

Environmental Impact: Media Ecology and QAnon

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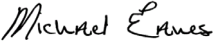
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Abstract

This thesis studies the proliferation of conspiracy theories, specifically QAnon, to determine how the media environment, including various media channels, audiences, and messages, played a factor in the group's growth. QAnon grew from a relatively obscure branch of the alt-right movement into a mob capable of storming the Capitol Building in early 2021. Applying media ecology framework to the QAnon phenomenon, this research investigates the media environment where QAnon was facilitated by using a content analysis of various media surrounding QAnon and those affected by its messages. As a case study, this study reviews comments made about QAnon by Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene to illustrate the group's influence and reach. This study demonstrates that media technology aided QAnon in spreading their conspiracy theories through social media influencers, algorithms, word of mouth, and traditional media. The target audiences of QAnon found in this study included people seeking entertainment and people seeking something bigger than themselves. According to this research, the media environment enabled QAnon to reach its audience. Marjorie Taylor Greene is an example of how fringe beliefs influence an individual with rising political authority due to the media environment surrounding her. Lastly, this research illustrates that limitless information and technology are insufficient resources to combat the spread of conspiracy theories such as QAnon due to their essence being epistemological and inherently part of the human condition.

Keywords: Conspiracy Theories, QAnon, Media Ecology, Neil Postman

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Environmental Impact: Media Ecology and QAnon

This thesis studies the rise and reach of QAnon to see if and how the media environment, including various media channels, audiences, and messages, played a factor in the group's growth. QAnon grew from a relatively obscure branch of the alt-right movement into a massive militia capable of storming the Capitol Building in early 2021. The group influenced regular citizens and affected politicians such as Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who espoused the group's rhetoric. Studying QAnon as both a proponent of conspiracy theories and as the creator of a media environment is important because beliefs often drive actions on an individual and collective level, which in turn bears implications for democracy and free thought (Uscinski, 2020).

This research is useful for furthering the discussion of media and society considering QAnon's ability to influence common citizens and elected officials alike. By analyzing the media channels used and messages created by QAnon, this study will illuminate how a group of individuals who believe in a conspiracy thrived in a media environment and add to a growing body of work regarding the group. Following previous research, this study will view QAnon as both an extension of and resulting from current media technology and the contemporary media ecosystem (Hannah, 2021).

Theoretical Foundation

The nature of this research relies on a critical perspective that views various aspects of the world as flawed and often unequal in power (Baran & Davis, 2021). Accordingly, a free society requires the flow of information and knowledge to be unhindered from the influence of powerful elites. Whereas this concept is frequently applied to governments and corporate elites, the current research evaluates the influence QAnon held over its constituents. Within the purview of critical theory is the conflict between structures, in this case, the social norms created by QAnon, and

agency, whether the consumer of a message has the ability to think freely in a given media environment (Baran & Davis, 2021). Common examples from a critical theory perspective of how media influence a population stem from dystopian fiction literature such as George Orwell's *1984* and Aldus Huxley's *Brave New World* (Baran & Davis, 2021; Postman, 2006). In both cases, media technologies provide mindless self-indulgence to keep the masses unaware of reality and simultaneously feed the masses propaganda.

Critical theory's influence is found in media ecology, manifesting in the idea that changes in media technology often result in drastic changes in both culture and social order (Baran & Davis, 2021). Marshall McLuhan, a founder of media ecology, was a colleague and understudy of Harold Innis, a Canadian political economist with links to the Frankfurt School, the birthplace of critical theory (Stamps, 2001). Through a critical lens and applying media ecology as a framework, this research attempts to understand how media enables an imbalance of power and influenced a portion of the United States population.

Research Questions:

RQ1: How has media technology facilitated QAnon to spread their conspiracy theories and which media channels did they use?

RQ2: Who were their target audiences?

RQ3: How did the media environment enable QAnon to reach their audience?

RQ4: Can phenomena such as QAnon happen again and if so, how?

Literature Review

Conspiracy Theories

QAnon's rise relied heavily on an assortment of conspiracy theories (CT). At first glance, belief in a CT is nothing new. Oliver and Wood (2014) suggested that nearly half of the American

public believes in at least one conspiracy theory. Previous research referred to CTs in various terms such as rumors (Berinsky, 2017), myths (Nyhan et al., 2013), and misinformation or false beliefs (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Other research attempted to differentiate CTs from similar buzzwords such as misinformation, disinformation, and fake news, which have the intention to mislead, deceive, or profit from their spreading (Uscinski, 2020). To better understand how their use of CTs affected the media environment and media consumers, a brief description of conspiracy believers and a definition of CTs must be established.

Douglas et al. (2017) suggested that belief in CTs is primarily driven by epistemic, existential, and social motives. An epistemic motive involves the knowledge or information environment in which a believer lives. Within this environment, individuals may be more inclined toward conspiracy beliefs if there is a level of uncertainty present (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). The believer attempts to divine what will happen next through the conspiratorial belief, therefore satisfying the need for certainty. Another factor in epistemic motives is randomness (van Prooijen et al., 2018; van der Wal et al., 2018). In this case, believers attempt to connect the dots between un-related events thinking that there is a hidden knowledge to be discovered about why the events occurred or by whose authority.

A last facet of epistemic motives may be religious in nature. Franks et al. (2013), found that beliefs in conspiracy theories are comparable to those found in beliefs in institutionalized religions and can mimic the uptake and spread of religious beliefs as well. Wood and Douglas (2018) argued that CTs appear to fulfill some of the same psychological needs as religious beliefs systems, such as establishing a sense of order in the chaos of randomness. CTs also share similarities with content and structure to religious beliefs such as the Manichean cosmology of good versus evil and the fall from grace wherein one group lost power through the interference of

another party and all human endeavors are an attempt to regain that former position of power (Wood & Douglas, 2018).

Aside from epistemic motives, some CT believers have existential motives, which involve attempts to control the person's physical and emotional environment, and social motives which include maintaining a positive self-image in social groups (Douglas et al., 2017). For these believers, CTs may offer a mechanism to differentiate between the individuals or groups who wish to harm and those who wish to help in a given situation. It may also help them to feel a sense of belonging where they may lack it in a local setting. These are a few reasons for people to believe in CTs, but it does not properly define what they are.

