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Taxonomizing Information Practices in a Large Conspiracy Movement:

Using Early QAnon as a Case Study

James Hodges

Bio: James A. Hodges studies the evidentiary value of digital objects. He is currently Assistant Professor at the San José State University School of Information and Junior Fellow in the Mellon Society of Fellows in Critical Bibliography.

Abstract: This paper presents a taxonomy of the information practices apparent in an imageboard discussion thread that was influential in jump-starting the worldwide QAnon movement. After introducing QAnon with a review of literature, the author examines 4Chan /pol/ thread #147547939 (key in introducing multiple key elements of the QAnon narrative) to enumerate and classify the information practices deployed by discussion participants. In conclusion, the paper expands beyond existing research's previous focus on outright fabrication, showing that early QAnon participants' information practices are also defined in large part by suspicious and idiosyncratic modes of reading authentic sources, not simply the propagation of falsehoods.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, epistemology, information practices, internet culture, mis- and dis-information.

Introduction

Perception and reality are frequently understood to be relativistic in many areas of social and human sciences, dating back at least to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's

1966 “social construction of reality” model.¹ Despite the wide acceptance of such concepts in the academy, however, contemporary conspiracy movements such as QAnon— a wildly popular conspiracy theory that first emerged in 2017, which posited that United States Democratic Party officials were engaged in Satanic ritual child abuse— are frequently characterized as total falsehoods or cases of “unreality.”² Rather than presuming to dictate the terms of “actual” reality, however, this paper begins by accepting Bruno Latour’s 2002 notion of a “reality war” between various mutually incompatible epistemic frameworks, in order to examine the specific information practices used to construct an international conspiracy movement such as QAnon.³ This paper argues that such activities are best understood as the result of particular (if problematic) forms of engagement with authentic sources, rather than the result of wholesale fabrication. I begin with the following research question: How do participants in the QAnon conspiracy movement use information resources to construct the narratives around which their movement is organized?

To answer the research question, I present a case study concerning formative online discussions in the QAnon movement. First, a review of literature contextualizes QAnon within a broader set of information practices related to conspiracy narratives. This review of literature includes both academic research on conspiracist movements in general, as well as academic and journalistic writing on QAnon in particular. After the review of literature, I discuss the theory underlying the project, drawing on sociology of knowledge, information literacy, and information practice literature. Next, I outline my method, which draws on enumerative bibliography and media archaeology. Finally, I present the case study, examining 4chan /pol/ discussion thread #147547939, in which QAnon participants react to the first mention of key elements in the QAnon narrative, including the name “Q Clearance Patriot” and the notion of a coming “storm.” I perform this analysis by quantifying the number of external sources deployed among participants, and then examining the specific

methods of narrative construction applied to each identified source. The result is a taxonomy that includes four core information practices central to the QAnon movement's initial construction of conspiracy narratives: close reading, exaggeration, accusation of ignorance, and deployment of esoteric yet unclear arguments. In conclusion, I highlight the study's implications in terms of offering a more nuanced view of conspiracy movement participants' information practices, emphasizing the role of user interpretation in reframing authentic sources within a speculative narrative that assaults commonly held beliefs and norms.

This study's goal is an improved understanding of the specific interpretive actions that participants in conspiracy movements perform when interacting with information sources on the internet, focusing in particular on the participants' novel engagements with authentic sources, such as journalistic reporting. By focusing on participants' interactions with such authentic sources, I aim not to condone their conclusions or activities, but rather to highlight the insufficient nature of responses to disinformation that focus primarily on denigrating participants while ignoring the factual building blocks upon which their beliefs are constructed. In contributing towards a better understanding of conspiracy movement participants' information practices, this paper assists information workers in more effectively responding to, and perhaps even preventing the spread of, conspiracy movements like QAnon in the future.

Literature Review

Any inquiry concerning a specific conspiracy movement like QAnon should ground its perspective in a thorough understanding of existing research. This section provides a review of literature concerning both the state of scholarly research concerning conspiracy movements, as well as the background specific to the QAnon movement in particular.

Conspiracy Theories

The word “conspiracy” simply refers to an act of collusion between two or more people to carry out some action—generally an action that could be deemed unsavory or unlawful. The notion of a conspiracy *theory*, however, carries with it several additional layers of implication. Most frequently, “conspiracy theory” is a label applied to some belief or set of beliefs that draws the potential truthfulness of those beliefs into question. In this paper, I remain neutral on the moral or epistemological implications of conspiracy theory. Instead, I highlight the ways that conspiratorial belief systems and narratives are constructed through an observable set of information practices. In doing so, I hope to enable allied fields like information and computer science, as well as media and communication studies, to more effectively account for the specific actions and behaviors undertaken in the process of developing and popularizing a belief in any given conspiracy. By accounting for these actions, knowledge workers who produce information systems and media content may more effectively anticipate, avoid, or guide the interpretation and construction of narratives by end users.

