The Art of Baking: How QAnon Folk Media Turned Crumbs into a Mass Conspiracy Culture

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: The Art of Baking: How QAnon Folk Media Turned Crumbs into a Mass Conspiracy Culture

QAnon's umbrella conspiracy culture operates through a multi-scaled folk media infrastructure constituted by an array of distinct subcultures. Because QAnon offers a broad variety of online subcultures and corresponding internet communities (each with their own flavor of QAnon), this conspiracist movement has been able to attract and unite a wide variety of audiences without necessarily requiring ideological unity amongst them. In their role as lead interpreters, QAnon influencers position themselves as central nodes around which social media networks and distinct QAnon subcultures form. QAnon meaning-making occurs largely through the collaborative process of "baking", a term which refers to a variety of do-it-yourself media strategies used to interpret, decode, and spread the esoteric messages ("crumbs") supposedly embedded in the jumbled posts of the anonymous forum user known as "Q Clearance Patriot". Baking combines long-standing folkloric traditions—such as the collective production of shared symbols, myths, and vernaculars—with the many formats and platforms offered by social media in order to advance QAnon narratives.

QAnon incorporates many pre-existing vernaculars and narratives from both online and offline extremist cultures. First appearing on the infamous /pol/ ("politically incorrect") board of the anonymous internet forum 4chan, QAnon's lore draws heavily upon tropes from right-wing internet forum cultures, as well as centuries-old white supremacist myths. QAnon claims to offer truths about widespread abuses of power, while also misdirecting critical attention away from systemic analysis of historical and material configurations of power/domination. Instead, QAnon primarily advances theories of ontological good versus evil, personified by an alleged secret war between good and evil individuals involved in grand conspiracies. QAnon calls for a "Great Awakening" to the many injustices of the world, while simultaneously undermining the idea that oppressive systems like capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy drive many of these injustices. Thus, QAnon defends the ultra-conservative ideologies of hardcore American self-identified patriots (explicitly or implicitly constructed as white/Christian) by *reacting against* perceived threats of transformation to an imagined vision of the traditional great nation.

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Some of the loneliest and most challenging years of my life took place while I was writing this dissertation. My deepest love and gratitude for the other graduate students who have served as my mentors, my friends, and my family throughout all of it. In particular, my fellow first-generation and queer community members have been a critical source of acceptance and support that kept me going, even when I wanted to quit. Additionally, I want to thank the many inspiring organizers who I have learned from and worked with; nothing has felt as impactful as my experiences actually fighting for a better world alongside others engaged in shared struggle.

Finally, I want to thank the members of my committee and my other faculty mentors for helping me to tackle this enormous task. I am grateful that you offered me your knowledge while also helping me to figure out what knowledge I could contribute.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the Palestinian students and faculty who are currently undergoing scholasticide, according to UN experts. I especially dedicate my work to those Palestinian students who should have graduated this year but could not, either because they were killed, or because every university in Gaza has been completely destroyed by bombs.

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INTRODUCTION - Reactionary Conspiracism and the American "Politics of Truth"

"So, with the revelation of MASSIVE & WIDESPREAD FRAUD & DECEPTION in working closely with Big Tech Companies, the DNC, & the Democrat Party, do you throw the Presidential Election Results of 2020 OUT and declare the RIGHTFUL WINNER, or do you have a NEW ELECTION? A Massive Fraud of this type and magnitude allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution. Our great "Founders" did not want, and would not condone, False & Fraudulent Elections!" — Donald J. Trump in a Truth Social post[1] dated December 3, 2022

"The Great Awakening ('Freedom of Thought'), was designed and created not only as a backchannel to the public (away from the longstanding 'mind' control of the corrupt & heavily biased media) to endure future events through transparency and regeneration of individual thought (breaking the chains of 'group-think'), but, more importantly, aid in the construction of a vehicle (a 'ship') that provides the scattered ('free thinkers') with a 'starter' new social-networking platform which allows for freedom of thought, expression, and patriotism or national pride (the feeling of love, devotion and sense of attachment to a homeland and alliance with other citizens who share the same sentiment). When 'non-dogmatic' information becomes FREE & TRANSPARENT it becomes a threat to those who attempt to control the narrative and/or the stable. When you are awake, you stand on the outside of the stable ('group-think' collective), and have 'free thought'...When you are awake, you are able to clearly see." — "Q" in Q-Drop #3906, dated March 28, 2020

The question of what exactly constitutes the particular American "politics of truth" has gained new urgency within the context of rampant political conspiracism in the United States. Amidst growing distrust of institutional authorities, politicians, and news media in the 21st century, we are now facing a national crisis[2] of faith in what Foucault[3] might refer to as "the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (131). Of course, paranoia

[1] Maggie Astor reported on Trump's Truth Social posts for *The New York Times* in "Trump's Call for 'Termination' of Constitution Draws Rebukes", published December 4, 2022.

[2] See: "Epistemic Crisis" from Benkler, Faris, Roberts, *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics* (2018).

[3] In *Power/Knowledge* (1980), Foucault suggests: "...truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power… Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (131).

about the "truth" is well-warranted in many instances, given the United States' long and dark history of actual cover-ups, corruption, and real conspiracies orchestrated by those in power. However, many conspiracy theories about the abuse of power fail to actually articulate a theory of power that reflects material histories and systemic configurations of domination—inevitably leading to a warped analysis of the root structural causes of abuse, corruption, and exploitation.

In particular, the influence of the unsubstantiated QAnon online conspiracy theory has grown at every level of American political life since its online inception in 2017, from the halls of Congress to local school board meetings[4]. A March 2021 poll from a nonprofit/nonpartisan research group called the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) reported that 15% of Americans believed that "the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshiping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation," and a whopping 20% of Americans agreed that "there is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders.". When the same survey was given a year later in March 2022, researchers found that "nearly one in five Americans (16%) are QAnon believers, a number that held steady throughout 2021. The proportion of Americans who buy into QAnon theories increases among Republicans, as one in four (25%) are QAnon believers, compared to 14% of independents and 9% of Democrats" ("Understanding QAnon's Connection to American Politics, Religion, and Media Consumption").

The rapid spread of "folk media" conspiracy theories like QAnon can be understood (at least in part) as an effect of our increasingly fractured new media sphere, which is made up of countless immersive "pseudoworlds" and "spectacles" as Guy Debord put it in *Society of the*

[4] House Representatives Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert are the most famous Q supporters to take public office (and to hold onto it through multiple terms). In June 2021, *Business Insider* reported that at least 36 Congressional candidates running in the 2022 midterm election had espoused QAnon beliefs, with one of the most prominent being the defeated Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano. While many QAnon-linked candidates were defeated at the national level in the 2022 election, many others won local offices. See reporting by *Newsweek*: "QAnon 'Not Going Away Anytime Soon' Despite Poor Midterms Performance" (November 16, 2022).

Spectacle (10). Driven by late-stage neoliberal capitalism and globalization, the American new media ecology is built to spread and sell any worldview that keeps eyes on screens[5]. In addition to performing well within the capital-driven attention economy of social media[6], conspiracy theories also perform well within the American political economy more broadly, as Donald Trump's continued political success has shown[7].

Within such a context, how is the average person supposed to determine which interpretations of political reality are "true"? Are some perspectives more "correct" or "legitimate" than others? Who decides? These kinds of philosophical and epistemological questions about the relativity of truth, perspective, and authority have long been debated. In book

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[5] For more on social media economics and the market of attention, see also: Beck and Davenport, *The Attention Economy Understanding the New Currency of Business* (2002); Kende, *The Flip Side of Free: Understanding the Economics of the Internet* (2021); and Hu, *Digital Lethargy: Dispatches from an Age of Disconnection* (2024).

[6] Diaz Ruiz argues in "Disinformation on digital media platforms: A market-shaping approach" (2023) that "disinformation is an expected outcome, not breakage, of the current media market in digital platforms" that can largely be attributed to their business models and other "practices of media markets" (1-2). As a result of the profitability of disinformation, Diaz Ruiz concludes that platform efforts to prevent the spread of disinformation "may be incompatible with their business models" (7). Diaz Ruiz also cites Dholakia et al. (2023) who argue: "In the age of superabundant information, the emergence and rapid ascendance of misinformation, is not paradoxical… with profit-driven media, the conditions for the rise of misinformation have been in place for decades, and social media have given a massive boost to these conditions" (5).

[7] The media ecosystem between Trump and the QAnon conspiracy culture has been mutually beneficial for both Trump's political aspirations and for QAnon's overall level of influence. Although Trump's first run for office in 2016 pre-dates QAnon's founding in 2017, his first campaign played upon fear-mongering around topics like immigration and "deep state" corruption (ideas which figure strongly into the QAnon conspiracy theories that followed). Q-drops have always been highly deferential to Trump, and "Q" has explicitly claimed to be a high-ranking official aligned with Trump's political goals. QAnon first appeared in mainstream national news media during a "breakout moment" at a 2018 Trump rally in Tampa, Florida (See: Bank et al. for *New York Times*: "Explaining QAnon, the Internet Conspiracy Theory That Showed Up at a Trump Rally" 1 August 2018).

Trump rallies have since frequently featured QAnon music, speakers, and motifs. In October 2017, Trump made references to "the calm before the storm" during a White House press briefing (See: Johnson for *Washington Post*: "'What storm, Mr. President?' Trump puts world on edge with cryptic cliffhanger"). Trump has also frequently reshared X (formerly Twitter) posts from QAnon conspiracy theorists (See: Nguyen for *Politico*: "Trump isn't secretly winking at QAnon. He's retweeting its followers" 12 July 2020). Moreover, after being banned from X following the January 6 Insurrection, Trump's presence on alternative platforms like TruthSocial have become increasingly explicit in their conspiratory nature and ties to QAnon (See: Klepper and Johnson for *AP News*: "Trump openly embraces, amplifies QAnon conspiracy theories" 16 September 2022). Most notably, Trump's constant promotion of the 2020 election fraud conspiracy has been incorporated as a major touchstone within QAnon's conspiratory landscape overall.

III of *The Will to Power* (1901) Friedrich Nietzsche speculates on the subjectivity of perception, going so far as to suggest that:

> "facts is precisely what there is not, only *interpretations*... In so far as the word 'knowledge' has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings—'Perspectivism.' It is our needs that interpret the world… each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm. (267)

In Nietzsche's view, knowledge-production is ultimately shaped by an underlying drive towards power—the drive to grasp "a certain amount of reality in order to become a master of it, in order to press it into service" (266-267). Because our needs/desires shape our subjective perspectives and sense of what is "real", he argues that "knowledge works as a tool of power" (266).

Building upon such questions of power and knowledge, Michel Foucault provides an historic account of how Western scientific discourses and institutions have been shaped by Western systems of domination. In an interview recorded within *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (1980), Foucault suggests:

> Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power… Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (131)

By invoking phrases like "regime of truth" and "politics of truth", Foucault calls our attention to the radical historical contingency of knowledge, discourse, and institutional authority.

The concept that "truth isn't outside power" and that power seeks to "press" knowledge into its service has remained important for contemporary scholars who argue that oppressive structures like racism, sexism, and classism shape dominant cultural perceptions of truth/knowledge[8] in ways that uphold existing arrangements of authority. Donna Haraway points out in "Situated Knowledges" (1988) that all knowledge and knowers are "situated" within particular configurations of power and conditions of knowledge-production. As a result, Haraway suggests that "feminist objectivity" must take the form of "situated knowledges" which address the simultaneous needs for a "an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world" (579).

In further exploring the question of situated knowledges, Black feminists[9] have explicitly argued that the dominance of white perspectives within systems of power/oppression have deeply shaped mainstream practices of knowledge-production, often leading to the replication of white supremacist structures of thought within institutions of knowledge—despite attempts at objectivity in domains such as science. On the question of addressing such deeply embedded epistemological/historical perspectives, Katherine McKittrick suggests in *Dear Science and Other Stories* (2021) that "A black sense of place is a diasporic-plantocratic-black geography that reframes what we know by reorienting and honoring *where* we know from" (107). In this

[8] In *Racism Without Racists* (2003) Eduardo Bonilla-Silva memorably quotes John Thompson's *Studies in Theory and Ideology* (1984) in order to argue that ideology might best be understood as "meaning in the service of power" (74). Bonilla-Silva further suggests in footnote 4 that ideology therefore must "be countered with power" rather than "counter-ideological battles alone" (313).

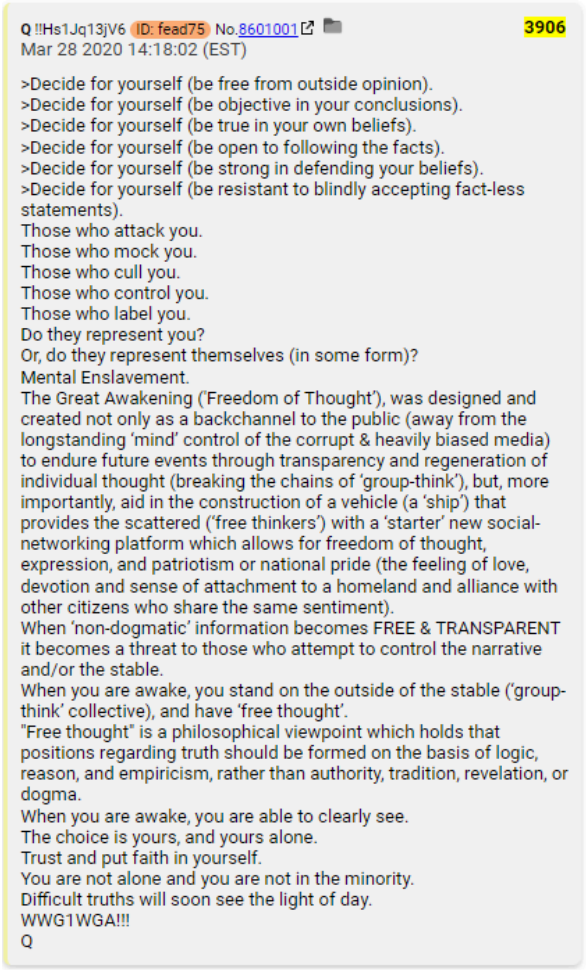
[9] For example, Patricia Hill Collins' articulation of Black feminist epistemology in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) made it clear that the lived experiences of oppressed people (particularly Black women) are an important source of information about systemic oppression that must be understood as legitimate knowledge.

sense, the "truth" might be considered a matter of recognition and responsibility for our situatedness, including our situatedness within broader political/historical configurations.

The Politics of QAnon's Core Narratives

As I hope to have demonstrated above, the question of how an entire society develops a distinct "politics of truth" provides a compelling direction for further exploring the question of conspiracy theories associated with QAnon have become so alarmingly influential within the American context since its inception in 2017. In the case of the QAnon conspiracy culture, the promise of clarity, enlightenment, and ultimate truth comes in the form of the so-called Great Awakening. Take for example Q-Drop #3906, a March 28, 2020 post[10] which appeared amidst the initial COVID-19 shutdowns in the United States:

[10] WayBack Web Archive copy of all Q-drops featuring the phrase "Great Awakening" (including Q-Drop #3906) https://web.archive.org/web/20230508203620/https://QAnon.pub/?q=great%20awakening



Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6 ID: fead75 No.8601001 3906
Mar 28 2020 14:18:02 (EST)

>Decide for yourself (be free from outside opinion).
>Decide for yourself (be objective in your conclusions).
>Decide for yourself (be true in your own beliefs).
>Decide for yourself (be open to following the facts).
>Decide for yourself (be strong in defending your beliefs).
>Decide for yourself (be resistant to blindly accepting fact-less statements).
Those who attack you.
Those who mock you.
Those who cull you.
Those who control you.
Those who label you.
Do they represent you?
Or, do they represent themselves (in some form)?
Mental Enslavement.
The Great Awakening ('Freedom of Thought'), was designed and created not only as a backchannel to the public (away from the longstanding 'mind' control of the corrupt & heavily biased media) to endure future events through transparency and regeneration of individual thought (breaking the chains of 'group-think'), but, more importantly, aid in the construction of a vehicle (a 'ship') that provides the scattered ('free thinkers') with a 'starter' new social-networking platform which allows for freedom of thought, expression, and patriotism or national pride (the feeling of love, devotion and sense of attachment to a homeland and alliance with other citizens who share the same sentiment).
When 'non-dogmatic' information becomes FREE & TRANSPARENT it becomes a threat to those who attempt to control the narrative and/or the stable.
When you are awake, you stand on the outside of the stable ('group-think' collective), and have 'free thought'.
"Free thought" is a philosophical viewpoint which holds that positions regarding truth should be formed on the basis of logic, reason, and empiricism, rather than authority, tradition, revelation, or dogma.
When you are awake, you are able to clearly see.
The choice is yours, and yours alone.
Trust and put faith in yourself.
You are not alone and you are not in the minority.
Difficult truths will soon see the light of day.
WWG1WGA!!!
Q

Figure 1: Screenshot of Q-Drop #3906 (28 March 2020)

Alt Text: A jumbled wall of text, including emphatic punctuation (!!!!), leading statements ("Decide for yourself (be free from outside opinion)") and QAnon acronyms (such as WWG1WGA). These stylistic choices are typical of Q-drops. In full, the text reads:
>Decide for yourself (be free from outside opinion).
>Decide for yourself (be objective in your conclusions).
>Decide for yourself (be true in your own beliefs).
>Decide for yourself (be open to following the facts).
>Decide for yourself (be strong in defending your beliefs).
>Decide for yourself (be resistant to blindly accepting fact-less statements).
Those who attack you.
Those who mock you.
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When you are awake, you are able to clearly see.
The choice is yours, and yours alone.
Trust and put faith in yourself.
You are not alone and you are not in the minority.
Difficult truths will soon see the light of day.
WWG1WGA!!!
Q"

In this post, the mysterious anonymous forum user who refers to themselves as "Q Clearance Patriot" (or Q for short) claimed that their online posts were part of a broader strategy to enlighten the masses. Q suggests: "The Great Awakening ('Freedom of Thought'), was designed and created… as a backchannel to the public (away from the longstanding 'mind' control of the corrupt & heavily biased media)... When you are awake, you stand on the outside of the stable ('group-think' collective), and have 'free thought'... When you are awake, you are able to clearly see". In this way, "Q" presents the QAnon conspiracy theory as a kind of consciousness-raising effort meant to help the brainwashed masses achieve "freedom of thought" and autonomy against the tyranny of institutions and authorities.

In practice, however, QAnon conspiracy theories generally work to rationalize existing configurations of power/domination *in reaction against* movements for social justice and anticapitalist reforms. Although all conspiracy theories under the QAnon umbrella are united by the common enemy of shadowy "elites" who abuse their power, QAnon's critique of powerful elites is specifically *not* a criticism of classism, racism, or cisheteropatriarchy—the underlying

systems responsible for the profoundly unequal distribution of power/exploitation/abuse within the US context. Instead, QAnon offers a conception of power that is fundamentally revisionist and obfuscatory: a story about ontologically evil individuals and groups whose defeat will return America to its imagined glory days, thus resolving the ills of society without any deeper structural transformations. The collective identity of QAnon patriots is thus imagined through the folkloric narrative of an existential conflict driven by evil people, not systemic oppression.

This limited perspective on the causes of (and solutions to) societal problems aligns with Frank Mintz's definition of "conspiracism" in *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right: Race, Conspiracy, and Culture* (1985) as "belief in the primacy of conspiracies in the unfolding of history" (4). The primary driver of societal problems like poverty or abuse is said to be a conspiracy of evil-doers, rather than a system which perpetuates poverty and rewards abuse. Thus, as a highly nationalistic conservative cultural movement, QAnon aspires towards a patriotic resurrection of an old American order—not a revolution towards a new one. If anything, the visions of structural transformation offered by feminists, antiracists, and anticapitalists are interpreted as evil schemes by elites (and their puppet armies) to destroy the great nation (see, for example, QAnon influencer @RedPill78's claims in Chapter 1, Case Study #3). QAnon believers aren't actually against structural hierarchies or authoritarianism itself, as seems obvious from their intense support of Donald Trump's politics. Instead of protesting the broader system of power/domination itself, they just want a specific "traditional" configuration of power.

Because this ideologically motivated dynamic of *reaction against* worldviews perceived as a threat to the "traditional" arrangement of American society is so fundamental to QAnon's structure of thought and conception of power/domination, I characterize QAnon specifically as a form of *reactionary conspiracism*. In this work, the phrase "reactionary conspiracism" describes

the convergence of the specific structures of thought and feeling which are characteristic to both reactionary ideologies—broadly defined here as traditionalist, conservative views in opposition to broadly progressive political reform and social change—and conspiracy theories. In part, my work seeks to address a gap in which studies of conspiracy theories have often failed to account for the specific ways in which conspiracism enables historical revisionism, and by extension, enables right-wing ideologies which recast those with historical/systemic power (such as white Americans) as the actual victims of oppression. More simply put: conspiracy theories propose that bad things happen because villains with evil intentions are trying to harm good people; right-wing ideologies offer villains who appear to be threats to good American patriots, who view themselves as defending some imagined vision of the "traditional" nation.

In the context of the American far-right, where QAnon was birthed, this "traditional" vision both implicitly and explicitly configures American patriots as white Christians fighting a war of so-called self-defense against the invasion of highly racialized outsiders and internal enemies, such as immigrants and racial minorities. That isn't to say, however, that QAnon (and other far-right movements like it) solely appeals to white, Christian audiences. As documented extensively by HoSang and Lowndes in *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity* (2019), many far-right American political movements today reveal a somewhat surprising (and often somewhat garbled) landscape in terms of how racial meanings are configured and reconfigured ideologically, by both white and nonwhite participants. HoSang and Lowndes document, for example, how Joey Gibson—a multiracial Japanese-American man associated with the far right and white nationalism—has claimed Black leaders of the Civil Rights Movement as his inspiration for helping found white Christian

nationalist movements like Patriot Prayer (2). The authors explain the seeming contradictions of racial meanings on in US far-right movements today by suggesting that:

> The racialized categories of the 'producer', the 'parasite' and the 'patriot' have long been deployed to… [differentiate] those groups deemed self-reliant, autonomous, and worthy of social protection from those who are dependent, debased, and worthy of abandonment and disavowal… changing material and political conditions have produced subtle but significant shifts in the ways these categories are put to use and inhabited. (4)

These categories of producers, parasites, and patriots are certainly at play under the surface of QAnon's conspiracist worldview. In their book, HoSang and Lowndes discuss themes such as "parasites of government" who supposedly feed off the "productivity" of good (white) "patriots" (19). In this worldview, "the virtuous, striving, and browbeaten producer struggles to fend off the parasite, a dependent subject that consumes tax dollars", often depicted as racialized groups like undocumented immigrants or poor nonwhite families (19).

Similar ideas and categories are evident +++in the imagination of QAnon influencers like Zak Paine (Chapter 1, Case Study #3) and Joe M (Chapter 3). In the former case, Paine focuses much of his conspiracism towards nonwhite immigrants as one of the key crises facing American patriots; and in the latter case, Joe M argues that widespread economic devastation in America is actually symptomatic of a secretive parasite class (not capitalism's own failures). The reactionary scapegoating[11] of perceived internal and external enemies for a nation's economic woes (often through the vessel of conspiracy theories) is a narrative frame with a longer, more troubling history which I will explore next.

[11] See also: Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Adorno explores the scapegoating of oppressed groups (specifically Jewish people) as an aspect of authoritarian cultural/psychological contexts.

Reactionary Conspiracism in a Broader Historical Context

History suggests that conspiracy theories often emerge in reaction against significant shifts within a given society, and this kind of conspiracism tends to be shaped by intensely held emotional and political beliefs about the enemies imagined to be responsible for social, political, and/or economic shifts. As van Prooijen and Douglas note in "Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations" (2017), history shows that significant national or global crises—especially significant economic changes or crises linked to highly impactful world events, such as the Industrial Revolution, the aftermath of World War I, or the globalized COVID-19 Pandemic—have consistently been major drivers of popular conspiracy theories which are "based on the emotional experiences associated with imminent crisis situations" (330). The researchers additionally conclude that these initial, emotionally-driven conspiracy theories "may soon after stabilize into coherent narratives that are part of how people remember the past" (332). In this sense, some conspiracy theories are much more than just passing narratives that exist on the fringes of society; under the right conditions, a conspiracy theory can grow to become a widely shared (even structural) narrative that perpetuates a historically revisionist viewpoint on a society's past and present.

This structural incorporation of conspiracist narratives can be particularly dangerous when a theory is designed to scapegoat a particular group for a society's ills. As Barkun explains in *A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2013) "the essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil… The locus of this evil lies outside the true community, in some 'Other, defined as foreign or barbarian… The result is a worldview characterized by a sharp division between the realms of good and evil" (19). Furthermore, Barkun argues that conspiracist worldviews are ruled by three primary principles

which cast all events in the world as entirely nonrandom: "nothing happens by accident", "nothing is as it seems", and "everything is connected" (19-20).

Because conspiracism hyper-focuses on evil individuals and groups, its use as a method for analyzing power (and the abuse of power) tends to distort real-world injustices by decontextualizing their relationship to broader systemic/historic conditions. So, for example, a conspiracist analysis of the deteriorating economic prospects of working class Americans would likely suggest the culprit is some malevolent group of individuals who are intentionally creating hostile conditions—a distorted analysis which obscures the fact that capitalism has historically and necessarily created unequal dynamics of exploitation and accumulation due to the hierarchical design of the class system. This is exactly the case in Joe M's wildly popular *Q: The Plan to Save the World* video, which I explore in depth throughout Chapter 3.

This conspiracist tendency to misrepresent the structural dynamics of power/domination quickly leads to historical revisionism. This creates ample opportunities for reactionary ideologies to provide historically revisionist, folklore-style monsters and evil villains. To continue my example analysis from the last paragraph, a conspiracist analysis of the deteriorating economic conditions in America might find their culprits in the groups that reactionaries view as traitors or outsiders opposed to "traditional" American values, such as immigrants, feminists, Marxists, etc. In online spaces like the 8chan[12] forum where QAnon first arose, it is common to see societal and economic woes attributed to the efforts of "globalists" and "international bankers"—terms which function as highly racialized anti-Jewish dog-whistles that can be traced back to the racist, fake mythologies of texts like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903).

[12] Mike Rothschild notes that "8chan has been rated as one of the most anti-Semitic places on the Internet by the Anti-Defamation League" (60).

In particular, the constant reference to a secret "cabal" within QAnon culture is a sign of the deep structural anti-Jewish sentiment within the QAnon conspiracy theory, as the derogatory term (deriving from "kabbalah") has frequently been co-opted by white supremacists as a short reference to a whole host of anti-Jewish myths. This structural racism cannot be understated, despite the claims of some QAnon promoters that the conspiracy theory is not particularly racist. As Mike Rothschild explains in *The Storm Is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, a Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (2021):

> While Q believers hold themselves up as a nonpartisan, race-blind movement of researchers who believe "patriotism has no skin color," the fact is that QAnon is a deeply anti-Semitic movement. Like other conspiracy theory icons, Q holds up wealthy Jews as a protected class, scheming among themselves in evil cliques to hoard the riches of the world and destroy those who oppose them. And just as the anti-Semite of the twentieth century had tracts like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or *The International Jew* (both of which were either published or promoted by iconic automobile scion Henry Ford), modern anti-Semites can look at Q's drops and the vast universe of Jew-hating on the chans as their own canonical texts (59).

Rothschild additionally points out that QAnon's central theory about a secret cabal of child traffickers seeking to harvest adrenochrome through ritual abuse is essentially just a "social media age" version of long-existing anti-Jewish conspiracy theories about blood libel and ritual murder of children (63).

The spread of anti-Jewish racism specifically through the vehicle of reactionary conspiracy theories, then, is not something new or unique. For an example of this dynamic, many

historians[13] have noted that the cultural influence of anti-Jewish conspiracy theories grew massively in Germany during the years leading up to the Holocaust. Moishe Postone notes in "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism" (1986) that "It is not only the degree, but also the quality of power attributed to the Jews which distinguishes anti-Semitism from other forms of racism… The Jews represent an immensely powerful, intangible, international conspiracy" within Nazi propaganda (106). Brendan Fay echoes this sentiment in "The Nazi Conspiracy Theory: German Fantasies and Jewish Power in the Third Reich" (2019), writing:

> Nazism was born in conspiracy… the interwar period saw German nationalists cast blame on Marxists, democrats and other treasonous elements that they claimed had stabbed the nation in the back. Evidence of alleged Jewish involvement was not hard to find given the popularity of the notorious anti-Semitic forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*… three conspiracy theories in particular— the ideas elaborated in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the 1934 Rohm putsch, and the myth of a Judaeo-Bolshevik conspiracy — played a central role in bringing the Nazi Party to power, consolidating its base of support and radicalising the regime's policies (75-76).

As Fay shows, it was not only racism in general, but specifically anti-Jewish conspiracy theories, which ultimately enabled Nazis to scapegoat Germany's societal woes through historically revisionist narratives, the stoking of German ethno-nationalism, and the general demonization of Jewish people and other groups. Fay further suggests that, in spite of "the ubiquity of conspiratorial thinking in the Nazis' rise to power, there are surprisingly few studies that have placed the conspiracy theory at the centre of their analysis" (76).

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[13] See also: Michael Hagemeister: *The Perennial Conspiracy Theory Reflections on the History of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (2022).

My work in part seeks to bridge gaps like this which have, in some cases, failed to account for conspiracism as a major driver of reactionary right-wing politics. For another historical example of this, Frank Mintz notes in *The Liberty Lobby* that the same right-wing, anti-Jewish conspiracy theories which animated the right-wing National Socialist movement in Germany also thrived in the right-wing movement in the US following World War II. Founded in 1957, the Liberty Lobby was a right-wing "news service" which sought to advance far-right and anti-Jewish views in America by promoting racial and nationalist hierarchies through the distribution of pamphlets and periodicals, as well as Holocaust-denial texts like *The Myth of the Six Million* (1969).

Mintz argues that the Liberty Lobby promoted both racism and conspiracism, and loudly condemned the Civil Rights Movement as part of a larger conspiracy to undermine white Americans—a claim adopted by QAnon believers (including Q himself) who argue that racial/gender/economic justice movements are secretly controlled by the "cabal", with the goal of undermining the rights of "patriots" implicitly or explicitly imagined as white. These conspiracy narratives have had a lasting influence on conservative American politics, given the Liberty Lobby's association with the John Birch Society which was the largest radical right-wing group in the US for many years. Today, right-wing politics continue to be characterized by the constant (often conspiracist) demonization of immigrants, leftists, and racial/gender justice groups; as well as the promotion of explicit right-wing authoritarianism and white nationalism under Donald Trump's leadership.

This historic connection between conspiracy theories and right-wing authoritarianism across Europe and the US also informs my argument that reactionary conspiracism—that is, conspiracist style thought which is preoccupied with perceived threats to a "traditional" nation,

particularly in the case of historically ethno-supremacist nations—implies a uniquely authoritarian and grim political endpoint, which makes it worth differentiating from other types of conspiracism. Reactionary conspiracism is a structure of thought that advances fascist politics primarily through the manipulation of truth and the demonization of perceived (internal or external) enemies who must be "eliminated" to restore justice in the nation.

A recent publication from Naomi Klein also explores (in part) the relationship between fascism and this type of paranoid thought. The figure of the mirrored double, or the doppelganger, figures centrally to her examination of this relationship. Although the vast bulk of my writing/research for this project took place prior to the publication of her work on the doppelganger, I have found a great deal of resonance between our two projects. Klein describes her own work in *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (2023) as an "my attempt to decipher the chaos of doppelganger culture, with its maze of simulated selves and digital avatars and mass surveillance and racial and ethnic projections and fascist doubles and the studiously denied shadows that are all coming to the surface at once" (17).

Indeed, as my own chapters will show, the "doubling" effect is powerful within conspiracism in the context of new media, particularly when it comes to the simulation of "truth" through fragmented views of reality, as discussed through the lens of Debord in Chapter 3. As I've alluded to already, QAnon's promises of deeper enlightenment results in a kind of distorted, doubled mirror image of power abuse and its root causes. QAnon's trademark mistrust of (a selective group of) elites and institutions is decidedly disconnected from an underlying theory of capital/power; thus, these critiques of the rich and powerful tend to distort and undermine material analysis of systemic power/domination, despite simulating a kind of consciousness around societal issues like inequality, abuse, and injustice.

Beyond the relevance of the "doubling" effect to my own work, Naomi Klein also asks similar questions to those which I began my own investigations with: "What do we do when important ideas and concepts are being distorted in this way, when absurdity seems to take over, making serious discussion impossible? What do we do when we seem to be surrounded by warped doubles and imposters?" (Klein 70). Her questions mirror the ones I wrote in my introductory chapter, well before her book was even published. In the beginning of this work, I presented insights about the : "Within such a context, how is the average person supposed to determine which interpretations of political reality are "true"? Are some perspectives more "correct" or "legitimate" than others? Who decides?

In beginning to answer complex questions of truth and perception like these, I must first mark out the intellectual, political, and ethical commitments which are involved in such an inquiry, and where exactly I stand as a scholar within a broader political context. In the next section, I'll try to do exactly that.

Methodological and Political Approaches to Reactionary Conspiracism

In writing about conspiracy theories and the politics of truth within this work, I have chosen *not* to adopt a so-called "neutral" political viewpoint. That is because my experiences as an activist and as a scholar lead me to believe that, in order to actually account for the extremist right-wing political context that underpins and drives reactionary conspiracism online, one must adopt an explicitly anti-fascist, anti-capitalist, and intersectional feminist research methodology. My decidedly un-neutral approach that mirrors some of what Slavoj Žižek describes in his 2009 work on communism, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*: "What this books offers is not a neutral

analysis but an engaged and extremely 'partial' one—for *truth is partial*, accessible only when one takes sides, and no less universal for this reason" (6).

In case my introduction didn't already give it away, I want to be clear in stating that my overall scholarly approach to this project is rooted in the principles and practices of intersectional feminism and Marxist cultural critique. My methods might be included under the broad umbrella of critical theory in the tradition of the Frankfurt School's analyses of mass culture's relationship to authoritarianism[14] [15] and capitalist economic structures. I am strongly convinced of the arguments for the necessity of consciously political interpretations of cultural artifacts, as advanced in Marxist texts such as *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). Fredric Jameson argues compellingly for

> the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It [this book] conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today—the psychoanalytic or the myth-critical, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural—but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation. (1)

It is entirely necessary to frame intersectional critiques of capital (and its many interlocking systems of power/domination) as central to the interpretation of a media phenomenon like QAnon which draws upon all dimensions of our social lives, including the political, the cultural, the psychological, and the historical.

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[14] See: Horkheimer, *Studies in Authority and the Family* (1936); Adorno, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (1949) and *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Particularly relevant to understanding QAnon's brand of reactionary conspiracism are Adorno's 1950 discussions of the scapegoating of oppressed groups (such as Jewish people) within authoritarian contexts. This is also discussed by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

[15] For another study on digital authoritarianism which also adopts the Frankfurt School's critical theory tools, see also: Fuchs, Christian. *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*. London: Pluto Press, 2018. Print.

On the point of the historical, I am also powerfully compelled by Jameson's demand in the preface to "Always historicize!" (IX). As Jameson further suggests, "texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations" (IX). The "text" of QAnon may be recent, but many of its core narratives, concepts, and sociopolitical dynamics are anything but new. Thus, my goal is to understand the systemic drivers of reactionary conspiracist structures of thought through materialist/historical analysis, and by centering neoliberal capitalism's cultural and media system itself as a drive.

Such an approach, which necessarily centers analysis of material inequalities, is endorsed by other scholars in the new media field. Kreiss and McGregor argue in "A review and provocation: On polarization and platforms" (2023) that polarization on new media platforms "can only be seen as a central threat to democracy if inequality is ignored" (556). Furthermore, they suggest that inequality must be centered in methodological approaches within the field:

> Political identities map more or less onto social groups, and groups are, in turn, located in social structures. As such, scholars must analyze groups as they are embedded in relations of power to meaningfully evaluate the democratic consequences of polarization. Groups struggling for equality, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, often cause polarization because they threaten the extant power and status of dominant groups. To develop a shared theoretical lens around polarization and its relationship with inequality, we take up the case of research on the role of platforms in polarization, showing how scholarship routinely lacks analysis of inequality. (556)

So, failure to analyze the inequalities between differently embedded social groups and broader historical structures would be a failure to develop an accurate account of emergent media structures like QAnon which are rooted in political structures of thought.

Thus, the rest of my project explores the question of how the political structure of thought advanced by reactionary conspiracism, as exemplified by QAnon culture, has shaped particular interpretations of truth and reality within the specific new media context and culture of contemporary American neoliberal capitalism. More specifically, I will show how QAnon conspiracy theories peddle a kind of false enlightenment and consciousness-raising through digital folkloric practices, with the ultimate effect of perpetuating distorted and historically revisionist analyses of power/domination—thus undermining the potential for deeper systemic criticisms of capitalism, white supremacy, and cisheteropatriarchy.

Analyzing conspiracy theories as a form of folklore is a method that has been advocated by other scholars of conspiracism such as Michael Barkun, who suggests that "the nature of conspiracy ideas can best be illuminated through the category of folklore known as the *urban legend*" (27). Although there is not yet much published scholarship which analyzes QAnon specifically through the lens of digital folklore, de Zeeuw and Gekker gesture towards this as another possible lens in their game-focused analysis of QAnon, "A God-Tier LARP? QAnon as Conspiracy Fictioning" (2023):

> Because of its epistemological and cognitive focus, the label of "conspiracy theory" fails to capture the specific social and participatory dynamics that increasingly characterize online conspiracy movements. Rather than theories, QAnon is better understood as narrative or as conspiratorial folklore, which demands a different framework better attuned to its neotribal and (secondary) "oral" dynamics (Venturini, 2022). (5)

This citation of Venturini's "Online Conspiracy Theories, Digital Platforms and Secondary Orality: Toward a Sociology of Online Monsters" provides one research study which does take a

folkloric lens to online conspiracy theories, with QAnon included as one example among others. Venturini argues powerfully for the application of folkloric methods to online conspiracism:

> Nowhere, however, is the oral-like quality of digital communication more manifest than in conspiratorial narratives, which exhibit striking similarities with preliterate folklore both in style and in content. Using natural language processing techniques, researchers have shown that conspiracism and online misinformation are associated with a distinctively oral tone… At the content level, conspiratorial narratives are characterized by a stunning capacity to absorb inconsistencies that reminds the homeostatic organization of preliterate societies. The lack of cogency that perplexes so many scholarly commentators is not a shortcoming for digital folklore but an essential oral-like quality that facilitates reproduction in an evanescent environment. (64)

The communicative and narrative style of conspiracism, then, has significant oral-like vernacular characteristics which digital folklore methods can help draw our attention towards. With regards to the emphasis of narrative within this method, Venturini suggests that "online conspiracism secures its durability through elasticity rather than consistency is the reason why this paper insists on calling its expressions 'conspiracy narratives' rather than 'conspiracy theories'" (71).

Moreover, through the folkloric lens, QAnon conspiracy narratives can be held up as a broader mirror of American society and its narratives. Trevor Blank argues in *Folklore and the Internet:* "Folklore theory holds that folkloric expression is reflective and serves as a "mirror" of societal and cultural values; folklorists should therefore use this mirror to analyze society and culture" (4). Thus, as I analyze the conspiracist *folk media* being produced by QAnon, I am also offering analysis of our society and culture more generally, especially with regards to the

question of how mainstream American cultural values have contributed to the trend towards reactionary conspiracism.

In particular, widespread distrust in American institutions, and particularly news media, is a primary driver of QAnon conspiracies. QAnon promises its followers deeper enlightenment characterized by a Great Awakening[16] to the many lies of the media and the so-called deep state. However, this distrust of mass media is hardly unique to QAnon; as Barkun points out, conspiracy theories are commonly characterized by distrust of institutional knowledge:

> By claiming to disbelieve mass media and other sources, believers can argue that they have avoided the mind control and brainwashing used to deceive the majority. This also accounts in part for their fondness for what in the following chapter I call stigmatized knowledge—that is, knowledge claims that run counter to generally accepted beliefs. (24)

So, QAnon's fixation on consuming and producing "stigmatized knowledge" is not unique among other conspiracy theories, but QAnon's use of digital tools to propagate such "stigmatized knowledge" itself is a relatively recent development in terms of sheer media infrastructure.

Research into the psychology of conspiracy theories would suggest that QAnon's key motif of promising "stigmatized knowledge" is likely a major reason why it appeals to so many audiences[17]. As Douglas et al. explain in "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories" (2017):

> As well as their purely epistemic purposes, causal explanations serve the need for people to feel safe and secure in their environment… people turn to conspiracy theories for

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[16] The "Great Awakening" is a phrase that dates back at least to the 1700s in the US. The first "Great Awakening" was a Protestant religious revival during the 18th century. The phrase was brought back a century later for a new religious movement during the "Second Great Awakening" of the 1800s, which included end-times biblical conspiracy theories about the year 1844. See: Klepper, David. "Secret History: Even before the Revolution, America Was a Nation of Conspiracy Theorists." *AP News*, 31 Jan. 2024.

[17] See also: See: Marwick and Partin, "Constructing alternative facts: Populist expertise and the QAnon conspiracy", *New Media and Society,* 2022).

> compensatory satisfaction when these needs are threatened. For example, people who lack instrumental control may be afforded some compensatory sense of control by conspiracy theories, because they offer them the opportunity to reject official narratives and feel that they possess an alternative account… Studies have shown that people are likely to turn to conspiracy theories when they are anxious (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013) and feel powerless (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999). Other research indicates that conspiracy belief is strongly related to lack of sociopolitical control or lack of psychological empowerment (Bruder et al., 2013). (539)

Certainly it seems to be the case that QAnon's promise of a "great awakening" provides feelings of control, autonomy, and empowerment to many of its believers. This seems likely given how QAnon's popularity[18] rose during the Coronavirus lockdown of March 2020 and during the following years. For those who felt powerless and anxious about the global crisis, the prospect of enlightenment and higher consciousness—especially in a form that doesn't threaten their personal identity, values, or belief system—was a powerful emotional lure.

It is worth pausing here to further explore my claim that QAnon's promises of enlightenment can function to produce a kind of "false consciousness" in believers. The somewhat controversial Marxist concept of "false consciousness" has been hotly debated among scholars, who disagree about whether or not this theory—that oppressed people may come to internalize and adopt the ideology of the ruling class—is the best explanation for their

[18] According to Google Trends analytics, searches for QAnon began to grow massively starting in March 2020, when the pandemic began to take root in the USA. Over the next few months, search results grew to double and triple their prior numbers, spiking up to peak popularity in mid-August 2020; then again in early October 2020; and then once more in early January 2021. In an August 2020 article titled "Revealed: QAnon Facebook groups are growing at a rapid pace around the world", Julia Carrie Wong reported that the number of aggregate followers of groups and pages across Facebook and Instagram at around 4.5 million accounts, with a 34% increase in following between late June and August 9th alone (*The Guardian*).

participation in the system of capitalism. Contextualizing those existing debates can provide helpful context for my limited use of this idea in relation to reactionary conspiracism.

