Moving from Critiques to Conspiracy Theories:

How Misinformation Turned into Conspiracy Theory through QAnon and the Potential Detriments to Society

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Figure 1. Instagram. (2020). "Pastel QAnon": The female lifestyle bloggers and influencers spreading conspiracy theories through Instagram [Image]. Retrieved October 20, 2020. https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/pastel-qanon-the-female-lifestyle-blogg.

Approximately six months ago, in May 2020, I began seeing online posts about child trafficking. At first, I did not pay them much attention because while child trafficking is a concern, especially within the ICE detention camps in the United States, I was more focused on the Black Lives Matter movement, which is a mass protest against racial discrimination and police brutality. However, something curious happened. I started to notice these posts had hashtags declaring support for Donald Trump and asking people to take the red pill (Figure 1). These posts then caught my full attention. My friends and I used to make fun of people talking about taking the "red pill," after learning a scene from The Matrix *was commonly used by men's rights activists to describe "learning" about the toxicity of feminism and women's true desire to be controlled and manipulated, as New Stateman journalist, Tait describes (2017, para. 7). As a female Interactive Arts and Technology major, I then became interested in the connection between child trafficking and men's rights activism. The right-wing stance of these posts also intrigued me because Trump has had multiple sexual assault charges filed against*

him, including by his ex-wife, Ivana Trump, which journalist, Mindock comprehensively lists (2020, para. 9). At the time, I was cautiously curious about these posts. QAnon provided me with a glimpse into ideologies I previously never knew about, all showing clear rhetorical and contextual inaccuracies that showed deeper issues with the spread of misinformation in online spaces.

Echo chambers and the spread of misinformation are crucial discussions, especially in online spaces. However, the appearance of a widely known conspiracy theory called Pizzagate has increased the concern around these topics. Over the last three years, Pizzagate was then replaced by QAnon, a more expansive and dangerous online conspiracy theory. Figure 1 (2020) shows an Instagram post of common rhetoric around QAnon, including calls to "save our children" and "drain the swamp." These two phrases both refer to one aspect of QAnon, which argues that the American Democratic Party runs a satanic underground child sex ring, which Trump actively fights against. The effects of conspiracy theories cannot be underestimated. Author at the Washington Post, Craig Timberg explains the impact of Donald Trump refusing to disavow QAnon during the Republican Town Hall on October 15th, 2020 (2020, para. 1). Online QAnon groups expressed mass approval of his lack of recognition while failing to critically examine his strong political motivations for encouraging the group to undermine his political competitors (Timberg, 2020, para. 6). If the president of the United States refuses to dismiss harmful misinformation about his competitors engaging in illegal activities, then measuring the potential harm echo chambers and misinformation online causes through conspiracy theories becomes immensely difficult. This paper then argues that QAnon takes advantage of issues around misinformation and echo chambers, as well as its legitimization by Trump to spread potentially harmful ideas.

Given the immense impact of QAnon, we must understand where QAnon came from. As mentioned before, QAnon came from the conspiracy theory, Pizzagate. Tangherlini, Shahsavari,

Shahbazi, Ebrahimzadeh, and Roychowdhury, professors from the University of California, Los Angeles, outline the Pizzagate conspiracy theory (2020, p. 4). During Pizzagate, Hillary Clinton was alleged to have participated in human trafficking and satanic rituals; the name comes from an inventive analysis of her leaked emails by an online community (Tangherlini et al., 2020, p. 4). The analysis argued that every mention of "pizza" in her emails was secretly code for an underground child sex ring that ran out of a pizza parlour in Seattle (Tangherlini et al., 2020, p. 4). Figure 1 (2020) showed overwhelming concern for child trafficking, which is what Pizzagate argued was happening in the American Democratic Party. QAnon is then the spiritual successor of Pizzagate, given the similar topics and critique of the Democratic Party.

While the same themes from Pizzagate are present in QAnon, determining the exact beliefs of QAnon is a muddied process. QAnon is a conspiracy theory that includes a wide variety of beliefs and conspiracies about the world. Andrews, a Washington Post journalist, interviewed Jitarth Jadeja, a former believer of QAnon. Jadeja explains that QAnon first began in 2017 when "Q" appeared in online messaging boards, claiming to be a government insider who leaks classified information online (Andrews, 2020, para. 6). Many people from Pizzagate moved onto QAnon after the 2016 election with widespread belief in Clinton's child sex rings appearing in these communities. However, those are not the only beliefs justified within QAnon. Jadeja adds that some theories legitimized within QAnon include the Earth being flat and celebrities being shape-shifting lizard people from space (Andrews, 2020, para. 10). Through this method, all conspiracy theories are legitimized through QAnon, even ones that can have a lasting impact. A journalist from the Guardian, Wong (2020), mentions several other theories mixed in with QAnon, including JFK being alive, the Rothschild family controlling all banks, and Jewish cabals vying for world domination (para. 6; para. 9). QAnon then takes advantage of pre-existing

conspiracy theories and uses them to create a larger narrative. This conspiracy theory then becomes dangerous for two major reasons, the spread of discriminatory narratives and epistemic faults.

