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Trusted (Mis) information: An Essay

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Abstract If the audience accepts it, a lie is an objective truth. And leaders know this. This essay gives a brief background on QAnon and other extremist groups, but shows this mindset is present in arenas not traditionally seen as conspiratorial. This is a conceptual essay that is not only looking for answers but wants to inquire why people are not asking questions. The findings are bleak. There is no way to accept that misinformation does not shape people, but this essay looks at how it can mold an audience at a core level. This is evidenced by shifts in public reactions influenced by lies or deniable plausibility, and the results are seen on election days. Focusing on the commonality between extremist groups and how and why the general population has voted may not be a pleasant thought, but it must be examined.

Keywords conspiracy theory, QAnon, plausible deniability

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Introduction

Nobody is going to advocate for falsehoods and deceptions so let's discuss what counts for information, and how it is accepted. The Brookings Institution reported in 2020 that over 3.5 million people received QAnon messages on social media platforms. This certainly does not suggest that everyone who interacted with this content believed it, but Brookings also projected that QAnon membership may have reached one million viewers (Meriem, 2023). My concern is not the total sum of followers; I am alarmed that the number was never zero. The greatest problem, however, is that conspiracy theories must have a level of consent amongst the voting public. The messaging of Qanon has been widely debunked, but that may not matter. There is a mentality present that influences people, and spreading misinformation is easy because it can be salacious, and it is not confined to the restraints of verified facts. Conspiracy mindsets are not reserved for fringe groups.

This essay looks at what conspiracy groups do, how they communicate when recruiting members, and how extreme behaviors can be normalized by citing the involvement of others. In examining how the previous actions of radical groups can have similar characteristics to present-day politics, there should be a broader definition of extreme ideology. The worst place to look for conversations about a fanatical belief system is at the outskirts of the discourse; these dialogues are influencing all three branches of the United States government.

QAnon

A brief recap of QAnon must include the belief that Hollywood elites and high-ranking Democratic officials are involved in child-trafficking rings while engaging in Satanic rituals. Other QAnon tenets include that the Covid-19 pandemic was planned, and the vaccines are part of a sinister plot to support the deep state. The belief that John F. Kennedy Jr. is still alive and is working with Donald Trump was another missive from QAnon, as was the belief that the substance adrenochrome was harvested from the blood of trafficked children. The source of this information was posted on the online message board 4-Chan by someone only known as "Q." This screen name was used because the anonymous insider claimed to have "Q-level" government clearance. To receive Q-level classification a person must undergo thorough background checks in order to be trusted with sensitive, national security intelligence. To combat the Satanic pedophile rings, according to Q, Donald Trump waged an underground war and all of this would be revealed in "The Great Awakening" and "The Storm." These events promised to prove that Trump was the hero of this movement, and the mainstream media—which Q stated was part of the deep state—would be punished for their censorship and lies (Jones & Heckenlively, 2023).

The language of QAnon messaging is tailored to reach an audience with inherent mistrust of government and large organizations, then foster that uncertainty. Followers found themselves influenced by Q, even though they did not know who he was. It did not matter. There was a connection, and for many that felt deep, even if the source was ambiguous.

4-Chan is a platform that was started by Christopher Poole, who went by the user handle "Moot" in 2003. This site was characterized by anonymous discussions and there were no regulations, monitoring, or fact checking. Claims of the Satan-worshipping pedophiles first showed up on 4-Chan, as well as the discussions that Donald Trump was fighting a secret battle against dangerous cabals. Users of 4-Chan had the ability to create messaging and post pictures without creating a verified identity. As the site continued, the content became increasingly inflammatory. This served as an invitation for posting extreme ideologies and conspiracy theories. Since there was no oversight for content, the subject matter on 4-Chan became more violent. Rhetoric that became vital to the spread of Qanon was, "Do your own research." This discussion created seeds of mistrust in mainstream media, because these words on their own are benign, but in the context of conspiracy, they were used to discount vital information, and in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, potentially life-saving messaging. QAnon platforms portrayed Trump as a savior figure, so when he lost the 2020 election, a barrage of messaging flooded the internet, moving past 4-chan and onto Facebook and Twitter (Bradley, 2023). Flags and apparel showing giant Q's were prominently displayed during the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021. The impact of QAnon cannot be dismissed when there is a confirmed follower of Q in the United States Congress. Republican Marjorie Taylor Greene was elected to Georgia's 14th district in 2020, and has since been re-elected. Other members of Congress who have echoed QAnon talking points are Colorado Republican Lauren Boebert and Arizona Republican Paul Gosar.