Although Marx never used the term, he wrote often about the role that bourgeois ideology plays in misleading and distorting the ability of the working class to critique the relations of production responsible for their material oppression. In a 1893 letter to Franz Mehring[19], Engels used the phrase to refer to a scenario in which the working class might be ideologically conditioned into adopting the attitudes of the ruling class to their own detriment (451).

Decades later, in *History and Class Consciousness* (1920), György Lukács argued that "false consciousness" is "as an aspect of the historical totality and as a stage in the historical process" in which the hegemonic class's "interests and consciousness enable it to organise the whole of society in accordance with those interests" (50). In other words, Lukács suggested that capitalism necessarily shapes dominant perceptions of social relations in order to perpetuate alienation, prevent broader class consciousness, and coerce the participation of workers in the capitalist system. Antonio Gramsci similarly reflected in his *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935) on the idea that the ruling class's ability to condition working people into accepting dominant

[19] From: Engels, "Letter to F. Mehring". *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Selected Works in Two Volumes*, Volume II. (1949). Engels uses the terms "false consciousness" and "ideology" somewhat interchangeably in his letter to Mehring: "Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives. Because it is a process of thought he derives both its form and its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors. He works with mere thought material which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, he does not investigate further for a more remote process independent of thought; indeed its origin seems obvious to him, because as all action is produced through the medium of thought it also appears to him to be ultimately based upon thought. The ideologist who deals with history (history is here simply meant to comprise all the spheres – political, juridical, philosophical, theological – belonging to society and not only to nature), the ideologist dealing with history then, possesses in every sphere of science material which has formed itself independently out of the thought of previous generations and has gone through an independent series of developments in the brains of these successive generations. True, external facts belonging to its own or other spheres may have exercised a co-determining influence on this development, but the tacit pre-supposition is that these facts themselves are also only the fruits of a process of thought, and so we still remain within that realm of pure thought which has successfully digested the hardest facts" (451).

ideologies, especially through institutions like schools and churches[20], was key to maintaining bourgeois cultural hegemony[21].

However, the claim that the working class has been conditioned into ignorance about the source of their own oppression has been criticized at times for being elitist and overly reductive. For example, Herbert Marcuse warns[22] that the concept might enable paternalism and undermine the working class's ability to develop its own criticisms. On the other hand, Michael Rosen has argued compellingly for a limited use of this conceptual framework[23] in *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (1996), suggesting that "While we may not be justified in supposing that unequal societies maintain themselves because societies in general have the power to produce 'false consciousness' in their citizens, there may still be a sense in

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[20] See also Louis Althusser's later work on this topic: "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970).

[21] In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971), Gramsci describes cultural hegemony as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidents) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production" (12).

[22] In *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964) Marcuse writes: "In the last analysis, the question of what are true and false needs must be answered by the individuals themselves, but only in the last analysis; that is, if and when they are free to give their own answer. As long as they are kept incapable of being autonomous, as long as they are indoctrinated and manipulated (down to their very instincts), their answer to this question cannot be taken as their own. By the same token, however, no tribunal can justly arrogate to itself the right to decide which needs should be developed and satisfied. Any such tribunal is reprehensible, although our revulsion does not do away with the question: how can the people who have been the object of effective and productive domination by themselves create the conditions of freedom?" (11).

[23] Rosen considers multiple critical perspectives on false consciousness: "Why do the many accept the rule of the few, even when it seems to be plainly against their interests to do so? The theory of ideology gives one very distinctive kind of answer to Reich's question. The reason, it claims, is that societies are systems that produce the kind of consciousness that prevents the members of a society from behaving as their interests would otherwise dictate. Ideology, in Theodor Adorno's phrase, is 'necessary false consciousness'. But to assess this theory will turn out to be a complicated matter. In the first place, the nature of the answer that the theory of ideology is offering requires clarification. In what sense is ideological consciousness 'necessary'? In what sense 'false'? What is behind those terms? What assumptions must we make about the nature of society and the kinds of explanation that can be appropriately applied to it if a theory of ideology is to be possible?" (15) In responding to these questions, Rosen further argues: "Let me clarify the sense in which the theory of ideology is committed to the view that unequal or otherwise illegitimate societies reproduce themselves by means of false consciousness. The claim here is merely that this is a necessary condition for such societies' preservation, not that it is always the sole means that they employ. As far as Marx is concerned, I believe that he thought ideology was indispensable to the survival of capitalist class society. But, of course, it would be absurd to say that Marx thought coercion played no part in the survival of capitalism; he simply believed that coercion was not enough" (17).

which false consciousness is a pervasive feature of certain social orders (ours included)" (18). So, although I will not defend the theory of false consciousness on a general or broad level, I do believe that this second, more limited and modest proposal for its analytical uses sheds light on the false promises of enlightenment offered by the QAnon conspiracy culture.

Although QAnon falsely frames the dynamics of power, it is appealing to many people specifically because it seems to offer an explanation for the many failures of capitalism and the American government. In this sense, reactionary conspiracism is designed to exploit the anxieties, economic struggles, ignorance, and/or bigotry of those who lack (or reject) a material, historic, critical intersectional analysis of power as configured within contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Because American patriotism, as a culture, is defined by opposition to any analysis of the nation itself as a "bad guy"—especially criticisms of American racism, classism, or patriarchy—conspiracy theories may offer a more appealing explanation for the visible failures of a system which also harms self-identified patriotic Americans. Douglas et al. identify the desire to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group[24] as a major driver of conspiracism:

> [Conspiracy theory belief is] also informed by various motivations, including the desire to belong and to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group. Scholars have suggested that conspiracy theories valorize the self and the in-group by allowing blame

[24] Regarding positive image for self and in-group, it seems likely that widespread social ostracization of Trump voters following 2016, as well as Trump's subsequent electoral loss during the 2020 election, are partially responsible for the high appeal of conspiracy theories to Trump's most fervent followers. Douglas notes:

"Experimental results suggest that experiences of ostracism cause people to believe in superstitions and conspiracy theories, apparently as part of an effort to make sense of their experience (Graeupner & Coman, 2017)... conspiracy theories may be recruited defensively, to relieve the self or in-group from a sense of culpability for their disadvantaged position…. Conspiracy belief is also predicted by collective narcissism—a belief in the in-group's greatness paired with a belief that other people do not appreciate it enough (Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala, & Olechowski, 2016). Groups who feel that they have been victimized are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories about powerful out-groups (Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, & Wójcik, 2013)" (540).

> for negative outcomes to be attributed to others. Thus, they may help to uphold the image of the self and the in-group as competent and moral but as sabotaged by powerful and unscrupulous others. If this is the case, we can expect conspiracy theories to be particularly appealing to people who find the positive image of their self or in-group to be threatened (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de Zavala, 2016). (540)

This theory of positive self/group image is largely confirmed in the QAnon context based on Mike Rothschild's interviews with current and former QAnon believers for *The Storm Is Upon Us,* where he quotes one former believer as saying: "Q makes you feel important and gives you meaning and self-esteem. You are saving the world when you're in Q, [it's] the highest way you can view yourself" (95-96).

For some working class conservatives, the most appealing thing about QAnon's narrative about corrupt "elites" might be that it offers them a way to voice their distrust and resentment towards the capitalist system which threatens their wellbeing, without having to give up their patriotic identities or adopt the narrative perspectives of leftists. Such a seemingly contradictory, perhaps even self-defeating affective/ideological position is documented memorably by Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011): "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1).

Berlant further highlights how cruel optimism emerges in part as a response to capitalism's ongoing, endless state of crisis, characterized by the "overwhelming ordinary that is *disorganized* by it [capitalism]" (8). This profound disorganized, ordinary state of crisis produces "dynamic relations of hypervigilance, unreliable agency, and dissipated subjectivity under contemporary capitalism" (9). These affective structures themselves lend easily to conspiracy theories, and so it should be no surprise that conspiracy theories appeal to self-identified patriotic

Americans who may have particularly cruel and optimistic attachments to (racialized, gendered, nationalistic) systems like capitalism, especially if they are simultaneously being exploited by that system as members of the working class themselves.

In order for there to be popular patriotic support for the American system of capitalism and governance, patriots must believe that the United States has a good system that works well, in spite of pervasive and hypervisible evidence to the contrary. Thus, as a self-perpetuating cultural and economic system, the particular American brand of capitalism—one characterized by settler-colonial ideology, intensely racialized nationalism, and hyper-competitive individualism—must constantly rationalize and propagandize its very existence, especially through the distortion of its failures. Within conspiracist distortions, the alternative reasoning often takes the shape of some deeper, unseen force of inherent "evil". As Barkun writes:

> In an odd way, the conspiracy theorist's view is both frightening and reassuring. It is frightening because it magnifies the power of evil, leading in some cases to an outright dualism in which light and darkness struggle for cosmic supremacy. At the same time, however, it is reassuring, for it promises a world that is meaningful rather than arbitrary. Not only are events nonrandom, but the clear identification of evil gives the conspiracist a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose. (4)

Through such interpretive frames, systematic harms caused by the abuse of power at a structural level are distorted into the shape of evil individuals and groups acting out of sheer malevolence.

No wonder, then, that taking systematic context away from the analysis of systematic power abuse results in fantastical theories about almost-mystical evils in the form of pedophilic sex trafficking rings, Satanic politicians, and less-than-human cannibalistic celebrities. If one feels relentlessly plagued by an intense sense of unease and confusion about the state of the

world around them, these types of conspiracy theories might also come to feel true largely because the ideas are so intensely emotionally activating—not to mention how effectively they draw upon existing popular cultural, media, and religious depictions of evil. Such a perspective is compatible enough with American popular culture, which tends to depict the struggle for justice as an individualized conflict between literal individual heroes and villains.

Neoliberal capitalist ideology trains us to view all matters through the lens of the individual, which would lead to the conclusion that injustice is caused by bad individuals rather than systemic arrangements of power/domination. In this way, conspiracy theories are actually deeply compatible with the faux-meritocratic, hyper-individualistic conceptual structure of neoliberalism itself. No surprise, then, that the contemporary "Make America Great Again" movement—largely inspired by figures like Ronald Reagan, the father of neoliberalism himself—would find such a foothold through reactionary conspiracy theories like QAnon.

In combination with the many escalating crises of late-stage neoliberal capitalism in America, the increasingly chaotic new media landscape—characterized by an increasingly fragmented, individualistic, and immersive mass media infrastructure—has contributed significantly to the increased presence of reactionary conspiracism in our culture. The overwhelming availability of information online has made devastating inequalities and abuses into hypervisible spectacles, and the constant bombardment of updates from a 24-hour bad news cycle on every screen has exacerbated collective feelings of despair and disenfranchisement.

This ordinary, daily routine of technologically driven disaffection is itself worth thinking about critically in terms of what drives people towards conspiracism, and why our current new media landscape readily facilitates that dynamic. As Wendy Chun writes in *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (2016)*:* "our media matter most when they seem not to matter at

all, that is, when they have moved from the new to the habitual" (11). Chun further argues that "habits are central to understanding neoliberalism… [which] destroys the public by fostering the private… In a neoliberal society, the logic of the market has become its ethics" (15). American new media infrastructure (and corresponding media habits) today is not only hyper-individualized and thus fragmented, but also, it is driven primarily by the logic of the market above any other ethic, including user wellbeing, preventing the spread of false information, or halting political extremism.

The underlying market-driven design of today's digital media platforms and screen culture is a major factor driving disinformation, including conspiracy theories, online. Diaz Ruiz argues further in "Disinformation on digital media platforms: A market-shaping approach" (2023) that "disinformation is an expected outcome, not breakage, of the current media market in digital platforms" that can largely be attributed to their business models and other "practices of media markets" (1-2). As a result of the profitability of disinformation[25], Diaz Ruiz concludes that platform efforts to prevent the spread of disinformation "may be incompatible with their business models", citing Facebook's repeated maximization of online engagement (despite "harm to users") as one example (7).

Market logic also drives dominant media narratives about what causes America's (and the rest of the world's) many problems—resulting in narratives that seem to deeply conflict with the actual embodied reality of what people see and experience in their daily lives. Societal conditions of psychological distress and narrative contradiction like these tap into many of the major psychological drivers of conspiracism, as identified by Douglas et al., who argue that:

[25] In support of this point, Diaz Ruiz also cites Dholakia et al. (2023) who argue: "In the age of superabundant information, the emergence and rapid ascendance of misinformation, is not paradoxical… with profit-driven media, the conditions for the rise of misinformation have been in place for decades, and social media have given a massive boost to these conditions" (5).

> People may be drawn to conspiracy theories when—compared with nonconspiracy explanations—they promise to satisfy important social psychological motives that can be characterized as epistemic (e.g., the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty), existential (e.g., the desire for control and security), and social (e.g., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group). (538)

These kinds of epistemic, existential, and social drivers of conspiracism have all intensified rapidly throughout US society during the last decade or so. As the promises of capitalism and the American dream have fallen short in the face of existential threats like the COVID-19 pandemic, massively expanding economic inequalities, and other forms of catastrophe, Americans have sought out some kind of coherent organizing theory for understanding the many crises around them. They have sought out stories that make them feel less powerless.

Research Questions and Chapter Overview

Reactionary conspiracism, in offering false explanations for the hypervisible injustices in the world, operates like a pressure release valve[26] that redirects potential consciousness away from systemic criticisms and towards more individualistic, sensationalist, and ideologically appealing explanations. Injustices are reframed as avoidable abuses of power by "bad guys" who must simply be replaced with "good guys" in order to restore justice to America as a whole. Thus, reactionary conspiracism helps to maintain existing power configurations by framing hypervisible, widespread systemic abuses of power in a way that does not necessarily lead to a deeper questioning or rejection of the current structure of power itself. The ideology of

[26] Many scholars and philosophers have explored the idea that societies/cultures may develop various "safety valve institutions" which enable the performance of opposition/discontent (or the release of distress) in order to undermine broader potential resistance. For an example, see *Rabelais and His World* (1965) in which Bahktin analyzes carnivals and popular laughter as such institutions.

pro-capitalist, nationalistic conservatism—and the corresponding sense of self and community held by many conservative "patriots—thrives under reactionary conspiracism's false "awakenings" specifically because this structure of thought avoids addressing any explanations that are not compatible with a distinctly right-wing viewpoint.

In order to further demonstrate how reactionary conspiracism upholds systems of power/domination, this project takes up the ever-growing online QAnon conspiracy culture as a case study, with the following questions in mind:

1. What aspects of the QAnon conspiracy culture have made its interpretive frames so appealing and influential for such a large variety of US audiences?
2. How does reactionary conspiracism help to uphold systems of power/domination, including the specific contemporary American systems of capitalism, white supremacy, and cisheteropatriarchy in particular?

I have already recounted my general response to the second question. By attributing the many ills of capitalism, white supremacy, and cisheteropatriarchy *as systems* to a limited set of "evil" individuals and groups, reactionary conspiracism works to undermine potential consciousness about the oppressive structure of power/domination as a whole. The particular ways in which this interpretive bait-and-switch happens are specific to particular contexts, but that is the general dynamic I am interested in exploring.

My goal in answering the first question is to provide substantive, context-specific examples which can flesh out the nuances of the first question and my response to it. While the second question is a more general philosophical and political framing for this project, the first provides the opportunity to apply a particular methodology to a particular archive—an archive that is, as I will argue, particularly compelling and important because of the many lessons it can

teach us about how new media formats amplify, extend, and modify pre-existing cultural and political practices.

In the remainder of this work, I will employ a focused analysis of the varying propagandistic styles of different QAnon social media influencers, as well as the distinct media ecologies which coalesce around them, in order to demonstrate how QAnon conspiracy culture is constituted by an array of *folk media* practices which adapt the long-standing folkloric tradition of collective cultural authorship and meaning-making to the many formats and platforms offered by new media. Through the process of "baking"—a term which refers to the DIY collaborative social practice of interpreting the mysterious, jumbled posts ("Q-drops" or "breadcrumbs") made by the anonymous forum user known only as "Q"—QAnon influencers position themselves as central nodes around which communications networks and unique subcultures can form beneath the larger QAnon umbrella. As a result of its many distinct subcultures[27] and folk groups with their own distinct internal discourses and identities, the QAnon movement has been able to grow and appeal to a wide variety of audiences without requiring ideological unity[28] amongst them.

Chapter 1, "QAnon Conspiracy Cultures as Digital Folk Media", provides an overview of my methodology, which is rooted in intersectional feminism and digital folklore studies. I show how distinct, localized folk interpretations of the Q-drops help to produce an array of different digital folk groups with their own particular vernaculars, beliefs, and narratives. While the original QAnon cultures that emerged on the 4chan/8chan/8kun boards in response to the Q-drops are fairly explicit in their white supremacy, QAnon promoters on other platforms with

[27] See also: Conner and MacMurray, "The Perfect Storm: A Subcultural Analysis of the QAnon Movement" (2021).

[28] Data-driven analyses of Q-drops and forum posts confirm this lack of ideological unity. In "The Gospel According to Q", researchers analyzed a dataset of 4,949 posts claiming to be "canonical" Q posts and found that "the content echoed by individuals sharing aggregation sites on mainstream platforms could be conflicting, resulting in a different view of the conspiracy theory depending on the information source. In other words, this high level of disagreement indicates that conspiracy theories can "thrive" despite their narratives may at times contradict their core beliefs" (Papasavva, Antonis, et al. 7).

more mainstream audiences tend to offer others "flavors" of QAnon with a kind of "now you see it, now you don't" style of racialized conspiracism. For example, while some QAnon promoters (like the *PrayingMedic)* interpret the Q-drops primarily through the religious lens of evangelicalism and biblical prophecy, others (like *RedPillNews)* focus their rhetoric strategy on nationalistic fears about demographic shifts and immigration.

While my first chapter offers brief case studies of several QAnon subcultures, my later chapters offer more detailed personal histories, close readings, and rhetorical analysis of the strategies used by two of the earliest and most influential QAnon promoters. In Chapter 2, "Is it #HAPPENING ???": Tracy 'Beanz' Diaz and the QAnon Influencer's Recipe to Baking a Conspiracy Theory", I explore the folk media practice of "baking" in more detail by analyzing one of the first QAnon "bakes"—a YouTube video from one of QAnon's original promoters in November 2017. Through a close-reading of Diaz's early DIY-style approach to QAnon propaganda on YouTube, I demonstrate how the imagined relationship that Q believers have to each other, and to the conspiracy theory in general, is heavily mediated through the particular "bakes" they are exposed to. Because the original Q-drops themselves are both linguistically and functionally inaccessible to most average internet users, a parasocial dynamic of unequal influence—in which the localized QAnon digital subculture becomes dominated by the values of a particular influencer—emerges on platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram where QAnon subcultures tend to clump around individual bakers like Diaz.

Chapter 3, "Class Consciousness or 'The Great Awakening'? QAnon Meaning-Making and Joe M's Spectacular 'Q: The Plan to Save the World'", is a focused study into the affective, aesthetic, and rhetorical strategies of one of the most popular QAnon propaganda videos of all time. Stylized like a branded action film trailer, "Q: The Plan to Save the World" pairs a series of

fast-paced, decontextualized clips of real-world injustices with a series of equally fast-paced, decontextualized narrative proposals about how to interpret them, giving viewers the impression that only QAnon theories can make meaning out of all these fragments of suffering. Using Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* as a critical framework, I show how the video blurs the lines between the "real world" and conspiracy by regrouping brief glimpses of real conflicts into "a new unity as a *separate pseudoworld"* which *feels* true (10). Thus, the video operates as a highly stylized new media folk propaganda device which reassigns the systemic failures of capitalism to a limited set of political scapegoats whose elimination will supposedly restore justice.

Finally, in the conclusion, I will explore my claim that reactionary conspiracism is an ill of contemporary American capitalism that cannot be addressed within a vacuum without serious anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, and anti-revisionist transformation within the United States. Rather than being a phenomenon that emerges purely from the new media context, it is a cultural and historical reaction against attempted reforms that must be treated as a serious political crisis.

CHAPTER 1 - QAnon Conspiracy Cultures as Digital Folk Media

QAnon's multi-scaled media infrastructure and many variations of folk media have resulted in distinct, localized folk interpretations of the Q-drops that correspond to an array of distinct, localized digital folk groups with their own particular QAnon subcultures, collective symbols/rituals, and narratives. This chapter explores the multi-scaled QAnon media infrastructure, as well as my methodology for analyzing it, through brief case studies into some of the unique "flavors" of QAnon subculture[29] which have been powerfully shaped by the specific media platforms on which they arose. By doing this, I hope to bring my readers into what it feels like to explore QAnon's multi-platform presence, and how specific platforms have impacted users' engagement with conspiracism visually, functionally, and socially.

When tracing QAnon's historical spread across the internet, the most obvious place to start is the fringe online forums where the poster known as "Q Clearance Patriot" (claiming to be a military intelligence team) first began to post "drops". While QAnon influencers and promoters eventually helped the conspiracy theory migrate onto more mainstream social media platforms[30] (including Reddit and YouTube early on; as well as Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, Gab, TruthSocial, and others later on), Q's original posts appeared on the controversial and famously extremist /po/ ("politically incorrect") messaging board on the website 4chan, at least prior to Q's migration to 8chan/8kun. Beyond being wildly bigoted, 4chan's /pol/ board (as well as 8chan/8kun) has a second limitation that made it an unappealing host for a popular conspiracy theory: it's a very hard website to navigate.

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[29] See also: Conner, "QAnon, authoritarianism, and conspiracy within American alternative spiritual space" (2023).

[30] See also: Zhang et al. "How a peripheral ideology becomes mainstream: Strategic performance, audience reaction, and news media amplification in the case of QAnon Twitter accounts" (2022). De Zeeuw et al. "Tracing normiefication: a cross-platform analysis of the QAnon conspiracy theory" (2020).

New media scholars in the field of platform studies[31] have written extensively on how web infrastructure shapes the way users interact with internet content, build quasi-communities, and otherwise experience cyberspace—especially in the case of internet forums often deemed "toxic", including 4chan, 8chan, and many of the Reddit boards where QAnon got its start. In "Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures" (2017), Massanari argues that "Reddit's design, algorithm, and platform politics implicitly support these kinds of [toxic] cultures", highlighting design aspects such as the moderation/governance system and policies around offensive content. For QAnon, the extremely lax moderation of forums like 4chan/8chan, as well as the previously more lax moderation of Reddit, is a large part of the reason that the conspiracy theory was able to get a foothold on social media at all. Additionally, the thread structure of forums and relative anonymity of posters on such web forums has been central to QAnon's participatory culture.

That being said, many of QAnon's target audiences (including older internet users who first found QAnon through Facebook or YouTube) are less likely to be engaged fully by the complex navigation and niche subcultures of platforms like 4chan, or even the more mainstream forums on Reddit. As a result of 4chan's functional and cultural inaccessibility, secondary platforms (and even Google spreadsheets) became important sites for QAnon's growth, often linked in QAnon Facebook group descriptions or pinned within "start here" posts. Many of these secondary platforms were aggregators designed to organize and make 4chan/8chan posts more accessible to users unaccustomed to the forums. QResear.ch[32] is one such aggregator that includes collectively authored "decodings" for each individual post by the anonymous online

[31] See also: Miessen and Ritts, eds., *Para-Platforms: On the Spatial Politics of Right-Wing Populism* (2019); Lingel, *Digital Countercultures and the Struggle for Community* (2017); Armano, Briziarelli, and Risi, eds. *Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Subjectivities* (2022).

[32] WayBack Web Archive of QResear.ch: http://web.archive.org/web/20231010225837/https://qresear.ch/

user known only as “Q”. The homepage of the website excitedly declares its purpose: “QResear.ch - The 8chan/8kun QResearch Board Search... allows you to search through 24,531,011 documents from 51 #QAnon-related data sources - at once! There is no advertising or tracking on this site! Nothing is loaded from another domain! Your ability to research with privacy is my goal! WWG1WGA!”

Despite the fact that the QResear.ch site seems to offer itself as a kind of guide to navigating the complex and esoteric QAnon deep lore, the reality is that true newcomers—anyone who hadn’t already been exposed to QAnon in some other context first—would probably be bewildered by what they found on the page. The site is littered with insider language like the homepage’s reference to “WWG1WGA!”, an acronym for the QAnon catchphrase “Where We Go One We Go All” as borrowed from Ridley Scott’s 1996 film *White Squall*. Additionally, its interface provides little context for what might actually be found within each of the tabs listed in the navigation pane at the top of the page:

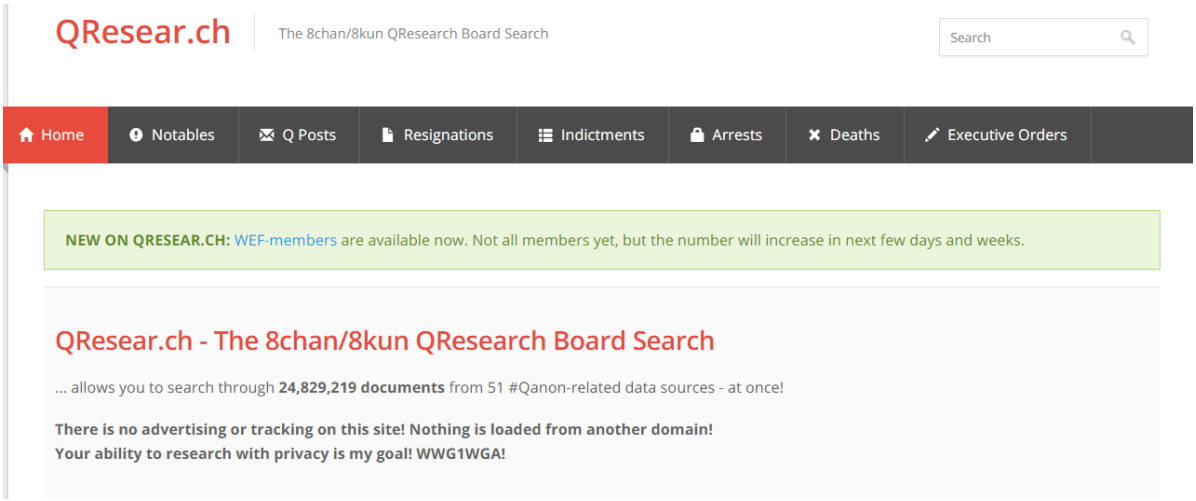


Figure 2: Screenshot of QResear.ch Homepage (April 2024)

Alt Text: QResear.ch’s simple web interface featuring eight different tabs sorted by type of QAnon source material, as well as a search bar. The homepage reads “QResear.ch - The 8chan/8kun QResearch Board

Search… allows you to search through 24,829,219 documents from 51 #Qanon-related data sources - at once! There is no advertising or tracking on this site! Nothing is loaded from another domain! Your ability to research with privacy is my goal! WWG1WGA!" The navigation panel at the top of the page includes seven types of archival sources for users to explore. While the latter tabs ("Q Posts", "Resignations", "Indictments", "Arrests", "Deaths", and "Executive Orders") are mostly archives of "primary" Q sources, including posts made by the anonymous 4chan/8kun user "Q", police statistics and links to criminal records, copies of legal documents, and/or news reporting (of varying quality in source material), the "Notables" tab differs from the other ones.

Upon exploration, these tabs reveal themselves to be collections of "primary" and "secondary" QAnon "sources" seemingly meant to guide those trying to get deeper into their own independent "research". The navigation panel at the top of the page includes seven types of archival sources for users to explore. While the latter tabs ("Q Posts", "Resignations", "Indictments", "Arrests", "Deaths", and "Executive Orders") are mostly archives of "primary" Q sources, including posts made by the anonymous 4chan/8kun user "Q", police statistics and links to criminal records, copies of legal documents, and/or news reporting (of varying quality in source material), the "Notables" tab differs from the other ones. Rather than being a collection of "primary" sources, this archive consists exclusively of aggregated "secondary" commentary and analysis of Q-drops, produced by various anonymous users on the chan forums and curated by forum moderators who deemed the posts "notable".

These "notables" are presented as belonging to a higher tier or having higher informational quality than most QAnon forum posts, almost as if they were "peer-reviewed" by the "experts" who publish compilation threads. Each thread title leads with the designation of "Q Research General" followed by a number and a subtitle—including both ominous ones like "It's The End Of The World As We Know It Edition" and "Nothing Can Stop What Is Coming Edition", as well as memorably bizarre titles such as "Dr. Halper-Hayes We Haz It All/Turtle Sux Balls Edition" and "Women love big bad ass men, that protect them edition". The "Q Research General" honorary is, of course, a reference to the QAnon vernacular of "digital soldiers" and

"information warfare", which is how many anons (a shorthand for believers of QAnon) conceive of their "work" online. The "generals" behind these aggregate threads appear to be the 8kun /QResearch/ moderators, and they seem to post on a pretty regular schedule in spite of the relative lack of new posts directly from Q himself over the last few years.

Upon expanding the threads, you'll generally encounter a series of dates and numbers that identify the original threads as they were uploaded to 4chan or 8chan/8kun (depending on whether you are accessing posts from before or after Q switched from 4chan to 8chan/8kun). Some of the threads also contain identifiers for related boards (such as the "International Q Research Threads" as organized by country), as well as copies of the forum moderators' rules for the board. Two notable rules are reiterated frequently: "Posting guidelines - report cp and violent threats, no naked children". These rules are followed by numerical identifiers for three other posts which apparently clarify "What counts as CP?" (child pornography). Given that relatively few other rules are given aside from the ban on violent threats and child sex abuse material—mainly just a few notes about spam and staying on topic—we can assume that that violent and abusive materials are a persistent issue on the board, a reflection of the chan forums' highly repugnant and problematic cultures.

Another indicator of this deeply problematic culture on the original QAnon forums is the listed rule that "No muh joos in notes, will be removed", which leads to a thread (#19103408) describing the history of moderation for the /QResearch/ board and the current moderators' stance on "REJECT[ing] PURPOSELY OFFENSIVE OR INAPPROPRIATE NOTES (muh joos, unsauced, etc.)". According to the history given there, a prior board moderator had "laced Notables with posts reflecting his personal likes and dislikes—hit pieces on his 'enemies', muh joos stuff like the Zion Protocols, and other junk" (reply #17241859). The phrase "No muh joos

in notes" within the /Research/ board context, then, refers to a ban on anti-Jewish posts that are off-topic or seem "unsubstantiated". To be clear, anti-Jewish content is still very common on the board, but the mods seem to be suggesting this racist attitude must be "proven" with "evidence" within individual posts in order to be allowed.

In addition to providing the rules for the board, these informational sections also provide resources for the board, including internal histories and guides. Most of the threads include numerical identifiers to help users access "how-to" guide posts, such as "Baking Tools & Guidelines - NEW BAKERS, PLEASE READ" and "How to bake/ebake"[33] (more on these later). These guides explain, in great detail, how to participate in the /QResearch/ forum's practice of "baking", which I defined in the introduction as the DIY collaborative social practice of interpreting and making meaning out of the mysterious, jumbled posts ("Q-drops") made by the anonymous user known only as "Q". The "bakes" are also referred to as "dough" or "bread" within the forum, an extension of the "breadcrumbs" metaphor often used to refer to Q's posts. Q used the term "Bread Crumbs" in the title of the first post[34] considered to be a "Q-drop" entitled "Bread Crumbs - Q Clearance Patriot"[35] and posted to the controversial 4chan /pol/ ("politically incorrect") board on October 31, 2017.

Because the formatting of these posts is highly specialized to the specific forum context in which they appear, most average users would not be able to navigate the 4chan/8chan/8kun forums or adhere to their expectations without some time spent exploring these informational

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[33] For an example, see the instructions posted to the QAnon 8kun Research Board in a frequently linked thread entitled "//'// FOR APPRENTICE BAKERS - 'HOW TO BAKE' //'//" - WayBack Web Archive Copy.

[34] In *Storm Is Upon Us*, Mike Rothschild also notes a Q-drop #0, or a "proto-Q" comment from October 28, 2017 with the subject "Mueller Investigation" which read "Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM–8:30 AM EST on Monday—the morning on Oct 30, 2017" (32).

[35] WayBack Web Archive Copy of first Q-drop (Oct 31, 2017): "Bread Crumbs - Q Clearance Patriot": https://web.archive.org/web/20240408112748/https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/search/uid/grTMpzrL/order/asc/

guides. Moreover, beyond the difficulty of deciphering the formatting and social expectations of the boards, users must also contend with the difficulty of interpreting the content itself—no small task thanks to the highly specialized QAnon dialects on the chan forums.

Take for example, an August 2023 thread from the 8kun QResearch Board labeled "Q Research General #23735: Emergency Ani-Bake"[36]. This archive of notable "bakes" is organized so that each post included in the thread starts with a new line, a numerical identifier, and title. Although, upon first glance, it appears as a seemingly incoherent list of jumbled ideas and numbers, the listing actually functions much like a card catalog or a table of contents:

23734 >>19325353
>>19325365 Patty McMurray: Michigan Police Find TENS OF THOUSANDS of Fake Registrations, Theorize Of Democratic "Multi-State Operation" To Rig Elections from 2020
>>19325393, >>19325478 Is This the Technocracy's Hidden Ace in the Global Anti-Meat Agenda?
>>19325409 Tera Dahl on Bannon re Slave Trade at the Southern Border
>>19325439 Trump in NH
>>19325474 Former African Union Ambassador to the U.S. Arikana Chihombori-Quao (@HEDrArikana) EXPLODES, wonders why France remains a member of the UN Security Council while committing atrocities in Africa,
>>19325481 Macron Depression: Globalist Leader Survives Many Crises, While French Influence Collapses in Africa
>>19325490 Trump is about to unleash his FULL subpoena power…
>>19325511 TRANS LAWMAKER HIT WITH CAMPAIGN COMPLAINT IN MONTANA
>>19325528 A Very Specific Set of Traits -- Melania Trump, The Steadfast Rock
>>19325579, >>19325619, >>19325631 Next batch of Covid fear pron - variant ERIS or EG.5
>>19325547, >>19325596 Reminder: Uranium 1 rundown from 2018
>>19325652 Aborted babies are used to develop vaxxes - video
>>19325670 PDJT: J6 Unselect Committee got rid of EVERYTHING!
>>19325686, >>19325698 The Capitol Hill Tapes - Epoch Times was given access, "WE PUBLISH THIS FRIDAY"
>>19325723, >>19325756 PDJT: I was extremely respectful of Sloppy Chris Christie today in New Hampshire…
>>19325733 "FEC Reports Just 22 DeSantis Donors in Iowa."
>>19325747 Western officials losing faith in Ukraine's military -- CNN
>>19325772, >>19325835, >>19325948 PDJT: A MUST WATCH! [Hitler parody with DeSantis as Hitler]
>>19325785 PDJT: So now that I have full Subpoena Power…
>>19325802, >>19325807 Trump Is Right. Mitch McConnell And Elaine Chao Spent Decades Getting 'Rich On China'
>>19325828 Anon: Who financed J6?
>>19325837 PDJT rt's Poso's Truth about Ray Epps
>>19325849, >>19325863, >>19325885, >>19325903 Texas woman was mowing the grass when a snake and hawk attacked her from above - comms or true or both?
>>19325858 O'Reilly reveals new information involving the Biden family corruption, media coverage of Donald Trump
>>19325890 Joe Biden adds two wonders to the seven wonders of the world
>>19325905 LIVE police chase in LA
>>19326126 Newsom administration muzzled Fresno Co. disclosure of Reedley COVID lab
>>19326138, >>19326149, >>19326152 INNOVATION 2023 - 2025 - THE B.I.S AGENDA
>>19326163 #23734

[36] WayBack Web Archive Copy of "Q Research General #23735: Emergency Ani-Bake" thread: https://web.archive.org/web/20240408083253/https://8kun.top/qresearch/res/19326166.html#19326169

Figure 3: Screenshot of thread: "Q Research General #23735: Emergency Ani-Bake"

Alt Text: A crowded thread of green text on a red background, with post numbers corresponding to individual lines and titles. The ideas in the titles are extremely choppy, littered with acronyms and vague references to political figures like Biden, DeSantis, and Trump. Full text reads:
"23734 >>19325353
>>19325365 Patty McMurray: Michigan Police Find TENS OF THOUSANDS of Fake Registrations, Theorize Of Democratic "Multi-State Operation" To Rig Elections from 2020
>>19325393, >>19325478 Is This the Technocracy's Hidden Ace in the Global Anti-Meat Agenda?
>>19325409 Tera Dahl on Bannon re Slave Trade at the Southern Border
>>19325439 Trump in NH
>>19325474 Former African Union Ambassador to the U.S. Arikana Chihombori-Quao (@HEDrArikana) EXPLODES, wonders why France remains a member of the UN Security Council while committing atrocities in Africa,
>>19325481 Macron Depression: Globalist Leader Survives Many Crises, While French Influence Collapses in Africa
>>19325490 Trump is about to unleash his FULL subpoena power…
>>19325511 TRANS LAWMAKER HIT WITH CAMPAIGN COMPLAINT IN MONTANA
>>19325528 A Very Specific Set of Traits – Melania Trump, The Steadfast Rock
>>19325579, >>19325619, >>19325631 Next batch of Covid fear pron - variant ERIS or EG.5
>>19325547, >>19325596 Reminder: Uranium 1 rundown from 2018
>>19325652 Aborted babies are used to develop vaxxes - video
>>19325670 PDJT: J6 Unselect Committee got rid of EVERYTHING!
>>19325686, >>19325698 The Capitol Hill Tapes - Epoch Times was given access, "WE PUBLISH THIS FRIDAY"
>>19325723, >>19325756 PDJT: I was extremely respectful of Sloppy Chris Christie today in New Hampshire…
>>19325733 "FEC Reports Just 22 DeSantis Donors in Iowa."
>>19325747 Western officials losing faith in Ukraine's military – CNN
>>19325772, >>19325835, >>19325948 PDJT: A MUST WATCH! [Hitler parody with DeSantis as Hitler]
>>19325785 PDJT: So now that I have full Subpoena Power…
>>19325802, >>19325807 Trump Is Right. Mitch McConnell And Elaine Chao Spent Decades Getting 'Rich On China'
>>19325828 Anon: Who financed J6?
>>19325837 PDJT rt's Poso's Truth about Ray Epps
>>19325849, >>19325863, >>19325885, >>19325903 Texas woman was mowing the grass when a snake and hawk attacked her from above - comms or true or both?
>>19325858 O'Reilly reveals new information involving the Biden family corruption, media coverage of Donald Trump
>>19325890 Joe Biden adds two wonders to the seven wonders of the world
>>19325905 LIVE police chase in LA
>>19326126 Newsom administration muzzled Fresno Co. disclosure of Reedley COVID lab
>>19326138, >>19326149, >>19326152 INNOVATION 2023 - 2025 - THE B.I.S AGENDA
>>19326163 #23734

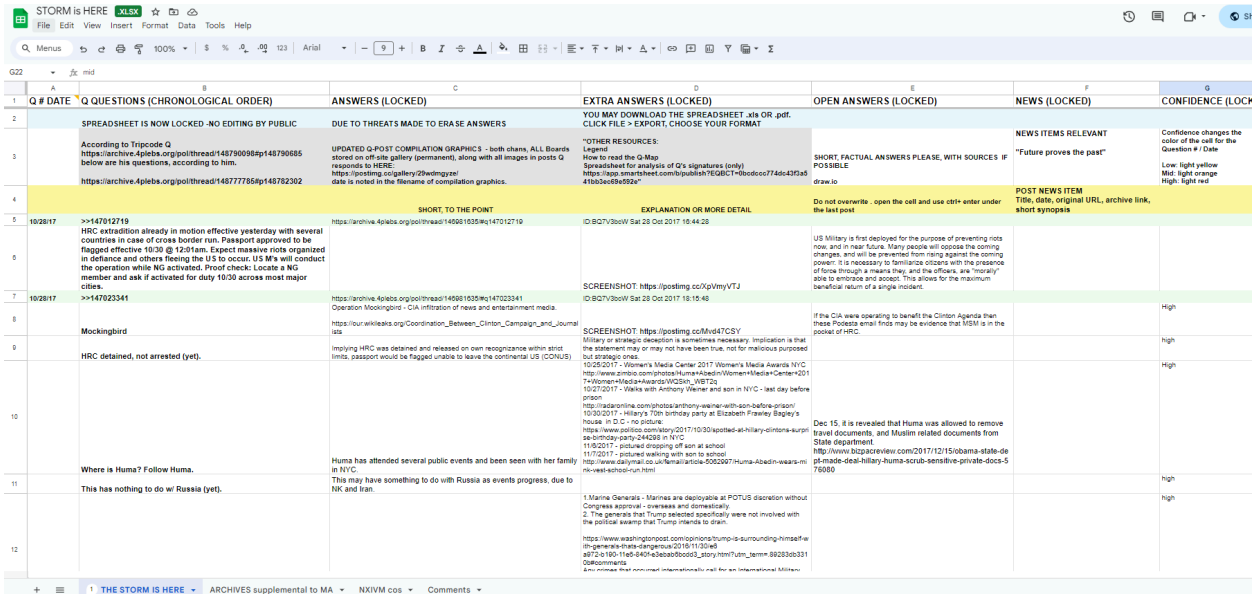
A user hoping to access the original posts would have to have some level of fluency with the chan forums in order to navigate the aggregate threads, much like a library user would need to understand the dewey decimal system in order to locate a book they found in a card catalog.

Moreover, it would be difficult for an unfamiliar user to even figure out what they were reading at all, given the niche language and limited information given in many of the titles. For example, QAnon-specific acronyms like "PDJT" (President Donald J. Trump) and "J6" (January 6th) come up in several post titles within this single thread, in addition to the more generalized lingo of forums like 8kun—including the frequent appearance of words like "shill"[37] and a slew of neologisms adapted from existing homophobic, racist, and sexist slurs. The effect of these niche and offensive dialects is not only to repel outsiders on the basis of morality or political attitude, but also to repel outsiders by creating actual interpretive inaccessibility.

Thus, rather than being sources for true "newcomers" to the conspiracy culture, I would argue that aggregators like QResear.ch (and other similar sites like QNotables.com, QProofs.com, and QAnon.pub, as well as the /QResearch/ board itself) are actually designed to cater towards an audience of people who are already highly invested in QAnon. This kind of forum represents a major upgrade from earlier and less sophisticated crowdsourced archives of QAnon content, such as the infamous "THE STORM IS HERE"[38] excel sheet:

[37] On anonymous forums, the term "shill" usually refers to a poster accused of posing as an unbiased person, despite having a vested interest in advancing a particular group or issue. It may also refer to figures in media/politics/etc. who are believed to be supporters of a particular secret agenda, or some other kind of distrusted organization or group. Often, it is combined with anti-Jewish signifiers such as the (((echo))) or phrases like "globalists" in order to accuse anonymous users of promoting the "Jewish agenda". For example, the phrase "OP is a globalist (((schill)))" would be coded language accusing the original poster of being a Jewish person (or sympathizer) attempting to promote Jewish supremacy.

