From Crumbs to Conspiracy:
Qanon as a community of hermeneutic practice

Rose See
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Senior Thesis, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Swarthmore College
Adviser: Maya Nadkarni
Second reader: Christopher Fraga
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Introduction

I grew up around various conspiracy theories – one of my close family members became a staunch subscriber to the anti-vaccination agenda when I was in high school, and has always entertained conservative conspiratorial ideas, including the theory that Obama’s birth certificate is falsified. Growing up in this context has fed into my interest as to why such extreme claims, which seem entirely baseless and disconnected from reality, become compelling to so many individuals. It is easy to dismiss conspiratorial claims as merely the result of human irrationality and fearmongering. However, I think this is an oversimplification. It is a way of dismissing, rather than addressing, the factors that contribute to conspiracy. “Irrationality” is an explanation we use to avoid actually engaging with the issue at hand, and is a label fundamentally lacking in nuance. This is not to say that we should try to normalize or justify the factual inexactitude of conspiracy, but rather, that we must look at why conspiracy, regardless of its truth value, can become such a central and compelling aspect of some worldviews.

With this background in mind, my interest was piqued when I stumbled upon the Pizzagate conspiracy. This theory began in 2016 and was based upon emails hacked from John Podesta, Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman, and distributed through WikiLeaks. These emails were combed through by right-wing groups on digital media sites and formed the basis of the Pizzagate theory. “In the span of a few weeks, a false rumor that Hillary Clinton and her top aides were involved in various crimes snowballed into a wild conspiracy theory that they were
running a child-trafficking ring out of a Washington pizza parlor” (Aisch et al, 2016). As internet actors decoded these releases, they concluded that Comet Ping Pong, a Pizzeria in Washington, DC, was the center of a child sex trafficking ring associated with the Clintons and other prominent Democrats. This theory had such salience that on December 4, 2016, Edgar M. Welch, a 28-year-old from North Carolina, stormed the restaurant with a handgun and assault rifle in search of the sex trafficking ring, supposedly hidden in a nonexistent basement (Aisch et al, 2016). This series of events was the motivation for my thesis, making me wonder how leaked emails could be taken up and decoded in such a compelling way as to gain a massive online following and result in a physical assault. I was especially interested in how conspiracy and digital media worked together to produce this series of events.

These two factors—familial connections with conspiratorial thought and intrigue over Pizzagate—led me to center my thesis around alt-right conspiracies in online communities. While Pizzagate was the first target of my interest, I ended up focusing on Qanon, a conspiracy theory built around a series of cryptic, anonymous posts, which posit that Trump is engaged in a war against the Deep State1. In formulating my thesis, I was concerned with the role and nature of conspiracy, as well as its intersections with digital media and the US social and political environment. What makes conspiracy so compelling? How does conspiracy operate as a mode of understanding, and what truths does it reflect about those who invest it with meaning? How are these forms of understanding tied to social and political realities? What forms of community and subjectivity are enacted by conspiracy, especially in conjunction with digital media? Because I evaluate these questions in the context of Qanon, thorough background on this conspiracy and its

1 According to Dictionary.com, “The Deep State is believed to be a clandestine network entrenched inside the government, bureaucracy, intelligence agencies, and other governmental entities. The Deep State supposedly controls state policy behind the scenes, while the democratically-elected process and elected officials are merely figureheads.”
community is necessary for an in-depth discussion of these questions, which I address later in this introduction. But first, I will offer a preliminary outline of my research and its implications.

Three areas of study shaped my research. In the first, I focused on the discursive elements of conspiracy within Qanon. I was concerned with how conspiracy operates as a specific analytical process and mode of understanding. This included evaluating both the processes and products of conspiratorial analysis. In the second, I studied the forms of community constituted through conspiracy, as well as the processes of subjectification involved. This allowed for a consideration of how conspiracy produces identification, and what kinds of belonging and subjectivity are fostered by it. In the third, I evaluated the epistemology formed through conspiracy. From these areas of focus, I have outlined below some of the key findings that will be discussed in depth throughout my analysis. These findings are considered in conversation with works of anthropological theorists of conspiracy, which will be introduced in my literature review.

While conspiracy is frequently viewed as an ideological entity, conspiratorial thinking, in and of itself, should be viewed separately from the ideological realm. Undoubtedly, conspiracy is utilized by groups with strong ideological affiliations—this is especially the case with the militantly ideological, right-wing outlook harnessed by Qanon. However, conspiracy is better viewed as a style of analysis—a way of viewing the world through a particular lens which reads meaning onto events that are otherwise mundane. This is a learned process that does not necessarily have the intention of constructing an alternate reality, divorced from normal occurrences. Drawing on Lilith Mahmud, conspiracy is a process through which everyday reality can be decoded in a new light and inscribed with new meaning. By learning to see the world
through a specific lens, individuals can view the conspiratorial reality all around them, which was concealed merely by their own ignorance.

While not inherently an ideological thought process, conspiracy undoubtedly reflects ideological elements based on the environment from which it arises. This is because conspiracy theories are produced from within specific social and political contexts and come to reflect these environmental and ideological factors. Especially with the Qanon theory, any understanding of its conspiratorial thinking is inseparable from an understanding of broader right-wing and alt-right thinking. Beyond these group-specific contexts, conspiracy also comes to reflect broader dynamics of the world in which it operates, including its historic and contemporary power structures, hierarchies, and inequalities.

The process of conspiracy is emotionally invested. It operates as an embodiment of hopes and fears, whether they be articulated outright or exist only subconsciously. These hopes and fears, later theorized as elements of apocalypticism and millennialism by Harding and Stewart, are produced by local and global dynamics. Conspiratorial thought and its subsequent theories operate as all-consuming embodiments of the fears and desires that exist within particular social contexts. It is a way to order the world into distinct categories of possibility and posit how these possibilities will come to be.

Conspiracy does not exist in isolation—not from the social and political spheres, nor from networks of other historic and contemporary conspiracies. As historicized products, conspiracies build upon what has come before. Applying this to Qanon, historic right-wing conspiracies and current social and political dynamics shape the content of its theories. Qanon is difficult to conceptualize as a singular conspiracy theory due to the multiplicity of its beliefs. Rather than being a singular entity, it is a network of theories linked together by unifying traits,
which include distrust in Mainstream Media narratives, disenchantment with the US political system, and a heavily racialized and gendered political and cultural constitution linked with the broader alt-right movement.

Finally, conspiracy as discussed throughout this thesis is in large part about community. More than just a thought process or conceptualization of the world, Qanon is a communal entity with its own dynamics and norms. It is a community into which one must be initiated in order to become a specific, knowing subject that abides by rules governing interaction, knowledge, and ideology. Identification with the community and acceptance into it is a process of subjectification. Individuals must learn to embody the conspiracy as an analytical process, demonstrate fluency with its norms, and internalize the worldview it produces.

Throughout this thesis, I will focus on the analytical processes Qanon has constructed to make Q’s serial posts legible and endow them with meaning. Drawing upon Lave and Wenger’s (1991) description of communities of practice, I argue that through engagement with Q’s posts and construction of a specific analytical process to decode them, Qanon has constituted itself as a community of hermeneutic practice with its own cultural norms and process of initiation by which individuals become specific, knowing subjects. Through their hermeneutic practice, the community articulates and embodies a conspiratorial epistemology through which the world becomes legible.

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2 “A community of practice is a net of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 98).
What is Qanon?

A conspiracy theory known as Qanon, previously existing on the internet fringes of 4chan and 8chan, gained nationwide media attention at a rally for President Trump in Tampa, Florida on July 31, 2018. Attendants at the Trump rally sported T-shirts and signs dedicated to Qanon, with messages declaring “Where we go one we go all” and “We are Q” (Stanley-Beker 2018). In the following days, Qanon became the focus of news articles across numerous national sources, including the New York Times and the Washington Post. In addition to its presence at physical rallies, Qanon has gained the attention of celebrities such as Rosanne Barr, who brought Qanon content increasingly onto more mainstream internet platforms. Barr’s interest in Qanon included her retweeting posts from prominent theorists in the Qanon community and making claims directly related to Qanon. One such claim is expressed when she tweets “President Trump has freed so many children held in bondage to pimps all over this world. Hundreds each month. He has broken up trafficking rings in high places everywhere. notice that. I disagree on some things, but give him benefit of the doubt-4 now” (Deb 2018).

With Qanon being one of the most contemporary conspiracy theories associated with the Trump presidency, it provides a window into right-wing conspiratorial thinking. Many news sources (which have described Qanon followers as “a deranged conspiracy cult”) offer a basic overview of the theory’s evolution and key beliefs. These summaries primarily describe how Qanon has arisen as a fringe conspiracy theory built on posts made by “Q” on 4chan. As one article describes, Q is “an anonymous user claiming to be a government agent with top security clearance, waging war against the so-called Deep State in service to the 45th president. “‘Q’

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3 4chan and 8chan are anonymous message boards known for their lack of content regulation, commitment to free speech, and “anything goes” logic. Interactions are ephemeral, disappearing after a couple hours or days unless users individually archive them.
feeds disciples, or “bakers,” scraps of intelligence, or “bread crumbs,” that they scramble to bake into an understanding of the ‘Storm’—the community’s term, drawn from Trump’s cryptic reference last year to ‘the calm before the storm’—for the president’s final conquest over elites, globalists and deep-state saboteurs” (Stanley-Becker 2018). However, these reports are lacking in-depth analysis of the evolution of Qanon, its analytical processes, the worldview it articulates, and the communal dynamics it produces. In this section, I will outline the evolution and ideology of Qanon and its followers, offering background that will be used in later analysis.

The Qanon conspiracy theory has its roots in a thread called “Calm Before the Storm” on 4chan’s /pol/, or politically incorrect, page. This thread was likely created in reference to a cryptic comment made by Trump at a dinner and promotional event with military leaders on October 5, 2017. Speaking to the press after dinner, Trump commented, “You guys know what this [gathering] represents? Maybe it’s the calm before the storm. Could be the calm, the calm before the storm,” and offered no further context to the press that were present (Martineau 2017). Later that month, on October 28, an anonymous 4chan user posted that Hillary Clinton would be arrested on the morning of October 30. In a subsequent post, the user claimed “HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am. Expect massive riots organized in defiance and others fleeing the US to occur.” Although these predictions never came to pass, this did not detract from the growth of Qanon. Their inaccuracy has since been interpreted by followers of Qanon as part of an intentional misinformation campaign that serves the broader purpose of the anonymous poster.

Following these predictions, the account began posting longer, more enigmatic bodies of text. These subsequent posts contained cryptic questions intermingled with vague statements
about a range of topics, including more claims about Hillary Clinton, references to military intelligence agencies, discussions of President Trump, and commentary about deeply rooted corruption in US and international politics. Most prominent were references to military intelligence agencies and claims about the supreme power of the President of the United States (POTUS), with nonspecific claims about Trump liberating the nation from the “criminal rogue elements” which control it (Q 2018). Over the couple of days following the initial post, this user posted approximately sixty times⁴, employing a similar rhetorical style and containing content centered around and expanding upon the previous themes. Although these posts started on 4chan, they later migrated to 8chan, with the intent of having a more free-speech space for dialogue. As of April 29, 2019, the user had posted 3,330 times (qanon.pub).

This anonymous user, or users, would come to be called “Q,” and their posts would spawn “Qanon,” a name used to describe both the theory produced based upon Q’s posts and the community built around it. The name Qanon is an attempt to acknowledge both the source of the posts (Q) and their anonymous identity (shortened to “anon”). This name is very fluid, used in many different contexts. Qanon is a conspiracy theory, or set of conspiracy theories, united by Q’s posts. It is also the community of individuals who follow these posts and undertake analytical labor and conspiratorial lines of thought that coproduce the Qanon theory. In addition, as will be described later, Qanon is considered a social and political movement which strives to enlighten the public to the truths being disclosed by Q. The fluidity of the term Qanon forces a more expansive conceptualization of conspiracy which encapsulates not just conspiracy theories themselves, but the analytical processes behind them, the community and individual subjectivities formed, and the decentralized, but ideologically aligned, movement it produces.

⁴ While users on 4chan and 8chan are anonymous, this user’s posts were identified by anons by using a tripcode, which is a unique series of characters assigned to posters on particular threads.
Q’s posts are called “crumbs” by participants in the community, and followers of these crumbs have named themselves “bakers,” a metaphor about how they construct the truth out of Q’s hints. This metaphor is frequently used within the community despite the fact that in reality, dough is baked into bread, not crumbs. From Q’s highly cryptic posts, an interactive community of followers and enthusiasts has formed, working together to interpret Q’s posts to form the Qanon theory. This digital community exists primarily on 4chan and 8chan threads such as /QResearch/, but also on third party websites such as qanon.pub, an app called Q Drops, and reddit, which contains several subreddit variations of r/thegreatawakening, all of which have been banned for violating sitewide policies, specifically for inciting violence, harassment, and disseminating personal information (Ohlheiser 2018). In an article written by a group of “anons,” (anonymous 4chan and 8chan users) and posted to Qanon community websites such as qanon.pub, the anons describe how Q’s post provides “intel” from inside the Trump administration and military intelligence agencies. These posts are decoded by anons, who consider themselves Q researchers, and are “focused on what President Trump has faced, is facing, and will face as the leader of the free world: corruption, subversion, sedition, and evil. The President is fighting for “We the People” of America, the public citizenry, and, ultimately, the world” (Anons, 3-4).

