CHAPTER 9

"TRUTH Always Wins"
Dispatches from the Information War

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Abstract

At our best, librarians are the medics of information warfare, rescuing and sustaining the truth without regard for ideological loyalty. Given the political polarization of the current information climate, how are we answering that call? Part ethnography, part media critique, and part confessional tale, this chapter reflects on information ethics in the context of the contemporary information environment through an examination of the QAnon Storm conspiracy phenomenon. The composition features three interwoven strands presenting three levels of analysis: an interpretive ethnography of the conspiracy, a critical discourse analysis and critique of contemporary news media, and a confessional tale reflecting on the allure of conspiracies, intellectual taboos, cognitive biases, epistemic choice making, intellectual humility, and the elusiveness of truth.

Building the Army

Figure 9.1
Q post to 8chan board referencing the Nunes memo and information warfare strategy, January 19, 2018.

Q !UWyye1fxo No.44 Jan 19 2018 16:53:00 (EST)

Why are we here?
Why are we providing crumbs?
Think MEMO.
BUILDING THE ARMY.
Not convinced this is spreading?
You, the PEOPLE, have THE POWER.
You, the PEOPLE, just forgot how to PLAY.
TOGETHER you are STRONG.
APART you are weak.
THEY WANT YOU DIVIDED.
THEY WANT RACE WARS.
THEY WANT CLASS WARS.
THEY WANT RELIGIOUS WARS.
THEY WANT POLITICAL WARS.
THEY WANT YOU DIVIDED!
LEARN!
FOR GOD & COUNTRY - LEARN!
STAY STRONG.
STAY TOGETHER.
FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT.
This is more important than you can imagine.
Q

The posts come rapid fire, tumbling from the bottom of the thread like Alice down the rabbit hole. In one conversation, anons criticize mainstream media's selective editorializing; in another, friendly banter about history's top conspiracies gives way to mocking condemnation of a flat-earth post, the contributor accused of shilling. They update each other on the status of congressional oversight committees, identify new targets for research digs, and review and critique each other's memes. My browser freezes, rendering new posts in sudden burps; the cooling fan in my eight-year-old laptop churns noisily as the outdated system strains under the weight of too many browser tabs. The effect is one of eavesdropping on multiple conversations in a crowded, echoing gymnasium.

The drop lands unceremoniously in the midst of the thread—a new Q post: "Make the Fake News Awards your 1st organized tweet storm day."[1]

Veterans of the Great Meme War rally to the charge dubbed Operation Crystal Clear,[2] establishing dedicated threads for tactical planning and a counterinformation armory to stockpile memes. Discussion shifts into war room mode. Anons create throwaway social media accounts as fallbacks and coalesce on a messaging strategy "to include crumbs that can be verified independently" and "assemble all of the publicly available research to connect the dots."[3] They recycle successful posts from a prior #medialiesagain campaign and hold tactical briefings with lessons learned from past victories: select a common hashtag,[4] curate text and image content, coordinate timing and volume of posts, plan the strategic deployment of original content. Anticipating censorship by automated social media filters and hands-on content engineers, anons prepare a multiphased attack with secondary hashtags and backup strategies to co-opt the organically trending topic of the day.

Down in the nethernet, on servers so shady even the indexing spiders don't crawl them, the image and message boards of the deep web hum with activity. The subconscious of the hivemind, posting boards like 4chan and 8chan are infamous as sites with little to no content moderation and where essentially anything goes. Synonymous with Anonymous, hacktivism, doxxing, trolling, and memes, the chans have a reputation for chaos—and that's precisely how they like it.[5] But just as the human subconscious is associated with our dual propensity for depravity as well as creativity, the chans have an unsung valiant streak.[6] In some fora, the anons dig for diamonds in the rough, ideas that are promising but formless, and use open access information to accumulate associated facts and analysis, excising the chaff and hammering the hypothesis into shape. Sometimes the thread leads nowhere, a dead end, and is abandoned. Sometimes the data points are partnered, the threads weave a warp and weft of names and dates and events, and a pattern emerges that was previously invisible, hidden in plain sight.[7]

It is precisely these conditions Cass Sunstein had in mind when he and Adrian Vermeule wrote about online conspiracy theories and what the government's role with respect to these communities should be.[8] In their analysis, those who engage in conspiracist ideation suffer from crippled epistemologies—conspiracy

theorists are informationally isolated, cut off from reliable accepted sources of truth, and, left to their own devices, are prone to concocting alternate explanatory realities by chaining together an incomplete set of facts in a faulty series of associations, causes, and effects.[9] Conspiracy theorists pose a danger to themselves and others when those ideas migrate from their digital margins into social and broadcast media, thereby polluting public discourse.[10] In Sunstein and Vermeule's view, open democratic societies buttressed by a free and independent press are antithetical to the conditions that harbor conspiracies; therefore, conspiracy theories about such societies must be false on their face, warranting no further consideration.[11]

There's just one problem. Sunstein and Vermeule are wrong.[12]

Participants in the QAnon Storm conspiracy community engage with a broad range of information sources, using sophisticated techniques to synthesize and communicate their findings. In any given thread one can find links to stories from multiple establishment newspapers of record, clips from broadcast and cable news, SEC filings and public records of financial transactions, government reports, statutes and regulations, patents, academic papers, live hearings, interviews and expert witness testimonies, indictments and other court filings, sacred texts and esoterica—just to name a few.[13] Pursuant to the themes of the conspiracy, anons collaboratively maintain a deep time line of political intrigue, compile lists of newsworthy resignations in the public and private sectors, follow law enforcement actions to thwart human trafficking, track the purchase and sale of stock by executives at major corporations, and count sealed federal indictments.[14] Diggers take deep dives into the public record to report back biographical and historical findings of note, some draw network maps and time lines of associations between entities and events of interest, anons with coding skills develop post aggregators and searchable dashboards,[15] and those with talent in digital artistry design images and iconography for memes.[16] Claims posted without supporting information are flagged as opinions or met with demands for "sauce," wordplay for source.[17]

Anons also debate the quality of sources referenced and validity of interpretations proposed; posts are excluded or removed from the notables archive when deemed deficient in supporting evidence or logic. They review, critique, build upon, and promote each other's contributions, insisting upon evidence-based debate. They assess the authenticity of posts from Q, utilizing the sole identity authentication mechanism baked into the chan source code—a unique, hash-generated tripcode that serves to collect and attribute posts to a single, yet anonymous, author.[18] Anons maintain a record of Q's trips and alert each other of spoof attempts. The bakers steward this content, beginning each thread with a running list of Q posts and notable submissions, links to dedicated research threads, tactics for social media campaigns, and a library of freely accessible online research tools.

