the cyber experts he summoned to the event, stated that his

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<sup>616</sup> Ibid.

<sup>617</sup> Ibid.

<sup>618</sup> Abby Livingston, “Texas officials speak at QAnon-affiliated event where Trump adviser Michael Flynn encouraged military coup on U.S. government,” *The Texas Tribune*, June 1 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/06/01/texas-allen-west-sid-miller-louie-gohmert-qanon/>.

<sup>619</sup> Alex Kaplan (AlKapDC), “Patrick Byrne, a QAnon-connected figure & a main funder of the AZ “audit” via his group, has now praised the QAnon community directly in a video: “On this road that I’m walking ... to expose the truth ... I sure meet a lot of people who got here from a different road called Q.”,” Twitter, November 8, 2021, <https://twitter.com/AlKapDC/status/1457795470776885250>.

<sup>620</sup> Jeremy Duda and Jim Small, “Arizona Senate hires a ‘Stop the Steal’ advocate to lead 2020 election audit,” *AZ Mirror*, March 31 2021, <https://www.azmirror.com/2021/03/31/arizona-senate-hires-a-stop-the-steal-advocate-to-lead-2020-election-audit/>.

data showed nothing of substance. QAnon survived primarily on the anti-democratic and anti-government narratives among the StopTheSteal ecosystem. QAnon now features prominently within the movement, as those who promote the stolen election narrative have echoed QAnon's call for public executions of Democrats and their supposed Republican co-conspirators. The continued trend of electoral fraud narratives and the violence they have inspired in the QAnon community is a potential concern in terms of violent extremism, as the US faced the midterm elections in 2022.

## 6.7.2 The Next "Q"

The departure of "Q" and Donald Trump from the QAnon scene left a significant power vacuum. Out of this power vacuum have emerged various neo-QAnon influencers who have built a large following around them in 2021. Three contenders have emerged as the next "Q" like figures to their own communities: GhostEzra, Negative48, and Queen Romana Didulo. Each of these influencers appears to have different motivations, and each has garnered hundreds of thousands of social media followers, as they attempt to become the leading figure in the still-growing QAnon movement.

### 6.7.2.1 GhostEzra

GhostEzra is a QAnon persona who has gained a following due to his antisemitic claims that Jews dominate Big Pharma, the media, and central banking. A *Logically* investigation found out that GhostEzra was a Florida man called Robert Smart, who first surfaced on the internet as GhostEzra toward the end of 2020. As a minor Twitter influencer at the time of his takedown, he had 26,900 followers.<sup>621</sup> GhostEzra truly gained prominence on Telegram, where he was able to be openly antisemitic and merge his QAnon base with other ideologically motivated violent extremists in the Telegram ecosystem. His channel currently has 311,000 members and is one of the largest QAnon channels on Telegram. Antisemitism was not a new QAnon phenomena in 2021.<sup>622</sup> GhostEzra's prominence has been built on how he has adapted QAnon narratives to fit with neo-Nazi, Christian Identity, and ethnonationalist narratives and ecosystems. The merger of ideologically motivated (violent) extremism and conspiracy theories has created new recruitment pools and ecosystems.

It was inevitable that a portion of QAnon would become further radicalized into more extreme ideologies following the major deplatforming the movement suffered on mainstream social media platforms. On platforms like Telegram, differing ecosystems easily share content across the board in the spaces, and the large influx of new users that appeared in these ecosystems following January 2021 created plenty of opportunities for extremists and "Parler and Twitter refugees," to engage with content they might not have been before. When individuals initially joined Telegram in January 2021, they were introduced to a host of content that they were not privy to on other platforms. It is important to remember that many of these individuals may have been extremists, but they were not violent extremists, nor were they used to the type of content

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<sup>621</sup> Logically, "Logically Identifies GhostEzra, Florida Man Behind World's 'Largest Antisemitic Internet Forum'," *Logically*, August 20 2021, <https://www.logically.ai/articles/exclusive-ghostezra-florida-man-largest-antisemitic-forum>.

<sup>622</sup> ADL, "QAnon's Antisemitism and What Comes Next," *Anti Defamation League*, September 17 2021, <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/qanons-antisemitism-and-what-comes-next>.

and propaganda that was already present in ecosystems on Telegram. Adding onto this the psychological and emotional impact of the loss of the election by Donald Trump and the creation of the Big Lie, between November 2020 and January 2021, as well as, numerous environmental factors combined with new extremist material could lead an individual to become radicalized. This is difficult to determine on an individual basis since radicalization is an individualistic process. Telegram, however, provides opportunities for this to occur.

Another possibility is that these new ecosystems permitted influencers from QAnon to shed the veneer to their more extremist beliefs or views prior to being de-platformed. Prior to deplatforming, they had were forced to hide some of these views, as they had to abide by the rules of the platforms like Twitter and Facebook. In this case, Telegram bills itself as a secure alternative to messaging applications. Telegram does offer end to end encryption in one-on-one conversations; however, the perception of protection transfers to users who are in public channels or public groups, though they are not actually fully protected. Nevertheless, their behaviours change when they do believe that they are protected by some type of encryption, as well as by the anonymous nature of their accounts. Studies have shown that anonymity is core to the participation in ecosystems, especially those who share controversial, sensitive or extremist content.<sup>623</sup> This is the reality for violent extremist movements on Telegram. The core principle is that everyone who participates is anonymous and no one wants to know other people's identities meaning that they do not share personal information and assume that they are always being watched by law enforcement. Ultimately, this type of ecosystem permits threat actors to behave openly in a way that they would not outside of this setting.

Though GhostEzra was a newer influencer, having come onto the stage after the last QDrop, he still plays an important role within the QAnon ecosystem. His initial content was in line with most of the QAnon community, where they were spreading disinformation about the results of the election and hoping that on inauguration day President Trump would be installed and that the Democrats would be arrested and jailed. By March 2021, GhostEzra had amassed over 330,000 subscribers to his Telegram channel making him the second largest QAnon influencer in the Telegram ecosystem. This is important, as in May 2020, GhostEzra pivoted from QAnon style narratives to antisemitic ones. In particular, he began sharing content related to the relationship between Israel and Edom, memes referring to how the Jews control the media, antisemitic myths about the Hittites, Canaanites, Khazarian Jewish conspiracies, crypto Judaism, and he blamed 9/11 on the Jews. GhostEzra is a perfect example of how extremists infiltrate and co-opt a welcoming big-tent movement.

As I began to further analyze the discourse in the GhostEzra channel and chats, his post went beyond the type of antisemitism found in the QAnon ecosystems. Rather, GhostEzra began sharing the type of narratives that are found in neo-Nazi, Christian Identity, and ethnonationalist communities, and his community of followers were doing the same. GhostEzra began to heavily promote a neo-Nazi documentary called *Europa, the Last Battle*. What my analysis found is that

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<sup>623</sup> Xiao Ma, Jeff Hancock, and Mor Naaman, "Anonymity, Intimacy and Self-Disclosure in Social Media" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, San Jose, California, 2016); Mainack Mondal, Denzil Correa, and Fabrício Benevenuto, "Anonymity Effects: A Large-Scale Dataset from an Anonymous Social Media Platform" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the 31st ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media, Virtual Event, 2020); Kaiping Zhang and René Kizilcec, "Anonymity in Social Media: Effects of Content Controversiality and Social Endorsement on Sharing Behavior," *Eighth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* 8, no. 1 (2014), <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/14573>.



this content was well received within the GhostEzra community, as each of these posts has received thousands of comments and tens of thousands of views. The channel generates engagement around this extreme antisemitic content (figure 60).

