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Where We Go 1 We Go All: A Public Discourse Analysis of QAnon

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ABSTRACT

During the 2016 presidential campaign, candidate Donald Trump amassed a following of extremists. After Trump settled into his presidency, subsets of his original following emerged. One group included a committed following of an individual known by the code name "Q." Q claimed to be a top-clearance military official who would slowly reveal the "truth" about the political "deep state." Q communicated directly to their followers through "leaks," or posts, on the anonymous message boards of 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun. This paper examines the content of these *leaks* and discusses how the *leaks* influenced the discourse of QAnon followers. This discourse analysis allows for an in-depth investigation of Q's *leaks* surrounding the subjects of bolstering anti-elitism, discrediting the establishment, and defining their followers' identity through a sense of threat and group-marginalization.

INTRODUCTION

During the 2016 presidential campaign, candidate Donald Trump amassed a following of extremists. After settling into his presidency, subsets of Trump's original following emerged. One group included a committed following of an individual known by the code name "Q." Q claimed to be a top-clearance military official who would slowly reveal the "truth" about the political "deep state." Q communicated directly to their followers through "leaks," or posts, on the anonymous message boards of 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun. Beginning in 2016, Q made a number of highly inflammatory claims, stating that (1) Donald Trump was working with the American military to combat the "deep state;" (2) Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election was, in fact, a top-secret collaborative investigation with Donald Trump to indict Hillary Clinton for a number of crimes; and (3)

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that many high ranking Democrats and "Hollywood elites" are secretly under arrest for creating and maintaining an international pedophilia ring.

The consequences of these conspiracy theories did not remain online. In 2017, a man walked into Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria in Washington, D.C., with an assault rifle. The gunman claimed to be on a mission to stop a pedophilia ring operating in the basement of that establishment. Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria did not have a basement. Q and his following, now known collectively as "QAnon," had encouraged the man through their internet posts to investigate on his own (Cosentino, 2020). This act of violence was not an isolated event. By May, 2020, eleven homicides (Watkins, 2019; McHugh et al., 2020), two armed standoffs (Brean & Hawkins, 2018; Cosentino, 2020), two instances of attempted and actual kidnappings (Shammas, 2020; Sommer, 2020), and two attempted and actualized fire-bombings of a women's health center and a mosque (Kelley, 2019) were tied to QAnon. The FBI specifically named QAnon as a domestic terrorism threat (Winter, 2019), even as Q continued to offer followers a number of conspiracy theories about government corruption. An analysis of how Q influenced others through the use of internet posts, presented as *leaks* of secret information, is imperative to understanding this movement.

Q is a more influential figure than most might expect. TIME Magazine (2018) listed Q in the top 25 most influential people on the internet. Celebrities such as Roseanne Barr and Sean Hannity have referred to Q in their tweets (Kaplan, 2019). On April 7th, 2018, a QAnon-proposed march in Washington D.C., known as the "Great Awakening," was identified by a subreddit dedicated to Q and had over 70,000 subscribers before it was deleted (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018). Individuals that use the QAnon #WWG1WGA (*Where We Go 1 We Go All*), the stand-in slogan for the movement, could gain thousands of followers by simply reposting Q's *leaks*. This study analyzes these *leaks* to answer the question: How do Q's posts discursively frame action-based messages to their followers?

Contextualizing QAnon Within Far-Right Extremism

The internet has been an invaluable tool in the proliferation of hate speech and political extremism. One example of this is the idea of the "Great Replacement," or the belief that the White population is the victim of deliberate racial and cultural replacement by non-Whites in European nations and the United States (Davey & Ebner, 2019). Researchers Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner (2019) stated that social media facilitated the

spread of this conspiracy theory from its origin in France throughout the Western world. From its first recorded usage on Twitter in April 2012 to April 2019, the phrase "Great Replacement" had been posted 1.5 million times. Notably, they observed that the annual use of the phrase tripled between 2014 and 2018. The idea of racial "replacement" led to a lone gunman killing 51 and injuring 50 worshipping Muslims in a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand on March 15th, 2019. Lizzie Dearden, a journalist with The Independent (2019), notes that the gunman posted a manifesto to the now-defunct anonymous message board "8chan," identifying his rage, which was driven by the Great Replacement, as the source of his desire to kill non-Whites. When asked where he had developed his beliefs, he answered, "The internet, of course. You will not find the truth anywhere else" (Dearden, 2019, para. 30). Other shootings, motivated by the Christchurch incident, occurred later that year in El Paso, Texas (Eligon, 2019), and Poway, California (Noack, 2019).