Writing in the areas of media and cultural studies, Bratich summarizes the definition of conspiracy theories as such thusly: “Conspiracy theories are defined not merely by their strictly denotative, inherent properties, but by their discursive position in relation to a ‘regime of truth.’”⁴ In other words, the act of designating any given set of beliefs as a conspiracy theory does not depend so much on the absolute qualities of its truthfulness or falsity. Instead, such designations rely on the denigrated theory’s relationship to the determining (often hegemonic) epistemological framework. Phrased more simply: conspiracy theories are generally defined as such when they contradict dominant beliefs. This opposition

to dominant beliefs has relatively little relation to the truth or falsity of a belief. Just as many once-dominant beliefs have been replaced by once-oppositional alternatives (e.g. geocentric vs. heliocentric models of the solar system), many contemporary conspiracy theories also contest dominant beliefs without the benefit of being provable according to any currently accepted scientific or epistemological criteria (e.g. the flat earth movement).

Within the realm of library and information studies, Eadon consciously avoids the term “conspiracy theory” due to its association with disparaging value judgements. Instead, she defines independent researchers working on counter-hegemonic interpretations of evidence related to classic cases like the JFK assassination primarily in terms of the “suspicion” they hold towards official narratives— which she sees as one “step below paranoia.”⁵ While Eadon presents a compelling case and set of considerations for information workers hoping to avoid further alienating or marginalizing the patrons of memory institutions with counter-hegemonic belief systems, there are nevertheless also many examples of participants in conspiracy culture or conspiracy movements self-identifying as such. For example, the /r/conspiracy forum on Reddit.com boasts over 1.5 million subscribers as of this writing, describing itself as a place to “challenge issues which have captured the public’s imagination, from JFK and UFOs to 9/11.”⁶ With this in mind, I will continue to use terms like conspiracy theory and conspiracy movement in the remainder of this paper in order to facilitate ease of reference to widely held understandings of the terms. All the same, this analysis of the terms and their political valence should serve to caution readers against heedlessly reproducing existing disparaging attitudes against conspiracy theories or theorists.

Another key innovation in Eadon’s treatment of conspiracy research is her analysis of conspiracy researchers’ relationship with primary sources. Eadon builds on Michael Buckland’s theory of the “document society,” in which “humans rely on increasingly

mediated forms information, often in the form of documents.”⁷ Under these conditions, Eadon notes that the documents on which we rely to understand the world have often been “interfered with, duplicated, copied, or... otherwise changed” from their original forms.⁸ Although Eadon’s observations are based on a case study examining conspiracy researchers’ use of declassified documents, the same conditions hold true when examining journalistic reporting as well. All knowledge gained from mediated reporting is necessarily selective, defined in part by its omissions and biases.

Shifting away from historical conspiracy theories into a more recent developments, scholars including Krafft and Donovan, Hannah, and Hodges et al show that present-day conspiracy narratives spread in large part through the networked circulation of decontextualized digital images, which accrue new narrative significance as they enter new contexts and arrangements, traveling further from their authentic sources and meanings over time.⁹ In other words, contemporary online conspiracy movements pull imagery from authentic sources and circulate it on new platforms, often adding new narrative interpretations via editing, collaging, and textual commentary. As images circulate further from their original source, they degrade in visual quality, and cross over into new social media platforms with different audiences, where users collage them into increasingly complex visual forms reflective of the increasingly complex conspiracy narratives they are used to promote.¹⁰ Yet while the aforementioned studies trace the *spread* of conspiracy narratives quite effectively, comparatively less research exists with a focus on understanding the moment of genesis in which a conspiracy narrative initially takes shape. Thus, the case study presented in this paper focuses on the earliest moments of QAnon as an exemplary case in the construction of digital conspiracy movements.

