THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

BY

WINSTON C. G. BERG

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2024

Copyright © 2024 by Winston C. G. Berg

All Rights Reserved

For Clancy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES vi

LIST OF TABLES vii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS viii

ABSTRACT x

1 INTRODUCTION: WHAT DO WE WORRY ABOUT, WHEN WE WORRY ABOUT CONSPIRACY THEORIES? 1
1.1 "There is no QAnon" 4
1.2 "Anons can be anyone" 8
1.3 QAnon as a conspiracy theory movement 11

2 ORIGINS OF THE "DEEP STATE" TROPE 18
2.1 Introduction 18
2.2 Diverse ideas, shared strategies 23
2.3 The 1950s and 1960s: changes in right wing conspiracy theory 27
2.4 The 1960s and 1970s: crossing ideological boundaries 33
2.5 1970s-1990s: the "deep state" concept and its critics 40
2.6 How the "deep state" became Trump's 49
2.7 Conclusion 52

3 MISINFORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION: MEDIA CHOICE IN THE QANON COMMUNITY 57
3.1 Introduction 57
3.1.1 Exposure to mainstream media sources 60
3.1.2 Causal symmetry 62
3.1.3 Finding "notables" 64
3.2 Methods 66
3.2.1 Variables 66
3.2.2 Operationalizing misinformation 67
3.2.3 Model construction 69
3.3 Results 70
3.3.1 Specific indicator models 72
3.3.2 Omitted indicators 74
3.3.3 General indicator models 75
3.3.4 Comparing models 76
3.4 Discussion 78

4 KNOWING (WITH) THE ENEMY: MOVEMENT INSTITUTIONS, BEFORE AND AFTER Q 86
4.1 Introduction 86
4.2 Methods 89
4.2.1 Research setting 91
4.3 Appropriating and re-coding of mainstream messaging 94
4.3.1 Fantasies of consensus 103
4.4 The Great Kitchen Fire 108
4.4.1 Epistemic vulnerability 111
4.4.2 Shift to procedural expertise 118
4.5 Conclusion 121

5 EPILOGUE: LIVING WITHOUT Q 128
5.1 The user will always get through 133
5.2 Problems with infiltration 137

REFERENCES 141

LIST OF FIGURES

2.1 Organization chart, *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* (1971) 36

3.1 Notable frequency by type 71
3.2 SI model coefficients 72
3.3 GI model coefficients 75

4.1 Trump's notecards, *AP* (2018) 98
4.2 The winning interpretation, screenshot by author. 99
4.3 Q drop 988, courtesy of qanon.pub. 101
4.4 The completed proof, courtesy of an anon. 102
4.5 An anon endorses a post, screenshot by author. 106
4.6 What if we are all shills? Courtesy of an anon. 113

LIST OF TABLES

3.1 Comparison of 2020 and 2023 Links Designated as "Notable" 72
3.2 Comparison of Specific Indicator Model Coefficients for 2020 and 2023 74
3.3 Comparison of General Indicator Model Coefficients for 2020 and 2023 75
3.4 AIC model comparison for 2023 77
3.5 AIC model comparison for 2020 78

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I deeply appreciate the continued interest and patience of my committee. Infinite thanks to Lisa Wedeen, who has been my adviser for nearly a decade, from my time in the Committee on International Relations to my subsequent years in the Department of Political Science. I am grateful for the time and attention she has dedicated to this project. When I arrived at the University of Chicago in 2014, none of us anticipated that conspiracy theories, misinformation, and online politics would soon become defining issues. From the beginning, Lisa took my interest in these topics seriously and encouraged me to pursue them wherever they led. Without her years of continued support, absolutely none of this work would have been possible. It took me some time to find my voice in this field. That I found it, to the extent that I have, I owe to her commitment to precision, clarity and intellectual honesty.

Joseph Masco provided unfailing feedback on the roughest of drafts, a genuine appreciation for the bizarrities of conspiracy theorist literature, and a necessary perspective outside the discipline. He encouraged me to pursue the questions that drive much of this dissertation, where politics intersects with knowledge, science and technology. William Howell was always there to help find a way for this project to move forward. He was a generous reader during this process. He seemed to understand what was interesting about this research before I myself did, and he provided valuable advice on how best to communicate its core ideas. I would like to additionally thank Kathleen Belew for her guidance on Chapter 2 of this dissertation, and for her perspective on the difficulties and responsibilities involved in studying these topics. Besides my committee, I am especially grateful to have learned from the faculty concentrated in the Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory, including Linda Zerilli, William Mazzarella and Kaushik Sunder Rajan, as well as the other faculty of the Departments of Political Science and Anthropology.

I am greatly appreciative of the interest that those in my cohort, especially Walker Gunning, Silvia Fedi, Omar Safadi and Arthur Zeyang Yu, took in my work. I would

particularly like to thank Chandler James for many conversations about what it means to do political science. I am also thankful for my friends outside the department, including Parker Burns, Clancy Taylor, Alex van Dorp, Allison Dulin, Patrick Graham, Alex Madsen, Erik Mueller and Morley Musick.

The organizers and attendees of the Political Theory Workshop, and the related Working Group, provided extensive feedback on these chapters. Parts of this project were also presented at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, the Midwestern Political Science Association, and the Organization of American Historians. The feedback and questions I received at these events were integral to the development of the project. A special thanks is due here to Jeffrey Friedman, for providing a forum for interesting and rigorous work on conspiracy theories, and to Shterna Friedman for her comments.

Many thanks to Joachim Laurent and Matthew Lee, who provided valuable research assistance for Chapter 3, and whose forgiveness I beg. No one besides me should have to read that many 8kun posts. Thank you to Bobby Amour, of the Q Origins Project, for additional assistance with data for Chapter 3, and to Ernie Lazar for assistance with archival material for Chapter 2. I thank the Center for Effective Government here at the University of Chicago for their generous support of this research. Further thanks are due to the students who would dutifully show up for three hours of discussion each Friday morning while attending my course on conspiracy theories in Winter 2024.

I thank my parents and my sister, who have cheered me every step of the way. They would remind me that every small step matters, and that, yes, I would finish. None of this – not my coursework, not my conference presentations, not my research, and especially not my dissertation – would have been possible without Chloe Yanny-Tillar. When I fall, she picks me up.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank my interlocutors from the field, who constantly challenged my expectations.

ABSTRACT

Journalistic and scholarly concerns about conspiracy theories often refer to the movement known as "QAnon." But what is QAnon? This question is crucial because much of the public concern and scholarly research on conspiracy theories and misinformation is driven by this specific case. While it seems natural to label the Q community as a "conspiracy theory movement," this label does not clarify much about the nature of the community on its own. The three chapters of this dissertation each represent a different approach to understanding QAnon as a conspiracy theory movement.

In Chapter 2, I trace the origins of the "deep state" trope used by the Q movement. Following the path of the term reveals a mid-century activist movement connected not by a shared ideology but by a strategy for signaling possible cooperation despite ideological differences. Contrary to the view that conspiracy theorizing is a defensive rationalization, I highlight cases where it was used to open ranks and negotiate ideological boundaries, imagining an elusive enemy appearing in contradictory guises.

Chapter 3 tests whether Q community beliefs are attributable to misinformation. Analyzing data from /qresearch/, the main online community of the Q movement, I find that users encounter fringe sources at a rate similar to mainstream social media users, undermining the misinformation explanation. I argue that the community does not significantly differentiate between fringe and mainstream sources. Increased importance assigned to fringe sources in 2023 reflects a lack of differentiation rather than a distinct preference.

Chapter 4 addresses why /qresearch/ members consume news from sources they distrust. I argue that the community's resilience is partly due to its interpretive institutions' ability to resolve disputes, challenging the idea that the community is held together by irrationally committed members. Instead, the community's cohesion is maintained by its ongoing practice of conspiracy theorizing, which provides a framework for managing internal disagreements and maintaining unity.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WHAT DO WE WORRY ABOUT, WHEN WE WORRY ABOUT CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

"If you run on the live boards long enough, the inorganic posts become obvious," anon tells me, "due to the repetition, spam and coordination. Real anon posts are rare. You must sift through garbage to find real anon posts...[they are like] those crumbs that fall to the floor." Anon is slowly scrolling through the 751 posts comprising a research thread on 8kun's /qresearch/ board, an online discussion board considered by participants in the QAnon community to be the nerve center of the movement. Each post in the thread, made by one of hundreds of anonymous users of the forum, consists of a single news article or social media post. Occasionally, posts include a short interpretation of how the article relates to the broader premise embraced by the community: that their fellow poster "Q," supposedly a government leaker, is slowly revealing a grand plot by members of the former Trump administration to expose the corrupt dealings of a malevolent "deep state" that secretly dominates American politics.

Political scientists have documented the political and psychological correlates (Douglas et al. 2019) of belief in major conspiracy theories like those focusing on the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks and various assassinations (e.g. MLK, RFK, JFK), as well as more recent theories like those addressing Barack Obama's birth certificate (Enders, Smallpage and Lupton 2020), the causes of climate change (Jolley and Douglas 2014a) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Jolley and Paterson 2020; Cassese, Farhart and Miller 2020). And yet, these accounts cannot explain OrgAnon who, despite having committed a remarkable amount of time to the research effort on the board, is reluctant to describe himself as a committed believer of any one theory. "I've seen nearly all of the theories that are out there and almost all of them fell apart for me under scrutiny," he says. For OrgAnon, being part of this community does not mean sharing a set of established, agreed-upon beliefs. "The important

thing," he explains, "is to keep up with new information as it comes in."

* * *

Following the unexpected success of the 2016 Brexit and Trump campaigns (Uscinski and Enders 2023), a narrative emerged among journalists, public figures, and some scholars that American politics had transitioned into a "post-truth" era. In this era, "alternative realities" thrive, and "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion" compared to "appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Wang 2016). This alarm over "post-truth" politics often manifests as concerns about the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation, which, according to this narrative, have "entered the mainstream" (e.g., Willingham 2020; Bond 2023; Simon 2024) and now exert an "outsized" influence on contemporary politics and culture (Klepper 2024). In this narrative, conspiracy theories are treated as bizarre, outrageous and, in a word, unbelievable (Butter and Knight 2018; Blanusa and Hristov 2020; Dentith 2018). Accordingly, many political scientists have taken an interest in understanding why some people believe in conspiracy theories (Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016; Nyhan and Reifler 2010).

When journalistic and scholarly accounts express concerns about conspiracy theories, there is a good chance that what they mean is the movement colloquially called "QAnon." But, what is QAnon, exactly? This dissertation asks and answers this simple question. Despite it's simplicity, this is a question of wide-ranging importance, because much of the public concern about, and scholarly research agenda around, conspiracy theories and misinformation is motivated by this specific case. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand exactly what QAnon is a case of.

Is QAnon a conspiracy theory? Among the approximately 50% of Americans who are at least somewhat familiar with it, half express disapproval of QAnon. The majority of these individuals cite the fact that QAnon is a conspiracy theory as the reason for their disapproval (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Oliphant, and Shearer 2020). This perspective is not confined to

the public; scholarly accounts also take a markedly pessimistic view of conspiracy theories. Researchers argue that conspiracy theories contribute to numerous detrimental political effects, such as widespread distrust in political institutions (Jolley and Douglas 2014a, 2014b; Einstein and Glick 2015; Jolley et al. 2019; Mari et al.), political polarization (Del Vicario et al. 2016a, 2016b; Sunstein 2018), political non-participation (Jolley and Douglas 2014a; Uscinski and Parent 2014), various forms of prejudice (Bartlett and Miller 2010; Swami 2012; Imhoff and Bruder 2014), and resistance to public health measures (Bogart and Bird 2003; Bogart and Thorburn 2006; Oliver and Wood 2014; Jolley and Douglas 2014b; Lamberty and Imhoff 2018).

Yet, even if many agree that QAnon is a conspiracy theory and that conspiracy theories are harmful, the issue is complicated by the broad and often ambiguous nature of the term "conspiracy theory."

Analytic philosophers writing on the epistemology of conspiracy theories (Keeley 1999; Basham 2001; Coady 2003; Hagen 2018; Pigden 1995; Dentith 2021) favor what they generally call the "minimal definition" (Dentith 2022; Dentith 2023) or "neutral definition" (Cassam 2023), wherein a conspiracy theory is simply any explanation of a historical event that attributes causality to a small group of people working in secret. A significant number of political scientists have more recently adopted this definition (e.g., Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson; van Prooijen and Douglas 2018; Keeley 1999; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). Viewed through this lens, conspiracy theories may not seem as threatening, given that real conspiracies of this nature are not uncommon in recent history (Dentith 2021; Uscinski and Enders 2023; Napolitano and Reuter 2021; Pigden 2007). Examples include the Watergate scandal, the Moscow Show Trials, the Bush administration's claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction before the 2003 invasion, the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, Al Qaeda's planning of the 9/11 attacks, and corporate efforts to obscure the harmful effects of smoking and the reality of human-caused climate change. Considering this perspective, recent find-

ings that many, if not most, people believe in at least some conspiracy theories (Oliver and Wood 2014) are not so surprising. Conspiracy theories seem plausible because numerous political events in recent memory fit the description of a conspiracy theory.

Is this what members of the public mean when they describe QAnon as a conspiracy theory? Probably not. More than its descriptive use, the term "conspiracy theory" is predominantly employed in a pejorative sense (Coady 2003; Husting and Orr 2007; Wood 2016; Douglas, van Prooijen, and Sutton 2022). It is sometimes used tactically, as governments and political actors have frequently utilized the term to discredit politically inconvenient claims (Coady 2018; deHaven-Smith 2014; Melley 2000; Thalmann 2019). When people who disapprove of QAnon label it a conspiracy theory, they might simply be expressing their disapproval. Thus, while it is common to consider QAnon an example of a conspiracy theory, it is unclear what this designation actually tells us about it. Indeed, QAnon may still warrant disapproval, but labeling it a conspiracy theory expresses that disapproval rather than explaining it. Even if we adopt the "minimal definition," where a "conspiracy theory" is any explanation that attributes causality to conspiracies, and assume that the beliefs of the Q community fit this description, we cannot conclude that this aspect is central to the movement's effectiveness or appeal without further investigation. Rather than relying on our understanding of conspiracy theories to make sense of QAnon, this dissertation aims to use QAnon as a paradigmatic case to clarify what exactly it is that social scientists, and the broader public, worry about, when we worry about "conspiracy theories."

1.1 "There is no QAnon"

"QAnon," as I was repeatedly reminded by interlocutors, is not what the movement is called by its members. For this reason, I generally refer to the movement as "the Q community," although throughout the dissertation I sometimes use "QAnon" when referring to research conducted by others. Ask someone in Q community what QAnon is, and this is what they

will unfailingly tell you: "There is no QAnon. There is Q, and there are anons."

Let's start with Q. In 2017, a user began posting on the long-running imageboard 4chan under the name Q. Claiming to be a high-ranking official in the Trump administration, this user insinuated that Trump was involved in a secret military operation to root out extreme corruption in the government. The user promised that hundreds of prominent Democrats—most notably, Hillary Clinton—would soon be arrested for crimes ranging from electoral fraud to cannibalism. Most of Q's posts were far more cryptic, consisting of seemingly encoded messages with no clear meaning or purpose. Over time, users on the site started to believe that these cryptic posts contained secret insider information about politics, and they began to work together to decode them. Due to increased moderation as the community grew, Q left 4chan and resettled on 8chan, another imageboard with similar features. The owners of 8chan later renamed the site to 8kun. Q continued to post there in the account's dedicated subforum, /qresearch/, until abruptly ceasing shortly after Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 election.

This dissertation does not directly examine why users on the imageboard found it plausible that Q's messages contained secret information. However, the narrative's plausibility can be attributed to certain features of imageboard communication. An imageboard is a type of popular online discussion platform that predates the rise of social media and has unique affordances compared to mainstream social media. Most notably, all imageboard users are anonymous by default, and imageboards collect little information about their users, making it very difficult to de-anonymize them. If a government official genuinely wanted to leak secret information without risk of identification, an imageboard would be a plausible choice. For the same reasons, imageboards are popular with users who want to evade censorship or public accountability for their political views. 8kun's most popular board is /qresearch/, the board that Q used to interact with the public. Other popular boards on the site, such as /egy/, an Egyptian language board, and Russia's /cafechan/, are primarily used to avoid

government censorship regimes.

While social scientists have examined the spread of content from the Q community on mainstream social media platforms (Gallagher, Davey, and Hart 2020; Hyzen and Van den Bulck 2021; Holoyda 2022), little scholarly attention has been paid to the imageboard communities where the movement first emerged. This is surprising, given that QAnon is not the first political movement to originate in the communicative context of an imageboard. In the mid-2000s, the "Anonymous" hacktivist movement, which supported the Occupy and Arab Spring movements, emerged from 4chan (Coleman 2014). Simultaneously, the Japanese *netto-uyoku*, or "net right," emerged on the popular Japanese imageboard 2channel (Sakamoto 2011). Imageboards are highly influential in online culture, with much of the content created by anons—imageboard users—eventually migrating to mainstream platforms (Zannettou et al. 2017; Hine et al. 2017).

2channel is currently owned and hosted by Jim Watkins, an American running several online businesses out of the Philippines. Watkins also owns 8kun, which is why many journalists argue that Watkins and his son Ron, who helps manage the board, are behind Q. Ron Watkins, in particular, has been implicated through linguistic analysis and suspicious behavior in various interviews. A pivotal moment occurred in the HBO documentary "Q: Into the Storm" (Hoback 2021), where Watkins appeared to inadvertently admit to being Q, although he later denied this (Putterman 2021). Paul Furber, a South African software developer and one of the early promoters of QAnon, has also been linked to the Q posts through linguistic analysis. Researchers from OrphAnalytics and French computational linguists used artificial intelligence to compare the writing styles of various suspected individuals, finding strong similarities between Q's posts and those of Watkins and Furber. This analysis noted that Q's writing style shifted noticeably around 2018, a period during which Furber claims Q was "hijacked" by Watkins, although Furber still denies the allegation that he was writing as Q before then (Marcus 2022).

Furber, along with right-wing YouTuber Tracy Diaz and Coleman Rogers, created much of the early online infrastructure related to Q, including the "Calm Before The Storm" subreddit, which journalists argue played a key role in popularizing the movement before Reddit shut it down (Zadrozny and Collins 2018). They profited from the expansion of the movement by creating a popular YouTube channel called Patriot's Soapbox, where they would interpret Q's posts to a streaming audience in the tens of thousands. During one of these livestreams, Rogers appears to post to 8kun using the Q identity without realizing he was still on-stream, after which the video quickly cuts out.

The Q identity is not an account in the sense familiar to users of other social media platforms. Instead, Q is a tripcode, an affordance unique to imageboards. Because imageboard operators generally want to minimize the data they collect on their users, no major imageboards use an account-and-registration system. Tripcodes are cryptographic signatures, more like passwords than accounts. Entering a particular password, generated by a hash algorithm generally known only to the board operator, allows users to "sign" their posts with the tripcode generated by that password. While this system eliminates the need for a large user account database, it is less secure than an account system, and tripcodes can be cracked with sufficient computational power.

Taken together, it seems highly likely that several different individuals or groups posted using the Q identity during the first period of its activity, from 2017 to 2020. Thus, Q is less like the movement's mastermind or leader and more like a mask adopted, at various points, by different community members. To perform the role of Q, these community members had to draw on their understanding of what the community is and what those in the community want. Consequently, while several accounts of the community have focused on discovering Q's identity and intentions, this dissertation focuses on the latter part of the "QAnon" equation – the anons.

1.2 "Anons can be anyone"

The term "anon" did not originate within the Q community but is instead a longstanding element of imageboard culture. On typical imageboards, even those that are not strictly political or associated with QAnon, users universally refer to one another as "anons," acknowledging their anonymous status. When I asked /qresearch/ users about the kinds of people the community's anons were likely to be, the consistent response was: "anons can be anyone." This belief underpins the plausibility of the movement's frame story—that the anon called Q is a high-ranking government official. Since anons can be anyone, even government leakers can be anons. However, determining the average anon's demographic profile is notoriously difficult because imageboards do not collect such information. Additionally, members of even non-political imageboards often have an irreverent sense of humor and enjoy online trolling (Coleman 2014), making straightforward surveys unreliable. For instance, a 2010 demographic survey attempt on 4chan, the most mainstream imageboard, was quickly derailed by trolls (Tsotsis 2010). Consequently, most demographic information about imageboard users is speculative.

Given that Q's first posts were made on 4chan and that the earliest Q movement participants emerged there, it seems reasonable to infer that 8kun/qresearch/'s user base is similar to 4chan's. According to 4chan's estimates for advertisers, its users are 70% male and 30% female, nearly all between the ages of 18-34. Approximately half are American, with the rest residing in Europe, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Japan. No other country contributes more than 7% of users except the United States (47%). Additionally, most users have attended or are currently enrolled in college.

However, Q did not just post on 4chan; Q posted on "Politically Incorrect," the site's notorious political community, also known as /pol/. To outsiders, 4chan is often conflated with /pol/, but much of the site is non-political, with main boards organized around diverse topics such as video games (/v/), literature (/lit/), origami (/po/), and personal advice

(/adv/). The "Politically Incorrect" board was created in 2011 as a "containment board" to siphon racist or otherwise disruptive political content away from mainstream boards (Lagorio-Chafkin 2018). Therefore, /pol/ likely has a distinct demographic composition compared to the rest of 4chan.

Although /qresearch/ is an imageboard community directly descended from 4chan, it may make more sense to draw on surveys of the broader Q community in order to speculate about the identities of those on the board. These surveys are also flawed, as surveyors often know little about the Q community and phrase their questions in ways that might confuse community members. For example, the Morning Consult (2023) asks "how accurate are the claims made by QAnon," "where do you get information about QAnon" and "do you have a favorable or unfavorable impression of QAnon?" This phrasing might be confusing to someone in the movement, because it seems to conflate Q with the movement as a whole. One purpose of these surveys is to ascertain support for the movement. But, because the phrasing is unclear, it is hard to generate expectations about what answers a supporter would give to each question. Other surveys, like the Public Religion Research Institute survey, operationalizes Q movement membership by asking respondents whether they agree with the statement "the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation." This likely reflects the views of some members of the community, but this is actually a summary of the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory which circulated during the 2016 Presidential election cycle, from which the community has largely moved on in the aftermath of Trump's 2020 defeat. Again, it is difficult to generate clear expectations of how community members would respond to this question. Despite these flaws, survey results generally agree on some demographic facts about American members of the Q community: the movement is mainly male (∼60%), mostly Republican in partisanship (∼40%), generally not college-educated (∼60%), southern (∼40%), suburban (∼45%), and White (∼60%) (PRRI 2020, 2021, 2023).

In order to provide an additional plausibility check on these surveys, I conducted a small survey of content creators on Pilled.net, a streaming political video platform often used by members of the Q community who have been banned from mainstream platforms. I randomly selected 100 streaming content creators from a list of the top 1000 channels on the site. I then recorded demographic information from their profiles. Of these creators, 77 were White, 4 were Black or Hispanic, and the remaining 17 did not disclose their race. Fifteen were women, 69 were men, and the remaining 16 did not disclose their sex. Two were under 18, 49 were between the ages of 18 and 35, 23 were between 35-44, and 6 were between 45-64, and the remaining 20 did not disclose their age. Based on this informal survey, PRRI and Morning Consult's findings of a largely White, male and relatively-young movement seem plausible.

The Q movement is also often described as far-right, Christian nationalist, anti-Semitic and/or White supremacist. To check the plausibility of this characterization, I also watched the top 3 streams, comprising over 300 hours of content in total, from each channel to collect some basic information about the content Q creators posted. In these videos, 61 creators mentioned supporting Trump, or displayed Trump-related imagery at least once, 5 made anti-Semitic comments, or made use of anti-Semitic imagery at least once, 3 expressed White supremacist sentiments, or used White power-related imagery at least once, 12 expressed anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, or used related imagery at least once, 26 mentioned Christian themes or used Christian imagery at least once, and 48 expressed anti-vaccine beliefs at least once.

The purpose of Pilled.net, according to its creators, is to provide a platform for political content creators that allows users to watch political content "without worrying about you or them being censored, punished, banned, booted, or de-platformed for differing political viewpoints." When I spoke with content creators, they all confirmed that the site does not have a moderation policy, and that creators have never been banned for any reason. This suggests

that content creators are unlikely to self-censor due to social desirability bias. If anything, the community's anti-censorship stance may foster a bias toward more transgressive content. Thus, creators expressing views undesirable in mainstream society might be overrepresented on this platform. Although no strong generalizations should be drawn from this informal survey, it suggests that the movement might be better characterized as simply pro-Trump. Racist and anti-Semitic content does certainly appear in the community, and perhaps even at a higher rate than these views appear amongst the general public, but the political motivations of those in the movement are not solely reducible to racism or anti-Semitism, nor does Q content consistently appear alongside racist or anti-Semitic content.

1.3 QAnon as a conspiracy theory movement

In sum, although the movement's estimated demographics and political views align with broader expectations about the composition of the Trumpian radical right, these demographics do not provide new insights into the movement. The prevalence of anti-vaccine sentiment might indicate an interest in conspiracy theories among its members. However, as I have already discussed, while it seems natural to label the Q community as a conspiracy theory movement, this label does not clarify much about the nature of the community on its own. The three chapters of this dissertation each represent a different approach to understanding QAnon as a conspiracy theory movement.

Origins of the "Deep State" Trope

In Chapter 2, I trace the origins of the "deep state" trope. My aim in this chapter is to examine whether the Q community's adoption of the term "deep state" can be situated within a long-running intellectual or ideological tradition. I hoped that treating conspiracy theory as a kind of self-contained ideology or intellectual tradition would allow me to avoid defining "conspiracy theory" through a set of descriptive criteria. Instead of viewing it as a

type of explanation, conspiracy theory could be better understood as a set of shared concerns that connect new conspiracy movements, like the Q community, to historical ones. Following the citational genealogy of the term "deep state" revealed a highly organized, mid-century activist movement attempting to mobilize across existing partisan and ideological divides. However, what connected these groups was less a shared ideology with distinct key ideas and attitudes, and more a shared strategy for signaling that inter-elite cooperation might still be possible, even between elites advocating conflicting political positions.

Treating conspiracy theorizing as a form of strategic signaling is not a new idea in the literature of political communications. However, the usual approach is to consider conspiracy theorizing as a form of strategic messaging aimed inward. In this view, movement elites put forward conspiracy theories as unifying narratives to rationalize political setbacks and to close ranks through appeals to a terrifying external enemy. This understanding of conspiracy theorizing at the movement level is, more or less, a generalization of its apparent psychological appeal at the individual level. Here, conspiracy theories are seen as defensive coping strategies that allow theorists to prevent the traumatic falsification of their existing beliefs by rationalizing away contradictory evidence. In sum, the conventional view is that, at both the movement and individual levels, conspiracy theories are about preserving existing beliefs when they are threatened by loss, defeat, or falsification.

However, tracing the intellectual and activist currents leading up to Peter Dale Scott's adoption of the "deep state" term highlights several mid-century cases where, I argue, conspiracy theorizing was a way of opening ranks to court other marginal political groups. When directed outward rather than inward, conspiracy theorizing helped redefine what it meant for a group to be ideologically uniform, providing a medium through which elites could negotiate over which points of agreement or disagreement mattered. In these cases, conspiracy theories did not shore up solidarity by positing a terrifying enemy, but by imagining an elusive one that cynically appeared in various contradictory ideological guises. If these narratives were

true, political ideology could no longer serve as a useful guide to distinguish friend from foe, enabling erstwhile enemies to chalk up their past hostilities to manipulation. These cases suggest that conspiracy theorizing can arise under more multifaceted conditions and have a more diverse "use value" beyond their characterization as "sense-making" tactics employed by marginal or failing groups to rationalize their subjugation at the hands of "impersonal and opaque forces" (Pelkmans and Machold 2011).

Misinformation and Transformation

Another common approach to studying conspiracy theories is to identify belief in conspiracy theories with belief in misinformation or "fake news." Chapter 3 examines two inter-related questions related to the relationship between the uptake of conspiracy theory beliefs, and the spread of fringe media online. In what is sometimes called the "rabbit hole" theory (e.g. Tufekci 2018), QAnon conspiracy theorists' adoption of their strange beliefs is attributable to incidental exposure to fringe media online, which compound over time to produce durable changes in belief. This explanation of the spread of conspiracy theory beliefs is attractive, in some ways, because it affirms that people are responsive to new information. Vulnerability to radicalization implies that people desire, or are at least sometimes susceptible to, information that contradicts their existing beliefs.

However, by analyzing data on the sources shared by users of /qresearch/ during their research process, I find that the majority of articles discussed within the community originate from mainstream media sources generally deemed credible by political scientists. Visitors to /qresearch/ encounter fringe sources at a rate comparable to that of a typical social media user on mainstream platforms. This finding undermines a fundamental premise of the "rabbit hole" narrative, as even core community members' media diets do not consist primarily of extreme fringe material.

I also examine whether the community treats fringe sources differently from mainstream

ones, addressing the "causal symmetry" debate in the study of misinformation. This debate centers on whether there is a distinct causal process for the uptake of false information. Misinformation researchers who isolate elements like social media (Del Vicario et al. 2016a; Bode and Vraga 2021), motivated reasoning (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017), or specific psychological tendencies (Roozenbeek et al. 2020) as drivers of belief in misinformation suggest that these factors uniquely predispose individuals to favor false information over true information. This view contrasts with classic public opinion frameworks, which argue that most people have no reliable way of distinguishing misinformation from accurate information in the absence of factors like ideological and partisan priors (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Therefore, there is no reason that the truth or falsehood of a claim would have any bearing on whether it is adopted by the public.

To determine whether the community is predisposed toward fringe sources, I examine data on a formal procedure that /qresearch/ users employ to evaluate and record judgments about the usefulness of outside media sources in their ongoing conspiracy research. Using a large-N observational dataset recording these judgments, I model the effect of source type (whether fringe or mainstream) on the community's internal judgments of source importance. I find that in 2020, the community was just as likely to assign importance to mainstream as to fringe sources. By 2023, the community was somewhat more likely to assign importance to fringe sources, although mainstream sources still contributed the majority of content discussed.

A subsequent multi-model comparison suggests that, despite the apparent shift towards increased endorsement of fringe content in 2023, the community does not treat mainstream and fringe sources significantly differently. Rather than indicating the development of a predisposition toward fringe content, the increased endorsement of fringe content from 2020 to 2023 may instead reflect the emergence of a more sophisticated fringe social media ecosystem during the intervening years. Increased endorsement of this content may simply be

proportional to its increased availability in 2023. I further examine this hypothesis through a multi-model inference comparing models predicting community judgments of importance using only the presence of a link to any outside source with models using more detailed information about whether sources are fringe are mainstream. The less detailed models omitting information about source type consistently outperform models incorporating this additional information. In other words, models more accurately represented the judgments of the community when they omitted information about source credibility. This suggests that, when community members make these judgments, they also act as if they have no information about source credibility, meaning that, in effect, they do not differentiate between mainstream and fringe sources.

Knowing (with) the Enemy

The finding that members of the /qresearch/ community predominantly consume and discuss mainstream media sources raises an important question: why do they consume so much news from sources they vocally distrust? In Chapter 4, this question guides my examination of the formal procedures through which /qresearch/ers interpret and assess the importance of the information they encounter online. I argue that the resilience of the community is attributable, at least in part, to the ability of the community's interpretive institutions to resolve disputes that threaten to create division. This argument challenges the idea that the cohesion of the Q community is based on a "hard core" of members who are totally and irrationally committed to various conspiracy theories. Instead, I contend that the community's cohesion is maintained by its ongoing practice of conspiracy theorizing. This chapter can be viewed as a process-tracing account of conspiracy theory, suggesting that we can learn about "conspiracy theories" by examining how this group produces them.

My findings indicate that, even without trusting mainstream messages, Q community members still find them useful for obtaining information that cannot be found elsewhere.

Because they suspect that mainstream media and political messages aim to influence their behavior, they view these messages as conveying hidden information about the motivations of media and political elites. To uncover this hidden information, they put forward radical reinterpretations of mainstream media content. However, this process raises further questions, as community interpretations are often only tenuously connected to the manifest content of mainstream media messages. Since interpretations are frequently arbitrary, disagreement over the "real meaning" of these sources is rampant.

What usually still settled debates over these hidden meanings, during the period the account was still active in the community, was the direct intervention of Q. Because Q supposedly had insider knowledge, Q could selectively affirm interpretations in a way that was acceptable to the rest of the group. After Q's abrupt departure from the movement in the wake of Joe Biden's victory in 2020, however, the community became de-stabilized by disagreement. If rationalizations for Q's disappearance emerged to solve the problem of mass exit in the wake of disappointment by helping the community to "close ranks" (Uscinski and Parent 2014), the emergence of these competing explanations simultaneously multiplied the axes over which disagreements could arise between those who remained in the broader Q community. What helped the movement stabilize, I argue, wasn't the emergence of new beliefs that helped those in the movement "cope," so much as it was the construction of procedural institutions that helped create space for multiple, conflicting interpretations of Q to simultaneously co-exist within the same community. These institutions revolve around the efforts of volunteer research managers known as "bakers," whose role gained significance as they took on the dispute-resolution function previously handled by Q. The result was the emergence of a structural role within the community analogous to that of "elites" in classic theories of political communications and public opinion, though with some important differences.

In sum, these chapters suggest that members of the Q community form their beliefs in

ways that are not fundamentally different from how ordinary people do. Like "the rest of us," conspiracy theorists come to share many beliefs because they acknowledge a set of mutually agreed-upon institutions, elites, and individuals responsible for verifying them, although the character of these institutions and modes of verification can be quite different from mainstream ones. Compared to accounts which emphasize ingrained "conspiracy thinking" or psychological predispositions, this conclusion should be taken as an optimistic one. It supports the premise that those who conspiracy theorize need not always do so. But moreover, it supports the flexibility of that practice to creative ends. Much of that "conspiracy thinking," this dissertation argues, takes place in a socially-distributed way, across the technological infrastructure of conspiracy. People – who else? – are still doing this thinking, but they are not all thinking the same thing. A conspiracy theory movement does not imply a uniformity of belief among its adherents. The institutional work done by this infrastructure is not exhausted in the task of locating and connecting people who already agree – the point of the institution, and its infrastructure, is that those in the movement do not have to believe the same things in order to be involved in their collective task. All they have to do, says OrgAnon, "is to keep up with new information as it comes in."