Conspiracy theorist groups owe the speed of their proliferation to the advent of the internet (Davey & Ebner, 2019). Paper flyers and brochures could not compete with mainstream news sources, which shun extremist causes. "Accelerationism," referring to an ideology promoting the belief that the polarization of political perspectives "should be sped up to increase instability and result in revolutionary change," is a major component of far-right extremism (Davey & Ebner, 2019, p. 6). QAnon's use of memes, anonymous message boards, and messaging apps made the movement virtually unstoppable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Decoding QAnon

There is very little formal research literature surrounding QAnon; at present, the primary publication on the topic was written by Ethan Zuckerman (2019). Zuckerman contends that QAnon is a "big tent conspiracy theory" suggesting that narratives drawn from other conspiracy theories could be reinterpreted to fit the grander narrative of QAnon (p. 3). Zuckerman claims that QAnon could foreshadow a combination of "news media and participatory social media" (Zuckerman, 2019, p. 7). This new participatory media allows individuals within QAnon to construct their reality by contributing to the greater collective narrative.

A better understanding of QAnon may come directly from individuals that identify with the movement. February 26, 2019, was the

day *QAnon: An Invitation to The Great Awakening* (Patriot et al., 2019) became available for purchase on Amazon.com. Twelve self-proclaimed top "researchers" within the QAnon community authored the book. The lore surrounding QAnon was quite complex. *QAnon: An Invitation to The Great Awakening* introduced the reader to the organization's worldview and provided context to some of the ideas that became key elements of QAnon's purpose.

The authors used various terms to describe QAnon's collective enemy. Some referred to them using terms such as "criminals," the "cabal," "satan-worshipers," "pedophiles," the "deep state," and "shills." QAnon asserted that groups led by Hillary Clinton, John Podesta, who served as President Bill Clinton's Chief of Staff, and the nation of Saudi Arabia intended to carry out a 16-year plan to destroy the United States by enacting policies that would "take away the Second Amendment," "open borders," "control the media," "seat... the Supreme Court with globalists," and, amongst other things, lead the world to "World War Three" (p. 46-47).

"Q" was framed as the hero of this narrative. According to the text, Q intended to work with Donald Trump to use The Great Awakening to bring forth "The Storm." The Great Awakening asked the public to join Q's fight for power against the cabal, which includes Clinton and others. The Storm was quoted from comments made by Donald Trump directly before a meeting with military officials: "You guys know what this represents? Maybe it's the calm before the storm" (Landler, 2017, para. 3). Individuals within QAnon claimed that The Storm was a coded expression for the change that would come with The Great Awakening; namely, the large-scale removal of the cabal from positions of power (Kunzelman, 2020).

This clandestine "war" would be hidden from the public, and the QAnon community would contribute to this cause through "decoding" and "memeing." Individuals who work to interpret or decode Q's messages have been referred to as "researchers" by the QAnon community. The twelve authors of *QAnon: An Invitation to The Great Awakening* were considered prominent researchers within the community at the time of the book's publication. The creation of memes, or easily copied and shared images on the internet, was a profoundly significant contribution to the cause. *QAnon: An Invitation to The Great Awakening* devoted an entire chapter to the creation and importance of memes within the QAnon community. Memes were seen as narrative tools, educational tools, and, most importantly, as tools that disseminated the communities' messages without reliance on the mainstream media (Patriot et al., 2019).

Resonance of Conspiracy Theories

Research on conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory rhetoric is cross-disciplinary, pulling elements from the fields of Communication, Sociology, and Political Science. Conspiracy theories are described as adhering to one of two theories: the "paranoid style theory" or the "cultural sociology theory" (Stempel et al., 2007). The paranoid style views conspiracy theories as a construction of "us versus them" (Stempel et al., 2007). Hofstadter (2012) stated that individuals who adopt the paranoid style are obsessive about finding ties between current or past events and a perceived opponent, or "them," usually identified as an individual or a group of individuals who are often classified as more socially-privileged, or "elite." Cultural sociology theory suggests that many conspiracy theories represent a reasonable skepticism toward the media in our society (Stempel et al., 2007). Sunstein & Vermeule (2019) noted that while it may be convenient to label conspiracy theory adherents as mentally ill, most are not suffering from a mental illness, but rather from information isolation.

While some conspiracy theories have large, dedicated audiences, not all conspiracy theories are accepted equally. It is important to understand why certain specific conspiracy theories resonate with some individuals more than others. Four main factors have been identified: "anti-elitism," "response by the accused," "consistency of accusation with audience ideology" (Bricker, 2013; Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014), and "perception of marginalization" (Stempel et al., 2007).