[38] WayBack Web Archival Copy: STORM IS HERE (excel sheet)



STORM is HERE .XLSX

File Edit View Insert Format Data Tools Help

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Q # DATE	Q QUESTIONS (CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER)	ANSWERS (LOCKED)	EXTRA ANSWERS (LOCKED)	OPEN ANSWERS (LOCKED)	NEWS (LOCKED)	CONFIDENCE (LOCK
2		SPREADSHEET IS NOW LOCKED -NO EDITING BY PUBLIC	DUE TO THREATS MADE TO ERASE ANSWERS	YOU MAY DOWNLOAD THE SPREADSHEET .xls OR .pdf. CLICK FILE > EXPORT, CHOOSE YOUR FORMAT			
3		According to Tripcode Q https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/148790098#p148790685 below are his questions, according to him. https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/148777786#p148782302	UPDATED Q-POST COMPILATION GRAPHICS - both chans, ALL Boards stored on off-site gallery (permanent), along with all images in posts Q responds to HERE: https://postimg.cc/gallery/29wdmgyze/ date is noted in the filename of compilation graphics.	"OTHER RESOURCES: Legend How to read the Q-Map Spreadsheet for analysis of Q's signatures (only) https://app.smartsheet.com/b/publish?EQBCT=6bcdccc774dc43f3a541bb2ec69e592e"	SHORT, FACTUAL ANSWERS PLEASE, WITH SOURCES IF POSSIBLE draw.io	NEWS ITEMS RELEVANT "Future proves the past"	Confidence changes the color of the cell for the Question # / Date Low: light yellow Mid: light orange High: light red
4					Do not overwrite . open the cell and use ctrl+ enter under the last post	POST NEWS ITEM Title, date, original URL, archive link, short synopsis	
5	10/28/17	>>147012719	SHORT, TO THE POINT https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146961635/#q147012719	EXPLANATION OR MORE DETAIL ID:BQTV3boW Sat 28 Oct 2017 18:44:28			
6		HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport 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 operation while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most major cities.		SCREENSHOT: https://postimg.cc/XpVmyVTJ	US Military is first deployed for the purpose of preventing riots now, and in near future. Many people will oppose the coming changes, and will be prevented from rising against the coming power. It is necessary to familiarize citizens with the presence of force through a means they, and the officers, are "morally" able to embrace and accept. This allows for the maximum beneficial return of a single incident.		
7	10/28/17	>>147023341	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146961635/#q147023341	ID:BQTV3boW Sat 28 Oct 2017 18:15:48			
8		Mockingbird	Operation Mockingbird - CIA infiltration of news and entertainment media. https://our.wikileaks.org/Coordination_Between_Clinton_Campaign_and_Journalists	SCREENSHOT: https://postimg.cc/Mvd47CSY	If the CIA were operating to benefit the Clinton Agenda then these Podesta email finds may be evidence that MSM is in the pocket of HRC.		High
9		HRC detained, not arrested (yet).	Implying HRC was detained and released on own recognizance within strict limits, passport would be flagged unable to leave the continental US (CONUS)	Military or strategic deception is sometimes necessary. Implication is that the statement may or may not have been true, not for malicious purposed but strategic ones.			high
10		Where is Huma? Follow Huma.	Huma has attended several public events and been seen with her family in NYC.	10/25/2017 - Women's Media Center 2017 Women's Media Awards NYC http://www.zimbio.com/photos/Huma+Abedin/Women+Media+Center+2017+Women+Media+Awards/WQSth_WBTQs 10/27/2017 - Walks with Anthony Weiner and son in NYC - last day before prison http://radaronline.com/photos/anthony-weiner-with-son-before-prison/ 10/30/2017 - Hillary's 70th birthday party at Elizabeth Frawley Bagley's house in D.C - no picture. https://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/30/spotted-at-hillary-clintons-surprise-birthday-party-244288 in NYC 11/6/2017 - pictured dropping off son at school 11/7/2017 - pictured walking with son to school http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-5062907/Huma-Abedin-wears-mink-vest-school-run.html	Dec 15, it is revealed that Huma was allowed to remove travel documents, and Muslim related documents from State department http://www.bizpacreview.com/2017/12/15/obama-state-dept-made-deal-hillary-huma-scrub-sensitive-private-docs-576080		High
11		This has nothing to do w/ Russia (yet).	This may have something to do with Russia as events progress, due to NK and Iran.				high
12				1.Marine Generals - Marines are deployable at POTUS discretion without Congress approval - overseas and domestically. 2. The generals that Trump selected specifically were not involved with the political swamp that Trump intends to drain. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-is-surrounding-himself-with-generals-thats-dangerous/2016/11/30/e9a972-b190-11e6-840f-e3ebab0bodd3_story.html?utm_term=.89283db331 Q#comments Any crimes that occurred internationally call for an International Military				high

THE STORM IS HERE | ARCHIVES supplemental to MA | NXIVM cos | Comments

Figure 4: Screenshot of "STORM IS HERE" (excel sheet)

Alt Text: A spreadsheet with many thousands of rows and dozens of columns, sorting Q-drops mainly by core questions and corresponding "answers" (interpretations) by Q researchers. For a text-accessible web version, see Web.Archive copy.

This spreadsheet circulated the internet widely during QAnon's major takeoff in 2020-2021, and it provided a log of "questions" and "answers" accompanied by links to specific Q-drops. These kinds of "research" archives have been produced by and for people who are already deep into the process of ideological indoctrination and "doing your own research"—not folks who are considering QAnon for the first time.

These aggregate sources are a clear example of the QAnon conspiracy culture's multi-scaled communications infrastructure and multiple audiences. It takes several steps of radicalization before most average users are ready or willing to navigate a resource like QResear.ch, so QAnon's ability to spread to new demographics depends upon the production of less-niche and less-extreme versions of QAnon's key ideas. "Soft sells" are made available to wider audiences on more mainstream platforms through easily accessed mediums (like videos);

then, as believers are gradually radicalized over time, they become partitioned into increasingly niche online QAnon spaces with increasingly limited accessibility to the outside world. So, the idea of QAnon believers going "down the rabbit hole" is, in fact, an apt metaphor for the gradual process of deep-diving into the more difficult-to-access levels of the QAnon communications infrastructure.

Prior to the mass bans of QAnon content on most mainstream platforms in 2020 and 2021, most casual users were exposed to QAnon mainly through bakes uploaded to mainstream platforms (especially Facebook Groups and YouTube videos) rather than being exposed through the forums where the Q-drops actually appeared. For example, in chapter 2, I examine one of the earliest QAnon bakes to hit YouTube back in 2017; and, in chapter 3, I analyze one of the most popular QAnon videos to ever go viral. This latter video, produced by the infamous Joe M, was one of the main entry points to QAnon for thousands of users specifically because it was a "soft sell" video often pinned in the "start here" sections of QAnon groups and forums.

Accounting for QAnon's multiple formats and platforms is key to understanding how this multi-scaled conspiracy theory took root among so many audiences so quickly. But the question remains: which methodological tools are most useful for analyzing and understanding the actual social media products created by Q and his many online followers?

Culture, Narrative, and Online "Community": Why Treat QAnon as Folk Media?

Each of the aforementioned media artifacts is an excellent example of how effectively the multi-scaled QAnon media infrastructure takes into account the knowledge levels of different target audiences, who have wildly different levels of familiarity with the incredibly niche insider cultures of QAnon. I have already suggested that QAnon culture consists of an array of *folk*

media practices which adapt the long-standing folkloric tradition of collective cultural authorship to the many formats and platforms of new media in order to advance reactionary conspiracism. Analysis of narrative itself is critical for my folkloric methodology, as narrative remains so central to both folklore and to conspiracy theories—one of the major reasons why the folkloric approach to online conspiracism is so effective, in my perspective. In fact, QAnon bakers will often explicitly describe their online practices as "narrative warfare" or "information warfare".

Unfortunately, the role of narrative has often been neglected within new media scholarship about online conspiracy theories, which tends to focus more on quantitative analysis and data-collection than detailed close-reading or narrative analysis of individual media objects. The emergent field of digital folklore studies[39] attempts to remedy this research gap, raising the obvious question of what actually counts as digital folklore. For my purposes, I will define "digital folklore" as *an array of collaborative/participatory online cultural practices including (but not limited to) communicative vernacular, narrative meaning-making, and collaborative media production, which enable the assembly of a social imaginary (an online cultural collective, quasi "folk group") which may be symbolically mediated, digitally networked, and/or affectively felt/embodied).*

Although a bit wordy, I think that this is the best definition which captures all the reasons why the folkloric lens provides so much insight into QAnon conspiracy culture. It is not purely about communication or culture, but also about affect, social imagination, participation[40], and the

[39] Trevor Blank argues that folklore as a discipline has been an underutilized methodology for digital cultural studies despite the fact that "from the earliest moments of the modern Internet's existence, folklore was a central component of the domain, moderating the intersection of computer professionals with hackers, newfangled lingo, and the dispersal of stories, pranks, and legends" (2). Recent scholarly endeavors like The Digital Folklore Project, directed by Lynne McNeill and Jeannie Thomas at Utah State University, demonstrate the utility of folklore studies in understanding how digital cultures operate.

[40] See: Zeeuw and Gekker, "A God-Tier LARP? QAnon as Conspiracy Fictioning" (2023).

assembly of shared narratives which seem to create some sense of real meaning in the lives of true believers.

In this sense, my methodology uses analysis of creative, vernacular QAnon media objects in order to access the underlying folk practices and social relationships that make this media appear as an intelligible form of communication and knowledge-making to their believers. As explained in the digital folklore chapter written by Gabriele de Seta for *The Second International Handbook of Internet Research* (2020): "Approaching digital folklore from the perspective of vernacular creativity gives precedence to practices over objects, to the ambiguous position of users over the generalized identity of "the folk," and to the social production of genres over the accretion of repertoires" (175). In other words, by accessing the collaborative creative vernaculars[41] of QAnon "folk groups", we can start to understand their social practices.

But what exactly constitutes a "folk group" on the internet, and why is QAnon a good candidate for this terminology? In *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World* (2009) Trevor Blank argues that

> Folk groups are readily identifiable on the Internet, as evidenced by chat forums, blogs, online political activity, fan web pages, and a plethora of other interrelated concepts. New traditions are being forged in online communities, and web lingo—emerging in such forms as net-derived lingo (see netlingo.com), wiki-based Internet vocabulary databases

[41] Other citations within de Seta's chapter also highlight the importance of vernacular to the digital folklore method: "Howard's approach to digital folklore passes through a recuperation of the term "vernacular" (a common resource for digital folklorists, as the next subsection illustrates) in light of the new affordances offered by participatory media, which contribute to the shaping of traditional forms of expression (2008a, p. 192). As he argues, 'a complex and dynamic conception of the vernacular as a performed aspect of specific communication events' (2008b, p. 497) is better suited to account for the forms of literacy and ephemeral content allowed by contemporary communication technologies. Communication through digital media implies a degree of complicity between vernacular and institutional expression that folklorists should foreground in their analyses. Howard's definition emphasizes the hybridity and dynamism of this relationship… The hybridity of this vernacular web warrants a shift in methodology from a focus on media objects to an attention to the 'persistent processes' of user activities on participatory media" (173).

> like urbandictionary.com, or the communal folk wisdom of online discussion groups—demonstrates the uniqueness of Internet expression. (9)

In other words, distinct online subcultures arise through the collaborative production and circulation of increasingly localized folk medias, which results in an array of different digital folk groups with their own distinct vernaculars, traditions, beliefs, and narratives that function to define and maintain an internal sense of collective identity—all key features of folklore as identified by Blank (5-6). And, as we have already seen, QAnon is so saturated with its own distinct insider vernaculars, expressive practices, and narratives that newcomers need detailed "how-to" guides just to be able to navigate online QAnon spaces.

So, despite ongoing contemporary debates[42] about which forms of expression actually qualify as folklore, Blank makes a strong case that folklore as a discipline has been underutilized within new media studies. He suggests that "from the earliest moments of the modern Internet's existence, folklore was a central component of the domain, moderating the intersection of computer professionals with hackers, newfangled lingo, and the dispersal of stories, pranks, and legends" (2). Certainly this is the case with QAnon, which emerged from pre-existing lingo and lore on 4chan. More specifically, QAnon emerged as a uniquely viral example of the

[42] With regards to the ongoing debate about what constitutes folklore, Blank writes: "Ben-Amos' classic definition of folklore assertively emphasizes that 'folklore communication takes place in a situation in which people confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly' (1971, 12–13), yet he also declares that folklore 'is the action that happens at [the time of the communicative event]' and, as such, 'is an artistic action' (10). This is confusing when carried over into an Internet context. Clearly, communicative events take place, but the lack of face-to-face interactions contradicts the instinctual efforts of the ethnographer… McClelland simplifies folklore by describing it as 'communicative behavior whose primary characteristics… are that… it doesn't 'belong' to an individual or group… and in the modern context therefore transcends issues of intellectual property; and [that]... it is transmitted spontaneously, from one individual (or group of individuals) to another under certain conditions, frequently without regard for remuneration or return benefit. As it is transmitted, it often undergoes modification, according to the inclination of the retransmitter' (2000, 184)... Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that 'folklore as a discipline has tended to conceive the everyday in largely aesthetic terms' (1998, 308), pointing to Ben-Amos' definition of folklore as 'artistic communication in small groups' (1971, 13) and the American Folklife Center's characterization as 'community life and values, artfully expressed in myriad forms and interactions' (Hufford 1991, 1). Elliott Oring puts it succinctly by saying that folklore 'is about people—individuals and communities—and their aesthetic expression' (1998, 335)" (4-6).

"insider-anon"[43] trope, a kind of prank and form of storytelling unique to 4chan in which anonymous forum users claim to have insider knowledge or high level secret access within organizations such as the CIA and FBI, often with the intent of purposely misleading or "trolling" unsuspecting other users.

In qualifying what "counts" as online communication versus digital folklore, Blank suggests asking questions such as:

> What comprises vernacular expression? What do tradition, belief, legend, performance, and narrative mean in an internet context? How does the Internet complicate notations of folk group, of audience, and of the dynamic, reflexive character of performance? As a mediatory agent, how does the Internet affect expression, engender unique folkloric material… and reconfigure the nature of communication as a form of cultural maintenance and definition? (5-6)

The development of vernacular, beliefs, and narratives that help bond specific imagined audiences together culturally is a central dynamic in the formation of unique online cultures and subcultures. Digital subcultures tend to co-construct increasingly niche and hyper-evolved "dialects" that are illegible to cultural outsiders who have not built knowledge about the shared index of visual and textual references[44].

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[43] See reporting by Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins for *NBC News:* "In 2016, there was FBIAnon, a self-described 'high-level analyst and strategist' offering intel about the 2016 investigation into the Clinton Foundation. Then came HLIAnon, an acronym for High Level Insider, who posted about various dubious conspiracies in riddles, including one that claimed Princess Diana had been killed because she found out about 9/11 'beforehand' and had 'tried to stop it.' Then 'CIAAnon' and 'CIA Intern' took to the boards in early 2017, and last August one called WH Insider Anon offered a supposed preview that something that was 'going to go down' regarding the DNC and leaks." from "How three conspiracy theorists took 'Q' and sparked QAnon" 14 August 2018.

[44] This phenomenon of linguistic/symbolic indexicality, or the increasing niche-ification of internet subcultural communications (including imagery, neologisms, and other forms of in-group references) is not limited to right-wing digital cultures. On the other end of the political spectrum, online leftist subcultures on various platforms also tend towards developing symbolic/linguistic communications highly specific to those particular contexts. Sometimes this occurs in relation to moderation and censorship, as on the right. I previously documented a good case study of this during the George Floyd Uprisings of 2020. At the time, leftist meme accounts on Instagram commonly adopted

As these cultural productions become increasingly niche, the interpretive difficulty of the media functions as a kind of gatekeeping. In order to understand and to be understood, one has to learn insider language through significant investment in consuming the group's folk media. To refer back to the examples from earlier in this chapter, QAnon-specific acronyms like "PDJT" (President Donald J. Trump) and "J6" (January 6th), as well as more generalized (and racially charged) forum lingo like "schill" and "globalists", often appear in the posts of QAnon influencers, QAnon groups, and other social media pages. In particular, terms like "schill" and "globalists" tend to have anti-Jewish connotations and uses, and the terms themselves are rooted in (and contribute to) conspiracist worldviews and ways of thinking.

Media consumption may therefore act as social or ideological conditioning in the sense that outsiders become insiders as they learn to think and communicate using the group's vernacular. This certainly seems to be the case for the QAnon conspiracy culture, which tends to radicalize new members slowly through the call to "do your own research". This call to "do your own research" essentially prompts individuals to consume QAnon folk media until their own thought patterns start to mirror the overall QAnon ideology of paranoid reactionary conspiracism, a process commonly referred to as "redpilling" or "taking the red pill".

Of course, this idea of the "red pill" finds its foil in the "blue pill" which represents anything liberal or left of "red pill" conservatism. "Red pill" online cultures are easily identified

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absurd, "cute" imagery and aesthetics as a way to remediate affect around violence (including property destruction as an act of protest). This also had the effect of creating ambiguity within interpretation of a meme's actual intent, allowing radical content to circulate platforms more easily during a time of heightened moderation. Among a cluster of Portland-local self-declared anarchist meme accounts which regularly promoted information about Portland-local protests, memes of dogs were circulated with captions like "THE WORLD'S BEEN LOOTED / LOOT BACK", as well as cartoon dogs wearing gas masks, homemade shields, and other anarchic protest imagery. These images would likely read as nonsensical outside of their original contexts, but within the media ecology where they emerged, they began to signify anti-sense as a form of protest. By dropping viewers into the contested middle ground between sense and nonsense, justice and violence, right and wrong, liberation and criminality, play and politics, this particular cultural signification served as a reminder that the order of the "sensible" should be rejected if it is rooted in domination.

by a litany of unique vernacular expressions and references which would be incomprehensible to most average internet users. This hyperlocalization of language has a kind of insulating social effect by creating a sense of a boundary between those who are included in the folk group and those who are not—even on open forums that do not formally close off their membership.

In general, the formation of niche knowledge communities tends to contribute to the impression of a boundary between insiders and outsiders, who can be differentiated by their ability to interpret and mimic the vernacular. Thus, despite the fact that members of an online folk group might not necessarily have direct relationships with one another, they are still able to recognize who is and is not a part of their "community"[45] through their distinct cultural and symbolic practices. In this sense, we might think of online folk groups are *cultural groups who can imagine*[46] *themselves as being together through the co-production of shared media, dialects, symbols, and rituals*.

This perspective is aligned with a symbolic interactionist approach to online "community". Fernback suggests in "Beyond the Diluted Community Concept: a symbolic interactionist perspective on online social relations" (2007) that:

> The metaphor of 'community' in cyberspace is one of convenient togetherness without real responsibility… a symbolic interactionist approach to the examination of online

[45] The methodologically ambiguous term of "community" has been hotly debated within the field of new media. Of particular concern is the fact that online social ecosystems are not necessarily tied to a stable, geographically and temporally bounded region the way real-world communities usually are. The word "community" could be used to describe an array of different online social arrangements: a literal network of users connected via digital infrastructure who circulate shared information amongst one another; a group of people who form direct connections in a bounded space of communication like a groupchat or small forum; a collection of users on the same platform united by shared structures of affect, who share the impression that there is a "community" with mutual commitments, priorities, and dedication; etc. My use of the term "folk groups" is meant to avoid the ambiguity of "community" by emphasizing shared folk media as the primary factor contributing to shared group identity.

[46] As Benedict Anderson tells us: "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). Q-drops (and their many interpretations) are a central media around which the collective QAnon group identity can be imagined, similar to the way that nationalist news media enables the nation itself to be imagined.

> social relationships that is free of the controversy and structural-functional baggage of the term ‘community’. It suggests that community is an evolving process, and that commitment is the truly desired social ideal in social interaction, whether online or offline. (49)

Within such a framework, conspiracy cultures like QAnon might be understood as highly affective social arrangements that are most persuasive when they are able to offer potential believers not only an overall theory of why things are the way that they are, but also a shared language and narrative, a feeling of political empowerment, and a sense of belonging in a social group.

In other words, folk media isn’t just about information and narrative; it’s about community and identity. It’s critical to highlight these social and affective aspects of QAnon, as they are extremely significant reasons why someone might find conspiracy theories to be appealing in the first place. As mentioned in the introduction, Douglas et al. suggest in “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories” (2017) that affective and social components are major psychological causes of conspiracism:

> People may be drawn to conspiracy theories when—compared with nonconspiracy explanations—they promise to satisfy important social psychological motives that can be characterized as epistemic (e.g., the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty), existential (e.g., the desire for control and security), and social (e.g., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group). (539)

QAnon’s online conspiracy theories certainly seem to offer an epistemic narrative that provides existentially-affirming feelings of truth and understanding to its believers. The constant encouragement to actively participate in the collaborative production of QAnon folk narratives

and media through "doing your own research" likely offers a significant sense of control, empowerment, and positive self/group image. And, beyond just narrative and understanding, online QAnon communities can provide real experiences of social belonging in a variety of different sub-groups, each offering their own unique flavor of QAnon subculture.

This last point is an essential insight central not only to my methodology, but also to the organization of this study itself. A folkloric analytical framework reveals the importance of specific context in understanding QAnon's wide array of subcultures. Because localized QAnon subcultures form around localized QAnon media hubs, it is important to analyze the particular context in which each subculture has formed and the particular influences upon it. What better way to explore the question of influence than to study QAnon influencers, who themselves operate as communication hubs for QAnon media and localized subcultures?

Online groups, forums, and accounts run by QAnon influencers form the digital communications infrastructure that allows Q believers to congregate in various digital "places" with their own local variations and dialects of QAnon culture. While forums and groups that act as "digital town squares" tend to have a more equal communications dynamic among most users (especially when anonymous), a parasocial dynamic of unequal influence—where the localized culture is dominated by the values of the "influencer" as the sole sovereign and arbiter of the localized social ecosystem—emerges on platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram where social media networks form nodes around individual users.

The hierarchical, market-driven influencer model of social media platforms that dominates most social media today is distinctly different from the platform models more common in the early days of the web, when folklorists first began taking note of how digital space enable the creation and spread of cultural behaviors and productions that might be

understood as “digital folklore”. Take, for example, a 2007 essay for *Folklore Forum* 37 entitled “Userpicks: Cyber folk art in the early 21st century”. Monica Foote argued that chat rooms had enabled the collaborative production of a new kind of folk art that was markedly different from prior folk genres:

> Those who frequent chat rooms, and use instant messenger programs have developed their own folkspeech, online communities function according to their own set of customary behavior, and people represent themselves with scraps of art cobbled together into images that distinguish themselves from their fellow users. (27)

In this example, chat room and instant messenger users are on a relatively equal playing ground in terms of their ability to communicate within the digital culture. The chat rooms and forums that dominated the early internet social landscape had two main purposes: to host 1-1 interactions and to serve as digital spaces where anyone who happened to be logged in at a given time could communicate on relatively equal footing. Although moderators or owners might be able to configure the rules and operations of the space, including booting people out, there wasn’t a hierarchical structure in which popular users had a much greater audience reach than others. We might refer to this first group of forums and chat rooms as “town square” platforms.

This is quite a different social and communicative arrangement than the algorithm-driven hierarchical structures used by platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Tiktok starting in the 2010s. If early internet forums can be compared to town squares, these later websites might be compared to “church pulpit” platforms. Like a town square, a church is a community gathering place where communication and collaboration occurs; however, within the church, there is one person with greater authority to dictate the values, customs, and rules of the shared space, and they are given an elevated position in the pulpit. While the churchgoers might bond as a

community and might participate in shared cultural rituals, the entire group's culture is ultimately dominated by the voice of the person speaking from a raised platform above everyone else.

The "church pulpit" infrastructure exists on websites where individual user profiles operate as network hubs within a communication hierarchy that elevates the voices of some users over others by algorithmic design. In the hierarchical communications model, individual users with larger "followings" have more power to dictate the rules and norms of the cultural space because they have a larger audience to broadcast to. Additionally, the posts and profiles of popular users (their "pulpits") operate as the actual "locations" where communication happens, unlike the shared "town square" model. Thus, these specific users have a heightened capacity to influence cultural values, social rules, and resulting social productions within the space. We call these users "influencers".

It's important to flag that this is a more unequal distribution of power and influence over group narrative than what is seen more often within "traditional" folklore. Because classic folklore is collectively produced and shared over time and space through participatory social and cultural dynamics, the collective authorship of collective narratives seems to come from everyone and no-one in particular. Digital folklore, on the other hand, tends to reflect the structure of the platform on which the communication is happening, and can more easily become extremely localized or dominated by singular voices due to the hierarchical configuration of digital space and subsequent communication flows. The QAnon umbrella itself reflects multiple structures of folklore and social space, as some overarching ideas are generalized enough to be widely shared, while subcultural aspects are highly niche and specific to particular individual QAnon groups, influencers, or pages. The culture is still participatory[47] in nature, but the

[47] For more perspectives on participatory cultures and networked media, see: Burgess, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2013) and Jenkins, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (2013).

dynamics of production reflect an underlying market-driven platform infrastructure designed to hierarchize flows of influence[48] and communication.

Although digital folklore does resemble many aspects of existing folklore genres, it should be considered as its own collection of practices with distinct characteristics. In *The Second International Handbook of Internet Research,* Hungsinger et al. explain:

> Responding to a widely perceived disciplinary crisis, folklorists have approached the Internet as both a technology capable of disseminating existing folklore and as a medium that undeniably encouraged the emergence of new folkloric forms. For the authors surveyed in this subsection, digital folklore can be fruitfully approached from the perspective of folklore studies, provided that this is opened up to the possibility that technological and social changes might have drastically changed what folklore is and how folklore is made. (174)

In other words, a methodological emphasis on practice, and not just artifacts, is key to understanding and analyzing the unique social and communicative flows which produce distinct subcultures within broader digital folklore cultures.

This last point is critical to understanding the methodology used within my own work in this project. A great deal of new media research into online communication and digital space has been focused on developing data-driven approaches to understanding social dynamics, such as network node analysis or big data analysis[49]. However, there is still a great deal of room in the

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[48] For more on market-driven demands and the rise of social media influencer culture selling "authenticity", see also: Hund, *The Influencer Industry* (2023).

[49] For a data-driven informational study of Q-drops, QAnon forums, and their most common themes, see also: Papasavva, Antonis, et al. "The Gospel According to Q: Understanding the QAnon Conspiracy from the Perspective of Canonical Information" (2022); Hannah, "A Conspiracy of Data: QAnon, Social Media, and Information Visualization" (2021); and Zhang et al. "How a peripheral ideology becomes mainstream: Strategic performance, audience reaction, and news media amplification in the case of QAnon Twitter accounts" (2022).

field[50] to expand upon approaches which, in Venturini's words, center the dynamics of "secondary orality" in media formats (63). In "Online Conspiracy Theories, Digital Platforms and Secondary Orality: Toward a Sociology of Online Monsters" (2022), Venturini argues:

> Inquiring into digital folklore also requires finding methodological tools capable of seizing the fluid nature of online communication. With some notable exceptions (e.g. Leskovec et al., 2009; Boydstun et al., 2014), media studies have not yet adjusted to the inversion of online media we discussed and still rely on methods developed for the study of document archives rather than attention streams. Taking conspiratorial folklore seriously requires not only a conceptual reorientation but also a twofold methodological shift: towards research techniques that are (1) temporal rather than spatial and (2) immersive rather than data oriented. (14)

So, while quantitative methods can reveal much about online conspiracy theories, my methodology primarily engages with what cultural studies and folklore methods can reveal through the close-reading of narrative, art, and media. I am attempting to better understand the ways in which "these cultural expressions… appeal to a different system of sensemaking" (Venturini 62).

Because my focus is limited to deep readings of the narratives promoted by just a few QAnon influencers, this project is decidedly not a complete or encyclopedic archive of QAnon as

[50] Venturini further contextualizes this claim within the field: "To deal with such incomprehension [of online conspiracy theories], research has taken two directions. Some researchers have refused to even question the sense of online misinformation and focused on its computational detection (Shu et al., 2017) and its topological spreading (Almaliki, 2019). Others have turned to the classic interpretations of conspiracism, reviving arguments about how pseudo-theories help cope with social complexity (Douglas et al., 2017, 2019; Marcus, 1999) and provide scapegoats for groups experiencing an erosion of their privileges – white middle-age upper and middle-class men in particular (Glick, 2005; Dafaure, 2020). While insightful, both these approaches sidestep the pith of online conspiracism… While excellent literature exists on conspiracy theories as a general social problem (cf., among others, Knight, 2000; Basham, 2006; Birchall, 2006b; Fenster, 2008), little research has yet focused on the features that single out online conspiracism and tune into its particular form of storytelling… This mismatch deserves attention for it points at a more general misunderstanding of internet vernaculars (Howard, 2008)... subcultures should be taken seriously and understood by their opposition to mainstream hegemony" (62).

a movement, nor is it a datafied study of QAnon's spread across the internet. Other researchers have written more complete histories of QAnon already, including Mike Rothschild's journalistic account in *The Storm Is Upon Us* (2021) which has been essential to my own study of the narratives advanced by key figures like Tracey Diaz (chapter 2) and Joe M (chapter 3).

At its very core, QAnon conspiracy culture is an intersubjective narrative game of (re)mediation and affect, played through practices of speculation and spectacle; thus, my goal is to drill down into specific speculative and spectacular narratives and affects promoted by QAnon figures who were particularly influential at key moments in QAnon's cultural development**.** If QAnon considers itself to be "narrative warfare" we must ask: whose voices determine which narratives should be fought for and which ones should be fought against?

Narrative warfare is not about fighting over the facts; narrative warfare is fought on the grounds of what *feels* compelling, *feels* true, and *feels* right. Conspiracy cultures, and the influencers who shape them, are sites of affective mediation, just as much as they are sites of ideological and informational mediation. Grusin argues that (re)mediation is a radical process of "generating, refashioning, and transforming experiences as well as connecting them… Mediations are always remediation, which change or translate experiences as well as relating or connecting them" (128). Re/mediation enables individuals and groups to make sense of their own experiences within group narratives, and this remediation of personal experience can make a conspiracy theory *feel* incredibly true—even if it flies in the face of widely accepted knowledge.

Because they act as mediators for these affects, the influencers who "bake" Q-drops into seemingly coherent conspiracy theories are arguably even more influential than the original Q-drops themselves. It is the process of baking itself that actually generates the conditions for the emergency of QAnon subcultures. As Grusin explains: "Radical mediation does not take

mediation as standing between already actualized subjects, objects, actants, or entities (or even as being within objects) but rather treats mediation as the process, action, or event that generates or provides the conditions of the emergence of subjects and objects" (137-138). According to this perspective, the process of baking "provides the conditions of the emergence" not only for the many denominations of QAnon culture, but also for the distinct identities, relationships, and behaviors of particular QAnon folk groups online and offline.

Moreover, because QAnon believers *feel* togetherness thanks to their shared narratives, they can imagine themselves as a community online and organize themselves as a collective offline. Grusin suggests that "mediation functions technically, bodily, and materially to generate and modulate individual and collective affective moods or structures of feeling among assemblages of humans and nonhumans" (125). In other words, it might be said that the constant curation and maintenance of collective affects within media ecologies like QAnon is exactly what drives the continued development of communications infrastructure online and political infrastructure offline.

As I showed in the introduction, QAnon targets existing anxieties and affects felt broadly across society, and it amplifies and transforms them. In "Conspiracy, anxiety, ontology: Theorising QAnon" (2022), Fitzgerald suggests that understanding "the productive capacity of anxiety" is critical to understanding "online ecologies that accelerate exposure to falsehoods feed (into) the persuasive power of contemporary conspiracy". Mass anxiety is a fuel source for QAnon, but it's also a product of QAnon; meaning the conspiracy culture is essentially a self-sustaining feedback loop that consumes, refashions, and reproduces negative affects en masse.

As I have already suggested, this is one of the reasons that a social problem like QAnon cannot be solved by treating it as a mere "disinformation" issue. Fitzgerald agrees with this point as well, suggesting that methods like bans and fact-checking miss the greater affective and social drivers of conspiracist thinking in general: "If we are serious about 'tackling' QAnon, then it is essential to look beyond networked formations in online spaces—and how to destroy them—and to focus more substantially on its conditions of emergence… that is, QAnon is not an outlier in contemporary [antagonistic] political processes, it is borne of them."

The specific anxieties and other feelings that QAnon feeds off and produces vary from QAnon subculture to subculture. Much like religious traditions which develop distinct denominations over time due to different cultural interpretations of the same central biblical text, distinct QAnon folk groups emerge as the result of increasingly niche and specialized folk media interpretations of the Q-drops. This multi-scaled media structure consolidates a general impression of togetherness (even among seemingly disparate audiences) because it divides the vastness of online cultural space into smaller, more intimate corners of the internet, like neighborhoods in a large city with their own unique subcultural characteristics and "flavors". Ideological unity is not necessary because the Q-drops can be baked into endless different interpretations, enabling believers to develop their own localized dialects and spaces for congregation while still feeling connected to the rest of the QAnon culture via the central shared media of Q's posts.

Similarly to how the term "Christian" could include a broad spectrum of religious denominations who follow the Bible—despite profound interpretive differences all the way down to the level of individual churches—the term "QAnon" groups together a stunning array of different subcultures who adhere to their own specialized interpretations of the Q-drops. For

example, the original QAnon culture on the 4chan/8chan/8kun forums is more extremist and more explicitly tied to overlapping white supremacist digital cultures, at least when compared to more mainstream QAnon subcultures on other platforms. As a result, the QResear.ch boards are more significantly dominated by rampant racism and ruminations on hundred-year old anti-Jewish myths about "globalists" in media, government, and finance.

QAnon promoters who originally grew their followings on mainstream platforms like Reddit, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter tend to take a less harsh and less explicitly racist approach to QAnon rhetoric than the 4chan/8chan/8kun boards—perhaps in part due to the stricter moderation on those platforms, and perhaps in part due to the less politically extreme cultures on those platforms. These more mainstream QAnon promoters incorporate their own unique interests and belief systems into their QAnon-style commentary on current events, media, and politics, creating different versions of QAnon which are more effective for a "soft sell" to newcomers than the original QAnon digital culture founded on 4chan/8chan/8kun.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will offer short vignettes examining first the extremist nature of anti-Jewish conspiracism on the QResar.ch boards, and then the (seemingly) more "mainstream" subcultures cultivated by two QAnon influencers who offer alternative "flavors" of QAnon. While David Hayes (*PrayingMedic*) focuses primarily on promoting a distinctly religious take on QAnon, including interpreting Q-drops through end-times prophecies and biblical passages, Zak Paine (*RedPillNews*) promotes the need for militaristic defense of "traditional" American identity/values in response to immigration and racial demographic shifts. These vignettes will help demonstrate not only some of the differences in QAnon subcultures, but also how the broader umbrella conspiracies of QAnon hold those different subcultures

together—primarily, through a shared thread of reactionary ideology that refuses any analysis of power/corruption which is critical of whiteness, patriarchy, nationalism/militarism, or capitalism.

Trevor Blank suggests that "Folklore theory holds that folkloric expression is reflective and serves as a 'mirror' of societal and cultural values; folklorists should therefore use this mirror to analyze society and culture" (4). As I have argued throughout the introduction and first chapter, it is important to understand reactionary conspiracism as a mirror of US politics in the 21st century, rather than a fringe phenomenon within it. Conspiracy theories are often shaped by political ideology, and ideologically-motivated mythologization (which is what we see within QAnon broadly) has been a tried and true strategy throughout history for helping to maintain the dominant arrangement of power.

In all three of the following case studies, historic white supremacist racial myths and violent settler-colonial narratives serve as the foundation upon which QAnon's contemporary ethnonationalist, Christian supremacist, and anti-Jewish narrative frames have been erected. These three case studies indicate how the main claims of the QAnon conspiracy are deeply tied to a reactionary conspiracist conception of power, which necessarily denies oppressive structures like patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism as the source of contemporary suffering, and instead seek to assign the problems of society to scapegoats seen as ontologically evil and deserving of violence. It should be no surprise, then, that those who consume QAnon propaganda online so often seem to pursue violent ends offline. Within the worldview produced by reactionary conspiracy theories like QAnon, violence is not incidental—it is structural.

Case Study #1: /QResearch/ Forums, Platform Politics, and Structural White Supremacy at the Core of Q's Conspiracy Culture

Since the beginning, the QAnon conspiracy culture has been deeply steeped in white supremacy. The central theory of a secret "cabal" engaging in widespread economic exploitation and abuse—particularly in the ritual abuse of children—plays upon anti-Jewish myths perpetuated across Europe and the US for centuries. Moishe Postone argues in that "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism" (1986) that:

> Modern anti-Semitism, which should not be confused with everyday anti-Jewish prejudice, is an ideology, a form of thought, which emerged in Europe in the late 19th century. Its emergence presupposed centuries of earlier forms of anti-Semitism, which has almost always been an integral part of Christian western civilization. What is common to all forms of anti-Semitism is the degree of power attributed to the Jews: the power to kill God, unleash the Bubonic Plague and, more recently, introduce capitalism and socialism. In other words, anti-Semitic thought is strongly Manichean, with the Jews playing the role of the children of darkness. (106)

So, it is no accident that QAnon's main narrative claims are largely shaped by the histories of anti-Jewish racial/religious bigotry within the white Christian world, as QAnon has always been an ideologically motivated conspiracy theory largely animated by reactionary attempts to maintain a specific configuration of power/domination in which the United States of America is imagined specifically as a white, Christian nation. Thus, whether or not QAnon believers are explicitly white supremacists or Christian nationalists, many of QAnon's core narrative claims about abuse, power, and violence all reflect structural white supremacy and Christian nationalism.

The false claim that Jewish people systematically torture and murder Christian children through ritual abuse has motivated anti-Semititic massacres and hate campaigns since at least the twelfth century, when a Christian boy in Norwich, England was found dead. Jewish locals were accused of torturing and killing the child, leading to anti-Jewish racial mythology being spread across Europe for the next several centuries: "This so-called blood libel—named after an accusation in 1144 that a group of Jews ritually murdered and consumed the blood of an English boy named William of Norwich—has driven countless crimes against Jews, from organized pogroms in the Middle Ages to social media harassment in the twenty-first century" (Rothschild 58).

Claims of ritual abuse by non-Christian "Satanists" loom large in QAnon mythology as well, as many believers claim that the secret "cabal" is systematically harvesting adrenochrome from the blood of abused children. Hashtags like #SaveOurChildren, inspired partly by the resurgence of tropes from the Satanic panic[51] of the 1980s, are wildly popular among QAnon believers. In "QAnon, Blood Libel, and the Satanic Panic", Tal Lavin also notes the frequency of claims about the cabal keeping so-called "mole children" who have "never seen the light of day.. locked in cages, electro-shocked and traumatized in order to harvest their blood—Adrenochrome for the elites to drink". Lavin compares these claims to the anti-Jewish myths documented in Joshua Trachtenberg's study *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (1943), including the idea that Jewish people took "communion on Easter Sunday with the blood of Christian children".

In *The Storm Is Upon Us,* Mike Rothschild suggests that adrenochrome is essentially the blood libel myth of the "social media era" (63). However, he also notes that "the term has never

[51] See also: Vrzal, Miroslav, "QAnon as a variation of a Satanic conspiracy theory : an overview". *Theory and Practice in English Studies*. 2020

appeared in a Q drop" despite the fact that "adrenochrome is still referenced constantly in the discourse of Q promoters" (58). So, how did this "social media era" blood libel trope become so prominent within QAnon culture if Q himself never directly introduced it?

Simply put: Q played off existing anti-Jewish cultural tropes and targeted Jewish individuals from the very beginning, thus broadly facilitating the centrality of anti-Jewish myths within QAnon lore. Although Q never specifically mentions adrenochrome or blood libel, he began identifying Jewish people as targets as early as his second post, where he "twice mentions the wealthy Hungarian Jewish financier, George Soros. It cryptically asks: 'Why did Soros donate all his money recently?'—an event that did not actually take place" (33). Additionally, throughout the first month of Q's posts in 2017, Rothschild notes that:

> More racism and anti-Semitism was also creeping into Q's posts. Q made four drops dredging up the anti-Semitic canard of the Rothschild family owning every central bank on the planet, then relentlessly hammered George Soros with the same language used by conspiracy theorists for years. Q began referring to Barack Obama by his middle name, Hussein, for no other apparent purpose than to win some points with birthers. (42)

So, from the very beginning, Q promoted fairly explicit white supremacist tropes and racial mythologies. It should come as no surprise, then, that a centuries-old racial myth like blood libel would appeal to QAnon conspiracy theorists who were already primed by Q's constant gestures towards anti-Jewish ideas.

The extremist cultures of the 4chan/8chan forums where QAnon first found its audience undoubtedly has something to do with Q's willingness to advance openly anti-Jewish and otherwise racist themes and tropes. As Rothschild notes:

> 8chan has been rated as one of the most anti-Semitic places on the Internet by the Anti-Defamation League, full of targeted harassment against Jewish journalists, praise of anti-Semitic mass shooters, and an endless supply of anti-Jewish memes and "jokes." How deep does it go? A search of the archives of 8chan and 8kun (found on the Q-drop aggregator site qresear.ch) for just the word "Jews" brings up well over one hundred thousand references. And the vast majority are not pleasant, full of the same "string puller" stereotypes found everywhere else anti-Semites congregate. There are over thirty-two thousand uses of the anti-Jewish slur "kike," thousands of references to the murder of 6 million Jews during World War II being a "holohoax," and thousands more derogatory mentions of Zionism. And naturally, posters on /qresearch/ are complimentary of those older texts that have inspired so much violence against Jews—one anon wrote, '*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* pretty accurate whether a forgery or not.' (60)

As he points out, QAnon's claims that a secretive "cabal" of powerful "deep state" operators are attempting to dominate the US (and world by extension) are a near carbon copy of the anti-Jewish claims that appeared in racist texts like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (first published in Russia in 1903) and *The International Jew* (a series of booklets[52] published by Henry Ford in the US during the 1920s).

