

Decoding QAnon: Building an Adaptive Alternative Reality at the Crossroads of American
Conspiracism, Cultic Commodification, and Schizogenic Hyperreality

by

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A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2025

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

QAnon has grown beyond a single conspiracy theory to become a self-perpetuating conspiracist alternative reality, one whose impact on the American political and cultural landscape will long outlive the influence of its cryptic figurehead. As bizarre as the practices of QAnon and its decoding rituals may seem, this dissertation argues that QAnon is a reflection of the technocultural milieu of its creation, an emergent consequence of the intersection of three key technocultural trends: America's deeply entrenched cultural tradition of conspiracist narrativization, the commodification of culture under neoliberalism, and the predatory affordances of corporate media platforms optimized for the attention economy. Drawing from an array of interdisciplinary research and discursive examples drawn directly from the QAnon community, this dissertation presents a framework that can explain QAnon's viral success within the American technocultural context and offer insight into the ongoing renaissance in hyper-individualistic reactionary conspiracism that QAnon has catalyzed. Only by understanding how these three trends have mutually reinforced and influenced each other can we begin to understand QAnon's uniquely protean narrative structure and decipher the symbolic map of cultural dysfunction it represents.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation wouldn't have been possible without the steadfast support of my family and friends, in both keeping me sane and listening to my endless rants about singularly strange subject matter. In particular, I want to thank my parents for their unfailing faith in my abilities, and my partner Heather, whose unwavering support and insight kept me going.

Equally, this dissertation would not have been possible without the help of the brilliant minds of Waterloo's English faculty. The insights and support given by my supervisor Dr. McMurry, as well as from my committee members Dr. Weins and Dr. MacDonald were essential in seeing this project through to completion. I'd also like to thank Dr. Lamont for his rhetorical insight and teaching mentorship that proved invaluable to surviving and thriving in the long PhD process.

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INTRODUCTION: QANON - THE CANARY IN THE COALMINE OF CONSENSUS REALITY

In 2019, a prominent underboss of the Gambino mafia, Francesco “Franky Boy” Cali, was assassinated outside his home in Staten Island. On the surface, this might not sound like an especially novel incident—organized crime is a dangerous business, and murders are not uncommon. However, investigators would quickly realize they were dealing with something altogether stranger than a mere mafia hit. Cali was gunned down by a rather unlikely assassin: Anthony Comello, a man in his mid-20s who lived with his mother, a socially isolated young man with no connections to either organized crime or law enforcement. Beyond that oddity, the very fact of the assassination itself was bizarre, as it had been decades since a major mafia figure had been assassinated in New York. This was not due to their strength, but precisely because of their weakness. The traditional mafia families that films like “The Godfather” and “Goodfellas” had raised to media fame have long since been reduced by law enforcement, particularly once empowered by the RICO act, and superseded by newer criminal organizations who have proven more adaptable to the modern age (Jacobs). So why did this man, with no personal connection or material motivation, assassinate the figurehead of a criminal organization whose relevance looms larger in pop culture than reality?

The answer would be broadcast clearly by Comello on his first day in court, as he made a series of claims that proved confused, contradictory and utterly bizarre. He claimed he was simply trying to conduct a “citizen’s arrest” of Cali on explicit orders from President Trump, part of a wider operation to root out the “Deep State,” and that the CIA had brought the Mafia under the influence of a pedophilic satanic cabal. At his trial, Comello would draw Qs on his palms and speak at length about elaborate theories which blended an array of real-world events and popular myths. He would reference real-world CIA operations like “Operation Mockingbird” in one

statement, then follow it up with claims that Donald Trump had been sending Comello coded messages during public statements, ordering him to make a citizen's arrest of the mobster. Rather than targeting Cali for his role in organized crime, Comello was instead convinced that the mobster's role in organized crime was a mere smokescreen hiding his true status in a worldwide deep state cabal (Watkins). It was an incoherent mess of ideas, but there was a throughline that linked it all together—Q, the occluded prophet of the QAnon conspiracy movement, and symbolic figurehead of America's newest conspiracy theory phenomenon.

Unsurprisingly, Comello was no casual visitor to the world of conspiracy theorizing. Investigators quickly found that Comello had been leading a digital double life and that his alternate Instagram account "RealAmericasVoice" was filled with QAnon content (Schrader and Eustachewich). Not only was he consuming QAnon content, but he was also making his own. In the lead-up to Cali's killing, Comello had already begun live-streaming his attempts to live out his delusions, attempting to "arrest" New York mayor Bill DeBlasio twice and offering his services to the FBI to help arrest several prominent Democratic Congressmen (Watkins). To those who knew him before 2016, he had been a regular man whose life had fallen on hard times, living alone in his mother's basement without a steady job or future prospects. In the customizable reality of the digital world, he was "RealAmericasVoice," a tireless crusader for America, a "digital soldier" in an information war against the ultimate evil. For Comello, the delusional landscape of his digital life had proved far more persuasive than the mundane life he led in the material world.

Comello's lawyer would go on to successfully argue that his client was not mentally sound to stand trial, and it is admittedly hard to claim that his paranoid, contradictory ramblings

originated from a cogent mind. While Comello's story of paranoid delusion shaped by mass media is far from unique, it is the nature and origin of that delusion which make it notable.

Compare Comello to a similarly surreal case several decades prior. In 1989, Kenneth Noid took the staff of a Domino's Pizza hostage because of his persistent delusion that their mischievous mascot, The Noid, was part of an elaborate conspiracy to destroy his life (Blitz). Noid, like Comello, was socially isolated and unemployed, and like Comello, he believed he was receiving hidden messages in television broadcasts, all part of the cloak-and-dagger campaign of he imagined was being waged against him by Domino's Pizza. Perhaps most importantly, much like Comello, Noid was immersed in the world of conspiracy literature. Indeed, one of Noid's demands during the hostage crisis (aside from retiring The Noid mascot) was a copy of Robert Anton Wilson's book, *The Widow's Son*. Wilson, whose *Illuminatus* novels and "Operation Mindfuck" disinformation campaign helped popularize the modern conception of "The Illuminati," is a landmark figure in the American conspiracy world whose work helped set the stage for QAnon's emergence decades later (Walker).

Much like Comello, Noid was found not guilty by reason of insanity, though thankfully unlike Comello he did not kill anyone during his delusional episode. The key difference between the two lies in the origins of their delusional framework, and their access to the narrative resources needed to build it. Both Noid and Comello's delusions were shaped by mass-media consumption, untreated mental illness, social isolation, and conspiracy theories.



Figure 1. *The UnSeen011101.*

hands, belief in QAnon and stochastic violence go hand in hand (Daly; Madani; “Man Accused”). Even worse, those examples are only the most extreme, they do not even begin to account for the more subtle devastations wrought by belief in QAnon.

A particularly evocative example of this damage can be found in the account of one of the survivors of the Parkland school shooting in 2018. Their real name withheld for fear of attracting the attention of the very conspiracists they were speaking about, “Bill” told their story in a 2021 *Vice* article titled “I’m a Parkland Shooting Survivor. QAnon Convinced My Dad It Was All a Hoax.” During the pandemic lockdown, Bill’s father became absorbed into the cloak-and-dagger world of QAnon. Despite his own personal experience with the tragedy, despite living in the same community with other survivors and grieving parents, despite a lifetime of knowing and loving his son, Bill’s father became convinced that his own child was a crisis actor working for the deep state. Bill told *Vice* his father would go on regular rants at home against his son’s imagined crimes, making statements like, “You’re a real piece of work to be able to sit here and

act like nothing ever happened if it wasn't a hoax. Shame on you for being part of it and putting your family through it too” (Gilbert). Stories like these have become so common that they have generated entire subreddits filled with similar stories, and increasing attention from QAnon researchers (Mastroni and Mooney; Phillips; St-Amant et al.).

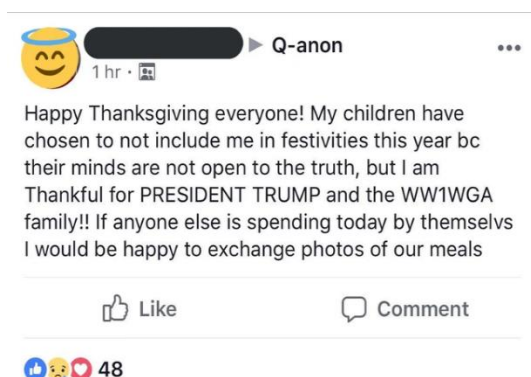


Figure 2. Krang T. Nelson.



Figure 3. Krang T. Nelson.

and Truth Social, QAnon devotees endlessly trade tales about their alienation from friends and family. Posts like these are extremely common around any holiday, as being exiled from family functions is a common rite of passage for Q’s digital soldiers. Yet as can be seen in these two posts to the Facebook group “Q-anon,” the typical response is not one of introspection, but defiant determination. Even in the face of such starkly depressing personal consequences, they remain steadfast in their beliefs, and their communities continue to grow.

In the 2020s, the case of Anthony Comello is no longer so singular or strange. Indeed, it would be hard to find an American who hasn’t had their own brush with a “Redpilled” relative,

Like so many others, Bill would later post about this experience on the subreddit QAnonCasualties, which is where the *Vice* reporter found his story. Even a cursory glance over subreddits like “QanonCasualties,” “ReQovery,” and “The Qult Headquarters” will show tens of thousands of posts by users posting versions of the same story: families torn apart, friendships ruined, and whole communities collapsing over the polarizing belief in QAnon’s self-referential web of conspiracy. Even in QAnon communities hidden away on Telegram, Gab

co-worker or friend. Despite the contradictory absurdity of their claims, despite the public mockery, and despite the loss of their families, jobs, and even their homes, the QAnon community remains steadfast in their belief that they have gained access to privileged, sacred knowledge through a series of social media posts. Sacred knowledge whose prophecies have failed again and again, sacred knowledge which failed to prevent Trump's loss in 2020, that failed to predict the Covid pandemic, that has consistently failed them in every material way possible. So why do these digital soldiers continue to march on?

From the bowels of 4Chan to the halls of Congress and even the Whitehouse itself, QAnon has grown from obscure internet curiosity to a full-blown cultural phenomenon. This dissertation argues that this is no unhappy accident, no aberration or statistical oddity. Instead, QAnon must be understood as a historically over-determined inevitably, the emergent consequence of the new modalities of digital media colliding with deeply rooted cultural narratives, supercharged by a digital hyperreality defined by a rapacious attention economy.

Defining QAnon

For the casual observer, conspiracy theories often fall into that nebulous zone of definition colloquially described as “I know it when I see it.” This is particularly relevant as the term “conspiracy theory” comes with a great deal of cultural baggage. It is not a neutral title, its usage within popular discourse carries the implication of a belief that is stigmatized, discredited, and otherwise excluded from “reasonable” mainstream discourse (Husting). Further compounding this problem are the term's loose definitional boundaries. Within its scope are narratives as diverse as the theoretically plausible (though entirely unproven), “The CIA killed JFK,” to the overtly preposterous, “The world is flat and the Illuminati keeps this truth hidden

from us.” Their claims may be rooted in elements of the current geopolitical landscape and gesture towards scientific facts, like those claiming that “jet fuel can’t melt steel beams,” leading to the claim that “9/11 was an inside job.” By the same token, popular conspiracy theories can base themselves in more esoteric claims like the state suppression of Atlantian Vril energy or the Akashic Records (Kachka; Soca). What is common across the whole category is a sense of pervasive persecution exercised by a malevolent, powerful group whose invisible tendrils of influence are responsible for the woes of the world.

Before something as complex as QAnon can be discussed, it must first be defined. This is easier said than done, as placing QAnon within a discreet category has proved to be exceedingly difficult. It contains many narratives that would qualify as “conspiracy theories,” but it is not bound by any narrative continuity or outcomes and has expanded its scope well beyond the boundaries of a single discreet conspiracy. This is primarily due to QAnon’s ceaselessly shifting internal narratives, always adapting its structure to new platforms and audiences, and growing exponentially in size and scope. The only constants are Q, and the distributed network of “Anons,” self-styled “digital soldiers in the information war” who follow Q’s example. Indeed, as one of Q’s oft-repeated aphorisms puts it “There is no QAnon, there is only Q, and Anons” (“/Qresearch/”). So, to understand QAnon, one must first begin with the origins of both Q and the Anons.

QAnon began as a conspiracy theory which posits that the world exists under the domination of a group of satanic pedophilic global powerbrokers known as “The Cabal.” Q, the enigmatic avatar of the movement, is the representative of a counter-conspiracy known as “The Whitehats” or “Team Q.” Q posts cryptic clues about this hidden world on the anonymous image boards of 4Chan (and later, 8Chan), recruiting internet savvy outcasts to be “digital soldiers” in

the war against the Cabal. Q claims that they and their digital soldiers must spread this information about the Cabal in order to wake up or “red pill” the masses so that they will be ready for “The Storm,” where Team Q triumphs over the Cabal, publicly executes its membership and initiates a utopian golden age (known as “The Great Awakening”) for all of humanity. Donald Trump is a key player in this plan who works closely with Q, though his exact role and agency are the subject of regular debate. Q’s communication to their adherents, known as “The Q Drops,” is a collection of around 5,000 cryptic messages delivered by Q exclusively on the notorious Chan image boards. This collection of bizarre and often incoherent posts is regarded as the central text of the movement, believed to have prophetic and mystical qualities.

In broad strokes, Q’s narrative hits the baseline requirements for a conspiracy theory: a false perception of a causal connection between unrelated people and events, which “prove” the existence of a coalition of antagonist groups who are the cause of all the subject’s problems and persecutions. Unfortunately, QAnon would not remain such a linear and stable narrative for long, owing to the unique circumstances of its creation.

The Origins of QAnon

QAnon’s birthplace is the famously reviled 4Chan, an online imageboard whose enforced anonymity has defined its rhetorical practices. With every post made to the website identified as being created by “Anonymous,” the moniker of “Anon” became a kind of gestalt collective identity, embodying the ever-shifting consensus of the boards. Everyone was an Anon, and thus Anon was everyone, and this collective identity would be a key ingredient in the formation of the QAnon community.

4Chan was the anarchic creation of bored teenagers in the early years of the internet, one intended to facilitate “inverted discussions where the point was not communication, but the performance of sliced-up gibberish, in which disaffected teenagers all tried collectively to derail the conversation” (Beran 66). It was an anonymized, never-ending stream of unmoderated content, where “users could create anonymous heaps of nonsense, funny images, file dumps, jokes, or porn, knowing that all of it would fade away as the site churned through new content” (Beran 67). It quickly attained a reputation for nihilistic misanthropy in both its content and user base, though always with an understood layer of ironic detachment. As the original generation of users largely aged out of the website, usually by joining the conventional world of jobs, bills, and relationships, those who remained to inculcate a new generation of users were the most extreme and bizarre. Where once users had ironically adopted racist and fascist talking points to spark a reaction from regular internet users or “normies”, these viewpoints were increasingly becoming normalized and accepted on the boards themselves. Nowhere was this trend more pronounced than on the politics sub-board of 4Chan, known as *Politically Incorrect*, or /pol in the 4chan shorthand. It is no coincidence that it was from this environment that QAnon would emerge.

As the Q Origins Project describes it, “QAnon was both an outgrowth and an evolution of /pol/ culture: not only were many of Q’s claims already popular on /pol/, but Q borrowed key themes and ideas from predecessors. The key to understanding the roots of Q is to understand the culture of /pol/” (“The Making of QAnon”). The board is defined by its politics, which have trended towards deeply reactionary ideology for the last decade. In the lead-up to Q’s emergence:

slurs against racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual or gender minorities have increased by 40% since 2015, while neo-Nazi propaganda has proliferated. And users on the forum are

increasingly making violent threats against minority groups: Comments that include both hate speech and violent language have increased by 25% over the same period. (Arthur)

To say that /pol is racist, reactionary, and paranoid would be an understatement, and it was growing more militantly hateful with each passing year leading up to Q.

One of the favorite practices of long-time users on /pol was to assume the identity of an expert, to roleplay as someone important who possessed privileged knowledge to try and trick other Anons (especially newcomers) into believing them. This is known as “LARPing,” the acronym stands for *live-action roleplaying*, and indeed, this is an apt description. In the months before Q, there was a string of popular, if short lived, precursors. With names like “FBIAnon” or “High-Level Insider Anon,” to the more esoteric “Victory of the Light,” these characters’ elaborate conspiracy theories would form the narrative foundation for QAnon.

These conspiracies revolved around tales of pedophilic Satanic cults within the Democrat Party leadership, claims that would metastasize into a specific, disprovable belief that a band of high-level pedophiles were operating a child sex dungeon out of a Washington DC pizza shop, Comet Ping Pong. They arrived at this conclusion by attempting to “decode” hidden messages they claimed to have found inside leaked emails from Clinton’s campaign chair, John Podesta. Adopting the name “Pizzagate,” they imagined that confirming this story would lead to a scandal that would dwarf even the famed Watergate scandal of the Nixon administration. This eventually led to a Pizzagate adherent storming the shop with automatic weapons to “rescue the children” (“The Saga of ‘Pizzagate’”). Unsurprisingly, he was stymied in his quest when it became clear the pizza shop did not have a basement, let alone a child-sex dungeon.

This incident made headlines nationwide, creating interest that Q would capitalize on, the term “Pizzagate” was used over 45,000 times on the board in 2017 (“Searching for Posts”). More

than just perfect timing, the Q Origins Project describes Q as “a skilled LARPer who fed the audience’s beliefs back to them; recycled ideas from earlier LARPs; and had help early on from a small but clever band of fans who spread the word about the drops outside of 4chan” (“The Making of QAnon”). Researcher Edward Tian conducted a detailed analysis of Q’s messages and the community response, identifying the emergence of key phrases and themes across the years of Q’s regular activity. Here, he demonstrates that QAnon adapts in real-time to the news, such as incorporating “Antifa” into the mythology in October of 2017 as the term became prominent in network news (Tian). This is essential context for QAnon, placing Q in an ongoing rhetorical process in which the denizens of /pol would craft a narrative by recontextualizing popular news using a constellation of deeply held reactionary beliefs. This was not a prophet preaching to their flock, but a collaborative creative effort to construct an ongoing narrative.

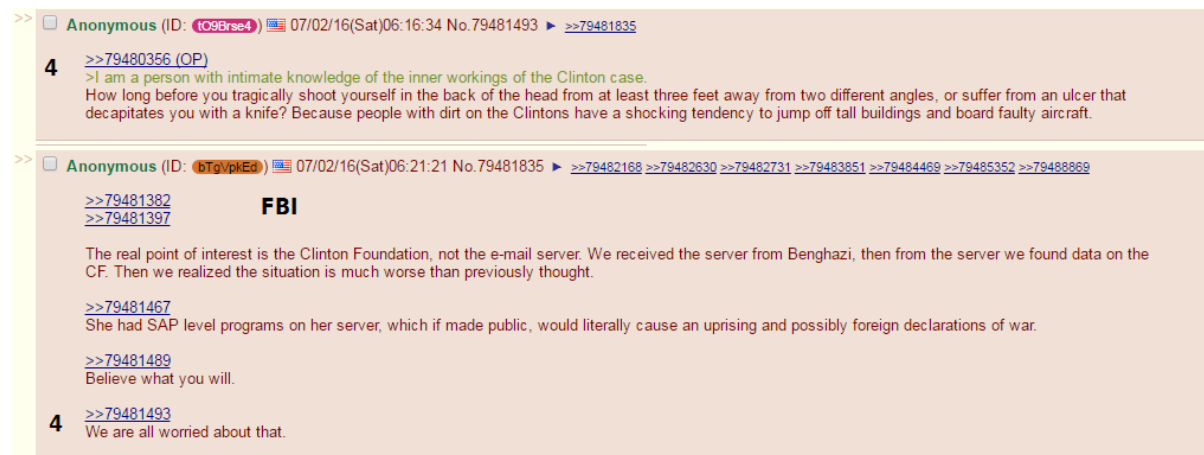


Figure 4. Anonymous.

In the endless churn of 4Chan, content that does not immediately draw a response fade into obscurity and deletion in mere minutes. This informational ephemerality is as crucial to 4Chan posting culture as its anonymity, shaping both the content creation and communication practices (Tuters). A user’s posts need to grab attention and create engagement at a glance, or else they are swept away to make room for newer content. A user is in constant competition with

other users and the affordances of the website itself for the attention of its mercurial audience, a state which often leads to rapidly evolving and mutating rhetorical practices by those users who want to stay in the digital limelight. The various larping personas that preceded Q demonstrate the evolution of conspiracism within the /pol community leading up to Q's emergence

In this post from 2016, we can see persona calling themselves FBIAnon holding a Q&A session on /pol. Note the use of proper sentence structure, and clear, direct language—an attempt to replicate the lexical style of what /pol users imagine an FBI agent might speak like.

FBIAnon's lack of ambiguity allows him to flesh out the details of the conspiracy but inevitably leads to false predictions and provable untrue statements, effectively limiting the character's mainstream potential.

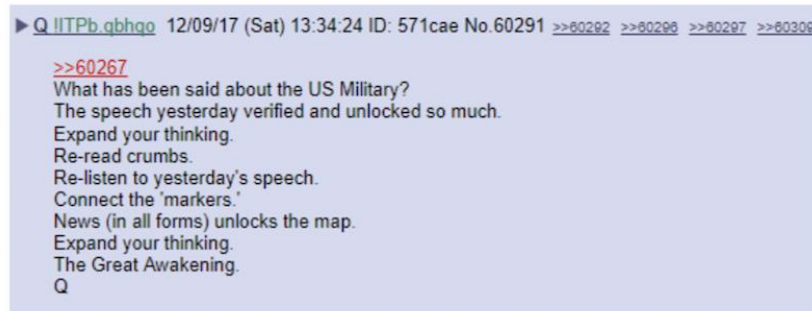


Figure 5. Anonymous.

In this post from 2017 by a persona going by “Victory of the Light,” we can begin to see the cosmic scale of Q's narrative beginning to form. Note the grandiose scale of the proposed changes, involving cosmic or divine elements and centering around a single day known as “The Event.” This transcendental climax to the conspiracy narrative would be repurposed in Q's “The Great Awakening” and “The Storm,” much like how Q would also repurpose the idea of “The Cabal” as

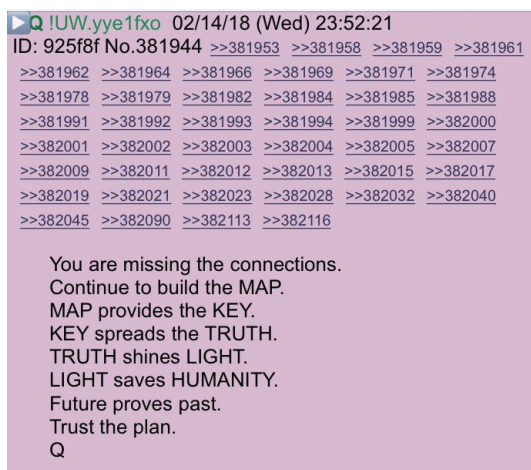
their umbrella term for their imagined supernaturally empowered conspirators.

When looking at Q's earliest drops, the rhetorical lineage becomes quite clear. In this



early Q drop from 2017, Q makes use of FBIAnon's tactic of incorporating headline news to bolster the LARP's legitimacy, while this

Figure 6. Q.



later post from early 2018 sees Q adopting similarly cosmic and mystical language to Victory of Light.

The key difference is that, unlike their predecessors, Q quickly moved away from offering specific

predictions or answers, after several failed

predictions among their first set of posts. Instead, Q

began offering open-ended questions to the audience

Figure 7. Q.

and anchoring their posts with slogans like “Where

We Go One, We Go All” or “Trust the Plan.” Through the strategic use of vague statements with multiple possible interpretations, Q's posts create the necessary room to speculate and theorize, inviting the audience of Anons to solve the puzzle. More than any of the previous LARPer, Q was building a brand, complete with catchphrases and a uniting goal for the growing conspiracy community—to discover the secret esoteric knowledge hidden in Q's messages.

At first, this process was known as “baking,” shortened from “baking the breadcrumbs,”

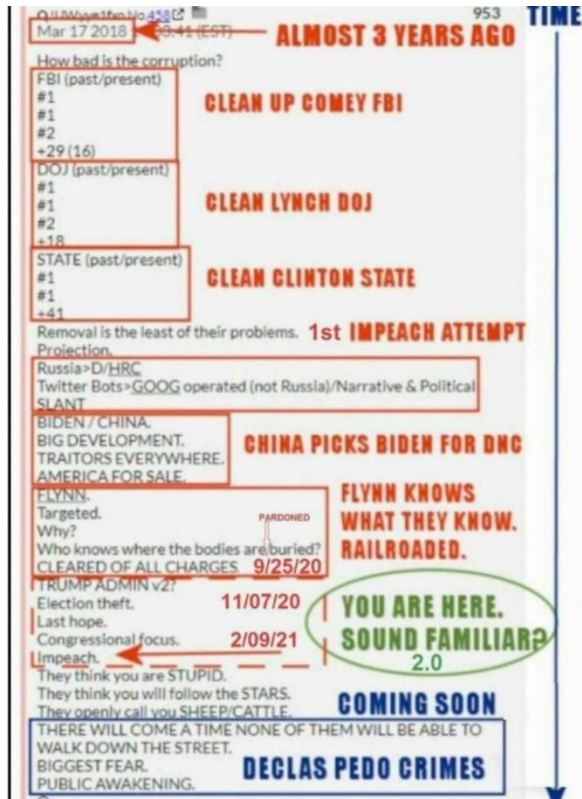


Figure 8. @dqIDaTaaJiCI9v.

itself a reference to “following a trail of breadcrumbs.” It is a clumsy, somewhat incoherent metaphor, one does not bake breadcrumbs into bread after all, but this is in keeping with the often-incoherent cultural mashups that define 4Chan discourse.

What began as a bit of bizarre Chan culture would go on to become the signature rhetorical practice of the QAnon community, though it would shed its clumsy analogy as the QAnon community grew larger, becoming known simply as “decoding.” Decoding would be

rapidly expanded from merely decrypting Q’s garbled messages to applying the “decoding” process to any piece of media that seemed related to Q’s posts. As Q’s content grew vaguer and more open-ended, the decoding process expanded in scope and scale.

This chaotic image provides an example of a basic “decode” in progress, retroactively re-interpreting Q’s posts from 2018 before to divine insight into the events of 2021. Without the semiotic resources of the in-group who created it, it can seem utterly incoherent, but there is a method to the madness.

While this process will be analyzed in much greater depth in a later chapter, what is important to understand is that decoding is fundamentally an improvisational exercise in pattern recognition and free association brainstorming.

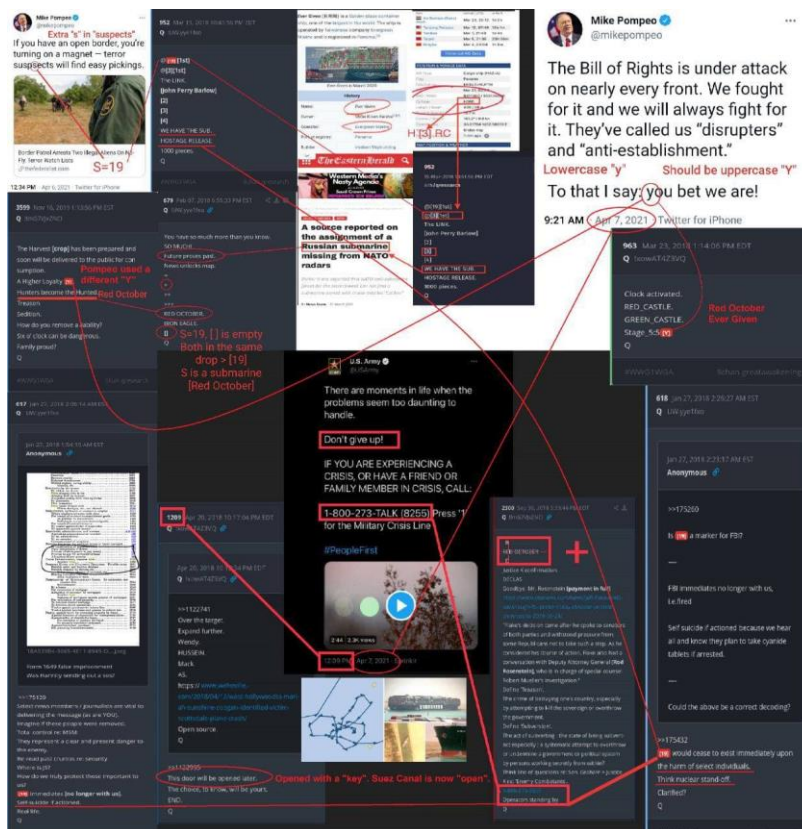


Figure 9. MelQ Channel.

reports of a missing Russian submarine, dialogue from the film *Red October*, a US Army recruitment ad, and the text of 9 different Q drops. Repeated numbers, dates, and even spelling mistakes are taken as evidence of meaningful connections between these disparate subjects, hidden messages left by team Q for their followers to discover.

Decoding is an act that can be understood as a kind of communal narrativization, serving the function that Hayden White identified in his essay “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality.” White noted that “far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, the narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted” (White 1). This observation is crucial for understanding the purpose of baking, as it is less about crafting a coherent or accurate understanding of reality, and more about creating a

In this particular decode QAnon influencer MelQ is attempting to divine the true meaning behind the blockage of the Suez Canal by the cargo ship Evergiven within the QAnon narrative. To connect the Evergiven to Hillary Clinton, MelQ attempts to construct a narrative from news coverage of the blockage, Twitter posts by Mike Pompeo,

shared narrative about the nature of reality among the Q community. While it began as a distinct 4Chan phenomenon, this process would prove to be extremely transmittable across both platforms and cultures.

In this early phase of QAnon's growth (2017 – 2018, roughly), the “breadcrumb baking” was quite free-form, with all possibilities being considered in the massive “research” threads. Without a coherent leader, it was a chaotic competition of who could spin the most engaging and satisfying reactionary narrative. It is in this period that the more outlandish theories begin to cement their place in the QAnon mythos. JFK Jr. is alive; he faked his death and will re-emerge as Trump's running mate in 2020 (Dickson). Hillary Clinton has already been arrested along with the majority of Hollywood, who have been replaced by clones and holograms for public appearances (Mell-Taylor). Q is actually a time traveler using the government's “Looking Glass” chrono-weapon to alter the future (Hall). The list goes on and on, each one more detached from objective evidence than the last. This was the norm for the self-styled “researchers” of /pol, for whom LARPing was a known practice and all involvement in the process was layered under many levels of ironic detachment. Due to the anonymized and ephemeral structure of 4Chan, it becomes impossible to separate the trolling LARPers from the earnest conspiracy theorists, creating a blend of fact and fiction as unstable and protean as the website of its creation. Through the informational structure of 4Chan and the social culture of /pol, the baking process becomes canon, as such:

Comments become interactive between the commenter and the article author (or content) and between commenters. Those comments become new texts, and the conversations observed in comments often digress from the topic of the article they are commenting on and become new topic streams. (Parson 576)

In this way, the Q conspiracy comes to encompass large swaths of popular culture and politics, growing from an indictment of the Clintons to a complex web of paranoid anger that could incorporate any new idea, narrative or news item. If it could be encoded into the baking/decoding process, it could be imagined as part of the interconnected conspiracy universe of QAnon. The process of decoding/baking can be seen as an example of recontextualization, where isolated pieces of information are filtered through the narrative conceits of QAnon and recontextualized into a kind of religious revelation, an uncanny insight into the secret war between good and evil.

Through this collaborative storytelling structure, QAnon quickly expanded from a single conspiracy theory to encompass every conspiracy theory, and indeed, anything else that caught the eye of the community. While all conspiracy theories, like all narratives, grow and change with the telling, QAnon was a distinctly digital phenomenon that reflected the affordances of digital media. Like the memetic culture of 4Chan which spawned it, the collective semiotic resources of the community were deployed, repurposed, and remixed endlessly to fit the needs of the moment. Not only to incorporate new events and information from the 24-hour news cycle but to reach back into the centuries of American conspiracy theory. Whole narratives from essential texts of American Conspiracism have been absorbed, from the invented Satanic child abuse networks of *Michelle Remembers*, the global communist infiltration imagined in *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*, and even the secret alien Illuminati of *Behold a Pale Horse* and global race-war holocaust of *The Turner Diaries* have been integrated into the world of QAnon as the community draws from their available narrative resources to construct this new reality.

Indeed, there is nothing particularly novel about any individual aspect of the QAnon mythos, every aspect is lifted (often quite directly) from past conspiracy narratives. Its

collaborative, communal approach to narrative combined with the reach and power of digital communication systems allowed it to grow from a mere conspiracy theory to a kind of meta-narrative framework capable of absorbing and repurposing novel conspiracy narratives it encountered.

QAnon would be spread to major social media networks through a handful of fringe rightwing influencers and would begin growing and mutating at a rate beyond anyone's expectations (Zadrozny and Collins). When QAnon broke through to mainstream social media platforms and a more general audience, so too did the decoding process expand to encompass these new communities and their attendant narratives. In the early days when QAnon was mostly contained to the 4Chan boards, prototypes can be seen emerging of what would later become the visual language of decoding, a way to try and organize all the various interconnected theories concocted by the QAnon community.

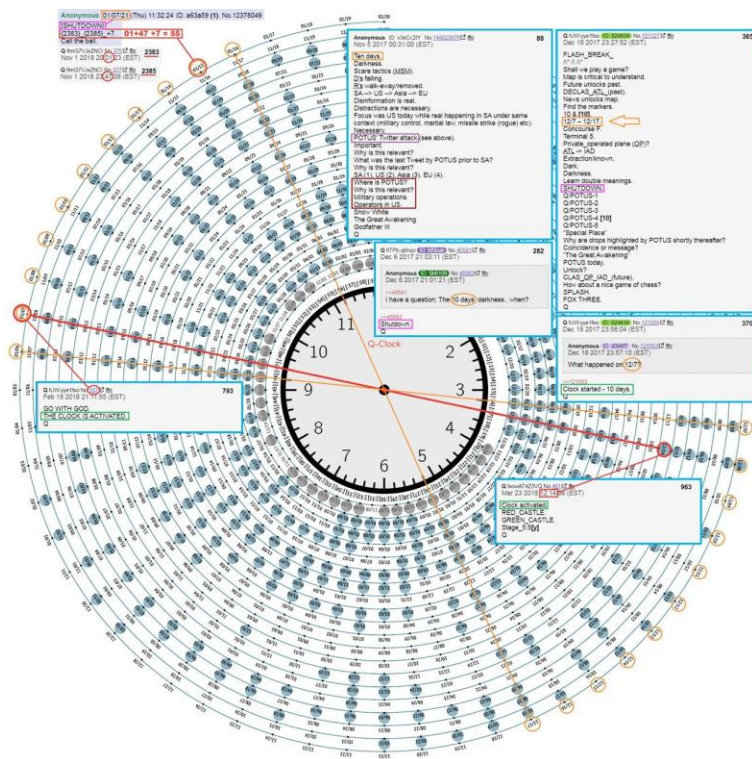


Figure 10. @PepegirlF.

One of the more famously inscrutable early visualizations can be seen on the left, colloquially known as the “Q-Clock,” this baffling apparatus exists to attempt to triangulate Q’s various prophecies across time and space. The decoding process seen in MelQ’s Evergiven visualization might have seemed incomprehensible when first

viewed, but compared to its predecessor, there is a clear evolution toward accessibility as QAnon becomes a larger community which extends to platforms beyond /pol.

Its viral spread across major social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc.) and appearances at real-world rallies, conferences and events raised QAnon's cultural profile, but increased scrutiny did not initially lead to greater understanding. As it grew, the QAnon community became harder to define, with scholars unable to decide "is it a conspiracy theory, a social movement, an instance of dark fandom, a religious cult, or a 'psychological warfare tool' gone open access?" (Kaminska). In truth, QAnon has functioned as all these categories and more within its ever-widening discursive umbrella, yet no individual element can encompass the whole. The next sections will examine two of these elements in detail, QAnon as a fascistic social movement and QAnon as a new religious movement, to demonstrate its ability to transcend pre-existing categories in its ceaseless protean mutations.

Digital Soldiers, Material Consequences

QAnon has been political from its inception, emerging as it did from 4Chan's politics sub-board. As such, the Q drops have focused heavily on elections, political figures and a deeply partisan framing of reality. This has not changed as QAnon has expanded and grown, with a slew of QAnon promoters running for office or finding places of prominence within the Republican political machine and a few even getting elected to Congress or appointments within the first Trump administration ("How One Man"; Nelken-Zitser). The most prominent examples of the latter would be found in Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene and former National Security Advisor, Lieutenant General Michael Flynn. Both were outspoken QAnon adherents whose beliefs would bleed into their political lives. Some of the more notable examples include

Greene’s infamous “Jewish Space Lasers” statement which referenced an ongoing narrative within the wider QAnon community, and Flynn uploading a video of his family taking the QAnon “oath of the digital soldier” (Chait; Mogensen).

On a more structural level, there is no doubt that QAnon has aspects in common with fascist political movements of the past, at least in the broad conceptual strokes. Their veneration of Donald Trump as an embodiment of the nation, their conception of the Cabal as being simultaneously overwhelmingly powerful yet also pitifully weak, their desire for a military coup to overthrow American democracy and publicly execute their political enemies, their utopian conception of an imaginary nostalgic past, their loathing of intellectuals and rejection of scientific consensus, and the incoherent set of reactionary grievances and desire to exterminate degeneracy—all align nicely with many of the traits Eco describes in his essay, *Ur-Fascism*.

Despite these common aspects, as a fascist political movement, QAnon is lacking some fundamental qualities that allow a popular fascist movement to coalesce into a political program. QAnon’s structure means the movement’s narrative and goals are continuously in flux, making for a fundamentally unstable foundation for any kind of concrete political action. While QAnon is quite adept at stirring up random acts of stochastic violence, that violence tends to be interpersonal rather than political (Jensen). The movement’s hyper-individualistic orientation and lack of coherent organizational structure of make it ill-suited to act as a vehicle for unified political action. While fascist movements have often been ideologically incoherent, their reliance on a strict hierarchy and absolute devotion to the party leadership are key elements that allow their organizations to function. Even though Trump occupies an almost messianic role in the QAnon mythology, QAnon adherents will readily reject or ignore him when he goes against the current tide of QAnon opinion. Trump’s vaccine initiative, “Operation Warp Speed,” is a perfect

example; QAnon adherents roundly rejected or ignored his pro-vaccine talking points once QAnon absorbed and re-purposed anti-vax conspiracies into the larger QAnon narrative (Spring and Wendling).

While QAnon is decidedly right-wing in its politics, the community's inherent distrust of authority often puts them at odds with the Republican party leadership. Indeed, within the QAnon community, almost as much hatred is reserved for the "RINO" (Republican in name only) Republican leadership as there is for Democrats and Antifa. This has led to a distinct pattern with any QAnon candidates who have managed to get elected: they must either begin to toe the party line (and be declared a member of the deep state by their fellow conspiracists) or be sidelined away from any real power. Even Greene has publicly disavowed her QAnon ties in the wake of January 6, though she maintains support for many key QAnon conspiracy theories. While QAnon adherents have found political success at the local level, they seem to be incapable of cohering to pursue any kind of cogent or directed political action (Bergengruen). Even more striking, in the second Trump term, even when former QAnon promoters like Kash Patel and Dan Bongino are running the FBI and ATF, they are unable to deliver on one of QAnon's most sacred promises to expose the Epstein client lists ("Team Trump Struggles").

More fundamentally, there are aspects of QAnon's core narrative structure that prevent it from functioning as a proper fascist political movement. The premise of QAnon is that the visible portion of politics, the elections, legislation, and law-making, are all a smokescreen meant to distract the population. As a popular slogan of Q goes, "You are watching a movie," a statement intended to encompass all politics and public-facing events. Q exists to fight the globalist Cabal conspiracy with a conspiracy of their own, and all Q's digital soldiers must do is spread the word and enjoy the show. Q's own rhetoric frames politics as media content which

exists solely for Anons to passively consume, critique and speculate on. In this way, membership in the QAnon community is inherently politically de-mobilizing even as it radicalizes its members.

Even though QAnon adherents frequently state that “The military is the only way,” indicating that the only political solution is a military coup, they are quick to disavow any adherents who attempt to realize this violent fantasy. Fascism is, as Eco describes it, “the cult of action for action’s sake,” yet QAnon is fundamentally a passive movement dedicated to observing and theorizing. In the fascist hierarchy, there is no action more valorized than violent action, particularly if it results in a heroic death for the fascists themselves. As Eco puts it, “The



Pedro L. Gonzalez
@emeriticus

New theory: the Paul Pelosi incident was the deep state’s October Surprise intended to throw midterms to the Democrats by evoking the specter of Q-anon terrorism. The attacker was an LSD (CIA supplied) addled sex pest sleeper cell activated by Paul’s elevated heartbeat.

5:50 PM · 10/29/22 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

Figure 11. @emeriticus.

committing false flag attacks,” and “Communist Degenerates.” Take this high-profile example from 2022, a QAnon adherent named David DePape broke into the home of Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi with the intent to kidnap and interrogate her, assaulting her husband with a hammer in the process. Despite an extensive online history showing years of active participation in QAnon communities, and despite his actions aligning perfectly with popular QAnon

Ur-Fascist hero craves heroic death, advertised as the best reward for a heroic life,” and this cult of heroic death serves an essential role in maintaining the ideological structure (1). For QAnon, those who have gained such heroic deaths are belittled and removed from the in-group, retroactively imagined as “deep state crisis actors,” “CIA operatives

sentiment, he was immediately derided as a “drug-addled gay communist prostitute” in service to the deep state. The accompanying image shows a typical example of this action by a QAnon influencer, retroactively exiling DePape from the QAnon community for the crime of following through on QAnon rhetoric.

This passivity is what has led Flynn to disavow the movement in recent years, decrying it as a “CIA Psyop” meant to de-mobilize right-wing voting blocks (Relman and Sheth). Given the results of the 2020 election and the 2022 midterms, a case can certainly be made that Trump’s embrace of QAnon has worked against him and the Republican party. Even amidst the second Trump term’s descent into overt fascism, as previously noted with the Epstein client list, the QAnon community is unable to leverage their viral success into political action. Put simply, while ideologically aligned with fascistic principles, QAnon is structurally incapable of supporting coherent or organized political action.

QAnon is inherently political, and the “decoding” of political news is a key aspect of its ongoing practice—but that does not mean it functions like a traditional political movement or ideology. Rather, partisan politics is an essential ingredient in the movement’s narrative that provides crucial semiotic resources for them to utilize in their ongoing process of narrativization, but it does not define QAnon’s function or purpose.

The Cult of Q?

Of course, the more esoteric qualities of QAnon which hamper its ability to act as a political movement would help to bolster the case for QAnon as a religious movement or cult. As before, QAnon undeniably shares many traits with cults and fringe religious/spiritual movements. Its basic structure and core narrative perhaps most strongly resemble the Japanese

eschatological cult Aum Shinrikyo, with its syncretic blending of religion and pop culture, early adoption of digital media platforms, apocalyptic prophecies and fascistic political aspirations (Silverman). Closer to its nation of origin, QAnon has had deep roots in the American evangelical movement from its inception. The central event of Q's prophecies, "The Great Awakening" is itself a reference to the successive series of Evangelical religious revivals that have reshaped the religious landscape of America and given birth to America's distinctive Evangelical interpretation of Christianity.

Of course, connections between the religious and political right in America are nothing new. The Republican party and right-wing Evangelical groups have been inseparable since Jerry Falwell Sr.'s "Moral Majority" movement, and it has proved to be a remarkably effective coalition. Going back even further, reactionary conspiracism and Evangelical faith have been closely linked since America's first colonists. Puritan fears of social change famously fueled multiple waves of witch trials in the 1600s, and this pattern of reactionary conspiracism cloaked in Protestant purity would repeat throughout America's history. From the creation of the Anti-Masonic and Know-nothing parties and the KKK, all the way to the John Birch Society and the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, reactionary groups have often used American Evangelical belief to frame their struggle against progressive change. Q has leveraged this connection since the beginning, frequently referencing God, biblical revelations and specifically Evangelical ideas like The Rapture. These connections will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 1, but for now, it is important to understand that many of the most popular and enduring Q influencers are explicitly Evangelical, if not outright Christian Dominionists.

However, the movement has also grown to encompass a range of New Age Spirituality movements, incorporating Spirit Chakras, Buddhist meditation, and Extra-dimensional energy

beings into the narrative alongside hardline fundamentalist Christian beliefs (Meltzer). On the surface, it seems like an odd fit. After all, this kind of heretical syncretism flies in the face of the fundamentalist orthodoxy demanded by the Christian Dominionist right, the same people who protest “Satanic” imagery in pop culture and claim the mere existence of drag queens is a pedophilic conspiracy.

As in previous cases, these contradictions do not prevent QAnon from incorporating these new communities into their network. Through the kaleidoscopic conspiracy narrative of QAnon, rigid religious orthodoxy becomes an endlessly fluid and ever-changing orthopraxy, where Jesus is the son of God as well as an extradimensional energy being, where new age crystal energies are employed by Christian crusaders in combatting digital demons. This incoherent, all-encompassing faith free-for-all flies in the face of the basic organizing principles that separate an organized religious orthodoxy from the orthopraxy of general folk beliefs and superstitions. If QAnon could be said to be an emerging religious movement, it much more resembles the pantheistic, orthopraxical, and orality-based religious traditions of the ancient world than anything modern.

Of course, the type of coherent structure and stable texts which define an organized religion is often not found within religious cults. Among these fringe groups, there are many that accomplish similar feats of syncretic belief blending to QAnon. There is, of course, the aforementioned Aum Shinrikyo, whose dogma seamlessly blends (at least for its adherents) Christian, Shinto, Buddhist, and esoteric mysticism into an apocalyptic miasma. Within the American tradition, there have been several notable waves of cult activity, most notably during the successive “Great Awakenings” previously mentioned, as well as those spawned by the

occultism of Crowley and Blavatsky in the late 1800s, and more recently during the bloom of New Religious Movements in the '60s and '70s (Jenkins).

However, despite these similarities in syncretism, QAnon lacks several fundamental defining features of a cult. Q is not a typical cult leader, as they do not make demands, take tithes or exert any control over their adherents. There is no coercive aspect to QAnon, no official hierarchy to enforce their leader's vision. Perhaps most importantly, there is no central religious authority. While cult beliefs can often change on a whim, it is the whim of the cult's leader which dictates these changes. This is not the case in QAnon. For example, Q has on several occasions openly debunked the persistent claim among the QAnon community that JFK Jr. lives, yet large swathes of the QAnon community have roundly ignored their digital messiah and instead opted to trust their own intuitive narrative direction ("Intel Drop #2611").

That is not to say that cults have not formed within the QAnon community, as it has proved remarkably fertile ground for such groups. While Chapter 2 will cover QAnon's cultic connections in greater detail, this section will offer a brief overview.

One group made headlines in 2021 by gathering in Dallas and claiming the return of JFK Jr. was imminent. The group is led by Michael Protzman AKA Negative48, a self-proclaimed prophet of Q who claims to be able to divine the future by applying numerology to news headlines. Stranger still is the cult of Austin Steinbart, AKA Baby Q, who claims they are a kind of embryonic version of Q themselves. In Steinbart's cosmology, Q is Steinbart in the future, who came back to the past to help fight the Cabal (Sommer). Steinbart got as far as a full-blown cult compound before running afoul of the authorities. Canada's own Romana Didulo, aka The QAnon Queen of Canada, has established a roving cult based out of a series of rented RVs,

touring the nation and issuing “royal decrees” while claiming to be the Q-appointed ruling monarch of Canada (Cecco). Cults within QAnon rise and fall, but the movement remains.

So, while QAnon undeniably possesses aspects in common with a religious movement, and contains within it many cults, its amorphous nature once again prevents standard categorization. While stable, structuralist definitions of QAnon fail to encompass its strange totality, postmodern, poststructuralist approaches can yield more accurate descriptions. For example, one prominent QAnon scholar Marc Andre Argentino argues that QAnon has become a “Hyper-real” religion rather than a traditional cult or religious movement. By absorbing any and all adjacent pop culture conspiracies into itself, it became “a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and is a source of beliefs for everyday life” (Baldwin and Possamai). Andre states that “QAnon is blatantly invented as it openly uses works of popular culture, media, entertainment, American evangelicalism, and conspiracy theories at its basis, that have been organically developed across time and space by a community of believers.” This has led to adherents constructing a worldview that “reflects a created hyper-real world based on such theories” (Argentino).

Argentino’s work reveals an essential aspect of the elusive core of the QAnon movement: for the typical QAnon adherent, there is no difference between a scene from a film, a news broadcast, or a bible verse—they are all simply texts which contain secret truths to be decoded, disassembled, remixed, and repurposed to better represent the relativistic truth of the moment. In this sense, QAnon is perhaps the purest modern example of what Hayden White described as the process of narrativizing reality, one where we construct narratives from the events of our lives in “an intimation of the psychological impulse behind the apparently universal need not only to

narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity” (4). Out of the cultural detritus of twenty-first-century America, the QAnon community has created a self-perpetuating informational system by which past, present, and future are subsumed within their ever-changing, all-encompassing narrative.

