# QAnon Conspiracy Theory: Examining its Evolution and Mechanisms of Radicalization

**Amanda Garry[a1], Samantha Walther[b], Rukaya Mohamed[c], Ayan Mohammed[d]**

[a]Senior Research Fellow, American Counterterrorism Targeting and Resilience Institute (ACTRI), [b]Research Fellow, ACTRI, [c]Research Fellow, ACTRI, [d]Research Fellow, ACTRI

*Abstract*

This report demonstrates the overarching need for additional exploration and intervention of conspiracy-based radicalization as the QAnon conspiracy theory continues to grow. Strong pillars of belief among the QAnon movement, coupled with the spread of disinformation online, has exacerbated the familiarity and willingness to accept the rhetoric within mainstream media and culture. This report examines the evolution, ideologies, and paradigms associated with supporters of QAnon to better understand the most influential mechanisms of modern conspiracy-based radicalization. Utilizing a France-based digital disinformation platform known as Storyzy, the authors hypothesize that disinformation campaigns, coupled with the Internet and social media, has greatly enabled the unprecedented global effect of QAnon. The authors explored the potential of several survey methods to seek insights from QAnon followers on Gab and Telegram. Additionally, the authors discerned various implications of QAnon in regard to the limitations placed upon P/CVE efforts.

*Keywords:* QAnon, Conspiracy Theory, Conspiracy-Based Radicalization, Right-Wing Extremism, Social Media, Disinformation, Telegram, Gab

## Introduction[2]

Conspiracy theories have long been a facet of American society, many of which have targeted politicians and the government. The presence of QAnon has emerged as perhaps the most popular and dangerous conspiracy theory in modern U.S. history since its origination in 2017. Over recent months, the conspiracy theory has gained vast notoriety and publicity, increasing the spread of disinformation. QAnon is no longer a traditional conspiracy theory that ties

---

[1] Corresponding Author Contact: Amada Garry; amanda.garry@americanctri.org; Marlborough, MA; Washington, D.C.

together a small pool of individuals based on misguided beliefs; it has sharply evolved into a radical cult-like movement that does not strictly operate in an online space. Not only has the U.S.-based conspiracy gained global traction, but QAnon followers have now mobilized offline committing real acts of violence. QAnon and its followers have become one of the largest spreaders of disinformation online, worsening an already polarized American public.

In 2019, the FBI released an unclassified document warning of the dangers posed by QAnon, highlighting the likelihood of inspiring and motivating domestic extremist violence (Winter, 2019). QAnon has since erupted and raised security concerns across the globe. Recent literature has also elucidated that a strong conspiracy mentality increases the likelihood of violent extremist behavior, especially in those individuals who exhibit low self-control, low regard for the law, and high self-efficacy (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020; Rousis, 2018). Thus, the rapid spread of QAnon has spiraled from simple disinformation largely distributed online to a real-world offline political violence threat. Taking this literature into consideration with the rising indoctrination of QAnon followers, this article seeks to answer the following research question: What are the mechanisms by which the QAnon conspiracy has been able to evolve from an internet board to one of the largest polarizing and radicalizing belief systems in the U.S. and abroad? The following report will analyze the history, evolution, and potential future implications of QAnon to add to the growing understanding of conspiracy-based radicalization. This report utilized open-source intelligence (OSINT) and surveys of QAnon followers to seek insights into QAnon's accelerating global reach and how it has evolved into a modern extremist threat.

## Literature Review

### *How Conspiracy Theories Rise*

Conspiracy theories have been used for decades as a coping mechanism during times of chaos to help cope during unprecedented times (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, p.327). Global shocks and major unexpected events can set the precedent for conspiracy theories to

be adopted as a means of comprehending complex events and often single out enemies, despite the theories being false or based on unsubstantiated claims (Hofstadter, 1966; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, p.327). Extremists tend to cling to rhetoric that amplifies their beliefs and provides a sense of direction despite counter rhetoric that may be circulating in society. Following the 9/11 attacks, for example, conspiracies surfaced suggesting that the attacks were deployed from within the country and that the U.S. government's failure in preventing the attack was deliberate (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017, p.326). This hypothesis was accelerated by the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, whereby conspiracy theorists claim an enemy was created by politicians to justify the invasion of those countries.

Mistrust in government and legislative institutions often serves as a push factor that influences the formation and spread of conspiracy theories. As can be seen through QAnon's agenda, their primary campaign revolves around their perceived evil of the current leaders of the U.S. government. Widespread support of conspiracy theories, especially by those in political positions, can affect political opponents and the institutions they represent, adding to the legitimacy and credibility of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theorists often focus on ideas and individuals that are well-known and influential in mainstream culture.

While conspiracy-thinking and violent extremist ideologies remain different categories of extreme thoughts and behavior, they can intersect nevertheless (Frennet & Joost, 2021). This intersection can raise threat concerns when the conspiracy asserts that "(1) one group is superior to another, (2) one group is under attack by another group, or (3) the threat is apocalyptic (existential threat) in nature" (Frennet & Joost, 2021). The QAnon conspiracy ticks off each of these three concerns, presenting the need to understand modern conspiracy-based radicalization and effective means to counter conspiracy narratives and de-radicalize adherents.

*Psychological Factors and Conspiracy Followings*

A study by van Prooijen (2015) highlights the idea that "self-uncertainty and belongingness predict belief in a conspiracy theory," suggesting that these individuals are

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

more suspicious and skeptical about social events. Individuals who are highly susceptible to violent extremism, for example, often experience issues with self-worth, sense of belonging and self-esteem; they are likely to not only question themselves, but their surroundings as well. Those who seek a sense of belonging that they are not adequately feeling in their everyday lives have been more inclined to seek it elsewhere, such as through terrorist organizations, hate groups, gangs, and conspiracy theory supporters (Borum, 2004). Individuals with self-uncertainty have strong attitudes towards social issues and identify more strongly with important groups, enabling themselves to accept conspiracy theory rhetoric like QAnon (van Prooijen, 2015).

Understanding critical psychological aspects that explain why conspiracy theories manifest and disperse is key when attempting to dissuade believers, especially within the extremist community. Group polarization and groupthink represent two psychological phenomena that can lead to the escalation of conspiracy theories, violent extremism, and terrorism. Group polarization refers to the tendencies of a group of people to make decisions based on what they believe or see others doing (Sunstein, 1999). Group polarization generally leads to emboldening ideologies due to being immersed in a community of like-minded individuals (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008, p.422).

Groupthink occurs when group members make decisions or behave in a manner more extreme than they naturally would, often due to the need to belong and fit group norms (Janis, 1991). Groupthink leads to individuals effectively losing their ability to be open to alternative lines of thinking, including counternarratives and all evidence to the contrary of their beliefs (Janis, 1991). This is commonplace within extremist communities, as individuals generally tend to follow the herd and lose their sense of autonomy. Group polarization can emerge computationally by simply assuming individuals hold opinions on a multitude of topics (Mueller & Tan, 2018; Olbrich, 2019, as cited by Turner & Smaldino, 2020). This can be seen in QAnon supporters' behavior, often filled with resentment and distrust of political elites..

Group polarization and groupthink can often lead to unhealthy or dangerous behaviors, such as drug consumption, binge drinking, or elevated school drop-out rates, whereby

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

teenagers are likely to engage in these behaviors if they see others doing the same (Sunstein, 1999, p.5). In terms of violent extremism and conspiracy narratives, however, groupthink dynamics often rely on a perceived enemy, creating an "us" versus "them" mentality (Frennet & Joost, 2021; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). At-risk individuals, such as those engaging in unhealthy behaviors, are much more likely to resort to acts of extremism due to their environment and upbringing. These phenomena are particularly important within the realm of terrorism today, as there has been a steady increase of polarization and radicalization within the United States in recent years (Horgan, 2021). While conspiracy theories may not have mass radicalizing effects, they are extremely effective at leading to increased polarization within societies (Horgan, 2021). Further polarization with a strong us versus them mentality, coupled with the right psychosocial factors or push/pull factors, may increase the likelihood of individuals plotting a violent act. While few studies have analyzed the full impact of groupthink in violent extremist contexts, it is necessary to consider these factors when analyzing the rise of conspiracy theories. Alternative social media platforms analyzed in this report provide online environments that propagate group polarization and groupthink that increase the spread and acceptance of disinformation.

*Origins of QAnon*

QAnon is a backless set of conspiracy beliefs, with the main pillar alleging a cabal of deep state Satan-worshipping and paedophile politicians is taking over the government (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018). Followers believe that QAnon is not one singular individual, but a small group of high-ranking military and intelligence officials with Q-level security clearances working directly with former President Trump (*"About-Q"*, n.d.). The ideology claiming that elites are controlling the United States government has circulated among QAnon since the 2016 Presidential Election.
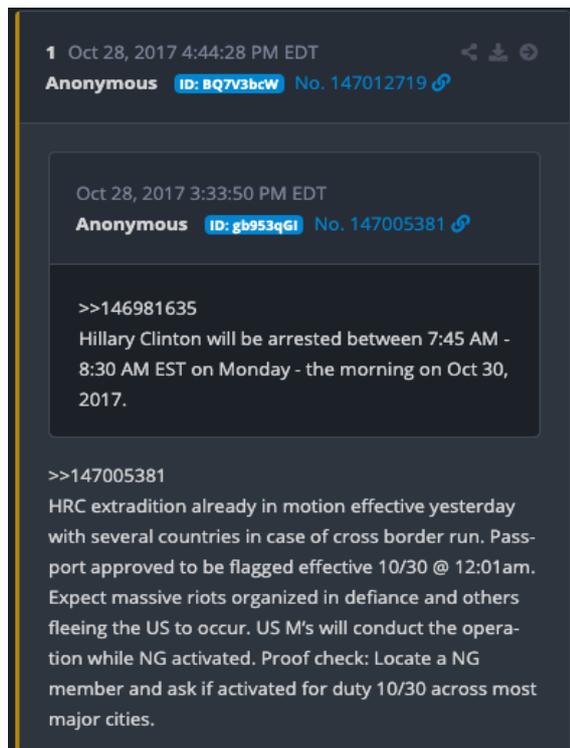
During this time, various right-wing influencers and news outlets extensively covered the presidential campaign of Hilary Clinton. Wikileaks released several emails from Hillary Clinton's campaign manager, John Podesta, some of which mentioned a prominent Washington D.C. pizza shop, Comet Ping Pong (Fisher et al., 2016). As the emails were

shared across alternative social media platforms, such as 4chan and Reddit, many began raising false accusations that the Clinton emails were written in code and alluding to a child sex trafficking ring within Comet Ping Pong (Fisher et al., 2016). Despite lack of any evidence, the rumors convinced a 29-year-old North Carolina man to drive to Washington D.C. to investigate the shop on his own, ultimately firing an AR-15 in the restaurant (Kennedy, 2017). While rumors about the restaurant have been debunked, the incident ignited a wave of believers who contend something more sinister is happening within the depths of the U.S. government. Thus, pizzagate became a predecessor to the much larger conspiracy beliefs of QAnon (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020).

QAnon believers also draw from anti-Semitic literature and conspiracy theories. For example, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an anti-Semitic propaganda book, suggests that Jews are continuously trying to control and implement a world-ruling cabal (Sales, 2020). The book is often used to justify anti-Semitic conspiracy beliefs (Sales, 2020). This rhetoric has been consistent with the QAnon conspiracy. Further, QAnon also dates back to a more modernized approach of blood libel or beliefs that cabal members extract "the chemical adrenochrome from the blood of their child victims" for ingestion, which will help extend their lifespan (Lavin, 2020). Those who believe in these particular pillars of QAnon are associated with the most extreme spectrum of the conspiracy narrative.

The ideologies that QAnon eventually emerged from first began to appear during the 2016 Presidential Election and Pizzagate incident. On October 28th, 2017, the screenname of QAnon created a post that was published on the message board 4chan, alleging that Hillary Clinton would be extradited and arrested for her involvement in a child sex trafficking ring (*Intelligence Drops*, 2017). This post was the very first "Q Drop." The post depicted below in Figure 1 generated significant noise online in the form of 4,000 additional posts discussing the drop (Robb, 2017). The identity behind the screen name QAnon established legitimacy among supporters by claiming to possess top security clearance and an affiliation with the government "who knew the truth about the secret struggle for power between Trump and the deep state" ("What is QAnon," 2020).

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

**Figure 1. First QAnon "drop" on October 28th, 2017 re-posted to the Qalerts.app website.**



1 Oct 28, 2017 4:44:28 PM EDT
Anonymous  ID: BQ7V3bcW  No. 147012719

Oct 28, 2017 3:33:50 PM EDT
Anonymous  ID: gb953qGI  No. 147005381

>>146981635
Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM -
8:30 AM EST on Monday - the morning on Oct 30,
2017.

>>147005381
HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday
with several countries in case of cross border run. Pass-
port approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am.
Expect massive riots organized in defiance and others
fleeing the US to occur. US M's will conduct the opera-
tion while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG
member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most
major cities.

*Source: Intelligence Drops, 2017.*

The capitalized "Q" in the QAnon name is most likely linked to "Q Clearance," which is a top-secret category of federal security clearances in the United States, with "A" referring to an "Anonymous" user with Q-level security clearance (Wendling, 2021). This linkage, however, has not generated much attention by previous studies. Q-level is a very particular type of clearance granted to the employees of the Department of Energy (DOE) and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), among others (U.S. NRC, 2020; *Departmental Personnel Security FAQs*, n.d.). The individual or group of individuals claiming to be QAnon allege to have access to highly sensitive information within the United States government.

While QAnon emerged on 4chan, a message-board consisting of threads and related comments, the movement migrated to 8chan in November 2017 after encountering various censorship and limitations in posting capabilities ("Absolutely everything," 2014). 8chan has been linked to various violent extremist attacks with several attackers posting their manifestos on the platform. As a result, 8chan was shut down, forcing the platform to transition and rebrand itself, now known as 8kun (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018).

8kun is currently hosted by an Ireland-based company known as Spartan Hoswhich that provides the service with protection from cybersecurity attacks to ensure it always remains accessible and available to the user (Ray, 2020). Additionally, it is also connected to a Russian protection service that monitors the network for potential cyber intrusion attacks. This increased level of security ensures continuous use and minimal disruption, allowing all users - including QAnon supporters - to push their rhetoric to new heights.

To distinguish itself from other anonymous users, QAnon relies on a "tripcode" to disguise the rhetoric being used and communicate only to dedicated supporters of QAnon that would be able to decipher the text, as shown in Figure 2 (Griffin, 2020). The meaning is often indiscernible to the general public, and only those close to QAnon have the decryption key.

**Figure 2. QAnon code possessing an encrypted meaning and executable instruction.**

—27-1—yes—USA94-2

—27-1—yes—USA58-A

—27-1—yes—USA04

—Conf—BECZ—y056-(3)—y

The—Castle—Runs—RED—yes

*Source: Griffin, 2020.*

QAnon's narrative on social media is presented in a way that allows the reader to believe that they came to the conclusion themselves, rather than forcing their beliefs upon

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

others. They often consist of leading questions that direct the user to the "truth" which supports the goals and ideologies of QAnon. Followers of QAnon have deduced a particular set of goals of the movement. According to the QAnon Alerts Website, the objectives of QAnon are:

A. "A massive information dissemination program meant to:
   a. Expose massive global corruption and conspiracy to the people.
   b. Cause the people to research further to aid further in their "great awakening."
B. Root out corruption, fraud, and human rights violations worldwide.
C. Return the Republic of the United States to the Constitutional rule of law and also return "the People" worldwide to their own rule.

In short, the QAnon operation is the greatest criminal sting and anti-treason/sedition event in world history (*"About-Q"*, n.d.)."