Figure 2. Flores, S. (2020). An anti-mask protester holds up a sign that reads "My body, my choice," at the Texas State Capitol on April 18, 2020 in Austin [Image]. NBC News*. Retrieved from https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/covid-19-mask-mandates-w*

QAnon's ability to co-opt other conspiracy theories has made it especially impactful but also more dangerous. Figure 2 (2020) depicts a sign from an anti-mask protest in Austin, Texas. Disbelief in the current global pandemic is yet another example of a conspiracy theory that has been co-opted by QAnon. Spring and Wendling (2020), journalists from BBC, described seeing a huge turn out of QAnon believers at an anti-mask rally in London (para. 5). Disbelief in the global pandemic will impact people's lives as COVID-19 measures are currently put in place to prevent the spread of the deadly illness. Another way that QAnon is dangerous is through its

spread of hate. As mentioned before, several of the theories attached to QAnon involve anti-Semitic beliefs about Jewish groups controlling the world. Professors from University College London, Binghamton University, and Boston University, Papasavva, Blackburn, Stringhini, Zannettou, and De Cristofaro conducted a study on QAnon posts, which found that many posts within these groups were hateful and racist, and many QAnon users were also on groups called "C**nTown," "N*gger," and "Fatpeoplehate" (community names have been censored due to use of racial slurs) (2020, p. 11). These tendencies likely reflect the major demographic of QAnon users, explaining why discrimination is central to these communities. To build on its spread of hate, QAnon and conspiracy theories, in general, have major epistemic issues. A professor from Charles Sturt University, Clarke explains that conspiracy theorists use their theory to explain their evidence, rather than the other way around (2002, p. 135). Therefore, they can then account for any conflicting evidence without changing their perspective. Evidence against Jewish groups controlling the world and the pandemic not existing then gets incorporated into QAnon theorists' pre-existing beliefs.

The issues with QAnon have been largely encouraged by the spread of misinformation online. According to professors from the Sapienza and Boston Universities, Del Vicario, Bessi, Zollo, Petroni, Scala, Caldarelli, Stanley, and Quattrociocchi, "[d]igital misinformation has become so pervasive in online social media that it has been listed by the [World Economic Forum] as one of the main threats to human society" (2016, p. 558). Ultimately, QAnon encourages and justifies the spread of misinformation while posing it as fact. Additionally, Del Vicario et al. point out that when misinformation spreads online, combatting it becomes difficult because of how the information fits into group belief and identity (2016, p. 558). Given that belief in conspiracy theories is already an identifier for these online communities, they become

increasingly likely to believe other misinformation spread within these groups. For example, if a user entered a QAnon group already believing in Pizzagate, they then become more likely to believe the other conspiracy theories attached to QAnon, including ones that discriminate against marginalized groups.

