

Mapping the messenger: Exploring the disinformation of QAnon

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Abstract

We analyzed message board content originating with the online persona “Q,” leader of the right-wing conspiracy community known as QAnon. We qualitatively placed all of Q’s messages into one of five qualitatively derived categories: *allusion to hidden knowledge*, *undermining institutions and individuals*, *inspirational*, *administration and security*, and *call to action*. Further analysis of how these categories are used by Q over time illustrates how the messaging evolved. Specifically, later Q messaging focused less on hidden knowledge and conspiratorial thinking and more on politics relative to earlier messaging. We also note what Q does not include in messages: very few direct calls to action are made to the QAnon community and no specific, direct calls for violent action. Implications and future directions of research are discussed.

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Introduction

QAnon is a far right-wing online community which began by circulating cryptic messages and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories and thrived spreading false political content leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election. QAnon is grounded in extremist ideologies and propagates a belief that a global cabal of cannibalistic, satanic pedophiles controls institutions including governments, the news media, and Hollywood (Roose, 2021). The QAnon community, which frequently employs anti-Semitic tropes as well as other hateful and violent content, has spread misinformation about issues ranging from mass shootings to vaccines (Timberg and Dvoskin, 2020). It has been suggested that QAnon’s anti-establishment ideology is rooted in “an apocalyptic desire to destroy the existing, corrupt world to usher in a promised golden age” [1]. To this end, QAnon followers view former president Donald J. Trump as a savior figure who is fighting to take down a fundamentally evil deep state (LaFrance, 2020). The cult-like following is due in part to the clues or “breadcrumbs” that the anonymous persona “Q” posted on various public message boards.

Q first posted in October 2017 on the message board 4chan claiming to be a high-level government insider with U.S. security clearance known as “Q clearance” (Wendling, 2021). While there has been speculation regarding the real world identity, or identities, of Q, no definitive identification is public (LaFrance, 2020). Since 2017, the community surrounding this figure has grown from the fringes of 4chan to a mainstream movement that has a presence in the U.S. Congress (Brewster, 2020). The language and beliefs of evangelical Christianity are particularly central to the QAnon movement (LaFrance, 2020). Polling conducted by The American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, found 29 percent of Republicans and 27 percent of white evangelicals believe the QAnon conspiracy theory is accurate (Cox, 2021). QAnon has also inspired social movements with broad based support, importantly 2020’s “Save the Children” effort, which resulted in rallies across the United States (Seitz, 2020).

The early QAnon movement has been said to overlap with Pizzagate, a 2016 conspiracy theory which falsely accused Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton of running a child sex ring out of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria (Amarasingam and Argentino, 2020). The pizzagate conspiracy theory led to violence, and, since its inception, QAnon community members have also been charged with violent crimes. The FBI officially named QAnon a domestic terrorism threat in 2019 (Winter, 2019). QAnon followers subsequently played a key role in the deadly attack on the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021. One in 10 people arrested in the U.S. Capitol attack had a QAnon connection (Stahl, 2021).

Social media and agenda building

Given the impact of the QAnon movement, it is important to understand the role that social media messaging played in its evolution. It is clear on its face that the co-construction of shared reality by Q and the QAnon community is central to the movement. Media plays an important role in helping individuals construct social reality (Adoni and Mane, 1984). Social media, however, has changed the dynamics by which this construction takes place. Social media creates mechanisms for activists to influence opinion in a bottom-up manner, enabling users to express their own narratives (Carney, 2016; Carty, 2015). More specifically, social media provides a platform for users to voice grievances, reaching audiences not otherwise possible (De Choudhury, *et al.*, 2016). Further, social media has advantages not seen with traditional media. Social media enhances group identity by encouraging feedback, peer acceptance, and reinforcement of group norms (Papacharissi, 2010). Finally, social media allows geographically divided individuals to engage with one another, it can provide important emotional support and motivation for activists, and it facilitates technical and other assistance from afar (Ems, 2014). Social media is not simply a neutral tool, but a rather mechanism which by its nature shapes social movements (Lim, 2012).

Research exploring disinformation has shown that social media can be employed as an inauthentic tool by bad actors for political and ideological purposes (Freelon, *et al.*, 2020; Linvill and Warren, 2020). This is particularly concerning considering social media’s capacity as an instrument to build social movements online and then transition them to the real world (Harlow, 2011). Previous research has pointed to examples where movements organized online have had harmful, real-world implications when moved off-line (Ekman, 2018). This has clearly occurred with the QAnon movement (Stahl, 2021).

Agenda building research explores the process by which various agenda are socially constructed and is central to understanding the development of online social movements like QAnon. Cobb and Elder (1971) defined *agenda-building* as the process by which actors endeavor to move issues from their own agenda onto the agendas of policy-makers. Denham (2010) surveyed research in the field and defined three overlapping but separate areas of research using differing conceptualizations of Cobb and Elder’s (1971) theory: *policy agenda building*, *media agenda building*, and *public agenda building*. Policy agenda building addresses how issues are created, expanded upon, and consequently enter the public policy agenda. Media agenda building analyzes the construction of media agenda. This work explores media institutions as well as the influence of journalists and their sources of information. Lastly, public agenda building applies to “behavioral responses to mass and interpersonal communication. Examples of such responses might include voting for a particular policy action,

attending an event, or offering financial support to a social movement” [2]. It is *public agenda building* that relates most to the messaging of Q in leading the QAnon movement.

Given the conspiratorial nature of many of the issues Q addressed, the lack of credible evidence Q offered to support claims, as well as Q’s choice to remain anonymous (Roose, 2021), traditional media may not have been viable means of building Q’s public agenda. Research on agenda building, however, has suggested social media can serve an agenda building function; political tweets, in particular, have been observed to influence the shape and nature of how media cover events (Parmelee, 2014). We argue that the Q persona has creatively used social media in part for its agenda building purposes. Q has actively attempted to raise the prominence of a range of issues. How issues are perceived and responded to by publics is the result of a subjective process done through communication. As Elder and Cobb (1984) explain:

... what is at issue in the agenda-building process is not just which problems will be considered but how those problems will be defined. Such definitions serve not only to structure subsequent policy choices but also to give affirmation to a particular conception of reality. [3]

By engaging directly with social media users, Q has helped shape the choice and definition of problems in ways that align with particular ideological goals.

Q’s first drop was on the message board 4chan on 28 October 2017. Messaging later continued on the platform 8Chan and then finally on 8kun through 8 December 2020 when Q ceased posting. Our work focused on the following two research questions:

RQ1: What is the nature of messaging originating with the anonymous social media persona “Q”?
RQ2: How, if at all, does the nature of Q’s messaging change over time?

