



THEME 01

QAnon and knowledge

QANON

POST-TRUTH

CONSPIRACY
THEORY

QAnon is a well-known conspiracy theory. It's also a phenomenon of an era beyond the era of post-truth, in which we uphold the value of truth we are not able to obtain anymore: an era in which there is no truth. More and more people adhere to QAnon, but how should we understand this as a sociopolitical phenomenon?

Our observations

- QAnon first appeared in October 2017 on 4chan, an online forum popular among alt-right and far-right adherents (it later moved to 8kun, a similar website that used to be called 8chan). The identity of the founder is unknown - all messages on 4chan are anonymous - but this person, who calls himself "Q Clearance Patriot" or just "Q", claims to be a high-ranking official in the Trump administration with information about a conspiracy to overthrow the president originating from deep within the state. Since October 2017, the anonymous person or group known as "Q" is responsible for 4,600 posts, or "[Q drops](#)" indicating that the world, but especially the U.S., is controlled by a "deep state" that Trump is attempting to fight.
- QAnon originated in a discussion on several platforms on social media and has become something of an "[omnispiracy](#)", encompassing different conspiracy theories. The problem is that its belief systems are intertwined systems of different beliefs that are codependent, so that the many conspiracy theories and beliefs within QAnon can mutually reinforce each other, which is how others can be persuaded to accept new beliefs. As such, QAnon offers an integrated whole of correlated conspiracy theories and "fake news" notions. To deal with QAnon, the whole information ecosystem should be dealt with. Otherwise, any solution will remain local and QAnon will keep cropping up. This could be done by attacking the distribution system of misinformation by informing users about manipulation and fake news, combating echo chambers and tunnels for algorithmic recommendations and actively highlighting contradictions and opposing perspectives, and breaking trust in conspiracy theorists and theories by demonstrating how wrong they are.
- Though it's unclear whether QAnon has attracted more adherents than other conspiracy theories, the difference is that with QAnon, those in power spread the theory and thus confirm that its adherents aren't crazy or outlaws. The community formed by QAnon has helped it to linger longer than other conspiracy theories, while the community works together to ascertain the real truth. Moreover, it plays into the desire for apocalypse and the complete collapse of society and its institutions. At the moment, there are over [35 politicians](#) in the American Congress that have in some form or other proclaimed themselves adherents of QAnon.

Connecting the dots

For a number of years, especially since the election of Trump, we've had to deal with fake news. This is, however, only a phase we'll have to go through. We've always relied on certain authorities that brought us truth, such as religious leaders, politicians or other persons whose knowledge we took as gospel. This led to a concentration of power, which also resulted in corruption or tunnel vision (whether consciously or subconsciously). QAnon has emerged from this and shows us a glimpse of the dynamic between media and a "post-truth" era. How can we now understand the rise of QAnon as an exponent of this?

First of all, digital technology now gives people the means to investigate for themselves and to share their insights at low cost and high scalability. This is visible in the stories and decodings of Q drops. Furthermore, the filter bubbles and echo chambers of digital media provide people who have extreme ideas with a platform and the means to broadcast their ideas. As such, QAnon and its narrative belong to the postmodern condition of deconstruction, debunking and false consciousness. Think, for example, of the critical theory of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – the “[masters of suspicion](#)”, according to Ricoeur – and this discourse is where QAnon fits in, with its alleged criticism of elites and the technocratic system (i.e. the deep state). QAnon thus appeals to a group that suffers existentially-economically, feels wronged by the leading elite and political systems, and therefore criticize these powers, which takes the form of accusations of corruption or running illustrious networks and systems (e.g. a pedophilia ring).

We're also living in a time of latent desire for [apocalypse and collapse](#): a preference for chaos in the system over

the maintaining of the status quo. That is also the proud message of QAnon's [Awakening and Calm before the storm](#). Furthermore, QAnon is a meta-conspiracy theory, feeding into all kinds of anti-government sentiment and aversion to centralization of power. This matches the libertarian, anarchist movements in [American culture](#). Corona has had a radicalizing effect on all this anti-government sentiment. Lastly, QAnon is mobilizing the strength of anonymous movements without a leader (e.g. Anonymous and Guy Fawkes, Bitcoin by Nakamoto). But we shouldn't just dismiss QAnon as an unnecessary conspiracy theory that wants to criticize, or as an absurd religion. In a broader sense, we're living in systems in which we mainly take for granted knowledge and convictions handed down to us, or which we're unable to verify. This isn't necessarily a problem, as long as we have faith in these systems, instruments and knowledge production. Not every person has to verify for herself whether the earth is in fact round, and we don't have to continuously engage in philosophical reflection on the knowledge instruments of a hospital to assess a form of treatment. And that means that we're living in a time of “conspiracy” of interrelated propositions and intertwined ways of knowledge production. And it isn't just in periods of great change and internal criticism that conditions for truth become apparent and clear. That makes QAnon a metamodern phenomenon; it constructs a narrative with an entire meta-narrative and idea of the Good Life, the political system and truth. At the same time, it's an undesirable outgrowth, because it's not committed to the epistemological conditions of falsifiable and coherent theory. Metamodernism is specifically supposed to guard us against that.

Implications

- **Effectively combating QAnon requires a broader view of our “ecology of knowledge production”, in which we include more aspects than a merely theoretical-discursive approach to knowledge production would (i.e. knowledge production as the formulation of true propositions and convictions). An increasing amount of research focuses on the way truth and our beliefs come into existence (e.g. the importance of [feelings](#), the broader [knowledge system](#) of propositions and mutual coherence between them, or the way [digital media](#) manipulate our rational capacities).**
- **Besides the strong focus on how knowledge arises “in ourselves”, we must take a broader view and consider the structural factors that contribute to the belief in conspiracy theories. We've written before about the significant demographic and political variables that influence the belief in conspiracy theories. But we should also reflect on the way we achieve ignorance instead of knowledge. The study of “[agnology](#)”, the construction of ignorance and its manifestations, can also be helpful in understanding how conspiracy theories play into this.**