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"No Cult Tells You to Think for Yourself": Discursive Ideology and the Limits of Rationality in Conspiracy Theory QAnon

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Abstract

What is truth in politics? Movements such as the anti-establishment, internet-born conspiracy theory QAnon are offered as dramatic cases of just how "irrational" people have become in a "post-truth" political world. However, with a growing number of everyday Americans believing in such theories, labeling adherents "irrational" ignores the internally rationalizing logic of conspiracy theories, so we ask the question: how do QAnon followers think through, argue, and rationalize their political truths? This paper establishes a discursive framework that demonstrates how QAnon adherents translate the theory's paradigmatic political epistemology into personal ideologies. I identify the narrative structures that guide belief, examining how QAnon followers develop a general political plot, set the parameters for conflict, embrace their role in the story, determine what is in the political canon, and relate to the narrative that has been constructed. This analysis highlights the contradictions within the QAnon conspiracy theory—not to pathologize adherents' irrationality but to demonstrate how people must wrestle with contradiction, paradox, and confusion when developing political ideologies. When framed as the as victims of a brainwashing cult, QAnons routinely respond, "no cult tells you to think for yourself"; instead, their narratives allow them to interpret QAnon in service of developing personalized political truths. Thus, this paper takes their words at face value to see the world as they interpret it. I argue that ideologies are a function of broader political epistemologies such as QAnon; they are embodied, narrativized ways of being in the world that make life livable—despite any inner contradictions—and guide political participation.

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It is June of 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Douglas, a prominent QAnon supporter, crackles to life over the phone as I ask him about his day, "Oh man," he smiles, "The best is yet to come." When I ask him what he means, he hesitates—unsure of if I got his reference—but then quickly jumps back into a cheery response, "I see things heading in a better direction than I did four years ago." In Douglas's world, "the best is yet to come" is more than an optimistic turn of phrase. Like scripture, it has become a mantra for interpreting the world he inhabits. While others fret about wearing masks to visit family, Douglas talks about a post-pandemic religious awakening, and he jokes about how the current death count is part of an act—like a bad movie plot—written by Democrats and executed by the mainstream media. Other supporters share not only Douglas's interpretation of current events but also the phrases he uses to describe them: "the best is yet to come," "enjoy the show," "shall we play a game?"

Each of these phrases is lifted from the shared lexicon of Q, the figurehead of the viral QAnon conspiracy movement. QAnon followers allege that a covert group of Satanic elites are ushering in a New World Order, and that a group of secret government operatives nicknamed Q is giving followers instructions to help save the world through coded online messages (such as the ones Douglas commits to memory). Q began posting on anonymous internet forum 4chan, the birthplace of a number of fringe political groups, and would eventually migrate to 8kun, a similar forum. However, Q's real discursive power comes from the way their messages have been perpetuated out into the internet. Followers decoding "drops" of information began discussing them on Reddit, unpacking them in YouTube videos, and eventually using them in everyday conversations on Twitter or Facebook. Short videos hooked people in with questions like, "What if I told you that the Democrats had a 16-year plan to destroy America?", and shared Facebook posts allowed conspiratorial messaging to move across groups, frequently exposing people with a predisposition to QAnon (Trump supporters, mothers, military veterans, retirees, evangelical Christians) to the theory (Forberg, 2021). While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of QAnon believers, a recent study found that nearly one-in-five Americans subscribe to the core beliefs regarding Satanism and media control (PRRI-IFYC, 2021).

Over the course of the summer of 2020, QAnon's anti-establishment theories claiming that COVID-19, racial unrest, and the November presidential election results were fabricated by a mainstream media-supported New World Order proliferated, and in their various forms, gained purchase among disparate conservative and libertarian groups, as well as groups on the political fringe. Regardless of if one subscribed to the QAnon theory writ large, its ideological influence could be seen across social media and in the news. QAnon adherents targeted groups like Trump supporters or COVID-19 skeptics with felicitous iterations of the theory that matched the language of

conservative talking points—indeed, the thrust of QAnon's beliefs quickly became that Donald Trump would take down the powers that be, bringing his "outsider politics" to the fore (Forberg, 2021). It was during this time that I performed a virtual ethnography of the movement's online spaces, conducted interviews with followers, performed natural language processing on 300,000 tweets, and generally consumed a wealth of their content online.