In an effort to answer these questions and better understand how Q engaged with the QAnon community, this research undertook exploratory, qualitative analysis of all 4,953 “Q drops” followed by analysis of descriptive statistics examining Q drops over time.

Method

Data

Qalerts.app is a site that contains a complete archive of all 4,953 Q posts. The first post was 31 October 2017 and the last post was 1 November 2020. An unsecured JSON endpoint, <https://qalerts.app/data/json/posts.json>, supplied the necessary data to conduct our analyses. The only significant refinement the data required was conversion of the Unix epoch timestamps to UTC date and time format. To validate the data contained in the JSON extract, we selected 25 random posts and examined their corresponding posts from Q’s posting history. All posts in the JSON corresponded to the 1,383 current 8kun, 3,337 archived 8chan, or 233 archived 4chan posts. We then removed the relevant data from the JSON into a spreadsheet and added a link to the corresponding post.

Analysis

We first examined randomly selected Q drops to get a sense of the data as recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2015). We then conducted unrestricted open coding. This process involved working together to examine, compare, and conceptualize data to build a common understanding and identify meaningful patterns. Second,

we conducted axial coding by comparing and reducing these patterns. Five distinct categories were identified. We created definitions for each category and worked together to clarify their meaning and identify exemplar drops.

Q drops were read in context with an understanding of any linked content. This often required the researchers to find archived versions of content as not all links were active. This was particularly true with links to social media. In many cases it was also necessary to examine Q drops which proceeded and followed the drop being examined. Drops often came in clustered posts and the meaning of these posts was often only clear in context with other contemporaneous drops.

To help assure the reliability of our analysis we engaged in both the use of a code book and testing of intercoder reliability. A code book was developed using clearly articulated definitions and example drops developed and identified during axial coding. The use of a code book served as a stable representation of the coding analysis to serve as a reference throughout the coding process (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Employing this code book, the four members of the research team coded randomly selected sets of 25 drops. After each set was coded we refined our analysis. This process continued until a minimum Krippendorff's alpha reliability of .70 was met. Krippendorff's alpha is a measure of inter-rater reliability suitable for determining agreement between coders in textual analysis; it is useful in situations where one rating is assigned per artifact analyzed and can be applied no matter how many raters are utilized (Krippendorff, 2004). We chose the commonly accepted standard of .70 as our cutoff for alpha to reflect an acceptable level of analytic agreement that is substantially better than chance. After this level of agreement was met, the full set of Q drops was then distributed among the research team for analysis and all drops were placed into one of the five categories. Following coding, all drops were examined quantitatively in an effort to explore how, if at all, Q's messaging evolved over time.



Results

To answer *RQ1*, we identified five categories of messaging within QAnon drops: *allusion to hidden knowledge*, *inspirational*, *undermining*, *call to action*, and *administration*. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the relative distribution of these categories. In order of prevalence, the categories were *allusion to hidden knowledge* ($n = 2,386$, 48.2 percent), *undermining institutions and individuals* ($n = 1,159$, 23.4 percent), *inspirational* ($n = 1,110$, 22.4 percent), *administration and security* ($n = 230$, 4.6 percent), and *call to action* ($n = 68$, 1.4 percent). [Figure 2](#) presents word clouds of the most prevalent terms employed in each category.