Virginia Thomas, the wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas was active in the "Stop the Steal" movement that falsely claimed that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election. Virginia Thomas has echoed talking

points about the “deep state,” and in her text messages with Mark Meadows has claimed there were voter irregularities that favored Joe Biden (Defrner, 2024). While Virginia Thomas has never voiced actual support for QAnon itself, there are enough overlapping ideas to question plausible deniability.

Comforts of Misinformation

Comfort can be the result of misinformation because it may offer an explanation for troubling issues. There is also the feeling of community. Messaging that agrees with a person’s beliefs and fears may naturally be accepted as fact. In times of uncertainty, comfort can be found in confident statements, and these declarations often go unchecked.

This leads to questions that need to be asked.

Q1) Is a false promise from a confident leader more comforting than shared uncertainty?

Q2) Is that comfort still present if the promise has been proven false?

False information can generate and be spread with far greater ease than data requiring verification. The Covid-19 pandemic had consequences far beyond the illness, and lies were easily disseminated. While in isolation, frightened people are always going to look for answers. Given the novel aspect of the virus, answers from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) could not be as quick or thorough as anyone wanted. People wanted explanation, and when groups like the CDC and WHO could not immediately provide them, someone else did. Controversy remains on the pandemic topic, but it is abundantly clear that many with the strongest opinions are not basing those conclusions on verified data.

A conspiracy theory is defined here as a naturally contentious narrative that events are not what they seem, and are actually the sinister actions of powerful groups. A narrative has a persuasive element. Fantasy, folklore, and traditions carry power and shape a person’s identity, either with their own heritage, or a degree of participation. Not only is there a degree of belonging, there is a complex interpretive process that goes with how somebody learns about something, and how they identify with it. If a person can identify with a person in any narrative telling, there can be a much deeper connection than a simple declarative sentence instructing a person about their identity, and their place in the world around them. In the context of conspiracy theory, this may be heightened because there is a secret shared and a common enemy.

Conspiracy theories, like any other narrative, are nuanced and complex. It is important to understand the storytelling element when trying to perceive how people accept what stands in direct contrast to logical reasoning. It also helps to consider the *theory* part of conspiracy theory. It is what brings in the narrative element and distinguishes a conspiracy from a conspiracy theory. A conspiracy theory usually ascribes some sort of agency behind an activity, and can have a villainous description of someone who is behind such activity. Discussions about Hollywood elite, secret government agencies, and shadow societies can create an environment where there is an organization that is portrayed as evil, and it can generate a place where that enemy is created.

Christopher Poole, the founder of 4-Chan, now has a net worth of over 2.5 million. Alex Jones—prior to the lawsuit—was worth over one billion dollars. Profit can be made when delivering misinformation. There can also be political power and influence gained by telling a large audience anything, as long as there is a confident delivery.

Debunked

The tenets of QAnon have been proven false, yet there are still followers. Even if the QAnon name does not have the same fanfare, the statements of Q still influence people. Followers predict that Q will start posting again, and given the fundamental anonymity, any user can claim this assumed name and take over. If the messages are believed, then they are true to the receiver. Add that to the iconoclastic disposition of the organization’s following, there is so much distrust which will cause objective, foundational arguments to be dismissed.