With one-in-five Americans believing what many consider an outright lie, the perennial question remains: what is truth in politics? In a "post-truth" political world, truth may be considered dead in practice and significance, with groups like QAnon offered as dramatic cases of just how *irrational* some people have become. However, this framing belies an assumption that researchers have been trying to undo: When asked, "How have people who are not 'rational' come to believe something irrational?" the question answers itself. Instead, we ask, "How have regular people come to believe in something so different from what is expected?" This paper takes an alternative approach to this question, focusing on how people who have become familiar with QAnon adopt and apply its language, integrating the conspiracy theory's logic into their belief systems. I ask: how do QAnons think through, argue, and rationalize their political truths?

Thus, this paper traces the discursive processes by which broad political epistemologies are translated into narrativized themes that provide structure to followers' ideologies through shared language and reasoning, allowing them to develop personal political truths. While ideology will be developed in the next section, for now it is best understood as a way of being in the world constructed through discourse with others, thus both determining and being determined by one's identity, community, and actions. Importantly, it is a sufficient way of being in the world: a function of a broader political epistemology (such as QAnon), ideology allows people to coherently navigate their reality and guides political participation. We've already seen how a political truth taken from QAnon's epistemology—that a shadowy force is planning reality—was turned into a narrative slogan—"the best is yet to come"—which guided Douglas's interpretation of and reaction to the pandemic. This is a generalized process that can be applied to ideologies more broadly, as adherents of political epistemologies make sense of the world through inference and interpretation, which doesn't point to interpreters' irrationality or rationality but the idiosyncratic nature of meaning-making. In this paper, QAnon's explicitly jarring set of beliefs brings these discursive processes into greater relief. I demonstrate how those who believe themselves to be engaged in an epistemological process are instead engaged in an interpretive one—which comes with all the messy, "irrational" pitfalls of interpretation. Thus, by taking followers' wide-ranging beliefs at face value, I develop QAnon's structural, underlying logic as a case study of discursively constructed ideology.

Discursive Ideology

A devout Christian, Douglas frequently merges religious beliefs with QAnon. His social media profiles are adorned with a syncretic mixture of religious iconography, political messaging, and QAnon memes. Online, he shares bright images of

world-encompassing, flaming Qs superimposed with psalms, "Everyone knows John 3:16," he tells me, "But most people forget about John 3:17." He brands himself as a prayer warrior, and, like God's only son, he is willing to make the sacrifice so that the world may be saved through him: "Who is Q?" he asks himself, "Well I am Q, and I'm nothing." The people he interacts with share in these convictions, broadcasting their allegiance to the movement with hashtags in their online bios, Qs in their profile pictures, and frequent conspiratorial posts. Some lack religious syncretism and talk more about politics, the military, or CIA experiments. Still, QAnon's language is present in their beliefs, adding shared conspiratorial structure to age-old ideologies that no longer gave QAnons sufficient direction, leaving them lost in contemporary politics and culture. Douglas's religion is remade, and he himself is remade, through QAnon. Both the content of the conspiracy—the memes, phrases, pictures, videos—and their medium—posting, retweeting, sharing, messaging—comprise the discursive work that QAnons perform to construct their ideologies.

In this discursive work, QAnons are employing their "communicative resources"—the "logical patterns of symbolic material that exist not for themselves but in order to bring forth meaningful social relations through structured expression" (Feld, [1982] 2012, p. 16). The repeated use of phrases, the creation of social media profiles, and the sharing of videos or memes are all instances of "structured expression" that help "bring forth meaningful social relations." These meaningful social relations embed QAnons in "interpretive communities" (Rauch, 2007), such as Douglas's weekly QAnon prayer group, where members are able to employ communicative resources to interpret current events through the shared, structured expression of QAnon. The process of interpretation is deeply personal—Douglas sees himself as Q, and many other members label themselves prayer warriors, digital soldiers, or generally "anons." In their interpretive communities they "consubstantiate" their identities, sharing the substance of their very existence to "experience the ambiguity of being separate yet being identified with others at the same time" (Quigley, 1998, p. 1). Thus, "rather than being *reflected* in discourse, identity is actively, ongoingly, dynamically *constituted* in discourse" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 4). When a QAnon posts Q content, they are employing communicative resources that both interpret the world and invite others into that interpretation, reinforcing and expanding the QAnon identity and community through structured expression.

