

The Unreal Q: The Rise of Populism and Conspiracism in America

Jiajun Chi

School of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York 14627,
U.S.A

Abstract

Following the Democrats' loss in the presidential election of 2016, QAnon, a relatively new conspiracy theory, thrived with the rise of Trumpism, which in turn, fed off the fallacious theories spun by QAnon members. The conspiracy theory originates from another conspiracy theory -- Pizzagate -- involving Hillary Clinton emails to the chairman of her campaign and a D.C. pizza place owner. From this point on, QAnon continued to disseminate the belief that the liberals run a secret pedophile organization from basements around the country. In 2017, Q, the unknown leader of the conspiracy theory, started to drop encrypted messages from an obscure Internet channel so its followers could piece together the truth about the deep state's next moves. Research shows that QAnon followers typically struggle with uncertainty and feel left out while conspiracists take advantage of such weaknesses to grow their influence. Using an anti-establishment/anti-mainstream media/anti-science message, QAnon parted ways with truth to fabricate its own reality. Since it has repeatedly incited violence among its followers, QAnon has been recently listed by the FBI as a domestic terrorist group. Its influence may negatively impact the country's political stability.

Keywords

Information ecosystem; Conspiracy theories; Populist; Deep state theory; QAnon phenomenon; Internet; Pizzagate; Domestic terrorism.

1. Introduction

"All this happened, more or less" [1], Kurt Vonnegut's opening line in the classic postmodern novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* encapsulates the tendency for pervasive ambiguity in American reality, where the eye of the beholder strangely shapes truth more often than not. Vonnegut's statement comes out of a fictional universe, where reality finds permission to be stretched, but what to say of American conspiracy theories and their flesh and blood creators and followers? Ironically, such theories claim to hold the key to a hidden truth; their narratives, however, sound as fragmented as a postmodern tale. QAnon, a relatively new conspiracy theory, checks all the boxes of a popular tale: a mystical leader, an on-going search for justice against evil forces, and a heavy touch of apocalyptic concern. All this takes a wild ride on a populist administration whose alleged goal is to rescue America from the liberal evil, thus providing an illusory safe net for those who feel left out of the political process and struggle to cope with the pervasive uncertainty surrounding them. In a nutshell, conspiracism feeds off its followers, who in turn, feed off conspiracism. To fully understand the QAnon phenomenon, this paper examines the origin and the particulars of the theory, provides a detailed analysis of its ecosystem, and determines the motivations of its creators as well as its political implications.

2. Setting the Stage for QAnon

In order to go into the details of the QAnon theory, it is essential to look back on the 2016 political scene and the atmosphere of turmoil that dominated the intense days of the Hillary vs.

Trump presidential contest. After two terms in power, the first African-American president of the United States, Barack Obama, hoped to continue to make history by passing the baton to a woman -- Hillary Clinton. But what if Clinton has partnered with the members of some deep state to run a secret criminal organization that kidnaps children to satisfy the needs of a powerful group of pedophiles? And what if the only man capable of stopping such a vile operation is the populist Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump? Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election, but to the relief of many conspiracy theorists, Trump's promise to stand tall against Hillary's deep state troupe, motivates the self-proclaimed chosen people of America to remain vigilant on the Internet, waiting for Q's guidance. As preposterous as this narrative may sound, it set the stage for the kind of paranoid thinking that QAnon has been disseminating since then.

The QAnon conspiracy theory is the wicked child of another infamous conspiracy theory -- Pizzagate. In the very beginning of her investigative piece, Adrienne LaFrance, one of the contributors in *Shadowland*, a project initiated by the magazine *The Atlantic* to study conspiracy thinking in the United States, advises anyone with an interest in understanding QAnon to refer back to Pizzagate [2]. In short, after Wikileaks hacked Hillary Clinton's emails, a conversation between the chair of her campaign and the owner of a Washington D.C.'s Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria gave Trump supporters and masters of misinformation Mike Cernovich and Alex Jones reason to believe that Clinton's emails could turn into a vessel for conspiracy. A *New York Times* article investigating the matter explains, "A participant on 4chan connected the phrase "cheese pizza" to... 'c.p.' to denote child pornography" [3]. With a little push from social media, the Mecca of all modern conspiracists, the story snowballed and reached its climax when Edgar Welch, a twenty-eight-year-old devoted Christian and gun lover, decided to take matters in his own hands, and stormed into Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria heavily armed, determined to dismantle the secret pedophile organization. When interviewed by the police, Welch admitted that "the intel on this wasn't 100 percent," but never dismissed the existence of a deep state [4]. Just like Welch, other Americans embraced the idea that a sect of liberal manipulators controls the country; they also believe that a God-sent vigilante watches every move of such an evil group, and therefore, they must keep decoding their master's messages while waiting for the day of reckoning.