Q’s posts and the accompanying communal input that has unfolded over the past year have worked together to produce a particular worldview that characterizes Qanon as a conspiratorial community. Analyzing the discourses and dialogues within Qanon materials, including publications by anons and posts by Q, a strong language of community is one of the

5 Reddit, “the front page of the internet,” is a news aggregation and discussion website. It is divided up into many different subreddits dedicated to particular topics. Material such as images, videos, links, and text can posted to subreddits and upvoted, shared, and commented on by registered users.
key themes. "Where we go one we go all" is a phrase that appears over and over again throughout Qanon sites and boards. Drawing upon an interpretive framework reliant on paranoid and conspiratorial group thinking, the Qanon theory encompasses and explains events as they unfold in real time. In an article authored by anons on the 8chan board that Q currently uses, Qanon was self-described as “an organic information operation and truth-seeking campaign, the goal of which is to help President Trump peacefully Make America Great Again, and by extension to make the world a better, safer place for all to live in peace” (Anons, 1).

The all-encompassing nature of Qanon makes it difficult to define with much specificity the overarching beliefs that tie the theory together due to the diversity of topics covered and claims made. However, at the broadest level, Qanon claims that the United States, and the world in general, is being controlled and subjugated by a group of deeply embedded, corrupt and illicit agents.

This worldwide power structure, known as “the Cabal”, along with the compromised monarchies, politicians, governmental agencies (the Deep State), corporations, charities, media organizations, and other private individuals is what President Trump is fighting. This same Cabal of corrupt and truly evil individuals is what was fighting to prevent President Trump, and We The People, from winning in the 2016 election, and it has been fighting those election results ever since. (Anons, 4)

The Cabal, or Deep State, is pinpointed by Q as the world power structure that is creating suffering, conflict, and inequality for humanity. The Qanon community believes that Q’s posts indicate that “three ‘puppet masters’ exert a degree of power in the world that defies credulity: The House of Saud [monarchy in Saudi Arabia], the Rothschild family, and George Soros, each having their own sources of financing and control mechanisms” (Anons, 4). These three figures exert totalizing political and economic control over the world order, especially the US political system. Using the Mainstream Media as their propaganda and subversion tool, the Cabal has supposedly been able to hide all traces of their influence from the world. They have also been
able to spark social and political discontent, pitting citizens against one another by orchestrating movements for racial and gender equality, Democratic versus Republican political races, and catalyzing war by promoting interventionist foreign policy or funding terrorist groups. All of this is part of the Cabal’s campaign to remain in control and keep global citizens locked into an exploitative system, in which the Cabal achieve great financial and political gains by keeping the world’s population locked in conflict and under financial duress.

In this global context, Q focuses primarily on the US social and political climate and Donald Trump specifically. In most of Qanon’s rhetoric, the three civilian intelligence agencies (the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Federal Bureau of Intelligence (FBI), and Department of Justice (DOJ)) have been coopted by the Deep State, or Cabal. The National Security Agency (NSA), referred to as military intelligence, is the one agency working on behalf of the people. In the words of Praying Medic⁶, a self-described Qanon researcher, "There is a war going on between the civilian intelligence agencies and the military intelligence. Civilian intelligence agencies essentially got coopted by bad people and the military saw what was going on, and the military essentially recruited Trump to work with them to gain back control of rogue intelligence agencies essentially" (Praying Medic, 2018). In this worldview, Trump is working alongside the military to liberate the United States from the corruption and oppression of the Deep State actors. Illustrating this theme is the belief that Attorney Robert Mueller’s investigation⁷ into the Trump

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⁶ Praying Medic is an EMT, paramedic, and author with a passion for writing, blogging, and creating videos about a range of topics including healing, dreams, deliverance, spirituality, hearing God’s voice, and politics (Praying Medic, prayingmedic.com/about). A former atheist, Praying Medic became religious in 2008, claiming he had a dream where God said he would heal Praying Medic’s patients if he prayed. Praying Medic has become a prominent Q “researcher,” making several YouTube videos on the topic, as well as discussing it on his social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook.

⁷ In May 2017, Attorney Robert Mueller was appointed as special counsel to investigate Russian interference in the US presidential election, and the involvement of Trump and his campaign. The investigation has been ongoing since that date and is leading to a series of indictments that implicate members of Trump’s campaign in illegal activities throughout the election. The investigation ended in late March 2019. Due to time constraints, the results of Mueller’s investigation will not be discussed in the context of this thesis.
administration’s collusion with Russia is a smokescreen for Trump’s investigation of the “Deep State” within the US. Essentially, Trump is working for the good of the populace to dismantle corrupt and illicit activities of the elitists who have previously controlled US politics. These elitists are most commonly claimed to be Hillary Clinton and her political allies, Barack Obama and his administration, and George Soros, to name a few. Depicted as child sex traffickers, globalists, and enemies of the state and the people, this elitist Deep State is the target of the Mueller investigation and will soon be brought down by Trump. In fact, Q claims that many of these individuals have already been indicted and are going about their daily lives with ankle monitors on to produce a semblance of normalcy.

The followers of Q’s posts consider themselves not only as the Qanon community, but as part of the Great Awakening movement, described by anons as an “enlightenment of the public consciousness and conscience, not just in America, but worldwide. This ‘awakening’ occurs as anons decode and decipher the meanings of crumbs and disseminate them to the rest of the public” (Anons. “Q: The Basics.” 5). This language is revealing of how members of the Qanon community view themselves as essential parts of a struggle to enact change in the world. They believe that by cultivating knowledge through Q’s hints they can be part of the movement to break out of the dystopian order of ignorance and exploitation imposed by the Deep State. This dynamic of struggle between good and evil is communicated through Qanon’s idea of “The Storm,” or the moment when Trump and his enlightened followers will take back the nation from its oppressors.

Because of the complexity of this topic, chapter 1 will be dedicated to providing background information necessary for understanding the multifaceted, and often technical, nature of Qanon. I will provide a literature review to frame subsequent analysis, as well as a discussion
of the right-wing worldview, which the Qanon community draws heavily upon. In chapter 2, I will provide an overview of 4chan and 8chan’s structure and function, as well as an ethnographic account of how I became fluent in their use. I will also discuss the informational ecology of the spaces through which Qanon constitutes itself and outline my methodology. My analysis does not truly begin until Chapter 3, where I will explicate Qanon’s analytical processes and conduct a textual analysis of Q’s 14th post to demonstrate these processes. I will analyze Qanon as a community of hermeneutic practice, showing the ways in which they constitute themselves as a collectivity and their processes of subjectification. In Chapter 4, I discuss common discursive and ideological themes throughout Qanon, showing the epistemology built through their hermeneutic practices. My final chapter offers concluding thoughts on this project.
Chapter 1: Literature review

Qanon sits at the intersection of multiple areas of study, including conspiracy, digital media, political extremism, and the contemporary US alt-right. Understandings Qanon’s complexities necessitates its contextualization within these multiple domains. In the following chapter, I will discuss the breadth of ethnographic and theoretical literature within anthropology on the topics of conspiracy, digital media, and political extremism, followed by a discussion of contemporary right-wing narratives in the US. These theories will provide a framework for analyzing Qanon in more depth in subsequent chapters.

Anthropology of conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories have long been a subject of cross-disciplinary analysis, including political science, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Yet this literature has historically drawn on a framework of conspiracy as pathology, rooted in human irrationality. Because conspiracy theories offer extreme and unbelievable alternatives to common modes of understanding, they are often dismissed as fantastical ravings. Richard Hofstadter’s foundational work, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” sums up the classic take on conspiracy theory, classifying it as a “paranoid style” defined by “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (Hofstadter 1964, 77). Hofstadter’s analysis oversimplifies conspiracy, passing judgment on the conspiracy theorist as someone who “resists enlightenment” rather than
asking what it means to use conspiracy as a mode of understanding. The common dismissal of conspiracy based on its factual validity fails to acknowledge that “there is truth to be found in suspicions of power” (West and Sanders 2003, 15). In this literature review, I will give an overview of the anthropological work that has been done to analyze the meaning of conspiracy and add nuance to the common perception that it is rooted in human irrationality. In doing so, I argue that conspiracy is better understood as a learned analytical style that reads meaning onto the world, embodies anxieties over the present, and constitutes individual and communal subjectivities.

Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style have been extensively studied in the United States context. Despite the drawbacks in Hofstadter’s conclusions, he does offer useful remarks on trends in right-wing movements. Tracing the paranoid style in politics back to the late 1700s, Hofstadter surmises that the paranoid aspects of right-wing thought in the United States draw upon a three-part framework—sustained conspiracy, the selling out of American interests by political elites, and the infiltration of institutions such as the mass media by enemies intending to sabotage the US populace. While Hofstadter’s conclusions should be read with caution, his observations nevertheless mirror many aspects of contemporary US conspiracy and show its heavily historical nature. Tracing the roots of US conspiracy, George Marcus concludes that the paranoid style rose to prominence during the Cold War era, when paranoid thought dominated culture, politics, and policy, and when international relations mirrored the anxieties of superpowers. In the post-Cold War era, modernization and globalization have produced a crisis of representation, where conspiracy has risen as a project of reason to fill the void left by a “felt inadequacy of conceptual frameworks to explain the world as it has historically emerged and is currently changing” (Marcus 1999, 4). While conspiratorial thinking is often only studied in the context of right wing politics, it is important to acknowledge its presence across the political spectrum. Right-wing theories often
center around opposition to the new world order, while left-wing theories center around inequalities of race, sex, and class (Harding and Stewart 2003, 260).

Conspiracy, as a totalizing force, offers the illusion of order in the rapidly changing modern landscape. Appadurai’s theory of globalization offers a useful lens to analyze conspiracy, focusing study onto “the impact of deteritorialization on the imaginative resources of lived, local experiences” (Appadurai 1990, 49). Applying this to conspiracy, paranoid thinking can be interpreted as an “ideoscape” in which transparency and conspiracy manifest at the intersection of global forces and local interpretations, where ideas are “decoded” through diverse perspectives and experiences of the modern world (West and Sanders 2003, 11). Conceptualizations of globalization highlight the increasingly complex ways in which power and ideas circulate in ways that are often obfuscated from individual understanding. Modern political systems claim legitimacy through the idea of democratic transparency, yet the increasingly complex nature of political systems makes governance and the exercise of political power difficult for most individuals to understand. Considering this, the New World Order of global political interconnectedness has become a source of anxiety, which in turn promotes conspiratorial thinking.

While conspiracy is often viewed as a fringe mode of understanding, Lilith Mahmud demonstrates how conspiracy becomes a central mode of understanding the world. From her research on Italian Freemasonry, Mahmud finds that the practice of discretion becomes a way to understand and decode a world that is layered with symbols and meaning. "Discretion became for me a kind of coded visibility in which certain symbols and signs, intelligible only to those who have been trained to recognize them, were in plain sight, hidden not by an act of concealment but by the beholder’s own illiteracy" (Mahmud 2012, 431). In this way, conspiratorial thinking is not
about uncovering hidden secrets, but about learning to discern the existing truth, where the only concealing factor is the viewer’s inability to see. “Discretion required an understanding that objects are at the same time in plain sight and hidden from view. Symbols are everywhere and events are public, but only the correctly conjured public has the knowledge necessary, be it esoteric or social, to decipher, to participate, to see.” (Mahmud 2012, 431) Mahmud also makes a link to Turner’s (1969) conceptualization of communitas, in which learning to be discreet enables new forms of sociality, meaning, and belonging. “It was their ability to see the world as a forest of symbols that allowed Freemasons to find meaning, beauty, and sociality in their lives” (Mahmud 2012, 435). In explicating the concept of discretion amongst Freemasons, Mahmud shows how conspiracy cannot just be viewed as a process of digging for hidden truths, but as a new way of seeing which enables the properly trained individual to view the truths that have been there, in plain sight, all along. This new process of seeing also translates into a process of identification, forming a community based on the practice of discretion.

Much anthropological literature strives to understand the truths about self and society conveyed by conspiracy. Harry West and Todd Sanders situate conspiracy within discourses of power, transparency, and modernity, arguing that conspiracy theories are a mode of understanding that interrogates existing systems and conveys truths about power relations. The labeling of the new, global world order as an entity with transparent structures of power and politics has been accompanied by a rise in the suspicion of political power. Due to this, conspiratorial thinking must analyze discourses of transparency as well as conspiracy to understand how the two are shaped by power and politics. Conspiracy theories are “discourses that construct truths in contradiction to the (also constructed) truths of discourses on transparency” (West and Sanders 2003, 15).
Conspiratorial thinking is thus a productive process that challenges common conceptualizations of power.

Although its theories are often interpreted as ideology, conspiracy must be understood as a practice that draws upon a particular style of interpretation. The practice of conspiracy, rather than being driven by irrationality, is an explanatory interpretation of modern and historical facts. “Paranoid observations,” as Jammer Hunt calls them, serve as swift, subtle, and refined ways of ordering reality to explain an outcome that seems otherwise random or inexplicable. These observations, taken together, construct conspiracy. Rather than serving as a source of suffering, as Hofstadter claimed, “conspiracy theory, and the mundane details that root it on planet earth, can become a stable center in itself—the missing details in a life” (Stewart 1999, 15). Considering this, digital life often fails to provide concrete answers to life’s questions, conspiracy interpretations can be “a ‘reasonable’ component of rational and commonsensical thought and experience in certain contexts” (Marcus 1999, 2). Conspiracy should be viewed as “rational interpretations of random occurrences (‘objectifying facts’) based on a delusional hypothesis” (Hunt 1999, 29).

Pushing further against the establishment of conspiracy as pathology, anthropologists have theorized how conspiracy can be a therapeutic and even empowering mode of understanding the modern world. Daniel Hellinger theorizes that conspiracy is a behavioral process that pushes back against hegemonic claims of political transparency. In the United States, conspiracies can “serve popular resistance and empowerment because they cast suspicion on the transparency and legitimacy of actions undertaken by the police, military, and intelligence agencies, whose missions include undertaking conspiracies” (Hellinger 2003, 105). Conspiracy can thus be a form of collective resistance against a hegemonic political order. This conceptualization, however, may overestimate the empowering aspects of conspiracy, and should be read with caution. Rather than
being overtly an act of resistance, conspiracy can be viewed more accurately as an aspect of “therapeutic culture” that tracks the “tensions and symptoms of the New World Order” (Harding and Stewart 2003, 259). In an increasingly globalized reality, conspiratorial thinking is a “discourse animated at once by fear and desire,” a reaction to the anxieties of modern existence and sociopolitical reality. Read together, Hellinger, Harding and Stewart reveal the inextricable relationship between hegemonic global modernity and conspiratorial thinking, which is both a reactive and constructive process.