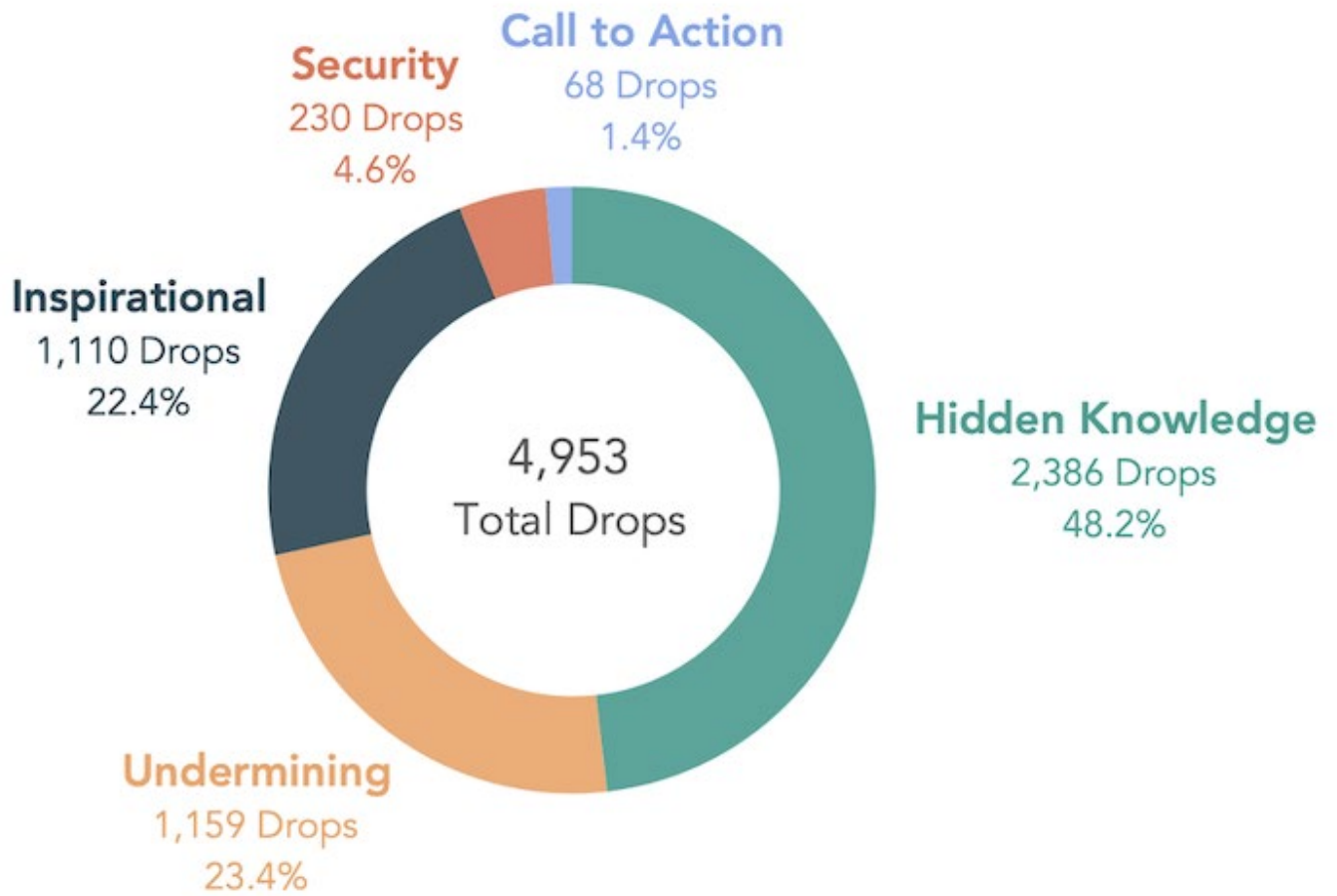
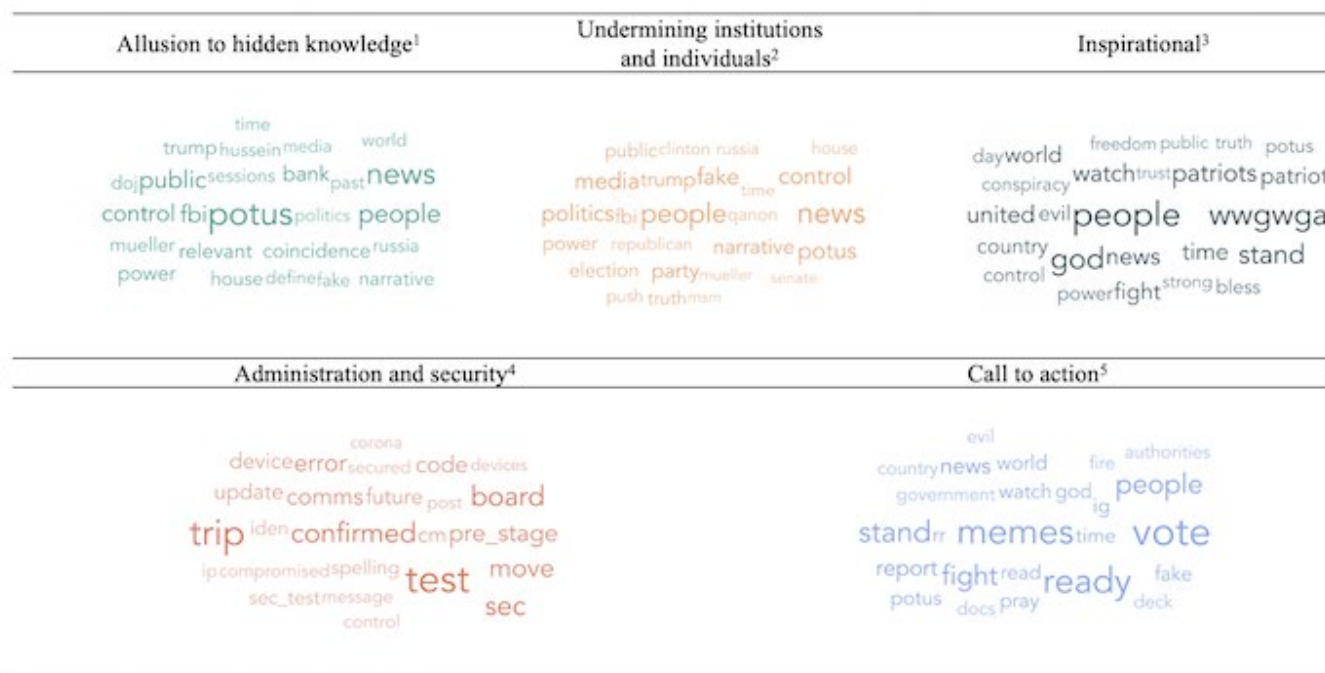


Figure 1: Distribution of Q drop message categories.

Note: Larger version of Figure 1 available [here](#).



- 1: Hussein = Barrack Hussein Obama
- 2: msm = main stream media
- 3: wgwga = where we go one, we go all
- 4: cm = CodeMonkey, the user name for 8Chan administrator Ron Watkins
- 5: rr = Rod Rosenstein, ig = Inspector General

Figure 2: Q drop category word clouds.

Note: Larger version of Figure 2 available [here](#).

The five categories are described below. It is important to note that all example drops used as illustration in these descriptions are chosen for three reasons: (1) they are easily understood without additional context; (2) they are relatively short; and, (3) they contribute to an understanding of the given category. Some Q drops are quite long or come in a series of drops that have additional meaning as a cluster of drops. Other drops contain a great deal of jargon that could confuse clear interpretation. We avoided choosing such drops as exemplars and in these important ways the examples below are not representative.

Allusion to hidden knowledge ($n = 2,386$, 48.2 percent). These drops alluded to Q’s knowledge of secret events going on within world governments and institutions. In many cases these drops offered the user clues, referred to by the QAnon community as breadcrumbs, and encouraged them to decipher them. These clues often came as a series of open-ended questions. An example of this type of post is Q drop #38:

Four carriers & escorts in the pacific? Why is that relevant? To prevent other state actors from attempting to harm us during this transition? Russia / China? Or conversely all for NK? Or all three. Think logically about the timing of everything happening. Note increased military movement. Note NG deployments starting tomorrow. Note false flags. Follow Huma. Prepare messages of reassurance based on what was dropped here to spread on different platforms. The calm before the storm.

The mean number of question marks appearing per drop in this category was 2.1; this compares to .76 question marks per drop elsewhere.

Drops in this category included a great deal of official sounding jargon and acronyms. All Q drops, but especially messages in this category, used initials to refer to recurring figures, *e.g.*, George Soros (GS), Lynn Rothschild (L), and Mark Zuckerberg (MZ).

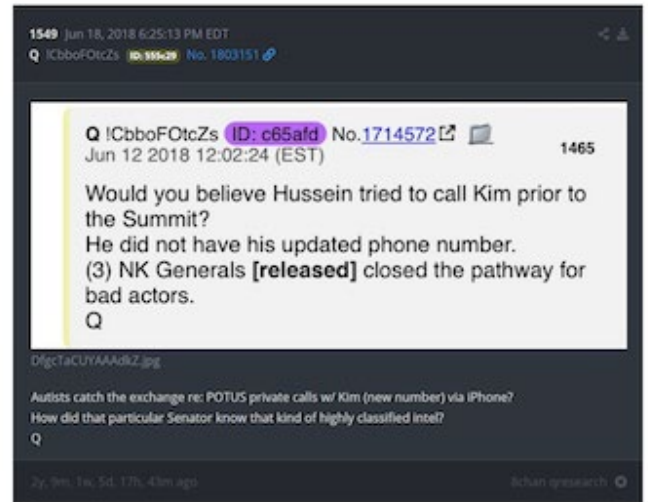
Drops we included in this category frequently incorporated images. These images were typically of individuals or locations relevant to a particular narrative, sometimes dropped with little or no comment. This included drop #752, a photo of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg speaking with Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung during an August, 2016 visit to Vietnam along with the message "I hear Hanoi is educational" (see [Figure 3](#)).

