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

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Tripcodes and treasure hunts: The growth of QAnon

On 28 October 2017, a user named ‘Q’ began to post ‘highly classified US government secrets’ on 4chan’s /pol/ (politically incorrect) discussion board (Argentino and Amarasingam, 2020). In a quite notorious online space with a ‘no rules’ policy and an unwavering commitment to ‘free speech’ (Knuttila, 2011;
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Nagle, 2017; Gallagher, et al., 2020), users of 4chan are ‘anonymous’ by default: hence the shorthand, ‘anon’. With ‘Q’ denoting Q-level clearance to access top-secret, classified information in the U.S. government, and ‘anons’ denoting followers who parse this information — and speculate wildly on it — the phenomenon of QAnon as a highly complex umbrella for communally generated conspiracy is, at its heart, a collaborative affair built on faith. Faith, of course, must be rewarded, and ‘Q drops’ (posts made to 4chan/8chan/8kun by Q) provide a very modern form of consecration. Between 28 October 2017 and 8 December 2020, 4,953 Q drops set the thematic agenda for the QAnon movement, quite apart from providing a neat dataset for analysis [1]. Taken individually, the Q drops are mostly rhetorical and often nonsensical. Early musings such as “Why did Soros donate all his money recently?” (28 October 2017) and “Why is POTUS surrounded by generals?” (29 October 2017) may mean little in isolation, but these drops coalesce around specific themes, tend to leverage major occurrences in U.S. politics and are umbilically tied to the promotion of U.S. President Donald Trump as a modern-day saviour. There is continuity within the ambiguity if one is willing to dig deep enough, and the smooth adaptation of QAnon beliefs to country-specific politics around the world coupled with the speed of their spread certainly speaks to the persuasive capacity of its canon (Scott, 2020; Zimmerman, 2020).

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

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

Despite the growing significance of QAnon as a cultural/sociological phenomenon, most of the academic literature to date has focused on its social media footprint and its interconnected growth online (Pappasava, et al., 2021) [5]. Certainly, this online footprint is not to be underestimated: a number of studies point to the centrality of the deeply intertwined social networks — and especially the tight-knit communities — formed around QAnon, with classic platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit amplifying Q drops (and ensuing discussions) to take the conspiratorial chatter to dizzying heights (Garry, et al., 2021). In addition, QAnon activity has exploded since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by the parallel occurrence of mass dislocation and a major spike in the amount of time people spend online/tme often spent in communal socialization (Tsao, et al., 2021). This confluence of events has allowed for the cross-fertilization of a number of conspiratorial communities interested in apparently disparate concerns, such as
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cancer-spreading 5G, anti-vaccination, and uncovering the true nature of the ‘plandemic’, which has grown the movement even further (Spring and Wendling, 2020). A recent study from network analysis firm Graphika [6] puts this growth — and the relative size of QAnon — into context. In a study of 13,800 QAnon accounts on Twitter, Smith finds that this cluster alone posted 41 million tweets in 30 days between January and February 2020, rising to 62.5 million tweets in the 30 days between July and August of the same year [7]. Mirroring the sentiments in similar research (de Zeeuw, et al., 2020), Smith concedes that QAnon remains “the most dense conspiratorial network that Graphika has ever studied” [8], with “the volume of content produced and shared by QAnon accounts [...] staggering in comparison to other political communities we study” [9] — an admission that would surely be appreciated by QAnon’s saviour, on the grounds of both style and substance.

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

Ontological insecurity, second modernity, and the fulfillment of a lack

There is a tendency — both historical and contemporary — to view reality as procedural and full at any given point in time. This is especially the case if we interpret reality (as the vast majority of studies do) from a realist ontological standpoint, which guides one’s focus towards what is empirically present rather than what is not. There are, however, various analytical approaches that essentially flip this assumption arguing, alternatively, that ontology (that is, the basis of reality itself) is always and already pierced by a constitutive lack and that it is the absence of fullness that drives collective attempts at identity formation. In this Lacanian reading, the primacy of lack dictates that:

The space of the social is [...] revealed as a field that can never be closed or constituted as an objective full presence: “The limit of the social must be given within the social itself as something subverting it, destroying its ambition to constitute full presence. Society never manages fully to be society, because everything in it is penetrated by its limits, which prevent it from constituting itself as an objective reality.” [10]

Rather than being fully constituted, or ‘closed’, society is always overflowing with a surplus of meaning [11] as social agents strive to attain ‘full’ political identities by attaching themselves variously to any
number of floating discourses. As Anna Marie Smith puts it, “[it] is only through political discourses that we experience the ways in which we are positioned within social structures” [12], with the result that “no individual can choose to stand outside the totality of interpretative frameworks; our fundamental dependence upon the interpretative function of discourse is written into our very human condition” [13]. We might say, then, that individuals — as social agents — are always drawn to bind themselves to collective discourses that help to shape the complex symbolic orders into which they are thrust. This drive may be satiated by more profane expressions of a person’s place in the traditional family unit or, say, how they attempt to construct their identity in the workplace (Harding, 2008). Quite often, however, this (Lacanian) desire is escalated to more profound, collective causes, with a person’s performative identity tied to a political ideology or a social movement — including those steeped in a conspiratorial lifeworld. From aligning with ideologies to joining a political/(conspiracy) movement, the existential drive is the same: the constitutive pursuit of an impossible fullness.

While a desire for ‘fullness’ characterizes identity formation in general, the speed and intensity of this pursuit will differ according to subjects’ collective sense of dislocation [14]. Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020), through Laing (1990) and Giddens (2004, 1991), dovetail with this concept by arguing that the drive for ontological fullness (or, in their particular vocabulary, security) is tied to the management of anxiety. Anxiety, in this reading, should be seen as a productive force in international politics. Of course, the fact that anxiety — fundamentally based on the anticipation of future events (and simultaneously rendered through a silhouette of past occurrences) — may underpin entire political orders should not surprise any reader of twentieth- or twenty-first-century politics (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020). The political imaginary of these histories has been consistently shaped by amorphous disasters yet to occur — be they nuclear explosions, mass cyber-attacks, environmental catastrophes or, indeed, a pandemic — with political epochs also defined by (Western) humanity’s emergence from the post facto realization of various worst-case scenarios: ‘post-WWII’, ‘post-9/11’, ‘post-2007 financial crash’, and, surely, ‘post-COVID’. With mental health problems and anxiety diagnoses reaching record levels over the past decade [15], and a further peak brought about by the ongoing COVID pandemic (Yasgur, 2020), it cannot be hyperbolic to assert that we are living in especially anxious times.

