CREST Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats

Introducing SHIFT Analysis and Understanding Intra-actions within QAnon: Co-presence of Conspiracy Beliefs and Extremism

FULL REPORT

JUNE 2024

MICE[2]

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FULL REPORT

MICE^2

This report was produced as part of the 'MICE^2' project, which develops an empirically informed, conceptual model of the interactive influences between contemporary forms of political extremism and conspiracy theories. You can find all the outputs from this project at: *www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/mapping-influence-between-conspiracy-communities-and-extremist-entities/*

Study design, data analysis and findings were completed independently by the research team and should not be taken as representative of views held by those who fund CREST.

ABOUT CREST

The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) is funded by the UK's Home Office and security and intelligence agencies to identify and produce social science that enhances their understanding of security threats and capacity to counter them. Its funding is administered by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Award ES/V002775/1).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 4

Key Findings 4

Glossary 5

INTRODUCTION 6

LITERATURE OVERVIEW 7

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY 9

Social Network Analysis and Identification 10

Hone Extracted Sample and Coding 10

Investigative Netnography 10

Frame Analysis 11

Text Analytics 12

QANON CASE STUDY 13

Introduction and Background 13

Data: Parler 13

Method Adaptation and Findings: 14

Frame Analysis 17

Hidden Truth Frame 18

Unfair Treatment Frame 18

Impending Doom Frame 19

Influential Facilitators 20

Text Analytics 20

Case Study Summary 26

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION 27

Future Research 27

APPENDIX 29

BIBLIOGRAPHY 32

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eruptions of violence during the events of January 6th 2021 exemplified the need to understand how conspiracy theories and extremism interact to create security threats. Social media presents as a key player in this exchange, and this project sought to respond to that dynamic by exploring and seeking to understand the intra-actions in groups which discuss both conspiracy beliefs and extreme ideas. To achieve this, it synthesises techniques from computer science and social science to analyse data from platforms which enable and promote unguarded speech.

QANON CASE STUDY: QAnon - on the path to January 6th on Parler

Applying frame analysis to the QAnon dataset on Parler revealed the coalescing of intra-actions between QAnon users around three master frames. Central was a belief in a hidden truth, an ever-present grievance of unfair treatment, and an impending sense of doom. Rumours and religious references were found to be the currency of group interaction, fuelling belief and mainstream view intolerance. This also made users highly vulnerable to manipulation by political or external actors. Many demonstrated levels of psychological vulnerability, particularly social isolation from others, exacerbated by echo chamber social media. In the aftermath of the insurrection, several fissures appeared between QAnon adherents over whether to stoke up violent intentions or back down and turn away from the movement. While an exploitable vulnerability, it may also be a pathway to treatment interventions and social responses.

KEY FINDINGS:

- SHIFT analysis provides a research framework for understanding the online journey of conspiracy and politically extreme groups overtime by framing the distinguishing elements of member motivation, beliefs, grievances as the bedrock for their interpretation of events and world view. These elements can be tracked over time to chart a movements evolution.

- Intra-actions are organised around three key master frames which fulfil three key roles. These frames were tracked over the wider dataset from the 1st of November 2020 to January 11th 2021.

1. **Isolator frame: Hidden truth** – which remained salient in all contexts studied, however was more influential in intra-actions than interactions as it served to isolate adherents from the broader mainstream.

2. **Bridging frames: Unfair treatment** – was particularly salient around the 2020 US election. It unified the social in-group and positioned them in opposition to out-groups.

3. **Motivational frames: Impending doom** –this motivated and legitimised extreme responses and was particularly influential around the 2020 US election.

In parallel to this report, a *second report* builds on the findings set out herein, to extend the analysis of interactions between conspiracy theory communities and far right groups that do not all meet the threshold of extremism. The interactions case study includes the results of a case study of the interaction between several conspiracy and far right groups on the Telegram platform and how they influenced one another in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The figurehead case study takes a deeper dive into this data to examine the role of figureheads within the group dynamics of conspiracy and far right movements.

GLOSSARY

CONCEPTUAL TERMINOLOGY

- **Extremism –** a political term which determines activities that are not in accordance with norms, are intolerant toward others, reject democracy and reject the existing social order (Sotlar, 2004).
- **Far Right –** an umbrella term used to refer to those to the ideological right of mainstream politics (see Lee, 2015). In this report, Far Right includes both those who are on the extreme right and those who do not meet that threshold yet remain on the 'radical right' of mainstream political beliefs.
- **Conspiracy Theory –** a belief that there are hidden mechanisms for events that are controlled by elites with a sinister goal(s) (Pigden, 2006).

TECHNICAL TERMINOLOGY

- **Frame Analysis –** Frame analysis aims to interpret and discover "the 'socialframeworks', that provide meaning, determine what is relevant and irrelevant when considering certain actors, issues, or events, and suggest appropriate behaviour" (Vliegenthart & Van Zoonen, 2011)
- **Netnography –** Netnography is a methodology designed to mimic ethnographic techniques but in an online space (Kozinets, 1999).
- **Abductive –** in abduction we pass from the observation of certain facts to the supposition of a general principle to account for the facts (Fann, 1970).

INTRODUCTION

This report seeks to understand how conspiracy theories and extreme ideologies impact one another. Recent years have exemplified the risk posed when conspiracy theories and radical extremism are allowed to develop unchecked. Indeed, news outlets (Walters & Chang, 2021) and the United States Congress (Committee on the Judiciary, 2019) have shown that right-wing extremists are the most urgent domestic terror threat facing the United States of America. A key concern is the threat from these groups targeting US national infrastructure (BBC, 2023).

This report will introduce a new method analysis of conspiracy and politically motivated groups named the SHIFT analysis. This analysis combines data science and social research techniques within a broadly abductive approach to develop new understanding of dynamic events. SHIFT analysis, which is mutable and robust to examine a singular group or between group interactions in this context, is applied to examine the QAnon movement, in the context of the lead up to and aftermath of January 6th, which espoused both extreme political ideology and conspiracy beliefs. It will look at the intra-actions between conspiracy theories and extreme ideas within this group and the context surrounding January 6th. The rise of populist conspiracy theories has seen an increase in violence and domestic terrorism, including the mass violence and destruction of property that took place on January 6th at the US Capitol (Rubin et al., 2022). The concern is the merging of conspiracy and far-right ideology exemplified in groups, such as QAnon, and the increased interactions between conspiracy communities and far right entities.

The following section provides a brief overview of the literature surrounding conspiracy theories, the far right and radical extremism. It will define the concepts, the theoretical overlap, and the importance of group dynamics in these spaces. This is followed by a section covering the research design, the importance of social media in the proliferation of conspiracy theories and political extremism. This section details the SHIFT analysis method proposed to approach conspiracy and extremism and the far right using social media data and how it draws on techniques from social and computer sciences. After laying out the SHIFT analysis techniques, the report will cover the case study of a conspiracy group mobilising toward extreme violence. The case study is based on data from the platform Parler and the intra-actions of the QAnon movement in the lead-up to, and aftermath of, the US January 6th insurrection. This case study attempts to deepen understanding of how a conspiracy-based movement escalated and deepened their level of extremism culminating in mass violence and vandalism following the 2020 presidential election. We conclude the report by summarising the findings and discussing their implications for policy and future research

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Conspiracy theories and political extremism have defined many recent security threats (CTEC, 2022). There are many different connections between conspiracy theories and extremism. While not all conspiracy theorists are extremists, extremist ideologies often incorporate conspiratorial thinking and conspiracy groups can tend toward extremist acts (Van Prooijen et al. 2015). The repeated co-occurrence of conspiracies and extremism would suggest that they may share a similar base framework for understanding the world.

Conspiracy theories can generally be understood as:

> **"a secret plan on the part of some group to influence events by partly covert action" (Pigden, 2006:157). This conceptualisation of conspiracy theories is intentionally broad to allow for a greater range of conspiracy groups to be studied. This report defines extremism as "a political term which determines the activities that are not in accordance with norms, intolerant toward others, reject democracy and reject the existing social order" (Sotlar, 2004:703).**

Although there is a clear distinction in the concepts of conspiracy theories and extremism, their presentation in real world cases often blurs or ignores the crossover and communication between them. There is contentious debate in the literature over the extent and the direction of the influence between conspiracy theories and extremism (Van Prooijen et al., 2015, Bartlett & Miller, 2010). Examining the motivations for engaging in conspiracy theories and extremism helps to explain the blurring of the two concepts in practice. Douglas et al. (2017) posits that there are three principal motivations for conspiracy beliefs, which we deploy in this study:

1. **Epistemic motivations –** to provide an answer for a looming unknown in a way which fits their preconceived world view.

2. **Social motivations –** to explain the unfair treatment they perceive their social group have received and raise their own standing by being 'in the know'.

3. **Existential motivations –** to provide an explanation to a sense of existential dread to their physical safety or way of life.