The anons have established a virtual community of practice around shared information behaviors, standards, and values, encompassing a research library, an

identity management mechanism, and a format for publishing findings utilizing open source tools, open access information, and uncompensated crowdsourced research labor. What makes them conspiracy theorists is not their crippled epistemologies, but their differential hermeneutics.

Conspiracy theories emerge from the interplay between two key ingredients: secrecy and power—the same two ingredients that comprise the modern bureaucratic state.[19] Since the crystallization of covert intelligence operations in the United States during and after World War II, the size and scope of the bureaucracy of secrecy have ballooned and burrowed into nearly every dynamic of daily life.[20] Steeped as we are in this ubiquitous, anonymous bureaucracy, the seemingly supernatural forces of secrecy and power infuse our lived experiences; we exist in a state of suspended disbelief regarding the inverse relationship between privacy—our exercise of personal secrecy—and state power.

Sunstein and Vermeule's solution—that the government engage in "cognitive infiltration" to seed counterintelligence into conspiracy communities—accomplishes little except enlarging the system of secrecy and power that provides such fertile grounds for conspiracist ideation.[21] Such a proposal could only backfire.

Perhaps it already has.
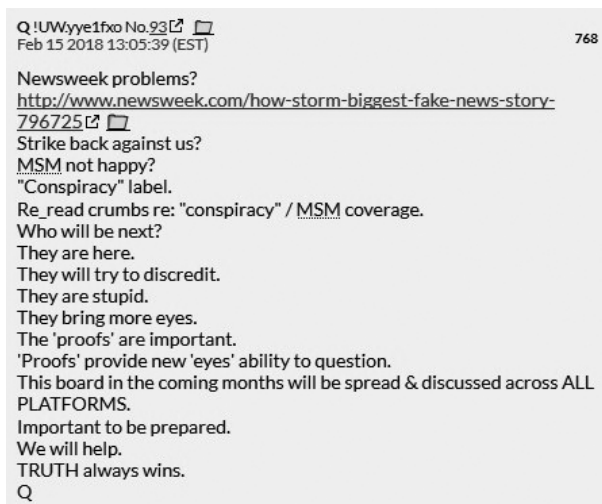
"Conspiracy" Label

Figure 9.2
Q post to 8chan board addressing media coverage of the conspiracy and referencing the January 18, 2018 raid of *Newsweek*'s offices by the Manhattan district attorney, February 15, 2018.

Many in media, the academy, and government rationalize the 2016 US presidential election upset as the result of manipulation by Russian bots, whether social media puppets or networks of automated accounts creating an artifice of social discontent. The Russian disinformation front Internet Research Agency, LLC, is said to have influenced the outcome of a $1.5 billion election—in which the losing candidate outspent the

winner two-to-one and received support from a registered online influence campaign—with a budget "equivalent [to] millions of US dollars" and a social media influence operations staff of "hundreds."[22]

These are the Russian bots that Representative Adam Schiff finds so concerning. In media interviews following the election, Schiff frequently attributed pro-Trump online speech to the machinations of foreign operatives. During Congressional hearings, he pressed industry executives from technology and social media on what actions were being taken to identify and quash content from purportedly fake accounts.[23] Schiff's fears reached fever pitch in January 2018, when Republicans on the House Select Committee on Intelligence prepared to release a four-page memo summarizing their allegations of FISA surveillance abuses; meanwhile, online, a keyboard army of thousands of Trump supporters and nonpartisan truth seekers executed a coordinated memetic operation to get #ReleaseTheMemo trending on social media.

The effect was so huge that political opponents had no choice but to attribute it to Russian bots, or "willing human bot[s]."[24] One article went so far as to claim that "there is little chance an organic or incidental community, even of friends or acquaintances, would look this way online so holistically, tweeting together in such tight intervals"—although that is exactly the kind of "computational propaganda" campaign the conspiracy community planned.[25] Mainstream media outlets, the Hamilton68 social media monitoring project, and California Democrats Adam Schiff and Dianne Feinstein declared #ReleaseTheMemo to be evidence of ongoing Russian interference with American political institutions.[26] A national affairs analyst on MSNBC went so far as to imply that Republican Representative Devin Nunes was himself compromised by the Russians.[27]

Paranoia about Russian bots and fake news has fueled debates among policymakers about what government and industry can do to combat online propaganda. This anxiety persists despite Twitter's testimony to the Senate Select Intelligence Committee that such content accounted for, in its analysis, "one-hundredth of a percent of the total Twitter count," with "one-third of one percent" emanating from "linked automated accounts";[28] despite academic analysis that conservatively estimates that the average US adult saw "one or perhaps several [fake news] articles" resulting in a potential influence of 0.02 percentage points—"much smaller than [the winner's] margin of victory in the pivotal states on which the outcome depended";[29] and despite further empirical findings that authentic human operators are more responsible for the speed, depth, and breadth at which fake news propagates online than bots.[30] An exchange between Representative Mike Quigley and Twitter general counsel Sean Edgett characterizes these discussions, as Edgett assures Quigley that a popular tweet containing content from the alternative news platform InfoWars was replaced with a *USA Today* article. Edgett explains that the system "self-corrected" with automated mechanisms designed to "balance free speech with making the information you see …accurate information and reporting."[31] Representative Chris Stewart follows up on this exchange, noting:

> We all recognize that fake news is in the eye of the behold-
> er many times. There are some things that are reported
> that are demonstrably untrue. But the vast majority of it is
> some spectrum of opinion and reality. I'll use Mr. Quigley's
> example. He said, as I best recall, "Imam warns DeBlasio
> [about impending terrorist attack], he ignored it because
> he was too busy criticizing Trump." Whether he was too
> busy criticizing Trump is a matter of opinion. To my friend
> Mr. Quigley, I don't mean this as a criticism, that's fake
> news. Someone else would read that and find legitimate
> critique in there. How in the world do you intend to identify
> fake news without weaponizing this in the political realm?[32]