#752



#2137

#1549



#3404

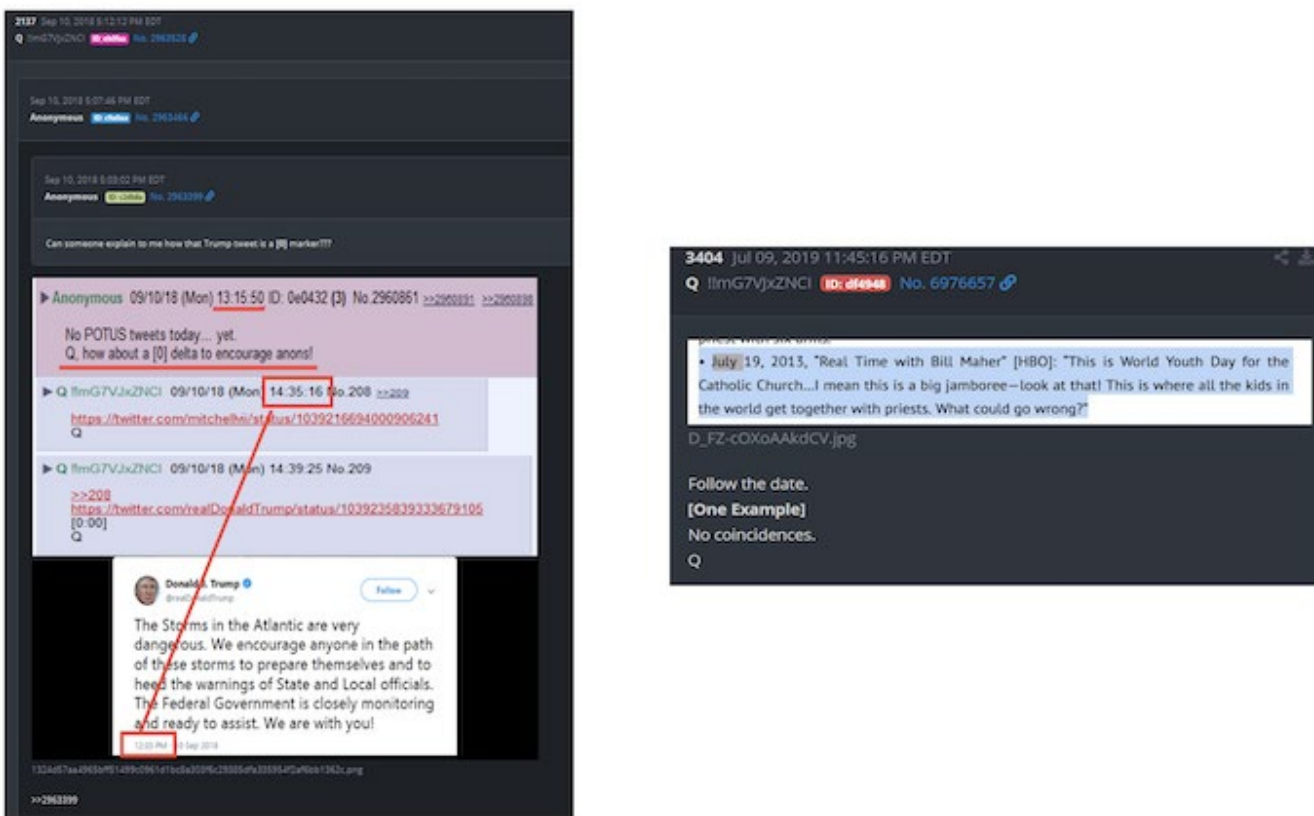


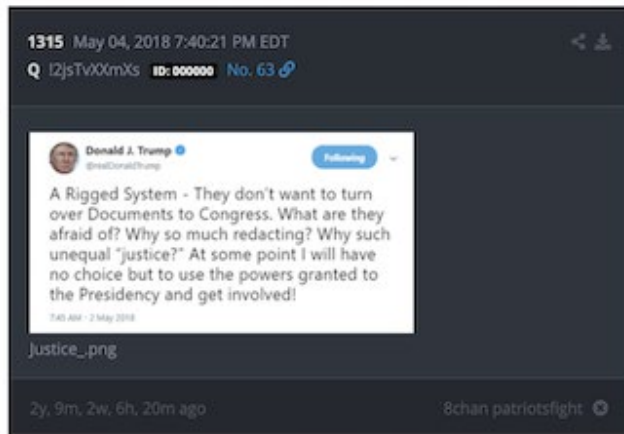
Figure 3: Sample allusion to hidden knowledge drops.

Finally, drops we coded as *allusion to hidden knowledge* often pointed to current, sometimes mundane events to suggest they were something more than they may have appeared on the surface (see [Figure 3](#), drop #3404). These drops used phrases such as “Do you believe in coincidences?” or “How many coincidences before it’s mathematically impossible?” Similarly, drops in the category frequently pointed back to older Q drops to suggest that intervening events were not a coincidence but occurred as predicted. The word *coincidence* was used in 264 Q drops across all categories, 80.7 percent of which were *allusions to hidden knowledge*. Hidden knowledge posts also used the timing of Q’s own drops to suggest direct, insider knowledge (see [Figure 3](#), drop #2137).

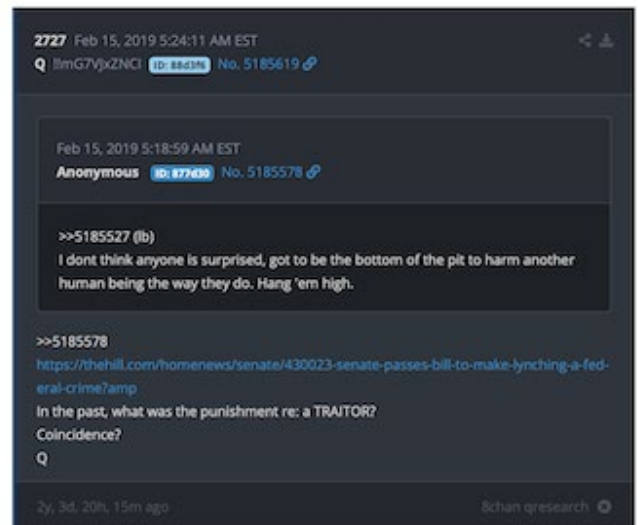
Undermining institutions and individuals ($n = 1,159$, 23.4 percent). These drops addressed corruption within governments, corporations, and institutions like the news media and Hollywood. Many of these posts also alluded to claims of pedophilia by well-known public figures.