It is important to note that although ontological insecurity dislocates a person’s sense of stable existence, it is always accompanied by individual and collective attempts to “devise effective mechanisms [...] that control anxiety, and make it tolerable” [emphasis in original] [16]. These mechanisms provide what Berger and Luckmann have called a ‘stock of knowledge’ [17], which in helping to satiate anxiety (however temporary) renders ontological security as a distinctly emotional/political desire [18]. The means by which this ontological desire is enacted chimes with those human, psychological needs for predictability and continuity in our interactions with the world [19], mirroring the endless personal/mental health literature that confirms the importance of routine and meaningful social interaction for keeping one’s anxieties in check [20]. For ontological (in)security theorists, while the need to satiate anxiety has always been present in individuals and evident within society at large [21], the emotional/political desire for security has greatly accelerated since the late twentieth century, as we continue to transition from what Giddens and Beck (Beck, 1992; Cassell, 1993) have labelled ‘first modernity’ to our currently experienced ‘second modernity’. In contrast to the more stable flows of self-identity in first modernity — very much embodying an Enlightenment image of constancy, scientific truth and incremental progress [22] — second modernity is defined far more by flux and instability. This can be seen through various sociological shifts that have exploded onto centre stage — be it the intensification of individualistic expression and/or the ongoing deconstruction of traditional social dichotomies, such as those classically attributed to gender and race [23]. The growth of the Internet (2.0) and the hyper-connectivity that it brings unquestionably play a key role in facilitating these societal shifts: let us not forget that Time declared ‘you’ to be Person of the Year in 2006 on the basis of social media connectivity and the attendant possibilities for self-expression [24]. Nevertheless, with due regard for the flow of time, a longitudinal reading surely indicates that our (post)modern insecurities have not been entirely driven by social media connectivity: when it comes to second modernity and its encompassing desire for ontological security, the medium is not necessarily the message.
If we accept that the ever-present condition of ontological insecurity necessitates corrective moves to mitigate its attendant anxiety, then the question is how? Here, an initial foray into the analytical framework of discourse theory — which focuses on the discursive production of political and social identities — is useful. While discourse theory is quite notoriously opaque and jargon-heavy, its core thesis on identity formation as an ontological process (as already introduced above) can be distilled into two, interlocking steps [25]. The first step is to identify an outside antagonistic force (/Other) that is responsible for blocking the realization of one’s ‘full’ identity:

All identities and all values are constituted by reference to something outside them, which has the character of a subversive margin preventing the possibility of an ultimate fixity [...] Th[is] antagonistic force is held responsible for the blockage of our full identity, and this permits the externalization of our constitutive lack as subjects to the negating Other, which thus becomes the positive embodiment of our self-blockage. As a result our political actions will tend to be guided by the illusion that the annihilation of the antagonistic force will permit us to become the fully constituted ‘we’ that we have always sought to be. [emphasis added] [26]

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

By definition, the identity-formation process outlined in discourse theory can be recognized across a broad range of political movements. In the case of green movements, for example, we find a series of demands that draws a thematic equivalence through disparate factors such as the reclaiming of city streets from cars, the melting of the icecaps, energy consumption linked to large-scale AI experimentation, and so on [27]. The very same process of identity formation can also be ascribed to other far less legitimate political actors, from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State — who draw an equivalence between historical utopias, legitimate self-defence, and a ‘right to self-determination’ (with the U.S./West as an antagonistic Other; Fitzgerald, 2014) — to adherents of QAnon who (as will be shown) draw equivalences through anti-science, anti-establishment, and pro-child protection narratives, premised against a shadowy cabal of global(ist) pedophiles. With these foundational dynamics in mind — that is, ontological insecurity, anxiety control, and identity formation — let us turn to examining how conspiracy theories fit into the equation.

Conspiracy theories: Psychology and society

Conspiracy theories are routinely denounced as irrational, pathological, and the exclusive remit of gullible dupes (Cassam, 2016) [28]. Yet, as exercises in radical doubt, conspiracy theories are powerful touchstones for populations that have become disillusioned with modern political processes, and their impact is growing (Oliver and Wood, 2014). In the U.S. — the effective ground zero for QAnon — conspiracy theories have always been prevalent: in 2000, for example, over 50 percent of citizens believed that the government had attempted to cover up the JFK assassination, while over 80 percent believed that the government knew more about extra-terrestrials than they were prepared to admit (Knight, 2000). In 2016, a poll at Chapman University found that over 50 percent of Americans believed that the government had covered up key
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information about 9/11 (Chapman University, 2016), while in 2020 — as polarization intensified to an apex — over 70 percent of Republican voters agreed that allegations of systematic fraud had made them question Joe Biden’s presidential election victory over Donald Trump (Zhou, 2020). Similar trends of popular conspiracism have been identified globally, including in Europe (Pfeifer, 2021), South America (Roniger and Senkman, 2021), Southeast Asia (Swami, et al., 2020) and sub-Saharan Africa (Ouattara and Århem, 2021). Whatever the way in which new conspiracies become manifest in public discourse, their popularity can be quite pervasive. ‘True’ conspiracies such as the Watergate scandal in 1972 have helped to sow reflexive suspicion of the government among many Americans (Aupers, 2012) while, culturally, the likes of The X-files, The Matrix, and, today, much material discussed on the phenomenally popular Joe Rogan Experience podcast — such as Bob Lazar’s two-hour interview on the inside story of Area 51 [29] — helps to inculcate a conspiratorial mindset as a (sub-)cultural mode of critical thought, affirming the truth to be “out there”, if one only knows where to look. This diffusion of conspiracies across media is significant, as various studies show that individuals’ habitual motivations to find patterns in their environment (and in otherwise random occurrences) helps to explain why those who tend to believe strongly in conspiracies also tend to believe in paranormal and supernatural phenomena, and vice versa (Dieguez, et al., 2015).

Essentially, the draw of conspiracy theories is not derived from the content per se, but from their function as powerful reasoning mechanisms that provide “broad, internally consistent explanations that allow people to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradiction” [30].

The underlying function of conspiracy theories as dynamic simplifying devices has direct ramifications for a person’s ability to evaluate complex information and competing hypotheses ‘neutrally’ — that is, the very basis of what one might consider ‘sound’ judgement, or what Stanvoich (2016) has labelled ‘epistemic rationality’. Indeed, conspiracy adherents, who tend to seek cognitive closure, habitually “‘seize’ upon early information and quickly ‘freeze’ on the judgments that it implies” [31]. This epistemic shielding effectively guards the individual against future information that might meaningfully challenge previously held assumptions. In shrinking their parameters to evaluate competing perspectives, conspiracy adherents therefore exhibit greater judgemental confidence, presenting what would normally be seen as subjective positions as something more approaching objective fact. A combination of all these factors manifests in what Goertzel (1994) called a monological belief system: “belief systems closed on themselves, in which each conspiracy belief reinforces others, buttressing a general assumption that the world is orchestrated by sinister forces” [32].