However, QAnon's discursive work is not being done solely in service of identity or community, as it also furthers a political agenda responding to material conditions. Conspiracy theorists have not been treated as collective entities engaged in political projects, often seen as individual aberrations from communities, outliers that are motivated in part by their own individual paranoia, lack of education and socioeconomic resources, or isolation from government systems (Aupers, 2012; Butter & Knight, 2020; Moulding et al., 2016; van Prooijen, 2016). But, as has been seen with other U.S. conspiracy theories throughout history, QAnon represents a distinct political ideology and community sharing symbols in service of a political cause (Walker, 2013). While QAnons may owe their beliefs to the United States' history of conspiracies and anti-intellectualism (Hofstadter, [1964] 2012, p. 4), it is a new group that has attracted

a large number of supporters who have reimagined themselves as conspiracy theorists in response to real or perceived contemporary injustices. Especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, QAnon as ideology guided followers through the troubled waters of an unflinching year of racial unrest, economic depression, and mass death.

Thus, the focus on the discursive formation of QAnon's identities and communities does not neglect the material reality within which this discourse takes place. The material world is in constant communication with these discursive practices, as the latter attempts to interpret the former. Further, uptake of QAnon discursive practices most often occurs when these discursive practices are effective at interpreting the material world. QAnons believe their discursive practices are effective when their interpretations are affirmatively recognized by their interpretive community, when those interpretations are corroborated by conditions in the material world, and when their practices resonate with previously held beliefs (Glaeser, 2011). Douglas's beliefs were recognized by other Christian QAnons as valid and valuable. His beliefs in Satanic pedophilia were corroborated by lurid news stories. And QAnon allowed for a syncretic belief system in which his newer QAnon beliefs blended with his deeply held religious beliefs.

As a distinct set of validated beliefs and communicative resources aimed at responding to the material world, QAnon is best understood, then, as an ideology in Wedeen's sense of the term; that is, as "embodied, affectively laden discourses often conveyed acephalously through everyday practices" with "identifiable structuring effects, the nature and function of which are to contain conflict and smooth out complexities that might otherwise make life unlivable" (2019, p. 7–8). QAnon's beliefs make life livable for adherents, and their communicative resources amount to affective, collective identity-constructing "everyday practices." Taken together, these theoretical frames allow for a holistic understanding of *the political epistemology of QAnon*; that is, they allow QAnon's truth- and sense-making processes to be seen in its (1) paradigmatic set of truths, (2) set of communicative resources, (3) influential collective identity, (4) interpretive practices, and (5) ideology formation that actively makes sense of current events.

In the sections that follow, I identify five of the most prevalent narrative tenets in QAnons' communication. Employed in structured expression, these tenets construct the QAnon identity, interpret the social world, and are embodied in the political behavior of adherents. Most importantly, for QAnons these tenets *are* the conspiracy theory, but for this analysis, we treat them as distinct communicative forms that enable certain beliefs, logics, and actions. Some tenets are common to studies of conspiracy, but by engaging with them on the level of individuals, we see how they actually play out to constitute QAnon itself, allowing for a nuanced understanding of conspiratorial belief systems. This addresses the ongoing trend in conspiratorial studies, which aims to treat conspiracy theorists not as engaged in irrational, anti-political responses but as "a rational attempt to understand social reality" by "more or less normal people" (Hofstadter, [1964] 2012, p. 4). While this trend is well-intentioned, it privileges an overbroad notion of rationality that doesn't exist in politics, so this paper gives depth to a political ideology that doesn't quite fit into the binary of rationality or irrationality. Instead, I focus on "ordinary moments of disavowal"—moments when QAnons

recognize narrative contradictions or justify inconsistencies—to allow for the holding of paradoxical ideas in mind in order to grapple with a complex and harsh reality (Polletta, 2019, p. 12–15; Wedeen, 2019, p. 9–12).

QAnon's Discursive Tenets

These five sections construct QAnon's ideology through its central narrative tenets: while there are other tenets to QAnon, these five are prominent and distinctive, each contributing a different form to QAnon ideology. If ideologies function to narrativize the world, then these tenets tell the story of QAnon: first, "everything is planned" lays out QAnon's plot, revealing how QAnons believe history to be unfolding and what actions they are afforded within that storyline. Second, "good versus evil" establishes the parameters for conflict. Third, "the protagonist" denotes how each QAnon sees themselves as a part of this story. Fourth, "trust no one" sets ground rules for what information is allowed into the story—essentially, what is within the story's canon. And fifth, "personal problems, political solutions" leverages the previous four tenets to suggest why this story is relevant to each QAnon, what each protagonist believes they are fighting for. At every turn, these tenets assist QAnons in thinking through and responding to the world's conflicts, allowing followers to be hypocritical, inconsistent, and alternatively rational or irrational—which is not to reify such distinctions but to demonstrate their lack of purchase in discussing how QAnons actually think.