CHAPTER 2

ORIGINS OF THE "DEEP STATE" TROPE

2.1 Introduction

On March 25, 2023 former President Trump publicly announced that "either the deep state destroys America, or we destroy the deep state" (quoted in Allen 2023). In invoking the deep state, he finally followed the lead of his erstwhile allies Steve Bannon and retired General Michael Flynn, known for their embrace of the more conspiratorial element of the former President's base. There was, from that point of view, nothing surprising about Trump's adoption of the term. But to those familiar with the longer history of the term "deep state," its recent cachet on the far right is puzzling. In fact, the term entered American politics with Peter Dale Scott, a former Canadian diplomat and emeritus professor at the University of California, Berkeley, most famous for his poetry, socialist politics, and his detailed histories of what he portrays as a nexus among intelligence, government, and criminal actors he has variously called the "parapolitical milieu," the "deep political milieu" and, more simply, the "deep state." How and why did a conceptual vocabulary with origins traceable to the writings of the Kennedy-era New Left come to hold such significance for the Trumpian right?

In this chapter I reconstruct and interpret a series of debates between major intellectuals and activists who offered accounts invoking conspiracies to explain the reasons for, and the political implications of, the Kennedy assassination. These earlier debates influenced contemporary thinkers responsible for the popularization of the idea of the "deep state," which has in recent times proved a rallying point for the radical right cohering around former President Trump. In light of existing research on the ideological and partisan uptake of conspiracy theories, the left-to-right "truth trajectory" (Pelkmans and Machold 2011) of "deep state" terminology may be surprising. After all, a long-running view of conspiracy theories, of which Hofstadter's "The Paranoid Style In American Politics" (1964) is the

paradigmatic example, argues that conspiracy theories are basically the domain of the radical right – a view that many recent accounts still affirm (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Faris et al. 2017; Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018). At the same time, this understanding of the political support for conspiracy theories remains contested. By the "minimal" definition, "conspiracy theory" simply refers to any explanation assigning causal significance to a small group acting in secret for political ends (Dentith 2019). If this is what is meant by "conspiracy theory," then there is less evidence that conspiracy theories are embraced predominately on the political right. Indeed, half of the American public embraces at least one theory of this type (Oliver and Wood 2014), and there is little recent evidence of partisan asymmetry in conspiracy theory beliefs (Enders et al. 2022).

The wide acceptance of conspiracy theories, which often contradict mainstream explanations for public events and are generally suspicious of political elites (Harris 2022), presents a puzzle: if public opinion is so determined by elite discourse (Zaller 1992; Erikson, Luttbeg and Tedin 2010), then why and how have a set of beliefs that challenge the sincerity and authority of political elites been able to spread so widely? More recent research has affirmed that conspiracy theories spread in much the same way, and due to the same sources as ordinary beliefs: elite cues drive belief in conspiracy theories, too (Watts et al. 1999; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016; Nefes 2015, 2017). The answer to this puzzle is simply that different elites endorse different conspiracy theories – namely, they endorse theories that question the sincerity of out-groups while excusing in-group elites from accusations (Smallpage, Enders and Uscinski 2017; Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016; Radnitz and Underwood 2017). While recent research has affirmed that both those on the left and the right believe conspiracy theories, there is strong evidence that differently-partisan people embrace different conspiracy theories (Enders et al. 2021; Einstein and Glick 2015; Hartman and Newmark 2012; Pasek et al. 2015).

Yet, if conspiracy theories, like other forms of political messaging, are strongly tied to

the partisan elites that speak them, then how could the vocabulary of the "deep state" range so far across the ideological and partisan boundaries of American politics? More broadly, how do elites decide which conspiracy theories to endorse? And, under what conditions to they put forward new narratives rather than sticking with old ones? Despite this strong emphasis on the role of partisan and ideological media elites in spreading conspiracy theory beliefs amongst the public, little attention has been paid to the sources of elite ideas, and the ways that various conspiracy theories have circulated between elite thinkers and groups. Most recent studies focus on the ways that sharing conspiracy theories functions as a form of "strategic communication" (Uscinski and Parent 2014) by which elites signal to, and mobilize their partisan base in order to discourage defection to competing political groups (Miller et al. 2016; Atkinson et al. 2017). Many of these accounts focusing on elite signaling also stage the significance of conspiracy theories in primarily emotional terms. Individual-level research in political psychology affirms the narrative that conspiracy theories basically function as defensive "coping mechanisms" (Marchlewska et al. 2022; Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre and Utych 2023) that enable an "alternative reality" (van Prooijen 2022) in which conspiracy theorists can defend a fragile ego by perceiving themselves as important, and rationalize their beliefs despite counter-evidence. Similarly, at the individual level, conspiracy theories can provide entertainment and meaning through the apophenic pleasures of connecting dots and solving mysteries (Stewart 1999; Lepselter 2024; Masco and Wedeen 2024).

In other words, views of conspiracy theories rooted at the intersection of public opinion and political psychology characterize conspiracy theories as pleasurable and appealing narratives used by elites on the back foot to retain control over their movements and prevent exit by the base. For example, Uscinski and Parent (2014) famously argue that "conspiracy theories are for losers," and that they tend to "resonate" with groups when they are suffering from loss, weakness or disunity. My argument in this chapter is similar to theirs in that I also find that forms of conspiracy theorizing—exemplified by, but not limited to appeals to

a "deep state"—can help shore up in-group cooperation. However, I argue that conspiracy theories can accomplish similar effects in a markedly different way: at the level of inter-elite communication. For Uscinski and Parent, conspiracy theories act as a "unifying narrative of a terrifying enemy" which allow marginal and defeated groups to "close ranks" (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 132-133). In their telling, conspiracy theories originating from marginal groups are "only a more intense version of mundane political discourse" (146) wherein there are no "shades of gray" (147). In their view, this is due to marginal groups' comparatively greater need to imagine an overwhelmingly powerful enemy in order to discourage exit by embattled group members. This may well be true of certain forms of public-facing conspiracy theorizing. However, I focus on several mid-century cases wherein, I argue, conspiracy theorizing was a way of *opening ranks* to court other marginal political groups. In these cases, conspiracy theories didn't shore up solidarity by positing a terrifying, omnipresent enemy, but an elusive one that cynically appeared in a number of contradictory ideological guises. If these narratives were true, then political ideology could no longer serve as a useful guide to distinguish friend from foe, enabling erstwhile enemies to chalk up their past hostilities to manipulation. I do not argue that the narratives I examine here are more representative of conspiracy theorizing during the mid-century than the ones examined by Uscinski and Parent. All the same, these cases reflect some of the major inter-elite debates of this period and, at minimum, suggest that conspiracy theorizing can appear under more multifarious conditions, and have more of a multifarious "use value" beyond their characterization as "sense-making" tactics employed by marginal or failing groups to rationalize their subjugation at the hands of "impersonal and opaque forces" (Pelkmans and Machold 2011).

The trope that conspiracy theories are generally defensive rationalizations by "losers" is a product of the overlap between at least two separate meanings of the term as employed in ordinary use. Descriptively, the term refers to explanations which assign causal significance to small groups acting to influence political events, in what is called the "minimal" or "neutral"

definition (Dentith 2019). From this perspective, a conspiracy theory is just a theory that displays a specific set of qualities, but the term is not an evaluation of veracity and conspiracy theories, so defined, can in principle be true or false. However, a predominant, if not *the* predominant use of the term in ordinary language is as a pejorative indicating that the explanation in question is ridiculous, bizarre or obviously flawed in some way (Bratich 2008; Napolitano and Reuter 2021). An explanation being a "rationalization" implies that it is wrong, but conspiracy theories in the first sense need not be wrong. The tension between these two uses of the term highlights what, for Pelkmans and Machold, makes conspiracy theories interesting: because there is no reason for conspiracy theories to be intrinsically unacceptable, tracking the distinction between which accounts become "official" for groups and elites provides a way into the power relationships that are involved in labeling proposed explanations as acceptable or unacceptable. In other words, under what conditions do claims variously appear as acceptable, plausible, or "beyond the pale" (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2020) from the perspective of different institutions and audiences?

Existing studies, by contrast, tend to treat the emergence of conspiracy theory beliefs as the result of extremism or ideological uniformity within the in-group. In the cases I examine in this chapter, I find that rather than arising to help protect existing in-group ideological uniformity, conspiracy theorizing helped to re-define what it meant for a group to be ideologically uniform, providing a medium through which elites could negotiate over what points of agreement or disagreement mattered. The additional strategic possibilities for conspiracy theorizing represented by these historical cases speaks to the possibility that conspiracy theories are part of equally-diverse signalling strategies in contemporary politics. With this in mind, rather than saying that canonical conspiracy theories like the theory of communist world domination, as well as the body of theories around Watergate and the JFK assassinations, were *used* by elites to accomplish various effects, it is better put that these canonical theories *emerged* as the collective residue of a set of discursive strategies

for negotiating solidarity. The resulting ambiguity, factual contradictions, and analytic dead ends of these conspiracy theories are more than aesthetic hallmarks of the genre – they record the accumulated sediment of efforts by political actors with contradictory motivations, but whose common task of challenging official explanations lead them, again and again, to the same explanatory resources and objects of interpretation. The way I approach "conspiracy theories" is thus more closely reminiscent of Davis' (2024) focus on the causes of "conspiracy attunement," meaning "dialogic...public talk about 'conspiracy theory' that is historically deep and recursive in nature" (111), at the elite level.

2.2 Diverse ideas, shared strategies

The process by which the term "deep state" came to hold the significance that it today holds on the right was not a straightforward one of elaboration on the work of prior thinkers. While the term "deep state" was introduced to American political discourse through the work of Scott, it did not rise to prominence until thinkers in the movement around former President Trump embraced it. They adopted this conceptual vocabulary to attribute what they saw as concerted attacks against Trump to the same "deep state" apparatus that supposedly killed Kennedy and cashiered Nixon. Acknowledging definitional problems reminiscent of those complicating what counts as a "conspiracy theory," my methodological approach in this chapter does not involve locating examples of claims that fit a pre-existing criteria for what counts as a "deep state" theory, and I do not argue that there is some shared genealogical essence connecting the term's contemporary usage by Trump and his allies back to the Birchian far-right, much less the mid-century thinkers of the New Left. Much attention has been given to the Trumpian right's adoption of the term "deep state" to demonize bureaucratic agencies within the executive branch. However, their usage of the term significantly diverges from Scott's original intent. In fact, Trump's use of the term aligns more closely with the very ideas Scott critiqued. My argument is not that we can learn about Trump's

usage of "deep state" by tracing it back to Scott's introduction of the term into American politics. Rather, I contend that the strategies employed by mid-century activists of Scott's milieu in utilizing conspiracy theories are highly relevant to Trumpian politics.

Some have basically identified the "deep state" theory as, more or less, another way of voicing concerns about an "enemy within" (Walker 2013; Thalmann 2019), to be understood in distinction from conspiracy accusations that point to external enemies. Within the paradigm adopted by Uscinski and Parent, and related accounts which interpret conspiracy theorizing as basically a practice of scapegoating toward the end of rationalizing and preserving beliefs endangered by conflicting evidence, it makes sense to focus on whether that enemy is an internal or external one. The problem with this simplistic mode of classification is that the question of whether they were facing an internal or external enemy was often precisely what vexed conspiracy theorists. One of the hallmarks of conspiracy theorizing, in my telling, is that they emerge as the result of efforts by political thinkers to challenge the origins and reality of the divide between within and without. As we shall see, one of the main motivations behind Scott's development of the "deep politics" concept, and his later appropriation of the term "deep state," was to respond to previous figurations of conspiratorial politics which staged the fundamental problem of government as one of organizational control in the face of subversion by internal or external interlopers.

Instead of the definitional approach, my approach instead involves following citations and correspondence outward from Scott at the point he began to outline the premise of "deep politics" for which he would subsequently appropriate the Turkish term *derin devlet*, translatable to "deep state." Scott's involvement in discussions about government conspiracies took place within a larger framework of mid-century interactions between elites from both the left and the right. These elites attempted to bridge ideological differences by downplaying them and instead focusing on a non-ideological, power-oriented concept of conspiracy. In the 1950s, the far-right John Birch Society reconciled internal differences between anti-

communists and anti-Semites by imagining a conspiracy that cynically presented itself in the guise of both identities to foment internal conflict. In the 1960s and 1970s, activists of the New Left attempted to "organize to the right" (Oglesby 1974), hoping to appeal to the anti-war elements of the radical right by putting forward variant interpretations of texts that had been popularized by the John Birch Society, especially Carroll Quigley's *Tragedy and Hope* (1966).

To pursue this strategy, a group of New Left activists including Scott created a formal network activist-researchers called the Assassination Information Bureau (AIB) in the 1970s. Founded by Carl Oglesby, David Dellinger and other alumni of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the AIB was created as a vehicle for this organization strategy, responding to widespread distress over the Kennedy assassination, which movement activists believed transcended ideological and partisan lines. They sought to build a political movement by offering a platform for public efforts to uncover the truth behind the assassination and providing researchers with access to hard-to-find evidentiary material, such as copies of Abraham Zapruder's film of the assassination. Seeking to de-emphasize ideological politics, they imagined a politics oriented around seeking answers to concrete, factual questions: who killed Kennedy? And, who cashiered Nixon? Determining who was the villain behind these acts promised to definitively resolve ideological questions in the future, allowing activists to de-emphasize them in the present. In the 1980s and 1990s, conspiracy researchers began to justify cross-partisan collaboration in the name of research, drawing ire from their erstwhile ideological allies. Mid-century activists throughout this milieu were quite open about their motivations for engaging in conspiracy research. As we shall see from their private correspondence and public-facing political writings alike, they saw conspiracy theorizing as a promising tactic for re-drawing the bounds of their in-groups.

My aim in this chapter is not necessarily to explicate Scott's ideas in detail. In fact, Scott himself was often quite critical of the other thinkers in this broad milieu who were

more directly involved in these efforts at cross-ideological mobilization. One finding of contextual importance for scholars seeking to understand the Trump Presidency, and the forces that propelled Trump to unexpected power is that the use of the term by Trump and his allies is not consistent with the way that it was employed by Scott. Nor is there anything like a direct line of use connecting Trump's use of the term with an existing tradition of "conspiracy theorist" thought. Instead, the most likely story for his uptake of the term is that his base encountered it when Sean Hannity started using the term in 2017 while making allegations that the CIA was behind the so-called Steele Dossier, an unverified opposition research report which claimed that Trump was under the direct influence of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Hannity used the term to draw explicit parallels between older theories about CIA involvement in the Kennedy assassination, as well as Nixon's impeachment, and the allegations he himself was now making that the Steele Dossier emerged as part of a plot by the CIA to undermine the Trump administration. That McCain and other prominent Republicans seemed to be taking the Dossier seriously, Hannity argued, was evidence of a "deep state" spanning "both parties" that had now aligned against President Trump. Hannity invoked the "deep state" trope to suggest, in effect, that Republicans should disregard their partisan affiliation because that affiliation was actually an illusion manufactured by shadowy conspiracies motivated by power and little else. Hannity's invocation of the "deep state" trope, and his broader allegations of a conspiracy spanning both parties, exemplify the strategic use of conspiracy accusations to suggest that partisan lines were a facade concealing a more insidious alliance among elites, and it is the political history of how canonical conspiracy narratives around the JFK assassination co-evolved with this mode of strategic signaling that is the subject of the rest of the chapter.

2.3 The 1950s and 1960s: changes in right wing conspiracy theory

One early example of this strategy is the drastic revision that the official line of the John Birch Society underwent in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination at the hands of the organization's founder, Robert Welch. For over a decade, he had claimed that the United States, and indeed the whole world, was under almost total control by a communist conspiracy originating in the government of the Soviet Union. The result was a new explanation of world politics that instead situated control in the hands of a shadowy group of "Insiders." In the new narrative, these insiders had no ideology besides a desire for power and control – if and when they appeared to be communist, this too was an effort at manipulation. Why would Welch give up his, and his organization's, single-minded anti-communism?

One possible interpretation of this shift, consistent with the "sense-making" interpretation, is that Welch was simply rationalizing and shoring up his conspiracy theorist beliefs, and the beliefs of those in his movement, which had been threatened by counter-evidence in the form of the Kennedy assassination (Miller 2021). Kennedy, who Welch had accused of being an agent of the communist conspiracy, had been assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald, a self-avowed communist who had once defected to the Soviet Union, and who had been a pro-Cuban activist. In the days following the assassination, Welch went on damage control, placing ads in major newspapers announcing that "Communism Killed Kennedy" (cited in Miller 2021) while directing his American Opinion co-author Revilo Oliver to provide some explanation for the assassination that preserved the movement's existing assumptions about communist organizational unity. Oliver made a valiant attempt, positing that the assassination occurred as part of a plot involving Khrushchev and Kennedy collaborating with the CIA to stage a "fake revolt" in order to scare a disloyal Castro back into line (Oliver 1964). These frantic efforts do suggest that the Birchers hoped to shore up their existing beliefs, at least initially.

However, Oliver's story did not remain Birch orthodoxy for long, as Welch began to

put forward more drastic revisions. Examining the internal correspondence of the John Birch Society's leadership in the years leading up to the assassination and Welch's subsequent shift, there is strong evidence that these substantial revisions in the Birch line weren't just made to reinforce existing beliefs that had been challenged by the Kennedy assassination, but were also aimed at managing internal tensions within the Society. Welch sought to manage intractable differences between anti-communist and anti-Semitic factions within the organization by claiming that the disagreement stemmed from the *modus operandi* of the conspiracy itself. If conspiracies "play every side of every street," (Welch 1963, 7) as Welch would argue, then disputes within the movement over whether the conspiracy was a communist or a Jewish one revealed that the conspiracy was likely to be strictly neither.

Although Welch did not formally disclose his increasing dissatisfaction with the theory of communist world domination to the rest of the Society until 1964, he had long clashed with other Birch leaders over whether his proposed communist conspiracy was merely a rebranded version of the longstanding theory of a Jewish world conspiracy. There is no question that Welch at least tolerated anti-Semites in his organization: besides eventually firing his erstwhile collaborator Revilo Oliver, he took little direct action against those in the organization who embraced the theory of the Jewish world conspiracy. However, it would be going too far to concur with Oliver's own assessment in the aftermath of his firing that Welch's conspiracy theories about communists were cynically intended to persuade the mass public of something like a Jewish conspiracy while maintaining plausible deniability[1] and, in fact, Welch somewhat frequently expressed his disapproval of anti-Semitic conspiracy theorizing in his private correspondence.[2] Meanwhile, Oliver was active in openly anti-Semitic groups throughout his time working with Welch in the JBS. Believing Welch to

1. After his expulsion from the JBS in 1964, Oliver (2006) would first accuse Welch of being an agent of a Jewish world conspiracy bent on "neutralizing" the radical right, before subsequently contradicting himself with allegations that Welch himself was also an anti-Semite who had drastically revised The Politician before publication to remove all "references to the Jews."

2. Ernie Lazar Archive, Welch to Smith, 1962.

secretly support the hypothesis of a Jewish world conspiracy, he assumed that Welch intended Bircher rhetoric about the communist conspiracy to be an elaborate, politically expedient dogwhistle. When it became clear by 1962 that this was not the case, Oliver and Slobodan Draskovich, another JBS executive council member, began to organize secret meetings of Society higher-ups to discuss unseating Welch from the organization.[3]

Faced with increasing internal pressure by advocates of the Jewish world conspiracy theory in the JBS, in early 1963 Welch delivered a speech that was subsequently published as "the Neutralizers," a pamphlet targeting anti-Semites in the organization. While Welch had previously been steadfast in his allegations that the vast conspiracy undermining world politics was a communist one, he now emphasized that, rather than seeking to advance some program based in a specific ideology, religion, nation or culture, the conspiracy was motivated by a simple desire for power. For this reason, those identities could not be relied on by conspiracy theorists to distinguish friend from foe: "The Communists do work both sides of every street, or every battle line. And they have certainly been working diligently both sides of this 'anti-Semitic' battleground in their efforts to weaken or destroy The John Birch Society" (Welch 1963, 7). In other words, Welch argued that distinctions like those between Jew and anti-Semite, communist and capitalist, American and un-American, were not prior to the conspiracy. Instead, these very distinctions were created by conspirators, who imposed them on the public to obscure their efforts to take and hold power.

In Welch's writings from 1963, the conspiracy was still "Communist," but that did not stop it from donning diverse ideological guises, prefiguring the post-assassination turn to the non-ideological "Insiders." Moreover, the appearance of these themes in The Neutralizers, which was published in the months before the assassination and based on an even earlier speech.

That Welch's shift toward the theory of the "Insiders" began to emerge nearly a year befor

3. The Revilo P. Oliver Papers, Draskovich to Oliver, April 20, 1962; Draskovich to Oliver, August 12, 1963.

the Kennedy assassination took place casts further doubt on the hypothesis that his revisions of movement orthodoxy were motivated by a desire to defend the movement's beliefs in the face of the contradictory evidence provided by the assassination. Welch's writings from before the assassination suggest that he was also responding to increasing pressures from competing elites who were endorsing an expanding variety of alternative conspiracy theories meant to replace the JBS-approved theory of communist dominance. Welch concluded his argument in The Neutralizers by situating his defense of the communist theory in relation to other theories circulating at the time:

> To identify [the worldwide conspiracy] as the Zionists, or the CFR, or Force X, or the Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise, is simply to complicate and confuse the total problem disastrously by mistaking the part for the whole. (Welch 1963, 11)

The reference to the "Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise" is certainly a joke, referring to a fictional membership organization in the stories of Octavus Roy Cohen; the reference to "the Zionists" clearly point to the theories of Welch's anti-Semitic counterparts. But his mention of the theories invoking the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and Force X are more significant. In fact, the Birchers would embrace the CFR theory in the coming years under the intellectual influence of American Opinion writer Gary Allen. More significantly, the "Insiders" narrative that Welch would articulate a year later would be markedly similar to the Force X theory. Authored by Kenneth Hugh de Courcy, a minor British lord committed to monarchical, imperial federalist, and British Israelist[4] organizations (Gerth 2023), the theory first appeared in his private intelligence journal entitled the *British Intelligence Digest*

4. British Israelism is the pseudohistorical belief that the people of Great Britain are the genetic, racial and linguistic descendents of the Biblical lost tribes of Israel. At its height in the post-war era, the British Israelist movement could claim to have tens of thousands of card-carrying adherents and counted amongst its membership admirals, peers, television personalities, MPs and members of the royal family including the King of England. Many forms of British Israelism involved anti-Semitic conspiracy theorizing. See Cottrell-Boyce 2021.

in May of 1963, months before the Kennedy assassination. He alleged that international communism was merely one sub-organization controlled by a much larger conspiracy that he referred to variously as "Force X" or "Organization X." "The facts show that no particular ideology has control of the situation," he wrote, "what is needed is confusion. This can best be generated by first backing this group and then another" (De Courcy 1963). The "Force X" article must have proved interesting to other marginal organizations in the Birch orbit, as it was reprinted in the long-running anti-Semitic periodical *Common Sense*,[5] Canada's *The Social Creditor*[6] in the months before the assassination, as well as later in Birch supporter W. Cleon Skousen's conspiracy theory book *The Naked Capitalist*. In this context, Welch's shift toward the narrative of an ideologically-neutral conspiracy adopting various disguises seems more like an effort to appropriate elements of these rival narratives in an effort to co-opt their supporters while de-emphasizing the importance of internal disputes over the "true nature" of the conspiracy.

In a 1964 speech to members of the Society in Chicago, later published as a pamphlet entitled "More Stately Mansions" (1966), Welch finally made his shift away from a total focus on communism official, now referring to the forces behind the conspiracy only as "the Insiders." The speech is basically a close reading of John Robison's (1797) *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe*. Sometimes called the first modern conspiracy theory, Robison implicated membership organizations like the Freemasons, "Reading Societies" and, in particular, Adam Weishaupt's Illuminati organization in a grand conspiracy to seize total power under the cover of popular dissent during the French Revolution. By drawing a connection between his theory of a communist world conspiracy and the theory of the Illuminati, Welch generated an interpretation of what it meant for a theory to be a "conspiracy theory." The *raison d'être* of conspiracies could "be expressed

5. *Common Sense*, No. 411, August 1963.

6. *The Social Creditor*, Vol. 43, No. 6, June 22, 1963.

quite simply in one word: Organization" (Welch 1966, 8). The most important attribute of the conspiracy's structure, its basic function, was to ensure "continuity and organization" (ibid., 6), maintaining total control of European politics even while formal offices appeared to change hands. The Illuminati, according to Welch, had controlled European politics by constantly disguising its actions as the work of other organizations, playing them against one another such that even co-conspirators could not always recognize one another and, as far as possible, would "know nothing" (ibid., 18) of each others' actions. Any global conspiracy that existed presently would be "bound to have had an extreme degree of similarity to the Weishaupt clique, [therefore] it is worth while for us to . . . examine some of the clearly established facts about this particular sect" (ibid., 12). Therefore, it was also foolish to hypothesize that existing conspiracies could be identified with a specific ideology, sect, race or creed in the present day. Instead, conspiracies functioned by strategically taking on these appearances to further inscrutable ends.

In striking contrast to his earliest theories, filled with accusations that various presidents and government officials were "conscious, dedicated agents of the communist conspiracy," (Welch 1964) the conspiracy was no longer described as an "octopus" with a myriad of tentacles consciously controlled by the center in Moscow. Instead, it took the form of a hidden, self-reproducing organizational structure laid on top of formal institutions. From the perspective of his critics in the mainstream conservative movement, exemplified by the editors of William F. Buckey's national review, the shift represented Welch's increasing extremism.[7] But, when considered in the context of the JBS' internal power struggle, Welch's revisions are better characterized as a form of fence-sitting – this new frame was vague enough to accommodate anti-Semitic and anti-communist interpretations, and integrated elements taken from rival conspiracy narratives that had been circulating amongst the pamphleteers of the far right. Welch and the Birchers, to be sure, remained vehement anti-communists

7. "The John Birch Society and the Conservative Movement." *The National Review* 17(42): 914-918.

in the aftermath of the speech. But we can detect a broad shift away from a focus on "the Communists, and no one else" to a more generalized critique of "collectivism," coupled with an analysis of the conspiracy resembling later deep state theories in its portrayal of a systemic, unconscious and fragmented conspiracy subtly manipulating seemingly opposed ideological actors from behind the scenes. This shift, in turn, prefigured debates across the ideological divides of American politics in the following decades.

2.4 The 1960s and 1970s: crossing ideological boundaries

After Welch's 1964 speech, the John Birch Society was no longer wedded to single-minded anti-communism, enabling the Society and its publishing arms to integrate a diverse array of accounts under a more inclusive interpretation of their central conspiracy theory that some group, once described as communist and now described as a group of shadowy "Insiders," controlled all world politics behind the scenes. In the process, Birch researchers would come to take interest in texts and sources originating from the pre-war Old Right that simultaneously attracted interest from major activists and intellectuals associated with the New Left. The result was a series of textually-mediated cross-partisan encounters which promised, to thinkers on both sides of the ideological divide, that research into the causes of the Kennedy assassination could provide the impetus for realignment. Mid-century elites on both the left and the right, hoping to create a cross-ideological coalition, constantly faced incentives to minimize their differences with one another. The trade off they faced was a classic one between ideological consistence and flexibility. Similarly to how they were employed by Welch, conspiracy theories provided a way to de-emphasize ideological disagreements. Now, capitalizing on public interest in unanswered questions around the Kennedy assassination, activists proposed cross-ideological collaboration in the near term, with the expectation that uncovering further factual information about the forces behind the conspiracy would eventually provide resolution to ideological disputes. Who killed Kennedy?

Who cashiered Nixon? Who is behind it all? Activists hoped that definitively determining who the "real enemy" was—whether Welch's "Insiders," communists, monopolists or the CIA—would also retroactively vindicate their own faction by revealing whose ideological perspective was correct. The result was that, by imagining future factual resolutions to current ideological and partisan disputes, they could put off prosecuting these differences in the present. For this reason, conspiracy theorizing proved to be a valuable tactic for shoring up in-group solidarity, and for making overtures to potential allies at the margins of the partisan out-group.

The JBS' *American Opinion*-branded bookstores, which had previously focused on titles by Birch authors, expanded their offerings to include works from Robison's *Proofs* to new titles that drew from a broader array of political influences.[8] The same year that Welch drastically revised the JBS mythology was also marked by the first appearance of Gary Allen's writing in *American Opinion*. A former speechwriter for George Wallace, Allen's first contributions to the Society's publications raised alarms over the Civil Rights movement's supposed communist proclivities. His subsequent conspiracy theory research into the CFR theory turned Allen into the flagship writer of the Birch publishing empire until the restructuring of American Opinion in the 1980s.

Liberated from the Society's earlier focus on strongly anti-communist texts, Allen drew heavily from sources across ideological lines. Allen couched his conspiracy theory in the more dignified, scholarly language of "power structure research," referencing the work of C. Wright Mills and G. William Domhoff. He was influenced as much by the writings of New Left historian Gabriel Kolko, who he cited without reservation (e.g. Allen and Abraham 1971, 48), as he was by Dan Smoot, W. Cleon Skousen, and Don Bell, the foremost proponents of the CFR theory on the radical right whose work now appeared in American Opinion

8. For example, see the 1968 Book List of titles available at the Society's *American Opinion* stores, which lists titles by Welch alongside those discussed here by Allen, Robison, Smoot, Skousen and Quigley. A copy is available at https://archive.org/details/JBSCATALOG1968/.

catalogs.

Allen's contribution to the revised JBS conspiracy line drew heavily on the work of Smoot in particular. Smoot was credited by Allen and later writers for being the first theorist on the right to discover Carroll Quigley's infamous *Tragedy and Hope* (1966), which had described Cecil Rhodes' Round Table group as an elite influencer of policy on both sides of the Atlantic. *Tragedy and Hope* would soon become available in American Opinion book order catalogs. *Tragedy and Hope* was sold, and meant to be read, alongside a book-length interpretation of it entitled *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*, authored by Allen, and his Bircher co-author Larry Abraham in 1971. *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* would become one of the most enduring works of this period, which still circulates online as a text pre-figuring, for contemporary conspiracy theorists in Q web communities, the coming of "globalism." The text elaborates on Welch's 1965 turn away from single-minded anti-communism. Rhetorically, *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* is still oriented around the threat of socialism and communism. The distinction between the pre- and post-"Insiders" turn was that the threat of communism was now presented as an organizational rather than normative one.

Before the turn, Welch's issue with communism was normative – it was a "collectivist," "godless" and "anti-American" ideology that was incompatible with American values. After the turn, socialism and communism were still concerning, but mainly because their centralized structure made them more vulnerable to infiltration and external control. Allen and Abraham argue that, under the U.S. Constitution's separation of powers, "no segment of government could possibly amass enough power to form a dictatorship" (Allen and Abraham 1971, 19). A socialist or communist system was preferable for conspirators because it lacked a separation of powers, making it far easier for them to take control of the entire system by simply capturing a single office. As they put it, "if you and your clique wanted control over the United States, it would be impossible to take over every city hall, county seat and state house. You would want all power vested at the apex of the executive branch of the federal

government; then you would have only to control one man to control the whole shebang" (20). Part of this thinking, for Allen and Abraham, was that communists themselves weren't ideological but cynical: "'Communism' is not a movement of the downtrodden masses but is a movement created, manipulated and used by power-seeking billionaires in order to gain control over the world ... first by establishing socialist governments in the various nations and then consolidating them all through a 'Great Merger,' into an all-powerful world socialist super-state probably under the auspices of the United Nations" (20).

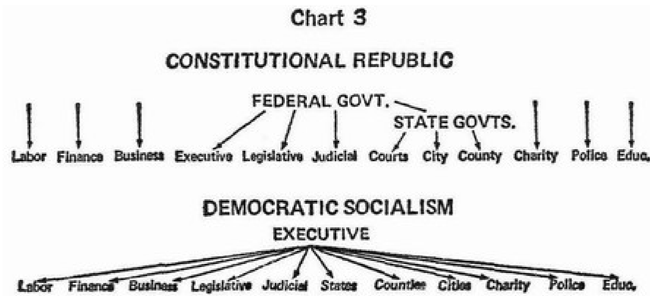


Figure 2.1: Organization chart, *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* (1971)

The mode of conspiracy theorizing exemplified by Allen and Abraham, what Scott would later critically refer to as "invisible government," "shadow government" and "secret team" theories, held that conspiracies were organizations that captured power by infiltrating authoritative decision-making posts in rival organizations, including governments, centralizing control within the conspiracy. For Allen and Abraham, the conspiracy was a "communist" one only in the sense that it made use of a communist or socialist ideological language in order to advocate for a re-organization of government that would facilitate its capture of centralized control.

Again, it is possible to interpret this conspiracy theory through the lens of defensive sense-making: Allen and Abraham imagined a hyper-powerful conspiracy uniting the "downtrodden masses" with their polar opposite, "power-seeking billionaires," in hopes of stoking fears and shoring up solidarity in the JBS. In this interpretation, when Allen and Abraham de-emphasized the conspiracy's communist ideology and portrayed it as cynical, they did so in order to expand the potential breadth of the conspiracy in order to render it all the more

terrifying. Even if this was their intention, their approach to conspiracy theorizing here – framing their contribution as an interpretation of *Tragedy and Hope*, and de-emphasizing ideological differences in favor of organizational ones, would create optimism amongst the activists of a very different political milieu that adherents of this narrative could be co-opted away from the far right.

This was the hope of a contingent amongst the activist leadership of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the big-tent organizational base for the students of the New Left. This contingent was represented by Carl Oglesby, a left-wing writer and organizer who served as the movement's President from 1965 to 1966. As American involvement in Vietnam increasingly divided the public, Oglesby hoped that SDS could harness anti-war sentiment to appeal to new constituencies across existing ideological and partisan divides. Oglesby continually argued in favor of "organizing the anti-war movement to the right" (Oglesby 1974) by uniting with Kennedy liberals and anti-war right-libertarians. He was continually criticized on this point by writers in "Movement" outlets like Ramparts, which would become a major forum for debates over mobilization after the assassinations of Kennedy, Kennedy, and King. After reading the works of right-libertarian Murray Rothbard, Oglesby wrote *Containment and Change* (1967), in which he advocated for a cross-cutting alliance between the libertarian right and the New Left. He suggested that "in a strong sense, the Old Right and the New Left are morally and politically coordinate" (ibid., 167). Describing this potential alliance as "democratic populist," (ibid., 167) Oglesby urged anti-war activists from both sides to unite before it was too late.