The evolution from a conspiracy on an online message board to the offline shooting at Comet Ping-Pong was the beginning of a much larger disinformation and security crisis. The misguided objectives defined by QAnon raise real-time national security concerns, especially as QAnon continues to indoctrinate new followers. These objectives are not simply to raise harmless thought-provoking conspiracy discussions online, but also serve to deliberately undermine the current governing structure in the U.S. Initial evidence suggests that QAnon has influenced the violence that occurred at the U.S. Capitol building on January 6th, 2021. The Soufan Center has released a working database titled "Mapping Insecurity: Tracking Domestic Violent Extremism," which reports on individuals that have been identified in connection to the Capitol Insurrection and is largely based on the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) records. This interactive tracker includes references to the arrest reports for many of those who have been connected to the Capitol building violence, many of whom have been identified as supporting white supremacist, anti-government ideologies, and QAnon. While

not every individual involved in the insurrection has been arrested and, for those that have, not everyone is an adherent of QAnon, there have been several examples of QAnon followers who participated in the January 6th events, such as Jacob Chansley (also known as the QAnon Shaman), Douglas Jensen, Cleveland Meredith Jr., Rosanne Boyland, and Ashli Babbitt (Rubin et al., 2021). The Capitol Insurrection highlights how this conspiracy ideology has evolved from online activity to a driver of one of the most recent attacks on a democratic institution in the United States, resulting in the deaths of 5 Americans.

Further, with the inauguration of President Joe Biden, the future of QAnon remains contentious, as so much of the movement was based on then President Trump's success and power in office. According to QAnon's belief system, the election of President Joe Biden was never supposed to happen (Sabin, 2021). Some followers therefore felt they were misguided by QAnon's false predictions, which may cause some fracturing in the movement ("IntelBrief," 2021). However, many QAnon supporters may be vulnerable to recruitment by other violent non-state actors ("IntelBrief," 2021).

Recent reports suggest that many of the most ardent QAnon supporters have been alluding to March 4th, 2021 (dubbed "the Storm") as the final day when the cabal of deep state paedophiles is finally defeated and when former President Donald Trump will assume a second term (Feeld, 2021; "IntelBrief," 2021). Until the ratification of the twentieth Amendment to the U.S. constitution in 1933, the U.S. presidents used to be inaugurated on March 4th, hence the belief that former President Trump will become the 19th President on March 4th, 2021. The belief echoes that of the "sovereign citizen" movement propagating that there has been no legitimate president in the United States since the 18th President Ulysses S. Grant—and therefore no legitimate country since (Feeld, 2021; "IntelBrief," 2021). This narrative has caused some measurable impacts, such as a dramatic raise of hotel prices in Washington D.C. on March 4th and the continuation of National Guard presence in the city (Cohen & Kaufman, 2021; "IntelBrief," 2021). However, many QAnon leaders did begin to backpedal on the March 4th significance, claiming it was Antifa propaganda to "make the whole movement look dumb" (Rogers, 2021). QAnon adherents have long blamed Antifa for

inciting violence and QAnon leaders may feel the legitimacy of the movement is under pressure after several false predictions (Greenspan, 2021). Thus, by shifting blame, QAnon followers gain an opportunity to "waive responsibility," if the prediction does not come true (Greenspan, 2021). While it is more important to gather intel and thwart individuals from attacks rather than focusing on specific dates (Rogers, 2021), it is This is unique to have such an in the senssuch an e that this level of ideological overlap. The connection to far-right conspiracy and sovereign citizens beliefs is largely unprecedented and further highlights how QAnon has been able to warp many lines of radical thinking under its umbrella.

*Tools for Spreading Disinformation*

The authors argue that social media is a double-edged sword partly because the low barriers for entry are often manipulated by violent extremist groups and non-state actors to propagate their message to larger crowds. While messages of misinformation and disinformation both seemingly spread fast, it is noteworthy to emphasize the variances between the two terms. Misinformation is simply the sharing of any non-factual information without necessarily doing so purposefully or with an intent to influence one's thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors (Hameleers et al., 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Schiffrin & Goodman, 2019, p.4). Disinformation is the intentional sharing of biased, misleading, or manipulative information, oftentimes in the form of propaganda (Hameleers et al., 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Schiffrin & Goodman, 2019, p.4).

Individuals who are trying to recruit towards a cause to grow a network and indoctrinate new followers with propaganda videos, fringe websites, and other sources may intentionally engage in these acts and spread disinformation. Some individuals following the conspiracies passively can also spread misinformation. Much of the propaganda seen on fringe websites and alternative social media regarding QAnon is deliberate disinformation sharing. However, the internet and social media creates an extremely easy environment for both misinformation and disinformation to be shared very quickly and to mass audiences.

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

A 2018 study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology revealed that "falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper and more broadly" than truth on Twitter, especially regarding political news (Vosoughi et al., 2018, p.359). Further, social media has become a main outlet for users to receive news in real time; however, the contemporary media ecosystem can also amplify the reach of conspiracy theories and disinformation (Innes, 2020). Misinformation and/or disinformation often circulates quicker online and has a greater reach than verified information (Innes, 2020; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

In relation to conspiracy-based radicalization, conspiracies that have the potential to indoctrinate and radicalize individuals can often be presented to encourage a higher level of engagement than factual information online. With public trust in news stations and institutions declining as polarization rises, online users may be even more susceptible to accepting digital disinformation from alternative sources. Thus, it is important to consider how disinformation can have similar effects as intentional propaganda in terms of the intended political consequences (Hameleers et al., 2020). With QAnon's narrative deliberately attempting to discredit the current democratic institutions and leaders, the authors of this study argue that disinformation online would manifest as propaganda similar to that used by terrorist organizations, increasing the rate of conspiracy-based radicalization, while delegitimizing the current United States democratic institutions. Referring to the research question of which mechanisms have enabled QAnon to evolve so rapidly, the authors conclude that the intersection of social media and the rampant disinformation it allows for has been a large, if not the largest, contributing factor to QAnon's unprecedented reach.

## Methodology

The authors utilized two methods to collect and analyze information online. Open-Source Intelligence techniques (OSINT) remained at the forefront as the authors gathered intelligence from publicly available sources where dialogues about QAnon were rampant. Since many popular social media platforms have removed QAnon-related content, the authors focused on

two main alternative platforms for data collection: Telegram and Gab. Telegram channels dedicated to QAnon were largely found through the general search bar and then through snowball techniques. The authors used the keywords "QAnon," "Q," and "WWG1WGA," to find initial QAnon Telegram channels ("WWG1WGA" refers to a popular QAnon phrase "Where we go one, we go all"). Channels were often linked to several other QAnon related channels through content sharing or they would put other channel usernames in their bio lines to help build followings. In total, 35 QAnon-focused Telegram channels were analyzed in this report. While there are many more available, this sample collectively analyzed Telegram channels with regional focuses from all around the globe. The authors collected channel creation date, number of subscribers, and country affiliation. The number of subscribers to the channel was initially recorded on October 19th, 2020, with a follow up on November 26th, 2020. For the 19 channels that were found to have an international presence, subscriber size was also recorded again on February 19, 2021, to analyze potential growth after the inauguration of President Biden.

The same search and snowball techniques were utilized to build a database of Gab profiles. Using the search bar and the keyword "QAnon," the authors found and tracked 21 Gab accounts and groups. The authors collected similar open-source data from Gab and included group name, follower base size, country source information, as well as the creation dates for groups. No personal information pertaining to individual users was collected from any of the platforms, including names, usernames, IP addresses, or other information that could be used to identify online users.

Several pieces of data collected from the OSINT techniques were able to be used in an algorithmic disinformation platform known as Storyzy. Storyzy is a France-based company that commercializes a SaaS (software-as-a-service) tool designed to alert and educate authors and analysts of disinformation platforms online. The Storyzy tool offers source analysis, topic analysis, chronology, country analysis, and social media analysis tools of disinformation sites, blogs, articles, and topics. The authors in this report were able to input topic keywords, such as "QAnon," into the Storyzy database, which would return information on all cited articles—

trusted and disinformation—regarding the topic. While Storyzy has a range of source classifications, including "Think Tank, NGO, Academic, Association, Government, IGO, Political Party, Religious, Uncategorized, and Neutral," the two main categories analyzed in this report were "Trusted" and "Disinformation." Disinformation is broken down further into subcategories to better understand what topics each source may often be reporting misinformation or disinformation on. These subcategories include "Clickbait, Conspiracy, Extreme left, Extreme right, False information, Hate, Propaganda, Pseudoscience, Satire, and Tabloid" content. While Storyzy may classify some well-known sources as disinformation, it does not necessarily mean that every piece of information reported by that source is mis/disinformation, but there is evidence found by Storyzy of strong patterns of bias and/or misinformation occurring.

This analysis tool also shared source locations for all articles relating to QAnon. The source location is critical when considering the global impact of the conspiracy following. The Storyzy platform was also critical in determining source ecosystems and networks of sources sharing these narratives. The platform analyzed which articles, both information and disinformation, were cited by other articles. It was used in this study to analyze both outbound and inbound links from popular blogs and sites regarding QAnon, helping to identify which sites are most critical and influential in spreading disinformation to QAnon followers around the globe. Storyzy was also used to determine patterns of publication volume relating to QAnon over time, as the platform is able to analyze thousands of sources to compile the number of articles relating to any one topic for any period of time.

The final piece of this report was to ask real QAnon followers about their beliefs. Using the groups and accounts from Telegram and Gab, the authors utilized retrospective and longitudinal online in-app survey questions to gain insights into QAnon followers' beliefs. Since each application functions in very different manners, two different styles of questions were presented to determine which methods may be best for future studies to collect more insights from QAnon followers. A five-question survey was created using Typeform, and the link was posted to two of the largest QAnon groups on Gab: "QAnon" and "QAnon and the

Great Awakening." At the time, these two groups had 31.4k and 47.7k followers, respectively, and both allow for moderated content to be shared by any followers. The survey questions included both multiple choice and short answers and had an estimated completion time of less than five minutes according to the Typeform analysis. The five questions were as follows:

1. How long have you followed Q?
2. What is the most important truth Q has shared since starting drops?
3. Do you have friends and family who follow Q?
4. What convinced you Q knew the truth?
5. What intel motivates you the most to protest/take action offline?

Telegram users were polled in a slightly different manner, as Telegram has an in-app poll feature already built in. Users can simply create a one question poll with multiple answer choices. Users can choose if there is a correct answer or if the poll is open ended, as well as decide if the polltakers have the choice to select one or more options. In this case, the authors allowed users to choose more than one option to best elucidate which of the many pillars of QAnon are important to them. The question posed included, "what pillars of QAnon drew respondents in?" The answer choices included: exposing the Democrats, keeping former President Trump in power, save the children, 2020 U.S. election, and the coronavirus control tactics. The Telegram poll requires that the creator input the response choices. These 5 responses were chosen based on prior research and initial content analysis of Telegram channels. The authors reviewed prior research on violent incidents by QAnon followers (see Appendix A for complete list) and found that many perpetrators were conducting kidnappings or other violence when they thought children were in danger, hence the "save the children" option. Other perpetrators believed that the deep state was attempting to control civilians or that Democrats were the key perpetrators of child exploitation and other major crimes, hence the "expose the Democrats option." Many of the Q drops were centered around former President Trump, as many followers see him as the answer to perceived corruption, and later

focused on the 2020 Presidential election, leading to the "keeping President Trump in power" and "2020 U.S. election options." The authors also found that within the Telegram channels, there was an abundance of pseudoscience and conspiracies related to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine and therefore chose to include this as a choice option to gauge the intersection of pseudoscience and the QAnon ideology. The poll was posted in a prominent English-speaking QAnon group with 7,073 members that on average receives over 1,000 messages a day. The participation was considerably greater on this poll, with 53 Telegram users willingly responding to the poll.

## Limitations and Ethical Considerations

*Small N*

The Gab survey portion highlights one of the limitations in this report, as many users were not willing to discuss their views with a user who they were not already affiliated with and did not trust. The post with the survey link received nine comments of QAnon followers who expressed their disagreement or distaste with attempts to collect any information about their beliefs. In total, only 11 out of the 31.4k and 47.7k followers began the survey, with 7 completing. This resulted in a 63.6% completion rate with an average completion time of 4 minutes and 9 seconds. This highlights an under coverage bias due to non-responsiveness, leading to a small *N*. This small sample size leads to a much higher variability and potential bias in the overall findings of this research. Those QAnon followers who did answer the survey may have had different answers than the respondents or different than the options that were available on the Telegram poll. However, the research did reveal the level of hesitation and suspicion towards outgroup members which foreshadows implications for future studies.

*Reporting Bias*

When interpreting survey responses, there is potential for reporting bias by seeking answers that support the hypothesis. To avoid outcome reporting bias in regard to the survey

results, the authors summarized and reported all 7 answers for each of the five survey questions to give a full understanding of the complexity of the QAnon conspiracy, as well as to reflect the answers from the already small *N*. The authors also disclosed negative findings, such as those QAnon channels that shrunk in follower size over the course of this research and potential bias of the Storyzy tool when discussing global findings. With the company being based in France, their database may have more disinformation sources from France compared to sources from other countries, skewing the findings for activity from links with French origins. This potential bias is displayed in Figure 15.

*Privacy, Anonymity, and Confidentiality*

Even though the authors did not have access to an Institutional Review Board (IRB), they remained committed to ensuring that the largest three ethical concerns of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were maintained (Sugiura, Wiles, & Pope, 2016). Firstly, the authors did not collect any data on identifying factors of respondents. The poll posted to Gab was completely anonymous and the authors had no way of knowing who was responding to the questions. Similarly, the poll posted on the Telegram channel was anonymous with the results only showing a statistical breakdown of the response choices. While this report does name large Telegram channels and Gab groups, these spaces are considered public Telegram channels that are easily searchable and retrievable. By not collecting username or respondent data, choosing the survey settings to remain anonymous, and only accessing public spaces, the authors ensured that participant information was protected.

Other safeguards that ensured a degree of protection for participants included (1) refraining from asking any questions or protracting dialogues and engagements that could have potentially incriminated any of the respondents to ensure no legal issues or implications of entrapment and (2) only engaging in short-term passive measures to focus on information critical for the study to avoid interfering with any law enforcement activities online (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; UNODC, 2012; BPS, 2014). The questions were all formulated to acquire a better understanding of how users became interested in QAnon and have engaged with the

conspiracy narrative, while refraining from questions about specific behaviors offline, intentions to act, or past crimes. The authors aimed to better understand the ideology as a whole, rather than any particular individuals' behaviors and intentions, as the goal of the report was not to target any particular followers for their engagement for any reporting/intelligence purposes. Participants and all exposed to the questions were only contacted once on each platform in order to remain covert and non-intrusive.

*Open Source Intelligence and Data Collection*

The online environment presents unique access capabilities as well as challenges when conducting research on human subjects and there is not yet a clear consensus on ethical protocols for collecting and reporting on these spaces as the internet continues to develop rapidly (Innes, 2020; Webb et al., 2016). The data collected regarding channel name, channel size, source country and other descriptive information can be considered open-source intelligence (Pastor-Galindo et al., 2020). While generally used to unveil cybercrimes and aid cyberdefense, OSINT is also applicable to online social networks to gauge sentiment analysis and social opinion (Pastor-Galindo et al., 2020). While guidelines for OSINT research are still developing, the authors of this study ensured respect for user privacy by implementing the previously mentioned safeguards. Further, the collection of this data was covert and unobtrusive to not disrupt the natural sentiments and behaviors of users.

In regard to the survey results, the authors also chose to remain covert and post from a pseudonym for two main reasons. By announcing their presence as researchers, the authors felt this would have significantly influenced the natural behaviors of the group and hindered the response rate if perceived as an outsider to the group (Sullivan, 1959, Oliver & Eales, 2008, Roulet & Stenger, 2014 from Roulet et al., 2016). Similar to Langer & Beckman's (2005) defense of covert research, the authors relied on unobtrusive efforts to analyze how QAnon narrative manifests on the individual level without stirring up emotions or posts in response to our presence.