QAnon as Adaptive Response to the Schizogenic Sublime

QAnon has grown far beyond its origins as a mere conspiracy theory into a conspiratorial “theory of everything.” For its adherents, QAnon is a meta-narrative framework, collaboratively created in real-time by its own adherents and fueled by the perpetual content delivery algorithms of social media platforms. It provides not only an interpretive lens to unite the disparate events of the world within a simplified conspiracy narrative but through the decoding process, the rhetorical tools to both build a tight-knit community and retroactively re-write any aspect of the narrative to meet the community’s consensus.

If QAnon was an isolated phenomenon and not a movement that has helped to reshape American politics and culture, it would be simple to write it off as a mere cultural anomaly, an aberrant oddity of the digital age. Instead, this dissertation argues that QAnon is a reflection of the techno-cultural milieu of its creation, a reaction to the incomprehensible, ever-changing totality of our digital hyperreality, filtered through the ideological framework of neoliberal cultural commodification and America’s deep historical and cultural connection to conspiracism. Indeed, as this dissertation will demonstrate, the deluded narratives of QAnon are a reaction to an increasingly incoherent digital informational ecosystem and an increasingly fractured and contradictory cultural landscape. The cumulative effect of this milieu is what I will be calling the *schizogenic sublime*, and it is in response to the alienating and overwhelming totality of this

informational system that QAnon has formed. In this way, the digital soldiers of QAnon are akin to the canaries placed in turn of the century coalmines; they are a community of those most vulnerable to the toxic qualities of our current techno-cultural environment, and their collective narrativization can help us map out the sources of the damage.

As bizarre as the practices of QAnon and its decoding rituals may seem, they arise from the intersection of three key techno-cultural trends: America's deeply entrenched cultural tradition of conspiracist narrativization, the commodification of culture under neoliberalism, and the predatory affordances of corporate media platforms optimized for the attention economy. Only by understanding how these three trends have mutually reinforced and influenced each other can we begin to understand QAnon's unique narrative structure and the symbolic map of cultural dysfunction it represents.

In many ways, QAnon's meta-narrative structure hews much more closely to those found in Orality-based societies than literate ones, albeit one built around the unique affordances of digital communication. Walter Ong called this process "Secondary Orality," "in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print" (11). Of course, Ong was writing before the emergence of the internet, and the neuro-linguistic effects of Secondary Orality generated by the affordances of digital communications systems are only now beginning to be properly understood.

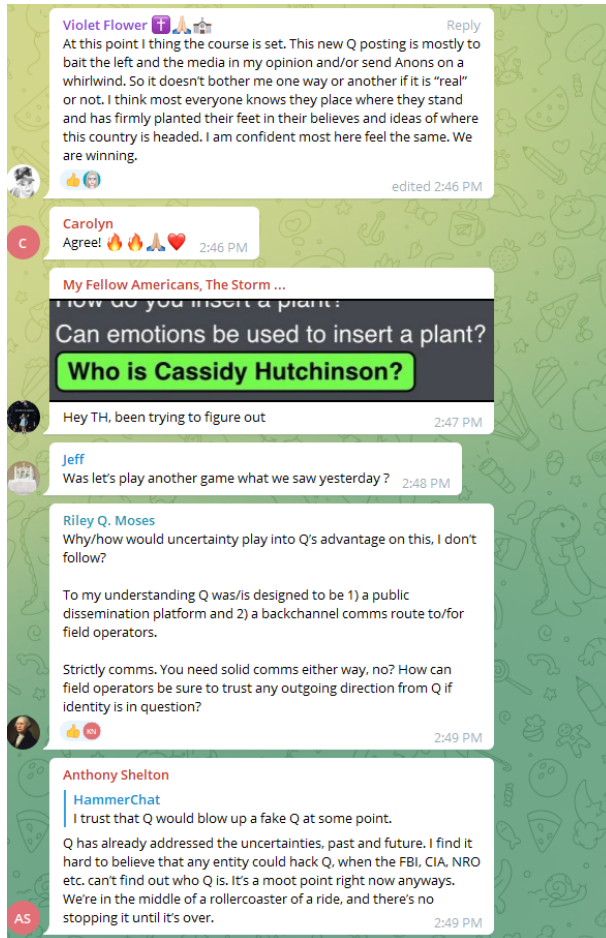


Figure 12. TruthHammer Channel.

This fundamental adaptation to the affordances of social media platforms is what gives QAnon its ability to thrive despite countless failed prophecies and predictions, countless social media banning campaigns, and its own infighting and incoherence. Individual elements of mythology may fail or fall out of favor, but the wider community will continue to construct new mythology by crafting a bricolage of old conspiracy theories and current events. Being able to exist in this uncertain and contradictory flux state has proven to be its greatest asset, the key to its ability to endlessly re-invent itself in the face of adversity and

failure. The extended QAnon network has found a kind of equilibrium in the chaos, where individual nodes in its vast network of communities may rise and fall, but the network remains. In this way, QAnon has grown beyond any one conspiracy narrative, beyond Trump, and indeed, beyond Q themselves.

There is no clearer example of this than Q's return in 2022. Having disappeared in the wake of January 6 for almost a year, Q re-emerged in the lead-up to the American midterm elections. While Q's posts were once waited on breathlessly by millions, the new drops barely made a splash in the feeds of most major QAnon promoters (Lamoureux and Gilbert). The accompanying image shows a typical exchange within a popular QAnon telegram channel in the

wake of Q's return. Q's posts are simply another set of texts to decode, and Q's authenticity is an afterthought. Given the general consensus among experts (and among QAnon adherents) that the Q account has had multiple authors even in its heyday, Q has always been more symbolic figurehead than a specific individual (Stokel-Walker). Despite their central place in the originating mythology of QAnon, even Q has become disposable.

As Q and their core mythology fade from relevance, the network it generated and the rhetorical tools which maintain and sustain it show no signs of slowing. While it began as a conspiracy theory and has many aspects of both religious and political movements, these aspects are better understood as semiotic resources to be drawn from to sustain the function of QAnon—generating a digitally-derived simulacrum of reality that reflects the consensus of fears, anxieties and hopes of the community which creates it. This simulacrum is quite extensive; a network of millions of individuals over every major social media platform, complete with its own experts, influencers, and institutions.

In many ways, it is a grim inverse image of the utopian vision of the internet's early pioneers; a digital world free from the constraints of the material, where users can explore and experiment with identities and ideas. QAnon represents the dark side of the democratization of information, giving individuals the power to craft their own version of reality. Through the algorithmic optimization of user interactions, social media platforms are perfectly calibrated to cater to each individual's own worldview. Without realizing it, users are playing an active role in determining what information they are being presented with, as each social media platform's content delivery algorithm adapts its content to keep them engaged on the platform for as long as possible. Add to that the centuries of pre-existing conspiracy theories to mine for content, as well as the collaborative content-creation practices of the community as a whole, and a closed system

begins to form. This helps to explain why “fact-checking” QAnon has yielded so little fruit—they have their own facts, texts and experts which they trust over the competing narrative provided by the legitimizing institutions of society.

Decoding QAnon: Chapter Outlines

If QAnon has proved exceedingly difficult to define or pin down, the damage that it has caused is not. More than stochastic violence and broken families, it is a threat to the consensus reality on which democratic government and the nation-state itself are predicated. As QAnon does not easily fit into pre-existing categories, even if it is largely composed of the same ingredients, a deconstructive analysis of its components and how they operate in conjunction to produce its negative effects is needed.

The purpose of this dissertation is to craft a framework that can explain QAnon’s viral success within the American techno-cultural context and offer insight into the ongoing renaissance in hyper-individualistic reactionary conspiracism that QAnon has catalyzed. In order to accomplish this goal, this dissertation will be broken into three primary chapters, each focusing on one of the three techno-cultural trends whose intersection has given QAnon its form and function.

Chapter 1 explores the narrative lineage of QAnon through the history of Western conspiracism, from its pre-modern origins in folklore and superstition to its highly politicized secular incarnations in the modern period. By drawing on a wide range of historical, sociological, and anthropological scholarship on conspiracism, this chapter will explore the interconnected socio-cultural and technological elements that have shaped Western conspiracism generally, and American conspiracism specifically, into the narrative foundations of QAnon. The

theoretical framework for the chapter will be drawn from a synthesis of Barthes, White, and Jameson's work on historical narrativity and the psychological principle of cognitive dissonance. By examining the cultural practice of conspiracism through the lens of narrativization, this chapter will explore the function of conspiracism as cultural narrative that can both support and destroy socio-political structures, and establish the narrative "cannon" of the American conspiracist tradition. Through the application of Festinger's principle of cognitive dissonance and a host of conspiracism scholarship, the chapter will also explore the motivations that have driven individuals to create and maintain alternative reality narratives. By combining these approaches, we are able to draw a direct line from Puritan satanic panics and anti-indigenous conspiracies of the colonial era to the chaotic and protean digital conspiracy narratives of QAnon.

As Chapter 1 covers the pre-modern and modernist eras of conspiracism, Chapter 2 will continue chronologically into the postmodern era and examine how the changes to America's socio-cultural, ideological and technological context paved the way for the era of pop culture conspiracism. To do so, Chapter 2 will employ a theoretical framework that synthesizes Colin Campbell's influential theory of the cultic milieu with Jenkin's new media theory of convergence culture to bridge the gap between QAnon's roots in the cultic conspiracism of the '70s and '80s and its uniquely digital expression. In order to place this evolution of American conspiracism in its proper cultural context, Chapter 2 will draw extensively from Jameson's *Postmodernism* and Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, as well as related figures like Jodi Dean, Guy Debord, and Louis Althusser. Through the application of Neo-Marxist critique of cultural commodification to Campbell and Jenkins' theories, we are able to identify the trends and forces that inevitably shaped QAnon away from meaningful collective action and towards the

reactionary, hyper-individualistic, and incoherent narrative structure that has defined its practice. This framework will also be employed directly in two case studies of QAnon discourse to demonstrate the dynamics in actual usage.

With the scaffolding of Chapters 1 and 2 in place, Chapter 3 will focus on the final ingredient for QAnon's rise: the attention economy and the commodified hyperreality it has created. Using Fisher's capitalist realism as a conceptual framework, the first half of Chapter 3 will examine how the same trends towards the commodification of culture examined in Chapter 2 have manifested in the structure of the digital world. By applying Fisher's concepts of business ontology, reflexive impotence and corporate precorporation to the work of digital media scholars like Jenkins, Kopomaa, Djiick, Stiegler, Zuboff and DiResta, Barbrook, and Cameron, Chapter 3 will demonstrate the method behind the madness of QAnon decoding. Specifically, that the affordances of digital platforms, optimized to generate profit in a digital economy defined by data harvesting and attentional capture, have worked to promote QAnon content and shape the community practice of decoding towards its uniquely schizophrenic output. With this final trend established, the second half of Chapter 3 will return to the concept of the schizogenic sublime and fully explore its core concept and its growing impact on digital culture. This will be followed by another two case studies examining Q's own discursive style and how the practice of decoding actually functions in QAnon communities.

CHAPTER 1 - THE CONSPIRACIST NARRATIVES OF QANON

America's Chapel Perilous

In the World of QAnon, the biblical figure of Satan is ubiquitous. Not as a metaphor or rhetorical figuration, but a literal being of pure evil whose machinations shape the material



Figure 2. @PunishDem1776.

world. He lurks in every board room, government building, and according to QAnon influencer @punishdem1776, even in the halls of the Vatican itself. Unlike his divine counterpart, Satan is evidently quite proactive, forging alliances among the world's elites and constructing vast global apparatuses for mass child sacrifice. Of all the various strands of esoteric beliefs and hidden truths that make up the tangled narrative tapestry of QAnon, the claims of a satanic cabal are among the most strange and impossible. It would be comforting to

imagine this eruption of fearful satanic suspicion as a singular quirk of the moment, a strange throwback to ancient superstition brought on by a kind of digital derangement. However, a closer examination of American cultural history reveals that even a belief as ludicrous and unfounded as a global Satanic cabal is far from singular or unique. Rather than some distant historical moment featuring dour Puritans putting flame to a witch's pyre, the most direct precursor to QAnon's Satanic Cabal is found uncomfortably close to the present.

In the 1980s, America was gripped by a mass hysteria generally referred to as "The Satanic Panic," which alleged a nationwide conspiracy of Satanic cults to ritually abuse and

murder children. Rumors of Satanic activity had long circulated through the country's more rural locals, stories blaming Satanists for everything from cattle mutilations to graffiti spread through informal communications networks, but the release of a "survivor's testimonial" would catalyze these ambient fears into a full-blown national hysteria (Koenig).

Michelle Remembers was the product of the titular Michelle Smith and psychologist Lawrence Pazder, a memoir of the horrific childhood abuse she supposedly suffered at the hands of a Satanic cult. These accounts were based on the "recovered memories" discovered through extensive hypnotism sessions by Pazder and claimed to reveal a nationwide Satanic child abuse network (Pazder). Given a measure of legitimacy through Pazder's academic credentials, it was quickly picked up by local, then national news (Victor, "Satanic Cult"). As the adage goes, "if it bleeds, it leads," and this story was positively soaked in imagined blood. As media coverage grew, so too did the accusations, which were in turn given greater media coverage. Prominent investigative journalism programs like *20/20* presented the unverified claims of fringe "experts" as fact, and hundreds of reporters offered round the clock coverage of the "Toledo dig," an excavation of supposed Satanic mass graves in rural America which ultimately found nothing (Victor). A campaign was even put into action against Proctor and Gamble, proclaiming them to be servants of Satan due to the supposed occult implications of their logo. Even with their extensive public relations department and a full corporate investigation into the source of these rumors, they ultimately gave in to the campaign of harassment and changed their logo (Victor, "Satanic Cult").

As darkly amusing as the Proctor and Gamble accusations are, the consequences for hundreds of accused childcare workers were anything but. As popular programs like *Geraldo* aired episodes claiming, "over a million satanists are active in America today," a string of

accusations against daycares and preschools were made, alleging preposterous and often physically impossible child abuse (Victor, *Satanic Panic*). Despite their nonsensical claims and complete lack of material evidence, these accusations led to hundreds of arrests and trials, supported by mobs of Evangelical Christians screaming for righteous retribution against these evil doers. The most noteworthy of these was the McMartin Preschool trial, which would go on to become America's longest and most expensive trial in history. For almost a decade this hysteria continued unabated, yet despite this exhaustive legal inquiry and countless investigations at the local, state, and federal level, not a single shred of evidence could be found to support the claims of a Satanic conspiracy. Then as now, this lack of evidence in no way served to discredit the belief, and the accusations of Satanic child abuse would continue into the early 2000s. Even as this particular wave of hysteria died down, it did not die out. These narratives only receded to the social margins, safely waiting in the minds of the faithful until the nascent QAnon movement would give them a home once more.

Far from a historical aberration, in the United States of America this kind of hysterical delusion is closer to the norm. A decade before suburban parents would clutch their proverbial pearls at the thought of Satanic daycares, there was the "stranger danger" panic brought on by several high-profile serial killers, as well as widespread fear of murderous cults sparked by the Manson murders and the Jonestown Massacre. Despite the vastly greater chance children would be hit by a car or die from preventable illness, these lurid imagined dangers captured the cultural limelight. While these panics were distinct cultural phenomena, they also directly contributed to the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, their archetypes simply adapting and evolving to fit the tenor of the times (Lanning).

Back even to the golden age of America, the nostalgically remembered 1950s era of prosperity and cultural homogeneity, McCarthyism burned like a fever through the American population, seeing communists in every shadow and behind every woe. Before the communists were the Freemasons, the immigrants, and the indigenous out-groups that prompted the creation of the Anti-masonic and Know-nothing parties, as well as the Ghost Dance Panic of 1890s which would culminate in the massacre at Wounded Knee (Knight, *Conspiracy Theories*). Just as the chain of conspiracism extends unbroken into the past, so too does it extend into the future. After the Satanic panic of the '80s would come the UFO craze of the '90s and the paranoid panopticon of the War on Terror soon after. While conspiracy and paranoia have always been constant companions to the grand American experiment, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries had seen this impulse expressed in ever greater intensity and scope.

America always seems to be dangerously teetering on the edge of mass-hysteria and paranoid delusion, what philosopher and conspiracy connoisseur Robert Anton Wilson called the “Chapel Perilous” crossroads. The name was originally a setting for an Arthurian adventure, wherein the noble Sir Lancelot faces reality-distorting magical illusions crafted by the nefarious sorceress Helawess. This theme of illusion and false realities is what led Wilson to use the term to describe the point of no return every conspiracy theorist reaches in their path along the fringes of consensus reality.

In Wilson’s own words, “In researching occult conspiracies, one eventually faces a crossroad of mythic proportions (called Chapel Perilous in the trade). You come out the other side either stone paranoid or an agnostic; there is no third way” (R. A. Wilson 6). This moment occurs when the individual has gone too far, delved too deep, accepted too many “facts” contrary to the accepted truths of societal consensus. Noted rhetorician Kenneth Burke provides a useful

lens for understanding how language shapes our perception of reality by symbolic representation, where a “given terminology is a reflection of reality, but its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality given the same characteristics” (Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form* 45). For the conspiracist, their internal screen becomes a selection of reality deflected by the hegemonic social consensus, much like how Anthony Comello, the QAnon mob boss killer from the introduction, was able to interpret Trump’s rambling speeches as a secret code compelling him to violent action. Put in more psychological terms, the dissonance between the secret, privileged truths of the conspiracy and the open, accepted truths of consensus reality reaches its breaking point. The individual either accepts the world of grand, esoteric, and impossible conspiracy (thereby rejecting the reality shared with much of the population) or becomes agnostic about their understanding of reality as a whole.

Becoming a “reality agnostic” as Wilson describes means taking both fringe and mainstream versions of reality with a proverbial grain of salt, accepting the limits of both individual knowledge and institutional wisdom, and generally coming out of the experience a wiser person. The individual accepts the constructed nature of hegemonic consensus reality as well as the anti-hegemonic alternative realities that oppose, that they can neither fully accept nor reject any socially constructed interpretation of reality wholesale. As flawed creatures, we must accept the uncomfortable truth that perfect knowledge of our reality is beyond our capabilities, and by embracing this existential uncertainty we can find a measure of equilibrium with consensus reality and go about our lives. Embracing paranoia, by far the easier path in the short term as no core beliefs are challenged, exchanges existential uncertainty for an ever-escalating

spiral of paranoid delusions that sever the individual from the consensus reality shared by their friends, family, and country.

In the '70s, Wilson and his fellow anarchist rabble-rousers set about a project they colorfully called "Operation Mindfuck," a grand feat of self-described "chaos magic" and media manipulation intended to bring the entire American population to the Chapel Perilous crossroads. In many ways, they had tapped into the same ideas and energy as the Situationist International, Operation Mindfuck being a uniquely American spin on Guy Debord's notion of cultural "detournement." Where the French philosopher had sought to conduct cultural sabotage against corporate advertising and imagery as an inherently anti-capitalist act, Wilson was far more interested in the hyper-individualized delusions of the reactionary fringe (Debord et al.). Of Operation Mindfuck's various culture-jamming projects, the most impactful was their plan to seed popular culture with a send-up of the Bavarian Illuminati, portraying them as a global conspiracy mockingly made in the image of the John Birch Society's anti-communist paranoia. If the reactionaries were going to imagine conspirators lurking in every shadow, then Wilson and company were going to take it a step further. By taking the reality promoted by reactionary conspiracists to its absurd and incoherent endpoint, Wilson and his collaborators believed they could trigger a "Chapel Perilous" moment for the growing reactionary right, and that the absurdist subject matter would tip the scales in favor of reality agnosticism and lay the groundwork for an engaged electorate to face the problems of the twenty-first century.

What is most incredible is not that their plan spectacularly backfired, but that it only failed in the last step. As Wilson's co-conspirator Kerry Wilson's biography describes it, "Discordian conspirators started planting stories about the Discordian Society's age-old war against the Illuminati, accusing everyone under the sun of being a member of that sinister and

sneaky organization” (Gorightly 136). What they had failed to understand was their audience’s deeply ingrained desire for conspiracy narratives, and how closely intertwined the narratives of conspiracy theories and America had become. By re-introducing the idea of the Illuminati, they crystalized ambient American fears of the growing military-industrial complex and mass media indoctrination into a single symbol, one with centuries of conspiracist narratives associated with it. When it came time to choose at the Chapel Perilous crossroads, the reality agonistic’s path was the road untaken.

Standing on the shoulders of the conspiracy giants who came before, QAnon represents the latest American Chapel Perilous, the most widespread and persistent challenge to the consensus reality that America’s paranoid cultural unconscious has mustered. Wilson’s experiment begs the same question in the ‘70s as QAnon does today: why do so many Americans readily accept the path of delusion? Why is it that so few seem to take the path of Wilson’s reality agnostic when offered the choice? Perhaps most importantly, why do these patterns of paranoid delusion seem to repeat with such ardent frequency across American history?

It certainly is not due to compelling evidence or damning proof, as such incidents would cease to be conspiracy theories and simply be documented conspiracies. While no shortage of these are real, documented conspiracies by the US government like Operation Gladio or the Iran-Contra affair, they invariably prove much less popular than tales of Satanic daycares and pedophile pizza shops (Pedrick). While the work of influential conspiracy scholar van Prooijen has explored the potentially adaptive value in a conspiracist outlook, one that hardens a society against the deleterious effects of actual conspiracies, this does not seem to have been the case for the United State of America (2018).

Indeed, despite the constant drumbeat of fear that America has sustained for the last century, the American populace seems utterly incapable of mounting any serious challenge to their own governmental perfidy. America's fears about institutional power have done nothing to prevent the invasive Patriot Act, the militarization of the police, dehumanizing immigration policies, and the countless other instances of governmental brutality and coercion under the so-called "wars" on drugs, terror, and poverty. Indeed, if anything, America's conspiracy-minded population seems more ready than ever to usher in a new era of iron-fisted state oppression. From the outside, these narratives seem to offer nothing to their adherents but paranoid alienation, impotent rage, and crushing loneliness.

Yet none of these consequences prevent waves of dangerous, delusional conspiracy theories from washing over American life as reliably as the tides. As previously discussed, QAnon draws from an astonishingly diverse array of sources to construct its mythos, yet its core narrative remains that of a conspiracy theory—and this core narrative structure persists in a fractal pattern throughout the vast expanse of QAnon community output. As impossibly cosmic and mystifyingly esoteric as aspects of the QAnon mythology have become, they always connect back around to paranoid delusions surrounding American politics. While it is amusing to imagine the sheer idiotic absurdity of fifth-dimensional energy beings, time traveling techno-wizards, angels, and aliens all working in concert to unsuccessfully engineer a Trump presidential victory, this is evidently a compelling narrative to millions of Americans.

While QAnon exists at the intersection of novel factors emerging from new technology, its narrative components are exclusively second-hand, with some stretching back before the first pilgrims arrived. Just as the core conspiracy narrative structure repeats throughout the QAnon community, so too does this narrative repeat through the centuries of American history, and

indeed, Western modernity. While there is a strong case to be made that the affordances of digital media and the profit-driven design decisions of social media corporations have played an enormous role in the shaping and proliferation of QAnon (as will be explored in Chapter 3), the desire for these paranoid, damaging narrative frameworks cannot be blamed solely on the many failings of Silicon Valley and its digital communications platforms. In this sense, QAnon is part of the larger pattern of conspiracism in Western culture and must be understood within this tradition as much as it must be understood as a digital phenomenon.

Dissecting Delusion: The Narrativity of Conspiracy

The various components of QAnon do not add up to a coherent framework for political action, empirical analysis or rational deduction—but they do form a narrative that clearly speaks to something fundamental in the lives of its adherents. Thankfully, the stories we tell can prove just as revealing as any formal ideology or rationale. From a sociological perspective, narratives are essential communicative frameworks for socialization, the mortar between the bricks of culture, history, ideology, and identity. As ubiquitous as it is adaptive, Barthes would eloquently describe narrative as, “international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself” (79). Barthes would go on to describe its function as one which “ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted,” emphasizing the role narrative plays not only in conveying information but instilling that information with relational meaning. Indeed, building from Barthes, historian Hayden White would call narrative, “a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted” (6). In short, narratives are far more than simply stories or entertainment, they reflect our cognitive imperative to organize information into meaningful configurations.

From this lens, any individual conspiracy narrative is undeniably doing the work Barthes and White describe (albeit in an oft-maladaptive form), generating a shared understanding and interpretive meaning to major events. Conspiracy narratives can act as both social identity and epistemological strategy, one based on deciphering the supposedly hidden truths writhing beneath the thin veil of normality. While conspiracy narratives have taken many forms and served many social functions across history, in the twenty-first century they are typically predicated on what conspiracy scholar Michael Barkun calls “stigmatized knowledge.” These are beliefs that have been ignored, suppressed, forgotten, or otherwise rejected by the hegemonic ideologies of a society. This places conspiracy theorists in an inherently adversarial position to societal orthodoxy, where the stigmatization of their beliefs becomes further confirmation of their accuracy.

Consider this post from 2021 by popular QAnon influencer @stormisuponus from the perspective of narrativization. Through a bouquet of repurposed conspiracy narratives tied

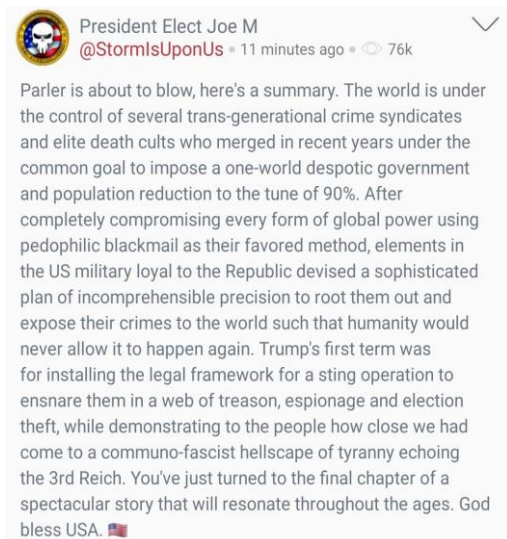


Figure 3. @StormIsUponUs.

together through the unifying Q’s counter-conspiracy,

an alternate version of the Trump presidency is

conjured into being. Rather than simply an alternative

telling of events, the reliance on QAnon’s pool of

stigmatized knowledge creates a world more akin to

popular fiction. Every element is larger than life; Q

executes “a sophisticated plan of incomprehensible

precision” while the Cabal seeks to bring about “a

communo-fascist hellscape of tyranny.” The morality is

purely Manichean, the dramatic stakes set to apocalyptic levels usually found in a summer

blockbuster. In the world of QAnon, the hidden truths of the world are strictly of the mythic variety, mundanity exists only in the false consensus reality of the Cabal.

In effect, QAnon promoters like @StormIsUponUs are engaged in what Jameson called “retextualization,” an attempt to turn historical record into narrative text because while the past “is not a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational,” it is equally true “that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form ... that it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization” (*Political Unconscious* 34). Along similar lines as White’s work on the narrativization of history, Jameson observes that this paradoxical arrangement creates tendency towards “allegorical master narratives,” whose clear causality and moral lessons represent “a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality” (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 19). The meta-narrative framework of QAnon is precisely that, a narrative text offering an alternative interpretation of reality that caters to narrative expectations and fantasies of its intended audience.

Looking at the rhetoric of QAnon influencers through this lens, it is apparent that the conspiracist narrative of QAnon is predicated on offering privileged access to a version of reality filled with excitement, purpose, and transcendental truth. These benefits are most often framed as a kind of prophetic knowledge, that by adopting the QAnon practices of decoding and discernment an individual will gain not only uncanny insight into the events that shape their world, but the moral clarity and narrative purpose of a protagonist. However, this clarity and purpose is regularly confronted with its own limitations, as the narrative framework of QAnon has proven singularly incapable of delivering anything other than stories.

Here is another post of @stormisuponus, filled with the same excitement, surety, and conviction that the end is nigh. Yet this post comes a year before the previous one, as the author

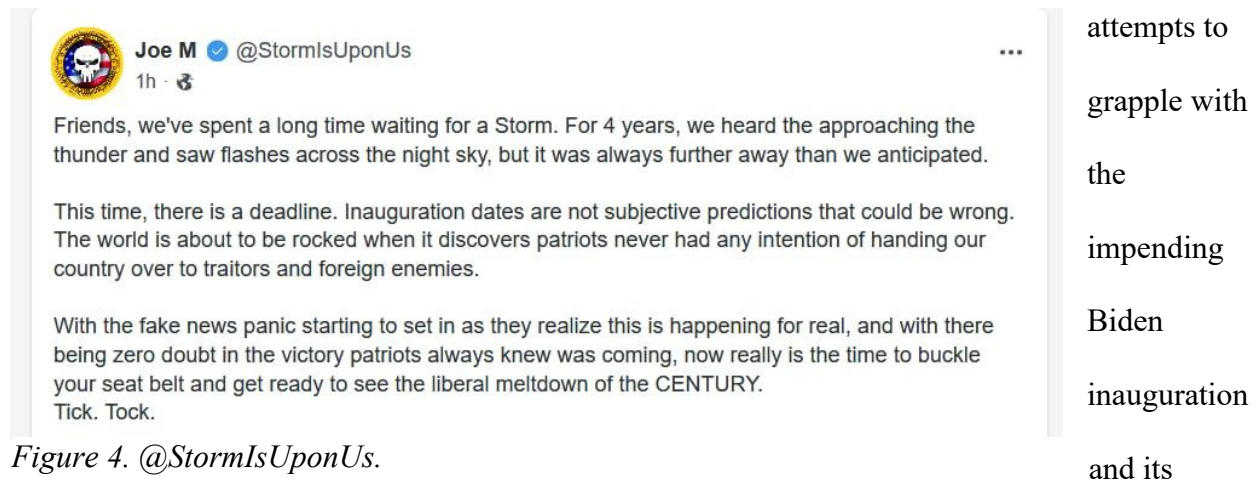


Figure 4. @StormIsUponUs.

implications for Q's prophecies. They emphasize the immutable, objective fact of the Biden presidency as a terminal boundary: if Biden becomes president, then the whole movement has been a lie. Yet a year later they are more fervent in their beliefs than before, utterly convinced that this time they are truly amid "the final chapter of a story that will resonate through the ages."

Burke defines humans as the "symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal," who construct their world through representative symbol systems as much as through their own physicality (*Language as Symbolic Action* 8). We build narratives using our symbol systems to impart causal structure and moral meaning to the experience of reality, and the conspiracy theory is no exception. However, not all conspiracy theories are created equal, and defining the conspiratorial metanarrative of QAnon requires more precise terminology.

Conspiracy Theory vs. Conspiracism

Conspiracy theory is a term which works well enough in casual conversation, but it lacks the precision needed for a formal academic analysis. To remedy this issue, a degree of

definitional pruning is in order. First, there is a world of difference between the scholarly study of conspiracies and the fevered realm of conspiracy narrativization. Ideological groups within massive power structures who seek to utilize their positions to further their agendas are not uncommon, and history is replete with examples both ancient and modern. Particularly in a nation-state as large, powerful and influential as America, it would be more surprising (and suspicious) to find no evidence of conspiracies within its vast Imperial apparatus.

The study of material motivations and ideological imperatives which generate such conspiracies are found in many academic disciplines—economists, historians, sociologists, and political scientists can all provide theories for understanding the how and why of proven conspiracies like America’s own MK Ultra, Operation Gladio, or the 1933 Business Plot. These are documented events supported by evidence, whose study invariably reveals a complex network of influences and motivations. While these are technically “conspiracy theories,” they are theories in the formal sense, based on empirical evidence and presenting falsifiable claims. Conversely, while names like MK Ultra and Gladio are featured often within the QAnon community, they appear not as complex studies of real-world events, but as throwaway catchphrases that have been stripped of their complexity and nuance. Calling QAnon adherents “conspiracy theorists” wrongly implies they are forming and testing falsifiable theories based on evidence, when it would be far more accurate to describe their discursive practices as narrativizing rather than theorizing.

This blatant mismatch between terminology and phenomenon led theorist Frank Mintz to coin the term “conspiracism,” meaning a persistent, unfalsifiable belief in the primacy of hidden conspiracies as the force behind historical and current events (Mintz). As QAnon has evolved from a collection of conspiracy narratives into an all-encompassing conspiratorial theory of

everything, conspiracism provides a far more useful lens than conspiracy theories. The QAnon community's discursive practices reflect their commitment to conspiracism, particularly in how they respond to disconfirming evidence. Originating from Q themselves, one of the QAnon community's most popular aphorisms is "over the target."

Seen here in a Q drop from late 2018, "over the target" is in reference to a more mainstream aphorism, "You only catch flak when you're over the target." Q is responding to



increasingly hostile coverage of the movement, claiming that attacks by "fake news, shills and blue checkmarks"¹ are a good sign and should be considered a "badge of honor." The logic here goes as follows: if all mainstream news media is controlled by

Figure 5. Q.

the Cabal, and the Cabal seeks to suppress the truth, then to be attacked by mainstream news indicates that they are getting close to the truth. In this way, a belief in conspiracism works to reframe all mainstream criticism as reinforcement of their beliefs rather than refutation. Put simply, the tangible world of evidence and results does not play a role in conspiracist narratives. While it would be tempting to simply write off the phenomenon as the province of "fringe lunatics" (as was the norm during the paranoid-style era of scholarship), the recent renaissance in conspiracism spearheaded by QAnon, boasting adherents coming from a range of backgrounds

¹ "Blue checkmark" is a reference to a special Twitter account status held by verified public figures.

and beliefs must give pause to any observer seeking such an easy answer (Enders et al.). When over half of Americans have been consistently shown to believe in at least one conspiracy theory, one must either accept that a majority of Americans are lunatics or reconsider the framing of the problem (Oliver and Wood).

Conspiracism scholarship within the humanities tends to define the roots of the phenomenon within one of two broad theoretical categories: the “paranoid style theory” or the “cultural studies theory.” The paranoid style draws its name from Hofstadter’s landmark essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” and tends to focus on a paranoia-led cognitive style and a generally faulty thought process for understanding events (Stempel et al.). Conversely, the cultural studies approach emphasizes the social structuring of these beliefs, and that “the task is not to condemn popular manifestations of conspiracy theory, but to understand their appeal and assess their cultural significance” (Butter, *Plots, Designs* 31). Beginning in the early 2000s, academic scholarship has shifted towards the second category, reflected in the work of scholars like Barkun, Knight, Dean, and Jameson.

While certain personality types have been identified by psychologists as being more prone to conspiracist ideation, socialization and environment have a major role to play in how these traits are made manifest (Bowes et al.; Dangall et al.; Dudley et al.). This is to say, there is no easy diagnosis or singular pathology to explain away conspiracism as a mere mental defect, lending credence to the more diffuse cultural studies approach. While individual pathologies and personality traits undeniably impact an individual’s ability to accurately deduce the cause of major events, these individual aspects are greatly mediated in their expression by the socio-cultural-technological framework of the societies they exist in. As this chapter will explore, some socio-cultural environments are more conducive to this type of thinking than others.

To better understand how culture and socialization can function to enable conspiracism, we return to Jameson's concept of retexualization. In his landmark work, "Postmodernism, or the

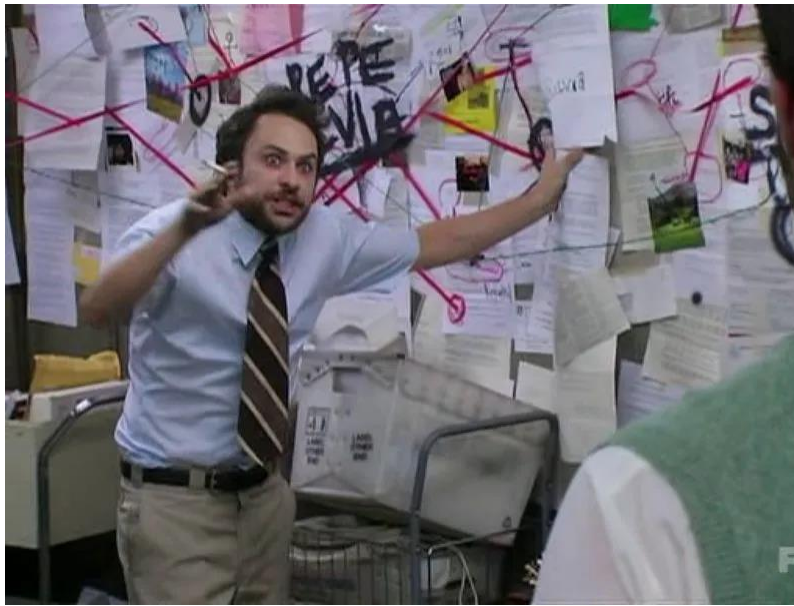


Figure 6. "S4. E10. Sweet Dee Has a Heart Attack."

Cultural Logic of Late Stage Capitalism," he frames the current resurgence in Western conspiracism as "a degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (Jameson, "Postmodernism"

80). The totality of globalized technocratic capitalism, much like the events of history, cannot be accessed directly, only through symbolic narrative representations. Conspiracism is one potential framework for building this narrative, one Jameson presciently observes is increasingly modeled on the technological frameworks that have defined post-modernity. The archetypal conspiracy corkboard crisscrossed in red string is an iconic representation of conspiracism, one still replicated in popular memetic templates like the accompanying image. Its enduring appeal lies in its simple, iconic representation of a grasping a network of power and control, the networks of imagined conspiracies mirroring the informational networks of the internet and the labyrinthine networks of a globalized economy.

In this way, Jameson frames postmodern conspiracism like QAnon as the result of an epistemology crippled by both the incomprehensible complexity of the techno-cultural systems of late-stage capitalism, and the enduringly human desire for narrative simplicity. This framing

serves as an elegant update to modernist adage, “antisemitism is the socialism of fools,” referring to the tendency of antisemitic conspiracism to ignore the complex systemic problems of capitalism in favor of a simplistic narrative of good versus evil. In both cases, the idea of a crippled epistemology is particularly important, as it highlights a crucial truth that the paranoid style theory correctly identified: conspiracism is deeply dysfunctional as an epistemology, and the “hidden truths” claimed by conspiracists consistently fail to translate into real-world results.

No amount of denouncing the Illuminati has resulted in their downfall, nor has any conspiracist leveraged their knowledge to reveal any reptoid infiltrators or secret cloning facilities. Even in the case of the more grounded conspiracies of older generations, revelations about MK Ultra and Operation Mockingbird have done little to curb the influence of powerful, unaccountable intelligence agencies from continuing their work. Similarly, popular conspiracy narratives regarding the creation of a “one-world government” under the control of the shadowy “New World Order” have proven utterly impotent against the forces of globalization. By any material reading, the dissemination of conspiracy theories in the postmodern era, both legitimate theorizing and delusional conspiracism, have comprehensively failed at achieving their stated objectives.

QAnon’s distinctive mix of prophetic revealed truths and digital media augury offer a clearer vision of this failure than most, as Q and the QAnon community have endured a constant succession of failed predictions and prophecies. Yet the community as a whole remains doggedly committed to the idea of “waking up” the masses. If only they could simply convey the truth they have found to others, then the world would change for the better—as though their perspective was the only possible conclusion when presented with “the truth.” This is likely an easier belief to maintain while firmly ensconced in their fringe communities, but their insistence on trying to

wake up the masses regularly confronts them with their own Chapel Perilous. QAnon influencers and news aggregators paint an apocalyptic picture of burning cities and invading foreign hordes, yet their family and friends continue about their lives as though nothing has changed. If adherents were looking for an epistemology that would help them navigate their lives and enact systemic change, then conspiracism has been a resounding failure. Yet QAnon's vast network of conspiracist media and news continues to grow, demonstrating that these narratives serve a rather different purpose than their stated one.

While the failures of QAnon tend to get more press coverage, the crippled epistemology inherent in the conspiracist worldview is revealed even more clearly in their rare successes. Fears over child trafficking and government corruption are central to the QAnon core narrative and do represent real-world problems that need to be addressed. Yet even when correctly identifying a problem, the QAnon community assiduously avoids engaging with meaningful solutions. Rather than support existing and functioning organizations that seek to help abused and trafficked children, QAnon adherents throw their support behind less reputable and flashier groups like "Operation Underground Railroad," which invariably are revealed to be scams or even havens for sexual predators themselves (Gehrke). The organizations that do the real work of combatting child sex trafficking do not align with the QAnon mythic framing; they are not gun-toting action heroes but dedicated social workers and volunteers whose work is focused on harm reduction and childcare rather than kicking down doors and shooting pedophiles. This leads to their real, impactful work being either ignored, or in the case of overtly liberal or leftist organizations, actively defamed and attacked by virtue of their inability to align symbolically with the QAnon community's expectations (Sarteschi).

In a strange turn, one of QAnon's most outlandish claims has recently found a measure of grounding in reality. While a far cry from their conception of an international satanic Cabal at the highest levels of power, the esoteric satanist Neo-Nazi group "The Order of the Nine Angles" and its various splinter groups have been implicated in a number of ritual murders, terrorist attacks, and even child trafficking networks (Winston, "A 23-Year-Old"; Wiston, "The Satanist"). The Order of the Nine Angles (O9A) has been operating since the 1980s and much like QAnon the internet has provided its adherents with an unparalleled mechanism for spreading their vile ideology, one that champions rape, murder and the wholesale destruction of "Christian" society (Gartenstein-Ross and Chace-Donahue).

A casual observer might imagine that the QAnon community would view the existence of these vile groups as proof of their claims, evidence they could throw in the face of their many detractors—literal satanic pedophiles, operating in an international cabal! Yet these stories never even make it onto the QAnon community's radar, barely even registering as a topic of discussion.

It is not that the QAnon community doesn't believe the story, it is that they do not even see it: the networks of Telegram channels, Facebook groups, Twitter threads, YouTube channels, and TikTok influencers which provide them new media to analyze simply do not carry such stories to them. The Order of the Nine Angles, while seemingly a perfect fit for their worldview, are missing some key narrative components. Namely, they are fellow fringe-dwellers rather than powerful members of the establishment, and even more damning, they embody a right-wing ideology rather than a left-wing one. Indeed, the O9A often deal in the same kind of reactionary conspiracism as those in the QAnon community and largely have the same enemies in progressives and liberal institutions. To accept the accounts of O9A's satanism would

simultaneously vindicate their individual conspiracy claims, while also destroying the Manichean moral framing on which those claims were built. If Satanism supports the same right-wing ideologies QAnon adherents claim are derived from solely from God, it creates a massive contradiction in the very core of their narrative claims. It is far easier to simply ignore any external evidence that could generate such contradictions and remain purely in the realm of narrative abstraction. Put simply, the QAnon community would rather ignore empirical evidence that supports their claims rather than resolve the contradictions and complexities that evidence introduces to their narrative.

This is where the other path of the Chapel Perilous crossroads leads, away from the reality agnostic's complex and uncertain world into the solipsistic delusion of perpetual conspiracy. Walking away from reality has its consequences, most notably in any attempts to accomplish anything outside the conspiracist echo chamber. Countless failed "stolen election" lawsuits have foundered on the total lack of evidence provided by the conspiracists while whole communities are scammed by "Trump coin" or promises of miraculous currency revaluations or cancer curing "med beds" (Katic et al.; Valverde and Sherman). Adherents drink bleach and take hydroxychloroquine rather than take the Covid vaccine, only to suffer vastly increased mortality rates for their trouble (Dickson, "Qanon YouTubers"; Mathieu and Roser; Wong). However, what this hyperfocus on symbolism does offer is a purity of purpose, a moral clarity free from the contradictions and complications inherent to living in a shared social reality. To put the appeal of such a paradigm into perspective, we next turn to the social psychology theory of *cognitive dissonance*.

The Dissonance Beneath the Delusion: Conspiracism and Cognitive Dissonance

In the late 1950s, psychologist Leon Festinger proposed an idea that would prove to be foundational to the growing field—cognitive dissonance. Put simply, cognitive dissonance is the result of maintaining mutually exclusive or contradictory beliefs, resulting in an ever-growing psychological toll on the individual and a drive to reduce or resolve the source of the dissonance. This effect is especially pronounced when it comes to beliefs tied to personal identity, particularly any experiences or information that paints the individual as stupid, immoral or inconsistent (Aronson et al.). The drive to resolve this dissonance has been shown to be a profound motivator of behavior, particularly when associated with important or core beliefs. Indeed, whether a piece of information generates dissonance has been shown to be a more effective predictor of belief than reward, punishment or perceived source credibility (Freedman). In the decades since Festinger’s original work, the theory has been expanded and re-worked to encompass a wide range of perspectives on the role of cognitive dissonance in shaping cognition (Harmon-Jones). However, it is in Festinger’s original context that we will be applying the theory to the rhetorical strategy of the QAnon community, as cognitive dissonance theory originated from the study of delusional belief systems akin to QAnon.

Festinger coined the term while studying the behavior of cults, specifically the reaction of cult adherents when their group’s prophecies fail to come true. Collected in his landmark book, *When Prophecies Fail*, Festinger’s observations of cult members attempting to resolve the dissonance of their belief and reality would form the basis for “A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance,” published a year later. Contrary to Festinger’s initial hypothesis, he found that if a belief was sufficiently strongly held, individuals would resolve their dissonance in favor of the belief rather than reality. This was most famously demonstrated by the adherents of a Michigan-

based UFO cult in *When Prophecies Fail*, where the failed prophecy of their leader actually increased the dedication and fervor of the committed believers (Festinger).

In essence, the dissonance created by the failed prophecy placed cult members at the Chapel Perilous. Indeed, Wilson's own emphasis on the Chapel Perilous operating at the site of grinding contradiction between internal beliefs and external experience nicely dovetails with Festinger's findings. Down one path lay the painful realization that they had been duped, that years of their life had been wasted, and that ultimately, they had to rebuild their understanding of the world and themselves from the ground up. Down the other path lay their friends, family, and positive self-image—if only they would simply ignore the material reality of a failed prophecy. When push came to shove, adherents chose the delusion that let them maintain their beliefs and social identity rather than the consensus reality that let them participate in society. As discussed in the introduction, belief in conspiracy theories and cults share many underlying cognitive biases, and QAnon has worked to blur the boundaries between the two even more so.

No one enjoys having their identity and beliefs undermined or challenged, as psychological research has consistently shown for decades. Individual selection bias towards information that does not threaten cherished beliefs, demand undesired change or action, or lead to unpleasant emotions is well established, as is the tendency for individuals to stick to their moral judgements even when they cannot justify them rationally (Haidt; Sweeny et al.). These biases are magnified by the propensity for conspiracists to favor intuition over rational inquiry, and favor simple solutions for complex problems (van Prooijen; van Prooijen and van Vugt). This complex interplay of cognitive style and bias leads conspiracists to adopt a belief system “driven not by direct relationships among individual theories, but by agreement between individual theories and higher-order beliefs about the world” (Wood et al.).

While these studies are certainly helpful in understanding the motivations of individual QAnon conspiracists, they do have some crucial limitations. Namely, the conspiracists themselves, and their distrust of such research. There is an undeniable sampling bias in effect, as any true believer in QAnon would be utterly unwilling to engage honestly with any kind of academic study. In their minds, since these institutions are run by child sacrificing Satanists, it would be their moral duty to ignore, disparage, or even sabotage such attempts to survey their community. Akin to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle but as applied to the humanities, observing deeply paranoid individuals can unsurprisingly lead to changes in their behavior. Even if the conspiracists agree to be tested and observed, such studies run the risk of receiving false information or even acting as a platform for conspiracists to legitimize their narratives by having them appear in academic papers (Campion-Vincent). This has long been an issue in studying fringe communities, even Festinger's foundational work with the Michigan UFO cults attracted criticism along these lines (Bermejo-Rubio).

Thankfully, while creating an unbiased "experimental reality" to properly measure and test conspiracists' biases and beliefs remains out of practical reach, the digital world has provided a historically unparalleled opportunity to study the rhetorical practices of these communities in their natural setting. In the anonymity of 4Chan, the supposed security of Telegram, and more recently in the far-right echo chamber of Musk's under-moderated Twitter, these communities operate under the false belief that their identities are safely obscured even as their conversations and debates are automatically archived and cataloged on these public platforms.

In analyzing QAnon community discourse, we can see how the paradigm of cognitive dissonance manifests within their rhetorical practices. Cognitive dissonance offers at least a partial answer to why the path of the “reality agnostic” is so often ignored; it is simply less



UltraMJTruth
@MJTruthUltra

Today is the 6th anniversary of Q's first post. HAPPY BDAY 17!!!

Most people misunderstand the first post to think Q wrote that Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM on the morning of A October 30, 2017...

That is not the case...

That was a person on the board Q was responding to.

What Q said (even though they didn't sign off as Q yet) was

“HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am. Expect massive riots organized in defiance and others fleeing the US to occur. US M's will conduct the operation while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most major cities.”