In order to support this outreach, Oglesby sought to put forward a narrative, using texts and tropes familiar to the libertarian right, that portrayed his and their ideological differences as the product of a conspiracy by two rival centers of elite power. Oglesby hoped to persuade those on the far right that he and they had actually been attacking a shared enemy – the "power structure which the Radical Right in the United States has been attacking for years

in the belief that they are attacking the Communists" (26). Citing both the power structure researchers of the left and the CFR theorists of the right, Oglesby detailed an early version of his meta-theory in an article in *The National Guardian* in 1968. He would fully expound this theory a decade later with the publication of *The Yankee and Cowboy War* (1976). The major point of contact was Quigley's *Tragedy and Hope*, and Oglesby specifically positioned his analysis as a refutation of the line taken by Allen and Smoot in their interpretation of the text. He argued that the Birchers misread Quigley: where they saw a single conspiracy implicating the CFR and its many interlocking corporate institutions, Oglesby said that the "implicit claim" of Quigley was that "a multitude of conspiracies contend in the night" (ibid., 25-26).

Combining the SDS' concept of the "new class"[9] with the Birchers' multifaceted concept of the elite, he argued that the simplistic model of the CFR theorists was complicated by what he saw as a "split in the ruling class" between the "East Coast monopolists," which he called the "Yankees," and the "Western tycoon entrepreneurs," which he called the "Cowboys" (ibid., 9). In Oglesby's telling, Yankees drew their power from their managerial status, while Cowboys were classic bourgeois owner-operators. Each competing ruling class was not defined by their ideological views. Thus, the Yankees were not obviously liberal and the Cowboys were not obviously conservative. Rather, their incompatible interests were grounded in their economic bases and geographical location. In the theory, the Yankees were Atlanticists who supported detente with the Soviets and the slow expansion of multinational managerial capitalism, while the Cowboys favored an aggressive anti-communist foreign policy that hoped to improve American prosperity through aggressive rollback of Asian communism followed by investment in the newly "liberated" countries.

In effect, the appeal to two separate conspiracies was a compromise – accepting the existence of both would provide grounds for the libertarian right Oglesby was courting, and

9. The "new class" concept, in turn, was itself influenced by James Burnham's concept of the "managerial elite," which had also proved highly influential in the early days of the JBS.

the New Left he was representing, to both be correct. In their allegations about secret collaborations between Soviet communists and East Coast "Insiders," Allen and Smoot had clearly caught on to the Yankee conspiracy, but in the process had opened themselves up to manipulation by the Cowboys. Meanwhile, New Left researchers had done much to uncover the role played by Cowboys in the JFK assassination, but had become too cozy with the liberal-seeming Yankees in the process. In this way, the Yankee-Cowboy theory helped shore up existing beliefs but, more importantly, it was also meant to render the New Left's concerns about the Cowboy conspiracy consistent with the libertarian right's long-running investigation of what was, for Oglesby, the Yankee conspiracy.

In the two-conspiracy theory of *The Yankee and Cowboy War*, Oglesby provided his own explanation of the assassination of JFK and the Watergate scandal a decade later, characterizing the events as "coup and countercoup" (2)—with the Cowboys installing their Texan co-conspirator Lyndon B. Johnson after Kennedy's death, only to lose control again with the demise of Nixon. However, his primary goal was less to definitively answer these questions than to raise them as a vehicle for mobilization. Indeed, the book's final chapter (titled "Who Killed JFK?") sought to provide not yet another answer to the chapter's titular question, but to politicize that question:

> How do we resist the power-elite tendency to resolve differences through state violence? To these, I propose that a major immediate effort should be to politicize the question, Who killed JFK? That question sums up everything we need to fear in the Dallas-Watergate decade. To comprehend and solve that crime—and then the countercrime of Watergate, "who cashiered Nixon?"—is to restore the precondition of any self-governing and republican people, the security of the public state. . . . To get at Dallas '63 would be to get at this sickness by one of its major victories. It would be to get at the political bottom of the Vietnam war, of the structures of internal conflict that helped produce that entire decade,

> the decade of Dallas-Watergate and Vietnam. Understand Dallas: That is the start of the way out. (ibid., 322-323)

Oglesby hoped that, "once the necessity for some conspiracy hypothesis is clearly and widely acknowledged, only then will the real arguments erupt. What kind of conspiracy? Left or right? Foreign or domestic? Private or public?" (98) At that point, discovering "what kind of conspiracy" killed Kennedy would be tantamount to discovering who the real enemy was, all along. In *The Yankee and Cowboy War*, Oglesby had argued that "JFK was killed by a rightist conspiracy formed out of anti-Castro Cuban exiles, the [Meyer Lansky crime] Syndicate, and a Cowboy oligarchy, supported by renegade CIA and FBI agents" (324). He hoped that, if this explanation turned out to be true, it would prove persuasive to sympathetic conspiracy theorists on the other side of the ideological and partisan divide that, in their counter-conspiratorial politics, they had been unknowingly converging on the same enemy. But, until the truth was definitively revealed, "whatever it turns out to be" (324), he hoped that a shared movement could form by prioritizing these shared questions around the assassination.

2.5 1970s-1990s: the "deep state" concept and its critics

Throughout *The Yankee and Cowboy War*, Oglesby cited factual information uncovered by the investigative work of Peter Dale Scott, a former Canadian diplomat who would become a major intellectual force behind the movement in the years to come. Oglesby had met Scott through the organization that Oglesby had founded in 1972 to pursue the politicization strategy he later described in the Yankee and Cowboy War, the Assassination Information Bureau (AIB). The Assassination Information Bureau became a new home for many of the most important activists of the New Left. On its board, alongside New Left celebrities Allen Ginsberg and Norman Mailer, sat Tom Hayden, author of the *Port Huron Statement*. Also on the board was David Dellinger, a co-defendent with Hayden in the famous Chicago

Conspiracy Trial of 1968. Oglesby and his compatriots in the AIB's strategy for politicizing the assassinations were involved in developing interpretative frameworks like the Yankee-Cowboy theory and, later, Peter Dale Scott's theory of deep politics, and the deep state.[10]

Scott's earliest works were meticulous reconstructions of conspiratorial behavior by American intelligence services, whose goal, argued Scott, was to perpetuate American involvement in Asia. However, his lasting contributions to the literature of conspiracy theory were a series of meta-theoretical frameworks that he employed to criticize explanations of the JFK assassination, and its related events, that had been put forward by his allies in the now-consolidating assassination research movement. The first of these frameworks was the "parapolitics" concept appearing in Scott's first book, *The War Conspiracy* (1972). Scott claimed later that his publishers had insisted on the appearance of the term "conspiracy" in the title, reflecting increasing public interest in conspiracies in the decades of the assassinations and the Watergate incident (Good 2022). Scott, however, insists that, at the time, he was apprehensive about staging his work as a "conspiracy" theory, hence his efforts to introduce the alternative framework of parapolitics, which referred to "the conduct of public affairs . . . by indirection, collusion and deceit."

Scott's apprehension about the term "conspiracy theory," and his adoption of the various frames of "parapolitics," "deep politics" and the "deep state," was motivated by a theory of politics that was, in some ways, conducive to the strategy adopted by Oglesby and the AIB. In other ways, however, Scott's approach diverged from Oglesby's. Scott was concerned that what he variously called "invisible government," "shadow government" and "secret team" theories were over-simplistic and mis-characterized government conspiracies as the work of identifiable, bounded alliances and organizations. What this meant was that Scott was critical of Allen-style explanations which pointed the finger at "elite" organizations like the CFR, but also critical of Oglesby's portrayal of conspiracies as discrete, competing networks, which

10. For a complete list of directors and advisory board members see, for example, Harold Weisberg Archive, A Disk, Assassination Information Bureau file, Item 20. Oglesby to Weisberg, 4 December, 1978.

Oglesby hoped would facilitate the definitive identification of the identities and interests behind the assassination.

By contrast, Scott's view was that conspiracies thrived precisely where the organization of power began to break down. "Invisible government" theories, Scott argued, "by their very totalizing, do not seriously challenge the most sensitive feature of the conventional power paradigm...[which is] the belief that overt politics and deep politics have little to do with each other" (1993, 17). For Scott, the question of "which forces are in control, the public or shadow powers" created an artificial distinction between overt and covert power. Instead, formal and informal institutions were linked together to form what he called the "deep political milieu" and later, after adopting a term used to describe similar phenomena in Turkey, the "deep state." Scott argued that the "invisible government" in total control, and the formal state in total control, were merely two sides of the same fantasy of government order. Repression, "resistance and denial" did not cover over the real functioning of a wholly covert government so much as these modes played important roles in connecting the public system to the covert one.

What made certain aspects of politics "deep" for Scott wasn't their embeddedness within the state apparatus or their organizational persistence. In fact, these were attributes attributed to conspiracies by the popular "shadow government" theories that he was contesting. If "invisible government" theories, like Allen's, took the ideal organization chart of government to be so literally true that it could simply be hooked up to some outside organization like a machine, or short circuited by an internal cabal in such a way that its entirety could be controlled from a single point, then "deep politics" was the theory that government was nothing but compounded short circuits, kludges and hacks, with the accumulation of these rendering any notion of total control impossible, whether by its visible, formal parts or its clandestine elements.

And yet, if Scott's theoretical writings expressed unreserved criticisms of the "invisible

government" theories put forward by Oglesby, Mark Lane, Fletcher Prouty and the other writers associated with the AIB, he spent less time responding to writers outside the AIB sphere. From Oglesby's perspective, researchers putting forward explanations of the assassination could be divided into two categories: the "conspiracy theorists" of the AIB, and the (to Oglesby) "bewildered Kennedy liberals" of what was called the "assassination research community" an informal community of researchers which predated, and was distinct from, the AIB set. Although they sought to uncover the truth of the Kennedy, Kennedy, and King assassinations, and they generally believed that a conspiracy within the government was responsible for their deaths, the members of the assassination research community were defined by their unwillingness, in contrast to the AIB, to defend conspiracy theorizing as a collective, cross-partisan enterprise. Exemplifying this tendency was the self-described "critic" of the Warren Commission, Harold Weisberg, a former OSS officer, U. S. Senate investigator and intelligence analyst, who was described by his counterparts in the AIB as "the most prolific writer in the field."[11] In his private correspondence with fellow assassination researcher James Lesar,[12] Weisberg frequently excoriated Oglesby, Scott, and other analysts of the assassination for their credulity toward the broader "conspiracy theory literature."[13]

Weisberg had known Scott since 1973, when he wrote to him after a brief meeting they had in D.C. to discuss access to private archives of documents related to the assassination.[14] By 1975, Scott had become involved in the AIB's efforts to publicize research relating to the

11. Harold Weisberg Archive, A Disk, Item 84: AIB JFK Assassination Selected Bibliography.

12. Lesar, along with Jim Hougan and Bud Fensterwald, would later diverge from Weisberg to follow a strategic trail quite similar to the one blazed by Oglesby and the AIB, remarking that serious assassination researchers should create a magazine focused not just on the JFK assassination, but on other "parapolitical" phenomena. This ultimately culminated in their formation of the Assassination Archives and Research Center (AARC), a strategic turn which earned the ire of Weisberg, who excoriated Lesar as a "conspiracy theorist." As this exchange indicates, while "conspiracy theorist" was no pejorative to the activists of the AIB, to the assassination researchers these were fighting words. See Harold Weisberg Archive, L Disk, Item 15: Weisberg to Lesar, 20 October 1994.

13. See, for example, Harold Weisberg Archive, A Disk, AIB File, Weisberg to Goldberg, October 6, 1978; R Disk, Weisberg to Lesar, 13 January 1993.

14. Harold Weisberg Archive, S Disk, Scott File, Item 19, Weisberg to Lesar, June 20, 1973.

Kennedy assassination. Scott had reached out to Weisberg because he wanted to include some of Weisberg and Lesar's writing in an edited volume for Random House of authors who were then called "Warren critics." In his correspondence with Scott, Weisberg claimed that Scott had failed to properly pay him for his contributions.[15] But more than that, Weisberg bristled at the inclusion in the volume of work by those he did not respect. Weisberg's selection appeared alongside writings by his longtime friend and collaborator Jim Lesar, but also with contributions from Mark Lane and David Lifton, who Weisberg castigated as "irresponsible . . . conspiracy theorists" in his letter to Scott.[16] While, at that point, Scott, Oglesby and the Assassination Information Bureau had embraced the term "conspiracy theory", others in the broader assassination research community were sometimes reluctant to do so. In fact, to Weisberg, the term "conspiracy theory" was itself dangerous because, in linking together the disparate hypotheses pursued by the squabbling members of the research community, it implied the existence of a uniform political perspective.

Weisberg wrote copious letters to the AIB to castigate its members for presuming to speak "for the critical community," but in those same envelopes he sent cash and checks: while Weisberg criticized the organization, he still depended on them for access to some research materials related to the assassinations. If the AIB contributed little in the way of original research, it did much to make available sources related to the assassinations to a wide audience. Control of these informational resources allowed the AIB to knit disparate researchers into a common network, whether they liked it or not. In this approach, the AIB adopted a strategy similar to the one employed by Oglesby when he put forward his own interpretation of Tragedy and Hope with the intent of drawing the attention of the libertarian right. Now, the AIB made shared texts available in hopes of facilitating and mediating cross-partisan contact. Oglesby would remark in a letter to Weisberg that most

15. ibid.

16. ibid.

of the organization's funds were going to copying and distributing important sources like Kennedy's autopsy reports, as well as illegally-duplicated copies of Abraham Zapruder's film of the Kennedy assassination,[17] through mail-order catalogs.

Indeed, part of Weisberg's frustration with the AIB, and Scott in particular, was that AIB researchers would continually bypass Weisberg and his network when seeking access to evidence related to the assassination such as government files. For example, in one letter to co-researchers James D. White and Howard Roffman from November 1973, Weisberg expressed his suspicions of Scott because he had insisted on on going directly to the National Archives in Washington rather than access the relevant material through a Weisberg associate, Paul Hoch, back in California where Scott resided. "There was nothing in [the Archives] that he couldn't have gotten from what to him were local files, Hoch's"[18] wrote Weisberg. Events like these highlight that Weisberg—and his co-researchers including Lesar, White, Roffman—represented what was effectively a rival group of elites pursuing a similar strategy to that of the AIB, one based on controlling access to political information for the purposes of inter-elite politics. Sometimes, the old guard's suspicions took their own turn toward conspiracy theory. In February 1975, about a month after some assassination researchers in Weisberg's orbit attended an AIB-hosted conference in Boston, some began to accuse Oglesby of being a CIA agent. Longtime research community member Richard Popkin, who had attended the conference, would speculate that Oglesby, and his AIB colleague Mark Lane were both secretly CIA agents, in a letter address to conspiracy theorist lawyer Bernard "Bud" Fensterwald and Weisberg. "The Kennedy assassination...seems like a strange thing to make a political movement out of at the moment," Popkin commented on AIB's efforts.[19] Looking back on the movement, the ever-pessimistic Weisberg lamented

17. Harold Weisberg Archive, A Disk, AIB File, Item 84.

18. Harold Weisberg Archive, S Disk, Scott, Peter Dale File, Item 25.

19. Harold Weisberg Archive, O Disk, Oglesby File, Item 01.

that the AIB had, from his perspective, "misled an entire generation" of researchers.[20]

The Assassination Information Bureau closed its doors in 1979 after the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations stated that there was evidence of a government conspiracy behind the Kennedy and King Assassinations, with Oglesby declaring that there was now "no reason to continue" the project.[21] Years later, Oglesby and Scott became involved, alongside Michael Parenti and Fletcher Prouty, in the formation of the Center for the Preservation of Modern History (CPMH), an organization founded in 1989 to take up the AIB's project of distributing research material related to the assassinations. Under the auspices of this organization, they would again come under fire from fellow left-wing activists concerned that right wing groups interested in conspiracy research were capitalizing on this shared interest in an effort to co-opt or manipulate leftists.

Throughout the 1980s, the "secret team" theories which Scott had tried to critique would resonate broadly on the radical right. While he was writing articles for the left-oriented Prevailing Winds, Fletcher Prouty had also given permission to the neo-Nazi Liberty Lobby's Spotlight magazine to reprint his works. Spotlight did so, but had apparently surrounded Prouty's "secret team" analysis with articles complaining of a "Jewish secret team." In response, extremism researcher Chip Berlet, who wrote frequently in various New Left journals related to assassination research, published a critique entitled "Right Woos Left" (1990) which admonished assassination researchers associated with the New Left for working with researchers of the right, leading to a debate amongst the participants in the assassination research community about its scope and attitude toward the politics of its members.

Berlet also criticized the writers associated with the Center for the Preservation of Modern History, including Oglesby and Scott as well as Scott's co-author Jonathan Marshall, for keeping in touch with Herbert Quinde, a representative of Lyndon LaRouche's *Executive*

20. Harold Weisberg Archive, A Disk, AIB File, Weisberg to Lardner, January 5, 1982.

21. "Study Group On Slayings of King and John Kennedy Is Disbanding," The New York Times, December 16, 1979.

Intelligence Review (EIR) journal. LaRouche had formerly led the Labor Committee tendency within SDS but, in the aftermath of the organization's collapse, his now-independent National Council of Labor Committees took a turn to the radical right and had been working with the Liberty Lobby since 1974. Widely described as a political cult, the LaRouchians were uninterested in mobilizing around the Kennedy assassination, but they were terrified of infiltration and conducted extensive research into the actions of American intelligence agencies using what amounted to a private intelligence service under the auspices of the EIR. But, as Berlet and his sometime co-author Dennis King would both point out, the LaRouchian would use their accumulation of (real or insinuated) incriminating information tactically, in order to forge connections with groups that would otherwise be opposed on ideological grounds, and access to this intelligence came with strings attached (King 1989, 251). While documentary evidence is insufficient to definitively establish the motives of right-wing activists when they shared information with leftists in the orbit of Parenti, Oglesby, Scott and the CPMH, Berlet's concerns paint the right as potentially employing a strategy that evoked the one explicitly adopted by the AIB in feeding concerns about conspiracy, while controlling access to documents that purportedly shed light on what was really going on.

The CPMH writers' defended their work with the LaRouchians through appeals to pragmatism. Scott explained that he felt "it is a matter of intellectual freedom to keep the lines of communication open," while also denouncing the LaRouchians as "probably guilty of some criminal conduct" (quoted in Berlet 1990). Similarly, Marshall explained that the LaRouchians had been a "source of good leads . . . if you look across the board at cultish groups that do research you find sometimes that they have found amazing documents that do in fact check out." At the same time, he cautioned assassination researchers to be careful of accepting their interpretations of those same documents. Oglesby was a bit more suspicious. While he worried that LaRouche's network might itself be a disinformation operation, he did agree that it had "access to sources of information that reflect official circuits."

The editorial staff of *The Lobster*, an influential British conspiracy theorist magazine in which AIB affiliates like Scott, Oglesby, and Marshall had published, responded to Berlet's criticism by blaming the mainstream American left. "Since the demise of Ramparts magazine, the American left has rarely been much interested in conspiracies and has thus left the field open for the right, who are," wrote editor Robin Ramsay. "Would Marchetti and Lane have been sucked into the Liberty Lobby's operations if they had been taken seriously by the American left in the past 15 years? Did Prouty get any other offers from the left to republish his book before the one from Liberty Lobby?" (Ramsay 1992).

In virtually all of the cases that Berlet discussed, the Center's researchers disavowed any shared political aims with the conspiracy theory researchers of the radical right. Yet their shared research activities and anti-government stance complicated the relationship between groups that openly opposed one another on political and ideological grounds. The conspiracy theorists of the Center were reluctant to neglect any source that might contribute to revealing the truth of the assassination. As a Prevailing Winds representative explained to Berlet, "it's an argument we've gone back and forth on, it's a tough question, whether or not to make it available and to preserve it for research. We are interested in getting the information to the people. The good thing about it is no one else is trying to build these bridges between groups. We need to reach a rainbow of people" (quoted in Berlet 1990).

As the debate illustrates, when crossing ideological divides, the conspiracy theorists of the left and right portrayed themselves as scholarly researchers more interested in seeking the truth than indulging in ideological or programmatic debate. They defended this attitude by pointing to the content of the theories they endorsed. They aimed to de-emphasize the role of ideology, arguing that ideological lines were being manipulated by conspiratorial actors. More importantly, while only two decades ago Oglesby and the AIB were making waves by creating a platform which united the disparate work of assassination researchers and "Warren critics" like Weisberg under the framework of conspiracy theory, the politicization

of conspiracy had taken on a life of its own. By this point, those in the CPMH had come to see conspiracy theory as an autonomous domain, a genre space, that activists had to fight over. As exemplified by the accusations leveled by the editors of *The Lobster*, there was now the worry that there was a domain of conspiracy theory that came with its own audience that would be attracted to the field regardless of its political content, such that if the left ignored the world of conspiracy, they would risk having "left the field open for the right."

2.6 How the "deep state" became Trump's

In the years after the 9/11 attacks, Scott's term "deep state," originally introduced as a critique of simplistic "shadow government" theories, was embraced by the American right to refer to those very theories. Some simply shoehorned Scott's terminology into the "shadow government" model. For instance, in 2008, Scott made a series of appearances on Alex Jones' *InfoWars* radio program, where Jones, implicating copious "theys" who "ran the JFK assassination just like they ran 9/11," seemed to conflate Scott's model with the "invisible government" model which he had criticized. Others, however, drew from the work of Scott, Oglesby, and the other assassination researchers to make more complex arguments.

Some journalistic accounts attribute the term's re-emergence to a 2016 book by Mike Lofgren, a former Republican Congressional aide, entitled *The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government*. While Lofgren's use of the term resembles Scott's, referring to actors that link government with non-government organizations as comprising a "deep state," Lofgren displays no awareness of the term's conceptual history. Instead, he attributes his knowledge of it to a 2013 novel by the legendary British spy fiction author John Le Carre, where it refers to "non-governmental insiders." A more promising point of contact comes from a series of articles published on Breitbart in December of 2016, shortly after Donald Trump's victory in the Presidential election. A pseudonymous writer using the name Virgil argued that conservatives and libertarians should support Trump in his

self-given mission to "drain the swamp" of the American administrative state (Virgil 2016). Citing a freshly created Wikipedia article attributing the term to Scott, Virgil decried the CIA as part of a deep state coalition arraigned against Trump. But he also targeted the "complex of bureaucrats, technocrats and plutocrats" that "aims to survive any change of government with its collective will—and self-interest—fully intact." This "complex" had reasons to obscure the nature of its own actions, possessed by "a class interest, befitting people who live off of government money—and like it that way" (Virgil 2020). But Virgil's deep state was not limited to the "2.8 million civilian federal employee" of the government bureaucracy—it also referred to the "empire" of federal government contractors. Virgil argued that "this New Class . . . reached its apex under Barack Obama" and now found itself "threatened by the drain-the-swamp pledge of Trump" (ibid.).

While some accounts attributed the rise of deep state terminology in the Trump administration to Lofgren and Virgil, search trend data would suggest that neither of these earlier instances of use contributed much to the term's popularity. While Lofgren and Virgil were both using the term as early as 2016, search volume for the term "deep state" did not increase until early 2017, first peaking on January 10 when BuzzFeed News published the infamous document that would later become known as the Steele Dossier. Reportedly already circulating in government institutions and appearing in Presidential briefings, the document made a number of unsubstantiated allegations about President Trump's supposed relationship with Russian intelligence and Russian President Putin in particular. BuzzFeed News published the document "so that Americans can make up their own minds" about its truth or falsehood. This was despite the fact that many other news outlets had refused to publish the dossier, which alleged much but proved little. The upticks in search volume occur around the same time that Wikipedia users published the first draft of an article entitled "The Deep State in the United States," appearing in February 2017. While searching the term "deep state" on Wikipedia had resulted in a redirect to the article for "State Within a State" as

early as 2008, that a dedicated article only appeared around the same time as the uptick in search volume due to public interest in the Steele Dossier suggests that the uptake of the "deep state" vocabulary into the mainstream of American politics is mostly attributable to discussion around the dossier.

What drove a large part of the search volume for the term "deep state" in January of 2017 was an article by investigative journalist Glenn Greenwald entitled "The Deep State Goes to War With President-Elect" (Greenwald 2017), wherein Greenwald chastised reporters at BuzzFeed News for publishing the dossier. Asserting that the dossier was spread or created by "the CIA and its shadowy allies" to justify attacks on President Trump, Greenwald employed the term "deep state" to draw parallels between older theories about CIA involvement in the Kennedy assassination, as well as Nixon's impeachment, and opposition to President Trump originating from both within and outside of government. A second, bigger jump in search volume occurs in early March 2017, coinciding with the first mentions of the term "deep state" on Sean Hannity's radio programs discussing the circumstances surrounding the Steele Dossier.[22] But Hannity did not actually introduce deep state terminology himself. Instead, deep state terminology first appeared on Hannity's program during an episode wherein MAGA influencer Jonathan Gilliam and Trump campaign strategist Jason Meister discussed the topic. Jonathan Gilliam, filling in for Hannity in a radio episode dedicated to "the shadow government," insisted he wasn't spreading conspiracy theories "like Alex Jones," but was simply speaking the truth. Evoking Oglesby's dueling Yankee and Cowboy establishments, Gilliam argued that "the government is run by two different companies that have their own establishments," and that "instead of investigating Russia, we should be investigating something called the deep state." By the next episode on March 7, between ads for Trump backer Mike Lindell's MyPillow, Hannity himself now alleged that a "deep

22. In early 2017, the terminology had already been making its rounds on conservative talk radio even before the appearance of the Steele Dossier, first appearing in episodes of Clyde Lewis' *Ground Zero* conspiracy theory program wherein he discussed the Christic Institute's theories regarding the death of Danny Casolaro, a journalist who was allegedly killed by "the deep state" in 1991.

state" consisting of "Obama holdovers" in government had plotted to "wiretap" the Trump campaign. What he called "the shadow government," "the deep state," "the establishment" and "the swamp," all spanning "both parties," were "literally trying to destroy the President." Soon enough, the vocabulary of the deep state was appearing in White House memos (Winter and Groll 2017) and, eventually, in Trump's speeches at rallies.

From one angle, Hannity's invocation of the "deep state" to draw suspicions on Republicans who took the Steele Dossier seriously more closely resembles existing explanations of how conspiracy theories are used, such as the one put forward by Uscinski and Parent. Existing understandings of conspiracy theories have emphasized their utility for "losers" seeking to shore up loyalty by imagining a terrifying enemy, and to reinforce existing beliefs in the face of contradictory evidence, serving in both cases as a "sense-making" narrative for groups to rationalize experiences of loss, weakness, or disunity. The Steele Dossier alleged that Trump was compromised – accordingly, Trump supporters put forward an explanation that would allow them to disregard the claims made in the Dossier as an attempt at manipulation. But, from another angle, Hannity's invocation of the "deep state" also reflects the more generative forms of conspiracy theorizing exemplified by the strategies of Welch, Oglesby and the AIB. By framing the Steele Dossier as part of a larger "deep state" conspiracy, Hannity was not only rallying Trump's base against a perceived external threat but also attempting to redefine ideological boundaries within the Republican Party. This move sought to delegitimize the dossier and anyone within the party who supported it, thereby consolidating loyalty to Trump and promoting a narrative that transcended traditional partisan lines.

2.7 Conclusion

As exemplified by these cases, conspiracy theorizing could facilitate elites' strategies for closing ranks, but it could also facilitate opening them, functioning as a discourse for negotiating solidarity and redefining ideological boundaries among elites. Rather than merely shoring up

existing beliefs, conspiracy theories facilitated new alliances and re-framed political debates by challenging the origins and reality of ideological divides. For Robert Welch, shifting the JBS' narrative from an exclusive focus on a communist conspiracy to a more inclusive theory of "Insiders" manipulating various ideological guises helped manage internal tensions between anti-communist and anti-Semitic factions within the organization by suggesting that both viewpoints were manipulated by a larger, non-ideological conspiracy. For Carl Oglesby, conspiracy theorizing was a tactic for de-emphasizing ideological divides by focusing on what he characterized as "factual" questions, and on interpreting agreed-upon pieces of evidence like *Tragedy and Hope*. Both strategies involved downplaying present disagreements by promising that they would be resolved through the future discovery of vindicating factual information. Similarly, the AIB and its successor organization, the CPMH, forged interpretive communities by controlling access to key pieces of information, with the hope of transforming these communities into political movements.

While Hannity and his co-hosts' invocation of the "deep state" trope can be understood in this context, Greenwald's (2017) use of the term to criticize the mainstream media's uncritical embrace of the Steele Dossier reflects how the strategies described in this chapter, especially those involving consolidating interpretive communities around shared pieces of evidence, may play out differently in the contemporary, online media environment. Greenwald was concerned that the Dossier was a disinformation operation by "the CIA and its shadowy allies." After all, Christopher Steele, the report's author, was a product of the intelligence community, working at MI5 before he was hired by anti-Trump Republicans and, subsequently, Clintonite Democrats. Pointing out that Trump was already widely disliked, Greenwald argued that the document was not aimed at convincing Trump's base of his untrustworthiness but at reinforcing the concerns of those who already disapproved of him. The Dossier, for Greenwald, was essentially a form of strategic conspiracy theorizing aimed at redirecting popular dissatisfaction with Trump toward Russia. Greenwald con-

nected Democrats' susceptibility to the Dossier to their recent, unexpected loss to Trump in 2016, evoking Uscinski and Parent's findings that "conspiracy theories are for losers." But, for Greenwald, the uptake of the Dossier was intended to cover over internal divisions just as much as it was intended to close ranks in the wake of defeat. Reminiscent of Welch and Oglesby's strategies for outreach, Greenwald saw "baselessly" linking Trump to Russia as a cynical strategy to shore up solidarity in the Democratic Party between the party's liberal base, who already hated Trump for his ties to the far-right, and its moderate elites exemplified by the Clinton wing, who sought to redirect hatred of Trump in service of foreign policy goals that were less widely shared.

What had thrust the Dossier into the public eye, after it had apparently circulated for months amongst journalists, politicians, public policy organizations and intelligence agencies, was the decision by BuzzFeed editor Ben Smith to publish the unsubstantiated report in full, in the form of a PDF. This meant that, despite carefully-written disclaimers written by the BuzzFeed editors that had accompanied it when it was originally posted there, it could easily be downloaded and circulated in full in absence of warnings that it was unverified, and possibly unverifiable. In contrast to the members-only interpretive communities carefully crafted by mid-century conspiracy theorists, who provided access to similarly unverified and compromising material as overtures to potential allies, anyone and everyone could access the Dossier. This, in turn, meant that there was little opportunity for a shared narrative to consolidate around it. Indeed, Greenwald's reaction that the document was frivolous was not an isolated one. As Smith would reveal later in an interview with The Atlantic (2023), the backlash was immediate, culminating in a series of lawsuits against BuzzFeed for publishing unsubstantiated and potentially-harmful information. The Dossier could only serve as a defensive rationalization to the extent that further rationalizations could be indefinitely provided to shore up its credibility in the face of what became constant criticism, and even incredulity that the document was published at all.

The free circulation of the Dossier online allowed various groups—including Trump Republicans represented by Hannity, anti-Trumpers in both parties criticized by Greenwald, and potentially the "deep state" itself—to shape its interpretation. Despite BuzzFeed's efforts, a ready-made interpretation could not easily be attached to the Dossier. Similarly, the journey of the "deep state" trope across ideological and partisan lines, morphing in interpretation until its adoption by the Trumpian right, shows how meanings shift in a high-choice media environment. Their usage of the term bares little resemblance to what it had meant for Scott when he himself appropriated the term across national borders. For Scott, the idea of the "deep state" was meant to highlight the ways in which "invisible government" theories failed to capture the collapse of formal and informal political institutions into one another. For Virgil, Hannity and the rest of the Trumpians, it became what amounted to an evocative term for the very "invisible government" theories Scott hoped to dismiss. While appeals to the "deep state" had relatively stable meanings within communities, the term's use was more flexible between them. Accordingly, when mid-century activists sought to expand their communities, they did so by distributing their own sources, or by providing their own interpretations of the sources that were canonical in other communities. But, how do activists adapt these strategies for a more chaotic, high-choice media environment characterized by the free circulation of information?

Oriented around this basic problem, the dissertation will turn to the preeminent "deep state" theorists of the present: those in the QAnon community. Many accounts attribute the Q community's strange beliefs to exposure to fringe sources, including misinformation and conspiracy theory narratives. However, as we will see in the next chapter, examining the media sources circulating within the movement suggests that most of the content discussed originates from ordinary, mainstream sources. The fact that the Q community arrives at its unique beliefs while drawing on these mainstream sources underscores the importance of interpretation—a step in political communication often overlooked in conventional accounts.

As the case of the Steele Dossier exemplifies, the process of interpretation is constantly complicated by feedback from audiences and rival interpreters who advance their own readings.

CHAPTER 3

MISINFORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION: MEDIA CHOICE IN THE QANON COMMUNITY

3.1 Introduction

Less than a year after Q's first posts on the 4chan discussion boards in 2017, the first journalistic accounts of the movement began to appear. These earliest explanations of the conspiracy theory movement adhered to a common template: take someone who had previously been uninterested in politics. Friends and family start to notice they are spending more time online, reading and sharing bizarre articles from unfamiliar sources. They start to grow increasingly combative in ordinary conversations, rattling off bizarre claims about celebrities and politicians. They make smug predictions of future political events - Hillary Clinton will be arrested next month, everyone who received an mRNA vaccine will develop a terrible illness, martial law will be implemented – remaining unfazed even when they repeatedly fail to occur. Over time, they become distant, isolated in their online world, seemingly transformed into a different person. Distraught family and friends left wondering, why?

The theme of unexpected transformations induced by encounters with online media appears over and over in journalistic accounts of QAnon adherents. Friends and family repeatedly express concern that their loved ones have "morphed" (Minutaglio 2018) or "transformed" (Mosley and McMahon 2021; Donnelly 2023; Sommer 2023) into "someone else" (Watt 2020), that they have been "possessed" (Bellware 2022) or "taken over" (Cook 2021; Nagesh 2021; Samaha 2021) by the conspiracy theory movement. Even QAnon adherents themselves described their shift toward believing in the movement's theories as a kind of total transformation. As one adherent put it in a 2018 interview, "I haven't always been with these feelings I have now...I've done a complete 180...I've lost some friends" (Weill 2018).

