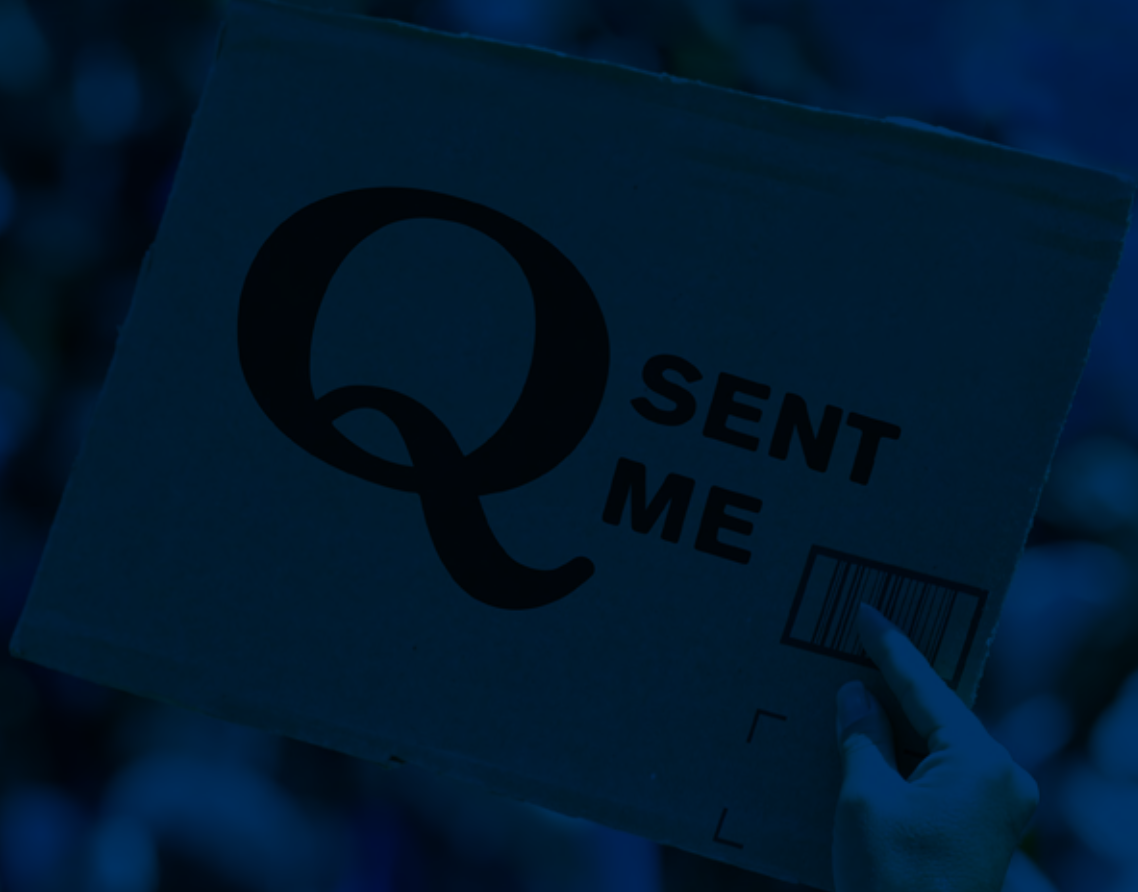


The Boom Before the Ban: QAnon and Facebook

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About this report

This report is a collaboration between the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the nonpartisan news-rating organisation NewsGuard. It analyses QAnon-related contents on Facebook during a period of increased activity, just before the platform implemented moderation of public contents spreading the conspiracy theory. Combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, this report looks at key trends in discussions around QAnon, prominent accounts in that discussion, and domains – particularly news websites – that were frequently shared alongside QAnon contents on Facebook. This report also recommends some steps to be taken by technology companies, governments and the media when seeking to counter the spread of problematic conspiracy theories like QAnon on social media.

About ISD

Founded in 2006, ISD is now the leading global “think and do” tank dedicated to understanding and innovating real-world responses to the rising tide of polarisation, hate and extremism of all forms. We combine anthropological research, expertise in international extremist movements and an advanced digital analysis capability that tracks hate, disinformation and extremism online, with policy advisory support and training to governments and cities around the world. We also work to empower youth and community influencers internationally through our pioneering education, technology and communications programmes.

Innovating, trialling and scaling data-driven solutions across our unique networks of community influencers, city and government officials and tech sector partnerships, we work to mount a soft power strategy, proportional in influence and impact to the evermore sophisticated, cross-border polarisation and recruitment machineries of state and non-state actors promulgating hate, division and conflict.

About NewsGuard

Launched in March 2018 by media entrepreneur and award-winning journalist Steven Brill and former Wall Street Journal publisher Gordon Crovitz, NewsGuard provides credibility ratings and detailed “Nutrition Labels” for thousands of news and information websites. NewsGuard rates all the news and information websites that account for 95% of online engagement across the US, UK, Germany, France, and Italy. NewsGuard products include NewsGuard, HealthGuard, and BrandGuard, which helps marketers concerned about their brand safety, and the Misinformation Fingerprints catalogue of top hoaxes.

NewsGuard rates each site based on nine apolitical criteria of journalistic practice, including whether a site repeatedly publishes false content, whether it regularly corrects or clarifies errors, and whether it avoids deceptive headlines. It awards weighted points for each criterion and sums them up; a score of less than 60 earns a “Red” rating, while 60 and above earns a “Green” rating, which indicates it is generally reliable.

NewsGuard’s ratings and Nutrition Labels can be licensed by internet service providers, browsers, news aggregators, education companies, and social media and search platforms in order to make NewsGuard’s information about news websites available to their users. Consumers can access these ratings by purchasing a subscription to NewsGuard, which costs US\$2.95/month and includes access to NewsGuard’s browser extension for Chrome, Safari, and Firefox and its mobile app for iOS and Android. The extension is available for free on Microsoft’s Edge browser through a license agreement with Microsoft, and NewsGuard’s ratings can also be accessed free through the Edge mobile browser. Hundreds of public libraries globally receive free access to use NewsGuard’s browser extension on their public-access computers to give their patrons more context for the news they encounter online. For more information, including to download the browser extension and review the ratings process, visit newsguardtech.com.

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Executive Summary

In the summer of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world and forced many inside for safety and online for social connection, Facebook activity relating to the baseless QAnon conspiracy theory experienced an unprecedented surge. Public posts with terms related to QAnon, such as “Where We Go One We Go All” (WWG1WGA) or “PedoGate” appeared over 1,000 times a day on average on the platform and were shared across a wide network of pages, groups and profiles of influential individuals. In this research, produced in partnership between ISD and NewsGuard, we sought to examine this surge and identify the dominant narratives and domains among QAnon communities on Facebook.

The resulting report, based on analysis of over 200,000 Facebook posts across five months of 2020, found that the conspiracy experienced month-on-month growth on Facebook throughout the year with engagement around QAnon almost doubling between April and August. Influential individual Facebook users, termed “superspreaders” in this report, were found to be a key link in the conspiracy chain, responsible for sharing and promoting introductory materials among new followers, posting videos and instilling a do-it-yourself ethos that empowered recruits to do their research, consume more QAnon content and, in turn, become further indoctrinated.

False claims and disinformation about the severity of COVID-19, anti-mask and anti-lockdown campaigning, and baseless, outlandish conspiracy theories about the origins of COVID-19 were all absorbed into broader QAnon narratives during 2020. Similarly, QAnon communities were hijacking and injecting conspiracy theories into the mainstream discussions about non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and campaigns seeking to protect children, such as the Save the Children movement. This was to advance their claims about elite-orchestrated child sex-trafficking rings moving from online spaces to offline events and protests.

Websites that publish disinformation were frequently shared among QAnon communities on Facebook, serving as a crucial link in the support structure for the conspiracy. This includes sites focused on QAnon themes as well as sites that deal with more general types of political or cultural misinformation, both in the US and beyond. This report also captures the recent international spread of QAnon, as introductory materials used to indoctrinate people to QAnon are now being translated and shared among communities in non-anglophone countries too.

What does this all mean?

Firstly, Facebook's 6 October ban of QAnon content came too late. Though pages and groups with tens of thousands of members that promoted QAnon were removed from the platform after the ban, the conspiracy had by then already enjoyed a three-year run on Facebook with little to stop it. What started as a conspiracy on fringe forums of the web has now gone global and indoctrinated many, with platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter playing a crucial role in facilitating its spread. As this report shows, even with sweeping actions and policy changes, it is very difficult to completely eradicate the conspiracy on these platforms.

Even after the ban, personal Facebook profiles – many with large followings – are continuing to discuss and promote the conspiracy. Facebook, and similar platforms, must consider content moderation policies that include activity from individual users who spread harmful conspiracies like QAnon. Platforms should also consider deprioritising QAnon content in recommendation algorithms, in similar ways to their response to other public health concerns like COVID-19 disinformation. Greater transparency from platforms in their responses to problematic content and communities could in fact empower research institutions and civil society groups to find solutions to common-interest problems.

This report also includes recommendations for how media organisations and government bodies can play a role in countering dangerous conspiracy theories. This research shows how QAnon followers cite mainstream reports in ways that support their conspiratorial beliefs. At all times, media organisations must not lend credibility or validity to QAnon and remind their audiences that there is no evidence to support the wide number of conspiracy theories wrapped up in this belief system.

For governments, they must respect freedoms of expression and privacy, but also protect their citizens by proactively monitoring for the spread of potentially harmful contents on public social media channels and designating disinformation narratives and groups responsible as threats when appropriate. This will empower national institutions, social platforms and civil society groups to monitor, flag and tackle harmful ideologies in more effective ways as they arise.

Glossary

Superspreader

In previous research regarding COVID-19 misinformation, NewsGuard defined superspreader Facebook pages as pages that have “large followings of more than 100,000 likes” and that have published or shared false content about COVID-19.¹ In the context of this research paper, we define superspreaders as personal Facebook profiles that are responsible for the mass proliferation of disinformation or activity that promotes the QAnon conspiracy and whose content has been viewed at least 100,000 times.

Redpilling

Taking the red pill is a phrase that originated from the 1999 science fiction film, *The Matrix*, that refers to a person choosing to become aware of perceived unpleasant but necessary truths in the world, instead of taking the blue pill, which instead describes choosing to remain living in blissful ignorance about the world.² The phrase has been adopted by far-right or misogynistic online communities in recent years and is now part of the vernacular among conspiracy communities like QAnon. It is used to describe the process of how an uninitiated person becomes educated about the central belief system of a particular conspiracy.³ QAnon redpilling takes the form of online users becoming exposed to videos and fringe sites that provide material to support the claim that an elite group of child-trafficking paedophiles rule the world and that outgoing President Trump has a secret plan in place to bring this group to justice.

Established Misinformers

In the context of this research, established misinformed refer to websites that predate QAnon and that are known to have published misinformation on a wide range of subjects. The websites are both popular among and outside QAnon communities. Examples include right-wing media sites *The Gateway Pundit* and *The Federalist*.

Fringe Misinformers

In the context of this research, Fringe Misinformers refer to websites that focus almost exclusively on covering or promoting disinformation associated with the QAnon conspiracy and do not seem to receive significant social media engagement outside of the QAnon community. Examples include *Humorous Mathematics* and *QNation.us*.

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world and forced many indoors for safety and online for social connection, Facebook activity related to the baseless QAnon conspiracy experienced an unprecedented surge. Public posts with terms related to the QAnon conspiracy theory, such as “Where We Go One We Go All” or “PedoGate” appeared over 1,000 times a day on average and were shared across a wide network of pages, groups and profiles of influential individuals.

In this report, produced in a partnership between the ISD and NewsGuard, we sought to understand how QAnon followers have used Facebook to share information about the conspiracy through a network of dozens of pages, groups and profiles of influential individuals. We conducted a qualitative and quantitative analysis of over 200,000 posts on the platform during five months in 2020. This empirical approach allowed us to study the conspiracy theory through a broad lens and understand significant narratives and trends that emerged across a comprehensive set of Facebook posts.

This report presents findings from narrative and domain analyses of those posts, covering the period 1 April-11 September 2020. This time, which coincided with the initial surge of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, saw a widely documented surge in activity among followers of the conspiracy theory and interactions with content supportive of it online.^{9 10 11}

For this study, we solely focused on analysing QAnon activity on Facebook due to the platform’s size and reach, as well as its frequent use for sharing links to news and other third-party websites. We analysed posts discussing QAnon topics made by page administrators and public group members active on the platform.¹² Specifically, we examined trends in topics discussed, domains shared, spikes in volume and other notable metrics.

The report presents a breakdown of key features of the QAnon ecosystem on Facebook during the period, and shows the convergence of QAnon misinformation with other online communities and a significant uptick in the dissemination of wider conspiracies online – as reported in previous research from ISD.¹³

What is QAnon?

QAnon is a wide-ranging conspiracy theory that claims that an elite group of child-trafficking paedophiles have been ruling the world for many decades and that outgoing President Trump has a secret plan in place to bring this group to justice.⁴ QAnon, which was preceded by similar conspiracies like Pizzagate, started in October 2017, when a user calling themselves Q claimed to have high-level security clearance and started posting a series of cryptic messages about Trump’s supposed battle against corrupt elites on the politically incorrect forum on 4chan – an anonymous imageboard website known for hosting extremist and violent content.⁵

Q later moved to 8chan, a more extreme site with even fewer content moderation rules, before the site was taken down in 2019 after it was linked to a spate of mass shootings in the US.⁶ It was relaunched as 8kun and it remains the home of Q, who posts messages (known as QDrops), that are quickly shared on mainstream platforms where supporters attempt to decode their supposed meaning and link them to ongoing political events in the US. These messages always reinforce the central belief that Trump will someday expose the deep state and bring corrupt elites to justice. In the span of a few months in 2020, as misinformation about the pandemic converged with falsehoods related to QAnon, awareness of QAnon among the US public “increased dramatically” and the conspiracy theory grew more popular than ever.

Following our data collection, on 6 October 2020 Facebook announced a ban on QAnon content across Facebook and Instagram, and YouTube announced a similar ban on QAnon content on 15 October. However, it was clear from our analysis that by the time of the ban, the conspiracy theory had already established a significant following with the potential to shape real-world events.

It is significant to note that Facebook and YouTube's bans came after content related to the conspiracy had surged and merged with misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic. QAnon's extremist ideology and false claims reached millions at a time of great uncertainty, while many were vulnerable to a deadly viral disease and the viral misinformation that accompanied it.

Throughout this report, we have noted where pages or groups on Facebook and videos on YouTube have been removed by the platforms. We also note the many instances where influential posts related to QAnon remained live on the platform in the weeks following the 6 October ban of QAnon content, despite the social media giant's stated policy. In our conclusion, we discuss the implications of the conspiracy theory's yearly growth on the platform, as well as what this belated ban might mean for the future of the QAnon conspiracy.



QAnon's extremist ideology and false claims reached millions at a time of great uncertainty, while many were vulnerable to a deadly viral disease and the viral misinformation that accompanied it.



What is a Superspreader?

In previous research regarding COVID-19 misinformation, NewsGuard defined superspreader Facebook pages as pages that have **"large followings of more than 100,000 likes"** and that have published or shared false content about COVID-19.¹⁴ In the context of this research paper, we define superspreaders as personal Facebook profiles that are responsible for the mass proliferation of disinformation or activity that promotes the QAnon conspiracy and whose content has been viewed at least **100,000 times**.



Key findings

In summary:

- **QAnon and associated conspiracies surged since April 2020.**
 - The average number of Facebook posts related to QAnon captured in our data set increased month-on-month from April to September. The most notable increase took place in the summer, when the average number of QAnon-related posts per day on Facebook rose from 1,193 in June to 1,602 in July and higher still in August with 1,772.
 - Engagement around QAnon-related content increased significantly on Facebook over the summer. 31% of the most widely shared posts within our data set were made in August versus 22% in July and 15% in June.
 - At least 10 videos identified in this analysis that promote key messages of the QAnon conspiracy posted on personal Facebook profiles (superspreaders), have received over one million views on the platform. Dozens more also have tens or hundreds of thousands of views.
 - Humorous Mathematics, one of the websites that was shared the most frequently in our data set of Facebook posts, was created in April 2020 following the onset of the pandemic and grew in popularity over the last several months. Its top-performing articles were from July and August 2020, the most active period of posting in the data. Facebook's QAnon ban came too late. Pages/groups spreading the conspiracy were removed en masse, but superspreader personal profiles continue to promote disinformation on the platform.
- **Analysts identified numerous key narratives in QAnon discussions, including:**
 - The claim that "Pizzagate is real," i.e. asserting the veracity of the theory that Democratic party officials, celebrities and elites are involved in a global child sex-trafficking ring.
 - The mass proliferation of false claims, misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19, ranging from anti-mask campaigning to the belief that the coronavirus was released intentionally – ultimately leading to a convergence of COVID-19 misinformation with core QAnon assertions.
 - The appropriation of language and themes traditionally used to raise public awareness of child trafficking, such as the campaign work of Save the Children and other international NGOs. This was done to advance child sex-trafficking narratives popular within the QAnon conspiracy.
 - The promotion of the "Obamagate" or "Spygate" conspiracy, a complex and unsubstantiated conspiracy theory that broadly alleges that former US President Barack Obama and other members of his administration plotted to undermine Donald Trump's presidency by illegally spying on and entrapping members of the Trump campaign.
 - References to Adrenochrome, the chemical compound QAnon followers falsely believe is harvested from children by members of the "cabal" and used to stay young or healthy.

