



Understanding Conspiracist Radicalisation

QAnon's Mobilisation to Violence

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Counter-Terrorism

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Abstract

This policy brief analyses the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, and how they fit in the realm of research on violent extremism. Using the case study of QAnon, this Policy Brief looks at how the movement mobilises people to violence on social media and attempts to determine how different this process is from any other process of radicalisation to violence. By combining discourse analysis of the movement's Gab posts, interviewing former supporters, and analysing three illustrative case studies, this Policy Brief identifies five discourses - such as revenge, "the Other", chosenness/specialness, apocalypse, and urgency for action and altruism - that are used to bring people into the violent mindset. It emphasises the similarity of these discourses to the ones used by other extremist organisations and argues against exceptionalising the threat of QAnon and other conspiracy theories. It concludes by making recommendations about how to tackle QAnon propaganda.

Keywords: QAnon, conspiracy, extremist, online radicalisation, violence, propaganda, P/CVE

Background

On the 6th January 2021 a group of pro-Trump rioters entered the US Capitol Building with a goal to violently contest the result of the US elections. A significant number of them were believers in conspiratorial movement named QAnon which was then deemed by the FBI as a new terrorist threat.¹ The debate over the nature of conspiracy theories is currently developing around the question of whether they constitute an extremist threat.² While some scholars pinpoint that securitising conspiracy theories tends to rather be a way for the government to delegitimise dissent,³ a large pool of researchers do see it as a security concern. Bartlett and Miller, for example, argued that belief in conspiracy theories at the very least acts as “radicalising multiplier” i.e. people who believe in them are more likely to turn to violence.⁴ Overall researchers question then whether they represent a totally new phenomenon and need a completely new approach, or whether they could be countered with traditional preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) means.⁵ Examining QAnon as one of the most well-known examples of a conspiracy theory turning violent may help with this task. Several researchers emphasise how it is different from “traditional” extremist movements. For example, unlike other extremist movements which tend to attract people with a more or less similar ideological stance, QAnon is very diverse and represents an independent conglomerate of members who come from both far-right and far-left backgrounds.⁶ Another difference is that its members are more prone to commit interpersonal attacks rather than politically motivated ones and unlike “traditional” terrorists, Q-supporters tend to display so-called “anti-social traits” such as narcissism or psychopathy⁷ (unlike “traditional” pathways to terrorism where psychological disorders or traits are believed not to play a role).⁸

The question that follows from these observations, is what does QAnon do to impart such a strong influence on its target audiences, that are so different and diverse, and yet seem to be so susceptible to its message? And how is this different from other extremist movements i.e. whether existing instruments in tackling extremist groups can be also applicable when dealing with QAnon?

1 S. Moskalkenko, & C. McCauley, “QAnon: Radical Opinion versus Radical Action”. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 2 (2021): 142–146.

2 Daniel Jolley, Mathew D. Marques, Darel Cookson, “Shining a spotlight on the dangerous consequences of conspiracy theories” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47, (2022): 1-5.

3 Michael J. Wood, “Some Dare Call It Conspiracy: Labeling Something a Conspiracy Theory Does Not Reduce Belief in It”, *Political Psychology* 37, no. 5 (2016): 965-705.

4 J., Bartlett, & C. Miller, *The power of unreason: Conspiracy theories, extremism and counter-terrorism*. (London, England: Demos): 4.

5 Michael A. Jensen, and Kane Sheehan, "QAnon-inspired Violence in the United States: An Empirical Assessment of a Misunderstood Threat," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, (December 2021):1-20.

6 Adam E. Enders, Uscinski Joseph, et al. “Who Supports QAnon? A Case Study in Political Extremism”, *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 (2021): 1844.

7 Mike Rothschild, *The Storm is Upon Us: How Qanon became a movement, cult and a conspiracy theory of everything* (New York: Melville House, 2021); Saifelddeen Gabriel Lima Zihiri, Han Jiyong, Cha Meeyoung, Lee Wonjae, “QAnon shifts into the mainstream, remains a far-right ally”, *Heliyon* 8 no.2 (2022): 1-7; Adam Enders, Casey Klofstad, Justin Stoler, and Joseph E. Uscinski, “ How Anti-Social Personality Traits and Anti-Establishment Views Promote Beliefs in Election Fraud, QAnon, and COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation”, *American Politics Research* 0, no. 0 (2022): 9; Jensen and Sheehan, “QAnon-inspired violence”.

8 A., Piccinni, D., Marazziti, & A. Veltri, “Psychopathology of terrorists”, *CNS Spectrums* 23, no.2 (2018): 141-144; Emily Corner, Helen Taylor, Isabelle Van Der Vegt, Nadine Salman, Bettina Rottweiler, Florian Hetzel, Caitlin Clemmow, Norah Schulten & Paul Gill, “Reviewing the links between violent extremism and personality, personality disorders, and psychopathy”, *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* 32, no.3 (2021), 378-407.