Further, the environments that were analyzed are particularly hostile and suspicious of out-group members, a trait that is considerably different from most research subjects. The decision to collect data covertly also ensured protections to the researchers' identity (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). While there is debate over the ethics and standards for data collection on digital spaces, the authors relied on previous works and the Association of Internet Researchers guidelines on easily retrievable public domains and other works on covert research of hostile public spaces to guide this research, while also prioritizing respect and no harm guidelines to participants (Kitchin, 2003; Langer & Beckman, 2005; Roulet et al., 2016; Sugiura, Wiles, & Pope, 2016). This decision to operate covertly does lead to a potential for reporting bias, as respondents may have answered differently than they would have in a research setting, which should be taken into consideration when assessing the findings of this report. The authors sought to balance respect and safety for participants, as well as for the researchers.

**Results**

*The Flow of Disinformation*

Analysis of the QAnon Telegram channels led the authors to several outbound links where QAnon drops are aggregated, one of which being the "qalerts.app" site. The relation between this site and Telegram channels details how the flow of QAnon information is mobilized. "Q" drops "intel" to one of seven 4chan or 8kun message boards. According to the qalerts.app site, these message boards are titled "Project D Comms," "Q Research," "Patriots Fight," "Great Awakening," "The Storm," "Calm Before the Storm," and "4chan POL." Many of the most recent postings have been on the "Q Research" board on 8kun.
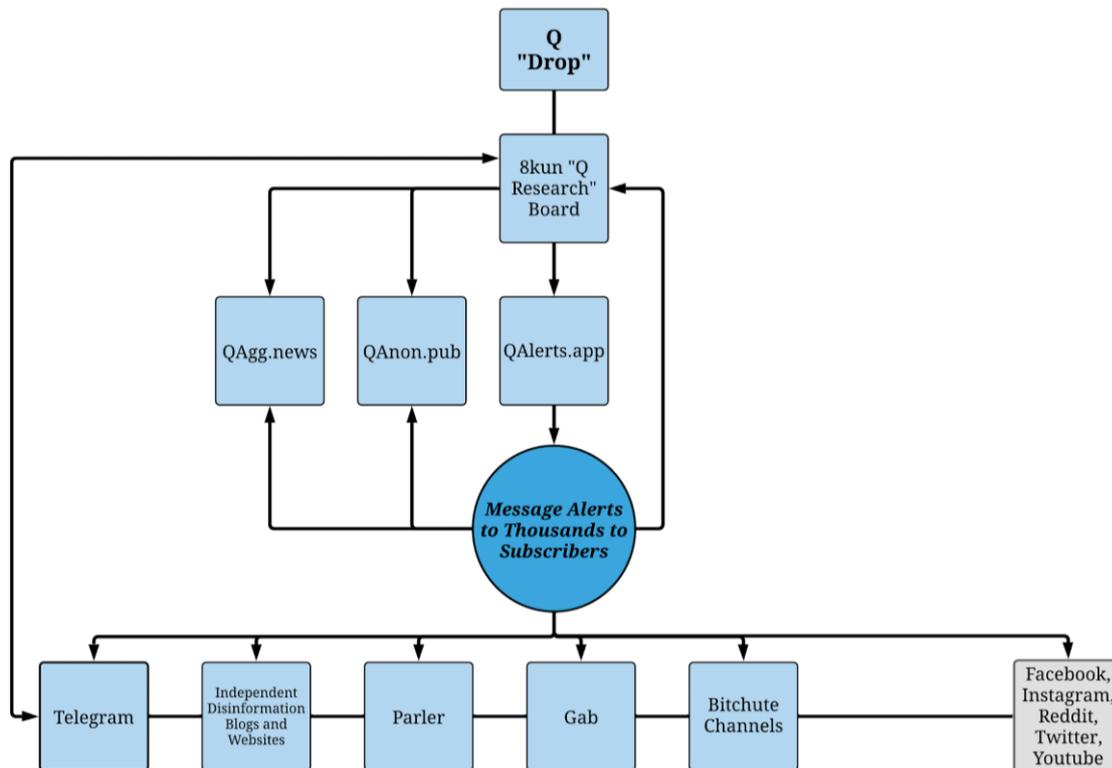
Figure 3 shows an example of how QAnon information can flow from the original intel drop down to individual followers. The new drop, which usually gets published on "Q Research" on 8kun, gets reposted on sites like Qalerts.app, which will send out text notifications to individuals who have subscribed. Qalerts.app allows QAnon followers to

subscribe to notifications to be sent to their phones or computers immediately after a new "Q drop" is posted. The alerts are available for iOS, Android, Windows, Mac, and Linux users. This alert system is one of the factors that influences how quickly the "Q drops" are now shared across hundreds of other messaging boards and apps.

Two other sites, "QAgg.news" and "QAnon.pub," both similar to "Qalerts.app," are also popular aggregates for QAnon intel drops. As QAnon followers are notified of the new intel, the "Q drop" gets reposted to QAnon related groups on a plethora of social media including Telegram, Gab, and Bitchute, which then allow for discussion. While sites like Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube previously played a role in the flow of disinformation, these platforms have recently enforced strict removal policies for QAnon content. Therefore, these sites have become less influential in the flow of QAnon intel and are greyed out in the flowchart in Figure 3. These social media users often link back to the original sources on 8kun where more discussions can be found.

It is also important to consider the influence that individual websites and blogs, as well as disinformation news sources, have in the flow of disinformation. These sites and blogs are often linked on pages like Qalerts.app and in social media channels for followers seeking more propaganda. It is at these levels of the flowchart where potential new conspiracy theorists can be truly indoctrinated by the plethora of echo chambers and propaganda on social media platforms and websites, which are all heavily interconnected. The unprecedented speed at which QAnon has grown and spread masses of disinformation globally can largely be attributed to the internet and social media.

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

**Figure 3. A simplified flowchart representing the spread of disinformation after a "Q drop" is made to an 8kun or 4chan board.**



*Source: Authors.*
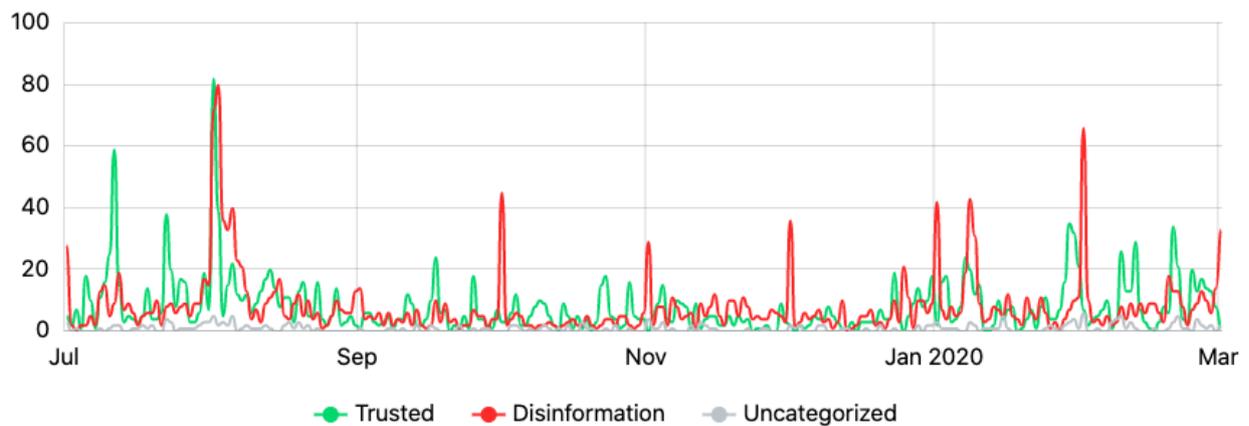
*Growing Spread of Disinformation*

Findings also support previous literature contending that the growth of QAnon dramatically increased during the summer months of 2020. This increase is particularly visible when considering the number of news and research articles being released regarding QAnon over the last few years. There is a large disparity when comparing the volume of articles, both from trusted and disinformation sources, regarding QAnon in the months before and after March 2020.

Figure 4 shows that from July 1st, 2019, to March 1, 2020, there were 4,207 articles released globally that discussed the QAnon conspiracy in some capacity. There was a fairly

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

even split between trusted and disinformation sources, with 1,964 articles being from trusted sources, 2,006 articles from disinformation sources, and 237 articles not categorized. However, this number drastically increased during the summer months of 2020.

Figure 5 shows that from March 1st, 2020, to November 1st, 2020, a total of 39,692 articles were released regarding QAnon (note that the Y-axis is drastically larger in Figure 5 compared to Figure 4 to show the increase in publications). This is an 843.4% increase in articles discussing QAnon compared to the eight-month period prior. Article releases during March through the early months of July remained fairly low, generally producing less than 100 articles per day. However, on July 22nd, the first spike in QAnon information began, with 830 articles being published discussing QAnon. This spike came directly after Twitter announced its removal of thousands of QAnon-related accounts on July 21st, 2020 (Allyn, 2020). Since July 2020, the interest in covering QAnon from a trusted information source, as well as disinformation being spread from QAnon supporters, has only continued to escalate.
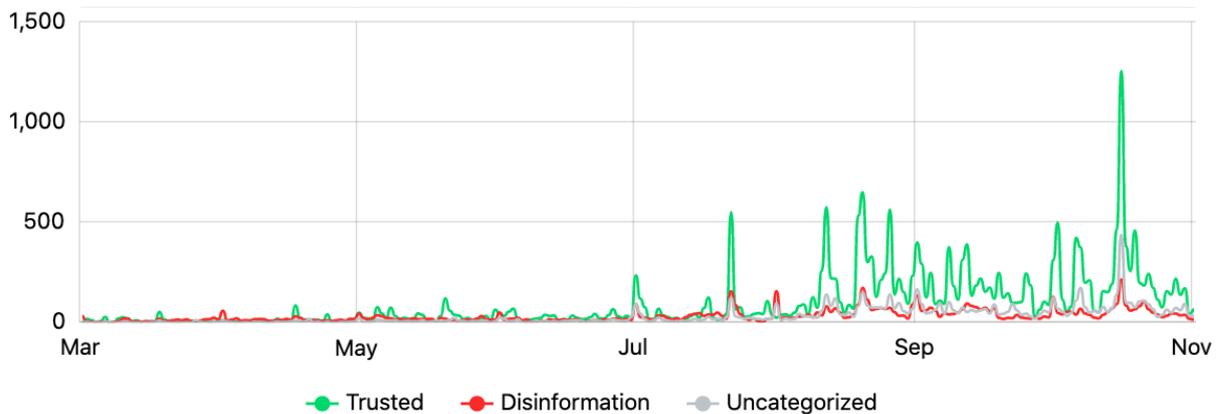
**Figure 4. Number of articles published about QAnon from July 1st, 2019, to March 1st, 2020.**



| Total articles | 4,207 |
|---|---|
| Articles from trusted sources | 1,964 |
| Articles from disinformation sources | 2,006 |
| Articles from uncategorized sources | 237 |

*Source: Storyzy.*

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

**Figure 5. Number of articles published about QAnon from March 1st, 2020, to November 1st, 2020.**
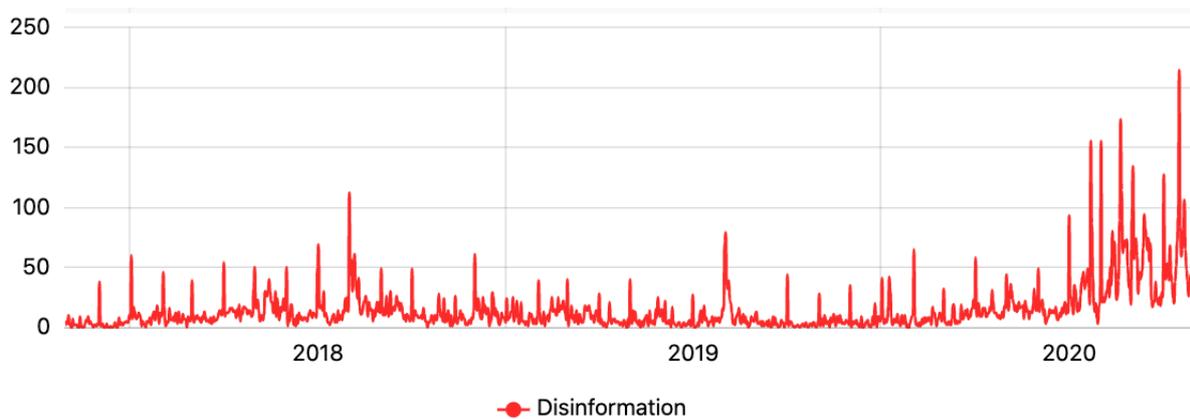


| Total articles | 39,692 |
|---|---|
| Articles from trusted sources | 23,630 |
| Articles from disinformation sources | 8,032 |
| Articles from uncategorized sources | 8,030 |

*Source: Storyzy.*

While the overall volume of sources shows a significant jump in the public and media awareness of QAnon, understanding the trends that enable the spread of disinformation is critical to suppress its reach. Since the first QAnon drop, disinformation had spread at a considerably steady rate until the early months of 2020. According to Storyzy data platform, there have been 17,152 disinformation articles shared regarding QAnon since October 28th, 2017, to November 1, 2020 (Figure 6). However, 8,032 of those articles have been released since March 1, 2020 (per Figure 5). This is nearly half (46.8%) of all the disinformation articles on QAnon being disseminated in the past eight months, despite QAnon existing for over three years at the time of this report. This is an alarming jump in the creation and spread of disinformation in a relatively short period of time.

**Figure 6. Volume of QAnon disinformation articles published by disinformation sources from October 28th, 2017, to November 1, 2020.**



| Total articles | 17,152 |
|---|---|
| Articles from disinformation sources | 17,152 |

*Source: Storyzy.*

Several well-known disinformation sources have been at the forefront of this surge. The type of disinformation spread by QAnon is categorized as fabricated content, meant to deceive people entirely with the aim of creating mistrust in the government. The top 10 most cited sources featuring QAnon are online news hubs that have been most frequently quoted or used as a source for another article. While some of the links citing these sources are trustworthy and include factual information about the source itself, most often other disinformation hubs are using the fake information to further propagate the spread of falsehoods. The network of disinformation sources is well interconnected and includes sources both U.S.-based and abroad. Figure 7, which shows the "10 most cited disinformation sources about QAnon," (between March 1, 2020, and November 1, 2020), serves to illustrate that Russian based rt.com has been cited 219 times in regard to QAnon information. Storyzy has rt.com categorized as a propaganda source, which may insert bias into the articles being

disseminated. Further, Daily Caller is a right-wing U.S. based news source, which is classified as a "False Information" disinformation source by the Storyzy analysis platform. Dailycaller.com has been linked 194 times by other articles between March 1, 2020, and November 1, 2020. While the Daily Caller is a well-known and sought out news source, the classification may stem from right-wing bias which could perpetuate the spread of misinformation, especially when reporting on the QAnon conspiracy theory.

The remaining 8 sources host an interesting range of disinformation. Five of the sources - westernjournal.com, the gatewaypundit.com, breitbart.com, pjmedia.com, and the federalist.com - are extreme right sources. While extreme right sources remain key influencers in the spread of QAnon disinformation, zerohedge.com is a pseudoscience and conspiracy source that has many recent articles discussing COVID-19 conspiracies. This reasserts the ability for QAnon to peak interest of new followers by relating to other existing lines of extreme and conspiracy thinking. Rightwingwatch.com is classified as a far-left source and is heavily connected to the QAnon disinformation spread from a left-leaning point of view. The range of classifications suggests that there is an abundance of falsehoods circulating regarding QAnon from all sides of the political spectrum.