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between the beliefs of the Q community and

their media choice, focusing on the extent to which they are exposed to untrustworthy and misleading media sources, including misinformation and "fake news." Journalistic accounts, especially the lived-experience narratives that follow this pattern, argue that these surprising transformations were caused by encounters with online fringe media. What makes these lived-experience accounts particularly concerning is that the people who ultimately embrace QAnon-related beliefs, according to themselves or their families, friends and co-workers, often do not seem to have been obviously predisposed to such beliefs before they adopt them. In other words, these accounts argue that otherwise-ordinary people can sometimes undergo drastic shifts in their beliefs after encountering Q-related material online.

The hypothesis that incidental encounters with fringe material can compound to produce durable, and sometimes-drastic, changes in beliefs is sometimes called the "rabbit hole" hypothesis (Munger 2024). One common version of this hypothesis, the *algorithmic radicalization hypothesis*, further emphasizes the role of automated, algorithmic content delivery systems, arguing that they can radicalize viewers by exposing them to conspiracy theories and misinformation that they would not otherwise select for consumption (e.g. Tufekci 2018). As exemplified by the journalistic accounts cited here, the QAnon conspiracy theory arguably is, in the public eye, *the* paradigmatic "rabbit hole" conspiracy theory. However, surprisingly little research has focused on the case of QAnon from this perspective. What research there has been on the Q community has focused on public support for the movement and its main claims (Enders et. al 2022), rather than on the community and the institutions of the movement itself. Existing research that does explicitly focus on the community tends to assume the popular "rabbit hole" narrative as a background truth, building on it without directly evaluating it (e.g. Bloom and Moskalenko 2021; Forberg 2022).

There are some reasons to support the "rabbit hole" narrative. As these copious journalistic accounts indicate, the "rabbit hole" narrative is consistent with many current and former adherents' explanations of their own lived experience in the movement. For example,

as one former conspiracy theorist put it, "I guess the algorithm must have changed it to where I was seeing, obviously, more... pro-Trump videos and then it led into conspiracy things." Attributing her beliefs to TikTok's "For You" page, she suggested that she "was unintentionally getting conspiracy theories...when you start getting information from these groups...it snowballed to just build bigger and bigger" (Rosa 2021).

Moreover, attributing people's strange beliefs to variation in information exposure allows for a more optimistic view of public rationality. This contrasts with theories that attribute such beliefs to an ingrained psychological tendency often referred to as "conspiracy thinking"[1] (Wood, Douglas and Sutton 2012; Wood 2016; Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016; Frenken and Imhoff 2021; Enders et. al 2023). Unlike these psychological accounts, explanations that link misinformation exposure to the adoption of conspiracy theory beliefs do not assume that some people hold an irrational predisposition towards such beliefs. Instead, they suggest that strange or seemingly-irrational beliefs, including some conspiracy theories, arise from deception, presenting a rational response to a distorted informational environment.

Misinformation explanations are appealing because they acknowledge the potential for genuine transformation in belief systems in response to changes in the informational environment, aligning with lived-experience accounts toward which "conspiracy thinking" explanations encourage skepticism. The "conspiracy thinking" perspective implies that people who adopt conspiracy theories already had a latent predisposition towards these beliefs, which eventually becomes evident in a way that observers sometimes mistake for a radical transformation. However, if even strange beliefs can arise from variations in information exposure, it suggests that transformation is possible. More importantly, it implies that by eliminating erroneous and misleading sources from the information environment, individuals who hold

1. Other terms social scientists use to refer to this hypothesized tendency include "conspiracist ideation" (Brotherton, French and Pickering 2013), "the conspiracy mindset" (Sutton and Douglas 2020), "conspiratorial thinking" (Goertzel 1994), and "conspiracism" . For clarity, I use "conspiracy thinking" to refer to the hypothesis that some individuals have a general tendency to believe in conspiracy theories, as minimally defined.

bizarre conspiracy theories might shift towards more conventional beliefs.

Yet, there are strong reasons to be skeptical of the "rabbit hole" narrative as well. The "rabbit hole" narrative is a restatement of what is sometimes called the "supply-side" explanation of belief adoption, for which there is little evidence in the existing literature of political communications. "Supply-side" explanations argue that the existing supply of political media supporting a given ideological position or political view can create its own demand through a process of radicalization. However, academic research on the role of algorithmic recommendations in promoting extremist content has generally not supported the algorithmic radicalization hypothesis (Ledwich and Zaitsev 2020; Ribeiro et al. 2020; Hosseinmardi et al. 2021; Brown et al. 2022; Ledwich, Zaitsev, and Laukemper 2022). Instead, studies indicate that people tend to choose new media and adopt new beliefs in ways that align with their prior beliefs (Kunda 1990; Stroud 2017; Guess and Coppock 2020; Coppock 2021), integrating new information with their existing belief systems (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Katz 1996; Stroud 2008; Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). For most Americans, untrustworthy or extreme sources constitute only a small portion of their media consumption (Grinberg et al. 2019; Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2020; Guess 2021; Rao, Morstatter, and Lerman 2022). This, coupled with findings that incidental exposures to such content are unlikely to compound (Guess et al. 2020a; Uscinski et al. 2022), casts further doubt on the "rabbit hole" theory. However, the research is not unanimous. Some evidence suggests that repeated and prolonged exposure can make the claims in fake news appear more plausible (Pennycook et al. 2018).

3.1.1 Exposure to mainstream media sources

In light of this existing research, we should be skeptical of the widespread, popular narratives in which people unexpectedly adopt bizarre or radical beliefs as the result of encountering fringe media. Instead, we should expect that the supply of online media advocating for

the views of the Q community should, in the long run, come to match existing demand for such views rather than driving increases in demand, as in the "rabbit hole" narrative. This presents a puzzle – how can we square "supply-side," lived-experience accounts emphasizing the transformative effects of online media with empirical findings that are more consistent with consensus, "demand-side" explanations of the relationship between media and the beliefs of the public?

I answer this question through a two-part analysis combining, in this chapter, a descriptive analysis of large-N observational data with, in the next chapter, ethnographic immersion in the institutions of the QAnon community. First, I establish some facts about the media consumption practices of participants on /qresearch/[2], the QAnon community's main online discussion platform as well as their only direct point of contact with Q. I do so for a period in 2020, when the Q account was still active in the movement and on the site, and again for 2023, after Q had stopped participating in the community. I first classify the articles posted and discussed by community members to identify articles from sources that political scientists consider to be unreliable, untrustworthy or sources of misinformation (e.g. Grinberg et al. 2019; Guess and Coppock 2020) – which I collectively term "fringe sources."

I use this data to evaluate whether the Q community is disproportionately exposed to fringe sources. I find that the articles posted within, and discussed by the community preponderantly come from mainstream media sources that political scientists generally consider to be credible, and that visitors to /qresearch/, the QAnon site most central to the broader movement, will still encounter fringe sources at a level comparable to that of an ordinary social media user on a mainstream platform. This undermines a fundamental premise of the "rabbit hole" narrative, since even core community members' media diets do not consist primarily of extreme fringe material. At the same time, if we assume that those in the QAnon community hold at least some beliefs that are fundamentally incompatible with the

2. For further background information on /qresearch/, please see the Introduction.

claims and perspectives appearing in mainstream media, this also not entirely consistent with the conventional political communications axiom that people tend to consume media that comports with their existing beliefs.

3.1.2 Causal symmetry

I also examine whether the community treats fringe sources differently from mainstream ones. Even though I find that those in the community are not disproportionately exposed to fringe sources, it is still possible that they disproportionately assign importance to the few fringe sources that they do encounter. If community members are disproportionately attracted to fringe sources, this might indicate that distinct factors influence their uptake of fringe sources as compared to mainstream ones. Accounts in the literature are currently divided between those falling into what Uscinski (2023) calls the "causal asymmetry paradigm," because they argue for the existence of a distinct causal process for the uptake of false information, and the "causal symmetry paradigm," which takes the epistemological perspective that people adopt beliefs as a result of the same causal process, regardless of whether those beliefs are true or false. When misinformation researchers isolate elements like social media (Del Vicario et al. 2016a; Bode and Vraga 2021), motivated reasoning (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017), or specific psychological tendencies (Roozenbeek et al. 2020) as drivers of belief in misinformation rather than general belief formation, they argue that these factors uniquely predispose some people to favor false information over true. This implies that without these influences, people would naturally gravitate towards accepting accurate information. By contrast, classic public opinion frameworks directly acknowledge that there is no way for most people to know whether the claims they encounter in political life are actually true, and thus have no reliable way to distinguish misinformation from information in absence of factors like ideological and partisan priors (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Therefore, there is no reason that the truth or falsehood of a claim would have any bearing on whether it is

adopted by the public.

To deduce whether those in the community treat fringe accounts asymmetrically, I examine data describing a formal procedure that /qresearch/ users employ to make and record judgments about which outside media sources have proven useful in their ongoing conspiracy research process. Using a large-N observational dataset recording these judgments, I model the effect of source type (whether the source was fringe or mainstream) on the community's internal judgments of source importance. Here I find that the community was just as likely to assign importance to mainstream and fringe sources in 2020. By 2023, the community was somewhat more likely to assign importance to fringe sources, although mainstream sources still contributed the majority of content discussed by the community.

A subsequent multi-model comparison suggests that, despite this apparent shift towards increased endorsement of fringe content in 2023, the community does not treat mainstream and fringe sources in a significantly different way. For both 2020 and 2023, models which predict community judgments of importance using only information about the presence of a link to any outside source consistently outperformed models making use of additional information about source type. Because models which did not differentiate between mainstream and fringe sources were the most effective at predicting community members' judgments of importance, we are justified in modeling community members' judgments as if they do not account for source type, at least in the way that it is represented within the mainstream-fringe dichotomy that appears in this and other research discussed above.

One possible interpretation of this result is that community members, on balance, might prefer to avoid fringe sources (assuming as I do, for the purposes of this chapter, that fringe sources are less credible), but they cannot reliably distinguish between fringe and mainstream sources. This would support a growing body of public policy work arguing for the efficacy of media literacy interventions intended to improve the public's discernment of fringe from mainstream sources (e.g. Badrinathan 2021; Guess et al. 2020b; Guess et al.

2024), thereby mitigating the effects of exposure to fake news, misinformation and other untrustworthy online media. However, this interpretation is complicated by ethnographic observations revealing that most community members have little difficulty discerning which sources are mainstream and which are fringe. What might appear to outsiders as a lack of media literacy, I argue, is evidence of a different, but similarly institutionalized, form of media literacy arising from community standards rather than mainstream ones.

3.1.3 Finding "notables"

This study examines media consumption habits on 8kun/qresearch/, the online home of the Q movement. On the site, movement participants interact with Q, posing questions and interpreting Q's cryptic responses with the help of their fellow community members. A significant part of this research process involves examining and discussing news media sources to corroborate Q's claims and hunt for evidence of the conspiracy. Thus, despite the fact that the board is oriented around interacting with Q, discussing news sources is actually the predominate activity taking place on the boards, to the extent that users see /qresearch/, in one community member's own words, as "an imageboard moonlighting as a MSM [mainstream media] news aggregator." Or, as another put it, "[8kun is] a global review of daily events...[we] track events so you don't have to!" Users on the board post and discuss news articles, government documents and other pieces of information in hopes of discovering proof of the conspiracy alleged by Q. Because of this focus on interpreting media, users on 8kun see themselves as having a distinct role in the movement's division of labor – an expert-like role, responsible not only for interpreting Q's posts, but also for conducting additional research in accordance with the broader aims of the movement. Why users on the board come to see some of their fellow participants as having expertise discussed in the next chapter. For now, I focus the way that these local, expert-like participants treat externally produced media. In doing so, we not only learn which media sources QAnon

conspiracy theorists encounter, but also whether they make use of these resources in a way that is consistent with existing accounts of opinion formation.

These local experts refer to their research methodology as "baking," and the forum threads where they conduct their research in accordance with these rules are called "breads."[3] In these research "breads," participants post news articles, social media posts and personal theories. Other participants, in turn, offer their own interpretations of this content. When other participants deem a post to be worth sharing, they can endorse it. Posts that get endorsed by other participants are called "notables." The overall goal of the baking process is to separate out the most useful and important posts made by other users and designating them as "notables," with the most-endorsed posts comprising a curated list of sources for other participants. These "notables" provide ready-made topics of discussion for QAnon streaming video creators and bloggers, as well as material for the use of ordinary participants to shore up their arguments and propose new theories. Thus, Q research forums fulfill an important function in the media ecosystem of the broader movement. Think of the process as one of separating signal from noise. For many of us who read social media platforms like Twitter/X or Reddit, this should be familiar - users on these platforms can reward other users with upvotes or likes, making it possible for other users to apply a filter to the content in order to extract posts which have received the most engagement. This study measures the factors that contribute to a post being labeled as "notable" by those in the community, with a specific focus on the role of links to external sources. By examining the types of linked content that correlate with "notability"—ranging from mainstream news outlets to fringe media sources and other alternative platforms—we can evaluate whether those in the movement have a propensity to assign greater importance to unreliable sources, such as fake news or misinformation.

3. Because "thread" sounds like "bread."

3.2 Methods

I draw on data from two different time periods: September and October of 2020, and June to August of 2023. These intervals were chosen to capture the community's "notable" selection procedures both while Q was actively contributing to the forum (in 2020), and after Q's departure from the movement (2023). The dataset includes posts labeled as "notable" by community moderators, a designation indicating perceived relevance or importance. For each post, data on the amount, presence and type of external links, thread population metrics, and reply counts were extracted, alongside the binary outcome indicating whether the post was deemed "notable." The data for 2020 consists of 72,906 posts across 97 research threads. These posts contained 9,529 links, 7,396 of which were to broadly mainstream sources and 939 of which were to fringe sources. The data for 2023 consists of 176,312 posts across 236 research threads. These posts contained 24,753 links, 17,934 of which were to broadly mainstream sources and 4,903 of which were to fringe sources.

3.2.1 Variables

For each post, the key independent variable is the presence of external links, categorized into eight distinct types for the specific indicator models: Mainstream News, Mainstream Social Media, Other Mainstream Sources, Fringe News, Fringe Social Media, Utility Links, Q Community Links, and Imageboard Links. Thread population was included as a control variable to account for engagement and visibility factors that might influence "notability" status, the main dependent variable of interest. Note that the unit of analysis in this study is the post, rather each link appearing in the post. It is posts rather than links that are categorized as "notable" within the community, and posts sometimes contain more than one link to different outside sources. Links to mainstream and fringe sources sometimes appear in the same post, which is why I include binary variables tracking the presence of each category separately.

Mainstream sources include major news sites, such as CNN, BBC, Fox and so on, as well as mainstream local news organizations (e.g. CBS, NBC etc.). Mainstream social media sources include social media accounts of mainstream news organizations, journalists and politicians. An additional "mainstream – other" category captured non-news oriented official websites of companies, non-profits and government organizations (e.g. sites with .gov domains). I coded additional categories capturing sites maintained by members of the Q community, as well as other "Chans" – imageboard communities associated with the broader movement. A final category captured general-use "utility" sites like image hosting platforms without a social media component.

3.2.2 Operationalizing misinformation

In terms of the way social scientists operationalize the concepts of misinformation, extreme-right content, and even conspiracy theories, there is often substantial overlap. Most of the sources categorized as "misinformation" by political scientists ideologically lean to the political right (Grinberg et al. 2019; Guess, Nagler and Tucker 2019; Rao, Morstatter and Lerman 2022; Gonzales-Bailon et al. 2023), to the extent that tracking exposure to (what social scientists consider to be) misinformation strongly maps onto exposure to extreme-right media. Some stage conspiracy theories as one type of misinformation (Del Vicario et al. 2016a; Rao, Morstatter and Lerman 2022; Gioia et al. 2023; Neylan et al. 2023), despite the well-acknowledged fact that many explanations which fit the descriptive criteria are neither false nor necessarily even controversial. Conspiracy theories and misinformation are sometimes lumped together under the heading of "alternative beliefs" (e.g. Enders and Uscinski 2021). Both the terms "conspiracy theory" and "misinformation" are politically fraught. A predominate use of both terms is pejorative (Bratich 2008; deHaven-Smith 2014; Duetz 2023), with both researchers and political practitioners often simply applying them to claims with which they personally disagree (Wood and Douglas 2013; Uscinski 2023).

Deciding which media sources should be considered trustworthy or untrustworthy, reliable or unreliable, is a similarly fraught, subjective exercise. To identify "untrustworthy" sources, I make use of a comprehensive list compiled by Grinberg et al. (2019) of sites that frequently publish verifiably false information, and/or frequently publish unverified information. This list includes sites flagged by fact checkers as publishing false content as well as additional websites that were labeled as unreliable by that research team. This list has been adopted by political scientists researching misinformation (e.g. Guess et al. 2020; Allen et al. 2020), while subsuming and expanding upon previous lists compiled by political scientists (Guess et al. 2018; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). My use of this list is mainly to facilitate comparison with the work of these other researchers, but I have no epistemic commitment to the premise that misinformation is easily discernible from trustworthy information, even by professional political scientists. I designate these sources as "fringe" sources, rather than as "misinformation," "fake news" and so on, to reflect that the list of sources I code as untrustworthy, misinformation, etc., is compiled from a number of existing accounts that treat misinformation differently. As this list primarily draws on, and consolidates, the judgments of credibility made by numerous independent fact checkers as well as those of the research team, it should be interpreted as a generously broad way of operationalizing misinformation.

In addition to tracking the community's consumption of media sources categorized as misinformation in this way, I also track consumption of content from alt-tech social media platforms such as Rumble, Truth Social and Telegram. While in principle these sites can be used in the same way as conventional social media, the stated purpose of these sites is to provide a social media platform free of the content moderation policies now prevalent on mainstream platforms, many of which were introduced specifically to mitigate the spread of unreliable and unverified sources. Since the main reason to use these platforms is to circumvent moderation, fact checking and content policies, I also classify these platforms as fringe sources. However, it is important to note that these sources are not considered

"untrustworthy" by Grinberg. Consequently, this statistic is not directly comparable to their account, which is significant because, as we shall see, the small increase in fringe content I observe in 2023 largely reflects the increased circulation of links to fringe social media within the community.

Again, my goal here is to utilize the most generously expansive criteria for fringe sources that is justifiable by combining a number of operational definitions of misinformation in such a way as to facilitate a "most likely" case, or "easy" case, for detecting exposure to fringe material. What I ultimately find is that, even using this expansive definition, fringe material circulates within the QAnon discussion community at a level comparable to its circulation on mainstream platforms, at least during the period during which Q was still highly active in the community. While a relatively greater portion of the media circulating within the community by 2023 originated from fringe sources, the reduced circulation of untrustworthy sources within the community in 2020, during its height of popularity and influence, suggests that the community's sometimes bizarre beliefs are not reflective of, or reducible to, differences in media consumption profiles.

3.2.3 Model construction

I employ logistic regression models to estimate the probability of a post being marked as "notable" based on the specified predictors. Two model variants were constructed for each period under study. First, a general indicator (GI) model:

$$\text{logit}(P(N = 1|l, p)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 l + \beta_2 p$$

where $\Pr(\text{Notable} = 1 \mid l, p)$ is the probability that a post has been deemed "notable" given l, an indicator tracking the presence of a link to *any* outside source in the post, and p, a control variable representing thread population.

I then estimate a specific indicator (SI) model which substituted the general source presence indicator with separate binary variables for each source type, alongside control variables:

$$\text{logit}(P(N=1|m,s,o,f,a,u,q,c,p)) = \beta_0+\beta_1 m+\beta_2 s+\beta_3 o+\beta_4 f+\beta_5 a+\beta_6 u+\beta_7 q+\beta_8 c+\beta_9 p$$

where the probability that a post has been deemed "notable" is estimated as a function of several indicator variables tracking the presence in a given post of links to various types of online media. m tracks the presence of links to Mainstream News, s tracks Mainstream Social Media sources, o tracks the presence of links to Other Mainstream Sources, f tracks Fringe News, a tracks Fringe Social Media, u tracks Utility links, q tracks Q Community links, c tracks links to "Chans," or other imageboards, and p is a control variable representing thread population.

Model performance was evaluated using the Akaike Information Criterion (Akaike 1973), discussed below, which ranks models based on fit and parsimony. My goal here is to discern whether the specific type of external link (as in the SI model) contributes more information to predicting a post's "notable" status than the mere presence of any link (as in the GI model). If the SI model facilitates more accurate prediction, then this would suggest that source type matters for community members' judgments of "notability".

3.3 Results

Table 3.1 describes the links to outside sources appearing in posts on the /qresearch/ forum. We might have expected that those in the QAnon community would be exposed to far more fringe/unreliable content. However, in both 2020 and 2023, the preponderance of links to outside sources appearing in discussions in research threads were to mainstream content rather than fringe content. In 2020, 9% of links were to fringe content – alternative

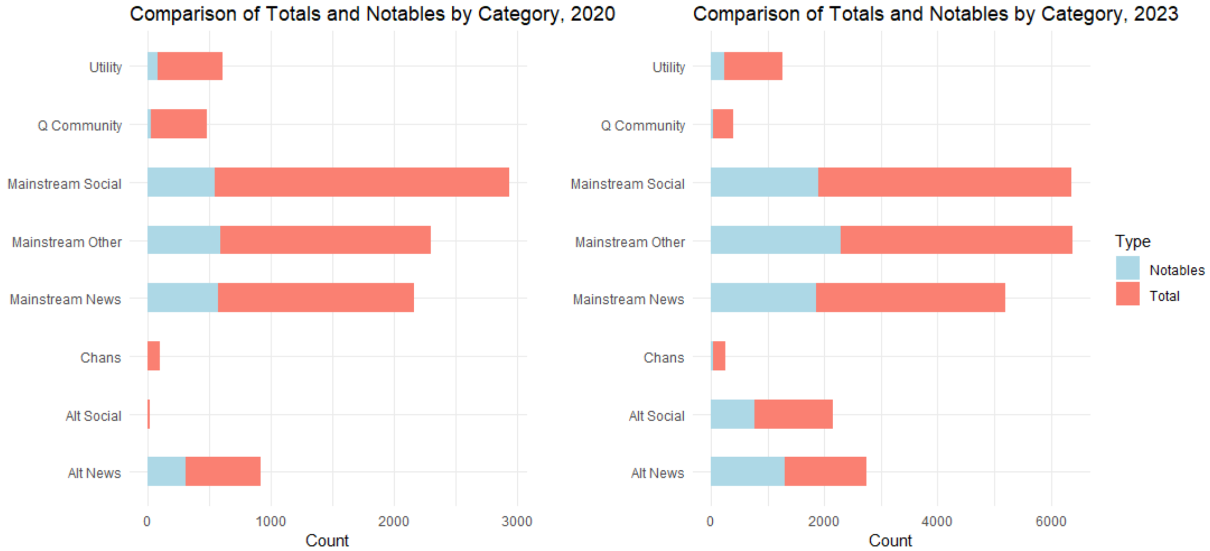


Figure 3.1: Notable frequency by type

news and social media. This is consistent with other recent accounts of the circulation of fake news and unreliable sources on social media, which find that the amount of unreliable sources, including fake news and misinformation, circulating online is relatively small on most platforms. For example, one recent account of fake news' circulation on Twitter found that fake news only accounted for around 6% of news consumption (Grinberg et. al 2019).

However, by 2023, 19% of all links were to fringe content, reflecting a substantial increase. The increase in the proportion of links to fringe content between 2020 and 2023 is mostly attributable to the emergence of alt-tech platforms. The proportion of total links referring to unreliable news sources remains roughly the same between these two periods: 9% in 2020 and 11% in 2023. In the 2020 data, almost no links to alt-tech platforms appear. By 2023 however, around 8% of links and "notables" fall into the alt-tech category. This reflects the emergence of alt-tech platforms like Truth Social, Rumble and Telegram as mainstream social media platforms began to more aggressively moderate QAnon content in the aftermath of the January 6 Capitol invasion. In 2020, before the emergence of alt-tech platforms, around 30% of links and 25% of "notables" refer to mainstream social media platforms. However, by 2023, this has slightly decreased – mainstream social content only makes up around 22%

Table 3.1: Comparison of 2020 and 2023 Links Designated as "Notable"

	2023 Data		2020 Data	
Category	Total Links	Notables	Total Links	Notables
Mainstream News	5198	1855	2163	571
Mainstream Social	6353	1891	2936	546
Mainstream Other	6383	2295	2297	589
Alt News	2747	1307	920	314
Alt Social	2156	768	19	4
Utility	1259	249	608	81
Q Community	405	34	485	24
Chans	252	34	101	3
Total	**24753**	**8433**	**9529**	**2132**

of links and "notables," potentially reflecting that a portion of the community has largely shifted to using alternative social media platforms.

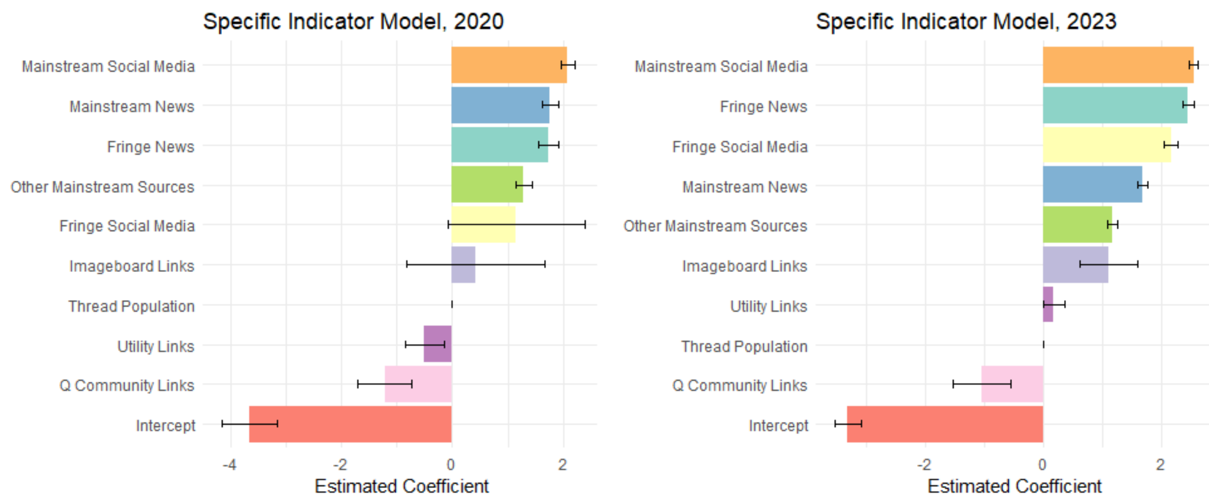


Figure 3.2: SI model coefficients

3.3.1 Specific indicator models

In 2020, the strongest predictors of "notable" status were the presence of mainstream news and mainstream social media links. Posts with links to mainstream news sources were nearly 6 times more likely to be classified as "notable," and posts with links to mainstream social

media sources were 8 times more likely to be selected than those without.

At the same time, the presence of a link to a fringe source also considerably increased the odds of a post being labeled as "notable." These posts were only minutely less likely to be selected as "notables" compared to posts containing links to mainstream sources. The similarity between these coefficients suggests that participants in the research process on the forum may not be able to reliably distinguish between mainstream and fringe news sources, and thus treat them similarly.

In 2023, the coefficients for both mainstream and fringe content types are positive and significant, indicating a high propensity to assign "notable" status to external content regardless of its mainstream or fringe status. Posts with links to mainstream news content were about 5 times more likely to be labeled as "notable" than those without. Yet, while the coefficients for the variable associated with the presence of links to mainstream news remains similar between 2020 and 2023, the coefficient associated with fringe news increases substantially. In 2023, posts containing links to fringe news content were over 11 times more likely than those without to be selected as "notables."

This shift toward assigning increasing significance to fringe sources may reflect changes in the broader media ecosystem, rather than changes in community members' behaviors. Between 2020 and 2023, the alt-tech social media ecosystem expanded rapidly due to increasingly aggressive moderation of QAnon content on mainstream platforms, which drove those in the movement to other platforms that branded themselves as less strictly moderated, such as Trump's own Truth Social platform. The online fringe media ecosystem likely expanded drastically during this period for similar reasons, meaning that fringe sources may simply be more prevalent online during this later period.

Table 3.2: Comparison of Specific Indicator Model Coefficients for 2020 and 2023

	2020		2023	
Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Intercept	-3.662	0.258	-3.315	0.115
Mainstream News	1.767	0.075	1.678	0.042
Mainstream Social Media	2.084	0.062	2.546	0.035
Mainstream Other	1.294	0.077	1.170	0.041
Alt News	1.747	0.093	2.451	0.049
Alt Social	1.159	0.628	2.167	0.059
Utility	-0.501	0.182	0.176	0.091
Q Community Links	-1.217	0.251	-1.045	0.249
Link to Chan	0.420	0.635	1.110	0.251
Thread Population	-0.002	0.001	-0.004	0.001

3.3.2 Omitted indicators

One strong predictor of "notable" status was the amount of discussion that the source provoked in research threads, with "notable" sources receiving many more replies. For example, in the 2020 data, I found that, for each reply a post receives, it was 6% more likely to be included as a "notable." However, because every post that the community selected as "notable" received at least some replies, it was unsuitable to include the data tracking reply count in the logit model as this created separation. So, note that while reply count is a strong indicator of interest, it has been omitted here.

Similarly, every post by Q himself during 2020 was designated as "notable." In fact, this was the original purpose of "notable" designation – to preserve Q's posts. So, while Q posting a link guaranteed that the community would classify it as "notable," this was also omitted from the logit analysis. Accordingly, I omitted all posts by Q himself, and the analysis of the 2020 data thus captures the community's response only to links posted by other community members, rather than by Q himself.

3.3.3 General indicator models

To test the extent to which information about source type improved predictions about which post would be categorized as "notable," I also generated a simplified model for each year which attempted to predict "notability" using only a variable that indicated the presence of any link to an outside source, along with a control variable tracking the number of active users in each research thread. The coefficients for the variable indicating the presence of a link were similarly high in the 2020 and 2023 models. In 2020, posts with any link were about 33 times more likely to be classified as "notable" compared to posts without any links, holding thread activity levels constant. In 2023, posts with links were over 45 times more likely to be classified as "notables."

Table 3.3: Comparison of General Indicator Model Coefficients for 2020 and 2023

	2020		2023	
Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Intercept	-4.357	0.264	-4.018	0.116
Presence of Any Link	3.492	0.054	3.813	0.030
Thread Population	-0.002	0.001	-0.004	0.001

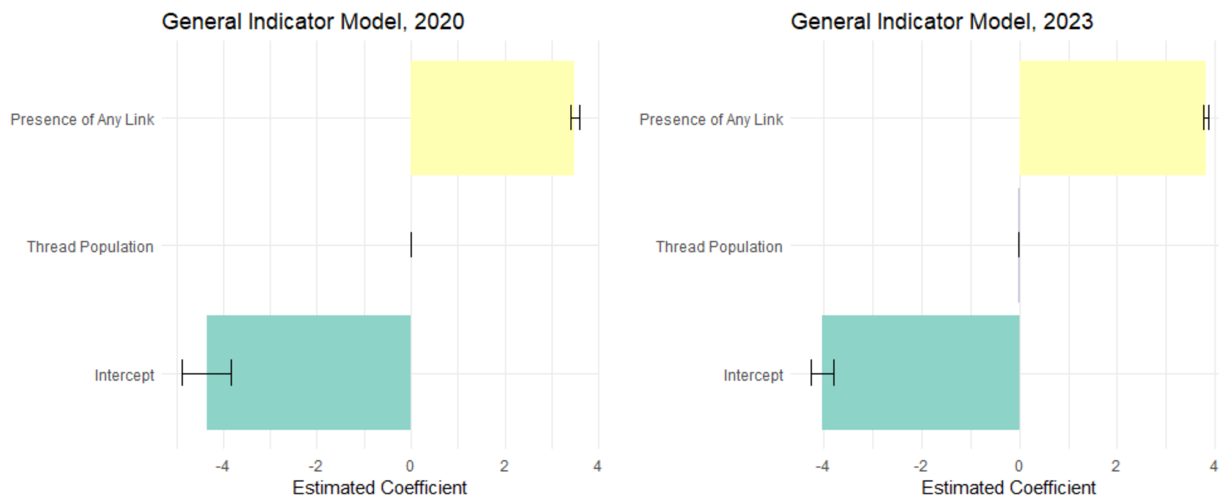


Figure 3.3: GI model coefficients

3.3.4 Comparing models

I then compared the GI and SI models by calculating a comparison statistic derived from information theory, the Akaike information criterion (AIC). The AIC should be interpreted as a methodology for estimating and comparing models' predictive accuracy (Sobor 2002). I employ it here to evaluate whether additional information about source type improves a models predictions of "notability" over a model that predicts "notability" using only control variables and information about the presence or absence of any source in a post at all. What I am modeling is the community's judgment process through which they assign "notable" status. If information about source type does not significantly improve the predictions of the SI model over the GI model, this implies that, whether those in the community are, or are not, actually capable of discerning mainstream sources from fringe ones, their judgments are indistinguishable from those made under conditions where they do not know this information. Model selection is determined by calculating an AIC score for each candidate model, and selecting the model with the lower score. A lower score reflects that the model minimizes information loss, meaning it achieves an equally good fit with fewer parameters. It is important to note that AIC scores are ordinal and mean nothing on their own. They are simply a way of ranking the models.

For each model, the AIC score is calculated as

$$\text{AIC} = 2K - 2\log(L(\hat{\theta}|y)$$

where K is the number of estimable parameters (degrees of freedom) and $\log(L(\hat{\theta}|y)$ is the log-likelihood at its maximum point of the model estimated.

The comparison between GI and SI models for each year is calculated as

$$\Delta\text{AIC} = \text{AIC}_{\text{high}} - \text{AIC}_{\text{low}}$$

which is the difference between the model with the higher and lower AIC. I also calculate the AIC weight, which represents the probability that a given model is the best among the set of models considered.

