The socio-psychological dynamics of conspiracy theories: Is "Q" a warning sign for the future?

Erik Hacker

SUMMARY

Conspiracy theories have been surging worldwide since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only can they have considerable negative impact on a societal level, they are also capable of disrupting individual lives. Along commonly asked questions, this extended factsheet provides an overview of socio-psychological theories that explain belief in conspiracy theories in general. This framework is then applied to empirical data on the QAnon conspiracy movement in order to illustrate theoretical assumptions. After a brief introduction of the concept of conspiracy mindset and related demographic groups, the focus is on the fulfillment of epistemic, existential and social motives from a multitude of perspectives: media landscapes, communities, ideological structures, addiction, and gamification. The factsheet is concluded with a variety of options for prevention and mitigation, and a discussion on the implications for the future of society in the context of deep fakes and the post-truth world.

AUTHOR

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THE SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES: IS "Q" A WARNING SIGN FOR THE FUTURE?

"What we've seen is what some people call truth decay. Something that's been accelerated by outgoing President Trump, the sense that not only do we not have to tell the truth, but the truth doesn't even matter."

([Barack Obama]())

Conspiracy theories are anything but new, yet for a while now, they have been increasingly becoming popular, affecting more and more people and their environment. With a pandemic that brought along a number of changes in our way of life, the uptick in various conspiracy beliefs has become the center of attention: previously being frowned upon and seen as a thing only in some fringes of society, multiple conspiracy beliefs are now widely accepted (Olito 2020), making their way into the highest level of politics in multiple Western countries (BBC 2020; Focus 2020), tearing families and communities apart (Jaffe & Del Real 2021), as well as risking lives and democracies (Gilbert 2021a; Poniewozik 2021).

In 2020, the size of Q Anon[1] followers in Germany were estimated to be around 200 000 (Bennhold 2020); the largest in the non-English-speaking world. Similarly, some experts claim that there are a few hundred thousand "Anons" in France (Gilbert 2021b). Yet unlike in the USA, where security agencies see Q as a domestic terror threat, French experts rather perceive the movement as a threat to democracy, and less as a potential for violence. In Austria, security authorities keep an eye on the Austrian Q scene as a movement due to its potential for violence and societal disruption (Der Standard 2020). Even besides Q, a recent study by the Institut Market-Agent found that 3 out of 10 Austrian think that there may be more truth to conspiracy theories than authorities acknowledge (Tschiderer 2020).

In the online media landscape, a vast amount of articles were published recently with bits of information on conspiracy theories. Many have interviewed experts, but fell short of providing a comprehensive yet compact explanation for the mechanisms of conspiracies. When it comes to the infamous topic of Q, most of the reporting focuses on particular individuals (Rosenberg 2021), the claims of Q (Caffier 2018), spreading counter-conspiracies (Gilbert 2021c), or on ridiculing its followers in general. Multiple articles in the Austrian press explain the history and main premises of the Q ideology (Tschiderer, 2020), bring some examples of Anons on various demonstrations (Profil 2021), and even connect these circles to right-wing extremists (Der Standard 2020). Yet barely any of these elaborate on the complex psychological mechanisms behind this kind of radicalization.

This gap often leaves readers with a series of unanswered questions: how and why do people believe seemingly ridiculous claims? Which characteristics make individuals prone to conspiracy thinking? Why is it difficult to disprove and disrupt conspiracy theories? What is the role of the media and addiction in embracing and maintaining conspiracy beliefs? How do conspiracy communities shape identities? What can one do to prevent or mitigate conspiracy thinking? What are the implications for the future of society and political extremism?

There are a lot of angles to approach conspiracy theories from in order to answer the above listed questions (Butter 2020). Given the recent increase in the number of believers of conspiracy theories, and the subsequent confusion in society about how one can believe conspiracies, this extended factsheet will attempt to provide answers by summarizing existing knowledge on mechanisms of conspiracy theories in general — *without claiming to be exhaustive* — from a socio-psychological perspective. While the presented theories are applicable to all sorts of conspiracies in general, this factsheet will also utilize open-source data

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[1] While this conspiracy theory is mostly known as QAnon, the Q community itself rejects that term. On the one hand, there is Q, regardless whether it is one person or multiple individuals; on the other hand, there are the so-called Anons, i.e. anonymous people that believe in the conspiracies spread by the entity known as Q. The term QAnon is hence questionable and will not be used.

on online Q communities to illustrate and amend the general theoretical assumptions with empirical evidence and analytical observations by the author. The paper is concluded with a discussion on the long-term societal implications of trends that led to the recent surge of conspiracy theories.

WHAT ARE CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

Defining key terms in this context is crucial, given the negative connotations and political weaponization of the term *conspiracy (theory)*, often used by public actors to delegitimize criticism and shift the focus to the accuser from the accused. Given that the world is complex, random coincidences are inevitable (Sprenger et al. 2021). In other words: conspiracies do happen and revealing conspiracy theories is not necessarily a negative thing. Real conspiracies are however uncovered by investigative reporters, whistleblowers, or scientists; and not unknown sources on social media. Hence, it is all the more important to define what conspiracies are. According to Douglas et al. (2019), "conspiracy theories are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors", whereas these secret plots are usually perceived as unlawful or malevolent (Klein & Nera 2020) and against the common good (Uscinski et al. 2016).

ARE CONSPIRACY THEORIES ALWAYS EVIL AND HARMFUL?

Conspiracy theories have both benefits and negative effects on society and politics. On the positive side, they highlight gaps and inconsistencies in official positions and communication, might open up valuable discussions, or potentially uncover real conspiracies. They also encourage individuals to engage with societal and political questions (Gorvett 2020). An interesting argument from Douglas et al. (2019) is that conspiracy theories are actually symptoms, not causes of social dysfunction, hence they highlight real issues, such as class-based alienation. However, these researchers also found that **negative aspects outweigh the benefits by far**: conspiracy theories tend to lead to prejudice towards particular groups, science denial, decreased political trust and engagement, as well as harmful health-related choices, such as the rejection of vaccines, decreased trust in medical professionals and the subsequent shift towards unconventional medicine. In some cases, they may even lead to radicalisation and violence (Lee 2020), given that there is a broad overlap between extremist groups and conspiracy theories. A study has also found that higher levels of conspiracy thinking correlate with higher levels of justifying violence to express disagreement with the government (Douglas et al. 2019). In sum, conspiracy theories are more likely to be harmful than beneficial, both on individual and societal levels.

ARE SOME PEOPLE MORE PRONE TO CONSPIRACY THINKING?

The idea of some individuals having a tendency of conspiracy thinking or even a **conspiracy mindset** *(other terms used: conspiracy predisposition, conspiracist ideation, conspiracy mentality, conspiracy worldview)* has been gaining traction lately (ibid.). Such concepts imply that individuals who believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe other unrelated conspiracy theories. This in turn suggests that they may tend to interpret events through conspirational frames due to a bias against certain groups that are perceived as powerful. For instance, regressions found that those with stronger conspirational predispositions are more likely to believe the media is biased than those with weaker predispositions (Uscinski et al. 2016). As a high-profile example, Michael Flynn Jr., a key player in the Q movement and the Capitol insurrection (Steakin et al. 2021), was associated with the term "Flynn facts" by colleagues during his directorship of the D.I.A. (Rosenberg 2021), as a reaction to the large number of dubious assertions made by him which suggests a conspiracy mindset. Shortly, there is a known psychological feature that makes certain individuals more likely to believe in conspiracies.

AMONG WHICH DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS IS A CONSPIRACY MINDSET THE MOST PREVALENT?

Given that social psychologists established the existence of a conspiracy mindset, the next question is: among which demographic is a conspiracy mindset prevalent? The answer is rather blurry. The drivers of the conspiracy predisposition remain largely disputed; similarly to the lack of characteristics that would confidently predict vulnerability to violent radicalization. However, studies found that higher levels of