**Figure 7. Top 10 most cited disinformation sources about QAnon from March 1, 2020, to November 1, 2020.**



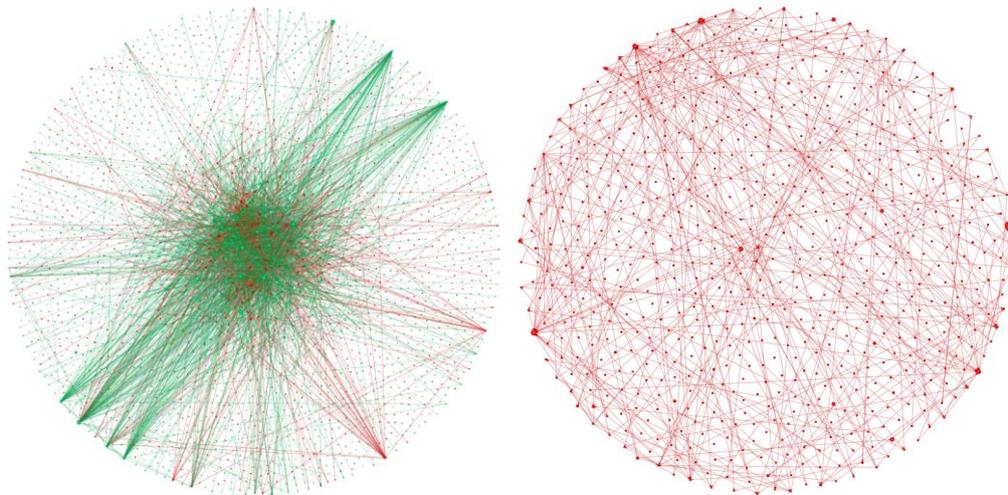| 10 most cited sources about QAnon | |
|---|---|
| rt.com | 219 links |
| dailycaller.com | 194 links |
| rightwingwatch.org | 161 links |
| rawstory.com | 144 links |
| westernjournal.com | 111 links |
| thegatewaypundit.com | 104 links |
| breitbart.com | 99 links |
| zerohedge.com | 92 links |
| pjmedia.com | 79 links |
| thefederalist.com | 76 links |

*Source: Storyzy.*

These top 10 cited sources have a great influence on a much larger web of disinformation sources. Figure 8 displays the network analysis of 9,920 articles published about QAnon from March 1, 2020, to November 1, 2020. The green nodes represent trustworthy news sources, while the red nodes represent disinformation sources as classified by Storyzy. The color of the edge is based on the article source since disinformation sources were cited by trustworthy sources and trustworthy sources were cited by disinformation sources. While the web is largely made up of trustworthy sources and connections, there is a significant red to red connectivity, which is extracted on the image on the left. The network consists of the most recent 4,985 disinformation articles. The denser red nodes include many of the news sources in the Top 10 Most Cited Sources List in Figure 7. The social network analysis visualizes how vast the spread of disinformation regarding QAnon has become

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

online. While red nodes with no connected edges are news sources with no shared links (inbound or outbound) to other sources in the database, most of the disinformation sources are connected to each other, sharing information and propaganda.

While YouTube began removing QAnon content from its site in October 2020, it is necessary to stress the powerful influence that propaganda videos had during the early risings of QAnon as well (Ortutay, 2020). A study by Hameleers et al. (2020) found that multimodal disinformation, such as videos and images, can be perceived as more credible than simple textual disinformation. This finding supports our evidence that videos had a large impact on the vast conspiracy-based indoctrination QAnon was able to achieve. While articles about QAnon were being produced by trusted sources at greater rates than disinformation sources, the same trend does not hold true when it comes to video sources. Between March 1st, 2020, and November 1st, 2020, 4,422 videos were produced on YouTube regarding QAnon. Only 1.96% (87) of those videos were generated from trusted sources, while disinformation videos received more 37 million views across 4,335 videos in the 8 month period. While most YouTube channels and videos related to QAnon have been taken down, the influence of YouTube and other video platforms, such as Bitchute, must be considered when attempting to disengage conspiracy followers.

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory
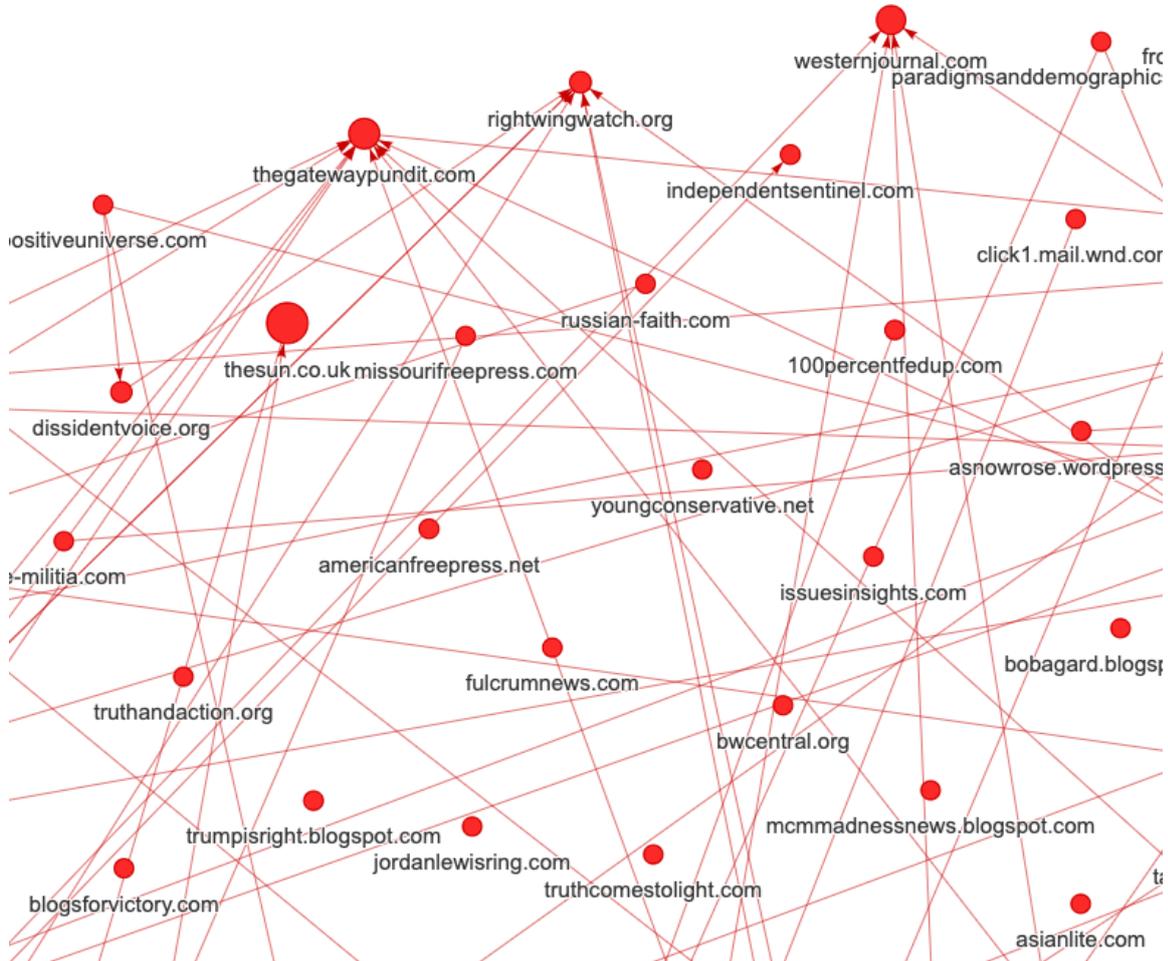
**Figure 8. Left image: social network analysis (SNA) of the 9,920 most recent articles from March 1, 2020, to November 1, 2020, including both trustworthy and disinformation sources. Right Image: SNA of 4,422 most recent disinformation sources from March 1, 2020, to November 1, 2020.**



*Source: Storyzy.*

To visualize the connectivity further, Figure 9 shows a portion of the disinformation network closer. Three of the sites mentioned on the top 10 Most Cited Sources List are found at the top of the network: thegatewaypundit.com, rightwingwatch.org, and westernjournal.com. These larger nodes with several bidirectional edges illustrate the plethora of sources that they can influence. Further, the image highlights the range of other disinformation sources, including independent websites, personal blogs, and other disinformation news hubs. The vastness of disinformation simply related to QAnon is a significant threat to the legitimacy of news and democratic institutions that are attempting to curb the conspiracy theory and other violent rhetoric.

**Figure 9. Enlarged example of the disinformation SNA.**



*Source: Storyzy.*

*Gab Survey Results*

　　In addition to collecting data on QAnon disinformation sources, the authors attempted to seek answers from QAnon followers themselves through two different social media platforms. The survey sent out on Gab was the most formal survey method; however, engagement with the survey was extremely low. The survey only received 7 total responses from members of the two largest QAnon groups on Gab. While this sample cannot necessarily be said to be a representative sample of all QAnon followers in the group, the results help to

begin building a picture of how QAnon followers engage with "Q." All 7 of the responses to each question were summarized to maintain the full range of beliefs that QAnon propagates.

**Question 1.** *How long have you followed Q?*

Users shared a range of answers when asked how long they have been following QAnon. The answers included: "*since the beginning; 3 years; on and off for about 3 years; 2 years; 1 year; 8 months; and 6 months*. This does suggest that while many QAnon believers have followed the conspiracy for quite some time, new users are still being indoctrinated within recent months.

**Question 2.** *What is the most important truth Q has shared since starting drops?*

The second question asked users what the most important truth "Q" has shared since starting drops. This question was designed to seek insights into whether there were any discernible patterns in regard to what QAnon pillars drew new followers in. Two users pointed to frustrations over "corruption in the government," while two users stated that it is "the rampant paedophilia" and "widespread paedophilia" of elites that has been the most important pillar of QAnon. It is not surprising that this belief that the Democrats are taking part in a range of child sex trafficking rings can draw individuals to the QAnon following. At the core, it is a morally-just cause. However, the particular claims made by "Q" are baseless and suggest harm that cannot be supported by evidence. Many people have been influenced by the "save the children" movement of QAnon, indirectly encouraging criminal behavior and violence among adherents. These examples are discussed in depth in the Appendix A of this report.

The final three answers to this question were a bit more conspicuous. They included "trust the plan," "we've got it all," and "the day of the rope is coming for the wicked." These answers elucidate such a deep indoctrination into this belief system, but also point to lack of concrete plans and truths that have actually been supported by evidence. Despite many of

"Q's" predictions never actually coming to fruition, followers still believe "Q drops" are part of a larger ambiguous plan to overhaul the current governing institutions.

***Question 3.*** *Do you have friends and family who follow Q?*

There was a 4-3 split to the question regarding whether family and friends also follow QAnon, with four users answering yes. While this is no significant percentage or sample, further research may consider how family dynamics, friendships, and social networks are also influencing the spread of this particular conspiracy (Goldenberg, et al., 2020). Being immersed in a community offline that is also perpetuating conspiracy-based radicalization can create further instances of group polarization and groupthink.

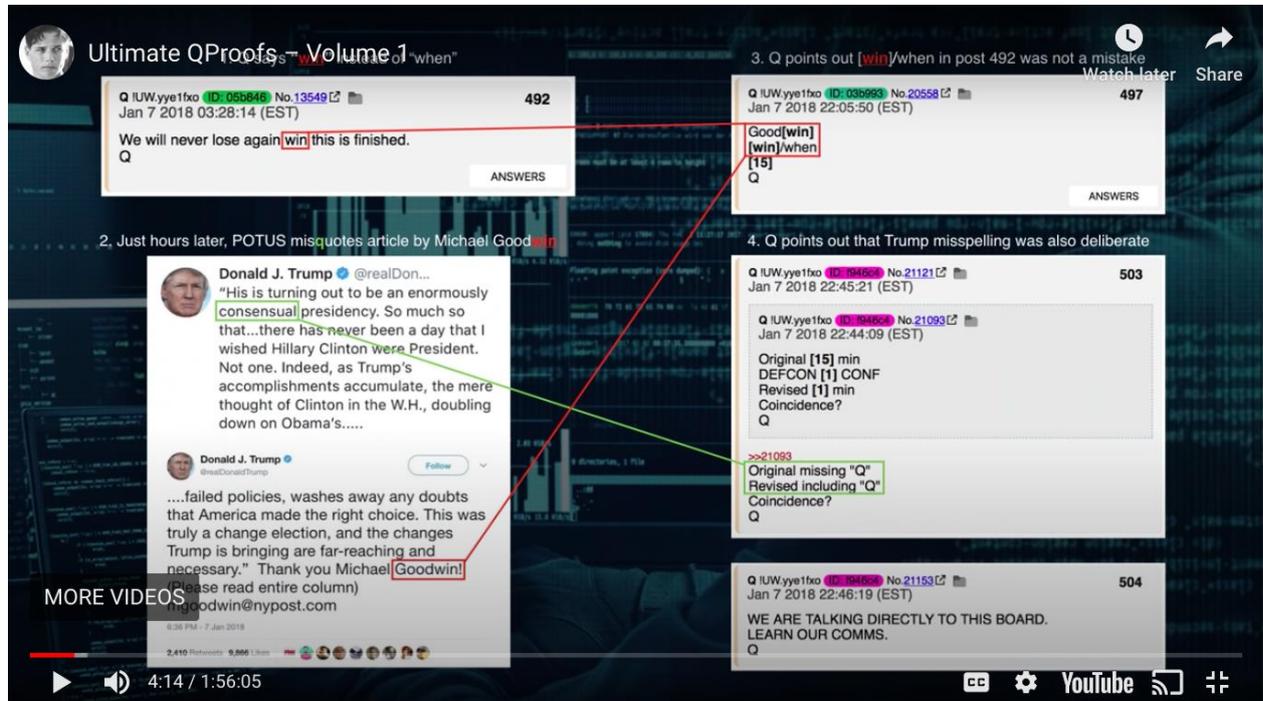***Question 4.*** *What convinced you Q knew the truth?*

The fourth question asked users what convinced them that "Q" knew the truth. This question, despite only 7 answers provided, revealed initial insights into just how important the mass of disinformation sources online is to this movement. While four of the answers were similar to those of question 2 and were conspicuous, three pointed to actual sources that helped users become indoctrinated. These sources included "Revolution Q," a book written by NeonRevolt; the "Proofs," a series of images and videos that attempt to draw connections between "Q drops" and communications (often Tweets) from former President Trump to explain QAnon's legitimacy; and "research and critical thinking skills... which invites one to research and use critical thinking." New potential QAnon followers are being encouraged to "do their own research" and "find their own enlightenment." This is an interesting finding, as many people are claiming this is how they have been awakened by QAnon.

This pattern of thinking was elucidated initially after posting the survey link to the Gab page as well. Many QAnon followers commented on the post sharing their disagreement and suspicion of the questions, which is a potential factor for the low response rate to this survey. The major theme of the comments received was that individuals needed to do their own research before talking to others about the generalities of QAnon. The post received 8

total comments, one tagging the page admin, and three simply saying no to the survey. The other 4 told the authors to go read through "Q's" posts since the beginning, read through the boards, and form our own opinions about QAnon. While these users may not have actually opened the survey, their comments did reveal that QAnon has long encouraged new followers to read all of the drops from the beginning. "Q" has directly posted to followers "Think for yourself. Research for yourself. Trust yourself ("Research Resources," n.d.)."