3. The Deep State and Q

Welch's violent response to the deep state theory may have put a damper on the Pizzagate hype, but the divisive environment of American politics propitiated the birth of another truther -- QAnon. Q, whose code name refers to a level of security clearance in the United States Department of Energy, anonymously unleashed its "Calm-Before-the-Storm" thread on October 28, 2017, on 4chan's /pol/ (politically incorrect page) [5]. The post predicted the arrest of Hillary Clinton in the morning of October 30, 2017 and was signed off by a 4chan user under the name of Q. This attention-getting opening post set the tone of QAnon's underground narrative, suggesting that a secret organization might have infiltrated the realm of the establishment. The message also brought hope for those who longed for revenge on the members of the so-called deep state. Above all, Q's message supported the idea that American society is divided between the forces of evil -- the deep state -- and the forces of good -- Q and its followers, leaving no room for a middle ground where such forces could reach a compromise. A conspiracist mind tends to see the world as a polarized space, and this explains why conspiracists try to defeat what they think is evil rather than accommodating the idea that the world must find balance within a gray area, where both the forces of good and evil coexist. But what happens when conspiracy theories fail to deliver victories against the sinister subjects that they vow to combat? Frustration, of course, builds up, though, surprisingly, it does not

necessarily encourage the conspiracist mind to quit his or her fight. What happens is that conspiracists feed off frustration and their sense of powerlessness, and that keeps them inside their paranoid minds. For example, the QAnon conspiracy theory fights the evil deep state, and has promised its followers to bring justice to the American people through Trumpism. Since Trump has lost the election and the evil members of the deep state are about to take over power, QAnon followers feel terribly frustrated. Such frustration, however, rather than encouraging them to discredit Q's failed prophecies, strengthens QAnon supporters to keep the fight against the enemy -- the deep state. In a way, the polarization of good and evil in QAnon cryptic messages emulates the days of the Cold War, when Communists were the ultimate evil to fight and McCarthyism was the holder of its own conspiracist truth. A divisive environment certainly plays well within the universe of conspiracism by offering a simplified vision of the world, with a clear-cut enemy on one side and the vigilant good people directly opposing it. Today, QAnon, thus, comes to life as a response to the "knowledge" that the powerful are up to no good in Washington D.C.'s dark basements.

4. Trumpism and the Rise of Conspiracism in America

It is not surprising that conspiracism is the word of the day in an America that has been experiencing high levels of divisiveness, especially when it comes to bipartisan ventures. Just to illustrate how U.S. political parties have grown more and more hostile towards each other, it is worth to note that while "Medicare passed the House in 1965 with the support of 237 Democrats and 70 Republicans, [for example], ...President Obama's health-care reform package passed the House in 2010 without a single Republican" [6]. Trump's victory in 2016 only made the climate of divisiveness more intense, fueling anti bipartisanship, and thus making way for the idea that American society houses a constant duel between liberal and conservative forces. In such a divisive political context, conspiracy theories blossom, for conspiracism speaks the same black-and-white language of anti-bipartisanship.

Trumpism and conspiracism fit like a glove. Trump's discordant rhetoric magnified uncertainty and QAnon constructed a way to explain uncertainty, offering temptingly credible, though unrealistic explanations for troubled minds. No wonder Trump delighted in the fringe theories spread by QAnon since they pointed to him as the one who would defend weak and disenfranchised Americans from everything liberal. Clearly, while Trump used QAnon as a "launching pad," borrowing QAnon popular phrases such as "the calm before the storm" to allude to the conspiracy group; not to mention QAnon followers made up a large part of Trump's base, wearing MAGA hats at his rallies and casting votes for the Republican conservative agenda [2]; QAnon took advantage of Trump's divisive populist message while Trump milked on Q's ability to keep recruiting the needy masses.

