

‘We the people, not the sheeple’: QAnon and the transnational mobilisation of millennialist far-right conspiracy theories

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Abstract

QAnon is a U.S.-based conspiracy theory that has been branded as far-right, yet it remains unclear which tenets of transnational far-right ideology are present within QAnon discourse and how adherents actively participate in the movement. To address this problem, a multi-phase content analysis on 1,000 tweets and 8kun posts explores the presence of transnational far-right tenets and millennialist themes within QAnon discourse. A posting frequency analysis of 37,782 tweets and 9,023 posts determines how QAnon adherents participate in precipitating a millennialist apocalypse, and how they can be disrupted. The results suggest that Australian QAnon communities integrate national themes and narratives to ground discourse in the Australian context, and communicate far-right tenets to identify a complex, interconnected left-wing deep state, that must be combatted through a coming apocalypse that QAnon adherents will participate in. This research develops new understandings of how far-right ideology can mould to fit different national contexts, can covertly manifest in discussion topics that are not explicitly far-right, and shows that millennialist movements can be both accelerated and disrupted using social media.

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Introduction

The far-right has a complex relationship with conspiracy theories (Cosentino, 2020; Barkun, 2013) and QAnon is no exception. QAnon is an offshoot of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, which was the ideological motivation for the 2016 shooting at Comet Ping Pong, a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. (Cosentino, 2020). The debunked Pizzagate conspiracy theory claimed that Comet Ping Pong served as the operational base for a ring of paedophiles and Satanists, including high-profile members of the Democratic

Party, such as Hillary Clinton and John Podesta, the former chair of Hillary Clinton's 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. QAnon shares the same ideological foundation as the Pizzagate conspiracy theory yet goes further to suggest involvement by the 'deep state' [1], not only in a child sex ring but also in an ongoing war being waged against former U.S. president, Donald Trump (Cosentino, 2020). Notably, QAnon originated in the U.S. and focuses on U.S. public figures, yet has successfully gained global support. Argentino and Amarasingam (2021) highlighted the transnational threat posed by QAnon, specifically noting the connection between QAnon in Canada, the European Union and Australia. This research is interested in determining how QAnon is assimilated into, and moulded to fit, different national contexts, and to do so, examines an Australian case study.

Since its inception, QAnon has been deeply embroiled with the far-right. The first allegation that Hillary Clinton was involved in a child sex ring was made in October 2016 by a Twitter account associated with white supremacists (Cosentino, 2020). Further allegations were made on 4chan and Reddit, in the particularly notorious 4chan board /pol/ and subreddit r/TheDonald. These spaces are well-known for their affiliation with the ethnonationalist far-right and alt-right (Cosentino, 2020). While existing literature has branded QAnon as far-right (Cosentino, 2020; Papasavva, *et al.*, 2020) other scholars such as Zihiri, *et al.* (2022) claim that QAnon does not cleanly identify with any subset of far-right ideologies, such as hate groups or race-based identity movements. While Zihiri, *et al.* (2022) consider topic cross-over between QAnon and the far-right, they do not explore whether tenets of far-right ideology are present within QAnon tropes themselves. If far-right tenets are present, that could mean that QAnon discourse is covertly aligning with, and promoting, far-right ideologies, while overtly focusing on popular QAnon tropes, such as discussion about perpetrators of child sexual abuse. This is a problem that this research aims to address through the creation and implementation of a code frame based on scholarship on the far-right.

Scholars have also noted QAnon is millennialist in nature (MacMillen and Rush, 2022). Millennialism is the belief in an imminently arriving transformation that will result in the perfection of human existence (Barkun, 2013). In particular, QAnon's apocalypticism has been used as evidence of its millennialism (MacMillen and Rush, 2022). While QAnon's millennialist themes have been documented, it is less common to explore the perceived role, and corresponding actions, of adherents in assisting in precipitating the apocalypse. This study is interested in how apocalyptic themes within QAnon motivate adherents to action, and what that action is — an important task given QAnon has motivated acts of violence. To do so, it will explore the presence of millennialist themes within QAnon discourse.

This study has two aims. First, it aims to establish which tenets of transnational far-right political ideologies are present within QAnon communities. Second, it aims to outline the millennialist themes within the discourse, and the role that QAnon adherents see themselves playing in precipitating the apocalypse. To achieve these aims, this study employed a multi-layered research design, similar to that adopted by Wright, *et al.* (2020). It combines macro-level analysis of two social media platforms (Twitter and 8kun) with large Australian QAnon communities to determine posting patterns; meso-level content analysis on random samples of posts from both platforms; a qualitative digital ethnography during which time was spent immersed within Australian QAnon communities.

This study found that the central discursive themes within Australian QAnon communities focus on identifying a complex, interconnected deep state. This state comprised of left-wing (and sometimes Jewish) powerful figures, engaging in, and facilitating, sex crimes against children and attempting to establish a New World Order [2]. While not often openly identifying as, or directly associating with, the far-right (as found by Zihiri, *et al.* [2022]), multiple tenets of far-right political ideologies permeate QAnon discourse, drawing on both Australian and international themes to become transnational.

This study confirmed the millennialist nature of QAnon, documenting the belief in a 'coming apocalypse', brought about by 'righteous' right-wing political figures. Additionally, it found that QAnon adherents participate in precipitating this apocalypse through online activism and campaigning, and do so because they view themselves as proud 'patriots' charged with protecting the nation. This finding, that QAnon adherents see themselves as playing a direct role in the coming apocalypse, sheds new light on the specific

millennialist themes present within QAnon. Previous scholarship found that adherents of millennialist movements did not always have an active role in the ‘divine’ plan (Wessinger, 2016). This research also contributed to existing scholarship on millennialism by reinforcing the emerging role that social media has played in allowing adherents to participate in the apocalypse, which scholars such as Berger (2015) have noted in the past. Notably, this study also captured the limitations of online activism, and possible approaches to disrupting organisation, in the form of Australian QAnon communities being moderated on their respective social media platforms.