conspiracy thinking correlate with **lower levels of education** (*media literacy in particular)*, **lower levels of income**, **unemployment**, being **unmarried**, having **weaker social networks** and even **belonging to ethnic minorities** (Douglas et al. 2019). Yet considering how broad and general these groups are, the specific mechanisms behind these correlations are unclear. In the case of individuals with lower education, experts presume that the reason is the decreased analytical thinking and the increased tendency to prefer simple solutions for societal problems (van Prooijen et al. 2020). At the same time, Uscinski et al. (2016) believe that political socialization and psychological traits are the most important factors for conspirational predispositions. Their findings show that those socialized not to trust mainstream institutions, and those that have psychological traits that overwhelm mainstream political socializing are more likely to be on the stronger side of the conspiracy thinking continuum.
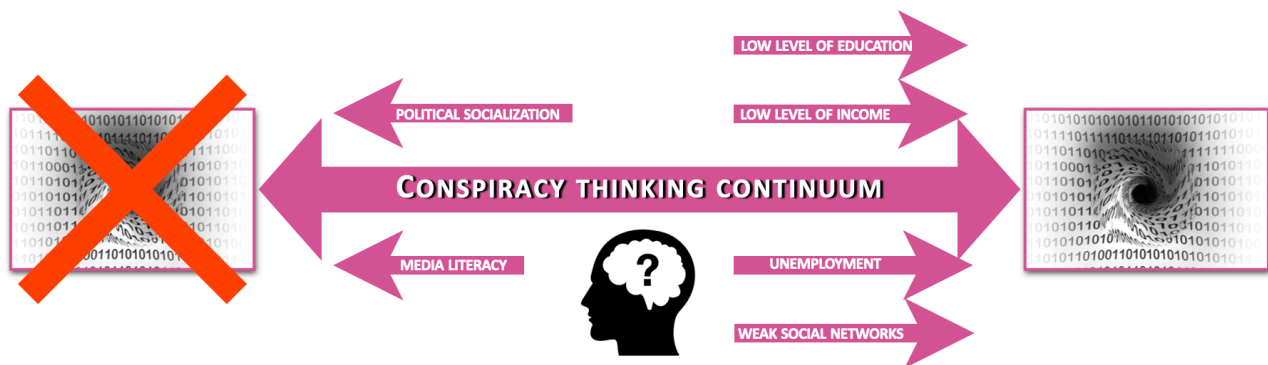
Based on a limited database by the START National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism on Q Anon offenders in the USA (Jensen & Kane 2020), these factors are questionable; albeit being a conspiracy theorist and being an offender are two different things. The age of offenders was largely mixed between 22 and 71 *(avg.: 41)*, with only 21% of the sample being female; although Loofbourow (2020) and other experts claim that women constitute the majority of the general Q community based on their observations. About **37,5%** of offenders were **married** and **48,2% were parents or legal guardians of children**. Surprisingly, 19,6% had a military or law enforcement background. Regarding their employment, **17,8% were unemployed** at the time of the crime, and 33,9% had a criminal record already for non-ideologically motivated crimes. Thus so far, **no personal features appear to be sufficient or necessary**. However, one attribute appears to be overrepresented among offenders related to the Q ideology compared to the general population: **mental health issues**, particularly related to **personal trauma**. **68%** of those that committed crimes before and after the Capitol riot had mental health issues, including PTSD, paranoid schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and Munchausen syndrome by proxy. Around **44%** of the 31 Q offenders "who committed crimes before and after the Capitol riot radicalized after experiencing a traumatic event", such as deaths of loved ones or abuse (emotional, sexual, physical). An astonishing **83% of the female Q offenders** experienced "trauma prior to their radicalization that involved the physical and/or sexual abuse of their children by a romantic partner or family member.", likely explaining what drew them to the conspiracy: the agenda of protecting and saving children. (Jensen & Kane 2020) In fact, women have become a leading force behind the spread of the Q conspiracy in summer 2020 (Loofbourow 2020). As for Austria, there is no publicly available data on who are Q followers, particularly because a stand-alone Q scene as such, like in the USA, does not yet exist. However, Anons are usually found among "Staatsverweigerer" and — recently — corona skeptics (Puls24 2021). To sum things up, academics claim that lower levels of education and lower socio-economic status correlate with conspiracy mindset, while among Q offenders, personal trauma and mental health issues appear to be significant.

THE DESIRE-TRIAD BEHIND CONSPIRACY THINKING: UNDERSTANDING — CONTROL — POSITIVE SOCIAL IMAGE

As illustrated above, descriptive theories seem to be rather insufficient for explaining belief in conspiracy theories, similarly to violent extremism. However, a recent theory — presented by Douglas et al. (2019) — is much more promising, as it argues that conspiracy thinking can be explained by the satisfaction of three particular social-psychological motives: the desire to understand something (*epistemic)*, the desire for control (*existence)*, and the desire to maintain a positive image (*social)*.

(1) EPISTEMIC MOTIVES

So-called **epistemic motives** are our desire to understand the world using our prior beliefs. In other words, when processing new information, we inherently strive to uphold our pre-existing views. Conspiracy theories can fulfill this motive by providing a framework of internally consistent ideas that reduce uncertainty and contradiction while preserving previous beliefs. This is most likely when new information is incomplete or challenges our views, suggesting that conspiracy beliefs may be a product of biased assimilation, i.e. an individual accepting information which supports pre-existing beliefs yet rejecting information that goes against one's views. At the same time, this also implies that conspiracy theories are more prevalent in uncertain situations or among people that tend to look for meaning in their everyday environment (e.g. believers of supernatural phenomena). In addition to uncertainty, boredom and curiosity are also good predictors: those who are bored or are looking for cognitive closure (i.e. our understanding of a situation is perceived to be incomplete), particularly when no official explanation is given, also tend to turn to conspiracy beliefs to fulfill epistemic motives. Particularly during the pandemic, people have had increased freetime at hand (Wesolowski 2021), coupled with loneliness, and a desire to understand something new (i.e. a pandemic), hence they often ended up browsing the internet and finding conspiracy groups on social media. In short, research suggests that when we are looking for answers and meaning — regardless whether out of uncertainty, boredom, curiosity —, we inherently interpret new information in a way that is in accordance with our prior beliefs; yet in cases where we lack cognitive means to do so or if new information contradicts our pre-existing beliefs, we turn to conspiracy theories. (Dougas et al. 2019)

For instance, a person that is afraid of needles is more likely to look for theories online that reinforce one's pre-existing belief, thereby often ending up with anti-vaccination conspiracies (Wesolowski 2021). In the case of Q, most Anons have already been having long-term grievances related to the general distrust towards the establishment and elites. This nudges the brain towards interpreting new information in a way that confirms this: that politicians are part of an evil plan which exploits children.

(2) EXISTENTIAL MOTIVES

Conspiracy theories can also be appealing in situations where we perceive our existential needs to be under threat, thereby looking to satisfy our **existential motives**. The main mechanism in this context is the individual lacking agency (i.e. feeling powerless), which is then reclaimed by turning to conspiracy beliefs that reject mainstream accounts and create an illusion of having a better account. Especially nowadays, when the world is often depicted as being in an age of uncertainty, it is easy to feel like one is losing control. There are a number of scenarios and circumstances under which individuals become more prone to draw on conspiracies in order to fulfill existential motives. Among these are individuals who feel alienated and disconnected from the political system, who struggle to understand the social world, and even those who overestimate their ability to understand complex phenomena. (Douglas et al. 2019) In such cases, conspiracies offer a "compensatory fantasy" by the narrative that nothing is coincidental and everything is meaningful, all tied to a conspiracy (Lee 2020). This helps the individual restore order to a complex political and societal field. While finding causal connections is an evolutionary cognitive process called pattern perception, which helps us survive (e.g. by identifying patterns such as large predators are dangerous), the issue is that people also tend to perceive causal connections that are not there, resulting in **illusory pattern perception** (van Prooijen et al. 2020). Closely related to this (and correlating with conspiracy beliefs) is teleological thinking, which is the tendency to attribute a cause to a natural event, e.g. considering the rainbow at the top of a mountain as a reward (ibid.).
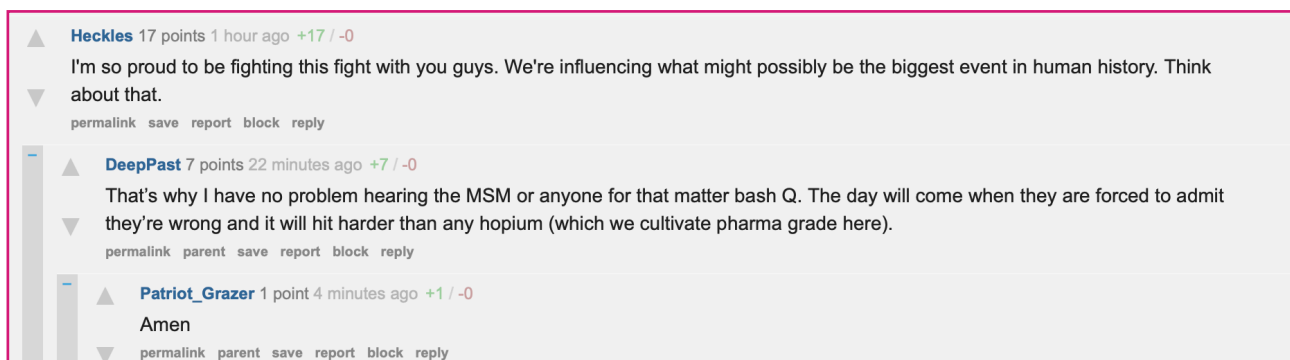
Control and agency are hence key existential factors in this context: experiments that strengthened people's sense of control have led to reduced conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al. 2019). Vice versa, the perceived lack of control (i.e. powerlessness) increases conspiracy beliefs. Researchers found that it is particularly the perceived low power to achieve socio-political goals, and not personal goals, which triggers a feeling of powerlessness, leading to conspiracy thinking (Imhoff & Lamberty 2020). For instance, after US elections, supporters of the party that won the election scored lower on election-related conspiracy beliefs, and

supporters of the party that lost scored higher. This perceived lack of one's agency was often found to be paired with an overestimation of other's agency, i.e. when people detect agency in cases where none exists (van Prooijen et al. 2020). Conspiracy theories rely on this mechanism by definition: people believe that a group of actors conspire in secret for harmful purposes. To compensate the perceived imbalance between others' and one's agency, conspiracy theories tend to make believers feel as if they were heroes of the world that have special knowledge to fight the common enemy (Lee 2020).

Indeed, perceived victimhood and being under attack is a common pattern among conspiracies, establishing a narrative of everyday people being the victims and main targets of elites. This activates a cognitive reaction to fight back for survival under the motto of this being the last chance. Accordingly, former Anon Jitarth Jadeja, who spent 2 years in the movement, claims that the biggest danger in Q lies therein, that followers believe there is an existential threat to their lives: a battle between good and evil (CNN 2020). Akin to that, another former, Ashley Vanderbilt, said that she has been in a "constant state of fear and panic" (Good Morning America 2021). Q gave them control by making them believe that there is a plan, and in the end, everything will be all right.

Perceived powerlessness can however also take place in situations where one is experiencing a major loss of control in life over one's own beliefs, resulting in uncertainty. This type of lack of control is especially characteristic after personal trauma. In situations where our existential needs appear to be under threat while feeling powerless to do anything about it, conspiracies can help make sense of everything. By doing so, we reclaim control, especially if our peers share and confirm these conspiracy beliefs. One prevalent mechanism in this context is drawing on conspiracies to cope with perceived threats "by making abstract risk more concrete and by focusing blame on a set of conspirators" (Douglas et al. 2019). This process provides a certain sense of stability, according to neuroscientist Franca Parianen (Wesolowski 2021).