Mainstream coverage surrounding conservative allegations of social media censorship is often skeptical, depicting the concerns as paranoid; or smug, concluding that banning techniques are valid and deserved given the private companies' terms of service agreements.[33] Alternative media provide a very different picture. The muckraking provocateurs at Project Veritas released undercover videos of social media employees and news media professionals candidly discussing their companies' anti-conservative, anti-Republican, anti-Americana, and anti-Trump editorial policies and tactics.[34] At the Conservative Political Action Conference in February 2018, a panel of right-leaning media, technology, and legal personalities discussed social media censorship.[35] Within a month of Mueller's indictment of the Internet Research Agency, Twitter and other social media companies responded by purging accounts they claimed to be bots. However, the dragnet nature of the system cleanup ensnared many legitimate human users—and disproportionately affected conservative-leaning accounts.[36] The black-box Hamilton68 project, whose mission is to track Russian influence online, declared that Twitter handles decrying the #twitterlockout and #twitterpurge were themselves Russian bots. Such online censorship techniques deployed by private social media companies independent of government efforts are supported by a majority of Democratic-leaning respondents, as well as nearly half of conservatives.[37]

Soon after widespread media reports that the #ReleaseTheMemo tweetstorm represented another successful Russian bot influence campaign, internal analysis from Twitter revealed the more likely scenario: that Americans themselves were taking to the social media platform to demand more transparency from their federal government.[38] The justification of internet censorship informed by unsourced attributions of online activity to foreign agents thus warrants heightened scrutiny.[39] Understood historically, discrediting counter-hegemonic speech as influenced by geopolitical enemies is a tactic brought forward from the Cold War–era intelligence operations playbook. In 1967, foreign media carried out a CIA directive to vilify Warren Commission skeptics as Soviet propagandists—and this is the origin story for our modern usage of the term *conspiracy theorist*.[40]

Russian Bots

> ▶ Q !UW.yye1fxo 01/19/18 (Fri) 22:26:08 No.45
>
> Counter-narrative went out @ 4am to MSM contractors [like clockwork].
> Russian bots.
> These people are REALLY REALLY STUPID.
> Desperation.
> Fear.
> When does a bird sing?
> NOBODY is safe.
> NO DEALS.
> MSM contractors #Goodbye#
> Fight, Fight, Fight.
> Q

Figure 9.3
Q post to 8chan board alleging mainstream media contractors are coordinating to disseminate a narrative attributing online support of the Nunes memo to Russian bots, January 19, 2018.

Adam Schiff just called me a Russian bot.[41]

Well, not literally, since I don't have a social media account and therefore didn't participate in the coordinated #ReleaseTheMemo tweetstorm.

But I was there.

I witnessed Q's call to meme.

I witnessed the tactical briefings in which the community selected their hashtags; identified target audiences; designed, editorialized, and shared their memes; coordinated their opposition; and dodged social media censorship with moves and countermoves.

At the time, I was searching upstream from the alternative news outlet where I first learned about Q toward the primary field of action in 8chan. I lurked on the most active subreddit community, CBTS_Stream, and dropped in on their YouTube livestreams. The subreddit could provide the most persistent surface web record of the community's activity, were it not for the fact that Reddit banned and deleted it without warning for an alleged, and publicly unverifiable, violation of its content policy.[42]

Among librarians, it is becoming as acceptable to promote censorship as it is to question it. In November 2017, I participated in an event featuring librarians, journalists, fact checkers, and media scholars responding to the phenomenon of fake news.[43] The presenter before me proudly shared an anecdote of her effort to remove an ad for the Russian state-subsidized news channel, RT (formerly Russia Today), from a bus stop shelter near her campus. She described emailing the transit authority to plead her case that the ad, benefitting from such high exposure to a collegiate audience, was making her job of teaching students to be discerning media consumers more difficult. The transit authority responded by saying that

the ad did not violate its existing content policies; but, she concluded, it was soon removed.

In my talk, I made the case that librarians should approach the disruption in the current media industry with the wisdom of a broader historical perspective, drawing specifically on the twentieth-century innovations of yellow journalism, muckraking, gonzo, and new journalism.[44] Considering the controversies surrounding the emergence of these genres, their impact on the news reportage of their times, and the influence they had on social and political reforms throughout the twentieth century, might there be a downside to censoring or otherwise quashing the emergent and controversial media outlets of the digital era? I received a single positive response to this proposal from a librarian who confided in me their closeted status—as a conservative in an unabashedly liberal profession: "You just redpilled all these ppl."[45]

All for a LARP?

Figure 9.4
Q post to 8chan board containing a sample of mainstream media articles about the conspiracy community, and rhetorically questioning the media's interest in the conspiracy, May 14, 2018.

Members of the Q research community are acutely aware of and embrace their status as conspiracy theorists. Included among the many subjects they investigate and monitor in the news are commentaries on the community itself. In mid-April 2018, an anon self-identifying as a "Navy vet lurker" posted a chronological list of nine recent stories covering the QAnon conspiracy in a variety of outlets, ranging from newspapers of record (*New York Times, Washington Post*), local papers (*Telluride Daily Planet*), news magazines (*National Review*), born-digital media (*The Outline, Daily Beast*; *The Daily Dot* appears twice), and partisan organizations (*Right Wing Watch* appears twice). In mid-May, Q posted a similar "sample" of eighteen stories, as seen in figure 9.4:

Coordinated?

All For A LARP?

[ATTACKS WILL ONLY INTENSIFY]

Ask yourself, WHY?[46]

A close reading of the coverage reveals what these commentators find note-worthy about the conspiracy, how they choose to frame those observations, and, from an insider perspective, what they choose to omit. The discourse aligns close-ly with that of the *New York Times's* treatment of conspiracy theories dating back to the fateful 1967 directive from the CIA.[47] Lance deHaven-Smith identified the most frequent pejoratives used by the *Times* in its coverage of counternarratives, beginning with Warren Commission skeptics in 1967 through 2011. Character-izations of the Storm conspiracy community deploy similar discursive strategies to disparage adherents and discourage curious onlookers, as seen in table 9.1.