Conceptualising conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories are the belief that an organisation comprised of individuals or groups, is, or was, covertly acting to bring about a malevolent end (Barkun, 2013). Conspiracy theories make assumptions about how objects, people or events are causally interconnected (Douglas, *et al.*, 2019; van Prooijen, *et al.*, 2015) and can range in scope — some explain a single, limited occurrence while others constitute the entire worldview of believers (Barkun, 2013). The individuals or groups responsible for the conspiracy can be anyone, so long as they are a collective (not a lone wolf) (van Prooijen, *et al.*, 2015), deemed powerful and malevolent (Douglas, *et al.*, 2019), are acting deliberately (van Prooijen, *et al.*, 2015) and with some degree of secrecy (Barkun, 2013; van Prooijen, *et al.*, 2015).

Power is crucial within conspiracy theories. Uscinski (2018) explained that conspiracy theories are notions about power, specifically who has power and how they use it. Those accused of conspiring are rarely powerless, but rather are typically implicitly powerful groups, such as politicians, legislative bodies, industries or corporations and multinational groups (Uscinski, 2018). Castanho Silva, *et al.* (2017) discussed how these implicitly powerful groups, who are often the central focus of conspiracy theories and populist politics, are often framed as oppressive ‘elites’ while the public are presented as victims. The powerful ‘out-group’ responsible for the conspiracy are evil ruling powers, who pose a direct threat (van Prooijen, *et al.*, 2015), and are pitted against the ‘in-group’, usually portrayed as righteous (Berger, 2018). The in-group and out-group are subject to change based on the topic of a given conspiracy theory (Cichocka, *et al.*, 2016). Notably, the positioning of in-groups and out-groups is an essential part of different extremisms, including the far-right (Berger, 2018).

One prominent theme within conspiracy theories is millennialism (Barkun, 2013). Millennialism, which derives from Jewish and Christian roots, is an imminent transformation that will bring about the perfection of human existence (Barkun, 2013). Millennialism can be divided into two main categories — progressive and catastrophic. Both maintain that there is a divine plan to establish a millennial kingdom, which is imminently approaching (Wessinger, 1997). They differ, however, in that progressive millennialism looks optimistically at human nature and believes that changes can occur non-catastrophically and progressively to create the millennial kingdom (Wessinger, 2013). Conversely, catastrophic millennialism views human nature pessimistically, framing humanity and society as so corrupt that the world must be destroyed completely to make way for a new one (Wessinger, 1997). Notably, both progressive and catastrophic millennialism can include an active role for believers — the ushering in of the new world may be achieved through the lone efforts of the divine, or in tandem with the efforts of believers (Wessinger, 1997).

Apocalypse is a central concept in millennialism, an approaching transformation, confrontation or cataclysmic event, of epochal proportion, with only a few select individuals having been forewarned (Berlet, 2004). The apocalypse is seen as a battle between good (the in-group) and evil (the out-group) and can be used to justify violence against perceived members of the out-group (Post, *et al.*, 2014). Millennialist worldviews frame the world in terms of a struggle between good and evil, maintaining that this polarisation will continue until the coming of the apocalypse, with evil finally defeated (Barkun, 2013). It is important to note that conspiracism is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for millennialism, in that some millennialist movements lack conspiracist components. While conspiracism imposes a dualistic view of the

world, it does not guarantee good will triumph over evil (Barkun, 2013). In exploring the relationship between conspiracy theories and millennialism, Barkun (2013) noted that the former locates and describes evil, while the latter explains how it is to be ultimately defeated. This study explores how far-right ideological tenets interact with millennialist themes within QAnon discourse, and how millennialist belief motivates the actions of adherents. Existing literature on conspiracy theories will contribute to the conspiracy theory dimension of the code frame (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1: Content analysis framework.	
Category	Category description
(1) Power and corruption	References to power structures or powerful figures. Examples include governments (politicians), law enforcement (police, lawyers) and news media outlets (journalists). Power structures or powerful figures may be unknown, such as the deep state, or the figure Q. Commonly, references to power are within the context of discussing the corrupt nature of that power. References to powerful figures, institutions or structures may justify or propose overthrowing them, for example, the desire to destabilise or remove democratic systems of governance. Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.777$
(2) QAnon ideology	Discussion of QAnon ideology. This includes discussion of physical and sexual abuse of children, the deep state and those comprising it, as well as attempts being made to disrupt or stop it. QAnon slogans such as WWG1WGA and save the children, as well as key terms such as digital soldiers and adrenochrome, are also included. Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.857$
(3) Conspiracy theories	References to conspiracy theories that are not QAnon. This includes far-right conspiracy theories (white genocide, ZOG) or other conspiracy theories (COVID-19 pandemic, vaccinations, 5G). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.794$.
(4) Anti-elites	Negative references to an elite group or its members. This includes the political elite (politicians), the academic elite (academics, scientists), the financial elite (billionaires, business people) and the media elite (journalists, editors). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.877$
(5) Right-	Statements that promote, defend or support any right-wing political figures, organisations, movements or ideologies, ranging from centre-right to radical and extreme right. This