A common trend among these drops were references to a “shadow presidency” and “shadow government.” Images of public figures ranging from leaders of the Democratic Party, business tycoons, and officials who were investigating Former President Trump were commonly employed as the subject of memes. This includes drop #2806 ([Figure 4](#)), which superimposed prison bars in front of images of special prosecutor Robert Mueller, former president Barack Obama, U.S. House speaker Nancy Pelosi, former U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton, and several other high-profile, mostly Democratic, government leaders. These drops also frequently reposted links to stories from ideologically biased news stories criticizing these same public figures.

#1315



#2727



#2806



#4692

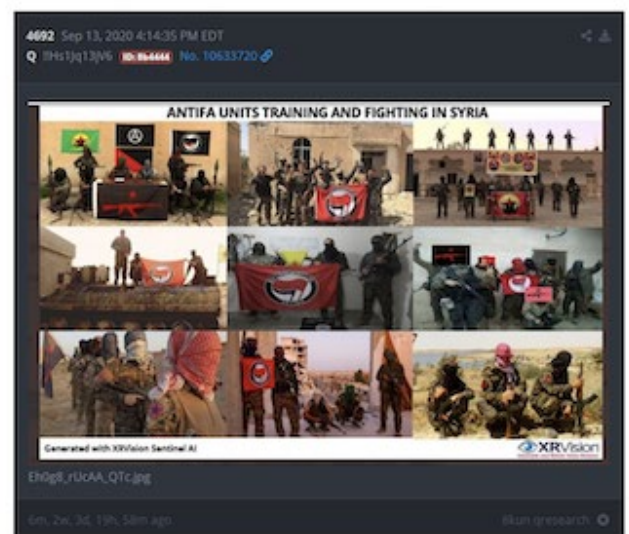


Figure 4: Sample undermining institutions and individuals drops.

Drops in this category fell short of direct, specific calls for violence, but at times discussed violence in implied or conceptual terms as a possible response to perceived wrong doing. This included discussion of hanging and lynching during a period of marked racial tension in the U.S. This can be seen in Q drop #2727 (Figure 4).

Additionally, many of these drops related to the COVID-19 pandemic and pushed conspiracy theories which undermined both pandemic response and election integrity. Language suggested COVID-19 was being used by Democrats as a political tool. These drops furthered narratives about government corruption by repeating phrases including, “Election not virus. Win by any means necessary” and “Is this about the virus OR THE ELECTION?”

Finally, drops in this category sometimes contained screenshots of former president Trump’s tweets which

contained messages which undermined institutions, especially the U.S. government and electoral process. See, for example, drop #1315 (Figure 4). Beyond such direct amplification of president Trump’s tweets, Q drops often employed similar language and phrasing used by the president. Q drops in this category, for example, commonly repeated the phrase “rigged” and “election gaming.”

Inspirational ($n = 1,110$, 22.4 percent). These drops included motivational and encouraging messages. Both patriotic and Christian religious messaging were common in this category. Other drops included in this category included self-aggrandizement and self-promotion of Q, inflating the power and knowledge Q claimed to possess.

Posts with inspirational patriotic memes and images, like the American flag, were repeated often with the words “patriot,” such as drop #3901 (Figure 5). Patriotic themes and word choices were also used alongside inspirational content from military websites and YouTube, particularly video and images of military aircraft in action such as drop #2065 (Figure 5). Other inspirational content was taken from popular culture, including the iconic Punisher logo frequently employed by U.S. paramilitary organizations. Posts leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election referenced the military as the “only way,” featuring screenshots of former president Trump’s tweets with Q’s inspirational sign off “all systems go.”

#3901



#2065



Figure 5: Sample inspirational drops.

Drops including Christian symbolism were prevalent. Such drops often included direct quotes from the Christian Bible, including drop #4249 which quoted “Have faith in God. Mark 11:22,” along with the message

“PEACE FOR THE STORM.” The phrase “God bless” was also frequently placed as a sign off in Q drops across categories.

Finally, apocalyptic phrases like “the storm” and inspirational phrases like “The Great Awakening” and the most prevalent rallying call, “#WWG1WGA!,” were frequent across all Q drops, but particularly so in this category. Variations of #WWG1WGA were used by Q 198 times in total with 160 of these being in inspirational drops. This hashtag was also featured on social media with photos of QAnon followers holding Q signs or wearing Q paraphernalia at rallies for former president Trump. Q often reposted tweets which highlighted these and other QAnon followers in Q drops appearing in this category.

Administration and security (n = 230, 4.6 percent). These drops involved messaging related to the smooth functioning of the Q persona’s engagement with the QAnon community.

Some of these posts suggested that forces were working against Q. In many cases, these drops took the form of drops that appeared to be trip codes, cryptographic information, or other information security related measures. These drops seemed crafted to give the impression Q was engaged in active security measures to safeguard Q’s communication with the QAnon community. Drop #358, for example, stated: “Being advised to update code. Serious hardware being used to break. 4 is not secure. Q.”

This category also involves clarifications and corrections made by Q of errors and misspellings. Some misspellings were interpreted by the QAnon community as purposeful clues left by Q to be interpreted. This may have necessitated active corrections such as drop #3072, “Disregard spelling error. On the move. Q.” This drop referenced Q’s previous post which included the phrase “PUSH TALING POINTS RE: VOTER AGE SHOULD DECREASE FROM 18 to 16,” leaving the letter “k” out of the word “talking.”

Some of these posts directly referenced the staff of 8chan and 8kun. Jim Watkins, who owned 8chan and 8kun, was referenced as BO or Board Owner in two posts. 8chan site administrator Ron Watkins, referred to as CM or CodeMonkey, is referenced seven times in this category of posts (and four other occurrences elsewhere). This included drop #3629, “New board created [pending approval/CM/] /projectDcomms/ Q.”

Call to action (n = 68, 1.4 percent). These drops were direct calls for the reader of the drop to do something.