5. The Internet and Conspiracism

The marriage of Trumpism and conspiracism could not have found a better magnifier than the Internet and social media. What better way to disseminate lies than the reality-warping online universe? Peter Pomerantsev, in *This Is Not Propaganda*, describes how "the powerful can use 'information abundance' to find new ways of stifling you" [3]. Pomerantsev interviews Phillipino influencer "P" to warn of the pleasures of anonymous manipulation in the digital world. "P," who wants to remain anonymous, says "'There's a happiness to me if I'm able to control the people. Maybe it's a bad thing. It satisfies my ego, something deeper in me ... It's like becoming a god in the digital side'" [7]. Trump's use of his Twitter account to disseminate misinformation reflects the pleasure to manipulate others in order to retain political power. While never explicitly voicing his support of the QAnon conspiracy theories, Trump has repeatedly tweeted clues and retweeted messages associated with the QAnon conspiracy that

signaled his support to the group. Just to mention a couple of examples of the kind of exposure QAnon has received through Trump's Twitter account, on November 7th, 2019 "White House deputy chief of staff Dan Scavino tweets a GIF of a ticking clock, an apparent reference to QAnon iconography signifying the countdown to the moment when Trump vanquishes his detractors" and on April 12th, 2020, during the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic, "Trump [retweeted] a call to fire Anthony Fauci from DeAnna Lorraine, a congressional candidate who has openly espoused QAnon beliefs" [8]. From behind his screen, Trump, just like Q, super spread whatever truths he believed would create political momentum and keep their base craving for more. In a way, "this is a brilliant and terrifying way of crowdsourcing conspiracies. Because not only is it engaging, it makes you think you're contributing to this larger cause of dismantling this invisible harm" [9]. To the masses who came in contact with QAnon, and eventually joined the crowd, any meaning out of Trump's Tweets or Q's encrypted messages on 8kun, not only helped their minds escape the confusing real world, but also reassured them that the law and order president and the anonymous Q were at work to disable the deep state -- a cause that, according to QAnon enthusiasts, is worth passing on to friends and family.

6. Gamification Is the Name of the Conspiracy Game

There is no question that the Internet is a superspreader of conspiracy theories and that QAnon capitalizes on the overreaching power of the digital world. However, it is also important to mention that QAnon enticed followers through the gamification of its theory. Clearly, QAnon's conspiracy platform took advantage of the element of anonymity that the Internet provides, never revealing the identity of the human behind the movement. As a result, Q's unknown identity teased its followers' imagination, giving them a subject matter to investigate. The QAnon experience is like a game since "it leaves people to figure out the puzzle through their own research. And then they discuss it together, whether it's in a private group or whether it's in a public forum" [9]. This may explain why the individual who calls himself "Q," chose a shady image board called 4chan to send its first message to the "Patriots," a term Q uses when referring to QAnon followers [2]. Once Q drops his messages, its followers, who see themselves as "patriotic," engage in the game of making meaning out of Q's mambo jambo: "Mockingbird HRC detained, not arrested (yet). Where is Huma? Follow Huma" [Q qtd. in 2]. Q has hopped from one image board to another, always finding a way to send its cryptic messages through the use of tripcodes, which allow Q to hide its identity while still visible as a permanent address by other image boards. The more mysterious the ecosystem looks, the more attractive to the avid online explorer of truths: "The audience for internet narratives doesn't want to read, it wants to write. It doesn't want answers provided, it wants to search for them" [Walter Kim qtd. in 10]. Navigating QAnon drops require hours of detective work, except that the "bakers," [10] as QAnon followers are known, will never reach the ultimate truth; instead, they will pick up the tiny bits of meaning and, using their own unique recipes, will bake their own version of reality. In the QAnon game, the mantra is "Do your own research" -- "The idea is that QAnon helps freethinkers break from the hive mind — though their research leads them all ineluctably to the conclusion that most Democratic politicians and celebrities are cannibalistic pedophiles" [7]. Ultimately, QAnon's gamification of conspiracy helps attract followers -- the bored, the desperate, the uninformed, the fearful, and more. If the game of life looks bleak, then the QAnon game comes up with an alt-reality that may suit many vulnerable minds. Some politicians just loved it.