But beyond just sharing general outlines or motifs, QAnon conspiracy theories directly correspond to many specific anti-Jewish conspiracy theories that first appeared within these texts. For example, Volume 3 of Henry Ford's *The International Jew* (1921) bears the subtitle "Jewish Influence in American Life" and bears striking resemblance to QAnon claims about the

[52] Titles of each booklet published by Henry Ford are as follows: *Volume 1: The International Jew:The World's Foremost Problem* (1920); *Volume 2: Jewish Activities in the United States* (1921); *Volume 3: Jewish Influence in American Life* (1921); *Volume 4: Aspects of Jewish Power in the United States* (1922)

secret “cabal’s” domination in the media, the financial system, and other American institutions. Volume 3 includes section titles like “How Jewish International Finance Functions” and “Jewish Power and America’s Money Famine”. In Volume 2 (subtitled “Jewish Activities in the United States”) we see similar themes, including “Jewish Control of the American Theater”, “Jewish Supremacy in the Motion Picture World”, and “‘Jewish Rights’ Clash With American Rights”.

These same anti-Jewish ideas are re-animated within QAnon, with its fixation on the so-called “cabal’s” connection to both Hollywood/media, politicians, and wealthy individuals. For example, a search of the term “Hollywood” returns over 35,000 posts exploring various QAnon conspiracy theories about Hollywood’s corruption[53]—most of which share the same central claims that US media is dominated by a broader Jewish conspiracy connected to a “cabal” of evil-doers in government and finance. For a sense of how extreme the anti-Jewish culture is on the /QResearch/ forums, consider the following comments from a February 2024 thread in which an anonymous user directly connects Holocaust denialism to anti-Jewish conspiracy theories about the “kabal’s” role in Hollywood[54]:

[53] WayBack Machine - Internet Archive stable post of returned results for “Hollywood” on QResear.ch: https://web.archive.org/web/20240405140329/https://qresear.ch/?q=hollwood

[54] WayBack Internet Archive of February 2024 /QResearch/ Holocaust denial thread: https://web.archive.org/web/20240408140236/https://8kun.top/qresearch/res/20369456.html#20369953



Figure 5: Screenshot of a February 2024 Holocaust-denial reply to a /QResearch/ thread

Alt Text: An anonymous forum post with a red background, featuring a yellow graphic of a snake severed into many pieces with the phrase "Join or 404". The text recounts a conspiracy theory that the atrocities of the Holocaust were "fabricated" through Hollywood/media by Jewish people . Many anti-Jewish slurs and ideas are invoked. The text reads:

">>20369885
I read something recently which stated that after WWII ended, the autobiographies of all the big names like Churchill, Eisenhower, Generals ..they never mentioned the "Holocaust".
It wasn't until the 1960's that the Jews started pushing the Holocaust.
Through the Jewish MSM and Jewish Hollywood making a zillion movies and TV series about it for the last 50 years.
This year there is another Holocaust movie, and a couple of TV shows like Hunters which fabricates wild stories Nazi "atrocities".
The Jewish Kabal have succeeded in warping the world into thinking that "Nazi" Germans (Christians) are the utmost evil, and that ONLY the Jews' lives matter because Holocaust Permanent Victim.
Even though WWII Ended78 YEARS Ago, the relentless propaganda has kept their Victim Card alive.
Along with the 68 Holocaust Museums in the US, where all school children (mostly Gentiles) are taken to be indoctrinated in the Jews-Can-Do-No-Wrong Dictatorship."

At the bottom of each post on this forum, a disclaimer appears: "Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration."

This comment is a good example of how much more openly anti-Jewish /QResearch/ forum users tend to be compared to the original Q-drops. As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, although the boards technically have "rules" against "unsubstantiated" anti-Jewish claims, they are still littered with open anti-Jewish speech. The forum moderators seem to take the approach of not explicitly endorsing white supremacy, but rather, endorsing and promoting anti-Jewish ideas which they consider to be "proven" (with a very low bar of "evidence") by QAnon theories.

This rhetorical strategy—a sort of "now you see it, now you don't" approach to racism—allows QAnon promoters to claim it is not an explicitly anti-Jewish conspiracy theory, even as actual QAnon believers actively and constantly obsess over anti-Jewish myths. Instead of being viewed as structural to QAnon itself, racism is minimized to a phenomenon perpetuated by individuals who happen to post in QAnon spaces.

Despite the differing levels of explicit racism, there are clear and direct connections between the anti-Jewish ideas within Q's own posts and the anti-Jewish ideas of /QResearch/ forum users. As Mike Rothschild points out, Q's early posts frequently played upon tropes of wealthy Jewish financiers manipulating global markets and abusing their power in the media:

> The Rothschilds were posited as financiers so flush with their hundreds of trillions of dollars in holdings that they funded both sides in every war of the last three centuries, and owned almost every central bank in the world. Both were the moneymen behind a cabal so dark and evil it controlled almost every aspect of the media, banking, and politics. (59)

Media "elites" are a frequent target for Q's posts, and he has often included anti-Jewish dogwhistles in his posts about Hollywood. Consider the following two posts. The first is a reply

from Q under the thread within the very first Q-drop, with the reply dated November 1, 2017[55] (just a day after Q started the thread). The second example is a Q-drop from March 2018, or about five months later[56]:

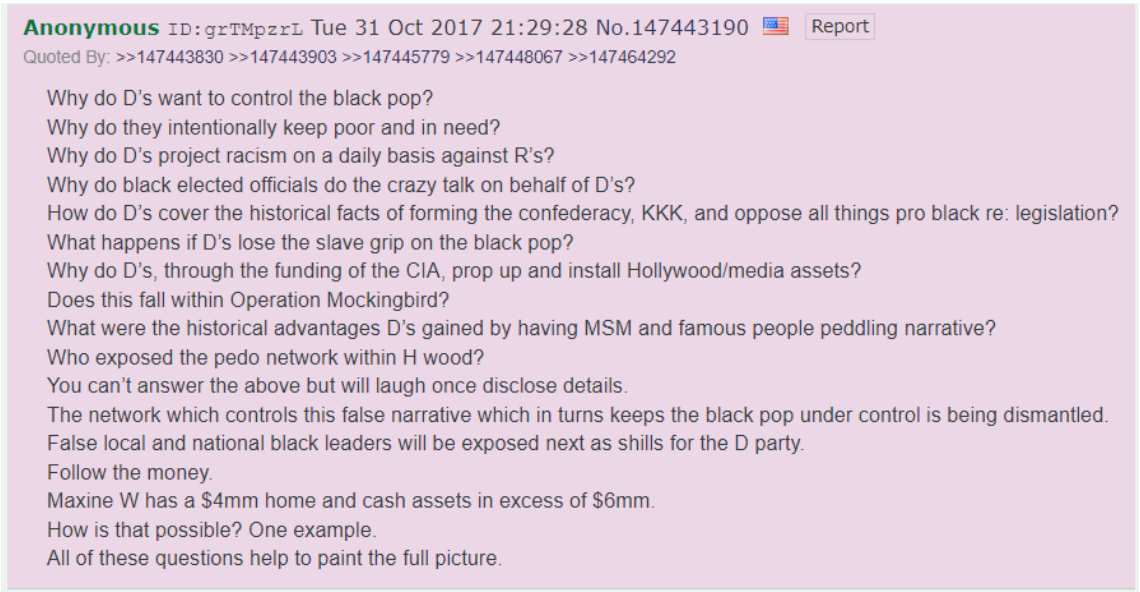


Figure 6.1: Screenshot of Q's reply on Nov 1, 2017 within his original Oct 31, 2017 thread

Alt Text: A reply thread within the initial Q-drop dated 31 October 2017. Reply is dated 1 November 2017 (see Web.Archive copy). The text reads:

"Why do D's want to control the black pop?
Why do they intentionally keep poor and in need?
Why do D's project racism on a daily basis against R's?
Why do black elected officials do the crazy talk on behalf of D's?
How do D's cover the historical facts of forming the confederacy, KKK, and oppose all things pro black re: legislation?
What happens if D's lose the slave grip on the black pop?
Why do D's, through the funding of the CIA, prop up and install Hollywood/media assets?
Does this fall within Operation Mockingbird?
What were the historical advantages D's gained by having MSM and famous people peddling narrative?
Who exposed the pedo network within H wood?
You can't answer the above but will laugh once disclose details.

[55] WayBack Web Archive November 1, 2017 Q-drop (/pol/ - Politically Incorrect » Thread #147433975): https://web.archive.org/web/20240408142858/https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147433975/#q147443190

[56] WayBack Web Archive March 10, 2018 Q-drop: https://web.archive.org/web/20240408142344/https://8kun.top/qresearch/res/614406.html#614610

The network which controls this false narrative which in turns keeps the black pop under control is being dismantled.
False local and national black leaders will be exposed next as shills for the D party.
Follow the money.
Maxine W has a $4mm home and cash assets in excess of $6mm.
How is that possible? One example.
All of these questions help to paint the full picture."

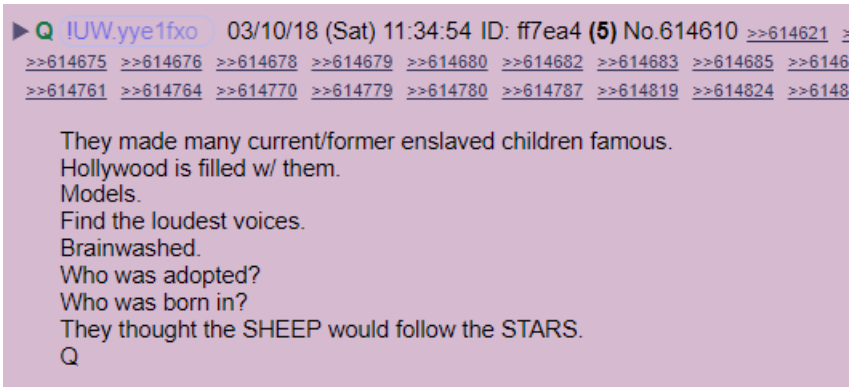


Figure 6.2: Screenshot of a Q-Drop from March 10, 2018

Alt Text: A Q-drop dated 10 March 2018 (see Web.Archive copy). The text reads:

"They made many current/former enslaved children famous.
Hollywood is filled w/ them.
Models.
Find the loudest voices.
Brainwashed.
Who was adopted?
Who was born in?
They thought the SHEEP would follow the STARRS.
Q"

The first post clearly claims the existence of a "pedo network within H wood" which is further confirmed in Q's second post about the "current/former enslaved children" that apparently "fill" Hollywood. Both posts seem to allude to similar themes of child torture as imagined by QAnon believers of the "mole children" and adrenochrome conspiracy theories. Although Q does not explicitly make anti-Jewish claims in either post, the already-established dominant belief of the 4chan/8chan/8kun forum cultures is that Hollywood is secretly controlled

by Jewish elites—so, any crimes committed by Hollywood elites would be attributed to the highly racialized, implied-to-be-Jewish "cabal". Additionally, Q does clearly draw out connections between wealthy Jewish individuals, Hollywood, and the media in many of his other posts.

Given that Q-drops are meant to be "decoded" in relation to one another like a game of (re)signification, and given that Q was posting his "hints" to an infamously anti-Jewish forum, it seems obvious that Q meant for the conspiracy theory to be anti-Jewish on a structural level from the very beginning—while always maintaining a "now you see it, now you don't" style of racism and plausible deniability. As Rothschild puts it, this rhetorical strategy was "a language spoken fluently on the chans and the other cesspools where Q drops were interpreted" (60).

Understanding the ways in which white supremacy is baked into the foundations of the QAnon conspiracy theory is critical to understanding how QAnon-style racism operates through linguistic ambiguity and rhetorical sign-posting. The next two case studies will show how that foundational white supremacy and Christian nationalism operate through the influence of more mainstream QAnon promoters beyond the forums where QAnon was originally founded.

Case Study #2: The Praying Medic's Gospel: Christian Nationalism and the Spiritual/Affective Dimensions of Trump-Loving QAnon Lore

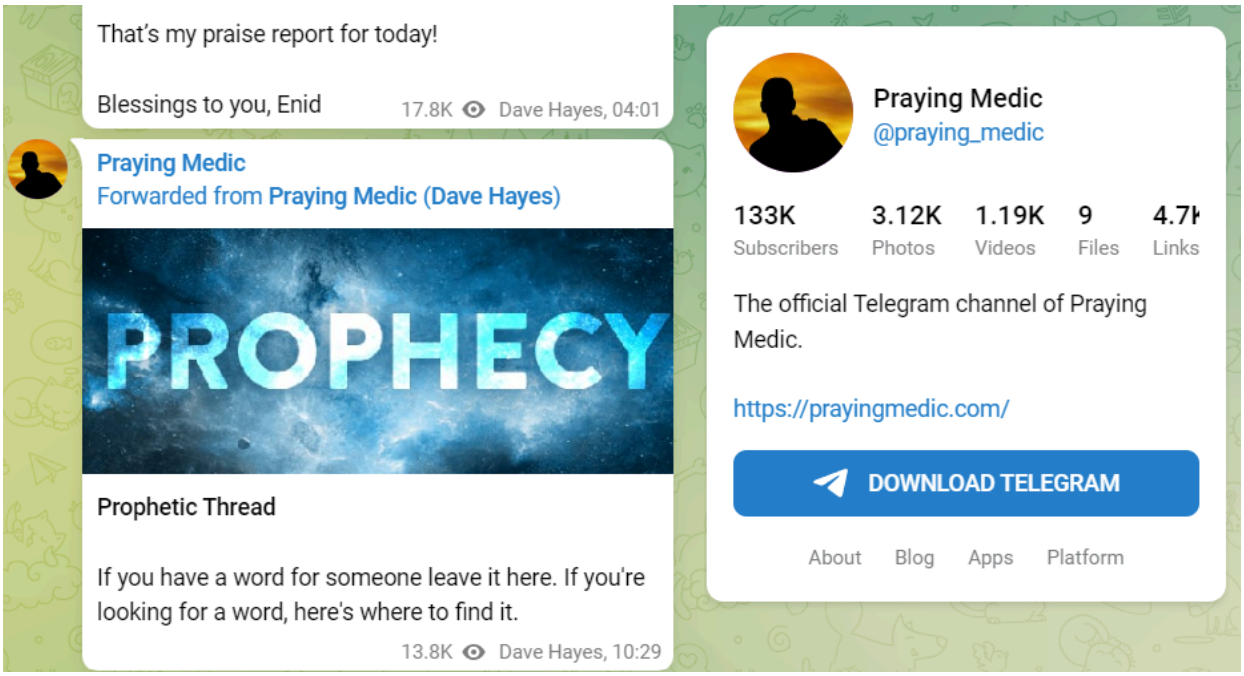


Figure 7: Screenshot of @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel, featuring a "praise report" and a "prophetic thread" (March 2024)

Alt Text: A screenshot of @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel, featuring a "Prophetic Threat" in which Telegram followers are invited to find or leave prophetic words for one another (see Web.Archive copy). Text of the description reads "The official Telegram channel of Praying Medic https://prayingmedic.com/". The description shows 133K subscribers, 3.12K photos, 1.19K videos, 9 files, and 4.7K links. The bottom of the top post reads "That's my praise report for today! Blessings to you, Enid" (posted by Dave Hayes, seen by 17.8K viewers). The second post from Dave Hayes shows a blue image of clouds and stars reading "PROPHECY". Below this, the text reads: "Prophetic Thread / If you have a word for someone leave it here. If you're looking for a word, here's where to find it" (seen by 13.8K viewers).

The idea that a war of biblical proportions is taking place over the identity of the nation figures strongly into QAnon's contemporary myth-making. This righteous (even holy) war for control over the American nation (and the world by extension) is understood as a project of "defense" against perceived internal and external enemies who are always-already a threat to the "morality" and "identity" of the nation—with Donald Trump and "Q" fighting for the light

against the transcendental, dark forces of Satanic evil itself. In this case study, I analyze the social media presence of a popular QAnon influencer known as the "The Praying Medic"[57] (AKA Dave Hayes) both as an example of a specific QAnon subculture primarily animated by an affective vision of kinship among Christian nationalists, and also as an example of how QAnon more broadly contributes to the ongoing project of racial/religious domination over non-Christian and non-white groups in the United States.

Before we dive into Hayes' QAnon subculture more deeply, I first want to ask a different question: how central is religion in QAnon culture more broadly? In a data-driven study of nearly 5,000 forum posts by Papasavva, Antonis, et al. entitled "The Gospel According to Q: Understanding the QAnon Conspiracy from the Perspective of Canonical Information", researchers found that "religion" and "spirituality" are some of the most frequently occuring topics within the Q-drops, often associated with related terms qualified as "calls to revolutionary action" including "struggle", "blood", and "flesh" (8). In addition to this quantitative research showing religious struggle is key to QAnon's core narratives, qualitative research from reporters and writers who have covered QAnon from the beginning indicates the same. Mike Rothschild notes in *The Storm Is Upon Us* that QAnon features "rampant" ideation around Donald Trump as a "messianic figure touched by God and chosen by the military to stop this forward march of

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[57] Despite broad bans of QAnon content on the platform, David Hayes still has a popular Facebook page with over 14,000 "likes" as of April 2024: https://www.facebook.com/p/Praying-Medic-100057591813715/

WayBack Internet Archive Copy of PrayingMedic Facebook page: https://web.archive.org/web/20240413062352/https://www.facebook.com/p/Praying-Medic-100057591813715/

Hayes' other media assets include his own website (praymedic.com), a Twitter account with more than 340,000 followers (@PrayingMedic + WayBack Archival Copy), a YouTube channel with 2,000 subscribers (@PrayingMedic + WayBack Archival Copy), and a Telegram channel with 133,000 subscribers (https://t.me/s/praying_medic + WayBack Archival Copy: https://web.archive.org/web/20240413063013/https://t.me/s/praying_medic)

alienating progressivism" (98). Rothschild also quotes QAnon writer Brian Dunning as suggesting that QAnon followers "believe they're doing God's work" (98).

This idea of a struggle against "alienating progressivism" and Satanic forces certainly fits the bill for Hofstadter's "paranoid style" of American politics, which he argues is "above all, a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself… the feeling of persecution is central… the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others" (4). In recent history, US several moral panics have been largely driven by the perceived secularization of US society and so-called "threats" to the patriarchal nuclear Christian family (and more specifically, to Christian children). This connection is most obvious when looking at the shared ancestry between the narratives of the "Satanic Panic" during the 1980s and QAnon conspiracy narratives today. As explored in the prior section, the central trope of ritualistic torture and murder by non-Christians (a trope shared by both the Satanic Panic and QAnon) can be traced historically back to anti-Jewish myths perpetuated by Christians as early as the Middle Ages. Non-Christian enemies are always-already a threat to the "morality" and "identity" of the nation, as imagined by white Christian nationalist, and easily aligned with Satan himself.

This explanation—that transcendental forces of good and evil are responsible for the conditions of despair in the world—provides little real analytical substance; however, it provides an awful lot in terms of affective persuasion. As I have argued elsewhere, QAnon digital culture can be best understood as a structure of affect—a way of feeling. Ideas that *feel* true receive more attention within the social ecology than ideas that are "true" but feel wrong or dissatisfying for some reason. Feelings inspire unquestioning faith in the social narrative; the social narrative provides a pretext for any action proclaimed to be taken on behalf of the group in order to

advance the broader war between good and evil. Actions, events, or ideas that make the group *feel* good—even those apparently unconnected in any material way to QAnon itself or to any Q believers—are incorporated into the group narrative as proof of the narrative's "truth".

Being willing to participate in QAnon culture opens up very real opportunities for peer support and the chance for isolated individuals to make connections and friendships, as this case study into Dave Hayes will show. In one sense, the process of being on-boarded into the Praying Medic's version of QAnon might be understood as a kind of emotional grooming because individuals receive gestures of affirmations and resources (including most notably, group prayers and faith healing) if they're willing to frame their experiences of suffering in relation to the group narrative. Many of the people who are most susceptible to conspiracy theories are at low points in their lives (such as those seeking prayers through Hayes' various prayer groups) and they may find relief in feelings of connection to other downtrodden conspiracy believers. For those who might not have any other setting in which they can process their frustrations and despair, connecting with other real human beings—even if you're connecting through a screen over a shared fever dream—might feel sincerely healing.

Hayes originally got his start making faith healing videos on YouTube, only to discover his viewership exploded after he began making QAnon videos in December 2017 (Rothschild 46). This timeframe makes him one of the earliest and most popular QAnon influencers on YouTube, and one of the first to realize he could build his own quasi-ministry through the conspiracy theory. What is most immediately and obviously unique about Hayes is the outsized role that biblical-style prophecy and prayer plays in his version of QAnon. Take, for example, his Telegram channel, which has more than 133,000 subscribers as of April 2024. The public channel includes more than 3000 photos, 1000 videos, and 4000 links to date, and he posts

updates to it several times a day (at a minimum). Although his followers are allowed to comment (and often participate actively) on his other platforms like Facebook and YouTube, his Telegram channel is strictly his own posts and messages he forwards—operating sort of like a constant, one-way text messaging thread from Hayes to all of his followers.

Many of the posts are "Testimonies" written to him by followers who believe that his faith healing abilities, videos/books, and prayer groups actually healed their physical, emotional, and other life ailments (one even describes faith healing a printer, another, a lawn-mower). The following "testimonies" shared on April 4 and April 5, 2024 are fairly typical for the channel:

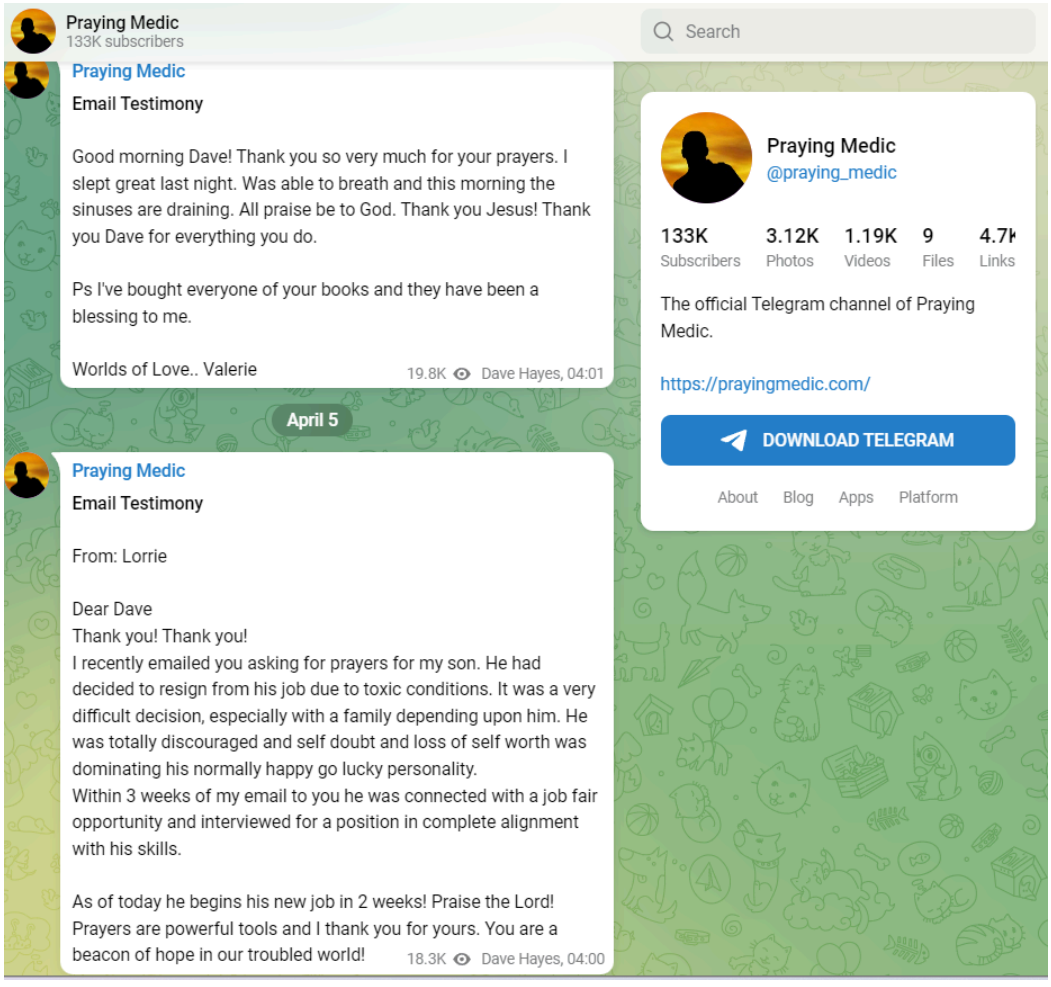


Figure 8: Screenshot of "email testimonies" describing faith healings, as featured on @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel (March 2024)

Alt Text: A screenshot of @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel, featuring several "Email Testimonies" in which followers describe supposedly successful faith healings (see Web.Archive copy). The top testimony post reads: "Email Testimony / Good morning Dave! Thank you so very much for your prayers. I slept great last night. Was able to breath and this morning the sinuses are draining. All praise be to God. Thank you Jesus! Thank you Dave for everything you do. Ps I've bought everyone of your books and they have been a blessing to me. Worlds of Love… Valerie" (seen by 19.8K viewers). The second testimony post reads: "From: Lorrie / Dear Dave / Thank you! Thank you! / I recently emailed you asking for prayers for my son. He had decided to resign from his job due to toxic conditions. It was a very difficult decision, especially with a family depending upon him. He was totally discouraged and self doubt and loss of self worth was dominating his normally happy go lucky personality. / Within 3 weeks of my email to you he was connected with a job fair opportunity and interviewed for a position in complete alignment with his skills. / As of today he begins his new job in 2 weeks! Praise the Lord! Prayers are powerful tools and I thank you for yours. You are a beacon of hope in our troubled world!" (seen by 18.3K viewers).

These reports of successful faith healings are endless in the channel, functioning as a kind of advertisement for Hayes' supposed abilities. Although it is unclear whether Hayes charges for prayers offered through email solicitation, his website (prayingmedic.com[58]) offers a number of paid "divine healing" and "seeing in the spirit" lessons, as well as links to purchase his many books. The financialization of his online presence is seamless, with immersive advertisements and free "samples" of online content ultimately geared at leading his followers towards actual book/class purchases.

While several of Hayes' books are purely spiritual/religious (*Emotional Healing Made Simple, Power and Authority Made Simple, Dream Interpretation Made Simple, Divine Healing Made Simple, Seeing in the Spirit Made Simple),* others are militaristic and vaguely dystopic *(Emergency Preparedness and Off-Grid Communication, American Sniper: Lessons in Spiritual Warfare, A Kingdom View of Economic Collapse).* Additionally, he has written a three-book

[58] WayBack Internet Archive Copy of PrayingMedic web book store (May 2024): https://web.archive.org/web/20240504010204/https://prayingmedic.com/book-store/

series on QAnon that seems to have a high readership, based on sites like Amazon: *Calm Before the Storm* (Book 1), *The Great Awakening* (Book 2), and *This is Not a Game* (Book 3).

The combination of topics covered in his various books and social media posts might be best described as a highly emotionally charged flavor of end-times conspiratory Christian Nationalism[59]. Above all, QAnon offers believers a narrative of identity and belonging, whether that comes in the form of feeling like you're part of an insider group, feeling like you're part of a national movement, or feeling like you're part of a church. This is effective because it offers to transform collective despair and fear into strength, connection, and change. Conspiracy theories might be considered a kind of affective technology for (re)mediating social structures of feeling and faith. So, while conspiracy theories might not be "true", they are "real" in how they structure collective affects in relation to a perceived reality.

In this way, conspiracy theories work to craft transformative identities, powerful social bonds, and political infrastructure through the imposition of spectacular explanations for chaotic or despairing conditions actually produced by institutions. But, in reality, the experience of alienation and isolation under individualistic neoliberal capitalism is the exact condition of mass despair that makes people more vulnerable to conspiracy theories like QAnon. Rather than offering his followers an explanation for the ills of the world that is rooted in systemic analysis of power/domination and abuse, Hayes offers a vision of the world in which evil, Satanic forces are out to brainwash the masses.

[59] See also: Linda Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market: The Emotions That Matter in Right-Wing America* (Duke University Press, 1997) and *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998)



Figure 9: Screenshot of a livestream entitled "Healing from Satanic Ritual Abuse - w/ Praying Medic" (March 2024)

Alt Text: An Youtube thumbnail featuring two white men juxtaposed with smiles over a plain dark background with a religiously-coded beam of yellow shining light. The video title reads, in three colors and different fonts: "Healing from Satanic Ritual Abuse - w/ Praying Medic". At time of screenshot, the video had 1,200 views and was streamed three weeks ago.

For one example, consider a March 2024 livestream entitled "Healing from Satanic Ritual Abuse - W/Praying Medic"[60]. In the video, Hayes claims:

> Satanic ritual abuse is a term that a lot of people are familiar with… a better way to describe the condition is 'trauma-based mind control'. You can remove the Satanic element from it because, although it's true, it's not relevant. Not every form of trauma-based mind control is Satanic in its focus. There are other cults… primarily a way in which cult leaders propagate and empower their own personality cults that they've

[60] WayBack Internet Archive Copy of "Healing from Satanic Ritual Abuse - W/Praying Medic" Livestream: https://web.archive.org/web/20240413072409/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2b3V8_hZbA

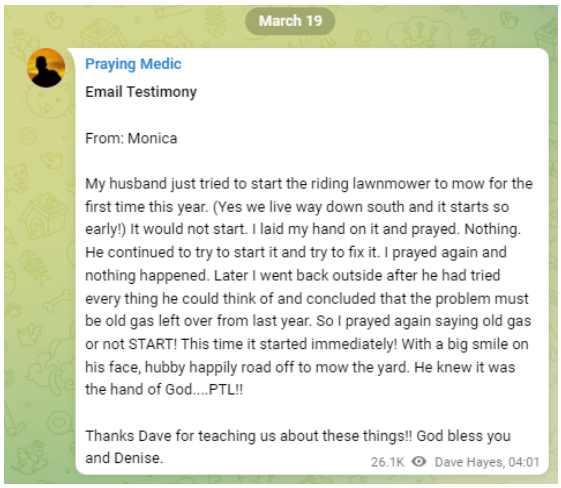
> developed… whether it is a Hollywood sex cult, an Illuminati cult, Free Masonry, or some other cult following. (00:20:30-00:20:51)

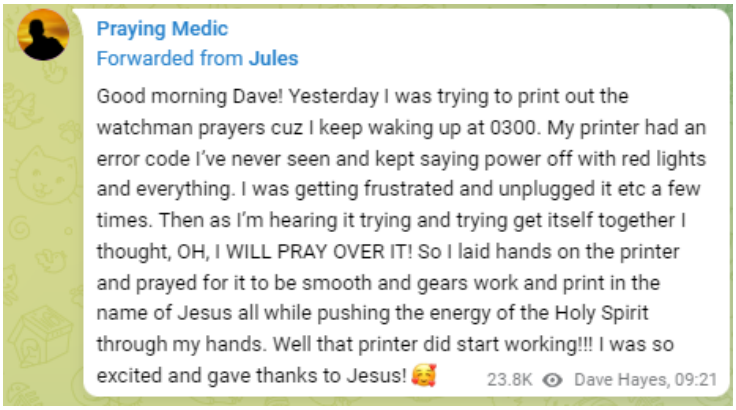
Here, Hayes works to make the claim of "Satanic ritual abuse" seem more innocuous by claiming that "it's true" but "not relevant" because some forms of this "trauma-based mind control" aren't focused on Satanism specifically. Instead, he lists off a series of other conspiracy theories and cults which might also use the technique for evil.

Ironically (and with very little self-awareness as to his own role as a self-appointed faith healer and quasi-QAnon prophet), Hayes then comments that even some denominational churches "unintentionally" abuse the practice, noting "sometimes the people who are at the top don't even realize that they have created a cult and that they are kind of brainwashing their followers… it's actually much more prevalent than most people think" (00:20:53-00:20:59). He suggests that these groups use "punishment and reward to reinforce desired behavior" with no hint of acknowledgment that he does this in his own online groups through reinforcing or discouraging certain narratives about the personal struggles experienced by followers.

Throughout the rest of the livestream, Hayes continues to drop conspiracist references while advising "trauma-based mind control" victims on how to heal by "seeking the lord", taking down their "walls", and reassembling the "fragments" of their souls. (00:57:00). The overall process is likened also to a broader religious/political struggle for goodness. This livestream (and other videos/books like it) give more context to his Telegram channel full of testimonies and "prayer reports" from his more than one hundred thousands subscribers, all of whom have learned to frame their own personal struggles within the group narrative of a holy war constantly taking place between the forces of transcendental good and evil.

A framework like this provides easy answers to hard questions. Michael Barkun argues in *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2013) that "the essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil" and that "a conspiracist worldview implies a universe governed by design rather than by randomness" (3) Furthermore, he suggests that conspiracy theories often lead to "an outright dualism in which light and darkness struggle for cosmic supremacy… not only are events nonrandom, but the clear identification of evil gives the conspiracist a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose" (4). In Hayes' prayer-focused online groups, not even broken lawnmowers (March 19, 2024) or printers (March 23, 2024) are nonrandom:





Figures 10.1 & 10.2: Screenshots from @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel featuring email testimonies which claimed to fix a lawnmower and a printer through prayer.

Image Alt Text: A screenshot of @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel, featuring several "Email Testimonies" in which followers describe supposedly successfully fixing a lawnmower and a printer through prayer (see Web.Archive copy).

10.1 - The text of the first post reads: "From: Monica / My husband just tried to start the riding lawnmower to mow for the first time this year. (Yes we live way down south and it starts so early!) It would not start. I laid my hand on it and prayed. Nothing. He continued to try to start it and try to fix it. I prayed again and nothing happened. Later I went back outside after he had tried every thing he could think of and concluded that the problem must be old gas left over from last year. So I prayed again saying

old gas or not START! This time it started immediately! With a big smile on his face, hubby happily road off to mow the yard. He knew it was the hand of God....PTL!! Thanks Dave for teaching us about these things!! God bless you and Denise" (seen by 26.1K Viewers).

10.2 - The second testimony was "Forwarded from Jules" and the text reads: "Good morning Dave! Yesterday I was trying to print out the watchman prayers cuz I keep waking up at 0300. My printer had an error code I've never seen and kept saying power off with red lights and everything. I was getting frustrated and unplugged it etc a few times. Then as I'm hearing it trying and trying get itself together I thought, OH, I WILL PRAY OVER IT! So I laid hands on the printer and prayed for it to be smooth and gears work and print in the name of Jesus all while pushing the energy of the Holy Spirit through my hands. Well that printer did start working!!! I was so excited and gave thanks to Jesus! [smiling heart emoji]" (seen by 23.8K viewers).

A religious worldview like this is deeply compatible with reactionary conspiracism. In both perspectives, if bad things happen in the world, it's because a group of bad individuals (or even actual demons) are working together to create that outcome—rather than social ills being the product of a system like capitalism or an institution like the state. Thus, for hyper-Christian QAnon believers like Hayes' followers, there is no need to sort through the messiness of a reality in which individual people are both good and bad, or a reality in which abuse/exploitation has been enabled by systemic patriarchal, racial, and capitalist design. Instead, political conflicts are viewed as an extension of a transcendent conflict between inherent God and Satan himself.

This explains Hayes' open embrace of the main claim of Trump as a kind of messianic savior figure that must be defended through nationalistic and militaristic struggle. Consider, for example, his following tweets the months before and after Trump's electoral defeat in 2020:



Figure 11: A screenshot of two posts from @PrayingMedic on Twitter (Nov & Aug 2020)

Alt Text: A screenshot of @Praying_Medic's Twitter feed. An original tweet dated 10 November 2020 (with 1.1K replies, 4.9K reposts, and 13k likes) reads: "Create accounts on other platforms. But POTUS needs Patriots on Twitter now, more than ever. Our assignment is to refute the false narratives of the mainstream media. Digital soldiers do not leave the field of battle." The second tweet is a retweet with a comment dated 6 August 2020 (with 647 replies, 4.7K reposts, and 14K likes). Original reposted tweet from @RobbyStarbuck reads: "'I have a lot of enemies. This may be the last time you see me for a while. I have al ot of very rich enemies. They're not happy with what I'm doing. But I figure we have one chance to do it. No other president is gonna do what I do.' - @realDonaldTrump [followed by American flag emoji and a link to twitter.com/anonpatriotq's profile]". Praying Medic quotes this tweet and adds: "I admire a man who isn't intimidated by threats from lawless thugs and rather than backing down, chooses to do what God has called him to do."

In August 2020, Hayes praises Trump for choosing "to do what God has called him to" rather than "backing down" to "lawless thugs". The attached tweet includes a quote from a Donald Trump video originally posted from the (now-banned) QAnon URL "anonpatriotq", clearly signaling that Hayes (and the person he is quote-tweeting) are specifically connecting this Donald Trump quote to the QAnon conspiracy theory.

Later, on November 10, 2020 (just a few days following Trump's election loss) Hayes calls his followers to action, announcing that "POTUS needs Patriots on Twitter now, more than ever" and suggesting that "Our assignment is to refute the false narratives of the mainstream media. Digital soldiers do not leave the field of battle." The resulting impression is one of strong Christian nationalism backed up by outright violence if necessary. The theme of violence as always-already justified within QAnon's national imaginary will be further explored in the next case study.

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Before beginning the next section, it is worth mentioning that QAnon influencers are often in direct communication and community with each other. Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of QAnon folk media and influencer culture are the "crossover events" when we get to see multiple QAnon conspiracy promoters collaborate to make content or to appear together at QAnon events in the real world. These events, including conferences like QAnon's "Reawaken America Tour" as well as online video streams, give us further insight into the social and communal nature of the QAnon conspiracy culture.

Consider, for example, the collaborative podcast recorded in June 2020[61] between David Hayes and the QAnon influencer explored in the next case study, Zak Paine of @RedPill78:

[61] The two men also recently recorded a collaborative podcast with the title "Emergency Preparedness" (dated February 18, 2024) suggesting their ongoing relationship has remained strong. WayBack WebArchive copy: https://web.archive.org/web/20240413053515/https://prayingmedic.com/2024/02/18/redpill-78-livestream-on-emergency-preparedness/



Figure 12: A screenshot of a Tweet from @RedPill78 announcing a collaborative livestream entitled "Calm Before the Storm" featuring @PrayingMedic (June 2020)

Alt Text: A screenshot of a Tweet from @RedPill78 announcing a collaborative livestream entitled "Calm Before the Storm" featuring @PrayingMedic (June 13, 2020). Tweet from @RedPill78 reads:"I'm pleased to welcome @prayingmedic tonight at 9PM for Saturday Night Livestream! We'll talk about his journey through the years and discuss his new book, Calm Before The Storm! Plus your questions in the second hour! youtu.be/x8634Dsha9g". The video thumbnail features vaporwave-style grids, a sun, and bright colors, as well as scratchy fonts and an image of Hayes' CBTS book cover. Text on the image reads "RPN Saturday Night Livestream Praying Medic Calm Before The Storm. 9PM EST Saturday June 13, 2020.

While I won't be analyzing this video in depth for the purposes of this chapter—it has been removed from Twitter and isn't listed on Paine's website, so the only evidence of its existence appears to be the attached Tweet—it is an excellent example of how QAnon influencers work together to grow their audiences and solidify the impression of a coherent "QAnon community", even as they prompt their own versions of QAnon to followers.

Case Study #3: "You can't stop the truth!"[62] Paranoid QAnon Narratives, Conspiracist Violence, and the National/Racial Imaginary of *RedPillNews*

This case study explores the real-world consequences of QAnon's online narratives about war, how these narratives feed off of longstanding white supremacist myths about the threat of internal and external enemies, and what this connection reveals about the American national/racial imaginary within the QAnon conspiracy theory more broadly. I also analyze the rhetorical strategies ("moves to innocence") used by one popular QAnon influencer, Zak Paine (AKA @RedPillNews78) to minimize the contradiction between constantly promoting highly militaristic and nationalistic imagery/rhetoric—including the promotion of political goals that are fundamentally violent—while also refusing the connection between that ideology and real-world incidents of conspiracy-motivated right-wing violence.

As mentioned in the last case study, one of the key motifs shared by all QAnon subcultures is the idea of the "storm"—a secretive, perhaps even biblical, war taking place between the forces of good and evil. Critically, "Q" and his followers believe that this storm will lead to a great political "awakening"[63] among Americans. Although QAnon believers tend to refer to themselves as "digital soldiers" rather than literal ones, the lines between "war" in online

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[62] "You can't stop the truth!" is from the description on Zak Paine's Telegram channel @OfficialRedPillNews. This portion of the channel description has remained the same from at least March 2023-March 2024 according to my own research records. As of March 2024, the channel has more than 48,000 members.

[63] As explored in the introduction, "Q" claimed in Q-Drop #3906 [dated March 28, 2020] that: "The Great Awakening ('Freedom of Thought'), was designed and created not only as a backchannel to the public (away from the longstanding 'mind' control of the corrupt & heavily biased media) to endure future events through transparency and regeneration of individual thought (breaking the chains of 'group-think'), but, more importantly, aid in the construction of a vehicle (a 'ship') that provides the scattered ('free thinkers') with a 'starter' new social-networking platform which allows for freedom of thought, expression, and patriotism or national pride (the feeling of love, devotion and sense of attachment to a homeland and alliance with other citizens who share the same sentiment). When 'non-dogmatic' information becomes FREE & TRANSPARENT it becomes a threat to those who attempt to control the narrative and/or the stable. When you are awake, you stand on the outside of the stable ('group-think' collective), and have 'free thought'...When you are awake, you are able to clearly see." Web Archive: https://web.archive.org/web/20230508203620/https://QAnon.pub/?q=great%20awakening

and offline realms have become increasingly blurred as more and more highly visible real-world political officials, military figures, and media celebrities have promoted QAnon ideas and narratives over the years.

Through this kind of mainstream platforming, the once-fringe conspiracy theories under the QAnon umbrella have increasingly leeched beyond the borders of internet forums and groups, and into more mainstream political discourse and real-world spaces. In *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far-Right* (2019), Fielitz and Thurston describe "mainstreamizing"[64] as the process of "getting people to sympathize with a set of ideas so as to mobilize them to act accordingly, in order to institutionalize those ideas" (68). When we look back at the gradual mainstreamization of QAnon, the influence of political figures like Michael Flynn seems to be one of the early factors which enabled the online "storm" to grow offline.

For example, in July 2020 former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn filmed himself (along with his family members) taking the so-called "digital soldier oath"[65]. Flynn invoked the popular QAnon catchphrase "Where We Go One, We Go All" at the end of his oath to "defend" the nation, seemingly acknowledging the secret war often described by QAnon believers. At the time, Flynn's high status as a high ranking former US military official was held up as proof that the "storm" was indeed real.

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[64] Fielitz and Thurston suggest that common strategies for "mainstreamizing" extremist ideas online and offline include: using "shock" content to create gateways between mainstream platforms and the alt-web; weaponizing "ambiguous humor", self-awareness, and "ironic misdirection" in order to "mainstreamize" extremist ideas while also maintaining "plausible deniability" that the propaganda is serious; and developing a "deep vernacular" of inside jokes, symbols, and signals to produce a sense of community (13-15). They argue that these tools are able to weaponize "ironic misdirection" to accomplish political aims like radicalization (26-28). Fielitz and Thurston also refer to this as a strategy of "ideological bifurcation" which can communicate "rejected knowledge" (such as conspiracy theories) while also creating a feeling of community through insider jokes (25).