Socio-psychological insights into conspiracy theories may be relatively new, but it is important to recall that conspiracies are not a modern innovation. Rumour-spreading, myths, gossip, and folklore are all examples of interrelated phenomena that occur on the same conceptual plane as conspiracy (Bangerter, et al., 2020), and conspiracies have been identified as far back as ancient Egypt (Montserrat, 2002) and Greece (Roisman, 2006). Nonetheless, their form has changed over time: conspiracies in the Middle Ages, for example, generally focused on exotic Others who resided ‘outside society’ (often, secret societies such as the Illuminati, Freemasons, and Knights Templar; Knight, 2000). These conspiracies of ‘secure paranoia’ have steadily given way to conspiracies of ‘insecure paranoia’, however, moving further away from this neat ‘self/other’ delineation to a far more insecure version of conspiracy-infused anxiety which plunges everything into an infinite regress of suspicion. [emphasis added]. [33]

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

Viral falsehoods: Agency, the algorithm and the epistemological hinge of anti-science

In a study sampling cultural attitudes among Canadian undergraduates, Rizeq, et al. (2020) show that anti-science beliefs are cognitively tied to paranormal beliefs and conspiracy beliefs, and vice versa; that is, anti-science acts as an effective epistemological hinge for other forms of conspiratorial thought (van Zoonen, 2012). Of course, anti-scientific sentiment is nothing new; it is as old as science itself and, like conspiracism, it too is seen to accelerate in periods of deep social crisis (Dunbar, 1996). In a sign of our times, academic communities in the natural sciences are beginning to report on this phenomenon with increasing alarm. Studies on the dangers of anti-scientific falsehoods being spread by far-right actors have appeared in specialist journals such as *Microbes and Infection* (Hotez, 2020), for instance; and a pre-COVID editorial in the high-profile *Physician’s Weekly* (January 2020) lays bare the causal malaise attributed to rising and more readily expressed anti-scientific sentiment:

> There has been a rise in many forms of science rejection, ranging from vaccine hesitancy and refusal, antithesis to research investment, and legislation that would encourage factual-relativism. Unless this course is reversed, we can expect the future to include a return of basic diseases such as cholera, typhus, and yellow fever, as well as a reversal of the gains in reducing population morbidity and mortality of the last two centuries. [34]

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

Thinking ontologically for a moment, this growth in anti-scientific sentiment can also be located in the transition from first modernity to second modernity (Forman, 2007). Recall that the constancy and sense of linear progression that distinguishes first modernity has its roots in the philosophical traditions of rationalism and scientific-led epistemologies (Forman, 2007). Second modernity has promoted a creeping rupture of this stable, ‘scientific’ core of truth in some quarters, effectively opening up an epistemological vacuum that presents ample opportunity for the growth of self-assured — and yet anti-scientific — systems of interpretation far less tied to classic notions of objectivity. Indeed, this effect has become so intuitively recognizable that a complex concept of ontological and epistemological instability — ‘post-truth’ — has
arguably slid into the modern lexicon with consummate ease. Of course, the degree to which social media directly cause post-truth ontology is a matter of debate. Hannan, for example, argues that social media are a post-truth ontology, serving as the incubation site for trolling behaviours that have spilled out into mainstream politics and legislation [35]. While I fundamentally disagree that social media are a cause of post-truth politics, they unquestionably play an important role in accentuating the falsehoods and conspiratorial foundations of movements such as QAnon, which are post-truth constructs par excellence [36]. The nature of this contribution — and its effects on personal agency in particular — requires to be briefly unpacked.

We know that mass media play a key role in exacerbating contentious debates around various scientific controversies (Aykut, et al., 2012), but the growth of user-generated content, which has proliferated rapidly alongside the growth in social media, has been a game-changer. As van Dijck (2009) has argued, social media ‘users’ tend to be conceived as more active consumers (or prosumers) of media than previous generations — content amplifiers in a democratized digital landscape. Furthermore, it is well established that users’ sense of self-agency is tied to their status within online communities (Albrechtslund, 2017), mirroring classic formations of social agency that we have seen replicated in ‘off-line’ communal settings (Trapnell and Paulhus, 2012). The avalanche of false news online that has peaked at various times since 2013 greatly exacerbates this reciprocal relationship between falsehoods and user-generated, autobiographical journeys of epistemological discovery (a hallmark of second modernity). In the first paper to explore comprehensively how ‘true’ and ‘false’ news spreads online, Vosoughi, et al. (2018) provide some key insights by tracing rumor cascades [37]. First, they identify politics as the largest rumor category (c. 45,000 cascades), followed by urban legends (c. 32,000 cascades). Second, falsehoods categorically reach more people than the truth; indeed, “[i]t took the truth about six times as long as falsehood to reach 1,500 people and 20 times as long as falsehood to reach a cascade depth of 10” [38]. Third, the authors estimate that falsehoods are 70 percent more likely to be retweeted/shared than the truth [39]. And finally, novelty has a strong effect on the diffusion of false news, not only because when information is novel it is more valuable for individual decision-making, but from a social perspective “it conveys social status on one that is ‘in the know’ or has access to unique ‘inside’ information” [40].

This latter finding, in particular, chimes with a similar desire for reciprocal ‘in-group’ confirmation among ‘in the know’ conspiratorial communities (Douglas, et al., 2019; 2017), which can motivate users to spread these insights to one another, but also to incubate polarizing narratives against Others (such as immigrants and ethnic minorities) that are more readily spread to external, non-involved groups (Jolley, et al., 2020). In more technical terms, greater levels of communal integration translate to higher degrees of homophily [41]: if the political vocabulary of a group is built on falsehoods, then naturally, these falsehoods will spread more rapidly than ‘truth’. In addition, the acceleration of falsehoods across online communities is often led by small numbers of individuals. These individuals can creatively leverage existing sentiment and instantly recognizable hashtags (such as ‘#buildthewall’ and ‘#lockherup’) to generate new variations of familiar content (de Saint Laurent, et al., 2020), thereby satiating the consumer while helping to grow a thriving online community of believers/followers [42]. When the high prevalence of bot accounts that “promote political conspiracies and divisive hashtags alongside COVID-19 content” (Ferrara, 2020) is factored into the equation, the divisive potential of this (post)modern ecology of untruth would appear to be more potent and perhaps novel. Yet, from a communications perspective, this ecology is not necessarily so new. The convergence of self-communication and mass-communication (Castells, 2013) — which underpins social media — represents an evolution of classic forms of networked community building, not a revolution [43]. Thus the degree to which one can isolate the algorithmic hand of falsehood-accelerating mechanisms such as recommender systems as being directly causal in pathways of extremism and polarization is not immediately clear [44].