7. Conspiracism and its Political Consequences

The political consequences of drawing people towards alternate realities are evident. Conspiracism creates even more uncertainty while "unveils" a promisingly appeasing truth. To

conspiracy theories believers, “knowing” that the deep state lurks in the shadows of D.C. is terrifying, so following the leader’s political agenda gains a cult-like significance. Trump, for example, saw conspiracism as an opportunity to ascend politically. The more bogus the rhetoric, the easier it was to manipulate his base. His political power relied on suspending disbelief in reality. Trump lost the 2020 presidential election, but maintained his conspiratorial rhetoric to maintain influence in the political scene. Even if his absurd claims that the election was rigged failed to fulfill the promise that he would be sworn as president for another term, his followers, many of them QAnon enthusiasts, held on to conspiracy theories rather than accepting a glaring reality, for the simple reason that such theories make them feel reassured. Trump’s rant on Twitter sounded as absurdly cheesy as Q’s drops. As LaFrance notes, “Q’s tone is conspiratorial to the point of cliché: ‘I’ve said too much,’ and ‘Follow the money,’ and ‘Some things must remain classified to the very end.’” [2]. Like Trump’s rhetoric, these vague phrases were designed to reach an army of common minds. Q speaks in riddles that echo popular wisdom, so the catchier the better, especially when using a medium such as the Internet, where users quickly browse pages looking for random information. Trump, like Q, capitalized on such elusiveness.

8. Conspiracism and its Antagonism of the Mainstream Media

Achieving such suspension of disbelief required the development of a desire to antagonize the mainstream media. Helen Lewis, a British contributor for *The Atlantic*, advises in the very first lines of her article, “Cry ‘conspiracy’ when no one else reports it” [11]. Conspiracists want to stay away from journalism that looks into investigating facts, so they can spin whatever fictitious stories suit their paranoid agenda. QAnon follows the same script: “To believe Q requires rejecting mainstream institutions, ignoring government officials, battling apostates, and despising the press” [2]. By telling its followers that “[they] are the news now” [2], QAnon adherents dive into a never-ending cycle of truth fabrication. Invariably, every time the media outlets go against conspiracy theories, journalists are portrayed as contemptuous liberals who lack the morals to fight for the true interests of the nation. Lewis also comments on how journalism can be swallowed up by conspiracists, who can increase the level of interest in a false story by claiming that “other outlets’ refusal to follow up on it can be depicted as sinister” [11]. This suggests that the greater the mystery, the more coveted the story.

It was not uncommon to hear Trump bashing the mainstream media. Any press conference during the Trump administration seemed like a wrestling competition between freedom of speech and censorship. In fact, “Donald Trump’s relentless attacks on the mainstream media have helped constrain the range of sources QAnon supporters are willing to believe” [10]. QAnon used this same strategy to make sure that each one of its stories unveils truths that were supposed to stay in the shadows; but thanks to Q, and with the help of those who have deciphered Q’s clues, these truths have surfaced. In sum, a hateful liar can turn into a hero before a Democrat can spell liberal, metamorphosing into a true patriot who wants to protect American children from a ring of pedophiles. By discrediting the mainstream media, potential QAnon believers are kept from trusting reliable sources where they can fact check theories. La France’s article on QAnon, shows how belief in conspiracy led QAnon followers to move away from local sources and gravitate towards the far-right, Donald Trump enthusiast, One America News Network: “Taking a page from Trump’s playbook, Q frequently rails against legitimate sources of information as fake. [QAnon followers] rely on information they encounter on Facebook rather than news outlets run by journalists. They don’t read the local paper or watch any of the major television networks” [2]. Conspiracy theories built armies of misinformed people, who were kept in the dark at the same time they were promised the path to light.