- **Although primarily driven from the US, this research shows the extent to which the QAnon conspiracy has grown internationally.**
 - News websites in at least 15 different languages appear in the data. English was by far the biggest proportion followed by German, Italian and French.
 - Facebook posts captured in the data identified a Spanish-language QAnon superspreader.
 - A French website specifically covering QAnon ranks among the top 15 news sources that appeared most frequently in the data, with links in 161 posts that were shared a cumulative 1,159 times.
 - Introductory materials used to brief or indoctrinate people who are new to QAnon on the basics of the theory (known as “redpilling” – see glossary) are now being translated/subtitled and shared among non-anglophone communities.
 - Three of the top 10 most-active communities posting QAnon content captured in our data were German-language Facebook groups.
- **QAnon followers frequently reference and share news sources that traffic in disinformation.**
 - Of the news sites that appeared in 10 or more posts in this data set, sites found by NewsGuard to be generally unreliable (Red-rated) were linked to in 6,669 posts with a cumulative 185,784 shares, while sites found by NewsGuard to be generally reliable (Green-rated) were linked to in only 3,553 posts with a cumulative 56,203 shares.¹⁵
- **The top Red-rated websites in the data included popular purveyors of misinformation as well as obscure websites. These include:**
 - **Established Misinformers:** Sites like TheFederalist.com and TheGatewayPundit.com, which predate the conspiracy theory and are known to have published misinformation on a wide range of subjects appeared frequently in posts in this data set, but are also popular outside of the QAnon community. According to media intelligence company NewsWhip, TheFederalist.com received more interactions (likes, comments, and shares) on major social media platforms from 11 June to 11 September 2020 than major news sites like WSJ.com, TheAtlantic.com and Politico.com. TheGateWayPundit.com received more interactions during that same period than sites like TheGuardian.com and DenverPost.com.
 - **Fringe Misinformers:** Other less familiar sites like HumorousMathematics.com and QNation.us also appear frequently in the data but are more focused on covering QAnon and do not seem to receive significant social media engagement outside the QAnon community. While some sources of misinformation shared among QAnon followers reflect popularity seen elsewhere on Facebook, other sources of misinformation appear confined within the conspiracy’s community.

Methodology

We addressed the following research questions:

- **What domains are most commonly shared among QAnon followers on social media?**
 - What sources do QAnon followers rely on for their news?
 - What were the most popular news stories shared by QAnon followers on Facebook?
 - What languages and countries were represented in the domain data?
 - What types of non-news sites were frequently shared by QAnon followers on Facebook, and what can be gathered from those?
- **What and who are the dominant narratives, topics and actors among QAnon communities on Facebook?**
 - What are the primary narratives in online discussion around QAnon?
 - What are the most-shared pieces of content among QAnon followers?
 - Who are the primary influencers among QAnon followers online?
 - How is QAnon content shared among and between online communities?

To answer our research questions, we adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of large data sets with quantitative analysis of content to identify and analyse QAnon discourse on Facebook.

Data collection

Data was collected using the CrowdTangle API, which provides data on posts made by administrators in public pages and groups across Facebook. This data includes: the text of the post, the group where it was shared, time and date of publication, any associated links or media, the number of comments, shares and reactions, and other metadata. Data was gathered from 1 April 2020 to 11 September 2020 and collected on 12 September 2020 –before the Facebook ban on QAnon content. All data was collected using a keyword-based query of this API.

Keyword collection

We began by identifying a comprehensive list of keywords to capture QAnon discourse across Facebook. Selection of these keywords and terms was informed by previous research by ISD, in combination with insights from our regular monitoring of the conspiracy theory online and in collaboration with NewsGuard. We aimed to only include terms frequently used by QAnon advocates and those supportive of the conspiracy. In choosing these terms, we also avoided more generalist keywords associated with the conspiracy, to limit the number of false positives (posts that mentioned the conspiracy theory but were not posted by QAnon followers, such as posts fact-checking the theory or expressing concern about its rise).

We gathered an initial data set using the keyword list and qualitatively assessed it for precision and recall. Our researchers then extracted and manually reviewed a random sample of this initial data set to ensure the keyword list was returning only posts that would be of interest in this research. This process resulted in us removing the term “Spygate” from our keyword lists, as many posts containing only this keyword could not be directly tied to QAnon. Although the Spygate conspiracy theory (explained in the key themes section of this report) was popular among QAnon followers, it has also circulated in broader circles of conservatives who do not believe in QAnon. We also removed the term “moloch” from our keyword list. The term is used by QAnon followers to refer to the act of sacrificing children. However, we removed the term because it is also the name of a hip-hop artist and posts mentioning the keyword could therefore not be directly tied to QAnon.

Following this keyword review, we performed a final collection of data, which serves as the basis for analysis in this report. The full keyword list can be found in appendix A.

The size of the final data set is shown in table 1 below.

Final data set

Unique posts	210,505
Unique accounts	27,404

Table 1: Number of unique posts containing QAnon keywords and number of unique accounts mentioning QAnon keywords.

Narrative analysis

ISD analysed the full data set using a bespoke analytical platform developed by ISD and our technology partner. Analytical workflows in this platform have been developed specifically to analyse social media data, particularly about hate, extremism, conspiracy theories and polarisation. Individual posts are processed based on the data drawn from the API, including by organising posts by linguistic similarity, aggregating posts containing the same URL, and tracking the number of posts from individual pages or groups.

Using this analytical platform, we identified five characteristics of the data set:

- Widely repeated messages, or text that occurred multiple times in unique posts within the data set.
- Widely shared messages, or posts that were most shared via platform functionality (i.e., clicking “share” on the Facebook platform).
- Post volume over time.
- Most prolific accounts, or those accounts that most frequently posted using one or more keywords.
- Most frequently shared external URLs.

We then manually assessed these lists to better understand the broader trends in the data set. Widely repeated and shared messages were assessed to understand the main narratives within the data set. Post volume over time was used to identify peaks in activity, and the most prolific account list was used to identify key influencers. After identifying these top-level trends, researchers selected specific narratives or periods of particular interest for further investigation.

Bespoke keyword lists were developed to extract subsets of posts for further manual analysis; and posts from a specific day or days were analysed separately. For example, when outgoing President Trump commented on QAnon publicly for the first time on 18 August, we extracted all posts made in the days following for closer analysis. In these instances, the subsets were processed using the same analytical workflows as above and similar summary tables were produced for manual assessment.

Finally, the list of most frequently shared external URLs was processed to identify the domains that were most frequently cited. The number of times each URL was shared via Facebook’s share function was tabulated and this figure was aggregated at the domain level.

The final list of unique URLs and domains served as the basis for the domain analysis conducted by NewsGuard.

Domain analysis

NewsGuard analysed the websites and, in particular, the news websites most referenced by QAnon followers in their posts on Facebook. To carry out the domain analysis, we limited our focus to websites that appeared in 10 or more Facebook posts in the data set, comprising 396 domains that account for 98% of all links in the data set. We also combined duplicate domains that represent the same website shared in different formats where relevant (e.g. combining the data from YouTube.com, the main URL for YouTube, with that of m.youtube.com, the mobile URL for the site).

Because we were most interested in determining how QAnon followers reference and share news articles – both reliable and unreliable – much of our domain analysis focuses on websites that publish or purport to publish news and opinion, rather than other types of sites that are not focused on news content, like Reddit.com and YouTube.com. The bulk of this analysis was powered by NewsGuard’s ratings and “Nutrition Label” reviews of news websites, which are produced by trained journalists who assess websites using nine apolitical criteria of journalistic practice.¹⁶ NewsGuard rates news and information websites in the US, UK, France, Germany, and Italy. It prioritises rating websites that receive high levels of engagement on social media (shares, likes, comments, etc.), based on data from media intelligence firm NewsWhip.

Of the 302 news websites that appeared in at least 10 Facebook posts in our data set, 181 were rated by NewsGuard, 29 had not been rated because they serve countries in which NewsGuard does not currently operate and the remaining 92 were not rated because they did not receive sufficient levels of social media engagement to qualify for NewsGuard’s threshold for warranting a review. The NewsGuard ratings cited in this report were current as of 28 October 2020. NewsGuard regularly updates its ratings of news websites and some of the ratings cited in this report may later change.

For websites in the data set that had not been rated by NewsGuard, we classified the language (English, Spanish, etc.) and category (news, platform, e-commerce, etc.) of each site, enabling us to observe other trends in the data such as the presence of at least 80 different platforms (discussed below).

Overall trends

Volume over time

ISD tracked a significant increase in discussion around QAnon and associated conspiracies since April, when our analysis started. The average number of Facebook posts related to QAnon captured in our data set increased every month from April to September.

Month	Average posts per day	Month-on-month increase
April	992	n/a
May	1,174	182
June	1,192	18
July	1,602	410
August	1,772	170

Table 2: Table representing the month-on-month increase of QAnon-related posts on Facebook per day captured in our data set.

The greatest increase in activity month-on-month occurred between June and July when the average number of posts per day rose from 1,192 to 1,602. Between April and August, the average number of Facebook posts per day almost doubled, rising from 992 to 1,772, or a 178% increase. This spike in volume as the summer progressed is visible in figure 1. On 19 August, Facebook announced it had taken down or restricted more than 10,000 groups, pages and Instagram accounts associated with QAnon.¹⁷ Our analysis tracked a drop in QAnon activity from this date onwards.

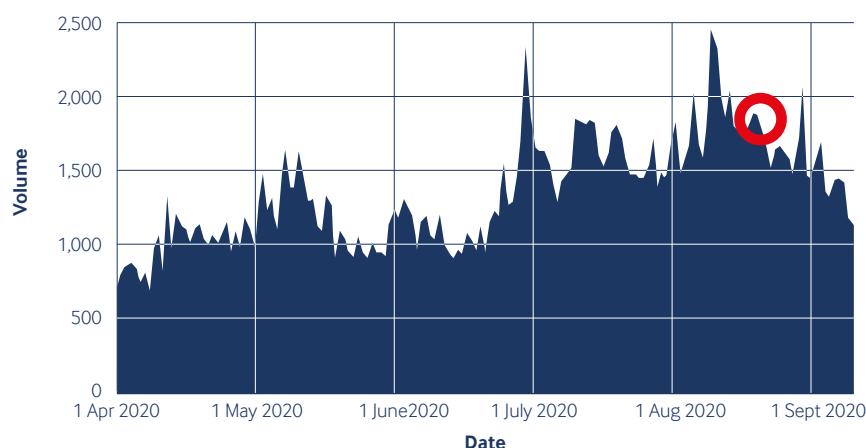


Figure 1: Graph representing the number of QAnon-related posts on Facebook per day captured in our data set. The red circle signals a spike in QAnon discussion on Facebook from August 18 that corresponds with the date Trump made his first public comments about the conspiracy.

Notable peaks in volume: Outgoing President Trump comments on QAnon for the first time

ISD analysed the data set for spikes in QAnon communities around several key incidents. One of these was the activity on and around 18 August (seen circled in red in the figure 1), when Trump made his first public comments about the conspiracy during a press conference in the White House. In response to a reporter's question about the conspiracy, Trump said he does not "know much about the movement other than I understand they like me very much, which I appreciate" and added that "if I can help save the world from problems, I'm willing to do it", referring to the belief among QAnon supporters that he is at the forefront of a fight against corrupt global elites.¹⁸

In the days following these comments, there was a spike in QAnon discussion on Facebook, leading to two consecutive days with higher-than-average posts (19 August: 1,883 posts, 20 August: 1,874 posts) where QAnon supporters celebrated Trump's remarks and shared videos from the press conference.

Highly engaged posts in this timeframe included a Facebook video, viewed 66,000 times, which was posted by highly prominent QAnon activist Liz Crokin (Crokin's profile was removed from Facebook on 20 October). A video posted to her profile stated: "President Trump discusses QAnon for the first time! He says Q followers love him & the country & the movement is gaining momentum. BOOM! Thank you Q".

Another video, posted on YouTube by a Canadian QAnon follower and shared 242 times on Facebook, praised Trump's comments and said "#DonaldTrump pretty much confirmed that he's aware of #QAnon, he didn't condemn it as a conspiracy, he actually acknowledged the #Patriots that make up the #WWG1WGA movement". The video was removed following YouTube's 15 October policy change to ban QAnon content.

August surge

Engagement around QAnon-related content increased on Facebook over the summer. Of the most widely shared posts, 31% were made in August, versus 22% in July, and 15% in June.

This can at least partly be attributed to a communication strategy adopted by members of the QAnon community over the summer to hijack hashtags associated with the Save the Children movement, which is explained in detail in the key themes section below. Members of the QAnon community were behind numerous rallies protesting child sex trafficking, which were held across the US throughout August and led to a nationwide surge in the use of terms linked to QAnon.¹⁹ Posts captured in our data set that featured terms such as "SaveTheChildren" and "SaveOurChildren" were shared a collective 132,000 times, with activity around the terms highest in August, as seen in the graph below.

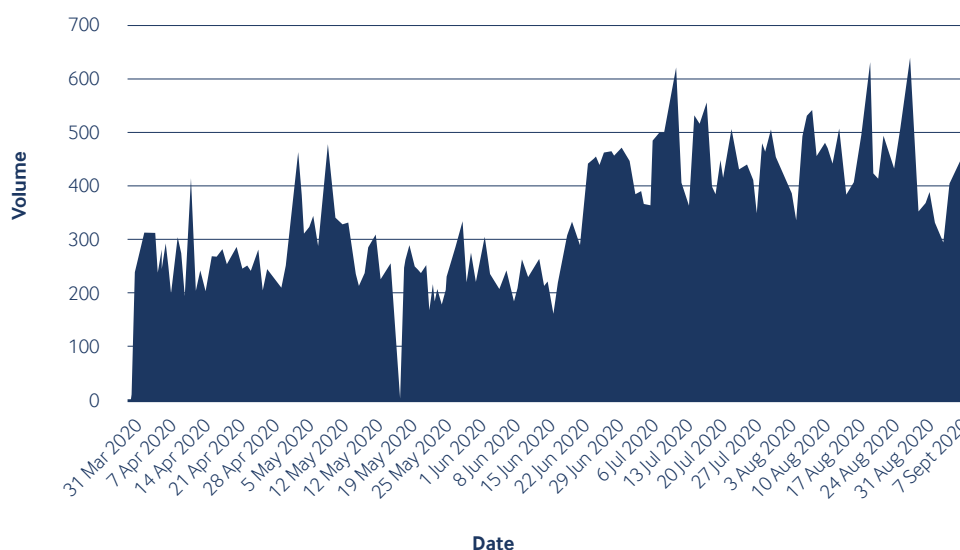


Figure 2: Graph representing the use of #SaveTheChildren among QAnon communities April-September, reflecting the growth of the hashtag from mid-July onwards.

The most widely shared post captured in our data set was posted in August. The post has been shared on Facebook 53,000 times and features a video that has been viewed two million times.²⁰ The video, posted on a page on 1 August, shows a crowd of protesters demonstrating outside the Los Angeles offices of CNN, chanting “save the children” and “where we go one, we go all”. The latter statement is a central motto of the QAnon movement, which followers claim appeared on a bell on a yacht belonging to former President John F. Kennedy, Jr., but which comes from a 1996 Ridley Scott film called *White Squall*.²¹ The Facebook post also used both slogans as hashtags.

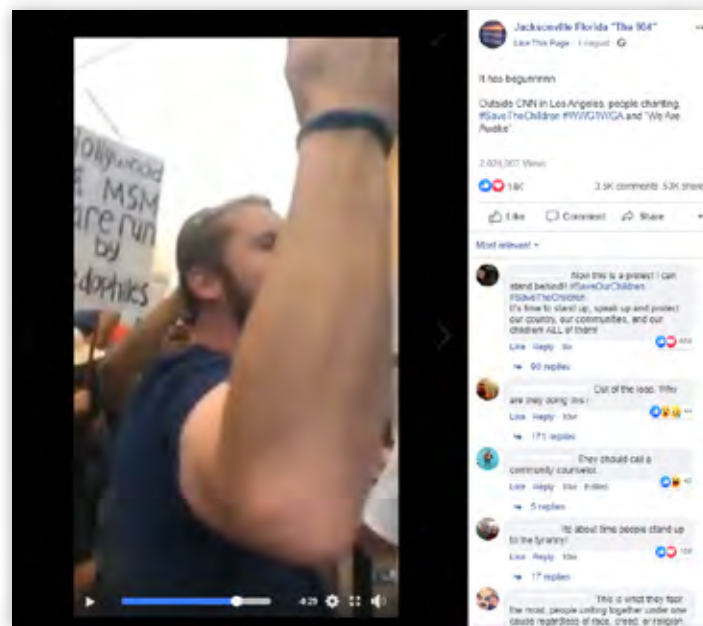


Figure 3: Screenshot from a video of a “Save the Children”/QAnon protest outside CNN’s Los Angeles office, uploaded in August. A placard in the background claims “Hollywood and the mainstream media are run by pedophiles”.