The direction of causality between power and conspiracies remains a question. Studies about the compensatory hypothesis found that the feeling of powerlessness leads to conspiracy beliefs because conspiracies suggest that negative events in one's life are caused by external forces (conspiracies) (Imhoff & Lamberty 2020). Confirmation bias may also contribute to this effect, given that the perception of being powerless aligns with conspiracy theories that usually depict the everyday person as a victim. To address this, believing in conspiracy beliefs empowers the individual of seeing through the conspiracy, which allows the individual to take political (or violent) action instead of resignation. On the other hand, the reinforcement hypothesis supposes that the direction of causality goes from conspiracy theories to powerlessness, given that conspiracies mostly portray the world being run by a small elite, making one feel powerless. These two hypotheses may even turn into a downward spiral. Either way, it is interesting to note that power is also strongly involved in the correlation between education, knowledge, and conspiracy beliefs (ibid.). Education and knowledge can be perceived as power, as they make the individual feel as if they can exert control over life by gaining the skills needed to influence social environment. It is thus presumed that the correlation between education and conspiracy beliefs is at least partially mediated by perceived power. This would explain why people with lower education tend to believe in conspiracy theories to a greater extent: because they feel powerless, and not directly because they are less intelligent.

Perceived power and positive self-image on a Q board: the illusion of influencing the biggest event in human history.

(3) SOCIAL MOTIVES

Feeling intelligent or not is also related to the third, **social motive**. As human beings, we tend to desire to maintain a **positive image of ourselves**. According to the better-than-average effect of social psychology, people in general always compare themselves to others and they always perceive themselves as better than other in just about everything they care about, regardless whether that is true or not (Payne 2020). After all, it is painful to feel like one is at the bottom. The most prevalent coping mechanism for that is shifting how one sees the world, for instance by claiming that the system is rigged. When things are going well, people tend to perceive it as a personal success due to their skills and abilities, yet when people struggle, they interpret it primarily as the result of external obstacles. Therefore, groups that are perceived as important yet undervalued and underprivileged tend to give rise to sentiments of being the victim of a conspiracy. (ibid.) At the same time, conspiracy theories further satisfy this social motive by making one feel superior and special to others through the illusion of possessing rare knowledge. This addresses the social-psychological need of feeling unique as well. Such mechanisms result in collective narcissism (feeling superior as a group): when in-group positivity is paired with a perceived under-appreciation, most usually occurring in low-status groups, it can give birth to conspiracy beliefs that validate the in-group by explaining the low status and raises the group above others by perceived uniqueness (Douglas et al. 2019). This is supported by findings that conspiracy beliefs are more prevalent in groups with low social standing and little power in society, e.g. minorities or marginalized groups such as migrants (Imhoff & Lamberty 2020).

This mechanism is also applicable to individuals. For instance, Ashley Vanderbilt had just lost her job and felt depressed when she started liking pro-Trump and anti-Biden posts on social media. Shortly after, the algorithm recommended her particular TikToks, that were about Q conspiracies. She immediately felt like these short videos were telling her things that nobody else knew (i.e. making her feeling unique), which was the main reason why she continued to go down the so-called rabbit hole. (O'Sullivan 2021) This is also where the "sheep" narrative comes from: the self-perception of being better than the rest.

Summed up, social psychologists argue that conspiracy thinking is closely related to the satisfaction of three basic psychological desires, namely to understand new information without contradicting pre-existing beliefs (epistemic motive), to establish and maintain control over our lives (existential motive), and to maintain a positive image of ourselves (social motive). The empirical data from interviews with former Anons supports this thesis, with each three motive playing a central role in their processes of radicalization.

WHAT ARE THE PREDICTORS AND REQUIREMENTS OF THESE MECHANISMS?

While the desire-triad explains the core of conspiracy thinking, a crucial question still unanswered is *under what circumstances these socio-psychological processes are triggered*, considering that the "risk group" is fairly broad. There are a number of factors to consider, such as strong, negative emotions; personal crises; a perceived threat to a subjectively important peer-group; and — most importantly — a political predisposition that matches the particular conspiracy.

As already described above, perceived uncertainty, loss of control, boredom, perceived threats, feeling powerless as well as marginalized (both on a personal and group level) are likely to trigger these mechanisms. Researchers also found that both perceived threats to one's societal status quo and the feeling of fear tend to increase conspirational thinking, mediated by intuitive (i.e. not necessarily rational) thinking (van Prooijen et al. 2020). This effect is further amplified when any of the listed factors — e.g. fear, perceived threat — affect one's peer-group (Paul & Matthews 2016). In some cases, involved factors even create a spiral: threats tend to make people angry, and angry messages — regardless whether true or not — have a higher likelihood to be believed by angry people. In sum, a scenario that poses a high level of risk of embracing conspiracy theories would be one in which (1) emotionalized information (2) from a trusted source makes an individual (3) perceive a legitimate outside threat (4) to an important peer-group; (5) this threat is rather unknown and (6) little can be done against it; and (7) the individual is in an emotional state of mind (be it anger or fear) after experiencing a personal trauma or crisis recently. The key word is **perceive**: none of the above mentioned criterion need to be objectively true to trigger conspiracy thinking.

What matters is how the particular individual perceives the situation, which is heavily affected by a variety of psychological biases and cognitive factors.

In fact, fear, anxiety, depression, uncertainty, inconsistencies about the pandemic, as well as feeling hopeless after losing her own business due to restrictions and not knowing what to do are what Melissa Rein Lively named as the main drivers behind her radicalization pertaining to Q (CNN 2021b). Similarly, another former Anon blames the "general state of confusion and paranoia in our lives" for getting into Q conspiracies (CNN 2021d).

Yet revisiting epistemic motives — that make us want to interpret the world in accordance with our prior beliefs —, a key question remains: *if one's beliefs are not conspirational already, why would one interpret new information through a conspirational frame?* The answer is simple: because new information contradicts a particular set of our beliefs that we consider to be highly important to us. It is cognitively less costly to find a conspiracy that allows us to keep these views unchanged. This leads to the main requirement of conspiracy thinking: **political predisposition**. When it comes to ideology and politics, multiple studies found that conspiracy beliefs must align with pre-existing beliefs *(political pre-disposition)* to be embraced (Douglas et al. 2019). These findings also suggest that conspiracy beliefs are the most prevalent at the two ends — i.e. the extremes — of the political spectrum, creating a U-shape, implying that conspiracy beliefs might be a consequence of extremism (or at least very strong political views), or vice versa (ibid.). For instance, people tend to believe conspiracy beliefs about opposing parties, but very rarely about their own party. A survey in the USA supports this theory: partisanship was found to drive conspirational thinking, as expected (Uscinski et al. 2016). Republicans were more likely to believe in conspiracies that portray Democrats and their allies ("liberals") as conspirators. Hence, conspiracy theories require the individual to score high on *both* the conspirational predisposition continuum *and* the political predisposition which is in accordance with the particular conspiracy theory. However, partisanship does not seem to correlate with a conspiracy mindset; i.e., Democrats and Republicans were equally predisposed toward conspirational thinking. On the positive side, this implies that in order for a conspiracy to overtake the entire society, it would have to be non-partisan or it would have to make partisan people believe that their own party is conspiring. (ibid.)

The previously introduced Ashley Vanderbilt has never been watching news or reading newspapers in her life, yet she was a life-long Republican voter (O'Sullivan 2021). In Europe, existing anti-establishment sentiment is presumed to have contributed to the spread of the Q conspiracy, particularly in the context of the pandemic (Scott 2020). Similarly, Brodnig claims that the reason why Q could spread in Austria is Trump's popularity prior to Q: many Austrians showed a strong liking towards Trump (Puls24 2021).

In short, there is a number of factors and circumstances related to the desire-triad that increase the chances of conspiracy thinking, e.g. perceived threats and a highly emotional mindset among others. However, the individual must also have a certain political predisposition that aligns with the conspiracy in order to trigger the social-psychological process of embracing conspiracy theories.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF (SOCIAL) MEDIA?

Conspiracy theories do not emerge and spread in a vacuum; on the contrary, they require an adequate medium, which raises the question on what role (social) media plays and how modern patterns of information consumption affect conspiracy theories. Thanks to technological innovation, today's media landscape not only allows consumers to receive and decode new information, but also to add new meaning and act as a source of information. This decentralized information system coincides with the recently emerged data economy, in which clicks serve as currency, creating a fertile ground for conspiracy theories.

For a long time, communication experts thought that mass media delivers a complete product to the (passive) people, which is received as it is written. However, researchers have meanwhile found that consumers are not merely passive recipients, but are instead active by decoding and reconstructing the

media's information, and eventually even producing a different meaning (Aupers 2020). From this perspective, conspiracy theories can be seen as oppositional reading of mass media texts, that are deconstructed and then given a new meaning in an attempt to resist alleged media control. This resistance can be stretched to the extent where the term "nothing is what it seems" applies, in that believers of conspiracies decode every single piece of information and produce their own message which contradicts the original. In light of this, Aupers (2020) claims that conspiracy theory communities are "assembling information, collecting data, revising texts and are relentlessly involved in interpretive practices to make sense of events". In the end, their theories often end up being inconsistent, non-conclusive and unstable chains of interpretations of possible conspiracies.

This process of decoding and recoding often involves hidden codes, that are presumed to be part of a broader system. Believers of conspiracy theories perceive "deep structures underneath the surface of what is said, written or visualised in the text and, in a typical modernist way, reduce every empirical detail to the underlying theory" (ibid.). In other words, instead of accepting the meaning of a message, they focus on what it hides; thus as a paradox, transparency is understood as concealment, and this interpretive process attempts to make the invisible visible.

While conspiracy theories have been around for centuries, it is social media that has taken the decoding and encoding process to the next level. With the emergence of social media, the distinction between experts and amateurs, as well as between established truth and alternative facts has been eroding. (ibid.) Nowadays, anyone with a device and internet connection can engage in this participatory decoding/ encoding practice of producing knowledge, and even share it immediately with others. This marks another turn in the development of audience reception, namely the turn from active to interactive audiences: people do not only take active part in interpreting and deconstructing messages, they also engage in negotiation and co-production by becoming a part of the communication chain, i.e. by decoding a message, encoding it into a conspiracy theory, and sharing it with others. Information has thus become constantly renegotiated and transformed during circulation, and at the same time, the sources we get our news from these days have multiplied, with severe implications. (ibid.)