The "Qalerts" site has a page titled "Research Resources," where users can browse a network of 49 other sites and 24 video content and social media profiles to "enlighten" themselves ("Research Resources," n.d.). Many of the sites listed simply reshare QAnon drops. However, some of the sites seek to legitimize QAnon further by providing "proofs," which formulate supposed evidence proving that "Q" was communicating with former President Trump. Adherents believe that QProofs are "subtle connections between QAnon posts and actions or events involving former President Trump ("A Small Sampling of QProofs," n.d.)." These "coincidences" are set up to validate QAnon as a legitimate insider source working closely with former President Trump, whilst allowing all involved to retain plausible deniability ("A Small Sampling of QProofs," n.d.)." Adherents believe that oftentimes "Q" and former President [Trump] will coordinate the times of their online posts to share a deeper encrypted message ("Q/POTUS Deltas," n.d.). This type of timing is known as a "delta" to followers and is a calculation of the time between a "Q drop" and a POTUS tweet. Further, the Q Proofs are often in the form of YouTube videos or images, which as a multimodal form of disinformation can increase the likelihood that viewers find the information credible. One adherent has published a 2-hour long video with 17 of the most important coincidences, titled "Ultimate QProofs- Volume 1." The video had over 217k views since January 20, 2020. An example of a QProof can be seen in Figure 10.

**Figure 10. An example of a QProof from the "Ultimate QProofs-Volume 1" video on YouTube.**



*Source: "Ultimate QProofs-Volume 1," YouTube.*

While having the freedom to research beliefs and form individual opinions is certainly a pillar of any functioning democracy, users are being exposed to resources that are largely biased and sharing false information. The information users receive, such as the QProofs, prime users in a way to only come to one conclusion- that QAnon is legitimate, truthful, and working directly with former President Trump to take down the cabal of deep state politicians in power.

***Question 5.*** *What intel motivates you the most to protest/take action offline?*

The final question asked users what intel would motivate them to protest/take action offline. This question was formulated to understand if most users were indoctrinated enough to act on any of their beliefs and, most importantly, if so, what were the driving ideologies.
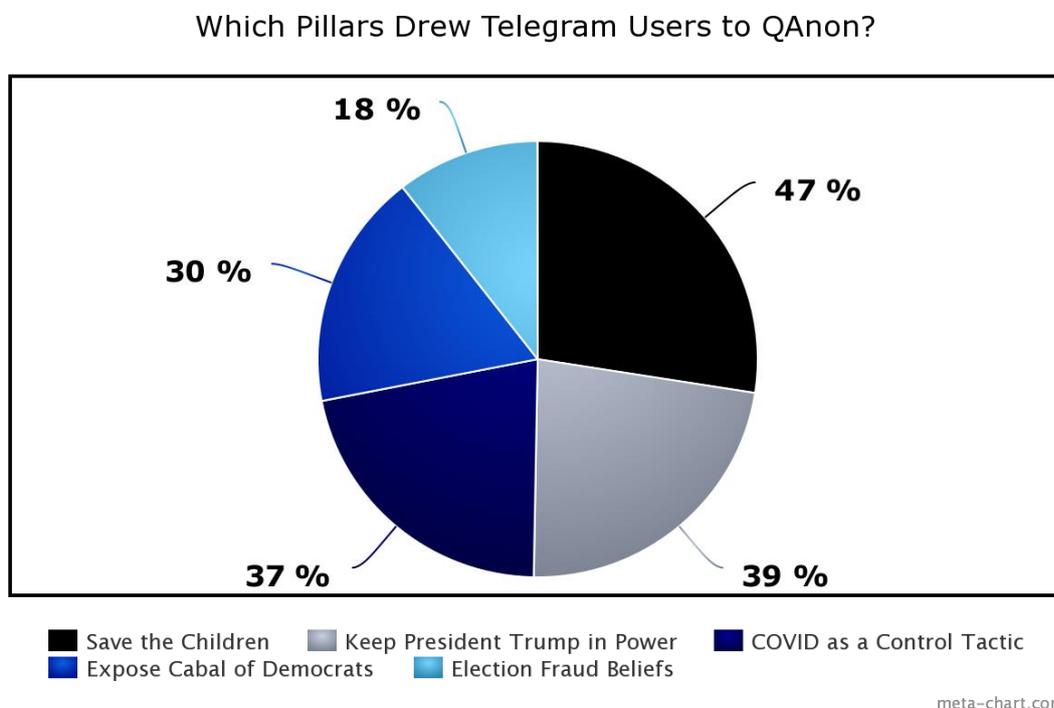
The answers were similar to the first question and pointed to a range of the pillars that QAnon has long shared disinformation about. Answers included "violence, corruption, and abuse of children," "the knowledge that we the people hold the real power," "any intel that correctly identifies and exposes the enemy amongst us," and "save the children." While these answers point to a range of information being enough to potentially motivate individuals to take action offline, two other answers revealed that followers have long been preparing for some type of engagement and unrest. Whether that is related to "day of the rope," or another type of clash, remains unclear, but QAnon followers continue to share beliefs that if there is a time for an overhaul of the government system, it is now. The danger with these beliefs is that if one person were to take action, groupthink dynamics could encourage and escalate others to do the same.

*Telegram Survey Results*

Telegram provided the most revealing information regarding the true breadth of influence that QAnon has had across the United States and internationally. The authors were able to track the change in follower size across 32 of the Telegram channels over a 39-day period. On October 19, 2020, across the 32 channels tracked, there were a total of 292,272 followers of just these QAnon-related channels. On November 26, 2020, that number had risen to 340,761 total followers. This is a 17% increase in aggregate channel followings in just over a 5-week period. In fact, the "Qlobal-Change" channel, one of the largest international hubs on Telegram, gained 10,698 in a little over a month. Further, only three channels actually lost followers, though not by any large numbers. The channels lost 2, 9, and 25 followers, respectively, and each of these channels were less active than many of the other channels in the dataset. While some followers could certainly be following more than one channel tracked in this report, the increase still presents accurate counts of individual users being exposed to new or additional QAnon content. This positive change in size suggests that QAnon is momentous not just in the United States, but abroad as well.

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

The survey used on Telegram also provided a much higher engagement than the attempts to engage with followers on Gab. In total, 53 users responded to the one question poll asking which Pillars of QAnon drew them in. The total percentage is greater than 100% since participants could select more than one option (Figure 11). This gave a better idea of the multiplicity that is the QAnon conspiracy and which of the many factors are driving individuals' engagement.

**Figure 11. Breakdown of Telegram users' beliefs on the most important QAnon pillars.**



Which Pillars Drew Telegram Users to QAnon?

Save the Children — 47 %
Keep President Trump in Power — 39 %
COVID as a Control Tactic — 37 %
Expose Cabal of Democrats — 30 %
Election Fraud Beliefs — 18 %

meta-chart.com

*Source: Authors.*

Forty seven percent of the respondents chose "save the children" as at least one of their responses. This is not a surprising result and begins to support the Gab results in which the "Save the Children" pillar was also talked about several times. This belief in widespread paedophilia continues to be one of the most engaging facets of QAnon and disproving this theory must be at the heart of future CVE efforts.

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

"Keeping President Trump in Power" received 39% of users' votes. This points to an interesting dichotomy that exists between QAnon and the traditional nature of far-right movements. The far-right has generally opposed big government, however, the QAnon following is built upon growing the power and influence of who QAnon followers see as their true leader. The conspiracy appeals to millions of Americans who support former President Trump, even those who do so passively. With such a mass following, the conspiracy theory continues to attract new adherents and may continue to do so in the future. Those former President Trump supporters who repudiate the election results may be even more attracted to a conspiracy following that continues to provide hope for the candidate. Even though it received the smallest percentage of votes, 18% of participants did say that election fraud beliefs are influencing their draw to QAnon. With election fraud claims being a relatively recent event yet still having influence on building new QAnon support, there may be a spike in QAnon growth in the coming weeks and months. This finding supports previous research contending that feeling like an outsider in the democratic process can lead one to seek alternative information and communities to cope with unprecedented times and chaos. Many former President Trump supporters who are unhappy with the election results may accept these fraud claims and find QAnon to be supporting the results they wanted.

Similarly, 37% of participants also selected "COVID as a control tactic" as a motivating factor that piqued their interest in QAnon. What is important to consider is how a conspiracy theory that was initiated in 2017, two years before the first COVID-19 case, has been able to manipulate current events to further their agenda. QAnon has long been able to draw in anti-vaxxers, and in the era of COVID-19, those who do not believe in mainstream science were easily manipulated by "Q's" assertions that COVID is a government developed ploy to impose more controlling restrictions on citizens. It seems that due to QAnon's facade as a government official, along with the wide range of types of people that it can appeal to, allows QAnon to adapt and absorb new pillars at ease to follow current events and trends.

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

*Global Trends*

While Gab is known for hosting United States based far-right content, Telegram offered a particularly high sense of international influence. In the 35 channels analyzed, at least 11 countries had channels dedicated to the intersection of their nationality and QAnon-related topics, many of which grew throughout the final months of 2020 and early 2021. These countries and regions included the United States, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany—specifically the Bavaria region—France, Austria, Brazil, Argentina, and the United Kingdom. There were also several channels with large followings dedicated to an international crowd, including "Qlobal-Change." A sample of 19 channels that have an international presence are illustrated in Table 1, which includes the audience target, the channel size as of November 26th, 2020, with a near three-month follow up total recorded on February 19, 2021, and the channel creation date, if known.

While many of the channels with the largest followings began in 2018 and 2019, some country specific channels, such as WWG1WGA!-Austria Chat, Deutschland/USA/NEWS, Digital Soldiers Germany Memes, Digital Soldiers Germany News, Qlobal-Change France, and Global-Change ARG, were created in the early months of 2020. This suggests that channels are still being created and generating interest from a range of countries around the globe. Of the 19 channels in Table 1, 15 of them grew from November 1, 2020, to February 19, 2021, many of which by thousands of subscribers. Aside from the U.S.-focused "Qlobal-Change USA," the country specific channels that experienced the largest growth were "Qlobal-Change Italy" and "Frag uns doch," a German channel. One smaller German and U.S.-centric channel "Deutschland/USA/NEWS" has since gone offline. The channels that experienced a decrease in subscribers were the UK, Austria, and Argentina focused, respectively. The drastic growth by several of the channels suggests sustained momentum even post-Trump's presidency on a global scale. This is best seen by the example of the "Qlobal-Change." On October 19th, 2020, the channel had certain countries, and underlying socio-political dynamics seem to have a lower threshold for QAnon to enter the mainstream

discourse, more so than others, especially in countries that are seeing similar uprising of far-right movements as the in United States.

**Table 1. Telegram Channels and their country affiliations, size, and creation dates.**

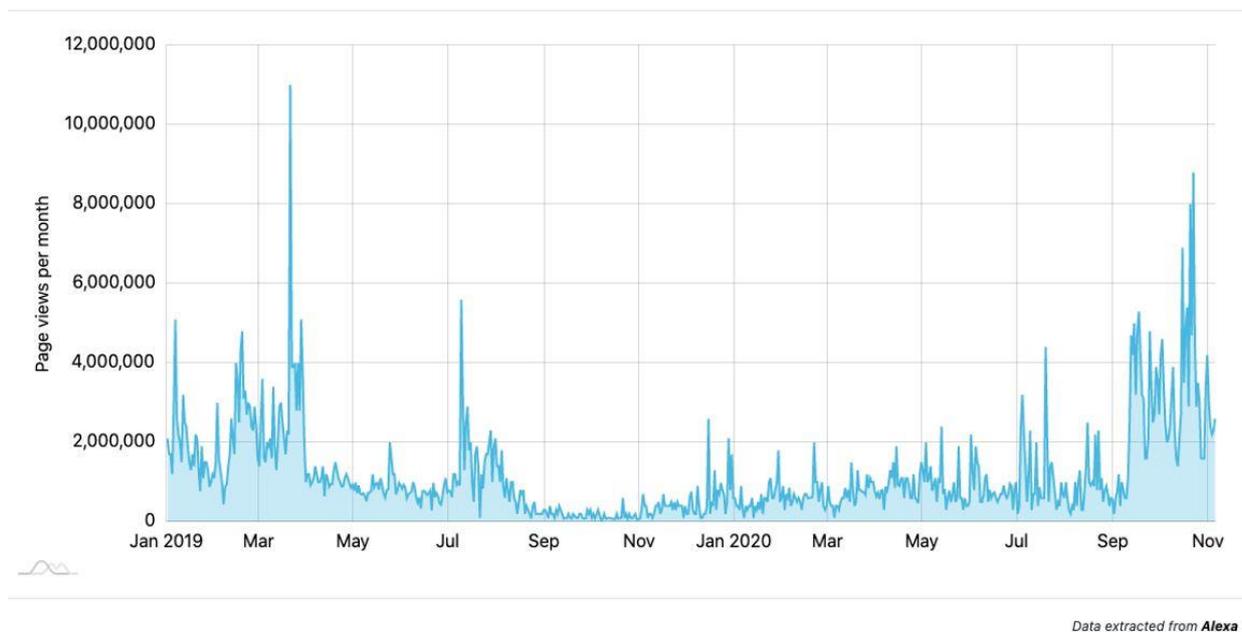| Channel/Group Name | Target Country | Size as of November 26th, 2020 | Size as February 19th, 2021 | Date Created |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Qlobal-Change | International | 137,006 subscribers | 164,857 | November 10, 2019 |
| Qlobal-Change USA | USA | 10,560 subscribers | 18,595 | December 9, 2018 |
| Qlobal-Change MEME_WARFARE | International | 5,281 subscribers | 7,160 | December 9, 2018 |
| Qlobal-Change Italy | Italy | 10,709 subscribers | 15,938 | December 9, 2019 |
| Brexiteers WWG1WGA Chat | United Kingdom | 788 members | 765 | June 5, 2019 |
| Qlobal-Change Espana | Spain | 1,763 subscribers | 2,524 | June 10, 2019 |
| Qlobal-Change Portugal | Portugal | 736 subscribers | 1,251 | June 10, 2019 |

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

| Frag uns doch | Germany | 37,614 subscribers | 66,156 | September 1, 2020 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| QAnons InstaFEED | International | 1,188 subscribers | 1,257 | October 1, 2019 |
| WWG1WGA.Global | International | 447 subscribers | 662 | February 4, 2020 |
| WWG1WGA!-Austria Chat | Austria | 345 members | 328 | April 5, 2020 |
| Deutschland/USA/NEWS | Germany/USA | 219 members | Offline | May 3, 2020 |
| Digital Soldiers Germany Memes | Germany | 2,757 subscribers | 2,832 | June 14, 2020 |
| Digital Soldiers Germany News | Germany | 4,859 subscribers | 7,435 | June 23, 2020 |
| QAnons USA-Dark to Light | USA | 1,985 subscribers | 2,753 | Unknown |
| Digital Soldiers Germany | Germany | 3,487 subscribers | 4,171 | Unknown |
| Qlobal-Change France | France | 279 subscribers | 910 | May 8, 2020 |
| Qlobal-Change Brasil | Brasil | 1,113 subscribers | 2,619 | June 6, 2019 |

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

| Qlobal-Change ARG | Argentina | 393 subscribers | 375 | May 21, 2020 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