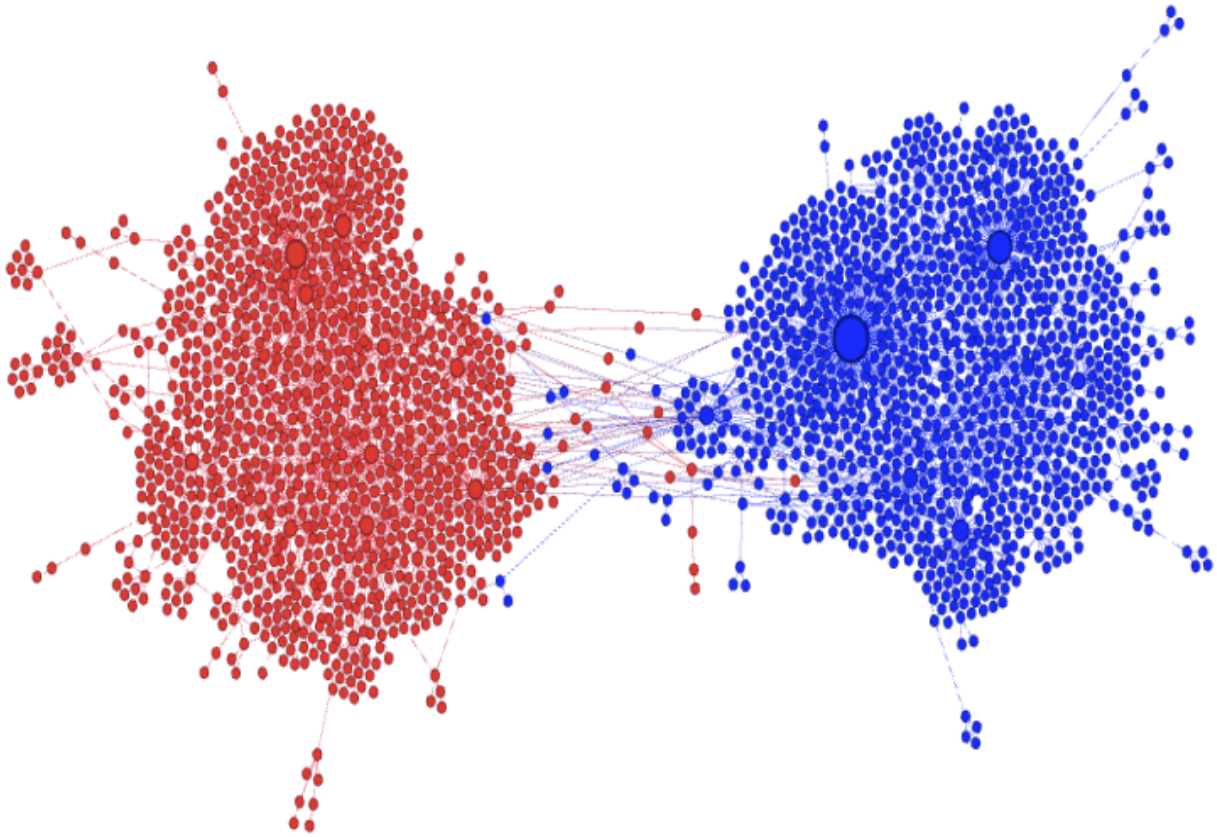

Figure 3. Jiang, M., & Leskovec, J. (2018). Echo-chamber formation on #beefban [Image]. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Social-media-platforms-can-produce-echo-chambers-which-lead-to-polarization-and-can_fig4_322971747.

Misinformation does not spread because people are information illiterate, although that is a common narrative around misinformation online. Figure 2 (2018) shows the division between two groups in an online debate about banning beef. While there is a lot of overall interaction, the two sides hardly interacted with one another. The same structure of interaction happens in most online communities, including QAnon communities. Two professors from the Nanyang

Technological University, Chen and Sin argue that misinformation spreads online due to the interaction between news, self-expression, and socialization (2013, p. 3). More simply, people spread information on social media because of their personal beliefs and support of their online communities. People who believe in QAnon are then more likely to interact with members of the same community about their beliefs because those conversations only confirm group membership. Therefore, when misinformation, including conspiracy theories, enters an online group, the members of the community are unlikely to be exposed to differing perspectives, creating an echo chamber.

Echo chambers and misinformation had a large impact on public discontent after the 2016 American election. Justwan, Baumgaertner, Carlisle, Clark and Clark are all professors from the University of Idaho and Northern Illinois University. After the 2016 American election, they published a study on echo chambers in the Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties that found most people in the study felt their online friends and followers had similar political beliefs (Justwan et al., 2018, p. 425). Facebook and Twitter use specific algorithms that make it more likely for users to see the content they agree with. Justwan et al. argue these algorithms affected satisfaction rates because the close results did not reflect the opinions the study participants saw on social media (2018, p. 430). Given that Pizzagate strongly supports Trump, the dissatisfaction was likely strongly felt by its supporters because they were less likely to come across differing opinions. Within this framework, Pizzagate believers would feel that Trump's victory should have been a landslide and then encouraged them to find frameworks explaining how close the election was. Kusune, a professor at the University of Kanazawa, builds on this argument by explaining that spreading political information online makes social media users feel like they are participating in politics (2018, p. 5). Using these conspiracy theory communities

then becomes a way of making political beliefs known, regardless of whether the members of the community spread misinformation or believed things that were inherently harmful to marginalized groups.

Today, the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories online have larger consequences. Stojanoy and Halberstadt, professors from the University of Otago, argue that conspiracy theories merely show a healthy but misplaced skepticism about global politics, based on a study they conducted (2019, p. 229). Their counterargument to the danger of conspiracy theories is understandable. Skepticism can be extremely important when systemic injustice, climate change, and corruption are major global issues. However, my response to this argument about conspiracy theories is that skepticism must be accompanied by accurate information and critical thinking skills. As explained before, conspiracy theorists do not use their evidence to explain their theory, preventing them from realizing the inaccuracies in their knowledge. Within echo chambers, those perspectives then get repeatedly legitimized by other members of the community. The misinformation itself is also harmful to marginalized groups, resulting in higher stakes than skepticism around politics.

Misinformation, echo chambers, and conspiracy theories have caused dangerous tendencies within online groups, such as Facebook or Twitter. Misinformation is currently difficult to combat in online echo chambers because sharing information reflects personal belief rather than fact. Therefore, when conspiracy theorists enter these groups, their theories take on a life of their own and have significant sway over political discourse, such as Pizzagate and QAnon. Further harm may result from these groups, especially because echo chambers further legitimize their perspectives. Banning hate speech and shutting down QAnon groups may be a strong initial response to these conspiracy theories, as Facebook and Twitter have already done.

However, more long-term measures also need to be taken. More thorough education about critical thinking and echo chambers should be introduced and implemented from a young age. Overall, recognizing misinformation and conspiracy theories as potentially dangerous is a necessary step in our current societal context, including COVID-19 and systemic injustice.

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