This decentralized information landscape created biases. When a message is spread by a large number of sources, individuals tend to show more trust and confidence in the information, regardless of the credibility of such sources (Paul & Matthews 2016). This bias can easily be weaponized, whether strategically or unconsciously. Moreover, when the volume of information is low, people tend to prefer experts, yet with high volumes, crowd-sourced and user-generated information tends to be preferred (ibid.). In addition to volume, researchers also found that consumers tend to judge a source's credibility based on how credible others perceive the source to be (ibid.). As a result, peers attacking a source's trustworthiness decreases credibility in the eye of the consumer, and makes it less likely that the consumer will act on the information distributed by that source. Again, it is perception that matters: social media algorithms are known to create echo chambers by feeding the reader content that echos and reinforces the particular individual's pre-existing beliefs while keeping other views away, paving the way for the spread of conspiracies.

WHY DO PEOPLE TURN TO FRINGE INFORMATION SOURCES?

For the successful emergence of the decentralized information landscape, traditional media had to have struggled in the first place. Yet *what triggered the resistance to mass media*? *When and how did it lose credibility?* With the shift to social media and online news platforms, clicks and engagement now serve as currency. Hence, it is no surprise that public actors — that meanwhile often serve as sources of information — and journalists reacted to this trend: information which warrants an emotional reaction is much more likely to be passed on, regardless whether it is true or not (ibid.). Consequently, journalism shifted "from a theoretically neutral means of "manufacturing consent" into a political cause that people are rallied into supporting, usually by inciting them to some form of outrage" (Hussein 2021). Yet not only do outlets need to keep their readers satisfied, but, as a result of the modalities of social media, they also need to keep

readers engaged. Making people outraged and angry is one of the best ways to keep people engaged. Hence to get and keep someone's attention, dramatization and amplification are useful means. These changes led to what Mir calls postjournalism: a decrease in ethical standards, which "will produce mobs whose rage is incomprehensible to those outside their bubbles" (ibid.). The consequences according to Hussain (2021) are increasing polarization and the amplification of extremes, which drives outlets against each other in competition for audience.
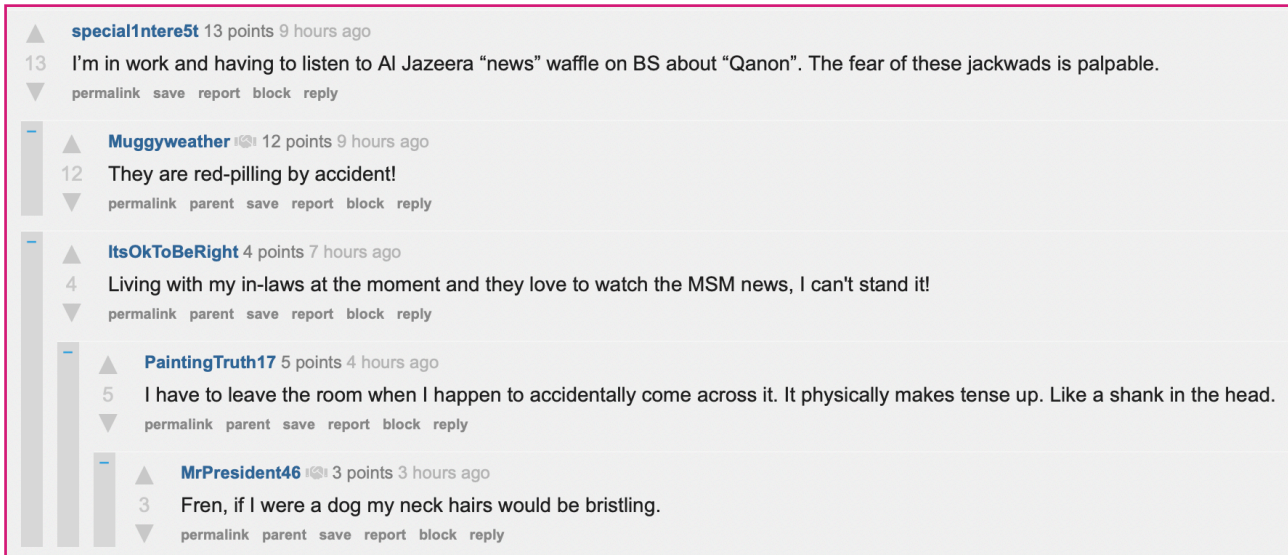
Anons' strong opinion about mainstream media on a Q board.

Still, there are limits as to how far mainstream outlets can push their boundaries while trying to get readers' engagement, which is how fringe outlets became successful: with no reputation to lose, they were able to produce even more outrageous content. In this context, a key characteristic of conspiracy theories is that conspiracies often end up creating a slippery slope (Loofbourow, 2020). For instance, a person reads about a large-scale pedophile ring, reported by fringe sources to cite outrage and generate clicks, and finds it credible for due to any combination of the psychological mechanisms outlined above. However, that story is not reported by mainstream outlets. As a result, the mainstream completely loses its credibility in that person's eyes. Afterwards, that person is likely to get his news from fringe outlets, potentially believing in more and more conspiracy theories, resulting in a spiral.

For instance, Melissa Rein Lively, a former Anon, said she eliminated 98% of news media after she got into Q, and was just reading outlets that were sympathetic to the conspiracy ideology (CNN 2021e). This shift was further strengthened by fringe outlets telling viewers not to entertain mainstream sources, claiming that other stations are "fake news". This — according to her — played a significant part in her staying in the movement for long. In a matter of weeks, she completely changed how she processed information.

To be even more clear, the enemy wants to divide us between those who know the TRUTH and those who do not know the TRUTH which allows the latter to believe the LIE.

The enemy wants fewer of the former and more of the latter. So the enemy viciously attacks the truth-givers. The enemy hates truth-givers as the enemy knows that TRUTH is our most effective weapon. In time, TRUTH always prevails over the LIE.

Well, I will take a break from my "crazy rant" for awhile with the promise to come back to the discussion soon.

In the meantime, to answer the question, "what can I do?, most importantly get informed. Turn off the TV and do your own research. Reject the media propaganda and speak TRUTH. Do not be intimidated. Find the truth and exercise your First Amendment Right to Free Speech and SHARE the TRUTH.

Screenshot of a Telegram post by Lin Wood.

In the case of Q, destabilizing the previously undisputed status of facts and truth is a core element and one of the main strengths of the ideology (LaFrance 2020). Multiple Q drops explain that everything one knew about the world so far is false, and things previously considered outrageous and impossible are in fact the reality. The narrative is that the cabal controls the media. Of course, this alone would not be sufficient for someone to believe Q drops. However, once a Q drop is believed, it sets a cognitive process in motion: the flood gates open. In particular, it triggers reactance pertaining to mainstream media, i.e. the reader perceives

mainstream media as an attempt by an external actor to influence one's thinking. This leads to doubling down on views opposing to what the mainstream says, as a reflex to maintain the autonomy of thinking. As a result, all information reported in mainstream media or the establishment are reflexively rejected regardless of their content, as Anons presume a secret plan behind them. At the same time, this shift in trust towards information sources also increases the reader's engagement with Q. Readers might realize, 'I did not think the first couple of things could be true, but they are, so what else is?' As a result, the reader's mind is already made up that there is more to discover, driving them to actively work on finding information which supports this assumption.

At the same time, the Q ideology does not only delegitimize mainstream sources, but purposefully reduce reactance: Q drops are mostly posted as questions, not as statements. This counters the reader's general assumption that any information that is given to one must have an agenda behind it. Instead, Q makes the reader produce the information based on suggestive questions, thereby increasing the likelihood that whatever the conclusion is will be believed. Recognizing the potential in this pattern and mass media's shaking credibility, Michael T. Flynn, a key actor in the Q scene, established a media company called Digital Soldiers with a "news" website that relies on articles submitted by Anons: "Digital Soldiers from all over the world have stepped up to fill the void where real journalism once stood" (Rosenberg 2021).
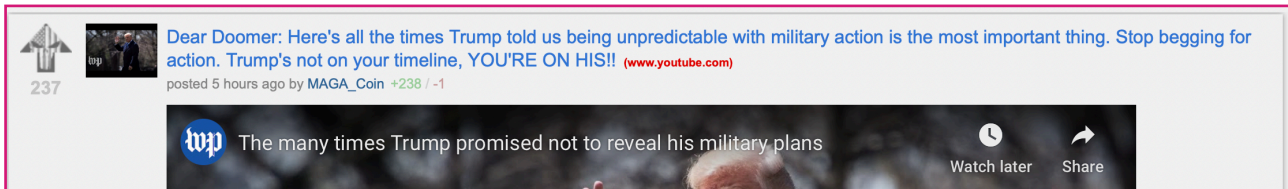
Altogether, the currently dominant information consumption behavior led by social media and postjournalism created ideal circumstances for the rise, transformation and spread of a variety of conspiracy theories. This emotionalized yet interactive media landscape was well utilized by Q, leading to an erosion of trust in mainstream media and a rising popularity of fringe information sources.

WHY ARE CONSPIRACY THEORIES SO HARD TO DISPROVE IN THE EYES OF CONSPIRACY BELIEVERS?

With a number of social-psychological processes and particular circumstances introduced until this point, it is clear how easy it is nowadays to embrace conspiracy theories. Yet with some of the far-fetched claims made by many conspiracies, the question arises why and how conspiracy believers do not recognize obvious falsehoods. The theory of motivated reasoning — closely related to the epistemic motive — provides a plausible answer, particularly when considering the ideological structure of most conspiracies.