Situated within a context of globalization and modernity, anxieties over the present in the United States are shaped by a twofold framework of apocalypticism and millennialism—or competing senses of impending doom or coming utopia (Harding and Stewart 1999, 285). In the new world order, according to Berlant, “politics itself has been demonized in America so that ordinary conflicts among different publics are taken as evidence of a terrible state of political emergency. Images of political life ‘on the street’ become proof that a violent change threatens an idealized version of the nation” (Harding and Stewart 1999, 300). Memories of the past, which are themselves shaped by modern discourses and often blend fantasy with factuality, form the basis of conspiratorial thinking. Because “our historical condition is the foundation of our experience of history,” the past is interpreted in ways that align with present ideologies (Fassin 2008, 213). Thus, the interpretation of history and embodiment of its present impacts makes it so that “conspiracy theories become not so much fantasies as factual realities” (Fassin 2008, 325). Modern imagination is a productive force that draws upon the anxieties and ideals of the present, as well as historic contexts and factors of social and political existence. As a part of this imaginative project, conspiratorial thinking produces an ordered view of society and constitutes subjectivities.
Anthropology of digital communities

Contemporary times are marked by the growth of the digital sphere, and a breadth of theoretical and ethnographic literature has been produced on these topics in the field of anthropology. Anthropologists have increasingly questioned the ways in which the rapidly growing and changing digital world is impacting lived realities, social relations and norms, space and time, communal identity, as well as influencing socioeconomic and cultural change (Spitulnik 1993, 293). In this section, I will offer an overview of digital media and their relation to power, politics, social life, identity, and modes of understanding, showing how they enable new forms of community while also being implicated in the reproduction of systems of power and politics.

According to Gabriella Coleman, "digital media have cultivated new modes of communication and selfhood; reorganized social perceptions and forms of self-awareness; and established collective interests, institutions, and life projects" (Coleman 2010, 490). While digital media has inarguably impacted the nature of the social world, theories vary on the nature and meaning of these changes. Drawing upon Coleman’s review article, “Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media,” (2010) two primary frameworks are used to characterize the impact of digital media on social relations. The first is an optimistic analysis which posits that digital media acts as a democratizing force in social interactions and the exchange of ideas. Citing Shirky (2008) and Weinberg (2007), Coleman states that “social media allowed for more communicative interactivity, flexibility, social connectivity, user-generated content, and creativity, facilitating more democratic participation than did previous digital platforms and greater interaction among larger swaths of the global populace” (Coleman 2010, 489). In the other, more pessimistic, framework, digital media has failed to realize this promise of democratic participation and dialogue. As Ginsburg, quoted in Coleman, claims “This techno-imaginary universe of digital eras
and divides... has the effect of restratifying the world along lines of a late modernity” (Coleman 2010, 490). While digital media provides a new forum for communication and interaction, this space is still bound by the same rules of power and politics, thus reinscribing hierarchy and exclusivity.

One of the earlier anthropologists of digital media, writing in 1993, Spitulnik sees media as fundamentally reconstituting relations. As a theorist who draws from the first idea of media as democratization, Spitulnik evaluates how the digital world acts as a site of constant interaction and negotiation. She claims it has led to the "erosion of the linear communication model" and the consumption / production dichotomy (Spitulnik 1993, 297). Material is received, analyzed, evaluated, and often altered or contested, leading to new modes of understanding through a decentralized process. In her work, Spitulnik examines mass media “not so much as definers of ‘reality,’ but as dynamic sites of struggle over representation, and complex spaces in which subjectivities are constructed and identities are contested” (Spitulnik 1993, 296). In this way, she draws heavily upon the idea of digital media as a democratic space of struggle where preexisting social dynamics can be altered and negotiated.

Furthering Spitulnik’s analysis, Clay Shirky describes how digital media has opened up new channels to enact change through "greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action" (Shirky 2011, 29). Anonymity and activism often go hand in hand. Situated within this framework, Gabriella Coleman in “Our Weirdness is Free” evaluates the ways in which the anonymity of digital interactions creates a powerful space for collective action, in which the culture of anonymous creates a spontaneous “logic of its own.” Within the digital sphere, social relations are fundamentally altered (Coleman 2012). Many sites of digital activity draw upon elements of
complete anonymity, in the case of 4chan, or pseudo-anonymity, in the case of reddit. Without the constraints of having personal identities disclosed, anonymity enables new forms of interaction and becomes a project that intermingles internet culture and political activism. The fluidity of participation and impossibility of determining the identity of individual participant means that "anonymous manages to achieve spectacular visibility and individual invisibility at once," creating a decentralized movement that cannot be pinned to figureheads (Coleman 2012, 93). As Coleman argues, anonymous activities "have tapped into a deep disenchantment with the political status quo, without positing a utopian vision—or any overarching agenda—in response" (Coleman 2012, 86). Anonymous practices have become a way to pursue social and political change and have altered the ways in which politics and identity are constituted.

While digital communities may draw upon preexisting frameworks, it is important to recognize how they are also producing something new and acting as sites that fundamentally reconstruct individual and communal identity. One of the most significant impacts of digital technologies is their ability to create virtual connections, community, and subjectivities that were previously unimaginable. Tom Boellstorff’s theorization outlined in Coming of Age in Second Life is crucial for understanding the meaning of digital community. Boellstorff proposes that digital communities can be studied “in their own right,” and was one of the first anthropologists to conduct an ethnography of digital communities without evaluating the physical identities of his study participants. In doing so, Boellstorff asserts that the interactions that occur and subjectivities that are formed in the virtual world do not need to be analyzed in conjunction with their physical counterparts, but that digital communities are “legitimate sites of culture” in and of themselves (Boellstorff 2008, 61). Interactions and communities do not need to be physical to be “real.” In fact, the virtuality used to characterize digital interactions can be applied to all aspects of life. “It
is not only that virtual worlds borrow assumptions from real life; virtual worlds show us how, under our very noses, our ‘real’ lives have been ‘virtual’ all along” (Boellstorff 2008, 5). Because experiences are all filtered through preexisting modes of understanding, determined by cultural, political, and social dynamics, physical identity always has an element of virtuality.

In contrast, drawing upon Coleman’s second framework of digital community as a process of re-stratification, Wilson and Peterson argue that early analyses of the internet’s potential for democratization and individual empowerment were overly optimistic and ignored the ways in which preexisting hierarchies of power and agency shape digital spaces. While technology provides a new forum for interaction and connection that may alter the social sphere, the changes in community and communicative practice are “embedded in existing practices and power relations of everyday life” (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 449). While new forms of communication, identity, and understanding are produced in a decentralized and participatory manner within digital media, they are products of the preexisting social world. This perspective of reinscription can be seen in movements such as #Gamergate, a 2014 trend that sold itself as activism against unethical game journalism but was largely a cover for a backlash against increasing feminist involvement in the digital and game world. Digital media sites, primarily reddit and 4chan, became sites for misogyny and anti-feminist activism, affirming masculine identity in the digital sphere (Massanri 2017).

Rather than being mutually exclusive, these two frameworks overlap and intersect. Taken together, they provide a structure to analyze the nature and meaning of digital communities. Digital media are cultural products and act as sites of contestation and negotiation, where social relations, politics, and power are both defined in new ways and reinscribed according to preexisting structures. Digital media enable practices of modernity to be reconfigured through “continuous
appropriation of taken for granted cultural backgrounds and practices by explicit mechanisms of knowledge and power" (Escobar 1994, 58). Because they enable an increased frequency of interactions not bounded by physical space, digital media have great power to bring together a wide range of perspectives and create a new sphere for cultural production, in which preexisting practices are negotiated alongside new practices. With the distribution of media into daily life, the digital sphere is now a "genuine site of human activity supported by crafted objects that open possibilities for social and cultural development" (Nardi 2015, 19).

A final important aspect in the anthropology of digital media is its role in creating a space for individual and collective identity formation. As Boellstorff discusses, technology creates the possibility for reconstituting identity in unique ways. "Our humanity is thrown off balance, considered anew, and reconfigured through transformed possibilities for place-making, subjectivity, and community” (Boellstorff 2008, 5). While the forms of identity and community constituted may draw upon aspects of physical identity and the dynamics that comprise the social world as a whole, digital spheres alter the ways in which they operate and allow for their reconfiguration in altered ways. "Today's life on the screen dramatizes and concretizes a range of cultural trends that encourage us to think of identity in terms of multiplicity and flexibility" (Turkle 1999, 643). Digital modes of existence allow for relative anonymity with greater flexibility and multiplicity in modes of existence, which enables the exploration of new aspects of identity. Several forms of identity may even be adopted and explored simultaneously, creating "a distributed self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time" (Turkle 1999, 644). Conceptualizations of digital media as a site of subjectification and community building are integral to understanding the ways in which Qanon constitutes itself in the digital sphere.
Political extremism and the Alt Right

While the focus of this section is to provide background information on the rise and current situation of the alt right in the United States, a few notes on the anthropology of political extremism will be useful to foreground this discussion. In “Ethnographies of the Far Right,” Kathleen Blee suggests that theoretical literature explaining right-wing ideology requires supplementation with anthropological ethnography to challenge externalist, oversimplified conclusions that have traditionally been drawn on extremist movements. Ethnographic studies have revealed that extremist groups are far from monolithic in their membership, and members participate for a wide range of reasons, with differing ideologies and agendas. As discussed by Linden and Klandermans, motives for joining extremist movements can be characterized in some of the following ways: "instrumentality—someone wants to change a social or political state of affairs; identity—someone wants to engage with like-minded others; and ideology—someone wants to express a view" (Linden and Klandermans 2007, 199). Susan Harding’s work articulates the importance of separating value judgments from analytical frameworks when evaluating fundamentalist belief systems. While fundamentalism and extremism are not the same, her theorization can be applied to extremism as well. Academic discourses have historically concluded that fundamentalism is backwards, leading to an othering of fundamentalists that poises them as antithetical to modernity. This analysis ignores the ways that fundamentalism is constituted by modernity. As Harding says, “if we approach the multiple representations of fundamentalism according to modernist code, that is, literally, weighing their truth-value against some hypothetically independent realities, then we remain captive of the overarching story line of liberal progress which those representations reproduce” (Harding 1991, 374). Considering that many of the works I cite in this section are not
from anthropologists due to the contemporary nature of the alt right, their analysis should be evaluated within the context of these frameworks.

While providing an extensive history of the alt right is not possible in this limited context, I will provide a brief outline of elements contributing to the rise of the movement. Despite the sudden crystallization of the alt-right’s presence in public consciousness with the rise of the Trump administration, the movement has a long history. In Hofstadter’s early analysis of the paranoid style, he demonstrates how right-wing politics as early as the 18th century in the colonial US drew upon conspiratorial thinking that made claims about the selling out of US interests to elites, and the infiltration of the media by nefarious actors—rhetoric that is echoed by the alt-right movement (Hofstadter 1964). Political extremism and white nationalism, trademarks of the alt-right, have roots in the explicitly white supremacist movement that has historically existed on the fringes of the US as a “politics of white resentment” (Bjork-James and Maskovsky 2017). These movements have generally tried to “rebrand white supremacy within more broadly acceptable language,” exemplified by the KKK’s attempt to subsume white nationalism under the guise of cultural pride (Bjork-James and Maskovsky 2017).

Despite this long history, the explicit white nationalism employed by the alt-right has not been so visible in the public sphere since the civil rights era. As David Neiwert8 outlines in Alt America, the alt-right, as the latest incarnation of right-wing politics, began to gain more strength during the Clinton administration in the 1990s. During this time, right-wing political groups categorized themselves as patriotic militia movements, supported by a growing right-wing media.

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8 It should be noted that David Neiwert, a journalist and author specializing in right-wing extremism, oversimplifies several aspects of alt-right ideology, including saying that more conspiratorial aspects of their thinking is “made possible only by a willingness to believe in easily disprovable falsehoods.” This is a judgment that is definitely not anthropological, coming from a different discipline. However, Neiwert offers a well-documented analysis of the alt-right’s recent history. Due to the contemporary nature of this topic, anthropological research is limited.
apparatus. During the Obama administration, these movements gained more momentum, accompanied by a shift to the right in many media sources. The emergence of the Tea Party in 2009, which drew upon white populism, was one precursor to the alt-right. Central to the Tea Party was the concept of “producerism,” or the idea that hard-working American producers are threatened by both the elites in society and an underclass reliant on welfare (Neiwert 2017, 4).

During the Obama administration and up into the 2016 presidential elections, far right politics were more frequently marked by hyper patriotism and the embrace of paranoid-style politics. In this context, Donald Trump’s candidacy and subsequent election pushed alt-right politics towards the mainstream. "Trump's electoral victory helped to highlight the successful re-articulation of white nationalism to electoral politics, but we also argue that it shows the changing meanings of whiteness today and is a part of a longer trend of fusing right-wing populism to overt or covert white nationalist projects" (Bjork-Jamer and Maskovsky 2017). With his public embrace of far right and white nationalist movements, anti-establishment politics campaign, anti-political correctness rhetoric, and exclusive, America-first rhetoric, Trump provided a point of cohesion and legitimation of the preexisting movement.