According to Douglas et al. (2019), CTs are “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (p. 4). In their strictest sense, CTs question who has the power and how they are using it, thereby accusing an elite or powerful group of conspiring to maintain or gain more control (Uscinski, 2017). According to Uscinski (2020), a conspiracy theory is:

an explanation of past, present, or future events or circumstances that cites, as a primary cause, a conspiracy. Like conspiracies, conspiracy theories involve the intentions and actions of powerful people; for this reason, conspiracy theories are inherently political. Conspiracy theories are accusatory ideas that could be either true or false, and they contradict the proclamations of epistemological authorities, assuming such proclamations exist. (p. 23).

Following this definition where political power as well as epistemological authority is involved, CTs present two problems: action on the part of the people who believe them, which may lead to the destruction of democracy (e.g., the storming of the Capitol building January 6,

2021); and action on the part of those in power through censorship or criticism, which may be detrimental to free speech, free press, and free ideas (Uscinski, 2020). A fundamental issue surrounding CTs is the disagreement over truth, often pitting the political powers who control or use media against the common citizen who both distrusts and disdains the power imbalance. In this regard, individuals who believe in CTs consider the theory to be a fact and otherwise true (Uscinski, 2020). This phenomenon presents a problem for ways of differentiating fact from fiction, and what is known from what is knowable.

From an epistemological perspective, conspiracy theories are hard to disprove. While many of these theories may sound outlandish or outright insane, there is often little concrete evidence to refute them, thus making them non-falsifiable. In a scientific approach, a researcher may nullify a hypothesis if there is enough evidence to do so. The researcher may also get a partial or less-significant acceptance of a hypothesis if some of the theory proved to be accurate. This scientific outlook is also what makes conspiracy theories so pervasive (Uscinski, 2020): there is generally not enough evidence to disprove their hypothesis.

According to Karl Popper, a renowned 20th-century philosopher and social commentator, falsifiability is a basic tenet of scientific research, which means a hypothesis cannot have credibility unless it is disprovable or testable (Caldwell, 1991). Popular examples include the statement, “Unicorns exist” and the assertion that there is a fire-breathing dragon in Carl Sagan’s garage (Sagan, 2011). In the first case, being unable to find a unicorn does not indicate that none exist, but that one has not been found yet (Caldwell, 1991). As for Sagan’s dragon, the inability to nullify the hypothesis that a fire-breathing dragon was in his garage is not the same as proving the claim to be true. Sagan suggested that current evidence strongly denied there being a dragon in his

garage, but if new information emerged, the claim would need to be re-evaluated (Sagan, 2011). The next question is from where does the new data flow?

Remembering the power dynamic involved in media technology, many people do not accept information when it comes from a source or expert who, in their minds, could be part of the conspiracy (Uscinski, 2020). In their mind, individuals believing in CTs frequently view the organizations with legitimate epistemological authority as being deeply entrenched in the elite establishment (Uscinski, 2017). Groups such as colleges and universities, peer-reviewed journals, government institutions, and high-profile journalists fall into this category and hold little weight in the mind of a conspiracy consumer. Compounding this mentality is the issue of efforts to change the mind of these individuals. When an attempt is made, the information conveyed contrary to their beliefs can often have a backfiring effect where they hold tighter to their previously held convictions (Nyhan et al., 2013). Furthering the divide is that few people want to be labeled as conspiracy theorists. Even fewer want their ideas to be labeled as conspiracy theories because the general public sees these terms as derogatory.

The stigma surrounding conspiracy theories skews negative, but there are instances of usefulness prompting one researcher to consider them necessary to a healthy democracy because they help weaker groups balance power through the use of dissent against more powerful elites (Uscinski, 2020). Uscinski (2017) suggested conspiracy theorists are akin to defense lawyers in their approach to the power imbalance in a given society. They generally lose the case to the prosecutors with more evidence, in this case, the epistemological authorities. Even with a losing record, Uscinski (2017) recommended that the defense team should not give up the fight. For him, conspiracy theories are fundamentally “about the views of the strong versus the weak, the pros

versus the amateurs, and the experts versus the novices” (p. 238) where the authorities win more than they lose.

When one hears CT claims, a common response is to think the individual reporting them is ridiculous. It would be easy in many ways to classify CT believers as insane or suffering from some form of mental illness, but for most believers, the ultimate issue stems from the information environment in which they live (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). They either have too much random and often entertaining information, or they have too little verifiable data or focus to parse through fact from fiction. This phenomenon is what Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) called a “crippled epistemology” wherein limited access to informational resources means the consumer either only has or only accepts a small portion of the information as authoritative.

A common thought among some researchers is that right-leaning individuals fall prey to CTs more often than left-leaning, largely due to their level of paranoia about power (Hofstadter, 1964). Current research suggests that CTs affect both sides of the political spectrum. In line with Hofstadter (1964), van der Linden et al. (2021) demonstrated that individuals who slant conservative maintain a high level of paranoia and suffer from a crippled epistemology, whether it is of their own creation or otherwise. Uscinski (2020) believed that much of the research on political bias and CTs is questionable due to how the data is gathered, mainly through self-reporting and questionnaires that have a political bias in how the questions are worded. Regardless of political slant, QAnon and its followers fit the paradigm of a conspiracy theory, if not representing the ultimate conspiracy theory where anything goes, and any relevant information is useful while any that is not gets refuted. Hofstadter (1964) prophetically summed up the nature of QAnon when he wrote that, “The central image is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic

and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life” (p. 29).