Everything Is Planned: Pacifying Dissidence and Mobilizing Panic

> "The show's the show; the movie was written long ago. You can quote me on that."
> —Patrick, software salesman

Douglas's hope that "the best is yet to come" is typical of the first QAnon tenet: *everything is planned.* Consistent with literature on conspiracy theories (Aupers, 2012), QAnons read intention into all actions. This goes hand-in-hand with one of the most widely circulated Q phrases: "trust the plan." In the form of a hashtag, image caption, or conversational phrase, QAnons employ these three words to signal faith in the movement and compliance with a higher power. This theme appeared early on in QAnon, with Q's third post instructing followers to "Trust in your president," succeeded by a post assuring readers that, "Patriots are in control. Sit back and enjoy the show." While trust and predestination emerged early on, it wasn't until half a year (and 668 posts) into the conspiracy theory that Q would employ the phrase "trust the plan," which would become one of the movement's most familiar rallying cries.

The phrase allowed QAnons to interpret ongoing events in favor of their ideals: When Donald Trump faced a loss at the polls, QAnons clung to a forthcoming "red wave" forecasted by Q, and when that landslide of Republican support didn't manifest, Trump's loss was positively reconstructed. Supporters propagated a variety of theories: Trump had to lose to reveal the incoming president's incompetence, Trump didn't actually lose and was using the election to entrap fraudulent Democrats, or

Trump had to lose to operate without constant scrutiny. Unfulfilled prophecy after unfulfilled prophecy, QAnons returned to their tried and true "plan."

However, it is an oversimplification to view QAnons as passive observers of an unfolding script; instead, the ethos of *everything is planned* acted as the justification for engaging in aggressive action because QAnons are asked to hold two impossible ideas in mind at once. On the one hand, they must accept that the plan is working, which gives them energy to respond to the other hand: the idea that the plan is rapidly falling apart. Patrick, a software salesman whose run-ins with the US's legal systems left him wary of government, bragged about organizing anti-lockdown protests because the rise of Democratic leaders' authority in COVID-19 prevention measures was definitely *not the plan*. Protests that tried to disrupt vote counting during the November election, as well as the January 6th insurrection, resulted from the notion that the plan required assistance to keep it going. Take Patrick's interpretation of the vaccine rollout:

> Patrick: . . . do you remember who Trump said is going to [deliver vaccines]?
>
> Interviewer: No.
>
> Patrick: The military. And nobody questions that . . . I'll tell you what it means. It means soon, now, next month . . . He's going round up these fucking pedophiles . . . child porn, child trafficking, drugs, laundering, money, bankers, just corporate leaders, every sort of scumbag . . . . That's who's getting the "vaccine." . . . that's where all of us as patriots have been called to be prepared, have food, have water . . . be able to protect yourself, your family, take care of yourself.

For Patrick, the vaccine rollout was not an aberration of the plan, but it also required QAnons to act. Thus, *everything is planned* both pacified QAnons as critics of the ruling administration and mobilized QAnons as aggressors against that administration's opponents.

Appearing in tens of thousands of tweets, "trust the plan" helped true QAnon adherents recognize one another as devout and silenced dissent. It laid out the general plot of QAnon, and it told QAnons how they should move that plot along. Further, it gave followers a sense that their ideology must be true without requiring any real-world evidence because the plan was inherently a secret. This allowed for the construction of a collective identity that was primed to aggressively counter opposition and accept failure without losing energy. By infinitely offering different interpretations of "the plan," QAnons remained hopeful but inconsistent. A major component of these plans involved determining who to work with and against: the good and the evil.

Good versus Evil: Setting Moral Parameters for Conflict

> "I think when people learn about how evil our world is . . . it's hard to see. It's hard to know, and it's hard to turn your head back."—Lisa, real estate agent

On screen, a dystopic vision of the United States flickers into view as a haunting orchestral score crescendos out of its lowest notes: city streets are lined with tents, police cars ram into traffic, and fighter jets soar above fences of barbed wired. In a subdued baritone, the narrator asks, "What if I told you that those who were corrupting the world . . . were themselves about to be permanently eradicated from the Earth?" The video comes from one of QAnon's most prolific content creators who would compile evocative footage of both horror and triumph to spread a key message: the world is a dangerous place. His videos were overwhelming, but their tension was released by the inevitable cure to all social ills: QAnon, the "good guys."

