

# From Pizzagate to the Reichstag: A Multidimensional Analysis of the Coevolution of QAnon and Querdenken on German Telegram

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## Extended Abstract

In 2016, during the U.S. presidential election, rumors of high-ranking Democratic Party officials being involved in child trafficking and child pornography spread on 4chan and Reddit (Fisher et al., n.d.). While there was no proof for this incident, later known as *Pizzagate*, the rumors not only led to an armed attack on the pizza store but also gave rise to one of the most prominent conspiracy theories on the internet, *QAnon* (Zuckerman, 2019), which is best understood as a patchwork of different narratives and concrete ideas, some of which contradict each other, rather than a consolidated theory. Central to the narrative is only the assumed *insider knowledge* about the inner workings of the state, in particular the assumed existence of a *deep state*, the true locus of power, which differs from the democratically elected government. In Germany, QAnon was long monopolized by far-right groups but could not truly flourish.

Querdenken is a grassroots movement that originated in the wake of protests against the German COVID-19 policies. Sandner (2022) interprets Querdenken as a prototypical instance of a psychological mass movement in multiple stages. While it started as a more or less diffuse protest group opposing government actions related to the Covid pandemic, different preexisting societal currents quickly latched on, trying to profit from the movement's rapid growth. Querdenken hasn't converged towards a single demand. Yet, the protest quickly became more organized, as a large number of Facebook groups and Telegram channels were formed to facilitate discussion and coordination among the followers.

The sheer number of followers and disruptive potential Querdenken and QAnon have calls for research on both movements. Notably, some researchers describe strengthening ties between the two, e.g., in the form of QAnon posters seen at Querdenken protests (Goertz, 2022).

Hence, this study aims to measure the coevolution and spread of QAnon and Querdenken on German Telegram channels at an unprecedented scale. In particular, we want to understand the supposed convergence of both movements on the network and the content level.

The data used by this study is obtained via the tdlib-API and iterative network expansion. Starting with a list of 23 well-known channels, we add a new channel to the network whenever its messages are forwarded at least 1'000 times within the current network, considering the entire message history of every included channel. Convergence is reached at 282 channels with over 5'000'000 messages from early 2016 to April 2021. For the scope of this analysis, we consider messages between January 2019 and April 2021 that contain at least five characters of text, of which there are over 3'000'000. Each channel is labeled by hand as part of either one of two networks or clusters, Querdenken and QAnon.

We analyze the data along two axes, network structure and content. For the former, we employ classical network analysis to understand the genesis of both networks on a structural level. In particular, the fraction of inter-network links in the form of message forwards is compared in both channels over time, as well as their individual reach and level of connectedness.

Both networks appear scale-free, considering the connectedness, the number of incoming and outgoing citations, and the average number of views per node. Further, the networks grow more strongly connected within themselves but remain at a steady level of inter-network links. Figure 2 displays the network structure averaged over the observed period.

On the content level, Topic-Modeling in the form of classical LDA, as well as an unsupervised BERT-based embedding model, based on a procedure proposed by Grootendorst (2022), are employed, the results of which are showcased in Figure 1. Both methods are checked against a test set of well-known terms to see which yields the highest coherence within the corresponding categories. Combining BERT-embeddings with PCA and UMAP (McInnes et al., 2020) for dimensionality reduction and DBSCAN (Ester et al., 1996) for clustering generates the best topic assignments. Around April 2020, during the first lockdown in Germany, and January 2021, after the United States Capitol attack, we observe a growing synchronization between the content posted in both clusters. In particular, Querdenken channels appear to start posting more QAnon-related content, yet often without linking to the corresponding channels and hence leaving the network structure intact.

The study finds contending forces in the coevolution of both networks. On the network level, QAnon and Querdenken remain separated, whereas, on a content level, both channels appear to synchronize. This indicates a slow diffusion of QAnon narratives into Querdenken, even while members of Querdenken are not always willing to link to the corresponding QAnon accounts. Querdenken, a movement with a considerable number of supporters, adopting QAnon ideology, might pose a significant challenge to Germany's democratic institutions. While Querdenken started with protests against acute measures, QAnon is anti-statist per se. It may allow parties like AfD to successfully cast doubt on the security and fairness of public elections, instilling an unsettling and unseen amount of distrust in governmental organizations. On the other hand, if Querdenken generally repels QAnon, the latter might still implant itself in German society, for example, in small but growing groups like the *Neue Rechte* or *Reichsbürger*.