Scholars are currently grappling with this problem. The original purpose of these recommender systems, which arose in the mid-1990s, was to help users navigate the vast mounds of data available in the World Wide Web, and to forecast more accurately what individual users would purchase/consume based on past behaviour. This guiding principle of accuracy was steadily diluted over time, however, as recommender systems were re-primed to hook users into compulsive online browsing and extended periods of platform
engagement, acting as “a trap for capturing fickle users” [45]. This shift led to concerns about the capacity of algorithmically created ‘filter bubbles’ effectively to overpower the agency of users: that is, to propel them down extremist rabbit holes. Early literature cautiously supported this hypothesis. O’Callaghan, et al. (2015), for example, found that consumers of extreme-right content on YouTube were directed ‘down a rabbit hole’ of reinforcing (extremist) content within a few short clicks, while recommender systems were also implicated in the ease of forming jihadi communities on Twitter (Berger, 2013) [46]. Less careful analyses assumed that both radicalization to violent extremism and journeys through the filter bubble were neatly linear, and so it made intuitive sense for some commentators to speak about the ‘extremist swamp’ that exists on YouTube and how “[r]ecommendation algorithm[s] can lead online viewers up the radicalisation pathway” (Mullally, 2019). Subsequent literature has probed into the structural power of recommender systems in more detail, finding that filter bubbles are not nearly as prevalent as originally assumed (Haim, et al., 2017). In fact, current research “lean[s] towards filter bubbles not being a problem” [47], with “most of the empirical studies suggest[ing] that they either do not exist or are very weak” [48]. As a result, it is becoming increasingly clear that users’ choices play a much more important role in whether they opt to proceed down ‘rabbit holes’ and/or to move through filter bubbles, an understanding that directs the conversation further away from the popular, reductive notion that recommender systems possess a unique power to compel individual agency beyond all control, especially when it comes to ‘online radicalization’ (Reed, et al., 2019). And so, at the current state of play, we know that: (a) algorithms play a role in compelling online behaviour, but: (b) the degree to which they cause radicalization towards extreme positions cannot be extricated from the complex societal configurations in which individuals find themselves (neatly recalling one of the course assumptions of discourse theory) [49].

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

[T]he wide spread of conspiracy theories in contemporary mediascapes can be seen as an uncontrolled contagion that, thanks to both the permeability of culture and the agency of memes, has increasingly affected social discourses. Exactly as with other viral texts, conspiracy theories would have therefore progressively ‘infected’ the Internet, hence finding larger consent among its users. However, this view is problematic, since it attributes to Web users a passive role and represents them as infected objects of an external action (that of the viral content), rather than as active subjects. In other words, virality theories suggest the reductionist idea that messages are totally and unconditionally accepted by their receivers. [50]

Stano ultimately concludes:

[T]he forms of ‘online conviviality’ brought about by the Web 2.0 have made ‘social trust’ emerge and become the base of a number of narratives whose verification transcends any reference to proven facts, and rather relies on other narratives. From such a perspective [...] conspiracy theories can be conceived as a symptom of a larger problem embedded in the infrastructure of current communication systems, that is to say, the so-called ‘post-truth’ era. [51]

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

Forging a community, satiating anxiety: Identity formation in the canonical discourse of QAnon

Up to this point I have outlined the ontological underpinnings that determine processes of collective identity formation, focusing not only on the productive capacity of anxiety but also on how online ecologies that accelerate exposure to falsehoods feed (into) the persuasive power of contemporary conspiracy. Similarly, I have highlighted how anti-science functions as a key epistemological hinge for conspiracy, sowing as it does a reflexive suspicion of authority and a performative rejection of ‘first modern’ fundamentals. In this section, I undertake a discourse analysis of QAnon content to highlight these dynamics while providing some essential insight(s) into how the movement actively constructs itself as a bastion for ‘real’ truth, positions itself as a totem of morality and has successfully cross-fertilized with other conspiracy narratives, such as those associated with anti-vaccination and COVID-19.

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

Beyond good and evil? Moral depravity and the antagonistic other

In order to establish an antagonistic Other as a key reference point, it is incumbent on various QAnon messengers to underline the legitimacy of Q: the very person/people responsible for identifying ‘the enemy’ and uncovering their crimes. Often, the first step is to reference the vague nature of Q’s drops explicitly and to spin this breadcrumb approach as an empowering communal mechanism — an invitation to QAnon followers to “do your own research” and “expand your thinking”. Of course, these breadcrumbs would mean little in isolation: Q’s true legitimacy lies in having direct connections with former U.S. President Donald Trump and a ‘plan’ which is to be trusted at all times. As confirmation, QAnon influencers (such as SerialBrain2) employ bespoke tools — such as ‘the Matrix Time Stamp Method’ — to interpret the proximity between Q drops, Trump tweets and real-world events as ‘proof(s)’ that Trump is listening to Q, and vice versa. An early passage from the prominent (and Amazon best-seller: Tiffany, 2019) *An Invitation to the Great Awakening* neatly captures these dynamics, accompanied by an example of how a ‘proof’ is constructed:

As long as Q has been posting, Anons on the boards have been taking those posts, combining them with tweets by POTUS along with news and real world events, in order to create
proofs. Proofs are our evidence, our argument of fact that establishes the validity of these posts. The number of proofs you can create from the variety of posts, tweets, future news and world events is staggering. Although Q’s first post has yet to be proven true, many more crumbs have been dropped in its wake that have been. These crumbs, taken by other Anons and arranged into pictographic memes have given us the body of evidence required to establish, with statistical certainty, the legitimacy of the anonymous Q. [58]

Figure 1: ‘Q proof’ demonstrating collaboration between Q and Donald Trump [59].

Over time, QAnon followers have traced ever-stronger links between Trump and Q, believing that the U.S. president regularly accessed the Q tripcode(s) to communicate with his followers. This is evident in Q drop
#533, for example, signed “GOD BLESS YOU AND GOD BLESS THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. 4, 10, 20”, with ‘4, 10, 20’ a cipher for DJT: Donald J. Trump [60]. Elsewhere, Trump has actively fed the impression of collaboration by retweeting QAnon accounts [61] and at one point publicly describing QAnon followers as people that “seem to like me” and “people that love our country”. Q has even pulled the curtain back on their collaboration by providing tantalizing snippets of conversations with the president. Drop #2420 (Figure 2) offers a neat, verbatim exchange:

![Q drop #2420](image)

With the Q/Trump legitimacy strongly established, their identity as a righteous bulwark against the tyranny of the cabal helps to maintain a neat self/enemy dialectic that animates the entire QAnon discourse. The cabal is a mirror image of Trump and Q — elitist [63], manipulative [64], enemies of the people [65] — but much more than that, their formidable status is underlined by their protean form and perplexing array of implicated actors:

The elite class of bad actors that are currently active in human affairs defies easy definition. They are amorphous coalitions of powerful persons and institutions. The institutions can include royalty, business, government, religions, charitable organizations, foundations, societies, crime syndicates, etc. The things that all of these bad actors have in common are accumulation of power and actions that intend harm upon the non-elite classes of citizens. [66]

The scale of this struggle arguably necessitates two discursive moves: first, the need to make sense of an unseen enemy; and second, a suitably epic sense of purpose designed to overcome a centuries-old foe [62]. For the first task, the narrative thread of pedophilia becomes one of the most powerful weapons at Q’s disposal [68]. Leveraging a classic moral panic (Critcher, 2008), casting the enemy as a global collective of child abusers engaged in sex trafficking allows QAnon believers to rally around an almost universal moral cause, while also permitting Q to build on the very real history of powerful institutions and individuals — such as the Catholic Church and Jeffrey Epstein [69] — who have been implicated in very real child abuse. From Netflix [70], to Hilary Clinton [71], to the Pope [72], this (a)moral deprivation effectively tightens the
feedback loop between Q and the anons, reminding us (*ad nauseam*) that ‘everything is connected’:

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

![Figure 3: Q drop #744 in Neon Revolt (2019).](image-url)
Ultimately, defining the cabal by means of satanism and pedophilia allows Q to elevate its struggle to the grandest moral dichotomy of all: a Manichean struggle between good and evil, which in the vernacular of QAnon is repeatedly construed in terms of light and darkness. Serving a dual function, not only does this darkness define individual members of the cabal (from pedophilic Hollywood actors [73] to morally depraved Antifa protestors) [74] — it also constitutes the current state of the world which can only be overcome by a ‘great awakening’, the process through which believers discern the ability to see the truth for themselves:

**Figure 4:** Q drop #747 in Neon Revolt (2019).

(Neon Revolt, 2019, Chapter 5).
Figure 5: Snapshot of tweet quoted in Q drop #4481.
In the end, it is the darkness of the cabal that constitutes the outside enemy rather than the cabal itself. Popular (and well-researched) analyses of QAnon that settle upon the Storm as the conspiracy’s endgame (Rahn and Patterson, 2021) are, therefore, not quite correct. The Storm is simply a prelude to the final (true) purpose of QAnon, which is to lead its followers out of darkness and towards the emancipatory, (ontological) fulfillment of light — a hazy afterlife of sorts when all of humanity can enact its capacity to do good and ultimately to become whole:
"I want [to] come out and say ‘hey, it doesn’t have to be like this; we are good people’, humans are good and we can make the world a better place because the money and technology to make the world a better place is there. It’s just been covered up or been controlled for so long, that it’s time for it all to come out. And maybe I’m the catalyst for something better.” [75]

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

In essence, all conspiracy theories are applied *chains of equivalence*. They draw connective threads through a series of wild claims and (re)package them into a neat, referential whole. They are, by design, amenable to the absorption of new, reinforcing narratives to tauten and strengthen the chain. The cross-fertilization of QAnon and anti-vaccination communities is born of this process, with both communities sharing similar thematic frameworks and, in many cases, content (Dickinson, 2021). The anti-vaccination (or anti-vaxx) movement is very well established, of course (Blume, 2006) and has built much of its sceptical legitimacy over time by mixing ‘true’ examples of big pharma misadventure and adverse vaccine outcomes with objectively false information, thereby replicating the basic formula of most effective conspiracy theories.
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with a splicing of anti-science. Formed around “moral outrage and structural oppression by institutional government and the media” [77], one might argue that anti-vaccination communities have long been primed for a potential merger with QAnon: all that was missing was a seismic push.

Network analysis confirms that QAnon communities were greatly preoccupied with the topic of COVID-19 from the early stages of the pandemic [78] and, furthermore, that mutual migration between major clusters has been aided by recommender systems on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram that directed QAnon content towards established conspiracy communities — such as anti-vaxxers — and vice versa (Wong, 2020). A recent report from the Network Contagion Research Institute charts this effect across six months in 2020, with the rapid development of a ‘pedophile cluster’ indicative of “the absorption of QAnon conspiracy into the topic network” [79]:

![Figure 8: A topic network for the term “NWO” (New World Order) [80].](image)

On Q’s part, the discursive foray into COVID-19 began with surprisingly few references. Short Q drops aped Trump’s vernacular by citing ‘the China virus’ [81] and ‘hydroxychloroquine cure’ [82] as they framed the pandemic around the Democratic Party’s plans to exploit the virus and consolidate its political standing ahead of the U.S. presidential election (Tian, 2021). Q’s first mention of the term ‘COVID-19’ arrives on 8 April 2020, similarly framed around the looming presidential election:
With the die cast in favour of protecting Trump, Q proceeded to build a COVID narrative around pre-existing themes, effectively adding links to a *chain of equivalence* that had been established over the previous two-and-a-half years. Particularly notable is the foregrounding of children, accompanied by familiar themes such as the overarching tension between darkness and light:
Why are children immune to COVID-19?
How many children die from influenza each year?
Why are elderly more at risk to COVID-19?
How many elderly die from influenza each year?

Figure 10: Q drop #4041.
The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had a massive effect in mainstreaming QAnon [83], and perhaps the most significant driver in the early days actually came not from Q, but from the release of a movie, entitled *Plandemic*. A 26-minute video originally uploaded to Vimeo on 4 May 2020, *Plandemic* garnered eight million views in just over a week, and became an instant mainstay of YouTube channels and Facebook pages dedicated to anti-vaccination and conspiracies before eventually being removed (Frenkel, et al., 2020; Hatmake, 2020). It is premised on challenging the accepted science of the pandemic and spotlights ‘whistle-blower’ scientist Dr. Judy Mikovits, who proceeds to make a series of (debunked) claims (Funke, 2020). These include: Dr Antony Fauci and Bill Gates stand to gain financially from ‘mandatory vaccination’ [84], Italy’s early wave of COVID-19 deaths was actually caused by the flu vaccine [85], and mask wearing actively damages the immune system, thereby increasing an individual’s risk of death from opportunistic infections [86]. With a structure similar to that of established QAnon narratives, Mikovits’s testimony is built around the need to emancipate ourselves from the nefarious influence of shadowy elites (the constitutive enemy), because “if we don’t stop this now, we can not only forget our Republic and our freedom, but we can forget humanity, because we’ll be killed by this agenda”
Within a day of its release, prominent QAnon channels — such as the Chasing the White Rabbit Facebook page, 25,000 followers — endorsed *Plandemic* as ‘essential viewing’ (Frenkel, et al., 2020) while, over 15 months later, its central narrative persists within QAnon communities:

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

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

![Figure 12](image_url): Snapshot of protesters with signs detailing familiar slogans from the anti-vaccination and QAnon vernacular (in Spring and Wendling, 2020).