With this brief timeline in mind, some key elements of the alt right’s discourse and ideology can be evaluated. While the name “alt right” invokes the idea of a singular, cohesive party, the alt right can be better understood as “an incredibly loose set of ideologies held together by what they oppose: feminism, Islam, the Black Lives Matter Movement, political correctness, a fuzzy idea they call ‘globalism,’ and establishment politics of both the left and right” (Wendling 2018, 3). Because of this, the alt right can be characterized not just as a movement, but also as a counter movement. Right wing movements are often responsive in nature, and “their rhetoric and tactics are influenced by opposing movements” (Blee and Creasap 2010, 269). Many aspects of the alt-
right’s rhetoric demonstrate how it is in part a counter-movement against claims for racial equality. Interviews conducted with far-right individuals reveal their belief in rise of anti-white bias and the idea that “as people of color gain new forms of social, political, and cultural power, whites are in turn losing power” (Bjork-James and Maskovsky 2017). Members of the alt-right often claims victimization through identity politics and harness the rhetoric of groups such as Black Lives Matter for their own political projects by asserting the importance of white rights and white culture (Wendling 2018, 73).

Furthermore, the alt right draws upon conspiratorial thinking and a paranoid style of social and political understanding. This is represented through Trump’s ceaseless condemnation of “Fake News” as targeting his presidency, and by proxy, the nation and its citizens. Neiwert describes the alt right as characterized by “an increasingly entrenched conspiracy industry that generates one theory after another about the truth that lies behind the public narrative generated in the Mainstream Media” (Neiwert 2017, 37-38). This conspiratorial thinking is marked by nihilistic and existentialist rhetoric, often positing that it is the fate of the nation, and even life itself, that is at stake. Wendling quotes a member of the alt right he interviewed expressing that “Everyone on the alt-right is less worried about what we’re going to do when we win than just being wiped out, and being forced into the recesses and margins of society, till eventually we don’t exist—a slow genocide” (Wendling 2018, 153). Drawing from this nihilistic, existentialist style, the alt right often depicts Trump as not just the figurehead of their movement, but as a savior of their country, their race, and themselves—the only one willing to explicitly represent “underrepresented” white claims. Especially in online forums, Trump is described in intentionally divine language, sometimes referred to with titles such as God Emperor. “The Trump hero worship is over-the-top, often intentionally hilarious, but at the same time demonstrates just how strongly the movement
has yoked its fortunes to one particular politician” (Wendling 2018, 84). These two discourses, one of existential threat and one of patriotism or salvation, work together to form a large part of the rhetoric of the alt right movement.

In addition to a political movement, the alt right can be understood as a social and cultural community, where members are taught the cultural practices of the group through social bonds, which serves to "teach supporters to embody the emotional styles of extremist politics" (Blee 2007, 123). It is made up of individuals with varying ideologies and motivations, who impact the perceptions and identities of those around them. Wendling differentiates two branches of the alt right movement, the first of which being a more moderate group made up of individuals not convinced by the entirety of the movement’s ideology and actions. Many in this category could be characterized as individuals who believe America is in decline and have some degree of resentment against the political state of the country, or who feel they have been left behind by politicians (Wendling 2018, 145-147). That being said, it is important to recognize that many attracted by rightist movements are not downwardly mobile and socially marginal, but often middle class and fairly “ordinary” individuals even if they feel resentment against the status quo (Blee and Creasap 2010). On the other side of the movement’s spectrum are more fringe ethno-nationalists, those who associate strongly with the KKK, neonazis, or other extremist groups (Wendling, 2018).

The culture, community, and ideology of the alt right is inextricably linked with digital media. Sites such as reddit and 4chan (a completely anonymous user-generated content site) have been central to the evolution of the alt right and the growth of its conspiratorial thinking. With digital media and the decentralization of information sharing, information can be distributed by numerous different sources and information is not subject to the same fact-checking as traditional, professional news sources (Neiwert 2017, 215). This allows for the spread of “alternative”
information, often partially or entirely false or misleading, that produces and is produced by specific political ideologies. Digital media enable users to interact anonymously or pseudonymously online, which changes the nature of social relations and creates new forms of community not bound by the same fear of repercussion and moral, social, or cultural norms as physical interactions. A large part of the alt-right’s power as a movement has come from its ability to use digital media to achieve identity demarginalization, or “to change what is acceptable to talk about in the public space” (Neiwert 2017, 261). Social sites such as 4chan and reddit can serve as hive minds, where anonymity and virtual connectivity enable the aggregation of beliefs, identity formation, and sites of political action that perpetuate racialized and gendered hierarchies and violent or oppressive content. Internet culture draws upon a prankster and troll mentality, where shaming, irony, and humor are modes of interaction. Harnessing this culture, the alt right has been able to use the blurred the line between irony and seriousness to normalize white supremacy and transform ironic racism into earnest racism. “Their sense of irony acts as a weapon and a shield. They make jokes about being a Nazi, but if anyone accuses an activist of actually being a Nazi, they can turn around and mock the opponent for their lack of humor” (Wendling 2018, 75). Thus, internet culture and digital media has been central to the alt right’s rise by enabling new forms of political action, normalizing their rhetoric in public discourse, and providing grounds for recruitment and community organizing. Moreover, digital media’s ability to enable new forms of community has allowed for groups such as Qanon to constitute themselves in unique ways.

Right-wing worldview

The Qanon conspiracy draws upon a broad set of discontents which are central to the contemporary worldview of those on the political right in the US. Understanding the Qanon
community necessitates a consideration of how individuals in right-leaning communities view their contemporary social, political, and economic condition. In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, sociologist Arlie Hochschild discusses the perspectives of conservative Americans on current US social and political dynamics. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Louisiana for five years, Hochschild seeks to understand not just what those in conservative areas believe in relation to the current US political atmosphere, but how and why they have come to form these beliefs.

Hochschild uses the idea of a "deep story" to explicate the discontents underpinning conservative perspective on politics and society. According to Hochschild, the "deep story" offers a way to tell how someone feels, divorcing these feelings from moral or factual judgments in order to explore the "subjective prism through which the party on the other side sees the world" (Hochschild 2016, 135). To outline the deep story of US conservatives, Hochschild uses a metaphor of white, conservative, male Americans waiting in line. At the end of this line is the American Dream, or a "dream of progress--the idea that you're better off than your forebears just as they superseded their parents before you--and extends beyond money and stuff" (Hochschild 2016, 136). As time passes, the line appears to be moving more and more slowly, with the number of people reaching the American Dream dwindling. Suddenly, people begin cutting into the line from unfair starting positions—people of color, immigrants, and women, to name a few. The starting positions of these minority groups are bolstered by new government programs such as affirmative action and asylum policies. Seeing these groups cutting in line and feeling that their chance at the American Dream is being unfairly compromised, conservative Americans wonder, "If people are cutting in line ahead of you, someone must be helping them. Who?" (Hochschild 2016, 139). This line of thought directs blame at political opponents, especially liberal figures such as former President Obama.
While the individuals standing in line believe that everyone should have the opportunity to achieve the American Dream, seeing people cut into the line fosters resentment. Describing the resulting resentment, Hochschild states that "You resent them, and you feel it's right that you do. So do your friends. Fox commentators reflect your feelings, for your deep story is also the Fox News deep story" (Hochschild 2016, 139). While the American Dream of progress was a lived reality for past generations, recent years have seen a stagnation in economic and social progress. "The year when the Dream stopped working for the 90 percent was 1950. If you were born before 1950, on average, the older you got, the more your income rose. If you were born after 1950, it did not" (Hochschild 2016, 150). More wealth became concentrated in the ranks of an economic elite, with less chance for the majority of the population, while changing economic factors such as automation and off-shoring made the American Dream harder to achieve. As Hochschild describes, "The deep story of the right, the feels-as-if story, corresponds to a real structural squeeze. People want to achieve the American Dream, but for a mixture of reasons feel they are being held back, and this leads people of the right to feel frustrated, angry, and betrayed by the government" (Hochschild 2016, 146).

Simultaneously with the struggle to achieve financial progress, white conservatives feel that their sources of pride and social capital are rapidly decreasing. Success through financial advancement is hard to achieve, Christian values feel under attack as the US becomes more religiously diverse, pride in heterosexual marriage becomes associated with homophobia, and racial pride is not socially acceptable as a white value. As one of Hochschild’s interviewees, Janice Areno, states, "the American Dream is more than having money. It's feeling proud to be an American, and to say under God when you salute the flag, and feel good about that. And it's about living in a society that believes in clean, normal family life" (Hochschild 2016, 145). As
white conservatives feel that their traditional sources of honor are dwindling, their
disillusionment at social change and stagnation foments bitterness and resentment at the
increasingly diverse US population. This resentment crystallizes into the belief that America is
on the decline and is under siege by liberal actors, who are enabling immigrants or minorities to
take advantage of the system. Political actors such as President Trump have been able to harness
this resentment at stagnation and change, building political platforms around it with the promise
of returning America to greatness.

Using Hochschild’s work reveals how conservative Americans conceptualize themselves
as at risk of losing the American Dream and being cheated by a system that privileges a diversity
of other, less traditionally American, groups over them. An increasingly diverse populace has
led to the feeling that hardworking Americans and their traditional values are being displaced
and left behind. In addition, these discontents have resulted in a deep distrust of political actors
on the other side of the partisan divide, including the conspiratorial belief that they must be
helping the “line cutters.” It is from this context of discontent that the Qanon community builds
its identity and conspiratorial worldview.

The works presented throughout this chapter on conspiracy, digital media, political
extremism, and the alt right will be used to frame subsequent discussions of Qanon. Because the
study of Qanon sits at the intersection of several different fields of study, extensive background
knowledge is necessary to explicate its complexities. Throughout subsequent chapters, I will
refer back to the ideas presented throughout my literature review to frame my analysis.
Chapter 2: Methodology and informational ecology

Discussing Qanon is impossible without an understanding of the digital spaces throughout which it constitutes itself. The nature of Qanon as a community is intimately linked with the structure of the digital spaces it inhabits. Because Q uses 4chan and 8chan to post, I will discuss these sites and their structural complexities in depth. But beyond these sites, Qanon inhabits a web of other digital spaces, with unique structures and functions in constituting Qanon. I use the term informational ecology to describe the ways in which Qanon inhabits this network of spaces and uses them to locate and disseminate information. In this chapter I will also describe my methodology and offer some ethnographic remarks on the challenges I faced in becoming a fluent user of 8chan.

4Chan and 8Chan

Q’s identity, and much of the Qanon community’s constitution, has been enabled by the anonymous nature of these 4chan and 8chan. As two sites that have been integral to the evolution of Qanon, 4chan and 8chan will be discussed in depth throughout this section. An understanding of these sites is essential for a nuanced discussion of Qanon.
Anatomy of a post

Name of poster (usually anonymous)

Unique Identifier

Date

Timestamp

Post number

Link to a response to this post

Figure 1: Diagram of posts on 4chan and 8chan provided by Praying Medic.

4Chan is an anonymous online imageboard created in 2003 by Christopher Poole. Based on the Japanese imageboard 2chan, or Futaba Channel, 4chan is a bulletin-board style social platform where users post images or bodies of text. While originally intended for the discussion of manga and anime, the site has expanded to include many different subtopics. With approximately 22 million users, 4chan is a large and influential social forum (Dewey 2014). Most commonly, 4chan is known for its ardent commitment to free speech, anonymity, meme or troll culture, and fringe or extremist political orientations. It is known both as the birthplace of meme culture and a hub for deviant behavior. In short, “It’s just a forum with no names, few rules and few consequences, which is (a) the philosophical antithesis to virtually every other mainstream social property and (b) means people can (and do!) say just about anything they want” (Dewey 2014).

Structurally, 4chan is divided into many thematically oriented boards, most common of which are /pol/ (politically incorrect), and /b/ (random board, which often ends up having
language and imagery not permitted on the rest of the site). Threads within these boards have a short lifespan, only storing a limited number of posts before old ones are deleted to make room for new ones. As Wired Magazine reports, “Because each message board is limited to 10 pages of posts, most messages get bumped off the server within a day, if not hours. It’s pretty much unusable for the uninitiated” (Ellis 2018). Unless a post is archived, it will automatically be deleted. This lack of automatic archiving makes the interactions and information on 4chan highly ephemeral, which shapes the platform’s dialogue. "The ephemerality and non-permanence of posts seems to encourage users to make their posts as often and as potentially inflammatory as possible-knowing full well that these threads will, more likely than not, erase themselves in a matter of minutes or hours" (Ludemann 2018, 93). The short lifespan of posts removes accountability for statements through the knowledge that any interactions will disappear unless an individual user actively archives them.

Additionally, 4chan offers complete anonymity to all users. Unlike most social platforms, which require the creation of an account to engage in interactions, 4chan users do not need to register for an account or submit any personal information to engage in the community. Upon commenting, users are assigned a randomly generated user ID, or tripcode, that changes between posts, making it impossible to track the posts being made by a single individual. On some boards, such as /pol/ (politically incorrect), users retain their tripcode throughout the entire thread, and can also assigned a flag that indicates their geographic region. Tracking Q’s tripcode is one way that anons identify Q’s crumbs. However, the level of identification remains low even on these boards. 4chan offers the option of creating an account with a username, but this is culturally discouraged. "Users operate in an opt-out system of anonymity, and the general discourse of the website encourages users to remain unnamed. This is further enforced and
embodied as named users, colloquially known as 'namefags,' are often villified for their separation from the anonymous collective community" (Ludemann 2018, 92). Users are also unable to message one another individually and thus can only interact publicly on comment threads.

4chan’s structure has been critiqued for enabling illegal and harmful interactions, racist or misogynistic material, and child pornography. The site does have a set of rules, such that “users are banned from violating U.S. law, including copyright law, and from posting other people’s personal information, impersonating site administrators, and using bots on the site” (Dewey 2014). To enforce these rules, 4chan has moderators, or “janitors.” However, it is impossible to tell how many janitors 4chan actually has. When asked on its FAQ page about how much presence its moderators have, 4chan responded that “there is no way for an end user to accurately judge the amount of moderation taking place at any given point in time” (Dewey 2014). Thus, while the site does have janitors to enforce a set of rules, this level of moderation is perceived to be low, and the rules themselves are very limited.

