

Have Faith and Question Everything: Understanding QAnon's Allure

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Abstract

QAnon is an influential conspiracy theory centering on a nefarious “deep state” network. The core of the movement is Q, an unknown individual claiming to have classified access. This article examines one year of Q’s posts. These highly influential texts are read by followers, who follow the “crumbs” and “bake” them into conspiratorial narratives. Drawing on rhetorical criticism methods, the article conducts a baseline coding of these posts and develops an explanatory schema consisting of two fantasy themes. Faith is one theme, with spiritual language evoking an apocalyptic battle between the children of light and the children of darkness. Skepticism is another theme, with posts championing the enlightened individual who employs free-thought to uncover the truth. These elements blend powerful religious narratives with contemporary ideals of critical thinking and independent knowledge construction. This unique rhetorical vision contributes one explanation for QAnon’s ability to mobilize an increasingly large and diverse following.

Keywords

QAnon, conspiracy theory, online movement, post-truth, religious right

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Introduction

This article investigates QAnon, a movement centering on the anonymous Q and their online posts concerning a vast covert war between the “deep state” and former-President Donald Trump. Q has become an increasingly influential figure over the last few years, particularly in the run up to the 2020 US elections. Across social media, QAnon content has millions of views and thousands of followers. QAnon posters and apparel now appear at protests and political rallies. Q-affiliated statements have been retweeted over 200 times by Trump (Kaplan, 2020). One QAnon follower has been nominated for the US Senate (Sonmez and DeBonis, 2020); another easily won her seat in the House (Darby, 2021). And a book compiled by Q followers, *The Great Awakening*, reached #1 in Amazon’s Censorship category (Collins, 2019).

While Q’s influence is increasingly acknowledged, it is often depicted in the media as a bewildering phenomenon, composed of bewildering beliefs, that has crawled out of the underbelly of the internet. As a result, QAnon is patronized as a bizarre curiosity and Q followers derided as crazy (Hoysted, 2020). Labelling believers as conspiracy theorists has long been a tactic for exclusion and dismissal (Husting and Orr, 2007). But to dismiss this movement or simply ban online groups (Frenkel, 2020) is both dangerous and ineffective, playing directly into the QAnon claim that free speech will be censored and “the truth” seen as unwelcome. Instead, I strive to understand the movement by beginning where Q followers begin: with the “crumbs” written by Q. Taking cues from Theweleit (1987) in privileging the source material, one year of Q posts are collected and examined. Drawing on rhetorical criticism, I conduct a baseline

coding of this material, develop an explanatory schema by clustering tags into themes, and explore how these themes construct a compelling rhetorical vision.

Approaching QAnon

What makes QAnon important and worth attending to? QAnon's sociopolitical force has been significant and has been linked to a number of violent incidents. Early warning signs of Q's influence came in the form of a follower who blocked the Hoover Dam with an armored truck, demanding the release of a report related to the Hillary Clinton email probe (Ruelas, 2020). More recently, QAnon's "real-world" impact was witnessed in the violent storming of the U.S. Capitol (Argentino, 2021; Munn, 2021), a shocking attack designed to keep Trump in power and punish his political foes. Several participants in the attack were devoted Q followers, including casualty Ashli Babbitt and the now iconic QAnon Shaman.

Yet while these spectacular acts certainly matter, QAnon can also be linked to a less perceptible challenge to political consensus and evidence-driven claims. QAnon constitutes a parallel world with its own logic of truth. Of course, the media-driven polarization of politics (Baum and Groeling, 2008; Pariser, 2012) and the rise of fake news, pseudoscience, and alternative facts has been noted by scholars for some time (Kaufman and Kaufman, 2018; Farkas and Schou, 2019). For some, this constitutes a global "epistemic crisis" (Cosentino, 2020, p. 8), with polarizing digital technologies contributing to a profound "collapse of trust" (d'Ancona, 2017, p. 36). For others, such rhetoric is alarmist and fake news is another moral panic (Bratich 2020).

More nuanced voices have argued that networked technologies and the digital mediascape exacerbate a post-truth condition in which trust in historical gatekeepers like the church, state, and science has been systematically eroded (Harsin, 2018). In this context, we can certainly identify some affinities between post-truth modes of communication which leverage new digital media forms and forms of populist politics (Waisboard, 2018). However, contra Waisboard, I see this emerging post-truth/populism nexus not as a wholesale rejection of consensus and expertise, but as a reconfiguration that questions whose consensus counts and whose expertise matters. While such challenges are not entirely novel, QAnon seems to have amplified and exemplified these questions to a new degree, shunting them into the media spotlight. This is a movement that has seen prominent politicians openly endorse Q-beliefs, middle-class mothers attend #savethechildren rallies, and Facebook friends share narratives around Satanic cabals and the harvesting of children's blood (all events inspired by QAnon). In this sense, QAnon manifests the post-truth condition in a visible way and raises it to prominence in mainstream discussion.