Bricker (2013) has written that "anti-elitism" is characterized by the notion that "elites" have manipulated others, or are responsible for events that happen throughout history for their gain. The response of the accused "elites" is critical to the resonance of conspiracy theories; if perceived as inadequate, the conspiracy will resonate more deeply with the target audience (Bricker, 2013). If an accusation is consistent with an audience's ideology, the audience is more likely to resonate with the conspiracy (Bricker, 2013). Finally, the audience's sense of marginalization from others leads to the resonance of conspiracy theories. Many scholars support the notion that perception of political marginalization fosters a paranoid worldview capable of making conspiracy theories seem reasonable (Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014; Stempel et al., 2007).

METHODOLOGY

Discourse analysis is a multi-methodical investigation of how language is used in a group of texts, and the context in which it is used

(McCarthy et al., 2010). In its simplest form, discourse analysis is used to analyze language use and its effect on communication and knowledge creation (Wood & Kroger, 2004). This research uses a specific style of discourse analysis known as thematic analysis. Using this tool, we aim to better understand how language functions within a given context.

Discourse analysis was used in this study to examine posts, which were represented as *leaks* of highly-confidential material, posted to 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun, by "Q", the anonymous person, or people, who created the QAnon movement. This study organized the "leaks" into thematic groups to allow for a broader understanding of QAnon and the way the group communicates. A total of 3,890 *leaks* had been posted by Q at the time of this analysis; this study will examine 1,000 *leaks* posted between October 28, 2017, and April 3, 2018. This time period was selected because: (a) "Q's" political references are somewhat consistent within this timeframe; (b) this period allows for a substantive analysis of content in which length and substance can vary significantly between posts, and (c) this timeframe is early enough to capture both Q's self-creation and subsequent rise to internet visibility. These posts were accessed through the 8kun board "/qresearch2gen" and other leak-collection websites created by the QAnon community.

FINDINGS

After analyzing the discourse contained in Q's first 1,000 *leaks*, it became evident that Q focused heavily on current events and subsequent related commentary. Most posts were dedicated to an interpretation of government scandals. As Q's online persona grew, Q posted longer *leaks* and responded directly both to supporters and detractors of the group. Of these posts, three subcategories emerged: (1) anti-elitism and discrediting the establishment; (2) claims of group marginalization and oppression, and (3) QAnon's role in unifying "patriotic" Americans, through covert and, ultimately, overt actions.

Subcategories in QAnon Posts

1. Anti-elitism. A significant number of Q's posts utilized anti-elite rhetoric. Anti-elite rhetoric focused on purported acts of bribery, corruption, and other acts perpetrated against QAnon's followers. Many posts (Q, 2017c) questioned the ethics of U.S. political institutions: "Who audits the billions paid for war?" "Who audits the billions paid for environment policy...?" "Who controls the FED?" The answer to these rhetor-

ical questions was framed within the same post: "What is the underlying theme?" The answer, "MONEY," suggested that greed was the motivating factor in government policy, thus questioning the extent to which American institutions had been corrupted by "elite" influence (Table 1).

Table 1. *Examples of Anti-Elitism in Q's Posts (Q, 2017c)*

• What is money flow disruption? List the Billionaires.
• What family history goes back pre_WW1/2?
• Why did the Bush family recently break silence and attack POTUS?
• Who audits the billions paid for war?
• Where do the funds go? Offshore? To who/which entity and/or org?
• What slush fund was recently terminated by AG Sessions?
• Who controls the FED?
• How did political leaders/'talking heads' accum assets in excess of $5mm+?
• What was the net worth for each prior to taking office?

Discrediting the establishment. Information isolation is a very common prerequisite to engaging with conspiracy theories (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). If one wishes to bring credibility and followers to a conspiracy theory, attacking structures of authority are of high priority. Posts made by Q during the timeframe of this research sought to discredit the establishment through three central targets: political figures, the mainstream media, and the Democratic Party.

Political figures. An example of a direct attack against a political leader can be seen in posts about Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany (Q, 2018f). The posts questioned the relationship of Merkel and Adolf Hitler, with rhetorical statements such as: "Who is Angela Hitler?," and "Relationship to Adolf?." These posts are unique in their attack of a political leader outside of the United States. Targeting Merkel presumably showed support for QAnon's anti-globalization agenda (Zuckerman, 2019) by questioning the credibility of one of the most influential leaders of the European Union (Table 2).