9. Conspiracism and its Anti-Establishment Message

QAnon supporters not only fall for the anti-mainstream media agenda, but they also give in to populist and anti-establishment rhetoric. Trump's ascension to power brought to the White House a man who "is skeptical of elite opinion and not convinced that he has anything still to learn" [12]. All of a sudden, the leader of the Western World had harsh words to solid organizations that represent the establishment and any form of expertise -- NATO, the World Health Association, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the FBI, just to mention a few. No pre-established stone remained unturned under Trump, and it was not because he really held the knowledge of it all, it was simply because it was easier for him to control a vast amount of information by rejecting it. Potential supporters of conspiracy theories identified with Trump, for he simplified the convoluted world of power, reducing it to simply fabricated facts -- not difficult to swallow, easy to process. QAnon jumped on the same conspiracy wagon, deleting the established system to build its own, and the conspiracy monster lived to see another day.

10. QAnons Followers: Who Are They?

But besides the minds of the masters of populism, whose other minds exactly did QAnon attract? Anyone who showed a predisposition for believing conspiracy theories. Although the answer sounds simple, the complexities involved in joining the cultish ecosystem of QAnon are multiple. To get an insight into a typical QAnon's follower it is essential to look into the research. The Center for Communication and Civic Renewal team at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that people who tend to get their news online, in an incidental manner, are more vulnerable towards conspiracy theories [13]. According to the source, these individuals tend to be less interested in gathering information about politics and rely on social media to obtain the information on political developments. In fact, a survey published on the FactTank website, in March of 2020, supports these findings, "U.S. adults who get news on Reddit, Twitter [are] more likely to know about QAnon" [14]. LaFrance's article also provides a slice of QAnon reality by reporting on a conversation she had with two QAnon believers in Ohio. Both middle-aged women rejected the idea of getting the news from local newspapers and mainstream television networks, and commented on the reasons for their change in behavior: "Trump really opened our eyes to what's happening. And ... Q is telling us beforehand the stuff that's going to happen" [2]. For sure, QAnon followers united around their dismissal of the certainties created by the establishment and their understanding and desire that a new narrative must rise to the surface. In the eyes of some conspiracy theory researchers such as Joseph Uscinsky, QAnon followers also share another common characteristic -- they feel adrift and powerless. In Uscinski words, "[conspiracy theories] are tools used by the powerless to attack and defend against the powerful... In this way, conspiracy theories are for losers" [15]. Uscinsky's statement pictures the cultish QAnon movement as a safe haven for those who have not successfully engaged in life for a variety of reasons ranging from daily doses of frustration, extreme stress due to lack of money, youth, love, and any other grievances in the long list of human misery. By identifying the people responsible for their shortcomings and promising a better future through cryptic prophecies, Q gives its followers to feel hopeful about their chance to turn the tables one day. This message makes the QAnon cause worthwhile. It fills people's minds with hope, plus gives them the opportunity to play with meanings to create their own interpretations of Q's messages, regardless of the lack of evidence to support their veracity. Q's messages work like an antidote against disappointment, just like a religion. Followers will spend hours researching possible meanings for Q's ambiguous messages for hours, in a similar way that religious fanatics will sometimes focus on the study of Scripture. In the words of a QAnon supporter herself, "I feel God led me to Q...I feel like if it was deceitful, in my spirit, God would be telling me, 'Enough's enough.' But I don't feel that. I pray about it. I've said, 'Father, should I be wasting my time on

this? ... And I don't feel that feeling of I should stop" [2]. Going back to Uscinski's "losers" theory, it makes sense to infer that this woman needed a boost of powerfulness, and QAnon just fulfilled that need with its own explanation of all things wrong and promises of justice, and this has fulfilled her needs. Ultimately, QAnon adherents long for the Great Awakening, when those who want to undermine America, a once great country, will be brought to justice.