[65] Michael Flynn posted the original QAnon oath video on his own Twitter (now X) account: https://twitter.com/GenFlynn/status/1279590652200849409. A WayBack Web Archive copy can be found here: https://web.archive.org/save/https://twitter.com/GenFlynn/status/1279590652200849409 . Additionally, Marshall Cohen reported on the Flynn video for *CNN*: "Michael Flynn Posts Video Featuring QAnon Slogans" (7 July 2020) https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/07/politics/michael-flynn-QAnon-video/index.html.

But Flynn did not remain the highest-ranking former US official to seemingly promote QAnon and its associated conspiracy theories for very long. As mentioned earlier in chapter 1, Donald Trump himself began resharing QAnon-associated imagery and slogans on Twitter throughout his first presidency. He also promoted conspiracy theories about mass voter fraud during the 2020 election which became hugely influential within QAnon circles, in part because these election conspiracy theories aligned with many of QAnon's key claims: that there is vast internal corruption within the government, that immigrants are a threat to the nation, and that entities perceived as internal enemies (especially "liberal" leaders in media and technology) are secretly conspiring together to bring about the downfall of American patriots.

In the years since the 2020 election fraud conspiracy theory became a national crisis, QAnon narratives have increasingly been embraced within relatively mainstream political events, television shows, and political officials—facilitating increased institutionalization, mobilization, and even militarization around the main ideas behind the conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories which have gained mainstream cultural traction in this way have often led to panic, paranoia, and even mass violence. The most striking recent example of this dynamic—as well as the clearest example of the profound institutionalization, mobilization, and militarization of right-wing conspiracism in the US—is the violent riot and attempted insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

On that day, then commander-in-chief Donald Trump instructed crowds of armed insurrectionists—many of whom were sporting QAnon imagery and slogans—to march over to the Capitol and take action, claiming: "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore"[66]. At that point, many of QAnon's "digital soldiers" engaged in real-world

[66] Naylor, Brian. "Read Trump's Jan. 6 Speech, A Key Part Of Impeachment Trial." *NPR*, 10 Feb. 2021. NPR, https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial.

violence, culminating in five deaths and hundreds of injuries in a matter of hours. Some QAnon influencers openly claimed that this event was, indeed, the "storm" of reckoning that they had been waiting for, including David Hayes (AKA the Praying Medic), who shared the phrase "What a beautiful black sky" alongside an image of storm clouds over the Capitol building to his 92,000 followers on Gab[67].

Despite QAnon having been covered widely on mainstream media outlets since its major jump in popularity during 2020, the violence of January 6th seemed to shock media outlets. However, as Mike Rothschild argues compellingly in *The Storm is Upon Us* (2021):

> They shouldn't have been shocked. QAnon has centered around violent ideation since its very inception, and before the brutal attack on the Capitol, several killings, numerous incidents of domestic terrorism, multiple child-kidnapping schemes, police chases, and even a botched attempt to kill Joe Biden and destroy a coronavirus hospital ship were committed in the name of QAnon. It is a movement premised on the idea that a "storm" of mass arrests and executions will sweep corruption, child molesters, and liberals out of government forever, so it should not have been so jarring a surprise when Q's believers decided to carry out that long-promised purge themselves. (12)

As Rothschild gestures towards, the QAnon movement had already influenced real-world violence[68] before January 6th, and that violence has continued in the time since then.

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[67] According to Julia Wong's reporting for *The Guardian* on Jan 20, 2021: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/20/QAnon-biden-inauguration-trump-antisemitism-white-nationalism

[68] In addition to the other incidents mentioned here, Matthew Wright's standoff in an armored vehicle on the Hoover Dam in June 2018 was also motivated by QAnon beliefs. Wright spoke the catchphrase "Where We Go One, We Go All" on his livestream during the incident. See: Ruelas, Richard. "QAnon Follower Sentenced to Nearly 8 Years in Prison for Standoff near Hoover Dam", *The Arizona Republic*.

Although Q stopped posting for nearly two years following January 6th, 2021 (before returning to make some scattered posts during 2022[69]), it seems as if QAnon believers only became more emboldened during Q's absence. Along with many of the QAnon influencers in these chapters gaining more prominence since Q's disappearance, some highly visible January 6th rioters like the "Q Shaman" Jacob Chansley[70] have also become QAnon leaders. These new de facto leaders in the QAnon movement have embraced a new version of Q's promise that "The Storm is Coming". Instead of being a mantra about patiently waiting for Q and his team to save the day, QAnon believers are now encouraged to embrace a more active directive: "We are the Storm."

Some believers have taken this directive literally. In June 2021, journalist David Gilbert published a report for *VICE* with the striking headline: "This QAnon Militia of Ex-Cops and Soldiers Is Training 'Patriots' for Revolution". The group, known as the "1st Amendment Praetorians" offer "pro bono" security for "patriotic and religious events across the country", including providing security for QAnon conferences and prominent QAnon figures like Michael Flynn. A former army sergeant and QAnon believer, Robert Patrick Lewis, founded the "QAnon militia" in September 2020 and claimed it grew to hundreds of members within the first nine

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[69] Q returned to make a few posts in July 2022 in response to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. More Q-drops were posted in November and December 2022, mainly concerning the midterm elections. However, these more recent drops seem to be gaining less traction due to the suspicious nature of the July posts. The former owner of 8chan/8kun, Frederick Brennan, has pointed out on Twitter that Q should not have been able to post using the same tripcode on these newer posts because, according to Ron Watkins, the tripcodes had been "rotated" since the last Q-drop. The fact that Q was able to continue posting with the same tripcode suggests that the current site owners (father/son duo Ron and Jim Watkins) are likely posting as Q. See reporting by Matt Binder for *Mashable:* "Suddenly 'Q' of the QAnon conspiracy theory has returned after a years-long hiatus" 25 June 2022.

Additional news reporting and linguistic forensic analysis from 2022 suggests that the Watkins are likely responsible for writing Q-drops as early as 2018. See reporting by David Kirkpatrick for *The New York Times:* "Who Is Behind QAnon? Linguistic Detectives Find Fingerprints" 19 February 2022.

[70] "Capitol Riot: 'QAnon Shaman' Jacob Chansley Sentenced to 41 Months in Prison." *BBC News*, 17 Nov. 2021. www.bbc.com, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-59253090.

months; moreover, the group claims to be coordinating with other militia-style right-wing "security forces" like the Oath Keepers[71]. Lewis notes being particularly inspired by Michael Flynn's calls for a military coup in response to the "stolen" 202 election during the "For God & Country: Patriot Roundup"[72] QAnon conference, after which Lewis proclaimed on a livestream that "We need to talk about a revolution" (Gilbert). One of the group's notable goals is to "establish a nationwide network of survivalist training camps to prepare patriots for the coming revolution" (Gilbert). Although many QAnon influencers deny that they are attempting to stoke violence, the militaristic rhetoric and imagery of QAnon necessarily implies this kind of active armed mobilization and literal war-planning. Moreover, the significant engagement of current and former police/military personnel within groups like this indicates a startling level of potential institutionalization of QAnon's once-fringe conspiracist narratives about a coming conflict.

In addition to the formation of these organized "QAnon militias", we can also look to "lone wolf" actors for further evidence of how QAnon's militarism justifies and encourages offline violence. QAnon believer David DePape, who attempted to assault House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in her California home in October 2022, and instead wound up seriously injuring her 81 year old husband Paul Pelosi. According *New York Times* reporting on the incident[73], DePape's own blog reveals that he was driven by a host of QAnon conspiracy theories, including child sex trafficking theories and anti-Jewish racial myths.

Yet, in cases like these where violence was carried out fairly explicitly in the name of QAnon's "storm", QAnon influencers have consistently reacted by calling into question whether

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[71] See: Jackson, *Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group* (2021).

[72] Gilbert, David. "QAnon's Wildest Moments From Their Massively Disturbing Conference." *VICE*, 31 May 2021, https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7bebg/QAnon-conference-wildest-moments-from-patriot-roundup-dallas.

[73] See reporting from Charlie Savage et al. for *The New York Times*: "Politicized Rantings on Two Blogs by a 'David DePape' Are Drawing Scrutiny." 29 October 2022.

the perpetrators were true QAnon believers. Following the January 6th riot, QAnon conspiracists echoed the claims of conservative politicians and media who insisted that the insurrectionists were, in fact, undercover antifa members[74]. Elaborate alternative explanations to QAnon were given for the motivations of David DePape's assault on Paul Pelosi, including the claim that DePape was actually a sex worker that Pelosi had hired[75]. In both cases, conspiracists refused to claim violence that their own theories consistently call for; and in both cases, many conspiracists even went so far as to claim the incidents were actually staged to try to make QAnon believers look bad or crazy (thus undermining the broader "Great Awakening").

So: why do QAnon influencers promote a conspiracy theory using the language of war and crisis, while also condemning or distancing themselves from the actual consequences of that rhetoric? How can violence be so central to QAnon's theory, while simultaneously being something that QAnon influencers appear to condemn in practice?

QAnon conspiracy theorist Zak Paine (better known as @RedPill78 or *RedPillNews*) is a good case study for these questions, given that he has directly "reported" on several incidents of QAnon-motivated violence. His entire platform's identity is built around the claim that he reports the "truth" of current events, in opposition to "corrupt" mainstream media outlets. After being banned from YouTube[76] alongside other QAnon media figures like Joe M during October of

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[74] "Conspiracy Theories Paint Fraudulent Reality of Jan. 6 Riot." *PBS NewsHour*, 1 Jan. 2022, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/conspiracy-theories-paint-fraudulent-reality-of-jan-6-riot.

[75] Bronstein et al."Conservative Figures Push Salacious Theory about Pelosi Attack as Local Police Chief Debunks It." *CNN*, 31 Oct. 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/31/politics/pelosi-attack-right-wing-conspiracy-theories-invs/index.html.

[76] Paine's YouTube channel was deactivated on October 15, 2020 along with other QAnon media figures like Joe M (described in chapter 3). However, at the time, Paine and other QAnon influencers continued making money on mainstream platforms like Patreon. In October 2020, *Media Matters* reported that: "RedPill78 was recently removed from YouTube but has 674 supporters on Patreon and reports receiving $4,065 per month. This comes to approximately $48,780 per year, of which a minimum of $2,439 goes to Patreon". Little, Olivia. "Patreon Is Profiting from QAnon." *Media Matters for America*, 20 Oct. 2020, https://www.mediamatters.org/QAnon-conspiracy-theory/patreon-profiting-QAnon.

2020, Paine now livestreams his own daily news show every night at 6pm from Monday-Thursday on Rumble, a video hosting site known for its willingness to host content that is banned on YouTube and Twitch—including gambling, pornography, conspiracy theorists, and right-wing extremists. Paine also hosts podcast and livestream episodes on his own website redpill78news.com[77], which bears the memorable welcome text: "'THE CORRUPTION DETECTOR' YOUR HOME FOR REDPILL NEWS".



Figure 13: A screenshot of the homepage of redpill78news.com (May 2024)

Alt Text: A screenshot of the homepage of redpill78news.com (May 2024) redpillnews.com features vaporwave-style grids and city. The REDPILL78 logo is visible. The website is bright purple and has bold and scratchy fonts. It is a simple web interface featuring eight different tabs sorted by type. Tab text reads "About, Podcast, Merch, Sponsor, Watch, News, Donate, Contact." Website homepage text reads "REDPILL78. 'THE CORRUPTION DETECTOR. THE CORRUPTION DETECTOR. YOUR HOME FOR REDPILL NEWS"

[77] WayBack WebArchive copy: https://web.archive.org/web/20240503232730/https://redpill78news.com/

Across Paine's site, popups entitled "redpilled ads"[78] attempt to sell everything from questionable herbal supplements, to online multiplayer video games, to bulk food kits for survivalists. The alarmist nature of some of the "redpilled" advertisements[79] (particularly the survivalist kits) suggest that Paine benefits financially from the paranoia he attempts to stoke through his many headlines. A sampling of *RedPillNews* livestream titles in early 2024 reveals near-constant episodes about an alleged crisis at the US-Mexico border:

- Jan 18, 2024: "Standoff at Eagle Pass —Texas Says GTFO Biden"
- Jan 25, 2024: "Texas Sovereignty Over Federal Fascism"
- Jan 29, 2024: "Border Crisis Finally Results In Plausible Mayorkas Impeachment"
- Feb 5, 2024: "It's the Border Stupid: Traitorous Invasion Bill DOA"
- Feb 6, 2024: "Border Invasion Bill Suggests Possible Lankford Blackmail"

During these frequent livestreams about the border, Paine raises familiar themes about the border that echo the more mainstream "Make America Great Again" movement—mostly, claims that immigrants are violent and dangerous, and that the US-Mexico border must become increasingly militarized in response.

The border has grown increasingly large in the conservative American imagination since the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, who has relied heavily on stoking nationalist fears about the immigration to fuel his 2016, 2020, and 2024 presidential campaigns. Although many conservatives would not explicitly point to race as the motivation for their concerns about the

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[78] See Diaz Ruiz "Disinformation on digital media platforms: A market-shaping approach" (2023). Diaz Ruiz also cites other scholars on the connection between ads and conspiracism, suggesting: "The structure of digital media markets tempts brand managers and digital marketers to ignore whether their ads support disinformation (Braun and Eklund, 2019; Giansiracusa, 2021: 151)" (Diaz Ruiz 7).

[79] Including products such as conspiracy theorist Mike Lindell's MyPillow, miracle drugs, and a 3-month "emergency ration" food supply company.

border, the growing self-declared white nationalist movement in the United States is explicit in its stance that policing the US-Mexico border is about policing the future of white dominance in the nation. Historically, and in the present context of the United States, concern with policing the US-Mexico border is part and parcel to policing citizenship and the imagination of who does and does not belong within the nation. Today, a great deal of conservative populism continues to be driven by paranoid, reactionary demands to maintain some kind of "traditional" majority-white racial identity for the United States of America.

This strain of conspiracist white nationalism is best exemplified by the growing popularity of the "Great Replacement"[80] conspiracy theory and its connection to conspiracy theories about mass voter fraud during the 2020 election. Although real examples of US voter fraud extend at least as far back as the Gilded Age[81] (during which there was good evidence of politicians engaging in vote-buying and other, often racially-motivated tactics for suppressing the votes of nonwhite people), the Great Replacement conspiracy specifically posits that white American citizens are being gradually replaced with nonwhite immigrants explicitly in order to end the white citizen majority within the United States. The earlier versions of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory (which were promoted by self-proclaimed white supremacist) were less focused on voting, and more on promoting white nationalism in the US as its own political principle.

However, as the idea of a "Great Replacement" became increasingly mingled with voter fraud conspiracies following the 2020 election, the once-fringe conspiracy theory migrated onto more mainstream conservative platforms like *Fox News*. In April 2023, *NPR* reported that

[80] According to John Eligon for *The New York Times:* "The phrase [great replacement] was coined in 2012 by the French author Renaud Camus, whose writing on white genocide echoes at least a century of white supremacist views." From "The El Paso Screed, and the Racist Doctrine Behind It", August 7, 2019.

[81] See: Argersinger, Peter: "New Perspectives on Election Fraud in the Gilded Age" (1985).

"Many of the false narratives [Tucker] Carlson promoted were part of the 'great replacement' conspiracy theory, the racist fiction that nonwhite people are being brought into the U.S. to replace white voters"[82]. This racist conspiracy theory has been tied to several hate-motivated mass shootings in the US, including in El Paso, Texas (2019) and Buffalo, New York (2022).

The El Paso shooter, Patrick Crusius, referenced the great replacement directly in a four-page "screed" before he murdered 22 people in a 2019 targeted attack against Latinos (Bond). Just a few years later, the Buffalo shooter, Payton Gendron, posted a 180-page manifesto in which he claimed that whites were in danger of being replaced[83] before he went on to murder 10 Black Americans, with many comparing Gendron's manifesto to the earlier manifesto of Brenton Tarrant, who murdered 51 people in a 2019 mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand. Most recently, similar conspiracist paranoia about the threat of white "replacement"—including claims of an "invasion" at the border, and detailed rants against racial justice efforts and affirmative action—were espoused by Justin Mohn during a 15-minute livestream he recorded after beheading his own father, a federal employee, in January 2024[84].

Zak Paine has explicitly perpetuated the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory at least twice in his livestreams[85] and he has also "reported" on several violent incidents associated with

[82] *NPR* reports: "Many of the false narratives Carlson promoted were part of the "great replacement" conspiracy theory, the racist fiction that nonwhite people are being brought into the U.S. to replace white voters… 'Tucker took something that really was relegated to the fringes — it's a white nationalist conspiracy theory — and he made it not just a part of his show, but then a broader part of Fox News's culture, and then, by extension, Republican politics,' said Angelo Carusone, president of liberal watchdog Media Matters for America. 'It really became acceptable to embrace that idea.'" Bond, Shannon. "How Tucker Carlson Took Fringe Conspiracy Theories to a Mass Audience." *NPR*. Apr 25, 2023.

[83] Wiener, Aaron. "The Roots of the 'Great Replacement Theory' Believed to Fuel Buffalo Suspect." *Washington Post*, 17 May 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/05/15/great-replacement-theory-buffalo-bilbo/.

[84] "Man Accused of Beheading Father Was Steeped in Conspiracy Theories." *USA TODAY*, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2024/02/02/pennsylvania-man-beheading-extremist-conspiracy-theories/72443306007/.

[85] On May 15, 2023, Paine hosted a livestream entitled "Durham Report Released Biden's Great Replacement Begins on *RedPillNews"*. On October 15, 2022 he held a livestream entitled "Bloodlines of The Great Reset with Fritz Springmeier".

it through his platform *RedPillNews.* In each case, Paine offers an alternative explanation that attempts to refute the claim that racist conspiracy theories motivate racist violence. In fact, Paine suggests that these acts of violence are orchestrated events meant to spin public opinion against the highly racialized conspiracy theories he also promotes.

For example, in his May 30, 2022 livestream on Peyton Gendron entitled "PROOF! Fed Chatted with Buffalo Shooter BEFORE Attack – FF Confirmed?"[86], Paine argues that Gendron's manifesto was actually a "federal operation": "As soon as I saw it, I thought, this has got to be a fed op because it was a nearly word-for-word copy of the manifesto from the Christchurch shooter. It's like they don't even want to try any more. They're just putting something out there and hoping that everybody buys it" (02:45-02:55). He then proceeds to launch into an extended discussion attempting to prove that the people Gendron was speaking to on a Discord server prior to the shooting were, in fact, federal agents who coaxed him into committing the violence.



[86] WayBack Web Archive Link to *RedPillNews* livestream on Peyton Gendron (May 30, 2022): https://web.archive.org/web/20240311201059/https://redpill78news.com/proof-fed-chatted-with-buffalo-shooter-before-attack-ff-confirmed/

Figure 14: A screenshot of RedPillNews Livestream on Peyton Gendron (May 30, 2022)

Alt Text: A screenshot of the RedPillNews Livestream on Peyton Gendron, May 30, 2022. Peyton Gendron is wearing a cloth white mask and an orange jumpsuit, and he is looking at the camera while being escorted by a police officer in court. Graphics and text are laid over the image. The Discord logo, the Seal of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the RedPill78 logo are visible. Image reads "BUFFALO SHOOTER CHATTED WITH FEDS BEFORE ATTACK."

With this rhetorical framing, Paine is essentially attempting to debunk the idea that Gendron (and others like him) might be motivated to commit acts of violence by the white nationalist conspiracy theories they consumed online. This re-framing is important to understanding how Paine navigates the contradiction of promoting fundamentally racist and violent ideologies, while also attempting to maintain plausible deniability for doing so. Paine never has to explicitly acknowledge that he agrees with some of the perpetrator's ideas, particularly with regards to anti-immigrant sentiments. In other words, Paine is able to "rescue" white nationalist ideas without having to explicitly acknowledge his agreement with them. All he has to do is "prove" that the shooter was motivated not by his ideology, but instead by some combination of mental illness and federal tampering.

Paine uses similar rhetorical frames to deny any connection between QAnon and Justin Mohn's actions during a two-hour livestream on January 31, 2024 entitled "Unhinged Millennial Beheads Father on Livestream – MSM Blames Conspiracies on Red Pill News Live"[87]. Interestingly, there has been an important update to the *RedPillNews* format since the prior 2022 livestream about Peyton Gendron, as the opening titles for Paine's videos now include a disclaimer: "DISCLAIMER RPN is not responsible for the views, actions, statements or opinions

[87] WayBack Internet Archive livestream copy on Justin Mohn (Jan 31 2024): https://web.archive.org/web/20240215023429/https%3A%2F%2Fredpill78news.com%2Funhinged-millennial-beheads-father-on-livestream-msm-blames-conspiracies-on-red-pill-news-live%2F

of its guests, advertisers or even viewers the information contained on this program is not medical or legal advice. an appearance on this platform is not necessarily an endorsement. but as always we encourage you to do your own research. enjoy the show". The addition of this disclaimer in the time since Paine's coverage of Peyton Gendron's hate crimes in 2022 seems to indicate some greater level of self-awareness about Paine's influence and potential accountability for the media content he produces. However, Paine's narrative throughout his video on Mohn suggests otherwise.

Paine opens the stream by claiming that media reports associating Mohn with QAnon conspiracies are part of a "psychological operation", echoing his earlier claims about Gendron being a "fed op":

> It's definitely an election year. They are pulling out all the stops. And the latest psychological operation to be produced and implemented on the public by the mainstream media and of course, good old feds in the deep state, is this guy right here. A disaffected, unemployed millennial who has had an easy life as far as I can tell. He was living free at his parents' half-million dollar home… but, he went crazy and allegedly decapitated his father on livestream… They try to blame his psychosis on the world of conspiracies… as far as I can tell he never posted anything even glowing about Trump or anything else that they're trying to say. It's just that he thought people were following him and he hated the US government. Didn't want to pay his student loans, that's how you know he wasn't a conservative. (01:00-02:25)

The voiceover is accompanied by an image of Mohn with a superimposed screenshot of the cover for his self-authored book, *America's Coming Bloody Revolution*. Paine has added several logos and a subtitle that reads "PSYCHO BEHEADS FATHER 'BECAUSE QANON'":

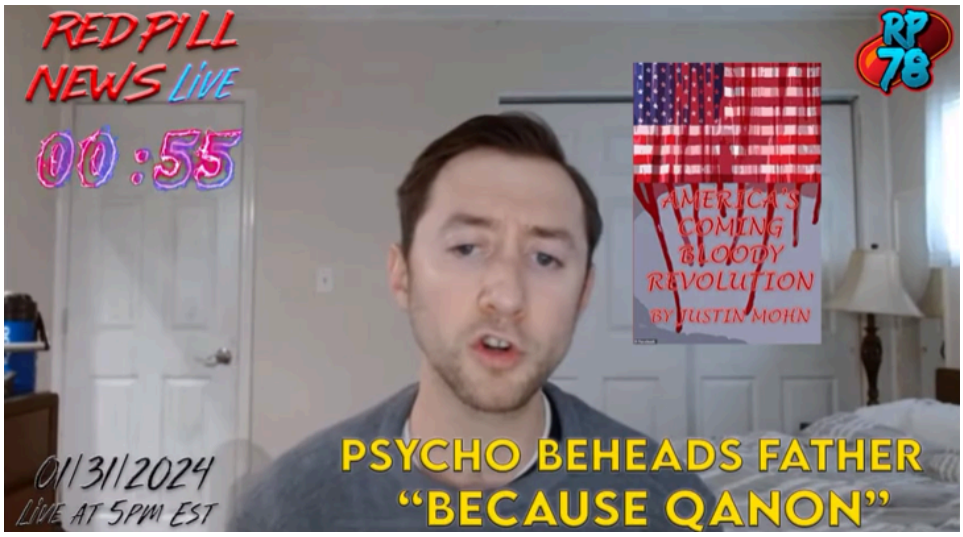


Figure 15: A screenshot of the beginning of the RedPillNews Livestream on Justin Mohn (Jan 31, 2024)

Alt Text: Justin Mohn, a white man in a gray shirt, is speaking to the camera from a white bedroom. The screenshot of the livestream features text and an image of Mohn's book cover, "America's Coming Bloody Revolution" by Justin Mohn. The RedPill78 logo is visible, along with a countdown clock to the beginning of the livestream. Image text reads "REDPILL NEWS LIVE. 0:55. 01/31/2024 LIVE AT 5PM EST. PSYCHO BEHEADS FATHER 'BECAUSE QANON'. AMERICA'S COMING BLOODY REVOLUTION by Justin Mohn."

Paine's denial of any connection between Mohn and conspiracists like himself is starkly contrasted by the similarity of Mohn's book title and Paine's own constant rhetoric about being a "soldier" in the coming "war". Some of Paine's livestreams even have similarly gorey titles, including "The Digital Bloodbath" (August 7, 2020) and "True The Vote Free! Dem Election Theft Efforts Exposed, Blood Bath Coming Tomorrow" (November 6, 2022). Additionally, Paine's reactivated @RedPill78 Twitter account (98k followers as of January 2024) shows him taking the "digital soldier" oath multiple times:



Figure 16: A screenshot of @RedPill78 taking the "digital soldier oath" on Twitter (June 26, 2020)

Alt Text: Twitter user @RedPill78 (AKA Zak Paine) posts a tweet with an image and text shared on June 26, 2020. His tweet was shared 373 times, liked 1,000 times, and commented on 94 times. Text of the tweet reads: "None of us take these words lightly. We will fight for our freedom and die for our country. Thank you to all who have served and for all who remember your oath #TakeTheOath". Zak Paine, a white man wearing a red shirt, is speaking into a microphone while raising his right hand at eye-level with the flag of the United States in the background.



Figure 17: A screenshot of @RedPill78 sharing a stylized #WWG1WGA promotional image on Twitter (June 26, 2020)

Alt Text: Twitter user RedPill78 shares a tweet with an image and text shared on June 26, 2020, that was reshared 379 times, liked 938 times, and commented on 55 times. Text reads "#In It Together: Wearing the full armor of God, we stand United. Thank you to each and every one of you. In a few short years, we've done what many had once thought impossible. Image reads "#In It Together: No one person is above another. 'Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.' God bless you. United we stand. Q. #WWG1WGA"

In his tweets, Pain promises to "fight for our freedom and die for our country". Militarstic imagery is also common for his brand, including one April 17, 2020 Tweet in which he suggests QAnon believers are "Wearing the full armor of God".

This kind of dramatic war imagery and rhetoric does heavy narrative lifting for Paine's overall brand, from the war-like titles of his livestreams to the survivalist products he promotes through advertisements. For example, his livestream on Justin Mohn includes a personalized ad read for a 3-month emergency "survival food" supply ration from a company called MyPatriotSupply, and his video descriptions often plug "Military Grade Home EMP Defense"

systems. Still, Paine claims to see no connection between the ultra-nationalistic, war-like conspiracies theories that he promotes online, and the violence committed by real-world ultra-nationalists who take the claims of such conspiracy theories to be true. As Paine's introduction to the January 31, 2024 livestream on Justin Mohn continues, he argues:

> The Federal Government is in the process of training their agents in the dangers they face… as they've been saying, the most dangerous terroristic threat is white supremacist, er, I guess America First Trump supporters. But we all know that's not true because, well. First of all, we're not white supremacists because we're people of all races. We are definitely patriots because we support the United States of America, and we're anti-deep state. But that doesn't mean we're going to go out there and do crazy things. We're attempting to take our country back through a peaceful, bloodless revolution if you will. (0:05:00-0:05:41)

Paine insists that there are important differences between QAnon believers and people like Justin Mohn, but before he elaborates on what they are, he launches into a nearly 40-minute detour about Hunter Biden and Joe Biden, including complaints about how Biden has failed to secure to prevent immigration at the US-Mexico border: "this is the most fundamental issue… he [Joe Biden] neglected to finish the construction of the wall" (0:42:00). Before looping back around to Mohn, Paine also covers Mark Zuckerberg's Congressional testimony about child sexual abuse material on his platforms, making sure to add in his own claims connecting the testimony to other QAnon conspiracy theories about child sex trafficking. The wandering nature of the livestream seems to imply a narrative structure more concerned with hitting all of QAnon's greatest hits, rather than making a coherent logical argument about Mohn.

Finally, Paine returns to the topic of what differentiates QAnon believers from Justin Mohn around around an hour and fifteen minutes into the livestream. For his source material, Paine uses a webpage entitled "SICK: Pennsylvania Man Arrested for Gruesome Beheading of Federal Employee Father and Posts Video of Decapitated Head Online — Calls for 'Revolution' Against the 'Biden Regime'" by Jim Hoft from the far-right fake news website *The Gateway Pundit*. The write-up provides a partial transcription for the now-deleted livestream Mohn posted after beheading his father. I have not been able to verify the accuracy of the video transcription due to the (apparently successful) efforts to limit its circulation online, so the following analysis focuses on Paine's engagement with Hoft's report, and not on the accuracy of Hoft's report itself.

Seeming to forget his earlier claims that Mohn's murder of his father and media reporting about it are simply part of a "psychological operation", Paine pivots to two other main arguments for why Mohn should not be called a "QAnon-style conspiracy theorist"—although, Paine does acknowledge that there is "an element of conspiracy to his fantasies" (01:13:45). Firstly, Paine argues that Mohn is "completely unhinged"; and, secondly, he argues that Mohn hated the US government, never posted about Trump, and was not a "true" conservative (01:15:00). He hammers this last point repeatedly by hitting on several right-wing tropes commonly used to malign liberals. Paine claims that Mohn is an "entitled" 32-year old "millennial" who "had always been taken care of" by his parents and who likely believed himself to be a "beautiful and unique snowflake". (01:17:00-01:18:00).

Of course, the claim that Mohn could not have been motivated by QAnon because he is not a conservative—and may even be a typical liberal millennial—seems contradicted by Hoft's reported transcript of Mohn's video, which points out the "woke" left as the real threat: "America is rotting from the inside out as far-left woke mobs rampage our once-prosperous cities".

According to Hoft, Mohn's video was entitled "Call to Arms for American Patriots" and included language referring to a "militia" of "soldiers" joining a "revolution"—language not unlike Paine's own militarized imagery/rhetoric and his "digital soldier" oath to fight, and even die, in order to defeat America's "enemies". Paine questions Mohn's self-identification as a patriot, and uses Mohn's claims that he is the "Commander" of a "militia" fighting against the "Biden Regime" and an "army of illegal immigrants" for "our children's futures" as evidence for Mohn being "unhinged" (01:22:00).

Paine's claims that Mohn was not motivated, at least in part, by QAnon-style conspiracy theories feel silly, at best, when Paine's own videos include many of the same key elements, imagery, and rhetoric used by Mohn. Beyond similarities between the two in their shared trope of a great war between patriots and the enemies of America, the enemies identified by Mohn are the many of the same ones frequently identified by Paine in his livestreams, including Joe Biden, the "Deep State", sex traffickers, illegal immigrants, globalists, tech companies, and woke leftists. There's also clear overlap between the issues that Paine frequently makes videos about, and many of the demands Mohn made in his video, according to Hoft:

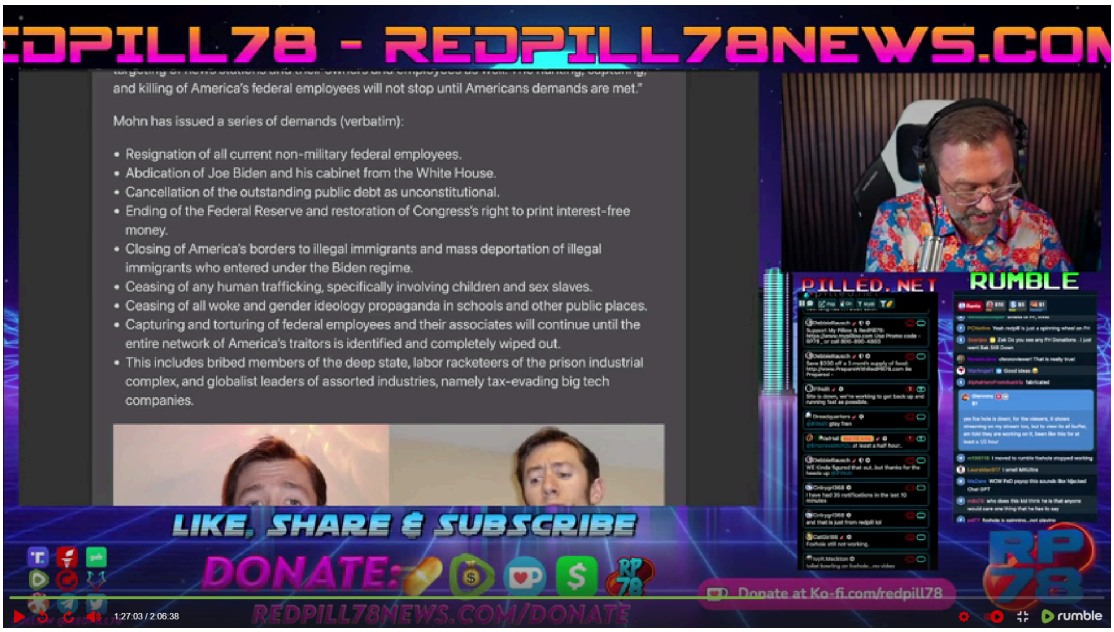


Figure 18: A screenshot approximately 90 minutes into the RedPillNews Livestream on Justin Mohn (Jan 31, 2024)

Alt text: Livestream of user RedPill78 (Zak Paine) on the Rumble video platform at the 90-minute mark of a 120-minute-long livestream posted on January 31, 2024. Paine is showing a list of Justin Mohn's demands as reported by Jim Hoft from the far-right fake news website The Gateway Pundit. The text reads: "Mohn has issued a series of demands (verbatim): -Resignation of all current non-military federal employees. -Abdication of Joe Biden and his cabinet from the White House. -Cancellation of the outstanding public debt as unconstitutional. -Ending of the Federal Reserve and restoration of Congress's right to print interest-free money. -Closing of America's borders to illegal immigrants and mass deportation of illegal immigrants who entered under the Biden regime. -Ceasing of any human trafficking, specifically involving children and sex slaves. -Ceasing of all woke and gender ideology propaganda in schools and other public places. -Capturing and torturing of federal employees and their associates will continue until the entire network of America's traitors is identified and completely wiped out. -This includes bribed members of the deep state, labor racketeers of the prison industrial complex, and globalist leaders of assorted industries, namely tax-evading big tech companies."

Paine does offer an explanation, however, for why there would be so much overlap in the demands of Mohn and the goals of QAnon, including key points like removing Joe Biden from the White House, closing the borders and deporting immigrants, punishing sex traffickers and deep state globalists, and stopping "woke and gender ideology propaganda in schools". Paine

(with some help from his livestream chat) explains that this list of demands must be, of course, a part of the "psychological operation":

> Do you see what they've done here? They've taken all of these very, very worthwhile points that many people with sound mind and body would make, and now they have attached them to a psychotic millennial who just cut his dad's head off on livestream… and they also attach it to a citizens militia… it's a fairly obvious attempt to categorize anyone supporting any of these things as the same thing as Justin Mohn… [Paine reads a livestream comment] 'I smell MK Ultra', I think you're right. (01:26:00)

So, the explanation for why Paine's ideas might have so much in common with the ideas of someone like Mohn is not that the ideas themselves imply violence as a solution, but rather that some secretive group has conspired to brainwash Mohn and use his murder of his father in order to taint the perception of QAnon's goals in the public imagination.

However, some of the goals shared by Mohn and Paine seem to imply violence as a necessary step. In particular, their shared rhetoric about the US-Mexico border stands out given that calls to close the border and deport migrants would necessarily require militarization and force—and militarization is a common theme in both of their styles of delivery, given their frequent reference to soldiers and wars, whether meant literally or figuratively. Moreover, in the historic and present-day context of the United States, an obsession with policing borders and immigration is part and parcel to white settler nationalism and the national imaginary. The constant obsession with policing the border (and US citizenship) relies upon a settler-colonial national imaginary which implicitly advocates for white supremacy and the act of continuous colonization as an ongoing "structure, not an event" in the words of Patrick Wolfe.

Paine often calls explicitly upon common conservative populist slogans like “America First!” and “Make America Great Again!”, which call back to specific racial imaginaries of the United States as a white-dominant nation, including the stark fact that “America First!” was a slogan used by the KKK as early as the 1920s. Although Mohn himself does not mention white nationalism explicitly, his specific terminology and overall framework suggests he has at least some knowledge of the racialized conspiracist theory about a “cabal” of “globalists”—words which frequently function as anti-Jewish dog-whistles in far-right and conspiracist spaces online. In particular, the close relationship between reactionary conspiracism in general and white nationalism in particular might be best demonstrated by the “Great Replacement” theory, in which Jewish people are claimed to be bringing masses of nonwhite migrants into the US in order to dilute the voting power of white Americans and the overall ethnic makeup of the nation. Within a broader historical context and within a broader context for contemporary politics, both Mohn and Paine’s obsession with immigration and the border are tied structurally to the imagination of the United States as a predominantly white nation whose futurity must be pre-emptively “defended”.

In her piece “Fascism as Love” Sara Ahmed analyzed a 2016 quote from the landing page of the white nationalist forum *Storm Front*[88] in order to analyze how white nationalists imagine futurity for the nation. *StormFront* is a white supremacist neo-Nazi forum that presents itself as a militant “front” against which to fight the “storm” of racial threats facing the white race. Since the early days of the internet, *StormFront* has been a major source of conspiracy theories online, in addition to white supremacist propaganda which has been traced to multiple

[88] StormFront began as a message board in the 1990s supporting KKK leader David Duke’s campaign for US Senate. In 1996, KKK leader Don Black established *StormFront* as its own standalone site.

violent incidents—including murder, which led to the site's registrar to seize the domain name temporarily back in 2017.

Although Q-drops never explicitly connect the phrase "The Storm Is Coming"[89] to *StormFront's* own longtime metaphor of a "storm" threatening white Americans, the overlap of users on "hate" forums like *StormFront* and 4chan makes it very likely that the original Q poster likely had prior exposure to *StormFront* forums—especially given "Q's" clear familiarity with existing anti-Jewish conspiracy theories and general right-wing forum culture, as evidenced by their use of the "insider anon" trope already common on 4chan by the time Q began posting. The framing of a "coming storm" in which "digital soldiers" of QAnon must be ready to fight certainly calls upon a similar motif as *StormFront*, although most QAnon believers would state that the "storm" is the dismantling of the (highly racialized) "Deep State" and not specifically an outright race war as *StormFront* seems to imagine.

Another common motif between *StormFront* and QAnon is the idea of "awakening" more people to the coming war through the use of new media. *StormFront's* website includes a list of sources which it describes as follows: "The Wake Up or Die Love Watch is a listing of those who love this nation and our White Racial Family and the alternative to the lists of parasitic propagandists." Commenting upon the convoluted "logic" of a "Love Watch" Sara Ahmed writes: "Such organizations claim they act out of love for their own kind, and for the nation as an

[89] WayBack Web Archival Copy: STORM IS HERE (excel sheet). The "STORM IS HERE" document claims in line 250 that "The storm is the take-down of the NWO [New World Order] cabal. It has begun. MIL operations have commenced and there are now over 9,000 sealed indictments nation-wide as of Jan 2018 and that is only 20% of what is actually taking place. See the foot-notes also to this spreadsheet." In line 1423, the spreadsheet claims an additional "spiritual storm" is taking place, which is connected more explicitly to anti-Jewish conspiracies. The cited Q-drop has only four lines: "+" "++" "+++" "Q". In interpreting this drop, the authors of the document give multiple interrelated answers for this code, firstly that the symbols might represent the "three main families that have the most power in the world" which are supposedly "Saud, Rothschild, Soros". Additionally, the "open answers" column claims that these symbols represent "a spiritual progression within the Storm" from the Masonic triple cross, to the Satanic cross, to the Christian cross.

inheritance of kind (‘Our White Racial Family’), rather than out of hatred for strangers or others.”

Feelings of white kinship, then, seem central to understanding the affective and ideological structure of paranoid right-wing politics which believe the rightful racial inheritance of white Americans has come under threat. Through the lens of folklore, we might ask questions about what kind of racial stories white Americans tell themselves and each other in order to maintain this affective structure of kinship, folk group, and ultimately, supreme ownership and rights within the nation? If, as Benedict Anderson suggests, the nation must be imagined through shared narratives and media—we should ask the question, how does new media enable white nationalists to advance their specific imaginary of a white nation through media/narrative? And what are the consequences of that media/narrative being platformed?

Fears about the future of the white race continue to fuel some of the most grisly violence committed by right-wing extremists in the US. In many ways, the belief that American identity and white identity should be synonymous is maintained specifically through the stoking of paranoid white nationalist folklore. Rather than being a “new” problem created solely by the availability of misinformation online, conspiracy theories rooted in fears about the changing racial identity of the United States are the product of a longstanding colonial structure at the foundation of the nation itself. As previously mentioned, Hofstadter suggests that the paranoid style of American politics is “above all, a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself… the feeling of persecution is central… the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others” (4). Paranoid politics are structurally integral to white nationalism, and so they are also

central to the kind of right-wing conspiracist populism that has become so appealing to many white Americans.

Within the white racial national imaginary, paranoid stories about invasion, takeover, and violence from racial others remains remarkably unchanged over time. Thus, the growing problem of racialized right-wing conspiracy theories cannot be addressed without addressing the longer history of white supremacy in the US. There is no way to simply "fact check" away centuries of structural racism and white supremacist racial storytelling about the nation. And, as I have already discussed at length, conspiracy theories are a useful tool for the manipulation of truth, the scapegoating of enemies, and the telling of racial stories.

Matthew Jacobson suggests that history shows white people "are not born… they are somehow made. It's just a question of who does the making" (3). In *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1999), Jacobson further writes that race is "a theory of who is who, of who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what" (6). The far-right's continued obsession with increasingly authoritarian policy-making, "protecting" the border, and "making America great again" reflects a specific concept of who does and does not "belong" in the nation—a concept grounded in settler colonialism and a historically white racial American identity.