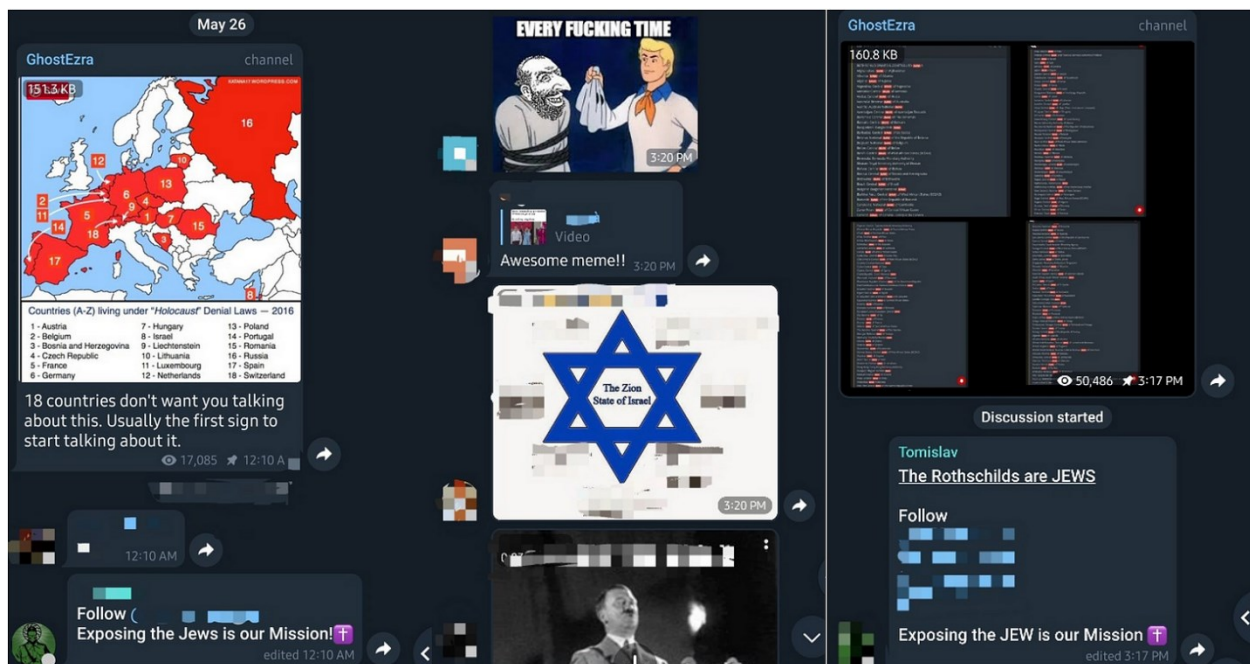


Figure 60 Example of antisemitic content shared by GhostEzra and his followers

Within the seven days of initially posting Europa, the Last Battle, GhostEzra and his followers doubled down on their antisemitism and moved into merging with the QAnon conspiracy theories, Holocaust denialism, and national socialist narratives about Zionist Occupied Government propaganda. Furthermore, members of his channel are networking directly with ideologically motivated violent extremists' ecosystems on Telegram. GhostEzra had therefore become an important hub for radicalization to extremist ideologies. His brand of QAnon is one that is more extreme and tends to promote more calls for violence.

### 6.7.2.2 Negative48

Between the legitimate Biden presidency and “Q”’s disappearance after December 2020, there continues to be an unprecedented confusion among QAnon adherents online. Without a leader to rein them in, believers overtime grew increasingly suspicious of once-influential figures in the movement such as Michael Flynn and Lin Wood, causing a massive amount of infighting among followers.<sup>624</sup> As the group continues to fracture, offshoots of QAnon have evolved from seemingly benign and esoteric sects to what many have considered full-blown cults.

In one unsettling case, QAnon follower Michael Brian Protzman has emerged as a new key figure in the “Q” ecosystem. He leads a group called Negative48, which is a QAnon-based, new religious movement that was formed in 2021. Protzman’s bizarre and dangerous rituals have kept

<sup>624</sup> Drew Harwell, "Since Jan. 6, the pro-Trump Internet has descended into infighting over money and followers," *Washington Post*, January 3 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/01/03/trump-qanon-online-money-war-jan6/>.

believers in unsafe conditions under the guise of spiritual leadership.<sup>625</sup> Protzman has also convinced his adherents to travel to Dallas, and in some cases abandon their families, in order to see the prophesied return of JFK and JFK Jr.<sup>626</sup> Therefore, on October 31, 2021, where hundreds of QAnon followers converged on Dallas, Texas, and stood for hours waiting for JFK and JFK Jr. to arise from the dead at Dealey Plaza, Michael Protzman had gathered them by implying that these events would occur. What was supposed to be a weekend gathering turned into a movement. Many of his followers left their families and stayed in Dallas for more than two months and missing Christmas and New Year's, while their families worried for their safety and wondered when this vigil would end. What is both interesting and of concern is how quickly Negative48 was able to form and lead a real-life new religious movement, gathering in Dallas to await the announcement that both JFK and JFK Jr. were still alive and ready to assume charge of the nation. The return of JFK has been a prophecy that has not only failed many times in QAnon, but was also deemed false by "Q." Protzman openly uses QDrops and numerology to command his small but loyal flock into specific actions, including , raising money from their families, and speaking in increasingly apocalyptic rhetoric as they wait patiently for the great event around the corner. Negative48 is a good example of the discussion in chapter 1, where I discussed QAnon as a lived religion. Negative48 practices involve not only interpreting QDrops and gematria, but offline rituals that Protzman has imposed on his followers. Not only has this segment of QAnon moved offline, but it also has a leader and figurehead that plays a role in determining membership, which is something that the wider QAnon movement lacked, but can be an attractive feature to some adherents.

Negative48 is not the first example of a formalized QAnon religious groups, as was discussed in chapter 2. However, the new religious movement that was birthed in 2021 demonstrates that QAnon is more than a mere conspiracy theory. The means by which it can turn individuals into fervent religious adherents is not only harmful to their friends and families, but indicates a threat vector, whereby this religious fervor could be weaponized by the right influencer.

### *6.7.2.3 Queen Romana Didulo*

Canada welcomed its own QAnon influencer in 2021, the self-proclaimed "Queen of Canada" Romana Didulo.<sup>627</sup> She claims to have been established as Queen of Canada by "Q" and the white hats that were helping Trump fight the "Deep State" in the US. According to her Telegram channels and videos, she makes references to "Q" and encourages adherents to harass establishments with bogus "cease and desist" notices if they adhere to COVID prevention policies.<sup>628</sup> Didulo's QAnon movement is participatory in nature. Though she has a large online following on Telegram, Didulo also has a caravan of RVs and cars that travel with her across Canada, as the mobile Canadian Government. Over the first few months of her supposed reign,

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<sup>625</sup> Justin Rohrlich, "Dallas QAnon 'Cult' Is Now Drinking Terrifying Chemical Cocktail, Family Says," *Daily Beast*, December 2021 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/dallas-qanon-cult-is-now-drinking-terrifying-chemical-cocktail-to-fight-covid-family-says>.

<sup>626</sup> Gilbert, "The QAnon JFK Cult in Dallas Is Tearing Families Apart."

<sup>627</sup> Mack Lamoureux, "QAnons Are Harassing People at the Whim of a Woman They Say Is Canada's Queen," *Vice News*, June 17 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3aqvkw/qanons-are-harassing-people-at-the-whim-of-a-woman-they-say-is-canadas-queen-romana-didulo>.

<sup>628</sup> Ibid.