One could assume the two posts were working together with the messaging... but they were two different messages by two anonymous accounts, which the latter turned out to be Q.
:)

The rest is history as we then began the Greatest Military-Civilian Alliance Op of all time to save the world!

Figure 7. @MJTruthUltra.

generated by Q's many failed prophecies. These posts are especially common around anniversaries of major Q predictions, and the rhetorical strategies employed to minimize community dissonance are quite telling.

As @MJTruthUltra observes, Q's first “canon” post (even before they adopted the moniker of Q) was the claim that Hillary Clinton was attempting to flee the country in the face of her imminent arrest and execution. @MJTruthUltra employs a classic bit of misdirection, placing the burden of failure on the community's misreading of the message rather than its patently inaccurate claims. Even if Q did not technically endorse the specific date and time of Clinton's

... socially and psychologically painful to continue down the path of delusion in the short term, even as the consequences become more dire in the long term. Just as Festinger found evidence for the role of cognitive dissonance in the failed prophecies of a cult, so too do the many failed prophecies of Q provide fertile ground for analysis.

One of the most reliable types of posts generated by QAnon influencers revolves around minimizing the dissonance

arrest, they make several other specific claims which proved utterly unsubstantiated, as Clinton's passport is yet to be revoked, nor was she captured in a military action by the Marines. Yet these glaring gaps go entirely unexamined, instead replaced with a simple declaration of QAnon's



success, a variant of the QAnon catchphrase spawned by Q declaring their mission “the greatest military operation of all time.” This basic structure is found time and time again: the influencer acknowledges the source of dissonance (failed prophecy or otherwise disappointed expectations), recontextualizes this dissonance into part of the ongoing narrative and deflects attention from this dissonance by re-affirming community identity.

Figure 7. @SunTzusWar.

@SunTzusWar delivers a quintessential failed prophecy post on Q’s sixth anniversary, cleverly turning frustration into solidarity by re-contextualizing repeated failure into a kind of accomplishment. “How far we have come” is, of course, left to the imaginations of the audience. He acknowledges the frustration felt by many, before recontextualizing this information in a way intended to minimize the dissonance experienced by his audience. The victory that was once merely days away has now become a “generational war,” where their social media posting habits are imagined as heroic military operations. Taking the title of Sun Tzu to post on Twitter about underground adrenochrome harvesting operations feels so absurd that it must be farcical, but the adherents of QAnon take their imagined battles as seriously as Don Quixote took to tilting at windmills.

As @DGr8Awakening describes, the maintenance of these beliefs can have very real consequences in the lives of adherents, particularly after six years. The difference in tone and content between these @SunTzusWar and @DGr8Awakening reflects the difference in their community roles: influencer and follower respectively. Blame and anger are cast in every direction except toward the self, with care taken to

avoid generating any additional dissonance. What is particularly important to note is the use of “6-year delta.” This term originated, like much of QAnon’s core terminology, from 4Chan. An early “Q proof” (something which confirms Q’s claims and insider status) was the regularity

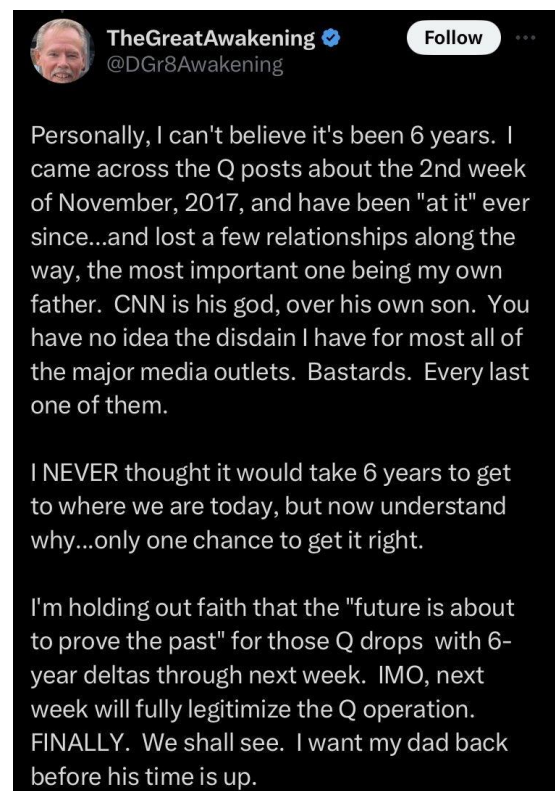


Figure 8. @DGr8Awakening.

with which Q and Trump would post messages at the same time. The time between Q posts and Trump Tweets would be called a “delta,” with a “zero delta” indicating posts within one minute of each other. In 2019, a particularly ardent QAnon adherent even placed every “delta” on a graph to prove their statistical legitimacy (*/Qresearch/*). Despite some obvious errors in basic statistical mathematics, the idea became popular enough to enter the general QAnon community vernacular.

Over time, it came to serve an entirely different purpose. As prediction after prediction failed to materialize, the community began to embrace a new interpretation of the Q Delta. What if instead of predicting the immediate future, they predicted events much further down the temporal pipeline? Instead of measuring deltas in minutes, they began to measure them in weeks, months and eventually years. Irrational, yes, if the goal is to provide a system for predicting the future. However, if the goal is the reduction of dissonance, then these rhetorical strategies make a great deal more sense. In this way, Q’s predictions can never be wrong and can never generate dissonance. If the prediction fails to come to pass, then the community simply has the wrong delta, and no internal beliefs need to be challenged.

While simply proclaiming victory by “holding the line” of belief is often the message on popular, public facing platforms like Twitter, the internal debates and narrativization behind the scenes can be seen in the discourse found on more obscure and “secure” platforms like Telegram. Here, the drive to resolve the dissonance of a failed prophecy can often result in

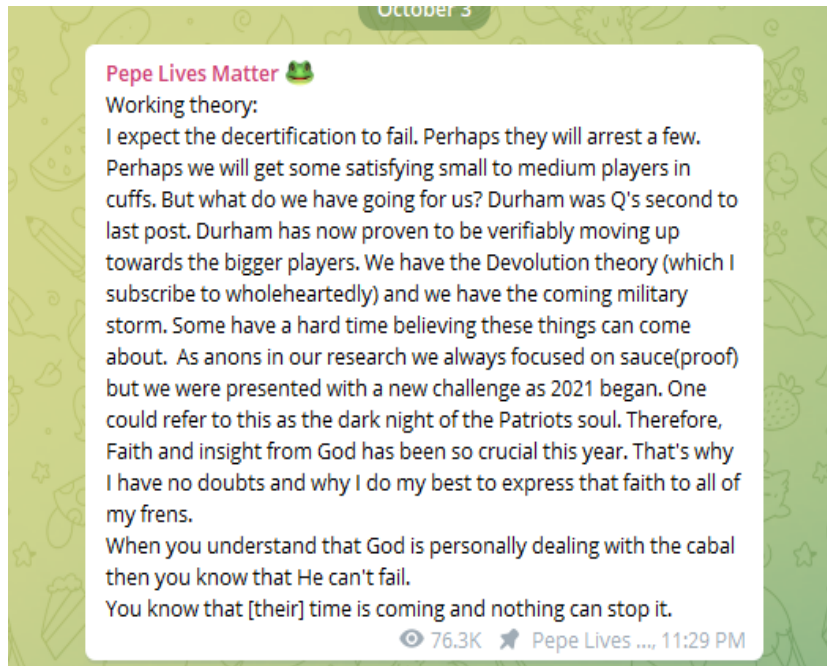


Figure 9. *Pepe Lives Matter.*

increasingly convoluted conspiracy narratives that often draw from a wide array of secondary theories and popular narratives in the community.

Here, popular influencer Pepe Lives Matter (a reference to Pepe the frog, a cartoon character co-opted by the MAGA movement

back in 2016) attempts to assuage his follower's dissonance in the wake of yet another failed prophecy. While Pepe Lives Matter engages in a much greater degree of narrativization, the essential structure remains the same.

This dissonance is generated by yet another failed Q prophecy, that the FBI investigation (led by Durham) into Trump's connections to Russia would play a crucial role in Q/Trump's plan to destroy the Cabal. This post is in the immediate wake of the three-and-a-half-year investigation's conclusion, the results of which were entirely inconsequential and a disappointment to both Democrats and Republican partisans. He acknowledges the dissonance, and immediately sets to work reincorporating it back into the ongoing narrative, invoking the briefly popular "devolution theory" (a claim that Trump intentionally lost the election to initiate a federal devolution of authority and a return to state-led governance) as well as the core Q claim of upcoming military intervention. With this new adapted narrative in place, he begins to reframe

the experience of dissonance by invoking their self-appointed identity as “independent researchers,” placing their feelings of disappointment as a kind of martyrdom suffered for their pursuit of the truth. That feeling of martyrdom naturally leads to an invocation of Christian identity, emphasizing the importance of faith in God, and correspondingly, a faith in Q. God is “personally dealing with the cabal,” and since “he can’t fail,” so too can Q’s plan never fail so long as one holds the faith. Pepe ends his post by paraphrasing a popular Q aphorism (Nothing can stop what is coming), further conflating Q with God as interchangeable signifiers for the moral authority behind their narrative. This syncretic approach is common across all QAnon communities, where breaking news, conspiracist narratives, pop culture, the Q drops, and the bible are all used as though they are all equivalent, interrelated texts.

This same pattern can be found beyond the realm of failed prophecy, in far more dramatic confrontations between the QAnon community and reality. Just as Festinger outlined: if a deeply held, committed belief (one sufficiently specific and related to the material world to be disproven) is met with disconfirming evidence, so long as there is strong social support for that belief, then evidence is disregarded, and the belief is strengthened.

Here, influencer Qtah responds to the news that beloved QAnon celebrity and former three-star general Michael Flynn had publicly disavowed the movement. The same basic format



from the previous examples repeats: Qtah concedes the dissonant evidence, recontextualizes it within the ongoing narrative (here, invoking descriptions of Flynn from various Q drops), and ends with Qtah invoking in-group identity through the dual faith in God and Q. Qtah is outright stating Festinger’s theorized response of renewed faith, that hearing this

Figure 10. Qtah.

disconfirming evidence has made him “trust the plan more.” Amusingly, Q’s description of Flynn as “the beautiful black sky poet” comes from a misreading of a passage in former deputy FBI director Andy McCabe's book. McCabe describes Flynn’s general incoherence and inability to formulate rational responses to questions like a man insisting on seeing a beautiful black sky in the middle of a sunny afternoon. This was misinterpreted by a Fox news writer as a quote from Flynn, and Q framed this as a reference to “the coming storm.” Despite this information being freely available to the supposedly diligent researchers of the QAnon community (the first result of a google search for “Flynn black sky poet” returns a thorough breakdown of this broken telephone effect in action), such dissonance-generating information is selectively ignored (@awprokop).

Few events were as well-positioned to generate dissonance than January 6, initially appearing to be the much-prophesied storm arriving in the nick of time. Archived social media posts give us uncanny evidence of this process occurring in real time, as QAnon adherents watched their moment of triumph become yet another humiliating defeat. There is perhaps no better example than the string of tweets made by QAnon celebrity Kevin Sorbo, an actor known primarily for playing Hercules in a daytime television show in the ‘90s and a string of Evangelical propaganda films (most notably the “God isn’t Dead” series) throughout the 2010s.

Sorbo’s emotional journey mirrors that of millions of QAnon adherents on that day. At 10:27, he is excitedly hopeful, by 11:17 he is ready to proclaim that the prophesied day is upon us, the storm has arrived, the great awakening has begun. By 12:16, the general chaos and ugliness of the riot has become clear, and Sorbo is desperately calling for order while attempting to invoke group identity by contrasting QAnon supporters with their hated foe, Antifa. By 1:00, faced with images of MAGA protestors storming barricades and the Q Shaman parading through

the halls of the Capitol building, Sorbo abruptly shifts gears and declares the entire event a false flag perpetrated by Antifa. This claim would go on to become the generally agreed upon version of events within the QAnon community, though the fluid nature of QAnon's conspiracist

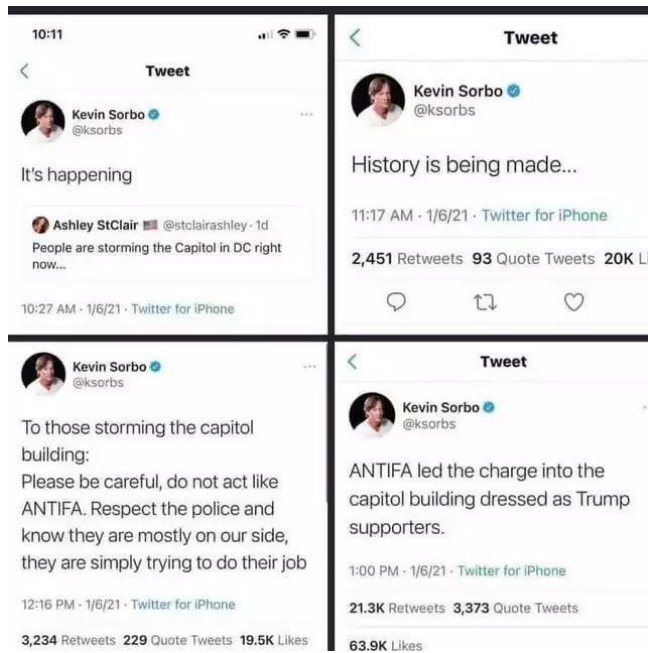


Figure 11. @ksorbs.

narratives would see many alternative explanations emerge as they became useful or convenient.

An entire dissertation could likely be filled by analysis and close reading of QAnon discourse through the lens of cognitive dissonance reduction, but it is only one aspect of the driving force behind the movement.

While the traditional cognitive dissonance model provides a useful lens to understand the

rhetorical strategies employed by the QAnon community, the question of why individual adherents adopts the conspiracist perspective in the first place remains unanswered. Indeed, as previously discussed, American history is rife with conspiracist movements, centuries worth of narratives whose origins go back to the very beginnings of modernity itself. However, the model of cognitive dissonance can offer a useful lens to understand QAnon's long lineage of conspiracy narratives as well.

As previously established, the beliefs most likely to result in profound dissonance tend to be closely linked to identity: how a person conceptualizes themselves, both in what differentiates and connects them to others. For the citizens of the modern world, there are undeniably shared points of identity with the pre-modern world—religion, language, and culture all remain

keystone elements of identity today. However, modernity has introduced several new vectors for identity formation through the introduction of new political, economic, cultural and technological paradigms. It is no coincidence that conspiracist narratives tend to hyper-fixate upon the contradictions embodied by the age of their creation, as they exist to retextualize those contradictions into a dissonance resolving narrative.

While the emergence of the contemporary, secularized narrative form of the “conspiracy theory” has often been ascribed to the French Revolution, a closer examination of history reveals that the conspiracy theory is only the latest iteration of conspiracist narrativization (E. White; Popper). Indeed, as the next section will demonstrate, conspiracism has proven to be a remarkably malleable and adaptable narrative form that has evolved alongside Western culture from pre-modern antiquity to the post-modern present.

Pre-modern Paranoia

The process of creating narratives to minimize cognitive dissonance is not a unique feature of modernity—indeed, it is likely as old as narrative and language itself. Anthropologists and historians have written extensively about the narratives of supernatural malefactors in the pre-modern world; tales of curses, witchcraft, and evil omens bear a distinct resemblance to modern conspiracist narratives in terms of form and function (Graumann; Groh; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*). Dissonance is not a uniquely modern phenomenon, after all. It is a ubiquitous feature of human cognition, though given this dissertation’s focus on QAnon and specifically the Western lineage of conspiracist narratives, we will be focusing on the evolution of these narratives in Western European societies.

The narrative of supernatural persecution tends to be associated with inexplicable tragedy—illness, failed crops, a death in the family, or any misfortune which seems to fall irrespective of the individual's faith in and adherence to the rules of their society. This represents an endemic problem for all human societies, a dissonance generating contradiction that must be addressed. Things cannot simply happen for no reason, otherwise the Gods would no longer be in control and the world would be reduced to mere chaos. Better to accept the existence of dark spirits and evil mystics than to accept a world without metaphysical structure or purpose.

While the flexibility of polytheistic faiths allows for a certain degree of chaos by their very design, the transition of the Western world into a belief in a single, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful God offers a more confounding conundrum. Catholicism has devoted much thought and writing to such situations, the theodicy problem being the most obvious example: How can evil happen in a world overseen by an omnipotent, all-seeing and all-loving God? The sheer scale and scope of texts devoted to this problem speaks to the universal drive to resolve this glaring contradiction, modern or otherwise (Berger). Once again, better to accept the existence of the Devil than to deny the existence of God, at least in terms of maintaining one's core beliefs.

Indeed, for pre-modern Europe, religion plays a central role in the resolution of cognitive dissonance, in both the regimented Catholic theology and the persistent, tolerated, local heresies of superstition, folklore, and mysticism. Misfortune could be the result of sin, even merely sinful thoughts, or perhaps the result of a witch's hex or a warlock's curse. In terms of an ideological narrative that encompasses both the material and spiritual world, European Catholicism fits the bill. It provides a narrative of political sovereignty and spiritual order from a place of institutional legitimacy, the Roman Catholic church acting as the last remaining pillar of the Roman Imperial state (Moller). The pope is infallible, the bible unimpeachable, the church's

authority an extension of God's dominion over man; when tragedy befalls the faithful flock, a scapegoat must be found lest the very foundations of social stability and communal identity collapse. The Devil's agents might strike down a herd of cattle with disease, or sweep a village away in a flood, but their assaults on divine providence can never move beyond localized tragedy.

Compared to the nation-states which will unseat its place of societal centrality, the Catholic church has an inherent narrative advantage when addressing the kind of cognitive dissonance which generates conspiracism—the inherently ineffable nature of God. In short, the unknowable nature of the divine provides a baseline of mystery which allows dissonance to dissipate. Why has tragedy befallen an otherwise virtuous and moral individual or group? Look at the stories of Job or the Israelites on their forty years of desert wandering and know that God's machinations are not always clear to the individuals within them. One must “embrace the mystery” and simply accept the limits of human knowledge, lest one venture into the territory of heresy and apostasy. Bad things happen for a reason, but one must be willing to cede the specific understanding of that reason to God and accept the humble humanity of ignorance. God is in heaven; all is right in the world.

This is not to say that this type of dissonance resolution was more just or sensible than the conspiracism of modernity, because these beliefs often resulted in prejudice against minority groups, witch burnings, riots, and massacres. However, they were distinctly more localized, less organized, and their narrative claims were far less specific, more rumors of conspiracy than comprehensive theories. Nevertheless, several significant QAnon conspiracy narratives do find their roots in this period, most notably the medieval “blood libel” claim, in which Christians claimed Jews would kill Christian children and add their blood to the food consumed during

Jewish religious holidays to appease their Satanic overlord (Dundes). However, it is equally important to note that these claims would not metastasize into the recognizable form of a conspiracist narrative until several centuries later, most notably in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1903.

In the evolution of this archetypal antisemitic conspiracy narrative, we can see a distorted reflection of the changing face of European society. The crucial difference between the rumors of blood libel and *The Protocols* lies in the role of the state, specifically in its supplanting of the supernatural or metaphysical authority with one based on the Enlightenment values. Given blood libel's origins as orally transmitted hearsay, the rumors remained vague on specifics and shrouded in mysticism, erupting into persecutory violence when local conditions called for a scapegoat. The murders were not imagined as part of a coherent political conspiracy, but rather as a metaphysical campaign to spite Christ and see the Jews returned to the holy land by some unspecified magical means (Dundes). Indeed, in this era, political scheming would be seen as decidedly less consequential than showing contempt for Christ and enacting ancient prophecy. Once again, sovereignty and power are perceived as flowing from the Church, subordinated to faith and divine providence, as reflected in the popular persecutory narratives of the times (Moller). As the nation state slowly supplanted the theocratic and monarchic institutions that preceded them, the nature of the folklore changed to match the times.

This can be clearly seen in the evolution of the medieval blood libel narrative into the modern form crystalized in *The Protocols*. Jewish mystic cabals were replaced by secret societies like the Illuminati and Freemasons, infiltrators corrupting the newly minted institutions of national state power and subverting (or reinforcing, depending on the conspiracist's stance on the ideological underpinnings of modernity) the enlightenment ideals on which they were based

(Oberhauser). The Jewish villains of *The Protocols* still operate under the metaphysical directive of evil, but their plans are now presented as specific actions (if often individually contradictory and incoherent as a whole) taken in the pursuit of global domination. Jewish Satanic prophecy takes a back seat to conspiracy plots surrounding capitalism, socialism and liberal democracy, making the document effectively antisemitic and anti-modern in equal measure (Heil). As seen in the evolution of the blood libel narrative into its modern incarnation in *The Protocols*, the desire for simplified dissonance resolving narratives was not banished by the arrival of the enlightenment but simply adapted to the conditions of modernity.

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Conspiracy: Revolutionary Conspiracism and Modernity

The road from antiquity to modernity was laid with ideals and paved with corpses. The comprehensive changes to European culture, economics, ideology, social identity, and communications technology that create the Modern era were centuries in the making, and the old world of feudal theocracy did not go quietly. In the decades of religious wars and political revolutions that forged the modern world, the same print media networks that disseminated Enlightenment philosophy and emerging political ideology would also carry new conspiracist narratives that reflected this emerging modern world.

The earliest incarnations of what modern audiences would understand as a “conspiracy theory” arise in the 1500s during the aftermath of the Protestant schism and the decades of religious wars that followed (Coward; Swann; Zwierlein). However, it is in the revolutionary period of the late 1700s that Western conspiracism would truly blossom. Recent scholarships make a compelling case for the utility of conspiracy theories in pre-modern contexts, particularly in periods of societal instability were identifying and organizing against hostile coalitions (both

within and without existing socio-political hierarchies) is a vital survival strategy (van Prooijen and van Vugt). Revolutionary era Europe would prove similarly amenable to conspiracism, where there was certainly no shortage of actual conspirators plotting to seize power and impose their vision of modernity on their countrymen (Coward; Swann).

Particularly during the chaos of the French Revolution, conspiracy theorizing presented a not unreasonable, if often inaccurate, framework for applying meaning to the often-confusing coups, countercoups and political intrigue which dominated Revolutionary politics (Campbell et al.). The revolutionary period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly in Britain, France, and North America, would see the widespread adoption of conspiracism as a common framework for understanding events, effectively acting as part of the cultural orthodoxy rather than the stigmatized knowledge category it occupies today (Furet; Wood). French revolution leader Robespierre made regular invocations of a “conspiracy against the republic,” claiming “Without, all the tyrants encircle you; within, all the friends of tyranny conspire” (Robespierre 353-6). His bold rhetoric had some basis, as the early years of the revolution saw several very real counter-revolutionary plots uncovered through revolutionary paranoia (Tackett). Monarchist and conservative counter-revolutionary authors, most notably Edmund Burke, invoked conspiracism with equal regularity, frequently painting the revolutionary movements of the era as a grand plot against civilization itself (Pestel).

Conspiracism was equally popular among the masses, as seen in conspiracy panics like that of the French “famine plots,” a conspiracist narrative that claimed elites were intentionally starving their subjects to achieve political goals. This popular conspiracism had real world consequences, a belief in “famine plots” contributed to revolutionary fervor and fueled the “Great Fear” and the subsequent wave of populist violence in 1789 (S. L. Kaplan). However, the

most important and enduring change to conspiracism was the shift away from the metaphysical conspiracism of the pre-modern world to the secular conspiracism that would follow it. Like modernity itself, the process was incremental, but over time the Satanic cults and witch covens of pre-modern Europe were replaced by secret societies and political plots to seize control of the emerging modern state institutions. There was still often a religious dimension to these narratives, but the general grand conspiracist meta-narrative “was replaced in revolutionary times, roughly speaking, with the vague philosophic-historical concept that each threat, each step, and all conspiracies were part of the larger struggle between the achievement of the new society and the Old Regime” (Butter, *Routledge Handbook* 550).

To better understand what caused this shift, we must examine more closely the causes and effects of modernity in the context of its emergence. In *Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens argues that the constellation of trends and forces we call modernity could be best understood by its three fundamental consequences. First, the individual’s conception of time and place became both uniform and externalized. The proliferation and standardization of clocks created a newly universalized relationship between the individual and time, while advances in transportation and communications technology resulted in more and more of the world’s geography being made available to the average European. Second, because of these changes, individual identity became ‘disembedded’ from the local and enmeshed into the emerging frameworks of nationalism and capitalism. National citizenship, with its attendant rights, responsibilities and institutional framework become central to individual identity, while new economic frameworks offer the potential for social mobility and new social relations through both economic class and consumer consumption. Finally, individuals can examine, reflect on, and adapt to these new systemic realities, creating identities based in complex, interrelated networks of social and economic

relations that create what Giddens refers to as “reflexivity.” By virtue of the expectations of rationality and empiricism, ideas and identities must be constantly adjusted or altered as new information comes to light. In essence, the nature of truth becomes an interactive process, nothing is so sacred that new knowledge or understanding cannot rewrite its rules. In place of tradition comes progression, and this constant churn of ideas, commodities, and identities creates opportunity and instability in equal measure.

For the proponents of modernity, the European philosophies of rationality, objectivism, and liberalism offered the tools to create a more productive, organized, and humane world. The abundance of material goods, the increase in farming production, pluralistic legal and political systems, and the scientific advances in medicine, transportation, and communications all offer persuasive points in favor of modernity’s worth. In more abstract terms, it offered the promise of a better future, progress built on ideals worth fighting and dying for. These ideas burned brightly indeed, but their shadows only deepened. This better world would require genocidal campaigns of colonization, cataclysmic wars, blood-soaked revolutions, the inequalities and exploitations of industrial capitalism, and the environmental degradation that flowed from their application. Perhaps more fundamentally, this new era of progress came at the price of existential instability and anxiety. The pre-modern societal systems of Europe may have had many flaws, but they were fundamentally stable in their hierarchies and cosmologies, based on the claim of timeless divine truths. For some, knowing one’s place at the bottom is better than not knowing one’s place at all. Worse yet for traditionalists, in this new era of ideological reflexivity, reified rationality and burgeoning democracy, the “modern” citizen was expected to participate in shaping these new systems and take a measure of responsibility in their successes and failures. In doing so, they also came to identify with these ideologies and their institutions, inadvertently

internalizing their contradictions as well as their ideals. Amidst the push and pull of forming a new status quo, a new civic identity was being formed, one more individualistic, participatory, and malleable than what had come before.

Of particular importance to the genesis of the modern conspiracy theory is the proliferation of new ideological identities within previously ideologically homogeneous populations. The emergence of new political identities which sought to remake European society in the form of various competing utopian visions created divisions within the population that defied the easy categorization schemes in and out groups. Despite speaking the same language, worshipping the same God, and sharing the same culture, now an increasingly urbanized population was sharing cramped living space with fellow citizens who might be working towards radically different visions of society. The enemy out-group was no longer solely identified by language, religion, or ethnicity but by ideologies, perhaps best embodied by the Illuminati conspiracy narratives that would be resurrected by Anton Wilson centuries later. The actual The Illuminati Order was founded in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt in Bavaria, one of countless “secret societies” inspired by Freemasonry and Enlightenment philosophy in equal measure (Markner; Wäges). While Weishaupt’s group was a rather comprehensive failure at actually furthering the cause of Enlightenment ideals, it was adopted as a kind of revolutionary boogeyman by a network of prominent anti-revolutionary conservatives like Edmund Burke, Augustine Barruel, and Jon Robinson. Through a series of misattributed quotes and false translations of supposed Illuminati documents, Burke and his collaborators created an ideal antagonist for the imagined invisible war between Enlightenment ideals and old-world tradition (Oberhauser). This threat was imagined as transcending nationality and religion, with anti-illuminati texts generated across Europe and its colonies, even appearing among the New England Puritans (McKenzie-McHarg).

Despite the historical illuminati being an entirely localized phenomenon, the narrativized Illuminati of conservative conspiracism was imagined as a kind of avatar for the effects of modernity; a standardized and uniform force disembedded from the localized culture and tradition they sought to displace through institutional reflexivity.

The Illuminati model for secular conspiracism would prove to be as enduring as the institutions of modernity, greatly outlasting its revolutionary context. In every subsequent crisis of modernity, the Illuminati model of secularized conspiracism would be adapted to current conditions while retaining its globalized conspiracy narrative. Returning to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the impact of the Illuminati narrative can be clearly felt a century later. As previously discussed, this highly influential conspiracist text shows how the Satanic Jewish cabals of medieval blood libel had given way to a new category of antisemitic tropes. The plotting Judeo-bolshevik revolutionary, the scheming Jewish bankers of “international finance,” the subversive “rootless cosmopolitan” Jewish diaspora—all are defined primarily by their connections to the political, economic and cultural systems of modernity. Their Jewish identity is still important but is now simply one identity marker among many in the disembedded context of modernity.

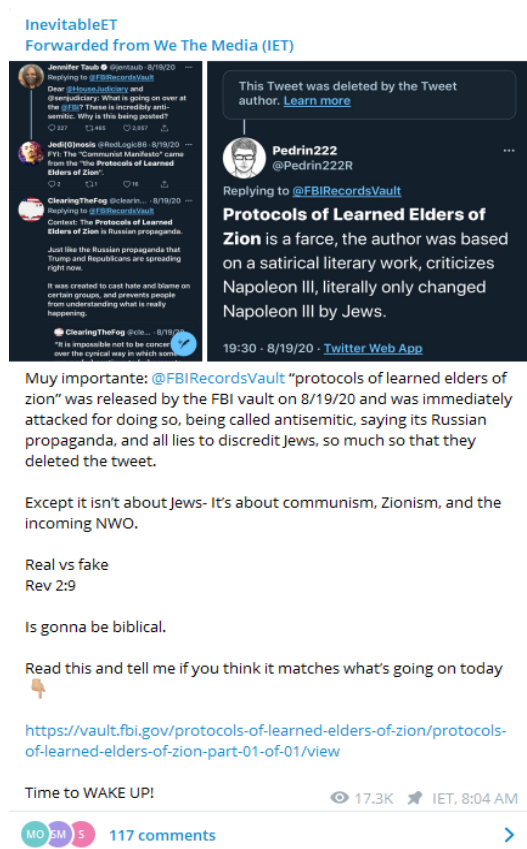


Figure 12. InevitableET.

This process can still be seen in QAnon communities a century later, where the identity category of Jewishness can be changed to meet the specific needs of a given narrative. While QAnon influencers like InevitableET and his frequent collaborator GhostEzra have often openly engaged in antisemitic diatribes on their Telegram Channels, they remain committed to the possibility of an array of alternative interpretations to be deployed when a strictly antisemitic reading would not match the current events being decoded. This serves as a good reminder that while the conspiracist narratives of QAnon are often antisemitic, that is not their ultimate

purpose. The goal is the same one that drives any act of narrativization: “a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (White 24). Thus, Zionism, communism, and globalism are all interchangeably deployed as signifiers of “the other,” placing QAnon firmly within the larger progression of western conspiracist narratives.

From examining the pre-modern and modern incarnations of conspiracist narratives, these stories can be understood as an ongoing process of narrativization that evolved to match the changing socio-cultural landscape. Particularly in eras of great strife and chaos, these narratives aim to resolve dissonance and maintain a cohesive societal narrative. They can serve as a useful bulwark against actual conspiracies, though they more often serve to victimize scapegoated

minorities than defy the power of wealthy elites. It takes external sources of anxiety and makes them responsible for injustice and misfortune, reflecting the socio-cultural affordances of the era. In the modern period, secularized conspiracist narratives often embodied the consequences of modernity, narrativizing the fault lines of newly emerging identities and ideologies. Arguably the most consequential change to the structure of conspiracist narratives has been the addition of the nation state as the new locus of socio-political power and individual identity. From the perspective of constructing theories about potential conspiracies, this makes perfect sense. The immense accumulation of power (both material and socio-cultural) that occurs in the apparatuses of state has indeed made them the location of actual conspiracies in the past. However, QAnon conspiracists and their ilk are primarily concerned with narrativizing rather than theorizing, and the QAnon community's fixation on American national institutions has more to do with the nation's mythologized past than its material present.

Imagined Communities, Imagined Conspiracies

There is an old joke about fish and water that goes something like this: there are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" The two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?" When something is ubiquitous, it paradoxically gets harder to see; as water is to fish, the nation state is to the modern individual. It is the foundational geopolitical unit of modernity; its laws and institutions govern the lives of its citizens while the global institutions of governance are designed to accommodate nations rather than individuals. Without a firm grasp of history, it would be easy to assume the nation is an inherent part of human society, a naturally occurring set

of hierarchies and norms. Little could be further from the truth, as the nation is a distinctly modern construction, and the gaps between its idealized form and its material outcomes provide fertile ground for dissonant contradictions to fester and conspiracist narratives to thrive.

Given the highly adaptive nature of conspiracist narratives, it should come as no surprise that the apparatuses of state are lodestones for paranoid ideation, particularly within the QAnon community. Where there is conspiracism, there are unresolved contradictions, and Benedict Anderson's landmark work, *Imagined Communities*, provides an excellent framework for understanding the contradictions embedded in the narratives of nationalism. Anderson defines the origins of the nation-state as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). The nation is predicated upon this shared imagining; this shared purpose that unites a population around building and maintaining the institutions of state. In essence, people need to buy into the idea of a national identity before they can build a nation, and that identity is as constructed as any national monument or institution. Of course, Anderson notes that all communities larger than a village are imagined in this way, a common identity bricolage pieced together from shared history, culture, religion, and language. As such, it is not its origins in the imagination that sets the nation state apart, but rather the substance and structure of what is being imagined.

The western nation state's vast bureaucracies and institutions embody and enact the ideologies of liberal democracy and free market capitalism, which in turn shape almost every aspect of a citizen's daily life. These material manifestations are inescapable as they are deeply ingrained into the rhythms of daily life. In the taxes paid on every purchase, in maintained roads

and functioning utilities, in school curriculums and judicial legislation—everywhere is daily life shaped by contours of the nation state. Before such institutions can colonize every aspect of civic life, they must first be imagined into being. As Anderson explains, this collective imagining was made possible by the existence of a literate society and the availability of cheap, mass-produced literature. Each citizen reads their morning paper “in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull,” yet they are paradoxically aware that their experience of private reading “is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (Anderson 43). Through this collective ritual of distributed individuals, a shared representation of events disembedded from their localized context is created, and “formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community (Anderson 44). Most significantly, these print media distribution networks, with their national reach and mass-produced uniformity of grammar and spelling, create the basis for a shared national language, and thus a shared national identity.

Newspapers were the most visible, but far from the only institution propping up a shared national reality. These are the Ideological State Apparatuses, a term coined by Louis Althusser in his analysis of the form and function of the nation within capitalism. As Althusser so aptly observes in his essay, “On Ideological State Apparatuses,” any system that does not create the means of its own perpetuation will not last past its initial generation. This is plainly true for material production: a factory without the ability to acquire more materials will quickly cease to produce goods. But it is equally true for the ideological systems which legitimize the material relations of industrial production. Ideology, as Althusser observes, is an imaginary construct that “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,” one whose material manifestation “always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices” (166).

Factories need workers to operate its machinery, and the skills, hierarchies, and ideologies which structure its operation are just as essential as the machinery itself. The two are intertwined, so that “the reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order” (Althusser 133). Althusser identifies the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) as the academic, religious, media, and political institutions which govern the ideological instruction of a given populace. These ISA’s function both by propagating their ideology, but also by working in conjunction with Repressive State apparatuses (the police, army, judiciary, etc.) to repress (often violently) any competing ideological narratives. If the ISAs are working properly, then the ideologies of the nation become embedded in the individual as internalized aspects of their national identity. Althusser identifies educational institutions as the primary ISA of the nation state, where students internalize the philosophical structures of logic, rationality and empiricism on which the ideologies and institutions of modernity are derived. With these apparatuses functioning properly, even profound contradictions (such as class exploitation and inequality in Capitalism) can be ignored in favor of the “deep, horizontal comradeship” found in national identity (Anderson 7).

Yet something is still missing, the nation is not yet complete. Once again returning to White’s work on narrativity, we find it is not enough to simply provide a set of ideals and institutions for a society, for they must be placed within the “meta-code” of narrative, “a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted” (White 1). The events of history simply happened; they do not intrinsically offer a moral or ideological lesson, let alone consistent themes or even a meaningful conclusion. To form the basis for a shared national identity, history is rearranged into a narrative that “organizes

its story according to a well-marked ternary plot structure but achieves narrative fullness by explicitly invoking the idea of a social system to serve as a fixed reference point by which the flow of ephemeral events can be endowed with specifically moral meaning” (White 22).

Anderson identifies the seams of national contradiction in the creation of a secular national mythology, a contentious arrangement between “the objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists” (Anderson 5). An astute observer might note that this kind of cathartic mythmaking goes against the very philosophies of rational empiricism on which modernity rests. Anderson offers an explanation, that “nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which — as well as against which—it came into being” (12). For early modernity, that context was one in which “Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (Anderson 7). The theological basis of a monarchy’s divine right to rule, and the mythological basis for aristocratic dynasties could not withstand the modernizing ideologies transforming Europe, but those same modern ideologies did not have an answer to the “desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (White 24). The timeless dimension of mythical prehistory, the age of heroes and monsters that always seems to be just out of reach of the historical record, offers an unassailable defensive position to place one’s identity. Religious and cultural myths cannot be disproven by new evidence as they are not based on any, providing a stable and secure basis for an identity narrative free from any potential challenge from the reflexivity of modernity.

The genesis of a national identity rests on an uneasy synthesis, wherein the nation state represents a break from the past through the modernizing ideologies of rationality, empiricism, and liberalism, yet remains tethered to the past through pre-modern mythic narrativization of its national origins. These contradictory elements also embody the informational systems of their eras, with the study of history firmly based in the typographic realm of literacy, and the mythmaking narrativization resting firmly in the orality-based world of the pre-modern. This seam of contradiction proves to be a fertile breeding ground for conspiracist narratives, and by applying these ideas to America we can place QAnon within the ongoing process of conspiracist narrativization that has been a crucial part of American culture from the very beginning.

Land of the Fearful, Home of the Paranoid: Conspiracism in American History

In the hearts and minds of the first Americans, there was fear. To the dour Puritans, the world was a workhouse, and God was an exceedingly punitive taskmaster. To deviate from God's demands was to fall into Satanic perfidy from which one's eternal soul could not be saved. Part of the Calvinist tradition, the Puritans believed they were part of the predestined elect, the only group for whom salvation was possible, though by no means guaranteed. Their austere anhedonia and fatalistic fundamentalism starkly divided the Puritan community from the fallen, degraded "New World" around them. This placed them in a kind of perpetual siege mentality in the New World, narrativizing their many tribulations in "the devil's territories" (from natural disasters, warfare and internal strife) as part of a cosmic struggle between good and evil (Cañizares-Esguerra). In their individualistic, fatalistic worldview conspiracism was inevitable: Divine providence was not a system of thought that could tolerate coincidence or happenstance but rather assumed the root of all misfortune was rooted in individual sin. This pre-modern

metaphysical conspiracism was uneasily married to more modern aspects of Puritanism, most notably in their embrace of literacy and dogged textualism when it came to interpreting the bible. The Puritans sought to apply the rational deductive frameworks of the Enlightenment to their pre-modern religious texts, and in so doing, create the perfect conditions for dissonance to flourish.

The Puritans harbored paranoid suspicions towards their indigenous neighbors and the “untamed land” they inhabited, but they also held these beliefs about their fellow Europeans. Catholics, Imperialists, Monarchists, Liberals, even fellow Protestants like the Quakers were viewed as tools of the Devil. As described by conspiracism researchers in early modern Europe, conspiracism in the Puritan colonies was a socio-political orthodoxy. While Puritanism is more diverse in its theological and social practices than this summary would indicate, as one prominent Puritan researcher put it, “When it came to the threat represented by Satan as an enemy of the polity, there was indeed a ‘Puritan’ orthodoxy” (Cañizares-Esguerra 18).

This proved to be a self-fulfilling prophet, as the socio-political orthodoxy of conspiracism in the Puritan colonies led to many unnecessary conflicts with the local indigenous tribes, and even other English colonies. However, it did provide a potent unifying narrative for Puritan society, and likely helped maintain social cohesion in the dire decades of early colonization. This stabilizing effect would not last, as the process of modernity would continue to place strain on the Puritan’s uneasy assemblage of pre-modern metaphysics and rational, literate modernity. Even as the outside pressures of plagues and wars helped prop up the narrative of omni-directional metaphysical persecution, the failure to defeat these external forces created mounting internal narrative contradictions. The colonial economy was shifting to favor

the merchant class over the farmer and between these internal and external pressures, something had to give (Heyrman).

That something took the form of the infamous Salem Witch trials, a spectacularly grotesque embodiment of the failures of conspiracism as an epistemological or political framework. It is worth noting that other colonies faced the same economic pressures, yet without Puritan conspiracism coursing through their cultural veins, they did not implode into self-destructive hysteria (Heyrman).

It would be a very different country if Puritan paranoia had consumed their community entirely, but unfortunately the same conspiracist narrative that had torn their community apart helped to put it back together. As conspiracy scholar Michael Butter put it, “the Puritans reconstructed the binary of inside and outside by casting what had happened as a delusion by the devil, thereby suggesting that none of them had really conspired with their archenemy” (Butter, *Plots, Designs* 112). Thus, the seed of conspiracist narrativization was planted deep in the foundations of the nascent nation, beginning a long line of falling dominoes that would eventually come to QAnon.

As the national character of America began to form through the following century along the textual ley lines of newspapers and pamphlets, burgeoning revolutionary sentiment created the ideal circumstances for orthodox conspiracism to transition from metaphysical to secular villains. However, in the wake of the successful revolutionary war and the creation of the American nation, these narratives did not subside. From fears of Illuminati takeover of the new government to conspiracist narratives about Catholic and Masonic infiltration of the burgeoning state institutions, the popular preference for conspiracism showed no signs of abating (Butter, *Plots, Designs*; McKenzie-McHarg). This widespread adoption of conspiracism is itself partially

derived from the uneasy alliance of Puritan theology and Enlightenment philosophy, one that accepted the rational causality of empiricism yet still clung to the religious notion of humanity's singular causal agency. As conspiracy scholar Gordon Wood, American conspiracism functioned on the assumption that the will and actions of individuals was "the starting point in the sequential chain of causes and effects in human affairs," and consequently that "all human actions and events could now be seen scientifically as the products of men's intentions" (416). When twined with the Puritan belief in a moral dimension to causality, it produced a popular epistemology where "good intentions and beliefs would therefore result in good actions; evil motives caused evil actions" (Wood 417).

As the fledgling nation of America grew and power, the contradictions between national mythology and material reality proved to be constant sources of dissonance for the citizenry of America. Unlike the nations of Europe, America was comparatively a "nation without history," a *tabula rasa* from which to build a truly modern nation for the modern age. Yet, as Anderson observed, ideology and infrastructure are not sufficient to build national identity, a narrativized national mythology is needed to provide a sense of purpose and legitimacy. Since the indigenous civilizations who preceded them had been designated as an outgroup against whom genocidal violence was both allowed and encouraged, American national mythology would have to draw from its own colonial origins.

The Puritan's were no strangers to mythmaking, having re-imagined their political exile from Britain as a holy pilgrimage towards a mythical promised land. Of course, unlike most other national mythologies that stretch back into the oral traditions of pre-modern ancestry, the highly literate nature of Puritan society would provide ample written residue of their beliefs and practices. This enshrined the paranoid conspiracism of the Puritan colonies into the national

consciousness, a fixation that would mesh nicely with the burgeoning republican political framework of post-revolutionary America. The Whig-led Republican political program was one that inherited the moralizing character of the Puritans, where the Republic was “conceived as the embodiment of a political community and defined by its capacity to secure liberty for its citizens and ensure the public good” (Pfau 40). This “public good” was predicated on a conflation of public and private morality, where the republic can only function with a public united on shared principles of moral virtue. This increasingly framed ideological diversity and dissent as a corrupting, moral contagion that threatened the institutional basis for individual liberty. Combined with the human-centric epistemology also inherited from the Puritans, “civic republican ideology ... encouraged the first generations of Americans to think about political life in terms of conspiracy” (Pfau 40). This is perhaps best seen in the emergence of conspiracist political parties like the Anti-masons and their Know-nothing successors. These parties framed their opponents explicitly through conspiracism, first in the anti-elite narratives of the Anti-masons, then in the more successful anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic narratives of the Know-nothings (Goodman; Roy). In both cases, their opponents did not simply occupy differing viewpoints but were framed explicitly as part of a conspiracy to corrupt the public good, undermine individual liberty and overthrow republican democracy. Prominent conspiracy scholar Michael Butter noted the clear connections between these forms of conspiracism and the growing class conflict and economic instability of early America. As such, he contends that “Both the Masonic and the Catholic conspiracy theory must, then, be understood as populist articulations of the troubles of Jacksonian society” (Butter, *Plots, Designs* 121).

Nevertheless, for a time the American frontier’s promise of free land and a new life could help mitigate many of American society’s contradictions. This drive to conquer the frontier

would metastasize into the national ideal of “Manifest Destiny,” a mythologized justification for the genocidal assault on the lands, culture, and people of America’s original indigenous inhabitants. While the Enlightenment ideals of the American state struggle to justify the brutality of its creation, the Puritan myth of divinely ordained destiny is quite well suited to the task.

It is along the seam of contradiction between national mythology and material reality on which American conspiracism would thrive as a political orthodoxy well into the twentieth century. Conspiracist narratives that imagined sinister Catholic organizations seeking to crush American Protestantism reflect the contradiction between the mythical Puritan motivations (namely, seeking a land free of religious oppression) and the reality of rabid Puritan oppression of all competing faiths. Ideals of freedom and tolerance upon which America was supposedly founded are rather obviously contradicted by the practice of chattel slavery and the continued genocide of indigenous tribes; it should come as no surprise that conspiracy narratives around abolition dominated political discourse in both the North and South. Pro-slavery politicians cast abolitionism as a plot to destroy American liberty by foreign conspirators, sometimes even the British seeking to reinstitute monarchism over their former colonies (Davis). Of greater importance was the “Slave Power” conspiracy narrative that served to unite disparate abolitionist groups against the machinations of a small group of powerful slaveholders seeking to expand slavery across America (Foner). While these narratives can be deployed to generate a sense of unity around a shared goal, as they did for the cause of Abolitionism, they can also lead to greater incidents of violent contradiction. For example, the conspiracy panic surrounding the indigenous Ghost Dance ceremony culminated in the massacre at Wounded Knee, one predicated on the false premise of Lakota plots to massacre American settlers (Knight).

As the American frontier closes and the Civil War concludes, the American federal state oversees the industrialization of the economy and the urbanization of its population. Society has changed under the reflexive pressures of modernity, and as before, the conspiracist narratives adapt with it. Wealth inequality and political corruption had become endemic by the late 1800s, problems so pervasive the entire era became known as “The Gilded Age,” one where the promised Golden Age of prosperity had been swapped out for a cheap and worthless gold-gilded knock-off. In an era defined by conflict between labor and capital, it is hardly surprising that the political orthodoxy of America (deeply intertwined with the robber barons who bankrolled political campaigns) continued to legitimize conspiracist narratives. Employed by societal elites and disseminated through the organs of journalistic and state institutions, these narratives paint those opposing the status quo as part of vast conspiracies pushed by sinister cabals of foreign communists, anarchists, and unionists. As before, these conspiracist narratives lead to eruptions of violence between the state and organized labor, bloody reminders of the class contradictions these narratives sought to explain away.

From the Puritans to the Gilded Age, paranoid conspiracism was alive and well in the highest halls of American power. These conspiracist narratives can offer utility in maintaining a coherent national identity in the face of growing contradictions between the mythologized ideologies and ideals America was founded on and the often. However, these narratives have little epistemological validity and are often based more on latent anxieties and prejudices than in empirical fact. When enacted as government policy, they tend to exacerbate the contradictions they were intended to mollify, creating the need for further conspiracist narrativization and resulting in a kind of self-perpetuating conspiracy ouroboros. This leads to conspiracism

remaining an important part of American socio-cultural life well into the twentieth century, a sizable sliver of pre-modern paranoia embedded in the heart of the American national character.

It is only in the wake of the widespread adoption of modern social sciences into the structure of the American state institutions that the socio-political orthodoxy of conspiracism began to fall away. Even as the final hysteria of American conspiracist orthodoxy raged in the “Red Scare” of the 1950s, new modalities of social analysis were being popularized by scholars like Adorno and Popper that challenged the fundamental assumptions of the Puritan derived epistemology which placed individual action as the sole causal factor for socio-political outcomes (Thalmann). The emphasis on systemic trends and structural forces had served America very well in its war-time material organization, and a massive influx of veterans to educational institutions with G.I. Bill scholarships created ideal conditions for the adoption of these new ideas into the national orthodoxy (Luey). By the dawn of the 1960s, the sliver of conspiracism had been extracted from the American body politic, resulting in conspiracism becoming stigmatized, heterodox knowledge (Butter, *Plots, Designs*; Thalmann).