The shock of QAnon, then, is not about its new effects, but the scale and intensity of these effects. If Hofstadter (1964) diagnosed the "paranoid style" in politics more than fifty years ago, that style has now been coupled to a powerful post-truth motor and accelerated by the affordances of networked media. These conditions have allowed Q-inspired theories to move from the fringes to the mainstream, where they are taken up by a diverse population of "normal people." When anti-vaxxing, climate change, and COVID-denial all find a new engine in the meta-theory of QAnon, then it is no longer an eccentric oddity but a dangerous reality with concrete repercussions for public health, environmental sustainability, and racial equality (Argentino, 2020a; Doward, 2020; Dyer, 2020).

Rather than dismissing Q as an irrational cult, then, I am interested in its internal logic, the way these posts render it rational or even incontrovertible for its followers. Here the study turns to communication theory, a discipline that has long taken seriously the ability of language to be persuasive, to shape perceptions of reality, and to legitimize certain understandings of the world. Rhetorical criticism seeks to unpack discourse and understand the persuasive force in the communicative act. For Burke (1969), it was clear that rhetoric functioned: language was a tool for achieving compliance with a common viewpoint and for inducing cooperation by tapping deeply into human nature. More recent scholarship

has stressed the key role rhetoric plays in coalition-building (Chávez, 2011), knitting together diverse actors and interests into powerful social and political movements.

In aiming to understand QAnon, I see particular value in fantasy-theme analysis (Bormann 1972; 1985), a method of rhetorical criticism interested in the shared worldviews of groups. Fantasy does not mean fiction or imply derision but refers instead to an imaginative or creative use of communication. Granted, fantasy-theme analysis typically assumes that language is used to interpret events in the past, future, or somehow distanced in time and space from the present (Foss 2017, p. 106). Yet one of the innovations of Q as a political movement is precisely its ability to employ digital media as a kind of real-time interpretation machine, commenting on events as they occur and quickly reworking them into an acceptable frame.

Symbolic convergence is a theory tightly aligned with fantasy-theme analysis and seeks to understand how language forms a consensus, a shared interpretation that satisfies the rhetorical or psychological needs of a group (Bormann, 1985). QAnon needs to legitimize a view of reality in which a deep state cabal is running a sex-trafficking ring and plotting against the (former) President. How is this worldview made credible and rational? Fantasy themes are powerful fables that work to structure reality and render it understandable. “While experience itself is often chaotic and confusing, fantasy themes are organized and artistic,” observes Foss (2017, p. 107), “they are designed to create a credible interpretation of experience.” In this sense, fantasies align with conspiracy theories in making sense of a complex and disorienting world. Fantasies develop a unified narrative that “joins the dots,” tying a messy constellation of actors, relationships, and events into a cohesive meta-narrative with persuasive force.

The next section begins with a primer on QAnon and a brief survey of existing literature. The following section explains the textual material and the methodology used to analyze it. The remaining sections unpack two fantasy themes. Faith is the first theme, with spiritual language portraying an apocalyptic battle in the present between the children of light and the children of darkness. Skepticism is the second theme, with rhetoric elevating the enlightened individual who employs critical thinking and draws her own fact-based conclusions. The final section discusses how these themes are blended into a narrative premised on thinking for oneself and critical knowledge creation, yet also rooted in powerful religious narratives and their community-forming capabilities. This unique rhetorical vision contributes one explanation for QAnon’s ability to reach beyond the typical niche of conspiracists and mobilize a large and diverse following.

The Birth and Rise of Q

QAnon began on 4chan’s “Politically Incorrect” board, a virulent space on a website already considered toxic. A new thread had started in response to a cryptic remark from Trump. “You guys know what this represents?” Trump had asked at a dinner for military leaders, “Maybe it’s the calm before the storm” (Johnson, 2017). On October 28, 2017, a user who would later identify as Q posted in this “Calm before the Storm” thread. Q claimed to have access to classified information, with the original moniker “Q Clearance Anon” alluding to Q-level security access (Energy.gov, 2020). QAnon was not the first “anon” on the board to make these claims. Throughout 2016 and 2017, users like FBIAnon, CIAAnon, and WH Insider Anon had all claimed to possess insider information and even conducted “ask me anything” sessions where users could quiz them about classified political events (Zadrozny and Collins, 2018).

What set Q apart from these other supposed insiders? QAnon’s emergence from niche community to wider social media milieu was not an organic development, but a conscious campaign carried out by three individuals. Two 4channers – Pamphlet Anon and BaruchtheScribe – reached out to Tracey Diaz, a YouTuber who had achieved some success in covering the earlier Pizzagate conspiracy theory (Zadrozny and Collins, 2018). Diaz, known online as TraceyBeanz, posted her first Q Clearance Anon video in November 2017. That video has garnered over 250,000 views and her channel now boasts over 120,000 subscribers and 10 million views (Beanz, 2020). QAnon’s spread was aided by a strategic understanding of the internet ecosystem, systematically moving from the niche hate havens to alternative

and then mainstream platforms. The trio set up a new group on Reddit (2018) called “Calm Before the Storm.” Reddit’s popularity meant that Q’s posts could draw upon a far wider community to develop and distribute these ideas. Over time, posts migrated across to a growing number of QAnon Facebook groups, where the content could be consumed and recirculated by an older and more diverse audience (Zadrozny and Collins, 2018). Eventually this online growth became apparent in the offline world. In 2018, apparel and posters stating “we are Q” and the quintessential Q slogan “where we go one we go all” appeared at a Trump rally in Tampa, triggering a flurry of reactions in mainstream media (Stanley-Becker, 2018).