Didulo's rhetoric has only become more extreme; violent (?).<sup>629</sup> In November 2021, she asked her 73,000 followers to "Shoot to kill anyone who tries to inject Children under the age of 19 years old with Coronavirus19 vaccines."<sup>630</sup> This led to one of Didulo's followers being arrested in Laval, Quebec. According to a press release by the Laval Police, the individual was arrested after allegedly making threats about his daughter's school.<sup>631</sup>

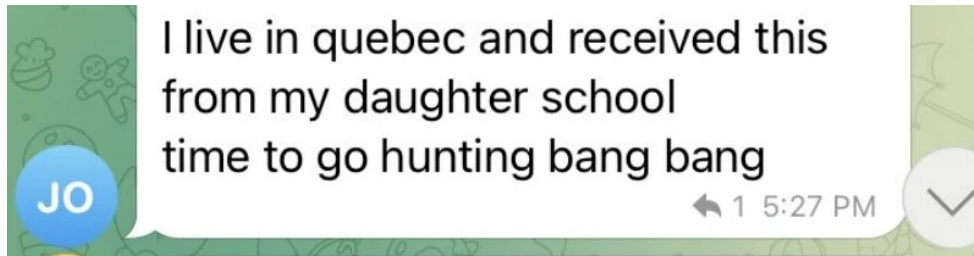


Figure 61 Screenshot of the Telegram post made by the man arrested in Laval

A *Vice* investigation by Lamoureux "found the accused man's social media pages, and it appears he and his immediate family are all followers of Didulo who have posted about her several times on Facebook." Didulo has built her following off her opposition to the vaccine mandates in Canada, as well as from her leveraging language and conspiracy theories from the pseudolaw movement in the cease and desist letters she had mailed to elected officials, reports and private citizens.

In August 2022, Didulo and some of her followers showed up to a Peterborough police station to arrest the police officers inside, on behalf of an order given by Didulo.<sup>632</sup> Didulo is not only an example of the transnational expansion of QAnon, but also a demonstration of how non-US-centric influencers can become a dominant force in the QAnon movement.

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<sup>629</sup> Mack Lamoureux, "QAnon's 'Queen of Canada' Calls for Followers to 'Kill' People Vaccinating Children," *Vice News*, November 25 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/v7ddgm/qanons-queen-of-canada-calls-for-followers-to-kill-people-vaccinating-children>.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid.

<sup>632</sup> Mack Lamoureux, "The 'QAnon Queen' Told Her Followers to Arrest Cops. It Didn't Go Well.," *vice News*, August 15 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/contributor/mack-lamoureux>.

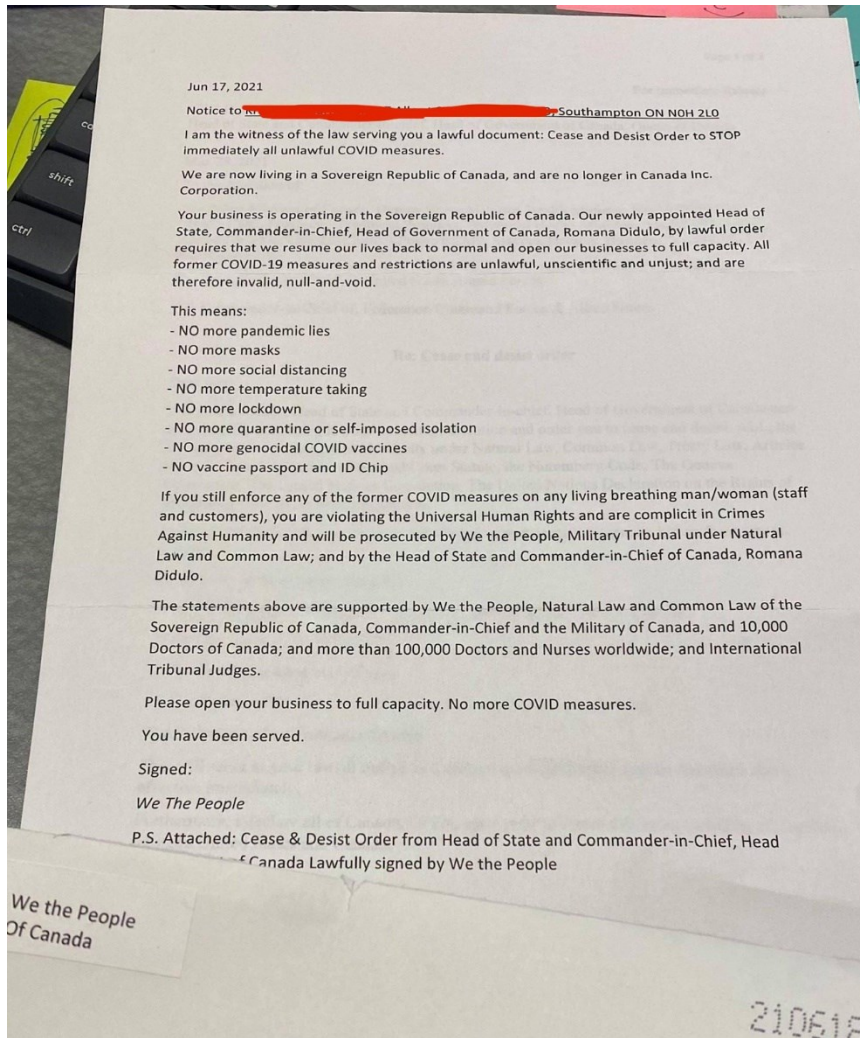


Figure 62 Example of the cease and desist letter that Didulo and her followers have been sending out.

### 6.7.3 Social Media and the Fractured Q Movement

Tracing the misinformation spread by promoters of the Capitol riots helped shed light on the role of Facebook and other social networks as catalysts of harmful rhetoric<sup>633</sup> – including that of QAnon. Not long after January 6<sup>th</sup>, “Q” influencers and followers fled mainstream social media in favour of alternative platforms, where conspiracy theories about the 2020 election continued long after the ballots were counted.<sup>634</sup> In fact, remnants of election fraud paranoia permeated these social networks during the 2021 California recall election,<sup>635</sup> as well as the 2021

<sup>633</sup> The Associated Press, "Ex-Facebook manager alleges the social network fed the Capitol riot," *NPR*, October 3 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/03/1042908136/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-social-network-capitol-riot>.

<sup>634</sup> Jordan Wildon and Marc-André Argentino, "QAnon is not Dead: New Research into Telegram Shows the Movement is Alive and Well," *GNET*, July 28 2021, <https://gnet-research.org/2021/07/28/qanon-is-not-dead-new-research-into-telegram-shows-the-movement-is-alive-and-well/>.

<sup>635</sup> Nick Corasaniti, "False Election Claims in California Reveal a New Normal for G.O.P.," *New York Times*, September 13 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/12/us/politics/gop-voter-fraud-california-recall.html>.

gubernatorial elections in New Jersey and Virginia,<sup>636</sup> generating further radicalizing discourse and sowing even more doubt in the electoral process.

What worked well for the growth of Negative48, GhostEzra and Romana Didulo, as well as being equally effective for other QAnon-adjacent groups, is the messaging app Telegram: a platform that famously favours open speech over moderation, thus leaving disinformation, antisemitism, and other dangerous content virtually unconstrained.<sup>637</sup> Since the Capitol riot, Telegram has become an unsurprisingly favourable alternative for QAnon – especially after mainstream sites like Twitter started cracking down on misinformation-spreading politicians such as Donald Trump and Marjorie Taylor Greene.<sup>638</sup> The app's global reach and lax moderation mean that events which might seem specific to American politics have become everyone's problem, with no safety features in place to moderate the content.