QAnon

The social phenomenon known as QAnon began as relatively incoherent posts (Aliapoulios et al., 2021) known as Q drops, on anonymous imageboards such as 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun, then spread rapidly to popular social media sites such as Reddit, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, and even had a presence on more traditional news sources (de Zeeuw et al., 2020). QAnon has ties to earlier conspiracy theories such as Pizzagate (Fisher et al., 2016). One writer described genesis of QAnon as evolving from the Pizzagate conspiracy, which accounts for some of the outlandish beliefs found in QAnon. Hannah (2021) summarized the Pizzagate fiasco:

In 2016, a Twitter account run by a man who presented himself as a New York lawyer tweeted a conspiracy theory that prominent Democrats were involved in a pedophilia ring fronted by Comet Ping Pong, a D.C.-area pizzeria. The theory spread quickly on 4chan, 8chan, and Twitter. After Wikileaks leaked e-mails from [Hillary] Clinton’s campaign manager John Podesta, adherents to the theory began combing the e-mails for coded messages related to supposed pedophile groups. (note 5)

The conspiracy theory eventually led to a man named Edgar Welch opening fire on the pizzeria with an assault rifle hoping to rescue the children supposedly held there (Hsu, 2017). No one was injured, but the incident illustrated the lengths individuals will go with information they believe to be true.

QAnon’s loose ties to Pizzagate and other CTs lead to it being called a “big tent” conspiracy theory and a “meta narrative” (Zuckerman, 2019), meaning it has absorbed and interwoven the ideas and histories of these other theories into a semi-cohesive grand epic, one which is more likely

found at a carnival than a library. Some of Q's followers have brought previous events such as the untimely death of John F. Kennedy Jr. in 1999 and current events such as COVID-19 under the same umbrella (LaFrance, 2020). Even amid the hype, no one is still certain as to who the wizard behind the curtain might be.

The individual, or likely, individuals (OrphAnalytics, 2020) who initiated the online conversation identified themselves "Q Clearance Patriot" or simply as "Q." The significance of this designation is due to the claim of being a government insider with Q level security clearance and insider knowledge that was going to shake the world (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). This knowledge further propagated the suggestion of a world-wide government cabal with Satan-worshipping pedophilic practices. Q also pledged their allegiance to Donald Trump, who was the likely savior from the twisted conspiracy. The Manichean divide and claims of satanic rituals propagated by Q are not new tactics (Vrzal, 2020). The association of satanism, child abduction, and popular culture has an established history, one ripe for the current media landscape and political division (Richardson, et al., 2017; Robertson, 2015). According to QAnon adherents' viewpoint, there is a cosmic battle wherein the Republicans are the 'good,' the Democrats are the 'bad,' and Donald Trump is the messiah sent to save the children and the world from Satan.

The interesting appeal of QAnon for many of its followers was its game-like nature (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018). The search for meaning among the Q posts mimicked what one follower described as an alternate reality game, or ARG (Thompson, 2020). These types of games take the player on a scavenger hunt in search of more information and clues to cracking a code. In similar fashion, QAnon's followers use the Internet's limitless information and search functions to discover and create new meanings for current events (Hannah, 2021; Zuckerman, 2019). QAnon adherents waited for new clues on message boards and then compared them to speeches and tweets

by President Trump and news articles surrounding the election (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018). These followers were encouraged to “dig deeper” and used the “breadcrumbs” to bake new concoctions about the world, but in a way they wanted to see it, not necessarily according to reality.

Armed with the new information and researched revelations, QAnon followers then took to the web in anonymous chat forums such as Reddit (Little, 2018) and social media sites such as Facebook (Holmes, 2020) and Twitter (Conger, 2020), all of which shut down the group’s movement on their respective platforms. The effort to de-platform QAnon did little to stop the movement and likely aided in its growth, both offline and on mainstream media outlets. This accounts for the group’s slogan, “Where We Go One, We Go All” or the hashtag, #WWG1WGA. Kicking a few of the followers off a site only means they re-spawn on another platform such as Voat (Papasavva et al., 2020) and Parler (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). The consistent sharing of Q content across these sites in many ways weaponized the platforms for the group, meaning the more they shared, the more the ideas seemed credible to those sharing them (Freedman, 2020). The algorithms created echo chambers where one’s voice became the loudest and most believable within the platform.

The group’s use of media sites and people’s willingness to believe in something more than what meets the eye allowed it to be so pervasive. In cult-like fashion, followers of Q embrace the full participatory scope of the Internet and media technology (Zuckerman, 2019) making it arguably the first crowd-sourced conspiracy theory due to its networked infrastructure (Hannah, 2021). With unlimited informational resources, Q followers do not seem to suffer from a ‘crippled epistemology’ (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009), but rather the opposite: an “unfettered, unmoderated access to information resources” (Hannah, 2021, para 21).

Aiding the QAnon phenomenon is a group solidarity that often mimics and even plagiarizes Christian doctrine, going so far as to cite Biblical scripture in Q drops (Beaty, 2020). Terms such as “Great Awakening” and “The Storm” echo Christian eschatology including the Day of Judgment or the Great Tribulation (Hannah, 2021). Several researchers believe this is no coincidence and even point to many of the followers having Christian backgrounds intermingled with their sense of patriotism (Hannah, 2021; Miller, 2021a). The trappings of Christianity surrounding QAnon have enabled it to spread similarly to its religious benefactor, an occurrence that is not uncommon to other conspiracy theories (Franks et al., 2013).

One investigator of the phenomenon wrote that, “To look at QAnon is to see not just a conspiracy theory but the birth of a new religion” (LaFrance, 2020, p. 30). Within the new religion, people maintained a suspicion of government, questioned scientific data (on evolution and COVID-19), and held a general rejection of anything from mainstream media. The appropriation of Christian doctrine into other spiritual or social systems is nothing new. It is akin to syncretism wherein Christian beliefs are blended with various myths or differing belief systems and can be seen in Santeria and Christian Scientology (Beaty, 2020).

Methodology

Applying media ecology framework and using a content analysis of various media surrounding the QAnon phenomenon and those affected by its messages, this research investigates the media environment in which QAnon grew. Comments made about QAnon by Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene were reviewed as a case study to see the group’s influence and reach.