The core fable of QAnon has been laid out by many (Martineau, 2017; Collins, 2018; LaFrance, 2020). In essence, the narrative is that a secret network of actors, from Hillary Clinton to George Soros, the Rothschilds and others, comprise a “deep state” with a nefarious agenda. With its global tendrils in finance, governments, and corporations, this cabal orchestrates heinous acts and hides them by maintaining tight control over the mainstream media. This narrative follows the post-war trend in which conspiracy theories no longer focus on a small secret society but point to a highly dispersed “organisation, technology, or system” (Melley, 2016, p.8) that openly manipulates a population, if only they had the eyes to see it. Echoing the earlier Pizzagate narratives (Tuters et al., 2018), Q followers believe that this cabal of powerful politicians, leaders, and celebrities engage in pedophilia and child trafficking. Indeed, the movement has enjoyed a surge of exposure and support thanks to its co-option of the “save the children” slogan and hashtag (Roose, 2020). Typically associated with humanitarian campaigns, the phrase has enabled Q-inspired content to be widely and often unwittingly endorsed (North, 2020), finding sympathetic new audiences and providing another access point into the Q world.

While these theories spinoff in dozens of directions, from blood harvesting to coronavirus as bioweapon, the protagonist at the heart of QAnon is Donald Trump. Whether strategically selected or divinely appointed, Trump is the key figure striving to undo the cabal’s corruption before it destroys America and the world. Trump has long been aware of the deep state’s dark schemes, deploying his military, legal, and financial power to orchestrate countermoves against them. Through Q’s texts and their own research, followers have become aware of this reality, beginning a “Great Awakening” that will ultimately sweep the world. While the cabal’s evil currently goes unchecked, the time of judgement is soon approaching. The moment of reckoning is near, a flood of indictments and arrests that followers call “the Storm.” According to Q, this act of judgement will be biblical.

First Steps to Q Research

How do we research QAnon? The Q universe has become sprawling, an entire ecosystem of theories, memes, and channels. And many Q followers are themselves prolific media creators, producing hours of podcasts, interviews, and videos to wade through. These myriad sects and multiplying media pose a formidable research challenge. Emerging research has responded by often focusing on single QAnon groups. Papisavva et al. (2020) explores one QAnon group on Voat, referring to its research as a “first step” and using computational methods to measure hate speech prevalence. Similarly, Procházka and Blommaert (2020) focus on one QAnon Facebook group, striving to understand how its members transform media narratives. That said, researchers are rapidly filling this gap. Recent articles frame QAnon as a product of the information dark age (Hannah, 2021), explore QAnon comments on YouTube (Miller, 2021), carry out a qualitative analysis of 300 hours of QAnon videos (Conner and MacMurray 2021), and unpack QAnon’s distinctive relationship to signs and symbols (McIntosh 2022).

This article takes a slightly different approach, examining one year of posts direct from the source: Q. After all, one of the directives for Q followers is to concentrate not on Q’s identity but on what he or she is communicating. An introductory guide (Anons, 2018, p. 3) stresses that it is the “messages, information, intel, and facts that Q posts which are important,” followers “focus not on who Q is, but on what Q is saying.” Q’s “crumbs” or “drops” are the foundational texts of the QAnon movement, the Rosetta stones that spawn countless discussion threads and inspire hours of online investigation. What

do these aphoristic and often cryptic posts actually say? What are the key themes and tropes embedded within them? And how might this thematic blend contribute to sustaining QAnon and mobilizing its broad audience?

As core material, this article draws upon Q posts between September 2019 and September 2020. This period offers a large but manageable archive for a single researcher, and includes a wide spectrum of material ranging from the presidential election to pandemic protests and corruption investigations. Q often posts several times per day, meaning that the archive covers drops #3571 – 4764 for a total of 1193 posts. Q posts on 8kun, and Q followers then meticulously record each drop on “official” archives like <http://qanon.pub> (the source I used) and other mirrors. Each post appears with a date-stamp, its original URL, and its number. To avoid driving traffic to these conspiracy theories, all posts are referenced by number rather than hyperlinked.

Methodologically, the analysis takes a consciously bottom-up approach, allowing the posts themselves to drive the study. Instead of beginning with a grand theory, the study focuses first and foremost on Q’s words, an approach inspired by Klaus Thieleweit (1987, p. 24), whose seminal study “did not originate in theory” but rather in the source documents he investigated; central to his methodology is that “the material has taken precedence.” Within communication studies, this approach would fall into generative criticism (Foss, 2017, p. 411) in that it begins with the “curious artifact” of the QAnon archive, conducts a “baseline coding” of that artifact by noting key terms and tropes, and only then develops an “explanatory schema” that aims to organize this material in a coherent and insightful way.