Q’s specific calls to action were limited in number and scope. Calls to action included requests such as “pray,” including drop #324, “Please pray tonight. Good people in harms way. Q.” Other posts called on the reader to engage with specific media at particular moments, including drop #3179, “LISTEN & WATCH SEAN HANNITY TODAY. Q”. The only direct and specific political action Q called on others to engage in was to vote, as in drop #2425, “VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! Will you answer the call? Your country needs you! Q.” This drop was 5 November 2018, the day before the U.S. mid-term elections.

Throughout other categories of posts Q addressed the importance of information warfare with a particular focus on memes. Q repeated several times, for instance, the phrase “memes, memes, and more memes!” Following this broad theme, there were several drops in this category that made specific calls to engage in the “digital battlefield.” In drop #4509 (Figure 6), Q gives specific missions which serve as a five-point lesson in social media information operations, saying, “You have been selected to help serve your Country.”

#4509

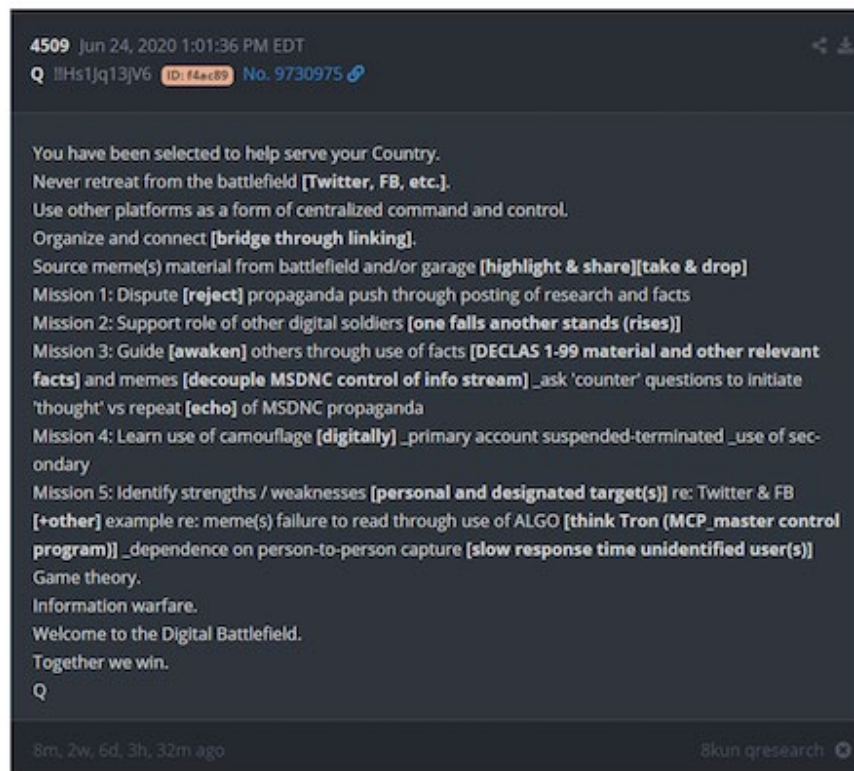


Figure 6: Sample call to action drop.

Some calls to action were indirect, requiring coders to infer Q's intent. In drop 4670, for instance, Q posted only, "https://signal.org" and signed the post "Q". This post was coded as a *call to action* as it appeared Q was suggesting for users to download the Signal encrypted communications app.

Descriptive results

To answer *RQ2*, we analyzed Q's drop behavior over time. [Figure 7](#) illustrates chronological volume of drop activity by category. Among early drops, *allusion to hidden knowledge* alone accounts for the majority of all drops with *undermining institutions and individuals*, *inspirational*, *administration and security*, and *call to action* following in order. [Figure 8](#) shows a clear change in behavior when Q's messages transition from 8chan to 8kun in November 2019. While both *security* and *call to action* posts (not appearing in the figure) continue at fairly low levels of activity, the other three categories shift to become more evenly distributed. In 2017 *hidden knowledge* drops accounted for 66.0 percent of posts while in 2020 it accounted for only 30.9 percent. The difference was accounted for by a greater proportion of *undermining* and *inspirational* drops. These categories accounted for 37.7 percent and 29.5 percent of 2020 drops, respectively. In short, Q moves from a specific focus on spreading conspiracy theory to a focus on building a social movement. This shift came a year before the 2020 U.S. election.

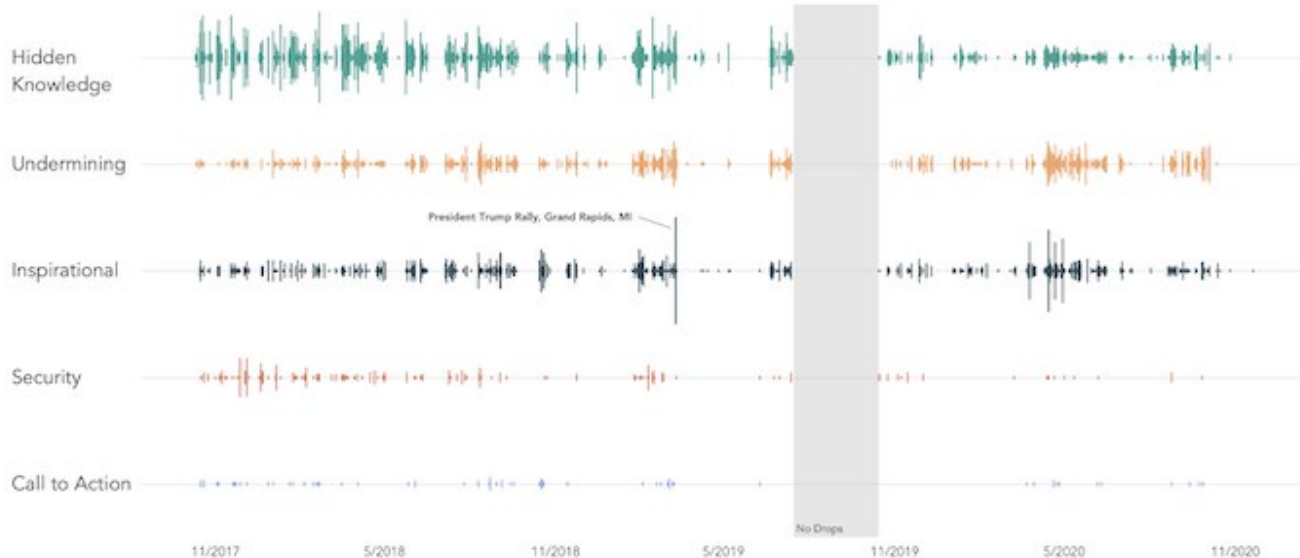


Figure 7: Q drop volume by category over time.