Igor Lanis

Igor Lanis was a fifty-two-year-old man from Michigan. His daughter, Rebecca Lanis, was not home the night of September 14, 2022. Otherwise, she likely would have been shot by her father. Rebecca had described her father as a “good dad” who was very much a part of her life. At the beginning of the pandemic, Igor started to work from home. While this was troubling to him, as it was for countless others, Rebecca reported that he was slipping deeper into isolation. The words he used started to change. He began talking about the “deep state,” and showed agitation every

time he did so. Rebecca reports that her father went from being a regular watcher of Fox News to “religiously” watching *InfoWars* with Alex Jones and One America News (Brooks, 2024).

There was an argument earlier in the day at the Lanis household. Rebecca’s sister, who was paralyzed by a gunshot from her father, does not speak much about the incident. She did, however, report that one of the last things her father ever said was about the deep state. While the Lanis case is certainly more extreme than the vast majority of instances revolving around paranoia and conspiracy theories, it goes to show how powerful a narrative can be.

Crisis Actors

There can be no greater horror than a school shooting. Following some of the more high-profile shootings the disturbing trend of calling victims “crisis actors” began (Keely, 2024). This idea started with the belief that the victims of these shootings had faked their deaths, and the survivors were hired by the government to influence the public into taking action on gun control. The concept of “crisis actors” became a trending topic on social media after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. David Hogg survived the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida in 2018. In the aftermath he became a visible advocate for gun control, which validated the opinions of Marjorie Taylor Greene and Alex Jones that the shooting was a ruse presented to dismantle the second amendment. Greene and Jones both used their platforms to lambast Hogg and discredit his statements. The seeds of mistrust had been sewn well before the Parkland shooting. So, when Hogg began to speak about gun violence, this confirmed to followers of Greene, Jones, QAnon, and other extremist groups that Parkland was indeed a conspiracy. Laura Loomer, a political activist and influencer, has echoed claims that school shootings are staged and there are many “false flags.” While she has never made the statement that school shootings are fake, she alluded to the notion, and has relied on plausible deniability (Jussim, 2024).

Alex Jones may be the biggest name when it comes to voicing conspiracy theories, and is one of the few who has been held accountable. In 2024, Jones’s lies about the Sandy Hook shooting caused him to be found liable for nine hundred sixty-five million dollars. Jones’s show, *InfoWars*, had an audience of millions before the pandemic, but his numbers had increased since 2020. Jones had said that September 11, 2001 was an inside job, the United States government created the AIDS virus, and chemicals in the water turned frogs gay.

While objectively absurd, it is vital to see how someone might be interested in something ridiculous. The way media delivery has changed plays a factor in how Jones’s popularity has increased. Appraisals of success are based on “clicks” and “follows,” which are not a qualitative measurement that assess engagement, belief, or understanding. Stories that seem outlandish create curiosity, which leads to clicks. The more clicks, the greater the platform, and with that increased power there have been dire consequences.

The 5g Theory

The 5G Theory gained traction because its implementation coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. Rollout of 5G (fifth generation) wireless technology began in 2019 so the timing alone caused message boards to sound alarms. There were also widely reported claims that 5G caused catastrophic environmental damage that killed birds, insects, and vital parts of the ecosystem. Unfounded reports of this technology creating a tool for mind control were also spread, as were posts of 5G being used as a surveillance tool (Amhed, et al., 2020). The World Health Organization did not find there was unsafe exposure, but the credibility of WHO had already been questioned by Q and other message posts, so an organization that had been disparaged is not going to have the same authority with all followers.