*Source: Authors.*

Further, traffic into the "qanon.pub" page (a popular aggregator of all QAnon drops) and the "Q Research" 8kun thread also illustrates a large disparity when it comes to international traffic. "Qanon.pub" has received an average of 2.6 million views per month over the last 6 months. The graph of the traffic patterns in Figure 12 shows page views per month since January 2019. While there are certainly spikes in interest prior to 2020, activity and page traction began to increase leading up the 2020 Presidential election through October and November 2020.
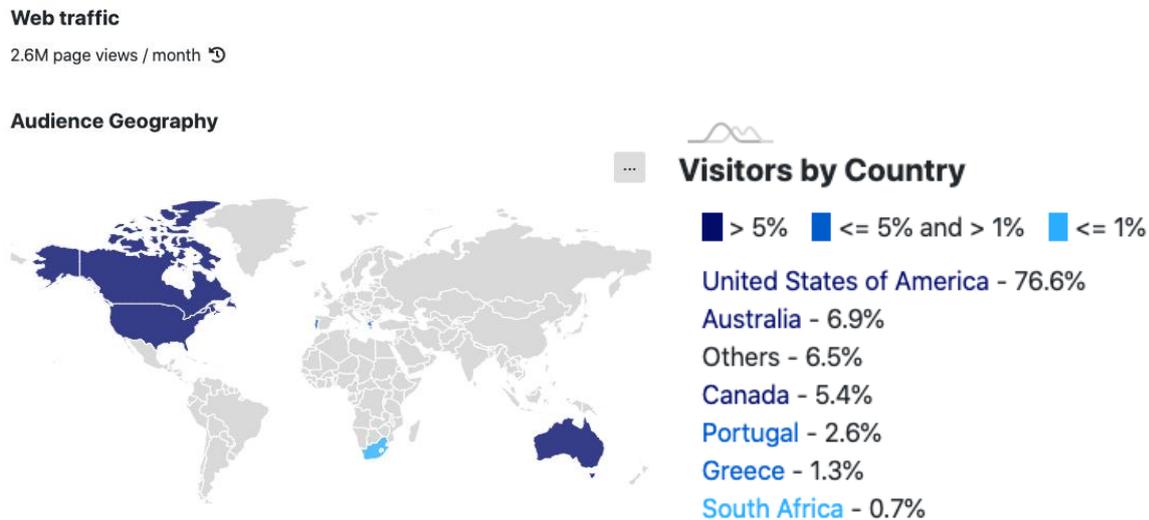
**Figure 12. Views per month of the qanon.pub webpage, averaging 2.6 million views from May 2020 to November 2020.**



*Data extracted from **Alexa***

*Source: Storyzy.*

The geographic breakdown of the web traffic supports claims that while the United States is still the hub for QAnon interest and adherents, other countries are gaining an interest. Visitors by country data suggests that the United States accounts for just over three quarters (76.6%) of incoming traffic to the webpage. Roughly 6.5% of the routers could not be located and were categorized as other. Australia, Canada, Portugal, Greece, and South Africa also represented significant channel source countries. See Figure 13.
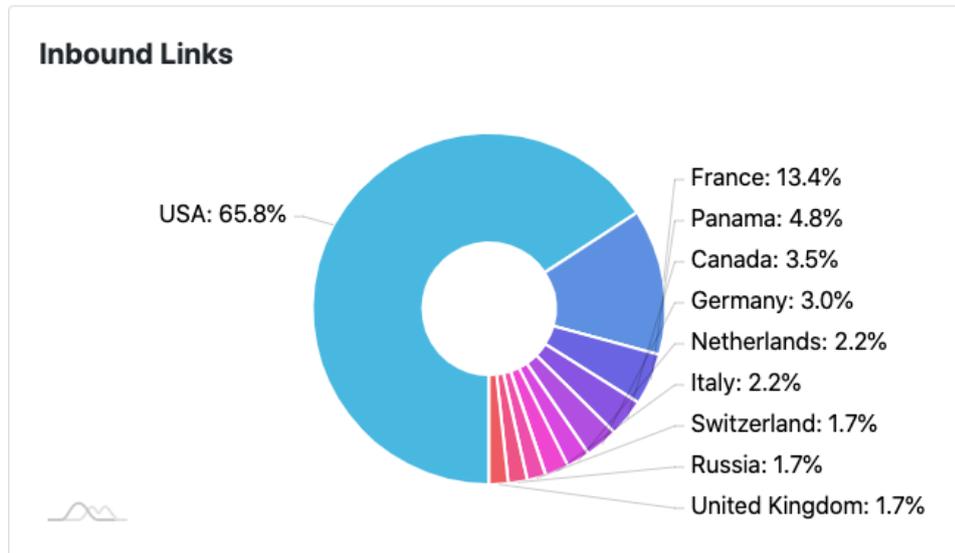
Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

**Figure 13. "Qanon.pub" web page visitors by country.**



*Source: Storyzy.*

There was also significant international presence when analyzing the source country of inbound links (articles and links that brought users to) the "QAnon.pub" site. The majority, or 65.8%, of inbound links are coming from United States based sources. However, several other countries account for the remaining 34.2% of inbound links (Figure 14). It should be noted that these findings are an estimate on location sources with several variables that could influence this statistic. These variables include the fact that some users may be using VPN to protect or bounce their IP address, as well as cases met with privacy concerns, which explains why Panama is over-represented in this chart.

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

**Figure 14. Inbound link origins to the "Qanon.pub" web page.**



**Inbound Links**

USA: 65.8%
France: 13.4%
Panama: 4.8%
Canada: 3.5%
Germany: 3.0%
Netherlands: 2.2%
Italy: 2.2%
Switzerland: 1.7%
Russia: 1.7%
United Kingdom: 1.7%

*Source: Storyzy.*

Standing at 13.4%, France made up a relatively large portion of incoming traffic. This is interesting since German followers make up the largest non-United States QAnon following (Dittrich, Grandjean, Jager & Rathje, 2020). This finding may be skewed by Storyzy being a French platform and having more French sources and information in its database compared to German sources. German sitemasters may also be declaring their sites in Panama or other false locations more frequently. However, from a larger perspective, this finding supports recent data by other studies that QAnon is catalyzing and drawing in followers by adapting EU-centric and local conspiracy theory beliefs, especially those related to COVID-19 ("Covid a 'catalyst'," 2020). In July of 2020, United States-based fake news monitor NewsGuard reported over 450,000 known QAnon followers in France, Italy, Germany, and Britain ("Covid a 'catalyst'," 2020). Analysis of 8kun traffic also showed evidence of global connectedness, with outbound and inbound links to several countries around the world (Figure 15). However, there is a large discrepancy between U.S. directed inbound and outbound links to the 8kun message board. The message board links to U.S. based sources 70.4% of the time,

195

while incoming link traffic is from the United States only 47.3% of the time. This suggests that there are sources from all around the world bringing users to the 8kun message board; however, the message board often links users to new sources that are largely United States-based and continue to serve as a large piece of QAnon's global growth.

**Figure 15. Inbound and outbound link origins of the 8kun "Q Research" board.**



*Source: Storyzy.*

This analysis adds insights into those findings, illustrating that QAnon has also been able to influence conspiracy theorists from Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Egypt, Portugal, South Africa and many more. The conspiracy theory has been able to draw people in from all cultures, countries, religions, political beliefs, and walks of life like no other before. QAnon has shared "intel" on such a wide range of topics, creating opportunities for users from other cultures and societies to connect with and find "Q" to be legitimate.

## Significance

This research underscores how the evolution of QAnon is unique from other conspiracy movements because it does not rest on one pillar or belief about a particular event. The fact that QAnon has shared "intel" on several different topics and events has allowed "Q" to warp many different lines of beliefs under the umbrella of the movement. "Q-drops" that pertain to

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

revealing "criminal activity" about prominent democrats appeals to those with right-wing views; intel regarding the COVID-19 pandemic appeals to anti-vaxxers and other lines of anti-science beliefs, while intel about potential voter fraud and deep-state activity often appeals to supporters of former President Donald Trump. However, this research revealed that the "save the children" movement is one of the more powerful sources of recruitment for QAnon, as it is morally just and can span interest across political ideologies and societal contexts.

A major pillar of the conspiracy theory is that adherents view former President Trump as someone who is going to bring the change they want against a system they feel they have been excluded from. Following the conclusion of the Trump Administration, speculations can be made to further assess and predict the future movement of QAnon. Firstly, QAnon supporters are highly unsettled by the election results and seek stability now that former President Trump is no longer in office (Harwell, 2021). As previously illustrated, QAnon supporters not only idolized the former president, but they wanted to attain their vision of what America should look like under the administration. They are now seemingly "lost" without a sense of direction as they strive to combat their perceived enemies within the democratic party, including current President Biden. Upticks in violence are expected to occur, as QAnon supporters yearn to seek revenge for the election outcome. Following former President Trump's departure, QAnon turned to social media to not only express their grievances, but to keep the notion of former President Trump alive. A QAnon channel on Telegram containing 40,000 users issued a post highlighting Trump's farewell remarks: "We will be back in some form - Have a good life. We will see you soon" (Harwell, 2021). Many QAnon supporters are likely to continue to cling to these words until former President Trump resurfaces in some way or capacity. However, it is important to note a large divide in terms of the response to the administration swap. This can be illustrated by exploring the reaction of Ron Watkins, a long-time administrator of the social media platform heavily used by QAnon, 8kun. Watkins posted on 8kun the following statement: "We need to keep our chins up and go back to our lives as best we are able" (Harwell, 2021). While the extent and sincerity of this

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

comment is unclear, spikes in violence and unrest are likely to occur in waves. Additionally, the geographic distribution of these cells is expected to remain decentralized, as some embrace change while others cling to their euphoric past.

The perception of an enemy and unwillingness to accept alternative information is the mechanism by which QAnon adherents continue to be indoctrinated and, in some cases, inclined to act offline. The momentum of followers and legitimacy that QAnon has built has effectively inspired some to take legitimate offline action, proving to be a significant and growing VE threat. Analysis of news sources and previous studies revealed that there are at least 23 criminal and/or violent incidents that have been connected to QAnon beliefs since 2017. These incidents have included threats against political and societal elite, as well as more severe crimes including several kidnappings and murder. With 10 of these incidents occurring in 2020, QAnon still inspires individuals to seek action offline. A summary of these incidents can be found in Appendix A. This report exemplifies the connection between groupthink and group polarization theory within the context of VE and conspiracy theories, highlighting the unprecedented need to understand conspiracy-based radicalization and P/CVE options. The influence that psychological factors such as inclusion and belonging have on conspiracy followers very suggests that psycho-social solutions are a key to combating QAnon and future conspiracy followings.

In addition to continued VE threats, the most critical future implications of the continued growth of QAnon are a weakening of the democratic institutions on which the country is founded. As many conspiracy theories do, QAnon is rising during an uncertain and contested political time in the U.S. It is effectively weakening the legitimacy and trust that Americans have in politicians and democratic institutions. Many followers are advocating for actions that blatantly breach the U.S. Constitution and laws in order to propagate further power for former President Trump. Thus, QAnon has become a political weapon with real offline consequences. It is quickly escalating further than any other conspiracy theory, with a potential to influence political thought, discourse, and decision-making if QAnon-adherents were to enter political office. During the 2020 election cycle, there were dozens of United

States politicians running for office whom have not only refused to condemn QAnon, but have explicitly expressed support for the conspiracy theory.

While the future implications of QAnon will greatly affect the United States as a domestic movement, the international presence of QAnon should not be understated. As highlighted in this research, QAnon is currently building followers in countries all around the globe, many of which have drastically different political and societal environments. Much of the disinformation QAnon and QAnon-adherents discuss regarding COVID-19 and "save the children" can be understood outside of a uniquely domestic context. Further, individuals from countries with histories of corruption and current political tensions may be inclined to consider QAnon. This may be due to perceived shared grievances over exclusion and lack of belonging from one's government and by political leaders. Future studies must consider QAnon's growth in individual countries to determine the unique driving causes that are recruiting and indoctrinating new followers.

In terms of research practicality, this research should be used as a starting point for future studies that seek insights from conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists themselves. The largest limitation of this research was the low response rate to the survey questions across styles and platforms. One factor for this may be due to QAnon encouraging individuals to seek their own research and enlightening, making individuals less willing to engage with an unknown user in their online social networks. Secondly, there are both active and passive social media users, which can also influence survey and dialogue engagement. While thousands of individuals are viewing QAnon related content, not all social media users are willing to actively engage online. Most importantly, however, is the level of suspicion that many alternative social media users feel about probing questions and new users. Telegram users were often suspicious of "feds" or spies on the platform, perhaps due to anxieties that the content and groups would be shut down. These suspicions stem from perceived bias in the mainstream media and research, as well as from law enforcement. Many respondents to the surveys in this report would question whether the work was to undermine their beliefs. While the network of QAnon supporters is large, it is still very much a disconnected movement as

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

many passive followers are refraining from public-facing dialogue over prospects of intelligence gathering or total shutdown. This also proves to be a motivator in refraining from communication with outgroup members.

Due to the suspicions of QAnon supporters, future studies should not present long surveys, but use the tools that adherents are already familiar with, as well as attempt to build a stronger rapport with users in their online communities. Questions should be posed without any glimpse that authors may be attempting to insert a counternarrative to use the information "against" conspiracists. Telegram had the most feedback because it used the poll option that so many users were already familiar with. It ensured anonymity and was a simple, quick engagement rather than a continued and potentially probing dialogue. Further, the online platforms are strong echo chambers, with thousands of QAnon adherents prepared to defend "Q" and those they are familiar with in their online community. Perhaps, online surveys are not the most effective means to gather information about QAnon's ability to recruit and indoctrinate, but rather in-person interviews may be more effective to bridge suspicions and build rapport with respondents.

## P/CVE Discussion

Whether it is 8kun, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube, the conspiracy-based movement will continue to grapple with constitutional edicts of free speech versus the potential harmful effects of disinformation. Deploying tools like artificial intelligence and fact-checker systems enhances the ability of platforms to be more consistent in weeding out disinformation. The authors recommend multimodal counternarrative efforts, such as videos and images, in addition to text based counternarratives, as these sources may be perceived as more credible and effective when combatting conspiracy-based disinformation online (Hameleers et al., 2020).

Following the study by Hameleers et al. (2020), the authors of this report find that their suggestions of fact checker tools are relevant to defecting conspiracy-based theories

online. They found that fact checker tools not only have the potential to counter disinformation, but they can overcome partisan and attitudinal filters, which are large facets of the QAnon conspiracy. While their research did contend that the effectiveness of these tools can depend on the topic of disinformation, it is worth initiating research on their potential effect on QAnon-based radicalization. Online users should normalize fact-checking tools to identify falsified information, images, and other media across social media and journalistic sites. While platforms such as Telegram and Gab are certainly presenting as echo-chambers of highly indoctrinated conspiracy-narratives, fact-checking and multimodal counter narratives may be able to force individuals to begin questioning alternative lines of thinking, lowering the threshold for disengagement to be successful. While it may not be possible to disengage the masses of QAnon followers, these tools may be effective at the individual level.

In terms of fact checking and disputing disinformation online, both established credible journalists and public figures, as well as ordinary citizens, can be equally effective voices for intervention (Hameleers et al., 2020). Further, independent audits of algorithms can be shared by multiple governments that are seeking similar outcomes of accountability and transparency; governments, social media companies, and research institutions can rely on information sharing to create more holistic and comprehensive response plans. In addition, creating campaigns that strive to raise awareness, strengthen capacities, educate the public, and deter sympathizers from the pillars of QAnon is a critical first step in establishing validity and cause with the general public (Goldenberg et al., 2020). In order for them to consider supporting a disassociation and defamation approach as a public good, the audience needs to understand how they will benefit from this and what are the potential consequences if the network is not defeated. Although social media platforms are an easy way to spread false content and disinformation, it also has the potential to enhance democratic participation and decrease the digital divide within societies.