These videos are indicative of what Aupers (2012) discusses as a disenchantment from an increasingly rationalized world. Faced with complex, inscrutable systems of finance, governance, and culture, people feel alienated from power and change which leads them to conspiracy theories that explain away nuance with a simpler story: the things you dislike are evil, and the things you want in their place are good. For QAnons, this ethos is innately tied to moralism. As Scott writes, "Moralism is an expression of resentment and anger . . . It individualizes social problems, blaming those who would point them out for having caused them in the first place" (2019, p. 26–27). The double-defense of disenchantment and moralism means that QAnons allow their anger to dismiss nuanced explanations of the world's troubles as not only incorrect but immoral. Such thinking was frequent following the protests against police brutality, as it was common for followers to suggest that those who pointed out racism (such as Black Lives Matter activist groups) were the real racists for diagnosing race as a relevant problem: The conservative response was simpler in its construction of homogenous good ("All lives") versus evil (death).

This elaboration of QAnon's logic demonstrates that "good" and "evil" are not objective and shared values but are instead contextually contingent and socially constructed. Many QAnons expressed sentiments indicative of "nostalgic deprivation" (Gest et al., 2018)—that is, they longed for a past America that they felt they had lost or would never be allowed to experience, which meant that "goodness" was tied up with more conservative American values such as criminal punishment, Christianity, heterosexuality, and whiteness writ large. However, this was often implicitly communicated, as QAnons' deference to the paradigms of good and evil allowed them to mask their moral warrants. While it is easy to see this as a continuation of traditional conservativism, such an analysis ignores that QAnons made their beliefs appear apolitical in their moral deference. "It's not about Republicans and Democrats, it's about good and evil," was a common turn of phrase. One informant, who initially described herself as a Q-skeptic, actively worked to hide this moral paradigm, telling me, ". . . both sides think the other side is evil and . . . they can't both be right. I don't think either side is evil, but there definitely are two sides now." Even in her hesitancy, there is a sense of disavowal: she is stating that there is not a good side and an evil side, but there is one she has chosen. Perhaps ambivalently, she eventually became more polarized, with later online posts equating liberalism to torture and leftism to genocide. Thus, despite QAnons' close ties to conservativism, the *good versus evil* tenet effectively disambiguated politics in order to reassign a moral value to each party, which

demonstrated a deepening of their political allegiances: the other side was not just another party but a force of evil. By allowing QAnons to analyze anything through this moral lens, they could prioritize morality over truth, smoothing out ideological contradictions.

Further, the *good versus evil* tenet often resonated with extant beliefs and made legible the grounds for ideological uptake. Appeals to "goodness" (read: White, traditional, Christian) allowed for easy recognition from other members or easier indoctrination, often presenting overbroad moral statements that lacked nuance (e.g., law enforcement is good, therefore all people who support law enforcement are good people) and could disguise the hidden agendas of malicious actors. In this way, the *good versus evil* tenet could absorb and contextualize other political beliefs and values, such as the value of free speech or the need to secure national borders. Corroboration was fueled by the persistent fear-mongering of social media: every time another news story launched about terrible events in the world, QAnons' actions were validated. QAnon's second biggest recruitment surge (following the COVID-19 lockdowns) was its appeal to mothers as defenders of children. When accomplice of arrested pedophile Jeffrey Epstein, Ghislaine Maxwell, was taken into custody, QAnons saw this as verification of their beliefs and actions. QAnon successfully proved to itself that it was the good guys to make its ideology unassailable. With these moral designations, the parameters for conflict were established, now it was about choosing sides—and being the good guy.

The Protagonist: Constructing the QAnon Self

> "I've always been a critical thinker. I was the kid that could decipher the important stuff from the garbage. Teachers liked me . . . because I asked the right questions and sparked discussion. The questions that challenged them even."—Derrick, travel enthusiast

At the heart of QAnon is its devoted base of followers, many of whom have been subject to the ridicule of mainstream media, politicians, and their friends and family. Their life narratives are integral to understanding how the conspiracy was so appealing. However, it is crucial to distinguish between the structural forces that researchers ascribe to conspiratorial uptake and the reasonings that QAnons themselves provide; the latter of these two explanations is more in line with the emic approach of discourse analysis, and so in this section I address the ethos of the self: how is the "QAnon follower" constructed by QAnon followers?

The opening quotation of this section provides one of their most frequent explanations: to be a QAnon, one must be a critical thinker. One informant described her family dynamic as an elaborate, ongoing political dialogue. Her husband reads "thousands and thousands" of books, with a deeper knowledge of American history than "most college professors." They passed this down to their children, who have a love of reading as well. Time and again, informants discussed how they stood out in their childhood education. For them, their intellect indicated other sensitivities: some informants always felt as though something about politics and the media was "off," with multiple informants signaling that their awakening happened after a disquieting political event,

such as the assassination of JFK, the events of September 11th, or the most recent outbreak of a deadly global flu. Whether it was their tendency to stand outside of mainstream thought, feelings of being an outsider, discomfort with group settings, or even OCD, autism, and ADHD diagnoses, they recognized that something enabled them to see what others could not.