Table 9.1
A discourse analysis of QAnon storm conspiracy coverage in news media applying deHaven-Smith's list of pejoratives used in *New York Times* stories about conspiracy theories from 1968-2011.

deHaven-Smith's list of most frequently occurring pejoratives used in NY Times stories mentioning conspiracy theories, 1968–2011a	Excerpts from QAnon storm conspiracy coverage circulated within the virtual community, 2017–18
crackpot, crazy, far-fetched, insane, obsession, psychotic, unhinged, wild	"absolutely insane"; "barking mad"; "bogus"; "bonkers"; "collective mental gymnastics"; "complex and convoluted"; "confirmation bias, proportionality bias, and projection"; "convoluted"; "countless logical leaps"; "dream of power"; "drunk on a sick culture"; "fantasy narrative"; "fantasy world"; "fever dream"; "feverish"; "hodgepodge"; "insanely detailed, totally bogus"; "magical thinking"; "Make sense? Of course not"; "mob mentality"; "nonsense"; "nutty"; "obsessions"; "political derangement"; "pure, raw delusion"; requiring "a bottle of Aspirin in hand"; "ridiculous"; "ugly dreams"; "uncanny"; "[un]deserving of any analysis whatsoever"; "unhinged"; "wild fantasy"; "wild"; "wishful thinking"

deHaven-Smith's list of most frequently occurring pejoratives used in NY Times stories mentioning conspiracy theories, 1968–2011a	Excerpts from QAnon storm conspiracy coverage circulated within the virtual community, 2017–18
cult	"as if it's god himself coming to speak to them"; "cult leader's best trick"; "failed prophecy"; "New Age"; "prophesies"; "scam"; "snake oil"; "stop drinking the kool-aid"
disease	"disgust"; "grimiest"; "incredibly vile"; "nastiest"
freak, fringe	"creepy"; "fringe"; "strange"; trolls
paranoid	"doomsayer"; "paranoid"
despicable	"terrible"; "upsetting"
bigot, extreme	antisemitic; bigots; "hate, bigotry and lies"; "internet hate group"; misogynist ("people who believe women shouldn't have basic human rights"); "nazi-sympathizing, jew hating"; "Neo-Nazis"; "perceived marginalization"; white supremacist
Radical (1968); Left-wing (1975); extreme, Right-wing (1995)	"alt-right"; "Cold War-era"; "Conservatives on the Internet"; "far right"; "John Birch Society"; "right-leaning"; "right-wing"; Rush Limbaugh; Sean Hannity; talk radio
birther	"birtherism"; Jerome Corsi
truther	Alex Jones, Infowars; truthers
a. deHaven-Smith searched the New York Times archives back to 1875; the first coverage of conspiracy theories appears in 1968. Lance deHaven-Smith, Conspiracy Theory in America (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 128–29.	

Extending deHaven-Smith's analysis are five additional rhetorical categories detailing the conspiracy's entertainment value and underpinning information warfare tactics, as well as its adherents' presumed lack of intelligence, low social status, and threat potential, as seen in table 9.2.

Table 9.2
Additional rhetorical categories from news media coverage of conspiracy theories extending deHaven-Smith's framework.

Rhetorical categories added through close reading of QAnon Storm conspiracy coverage	Excerpts from QAnon Storm conspiracy coverage circulated within the virtual community, 2017–18
Conspiracy as entertainment	"audience-participant narrative game"; "fabulist"; "fictional"; "follow the white rabbit"; "genre"; "immersive entertainment, like a role-playing game"; "immersive role-playing game"; "looking-glass world"; "mythology"; "performs several literary tasks"; "rabbit hole"; "spy novel"; "the Matrix is, shockingly, still cool"
Intelligence of conspiracy theorists	"gibberish"; "ignoramuses"; "ignorant"; "Q is like Socrates, or someone who doesn't have enough information to make statements"; "rage of the dumb flock, the poor, the lazy, the entitled Have Not's"; "slow-witted readers"; "suckers"; "wibblings"
Social status of conspiracy theorists	"coping mechanism for people who can't accept a world where Trump isn't winning"; "desperate"; "legions"; "lost souls"; "lowly geeks"; "minions"; "nerds"; "troll-y"
Threat potential of conspiracy theorists	Dangerous (suggests the conspiracy is cultivating another Edgar Welch PizzaGate-style vigilante; "mutated, bastard offspring of the discredited Pizzagate conspiracy theory"; "remember Pizzagate, the too-crazy-not-to-be-true conspiracy theory that started on the Internet but ended with a man shooting up a pizza parlor with an AR-15?"); "online outrage"; "rage-fueled"; "revenge fantasy"; "violent"
Information warfare tactics	disinformation; psyop

