Graphika

House Intelligence Committee: Hearing on Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories Online

Statement of Record
Melanie Smith, Graphika

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Testimony

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Esteemed members of the Intelligence Committee, I'm grateful for the chance to talk about my research on conspiracy theories and misinformation with you today.

My name is Melanie Smith and I'm Head of Analysis at Graphika. Graphika is a network analytics firm that analyzes social media landscapes and conversations to discover how communities form online and how influence and information flow within large-scale networks, with a focus on disinformation detection and risks to electoral integrity.

I have been studying the movement known as QAnon for over two years now, and I have watched it evolve from a fringe conspiracy theory into a major part of mainstream discourse, and from having a relatively negligible impact on global politics to having enormous influence.

In late August I published a report that chronicled the evolution of QAnon over this timeframe, as well as its potential appeal to foreign actors seeking to influence the US election and the growth of the movement outside of the US.[1]

When I first began researching QAnon, it was just one of a long list of communities that represented a concern for US election integrity - now I believe it to be the most pressing threat to trust in government, public institutions, and democratic processes. I want to discuss why I believe that to be the case, and explain how we got here.

The first question I would like to cover is what is QAnon, and what does the movement represent? We have little time today to explore the intricacies of the various theories that underpin this community, however it's worthwhile to run through a couple of the basics.

Firstly, the movement supports a nebulous set of conspiracy theories that emerged in late 2017 when a figure known as 'Q' began posting coded messages on the messaging board 4chan.[2] These theories revolve around the belief that there is a "global elite cabal" whose members are embedded in influential positions in government, media, finance, and the arts.

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[1] https://graphika.com/reports/interpreting-social-qs-implications-of-the-evolution-of-qanon/
[2] https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-n900531

In the US context, QAnon supporters usually also believe that this is a cabal that orchestrates the trafficking and exploitation of children and that Donald Trump is working to expose and dismantle these networks while being continually hindered by a set of actors referred to as "the deep state." QAnon supporters organize on a wide range of social media platforms - Twitter, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, and Discord, to name a few.

The second aspect of QAnon I want to note is that, like many online political movements, it represents a highly dualistic worldview. According to the foundations of these theories, there's a good and there's an evil, there is a hero and there are many villians.

With that context in mind, I'd like to highlight two of the most frequent misconceptions I hear in discussions about why QAnon poses a threat.

The first misconception is that QAnon poses a threat because it has been stoked and infiltrated by foreign actors. It is true that both Russia and Iran have shown an interest in leveraging the QAnon community at various points over the past few years for their own disinformation campaigns, but I'd like to stress that QAnon really does appear to be a homegrown movement.

The second is that QAnon poses a threat because it's being driven by fake accounts, troll farms, or bots. Again, while it may be true that the movement has benefited from these types of tactics in the past, the overwhelming majority of this content is produced and consumed by real users who are engaging organically with topics of conversation that they feel passionately about.

The real danger of QAnon is its systematic undermining of facts and truths on topics of genuine concern, such as the integrity of elections, human trafficking, and the global Covid-19 pandemic. The QAnon worldview is steeped in anti-Semitic tropes, and the community has called for, and been involved in, the coordinated harassment of numerous individuals and organizations over the past two years. Concerns about QAnon are centered around the subsection of this movement that has an appetite for real world violence and coordinated action, and is likely to follow calls to take matters of justice into their own hands.

Since the beginning of this year, the QAnon community has contributed in large part to a wealth of public health misinformation about the origins, symptoms and treatment of Covid-19. This includes promoting the narratives that the virus does not exist or was intentionally orchestrated by a group of elites as well as promoting specific pieces of conspiratorial content, such as viral documentaries that question the emergence of the pandemic.

There are three observations from our research on QAnon that I want to highlight: it's a conspiracy movement that has permeated the mainstream in many countries, it is highly adaptable and adept at reaching new audiences, and it has become very difficult for social media platforms to take meaningful action to restrict the spread of its content.

The first is, as mentioned, that QAnon has evolved from a fringe conspiracy theory into a complex web of interwoven and now mainstream beliefs about politics, the media, and public health. When my team and I created our first network map of QAnon Twitter accounts in June 2018, we set out with the objective of understanding how this community was structured, how supporters of these theories were interacting with each other, and what kind of content was proving popular with them.

What we found was the most dense conspiracy community we had ever studied. This means that the accounts engaging with QAnon theories in the summer of 2018 represented an extremely tight-knit and insular online community that relied upon mainstream right-wing accounts to boost its messaging and content. By the end of the following year, 2019, we began to see it becoming increasingly scattered and autonomous. These accounts also became prolific in their sharing, often employing spam-like patterns of behavior to amplify certain pieces of false and misleading content.