(1) MOTIVATED REASONING

Most of our beliefs tend to originate from intuitions, emotions and heuristics, instead of an analytical and rational evaluation of available information (van Prooijen et al. 2020). These two systems (intuition & analytics) make up our cognitive system, and while the intuitive system creates a belief almost instantly upon reception of information, the rational system takes a longer time. After all, humans do not have enough cognitive capacities to interpret everything analytically. However, studies have found that once a belief has been formed based on the first impression, active mental effort is required to "unbelieve" or change it, because people want to maintain a coherent worldview (*see epistemic motive*). (ibid.) Also, if the new information supports our previous beliefs, it is more likely to be accepted; whereas information that contradicts prior beliefs is less likely to be accepted (Paul & Matthews 2016). The latter scenario is a cognitive challenge that one has to cope with and resolve: one can either adjust their beliefs, which is costly from a cognitive perspective, or they can find ways to reject the information. Therefore, once a conspiracy claim is believed through intuitive thinking (due to biases, heuristics or emotions), analytical thinking is used to rationalize and justify the initial conspiracy by **motivated reasoning**, i.e. creating extensive theories based on speculations and/or valid arguments, or a mix thereof. (van Prooijen et al. 2020) While these made up arguments may be correct and factual, the inferences made based on them are mostly false. The rejection of information contradicting pre-existing beliefs can happen by **discrediting the source** of the contradicting information, or **finding evidence** and arguments that reinforce one's beliefs. Motivated reasoning also explains why many conspiracy theories have extensive lists of arguments, regardless whether they are logically consistent and plausible, which require analytical thinking: once a conspiracy is believed by intuition, analytical thinking is more likely to support it than to reject it. (ibid.)

Dear Doomer: Here's all the times Trump told us being unpredictable with military action is the most important thing. Stop begging for action. Trump's not on your timeline, YOU'RE ON HIS!! **(www.youtube.com)**
posted 5 hours ago by MAGA_Coin +238 / -1

The many times Trump promised not to reveal his military plans

Watch later   Share

Motivated reasoning: if the "plan" fails to materialize, Anons always find an explanation to keep the conspiracy alive.

In this context, a key finding is that the likelihood of false information being believed or rationalized rises when it is supported by (false) evidence, as the presence of evidence often overrides the quality of its arguments (Paul & Matthews 2016). Pre-existing beliefs thus influence which information to consider and what value to ascribe to it. Nowadays, it is fairly easy to find at least some evidence for most conspiracy theories, which are then valued more than evidence contradicting the conspiracy. Indeed, conspiracy theories never distinguish between trustworthy experts and untrustworthy sources on YouTube, profiting from the fact that most educational systems do not focus enough on equipping students with the necessary skills to navigate today's media landscape (Wesolowski 2021). In sum, conspiracy beliefs are formed based on intuitive thinking, but are then justified, rationalized as well as maintained using analytical thinking; hence once a conspiracy is believed, it can be extremely hard to change these beliefs.

In the case of Q, there are over 5000 Q drops that can be drawn on as "evidence" supporting whatever information was intuitively believed. In addition, many successful Anons that the community relies on for interpretations use some kind of pseudo-evidence, that is seemingly plausible and objective, yet in reality is not. For instance, a key Q player under the name of "MilSpecOps Monkey" is a military veteran known in the Q scene for using open-source platforms showing military air traffic in real time in order to interpret current developments. He would often make inferences about secret operations based on airplane movements. Before the Capitol insurrection, he predicted that the military was in control and Trump had declared martial law, because there was out-of-the-ordinary air traffic (MonkeyWerxUS 2020a; MonkeyWerxUS 2021). This might seem plausible; after all, he uses legitimate data. However, military airplanes on secret operations would have their transponders turned off. Any flights with a transponder on, obviously available to follow to the public, is highly unlikely to be involved in a military coup. Brodnig makes a similar point: many conspiracies are using words that exist yet are mostly unknown (Puls24 2021). This way, the conspiracy sounds as if it had a scientific basis: when one looks up the word, it can be verified that it exists. For instance, *adrenochrome* came from the movie Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, yet it is widely available and is not produced by children's blood, as Q claims. Oftentimes, even the "proof" that Q communities use to confirm for their conspiracies are screenshots from science fiction movies. In short, legitimate data is used to make plausible but false inferences (ibid.).

Another factor contributing to the difficulty of disproving Q claims while also helping motivated reasoning was political leaders embracing and normalizing narratives of Q in mainstream politics. Some of the highest-ranking officials in the Trump administration (secretary of state Mike Pompeo, deputy chief of staff Dan Scavino Jr., former national security advisor Michael Flynn) likely played into QAnon premises on purpose to advance their political interests (Brewster 2021). These individuals, or at least their staffers, must have known about the Q conspiracies, yet decided to ignore them, or even to adjust their behavior to fuel the conspiracy. A prominent example is Pompeo's scheduled tweets on his achievements, which were closely followed by Anons due to their expectation that the time between tweets serves as a countdown to *the storm*. While all tweets of Pompeo had hundreds of replies related to this conspiracy, hence why staffers must have known about it, the secretary of state made no efforts to denounce such ideas. On the contrary, he might have even changed the schedule of the tweets to play into the conspiracy by reducing the time between tweets according to Anons' expectations, albeit it remains unverified whether this was done on purpose. Similarly, Scavino's social media posts were closely related to key premises of Q narratives, and the timing of these posts also happened to coincide with Q prophecies. For instance, Scavino's videos were usually 17 seconds or 1 minute and 17 seconds long (Scavino 2020a), often posted in the 17th minute of an hour (Scavino 2020b), fueling the '17' symbolism of Q. Another example is how Scavino posted central symbols of the Q ideology, such as pictures of storms, red and green lights with no added context (Scavino
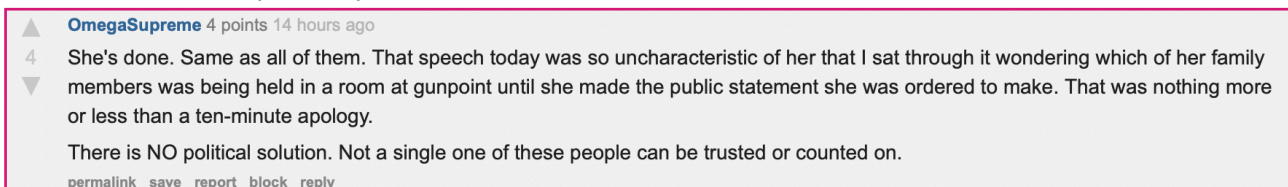
2020c; Scavino 2020d), retweeted posts of the military whereas the green lights somewhat resembled a Q letter (Department of Defense 2020), as well as a picture with a dossier in Trump's hand with a widespread QAnon term "Game on" in meanwhile removed tweet (QAnon Austria 2020). Such key actors continuously posting ambiguous signs added fuel to the fire and gave Anons hope, making it hard to exit the scene.

> **Q** 671
>
> **To our visitors: A central tenet of Q research is to present your work to others and ask them to find fault in your work. In essence we peer review our work. Does this sound like a cult to you?**
>
> New fren
>
> posted 10 hours ago by MAGA_Coin
>
> Does your media ask you to check their work? Do they tell you to look up court documents and read emails? If not... you may be the one still in a cult. We're here to talk if you want out of the main stream media cult.
>
> 54 comments   share   save   hide   report   block   hide child comments
>
> ---
>
> Comments (54)   sorted by: top
>
> **GematriaClown** 42 points 9 hours ago
> 42   What kind of cult leader tells its followers to follow logic and do your own research. and to "THINK FOR YOURSELF"
> permalink save report block reply
>
> **ZerroDefex** 19 points 9 hours ago
> 19   What sort of cult has a "leader" who has been absent for months and tells it's members to question everything?
> permalink parent save report block reply
>
> **TruthSeeker_6** 8 points 8 hours ago
> 8   A cult leader who sucks at being a cult leader!
> permalink parent save report block reply
>
> **GeoffreyDoorknob** 4 points 9 hours ago
> 4   All of them perhaps? Cult leaders have a magnetic power precisely because they convince their followers that they have been freed from the intellectual shackles binding them to the rest of society and are now free to 'think for themselves'. To be fair, all cult members believe (at the time) what they are doing is 'logical'. It's precisely this that allows the MSM to smear us in this way.
> permalink parent save report block reply
>
> **BeckCgull** 5 points 7 hours ago
> 5   They believe in it at the time, reminds me of anosognosia, where one isn't aware of their own mental illness.
> permalink parent save report block reply
>
> **Luke_Q-walker** 2 points 6 hours ago
> 2   In my understanding, cults generally try to isolate their members from outside input and shun external contact. A lot like what the media does.
>
> I've never seen that with our side in my experience of being a Trump supporter and then being a Q follower. In fact, it's next to impossible to avoid media-driven narratives since they're pushed on us everywhere we go.

An example of motivated reasoning on a Q board.

Motivated reasoning is further supported by the cult-like internal system of Anons, which maintains cohesion and suppresses critical voices. Anyone disagreeing or doubting the conspiracy theory is attacked by others, discouraging any criticism or challenge to the ideology. This even applies to previously trusted, key actors of the conspiracy; even Trump himself. For instance, when Marjorie-Taylor Green, a known Q supporter and now a Congresswoman, spoke in a way that was inconsistent with Q prophecies, the community immediately assumed that the enemy got to her. Similarly, when Trump released a video during the insurrection, asking people to go home, most Anons believed the video was a deepfake, raising concerns about Trump's safety and whereabouts.

> **OmegaSupreme** 4 points 14 hours ago
> 4   She's done. Same as all of them. That speech today was so uncharacteristic of her that I sat through it wondering which of her family members was being held in a room at gunpoint until she made the public statement she was ordered to make. That was nothing more or less than a ten-minute apology.
>
> There is NO political solution. Not a single one of these people can be trusted or counted on.
> permalink save report block reply

If a previously trusted actor goes against prophecies, a theory is found to dismiss it.