Key themes

Throughout our data set, several key themes were evident. The five major themes highlighted by the data were QAnon redpilling, COVID-19, the “Save the Children” campaign, the Obamagate conspiracy theory and adrenochrome.

QAnon redpilling

Videos and other content that serve as introductory materials for new members of the QAnon community ranked highly in the most widely shared posts in our data set. “The Fall of Cabal”, a video produced by Dutch filmmaker and conspiracy theorist Janet Ossebaard, is one of the most popular documentaries among QAnon followers. Direct links to versions of the documentary were shared in our data set in at least 20 posts. Copies of the video are hosted on platforms like BitChute, which is a video hosting platform with few content moderation rules that provides a haven for a significant amount of extremist material.^{22 23} It is also hosted on YouTube, though it appears videos featuring the documentary on this platform were removed after the 15 October ban.

The documentary was shared on Facebook on 26 July by a user who told people: “This is a great introduction into the world that you thought you knew. Make sure you watch it’s [sic] entirety. This is one of the biggest red pills you will take!” The post, which was shared 331 times in our data set, uses emotive language that urges people to interact with QAnon-related content, a common trait seen in content shared within this movement.



Figure 4: Screenshot from Facebook upload of “Fall of the Cabal” documentary, posted 26 July.

A link to a Google Drive folder entitled “Resources for Redpilling, Awakening, Healing – The First Steps” was shared 61 times in our data set. The link was posted by a self-identified QAnon follower underneath a video that featured him speaking about a movie he produced that “exposed Hollywood pedophiia [sic]”. This received 140,000 views.

The Google Drive folder features a document including a list of news articles about Jeffrey Epstein, Harvey Weinstein, Ghislaine Maxwell and Bill Gates from mainstream news organisations like the New York Times, BuzzFeed and the Daily Beast (all Green-rated by NewsGuard).^{24 25 26} While there is no framing

or caption alongside the articles in the folder, they all feature stories that highlighted links between Epstein or Maxwell and celebrities, politicians or entrepreneurs. It is possible, based on knowledge of QAnon narratives more broadly, that they were included here to support the claim that elites were closely connected to Epstein, a convicted sex offender who was charged with a range of sex-trafficking crimes in 2019. The citation of mainstream news sources to justify QAnon beliefs is discussed further in the domain assessments.

The folder also features numerous links to videos about alleged paedophiles and child sex-trafficking survivors, as well as QAnon documentaries like “Out of the Shadows”, all uploaded on YouTube (and still available after the 15 October ban) and Bitchute.

COVID-19

Conspiracies regarding COVID-19 are highly popular in the QAnon community. These take on many forms, but most align with the belief that COVID-19 was a planned event for population control or enforcing mass vaccinations across the world. Other conspiracy narratives include the assertion that, while the virus may be real, it has been seized upon by the mainstream media and governments worldwide to further their goals and alter society to their benefit.

This theme’s prominence was evident throughout our data set. A popular Facebook post, shared 731 times was captioned: “Please everyone, watch this video, this will hopefully make you understand what is going on with our world and way of life. I can’t stress this enough, you need to watch this video”. The post contained a video, posted by a user who can be regarded as a QAnon superspreader. This video has since been viewed 1.3 million times to date and remains on the platform, despite the QAnon ban on Facebook.

The video was originally released by Remnant TV, an online pro-Trump “Catholic news, discussion and information” YouTube channel.²⁷ The footage was presented as a short-form documentary and claimed that people like George Soros, Al Gore, and the secretary-general of the United Nations “are only too eager to admit that COVID-19 offers them a rare opportunity” to reset the world economy, enact population control, enforce climate change regulation and “transform every aspect of life as we know it”. The only thing standing in the way of this, according to the video, is Trump.

The video highlights how conspiracy theory supporters have merged various beliefs in recent months, using QAnon terminology to promote COVID-19 disinformation that claims the virus is part of a plot to remove Trump from office.



Figure 5: Screenshot from Remnant TV video “The Great Reset”, posted 6 August.

Save The Children

Pizzagate is a conspiracy theory that emerged during the 2016 US presidential election that claimed that senior figures in the Democratic Party, including Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager John Podesta, were involved in a child sex-trafficking ring.²⁸ As the QAnon conspiracy gained momentum during 2017-2018, supporters and influencers leaned heavily on many themes popularised by Pizzagate, most notably the notion that members of an elite group were exploiting and trafficking children.²⁹

During summer 2020, QAnon supporters “hijacked” the Save The Children movement by linking one of the core tenets of the conspiracy – child trafficking perpetrated by global elites – to legitimatise campaigns that seek to raise awareness of actual child sex-trafficking.³⁰ Members of the conspiracy community were behind numerous rallies against child sex-trafficking held across the US organised from July onwards and co-opted hashtags used by organisations like Save The Children.³¹ The move has been described as a “growth strategy” that “involves piggybacking on the anti-human trafficking movement”.³² As a result, the QAnon community has found new followers in people who may not know much about QAnon, but do agree that child exploitation is bad and will advocate online for increased awareness about child trafficking.

One post that captures how Save the Children has been used to spread QAnon conspiracies can be seen on the Facebook page for Marcela Iglesias, an Argentinian glamour model now living in the US. Iglesias has a combined following of over 300,000 people on her verified Facebook and Instagram profiles. Before August, no posts on her accounts contained Save the Children or other QAnon-related content.

However, on 10 August, Iglesias posted an image on both accounts featuring text that read: “The fact that no news channel talks about child trafficking should concern everyone. #SaveTheChildren”.^{33 34} The posts featured additional hashtags like #wwg1wga, #qdrops and #pedowood. The accompanying hashtags suggest that her interest in Save the Children emerged through QAnon-related content, not the established Save the Children organisation or campaign.

Activity like this demonstrates how QAnon content has been picked up in recent months by influential online users who command large followings and who previously never promoted the conspiracy. Posts like Iglesias’ substantially increase the visibility of QAnon-adjacent content and have the potential to pull in people into the QAnon conspiracy who may believe they are taking an uncontroversial position against child sex trafficking.

Connecting elites to sex-trafficking crimes

A trend popular among QAnon followers who co-opt the Save the Children movement is the act of highlighting cases of people who have been credibly accused of or charged with exploiting children.

Take the example of Jeffrey Epstein, a convicted sex offender and financier who had connections with many politicians, celebrities and media professionals.³⁵ Epstein was arrested and charged with a range of sex-trafficking crimes in July 2019, but died by suicide in a New York prison one month later in August 2019. Epstein's crimes fit the narrative espoused by QAnon followers that corrupt and powerful people were taking advantage of young children and escaping justice.³⁶

Over time, other high-profile individuals who travelled or socialised with Epstein have been pulled into the evolving conspiracy as a result. By their association with Epstein, people like former US President Bill Clinton, Oprah Winfrey and Tom Hanks have become central figures in Pizzagate/QAnon/Save the Children conspiracy narratives.³⁷

The data shows that widely shared posts related to Epstein promoted claims that he hosted parties where elites would perform rituals on children to produce adrenochrome, a supposed drug that elites would then later consume. This is described in further detail later in this section.

Some of the most widely shared posts mentioning Epstein within our data set are shown in the table below.

Post Title	Group/Page:	Shares
EPSTEIN FILES: THE HORRIFIC TRUTH ABOUT ADRENOCHROME!!! ðŸ’ SUBSCRIBE FOR MORE UPDATES! [sic]	DoeNut [Group] [Removed]	35,965
#epsteindidntkillhimself #PizzaGate and The Pedophilia Agenda [sic]	Tupac's Klluminati Soldiers of Truth [Group]	10,275
STILL A CONSPIRACY? ðŸ’ long read but this will help you navigate your searching for those curious minds.. Prince Andrew is accused for pedophilia and was extremely close with Jeffrey Epstein. (A convicted pedophile) [sic]	Gator Queen Liz [Page]	2,168
This is the effects of Satanic Ritual Abuse [SRA] and Adrenochrome harvesting on a child. When a child is trafficked by the Luciferian elite, they are then sexually abused and terrorised to the point that their blood becomes highly adrenalised... partaking in Epstein-styled parties that secretly perform SRA on trafficked children and teens.	The Truth and Mystery Behind this World [Page]	1,096
PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW! Prince Andrew was close with Jeffrey Epstein convicted paedophile and accused of the same. Research Epstein Island if you have a strong stomach.	Action Against Predators [Page]	910

Table 3: Widely shared Facebook posts mentioning Jeffrey Epstein captured in our data set.

Obamagate/Spygate

Obamagate, also referred to as Spygate, is a complex and unsubstantiated narrative that alleges that former US President Barack Obama and other members of his administration plotted to undermine Trump's presidency. In particular, through alleged illegal actions taken during the FBI investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and links between Russia and the Trump campaign.^{38 39} Justice Department investigations have indeed uncovered issues about the Russia investigation, including in the investigation of former Trump aide Carter Page, which included an FBI lawyer pleading guilty to doctoring an email to support a wiretapping request.⁴⁰ However, the Obamagate conspiracy theory goes beyond these revelations, which were not found to be caused by political bias, and involves false claims that a "spy" was embedded within the Trump campaign as an informant or that the Obama administration improperly unmasked – or revealed – a previously anonymous individual from the Trump campaign in intelligence reports. Such claims have been found to be untrue or unfounded by Justice Department investigations.⁴¹

It is important to note the differences between accurate reporting on abuses discovered by the Justice Department Inspector General, such as in the investigation of Page, versus baseless allegations waged by QAnon followers. Aware of this distinction, we took steps to exclude from our data set any Facebook posts that mentioned only Spygate or Obamagate without mentioning another term central to QAnon, such as WWG1WGA.

In December 2019, Michael Horowitz, Inspector General of the Justice Department, released a report about key aspects of the FBI's 2016 investigation.⁴² While the report did identify serious breaches, QAnon followers embraced them as evidence of the deep-state cabal and cause for legal action beyond the Justice Department's recommendations.

According to The New York Times, "Followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory also latched onto the Horowitz report, predicting that it would set in motion indictments and mass arrests of the president's enemies".⁴³ In fact, Q posted about Spygate on 8kun two days before the report was released, with an image of Obama and intelligence officials in his administration with text that read, "Spygate! Never has a President left office to collude with others to impede the next sitting President of the United States of America until Obama!" Q's post included the caption "Ask yourself a very simple question, why? The 'why' will be (publicly) answered soon. Dark > Light".⁴⁴ However, while Horowitz's report detailed significant issues, it stated that "We also did not find documentary or testimonial evidence that political bias or improper motivation influenced the FBI's decision" to open the investigation or conduct surveillance of Carter Page.

During the time of our data collection, the Justice Department dropped charges against former Trump national security adviser Michael Flynn, who had twice pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI in the course of the 2016 Russia investigation.⁴⁵ QAnon followers celebrated this development with posts linking to various news sources.

They also shared a significant amount of content related to an investigation into whether Flynn had been improperly "unmasked" by Obama officials – meaning he had been personally identified in documents that initially shielded his identity. In mid-October, the "unmasking" investigation concluded with no charges or statements of wrongdoing.⁴⁶

Obamagate aligns with QAnon followers' general belief in a battle between Trump and the "deep state". Posts from Q have frequently referenced the Russia investigation and the events and figures central to Obamagate.⁴⁷

Moreover, it is likely that news articles related to Obamagate feature prominently in our data set due to the timing in which it was collected. During this period, there were several legal developments related to multiple investigations into the origins of the Russian interference and other related topics. These constant updates provided ample fodder for QAnon followers to discuss and speculate about.

Facebook posts captured in our data set that mentioned Obamagate or Spygate alongside central QAnon terms indicate how these have become catch-all terms used by QAnon followers to point to a supposed grand conspiracy against Trump by “deep state elites”, smear critics of the President or push claims of censorship by social platforms.

One Facebook video, shared seven times in our data set, featured footage of Julian Assange claiming that “media lies” and uncritical coverage of “government propaganda” have fuelled wars in the past 50 years. The post featured the hashtags #Spygate and #Obamagate, along with hashtags more directly tied to QAnon, like #WWG1WGA and #WWG1WGAWorldwide. In another example, a QAnon superspreader whose videos were shared 170 times in our data set posted one video in which they claimed in the accompanying post that Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot had pledged allegiance to the “Zionist NWO”. Lightfoot did mention the “new world order” in the video, but a Reuters fact check reported that the mayor’s comments were taken out of context and she was not referring to “the conspiracy of a totalitarian world government”.⁴⁸ The Facebook user’s post did not specify what they meant by “Zionist NWO”, but did include the #Obamagate hashtag as well as #PizzagateIsReal and #SaveTheChildren.

Yet another Facebook post, since removed but previously shared at least 1,200 times, used #Obamagate along with other central QAnon terms to falsely claim the hashtags are now being censored by social platforms. A review carried out before the publishing of this report in November 2020 confirmed the hashtags could still be found in posts published on the platform.



Figure 6: Post, from a since-removed Facebook page, claiming Facebook is censoring content around QAnon and “Obamagate”.⁴⁹

Adrenochrome

Adrenochrome is a chemical compound created by the oxidation of adrenaline.

The Daily Beast reports that adrenochrome is “an easy-to-come-by chemical compound, usually found as a light pink solution”.⁵⁰ It further notes that it is “not approved for medical use by the Food and Drug Administration – although researchers can buy 25 milligrams of it for just US\$55 – but doctors in other countries prescribe a version of it to treat blood clotting”. In popular culture, the compound is best known for being mentioned in author Hunter S. Thompson’s 1971 novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.⁵¹

QAnon followers claim that members of a “cabal” harvest the compound from children and use it to stay young and healthy. Adrenochrome was a popular focus of links from e-commerce domains reviewed by NewsGuard, discussed in the domain analysis section below.

Brian Freidberg, a senior researcher on the Technology and Social Change Project at Harvard’s Shorenstein Center, wrote in a WIRED opinion column that early references to adrenochrome by QAnon followers were explicitly connected to the “blood libel”, which, according to the Anti-Defamation League, is “a centuries-old false allegation that Jews murder Christians – especially Christian children – to use their blood for ritual purposes”.^{52 53}

We saw adrenochrome mentioned in a similar way in our data set. One post, shared 61 times before it was removed, stated: “Adrenochrome is a very real drug that is mass-produced to the Global Elite with the help of organisations like Planned Parenthood & people like Senator Kamala Harris”. Another post, shared 34 times by users in the data set, states “adrenochrome [sic] is the powerful hormonal precursor for adrenaline” taken from children by “sick monsters”. The Facebook post linked out to a YouTube video titled “Hollywood [sic] Elite Pedophiles & Satanic Rituals” that is still live on that platform and features photos of the Clintons, celebrities like Robert DeNiro and Lady Gaga and other figures regularly mentioned in Pizzagate-related posts.

QAnon Superspreeder

To understand what drove other peaks in volume during the period analysed, we examined notable spikes in the number of posts per day in our data set, and in doing so, identified a QAnon superspreeder.

One notable spike in activity in the overall data set occurred between 23 June and 30 June when the number of posts per day rose from 1,219 to 2,347 by the end of the month. When we isolated posts around this period, one Facebook profile appeared regularly throughout the data subset. In line with ISD policies around anonymity and privacy, we are referring to them here as “the Superspreeder profile”.⁵⁴ The profile remained live on the platform despite Facebook’s ban but was taken down on 13 November. The same user continues to post QAnon content on a different personal profile not included in this research.

In a data set of 6,027 isolated posts captured between 27 June and 1 July, videos from the Superspreeder profile appeared 1,448 times, accounting for roughly 24% of total posts, all which linked to five videos uploaded by this individual during this period. The videos amassed over 9.8 million views before the profile was removed. The videos range in topic and are emblematic of how QAnon followers have co-opted other conspiracies and divisive incidents into their larger conspiracy. One video, uploaded 28 June, was a popular conspiracy video called “COVID 911 – Insurgency”, which claimed the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax that was manufactured by “Deep State Democrats” and the “mass media” to rig the presidential election and remove Trump from office. The upload received over 6.4 million views before the profile was removed. The post included the hashtags #WWG1WGA, #QAnonArmy and #TheGreatAwakening. It was flagged by fact-checkers on the platform and given a “false rating” yet continued to attract views.⁵⁵

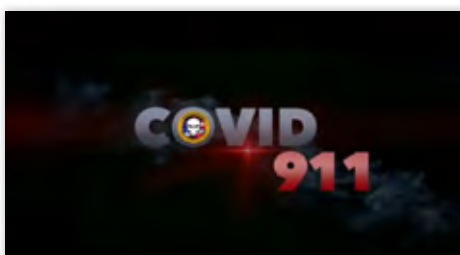


Figure 7: Screenshot from the opening scene of “COVID 911”, which received 6.4 million views on the Superspreeder profile.