Media ecology is as important today as it was when it was formulated in the 1960s. One leading researcher in the tradition stated that media ecology is “a powerful approach for the

purposes of cultural analysis and criticism; for studying human behavior individually and collectively; for understanding human history, our present situation, and our prospects for the future; and for coming to terms with the human condition and how we ourselves create the conditions that in turn condition us” (Strate, 2018, p. 307). The writers and theorists involved in media ecology use an interdisciplinary approach to their evaluation of history, society, culture, and media. The breadth of application within the framework makes it applicable to the nature of the current study.

While much of the literature from early media ecologists discussed radio and the advent of television in opposition to the former typographic world (Postman, 2006), the overarching premise that media technology influences social structures is imperative, if not more so in light of the Internet age. In many ways, McLuhan (1969) prophesied the coming era of Internet dominance concluding that, “all media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment” (p. 4).

According to McLuhan, the medium is the message, meaning the particular medium used to convey a message is as equally, if not more important than the content of the message. To use an analogy by Neil Postman (2006), a student and cohort of McLuhan’s, smoke signals used by Native Americans sent messages from one place to another. These messages were important, but not poetic or philosophical. The person would run out of wood before being able to wax poetic in trying to get a point across. In this manner, the medium used was appropriate to the message being sent. If the person tried to have an existential conversation with a neighbor across the mountain, the medium would not suit the purpose.

Media ecology as a discipline employs ideas and concepts from a host of individuals with the trio of McLuhan, Postman, and Walter Ong being at the top of the heap (Strate, 2004). Each

pioneer in the field brought a different perspective: McLuhan viewed media ecology as a means of practical application; Ong emphasized the historical aspects of oral versus literary cultures; and Postman saw media ecology as a field of inquiry focused on the current state of the world (Strate, 2004). The present research will apply Postman's use and understanding of the term "media ecology."

While McLuhan is often seen as the fountainhead of media ecology, the terminology owes as much to Postman as it does to McLuhan (Postman, 2000; Strate, 2017). Aside from casual conversations and mentions about the term, McLuhan rarely used the phrase "media ecology" (Postman, 2000). Breaking from McLuhan's belief that modern media were neither blessed nor cursed, Postman and other media ecology researchers were interested in media environments' moral implications and whether they made humanity better or worse (Postman, 2000). While McLuhan viewed media technology neutrally and often apologetically (Baran & Davis, 2021), Postman (1992; 2006) maintained a more pessimistic outlook toward media's technological advancements. To better understand media ecology as a means of rhetorical study, it will help to understand the conceptual roots of the phrase.

The genesis of the term "media ecology" began as a biological metaphor, suggesting that human beings inhabit two distinct environments: one with natural elements such as plants and animals; the other consisting of symbols such as words, numbers, and pictures. According to Postman (2000), in a biological lab, a Petri dish contains a medium or substance in which a culture grows. In the same manner, if one replaces the word substance with technology, then "a medium is a technology in which a culture grows" (p. 10) and morphs into social organizations replete with their own modes of thinking. The "ecology" portion of the phrase originated with the Aristotelian idea of a household and transformed into the study of how various plants and animals live in

harmony within a natural environment (Postman, 2000). Bringing the two words together forms the metaphor media ecology researchers interpret as the way media and human beings interact to create their symbolic balance or harmony within the media environment. For Postman (2000), the metaphor suggested humanity should keep its planetary household in harmony by attending to how media shaped our society, as a blessing and a curse.

Another parallel of the media ecology framework to the scientific realm is the conception of information. In the Law of Thermodynamics, energy is neither created nor destroyed; it can only be transferred from the sun (source) through various channels (i.e., heat or light) to plants and animals who convert it into other means of energy. Similarly, a message is a meaningless abstraction without a medium with which to convey it (Strate, 2012). Transmission models of communication such as the Shannon-Weaver model and the Laswell model suggest in one form or another that messages are transmitted from a sender (source) via a media (channel) to a receiver who then may resend, reinterpret, or share the message with others (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). Media ecology scholars are hesitant to describe communication in such linear terms, instead seeing a medium as more than just a channel, a thing between a) the sender and b) the receiver (Strate, 2017). In the media ecology view, the medium is the environment that surrounds the sender, the receiver, and the message. The ‘message’ in McLuhan’s phrase, “medium is the message,” has been used synonymously with the term ‘information’ in previous literature (Strate, 2012). The present research also uses the terms congruently when discussing how media technologies shape informational environments.

Postman (2006) viewed television as “the command center of the new epistemology” (p. 78) whereby everything from politics to news, religion to science, and even education were shaped by its biases. He believed that television had an influence on our environment that no other

technology had and considered it a meta-medium, one that directs our knowledge of the world and, more importantly, our ways of knowing as well. Postman, in many ways, foretold the coming Internet age, where, like the television before it, the Internet permeates everything and often orchestrates our perceptions.

Regarding the progression of technology through the course of humanity, Postman (2006) held that each new technology or innovation brought with it an agenda or inherent bias. Every technology has a way that it wants to be used. Strate (2017) explained that biases do not have absolute control over individuals and do not absolve them of personal responsibility. Instead, a bias represents a “path of least resistance” wherein media ecologists are concerned with how this effect causes people to “cede control to the biases of technology” (Strate, 2017, p. 36). In an example cited by Postman, monks created clocks to become more religious, but with the side effect that the world became more Capitalistic and less religious (Postman, 1992; 2006). To use another of Postman’s analogies, you may use a television set as a bookshelf or place to display pictures, but that is not the purpose for which it was designed. The Internet had positive intentions of bringing information to a person’s fingertips and connecting people across global boundaries, but as Postman has pointed out, the technology can be used beyond its original intent. In light of this phenomenon, Postman (1990) believed that any technological change brought with it an inherent compromise, a Faustian bargain in his terms. The changes sometimes created more than they destroyed or destroyed more than they created. The repercussions are never one-sided and there are always winners and losers. The question then becomes who wins and who loses, in what capacity and to what degree?

Keeping with Postman’s critical perspective, the present research evaluates the media environment within which groups such as QAnon have grown, focusing on the media channels,

messages, and audiences involved. This study looks at various individual's interactions within the media environment surrounding QAnon with a focus on Marjorie Taylor Greene. An assessment is made regarding the blessing or curse media played in this situation by evaluating these individuals' statements about the group. While the events QAnon predicted never came to fruition and adherence to the group's rhetoric waned since the inauguration of President Joe Biden (Hannah, 2021), studying the influence and environment created by QAnon is important for future discourse about media (Zuckerman, 2019).