Categorising the motivations for conspiracy belief in this way allows us to perceive that similar motivations exist for engagement in conspiracy theories and political extremism. For example, the *epistemic motivation* argues that individuals strive to find an explanation for events that fits their pre-existing worldview. Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning – the human tendency to favour and interpret information so that it confirms their pre-existing notions, has been linked to both conspiracy beliefs and extreme far right. The typical epistemic criticism for conspiracy theories is that, in their most basic form, they are a product of confirmation bias in that some official explanation is deemed unacceptable and counter evidence is refuted (Acks, 2008, Miller et al. 2016, van Prooijen, 2021). Whilst in extreme far right spaces, this motivated reasoning (a similar style of thinking to confirmation bias, (Druckman & McGrath, 2019)) supplies a self-perpetuating cycle of identity confirmation and radicalisation (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022). The *social motivation* for conspiracy belief and engagement in radical right-wing politics is rooted in the same starting point of perceiving that their social group is undervalued. For conspiracy beliefs, this has been demonstrated through a link between collective narcissism and conspiratorial thinking concerning social out-groups (Cichocka et al. 2016). For the

radical right, this can be seen in the association with nationalism and national identity threats (Lubbers & Coenders, 2017). In a similar vein to the social motivation being spurred by a social threat, the *existential motivation* for conspiracy belief and extremism is prompted by a perceived existential threat embodied in the expression of grievance. This helps to understand why conspiracy beliefs tend to swell in times of crisis (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). This is further exemplified by the well documented link between economic insecurity and conspiracy beliefs (Uscinski & Parent, 2014) and political extremism throughout history (Klapsis, 2014).

Another source of debate in the relationship between conspiracy theories and extremism surrounds the direction of influence between the two, or directionality. Do conspiracy theories influence and radicalise extremist groups or do extremist groups co-opt conspiracy theories to radicalise their base? Scholars in one school of thought have argued that conspiracy theories radicalise movements into extremism by compounding resentment and grievances towards physical targets (Vegetti & Littvay, 2021). On the other hand, certain scholars argue that extremist movements have exploited conspiracy theories, particularly those with potent emotional appeal to radicalise their adherents and lure new recruits (Basit, 2021). Bartlett and Miller (2010) have hypothesised that conspiracy theories act as a 'radicalising multiplier' that escalates pathways to extremism by:

1. Intensifying demonology of "other/out-groups"
2. "Condemn[ing] voices of dissent and moderation as being part of the conspiracy."
3. "A spur to violent action: a rhetorical device to justify the killing of innocents, often to 'awaken' the people from their acquiescent slumber."

Point 2 above demonstrates that when group identity and conspiracy beliefs are intertwined the group is at risk of radicalisation as they become resistant to correction (Mikhaeli et al., 2023). Analogous to this, "conspiracy theory" can also be used as a pejorative term to delegitimise the beliefs of those perceived as the social out-group. This highlights how group contexts can heighten escalation (Mikhaeli et al., 2023).

This report will conduct a case study of the QAnon in the context of January 6th. QAnon is a broad movement which is driven by conspiracy beliefs and has been shown to contribute to the radicalisation of violent extremisms (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020) and shows similarities to other far right extremist movements (Sorice, 2023). QAnon is a group that has been noted for its capacity to motivate conspiracy-based radicalisation (Garry et al. 2021). The background of the QAnon movement and its history will be discussed in greater depth in the case study.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Social media plays an important role for conspiracy and extremism, and particularly the social aspect of each concept. It allows like-minded individuals to create and build social relationships and to form groups, yet it also acts as a driver for social polarisation and distancing from more moderate views. It has become an essential tool for both conspiracy groups and far right entities. Social media offers opportunities for validation for their views, polarisation against the mainstream, and coordination of offline events. Social media has also caused a monumental shift in both the fields of computer science and social science. For social scientists, social media offers a vast new context to explore, analyse theories and study events in near real time. In computer science, it allows for the creation and experimentation of new methods of data analysis to compete with ever increasing volumes of data.

Identifying and assessing how to mitigate the harmful effects of conspiracy and extremism will undoubtedly depend on an interdisciplinary approach between computer and social sciences. Social science is necessary to provide an interpretation of group behaviour and interaction, whilst computer science is needed to effectively process the large quantity of data that can be collected from social media and provide analytical vision.

The research aims in this project and how they will be addressed can be summarised as:

1. **To design a research method which integrates social science and computer science techniques to provide a rubric of how to analyse conspiracy theories and political movements on social media.**

   The QAnon case study employs SHIFT analysis to test its application examining the internal dynamics of a single extreme conspiracy group.

2. **Examine the intra-actions within groups that exchange conspiracy theories, far right and extremist ideas.**

   The QAnon case study further examines a conspiracy theory-based group that resulted in a large-scale incident of violent extremism on January 6th. This provides insight into the escalating extremism of a conspiracy-based movement.

We have developed an abductive method termed ‘SHIFT analysis’ which allows insights from each analytic stage to feedback into and inform one another in a unified but non-linear process. Abductive reasoning is used to offer a ‘best guess’ approach given the available data to try and hypothesise general principles (Fann, 1970). The techniques in this method are outlined on the next page.

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS AND IDENTIFICATION

This aims to identify the key accounts or data of interest from the vast amounts of social media data available. Given the scale of social media data accessible it is pertinent to begin the investigative process by conducting some means of filtering to increase the relevancy and decrease volume. Another important aspect to this analysis is to understand how any identified network interacts within its own confines and how it relates to other accounts outside the network. This is achieved using complex network analysis, where a network of users is created using their mention or forwarding behaviour, dependent on the platform studied.

HONE EXTRACTED SAMPLE AND CODING

This is designed to be an exploratory analysis of the content of the social media post data. It allows social science researchers to engage with the content, understand what the key issues unique to this dataset might be and begin data sorting. This involves segmenting a stratified sample of the data to explore the type of content being produced, the writing style and platform idiosyncrasies. The data can then be coded for key themes relevant to the specific context and dataset.

INVESTIGATIVE NETNOGRAPHY

This allows researchers to employ open-source investigation techniques and netnographic methodology to examine what have been determined to be pivotal moments. Netnography was designed by Kozinets to mimic ethnography but in an online space (1999). It was originally developed for a marketing perspective to drill down into consumer stories and examine consumer behaviour in a more naturalised environment. In recent years, internet use has become “as much about interaction with others as it is about accessing information” (Miller, 2008:398). To recognise this shift from real-world to online communication and

the opportunity that this might present to researchers, netnography develops ethnographic (observation of subjects in their naturalised environment) techniques to an online environment. Netnography combines data analysis with emotional insights from the researcher. Kozinets argued that to be able to conduct netnographic investigation, the data must fit certain criteria (2010:168):

1. Communities are relevant to research question.
2. Active recent and regular communication.
3. Interactive flow of communication between participants.
4. Substantial dataset that satisfies critical mass of communication.
5. Heterogenous participants.
6. Data-rich in terms of descriptive detail.

Kozinets (2010) maintained there was an importance in making yourself known as a researcher and integrating the researcher within the group that is being studied. For this project this was deemed inappropriate because, as other scholars have outlined, when the topic is sensitive or dangerous (as conspiracy theories and political beliefs typically are) then this type of active netnography can bias the behaviour of the subjects being studied and endanger the researcher (Belk, 2007, Langer & Beckman, 2005). Therefore, this research employs netnography through observation where the researcher does not openly declare their presence or actively provoke interactions with the subject of the study. Langer and Beckman modified the steps of netnographic analysis laid out by Kozinets to accommodate for sensitive research areas (2005) by suggesting a four-step process:

1. **Entrée –** Refining of research question to target certain segments of the audience, community identification, filtering, and selection of groups.
2. **Data collection –** direct copy of members, interactions, and meanings (big data collection), integrity checks, curation of data.
3. **Analysis and interpretation –** classification, coding, and contextualisation of communicative acts
4. **Ethics and member checks –** because of the sensitive research area this project will replace these with consolidating insights into research findings.

FRAME ANALYSIS

Vliegenthart and Van Zoonen (2011) argue that "meanings only arise in processes of interaction, interpretation and contextualization" and this contextualisation results in social frameworks which provide meaning and prompt behaviour. These social frameworks are inspected using frame analysis. During frame analysis, content which is deemed to be particularly rich and of interest during the sample coding is scrutinised further using frame analysis. Frame analysis is a technique pioneered by Goffman (1974) in which he argues that people understand their experiences and the world through certain frames. The principal goal of this is to discern the motivations driving the behaviour in the data. This technique has been applied to social movements by Snow (2013) to demonstrate how framing can capture the animating concepts, such as grievances and the mobilising movements that result in action. Recent applications of frame analysis have demonstrated how this technique can be practically applied to social media data (Porter & Hellsten, 2014). This places particular focus on identifying the master frames present in the dataset and breaking these down to their component framing tasks. The framing tasks include:

1. **Diagnostic Framing –** identifies the problem that needs fixing and assigns blame (Kavrakis, 2022). This is where the primary grievance of the social movement can be identified (ibid). It also reveals

what the movement deems important enough to be worth protecting.

2. **Prognostic Framing –** suggests solutions, strategies, and tactics to address the problems identified by diagnostic framing (Kavrakis, 2022)

3. **Motivational Framing –** serves to call to arms adherents of the social movement and rationalises action rather than just discussion (ibid)

TEXT ANALYTICS

This technique utilises the findings from previous analysis and applies them to the wider data set. It allows identification of linguistic clues identified by previous techniques and utilises the social science theory and substantive subject knowledge gleaned from earlier exploration of the content. Extrapolating these findings out to the wider dataset further expands the understanding of how different themes and frames interrelate and morph over time. This allows both contextual richness and the robustness of seeing themes be replicated in the extensive dataset.

Table 1. summarises the strengths and limitations of the techniques which make up SHIFT analysis used to in this case study to examine social media data.