(2) CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS MONOLOGICAL BELIEF SYSTEMS

Further adding to the strength of motivated reasoning in the context of conspiracy theories, a study suggests that conspiracies often form a **monological belief system** (Douglas et al. 2019). This system creates a network of ideas that mutually reinforce each other, thereby making the network "self-sealing". As a result, even when one fails to find or produce proof for one particular conspiracy theory, it is often explained with another conspiracy theory: simply by stating that any information that would undermine the group's ideology is part of a conspiracy against the group. This is also called **limited falsifiability**. (ibid.)

The case of Q illustrates the common limited falsifiability of conspiracies for a multitude of reasons. Q drops being questions instead of statements resolves the issue of any prophecies not materializing. If prophecies do not come true, one can always claim that the answer one came up with to the question was simply false; but a question can never be false. Also, the term "trust the plan", without ever knowing what the plan was, also adds to limited falsifiability: regardless what happens, it can always be part of the plan. For instance, Biden being inaugurated was argued to be part of the plan by Anons, under the explanation that Biden would need to finish the "crime", and the mass public would need to witness the corruption before the cabal gets taken down; otherwise, there would be mass resistance against *the storm*. Another common justification for Q predictions not materializing is that falsehoods are part of the strategy to confuse the enemy, under the guise of purposeful disinformation: if Anons can figure out the meaning of Q drops, so can the enemy (MonkeyWerxUS 2020b). The ultimate Q theory for prophecies failing to coming true was the higher instance. Q was built on Christianity, as implied by the famous terms "nothing can stop what is coming" and "it will be biblical". Therefore, the last option was to trust God (MonkeyWerxUS 2020c).

All in all, holding on to conspiracy beliefs is the result of a variety of social-psychological processes around motivated reasoning, which is further strengthened by political legitimacy granted by key actors perceived credible. Moreover, the specific ideological structure of conspiracy theories form a monological belief system, that is almost impossible to disprove or falsify, making it harder to disbelieve conspiracies.

> **AlexJonesNeckFat** 2 points 45 minutes ago +2 / -0
>
> While we are on the side of just spreading information and preaching about peace with everyone we interact with, ive never felt like my life had more purpose than it does now.
>
> permalink save report block reply

Finding purpose is a significant part of conspiracy theory communities.

WHAT ROLE DO CONSPIRACY COMMUNITIES PLAY?

As already mentioned with regard to the role of the media, conspiracy theories do not exist in a vacuum. The decentralized information system implies that in addition to a medium, conspiracies also often involve a community, which poses the question of *how and why interpersonal relations may influence conspiracies*. In short, these communities contribute significantly to embracing as well as holding on to conspiracies by providing a sense of belonging and purpose, often making ideology secondary.

Conspiracy theory communities fulfill the basic psychological need of social belonging and contribute to stabilizing one's identity. They do so by clearly delineating in-group from out-group along the perceived unique insider knowledge provided by the conspiracy theory, which creates a sense of group exceptionalism (Lee 2020). This in-group is often defined by two further features: (1) being an out-group/outsider of society, i.e. those that think otherwise, and (2) the shared grievance of being under threat by the powerful actors or even the mainstream. The latter strengthens in-group bonding and makes it difficult to leave, as people perceive a danger that is best fought together. This underdog mentality also creates a positive group and personal identity as white knights and heroes, distinguished by saving the children, the world, society, etc. Belonging is often further strengthened by merchandise, which contributes to the community-building aspect of conspiracies, as they serve as a visual indicator of the group.

WELCOME

To The Great Awakening

We are researchers who deal in open-source information, reasoned argument, and dank memes. We do battle in the sphere of ideas and ideas only. We neither need nor condone the use of force in our work here. WE ARE THE PUBLIC FACE OF Q. OUR MISSION IS TO RED-PILL NORMIES.

This is a pro-Q community. Please read and respect our rules below before contributing.

WHY Q?

"Those who cannot understand that we cannot simply start arresting w/o first ensuring the safety & well-being of the population, shifting the narrative, removing those in DC through resignation to ensure success, defeating ISIS/MS13 to prevent fail-safes, freezing assets to remove network-network abilities, kill off COC to prevent top-down comms/org, etc. etc., should not be participating in discussions." Q

Welcome to the Digital Battlefield - Together We Win

Introduction to a Q board, highlighting the community aspect.

These mechanisms create the illusion of being the chosen ones, thereby raising self-esteem and establishing or maintaining a positive self-image. Especially for those that were previously lonely and isolated with a low self-esteem, it is an easy cure. In other words, as easy as it is to join, leaving is difficult, as it would mean the return to the previous isolation and self-depreciation. In addition, this positive group identity and the perceived fight for a good

cause also gives purpose to life, which can be a significant predictor of radicalization according to the significance quest theory of extremism (Kruglanski et al. 2018).

The psychological impact of belonging:"I owe this community for my sanity".

In the case of Q, community plays a central part in radicalization as well as in the continuous belief in the conspiracy. One of the main terms used by Anons is the infamous Where We Go 1 We Go All (WWG1WGA), signaling the importance of the community aspect. Another key term pertaining to the community is "digital soldiers", which was possibly coined by Michael Flynn when he "compared the Trump campaign to an insurgency — a theme that QAnon adherents would later adopt for themselves — with an army of digital soldiers" (Rosenberg 2021). This concept at the same time also illustrates the belief of an existential threat described above: Anons perceive themselves as soldiers that are at war. The Q community did not lack secret codes and concepts (e.g. white hats, the storm, 10 days of darkness, etc.) either, known only to Anons, that strengthened their sense of belonging and created the perception of being part of an elite, exclusive circle. The common understanding of the Q community being made up of "chosen ones" also created a false sense of security, believing that Q drop interpretations undergo "peer review".

WHY ARE CONSPIRACY THEORIES CONTAGIOUSLY ADDICTIVE?

While it was already mentioned above that negative emotions, that are consciously and strategically used in the rage economy, are known to keep us engaged, the reason behind this neurological process was not addressed yet. Recent findings by experts on addiction suggest that conspiracy theories can become neurologically addictive because they release dopamine, particularly in the context of revenge and gamification, that are both prevalent in conspiracies. This biological process is similar to taking drugs, explaining why and how conspiracy theories can be captivating for many people.

Psychiatrists found that **grievances** — e.g. perceived or real injustice — trigger the same area of the brain as narcotics (Kimmel Jr. 2020). Known from previous studies on addiction, environmental clues (e.g. the place where drugs have been taken, or meeting a person with whom drugs were taken earlier) also cause a dopamine-rush in the reward and habit area of the brain, which fires a **craving** in anticipation of pleasure. In the case of grievances, our brain biologically associates them with retaliation, which we perceive as a relief. This leads to dopamine surges in the reward and habit region of the brain. An environmental clue in this case is for instance being reminded of a perceived injustice, which triggers the same cravings. In other words, this clue of being reminded of a grievance unconsciously causes a dopamine-rush and fires a craving in anticipation of further pleasure or relief through retaliation, regardless whether this is physically violent or just an unkind word or tweet. (ibid.) This can make people addicted to seeking retribution, just like one would become addicted to heroine, despite the harmful consequences of both. At the same time, even

seeing grievances becomes a positive experience. Labelled "revenge addiction" by Yale psychiatrist James Kimmel Jr., this neurological finding may help explain compulsive behavior. In the postjournalism world, and particularly in fringe social media circles of Q communities, people are constantly confronted with propagated injustices and emotionalized messages meant to make the recipient outraged, which in turn fires a craving to retaliate in anticipation of a dopamine rush. The result is repeated compulsive behavior with potential negative consequences. One possible consequence is verbal (or even physical) violence in various forms: mean posts, retweets, likes, blocking people, direct messages, etc. Another consequence can be digging deeper into the conspiracy theory to link the particular injustice to a perceived hostile actor, or to find a prophecy on how that actor will be punished. This mechanism keeps people neurologically hooked to conspiracies. (Kimmel Jr. 2020)

Another insight from addiction studies is that addiction spreads from one person to another, as a **contagion** (ibid.). With revenge addiction, this can take place by spreading grievances that create a desire to take revenge. In the instance of Trump, "because of his unique position and use of the media and social networks, Trump is able to spread his grievances to thousands or millions of others through Twitter, TV and rallies. His demand for retribution becomes their demand, causing his supporters to crave retaliation—and, in a vicious cycle, this in turn causes Trump's targets and their supporters to feel aggrieved and want to retaliate, too" (ibid.) This creates a vicious spiral of retributions that has long been known to terrorism researchers (della Porta 2018).

This addiction was confirmed by Lenka, a former Anon as well as a former supporter of Bernie Sanders, who was outraged by Hillary Clinton winning the Democratic nomination (CNN 2021c). She was angry and felt injustice about the party's bias towards Clinton that was never acknowledged. Lenka claimed she was a victim of social media algorithms, that kept feeding her Q-related posts that would feed into the outrage.

▲	**Asyouwish** 5 points 2 days ago +6 / -1
5	In 2018, I got into Q as a form of entertainment actually. It read like the best Tom Clancy novel. The theories and brainstorming of ideas of what might be happening, was over the top intriguing. I thought many times, if the white hats hadn't thought of some of these strategies anons were throwing out, they should listen! Some really great ideas were given. I also liked getting the news sometimes a week ahead of msm. But when the actual waking up occurred, that's when it really got interesting. I couldn't watch news the same way. I learned to think critically rather than ingest what was fed to me. I even came to the conclusion after 11 days unable to sleep, that I hoped Q was a work of fiction when I learned about what was happening with the children. In some ways I still do. But...there's something now in my spirit, something deep down in my soul and bones, this is it. I have been praying DAILY since 2012 for God to end the corruption in OUR country. I asked for Him to raise up a man to do it. Three years later He did. I asked for the corruption to be exposed. It has and then some. I then asked for the perps to be prosecuted and justice to be served. There is NO WAY, NO HOW, that The Lord would bring us to this point to leave it unfinished. And right there, even without Q, without DJT, my hope and faith stand firm. I'm not throwing Q or DJT OUT of the equation at all....just saying GOD WILL FINISH WHAT HE STARTED.
	permalink save report block reply

A radicalization process that began with Q as "a form of entertainment".