8chan, or Infinitychan, is “the more-lawless, more-libertarian, more ‘free’ follow-up to 4chan” (Dewey 2015). The site’s popularity increased dramatically after #Gamergate⁹, as users migrated to 8chan when 4chan users began shutting down discussion threads that violated sitewide content policies. 8chan no longer appears by Google search due to accusations that it hosts child pornography. Although its structure is nearly identical to that of 4chan, 8chan operates with a much more stringent support of “free speech.” It is considered to be a host for

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⁹ Gamergate was “ostensibly a hashtag ‘movement’ spawned by individuals who purported to be frustrated by a perceived lack of ethics within gaming journalism became a campaign of systematic harassment of female and minority game developers, journalists, and critics and their allies” (Massanari 2017, 330). This happened in 2014 when a game journalist, Eron Gjoni, claimed that his ex-lover Zoe Quinn’s success in game development was due to sexual relationships with gaming journalists. This sparked #Gamergate, a targeted harassment campaign that eventually got shut down on 4chan.
harmful and fringe ideologies in a much more extreme way than 4chan is. While illegal content is banned, anything else goes on the site, and almost no effort is made to moderate what material is posted and what discussions happen.

Methodology

My methodology was shaped by the structure of 4chan, 8chan, and other sites utilized by the Qanon community. Throughout this thesis, I relied heavily on textual and discourse analysis of digital interactions throughout the Qanon community. Much of my analysis was enabled by the Qanon community’s fixation on self-archiving, which allowed me to access Q’s posts and community interpretations through third-party websites created by anons specifically for this purpose. I have broken my analysis into three parts. For the first part, I conducted an in-depth textual analysis of Q’s 14th post (selected for its demonstration of key themes and discursive strategies). Going line by line, I decoded both the structure and content of the post, contextualizing it within Qanon’s worldview. In the next section of my analysis, I took a broader view of Q’s posts, analyzing what they are articulating as a whole and how they are doing so. I viewed these posts entirely through an archive downloaded from qanon.pub, one of the primary archival websites created and maintained by anons. While the sheer volume of posts prevented me from reading and analyzing each, I read the majority of posts from Q’s first several months of posting, working to identify themes and tensions. For the last part of my analysis, I studied the dynamics of the Qanon community on 8chan and analyzed the structure of the community as a whole across different platforms. This included focusing on how the community constitutes itself, what websites it has made to support itself, and what it means to be a subject of the Qanon community.
When I first envisioned my thesis research, I wanted to make skype interviews a central part of my methodology. Because a large part of my topic revolves around understanding the logic of conspiracy, and what makes it a compelling mode of understanding and identification, interviews seemed like the best way forward. To protect the identity of interviewees, I was going to request oral participant consent only and not require participants to write down, or even verbalize, their actual names. In formulating my set of research questions, I was careful to use neutral language that made no mention of conspiracy, but rather focused on consumption of news and broad views about the current political atmosphere.

As I developed my research project, my intended interview recruitment methods changed over time. Initially, I planned on recruiting interviewees through far-right reddit pages such as r/The_Donald. However, recruiting interviewees this way was deemed too high risk by my department review board. Because research ethics dictate that researchers must disclose their identity and institutional affiliation to study participants, I would have needed to publish my personal information on a relatively unregulated public forum. My institutional affiliation with Swarthmore College, a liberal place frequently battered by conservative media sites, would have also been disclosed. These factors produced a high risk of harassment that made recruiting interviewees through digital forums unfeasible.

The fact that I never considered recruiting interviewees off of 4chan and 8chan shows just how hostile an environment it is, and the different levels of risk that are associated with my positionality. 4chan and 8chan are known to be platforms that allow the proliferation of harassment, and this risk was amplified by my identity as a woman. Cases such as #Gamergate, discussed earlier, exemplify the risk of digital harassment. To me and my professors, it was common sense not to try to recruit interviewees off of 4chan and 8chan
My second attempt was to recruit interviewees through my social networks. This consisted of reaching out to friends, family, and classmates who grew up in rural or conservative areas and asking them if they have any acquaintances who may hold right-wing or conspiratorial views. This, too, was ultimately unsuccessful. While I had several classmates acquainted with potential study participants, their attempts at recruiting them for interviews were unsuccessful. In the end, I was only in direct contact with one potential interviewee, who initially agreed to be interviewed. However, once I sent a written consent form, they stopped responding to my messages. While this social network recruiting yielded no interviews, my failure in and of itself indicates the tension and suspicion that marks the current US social and political atmosphere. Efforts at establishing dialogue are often met with suspicion, and putting one’s beliefs down on paper, even if these beliefs cannot be associated with their name, is a source of anxiety about potential repercussions.

**Informational ecology**

Qanon exists across a network of digital spaces that constitute its informational ecology. While I do not focus extensively on how conspiratorial information and ideas circulate across different platforms, I will offer an abridged analysis of the digital platforms that are involved in constituting knowledge and interactions within Qanon. The digital media platforms on which Qanon engages are not incidental but, rather, are deliberately chosen for their functional purposes. The structural components of these chosen digital sites provides a framework for the constitution of individual and collective norms and identities.

The Qanon community has been built using a wide range of digital spaces, with purposes ranging from creating posts, archiving content, engaging anonymously, to providing
interpretations of Q’s posts. These different digital structures have allowed for new forms of interpersonal interaction and community building that exist beyond the physical sphere. While interactions within the Qanon community are built around interpreting events in the physical world, they take place entirely in the digital sphere. Drawing upon Boellstorff, the separation of these virtual interactions from the physical world does not make them any less real. The Qanon community’s digital existence can be studied as a site of culture in its own right, where digital identities are valid without reference to their physical counterparts. As Boellstropp states of the digital sphere, “Our humanity is thrown off balance, considered anew, and reconfigured through transformed possibilities for place-making, subjectivity, and community” (Boellstropp 2008, 5). Throughout my research, I draw upon Boellstropp’s argument that the virtual sphere is culturally legitimate and reproduces elements of the physical world while also constituting a new interactive space.

Qanon’s anxiety over free speech, government oversight, and its logic of victimization is present in their pattern of migration from site to site. Due in part to content regulations that constrain their interactions on sites such as reddit, the Qanon community now gathers primarily on 4chan and 8chan. However, anxiety over free speech and monitoring of digital interactions pervades the Qanon community’s interactions even on these two sites, which are arguably the least regulated social spaces available online. While the Qanon community was initially constructed on 4chan, Q declared later that 4chan had been “compromised” and infiltrated by Deep State actors, presumably civilian intelligence agencies. “Q posted on multiple iterations of CBTS [Calm Before the storm] (536 threads) until stating that 4chan had been infiltrated and security compromised, necessitating a move to 8chan in order to maintain readers’ assurance of Q’s authenticity” (Anons n.d. “Q – The Basics” 2). The Qanon community’s anxiety about
government oversight and constitution of themselves as agents in a war against censorship
pervades the logic of this migration. The frequency of bans against Qanon content on various
digital platforms has been taken as a confirmation of their ideology of victimization. With each
progressive limitation or ban on Qanon content, such as the reddit’s shutdown of
r/thegreatawakening, the community has shifted further onto the internet’s anonymous fringes,
moving from reddit, to 4chan, to 8chan.

Qanon’s interactions on these platforms are transient and ephemeral, in that any
statements or information will disappear of its own accord unless participants take an active role
in archiving it. Throughout my research, these qualities of 8chan posed many challenges for
analyzing and documenting interactions that take place between users. The lack of archival
records made it impossible to look back through interactions, meaning that my analysis of
communal interactions had to take place live, as the interactions were unfolding. The level of
participation on 8chan is highly variable from day to day, primarily depending on whether or not
Q has posted. Numbers of participants and volume of posts over time is impossible to determine.
I attempted to access disappeared information on 8chan using the Internet Archive’s Wayback
Machine. This is a service which takes snapshots of websites at a set point in time across the
internet and archives them in a searchable, publicly-accessible database. However, the Wayback
Machine had collected limited archival information on 8chan, with only a couple captures per
month that did not provide a large enough dataset for my analysis.

Additionally, 8chan is almost inaccessible to those who are not familiar with how it is
used. Not only is it structurally confusing, displaying a chronological string of text, images, and
links, but it uses a distinct language that draws on meme culture, hashtags, and political satire.
Thus, analyzing interactions on 8chan required becoming fluent in both the structural elements of 8chan and the rhetoric employed by the community.

The anonymity of 4chan and 8chan has been central to constituting Q’s sense of identity, enabling them to assert to followers that the information they are sharing is part of a covert intelligence operation, which can only be accomplished through untraceable digital interactions. Drawing on Coleman’s argument that the culture of anonymous operates with a spontaneous “logic of its own,” the nature of 4chan and 8chan has enabled a new form of political action, whereby "anonymous manages to achieve spectacular visibility and individual invisibility at once" (Coleman 2012, 93). On these anonymous forums, participation is divorced from physical location and identifying information. Because so much of the Qanon ideology declares a covert war against the Deep State, the structure of 4chan and 8chan lend legitimacy to this claim by enabling a movement that cannot be traced to individual actors.

Outside of 4chan and 8chan, members of the Qanon community have produced a set of independent websites dedicated to the theory. These sites are all referenced on the current 8chan page, ‘QResearch’, and on introductory materials or videos such as Praying Medic’s “Qanon for Beginners” YouTube video or articles published by anons. Numerous independent websites are dedicated to archiving information associated with the Qanon theory. While crowdsourced information and proofs are part of this archival project, the top archival priority is preserving Q’s posts. In addition to documenting their digital presence, anons have produced extensive analytics of the raw information and interactions considered important to Qanon. Some examples of these analytics include a searchable clock of Q posts, timelines of child trafficking arrests and Trump’s tweets mapped alongside Q’s posts.
Another central aspect Qanon’s informational ecology is the crowdsourced and interactive production of material, which lends users the ability to be agents in constructing meaning and shaping community discourse. Many third-party online archives grant users the ability to add interpretations to Q’s posts, analyzing their cryptic meanings and publishing their own “research,” resources, and conclusions for other users to engage with. One such example is a Google Spreadsheet entitled “STORM is HERE.” This spreadsheet, linked on independent Qanon websites, contained 11,343 sections as of March 3rd, 2018. These sections, which are arranged in chronological order, each contain a single question that has been posed in Q’s crumbs. The two subsequent categories are dedicated to answers, one of which contains “primary answers,” presumably provided by administrators of the website, and the other of which contains “extra answers,” presumably crowdsourced from users. By the time I accessed this spreadsheet, it had been set to “comment only” by administrators, with the subtitle: “Spreadsheet is now locked – No editing by public due to threats made to erase answers.” (“STORM is HERE,” n.d.) In the course of my research, I consulted this spreadsheet several times. On every visit, between five and fifteen anonymous users were active on the sheet, showing that despite their inability to modify the information, users were still consulting it.

From the diversity of sources that make up Qanon’s informational ecology, a multi-platform digital community has been created. Information is decentralized and distributed across multiple sites, ranging from fringe and intangible in nature (4chan, 8chan), to independent websites or databases (qproofs.com, qanon.pub), to mainstream digital sites (youtube.com, reddit.com). Through these platforms, a broad-reaching informational and discursive community has been produced, whose sources require varying levels of fluency with digital technologies and Qanon’s analytical processes. While information and interactions are distributed across a range
of different platforms, they are all linked together to produce a self-referential web which constitutes the Qanon community. Through this self-referential structure, the community produces its own internal informational and discursive economy. In this way, their worldview can be formed almost entirely from sources internal to the community. The continued active engagement of members, primarily in archiving, distributing, and deconstructing Q’s posts, is essential to sustaining and expanding their community. The interactive constitution of knowledge and identity represents how forms of digital media have enabled the “erosion of the linear communication model,” in which consumption and production are no longer two distinct spheres, but operate simultaneously (Spitulnik 1993, 297).

Ethnography of 8chan research

The structural complexity of 4chan and 8chan can best be illustrated by an account of my own efforts to navigate them. In my research on the dynamics of Qanon’s interactions and process of community-building, I needed to look directly at its main 8chan page, /QResearch/. Learning how to navigate and locate the digital spaces through which Qanon communicates was perhaps the most difficult aspect of this thesis. While I was well aware of the complexity of 8chan from studying its structure and function, I did not realize the extent to which this impacts the site’s usability until I began researching how Qanon constitutes itself on /QResearch/. Reflecting on my efforts to become a fluent user of 8chan, I hope to convey not just its complex structure, but explicate the role of this complexity in constituting Qanon’s subjectivities.

From the very first step, conducting research on 8chan was never straightforward. Because 8chan does not appear in Google searches, you must have the site’s exact URL in order to access it. Once I arrived at 8chan, the structure itself was confusing, full of an overwhelming
number of boards and threads that all seem to have minimal levels of organization. At first, I tried to find Qanon material on my own by consulting 8chan’s list of boards, but could not determine which of the numerous boards containing Qanon-related content were actually in use. So, I instead used links posted on Qanon publications and archives to find the /QResearch/ board that is currently active. Arriving at this board, I was once again struck by how confusing and foreign the structure was. This board’s catalog page contains links to at least 350 different threads, most of which are archived and no longer active. A few days into my research, the thread I was originally linked to through third-party sites was no longer active, with a link at the top to the new Q thread. This pattern, of new boards being created and old ones being archived, repeats with great frequency. To know where to find the current active location of Q interactions requires constant engagement because of the community’s transient nature.