To begin with, the full corpus of Q posts was coded¹. This involved reading the post itself and any hyperlinked media, such as screenshots, tweets, or linked video. After understanding the context of the post, the coder tagged each post. Coding employed a template-based approach (King, 2004), drawing on the author’s domain expertise in right-wing online subcultures (Munn, 2019; Munn, 2021) to define tags but also allowing flexibility to revise these during coding. Coding aimed to stay reasonably close to the wording used in each post while also revealing key tropes that appeared frequently. For example, a short post stating “THE SILENT WAR CONTINUES” was labelled with “warfare.” A videoclip with the dialogue – “I’m gonna pull the whole thing down. I’m gonna bring the whole fuckin’ diseased, corrupt temple down on your head. It’s gonna be biblical” – was tagged with “biblical,” “temple,” and “corruption.” Coding avoided inferring tags, e.g. “corruption” but not Trump’s catch-all term of “swamp,” and also avoided creating too many variants – e.g. “corrupting,” “corrupted” – which would dilute overall frequency. Posts featuring tweets from suspended accounts were not coded. The resulting list of tags can be seen in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Cloud of tags from a year of Q posts, size indicates frequency

1 An Excel document (xlsx) containing the post numbers, contents, and tags is available here: https://www.dropbox.com/s/b8odj542wzbyuj/qanon_coding.xlsx?dl=0.

This baseline coding could be analyzed in any number of ways. However, drawing on generative criticism, I searched for a schema with explanatory power, a way to organize this material that provided an understanding of QAnon’s unique rhetorical vision and its persuasive mobilizing force. I chose to cluster a large number of tropes into two fantasy themes that seemed particularly interesting, not least because they appear superficially opposed. The first is *faith*, encompassing tags such as the armor of God, light vs darkness, justice, warfare, and other Christian tropes. The second is *skepticism*, including tags such as logic, thinking, questioning, coincidence, truth, and awakening. As Figure 2 demonstrates, these two themes effectively encapsulate many related concepts and phrases. Yet beyond this productive clustering, a key rationale for these particular themes is that they are imperatives. Across the corpus of posts, regardless of the particular topic, Q frequently commands followers to “have faith” and to “think” and “ask why.” These are not just themes, then, but directives issued from a leader to a movement. This discourse aims to legitimize particular kinds of practices and behaviors (Reyes, 2011). From a rhetorical perspective, these commands steer followers towards a certain way of approaching Q’s texts and interpreting the world around them.



Figure 2: Cluster of tropes used to identify faith and skepticism themes

“Have Faith”

One powerful command across these posts is the injunction to have faith. Drop #4249 consists of a single image of a lone figure looking across a wheat field, with the words of Mark 11:22 stamped in the center: “have faith in God.” Drops #4541 and #4542 reprint a letter from Carlo Viganò, former Apostolic Nuncio to the US, to Trump on Holy Trinity Sunday. In warning the President about the “deep state” and asserting that the children of light and the children of darkness are locked in a battle that can only be described as “biblical,” Viganò’s letter serves as a dog whistle for Q followers and a three-way bridge between their community, conservative Christians, and Trump followers. Drop #4739 is a type of public prayer, which begins by asking to “strengthen my faith, Lord.” The prayer asks for forgiveness of sins, for bravery to fight the “spiritual battles in my life” and for wisdom and discernment, before making a swift segue into a cosmic battle. “While evil still roams, the power of Your name and Your blood rises up to defeat and bring us victory against every evil planned against us.” The prayer states that, “While malicious actions may disturb us,” its followers will use the “armor of God” in order to stand firm.

As the prayer suggests, one term within this theme is the “armor of God,” a phrase Q uses repeatedly over the course of the year. The passage of scripture that this phrase is taken from, Ephesians 6:10-20, is posted in its entirety multiple times throughout this period. These Bible verses, well-known

to Christians, enjoin the listener to put on a set of spiritual armor, stepping through each component, from the belt of truth, to the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit. Adorned in these defenses, the listener may go forth, equipped to do battle with the “powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil.”

Similar imagery of battle often reappears when faith, God, or religion is mentioned, constructing a vision of spiritual warfare. Faith here is less a state of inner unity with God and more a set of outward armaments that protects the wearer and legitimizes their holy crusade. Q’s mention of the armor of God recalls former President Truman, who invoked the same phrase when describing America’s battle against communism (Spalding, 2007, p.103). In both cases, faith works to expand the territory of the battlefield beyond politics narrowly defined and into everyday life, where it becomes a more fundamental issue touching on one’s beliefs, morality, and lifestyle. As drop #4545 stresses:

“This is not about politics.

This is about preserving our way of life and protecting the generations that follow.

We are living in Biblical times.

Children of light vs children of darkness.

United against the Invisible Enemy of all humanity.”

Yet if this battle is vast in scale, it is nevertheless simple to understand. On one side are the children of light; on the other are the children of darkness. This vast cosmic clash takes place between good and evil. Drop #4390 echoes this dichotomy, consisting of a single quotation from Proverbs 13:9: “The light of the righteous shines brightly, but the lamp of the wicked is extinguished.” This clear dualism is characteristic of conspiracy theories, one way the genre simplifies the messy complexities of the world into a simpler version of reality. As Barkun (2013, p.19) notes, these theories often exhibit a “sharp division between the realms of good and evil.” This is a Manichean universe, a struggle between the starkly delineated forces of light and dark.