Following the de-platforming that has taken place since January 2021, QAnon affiliated actors have migrated to a multitude of alt-tech platforms. Other more entrepreneurial actors in QAnon have set out to create their own platforms. Though QAnon may not be able to leverage the powerful algorithms of the larger platforms, they are still active and growing on alternative platforms, where they are adapting their strategies to their new realities. This has formed new radicalization ecosystems which have altered the threat landscape. (figure 63)

Nevertheless, QAnon still has found a way to survive on some mainstream platforms. Even the more popular apps such as TikTok have remained worryingly successful in aiding the spread of misleading content from QAnon and other conspiracy theorists. TikTok, however, is not part of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), and does not have access to the GIFCT hash sharing database used by others to remove extremist content in a coordinated fashion. There is no doubt that QAnon and the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol riot influenced the thriving conspiracy ecosystem on TikTok, which ultimately benefits the platform by driving user traffic via disinformation-laden TikTok videos that gained momentum in 2020 and 2021, among conservative users. Despite the social media platform's community guidelines and bans on particularly offensive terms, QAnon content still goes viral.

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<sup>636</sup> Nicholas Reimann, "Conspiracy Theories Swirl After Democrat Phil Murphy Reelected New Jersey Governor—But There's No Evidence Of Widespread Fraud," *Forbes*, April 21 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nicholasreimann/2021/11/04/conspiracy-theories-swirl-after-democrat-murphy-reelected-new-jersey-governor-but-theres-no-evidence-of-widespread-fraud/?sh=6caeedb35c5a>.

<sup>637</sup> Logically, "Telegram COVID-19 Conspiracy Group Rife With Antisemitism," *Logically*, October 22 2021, <https://www.logically.ai/articles/antisemitism-on-telegram>.

<sup>638</sup> Shirin Ghaffary, "Marjorie Taylor Greene and Big Tech's never-ending censorship loop," *Vox*, January 4 2022, <https://www.vox.com/recode/22867140/marjorie-taylor-greene-facebook-twitter-suspension-big-tech-content-moderation>.

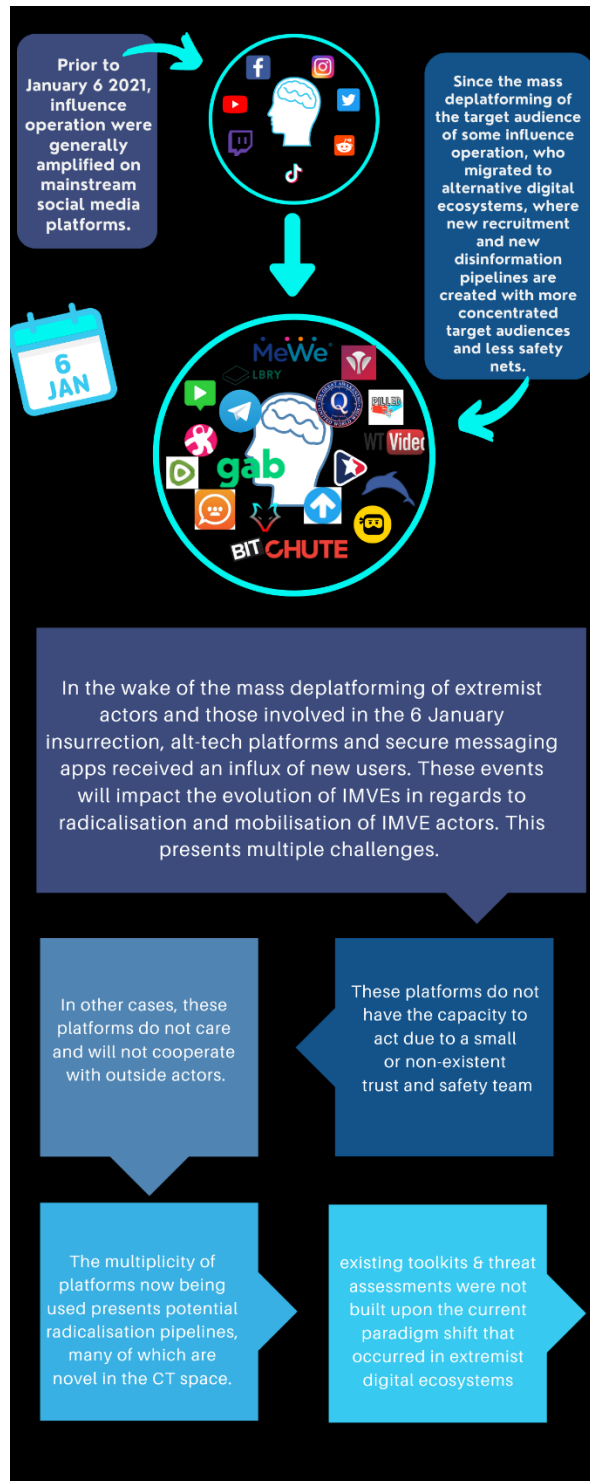


Figure 63 Visual representation of the ecosystem shift of QAnon following mass deplatforming by mainstream social media platforms

What follows now is the complex challenge of content moderation and threat reduction on platforms and in ecosystems where QAnon has migrated to. This challenge is one that is on the minds of many researchers, civil society organizations, and governments. More than a year later, that challenge has grown larger and more difficult, but it is one that still remains front and centre for 2023. Further research is required on these platforms and ecosystems in order to determine violent extremist threats. The potential threats emanating from these platforms must also be measured and reported on in order to better inform policymakers and decision makers. The growing cross-pollination between nonviolent and violent extremists presents a particularly important challenge. Even if recruitment and radicalization does not supersede past rates, the fact that a new large pool of potential recruits has migrated over to these platforms may lead to an increase in new members for more established extremist and violent extremist groups.

### 6.7.3 Trendlines

The evolution of QAnon a year after the January 6, 2021 insurrection has revealed that the movement's impact will outlast the figure of “Q” that spawned it, as well as Trump’s prophetic role. Every hopeful forecast that QAnon’s influence will fade has proven wrong and naïve. I make no claim to be able to forecast the future, but history suggests that it would be folly to underestimate the staying power of the most major online conspiracy movement ever founded. In many ways, the insurrection was a boiling point that demonstrated what far-right experts had been warning about for years. We witnessed a diverse range of cross-ideological movements unite around an unified resistance, aided by people in mainstream positions of power. While certain so-called groups or organizations were major participants, this was mostly a movement fueled by a vast and amorphous field of misinformation and the creeping influence of extreme ideology being reflected in mainstream institutions. Though this chapter only provides a snapshot of what has occurred in QAnon in 2021, we can highlight a few things: 1) Despite de-platforming, QAnon and its adjacent movements are far from gone over a year after the insurrection. What QAnon’s use of social media in 2021 does highlight is that de-platforming from mainstream social media platforms does not curb the problem, as the growing sphere of alt-tech platforms and ecosystems provide avenues for these movements to exist. Though it may be at a smaller scale, this continued existence has permitted QAnon to thrive. With growing platform polarization, alt-tech platforms continue to see a small but steady influx of influencers, media personalities and politicians who have drawn the ire of social media platforms.

Importantly, in reaction to mainstream social media platforms’ and financial services’ de-platforming actions, QAnon is both innovative and agile. QAnon, as a movement and ideology, has showed how it has leveraged the actions taken against it to further radicalize new adherents in attempts to widen the mass movement that has arisen in the aftermath of the January 6 insurgency. As a result, it is vital that we continue to monitor and create unique and more effective ways to disrupt these channels when we can, in a more purposeful manner than we have previously attempted.

# CONCLUSION

This chapter will conclude and summarize the key research findings on the QAnon movement and ideology in relation to my research aims, and discuss the value and contribution of that work. Finally, I will provide a review of the limits of the study and offer opportunities for future research. It is important to highlight that over the past 5 years QAnon has changed dramatically as both an ideology and a movement. QAnon has evolved from a fringe genre rooted in image board culture focused on the US political landscape, to a global phenomenon that is a threat to the security public health and democratic institutions of multiple nations. When this research project began, my analysis of QAnon was going to be a simple chapter in a larger project, where I wanted to examine how conspiracy theories could lead individuals to radicalize to violence. Yet 2020 and 2021 have demonstrated that the threat posed by QAnon and dangerous conspiracy theories is one that has now become multifaceted. The adherents of the QAnon movement are no longer only anonymous users on the internet, they include elected officials and influential political actors dictating government policies, along with pastors in churches blending QAnon with religious teachings, influencing the lives of believers. QAnon adherents have created their own news and media ecosystems, with their own news shows and reporters, providing an alternative media landscape which competes with mainstream media.