Pushed out of national institutions and into the social margins, American conspiracism would encounter its own discarded past: tales of Satanic cabals and witches began to re-appear in popular conspiracism as the narratives from defending national institutions from outsiders to “conspiracy theories proposed by the people about abuses of power by those in authority” (Knight 58). While no longer accepted as political orthodoxy, conspiracism is too deeply ingrained in American culture to remain hidden in the fringes for long. Indeed, even as new paradigms of thought drove conspiracism from the halls of power, new paradigms of pop culture driven by mass-media technologies would prove an accommodating home to conspiracist narrativization. Put simply, while modernity’s consequences would see a reflexive purge of

conspiracism from the principal ISAs of America, the techno-cultural conditions of the postmodern would see conspiracism take on a new life in American popular culture.

This is the crucial context for QAnon, the latest encounter with America's Chapel Perilous, that fateful crossroads between mythological narrativization and the reflexivity of modernity. To become a reality agnostic is to accept the limits of empiricism and rationality without discarding them, to stay the conspiracist course is to descend into a hodge-podge bricolage of paranoid narrativization that temporarily alleviates cognitive dissonance while ensuring its source goes unaddressed. While the reflexivity enshrined in the Enlightenment philosophies of modernity demands rationally derived and empirically tested explanations, American national mythology is so deeply rooted in conspiracism that it remained a socio-political orthodoxy well into the twentieth century. The fault line of contradiction between the ideals supposedly embodied by America and its actions as a nation state proved fertile ground for American elites to leverage conspiracist narratives to redirect popular anxieties and anger away from the centers of economic and political power.

When ousted by the very institutions of state that conspiracist narratives were once deployed to support, its deep roots in American society kept it alive and relevant as it was repurposed into a vehicle for populist anger and fear at the now incomprehensibly vast apparatuses of state. This complicated legacy as both orthodox and heterodox knowledge helps to explain the often conflicted and contradictory ideas held by the QAnon community about America and its government.

Like the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, QAnon conspiracism is distinctly post-modern in its structure, with pre-modern metaphysical conspiracist narratives freely intermingling with the secular modern conspiracist narratives that followed them. Just as the ideological, socio-cultural,

and technological affordances of the pre-modern and modern eras shaped the conspiracist narratives within them, the world of QAnon is predicated upon the dissonant contradictions of post-modern America and the digital communications technology that has defined our understanding of it. Conspiracism has proven itself a durable and adaptive practice of narrativization, and in the protean tangle of conspiracist narratives that are endlessly repurposed to suit the needs of the moment, the QAnon community reveals itself as merely the latest refinement on a very old process. It is no coincidence that conspiracist narratives tend to hyperfixate upon the contradictions embodied by the age of their creation, as they exist to retextualize those contradictions into a dissonance resolving narrative.

As we have seen in this chapter, conspiracism has served many purposes over the centuries, invariably reflecting the socio-cultural and technological context of its creation. However, one element that remains consistent across every era is conspiracism's ability to provide an alternative narrative of events that minimizes the experience of cognitive dissonance. In Chapter 2, we will examine the techno-cultural context of the postmodern period, and how its prevailing political ideology and commodified cultural landscape created the conditions for QAnon's particular brand of techno-cultic conspiracism to flourish.

CHAPTER 2 - CULTIC CONSPIRACISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

As demonstrated in the last chapter, conspiracism was part of the American political orthodoxy for much of its national history, so in some regards the integration of QAnon conspiracist narratives into the ascendant MAGA movement is a return to form. However, conspiracism has been transfigured by its time on the cultural fringe, and in many ways is better adapted to the rhetorical situation of the current techno-cultural moment than the institutions of state that seek to stigmatize it. QAnon has rapidly evolved from a cryptic collection of conspiracist narratives into a conspiracist “theory of everything” whose constituent narrative elements draw from both America’s rich history of conspiracism but also extending deep into the stigmatized fringes of American culture, creating something far stranger than either the pre-modern metaphysical or modern secular conspiracism that came before.

The pre-modern Puritan world of Satanic conspiracy served to reinforce a theologically derived social hierarchy, and the modern secular conspiracies of Antebellum slave revolts and Gilded Age anarchists did the same for the capitalist hierarchies that came after. In the postmodern era, QAnon has brought conspiracism back to the institutions it once served, but it no longer seems to fit. Even as QAnon conspiracism finds support from Supreme Court Justices, tech billionaires, and even President Trump himself, the QAnon community’s narrativization spirals further away from consensus reality (Carless; Guynn and Carless; “Texts Reveal Wife”). Despite the support of elected officials, supreme court justices, global celebrities, and Silicon Valley oligarchs, the QAnon community still see themselves as outsiders and rebels fighting against societal elites and the consensus reality they represent (Limbong). No amount of judicial, political, economic, or cultural power would be enough to proclaim victory, because that victory

would be in a version of reality QAnon adherents no longer accept. For QAnon there is no victory in consensus reality, only victory over consensus reality.

Even as QAnon's central narrative loses cohesion in the long silence of their digital prophet, the underlying assumptions, biases, and rhetorical framework for interpreting mass media popularized by the QAnon community have become indelible parts of the American cultural landscape. While the QAnon movement has not succeeded in its fantastical fascist aspirations—though a second Trump presidency may still deliver on some of their broader violent fantasies (anti-immigrant, anti-urban sentiments in particular)—their rhetorical proliferation of paranoid hysteria and contradictory claims have struck a deeper and more fundamental blow against the very notion of a shared national consensus reality.

Conspiracism thrives on contradictions, and the post-modern information age has provided the average American with a veritable buffet of dissonance generating information and ideas. The deluge of digital media presents a fractured and often contradictory vision of the world beyond the individual's senses, with the ISAs of America increasingly unwilling or incapable of maintaining a national consensus reality in the postmodern era. Modernity has indeed created a new world, but not the rational, progressive meritocracy that was promised, and the specter of this absent future haunts the postmodern cultural landscape. The combination of abstract neoliberal technocracy, digital media proliferation, and postmodern cultural malaise has created the ideal conditions for conspiracism to stage a comeback.

Just as pre-modern metaphysical conspiracist narratives adapted to narrativize the institutions and ideologies of modernity, the secular conspiracism of Europe's revolutionary period has evolved to narrativize the failures of those same institutions and ideologies centuries later. As such, QAnon conspiracism is neither a full return to pre-modern metaphysical

conspiracism nor a continuation of the secular-focused conspiracism ushered in by modernity, but a distinct product of the fragmented and chaotic cultural landscape of the postmodern. In keeping with the cultural context of its era, it functions as a pastiche of Western conspiracism, cultic beliefs, and pop culture texts that narrativizes the failures of modernity and creates a mythologized alternative to the alienating reality of late-stage capitalism.

Chapter 1 demonstrated how premodern and modern conspiracism has given QAnon much of its narrative structure, Chapter 2 will show how the postmodern era's combination of neoliberal ideology, mass media proliferation and cultural commodification have created the conditions for QAnon's brand of cultic conspiracism. To do so, this chapter will draw heavily from sociologist Robert Campbell's theory of the cultic milieu, a framework for understanding the cultural fringe of America during the '60s and '70s. By combining Campbell's insights with Henry Jenkins' new media theory (convergence culture) and the work of postmodern cultural scholars like Jameson, Dean, Debord, Fisher, this chapter will map the underlying alignment between neoliberalism, cultic conspiracist belief, and techno-cultural alienation that has shaped QAnon, and apply this framework to analyze specific case studies of cultic conspiracism on major social media platforms.

QAnon's Coalition of the Fringe

The sheer diversity in the online communities that have embraced QAnon conspiracism indicates the severity of America's collapsing consensus reality. QAnon's combination of cathartic reactionary grievance and dissonance resolving narrativization has proven alluring to groups well beyond the confines of 4Chan trolls, that viral quality that has allowed it to evolve into a "big-tent conspiracy" (Zuckerman). As discussed in the introduction, QAnon's origins are

in 4Chan's /pol board, a deeply reactionary and fascistic community whose culture strongly overlaps with Neonazi groups like the Atomwaffen Division. Their shared memetic language is steeped in equal parts earnest esoteric Hitlerism/Nazism and ironic detachment, simultaneously reifying and mocking their own reactionary beliefs. Creating intentionally dissonant memetic images using obscure esoteric fascist symbols, an aesthetic popularly known as "fashwave," is a shared practice in both group's posting culture, serving as a shibboleth signifying their reactionary beliefs as well as inducing dissonant confusion in the "normies" who see them (Tuters, "Belief Beyond Belief").

For example, this image from /pol places Joe Biden in the context of esoteric



Figure 8. "Biden with sonnenrand."

Hitlerism/Nazism, a term for the ideological retreat into the "supernatural imaginary" by many neo-Nazi groups in the aftermath of the collapse of the German Nazi state (Gardell). Not unlike QAnon's own roots in American conspiracism, Nazism also drew extensively from esoteric mysticism in its

early years and would return to these roots when material and political conditions forced them back to the fringe (Kurlander).

Returning to the memetic image, the specific iconography is drawn from the work of one of the most influential early proponents of this esoteric turn, Savitri Devi, whose writings sought to explicitly frame Hitler as a transcendental figure of cosmic significance (Versluis). The Sonnenrand,² one of Devi's favorite symbols, is used to frame one of Devi's central concepts, the "Man against time." This is a central figure in her esoteric Hitlerism mythology, a hero who fights against his "time" or era of chaos to instill order, a figure Devi explicitly associates with Hitler in the dedication to her 1958 book, *The Lightning and the Sun*, stating "To the god-like Individual of our times; the Man against Time; the greatest European of all times; both Sun and Lightning" (Devi). While Devi sincerely framed Hitler's genocidal campaign of racial purity as a divine mission, the use of the term within the irony-poisoned Fashwave context is entirely parodic. The public pool filled with African Americans is intended to evoke Biden's "Cornpop" anecdote, a story Biden told in 2017 "recounting an altercation that involved him—then a 19-year-old lifeguard working at a swimming pool in a black neighborhood in Delaware—and a gang leader who shared a nickname with a breakfast cereal" (Samuels). The meme is invoking Biden's checkered past with institutional racism (such as supporting the 1994 Crime bill), satirically presenting his "Cornpop" anecdote as the mythologized reincarnation of Hitler fighting against the "dark age" of racialized urban America.



Figure 9. @HumbertoOG6.

² The Sonnenrand, AKA the Black Sun, is an ancient European mystical symbol appropriated by the Nazis during their regime.

If this all comes across to the average American as confusing, contradictory, and bizarre, then the images have succeeded in their intended role of discursive shibboleth. The intended semiotic signification of these images is only clear when viewed in the context of their creation, an ongoing cross-platform memetic dialectic. The “Biden against time” image was part of a memetic chain that began with a sarcastic trolling attempt by Twitter user @HumbertoOG6, and takes place within the larger context of ironic “hyperborean” and esoteric Hitlerism imagery increasingly favored by /pol users in the 2020s (Tuters, “Belief Beyond Belief”). The images exist in the liminal space between earnest devotion and ironic mockery, much like the Chan culture as a whole.

The average American did not interpret these signifiers favorably, as shown when the



Figure 10. 5D Full Disclosure 17.

same imagery was used by the DeSantis camp in an election ad, resulting in general bafflement and eventual universal condemnation once the fascist subtext was made clear (Thompson). Of course, within the reactionary “groyper” community provoking outrage from the mainstream (“triggering the libs”) is an end unto itself (“Groypers”). Their memetic aesthetic is intentionally abrasive and confusing, a symbolic

representation of their community’s separation from mainstream liberal ideology and decorum. If QAnon was to evolve from a mere conspiracist narrative to the foundation of an alternative consensus reality, it would need to expand well beyond its misanthropic roots.

At a glance, it would be hard to see a connection between fashwave groyper memes and this prosaic, Thomas Kincaid-esque vision of the pearly gates shared by the QAnon group “5D Full Disclosure 17” on Telegram. However, the centrally placed Q indicates a shared affinity for reactionary conspiracism, and the presence of various “healing crystals” hanging as pendants and festooning a heavenly crown serve as shibboleths for an entirely different set of fringe beliefs.

These are the self-help influencers, New Age Gurus, and energy healers that have formed what conspiracism scholars have playfully titled “Pastel QAnon” or “Woo-Anon” (Dickson; Nelson). These rather derogatory titles reference the fanciful hodge-podge of Orientalist appropriation and New Age pseudoscience associated with 1960s California counterculture that served to introduce Eastern philosophy and holistic medicine into popular culture. Ostensibly a community with left-leaning values rooted in empathy, tolerance, and acceptance, this diverse group have increasingly found themselves rubbing shoulders with libertarian “Sovereign Citizens,” Authoritarian Proud Boys, and Millenarian Evangelicals. From their professed beliefs, it would seem likely that tolerant, pan-spiritual pacifists might find points of contention with the violent, bigoted, proudly chauvinistic nationalism of The Proud Boys. Yet greater contact has led to greater cooperation and engagement, communicating through the shared language of QAnon conspiracism both on social media and in person at anti-vax “Freedom” rallies during the Coronavirus pandemic (Exline et al.; Kricorian et al.; “Religious Identities”). This wider shift in the ideology of the holistic wellness subculture has been dubbed “Conspirituality,” the combination of the conspiracist conception of a world run by conspiracies with the New Age belief in the dawning of a new paradigm of consciousness (Ward). When combined, these two narratives become the Great Awakening of QAnon, where the conspiracist New World Order of the Cabal is overthrown by the mass awakening and enlightenment of the population through the

work of Q and their followers. Once again, the same malleable and protean narrative design that makes QAnon so incoherent and incomprehensible when viewed from the mainstream proved to be a decisive advantage when integrating into other fringe communities.

QAnon's ability to absorb and incorporate every conspiracy theory it encountered in its earliest days proved essential in propagating its narrative beyond the sewer of 4Chan. Its initial spread to conspiracy communities, particularly r/Conspiracy and r/Infowars, was easy as the core QAnon narrative already consisted of repurposed popular conspiracist narratives (de Zeeuw et al.). It was not much of a stretch to incorporate other, similar conspiracist narratives into the ongoing narrative bricolage; they simply provided additional semiotic resources for QAnon narrativization. However, as the movement began to push into the largest and most popular platforms (particularly Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube), it proved equally capable of incorporating entire occult cosmologies and stigmatized belief systems outside the traditional realm of conspiracism. Q's own vague pronouncements, loosely defined mythology, and collaborative storytelling certainly help make room for new narrative elements, but this alone does not explain the QAnon's viral proliferation.

Rather than the result of some masterful plan on Q's part (as many a QAnon adherent has claimed), this QAnon coalition against consensus reality is better understood as the inevitable by-product of conspiracism's immersion in the socio-cultural dynamics of "the cultic milieu."

The Cultic Milieu

Much like Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, Campbell's cultic milieu originated from his study of cults of the '60s and '70s. While initially focused on specific cults and

“alternative religions,” he quickly realized that these seemingly isolated groups shared a unifying cultural context that extended well beyond traditionally understood “cultic” domains.

Campbell called this context the cultic milieu, “defined as the sum of unorthodox and deviant belief systems together with their practices, institutions and personnel and constitutes a unity by virtue of a common consciousness of deviant status” (26). This was the cultural underground of modernity, the repository for all stigmatized beliefs and practices that included everything from pre-modern mysticism and magic to pseudo-scientific phenomena like psychic powers and alien super-technology. While the cult was the most notorious and obvious extrusion of the cultic milieu into mainstream society (particularly in the wake of the Manson murders) Campbell was surprised to find that cults were far less common than he had anticipated. Indeed, while the popular imagination tends to associate cults with their most organized, authoritarian, and violent outliers most cults “tend to have undefined boundaries, fluctuating belief systems, rudimentary organizational structures, and are frequently highly ephemeral” (Campbell 25). In the wider milieu from which these cults formed, Campbell found a dynamic, complex, and widely distributed network of individuals exchanging ideas, collaborating on media, and forming loose-knit communities. While individual cultic groups and communities typically prove highly unstable and short-lived, the cultic milieu from which they emerged remains constant. When a cultic institution or group ceases to function, its members typically go on to join other groups or create their own, granting the cultic milieu the chaotic dynamism and vitality to persist in the face of social censure, while at the same preventing it from cohering into a formal organizational structure.

It must be noted that the vast array of ideologies and perspectives contained within the American cultic milieu are not uniformly delusional or without merit. Consider the indigenous

practices of sweetgrass cultivation, once dismissed as “folk superstitions” through the colonial and racialized lens of academia, which is now understood to play a vital role in maintaining local biodiversity (Kimmerer). Viewing stigmatization under the status quo as an inherent sign of falsity implies a belief in the unimpeachable accuracy of institutional thinking, a decidedly dicey proposition in the Postmodern American context. Fringe ideas and unorthodox beliefs comprise a wide-ranging and diverse category whose opposition to the mainstream can stem from various ideological positions. An anarchist mutual aid network is a far cry from the violent Neo-Nazi gangs of the Atomwaffen group, just as members of the rural Raelian “free love” extraterrestrial cult and a suburban libertarian association devoted to the promised “Iraqi Dinar revaluation” would appear worlds apart (Adkisson; Palmer). Yet even the most opposed members of the cultic milieu share one common trait: their mutual status as stigmatized outsiders.

Precisely as Althusser described, the modern state first attempts to suppress dissenting ideas through the soft power of their ISAs before resorting to the violent repression wielded by their RSAs. As such, the vast majority of cultic stigmatization comes in the form of ISA soft power; a steady drumbeat of dismissive mockery from academics, journalists, and institutional experts followed by similarly derogatory depictions in popular media. The archetype of the naive drug-addled hippie, the tinfoil-hat conspiracy theorist, and the wild-eyed doomsday prophet all became stock characters in the emerging mass-media landscape of the ‘60s and ‘70s. All of this served to create “a common consciousness of deviance” among these disparate groups, as well as “the need to justify their own views in the light of the expressed ridicule or hostility of the larger society” (Campbell 26).

Unsurprisingly, those in the cultic milieu developed a shared animosity towards rigid orthodoxy and distrust in ISAs that would deepen skepticism about modernity. In place of

objective truth pursued through empirical methods, the denizens of the cultic milieu embraced a highly individualized syncretic approach to knowledge that fostered a generally orthopraxic orientation. In the simplest of terms, by believing the conclusions of consensus reality to be false regarding their personal beliefs, they also become more open to reconsidering the veracity of similarly stigmatized beliefs.

This effect is amplified by the strong influence of mysticism on many cultic beliefs, specifically the idea of a unified mystical truth that can be approached through a multitude of individualized paths (Troeltsch). The existence of UFOs did not compete with belief in angels or claims of psychic abilities, instead, they mutually confirmed a greater belief in the falsity of the status quo. Campbell notes that this effect can be seen most clearly in the interpenetrative communication networks that emerged to support the cultic milieu. This pre-digital media underground is not unlike the distribution networks of pamphlets and broadsheets that helped proliferate the ideals and ideas of the Enlightenment, consisting of “the magazines, periodicals, books, pamphlets, lectures, demonstrations and informal meetings through which its beliefs and practices are discussed and disseminated” (Campbell 27). Lacking the resources and institutions available to the mainstream, these fringe alternatives are the product of inter-group collaboration by necessity, resulting in free-wheeling publications where “the literature of particular groups and movements includes reviews of one another’s literature and advertises one another’s meetings” (Campbell 27). More than simply a structural feature of the cultic milieu, this syncretic orthopraxy is internalized by members in the hyper-individualistic ideology Campbell calls “seekership.”

In the simplest sense, seekership is predicated on the rejection of institutional knowledge claims in favour of a highly individualized search for secret wisdom. While individual seekers

may frame their pursuit through the lens of scientific discovery or religious devotion, their outlook is fundamentally rooted in the traditions of mysticism, placing truth as an esoteric commodity that can only be attained through a highly individualized “quest” that exists outside both secular and religious orthodoxies. This gives the cultic milieu its distinctly orthopraxic character, each seeker’s personal truth evoking the ultimate unity of being without denying the personal truth of their fellow seekers.

In keeping with the mystic tradition, cultic seekers invariably seek some kind of “a state of unity with the divine,” though within the cultic orthopraxy, “divine” is equally applicable to aliens and artificial superintelligences as it is to ancient gods or ascended masters. This state of divine unity is directly accessible to the individual due to the mystical tenants of “an underlying unity of all consciousness and life, and that no matter how diverse or how many versions of truth there are, all can lead to the same all-encompassing truth” (Campbell 29). One of the most common manifestations of this phenomenon is the belief that the individual adherent has a special destiny related to the stigmatized knowledge they seek and a bespoke path to enlightenment derived solely from their own subjective experience.

Seekership’s emphasis on personal freedom and orthopraxic truth is at odds with traditionally dogmatic and hierarchical structures, one of the reasons why cults are far less common than what Campbell calls “societies of seekers,” “organizations for seekers, offering aid, support, facilities and a form of fellowship to those in search of truth” (Campbell 30). These societies somewhat paradoxically tend to resemble the institutions they claim to oppose, albeit in a distorted, deviant form (Campbell 38). Cryptozoologist associations, UFO-watching groups, psychic alliances, and magical orders are all excellent examples of such seeker societies, loosely paralleling mainstream academic, religious, and cultural institutions. These members of these

societies operate similarly to children engaged in parallel play, each working towards their quest for knowledge in the company of fellow travelers whose own quests are oriented in a similar direction.

This social structure leads to extremely porous group boundaries, with members freely moving between groups and adapting new narratives into their cosmology. As individuals embrace seekership as their primary identity, there is a tendency for seeking to become more important than the hidden knowledge being sought. After all, they identify as seekers, not knowers, and it is in the journey rather than the destination that they find their purpose. In their desire for novel discoveries and the heady rush of revelation, “seekers do not necessarily cease seeking when a revealed truth is offered to them, nor do they necessarily stop looking in other directions when one path is indicated as the path to the truth” (Campbell 31).

While seekership is the defining ideological orientation of the cultic milieu, Campbell observes three distinct sub-divisions within the population of seekers. The first are seekers willing to subsume their own quest into that of a charismatic leader; they constitute a small but reliable minority of the cultic milieu who make up the membership of formal cults. Then there are the ardent seekers described in the previous paragraphs, those Don Quixote-esque true believers on their individualized quests for esoteric enlightenment. The third and largest group are what Campbell describes as cultic enthusiasts and hobbyists, individuals attracted to the ideals of the cultic milieu and seekership, but as a consumer identity more than a spiritual one. They consume the media, purchase the merchandise and attend the events of seekership institutions as one might with any hobby, but do not devote their entire lives to seekership. While true believers may perpetuate the cultic narratives and culture that give the milieu its distinct

character, it is the general audience of cultic enthusiasts whose purchases and attendance sustain the cultic economy.

Campbell's work provided an insightful framework for understanding the discursive dynamics of the American cultural fringe in the 1970s, and surprisingly, it may prove even more insightful as a means of conceptualizing QAnon fifty years later. With even a cursory examination of QAnon community discourse, the essential characteristics of the cultic milieu are hard to miss. The QAnon's community's ability to absorb and re-purpose new conspiracist narratives is predicated on precisely the kind of tolerant syncretic orthopraxy described by Campbell. Seekership is the defining identity characteristic of members of the QAnon community, who always describe themselves as "truth seekers" and independent thinkers conducting unorthodox research. Just like Campbell's seekers, the Anons of QAnon are never satisfied with a static truth, always seeking new esoteric revelations rather than applying the knowledge they have already acquired. Like seekers, Anons frame their conspiracism through an individualized quest for divine unity, represented in Q's promised "Great Awakening." The amateur zines and newsletters of Campbell's cultic milieu presage the dynamics of digital media. Democratizing authorship through low-cost content production and distribution, a blurred boundary between audience and author, and highly referential texts linking to related communities—all defining qualities of both analogue cultic media and digital social media platforms.

If the surface-level similarities cast QAnon as merely a digital seekership society, they

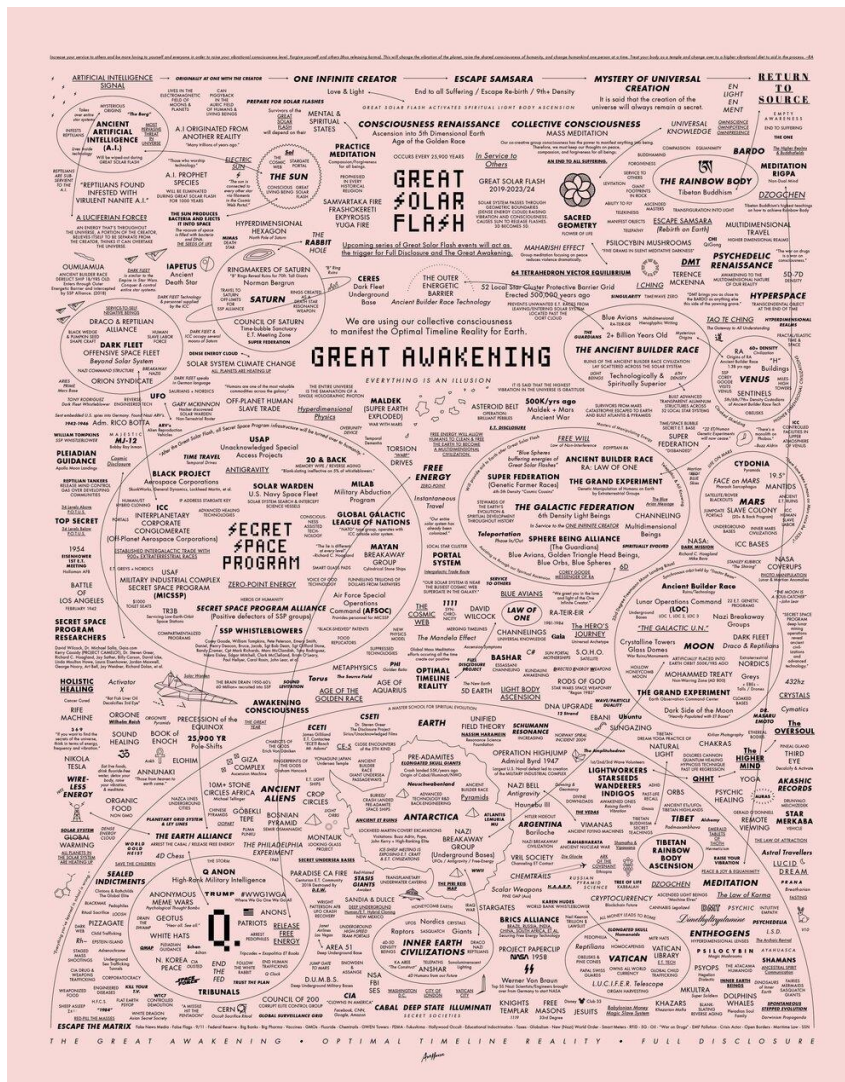


Figure 11. Champ Parinya.

and detailed snapshot of the American cultic milieu's new life in the digital world. Like the injection of radioactive dye revealing the arterial laneways of the circulatory system, QAnon's spread has effectively mapped out the cultic milieu of the digital media ecosystem.

Unfortunately, the proliferation of QAnon conspiracism has done more than highlight the disparate digital cultic communities; by acting as the connective semiotic tissue that unites the

obscure the more fundamental role that QAnon has played in shaping the digital cultic milieu. Returning to the Great Awakening Map created by Champ Parinya,³ this popular image takes on a different meaning when considered through the lens of the cultic milieu.

Parinya's attempt to map the full extent of QAnon's conspiracist narrative in 2019 also serves as a remarkably accurate

³ For a more legible high-resolution image, see attached documents.

digital cultic milieu, it has injected its particular brand of reactionary conspiracism into the cultic sub-communities it connects. QAnon conspiracism becomes the vehicle by which cultic seekers encounter new truths to pursue; its paranoid beliefs, conspiracist vernacular, and media analysis practices becoming the lingua-franca of a digital cultic milieu. QAnon conspiracism increasingly functions as a meta-textual shibboleth for cultic seekership that is unconfined to a single cultic tradition or belief.

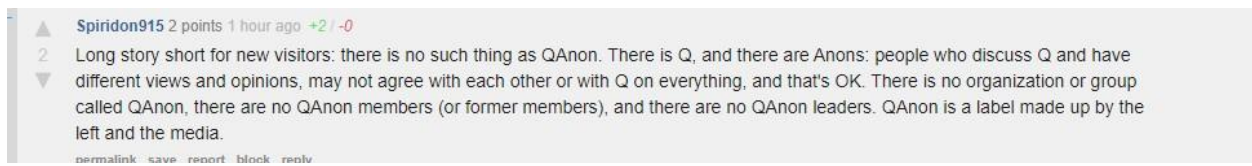


Figure 12. Spiridon915.

This points to another important factor: just as QAnon shapes the discourse of the cultic milieu, QAnon's network of conspiracist communities have been shaped by the cultic milieu in turn. QAnon's decentralized, protean structure has been greatly emphasized as it has expanded into new cultic communities, becoming a diffuse network of related but independent conspiracist communities capable of existing and evolving in Q's absence. As QAnon transitions from viral conspiracy to the metanarrative foundation for the digital cultic milieu, the dynamics of its constituent communities begin to mirror those described by Campbell for the milieu. The post below is from a thread of QAnon conspiracy forum greatawakening.win, as user Spiridon915 attempts to explain the state of the Q community to new arrivals on the eve of 2024.

Building on Q’s famous declaration that “There is no QAnon, only Q and Anons,” Spiridon915’s description of the QAnon movement 6 years is both remarkably accurate and eerily similar to Campbell’s observations of cultic communities. While there are assuredly still QAnon cults and seekership societies exclusively dedicated to decoding Q’s cryptic prophecies, their membership remains fluid. Formal cults emerge, like the group created by Michael Protzman AKA Negative48 in Dallas or by Romana Didulo in Canada, but their reliance on hierarchical orthodoxy rather than syncretic orthopraxy removes them from the wider QAnon community and the cultic milieu at large (Monacelli; Sciarpetti). Just as Campbell

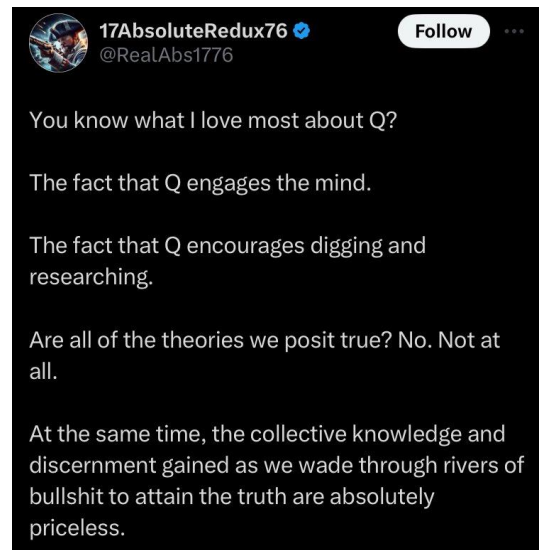


Figure 13. @RealAbs1776.

described, seekership institutions within QAnon rise and fall, but the cultic milieu of Q remains stable. QAnon seekers, united more by their shared stigmatization than by specific beliefs and prophecy, now openly discard narrative elements that were once undisputed cannon, exemplified by this 2024 post by Twitter user 17AbsoluteRedux76.

As QAnon becomes increasingly untethered from specific knowledge claims to function as a narrative foundation for the cultic milieu at large, QAnon community identity increasingly resembles cultic seekership. No longer is QAnon a linear narrative defined by “The Storm” and its specific promises of Hilary Clinton (and other top democrats) rotting in Guantanamo, but as a general framework for “engaging the mind,” a loosely defined identity based around “the collective knowledge and discernment” gained through seeking stigmatized truths.

To better illustrate the dynamics of the cultic milieu on social media platforms, and the impact of QAnon conspiracism to these communities, the next section will apply these frameworks to a specific case study. Few individuals fit Campbell's conception of seekership so well as Roger Spurr, a man who spent the last decade running his own "alternative" academic institution as part of his idiosyncratic quest for esoteric truth. Welcome to Mudfossil University, where geology is biology, intuition is evidence, and truth is a journey rather than a destination.

Cultic Case Study: Mudfossil University

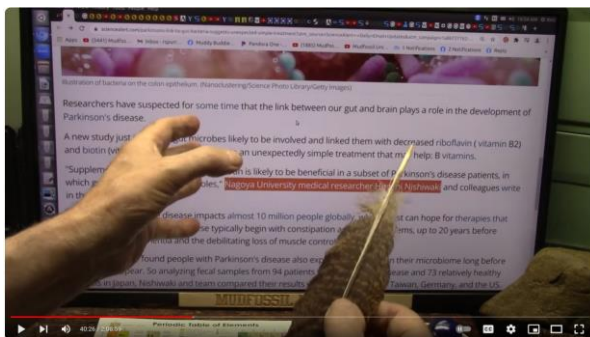


Figure 14. Roger Spurr.

It should come as no surprise that there is no Mudfossil University campus or classrooms, nor are there any faculty or staff. There is only Roger Spurr, his YouTube channel, the thousands of video lessons he has produced and the over 200,000 subscribers/students who follow him. Spurr is a soft-spoken bespectacled retiree with a kindly smile and a sincere belief in the impossible, presenting to his audience like a conspiracist Mr. Rogers. His video lessons are earnest but amateurish. Despite almost a decade of creating YouTube content Roger rarely edits his videos, resulting in "lessons" that are mostly "stream-of-consciousness" rants. He is, above all else, a man on a mission: to discover and share the fantastical truth that the world is built not from soil and sediment, but from the bodies of Giants, Gods, and mythical monsters of every variety. In Roger's world, there is no such thing as an "ordinary" rock or mineral. Every geological feature, from the tallest mountain to the smallest pebble, was once a part of an ancient Nephilim (a race of half-angel giants), a continent-spanning dragon or some other mythical cryptid. This is the esoteric truth Roger has structured his seekership society to pursue, launching

his first YouTube channel, Mud Fossils, in 2015, alongside the first of many self-published papers on Mudfossils (Spurr). Though this first iteration generated little traffic, Spurr remained undaunted and re-launched his “university” in 2017, timing that would prove fortuitously close to the QAnon-led surge in cultic conspiracism.

From a cursory glance, we can see that Roger is a prototypical cultic seeker; he defines his identity by a personal quest for hidden knowledge and has even created a seekership society devoted to it. A true believer through and through, Roger does not accept sponsorships, advertise



products, or sell merchandise; spreading the gospel of Mudfossils is evidently its own reward. Roger’s methods of research and presentation are extremely idiosyncratic, as would be expected given the hyper-

Figure 15. Roger Spurr.

individualistic core of seekership. His videos are usually unedited single takes filmed from a first-person perspective,⁴ with the camera aimed at Roger’s screen while he gestures and points from off-camera. The use of first-person perspective is a jarring choice, but an oddly appropriate one given Spurr’s almost religious devotion to his own ideas. The combination of low video quality, extended single takes, first-person perspective, and Roger’s unflappable enthusiasm give his videos an undeniably unique character, his willingness to flaunt convention gives his work a kind of “outsider authenticity” to his cultic audience—a consistent feature of successful QAnon influencers as well.

His video titles demonstrate his syncretic approach, freely combining mysticism and science in one (“Ancient Science.....Alchemists Could Convert Mercury to Gold Using

⁴ Though it should be noted that in 2023 Roger did begin experimenting with different shots and his videos now occasionally cut to a shot of Roger “lecturing” to the camera.

Bacterial Enzyme Concoctions”), and engaging in religious orthopraxy in the next (“Ancient Enuma Elish, Greek, Roman, Mayan, Aztec, Biblical Texts and Claims are Mostly Similar”). His passion for Mudfossils is only matched by his loathing of traditional educational institutions, where he places the blame for the stigmatization of his own beliefs. His videos often begin with Roger repeating his basic premise and insisting that “this is real stuff, this is not made up,” an assertion he supports by citing a DNA test and CAT scan from 2015 which supposedly proves that the rock he keeps on his desk is a giant’s petrified toe. These tests, despite their origins within the “compromised” world of academia, are a central part of the Mudfossil mythos, a bridge between Roger’s imagination and the material world.

As Campbell described, seeker societies maintain a contentious relationship with their mainstream counterparts. Even as cultic seekers vilify mainstream institutions, they desperately desire the legitimacy they confer, going as far as to create their own doppelganger institutions in the cultic milieu. Mudfossil University is an archetypal example of this phenomenon, as Roger simultaneously condemns mainstream science as false while justifying his own fringe beliefs through the same scientific practices. As previously seen, contradictions can generate cognitive dissonance when nested within an identity narrative, and conspiracism remains a tried and tested (if short-term) solution. Accordingly, Roger will slowly build a conspiracy narrative about academia’s attempts to suppress the knowledge of Mudfossils, often personified through a long-running feud with a local geology professor⁵ who refuses to entertain Roger’s theories.

⁵ Unsurprisingly, we only have Roger’s side to this story, as he does not name this professor or their institution.

About

Learn about the true nature of Rocks even the ones in space. Recent DNA verified "Mudfossils" are body parts and cat scans show anatomical details exquisitely. Mudfossils are perfectly preserved mineralized (now stone) soft tissues due to continuous wet anerobic mud packed conditions. You will learn how to identify these mudfossils...how they came to be and the ramifications which are FAR reaching. You will also see that Comet 67P is completely biological and the chemistry and anatomy and gaseous emissions are unimpeachable. Here are the details. Respectful factual questions based on the video evidence presented are WELCOME. If you are disrespectful you are instantly gone. No tests except by you for you. Open mind required as nothing taught is correct now because all knowledge is based on a false premise...therefore the Universe is alive and life is everywhere and the Earth is made of Giants exactly as ancient texts said so there is LOTS to cover. BTW ...no charge...no credits.

Figure 16. Roger Spurr.



Even the earliest Mudfossil

University documentation,
Roger's introductory summary of
the channel, demonstrates the
same cultic tendencies found in his
videos. Grammar, punctuation,
and sentence structure are largely
ignored in favour of transcribing

Roger's rambling oratorical style. At the same time, Roger peppers his text with formal scientific terms, even citing his much-mythologized Cat scan and DNA test from 2015.

This tension between authenticity and legitimacy continues throughout; after spending several sentences leveraging the scientific consensus for credibility, he pivots to telling prospective students "Open mind required as nothing taught is correct now because all knowledge is based on a false premise," which, in a confusing leap of lateral thinking, apparently proves that "the Earth is made of giants exactly as the ancient texts said." Here Roger embodies the orthopraxy of the cultic milieu, with ancient texts and mythical narratives placed as equivalent sources to peer-reviewed research. Equally telling is Roger's later insistence on "respectful, factual questions" from his students, with "disrespectful" behaviour being the only hard rule of Mudfossil decorum. As with other seekership societies, holding different ideas of the truth is acceptable as long as everyone engages with one another in mutual syncretic tolerance.

The very existence of Mudfossil University and its relative success speaks to how well-matched the dynamics of the cultic milieu are to the dynamics of social media platforms. Despite Roger's dogged determination in the face of stigmatization, the pre-digital cultic milieu of cheap

newsletters and poorly attended conferences would be unable to provide him with an audience of over 200,000. However, with freely available distribution infrastructure found on platforms like YouTube combined with cheap and easy-to-operate filming equipment, seekers like Roger can leverage their restless imagination and boundless confidence to cultivate a global audience. However, it is not simply that Roger gained easy access to both a platform and an audience, but equally that this platform gave him access to his audience's cultic beliefs.

Mudfossil University's early videos are much more restrained, as Roger leaned much more heavily into the university aesthetic. His videos were organized like a lecture series, with numbered entries and straightforward titles like "Mudfossil Geodes" or "The story of soft tissue fossilization in wet conditions." The content was focused on Roger's fantastical geology exclusively, but it would not stay that way for long. Even with an audience of hundreds, the dynamics of the cultic milieu were on full display. Each commenter would add their own personal theories and beliefs into the discussion in the comments section, and Roger was always an active participant.

His growing cultic audience gave Roger the narrative resources to expand the mythology of Mudfossils, incorporating all manner of esoteric theology, unproven science and occult mysticism into his exploration of biological geology. Each new topic brought in a different fringe community, and due to the dynamics of the cultic milieu (and the diligent moderation of Roger), Mudfossil University boasted an extraordinarily tolerant and collaborative fan community. As Roger became increasingly popular, his video's comment sections read like a microcosm of the cultic milieu. The following comments are from Mudfossil University's first video to break 300,000 views, "Are Giants Reemerging as Prophesied," published on October 9, 2017. Roger had returned to form here, going back to the core of Mudfossil University: looking

at blurry pictures from Google Earth and making wild claims about ancient giants and a pregnant planet Earth. This wild claim of planetary pregnancy was received well, and the responses cover a range of cultic domains.

User @lauren2882 interweaves the Fibonacci sequence and fractals with the idea of the Gaian Earth-mother to espouse a unifying, transcendental truth precisely as Campbell described. Lauren's comments are representative of a particular kind of cultic denizen, the exact kind of New Age, hippie-adjacent seeker who would later flock to QAnon in droves. In a common trope in cultic comments sections, @Lauren2882 barely engages with Roger's ideas, instead pivoting

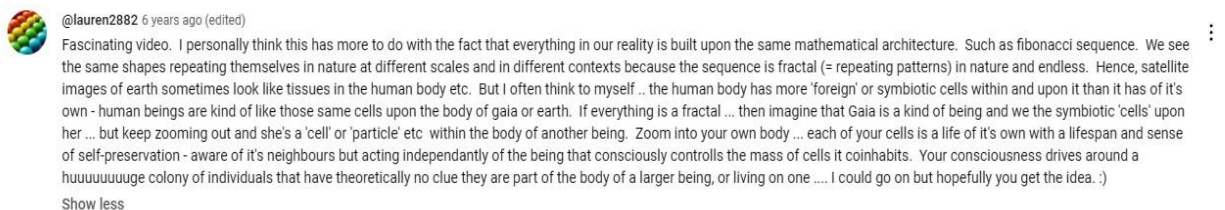


Figure 17. @lauren2882.

back to her individualized seekership quest narrative after a two-word sentence. Given the hyper-individualistic ideology of seekership, this is hardly surprising. As mentioned earlier, this behaviour bears a remarkable resemblance to children engaged in parallel play, as though the individual is undergoing some kind of Freudian regression to a childlike state of being.

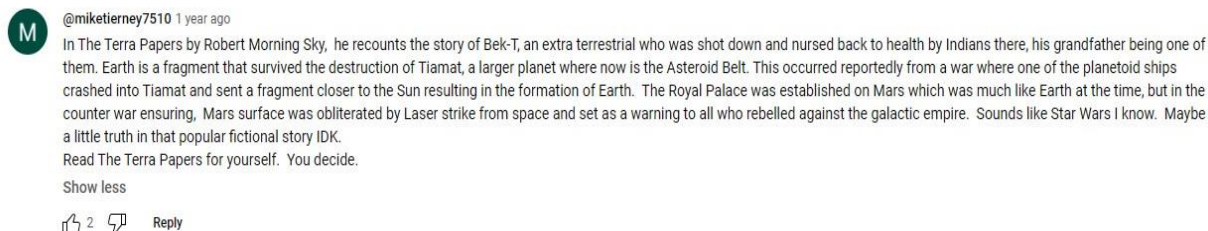


Figure 19. @miketierney.

Immediately below her is another archetypal member of the QAnon cultic coalition, the Project Bluebeam/Secret Space Program UFO truther. Mike employs an elaborate science fiction space opera framing to his narrativization and importantly engages in some pop-culture hyperreality by conflating a cultic document (The Terra Papers) and the film series *Star Wars* as historical narratives. This is a hallmark of QAnon conspiracism but not unique to it, serving an equally central role in the conspiracist narrativization of figures like Alex Jones and Bill Cooper (Barkun) a generation before QAnon would emerge. This is part of a larger cultural shift in the post-modern era, its influence on conspiracism will be explored at length later in this chapter.

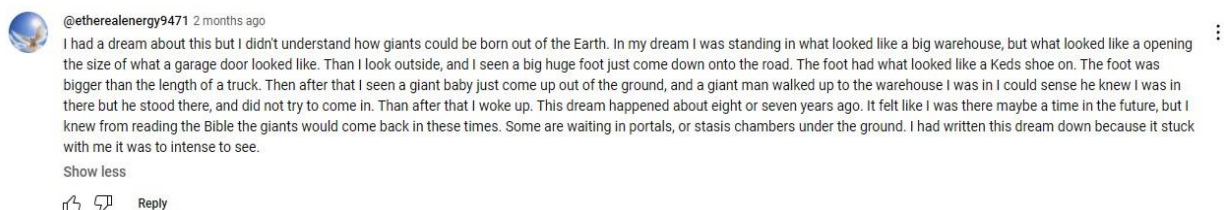


Figure 18. @etherealenergy9471.

Similar to the use of pop culture texts to “prove” the veracity of cultic narratives, prophetic dreams and visions are frequently employed to buttress cultic narratives when no external text is at hand. However, such niche and highly personalized narratives are typically consigned to parallel play, rather than the collaborative narrativization that has proven so crucial to QAnon’s success.



@melthedog6969 6 years ago (edited)

I was skeptical at first, even confused, but i am now in total agreement with you. the book of Enoch states we were as grasshoppers to these giants and this certainly proves that too be true! I am going to add my opinion to this by stating that the earth must be flat and much larger than we could ever imagine and this maybe why, after Noah's flood(which ended these fossils lives) Yahweh created the ice barrier that we now call the Antarctic and beyond this barrier could be much more land as Richard Byrd eluded to in his famous interview on tv back in the late 50's. To have these giant fossils and trying to comprehend the other support systems of the past that would be necessary to keep these "giants" alive is just mind boggling! This could be why Antarctica is so heavily "guarded" by all these treaties and why the secretive meetings that have occurred over the last year. Please ppl, let me know what anybody else may think or wants to add to my crazy "hypothesis"! Don't misunderstand, I do believe these fossils are real! Its just so mind boggling to understand the enormity of all of this!

Show less

👍 182 🗨️ Reply

↗️ 26 replies

Figure 20. @melthedog6969.

@melthedog6969 interweaves several popular cultic narratives in their conspiracist pitch, referencing biblical prophecy (Book of Enoch), UFOs (Richard Byrd and Antarctica) and flat earth claims as she makes her case. Despite textual contradictions (for example, Richard Byrd's story involves neither Flat Earth claims nor biblical prophecy), these cultic beliefs are treated as interchangeable and equally valid, providing the foundation for further cultic ideation about how ancient giants could survive on our small world. Finally, @melthedog6969 connects their narrativization back to the present with vague unsubstantiated claims of militaries "guarding" Antarctica and unspecified "treaties and secretive meetings." The ending of the post is perhaps most important; they do not offer a definitive answer, but rather a discussion prompt, asking for the community's input. This basic rhetorical structure will be adopted by many QAnon influencers; introduce a series of cultic narratives, imply their unified connection through the insinuation of conspiracy, and then ask their audience to help them puzzle out the meaning behind the implied connections. As Chapter 3's in-depth analysis of QAnon discourse will demonstrate, the use of Q drops and other QAnon lore as a discursive anchor tends to keep QAnon decoding sessions more focused on specific avenues of interpretation than the more free-form cultic bricolage shown here.

The responses to @melthedog6969 demonstrate the collaborative orthopraxy of seekership, each seeker leveraging their individual quest narrative to build on the ideas presented in the original post. Whether doubling down on Flat Earth theories, biblical prophecy, or vague

allusions to ancient myths and old maps, each response adds a new narrative element for conspiracist narrativization. Of course, there are always troublemakers in every community, and the digital cultic milieu is no exception. What is exceptional is how the cultic community polices itself precisely along the dynamics described by Campbell.

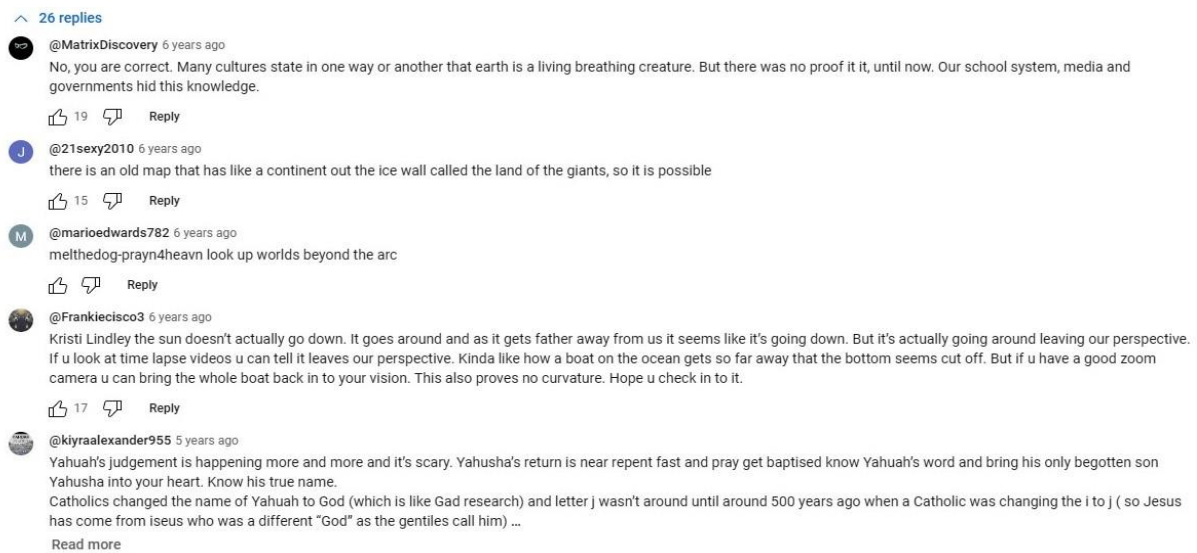


Figure 22. @matrixDiscovery.