Technique	Strengths	Limitations
Network Analysis and Identification	• Follows the natural structure of social media data. • Identifies the most relevant data and influential accounts.	• Necessitates a structure to interpret in the dataset. • Not effective in identifying actors that are influential outside the social network.
Sample Coding	• Allows the researcher to quickly get an idea of the most important trends, themes and understand the communication style and content. • Provides a relatively fast and broad understanding.	• Coding is a subjective process although consensus can be reached between researchers. • Sampling restricts the amount of content analysed.
Frame Analysis	• Identifies the underpinning worldviews that shape behaviour and how these are framed and communicated using their own group vocabulary.	• A subjective process although consensus can be reached between researchers. • Sampling restricts the amount of content.
Text Analytics	• Allows the researcher to quickly understand frequent terms. • Allows for insight into large amounts of data.	• Machine learning techniques such as emotion detection are reliant on the accuracy of machine learning model. • Social media is particularly challenging as the language can be informal and esoteric.
Netnography	• Provides deeper understanding of how and what those studied would have been feeling at the time of key events	• This research used a passive and retrospective netnography because of the sensitive research area and risk to researcher of disclosing their presence. This passive approach prevents the researcher from achieving the level of embeddedness within a group typical of ethnography.

Table 1: Techniques Strengths and Limitations

QANON CASE STUDY

Intra-Action of Co-Presence of Far-Right Extremism and Conspiracy Beliefs in QAnon in the Lead up to January 6th

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

On January 6th 2021, a large group stormed the United States Capitol in an attempt to stop a democratic process formalising Joe Biden's election victory and preserve Donald Trump's hold on power. Over 10,000 protesters attended the event and over 2,000 entered the building (Rubin et al., 2022). At least 928 people have subsequently been arrested and charged with crimes, with this number expected to keep growing (Hall et al. 2022). These include charges such as "seditious conspiracy", "assaulting officers", "civil disorder" etc. (ibid). There were several instances of vandalism and threats of physical violence made against senior politicians, including gallows being erected outside the Capitol. The attack also resulted in the injury of 140 police officers and several individuals losing their lives (Jackman, 2021). This event presents the clearest example of the intersection of conspiracy theories and extremism in recent history and how devastating the impacts can be. This case study examines how conspiracy theories and extremism combine to create a serious threat to national security by focusing on two areas heavily associated with January 6th, QAnon and Parler.

QAnon is a conspiracy group primarily based in America, although now widespread following a rise in popularity during Donald Trump's presidency. The core belief of the QAnon theory is that there is a satanic cabal of hidden elites who are conspiring toward various sinister ends such as child sex trafficking, a new global world order and global depopulation (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). Another key aspect of this theory is that Donald Trump and other 'saviour figures' are attempting to put a stop to this plot but are being conspired against (Fitzgerald, 2022, Bond & Neville-Shepard, 2021). QAnon, in terms of its structure, has often been likened to a cult and is seen by many researchers as a quasi-religious movement (Conner & MacMurray, 2022, Juergensmeyer, 2022). The movement originated on the message board system 4chan where a user named 'Q' claimed to be a government insider with Q level security clearance who had access to classified information and would leave coded messages for their followers to decipher (Papasavva et al., 2022). Recent research has indicated that these drops may be apocryphal or unsubstantiated (ibid). The QAnon ideology fits the definition in this research of a conspiracy theorist, in that it has present the elements of a belief that there are hidden mechanisms for events that are controlled by elites with a sinister goal(s) (Pigden, 2006, Young & Nathanson, 2010, Goertzel, 1994). Furthermore, the QAnon movement has been associated with moments of violent extremism beginning with the shooting at Comet pizza restaurant in Washington D.C. which arguably marked the inception for the QAnon movement (Bleakley, 2021), the attack on Paul Pelosi (Biesecker, 2022), and the insurrection (Bond & Neville-Shepard, 2021). These instances clearly provide examples of what Sotlar referred to as extremism in terms of an intolerance towards democracy, others, and societal norms (2004).

DATA: PARLER

Parler is an American social networking platform that has been typically associated with conservatives, Trump supporters and conspiracy theorists (Eliopoulos et al. 2021, Baines et al. 2021). Parler may offer greater insight than platforms with stricter moderation rules

because adherents feel less pressurised to guard their speech due to the affordances of the platform. Parler was created as a haven for far-right free expression after adherents were de-platformed from other platforms because of their views (Israeli & Tsur, 2022). Due to its minimal content moderation and focus on freedom of speech, it garnered a reputation for a place where users could share controversial views which would incur serious repercussions on other social media platforms (Pieroni et al., 2021, Aliapoulious et al. 2021). In the run up to the Capitol riots and acutely in the aftermath, the platform became closely associated with the alt-right (Kor-Sins, 2021). This eventually led to it being removed from apple and google app stores, and Amazon web services cancelling its hosting services (Floridi, 2021, Aliapoulious et al. 2021) leading to its eventual collapse. Parler was selected as the platform of interest in this case study because firstly it has close ties with the insurrection itself (Kor-Sins, 2021). Secondly, it was inferred that, because of the low levels of censorship and content moderation, users would talk with a certain level of candour. This unguarded speech might offer further insight into the motivations behind the attack which may not be possible on platforms where controversial content is removed more regularly and thus users are more mindful of what they say. The original Parler dataset has over 180 million posts, from 4 million unique users from August 2018 to January 2021 (Aliapoulious et al. 2021). Many users joined the platform after being signposted to it from mainstream platforms by key conservative politicians (ibid). Previous research has used text analytics and computational techniques to analyse this data and found that Parler creates a serious risk for radicalisation because of its characteristics which promote its use as an echo chamber (Baines et al. 2021).

METHOD ADAPTATION AND FINDINGS:

NETWORK IDENTIFICATION

The Parler dataset originally contained over 180 million posts. Whilst this is an extremely rich dataset, it is also far beyond what can be reasonably assessed by researchers. To reduce the volume of posts and increase the relevancy toward our target population, a 'mention network' was created. A mention network is a network created from users tagging other users in posts, which in the case of Parler is performed in the same way as X using the "@" symbol followed by a user's handle. The mention network used here comprised users that had 'QAnon' in their username and those they mentioned most. We infer from this that these users have effectively self-identified as QAnon adherents. By snowballing the sample in this way, further users who may have not wished to self-identify were captured. This gave us 1,833 unique users. Posts between the 1st of November 2020 (just before the US presidential election) and the 11th of January 2021 (when Parler was shut down) were extracted. This reduced the relevant posts to 585,658 across the period of interest. By isolating users associated with QAnon rather than posts which use QAnon phrases, the dataset is enriched with a greater level of context as to why users are behaving in certain ways.

Assessing the volume of posts over time, as shown in *Figure 1*, it is evident that in early November the number of posts per day suddenly increases and remains at a high level for several weeks. This point is when it begins to become clear to QAnon followers that Trump will not be declared the winner of the presidential election, and the data shows that the users begin to argue that the election was rigged. The number of posts a day shows a general downward trend from late November to January, with a large spike on January 6th. The number of posts declines dramatically following the insurrection when Parler started getting removed by tech companies.

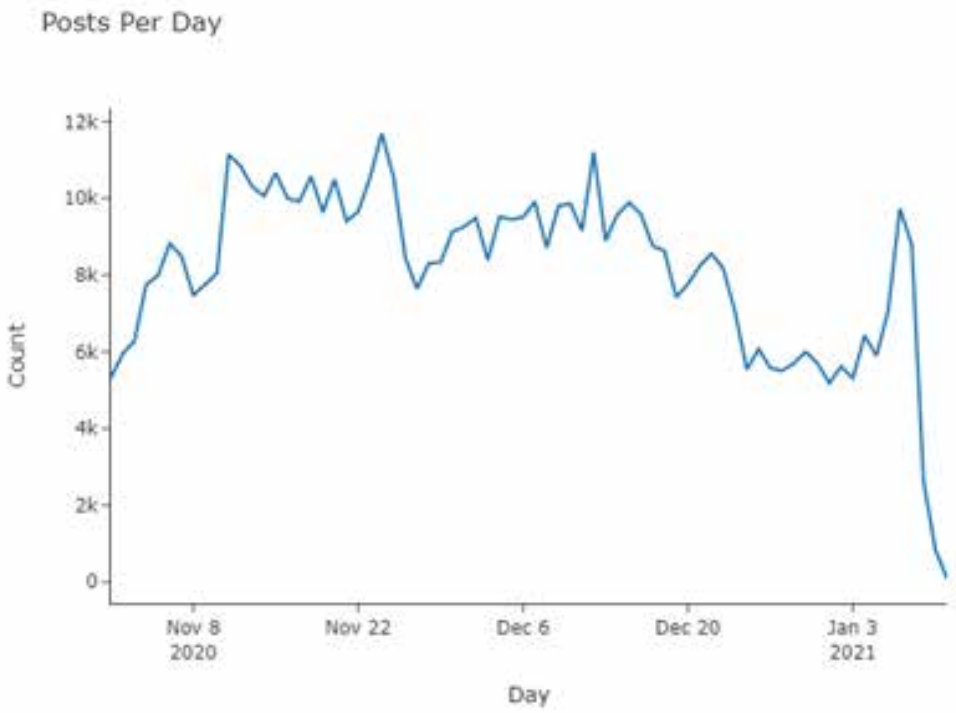

Figure 1. Volume of QAnon posts over time.