QAnon Background

QAnon is a conspiracy movement that began with a series of discussions on the imageboard 4Chan, which grew large enough to inspire several acts of violence and law enforcement investigations. Although many points of belief within the movement are contested and malleable, its core elements generally hold that a cabal of liberal elites are conspiring to engage in acts of pedophilia, as well as acts of sabotage against right-wing populists such as former president Donald Trump and his supporters.¹¹ The wide diversity of QAnon's various manifestations is reflected in the similarly wide variety of characterizations that observers, including journalists, academics, and laypeople alike, deploy when trying to encapsulate it. In order to bring increased specificity to public discussion about QAnon in particular and conspiracy movements in general, one must pay particular attention to these varied characterizations and their relationship to authors' epistemological orientations, as well as the particular sub-set of QAnon beliefs being focused on.

The QAnon movement is frequently derided in liberal analyses as being completely without basis in fact. For example, writing for CNN, Cohen and Wild call it "absurd and false."¹² In academic literature as well, QAnon is frequently described with similar terms. For example, Bloom and Moskalenko call it a "*baseless* conspiracy theory from the darkest underbelly of the Internet" (emphasis added), while Argentino and Amarasingam describe it as a "decentralized ideology rooted in an *unfounded* conspiracy theory that a globally active 'Deep State' cabal of satanic pedophile elites is responsible for all the evil in the world" (emphasis added).¹³ In these instances, the preponderance of untruth among QAnon participants leads authors to describe the movement as being *wholly* untrue.

Conversely, some research acknowledges that the movement has some basis in the interpretation—however outrageous—of verifiable facts. Cosentino offers a rather nuanced definition, calling QAnon "an open-ended collective narrative based on paranoid attitudes

toward political institutions and establishments.”¹⁴ After analyzing a corpus of images drawn from QAnon discussions occurring during a particular QAnon subcampaign in 2020, Buntain et al concluded “while QAnon imagery has a modicum of grounding in the truth of child trafficking, these images present a largely warped reality of this issue, especially around race and age.”¹⁵ This level of specificity is not entirely limited to academic literature, either, with journalist Mike Rothschild calling QAnon “a cult, a popular movement, a puzzle, a community, a way to fight back against evil, a new religion, a wedge between countless loved ones, a domestic terrorism threat, and more than anything, a conspiracy of everything.”¹⁶ In each of these examples, the interplay between fact and fiction is foregrounded, rather than fixating only on the movement’s many inflammatory and untrue manifestations.

Yet despite my emphasis on the kernel of truth undergirding certain key elements of QAnon, I have no intention of excusing the movement’s dangerous and sometimes violent elements. For example, Jensen and Kane note more than one hundred crimes committed by QAnon believers between 2016 and 2021, with more than half of them being violent. These crimes are sometimes explicitly political, such as an Oregon man who allegedly opened fire on a federal courthouse, and a Wisconsin man who attempted to fire paintballs at a group of Army reservists.¹⁷ Both more sociologically notable and also more disturbing, however, is the preponderance of violent crime committed by QAnon believers against their own family members, including a woman arrested and charged with killing three of her own children, and a man who killed his own brother with a sword.¹⁸ These intrafamilial crimes are generally committed by perpetrators possessing qualities that criminologists associate with a *reduced* likelihood of violent political extremism, including “advanced age, having a spouse or romantic partner, and raising children.”¹⁹ QAnon-motivated criminals thus present a new

form of danger that established approaches to law enforcement and counterterrorism are poorly equipped to address.

In response to the novel profile of QAnon-related criminal activity, I aim to resist the urges toward condescension and denigration that characterize much of the popular reaction to QAnon, which prevents third parties from effectively interfacing and/or intervening with participants. For example, while many mainstream commentators mock QAnon adherents' belief in a "shadowy cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles made up of prominent Democratic politicians and liberal celebrities," such dismissive descriptions overlook the very real instances of political and cultural leaders engaged in committing or enabling child exploitation and abuse, which are often cited by QAnon believers as a motivating factor for their participation in the conspiracy movement.²⁰ Perhaps most famously, such cases have included the ring of politicians, celebrities, and scholars associated with convicted sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, as well as the more than 11,000 allegations of abuse by Catholic clergy between 1950 and 2010.²¹ Certainly, QAnon adherents heavily emphasize the participation of politically liberal elites in such activities, while largely dismissing the many examples of documented participation by their conservative counterparts. Yet despite the intensely partisan orientation of many QAnon adherents, the case study presented in this paper shows that engagement with authentic primary sources does indeed constitute one of the key information behaviors observable in QAnon's formative moments. In other words, QAnon is a movement based on selective (if often exaggerated or otherwise idiosyncratic) interpretation of factual information, rather than wholesale fabrication. By emphasizing this fact, I aim not to condone the beliefs or actions of QAnon participants, but rather to enable more sophisticated forms of engagement between believers and non-believers, as well as a more sophisticated treatment of the division between reality and fiction more broadly.