wing political ideology	includes commending or defending right-wing political figures or their actions, or expressing support using slogans associated with right-wing politics, such as MAGA. Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.824$
(6) Anti-progressivism and the political left	Statements that are anti-progressivism or communicate a dislike, distrust or hatred for left-wing political figures, organisations, movements or ideologies. This includes accusations that left-wing political figures are abusing children as well as slurs such as feminazi or leftard. Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.841$
(7) Targeting marginalised groups	Comments that express a dislike, prejudice or a desire to cause harm to people from a marginalised group. This includes people from another country or different cultural, racial or religious backgrounds as well as those who are gender or sexually diverse. This ranges from, Islamophobia and antisemitism to homophobia and transphobia. Krippendorff's $\alpha = 1.0$
(8) Pride and protection of the nation	References that express a definition, pride of, or call to defend the nation. This ranges from general expressions of patriotism and nationalism to extreme references to ethnonationalism and white supremacy. It also includes references to the need or desire to protect the nation, through acts such as limiting immigration, preserving Western values, military intervention or acts of violence. Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.824$
(9) Activism and organisation	Attempts to promote QAnon to the wider public or organise the movement. This includes online activism such as sharing or reposting QAnon-related propaganda, creating and signing petitions or fundraising, as well as offline activism such as organising gatherings, meetings, marches or protests. Activism and organisation can include the justification, proposal or execution of acts of violence. It also includes attempts to organise and extend the movement by conducting 'research' on, or supplying evidence to support, QAnon-related topics. Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.918$

The radical right, the extreme right, and their conspiracy theories

The far-right is difficult to define (Davis, 2019). A range of terms are commonly used inconsistently to describe different far-right ideologies that comprise distinct characteristics (Mudde, 1995). For this research, an important delineation is drawn between the ‘radical right’ and the ‘extreme right’. The extreme right centres on neo-fascist and neo-Nazi ideology (Busbridge, *et al.*, 2020) whereas the radical right focuses on anti-immigration, protecting Western values and nationalism (Dean, *et al.*, 2016). Mudde (2019) expands on the characteristics of the radical right, noting that they also often aim to marginalise non-dominant social groups. An additional key distinction between the radical and extreme right is their stance toward democracy. The extreme right espouses anti-democratic stances and seeks to replace democracies with authoritarian regimes (Minkenberg, 2017). Conversely, the radical right seeks to enact change through resisting the existing political establishment and prioritising populist reform (Busbridge, *et al.*, 2020). This means their aims can be achieved without replacing existing frameworks of democracy (Mudde, 2019). Attitudes toward the necessity of violence have also been identified as key to distinguishing the radical and extreme right. The extreme right views violent actions as potentially necessary to achieve their political aims, whereas the radical right does less so (Mudde, 2019). This research will use the term ‘far-right’ to refer to the political family that encompasses both the radical and extreme right, and will draw distinctions between the two when necessary.

Given that this research is considering the transnational nature of QAnon, it is necessary to expand a definition of the far-right to include common characteristics found within the Australian far-right. The Australian far-right has been found to target marginalised groups of people and certain ideologies, including, amongst others, Muslims, Jews, Asians, Africans, and gender and sexually diverse people as well as progressivism and the political left, multiculturalism, immigration and globalism (Peucker, *et al.*, 2019; Richards, 2019; Dean, *et al.*, 2016). They have also been known to express dislike and distrust of the establishment and elites (Dean, *et al.*, 2016; Richards, 2019). Conversely, they have promoted certain definitions, pride and a need to protect the nation through various forms of patriotism, nationalism and calls to defend against ‘degeneracy’ or ‘decadence’ (Dean, *et al.*, 2016; Peucker, *et al.*, 2019; Richards, *et al.*, 2021). It is worth noting that these characteristics of the Australian far-right are not unique to the Australian context, but are transnational in that they are present in the far-right in different national settings (Mudde, 1995). These characteristics of the Australian far-right, along with existing definitions of the radical and extreme right as outlined above, contribute to the far-right dimension of the code frame (see [Table 1](#)).

The far-right has an extensive and complicated relationship with conspiracy theories, many of which contain apocalyptic themes (Cosentino, 2020; Barkun, 2013). A particularly poignant example of far-right apocalyptic millennialism is Nazi Germany’s vision of a racialised apocalypse that would see the dawn of a thousand-year Reich (Berlet, 2004). Neo-Nazis continue to use apocalyptic imagery to justify antisemitic violence. For example, Aryan nations claim a battle between the forces of good (the Aryan nations) and evil (Jewish people) is approaching (Post, *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, both Barkun (1989) and Berlet (2004) found aspects of apocalyptic millennialism within contemporary white supremacist groups. Extreme paranoia and apocalypticism have been manifested in a range of far-right conspiracy theories in Australia. Davis (2019) and Busbridge, *et al.* (2020) both found traces of a belief in the threat of ‘cultural Marxism’. This is a conspiracy theory that is reminiscent of Nazi Germany’s *Kulturbolshevismus* (Busbridge, *et al.*, 2020) which claims that the Frankfurt School and other Marxist theorists were involved in a plot to undermine Western culture and values by deliberately breaking down traditional conservatism, national identity, Christianity and the nuclear family — a process enforced by an ideology of political correctness (Busbridge, *et al.*, 2020). Davis (2019) and Richards (2019) found examples of white genocide conspiracy theory, which claims that the white race is being directly and deliberately endangered due to society being subject to increased cultural diversity (Greene, 2019) and racial integration (Kivisto and Rundblad, 2000), amongst other factors. Markus (2018) noted the presence of antisemitic conspiracy theories in Australia, in particular those that resembled the Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG) conspiracy theory, which claims that Jewish powers control the Western states, including the United Nations, United States federal government, financial systems and media (Vertigans, 2007). Markus (2018) also noted the presence of

conspiracy theories in Australia that were thematically similar to the Eurabia conspiracy theory, which posits that there is a deliberate, orchestrated process of Islamisation occurring in Europe, approved by the highest European political authorities (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2018).