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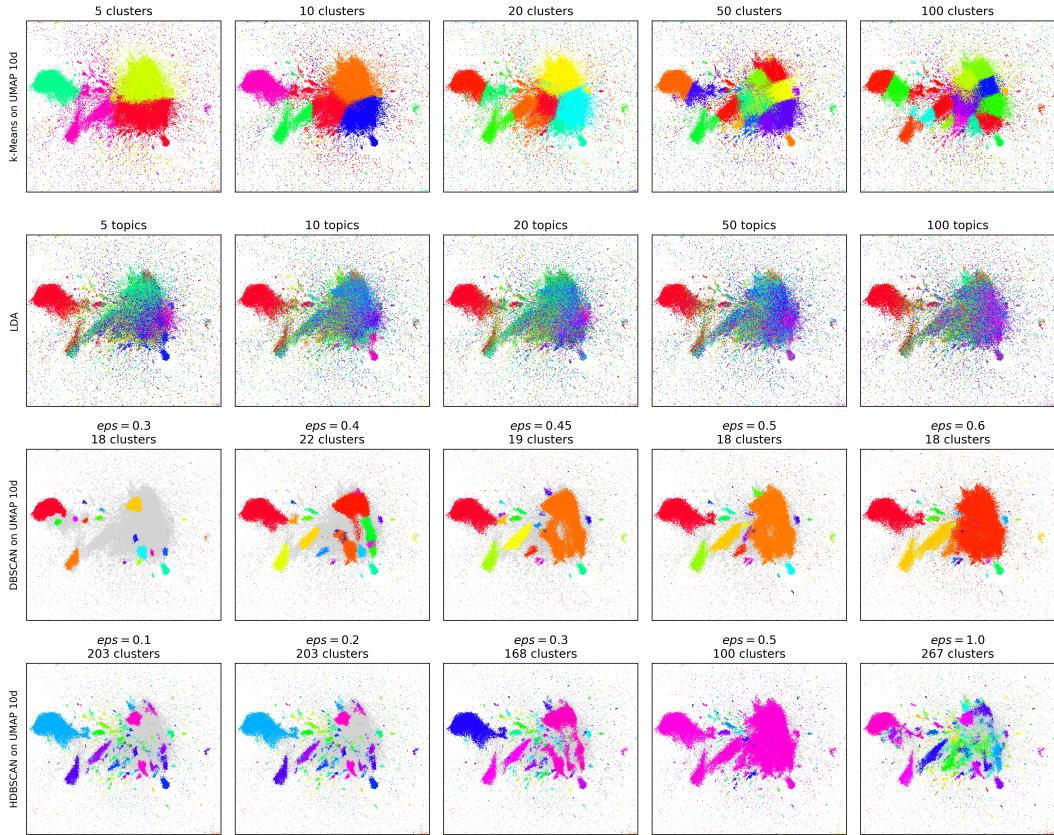


Figure 1: Topics assigned to each message by different topic models. Messages are represented as points in the BERT-embedding space, reduced by PCA and UMAP.

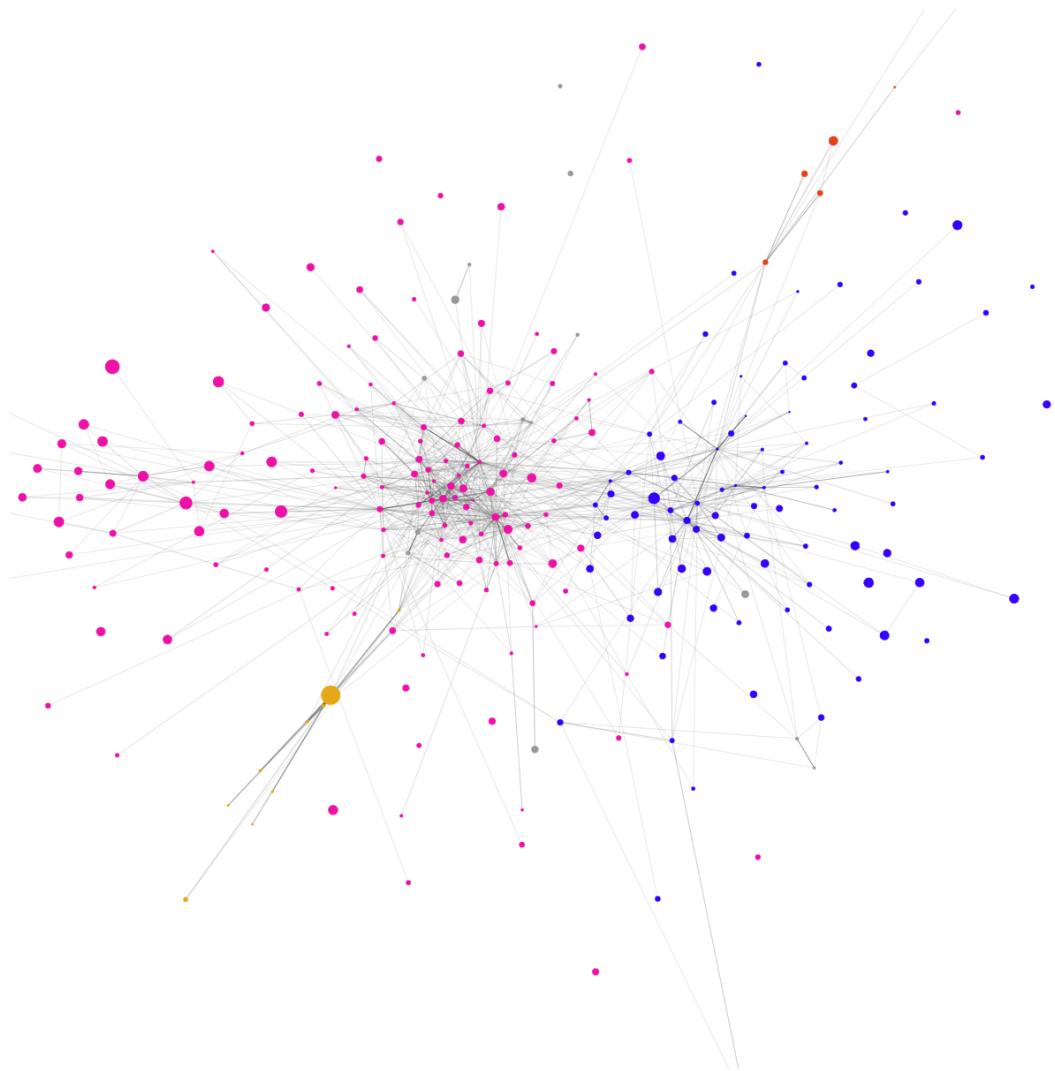


Figure 2: Network of all scraped channels. Blue indicates Querdenken, red QAnon, and orange is unrelated.