As the majority of QAnon supporters were radicalised online,⁹ it appears logical to look more closely at its online activities and propaganda that it disseminates online, which is going to be the main focus of this Policy Brief. The Policy Brief will begin by outlining the theoretical and methodological approach, then present the findings, and will then conclude with policy recommendations.

Theoretical Approach

One of the commonly relied upon approaches towards studying radicalisation is looking at strategic communications methods used by actors to convince their current and/or potential recruits to engage in a certain kind of political action.¹⁰ It is believed that through narratives it is possible to influence the way that people think and eventually behave.¹¹ This is done through various discourses, which form people's perception of the world and society, their place in it, and as a result may prompt them to commit attacks.¹² The existing literature highlights several main discourses that terrorist groups and movements tend to use in crafting their messages: revenge, othering, apocalypse and urgency of action, the feeling of being special or chosen by a divine forces and altruism (each of them will be discussed in more detail in the analysis section).¹³ These discourses formed the framework to guide this research in a way as to identify whether they are present in QAnon's rhetoric, and whether the movement uses any other types of discourses, different from the ones mentioned.¹⁴

Data Collection and Methodology

The project focused on three main sources of data: QAnon supporters' social media accounts, media reports covering specific case studies of violent QAnon supporters, and testimonies from former movement members or people who have someone close in QAnon.

At the first stage of the project, the author took the following steps:

9 Rothschild, *The Storm is Upon Us*.

10 L. Roselle, A. Miskimmon, & B. O'Loughlin, "Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power", *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no.1(2014): 70–84; A. Kruglova, *Terrorist Recruitment, Propaganda and Branding: Selling Terror Online*. (London: Routledge, 2022).

11 Ibid.

12 Haroro J. Ingram, 'The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operation.' *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69, (2015): 729–752; Haroro J. Ingram, "An Analysis of Islamic State's Dabiq Magazine", *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no.3 (2016): 458–477; Stephen Chan, *Spear to the West. Thought and Recruitment in Violent Jihadism* (London: Hurst and Company, 2019); Ian R., Pelletier, Leif Lundmark, Rachel Gardner, Gina Scott Ligon and Ramazan Kilinc, "Why ISIS's Message Resonates: Leveraging Islam, Sociopolitical Catalysts, and Adaptive Messaging", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39, no.10(2016): 871–899.

13 Tyler Welch, "Theology, heroism, justice, and fear: an analysis of ISIS propaganda magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*." *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 11, no.3(2019): 1-13; Randy Borum, 'Radicalization into violent extremism I: a review of social science theories'. *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011):7-36; William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday. Vision of the Islamic State*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015); Charlie Winter, "Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no.1 (2018): 103–121.

14 Rothschild, *The Storm is Upon Us*

Identification of QAnon-related hashtags

Most common hashtags (#Q, #WWGOWGA, #followthewhiterabbit, #greatawakening, #thestorm, #savethechildren), associated with QAnon were identified in order to then find its supporters' accounts.

Accounts selection

Fifty-three QAnon-associated accounts on Gab (a far right communication platform, which became one of the main hosts of QAnon community after Twitter started suspending their accounts) were collected and the content of their posts (10,300 in total) was analysed.

The accounts were considered associated with QAnon, and therefore relevant, if they contained any of the above mentioned hashtags typical for the QAnon community such as: #Q, #WWGOWGA, #followthewhiterabbit, #greatawakening, #thestorm, #savethechildren. Similar to Twitter, hashtags are used by Gab members to make their posts visible and easy to find. Pre-screening of topics, raised by the account holder was used as an additional method to determine if they coincided with typical QAnon topics– such as Pizzagate, seeing Donald Trump as a saviour, paedophile ring, etc. To ensure that accounts were representative of QAnon, they were selected based on the number of followers with a minimum of 1,500 followers and minimum of 1,000 posts, which indicate that these accounts have a larger outreach. As the movement originated and grew in the US, only North American, English-language accounts were used and, therefore, the conclusions made are primarily relevant to the English-speaking QAnon community. Once an initial set of accounts was identified, the others were selected using a snowball method (i.e. via the list of accounts' followers and comments).

Sampling of QAnon-related posts

The first 200 posts of each account were selected. The posts were then analysed with the use of discourse analysis.¹⁵ For this analysis, the focus was on the identification of the main themes, the use of specific terms to find instances of the use of the above-mentioned discourses, as well as possible discourses that are unique to QAnon (this will be elaborated on in the next section).