Based on existing literature, this research extends enquiries into a) the presence of transnational far-right tenets within QAnon discourse; and, b) the millennialist nature of QAnon. It does so by asking the following questions:

RQ1: How does transnational far-right ideology influence and shape QAnon?

RQ2: What role does apocalyptic thinking play in QAnon ideology?

Materials and methods

Data collection

Data for this study was collected from Twitter and 8kun (formerly 8chan) using Python. Tweets were collected via the Twitter application programming interface (API) between 14 June 2020 and 9 March 2021 based on their inclusion of the commonly used hashtag #AussieQ. A snowballing hashtag scraping approach was then taken. The total hashtags scraped were #AussieQ, #QAnonAus, #AustraliaQAnon, #QAnonAustralia #AussieCue, #WWG1WGAAUSTRALIA. In total 37,782 tweets were collected from 15,224 unique users. 8kun posts were scraped from the archives of Q Research Australia, an 8kun board dedicated to the discussion of QAnon in Australia, between 25 January 2019 and 5 March 2021. The date range for this data set is longer than the Twitter data set because the 8kun board catalogues all its existing archives, meaning that historic data can be accessed. In total 9,023 8kun posts were collected from 1,594 unique users.

Methods

Broadly, the methodological approach adopted for this research was modelled on the work of Maloney, *et al.* (2022), in that it blends computational and qualitative analysis. In terms of computational analysis, this research conducted a posting frequency analysis, used to understand patterns of participation within two Australian QAnon communities and captured how content moderation affected their ability to conduct activism.

In terms of qualitative analysis, a multi-phase content analysis was completed on a random sample of 1,000 posts drawn from both platforms to understand the connection QAnon has to transnational far-right ideology, and gain insights into the millennial nature of the conspiracy theory. The code frame used to categorise the data was created through a blend of inductive and deductive coding. An initial deductive code frame was developed using literature on conspiracy theories and transnational far-right ideologies. It was refined through inductive reasoning and a series of pilot tests coupled with intracoder reliability testing. Once these two steps were completed, all categories were compiled into a final code frame ([Table 1](#)). The code frame, and subsequent analysis, were refined further through a digital ethnographic approach — the researcher spent time over the data collection period immersed in two large Australian QAnon public Facebook communities. Finally, to ensure the validity of the code frame, an intercoder reliability test was conducted by two blind coders for each coding category on a 20 percent random sample, reporting percentage agreement scores of ≥ 80 percent and a Krippendorff's alpha reliability score between 0.777 and 1 ([Table 1](#)).

Ethics

The design of this research was informed by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Internet Research Ethics (IRE) 3.0 guidelines. Given the number of users, it was not practical to get informed consent from all of them. As per Wright, *et al.* (2020), all users were anonymised and no direct quotations were included, meaning users could not be re-identified. This was done to protect the privacy of users and also the safety of the researcher, as anonymising users has been noted as a model of good practice to minimise the risk of potential hostility (Jones, *et al.*, 2020). Some users may have objected to their inclusion in this research. Given that this research's primary intention was to reduce the harm that QAnon generates through certain issues such as COVID-19 scepticism and antisemitism, it was necessary and important to carry out.



A left-wing deep state, coalescing conspiracies, and marginalised groups

QAnon ideology was found in 33 percent of tweets and 31 percent of 8kun posts. Predominantly these conversations discussed child sexual abuse, and mostly accused powerful figures of being perpetrators. Uscinski (2018) has previously described conspiracy theories as being notions about power. Power, and who holds it, is a fundamental element within QAnon discourse. Most tweets (67 percent) and 8kun posts (74 percent) included a direct reference to a power structure or powerful figure, often portraying them as corrupt. Disproportionately, power and corruption focused on implicitly powerful groups of elites, an established trend within conspiracy theories (Cosentino, 2020; Uscinski, 2018) and the far-right (Dean, *et al.*, 2016; Richards, 2019). The most targeted elites had a connection to QAnon, such as international and Australian politicians, and famous international and Australian alleged perpetrators of sex crimes, including Jeffrey Epstein and George Pell. Usually, these figures were accused of belonging to the deep state. This focus on both international and national contexts occurred throughout the dataset, reflecting the transnational nature of QAnon, will be discussed in more depth later in this paper.