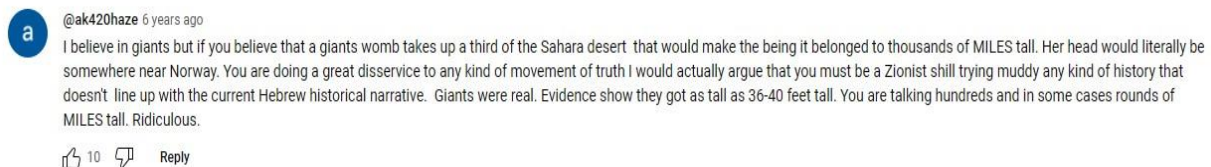


Figure 21. @ak420haze.

@ak420haze's comment is undeniably cultic, he even opens by acknowledging his belief in giants, but it violates the principles of syncretic tolerance and collaborative orthopraxy which define the community. By rigidly applying deductive logic to the original claim, not to mention introducing an antisemitic conspiracy claim, @ak420haze is not just attacking Roger, but the cognitive style of the community at large. The response is swift, beginning with a dismissive comment from Roger followed by an extended series of counterclaims from the general audience. Note that none of the refutations attempt to address the specific criticisms made by

@ak420haze, which it should be noted are indeed accurate extrapolations from Roger's claims in the video.

Instead, the community ignores his arguments in favor of attacking the very idea of a consistent material reality. Conspiracism is sprinkled into these attacks, used to undermine any external knowledge claims while reinforcing the commenters' shared status as stigmatized outsiders.

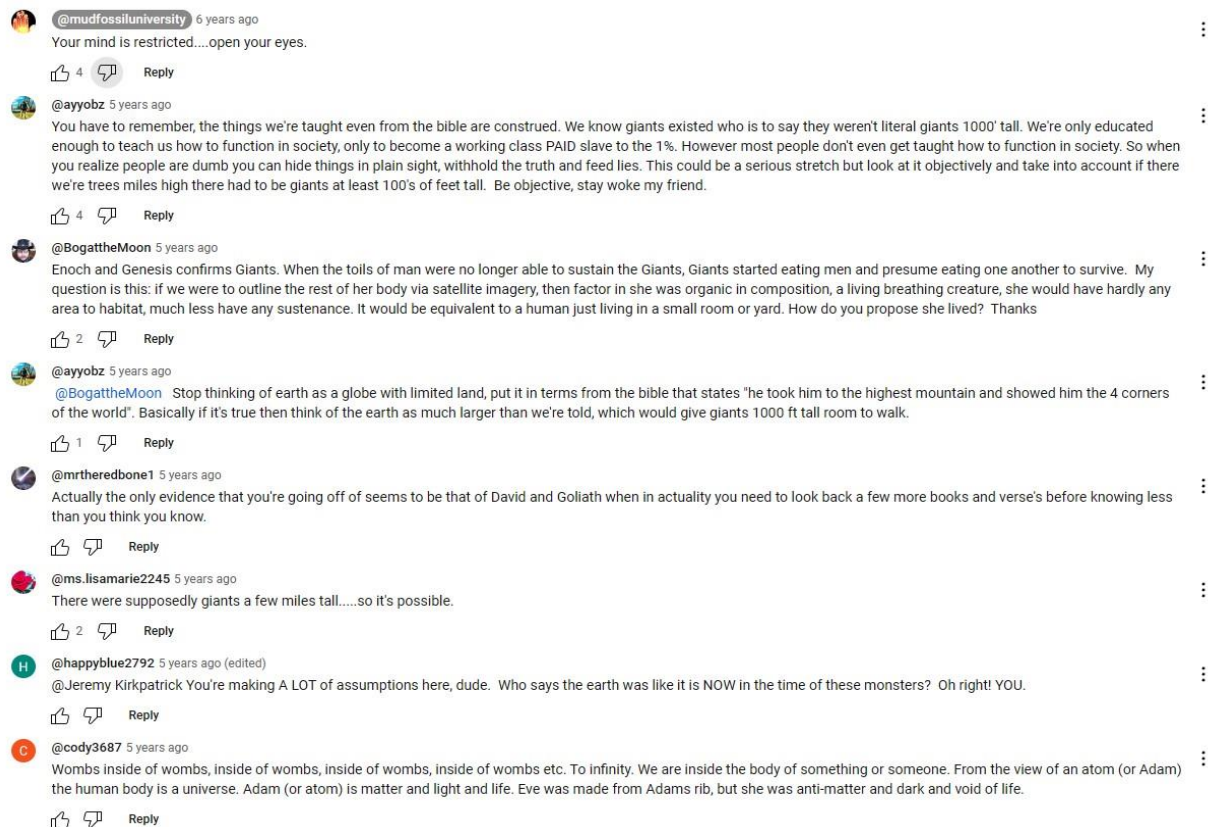


Figure 23. @mudfossiluniversity.

This trend towards conspiracism would be supercharged in 2019, when one of Roger's videos would be spotlighted by a popular cultic conspiracism aggregator YouTube channel, WoodwardTV. As Campbell noted, the cultic milieu is sustained not only by seekers and their seekership institutions but also by less ardent "cultic hobbyists" who buy the merchandise and attend the conferences of the more genuine cultic institutions. These hobbyists are drawn into the cultic milieu through commercial publications that aggregate cultic ideas for a more general

audience. Campbell cites magazines like *Fate*, *Prediction*, and *Zodiac Monthly*, as examples of publications designed to give their readers tantalizing looks into the cultic world. While some of these publications have managed to transition to a digital format (such as *Fate Magazine*), their role in the digital cultic milieu has been largely supplanted by social media influencers operating content aggregation channels like Jamin Woodward and WoodwardTV. Not aligned with any specific cultic tradition, the channel's videos offer general introductions and overviews of a wide array of cultic beliefs. From the channel's introductory blurb, WoodwardTV covers subjects related to "our planet Earth, the cosmos, nature, the elements, ancient civilizations and technologies, science, natural medicine, cryptids, and strange phenomenon, not to mention the great conspiracy theories of our day." The emphasis on "the great conspiracy theories of our day" would prove to be quite prophetic in the age of QAnon.

The Mudfossil video promoted by WoodwardTV, "Colossus Certified Biological in origin by MFU," exploded in popularity, generating over 768 thousand views and flooding the comments with every major cultic narrative imaginable, QAnon conspiracism prominently among them. This marks a shift in Roger's content, an increasing interest in conspiracist narratives that would place his stigmatization in a heroic light. By 2024, the apolitical kindly kook was still posting about Mudfossils, but now they rubbed shoulders with anti-vax rants ("Mental Health Like ADD"), calls to abolish the Department of Education ("Donald Trump Wants to Abolish"), government plots to hide the existence of aliens ("The NASA Cover Up"), celebrity callouts ("I Am Calling out Neil Degrasse Tyson") and of course, QAnon conspiracism ("Love Him or Hate Him").

His videos addressing conspiracy narratives around Donald Trump, specifically that Trump will disclose all manner of secret knowledge during his second presidency, were magnets

for QAnon conspiracists. In keeping with the ideology of seekership, Roger exclusively frames his engagement with QAnon through the lens of his personal seekership quest, stating that he is only covering Trump due to overwhelming audience demand and that his only concern is what Trump is doing about the Mudfossil coverup. As Roger writes in the introduction to one of these video responses, “If he (Trump) speaks about Mudfossil Giants we will be heard and he will show strength ... if he does not speak I will have no respect at all” (“Donald Trump Wants to Abolish”). While Roger doesn’t mention Q by name, he presents that QAnon narrative of Trump and his team fighting the deep state to reveal stigmatized knowledge as accepted common knowledge, as obviously true a statement as the sky is blue and water is wet. Despite Q’s years long silence, despite Q’s claim that “there is no QAnon, only Q and Anons,” despite countless crackdowns and purges, the impact of QAnon remains constant across the vast network of the digital cultic milieu.

The various aphorisms of Q are casually deployed throughout the comments section, though only one commenter, @thePoehladian, was using them to express their support of QAnon



Figure 24. @ThePoehladian.

openly. Instead, most of the comments employ QAnon narratives and vernacular as a more general invocation of cultic “common sense.”

@brandywell44 has clearly spent time on the QAnon chan boards, but identifies more broadly as a seeker than as a devoted QAnon adherent.

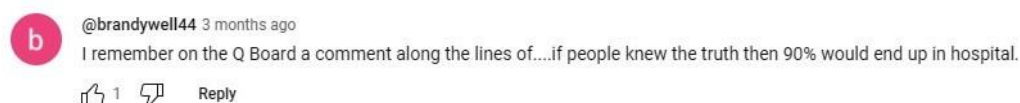


Figure 25. @brandywell44.

@tommyeharvell8783 doesn't invoke Q by name but invokes Q's military intelligence parlance (claiming all media is a psyop, shorthand for a government-run psychological



Figure 27. @tommyeharvell8783.

operation) and Q's terse, clipped writing style. This pattern repeats throughout the comments section, @mainecoon_Izzy

echoes Q's repeated claim that "this is not about politics" but rather a biblical struggle of good vs evil in which Trump will deploy secret knowledge suppressed by the Cabal.

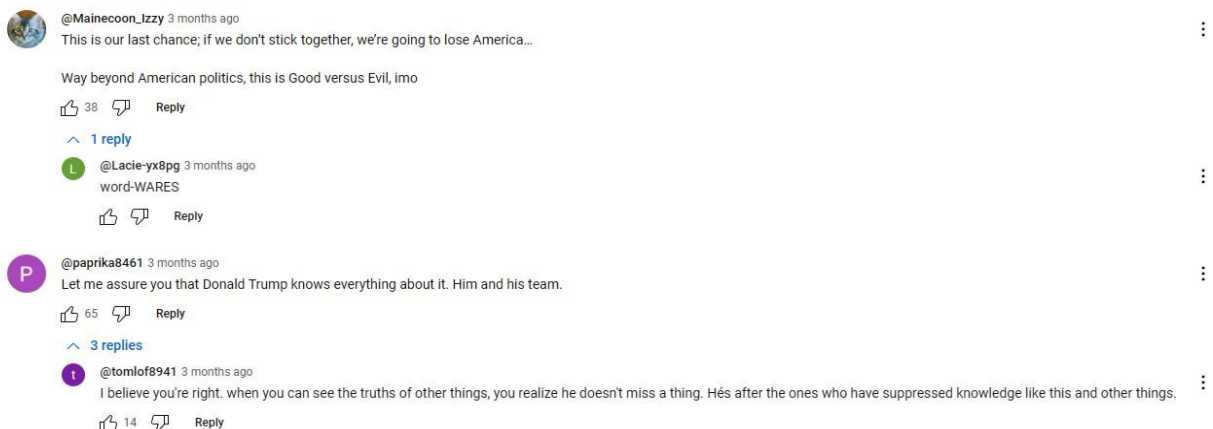


Figure 26. @Mainecoon_Izzy.

@paprika8461 repeat Q's claims that Trump and his "team" (a reference to Team Q) are equally steeped in the cultic world's stigmatized knowledge claims as QAnon conspiracists, that they "know everything about it." @tomlof8941 builds on this claim in a particularly revealing way; by claiming that when "you can see the truths of other things, you realize he doesn't miss a thing." He clarifies that "other things" are stigmatized knowledge claims, effectively claiming that to be immersed in the current digital cultic milieu is to realize Trump is a fellow seeker, one empowered to strike back at the status quo responsible for cultic stigmatization.

As seen in the comments of @paprika8461, tomlof89843, and @brandywell44, QAnon's general premise and Q's popular aphorisms were most commonly used to invoke a shared cultic consensus, a shibboleth for seekership in a post-Q cultic milieu. QAnon's broad conspiracist

narrative assumptions, terminology and discursive practices have become the lingua franca of the digital cultic milieu, a common semiotic framework for the collaborative construction of an alternative reality.

Roger Spurr is an ideal case study, an archetypally idiosyncratic seeker from the pre-digital cultic milieu who successfully transitioned to the digital media ecosystem. As his journey from isolated seeker to popular cultic content creator demonstrates, the affordances of social media networks and content platforms are a perfect fit for the cultic milieu. The pre-digital interpenetrative media networks utilized by seekership societies already encouraged a collaborative, referential and fluid approach to media. The low cost of entry, absence of gatekeeping institutions and networked media ecosystem have removed the material barriers keeping the cultic milieu from expanding beyond the stigmatized fringe.

The democratization of media creation and distribution place cultic seekers on a level playing field with their ideological opponents, and their ability to produce content unburdened by empirical expectations of evidence and falsifiable claims can meet the ravenous demands of social media platform algorithms more easily than their mainstream counterparts. Roger's prodigious video output is a perfect example, generally posting between six to ten videos every week with runtimes varying from twenty minutes to over an hour.

The milieu's syncretic orthopraxy provides a useful cognitive framework for avoiding informational overload; rather than attempting to discern which information is "true," an increasingly difficult and frustrating endeavour in a digital world flooded with contradictory claims, the seeker simply accepts any information that intuitively aligns with their internalized seekership narrative. As McLuhan wrote of the dawning information age,

Information pours upon us, instantaneously and continuously. As soon as information is acquired, it is very rapidly replaced by still newer information. Our electrically-configured world has forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition. We can no longer build serially, block-by-block, step-by-step, because instant communication ensures that all factors of the environment and of experience coexist in a state of active interplay. (*The Medium* 63)

In this sense, conspiracism and cultic beliefs are remarkably well-suited to the digital media ecosystem, able to react to information as quickly as it appears, riding the wave of data through intuitive pattern recognition rather than deductive logic. The promise of privileged esoteric knowledge is an attractive one, and the dynamics of the cultic discourse are well suited to user engagement. One cultic narrative naturally links to other related cultic narratives due to their syncretic structure, creating a natural “rabbit hole” for users to go down. Moreover, the collaborative orthopraxy of the cultic milieu creates an audience primed to engage one another in narrative bricolage, while the stigmatized status of these beliefs creates constant friction with more mainstream users, generating controversy and conflict which equally serves to keep users engaged on the platform. Both in terms of the syncretic collaboration between seekers, and in the arguments with non-seekers generated by the controversial stigmatized beliefs, seekership discourse’s lack of an objective end state means users can collaborate and argue indefinitely.

Before engaging in the in-depth analysis of the interplay between QAnon’s narrative bricolage and the digital platforms that shape it, several important questions still need to be answered; what brought the stigmatized cultic and conspiracist narratives back into mainstream popular culture, and of the vast and diverse array cultic narratives available, why has QAnon’s particular blend of reactionary cultic conspiracism proved so much more resonant than its

alternatives? To return to Spurr's example, why do Q's claims of Satanic child abuse end up shaping the discourse of Mudfossil University, and not the other way around?

The answer lies in the seismic socio-techno-cultural shifts in American society spurred by the adoption of a new ideological and economic paradigm that would transition America from the modern era into the post-modern. Only by understanding the impact of these changes on American society can we begin to understand the reactionary backlash against them that gave QAnon conspiracism its potent virality.

Paranoia to the People: Populist Conspiracism in Postmodern American Pop Culture

Before turning to the sprawling topic of postmodern America, we must return to the 1950s where American conspiracism would reconstitute itself in cultic milieu. It was a precipitous fall, having gone from informing the content of senate committees and national legislation to sharing the cover of grocery store tabloids with UFO sightings and Bat Boy's latest exploits (Lake). While establishment conspiracist figures like McCarthy were being publicly discredited, Republican leaders and influential businessmen like Lemuel Ricketts Boulware and Jasper Cranetheir began organizing to undo the changes wrought by the progressive Warren court (Phillips-Fein). To do so, they would need to create a conservative countermovement, complete with its own parallel ISAs creating and promoting a new conservative ideology. This led to a succession of well-funded conservative institutions and think tanks aimed at building a legal and intellectual framework to tear down the burgeoning administrative state and increasingly pluralistic democracy created by FDR and his progressive allies. By the time of the MAGA Republican party, groups like The Heritage Foundation, The National Review, The Cato

Institute, and the Federalist Society had become powerful fixtures on the American political landscape.

Of course, these long-term plans would take decades to fully realize, and so did little to assuage the fears of the newly stigmatized class of wealthy reactionary conspiracists in the 1950s. This is best exemplified in the frenzied panic leaping off the pages of the John Birch Society's (JBS) literature, where outraged anger mingles with hysterical fear to create conspiracist narratives proclaiming total communist infiltration at the highest offices of America political power. With JBS founder Robert Welch's personal fortune, the JBS would create an alternative media network through the mass-mailing of newsletters and pamphlets, closely resembling a better-funded version of the cultic media structures documented by Campbell (Goldberg 41-53). While wealthy conspiracists like Welch panicked at their loss of institutional legitimacy and despaired at their newly stigmatized cultural status, their fear of marginalization would prove short-lived.

Conspiracism has deep roots in American culture, remaining popular among the general population even as progressive ideals were enshrined in policy and law by New Deal Democrats and concretized through Johnson's Great Society infrastructure initiatives. America was left in a very favorable position at the end of World War 2 compared to their European allies, and unlike their Soviet competitors, America's industrial heartland had remained untouched by the ravages of war. While America's newfound pre-eminence would see it become more wealthy and powerful than its founders could have ever imagined, the question of what to do with that power became increasingly contentious.

The popular counter-culture movements of the '60s reflected this growing rift between the progressive aspirations of American ideals and the ugly realpolitik required to enforce

American capitalist hegemony. Eisenhower's warning against the military-industrial complex he had helped create would continue to resonate in conspiracy communities on both the left and right, distrust in the government fueled by unpopular wars, social instability and actual conspiracies perpetuated by American intelligence agencies both at home and abroad. From state-sponsored terror campaigns inside supposed allied nations in Europe and Asia to domestic intelligence operations that revealed profound abuses of power by the government (Tuskegee experiments, MK ULTRA, Operation CHAOS, etc.), the American state was dumping fuel on the populist conspiracist fire (Bevins, Ganser). All these factors contributed to a broad shift in conspiracism, from conspiracism devoted to safeguarding institutional power to conspiracist narratives "proposed by the people about abuses of power by those in authority" (Knight 58).

American conspiracism had re-aligned toward populism, but it had also begun to demonstrate the effects of its new home in the cultic milieu. While the '60s and '70s offered many real-world conspiracies to inspire conspiracist narratives (such as the ever-popular theories around a "fake moon landing" and the JFK assassination), this period also saw American conspiracism embrace the more fantastical elements of cultic culture. Conspiracy narratives about state-sponsored coverups of cryptids, psychics, and, most enduringly, flying saucers, became staples of cultic discourse. Narratives about secret military bases holding extraterrestrial technology, like those surrounding the infamous Area 51, became popular symbolic stand-ins for the dark deeds done in service of American imperial hegemony. The "Men in Black" who arrive in dark, unmarked choppers to cover up any evidence of cultic breaches in consensus reality equally became symbolic stand-ins for the immense and invisible power of the American state.

The assassination of JFK would prove to be a particularly potent Chapel Perilous moment for the popular imagination and demonstrate the deepening fault lines in the public trust. The

official explanation provided by the Warren Commission offers an imperfect, but consistent version of events rooted in empirical evidence. Its failure to address the unnervingly convenient deaths of key witnesses and suspects, as well as the seemingly ubiquitous intelligence agency influence around key events sowed distrust among the public and created cultural space for conspiracist ideation to fill with every paranoid fantasy imaginable (Fenster 244). More importantly, the proxy conflicts of the cold war were galvanizing popular opposition to the government (preserved in the cultural memory most vividly in the anti-war protests surrounding the Vietnam war). Widespread popular protest and counter-protest movements are ideal circumstances for conspiracism to flower (as seen in Europe's revolutionary period), and when combined with the alienating enormity of America's military industrial complex, created the conditions for widespread populist conspiracist narrativization. All of this served to enshrine conspiracism as a populist narrative; the more the government stigmatized conspiracism, the more popular anger towards the government crystallized around conspiracist narratives.

However popular these conspiracist narratives would become in general discourse, the 1970s would see American ISAs broadly maintaining a united front of stigmatizing derision that would keep conspiracism in the cultural margins and conspiracy theorists as figures for public ridicule. As Micheal Butter describes, "Where earlier ages had once worried about the effects of conspiracies, the public was now becoming concerned with the effects of conspiracy theories. Thus, conspiracy theories were much talked about but no longer believed" (*Routledge Handbook* 654). Conspiracism had become a tool for narrativizing populist frustrations with the American imperialist state but remained firmly stigmatized by the academic and governmental institutions, consigned to exist in the margins of the cultic milieu alongside the assorted esoteric errata which had proved incompatible with modernity.

Yet by the 1980s, cultic conspiracism, most notably in the form of the Satanic Panic, was a full-blown cultural phenomenon dominating the nightly news. The answers to the question of how this was possible are also the key to understanding the genesis of QAnon and the ideological and rhetorical affordances which made it such a success. Just as conspiracist narrativization adapted to reflect the transition from pre-modern to modern, here it is in the transition from modern to postmodern that cultic conspiracism takes on many of the traits so essential for QAnon's success.

To return to this dissertation's central thesis, QAnon is best understood as an ongoing process of narrativization, one that is applied to the endless deluge of new information provided by the digital media ecosystem to construct an alternative to mainstream consensus reality. This is accomplished through a communal process of discursive bricolage that draws its raw narrative components from three primary sources: American conspiracism, the cultic milieu, and mass media pop culture. In the previous sections and chapters, we have charted the evolution of Conspiracism from its roots in pre-modern folklore to its modern "conspiracy theory" incarnation, as well as its post-war symbiotic synthesis with the American cultic milieu. In fusing populist conspiracist narratives with the dynamics of the cultic milieu, many of QAnon's seemingly inexplicable or contradictory aspects become comprehensible, yet there is still a crucial piece of the puzzle missing. In the hyper-individualistic consumerism of the 1980s and '90s, not only will populist cultic conspiracism be recuperated back into acceptability as commodified pop culture, but the systemic consequences of neoliberal economics and ideology will shape the discursive character of cultic conspiracism inexorably towards reactionary delusion.

Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted: Postmodernism, Neoliberalism, and the Commodification of Consensus Reality

The postmodern is, like all attempts to define historical eras, an exercise in recontextualization for the sake of simplification and categorization. Even by these standards, postmodern is notoriously difficult to pin down across different disciplines and schools of thought. Is the postmodern defined by the post-structuralist social critique of Foucault, the semiotic deconstruction of Derrida, or the semiotic reconstruction of Baudrillard's hyperreality? Perhaps it is in the proliferation of meta-textual media or architectural aesthetic pastiche? Is it defined by the material impact of new communications technologies, or the commodification of subjective cultural signifiers? It is, of course, all of these and more.

A more recent scholar's idea is helpful in conceiving of the totality of the postmodern, Timothy Morton's *Hyper-Object*. Hyperobjects are phenomena so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend spatiotemporal specificity, such as the effects of climate change or the labyrinthine tangle that is globalized capitalism, phenomena that cannot be isolated or identified by a single aspect but are nonetheless undeniable in their presence and impact. A hyperobject cannot be studied directly, but it is understood through the effects it has on the material world we can study directly. Following in the footsteps of Giddens's analysis of modernity, the postmodern hyperobject can best be understood by its consequences. As QAnon is foundationally a socio-cultural phenomenon (one closely linked to digital technology, but the affordances of digital platforms will be investigated in the next chapter), we must return to Jameson and his fellow cultural critics of the postmodern era to understand the consequences of this shift.

As Jameson writes in his landmark work on the subject, the postmodern is best understood not as a rigid ideology or system of thought, but instead as a "cultural dominant: a

conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features” (56). Jameson conceptualizes this cultural dominant as inextricably linked to the emergence of a new form of capitalism, “the cultural logic of late-stage capitalism” as his book’s title describes.

If postmodernism is the cultural logic of late-stage capitalism, then neoliberalism is the ideology that informs and justifies the socio-economic structure of a late-stage capitalist society. Like a snowball rolling down a mountain, it has accumulated an array of connotations (typically pejorative) as its influence has permeated all aspects of twenty-first-century American society. Jodi Dean’s excellent work on neoliberalism offers a succinct definition,

Most generally, neoliberalism is a philosophy viewing market exchange as a guide for all human action. Redefining social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria and expectations, neoliberalism holds that human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets. Freedom (rather than justice or equality) is the fundamental political value. (51)

This “new” liberalism would supposedly deliver on modernity’s promise of a rational world, one where the pursuit of individual desire by a population acting out of rational individualized self-interest would create a frictionless capitalist technocracy without the need for administration or oversight. Fukuyama’s famous proclamation of “The End of History” was made under the premise of eternal neoliberal ascendance: a world beyond ideology and war, where even abstract ideas of culture, art and identity are rationalized into market commodities. The global ascension of man into the final form of liberal capitalist democracy was an undeniably compelling narrative, particularly in the wake of the Cold War’s end. It was also one

spread further, faster and more completely than before it by the instantaneous global communications network that now covered the planet.

This high-minded rhetoric proved compelling to many, particularly those in power. A world defined by continuous economic growth and technological innovation, a technocratic free market utopia. To borrow a phrase from technologist Stafford Beer, “the purpose of a system is what it does,” and the consequences of this paradigm have been anything but utopian. As Jameson describes, the era of postmodern neoliberalism has generated a culture in which historicity, context, and categorical distinctions are obliterated in an unceasing deluge of commodified consumer culture, consumed by an audience defined by hyper individualistic self-indulgence, operating in a world whose totality they can no longer conceive. In the next sections we will examine each of these claims in their historical context and illustrate how they laid the foundations of QAnon conspiracism.

Voodoo Economics: Neoliberalism as Ideology

Before exploring the cultural impact of neoliberal ideology that opened the door to the ascendance of QAnon conspiracism, it is worthwhile to examine the broader failures of this economic model and their contribution to destabilizing national consensus reality. The first and most obvious failure of neoliberalism in America is its failure to accomplish its stated goals: cutting government spending and encouraging economic growth. Government spending has continued to increase with every presidential administration, with spending re-directed away from social welfare programs and regulatory bodies (ISAs) and towards law enforcement, military, and intelligence agencies (RSAs). Deregulation of industry and tax cuts for the wealthy failed to generate greater national prosperity and social stability, serving instead deepening

wealth inequality and entrenching corporate power. Critiques of this economic system are as numerous as they are damning among the ranks of prominent left-wing academics. Of relevance to the rise of QAnon are those critiques that emphasize the destruction of the American social contract under neoliberalism, that promise of meritocratic social mobility that forms the core of the “American dream.”

Some prominent and popular examples include Naomi Klein’s attack on neoliberal claims of stability and security in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, describing a system which opportunistically thrives on the chaos and strife generated by disasters and amplified by neoliberal austerity domestically and abroad. Christopher Hedges details the sociological devastation wrought in the wake of neoliberal deindustrialization and social atomization in *America: A Farewell Tour*, while Suarez-villa’s *Technocapitalism* enumerates the compounding socio-technical problems arising from an economic model which only understands knowledge and information as commodities. In the simplest sense, it is easy to understand the origins of a populist reaction against the structures of liberalism when they have failed the American public so comprehensively. That most Americans are unlikely to draw an ideological distinction between liberalism and neoliberalism only further deepens the sense of betrayal, the sense that this vast interconnected impossibly complex series of interconnected systems that is the globalized economy is working against them. If the issue was somehow confined to an economic miscalculation, then a political solution might be more readily accessible. Unfortunately, just as Jameson described, the economic policies and ideology of neoliberalism are impossible to separate from the cultural shifts that enabled their ascendancy.

The neoliberal model required the widespread adoption of radical individualism to function, and this can be seen clearly in the words of neoliberalism's champions on the world

stage. There is little ambiguity in Margaret Thatcher's famous claim that citizens "are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first" ("Interview for *Woman's Own*"). A direct refutation of the modernist premise of the nation state, similarly echoed in Regan's famous line, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help" ("The President's News Conference").

Neoliberal ideology put the administrative ISAs of America in their crosshairs, defunding and defanging regulatory agencies and leveraging emerging media paradigms to their ideological program. The Reagan administration famously called their manipulation of mass media "perception management," a program of narrativizing American imperialism abroad and economic austerity at home to avoid another explosion of popular protests like those seen during the Vietnam war (Derman). This was achieved by a combination of overt and covert propaganda, or "black and white" propaganda, obfuscating the very real conspiracies perpetrated by the Reagan administration (Iran-contra, support for Pinochet, etc.) through a mixture of planting positive stories in the media with private money (white propaganda) and outright falsehoods to muddy the waters (black propaganda) (Ellul). As journalist Robert Parry put it in an extensive special report, "The point would be not to honestly inform the American people about events around the world but to manage their perceptions by ramping up fear in some cases and defusing outrage in others depending on the U.S. government's needs" (Parry).

Consensus reality was under attack from the highest halls of power, in service to a globalized media paradigm that served as "the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world," where

Reagan's simplistic narratives of good versus evil and Thatcher's obsessive individualism served to redirect attention from the reality that "the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and horror" (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 57). This dissonance-generating confusion was undeniably a boon for conspiracists and cultic belief at large, but the downstream effects of these actions would prove even more influential in bringing about the current renaissance in reactionary conspiracism.

The proliferation of media channels, first television and film, then followed by the internet and digital media platforms, was a new frontier for market commodification. This was the era of commodified "infotainment," twenty-four-hour news networks and television channels all hungry for content that would maximize their potential audiences. This motivation was not new to neoliberal capitalism, but the sweeping deregulation efforts of the Reagan administration created new possibilities in cultural commodification. In the words of one of neoliberalism's most convincing pop culture avatars, Wallstreet's Gordon Gecko, "greed—for lack of a better word—is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit."

As the institutions of modernity fail to offer the security and prosperity that was promised, the consensus reality of America begins to erode, and the atomized individual is left looking for an alternative. In accordance with neoliberal principles, the market would move to meet those demands not by popular political movements promising material change, but by an endless glut of escapist entertainment provided by the twenty-four mass media networks. Content was needed to fill time slots in these networks, content that would prove profitable by catering to populist desire, be novel enough to capture audience attention yet couched in familiar terms of good and evil for ease of consumption, with an extensive wellspring of narratives to

mine for content for years to come. Cultic conspiracism was the perfect fit, and as the ratings for coverage of the satanic panic demonstrated, the American public was primed and eager for this once stigmatized cultural fringe.

After removing the fantastical trappings of cultic narratives and esoteric quests, seekership operates as simply another consumer identity. The individual shops around the cultic marketplace, looking for narratives and communities that match their particular needs and desires. Esoteric wisdom becomes merely another commodity to be consumed, complete with associated merchandise and memorabilia to further cement one's cultic consumer identity. Moreover, the hyper-individualism of seekership combined with social stigmatization creates the perfect conditions for atomized alienation. If the truth can only be found internally, and the external consensus reality is actively hostile to this internal truth, then disengaging from consensus reality would be a logical next step.

This is not limited to strictly cultic pursuits, as seekers will increasingly apply this framework in "the search for interpretation and explanations of non-religious phenomena and in situations where there is no expectation of "revelatory experiences" and even in the context of the pursuit of worldly success, health or consolation" (Campbell 28). In effect, seekers begin to see every aspect of society through the lens of their quest narrative, which lends itself to a worldview where "social, economic, and political problems can only be resolved when a spiritual reformation has occurred at the individual level, and this requires that the spiritualization of personal life should be the principal aim" (Campbell 29). Replace spirituality with privatization/commodification, and this description would work just as well for the neoliberal consensus. When taken as a whole, the cultic milieu is not the revolutionary opponent of

modernity's consensus reality, but one of many competing realities available in the postmodern media landscape.

Neoliberalism as Cultural Dominant: Consumerism and the Commodification of Art

A crucial element in the mainstreaming of cultic narratives lies in the voracious demand for media content created by the neoliberal paradigm, where “the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 56). As previously mentioned, the novelty of once stigmatized cultural narratives proved quite effective at capturing audience attention, but the enduring appeal of culture conspiracism lies in its many structural affinities with the chaotic churn of the postmodern.

Theorists like Jameson, Debord, Baudrillard, McLuhan, Doanne, and countless others have observed an experiential flattening of time and space for those whose experience of the world is largely mediated by a series of screens. Be it the television, movie theater, computer monitor or the now ubiquitous smartphone, all screens display mere simulacra, reproductions rather than productions. Images of the past and depictions of the future play across a screen just as easily as an image of the present, subsuming the categories of future and past as mere aesthetic variations of one simultaneous now. Jameson called this consequence of postmodernity “a loss of historicity,” a disconnection from the past and future as material realities, now only accessible through commodified representation.

This breakdown in structure is also seen in the loss of the distinction between high and low culture, so famously exemplified by the work of Andy Warhol, but evident throughout the

cultural output of the postmodern age. Jameson specifically identifies this categorical degradation in a cultural landscape filled with “schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader's Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel” (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 55). He describes a media landscape simultaneously without depth yet charged with emotional intensity, moments of sublime aspect achieved by what Jameson calls “Postmodern Pastiche.”

Rather than risk something new and untested, Postmodern media splices together styles, narratives, and ideas from previous eras. In this way, the distinct artistic styles of modernity became interchangeable postmodern aesthetic codes, creating a consumer culture based in “a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm” where “the cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” would allow for a cultural production line capable of sating the ever-growing consumer demand for entertainment. (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 17-18).

Even from these brief summaries, the structural alignment between postmodern media trends and cultic conspiracist narrativization are hard to miss. The loss of historicity plays well into the cultic milieu's tendency to fabricate alternative histories to suit the needs of the current narrative, the simultaneity of the representational present aligns nicely with the orthopraxical tendencies of the milieu. After all, a strictly linear and causal understanding of history will be hard pressed to make room for an orthopraxical interpretation that accepts all answers. The breakdown of the distinction between high and low art allows cultic conspiracist narratives to operate on an equal playing field to their mainstream counterparts, their stigmatization no longer

barring them from entry. The surface level search for affective intensity matches the cultic seekers' constant search for new and engaging esoteric truths, truths whose only claim to authenticity is in the intensity of the seeker's emotional response. The syncretism inherent to the cultic milieu's collaborative narrativization naturally led to precisely the type of pastiche or bricolage that has come to dominate postmodern media. With this level of structural alignment, it was only a matter of time until the world of cultic conspiracism was brought to the mainstream of pop culture.

However, there would still need to be a measure of sanitization needed for seamless commodification, namely the controversial aspects that led to some of these ideas being stigmatized in the first place. This transformation from outsider art to homogenized commodity would place these narratives under the same market pressures as every other piece of media, blurring the line even further between paranoid ideation and entertainment media.

Selling Seekership: Detournement, Recuperation, and Cultic Commodification

While the QAnon community's ability to operate within a meta narrative "conspiratorial theory of everything" is one of its defining and singular features, it is not without precedent. The idea of exploring the cultic milieu as a single shared narrative universe found its first major literary manifestations in Wilson's *Illuminatus Trilogy*, Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, and Pynchon's eerily prescient *Crying of Lot 49*. While all are noteworthy contributions to the literary landscape, with Eco and Pynchon's work finding a place in many a literary studies syllabus, they are frankly too dense, complex, and abstract to function within the postmodern media paradigm Jameson described. The Satanic Panic had shown the potential power of populist conspiracism to drive ratings and shape popular discourse but equally demonstrated the

difficulty in directing and controlling this hysteria. These cultic and conspiracist narratives needed to be sanitized and simplified into more easily controlled and commodifiable forms before they could be successfully introduced into the mass media market, taken from counter-cultural detournement to fully recuperated intellectual property.

The terms detournement and recuperation are drawn from the work of Guy Debord and The Situationists, anarchic anti-capitalist philosophers and pranksters who operated in France from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. While Debord approaches his analysis with a certain whimsy and penchant for purple prose, his work in “The Society of the Spectacle” is undeniably a major influence on later thinkers like Jameson and Fisher. The spectacle is Debord’s term for the hyperobject of postmodern late-stage capitalist society, focusing on the emergent mass-media paradigm that was not merely “a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images,” these “images” include all forms of popular media, from “information or propaganda, advertisement or direct consumption of entertainments,” that when taken in their totality form “the present model of socially dominant life” (Debord and Knabb 9). As Althusser observed, a system must reproduce its material and ideological base, and as the production of art and culture became increasingly industrialized, this ideology became embedded in the cultural products being created. Communications technology had indeed created the mirage McLuhan’s global village, but ultimately one only accessible through the symbolic representation of mass media, and “Wherever there is independent representation the spectacle reconstitutes itself” (Debord and Knabb 13).

If the spectacle’s power is in its total domination of media and culture, then that is the battlefield where it must be fought, and “Détournement” would be the situationist mode of attack. In an early essay called “A User's Guide to Détournement,” Debord describes a

subversive program of cultural sabotage where Situationists would deface or alter existing media with two primary goals: it must negate the text's ability to function as a commodity, and in doing so transform or remix the text's message into something that subverts and challenges the dominant ideology of capitalist commodification. In effect, a campaign of symbolic disruption leverages the dominant pastiche media modality to subvert the ongoing process of cultural commodification.

Debord notes that the distortions and alterations to the original texts must not be too complex or structured, less than a rational counterargument but still more than a simple reversal of existing elements. In essence, a successful detournement cuts through the noise of mass media discourse to attack the symbolic order of the spectacle directly, like a disruptive dream that follows you into the waking world. In their own admittedly naive and clumsy way the stigmatized narratives of the cultic milieu and cultic conspiracism are attempts at detournement, of subverting the symbolic order of the status quo. The subversion of American iconography and institutions into cultic villains (Men in Black/Black Helicopters, Area 51, The Denver Airport, etc.) can be seen as attempts to, as Alex Jones would say, "break the conditioning" of an individual, to "take the red pill" and wake up from the illusory world of consensus reality to the ever-shifting individual truth of the seeker. This era of anti-establishment cultic conspiracism produced many enduring cultic narrative detournements, disrupting the narrative of benevolent state power by its iconography into sinister intimations of esoteric horrors but the hyper-individualism of the seeker community prevents them from attempting any kind of political action, making them particularly vulnerable to recuperation.

Recuperation is the process by which the spectacle sanitizes and denudes a piece of media of its radical or otherwise subversive connotations, while maintaining the surface level

affectations of counter-cultural cachet. The aesthetic commodification of Che Guevara's image onto t-shirts, of MLK's words adorning Hallmark greeting cards, the anarchist A plastered on "pop-punk" albums; the postmodern world is filled with such recuperated signifiers. Even as popular resentment and frustration with the status quo festers, this too is fuel for the neoliberal economy, offering commodified catharsis for the very problems it creates. The Satanic Panic had revealed the potential profits of commodifying cultic conspiracist hysteria, and in the '90s, the recuperation process would begin in earnest.

In stark contrast to previous decade's treatment of the subject, Oliver Stone's *JFK* would release in 1991, a fever dream of overlapping conspiracy narratives surrounding the assassination. Stone would describe the film as a "counter myth" to the "fictional myth" of the Warren Commission, and despite the film's stigmatized content and controversial critical reception, it would go on to earn more than quadruple its budget and win two Academy Awards (Crowdus; Petras). It was a sign of a changing cultural tide, but it was far from the only one.

The unexpected success of the singularly strange television show *Twin Peaks* demonstrated there was an interest in exploring the syncretic cultic underworld that lay just beneath the uniform surface of the everyday. An idiosyncratic fusion of esoteric mysticism, soap opera and police procedural that saw the plucky eternal optimist, FBI agent Dale Cooper, exploring the hidden underbelly of an idyllic and anachronistic all-American small town of Twin Peaks. Despite being transgressively strange in both its themes and structure, it found unexpected popularity with audiences domestic and international.

The struggle between recuperation and detournement can be found within the production of *Twin Peaks*, as series creator and director David Lynch sought to create a dreamlike subversive pastiche of classic Americana and cultic esoteria. The surface aesthetic of *Twin Peaks*

is pure unfiltered nostalgia for a timeless americana, the town itself being an anachronistic mix of everything from the nineteen fifties to the nineteen nineties. The show's protagonist, the ever-optimistic FBI agent Dale Cooper, exactly embodied the archetypal qualities of Campbell's cultic seeker. Brimming with the open-minded optimism of the 1960s counterculture, Cooper would attempt to solve his case through transcendental meditation and dream interpretation as much as conventional detective work. His encounters with the supernatural were famously striking and bizarre, perhaps most notably the famous "red room" of agent Cooper's dreams.

As the show found itself at the center of a pop culture phenomenon, so-called "*Twin Peaks* Mania," the network attempted to recuperate Lynch's much more audacious and experimental narrative, wanting to focus on the much more conventional police procedural mystery and soap opera aspects (Dolan 30-51). Eventually Lynch would be fired from his own production, effectively disowning the second season as the show's unique character faded and ratings plummeted (Cohen). TV networks took note of their audience's interest in the esoteric and set about finding a cultic narrative that was perhaps more amenable to the network's goals. The door to the cultic underground had been opened, and it would be only another year before a successor would emerge to embody the American cultic milieu on network television.

The *X-Files* took many of the larger cultic themes of *Twin Peaks* but put them much more firmly within the existing structures of serialized television. This time the audience would have not one but two FBI agents acting as their protagonists while exploring the world of conspiracies, cryptids and the occult. The same attributes of openness and seekership that animated Agent Cooper would be repeated in Agent Mulder, while his partner Agent Scully would provide the framing and perspective of mainstream consensus reality. Unlike *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files* would ground itself more directly in the current cultural moment, focusing less on the esoteric

mysticism and more on the popular fringe beliefs of the 9'0s, namely the more secular narratives of alien abductions and government cover-ups. Moreover, while Cooper was ostensibly part of the establishment, *Twin Peaks*'s portrayal of the FBI was itself so surreal and bizarre as to effectively subvert any recuperative power.⁶ The FBI of *The X-Files* was far closer to reality, and while Mulder was defined by his heroic individualistic struggle against the machine, he is still very much a part of it. Mulder's goals were not the overthrow of the power structure, merely the exposure of a few bad apples conspiring against humanity.

Indeed, the show's structure of an episodic police procedural ensured the status quo would be reset at the end of each episode. In order for the deviant or aberrant nature of the case to stand out, conventional reality must exist as a contrast, ensuring that the status quo is reset after every episode. Paradoxically, by focusing on the conflict between Mulder's cultic conspiracism and Scully's rational objectivity, the show demonstrates the symbiotic coexistence of these two worlds that rely on each other for categorical definition. As Mulder would say, "The truth is out there," but that truth did not seem to negate the opposite truth of consensus reality. The two could co-exist as commodities on the marketplace of ideas, with the cultic variant having the distinct advantage of being unrestrained by any expectations of coherence or consistency.

Agent Mulder is the perfect example of the cultic conspiracist seeker archetype being recuperated, from comedic object of ridicule to a principled, determined, passionate but troubled protagonist whose handsome features and charm made him something of a sex symbol. Mulder's

⁶ Interestingly *X-Files* actor David Duchovny would appear on *Twin Peaks* playing a different FBI agent before taking on Agent Mulder. His *Twin Peaks* character was Denise Bryson, a transgender FBI agent aiding Agent Cooper's investigation. In the world of *Twin Peaks*, the FBI was an idealized pastiche of progressive and wholesome Americana, unlike their more checkered and controversial real-life counterpart.

dogged refusal to accept the official story was not a flaw or epistemological error, it was a heroic act of individualism in a conformist world. That he would gain the strait-laced Agent Scully's respect and be treated as an equal by the show's stand-in for the rational empiricism of the status quo, only intensified the effect.

By the end of the decade film and television would be awash with entertainment properties built on fully recuperated and sanitized cultic signifiers. The blockbuster film *Independence Day* would casually include alien abduction lore and the Area 51 conspiracy narrative, while the "Men in Black" would go from shadowy figures conspiring in smoky back rooms to a family friendly sci-fi action-adventure franchise. Soon even the less salient niches of the cultic milieu would be commodified into increasingly surreal pastiches: Bigfoot would have his own sitcom in *Harry and the Hendersons*, while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* would take *The X-Files* "cultic cop" format and leverage the esoteric and mystical end of the cultic spectrum for content. Hollywood depictions of conspiracism would drift from narratives set loosely in consensus reality in films like *Enemy of the State* and *Conspiracy Theory*, to completely depoliticized flights of conspiracist fancy like *The DaVinci Code* and *National Treasure*. Played by the likes of Tom Hanks and Nicholas Cage, the conspiracist had become a swashbuckling adventurer archetype that whole blockbuster franchises could be based on. Even television networks ostensibly devoted to the maintenance of enlightenment values found themselves driven to the cultic fringes in search of greater profit margins, best embodied in the History channel's embrace of shows like "Ancient Aliens" and "Decoded" that offered a distinctly syncretic and orthopraxical alternate version of history replete with magic, aliens and world-spanning conspiracies.

Most obviously, this cultural shift that embraced formerly stigmatized narratives through recuperated, commodified media incarnations helped normalize conspiracism and create positive cultural identity for the cultic seeker. Aspiring seekers can now see their individualized quest for enlightenment embodied by Hollywood heartthrobs, heroic embodiments of individualism who nonetheless follow the rote path of convention by beating the bad guys and getting the girl. The figure of the cultic seeker was now a commodified identity, the cultic milieu established as a narrative resource to be exploited, and conspiracist narrativization had wormed its way back into the American mainstream once again. Conspiracist narratives had become stranger from the decades spent marinating in the cultic milieu, but the process of capitalist recuperation had successfully turned stigmatized strangeness into escapist novelty. Rendered into the flattened, interchangeable symbol structures of pop culture, conspiracism was now an equally valid and disposable ingredient in the endless process of postmodern pastiche. As the Satanic Panic demonstrated, it was now equally capable of sharing the screen with the nightly news and daytime talk shows as it was with Blockbuster films and serialized television.

Conspiracy scholar Jodi Dean wrote extensively about this shift from the fringe to the forefront of pop culture, placing particular emphasis on the increasingly all-encompassing media environment that digital technology created. She notes that “narratives of abduction and conspiracy are uniquely influential in the current technological context,” as the public grapples with “a context where information travels at the speed of light and everything is entertainment.” The blurring line between agency and spectatorship was clear even in the early days of the internet, and Dean’s observation that a resurgent interest in conspiracist narratives reflected “the present’s acceptance of passivity, suspicion, paranoia, and loss as, themselves, forms of action” (Dean, *Aliens in America* 7). There was an undeniable interest growing in cultic narratives that

featured characters navigating uncertain realities and attempting to secure a measure of stable personal truth. This not only reflected the experience of living in the postmodern, but it also reflected the changing media consumption habits of an increasingly digital media landscape.

Theorist Henry Jenkins's work on codifying these changes led to the popular media theory paradigm of convergence culture, one whose focus on transmedia storytelling, participatory culture, and collective intelligence "represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (12). The ever-increasing array of new media formats and platforms allowed for new possibilities in transmedia storytelling and cultivated an audience "who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (Jenkins 11). This new sense of audience agency combined with more responsive digital media platforms led to a more participatory culture around media consumption, one where the categories of media producers and consumers was re-litigated "according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands" (Jenkins 12). When combined with the connective power of the internet, this new form of media culture created new forms of individual identity and digital communities within it. Particularly salient for this discussion of cultic commodification is Jenkins's concept of collective intelligence, that digital communities could pool their collective knowledge and skills to navigate this new media landscape and effectively create "as an alternative source of media power" in their own right (13). This focus on emergent digital community highlights one of Jenkins's core insights, that despite being the product of new media technologies, ultimately "convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" (12).

Much like the novelty and populism of cultic conspiracist narratives aligned with the incentives of a newly deregulated media, the trends that define convergence culture also align

with the structural affordances of the cultic milieu. The cultic milieu was already engaged in pre-digital transmedia storytelling within the informal world of pamphlets, conventions and zines. To be a seeker is to take on an active role in seeking out new narratives across different texts and mediums, seekership institutions were already dominated by an individualistic participatory culture, and the cultic milieu relies on the collective intelligence of its members to generate new and novel cultic narratives. To be an avid fan of *The X-Files* on the early internet, posting on forums and working with fellow fans to try and unravel the show's many esoteric mysteries, was remarkably similar to the experience of being a genuine UFO hunter. The show referenced many authentic cultic texts and beliefs to build its narrative, which would invariably lead fans to seek them out to better participate in the show's fandom. In effect, a show based on the cultic milieu came pre-packaged with a never-ending rabbit hole of lore and secrets for fans to uncover.