At the second stage, twelve semi-structured interviews with QAnon former supporters, and/or people who have a close person (friend or family member) involved in the movement were conducted. Former members were identified and contacted through a designated Reddit group named re/ReQovery. Consent from the participants was obtained and they were made aware about the nature of the research and the identity of the researcher. Participants were identified based on the content of their posts – specifically the testimonies describing particularly severe cases of QAnon involvement (stories about changes in personality, change in interpersonal relationships, cases of physical and/or emotional harm). The participants were asked about their (or their loved ones') experience of being part of QAnon, what drew them into the movement, whether they witnessed any calls to violence, their opinion on the acts of violence committed by the members and the factors that made other members decide to commit violent attacks. In these conversations, the researcher coded transcripts based on the presence of the typical radicalising discourses as well as the ones unique to QAnon (if any). The interviews, in this sense, serve as a supplementary material to corroborate the results of the social media analysis.

¹⁵ Mike Rothschild, *The Storm is Upon Us: How Qanon became a movement, cult and a conspiracy theory of everything* (New York; Melville House, 2021); Lois Beckett, "Qanon: A Timeline of Violence Linked to the Conspiracy Theory", *The Guardian*. 16 October 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/15/qanon-violence-crimes-timeline>, accessed September 15.

At the last stage, three cases of QAnon-related violence were analysed. Specifically, the focus was the cases of Matthew P. Wright, Cynthia Abcug, and David Depape. The first two were named as some of the most representative cases of QAnon-related violence by Mike Rothschild (at the time of writing his book), and were widely covered by media.¹⁶ The case of Depape is the most recent QAnon-related incident, which has not yet been studied in depth by researchers and, therefore, provides new evidence for research. For these three cases the background of perpetrators, their motivations, and reasons for committing the attacks were discussed on the basis of media reports. Only media reports from large international news outlets (BBC, CNN, ABC News) were used. The author also only used the reports that did not have any analytical element - i.e. the author was on the factual element of the publications. Similarly, the case studies were used in order to corroborate the findings coming from social media analysis.

Validity, Reliability and Limitations

This project has two main limitations. First, the project was conducted within a short time frame (two months), therefore the analysis is limited to the amount of data and sources collected over this time. The second limitation is the single coder – all the coding and analysis is conducted by the author, which means that it will be affected by their interpretation of the data.

To overcome these limitations, as well as to increase the reliability of the findings, the author used data triangulation as a way to corroborate the findings through three sources of data. To make sure that the conclusions are valid and reliable, as well as to diminish bias, literature on extremist radicalising narratives was used as a guideline to the types of themes and ideas that the author needed to look for while working with the data.

Analysis

The analysis of QAnon Gab accounts demonstrated strong presence of several discourses that are very typical to many other extremist organisations. The discourses are inter-connected and often overlap, constructing a coherent narrative of the world that QAnon presents to its supporters.

Revenge

Researchers mention this discourse in relation to many other violent organisations and is often rendered through the idea of “our enemy deserved it because of all their crimes”.¹⁷ The discourse is used to justify the violence against “the enemy” by arguing that they “deserve” it due to their own actions. For example, ISIS was arguing that the West “deserved” terrorist attacks due to the airstrikes it carried out in Syria.¹⁸

¹⁶ Rothschild, *The Storm is Upon Us*; Lois Beckett, “Qanon: A Timeline of Violence Linked to the Conspiracy Theory”, *The Guardian*, 16 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/15/qanon-violence-crimes-timeline>.

¹⁷ Welch, “Theology, heroism, justice, and fear”.

¹⁸ Ibid,

The main “enemies” identified for QAnon supporters are the Democrats and Joe Biden, world elites, or the “deep state” – the secret group of politicians and financial circles who exercise power alongside the official government. The “enemies” are being blamed for stealing the elections, ruining the economy, introducing “ridiculous” liberal norms – such as promotion of LGBTQ rights associated with the erosion of moral principles underpinning the American state, as well as engaging in child abuse. Based on these ideas, QAnon members encourage each other to “take the country back” - i.e. take the initiative in their hands and deal with the “enemies”. They argue that the way to respond to the heinous crimes of “traitors” is violence. They see the violence as a justice, framing it in the historical/judicial terms often posting memes with figures from past centuries with captions like “the penalty for treason is death” (see Figure 1).