Another interesting aspect of these pieces is their internal linking and de-
rivative reporting; a co-citation analysis indicates they rely heavily on the inter-
pretation of early coverage of the conspiracy, with sparse evidence of original
investigation or reporting, as depicted in figure 9.5.[48] Only Paris Martineau, the
Opposition sketch, and *Right Wing Watch*'s Jared Holt directly reference primary
source material in the chans; the rest rely solely on secondary sources to inform
their criticism. As one anon observed, "Obvious non mention of 8chan is obvi-
ous."[49] Participants attribute commentators' failure to navigate upstream from
surface web accounts of the conspiracy to direct observation of activities in the
chans to a number of factors, including incompetence or digital illiteracy, jour-
nalistic laziness, bias by omission or willful misrepresentation, plagiarism or un-
willingness to credit the investigative work of the community, editorial narrative
framing or adherence to agreed-upon talking points, efforts to detour web traffic
away from the chans, and an overriding interest in the production of clickbait
irrespective of the truth. (Furthermore, given the alarmism regarding circula-
tion of fake news on Twitter, it is striking how much these writers rely on that
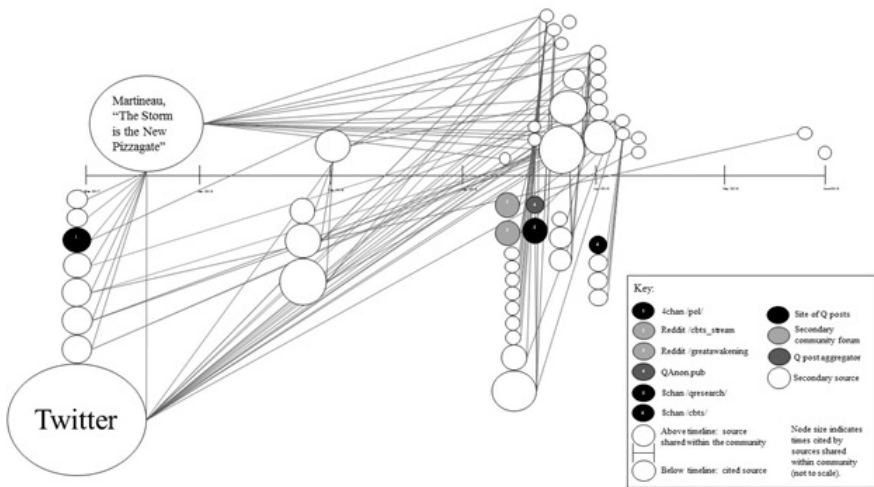platform as an information source.)

Figure 9.5
Citation network of sources about the QAnon conspiracy shared within
the community. Disconnected nodes do not directly reference or link to
supporting sources.

The unignorable prevalence of the letter Q at a Republican political rally in
Tampa, Florida on July 31 inspired a new maelstrom of mainstream commen-
tary that fretted over the conspiracy's migration from virtual to reality: a small

Washington, DC demonstration of Q adherents that occurred in April with no meaningful media coverage; an armed veteran who blocked traffic on the Hoover Dam for ninety minutes in June; references to the lawyer for adult entertainer Stephanie Clifford (DBA Stormy Daniels), around whom left-leaning pundits have composed salacious conspiracy theories of their own; a California arsonist and a would-be presidential assassin referencing the conspiracy on social media.[50] (While I don't mean to diminish the damage caused or potentiated by these fringe behaviors, such fear-mongering reads as just another iteration of media panic that historically attributed the downfall of society to dime novels, the telephone, pop music, and video games—taken to extremes, these and other sociocultural innovations are indeed pathological, but we also find a place for them in mainstream pedagogy.)[51] Online outlets herald censorship of conspiracy-related virtual communities on YouTube and Reddit but remain naïve to the Streisand Effect their own publications have caused.[52]

Reading these pieces together raises a further question: if it is the case that this is just some fringe far-right political fantasy, attention to which will result only in harm to society, then why publish stories about it, including in some of the nation's legacy papers of record?

What makes it newsworthy?

Do You Trust the MSM?

Q !UW.yye1fxo No.457 ☐
Mar 4 2018 01:46:40 (EST)

Do you trust the MSM?
Do you trust Facebook?
Do you trust Google?
Do you trust Youtube?
Do you trust Twitter?
Narrative.
Censorship.
Do not blindly believe.
FAKE.
They want you DIVIDED.
TOGETHER, YOU ARE STRONG.
APART, YOU ARE WEAK.
ORGANIZE.
CHALLENGE.
FIGHT.
DO YOU THINK ANTIFA WAS GROWN ORGANICALLY?
Purpose?
Watch the news this week.
Q

Figure 9.6
Q post to 8chan board rhetorically inquiring about community members' trust in the mainstream media and social media platforms as news sources, March 4, 2018.

Information, like other mind-altering substances, can be addicting.

With nothing more than the Socratic method, Q marshalled millions to participate in a massive-scale distributed civic research project that they later referred to as "the highest level of intel to ever be dropped publicly in the his-

tory of the world."[53] Whether such hyperbole turns out to be true is the prerogative of the future. With Q's prodding, the anons have collectively researched and documented a sprawling web of people, places, and events on interconnected themes ranging from international corruption schemes to human trafficking, composing open source proofs. I watched as they organized a Resources Library of free research tools featuring familiar sites like OpenSecrets.org for delving into campaign finance disclosures, the SEC's EDGAR database and Hoovers.com for researching corporate structures and activities, the Global Incident Map for monitoring natural and manmade disasters, and even the Library of Congress for access to back issues of the *Federal Register.* They organized a sequential series of general discussion threads and opened dedicated topical research boards as the need arose, developed a reproducible method for nominating and selecting notable posts to be archived, peer-reviewed and built upon each other's investigations, and shared online sites for validating and communicating their findings, including reverse image lookups, mapping tools, and data visualization sites. The curiosity alone is contagious. After a full day in the library and second shift at home, I'd find myself scrolling through lists of notable posts, link-surfing backward through the discussions, spawning browser tabs and cross-referencing fact claims until either the laptop crashed or I did. I distinctly remember thinking, *damn, I wish I could motivate my students to work this hard on their academic research. What am I missing?*

The community is united by a steadfast commitment to intellectual freedom, expressed as the ability to question, investigate, and communicate anything that is not legally prohibited speech. Each participant is expected to adjudicate the evidence, logic, validity, and significance of each claim for herself. While a Cult of Q (and Trump) certainly exists, not all participants are adherents; skepticism is common, and any given batch of notable posts will include views from Q agnostics and even detractors. Indeed, as the community accustomed to working in deep web obscurity was suddenly thrust into the media spotlight, forcing public figures to declare their (typically dismissive) views on Q, activity in the chans continues unabated, with many adopting the stance that Q's identity (or identities) are ultimately irrelevant—it's the information they're collectively uncovering that matters.