SAMPLE CODING

A sub-sample of the data were coded. To do this, a random sample of 50 posts per day (72 days from 1st of November to 11th January) was extracted from those that had over 10 words to ensure there was enough content to analyse. This allowed the researchers to engage with the data and begin understanding the content and context. The remaining 3600 posts formed the sub sample and were qualitatively coded for whether they contained:

- Content relevant to the focus of the project – this was to establish how well our filtering in the network identification had worked as a quality assurance check.
- Conspiracy theory content – to understand what conspiracy theories were being discussed.
- Escalating language – it was important to establish how escalating language changed over the period of interest and how that could have contributed to the events on January 6th.
- Anti-QAnon sentiments – because the initial sample identified QAnon users and their most interacted with accounts it was noted that this could include some negative interactions (e.g., QAnon users debating with anti-QAnon users). Therefore, there was a need to establish what level of posts were anti-QAnon in their sentiment.
- Specific QAnon rhetoric – currently, although several platforms have taken steps toward removing QAnon accounts (Spring, 2020, Pembroke, 2021, Spring, 2020), they almost entirely rely on identifying QAnon accounts through the language they use and matching that to known QAnon phrases. Therefore, it was pressing to understand how often this language was used in practice within the QAnon community.
- Religious references – QAnon has repeatedly been associated with and likened to a religious movement (Juergensmeyer, 2022, Pembroke, 2021,). Coding this theme was used to establish what level of posts fit this category and how religion is used in the QAnon movement.

(Appendix 1 provides an in-depth description of how posts were characterised for the sample coding).

Coding the sub-sample data revealed approximately three quarters of the data (74%) was relevant to our investigation. This suggests that our network identification and sampling methods were appropriate and captured posts of interest. Interestingly, only 4% of messages used specific known QAnon phrases and hashtags, suggesting that social media platforms which censor content based on these phrases may be allowing large amounts of content to go undetected. This exemplified that it is more appropriate to sample based on QAnon affiliated users rather than isolated posts which use QAnon phrases. 7% of content was positioning itself as anti the QAnon movement. This allowed us to identify that there were, as suspected, some users who frequently interact with QAnon accounts in a negative way, but that this was by no means an overwhelming presence in the sample. 15% of the content coded used escalating language. In the beginning of November, escalating language fluctuates between 5% and 15% whereas from late November onwards it is often between 10% and 25%. This was interesting as it mirrored the transition of the movement from extreme conspiracy beliefs toward violent extremism. 13% of content contained references to conspiracy theories. This level was constantly in flux over the period of interest.

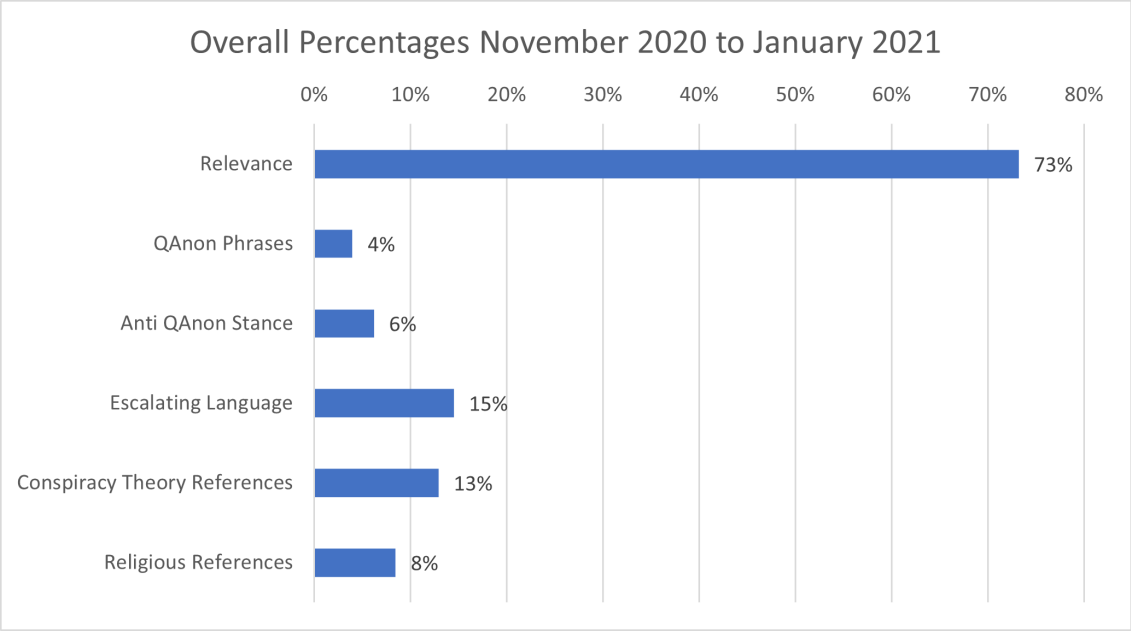

Figure 2. Percentage of posts classified in each theme (n = 3600 posts).. Volume of QAnon posts over time.

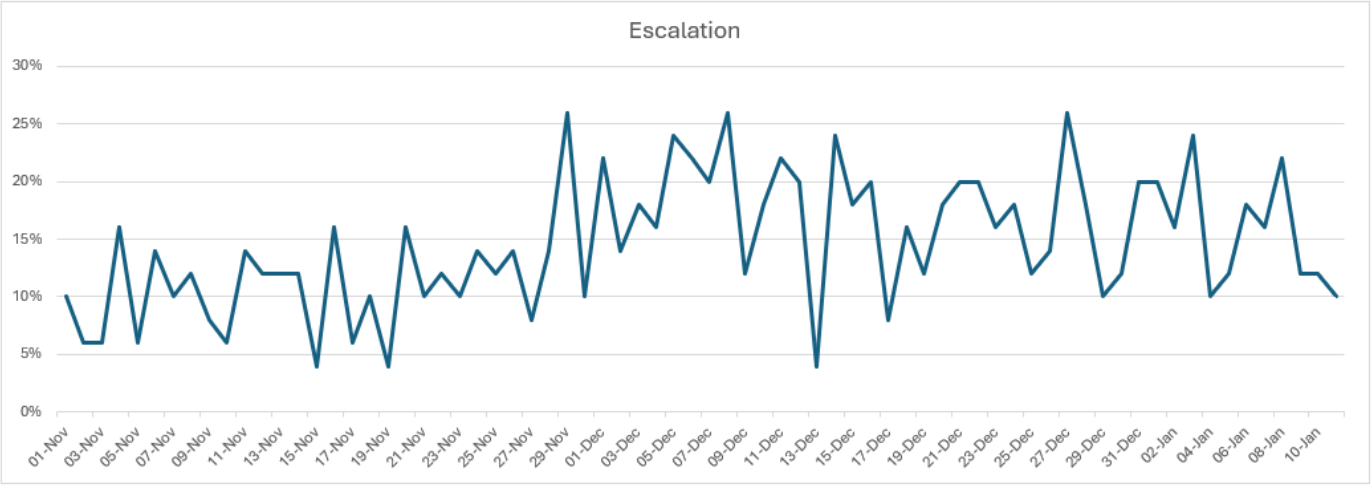

Figure 3. Percentage of posts classified as having escalating language over time.

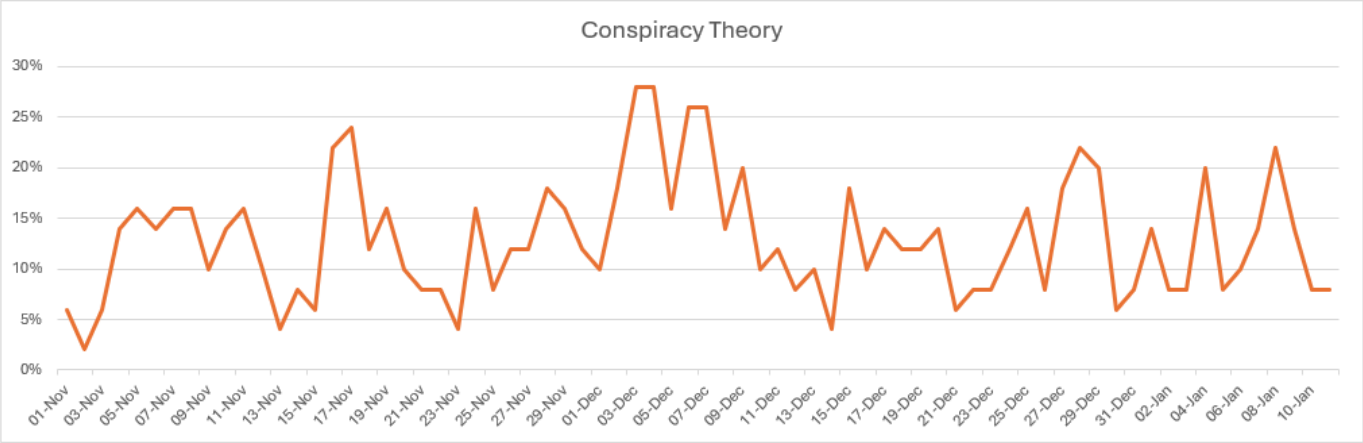

Figure 4. Percentage of posts classified as containing conspiracy content over time.

FRAME ANALYSIS

Guided by the analysis of Porter and Hellsten (2014) on social media data, several master frames were identified in the sub-set of the posts. This sub-sample was identified and coded in the honing the sample coding process. These posts were then closely analysed by two researchers who independently conducted content analysis for possible master frames then together discussed and agreed on what they believed were the key frames. This analysis drew upon the literature to steer our frame analysis by assessing posts in terms of their epistemic, existential, and social motivation (Douglas et al. 2017). The three master frames identified between the two researchers were: hidden truth, unfair treatment, and impending doom. The following section will cover these frames in more depth and the text analytics will demonstrate how these frames fluctuated over time and coincided with key moments in the movement. Each master frame was analogous to a diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational (or collective action) position: social polarisation, retaliation, and radical action. *Table 2* summarises these positions.