Analysis

RQ1: How has media technology facilitated QAnon to spread their conspiracy theories and which media channels did they use?

As previously mentioned, QAnon began as obscure posts on anonymous message boards such as 4chan, 8chan, and later 8kun (de Zeeuw et al., 2020). Social media influencers such as The Praying Medic (LaFrance, 2020), Tracy Diaz (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018) and Shady Groove (Grant, 2021) picked up or were asked to take up the mantle of protecting children from the Satanic cabal with one commentator referring to them in pandemic terms as "superspreaders" (Freedman, 2020). These influencers often had popular channels on YouTube and Twitter. Following the rise on anonymous message boards, QAnon found popular social media sites like Reddit an open door for growth due to the anonymity of the platform (Little, 2018). Facebook groups became filled with Q followers, allowing the theory to gain traction more openly through the use of algorithms. These algorithms also exposed often random YouTube subscribers such as Shelley Uscinski (mother to conspiracy theory expert, Joseph Uscinski) to Q influencers, thus enabling these subscribers to become unlikely followers (LaFrance, 2020).

Word of mouth became another source of growth for QAnon (LaFrance, 2020). As the myth and appeal grew online, so too did the desire to spread the wealth and the word. Sales of Q branded clothing and other items began popping up at Trump rallies. Books were written in attempts to explain the phenomenon, such as *QAnon and the Great Awakening* and *White Hats, Swamp Creatures and QAnon: A Who's Who of Spygate*, both by Roy Davis (Grant, 2021). In one case, Lorrie Shock shared her obsession with QAnon with her longtime friend, Pat Harger, who initially thought she had lost her mind. When Shock said, "Do your own research," quoting a Q mantra, Harger, using Facebook as a main source of information, became a follower as well (LaFrance, 2020).

By covering events surrounding the phenomenon, traditional media sources such as NBC (Zadrozny, & Collins, 2018) and *The New York Times* (Conger, 2020) helped to spread the Q influence. These traditional media also covered QAnon from a different perspective than the earlier message boards and social media sites, particularly a more critical one. This process is different from normalization whereby becoming a fringe idea becomes mainstream means it also becomes socially acceptable. Instead, the effect has been called normiefication. The term comes from the online reference to a 'normie,' an online user who is not familiar with the current fringe or subcultural trends (de Zeeuw et al., 2020). The term often carries a derogatory connotation whereby the early adopters bear contempt toward the latecomers to the party.

According to de Zeeuw et al. (2020), normiefication is a process where "a cultural object originating in an online space that adheres to the logic of the deep vernacular Web—understood as a collective understanding of, and commitment to, anonymity, irony, play, and ambivalence—reaches a larger audience outside of its native subcultural context." When QAnon moved from anonymous message boards to social media, and then to mainstream media sources, it embodied

the concept of normification. Normification is a situation that is specifically digital in nature wherein diffusion of ‘born-digital’ cultural artifacts grow from a tiny fringe to mainstream audiences (de Zeeuw et al., 2020). This effect may also account for how relatively innocuous items such as memes and incoherent anonymous posts can be shared, tweeted, and mentioned by average citizens and well-known politicians alike.

RQ2: Who were their target audiences?

People seeking entertainment.

Whether intentional or not, QAnon reached a group of people looking for entertainment. “Enjoy the show” was one of Q’s phrases that popped up frequently. According to Postman (2006), the need for entertainment is not a new phenomenon for American audiences. He claimed that “Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world” (p. 106). His statement is almost prescient given the fact that information is limitless in our society, but many individuals are lulled by the entertaining nature of conspiracy theories. The information and the way it is construed by conspiracy theorists such as Q can be labeled disinformation, which Postman believed did not mean false information (Postman, 2006). Instead, it means misleading information, or “misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information—information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing” (Postman, 2006, p. 107). The way in which Q followers disregard information that can be verified and accept that which is non-verifiable as factual indicates their willingness to be led, or in Postman’s view, amused astray. Following the Huxleyan vision, what is ‘true’ and arguably good information may be drowned out by what is seemingly irrelevant.

Just as the game Trivial Pursuit uses information as a means of amusement, so too do our news sources, according to Postman (2006). He believed that the consequences of this

epistemological change are dire, stating, “It has been demonstrated many times that a culture can survive misinformation and false opinion (but it) has not yet been demonstrated whether a culture can survive... if the value of its news is determined by the number of laughs it provides” (Postman, 2006, p. 113). In the case of QAnon, it is not necessarily that it garners laughs, but it is certainly entertaining to some of its followers, given its game-like structure and fan-fiction-esque participatory nature (Thompson, 2020; Zuckerman, 2019).

People who wanted to believe in a cause bigger than themselves.

QAnon reached individuals who wanted to believe in something bigger than themselves or the narrative the mainstream media was reporting. Some of these people became radicalized to an extent that they became violent. Amarasingam and Argentino (2020) documented the cases of several of the individuals whose actions and rhetoric were linked to QAnon. The list includes Edgar Welch, the Pizzagate perpetrator who entered Comet Pizza in Washington D.C. in 2016 armed and menacing to patrons because he believed they were trafficking children. In 2018, Matthew Philip Wright, a Marine Corps veteran, blocked traffic near the Hoover Dam using an armored truck, then engaged in a standoff with police and demanded an already-released-to-the-public internal watchdog report about the Hilary Clinton email probe. In letters to government officials and President Trump, Wright mentioned the “Great Awakening” and the phrase “Where We Go One, We Go All.”