Another video uploaded by the Superspreeder profile on 25 June was originally filmed by conspiracy theorist and pro-Trump content creator Dionne Alexander. In it, Alexander warns Black Lives Matter protesters to stay away from his neighbourhood. The video posted by the Superspreeder was viewed 2.4 million times. The post also featured the hashtags #WWG1WGA, #QAnonArmy and #TheGreatAwakening. Like that video, other videos posted on the superspreeder profile did not explicitly promote QAnon, but did show a police vehicle forcing its way through a group of protesters, who the user described as “terrorists”, mocking the left-wing anti-fascist movement, or seeking to discredit members of the Democrat party. Each video received a large number of views in the process and each post featured the hashtag #WWG1WGA, #QAnonArmy and #TheGreatAwakening.

This Superspreeder described themselves as a “digital soldier”, a term popular in the QAnon community and regularly posted memes and statuses expressing support for the US president, downplaying the severity of COVID-19 and promoting the Save The Children movement, as well as other QAnon-adjacent conspiracies. To better understand their role as a superspreeder, we’ve included tables below showing a number of pages and groups where videos from this profile were shared, highlighting how this QAnon content was predominantly shared among right-wing, pro-police and pro-Trump communities and from individual accounts, which were not affected by the Facebook ban.

Notably, the number of shares presented below only represent the number of times the content was shared from the listed page in the listed group. Analysis tools do not have access to user-level data, meaning we don’t have full visibility over the number of times and locations where the content was shared, and so these figures are likely underestimations.

1. Video: "COVID 911 – Insurgency"**Views on Facebook:** 6.4 million

Page/Group Name:	Date	Shares
Liz Wheeler/Tipping Point on OAN Fans Group [Group]	29/6/20	17
Deplorable Deb Reporting from my Basket [Page]	30/6/20	91
Frontline America with Ben Bergquam [Page]	30/6/20	105
Friends Who ELECTED Donald J Trump [Group]	30/6/20	15
Team Trump 2020 [Group]	1/7/20	18

Table 4: Table showing a sample of the groups where this video, uploaded by the Superspreader profile, was shared.**2. Video: Dionne Alexander warns *Black Lives Matter* protesters to stay away from his neighbourhood****Views on Facebook:** 2.4 million

Page/Group Name:	Date	Shares
Andrew Cuomo Has To Go [Group]	29/6/20	20
Russian Speaking Americans for Trump [Group] [Removed]	30/6/20	63
Donald Trump ~ The Silent Majority [Group]	30/6/20	51
Sarah H. Sanders Supporters [Group]	30/6/20	42
Recall Gretchen Whitmer [Group]	1/7/20	86

Table 5: Table showing a sample of the groups where this video, uploaded by the Superspreader profile, was shared.**3. Video: Police vehicle forces its way through a group of protesters, described as "terrorists" in post****Views on Facebook:** 29,177

Page/Group Name:	Date	Shares
WORCESTER POLICE OFFICIALS UNION – IBPO LOCAL 504 [Group]	29/6/20	7
Deplorables for Trump [Group] [Removed]	30/6/20	2
Just Right Broadcasting Group [Group]	30/6/20	0

Table 6: Table showing a sample of the groups where this video, uploaded by the Superspreader profile, was shared.**4. Video: Shows a person falling off a statue, used to mock anti-fascist protesters****Views on Facebook:** 1.2 million

Page/Group Name:	Date	Shares
The Rush Limbaugh Facebook Group [Group]	29/6/20	174
Bill O'Reilly fan group [Group]	29/6/20	139
Law Enforcement for Life! [Group]	29/6/20	60
Australians against radical Islam [Group] [Removed]	30/6/20	95
CANDACE OWENS FAN CLUB [Group]	30/6/20	42

Table 7: Table showing a sample of the groups where this video, uploaded by the Superspreader profile, was shared.**5. Video: News clips used to discredit New York Governor Andrew Cuomo****Views on Facebook:** 7,015

Page/Group Name:	Date	Shares
PensaScope [Group] [Removed]	29/6/20	10
Snowflake Central [Group]	30/6/20	0

Table 8: Table showing a sample of the groups where this video, uploaded by the Superspreader profile, was shared.

Key actors

Across our data set, we conducted an analysis to identify the public figures mentioned most frequently by QAnon followers on Facebook. Outgoing President Trump is the most-cited figure in our data, appearing in almost five times more QAnon-related posts than other high-profile individuals.

Throughout April-September, Trump received 15,551 mentions in our data, compared to Barack Obama, the next most-mentioned individual, who appeared in 3,350 posts. Other politicians featured in the data included Hillary Clinton (1,923 posts), Joe Biden (1,160 posts), Bill Clinton (457 posts), Justin Trudeau (452 posts) and Adolf Hitler (272 posts).

Aside from politicians, other notable individuals among the most-mentioned figures were Jeffrey Epstein (2,277 posts), George Soros (1,619 posts), former Trump advisor Gen. Michael Flynn (1,327 posts), Prince Andrew (1,265 posts), Bill Gates (850 posts) and Tom Hanks (652 posts). See a sample of some of these posts in figure 8.

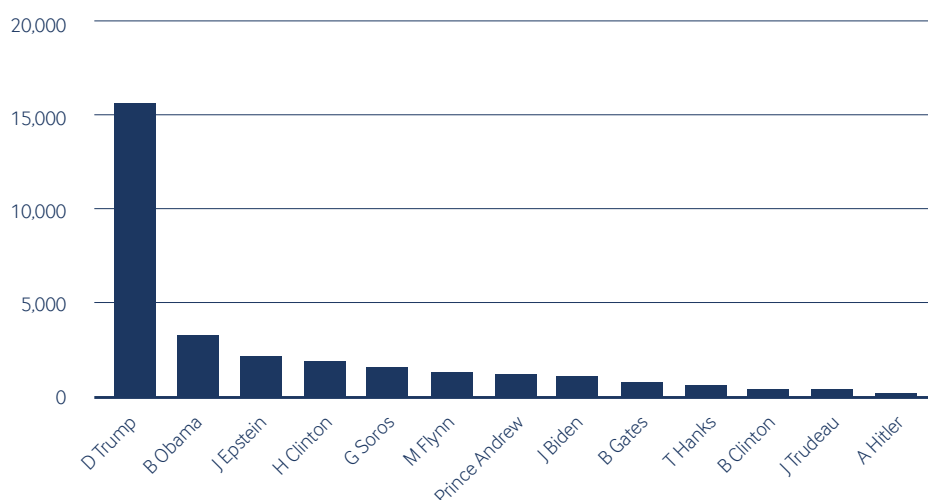


Figure 8: Chart showing mentions of public figures among QAnon community on Facebook between April and September.



Figure 9: Screenshot from video upload of Trump publicly commenting on QAnon for the first time. This clip was one of the most popular Trump posts captured in our data set. The video and profile were removed from the platform on 20 October.



Figure 10: Screenshot from video upload promoting the claim that Bill Gates set up a charitable trust to benefit Jeffrey Epstein and promoting the claim that the two were closely connected.

Most shared domains/links

To understand how QAnon followers consume, interpret and share news articles, we looked at the news sources they most often included in Facebook posts – both the unreliable sites whose stories align with QAnon’s anti-establishment worldview and the credible, mainstream sources whose stories were often shared by QAnon followers and spun to fit their narratives. We prioritised our domain analysis by looking at the number of times a link from a website was posted on Facebook by a QAnon follower. We chose to focus on this metric because it points to the sources most familiar to QAnon followers, or those that they sought to amplify most often. To simplify the process, we limited our domain analysis to domains that appeared in at least 10 Facebook posts in our data set. Finally, while news websites were our primary interest, we also provide brief assessments of other types of websites at the end of this section, including platforms and e-commerce sites.

Domains	Number of posts containing links to the domain	Number of shares of posts containing links to the domain	NewsGuard rating	NewsGuard score (out of 100)
thegatewaypundit.com	786	5742	Red	37.5
humorousmathematics.com	721	2117	Red	12.5
qnation.us	369	267	Red	20
uncoverdc.com	332	284	Red	27.5
thefederalist.com	303	9902	Red	12.5
conspiracydailyupdate.com	221	67	Red	7.5
trendingpolitics.com	219	11097	Red	57
foxnews.com	216	1962	Green	69.5
nytimes.com	199	3036	Green	100
theepochtimes.com	185	1577	Red	49.5

Table 9: The top 10 news sites in our data set based on the number of Facebook posts that include links from the domain in the data.

Red-rated sites



Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic journalistic standards.

Many of the news sites that appear most frequently in this data set – in 10 or more Facebook posts – were sites rated Red by NewsGuard (meaning they severely violate basic journalistic standards, in many cases publishing false claims related to QAnon and on other subjects). Of the 181 news websites rated by NewsGuard that appeared in the data set, 90 were rated Red by NewsGuard. Links from Red-rated sites appeared 6,669 times in the data set, while links from Green-rated sites (generally reliable) only appeared 3,553 times. Posts containing links to Red-rated news sites were far more popular than those containing links to Green-rated sites, racking up 185,784 shares compared to 56,203 from Green-rated sites.

NewsGuard domain rating	Number of posts containing links to sites rated by NewsGuard	Percentage of posts containing links to sites rated by NewsGuard
Red-rated news source	6,669	65%
Green-rated news source	3,553	35%
All NewsGuard-rated news sources	10,222	100%

Table 10: Posts containing links to NewsGuard Red-rated news sites vs. Green-rated news sites.

NewsGuard domain rating	Number of shares of posts containing links to sites rated by NewsGuard	Percentage of shares of posts containing links to sites rated by NewsGuard
Red-rated news source	185,784	77%
Green-rated news source	56,203	23%
All NewsGuard-rated news source	241,987	100%

Table 11: Shares of posts containing links to NewsGuard Red-rated news sites vs. Green-rated news sites.

We present here case studies of the top five Red-rated sources that appeared in the data the greatest number of times. These sites exist in two categories: Established Misinformers, whose popularity on social media exists outside the QAnon community and Fringe Misinformers, whose engagement appears to be contained within it.

As ISD has previously reported, QAnon has grown into a “lurid meta-conspiracy connecting a range of harmful narratives”, and its followers have incorporated other conspiracies into their central narrative about the “deep state”.⁵⁶ Most news stories from Established Misinformers do not directly address QAnon. Rather, the conspiracy’s followers use their false or distorted reporting to incorporate other anti-establishment narratives into QAnon and its general worldview, most prominently through misleading coverage of the Obamagate narrative.

By contrast, Fringe Misinformers directly address QAnon and appear to play evangelising and record-keeping roles within the conspiracy's community. They share or interpret Q's posts, host redpill material, promote QAnon influencers and repeatedly encourage readers to conduct their own research – often with resources or guides provided on the sites.

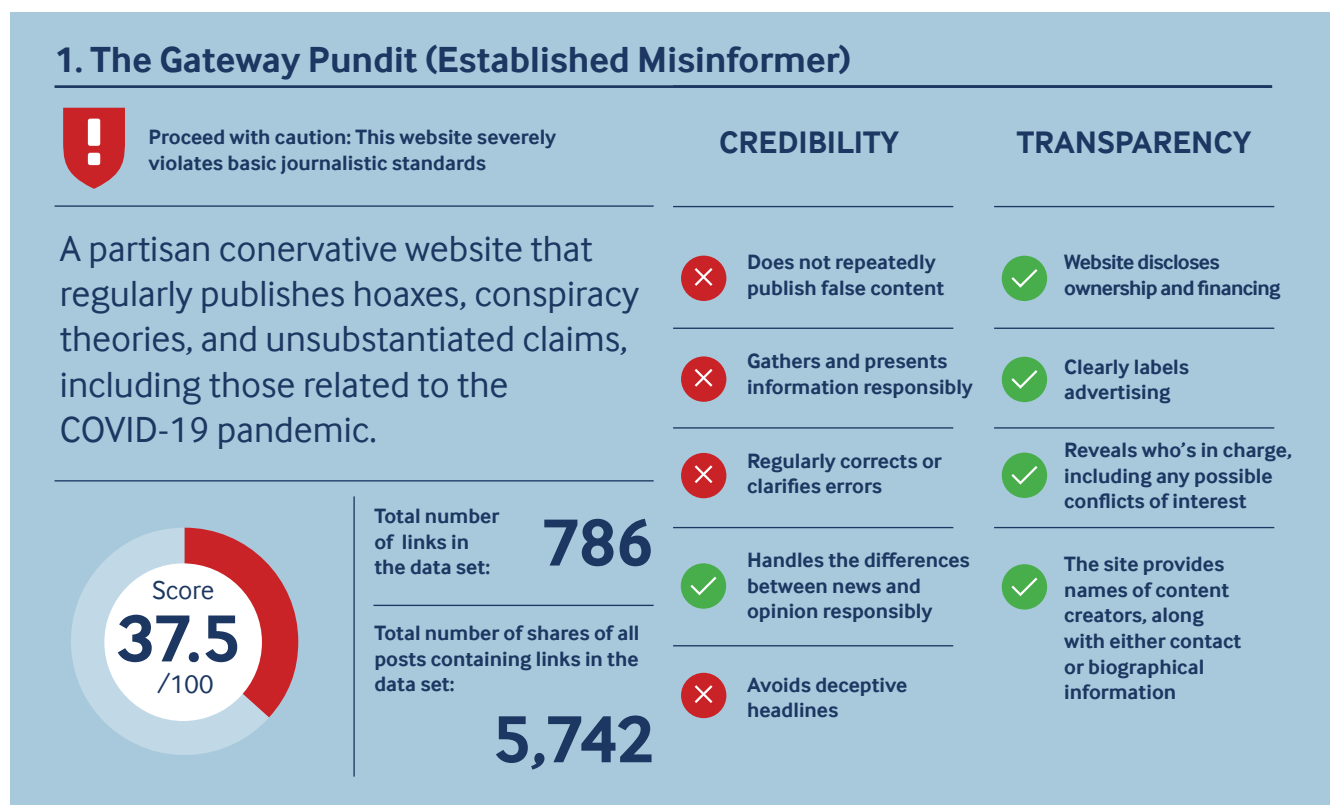


Figure 11: NewsGuard's red rating for The Gateway Pundit.

The Gateway Pundit was the news source most commonly shared in Facebook posts we analysed.

The Gateway Pundit is a conservative website owned and operated by Jim Hoft, a St. Louis-based blogger. It has been found by NewsGuard to repeatedly promote conspiracy theories and falsehoods, generally related to US politics.

The website's existence predates the QAnon conspiracy theory – it began in 2004 as Hoft's blog before he moved the site to its domain in 2011. Its popularity expands beyond circles of QAnon followers. On 11 September 2020, according to data from NewsWhip, the site ranked #121 in terms of online engagement among all news sites in the US, ranking between mainstream news sources such as *newyorker.com* (#110) and *theguardian.com* (#124).⁵⁷ In 2017, Trump's administration granted The Gateway Pundit White House press credentials.

In its Nutrition Label for the site, NewsGuard cites numerous false claims the site has advanced, including: claims about the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19, the whistleblower whose complaint about Trump's phone call with Ukraine's President led to an impeachment inquiry, the Clinton family and the students who spoke out in favour of gun control after the February 2018 mass shooting at a Parkland, Florida high school.

Yet, while the site's falsehoods span a range of topics, the Gateway Pundit stories shared most frequently by QAnon followers in our data set all dealt with Obamagate.

Headline	Number of posts containing the link	Total number of shares of all posts containing the link	Topic(s)	Story publication date
THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING! — Testimony Reveals Deep State Spy Joseph Mifsud Is Member of the Clinton Foundation	48	190	Obamagate	8/5/20
"It's Coming" — Reporter Adam Housley on Obamagate Scandal: Names to Watch... McMaster, Rosenstein and John McCain	44	336	Obamagate	26/5/20
Brennan Lashes Out at President Trump, Encourages Rioting and Looting by Left-Wing Terrorists, 'Necessary For Real Change'	42	820	Obamagate, Antifa	31/5/20
HUGE! Via John Solomon: Durham Has Subpoenaed and Called in Witnesses Before a DC Grand Jury	38	206	Obamagate	11/4/20
Stunning! Deep State Made Unmasking Requests on Trump Family Members the Morning of President Trump's Inauguration! (VIDEO)	35	175	Obamagate	14/5/20

Table 12: Top stories from TheGatewayPundit.com appearing in our data set, listed in order of number of posts containing the link.