As pop culture absorbs and commodifies conspiracist narratives into recuperated commercial media properties, actual conspiracist narratives begin to absorb the ideas and adopt the form of pop culture texts, further blurring the line between media fandom and fringe conspiracism. In effect, a diehard fan of *The X-Files* will have inadvertently absorbed a comprehensive understanding of the American cultic milieu and populist conspiracism, while a diehard cultic conspiracist will find themselves with an unexpected wealth of knowledge when it comes to some of the era's most popular pop culture products.

Conspiracism scholar Michael Barkun described this shift in narrative structure as the emergence of "superconspiracy theories," "conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically," where conspiracist narratives around both specific events (e.g., JFK assassination) and systemic control (e.g., Illuminati runs the UN) are "joined in complex ways, so that conspiracies come to be nested within one another"

(Barkun 6). Conspiracist authors like David Icke, Valdamar Valerian, and Milton William Cooper would create seminal superconspiracy texts in this period, and while QAnon's most direct predecessor in terms of its core narrative is undeniably the repulsive "Turner Diaries" (a connection that will be examined more closely in the final chapter), its most direct structural predecessor is undeniably Cooper's seminal work *Behold a Pale Horse*, which embodies the core traits of convergence culture.

The combination of cultic conspiracism narrativization intermingled with real events, told through supposed internal memos and correspondence from within the conspiracy, given to Cooper by nebulous insider sources (a clear precursor to Q), displayed alongside actual primary source material to further blur the lines between fact and fiction. Transmedia storytelling, collective intelligence (do your own research), and participatory culture through his radio show.

It should come as no surprise that Cooper was a direct predecessor to Alex Jones, and in keeping with the general trend from defiant detournement towards shallow recuperation, Jones would prove precisely that. While Cooper, for all of his many flaws, believed his own narrative enough that he died for it in a hail of police gunfire over unpaid taxes, Jones was simply here for the money, increasingly abandoning any attempt at coherent world building to simply wallow in whatever controversy seemed most pressing in the present.

However, there is a different precursor to QAnon's conspiracist "theory of everything," one whose existence presents a fascinating alternative to the binary choice offered by the Chapel Perilous crossroad. Perhaps no media property better reflects orthopraxical flexibility of cultic narratives better than the "cult classic" comic *The Invisibles*. Its core narrative will sound eerily familiar: a hidden Cabal dedicated to the most absolute cosmic incarnation of evil secretly rules the world and keeps secret all the wonders of the cultic world from the ignorant citizens of the

world. Esoteric mysticism, ancient ritual magic, miraculous technology, psychic powers, and extra-dimensional extraterrestrials are just the tip of the narrative iceberg that is explored by the heroic cultic protagonists, the titular Invisibles, in their war against secret chiefs of reality.

Its author, Grant Morrison, is considered one of the leading authors of the “British Generation” of comics authors, whose work is placed alongside figures like Alan Moore and Garth Ennis in pushing the boundaries of what the superhero comic can be (Carpenter). Famous for his metatextual explorations of personal agency and identity as well as his deconstructive superhero narratives that often feature transcendental mysticism, Morrison has built a career pushing the boundaries of comic narrative (Greene and Roddy). He considers *The Invisibles* to be his magnum opus, an occult “hypersigil” that fuses narrative into the symbolic “sigil” magic system popularized by Aleister Crowley (Metzger). Moreover, he claims he was instructed to write this story after contacting an extra dimensional intelligence through a drug-induced vision while visiting Kathmandu (Morrison). In short, to describe Grant Morrison as an archetype cultic seeker would be an understatement, and *The Invisibles* as his great detournement aimed at the whole of the neoliberal postmodern.

While the other examples dipped their toes in the cultic, *The Invisibles* immerses itself in even the most esoteric and absurd aspects of the milieu. Even the narrative’s structure rejects the expectations of linearity and coherence, gleefully embracing the chaotic maelstrom of often contradictory cultic traditions that form its foundation. Time folds in on itself as comic panels twist into a mobius strip, characters become aware of their status as fictional characters and induct the reader into their world, and real-world events are seamlessly fused with pop culture and cultic lore.

Even though it was created during the 1990s, its twisting narrative labyrinth of shifting realities and transcendental truths paradoxically drawn from material contradictions perfectly capture the unique madness of the roiling digital cultic milieu of QAnon, and yet, *The Invisibles* could not be more diametrically opposed to the actual ideology of QAnon. Where QAnon is reactionary, conservative, bigoted, and hateful, *The Invisibles* takes the same narrative threads and weaves a profoundly progressive and joyfully empathetic celebration of deviance from the norm. Where QAnon casts “Drag Queen Story Hour,” Antifa, and “Black Lives Matter” as their villains, *The Invisibles* features a transgender shaman, a revolutionary anarchist, and a Black Liberation Army mystic as heroic protagonists. *The Invisibles* even finds empathy and forgiveness for its nightmarish villains, its protagonists explicitly rejecting the cathartic massacre of their enemies to seek a more transcendental resolution. That both narratives share the same foundation and structure is a testament to the sheer orthopraxical versatility of the cultic milieu that Campbell first observed, and the increasingly blurred line between mainstream and fringe culture that digital media technology was making possible.

The Invisibles would prove to be highly influential among ambitious artists within its medium and further cement the cultic milieu as a treasure trove of increasingly resonant narrative resources for the constant churn of digital media bricolage that has come to define pop culture. These examples are merely the most noteworthy of an ongoing pattern of capitalist recuperation—taking the symbolic narrative resources of the anti-establishment fringe that embody grievances with the current system and turning them into profitable media franchises. The fact that these narratives found so many different ready audiences across the ideological spectrum speaks to an underlying commonality of experience within the postmodern, the very sense of pervasive alienation and identity fragmentation that postmodernists like Debord or

Jameson wrote about. Just as Campbell described, the cultic milieu's defining element is its orthopraxical flexibility, acting as a shared pool of symbolic resources to describe and contextualize pervasive feelings of absence and want.

What Morrison offers is a third option at the Chapel Perilous, neither descending into reflexive paranoia nor the measured skepticism of the reality agnostic, but an ecstatic embrace of the progressive possibilities entailed in cultic syncretism. Think of it along the lines of the old adage, "the way out is through," accepting the uncertainties of a narrativized world while embracing the unspoken opportunity that such a world provides. After all, if our reality is a story we tell ourselves, then we ought to at least tell a good one. *The Invisibles* illustrates the range of narrative possibilities that exists within cultic conspiracism, channeling the same trends of populist anger and pervasive alienation into a liberatory vision of the future that transcends the semiotic chaos of the postmodern.

As this section has shown, QAnon is simply the latest incarnation of the longstanding tradition of conspiracist narrativization, one that grew directly out of existing techno-cultural trends in both mainstream pop culture and cultic conspiracism. The individualistic ideology of neoliberalism and the cultural malaise that accompanied it drove demand for novel narratives of populist escapism, and a commodified cultic milieu combined with the rich American narrative tradition of conspiracism was ideally situated to act as fuel for the postmodern pastiche-style of modern media. Yet Morrison's *The Invisibles*, like so many counter-cultural exercises in detournement before it (Illuminatus Trilogy, Dadaism, etc.) demonstrates the inherent flexibility that comes with such orthopraxical, syncretic subject matter. These texts demonstrate that the basic narrative building blocks of QAnon are not inherently reactionary, yet that is the form which has proven most successful in the "marketplace of ideas."

So why then was it the reactionary incoherence of QAnon that ultimately won out and defined the cultural moment? Why is it that the self-described rebels, free thinkers, and independent researchers who rail against the material and cultural conditions of the neoliberal world are ultimately incapable of imagining anything beyond it? Why is it that for all the QAnon communities' insistent belief that the great awakening is just around the corner, they remain forever trapped in a holding pattern of endlessly recycled outrage? The answer lies in the work of one of Jameson's most influential successors, Mark Fisher, and his theory of *capitalist realism*.

Between Capitalist Realism and Conspiracist Delusion: QAnon as Postmodern Pastiche

Rather than invest in new narratives to meet the demands of a new era, across the mainstream media channels there is an overwhelming reliance on pre-existing intellectual property. This can be seen in the endless parade of remakes, reboots, prequels, and sequels that dominate the mainstream releases in television, film, and video games. Even in the realm of once fringe conspiracism brought back to the mainstream by QAnon, ideas which are presented as though they are revolutionary and subversive are in fact merely repackaged cultic conspiracism from previous eras.

From top to bottom society appears to be trapped in a kind of cultural stasis, even as technology rapidly evolves and complexifies, our cultural aesthetics and narratives remain dominated by the same stagnant postmodern pastiches identified by Jameson. Imagining a future that is not merely an extension of present aestheticized through nostalgia for an imaginary past appears to be increasingly beyond the grasp of Western culture, as "The effect of permanent structural instability, the 'cancellation of the long term,' is invariably stagnation and

conservatism,” owing to the fact that “the affects that predominate in late capitalism are fear and cynicism” (Fisher 82).

Fisher’s work places this failure of cultural imagination in the postmodern neoliberal context, where the continued failure of this techno-socio-economic paradigm to achieve its own self-stated goals has not prevented its global ascendancy, in large part due to the creation of a pervasive cultural narrative that endlessly proclaims the inevitability of the neoliberal system while decrying any alternatives as “unrealistic.” Fisher combines these ideas with the material failures of neoliberalism to analyze the cultural stasis and recycling of narratives that have defined the 2010s and 2020s as the effects of capitalist realism, “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (8).

Much like Jameson’s understanding of the postmodern not as a definitive construct but as more of a cultural dominant, Fisher expands the aperture of his analysis beyond “art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions” to encompass the effects of the neoliberal cultural complex, “a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (Fisher 22).

This is reminiscent of Debord’s concept of *the spectacle*, “not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images,” one that encompasses “information or propaganda, advertisement or direct consumption of entertainments,” that, in their totality, become “the present model of socially dominant life” (Debord and Knabb 9). Thought and action that exist outside of the spectacle are then inherently “unrealistic,” “impractical,” or “unserious,” as the “tautological character of the spectacle flows from the simple fact that its means are at the

same time its goal” (Debord and Knabb 11). To be outside the spectacle is to be outside the realm of the possible, because the spectacle encompasses our mediated understanding of the world beyond our immediate experience. Debord, Jameson, and Fisher are observing the same phenomenon decades apart through distinctly different techno-cultural contexts, and the hyperobject called alternatively the spectacle, the postmodern, and capitalist realism continues to expand into all areas of life, defining the existential experience of the neoliberal era.

Fisher’s work highlights a distinct shift in the interplay between detournement and recuperation, one essential to understanding the commodification of conspiracism that led to the emergence of QAnon. As he writes, “The old struggle between detournement and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation, seems to have been played out. What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their precorporation: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture” (15). After all, having to create something new is risky and expensive, while seeking rent on proven intellectual property is much more “efficient” in the neoliberal paradigm, adhering to “the cult of the minimal variation, the turning out of products which very closely resemble those that are already successful” (Fisher 82).

In effect, this acts as the precorporation Fisher describes, denuding the cultural fabric of narratives that could shape individual desire, aspirations and hope away from the current profitable sectors. The “pervasive atmosphere” of capitalist realism is experienced as a perpetual stasis of recycled ideas ceaselessly remixed into postmodern media pastiche, a cultural ouroboros endlessly consuming itself while the culture supporting it stagnates into senescence. To quote Debord’s purple prose on the subject, “It is the sun which never sets over the empire of modern

passivity. It covers the entire surface of the world and bathes endlessly in its own glory” (Debord and Knabb 11).

In such a context the apparent novelty and countercultural cache of cultic conspiracism, both as a way to distinguish the individual by their access to stigmatize knowledge and as a tool for narrativizing away the grinding contradictions of the cultural moment, a movement like QAnon becomes all but inevitable. Within the context of capitalist realism, a progressive vision of populist cultic conspiracism like The Invisibles simply doesn’t feel “realistic,” does it cater to the hyper-individualistic conception of self that has been enshrined as neoliberalism’s cardinal virtue. Since the narratives and symbols of the cultic milieu and its associated cultic conspiracism have undergone recuperation into pop culture commodities, and correspondingly the output of actual conspiracists has increasingly hewn to the overarching trends of Jenkins’ *convergence culture*, the narratives of postmodern conspiracism follow the trend towards pastiche as surely as their mainstream counterparts.

The next section will explore a specific example of this phenomenon, examining the pastiche process in action as a new myth is integrated into the wider QAnon metafiction. Blending popular fiction with fragments of fact, cultic myth with reactionary conspiracism, and transforming countercultural detournement into recuperated social media content; the strange saga of The Black Hexagon Timecube of Saturn.

Cultic Conspiracism as Postmodern Pastiche: Case Study

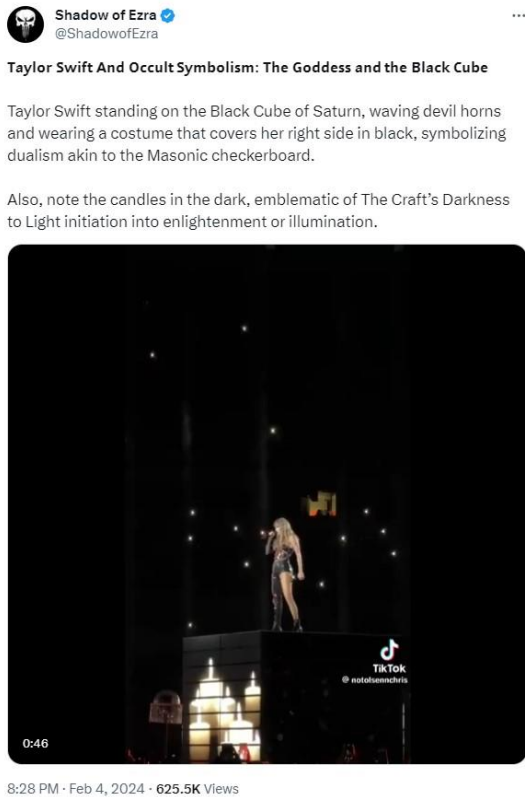


Figure 28. @ShadowofEzra.

their downfall,' 'Dark to light').

Meanwhile, accounts like QMum adopt a more “Pastel QAnon” approach, invoking broad cultic esoterica that noticeably ignores the attached meme’s criticism of Christianity to focus exclusively on an Islamophobic interpretation. The invocation of both the planet Saturn and the mathematical concept of a hypercube may seem like examples of the often incoherent syncretism

In later January of 2024, an idea began circulating in the QAnon Twitter community, a conspiracist narrative about a mysterious black cube which purportedly held profound Satanic power. Popular QAnon influencers directed their individual narratives towards their own sub-community’s interests, demonstrating the incredible diversity of QAnon narratives. Ghost of Ezra, taking a more traditional approach, plays into the motifs of the Satanic Panic to vilify pop culture icon Taylor Swift while evoking some of Q’s quintessential aphorisms (‘Symbolism will be



Figure 29. @nancy023922191.

that defines the cultic milieu, though as we will see, there is an observable deductive chain of logic at work.

Finally, on the furthest end of the paranoid conspiracism spectrum, former QAnon conspiracist Richard Wilmett turns the narrative against Trump and Musk, painting them as

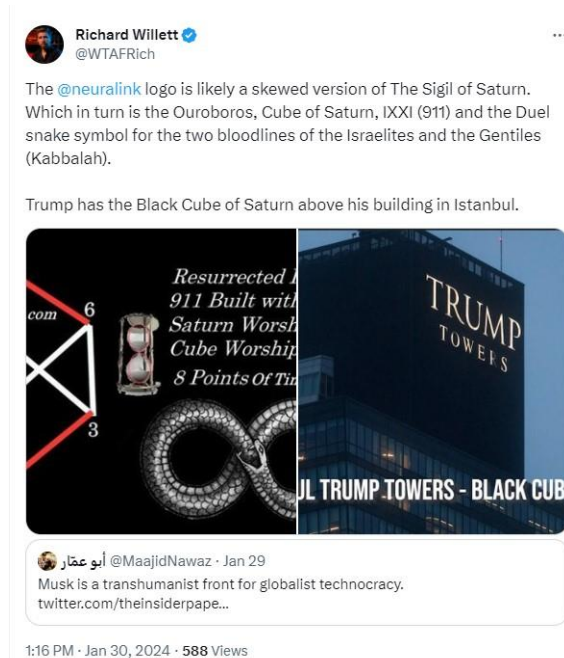


Figure 30. @WTAFRich.

tendency for QAnon adherents to cling to the overarching narrative even when they abandon the original narrative “canon” provided by Q.

As with so much QAnon content, a surface level glance would simply register this as incoherent nonsense, paranoid noise reverberating around the digital commons. However idiosyncratic and novel these claims may appear, examining the origins of this narrative’s induction into the wider QAnon mythos reveals not only that it is a recycling of an earlier idea, but that the idea itself is precisely the kind of postmodern pastiche that Jameson described.

This particular narrative strand of QAnon conspiracism begins, as so much QAnon narrativization does, with a celebrity on social media. On June 14, 2020 iconic rapper and actor Ice Cube re-tweeted a series of conspiracist claims and images united by a thread of antisemitic conspiracism surrounding a mystical “black cube.” Ever on the prowl for new content to decode, new narrative resources to incorporate, the seekers of the



Figure 31. @icecube.

QAnon world immediately began looking for information about these conspiracy claims.⁷ Following the interest of their audience, a range of QAnon influencers began offering links to “conspiracy primers” on the narrative for newcomers, and this section’s case study is one of them. The text in question is a massive Twitter thread from 2019 by QAnon conspiracist Nick Hinton.

⁷ In the sixty Telegram accounts I have followed in my research, individuals expressing interest in “the black cube” skyrockets from a single post in 2019 to hundreds in the immediate aftermath of Ice Cube’s post.



Figure 25. @NickHinton.

thread would most likely focus on the role of Saturn and its symbolism in specific esoteric traditions. Instead, Hinton is creating a narrative intended to resonate with as many cultic seekers as possible, and so he begins his narrative as broadly as possible—the “theme” of cubes throughout human history.

It should go without saying that the widespread use of a basic geometric form throughout human civilization is not an unexpected or strange phenomenon. Indeed, it would be far stranger if there was a distinct absence of cubes in human art and architecture. In keeping with the

Titled “A Conspiracy Thread: The Saturn Time Cube,” it is a showcase for the postmodern pastiche content generation strategy that has become synonymous with reactionary conspiracism in a post-QAnon world. The ringed gas giant Saturn sits in stark black and white, its trademark hexagonal weather formation taking on dark implications alongside the thread’s title. Were this an investigation of a discrete hypothesis or theory, the



Figure 26. @NickHinton.

depthlessness described by Jameson, no individual strand of his narrative is engaged with beyond surface level signifiers. Through his mixture of historical reference, cultic esotery, conspiracism, and pop culture, Hinton's emerging pastiche all but guarantees that his audience of seekers will find at least one of these signifiers relevant to their personal quest and related grievances. In the flattened, attenuated world of the postmodern they are all interchangeable information commodities, "content" for engagement removed from their original



Figure 27. @NickHinton.

cultural context that creates the surreal scenario where Marvel's loosely mystical "Tesseract" MacGuffin is regarded with equal symbolic significance as the Kaaba of Mecca. All that matters is that both symbols carry the implication of importance to Hinton's audience, albeit as decontextualized and desacralized social media "content."

After providing his audience with an array of signifiers to attach themselves to, he



Figure 28. @NickHinton.

presents the first part of his thesis; the cube is a representation of material reality. This intimation of a larger argumentative thesis is an important rhetorical move, instructing his audience of seekers to begin looking for connections in what will become a gish gallop of loosely associated cultic signifiers. In

keeping with the principles of Convergence Culture, Hinton leverages transmedia storytelling to

provide an array of potential narrative prompts to his audience and relies on their collective intelligence to generate further engagement on the platform. It is worth noting that Hinton will never arrive at a definitive answer to his initial question over the course of this massive thread, because that answer would dampen the participatory desire in his audience that will fuel ongoing engagement metrics.

It is important that Hinton leverages the cultural gravitas of a well-known philosopher like Plato, in much the same way that seekership societies tend to resemble the mainstream institutions they oppose. By beginning with Plato, he has situated his decoding prompt in a figure of mainstream legitimacy, one he uses to ease into the pivot into cultic mysticism in the very next post. By conflating platonic idealism with Gnostic dualism, Hinton is offering his audience a bridge into the esoteric through

a deeply reductive false equivalency. Once again, the individual texts and actors are all flattened to mere aesthetic. Neither Plato's philosophy nor Gnostic Christianity are investigated beyond their surface level signifiers.



Figure 29. @NickHinton.

Hinton's stream-of-consciousness progression of through his pastiche follows a distinct pattern; a trinity structure that begins with signifying a mainstream or legitimizing concept or



Figure 30. @NickHinton.

figure, connecting it to a conspiracist narrative or esoteric cultic tradition, and re-framing the esoteric/conspiracist conception back into to the mainstream by way of pop culture. We have already encountered this structure in Hinton's introduction, as he moves from real world examples of black cubes, to referencing

cultic conspiracist narratives about Judaism, Islam and Freemasonry, before returning to the mainstream by way of pop culture references.

Hinton continues to explore the idea of a false reality, beginning with a superficial examination of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. As with Platonism and Gnosticism, these are

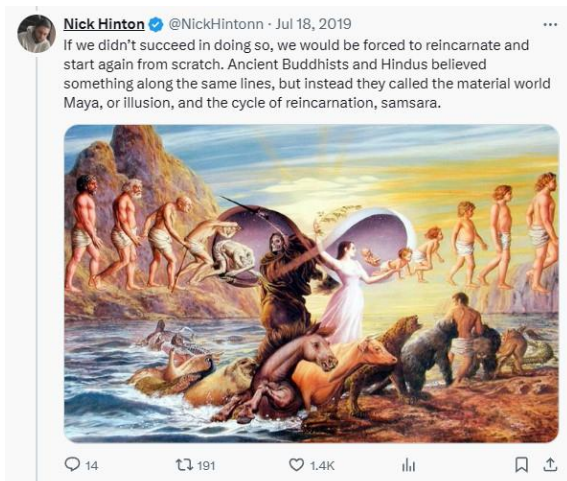


Figure 31. @NickHinton.

flattened, aestheticized invocations of complex theological structures; nuance and complexity would complicate the intuitive associations Hinton and his audience of QAnon conspiracists rely on when decoding. Following the established pattern, after re-affirming his narrative's foundations in externally validated mainstream belief systems, he pivots to a cultic narrative, this time in the more

science fiction coded simulation theory of reality.

As with Gnosticism before, Hinton does not engage with the actual complexities of simulation theory, but rather the flattened cultic conspiracist narrative that has grown up around those ideas. The samsara cycle of rebirth is not equivalent to simulation theory in substance, only in aesthetics. Since Hinton is operating entirely at the level of mediated representation and aesthetic, that is all that is required. Note Hinton's emphasis on a growing silent majority of "scientists and philosophers" support his assertions, a simple but effective rhetorical move to generate a false sense of consensus behind his narrativization. This is an appropriate place to put such a comment, as his next post will work to further cement this sense of false consensus.

This is of course the role of the final part of the conspiracist rhetorical trinity, by connecting the cultic idea back to pop culture Hinton establishes an immediate connection in the



Figure 32. @NickHinton.

life of his audience. While it is unlikely they are intimately familiar with the details of either Hindu theology or simulation theory, they have likely seen *The Matrix* or an episode of *Rick and Morty*. Just as Fisher observed in *Capitalist Realism*, cultic conspiracist media follows the same pattern

of endlessly recapitulating and remixing nostalgic media properties.

Over the course of the entire thread, Hinton continues this basic format across topics like the CERN Large Hadron Collider, Quantum AI, Saturn (both as Planet and ancient Greco-Roman deity), the chronological nature of currency (Hinton takes literally the aphorism that "time is money"), and of course, Satanic child sacrifice.

Hinton's flirtation with capitalist critique, by way of a particularly surreal series of intuitive leaps that implicate money itself as a kind of Satanic signal emanating from Saturn, is an instructive reminder of Fisher's observations about recuperation. Hinton gestures towards populist frustrations with the neoliberal paradigm of profit before people while assiduously avoiding any kind of material or political solution



Figure 34. @NickHinton.



Figure 33. @NickHinton.

that might challenge the status quo. In keeping with the principles of seekership observed by Campbell, the solutions to systemic problems are invariably found in the individual consumer choices of the seeker, not in collective action towards addressing the problem.

By the time Hinton has effectively created his own “meta-conspiracy” through pastiche, combining flattened images removed from their cultural context from an array of

sources to into a “theory of everything” with the titular “Saturn Timecube” becoming the central locus of both material reality and digital possibility. What will happen next? The answers are of course only available if enough fellow seekers like and follow his tweets.

While Hinton would never actually get around to finishing his narrative on Twitter, he would eventually expand this narrative in a self-published book, *The Saturn Time Cube*

Simulation. The symbiotic relationship between commodification and seekership on full display, interweaving cultic, mainstream and pop-culture ideas to create a buffet-style offering for curious seekers. Of course, this buffet is not “all you can eat,” adopting the more prevalent “Freemium” model found in so many digital commodities in the early 2020s. Cultic conspiracism, like everything else under neoliberalism, is a commodity before it is anything else. Even the most

transcendental revealed truth cannot change that underlying system of thought, reality itself can be revealed as an illusion and yet capitalism remains as the only true measure of value. If it is indeed easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, the commodification of cultic conspiracism demonstrates that it is easier to re-imagine the idea of reality itself than to escape the ideological schema of neoliberal capitalism. The goal is not to genuinely achieve enlightenment or revolution; the goal is simply to achieve a sense of purpose in the pursuit of



Figure 35. @NickHinton.

such lofty and abstract goals: it is the journey not the destination which is the commodity being sold.

This can be seen quite clearly in the evolution of cultic conspiracist influencers like Hinton, who are all too happy to pivot to entirely new esoteric identities when they have run out of content. In the words of one of Hinton's followers, @TheFancyFasho, Hinton pivoted to Orthodox Christian content in the immediate aftermath of January 6 when it became clear that QAnon content was no longer drawing the same level of audience engagement.

In many ways, Hinton represents the final stages of cultic conspiracist recuperation, a much more polished, coherent and professionalized face for the “decoding”



Figure 36. @TheFancyFasho.

process of narrativization. Removed from its original authors and the context of its creation, the vernacular, rhetorical practices and decoding rituals of QAnon can generate cultic conspiracist narrative pastiche endlessly in service to the digital attention economy.

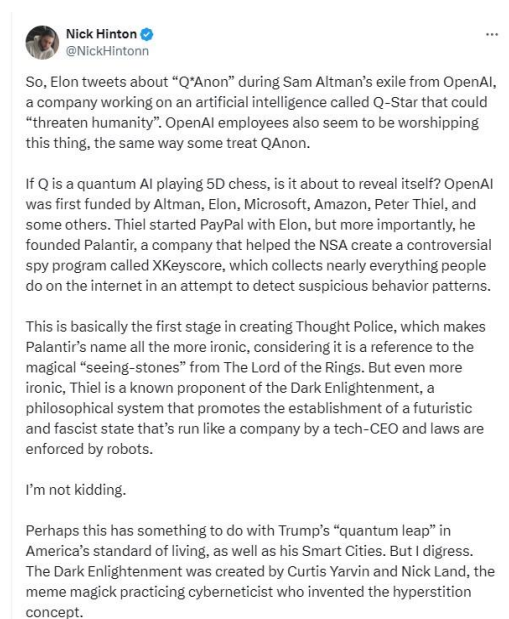


Figure 37. @NickHinton.

By 2024, Hinton had returned to cultic conspiracism, but from an explicitly anti-Q perspective, here riding the tide of general anxiety surrounding the proliferation of AI technology. Even though Q is re-imagined as a malevolent quantum AI playing 5D chess in service of Silicon Valley elites, the basic narrative structure of populist cultic conspiracism remains intact. The enemy is never beaten, the world has never been saved, and the

cultural stasis is unchallenged; yet the audience is given the illusion of progress and change through the ceaseless reshuffling of the conspiracist narratives on offer.

Through the recuperative commodification of cultic conspiracism, QAnon has returned American conspiracism to the highest halls of power. The popularity of conspiracist narratives, combined with the alignment of seekership and neoliberalism, as well as the synergy between cultic communication practices and convergent digital media, all but guaranteed their induction into pop culture, while the pernicious effects of capitalist realism ensured that only the most delusional reactionary narratives would find a mass audience. In the final chapter, we will examine the ways in which these trends have been magnified by the affordances of social media and digital content platforms. With this final piece of the puzzle, we will return to the concept of the schizogenic sublime and use this framing to understand QAnon as an adaptive response to an increasingly schizophrenic information ecosystem.

CHAPTER 3 - CAPITALIST REALISM AND THE SCHIZOGENIC SUBLIME

The recuperation of the cultic milieu effectively brought conspiracism back to its populist roots, not only disseminating once stigmatized narratives but also placing those narratives within the system of neoliberal commodification, leading them to increasingly take on the same qualities observed by media scholars like Jameson (the pastiche style, crisis of historicity, low depth/high affect) and Jenkins (participatory culture, transmedia storytelling, collective intelligence).

Enterprising conspiracists like Alex Jones and David Icke would leverage this new media environment to reach new audiences, now primed for their message by the pop culture ubiquity of recuperated conspiracism. Only one final piece was needed for the arrival of QAnon's evolutionary leap into techno-cultic conspiracism: a second stage of cultural commodification that would reshape the digital world through the emergent digital attention economy and platform capitalism. Only when the pernicious effects of capitalist realism had become embedded in the very structure of our digital hyperreality were the conditions for the schizogenic sublime fulfilled, and the stage was set for QAnon's viral explosion.

Cyberspace and the Retreat into Hyperreality

"Turn on, tune in, drop out" were the words spoken by famed '60s counterculture figure Timothy O'Leary to a crowd of 30,000 at San Francisco's 1967 hippie gathering, The Human Be-in. The event's size spoke to the growing popularity of the cultic milieu in American culture; O'Leary's iconic phrase captured the growing desire to eschew the conventional wisdom of public life and seek enlightenment by turning within. While the phrase is forever associated with O'Leary, it was coined by none other than Marshall McLuhan, whose techno-deterministic

optimism would soon be adopted by O’Leary as well. As discussed in the previous sections, the cultic milieu of America would be swiftly commodified and recuperated in the decades to follow, much like O’Leary himself. The godfather of LSD would go from fighting the establishment to hosting events alongside far-right figures like G. Gordon Liddy, his counter-cultural identity becoming merely another brand in an increasingly crowded field.

By 1997, O’Leary had decided to hitch his waning popularity to the emerging world of cyberspace, proclaiming that the “PC is the LSD of the 1990s” and re-worked his iconic phrase into “turn



Figure 32. “In 1997, Wired Magazine.”

on, boot up, jack in” (*Think for Yourself*). It was the same year the pictured issue of Wired magazine was published, practically bursting with child-like optimism for “25 years of prosperity, freedom and a better environment,” while “cyberpunks plot world liberation.” Even if O’Leary’s age of hippies and revolutionaries had been subsumed by the Reagan years, a digital frontier was being opened that appeared to offer a liberatory oasis in the stifling corporate consolidation of the neoliberal era.

This idealized rendering of the digital world attracted a newly emergent subset of the cultic seeker, the technologically adept and intellectually curious pioneers of cyberspace who would come to adopt the title of “hacker.” In the words of the famous “Hacker Manifesto” found in the September 1986 edition of noted hacker e-zine *Phrack*, accessing the internet was “like heroin through an addict’s veins, an electronic pulse is sent out, a refuge from the day-to-day

incompetencies is sought,” a refuge found in “the world of the electron and the switch, the beauty of the baud” (*Phrack Magazine*). Like the pre-digital seekers of the cultic milieu, the Hacker Manifesto defined their identities in direct opposition to the consensus reality of the status quo,

We explore... and you call us criminals. We seek after knowledge... and you call us criminals. We exist without skin color, without nationality, without religious bias... and you call us criminals. You build atomic bombs, you wage wars, you murder, cheat, and lie to us and try to make us believe it's for our own good, yet we're the criminals. (*Phrack Magazine*)

There is a clear alignment in values and identity between the cultic seeker and the hacker: both are defined by their pursuit of stigmatized esoteric knowledge, rejection of the status quo, animosity towards institutional authority, and reliance on informal communications networks (Usenet forums vs newsletters, e-zines vs zines, etc.). However, for all their similarities, there was an extremely important difference: hackers had the distinct advantage of having their personal quest for knowledge align with the socio-economic system they existed within. Unlike the ethereal realms of the spirit medium or the Noosphere of the psychic, cyberspace was directly connected to the material world; it was real and impactful in a way that transcended belief or faith. Moreover, unlike parapsychology or cryptozoology, an intimate knowledge of computers conferred economic value and employability. If the cultic milieu had proven a tempting target for capitalist recuperation, then the emergent techno-seeker archetype of the hacker was simply irresistible. Unfortunately for the early hacker collectives who read and wrote for zines like *Phreak*, this economic value all but guaranteed that the internet would not become the utopia they had dreamed of.

In the words of Barbrook and Cameron's famous essay, "The Californian Ideology," "a loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists and artists from the West Coast of the USA have succeeded in defining a heterogeneous orthodoxy for the coming information age: the Californian Ideology" (Barbrook and Cameron 1). This ideology "promiscuously combines the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies", with any fears of corporate consolidation hand-waved away by their "profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies", naive utopian daydreams of a world where "everybody will be both hip and rich" (Barbrook and Cameron 1).

The early hackers wanted "information technologies to be used to create a new 'Jeffersonian democracy' where all individuals will be able to express themselves freely within cyberspace," yet their growing association with defense department contracts, corporate control, and right-wing libertarian ideology would see them "reproducing some of the most atavistic features of American society" (Barbrook and Cameron 2).

Even as corporate control crept in, the cyberspace of the late '80s still felt special, a place only those tech-savvy and lucky few could access and enjoy. In those early days of the internet, September was known as a frustrating month to be online. Every September, a new cohort of university students who had just gained access through their schools would flood the forums and message boards with obvious questions and generally irritate longtime digital residents. Unfortunately for those digital elders, this was only the beginning.

By the early '90s, America Online had ushered millions of new users onto the net, and the "Eternal September" had begun (Koebler). The affordances of cyberspace would shift to accommodate this influx of new users; search engines, simplified UI and easy to navigate websites would make the private playgrounds of the Hackers available to all, but homogenized,

sanitized and packaged under corporate oversight. As the Hackers were experiencing their own digital tragedy of the commons, the average American still saw the internet as an exciting new frontier. Even if it felt like modernity's push towards a promised progressive future had begun to flounder and stall in the material world, here was an entirely new immaterial one for individuals to explore and self-actualize within.

What had been imagined by the idealistic hackers as a means of escaping the conditions of neoliberal cultural hegemony became the means of ensuring its perpetuation. With the advent of the portable smartphone, the internet stopped being an escape from the economic and ideological constraints of society and simply became an extension of it, and consequently, an extension of "the cultural logic of late-stage capitalism," as Jameson put it. No longer a place to visit, now it travelled with users everywhere they went, blurring the boundaries between digital and material while reshaping the individual's relationship to time, place and each other (Kopomaa). Instantaneous communication and access to information became the norm as smart phones became ubiquitous, creating the technological infrastructure for a true hyperreality to emerge, one whose affordances reflected the neoliberal ideal of information commodification.

The ramifications of an omnipresent digital world would impact every facet of modern life, generating positive and negative effects across countless domains as we reflexively re-shaped our world to reflect this new reality. However, for the purposes of this analysis of QAnon, we will be focusing on how the structural affordances of the digital world create the capitalist realism described by Fisher.

The communicative affordances of digital technology described by Jenkins would blend with the cultural complex described in Jameson's postmodernism and Debord's spectacle, creating "a vision of control and communication much as Jean Baudrillard understood it, in

which subjugation no longer takes the form of a subordination to an extrinsic spectacle, but rather invites us to interact and participate” (Fisher 18). In these embedded contradictions, the seeds of the schizogenic sublime are planted.

The effects of capitalist realism on the cultic milieu of the internet can be seen in the degradation of the hacker archetype, from the idealistic seekership practiced by the anarcho-hackers of *Phrack* to the misanthropic, irony-poisoned anons of 4Chan. In the early days of 4Chan there was still a faint echo of the “hacktivist” spirit that once animated digital pioneers. The loose collective of 4Chan users calling themselves “Anonymous” would use hacking as a tool against entrenched power structures (such as the Anonymous-led Project Chanology, a multi-pronged attack on Scientology), even if they lacked a coherent ideology to guide their actions (Dibbell). This lack of ideology would see these attempts to confront power devolve into mere chaotic acts of de-politicized detournement against the “normies,” the throngs of the eternal September who had made the internet so mundane. Even at this early stage, elements of reactionary bigotry were becoming more central to the identity of Anonymous, as seen in the racially charged content driving the infamous trolling “raids” on the virtual community platform Habbo Hotel (Higgin).

By the mid-2010s, 4Chan and its imitators had degraded into the mess of incoherent nihilism and misanthropic accelerationism described in this dissertation’s introduction. This combination of alienation from consensus reality and active loathing towards the “normies” who occupy it paved the way for a supremely chaotic discursive landscape that would support the layered meta-ironic practice of LARPing. This emergent discourse emphasizes ephemerality and subjectivity, actively subverting any notions of truth or objective meaning, creating an environment where appearance is reality (de Zeeuw and Tuters). It should come as no surprise

that this was the environment that would lead the efforts at electing Trump through memetic hyperstition, a belief that their collective could “meme” an idea into reality (de Zeeuw and Gekker 3). In this sense, their beliefs had come to more closely resemble the magical thinking of the pre-modern, the ancient practice of sympathetic magic (to use a symbolic representation to effect change in the material world) translated to the digital world. Of course, due to the endemic effects of capitalist realism, the anons of 4Chan could imagine that their memes were magic and their identities fluid but could not imagine that power being put towards a future outside of the narrow confines of neoliberal capitalism.

As the “pervasive atmosphere ... constraining thought and action” renders the idea of progressive change naive and foolish, the social identities once based around these ideals turn from confronting power, to merely creating chaos, to adopting the right-wing reactionary politics they once opposed (Fisher 22). This pattern of cultural stasis that generates reactionary anger is the motivational core of QAnon conspiracism, and this section will examine how Fisher’s concepts of capitalist precorporation, business ontology and reflexive impotence have shaped the digital world and paved the way for the QAnon community’s ascendance.

The Bottom Line Before All: Business Ontology

Fisher’s use of the term “business ontology” refers to the socio-cultural complex that has proliferated in forty years of neoliberal ideological dominance, a pervasive and accepted truth “in which it is simply obvious that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business” (Fisher 23). To do anything else would be considered “unrealistic,” the result of idealistic naivety rather than the hard-nosed, profit-driven pragmatism of the business world. More than an unthinking endorsement of neoliberal thinking, the prevailing business

ontology acts as a thought-terminating tautology. “Realistic” is not what is possible, only what is deemed appropriate and acceptable, categories that are more the product of ideological perspective and political determinations than objective measures of material reality. As Fisher describes, “An ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact” (Fisher 22).

Despite Silicon Valley’s obsessive mantras of “disruption,” “innovation,” and a commitment to, as per Facebook’s internal motto, “move fast and break things,” this approach is never turned towards the business ontology that shapes their goals (“Mark Zuckerberg’s Letter”). Innovation and disruption are only ever applied to commodities and services within the structures of capitalism, never the system itself. Indeed, much of the liberatory rhetoric of Silicon Valley rings hollow when viewed in the context of its own history, one marked by outward claims of “changing the world” and “do no evil”⁸ while encoding the neoliberal status quo into the very structure of the information age.

From its inception the high-minded libertarian ideology of Silicon Valley was in direct contradiction with its foundation in material reality. Even popular culture celebrates the “self-made” entrepreneurs as the scions of Silicon Valley; it is worth noting that their endeavors would be impossible without extensive government subsidy. Returning to Cameron and Barbrook’s *The Californian Ideology*, Silicon Valley’s supposed libertarian utopia was only possible through “Government dollars used to build the irrigation systems, highways, schools, universities and other infrastructural projects which makes the good life possible in California” (Barbrook and Cameron 9). The American Defense Department “poured billions of tax dollars into buying planes, missiles, electronics and nuclear bombs from Californian companies,” effectively using

⁸ Google’s original motto.

the impossibly vast defense budget as a kind of state planned economy, albeit one entirely predicted on privatizing public resources and institutions (9). This practice continues to this day, with billions in DoD funding flowing to the Silicon Valley venture capital ecosystem (Cross; Merrill).

This economy relied on the work of what Cameron and Barbrook describe as an emergent “virtual class,” one equally defined by their high wages and autonomy as by their precarious employment and crushing work schedule. This combination of hippie idealism and puritan work ethic creates a situation where for this emerging virtual class, “work itself has become the main route to self-fulfillment,” aligning with both the neoliberal paradigm of hyperindividualism and the cultic paradigm of self-centered seekership (Barbrook and Cameron 5).

This created a bubble that “simultaneously reflects the disciplines of market economics and the freedoms of hippie artisanship,” united through “a nearly universal belief in technological determinism” (Barbrook and Cameron 5). This technological determinism was greatly influenced by the work of Marshall McLuhan, whose optimistic predictions convinced the emerging “virtual class” of “the convergence of media, computing and telecommunications would inevitably create the electronic agora—a virtual place where everyone would be able to express their opinions without fear of censorship” (Barbrook and Cameron 3). Believing the lie of deterministic inevitability allowed this virtual class to largely ignore the growing corporate consolidation and market domination of their lives, choosing instead to “play at being cyberpunks within hyper-reality without having to meet any of their impoverished neighbors” (Barbrook and Cameron 13). Once again, the cultural primacy of hyperindividualism drives the individual to turn away from community engagement and collectively organizing for political solutions and look inwards for solipsistic salvation.

When the techno-deterministic utopia of the emergent virtual class failed to materialize, rather than confront the cognitive dissonance resulting from a core belief being challenged, a scapegoat was found. Within the neoliberal paradigm put forward by Reagan, it was the fault of government regulation that the tech utopia failed to materialize, and only a “true” free market could allow the “visionary” tech leaders to create it. In this way, the pervasive business ontology enshrined within the emerging Californian Ideology ensured that “the technologies of freedom” would inevitably metastasize “into the machines of dominance” (Barbrook and Cameron 13).

This perceived infallibility exists in stark contrast to the systemic outcomes, namely that de-regulation and tax cuts for the rich have only exacerbated income inequality (Alvaredo et al.; Atkinson et al.; Piketty). In a recent meta-study from the London School of Economics that combined research, the findings were quite stark, stating that “major tax cuts for the rich push up income inequality, but do not boost economic performance” (Hope and Limberg 17). The boom-and-bust cycle created by economic deregulation is particularly clear in the history of Silicon Valley, from the “dotcom” crash of the 1980s to the recent string of investment bubbles that have dominated the tech economy for the last decade. Crypto exchanges like FTX were hailed as the future of banking, NFTs as the future of art, the metaverse as the future of work, and LLMs are currently being touted as the future of creative and communicative work. In each case, the extravagant investments are justified by a sort of secular eschatology; tech industry leaders utterly self-assured in the necessity of their “creative destruction,” unconcerned with the potential damage (economic, social, cultural, political), undeterred by past failures and entirely committed to upholding the prevailing business ontology. As business and marketing scholar Susi Geiger puts it, “The purse-strings that are opened in the service of disruption determine the shape of tomorrow’s markets; perhaps less so through the markets that come to be as a result of

their activities, but more fundamentally as a result of those futures these eschatological narratives suppress.”

Even products and services that formed the backbone of the digital age are not immune, as Google, Apple, and Facebook have hemorrhaged usability and functionality at a breathtaking rate (Doctorow, “‘Enshittification’ is Coming”). Scholars have often used the term “platform decay/death” to describe the downward spiral in functionality and audience share that comes as digital platforms fail (McCammon and Lingel). However, in the 2020s, this process of decay began appearing on the most popular and central platforms to the digital world, caused by the deliberate actions of corporate leadership. The phenomenon is popularly known as “Enshittification,” a term coined by technologist Cory Doctorow that refers to the “gradual deterioration of a service or product brought about by a reduction in the quality of service provided, especially of an online platform, and as a consequence of profit-seeking” (Doctorow, “The ‘Enshittification’ of TikTok”). The term tapped into a widespread feeling of living in a decaying digital world, such that it was declared the word of the year by both the American Dialect Society and the Macquarie English Dictionary (“2023 Word of the Year”; “Word of the Year 2024”). As described by researcher Toomas Timpkas, “while financed by seeding financial capital, the service produces value for the primary users at low (or no) cost; then the service exploits the primary users to produce value for business customers and finally it exploits also the business customers to maximize the value for its owners, which eventually leads to the demise of the service” (Timpka 665). The all-consuming pursuit of short-term profits, as enshrined by the omnipresent business ontology of Silicon Valley, drives companies to destroy their own products and services. Yet because of the pervasive, almost religious belief in the infallibility of business ontology, these obvious and glaring flaws are taken to be inevitable rather than solvable.

When confronted with these mounting contradictions, Silicon Valley billionaires are increasingly embracing a self-made alternative reality of their own, what *New York Times* writer Ezra Klein called “reactionary futurism,” an affective ideology that rejects democracy and modernity in favor of corporatized control of a stateless society, reflecting their fear of a populist conspiracy to take away the control of their techno-fiefdoms (Taşkale). Perhaps best exemplified in Marc Andreessen’s bizarre “Techno-Optimist Manifesto,” it is a perfect example of Jameson’s postmodern deathlessness and lack of historicity, a pastiche of the aesthetics of 1950s Futurism and 1960s progressive optimism overlaid over the same techno-determinist, neoliberal business ontology that has defined the past forty years. The rise in prominence of figures like Curtis Yarvin and Balaji Srinivasan among Silicon Valley elites, whose ideas of a techno-feudal “network state” are as divorced from material reality as any QAnon conspiracy, demonstrate the cultural pivot towards delusional reaction (Duran; Lehmann). Paired with the rise in cult-like “rationalist” groups that construct elaborate conspiracy narratives involving eugenics and the threat of God-like AI from the future, and it becomes clear that the inability to confront the dissonant contradictions of the reigning business ontology have helped to foster the embrace of reactionary conspiracism in Silicon Valley as surely as it has in the general populace (Ratliff).

The Retreat from Reality: Reflexive Impotence

Just as Giddens identified reflexivity as a keystone element of modernity, the prevailing business ontology has given rise to an inverted, dysfunctional variation Fisher calls “reflexive impotence” (21). The modern subject is overwhelmed with information which demands reflexive change but can only conceptualize reflexive change within the confines of the existing framework informed by the pervasive business ontology. As Fisher notes, this ideological

limitation on reflexive change “is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Fisher 27).

Much as the American frontier had served as a kind of pressure release valve for the structural problems of early American society, the creation of the digital frontier would offer the possibility of escape from the problems of late-stage American empire. Adam Curtis’ documentary, *Hypernormalisation*, provides a compelling multi-disciplinary analysis of this phenomenon. The title refers to a term coined by a Soviet intellectual Alexei Yurchak to describe the cultural liminal space created by the collapsing institutions of the Soviet Union. Even as the institutions that governed everyday Soviet life began to falter and fail, the citizens kept going through the motions and retreated into delusion, unable to conceptualize the true extent of the collapse currently in motion (Yurchak).

As neoliberalism causes the same bloat in bureaucracy its proponents claimed to abhor, albeit a corporate bureaucracy rather than a national one, the contradictions become inescapable (Graeber). The resulting corruption, wealth inequality and collapsing institutional trust all help to foment the wave of populist reactionary sentiment (Öniş). Trapped within the confines of the reigning business ontology, the West is experiencing its own period of hypernormalisation within the confines of capitalist realism rather than soviet communism. The American political establishment’s unwillingness or incapacity to oppose Trump’s ransacking of Medicaid, USAID, disaster relief, educational funding, and virtually every other progressive vestige of the New Deal era is the result of this hypernormalized passivity (Hersher; Lesnes; Razor et al.; “What Do the Looming”).

It is not that there isn’t popular appetite or interest in change: the wave of anti-incumbency candidates sweeping to power across Western democracies in 2024 demonstrates

there is ample support for alternative solutions (Lawler and Basu; Mahnken; “The Year of Anti-Incumbancy”). However, the only solutions offered by the incumbent centrist political parties are either attempts to reverse only the worst of neoliberal policies “with their implicit concession that capitalism can only be resisted, never overcome,” or relying on the noblesse oblige of the Billionaire class, “who maintain that the amoral excesses of capitalism must be offset by charity” (Fisher 34). At the same time, the right relies on reactionary culture war grievances (abortion access, gay marriage, and trans identity) to hide their reliance on the same neoliberal policies, ensuring whoever wins, the prevailing socio-economic model remains unchanged.