Ultimately, QAnon influencers and followers have weaponized the COVID-19 pandemic to expand the *chain of equivalence* during a unique opportunity to ‘redpill normies’ (Dickinson, 2021) — the process whereby non-believers are exposed to conspiratorial content to bring them gradually into the fold. This
outreach has been met with considerable success, as QAnon narratives become more mainstreamed and readily absorbed (Dickson, 2020; de Zeeuw, et al., 2020). The effects of this normalization can be seen, for example, in how QAnon has become embedded in various non-conspiracy networks, such as wellness communities, which are similarly built around cultures of alternative thinking and proto-spirituality (Greenspan, 2020). Once again, the emotive hook of child protection in the face of dark forces appears to the fore; indeed, QAnon adherents have been acutely aware of this narrative power, in one instance hijacking the Save Our Children movement and reframing a genuine campaign to prevent child trafficking into something much more sinister (Roose, 2020). The words of wellness influencer Krystal Tini (147k Instagram followers) — one of many within the yoga, wellness, and spirituality communities who began to share QAnon content following the onset of the pandemic (Nelson, 2021) — ring familiar, as she proffers one more link for the chain: “I’m not promoting QAnon theories [...] I support finding truth. I support saving children from violence and sexual abuse. If that makes me a Q supporter, then I guess I am on the right side of what is best for humanity.” (Chang, 2021) [90].

Agonism and empathy: How to solve a problem like QAnon?

The mainstreaming of QAnon — and its association with violence — present a fundamental challenge to states and tech companies alike, with no easy answers. Most strategies for addressing QAnon are focused on tackling disinformation — typically the assumed lifeblood of conspiracy. A recent Brookings Institution report, for example, recommends combating disinformation ‘using data-driven methods’ and the establishment of a non-partisan public-private partnership (Paresky, et al., 2021), but the most significant pushback to date came in mid-to-late 2020 when Facebook and Instagram (Frenkel, 2020), Twitter (Conger, 2020) and YouTube (Solsman, 2020) engaged in mass takedowns of QAnon accounts and associated content in an effort to disrupt — if not cripple — the movement. Politically, this move reflected concerns about extremist discourses in the run-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election (Sanger and Perlroth, 2020). More substantially, it reflects an Internet policy landscape in which sweeping technological solutions are often applied on the basis of expediency (Kyza, et al., 2020) [91] and a tacit assumption that a reduction in extreme(ist) content should translate to an overall reduction in extreme(ist) behaviour and, ultimately, violence (Kundnani and Hayes, 2018).

The long-term efficacy of such policies remains squarely up for debate. In the first instance, we know that mass takedowns have a strong debilitating effect on online social networks and their ability to post further content (Conway, et al., 2019; Nouri, et al., 2020). On the other hand, explorative research indicates that takedowns may also funnel ‘extreme communities’ towards more ‘extreme spaces’ online, resulting in a hardening of belief systems (Pearson, 2018; Gaudette, et al., 2021). Thanks to this hardening, the explosive growth of alternative digital ecosystems (e.g., on Gab, Voat, and Parler) since the 2020 U.S. presidential election (Brandt, 2021) [92] has solidified a niche (alt-) online landscape where QAnon followers not only congregate in large numbers (Garry, et al., 2021), but do so in a space that is typically beyond the reach, and desire, of normies [93]. In the case of Gab, for example, this Twitter-like platform (popular especially with the far right) has always branded itself as a space for unfettered free speech and minimal content moderation; hate speech has flourished as a result, with anti-Semitism, anti-Black racism, and anti-feminism particularly to the fore [94]. Unsurprisingly, QAnon narratives of conspiracy and pedophila have grown substantially in these spaces [95] and the recent pivot of prominent QAnon influencer GhostEzra [96] (whose popularity exploded following his (enforced) migration from Twitter to Telegram) to outright and sustained anti-Semitism is (rightly) raising alarm at the prospect of equivalential discursive chains being formed around a toxic combination of QAnon conspiracy and established far-right narratives (Argentino, 2021). Recall that chains of equivalence are premised on the (impossible) erasure of an antagonistic Other — a struggle that binds collective identity to powerful political causes. Far from offering a digital panacea, content takedowns enacted by a newly antagonistic ‘Big Tech’ — who have also been vilified by Donald Trump on this basis (see, for example, Shalvey, 2021) — may just help to expand a binding sense of injustice, hardening “a community of grievance in the face of perceived techno-social
persecution” and ultimately constricting meaningful opportunities for reasoned, agonistic debate.

In many ways, communal cohesion in the face of ‘techno-social persecution’ might help to sustain a movement that (especially since January 2021) remains quite dislocated. At the time of writing, Q’s last drop came in 8 December 2020; it contained a single link to a pro-Trump mash-up set to ‘We’re Not Gonna Take it’ by Twisted Sister — conjuring the aesthetic of a farewell tour in more ways than one. As President Biden was sworn in and Donald Trump exited the stage with no mass arrests, nor any hint at the Storm, QAnon believers were left reeling and strangely unanchored. In one Telegram channel with over 18,400 members, doubts began to mount; one user writing: “It’s obvious now we’ve been had. No plan, no Q, nothing” (Menn, et al., 2021). In the months since, more and more expressions of doubt have appeared on 8kun and other dedicated spaces, as a façade normally defined by total conviction begins to crack: Figure 13: Post to 8Kun’s /qpatriotresearch board, 24 March 2021.

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

It is easy, and tempting, to laugh at those who follow QAnon and to ridicule a belief system that appears so outrageous to neutral observers. It is similarly easy to write individuals off as having simply ‘lost their minds’ and being beyond help, cast aside to wallow in their self-built forts of ‘critical thinking’ while the rest of us bleat like sheep. Yet perhaps a more empathetic — and less polarizing — outlook is required.