2. HumorousMathematics.com (Fringe Misinformer)



Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic journalistic standards

A website promoting debunked conspiracies and false science and health claims, including support for QAnon, a belief that the earth is flat, and misinformation related to COVID-19.



Total number of links in the data set: **721**

Total number of shares of all posts containing links in the data set:

2,117

CREDIBILITY

- ✗ Does not repeatedly publish false content
- ✗ Gathers and presents information responsibly
- ✗ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors
- ✗ Handles the differences between news and opinion responsibly
- ✗ Avoids deceptive headlines

TRANSPARENCY

- ✗ Website discloses ownership and financing
- ✓ Clearly labels advertising
- ✓ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
- ✗ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information

Figure 12: NewsGuard's red rating for Humorous Mathematics.

Humorous Mathematics is a website and podcast run by two Dallas, Texas residents. It was created in April 2020, seemingly in direct response to restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and grew throughout our data collection period.

In the site's first post explaining its founding, one of its co-founders wrote: "While we practice safe social distancing and prepare ourselves for what could be the worst pandemic since the spanish flu, we are, whether directly or indirectly, granted a copious amount of time to analyze our lives and the world around us.⁵⁸ We are able to needle through the details of events that have occurred over the course of our entire lives without the inconvenience of distraction or interruption."

However, the post also contains references to ideas like "a comprehensive network of child traffickers" and "satanic ritualistic murder and blood consumption", suggesting that the site's co-founders were already versed in QAnon before the COVID-19 pandemic. Once they began creating content directly discussing the conspiracy, the site quickly gained popularity with the QAnon community on Facebook.

The site publishes links to a substantial collection of QAnon resources, usually listed below each article, including a "Red Pill Package" and a "Guide To Begin Researching & Exposing The Deep State". Stories treat the conspiracy's main claims as fact, like the idea that John F. Kennedy, Jr. is still alive and that former Democratic National Committee staffer Seth Rich leaked internal emails to WikiLeaks.^{59 60} The site has also published "The Fall of Cabal", the introductory QAnon documentary, and NewsGuard identified articles with misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶¹

Many articles on the site include a disclaimer that reiterates the theme of self-guided research common within QAnon: "we do encourage the reader to do further research on their own and we hope that you will share your findings with us. The mission for the truth requires a collective effort".

The site displays advertisements from "partners", such as men's grooming company Duke Cannon and has appears to earn revenue from a Patreon account, a crowdfunding platform through which readers can subscribe to specific creators.

Humorous Mathematics does not get enough engagement across major social media platforms to fall into NewsWhip's rankings.

Headline	Number of posts containing the link	Total number of shares of all posts containing the link	Topic(s)	Story publication date
QAnon Protestors Invade CNN In Hollywood Over Elite Pedophilia & Child Trafficking Exposure	120	920	QAnon protesters	1/8/20
What Is Adrenochrome? Follow The White Rabbit...	50	182	Adrenochrome	2/7/20
PedoGate 2020 Part 3 By Mouthy Budda	39	31	Paedophilia	25/8/20
Mid-2020 GITMO Update: Arrests, Indictments, & Executions	37	267	Criminality of elites	22/6/20
Face Mask Dangers: Hypoxia, Reduced Immune Efficiency, & Causation Of COVID-19 Symptoms	37	110	COVID-19 misinformation	23/7/20

Table 13: Top stories from HumorousMathematics.com appearing in our data set, listed in order of number of posts containing the link.

3. QNation.us (Fringe Misinformer)



Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic journalistic standards

A website dedicated to the baseless QAnon conspiracy theory that has also published false information about COVID-19.



Total number of links in the data set: **369**

Total number of shares of all posts containing links in the data set: **267**

CREDIBILITY

- ✗ Does not repeatedly publish false content
- ✗ Gathers and presents information responsibly
- ✗ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors
- ✓ Handles the differences between news and opinion responsibly
- ✗ Avoids deceptive headlines

TRANSPARENCY

- ✗ Website discloses ownership and financing
- ✓ Clearly labels advertising
- ✗ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
- ✗ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information

Figure 13: NewsGuard's red rating for QNation.

QNation.us was created in 2018 and appears to be run by a resident in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Initially, the site predominantly posted screenshots of Q posts on 8chan, a platform that routinely hosts conspiracy theories and other harmful content and which is now known as 8kun. In addition to sharing Q posts, it now also seems to be connected to a video-on-demand and web-hosting business called Public Media News, Inc. (PMN) and publishes video content, either hosted by PMN or YouTube.⁶² NewsGuard did not find original content on the site; rather, the site amplifies content from YouTube channels, social media influencers and other news sources popular within the QAnon community.

The site also includes a "Q's Plan/Primer" page with an "Introduction to Q, The Plan and How We Are Going to Save the World!" Many of the videos on the page were taken down by the time of NewsGuard's review.

The site also includes links to apparel shops and a PayPal donation form, as well as a link to join the National Rifle Association.

The site does not get enough engagement across major social media platforms to fall into NewsWhip's rankings.

Headline	Number of posts containing the link	Total number of shares of all posts containing the link	Topic(s)	Story publication date
Scary OP by Australian Spy in America – Burisma Arrest – Bidens Smart VP Pick	10	2	N/A - video deleted	14/6/20
StroppyMe: DJT Assassination Attempt Discovered By Durham?	9	7	N/A - video deleted	18/6/20
Dan Bongino: BS Media Narrative Alert	9	1	Criticizing mainstream media, Obamagate	1/4/20
Trump Makes His Move, Economic Timing, Release The Chains	9	0	N/A – video deleted	3/4/20
State Dept. Cables Released, Disappearing Pope, Nothing Can Stop What is Coming	5	2	N/A - video deleted	15/4/20

Table 14: Top stories from QNation.us appearing in our data set, listed in order of number of posts containing the link.

4. UncoverDC.com (Fringe Misinformers)



Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic journalistic standards

A right-wing news and commentary site that has promoted false claims and conspiracy theories that does not disclose its ownership or political perspective.



Total number of links in the data set: **332**

Total number of shares of all posts containing links in the data set: **284**

CREDIBILITY

- ✗ Does not repeatedly publish false content
- ✗ Gathers and presents information responsibly
- ✗ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors
- ✗ Handles the differences between news and opinion responsibly
- ✓ Avoids deceptive headlines

TRANSPARENCY

- ✗ Website discloses ownership and financing
- ✓ Clearly labels advertising
- ✓ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
- ✓ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information

Figure 14: NewsGuard's red rating for UncoverDC.

UncoverDC.com was founded in January 2019 by Tracy Diaz (“Tracy Beanz”), a former radio host who gained notoriety in 2017 as one of the earliest proponents of QAnon.

According to NBC News, Diaz was one of three people who “first popularized the QAnon theory” and helped lead its evolution from publishing anonymous 4chan posts into a growing movement.⁶³ “As Diaz tells it in a blog post detailing her role in the early days of QAnon, she banded together with the two [4chan] moderators”, where Q posts had first appeared, NBC News reported in August 2018. “Their goal, according to Diaz, was to build a following for QAnon – which would mean bigger followings for them as well”.

While QAnon content doesn’t appear prominently on the site, the conspiracy is discussed on the Dark to Light podcast, which Diaz hosts with YouTuber Frank Val. For example, in an August 2020 episode, Diaz discussed the congressional campaign of Marjorie Taylor Greene, a supporter of the QAnon conspiracy theory who was elected to represent Georgia in the US Congress in November 2020. Diaz commented that coverage of Greene in the mainstream media was exposing more people to the theory. “People who had no idea what this was are gonna start to try to look to see what it is”, Diaz said on the podcast. “Once people see the information is presented, they’re gonna be like, this is interesting”.

The top five stories from the site that were shared in the greatest number of Facebook posts in our data set discussed the Obamagate conspiracy, most of which were from Dark to Light podcast episodes. In its review of the site, NewsGuard also found examples of COVID-19 misinformation, including articles falsely stating that masks were not effective against the spread of the disease.

On 11 September 2020, according to data from NewsWhip, the site ranked #1,410 in terms of online engagement among all news sites in the US, approximately the same ranking as local newspapers such as California’s Redding Record Searchlight and Indiana’s The Star Press. UncoverDC’s relatively high ranking in the engagement rankings may have been short-lived – its ranking was only #2,366 on 1 April and after the brief surge in engagement in late summer, its ranking had fallen back to #2,134 by 11 November.

Headline	Number of posts containing the link	Total number of shares of all posts containing the link	Topic(s)	Story publication date
Richard Grenell Reveals Stunning Information About Obamagate During RNC Speech	76	16	Obamagate	27/8/20
Dark To Light: The Connections	51	4	Obamagate	9/9/20
What Is John Durham Thinking?	38	9	Obamagate	8/9/20
Dark To Light: Steven Schrage and Lindsay Graham	25	2	Obamagate	10/8/20
Dark To Light: Big Bad Conspiracy Theorists are Taking Over Congress	25	2	Obamagate	14/8/20

Table 15: Top stories from UncoverDC.com appearing in our data set, listed in order of number of posts containing the link.

5. TheFederalist.com (Established Misinformer)



Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic journalistic standards

An anonymously owned website that has repeatedly published false or misleading information in significant news and opinion stories.



Total number of links in the data set: **303**

Total number of shares of all posts containing links in the data set: **9,902**

CREDIBILITY

- ✗ Does not repeatedly publish false content
- ✗ Gathers and presents information responsibly
- ✗ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors
- ✗ Handles the differences between news and opinion responsibly
- ✗ Avoids deceptive headlines

TRANSPARENCY

- ✗ Website discloses ownership and financing
- ✓ Clearly labels advertising
- ✓ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
- ✗ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information

Figure 15: NewsGuard's red rating for The Federalist.

The Federalist, which was created in 2013, is a popular conservative website. According to data from NewsWhip, it ranked #133 among US news sites in terms of engagement over the 90 days preceding 11 September 2020.

The site's ownership, which is not disclosed, has been a frequent subject of speculation in the press.⁶⁴ In August 2020, The New York Times reported that the site received funding from the prominent conservative political donor and businessman Dick Uihlein.⁶⁵

The site received significant attention in September 2019, when it was first to report the false claim that the US intelligence community had "secretly" made changes to its whistleblower process and standards so that a report could be filed alleging impropriety by Trump.⁶⁶ Even after the Office of the Inspector General of the Intelligence Community issued a rare statement calling such claims false, The Federalist did not correct or retract its report, and the site continued to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the impeachment inquiry triggered by the whistleblower report.⁶⁷

In 2020, the site became a prominent source of COVID-19 misinformation and dangerous medical advice. In March, the site published "How Medical 'Chickenpox Parties' Could Turn the Tide of the Wuhan Virus", which advocated a "controlled voluntary infection program".⁶⁸ More recently, the site published the story "Herd Immunity To COVID Is Not Reckless. It Would Protect The Vulnerable", arguing against the scientific consensus that herd immunity without prioritising widespread vaccination would be deadly.^{69 70}

The top Federalist stories shared in the posts from QAnon followers we analysed all dealt with the so-called "Obamagate" theory. The top story, "New York Times Manipulates FBI Lawyer's Guilty Plea To Hide Real Obamagate News", implicates the newspaper and the media more broadly as covering up evidence of the supposed attempt to undermine Trump.

The site has directly criticised QAnon in stories dating back to 2018, when the site published a column headlined “Why Thousands Are Obsessed With A Nest Of Conspiracy Theories Called QAnon”.⁷¹ Most recently, an August 2020 column on the site stated, “QAnon espouses a loose collection of conspiracy theories so sprawling and fluid that as long as you believe in some sort of conspiracy involving Trump battling nefarious global elites, you can find a place in it”.⁷²

Headline	Number of posts containing the link	Total number of shares of all posts containing the link	Topic(s)	Story publication date
New York Times Manipulates FBI Lawyer’s Guilty Plea To Hide Real Obamagate News	79	824	Obamagate	17/8/20
FBI Lawyer’s Guilty Plea Suggests Obamagate Corruption Goes Way Higher	39	690	Obamagate	24/8/20
Why John Durham Should Release His Obamagate Findings Before November	38	6468	Obamagate	27/7/20
7 Devastating Revelations About Crossfire Hurricane In New Releases	14	137	Obamagate	20/4/20
What We Learned Sunday From Obamagate Insider Steven Schrage	14	73	Obamagate	10/8/20

Table 16: Top stories from TheFederalist.com appearing in our data set, listed in order of number of posts containing the link.

Green-Rated sites



This website adheres to all nine of NewsGuard's standards of credibility and transparency.

Links to credible and mainstream news organisations also featured regularly throughout our data set. Many of these are sources that QAnon supporters typically denounce, such as CNN. While it may seem counterintuitive for QAnon followers to link to news organisations that regularly report on the dangerous and misleading offshoots of the conspiracy, an examination of QAnon activity around these websites point to several explanations.

In some cases, QAnon followers share and celebrate mainstream news coverage of the conspiracy because they believe it is evidence of the size and influence of QAnon.

In other cases, QAnon followers cite information from mainstream sources as supposed evidence for their various narratives. "Do your own research" is a common refrain among QAnon followers. It follows that the conspiracy's most dedicated followers spend significant time interpreting Q's posts based on publicly available information online. In our data, we see posts from QAnon followers distorting mainstream reporting on people, events and crimes by positioning it as evidence of the conspiracy – associating stories about real incidents involving child trafficking or paedophilia, for example, with a pre-existing belief that a "cabal" bears responsibility.

We examine some of the top credible sources that appeared in our data below.

1. The New York Times (nytimes.com)



This website adheres to all nine of NewsGuard's standards of credibility and transparency.

The website of a New York-based organization with a network of journalists worldwide whose coverage exerts significant influence on national and international news and on public debate.



Total number of links in the data set: **199**

Total number of shares of all posts containing links in the data set: **3,036**

CREDIBILITY

- ✓ Does not repeatedly publish false content
- ✓ Gathers and presents information responsibly
- ✓ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors
- ✓ Handles the differences between news and opinion responsibly
- ✓ Avoids deceptive headlines

TRANSPARENCY

- ✓ Website discloses ownership and financing
- ✓ Clearly labels advertising
- ✓ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
- ✓ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information

Figure 17: NewsGuard's green rating of the New York Times.

Facebook posts in the data set that included New York Times links celebrated the mainstream outlet's reporting on QAnon as a conspiracy movement. Seventeen posts in the data set included a link to the site's 12 August story, "QAnon Followers Are Hijacking the #SaveTheChildren Movement", accumulating a total of 61 shares. One Facebook post that linked to the story stated, "ATTENTION ALL PATRIOTS!!! WE HAVE MADE MAINSTREAM WITH OUR HASHTAG BLOWUPS OF #SAVETHECHILDREN #SAVEOURCHILDREN BOTH AT 1 MILLION+ NEXT BLOWUP IS #ENDCHILDTRAFFICKING NOTHING CAN STOP WHAT'S COMING..... NOTHING!!! #QANON #WWG1WGA".⁷³ The post has since been taken down. Another Facebook post that linked to the story and that has also since been taken down came from a French user, which stated, "PATRIOTS : le New-york TIMES !!!!!.... parle de notre prouesse" (PATRIOTS: the New-york TIMES !!!! talks about our prowess [sic]).⁷⁴

Besides celebrating the mainstream recognition, QAnon followers surfaced an October 2014 opinion column about paedophilia to argue that The New York Times was "trying to normalize pedophilia", as one post that was shared 180 times argued (the post has been since removed).⁷⁵ The article, headlined "Pedophilia: A Disorder, Not a Crime", was written by a Rutgers Law School professor who argued that, because paedophilia is a mental illness, "a pedophile should be held responsible for his conduct – but not for the underlying attraction". The same link appeared in six other posts in the data set.

2. CNN (cnn.com)



This website mostly adheres to basic standards of credibility and transparency.

The website of Cable News Network (CNN), the first U.S. television network dedicated to news, which pioneered the 24-hour news cycle.



Total number of links in the data set:

138

Total number of shares of all posts containing links in the data set:

749

CREDIBILITY



Does not repeatedly publish false content



Gathers and presents information responsibly



Regularly corrects or clarifies errors



Handles the differences between news and opinion responsibly



Avoids deceptive headlines

TRANSPARENCY



Website discloses ownership and financing



Clearly labels advertising



Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest



The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information

Figure 18: NewsGuard's green rating of CNN.

CNN's most popular story in our data was the 7 May report "Justice Department drops criminal case against Michael Flynn".⁷⁶ Writing in the group "FOX NEWS with Tucker Carlson", one user shared the article with the caption "GENERAL FLYNN IS FREE!!!! Love that I'm sharing this from CNN!!!! Welcome back Gen Flynn!!!! #WWG1WGA".⁷⁷ The post accumulated more than 1,700 reactions, 300 comments and 400 shares.