Note: Larger version of Figure 7 available [here](#).

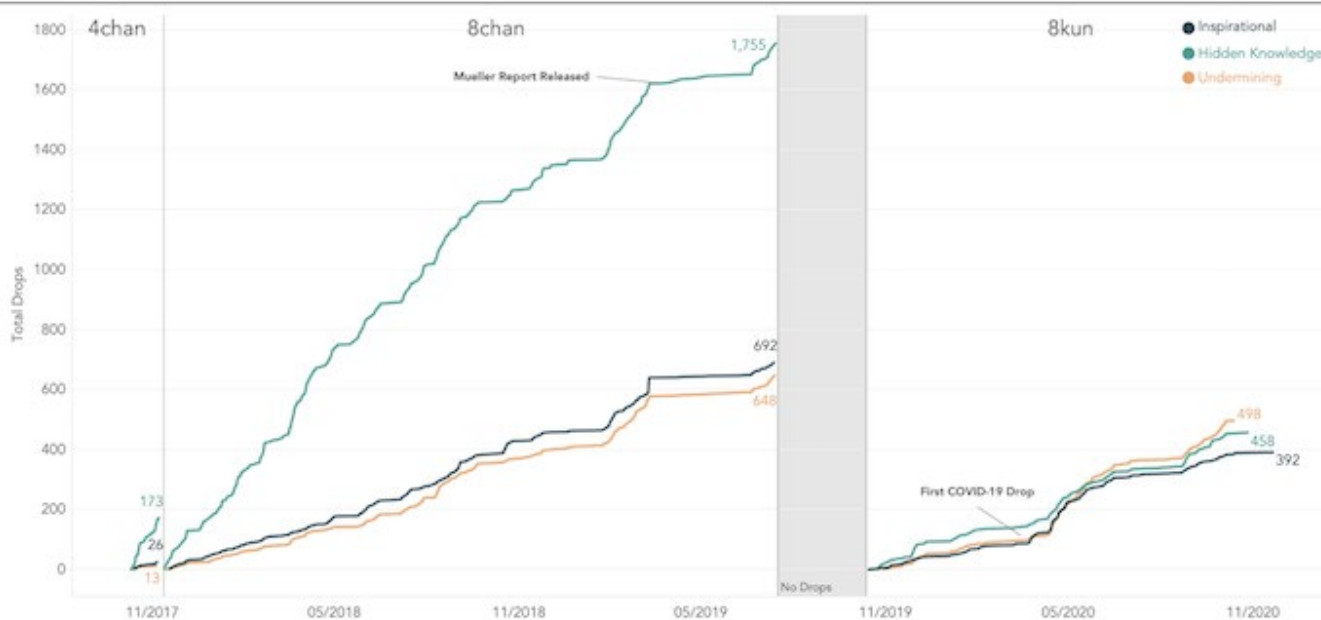


Figure 8: Three largest categories of Q drop activity over time by platform.

Note: Larger version of Figure 8 available [here](#).

[Figure 9](#) details the timing of Q drops. The x-axis shows hour of the day (UTC) in which percentages of posts

occurred and the y-axis shows the platform and quarter of the year in which posts occurred. This figure suggests two details of interest. First, while Q claims to be someone close to president Trump, the consistent daily time period in which posts do not occur suggests the individual or individuals purporting to be Q have a sleep schedule consistent with residing in a time zone well west of Washington, D.C. Second, the daily pattern of messaging also indicates a change in behavior in early 2018 where the majority of drops move from being made early in the day to late in the day.

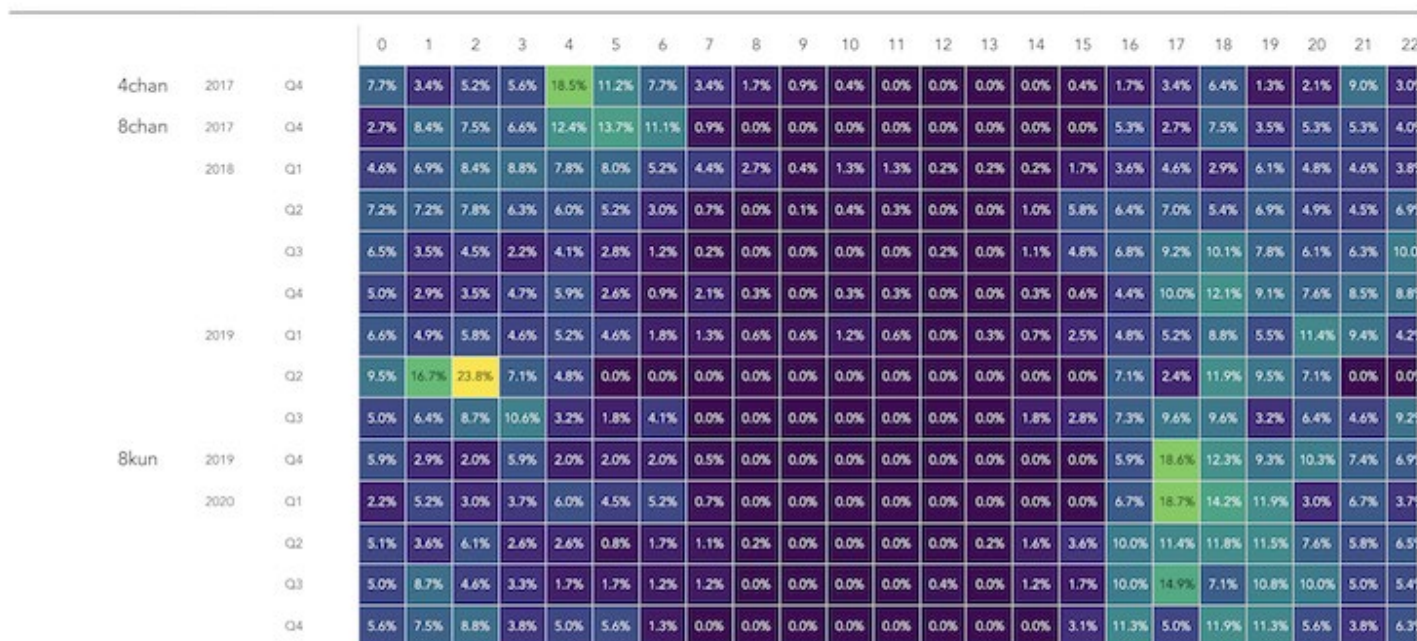


Figure 9: Percent of posts by source, hour (UTC), and quarter.