Table 2. *Examples of Posts Attacking Angela Merkel (Q, 2018f)*

• Angela Dorothea Kasner. Daughter of a Pastor? Name of FATHER? History of FATHER? Hitler youth (member). Family tree.
• US Intelligence post war controlled who?

• Who is Angela Hitler? Relationship to Adolf?
• How were children named in Germany during this period?
• Risk of 'conspiracy' label the deeper we go
• Truth will shock the WORLD.

Mainstream media. The majority of Q's posts claimed that the mainstream media (MSM) were sources of left-leaning propaganda. Q simultaneously framed the MSM as both influenced by a "MOVEMENT" and without value because they delivered "FAKE NEWS" (Q, 2018c). A similar but distinct idea is shown within the first leak (Q, 2018f), which stated: "Risk of 'Conspiracy' label the deeper we go." Eroding a follower's trust in traditional media works towards the goal of information isolation (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). QAnon appeared to attack news sources that worked to discredit them (Table 3).

Table 3. *Examples of Posts Attacking the Mainstream Media (Q, 2018c, 2017a)*

• Be READY. MSM coming - BIG WAY. MSM LOST CONTROL.
• MSM PROJECTS AS BIG MOVEMENT. FAKE NEWS.
• They rely on the MSM to keep the narrative going but tech is entrenching on their controls.
• They missed this in 2016 and desperately attempting to censor now due to CIA cash infusions. This will fail.
• CONSPIRACY push coming. We see all. We hear all.

The Democratic Party. The Democratic Party (D) as an institution was attacked in posts associating the party with the African American population, the nineteenth-century formation of the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group, and with conspiracies concerning the independent Caribbean nation of Haiti (Q, 2017a). While many southern Democrats during the Reconstruction period (1865-1877) supported the Ku Klux Klan, changes in party politics after the Second World War saw the Democrats become the heralds of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Brady & Ehlers, 2008). Followers of QAnon who identified as members of the far-right expressed unwavering support of Donald Trump, a Republican. Some prominent QAnon members believed that Trump spoke directly through Q at points (Patriot et al., 2019). Trump's popularity with the far-right led QAnon members to question authorities that opposed him and bolstered the credibility of the movement (Table 4).

Table 4. *Examples of Posts Against the Democratic Party (Q, 2017a, 2018c)*

• D's can't lose control over the black population
• At some point the great awakening will occur whereby these false local/national black leaders are corrupt and paid off to help keep the black pop poor and in need
• D's formed the confederate states against freeing slaves. D's formed the KKK
• What happens if the truth about Haiti is released? Do D's lose majority of the vote?
• D LOST SLAVE GRIP. D LOST CENTER VOTERS. LIBS are MINORITY.

2. Group marginalization and oppression. Creating a sense of marginalization has historically been an effective means of building unity in a group (Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014; Stempel et al., 2007). Q's posts (Table 2) during the timeframe of this study reflected the concerns of a marginalized and oppressed group that would find strength through participation in QAnon (Q, 2018e). The "us versus them" dialectic framed QAnon as "WE, THE PEOPLE" who were "TAKING BACK OUR COUNTRY" from the elite antagonists who were "EVIL LOSERS WHO WOULD DO US HARM… ALL FOR A BUCK" (Table 5) (Q, 2018d). Q stated that the greatest oppressor to the average QAnon member is an unnamed enemy, referred to as "THEY." The post (Q, 2018e) stated that "THEY WANT POLITICAL WARS," "THEY WANT RACE WARS," and "THEY WANT YOU DIVIDED." Such posts appeared to be intended to stoke fear and paranoia in QAnon members and to encourage an urgent response to the threat.

Table 5. *Examples of Posts Claiming Group-Marginalization (Q, 2018b, 2018d, 2018e, 2017b)*

• Why are we here? Why are we providing crumbs?
• EVIL LOSERS WHO WOULD DO US HARM… ALL FOR A BUCK
• The time has come to take back our great land.
• We will never lose again win this is finished.
• NO ONE PERSON IS ABOVE ANOTHER.
• Not convinced this is spreading? TOGETHER you are STRONG. APART you are weak

• THEY WANT YOU DIVIDED. THEY WANT RACE WARS. THEY WANT CLASS WARS. THEY WANT RELIGIOUS WARS. THEY WANT POLITICAL WARS. THEY WANT YOU DIVIDED!
• LEARN! FOR GOD & COUNTRY - LEARN! STAY STRONG. STAY TOGETHER. FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT.
• This is more important than you can imagine.