P/CVE cannot always be reactionary in nature; however, it should also target the push/pull factors that increase an individual's vulnerability to be radicalized in the first place. The concern with disinformation among QAnon stems from the fact that this rhetoric fuels

their legitimacy and grip on society, allowing their reach to grow to exponential lengths. In order to combat conspiracy-based radicalization before it happens, the authors understand the need for a greater emphasis on "Media and Information Literacy (MIL)" in educational and developmental settings (Abu-Fadil, 2018). By understanding the psychological appeal behind QAnon, researchers will be able to discern techniques and strategies that could be used to dissuade future followers. Media and Information Literacy is a skill that is highly regarded by UNESCO in order to allow individuals the right of freedom of expression, right to seek, receive, and impact information and opinion, while ensuring all humans are able to understand how their beliefs may be impacted and shared by the information they are exposed to everyday (Abu-Fadil, 2018). Leveraging this framework as a disengagement and defection tool for those that are not fully radicalized can help minimize the growth and appeal of QAnon. Increased Media and Information Literacy allows individuals to build increased resiliency to disinformation and potential conspiracy-based radicalization (Abu-Fadil, 2018). The authors of this study highly suggest that MIL based learning modules become a core facet of U.S. national and local P/CVE efforts during this age of disinformation.

A former member of QAnon, Jitarth Jadeja, recounted his experience and outlined why he decided to forgo future involvement. Jadeja's initial interest in QAnon peaked in 2016 when he began to watch Senator Bernie Sanders speak about anti-establishment sentiment and inequality (Lord, 2020). Following the Presidential Election of Donald Trump, Jadeja stated, "That kind of really kicked it all off for me" (Lord, 2020). He began listening to conspiracy theory podcasts and reading articles online that diverged from mainstream media. He claimed he was in a deep depression and relied on QAnon to foster a sense of hope and purpose for the future. He described the impact that QAnon had on him as very "nefarious" and "insidious" because of how slowly he became disconnected from reality (Lord, 2020). However, the motivating factor that caused him to doubt QAnon was the inconsistencies he found among promises and theories argued by QAnon members. For example, a QAnon member had allegedly asked former President Trump to use the words "tip top" in one of his speeches, which he did (Lord, 2020). To some, this provides legitimacy to the movement while it

encourages others to dive deeper into what may have been a sheer coincidence. Jadeja claimed he started questioning everything that QAnon represented after realizing that former President Trump had used that exact phrase in the past (Lord, 2020). Leveraging inconsistencies among QAnon is an integral part in P/CVE efforts that practitioners can utilize when crafting disengagement strategies. This can serve as a starting point to dismantle the foundation of QAnon and encourage others to question their legitimacy.

## Conclusion

This report found that the plethora of disinformation sources coupled with easy access of the internet are the major catalysts that enabled the QAnon conspiracy to grow to an unprecedented threat level. This research emphasizes how the digital environment can create an abundance of disinformation, which presents a modern P/CVE threat of conspiracy-based radicalization. Efforts to disengage conspiracy-based extremists will largely have to take place online rather than in a physical setting, leading to numerous challenges. Firstly, it can be harder to connect with individuals and get them to perceive counternarratives as credible when presented in a digital environment that has already become an echo-chamber of disinformation. Secondly, the digital space presents a unique slippery slope of constitutionality versus security. Some researchers argue that online disinformation threatens democracy, while others argue that social media has the potential to enhance democratic participation, and that legal restrictions can curtail this opportunity.

Being able to strike a balance between protecting free speech while limiting the influence of disinformation is key to slowing QAnon's global spread. Conspiracy theories and disinformation are boundless and spread easily with great speed across social media platforms, therefore necessitating a collaborative effort that transcends all sectors of society. Governments, the private sector, and civil society actors can help counter the threat of QAnon on a multidisciplinary level.

The future implications of QAnon are not simply based on removing all of its related content but finding avenues to effectively disengage adherents and discourage the spread of disinformation. While breaking cycles of conspiracy theorizing, as well as group polarization and groupthink, are difficult, literature has begun to delve into understanding the multitude of mechanisms that lead individuals towards conspiracies and potentially violence. The mass amounts of misinformation and disinformation in the U.S. have accumulated to what some consider to be a public health crisis that has led to unprecedented divides and that will take time to rebuild and unify (Horgan, 2021). Despite what constitutes an agreed upon legal definition of domestic violent extremism and domestic terrorism, there appears to be reluctance in its application to right-wing extremism and conspiracy-based movements, such as QAnon. The conspiracy theory has evolved so much as to influence the actions and rhetoric of its followers to degrees similar to other violent extremist groups and terrorist organizations. Despite these similar traits, QAnon has not been formally classified as a domestic violent extremist movement or network. The discretionary use of labelling movements as VE and terrorism networks produces additional hindrances for law enforcement, practitioners, and social media companies to actively engage in defection and intervention efforts among extremist movements.

While countering violent extremism efforts do not generally focus on conspiracy theories, QAnon is radicalizing in a way to promote political and ideological violence and thus must be a target for P/CVE efforts globally. These efforts must include an intersection of continued research on QAnon developments. These efforts must also focus on psycho-social approaches to understanding the psychological and societal components on conspiracy followings in order to deter engagement in the first place, education and resilience-building against disinformation, and partnerships with tech companies to effectively limit the spread of disinformation and violent extremism online.

## References

"About-Q." (n.d.). *Q Alerts.* Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://qalerts.app/about/.

Absolutely everything you need to know to understand 4chan, the Internet's own bogeyman. (2014, September 25). *Washington Post*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/09/25/absolutely-everything-you-need-to-know-to-understand-4chan-the-internets-own-bogeyman/.

Abu-Fadil, M. (2018) Module 4L Combatting disinformation and misinformation through Media and Information Literacy (MIL). *Journalism, 'Fake News,' & Disinformatio*n, UNESCO. Retrieved February 1, 2021, from https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/module_4.pdf.

Allyn, B. (2019, July 22). Lawyer: Shooter wasn't trying to kill a mob boss. He was under "QAnon" Delusion. *NPR*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.npr.org/2019/07/22/744244166/shooters-lawyer-he-wasn-t-trying-to-kill-a-mob-boss-he-was-under-qanon-delusion.

Allyn, B. (2020, July 21). Twitter removes thousands of QAnon accounts, promises sweeping ban on the conspiracy. *NPR*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.npr.org/2020/07/21/894014810/twitter-removes-thousands-of-qanon-accounts-promises-sweeping-ban-on-the-conspir.

Amarasingam, A., & Argentino, M.A.(2020, July). The QAnon conspiracy theory: A security threat in the making? CTC Sentinel. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from https://ctc.usma.edu/the-qanon-conspiracy-theory-a-security-threat-in-the-making/.

Beckett, L. (2020, October 16). QAnon: a timeline of violence linked to the conspiracy theory. *The Guardian*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/15/qanon-violence-crimes-timeline.

Beer, T. (2020, November 7). Report: Armed QAnon supporter drove to Philadelphia to deliver 'truck full of fake votes'. *Forbes*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/11/07/report-armed-qanon-supporter-drove-to-philadelphia-to-deliver-truck-full-of-fake-votes/?sh=7213fa9338fc.

Blankstein, A. (2020, April 1). Feds charge man with intentionally derailing train near USNS Mercy. *NBC News*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/feds-charge-man-who-intentionally-derailed-train-near-usns-mercy-n1174461.

Borum, R. (2004). Psychology of terrorism. *National Criminal Justice Reference Services*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/208552.pdf.

Cecco, L. (2020, July 2). Armed man roamed Justin Trudeau's grounds for 13 minutes after ramming gates. *The Guardian*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/03/armed-man-roamed-justin-trudeaus-grounds-for-13-minutes-after-ramming-gates.

Cohen, Z., & Kaufman, E. (2021, February 17). Nearly 5,000 National Guard troops to remain in Washington through mid-March due to concerns about QAnon chatter. *CNN*. Retrieved February 19, 2021, from https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/17/politics/national-guard-qanon-concerns/index.html.

Covid a 'catalyst' for QAnon's rise in Europe. (2020, September 15). *France24*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.france24.com/en/20200915-covid-a-catalyst-for-qanon-s-rise-in-europe.

Departmental Personnel Security FAQs. (n.d.). D*epartment of Energy*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.energy.gov/ehss/security-policy-guidance-reports/departmental-personnel-security-faqs.

Dittrich, M., Grandjean, A., Jager, L., & Rathje, J. (2020). QAnon in Deutschland. *Amadeu Antonio Stiftung.* Retrieved February 26, 2021, from https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/01-dehate-report-QAnon.pdf.

Ethics guidelines for Internet-mediated Research. (2014). *The British Psychological Society*. Retrieved February 3, 2021, from http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/inf206-guidelines-for-internet-mediated-research.pdf.

Feeld, J. (2021, February 10). Podcaster explains QAnon belief behind March 4th. *CNN*. Retrieved February 19, 2020, from https://www.cnn.com/videos/media/2021/02/10/qanon-march-fourth-conspiracy-theory-julian-feeld-newday-camerota-vpx.cnn.

Fisher, M., Woodrow Cox, J., & Hermann, P. (2016, December 6). Pizzagate: From rumor, to hashtag, to gunfire in D.C. *Washington Post*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pizzagate-from-rumor-to-hashtag-to-gunfire-in-dc/2016/12/06/4c7def50-bbd4-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html.

Frennet, R., & Joost, S. (2021, January 25). Conclusion paper: The impact of conspiracy narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives. *RAN*. Retrieved February 1, 2021, from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran_c-n_concl_pap_impact_consp_narr_on_vrwe_vlwe_24-25_112021_en.pdf.

Goldenberg et. al. (2020, December 15). The Qanon conspiracy: Destroying families, dividing communities, undermining democracy. *Network Contagion Research Institute.* Retrieved February 19, 2021, from https://networkcontagion.us/wp-content/uploads/NCRI-%E2%80%93-The-QAnon-Conspiracy-FINAL.pdf

Greenspan, R. E. (2020, October 16). A USPS worker suspected of throwing away bags full of mail posted about the QAnon conspiracy theory. *Insider*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.insider.com/usps-worker-qanon-trump-investigation-posted-pittsburgh-conspiracy-theory-2020-10.

Greenspan, R. E. (2020, November 11). QAnon conspiracy theorists have been linked to 12 alleged crimes. Here are the incidents said to be connected to the movement and its followers. *Insider*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.insider.com/qanon-violence-crime-conspiracy-theory-us-allegation-arrest-killing-gun-2020-8.

Greenspan, R.E. (2021, March 3). QAnon influencers are attacking their movement's hyped March 4 event, calling it a false flag conspiracy theory. Business Insider. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from https://www.businessinsider.nl/qanon-influencers-are-attacking-their-movements-hyped-march-4-event-calling-it-a-false-flag-conspiracy-theory/

Griffin, A. (2020, October 7). What Is QAnon? The origins of bizarre conspiracy theory spreading online. *The Independent*. Retrieved November 13, 2020, from https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/qanon-explained-what-trump-russia-investigation-pizzagate-a8845226.html.

Hagerty, J. (2020, May 15). Former Illinois woman arrested with knives: 'I am the coronavirus.' *Rock River Times.* Retrieved December 5, 2020, from http://rockrivertimes.com/2020/05/15/former-illinois-woman-arrested-with-knives-i-am-the-coronavirus/.

Hameleers, M., Powell, T.E., Van Der Meer, T.G.L.A., & Bos, L. (2020, February 5). A Picture paints a thousand lies? Effects and mechanisms of multimodal disinformation and rebuttals disseminated via social media. *Political Communication*, 37(2), 281-301. DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2019.1674979.

Harrington, R., Hall, M., Gould, S., Haroun, A., Shamsian, J. (2021, February 18). More than 250 people have been charged in the Capitol insurrection so far. This searchable table shows them all. *The Insider.* Retrieved February 19, 2021, from https://www.insider.com/all-the-us-capitol-pro-trump-riot-arrests-charges-names-2021-1.

Harwell, D. (2021, January 20). QAnon believers grapple with doubt, spin new theories as Trump era ends. *The Washington Post.* Retrieved February 3, 2021, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/20/qanon-trump-era-ends/

Hoftsadter, R. (2019, August 15). The paranoid style in American politics. *Harpers Magazine*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.

Horgan, J. (2021). "An exceptionally dangerous time." *Georgia State University Research Magazine.* Retrieved February 3, 2021, from https://news.gsu.edu/research-magazine/an-exceptionally-dangerous-time-john-horgan-on-political-violence-extremism.

Innes, M. (2020, January 31). Techniques of disinfomration: Constructing and communicating "soft facts" after terrorism. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 71(2), 284-299. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12735.

IntelBrief: The future of QAnon: Fringe conspiracy or acute security threat? (2021, February 16). *The Soufan Center*. Retrieved February 19, 2021, from https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-february-16/.

Intelligence Drops. (2017, October 28). *Q Alerts*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://qalerts.app/?sortasc=1.

Janis, I. (1991). Groupthink. In *A First Look at Communication Theory* (pp. 235-246). New York: McGrawHill. http://williamwolff.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/griffin-groupthink-challenger.pdf.

Kennedy, M. (2017, June 22). 'Pizzagate' gunman sentenced to 4 years in prison. *NPR*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/06/22/533941689/pizzagate-gunman-sentenced-to-4-years-in-prison.

Kitchin, H.A. (2003). The tri-council policy statement and research in cyberspace: Research ethics, the internet, and revising a 'living document'. *Journal of Academic Ethics* 1(4): 397–418. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JAET.0000025671.83557.fa.

Kurzius, R. (2019, December 18). Man pleads guilty to arson at Comet Ping Pong. *dcist*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://dcist.com/story/19/12/18/man-pleads-guilty-to-arson-at-comet-ping-pong/.

Langer, R., & Beckman, S.C. (2005). Sensitive research topics: Netnography revisited. *Qualitative Market Research* 8(2): 189–203. https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750510592454.

Lavin, T. (2020, September 29). QAnon, blood libel, and the satanic panic. *The New Republic*. Retrieved November 14, 2020, from https://newrepublic.com/article/159529/qanon-blood-libel-satanic-panic.

Levine, S., & Gambino, L. (2021, February 13). Donald Trump acquitted in second impeachment trial. *The Guardian.* Retrieved February 19, 2021, from https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/13/donald-trump-acquitted-impeachment-trial.

Lord, B., & Naik, R. (2020, October 18). He went down the QAnon rabbit hole for almost two years. Here's how he got out. *CNN*. Retrieved February 21, 2021, from https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/16/tech/qanon-believer-how-he-got-out/index.html

Mansell, W. (2020, February 13). Man pleads guilty to terrorism charge after blocking Hoover Dam Bridge with armored truck. *ABC News*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://abcnews.go.com/US/man-pleads-guilty-terrorism-charge-blocking-bridge-armored/story?id=68955385.

Mapping Insecurity: Tracking Domestic Violent Extremism. (2021). The Soufan Center. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from https://thesoufancenter.org/mapping-insecurity/.

Markham, A., & Buchanan, E. (2012). Ethical decision-making and internet research. *Association of Internet Researchers Working Committee.* Retrieved February 3, 2021, from http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf.

Marwick, A., & Lewis, B. (2017, May 15). Media manipulation and disinformation online. *Data & Society.* Retrieved February 2, 2021, from https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/.

McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2008, July 3). Mechanisms of political radicalization: Pathways toward terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20(3), 415-433. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09546550802073367.

Ortutay, B. (2020, October 15). YouTube follows Twitter and Facebook with QAnon crackdown. *AP News.* Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://apnews.com/article/youtube-qanon-conspiracy-theories-ef03a889e68239de6692ce42666d97d8.

Pastor-Galindo, J., Nespoli, P., Gómez Mármol, F., & Martínez Pérez, G. (2020). The not yet exploited goldmine of OSINT: Opportunities, open challenges and future trends. *IEEE Access*, 8, pp. 10282-10304. doi:10.1109/ACCESS.2020.2965257.

QAnon conspiracy theory on James Comey shuts school festival. (2019, May 10). *BBC News.* Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48231708.

Q/POTUS Deltas. (n.d.). *Conspiracy no more*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://conspiracynomore.com/q-potus-deltas/.

Ray, S. (2020, October 19). QAnon-conspiracy forum 8kun back online with help from Russian internet firm. *Forbes*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.forbes.com/sites/siladityaray/2020/10/19/qanon-conspiracy-forum-8kun-back-online-with-help-from-russian-internet-firm/?sh=58701a133e90.