Theoretical Framework

In 2002, sociologist of knowledge Bruno Latour published a short book entitled *The War of the Worlds, or, What About Peace?*, addressing the political aftermath of the 9/11/2001 World Trade Center terrorist attacks. In the book, he argues that an international liberal consensus emerged throughout mass media in the twentieth century, and that this consensus relied on positioning a conservative “other” as its foil. Latour writes: “cultural conservatism was indispensable for embellishing, enriching and ornamenting, by means of values and passions, the harsh world of facts and reason—provided, of course, that none of these cultures claimed any ontological pretensions.”²² Although Latour here is positioning radical militant Islam as the conservative “other” to western liberal democracy, today I argue that this epistemological phenomenon occurs similarly in the liberal West’s treatment of Western conservative movements like QAnon.

Casting a conservative “other” as the foil to liberal democracy, Latour argues, creates a situation in which conflicts are fought predominantly over the “many symbolic representations of the one and only world.”²³ In other words, by tokenizing the reactionary and the regressive, liberal consensus reality turns a blind eye to the more specific contours of very real ongoing wars over reality itself, which are fought at the level of media content and its dissemination through information technologies. Today, QAnon and other conspiracy movements serve as a tokenized foil to the consensus reality promoted in mainstream liberal media narratives. By emphasizing only the untrue elements of QAnon narratives and ignoring their basis in fact (however thinly stretched), liberal commentaries often position themselves as representatives of truth, rather than active combatants in a war over the proper representation of a complex reality. In this study, I hope to highlight the ways that QAnon

believers actively craft political counternarratives to consensus reality in the arena of media representation.

This study is also undergirded by the notion of information practices, which I take to constitute the activities through which QAnon participants construct, refine, and promote their beliefs. The term “information practices” refers to a set of behaviors that range from active seeking of information to serendipitous encounters with it.²⁴ Information practices are defined in part through their divergence from more directed forms of information seeking. In other words, information practices happen even when a subject is not consciously planning to find or interact with any particular kind of information in any particular fashion. This framework is particularly useful for describing the actions of participants in an online discussion forum, where their motivations range from focused determination on making and substantiating a particular argument, to distracted forms of inattentive browsing, and even outright trolling. Users may switch between multiple different modes of interaction during their participation, with different practices’ emergence or decline dictated by circumstances both in the forum itself as well as outside of the forum. In the case of QAnon, these practices involve several overlapping approaches to interacting with external sources and narrative construction.

Methodology

This study uses a methodological approach informed by bibliographic archaeology, which is derived from the work of Hodges and combines a media-archaeological approach to analyzing digital objects’ formal qualities with a bibliographic approach to enumerating the textual features in a given corpus. In this study, the bibliographic features that I examine are those related to formal qualities of electronic forum posts, such as image attachments and

linkages between multiple discussion posts. The research process is divided into four steps: first, “retrieval of samples,” second “classification of samples,” and then “pattern recognition among classified samples,” before concluding with “the interpretation of findings.”²⁵ The goal of this methodology is “compiling and explaining the notable material characteristics of individual samples within a corpus.”²⁶

Thus, step one in this study comprises retrieval of sources. Sources for this case study are retrieved from 4Chan /pol/ thread #147547939, which is in turn preserved online by 4plebs.org, a website that has archived 4chan discussion threads since 2013.²⁷ 4Chan discussion threads follow the norms of imageboard software, which is distinct from most other forms of discussion forum in that users are anonymous by default, and that conversations are regularly deleted. As a result, imageboard discussion threads from 4Chan and similar websites (including 8Chan and 8Kun, which have hosted subsequent QAnon discussions) are frequently preserved by several third-party archives. The thread in question is also available in other locations, and I verified consistency of content with another preserved copy of the source before moving forward with the 4Plebs archival copy.²⁸ The thread, /pol/ thread #147547939, is pulled from 4Chan’s “Politically Incorrect” sub-forum, and is selected because of its contents, which include the first reference to “Q Clearance Patriot,” or a user who self-identifies as “Q” and claims to possess insider government information.

Step two in this study comprises a classification of samples. I treat each individual post in the discussion as a separate sample. The goal of this study is an enhanced understanding of the specific information practices that participants use to construct a narrative in relation with the “factual” world of mediated information sources, such as journalistic reporting. For this reason, I focus in particular on posts that include links to, or references to, outside sources. Such posts are classified using an open coding scheme,

iteratively placing samples into emergent categories until saturation is achieved. Saturation in this case refers to a point in which no further categories continue to emerge.