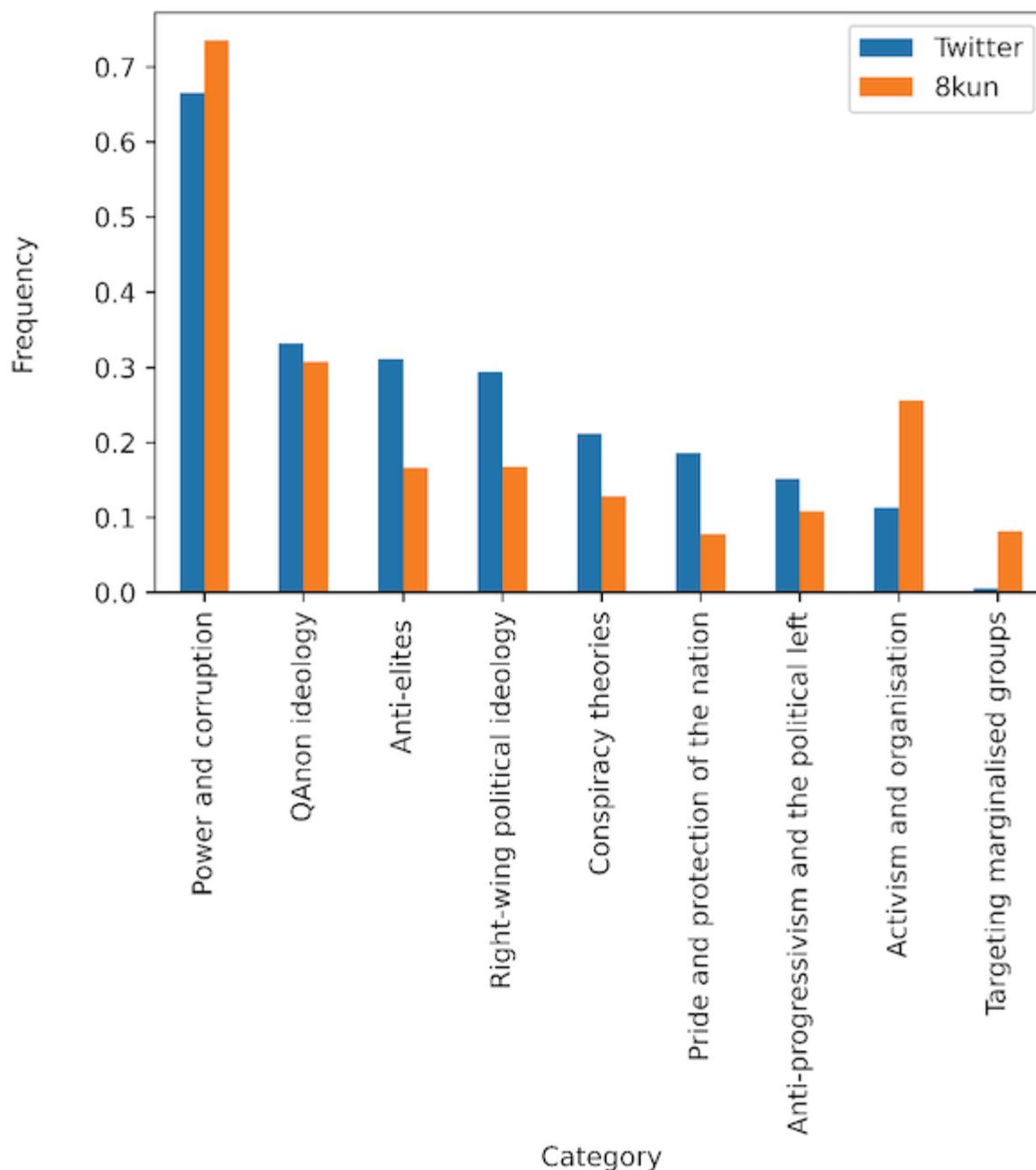


Figure 1: The frequency of conspiratorial thinking, far-right political ideology and attempts to mobilise within both data sets.

Notably, the powerful figures targeted were largely part of the political left. Broadly, 15 percent of tweets and 11 percent of 8kun posts communicated a dislike or distrust of progressivism and the political left, a prominent feature of far-right political ideologies (Richards, 2019; Busbridge, *et al.*, 2020; Davis, 2019). The most targeted left-wing political figures included Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, who were regularly identified as members of the deep state. Within the Australian context, the Victorian Labor Party was regularly subject to vitriol, in particular the premier of Victoria Daniel Andrews, and often within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdown measures were frequently criticised and viewed as draconian or authoritarian, and were even equated to tactics employed by communist states. This reflects the transnational nature of QAnon, demonstrating how it uses local examples, stories and themes to mould

itself to different contexts. Other transnational far-right conspiracy theories have manifested similarly in Australia. Busbridge, *et al.* (2020) found the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory mirrored American sources while blending Australian and international terminology and stories. Importantly, while there was a significant volume of criticism of left-wing governments, and a desire to reform them, references to a 'revolution' or a concerted effort to 'overthrow' government were infrequent. Moreover, contempt, rather than a desire for, authoritarian modes of governance was communicated. The conversations that were occurring on 8kun were less politicised than those on Twitter. However, many of the posts on 8kun were simply sharing resources, as a means of conducting 'research', rather than openly discussing ideas. This lack of political discourse meant that opposition to progressivism and the political left occurred less on 8kun.

QAnon adherents did not identify child sexual abuse at the hands of powerful, largely left-wing figures as the sole injustice. Tweets and 8kun posts (21 percent and 13 percent respectively) identified other abuses of power, discussed in the form of different conspiracy theories. On Twitter, COVID-19 conspiracy theories were the most discussed additional conspiracy theories. Claims ranged from inflated COVID-19 case numbers to the entire pandemic being faked, a 'plandemic', orchestrated by global elites to usher in a New World Order. Crossley (2021) previously pointed out that during the COVID-19 pandemic QAnon communities actively participated in promoting conspiracy theories about lockdowns or the virus being manufactured. Notably, within Australian QAnon communities, COVID-19 conspiracy theories were often intertwined with even more conspiracy theories, such as those surrounding vaccinations and 5G. While COVID-19 conspiracy theories were also prominent on 8kun, the most prevalent additional conspiracy theories were antisemitic. Antisemitism is present in Australian far-right discourse (Peucker and Smith, 2019; Richards, 2019) and antisemitic conspiracy theories are used by the extreme right to justify targeting Jewish people (Crawford, *et al.*, 2021). Holocaust denialism, Jewish control of the government, business and the media, as well as white genocide and the great replacement, were all present on 8kun. When discussed, powerful Jewish people were almost inevitably accused of belonging to the deep state. This convergence of QAnon with other conspiracy theories supports existing scholarship such as that of Swami, *et al.* (2010) who found that 9/11 conspiracist beliefs were positively associated with the belief in other conspiracy theories. It affirmed that believing in one conspiracy theory made it easier (van Prooijen and van Lange, 2014) and more likely (Swami, *et al.*, 2010) for an individual to assimilate more, even if they were completely unrelated.