Despite dedicating an extensive amount of time to it, my research on Q’s 8chan pages provided less content than I would have desired due to the ephemeral nature of interactions. For the majority of my research, I ended up referring to secondary sources in the community, primarily websites that archive Q’s posts and “important” statements by anons. This allowed me to have access to material in a more permanent format and avoid the excessively complicated structure of 8chan. Because these secondary sites are so much more accessible, it seems plausible that many members of the community may also not engage directly on 8chan. Engaging directly with 8chan requires extensively fluency with this form of digital media, in addition to the norms of the Qanon community’s interactions (as I will discuss in the following section). For individuals such as myself with no background in these topics, Qanon is essentially only accessible through third-party websites that translate the material into a more consumable format.
The difficult process of navigating 8chan speaks to the demanding nature of being a part of the Qanon community. Not only do individuals have to exert a profound amount of labor to become fluent in the digital platforms used by Qanon, but they must constantly be attentive to changes in the community’s areas of congregation. The community’s use of 8chan threads is in constant flux, with old ones being archived and new ones being produced in a rapid cycle, so that one must be vigilant in order to know where interactions are happening. This is similar to the nature of Q’s posts themselves, where decoding them requires a high degree of fluency. For newcomers, such as myself, becoming knowledgeable of Qanon’s digital domains is like trying to put together a puzzle, except new puzzle pieces are constantly being produced, so that the puzzle will never quite be finished. Thus, you must exert labor not just to become part of the community, but to stay part of the community. This process is undoubtedly a source of frustration for some. However, it likely also produces a deep sense of belonging and accomplishment to those who manage to put in the effort and become fluent. Because participation is so arduous, gaining the skills and knowledge necessary to do so is a special achievement, enabling one to pass into an exclusive community of anons who have superior skills and knowledge to those newcomers and outsiders who don’t have a comparable skillset.

In this chapter, I have discussed the informational ecology of Qanon, including explicating the structure of 4chan and 8chan in particular. I have also outlined the methodology which guided my research and given an ethnographic account of 8chan’s usability. Qanon’s informational ecology is central to its communal constitution, where the anonymity and ephemerality of 4chan and 8chan legitimizes their subjectivity as agents in a covert intelligence mission. The interactive structure of Qanon allows for nonlinear modes of knowledge production, where individuals
constitute themselves as active subjects in the community. Additionally, the ephemeral and transient nature of the community, and pattern of migration from site to site, demonstrates that becoming, and staying, part of the Qanon community requires profound labor. In the following chapter, I will begin conducting more in-depth analysis of Qanon, explicating the ways it has formed a community of hermeneutic practice.
Chapter 3: Formation of a community of hermeneutic practice

Now that Qanon has been situated within the relevant theoretical frameworks, background knowledge, and informational ecology, an analysis of its elements can begin in earnest. In this chapter, I will evaluate the ways in which members of Qanon engage with Q’s texts, identifying the practices through which they decode, or bake, these enigmatic crumbs into an understanding of the world. This process, while undertaken by individuals, is a communal endeavor in which strict norms govern research methodology, and where preexisting knowledge is an active agent in constituting future understandings. In this way, meaning “develops in a dynamic relationship with the reader’s expectations, projections, conclusions, judgments, and assumptions” (Fish 1980, 2). I argue that through engagement with Q’s series of posts, Qanon constitutes itself as a community of hermeneutic practice, in which individuals become knowing subjects as they learn to discern the world through a conspiratorial lens.

This chapter begins with ethnographic reflections on my efforts to become fluent in Qanon’s hermeneutic practices, followed by a discussion of the analytical methodology employed by members of Qanon. Through exercising this analytical style, individuals learn to read and analyze Q’s posts from a specific subjective context, where meaning is discerned from otherwise cryptic statements. I will then offer a textual analysis of Q’s 14th post to demonstrate how this process is enacted, and what forms of knowledge are produced. Following this, I will expand my discussion of how Qanon operates as a community of practice. I will offer a
biography of the role of Q and Trump within this community before discussing Qanon’s process of subjectification and the communal norms that govern interaction. In these sections, I argue that through their interpretation of Q’s texts, Qanon has constituted itself as a community of hermeneutic practice.

Ethnography

The complexity of the Qanon community’s discursive and analytical norms can best be illustrated through ethnographic reflections on my own efforts to become fluent in this analytical style. When I first began analyzing Q’s 14th post, I was overwhelmed by the long string of questions it contained, as well as its excessive use of abbreviations and references to political figures and events. Despite the amount of time I had already spent immersing myself in the dialogue and ideas of Qanon over the past months, interpreting post 14 showed just how much of an outsider I was to the discursive norms of this community. Because of the many abbreviations and often cryptic references to agencies or individuals the post contains, I had to first go through the post line by line and identify what exactly was being referenced before beginning to interpret the meaning of the post as a whole. Throughout this process, I came to the realization that interpreting Q’s posts requires not only a substantial input of time, but an intimate knowledge of the concepts and actors frequently employed by the Qanon community. This is indicative of the high level of fluency with Q’s discursive strategies, and extensive background knowledge of the relevant political context, that individuals must possess in order to be an engaged member of Qanon.

While the community’s most vocal anons stress that individuals should interpret posts on their own to form independent conclusions, I am skeptical of whether individuals are willing and
capable of doing so. Given how time-consuming deciphering Q's posts is, I consider it highly unlikely that all followers of Qanon will devote the same amount of time and effort to understanding these posts as self-described Q researchers do. Even as I was deciphering and contextualizing post 14, I found myself referencing preexisting community interpretations published on qanon.pub. These interpretations are both thorough and straightforward, conveniently linked to the text of each of Q's posts so that individuals can read a summary of the relevant information rather than deciphering it themselves. While I will offer a more thorough analysis of the community's proofs and dialogue later in this chapter, it is important to note the ease of accessing straightforward interpretations of Q's cryptic statements. Individually deciphering each post is a daunting task, making it unlikely to be undertaken by more casual participants in Qanon. Even with my own commitment to interpreting posts independently from communal interpretations, I could not fully do so without relying on resources provided by anons. The provision of crowdsourced interpretations by anons significantly lowers the barrier for participation and understanding, making information accessible to a wider group of people with varying levels of fluency in Q's linguistic style and theories, as well as differing degrees of commitment.

Moreover, communal interpretations lay a framework for how information should be read and consumed. Because Q relies heavily on questions in their posts, published interpretations ensure that the reader is guided to correct answers that align with Qanon's conceptualization of the world. Thus, we can see how the public emphasis on individual interpretation and autonomy in producing their own understandings may not translate into practice. Individual thought processes are heavily impacted by the preexisting body of knowledge, and the ease of accessing
summaries of Q’s posts provides a way to participate in the community without such a significant investment of time and energy.

Qanon’s analytical style

Qanon employs a distinct analytical style that is central to their constitution as a community of hermeneutic practice. Not only are participants expected to adhere to these analytical norms, but Q’s posts are often unintelligible without utilizing these particular processes. It is through their analytical engagement with Q’s posts that Qanon constitutes itself as a community of hermeneutic practice and is able to produce a conspiratorial epistemology. In the following section, I will discuss Qanon’s hermeneutic practices before applying them in a textual analysis of Q’s 14th post.

Q uses two distinct types of questions in their posts. In the first kind, Q poses one or more open-ended cryptic questions with references to individuals and events. A high degree of audience engagement and knowledge is required to establish their intended meaning. This is followed by the second type of question, which is rhetorical and straightforward with a clear implied answer. This second type, vaguely building upon the first, results in sweeping generalizations that paint Trump and the sociopolitical sphere in the image of Qanon’s theory of good and evil, with Trump as the centerpiece of good. Through this structure, Q relies on predetermined conclusions and biases that have been established through their own posts or by rhetoric throughout right-wing circles in order to produce the correct answers to their questions. In this way, it becomes apparent that the interpretive norms of the Qanon community act to confirm and build upon their own particular worldview. By drawing on the background
knowledge established by Q through previous posts to answer future questions posited by Q, answers operate to confirm the Qanon community’s ideology.

This interrogative and interactive framework is crucial to understanding how the Qanon community engages with content, in addition to the ways they constitute themselves as individual and collective subjects. Many of Q’s posts are very dense, packed with references to political figures, government agencies, activist groups, and current events. To make matters more complex, names are rarely written out in their entirety, and frequently are only given out as abbreviations. The cryptic and contextual nature of Q’s posts contributes to the self-constitution of community members as researchers rather than conspiracy theorists. Reflecting upon the “Qanon for Beginners” article published by anons reveals the ways in which members of the Qanon community clearly differentiate themselves from conspiracy theorists. They emphasize the high level of research that goes into creating their theory of the world and the authenticity of information released by Q. In their article, anons explicitly separate themselves from conspiracy theorists multiple times, and argue that any attempt to label them as such is an intentional and malicious move to discredit their legitimate perspectives. “The Great Awakening is not a conspiracy theory or a cult, as those who seek to discredit [it] would like the public to think. It is a sophisticated and coordinated information operation from within President Trump’s administration to enlighten the public about the true state of affairs of the nation and the world, providing vast amounts of information well beyond the scope of this introduction” (Anons, 6). Qanon’s opposition to identification with conspiracy reveals the common perception amongst Qanon followers that they are insiders to what is really happening in the US. They believe that their worldview is objective and factually based, making it devoid of any paranoid thought. Their perceived research-based approach is in sharp opposition to what they see as the ignorance and
stifling of individual intellects that has been imposed by the Deep State. In this way, they constitute themselves as active subjects contributing to a movement greater than what they could individually accomplish.

Members of the Qanon community encourage one another to engage in their own research to produce their own, individual interpretation of Q’s posts. As anons state, “The anon themselves come from many countries, occupational backgrounds, and stages of life, working cooperatively (‘the Hivemind’) to attempt to better understand the truth behind historical and current events” (Anons, 2). Here we can see an intersection between individual action and collective responsibility that is prevalent throughout much of the community’s discourse. It is through the contributions of individual researchers, with their supposedly diverse approaches and backgrounds, that a collective understanding can be formed. Using the language of a “hive mind” suggests that communal participation constitutes a cohesive whole. By stressing that individuality produces a functioning whole, the Qanon community is implicitly differentiating itself from how it depicts the way in which the Mainstream Media’s produces and disseminates of knowledge. The Mainstream Media, discussed in more depth later, is depicted throughout Qanon as a homogenous fake news entity, where its members are devoid of intellectual originality because their individuality has been suppressed by the agency’s corrupted agenda. Highlighting individual agency positions Qanon’s methodology in opposition to the media’s perceived inadequacies.

Applying Mahmud’s theory in this context reveals how Qanon believes that “Symbols are everywhere and events are public, but only the correctly conjured public has the knowledge necessary, be it esoteric or social, to decipher, to participate, to see” (Mahmud 2012, 431). While both followers of Qanon and Freemasons believe that ignorance prevents the uninitiated from
seeing these symbols, those in Qanon take this reasoning a step further to constitute ignorance as something that has been imposed upon individuals by a corrupt power. Unlike in Mahmud’s conception of freemasonry, where the truth is hidden only by the “illiteracy” of viewers, the Qanon community sees the Mainstream Media and Deep State as forces that actively conceal reality. Not only must individuals learn to see the symbols all around them in everyday reality, but they must realize the way in which they have been intentionally misled by Deep State actors.

The Qanon community has established a standardized analytical process, which is explicated in an introductory YouTube video by Praying Medic entitled “Q Anon for Beginners.” At approximately an hour long, this is an extensive video that outlines the core ideas that constitute the Qanon conspiracy theory, covers a sample of important posts over time, and discusses how to decode and interpret Q’s crumbs. Reflecting on the Qanon community’s constitution as researchers rather than conspiracy theorists, two central theme of the video are how to conduct credible research and strategies for decoding Q’s posts. These strategies are necessitated in part by the complexity of Q’s language. Praying Medic communicates early on in his video that understanding what Q is saying requires researchers to dedicate significant time and energy to decoding their posts. The information only becomes intelligible to those who exert the necessary labor to decode it. Speaking of Q’s reliance on cryptic language riddled with acronyms, Praying Medic states, with a laugh, “Sometimes it’s a guessing game, and sometimes we guess wrong. I’ve just learned because I’ve been studying Q for a while that I’ve gotten down most of the abbreviations and acronyms, although sometimes it does present a bit of a problem” (Praying Medic 2018).

Subsequently, Praying Medic walks through his interpretations of Q’s posts and his strategies for reaching these conclusions. Selecting one particular post as an example, Praying
Medic picks out the phrase “Operation Mockingbird,” which is a recurring term that I will discuss in more depth later. Because this is not a term that the average reader will be familiar with, Praying Medic discusses how he researched its meaning, using this as a tutorial for Q research in general. "I will go to Wikipedia and look at some things just as a basis for research, but I usually do a lot more research. I will find three or four or five articles on the same subject, compare what the authors are saying about them.” In his example, one key source of information about Operation Mockingbird is from reputable American journalist Carl Bernstein. Praying Medic’s walkthrough of his methodology demonstrates a level of proficiency with common research techniques, such as cross-referencing multiple sources, as well as use of at least some reputable sources such as the journalist Bernstein.

This challenges some common assumptions that conspiratorial and far-right research is based entirely on unreliable sources and improper research methods. That being said, Praying Medic only provides one example of a reputable source in his description of research methodology, and it is hard to determine what his criteria is for selecting sources, comparing them, and differentiating their credibility. Moreover, this research is applied only to confirm speculations made by Q and is never utilized to interrogate the truth value of Q’s claims. Praying Medic’s analytical process demonstrates how conspiracy can operate as what Hunt calls “rational interpretations of random occurrences (‘objectifying facts’) based on a delusional hypothesis” (Hunt 1999, 29). While some of the research methodology employed by Qanon members such as Praying Medic may compile factual information, these facts are fit into preexisting understandings of the world. The conclusion, while it may be influenced by facts, has already been drawn prior to the research process.
Strict norms and guidelines govern the selection of sources in Qanon’s research process. While researchers are encouraged to use multiple sources, most of these sources are internal to the Qanon community or have been taken from pre-designated lists of sources considered acceptable by community standards. Significantly, any organization considered to be part of the “Mainstream Media” is subject to intense scrutiny and assumed to be presenting biased conclusions, at the very least, or outright mistruths in more extreme cases. Praying Medic’s use of the journalist Bernstein as a source is somewhat anomalous, as Bernstein could be categorized as part of the Mainstream Media. However, perhaps the information presented by Bernstein was deemed relevant enough by Praying Medic so as to not be subject to scrutiny. It seems plausible that the Qanon community’s demonization of the Mainstream Media and rejection of their publications applies only when these materials conflict with beliefs and narratives held by Qanon.