Flynn, former national security adviser to outgoing President Trump, became an icon among QAnon followers who alleged as part of their "Obamagate" theory that officials in the Obama administration had improperly investigated Flynn in an attempt to take down Trump.⁷⁸

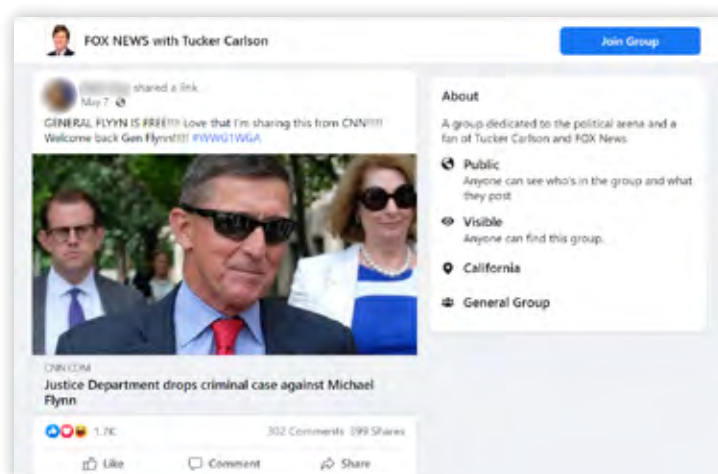


Figure 19: The most-engaged CNN article appearing in our data set, which was shared in the public group “FOX NEWS with Tucker Carlson”, celebrated the news that criminal charges against Michael Flynn had been dropped, including the QAnon hashtag WWG1WGA.

3. NBC News (nbcnews.com)



This website adheres to all nine of NewsGuard's standards of credibility and transparency.

The website of NBC News, a pioneering American broadcaster that publishes global news, original digital content, and clips from its network news shows.



Total number of links in the data set: **114**

Total number of shares of all posts containing links in the data set: **2,584**

CREDIBILITY

- ✓ Does not repeatedly publish false content
- ✓ Gathers and presents information responsibly
- ✓ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors
- ✓ Handles the differences between news and opinion responsibly
- ✓ Avoids deceptive headlines

TRANSPARENCY

- ✓ Website discloses ownership and financing
- ✓ Clearly labels advertising
- ✓ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
- ✓ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information

Figure 20: NewsGuard's green rating of NBC.

Many top links from NBCNews.com focused on enforcement actions from major technology platforms against QAnon content. The 21 July story, “Twitter bans 7,000 QAnon accounts, limits 150,000 others as part of broad crackdown”, was posted eight times, in posts accumulating approximately 1,200 total shares.⁷⁹ Some posts expressed frustration, such as one that stated “You know, because them Qs are out destroying cities, rioting, looting... Oh wait, that's another group. #WWG1WGA”.⁸⁰

Others suggested takedowns were proof of the conspiracy's accuracy. One post asked, “If we are just Conspiracy Theorists why are they soooo afraid of us” and another exclaimed, “Here we go....they are panicking!” before sharing an account on a different platform where they would post content if they were removed from Facebook.^{81 82} The latter post was later taken down.

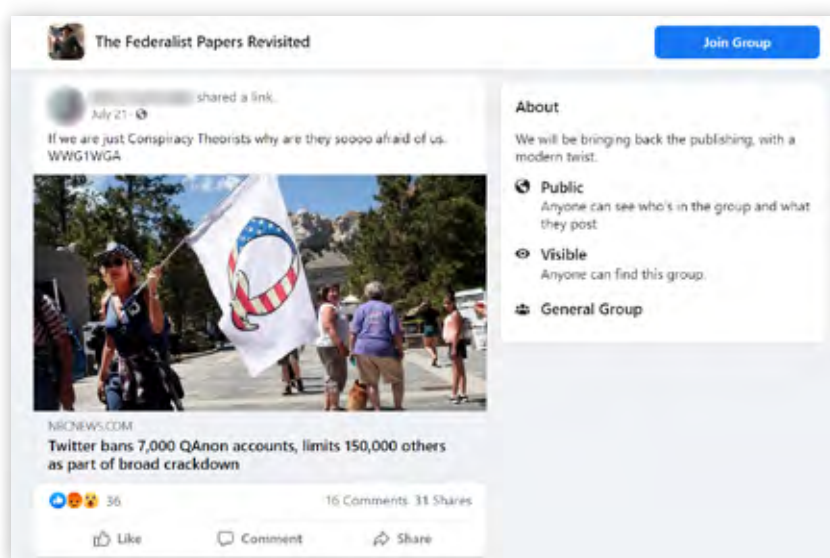


Figure 21: One post that linked to NBC News referenced the article “Twitter bans 7,000 QAnon accounts, limits 150,000 others as part of broad crackdown,” posted in the public group The Federalist Papers Revisited with the caption “if we are just Conspiracy Theorists why are they soooo afraid of us. WWG1WGA”.

Other types of websites

While our domain analysis was primarily intended to understand how followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory consume and share news online, we also examined the other types of websites whose links often appeared in QAnon-related posts.

Platforms

A significant trend in the data was the use of a variety of platforms to host and share content. We counted 47 different platforms whose content was shared in the data set we analysed, with at least an additional 33 platforms in the broader data set but which appeared in fewer than 10 Facebook posts. Of the sites whose links appeared in 10 or more Facebook posts, links to platforms comprised 91% of total links shared. Naturally, major mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube comprised the vast majority of links shared in the data set – cumulatively accounting for 86% of links posted in the data.

But less recognisable platforms and forums also featured prominently in the data, many of which appear to be dedicated exclusively to hosting QAnon discussions. Many of these platforms have been established by fringe influencers decrying censorship on mainstream platforms, as is the case for BitChute and Frei3.de. Such platforms frequently host controversial, hateful and at times extremist content that would be moderated on other platforms. The lesser-known platforms that appeared often in the data include the following:

- “Alternative” platforms used by extremists:
 - BitChute.com (1,015 posts)
 - Banned.Video (29 posts)
 - Frei3.de (22 posts).
- Platforms dedicated exclusively to QAnon content:
 - The-Remnant.proboards.com (91 posts)
 - QAnon.pub (53 posts).
- Others:
 - Petitions.WhiteHouse.Gov (43 posts).

Domains	Count	Unique links	Shares
facebook.com	13,8165	55,542	1,843,746
youtube.com	37,874	674	144,530
twitter.com	8,392	4,906	18,417
bitchute.com	607	208	1,015
tiktok.com	391	338	125
reddit.com	183	50	2,378
google.com	124	67	418
the-remnant.proboards.com	91	91	1
wikipedia.org	71	33	357
qanon.pub	53	5	19
instagram.com	49	13	2
soundcloud.com	45	26	181
patents.google.com	44	7	89
vimeo.com	43	20	174
petitions.whitehouse.gov	43	19	117
medium.com	30	19	17
change.org	29	14	85
banned.video	29	10	31
yandex.com	28	16	668
discord.com	27	7	90
pscp.tv	27	18	18
linkedin.com	26	8	43
gofundme.com	24	21	22
bing.com	23	14	80
frei3.de	22	20	120

Table 17: Top 25 platform websites that were linked to in at least 10 different posts in our data set.

E-commerce

Our data set contained 76 posts with links to Alibaba.com and 34 posts with links to Amazon.com, the Chinese and US e-commerce giants, respectively. Most top links from each domain referenced Adrenochrome, a chemical compound created by the oxidation of adrenaline.

All Alibaba links in the data set currently or at one point showed adrenochrome for sale. Posts to these links appeared in English, French, German and Spanish.

In Facebook groups with names such as “Justice For Human Trafficking - The LILAC Project”, “CHEMTRAILS X CHILE” and “ON NE MARCHE PLUS” (We do not walk anymore), QAnon followers posted with alarm about adrenochrome products available for purchase on Alibaba.⁸³

The most shared Alibaba link appeared in a since-deleted Facebook post that warned: “This post will hurt each of us. adrenachrome [sic] sold in China ! Come on let’s up the game they need stopping ! Alibaba. com offers 1,069 adrenochrome products. About 15% of these are Pharmaceutical Intermediates, 4% are Syntheses Material Intermediates, and 1% are Dyestuff Intermediates. A wide variety of adrenochrome options are available to you”.⁸⁴

The second most shared Alibaba link, from a Facebook post in Spanish in the public group “CHEMTRAILS X CHILE”, explicitly implicated the Chinese government because of its ties to the company.⁸⁵



Figure 22: A Spanish-language post in the group “CHEMTRAILS X CHILE” linked to an Alibaba entry supposedly selling Adrenochrome and claimed, without proof, the “Chinese government publicly sells you ADRENOCHROME”.

The top link from Amazon.com, shared in nine posts, was for the 2018 film “Adrenochrome” on the Prime Video streaming service. The fictional movie includes a plot summary describing a man who “comes to California and finds a gang of Venice Beach psychopaths killing people to get high off their adrenal glands”.⁸⁶

Larry Cook

Posts promoting websites and social media pages associated with Larry Cook, a prominent anti-vaccination activist, ranked highly among the most widely shared posts in our captured data, with links to each of his sites and pages posted hundreds of times.

Cook may be known chiefly for his anti-vaccination activism, but he also supports a range of conspiracy theories related to a supposed new world order that he maintains runs the world. For example, in one video from September, broadcast live across multiple Cook-run Facebook pages, Cook claimed World War II and 9/11 were planned events.⁸⁷

Notably, over the summer, Cook became a vocal supporter of the QAnon conspiracy. In late June, the Guardian reported that Cook was “openly courting QAnon supporters”.⁸⁸ He posted a video on Facebook on 8 July to “take the oath” and confirm he was now a believer in the conspiracy theory.⁸⁹ Following that, he regularly broadcast live, lengthy videos delving into various strands of the QAnon conspiracy and linked to an aggregator site that republishes posts from Q.⁹⁰

Cook acknowledged that direct links to the aggregator site would be blocked by Facebook, so instead, he spelled out the URL in his posts to escape action by the platform. The link was usually posted as: “Follow Q: qmap dot pub”. This did not change after the 6 October Facebook QAnon ban and Cook continued to post videos openly promoting the conspiracy across the platform. Cook’s profile was removed by Facebook on 17 November.

The newsletter Popular Information reported that the profile and Cook’s page Stop Mandatory Vaccinations were removed after they contacted Facebook about recent posts made on the page promoting vaccine disinformation.⁹¹ Popular Information also reported that Facebook “claimed the removal was a result” of the page violating the platform’s QAnon policy.

Cook’s transformation into a QAnon advocate is significant. He ran the Stop Mandatory Vaccination Facebook page (143,000 followers) before it was removed and its associated Facebook group Stop Mandatory Lockdown, Testing, Tracking and Vaccination (201,000 members) which was then also removed on 19 November.

The group was private, meaning it was outside the bounds of quantitative analysis; however, it was clear from a qualitative review that Cook used the group to promote his video content and external links to other sites that he included in each post.

A November 2019 study published by the journal Vaccine found that Cook’s Facebook page was one of two groups responsible for funding the majority of anti-vaccine advertisements on Facebook, a practice which the platform banned in October 2020.^{92 93}

Cook can be regarded as a QAnon superspreader. Our analysis shows that, in September, across nine videos uploaded on his Facebook profile, which all heavily promoted QAnon, Cook’s uploads received 19,105 shares and 575,991 views.

On Facebook and other platforms, Cook always linked to his Red-rated website, StopMandatoryVaccination.com, where he sells a “heavy metal detox” product, as well his Amazon store, where he sells vitamin supplements and books about vaccines and QAnon.^{94 95}

A page on Cook’s website soliciting donations states that donations “go directly to me and into my bank account, and from there I and I alone decide how to use the funds to further my Stop Mandatory Vaccination public awareness goals”, including for his personal bills and video production.⁹⁶

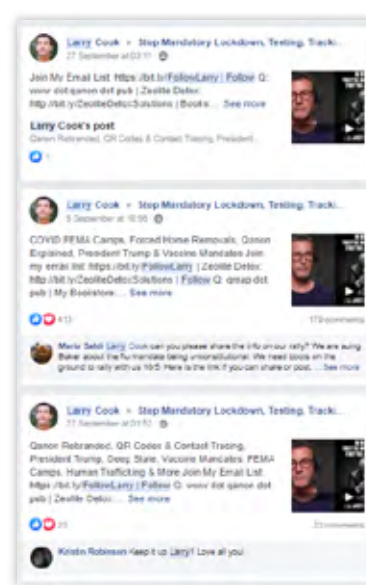


Figure 16: Screenshot from private Cook-run Facebook groups, showing that Cook regularly promotes QAnon in his video broadcasts.

QAnon international

Previous research from ISD found that the US is the largest QAnon content-producing country on social media sites where some level of geolocation is possible. It also showed that the conspiracy had gained a foothold in numerous other countries outside the anglosphere like Russia, Indonesia and Germany.⁹⁷ Similarly, a July 2020 report from NewsGuard noted how QAnon had been embraced by social media communities in the UK, France, Germany and Italy.⁹⁸ Our data set for this report supported this trend.

Among the top 10 most-active groups captured in our data, three were German-language Facebook groups. Neues Forum 89 Leipzig, QAnon Austria and Die Welt verändert sich WWG 1 WGA saw a combined 4,300 posts published by their members in the period April-September. These groups were removed after Facebook's QAnon ban took effect. Our analysis shows that before this, they had a combined membership of 37,000 users.

Why the international spread?

The main question arising from the international spread of QAnon is: what interest do non-US communities have in a conspiracy that, at its heart, centres around US figures and is rooted in its support for outgoing President Trump? International groups do appear to be interested in the central QAnon belief system and share posts that are supportive of Trump, but also promote wild and baseless claims about supposed elite-orchestrated child sex-trafficking.

Yet we also see that the conspiracy has been appropriated by regional groups to criticise “elites” in their own countries. This is particularly evident this year as QAnon blended with COVID-19 misinformation and the conspiracy was used to target local governments’ response to the pandemic, along with promoting co-opted Save the Children events.⁹⁹ The conspiracy has led to online and offline activity among international communities in recent months.

One example seen in our data set was a Facebook post from a Dutch user promoting a planned “Freedom for the Children” rally in Rotterdam on 18 September. The post included a video which featured a mixture of Dutch and English-language memes and captions on images, including a Dutch-language explanation of what adrenochrome supposedly is. The video featured COVID-19 disinformation centred around masks and a lab in Wuhan, China, the city where the virus originated. The video also features an antisemitic meme claiming that, historically, Jewish people used to kidnap Christian children for “ritual murders”.

Anti-establishment themes popularised within the US QAnon movement have also spread abroad and have been co-opted to fuel criticism of elites in other countries. In the German-language Neues Forum 89 Leipzig group, for instance, posts that criticised German Chancellor Angela Merkel were common. One trend identified here criticised Merkel over the prospect of increased restrictions in the country to combat the spread of COVID-19. Like their US counterparts, these groups were found to create and host posts that were critical of face masks or that supported protests by anti-mask activists.

In July, QAnon followers in Germany promoted a claim speculating that Merkel might be wearing an ankle monitor in a photo, indicating that she had been arrested and was being kept under restraint. The claim was based on photos of Merkel leaving a supermarket.¹⁰⁰ According to QAnon advocates, a crease in the right trouser leg, just above her ankle, matched the outline of an ankle monitor, though it wasn't specified what she was arrested for or who had arrested her.

In recent years, fact-checkers have devoted numerous articles to debunking claims from QAnon supporters that Hillary Clinton was photographed wearing ankle monitors after she was also purportedly arrested. The claim is linked to the Pizzagate/QAnon conspiracy, alleging that she was put under house arrest for her role in a supposed child sex-trafficking network.¹⁰¹ It is possible that German QAnon followers mirrored these conspiracy narratives in sharing the photos of Merkel.



Figure 23: Screenshot of Facebook post claiming German Chancellor Merkel was photographed wearing an ankle monitor. The user references seeing the post in “Q Faktor Germany”, a German QAnon Facebook group that was removed in the 6 October ban.¹⁰²

Spanish-language QAnon

The spread of QAnon to countries and cultures across the world was reflected in our data set that captured posts from a Spanish-language QAnon superspreader on Facebook. The user’s most-viewed upload, watched over 786,000 times since 24 April, is a video featuring comments from QAnon supporter Timothy Charles Holmseth, dubbed by a Spanish-language narrator. Holmseth claims that the Clinton Foundation was involved in a child sex-trafficking ring and kept thousands of children in tunnels and bunkers under New York.

The user’s accompanying Spanish-language caption claims that the USNS Mercy and USNS Comfort, military hospital ships which were used to help treat COVID-19 patients in Los Angeles and New York, were ordered to the cities by Trump to receive thousands of recently saved children from underground bunkers beneath the cities. The user further claims that the bulk of saved children were from Spanish-speaking countries south of the US like Mexico and Guatemala. There is no evidence to support any of these claims. A Reuters fact-check confirmed that thousands of children were not recently rescued from tunnels by the US military.¹⁰³ On 24 April, the Spanish-language user uploaded their video directly promoting the Pizzagate conspiracy, which has been viewed over 587,000 times. Despite Facebook’s QAnon ban, this user’s content is still live on the platform.