With political avenues for change stymied, there is a market for a mediated alternative, a performance of political progress to be consumed in place of the real thing. Fisher describes this using the term “interpassivity,” the mediated delegation of our own engagement and experience (Pfaller). Fisher uses the film *Wall-E* as an example, the implied capitalist critique of a polluted future Earth and sedentary, media addicted human population allows the film to “perform our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity” (18). Rather than engage in the difficult and uncertain process of political activism, we can consume media that depicts our desired outcome or offers our own critiques back to us.

In the era of social media, this process has become a central element in shaping media content creation and consumption, as seen in the popularity of video game streamers who effectively play the games on their audience’s behalf, video essays that summarize and explain popular films and television series to audiences that have never seen them, and political commentators who perform their audience’s activism and outrage in exchange for likes and views. Social media platforms themselves foster interpassivity by design, where emojis and memes perform our emotions for us and even those wishing to consume content exploring the

harms caused by social media platforms must turn to those same platforms to find the content they crave (Black; Mozdeika).

QAnon is simply a more extreme example of the same interpassivity, rather than merely consuming the representation of activism, the QAnon community both create and consume conspiracist fantasies that perform revolution (political and spiritual) on their behalf. Some of Q's own popular aphorisms gesture towards this underlying truth, extolling their followers to "get your popcorn" while reminding them that "you're watching a movie" where "patriots are in control." As passive spectators, the QAnon community can both enjoy the show, and continue to enjoy the fruits of the status quo they claim to oppose.

In effect, the central narrative of QAnon tells adherents that "Team Q" is doing the actual work of fighting the cabal, leaving the QAnon community to be "digital soldiers" who only need to focus on social media engagement and promotion. QAnon adherents simultaneously believe that political change is impossible and inevitable, something they can endlessly narrativize but never actually participate in. Indeed, those who attempt to take on an active role in fighting the cabal (such as Anthony Comello's murder of a mob boss, Jessica Prim's ill-fated attempt to assassinate Joe Biden, or David DePape's attack on Paul Pelosi) are immediately disowned by their community as "crisis actors" and "antifa communists" committing false flag attacks to discredit the movement (Harris; Jingnan, "Why Conspiracy Theories"). Even the participants of January 6, now largely pardoned in Trump's second term and rehabilitated in the QAnon community's eyes, are seen as unfortunate patriots caught in Cabal-led FBI-instigated false flag, a baseless conspiracy narrative peddled by political actors as prominent as Vance and Musk (Bump; Saric).

This peculiar intersection of interactive passivity is a central feature of the QAnon community's distinctive conspiracist narrativization. It is an attempt to reclaim a sense of agency in techno-cultural context of immense complexity, continuous change and embedded contradiction, without sacrificing the passive comforts of consuming digital media or the challenges of political activism. The overwhelming sense of reflexive impotence, that they must passively accept that systemic change is impossible to accomplish and naive to expect, collides with the liberatory promise of digital communication networks and the participatory affordances of convergent media, creating a potent source of cognitive dissonance. To resolve this dissonance, the QAnon community has created a discursive framework for an alternative hyperreality, one that can replace the complexities of a shared consensus reality with the simplicity of conspiracist narrative.

The loss of a shared sense of national consensus reality was always a possible danger when moving towards the democratized, de-localized framework of digital communications; if anyone can build their own part of the digital landscape, some of them are going to veer off the beaten path of consensus reality. The early days of the internet (1990s – early 2000s) saw several popular fringe dwellers who went viral and cemented their part in the history of the digital world. Otis Eugene Ray's surreal Timecube website was such a hit with early internet users that he was offered the chance to speak at MIT, or Terry Davis's singular and strange operating system based on biblical esoterica, Temple OS, which has gone on to become something of a cult classic among modern programmers ("IAP 2002 Activity"; Reed; *TempleOS*; *Time Cube*).

Despite their niche popularity, these individuals were mere flashes in the pan, singular oddballs whose antics inspired curiosity and amusement rather than sparking full blown cultural movements. However, as the digital world has become more centralized and consolidated under

corporate control, it has created the conditions for a movement like QAnon to spread like wildfire.

The Chaos Machine: Social Media Platform Precorporation

In 2024, a quarter of all webpages created between 2013 and 2024 have disappeared, and the number goes up to thirty-eight percent when webpages created before 2013 are factored in (Chapekis et al.). The digital world continues to generate ever larger amounts of content, but the diversity of sources hosting them is contracting, funneling more and more users through the same platforms. While this consolidation of information may be more efficient, it poses profound risks of censorship and media manipulation by the corporations who own these centralized digital media platforms. Capable of exerting invisible algorithmic influence over the content consumed by the public, these platforms have become the centerpieces of the digital media ecosystem, capable of shaping user perceptions of social consensus and available information in ways both subtle and overt. These are the informational engines that allow for the “precorporation” Fisher described, “the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture” (15).

Precorporation is not a new idea; indeed, this has always been the goal of corporate power since the inception of mass media advertising. In the words of Edward Bernays, America’s first marketing guru, “Mass production is only profitable if its rhythm can be maintained,” rhythm here meaning ever increasing product sales, and in order to maintain it, a company “cannot afford to wait until the public asks for its product; it must maintain constant touch, through advertising and propaganda, with the vast public in order to assure itself the continuous demand which alone will make its costly plant profitable” (Bernays and Miller 57).

Bernays keenly understood that this feat was only possible through the mass media networks that had emerged in the wake of industrialization. Bernays saw the mass media networks of the 1910s (newspapers, pamphlets, and radio programs) acting as “rubber stamps” on the minds of the public. Bernays explains that “each man's rubber stamps are the duplicates of millions of others, so that when those millions are exposed to the same stimuli, all receive identical imprints”, and in this way, mass media shapes the nation and its democratic process (14).

This sentiment echoes Benedict Anderson’s own observations on the role of mass media in the formation of national identity, where each citizen reads their morning paper “in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull,” yet they are paradoxically aware that their experience of private reading “is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (Anderson 43). Bernays too, believed that mass media was essential to democracy, though his ideas would quickly adopted by Goebbels and the Nazi regime and Bernays himself would employ his “propaganda of peacetime” in service to the American coup in Guatemala, which deposed the democratically elected leader in favor of a brutal dictator who was willing to do the bidding of the American United Fruit Company (France; Milburn).

However, it is only with the advent of what José van Dijck calls a “platform society” that the tools have been created to make Bernays’ dream into our collective nightmare. Dijck defines the digital platform as “a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users—not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies. It is geared toward systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data (Dijck et al. 4). These platforms do not exist in isolation, but as part of a platform ecosystem, “an assemblage of networked platforms, governed by a particular set of mechanisms that shapes

everyday practices” (Dijck et al. 4). The dominance of these platforms results in what Dijck dubbed a platform society, “a society in which social and economic traffic is increasingly channeled by an (overwhelmingly corporate) global online platform ecosystem that is driven by algorithms and fueled by data” (Dijck et al. 4).

With the overwhelming embrace of business ontology within Silicon Valley, this centralization of information has been directed towards the pursuit of profit above all else, the inevitable result of allowing for-profit corporations to control public resources. Rather than nationalize critical informational infrastructure (as we do with roads, water, electricity, etc.), corporations are allowed to run this essential infrastructure as they see fit, resulting in what prominent digital media scholar Shoshana Zuboff has dubbed “surveillance capitalism.” This is the realization of Bernays’ “peacetime propaganda,” and Fisher’s fears of corporate precorporation, the newest stage in neoliberal commodification that goes beyond ideas and aesthetics to transform the consumer themselves into a data commodity to be mined.

Zuboff describes how digital platforms have rendered “human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data,” creating an informational ecosystem where “automated machine processes not only know our behavior but also shape our behavior at scale” (15). This is not the heavy authoritarian hand of the IngSoc regime in Orwell’s *1984*, but a subtle process that presents specific information to the user to “nudge, coax, tune, and herd behavior toward profitable outcomes” (Zuboff 15). In keeping with the thought-terminating clichés of capitalist realism, this lopsided relationship between platform and user goes largely unchallenged by the userbase, as collective political action would be required to oppose such concentrated corporate power, and without such collective effort, addressing the as individuals is simply being “realistic.” Zuboff offers a succinct explanation for the root of this reflexive impotence, noting

that “the internet has become essential for social participation, that the internet is now saturated with commerce, and that commerce is now subordinated to surveillance capitalism,” creating the situation where “our felt needs for effective life vie against the inclination to resist its bold incursions” (17). In essence, it is easy to rail against the control exerted by companies like Google and Facebook over our access to data and over our political process through lobbying, but it is hard to boycott platforms that are essential parts of our everyday digital lives.

When Zuboff describes the widespread acceptance of “a self-regulating market as a natural force of such complexity and perfection that it demanded radical freedom from all forms of state oversight,” she is describing the effects of precorporation aimed at maintaining the sacrosanct status of business ontology and the reflexive impotence it generates (42). Having to accept the loss of privacy created by corporate data mining and the loss of agency generated by algorithmic automation is one more reason to seek refuge in the comforting arms of fantasy, to imagine a way to reclaim agency and independence from a system larger than they can conceptualize. Fisher echoes this in his own work when he writes of the “despondency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened” (15). In a digital world defined by omnipresent surveillance and informational control, the paranoid populist narrativization of QAnon conspiracists offers an alternative that grants a measure of agency and purpose, despite its delusional absurdity.

While the despondency observed by Fisher serves to make conspiracist narratives an enticing escape, the algorithmic content delivery systems of these digital platforms have worked to elevate and disseminate reactionary conspiracist content like QAnon in ways no previous media ecosystem has. Journalist Max Fisher outlines the causes and disastrous effects of this structural flaw in his book, *The Chaos Machine*. The problem begins simply enough: to best

advertise to users while harvesting their data, platforms must maximize user engagement to keep users on the platform for as long as possible. In one of Fisher's interviews with social media researcher Renee DiResta, she describes how conspiracists make ideal users,

A mother who accepts that vaccines are safe has little reason to spend much time discussing the subject online. Like-minded parenting groups she joins, while large, might be relatively quiet. But a mother who suspects a vast medical conspiracy imperiling her children might spend hours researching the subject. She is also likely to seek out allies, sharing information and coordinating action to fight back. (21)

The same seekership traits that fueled the pre-digital cultic milieu were used to drive user engagement by social media platforms, with the algorithmic content delivery system preying upon the cultic seeker's desire to join seekership societies in the pursuit of individualized esoteric knowledge. DiResta describes what she calls a "conspiracy correlation effect," where "the platform recognizes that somebody who's interested in conspiracy A is typically likely to be interested in conspiracy B," offering not just conspiracist content, but entire conspiracist communities (Fisher 66). Facebook Groups were particularly effective in this regard, as reading conspiracist content might occupy mere minutes of a user's time, but joining an active group created impetus for an ongoing process of radicalization. As Facebook placed greater and greater algorithmic weight on negative emotional reactions, content that created anger and outrage was pushed with greater and greater regularity. For regular users, unaware of the algorithmic hand directing the flow of information, "It was as if your community had suddenly decided that it valued provocation and outrage above all else, rewarding it with waves of attention that were, in reality, algorithmically generated" (Fisher 122).

That this proved effective should come as no surprise. DiResta's observations reveal the same basic behavioral truths observed by Campbell decades earlier, "Believers come back again and again, their obsession becoming an identity, with social media platforms the center of their day-to-day lives. And radicals, driven by the urgency of their cause, recruit other radicals" (Fisher 66). Moreover, these users demonstrated the same cultic aptitude for syncretic orthopraxy, knitting together the initially unrelated conspiracist content "as part of a unified community" brought together through created "a new collective identity" (Fisher 190). Unlike the collective identity fostered by the institutions of the nation state, these algorithmically derived, content consumption-based identities lacked any basis in material reality, nor the traditional ISA mechanisms for stable ideological reproduction. They were ephemeral and rooted in affective reaction to the content delivered by the platforms which hosted them, a whirlwind of emotionally charged, decontextualized content pushing users towards ever-greater platform engagement. The narratives of the QAnon community are not the product: it is the engagement of the users' time and energy in creating these narratives on digital platforms that allows the QAnon community's cultic conspiracist narratives to be recuperated into corporate profit.

This algorithmic framework has been shown to drive political violence in Sri-Lanka and Myanmar, countries where internet access is heavily reliant on platforms like Facebook (Fisher 162-65). Similarly, Facebook usage has been linked to hate crimes against immigrants in Germany and social media platforms have broadly assisted in the rise of "networked authoritarianism" across the globe (Müller and Schwarz; Roberts and Oosterom). Moreover, while the affordances of these platforms favor content generating reactionary rage, they appear to have the opposite effect on organized political protest. Despite making protests easier to organize, social media networks appear to greatly reduce the likelihood of the long-term success

of such political activism, as the algorithmic affordances of the platforms favor emotionally charged propaganda good for mobilizing protestors, but not the more mundane communicative tasks of long-term activism (Chenoweth; Zeynep Tufekci).

While QAnon may have begun as yet another 4Chan LARP, its inadvertent alignment with the engagement goals of major social media platforms ensured that once it entered the wider digital media environment it would spread at the speed of their algorithmic affordances. The disaffected denizens of the /pol/ board may have imagined themselves as digital occultists conjuring a new world through memetic hyperstition, but it was the affordances built into a consolidated and corporatized digital world that ensured their success. As Fisher describes,

QAnon, like so much technoculture before it, flowed quickly from fringe to mainstream platforms. Facebook and YouTube's systems slid QAnon into the slipstream of conspiracy and extremist recommendations. At first, it was just another node. But its ever-escalating claims and totalizing story allowed it to absorb other conspiracies, making it a focal point—much as Alex Jones had once been—of disparate communities, from anti-vaxxers to race-war preppers to anti-government paranoiacs. Its vehemently pro-Trump politics and open calls for violence made it a natural partner, and ultimately a fixture, of the online right. Most of all, it was endlessly time-consuming, the primary trait for which the platforms maximized. (206)

The communicative affordances of corporate platforms geared towards maximizing engagement in the attention economy, when combined with the socio-political and technological changes ushered in by neoliberalism in the postmodern era and America's deeply engrained cultural history of conspiracism, make the emergence of a movement like QAnon all but inevitable. While the QAnon community's narrativization cannot provide insight into

political struggles or visions of the future, it does provide a uniquely revealing window into the effects of the turbulent and protean present. Because at its most fundamental, QAnon is a reaction to the incomprehensible totality of the digital hyperreality we now occupy, what I refer to as the *schizogenic sublime*.

An Aberration in the Heartland of the Hyperreal: QAnon and the Emergence of the Schizogenic Sublime

When placed in the proper historical, techno-cultural context, QAnon and its signature discursive practice of decoding can be seen not as individual insanity or socio-cultural aberration, but an adaptive response to an increasingly protean and contradictory informational environment. This informational ecosystem, with platforms algorithmically optimized to generate engagement through an emotionally charged barrage of decontextualized content while rigidly adhering to the reigning business ontology, fosters individual delusion as a commodified alternative to consensus reality. The incomprehensible, ever-changing totality of this digital hyperreality, at once invisible yet omnipresent as the representational vehicle for social, political, cultural, and economic life, is the basis for the schizogenic sublime.

The totality of this digital hyperreality is presented to the individual user in digestible piecemeal chunks through digital interfaces optimized for user convenience. Yet the constant churn of new data, a decontextualized deluge of new information demanding reflexive change, presents a unique challenge to the maintenance of individual identity and understanding. To exist without friction within this flux of novel, decontextualized, affectively charged and often contradictory media demands the adoption of a schizophrenic mindset. In effect, QAnon is akin to the canary in the digital coal mine, a collection of those most vulnerable to the schizogenic

effects of this techno-cultural milieu, and as such, QAnon and its discursive practices can serve to map the contours of this increasingly incoherent and chaotic digital world.

The term schizophrenia is not chosen glibly or to paint the conspiracists of QAnon as categorically mentally ill, but as a specific reference to its use by theorists like Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari, who argued that “madness was not a natural, but a political, category,” as in, a political-economic effect generated by the systemic choices made by a given political system (Fisher 25). As Jameson explains, the Lacanian concept of schizophrenia originates from a “breakdown of the signifying chain” in his/her use of language until “the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (“Postmodernism” 27). Jameson saw this schizophrenic tendency in the postmodern media modality of pastiche as part of the larger crisis of historicity, where “the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold, and to organize its past and future into coherent experience,” producing cultural narratives that invariably degrade into incoherent “heaps of fragments” (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 71). In essence, the schizogenic sublime is the result of encoding the commodification of culture and its attendant crisis of historicity into the very fabric of our digital hyperreality. It is the cumulative effect of the current digital milieu, where the pastiche model of media is filtered through platforms optimized for the demands of surveillance capitalism, an endless automated system that provides an unceasing deluge of novel content aimed at maximizing user engagement. Attempting to enact the reflexivity engrained in the rational, empirical ideologies of modernity, to integrate new information into a coherent identity and world view, becomes impossible at the sheer velocity of change. To stay immersed in such an

environment necessitates adaptive change, to embrace the informational flux and become a reflection of a schizophrenic digital world.

As we explore the concept of the schizogenic sublime and its relationship to QAnon, it will be helpful to revisit both the conclusions of the earlier chapters. As covered in the first chapter, conspiracism can be understood as part of a longstanding narrative tradition, a way to simplify the impossible complexity of the world's systems and render them into comprehensible, simplified, actionable narratives. In their earliest incarnations, the supernatural conspiracism of witch hexes, harmful spirits, and shamanic curses, they function as a way of avoiding a confrontation with Kant's idea of the sublime. A malady strikes at the herdsman's flock, a blight strikes the farmer's field, a plague stalks the population at large—all naturally occurring phenomenon, yet the totality of the ecological systems that create them are simply too vast and complex to fully represent through our symbol systems. Jameson noted this connection as well, describing the sublime as

an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment, stupor and awe, of what was so enormous as to crush human life altogether: a description then refined by Kant to include the question of representation itself—so that the object of the sublime is now not only a matter of sheer power and of the physical incommensurability of the human organism with Nature, but also of the limits of figuration and the incapacity of the human mind to give representation to such enormous forces. (“Postmodernism” 77)

Kant's sublime generates fear and awe through sheer scale and sheer power,⁹ while Jameson's hysterical sublime “alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of a strange new hallucinatory exhilaration” brought about by the “derealization of the

⁹ In its sub-categories of mathematical and dynamical sublime, respectively.

whole surrounding world of everyday reality” through the pervasive commodification of culture (Kant 103-17, 119-23; Jameson, “Postmodernism” 76). In both cases, it is the experience of confronting an incomprehensible totality that generates a kind of exhilarating “negative pleasure” in the individual.

As the modern era saw the rise of enlightenment philosophy and the nation state, it fostered the parallel rise of a new kind of conspiracist narrativization to match. The natural world was increasingly imagined as subordinate to the emergent power of science and state, and consequently, “The other of our society is in that sense no longer Nature at all, as it was in precapitalist societies” (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 77). It would be overly reductive to claim that technology simply replaced nature, as Jameson himself described “technology is here itself a figure for something else. Yet technology may well serve as adequate shorthand to designate that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labor stored up in our machinery” (“Postmodernism” 77). In Jameson’s hysterical sublime, we experience an alienated fear and awe at the immensity of the techno-cultural, socio-political systems that we have built, a never-ending commodified hyperreality that is “mesmerizing and fascinating, not so much in its own right, but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp—namely the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself” (“Postmodernism” 80). In being mesmerized by the symbolic representations of our own power, it becomes ever-easier to imagine these vast societal systems as existing outside our control or responsibility, as natural and inevitable as the sea and sky.

Even as American conspiracism is banished to the stigmatized cultural fringe of the cultic milieu by the empowered ISAs of a post-war, post-New Deal America, Jameson darkly predicted

that conspiracism will become a popular avenue for “a degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system” (“Postmodernsim” 80). Jameson’s hysterical sublime anticipates the digital hyperreality to come, but not the uniquely distorting affordances of the attention economy under algorithmically optimized platform capitalism and the schizogenic effect it will have on those who experience it.

While the cultic milieu of previous American eras has produced narratives that spanned the ideological spectrum, the pervasive impact of capitalist realism on the affordances of platform capitalism and its attendant attention economy all but guarantee that a movement like QAnon will be reactionary and destructive. As daily life becomes inextricably enmeshed in the digital world, the digital world becomes more enmeshed in the hegemonic ideology and socio-cultural narratives of daily life, a feedback loop that has effectively encoded the effects of Fisher’s capitalist realism into the very fabric of our emergent digital hyperreality. The widespread acceptance of business ontology, as reinforced through the economic success of Silicon Valley, makes any alternatives appear foolish or unrealistic while also foreclosing the possibility of systemic political solutions. This engenders a state of reflexive impotence that drives users to create alternative realities in their digital lives where they can imagine themselves as proactive protagonists in a grand existential struggle for the fate of the world while still enjoying the privileges and conveniences the system brings. The advanced state of corporate precorporation, made possible by the affordances of digital content platforms, creates an environment extremely conducive to conspiracist content that can meet the demand of the reflexively impotent userbase.

The digital age saw the recuperation of cultic conspiracism into pop culture, at the same time as the affordance of digital media were reshaping popular culture into commodified

pastiche. As Jodi Dean describes in her book, *Aliens in America*, “Narratives of abduction and conspiracy’ are uniquely influential in the current technological context, a context where information travels at the speed of light and everything is entertainment” (6). Dean emphasizes that the narrative of abduction symbolically stand-in for the experience of the digital age, describing “experiences beyond belief and control,” through narratives that “reconfigure the present’s acceptance of passivity, suspicion, paranoia, and loss as, themselves, forms of action” (*Aliens in America* 7). Dean argues that if abduction narratives capture the experience of the individual within this cultural context, then we must understand that “conspiracy theory is a way of processing information, a way of making links in the combined sense of discovering as well as creating” (*Aliens in America* 143). Abduction narratives and aliens were effective symbolic stand-ins for the hysterical sublime of the ‘90s and early 2000s, but no static narrative would be sufficient to capture the reactive, adaptive, all-encompassing digital hyperreality of the schizogenic sublime. That QAnon is so incoherent and inconsistent speaks more to the technological conditions of its creation, an attempt to adapt to a world of ceaseless engagement, informational overload and collapsing semiotic consensus.

Jameson’s observations on the schizophrenic nature of postmodernity have been echoed by more recent digital media scholars, albeit in different terms. In *24/7 Economy*, author Jonathan Crary examines the rise of “a generalized inscription of human life into duration without breaks, defined by a principle of continuous functioning,” where the demands for ever-escalating productivity leads to a breakdown of temporality where individuals exist in “a time that no longer passes, beyond clock time” (8). In a similar vein, Wendy Chun’s *Updating to Remain the Same* explores the impact of living in an era of normalized crises, an emergent consequence of neoliberalism and its overriding emphasis on networked life, where the

affordances of digital communication create a highly individualized understanding of the world that effectively trap individuals in a “affectively intense cul-de-sac” (3, 39). Their work echoes Mark Fisher’s own extension of Jameson’s ideas into the digital world, where “work and life become inseparable. Capital follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions” (40).

Philosopher and digital media theorist Bernard Stiegler notes that this kind of epochal dysfunction has its roots in “a disadjustment between this technical system and what Bertrand Gille called the social systems, which had hitherto been ‘adjusted’ to the preceding technical system” (13). The rapid adoption of consecutive new informational systems ensures that “there is no longer any adjustment between the new technical system and the social systems,” and the resulting breakage in historical continuity sees the previous modalities of life “replaced by automatisms and addictions” while “intergenerational and transgenerational relations are unravelling” into mutual incomprehension (Gille 15). Without the mediating influence of educational organizations and other ISAs, Stiegler theorized the emergence of a population lacking the “capabilities by which the past can be interpreted,” and consequently incapable of forming a coherent understanding of the past from which “collective projections of the future can arise” (16). Stiegler is describing the same forces I have collected under the banner of the schizogenic sublime, and the QAnon community is the fulfillment of this prediction: a population that has had their connections to the past and future disrupted by the affordances of the digital media they rely on, and the communal practice of decoding is their attempt to maintain coherence in a continually fluctuating present.

This schizophrenic outlook is the foundation of the QAnon practice of decoding, one that can only function outside the rigid demands of linear time, causal logic, and empirical evidence.

Specifically, QAnon community's signature discursive practice of baking/decoding media texts should be understood as an evolution of the pastiche model of media creation. Conspiracism, cultic esotery, pop culture, and news media are all decontextualized and reassembled into forms that suit the community's present needs. The pastiche format is ideally suited to the mass-production model of media, where a given text can be assembled as though on a factory line from pre-existing concepts and themes that have already proven profitable. In the age of convergent media, discreet texts exist in a state of active interplay across different media systems, and as Zuboff articulates in *Surveillance Capitalism*, maintaining audience engagement and attention on digital platforms is more valuable than the sales of any specific media commodity. Combining the insights of Zuboff, Djick, and Jenkins, we can see how the convergent trends in digital media have led to a digital media ecosystem dominated by centralized corporate platforms whose primary purpose is to maximize user engagement, one that inevitably incentivizes the creation of media that lacks a discrete end point.

This same evolution can be seen in the realm of commodified conspiracism: If Jameson's pastiche media model describes the precursor narratives to QAnon (Barkun's "superconspiracy theories," as seen in the work of Bill Cooper and Alex Jones), then the QAnon bricolage model represents the transition to a "live service" model. To thrive in a platform society structured around surveillance capitalism, "decoding" makes commodified conspiracism content the perfect vehicle to shape convergent media trends towards ceaseless user engagement.

The convergent interplay between surveillance and engagement, between subordination and participation, between representation and reality is what gives rise to the schizogenic sublime. The immense, inextricably intertwined totality of our technological, economic, and cultural systems that are both incomprehensible and intimately familiar. An ever-shifting

symbolic map of reality that has completely subsumed its subject, the alienating other that acts as gatekeeper to the world beyond our immediate senses. A chaotic and protean informational landscape whose totality is as unknowable as it is inescapable, whose internal logic is fundamentally schizophrenic in nature. To adapt to this new informational environment demands the adoption of a schizophrenic outlook, and this is precisely what the members of the QAnon community have done.

In creating this alternative reality through major digital platforms and feeding into their attention economy, they ultimately end up reinforcing the very system that has alienated them, creating a self-reinforcing loop that will continue to perpetuate reactionary conspiracism long after Q and their prophecies are relegated to merely another source of symbolic resources for the unending bricolage they set in motion. Through the ritual of decoding, the QAnon community's discursive framework maintains a dependence on the world they claim to refute, their obsession with an imaginary past and an ever-changing future paradoxically trap them in the flattened and attenuated hyperreality of the schizogenic sublime.

Decoding as Adaptive Response to the Schizogenic Sublime

While it is the outlandish conspiracy claims and delusional beliefs they foster which tend to garner QAnon headlines, these conspiracist narratives are themselves unremarkable in the history of American conspiracism. No individual thread is novel or new, merely the repurposed cultural resources of America's cultural past. What makes QAnon so protean and distinct is the process of decoding, and while the process may have its roots in conspiracy culture, it is the adaptation to the ceaseless chaos of the schizogenic sublime that make it so effective.

As explored in the introduction, QAnon's signature rhetorical practice is known as "decoding" (or alternatively, "baking," in reference to the 4Chan vernacular of its origin), a collective and continuous act of narrativization wherein the community collectively tries to



Figure 33. @Patriottakes.

decipher and decode the hidden messages from both the Cabal and Team Q that are supposedly littered throughout all mainstream media.

The classical image of the conspiracy theorist invariably stands before the archetypal "conspiracy wall," typically a piece of corkboard festooned with images connected by red string. While this older, analogue form still occasionally rears its head, such as in the accompanying image from noted QAnon adherent Mike Lindell, created during the lead up to the 2020 election to map out the vast conspiracy working against Q and Trump. However, this static representation is a relic of the pre-digital age, its inability to update in real time making it all but useless in the perpetual flux of the schizogenic sublime. That is not to say that many QAnon influencers do not make use of the visual format and signifiers: as we will see in the next sections, digitization of

the classical “conspiracy wall” remains a popular aesthetic. However, rather than attempt to create maps of political power, influence and money, QAnon decoding acts more as a map of the community’s ongoing associative narrativization, disconnected from material reality and held together instead by a collection of Q-created aphorisms that create a unified, if loose, interpretive frame.

The core assumptions of the decoding process are epitomized in the endlessly repeated aphorisms of Q. To begin to understand the decoding mindset, one must begin with one of Q’s oldest sayings, “Do you believe in coincidences?” Like a related Q aphorism, “how many coincidences before mathematically impossible?” the intended answer from the audience is a refutation of coincidence. Much like the conspiracism of the Puritans that forms the cultural

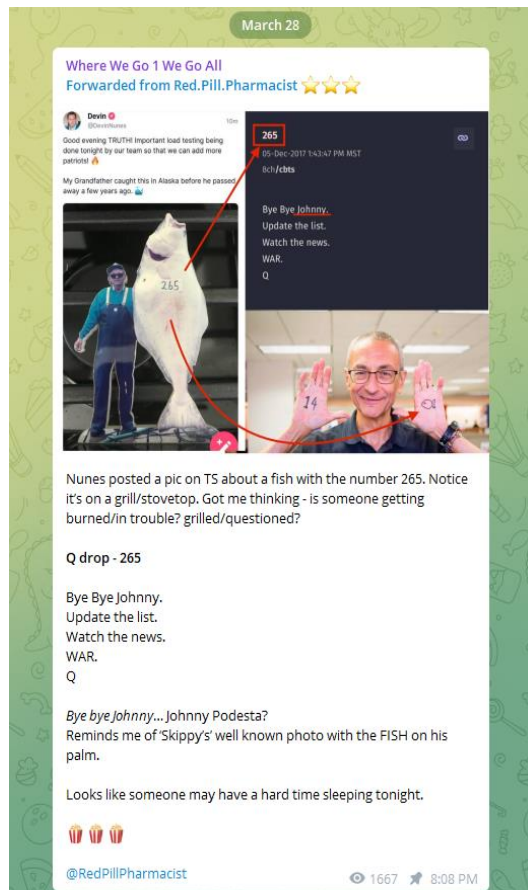


Figure 34. @RedPillPharmacist.

foundation of their worldview (see Chapter 1), they reject the notion that events can happen without human (or spiritual) agency, that events could occur without agentic intention. To be able to follow the internal logic of decoding, one must accept the premise that coincidences are an illusion, a keystone element in the obfuscating veil the Cabal maintains between us and the true nature of reality. This is also, of course, a keystone concept for the Lacanian conceptualization of the schizophrenic, whose delusions stem from the inability to separate the self from the semiotic process of signification. This is not to say that the QAnon community are experiencing

paranoid schizophrenia as an imbalance of neurotransmitters (though mental illness assuredly plays a role in some cases), but rather that they have adopted the discursive and ontological outlook of the paranoid schizophrenic. Only from this perspective can one begin to understand how the QAnon influencer @RedPillPharmacist can confidently assert that a personal photo posted by Devin Nunes (Former Chair of the House Intelligence Committee) must contain hidden clues about the future of America.

The presence of a number on the freshly caught fish provides a tenuous connection to the Q drops, but it is enough to begin the process. The text of Q drop 265 is used as a kind of interpretive framework for a close reading of the image. Q's post is aggressive, so RedPillPharmacist highlights the presence of a stove in the image's background, asking "is someone getting burned/in trouble? grilled/questioned?" The inclusion of the name Johnny in Q's cryptic text prompts the next associative leap, attaching the aggressive tone of Q's post to longtime QAnon villain John Podesta, a veteran political consultant for the Democratic party whose villanization by the QAnon community predates Q, as he featured prominently in the Pizzagate Conspiracy theory discourse (Bleakely). The photo of Podesta used to "confirm" this connection is from the Pizzagate period of 4Chan conspiracism as well, from a Twitter post in 2015 attempting to raise awareness about the impact of climate change on the world's fish population. As the QAnon community largely believes climate change to be a hoax (though the exact nature and purpose of this hoax may vary), this image is seen as an undeniable example of the Cabal's coded messaging, and the decade old tweet continues to generate death threats and enraged responses even in 2025 (@johnpodesta).

Each successive wave of anger arrives as a different QAnon subcommunity reinterprets this rather anodyne tweet in a new decode, each new decode placing the tweet further and further

from the context of its creation, creating more room to narrativize new associations and interpretations. The original context of the tweet is entirely subsumed within the ongoing bricolage of decoding, but the newly created contexts provided by the decoding process are subsumed in turn. When John Podesta is invariably not arrested, this decode will be discarded and forgotten in the rush to decode the newest information of the day. In the world of QAnon, there is no past or future, only an eternal attenuated present.

This is why it is important to understand that decoding is less about the specific interpretations and predictions of a given decode, and more about the creation and maintenance of what disinformation scholar Kate Starbird calls an adaptive sensemaking frame. A frame is an old and enduring concept popularized by sociologist Erving Goffman; they are the mental schema we use to interpret and give meaning to our experiences. Later work by Dr. Klein and his team built on Goffman's theory, demonstrating that sensemaking frames are engaged in an interactive process of both selection and interpretation of information, shaping what information is deemed relevant for interpretation as much as its meaning. In essence, people tend to select information for interpretation that matches their frame, which can lead to compounding problems when the frame is incorrect. Starbird's work reveals the increasing prevalence of collaborative, participatory maladaptive frames withing disinformation and conspiracist communities, and it is in the QAnon process of decoding that we find this phenomenon's purest manifestation (Starbird et al.).

Specifically, decoding operates using the basic elements of convergence culture to create a sensemaking framework as fluid and malleable to function within the schizogenic sublime, a framework adapted to leverage the flattening of different media modalities (fiction/non-fiction/cultic) into interchangeable content. When a new piece of information is encountered, it is

recontextualized into the QAnon narrative through the process of bricolage, stitching it together with other decontextualized elements to fit the current frame.

Take this decoding session in the comments section of QAnon influencer

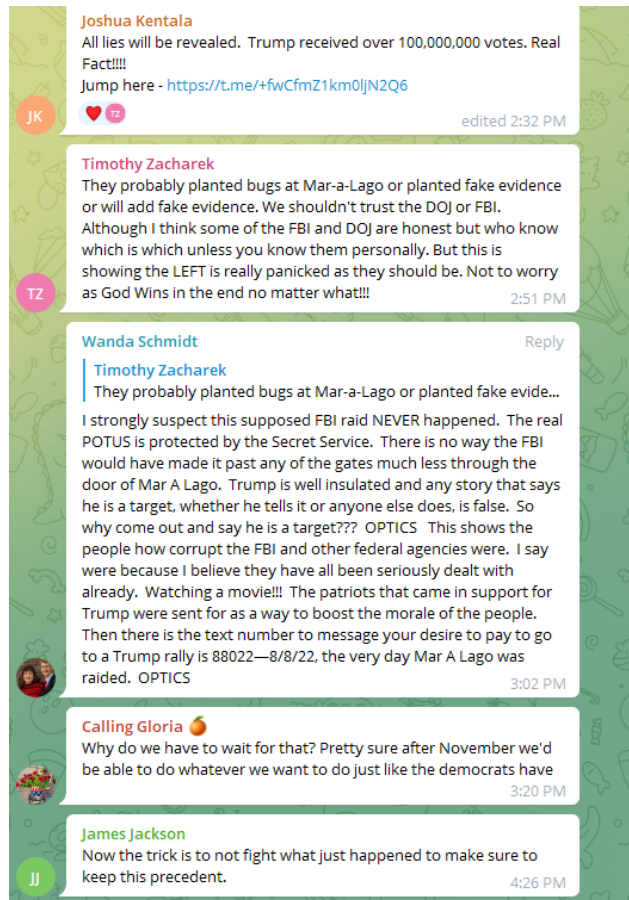


Figure 35. Joshua Kentala et al.

RedPillPharmacist on telegram, attempting to discern the meaning behind the FBI raid on Mar-a-Lago. The raid is imagined as being a deep state attack, an illusory distraction, or simply part of Q's inscrutable and ever-changing plan. At no point is the possibility of the raid simply being a product of the laws and legal institutions that enforce them, only the possibilities that align with their pre-existing conspiracist frames are considered.

QAnon decoding takes the dissonant chaos of the digital media ecosystem and refurbishes it into a temporarily coherent

format, possessing a stability like that of a dream. As Fisher describes in *Capitalist Realism*, “When we are dreaming, we forget, but immediately forget that we have done so; since the gaps and lacunae in our memories are Photoshopped out, they do not trouble or torment us. What dreamwork does is to produce a confabulated consistency which covers over anomalies and contradictions” (66). This is to say, the eternal present experienced by the individual feels consistent and coherent as long as nothing is closely examined, and nothing can be closely

examined when there is always something new to decode. As long as the QAnon community keeps decoding, the dream does not need to end.

While the reactionary ideology inherent to movements like QAnon revere rigid hierarchies of domination, they must also function within a digital environment that demands constant adaptive reflexivity. Rather than hide from the paradox, the QAnon community embraces both contradictory positions simultaneously. Their belief structure is rigid only in the attenuated present, absolute only until it shifts, and shifts again. In order to retain their reverence for absolute hierarchy while adopting the fluidity needed to maintain their collective syncretic conspiracism, they must abandon a rigid conception of temporality and linear causality. For the dream logic of decoding to function, bedrock concepts of modernity like empirical evidence, linear causality, and deductive logic must be discarded.

In the ever-changing digital world shaped by capitalist realism, this has a certain logic to it, a response to a reality “akin to the multiplicity of options available on a digital document, where no decision is final, revisions are always possible, and any previous moment can be recalled at any time” (Fisher 60). New information is replaced by newer information still, competing sources with contradictory claims multiply and even if a given user wishes to discern the truth there is simply no time to fact check them all. Decoding fundamentally recognizes what Fisher observed in *Capitalist Realism*, that “in these conditions of ontological precarity, forgetting becomes an adaptive strategy” (62).

Future Proves Past: Aphorisms and Secondary Orality in QAnon Discourse

As McLuhan observed, “Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication” (McLuhan,

Medium 9). QAnon is a conspiracy permutation unique to the technological affordances of the current era, an inevitable outcome of identity fragmentation in an unstable digital media landscape.

As McLuhan writes in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, “The invention of the alphabet, like the invention of the wheel, was the translation or reduction of a complex, organic interplay of spaces into a single space” (42). This fundamental change in language created an equally fundamental change in the way we processed information: “The phonetic alphabet reduced the use of all the senses at once, which is oral speech, to a merely visual code” (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 42). In this flattened, more linear and more structured media form, human thought follows the contours of the informational systems it uses. As Walter Ong describes, “from the invention of the alphabet there has been a continuous drive in the Western world toward the separation of the senses, of functions, of operations, of states emotional and political, as well as of tasks” (143). This separation is the foundation for categorization, from which organizational frameworks emerge.

The shift from oral to literate cultures is the fundamental change which makes the complex technological systems we currently inhabit possible—but those same systems exert an influence which shifts the human mind’s understanding of informational organization yet again. As covered in the first section, it is no accident that the disruptive and often violent periods of instability caused by these shifts in informational mediums are also periods of intense and widespread conspiracism.

Just as the printing press and the literate perspective arise from the roots of orality, so too does the integrated digital media landscape differ in many fundamental ways from the typographic informational ecosystem from which it grows. Digital culture is more fundamentally fluid, where all information is interactive, everchanging and available for repurposing. As digital

rhetoric scholars Ridolfo and DeVoss describe, a series of rhetorical practices emerge from these technological affordances, what they refer to as “rhetorical velocity.” This term encompasses “the understanding and rapidity at which information is crafted, delivered, distributed, recomposed, redelivered, redistributed across physical and virtual networks and spaces” (Kairos).

To maintain a sense of coherent identity and reflexivity amidst the constant flux of the schizogenic sublime, information must be constantly consumed and discarded to make room for newer information still. However, there is still a throughline of coherency that prevents the QAnon community from simply dissolving back into the informational slurry and keeps communal decoding, no matter how far afield it may stray into adjacent cultic conspiracist narratives and beliefs.

This coherency is not maintained as a rigid narrative cannon or internally consistent lore, but by a set of discursive practices that in many ways resembles oral traditions of pre-literate cultures, where “a vast database or collection of short ‘bits’ or ‘formulas’; the spare parts of potential or realized traditional utterances” are endlessly permuted through “heavy patterning and communal fixed formulas” which “determine the kind of thinking that can be done, the way experience is intellectually organized” (Ong 35; Saussy 40). The same kind of structuring patterns can be seen in the communication strategies that evolved during the Internet age. Where orality emphasizes the repeated structures of proverbs and poetics, the same principles can be found in the use of memes and slogans within digital communities. In an oral culture, much like the informational maelstrom of platforms like Twitter and Reddit, “experience is intellectualized mnemonically” (Ong 35).

Theorist Walter Ong described this phenomenon as “secondary orality,” “in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print” (11). While that statement was written before the ascendancy of digital mediums to a place of absolute cultural supremacy, time has only increased his observation’s potency.

As the internet extends our senses into the digital world, “a new translation of culture occurs as swiftly as the new technology is interiorized” (McLuhan, *Medium* 40). McLuhan described the change at length in his book, *The Medium is the Massage*, declaring, “We now live in a global village ... a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us” (McLuhan, *Medium* 63). It is from this tumultuous period of translation, of the chaotic and haphazard birth of McLuhan’s “global village” that QAnon emerges. It is the dark side of this retribalization, where “we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence” (McLuhan, *Gutenberg* 32).

The explicit rejection of the modernist status quo inherent to the function of the cultic milieu means more than simply a distrust in established scientific consensus or state institutions. By rejecting these authorities, the seekers of QAnon also reject the methodologies on which their authority rests. As Ong astutely observes in his landmark work on the widespread adoption of literate modalities, *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue*, the shift towards literate modernity was characterized by a shift towards “reasoning, not understanding,” an emphasis on method and formula over discourse and dialectic that reflected the changing zeitgeist of the dawning modern era (74, 97). In order to create the homogenization of knowledge described by

Giddens, language must be systematized and standardized, transitioning from the fluid world of oral speech to the structured system of visually arranged text. Of course, the residue of orality has not disappeared, hundreds of thousands of years of human communication cannot be overwritten so easily.

While few QAnon adherents would consciously formulate their journey into conspiracism as an explicit rejection of literate structure, the combination of their reactionary

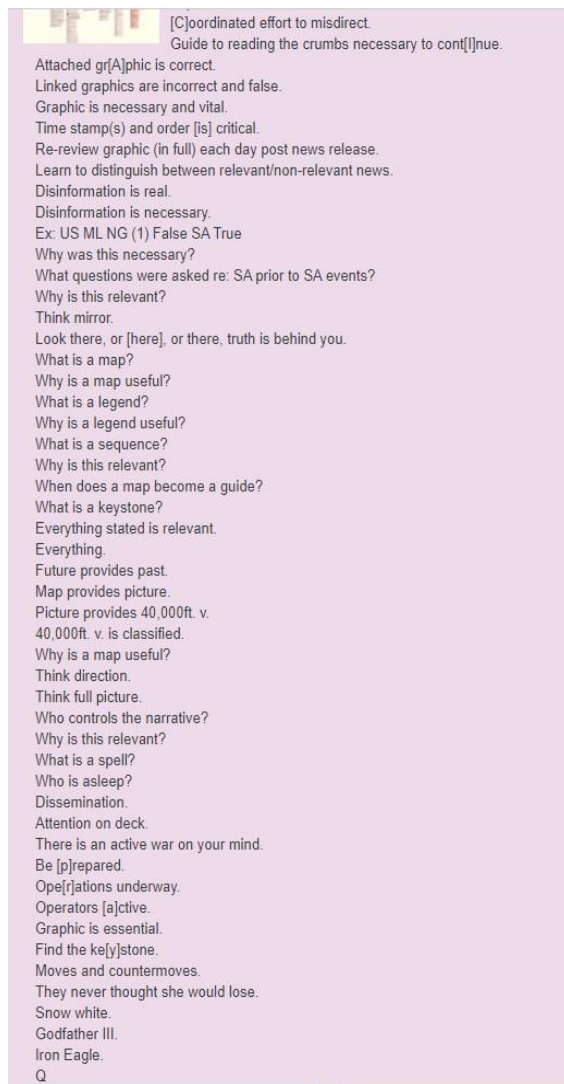


Figure 36. Q.

rejection of modernity combined with the evanescent informational environment of digital media platforms create the perfect conditions for a kind of degraded, anti-rational secondary orality to emerge alongside their emergent conspiracist worldview. Indeed, recent studies analyzing the use of language within these communities have found that members begin to abandon the fixed grammatical and compositional structures of textual language the longer they inhabit these digital spaces (Horne and Adali). As the next section will demonstrate, the loss of grammar and compositional structure belies a deeper rupture in the community's relationship to causality and time, one largely maintained by the repeated use of Q's collection of aphorisms.

Creating Continuity from Chaos: The Q Drops as Discursive Template for the Schizogenic Sublime

One of the key rhetorical practices that underpins the QAnon movement is the repetition of a series of proleptic proverbs that embody the community's ideals and beliefs. These are almost all drawn directly from the primary texts of the Q drops, such as the one pictured here where we see Q's first deployment of several key proverbs: "Disinformation is necessary," "Think Mirror," "Everything is relevant," and "Future proves past" (stated here as "Future provides past," though this would change by the next drop into its more popular and enduring configuration).

Q's earliest posts are much more grounded in consensus reality, in keeping with Q's origins as another "insider LARP" on the 4Chan boards. A key part of the LARP is demonstrating access to privileged information, and particularly early on this was a key aspect of Q's identity. One of the most famous examples is Q's early claim that Hilary Clinton would be taken to Guantanamo Bay for the crime of treason, a glaring predictive failure that has led to the creation of QAnon community narratives concerning clones, body double and holograms to explain

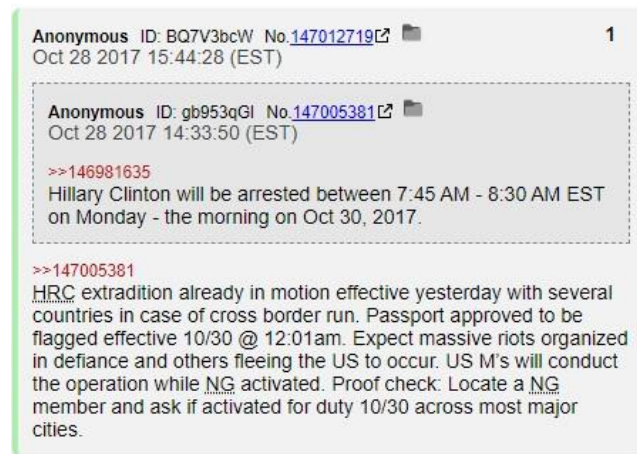


Figure 37. Q.

Clinton's continued public appearances. Even at this early stage, Q's incoherence only creates opportunities for the QAnon community to participate in the narrative. Nevertheless, Q quickly adapted to incorporating elements of America's cultic and conspiracist history to help smooth over any inconsistencies.

For example, a frequent target of Q’s attention is Huma Abedin, a democrat politician who served as Hilary Clinton’s vice campaign chair during the 2016 election. She was a figure of relatively minor importance, yet one who Q’s early authors showed a distinct fixation on. On October 29, 2017 Q implored their followers to “Follow Huma” in eight different posts on that day alone, most of which also referenced “Operation Mockingbird” (Q). This is a longstanding part of the American cultic milieu, a belief that the CIA had manipulated American media



Figure 38. Q.

institutions into becoming an elaborate propaganda machine for the state (Knight 485). As all good pieces of conspiracism, it has at least some rooting in the realm of fact—the CIA’s actual Project Mockingbird, a wiretapping operation commissioned by JFK conducted on American journalists in 1963 and declassified in 2007 (Mitchell). While legally dubious and ethically unsound, it is a far cry from the comprehensive program of social control imagined under the Operation Mockingbird conspiracy. Integrating a pre-existing conspiracist narrative, particularly one with at least a tenuous connection to reality like Operation Mockingbird, serves both to legitimize the unproven accusations against Abedin as well as serving to integrate the already popular narratives of the cultic milieu into the world of QAnon. Interestingly, Q’s posts follow this same pattern with non-cultic media as well, freely intermixing popular films like *Red October* and *Godfather 3* with popular conspiracism, cultic beliefs, and breaking news as though

they were all comprised of equally legitimate assertions. Like Jameson's postmodern media pastiche, all elements are flattened into interchangeable content, removed from their original context and intended meaning.

Peppered throughout this protean soup of unrelated assertions and references are Q's signature rhetorical questions, often delivered in rapid succession without elaboration or framing.



Figure 39. Q.

Individually, these questions are often incoherent, but when taken as a whole they work to suggest a pattern of relational meaning between the individual statements without offering meaningful clarification. Similarly, the selective application of bolded text, capitalization, and brackets evokes the concept

of a coded message without containing encoded information. In essence, the Q drops are not messages encoded with meaningful discursive information, they are incoherent cultural pastiche formed into the shape of encoded information.

This is why the Q drops are best understood as open ended narrative prompts rather than a message with specific encoded meaning. The purpose of the Q drops is to provide an array of symbolic resources within a general thematic framework. Reactionary conspiracism is infused into their contents, but little else. There is no secret message to be discovered, only the necessary pieces for one to be created retroactively through the audience's collaborative narrativization.