Modern conspiracy theories are however not only affected by revenge addiction, but quite possibly also by **gamification** and game addiction. Due to the decentralized media landscape and the above described process of decoding and encoding information, recent conspiracy movements have become increasingly interactive, essentially serving as an investigative game. Such **gamified concepts** address multiple vulnerabilities that can play a central role in the radicalization with conspiracy theories. By hunting for hidden clues, people suddenly feel empowered and smart, while also regaining autonomy and agency: finding complex symbols and connecting the dots counteracts the perceived powerlessness caused by low levels of education as well as struggles to understand the world. At the same time, clue-hunting provides agency to the individual by raising the perception that the individual can become actively involved in fighting against the conspiracy. For instance, a driver behind Anons' engagement is their assumption that due to their "research", the presumed global cabal can no longer continue with their evil plan, as Anons know about it and are working on stopping it. Another crucial mechanism of conspiracy theory communities related to gamification is the constant positive reinforcement and instant gratification through likes and retweets/reposts, enabled by contemporary social media designs. Briefly revisiting the third desire behind conspiracy thinking, the motivation to maintain a positive image is fulfilled to a large extent by becoming an active part of the community. Posting "results of research" are instantly rewarded by the community by the

simple push of a button, which in turn makes the poster feel as if they gained status and recognition. Particularly when people are deprived of acknowledgments, such nudges paired with the activation of humans' competitive instincts and love of games can quickly become **addictive**, driving people to engage more and more in this kind of activity, in extreme cases even taking over their lives completely.

These mechanisms enabled by gamification were also central in the case of 32-year-old Jitarth Jadeja, who spent over two years in the Q movement (CNN 2020). He was in "deep depression" before he got into Q, yet it gave him confidence, mildening his depression. Q's success is hence likely rooted in its interactive design, which actively involves Anons in building the conspiracy theory, instead of providing complete explanations: it is a living and breathing organism. Furthermore, given that Q does not directly interact with Anons, there is technically no right or wrong answer, i.e. the number of possible solutions is infinite. This is further exacerbated by Q's main premise, according to which the world as one had known before Q is an illusion, and no matter how ridiculous something sounds, it may be real. Therefore, as mentioned above, not finding anything is not an option; it only implies the failure of Anons. This turns the Q movement into a sort of **investigative role play game**, in which one is a member of a secret digital army that needs to be creative, and has to think hard to save children and the world. The ideology of Q takes this a step further by explicitly portraying reality as a movie, with the script and ending being hidden in Q drops, waiting to be resolved by those that are impatient. The contagiousness of this addictive design was even proven by a series recently released by HBO called "Q: Into the storm". While the series aimed at shining a light on the ins and outs of the conspiracy, Rogers (2021) claims that even the director of the documentary series appears to have fallen prey to this "gamified clue-hunting" the Q movement is known for by seeing conspiracies in everything.

> ▲ **TrumplovesJesus** 🖼️ 2 points 13 hours ago
> 2
> ▼ It's also important for knowing that Q can't fail. He can only be failed by the community interpreting him.
> permalink parent save report block reply

Failure is not an option.

Q is hence both an **active and passive** conspiracy theory at the same time, with potential for creating addictions. On the one hand, Anons are encouraged to get actively involved and hunt for clues, using gamification and possibly resulting in game addiction by addressing psychological vulnerabilities. On the other hand, Q plays into revenge addiction passively: the ideology is centered around the notion of a plan being in place that only needs to be trusted: sit back, relax, and watch the best movie of all times; "the storm is coming"; and "nothing can stop what is coming" (LaFrance 2020), i.e. there is not much to do other than enjoying the dopamine-rush caused by perceived revenge.

> ▲ **SuckaFree** 3 points 7 hours ago *+3 / -0*
> 3
> ▼ I'm tired of having to keep explain this to people. Especially people in my family that think I'm nuts and don't want to be around me. But they won't ever leave me alone. Because of it, I have friends that are family, and family that are enemies.
> permalink save report block reply
>
> > ▲ **Wexit-Delecto** 1 point 1 hour ago *+1 / -0*
> > 1
> > ▼ No one left but my wife and one friend, and I think they think I'm crazy but won't say.
> > Real dark winter up here in CAN. Hope we get some nuclear dirt on Justin soon. U1?
> > permalink parent save report block reply

The significant impact of conspiracy theories on people's lives.

HOW TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES? WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE BELIEVES IN THEM?

Summarizing what was said until now, there are quite a few psychological mechanisms and biases, as well as other context factors that can — however does not necessarily have to — lead to conspiracy thinking. Which particular combination of these processes are required to happen, and which are sufficient in order for someone to turn to conspiracies, remains unknown, considering that each individual's story is unique. What is certain however is that these psychological processes can serve as a potent recipe to take over someone's life in a stunningly short period of time, with **serious consequences** for both the individual as well as their environment, potentially even resulting in violence. Considering how Q plays into each bias, and even innovates some aspects, it is no surprise that based on the START database (Jensen & Kane 2021), the duration between the first exposure to Q and committing a crime for an ideological cause was less than

a year in 66,7% of the cases. With that said, **prevention and mitigation** become all the more important. Yet the first question that should be asked is on ethics: (when) should one intervene? Krekó (2020) argues that while there are democratic, moral and epistemic arguments for not intervening against conspiracy theories, a certain type of conspiracy theories needs to be challenged, namely when it is (1) harmful, and/or (2) has low plausibility and/or (3) is highly popular. Out of these three features, at least two should apply.

Krekó (2020) categorizes interventions in two dimension: (1) temporal aspects, differentiating between prevention and harm reduction, and (2) the target of the intervention, i.e. the source/messenger (supply side) and the recipient (demand side). This generates *four intervention options*.

(based on Krekó 2020)	Prevention	Harm reduction
Messenger	Pre-emptive strike	Striking back
Recipient	Immunisation	Healing

Whether preemptively targeting the messenger or striking back, as two options listed by Krekó (2020), social media is the key to success due to its currency status (see above). Conspiracy theories are very often created and driven by grifting and money (Rosenberg 2021). The director of the SITE Intelligence Group even called them a "full-blown industry" (Katz 2021). In the case of Q, Michael T. Flynn for instance used his past as a vehicle to legitimize his conspirational views on the "deep state cabal in Washington" to take over the Q movement as an informal leader that many looked up to. His motive is however questionable. While the above described circumstances ("Flynn facts") hint at his tendency to spread conspiracies, he is also admittedly in millions of debts for his legal defense. Coincidentally (or not), shortly after becoming a central player in the scene, he started selling merchandise to the Q movement through a company called 'Shirt Show USA', while he also launched a media company called 'Digital Soldiers', focusing on reader-submitted stories (Rosenberg 2021). Similarly, many users with immense following on social media due to their Q-related activities released merchandise, books, monthly subscriptions on various platforms, or simply profited from monetized content (e.g. on YouTube) as well as endorsement deals from sponsors. "The Praying Medic" has been pushing dozens of his books on his followers (Praying Medic n.d.); "MilSpecOps Monkey" uploads multiple monetized videos each week on YouTube and sells self-made soaps and clothing on his website; Lin Wood, a lawyer who launched numerous election-related lawsuits propagating falsehoods based on Q, is still collecting donations (Fight Back Law n.d.); CodeMonkeyX, also known as Ron Watkins, is not only a major player in Q-related social media activity, but at the same time he is the owner of 8kun, i.e. the platform on which Q was releasing Q drops (Mak 2021). Turning to Austria, the man behind the QAnon Austria Telegram channel asks for donations daily (QAnon Austria 2021). Therefore, **deplatforming**, **banning**, or **shadow-banning** (i.e. significantly reducing reach and visibility) main actors of a conspiracy theory from social media outlets and platforms on which they make money (e.g. PayPal, Patreon, Amazon) is likely to prevent and/or stop further spread of conspiracy beliefs to a certain extent. At the same time, such tactics play into the conspiracy narrative about powerful actors trying to hide the truth by silencing messengers. Still, after the large-scale crackdown on these accounts on mainstream platforms (BBC 2021), the Q scene has been struggling to agree on where to move next: some joined Parler, some moved to Gab, others launched Telegram channels, yet none of them were able to rebuild the following they had before. While the Q fever has been dying since Joe Biden was inaugurated, which certainly contributed to the failure to continue, another reason is that alternative platforms are simply not up to par with established outlets regarding security, user-friendliness, and hurdles (Petkauskas 2021; Hazelton 2020; Pardes 2020). Deplatforming can thus be successful.

Turning to the demand side, prevention can take place in the form of the immunisation of potential recipients. These types of interventions attempt to address the root causes underlying conspiracy beliefs, i.e. powerlessness, lack of critical thinking abilities, uncertainty, lack of control, mistrust. Of course, a

number of other factors, such as low social status or personality traits are difficult to influence. In treatments, focusing on individuals' personal experiences has proven to be efficient, e.g. by encouraging individuals to recall experiences where they successfully gained control. Another factor that has proven to increase the efficacy of refutations and retractions is to provide forewarning during the initial exposure to misinformation (Paul & Matthews 2016). In other words, beat the disinformation by being first, albeit not with facts but with warnings. The ultimate preventive measure is however the improvement of media literacy and critical thinking when it comes to picking sources. In sum, there are numerous viable ways to take preventive action, however, defining potential recipients and groups prone to conspiracies is challenging, and politics in general tends to rather react to threats, not proactively prevent them.

WHEN IT'S TOO LATE FOR PREVENTION: HOW TO HELP AND "HEAL" CONSPIRACY BELIEVERS?