11. QAnon Followers: Populists' Favorite Prey

Unfortunately, at the same time that QAnon soothes the loser's soul, it turns him or her into prey for populist leaders. Populists thrive on losers' broken spirit and need for an alternative truth. It is mindblowing to watch a crowd of Q fans -- from Uscinsky's view, the real losers -- applaud Trump's mockery of those he sees as losers -- anyone who crossed his path without massaging his ego through a "yes-man" attitude. It is like two beasts that feed off each other through a feedback loop: while conspiracism such as QAnon provides a safe haven from reality to its distressed followers, populism uses their needs to remain in power by ridiculing the establishment and any enlightened source of information that could allow reality to be verified. In other words, Q can only serve its purpose as a grounding element if its followers do not think rationally and fact check its existence and motivations. To any rational mind, believing in an anonymous leader reads as the ultimate uncertainty, and yet, to QAnon followers, oblivion to truth and belief in an unverified reality equals certainty. When asked if there was any evidence that proved that Q's theories are true, a QAnon supporter "flipped [the] question around: 'Is there any evidence not to?'" [2]. The answer definitely gave a populist such as Trump reason to keep playing the role of the anti-establishment guy. Opposing the system, it appears, has given the frail disenfranchised a reason to believe their own fringe realities.

12. QAnon Followers: on a Feeling of Powerlessness and a Low Tolerance to Uncertainty

Such feeling of powerlessness originates from an inability to handle all uncertainty in the world. As cliché as it may sound, the only certainty in life is death, which naturally creates deep complications for vulnerable minds. Like all human beings, QAnon followers crave certainty, but perhaps they have a stronger need for "[a] master narrative [that] gives believers a sense of control over uncontrollable events" [10]. Lack of certainty creates anxiety, which in abnormal levels, may lead to paranoid readings of reality. Besides "[harnessing] paranoia to fervent hope and a deep sense of belonging" [2], QAnon caters for a terribly anxious mindset by encompassing all types of anxiety triggers. Zuckerman and McQuade describe it as "a big tent conspiracy theory, a meta narrative that knits together contemporary politics and hoary racist tropes with centuries of history behind them" [10]. Under this same tent, Q manages to include a pedophile ring, Satan, the makings of the pandemic, and other mind-boggling narratives. This keeps QAnon relevant regardless of the number of variables that make the political wheels turn. Thus, as long as the level of uncertainty stays at high levels, the chances that QAnon's fight against the deep state will continue.

13. The Pandemic: the Cherry on Top of the QAnon Cake

The Coronavirus pandemic cast a dark and intense shadow of uncertainty over the American population, making the U.S. an even better vessel for conspiracism. In The Atlantic article "The Coronavirus Conspiracy Boom," Uscinsky and Enders ponder, "COVID-19 has created a perfect storm for conspiracy theorists. Here we have a global pandemic, a crashing economy, social isolation, and restrictive government policies: All of these can cause feelings of extreme anxiety, powerlessness, and stress, which in turn encourage conspiracy beliefs" [16]. Riding the waves

of such perfect storm, master conspiracists such as Trump disseminated the theory that the virus was just a hoax produced by the Democrats to undermine his administration. The virus-stricken U.S. quickly evolved into a battleground in which Democrats were to blame for the restrictive measures against the spread of the Coronavirus while the Republicans were the defenders of individual liberties. The conservative media supported Trump's conspiracist readings of the pandemic by doubling up on more conspiracy. The absurd theories ranged from claims that the number of COVID-19 deaths has been manipulated by the public-health officials, whom Rush Limbaugh suggested, "are deep-state operatives" to the description of images of ICUs overwhelmed with patients as fabrications of the liberal media [16]. With the politicization of the pandemic, official messages about ways to minimize the spread of the virus became more and more confusing, and uncertainty exploded. QAnon, who offered a quite bizarre explanation for the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, saying that the pandemic was staged to release the "mole children" from the Central Park secret tunnels. The children have been kept there by the pedophile members of the deep state and the rescue mission had been authorized by Trump [Pennacchia qtd. in 16]. Trump, even if pressured by the tragic outcomes of the pandemic for Americans, chose once again to embrace conspiracism, bashing Dr. Anthony Fauci, cutting ties with the World Health Organization, and personally attacking every governor who sided with science. Empowered by Trump's rhetoric, QAnon members waved their flags at Trump rallies and organized protests to liberate Americans, asking for the end of any restrictive measures during the pandemic, thus empowering Trump. Full circle. In such stressful times, the alarming results of Uscinski and Enders survey on Americans and their belief in conspiracy theories come as no surprise: out of the 2,023 Americans polled from March 17 to 19, almost everyone believed in one of the 22 conspiracy theories they were inquired about and "43 percent believe that an extrajudicial deep state is secretly embedded in our government" [16]. In times of great uncertainty, conspiracy theorists become a go to place for many; it is also during these tough times that populism takes the most advantage of conspiracism.