In a more recent timeframe, offline support for QAnon has also mobilized. We tend to consider online conspiracy movements as restricted to the confines of the internet - this is no longer the case for QAnon. There have been multiple violent events linked to belief in these theories over the past year, and we now see QAnon slogans being used in support of only remotely aligned causes at demonstrations and rallies across the world.

The influence of QAnon in the US political sphere has also grown - there are a total of 84 current or former congressional candidates who have publicly embraced the theory, and 26 of these will be on the ballot for House races in the upcoming election.[3]

The second of these three observations from our research is that QAnon is highly adaptable. My background is in studying violent extremist movements, and a certain degree of adaptability is necessary for the survival of these groups. ISIS, for example, adapted to potential recruits being turned off by some of its most gruesome propaganda by instead emphasizing its healthcare and education systems.

QAnon's success here lies in its ability to shape-shift. It is an all-encompassing and flexible framework that is capable of assimilating a wide range of existing and emerging conspiracy theories. Coupled with the ubiquity of supportive accounts online, these loose ideological boundaries enable the movement to be highly adaptive to the news cycle.

A recent example was the nomination of Kamala Harris as Joe Biden's vice presidential candidate. In the 36-hour period following the announcement of Harris as Joe Biden's VP pick, QAnon Facebook pages and Twitter accounts had already begun to produce dangerous falsehoods about members of Harris's family and disseminate these through huge networks.

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[3] https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/here-are-qanon-supporters-running-congress-2020

Since June 2018, Graphika has produced over 1,100 network maps on a wide range of online conversations taking place around the world, and 195 of these maps contain at least one cluster of accounts that support QAnon. These include conversations about events and topics that are seemingly irrelevant to QAnon: the fire at Notre Dame cathedral, yoga, the Nike boycott, Brexit, gun control, and alternative medicine.

This is surprising because these are not online conversations that we would expect QAnon supporters to naturally be a part of and it means that these new audiences, some of which are apolitical or even progressive, are likely to be exposed to conspiratorial content through more benign topics that act as an unfortunate gateway.

The consequences of this adaptability have been particularly obvious in the past few months, with waves of QAnon-led misinformation about the origins and effective treatment of Covid-19. Data collected on the Covid-19 online conversation on a monthly basis since January shows that QAnon support was not only growing in this context but that it was also spreading to other existing interest groups.

Our findings suggest that the topic of QAnon acted as an important bridge that drew together otherwise disparate communities - some of the communities that emerged revolved around topics like spirituality, health, and wellness.[4]

My third and final observation is a result of the previous two. As a consequence of QAnon becoming mainstream, and as a result of its ability to envelop existing conspiracy movements, it has become very difficult for social media platforms to take meaningful action against this community.

I'm pleased to see new efforts being announced in recent weeks to restrict the spread of QAnon content, for example with Facebook banning pages and groups on the grounds that it's a conspiracy theory that induces violence.

However, it remains to be seen how consistently and comprehensively these policies will be applied to a movement that is evolving at such a rapid pace. We have already seen the QAnon community respond to these measures by trying out a number of tactics to evade automatic detection and to coordinate moves to alternative platforms.[5]

As discussed, the mainstreaming of this community means that a large proportion of QAnon content is now focused on adjacent causes. This activity will likely not contravene platform

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[4] https://arxiv.org/abs/2007.03443

[5] https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/qanon-groups-are-taking-advantage-facebooks-inconsistent-ban-enforcement

community guidelines but is often used as a cover for making false allegations and spreading intentionally divisive political content.

There is an understandably strong focus at the moment on the potential influence of QAnon in the upcoming US election - I would urge us all to look beyond that. This is not a movement that will subside with either outcome, and it is growing rapidly in parts of the world with fragile political ecosystems.

During the time I spent working on violent extremist movements, a significant proportion of the difficulty with restricting the spread of that content lay in its detection. Enforcement was relatively straightforward, with much of this content simply needing to be removed from social media platforms, and swiftly.

QAnon poses a more nuanced challenge. Detection is not the core difficulty, and appropriate policies to contain the influence of this conspiratorial content without compromising essential freedoms are not necessarily obvious. Taking meaningful action against this threat will require sustained attention from researchers to understand how it's evolving, creativity from platforms to craft new and appropriate frameworks, and renewed efforts from entities tasked with ensuring that trust in government, public institutions and processes cannot be easily eroded.