Portuguese-language QAnon

Among the most-shared links in our data set was a post that linked to the YouTube channel of a Brazilian conspiracy theorist and QAnon supporter Ana Marins.¹⁰⁴ Marins’ most popular upload features a clip of Sandra Bullock speaking to Ellen DeGeneres about a new facial therapy dubbed the “penis facial” and has been viewed over 130,000 times since July.¹⁰⁵ The treatment is “derived from stem cells taken from the discarded foreskins of newborn babies”, as explained by the Huffington Post.¹⁰⁶

The Brazilian conspiracy theorist’s YouTube channel also included a Portuguese-subtitled version of “The Fall of Cabal”, though this was removed after the 15 October YouTube ban on QAnon content. Another popular video, still available on YouTube, features Marins talking over images of Disney movies

and cartoons, discussing the supposed symbolism hidden in characters popularised by the company like Mickey Mouse.¹⁰⁷ This is a direct extension of a central belief among QAnon followers that claims that the company is part of a child trafficking network, as explained by the BBC.¹⁰⁸

The clip has also been used by other Brazilian QAnon followers to spread disinformation about supposed ongoing child sex-trafficking orchestrated by elites. One such Facebook post, shared 77 times within our data set, featured the footage and posted it alongside a lengthy Portuguese description about Adrenochrome.¹⁰⁹ The Facebook post, which is still live on the platform, explains that the drug is popular among “the artists, models and elites who are part of the cabal” [translation].

Non-US news sites

The majority of news sites that were linked to in this data set were English-language sources, primarily based in the US. The data included 235 English-language news sites which were linked to a cumulative 13,629 times, representing 87% of news website links in the data.

While English was the most represented language among news sources shared in the data, news websites in several other languages, mainly those spoken in Western Europe, were also shared in the data set in significant numbers. After English, Italian news sites accounted for the next greatest number of news links in the data (584), followed by French (461), German (442), Bosnian (99), Dutch (85) and Spanish (84). In all, there were news sites from 15 languages represented in the data set.

Language	Number of domains	Number of links	Number of shares	Percentage of domains	Percentage of links	Percentage of shares
English	235	13,629	265,842	77.56%	87.32%	92.17%
Italian	15	584	4,483	4.95%	3.74%	1.55%
French	10	461	5,804	3.30%	2.95%	2.01%
German	23	442	7,748	7.59%	2.83%	2.69%
Bosnian	3	99	265	0.99%	0.63%	0.09%
Dutch	3	85	850	0.99%	0.54%	0.29%
Spanish	5	84	1,476	1.65%	0.54%	0.51%
Japanese	1	55	566	0.33%	0.35%	0.20%
Romanian	1	44	143	0.33%	0.28%	0.05%
Polish	1	34	449	0.33%	0.22%	0.16%
Norwegian	2	33	302	0.66%	0.21%	0.10%
Croatian	1	16	33	0.33%	0.10%	0.01%
Czech	1	15	207	0.33%	0.10%	0.07%
Hungarian	1	15	121	0.33%	0.10%	0.04%
Danish	1	13	122	0.33%	0.08%	0.04%
Total	303	15,609	288,411	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 18: News sites shared in the data broken down by site language.

As was observed with Facebook data showing QAnon's spread outside the US, the geographic diversity of news websites shared in the data reflects this trend also. This mirrors previous NewsGuard research from July 2020 that reported that the conspiracy theory has enjoyed a surge in interest in the UK, France, Germany and Italy, where websites and social media accounts have sprung up to foster the development of QAnon communities in each nation.¹¹⁰

Followers abroad take the central themes of the conspiracy theory – paedo-criminality, the existence of “deep state” etc. – and adapt them to their local context. In their retelling, right-wing leaders like UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and former Italian deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini are working with Trump to fight against left-leaning “elite” leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron, Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel and even the European Commission.

The data in this report adds new detail to this trend, indicating that QAnon has spread even wider than we had previously observed, reaching into Eastern Europe (the Czech Republic, Romania, Poland, Croatia, Bosnia and Hungary) and is gaining traction in Japan as well.

Two foreign language sites made it into the top 20 news sites appearing the greatest number of Facebook posts in the data: Qactus.fr (French) and LaCrunaDellAgo.net (Italian). Below, we present two case studies of those websites and how they were shared by QAnon followers in our data set.

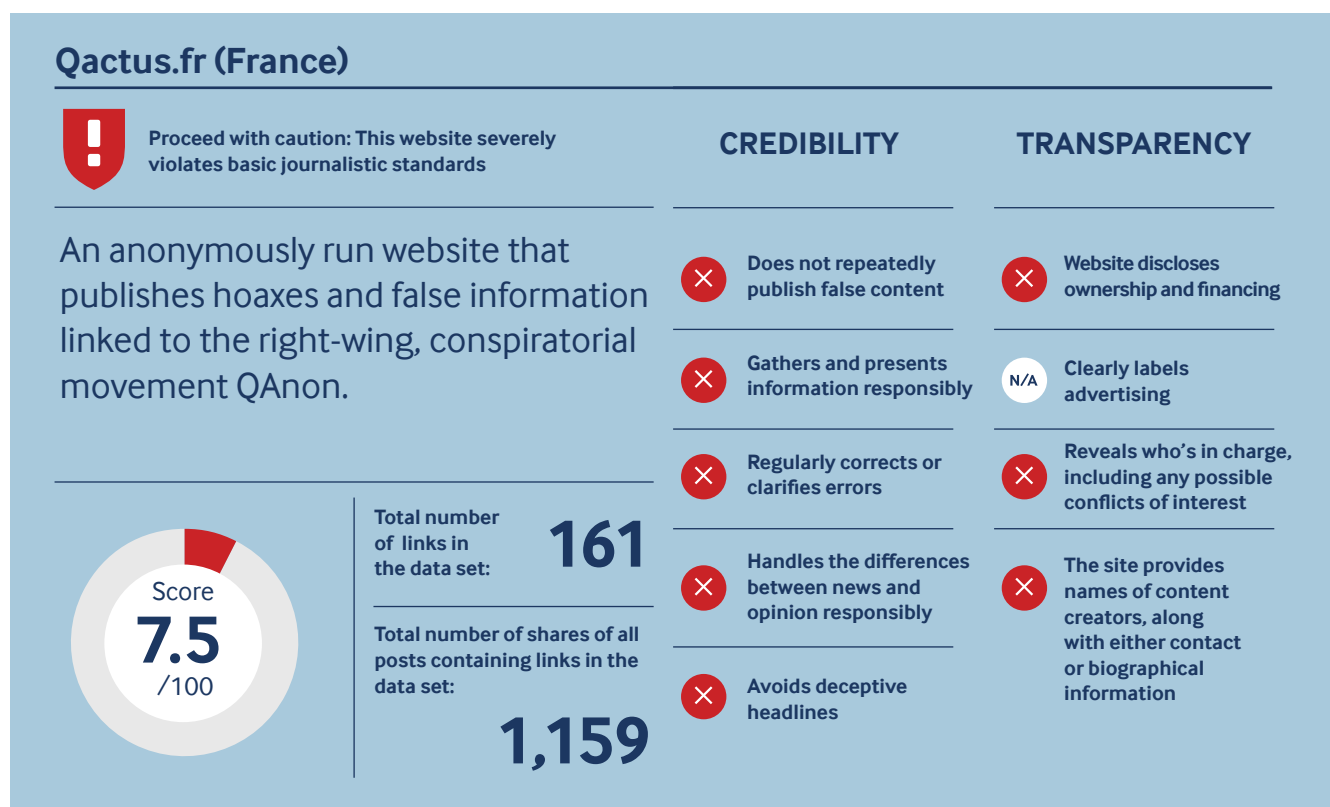


Figure 24: NewsGuard's red rating of Qactus.

Qactus, which means “Qnews” in French, is an anonymously-run website that publishes false information related to the QAnon conspiracy theory. Links from the site that were frequently shared by QAnon followers in our data set spanned a range of topics, including a video that promoted a conspiracy theory that John F. Kennedy Jr. is still alive, an article that suggested that US police departments were connected to Freemasons (an enduring target of conspiracy theories) and a lengthy explainer on QAnon (redpilling).

Headline	Number of posts containing the link	Total number of shares of all posts containing the link	Topic(s)	Story publication date
QINFOS – Ecussons de certaine Police US, y voyez vous des similitudes avec un symbole connus ?? (QINFO – Badges of some US Police, do you see similarities with a known symbol??)	11	204	Deep State	31/5/20
JFK JR.....Êtes-vous prêt?(JFK JR..... Are you ready?)	9	29	JFK Jr.	15/6/20
Q VIDEOS - D-TRUMP – « ON LES A TOUS ATTRAPÉ ». (Q VIDEOS – D-TRUMP – “WE CAUGHT THEM ALL.”)	8	33	Trump, deep state	13/8/20
Q INFOS – Un cours intensif sur les QAnons avec Liz Crokin. (Q INFO – A crash course on QAnon with Liz Crokin.)		15	Red pilling	24/8/20
Q INFOS – Un spectateur interpelle Bill Clinton!! (Q INFO – A spectator calls out Bill Clinton!!)	5	32	Clintons	28/6/20

Table 19: Top stories from Qactus.fr appearing in our data set, listed in order of number of posts containing the link.

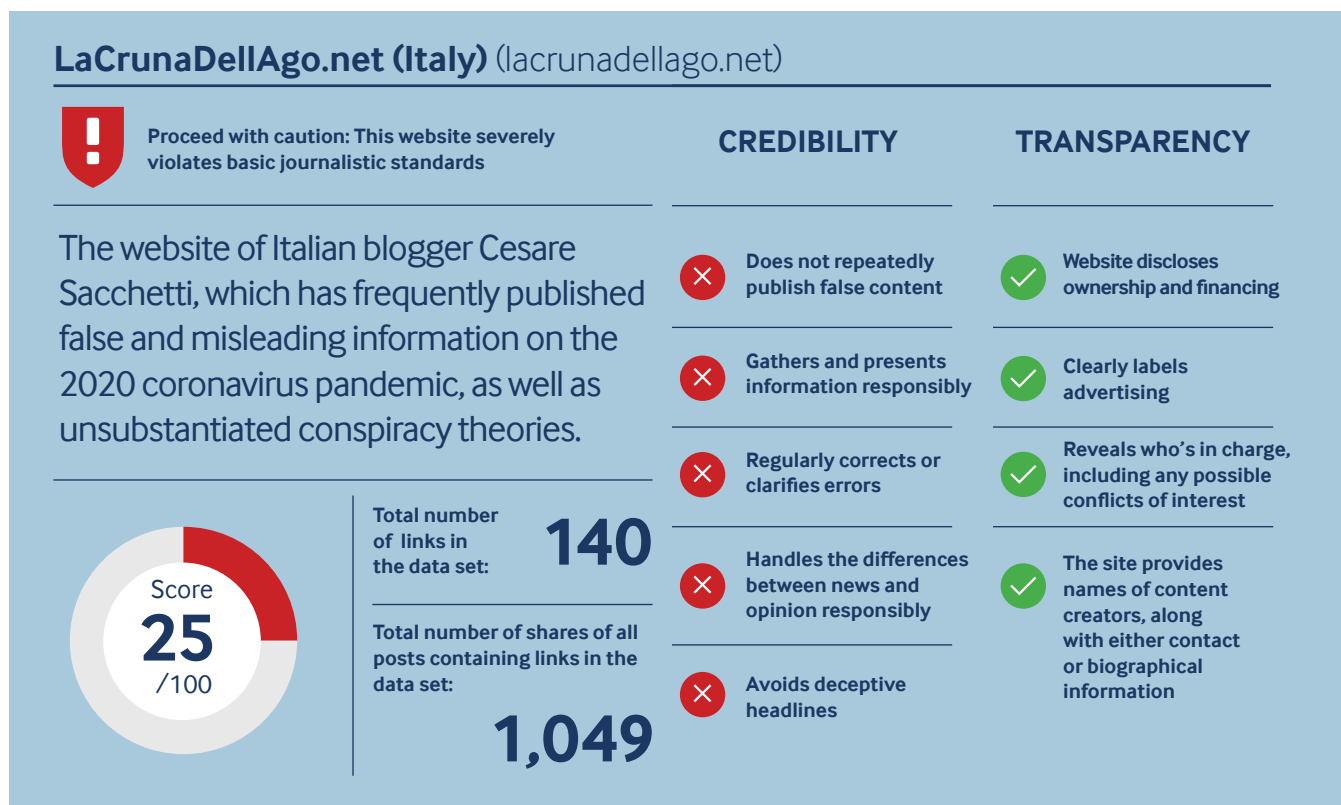


Figure 25: NewsGuard's red rating of La Cruna Dell'Ago.

La Cruna Dell'Ago (which means "The eye of the needle") is the blog of Italian journalist Cesare Sacchetti, which he created in 2018 to publish "news and opinions that are censored by the inquisition of the politically correct and mainstream propaganda", as described on the site's About Me page. The site has published a range of falsehoods about COVID-19, Bill Gates and a supposed "new world order", but it does not appear to directly mention QAnon in its content.

The top La Cruna Dell'Ago stories shared in the posts from QAnon followers promoted the notion that Trump is working to combat the "new world order" of deep-state elites like Bill Gates (referencing the myth that COVID-19 was a human-made virus released with the support of Gates) and Barack Obama (referencing the Obamagate conspiracy theory). While these articles generally focused on US politics, they frequently included descriptions of supposed connections to Italy.

- The August 2020 article "This fall, Trump will fight his final battle against the new world order" claimed that "Spygate involves Italy" because the country "had a leading role in the coup against Trump". The article, which appeared in 113 posts in our data and was shared a cumulative 728 times, also claimed that "Spygate is the most powerful weapon which [sic] Trump has in order to prevent Italy's fall in the hands of this looming global dictatorship".
- The July 2020 article "Can the Trump-Viganò alliance free Italy from the globalist dictatorship and stop the new world order?" described a supposed "alliance" between Trump and the Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò to counter the forces of globalism. The story was posted in four different posts in our data set, which were shared a total of 218 times.

Headline	Number of posts containing the link	Total number of shares of all posts containing the link	Topic(s)	Story publication date
Trump in autunno combatterà la sua battaglia finale contro il nuovo ordine mondiale (This fall, Trump will fight his final battle against the new world order)	113	728	Trump, deep state, New World Order, Obamagate	7/8/20
Lo spygate: lo scandalo che i media italiani non vogliono raccontare (Spygate: The scandal that the Italian media does not want to cover)	15	54	Spygate	18/2/20
Trump pronto a mettere fine all'operazione terroristica Covid: ora il mondialismo farà di tutto per eliminarlo (Trump ready to put an end to the Covid terrorist operation: now globalism will do everything to eliminate it)	5	15	Trump, deep state, globalism, new world order	8/9/20
L'alleanza Trump-Viganò può liberare l'Italia dalla dittatura globalista e fermare il nuovo ordine mondiale? (Can the Trump-Viganò alliance free Italy from the globalist dictatorship and stop the new world order?)	4	218	Trump, deep state, New World Order, Spygate	17/7/20
Le email hackerate di Wuhan e Bill Gates: "covid-19 fatto in laboratorio e rilasciato intenzionalmente" (The hacked emails of Wuhan and Bill Gates: "covid-19 made in the laboratory and released intentionally")	1	22	Bill Gates, COVID-19 misinformation	23/4/20

Table 20: Top stories from LaCrunaDellAgo.net appearing in our data set, listed in order of number of posts containing the link.

It is also worth noting that many of the English-language news websites that appeared in our data are based outside of the US, in countries including the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. For example, analysing the top-level domains (e.g., “.com” and “.net”) of English-language news sites in our data reveals that at least 14 websites serve English-speaking countries outside of the US, signalling QAnon’s spread to anglophone countries abroad.

- **Seven websites** ended with the UK domain ending “.uk” (dailymail.co.uk, independent.co.uk, thesun.co.uk, express.co.uk, telegraph.co.uk, metro.co.uk and bbc.co.uk).
- **Three websites** ended with the Australian domain ending “.au” (skynews.com.au, theaustralian.com.au and abc.net.au).
- **Three websites** ended with the Canadian domain ending “.ca” (montreal.ctvnews.ca, globalnews.ca and toronto.ctvnews.ca).
- **One website** ended with the New Zealand domain ending “.nz” (thespinoff.co.nz).

Top-level domains are an imperfect metric for measuring the country served by a news site – many are consumed in countries in which they are not based and other news sites are based in a country that is not indicated by their domain ending. For example, ConspiracyDailyUpdate.com is an Australian website that appeared frequently in our data set, but its country of origin cannot be deduced from its top-level domain. We present a case study of this website below.