While no one was harmed by the first two individuals listed by Amarasingam and Argentino (2020), the third person, Anthony Comello, was deadly. Comello, a 24-year-old New York native, had previously called for the arrest of Nancy Pelosi and Bill de Blasio. Believing he was “Trump’s chosen vigilante” and that the New York Mafia was tied to the deep state cabal, Comello confronted mafia Frank Cali, a leader of the Gambino crime family. Their conversation

led to Comello shooting Cali, though his original intent, according to his statement, was to make a citizen's arrest. This event followed a progression of radicalization for Comello, largely through online QAnon accounts. His obsession eventually led to his arrest for murder and subsequently being deemed mentally unfit to stand trial.

Ashli Babbitt is a more recent illustration of someone who believed Q was going to set the world straight. Babbitt was killed by Capitol security while trying to enter the Speaker's Lobby during the January 6 storming of the Capitol Building (Grant, 2021). She had previously posted about Pizzagate and used the hashtag, #SaveTheChildren in her posts on Twitter.

Each of these individuals saw themselves as part of the grand narrative created by QAnon and its adherents. Whether it was vigilante justice in the name of saving children from satanic sex traffickers or attempting to save democracy in America, many of the people involved in these crimes and others were informed, radicalized, and shaped by the media environments in which they lived. For Babbitt, Twitter became a never-ending rabbit hole (Grant, 2021). For Comello, Instagram became a platform to share his conspiracy theories (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). Welch and Wright's rhetoric in their post-arrest interviews indicate a deep-seated conviction about saving children and the democratic process (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020).

While the abovementioned individuals took violent measures, many Q followers are considerably more docile, but no less passionate. These people find themselves believing because they are disenfranchised with the current state of the world and see QAnon as a harbinger of better days ahead. LaFrance (2020) interviewed several individuals who felt Q gave them hope. Lorrie Shock, a caretaker of adults with special needs in Ohio, said she felt like God had led her to Q. After spending as much as six hours a day doing her own research online about Q (Shock did not own a television at the time of the interview), she started attending Trump rallies and displaying

her zeal for QAnon. LaFrance (2020) also interviewed Shelley Uscinski. Uscinski, a 62-year-old New Hampshire native, stumbled upon QAnon through YouTube and felt a “magnetic attraction,” one which gave her hope about the future. She was drawn to Q’s disdain for “fake news,” which lined up with her consumption of primarily Fox News and Twitter. She also enjoyed the Christian rhetoric and that some of the Q posts quoted scripture. All of these elements were hopeful signs of things to come for Uscinski (LaFrance, 2020). Butler (2021) interviewed moderators of parenting groups on Facebook. Some of the moderators of these groups had a sense that many of the mothers sharing the Q-related posts likely did not realize the information was part of a larger conspiracy theory. According to Butler (2021), the narratives discussed and shared snowballed to alarming rates due to the accusations of child trafficking and abuse, a theme that resonated within these parental groups.

A number of individuals took the QAnon platform into the political arena. Bergengruen and Espada (2021) described several of these people who won local elections. Amy Facchinello of Grand Blanc, MI, Katie Williams of Las Vegas, NV, and Eve Dobler-Drew of San Luis Obispo, CA, all won seats on their local school boards while sharing and tweeting QAnon rhetoric. William Armacost won mayorship of Sequim, WA, while encouraging his constituents to research QAnon on Youtube. Tito Ortiz became mayor pro tem of Huntington Beach, CA, after touting COVID-19 as a political scam and selling QAnon merchandise on his website. Their ascension met resistance to some extent, but they were ultimately elected largely due to a lack of knowledge about the phenomenon by the local populace as well as the political demographics of the residents.

Marjorie Taylor Greene: Political Elite and Q Acolyte

Along with the rise in local election wins by QAnon adherents, a surprising number of Q followers ran for state and national office. This occurrence is startling because it indicates a shift

in power from the elites to the citizenry through democratic means. While there was at one time between around 27 congressional candidates with ties to QAnon posts or displays, only two were elected (Miller, 2021b), including Marjorie Taylor Greene, a U.S. Representative from Georgia. Prior to and during her campaign, Greene posted about various conspiracy theories on her social media accounts including posts about the 2017 Las Vegas, Nevada shootings, the 2018 Parkland, Florida shootings (Miller, 2021b), and even questioned whether a plane actually flew into the Pentagon during the 9/11 attacks (Edmondson, 2021). One video shows her heckling David Hogg, a survivor of the Parkland shooting and a gun control advocate, about why he was “using kids” to try to take her Second Amendment rights away (Edmondson, 2021; Hayes, 2021). She also previously claimed that Hilary Clinton planned John F. Kennedy Jr.’s death (Edmondson, 2021). Greene’s beliefs are in line with those held by other QAnon adherents (LaFrance, 2020).

Not one to shy away from questionable information or provocative rhetoric, Green responded to a Facebook post in 2018 where a person asked whether former President Barack Obama and former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton could be hanged. According to CNN, she replied, “the stage is being set. Players are being put in place. We must be patient. This must be done perfectly or liberal judges would let them off” (Miller, 2021b). As a staunch Donald Trump supporter, Greene ran a campaign ad claiming that “‘Deep State’ actors tried to sabotage President Donald J. Trump before he even took office” (Edmondson, 2021). Just prior to the events that took place January 6 at the State Capitol building, she referred to that day as Republicans’ “1776 moment” (Edmondson, 2021).

Greene’s belief in QAnon began near the end of 2017 (Miller, 2021b). When questioned about her beliefs, she said she started finding misinformation in late 2018. Expressing remorse, Greene stated, “I was allowed to believe things that weren’t true and I would ask questions about

them and talk about them. And that is absolutely what I regret. Because if it weren't for the Facebook posts and comments that I liked in 2018, I wouldn't be standing here today and you couldn't point a finger and accuse me of anything wrong" (Miller, 2021b). She went on to blame mainstream media for attempting to cancel her even though they were, according to her, culpable for sharing the lies she was accused of believing. Since the reporting of her previous remarks were made public on media outlets, many of Greene's posts have been removed from social media (Hayes, 2021).