Who is included in these forces of darkness? In the Q messages examined here, there are clear villains that are repeatedly singled out. Democrats like Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Nancy Pelosi, and Joe Biden feature alongside convicted sexual offenders and their associates such as Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein, and Ghislaine Maxwell. Yet if this rhetorical vision offers well-known figures to scapegoat, there are also more shadowy forces. A number of drops (#3858, #3905, #4366, #4385) gestured to Antifa flags and funding, suggested fires and protests were coordinated by Antifa, and questioned what “organized group(s)” may be aiding them (#4799). These actors are undefined, their identities unknown. In Q’s rhetoric, these nebulous figures gesture to the limitless dimensions of evil: there are always more individuals to be identified, more organizations to be rooted out.

Throughout the texts there is a clear link between God and America. “Do you think it's a coincidence they banned and prevent you attending Church _house of worship?” asks drop #4550, answering with two simple statements: “Anti-American. Anti-God.” Drop #4397 follows in this vein, presenting a triple call to prayer: “Pray for Strength. Pray for Guidance. Pray for America.” Some American evangelicals, especially of a more fundamentalist stripe, have latched onto these ideas, finding an affinity with the rhetorical mixture of patriotism and religion that QAnon upholds. Pastors have admitted that some in their congregation have been attracted to the movement, repeating claims of child exploitation and satanic worship as true (Ohlheiser, 2020).

A strong current of millenarianism, anticipating a period of enormous societal upheaval where evil will be dealt with, runs through QAnon. This often blurs into the similarly named millennialism, the more distinctly Judeo-Christian beliefs surrounding the end times. Q’s frequent invocation of “it’s going to be biblical,” combined with the apocalyptic language of evil, punishment, and justice, resonates strongly with Revelation, the Biblical book of prophecy which describes God’s return and final judgement, as well as bestsellers like the *Left Behind* series. The conceptual overlaps between conspiracy theory and

eschatology are well documented. Fenster (2008, p. 227) observes that “many popular eschatological texts lean toward right-wing conspiracy theory, particularly in their militaristic patriotism, fears of a one-world government, virulent anticommunism.” For the fundamentalist follower of Q, the vast cosmic battle between the forces of light and dark predicted in eschatological texts is rendered real and present: the end-times are near. “It’s not a theory” stated one Christian QAnon follower (LaFrance, 2020), “it’s the foretelling of things to come.” Here, faith is not just a statement of beliefs but a kind of code through which contemporary events – the Mueller probe, the Oregon protests, the presidential election – are interpreted in real time.

Millenarianism and conspiracy theories both construct a strong sense of friend and enemy. As Wilson (2020, p. 1) notes, the division between “us” and “them” in conspiracy theories parallels the division between the “chosen people” and the “remnant” in millenarianism. The insiders have woken up to the truth and been redeemed; the outsiders have refused this gift and condemned themselves. These themes slot neatly into a broader narrative where the Kingdom of God will be established on earth: the good will be rewarded and evil finally punished. As one Christian political scientist stated, these QAnon themes “resonate with evangelicals, because it feels like part of a narrative we’ve been invested in for most of our lives” (Smith, 2020).

Across the corpus of Q texts, the injunction to “have faith” derives its meaning from this eschatological framing. Having faith in the end times is a matter of waiting. “One step at a time” reassures Q in drop #4037. “It’s only a matter of time” promises Q in drop #3634. Followers are instructed to trust in the broader plan, to have patience even when nothing seems to be happening. Indictments will come, justice will be meted out. Drop #4087, for example, features a text that states “be sure of this: the wicked will not go unpunished.” Drop #3724 expands on this point, stating:

“It must be done right.
 It must be done according to the rule of law.
 It must carry weight.
 It must be proven in the court of law.
 There can be no mistakes.
 Good things sometimes take time.
 Attempts to slow/block the inevitable [Justice] will fail.”

Followers must maintain their faith, holding steadfast to their belief in the face of difficulties. And yet, drawing from its eschatological roots, this is not a restful waiting, but a state of hypervigilance. “Prepare for the storm” states post #3880. “Be ready” cautions post #4006. “The enormity of what is coming will SHOCK THE WORLD. Pray.” advises post #3728. Put on the armor of God so that “when the day of evil comes you may be able to stand,” states the scripture discussed above, instructing disciples to “be alert and always keep praying.” Q’s posts thus cultivate a mode of anxiousness, of alertness, of expectancy. The world stands on a “precipice” and the next event may swiftly tilt into the “biblical” event of judgement and justice that followers eagerly await. Drop #4732 exemplifies this kind of eschatological anticipation, with one follower replying to Q: “I’m not turning a blind-eye, I’m just waiting for justice to arrive! Let it be soon please!”

The injunction to “have faith” thus contributes strategically to maintaining the QAnon conspiracy theory. On the one hand, followers must practice patience, being unwavering in their belief even when the events foretold by Q fail to occur. On the other hand, having faith means watching and waiting. Followers should be open-eyed and ready, attentive to the small clues that signal the start of the Storm. Together, these injunctions urge followers to be patient but also nervous and expectant, holding up permanent paranoia as an inner state to be cultivated.