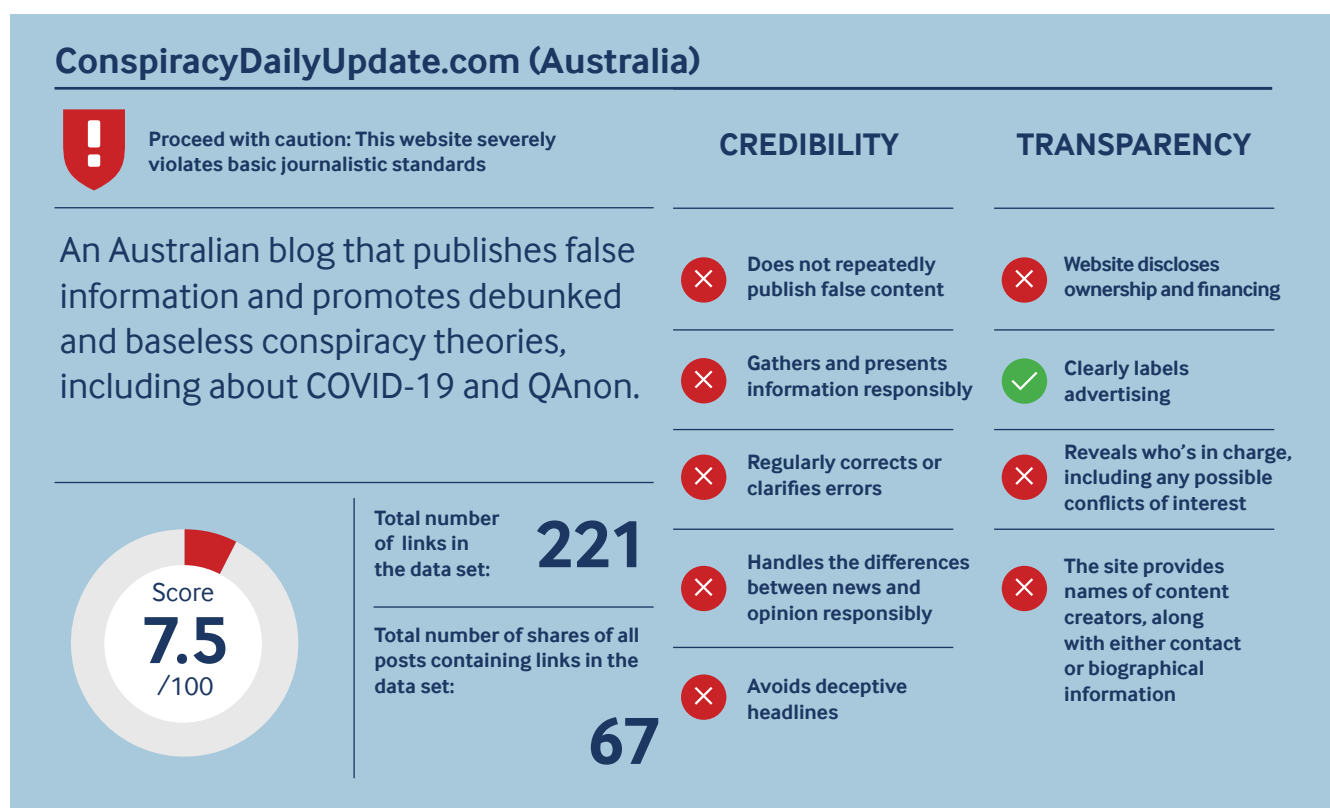


Figure 26: NewsGuard’s red rating of Conspiracy Daily Update.

One of the top news sources shared by QAnon followers in our data was ConspiracyDailyUpdate.com, a blog run by a resident of Perth, Australia named Bryan Robert Hyland. Links from the site appeared in our data 221 times.

Articles from the site are typically rambling introductions making several conspiratorial claims in quick succession, followed by dozens of screenshots of tweets and Facebook posts, without a clear explanation of their significance or connection between one another.

The site's top story in our data directly connected the COVID-19 pandemic to QAnon by claiming: "5 million kids are being rescued from underground under the cover of Operation COVID-19. That is what is really going on with the lockdowns. They are to keep our kids inside and safe while the monsters are rounded up and executed. None will escape!"

The site includes references to other major themes discussed in this report, such as Obamagate and adrenochrome. It also discusses other conspiracies that have gained widespread attention during the pandemic, such as one about 5G technology, as well as more obscure ones, such as the conspiracy popularised by former British footballer David Icke about the existence of humans who are secretly reptiles.^{111 112}

Conclusion

This research provides a comprehensive examination of QAnon narratives and communities on Facebook over five months, providing one of the most exhaustive and extensive analyses of the conspiracy theory's operations online. Crucially, the research covers a period during which QAnon activity surged on Facebook. After data was collected, the analysis period overlapped with Facebook's 6 October ban on QAnon content, meaning this research also provides one of the earliest examinations of the efficacy of these actions and how the conspiracy continues to survive on the platform.

The report analyses the dominant narratives, topics and actors among QAnon communities on Facebook and examines the key role of superspreader Facebook profiles in the amplification of redpilling or introductory material about the conspiracy on the platform. The report also offers a unique and novel assessment of how QAnon followers discuss and share news content as fodder to support and advance their theories, as we discuss both the sources (news websites) that were frequently relied on and the stories (news articles) that frequently appeared within the QAnon community. Lastly, the report explores the international spread of the conspiracy on Facebook.

The key conclusions are discussed in detail below.

Superspreader profiles

We discovered that numerous videos promoting key tenets of the QAnon conspiracy that often received large views on the platform were first posted on personal Facebook profiles. These accounts act as QAnon superspreaders in that they frequently posted about the conspiracy and pushed introductory "redpilling" QAnon material that explained the conspiracy, including the central baseless allegations against politicians and celebrities. Videos from users like these were widely shared in our data set and viewed millions of times on Facebook overall through page and group share functions, indicating superspreaders likely played a crucial role in expanding the user base of people exposed to QAnon content on the platform.

Examining the impact of superspreader activity also allows us to reflect on Facebook's ban of QAnon content on the platform. Following Facebook's ban, many pages and groups recorded in our analysis were removed and their links no longer active, indicating that these actions were successful in limiting the spread of the conspiracy through these platform spaces. Yet this came after these same pages and groups had amassed tens of thousands of followers or members on Facebook and were able to use the platform's networked infrastructure to share or promote harmful material that espoused a dangerous worldview with few limitations in the US and across the world over the past three years. The ban was also only enforced after the conspiracy experienced an unprecedented surge in interest and expansion of its supporter base throughout 2020. In short, the ban came too late.

In addition, QAnon superspreader activity reveals the shortcomings of Facebook's enforcement of the ban. Throughout our report, we've noted how QAnon content posted on personal profiles remains live on the platform. Personal profiles sharing QAnon content operate in similar ways to since-removed pages/groups, yet the former category has yet to face any systematic response from Facebook. Other established platforms like YouTube have similarly banned QAnon content of late, while Twitter has taken limited steps in banning accounts and links associated with QAnon content.¹¹³ TikTok, a relatively new platform compared to other more established sites, has blocked hashtags related to the conspiracy as well.¹¹⁴ The findings from our report indicate that proactive and early content moderation from platforms that monitor and limit the spread of disinformation campaigns, rather than simplistic responses that allow the infrastructure that supports the spread of harmful or false material to remain live on platforms, would be more effective in thwarting the reach of dangerous conspiracies like QAnon.

The role of personal profiles should not be understated. They perform a key function in promoting the

conspiracy and working to convert ordinary Facebook users into fully fledged QAnon supporters by way of organising and sharing “redpilling” material. These instruction manuals for QAnon encourage followers to do research and conduct their investigations based on the central tenets of the conspiracy. Decoding cryptic drops from Q or discovering an apparent link between high-profile individuals, though completely baseless and formed from a conspiratorial mindset, can serve as a highly motivating factor to continue to believe in QAnon and become further entrenched in the belief system. A quote from the first post published on Humorous Mathematics, one of the websites most-frequently shared in our data set, reflects the perceived empowerment of this DIY ethos.¹¹⁵

“This current ‘pandemic crisis’ is affording everyone the opportunity to take a look at the bigger picture, and more people than ever are beginning to step toward” [sic], one of the site’s co-founders wrote in the first post on the site. “The heavy lifting is no longer being solely left to the few and battered whistle blowers [sic], risking their lives and families, and sacrificing their careers and reputations, to provide crucial information to an uncaring or unappreciative populace. No... now you and I and anyone with a voice are working together to get this information out, and the numbers are multiplying by the second”.

Many QAnon supporters frame their belief system not as a fearful narrative about the dangers of sex-trafficking, but one about finding ways for good (Q) to defeat evil (the deep state). Through platforms like Facebook, “anyone with a voice” has endless resources at their disposal to research and discover information about QAnon and “get this information out” through the networked platform architecture of social platforms that, by way of their design, prompt users to like, share, click and comment on content. Everyone can be a QAnon superspreader – in fact it is highly encouraged.

Misinformation websites

We discovered that a handful of unreliable “news” websites were repeatedly shared in the data set, providing QAnon followers with constant news updates and fodder for frequent posts discussing news developments (or perceived ones). These unreliable sites fell into two categories: Established Misinformers that are widely popular beyond QAnon followers and Fringe Misinformers whose popularity is more exclusive to QAnon followers. But while unreliable news websites were more frequently shared in the data set and posts containing links to unreliable websites received the greatest levels of engagement, the data set also revealed that QAnon followers share a significant amount of content from mainstream news websites – even those that QAnon followers frequently criticise, such as CNN.

This data reveals that QAnon followers reference digital media in various ways. Most significantly, pernicious and unreliable news sites provide QAnon followers with ammunition for advancing their numerous theories or incorporating anti-establishment narratives into QAnon and its general worldview. Interestingly though, QAnon followers also use news reports from reliable sites – either to celebrate moments when QAnon is mentioned in the mainstream news or to cite factual events and twist them to support their worldview. For news organisations whose reporting is used as a supporting reference for elements of the conspiracy, as we found with the use of mainstream news featured in QAnon “redpilling” guides, there is a responsibility to ensure that their audience is reminded that the conspiracy remains just that: a harmful belief system that is not grounded in facts.

International spread

This report also demonstrates the extent to which QAnon has established an international reach, in particular following the surge of content posted in August. This confirms findings from previous research from ISD and NewsGuard, which indicated that the conspiracy theory was finding a foothold in several countries that were not initially implicated in the initially US-focused mythology.^{116 117}

Three of the top 10 most-active communities posting QAnon content captured in our data were German-language Facebook groups. Our domain analysis revealed that there were 15 different languages represented among the news sites commonly shared by QAnon followers on Facebook. Three of the top 20 news sites that were shared in the greatest number of Facebook posts in the data set were based outside of the US: ConspiracyDailyUpdate.com (Australia), Qactus.fr (France) and LaCrunaDellAgo.net (Italy).

Our analysis indicates that this international spread is at least in part due to QAnon followers that are motivated to localise content to their countries, including by dubbing or subtitling English-language content with their local languages. We also noted examples of users drawing parallels between the US and their local political contexts, further driving adoption of the QAnon conspiracy theory by international audiences.

Recommendations

The findings of this report have numerous implications for the tech sector, media and governments.

Tech sector

- There were many instances of individual Facebook user profiles spreading QAnon conspiracy theories and disinformation, which received increased visibility via sharing on pages and groups. While the platform ban affected pages and groups, our report found that much of the underlying content from individual users was still live on the platform. Facebook and similar social media platforms should consider tiered content moderation policies for individual users, enabling more robust action against those that consistently violate terms of service relating to harmful content. For example, some content-moderation systems already include “warning” strikes for users who continue to violate community standards before accounts are suspended or removed, which can help to maintain a balanced and proportionate approach to user safety and expression on platforms.
- While moderation of content can be a useful approach, platforms should also consider deprioritising QAnon content in their recommendation algorithms, as has been done with contents relating to public health concerns (e.g., COVID-19 and vaccine disinformation). This can be an effective approach to limit the visibility of this type of problematic content without encroaching upon freedom of speech.
- This research has demonstrated how a slow response from platforms can enable the rapid spread of conspiracy theories. Platforms should proactively monitor the spread of potentially harmful conspiracies to enable more rapid responses.
- Platforms should also increase transparency around their approaches to content moderation and algorithmic prioritisation. The 6 October Facebook ban appears to have been keyword-based yet there is no way of knowing for sure without greater transparency from the platform. Increased clarity around these policies can improve independent researchers’ ability to identify potential pitfalls and understand how problematic content spreads through the online ecosystem. Transparency around content moderation poses inherent challenges, as bad actors can take advantage of this to avoid running afoul of platform guidelines; however, platforms should work collaboratively with independent researchers to determine the best way to increase transparency without undermining moderation efforts.

Media

- This research has shown how QAnon followers can cite mainstream reporting in ways that support their conspiracy theories. News websites that are green-rated by NewsGuard make up a substantial portion of those cited by QAnon followers and their stories are reframed in ways that allow QAnon followers to validate their claims. In some cases, mainstream news content will attract interest from QAnon supporters randomly, yet can be framed as part of the wider conspiracy narrative. Media should

aim to report on QAnon in ways that avoid providing credibility or validity to the conspiracy theory, and where appropriate, highlight how fact-checking organisations and supplementary news reports have demonstrated there is no evidence to support the central tenets of the conspiracy.

Governments

- Democratic governments should also proactively monitor the spread of potentially harmful contents on public social media channels and designate disinformation narratives as threats as appropriate. This should be done with careful consideration given to freedoms of expression and privacy. The designation of QAnon as a potential domestic terrorism threat by the US government helped justify platforms' decisions to moderate related contents. Given how quickly conspiracy theories spread online, governments should create monitoring systems that allow them to react accordingly.

Appendix A – Keyword list

2yrdelta	OpMayflower2019	qproof
3DaysOfDarkness	ourchildrenarenotforsale	qresearch
adrenochrome	patriotsawakened	qsentme
adrenochromeharvesting	patriotsfight	qsentus
adrenochromejunkies	pedogate	qstorm
AdrenochromeWithdrawal	pedogate2019	qthestorm
aliexpressgate	pedogate2020	qthewakeup
asktheq	pedovore	redcastlegreencastle
aussieQ	pedowoodisreal	redpillq
billclintonispedo	pervywood	researchQ
BlakeDavidHampe	pizzagateisreal	ripkappy
cabaltakedown	pizzagateLsreal	satanicelite
cannibalclub	projectbluebeam	satanichollywood
CBTS_Stream	qanan	seeqfind
CelebrityCannibalism	qanon2017	sheepnomore
cemexchildsexcamp	qanon2018	spiritcooking
clintonbodycount	qanon2019	starvemoloch
ClintonCrimesAgainstChildren	qanon2020	stormiscoming
cometpingpong	qanon4chan	taketheoath
darktolight	qanon8chan	thebagery
deepstatecabal	qanon8kun	thebaqery
deepstatemappingproject	qanonarmy	thefutureprovespast
digitalsoldier	qanonaustralia	thegreatawakening
digitalsoldiers	qanonbalkan	thegreatawakeningworldwide
digitalsoldiersworldwide	Qanonbomber	thesepeopleareevil
fallcabal	qanonBR	thesepeoplearesick
fallofcabal	qanoncanada	thestormhasarrived
fallofthecabal	qanonfrance	thestormiscoming
followQ	qanongermany	thestormishere
followthewhiterabbit	qanonisreal	thestormisuponus
frazzledrip	qanonpatriot	traitormccann
futureprovespast	qanonpatriots	Trump2Q2Q
godblessQ	qanonposts	trusttheplan
GoodTRUMPsEvil	qanons	unitednotdivided
greatawakening	qanonsbringingtruth	wakeupanon
GreatAwakeningWorldwide	qanonspain	wayfairchildtrafficking
greatawakeningWW	qanonstorm	wayfairgate
Habbening	qanonsworldwide	weareQ
hisnamewassethrich	qanonUK	WeAreSavingOurChildrenNow
hollywoodpedos	qanonukdivision	wearethenewsnow
hrcrawvideo	qanonUS	wearethestorm
HRCvideo	QanonUSA	weinerslaptop
inQwetrust	qanonworldwide	wherewegoonewegoall
isaackappy	qanonymous	whiterabbitreality
luciferiancabal	qarmy	wqke
MakeitrainQ	qarmyworldwide	wrwy
marinaabramovic	Qbama	wwg1wga
myfavoritenumberis17	qdigs	WWG1WGA_WORLDWIDE
newtoQ	qisreal	wwg1wgall
okpedo	qmaildrops	wwg1wgaworldwide
operationbackyardbrawl	qmap	wwgowga
operationmockingbird	qpatriot	yourcelebsarepedos
OPMAYFLOWER	qpill	

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