In this example, both social media and traditional media outlets helped shape Greene's views of reality and also helped her share those views to her constituency and the broader public. She even stated, "Many posts have been liked. Many posts have been shared. Some did not represent my views" (Hayes, 2021). There is no indication that Greene consumed or was even aware of the hazy origins of QAnon, only that their *modus operandi* lined up with hers and that of her constituents. In this regard, she may be labeled a "normie" by QAnon diehards (de Zeeuw et al., 2020). Many of her comments point to the media environment surrounding her. Greene's use and consumption of social media and subsequent interrogation by traditional media exhibit her skeptical views of mainstream media sources. Her use of terms such as "fake news" and blaming mainstream media for presenting lies (Miller, 2021b) corroborate Uscinski's (2020) notion that a conspiracy believer will often disregard information if the source is perceived as being part of the conspiracy.

Greene also believed her cause was an issue of democratic power. In one statement, Greene said, "They are coming after me because they know I represent the people, not the politicians. They are coming after me because like President Trump, I will always defend conservative values. They want to take me out because I represent the people" (Hayes, 2021). Her statement is in line

with the critical perspective that the world has an unequal balance of power (Baran & Davis, 2021). The data in this case study indicate Marjorie Taylor Greene is an example of how an individual with rising political authority may be influenced by fringe beliefs due to the media environment surrounding her.

RQ3: How did the media environment enable QAnon to reach their audience?

According to the narratives within the extant literature, the media environment enabled certain individuals to be influenced. In this regard, the media landscape played a factor in reaching an audience. At issue is the question of whether these individuals were otherwise predisposed to conspiratorial thinking or doctrinal influence. Previous research by Hofstadter (1964) as well as current literature (van der Linden et al., 2021) argue that individuals who skew right on a political spectrum may be more susceptible to conspiratorial beliefs and may have less regard for a broader media environment. Marjorie Taylor Greene as well as many others listed in the literature are likely candidates in both senses: politically right-leaning and distrustful of media.

Other researchers question whether one political ideology is more disposed to conspiratorial thinking than others. Uscinski (2020) argued that the political left is just as likely to believe in conspiracy theories as those on the political right. When differences arise in the data, they can often be attributed to the measurements used in the study, such as only asking questions about communist plots toward which a right-leaning individual would naturally share disdain. Accordingly, conspiracy beliefs are not the same as partisan beliefs and should not be conflated (Uscinski, 2020). Partisanship may influence the particular theory a person chooses to believe though, and there are only rare occasions, such as the JFK assassination, where a conspiracy theory appeals to bipartisan audiences.

Another issue with the question of reach is whether or not the individuals sharing and disseminating the information actually believed in any, much less all, of the conspiracy. Pew Research (2020b) suggested that, although QAnon ideas were known and shared through the media environment, some of the people might not have known the entirety of the Q platform. Instead, these individuals likely felt drawn to one tenet of the group without realizing or knowing what else the group espoused, such as mothers in Facebook parenting groups (Butler, 2021) or unassuming middle-aged women seeking hope for a brighter future (LaFrance, 2020). Even with an affinity toward one facet of QAnon's jeremiad, Uscinski (2020) pointed out that many people who espouse conspiratorial beliefs often give little thought to the ideas they are sharing.

RQ4: Can phenomenon such as QAnon happen again and if so, how?

According to two studies conducted by Pew Research Center, data showed that the American public's awareness of QAnon roughly doubled from March 2020 to September 2020. Nearing the election, nearly half (47%) of U.S. adults had heard or read something about the group, up from 23% in March. The earlier study conducted in March 2020 found that of the individuals who had heard or read at least a little about the group, 25% of them listed a social media site such as Twitter or Reddit as their main source of news (Pew Research, 2020a). Schaffner (2020) found a similar situation through surveying nearly 2,000 American adults. One of the key findings in his study was the average respondent who viewed QAnon positively was not familiar with many of the conspiracy beliefs associated with QAnon. According to this data, views toward QAnon may not be seen as synonymous with conspiracy belief.

de Zeeuw et al. (2020) demonstrated that the Pew data and the earlier studies of national awareness of the phenomenon may have shifted as mainstream media sources began covering QAnon appearances and followers. The later Pew Research study conducted in September also

indicated a shift of news consumption from social media sites to traditional news sources, although this assessment may be influenced by the wording of the questions on the surveys which asked specifically about mainstream media such as Fox News, CNN, NPR, and The New York Times (Pew Research, 2020b).

Although the coverage grew in scope, it is hard to quantify the impact. Miller (2021b) noted in his news coverage that House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy feigned ignorance about QAnon during his defense of Marjorie Taylor Greene at a House meeting. On more than one occasion he called the group “Q-on” and said he had no knowledge of what it is (Miller, 2021b). While it may have been a ruse to protect his political position, he may have earnestly not known anything about Q at the time.

A particularly difficult condition of CTs and especially QAnon as an all-encompassing conspiracy theory is the near impossibility of verifying its claims. This hearkens back to Popper’s concept of non-verifiability and Sagan’s fire-breathing dragon. LaFrance (2020) illustrated in her analysis of QAnon that believers are certain a Great Awakening is coming and that nothing can stop it. This dogmatic belief means that “every contradiction can be explained away; no form of argument can prevail against it” (LaFrance, 2020, p. 29). The individuals who have embraced QAnon have no answer to the question, “What evidence would prove your claim false?” Even if logic and evidence were presented, as seen with previous CTs, attempts to change people’s minds often fall flat or worse, encourage them to embrace their beliefs with more fervor (Nyhan et al., 2013).

Worsening the effect is that many Q adherents followed their leaders (Q and lesser influencers) and scripture references (Q drops) with the same zeal they previously followed their religion. Beaty (2020) found that several pastors in evangelical churches attempted to reach their

congregations with reason and appeals to humanity, but it was often to no avail. One of the pastors tried to teach media literacy from the pulpit and encouraged his members to seek credible news sources. This endeavor was futile given the pervasive narrative of media cover-up embedded within QAnon (Beaty, 2020). So, where were these congregations getting their information? This is where Postman (1992) again foretold of a coming era. For many of Q's followers, the information they gleaned from their computers and smart devices effectively became Gospel. Postman's theory many years ago came to fruition in the media and informational environment surrounding QAnon: "The computer shows..." has now become the equivalent of "It is God's will" (p. 115) and maintains the same effect.