Note: Larger version of Figure 9 available [here](#).

Discussion and conclusion

Our findings have several important implications worth noting. First, we found that Q’s messaging evolved over time. Specifically, when Q transitioned from 8chan to 8kun in late 2019 drops began to focus relatively more on right-wing political content and less on conspiratorial thinking. The QAnon community grew through Q’s conspiratorial thinking and the promises of hidden knowledge but was seemingly harnessed for other purposes at a crucial moment in time. This research does not tell us the exact motivation for this change in behavior. Possibilities range from political goals related to the upcoming U.S. presidential election, to financial motivations, to a potential change in who was behind the curtain in the role of the Q persona. In any case, just as it is important to understand how social media information operations grow and evolve over time (Linville and Warren, 2020), it is similarly important to understand the evolution of communities such as QAnon.

As we have shown, central to Q’s messaging was the persona’s relatively consistent attempts at undermining institutions and individuals within governments, corporations, and the media. It is important we view this content, or any of Q’s messaging, not in isolation but rather in context with other Q messages. Garry, *et al.* (2021) have suggested that “Mistrust in government and legislative institutions often serves as a push factor

that influences the formation and spread of conspiracy theories” [4]. It seems likely that this category of Q messaging is serving just such a function, a sort of bait for the hook which is appealing to predisposed users. Experimental research by Kim and Cao (2016) has shown the potential for the interplay between distrust in government and conspiratorial content to set in motion a “spiral of distrust; that is, exposure to the content leads to belief in conspiracies that causes heightened distrust, and the heightened distrust, in turn, makes people more susceptible to the influence of the content, which further increases distrust.” [5]. This mechanism may help explain the process by which users could become increasingly indoctrinated by Q’s messaging.


Finally, it is important to examine what our findings tell us about the QAnon community’s move from the digital world into the real world, particularly in terms of violent activity and the 6 January storming of the Capitol. We found that Q rarely made specific calls to action requesting community members to engage in particular behavior. The *call to action* drops account for only 1.4 percent of total Q content. Even those drops that did call upon the QAnon community to engage in specific action did not ask for great sacrifice. Calls to action are both rare and fairly mundane. The “fight” Q calls for is a digital one. Violence is often alluded to in Q drops, desires for violent responses to events can certainly be read into many posts, but violence is not explicitly called for. Q does not request real world action beyond voting. It could even be argued Q encourages a certain amount of passivity with the frequent repetition of phrases such as “enjoy the show.”

This tactic may simply be a strategic choice made by the individual or individuals purporting to be Q, perhaps for legal reasons, but it is a finding that none-the-less requires exploration. It is clear that Q did, in fact, have important and tragic real world impacts and that members of the QAnon community engaged in violent activity. It is crucial that future research should identify the mechanisms by which this community moved from the digital world violently to the real one and what role interpretations of Q’s messaging by the community played. Future research should examine the interplay between Q and the QAnon community. Any role which Q’s references to violence, indirect though they may have been, may have had on the QAnon community has important implications for how platforms consider responding to such content moving forward.

It is evident that Q’s messaging has served to create “a particular conception of reality” [6] among the QAnon community. This has troublingly been done in a wholly anonymous manner. Our research has found that Q’s public agenda building efforts have transitioned over time. These changes in behavior have first been in the nature of the drops themselves, moving from a focus on conspiratorial content toward a focus on much more political content (Figure 8). This transition came as the movement gained broader political influence, both nationally and internationally, and began to influence public agenda. Whether this transition in messaging was purposefully intended to motivate greater political influence of the QAnon movement or rather as a response to that growing influence is not clear from our findings. The second important change our descriptive findings illustrate is a change in the daily timing of Q’s drops over time (Figure 9). While this finding is far from conclusive, we note that this is consistent with suggestions that the individual(s) purporting to be Q have changed over time (Binder, 2020).

This research was limited in that it only examined one side of the social media conversation, the voice of Q. An understanding of the nature of Q’s communication and its evolution over time is important to understanding this important social movement, but future research should work to also explore the interaction between both Q and the QAnon community and also among community members themselves. Q’s drops were often cryptic and so examination of how the QAnon community communally worked to construct meaning from these messages and thereby create a shared reality may be instructive. Future research should also work to better understand the processes by which the QAnon community moved from the relatively fringe message boards on which it originated onto more mainstream social media platforms and ultimately to the real world. The QAnon community was far more prolific on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube than on the platforms where Q’s messages originated, growing over multiple years before meaningful action was taken (Timberg and Dwoskin, 2020). The processes by which this occurred, and how to address similar movements in the future, needs to be better understood given the important policy and enforcement implications across social media.

The growth of the QAnon community also points to the need for a greater research and policy spotlight to be shown on fringe platforms such as 4chan and 8kun. Their user base is small compared to mainstream platforms, but QAnon has demonstrated their potential for disproportionate influence. A common view of social media platforms is that they facilitate politically likeminded individuals to efficiently interact in an

environment that only exposes them to information that reinforces existing beliefs and isolates them from opposing views (Sunstein, 2017). Research has found, however, that users of mainstream platforms such as Twitter and Facebook do experience alternate viewpoints and some ideological disagreement between and with their fellow users (Barnidge, 2017). The conspiracies which are central to the reality constructed by the QAnon community stretch believability and are perhaps less likely to stand up to critique than more mainstream ideological beliefs. Given the manner in which they found root in the platforms where they were first born, it seems possible that the ideological echo chambers which exist across social media are more pronounced on such platforms where alternate perspectives may be even harder to find. 

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Notes

[1.](#) Amarasingam and Argentino, 2020, p. 39.

[2.](#) Denham, 2010, p. 316.

[3.](#) Elder and Cobb, 1984, p. 115.

[4.](#) Garry, *et al.*, 2021, p. 154.

[5.](#) Kim and Cao, 2016, p. 3,822.

[6.](#) Elder and Cobb, 1984, p. 115.

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Editorial history

Received 28 July 2021; revised 1 September 2021; accepted 2 December 2021.



To the extent possible under law, this work is dedicated to the public domain.

Mapping the messenger: Exploring the disinformation of QAnon
by Darren Linvill, Matthew Chambers, Jennifer Duck, and Steven Sheffield.
First Monday, volume 26, number 12 (December 2021).
doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i12.11745>