They made themselves, in some sense, the protagonists of the conspiracy theory—a characterization they'd disagree with: they saw themselves as special, but theirs was a humble, reluctant, necessary, victimized participation. Humble because, as many followers put it, they were "just" hardworking, attentive Americans who were but a small part of a larger plan; reluctant because the knowledge of the cruelty of the world was a burden; necessary because they believed that there was no other option but participation; and victimized because they were underdogs fighting a power greater than themselves. Constant references to "other people" clarified this dual logic, as one informant said, "Some people are not willing to examine ideas that make them feel uncomfortable. Learning the truth can be painful. Living a lie can be easy."

This discursive analysis is antithetical to how many mainstream media outlets have portrayed QAnon. Even the best-intentioned discussions of class or religion miss the mark on viewing QAnons how they view themselves. At worst, news outlets and politicians call followers crazy, paranoid, or cultish; at best, they characterize them as victims of poverty, Evangelicalism, or skillful media manipulation equal to mind control. The top search result for "what is QAnon?" comes from the BBC, who have a fair account of the theory, but do briefly frame the followers' beliefs as absurd, with the heading "Nobody actually believes it, right?" (Wendling, 2021). Meanwhile, Buzzfeed made a point of terming the movement a "collective delusion," and while they explicitly avoid delusion as a "mental disorder," their justification equivocates, calling the movement "cartoonish" and "dangerous" (Moorhouse & Malone, 2020). When the U.S. House of Representatives voted to condemn the movement, they termed it a "sick cult" (Davis, 2020).

But for QAnons, the opposite could not be more true, as entrance into the theory is indicative of something special about the followers: they are not just smart or moral, but *particularly* smart and moral. To be called crazy was thus a direct assault on their special identity within this group, digging them even deeper into the QAnon identity. Their idols—like Donald Trump—were also lambasted by the mainstream media, so it was something of a badge of honor to be lumped together with "crazy" people. One informant welcomed the calls for craziness, assured that QAnon would prove itself to be true: "It just exposes the fakeness of the fake news." The discrepancy between how QAnons perceive themselves and how the media portrays them exemplifies the inherent difficulty of these two groups ever communicating productively.

In many ways, the centering of individual uniqueness in a supposedly anonymous movement that exists above the desire for power is another act of mental contradiction: QAnons could be anyone and everyone, but in the eyes of these supposed "anyones," they are uniquely equipped to do this sort of thinking and research. In QAnons' minds however, this is not a paradox and is instead easily resolved: QAnon can be open to everyone while primarily attracting the people with the necessary skills and

backgrounds to participate. Importantly, the centering of individuals constructed them as vectors through which discourse flowed, rendering the generation of collective identity through structured expression even more vital to individuals.

Trust No One: Truth as Survivalism

> "The whole Q movement is like, 'This is the information; think for yourself.' And then if somebody comes to a different conclusion . . . leave them alone."—Eva, housewife

At its core, QAnon is an anti-establishment and anti-intellectual movement, but it is one that has leveraged scientific language to present itself as rooted in objectivity and research, a shift that is not unlike journalists' turn to empiricism in the early 1900s (Uscinski, 2018). The movement developed following the election of Donald Trump, and it played into the rhetoric that, even once in power, Trump was an outsider who had to work covertly to create change because the establishment class would be working against him. In the mythos of QAnon, having an outsider in the White House would only highlight the power of the establishment, as the cabal would soon do anything in their power to stop him. Despising mainstream media, the government, and public education, QAnons conclude that no one is trustworthy. Instead, as protagonists, QAnons are gifted with the insights that allow them to properly decipher the truth.