Step three in the study involves the identification of patterns in the classified data. This interpretive phase of research generates preliminary findings, which are subsequently paired with explanatory conclusions during step four where interpretation is completed based on comparison with outside literature or research.

Case Study

4Chan /pol/ discussion thread #147547939 begins with a continuation of previous discussions (thread #147505376), posted on November 1, 2017, about the possibility that military insiders might be “planning a weekend martial law counter-coup” in response to left-wing demonstrations scheduled for November 4.²⁹ In response to discussion participants’ speculation about a suspected conflict between law enforcement and left-wing demonstrators, a user posted the following:

“Q Clearance Patriot

My fellow Americans, over the course of the next several days you will undoubtedly realize that we are taking back our great country (the land of the free) from the evil tyrants that wish to do us harm and destroy the last remaining refuge of shining light. On POTUS’ order, we have initiated certain fail-safes that shall safeguard the public from the primary fallout which is slated to occur 11.3 upon the arrest announcement of Mr. Podesta (actionable 11.4). Confirmation (to the public) of what is occurring will then be revealed and will not be openly accepted. Public riots are being organized in serious numbers in an effort to prevent the arrest and capture of more senior public officials. On POTUS’ order, a state of temporary military control will be actioned and special ops carried out. False leaks have been made to retain several within the confines of the United States to prevent extradition and special operator necessity. Rest assured, the safety and well-being of every man, woman, and child of this country is being exhausted in full. However, the atmosphere within the country will unfortunately be divided as so many have fallen for the corrupt and evil narrative that has long been broadcast. We will be initiating the Emergency Broadcast System (EMS) during this time in an effort to provide a direct message (avoiding the fake news) to all citizens. Organizations and/or people that wish to do us harm during this time will be met with swift fury – certain laws have

been pre-lifted to provide our great military the necessary authority to handle and conduct these operations (at home and abroad).”³⁰

This post introduces several themes that later became pervasive among QAnon participants. First, prominent liberal political actors (in this case John Podesta) were secretly targeted for arrest. Second, certain laws have been secretly and pre-emptively lifted in order to allow military and law enforcement to carry out the “counter-coup” against liberal and/or left-wing interests.

The post alone, however, does not account for the wide-ranging and widely shared beliefs of subsequent QAnon movement participants. Instead, subsequent acts of participation among end users collaboratively constructed a narrative and set of beliefs based on idiosyncratic interpretation of external reality as represented in social and news media. Over the course of the discussion, participants share six external sources. Despite the widespread criticism of QAnon in liberal media as “absurd and false,” I find that the news sources shared in this thread *are* in fact based within the consensus reality of mainstream reporting. Rather than dealing in wholesale fabrication, participants use selective and idiosyncratic interpretation of these sources to construct their system of beliefs. By emphasizing this engagement with factual sources, I hope to offer a new path forward in the popular response to conspiracy movements, avoiding the dismissive tokenization of QAnon and other conspiracy theories as reactionary “others” in the ongoing conflicts over media representation that define contemporary reality.

Findings

Of the six external sources posted in the thread, all six refer to verifiable stories. Zero of the stories traffic in “fake news.”³¹ Nevertheless, rampant speculation and selective

interpretation of these sources are pervasive in the subsequent discussion. Within discussion about the six shared sources, participants' actions can be classified in four categories: close reading, exaggerated interpretation, aggressive accusation of incorrectness, and those which are not clearly related with the topic at hand yet seem to imply connection with conspiratorial or esoteric topics (such as the Book of Revelation and UFOs). In the following analysis, I will provide examples of each and contextualize their role in constructing a conspiracy narrative.