The AIC weight for the GI model (w_{GI}) and the SI model (w_{SI}) can be calculated as:

$$w_{\text{GI}} = \frac{\exp\left(-\frac{1}{2}\Delta\text{AIC}_{\text{GI}}\right)}{\exp\left(-\frac{1}{2}\Delta\text{AIC}_{\text{GI}}\right) + \exp\left(-\frac{1}{2}\Delta\text{AIC}_{\text{SI}}\right)}$$

$$w_{\text{SI}} = \frac{\exp\left(-\frac{1}{2}\Delta\text{AIC}_{\text{SI}}\right)}{\exp\left(-\frac{1}{2}\Delta\text{AIC}_{\text{GI}}\right) + \exp\left(-\frac{1}{2}\Delta\text{AIC}_{\text{SI}}\right)}$$

Comparing AIC statistics for the GI and SI models in each year, I find that, despite their simplicity, the GI models are significantly more efficient at predicting "notable" classification. For both 2020 and 2023, the GI models are strongly preferred over the SI models according to the AIC comparison. These results suggest that the additional complexity introduced by specifying separate variables for different types of linked sources does not lead to a significant improvement in terms of predicting "notability," and that a simpler model that considers only whether any link is present (as opposed to the specific type of link) suffices. Thus, although the SI model reveals some variation in the way that community members treated different types of sources between the Q- and post-Q periods, the comparative efficiency of the GI model in both periods should generate some doubt that source type has a significant impact on community members' classifications of "notability." Instead, the presence of any source seems to be the main prerequisite for a post's "notability."

Table 3.4: AIC model comparison for 2023

Model	K	AIC	ΔAIC	AICWt	Cum.Wt	LL
GI	3	40791.29	0.00	1	1	-20392.64
SI	10	45996.34	5205.05	0	1	-22988.17

Table 3.5: AIC model comparison for 2020

Model	K	AIC	ΔAIC	AICWt	Cum.Wt	LL
GI	3	13351.24	0.00	1	1	-6672.62
SI	10	14763.65	1412.42	0	1	-7371.83

3.4 Discussion

The story told by these statistics is surprising because it is inconsistent with both the algorithmic radicalization account and the conventional political communications account discussed in the chapter's introduction. Whether supply drives demand as in the radicalization account, or demand drives supply as in the political communications account, both hypotheses are oriented toward explaining the relationship between political beliefs and media consumption preferences, and both assume that there will be some correlation between the two. The significance of the case discussed in this chapter is that, at the height of its popularity, the media profile appearing on the main discussion platform for the QAnon community – the paradigmatic community associated with widespread concern about radicalization, conspiracy theories and fake news – did not differ significantly from the media diet of, for example, the average Twitter user (Grinberg et al. 2019).

If consumption of fringe sources did increase, it only did so during the period when Q had already left the movement, after activity on the /qresearch/ community dramatically dropped off. In 2020, the mean number of unique participants in each research thread was 243. After Q's departure, this number had dropped by around one third, to just 157 for the period data was collected in 2023. With this in mind, the shift may mirror recent accounts in which institutional change occurs endogenously in online communities through population loss, because institutional losers become demotivated and leave, while institutional winners remain (Steinsson 2024). This shift will be analyzed further in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to point out that the community's shift toward consumption and endorsement of fringe material from 2020 to 2023 was made possible by the maturation of a news and social

media infrastructure catering to the Q community during the intervening period. This study is, to my knowledge, the first quantitative assessment of the uptake of alt-tech platforms by the conspiracy movement. Those in the conspiracy movement are arguably these platforms' target audience, as alt-tech platforms market themselves mainly as a way to avoid moderation policies on mainstream platforms. The emergence and uptake of alt-tech platforms exemplifies a major difficulty faced by efforts to restrict the supply of undesirable online media of any kind: it is always possible to circumvent moderation by moving to a different, unmoderated platform. Given the rapid shift from mainstream to alt-tech platforms shown by these data, alt-tech platforms are a promising case for future study. In comparison to mainstream sources which do not directly affirm the beliefs of the community, material appearing in fringe sources require less creative interpretation to bring their message into accordance with beliefs already circulating within the community. A smaller, more consolidated community means there is less room for disputes to emerge. And, the departure of the movement's charismatic figurehead – Q – means that some options for dispute resolution that proved highly effective in 2020 were no longer available in 2023.

Assuming that the sources categorized as fringe sources really do contain misinformation (which is what is claimed by the political scientists that developed the criteria I employ in this chapter), these findings do not suggest that those in the /qresearch/ community asymmetrically assign importance to misinforming sources. The multi-model comparison suggests that, when assigning "notable" status, community members do not treat sources in a significantly different way based on their source type. While the SI models indicated a slight shift toward increased consumption of fringe news and social media in 2023, and a similar increase in their propensity to assign "notable" status to fringe sources, the efficacy of the GI model suggests that we should still be cautious about attributing the movement's beliefs to an outsized propensity to consume, and assign importance to, fringe media sources. In effect, I use the GI model as a significance test to evaluate the SI model, finding that

adding more information about source type to the model did not substantially improve predictive efficacy. While the efficacy of the GI model in the multi-model comparison does not definitively rule out the possibility that the community does discern between mainstream and fringe sources when making judgments about "notability," it does suggest that we are justified in modeling their choices as if they did not account for source type, at least in the way that it is represented within the mainstream-fringe dichotomy that appears in this and other research discussed above.

In the SI models, the presence of links to outside content that was obviously associated with the Q community, or with other similar discussion forums, significantly decreased the likelihood that the post would be classified as "notable." That community members prefer external sources to those obviously affiliated with the movement suggests community members do exercise some degree of discernment when it comes to source type. Indeed, in interviews participants in the community frequently expressed a desire to be unbiased and objective in their research process, and an inclination to seek external validation beyond what they sometimes characterized as the community's own "echo chamber." This suggests that attributes of the source from which a specific article comes can matter to those in the community, at least sometimes.

Assuming that source type does matter to those in the community, and that, on balance, community members do want to consume media from the most credible sources available, one possible interpretation of the community's broad consumption of mainstream and fringe sources, and the result of the multi-model comparison that information about source type does not improve predictions, is that those in the community simply fail to discern fringe sources when they encounter them. The fact that the preponderance of the media they consume and designate as "notable" comes from mainstream sources, with fringe sources trickling in over time, might reflect an intention to consume media from credible sources frustrated by a lack of discernment when it comes to credibility. Under this interpretation,

their media consumption behaviors could simply reflect a lack of media literacy – perhaps those in the community treat reliable and unreliable sources similarly because they lack the training to effectively distinguish reliable sources from unreliable ones, and so treat all sources as potentially reliable pending further investigation.

Media literacy programs are a common policy intervention suggested in response to concerns about fake news and misinformation, as it has been shown that lower digital literacy in particular is correlated with a higher susceptibility to accepting claims from untrustworthy sources (Sirlin et al. 2021), and explains much variation in online behavior in general (Guess and Munger 2022). However, evidence on the effects of media literacy interventions is mixed. While media literacy training somewhat improved people's discernment of fake news from credible sources (Guess et al. 2020b; Guess et al. 2024), interventions providing media consumers with more information about source credibility has little impact on their existing media choice (Aslett et al. 2022).

However, as is likely apparent to anyone who has even casually encountered someone involved in the Q community, this interpretation is incomplete. This is because those in the movement are vocally critical of the mainstream media sources endorsed as credible by political scientists. As one interviewee put it:

> Q is a backchannel from the government to the people. It is a [way to] bypass the corrupt and infiltrated media propaganda machines [which] have the ability and know-how to fabricate news stories to fit a desired narrative.

This presents another puzzle – why do those in the community consume so much news media from sources that they vocally distrust? Even if mainstream sources actually are more credible, those in the QAnon movement do not believe so. It is true that the movement first emerged from attempts to interpret Q's cryptic messaging. And yet, as the above quote suggests, participants see Q as worth investigating because they believe Q's insider knowledge points to a conspiracy by mainstream media organizations to propagandize the

public. The point is not just that Q has the truth, the point is that Q is supposed to be a whistle-blower with secret clearance, like Edward Snowden or Chelsea Manning. Q doesn't just provide facts – those facts have political significance because they allow participants to make judgments about who is lying to them, and who can be trusted. In fact, those in the movement have come to see the movement's *raison d'être* to be serving as a watchdog for what they see as mainstream media's abuse of power. Returning to some statements from interviewees discussed earlier in the chapter:

> 8kun is an imageboard moonlighting as a MSM [mainstream media] news aggregator.
>
> [8kun is] a global review of daily events...[we] track events so you don't have to!

The result of this attitude is that those in the movement consume huge amounts of mainstream media messages in hopes of locating evidence for the conspiracy. But, they do not straightforwardly make use of mainstream messages as providing information about political events in the outside world. Instead, the information they seek appears in the form of slips, winks, and revelations both intentional and unintended about what is "really" going on. Because interpreters suspect that mainstream media and political messages seek to influence their behavior, they view mainstream media messages as conveying hidden information about the motivations of media and political elites. Consequently, Q researchers still see value in paying attention to the same mainstream media outlets that they otherwise distrust. As another interviewee explained:

> Do I trust CNN? Not [in] the slightest, but I still watch it sometimes, just to hear what 'they' want me to think.

This cynical attitude explains why members of the Q community still consume mainstream media, even when they don't trust its accuracy: they believe that mainstream media

messaging, combined with a properly cynical attitude, can be an accurate source of information about mainstream media. The next chapter will dive into this cynical approach to media consumption in detail. There, I will also offer further interpretation of the community's shift toward increasingly consuming fringe sources after Q's departure from the movement. For now, these descriptive statistics indicate that fringe sources play a limited role in the community. This suggests that the strange beliefs of those in the QAnon movement are not fully attributable to variation in information exposure.

The main attraction of the algorithmic radicalization hypothesis, and other explanations of belief adoption based on variation in media choice or information exposure, was that these explanations left room for genuine transformations of the kind appearing in lived-experience accounts of QAnon belief adoption. But, ruling out these hypotheses does not necessarily mean adopting a skeptical attitude toward transformation narratives. Explanations of conspiracy theory beliefs that invoke variation in information exposure have to assume that people generally treat the information they encounter in a similar way. The idea here is not that people think differently, but that the content they are exposed to varies, such that differences in belief, including the radical transformations alluded to in the radicalization literature, can be explained by differences in informational input. By contrast, other kinds of explanations seek to explain variation in beliefs without invoking variation in information exposure. In these explanations, conspiracy theorists may be broadly exposed to similar kinds of information as their non-conspiracy theorist counterparts, but still believe different claims because they interpret this information differently.

Many such explanations, including accounts arguing for the significance of psychological structures like "conspiracy thinking," attribute this variation in interpretation to ingrained psychological differences, which would rule out the transformations reported in journalistic and lived-experience accounts. But, the sources of these differences need not be psychological – they can also stem from institutional or cultural sources, which seem more plausibly

flexible than psychological sources of difference, providing another angle for evaluating transformation narratives. Knowledge production is a social enterprise (Schmitt 1994; Goldman 1999). Our environmental resources for thinking – including, ideally, factual media, methods and procedures for judgment, various computational, communicative and interpretive tools etc. – are the product of many hands, embodying the knowledge of many people. Opening or closing off access to these social strategies and resources can produce drastic changes in how people treat new information (Levy 2007). Similarly, changes in individual and group perceptions of the condition of the broader epistemic environment, such as the expectation that much of the media one encounters may be unreliable or intentionally disinforming, can influence how people treat all information they encounter (Wedeen 2024).

In effect, this is what is argued by accounts which center media literacy as a mediator in source choice. These are, in a way, institutional explanations. People only have so much attention, and "media literacy" indexes a collection of epistemic strategies that people can use to make judgments about what media is worth consuming in a highly competitive, oversaturated and high-choice media environment. One of these strategies, possibly the most common strategy, is to simply defer to a class of people that political scientists in the public opinion tradition refer to as "elites" – basically, professional interpreters of political events (Zaller 1992). This is the essential instruction appearing in existing studies on the efficacy of media literacy interventions – common interventions include instructing people to consider an outlet's reputation, to consider whether they themselves trust the source, whether they "know the source to be credible" (Guess et al. 2020). The remaining interventions proposed in these studies are not epistemic, but heuristic. They instruct participants to look for shoddy workmanship as a heuristic for falsehood – the presence of misspellings, awkward layouts, incoherent headlines. In sum, these interventions work, when they do, by reminding people to consider which sources they already trust, rather than providing some behavioral algorithm through which people can reliably ascertain which sources are intrinsically trustworthy.

Media literacy interventions implicitly acknowledge, as do classic accounts of public opinion, that the public does not generally have the resources to actually verify the claims they encounter in media. If they did, they would have no reason to consume media in the first place. This explains the backlash effects noted in some studies, where media literacy interventions increased overall skepticism toward media encountered online, rather than leading to a targeted increase in skepticism toward sources that political scientists consider to be non-credible (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Badrinathan 2021; Lyons et al. 2021; Aslett et al. 2023; van den Meer, Hameleers and Ohme 2023). It also explains why those in the Q community consume media from both mainstream and fringe sources. What the findings of this chapter show is not necessarily that those in the community lack coherent criteria for which sources are credible and which sources are untrustworthy, but only that, if they do have some systematic criteria for assigning trust or importance to sources, it is not captured by the distinction I have operationalized here between mainstream sources and fringe ones. Accordingly, political scientists err when they consider media literacy in terms of presence or absence, with some people having "more" literacy and others having "less." What might appear to outsiders as a lack of media literacy may just as well be evidence of a different, but similarly institutionalized, form of media literacy arising from community epistemic standards rather than mainstream ones. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, elites in the community, including the Q account itself, impart their own "media literacy" interventions which enable community members to draw strange conclusions from even mainstream sources.

CHAPTER 4

KNOWING (WITH) THE ENEMY: MOVEMENT INSTITUTIONS, BEFORE AND AFTER Q

4.1 Introduction

In Winter of 2022, I spoke to a longtime participant in online communities associated with the QAnon conspiracy theory movement. An Army veteran who served multiple tours of duty in Iraq, he now dedicated his time to instilling a sense of military discipline amongst those in his online community."The board's structure is reminiscent to the structure of a military operation," he told me, "it is very organized and planned." Indeed, the QAnon movement's online community is so organized that, he speculates, it may secretly be a military operation: "The /qresearch/ board is a beautiful weapon that the military gave to 'We the People', it serves as a hub of information distribution. However, it does not function in a way that is easily navigable by the average person. I noticed these accessibility issues with the board and attempted to 'translate' what has happened for the general public."

The participant in question, who I will refer to as OrgAnon[1], occupies a familiar, yet perhaps unexpected role for a self-admitted conspiracy theorist – he is something like an interpreter, a fact checker, a debunker. Recent accounts have sought to explain the adoption of conspiracy theorist beliefs in the mass public. Making use of survey methods, these accounts (e.g. Oliver and Wood 2014; Nyhan and Zeitzoff 2018; Uscinski et al. 2022) focus on ascertaining the psychological correlates of individual belief in conspiracy theories, like distrust of authority or feelings of vulnerability. These accounts have largely ignored what, to OrgAnon, is his movement's secret weapon: its online information infrastructure. In

1. While all interviewees were anonymous or utilized pseudonyms, I have changed pseudonyms in order to further preserve participants' anonymity. I have made efforts to preserve the style of pseudonym generally used by participants – pseudonyms generally consist of a noun or adjective related to the anon's mode of participation followed by "Anon." OrgAnon is a composite of multiple individuals with similar responses in order to minimize the possibility of identification based on personal details.

an effort to de-center the outsized role played by the psychology of personal belief in this literature, the objective of this chapter is to highlight the role played by this infrastructure in shoring up adherent's beliefs. In the parlance of political communications, OrgAnon is something like an "elite," or a professional interpreter of politics that exercises influence through mediated communication (Zaller 1992). In the distinct terminology of the board, however, he is a baker: a volunteer discussion moderator responsible for transforming the raw posts of each discussion thread, which participants call the dough, into a bread – a finished product consisting of links to what bakers judge to be the most useful, interesting and important media items posted in the thread.

Scholarly attention to the topic of conspiracy theories has increased drastically in recent years, with researchers evaluating the public prevalence of belief in various conspiracy theories (Oliver and Wood 2014; Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016), the factors influencing whether someone believes a given conspiracy theory (Wood et al. 2012; Brotherton et al. 2013; Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016; Enders, Smallpage and Lupton 2020), and the effects of exposure to common conspiracy theories on political behavior (Jolley and Douglas 2014a). While many accounts emphasize the role of exposure to partisan and media elite discourse in cueing belief in various conspiracy theories (Goertzel 2010; Furnham 2013; Frankovic 2016; Berinsky 2023), they pay less attention to the role of someone like OrgAnon. But, his role is far from insignificant. Moreover, OrgAnon is not alone in what he called his "translation" efforts – he is one of hundreds of volunteer bakers who are constantly active on the /qresearch/ board as part of a highly-formalized institution developed by participants to parse through the overwhelming amount of news and social media posted online each day. While the pseudonymous OrgAnon may scarcely resemble the classical figure of the "elite" in public opinion literature, he and his fellow bakers have an analogous responsibility for deciding what information – including news articles, social media posts, and even conspiracy theories – will circulate throughout their online community.

Drawing from in-depth open-ended interviews conducted during the course of 18 months of online ethnographic observation of anonymous participant practices on the QAnon community's major web community, I argue that the resilience of the Q community is attributable to the resilience of the community's information infrastructure. Specifically, I focus on the ways that the community adapted to Q's abrupt departure from the movement in the wake of Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 Presidential election. Q, and those in the movement, had all but guaranteed that Trump would win a second term. When this failed to happen, however, Q stopped participating in the community soon after. As we saw in chapter 2, conventional accounts of conspiracy theory beliefs argue that conspiracy theories generally emerge as a defensive reaction to new information that contradicts one's established beliefs (Marchlewska et al. 2022; van Prooijen 2022). As these theories expect, rationalizations certainly did emerge within the Q movement in the wake of these disappointments. For instance, some community members adopted what is called the "continuity-of-government" theory within the movement, which claims that Trump actually still is President, and that Biden is actually a powerless figurehead installed by the Trumpian conspiracy to assuage Democrats suffering from "Trump derangement syndrome" long enough for him to make America great again. But, this is not the only theory that emerged to rationalize Biden's victory and Q's departure. If rationalizations emerged to solve the problem mass exit in the wake of disappointment by helping the community to "close ranks" (Uscinski and Parent 2014), the emergence of these competing explanations simultaneously multiplied the axes over which disagreements could arise among those who remained in the broader Q community. What helped the movement stabilize, I argue, wasn't the emergence of new beliefs that helped those in the movement "cope," so much as it was the construction of procedural institutions that helped create space for multiple, conflicting interpretations of Q to simultaneously co-exist within the same community. In other words, changes in the belief system triggered the start of endogenous institutional change. But more importantly, a robust infor-

mational infrastructure within the community co-evolved with the responsibilities of bakers like OrgAnon, with the result that movement's adaption to life without Q created a structural role within the movement analogous to that of "elites" in classic theories of political communications and public opinion – albeit, as we will see, with some important differences.

4.2 Methods

In the previous chapter, I briefly explained the "notable" selection process, and how it fits in to the overall "baking" process on the forum. Key to this process are the bakers, whose role is to ensure that all the rules of the community's research process are followed in each research thread. As we will see, this role emerged early on in the life-cycle of the movement in a somewhat different guise – at that point, bakers were responsible only for recording and preserving Q's posts. Over time, however, the role accumulated more responsibilities in response to new difficulties.

The role of baker is a formal role, one with explicitly prescribed participatory norms. Participants have dedicated time and resources to create formal training materials to prepare would-be bakers for their role – they even have a formal "baker school," wherein would-be bakers learn procedure from their seniors in the movement. I took advantage of these instructional resources, and I spent 8 months in 2022 learning how to be a baker. Working with the IRB, I decided that I would not make posts to the forum myself, so I did not actually take on the role in the live forums. But I followed along with baker school, I watched bakers practice their trade, and I interviewed bakers to understand their different approaches to the role.

I conducted all interviews cited in this article between January and August 2022. I was unable to directly recruit potential interviewees on the forum due to rules prohibiting "self-doxxing," or the posting of personal identifying and contact information. However, while self-doxxing is banned on /qresearch/, posting links to self-created online resources is

accepted and quite common. I observed activity on /qresearch/, compiled a list of links to sites created and promoted by anons on the forum, and found anons' contact information on the sites that they created. I then reached out to these anons to request an interview. From the 45 requests that I made via email over the course of eight months, I ultimately corresponded with 14 anons in total, including 12 who responded to my email requests as well as two anons referred to me by other interviewees. All interviewees reported that they regularly posted in research threads and 5 reported that they had previously volunteered for the baker role on the forum. 2 anons reported that they were regularly baking at the time of the interviews.

All interviews were conducted asynchronously via email. Because I reached out to participants using their pseudonymous email addresses, I was not exposed to any participants' identifying information during the solicitation phase and I asked participants to refrain from disclosing any identifying information during the interview process. Two participants also gave me access to their personal digital research archives, consisting of images, news and document files mostly acquired through the forum. Many of those I contacted simply did not respond, others terminated contact after I provided my consent notice and explained my status as a researcher.

It is likely that the individuals that I interviewed differ from the broader participant population – while anti-expert and anti-academic sentiment is relatively common on /qresearch/, some interviewees suggested that, because of my education, I would be better equipped to understand their theories. "As a poli sci major, I am sure you are capable of seeing the societal patterns across the decades," one anon noted while explaining his theories about political events. Another compared his "university anthropology studies" to my own and explained how his prior study helped him fit into the /qresearch/ community. That said, interviewees also suspected that, as a graduate student in Chicago, there was "strong evidence" that I would come to the interview with "left leaning political bias."

While the anons I interviewed are likely not representative of the average participant in the /qresearch/ community, I interviewed purposively (Small 2009) with the objective of speaking with individuals who strongly influence the direction of research on the site, and those anons that ultimately did respond were epistemically central participants who maintained sites hosting Q-related content including research tools, archives, chatrooms and blogs. This was how I learned about the role of bakers on the forum, a role of which I was not aware before I began soliciting interviews. This approach is aimed at filling a significant gap in the political communications literature around conspiracy theories, which has almost exclusively focused on mainstream social media platforms, even in the face of strong evidence that conspiracy theorists and other "extremists" are being driven to create fringe communities in response to pervasive moderation, leading to the creation of the "alt-tech" platforms I discussed at the close of the previous chapter.

4.2.1 Research setting

Alt-tech platforms, however, are not my focus in this chapter. In this chapter I instead analyze the mechanisms driving opinion formation on the /qresearch/ forum on 8kun, an imageboard. An imageboard is a type of popular online discussion platform that predates the rise of social media. Imageboards possess some unique affordances in comparison to mainstream social media. Most notably, all imageboard users are anonymous by default, and imageboards collect little information about their users. Why study these platforms which are comparatively older and smaller, and which make use of less sophisticated affordances than their mainstream and alt-tech counterparts? While conspiracy theories involving the material produced by Q were popularized on mainstream social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram (Gallagher, Davey and Hart 2020; Hyzen and Van den Bulck 2021; Holoyda 2022), Q's initial posts first appeared and were first discussed on popular, long-running anonymous imageboards. Indeed, while their population is quite

small in comparison to the proportion of users interacting mostly on mainstream platforms, "anons" on imageboards create much content that eventually appears on mainstream platforms (Zannettou et al. 2017; Hine et al. 2017). Moreover, even before the advent of QAnon, imageboards had already served as the cradle for earlier decentralized political movements. In the mid-2000s, the "Anonymous" hacktivist movement, which played a supporting role in the Occupy and Arab Spring movements, emerged from 4chan (Coleman 2014). At the same time, the Japanese *netto-uyoku*, or "net right," emerged on the Japanese imageboard 2channel (Sakamoto 2011), which is owned and hosted by Jim Watkins, the now-infamous owner of 8kun, the imageboard that serves as Q's online home.[2] For these reasons, understanding the mechanisms driving opinion formation and circulation on anonymous imageboards is crucial for understanding the public uptake of conspiracy theories in the broader media ecosystem.

Existing accounts seeking to understand the circulation of conspiracy theories online focus on major social media platforms, analyzing the ways in which their architecture and affordances might both increase (Gagliardone, et al. 2015) as well as contribute to meeting existing "demand" for conspiracy theorist material (Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández 2016; Ledwich and Zaitsev 2020; Munger and Phillips 2022). However, there has been little research on online platforms and institutions designed by conspiracy theorists themselves. While these platforms are less oriented toward serving conspiracy theorists content to mass audiences, they play an important role facilitating collective judgments, authoritative decision-making and activist coordination influencing the way these efforts play out on mainstream platforms. Thus, while it is certainly true that conspiracy theorist online institutions are much smaller, serving a user-base that is only a small fraction of those encountering

2. It has been widely speculated by journalists and conspiracy theory researchers that either Jim Watkins, or his son Ron Watkins, are responsible for the Q identity and its posts. See Stanley, Alyse. "Wait...did Ron Watkins just rat his dad out as Q?" *Gizmodo*. November 15, 2020. https://gizmodo.com/wait-did-ron-watkins-just-rat-his-dad-out-as-q-1845683225.; Amore, Samson. "QAnon in Meltdown After Biden Inaugration." *The Wrap*. https://www.thewrap.com/qanon-in-meltdown-after-biden-inauguration-we-need-to-get-to-go-back-to-our-lives/.; Francescani, Chris. "The Men Behind QAnon." ABC News. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/men-qanon/story?id=73046374.

conspiracy theorist content on major platforms like YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, the users on these niche platforms might be expected to play a greater role in determining the direction of the movement. These institutions also play an important role in conspiracy theorist elites' self-construction of their authority to interpret alleged evidence of conspiracy, making their investigation useful for both interpretivist projects seeking to uncover the role played by conspiracy theorists' values in guiding their judgments, as well as public opinion-oriented projects which emphasize the role of elite cues and misinformation as important determinants of political beliefs.

Summary of findings

Based on my ethnographic research, three main findings emerge. First, QAnon conspiracy theorists have a distinct interpretive process, with the consequence that their interpretations of mainstream media messages often bare little resemblance to their manifest content. While they may read much of the same mainstream media, they interpret it in different ways from those outside the movement. Instead bakers and participants in the /qresearch/ community work together to recover what they believe to be hidden messages within mainstream media content.

Second, I find that, despite participants' self-descriptions of the role of consensus in their research process, the community was initially highly dependent on Q to guide their interpretive process. This deference suggested that those in the movement might have a more complex division of interpretive labor than sometimes appeared in their own self-descriptions of what they were up to.

Finally, this dependence on Q changed after Q's departure. While early in the movement the Q account posted regularly on 8kun, providing participants with a near constant stream of materials to digest, the posts mysteriously stopped after President Biden's victory in the 2020 election. After Q's departure, and without readily available feedback from the Q

account, the baker's began to take on Q's role after Q's disappearance from the movement.

These findings demonstrate the significant role of collaborative reasoning in the conspiracy theory movement, but they also highlight a division of labor within the movement which prioritizes Baker's contributions over those of ordinary participants. So, my case affirms conventional political scientific ideas about the influential role of professional interpreters, or elites, in guiding public opinion. But, it also suggests that the way elites accomplish these effects has changed. Namely, my account proposes that, in the contemporary, high-choice media environment defined by "epistemic murk" (Wedeen 2024) and saturated with an overwhelming amount of messages, the role of elites has shifted from one of generating messages to publicly interpreting existing messages for their audience. For this reason, when examining the factors influencing conspiracy theorist opinion formation, source quality is only part of the story. And indeed, even when an overabundance of trustworthy sources is provided – which is a common suggestion to solve the problem of harmful conspiracy theories – this only creates an opening for this newly emerging kind of interpretive elite to exert influence on public opinion.

4.3 Appropriating and re-coding of mainstream messaging

As we saw in the previous chapter, participants in the Q research process are often working with mainstream media content, and they often categorize this mainstream content as "notable" - that is, as useful for the broader movement. However, their interaction with predominately mainstream sources does not mean that they trust those sources, much less that they take the claims appearing in those sources to be true. Consistent with scholarly descriptions of populist politics (e.g. Friedman 2019), anons are highly suspicious of the motives of partisan and media elites. Anons believe that the Q account is operated by multiple government leakers as a tool created to bypass the malicious media and communicate directly with the people. As one baker explained,

> Q is a backchannel from the government to the people. It is a [way to] bypass the corrupt and infiltrated media propaganda machines [which] have the ability and know-how to fabricate news stories to fit a desired narrative.

Other studies in political communications have found that belief in conspiracy theories is linked to distrust in mainstream media institutions. Typically, these studies assume that people disregard messages they find untrustworthy. However, Q community interpreters perceive even these untrusted messages as revealing hidden information about the motivations of media and political elites. As a result, Q researchers see value in monitoring mainstream media outlets they otherwise distrust. As another interviewee explained:

> Do I trust CNN? Not the slightest, but I still watch it sometimes, just to hear what 'they' want me to think.

Anons are not strictly distrustful of mainstream media elites, so much as they are cynical about them – they view them as both malicious and knowledgeable. In his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1988), Peter Sloterdijk characterizes the kind of knowing characteristic of war and conflict, what he calls "black empiricism (in the multiple senses: secret, polemical, anarchist, directed at the bad)" and, more specifically, "espionage as enlightenment," as taking an epistemic approach that is related to, but distinct from that of science. In espionage, the context of struggle, warfare and conflict come to guide epistemic strategy, wherein knowledge producers are forced to contend with objects that actively seek to deceive their observers. The capacity to see through this deception is the prerequisite to knowing one's enemy, but at the same time the methodology of espionage is premised on the certainty that, behind their deception, the enemy really does possess the relevant knowledge. The spy assumes that the enemy knows something about their own behavior that the spy does not already know. Thus, as Sloterdijk points out, espionage depends on "the art of getting the other to talk," it "banks on the readiness of individuals on the other side to betray it."

In their research practices, anons embrace epistemic strategies similar to those described by Sloterdijk. For anons, elites are the ones with knowledge, everyone else is just making do. As one anon put it, "Everyone is anonymous (to a point, the NSA has everything)." Embracing interpretative strategies patterned on intelligence gathering, this attitude informs anons' attempts to wrest knowledge from elites using tactics of decryption and provocation, best encapsulated by 8kun founder Ron Watkin's explanation of his own role in the movement as one of "...intelligence training, teaching normies how to do intelligence work" (quoted in Hoback 2021).

Specifically, anons characterize their research practice as analogous to military intelligence work. 8kun's official "/qresearch/ newcomers" thread opens with the greeting, "welcome home, digital soldier!," and military imagery is pervasive on the boards. For example, the header of every research thread includes a .jpeg of Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima, the oft-reproduced photograph depicting American Marines raising the flag over Mount Suribachi during World War II. Three of those I interviewed claimed they were veterans of Afghanistan or Iraq, and they explained that, like OrgAnon had mentioned, they felt comfortable participating on the board because of their familiarity with these structures. Others without military backgrounds also suggested that the Q operation actually is a military intelligence operation. "They straight told us it was a military operation," said one anon, referencing the Q account's frequent invocations of intelligence credentials.[3]

In keeping with their identification with military intelligence professionals, the epistemic strategies employed by anons are premised on the possibility that they can induce knowledgeable elites to reveal their hand. This interpretative approach provides opportunities for local elites to insert themselves into the messaging process, appropriating the authority of mainstream elites while recoding the content of their messages to match audience desires and

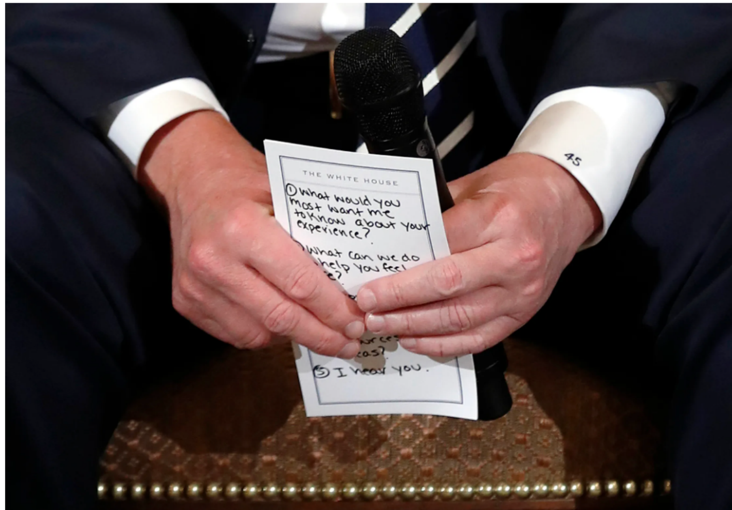
3. For just a few examples, see early Q drops like nos. 11, 14, and 38. Claims to intelligence agency access also appear in later drops, e.g. 755. Q initially posted under the account name "Q Clearance Patriot," referencing the top level security clearance of the U.S. Department of Energy.

expectations. This was Q's approach to messaging, when the account still posted regularly on the boards, and the notable selection process as it is implemented today first emerged from efforts by anons to interpret Q's cryptic posts, called "drops" by those in the community.

It is not that anons try to affirm Q's theories. After all, during the time the account was active in the community, it made very few concrete statements about conspiracy theory or political outcomes. Anons understand Q drops not just as explanations of current events, pithy slogans or mobilizing calls to action, although they sometimes include all these things, but most frequently as a sort of cryptographic key. For example, in some drops, Q appended the initials "SA." Anons interpreted this as a reference to "Saudi Arabia," and the Saudi royal family in particular. After a Q drop mentioning SA appeared, anons would attempt to collect every news article from around the date of the drop that referenced Saudi Arabia. The implication, anons interpreted, was that Q hoped to point them towards specific items of information already hidden in plain sight within the mass of content posted online. Once enough community members had put forward potential candidates for the "intel" that Q supposedly wanted them to find, and offered their own interpretations of what that intel might mean, Q would then selectively intervene to endorse some interpretations and reject others.

For example, take the case of how community members, under the guidance of Q, interpreted a series of news articles about then-President Trump's meeting with survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting in February 2018. One week after the attack on the Florida high school, Trump held a meeting with some of the survivors. As he reviewed his note cards before the event, he was photographed with a rather simplistic list of talking points, one of which reminded him to tell the survivors, "I hear you." Over the following days, several mainstream media sources reported on this gaffe, portraying Trump as a callous President so detached from the lives of everyday people that he needed written reminders on how to display empathy. As one headline from the Washington Post put it, the

photo of Trump's notes "captures his empathy deficit better than anything" (Blake 2018).