Research Resources. (n.d.). *Q Alerts*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://qalerts.app/research/.

Robb, A. (2017, November 16). Anatomy of a fake news scandal. *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved November 15, 2020, from https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/anatomy-of-a-fake-news-scandal-125877/.

Rogers, K. (2021, March 26). QAnon has become the cult that cries wolf. FiveThirtyEight. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/qanon-has-become-the-cult-that-cries-wolf/.

Rottweiler, B., & Gill, P. (2020, October 20). Conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions: The Contingent effects of self-efficacy, self- control, and law-related morality. *Terrorism and Political Violence*. DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288.

Roulet, T.J., Gill, M., Stenger, S., & Gill, D.J. (2017). Reconsidering the value of covert research: The role of ambiguous consent in participant observation. Forthcoming at *Organizational Research Methods*. https://ssrn.com/abstract=2919049.

Rousis, G. (2018). The truth is out there: The use of conspiracy theories by radical violent extremist organizations. *UNF Graduate Theses and Dissertations*, 822. Retrieved February 1, 2020, from https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1871&context=etd.

Rubin, O., Bruggeman, L., & Steakin, W. (2021, January 19). QAnon emerges as recurring theme of criminal cases tied to US Capitol siege. ABC News. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from https://abcnews.go.com/US/qanon-emerges-recurring-theme-criminal-cases-tied-us/story?id=75347445.

Sabin, S. (2021, February 2). Belief in QAnon wavers slightly among adults after capitol riots, inauguration. Morning Consult. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from https://morningconsult.com/2021/02/02/qanon-beliefs-polling/.

Salahi, L. (2020, June 13). Father livestreams police chase with 5 kids in van. *NBC Boston*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.nbcboston.com/news/local/father-livestreams-police-chase-with-5-kids-in-van/2142529/.

Sales, B. (2020, September 20). QAnon an old form of anti-Semitism in a new package, say experts. *Times of Israel*. Retrieved November 13, 2020, from https://www.timesofisrael.com/qanon-is-an-old-form-of-anti-semitism-in-a-new-package-say-experts/.

Schiffrin, A., & Goodman, E. P. (2019, August). AI startups and the fight against online disinformation. *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, (22). https://www.gmfus.org/file/28190/download.

A Small Sampling of QProofs. (n.d.). *Conspiracy no more*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://conspiracynomore.com/a-small-sampling-of-qproofs/.

Sommer, W. (2018, August 11). QAnon referenced by man arrested for threatening to kill Trump. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.thedailybeast.com/qanon-referenced-by-man-arrested-for-threatening-to-kill-trump.

Sommer, W. (2019, January 9). Qanon-believing Proud Boy accused of murdering 'Lizard' brother with sword. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.thedailybeast.com/proud-boy-member-accused-of-murdering-his-brother-with-a-sword-4?ref=home.

Sommer, W. (2020, July 31). Avenatti targeted in person by QAnon, the crazy pro-Trump conspiracy theory. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.thedailybeast.com/avenatti-targeted-in-person-by-qanon-the-crazy-pro-trump-conspiracy-theory.

Sugiura, L., Wiles, R., & Pope, C. (2016, July 6). Ethical challenges in online research: Public/private perceptions. *Research Ethics*, 13(3-4), 184-199. Doi:10.1177/1747016116650720.

Sunstein, C. (1999, December). The law of group polarization. *University of Chicago Law School, John M. Olin Law & Economics Working Paper*, 91. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.199668.

Turner, M.A, & Smaldino, P.E (2020, July). Stubborn extremism as a potential pathway to group polarization. Conference: Proceedings of the 42nd Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society.  Retrieved on December 6, 2020, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342153646_Stubborn_extremism_as_a_potential_pathway_to_group_polarization

The use of the Internet for terrorist purposes. (2012). *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*. Retrieved February 3, 2021, from https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf.

U.S. NRC. (2020). "Information security." Retrieved on March 20, 2020, from https://www.nrc.gov/security/info-security.html.

van Prooijen, J.-W. (2015, October 13). Sometimes inclusion breeds suspicion: Self-uncertainty and belongingness predict belief in conspiracy theories. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(3), 267-279. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2157.

van Prooijen, J.-W., & Douglas, K. M. (2017, June 29). Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations. *Memory Studies*, 10(3), 323-333. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017701615.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018, March 9). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146-1151. https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146.

Webb, H., Burnap, P., Procter, R., Rana, O., Stahl, B. C., Williams, M., Housley, W., Edwards, A., & Jirotka, M. (2016). Digital wildfires? Propagation, verification, regulation and responsible innovation. *ACM Transactions on Information Systems*, 34(3). https://doi.org/10.1145/2893478.

Wendling, M. (2021, January 6). QAnon is it and where did it come from? *BBC*. Retrieved March 20, 2020, from https://www.bbc.com/news/53498434.

What is QAnon? Explaining the bizarre rightwing conspiracy theory. (2018, July 30). *The Guardian*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jul/30/qanon-4chan-rightwing-conspiracy-theory-explained-trump.

Wiles, T. (2018, September 12). Conspiracy theories inspire vigilante justice in Tucson. *High Country News*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/pizzagate-gunman-pleads-guilty-carrying-firearm-d-c-restaurant-n738171.

Williams, P. (2017, March 24). 'Pizzagate' gunman pleads guilty to carrying firearm into D.C. restaurant. *NBC News.* Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/pizzagate-gunman-pleads-guilty-carrying-firearm-d-c-restaurant-n738171.

Winter, J. (2019, August 1). Exclusive: FBI document warns conspiracy theories are a new domestic terrorism threat. *Yahoo News*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://news.yahoo.com/fbi-

documents-conspiracy-theories-terrorism-160000507.html?soc_src=hl-
viewer&soc_trk=tw&guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGhlZGFpbHliZWFzdC5jb
20v&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAIBfZsZ-
kFoR4aVPKP4dRCiw7VGHBBYFAPT7w7mQ_6HuWpPr5PFNlDs.

YouTube. (2020, January 20). Ultimate QProofs- Volume 1. *YouTube*. Retrieved December 5, 2020,
from https://youtu.be/Z15Xt1vGXns.

Zadrozny, B., & Collins, B. (2018, August 14). QAnon explained: The antisemitic conspiracy theory
gaining traction around the world. *NBC News*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from
https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-
n900531.

### Appendix A.  Timeline of Criminal Incidents and Violence Related to QAnon

**December 4, 2016- Washington D.C.-** Edgar Welch, a North Carolina resident, drove to Washington D.C. and entered the Comet Ping Pong pizza shop armed with an AR-15. Believing that the pizza shop was housing a child sex ring in a basement, which the facility did not have, Welch shot off the lock to a door. Nobody was injured in the incident. Welch was immediately arrested and pleaded guilty to federal and local weapon charges in March of 2017. The incident is well-known as the "pizzagate" conspiracy (Williams, 2017).

**May 2018 & August 2019- Tucson, AZ-** Michael Lewis Arthur Meyer, a known QAnon supporter, was charged in August of 2019 for stealing and damaging water tanks at Cemex plant, known for distributing water to migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Meyer was previously on Tucson police radar for claiming he had discovered a bunker that was being used by child sex traffickers. The site, which had old clothes, a toilet seat, and a septic tank, was previously the site of a homeless camp (Wiles, 2018).

**June 15, 2018- Clark County, NV-** QAnon supporter Matthew Wright blocked off a bridge near the Hoover Dam with his vehicle. The vehicle was found to have two military-grade rifles, two handguns, and 900 rounds of ammunition inside. A video recorded from inside the vehicle showed Wright claiming he was unhappy that mass arrests had not been made yet against the cabal of pedophiles Q had been exposing. Wright was found guilty of terrorism-related charges in February of 2020. He continued to write to former President Trump from prison, using QAnon related expressions frequently (Beckett, 2020).

**July 2018- Newport Beach, CA-** Michael Avenatti, a high-profile lawyer who represented actress Stormy Daniels, was targeted by a QAnon drop in July 2018. The drop included images of a man outside of Avenatti's office building, holding an unidentifiable object. The drop led to increased threats against Avenatti, and police were called to investigate the incident (Sommer, 2020).

**July 31, 2018- Berwick, PA-** 55-year-old Jeffrey Gardner Boyd of Oklahoma was arrested for making terroristic threats to kill former President Trump, Ivanka Trump, Donald Trump Jr., and Jared Kushner. Boyd told a local woman he had driven to Pennsylvania that he was convinced a local woman who posts online about QAnon was being held hostage by the deep state. When he found the woman was not being held hostage, he told her he was planning to drive to Washington D.C. to shoot the former President and his family and that the CIA was controlling his mind. He was found in his truck with a gun and ammunition after the woman reported him to authorities (Sommer, 2018).

**December 19, 2018- Springfield, Ill-** A California man was arrested after alleging he was going to 'blow up a satanic temple monument' in Springfield, Illinois. According to an FBI Bulletin, the man had been found in possession of bomb making materials with the intent to construct an explosive device in his car after driving to Illinois. The report stated the intent was to "make Americans aware of 'Pizzagate' and the New World Order, who were dismantling society (Winter, 2019).

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

**January 6, 2019- Seattle, WA-** 26-year-old Proud Boy and QAnon supporter, Buckey Wolfe, murdered his brother with a sword. He told dispatch at the time that "God told me he was a lizard." Wolfe was acquitted of charges due to an insanity plea (Sommer, 2019).

**January 23, 2019- Washington D.C.-** Just over two years after Edgar Welch entered Comet Ping Pong armed with an AR-15, a California man set the same pizza shop on fire. Ryan Jaselskis, who was charged with the arson, had posted a video to his parents' YouTube account one hour prior, spewing sentiments that "the world is run by a Satanic global pedophile ring fronted by most major celebrities and Hillary Clinton" (Kurzius, 2019).

**March 13, 2019- Staten Island, NY-** 24-year-old Anthony Comello was charged with the murder of one of the leaders of the notorious Gambino crime family. Comello shot and killed Francesco Cali outside of his home. Court documents shared that Comello was at the time acting under QAnon delusions that people associated with organized crime were a part of the deep state (Allyn, 2019).

**May 9, 2019- Grass Valley, CA-** A QProof theory became centered around the Grass Valley Charter School in California, leading to the shutdown of a major fundraiser event over security concerns. The theory assumed that FBI Director James Comey was going to stage a terrorist attack at the school's upcoming fundraising event. While the claim was outlandish, the school cancelled the event in case of attracting QAnon supporters to the event ("QAnon conspiracy theory on James Comey," 2019).

**September 25, 2019- Sedona, AZ-** A QAnon supporter, Timothy Larson, was arrested for vandalizing the Chapel of the Holy Hill while yelling claims that the church was supporting human trafficking (Beckett, 2020).

**December 30, 2019- Kalispell, MT-** Colorado woman Cynthia Abcug, 50, was arrested and charged by Montana police with felony conspiracy to commit kidnapping after attempting to plot the kidnapping of her son from child-welfare services with support from other QAnon believers (Beckett, 2020).

**March 26, 2020- Kentucky-** A stark QAnon believer and sovereign citizen adherent, Neely Blanchard, was charged with the kidnapping of her two daughters, who are in their grandmothers' full custody. She argued her beliefs gave her the legal right to her children (Beckett, 2020).

**April 2, 2020- Los Angeles, CA-** The FBI charged train operator Eduardo Morena with purposefully derailing a freight train, which was traveling at high speeds, near a Navy hospital ship. Morena told investigators he believed the ship was being used in part for a "government takeover" (Blankstein, 2020).

**April 30, 2020- New York, NY-** An Illinois woman, Jessica Prim, drove to NYC while livestreaming on Facebook making threats against Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, and Tony Podesta. Prim had previously posted online about QAnon. She was found with 18 knives in her car as she approached the docked USS Intrepid in New York City (Hagerty, 2020).
.

**June 11, 2020- Boston, MA-** 29-year-old Apalus Slyman led police on a 20-mile police chase in Massachusetts and New Hampshire while livestreaming to Facebook rants about QAnon. His five children were also in the car during the incident (Salahi, 2020).

**July 3, 2020- Ottawa, CAN-** A Canadian Ranger who had previously posted online about multiple conspiracy theories, including QAnon and the coronavirus, rammed his truck into the gates of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's residence. He was charged with 22 charges related to illegal firearm possessions (Cecco, 2020).

**August 12, 2020- Waco, TX-** A 30-year-old woman, Cecilia Fulbright, intentionally chased down and crashed into a vehicle because she thought she was chasing a pedophile and rescuing a girl from being trafficked (Beckett, 2020).

**September 25, 2020- Oklahoma City, OK-** Joshua Jennings was arrested and charged with murdering his girlfriend's 10-month-old baby. Jennings Facebook often shared posts with the #saveourchildren hashtag. (Greenspan, 2020).

**October 1, 2020- Salt Lake City, UT-** Emily Jolley of Utah abducted her 6-year-old son from his father, who has sole custody. Jolley travelled to Oregon when she was arrested by authorities. Jolley was an avid adherent to QAnon and often posted on her social media (Beckett, 2020).

**October 16, 2020- Pittsburgh, PA-** A USPS mail carrier, Sean Troesch, who had posted about QAnon is currently under investigation for allegedly throwing away bags of mail prior to the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election (Greenspan, "A USPS worker," 2020).

**November 5, 2020- Philadelphia, PA-** Two Virginia men were arrested after driving a truck with fake ballots and two loaded handguns to the Pennsylvania Convention Center where election ballots were being counted. The QAnon followers said they were concerned over election fraud. Police also found an AR-style rifle and 160 rounds of ammunition. Two QAnon emblems and #WWG1WGA were visible on the truck the men were driving (Beer, 2020).

**January 6, 2021- Washington D.C.-** On the day of the presidential election certification process following the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, rioters began breaching the security at the United States Capitol building. What is being called the Capitol Insurrection, it resulted in the death of 5 people, including a D.C. police officer. More than 260 people have since been charged with crimes related to the riots and attacks, many connected to anti-government, white supremacist, and QAnon movements (Harrington et al., 2021; "IntelBrief," 2021).

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory

## About the JD Journal for Deradicalization

The JD Journal for Deradicalization is the world's only peer reviewed periodical for the theory and practice of deradicalization with a wide international audience. Named an "essential journal of our times" (Cheryl LaGuardia, Harvard University) the JD's editorial board of expert advisors includes some of the most renowned scholars in the field of deradicalization studies, such as Prof. Dr. John G. Horgan (Georgia State University); Prof. Dr. Tore Bjørgo (Norwegian Police University College); Prof. Dr. Mark Dechesne (Leiden University); Prof. Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss (American University Washington); Prof. Dr. Julie Chernov Hwang (Goucher College); Prof. Dr. Marco Lombardi, (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore Milano); Dr. Paul Jackson (University of Northampton); Professor Michael Freeden, (University of Nottingham); Professor Hamed El-Sa'id (Manchester Metropolitan University); Prof. Sadeq Rahimi (University of Saskatchewan, Harvard Medical School), Dr. Omar Ashour (University of Exeter), Prof. Neil Ferguson (Liverpool Hope University), Prof. Sarah Marsden (Lancaster University), Prof. Maura Conway (Dublin City University), Dr. Kurt Braddock (Pennsylvania State University), Dr. Michael J. Williams (The Science of P/CVE), and Dr. Aaron Y. Zelin (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), Prof. Dr. Adrian Cherney (University of Queensland).

For more information please see: www.journal-derad.com

Twitter: @JD_JournalDerad
Facebook: www.facebook.com/deradicalisation

The JD Journal for Deradicalization is a proud member of the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).

ISSN: 2363-9849

Editor in Chief: Daniel Koehler

Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed: QAnon Conspiracy Theory