Master Frame	Diagnostic		Prognostic	Motivational
	Protecting	Threat		
Epistemic frame: Hidden Truth	The truth	Media	Prophecy of truth	Social polarisation
Social frame: Unfair Treatment	Social in-group	Government	Identify traitors through rumours	Retaliation against traitors
Existential frame: Impending Doom	Way of life	Elites	Prophecy of doom	Radical action

Table 2. QAnon Case Study Master Frame Summary

A high-level view reveals that each master frame follows a similar pattern. The diagnosis framing is made up of an aspect of life deemed vital to an individual's world view and a threat towards it, typically from various powerful elite groups. The threat identified in these frames matches up well to the definition of conspiracy theory laid out in the literature review. The Prognosis framing involves using rumours and prophecies to generate solutions to these grievances. Finally, the motivational framing works to legitimise and justify radical action and social polarisation.

HIDDEN TRUTH FRAME

The first dominant master frame identified in this analysis was around the idea that users were searching for a truth that they felt was being deliberately hidden from them. Generally, this frame assigned blame to a corrupt mainstream media. This frame values truth and honesty and can help to enforce a social hierarchy between those who are enlightened with the 'truth' and those who are blinded by lies (i.e., things that do not fit their world view). The elements of the frame followed a familiar script around uncovering truth and exposing lies. Common phrases and references included "waking up" "sheep" and "exposing" or "uncovering" the truth.

> **"Remember it took 4 days for trump to be announced as having won in 2016. The media lied for 4 days. I think trump has a good chance to win but don't listen to liars".**

This example illustrates that the diagnostic framing is working to identify the real "truth" as: Trump having won the 2020 election. Furthermore, it positions the media as the opposition or antithesis to this truth placing blame at their door as the antagonists of this narrative. Although occasionally this type of speech referenced specific figures, more often users tended to nebulously refer to "the media" or "democrats" (out-groups) as the perpetuators of the lies designed to fool the public.

> **"Turn the TV off because MSM lies just like they did in 2016."**

The prognostic framing in this master frame offers rumours and prophecies regarding the future to fill the gap left by this hidden truth. This fulfils the epistemic motivation for conspiracy beliefs as theorised by Douglas et al. (2017), whereby gaps in our understanding demand to be filled and the social exchange of rumours as 'improvised news' allows conspiracy theories to form in those voids (Shibutani, 1966). This frame also exemplifies the epistemic impulse of conspiracy beliefs to support a pre-existing world view.

> **"I think you're wasting your time as much as I [k]no[w] you're talking the truth.**
>
> **Everyone knows Biden fixed it".**

The motivational framing and collective action positions stimulated by this master frame centre around disengaging from conventional media or the official narrative and often ask their listeners to entrench themselves more deeply in the social in-group. This leads to social isolation and polarisation. The function of this frame is to cut off group members from more mainstream, placating views.

UNFAIR TREATMENT FRAME

The second dominant master frame was based upon the grievance that their social group was being unfairly treated in comparison to other social groups. This can be seen in the 'stop the steal' slogan and accompanying rhetoric which went viral amongst Trump and QAnon supporters. This phrase exemplifies how they feel they are owed something which has been stolen from them. The script for this frame consisted typically of dividing social groups into 'us' and 'them'. It often sought to compare what they perceived as their own ill treatment with what they perceived as the more favourable treatment of 'liberals' etc.

The diagnosis of this frame centres around protecting their social group and thus the script typically references high levels of in-group identification, demonstrating that their social group is an important facet of their identity. This also maps on to the social motivation for conspiracy belief (Douglas et al., 2017). For example, the below quote shows that the user identifies so strongly with Trump that they perceive themselves as almost one entity.

> **"The plan is to hit Trump by hurting us".**

This frame positions Trump and QAnon supporters as oppressed by governing elites and thus the prognosis of this frame involves identifying and weeding out 'traitors'. Later-on in the dataset, as it becomes clear that Mike Pence will not use his powers as vice president to refuse to ratify the election result, he becomes a particular target of this type of traitor speech which can be an incitement of violence (Rasmussen, 2006).

> **"Too many people in leadership positions have been compromised due to their own egos doing shit that creates leverage for the enemy."**

The motivational framing task and collective action position in this frame were to retaliate against the unfair treatment. Often posts adopting this collective action position drew attention to what they saw as their persecution and used this to springboard support for a movement against the perpetrators. This frame fulfils a bridging function by uniting adherents into a cohesive group against their opponents.

> **"I am all in!!!!! We must fight them and punish them as they most certainly would do to us".**

IMPENDING DOOM FRAME

The final dominant master frame is related to an idea of impending doom. Essentially, in this frame the users feel that their current way of life is under serious attack. The script for this frame consists mostly of harking backwards to 'golden ages' or a 'simpler time' and reflects that some great evil has either already taken over or is looming on the horizon. This script bears a striking resemblance to the 'Make America Great Again' slogan which was popular with Trump and QAnon supporters.

> **"America what have we become, suckers for crappy ads and fraudulent traitorous shills."**

This rhetoric is dramatic by nature and draws heavily on the idea of a good way of life under threat from evil. This pessimistic view of the world correlates with the existential motivation for conspiracy belief (Douglas et al., 2017). It highlights the corruption of governing powers and draws upon traditional American values such as freedom, capitalism, and religion.

> **"Political termites are Eating the foundation of the Nation. Not exterminated, or if ignored. Then collapse of Freedom! When Gods replaced, Socialist infestation worsens."**

The prognosis framing involves prophesising either about the forthcoming disaster or it advocates for radical solutions to escape certain doom. It asserts the idea that a war or struggle is afoot and that loyalists must stand their ground to protect their way of life. These disastrous and dramatic predictions enable the motivational call for this frame by legitimising an equally extreme response. The extreme perspective of this frame necessitates extreme action achieving a motivational function.

> **"I just don't see how this can come out well since we are dealing with corrupt, deceitful powermongers".**

INFLUENTIAL FACILITATORS

As a result of identifying posts which matched the three master frames, several factors and techniques which facilitated the frame bridging process also became apparent.

Religious references – A substantial number of posts referenced religious imagery, this helps to personalise the frame to their world view and helps to instil the hierarchy and structure of the QAnon movement by outlining Trump as a deity-like figure and invoking the unquestioning faith of Christianity.

> **"We are keeping the faith Mr President! We are ready to roll through this and place you back in the White House sir. We believe in you and can't wait for you to take your rightful place for the next 4 years! God bless you🙏✝️🇺🇸"**

Role of rumours – Rumours and prophecies were often used as a symbol of status within discussion and could be exchanged and traded to signify knowledge. Furthermore, they also offered a prognosis to the hidden truth and impending doom frames.

> **"I believe that there are NOT nearly as many votes still outstanding and uncounted … Donald Trump has staged the greatest political come back in American political history".**

Psychological vulnerability – Previous research has linked psychological vulnerability and conspiracy beliefs and extremism (Murphy et al., 2017). Although this must be caveated by noting that psychological conditions cannot be diagnosed by analysis of social media posts. However, some posts clearly reference specific psychological conditions such as paranoia or delusions of grandeur or indicate risk factors for psychological conditions such as social isolation.

> **"Ok I'm going a little crazy with conspiracy theories, but I've seen a lot of fkd up shit I can honestly say I thought would never happen in this country."**

TEXT ANALYTICS

TERM ANALYSIS – WORD CLOUDS

The purpose of text analytics is to provide testing, corroboration and robustness to the insights generated from qualitative examination of the source material. As a form of quality assurance for the sample coding, Knime, a text mining software, was employed to create word clouds across each of the themes studied. The word clouds used the 3600 posts used in the sample coding to calculate term frequency, (derived from term frequency and inverse document frequency to show a measure of word relevance and importance). Overall, the coding was qualitatively judged to be aligned with the result of the text analysis thus adding strength to the conclusions.

Figure 5 shows the 'conspiracy' content word cloud – The most frequently used terms in this theme include election, fraud, Trump, swamp, and Biden. This shows that the single greatest conspiracy issue was that the election had been stolen from Trump and his supporters. The references to swamp are part of the QAnon rhetoric which involves 'draining the swamp' which alludes to ridding the upper echelons of politics and celebrities of corrupt satanists.

Figure 5. Conspiracy coded word cloud

Figure 6 shows the Religious References word cloud. The top terms in this theme include God, pray, faith, Trump, and Jesus. The most used terms in this theme also involved praying and cross emojis. Trump was one of the most frequently used terms in posts coded for this theme, whilst there are very few other references to QAnon talking points. This helps to illustrate Trump's position in the QAnon movement as a messiah figure, something that has been noted in academic works (Bond & Neville-Shepard, 2021).

Figure 7 shows a QAnon Rhetoric word cloud. The top terms in this theme included swamp, Trump, paedophile, deep, children. As with the conspiracy narratives, the high frequency of the term 'swamp' refers to 'draining the swamp'. 'Deep' refers to 'deep state' the idea that there is a secret organisation controlling the political agenda. 'Children' and 'paedophile' refer to a core tenant of the QAnon conspiracy that children are being satanically and sexually abused by elites.