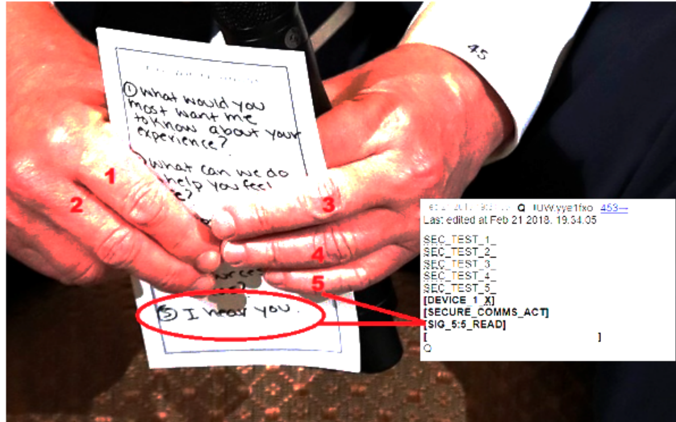
During Wednesday's "listening session" with survivors of mass shootings, Donald Trump provided an image that perfectly captures his Presidential indifference. Photograph by Carolyn Kaster / AP

Figure 4.1: Trump's notecards, *AP* (2018)

However, for those in the Q community, this embarrassing but relatively innocuous gaffe soon took on an altogether different meaning. As participants posted mainstream headlines discussing the gaffe in /qresearch/ threads, they questioned why mainstream sources would report on an occurrence as seemingly-insignificant as Trump fumbling with his note cards. The Q Researchers began to speculate that mainstream media elites might be trying to rapidly establish some narrative about the notes for political reasons. After debating for some time, one community member insisted he had cracked the case, arriving at the conclusion that the messages on the note card were not simple reminders for Trump to display empathy when interacting with the Parkland survivors, but were actually messages meant for the Q community that Trump had intentionally flashed to the camera. Circling Trump's fifth point on the notecard, the interpreter superimposed a Q drop from several days prior on the photograph that included the highly ambiguous phrase "SIG_5 5_READ." For this interpreter, the message from Trump was clear: point number 5, "I hear you," was meant not for the shooting survivors, but for the Q community. "We fill in the blanks. He hears us," the anon wrote.

Within a few hours, the Q account directly replied to affirm this interpretation. "You

659654bf866cd69649b7cb433b3c7472ec5c4406a2c470369fab784c23a11f8b.jpg



>>462038

We fill in the blanks.

He hears us.

We insert something here and show we understand how this works.

Whatever the board consensus is, it will be.

Figure 4.2: The winning interpretation, screenshot by author.

are learning our comms," the account wrote. Movement bakers, in turn, archived the entire exchange as a notable. Specifically, it was archived as what those in the movement call a "Q Proof" – in other words, a particularly fine example of how to interpret Q's messages, to be preserved as a form of instruction for future /qresearch/ers. The final result of this interpretive process was that community members not only disregarded the mainstream interpretation of the event, but used the fact that various mainstream outlets had put forward an interpretation of this event at all as a springboard for cultivating suspicions that mainstream elites were trying to head-off the truth that Trump was trying to communicate with those in the movement. But more importantly, Q had suggested that, in arriving at this flimsy interpretation, those in the community were "learning [Q's] comms," learning how to properly interpret media messages in order to extract hidden messages. Over time, anons also began to apply this approach to the communications of other figures in the Trump administration, increasingly interpreting their messages as coded references inciting them to

locate hidden material. As one anon explained to others in a research thread,

> POTUS should be giving clues in his tweets about what the dems have in store. Use this info to build a counter narrative, before it happens and 'they' state their narrative.

Anons often refer to mainstream media and partisan elites as "narrative setters," portraying them as nefariously exerting influence over public opinion. At the same time, anons nominally embrace a different set of elites including General Michael Flynn, President Trump, and Q. Anons' simultaneous acceptance of Trump-aligned elites and intense suspicion of other elites is consistent with accounts emphasizing the effect of partisan loyalty on information processing (Tappin, Berinsky and Rand 2023). And yet, anons' idiosyncratic approach to interpretation actively leads them to disregard the straightforward meaning of messaging even from trusted elites, treating their messages only as a code delivering an occult message – sometimes one with little connection to the original message.

Perusing the dedicated "Q Proofs" thread of the forum, there are hundreds of examples of this process in action. During the period in which Q posted actively on the forums, anons had a saying which described their approach to interpreting Q's posts: "future proves past." What this means to anons is that information in Q's posts will be confirmed by later coded messages from former President Trump. These messages are supposedly concealed in the former President's tweets and other mundane messages.

For example, in one post from April, 2018, Q Drop 988 using anons' numbering system, Q offers this cryptic message:

Anons struggled to interpret the post over the next 24 hours, until one anon noticed a recent tweet from Trump that included three capital A's, reminiscent of those in Q's message. While the text of the tweet concerned Trump's desire to fine Amazon.com, Inc., hence the multiple capital A's, anons disregarded the text of the tweet, insisting that the real message from Trump was that deep state operatives had been arrested. Bakers accepted

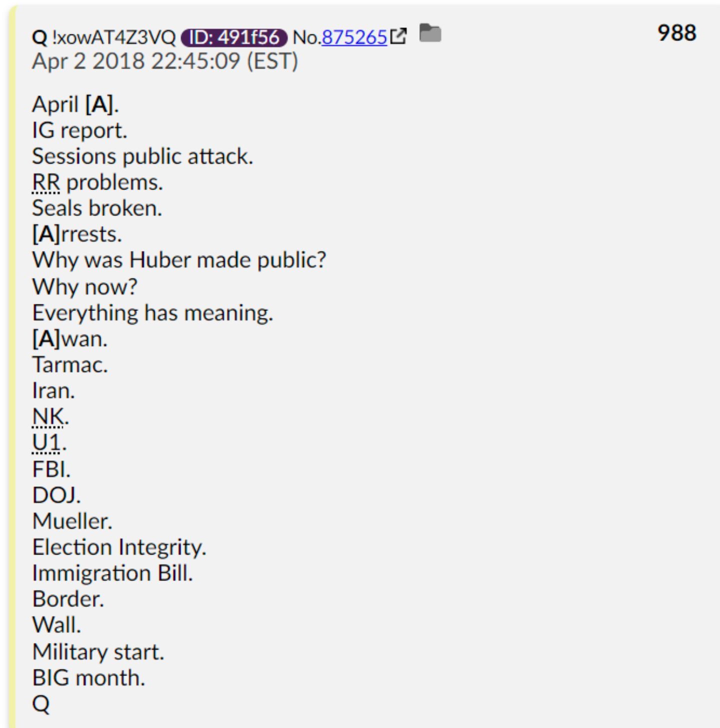


Figure 4.3: Q drop 988, courtesy of qanon.pub.

this explanation, designating it as a notable, and it now appears on several anon sites as a strong example of a "Q Proof."

As these exchanges exemplify, QAnon conspiracy theorists apply their mode of communally-adjudicated interpretation both to messages from mainstream media which they strongly distrust, and to messages from elites they strongly trust, like Trump himself. Through their communal interpretive practices, they are able to radically transform the received meaning of even the most innocuous messages. The straightforward, manifest content of both the mainstream media messages, and Trump's tweet, had absolutely nothing to do with Q. Yet, without these messages to serve as the raw material for their interpretation, /qresearch/ers would not have arrived at these interpretations wherein Trump appeared to confirmed their beliefs by seeming to communicate directly with those in the movement.

As exemplified by anons' interpretation of the Q account as a "backchannel from the government to the people," anons describe information and communication technologies as tools enabling limitless communicative access to others, even elite others, through social

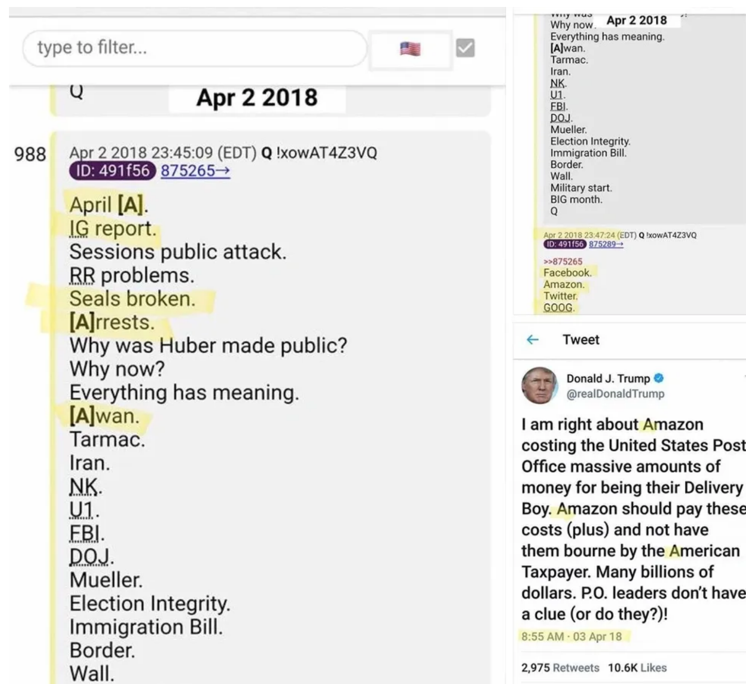


Figure 4.4: The completed proof, courtesy of an anon.

media and "open source intelligence," in turn enabling virtually anyone to access politically-relevant information, even if they lack the substantive knowledge necessary to understand political events.[4] This method of conspiracy theory research involves, more or less, an epistemological gambit. It's a strategy for knowing when you know that the other knows more than you, an insight captured by Kathleen Stewart's description of conspiracy theory as the act of "calling the cards on the table" when one has "already lost" (Stewart 1999). Armed only with the conviction that there are secret meanings, Q conspiracy theorists are less like scientists trying to prove claims about the political world, and more like translators trying to understand an unfamiliar language, albeit one that happens to consist of words and grammatical principles seemingly identical to their native tongue, but which hold a

4. Indeed, anons relished in the degree to which they could access personal information about me when I contacted them in hopes of arranging an interview, often pre-empting my own efforts to disclose information about myself. When I emailed anons asking if they would be interested in talking further, I would offer a brief explanation of the project, give a sense of the kinds of questions I wanted to ask, and provide contact information including my full name in my farewell. To my surprise, several respondents demonstrated that they had gathered intelligence on me in their initial replies, locating my departmental profile, various social media accounts, earlier journalistic writings and, most significantly, evidence of my previous membership in a left-wing political group.

private meaning for both friendly and hostile elites. In this case, the would-be translator is continually confounded by an other who will dissimulate, who will pretend not to understand and will always deny that they have been translated correctly.

Of course, these events immediately raise the question: how does the community arrive at this interpretation? And, why do community members find their own interpretation more plausible than the "straight" interpretation, which would mean taking the media message at face value? This question taps into a broader debate in the study of conspiracy theories and misinformation regarding the causal pathways through which people adopt such beliefs.

4.3.1 Fantasies of consensus

As I touched on in the previous chapter, one major point of disagreement in the study of conspiracy theories and misinformation is over whether people arrive at such beliefs through a causal pathway that is distinct from the one through which people adopt their ordinary opinions, in what Uscinski (2023) calls the "causal asymmetry" debate. Scholars who identify the spread of conspiracy theories with the spread of misinformation argue that people adopt false views due to factors that are distinct from those that lead people to adopt true views (e.g. Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Lazer et al. 2018; Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018; Dow et al. 2021). However, in what has been characterized as a "particularist" turn in the study of conspiracy theories (Dentith 2018; Harris 2022; Uscinski 2023), political scientists working within the literature of public opinion argue that researchers should treat the adoption of conspiracy theory beliefs as no different from the adoption of ordinary opinions (Oliver and Wood 2014), opening the way to explaining conspiracy beliefs through established mechanisms driving public opinion formation like elite discourse and ideological predisposition (e.g. Zaller 1992).

Yet, explaining conspiracy theory belief in this way seems puzzling on account of many conspiracy theories' propensity for suspicion about political and media elites. Indeed, the

narrative content of conspiracy theories often hinges on accusations that at least some elites are actively trying to mislead the public (Harris 2022) and that, therefore, trusting elite opinion is misguided. Many scholars have described the anti-elite, anti-expert tendency rising in contemporary politics under the name of "populism" (Canovan 2005; Müller 2016), defined broadly as a rhetorical style, "narrative framework" (Rosenfeld 2018) or "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) which portrays democratic politics as the venue for a society-wide struggle between a corrupt, minoritarian "elite" and "the people," the virtuous majority. Those who embrace a populist politics also tend to report belief in conspiracy theories (Oliver and Rahn 2016; Bergmann 2018; Bergmann and Butter 2020; Thielmann and Hilbig 2023; Loziak and Havrillova 2024), and a strong distrust of mainstream political and media institutions (Bertsou 2019).

Populists thus present their own vision of opinion formation that is directly critical of the one appearing in conventional political science accounts, one which seeks to center the views of the masses instead of the views of elites. The prospect raised by populism is, in effect, that of a causal asymmetry in the process of opinion formation, separating populists from everyone else. After all, populists themselves situate their own views as naturally arising from common consensus, constituting "obvious" interpretations of political events that do not need to be mediated by elites (Friedman 2019). This aspect of populism is captured by a popular QAnon slogan: "We Are The News Now!"

Do participants in the /qresearch/ community adopt the views that they do through a consensus-based process without the need for elite mediation? Both bakers and ordinary participants explained to me that this is precisely what their research process was designed to do. Anons see their research process as an inclusive, egalitarian institution which aims to bypass the need for potentially-manipulative elites. Key to this process is the board's affordance of enforced anonymity. Nearly all participants post anonymously, meaning that it is far more difficult for anons to amass a reputation that persists between individual

research threads. Indeed, anons often invoke this affordance to explain the board's unique attraction:

> ...that's what I love about the board, unlike social media, there is no ego or idolatry associated with the posts, no follower counts, no minion accounts echoing or propping each other up to squash dissenting opinion.
>
> Nobody has an identity. Anybody that attempts to go against this, does so for their own attention.

Here, the anon ascribes normative value to aspects of the research process that minimize individual identity. While accounts of ordinary opinion formation strongly emphasize the role played by elite cues (Downs 1957; Gilens and Murakawa 2002; Layman and Carsey 2002), the uptake of which depends on long-running relationships of trust (Ternullo 2022), the research process on /qresearch/ is expressly designed to foreclose strategies of judgment based on trust placed in the reputations of specific interpreters or media elites which, for anons, are easily abused. Instead, anons place great importance on consensus:

> Nobody cares who you are in an anonymous platform. You are merely another brain to increase the collective processing power.
>
> The Q drops...would help focus our attention, and we implemented the hive mind. Hundreds of anons working together, looking though open source information to point out key items of interest and personal ties.

As exemplified by these interviewee's references to "the hive mind," and to the community's "collective processing power," community members often attribute the origin of each interpretation to the group process itself, rather than to the specific participant that put forward the relevant article, interpretation or notable. And, when Q researchers explain what makes for a persuasive interpretation, they do not invoke some shared evidentiary standard.

Nor do they reference some particularly persuasive argument made by a specific participant in the conversation. Instead, when they are not making appeals to the endorsement of Q, as we saw in the community's interpretation of the incident surrounding Trump's notepad, they appeal to the contribution's popularity. The most widely accepted criteria for notability is the amount of replies that a particular post receives from fellow anons, and research threads are filled with posts by anons offering one-word replies of "notable" to their fellows' posts as votes of approval.

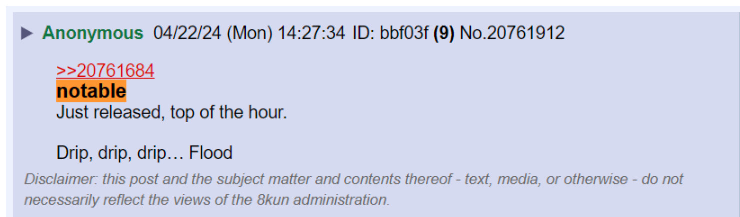


Figure 4.5: An anon endorses a post, screenshot by author.

Another consequence of enforced anonymity is it is nearly impossible to exclude anyone from this semi-democratic process of adjudication. Since users do not create and maintain accounts, there is no way to easily ban disruptive participants, or those who express unpopular opinions on the board. As might be expected, this also leads to widespread concerns about infiltration, which I say more about later. But, anons generally appreciate that their research process is inclusive, and that anyone can contribute to the process regardless of their prior experience.

OrgAnon, for instance, is adamant that "everything is meant to be open to the public." The publicity of the research process, he explains, is not just attributable to anons' normative valuation of populist values. For OrgAnon, its publicity and anonymity have epistemic value, too. These attributes are what makes their research process well-suited to uncovering hidden truths by negating what, to them, amount to identitarian biases. OrgAnon characterizes anonymity on the boards as enabling a kind of objectivity. By suppressing references to situated identities and the interests, preferences and desires that come along with them, anons believe their community can avoid bias:

> Everyone is anonymous (to a point, the NSA has everything). Societal norms and labels are meaningless. There are no genders, races, classes...We don't care about your race or sex...In an anonymous culture, identity-manipulation is toxic. Nobody cares who you are in an anonymous platform. You are merely another brain to increase the collective processing power. The moment you revert back to using worldly divisive structures, is the moment people will tell you to get the F out.

OrgAnon's reference to "collective processing power" captures the interplay of normative and epistemic concerns in the injunction to suppress one's identity. Anons believe that media elites manipulate the public by influencing their audiences to create a false consensus. They do so through tactics of "identity manipulation," activating group loyalties to "control the narrative." In characterizing elites as "narrative setters," anons emphasize that they act as focal points for common knowledge, setting expectations about what others believe through their communicative practices. Anons argue that this expectation-setting role can take on a coercive character when combined with appeals to group identity, allowing media elites to set expectations about what one's fellow group-members believe and creating the pressure to conform. To pre-empt these coercive efforts, the research process involves recovering what anons characterize as pre-deliberative points of agreement between anons, testing to see if they have similar immediate responses to new information. And yet, as we will see, these appeals to uniformity have their own coercive potential, a point that is widely acknowledged about the populist position.

In sum, /qresearch/ers, including bakers and ordinary anons alike, agreed in their valorization of populist attitudes, such as consensus politics, suspicions of elites, and appeals to a uniform concept of their community evoking populist conceptions of "the people" in its identification of truth and authenticity with homogeneity. And yet, simply concluding that Q-Anon participants rely solely on appeals to consensus misses important aspects of

their narrative construction. Because, as we also saw in the example of Q researchers' interpretation of the note card incident, it wasn't the existence of a consensus that ultimately persuaded Q researchers of the final interpretation. Instead, it was the endorsement of Q himself. That appeals to Q are as efficacious as they seem to be would suggest, then, that the approach of the Q researchers is not a straightforwardly populist one. Just as in conventional, elite theories of public opinion formation, the efficacy of appeals to Q points to a division of labor here. The operation of this division of labor is clarified by examining how the movement adapted when, in late 2020, Q disappeared.

4.4 The Great Kitchen Fire

Shortly after Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 Presidential election, Q posts dropped off sharply, with the account making only five posts in November, followed by a single post in December of that year. Q would not make another post for almost two years. This triggered a period of confusion and disorganization in the movement that those in the community refer to as "The Great Kitchen Fire." It was the result of this period of disorganization that movement participants reformed the baking system to operate in the way that I have already described. When Q was active in the community, the role of Bakers was secondary to that of Q. The purpose of these reforms, then, was to enable Bakers to take over the functional role previously held by Q, which was to formally certify useful, seemingly correct or interesting interpretations as notables.

When Q intervened in the research process on the boards in the past, he acted as something of an interpreter of last resort. For example, when Q intervened in the process of interpretation of the incident around Trump's meeting with the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas survivors in February 2018, there were a number of competing attempts to explain the mainstream media's seeming fixation on the notecards. Some simply interpreted the wide spread of the image of Trump's notecards as a smear by a Democrat-aligned photographer.

Without Q's intervention, the community would have had no simple way to decide which of these possible interpretations was correct. Put differently, the availability of Q as a resource for the resolution of interpretive disputes, and widespread buy-in throughout the community as to Q's credentials and possession of insider knowledge, was what allowed interpretations within the community to be as wide-ranging as they were.

Q's disappearance was so disruptive, participants explained, because without Q to act as an interpreter of last resort in this way, disagreement over which posts should be considered notables, and which interpretations were correct, threatened to become irresolvable. Bakers, who had previously been responsible for simply collating the posts that Q endorsed, now had to make their own decisions. While they would eventually adopt some widely agreed-upon heuristics, such as the rule that bakers should focus on interpretively-neutral standards like the number of replies received by a post, interpretive standards remained unclear in the months immediately following Q's departure. Without a shared standard, bakers inevitably made decisions that clashed with one another, and anons began to believe that bakers were unfairly ignoring the material they were contributing to the discussion. One baker explained:

> Anons who submit notables and would not see them listed in the bakers notes or the dough of the next bread eventually called it out. This pissed off many anons and resulted in heated debates

Furthermore, bakers differed in their approaches to creating and managing new research threads, leading discontented anons to create parallel research threads instead of sticking to the one-active-thread policy that usually characterized discussion on the site. OrgAnon admits to me that he himself was sometimes responsible for duplicate threads, telling me that

> Many anons, including myself, occasionally broke procedure to attempt to wrestle control away from suspect bakers.

In response to these difficulties, some in the community proposed more rigorous standards for bakers, including de-anonymization and formal oversight groups called "baker's unions." One baker, who also operates an off-site chatroom for discussing topics related to Q elaborated,

> There have been several instances where the proof of ability of any given anon would be called into question while baking, whether it be [intentional disruption] or just inexperience in the kitchen during high traffic times. Because of the recurrence of this, a few attempts were made in the /qr/ general threads to ID the anons who baked regularly, for better or for worse.

Some community members even suggested that Bakers should be replaced with bots coded to archive notables purely on the basis of the number of replies they received in research threads:

> I don't trust bakers so I would end the position and replace with Bots! Bakers could be like hall monitors who ban shill accounts so they cannot vote in our New Up/Down voting system!

As the extent of disagreement over the proper approach to Baking became apparent, some Bakers began to attempt to coordinate hand-offs of the position to like-minded participants using private, off-site modes of communication. The goal of these measures was to ensure that the position would be passed between participants who were familiar with the role, and who would stick to an emerging set of best practices. From the outside perspective of the anonymous users of the /qresearch/ forum, however, this looked like an effort to ensure that the role would be continually passed back and forth within competing cliques of members sharing like-minded approaches to interpretation. What was, for concerned bakers, a "method of keeping obvious malcontents from baking" appeared to ordinary anons as an effort to seize control of the community.

This breakdown in the absence of Q illustrates how anons' appeals to prior consensus and collective identity could only avoid compounding and intensifying internal divisions when the community shared an agreed-upon method of dispute resolution: the Q account itself. One participant succinctly summed up the conflict behind the Kitchen Fire:

> Who chooses who is a goodbaker (sic), and who is a shitbaker (sic)?...Whether it be so-called 'baker unions', support and resource groups, participation protocols, etc etc, the problem of 'who's the gatekeeper now?' will always come up.

Q had effectively occupied this role when the account was active in the movement, providing a point around which community members could coordinate their interpretations. In doing so, the Q account came to stand in for the deep-seated agreements that participants imagined they shared. Their shared project of selecting notables, which had heretofore always terminated with the discovery of relevant "intel," allowed them to viscerally experience that imagined agreement. When that agreement seemed to disappear at the very moment Q had left, some community members recognized the problem as one of discovering an alternative institutional approach to dispute resolution, one of making a collective decision about who should be the new "gatekeeper." Others, however, experienced that loss of institutional coordination as if the gate had been ripped off its hinges entirely.

4.4.1 Epistemic vulnerability

Countersubversive concerns about infiltration by shills are the reverse side of community fantasies of consensus – when disagreement emerges within the community, parties are liable to accuse one another of arguing in bad faith, or intentionally seeking to disrupt the community. A shill is someone who bakers believe to be acting on behalf of an outside agenda, institution or interest. Shills are variously exemplified as law enforcement monitoring the board for extremists, "deep state" operatives seeding misinformation to misdirect researchers

toward erroneous conclusions, hawkers of various products and services seeking to exploit conspiracy theorists and, most commonly, representatives of various interpretive tendencies within the movement attempting to systematically promote their pet interpretations. According to anons, one can shill for just about anything – an ideology, a party, a race, a country, and even a particular person.

Anons also apply this label to anyone who posts in a way deemed to be disruptive, even if it is not immediately obvious how the purported shill's post might serve an outside interest. In fact, shill accusations are so commonplace that some anons believe that shills actually outnumber genuine participants on the board. According to anons, it is shills and not authentic users who are generally responsible for any shocking or transgressive material appearing on the site. One baker explained,

> [Outsiders like you] only see the shills, because anons post intermittently, strategically, and [anons] quietly drop nuggets of information. Shills scream, drop insults, porn, even gore, because they know the public will try to shut us down. But we wade through it all, in an effort to [prevent] free speech from being controlled.

In this way, anons ascribe normative value to platforms which refrain from moderating transgressive posts while simultaneously denouncing posters who take advantage of such policies. Furthermore, they interpret these transgressive posters who flout the rules of participation as being motivated by a desire to disrupt the research process, to "shut us down." Anons thus tend to blame the activities of shills for any condemnations of the Q community by outsiders. As one anon poetically put it, "they look in our toilet and tell the world we're full of shit."

While subversives seem omnipresent, their motivations and specific identities remains opaque. And yet, evoking anons' cynical approach to mainstream media, understanding other posters' motivations seems necessary to make judgments about the material that they

post. Anons recognize that there is a substantial degree of ambiguity with regard to shill accusations. As one anon speculated in a meme,

Figure 4.6: What if we are all shills? Courtesy of an anon.

Such jokes illustrate that when anons worry that they are unable to make conclusive judgments about the motivations of potential shills, this worry leads to feelings of epistemic vulnerability. It also allows others, including the bakers, to take on the role of experts responsible for mitigating this vulnerability by developing a capacity to identify "obvious" shills. Indeed, as OrgAnon explains, identifying shills constitutes much of the baker's job. Since bakers aren't supposed to make judgments about what counts as notable themselves, but ideally to record and accurately represent the community's collective judgment, then one ideally-fair way to adjudicate notability is to assign it to all participants who seem to be contributing in good faith – remove the shills, and the authentic contributions will remain. He explained that, more than judging what is notable for oneself,

> [the role of the baker] is more about figuring out who you can trust in the bread...If you run on the live boards long enough, the inorganic posts become obvious due to the repetition, spam and coordination. Real anon posts are rare. You must sift through garbage to find real anon posts...[they are like] those crumbs that fall to the floor.

OrgAnon keeps a meticulous file of posts by suspected shills. His "shills" folder is, for some

reason, inside another folder titled "Abstract," perhaps hinting at the inevitable ambiguities of shill-hunting. "That folder is fluid and not set in stone," he remarks when I ask. "I have changed opinions on some both ways," he continued. Inside is a number of other folders each labeled with the name of a suspected shill group. There is MJ12, a group of YouTubers who promote theories suggesting that Q is a time-traveler. There is Ingersoll Lockwood, a group of posters who spam the board with links to sites purporting to sell books and supplements to "patriots." There are folders for influencers like Austin Steinbart who market their social media channels to the QAnon movement, and even one specifically dedicated to conspiracy theorist and Roger Stone ally Jerome Corsi. There is also a folder for B, an account that frequently replied to Q's posts, claiming to be a government leaker similar to how the operators of the Q account initially portrayed themselves. OrgAnon's folder revealed that, for him, the term "shill" condensed "malevolent interloper" with "competing interpreter." OrgAnon explained his criteria for identifying a shill in detail:

> Questioning the narrative on the boards does not make a person a shill. Attacking others, using psychological manipulation tactics or attempting to derail discussion does. There have been CP [child pornography] shills, porn shills, racist shills, gore shills, doom shills, etc. They are a psychological weapon used against anons to attempt to get us to disassociate from the current information flow and become distracted or demoralized. Most are automatic bot-type accounts that will literally spam the same trash bread after bread. These scare off potential readers. Others are organized attacks from what I believe to be either foreign hostile actors or paid shills. Who they would be, specifically, is unimportant to me. The same type of accounts are prevalent in all social media. Research "bot farms." After 4 years I consider myself to be almost immune to it and recognize it for what it is. It can be exhausting arguing with them but ultimately becomes an exercise in endurance. The filter is your friend some days.

For OrgAnon, shills' main motivation is to disrupt the research process on the board, stymieing the "information flow" with repetitive or offensive content. Anons' demonological characterization of shills attributes any sort of disruptive behavior, including the kinds of disruptive behaviors like posting racist or pornographic content that are common to virtually all imageboards, to outsiders who have a political interest in disrupting the research process. However, as evidenced by the cast of characters in OrgAnon's shill folder, many of the recorded instances of supposed subversion by outsiders have actually been the work of at-least-somewhat like-minded members of the broader Q community, albeit ones from rival research boards.

Take one episode from 2020 in which the activities of an alleged shill were extensively documented by /qresearch/ anons. One baker directed me toward this episode, documented in a permanent thread oriented around training would-be bakers, when I voiced skepticism toward the prospect of infiltrators on the boards. Bakers had been using the archived posts related to this case as a solid example of proper baking procedure, illustrating an ideal case of anons and bakers successfully detecting subversion.

The controversy began when one anon noticed that links were appearing in notables posts that did not originate from a post in the corresponding research thread. Someone, it appeared, had made a change to the standard original post containing the list of links and instructions which bakers were supposed to paste at the beginning of each new notable thread. The changes were minute – in a larger block of instructions, someone had appended a link to Endchan, a different imageboard with its own /qanonresearch/ subforum. Additionally, someone had posted content from Endchan to the research thread and subsequently modified the list of notables to link to the newly added content while ignoring the standard nomination procedure. In the earliest years of research in the Q movement, an anon explained to me, this tactic had been common:

> I was a rookie baker, back in a blazing kitchen in the first month of Q. There were

> attempts to slip bad pastes to the bakers at least once every day as what seemed like dozens of factions were fighting to 'own the dough' and inject things such as wrong links to The SpreadSheet or links to Q posts in previous threads. Back then The SpreadSheet [a simple Google drive document on which anons would paste Q drops] was the only external repository of Q's posts...It was indeed the wild, wild west.

The anons that I spoke to frequently referred to these early days as "wild," a problem addressed over subsequent years as anons developed complex institutions guiding their research practices. These early feelings of vulnerability transformed into opportunities for the consolidation of expertise, with the formal baking system currently employed by anons was intended to provide checks against co-optation and re-direction tactics like these. Part of this system now involves "forensics anons," additional bakers who volunteer to meticulously check each notables post against its corresponding research thread to ensure that bakers have properly followed procedure. To assist with this process, one anon developed a web tool which automatically logs every notables thread posted on /qresearch/ while providing a user interface, making them easily searchable.

When /qresearch/'s "forensics anons" searched these logs, they noticed that the changes, including the link to Endchan, had first appeared in early April when an anon posting in the research thread complained several times about unfair notable selection before offering to take over the baker role for the thread. While no other anon confirmed the switch, the interloper nonetheless posted a link to a text file hosted on Pastebin, claiming that it was the most recent version of the dough. The stressed baker thanked the interloper for their assistance, and promptly posted the compromised dough that had been modified by the interloper. Bakers re-posted the modified dough for several weeks before regulars noticed that it had been changed without following the proper procedure.

After they noticed the changes, forensics anons then examined the Endchan /qanonre-

search/ archives from the day the changes were introduced and found a thread in which an Endchan anon remarked that they "had to hijack the bread to get it into notables and the dough." The interloper had added instructions and links asking readers to assist with "ongoing operations" coordinated through Endchan's War Room subforum. In the subforum, Endchan's moderators regularly made posts instructing anons on how to join coordinated spam operations targeting various popular Twitter hashtags. When /qresearch/ anons posted on Endchan demanding an explanation, Endchan anons argued that they felt that /qresearch/'s policy against coordinating activist and spamming operations on-site was counterproductive. As one Endchan anon posted,

> I want to get /qresearch/ back to doing meme operations. We need to, it's what /qresearch/ excelled at in addition to the digs and graphics.

/qresearch/ bakers, however, remained distrustful of their counterparts' motives. "IF YOU GO TO ENDCHAN YOU ARE GIVING UP YOUR INFO," one /qresearch/ baker claimed. The rumor rapidly spread that Endchan was a "honeypot" operation intended to misdirect researchers and waste their time with useless spamming operations.

> They aren't on our side anon...[Endchan] was setup to grab anons info when 8chan went down. If you go there you are giving up whatever you say in posts, hardware IDs, IP addresses and so on which can then be used to target you. It is obvious why the baker-hate shilling was happening so consistently and why the board was being DOSed [denial of service attacked] tonight when they were called out and were trying to convince anons to go there "when the board goes down"

Incensed at /qresearch/ bakers posting accusations that their board was compromised, Endchan anons began to raid /qresearch/, spamming the board with accusatory threads and making it difficult for anons to carry on with their formal research practices as usual. In

sum, what was in all likelihood reducible to a dispute over activist strategy quickly took the form of a shill hunt. During the course of the shill hunt, even anons' own activist strategies and practices appeared to one another as potentially alien attempts at subversion.

4.4.2 Shift to procedural expertise

The community's response to shills illustrates how, after Q's departure endangered the community's sense of unity and consensus, what filled the gap was procedural and institutional development. Because anons were unable to definitively discern good- from bad-faith participation in a way they could all agree on, they instituted the rules and procedures of the baking process which could act as a heuristic. Recent scholarship in comparative politics, particularly within the historical institutionalist tradition (Thelen 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2009; Bleich 2018), as well as research in international relations on norm contestation (Wiener 2009; Sandholtz and Stiles 2009; Sandholtz 2008; Dietelhoff and Zimmermann 2020), has highlighted rule and norm ambiguity as potential mechanisms for gradual internal change. As exemplified in the case of detecting shills, the inherent inability of rules to apply clearly and unambiguously to most situations faced by members of complex institutions creates opportunities for creative reinterpretations that can compound over time, but also for useful ambiguities to persist. Some forms of participation – like repeatedly posting pornography or profanity – seemed obviously bad intentioned, but the concern was that other, more nefarious forms of disruption could be basically indistinguishable from ordinary participation. This more ambiguous kind of case is exemplified by the encounter with the Endchan trolls, wherein it became clear relatively quickly that the interlopers were fellow anons, but this only solidified /qresearch/ anons' anxiety. Since anons "can be literally anyone," the investigation only sustained the plausibility that the Endchan anons' tampering was motivated by malice.