"Don't try to change someone else's mind. Instead, help them find their own motivation to change." (Grant, 2021)

Krekó's (2020) fourth option is healing those that already believe harmful conspiracies. Studies cited by him found that rational and ridiculing arguments tend to have at least a modest effect, yet sympathizing with the conspiracy's target group had no effect at all. However, even Krekó admits that this finding on pointing out the factual and logical inconsistencies being effective goes against the state of the art. In today's post-truth world, emotions trump facts in most cases. Still, Krekó assumes that we might see a change in this regard in the near future: as people are already overwhelmed with emotional messages in the current communication environment, rational fact-based arguments may work after all. The three rules of rational debunking is to stick to facts to avoid the familiarity backfire effect; to warn recipients of the falseness of claims before mentioning such information; and to offer alternative explanations. To avoid the overkill backfire effect, Krekó recommends to use few but strong arguments. An alternative — albeit disputed — method is cognitive infiltration, which attempts to plant doubts about the conspiracy theory. (ibid.)

However, according to the majority of studies, rational arguments usually do not work on people that believe in conspiracy theories (Grant 2021). Kappes, a psychology lecturer, says that while conspiracists are not immune to rational arguments, simply disagreeing with them — which is most people's natural reaction — won't make them listen (Wesolowski 2021). On the contrary, it is likely to backfire, in that the other person either fights back or ends the conversation. As people tend to resist perceived attempts at persuasion due to a process called reactance, argumentative debates may even strengthen the other side's beliefs, making it much more difficult to change their minds (Krekó 2020). Once one embraces conspiracy theories, the echo chamber effect can turn it into an addiction that takes over the individual's life, according to a former extremist (Foley Martinez 2021). This implies that the solution is just as difficult as with other addictions, and that the individual's social environment is largely powerless unless the individual wants to disengage voluntarily. Therefore, what has proven to work in the last few decades is motivational interviewing, i.e. helping the opposite side find their own intrinsic motivation to change their view by asking them open-ended questions and actively listening to their answers (Grant 2021). Motivational interviewing requires a supportive environment, which can help address the original vulnerabilities. According to Parianen, this can be done by establishing a common ground which gives people a sense of stability and security; by finding activities in life which also provide a certain control to the individual; or by creating stable social bonds (Wesolowski 2021). Without dealing with these vulnerabilities, disengagement will either fail or not be sustainable, potentially leading to other forms of destructive behavior.

Another criteria of motivational interviewing is to have "a genuine desire to understand people's motivations and help them reach their goals" (Grant 2021). In other words, this is not a direct technique to manipulate people, but rather a method to understand others' standpoints better, that may lead to them changing their minds. Regarding the setting, Brodnig (2021) emphasises the importance of having one-on-one discussions. Confronting someone in a group (chat) with facts as well as pointing out contradictions can come across as threatening, as the individual might feel like being cornered. It is always easier to admit that one has been wrong in front of one person, than in front of two or more. Considering that conspiracies usually affect the individual on an emotional level, and less so on a factual level, speaking about emotions

(rather than facts and content) is recommended. In this context, asking "how" questions instead of "why" is more effective (Grant 2021), e.g. asking *how do you feel when you hear that?* An alternative strategy is to agree with the emotions, but contradict the facts by saying: *I share your concerns about X, but at the same time, do not agree with your particular views* (Brodnig 2021). Should the discussion be focused on content only, one should still stick to "how" questions, so that the opposing sides has to think and explain his/her views, e.g. how something may work, instead of why someone prefers that option. Such questions often shine a light on the complexity of things that conspiracy theories simplify, thereby making the opposing side recognize gaps in their arguments and knowledge. In the case of Q, a large number of followers were fed up with the repeated non-fulfillment of prophecies after the inauguration of Joe Biden. Once there is such a cognitive opening, the next step is to guide the conversation towards elaborating on those alternatives:

> "I asked R. what the odds were that he would get a Covid vaccine. He said they were 'pretty low for many different reasons.' I told him it was fascinating to me that he didn't say zero." (Grant 2021)

WHERE TO TURN TO FOR SUPPORT?

Should one not be comfortable or in the position to confront a family member, friend or acquaintance, there are numerous organizations with highly educated, experienced staff to provide assistance and confidential counseling, both for those wanting to leave conspiracies behind and those in their environment. In Germany, the dedicated experts of the **Initiative "veritas"** offer personalized consultations free of charge. In Austria, the **Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen** provides a similar service and has already proven itself as a compelling agency a few years ago, when the so-called Staatsverweigerer were rapidly expanding in the country (Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen n.d.). Otherwise, there are also two subreddits dedicated to the "victims" of Q, forming a self-help community for both formers and those affected by the conspiracy theory (Reddit n.d. a.; Reddit n.d. b.).

A WARNING SIGN FOR THE FUTURE? THE POST-TRUTH WORLD AND THE RISE OF DEEPFAKES

A question many have been asking in the context of the recent surge of conspiracy theories is *whether we are getting a first taste of what the post-truth world is going to be like*. With mental health issues simmering unaddressed in most countries (McKinsey 2020), the coming of the age of uncertainty, and the current media landscape driven by engagement and clicks, it is easy to see how societies could become more prone to conspiracy theories. Not only did Q spread spectacularly quickly among all societal groups (Haimowitz, 2020), even contributing to an insurrection in the USA, the pandemic has also shown how conspiracy theories pose a serious threat to societies (Schuetze 2021). More and more experts are warning about entering a post-truth world (McIntyre 2018), where the truth does not matter or even exist, particularly with the emergence of **deepfakes** (Chesney et al. 2020).

As explained above, deepfakes play a crucial role in the Q world: numerous Q drops refer to clones, deepfakes, holograms, and body doubles. When Trump's speech did not fit the agenda, the explanation was that it isn't actually Trump on the video; it is a deepfake. When Biden took office, Q boards claimed it was not him, but a clone, a body double, or simply an animation instead, controlled by the military friendly to Q. Anons have been raising awareness of such technological innovations (see screenshots above) in general, fitting the narrative of life being a movie, as if we were living in a matrix. In fact, besides Q, the FBI (Sewell 2021) and experts are concerned about deepfakes as well (Chesney & Citron 2018). There is meanwhile even an openly available and easy to use deep fake tool that lets users generate videos, being able to simulate another person's facial expressions (wombo n.d.). As a paradox however, this growing awareness of deepfakes may turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy: Chesney (2021) and Citron coined the term "Liar's dividend", describing the phenomenon of people referring to deepfakes to justify their views. For instance, some mainstream politicians have been refusing to acknowledge evidence, claiming that it may have been manipulated (Raju et al. 2021).

The latest South Korea scandals on celebrities' faces being added into pornographic material through deepfakes (Ryall 2021), as well as the scandal around Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's face being modified onto a bikini picture should serve as a warning (Mahdawi 2021). Trump's strategy of alternative facts (Wehner 2020), his advisor's infamous advice of "flooding the zone with shit" (Illing 2020), or the frequently used Russian

firehose of falsehood propaganda model (Paul & Matthews 2016) are all signs of a significant change that global society might be undergoing already regarding the very basics of our cognition, with potentially grave consequences (Mazarr et al. 2019). Q and the conspiracy theories around the pandemic are not rare illnesses, they are mere symptoms: so far only affecting a small fraction of society yet indicating a lingering issue on a larger scale. More focus on **media literacy in education** is a must, and so is a comprehensive **strategy for primary and secondary prevention** targeting the entire society to address vulnerabilities that potentially lead to radicalization, regardless whether it is in the context of conspiracy theories, left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism or religious extremism.
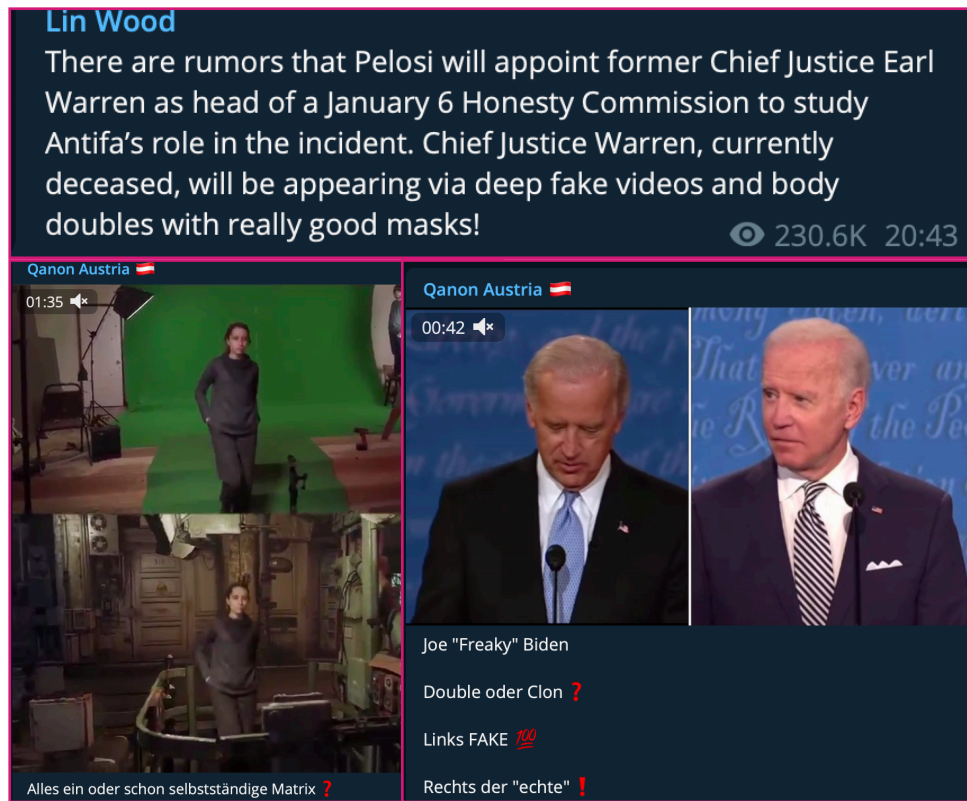
Deep fakes are rather popular in the Q community as ultimate trump cards.

As this paper began with a quote from Barack Obama on how truth does not seem to matter anymore, it is fitting to end the analysis with another one on facts losing their meaning in the shift to a post-truth world:

"One of the biggest challenges we have to our democracy is the degree to which we don't share a common baseline of facts." ([Barack Obama](#))

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