The conspiracy theory coalescence found in this study means QAnon communities were likely to be exposed to multiple conspiracy theories, and their belief in QAnon predisposed them to assimilate conspiracy theories. This is a particularly worrying prospect given the strong trends of COVID-19 scepticism and antisemitism. This suggests emerging scholarship must consider the role that QAnon plays in digitally locating adherents amongst extreme right discourse, such as antisemitic conspiracy theories, and the risks that this poses for potential radicalisation. Existing scholarship has explored the role that conspiracy theories have played in extreme right radicalisation (Crawford, *et al.*, 2021), however, QAnon has not always been considered and, as this study has demonstrated, it needs to be. Jewish people were not the only marginalised group to be targeted. While only 0.6 percent of tweets targeted marginalised groups, eight percent of 8kun posts did. Eighty percent of 8kun posts targeting marginalised groups expressed antisemitism, usually in the form of conspiracy theories as noted earlier. Other common victims of the Australian far-right included gender and sexually diverse people (Busbridge, *et al.*, 2020; Davis, 2019), Muslims (Peucker and Smith, 2019; Richards, 2019) and Africans (Peucker, *et al.*, 2019; Richards, 2019). All of these groups were centred in 10 percent, five percent and two percent of posts targeting marginalised groups, respectively. While Jewish people were often framed as being part of the deep state, in most instances, other marginalised groups were targeted for reasons that did not relate to QAnon ideology, and often in association with the extreme right. For example, Muslims were at times discussed in relation to the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings, the perpetrator of which held extreme right beliefs.

Millennialism and precipitating the apocalypse

Two interconnected QAnon concepts are deeply millennialist in nature, and both allude to a coming apocalypse: The Storm and The Great Awakening. The Storm refers to the day of reckoning, as planned by Donald Trump, where members of the deep state will be arrested and removed from power (Robertson and Amarasingam, 2022). Not only will The Storm lead to the demise of the deep state and a reign of righteousness, but it will result in The Great Awakening, where the rest of humanity will comprehend the evil that they were blind to (Robertson and Amarasingam, 2022).

The Storm, and subsequently The Great Awakening, was framed as the only solution to the injustices outlined by members of both QAnon communities. This is reflected in the substantial volume of both total data sets that mention either The Storm or The Great Awakening — 29 percent of all tweets and 14 percent of all 8kun posts. The prevalence of this cataclysmic event within QAnon ideology reflects the millennialism, and apocalyptic visions, that permeate it. Notably, QAnon ideology asserts the success of The Storm. Barkun (2013) noted that this was not always the case within millennialist views; some led to antimillenarian conclusions where the evil cabal was portrayed as invincible. Members of QAnon communities consider themselves the select few forewarned of the apocalypse, and as such, play an active role in ensuring its success. In millennialist ideologies, the coming apocalypse, and the salvation that it will bring, can be precipitated in different ways — it can be achieved by a divine or superhuman agent alone, or adherents can play an active role by working according to the will and the plan of the superhuman agent (Wessinger, 2016). QAnon is the latter, and members of Australian QAnon communities participated in two notable ways.

Firstly, QAnon adherents promoted, and made clear their alliance with, the political right, who they viewed as righteous saviours. Support for right-wing political figures, organisations, and ideologies was prevalent on both Twitter (29 percent) and 8kun (17 percent). International right-wing political figures like Donald Trump and other members of his administration, such as General Michael Flynn, were supported most prominently — these figures were seen to be leading the charge against the deep state. Support was often conveyed via slogans associated with Donald Trump such as Make America Great Again and Drain the Swamp. Interestingly, these slogans were also altered to fit the Australian context, such as Make Australia Great Again and Drain the Billabong. This kind of transnationalism is common amongst the Australian far-right, with Davis (2019) finding in his study, amongst other examples, the Pepe the Frog meme featuring a Ned Kelly mask. QAnon's ability to adapt to national contexts is particularly concerning, seeing as this means its growth is not limited to the U.S. where it originated.

Secondly, Australian QAnon adherents engaged in online and off-line activism. A common justification for participation was pride in, and a desire to protect, the nation, most often communicated through the self-identification as a 'patriot'. 'Patriots' protected the nation from various threats, amongst them members of the deep state, foreign powers (in particular China), mainstream left-wing politics and even 'Satanic Marxists'. Military action was seen as necessary to defend the nation and help bring about The Storm. References to the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) were commonly made (modified to QANZACs). However, most prominently, QAnon adherents were encouraged to take the Digital Soldier Oath (which is the U.S. Military Oath of Enlistment with WWG1WGA [3] added to the end) and pledge allegiance to Donald Trump and his administration. This kind of transnational allegiance occurred within other far-right networks. Beirich (2013) noted that some white supremacist movements established an international white collective which has a coherent and well-defined ideological worldview, focusing on the displacement and replacement of white people from 'white homelands' in multiple geographic locations. In pledging their allegiance, Australian 'digital soldiers' vowed to use their keyboards as 'weapons' and information as 'ammunition' to defend Western nations against threats, the most prominent of which was the deep state. This desire, and willingness, to serve in the QAnon army is typical of adherents of millennialist ideologies. Wessinger (2016) noted that serving as 'warriors' in the 'Endtime army' is an activity often performed by believers who have faith in the coming apocalypse. What is of particular interest is the transnational dimension. Somewhat counter-intuitively, members of Australian QAnon communities, whose patriotism motivates their military actions, pledged allegiance to a foreign country,

going as far as reciting the U.S. Military Oath of Enlistment. This reflects the crucial role that social media plays in uniting members of far-right communities across international borders and helping to establish common goals and courses of action, a concern that has been raised by multiple scholars (Davis, 2019; Richards, 2019; Lewis, *et al.*, 2017).