In the Endchan case, the practices of the expert "forensics anons" were able to identify

that baking procedure really had been violated. They were eventually able to pinpoint the source of that violation, and they substantiate their claim with documentary evidence. While it was difficult to determine a users' motivations, it was comparatively easier to determine whether they had broken the rules. From one perspective, these practices had no way to conclusively answer anons' questions about each others' motivations and thus failed to do what they promised. From another, however, the system was working just fine. While it was true that the people it had excluded had claimed to be like-minded Q researchers from a different community, that the procedure cast doubt on the motivations of people claiming to be allies was evidence that the system was effective and fair. This was precisely why Bakers related this case to me when I asked for a concrete example of the discovery of a shill. If they were caught, of course shills would pretend that they were part of a compatible group, that their motives were pure, and this was all a big misunderstanding. Nobody disagreed that, in the words of OrgAnon, "CP [child pornography] shills, porn shills, racist shills, gore shills, doom shills" and other blatantly disruptive participants were shills. While this group was relatively easy to rule out by creating a procedure and characterizing any deviation from it as unacceptable, this group was not the primary problem that these rules were meant to solve, because attitudes toward them were already fairly unambiguous and needed no clarification. What did require clarification was what to do when agreement lapsed over which interpretations, media items and contributions counted as notable, and, if and when these disputes emerged, which participants were acting in good faith.

The stabilization of the community in the aftermath of the Great Kitchen Fire followed a similar logic. When the bakers stepped up in the aftermath of Q's departure, this initially aroused suspicion because it highlighted situations where people disagreed over what counted as notable. At first they were distressed by this disagreement. But, after efforts to establish a shared criteria of judgment failed, some community members reflected that it was actually the lack of a shared standard that allowed participants with diverse, and often

contradictory perspectives to coexist within the same community. Therefore, instituting a formal, but open role provided organizational benefits without alienating participants with different interpretive perspectives:

> The baker position can be infiltrated quite easily as hand offs are at the discretion of the baker, but the alternative [of vetting and identifying bakers] would give one group control of the narrative on the boards.
>
> There isn't any way to prevent disagreement [between bakers] without creating a vector for a total takeover.

These quotes reflect the eventual development of institutionalized disagreement within the community. Although community members reported that they trusted Q because they viewed Q as having insider knowledge and special expertise, empowering the Bakers to fill Q's functional role proved that what seemed like a substantive role was basically a procedural one – even if access to Q's secret knowledge had been lost, the community could adhere because it eventually arrived on a way to make authoritative, final decisions to resolve disputes in judgment that risked driving those in the movement apart. When bakers stepped into Q's shoes, it became clear that occupying that role did not require secret knowledge, but an understanding of the community's norms, values, and interpretive frameworks. As instructional material aimed at new bakers now puts it:

> Bakering on the...qresearch boards has many traditions that give rise to rules of thumb based on the culture of particular groups or boards.
>
> Finding notables in the bread is absolutely an art form...Don't take the baking responsibility lightly.

Or, in the words of one longtime baker:

> There is a requirement for new anons to 'lurk moar.' I spent 3 months just lurking - reading without posting, to be able to understand the anon culture. My university anthropology studies helped. It is a culture of its own...I should have lurked moar.

This shift to a practical and experiential basis of authority thus highlights /qresearch/ers realization that the cohesion and continuity of the community depended less on the continued revelation of hidden truths and more on the ability to organize and validate the collective interpretive effort. The bakers, through their procedural expertise, provided a framework within which the community could continue to operate and evolve, even in the absence of its original epistemic anchor.

4.5 Conclusion

It is unlikely that participants in the /qresearch/ community first began to disagree with one another only after Q disappeared from the movement. What seems more plausible is that, with Q no longer around to guide the interpretive process, community members simply started noticing their disagreements more because there was no institutionalized resolution mechanism in place. In this way, Q's departure exposed a number of tensions that had accumulated from the movement's beginnings. The valorization of consensus alongside anxieties about "total takeover;" the subjective line between good-faith argument and intentional disruption; the trade-off between interpretive flexibility and the utility of the unambiguous rule; the wear and tear exerted on communal solidarity by the ordinary reality of disagreement—the role of the baker slowly accumulated new duties and responsibilities in order to better manage these tensions.

This chapter contributes to the causal symmetry debate by exploring a different angle than the usual survey-based studies on the psychological correlates of conspiracy theory belief. Specifically, it investigates whether the Q community makes use of the kinds of

recognizable institutions of political communication that guide the belief formation process in other corners of the public. In effect, the community's consolidation of their procedural prosthesis reflects something like a Weberian (1968) "routinization of charisma," allowing them to hold on to a semblance of their community after the demise of their charismatic leader, Q. Routinization reflects that, in order to survive, the community had to change, but in changing it had to give up, to some degree, on the emergent, charismatic qualities that had made it attractive in the first place (Toth 1972). Whether these institutions suggest causal symmetry is bound up with this question: are bakers "elites," in the political communications sense? In a superficial sense, they are – they are professional interpreters of politics that act as a filter on the information that reaches their public. From this perspective, their presence and role, especially its stabilizing function, supports the causal symmetry approach to the strange beliefs of conspiracy theorists.

But what bakers are up to, and the story of their emergence, also indicates the limitations of the elite model for online media. Surprisingly, the process I observed on the /qresearch/ forums less resembled unidirectional models of elite influence created in response to TV media than it did the classic two-step flow model of media influence (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948), which emphasized the indirect effects of media through "opinion leaders," who would locally diffuse their interpretations of media messages to the public. This model was hypothesized to explain opinion circulation in an era of low media choice, but also low saturation – access was less common than a present, and as a result those with access acted as interpreters of media. Here, a similar process occurred in a high-choice media environment, where audiences had access to a high volume of competing media sources. However, it was precisely because of this overwhelming, high-choice environment that anons sought the assistance of interpretive institutions.

I highlight this affinity not to suggest a return to the classic model, but to emphasize that while political communication models have long acknowledged the outsized influence

of certain "elites," the role of these elites has evolved alongside changes in communication media. Debates in political communications have arisen over whether the "supply-side" (the influence of elites) is more significant, as in classic elite models and radicalization models (e.g., Tufekci 2018), or whether the "demand-side" (the influence of audiences) plays a greater role, as recent research suggests. This new research emphasizes that online platforms provide affordances allowing content creators to respond to audience views in real time (Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández 2016; Ledwich and Zaitsev 2020; Munger and Phillips 2022). It is likely that both audiences and creators mutually influence each other. However, the type of information each side has about the other—content creators about their audiences and content consumers about creators—strongly shapes the content on which they converge. For example, mainstream platforms like YouTube include affordances for creators and audiences to provide feedback to one another through likes, views, and comments. This mutual feedback mechanism means that, unlike classic models of political communication that emphasize unidirectional influence from elites to audiences, platforms like YouTube allow for a bidirectional influence, where audiences and creators can mutually influence and sometimes mutually radicalize each other (Munger 2024).

In the case of /qresearch/, bakers also actively monitored the views of their audience. Bakers, who appropriate the authority of mainstream elites but provide interpretations of elite messages tailored to their local audience, get to have it both ways. Instead of competing with mainstream elites, bakers worked to shore up trust in figures like Trump by providing interpretations of elite messaging that matched the expectations of their audience on the forums. Similarly, bakers purported to be able to extract useful intelligence from enemy elites, reinterpreting benign statements and actions by political enemies to match audience expectations about their nefarious intentions.

Increased communication and information feedback between creators and audiences refocuses the relationship between these two groups from one of exit, wherein audiences simply

stop consuming media that does not match their expectation, to one of voice, wherein they attempt to influence the content that they encounter to fit those expectation. In classic models created to explain people's uptake of broadcast media, the concern was that audiences would selectively expose themselves only to media that affirmed their prior preconceptions about politics (Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006; Stroud 2007, 2010). In some ways, the contemporary concern about misinformation and "fake news" reflects a hold-over of this model, and its accompanying concerns about selective exposure, in an online context wherein it no longer accurately characterizes the relation between creators and audiences. For new media, however, the problem is often less one of selective exposure than one involving what I am calling the *hypercirculation* of some media, resulting in repeated, unwanted exposures to media that has become omnipresent. The hypercirculation of media diminishes the importance and possibility of strategies based on exit. This is what we saw in the case of the Steele Dossier, the spread of which, in some ways, represented the obsolescence of earlier conspiracy theorists' efforts to construct new communities around rare, carefully-guarded evidentiary materials. As soon as the Steele Dossier was made public by BuzzFeed, it began to spread widely, shedding in the process the carefully constructed interpretation that BuzzFeed editors had meant to accompany it.

Hypercirculation reflects a broader context wherein it is unavoidable that people will constantly encounter contradictory, disagreeable, and sometimes distressing information on a daily basis. In the contemporary conditions of "epistemic murk" (Wedeen 2024), strategies aimed at shutting out conflicting claims, enforcing echo chambers, and withholding information at the state level to quash dissent are far more difficult in a participatory, high-choice media environment where duplicating, hacking, and re-coding existing media are common tactics. The effective strategies are those that accept these conditions, learning either to internalize disagreements through institutionalization or to intentionally foment disorientation for political ends. For instance, on /qresearch/, the constant emergence of disagreement

was re-figured, in response to concerns about the capture of bakers by outside forces, as a reassuring indicator that no single interpretive group or external conspiracy had co-opted the boards. This approach ensured that community members continually found evidence to fuel their process of cynical interpretation.

Under these conditions of hypercirculation, voice becomes more important than ever. When it is impossible to avoid confusing, contradictory, or distressing information—whether true or false, misinformation or not—strategies for dealing with that information are paramount. This is particularly evident on non-mainstream platforms like 8kun, where, unlike YouTube and mainstream social media, there are no alternative creators available on the same site. The site is the entire community, so it is not possible for users to switch to an alternative that better matches their views while still remaining on the same platform.

With this in mind, and perhaps surprisingly, the closest reference point for the /qresearch/ community's adoption of strong procedural institutions in the aftermath of Q's departure is Steinsson's (2024) depiction of the emergence of a new editorial policy on Wikipedia. Like the process observed by Steinsson, the transformation of /qresearch/ occurred through endogenous processes rooted in rule ambiguity, dispute resolution, and a factor which has been less emphasized in my account: population loss. Indeed, the Q community did suffer a significant population decline after Q left.

In comparison to Wikipedia, which uses a user-account system, it is much more difficult to estimate the total active user base on /qresearch/ because all users are anonymous. However, it is possible to determine the average active user base at any given time because the rules stipulate that only one research thread is official at any given time, and each thread is the same length. In 2020, before Q's departure, the mean number of unique participants in each research thread was 243. After Q's departure, this number dropped by around one third, to just 157 for the period data was collected in 2023.

This decrease could reflect that many participants came to believe that Q had misled

them after Biden, and not Trump, became President in 2020. However, it is also possible that community members exited more gradually if they disagreed with the procedural changes of the Great Kitchen Fire. According to OrgAnon, this version of the story is more accurate. As we saw in the last chapter, the content posted by users within the /qresearch/ community shifted somewhat toward "fake news," misinformation, and other fringe sources in the period after Q's departure. Community procedures also shifted toward a greater likelihood of designating this fringe content as notable.

While the magnitude of that shift is less clear, there was a definite increase in interaction and content crossover between the /qresearch/ community and newly emerging alt-tech platforms like Trump's Truth Social, Rumble, Telegram, and the explicitly QAnon streaming site Pilled.net. Considering this data, it may be that, rather than the community simply shrinking in response to Biden's unexpected win and Q's subsequent disappearance, the community dispersed across these alternative platforms as they became available. More data on the activity levels of the community would help answer these lingering questions.

Whether the emergence of Q-related communities and content across this archipelago of alternative platforms reflects a diaspora of dissatisfied /qresearch/ers, or the consolidation of unrelated groups that came to be interested in the same content, the community's shift to using multiple, interlocking platforms is likely tied to the rise of a broader "fake news" infrastructure. After Q left, it became much harder to resolve interpretive disputes in a way that avoided one faction simply exiting the community, leading the community to switch to a procedural mode of interpretation that proved less disputatious, but perhaps stifled creative re-interpretation. My findings suggest that this procedural shift on /qresearch/ coincided with the emergence of the fringe news and social media ecosystem we saw in the previous chapter. As the community grew or spread across platforms, it became more visible, solidifying expectations about what kinds of things those in the community found notable. It may be the case that the fake news ecosystem emerged through efforts to generate media

that could broadly address pro-Q audiences across institutional and community boundaries.

The distributed and interlocking nature of the Q community's archipelagic outposts highlights the limitations of the shift, within the literature of political communications, to an almost single-minded focus on social media. Seeking to limit the spread of the Q community, various mainstream platforms like Facebook and Discord have instituted unequivocal bans of Q-related content. These bans often frustrated my attempts at locating and joining stable Q-related discussion groups. Throughout the interviewing process, I joined several Discord groups created as part of the community's baker school programs, but they were, without fail, banned and shut down by the company within two weeks. That these efforts at moderation so often frustrated my attempts to make contact with those in the community reflects their effectiveness at frustrating the community itself. At the same time, the unfailing existence and availability of /qresearch/ always made it easy to locate these temporary sub-communities after old ones were closed down. Communities make use of social media, and can even consolidate on social media. At the same time, when they disappear from these fora, this does not imply that they have ceased to exist. Instead, they adapt, regroup, and often find new platforms that are less restrictive, thus demonstrating a resilience that challenges the notion that banning can fully eradicate such communities. This persistence points to a fundamental aspect of the QAnon movement: its reliance on decentralized and resilient networks rather than any single platform or leader. The evolution of the Q community into a more procedural and less charismatic form did not diminish its impact but may have rather transformed it into a more stable, if fragmented, entity. And, this transition from a single interpretive authority to a distributed network of interpretive nodes, each vying for legitimacy and influence, mirrors the broader dynamics of online information infrastructures.

CHAPTER 5

EPILOGUE: LIVING WITHOUT Q

In 2023, I reached out to OrgAnon to confirm some details about my understanding of the Great Kitchen Fire and to show him how I had quoted him in this dissertation—one of his original conditions for agreeing to speak with me. My reluctance throughout this project to put forward a comprehensive interpretation of the community's broader political anxieties, or the sources of its political appeal, was largely in response to his insistence that the movement wasn't "about" any one thing. For him, it was about finding the truth, whatever that truth may be. Taking this perspective, my interpretation of what the movement was really about would have been just one more interpretation alongside those produced by community members themselves—interpretations that sometimes clashed and drove the community to develop modes of adjudication. To those in the movement, the "truth" is partially embodied in these procedures and institutions, which they count on even when they are distrustful of so much else.

When OrgAnon replied, he informed me that he was "announcing the end of [his] archival process" and that he would no longer be actively maintaining the aggregator sites through which I had originally contacted him. Citing health problems and work issues contributing to what he sometimes calls his poor "work/life/information war balance," he simply no longer had time to play the role in the community that he had held, without compensation, for the last four years. "Efforts here are time consuming and seemingly everything I do to push awareness of this resource does not effect the change I seek," he explained.

His departure from the movement did not mean he was giving up his support of Trump or that he was no longer concerned about a deep state conspiracy. His departure, he told me, was for his family and for others in his life who needed him more than the Q community did. "I struggle with the thought of silently watching from the sidelines, hustling for something else knowing it will never satisfy quite like this effort has," he said. He was leaving because

he had to, not because he wanted to.

* * *

One contribution of this dissertation has been to establish that, although the beliefs embraced by the Q community are often unstable and unfamiliar, the communicative and informational infrastructure of the movement is not so different from the elite model seen in classic accounts of opinion formation. However, the elites within this community differ in key ways—they are anonymous and, due to the procedural and rules-based nature of their roles, are more fungible than traditional elites. This finding has important implications for policymakers seeking to curb the growth of the movement and support those attempting to leave it behind.

A common strategy for reducing the spread of Q-related content is "decapitation," which involves targeting content creators through moderation efforts to prevent the dissemination of movement content. However, the systems of redundancy within the Q community complicate this strategy. When elites are banned or removed, they can be easily replaced by others willing to step into their roles. This is evident in the case of OrgAnon. While he planned to step back from the community, he intended to pass his network of websites to another community member who had offered to take over their management. "Failure to maintain adequate archival efforts and information flow feels like failure in my own eyes," he told me, "but I always knew at some point I would not be able to keep up by myself, so I made efforts to build this platform as a way for multiple anons to work together to assist in that effort." The fungibility of these elite roles and their integration with the community's online infrastructure make them resilient to "decapitation" strategies.

At the same time, it cannot be ignored that, after Q left the movement, activity in the /qresearch/ community dropped by a third over the following year. As I noted in the last chapter, this decrease in activity is likely due to more complex factors than Q's departure alone. The emergence of alt-tech platforms during this period suggests that the

decreased activity on /qresearch/ may reflect the dispersal of the community across an interlocking archipelago of platforms and sites. OrgAnon's aggregator site functioned as an off-site archive of "notables" selected by anons in case /qresearch/ became temporarily inaccessible. This kind of decentralized, resilient redundancy aligns with the original purpose behind the creation of the internet (Clark 2013), designed to ensure that sites and information can always be preserved, duplicated, and re-hosted. With this in mind, we should not hastily assume that the population loss following Q's departure indicates a loss of faith in the movement. As argued in the last chapter, Q's departure led to a routinization of charisma, which likely contributed to the movement's long-term stability. This suggests that, rather than diminishing the movement, Q's exit may have facilitated a more robust and adaptable structure, capable of enduring beyond the presence of any single leader.

However, one major component of the movement's online infrastructure appears more vulnerable to this kind of attack: streaming content creators. Although this dissertation did not cover the movement's streaming content creators, streaming video is extremely popular in the Q community's online media ecosystem. In terms of affordances, online streaming content is much more similar to classic broadcast media than to movement research communities like /qresearch/. Streaming content creators often adopt the talking-head format of TV punditry, directly addressing their audience while discussing news media items. These media items, especially on alt-tech platforms like Pilled.net, which was created specifically to host Q-related content, are often derived from the lists of notables produced on /qresearch/.

For example, one of the top streaming video creators on Pilled.net is Patrick Gunnels, the host of a show called Reading Epic Threads. As the show title suggests, Gunnels' format involves him reading and analyzing threads from /qresearch/ while hawking pseudoscientific health and wellness products. In this way, Gunnels adapts the baking procedure for a video audience. Streamers BaruchTheScribe, PamphletAnon and TracyBeanz, who some journalists believe controlled the Q tripcode at various points (Zadrozny and Collins 2018), utilized

a similar format in their “Patriot Soapbox” streaming shows. As the presence of names here implies, streaming content creators are not anonymous. Since they appear on-stream as talking heads, it is much more difficult for streamers to hide their identities. Although they almost universally adopt pseudonyms, doxxing is common. The lack of anonymity amongst streamers allows their audiences to develop long term relations of trust that are not possible in the same way amongst the anonymous /qresearch/ community.

Streaming content related to the movement is now almost entirely hosted on alt-tech platforms – mainly Rumble, Pilled.net and Telegram – due to content moderation policies on mainstream platforms which explicitly ban Q related content. For example, Facebook, YouTube, Discord, Twitch.tv and Instagram have all explicitly banned Q-related content. The relations of trust with streaming content creators, which would make “decapitation” through banning seem like a good option, also make it difficult to accomplish in an online context – since audiences are drawn specifically to their favorite streaming content creators rather than the platform itself, they are willing to follow favorite creators from platform to platform in the event that they are banned. In fact, threatening to move to an alternative platform is a common way that the most popular streamers exert their influence over the way that platforms operate (e.g. Chen 2018).

This dissertation did not directly address alt-tech platforms, but the conclusions of each chapter suggest that these platforms should be treated with increased importance in the literatures of American radical politics and political communications. However, because affordances on alt-tech platforms are often identical to, and were patterned off of, those on mainstream platforms, insights from existing research on streaming video platforms can set initial expectations for what these newer platforms are like. There is an emerging body of research on streaming political content creators based on YouTube and Twitch, the two most popular platforms for streaming video casts. The major feature of these platforms, according to the political communications literature, is the increased feedback available be-

tween creators and their audiences, allowing creators to adapt to audience preferences in real time (Ventura et al. 2021; Munger 2024). In this context, the directionality of influence is reversed from classic models of broadcast media - audiences are more strongly influential over creators than the other way around, as the audience rewards the creator for adopting more outrageous views (Lewis 2018, 2020).

Munger and Phillips (2022) have argued that shifts at the "supply-side" reflect creators matching the preferences of their audiences in an effort to meet their demand for content and retain them. However, it also seems possible that audiences could take pleasure in driving creators to express outrageous views and behaviors that they themselves do not hold. This is a common phenomenon amongst so-called "IRL" (in-real-life) streamers who constantly broadcast their daily lives, attracting online audiences by acting on whatever outrageous suggestions they provide. For example, top streamer Ice Poseidon is known for his 6-hour long streams in which he wanders around Los Angeles, accosting bystanders at the behest of his audience and attempting to "trigger" people (Partin 2017). While these examples are not expressly political content creators, some streaming content creators present at the January 6 invasion of the Capitol had previously adopted this strategy for content creation. For example, before he was arrested for his participation in the Capitol invasion (Ryman 2021), QAnon streamer Baked Alaska was known for streaming content in which he provoked random people in public, sometimes resulting in his arrest (Baxter 2020). In sum, streaming video combines some aspects of broadcast media – relations of trust with media figures and durable audience loyalty – with aspects of the more procedural and decentralized forms of content mediation discussed in this dissertation that are conducive to redundancy, fungibility and resiliency.

5.1 The user will always get through

As I touched on in Chapter 3, the alt-tech media ecosystem began to emerge in response to the heavy moderation policies targeting Q and MAGA content on mainstream platforms. Although the extent to which the user base on these platforms was motivated to join them due to disapproval of mainstream moderation policies is unclear, the founders of alt-tech platforms have universally attributed their creation of these platforms to their disapproval of moderation. For example, Rumble's "About Us" page mentions that the platform was founded in response to "cancel culture," and Trump's own Truth Social is described as a platform that refrains from "discriminating on the basis of political ideology."

The dispersal of Q-related content from mainstream to alt-tech platforms, driven by intensifying moderation on mainstream platforms, highlights both the advantages and disadvantages of responding to undesirable online content with moderation. On one hand, moderation can be quite effective at getting problematic content off of even the most active mainstream social media platforms (Schneider and Rizoiu 2023). On the other hand, these efforts at moderation led to the creation of a more resilient, decentralized informational infrastructure existing outside mainstream networks. Insofar as I have argued that the resilience of the movement has more to do with the resilience of its informational infrastructure than it has to do with community members' individual beliefs, moderation practices that drive people off of mainstream platforms should be avoided.

Moderation also can break the online social connections linking isolated conspiracy theorists to the people that have the greatest chance of reconnecting them to ordinary life (Zhang et al. 2023). This is precisely what happened with OrgAnon. When we corresponded, he told me about a recent incident that made him question whether his participation in the "information war" was worth the sacrifices it demanded. He recounted being contacted by a close friend from his time in the military, with whom he had lost contact several years ago. Living on a rural homestead with only his wife and children, OrgAnon had become

increasingly isolated, losing many formerly close relationships over the years. This isolation intensified when he started posting Q-related content on Facebook in 2018. He was soon banned from the platform. Although he created seven more accounts afterward, he was continually banned for similar reasons.

OrgAnon told me that his friend, along with their broader network of veterans, had assumed that he had wanted to break contact with them due to their opposition to his political views, and so they had refrained from reaching out. In reality, OrgAnon had wanted to maintain these relationships but was unable to because he had been banned from virtually all mainstream social media platforms due to his tendency to post Q-related content. "I found out [my friends were] under the impression that I disliked and was ignoring all of them. In reality, their primary choice of communication was Facebook, a place that silenced me over 2 years ago for re-posting notables, much like I do here," he explained.

Once he reconnected with his friend, he was able to clarify that he had not intended to cut off contact. This reconnection allowed him to rekindle these relationships. His desire to help his fellow veterans with their struggles ultimately led him to decide to stop maintaining his network of sites. This encounter triggered "the realization that this is a manually curated resource and my time is better allocated elsewhere for the purposes of furthering The Great Awakening," he said.

OrgAnon's story exemplifies how user-focused moderation risks isolating those in the movement, leading them to place greater importance on the remaining connections they have, including those to the Q community. This suggests that moderation policies should be content-focused rather than user-focused. Moderation should aim to remove problematic posts and contributions from platforms while trying to avoid permanently driving users who post such content off the platform. By focusing on the content rather than the individuals, platforms can mitigate the risk of isolating users and inadvertently strengthening their ties to fringe communities.

For one, re-joining a mainstream platform after an account ban is trivially easy—it is simply not possible to durably ban a specific individual from using a publicly accessible website. Attempting to prevent this is a waste of time and resources, as the user will always find a way through. Account bans can be circumvented by creating sock-puppet accounts, and IP bans can be bypassed through VPN usage, Tor, or more simply, by using public Wi-Fi, another device, or resetting one's router. Some proposals have suggested requiring government identification for account creation on social media platforms to address this issue, but it is also easy to purchase stolen identity information online. More importantly, such measures risk driving ordinary, rule-abiding users to alternative platforms due to legitimate identity concerns, especially given social media companies' failures to secure user data in major cases of mass identity theft (Facebook alone has experienced at least two major leaks in 2024; see Laird 2024; Mauran 2024).

In short, efforts to durably ban specific users from online communities can be easily circumvented by people with a moderate level of computer literacy, and the externalities of enforcing more stringent restrictions are quite risky. While user moderation efforts are sometimes justified as creating "friction" to reduce problematic content, the minimal friction created is not worth the cost of these externalities. Moderation should aim to ensure user safety across platforms, considering the adverse effects of banning users on major platforms. Generally, banning a user on a single platform results in their migration to alternative platforms with less stringent moderation policies and a long-term increase in the "toxicity" of their content across platforms (Ali et al. 2021).

Content-level moderation strategies are much more time and resource-intensive than ban-oriented strategies, but they avoid many of these issues. Avoiding bans will keep at-risk users concentrated on mainstream platforms where they can be located by those with whom they have real-world social relationships, while ensuring that further content posted by these users is also subject to moderation. However, this style of moderation policy has substantial down-

sides of its own. Content moderation on mainstream platforms is often labor intensive, and this work is often poorly-compensated as well as traumatic for workers who are repeatedly exposed to offending content as a hazard of the job (Roberts 2014, 2016, 2018). For example, Facebook moderators display the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of repeated exposures to violent content (Solon 2017). From this perspective, there are strong incentives to try to drive repeat offenders off of mainstream platforms entirely.

The emergence of alt-tech sites represents the results of mainstream platforms' continual passing of the buck in this respect. Users of mainstream platforms benefit from the emergence of alt-tech platforms, which absorb disruptive, banned users and prevent them from immediately re-registering on mainstream sites. This tactic has been explicitly pursued on imageboards. For example, I mentioned in the introduction that the operators of 4chan created its "Politically Incorrect" board as a "containment board" meant to draw racist content away from other boards on the platform. Alt-tech platforms like Rumble and Truth Social accomplish something similar in relation to mainstream platforms. But, for the reasons I have described, this is not an ideal solution.

One promising approach to moderation here is also one of the oldest, dating back to the earliest form of online public communication: Usenet. Usenet was a "billboard system" (BBS), a semi-decentralized network of servers hosting what amounted to email listservs on a variety of topics. Users could subscribe to these listservs, or "newsgroups," and receive messages sent by other members. Usenet was decentralized across a constellation of university-operated and privately-owned servers, meaning there existed no central authority that could moderate the whole network in a cohesive way. It was also trivially easy to send huge amounts of disruptive messages to other users using a tactic called "cascading," similar to spamming.

Although centralized moderation was impossible, users solved the problems of cascading and spamming by implementing self-moderation at the user level. Using an affordance called

"filtering," users could specify that they did not want to receive messages containing snippets of user-specified text, or that they did not want to receive messages sent by specific users, a function analogous to "blocking" on contemporary platforms. Indeed, although it often goes un-utilized, filtering functionality is available on most mainstream platforms.

One concern with this individualistic approach to moderation is selective exposure. There is a real risk that users might filter out content from sources that contradict their existing beliefs. However, the general consensus about social media usage is that people often engage in selective exposure at an intellectual or social level, even without software-enabled filtering. In other words, the risk of selective exposure is not unique to filtering. Moreover, since filtering content requires users to specify particular strings or users they want to exclude, they must know in advance what content they want to filter. This makes filtering less effective for avoiding unexpected unwanted information but well-suited for avoiding known disruptive or unwanted content, such as Q-related content.

5.2 Problems with infiltration

One controversial approach to mitigating the growth and operations of conspiracy theory communities, "cognitive infiltration," has been suggested by Sunstein and Vermeule (2009). By their account, conspiracy theory communities suffer from "crippled epistemologies" because they are able to successfully filter contradictory outside information before it reaches the community. My findings in Chapter 3 undermine this understanding of conspiracy theory communities – not only are they constantly exposed to mainstream media accounts containing information that contradicts their views, but they actually prefer outside media to Q-community outlets. However, this does not mean they trust this media – as we saw in Chapter 4, their cynical interpretive process means that they are exposed to mainstream content without straightforwardly adopting the claims made therein.

My findings that belief formation in these communities can be grounded in rules and pro-

cedures, even though these procedures do not reflect mainstream epistemic norms, suggests that outsiders can exercise a degree of influence over the interpretive process even if they put forward claims that are likely to be disagreeable to those in the community. I am certainly not arguing that outsiders should "infiltrate" these communities in the sense advocated by Sunstein and Vermeule. As they acknowledge, introducing infiltrators into the community could backfire by reinforcing perceptions that the movement is under attack, or that those in the community are being targeted because they are close to finding out what's "really going on." However, participation in these rule based processes should not even strictly be considered infiltration – participants insist that their research process totally open to the public and, according to interviewees, thrives on widespread public participation. That said, it is likely that participation by outsiders affirming straightforward interpretations of media is liable to be ignored. If done at the scale required to meaningfully shift these processes, the most likely outcome would be the exit of core members and their subsequent re-consolidation of institutions on yet another alternative board. While strategies oriented around "changing the system from the inside" can be attractive, they are unlikely to be effective when conducted in an ethical way involving identity disclosure.

Ultimately, what led OrgAnon to leave the movement wasn't that his beliefs were challenged. He simply no longer had the time that participation required. Put another way, he finally found something that seemed more important than "keeping up with new information." For him, this was reconnecting with friends and family with whom he had lost touch. It is unclear what it would take for others in the community to come to see their activities therein as unimportant. OrgAnon himself lamented that, while he knew that looking out for his relationships was more important, it often did not feel more important, and that ordinary life would "never satisfy quite like this effort [participating in the Q community] has." Participating in these communities can be attention- and labor-intensive. In some ways, perhaps, this intensity is the whole point. In the Q community, there is always work that needs to

be done, there is always new information coming in, "forensics anons" and bakers are always finding something new, whether it be infiltrators or hidden messages within innocuous media. As with OrgAnon, what draws people away from this constant whirl may not be a shift in their beliefs, but a shift in their activities. From this perspective, introducing more information for those in the community to respond to is the wrong strategy.

Sunstein and Vermeule's many scholarly respondents have pointed out the ways in which tactics of "cognitive infiltration" are inconsistent with the democratic norms that they are ostensibly meant to protect (Coady 2017; Hagen 2017). Others have criticized their depiction of conspiracy theorizing as grounded in a "crippled epistemology" that can easily be disrupted through the introduction of factual information (Sato 2023; Melley 2024). While "infiltration" with the goal of introducing mainstream information is misguided for the reasons I have described, increasing interactions between community insiders and outsiders is generally a promising strategy. Despite my practice of always disclosing my identity and institutional affiliation to interviewees, and my compliance with the stipulations of internal review, I am certain that many in the community would consider my presence to constitute a form of infiltration, albeit a relatively benign one. The most common reaction to my questions, oriented around the daily practices of managing conversation on the board, was a mix of curiosity and bewilderment. Interviewees didn't understand why I wanted to know about shill hunting procedures, or about how decisions are made regarding what counts as notable. OrgAnon, in particular, was incredulous when I asked him to explain the various groups he considered to be shills. "I know you're doing research for your dissertation," he wrote, "but old board shills? Why are you worried about that?"

Asking community members to explain their actions in a way that is intelligible to the broader public can encourage them to reflect on their own behavior and how it might appear to outsiders. As we have seen, community members are sometimes involved in complex internal debates, not only about the nature of the conspiracy but also about how the research

process should be run. Community members talk to one another about these issues but do not commonly discuss these aspects with outsiders. Instead of trying to introduce new information to the community, "infiltrators" might be better served by simply asking questions to those involved in the group. The Q community and the Trump movement are often described as "anti-establishment," with some scholars suggesting that a pro/anti-establishment dimension has replaced the classic left/right dimension in contemporary politics (Uscinski et al. 2021). It is important to remember that social scientists are, from the Q community's point of view, representatives of this establishment. Conducting research on these groups is liable, depending on the approach, to either intensify or mitigate these anti-establishment attitudes. For this reason, researchers working with these groups should remember they are also acting as representatives of mainstream epistemic institutions. Conducting research that is transparent and intellectually charitable will, I hope, help create a more favorable reputation for mainstream epistemic institutions among those in the community.

REFERENCES

Akaike, H. (1973). Information Theory and an Extension of the Maximum Likelihood Principle. In B. N. Petrov & F. Csaki (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2nd International Symposium on Information Theory* (pp. 267-281). Budapest: Akademiai Kiado.

Akbar, M. J. (2005). Hasib Hussain: The boy who grew up to bomb the No 30 bus. *The Independent*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/hasib-hussain-the-boy-who-grew-up-to-bomb-the-no-30-bus-299086.html`.

Ali, S., Saeed, M. H., Aldreabi, E., Blackburn, J., De Cristofaro, E., Zannettou, S., & Stringhini, G. (2021). Understanding the Effect of Deplatforming on Social Networks. In *13th ACM Web Science Conference 2021 (WebSci '21)*, June 21-25.

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211-236.

Allen, J., et al. (2020). Evaluating the Fake News Problem at the Scale of the Information Ecosystem. *Science Advances*, 6(14).

Allen, G., & Abraham, L. (1971). *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*. Rossmoor, California: Concord Press.

Allen, J. (2023). Awaiting Possible Indictment, Trump Rallies in Waco and Vows to "Destroy the Deep State". NBC News, 25 March.

Arceneaux, K., & Johnson, M. (2013). *Changing Minds or Changing Channels? Partisan News in an Age of Choice*. University of Chicago Press.

Aslett, K., Guess, A. M., Bonneay, R., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2022). News credibility

labels have limited average effects on news diet quality and fail to reduce misperceptions. *Science Advances*, 8(18).