14. Incitement of Violent Behavior and the Threat to American Society

Besides concerns about its dangerous spread of misinformation, some worry that QAnon poses a threat to American society since it incites violent behavior. Americans have loved guns since colonial times, and in any corner of this country an assault weapon could be waiting for those messages that will trigger in some unstable mind the desire to resolve grudges with the deep state. The same level of preparedness demonstrated in Edgar Welch's Comet Pizza invasion is not hard to find among the American population. In 2019, the F.B.I. listed QAnon as one of the domestic terrorist groups that pose a threat to the United States after some violent acts involving QAnon related-rhetoric such as Pizzagate and Hillary Clinton emails. On the occasion, the F.B.I issued a memo warning about the conspiracy theories' potential for inciting acts of extreme violence [2]. Even if conspiracy theories have always found their way into American society, QAnon may lead to more serious implications to the country's state of affairs. For one, the president of the United States openly fuels the deep state rhetoric for the simple reason that not only was he elected on conspiracism, but he governs on it. Jeff Goldberg, the editor in chief of *The Atlantic*, accuses Trump of not [defending] our democracy from the ruinous consequences of conspiracy thinking," and calls conspiracy thinking "an existential threat" [17].

15. Pastel Shades and QAnon

The QAnon phenomenon, however, which has seen a rise during the Trump administration, has taken on a different form, trying to distance itself from the image of a domestic terrorist group. Thanks to the influence that QAnon has gained in the universe of multi-level marketing, the conspiracy theory has branched out into what Concordia University researcher Marc-Andre

Argentino has identified as “Pastel QAnon.” The soft colors of their postings and lightness of their pro-natural and simple life message work as a platform for “the mythology of QAnon, which holds that Trump was a warrior taking on a global ring of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, who are also in cahoots with the ‘deep state,’ and tend to be Democratic politicians, Hollywood celebrities, or the owners of seemingly small business” [18]. Some of these women, the face of the pastel shades of QAnon, are successful business women who hold Facebook accounts with thousands of followers and share a number of similarities with the QAnon movement. They sell natural products such as essential oils that do not always comply with FDA regulations, which put their industry at odds with scientists and governments. William Keep, a marketing professor at the College of New Jersey who is an expert in the multilevel marketing industry phenomenon, comments about its philosophical similarities with QAnon, “[This industry] loathes oversight and regulation,...have had close ties to conservative politics, and many have antagonistic relationships with bodies like the FDA, or the idea of authority in general, in cases where products are marketed in ways that flout scientific consensus or medical expertise” [qtd. in 18]. The unrealistic grandiose promises of QAnon mirror the promises of a healthier and happier life through the purchase of the products commercialized by multilevel marketing companies. These promises are “equally false, and equally predicated on a desperate search for meaning and stability” [18]. QAnon followers search for this stability and thus become the best target public for these companies. QAnon prophecies never become true, but QAnon followers have a great tolerance for delayed reinforcement, which make them even more ideal customers for products that promise the sky and deliver fantasy. Pastel QAnon has metamorphosed the conspiracy theory into a format that can reach the mainstream, and so did Marjorie Taylor Greene, the first QAnon supporter to win a House seat in Georgia. Greene describes herself as an ex-athlete and sport enthusiast and vows to do all within her power to keep all gyms open, even if it contradicts the recommendations of public-health experts [19]. Amazingly, a conspiracy movement that has been listed by the FBI as a domestic terrorism group, has now official set foot in the House of Representatives. In the bag of conspiracism there is room for both prey and predators.