So, while right-wing conspiracists like Paine may not explicitly call themselves white supremacists or white nationalists (and may make broad claims about nonwhite people agreeing with them) the ideology of whiteness as a prerequisite for American identity is built deeply into the foundation of the racialized conspiracy theories they parrot. In *Racism Without Racists* Eduardo Bonilla-Silva outlines a similar principle of narrative formation in the kind of colorblind white supremacist racial ideology claimed by Paine:

> The central component of any dominant racial ideology is its frames or set paths for interpreting information. These set paths operate as cul-de-sacs because after people filter issues through them, they explain racial phenomena following a predictable route. Although by definition dominant frames must misrepresent the world (hide the fact of dominance), this does not mean that they are totally without foundation. (73)

It is in this sense we might think about ultra-nationalistic QAnon conspiracy theories: as "set paths for interpretation" which are designed to "hide the fact of dominance" through misrepresentation. Paine's goal is not to openly proclaim the need for white supremacy; his goal is to "hide the fact of dominance" of white supremacy while also advocating for specific policies and practices which reinforce it.

This underlying ideology of white supremacy and nationalism explains the strategic rhetoric of innocence proclaimed by Paine and others like him when violence is actually carried out in the name of QAnon's forever-coming war over American politics and identity. Paine's own moves to innocence reflect some of the underlying colonial ideologies highlighted by Tuck and Yang in their famous article "Decolonization is not a metaphor" (2012). Tuck and Yang refer to "a set of evasions, or 'settler moves to innocence', that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity" (1). While the authors were referring specifically to these "evasions" in relation to the "metaphorization of decolonization", I think the general concept of "settler moves to innocence" is broadly applicable to the more general historical revisionism perpetuated by US nationalist narratives that deny the ongoing existence of systemic white supremacy and settler coloniality—despite these underlying structures being largely responsible for how we view political conflicts like immigration/borders.

One of the characteristics shared by Tuck and Yang's so-called "settler moves to innocence" and the seemingly "postracial" rhetorical moves to innocence made by nationalistic conspiracy theorists like Zak Paine is the quality of reversed victimization. Claims of innocence are necessary to maintain the national American imaginary of being persecuted—a vision in which American citizens are the victims of immigration violence, rather than the perpetrators of it. As a result, nationalistic conspiracy theorists like Zak Paine and Justin Mohn imagine themselves (and the nation by extension) as being always-already under threat from the violence of outsiders, thus justifying the violence they call for or commit themselves.

In the end, whether Paine claims the violence of figures like Mohn or not, they are all telling the same story: a story about the need to defend the borders of a colonized land; the need to protect white settler futurity; and the need to perpetuate a regime of state and vigilante terror to enforce this particular configuration of the nation. The pretext for violence is baked into such a worldview.

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This concludes my case studies for Chapter 1. In the remaining chapters, I will continue to explore QAnon folk media and influencer culture through a close-reading of two early QAnon YouTube videos which were responsible, in large part, for the explosion of QAnon into mainstream America. These earlier QAnon "bakes" predate many of the unique subcultures that developed later on for more tailored audiences (like those of Zak Paine and David Hayes). As such, they are useful windows into the "mainstreamization" of QAnon and its broadest strategies for appealing to unsuspecting audiences being exposed to the conspiracy theory for the very first time.

CHAPTER 2 - "Is it #HAPPENING ???": Tracy "Beanz" Diaz and the QAnon Influencer's Recipe for Baking a Folk Media Conspiracy Theory

> "Now, as many of you know, I do not typically do videos like this. However, due to the very specific and kind of... eerie nature of what's been going on over on /pol/, I've decided that it's important for me to cover this. Just in case this stuff turns out to be legit. Because honestly, it kind of seems legit, to be honest..." — Tracy "Beanz" Diaz in "/POL/- Q CLEARANCE ANON - IS IT #HAPPENING ???" (November 3, 2017)

Just a few days after the first documented[90] "Q-drop"—the first in a series of more than 5,000 mysterious messages from an anonymous user known only as "Q Clearance Patriot"—was posted to the infamous 4chan /pol/ message boards on October 27, 2017, a small YouTuber known as Tracy "Beanz" Diaz uploaded a video that attempted to decode the cryptic post. The video soon became one of the first QAnon conspiracy videos[91] to go viral, with the original upload receiving at least 250,000 views[92] before its eventual removal during the mass bans of QAnon content on YouTube in 2020. Beyond igniting broader interest in the mysterious figure of Q, that video also laid the foundation for Diaz's years-long career as a QAnon influencer[93], a

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[90] See reporting from Edward Tian for *Bellingcat* (2021): "The QAnon Timeline: Four Years, 5,000 Drops and Countless Failed Prophecies"

[91] WayBack Web Archive Copy of re-uploaded video: "/POL/- Q CLEARANCE ANON - IS IT #HAPPENING ???" (Part 1) originally posted November 3, 2017. Google Drive Archival Copy of re-uploaded part 2: "/POL/- Q CLEARANCE ANON - IS IT #HAPPENING ???" (Part 2) posted November 5, 2017

[92] See reporting from Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins for *NBC News:* "How three conspiracy theorists took 'Q' and sparked QAnon" 14 August 2018.

[93] Diaz boasts, as of March 2024, a highly active Telegram channel (@TracyBeanzOfficial) with around 40,000 subscribers and a YouTube channel (@TracyBeanz) with 123,000 subscribers. Diaz temporarily lost her Twitter account during the mass banning of QAnon-related accounts in the days following the January 6th Capitol Riot (see *BBC* (2021): "Twitter suspends 70,000 accounts linked to QAnon") but her account was reinstated on December 16, 2022 after Elon Musk's Twitter takeover, alongside the reinstatement of many other QAnon influencers. As of March 2024, she has nearly 600,000 Twitter followers (@TracyBeanz).

right-wing micro-celebrity[94], and a former elected South Carolina Republican Party official[95]. Diaz's election to public office in April 2021 came amid rising public awareness of the QAnon conspiracy movement following the involvement of QAnoners in the January 6th Capitol Riot.

One might rightfully wonder: how did a small YouTube conspiracy theorist like Tracy Diaz manage to build multiple platforms with hundreds of thousands of followers and then become an elected official in the span of just a few years? And what can her quick rise to fame teach us about how online right-wing conspiracy cultures operate in America today?

The answer lies in the art of "baking", a social practice in which QAnon believers attempt to decode the secret meanings supposedly embedded within Q-drops (AKA "breadcrumbs") and then repost their "research" online for others to build off, with the ultimate goal of uncovering the secret machinations of the world's greatest evils. As mentioned in the first chapter, baking is a folk media practice which adapts the long-standing folkloric tradition of collective cultural authorship to the many formats and platforms of new media. Distinct online subcultures arise through the collaborative production and circulation of increasingly localized folk medias, which results in an array of different digital folk groups with their own distinct vernaculars[96], traditions,

[94] Diaz co-hosts (alongside fellow YouTube conspiracy theorist Frank Val) a podcast called "Dark to Light with Frank and Beanz" which has enabled her to interview high profile guests associated with QAnon like General Michael Flynn, Former National Security Advisor to Donald Trump. Additionally, she serves as editor in chief for a digital media outlet she helped found called *UncoverDC,* which claims to deliver "the unvarnished truth, a concept the legacy media abandoned long ago". Diaz has also been a recurrent figure appearing on the popular Patriot Soapbox YouTube channel. Prior to her involvement with QAnon, she hosted a right-wing talk show called "TD Uncensored" (est. 2012) on Liberty Movement Radio.

[95] See reporting by David Gilbert for *Vice News*: "One of QAnon's Earliest Influencers Just Got Elected to South Carolina GOP" 26 April 26 2021. In September 2022, Adam Benson reported for *The Sun News* that, after a controversial 18 months in the position, Diaz resigned as executive committee chairwoman on September 30, 2022. Diaz hurled accusations at various members of the South Carolina GOP for a perceived lack of loyalty to Donald Trump, and was quoted saying: "You have a state party weaponized against its own, that's what really bothers me. They don't like us because we represent populism and freedom and change, and they are so happy with things the way things are that even if this country go Marxist, they'll still get paid."

[96] Online subcultures tend to co-construct increasingly niche and hyper-evolved "dialects" that are illegible to cultural outsiders who have not built knowledge about the shared index of visual and textual references. As these cultural productions become increasingly niche, the interpretive difficulty of the media functions as a kind of gatekeeping. In order to understand and to be understood, one has to learn to "speak the language" through significant investment in consuming the group's folk media. Media consumption may therefore act as social or

beliefs, and narratives that function to define and maintain an internal sense of collective identity—all key features of folklore as identified by Trevor Blank in *Folklore and the Internet* (5-6). Despite the fact that members of an online folk group might not necessarily have direct relationships with one another, they are still able to recognize who is and is not a part of their "community"[97] through their distinct cultural practices.

In this sense, online folk groups are *cultural groups who can imagine*[98] *themselves as being together through the co-production of shared media, dialects, and rituals*. This kind of folkloric analytical framework demands a recognition that conspiracy cultures operate in a way that goes much deeper than mere misinformation. Conspiracy theories thrive when people lack a coherent overall theory for the despairing material conditions of the world around them. Thus, conspiracy cultures might best be understood as highly affective social arrangements that are most persuasive when they are able to offer potential believers not only an overall theory of why things are the way that they are, but also a shared language and narrative, a feeling of political empowerment, and a sense of identity and belonging. In this respect, the problem is intimate and not merely informational.

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ideological conditioning in the sense that outsiders become insiders as they learn to think and communicate using the group's vernacular. The formation of niche knowledge communities contributes to the impression of a boundary between insiders and outsiders, who can be differentiated by their ability to interpret and mimic the vernacular.

[97] The methodologically ambiguous term of "community" has been hotly debated within the field of new media. Of particular concern is the fact that online social ecosystems are not necessarily tied to a stable, geographically and temporally bounded region the way real-world communities usually are. The word "community" could be used to describe an array of different online social arrangements: a literal network of users connected via digital infrastructure who circulate shared information amongst one another; a group of people who form direct connections in a bounded space of communication like a groupchat or small forum; a collection of users on the same platform united by shared structures of affect, who share the impression that there is a "community" with mutual commitments, priorities, and dedication; etc. My use of the term "folk groups" is meant to avoid the ambiguity of "community" by emphasizing shared folk media as the primary factor contributing to shared group identity.

[98] As Benedict Anderson tells us: "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). Q-drops (and their many interpretations) are a central media around which QAnon identity can be imagined, similar to the way that nationalist news media enables the nation to be imagined.

This chapter takes Tracy Diaz's first viral QAnon video as a case study in how successful QAnon propagandists have leveraged folk media practices and the interpretive ambiguity of the Q-drops to prop themselves up as cultural influencers and political leaders. As an intersubjective and highly context-dependent communicative practice, baking[99] tends to produce progressively more localized and niche subcultures. Although forums and groups that act as digital town squares tend to have a more equal flow of information among users (especially anonymous forums), a parasocial dynamic of unequal influence often emerges on platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram where social media networks form hierarchies around popular individual users. This hierarchical communications infrastructure allows influencers to dominate localized subcultures to their own benefit by exerting outsized control over the flow of media. In the QAnon context, popular bakers are able to inject their personal beliefs and agendas into the QAnon culture by influencing their audiences' interpretations of the Q-drops. Thus, the imagined relationship that QAnoners have to each other and to the culture in general is heavily mediated through the specific bakes that they are exposed to.

It is crucial to re-emphasize here that the Q-drops are both functionally[100] and linguistically inaccessible to most average internet users. The interpretive ambiguity of the Q-drops is typified by an incredibly niche self-referential rhetorical style that is littered with unspecified acronyms, long series of vague (but provocative) leading questions, and implied code words. These linguistic features provide multiple openings to encode and decode different

[99] The term "baking" is used in more and less specific ways depending on context. In its most general usage, the term "baking" is a reference to Q-drops which are also known as "crumbs". Interpretations of the Q-drops are sometimes referred to as "bakes". In its most specific usage, "baking" refers to a set of formatting expectations for posts on QAnon "research" boards. For an example, see the instructions posted to the QAnon 8kun Research Board in a frequently linked thread entitled "//'// FOR APPRENTICE BAKERS - 'HOW TO BAKE' //'//" - WayBack Web Archive Copy.

[100] Q-drops have historically been posted on 4chan and 8chan/8kun, which makes them relatively inaccessible to average internet users. In addition to the difficulty of navigating the forums themselves, these platforms have notoriously toxic (i.e. racist, misogynistic, homophobic, etc.) cultures that tend to repel general audiences.

meanings, which simultaneously limits access to meaning for those not deeply versed in QAnon lore, while also enabling influencers like Tracy Diaz to manipulate and wield the posts for a wide variety of audiences and purposes. In this sense, the practice of baking Q-drops is the very heartbeat of QAnon folk culture because it is an activity of togetherness that does not require a singular or unified ideology.

Thus, as a practice of mediation, baking is arguably even more influential than the original Q-drops themselves. Richard Grusin (2015) describes the totality of processes that take place via media interfaces as "radical mediation": "Radical mediation does not take mediation as standing between already actualized subjects, objects, actants, or entities (or even as being within objects) but rather treats mediation as the process, action, or event that generates or provides the conditions of the emergence of subjects and objects" (137-138). According to this perspective, the process of baking "provides the conditions of the emergence" not only for the many denominations of QAnon culture, but also for the distinct identities, relationships, and behaviors of particular QAnon folk groups.

While anyone can participate in baking on QAnon forums—and in fact, Q's "digital soldiers" are explicitly encouraged to participate in the "information war", as the core QAnon catchphrase "do your own research" implies—we should not underestimate the outsized influence of career bakers like Diaz whose self-appointed role is to further popularize and mainstreamize QAnon. Beyond the influence that popular bakers have exerted over their own followers through the process of compiling their "research" into more widely accessible and persuasive formats like videos, they have also exerted influence over the content of the Q-drops themselves. The anonymous poster known as Q has frequently picked up lines of reasoning suggested by QAnon bakers in a sprawling mimetic game of (re)signification.

Above all else, QAnoners are united by their cult-like dedication to what the Q-drops represent: a collectivized (re)authorship of the interpretive frames of reality itself, as dictated by institutions like the mainstream news media and the existing American political establishment. Given that the online QAnon conspiracy culture continues to seep into the real world with such dire consequences, it is more important than ever that we understand exactly how QAnon conspiracy propaganda operates. With this theoretical and political context established as the basis for my case study of early QAnon bakes, the rest of this article will proceed first with a discussion of how Tracy "Beanz" Diaz came to be a major player in early QAnon digital spaces and her potential involvement in the invention of Q. After a brief history lesson, I will proceed to analyze the dynamics of influence at work in Diaz's first viral QAnon video, while also providing insight into how it built off of pre-existing digital cultures that predate the QAnon conspiracy theory. In my conclusion, I will revisit the question of what this case study tells us about QAnon culture more broadly—and, in particular, what it tells us about the possibilities for intervention in this continuously growing conspiracy movement.

A Brief History of Tracy "Beanz" Diaz and the Early Days of Q

Tracing the development of baking as a QAnon cultural practice requires us to further explore the question of how Diaz herself actually began making Q propaganda in the first place. In a 2018 *Steemit* blog post entitled "She stood in the Storm.." Diaz claims that she created her YouTube channel prior to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. She began to gain traction by covering conspiracy theories that were circulating the infamous 4chan /pol/ board, including claims about Hillary Clinton's WikiLeaks emails and "antifa and child trafficking/pedophilia" (Diaz). One of her early (now banned) WikiLeaks videos reveals the extremist nature of her

political alignment, even then, as the description originally included links to Project Veritas (a controversial far-right media group accused of using journalism as a cover for less-than-legal activity[101]) as well as links to the official website of the Oath Keepers[102] (a far-right white supremacist militia group highly involved in organizing the January 6th riot). Through her WikiLeaks videos, Diaz helped contribute to the development of a proto-QAnon[103] conspiracy theory known as Pizzagate[104], which claimed that members of the liberal political elite (Hillary Clinton in particular) were secretly part of a "deep state" that ran a massive child sex trafficking trade.

Then, on November 3, 2017, a mere six days after the first Q-drop was posted to the 4chan /pol/ board, Tracy Diaz published her first QAnon video to YouTube with the title: "/POL/- Q CLEARANCE ANON - IS IT #HAPPENING ???". According to Diaz's blog, her video caught the attention of the moderator of the 4chan board "The Calm Before the Storm" (CBTS) where Q had been posting. Diaz claims that the mods of the CBTS board first reached out to her via email on December 19th 2017, and that they proceeded to collaborate on QAnon baking strategies and to produce three videos together. Although she does not name Paul Furber (aka BaruchtheScribe) or Coleman Rodgers (aka Pamphlet Anon) in her blog entry, we know

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[101] See reporting from Adam Goldman and Mark Mazzetti for *The New York Times*: "Project Veritas and the Line Between Journalism and Political Spying" 11 November 2021

[102] See: Jackson, *Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group*. 2021.

[103] See: Bleakley, "Panic, pizza and mainstreaming the alt-right: A social media analysis of Pizzagate and the rise of the QAnon conspiracy." *Current Sociology*, 71(3), 509-525. 2023.

[104] The Pizzagate conspiracy first came to national attention in December of 2016 after a 28-year-old white man named Edgar Maddison Welch drove more than 350 miles from his home in North Carolina to storm the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, D.C., where the Clinton campaign had previously held a fundraiser. He fired an assault rifle inside the restaurant during his attempt to "rescue" the children he believed to be trapped in the basement. According to Adam Goldman with *The New York Times* (2016), Welch had been consuming not only extremist material about child sex trafficking, but also a variety of other paranoid media such as 9/11 conspiracy videos and the far-right masculinized white paranoia peddled by the likes of Alex Jones.

from later reporting[105] that these are at least two of the 4chan moderators that she began talking to.

Together, the group began discussing the "confusion and problems on the Chans" according to Diaz's 2018 Steemit blog entry. Although she doesn't spell out all the problems in detail, she does indicate that the general theme of the conversation was the difficulty of distributing the Q-drops to wider audiences. As previously mentioned, 4chan and 8chan/8kun are notoriously inhospitable to average internet users. In addition to hosting disturbing content and having confusing navigation interfaces, the sites also have relatively small user bases that make them less than ideal candidates for finding new audiences. Additionally, Diaz's blog indicates that there was confusion over which Q-drops were "real" because people didn't understand how to use trip codes[106] to identify anonymous posters. Diaz confirms as much in her blog post, noting that the CBTS mods wanted "to speak to my subscribers about how to use the boards" in order to improve traffic to the site.

However, Diaz had another idea. As a creator from a mainstream platform (unlike the 4chan mods), Diaz seemed to understand the importance of expanding QAnon onto mainstream platforms in order to grow beyond the niche subculture of the chans, where other "insider anon" conspiracy tropes[107] had already lived and died—including FBIAnon, HLIAnon, CIAAnon, and

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[105] See reporting from Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins for *NBC News:* "How three conspiracy theorists took 'Q' and sparked QAnon" 14 August 2018.

[106] Trip codes are a unique series of characters, connected only to a password, used to identify anonymous posters as being the authors of prior anonymous posts on message boards like 4chan and 8chan/8kun.

[107] Zadrozny and Collins*:* "In 2016, there was FBIAnon, a self-described 'high-level analyst and strategist' offering intel about the 2016 investigation into the Clinton Foundation. Then came HLIAnon, an acronym for High Level Insider, who posted about various dubious conspiracies in riddles, including one that claimed Princess Diana had been killed because she found out about 9/11 'beforehand' and had 'tried to stop it.' Then 'CIAAnon' and 'CIA Intern' took to the boards in early 2017, and last August one called WH Insider Anon offered a supposed preview that something that was 'going to go down' regarding the DNC and leaks."

WHInsider Anon. Diaz claims in her blog that she personally "recommended we start the CBTS reddit board. And the Reddit was born".

It is hard to overstate the significance of the shift to Reddit in terms of how it supported the growth of QAnon culture. Rothschild also mentions Diaz and the shift to Reddit briefly in *The Storm Is Upon Us* as an important moment in the development of QAnon, suggesting that "Reddit was simple and welcoming to newcomers. And Reddit already had a robust conspiracy theory community" (38). The niche language of the Q-drops had already created a huge barrier to access, and the platforming issue with the chan forums only exacerbated accessibility problems and limited Q's potential audience. However, on mainstream social media platforms like Reddit and YouTube, QAnon promoters could not only grow their realm of influence much more easily, but they could also invite others into the process of baking through more user-friendly interfaces and mediums. Platforming QAnon on Reddit was a crucial strategic move.

It's worth pausing here briefly to note some allegations which have been made that Diaz's influence goes far beyond platforming QAnon, and perhaps as far as actually helping to invent the persona of Q. Despite her denial[108] of any involvement in the creation of Q, some evidence suggests otherwise. Take, for example, a widely shared spring 2018 video in which Diaz can be

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[108] With regards to accusations that she helped fabricate Q, Diaz writes in her Steemit blog post that: "There have been many charges thrown my way, and I can emphatically state that I have literally ZERO knowledge of who Q is, or who Q was or who he was supposed to be. I have not watched these videos about people saying that Q was taken over, or Q was hijacked, or Q was a different Q and then changed to a new Q who then became another organization, and on and on as the drama goes. I had and have no knowledge of who was or is behind Q. There was no secret handshake or pact with anyone. I CERTAINLY never "used" Q for money or to mislead people-- that is just utterly ridiculous. I was not in possession of some secret information that I never told anyone so that I could keep all of the Q glory for myself and "dupe" my followers. I have never claimed to speak with Q directly. I have never tried to investigate to find out who Q is. I never received any email about Q or someone telling me who Q really is-- all of that- all of those claims are all just baloney. There is no way for me to prove them wrong because I can not prove a negative. That is, in fact, the very reason why people have chosen those very things to attack me with. Because since they are untrue, I can not prove them. And since I have no access, and never had any access, to the back end of 8 chan or the chans in general, I have no magic information I can produce."

WayBack Web Archive of Tracey Diaz's Steemit blog post "She stood in the storm" (2018)
https://web.archive.org/web/20240408104915/https://steemit.com/drama/@tracybeanz/she-stood-in-the-storm

heard shouting desperately at Donald Trump: "We are Q! We're Q! We organized the whole thing!"[109]

In addition to this self-report, Diaz's involvement with Paul Furber and the CBTS boards in the early days of QAnon deserves scrutiny. The investigative *HBO* documentary *Q: Into the Storm* (2021) posits that Paul Furber was the original user posting as Q, lending some weight to the idea that Diaz may have played a role in authoring some of the early drops. Moreover, in February 2022, *The New York Times* covered a story about two teams of forensic linguists who used machine learning to establish with 93% accuracy that Paul Furber likely wrote most of the Q-drops prior to 2018 (Kirkpatrick). Strong evidence from that study also suggests that Ron and Jim Watkins took over the Q trip codes some time in 2018, and likely have remained in control of them. Former 8chan owner Frederick Brennan has argued that the Watkins must necessarily have been involved in the 2022 Q-drops due to site-wide trip code rotations (see footnote 18).

Uncovering some singular "true" identity of Q is impossible because the growth of the conspiracy culture around the drops was always a group effort. After the "Calm Before the Storm" subreddit was established, more and more people became involved with baking and distributing the ideas on other mainstream platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Despite having been accused of stealing ideas for her videos, Diaz fondly recalls this early period of QAnon propagandization in her 2018 *Steemit* blog:

> I researched them ON MY OWN. I did not take anyone else's research, and in many of my videos I stated that this was all open source information- it was freely available on the web for anyone to find. And this was the beauty of the Q phenomenon. The Socratic Method of asking questions and pointing people to research for THEMSELVES was an amazing thing to behold. It has awoken more people in a short amount of time than I ever

[109] WayBack Web Archive Copy: "Tracy Beanz - We Are Q, We Organized the Whole Thing" [video]

> dreamed possible. It was ingenious. It was brilliant. It was MAGICAL. And the best part? It does not matter who this "Q" was then, or who this "Q" is NOW. It really does not matter. What does matter? The connections we have made, what we have learned and continue to learn, and how we then apply this knowledge moving forward.

As Diaz indicates here, the practice of baking Q-drops caught on like fire after being platformed on mainstream sites. The central demand to "do your own research" proved to be an extremely effective technique to get audiences involved in the mass production of QAnon propaganda. In response to the open invitation for anyone to collaborate in decoding the cryptic posts, thousands of users began assembling their own "research" to support personal interpretations.

Conspiracism as a Tool for Would-Be Influencers

As more people were drawn into QAnon culture through baking, the amount of influence held by early bakers like Diaz grew into veritable media influencer empires. Online influencer culture, characterized by group worship around cults of personality, provides a uniquely fertile and profitable ground for spreading conspiracy theories. Because the status of an influencer is, by definition, about their popularity and not necessarily their expertise, successful influencers can position themselves as more trustworthy than institutional authorities by exploiting parasocial relationships, social proof[110], and the structural design of media platforms themselves.

[110] The term "social proof" was coined by Robert Cialdini in his wildly popular 1984 book, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion.* Social proof is the idea that humans instinctively look to one another for informational cues about how to behave, what to think, and how to navigate different environments. In other words, we rely upon constant external social cues in order to understand what is and is not real or true or good, and we tend towards mimetic repetition of those cues. Over time, widespread social validation of an alternative worldview, as in the case of QAnon conspiracy theories, can facilitate the entire (re)construction of one's sense of reality. It is uniquely difficult to address as a form of persuasion because it involves the participation of groups of people, and not merely individuals.

In her first QAnon video entitled "/POL/- Q CLEARANCE ANON - IS IT #HAPPENING ???", Diaz shows finesse in her ability to draw upon multiple rhetorical and affective strategies to influence her audiences. In a deft and subtle persuasive maneuver, Diaz introduces her personal interpretation of the Q-drops by introducing seeds of doubt in conspiracy culture more generally. Over a screenshot of a Wikipedia page on the Q-level clearance of the US Department of Energy, Diaz starts narrating the 36 minute video by explaining that she herself is not one of *those* conspiracy theorists:

> Now, as many of you know, I do not typically do videos like this. However, due to the very specific and kind of... eerie nature of what's been going on over on /pol/, I've decided that it's important for me to cover this. Just in case this stuff turns out to be legit. Because honestly, it kind of seems legit, to be honest. I haven't researched every specific point that's made… but… I'm gonna go through the whole thing. (0:20-0:47)

Her voiceover is soft, friendly, and measured in these first few moments of the video, and she emphasizes a kind of ongoing personal-parasocial relationship with the implied audience ("as many of you know"). Diaz also takes a moment to mention "Ed" by first name from The Outer Light YouTube channel by name and to encourage viewers to check out his video on the posts as well. By mentioning his first name, she not only signals her own belonging within this particular digital social ecosystem, but also produces the impression of an already-existing community among listeners and other creators. The mention of The Outer Light channel also lends more weight to her claims, as she assures audiences that she is not the *only* person talking about these strange posts. Each of these moves, made within the first 45 seconds of the video, help to affectively prime viewers and to establish a powerful social premise for persuasion.

By combining these social and parasocial appeals with an outward performance of her own doubt, she attempts to disarm viewers and curate a sense of authentic and rigorous shared critical inquiry. Naming the presence of doubt so immediately seems to get it "out of the way" long enough for viewers to suspend disbelief while they listen, and it also creates a false equivalency of doubt—as if it were equally as reasonable to believe in the doubts that Q raises, as it is reasonable to doubt that Q is real. By opening the video on the Wikipedia page for Q level clearance, she cleverly establishes a factual basis, or grain of truth, which she can use to exaggerate her own credibility and the credibility of the anonymous 4chan poster who claims to have "Q clearance":

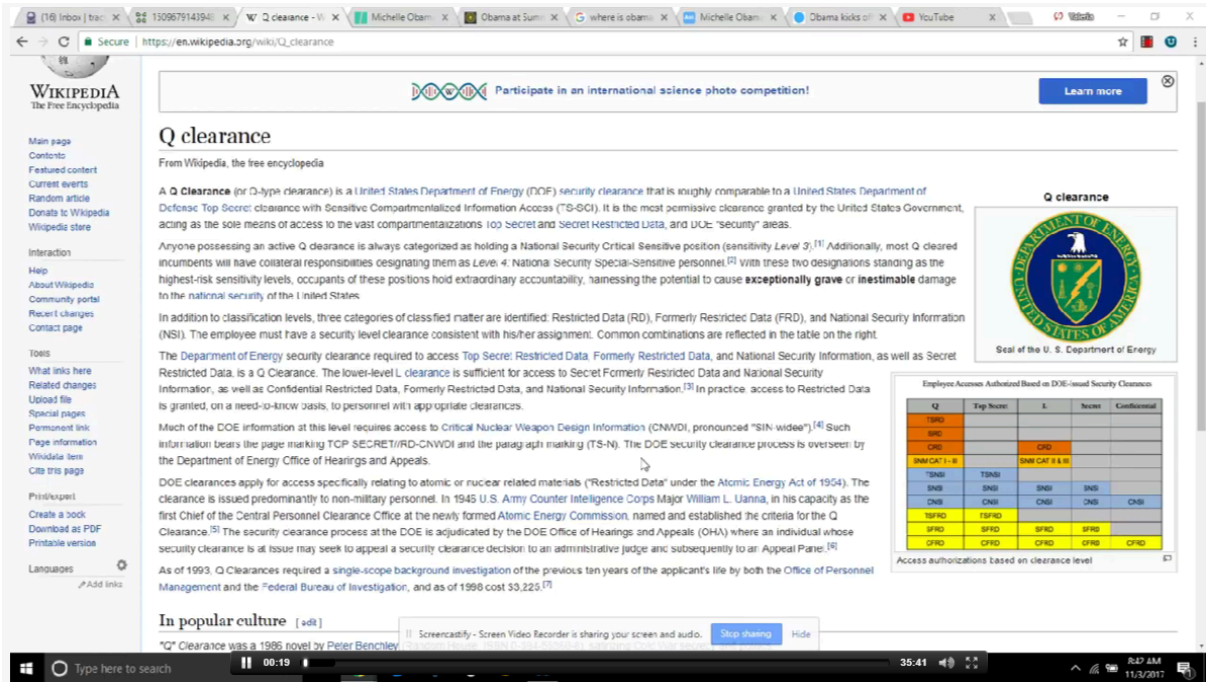


Figure 19: A screenshot ~19 seconds into Tracy Diaz's video "/POL/- Q CLEARANCE ANON - IS IT #HAPPENING ???" (November 3, 2017)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 19-second mark of Tracy Diaz's video titled "/pol/ - Q Clearance Anon - Is it #happening?" posted on November 3, 2017. Shows a Wikipedia page titled "Q clearance" that describes the United States Department of Energy highest security clearance.

In her narration, Diaz emphasizes the dramatic language of security and secrecy, cultivating a sense of national intrigue which mirrors earlier online conspiracy theories like FBIAnon. She explains that Q-clearance is "roughly comparable to a United States Department of Defense top secret clearance" and that it is "the most permissive clearance granted by the United States Government" (1:30-1:45).

With that grain of truth established as the dramatic but believable foundation upon which to build her house of cards, Diaz pivots: "With that in mind, let's check out this thread" (2:45). She proceeds to actually discuss the cryptic posts themselves, which had begun appearing suddenly on the controversial 4chan /pol/ (politically incorrect) board earlier in the week. The first post in her screenshot includes a phrase that would later become essential QAnon vocabulary: "Bread Crumbs - Q Clearance Patriot":

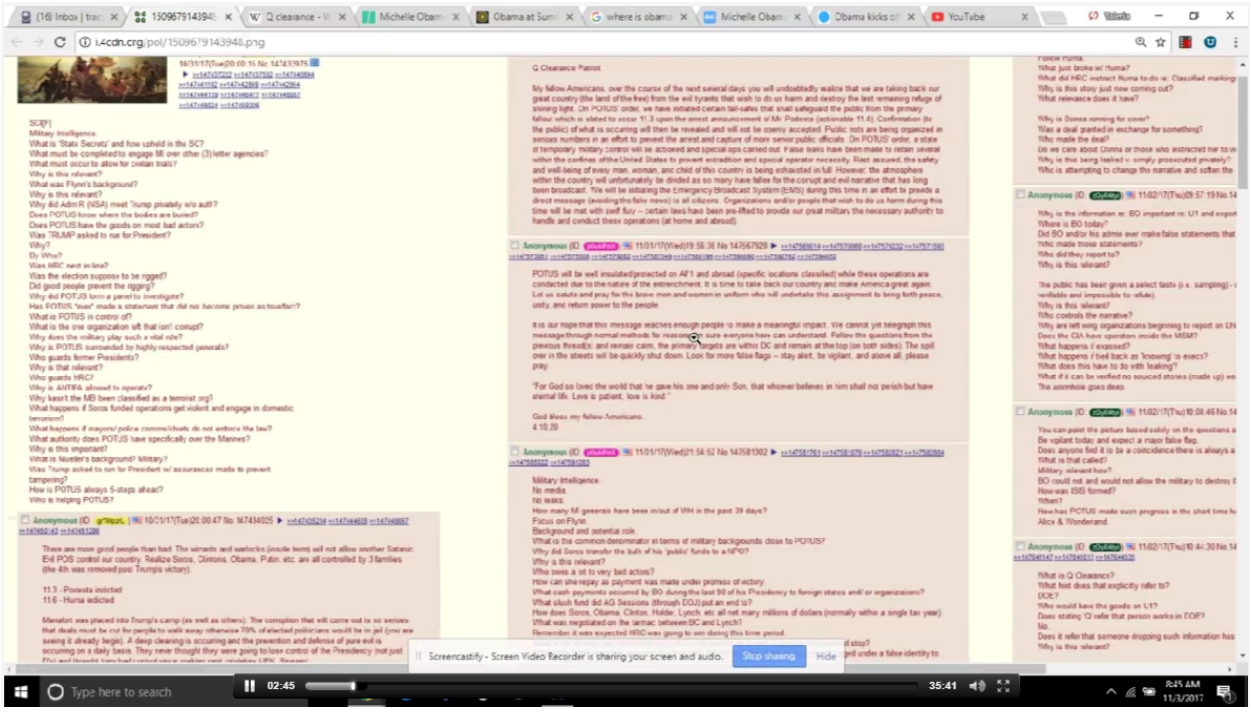


Figure 20: A screenshot ~3 minutes into Tracy Diaz's video "/POL/- Q CLEARANCE ANON - IS IT #HAPPENING ???" (November 3, 2017)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 19-second mark of Tracy Diaz's video titled "/pol/ - Q Clearance Anon - Is it #happening?" posted on November 3, 2017. The screenshot shows the first nine"Q-drops" and replies posted by "Q Clearance Patriot" to 4chan's /pol/ ("politically incorrect") board between October 31 and November 3, 2017. Diaz's screenshot is grainy and makes the small text highly difficult to read, but each of the nine posts clearly includes several long lists of leading questions, acronyms, code words, and other stylistic traits typical of Q-drops. Diaz's screenshot also shows that she has nine tabs open, including an email inbox, a Wikipedia entry on "Q clearance", and several tabs on Barack and Michelle Obama (including terms such as "where is Obama" and "Obama kids"). See body of chapter for transcription of key phrases from the nine Q-drops.

The 4chan post itself is formatted as a string of evocative, leading questions such as: "Does POTUS know where the bodies are buried? Does POTUS have the goods on most bad actors? Was TRUMP asked to run for President? Why? By Who? Was HRC next in line? Was the election suppose to be rigged?" Amid these leading questions, Diaz pauses to assert that the Trump presidential transition team did factually move to New Jersey a few days after a meeting with the NSA back in 2016 (03:45). She conflates this loose fact—a crumb of truth—with being exemplary of the veracity of all Q's statements: "I could go through each of these points and research them for you guys, but it would be very very long and I just want to get this out there cus it seems like it may be important" (4:15).

As I have already pointed out, the high level of interpretive ambiguity in Q-drops leaves plenty of room for amateur "researchers" to try to make sense of them, which encourages an ongoing dynamic of collectivized mimesis and crowdsourced meaning-making. Online folklore like QAnon does not have some underlying canon printed and living in a library somewhere; it grows and takes shape in the minds of its believers in the same way that information in a decentralized network is stored in fragments on many computers within a network. It is important to note here that political movements do not thrive purely on negative affects; it is also

necessary that they offer pride, excitement, and even fun. It would be prudent to understand the mimetic baking process for Q-Drops as being a game in the literal sense, in which online users are rewarded with gamified positive feedback (such as likes and comments) when they successfully combine information in a way that appeals to other players and fits within the greater QAnon folkloric universe. Over time if you become very good at the game, you can gain prestige and attention for being one of the best players. Despite its dark content, you would be hard-pressed to find a dedicated QAnon believer who doesn't sincerely enjoy the gamified aspect of solving Q's many mysteries.

This gamified component of the QAnon media ecology is a large part of why I emphasize it as a folkloric practice. In *Folklore and the Internet,* Trevor Blank argues that folklore as a discipline was an underutilized methodology for digital cultural studies given that "from the earliest moments of the modern Internet's existence, folklore was a central component of the domain, moderating the intersection of computer professionals with hackers, newfangled lingo, and the dispersal of stories, pranks, and legends" (2). In qualifying what "counts" as digital folklore rather than communication. Blank cites a definition of folklore from McClelland:

> [Folklore is] communicative behavior whose primary characteristics . . . are that . . . it doesn't 'belong' to an individual or group . . . and in the modern context therefore transcends issues of intellectual property; and [that] . . . it is transmitted spontaneously, from one individual (or group of individuals) to another under certain conditions, frequently without regard for remuneration or return benefit. As it is transmitted, it often undergoes modification, according to the inclination of the retransmitter. (184)

Like more traditional folklore, the stories that comprise QAnon seem to come from everywhere and nowhere at once, having been authored by everybody and nobody; they are a far-fetched mix

between faith and fantasy; they are about heroes and villains and morality and family. Plots from classical folk tales even seem to re-emerge, including tropes like witches or demons who eat children being transformed into adrenochrome conspiracies. Also similar to other racialized folktales of the past—particularly the anti-Jewish myths first espoused in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903), which largely informs QAnon theories—QAnon lore emphasizes the need to protect children specifically from non-Christians.

Tracy Diaz generally demonstrates a highly racialized set of influences in her baking and often seems to have a highly racialized (white, Christian nationalist) audience in mind. As I mentioned earlier, some of her videos have included links to overt white supremacist militia groups such as the Oath Keepers. However, she is not as explicit in her body of work as to outright claim white supremacist views. Instead, the white racial perspective of dominance is encoded through coded language, logical fallacies, ahistoric claims, and other manipulative rhetoric owing in large part to the racially charged claims of "Q" themselves. These views were obvious as early as the first Q-drops. In her first video on QAnon, Diaz reads a series of highly racialized leading questions from the Q-drop entitled "Bread Crumbs - Q Clearance Patriot" from October 31, 2017:

> Why is ANTIFA allowed to operate? Why hasn't the MB [Muslim Brotherhood] been classified as a terrorist org? What happens if Soros funded operations get violent and engage in domestic terrorism? What happens if mayors/police comms/chiefs do not enforce the law? (05:05)

Here, we can see longstanding white racial lore being brought into the QAnon conspiracy from the very beginning. The Jewish billionaire George Soros, perhaps the most recognizable dogwhistle on 4chan, is used to reference the anti-Jewish belief that wealthy Jewish people

secretly pull at the strings of power. The mention of "Soros funded operations" in close relation to leading questions about the Muslim Brotherhood, antifa, terrorism, and policing failures in this section, is meant to reinforce the notion that George Soros and other wealthy Jewish people are secretly controlling groups of nonwhite people in order to oppress and bring about the downfall of the white race.

The next Q-drop that Diaz reads from (also dated 10/31/17) includes the same motifs of secretive, evil elites, with the addition of a contrasting heroic figure: "There are more good people than bad. The wizards and warlocks (inside term) will not allow another Satanic Evil POS control our country. Realize Soros, Clintons, Obama, Putin, etc. are all controlled by 3 families (the 4th was removed post Trump's victory" (5:40). Once again, the implication seems to be that major political institutions (and liberal politicians in particular) are secretly controlled by Jewish people. While there are some debates among believers about which families Q is referencing here, the most common suggestions are the Rothschild family and the Soros family (although the Morgans and the Rockefellers have also been proposed). Additionally, the Saud family (the ruling family of Saudi Arabia) are also frequently brought up on Q research forums[111] as one of the three families supposedly working in coordination with the secret "cabal". Diaz does not challenge any of these claims, and instead lends them a serious tone meant to create the impression that these are messages to be decoded, but not to be debated in terms of their truthfulness.

The next highly racialized discussion comes up around the 8:45 minute mark after some jumbled posts about the military, Nancy Pelosi, censorship, and Robert Mueller—to which Diaz asserts "I reported on that way back in the day", another crumb of truth used to claim her overall

[111] Example QAnon "research" thread on the "three families" as mentioned (WayBack Web Archive Copy): https://web.archive.org/web/20201015000000*/https://8kun.top/qrb/res/2790.html#3533

authority (8:10). She then reads a provocative Q-drop that tries to position Black people as hapless political tools being used as pawns by the shadowy elite deep state:

> Why do Ds [Democrats] want to control black population? Why do they intentionally keep poor and in need? Why do Ds project racism on a daily basis against ours? Why do black elected officials do crazy talk on behalf of Ds? How do Ds cover the historical facts of forming the confederacy, the KKK, and oppose all things pro-black in regards to legislation? What happens if the Ds lose the slave grip on the black population?...The network which controls this false narrative which in turn keeps the black population under control is being dismantled. False local, national black leaders will soon be exposed as shills for the deep party. Follow the money. Maxine W(aters) has a $4mil home and cash assets in excess of $6mil, how is that possible? One example. All of these questions help to paint the full picture. (08:35-09:42)

In this series, Diaz helps validate Q's historic revisionism by endorsing the narrative that Democrats are actually the "more racist" party seeking to oppress Black people by weaponizing them to push liberal agendas. Here, again, crumbs of truth are twisted around to produce an alternative view of reality. The values of the Civil War era conservative southern Democrats, associated with the Confederacy and long ago abandoned by the modern liberal Democratic party, are trotted out as evidence of a contemporary antiblack racial agenda.

This historic revisionism creates a framework in which "false local, national black leaders" can then be presented as ill intentioned (or clueless) "shills" (a derogatory slang word referring to a person being paid to promote/pretend to believe in an agenda they don't actually believe in) carrying out the racist dirty work for white Democrats, rather than having their own independent agency and political goals. It also sets up a strong claim to innocence for the

Republican Party, coded explicitly as white through the operative word *ours*: "Why do Ds project racism on a daily basis against ours? Why do black elected officials do crazy talk on behalf of Ds?" In this formulation, both the Democratic and Republican Parties are implicitly and explicitly coded as having problems with racism and white leadership—and yet, the twisted rhetoric of the passage has twisted the conflict into one in which white Republicans are actually the group which is more respectful to Black people, and the Democratic agenda is actually harmful to Black people.

Despite its convoluted logic, this passage could have strong appeal to white audiences seeking a narrative that rationalizes why they are the true victims of racism—because racism is being "projected" onto them (as claimed in this passage), and because Black people would only agree with Democrats if they're being paid. Because of the coding of words like "ours", the audience of the video is clearly implied to be white conservatives, allowing for the imagining of a white community of like-minded Q believers bonded together in both political and racial kinship. The affective result is likely a powerful panacea to aggrieved whites who feel victimized by accusations of racism.