Participants' Information Practices

Close Reading

The QAnon participants' information practice most recognizable to an academic audience is likely the practice of close reading. In one post, a user shares the ZeroHedge news story entitled "Congress Quietly Passed A Bill Allowing Warrantless Searches of Homes - Only 1% Opposed It."³² ZeroHedge is a right-wing libertarian economics blog known for trafficking in conspiratorial narratives. Despite the relative untrustworthiness of the source, this story is in fact based on the close reading of the 115th U.S. Congress's House Joint Resolution 76, entitled "Granting the consent and approval of Congress for the Commonwealth of Virginia, the State of Maryland, and the District of Columbia to enter into a compact relating to the establishment of the Washington Metrorail Safety Commission." While the resolution is primarily concerned with establishing a safety commission to oversee Washington, D.C. area public transit, it includes a passage related to allowing transit workers to enter properties adjacent to transit facilities when needed for maintenance.³³ ZeroHedge presents a close reading of this passage, noting that the resolution "gives the Commission the

authority to enter property near the Metro Rail System ‘without limitation’ and without a warrant, for the purpose of ‘making inspections, investigations, examinations, and testing.’” In the ZeroHedge analysis, this passage “goes against the Fourth Amendment, which states that Americans’ rights ‘to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause.’”³⁴

In other words, this story reports on an actual piece of legislation, but reads deeply into a single line. The article concludes that while this development, “may only affect the Washington D.C. metro area now, it could be laying the blueprint for future legislation across the country.”³⁵ This fear of authoritarian overreach is perhaps ironic, emerging as it does within a discussion thread that includes positive framing of a “state of temporary military control” when used to put down suspected left-wing demonstrations. It is also ironic to cite Joint Resolution 76 as evidence of creeping government overreach when it is largely limited to transit-adjacent properties in a single metropolitan area, while laws like the 2001 US PATRIOT Act have already authorized far more wide-reaching invasions of personal privacy and property for well over a decade. Yet the ZeroHedge story in question, and subsequent discussion of it on 4Chan, is still based in a competent close reading of legitimate primary sources. With these observations in mind, I understand QAnon participants’ close reading practices to constitute a weaponized information practice that assaults consensus reality by building social support for hysterical and one-sided interpretation of authentic texts, rather than the outright construction of falsehood.

Exaggerated Interpretation of Correlation

The second information practice that I have identified within QAnon discussion participants is exaggerated interpretation of correlation. The close reading of House Joint Resolution 76 referenced above presents an alarmist interpretation of a legitimate source, but its conclusions remain relatively valid. In other cases, interpretive actions of authentic sources are further removed from the sphere of mainstream consensus because they combine idiosyncratic interpretations of multiple authentic sources to produce another, more outlandish narratives. For example, post #147575984 includes a map purported to list sites of planned left-wing actions during the November 4, 2017 weekend (see figure 1). The image contains clear diegetic markings related to its origin as a screenshot and the particular dimensions in which it was cropped, which make it traceable using reverse image search to its point of origin.³⁶ The image in question shares its unique cropping and on-screen interface elements with an image shared by the “fake news” site NewsPunch in a story entitled “DoD To Run Solar-Storm Blackout Drill During Antifa Riots This November.”³⁷

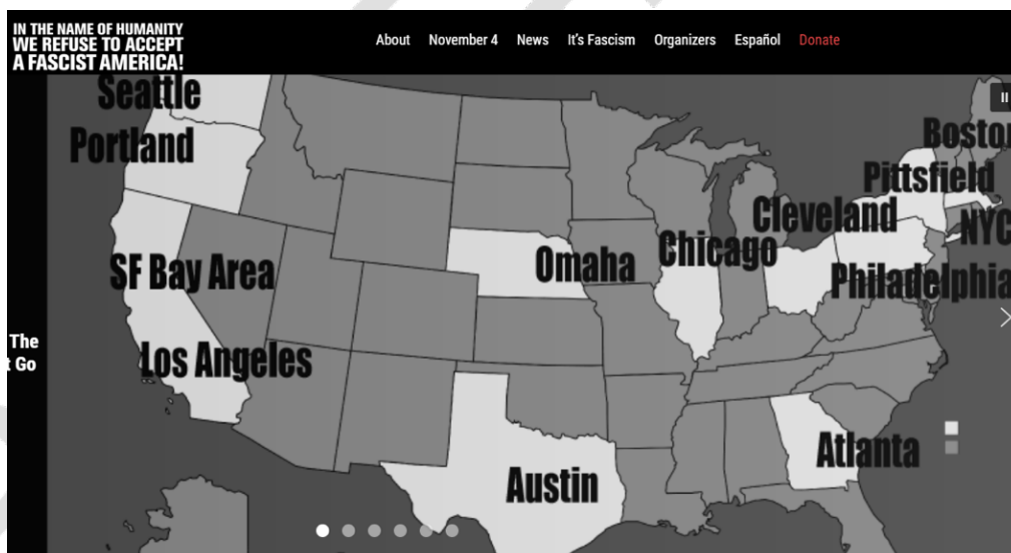


Figure 1. Image included with 4Chan /pol/ post #147575984. Note the partially cropped text at left, the web menu along top, and the presence of dots indicating position within a splash image carousel. These elements suggest that the image was captured via screenshot from another website.