As their attention panned between media coverage of world affairs to media coverage of the conspiracy itself, anons found that it is one thing to be lied *to,* and another thing entirely to be lied *about.* The other tie that binds, and which has not yet wound its way into mainstream media analysis, is a nearly universal distrust of corporate news. On this the anons are more normative than they might otherwise seem. Public polling data reveals a resurgence of the credibility gap that characterized the dynamic between government policy, journalism,

and public perception in the 1960s and 1970s.[54] Strong majorities across the political spectrum view the media as biased. (Perhaps this is one thing we can all agree on.)[55] On the other hand, more Republicans than Democrats view the national news as partisan, untrustworthy, and ineffective at informing the public—gaps that trend wider from 2016 to 2017.[56] Post-election mea culpas atone for the "urban," "coastal," "liberal" "groupthink" that blinded the punditry to alternate electoral possibilities,[57] and analyses bemoan the loss of local papers that once served as "validators for national political coverage by reporters thousands of miles away"[58]—but distrust in media cannot be pegged entirely on coverage of the 2016 election, as a 2015 Gallup poll found Americans reporting their lowest level of trust in national media since the organization began measuring the trend in 1997.[59]

Commentary on those 2015 poll results suggests the media's turn to journalism-as-activism itself is responsible, as reporters "liberated" "from the chore of describing events" can spend more time telling viewers "what those events mean"—an interpretive task that used to be the prerogative of citizens themselves.[60] In fact, Americans denounce editorializing in addition to factual errors, with 42 percent of respondents believing that media publish fake news stories to advance an agenda.[61] The same 2018 Monmouth poll found that 83 percent of those surveyed think that outside agents plant fake news stories in the mainstream media, down only a few points from the 86 percent who believe this happens in born-digital outlets and 87 percent who believe the same happens on social media.

That media commentators highlight the most extreme claims of the conspiracy theory while conspicuously ignoring their own headlining role is detectable only from the inside; it's analogous to reporting on the often-toxic comment threads festering under mainstream news articles rather than on the content of the articles themselves. From day one of the Storm conspiracy on October 28, 2017, Q's second post opened and closed with the term *Mockingbird*, a reference to the surveillance of two DC-based journalists described on a single page of the massive 1973 "Family Jewels" report, which inventories covert CIA activities posing a threat of "flap potential."[62] Nearly four months later, on February 22, 2018, Q posted links to two government reports detailing the CIA's use of journalists as operatives. Q asked, "What is Operation Mockingbird? Active?"[63] Indeed, recent public policy developments in all three branches of government document ongoing direct coordination between the intelligence community and the press—and though the information war is being fought on social media, that's not where it started.[64]

Freedom of the Press Is Vital to Retain

> ▶ Q !UW.yye1fxo 02/05/18 (Mon) 12:30:09 ID: 472124 No.275719 >>275727 >>275740 >>275746 >>275747 >>275749 >>275753 >>275755
> >>275834 >>275852 >>275854 >>275857 >>275858 >>275874 >>275875 >>275885 >>275891 >>275897 >>275907 >>275916 >>275931 >>275...
>
> >>275574
> Imagine THIS.
> Raw intel collection.
> Narrative FEEDER.
> Narrative COLLECTORS.
> Narrative DISTRIBUTORS.
> LEAKS.
> CLASSIFIED.
> PAYMENTS.
> FOREIGN ACCOUNTS.
> CASH.
> SPOOK FILES.
> HOTELS.
> BLACKMAIL.
> How do you retain 'Freedom of the Press' if those in front of the camera [trusted by select viewers] are extensions of the ARM?
> Freedom of the Press is VITAL to retain.
> TRUST THE PLAN.
> THERE ARE A LOT MORE GOOD THAN BAD.
> You, THE PEOPLE, need to remember how TO PLAY.
> You, THE PEOPLE, have the POWER.
> We STRIKE every SINGLE DAY.
> We WIN every SINGLE DAY.
> EVERY SINGLE DAY THEY ARE BEING DESTROYED - LITERALLY.
> STAY STRONG.
> HAVE FAITH.
> THIS IS BIGGER THAN ANYONE CAN IMAGINE.
> Q

Figure 9.7
Q post to 8chan providing additional details into alleged coordination between the media and domestic and foreign intelligence agencies for the purpose of disseminating specific narratives, February 5, 2018.

The CIA's use of journalists for intelligence gathering as well as propagandizing was always integral to its operations—not incidental.[65] This mutually beneficial relationship between the intelligence community and the press grew organically out of interpersonal relationships forged between journalists and OSS members during World War II and was strengthened by the "national consensus about a national threat" of communism in the Cold War paranoia of the 1950s and 1960s.[66] Press organizations provided jobs, credentials, and cover for agents; served as vehicles of asset recruitment and handling; provided access to acquire information; and acted as outlets to plant propaganda.[67] In exchange, journalists enjoyed privileged access to "backgrounders" and agency briefings. Several foreign media and publishing outlets as well as Broadcasting Board of Governors programs were used—unwittingly in some cases—as propaganda arms of the CIA.[68] Domestic arrangements existed at the highest levels of the most venerated media organizations, among which CIA officials recognized CBS, the *New York Times*, and *Time* as the most strategically valuable.[69] The CIA acknowledged a fallout effect whereby propaganda intended for distribution to foreign audiences

abroad was picked up by domestic publications and reported as legitimate, authentic news; in some cases, such roundabout influence on American public sentiment was admittedly intentional.[70] The output of congressional oversight committees and response by the CIA suggest that these information operations were considered sensitive and not intended for public disclosure; furthermore, they were understood to undermine the public's trust and confidence in critical cultural, educational, and information institutions and to compromise the credibility and integrity of these institutions.

These same propaganda initiatives that the CIA once kept secret are now the public policy of all three branches of government, established first by executive order, then enabling statute, and recently upheld in federal court. Coordination between the intelligence community and the media evolved significantly during the Obama administration in a cascade of public policy developments that formalized formerly clandestine partnerships. A 2011 executive order established the Integrated Strategic Counterterrorism Communications Initiative to coordinate the activities of the Counterterrorism Center of the CIA and other executive branch agencies, including the dissemination of propaganda ostensibly targeting terrorists and extremists abroad.[71] Shortly thereafter, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2013 contained a version of the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act lifting the Cold War–era ban on domestic distribution of state-sponsored propaganda intended for foreign audiences.[72] In early 2016, a new executive order superseded the Integrated Strategic Counterterrorism Communications Initiative with the development of the Integrated Global Engagement Center,[73] outlining the development of evidence-based countermessaging programs for international audiences (which, under Smith-Mundt modernization, could also be broadcast within the US), and establishing networks of nongovernmental partners to "disseminate messaging products to foreign audiences abroad."[74]