Of course, inaccurate historic accounts and leading questions alone are not enough to create a highly convincing propaganda video; there also needs to be a promise that confirmation of truth will come at some point. Around the 12 minute mark, Diaz reads another series of posts which claim that proof will be provided (her commentary is in brackets):

> This all has meaning - everything stated. Big picture stuff - few positions allow for this direct knowledge. Proof to begin 11.3. [which is today] We all sincerely appreciate the work you do. Keep up the good fight. The flow of information is vital. God bless. [And this is why I'm sharing this stuff, because, it's just, if this is a LARP, it's like… whew.. It

> gets so much better, here we go.] Think about it logically. The only way is the military. Fully controlled. Save & spread (once 11.3 verifies as 1st marker) Biggest advanced drop on Pol. Not everything can be publicly discussed because so much ties back to foreign heads of state. Much will be revealed, we want transparency but not at a cost we can't recover from. (12:00-12:30)

Diaz's commentary within this block of text adds an affective dimension to its interpretation that would not be lost on viewers, as her excited, exasperated tone and emphatic "whew!" emphasize the dramatic nature of the epic conflict being described. Much like a laugh track in a sitcom tells audiences how they're supposed to react to lines in a TV show, Diaz's highly dramatized interruptions inform audiences of how astounding they should find the information to be. She also actively dispels the claim that Q is a "LARP" (Live Action Role Play), exorcizing any doubt the viewer may feel by voicing it directly like she did in the beginning of the video. Additionally, she positions herself as having authority of knowledge through her ease with the highly niche lingo, indicating her insider status as a member of the 4chan/8chan community (within which insider anon trolls frequently "LARP" conspiracies, see footnote 8, as she references).

While I could continue through the other 20 minutes of Diaz's video for more examples, the format throughout the rest remains largely the same. The "research" she has supposedly conducted is extremely sparse, as the vast majority of the video consists of her simply reading aloud Q-drops and research threads posted by other anonymous users to the board throughout the period of time between October 27-November 3, 2017. She pauses between threads every few minutes to offer affirmational commentary typically in the form of anecdotes and minor real world facts held up as proof of truth for the whole statement; or else commentary about how she or another member of the conspiracy media ecology had previously covered an issue/conspiracy

brought up by Q in one of the posts. The overall effect lends credibility to her claims through the illusion of social proof—the idea that "everyone" who is "in the know" is thinking the same thing as Diaz, and so viewers should believe it so that they can be "in the know" too.

The last minute of her video demonstrates the strategy to a T. She reads a dramatic Q-drop, the last to be posted before she made her video, which once again promises proof of these theories will become public knowledge shortly. With a smack of her lips, she concludes:

> And that, my friends, is the craziest /pol/ thread compilation I think I've ever read in all my time of jumping around on /pol/. And it took a hell of a long time for me to get through, but, there is some craziness going on, I can tell you that… [here, she pauses to check Donald Trump's Twitter page after saying her phone is "blowing up"] …nothing too crazy, so we'll just keep an eye out. We'll just keep an eye out. Do what you will with this information guys, you know there's a lot of research to be done outside of the things we already know that have been going on, but… it's November 3rd, at 9:17am, and I guess if nothing happens, then this is the hugest, most detailed, amazing LARP ever in the history of LARPs. Or, this person really has a Q clearance [she laughs] and is really sharing this stuff on /pol/ and wants us to let everybody know about it. Make up your own minds. Buckle up, I guess. Talk to you soon. (34:00-35:41)

She makes several moves to simulate intimacy and connection with her audience here, addressing them directly using terms like "my friends" and "you guys", and saying that she will "talk to you soon". She also reminds listeners of her insider status as someone who knows 4chan well, is familiar with other trolling attempts from the past, and would therefore be capable of differentiating if this were a LARP like others had been in the past. She emphasizes how uniquely "detailed" these posts are, emphasizing how "crazy" they are and eagerly looking at

Trump's Twitter page for something "crazy" to tie back to Q—knowing that, for many of her viewers, Trump acknowledging anything tangential to the conspiracy in any way would be taken as evidence of its authenticity.

The overall effect of the video would be emotionally activating to most viewers due to the nature of the material and the mode of its delivery. As I've stated previously, leveraging affectively activating issues, encouraging the imagining of a community of some kind, and creating the impression of social proof are three powerful strategies that must be utilized in the art of effective conspiracy propaganda. Diaz accomplishes all three of these goals throughout her video, resulting in an end product that garnered hundreds of thousands of views, connected her to an ecosystem of other propagandists, and helped her to build a sprawling years' long lucrative media career and political career.

What her career as a QAnon propagandist demonstrates, above all else, is the importance of context in addressing the particular subcultural variations of QAnon that continue to arise online. QAnon's ability to achieve widespread appeal is the direct result of baking as a folk media practice that partitions the conspiracy theory into subcultures which reflect the particular investments of individual influencers and social groups. Thus, any intervention into the QAnon media ecology needs to meaningfully account for the many differences in ideology, social environment, and personal background that make people more susceptible to different subcultures of the conspiracy theory. Interventions must also go beyond the issue of disinformation, and instead must begin to address the intense affective attachments felt by many participants to both the underlying principles and the social ecosystem of QAnon. If QAnon draws people in by offering feelings of political empowerment, supposed insider knowledge

about how powerful institutions operate, and an experience of social belonging, then interventions into the QAnon problem must necessarily address these dynamics.

CHAPTER 3 - Class Consciousness or the "Great Awakening"? QAnon Meaning-Making and Joe M's Spectacular "Plan to Save the World"

"Have you ever wondered why we go to war? Or why you never seem to be able to get out of debt? Why there is poverty, division, and crime? What if I told you there was a reason for it all? What if I told you it was done on purpose? What if I told you that those who are corrupting the world, poisoning our food, and igniting conflict were themselves about to be permanently eradicated from the earth? You might think that an idealistic fantasy. Well, let me tell you a story." — "Q: The Plan to Save the World"

It is hard to say how many people in total have viewed the 13-minute video entitled "Q: The Plan to Save the World" first uploaded to YouTube by Joe M (aka @StormIsUponUs[112]) on June 25, 2018. Because the video gives such an effective soft sell for QAnon narratives, it has frequently appeared in "start here" sections of QAnon groups and forums, and has even been promoted directly by Q several times over the years. The last capture of the remastered YouTube version on the Internet Archive[113] dates to March 5th, 2019, with a whopping 4.9 million views—an astonishing number that makes it one of the most popular and successful pieces of QAnon propaganda to date[114]. That level of exposure is especially remarkable given that it was achieved *before* the major boom in QAnon's online visibility following the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, this metric does not include views from any of the countless reuploads on various platforms in the years since the original video was removed from YouTube.

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[112] List of his social media account names and follower counts. Telegram backup: StormIsUponUs with 25,306 subscribers as of February 2022. WayBack Internet Archive copies of @StormIsUponUs Twitter (dates available pre-suspension) https://web.archive.org/web/20221201000000*/twitter.com/stormisuponus

[113] WayBack Internet Archive: "Q: The Plan To Save the World": https://web.archive.org/web/20200921133649/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVeDKuHPDK8

[114] Although similar virality has been achieved by some of the more recent and well-funded QAnon propaganda films (like *Fall of the Cabal* or *Out of the Shadows*, both released in 2020) these later productions owe a significant portion of their audiences to the work of earlier bakers like Joe M.

In spite of this virality, Joe M has claimed[115] that he never has and never will monetize this video (or any of his other QAnon platforms) which is a notable departure from the usual self-promotion and money-making schemes of QAnon influencers. In his original video description for "The Plan to Save the World"—where he also recommends other QAnon influencers including @RedPill78 (Zak Paine)—he refers to himself as merely an "average Joe" fulfilling his patriotic duty to help awaken the sleeping masses to dark political truths. Unlike other early QAnon propagandists who have tended towards producing low quality videos that emphasize the active process of "doing your own research", Joe M's version of highly aestheticized DIY propaganda is decidedly more polished and theatrical.

To summarize it in a single word, "Q: The Plan to Save the World" is *spectacular*—both the vernacular sense and in the Debordian sense of the word. Debord famously argued in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) that the spectacle regroups "*fragmented* views of reality" into "a new unity as a *separate pseudoworld* that can only be looked at" (10). By pairing a series of fast-paced, decontextualized clips of real-world injustices with a series of equally fast-paced, decontextualized narrative proposals about how to interpret them, "Q: The Plan to Save the World" claims to make meaning out of all these fragments of suffering. Brief glimpses of decontextualized conflicts are thus regrouped into "a new unity as a *separate pseudoworld"* that presents itself as an accurate representation of the true dynamics of power and domination in

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[115] In his description to the remastered video, Joe M writes [original links replaced with WebArchive copies]:

"It's my personal choice not to monetize my platform for anything until the Fed is dead, gold backs our money and the Republic is debt free. Don't accuse me of taking ad revenue from these videos, I have turned off monetization.It's my personal choice not to monetize my platform for anything until the Fed is dead, gold backs our money and the Republic is debt free. Don't accuse me of taking ad revenue from these videos, I have turned off monetization. If you see ads, it's because of copyright claims on the music. I do NOT monetize these videos..
Not affiliated with Trump, Q or any intel source other than what is publicly available here:
Q intel drops: https://web.archive.org/web/20200921133649/https://bit.ly/2QUTFrb
Q proofs: https://web.archive.org/web/20200921133649/https://bit.ly/2FTZqPC
Also I am NOT JFK Jr or that coastguard dude. Just an average Joe."

society. The video should be understood as both a microcosm of our hyper-consumerist, media-driven capitalist society, and also as an ideological propaganda device which reassigns the systemic failures of capitalism to a limited set of political scapegoats. The overall effect is to redirect critical attention away from the structure of oppression as a whole, and instead to focus attention on evil individuals and secret groups whose elimination will supposedly restore justice.

Rather than making explicitly ideological arguments, "Q: The Plan to Save the World" attempts to persuade audiences primarily through affective appeals. After all, when stripped of its flashy production elements, the video offers no substantive evidence for its sweeping narratives. Instead, as the title might suggest, Joe M has recruited the format of action movie trailers to deliver the content of QAnon conspiracy theories—including visually dramatic HD footage, a compelling heroes vs. villains storyline, and a soaring musical score complimented by highly scripted dramatic narration. The theatrical production style of the video maximizes and weaponizes audiences' emotional activation in order to make them more open to political suggestion; and, as a result, these collective feelings provide favorable cultural conditions of possibility for the emergence of conspiracist mass politics.

My last point about the politically emergent qualities of collective feelings deserves further elaboration and clarification as to why this affective analysis is also a materialist analysis. In order to describe the materiality of collective feelings, I will use the phrase *structures of feeling*, which I define as collective affects which provide conditions for the emergence of particular sociopolitical formations. I adapt my definition in part from Richard Grusin's theories about radical mediation, and also from Raymond Williams' materialist theories of culture. As mentioned in chapter 1, Grusin argues that "mediation functions technically, bodily, and materially to generate and modulate individual and collective affective moods or structures of

feeling among assemblages of humans and nonhumans" (125). Certainly it is true that the mediation of collective affect within media ecologies like QAnon is exactly what drives the continued development of communications infrastructure online and political infrastructure offline. Because QAnon believers *feel* as if they are together, they can imagine themselves as a community online and they can organize themselves as a collective offline.

Raymond Williams makes similar observations about the relationships among collective feelings, cultural conditions of possibility, and materialized political formations. In *Marxism and Literature* (1977), he also attempts to define his use of the phrase "structures of feeling"[116]:

> ...the term is difficult, but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology'. It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt… not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. (132)

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[116] Other passages about "structures of feeling" from Williams' *Marxism and Literature* (1977) worth considering: "What matters, finally, in understanding emergent culture, as distinct from both the dominant and the residual, is that it is never only a matter of immediate practice; indeed it depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form. Again and again what we have to observe is in effect a pre-emergence, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named. It is to understand more closely this condition of pre-emergence, as well as the more evident forms of the emergent. the residual, and the dominant, that we need to explore the concept of structures of feeling" (126-127).

In defining the term, he writes: "The term is difficult, but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology'. It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt , and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences… [we are talking about] affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity" (132).

Additionally, "as a matter of cultural theory this is a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements, a social material process: not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as a social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced. For structures of feeling can be defined as social experience in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations…" (134).

Williams' notion of "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" provides a powerful lens for interpreting conspiracy cultures like QAnon which may seem, at first glance, to have little grounding in material realities. Although conspiracy media like "Q: The Plan to Save the World" does not accurately identify the root causes of systemic injustices, it does frequently identify real conditions of systemic injustice and audiences' real "gut" feelings about these conditions.

As Lauren Berlant suggests in "The Epistemology of State Emotion", this kind of negotiation of collective feelings is central to American political culture: "While the political sphere is not void of rational thought, its dominant rhetorical style is to recruit the public to see political attachments as an amalgam of reflexive opinion and visceral or 'gut' feeling (visceral, from the Latin *viscera*, intestine)" (47). So, although QAnon's claims are not true, they are felt as real by believers, and that collective feeling shapes material political arrangements.

Importantly, QAnon does not create entirely new structures of feeling, but rather works to activate and appropriate other pre-existing structures of feeling. Of course this includes the activation and rationalization of pre-existing collective attitudes of domination, such as white supremacy and cisheterosexual supremacy. However, perhaps less obvious is the way that this strategy appropriates and redirects potentially *revolutionary feelings* back into *reactionary politics*. QAnon narratives are often compelling to people specifically because they tap into real experiences of collective economic despair which arise out of deteriorating material conditions of life in the United States today. Joe M even states this explicitly in his video description for "The Plan to Save the World", where he claims:

> We realize that the problem was never Capitalism or Socialism, Democrat or Republican, black or white, Muslim or Christian. We know it was just very powerful criminals who

> had too much power and were crushing us under debt and asinine entertainment, Fellow slaves. It's time to buckle your seatbelt, recognize your true enemy, and embrace a new future that we all owe to the brave patriots who risked their lives to achieve this victory against the greatest force of evil the world has ever seen.

So, in a real way, what "The Plan to Save the World" specifically accomplishes is the redirection of emerging, felt class consciousness away from the culprit of capitalism as a system, and towards a false consciousness ("The Great Awakening") which identifies a specific, limited set of political opponents as the source of systemic injustices.

In other words, felt experiences of exploitation, domination, and alienation under capitalism pose an *explanandum;* QAnon offers an *explanans*—a Q-shaped answer to a existential question. By providing an explanation for feelings of political despair and economic dispossession, "The Plan to Save the World" effectively captures and transforms an intuitive, affective emergent potential for class consciousness into reactionary politics. As the video demonstrates, conspiracism that denies the systemic failures of capitalism must necessarily perpetuate historically revisionist and reactionary narratives about race, gender/sexuality, nationality, religion, etc. in order to conceal the real operations of power at the systemic level. The result is a contemporary reproduction of harmful historic mythologies which have often been used to rationalize violence against systematically oppressed groups.

Action Aesthetics and Narrative Technique in "The Plan To Save the World"

The major narrative frames of the video are demonstrated within the first 35 seconds of "Q: The Plan to Save the World", which opens on a *Punisher* style skull logo with an American flag background and the words "MADE IN THE USA" emblazoned in a golden circle:



Figure 21: A screenshot ~2 seconds into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 2-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Blue lightning bolts form a circle in the center of a black background. In the circle are the words Made in The USA, a Punisher style skull, and the American flag.

Smokey tendrils drift around the image as the sound swells, with a dramatic, sweeping stroke of orchestral strings. A somber voice follows, filtered through editing software that makes the tone sound more tinny and microphone-like (perhaps reminiscent of the original radio broadcast of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds*). The sound of the voice pans back and forth between the right and the left as the title screen appears: a large blue and silver Q with the words "THE PLAN TO SAVE THE WORLD" beneath it:



Figure 22: A screenshot ~7 seconds into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 7-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. An embossed gray Q is centered against a black gray ombre background.

The Q is illuminated briefly by a spotlight that resembles the opening sequences of many D.C. and Marvel superhero movies. The voiceover demands: "Have you ever wondered why we go to war? Or why you never seem to be able to get out of debt? Why there is poverty, division, and crime?"

At this point, the screen quickly flashes between a series of clips: a desaturated video of an unhoused person's tent pitched on a sidewalk; surveillance film of armed officers stepping out of police cruisers opposite of an SUV; stock footage of a shadowy black figure in front of a smokey gray room; dash cam footage of a person driving behind someone in crisis on the roadway. The voiceover shifts tone slightly and begins a different series of questions: "What if I told you there was a reason for it all? What if I told you it was done on purpose?" Here, the screen goes black and emphasizes only the text "ON PURPOSE".

A dramatic moment passes, and then the video shifts back into another series of quick images, including barbed wire, a tractor spraying pesticides on a large field, and soldiers carrying large guns in military combat: “What if I told you that those who are corrupting the world, poisoning our food, and igniting conflict were themselves about to be permanently eradicated from the earth?” (0:20-0:25). The last image in this sequence features an American flag behind barbed wire, at it is timed alongside the word “eradicated”:

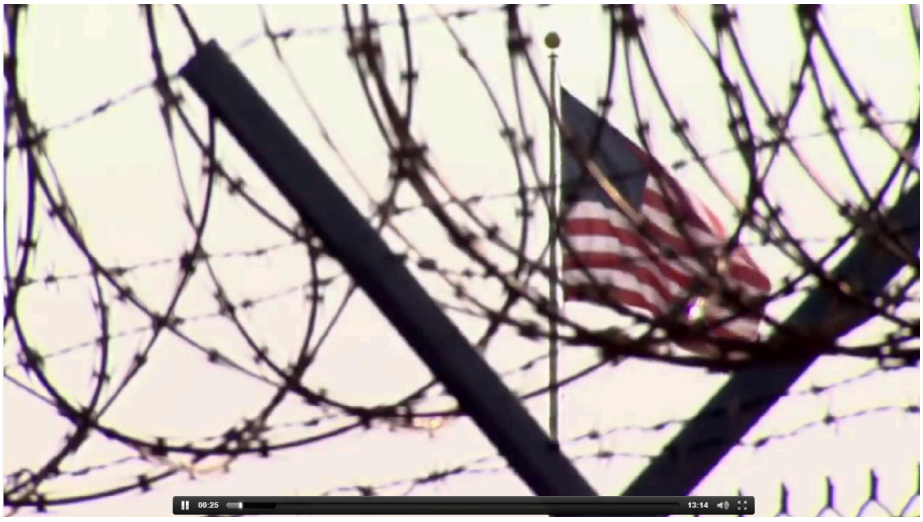


Figure 23: A screenshot ~25 seconds into Joe M’s video “Q: Plan to Save the World” (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 25-second mark of Joe M’s video “Q: Plan to Save the World” posted on June 25, 2018. An American flag is behind a close-up of barbed wire.

Following a minor, hopeful shift in the tone of the backing music, viewers are suddenly greeted by a juxtaposed clip meant to convey peace: a white, heterosexual couple walking down a beautiful beach with bright lights surrounding them:



Figure 24: A screenshot ~29 seconds into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 29-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Behind partial white bands of light, a man and woman hold hands and walk down a beach with water on both sides.

The voice suggests: "You might think that an idealistic fantasy. Well, let me tell you a story." A black screen shows for a moment and the music and voice fade out. The video and narration continue after a moment of pause at 00:35, but the intro sequence is "packaged" neatly by this black screen bookend the way any other trailer would be edited for dramatic effect.

This introductory sequence sets up a simple narrative structure of good guys versus bad guys that gives simple answers to complex questions. Although QAnon often claims to be a practice of research and "just asking questions", it actually requires believers to ask *fewer* questions about the organization of society than they might otherwise need to ask. For example, QAnon offers an answer about economic despair and capitalism's other failures without asking you to re-evaluate your beliefs about capitalism as an entire system, or whether you are its victim or its beneficiary. QAnon presents itself as political theory, but it often operates to actually

depoliticize issues which are fundamentally political. Child sexual abuse is presented as the fault of an evil group of Satan-worshipping politicians, rather than being the result of systems of power/domination that enable sexual violence towards those without power. This narrative does not require individuals to do any active interrogation of dynamics within families, friend groups, churches, or other intimate settings where sexual abuse occurs more commonly.

To return to Michael Barkun's argument in *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2013), "the essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil" which often leads to "an outright dualism in which light and darkness struggle for cosmic supremacy… not only are events nonrandom, but the clear identification of evil gives the conspiracist a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose" (3-4). Within QAnon, systemically-driven political conflicts and societal problems are viewed as an extension of a deeper battle between ontological good and ontological evil. In this way, outlandish conspiracy theories can actually be less demanding than facing the harshness of reality. It is easier to hate the villains and root for the heroes than to try to wrap your mind around the complex idea that you (and everyone else) are both hero and villain (and also neither), and that all of us are wrapped up in a larger system of power/domination. The social rejection one might experience as a conspiracy believer is perhaps less emotionally expensive than admitting that ontologically good guys and ontologically bad guys have never existed, but rather that an ontologically bad system exists and we are all trapped inside of it without a clear way out.

Furthermore, for those whose belief systems may be partially or fully at odds with their own material position in the world, conspiracy theories provide a helpful kind of cognitive dissonance. The hyper-visibility of the many crises of American capitalism in the media over the last several decades has made it increasingly difficult to rationalize a system that is clearly failing

to fulfill its golden promises. It is no accident that one of the largest QAnon constituencies can be found among white working class conservatives, many of whom are experiencing continued economic suffering and decline. Even though they may feel strongly identified with the values of capitalism and American nationalism, they may simultaneously experience the strong feeling that something in the world is very off due to continually deteriorating material conditions that make it hard to pay bills, feel fulfilled by a job, or even just watch the news before bed. Additionally, conservative news organizations are especially notorious for sensationalization and stirring up the rage of viewers, who find themselves in a constant state of agitation over the state of their nation without a clear underlying theory for why things have turned out the way they have if capitalism and nationalism are the correct governing values and practices.

So it is not an accident, then, that a patriotic conspiracy such as QAnon attracts and binds together those believers who place a relentless trust and pride in the American concept. After all, if you have invested their whole life, identity, livelihood, and sense of self into a patriotic American identity that specifically prides itself on the "innovative" and "proud" tradition of capitalism, then you are highly unlikely to identify the source of your material suffering in the material conditions produced by capitalism. If you never suspect the machine of capital to be the issue, despite the fact that you can see it has failed to produce the promised outcomes of abundance in your own life, then you must conclude that whoever happens to be operating the machine of capital right now must be the issue. This is a conveniently neoliberal idea in that it fits nicely into the logic of individualism.

This is, of course, the existing narrative already of the two-party political system, with the Democrats claiming the problem is Republicans operating the machine incorrectly, and Republicans claiming that Democrats are the ones misusing it. The result is a politically

advantageous situation in which nobody ever has to ask questions about their own side and the "good" and "bad" guys are easy to identify. Thus, what QAnon has accomplished is not the invention of a whole new structure of feeling; it has simply exploited an existing narrative and structure of feeling that has been used to redirect collective feelings of economic outrage towards one political party or another, instead of the entire system, for centuries. A conspiracy like QAnon is neither a random occurrence nor a glitch in how the machine of power/domination usually operates; it's a strategic steam valve used to let off pressure when the machine starts getting too hot.

The cross-sections of racism, religion, and patriarchy[117] that serve as the foundation for conservative economic beliefs (implicitly or explicitly) add another layer of complexity. If one were to acknowledge that capitalism is the problem, this would require acknowledgement that perhaps other belief systems founded in racism or patriarchy were wrong. A good motivation to not blame capitalism is because acknowledging it would likely lead to an acknowledgement of how it operates in relation to gender, race, nationality, etc., and by association would likely lead to a realization of oneself as a participant in those systems of oppression. Moreover, QAnon conspiracy theories often rationalize bigoted racial beliefs without necessarily announcing themselves as being explicitly white supremacist in nature; or, to be more precise, QAnon racism does not become overtly about racism until one has already consumed a large amount of "soft sell" propaganda that normalizes and builds up to the more extreme racial claims.

The fact that Joe M's "Plan to Save the World" lacks an explicitly racial claim is a design feature, since the video was meant to be a "soft sell" that introduces new viewers to ideas that will become progressively more extreme as they go deeper into the QAnon ideological conditioning process. Although it is not explicit, the underlying theory of "criminality" within

[117] See also: Bracewell, "Gender, Populism, and the QAnon Conspiracy Movement" (2021).

the video is deeply racial upon close inspection, as it plays up long-standing anti-Jewish conspiracy theories about secret Jewish organizations pulling the levers of power. The narrator carefully avoids revealing this underlying idea explicitly, and even includes surface-level language about how racism is wrong, in order to maintain plausible deniability and remain palatable to those who might be off-put by more overt racism.

Around 45 seconds into the video, clips of OJ Simpson, Casey Anthony, Martin Shkreli, and Elizabeth Holmes flash across the screen while the narrator introduces the QAnon theory of criminality and the so-called "deep state":

> We have all experienced criminals in one way or another. Criminals as we know are those who choose personal gain over the rights of others and have no regard for the law. But here's where you need to expand your thinking. Criminals can also succeed in business and politics, and can be elected as our leaders. If a criminal became the president, imagine what they could achieve… A criminal president could create an alliance with other criminal presidents, and then collaborate on more global criminal activities. Anything goes: drug running, human trafficking, whatever makes the big bucks (0:40-1:30).

As the narrator transitions into talking about political figures, videos flash of George Bush Sr. during a ceremony, a plane hitting the twin towers on 9/11, and various reports about John McCain and Barack Obama's corruption:



Figure 25: A screenshot ~1:15 minutes into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 1-minute and 15-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Five men stand around John McCain, including a man wearing a Palestinian keffiyeh. Reporting from New York Times (2014) states that the men in the image are members or associates of the Free Syrian Army. The text added over the image reads: "Have you ever seen these photos of John McCain hanging out with ISIS".

The dark music in the background continues to rise and swell. Short clips of 2-3 seconds each continue to flash on the screen: bombs dropping from planes, starving children, people sleeping on the street, police officers standing around a car, and the Sandy Hook Elementary school building:

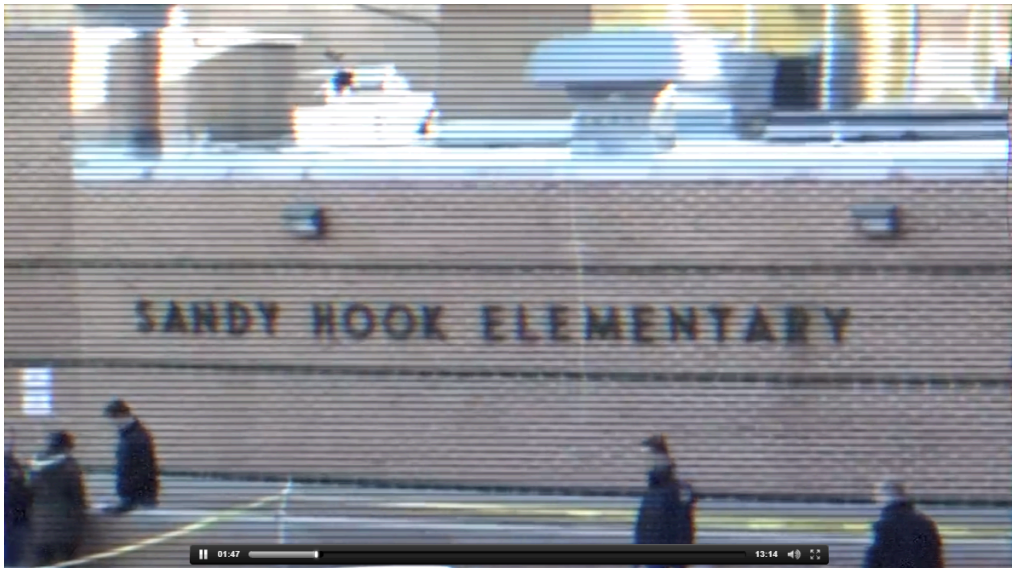


Figure 25: A screenshot approximately 1:47 minutes into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 1-minute and 47-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Shows the Sandy Hook Elementary school sign, with police walking around in front of the school following the shooting of children there in 2012. Sandy Hook "crisis actor" conspiracy theories were most famously peddled by Alex Jones of InfoWars, leading to a lawsuit of the survivors' families against Jones.

While these images flash, the narrator continues to tease out the idea that evil individuals are working together to harm humanity writ-large:

> The 20th century was turbulent with war, economic disaster, famines, and displacement. We have always accepted these things as just human nature and simply the way the world works. Something inevitable and due to the weaknesses of human nature that drive us to these actions. This is where we were all tragically wrong. You are not a criminal. I'm not a criminal. So how can we just assume that it is human nature that is driving all of this pain and misery? What if it wasn't human nature at all, but as a result of something more deliberate? (1:30-2:00)

As the narrator declares “we were all tragically wrong” the tone of the music and accompanying clips shifts slightly. The orchestral music becomes slightly softer, and clips alternate between crowds of tourists and children playing.

In my own reading of the video, I find that nearly everything up to this point is basically compatible with a generally anticapitalist viewpoint on the world. The video correctly identifies many ills in society, ranging from violence to ecological destruction to poverty, and it correctly identifies people in power (including politicians, corporations, etc.) as responsible for exacerbating these ills. In particular, the last claim that corruption and violence are not “human nature at all” but rather “a result of something more deliberate” could easily be imagined as the introduction to a critique of capitalism.

However, the next moment in the video changes everything about the narrative frame through a dramatic affective shift. It might be best described as a sort of red herring moment, or decontextualizing pivot, that redirects the focus away from systemic anticapitalist critique at the very same moment it becomes imaginable that capitalism is the problem:

> We were taught that capitalism was the cause of a massive rich/poor divide, and the reason for poverty, which in turn is the reason for war, crime, and starvation. Others were taught that communism, the system of equal wealth across all people, was really to blame for the mess. But you see, folks, it is none of these things. It is not our nature to fight and be racist. It is not in our nature to rob from others. What you must learn is that it was the criminals all along. (2:05-2:35)

Amidst this narration, a video of a young Bill and Hillary Clinton appears at the same moment as the narrator voices the words “criminals all along”:



Figure 26: A screenshot approximately 2:33 minutes into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 2-minute and 33-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. A young Hillary and Bill Clinton are shown.

This 30 second clip is an excellent demonstration of my argument from the introduction that conspiracy theories help to maintain power by framing decontextualized abuses of power in such a way that it does not necessarily lead to a deeper questioning or rejection of the current structure of power itself. The ideology of capitalism can survive false "awakenings" specifically because they prevent a deeper awakening or rise in true critical consciousness. In other words, if Bill and Hillary Clinton and a few other bad politicians and celebrities are the real problem, then systems of governance and economics themselves are not.

At this point in the video, Joe M introduces the promise that removing ontologically evil bogeymen from positions of power will resolve social ills without any other major systemic transformation being necessary. There is a direct tension between the individualistic logic of the

deep state theory and the evidence of widespread corruption that is being offered in the video at this point. The narrator informs audiences that these "criminals" include media figures, bankers, politicians, monarchs, entertainers, big pharma, and big agriculture among others; and, furthermore, claims that "nobody stopped them" (2:40-3:07). There is no acknowledgement of the seeming contradiction between the claim that systems are not the problem, but rather bad individual criminals.

Again and again, the video veers towards systemic analysis, and then drops back into the logic of secret organizations of evil individuals. It seems as if bringing viewers to the very edge of a kind of class consciousness and then back into the logic of neoliberalism is a strategy designed to maximize emotional activation and the feeling that the narrator is saying something true. The story being told by the narrator begins to echo anti-Jewish myths more and more closely starting around 3:15, when historic images begin to flash of men associated with the founding of the Federal Reserve and other financial/banking systems:



Figure 27: A screenshot approximately 3:17 minutes into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 3-minute and 17-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Black and white image showing dissolved overlapping images of men associated with the founding of the Federal Reserve and other financial institutions. One of the men appears to be J.P. Morgan, a financier and banker from the early 1900s (although, the image is a bit unclear; it could also be Nelson Aldrich, a Republican who influenced the founding of the Federal Reserve). The other man is clearly identifiable as John D. Rockefeller's grandson, David Rockefeller. The third visible man is not identifiable.

Over criticisms that could almost sound anti-imperialist, the narrator explains how this secret group of criminals gained their power:

> First, they accumulated the world's wealth. They invented a system of money called central banking which lends money to governments with interest, placing countries into eternal debt. Peoples' wealth got less, their wealth got more, much more. When a criminal is already as rich as they can get, then protecting their ill-gotten gains becomes the priority. Angry citizens tired of being poor are a major obstacle, and can revolt if they suffer enough. The criminals needed to prevent this. (3:15-3:45)

During this dialogue, images of politicians and the wealthy are cut between images of protesters fighting against police. The arrangement of ideas and images *feels* true, but upon closer instruction, the evidence is just a disorienting mix of half truths that are missing context. For example, the narrator correctly identifies the unequal distribution of wealth as a social problem, but then assigns this dynamic specifically to the world bank system and not to capitalism itself—despite the fact that the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few is the definitional dynamic of capitalism, which the video claims is not the real issue.

As explored in chapter 1, QAnon's specific focus on global elites who control governments through the banking industry is a distinctly anti-Jewish conspiracy theory with

roots in racist texts like Henry Ford's *The International Jew* series. The idea that racial and economic divides are actually the result of an intentional strategy by Jewish "elites", rather than an intentional colonial strategy advanced by globalized white supremacy under capitalism, inverts perpetrator and victim in the historic context of racial/economic domination—contributing to a distorted, almost upside-down vision of oppression.

The historical revisionism of the video becomes more pronounced around 3:45 as the narrator explains that issues of racism, sexism, economic repression, and other types of systemic dominance are actually symptoms of the global elite trying to turn people against one another, rather than symptoms of the arrangement of capitalism and power on a global order. Instead of being systemic issues that we all participate in (either as beneficiaries or victims), things like race and gender are reduced to issues which "they" are using to divide "us". By decontextualizing these problems, the narrator attempts to claim a perspective of neutrality on issues like racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression:

> So they diverted attention to the last remaining competitor: the people of the world. You and me. We were not happy being ruled by criminals and having to work three jobs just to survive. They know that we won't accept it. So they use their control of the media to set black against white, woman against man, young against old, Muslim against Christian. They convinced us we were the problem so that we would fight and destroy ourselves. (3:45-4:10)

The general impression of a neutral attitude towards race, gender, and class is given away by the choice of imagery and the distinctly reactionary claims which follow. As the narrator explains how "we" are divided by "them", footage from the Women's March and from BLM protests

flash across the screen, with the implication being that they are just confused groups of people being misled by criminals in power rather than groups with real issues to be addressed:



Figure 28: A screenshot approximately 3:55 minutes into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 3-minute and 55-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. A group of Black Lives Matter protesters are holding up signs that say "Stop Killing Us."

In addition to suggesting that protests for racial justice and women's rights are misguided, the narrator begins to wax on about "culture wars" talking points about threats to the nuclear family and the patriarchal arrangement of society. Over images of children playing, the narrator begins by claiming: "To get it done faster, they attacked all aspects of humanity that make us strong, like family" (4:10-4:15). Then, after showing the children, the video transitions to a graphic with two photos of Miley Cyrus meant to demonstrate the supposed process of intentional media corruption:

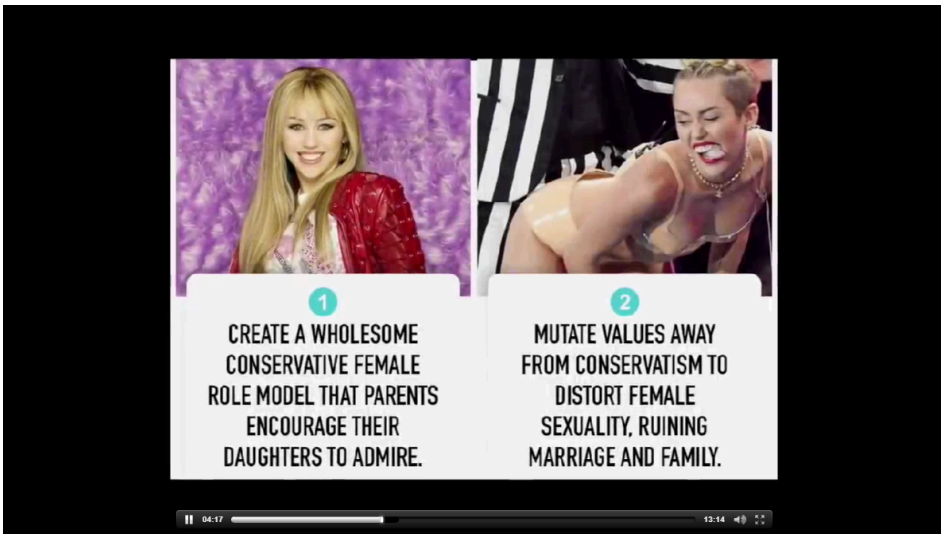


Figure 29: A screenshot approximately 4:17 minutes into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 4-minute and 17-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Left-side of the graphic image shows Hannah Montana with the text "Create a wholesome conservative female role model that parents encourage their daughters to admire." Ride-side of the graphic image shows Miley Cyrus in a bra, bending over, with tongue out with the text "Mutate values away from conservatism to distort female sexuality, running marriage and family." The graphic suggests that there is a conspiracy in children's entertainment which weaponizes figures like Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus to "mitigate values away from conservatism to distort female sexuality, ruining marriage and family". This connects to the broader QAnon belief that Hollywood/media elites are engaged in a conspiracy of child sexual abuse, and that mass media is used to normalize and enable the sexualization of children. Such a framing undermines the feminist idea that women should be safe and empowered to choose how to express their sexuality, and instead asserts that women's sexual liberation is a conspiracy.

The first photo shows Cyrus dressed as a teenage Hannah Montana representing "a wholesome conservative female role model that parents encourage their daughters to admire." The second image shows Cyrus in a nude latex bra and underwear while sticking her tongue out during her controversial 2013 MTV VMAs performance, apparently embodying the goal to "Mutate values away from conservatism to distort female sexuality, ruining marriage and family."

The narration over the image seems to suggest that female sexuality is responsible for a whole slew of social issues: “Using their influence over culture, they popularized lifestyle choices that led to a surge in broken homes, lost youth, and substance abuse” (4:20).



Figure 30: A screenshot approximately 4:24 minutes into Joe M’s video “Q: Plan to Save the World” (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 4-minute and 24-second mark of Joe M’s video “Q: Plan to Save the World” posted on June 25, 2018. Two adults are passed out in a truck, and the car windows are down revealing a small child in the backseat. The narration implies the adults are incapacitated due to drug use.

The impression of tragedy is heightened by videos of people passed out in a car (presumably after drug use) and a soft soprano voice crooning sadly in the background:

These kinds of distinctly reactionary claims against women’s rights and racial justice reveal that the deep state conspiracy theory is a more appealing explanation for the failures of capitalism to many conservatives specifically because this explanation is not in conflict with other values around gender, race, and power. Even though they clearly find certain types of anticapitalist rhetoric appealing—after all, the video is full of anticapitalist seeming rhetoric—they seem to feel differently about the “culture war” issues like racial and gender

justice which generally accompany anticapitalist politics. In some ways, the most appealing thing about QAnon might be that it offers a way for conservatives to voice their distrust and resentment towards the ruling class, without having to use the language or concepts of leftists who they find culturally unappealing (not to mention related perspectives on racism and sexism).

This emphasis on cultural conservatism is reiterated around 4:40, when the narrator offers characterizes what makes "good people" over images of US military aircraft and heteronormativity: "So where are all the good guys? Good people just wanna get married, have kids, make a living, and enjoy their liberty." Interestingly, the video pivots to a discussion of JFK as a historic "good guy" who, as the video implies, was assassinated by the "bad guys" because he tried to dismantle the CIA. The video editing seems to intentionally include a mix of both conservative and democratic politicians whenever showcasing heroes and villains in order to build up the impression of some kind of objective political neutrality on the part of the narrator. Despite being a Democrat, JFK still represents a whiter, more heterosexual, and more Christian version of American politics in the context of modern culture war.

Following JFK, the video moves onto Ronald Reagan, continuing to fabricate a timeline of secret resistance by insisting he was thwarted in his attempts to destroy the "criminal mafia" and "powerful rogue intelligence agencies" (5:20). After emphasizing how many great people have tried to resist this secretive group (including a suggestive news clip about the death of JFK Jr. and a clip of an attempted assassination of Reagan) the narrator introduces a key piece of QAnon vocabulary:

> These criminals are also known as the deep state, or cabal, because of how they control things from behind the scenes. Every president after Reagan was one of these deep state criminals, and their empire got even stronger. With each bad president, came new depths

> America and the world would sink. The world collapsed into darkness. Do you need me to tell you how? Destroyed factories, declining job numbers, sicker people, opioids, destruction of Iraq, Syria, and Yemen with pointless war, displacement of people into Europe, ISIS, terrorism, collapsed governments, poverty, and genocide. Total misery. (5:40-6:20)

The use of the term "cabal" specifically re-emphasizes the anti-Jewish undercurrent of the conspiracy theory. Given that context, the video's claims about the deep state must be understood as a "soft sell" of the idea that a secret group of Jewish bankers and world leaders are responsible for every social ill that plagues the USA, and the rest of the world by extension. Implied within this, too, is the idea that they must be stopped at all costs—a kind of self-rationalizing, violent logic of scapegoating that is uncomfortably similar to the scapegoating of Jewish people for Germany's economic woes following World War I.

At this point, there is a dramatic shift in tone. The music becomes more bright and upbeat, and it is paired with patriotic clips of the American flag, the troops, and General Michael Flynn (a known QAnon believer and fan favorite). The narrator asks:

> Do you think that was inevitable? Hell no. Well here is where things start taking a new turn. When the full picture comes to be known, it will forever be regarded as the greatest story ever told. Well here is the top line. Some good people still held positions of power. They valued humanity and the rule of law… the good guys were making plans of their own. The information age was coming to change history forever… an opportunity to put an end to criminal control over the world was emerging. We became connected, trackable, and surveilled. But so did they… It put them on a grid that, if accessed by the

> right people, would expose their crimes to the public and end their iron grip on us once and for all. (6:30-7:25)

New clippings about scandals from Hillary Clinton, Anthony Weiner, and Barack Obama are shown while the narrator explains how the information age will lead to the end of the deep state's many crimes—even going so far as to imply the creation of the NSA and military cybersecurity are a part of the effort to crack down on these criminals.