3. The need for QAnon. Q's posts (Q, 2018a) framed QAnon as a covert but united movement within the government that identified and worked against the elite cabal: "PATRIOTS in FULL CONTROL." Q's posts simultaneously described a devastated society, while suggesting that QAnon would save the nation. The rhetorical questions posed by Q suggested that a great conspiracy was at work to acquire and maintain political power. These messages supported "anti-elitism" by creating an "us versus them" dialectic, questioning the ability of political institutions to remain free from monetary influence and suggesting that supporting QAnon would make more information "public" (Q, 2018a). Q's claims inferred that QAnon's covert mission was to save the nation (Table 6).

Table 6. *Examples of Posts Revealing QAnon's Purported Covert Activity (Q, 2018a)*

• Dear Patriot. We hear you. We hear all Americans such as yourself
• Where did the MONEY come from?
• How do you destroy the most POWERFUL country in the world? Direct attack?
• Covert OP by [CLAS-59#241-Q] to infiltrate at highest level to destroy from within?
• Think GAME. Who are the PLAYERS? What are the REWARDS?
• AMERICA FOR SALE. PATRIOTS in FULL CONTROL
• We will make more public. SA was strategic
• "We know" "Do as we say or face consequences"

Calls for unity through participation in QAnon. Having suggested that covert forces are at work to remove the threats posed by "elites," a corrupt establishment, the mainstream media's "fake" news, and the left-leaning Democratic Party, Q sought to build unity within QAnon by identifying obstacles to followers' well-being, calling for a collective movement and inspiring followers to rise up and fight their "oppressors."

Q attempted to build group unity through posts such as (Q, 2017b): "We hear all Americans such as yourself," and "Rest assured

POTUS is backed by the finest people alive who are all dedicated to the eradication of evil." Similar notions can be found in the post (Q, 2018e) stating, "TOGETHER you are STRONG" and "APART you are weak." Q's posts promised a return to power for those who felt marginalized. Q (Q, 2018b) wrote, "We will never lose again when this is over." Another post (Q, 2017b) stated, "The time has come to take back our great land" (Table 7).

Table 7. *Examples of Posts Calling for Unity Through QAnon (Q, 2017b, 2018d, 2018e)*

• WE, THE PEOPLE! WE, THE PEOPLE! WE, THE PEOPLE! WE, THE PEOPLE! WHERE WE GO ONE, WE GO ALL. NO ONE PERSON IS ABOVE ANOTHER.
• WE, THE PEOPLE, ARE MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE.
• STAND UP PATRIOTS. STAND UP AND DEFEND WHAT YOU KNOW IS RIGHT.
• BUILDING THE ARMY
• You, the PEOPLE, have THE POWER. You, the PEOPLE, just forgot how to PLAY.
• STAY STRONG. STAY TOGETHER. FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT.
• Find peace. God is with us. God bless and be safe.
• GOD BLESS YOU AND GOD BLESS THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

DISCUSSION

An analysis of posts made during the research timeframe (October 28, 2017, to April 3, 2018) suggests that Q intended to deflect attention away from the movement by focusing on perceived allies or enemies of QAnon. The posts sought to consolidate a following by questioning the ethics and validity of power structures and rejecting the legitimacy of QAnon's detractors. If members of QAnon were to follow Q's posts without question, they would isolate themselves from larger society and be suspicious of any source that questioned the validity of the movement.

There are questions about whether the QAnon movement will continue if Donald Trump does not win reelection in 2020. Q's posts suggest that everything Trump does is intentional, from larger foreign policy actions to misspelled words in his tweets. It all has a deeper meaning than

it seems. The mobilization of the QAnon community under a common goal to defeat the "deep state" may continue into the future. There is no reason to believe otherwise; the ability to suspend one's disbelief is a prerequisite to membership in the community. Essentially, this targeted use of social media allows QAnon to construct reality and ensure its continued existence, proliferation, and potential success.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a surprising amount of variety in Q's *leaks*. Trying to consolidate them into thematic groups was quite difficult. Q speaks in riddles, code, and sometimes in complete gibberish. Doing the research, I have sought to understand a lot of the coded language that is common throughout the QAnon movement. The use of metaphor and coded language is quite unorganized. Sometimes the posts refer to a very specific person or action, but other times they mean something completely different.

QAnon is unique in the relationship between Q and their followers. One of the most interesting things to me throughout this research has been the creation of a lore—the growth from a barebones narrative to a massive framework of conspiracies. I think a case study looking into the growth of the QAnon community, making a specific examination of the transition between 4chan (a completely anonymous community) into Reddit (which forces their members to create aliases) would be quite interesting. This is completely unexplored territory and could represent the future of counter-public political discourse.

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