Figure 8 illustrates the word cloud of prominent terms associated with the Anti-QAnon theme. Notable keywords in this context include "Trump," "Biden," "won," "lost," and "election." The prevailing narrative within these posts primarily revolves around countering the misinformation linked to the 'stop the steal' hashtag, which gained widespread traction on Parler and various right-wing social media platforms. Furthermore, the term 'evidence' emerges as significant, signifying QAnon's positioning as a movement challenging established evidence and discourse.

Butters argues that Donald Trump assumes a messianic role within the QAnon movement (2022). Consequently, efforts to discredit the QAnon movement often entail derogatory references to Trump, such as terms like 'orange' or 'trumpf*ck.' These insults underscore the strong sense of group identification between QAnon adherents and Trump, as any critique directed at Trump is also perceived as an affront to the movement.

Figure 9 shows the Escalating language word cloud. The prominent keywords in this theme included "fight", "treason", "war", "people", and "Trump". Posts in this category often refer to "civil war" and the need to physically "fight" for what they believe in. Furthermore, the high frequency of the term treason highlights the importance of 'traitor speech' as a legitimisation of violence (Rasmussen, 2006). The high frequency of the term 'people' sheds light on to the populist and revolutionary under currents of the movement. Trump appears in the top five terms across all the themes studied. This underlines Trump's centrality to the QAnon movement and the importance of figureheads.

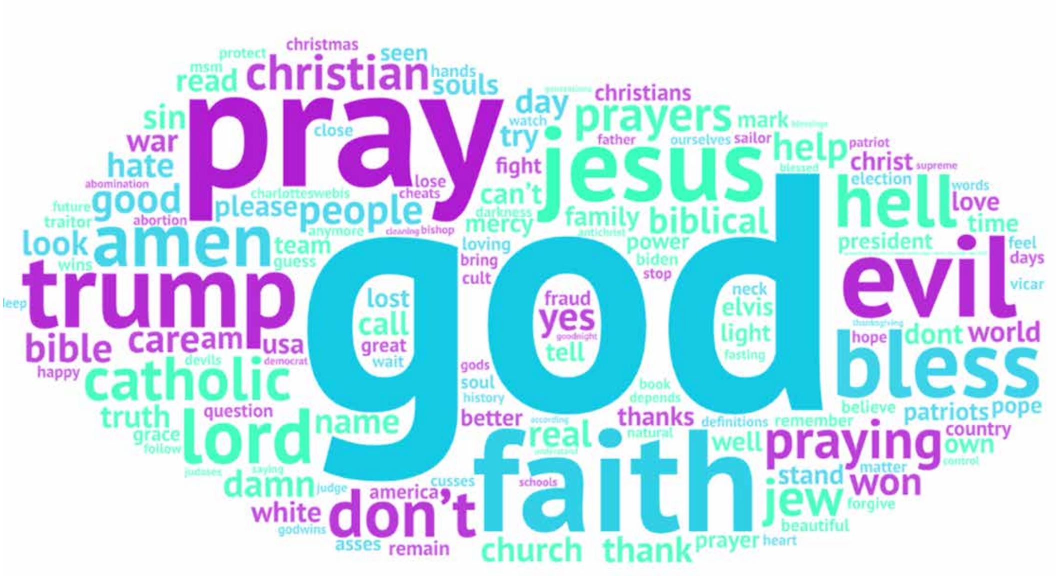

Figure 6. Religion coded word cloud

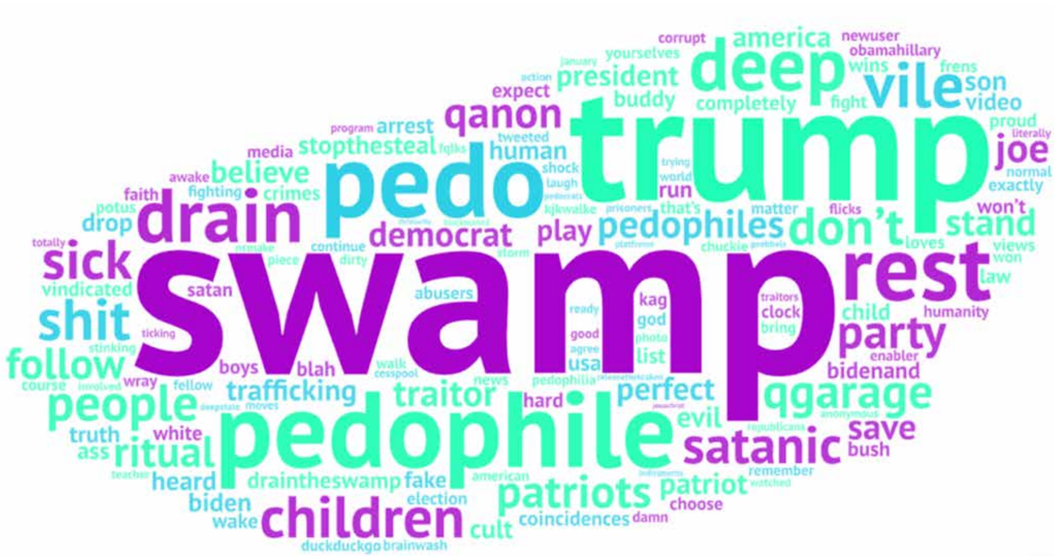

Figure 7. QAnon rhetoric coded word cloud.

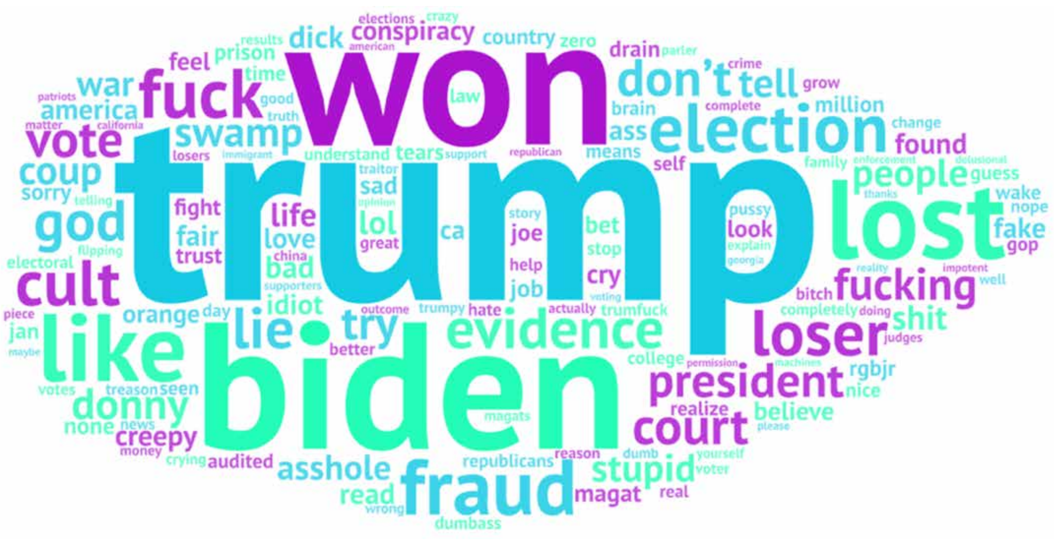

Figure 8. Anti-QAnon coded word cloud

Figure 9. Escalating language coded word cloud.

TRACKING THEMES OVER TIME

As part of the text analytics, a small subset of influential users were isolated to allow for further insight into the data. 52 users were selected who posted 68 out of 72 days in the period of interest. They posted 98,470 times across the period. Then, using the findings from the sample coding, frame analysis and term analysis keywords associated with specific themes were identified. These keywords were then checked, and quality assured to ensure they did not generate a large amount of erroneous noise. These themes were then tracked across time to provide greater contextual richness. To demonstrate how we can track the themes over time we selected a full list of keywords used for analysis and their confidence levels in the theme can be found in Appendix 2.

Figure 10 shows the collective action (blue) and escalation (green) themes over time. The y-axis shows the volume of posts mentioning the two themes scaled between 0 and 1. The volume is normalised in this way so that relative rises and falls can be compared. The x-axis is time.

The escalation begins at a lower level in early November and from late November escalation increases as it becomes clearer that Biden's election victory will not be overturned. The escalation reaches an all-time peak on January the 6th when violent language is being used to show support for the insurrection. For example,

> **"She is another that should hang for treason with her husband Mitch maybe a double hanging for these traitors ???"**

There is a spike in collective action early in the dataset shortly following the polling day when Trump supporters are still hopeful that Trump would be announced as victorious. Posts are mainly calling supporters to action for legitimate means as can be seen below.

> **"Every ballot must be validated! If we lose after that, then we lost! We MUST be able to trust the vote and with all the attacks and lies about our President for the last 5 years, we cannot without verification! 🇺🇸"**

There is also a spike in the collective action frame at the end of the dataset. Posts of this type tend to reference moving to different platforms as they begin to be removed from more mainstream social media sites. These posts also try and motivate the movement in the aftermath of the insurrection.