The main narrative of the NewsPunch story is based on exaggerated interpretation of a verifiably authentic source: a National Association for Amateur Radio press release discussing the U.S. Army's Network Enterprise Technology Command (NETCOM) upcoming exercise to “simulate a power-outage scenario.”³⁸ The NewsPunch article notes correlation between two other legitimate stories: first, news that the federal government had begun taking precautions to prepare for events in which anomalies in the sun’s magnetic field affect electrical systems on Earth, and second, the previously discussed day of left-wing demonstrations on November 4, 2017. While each of these stories is factual on its own, the NewsPunch story combines them and exaggerates their significance, in order to suggest that “The United States government is quietly preparing for a major space-weather event to paralyze communication systems and energy grids across the entire country” at exactly the moment when left-wing radicals plan demonstrations in several major cities.³⁹

Back on 4Chan, discussion of the map in question, as well as the legitimate news of planned left-wing actions, is used to further consolidate these disparate narrative threads. One participant summarizes a potential interpretation as follows: “Military intelligence and/or Mueller is going to sweep up a chunk of the Swamp while Trump is visiting in Asia. The left will spaz out and there will be riots to try to prevent some of the arrests, so they may declare martial law (or something) to simplify matters, and use the emergency alert system to tell the people what's going on.”⁴⁰ By combining several legitimate sources, exaggerating their significance, and speculating about their correlation, participants construct a new conspiracy narrative that is based in fact while offering highly speculative conclusions. This basis in fact, stretched however thin, makes such beliefs highly resistant to complete debunking. As Bratich writes of conspiracy theories in general, “they do not reach the threshold of acceptability to even be tested, to be falsifiable.”⁴¹ As a result of this unfalsifiable character,

this information practice may be of particular value in the popularization of conspiracy narratives.

Aggressive Accusation of Incorrectness

A third behavior that emerges when examining QAnon participants' information practices is the assertion that other users may be incorrect or ignorant. This practice is shown most clearly in discussion about the original "Q Clearance Patriot" post's assertion that actors within the federal government plan on "initiating the Emergency Broadcast System (EMS)" during the unrest on November 4. The author of Post #147581315 links to the Federal Communication Commission's information page concerning the "Emergency Alert System (EAS)," and expresses doubt in the Q Clearance Patriot post's authenticity, writing "I'm talking about the Emergency Alert System you [slur], if this isn't a LARP I'm gonna expect the boxes I look over to squak hard."⁴² The accusation that other discussion participants may be unaware of the correct acronym used to refer to official emergency communication systems is used by some users to discredit their interlocutors, while others work to identify potential explanations for discrepancies. One participant writes "EMS? Clarify that you're not a [slur] larper and you're actually talking about EAS. This is important."⁴³ "Seems like the guy might be old school.. Used to be EBS.. And sounds like he was thinking Emerg Mgmt System.. I'm just guessing" writes another.⁴⁴ By negotiating the potential accuracy of statements in this fashion, and referring to outside sources in the process, participants negotiate a narrative that accounts for inconsistencies and further inoculates the emergent QAnon movement against debunking. When aggressively insulting the users who offer interpretations that run against the emerging narrative, participants practice discrediting opposing viewpoints. By offering alternative explanations, on the other

hand, participants demonstrate a more omnivorous approach to constructing alternative realities, which brings dissenting viewpoints into the narrative, rather than attempting to keep them out. Together, these two approaches to argumentation solidify social cohesion and expand the narrative's scope.

Esoteric but Unclear Meaning

It is worth noting that not all the discussion posts in the identified thread offer coherent meaning, even when they engage with authentic outside sources. For example, post #147582625 includes a screenshot of the authentic tweet from Democratic organizer John Podesta, in which he shares a Huffington Post news story about his desire to declassify documents concerning Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (also known as UFOs). The post's accompanying text reads "beware false prophets, whoever comes out on top of this is the anti-christ."⁴⁵ In this rather strange juxtaposition of subject matter, the user draws connections between UFO conspiracy theories, liberal politicians, and apocalyptic biblical imagery. It is based on an authentic outside source, but it serves mostly to draw unclear associations between the core subject matter (riots, martial law, and secret plans), and other, tangentially related topics (UFOs, religion), with an overall effect of loosely associating a variety of esoteric topics. Despite such discussion posts' seemingly nonsensical contents, the presence of loosely bundled esoteric topics nevertheless implies a form of "public secrecy," or the partial disclosure of occulted knowledge.⁴⁶ The esoteric and riddle-like structure of such posts, like that of QAnon itself, serves for many participants as signification of knowledge concerning a deeper reality than that of hegemonic consensus reality. This finding also points towards the limitations of my study: while I have shown that the QAnon movement is based on some amount of engagement with factual sources, the prominence of

nonsensical and esoteric content reminds the observer that the movement is also related to an impressionistic, free-associative engagement with unclear reasoning and unprovable concepts.