16. Can America Survive Conspiracy Thinking?

The question is how can America survive the threat of conspiracy thinking? There is no doubt that QAnon has not thrived on America divisiveness but also added more disagreement to an already either red or blue country. To illustrate the divisive QAnon ecosystem, Zuckerman alludes to Keanu Reeves’s iconic film *The Matrix*. In the movie, the blue pill, red pill dilemma becomes the only way to face unreality. In a society dominated by conspiracy theories, choosing red means living with the unpleasant truth that reality has been suspended, while going for the blue pill means living in the blissful reality of unreality. It is true that the Internet has added way too many possibilities of constructing meaning, turning reality into a fragmented spectacle, and that perhaps the only way to exist in these unreal times is to live in total suspension of disbelief. This, however, would have serious implications for America, especially when it comes to liberal causes such as Black Lives Matter and the Me Too Movement, which require standing the ground without the interference of doubt. This does not mean that society must be on the same page as far as the core values of these movements go. Disagreement is part of a democratic society, but misinformation about the motivations behind these liberal ideas can undermine them. As Zuckerman and McQuade conclude, “The main byproduct of unreality is doubt, and doubt is dangerous. Doubt makes it difficult to organize—to demand a change—because movements for change require a set of people to agree on a problem and a possible solution” [10]. This would generate pervasive cynicism among Americans and undermine the very democratic fabric of this society. Recently, the first signs of doubt about core American values began to appear in the form of censorship. Social media platforms such as Reddit, Facebook,

and Twitter due to the growing dissemination of misinformation through conspiracy theories, are questioning the feasibility of freedom of speech, one of the basic rights of the American people. QAnon-related accounts have been blocked on social media and the conspiracy theory had to flock to right-wing applications such as Parler. The social media giants fought the idea of relying on censorship, but understood that the situation called for drastic measures since misinformation was crossing lines with a view to undermine the most sacred space of democracy -- the right to a fair election.

With or without the looming prospect of Trump trying to run a parallel populist government using the influential voice of conspiracists, the Biden administration will have to fight the enemy of disinformation, who has been wreaking havoc in the country since Trump was elected in 2016. According to Nina Jancowicz's recent article "How to Defeat Disinformation," "After four fractious years of politicization and polarization...it will take more than official pledges to address the degradation of public discourse in the United States and the manipulation of information by self-interested charlatans" [20]. Jancowicz suggests that Biden pushes for government restructures and work on bipartisan ventures to pass legislation that promotes a more clear Internet. Given the state of affairs when it comes to conspiracism in the United States, Biden's challenges are gargantuan.

17. Conclusion

As for QAnon, it is fair to say that even if the news of Trump's loss has its followers feeling down and lost -- not that they have not felt like this before -- the movement is "already much more than a loose collection of conspiracy-minded chat-room inhabitants. It is a movement united in mass rejection of reason, objectivity, and other Enlightenment values". Its focus on apocalyptic paybacks rather than on constructive ways to face the world, its disregard for reality, and its reckless idea that evidence is an unnecessary item has hijacked several minds, taking them on a bad trip down the rabbit hole. Now that the United States faces the challenges of a public health crisis such as a pandemic, casting doubt on scientific practices can only undermine the country's effectiveness in responding to a life-threatening virus such as COVID-19, not to mention it speaks to populism, a bullet that America has barely dodged in the 2020 presidential election. It is advisable to stress the word "barely" because although Trump will no longer be in power, he set the modus operandi for the Republican Party and Republicans to follow his lead. Following his lead means sticking with the dangerous narratives of conspiracy, QAnon style. Many still wonder about the real face or faces behind Q. Some even believe that Q is an Internet troll; others say that Q was Trump himself, just like the QAnon supporter in LaFrance's article. Let's not forget that even if Q's voice dwindles, his experiment has been quite successful not to be replicated. In other words, the diabolical mix of desire for populism and wide availability of digital vessels, other Q-like anonymous personas will pop, like in a game of whack-a-mole. Whatever its identity, Q and all the potential Qs out there are nothing but merchants of doubt, and "the merchants of doubt wield their product like a weapon, and the primary product of unreality is perpetual paralysis". Run, rabbit, run, but not into the hole of conspiracy thinking. If Kurt Vonnegut were alive and had been asked to write about the history of America in these last four years, he would certainly begin his narrative with the famous line, "All this happened, more or less".

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