"This is fantastic news! We need to focus on organizing group, getting the word out and getting work done instead of just complaining on social media"

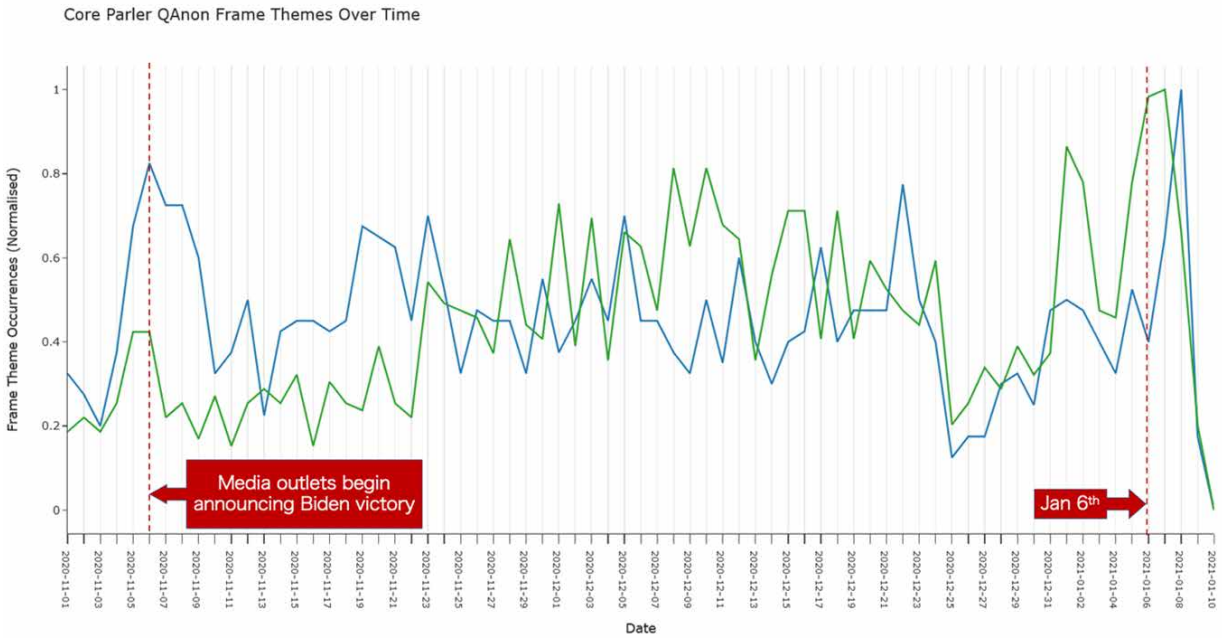

Figure 10. Collective action (blue) and Escalation (green) timeline

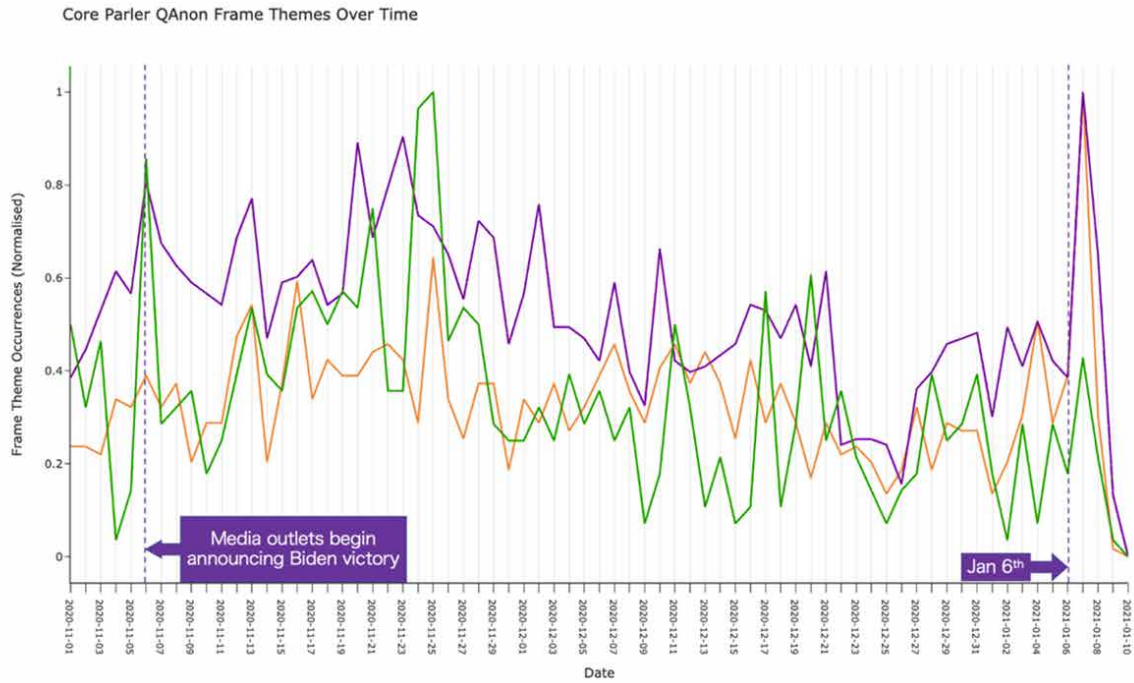

Figure 11. Hidden truth frame (purple), Unfair treatment frame (green), Doom frame (orange) Timeline.

Two significant spikes for the frames are following media outlets announcement of Biden's victory and in the aftermath of the events of January 6th.

Around the time when mainstream media outlets begin announcing Biden's election victory there is a surge in the hidden truth frame and the unfair treatment frame. Posts at this time were generally concerned that the media was lying or that the election had been stolen from its rightful victors. The following quote exemplifies both the hidden truth and unfair treatment frames.

> **"Walk by faith, not by sight. Do not believe what you see on mainstream media. It is all designed against you and me. lies designed to stir up fear".**

The doom frame spiked following the January 6th insurrection when it seemed to many QAnon adherents that all hope was lost, several posts begin to predict the impending anarchy. The hidden truth frame also spikes around this time as QAnon supporters begin to blame the insurrection on Antifa insurgents.

> **"That is a lie, the evil democrats set this up. Antifas dressed as supporters, with their hats turned to the back so they could be distinguished from the true supporters. they were NOT TRUMP SUPPORTERS!!! That I assure you!"**

NETNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION

Implementing the findings from earlier analysis to identify pivotal triggers that transformed the conspiracy discussion toward extremism, netnographic investigation was employed to take a deeper dive into the data. An obvious spike in influential behaviour lay around the lead up to, and aftermath of, January the 6th. Therefore, an event study was conducted into the language used around this period.

The netnographic deep dive first begins with posts marked for frame analysis during the sample coding analysis (from the 3600 posts, 50 posts a day for 72 days, 1st November to 11th January). This sample was then extrapolated to include a larger range of posts from the wider dataset. In our dataset, 47,675 posts were made between the 3rd and 11th of January. These were examined for the themes that had been identified by previous analysis in the sample coding and frame analysis stages. Netnography is used to attempt to understand the voices calling for escalation and violence and the voices trying to call the movement back from extremism.

In the lead-up to the event from the 3rd to 5th of January there were voices calling to action to mobilise support and to assure themselves and others that this would be a significant event.

> **"Always good to be prepared and ready. Travel in numbers and trust nothing".**

On the other end of the spectrum, several posts attempt to invoke moral superiority to differentiate themselves from what they see as more extreme movements such as Black Lives Matter or Antifa.

> **"We don't burn our cities down and THATS a FACT."**

During the insurrection there were heightened levels of calls for violence aiming to stimulate attendees and inspire on-lookers.

> **"FOR ALL RHINOS AND TRAITORS TO COME OUT OF THE DARK. NOW PENCE WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO WALK IN PUBLIC AGAIN WITHOUT FEAR, …REMEMBER WE NEED TO MOVE AS A TEAM".**

Whilst other, less frequent, were trying to call adherents back from extremist rhetoric and instead promoting peace.

> **"Violence isn't the answer".**

In the aftermath of the insurrection from the 7th to 11th of January (when Parler was essentially shut down) some QAnon adherents became further entrenched in their conspiratorial thinking and focused on what they perceived as an overreaction by the government and media. They argued that the insurrection had been exaggerated by the media and that protests by Black Lives Matter had been more damaging. This type of speech typically involved users falling further into the conspiracy echo chamber by claiming the events were a false flag perpetrated by Antifa or arguing that they should have gone further and seized power whilst they had the chance. There was also for some a renewed sense that traitors should be punished for not following through with their rebellion against the election result.

> **"Prison is the new camps for conservative people. But there is more of us than them".**

In the run up to the insurrection and during the event, most messages expressing an opinion on the level of extremity had been calling for escalation and ramping up tensions. However, in the aftermath there is a starker divide between the response to events. Increasingly more users seem to indicate that they felt let down by the movement due to prophecies not being fulfilled. Generally, following the failure of the insurrection fissures in the group which were present throughout the period studied began to widen and become more divisive.

> **"We've heard countless times something big was going to happen and the only thing that happened was We the People got F*CKED. Over and over again. We are tired of your false hope".**

CASE STUDY SUMMARY

This case study aimed to analyse intra-actions of a group to identify how an extreme conspiracy movement escalated to a point of mass vandalism and physical violence in the January 6th insurrection. Our analysis identified three key frames driving behaviour on Parler in the run up to the January 6th insurrection. This included the idea that a truth was being hidden from the public, that their social group was being unfairly treated (particularly in comparison with so called 'liberals') and the sense of an impending doom or generally pessimistic world view. Furthermore, this case study has demonstrated, using text analytics methods, how the key themes fluctuated across time and coincided with key moments in the transformation of the movement and its descent into extremism.