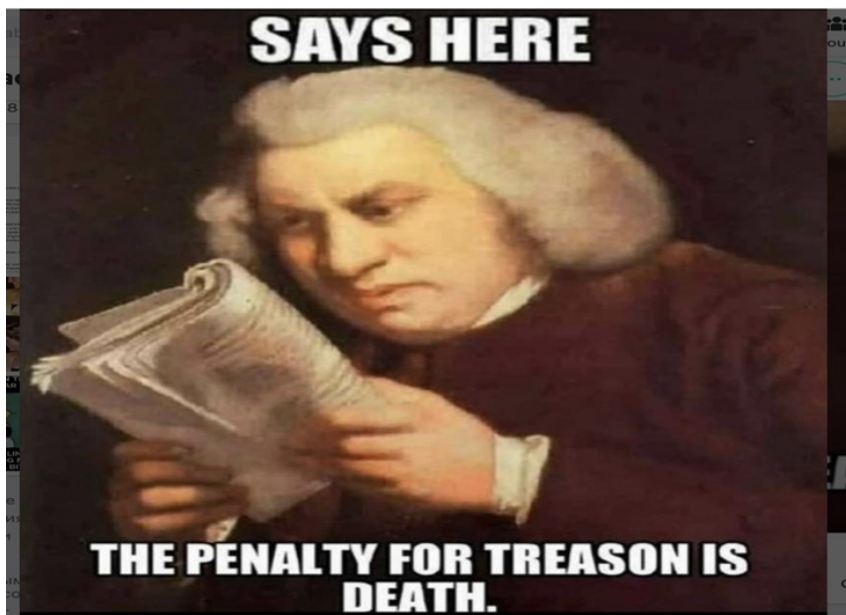


Figure 1. A Gab post by QAnon supporter.

Another way to justify the violence is the appeal to people’s personal grievances that are seen as a result of “the enemy’s” hostile activities for which the enemy must pay. In this case, COVID-19 became a strong argument in convincing people that they need to “take control” over their lives. They present the period of COVID-19 lockdowns as the time when the “enemies” ruined their lives by imposing cruel, harmful measures that ruined many businesses, families, and lives of ordinary Americans. Therefore, now it is the time for revenge (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Selections of Gab posts by QAnon supporters.

Overall, it appears that QAnon appeals to people's feeling of lack of control and powerlessness, and perception of the government as being corrupt and doing everything they can to harm their own citizens. According to one of the respondents, QAnon supporters see themselves as victims who are being mistreated by vicious members of the "deep state".¹⁹ Some of the respondents put it like this: "It's just wanting change as people think they are not being heard and it can lead to a lot of frustration. With elections you feel you want something to change, and you really believe something and you really believe that it's a morally correct thing but it doesn't happen, and it would feel like cheating happens".²⁰

David Depape, the perpetrator of one of the most recent QAnon-related attacks, appears to see himself on a mission against the corrupt government that needs to be punished.²¹ On 28 October 2022 he broke into House Speaker's Nancy Pelosi's home and attacked her husband Paul Pelosi with a hammer.²² According to the official indictment, Depape said that he wanted to talk to former Speaker Pelosi and if she was honest with him he would have let her go, otherwise he would harm her.²³ From the interviews with Depape, as well as from the content of his social media posts, it is clear that he saw himself at war with corrupt politicians, perceiving Speaker Pelosi as "the leader of the pack" of lies.²⁴ He admitted to have a list of politicians he wanted to target as he was "fighting tyranny without an option to surrender".²⁵ He even said that he was on "suicide mission", implying that he was ready to die for the cause.²⁶

Othering

Many extremist organisations use othering to dehumanise the enemy and show their target audience that the general norms of morality and law should not apply to "the enemy" due to the viciousness of their nature.²⁷ The "other" is given a variety of negative characteristics. The "enemy" - democrats and world elites - are extremely corrupt, cruel, immoral, "insane" and, simply evil (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Selections of Gab posts by Qanon supporters.

¹⁹ Interview transcript, 24.01.2023.

²⁰ Interview transcript, 20.11.2022.

²¹ David Depape's Indictment, 4, United States District Court (San Francisco: 2022), <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/09/politics/read-depape-federal-indictment/index.html>, accessed 18.11.2022.

²² Olga R. Rodriguez and Stephanie Dazio, "Officials: Suspect in Pelosi attack was on 'suicide mission'", *The Associated Press*, 2nd of November 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/california-san-francisco-nancy-pelosi-government-and-politics-paul-985a574966438975ec9ccdc39061d83c>

²³ David Depape's Indictment, 4, United States District Court (San Francisco: 2022), <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/09/politics/read-depape-federal-indictment/index.html>.

²⁴ David Depape's Indictment, 4.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rodriguez and Dazio, "Officials: Suspect in Pelosi attack was on 'suicide mission'".

²⁷ Borum, "Radicalization into violent extremism I".

There is also a tendency to juxtapose former President Trump to the stupidity and ridiculousness of the Democrats and President Biden. Usually, he is depicted in a very flattering way, with images/memes showing his best shots. There are even initiatives to present Trump as a divine warrior, photoshopping him in the image of God's messenger (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Selections of Gab posts by QAnon supporters.

So many people have no clue that we are at WAR. Just because it doesn't involve war planes, battle ships and guns. WE are fighting for the very soul and freedom of humanity. Make no mistake, WE ARE AT WAR.