An initial dilemma arises: without access to insider knowledge, how exactly are QAnons supposed to construct an alternative narrative? Q, an alleged military contact, provides them not with answers but with questions, leaving QAnons on their own to construct the narrative. And this is where "no one" becomes blurry: QAnons do trust *other QAnons*. However, their knowledge is never seen as absolute but as responsive. Since QAnons are *interpreting* Q's messages, they recognize that their beliefs can only ever be proximate to the truth, easily shaped by current events. One informant, a QAnon YouTuber, made a video titled "Things That Make You Go Hmmmm . . . " In it, the audience is presented with often inscrutable images, such as a side-by-side photo of two famous blonde celebrities from different time periods. Understanding this image requires a familiarity with QAnon's interpretative logic. In QAnon logic, the image suggests that it is the same woman who has stayed young by consuming the blood of child, but this is only a liminal interpretation—not yet proven or disproven—and thus a liminal truth. QAnon allows followers to linger in the affective space of the "hmmmm," entertaining an interpretation that is infrequently confirmed or denied. The paradox of "trust no one" yet "trust other QAnons" is something of an epistemic survivalism: to accept absolute truth is to paint themselves into a corner, so they must embrace their outsider role and accept liminal truths that they treat as absolute indefinitely.

Following this, it is easy to understand the *trust no one* tenet as a bold-faced lie: QAnons *do* trust people who play into their confirmation bias. While it is true that QAnons place their faith in promoters or alternative news sources on the basis of their predisposed beliefs, their faith is always fraught. They don't engage in permanent belief but liminal belief, and with that, perpetual forms of disavowal, in which "the power of

ideology comes into especially bold relief, with subjects hailed into a position where the realities that can no longer be denied can still be dismissed" (Wedeen, 2019, p. 164). This creates a fissure between belief and knowledge, and from that a fissure between knowledge and actions, as QAnons will frequently say, "I don't know if it's confirmed or not," hedging their bets, but they will act as if it *is true.* They will deny accepted truth for the sake of liminal information, acknowledge the information's liminal status, and then act on the liminal information as if it is the known information.

During the wave of misinformation following the 2020 presidential election, many QAnons denied that they could prove the election to be false, but they attended protests and spread misinformation as if their belief was certain—the cost of inaction, were the election to be stolen, was too great. They simultaneously accepted multiple known truths and multiple liminal truths: Trump had lost the election, but perhaps the election was rigged, therefore Trump had not lost the election, which means they would act at once as if Trump had won and Trump had lost. Thus, the *trust no one* tenet allows QAnons to act on liminal interpretations and then deny their faith later should their initial interpretations have been wrong. By instilling a deep sense of distrust, QAnons are excused for inconsistent beliefs. This is seen in their social media, where sharing misinformation is an acceptable tactic for confirming whether or not something is misinformation, regardless of the ramifications of its increased visibility. There is a great deal of power in this liminal truth, as doubt is transformed into certainty. Questions, under a different political epistemology, may be asked with earnest doubt, but in QAnon, they are leveraged to excuse unfounded certainty in the very things called into question: "What if the election was rigged?" becomes "The election was rigged," as uncertainty becomes actionable truth.

Personal Problems, Political Solutions: The QAnon Narrative's Optimistic Epilogue

> "I'm really glad the kids got taken out of school and got to spend time with their parents. And when I was telling you about the 16-year-old, now it's completely different. It's almost like they were in an environment where 'hate your parents' was being beamed into their heads."—Mary, church leader and retired weapons engineer

QAnon's protagonist ethos is complemented by the frequent invocation of the second person in Q's communication with their adherents. All messages are written with followers as the agent of any question, and when not directly addressing adherents, Q refers to everyone as a collective "us" or "we." But "you" has two different valences for QAnon followers: the use of a direct "you" and hypothetical "you," with the former shown in Q's 4,880th post, which reads,

> Without you, collectively, there would have been no way to bypass their control.
>
> They weren't about to repeat the mistake(s) of 2016.
>
> You are what matters most. . .
>
> WELCOME TO THE DIGITAL BATTLEFIELD.

Here, Q addresses each follower as a soldier on the digital battlefield opposing the evil cabal ("they") who must now adapt their 2020 election strategies to not "repeat the mistake(s) of 2016" because they are afraid of the power of the QAnons. QAnons are treated as individually historically significant. But the hypothetical "you" often motivates QAnons to think about the actions of the "evil" as the result of powerful people's personal decisions, as in Q's tenth post: ". . . good people were forced into bed with this evil under personal and family threats. Could you live with yourself helping to cover up such evil despicable acts if given a safe way out?" This framing suggests that if QAnons were given power, then they wouldn't abuse it for evil but would accomplish their righteous agenda. As will be demonstrated, it is in the negotiation of these two "you's" that QAnon's discursive tenets converge, the crux of the conspiracy theory.

At once, QAnons' status as direct, victimized protagonists is reiterated—direct "you," *personal problems*—while their chance at moral victory through a political revolution is highlighted—hypothetical "you," *political solutions.* QAnon's hypothetical "you" situates followers in the driver's seat, they are asked to imagine what they would do with great power. And what would they do? They would let *good beat evil* by *following the plan* and *trusting no one*, becoming the *protagonist* of the story that is QAnon. Together, the discourses create a political frame from which QAnons can approach affectual, individual issues.