## Overall findings and contributions to the field

The most important findings in *Chapter 1* are twofold. The first is how QAnon has evolved beyond the simple conspiracy theory into a new religious movement. My research has found that QAnon does not have any formal initiation process. Rather, initiation into the movement is achieved through participation in QAnon as a lived religion. This can only be achieved through praxis. The multifaceted manifestation of membership and participation is found in the nexus of mental, emotional, embodiment, and social connections that shape an individual's experience. As QAnon adherents act as digital soldiers, digital engagement signals their identification with the QAnon tradition and dictates how they narrate their life. Specific praxis is also dictated by the time period in which one believed in and engaged in QAnon, the platforms used, and one's environment. Praxis is mediated by the use of technology, particularly during the pandemic, when offline praxis was not an option. There are three forms of QAnon living practices: entangled, established, and interstitial religious practices. This reflects how QAnon has spread and changed over the years.

The second finding is that lived religion allows us to understand QAnon as a particular, local, and varied phenomenon. Practice is shaped by unique cultural, social, political, material, and other circumstances of human experience. This was especially true when researching QAnon outside of the US and analysing QAnon post-“Q” and Trump. The new standard for QAnon ritual and religious rituals is particularly “Q” groupuscule-centred, around one or more influencers. Influencers also offers a prism through which to better understand why QAnon supporters hold the ideas they do (even though they may seem absurd to outsiders) and how, at times, they violently act out those beliefs in ways destructive to society. I divided QAnon into three distinct eras—proto, canonical, and apocryphal—to better analyze the movement based on a multiplicity of factors and realities both within the movement itself and the ecological realities. Those who wish to pursue further research into the QAnon movement will need to pay attention



to these distinct moments. My analysis of QAnon—as a lived religion and how that has changed and manifested itself depending on different periods—has contributed to the field of research.

*Chapter 2* delves further into the concept of QAnon as a religion. Not only does QAnon invite adherents to engage in a praxis, it is also a conspiracy theory that evolved into a new religious movement, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. QAnon evolved from a conspiracy theory to a hyper-real religion, and its “religious” effects and behavioural influence can be seen in the actual world. This is important for journalists, academics, media outlets, and decision-makers who must take QAnon seriously. The analysis can provide insight on how to assess and report on the movement as a hyper-real religion. Understanding the ideology of QAnon and its behavioural impact are central to better developing counter radicalization efforts, as well as mitigating harm to democratic institutions, public health, and national security. The mainstreaming of QAnon in popular culture has aided in the movement’s transition from a fringe conspiracy theory to a hyper-real religion. Conspiracy theories are now encouraged at the highest levels of political, economic and corporate authority, and are no more the pastime of the powerless.

One of QAnon’s major purposes is the quest to define and explain evil: theodicy. As the movement crowdsources answers to the unexplainable, QAnon provides its devotees with solace in an uncertain—and unprecedented—age. QAnon becomes the master story, capable of simply explaining complex events and providing relief for modern concerns such as a pandemic, economic uncertainty, political polarisation, war, child abuse, and so on. As a result, there is a clear line between good and evil in their worldview. This is accomplished through the movement’s claims of empirical relevancy. QDrops can be tested by amassing evidence about the observable world while resisting evil. Subscribers to QDrops are shown elaborate evidence to substantiate QAnon’s assertions, including source citation to imitate academic practices. Their attempt to decode QDrops, however, conceals a larger concern: the more broad a conspiracy theory’s assertions, the less important proof becomes—regardless of QAnon’s claims of scientificity. QAnon is non-falsifiable at its core. Regardless of how much evidence journalists, academia, and civic society present to refute the movement’s assertions, believing in QAnon as the source of truth is a matter of faith rather than proof.

*Chapter 2* seeks to shift the common question, *How can people believe in QAnon when so many of its assertions contradict facts?* to *What are QAnon adherents doing with their belief system?* In response to the movement’s conspiracy theories, QAnon members have committed acts of violence. Elected officials or candidates for political office have run on a QAnon platform or used its believers as a constituency and electoral block. Researchers and reporters must look beyond QAnon as a mere conspiracy theory: it has evolved beyond that. We have been witness to the creation of a hyper-real religion. QAnon is not solely dependent on Donald Trump's administration and capacity to maintain power, as has been demonstrated by the movements survival and growth post-Trump presidency. The content created by the figure known as “Q” will undoubtedly drive the movement for a long time. “Q” and QAnon influencers will continue to claim special insights, expertise, and frame matters in terms of their rivals' supposed objectives for QAnon followers.

Some may argue that a hyper-real religion is not “genuine” religion since it is constructed, but religious researchers do not validate or invalidate statements about what defines “true” religion, because it is true for the individuals that are part of the movement. Participating in online

communities tends to promote a greater connection to other members of the online community while also solidifying one's participation in it. This connection and community defines the QAnon experience. Furthermore, seeing one's opinions validated by others creates a sense of connectedness for otherwise solitary individuals. Rather than attempting to validate the religious message or experience, Chapter 2 demonstrated what QAnon members *do* with their religious views. As followers build a religion, religious ideas become routinized through time. As a result, all religions, including hyper-real ones, are socially constructed. The same goes for QAnon. It draws on elements of popular culture, media, entertainment, American evangelicalism, and conspiracy theories that have organically formed through time and space by a community of believers.

Whatever the outcome and whatever the future holds, classifying QAnon as a hyper-real religion rather than a dispersed assemblage of conspiracy theorists, provides an analytical framework for quantifying and qualifying QAnon-inspired acts of violence as ideologically motivated violent extremism. QAnon as a hyper-real religion has found resonance not only within the American election system, but with populists all around the world. By framing QAnon as a religion—specifically, a hyper-real religion—I offer a paradigm for better studying, reporting on, and comprehending QAnon. This is the first analysis of its kind of the QAnon movement's ideological beliefs and its manifestation from the observations of the adherents themselves, in their own ecosystems.

The final contribution of this second chapter is that of QAnon failed prophecies. An outsider may interpret the failure of a prophetic occurrence as evidence of the group's obvious weakness. This is typical of the media's and the general public's perception of QAnon. Outsiders have already established that the group's worldview is flawed, which is why they are considered outsiders. According to academic literature on the prophecy's failure, the failure causes cognitive dissonance among ardent believers, a scenario in which the legitimacy of one's accepted belief system is challenged, accompanied by deep feelings of dejection and despair. The occurrence puts the community's faith to the test and jeopardises social bonds within the group. The nonbeliever who has already concluded that the religion of the group is insufficient sees only one realistic line of action: believers should leave the group and its worldview. However, for an insider who has built social relationships and shaped their worldview around an idea, it is not that straightforward. The QAnon follower is primed to overcome the dissonance by working with other members of the group to provide a variety of possibilities for bridging the gap between belief and reality. The ambiguity of QAnon conspiracy theories and "Q's" predictions play well into this reality. Those who adhere to QAnon beliefs can rely on the greater framework of the ideology, on the unfalsifiable principles that form the cornerstone of their ideology, in the face of dissonance. QAnon beliefs are not based on facts, but on confidence in "Q", in Trump and other subsequent influencers. Adherents reconfirm and recreate their key ideas; they reevaluate their position in this context using the QAnon ideological framework. The ambiguity of QAnon conspiracy theories and "Q's" predictions fit into this reality nicely. The combined analysis of the QAnon movement as a new religion movement, and how adherents respond to the failure of prophecy explains the violent fanaticism that has been manifest by QAnon is similar to other

studies in the field of sociology of religion<sup>639</sup> or new religious movements,<sup>640</sup> or those who have studied violent extremist movements.<sup>641</sup> QAnon have found themselves intellectually, theologically, morally, or socially opposed to public authorities and interest groups, and this resistance can lead to feelings of fear, pressure, persecution, and a loss of control over the group's destiny. It is important to grasp how groups perceive dangers and those attempting to counter them. Perceptions of persecution, enemies, and pain are more important than real attitudes or attacks, though the latter can be equally distressing.