Figure 5. Selections of Gab posts by QAnon supporters.

QAnon members are given a message that by engaging in a fight, they became involved in a battle between Good and Evil (Figure 5). As one of the former supporters phrased it: “The message was hopeful. This whole idea of good vs. evil, not just in a cosmic way, but it’s actually happening, militarily, and through government and through action”.²⁸ He then added, “They think they are on a mission from God, I think. Like it’s just...it’s a cosmic battle, they convince themselves that their life is insignificant, and this is a much bigger mission”.²⁹ Such framing, may help QAnon present violence as justified by the fact that its supporters are at war against “bad people,” or even indeed pure evil.

²⁸ Interview transcript 15.11.2022.

²⁹ Interview transcript 15.11.2022

Apocalypse and urgency of action

This discourse establishes an idea that the world is coming to an end (or is in deep, potentially deadly crisis), therefore if no one does anything immediately, the consequences will be devastating.³⁰ This suggests that there is strong evidence that the “enemies” are conspiring to ruin the US and the world, if no one does anything urgently, the apocalypse is going to come very soon. QAnon promotes an idea of taking responsibility for the country’s (and the world’s) future, emphasising that if people don’t do anything to “save” it, the apocalypse is going to be their fault too (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Selections of Gab posts by QAnon and its supporters.

One of the respondents noted that much of QAnon rhetoric developed around the preparation for the apocalypse: “The apocalypse is always on the rise, always coming. Idk how many apocalypses I technically survived”.³¹ In this sense, QAnon is using people’s fear and desire to take control over the perceived crisis. It presents current governments and world elites as a threat to citizens in relation to their already existing concerns over future. As one of the respondents pointed out, “the fear of loss of life or loss of independence was huge... (...) There’s this intense fear of physical harm and if you don’t do something, this is going to be on you, this is going to happen to you because you did nothing. There’s this extreme urgency to protect your personal self, your family”.³²

‘Chosenness’

The “chosenness” or “specialness” discourse makes people feel good about themselves. Usually its aim is to portray the group’s members as being better than anyone else and, therefore, having rights and obligations to take necessary measure to fulfil their “mission”, usually dictated to them by a divine entity.³³ This discourse is used by QAnon and its members to juxtapose themselves against the rest of society. Other people are portrayed as blind and oblivious. However, the members of the group are seen as special, they were chosen by a higher power to fight the evil and save the world. The degree of “chosenness” and “specialness” varies from just seeing themselves as critical thinkers, researchers and non-conformists who are not easily brainwashed,

30 McCants, The ISIS Apocalypse; Winter, “Apocalypse , later”.

31 Interview transcript 19.11.2022.

32 Ibid.

33 Winter, “Apocalypse, later”; Kruglova, “Selling Terror”.

to almost metaphysical realms, where QAnon supporters perceive themselves as holy warriors who are chosen by God to save the world (Figure 7).