“Ask Yourself Why”

If faith is one fantasy theme, skepticism is another. Q commands followers to question and be skeptical, to “think” and “ask yourself why.” These phrases often assert the importance of rationality. In Drop #4535, Q states that free thought is “a philosophical viewpoint which holds that positions regarding truth should be formed on the basis of logic, reason, and empiricism, rather than authority, tradition, revelation, or dogma.” Drop #4494 champions “logical thinking.” Drop #4336 speaks of “critical thinking.” And Drop #4312 quotes the definition of common sense as “the basic level of practical knowledge and judgment that we all need to help us live in a reasonable and safe way.”

Of course, whether conspiracy theorists engage in logical thinking and common sense is questionable. One recent study suggested that conspiracy believers have a less developed critical thinking ability (Lantian et al., 2020). And as See (2019, p. 67) notes, the criticality employed by QAnon followers is always highly selective: sources internal to the community are consumed uncritically, while mainstream media sources are carefully dissected “with the goal of confirming pre-existing perceptions.” Rather than engaging in dialogue and remaining open to contradictions, such thinking has been conceptualized as a monological belief system (Goertzel 1994; Miller 2020), with participants selectively pattern-seeking as a way to reinforce their beliefs and speak to themselves. However, the focus here is on taking these phrases at face value and exploring the rhetorical vision they construct.

Placed together, these phrases champion a particular mode of engagement with the world, one predicated on reason and logic. Q followers are not to accept the version of reality handed to them, but instead to question it. Dominant narratives should be interrogated and deconstructed, a strategy that Q models by identifying individuals, zooming in on license plates, locating financial links, tracking down government documents, and highlighting dubious portions of images. This work of screenshotting, searching, and document retrieval, carried out in what Q terms the “Digital Battlefield” (#4509), constitutes a contemporary version of critical thinking. For outsiders of course, this thinking is tragically misguided, a form of apophenia (Steyerl, 2016) that mistakenly finds patterns where none exist. Yet for the Q faithful, these practices make sense of the data, establishing complex connections and suggesting surprising new relationships.

QAnon practices, from posting, to researching, and “baking” crumbs into proofs, work to establish new forms of knowledge. But just as importantly, they work to erode established knowledge, rendering it suspect, unstable, even illusory. By creating “closed universes of mutually reinforcing facts and interpretations,” what is real for many becomes unreal to the QAnon community (Zuckerman, 2020). Whether claims center around climate change or the coronavirus, the aim of the Q follower is the same: to tear down the edifice of epistemological authority by producing their own digital mountain of contradictory knowledge. Based on a common antipathy towards elite institutions and established knowledge, this work knits together the otherwise scattered pockets of the #QArmy, constituting what See (2019, p. 89) calls a “community of hermeneutic practice.” As Procházka and Bloomaert (2020, p. 24) observe, the work of “knowledge activism constitutes the main organizing principle of the Qanon community,” securing its “social cohesion in the face of a great internal diversity.”

Traceybeanz (Diaz, 2018) reiterates this theme of skepticism when explaining her work on Q’s posts, exemplifying a post-truth distrust in authority:

“I researched them ON MY OWN. I did not take anyone else’s research, and in many of my videos I stated that this was all open source information – it was freely available on the web for anyone to find. And this was the beauty of the Q phenomenon. The Socratic Method of asking questions and pointing people to research for THEMSELVES was an amazing thing to behold. It has awoken more people in a short amount of time than I ever dreamed possible.”

Throughout the corpus, the “Socratic Method” does appear repeatedly, albeit as a decidedly more steered version of the ancient technique. Q will often present a fact or figure and then immediately follow it with a question. Indeed, across this corpus, question marks (“?”) occur a remarkable 1700 times. Drop #4672, for example, lists downloads of an item before and after recent protests, then prompts the reader with the query: “Coordinated?” Drop #4673 states “Antifa.com redirect to Biden’s donation page” and questions whether this is “Similar to BLM > DNC?” In one twist on this method, Q will present two seemingly opposed facts and ask followers to explain them. Drop #4651, for example, concludes with: “Events then. Events today. Reconcile.” Rather than serving up the answer discursively, these texts require active work from the reader.

For Q, this is a way to “_ask ‘counter’ questions to initiate ‘thought’ vs repeat [echo] of MSDNC propaganda” (#4509). In the Q imaginary, the public has been force-fed lies from the mainstream media. Questions interrupt this diet, providing a starting point for critical thinking and a route to recovery. These questions undermine the established experts and their established narrative. They contest the “epistemic authority” (Harambam and Aupers, 2015) of individuals and organizations whom others regard as trustworthy and unbiased. After this doubt is triggered, a void opens up – what then is the real explanation? Q’s statements function as “informational cues” (Uscinski et al. 2016) to those predisposed to conspiratorial thinking. These statements do not hand the reader an answer, but neither do they leave a response entirely open ended. Instead, Q’s prompts typically lead the reader to a “logical” if broad conclusion: that operation was a false flag, this group is secretly funded, that news was fake.