Other Extreme Groups

Jim Jones had a compound in Jonestown, Guyana, and David Koresh had a compound in Waco, Texas. Both of these cult leaders claimed to be an incarnation of Jesus Christ, and this led to his followers doing anything they wanted (Gunn, 2023). The overwhelming majority of these cults died as a result of their servitude (Wright, 2024). Accounts of Jones and Koresh report that these leaders were confident and charismatic. These characteristics led to a devout following with deep obedience. The allure of leadership in Heaven’s Gate and the Raelian Movement convinced male members to castrate themselves as a sign of loyalty and devotion (Chryssides, 2021). Leaders who have the ability to make followers submit elevate their own standing in a variety of ways, and the power dynamic can be established—and maintained—simply with words.

What Is Knowledge?

Qanon members and others who subscribe to these beliefs often do not simply believe something, but it speaks to a “truth” that may hit on a deeper level than most people are able to believe. Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that examines the nature of knowledge, how it is acquired, and what justifies belief. There are deeply held beliefs within extremist groups, and the call to “do your own research,” can become a trust issue. It is not realistic to investigate claims about the origins of a virus, or the inner workings of a government agency, so people are going to look for sources that align with their beliefs, fears, or mistrust. The narratives of these groups can certainly affect how events are viewed and filtered, and “do your own research” can quickly be a call to turn from an objective source, and onto one that aligns with a belief system (Romer & Jamison, 2020).

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner posits that an individual’s self-worth depends highly upon inclusion in social groups (Harwood, 2020). These associations are counted as in-groups, which means organizations where the individual belongs, and out-groups, which, as the name indicates, is where there is no fellowship. SIT, which was studied in the 1970’s and ‘80’s was part of a series on self-categorization that included self-esteem, self-categorization, interpersonal, and politics. This theory predicts behaviors based on belonging, even if that acceptance is only perceived.

More than eighty years ago American psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943) where he created a hierarchy of needs. This list contained needs like psychological and safety, but may be best known for including the need to belong. While this famous study is often represented as a pyramid, it is worth noting that Maslow did not create this representation. What he did, however, was show that inclusion has been an important part of identity, and it is safe to say this has not changed. In the last eight decades, the way to shape those identities has grown to include online forums.

Language is a malleable construct. It is just noise with significance attached, and these meanings can change. In the case of extremism, there is also plausible deniability. Plausible deniability gives speakers the opportunity to distance themselves from what has been spoken. Lauren Boebert and Paul Gosar have both used QAnon talking points but were never actual members. Both Boebert and Gosar said they had not been quoting Q, rather there happened to be overlapping ideas. One of the powers of language is also its weakness. Words have both denotative and cognitive meanings, so they can be a creative tool, but since there are not always concrete, designated definitions, it can be easy to spread misinformation while claiming there was never a mistruth.

Language itself can be shaped by misuse. The words momentarily, utilize, and decimate have been misapplied with such frequency that the Oxford Dictionary amended the definitions to match popular usage (Steinmetz, 2009). So, there are a number of problems to recognize when it comes to how messaging is sent, and received. Language can be as unreliable as the information communicated, it does not matter if material is proven false, and the influence of the sender is strong even if the source is obscure.

Moving Forward... Or Backwards

If influence aligns with belief, there is power. Conspiracy theories are going to continue, lies will spread, and the vulnerable will be preyed upon. No amount of awareness can prevent a pattern that has repeated itself for countless generations, and the environment to spread misinformation is not filled with safeguards or vetting measures. Lies get attention. The salacious lies get traction. Lauren Boebert, Marjorie Taylor Greene, and Paul Gosar have all been elected, and re-elected. Their electorates had heard the messaging, and they remain in office. Lausa Loomer is a close associate of Donald Trump, and her claims that 9/11 was inside job, Muslims should not be allowed in the United States, and Covid being a hoax have not been addressed by the president-elect. JD Vance and Trump made unsubstantiated proclamations about Haitian immigrants eating pets in Springfield, Ohio. This resulted in extreme groups making bomb threats to schools and demonstrations by neo-Nazi organizations. Not only did Trump and Vance win the presidential election, they carried Ohio. If the state that was directly harmed by brazen falsehoods does not condemn the lie, the climate for extreme ideologies could not be more fertile.

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