A publication by anons advises that “Those who are interested [in Qanon]… are encouraged to research and learn for themselves what these crumbs imply and to draw their own conclusions by viewing crumbs and side by sides [sic] in the websites listed in the introduction” (Anons, 4). Websites listed in the introduction include qanon.app, qmap.pub, qproofs.com, and qanon.news. Significantly, these websites are all completely internal to the community and are not associated with outside, or “mainstream,” news sources. Moreover, they are all based on discussing and interpreting Q’s posts, not on interrogating this information in the context of outside sources, perspectives, and conclusions. As anons state, the purpose of third-party Qanon sites is to “compile crumbs, side by sides (side-by-side graphics confirming intel through open-source reporting), and proofs (graphics showing that coincidences mentioned by Q are not coincidences at all)” (Anons, 1). In this way, it becomes clear that sources will likely be
mutually-reinforcing of preexisting ideas within the Qanon community, and that much of their research methodology will reinforce distrust of narratives produced by “mainstream” sources.

Throughout my research, I noticed that certain topics are not subjected to scrutiny by the Qanon community. One of these subjects is the identity of Q. As I will discuss later, the community prohibits anons from trying to uncover Q’s identity. Similarly, Q’s grammar is never the focus of analysis, despite frequent grammatical errors. Post 14, analyzed next, demonstrates the frequency of these grammatical errors. While these errors are not so significant as to make posts unreadable, they do raise questions about Q’s fluency in the English written language. Considering that the alt-right often fixates on mastery of the English language as a requirement of belonging in the US, it is interesting that Q’s pervasive deviation from grammatical standards raises no questions. Moreover, the community expresses no concern that Q’s grammatical errors may be an indication that Q is not the educated, professional military intelligence insider that they claim to be. While I will not focus extensively on Q’s grammar, it is noteworthy in that it is indicative of how only certain topics are selected by the community as containing hidden realities that require extensive research to uncover. Other topics, such as Q’s identity and grammar, are subject to no such criticism, and taken to be exactly as they appear, rather than as receptacles of hidden knowledge.

Through its establishment of a standardized analytical process, Qanon constitutes itself as a community of hermeneutic practice. By using a specific style of interpretation, the community is able to decipher meaning from Q’s otherwise cryptic crumbs. This process of interpretation relies on preexisting convictions of what constitutes the truth and operates as a way by which to solidify narratives that constitute the community’s sense of self and conception of the world.
Textual analysis of post 14

In the following section, I will analyze Q post 14 line by line to demonstrate the rhetorical and discursive strategies employed in Q’s posts. This post originated at 10:00 pm EST on October 31, 2017. At 37 sentences long, it is one of Q’s lengthier crumbs. It embodies many of the key themes within Qanon and demonstrates many of the structural and linguistic strategies Q traditionally employs. Drawing on Q’s common question and answer format, this post requires audience engagement to decode the lines. It is also representative of some of the key ideas about military intelligence and the Deep State contained within Qanon’s conspiratorial imaginary. However, post 14 cannot be said to be entirely representative of Q’s communications. While the question and answer format is a hallmark of Q posts, some are much more straightforward. Q sometimes forgoes the interactive question framework to offer predictions or commentary on current events, or to share links to outside articles and other sources. In other cases, Q will respond to questions posed by 4chan or 8chan users or share these users’ posts with added commentary.

In my analysis, I will explain and evaluate the content and language within post 14, as well as make connections to the themes it alludes to in the broader Qanon theory. To more thoroughly analyze post 14, I have grouped the lines into seven sections, in order of how they appear in the initial post. These sections will provide a guide through the post and its intended interpretation. Prior to my analysis, I provide the text of each section for context, followed by my close reading.

SCI[F]
Military Intelligence.
What is ‘State Secrets’ and how upheld in the SC?
What must be completed to engage MI over other (3) letter agencies?
What must occur to allow for civilian trials?
Why is this relevant?
As can be seen above, the text of post 14 begins with the phrase SCI[F], which can be read as both Sensitive Compartmented Information (SCI) and Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility (SCIF). These are two military terms used to describe sites that process sensitive and classified information, often for national security and defense purposes. They are only open to individuals with the proper security clearances. This first line sets the tone for the post as a whole, implying that classified intelligence is being revealed to the public for the first time, while also evoking the idea that the information is associated with, and vital to, national security. This first line uses technical language to demonstrate Q’s legitimacy as a military intelligence insider who is disclosing otherwise classified information from within the Trump administration. It establishes a framework of military involvement and national security, while implying that readers are receiving privileged access to state secrets and the hidden realities of US security.

After using these questions to assert their military credentials, Q goes on to ask how state secrets are upheld by the SC (Supreme Court). Because the post does not outright answer the posed question, or clarify what the abbreviation SC means, it demands reader engagement and interpretation to become intelligible. In this case, when Q enquires about how state secrets are upheld, members of the Q community have claimed that they are referring to the 1953 court case of US v. Reynolds, in which a lawsuit was brought against the Air Force after a plane crash resulted in multiple deaths. The Air Force claimed that it could not release an accident report for national security reasons, and the Supreme Court ruled in its favor. This established a precedent for excluding evidence on the basis of national security as part of the State Secrets Privilege (United States v. Reynolds 1953). After 9/11, the Supreme Court expanded this privilege, and under the Bush administration it came to act as “an absolute bar to litigation whenever the
administration determine[d] that the disclosure of agency documents would harm national security” (Law Library of Congress). Because the Qanon community believes that the US is facing an existential threat, we can plausibly assume that Q’s questions suggest that military intelligence actors are concealing their investigations of the Deep State by invoking the States Secret Privilege. This line of reasoning explains how the public could be unaware of such a large-scale investigation and operates to confirm the community’s conviction that this investigation is ongoing behind the scenes.

Building off this, Q asks what is required to enable military agencies to take control of the “other (3) letter agencies,” meaning the Department of Justice (DOJ), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). These three agencies are not part of the military and are frequently referred to by the Qanon community as civilian intelligence agencies. Civilian intelligence agencies are posited as being corrupt and working in opposition to military intelligence, which is the one institution remaining on the side of the US populace. Q’s line of questioning indicates one of the central theories within the Qanon community, which is the necessity of using military intelligence agencies to investigate their civilian counterparts. The opposition between military and civilian agencies reflects a broader glorification of the US military within not just the Qanon community, but the political right in general. Significantly, Q begins post 14 by highlighting this division, and thus frames the entire conversation in terms of a binary opposition between military and civilian actors.

The following line enquires about how “civilian trials” can be enabled. In the context of the established military/civilian binary, this line is urging the audience to consider how the military will take action against corrupt civilian actors. In Qanon’s worldview, bringing corrupt actors to justice is a central issue due to the Deep State’s control over the entire justice system.
This becomes apparent through the inclusion of the Department of Justice in discussions of the “three letter agencies” that have been corrupted by the Deep State. Considering this, the question for Qanon becomes how to circumvent a corrupt civilian judicial system and rely on military judicial mechanisms instead. Reading this line in the context of the previous one about how to engage military actors over civilian ones, it becomes clear that the unstated answer to Q’s questions is that martial law must be declared to circumvent civilian intelligence agencies. Subsequently, a national security threat would be required for this declaration to come into place and to enable the trial of civilians by military courts. In general, when Q discusses “civilian trials,” they are often implying that these are trials under the military, not civilian, courts.

Finishing off the first section, Q prompts the reader to interpret the relevance of their series of questions as a whole. Drawing upon the language of military intelligence and multiple allusions to measures that can be undertaken in the case of a national security crisis, Q solidifies the impression that the US is facing an imminent existential threat to imply that national security is currently, or soon will be, threatened. By focusing on how to enable martial law, take control of civilian intelligence agencies, and subject civilians to military trials, Q implies that nonmilitary actors are part of this threat to national security. This prompts the reader to conclude that situations exist which will necessitate President Trump to declare martial law to protect US national security. In positing this situation, Q also implies that Trump and the military are both competent and powerful, and that they have prepared a contingency plan that will keep the US safe. As can be seen, these questions and their implied answers are exceedingly vague. They do not name specific actors or identify particular emergency situations, but rather imply that such threats exist and are being dealt with, leaving it up to the reader to fill in the blanks.

What was Flynn’s background? Why is this relevant?
Why did Adm R (NSA) meet Trump privately w/o auth? 
Does POTUS know where the bodies are buried? 
Does POTUS have the goods on most bad actors? 

In this section, Q names two specific figures—Michael Flynn, national security adviser to the Trump administration from January 20 - February 13, 2017, and Admiral Michael Rogers, NSA Director and commander of the Department of Defense cyber-operations from January 2014 - Spring 2018. Both Flynn and Rogers have served in the military. Given Q’s portrayal of the military as uncorrupted actors, Q is implying that Trump’s personal connections with both Flynn and Rogers proves that he has a close working relationship with the military. Considering that Flynn later complied with the Mueller investigation, Q’s emphasis on Flynn’s military background can be interpreted as an attempt to prove that Flynn is not betraying the president, but rather working with Trump from within Mueller’s investigation. Moreover, it is an effort to prove that the Mueller investigation is actually a smokescreen for Trump’s investigation of the Deep State due to its association with military insiders such as Flynn. This serves to assuage right-wing anxieties that Trump will face negative consequences from the Mueller investigation. Furthermore, the mention of Rogers is relevant due to a meeting he had with Trump, without official authorization or a publicly disclosed purpose, on November 17, 2016. This meeting has been the subject of some controversy, including being condemned as unethical by multiple news agencies (NPR. “NSA Head Meets with Trump Team,” 2016). However, in the Qanon community, Rogers’s military background and the unauthorized nature of the meeting have led many to assume that the meeting’s purpose was to warn Trump of the corruption surrounding the presidential election, and to pledge the military’s support for him (Anons).

Was TRUMP asked to run for President? 
Why? 
By Who? 
Was HRC next in line?
Was the election suppose to be rigged?
Did good people prevent the rigging?
Why did POTUS form a panel to investigate?

Now that Q has demonstrated Trump’s personal connections with the military, they begin guiding the reader towards an interpretation of the presidential election as proof of the Deep State’s existence and agenda, in addition to Trump’s oppositional role. Because Qanon draws upon a preexisting network of right-wing conspiratorial thinking, theories of election interference against Trump’s campaign pervade the Qanon imaginary. By enquiring if Trump was asked to run for president, Qanon draws upon the audience’s preexisting favorable view of Trump to imply that the answer is yes. In the context of the previous discussion about military agencies fighting Deep State corruption and Trump’s connection with Flynn and Rogers, the only logical answer to the question of who asked Trump to run is that he was sponsored by military actors. These lines embody the Qanon community’s commitment to Trump and idolization of him.

The following lines of this section draw upon preexisting distrust of Hillary in right-leaning communities to validate the perception that the 2016 presidential election was rigged against Trump. This is a relatively common idea, and as previously mentioned, draws on broader anxieties over the validity of the US democratic process. However, Q applies these anxieties in a unique way to imply that Trump has overcome the Deep State’s corrupt agenda and is in the midst of an investigation to restore democracy. In the final line of this section, Q asks why Trump formed a panel to investigate the election. In my initial analysis, I was unsure what panel this line could be referring to. Upon increased immersion in the Qanon worldview, I realized that this line represents one of the most central aspects of the Qanon conspiracy, being the conviction that Trump is covertly running the Mueller investigation.
Interpretations of Q posts published by anons on qanon.pub best sum up the logical processes underpinning this belief. Responding to why Trump formed the Mueller investigation, anons state that he did so “To restore our voting process, and highlight the problems that exist in it. Especially the electronic voting machines, but also the usual dems [Democrats] getting the dead and the illegally present in our country to vote” (Anon, Qanon.pub). In this quote, background paranoia and conspiracy about the US democratic system is apparent, as is a distinct demonization of Democrats. Referring more specifically to the investigation, these anons open up a line of enquiry about the actual purpose of the investigation and its relationship to Russia. “Was it really Russia, or were operatives in [the] Deep State doing the hacking under [the] guise of Russia[n] hacking ‘fingerprint[s]’ in order to FIX [the] election for Hillary?” (Anon, Qanon.pub). This enquiry takes anxieties over the US voting system one step further than is frequently done by implying that Russia’s involvement was masterminded by Democrats and Hillary specifically.

Has POTUS *ever* made a statement that did not become proven as true/fact?
What is POTUS in control of?
What is the one organization left that isn’t corrupt?
Why does the military play such a vital role?
Why is POTUS surrounded by highly respected generals?

This section once again attempts to show a strong relationship between Trump and the military, in addition to implying that this relationship endows Trump with unparalleled knowledge. Q’s statement about Trump’s factuality completely ignores the many objectively false statements that Trump has made, especially on his Twitter account. Herein lies a fundamental and pervasive disconnect between the Qanon community’s rhetoric of research and the exercise of its cognitive processes. Drawing upon the previous description of the Qanon community’s analytical norms shows that only a subset of dialogue, ideas, and events are subject
to interrogation and investigation within Qanon. Whether discourse will be readily consumed or subject to skepticism is primarily source-dependent. Sources consumed uncritically include those internal to the Qanon community, such as interpretations provided by anons, in addition to the statements of actors considered patriotic and uncorrupted, such as Trump. All other sources, especially those considered to be part of the Mainstream Media, are treated with skepticism and dissected with the goal of confirming preexisting perceptions.