The activism of digital soldiers, which intended to assure the success of The Storm, came in several different forms. Twitter was used to organise and spread QAnon propaganda, and users were encouraged to share QAnon content on as many social media platforms as possible. They also used Twitter to share and increase support for online petitions, organise and publicise off-line gatherings, meetings, marches and protests, fundraise money for the QAnon cause, encourage red pilling and even engage in targeted harassment campaigns. Conversely, 8kun was used for a very different type of mobilisation. While off-line meetings and protests were promoted, along with calls to red pill family members, the focus was on conducting ‘research’ and helping develop QAnon ideology. This was done through supplying resources, predominantly newspaper articles, but also court documents, blog posts, YouTube videos and tweets, all of which were used to propose or substantiate claims about either the sexual abuse of children, the deep state, or both. This kind of behaviour has been documented as common within millennialist ideologies. An essential task to be completed by believers is reading signs and looking for clues in a range of diverse source materials, and then fitting them into a coherent pattern (Wessinger, 2016). The perceived importance, and willingness, of QAnon adherents to help precipitate the apocalypse is a worrying dimension of QAnon. This is because it has been noted previously that when believers view themselves as having this kind of role their actions can be violent (Wessinger, 2013). QAnon adherents have already acted violently, most notably the Comet Ping Pong shooting (Cosentino, 2020) and the 2021 U.S. Capitol Attack (MacMillen and Rush, 2022). There is an ongoing risk that, given the role that QAnon adherents see themselves playing in the apocalypse, the movement could produce more violence — reflecting the urgency of disrupting the movement, which will be explored below.

Disrupting millennialist mobilisation

Notably, both Australian QAnon communities were not able to prepare for The Storm on their respective platforms uninhibited. On 22 July 2020, Twitter (followed by TikTok, and later Facebook) announced that they would ban the QAnon hashtag, remove 7,000 QAnon-associated accounts, prevent QAnon-associated URLs from being shared and stop QAnon content from appearing in their Trending section (Courty, 2020). This had a significant impact on the Australian QAnon Twitter community. Before the ban, the daily average tweeting volume across all the hashtags was 916. From 22 July 2020, until the end date of data collection, the daily average tweeting volume dropped to 28.

The QAnon 8kun community also faced challenges. Over the approximate nine-month data collection period (268 days) the volume of posting was relatively low, but consistent, with a daily average of 14 posts. However, there was a noticeable posting gap between 5 August 2020 and 5 November 2020. This gap resulted from the decision made by Cloudflare, Inc. (an American Web infrastructure and Web site security company) to cut service to 8chan, which became effective on 5 August 2020. The decision came after mounting pressure to rescind support for 8chan in the wake of several mass shootings whose perpetrators posted manifestos on the platform (Roose, 2019). However, only a few months later, in November 2019, 8chan returned to the Clearnet, with a new logo and under a new name: 8kun (Porter, 2019). The posting activity of the Australian QAnon 8kun community returned to a similar level as it was on 8chan.

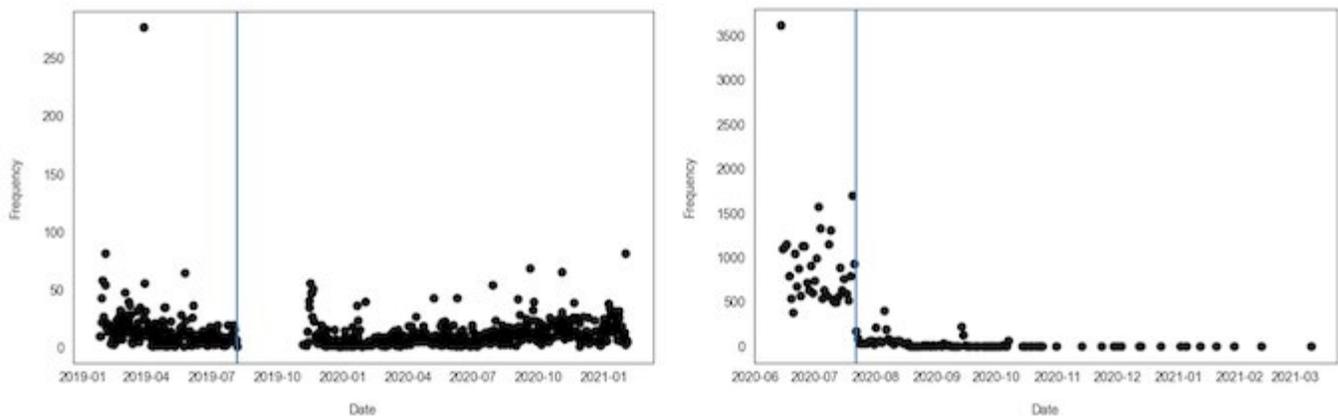


Figure 2: Daily posting volume on the Q Research Australia board on 8kun (left), where the blue vertical line marks 5 August 2019, the day Cloudflare, Inc. rescinded support for 8chan, and the Australian QAnon Twitter community (right) where the blue vertical line marks 22 July 2020, the day Twitter announced actions impacting QAnon tweets, hashtags and accounts.