Aslett, K., Sanderson, Z., Godel, W., Persily, N., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2023). Online searches to evaluate misinformation can increase its perceived veracity. *Nature*, 625, 548-556.

Atkinson, M., DeWitt, D., & Uscinski, J. (2017). Conspiracy Theories in the 2016 Election: Costly Signals or Conventional Wisdom. In J. C. Lucas, C. J. Galdieri, & T. S. Sisco (Eds.), *Conventional Wisdom, Parties and Broken Barriers in the 2016 Election*. Lexington Books.

Badrinathan, S. (2021). Educative Interventions to Combat Misinformation: Evidence from a Field Experiment in India. *American Political Science Review*, 115(4), 1325-1341.

Bartlett, J., & Miller, C. (2010). The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, Extremism and Counter-Terrorism. Demos.

Bartlett, J., & Miller, C. (2012). The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24(1), 1-21.

Basham, L. (2001). Living With The Conspiracy. *The Philosophical Forum*, 32(3).

Baxter, E. (2020). Alt-Right Troll Baked Alaska Arrested for Macing Scottsdale Bouncer. *Phoenix New Times*. Retrieved June 14, 2024, from `https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/baked-alaska-arrested-in-scottsdale-for-macing-bouncer-11519482`.

Bellware, K. (2022). Daughter says QAnon conspiracy theory fueled father's deadly rampage. *Washington Post*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/09/12/igor-lanis-murder/`.

Ben-David, A., & Matamoros-Fernández, A. (2016). Hate Speech and Covert Discrimination on Social Media: Monitoring the Facebook Pages of Extreme-Right Political Parties in Spain. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 1167-1193.

Berelson, B. R., Lazarsfeld, P. F., & McPhee, W. N. (1954). *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*. University of Chicago Press.

Bergmann, E. (2018). *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Bergmann, E., & Butter, M. (2020). Conspiracy Theory and Populism. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*.

Berlet, C. (1990). Right Woos Left. Political Research Associates, 27 February.

Berinsky, A. J. (2023). *Political Rumors: Why We Accept Misinformation And How To Fight It*. Princeton University Press.

Bertsou, E. (2019). Rethinking political distrust. *European Political Science Review*, 11(2), 213-230.

Blake, A. (2018). This photo of Trump's notes captures his empathy deficit better than anything. *Washington Post*. Retrieved June 12, 2024, from `https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/02/21/this-photo-of-trumps-notes-captures-his-empathy-problem-better-than-anything/`.

Blanuša, N., & Hristov, T. (2020). Psychoanalysis, Critical Theory and Conspiracy Theory. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*.

Bleich, E. (2018). Historical Institutionalism and Judicial DecisionMaking: Ideas, Institutions, and Actors in French High Court Hate Speech Rulings. *World Politics*, 70(1), 53-85.

Bloom, M., & Moskalenko, S. (2021). *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon*. Stanford University Press.

Bode, L., & Vraga, E. K. (2021). Correction Experiences on Social Media During COVID-19. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2).

Bogart, L. M., & Bird, S. T. (2003). Exploring the relationship of conspiracy beliefs about HIV/AIDS to sexual behaviors and attitudes among African-American adults. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 95(11), 1057-1065.

Bogart, L. M., & Bird, S. T. (2003). Relationship of African Americans' sociodemographic characteristics to belief in conspiracies about HIV/AIDS and birth control. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 98(7), 1144-1150.

Bratich, J. Z. (2008). *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*. State University of New York Press.

Brotherton, R., French, C. C., & Pickering, A. D. (2013). Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 279.

Brown, M. A., Nagler, J., Bisbee, J., Lai, A., & Tucker, J. A. (2022). Echo chambers, rabbit holes, and ideological bias: How YouTube recommends content to real users. *Brookings*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.brookings.edu/articles/echo-chambers-rabbit-holes-and-ideological-bias-how-youtube-recommends-content-to-real-users/`.

Butter, M., & Knight, P. (2018). The History of Conspiracy Theory Research: A Review and Commentary. In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (pp. 33-46).

Canovan, M. (2005). *The People*. Polity.

Cassam, Q. (2023). Conspiracy Theories. *Society*, 60(2), 190-199.

Cassese, E. C., Farhart, C. E., & Miller, J. M. (2020). Gender Differences in COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs. *Politics and Gender*, 16(4), 1-12.

Clark, D. D. (2013). The Design Philosophy of the DARPA Internet Protocols. *ACM SigComm Computer Communications Review*, 25(1), 102-111.

Coady, D. (2003). Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 17(2), 197-209.

Coady, D. (2017). Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule on Conspiracy Theories. *Argumenta*, 3(2), 291-302.

Coady, D. (2018). Conspiracy-baiting and Anti-rumour Campaigns as Propoganda. In M. R. X. Dentith (Ed.), *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*. Rowman & Littlefield International.

Coleman, G. (2014). *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous*. Verso Books.

Converse, P. E. (1964). The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics. In D. E. Apter (Ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (pp. 206-261). Free Press of Glencoe.

Cook, J. (2021). 'I Miss My Mom': Children of QAnon Believers Are Desperately Trying To Deradicalize Their Own Parents. *Huffpost*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.huffpost.com/entry/children-of-qanon-believers_n_601078e9c5b6c5586aa49077`.

Coppock, A. (2021). *Persuasion in Parallel: How Information Changes Minds about Politics*. University of Chicago Press.

Dalgaard-Nielson, A. (2010). Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33(9), 797-814.

Davis, E. A. (2024). Conspiracy Attunement and Context: The Case of the President's Body. In J. Masco & L. Wedeen (Eds.), *Conspiracy/Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press.

De Courcy, K. H. (1963). Force X. *Intelligence Digest*, (294), 2-6.

deHaven-Smith, L. (2014). *Conspiracy Theory in America*. University of Texas Press.

Del Vicario, M., Bessi, A., Zollo, F., Petroni, F., Scala, A., Caldarelli, G., Stanley, H. E., & Quattrociocchi, W. (2016). The Spreading of Misinformation Online. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(3), 554-559.

Del Vicario, M., Bessi, A., Zollo, F., Petroni, F., Scala, A., Caldarelli, G., Stanley, H. E., & Quattrociocchi, W. (2016). Echo Chambers: Emotional Contagion and Group Polarization on Facebook. *Scientific Reports*, 6, 37825.

Dentith, M. R. X. (2018). The Conspiracy Theory Theorists and Their Attitude Towards Conspiracy Theory. In M. R. X. Dentith (Ed.), *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*. Rowman and Littlefield.

Dentith, M. R. X. (2019). Conspiracy theories on the basis of the evidence. *Synthese*, 196(6), 2243-2261.

Dentith, M. R. X. (2021). Debunking conspiracy theories. *Synthese*, 198(10), 9897-9911.

Dentith, M. R. X. (2022). Suspicious conspiracy theories. *Synthese*, 200(3), 1-14.

Dentith, M. R. X. (2023). Some Conspiracy Theories. *Social Epistemology*, (4), 522-534.

Deitelhoff, N., & Zimmerman, L. (2020). Things We Lost in the Fire: How Different Types of Contestation Affect the Robustness of International Norms. *International Studies Review*, 22(1), 51-76.

Donnelly, S. (2023). My mom got sucked in to QAnon. I can imagine how it happened to Marjorie Taylor Greene. *The Independent*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/qanon-marjorie-taylor-greene-websites-b2259561.html`.

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding Conspiracy Theories. *Political Psychology*.

Douglas, K. M., van Prooijen, J. W., & Sutton, R. M. (2022). Is the label 'conspiracy theory' a cause or a consequence of disbelief in alternative narratives? *British Journal of Psychology*, 113(2), 575-590.

Downs, A. (1957). An Economic Theory of Political Action In A Democracy. *Journal of Political Economy*, 65(2), 135-150.

Duetz, J. (2023). What Does It Mean for a Conspiracy Theory to Be a "Theory"? *Social Epistemology*, 37(4), 438-453.

Einstein, K. L., & Glick, D. M. (2014). Do I Think BLS Data are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories. *Political Behavior*, 37, 679-701.

Enders, A. M., Smallpage, S. M., & Lupton, R. N. (2020). Are All "Birthers" Conspiracy Theorists? On the Relationship Between Conspiratorial Thinking and Political Orientations. *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), 849-866.

Enders, A. M., & Uscinski, J. E. (2021). Are misinformation, antiscientific claims, and conspiracy theories for political extremists? *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 24(4), 583-605.

Enders, A. M., Uscinski, J. E., Klofstad, C. A., Wuchty, S., Seelig, M. I., Funchion, J. R., Murthi, M. N., Premaratne, K., & Stoler, J. (2022). Who Supports QAnon? A Case Study in Political Extremism. *The Journal of Politics*, 84(3), 1843-1849.

Enders, A. M., Uscinski, J. E., Seelig, M. I., Klofstad, C. A., Wuchty, S., Funchion, J. R., Murthi, M. N., Premaratne, K., & Stoler, J. (2023). The Relationship Between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation. *Political Behavior*, 45(2), 781-804.

Erikson, R. S., Luttbeg, N. R., & Tedin, K. L. (2010). *American Public Opinion: its origins, content and impact*. New York: Macmillan.

Faris, R. M., Roberts, H., Etling, B., Bourassa, N., Zuckerman, E., & Benkler, Y. (2017). Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society.

Flynn, D. J., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2017). The Nature and Origins of Misperceptions: Understanding False and Unsupported Beliefs About Politics. *Advances in Political Psychology*, 38(S1), 127-150.

Forberg, P. (2022). From the Fringe to the Fore: An Algorithmic Ethnography of the Far-Right Conspiracy Theory Group QAnon. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 51(3), 291-317.

Frankovic, K. (2016). Belief in conspiracies largely depends on political identity. YouGov. Retrieved June 12, 2024, from `https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/12/27/belief-conspiracies-largely-depends-political-iden`.

Frenken, M., & Imhoff, R. (2021). A Uniform Conspiracy Mindset or Differentiated Reactions to Specific Conspiracy Beliefs? Evidence From Latent Profile Analyses. *International Review of Social Psychology*, 34(1).

Friedman, J. (2019). *Power Without Knowledge: A Critique of Technocracy*. Oxford University Press.

Furnham, A. (2013). Commercial conspiracy theories: a pilot study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4(379).

Gagliardone, I., Gal, D., Alves, T., & Martinez, G. (2015). Countering Online Hate Speech. UNESCO.

Gallagher, A., Davey, J., & Hart, M. (2020). The Genesis of a Conspiracy Theory: Key trends in QAnon activity since 2017. Washington, DC: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

Gerth, M. (2015). Anti-Communism in Britain During the Early Cold War: A Very British Witch Hunt. London: University of London Press.

Gilens, M., & Murkawa, N. (2002). Elite cues and political decision making. *Political Decision Making, Deliberation and Participation*, 6, 15-49.

Gioia, F., Imperato, C., Boursier, V., Franceschini, C., Schimmenti, A., & Musetti, A. (2023). The role of defense styles and psychopathological symptoms on adherence to conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Scientific Reports*, 13(3482).

Goertzel, T. (1994). Belief in Conspiracy Theories. *Political Psychology*, 15(4), 731-742.

Goertzel, T. (2010). Conspiracy Theories in Science. *EMBO Reports*, 11(7), 493-499.

Goldman, A. (1999). *Knowledge in a Social World*. Oxford University Press.

González-Bailón, S., et al. (2023). Asymmetric ideological segregation in exposure to political news on Facebook. *Science*, 381(6656), 392-398.

Good, A. (Host). (2022). Minding the darkness. In *American Exception* (47). [Audio podcast episode].

Goodison, D., & Stout, M. (2013). Dzhokhar Tsarnaev loves pot, wrestling say friends. *Boston Herald*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.bostonherald.com/2013/04/20/dzhokhar-tsarnaev-loves-pot-wrestling-say-friends/`.

Greenwald, G. (2017). The Deep State Goes to War With President-Elect, Using Unverified Claims, as Democrats Cheer. *The Intercept*, 11 January.

Grinberg, N., Joseph, K., Friedland, L., Swire-Thompson, B., & Lazer, D. (2019). Fake News on Twitter During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. *Science*, 363(6425), 374-378.

Guess, A. M. (2021). (Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans' Online Media Diets. *American Journal of Political Science*, 65(4), 1007-1022.

Guess, A. M., & Coppock, A. (2020). Does Counter-Attitudinal Information Cause Backlash? Results from Three Large Survey Experiments. *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(4), 1497-1515.

Guess, A. M., & Munger, K. (2022). Digital Literacy and Online Political Behavior. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 11(1), 110-128.

Guess, A. M., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2018). Selective exposure to misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Working paper, European Research Council, Brussels. Retrieved June 12, 2024, from https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/fake-news-2016.pdf.

Guess, A. M., Lockett, D., Lyons, B., Montgomery, J. M., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2020a). 'Fake news' may have limited effects beyond increasing beliefs in false claims. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 1(1).

Guess, A. M., Lerner, M., Lyons, B., Montgomery, J. M., Nyhan, B., Reifler, J., & Sircar, N. (2020b). A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(27), 15536-15545.

Guess, A. M., McGregor, S., Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. (2024). Unbundling Digital Media

Literacy Tips: Results from Two Experiments. Preprint. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/u34fp.

Guess, A. M., Tucker, J., & Nagler, J. (2019). Less than you think: Prevalence and Predictors of Fake News Dissemination on Facebook. *Science Advances*, 5(1).

Guess, A. M., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2020). Exposure to Untrustworthy Websites in the 2016 US Election. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4, 472-480.

Hagen, K. (2017). Conspiracy Theorists and Monological Belief Systems. *Argumenta*, 3(2), 303-326.

Hagen, K. (2018). Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style: Do Conspiracy Theories Posit Implausibly Vast and Evil Conspiracies? *Social Epistemology*, 32(1), 24-40.

Harris, K. R. (2022). Some problems with particularism. *Synthese*, 200(6), 1-16.

Hartman, T. K., & Newmark, A. J. (2012). Motivated Reasoning, Political Sophisticaion and Associations Between President Obama and Islam. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 45(3), 449-455.

Hayden, T. (1962). *The Port Huron Statement.* New York: Students for a Democratic Society.

Herbert, M. (2008). The Plasticity of the Islamic Activist: Notes from the Counterterrorism Literature. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 32(5), 389-405.

Hine, G. E., Onaolapo, J., De Cristofaro, E., Kourtellis, N., Leontiadis, I., Samaras, R., Stringhini, G., & Blackburn, J. (2017). Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump: A Measurement Study of 4chan's Politically Incorrect Forum and Its Effects on the Web. In *Proceedings of the 11th International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*.

Hoback, C. (2021). *Q Into the Storm* [film]. HBO.

Holoyda, B. (2022). QAnon: A Modern Conspiracy Theory and the Assessment of Its Believers. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law*, 50(2), 1-12.

Hosseinmardi, H., Ghasemian, A., Clauset, A., Mobius, M., Rothschild, D. M., & Watts, D. J. (2021). Examining the consumption of radical content on YouTube. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(32).

Husting, G., & Orr, M. (2007). Dangerous machinery: 'Conspiracy theorist' as a transpersonal strategy of exclusion. *Symbolic Interaction*, 30(2), 127-150.

Hyzen, A., & Van den Bulck, H. (2021). Conspiracies, Ideological Entrepreneurs and Digital Popular Culture. *Media and Communication*, 9(3), 179-188.

Imhoff, R., & Bruder, M. (2014). Speaking (un-)truth to power: Conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude. *European Journal of Personality*, 28(1), 25-43.

Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2014a). The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint. *British Journal of Psychology*, 105(1), 35-36.

Jolley, D., & Douglas, K. M. (2014b). The effects of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories on vaccination intentions. *PloS One*, 9(2).

Jolley, D., & Paterson, J. L. (2020). Pylons ablaze: Examining the role of 5G COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and support for violence. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 59(3), 628-640.

Katz, E. (1996). And Deliver Us from Segmentation. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 546, 22-33.

Keeley, B. L. (1999). Of Conspiracy Theories. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96(3), 109-126.

King, M., & Taylor, D. (2011). The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 23(4), 602-622.

Klepper, D. (2024). Takeaways from the AP's look at the role of conspiracy theories in American politics and society. *AP*. Retrieved June 14, 2024, from `https://apnews.com/article/conspiracy-theory-misinformation-trump-qanon-facebook-twitter-39505e8c05b55f91856d809ab6e553a8`.

Kunda, Z. (1990). The Case for Motivated Reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 480-498.

Lagorio-Chafkin, C. (2018). *We Are The Nerds: The Birth and Tumultuous Life of Reddit, the Internet's Culture Laboratory*. Hachette Books.

Lamberty, P., & Imhoff, R. (2018). Powerful pharma and its marginalized alternatives? Effects of individual differences in conspiracy mentality on attitudes toward medical approaches. *Social Psychology*, 49(5), 255-270.

Layman, G. C., & Carsey, T. M. (2002). Party Polarization and Party Structuring of Policy Attitudes: A Comparison of Three NES Panel Studies. *Political Behavior*, 24(3), 199-236.

Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1948). *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. Columbia University Press.

Ledwich, M., & Zaitsev, A. (2020). Algorithmic Extremism: Examining YouTube's Rabbit Hole of Radicalization. *First Monday*, 25(3).

Ledwich, M., Zaitsev, A., & Laukemper, A. (2022). Radical bubbles on YouTube? Revisiting algorithmic extremism with personalised recommendations. *First Monday*, 27(12).

Lepselter, S. (2024). Resonant Apophenia. In J. Masco & L. Wedeen (Eds.), *Conspiracy/Theory*. Duke University Press.

Levy, N. (2007). Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories. *Synthese*, 153(2), 431-447.

Lewis, R. (2018). Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube. Data & Society.

Lewis, R. (2020). 'This is what the news won't show you': YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-celebrity. *Television & New Media*, 21(2), 201-217.

Loziak, A., & Havrilova, D. (2024). Conspiracy Mentality: How it Relates to Populism, Relative Deprivation, Mistrust of Expertise and Voting Behaviour. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 20(1), 1-15.

Lyons, B. A., Montgomery, J. M., Guess, A. M., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2021). Overconfidence in news judgments is associated with false news susceptibility. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(23).

Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (Eds.). (2009). *Explaining Institutional Change*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Marchlewska, M., Szczepańska, D., Karakula, A., Molenda, Z., Rogoza, M., & Maison, D. (2022). The devil is not as black as he is painted? On the positive relationship between food industry conspiracy beliefs and conscious food choices. *PloS ONE*, 17(8), e0272737.

Masco, J., & Wedeen, L. (2024). Introduction. In J. Masco & L. Wedeen (Eds.), *Conspiracy/Theory*. Duke University Press.

Mauran, C. (2024). 200,000 Facebook Marketplace user records were leaked on the dark web.

Mashable. Retrieved June 13, 2024, from https://mashable.com/article/facebook-marketplace-data-breach-details.

Melley, T. (2000). *Empire of Conspiracy: the culture of paranoia in postwar America*. Cornell University Press.

Melley, T. (2024). Conspiracy Theory, and the 'Post-Truth' Public Sphere. In J. Masco & L. Wedeen (Eds.), *Conspiracy/Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Miller, E. H. (2021). *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism*. University of Chicago Press.

Miller, J., Saunders, K., & Farhart, C. (2016). Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: the Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust. *American Journal of Political Science*, 60(4), 824-844.

Minutaglio, R. (2018). My Boyfriend Reads QAnon Theories. I Still Love Him, But I'm Worried. *Esquire*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a22664244/qanon-boyfriend-conspiracy-theorist-my-partner-deep-state/.

Mitchell, A., Jurkowitz, M., Oliphant, J. B., & Shearer, E. (2020). Political Divides, Conspiracy Theories and Divergent News Sources Heading Into 2020 Election. Pew Research Center. Retrieved June 12, 2024, from https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/09/16/political-divides-conspiracy-theories-and-divergent-news-sources-heading-into-2020-election/.

Mosley, T., & McMahon, S. (2021). Losing A Loved One To QAnon: The Reality Of Navigating Relationships With Conspiracy Theorists. *WBUR*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2021/03/26/qanon-family-members.

Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Müller, J.-W. (2016). *What Is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Munger, K. (2024). *The YouTube Apparatus*. Cambridge University Press.

Munger, K., & Phillips, J. (2022). Right-Wing YouTube: A Supply and Demand Perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(1), 186-219.

Nagesh, A. (2021). The moment QAnon took the person I love most. *BBC*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57369349`.

Napolitano, M. G., & Reuter, K. (2021). What Is A Conspiracy Theory? *Erkenntnis*, 88(5), 2035-2062.

Nefes, T. S. (2015). Scrutinizing impacts of conspiracy theories on readers' political views: a rational choice perspective on anti-semitic rhetoric in Turkey. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 66(3), 557-575.

Nefes, T. S. (2017). The impacts of the Turkish government's conspiratorial framing of the Gezi Park protests. *Social Movement Studies*, 16(5), 610-622.

Neylan, J., Biddlestone, M., Roozenbeek, J., & van der Linden, S. (2023). How to 'inoculate' against multimodal misinformation: A conceptual replication of Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2020). *Scientific Reports*, 13(18273).

Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions. *Political Behavior*, 32, 303-330.

Oglesby, C., & Shaull, R. (1967). *Containment and Change*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

Oglesby, C. (1974). In Defense of Paranoia. *Ramparts*, November.

Oglesby, C. (1976). *The Yankee and Cowboy War: Conspiracies from Dallas to Watergate and Beyond*. New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation.

Oliver, R. P. (1964). Marxmanship in Dallas. *American Opinion*, 7(2), 13-28.

Oliver, R. P. (1981). *America's Decline: The Education of a Conservative*. Sussex: Historical Review Press.

Oliver, J. E., & Rahn, W. M. (2016). Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016 Election. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 667(1), 189-206.

Oliver, J. E., & Wood, T. J. (2014). Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(4), 952-966.

Partin, W. (2017). On Air With LA's Most Wanted Man, 'Life Streamer' Ice Poseidon. *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved June 14, 2024, from `https://web.archive.org/web/20171114184112/http://www.rollingstone.com/glixel/news/a-day-with-las-most-wanted-life-streamer-ice-poseidon-w486841`.

Pasek, J., Stark, T. H., Krosnick, J. A., & Thompson, T. (2015). What motivates a conspiracy theory? Birther beliefs, partisanship, liberal-conservative ideology, and anti-Black attitudes. *Electoral Studies*, 40, 482-489.

Pelkmans, M., & Machold, R. (2011). Conspiracy theories and their truth trajectories. *Focaal*, 59, 66-80.

Pennycook, G., Cannon, T. D., & Rand, D. G. (2018). Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 147(12), 1865-1880.

Pigden, C. (1993). Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 25(1), 3-34.

Pigden, C. (1995). Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 25(1), 3-34.

Pigden, C. (2007). Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom. *Episteme*, 4(2), 219-232.

Popper, K. (1966). *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton University Press.

Quigley, C. (1966). *Tragedy and Hope*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

Radnitz, S., & Underwood, P. (2017). Is Belief in Conspiracy Theories Pathological? A Survey Experiment on the Cognitive Roots of Extreme Suspicion. *British Journal of Political Science*, 47(1), 113-129.

Ramsay, R. (1992). Right Woos Left: Review. *Lobster*, 23.

Rao, A., Morstatter, F., & Lerman, K. (2022). Partisan asymmetries in exposure to misinformation. *Scientific Reports*, 12(15671).

Rhodes-Purdy, M., Navarre, R., & Utych, S. (2023). *The Age of Discontent: Populism, Extremism and Conspiracy Theories in Contemporary Democracies*. Cambridge University Press.

Ribeiro, M. H., Ottoni, R., West, R., Almeida, V. A. F., & Meira Jr., W. (2020). Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube. In *Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency* (pp. 131-141).

Roberts, S. T. (2014). *Behind the Screen: The Hidden Digital Labor of Commercial Content Moderation*. Dissertation.

Roberts, S. T. (2016). Digital Refuse: Canadian Garbage, Commercial Content Moderation and the Global Circulation of Social Media's Waste. *Media Studies Publications*, 14.

Roberts, S. T. (2018). Digital detritus: 'Error' and the logic of opacity in social media content moderation. *First Monday*, 23(3-5). Retrieved June 14, 2024, from `https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/8283/6649`.

Robison, J. (1797). *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe*. New York: George Forman.

Roozenbeek, J., Schneider, C. R., Dryhurst, S., Kerr, J., Freeman, A. L. J., Recchia, G., van der Bles, A. M., & van der Linden, S. (2020). Susceptibility to Misinformation About COVID-19 Around the World. *Royal Society Open Science*, 7(10), 201199.

Rosa, J. (2021). How QAnon conspiracies took over one mom's life: 'It made me emotionally unavailable'. *ABC News*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/qanon-conspiracies-moms-life-made-emotionally-unavailable/story?id=75840525`.

Rosenfeld, S. (2018). *Democracy and Truth: a Short History*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ryman, A. (2021). Far-right streamer 'Baked Alaska' found guilty of assault, disorderly conduct, criminal trespass in Scottsdale case. *AZCentral*. Retrieved June 14, 2024, from `https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/scottsdale/2021/11/01/far-right-streamer-baked-alaska-found-guilty-of-assault-disorderly-conduct-scottsdale/6237640001/`.

Sakamoto, R. (2011). 'Koreans, Go Home!' Internet Nationalism in Contemporary Japan as a Digitally Mediated Subculture. *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 9(10).

Samaha, A. (2021). My Mom Believes In QAnon. I've Been Trying To Get Her Out. *Buzzfeed News*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertsamaha/qanon-parents-millennial-children`.

Sandholtz, W. (2008). Dynamics of International Norm Change: Rules Against Wartime Plunder. *European Journal of International Relations*, 14(1), 101-131.

Sandholtz, W., & Stiles, K. (2009). *International Norms and Cycles of Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sato, R. (2023). The rabbit-hole of conspiracy theories: An analysis from the perspective of the free energy principle. *Philosophical Psychology*, 36(6), 1160-1181.

Schmitt, F. (1994). *Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Schneider, P. J., & Rizoiu, M.-A. (2023). The effectiveness of moderating harmful online content. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 120(34).

Scott, P. D. (1972). *The War Conspiracy*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.

Scott, P. D. (1993). *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sedgwick, M. (2010). The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22(4), 479-494.

Sirlin, N., Epstein, Z., Arechar, A. A., & Rand, D. G. (2021). Digital literacy is associated with more discerning accuracy judgments but not sharing intentions. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 2(6).

Sloterdijk, P. (1988). *Critique of Cynical Reason*. University of Minnesota Press.

Small, M. L. (2009). 'How many cases do I need?': On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research. *Ethnography*, 10(1), 5-38.

Smallpage, S. M., Enders, A. M., & Uscinski, J. E. (2017). The partisan contours of conspiracy theory beliefs. *Research & Politics*, 4(4).

Sobor, E. (2002). Instrumentalism, Parsimony, and the Akaike Framework. *Philosophy of Science*, 69(S3), S112-S123.

Solon, O. (2017). Facebook is hiring moderators. But is the job too gruesome to handle? *The Guardian*. Retrieved June 14, 2024, from `https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/04/facebook-content-moderators-ptsd-psychological-dangers`.

Sommer, W. (2023). *Trust the Plan: The Rise and Fall of QAnon*. HarperCollins.

Steinsson, S. (2024). Rule Ambiguity, Institutional Clashes, and Population Loss: How Wikipedia Became the Last Good Place on the Internet. *American Political Science Review*, 18(1), 235-251.

Stewart, K. (1999). Conspiracy Theory's Worlds. In G. Marcus (Ed.), *Paranoia Within Reason: a Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*. University of Chicago Press.

Stokes, P. (2018). Conspiracy Theory and the Perils of Pure Particularism. In M. R. X. Dentith (Ed.), *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*. Rowman and Littlefield.

Streeck, W., & Thelen, K. (2005). *Beyond Continuity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stroud, N. J. (2007). Media effects, selective exposure, & Fahrenheit 9/11. *Political Communication*, 24(4), 415-432.

Stroud, N. J. (2008). Media Use and Political Predispositions: Revisiting the Concept of Selective Exposure. *Political Behavior*, 30(3), 341-366.

Stroud, N. J. (2010). Polarization and partisan selective exposure. *Journal of Communication*, 60(3), 556-576.

Stroud, N. J. (2017). Selective Exposure Theories. In K. Kenski & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*. Oxford University Press.

Sunstein, C. R., & Vermeule, A. (2009). Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17(2), 202-227.

Sunstein, C. R. (2018). #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media. Princeton University Press.

Sutton, R. M., & Douglas, K. M. (2020). Conspiracy Theories and the Conspiracy Mindset: Implications for Political Ideology. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34, 118-122.

Swami, V. (2012). Social psychological origins of conspiracy theories: the case of the Jewish conspiracy theory in Malaysia. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 3.

Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), 755-769.

Tappin, B. M., Berinsky, A. J., & Rand, D. G. (2023). Partisans' receptivity to persuasive messaging is undiminished by countervailing party leader cues. *Nature Human Behavior*, 7, 568-582.

Ternullo, S. (2022). 'I'm Not Sure What To Believe': Media Distrust and Opinion Formation during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *American Political Science Review*, 116(3), 1096-1109.

Thalmann, K. (2019). *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory Since the 1950s: "A Plot To Make Us Look Foolish"*. London and New York: Routledge.

Thelen, K. (2004). *How Institutions Evolve*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Thielmann, I., & Hilbig, B. E. (2023). Generalized Dispositional Distrust as the Common Core of Populism and Conspiracy Mentality. *Political Psychology*, 44(4), 789-805.

Toth, M. A. (1972). Toward a Theory of the Routinization of Charisma. *Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal*, 9(2), 93-98.

Tufekci, Z. (2018). YouTube, the Great Radicalizer. *New York Times*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html`.

Uscinski, J. E. (2023). What Are We Doing When We Research Misinformation? *Political Epistemology*, 2, 2-14.

Uscinski, J. E., & Enders, A. M. (2023). What Is a Conspiracy Theory and Why Does It Matter? *Critical Review*, 35(1-2), 148-169.

Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014). *American Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Uscinski, J. E., Enders, A. M., Klofstad, C., Seelig, M., Funchion, J., Everett, C., Wuchty, S., Premaratne, K., & Murthi, M. (2020). Why do people believe COVID-19 conspiracy theories? *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 1(Special Issue on COVID-19 and Misinformation).

Uscinski, J. E., Enders, A. M., Seelig, M. I., et al. (2021). American politics in two dimensions: partisan and ideological identities versus anti-establishment orientations. *American Journal of Political Science*, 65(4), 877-895.

Uscinski, J. E., Enders, A. M., Klofstad, C. A., & Stoler, J. (2022). Cause and effect: On the antecedents and consequences of conspiracy theory beliefs. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 47, 101364.

Uscinski, J. E., Klofstad, L. K., & Atkinson, M. D. (2016). What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions. *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(1), 57-71.

van den Meer, T. G. L. A., Hameleers, M., & Ohme, J. (2023). Can Fighting Misinformation Have a Negative Spillover Effect? How Warnings for the Threat of Misinformation Can Decrease General News Credibility. *Journalism Studies*, 24(6), 803-823.

van Prooijen, J.-W. (2022). Psychological benefits of believing conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 47, 101352.

Ventura, T., Munger, K., McCabe, K., & Chang, K.-C. (2021). Connective Effervescence and Streaming Chat During Political Debates. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, 1.

Virgil, pseud. (2016). The Deep State vs. Donald Trump. *Breitbart*, 12 December.

Virgil, pseud. (2020). The Deep State Becomes The Obvious State. *Breitbart*, 9 September.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146-1151.

Walker, J. (2014). *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*. Harper Collins.

Wang, A. B. (2016). Post-truth named 2016 word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries. *Washington Post*. Retrieved June 12, 2024, from `https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/16/post-truth-named-2016-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries/`.

Watt, C. S. (2020). The QAnon orphans: people who have lost loved ones to conspiracy theories. *The Guardian*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/23/qanon-conspiracy-theories-loved-ones`.

Watts, M. D., Domke, D., Shah, D. V., & Fan, D. P. (1999). Elite Cues and Media Bias in Presidential Campaigns: Explaining Public Perceptions of a Liberal Press. *Communication Research*, 26(2), 144-175.

Weber, M. (1968). *Economy and Society*. New York: Bedminster Press.

Wedeen, L. (2024). On Uncertainty and the Question of Judgment. In J. Masco & L. Wedeen (Eds.), *Conspiracy/Theory*. Duke University Press.

Weill, K. (2018). Christmas Is the Loneliest Time for Qanon Fans. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved May 14, 2024, from `https://www.thedailybeast.com/christmas-is-the-loneliest-time-for-qanon-fans`.

Welch, R. (1963). *The Neutralizers*. Belmont, Massachusetts: The John Birch Society.

Welch, R. (1964). *The Politician*. Belmont, Massachusetts: Belmont Publishing Company.

Welch, R. (1966). *More Stately Mansions*. Belmont, Massachusetts: American Opinion.

Wiener, A. (2009). Enacting Meaning-in-Use: Qualitative Research on Norms and International Relations. *Review of International Studies*, 35(1), 175-193.

Wiktorowicz, Q. (2005). *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Winter, J., & Groll, E. (2017). Here's The Memo That Blew Up The NSC. *Foreign Policy*, 10 August.

Wood, M. (2016). Some Dare Call It Conspiracy: Labeling Something a Conspiracy Theory Does Not Reduce Belief in It. *Political Psychology*, 37(5), 695-705.

Wood, M. J., & Douglas, K. M. (2013). What about Building 7? A Social Psychological Study of Online Discussion of 9/11 Conspiracy Theories. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 409.

Wood, M. J., Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2012a). Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3(6), 767-773.

Wood, M. J., Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2012b). Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3(6), 767-773.

Zadrozny, B., & Collins, B. (2018). How three conspiracy theorists took 'Q' and sparked Qanon. *NBC News*. Retrieved June 10, 2024, from `https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-n900531`.

Zaller, J. (1992). *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge University Press.

Zannettou, S., Caulfield, T., De Cristofaro, E., Kourtelris, N., Leontiadis, I., Sirivianos, M., Stringhini, G., & Blackburn, J. (2017). The web centipede: understanding how web communities influence each other through the lens of mainstream and alternative news sources. In *IMC '17: Proceedings of the 2017 Internet Measurement Conference* (pp. 405-417).

Zhang, C. C., Zaleski, G., Kailley, J. N., Teng, K. A., English, M., Riminchan, A., & Robillard, J. M. (2024). Debate: Social media content moderation may do more harm than good for youth mental health. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 29(1), 104-106.