Postman (1992) called the environment where information was limitless and often trivial a technopoly. A technopoly, in this regard, is the opposite of a crippled epistemology (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009) due to its unregulated access to information (Hannah, 2021). Postman (1992) believed a technopoly increased the available supply of information, which in turn, strained the control mechanisms. This led to a need for more control mechanisms, but these were often of a similar technological vein. The cycle becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy or a positive feedback loop of sorts wherein the end result is a supply of information that is no longer controllable. When this happens, a breakdown in the social ecosystem occurs (Postman, 1992).

Remembering the original Media Ecology metaphor of a Petri dish containing a medium or substance in which a culture grows being equated to media environments, Postman (1992) used the analogy of a biological immune system to illustrate what happens when a virus is introduced into the body. If the immune system is not functioning properly, the organism cannot manage cellular growth, which can have dire consequences for the organism. A healthy immune system, on the other hand, destroys unwanted cells to keep the organism well. Postman (1992) suggested

that all societies have various mechanisms that function in the same manner as a biological immune system. These mechanisms maintain balance between old and new information, or bad and good information, by “destroying” the unwanted data.

Examples of the mechanisms Postman (1992) listed to illustrate the exclusion of information for the sake of seeking truth include a court of law. Almost all rules for the admission and presentation of evidence are designed to control what information is allowed into the court system. In this example, hearsay and opinion are excluded as evidence. Another example is the family unit. From birth, a family or parental guidance generally acts as a filter for what information the family will allow to influence the children. This may be what religion and political affiliation to follow, which language will be spoken, and what is the value of education. In each of the examples, the filters of exclusion work well when all of the parts are working as a whole. Postman (1992) was not so optimistic when the mechanisms were fractured or overloaded.

Not only was unbridled availability of information an effect of technopoly, Postman (1992) also believed a society wherein the defenses against informational overload had broken down was another indication of a technopoly. One could argue that social media attempts to shut down or curb informational glut did little because repairing the system with the very technologies that created it is similar to a person taking a pill for nausea after taking other pills that made him nauseous in the first place. Postman (1992) argued that a social immune system had fallen ill “when a culture, overcome by information generated by technology, tries to employ technology itself as a means of providing clear direction and humane purpose” (p. 72). He argued that a problem with the human condition cannot be solved by technology. Postman wrote that people are not starving to death because of a lack of information. Crime and family dissolutions are not due to inadequate

information. According to him, instant communication and limitless information have nothing to do with any of these problems and are largely useless in addressing them.

Conclusion

The proliferation of QAnon cannot be separated from the media technologies used to birth the phenomenon. Postman (1992) issued prophetically that technology would shape our epistemological environment when he wrote, “New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop” (p. 20). Following this line of thinking, traditional media have been incorporated into newer media platforms, ones with arguably more social influence due to their participatory nature. Zuckerman (2019) suggested this convergence of media creates a new environment, one where “non-professional individuals can report what’s happening in their communities, amplify stories that might have otherwise been missed, and demand attention towards subaltern narratives” (p. 8). As illustrated in the lives of Ashli Babbitt, Anthony Comello, and Marjorie Taylor Greene among so many others, the media landscape in which they reside certainly influenced their thinking and amplified a subaltern narrative.

Just as bacteria grows in a Petri dish when aided by a medium, so too did QAnon in a 21st century media environment. Also akin to many bacteria, the effect had real-world costs. Schaffner (2020) found that nearly 40 percent of survey respondents (N=1899) who said they trusted QAnon to provide accurate information also felt that their belief in Q had negatively affected their relationships with family members and friends. Beaty (2020) also noted the strain on relationships when she interviewed pastors whose congregations were being torn apart by the sharing of “verifiably false claims about actual human beings.” The gradual spread of QAnon did not just

affect fringe political actors or unhinged vigilantes. It also affected average human beings who were caught up in the environment.

For most of these individuals, they either limited their informational sources to a select few, thus creating their own crippled epistemology (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009); or they could not critically parse through the informational glut in their technologically driven media environment (Postman, 1992). In either case, their environment was contaminated. de Zeeuw et al. (2020) wrote, “The problem of a media ecology polluted by conspiracy beliefs is not just that it might induce false belief, but that it contributes to an epistemological condition where the distinction between true and false itself is rendered increasingly moot.” In this regard, individuals began to care less about the veracity of the information and only how it made them feel, whether it was amusing and game-like, empowering and revolutionary, or hopeful and delivering.

One area of limitation in the present research is the lack of focus on human agency. A common critique of the media ecology tradition is it is viewed as technologically deterministic (Baran & Davis, 2021). Terms such as *technological determinism* and *media determinism* are labels applied by critics more so than frameworks embraced by media ecology scholars (Strate, 2017). While the framework and this research did not expressly address the agency of the individuals studied, they both consider that media technologies influence and shape the content or information created by individuals (Strate, 2012). This does not deny the freedom to create, but impacts the ability to share and consume the creation. For this reason, many media ecologists have warned against the speed at which individuals adopt new technologies (Strate, 2017). People have a choice in the matter if they are given enough time to contemplate what using the media or technology will mean in the long term.

Another area of limitation in this study is the use of popular press articles for analysis and illustration. Though not specifically academic or scientific, the sources otherwise provide an insight into how individuals use media technology, and how media technologies influence them. In this manner, the research is grounded through the interviews and profiles of these individuals and adds to the conversation of media ecology in the 21st century.

Given the events predicted by QAnon have yet to occur, and the evidence of a Satanic cabal is lacking, what is next for the people who had faith that the Great Awakening was coming? There is no clear indication other than accepting conspiracy theories and those who believe in them will always be present as long as power structures, uncertainty, and a willingness to believe in greater causes exist. Future research may seek to see how education and media literacy affects conspiratorial thinking. As participatory media and the use of crowd-sourced information grow, future studies may also investigate their effects on groupthink, crippled epistemologies, and other forms of limited information environments. The 21st-century media technology landscape is ripe for exploration, and media ecology is one perspective equipped for the endeavor.

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