Conclusion

This case study has shown that the QAnon conspiracy movement, although frequently denigrated as total falsehood, *is* actually based upon narratives constructed through engagement with authentic sources. The interpretations frequently involve spectacular logical leaps or mis-readings, yet I argue that understanding the relationship between QAnon and consensus reality more deeply and with greater nuance can assist in enabling more effective interactions, and potentially even interventions, between participants and third parties such as information, library, and media workers.

By identifying the specific interpretive actions used to construct the QAnon narrative in its earliest stages, these findings offer a new path forward for the understanding of conspiracy movements. Rather than patronizing believers for their apparently false beliefs, information system designers and managers, as well as digital media workers, should begin by acknowledging the kernel of truth that makes such narratives compelling. Fictional narratives do not require fictional sources in order to gain traction. Real sources are flexible enough. Narrative is constructed through interpretation, and even the most authentic sources are subject to practically limitless forms of interpretation.

This study has highlighted four information practices as being particularly significant to the construction of a conspiratorial belief system: close reading, exaggeration of correlation, aggressive accusation of ignorance or incorrectness, and the insertion of unclear but esoteric elements pulled from other interpretive communities. By highlighting the information practices employed among participants in a conspiracy movement, and

emphasizing their engagement with widely accepted sources, this paper has shown that a movement like QAnon is defined more by its interpretive incompatibility with dominant ways of framing factual knowledge. Although many knowledge workers operating within the dominant liberal consensus use belief systems like QAnon as a foil for their own ostensibly correct worldviews, this framing furthers an irresolvable antagonistic relationship between epistemic communities. By acknowledging the factual basis for even apparently outrageous beliefs like those held by most QAnon adherents, I hope that this paper offers a new path forward in the media and information fields. Furthermore, by casting conflict between QAnon and mainstream consensus reality in terms of epistemological warfare, I draw attention to the ongoing struggle to define reality simmering within all media artifacts and the interpretation thereof.

Despite the value of its conclusions, however, this paper also possesses a number of significant limitations. First, this paper is based only on the very first discussion thread in a much larger and endlessly expanding universe of conspiratorial belief. This paper does not account for many of the beliefs later codified in third-party interpretations, YouTube videos, social media posts, and other media formats throughout the QAnon movement. Furthermore, many of the key tenets later associated with QAnon, including explicit characterizations of liberal politicians as Satanists and/or pedophiles, were not yet present in the early discussions that I have examined here. Further study should be pursued in the future, in order to account for additional information practices and forms of engagement with outside sources. Nevertheless, this study offers clear value to the fields of library and information science, as well as journalism and media studies, insofar as it offers a new framework for understanding conspiratorial movements. This framework includes a methodology and a theoretical framework. The method, based on bibliographic archaeology, focuses on information practices as recorded in posts digital discussion forum. This allows a scholar to highlight the

way that belief is constructed, rather than fixating on the belief's apparent status as fact or fiction. The theory, derived from Latour's *War of the Worlds*, highlights epistemology as the ground for conflict between dominant and insurgent knowledge communities. By framing conspiracy movements as a question of epistemology, rather than fixating on their content, the scholar can more accurately understand the inner workings of belief.

Notes

Author Declaration: This manuscript is original, has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere. The author(s) wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome. We confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. We further confirm that the order of authors listed in the manuscript has been approved by all of us. We confirm that we have given due consideration to the protection of intellectual property associated with this work and that there are no impediments to publication, including the timing of publication, with respect to intellectual property. In so doing we confirm that we have followed the regulations of our institutions concerning intellectual property. We understand that the Corresponding Author is the sole contact for the Editorial process (including Editorial Manager and direct communications with the office). He/she is responsible for communicating with the other authors about progress, submissions of revisions and final approval of proofs. We confirm that we have provided a current, correct email address which is accessible by the Corresponding Author and which has been configured to accept email from this journal.

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