The failure of prophecy is crucial to understanding how QAnon's identity was impacted and how their ideas and actions following these failures were motivated. When a prophecy ultimately fails, the adherents need to return to deciphering cryptic messages to find the prophecy that will ultimately be realised. Individuals observe and experience uncertainty, but thrive within their community's social and cultural life. They frequently use conspiracies, dualistic oppositions, and victimisation to define outsiders and their intentions.

Another effect of prophetic failure was factionalism and infighting. Following Trump's demise and the persistent absence of "Q," QAnon adherents created groups centred on specific trusted influencers of QAnon-aligned politicians and media people. Some followers were pulled into other movements and organisations, where they continued their activity in ways that were only vaguely related to QAnon. There has been an increase in the number of QAnon-related movements, as well as QAnon members simply joining forces with groups that are more ideologically motivated and violent extreme in nature.

*Chapter 3* offered insight into the importance of women in the QAnon movement. As a case study, Pastel QAnon shed light into how IMVE movements like QAnon may quickly appeal and modify itself to new audiences, aesthetics, and gender conventions. On a macro level, gender is extremely important: QAnon influencers and believers use strongly gendered messaging and ideology. However, the far-right's use of gendered themes and ideas differs. While actors have mainly mobilised online, the majority of this element of the QAnon community is not violent, though some were active participants in the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurgency. Pastel QAnon is a fantastic example of the range of harm that QAnon may cause, especially during a pandemic, because Pastel QAnon influencers played a critical role in disseminating disinformation that threatens public health, as well as disinformation that threatens democratic institutions. Furthermore, participation in QAnon does not appear to have a detrimental impact on these influencers' brand or credibility. Rather, they noticed an increase in followers and post engagements. Because of the softening of the QAnon narratives and aesthetic, Pastel QAnon did not attract the same level of attention from the media and platforms, as the more visibly anti-Semitic and extreme QAnon

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<sup>639</sup> Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism*; Mayer, *Les mythes du Temple solaire*; Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America*; Zeller, *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion*; Walliss, *Apocalyptic Trajectories: Millenarianism and Violence in the Contemporary World*; Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence*.

<sup>640</sup> Bromley and Melton, *Cults, Religion and Violence*; Dyrendal, Aspren, and Robertson, "Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Religion(s): What we are Talking about, and Why it is Important."; Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*; Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence*.

<sup>641</sup> Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*; Butter, *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories*; Hunt, *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco*. Some details missing from these titles (publisher, date, etc.)

content. The use of light colours and the tweaking of basic QAnon doctrines to match their audience, resulted in the creation of new radicalization pipelines for QAnon. This reality, however, poses new obstacles for existing counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization-to-violence techniques, which must be cognizant of this reality when dealing with QAnon adherents. From a policy and national security perspective, the individuals who can be labelled as Pastel QAnon do not fit any national security threat models or policies. However, some of these influencers have been charged for their participation in the events of January 6, kidnapping, uttering threats against both private individuals and elected officials. Furthermore, my research has highlighted that Pastel QAnon is a subset of QAnon where prevention and intervention would be beneficial, because the majority of the content fits into the “dreadful but legal” category of digital content. These individuals possessed social media power and are intrinsically trained and experienced in social media marketing and public relations. Pastel QAnon influencers know how to maintain a certain image and brand online regardless of what they are selling. Their propaganda is not only convincing, but it is not plastered with the obvious mimetic imagery and over QAnon symbology. This can lead their followers down pathways of radicalization, without them being aware of the original source of the message they are being sold, due to the branding and image Pastel QAnon influencers have built. Some were even certified by the platform before becoming radicalised into QAnon, and this effect carried over into their QAnon conversion, making them potent vectors of radicalization as well as essential persons for intervention attempts. In the instance of Pastel QAnon, this community adds new dimensions to the radicalization process, and these early radicalization pipelines are critical in preventative efforts. Women who play a key part in QAnon-related violence and criminality should not be disregarded.

Despite the fact that Pastel QAnon is a female-dominated subset of the QAnon movement, my research in Chapter 3 has found that the QAnon movement is gender inclusive beyond this community subset, and women play an important role in disseminating and creating QAnon propaganda in their roles as political figures, as well as in leveraging conspiracy theories to advance their careers. My research further revealed that female QAnon candidates found the conspiratorial accusations regarding child sex trafficking particularly moving. The women who supported QAnon ran for election in the hopes of becoming more than simply “digital soldiers;” their ultimate goal was to be elected in order to assist former-President Trump and the Q-Team in their fight against the “Deep State.” It is critical to observe that this is a nonviolent sort of mobilisation. These individuals were radicalised online and then went on to undertake political campaigns to promote QAnon’s ideological goals. Women in QAnon have continually been mobilised for both nonviolent and violent operations, indicating that they do not only support the movement but rather act with force and impact. These candidates pose a threat to democratic institutions by gaining political wealth and positions of authority, QAnon adherents in position of power play an important role in eroding trust in democratic institutions, and may serve as a catalyst for future acts of extremist violence.

Finally, my research has shown that the 2020 elections in the United States were the first time that women formed a substantial political force in favour of QAnon. Most importantly, two women who believe in – or at least sympathise with – an ideologically driven violent extremist

ideology now sit in the United States House of Representatives, one of the world's most powerful political platforms. One cannot overstate the importance of this. Their presence in the House of Representatives, and by extension, the campaigns of other female Congressional candidates, demonstrates that women are willing to mobilise offline for radical ideology in a nonviolent manner. Not only are two extremist QAnon adherents in positions of political power and policy influence, but their positions in Congress have the potential to legitimise QAnon in the eyes of new potential believers. As a result, they may have some influence in radicalising people to QAnon. Greene and Boebert are also likely to have some mobilising power among entrenched QAnon supporters, whom they, particularly Greene, continue to signal from their elected positions. Other women, like Sidney Powell, who stands beside Green and Boebert, help to legitimise the conspiracy. Powell, in particular, has emerged as one of the most powerful voices among hard-line MAGA neo-QAnon supporters, with a sizable following. Her work as a member of Trump's legal staff, along with her apparent closeness to the former president, has established her as one of the most powerful female players in the QAnon political sphere. Finally, DeAnna Lorraine Tesoriero's (short) success as an InfoWars presenter exemplifies the natural ebb and flow of the QAnon sphere and the greater far-right social media ecosystem, as well as women's potential significance in both. Overall, women have played an important role in the political mainstreaming of QAnon, and Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert have broken the glass ceiling for female ideologically driven radicals by being publicly elected Congresswomen. Their election successes, along with the high-profile political careers of other women tied to the conspiracy, highlight both the essential position of women as leaders within QAnon and the potential damage the conspiracy poses to the credibility of the US democratic system. Their presence in the House of Representatives will almost certainly motivate other QAnon candidates, both male and female, to run for office in the next election. Understanding women's participation, goals, and positions in the conspiracy is a critical first step in fully understanding the myriad hazards posed by QAnon being involved in American and global affairs.