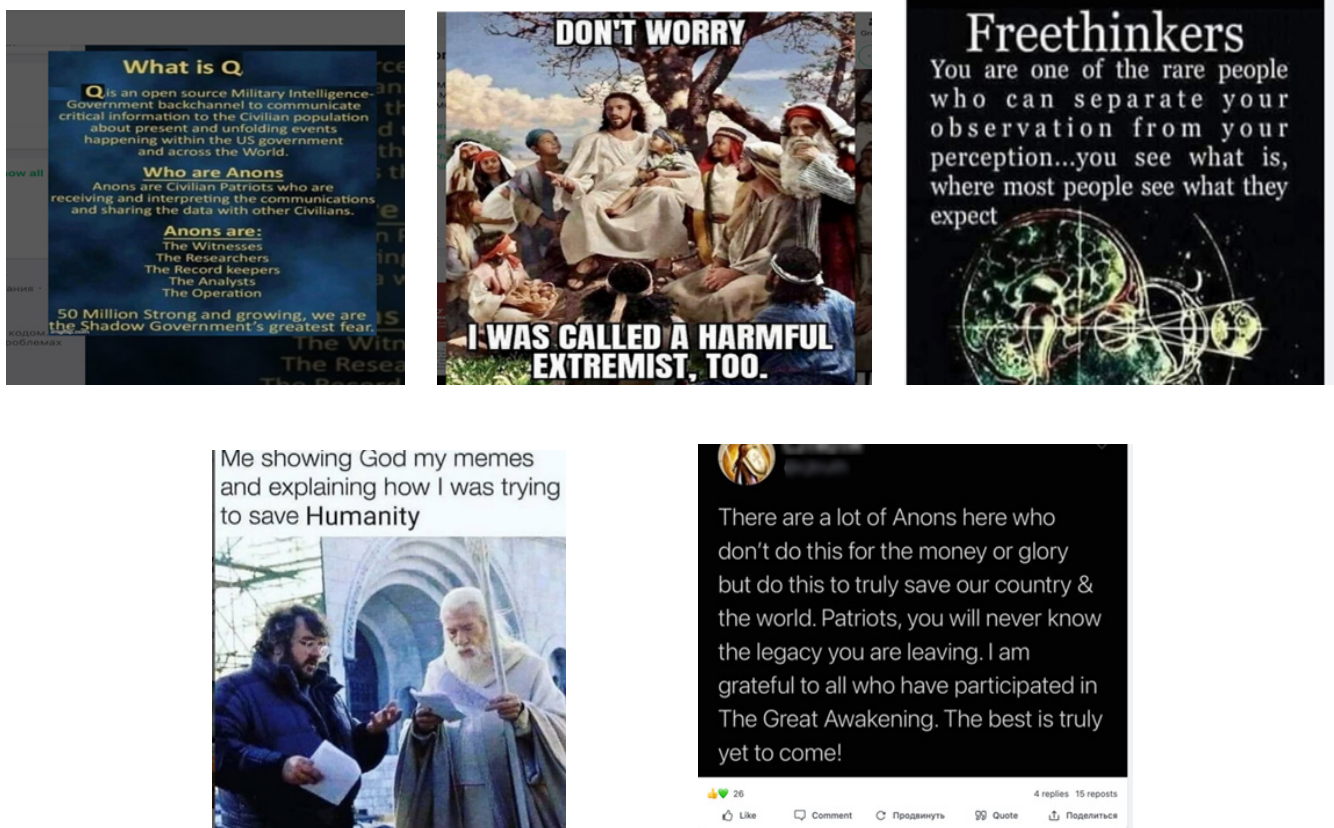


Figure 7. Selections of Gab posts by QAnon supporters.

As shown in Figure 7, QAnon also capitalises on the idea of a “secret society”. It presents itself as an elite group which is only open to special people, therefore, once again appealing to members’ ego. One of the respondents noted that the members “are a bit arrogant, they think they know something we don’t. They want to be the heroes in the end of the day, they are doing something good for the world”.³⁴ Another respondent argued that some QAnon members’ self-perception goes as far as seeing themselves as supernatural beings: “A lot of them think that they are immortal, one of them asked me to join his immortal army. They can commit these acts on the Internet because they can’t die”.³⁵

Religion seems to play an important role in QAnon mobilising messages at several levels – specifically in presenting the “battle” as commissioned by God, emphasising the divine nature of “special power” that QAnon members have (Figure 8), and also appealing to the personal fears. QAnon promotes the idea that “you have your eternal soul to worry about and a lot of that would come down to if you are not on this side, if you are on the other side and you are going to burn later in fire forever, you have to pick a side, and it has to be a right side and you have to win.”³⁶

34 Interview transcript, 16.11.2022.

35 Interview transcript, 21.11.2022.

36 Interview transcript, 19.11.2022.

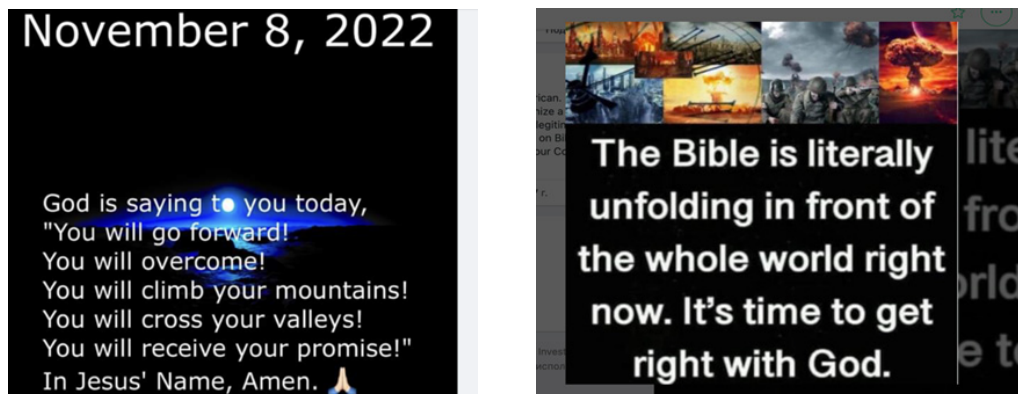


Figure 8. Selection of Gab posts by QAnon supporters.

Altruism

The final discourse has to do with another issue related to people's self-perception, often discussed as being an altruist. This would generally project a certain behavioural code – as an altruist you are expected to act in a certain way.³⁷ For example, QAnon supporters see patriotism as a great virtue. Therefore, as patriots, they need to do everything they can to serve their country, even if it means using violence (Figure 9).