The Global Engagement Center gained legislative status in NDAA 2017 Section 1287.[75] Signed into law on the cusp of the change in administration, NDAA 2017 broadens the center's focus again to include countering "non-state propaganda efforts aimed at undermining US national security interests" with "fact-based narratives."[76] It also creates an Information Access Fund to provide grants to a broad range of institutions, including "civil society groups, media content providers, nongovernmental organizations, federally funded research and development centers, private companies, or academic institutions" for the purposes of supporting local independent media outside of the US, collecting examples of propaganda directed at US audiences, analyzing and reporting on tactics of disinformation and propaganda, and to counter foreign efforts to influence US policy or social or political stability through the manipulation of information.[77] Most recently, a federal judge issued a 2018 ruling that protects the CIA's ability to selectively disclose information to individual journalists but redact the same information from the public record when responding to FOIA requests.[78]

Given this trajectory, it is difficult to ignore echoes of Sunstein and Vermeule's 2009 proposal for government-led cognitive infiltration of online conspiracy communities—especially in light of Sunstein's role as the director of Obama's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs from 2009 until 2012.[79] Sunstein and Vermeule's dismissal of the possibility of conspiracies succeeding in a democratic society rests on two claims; first, that the society is open, with strong mechanisms of government accountability; second, that the press is free and independent.[80] Tracing the history of press-intelligence relations from the mid-twentieth century to the present, coupled with the systemic complex of secrecy that excludes officials elected to govern from access to classified information necessary to exert oversight of state activities, jeopardizes any assumptions about our open and democratic society and our free and independent press.

"Fake news" is so often framed as an issue of public trust in the media that we fail to consider whether the public might have a point.

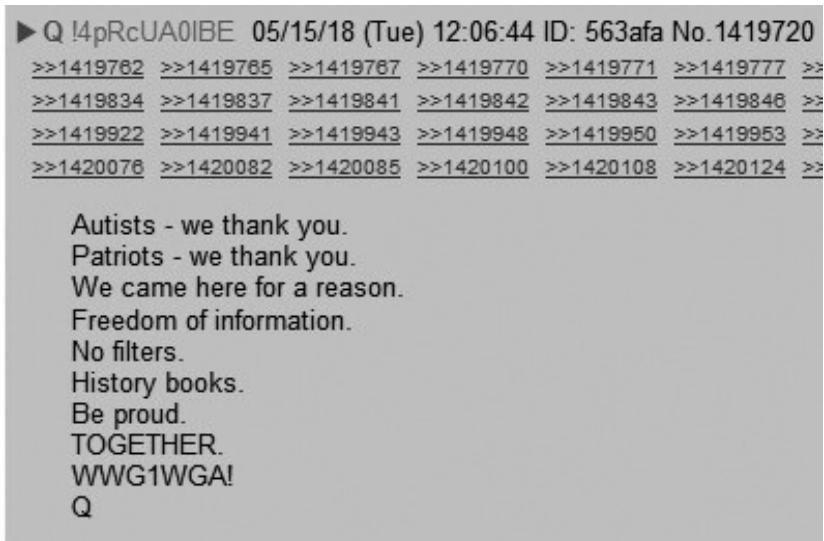# We Came Here for a Reason: Freedom of Information

Figure 9.8
Q post to 8chan board highlighting intellectual freedom as a shared value of the online conspiracy community, May 15, 2018.

Permeating the firewalls of our libraries' resource-sharing networks is a fragile epistemological ecosystem—polluted from above, by surveillance and propaganda from multinational state intelligence agencies and corporate influence brokers; from alongside, by social surveillance and mutual disciplining into ideological identity groups self-policed for wrongthink; and from below, by sousveillance and memetic psyops from a decentralized network of digital minutemen and chaos mongers. In an ethnographic capacity, I'm trying to bring you into the eye of the storm, the better to see the true state of things, the better to ask: as librarians, what do we really know about the contemporary information environment? Why am I only now encountering the primary and secondary sources documenting the compromising entanglements between the elected government, the intelligence community, and the news media dating back to at least World War II and continuing with increasing legitimacy in the present day? Why is this deliberate manipulation of the public's ability to know treated as a historical relic at best, and a dismissible conspiracy theory at worst? Why is intolerance of different worldviews increasingly acceptable in mainstream discourse? What kind of equal and opposite social reactions will these waves of collective cognitive abuse produce?

And why did it take a descent into the chans for me to even consider these questions?

The 2016 election is, for me, not so much a repudiation of the left's neoliberal technocracy or the establishment right's comeuppance, but a referendum on the mainstream media. Transfixed to the TV at 2 a.m. on November 9, 2016, flipping between Fox's jubilation and PBS's despondence, I watched an existential angst age Cornell Belcher as he wondered aloud about pollsters' failure to predict this unthinkable outcome. A seed of skepticism sprouted in my mind: was this truly a failure of prognostication, or a failure of persuasion? Can any coverage of a future event accurately be called "reporting," or had the media actually been caught running an influence campaign that flopped?

The skepticism that took root blossomed into a sense of betrayal. I developed a habit of dissecting corporate news stories into their constituent parts: attributed sources, verifiable facts, unattributed assertions, qualifiers, adjectives, opinions. In cross-referencing claims, I discovered that aggregate journalism resulted in multiple news outlets publishing the same coverage with little to no original reporting, creating a potentially unwarranted sense of consensus on breaking news and analysis. Unadulterated sources and facts were sometimes hard to come by, even in the so-called objective mainstream outlets. In the process, I found myself gravitating to news sources that appeared transparent in their biases and that made no claim to neutrality; where authenticity, not authority, is the gold standard. I let my mind wander off the leash, a spurned intellect on the rebound—and it felt good to go rogue. Some colleagues characterize my information experimentation as distastefully unprofessional at best, and dangerous at worst. That a profession committed to intellectual freedom can harbor such intellectual taboos is equal parts ironic and sad.