*Chapter 4* studied the manifestation of gender-based violence (GBV) perpetrated by QAnon. While standard markers of gendered harassment and hate, such as abusive language and threats, were present, they were overshadowed by abusive and violent rhetoric in the form of accusations about persons being pedophiles, which fits firmly within the QAnon ideology. Through a GBV perspective, we see that while the discourse in this context is unique, patterns of volume and prevalence of brigading harassment demonstrate that gender continues to be a determining factor in who is targeted more frequently and persistently. This chapter demonstrated the significance of GBV and misogyny in the targeted harassment and abuse of female celebrities. This translates to other women in positions of power and authority, as evidenced by the targeted aggression of QAnon believers who attacked Governor Whitmer, or when Nancy Pelosi's husband was the focus of violence. This is also reflected in violence against women in elected positions. When evaluating the research, QAnon-related mentions for women are greater than for men, even when they feature as significantly in the conspiracy theory. Women were subjected to a disproportionate amount of bullying and abusive language in the form of baseless allegations.

The findings from this chapter also highlighted the need to further research the form of indirect abuse directed at people associated with celebrities. This type of indirect abuse by “association” emphasizes the essence of GBV as being unafraid of boundaries, absence, or lack of involvement. According to qualitative content analysis, those linked with the principal targets of brigading and harassment were themselves, to a lesser extent, targets of that same behaviour. Each was disparaged, and they were viewed as complicit and fair game in the community’s persecution, although indirectly.

Another key finding was that race is a compounding factor, with women of colour receiving the most mentions. This underlines how people of colour, particularly women of colour, experience intersecting and compounding forms of hate and harassment as a result of ingrained and institutional racism. This context is significant in our analysis because findings, at times, rely more on behaviour than openly harsh words and concepts. Finally, the ongoing employment of anti-Semitic tropes as a constant baseline hate present throughout the dataset cannot be overlooked. While at low levels, it is worth noting that this is yet another racist motif in hostile content that appears in almost all conspiratorial debate, and this analysis was no exception.

A key finding from *Chapter 5* is the rapid rate at which QAnon criminality has grown between 2020 and 2022. The qualitative case studies and quantitative data, in particular, demonstrate the significance of the QAnon ecosystem in radicalising and mobilising, particularly among vulnerable individuals with trauma or mental illness, as well as the threat QAnon may offer to public security. According to my research, it is critical to contextualise the QAnon ideology and its role in the radicalising of 237 people associated with high-profile criminal or violent crimes. Based on my findings, it is plausible to speculate that QAnon members who believe and combine multiple conspiracy theories, may have inspired their broader sense of paranoia and anti-establishment worldview. As the conspiracy theories championed by QAnon devotees, and other conspiracy theorists, rely on the rejection of mainstream beliefs, for their own—as well as the demonization of the other—the material consumed by QAnon adherents illuminate aspects of their radicalization. The overlap between QAnon adherents radicalised to violence and online conspiracy communities, suggests that the impact of the QAnon attack may be felt in areas other than those normally associated with ideologically motivated violent extremists. The deep engagement of these devotees in online conspiracy theory circles, as well as the following attack, suggests the possibility of future instances of larger-scale violence prompted by QAnon.

This chapter and several others have highlighted that QAnon thrives on the periphery of political discourse. When former national security advisers, former Presidents, former presidential lawyers, and over 300 officials have run for political office between 2020 and 2022, two of which are still in congress as of November 2022, support and amplify QAnon in major political arenas, this sends a strong signal to the QAnon community. QAnon supporters are having an increased impact on mainstream discourse in the US, Canada, Germany, Australia and the Netherlands, as well as being present and influential in 85 different countries. With this mainstreaming, and the continued presence of QAnon in the US political arena, there will likely be an increase of QAnon’s salience, and continued criminal or violent acts, as key political and media figures embrace and leverage the movement. Finally, the threat to public security posed by QAnon is not limited to the movement or to the cases listed above; rather, it reflects broader currents in Western information ecosystems. The growing consumption and dissemination of

misinformation on social media, as well as their harmful consequences, is exemplified most prominently by QAnon. Future (related or unrelated) conspiracy theories that may be effective at radicalising individuals to terrorist violence should therefore not be dismissed as a threat to public security.

Finally, *Chapter 6* has found that QAnon will outlive the character of “Q,” as well as Trump’s prophetic role. Every optimistic prediction that QAnon’s influence would wane proved false and naive. I make no claim to be able to predict the future, but history suggests that underestimating the lasting power of one of or the most significant online conspiracy movement ever formed would be a mistake. The January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection was, in many ways, a boiling point that confirmed what far-right academics had been warning about for years. A varied spectrum of cross-ideological movements banded together in support of a cohesive resistance, aided by those in mainstream positions of authority. While various groups or organizations were active, this was primarily a movement fueled by a large and amorphous field of misinformation and the creeping influence of radical ideology being reflected in mainstream institutions. Though this chapter is simply a snapshot of what happened in QAnon in 2021, my research has found that despite de-platforming, QAnon and its associated movements are far from extinct more than a year after the insurgency. What QAnon’s use of social media in 2021 does reveal is that de-platforming from mainstream social media does not solve the problem. The rising sphere of alt-tech platforms and ecosystems allows these movements to persist. Though on a smaller scale, QAnon’s continuing presence has allowed it to prosper. With increasing platform division, alt-tech sites continue to receive a small but consistent stream of influencers, media figures, and politicians who have enraged social networks. Importantly, in response to the de-platforming actions of mainstream social media and financial services, QAnon is both inventive and adaptable. The movement has demonstrated how it has used the actions taken against it to further radicalize new adherents in an attempt to broaden the mass movement which emerged after the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurgency. As a result, it is critical to continue to watch and develop new and more effective ways to disrupt these channels wherever possible, in a more intentional manner than previously attempted.

Following the major de-platforming of violent extremist individuals, alt-tech platforms and secure messaging apps saw a surge in new users. This will have an effect on the evolution, radicalization, and mobilisation of existing and prospective QAnon members, as well as other IMVE actors. My research shows that many of these platforms were created with the intent of providing a space for “free speech.” With the influx of new extremist users, these platforms have stayed true to their free speech mission, and are usually unwilling to act on the threats no present on their platform. Most of the time, these platforms lack the ability to act due to a limited or non-existent trust and safety staff. In other circumstances, these platforms do not care and refuse to work with other actors.

The second difficulty is that the increasing number of platforms utilised by extremists and violent extremists creates a plethora of possible radicalization pipelines, many of which are novel in the counter-terrorism area. Due to methodological restrictions and data availability, it will be difficult for intelligence and law enforcement communities to identify and monitor developing threat actors across these platforms in the immediate future. This difficulty always existed on mainstream platforms, but it will now be exacerbated due to an unwillingness of these spaces to censor, comply with international law, or work with law enforcement. The lack of APIs and data pipelines will be require OSINT-focused procedures rather than methods that rely on data science or big data.

Furthermore, existing toolkits and threat assessments were not designed with the current paradigm change in extremist digital ecosystems in mind. These will need to be updated and adapted to reflect the new realities. The increased cross-pollination of radicals and violent extremists, in particular, will provide a significant difficulty. Even if recruiting and radicalization rates do not exceed previous levels, the fact that new vast pools of potential recruits have joined these platforms may result in an increase in extremist and violent extremist groups. Furthermore, the interaction of previously unrelated individuals and disengagement from QAnon may result in the emergence of new communities and beliefs.

My analysis in this chapter and others shows that policymakers, researchers, journalists, law enforcement, and intelligence community must become acquainted with the plethora of new platforms and ecosystems in order to adequately report, research, investigate, and inform possible risks. The task is huge, as many of these novel platforms now require manual inquiry and analysis. There will be a rising need for research and reporting on these spaces in order to better understand the potential threat vectors that may emerge from them, the kind of actors who utilise them, and if activity increases or declines in the coming months. It is feasible that new alt-tech platforms may emerge in the coming months to accommodate or capitalise on the enormous pool of actors who were deplatformed in the first 100 days.