This case study has allowed the implementation of SHIFT analysis to answer the objective of developing a method which integrates social and computer techniques. Network analysis allowed the researchers to identify the most relevant accounts in the QAnon movement. Sample coding identified the key themes most salient in this content; relevance, QAnon phrases, Anti-QAnon stance, conspiracy theory references, escalating language and religious rhetoric. Frame analysis distils the core motivations behind these common themes; uncovering a hidden truth, responding to being treated unfairly and preparing for an impending doom. Text analytics can then be used to extrapolate these findings to a larger dataset using word clouds and keyword plotting to track the themes against key moments in the QAnon movement. Finally, netnographic methods deepen insights into specific moments of violent extremism, in this case study that involved the storming of the capitol on January 6th. Using these techniques, SHIFT analysis is able to deal with large datasets and generate findings surrounding social behaviour in the context of conspiracies and extremism.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this report help to answer the two research aims set out at the beginning of this report. First, we were able to validate social science and computer science techniques in their ability to provide a deeper understanding of conspiracy theories and political extremism using social media data. This report describes a process which utilises network analysis, sample coding, frame analysis, text analytics and netnographic investigation to generate a full picture and rich insights into conspiracy and political extremism. This case study demonstrates that the SHIFT analysis can generate robust findings.

Secondly, this analysis has identified data which suggests a link between online communication and offline events, including violence. This data was organised around several key themes, which drive behaviour and stimulate intra-actions in the group. The frames identified are:

1. **Hidden truth –** This frame was analogous to the epistemic motivations for conspiracy beliefs and served as an isolator, motivating individuals to cut themselves off from the mainstream understanding. This function explains why it was influential in the intra-actions in QAnon and allowed the movement to polarise to the point of mass vandalism and violence on January 6th.

2. **Unfair treatment –** which was particularly salient around the 2020 US election and helped to solidify QAnon as in opposition to the election results. It helped to fulfil the social motivation of conspiracy beliefs as it legitimises the view that their social group is being persecuted and not recognised as superior. In the QAnon movement this promoted a bridging function internally by uniting QAnon adherents against perceived "outsiders" or "traitors".

3. **Impending doom –** this pessimistic worldview legitimised radical action to what was perceived as a hopeless situation. This fits the existential motivation for conspiracy beliefs and served as a motivator for escalation. This was particularly motivational around the 2020 US election where internally in the QAnon echo chamber tensions were raised through frequent discussion of impending doom which motivated extreme behaviour in response.

The text analytics and computer science techniques provided evidence that these frames coincided with key moments in the progression of the movements. This helps to understand both the role of internal group discussions and dynamics when considering conspiracies and extremism. Our final contribution is to demonstrate the importance of within the QAnon movement as can be seen by the repeated centrality of Trump in every key theme.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Our findings indicate several areas and directions where further research is needed to enable more effective mitigation of the security risks and detrimental impacts of extremism, far right and conspiracy beliefs. Following the January 6th insurrection and the splintering evidenced in the netnographic investigation, there are several questions that remain about how QAnon as a group evolved. As has been highlighted in the previous sections, narratives in extreme conspiracy groups are not static and ongoing research is needed to understand how narratives are evolving. While the focus of this case study examines the interplay between extremism and conspiracy theories, conspiracy beliefs have become intertwined with a breadth of political movements. In our report (Understanding Interactions between Conspiracy Communities and Far Right Groups on Telegram and the Role of Figureheads),

we examine how conspiracy groups interact with far-right groups (that may not be be extreme). This report illustrates how the SHIFT analysis techniques can be applied to contexts with a greater number of groups and new narratives, and the overlap in frames.

The current analysis revealed that Trump was a prominent discussion topic in the QAnon movement and its strong hierarchal structure. Further analysis is needed to understand how Trump's absence following his suspension from several mainstream platforms in the wake of the attempted insurrection was dealt with by the QAnon movement. Some indicators suggest they migrated to platforms where they could continue to communicate freely and follow Trump onto more alternative platforms such as Truth Social (Forman-Kat & Stocking, 2022). Other research suggests that QAnon is in search of new messiah figures such as Putin (BBC, 2022, Henderson, 2022). Further research is needed to understand the transformation of the narratives in this movement in the current day and how this impacts the security risk they pose.

This research noted that although the pressure of the initial stimulus (in this case study the 2020 US presidential election) had been relieved, this did not always coincide with a decrease in the level of escalating rhetoric and in most cases led to a change in narratives. For example, some QAnon adherents began to focus on Putin as a new "white hat" figure (BBC, 2022). These changes in narrative should be monitored as they are likely to have an impact on the intra-actions of groups and their behaviour. For example, QAnon in the aftermath of January 6th showed signs of splintering in the netnographic investigation. However, although QAnon seems to have fractured and become in some ways more scattered (Argentino et al. 2021) further investigation is needed to understand whether this has resulted in a decreased security risk or whether the risk has mutated (ibid).

Finally, our research highlighted that there were moments where individuals became disillusioned and, in some cases, de-radicalised to some degree. Future research which wishes to reduce the harmful effects of extremism and conspiracy theories should aim to establish what facilitates these moments and pathways to safe de-radicalisation.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1. SAMPLE CODING QANON CASE STUDY: HOW THEMES WERE CHARACTERISED.

Sample coding is designed to be an exploratory analysis of the content of the data. It allows the social science researchers to engage with the content, understand what the key issues unique to this dataset might be and begin data sorting. This involves segmenting a stratified sample of the data to explore the type of content being produced, the writing style and platform idiosyncrasies. The data can then be coded for key themes relevant to the specific context and dataset.

To ascertain what posts matched these key themes, the research team identified several features of each theme. It is important to note that classification of themes are not mutually exclusive.

Key Themes	Identifying Features: Posts are classified under that theme if...
Relevant to the project	• There was enough content to establish a meaning and if that meaning was related to the research focus • It was clear who the post was addressing or concerning • It referenced specific events or actors • The post was **not** overly similar to other posts (but not picked up by a duplicate filter because of small changes) • The post was **not** spam and was **not** repeatedly promoting goods or services
Conspiracy theory content	• Posts referred to a hidden plot perpetuated by a group of conspirators. For example, coronavirus being a hoax or cover for another government agenda, large scale election rigging (not simply small amounts of voter fraud), the QAnon conspiracy.
Escalating language	• Posts referencing and advocating for violence. • Posts justifying violence and escalation (e.g., traitor speech) • Posts using metaphors which could signify violence or other coded threats (e.g., dose of their own medicine) • Posts arguing that legal means of justice are not sufficient. • Use of hate speech and offensive slurs. • Insults or use of profanity against named individuals (excluding other Parler users who they are in direct conversation with).
Anti-QAnon sentiments	• Posts that were derogatory about QAnon or QAnon users • Posts that were derogatory about Trump (as Trump is a key figure in the QAnon movement). • Posts that disputed key ideas in the QAnon movement (for example that key Democrat figures engage in paedophilia and ritual satanic abuse of children).

Specific QAnon rhetoric	• Bakers and breadcrumbs and allusions to 'following the breadcrumbs. • 'Draining the swamp' or sewers. • 'The Great Awakening' • "Where we go one, we go all' or WWG1WGA. • 'The Storm' that is looming. • White or Black hats • #saveourchildren • The Cabal or deep state – especially in reference to abuse of children • Moles or tunnels • The letter Q or number 17 (as Q is the 17th letter in the alphabet) • Satanic cults and ritual sacrifice **Sources:** Chandler, K. J. (2020). Where we go 1 we go all: a public discourse analysis of QAnon. *McNair Scholars Research Journal*, 13(1), 4. Fong, A., Roozenbeek, J., Goldwert, D., Rathje, S., & van der Linden, S. (2021). The language of conspiracy: A psychological analysis of speech used by conspiracy theorists and their followers on Twitter. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations,* 24(4), 606-623.
Content for further frame analysis	• If the post revealed information about why the user feels connected to the movement. • If the post is calling other users to action. • If the post is conveying important information about who the user sees as antagonists and in opposition to their world view.
Religious references	• Religious imagery and figures (e.g., God, Jesus, Faith, Cross, Rapture, Heaven, Hell, prayer) • References or quotes religious texts (e.g., the Bible and the Quran etc.) • References religious groups (e.g., Christians, Jehovah's witnesses, ISIS, Muslims, Jews etc.)

APPENDIX 2. KEYWORDS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Frame / Theme	Keywords	Quality Assurance Results Number of posts assessed to fit the frame over the number of total posts assessed
Hidden Truth Frame **Total 298 QAd**	Lies	41/43 – fit frame
	Liars	39/42 – fit frame
	Lying	47/50 – fit frame
	Mainstream + media	19/19 – fit frame
	MSM	61/62 – fit frame
	Truth	75/82 – fit frame
Doom Frame **Total 181 QAd**	Chaos	21/26 – fit frame
	Evil	76/82 – fit frame
	Destroy	67/73 – fit frame
Unfair Treatment **Total 127 QAd**	rights	50/54 – fit frame
	Gulag	3/3 – fit frame
	Persecut(ed/ion)	3/3– fit frame
	They + control	19/19 – fit frame
	Oppress	2/2 – fit frame
	Cancel + culture	5/5 – fit frame
	Punish + us	4/4 – fit frame
	tyranny	15/15 – fit frame
	Our voice	11/11 – fit frame
Collective Action **Total 141 QAd**	We + need + to	49/50 – fit theme
	We + have + to	31/32 – fit theme
	We + must	30/30 – fit theme
	We + should	28/29 – fit theme
Escalation **Total 181 QAd**	Fight + for	24/26 – fit theme
	Fight + the(m)	10/11 – fit theme
	Treason	82/84 – fit theme
	Traitor	60/61 – fit theme
Religion **Total 276 QAd**	Pray	76/79 – fit theme
	God	144/156 - fit theme
	Jesus	41/41 – fit theme

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