This was the case of Matthew Wright, who blocked the Hoover Dam with his homemade armoured vehicle, and was later charged with terrorism – he indeed explain his motivations as “patriotism”.³⁸ In prison, Wright wrote several letters to US official institutions, such as the FBI and CIA, as well as to Donald Trump, that shed some light on his line of thinking and possible motivations. In the letters, he calls himself a “humble Patriot”,³⁹ claims that he “loves his country” and that he felt like it was his obligation to fight against corruption and evil that tries to ruin it.⁴⁰ He also describes himself as “god-fearing” and refers to his faith that, as he argued showed him his purpose on earth, which is to “help others”.⁴¹

³⁷ Kruglova, *Terrorist Recruitment*.

³⁸ Ariz Kingman, “Man pleads guilty to terrorism after Hoover Dam barricade”, *The Associated Press*, 20th of February 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/4a977b1627374e541d5173d4a3d6d987>.

³⁹ Matthew Wright's Letters quoted in Henry Brean and Dave Hawkins, “Suspect in Hoover Dam standoff writes Trump, cites conspiracy in letters”, *Las Vegas Review Journal*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/courts/suspect-in-hoover-dam-standoff-writes-trump-cites-conspiracy-in-letters/>.

⁴⁰ Matthew Wright's Letters.

⁴¹ Ibid.

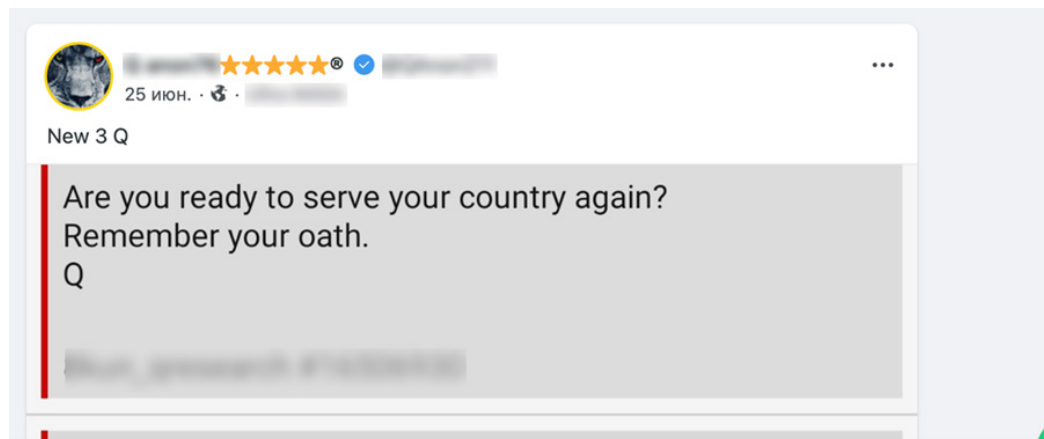


Figure 9. A Gab post by QAnon

Another angle of this discourse is protecting children. It appears to work even for people who may not be falling for other, more fantastical ideas, possibly due to the fact that children are perceived as the most innocent beings. As one of the interview respondents summarised: “I remember someone saying “How can you see ‘#savethechildren’ and NOT get involved? You’d have to be a terrible person not to!”⁴² The reason why it works particularly well, is that unlike less verifiable ideas, the paedophile plot has some ground, for example, the case of Jeffrey Epstein who indeed was involved in the sexual abuse and trafficking of children.

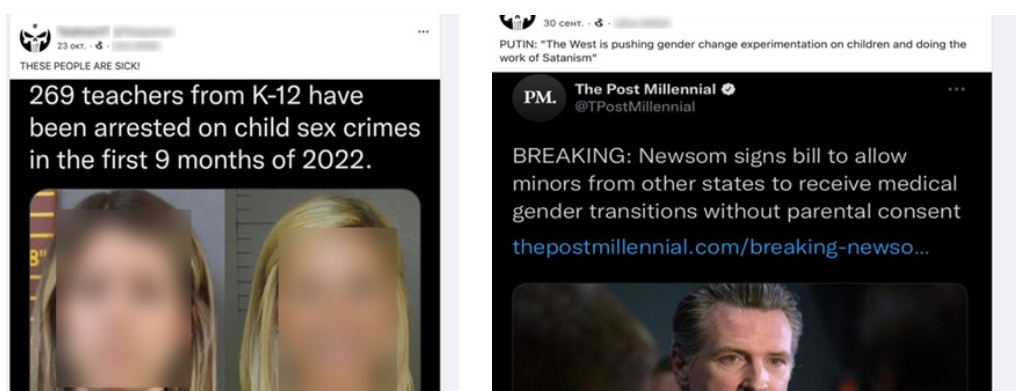


Figure 10. Selection of Gab posts by QAnon supporters.