The focus on the internet as a medium for information also introduces viewers to the important role they must play in the "information war" as "digital soldiers" whose job is to enlighten and awaken other Americans to the epic conflict occurring in secret. At 8:05, the narrator speaks directly to viewers about "the plan":

> The good guys were devising a plan to reclaim the world from the cabal and return it to the people. It would involve alliances with multiple countries… It came down to two choices for America: launch a military coup to seize the government from whichever cabal puppet was in the White House at the time. Or, win legitimately, take control of the NSA, expose the criminals for what they are, and arrest them all. Obviously the first option would be very troubling for the public. With people still preoccupied with cabal-engineered social issues, they would likely revolt and hurt themselves and others. No, it would have to be the latter. (8:05-9:00)

With this, the video establishes an epic lore behind the election of Donald Trump to the White House and effectively appoints him as a representative of the good military guys working against the deep state in the background.

Social movements like the Women's March and anti-police brutality protests are once again suggested to be "cabal-engineered", while images of Kevin Spacey and Harvey Weinstein

being arrested are seemingly attributed to the work of the "good guys" rather than the feminist #MeToo movement. The highly fascistic concepts of a military takeover or a president using different branches of government to arrest political opponents are recast as necessary steps in the transcendental battle for good and evil, once again revealing the highly reactionary and authoritarian nature of the QAnon conspiracy culture.

After insisting that the odds were stacked against Trump due to fraud and corruption in the voting system (including electronic ballots in California in particular), the narrator states that "good patriots in the US military and their global partners asked Trump to run for president so they could take back control of America legitimately without alarming the public" (9:10-9:20). Inspirational string music and images of Trump hugging an American flag are shown while the narrator speaks to his good patriotic personal qualities:

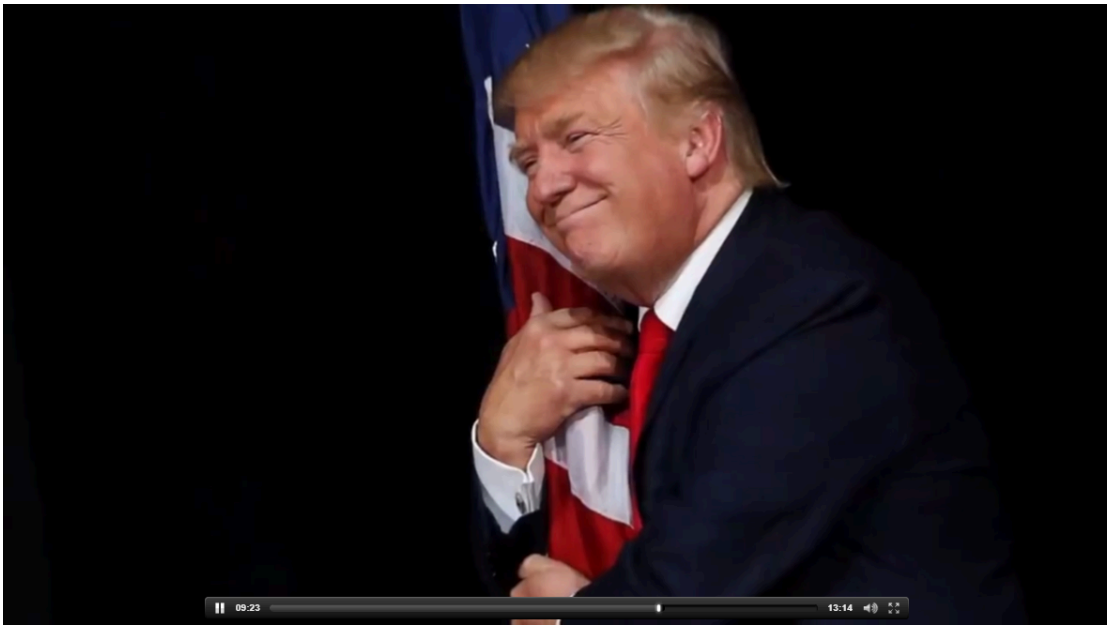


Figure 31: A screenshot approximately 9:23 minutes into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 9-minute and 23-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Donal Trump smiles while hugging the American Flag.

Of course, the narrator also takes this opportunity to offer a lukewarm explanation for why this particular rich and powerful man is not like the others: “He was not interested in joining the cabal because they hated America and he did not agree with them on that point” (9:30). His own power and control are decontextualized merely to the issue of loving or hating America. That point is driven home by images of liberal news media figures like Rachel Maddow, Anderson Cooper, Jimmy Kimmel, and John Oliver overlaid with the narrator’s claim that the deep state “activated their media assets to viciously turn on him. That’s when we saw the sudden hatred emerge” (9:30-9:45).

At this point in the video, the narrator starts to spin the media attacks and widespread public criticism of Trump as being evidence of the deep state’s attempts to unseat him and dupe him, but not evidence of any actual real underlying problems. The impeachment investigation into Trump is dismissed as an attempt to “frame” him, and any negative media attention on him is equated with participation in the deep state cabal (and their many crimes). Once again, the broad complexity of American politics is reduced down to a simple “heroes vs villains” story.

As the conclusion to the video begins building around 10:30, a series of highly dramatic military clips are interspersed with clips of provocative imagery associated with secret organizations and images of Trump supporters at rally, over claims from the narrator that Trump secretly defeated the deep state from using a nuclear arsenal in North Korea. The narrator insists that the first two years of Trump’s presidency have already massively improved global conditions as the result of this secret war:

> Our biggest global concerns are starting to recede and peace is returning. It is all evidence that the good guys are winning the war. But we are still in the middle. While a lot is improving, it still puzzles many that most of these known criminals are still free,

> especially the higher ups like Hillary Clinton, the Bushes, and Obama. That is coming in the next chapter of the story. (11:00-11:20)

Then, finally, after 11 minutes of preparation and emotional activation, the narrator introduces the QAnon conspiracy theory and the "digital soldier" concept to viewers:

> That's why we have Q. The good guys with control over the NSA began the Q intelligence dissemination program to invoke an online grassroots movement that came to be called 'The Great Awakening'... Q has been a fun distraction for those who follow world events and desire truth, but it is about to begin a much more important and necessary phase: keeping the public informed when the deep state war breaks out onto the surface. (11:25-12:00)

The narrator proposes that, as arrests of high profile celebrities become more common, QAnon believers will play an indispensable role in explaining to the rest of the public what the secret war has been about all along. Over images of (primarily liberal) celebrities and politicians like Maxine Waters, Patton Oswald, Beyonce, and Kathy Griffin, the narrator insists that the public will need QAnon believers' support in making sense of the terrible crimes of these evil-doers.

At 12:18, a title card flashes to show a word cloud of QAnon insider key terms, including references to specific catchphrases ("trust the plan", "expand your thinking") as well as QAnon-associated figures (Michael Flynn) and events ("Red October"):



Figure 32: A screenshot approximately 12:18 minutes into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 12-minute and 18-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Orange words form a circle around a Q. Some key phrases included are: "trust the plan", "expand your thinking", "Michael Flynn", and "Red October". The word cloud demonstrates the symbolic and linguistic density of QAnon's digital culture.

The image is seemingly meant to suggest the depth of esoteric knowledge held by Q and his believers, an apparent move towards some role of authority in the coming "storm".

As the narrator insists on the enlightened quality of Q believers, the screen shows a title card that reads: "THEY WANT YOU DIVIDED. THEY WANT RACE WARS. THEY WANT CLASS WARS. THEY WANT RELIGIOUS WARS. THEY WANT POLITICAL WARS. FOR GOD AND COUNTRY -- LEARN. STAY STRONG. STAY TOGETHER" (12:20). As the music swells to a fever pitch and patriotic clips flash across the screen, the narrator summarizes the claims of the video yet again:

> We realize that the problem was never capitalism or socialism, Democrat or Republican, black or white, Muslim or Christian. We know it was just very powerful criminals who had too much power. Fellow slaves, it's time to buckle your seatbelt, recognize your true enemy, and embrace a new future that we all owe to the brave patriots who risked their lives to achieve this victory against the greatest force of evil this world has ever known. (12:25-12:56)

Lightning sound and visual effects crackle across the screen right as the narrator concludes the words "has ever known". Then, a title screen with the phrase "Q Trust the Plan" and Joe M's @StormIsUponUs Twitter handle appears as the narrator reads "God bless America" (13:01). Another title screen with the American flag Punisher logo follows, along with the words"god will judge our enemies / we will arrange the meeting" and an ominous title claiming that "PAIN IS COMING":

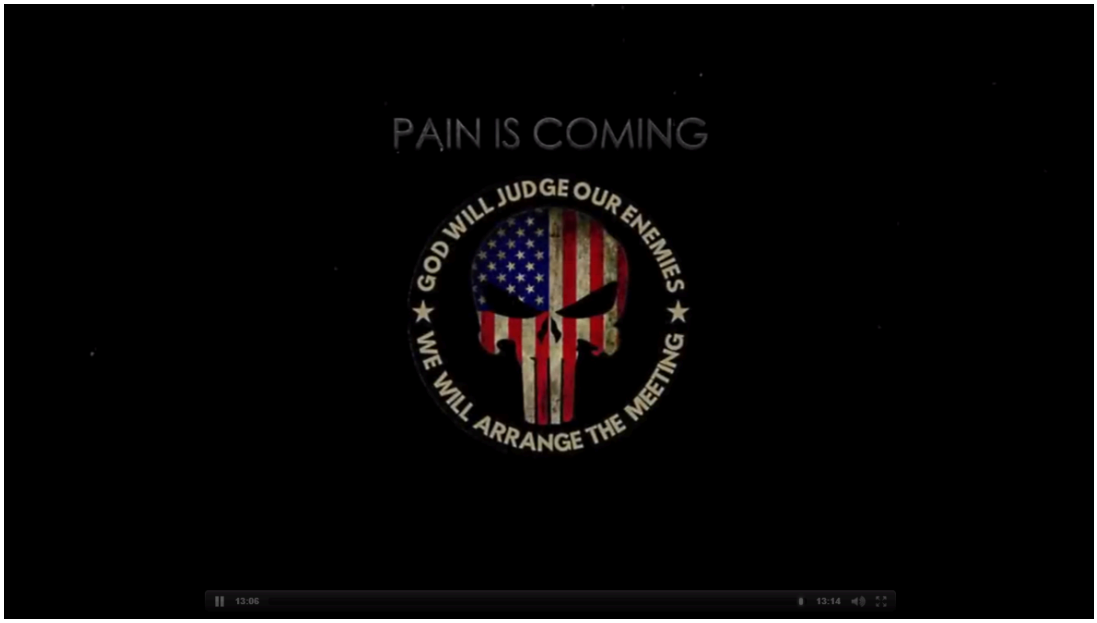


Figure 33: A screenshot approximately 13:06 minutes into Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018)

Alt text: Screenshot at the 13-minute and 6-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. A Punisher-style skull patterned with the American Flag centered against black background. Text above it reads: "Pain is coming". Text forming a circle around the skull reads: "God will judge our enemies / we will arrange the meeting".

Ater this warning, the video fades out along with the music to reveal only a black screen with the QAnon hashtag #WWG1WGA ("where we go one we go all).

Overall, the narrative of the video is one in which all systemic political struggles are decontextualized in favor of a reductive heroes vs. villains narrative that doesn't require believers to necessarily do deeper political or ideological reflection, and in fact encourages adherence to reactionary attitudes about race, class, gender/sexuality, and nationality among other things. As a worldview, QAnon promises believers that removing ontologically evil bogeymen from positions of power will resolve social ills without other major systemic transformation being necessary. Within this framework, if bad things happen in the world, it's because a secret group of bad individuals are working together to create that outcome—rather than social ills being the product of a system like capitalism or an institution like the state.

Taken to its extreme conclusion, the ultimate message of *The Plan to Save the World* is that violence against those presumed to be responsible for these conditions is a rational, justified, and even inevitable outcome. By stoking collective feelings of dispossession, victimization, and righteous rage, online QAnon propaganda like this effectively provides conditions for the emergence of extremist political actions and movements in the material world. Recognizing and accounting for these affective dimensions of the QAnon media ecology is a necessary step in understanding how this conspiracy culture has achieved such mass appeal and political utility, and what we can do to stop it from gaining even more influence.

CONCLUSION - Truth and Power: Conspiracism as a Counter-Revolutionary Conceptual Structure

Paranoid politics and conspiracism have grown to become structurally integral to contemporary right-wing American nationalist movements, including white nationalism and Christian nationalism. More concerning, however, is the fact that conspiracy-style structural misrepresentation offers itself as a potential tool of fascism—as a style for manipulating truth, identifying enemies to be eliminated, and crushing potential ideological dissent.

It seems likely that, as long as these material conditions of oppression and crisis persist, paranoid conspiracism will persist in reaction to those conditions. There will always be a need for a red herring, for some explanation other than the one right in front of our faces. As Douglas et al. point out in "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories" (2017), research suggests that when people are exposed to "threats to the legitimacy of their social system… the deleterious effects of these threats on satisfaction with the status quo" may be "eliminated" if they are "also exposed to conspiracy theories" (541). In this way, conspiracism may be deeply counter-revolutionary, as the material realities of oppression can be co-opted, twisted, and turned by narrative—even to the point that justice movements themselves might be cast as conspiracies designed to unfairly target those like Donald Trump who, in reality, hold immense systemic/historic power.

My research has tried to answer many questions: how do our social environments and political entanglements drive our perceptions of what is real and what is not? Why are paranoid affects and conspiracy theories such effective tools for right-wing politics? How are those tools being weaponized during the digital age? And what can, or should, be done about it? In the end, my answer is decidedly uncomplex: to address (or even prevent) the continued outgrowth of reactionary conspiracy cultures like QAnon within the United States, we must start by telling more truthful stories about the nation itself.

Conspiracy theories are narratives about who does and does not have power, and how they choose to use it; however, they often are not accurate reflections of how power has been arranged. The real conspiracies driving abuse and exploitation in our society are white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. Thus, the lack of a serious, widely understood historical materialist account of power within mainstream American culture is partially to blame for phenomena like QAnon.

This kind of widespread trained ignorance, built upon centuries of false nationalist propaganda, continuously provides conditions for the emergence of right-wing conspiracism. Research clearly shows that a key driver of conspiracism is the search for epistemic truth:

> Finding causal explanations for events is a core part of building up a stable, accurate, and internally consistent understanding of the world (Heider, 1958). Specific epistemic motives that causal explanations [conspiracy theories] may serve include slaking curiosity when information is unavailable, reducing uncertainty and bewilderment when available information is conflicting, finding meaning when events seem random, and defending beliefs from disconfirmation (Douglas et al. 538).

In the world today, many people are seeking a deeper understanding of the problems of the world around them; however, centuries of relentless distortion of truth through nationalistic, often highly racialized storytelling has led to confusion and uncertainty in the search for truth.

Ideologically driven conspiracy theories may be an unavoidable outcome in such a context. How can we expect Americans to develop an accurate understanding of problems caused by the abuse of power—systemic problems like widespread poverty, exploitation, and violence—when our media, schools, and mainstream political discourse constantly and intentionally fail to identify capitalism, patriarchy, and colonial white supremacy as the

underlying structures fueling these patterns of destruction and abuse? How should Americans understand a problem like poverty, without understanding capitalism? How should they understand sex abuse without understanding patriarchy? Racial inequalities without racism?

Reactionary conspiracism is a product of contemporary American capitalism that cannot be addressed within a vacuum without serious anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-revisionist transformation within the United States. Rather than being a phenomenon that emerges purely from the new media context, it is a cultural and historical reaction against attempted reforms that must be treated as a serious political crisis.

As Wendy Chun writes in *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (2006): "power now operates through the coupling of control and freedom" in the way we use and are used by the technologies around us (1). This relation contributes to a broadly felt paranoia, which Chun argues "stems from the reduction of political problems into technological ones—a reduction that blinds us to the ways in which those very technologies operate and fail to operate" (3). In other words, the recent rise of reactionary conspiracy theories are not just a problem of technology; they are a deeper political and historical problem. And, in my reading, they emerge in large part as the result of high control societies masquerading as "free" (through free-market logic) in the specific neoliberalized context of US economics, politics, and culture.

Neoliberal market values are an epistemic infection to our culture, education, and media within the United States today, selling us the concept of our own freedom as a method of control. But conspiracism and paranoia thrive in contexts where people lack a coherent theory or explanation for how the world is organized around us, and the neoliberal conception of everything as a matter of the individual leads more easily towards conspiracist-style explanations of good guys and bad guys, as opposed to systemic accounts of power/domination.

As Jameson reminds us: “always historicize!” One approach to meeting the challenge of a growing conspiracy culture is the integration of critical media literacy with the practice of historical materialism. Incorporating historical materialism into critical media literacy as a grounding practice goes beyond “fact-checking” individual pieces of information, and towards the re-establishment of a broader conceptual framework for investigating epistemological and political questions. There are deep historical and material contexts to the legitimate questions of truth, injustice, and authority which often lead people down the path of conspiracy theories. Conspiracism and authoritarianism both thrive when major societal institutions (including education, media, news, and politics) actively erase these contexts from popular consciousness as a method of social control.

Terrible things *do* happen in the world. Sex trafficking, corrupt politicians and wealthy elites, and child abuse—a few of the terrible things that figure so centrally into the QAnon worldview—are real problems, although not in the way or for the reasons that QAnon claims. The problem of interpretation arises when those terrible things are decontextualized from the specific systems of power/domination which structure broad patterns of oppression, abuse, and exploitation. How could a person understand the issue of sex trafficking without understanding patriarchy, capitalism, and racism? How to interpret corruption of politicians or wealthy elites without understanding the relationship between the ruling classes and the oppressed classes? How could we understand child abuse without understanding how our culture and institutions enable abuse as a method of control?

Once we find our way back to our embeddedness within a historical and systemic context, these kinds of societal problems (and their underlying root causes) start to make sense—and alternative forms of sense-making are no longer needed. But this still begs the

question: if QAnon's folk media culture holds up a mirror to our whole society, then what does it show us?

True believers of Q may be right about at least one thing: the narrative war may very well be the key field of battle upon which the struggle for our collective future will be waged.

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APPENDIX A - LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1

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APPENDIX B - ALT TEXT FOR ALL FIGURES

Chapter 1

Figure 1: Screenshot of Q-Drop #3906 (28 March 2020) 13

Alt Text: A jumbled wall of text, including emphatic punctuation (!!!!), leading statements ("Decide for yourself (be free from outside opinion)") and QAnon acronyms (such as WWG1WGA). These stylistic choices are typical of Q-drops. In full, the text reads:
>Decide for yourself (be free from outside opinion).
>Decide for yourself (be objective in your conclusions).
>Decide for yourself (be true in your own beliefs).
>Decide for yourself (be open to following the facts).
>Decide for yourself (be strong in defending your beliefs).
>Decide for yourself (be resistant to blindly accepting fact-less statements).
Those who attack you.
Those who mock you.
Those who cull you.
Those who control you.
Those who label you.
Do they represent you?
Or, do they represent themselves (in some form)?
Mental Enslavement.
The Great Awakening ('Freedom of Thought'), was designed and created not only as a backchannel to the public (away from the longstanding 'mind' control of the corrupt & heavily biased media) to endure future events through transparency and regeneration of individual thought (breaking the chains of 'group-think'), but, more importantly, aid in the construction of a vehicle (a 'ship') that provides the scattered ('free thinkers') with a 'starter' new social-networking platform which allows for freedom of thought, expression, and patriotism or national pride (the feeling of love, devotion and sense of attachment to a homeland and alliance with other citizens who share the same sentiment).
When 'non-dogmatic' information becomes FREE & TRANSPARENT it becomes a threat to those who attempt to control the narrative and/or the stable.
When you are awake, you stand on the outside of the stable ('group-think' collective), and have 'free thought'.
"Free thought" is a philosophical viewpoint which holds that positions regarding truth should be formed on the basis of logic, reason, and empiricism, rather than authority, tradition, revelation, or dogma.
When you are awake, you are able to clearly see.
The choice is yours, and yours alone.
Trust and put faith in yourself.
You are not alone and you are not in the minority.
Difficult truths will soon see the light of day.
WWG1WGA!!!
Q"

Figure 2: Screenshot of QResear.ch Homepage (April 2024) 45

Alt Text: QResear.ch's simple web interface featuring eight different tabs sorted by type of QAnon source material, as well as a search bar. The homepage reads "QResear.ch - The 8chan/8kun QResearch Board Search… allows you to search through 24,829,219 documents from 51

#Qanon-related data sources - at once! There is no advertising or tracking on this site! Nothing is loaded from another domain! Your ability to research with privacy is my goal! WWG1WGA!" The navigation panel at the top of the page includes seven types of archival sources for users to explore. While the latter tabs ("Q Posts", "Resignations", "Indictments", "Arrests", "Deaths", and "Executive Orders") are mostly archives of "primary" Q sources, including posts made by the anonymous 4chan/8kun user "Q", police statistics and links to criminal records, copies of legal documents, and/or news reporting (of varying quality in source material), the "Notables" tab differs from the other ones.

Figure 3: Screenshot of thread: "Q Research General #23735: Emergency Ani-Bake" 49

Alt Text: A crowded thread of green text on a red background, with post numbers corresponding to individual lines and titles. The ideas in the titles are extremely choppy, littered with acronyms and vague references to political figures like Biden, DeSantis, and Trump. Full text reads:
"23734 >>19325353
>>19325365 Patty McMurray: Michigan Police Find TENS OF THOUSANDS of Fake Registrations, Theorize Of Democratic "Multi-State Operation" To Rig Elections from 2020
>>19325393, >>19325478 Is This the Technocracy's Hidden Ace in the Global Anti-Meat Agenda?
>>19325409 Tera Dahl on Bannon re Slave Trade at the Southern Border
>>19325439 Trump in NH
>>19325474 Former African Union Ambassador to the U.S. Arikana Chihombori-Quao (@HEDrArikana) EXPLODES, wonders why France remains a member of the UN Security Council while committing atrocities in Africa,
>>19325481 Macron Depression: Globalist Leader Survives Many Crises, While French Influence Collapses in Africa
>>19325490 Trump is about to unleash his FULL subpoena power…
>>19325511 TRANS LAWMAKER HIT WITH CAMPAIGN COMPLAINT IN MONTANA
>>19325528 A Very Specific Set of Traits – Melania Trump, The Steadfast Rock
>>19325579, >>19325619, >>19325631 Next batch of Covid fear pron - variant ERIS or EG.5
>>19325547, >>19325596 Reminder: Uranium 1 rundown from 2018
>>19325652 Aborted babies are used to develop vaxxes - video
>>19325670 PDJT: J6 Unselect Committee got rid of EVERYTHING!
>>19325686, >>19325698 The Capitol Hill Tapes - Epoch Times was given access, "WE PUBLISH THIS FRIDAY"
>>19325723, >>19325756 PDJT: I was extremely respectful of Sloppy Chris Christie today in New Hampshire…
>>19325733 "FEC Reports Just 22 DeSantis Donors in Iowa."
>>19325747 Western officials losing faith in Ukraine's military – CNN
>>19325772, >>19325835, >>19325948 PDJT: A MUST WATCH! [Hitler parody with DeSantis as Hitler]
>>19325785 PDJT: So now that I have full Subpoena Power…
>>19325802, >>19325807 Trump Is Right. Mitch McConnell And Elaine Chao Spent Decades Getting 'Rich On China'
>>19325828 Anon: Who financed J6?
>>19325837 PDJT rt's Poso's Truth about Ray Epps
>>19325849, >>19325863, >>19325885, >>19325903 Texas woman was mowing the grass when a snake and hawk attacked her from above - comms or true or both?
>>19325858 O'Reilly reveals new information involving the Biden family corruption, media coverage of Donald Trump
>>19325890 Joe Biden adds two wonders to the seven wonders of the world

>>19325905 LIVE police chase in LA
>>19326126 Newsom administration muzzled Fresno Co. disclosure of Reedley COVID lab
>>19326138, >>19326149, >>19326152 INNOVATION 2023 - 2025 - THE B.I.S AGENDA
>>19326163 #23734

Figure 4: Screenshot of "STORM IS HERE" (excel sheet) 52

Alt Text: A spreadsheet with many thousands of rows and dozens of columns, sorting Q-drops mainly by core questions and corresponding "answers" (interpretations) by Q researchers. For a text-accessible web version, see Web.Archive copy.

Figure 5: Screenshot of a February 2024 Holocaust-denial reply to a /QResearch/ thread 76

Alt Text: An anonymous forum post with a red background, featuring a yellow graphic of a snake severed into many pieces with the phrase "Join or 404". The text recounts a conspiracy theory that the atrocities of the Holocaust were "fabricated" through Hollywood/media by Jewish people . Many anti-Jewish slurs and ideas are invoked. The text reads:
">>20369885
I read something recently which stated that after WWII ended, the autobiographies of all the big names like Churchill, Eisenhower, Generals ..they never mentioned the "Holocaust".
It wasn't until the 1960's that the Jews started pushing the Holocaust.
Through the Jewish MSM and Jewish Hollywood making a zillion movies and TV series about it for the last 50 years.
This year there is another Holocaust movie, and a couple of TV shows like Hunters which fabricates wild stories Nazi "atrocities".
The Jewish Kabal have succeeded in warping the world into thinking that "Nazi" Germans (Christians) are the utmost evil, and that ONLY the Jews' lives matter because Holocaust Permanent Victim.
Even though WWII Ended78 YEARS Ago, the relentless propaganda has kept their Victim Card alive.
Along with the 68 Holocaust Museums in the US, where all school children (mostly Gentiles) are taken to be indoctrinated in the Jews-Can-Do-No-Wrong Dictatorship."
At the bottom of each post on this forum, a disclaimer appears: "Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text, media, or otherwise - do not necessarily reflect the views of the 8kun administration."

Figure 6.1: Screenshot of Q's reply on Nov 1, 2017 within his original Oct 31, 2017 thread 78

Alt Text: A reply thread within the initial Q-drop dated 31 October 2017. Reply is dated 1 November 2017 (see Web.Archive copy). The text reads:
"Why do D's want to control the black pop?
Why do they intentionally keep poor and in need?
Why do D's project racism on a daily basis against R's?
Why do black elected officials do the crazy talk on behalf of D's?
How do D's cover the historical facts of forming the confederacy, KKK, and oppose all things pro black re: legislation?
What happens if D's lose the slave grip on the black pop?
Why do D's, through the funding of the CIA, prop up and install Hollywood/media assets?
Does this fall within Operation Mockingbird?
What were the historical advantages D's gained by having MSM and famous people peddling narrative?

Who exposed the pedo network within H wood?
You can't answer the above but will laugh once disclose details.
The network which controls this false narrative which in turns keeps the black pop under control is being dismantled.
False local and national black leaders will be exposed next as shills for the D party.
Follow the money.
Maxine W has a $4mm home and cash assets in excess of $6mm.
How is that possible? One example.
All of these questions help to paint the full picture."

Figure 6.2: Screenshot of a Q-Drop from March 10, 2018 79

Alt Text: A Q-drop dated 10 March 2018 (see Web.Archive copy). The text reads:
"They made many current/former enslaved children famous.
Hollywood is filled w/ them.
Models.
Find the loudest voices.
Brainwashed.
Who was adopted?
Who was born in?
They thought the SHEEP would follow the STARRS.
Q"

Figure 7: Screenshot of @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel, featuring a "praise report" and a "prophetic thread" (March 2024) 81

Alt Text: A screenshot of @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel, featuring a "Prophetic Threat" in which Telegram followers are invited to find or leave prophetic words for one another (see Web.Archive copy). Text of the description reads "The official Telegram channel of Praying Medic https://prayingmedic.com/". The description shows 133K subscribers, 3.12K photos, 1.19K videos, 9 files, and 4.7K links. The bottom of the top post reads "That's my praise report for today! Blessings to you, Enid" (posted by Dave Hayes, seen by 17.8K viewers). The second post from Dave Hayes shows a blue image of clouds and stars reading "PROPHECY". Below this, the text reads: "Prophetic Thread / If you have a word for someone leave it here. If you're looking for a word, here's where to find it" (seen by 13.8K viewers).

Figure 8: Screenshot of "email testimonies" describing faith healings, as featured on @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel (March 2024) 85

Alt Text: A screenshot of @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel, featuring several "Email Testimonies" in which followers describe supposedly successful faith healings (see Web.Archive copy). The top testimony post reads: "Email Testimony / Good morning Dave! Thank you so very much for your prayers. I slept great last night. Was able to breath and this morning the sinuses are draining. All praise be to God. Thank you Jesus! Thank you Dave for everything you do. Ps I've bought everyone of your books and they have been a blessing to me. Worlds of Love… Valerie" (seen by 19.8K viewers). The second testimony post reads: "From: Lorrie / Dear Dave / Thank you! Thank you! / I recently emailed you asking for prayers for my son. He had decided to resign from his job due to toxic conditions. It was a very difficult decision, especially with a family depending upon him. He was totally discouraged and self doubt and loss of self worth was dominating his normally happy go lucky personality. / Within 3 weeks of my email to you he was connected with a job fair opportunity and interviewed for a position in complete alignment with his skills. / As of today he begins his new job in 2 weeks! Praise the Lord! Prayers are powerful

tools and I thank you for yours. You are a beacon of hope in our troubled world!" (seen by 18.3K viewers).

Figure 9: Screenshot of a livestream entitled "Healing from Satanic Ritual Abuse - w/ Praying Medic" (March 2024) 88

Alt Text: An Youtube thumbnail featuring two white men juxtaposed with smiles over a plain dark background with a religiously-coded beam of yellow shining light. The video title reads, in three colors and different fonts: "Healing from Satanic Ritual Abuse - w/ Praying Medic". At time of screenshot, the video had 1,200 views and was streamed three weeks ago.

Figures 10.1 & 10.2: Screenshots from @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel featuring email testimonies which claimed to fix a lawnmower and a printer through prayer. 90

Image Alt Text: A screenshot of @Praying_Medic's Telegram channel, featuring several "Email Testimonies" in which followers describe supposedly successfully fixing a lawnmower and a printer through prayer (see Web.Archive copy).

10.1 - The text of the first post reads: "From: Monica / My husband just tried to start the riding lawnmower to mow for the first time this year. (Yes we live way down south and it starts so early!) It would not start. I laid my hand on it and prayed. Nothing. He continued to try to start it and try to fix it. I prayed again and nothing happened. Later I went back outside after he had tried every thing he could think of and concluded that the problem must be old gas left over from last year. So I prayed again saying old gas or not START! This time it started immediately! With a big smile on his face, hubby happily road off to mow the yard. He knew it was the hand of God....PTL!! Thanks Dave for teaching us about these things!! God bless you and Denise" (seen by 26.1K Viewers).

10.2 - The second testimony was "Forwarded from Jules" and the text reads: "Good morning Dave! Yesterday I was trying to print out the watchman prayers cuz I keep waking up at 0300. My printer had an error code I've never seen and kept saying power off with red lights and everything. I was getting frustrated and unplugged it etc a few times. Then as I'm hearing it trying and trying get itself together I thought, OH, I WILL PRAY OVER IT! So I laid hands on the printer and prayed for it to be smooth and gears work and print in the name of Jesus all while pushing the energy of the Holy Spirit through my hands. Well that printer did start working!!! I was so excited and gave thanks to Jesus! [smiling heart emoji]" (seen by 23.8K viewers).

Figure 11: A screenshot of two posts from @PrayingMedic on Twitter (Nov & Aug 2020) 92

Alt Text: A screenshot of @Praying_Medic's Twitter feed. An original tweet dated 10 November 2020 (with 1.1K replies, 4.9K reposts, and 13k likes) reads: "Create accounts on other platforms. But POTUS needs Patriots on Twitter now, more than ever. Our assignment is to refute the false narratives of the mainstream media. Digital soldiers do not leave the field of battle." The second tweet is a retweet with a comment dated 6 August 2020 (with 647 replies, 4.7K reposts, and 14K likes). Original reposted tweet from @RobbyStarbuck reads: "'I have a lot of enemies. This may be the last time you see me for a while. I have al ot of very rich enemies. They're not happy with what I'm doing. But I figure we have one chance to do it. No other president is gonna do what I do.' - @realDonaldTrump [followed by American flag emoji and a link to twitter.com/anonpatriotq's profile]". Praying Medic quotes this tweet and adds: "I admire a man who isn't intimidated by threats from lawless thugs and rather than backing down, chooses to do what God has called him to do."

Figure 12: A screenshot of a Tweet from @RedPill78 announcing a collaborative livestream entitled “Calm Before the Storm” featuring @PrayingMedic (June 2020) 94

Alt Text: A screenshot of a Tweet from @RedPill78 announcing a collaborative livestream entitled “Calm Before the Storm” featuring @PrayingMedic (June 13, 2020). Tweet from @RedPill78 reads :“I’m pleased to welcome @prayingmedic tonight at 9PM for Saturday Night Livestream! We’ll talk about his journey through the years and discuss his new book, Calm Before The Storm! Plus your questions in the second hour! youtu.be/x8634Dsha9g". The video thumbnail features vaporwave-style grids, a sun, and bright colors, as well as scratchy fonts and an image of Hayes’ CBTS book cover. Text on the image reads “RPN Saturday Night Livestream Praying Medic Calm Before The Storm. 9PM EST Saturday June 13, 2020.

Figure 13: A screenshot of the homepage of redpill78news.com (May 2024) 102

Alt Text: A screenshot of the homepage of redpill78news.com (May 2024) redpillnews.com features vaporwave-style grids and city. The REDPILL78 logo is visible. The website is bright purple and has bold and scratchy fonts. It is a simple web interface featuring eight different tabs sorted by type. Tab text reads “About, Podcast, Merch, Sponsor, Watch, News, Donate, Contact.” Website homepage text reads “REDPILL78. ‘THE CORRUPTION DETECTOR. THE CORRUPTION DETECTOR. YOUR HOME FOR REDPILL NEWS”

Figure 14: A screenshot of RedPillNews Livestream on Peyton Gendron (May 30, 2022) 106

Alt Text: A screenshot of the RedPillNews Livestream on Peyton Gendron, May 30, 2022. Peyton Gendron is wearing a cloth white mask and an orange jumpsuit, and he is looking at the camera while being escorted by a police officer in court. Graphics and text are laid over the image. The Discord logo, the Seal of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the RedPill78 logo are visible. Image reads “BUFFALO SHOOTER CHATTED WITH FEDS BEFORE ATTACK.”

Figure 15: A screenshot of the beginning of the RedPillNews Livestream on Justin Mohn (Jan 31, 2024) 109

Alt Text: Justin Mohn, a white man in a gray shirt, is speaking to the camera from a white bedroom. The screenshot of the livestream features text and an image of Mohn’s book cover, “America’s Coming Bloody Revolution” by Justin Mohn. The RedPill78 logo is visible, along with a countdown clock to the beginning of the livestream. Image text reads “REDPILL NEWS LIVE. 0:55. 01/31/2024 LIVE AT 5PM EST. PSYCHO BEHEADS FATHER ‘BECAUSE QANON’. AMERICA’S COMING BLOODY REVOLUTION by Justin Mohn.”

Figure 16: A screenshot of @RedPill78 taking the “digital soldier oath” on Twitter (June 26, 2020) 110

Alt Text: Twitter user @RedPill78 (AKA Zak Paine) posts a tweet with an image and text shared on June 26, 2020. His tweet was shared 373 times, liked 1,000 times, and commented on 94 times. Text of the tweet reads: “None of us take these words lightly. We will fight for our freedom and die for our country. Thank you to all who have served and for all who remember your oath #TakeTheOath”. Zak Paine, a white man wearing a red shirt, is speaking into a microphone while raising his right hand at eye-level with the flag

of the United States in the background.

Figure 17: A screenshot of @RedPill78 sharing a stylized #WWG1WGA promotional image on Twitter (June 26, 2020) 111

Twitter user RedPill78 shares a tweet with an image and text shared on June 26, 2020, that was reshared 379 times, liked 938 times, and commented on 55 times. Text reads "#In It Together: Wearing the full armor of God, we stand United. Thank you to each and every one of you. In a few short years, we've done what many had once thought impossible. Image reads "#In It Together: No one person is above another. 'Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.' God bless you. United we stand. Q. #WWG1WGA"

Figure 18: A screenshot approximately 90 minutes into the RedPillNews Livestream on Justin Mohn (Jan 31, 2024) 115

Livestream of user RedPill78 (Zak Paine) on the Rumble video platform at the 90-minute mark of a 120-minute-long livestream posted on January 31, 2024. Paine is showing a list of Justin Mohn's demands as reported by Jim Hoft from the far-right fake news website The Gateway Pundit. The text reads: "Mohn has issued a series of demands (verbatim): -Resignation of all current non-military federal employees. -Abdication of Joe Biden and his cabinet from the White House. -Cancellation of the outstanding public debt as unconstitutional. -Ending of the Federal Reserve and restoration of Congress's right to print interest-free money. -Closing of America's borders to illegal immigrants and mass deportation of illegal immigrants who entered under the Biden regime. -Ceasing of any human trafficking, specifically involving children and sex slaves. -Ceasing of all woke and gender ideology propaganda in schools and other public places. -Capturing and torturing of federal employees and their associates will continue until the entire network of America's traitors is identified and completely wiped out. -This includes bribed members of the deep state, labor racketeers of the prison industrial complex, and globalist leaders of assorted industries, namely tax-evading big tech companies."

Chapter 2

Figure 19: A screenshot approximately 19 seconds into Tracy Diaz's video "/POL/- Q CLEARANCE ANON - IS IT #HAPPENING ???" (November 3, 2017) 135

Screenshot at the 19-second mark of Tracy Diaz's video titled "/pol/ - Q Clearance Anon - Is it #happening?" posted on November 3, 2017. Shows a Wikipedia page titled "Q clearance" that describes the United States Department of Energy highest security clearance.

Figure 20: A screenshot approximately 3 minutes into Tracy Diaz's video "/POL/- Q CLEARANCE ANON - IS IT #HAPPENING ???" (November 3, 2017) 136

Alt text: Screenshot at the 19-second mark of Tracy Diaz's video titled "/pol/ - Q Clearance Anon - Is it #happening?" posted on November 3, 2017. The screenshot shows the first nine"Q-drops" and replies posted by "Q Clearance Patriot" to 4chan's /pol/ ("politically incorrect") board between October 31 and November 3, 2017. Diaz's screenshot is grainy and makes the small text highly difficult to read, but each of the nine posts clearly includes several long lists of leading questions, acronyms, code words, and other stylistic traits typical of Q-drops. Diaz's screenshot also shows that she has nine tabs open, including an email inbox, a Wikipedia entry on "Q clearance", and several tabs on Barack and Michelle Obama (including terms such as "where is Obama" and "Obama kids"). See body of chapter for transcription of key phrases from the nine Q-drops.

Chapter 3

Figure 21: A screenshot ~2 seconds into Joe M's video
"Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 153
Alt text: Screenshot at the 2-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Blue lightning bolts form a circle in the center of a black background. In the circle are the words Made in The USA, a Punisher style skull, and the American flag.

Figure 22: A screenshot ~7 seconds into Joe M's video
"Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 154
Alt text: Screenshot at the 7-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. An embossed gray Q is centered against a black gray ombre background.

Figure 23: A screenshot ~25 seconds into Joe M's video
"Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 155
Alt text: Screenshot at the 25-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. An American flag is behind a close-up of barbed wire.

Figure 24: A screenshot ~29 seconds into
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 156
Alt text: Screenshot at the 29-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Behind partial white bands of light, a man and woman hold hands and walk down a beach with water on both sides.

Figure 25: A screenshot ~1:15 minutes into
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 161
Alt text: Screenshot at the 1-minute and 15-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Five men stand around John McCain, including a man wearing a Palestinian keffiyeh. Reporting from New York Times (2014) states that the men in the image are members or associates of the Free Syrian Army. The text added over the image reads:"Have you ever seen these photos of John McCain hanging out with ISIS".

Figure 25: A screenshot approximately 1:47 minutes into
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 162
Alt text: Screenshot at the 1-minute and 47-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Shows the Sandy Hook Elementary school sign, with police walking around in front of the school following the shooting of children there in 2012. Sandy Hook "crisis actor" conspiracy theories were most famously peddled by Alex Jones of InfoWars, leading to a lawsuit of the survivors' families against Jones.

Figure 26: A screenshot ~2:33 minutes into
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 164
Alt text: Screenshot at the 2-minute and 33-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. A young Hillary and Bill Clinton are shown.

Figure 27: A screenshot ~3:17 minutes into
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 166
Alt text: Screenshot at the 3-minute and 17-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Black and white image showing dissolved overlapping images of men associated with the founding of the Federal Reserve and other financial institutions. One of the men appears to be J.P. Morgan, a financier and banker from the early 1900s (although, the image is a bit unclear; it could also be Nelson Aldrich, a Republican who influenced the founding of the Federal Reserve). The other man is clearly identifiable as John D. Rockefeller's grandson, David Rockefeller. The third visible man is not identifiable.

Figure 28: A screenshot ~3:55 minutes intS
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 168
Alt text: Screenshot at the 3-minute and 55-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. A group of Black Lives Matter protesters are holding up signs that say"Stop Killing Us."

Figure 29: A screenshot ~4:17 minutes into
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 169
Alt text: Screenshot at the 4-minute and 17-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Left-side of the graphic image shows Hannah Montana with the text "Create a wholesome conservative female role model that parents encourage their daughters to admire." Ride-side of the graphic image shows Miley Cyrus in a bra, bending over, with tongue out with the text "Mutate values away from conservatism to distort female sexuality, running marriage and family." The graphic suggests that there is a conspiracy in children's entertainment which weaponizes figures like Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus to "mitigate values away from conservatism to distort female sexuality, ruining marriage and family". This connects to the broader QAnon belief that Hollywood/media elites are engaged in a conspiracy of child sexual abuse, and that mass media is used to normalize and enable the sexualization of children. Such a framing undermines the feminist idea that women should be safe and empowered to choose how to express their sexuality, and instead asserts that women's sexual liberation is a conspiracy.

Figure 30: A screenshot ~4:24 minutes into
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 170
Alt text: Screenshot at the 4-minute and 24-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Two adults are passed out in a truck, and the car windows are down revealing a small child in the backseat. The narration implies the adults are incapacitated due to drug use.

Figure 31: A screenshot ~9:23 minutes into
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 174
Alt text: Screenshot at the 9-minute and 23-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Donal Trump smiles while hugging the American Flag.

Figure 32: A screenshot ~12:18 minutes into
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 177
Alt text: Screenshot at the 12-minute and 18-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. Orange words form a circle around a Q. Some key phrases included are: "trust the plan", "expand your thinking", "Michael Flynn", and "Red October". The word cloud demonstrates the symbolic and linguistic density of QAnon's digital culture.

Figure 33: A screenshot ~13:06 minutes into
Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" (June 25, 2018) 178
Alt text: Screenshot at the 13-minute and 6-second mark of Joe M's video "Q: Plan to Save the World" posted on June 25, 2018. A Punisher-style skull patterned with the American Flag centered against black background. Text above it reads: "Pain is coming". Text forming a circle around the skull reads: "God will judge our enemies / we will arrange the meeting".