Given the defining characteristic of gray propaganda as a strategic distribution of truth tainted with lies, I am newly cautious to dismiss facts simply on the basis that they are enmeshed in fictions. By extension, the more ad hominem attacks I see elected officials and establishment media lob at upstart self-declared citizen journalists, the more curious I am as to the establishment's motivation. With apologies to the Bard, "the Gray Lady doth protest too much, methinks." Does it occur to anyone else that librarians have assumed a default position of speaking truth to power through the endorsement of establishment news brands?

I can't help but wonder whether this puts libraries at risk for the same credibility gap currently facing journalism.[81] The return on upholding our ethics and fulfilling our "special obligation" to intellectual freedom is sustaining public trust in libraries as social institutions, and in our supporting role in a self-governing society.[82] Practices that favor privacy, confidentiality, and neutrality relinquish control over information seeking, access, interpretation, and use to our patrons, respecting their natural right to freedom of conscience and affirming the individual as the locus of intellectual agency. Compromising our ethical foundation, however righteous the motivation, puts libraries' contributions and relevance to society in question. Our ethics matter most not when they are easiest, but when they are hardest—"when values are in conflict."[83]

The most important reflection in a reflective dialogue is the one that appears in the mirror. I confronted some difficult questions early on in my exploration of alternative media and viewpoints: did I pass judgment on information outlets based on secondary analysis, relying on others' opinions, without ever navigating upstream to review them myself? What is the prevalence of unattributed sources, derivative reporting, clarifications, corrections, and retractions in the mainstream news media? What is my standard of evidence? Where is the line between interpretation and misrepresentation? What does it mean when a consensus view emerges in commentary and analysis? What are my deeply held beliefs and values—the ones I take for granted as both factually correct and morally right—and how do they skew my information habits? In whose company do these habits situate me; from whom do they estrange me? What is achieved through official censorship and social shaming? What is the relationship between conformity and oppression?

How willing am I to change my mind—and at what cost?

I can either concern myself with controlling what's going on in everyone else's head, or I can concentrate on disciplining my own. The very fact that I can update my thinking in light of new evidence inspires me to be wary of any impulse I have to silence the views of others.[84] Our current outrage culture makes it easy to mistake a molehill for moral high ground. We are all, of course, free to exercise and express our judgment, but should remain ever mindful that posterity has the final word on what unknown future values we are presently violating. We can no more anticipate where a disruptive truth will come from than we can identify the truisms we currently accept as fact that will be subject to future correction.

Truth Belongs with the People

Q !UW.yye1fxo No.1
Jan 8 2018 22:03:27 (EST)

TRUTH belongs with the PEOPLE.
Q

Figure 9.9
Q post to 8chan board promoting transparency, January 8, 2018.

As librarians, we present the domain of information as a battleground of symmetric warfare, with obvious sides, identifiable allies and enemies, well-defended safe zones, and respected rules of engagement that protect journalists and civilians.

This is wrong.

The domain of information is a battleground of asymmetric warfare.[85] Allegiance is a strategic liability, today's allies are tomorrows spies, the ubiquity of the network compromises all safe zones, and multilateral cooperation flouting national laws means there are no rules.[86] Citizens are targets as well as operatives. Perhaps we should introduce each information literacy session with, "We built the library in a minefield, so be careful where you step."[87]

The mind-set of a conspiracy theorist is a positive adaptation to a hostile bureaucracy and weaponized information environment; an indigenous knowledge of industrial states. Skepticism toward consensus views, suspicion of official narratives, discomfort with conformity, openness to alternative theories, an ability to articulate a null hypothesis followed by inductive pursuit of the fact pattern wherever it leads, can all serve as self-defense tactics for a disinformation campaign.

So often, the debates I see about fake news and alternative facts are actually differences in the interpretation of a disputed terrain of information that a pluralistic society should embrace.[88] Facts are a critical component of truth, but they are not the whole truth. Interpretation, the act of selecting, prioritizing, partnering, and sequencing facts to derive meaning, is the connective tissue between facts, an interstitium within which we construct our sense of reality. The most honest way I know to teach about truth is as a holistic blend of our collective epistemic choices, in which the sum is greater than the whole of its parts.[89] Truth is a longtail phenomenon.

Broadening focus from rote fact checking to epistemic choice making eases the tension around contested interpretations of reality, affording our students an opportunity to wrestle with their own "metaphysical and informational confusion."[90] We can all own up to making choices about what to believe and how to

know the world; the faulty finitude of cognition is an aspect of the human condition we share in common. Talking about epistemic ethics is an entry point to so many of the dispositions in the *Framework*,[91] a technique for making an unconscious cognitive process open to observation,[92] a challenge to take responsibility for the reality we cocreate, a celebration of freedom of conscience, an acknowledgment that we are going to get it wrong, and of the redemption in changing our minds. Helping students think through epistemic choices and their consequences seems a reasonable pedagogical approach in the learning context of a tainted, compromised, and weaponized information domain.

At our best, librarians are the medics of information war, rescuing and sustaining the truth without regard for ideological loyalty. But how often have I been an unwitting propagandist instead?

In this instance, I don't know if Q is a white propagandist, a black propagandist, an intelligence operative, a psyop, a LARP, quantum artificial intelligence, some combination thereof, or something even more incredible.

But I do know we agree on one thing—

"TRUTH always wins."

Methodology

This study adapted the Grounded Theory Online Ethnographic Process to understand the information culture (behaviors, values, and strategies) of the QAnon Storm conspiracy virtual community.[93] Navigating upstream from coverage of QAnon in the alternative, social, and mainstream media, the dedicated conspiracy research forum on the 8chan platform was identified as a primary site of activities exhibiting the phenomena of interest and was selected as the main field of participant-observation.[94] Autoethnographic segments were compiled using the methodology described in *Systematic Self Observation*,[95] with an emphasis on objectifying and analyzing tacit inner experiences of a librarian who violates professional taboos in her engagement with alternative media and tendency for conspiracist ideation (or, as she prefers to think of it, "recreational thinking").

Access supplemental materials, including a detailed methodology and bibliography, at https://scholarsphere.psu.edu/concern/generic_works/63x816n39x.

Acknowledgements

To the anons—Thanks for letting me lurk. May we all find the truth we seek and keep moving from darkness to light.

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