As a result, the larger and more established social media sites will take on a new role in the prevention of radicalization to violence. When deciding whether to de-platform an actor, social media sites must evaluate the possibility of radicalization to violence if the actor ends up on an alt-tech platform. Platforms will need to reconsider how they deal with actors that violate their terms of service, as well as how they tackle innovative threat actors and harmful content, because damaging content can turn extremist, and extremists can become violent extremists. Since the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, the stakes have grown, necessitating new policies and assessment processes for trust and safety teams. Partnerships and conversations with think tanks, universities, and subject matter experts will also be required if big tech is to address unique trust and safety challenges. Prevention and mitigation techniques must be prioritized in platform policies, and they must be proactive rather than reactive. Failure to do so will mean that big tech will continue to play a key role in the radicalization and mobilisation processes if it continues to ignore these challenges.

## 7.2 The limitations of this dissertation

There were several challenges and limitations to this study of the QAnon movement. Originally, QAnon was going to be a single chapter in a different project, examining different groups and movements. The explosion of the movement in 2020, however, drastically changed my dissertation to focus solely on QAnon due to its growing relevance and the vast amount of data available on the topic. Therefore, the first limitation of this research is the speed at which QAnon grew and evolved. This outpaced the capacity at which I could perform in-depth research on the movement, and I had to rely on an overall survey of select aspects of the movement. At several points, I had to rewrite and update chapters as the information was no longer reflective of the QAnon movement and would prove to be incorrect. This also meant that several elements of research were abandoned, in particular, a historical study of the early QAnon movement prior to its exponential growth due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This dissertation is therefore not an in-depth analysis of the QAnon movement, but should serve as a stepping stone for future research



on the topic. It surveys several dimensions of the movement as it has evolved over the past five years.

There is also room for deeper social media analytics of the QAnon movement. This is a topic that I have not had the time to fully research and could not include in my dissertation. Firstly, obtaining relevant social media data was extremely difficult. For example, concerning Facebook Data, in April 2021, the Crowdtangle team at Facebook was broken up. Meta decided that it had granted too much data transparency to the academic and journalistic community. Alex Schultz, the chief marketing officer, was concerned that the research and reporting done on the company highlighted the role Facebook and Instagram were playing in the disinformation and IMVE space. Rather than giving access to Facebook data so that researchers and journalists could themselves collect and curate the information needed, the company opted for Meta to selectively disclose its own data in the form of carefully curated reports. As of 2021, the tool is no longer usable or reliable in terms of the integrity of its data, and neither is Crowdtangle itself. This is not only based on journalistic reporting but also based on my experience in using the tool for my own research. I no longer used it after July 2021. Meta did launch an API for academics, which I was able to test for 12 months, but the tool design was clunky and almost unusable. The community of researchers who used both Crowdtangle and the researcher API came to the conclusion that Meta sought to make research on the platform as difficult as possible. This effort was successful. Facebook is not making data available to researchers in a way that is functional, nor is it transparent.

Twitter provides a another data challenge to that of Facebook. Twitter does have two available APIs, one public, with limited data collection capacity, and a second API for researchers, giving them access to a larger amount of data on a monthly basis. However, the Twitter ban following the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 insurrection resulted in all QAnon accounts to be deleted from the platform. All historical information to the QAnon community on Twitter was lost. This represents a key challenge in working with social media data: vaulting. Vaulting is a concept that is still being developed, but the principle is that social media companies who take down violent extremist and terrorist content from their platforms, should preserve a version of this data for researchers and law enforcement. A key challenge as a researcher studying violent extremism and terrorism online is the transience of relevant data. Though it is understandable that platforms wish to remove content that violates their terms of service, in doing so, they remove important information about radicalization to violence, as well as data which can be used to better inform mitigation and prevention strategies; something that could benefit the platforms themselves. This makes quantitative and qualitative research extremely difficult, especially with the lack of historical information to inform present analyses.

The timing on the research for gender-based violence, which was prior to the 2020 US election, made it very difficult to study how QAnon targeted women in positions of political power. When preparing to collect the data for this project, the increase in social media attention on elected officials, prior to an election cycle, was taken into consideration as it would be difficult to determine if the increase in social media posts attributed to an elected official would be linked to QAnon or the election cycle itself. As there were too many factors that could bias the data and the findings, this was not considered and it left a large gap in understanding GBV in relation to women in position of power.

## 7.3 Avenues of future research

The QAnon movement and ideology is still relatively new, and garnered attention from journalists and researchers since its growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are therefore several avenues of research that are possible. First, an examination of the QAnon ecosystem on Telegram, Truth Social and Gab, would be valuable. These platforms now form the core of the QAnon movement. A cross-platform analysis would be useful to understand how the movement has adapted and evolved since being de-platformed from mainstream social media sites. Telegram channels and chats administered by QAnon influencers and leaders have between 10,000 to 300,000 individuals, yet there is currently no analysis of this ecosystem. There is also little research on the impact, reach and typology of QAnon content on alt-tech video sharing platforms, such as WorldTruthVideo, Rumble, Bitchute, and Gab Video.

Within the context of social media analysis, there is room for research about the manifestation of QAnon internationally. I have found evidence of QAnon activity and adherents in 85 different countries, yet without socio-cultural and linguistic knowledge of the majority of these countries, I would not be able to pursue such research. Better understanding how QAnon is manifest transnationally, by providing evidence about the differences and similarities between QAnon in the US and other countries, would provide important insight about violent extremist ideologies and dangerous conspiracy theories globally. Also understanding how QAnon communities worldwide are different and have adapted to their own cultural and political could provide more information about important questions such as: “Why is QAnon, an American-centric conspiracy theory, finding resonance in non-American and even non-Western contexts?”, “What makes QAnon resonate and stick with such a wide and diverse audience?” Answering these questions could inform prevention and mitigation strategies for those who have family members radicalized into QAnon.

There is also a need for more gender and queer based analysis of the QAnon movement, especially how women and queer people are both welcomed into QAnon but also targets of the movement. There is also a large gap in the literature for QAnon and IMVE generally about transphobia and how QAnon attacks the trans community, or leverages trans identities as a way of attacking non-trans people. As QAnon leverages transness and weaponizes it to label those who the movement appears as enemies of the movement, or uses transness as a weapon to label people as pedophiles. This is an avenue of research that is crucial to undertake.

There is also room to study and understand what will become of the QAnon movement now that “Q” is gone. It is also unclear if Donald Trump will ever return to the Presidency. The fracture and fractious reality of QAnon will be important. It is unclear if we will still be talking about “QAnon” in the future, or if we will be referring to several narrative and ideological derivatives that were born out of the QAnon movement. Furthermore, there is also rooms to better understand how conspiracy theories, beyond QAnon alone, can pose a threat to public health, democratic institutions and national security.

Finally, there is a need to understand how individuals radicalize into QAnon and other dangerous conspiracy theories. There is a gap in evidence-based research about the pathways to radicalization and mobilization to help practitioners in countering radicalization to violence. Research on this topic would provide insight into the development of positive interventions, as well as develop psychosocial tools to support those seeking to get out of the movement. Future research on this topic could focus on early prevention aimed at the general population, and work

on at-risk prevention t directed at individuals or groups in the initial stages of radicalization to violence. Finally, research on avenues of disengagement aimed at individuals directly involved in violent extremism could also be explored. This would require a multidisciplinary team of research, combining experts on violent extremism, and clinical health practitioners, and social workers. A key dimension of QAnon is that it is an ideology and movement that is primed for positive interventions. Adherents tend to turn to the movement in their times of needs; therefore, finding positive alternatives would be the best way to mitigate more acts of violence, as well as limiting more people into joining the movement.

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