These results echo existing scholarship. Regarding mainstream platforms, Engel, *et al.* (2022) found that Reddit's 2018 ban on 19 QAnon-focused subreddits was effective in significantly decreasing QAnon user activity. This in turn validated existing research that community bans on Reddit effectively reduced the participation of users from the banned subreddits (Chandrasekharan, *et al.*, 2017). Regarding fringe platforms, Sipka, *et al.* (2022) observed that the QAnon community on Parler was disrupted when the platform was taken off-line, however, this was temporarily effective as Parler was only off-line for a month. Similarly, this research found that QAnon could be effectively moderated on mainstream platforms, but not on fringe platforms, even when drastic action is taken, such as taking the platform off-line. This finding suggests that it is possible to disrupt transnational far-right conspiracy theories. As noted by Davis (2019) social media platforms have enabled the far-right to become increasingly transnational and in doing so have made them inaccessible to lawmakers and police. This reinforces the fundamental role social media platforms play in addressing the proliferation of extremist ideologies, and, as pointed out by Berger (2015), highlights the role that social media plays in amplifying and facilitating the transmission and inculcation of apocalyptic beliefs.



Conclusion

This study explored the presence of tenets of transnational far-right political ideologies within QAnon discourse. It also documented its millennialist nature, specifically the role adherents played in precipitating the apocalypse.

First, it has established that far-right tenets are present within QAnon communities and international and national contexts were blended to make QAnon transnational. As noted previously, existing scholarship has considered the history and origin of QAnon (Cosentino, 2020) and their discussion of far-right topics (Zihiri, *et al.*, 2022) when establishing QAnon's association with the far-right. Given that QAnon online communities are largely anonymous and pseudonymous it is challenging to quantitatively determine the volume of QAnon adherents who identify as far-right. However, this research demonstrated that facets of QAnon ideology that might not outwardly seem politically motivated reflect far-right tenets. This finding suggests that QAnon might serve as a Trojan horse for far-right ideologies to covertly access larger and

more diverse groups of individuals. This is further enhanced by QAnon's transnational nature which allows it to become more relatable to adherents in different countries. Conspiracy theories and associated misinformation (such as those surrounding COVID-19 and vaccinations) were used to normalise far-right ideals amongst people who might not have otherwise been exposed to them (Hannah, *et al.*, 2022). This research adds further evidence that this is an ongoing threat.

The most notable far-right tenets present were a dislike and distrust in elites, progressivism and the political left, the promotion of right and far-right politics, targeting marginalised groups, and expressing pride and the need to protect the nation. The revolutionary vision typical of the extreme right that calls for the overthrowing of democracy was rarely communicated. However, antisemitic attitudes and conspiracy theories often associated with neo-Nazi doctrine (like Holocaust denial and open calls for Jewish people to be 'exterminated') were present on 8kun, suggesting some members of that community hold extreme right beliefs. These members were sharing these views with a community who were prone to conspiratorial thinking, were already distrustful of 'elites' and 'the establishment', and were susceptible to far-right ideology. These coalescing factors are what pose one of the most tangible risks in terms of political extremism, as they provide a suitable recruiting ground for members of the radical and extreme right.

Second, by exploring the millennialist themes present within QAnon ideology, this research supports existing scholarship that found similar themes (MacMillen and Rush, 2022). By focusing on The Storm and The Great Awakening, it documented QAnon communities encouraging adherents to participate in the apocalypse, which was not always the case with millennialist movements. Some claimed that the apocalypse would come about solely through the actions of a superhuman agent (Wessinger, 2016). It also documented that social media platforms were used distinctly to mobilise millennialist movements. Twitter was a space for promoting QAnon, resulting in greater advocacy of radical right politics and the condemnation of progressivism and the political left. Twitter, as a mainstream platform, also likely exposed QAnon to a much broader audience who wouldn't otherwise have ventured into fringe spaces like 8kun. Twitter was used to openly campaign and organise a range of online and off-line activism, whereas 8kun was used to conduct and share 'research' and develop QAnon ideology.

Finally, due to content moderation QAnon communities faced within the data collection period, this research happened to capture how millennialist movements could be disrupted. It documented the efficacy of combatting QAnon on social media platforms, finding that mainstream social media could use content moderation effectively, like that executed by Twitter, whereas it was more challenging to disrupt fringe social media platforms such as 8kun, even through extreme measures like forcing it off-line.

Future research into the presence of QAnon communities on additional social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and 4chan would clarify the role that these platforms play in establishing a broader QAnon transnational ecology. Additional longitudinal studies will also be required to understand how effective content moderation is at preventing the spread of QAnon ideology in the long term. 

About the author

Callum Jones is a researcher and Ph.D. candidate at Monash University whose research focuses on political extremism, particularly the networks and discursive strategies of radicalised groups and the violence they produce. His wider research focus extends to other ideological groups, including religious extremists and members of the Manosphere.

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Acknowledgements

Callum Jones would like to acknowledge Steven Roberts, Verity Trott, Brady Robards and Christian Barkho for their contributions to the development of the research topic and their ongoing help and guidance throughout its duration.

Notes

- 1 The deep state is a notion in some conspiracy theories suggesting the secret existence of governmental and non-governmental entities that form a hidden power system, and rely on collusion and cronyism, within a legitimately elected government (Cosentino, 2020).
- 2 New World Order conspiracy theories claim that past and present events are the outcome of efforts by a powerful, secret group who intend to seize control of the world (Barkun, 2013).
- 3 WWG1WGA is short for ‘where we go one, we go all’, a quote from the 1996 Ridley Scott film *White squall*.

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Editorial history

Received 16 January 2023; revised 21 February 2023; accepted 27 February 2023.



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‘We the people, not the sheeple’: QAnon and the transnational mobilisation of millennialist far-right conspiracy theories

by Callum Jones.

First Monday, Volume 28, Number 3,

<https://firstmonday.org/article/view/12854/10836>

doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i3.12854>