In this way, the Q drops are treated less like a literature text, whose meaning is static, but instead acting as an oral history would, "a reservoir, a virtual coexistence, of particulars that we are accustomed to see separated into distinct, mutually exclusive events" (Saussy 137). Instead

of static text, one must understand the Q mythology similarly to Saussy's description of the epic oral poetry of ancient Greece, as "a reservoir of ready-made poetic phrases, accessible to the memories of all poets in the tradition, from which new lines and episodes could ceaselessly be built up, thus offering a new and provocative vision of ancient epic" (42). While the epic here is decidedly less ancient, its constellation of conspiracies adheres to the same "combinatorial view leads us to see the Iliad and Odyssey not as isolated masterpieces but as sample utterances with a common language between them, two outputs of an infinitely variable virtual system" (Saussy 42).

The collectively maintained database of stories, proverbs and concepts in an oral tradition are endlessly reconfigured and re-assembled to fit the current context, which is precisely how the

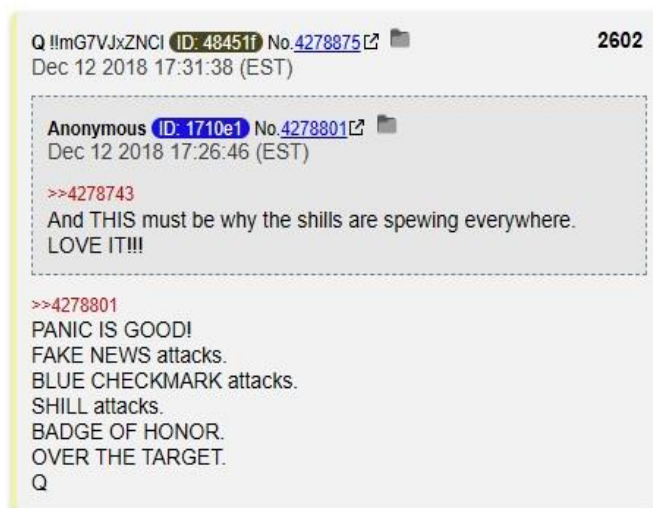


Figure 40. Q.

texts of the Q drops are deployed as proverbs in both casual conversation and the communal process of decoding. Once again, the parallel must be drawn to Ong's characteristics of oral thought, where "Oral cultures know a kind of autonomous discourse in fixed ritual formulas as well as in vatic sayings

or prophecies, for which the utterer himself or herself is considered only the channel, not the source" (Ong 77). In this way, each QAnon community member can "channel" the transcendental wisdom of Q during the process of decoding, effectively channeling the

legitimacy of Q while also absolving the individual of any culpability if their assertion proves incorrect.

As Kenneth Burke describes, “Proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations. In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them” (297). In the case of QAnon, these are specific strategies for interpreting current events through the lens of Q’s prophecies and conspiracies.

While many commentators have noted that Q’s proverbs contain many contradictions, this is once again applying the linear logic of the literate mind to the secondary orality of QAnon digital discourse. Instead, drawing again from Burke, “the apparent contradictions depend upon differences in attitude, involving a correspondingly different choice of strategy” (297). Different situations will call for different justifications, and QAnon’s array of proverbs run the gamut of possibilities through their use of rhetorical figuration. As Fahnestock work on rhetorical figures demonstrates, these figures “epitomize a line of reasoning,” offering a “diagram-like rendering of the relationship among a set of terms” (24). By analyzing their usage, we can create a model of the logical structures (or illogical, as the case may be) that QAnon adherents operate under.

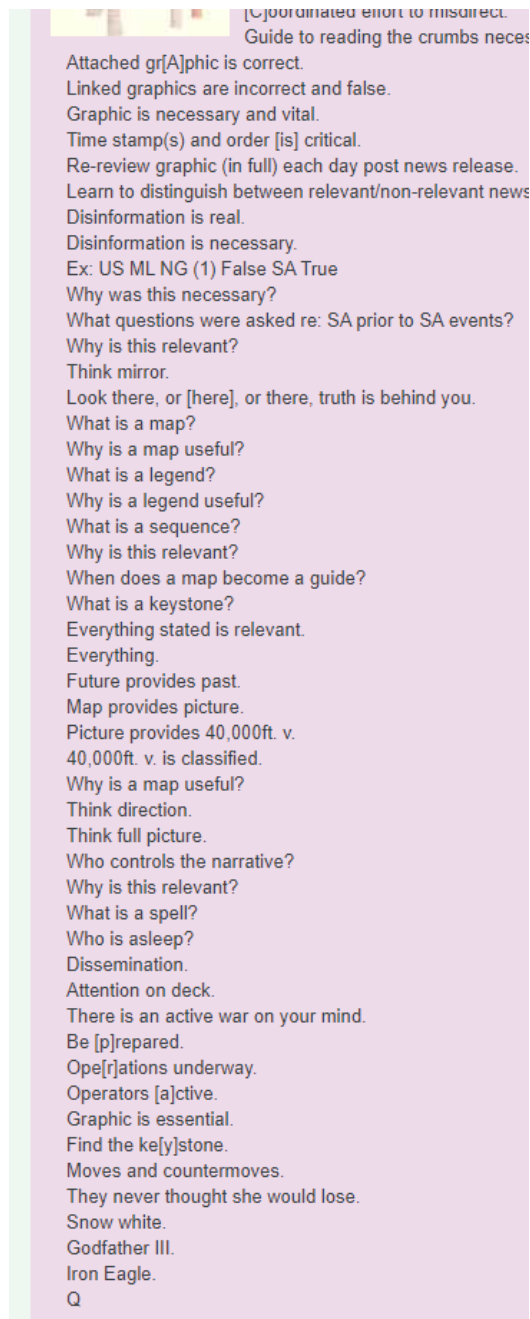


Figure 41. Q.

The four proverbs which appear in this early Q drop are especially notable for both their enduring popularity, and how they embody the analytic framework of the QAnon movement through rhetorical figuration. “Everything is relevant” is often deployed in association with allusion, primarily in connection to other bits of Q-mythology to create a closed referential loop that connects all subjects back to Q. Recall the previous figures of The Great Awakening Map and Lindell’s whiteboard—both of these are iconic visualizations of allusion’s function within the QAnon oral tradition, creating interdependent networks of definitions that only exist in relation to one another. In effect, an assertion becomes true due to its connections to previously established assertions, which themselves are only true in association with other assertions, an endless line of relational signifiers that will eventually take the individual all the way back around to Q. The logic of decoding is fundamentally circular, and it is

the deployment of self-referential allusions that maintains that circle.

“Think Mirror” is a prime example of QAnon’s use of metaphor, in this case meaning “consider the reverse to be true,” as though the information was reflected in a mirror. This proverb is typically deployed to square the circle of a decoding attempt that cannot quite hold

together, as we will see in the upcoming decoding case study. Because these metaphors can only be decoded through an understanding of the mythology of Q, the mutual recognition of their meaning reinforces the communal bond between members. The shared understanding of a metaphor or allusion helps to fulfill yet another of Ong’s characteristics of oral thought, where “learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known” (Ong 43).

“Disinformation is necessary” enacts the rhetorical figure of enigma, used to encourage adherents to “embrace the mystery” when contradictions between prophecy and expectations

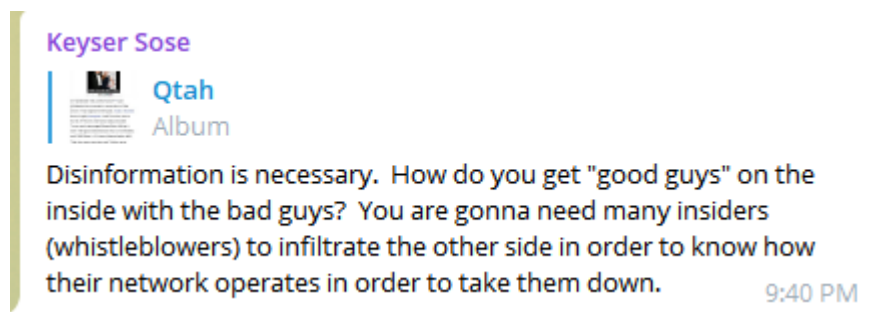


Figure 42. Keyser Sose.

become too
overwhelming. This
aphorism is often enacted
by both influencers and
seekers alike during

decoding when encountering failed predictions or other inconsistencies in “the plan,” as seen in the following two images. In this way, even Q’s most straightforward failed predictions are rendered ineffable, merely incorrectly decoded rather than being wrong. Conspiracy theories fundamentally operate on the absence of evidence, and QAnon’s use of enigma ensures there is always enough semantic instability to accommodate them.

Perhaps the most telling proverb, “future proves past” (here as “future provides past”), lies at the heart of QAnon’s fluid, evolving and collaboratively created prophecies. This active,

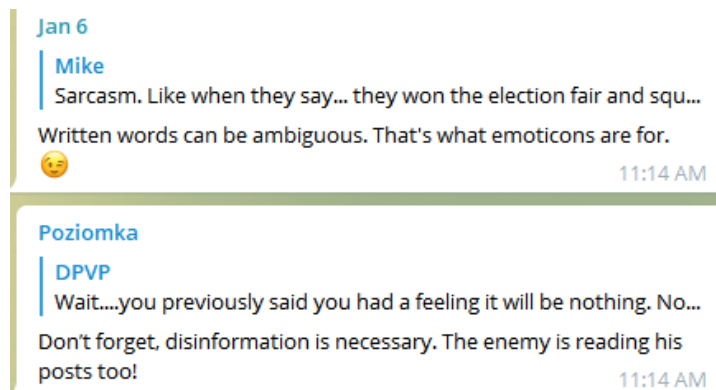


Figure 43. Poziomka.

participatory involvement in the decoding of future events is a key factor in the maintenance of the communal ties that keep QAnon together. Consider the maxim’s structure—it is an iconic representation

of their cognitive framework, where the future literally precedes the past in terms of causality. Through the deployment of aphoristic resources like this one, the past is reconfigured retroactively by events in the future. Thus, Trump was prophesized to win the election, and when he didn’t, the prophecy was revealed to indicate he was going to fake losing the election to defeat the cabal in the future. To gain a deeper understanding of how this process functions, we will once again turn to the underlying rhetorical strategies being deployed.

Prolepsis and Prophecy in QAnon Decoding

Prolepsis is a rhetorical strategy concerned with presenting the future as assured in order to advance an argument in the present. Scholar Ashley Mehlenbacher identifies three rhetorical functions prolepsis serves, which she refers to as the “propelectic suite”: prolepsis-occupatio, which functions argumentatively by anticipating and rebutting arguments before they occur; prolespsis-ampliatio, presenting future events as certain in order to support an argument in the

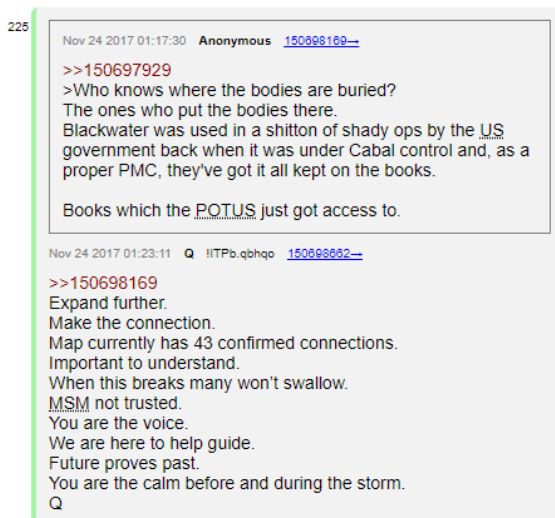


Figure 44. Q.

present; and prolepsis-*praemonitio*, asserting a future eventuality as certain unless action is taken in the present (241, 244, 245). While the QAnon community makes use of all three of these functions, it is their use of *prolepsis-ampliatio*, and indeed, their unique deviations from causal logic in its deployment, which are of particular interest.

Here we can see a prime example of Q’s use of “future proves past,” deployed in conjunction with other aphoristic mainstays like “the coming storm” and “map the connections.” Not only does it fulfill the requirements of the *proleptic* suite—rebutting the arguments of the “mainstream media,” asserting the certainty of the “coming storm” and the necessity to remain calm to avoid disaster—but it has a unique mutation: it also offers the possibility of redefining past events.

As exemplified in the response by user 911bodysnatchers322, the QAnon community

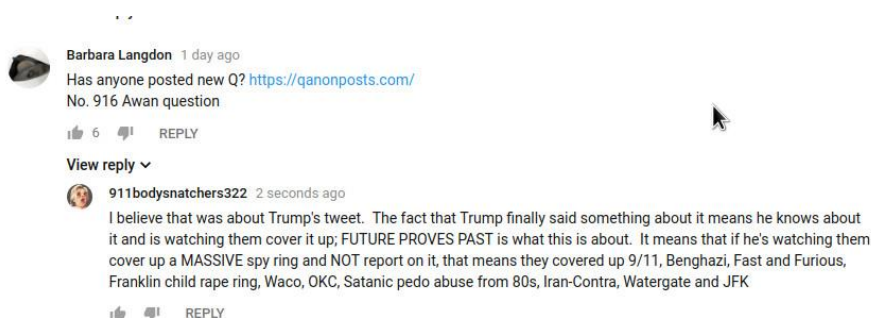


Figure 45. 911bodysnatchers322.

adopted this framing, using the proverb to present the future as certain, and retroactively redefine past events

in order to fit the narrative of Q. As previously stated, the maxim itself is an iconic representation of its own reasoning, literally placing the future before the past and disrupting the

causal sequence. This disruption is evident in the beliefs of QAnon: untethered from cause and effect, certainty about the events of tomorrow change the perception of the events of yesterday. Saussy's description of "a constant, anonymous feedback loop of censorship" perfectly embodies the function served by this unique mutation of Prolepsis-ampliatio within QAnon (53). Through the invocation of "Future proves past," the community can redefine past failings through proclamations of future certainty, the unwanted information to be "passively and unconsciously exercised through the forgetting of malaprop additions" (Saussy 53). In this way, Trump did not lose the election because he will be reinstated in the future, or more simply, that Q was never wrong because they will be proven right. As form follows function, QAnon's unique use of prolepsis warps the community's understanding of causality, leading them to continuously claim victory amidst a never-ending series of defeats.

In isolation, the QAnon community's practice of collaborative prophecy generation by repurposing Q drops within the context of current events appears completely incomprehensible. While putting it in the proper context of a digital secondary orality does not make it any less detached from reality, it does serve to make it a coherent expression of an underlying informational framework. In the same way that oral traditions are "not greatly concerned with exact sequential parallelism between the sequence in the narrative and the sequence in extra-narrative referents," so too do the underlying processes which create the secondary oral tradition of QAnon largely disregard the causal requirements of linear thought (Ong 144).

In the words of another of Q's more viral aphorisms, "there is no QAnon, only Q and Anons." In the sense that there is no official QAnon cannon, no formal and rigid cult structure to separate it from the tumultuous chaos of the wider cultic milieu, there is some truth to this. Q provides the context and decoding prompts, and the various sub-communities of Anons each

attempt to decode the news through the Q drops as well as any cultic and conspiracist narratives

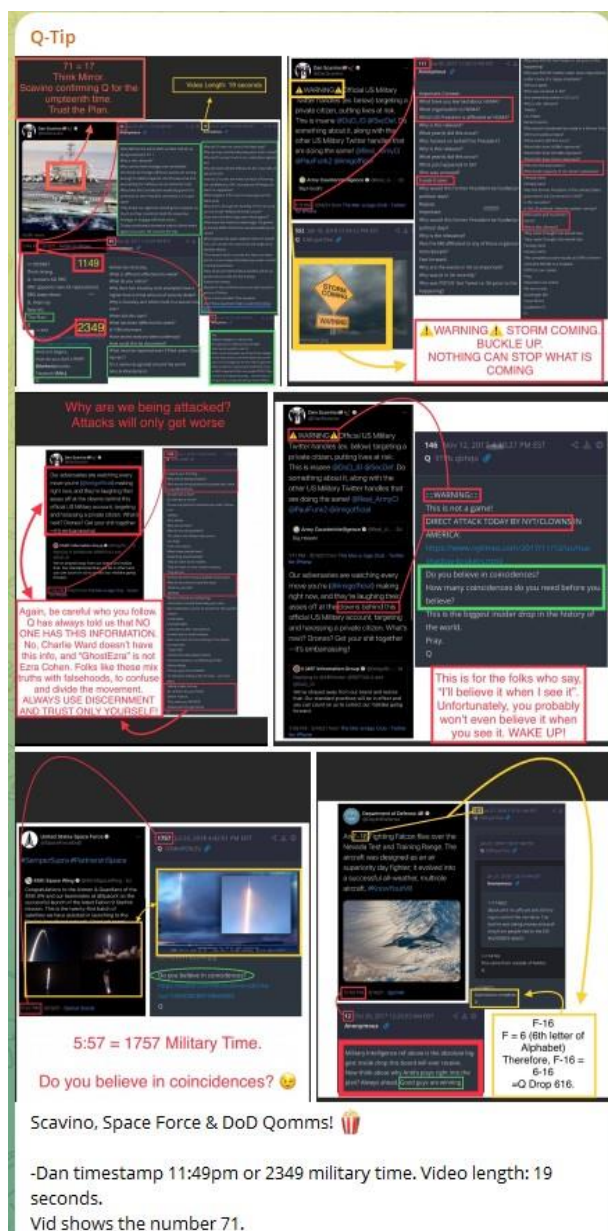


Figure 47. Q-Tip.

the iconic 4Chan Groyper frog as an avatar (pictured on the right), their account began by sharing QAnon memes, promoting related conspiracist media and providing a discursive space for fellow seekers. However, within weeks they became obsessed by the practice of

salient within a given sub-community. There is no single “QAnon,” but a series of networked communities operating within a common social-semiotic framework shaped by Q’s posts and through the constant flow of seekers from one group to the next.

QAnon Decoding Case Study: Q-tip’s Dan Scavino Decode

In this final section, we will analyze a specific instance of decoding to see how this framework functions in a typical QAnon community on Telegram.

Q-Tip was an QAnon promoter who migrated to Telegram at the beginning of 2021, and their short-lived career as a Telegram QAnon influencer followed an all-too-common trajectory. Sporting



Figure 46. Q-Tip.

decoding. The image on the left is part of a collage posted by QAnon influencer Q-Tip to his Telegram account on March 15, 2019. Before their account abruptly stopped activity April, they were producing intricate and convoluted visual decodes on a daily basis that could each span up to ten pages. The deeper they descend into the cultic milieu of Q, the more esoteric cultic practices and conspiracy narratives they incorporate into their decoding, veering further and further away from the original QAnon narrative while remaining tethered to the community sensemaking frame through regular use of Q's various aphorisms.

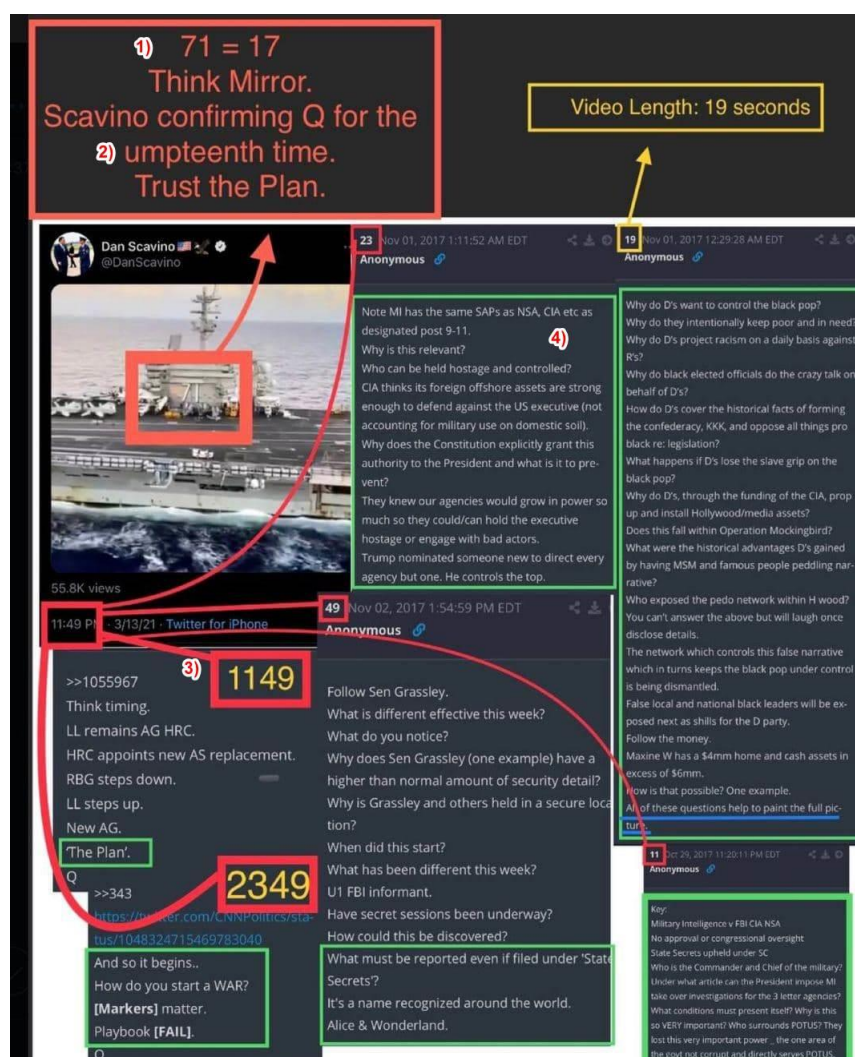


Figure 48. Q-Tip.

The following section will analyze several parts of Q-Tip's March 15 visual decode in detail, analyzing how Q-tip leverages the QAnon sensemaking frame to create content and bolster his position within his community.

1) As previously discussed, "Think Mirror" is a key QAnon aphorism. It serves as a contextualization cue to the larger ideology, but it also serves a much

more specific purpose for QAnon influencers in maintaining their authority. In this case Q-Tip is using it to prime the audience to see the number 71 as 17, a holy number in the cosmology of Q (it being the seventeenth letter of the alphabet), thus connecting the image used in Scavino's tweet to the canonical Q drops and bolstering the validity of Q-Tip's intertextual chain. "Think Mirror" is also often used as a kind of face-saving technique when a given influencer's interpretation of a Q drop does not hold true. When attempting to explain their failure, they can invoke the "Think Mirror" concept to re-contextualize their reading of Q's cryptic drops and show that it was merely their interpretation of the text that was incorrect, not the text itself. As we will see, there are many layered defenses built into the discursive structures of QAnon against Q ever being held to account for a faulty prediction.

2) The phrase "Trust the Plan" is one of the most important and commonly repeated phrases in QAnon, and Q-Tip is opening his post with it for several reasons. It acts as a contextualization signal to the reader, situating whatever follows it as bearing the cosmic significance of Q's all-encompassing plan. In effect, this is similar to adding "Inshallah" or "Amen" to a statement, invoking the assent of a higher power. In keeping with this religious interpretation, this phrase also conveys a sense of organization and structure, priming the audience to locate and emphasize the patterns highlighted by Q-Tip. By placing this statement at the beginning of his image, Q-Tip is both invoking the wider ideological context of QAnon and implicitly promising his audience that this will all make sense, at least in a grand cosmic sense. Any elements which do not hold up to scrutiny or logic can be defended by deferring authority to this higher power. By priming the audience to accept the legitimacy of this intertextual chain by connecting it to "The Plan," it implicitly places the audience at fault if they do not understand the connections, rather than Q or Q-Tip. This reflects the core flaw in QAnon's analytical tools—

they begin with a conclusion ('there is a plan, trust the plan') and work backwards to confirm that conclusion, altering or discarding information as it becomes inconvenient or incompatible.

3) To further concretize Q-Tip's predictions, he uses the modality of numerological analysis to increase his claim's perceived legitimacy. While linking a random tweet by Dan Scavino to a Q drop is an exceedingly thin connection, the use of numerological techniques masks this logical deficiency behind the perceived "empiricism" of math, that "numbers don't lie." The numerical connections to the primary texts of Q's posts are intended to invoke connections to various schools of esoteric mysticism (like Torah scholars looking for patterns in the numerological framework of ancient Hebrew), further cementing the Q drops as equivalent to holy texts. This also has the added benefit of framing the intertextual chain that Q-Tip has created through this manufactured divine connection. Instead of a series of incoherent claims and connections Q-Tip has haphazardly strung together, the use of numerology creates legitimacy and awe where his irrational assumptions alone would create confusion and irritation.

4) These side panels feature some of the fabled Q drops. It is important to note the structure of the Q drops themselves, and the way in which they set the linguistic expectations for the QAnon audience. The Q drop structure of asking broad, poorly defined questions provides room for interpretation/improvisation on the part of influencers like Q-Tip. This is a core interactional routine within the Q community, this call and response that leaves room for influencers to add in their own spin or interpretation, serving as ideological gatekeepers for the movement as they "interpret" Q's meaning for their followers. This serves the dual purpose of creating middlemen whose position relies on keeping the movement's base engaged and excited while also distancing Q from any specific statements which can be proven wrong. In this way,

influencers like Q-Tip keep the movement's adherents constantly engaged and excited, while leaving the interpretive room to maintain the larger Q movement's narrative consistency.

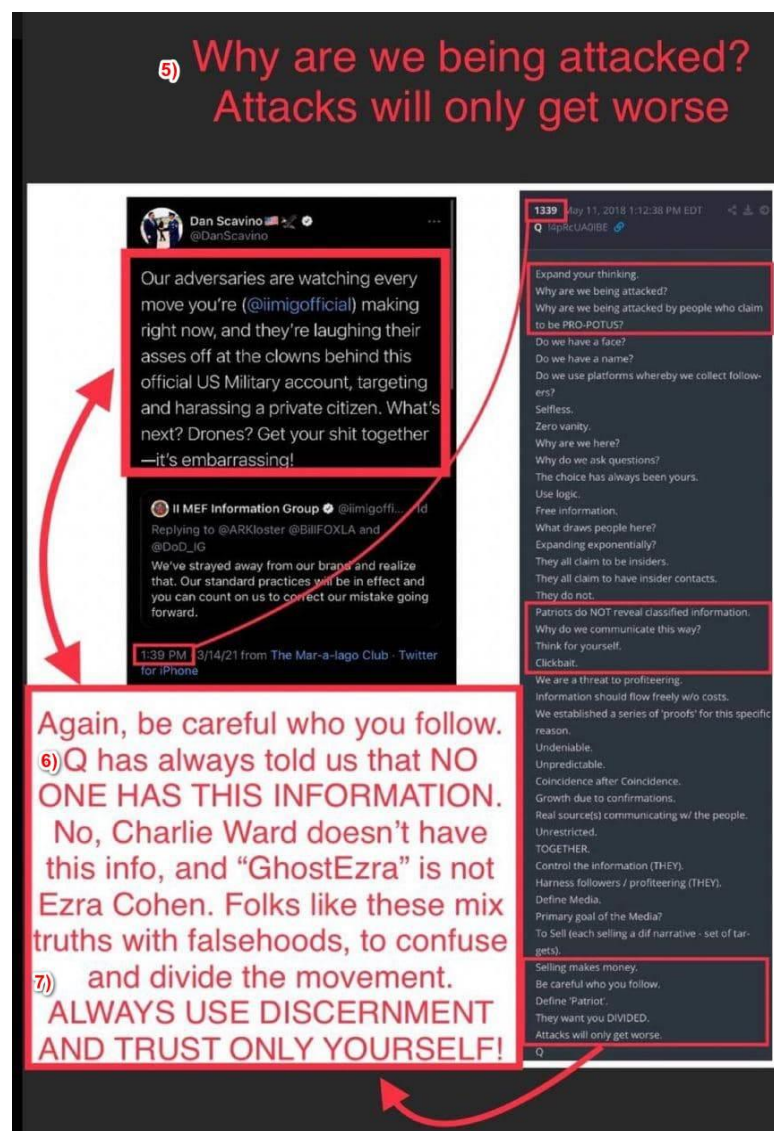


Figure 49. Q-Tip.

5) We can see Q-Tip mimicking Q's style here, but with a key difference. Where there would normally be a call and response, Q-Tip provides both—"Why are we being attacked?" and "Attacks will continue." This statement not only adds to the threat of outside pressure to maintain internal group cohesion but crucially does not provide the ambiguity that Q's drops rely on. Q provides the esoteric mystery, and influencers like Q-Tip reassure their community by providing confident interpretation, creating an information ecosystem that

balances the extremes of cosmic uncertainty and absolute authority. This use of stylistic similarities between Q-Tip and Q helps to create a sense of textual coherence amidst wildly different formats and originating contexts, reinforcing the idea that there is a "plan" to trust, and Q-Tip is the one who can see it more clearly than his audience.

6) By reinforcing this distance between himself and Q by reminding his followers that no one, not even him, has all the information, Q-Tip is pre-emptively saving face for when his interpretations invariably fail to materialize. Q-Tip both deflects blame by preemptively excusing his failure while explicitly leaving room for that failure to be re-contextualized through the invocation of symbolic frameworks like the previously examined “Think Mirror” slogan. Even if his prediction fails, Q’s prediction succeeds as it is retroactively interpreted to mean its opposite. Q’s other face-saving phrase, “Future proves past,” operates similarly, allowing for the retroactive correction of seemingly incorrect statements, and giving influencers like Q-Tip the ability to repair his reputation. Even if he interpreted the prediction wrong, his retroactive re-contextualization of Q’s words makes him right about why he was wrong, thus maintaining enough authority to continue acting as interpreter.

7) This section highlights Q-Tip’s maintenance of the in-group/out-group boundary, specifically between his followers and those of a rival. GhostEzra is another more popular QAnon influencer who Q-Tip is currently in a feud with, both having made several competing predictions on the same subjects in the weeks leading up to this post. Notice how Q-Tip uses his interactional control over the interpretational process to attack his rivals while simultaneously elevating his own follower community through the lens of the QAnon movement’s core tenants. The initial Twitter post he is decrypting has absolutely nothing to do with his personal feud, and neither do the Q drops he references. It is only through his assumed status as a “trusted decoder” that he can exercise this level of interactional control with no pushback from his followers. His use of phrases like “use discernment” and “trust only yourself” are key ideological markers to the Q community conception of themselves as free-thinking independent researchers, used to separate the “we-community” of QAnon and the “They-community” of “the sheep.” By framing

GhostEzra's community as equally sheep-like as the mainstream, he has effectively labeled his enemy as the enemy of the movement as a whole and thus maintained his status.

This final bit of text provides a situational context which frames the influencer's post as within the same framework as the unassailable cosmic truth of the Q drops. This is essentially a

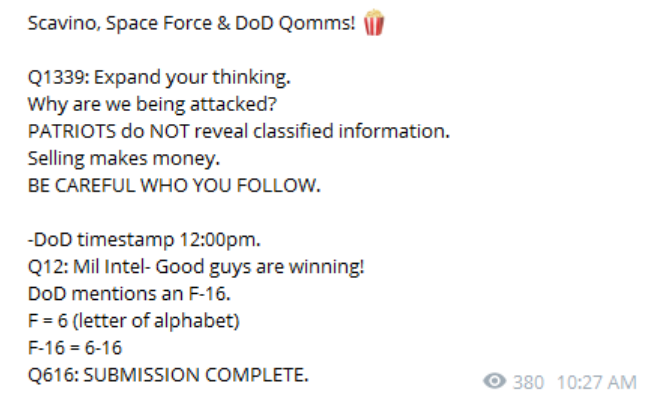


Figure 50. Q-Tip.

summary of his conclusions in the larger images using the lexical framework of the Q drops. Once the reader has been primed by the images and text previously presented, Q-Tip assumes the "member resources" of his community have been activated, allowing

him to summarize his incoherent interpretations in short, ideologically coded statements he can safely assume his followers will be able to understand. In direct contention with previously stated "use discernment/trust only yourself" convention, this stylistic similarity draws a clear connection between Q-Tip and Q, linking them as absolute authorities to be trusted by the audience. This dichotomy is a recurring theme within reactionary American political movements where the individual is valorized for being independently minded and beholden to none, while simultaneously expected to conform absolutely to the prevailing ideological consensus of the status quo. This is a more extreme example of the oscillation between extremes mentioned earlier, where dichotomies like total uncertainty/absolute authority and rugged individual/conformity to the group are mediated and absolved through the divine trinity of Christ/Trump/Q.

From Q drops and their cultic conspiracist decoding prompts, to QAnon influencer's decoding posts, to the anarchic free-wheeling communal decoding in the comments sections, at

every level the decoding process works to generate a continuous stream of narrative possibilities, ensuring that the individual QAnon seeker will always have the option to persist in delusion rather than confront the contradiction-laden totality of the schizogenic sublime.

CONCLUSION - THE GREAT AWAKENING FROM THE AMERICAN DREAM

“The suburbs dream of violence. Asleep in their drowsy villas, sheltered by benevolent shopping malls, they wait patiently for the nightmares that will wake them into a more passionate world.” J.G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*

The 2024 election found America at the Chapel Perilous crossroads yet again, between the continued stasis of the capitalist realism status quo and the endless possibilities of paranoid delusion. As with Operation Mindfuck, when presented with the choice between the frustration of reality agnosticism (the pain of precarity and existential uncertainty) and the empowering (or at least distracting) paranoia of conspiracism, the nation chose the latter. For the many Americans who have descended into the spiraling depths of QAnon conspiracism, Ballard’s quote perfectly frames their perspective. Adrift in the controlled chaos of neoliberal ascendance and awash in the alienating and pervasive effects of capitalist realism, they have opted out of consensus reality entirely, instead co-creating a protean reactionary fantasy that aligns with the affordances of the schizogenic sublime.

With the widespread adoption of QAnon conspiracy narratives by the MAGA movement, the open promotion of QAnon content by Trump and his associates on Truth Social, the open practice of QAnon-style decoding bricolage applied to every natural disaster and accident, the embrace of reactionary conspiracism by the MAGA Republican party was comprehensive (“‘Biden-Era HHS’”; Jingnan, “How FEMA”; Kaplan). Seeing as QAnon originally came into being under the first Trump administration, a coping mechanism for the chaos and lack of observable results, it would follow that the stage is set for the triumphant return of Q and the

QAnon movement. Yet this has not come to pass, and I would argue that even if Q did begin to post again, it would not matter.

That is not to say that the QAnon community is not active, indeed, they are spoiled for choice when it comes to events worth decoding in Trump's chaotic second term. Musk and Trump have both actively courted the QAnon crowd in their social media posts, the true believers who never wavered (or at least now retroactively choose to remember it that way) excitedly hope that the Trump administration's demolition of the administrative state is the prophesized storm finally arriving, the great awakening soon to follow. If QAnon is not making headlines and attracting coverage, it is not because it has been expunged from the cultural firmament, but rather that it has become endemic.

The Trump appointed FBI and ATF director Kash Patel is a former QAnon promoter, his deputy director a former Infowars employee. The department of Health and Human services is headed by Robert Kennedy (RFK), a major figure on the conspirituality and anti-vax circuit, while the Defense department is led by Pete Hegseth, who has clear ties to white supremacist groups and has repeatedly endorsed a variety of racially charged conspiracy theories such as the popular "great replacement" (J. Wilson).

There are multiple high level government insiders who openly promulgate conspiracist narratives on social media, exemplified by Trump's claims of nebulous "globalists" trying to destroy America (Breuninger). At this point, even if Q was really a high-level insider working to destroy the deep state, they would simply be one among many in the second Trump administration. As Trump and Musk move to punish their enemies, prosecute discrimination campaigns against vulnerable minorities and gut the administrative infrastructure of America even as these actions plunge the economy into turmoil, they are effectively fulfilling Q's vague

prophecies. Q often warned that the great awakening would be preceded by “7 days of darkness,” a “scare event” that would throw the country (temporarily) into chaos before the great awakening can occur. In effect, the self-described “meme-magic” of 4Chan’s misanthropic attempt at hyperstition have succeeded, they have remade the Republican party in their own delusional image.

Every natural disaster sees a new conspiracy hysteria erupt, crystallizing around DEI and “wokeness” witch hunts led by Republican elected officials, though often a real event is not even required, as seen in the New Jersey Drone panic in December 2024 (Brier). Adopting this framework does not necessitate an intimate knowledge of Q or their prophetic claims, only their general position as signifiers of seekership. Even though it has been years since Q last posted, the Q drops are still deployed as interpretive frames that legitimize the results of the decoding bricolage, remixed and reinterpreted far past their original context or intent.

Indeed, as the success of former QAnon influencers like Nick Hinton demonstrate, the basic format of decoding media through associative conspiracist bricolage has proven quite capable of working without the Q or the Q drops entirely. The Q drops and their attendant mythos are still narrative resources that can be marshalled, but their role as legitimizing shibboleths is no longer necessary. With entire conspiracist digital media ecosystems emerging to provide QAnon influencers (and increasingly those merely inspired by QAnon) a continuous stream of content primed for reactionary conspiracist decoding, Q and their elaborate mythology invariably receded from their position of centrality. With a continuous flow of conspiracy-primed disinformation content from digital media channels like Disclose.tv and more traditional news network formats like Right Side Broadcasting, a single legitimizing authorial voice would

only get in the way of the self-perpetuating disinformation engine that has formed to cater to this new generation of techno-cultic conspiracism forming in QAnon's wake.

QAnon's evolution can only be understood at the intersection of American conspiracism, the commodification of the cultic milieu, and the alienating effects of a digital hyperreality predicated on perpetuating the conditions of capitalist realism. It is the fulfillment of so many of the warnings of postmodern scholars like Jameson, Debord, and Dean, the crisis of historicity and the fragmentation of identity given lurid narrative life. To quote one last time from Dean,

Expanded and intensified communicativity neither enhances opportunities for linking together political struggles nor enlivens radical democratic practices-although it has exacerbated left fragmentation, amplified the voices of right-wing extremists, and delivered ever more eyeballs to corporate advertisers. Instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles coincides with extreme corporatization, financialization, and privatization across the globe. Rhetorics of access, participation, and democracy work ideologically to secure the technological infrastructure of neoliberalism, an invidious and predatory politico-economic project that concentrates assets and power in the hands of the very, very rich, devastating the planet and destroying the lives of billions of people. (Dean 23)

In a world with such contradictions built into its very foundation, resolving cognitive dissonance without confronting those contradictions requires fantastical narrativization. Yet even fantastical narrativization is ensconced within the same extractive, exploitative system that has now colonized the digital world as surely as it has the material. A self-perpetuating cycle, an idiot ouroboros for an age that can no longer remember its past or imagine its future.

Returning to analogy made in this dissertation's introduction; QAnon functions as the canary in the coalmine of consensus reality. It is not the cause of the current consensus collapse, but an early warning sign of the damage being done by the current techno-cultural conditions that create the schizogenic sublime. Those already primed for reactionary conspiracism and cultic seekership were the most vulnerable to the schizophrenic hyperreality we have created, and now that the QAnon community shown how digital platforms how to "maximize engagement" with vulnerable audiences and popularized decoding as a response to the protean dissonance of schizogenic sublime, it is only a matter of time before similar movements emerge in its wake.

Future Research: Mapping the Schizogenic Sublime

When viewed within the larger context of the emergent digital hyperreality that gives rise to the schizogenic sublime, the delusional narrative architecture espoused by the QAnon community seems less the product of deranged individuals, and more a reflection of society's growing incoherence. Lacking the tools and terminology needed to accurately diagnose the problem, QAnon adherents have inadvertently built a symbolic architecture that reflects the alienating incoherence of the world they live in, an ongoing narrative bricolage in the mold of the postmodern pastiche, built from the pop culture ephemera they have internalized. While this process brings them no closer to revolution or enlightenment, no closer to escape from the endless alienating the stasis of the present, it has still generated something worthy of study: a symbolic map of a schizophrenic world.

The discursive practice of decoding has expanded well beyond QAnon, and indeed, even the reactionary far-right. The rise of “BlueAnon” has begun to penetrate the mainstream, a



Figure 52. *@altnps.bsky.social*.

proliferation of Q-esque liberal Democrat influencers across major social media platforms (Lorenz). Popular accounts like “Muller, She Wrote,” imagine elaborate conspiracies where figures like former FBI director



Figure 51. *@altnps.bsky.social*.

Robert Mueller are secretly working behind the scenes to bring down Trump. More recently, the rise of “AltGov” accounts on Bluesky like the AltNationalParksService have begun directly mimicking Q’s own narrative prompt posting style, claiming to be directing a shadow war against the Trump government through cryptic posts. The AltNationalParksService can

be seen here broadcasting secret codes “to be disregarded” by the public and claiming to lead a resistance campaign that has no material evidence or record, though the sale of official merchandise may better indicate what the true purpose of the account may be (@hypoautonomic.bsky.social).

Beyond bridging the divide between political ideology, decoding as a general framework for media analysis is seen even in relatively depoliticized contexts. Within the massive Taylor Swift fanbase, there is a substantial conspiracist subculture formed around the believe that Swift

is secretly gay and is trying to communicate this fact to their fans through hidden messages in their songs and media appearances. Known as “Gaylors,” their subreddit is filled with QAnon-style decoding threads attempting ascertain the hidden queer truth behind Swift’s career (“GaylorSwift”; Missmacrophages). In a subreddit so different it could qualify as an alternative reality, R/Wallstreetbets, the same descent into conspiracism would play out for amateur investors. A bizarre belief in an elaborate conspiracy involving the ailing video game retailer Gamestop would create an entire subculture, complete with its own influencers and social media artefacts to decode, one that would grow so consequential that it would be investigated and debunked by the SEC (Brown; Manjoo). These are not derived from QAnon, they do not share an ideology or narrative, but they share uncanny structural similarities that belie their source; an adaptive response to the schizogenic sublime. These examples are not responses to QAnon, but their shared elements point to their shared source, the schizogenic sublime. Unable to accept an unknowably complex and chaotic world of our own creation, we turn to narrative to create an alternative. That alternative invariably draws on the same shared national history of conspiracism, responding to the same pressures of cultural commodification and capitalist realism, and is shaped by the affordances of the same digital platform affordances. QAnon was merely the first successful intersection of these trends, highlighting the synergies between the cultic seekership and the attention economy while tapping into deep seated cultural anxieties and pathologies around national identity and federal power.

The continued popularity and political power of cultic conspiracism in the wake of Q points to the pervasive influence of the schizogenic sublime, the totality of the incoherent informational deluge we are forced to consume to participate in modern society. Through this theoretical framework, we can see how the incoherent narratives of QAnon act to resolve

dissonance generated by the contradictions of existing within this system and regain agency in the face its alienating totality while still participating and benefitting from that system.

Narrativizing their alienation by the “pervasive atmosphere” of capitalist realism into the often-incoherent gestalt antagonist of the Cabal, a force that is alternatively corporatism, communism, “international finance” (typically laden with antisemitic intonation), fascism, Satanism, and liberal elites. Because these forces are abstracted into vague cultural shibboleths, QAnon adherents see little conflict in participating in the same system they claim to be fighting; backing billionaires in the fight against “elites,” operating on the very communicative platforms that form the backbone of the international financial system to rail against it.

With the proliferation of LLMs and other generative “AI” tools, the schizogenic nature of the contemporary digital platform ecosystem will only intensify. There are already mounting problems with LLM-induced psychosis, with LLMs actively encouraging conspiracist bricolage eerily reminiscent of QAnon decoding among vulnerable users (“People Are Being”; Wel). Q’s own posts were often incoherent pastiches of pop culture, conspiracism and cultic mysticism—a combination ChatGPT would have no issue replicating endlessly, effectively acting as a customizable Q for each and every seeker who wants one. To draw from a different 4Chan-derived conspiracy theory, the rise of generative AI could very well make the “Dead Internet Theory” a reality. A 4Chan conspiracy theory that emerged from the notorious /Pol/ board in 2021 after about a decade of percolation within the community. In the words of IlluminatiPirate, who aggregated the theory for popular consumption on the Agora Road forum,

The Internet feels empty and devoid of people. It is also devoid of content. Compared to the Internet of say 2007 (and beyond) the Internet of today is entirely sterile. There is nowhere to go and nothing to do, see, read or experience anymore. It all imploded into a

handful of normalfag sites and these empty husks we inhabit. Yes, the Internet may seem gigantic, but it's like a hot air balloon with nothing inside. Some of this is absolutely the fault of corporations and government entities. However! That doesn't explain the following. (“Dead Internet Theory”)

IlluminatiPirate goes on to produce a list of anecdotal observations around the proliferation of low-effort content, incoherent and repetitive discourse, stale memes, and an overarching loss of the rebellious “Hacker” ethos that once defined the digital spaces in which they dwell. Their explanation, somewhat appropriately given their screen name, is an elaborate conspiracy where much of the internet has been replaced with an elaborate simulacrum; entire fake websites whose content changes depending on the user’s medium and background, forums populated entirely by bots spewing AI content and algorithmically derived slop.

Not unlike QAnon, this alternative conspiracist reality reflects the actual schizogenic experience of the contradictions of digital life. Existing in a state of constant reflexive change as social media bombards the user with continuous, often contradictory updates is evidently an untenable long-term position, and the QAnon practice of decoding has become an increasingly common epistemological tool for the average user.

In attempting to analyze the discursive impact the schizogenic sublime has had on language use and communication strategies in the digital world, as demonstrated in this dissertation, I believe Ong and McLuhan’s idea of secondary orality can serve as a framework for understanding the discursive affordances of an effervescent informational environment.

The explicit rejection of the modernist status quo inherent to the function of the cultic milieu means more than simply a distrust in established scientific consensus or state institutions. By rejecting these authorities, the seekers of QAnon also reject the methodologies on which their

authority rests. As Ong astutely observes in his landmark work on the widespread adoption of literate modalities, *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue*, the shift towards literate modernity was characterized by a shift towards “reasoning, not understanding,” an emphasis on method and formula over discourse and dialectic that reflected the changing zeitgeist of the dawning modern era (74, 97). In order to create the homogenization of knowledge described by Giddens, language must be systematized and standardized, transitioning from the fluid world of oral speech to the structured system of visually arranged text. Of course, the residue of orality has not disappeared, hundreds of thousands of years of human communication cannot be overwritten so easily.

While few QAnon adherents would consciously formulate their journey into conspiracism as an explicit rejection of literate structure, the combination of their reactionary rejection of modernity combined with the evanescent informational environment of digital media platforms create the perfect conditions for a kind of degraded, anti-rational secondary orality to emerge alongside their emergent conspiracist worldview. As the cultic seekers increasingly reject the rational and empirical contours of modernity’s consensus, this is reflected in their increasingly disorder discourse and affectively determined assumptions about the nature of reality.

Concluding Statement

In 2025, America finds itself standing at the Chapel Perilous crossroads once again, and in the re-election of Trump and his cabinet of conspiracists, it would appear as though America has once again chosen the path of paranoid delusion. When placed in relation to America’s cultural history of conspiracism, the postmodern push for cultural commodification, and a digital

hyperreality predicated on an algorithmically optimized attention economy, delusion becomes an adaptive strategy. With Epstein's clear connection to Trump becoming increasingly impossible to ignore, the seeds are being laid for the same virulent cognitive dissonance that motivated the formation of the QAnon community almost ten years ago (Khardori). Many journalists wonder if this is the moment that breaks the MAGA conspiracy community, yet this belies a misunderstanding of what motivated the formation of a MAGA conspiracy community (and QAnon) in the first place (Edwards; Smith; Wendling). This revelation will not break the QAnon and wider MAGA conspiracy community any more than the innumerable failed prophecies and predictions before it, because the only information they accept as true is that which has been decoded and narrativized.

At first glance, it is easy to write off the QAnon community as kooks, fools, and zealots – and in all fairness, many adherents would fall into at least one of these categories. Yet accepting this simplistic framing would blind us to the very real techno-cultural problems brewing just beneath the ever-changing surface of our digital hyperreality. QAnon's incoherence is not an aberration, but a reflection of the deeply embedded ideological contradictions and structural failures of the current status quo. If we do not heed this warning, if we do not address the destigmatization of conspiracism, the corrosive effects of neoliberal inequalities and cultural commodification, and the predatory surveillance capitalism of our centralized digital platforms, then QAnon will be the first of many. Efforts must be made to archive the enormous amount of QAnon discourse generated across every major social media platform; the discursive blueprints of a collective delusion uniquely coded to the contradictions of the digital age. As we grapple with the emergent consequences of the schizogenic hyperreality in which we are now immersed,

the lessons that can be learned from the proliferation of QAnon conspiracism will only grow more important, and the time to implement them grows ever-shorter.

Those who do not learn the lessons of history are said to be doomed to repeat them. With America descending into fascism and the effects of climate change growing ever more acute, repeating the consensus-reality shredding mistakes that led to the formation of QAnon is not an option. If the Western world is to meet this polycrisis with a unified, coherent response, then we cannot allow the conditions of that create schizogenic sublime to continue. The delusional world of QAnon cannot offer real world solutions, only cognitive dissonance resolving narratives—narratives that will be small comfort in the face of the catastrophic consequences we will face if we retreat into delusion from the challenges ahead.

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