There is substantial evidence to show that QAnon is tearing friendships and families apart (Jackson, 2021; Jaff and del Real, 2021), and people are desperate to understand not only how this has happened, but how they might persuade loved ones to ‘come back’ — a tacit desire, surely, for empathetic understanding. There is more, too, than meets the eye with regard to those involved in the U.S. Capitol siege. Court records of QAnon followers arrested for involvement shows that 68 percent had received mental health diagnoses (as opposed to 19 percent among all Americans), while among the QAnon actors with criminal records, 44 percent “experienced a serious psychological trauma that preceded their radicalization, such as physical or sexual abuse of them or of their children” (Moskalenko, 2021). Anxiety diagnoses were especially to the fore in this subset (Moskalenko, 2021) — a coincidence perhaps, but more likely an indicator of societal and psychological fissures that remain to be fully understood.
Empathy has meaning in ontology too. If we are serious about ‘tackling’ QAnon, then it is essential to look beyond networked formations in online spaces — and how to destroy them — and to focus more substantially on its conditions of emergence. The starting point along this process must be a recognition that “the very condition of possibility of the formation of political identities is at the same time the condition of impossibility of a society from which antagonism can be eliminated” [103]; that is, QAnon is not an outlier in contemporary political processes, it is borne of them. Long recognizing the silo-ing effects of antagonistic politics, Mouffe (2013, 2005, 1993) argues strongly for the (difficult) need to shift to agonistic formations of democracy, in which “the crucial issue […] is how to establish [an] us/them distinction, which is constitutive of politics, in a way that is compatible with the recognition of pluralism” [104]. The question, then, becomes not how to reach a compromise with antagonistic forces or to be fully inclusive (that is, consensus without exclusion) [105]; nor is it to “eliminate passions or to relegate them to the private sphere in order to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere” [106], as takedown policies arguably do. The real task lies in ‘sublimating’ those passions “by mobilizing them towards democratic designs, by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives” [107]; it is, therefore, to expand the inclusive, democratic horizons of participation within our societies before those passions can metastasize into hateful and potentially violent conspiracy. Understanding why countless individuals have adhered to the wild narratives of QAnon — as a blatantly antagonistic Other — resonates far beyond traditional notions of ‘radicalization’ and reflexive denunciations of ‘madness’: it tells us something about the stratified nature of a modern, antagonistic politics in which so many people have chosen to be outsiders in an attempt to bring the system down; or indeed, to elect those promising to act on their behalf (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

The key now is to discern how, or indeed if, an empathetic politics of inclusion is possible, particularly when as with classic antagonisms of “terrorism” (Mouffe, 2005) — the values (and violence) espoused by QAnon are anathema to the very idea of liberal democracy. This is a task that goes far beyond QAnon. When QAnon ‘dies’ — as it surely will — it will be replaced by a similar antagonism that reflects anew the politics and anxieties of our time. We will not be able to explain it away by pointing at ‘the algorithm’, nor will we erase its presence by obliterating online footprints as they take shape. Ultimately, acceptance of this precept might constitute a new form of resilience to (online) polarization — one which recognizes the inevitability of antagonism and the need for a more empathetic, agonistic politics; that is to say, a resilient commitment to dull the sharpest edges of antagonism without erasing them altogether. The next step is to determine what this process might look like in reality and the mammoth task surely entailed.

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Notes

1. QAnon followers often consult Q drop aggregators such as qmap.pub and qanon.pub to keep track of Q’s pronouncements and ‘proofs’, as do less enamoured researchers. All Q drops analysed for this paper have
been taken from these sources.

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


4. As this paper is going to press, the most recent FBI warning of QAnon-associated violence came on 14 June 2021. The FBI points to the transformation of QAnon adherents — disillusioned by the failure of ‘the Storm’ — from ‘digital soldiers’ into fighters engaging in real-world violence against Democrats and “other political opposition” (Hosenball, 2021).

5. Much of this stems from the publishing cycles of sociology, political science, and international relations journals, which tend to be quite elongated. This contrasts with the cycles for computer science journals, for example, which are often much shorter.

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

7. Smith, 2020, p. 3.


9. Smith, 2020, p. 3.


13. Ibid.

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


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

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

21. Berenkotter (2020), for example, traces this dynamic from Ancient Greece, through biblical times, right up to the present day.

22. And always “towards some final or ultimate balance or order” (Heaphy, 2007, pp. 5–6).

23. Fitzgerald, 2014, p. 56; Calhoun, parsing Beck, argues: “This ‘second modernity’ is ‘reflexive’ in several senses including (a) growing efforts to try to guide it, and (b) greater consciousness of the larger patterns on the part of ordinary people — who for example not only mix more across lines of cultural difference but are consciously aware of this and often explicitly affirm the virtues of such mixing, and who recognize the existence of a global community of fate.” (Calhoun, 2010, p. 610)


25. These steps will be applied to an analysis of QAnon’s canonical discourse later in the paper.

26. Torfing, 1999, pp. 6–7, p. 129. “[An] antagonism is seen to occur when the presence of [an] ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution” (Howarth, et al., 2000, p. 10).

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

28. Cassam argues that ‘epistemic vices’ are typically equated with negative intellectual traits. These include “gullibility, dogmatism, prejudice, closed-mindedness, and negligence” (Cassam, 2016, p. 159). Outlining how these traits may be a priori (and incorrectly) associated with a person’s belief that 9/11 was an ‘inside job’, Cassam walks us through the following scenario: “Because he is gullible, dogmatic, closed-minded, cynical, prejudiced, and so on, he ignores important evidence which bears on his questions, relies on unreliable sources, jumps to conclusions and generally can’t see the wood for the trees. The fact that this is how he goes about his business is a reflection of his intellectual character. He ignores critical evidence because he is grossly negligent, he relies on untrustworthy sources because he is gullible, he jumps to conclusions because he is lazy and careless. He is neither a responsible nor an effective inquirer, and it is the influence of his intellectual character traits which is responsible for this” (Cassam, 2016, p. 164). Cassam’s point is that this assumption simplifies deeper epistemic dynamics and incorrectly reduces the intellectual capacity of those believing in conspiracy theories to redundancy, or, indeed vice. A much deeper engagement with the epistemological process of conspiracy belief is therefore required.

29. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEWz4SXfyCQ.


32. Klein and Nera, 2020, p. 123. Furthermore, as Rotweiller and Gill (2020) have noted, this process has direct overlaps with psychological antecedents to violent extremism — a dynamic relationship that the literature is only now beginning to unravel seriously (Bhui and Bhugra, 2020), and a puzzle made all the more important by the Capitol Hill riots/attacks on 6 January 2021.


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


36. I would say, rather, that conspiracy theories have interlocked with a rise of anti-scientific sentiment and fake news, and with a huge increase in the amount of time individuals and communities are spending online: the influence of social media slots into this matrix, rather than creating it.