One mode of questioning hinges on probability. Drop #4639 asks the reader to look at “Average number of fires 2018, 2019, 2020” and then follows up with the question: “Outside of standard deviation?” This rhetoric invokes statistical likelihood as an objective criterion for determining the truth and guiding a follower’s inquiries. Some events lie within the bell curve of normalcy; others are outliers, unusual, suspicious. One of Q’s favorite catchphrases is “coincidence?” Of course, there are no coincidences within the Q universe, nor within the wider constellation of conspiracy theory that preceded it. “Conspiracy implies a world based on intentionality, from which accident and coincidence have been removed” stresses Barkun (2013, p. 41): “Anything that happens occurs because it has been willed.” This is a logical world where things play out in a logical way. Everything has a reason. Effects can be traced back to causes, and if followers cannot always see the threads linking individuals, institutions, and events, it is because they are not looking hard enough or have been misled by deep state actors.

Skepticism and rationality are often championed through references to the Enlightenment. In drop #4408, Q speaks of the movement as a “new reason-based order instituting the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality”; followers should adopt these ideals by “undertaking to think for oneself, to employ and rely on one’s own intellectual capacities in determining what to believe and how to act.” These references to the Age of Reason suggest a new epoch, a revolution that shrugs off the dogma of religion and embraces the rigor of scientific investigation. Now, longstanding doctrines can be disputed and experts can be challenged. Everything is open to scrutiny, debate, and debunking. In “What is Enlightenment” Kant (1784, p.1) urged his readers to “have the courage to use one’s own understanding.” Across the corpus of posts, Q mirrors this call, urging followers to analyze and uncover for themselves. “Read and discern for yourself” Q urges in drop #3912. “Think for yourself” commands drop #3964. “Research for yourself” asserts drop #4734. “Knowledge is power. Take ownership of yourself” states #4503. “Ask yourself, why?” prods drop #3582. Fed up with the de-facto explanations handed out by others, the enlightened figure dares to take the plunge, diving into the hard truths that lie under the surface of reality.

There is a parallel here to the radical right motif of being red-pilled, a concept deriving from *The Matrix* in which the protagonist is asked to choose between swallowing one pill and forgetting everything, or swallowing the red pill and seeing how “deep the rabbit hole goes” (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1998). In the rhetoric of the radical right, this is not a pleasant experience, but it is a necessary one. Within these communities, the red pill figure is the enlightened figure, one who has opened their eyes to the manicured reality presented by the powers-that-be and seen things as they really are (Evans, 2019; Munn,

2019). In drop #4550, Q states that “You are being presented with the gift of vision. Ability to see [clearly] what they’ve hid from you for so long [illumination].” From the alt-right to the newer formations of QAnon, then, the concept is remarkably similar: the “sheeple” (portmanteau of sheep and people) have their comfortable lies, while “we” know the harsh truths. In this imaginary, the Q follower escapes the darkness of ignorance and steps into the light.

Q’s Blend

Q’s injunctions to “have faith” and “think for yourself” bring together a unique blend of faith and skepticism. On the one hand, there is a prominent fantasy theme of rationality, empiricism, critical thinking, and logical proofs. “Knowledge is power,” states drop #3662, “Think for yourself. Trust yourself. Do due diligence.” These slogans distance themselves from any belief in divine sovereignty and gesture to contemporary ideals of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The neoliberal self must trust herself, managing her own life and finding her own truths (Gershon, 2011). On the other hand, there is a strong fantasy theme of faith, justice, judgement, warfare, and Christian rhetoric running through Q’s posts. The faithful must trust in God, maintaining their beliefs and awaiting the coming of justice. This theme evokes a kind of quasi-religious assembly, the children of light who must band together against the forces of darkness.

For the reader scrolling through Q’s posts, these themes appear directly alongside each other. Eschatology and the Enlightenment are interwoven. While QAnon’s novelty and the gap in academic research make any discussion speculative, one byproduct of this blend seems to be a strong community. Neoliberal invocations of the self are augmented with the overarching purpose and unified front of the religious right. Individuals are bound together into a moral community (Graham and Haidt, 2010) founded on the tropes of justice and warfare. These cosmic mythologies establish a tight-knit “we” and bless their work as important and urgent. Q followers are faithful patriots, an assembly of good citizens struggling against evil forces. “United We Stand” proclaims one Q slogan. “Where We Go One, We Go All” declares another. Q regularly showcases video greetings from Q followers around the world, from Ghana to the UK and Iran (#3935, #3938, #4051). Each Q follower may have to investigate the truth for themselves, but these “independent researchers” are all carrying this task together, posting proofs back into the QAnon “hivemind” that are then discussed and built upon (Zuckerman, 2019). These practices collectively construct a shared reality and tie individuals into the #Qarmy.