There are plenty of examples, of the effectiveness of this narrative. One of them, is Cynthia Abcug, a single mother who had her son removed from her and put in foster care, is a representative example. As she believed in the child abusers conspiracy promoted by QAnon, her fear for her own child becoming victim to it, made her kidnap him from the foster care which resulted in court charges pressed against her.⁴³

⁴² Interview transcript, 25.11.2022.

⁴³ Kruglova, 2022

Conclusions and recommendations

The reviewed discourses of QAnon appear to present a relatively coherent narrative and similarly to other extremist organisations, in so far as they also construct an imagined reality for its supporters. Like in many other extremist organisation,⁴⁴ the reality for many QAnon supporters is that they are not just ordinary citizens who have to deal with daily problems and struggles. They are warriors, real patriots, and members of an elite secret group, who are at a holy war with the enemies of the state. They are the ones on whom the future of this world and the country is dependent. It is their obligation to fight, because they are not doing it for themselves, they are doing it for the greater good.

In this sense, in line with the argument of Sofia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, one should not exceptionalise the threat of QAnon and conspiracy theories in general.⁴⁵ The movement exploits previously used narratives to construct an alternative reality and bring people in the state of mind where they feel like “doing something”, i.e. engaging in violence is their obligation and a mission. When it comes to countering QAnon and conspiracy-related propaganda, there may be several actions that could be undertaken:

1) Educating people about fact-checking and fake news detection

It appears that education about the ways to detect and verify fake news disseminated on social media may be an effective way to address the issue. As one of the participants noted “If I had really good fact-checkers after that Fall Cabal video, I would have done my research, and I would have gone – ok, here’s an argument for it, here’s an argument against it, and I would have had a more balanced thinking. This did not exist whatsoever.”⁴⁶ Many of the participants argued that the turning point for them when they started doubting QAnon ideas was when they started questioning the group’s prophecies or “facts” – for example, when they failed to happen or didn’t have any confirmation. Therefore, it is necessary to inoculate people against fake news by providing relevant training and education.

2) Engaging with family and former members both online and offline

The process of mobilisation to violence in QAnon happens in a way that is similar to other extremist movements. They appeal to a combination of personal and political grievances of members, as well as their self-perception. It has been argued that families play a major role in breaking the hold of similar jihadist and right-wing extremist narratives.⁴⁷ Due to similarities between QAnon and other movements, engagement with families may be useful in this case. Indeed, many interview respondents who felt this way argued that they thought about their families and the fear of losing them helped to eventually begin their distancing away from the movement. Therefore, when it comes to countering QAnon narratives, appealing to people’s connection with their loved ones may become an effective approach. Moreover, sharing stories of people whose relationship was affected by QAnon (such as via the subreddit re:/QAnonCasualties) may also become a base for an effective response to QAnon’s messaging.

44 Kruglova, *Terrorist Recruitment*.

45 Moskalenko and McCauley, “Radical Opinion vs radical action”, 144.

46 Interview transcript, 05.12.2022.

47 Hafal Ahmad, “Youth Deradicalization: A Canadian Framework”, *Journal for Deradicalization* 12, (Fall 2017): 119-168.

3) Creating attractive alternative narratives

Like other extremist groups,⁴⁸ QAnon creates an alternative reality for its supporters where they feel empowered and receive a lot of personal gratification as they see themselves as special, and morally and intellectually superior. At the same time, they see the rest of the world as corrupt and on the brink of collapse. While people may have legitimate grievances, the main reason why people tend to turn to a violent reaction, is not a grievance itself but an idea that they can be heroes in “saving” the world from evil. It is, therefore, necessary to come up with alternative narratives that appeal to the same drivers that extremists appeal to - i.e. the narratives that would provide the target audience with an alternative way to find meaning, excitement in life and fight evil. Further research is needed, however, to identify the narratives that could potentially resonate with QAnon supporters.

4) Engaging with social care services and raising awareness of their accessibility

For QAnon believers there may be social, economic and political elements to their support for the group. As such, traditional P/CVE strategies may need to be altered to adopt a “public health” approach.⁴⁹ While the QAnon narrative does evolve around the discourse of corrupt politicians, the real reason for its emergence is people’s fear for personal well-being, security, future, and - in particular - the safety of children. As several interviewees argued, QAnon’s ideas resonate more when people were in a difficult life situation – for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the isolation that followed, job loss, etc.⁵⁰ Therefore, directly addressing these issues by improving access to social and (possibly) psychological support and raising awareness about their availability may help to further address the issue.

48 Kruglova, *Terrorist Recruitment*.

49 Jensen and Kane, “Qanon-inspired violence”, 13.

50 Interview transcript, 22.01.2023.

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