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


40. Ibid.

41. For a neat overview of the origins and evolution of homophily, see Kossinets and Watts, 2009.

42. “[T]he creative uses we evidenced (at least for part of the broader online community discussing immigration) are prefaced on generating variations rather than sticking to the original formula. These variations might not bring the user popularity, but they are likely to attract attention and, through following and retweets, to build community. The final, surprising conclusion coming out of studying malevolent creativity on social media might be exactly this: that creative expression can sacrifice individuality, in the context of Twitter, on the altar of achieving togetherness.” (de Saint Laurent, et al., 2020, p. 78)


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

45. Seaver, 2019, p. 430.

46. Also O’Hara and Stevens, 2015.

47. Kaiser and Rauchfleisch, 2020, p. 3.

48. Ibid.

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


51. Emphasis added; Stano, 2020, p. 493.
52. In so doing, I align with the primary task of discourse theorists which is, according to David Howarth, “to describe the ways in which the identities of agents are blocked, and to chart the different means by which these obstacles are constructed in antagonistic terms by social agents” [emphasis added] (Howarth, 2000, p. 105). I am also subscribing to an interpretation of structure and agency that is common among discourse theorists: “[D]iscourse theorists stress the historical contingency and ‘structural impossibility’ of social systems, and refuse to posit essentialist conceptions of social agency. Instead, agents and systems are social constructs that undergo constant historical and social change as a result of political practices. Indeed, a major task of the discourse theorist is to chart and explain such historical and social change by recourse to political factors and logics.” (Howarth, et al., 2000, p. 6)

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

54. This method of discourse analysis is based on the notion that authors should show a suitable amount of discourse from which they have attempted to draw their conclusions. For a more thorough outline of this rationale, see Fitzgerald, 2014.

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

56. “Learn double meanings. News unlocks MAP. Why is STEEL so important? Expand your thinking [...] Q” (Q drop #850).

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


60. As time passed, drops signed off as ‘Q+’ were identified as direct communications from Trump.


62. All Q drops have been sourced from qanon.pub; the database has been confirmed as accurate and accessible as of 6 April 2021.

63. “Are you ready to hold the political elite [protected] accountable? Q” Q drop #4945.

64. “The Cabal is a word fraught with fear. Sometimes called the Illuminati, the New World Order or even the Global Elite, it refers to a secret faction working inside our governments with an agenda for world domination and the destruction of humanity. To become aware of their programming, we must empower ourselves with awareness free from their crafted agendas.”

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TRUTH about what happened to the PUBLIC? What ‘value’ might exist by attempting to BLOCK ‘PUBLIC’ testimony/hearings? Would educating the public through the Senate prior to Barr/Durham/Huber release(s) be important? Narratives are created and pushed to prevent the public from discovering the TRUTH. ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE. Q” (Q drop #3742).


67. As QAnon influencer Neon Revolt explains in Revolution Q: The Story of QAnon and the 2nd American Revolution: “Buckle up, because this is where things start to sound crazy. For centuries, the world has been ruled by an ancient and secret death cult. Throughout my intensive study about who these people are, how they function, and how they retain their power, I’ve come to call this group, simply, the Cabal. The Cabal is a hierarchical organization that, at its core, is Satanic in origin. We’ll get in to the specifics in a later chapter, but the short of it is that they are an occult group that leverages institutions like banking, media, governments, as well as blackmail, pedophilia, human sacrifice, and even cannibalism in order to achieve their goals. Nothing is off the table, so long as it accumulates power for themselves. They’ve embedded themselves in the halls of power all over the world, and use whatever means they have at their disposal to retain that power. The depths of evil in which they are willing to engage reveal their fundamental depravity. And the insidious thing about them is that, just like snakes in the grass, they are experts at hiding in plain sight. Many, if not most of the people who will be arrested and tried are all members of the Cabal.” (Neon Revolt, 2019, Chapter 1)

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

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

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

71. “How many people in DC does Clinton have dirt on? How many people in DC does Clinton have [had] on payroll? Dark secrets. Q” (Q drop #4819).

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

73. Q drop #288.
Q drop #1741.

M. Smith, 2020, 1:15:28–1:16:47. Smith continues: “What does the media look like in the future? Well, to me, what I would hope is that it’s not filtered. I would love to build a platform or build some sort of system where artists could connect directly to the audience. I want to build products and tell stories that bring humanity together, that bring compassion, that bring love, that bring forgiveness. That bring inspiration and courage back to the audience without having the influence of violence or gratuitous sex or gratuitous death [...] because those are things and images that get stored in our psyche and in our soul and I don’t think that’s the way this earth was intended to be.” (M. Smith, 2020, 1:16:47–1:17:37.)

The movement had reached dangerous heights pre-COVID: the WHO identified anti-vaccination sentiment as one of the top 10 threats to global health in 2019 (World Health Organization, 2019) and the ecology of social media has been implicated. Mirroring the findings of Vosoughi, et al. (2018), for example, an analysis of 1,300 Facebook pages during the 2019 measles outbreak found that anti-vaxx pages increased by 500 percent, compared with a rise of 50 percent for pro-vaccine pages (Johnson, et al., 2020).

Smith and Graham, 2019, p. 1,310.

M. Smith, 2020, p. 23.

Ross, et al., 2021, p. 8. Similar analyses confirm that this mutual migration continues to grow on ‘open’ fora such as Gab and Telegram which have been mostly unaffected by content takedowns and censorship (Timberg and Dwoskin, 2021).


Q drop #3896.

Q drop #3956.

The report, “Q-tips: Measuring the mainstreaming of QAnon during the pandemic” (McAweeney, 2020), for example, not only shows a wholesale mainstreaming of QAnon concepts, but also shows how this has been achieved by solidifying already existing social media networks online.

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

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

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

Plandemic, 2020, 00.03.52–00.04.02.

As an anon puts it on 8kun’s /qresearch (5 March 2021), “The governments around the world are complicit. This goes way beyond Trump, as this was planned long before. I DO think Trump triggered the early release though. Right before the release of the virus Trump had gone up against the big pharma cartel, remember? They fastracked the Plandemic to use as election weapon, because they had to get him out.
Coincidence the great Green Reset was waiting for release as soon as the Western economies were devastaded, no. I think we can all see now, this virus was not accidentally released.”

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

90. For a more detailed outline of QAnon and wellness communities, see https://twitter.com/_MAArgentino/status/1303053412456640518.

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

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

93. We would also do well to remember that QAnon was born in one of the more obscure spaces on the Internet, none more so than 4chan.


95. Ibid.

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


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


101. Surreal as these examples are, we are reminded of the FBI’s warning of frustrated QAnon ‘digital soldiers’, who feel they can “no longer trust the plan” and may pivot towards off-line violence (see Hosenball, 2021).
102. A substantial compilation of stories from those describing the effects of ‘losing’ friends and family to QAnon can be found at https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/.

103. Mouffe, 2013, p. 5.


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


107. Ibid.

References


M-A. Argentino [@_MAArgentino], 2021. “t this point GhostEzra is the first QAnon influencer who has gone full neo-nazi. He’s moves beyond blending Antisemitism with QAnon narratives, but is fully pilled on ZOG narratives. GE is probably the most dangerous QAnon influencer with his 330k followers consuming this stuff,” Twitter (17 June), at https://twitter.com/_MAArgentino/status/1405338751363059716, accessed 20 June 2021.


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