In the opening quotation for this section, Mary's personal familial problems are viewed as the result of a corrupt public education system. Thus, she prefers homeschooling, which she believes QAnon will expand. Samantha, a victim of childhood abuse in the foster care system, ascribed her trauma to an evil system of foster services, and described her solution,

> I know that I'm here to make a difference. And if I were to do anything and it would be my wildest fucking dream to be able to give a speech at Washington DC and like, just talk about this kind of stuff and how it affects people. Like, I would love to plan and organize something like that and talk about it.

QAnon's plan for saving the world has given her the chance to be the protagonist, to speak her truth, to counter evil: it has given her a political solution to a personal crisis.

This theme is also indicative of how QAnons leverage misinterpreted contemporary social theory as their own. QAnons are correct to suggest that top-down government policies can affect the quality of their lives, but they use the language of social justice or systemic discrimination to suggest that they can't be held accountable for their own personal failings, especially when those systems are not in fact as biased against them as QAnons would like to believe. This demonstrates that nuanced analyses of institutionalized issues regarding class or race are accessible to conspiracy theorists, even if they are inadequately applied. More powerful than coherent social critiques is communal reification, so when followers express their frustration with systems like public education or foster care, their online communities validate such grievances, reinforcing that Q will solve their collective personal issues. QAnons employ a volley of conspiratorial logic, sometimes mixing it with logic from

elsewhere, and justify that, for all of the grand plans, the moral battles, and the sources of lies, the political world is supposed to cater to the protagonist, the personal. Through this final tenet they imagine the optimistic epilogue where personal ills are remedied post-revolution.

Conclusion

Sociologists and anthropologists of conspiracy theory tend to suggest that conspiratorial logic is in some way absolute and all-consuming: flowing from their political oppression, mental instability, media brainwashing, or lack of education, conspiracy theorists subscribe to simplistic, irrational narratives. In trying to establish a rational approach to conspiracy theories, rationality itself was pathologized, rendering conspiracy theorists no more than the brainwashed drones of particular ways of thinking. However, this pathologizing neglects conspiracy theorists' capacity for paradox, contradiction, and disavowal, a capacity shared by non-conspiracy theorists.

Few phrases may be more demonstrative of QAnons' capacity for contradiction than their typical reply to accusations of being brainwashed: "No cult tells you to think for yourself." Paradoxically, the rebuttal champions followers' claim to independent, critical thinking through the use of a dogmatic phrase that excuses them from deeper self-reflection. This paper has demonstrated that followers' independent thought is deeply influenced by larger, communally-driven beliefs that give them ideological flexibility, enabling a constant play between collective narrative and personal projection—no two QAnons are alike. Generally, then, their community narratives generate collective identity and action, confine contemporary political issues within moral binaries, give followers a sense of purpose, turn doubt into certainty, and offer solutions to personal problems. Importantly, the details of these stories are demonstrative of how QAnon's larger ideas play out in the minds of followers, guiding their actions and beliefs. With the rise of conspiracy theories has come an equal rise in work attempting to debunk and deradicalize followers, but these stories also evidence how emotional, communal, personal, and flexible truth becomes, rendering cold, rational, fact-checking processes ineffectual.

Thus, while the content of conspiracy theories automatically privileges an "othering" analysis, this othering may in turn teach us more about the rationality of non-conspiracy theorists by juxtaposition. What is clearly demonstrated in the case of QAnon is how deeply contextual rationality is—it is through shared themes, language, images, and affects that QAnons manage to construct compelling arguments that endear them to the community and translate the political epistemology of QAnon into an embodied set of beliefs. Through structured expression, QAnons employ a variety of logics that, in tandem, constitute collective ideology and are constituted by interpretive communities. The patterns of this logic suggest that QAnons must adhere to certain "rational" ways of thinking, but when this logic is picked apart, it is filled with nuance and ambivalence. That the logic is translated into behavior makes it worth studying because to study only behavior is to misunderstand the motivating forces behind it. Doubtless, more intense scrutiny is placed on conspiracy theorists precisely

because their ways of engaging with the world are often at odds with the social scientist's faith in research and theory, but it is a mistake to think that the same intense scrutiny cannot be applied to groups whose logic we implicitly assume to be more rational due to our own judgments about its truth-value. In any case, political truth must be stored in individuals and take on all the complexity an individual holds.

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