QAnon’s unique blend of narratives produces a compelling rhetorical vision, one not adequately captured by defining it as a religion (Argentino, 2020b) or dismissing it as a cult (Stanley-Becker, 2018). Of course, QAnon is certainly not unprecedented; there are some clear historical connections to note. For Lavin (2020), QAnon’s obsession with blood, ritual, and sacrifice are updates of antisemitic blood libel conspiracy theories (Rose, 2015) and the more recent “satanic panic” of the 1980s. For Goodwin (2020), Q feels like an extrapolation of the New Christian Right, with its hyperpatriotism and conflation of progressive values with sexual deviancy. But these religious predecessors don’t pull together all the puzzle pieces that QAnon does. QAnon borrows liberally to construct its powerful fantasy, drawing together the paranoid style with post-truth elements and combining enlightenment ideals with knowledge-construction practices enabled by networked media.

These knowledge practices of QAnoners are highly participatory. In that regard, they exemplify what cultural studies scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) termed participatory media culture. The new affordances of digital media allow individuals to come together as networked publics (boyd 2010) and generate their own media. Participatory media delighted in the fact that media was no longer dictated by a handful of gatekeepers; individuals could now create media forms that were meaningful to them. For Jenkins, this development was clearly liberating, allowing people to move from being passive consumers of media to active producers. Yet as Marwick and Partin (2022 forthcoming) note, QAnon culture brings into question this relentlessly positive, normative concept of participation. Participative media culture can be a powerful motor for coalescing publics and generating new epistemic claims — but those “truths”

can also be toxic, contributing (as QAnon has done) to antisemitic sentiment and incitements to violence.

QAnon's ability to incorporate all these elements is not just due to its role as "big tent" conspiracy theory (Roose, 2020), but stems more precisely from Q's writings. Q weaves together faith and paranoia, spirituality and secular humanism into a seamless story. Habermas (2010) asked what is missing in our post-secular age and suggested it might lie in a new marriage of faith and reason; QAnon steps precisely into this gap. Granted, the "cross-fertilization of more 'secular' anti-government and apocalyptic conspiracy theories with more 'religious' ones" has been underway for at least three decades (Stroop, 2020). Yet the scale and success of this blend marks QAnon as new in degree, if not in kind. This is a story that applies powerful religious concepts like righteousness, justice, and evil to present-day political figures and events. This is a story told through the video grabs, GPS coordinates, and Twitter threads of Q. And this is a story remixed and retold through the growing community of independent QAnon researchers, who step others through their "logical thinking" with the use of screenshots, maps, and timestamps. Both the story itself, and the mechanisms of storytelling, then, stitch together a hybrid formation. This is a persuasive rhetorical vision that powerfully shapes a community's understanding of reality. Judging by the growing social and political influence of QAnon, this synthesis has proven coherent and compelling.

These insights into the persuasive power of QAnon resonate with stories by former followers. Echoing the theme of faith, one ex-QAnoner stated that a fundamentalist Christian upbringing primed him to accept conspiracy thinking. "Theories about evil evolution, science denial and the End of the world rapture return of Christ stuff is all pretty crazy too," he stated, "there's a strong link between the two" (Diceblue, 2021). The same ex-follower also echoed the theme of skepticism and rationality. "Conspiracy thinking hooks the brain because it feels like critical thinking," he stressed, people "gain a massive ego boost in thinking they have a secret that the sheeple don't know" (Diceblue, 2021). Another ex-QAnoner explained that the command to do your own research "works to reinforce conspiracy theories while making people think they're coming to conclusion on their own, thanks to the way search engines and social media algorithms work" (Reneau, 2021). Rather than being told what to believe, individuals are told to search for themselves – a far more powerful proposition that sees them inevitably finding media to support their view. These testimonies gesture to the persuasive power of QAnon's narrative-blend and its ability to mobilize individuals.

Conclusion

This article has examined the QAnon movement through the texts of its central figure: Q. One year of Q posts were analyzed, highlighting two fantasy themes in the QAnon canon. Faith is one, scripture and spiritual language gesturing to an apocalyptic battle in the present between the children of light and the children of darkness. Skepticism is another, a stress on the enlightened individual who employs critical thinking and draws her own fact-based claims. These twin themes come together to form a rhetorical vision grounded in powerful religious narratives and a tight-knit community but also premised on post-truth ideals of questioning dogma and forging your own truth through online knowledge construction practices.

This narrative blend offers one starting point for those seeking to understand QAnon and the powerful pull it exerts on followers. Of course, this study is an early and inherently limited intervention. More research is needed to investigate how Q's texts are adapted by followers, morphing as they encounter distinct subcultures. Other work might adopt a temporal lens, examining how Q's narrative has shifted over the last several years. Indeed, as a field of research, QAnon is vast, chaotic, and always changing. This rapid evolution challenges the researcher to keep pace, acknowledging her limits while still striving to conduct critical research that provides depth and insight.

"The Great Awakening is not a conspiracy theory or a cult," state the authors (Anons, 2018, p. 6) in their introduction to QAnon, "it is a sophisticated and coordinated information operation from within

President Trump’s administration to enlighten the public about the true state of affairs of the nation and the world.” While countering this dangerous movement is key, the first step is to understand how statements like this make sense at psychological, social, and cultural levels – how these powerful fantasies come to be internalized, endorsed, and propagated. Engaging with its texts and unpacking its themes provides one starting point for grasping the logics that drive this movement and mobilize its followers.

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