Q’s questions strive to affirm and enhance broader suspicion towards the Mainstream Media within far-right communities. Because mainstream news sources are platforms which often evaluate and critique the validity of Trump’s claims, Q can claim that Trump’s statements are completely factual with the implication that any of his statements being labeled as false is simply an attack on him by the Mainstream Media, and the Deep State by proxy. In an anon’s answer on qanon.pub to Q’s question about whether Trump has made untruthful statements, “TECHNICALLY yes (he calls these truthful hyperboles in his book) but I would say for important things or promises he’s made, no.” Demonstrated here is the quintessential argumentative style of Qanon, which juxtaposes reliable Qanon-community sources with false narratives pushed by the Mainstream Media. The sweeping statement about Trump as truthful and dismissal of contradictory information is supported by subsequent lines discussing Trump’s relationship with the uncorrupted military. By linking Trump with military actors, and therefore with honesty and patriotism, examples of him being untruthful become insignificant, as his character and role have already been established as unquestionable.

Who guards former Presidents?
Why is that relevant?
Who guards HRC? (Q, 2017)
This section establishes a narrative of corruption amongst former presidents and their administrations. It focuses on both structural corruption (the implied corruption of the civilian secret service agency that protects former presidents) and individual corruption (Hillary). In these lines, Q uses absolutely no direct statements about the corruption of former presidents and civilian agencies and offers no concrete examples of their corruption. Instead, Q relies on the audience to attribute corruption to these figures solely based on their association with civilian agencies such as the Secret Service. Once again, the ability of the audience to interpret the intended message is entirely dependent on their background knowledge of the corruption complex posited by Q. To understand that this section implies the corruption of former presidents, the secret service, and Hillary, the audience must themselves make the connection between the Deep State and these civilian actors by applying preexisting communal understandings. Throughout previous sections and the posts that predate post 14, Q has already ensured that the necessary background understandings and value judgments are already in the audience’s mind, so that they will engage uncritically and provide their own answers about the corruption of key figures. In this post, we can see the internalization of distrust against civilian agencies and past political figures, combined with the audience’s belief that Q has already given valid proof of the Deep State’s hold on these actors. Consumption of Q’s intended meaning is once again dependent upon the audience previous knowledge and uncritical reception of Q’s statements.

Why is ANTIFA allowed to operate?
Why hasn’t the MB been classified as a terrorist org?
What happens if Soros funded operations get violent and engage in domestic terrorism?
What happens if mayors/ police comms/chiefs do not enforce the law?
What authority does POTUS have specifically over the Marines?
Why is this important? (Q, 2017)
Engaging in a discussion of Antifa and the Muslim Brotherhood, Q brings up two organizations which are perceived very differently across the US political spectrum. Because the questions posed about the two organizations are open ended, their set of possible answers is broad. Nonetheless, this section of post 14 only makes sense when its questions are answered in a way that paints Antifa and the Muslim Brotherhood as organizations that pose a threat to US society and politics. Short for “anti-fascist,” Antifa is a loosely organized left-wing group dedicated to fighting racism and white supremacy, as well as tracking and opposing the activities of Neo-Nazis. Antifa attempts to prevent groups it considers fascist from having a public forum, often physically confronting them and counter-protesting at sponsored events. Because they are not a nonviolent organization and stand by the use of physical means to defend against fascism, Antifa has been condemned as a violent leftist extremist organization by many on the political right (Stranglin 2017). The Muslim Brotherhood is a political and religious activist organization founded in 1928 that advocates for using the Quran as a guideline for society. The organization has operated as a political party in some Middle Eastern countries, including fielding political candidates in Egypt. It has also been involved in social and political movements such as the 2011 Egyptian uprising against the Mubarak regime (Jones and Cullinane 2013). The Muslim Brotherhood has been designated as a terrorist organization by numerous governments, and the United States is politically divided over whether it should be labeled as such. Many US Foreign Policy experts oppose its designation as a terrorist organization and claim the label may lead to repression of nonviolent Muslims worldwide (Hamid 2017). However, in most conservative circles, the Muslim Brotherhood is viewed as a sponsor of violent Islamic extremism, necessitating a label as a terrorist organization (Lott 2017).
As I will discuss later, Q often claims that the issues facing the US are not about partisan politics, but rather a battle of good versus evil that surpasses partisan divisions. However, this section highlights the pervasive disconnect between Qanon’s claim to be a non-partisan movement and its use of politically charged commentary. In Q’s second post, this non-partisan language is explicitly expressed with the statement that “This is not a R[epublican] v D[emocrat] battle” (Q 2017). While Q’s questions are presented as open-ended and non-partisan, only a specific set of answers that conform with the Qanon community’s right-wing ideological affiliation provide answers that make sense in the given context and lead coherently into the next set of questions. Without a set of preexisting assumptions about the terrorist danger posed by the Muslim Brotherhood and Antifa, the reader would be unable to engage with the line of reasoning Q is conferring. Because each question leads into the next and meaning must be inferred through an interactive framework, doubt in the answers of previous questions derails one’s ability to understand future ones. Thus, Q posts are targeted at individuals with a very specific partisan affiliation. Statements that juxtapose good versus evil, corrupted versus uncorrupted, draw ideological and political lines, identifying with conservative interpretations of the roots of social ills and trying to universalize this viewpoint through non-partisan claims.

Q’s discussion of the Muslim Brotherhood and Antifa has been extensively contextualized by anons within the Qanon community. One anon’s interpretation of why the organizations are allowed to operate was considered insightful enough that Q re-posted it with the comment, “Well done. Picture being painted” (Q. 1 November 2017). In their response, the anon presents a historical timeline of how the military has interfered in civilian affairs to prevent social disorder, including when they were deployed in the 1950s and ’60s to maintain peace during the integration of public schools. They also describe the history of military intelligence
oversight of civil society, specifically how “Army agents were sent throughout the country to keep surveillance over the way the civilian population expressed their sentiments about government policies” (Anon. 1 November 2017). These examples are relatively well-documented, with a link to a 2004 article by Stephen Dycus entitled “The Role of Military Intelligence in Homeland Security,” published by the Louisiana Law Review.

While the anon’s research on military intelligence agencies’ involvement in civil society relies on reputable sources to offer a historically accurate timeline, the connection they establish with Q’s line of questioning is much more tenuous. After a multi-paragraph description of the military’s involvement, the anon applies their analysis to Q’s post, stating “Hahahaha, Trump has had MI infiltrate Antifa and all the dissenting local govts [governments]. Always 5 steps ahead! Please be true” (Anon. 1 November 2017). In this way, a disconnect appears between the anon’s relatively factual background information and its application. This disconnect persists throughout the Qanon community, with research haphazardly applied to form conclusive interpretations of Q’s posts. Looking at how the anon concludes by stating “Please be true,” the application of this research embodies their hopes and ideals about the worldview being constructed through Qanon. The process of drawing conclusions within the Qanon community is not so much about interrogating the meaning of research results on topics such as military intelligence, but on confirming the worldview that has been painted and using facts as a validation of their desires.

Returning to the text of post 14, this section begins to provide a more concrete prediction of how the coming Storm will unfold. Connecting back to the opening lines concerning military takeover of civilian government agencies, Q begin shows the ways these measures could be translated into reality. When Q references Antifa and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in this section, Qanon supporters view it as an outline of how martial law could be declared by Trump
for the purpose of ensuring national security and putting an end to corruption and lawlessness. Because military intelligence has supposedly infiltrated the Muslim Brotherhood and Antifa, allowing them to engage in violent actions at the correct time would provide an excuse to declare martial law once Trump and the military are prepared to liberate the US populace.

Next, Q begins questioning what would happen if the US was the target of domestic terrorist attacks and local political actors were negligent in their duties. Q implies that this predicted deterioration in social structure and security is associated with operations funded by George Soros, a well-known funder of liberal causes, as well as with civilian agencies such as the police and elected officials. In doing so, Q offers a narrative that reiterates previous assertions about the corruption of nonmilitary and liberal actors. Q’s question regarding the authority of POTUS and the Marines has been interpreted as alluding to the National Security Act of 1947. This Act outlines the general role of the military and contains the specific mandate that Marines are obligated to “perform such other duties as the president may direct,” (10 U.S. Code § 5063) placing their objectives at the president’s discretion.

In the context of previous discussions of martial law, Q brings the reader to the conclusion that Trump will declare martial law in order to reassert control of the country through a military takeover. According to Q, this is the undisputed trajectory of US politics, and this prediction is central to the interpretation of events by the Qanon community. In the Qanon theory, this takeover is “The Storm,” which will consume the US and undo the Deep State, bringing about a utopian sociopolitical reality that revitalizes the patriotic past of the American Dream. This utopian and nostalgic vision of the nation’s future will be discussed in the following section.

What is Mueller’s background? Military?
Was Trump asked to run for President w/assurances made to prevent tampering?
How is POTUS always 5-steps ahead?
Who is helping POTUS? (Q, 2017)

The concluding lines of this post discuss Mueller’s role and relationship to Trump, both of which are central to the Qanon theory. While mainstream news sources see these indictments as proof of illicit and corrupt activity during the presidential elections, the Qanon theory posits that the Mueller’s investigation is actually directed at the Deep State, using the investigation of Trump as a public smokescreen. By bringing to the audience’s attention that Mueller served in the military, enlisting in the Marines in 1968 and serving until 1971, Q is drawing on the credibility of the military as uncorrupted actors to prove the theory that Mueller is collaborating with Trump. Following this, Q is once again alluding to the supreme knowledge and influence of Trump by implying that he has been placed in the office of the presidency by powerful actors, while their continued help is lending him knowledge and foresight.

Through this textual analysis of Q’s 14th post, I have demonstrated the complex nature of Q’s serial texts and the analytical labor required to interpret them. Qanon’s process of interpretation, wherein participants decode Q’s cryptic statements through a standardized analytical methodology, defines Qanon as a community of hermeneutic practice and produces meaning from otherwise enigmatic statements. Because this community is built around the personas of Q and Trump, in the following section I will offer social biographies of who these figures are within the Qanon imaginary, and how they are involved in Qanon’s constitution of itself.
Social biographies

The Qanon community is comprised of individuals with a broad set of conspiratorial ideologies who are all unified around the persona of Q and content of their posts. Because Q is the central figure of the community, understanding their identity is crucial to understanding the dynamics of Qanon as a community. Q’s cryptic posts are the building blocks of Qanon, viewed as crumbs of truth that enable individuals to liberate themselves from an oppressive reality imposed by the Deep State. Qanon’s hermeneutic practices are constituted around the perception of Q as a repository of ultimate knowledge who endows the public with the ability to see the world as it really is.

Perhaps the most universally recognized norm of the Qanon community is that individuals are forbidden from seeking to uncover Q’s identity. As is the nature of 4chan and 8chan, Q does not need an account or username to post and thus has no physical identity associated with their digital presence. In their introductory document for new members of the Qanon community, anons explicitly state the necessity of respecting Q’s anonymity. “Q’s specifically confirmed identity might remain a mystery to anons and to the public, but ultimately that is not important. It is, rather, the messages, information, intel, and facts that Q posts which are important. Anons focus not on who Q is, but on what Q is saying” (Anon n.d. “Q – The Basics” 3). Q’s identity is thus constituted in an intentionally broad and is never personalized. In this way, they become almost more of a symbol than an individual within the community. Although defined as a team of individuals, the monolithic nature of Q’s role and purpose produces this idea of them as a patriotic symbol of truth and public service.

The prioritization of Q’s anonymity demonstrates multiple aspects of Q’s role in the Qanon community. By respecting Q’s anonymity and identifying them by their stated role as a
military intelligence insider, the universality of trust for Q throughout the community is apparent. While extensive efforts are made to decode and “prove” the statements leaked by Q, no such scrutiny is applied to the claims Q makes about their identity. In this way, Q’s legitimacy is established as a pillar of the community. This shapes the entire analytical process of the community, where intense scrutiny is applied to Q’s statements, not to pass judgment on their truth value, but to uncover what truths are being disclosed through these cryptic questions. This ready acceptance of Q’s stated identity indicates the ultimate trust that is placed in Q.

Beyond this, the community’s focus on Q’s anonymity demonstrates how they constitute themselves as a collectivity. The community believes that they have a duty to protect Q’s identity from being disclosed to the public, and especially from Deep State actors. In the Qanon worldview, individuals are all part of a collective struggle against the Deep State. They are the target of Q’s covert intelligence operation whereby they gain intellectual liberation. Because Q’s mission is dependent upon the dissemination of knowledge, community members believe they have a responsibility to receive Q’s crumbs and disseminate them so as to become members of Q’s project of liberation. The anonymity offered by the structure of 4chan and 8chan is essential to the continuation of Q’s mission and personal safety, which would both supposedly be jeopardized if Q’s identity was disclosed. Thus, interrogating Q’s actual identity is a social taboo because of the community’s belief in the real-world impact of their actions and constitution as agents in a covert war.

This fixation around protecting Q’s identity also indicates how the digital sphere has been legitimized as a standalone site of communal activism and engagement. In this context, anonymity is not a source of suspicion or delegitimization of informational accuracy, but rather an important tool utilized as part of a political struggle. The social stigma against interrogating
Q’s identity is indicative of the culture of anonymity in which the Qanon community has evolved, where a collective political action is divorced from personal identification. Considering how modern journalistic and political ethics are overwhelmingly oriented around transparency of sources and processes, it seems almost counterintuitive that anonymity would become such a pillar of the Qanon community. However, applying West and Sanders’ theorization of how the ideosphere of transparency is not universally received reveals the ways in which modern discourses become sites of contestation. Anonymity and conspiracy operate together in resistance to the construction of transparency as a site of legitimacy.

President Trump is the second foundational figure in the Qanon community, holding a role which is much different from, but no less important than, that held by Q. In the community, Donald Trump is applauded as the pinnacle of success and described as a true “winner.” As the card reads, “The Donald knows all about the American Dream and achieving success. With his election to the presidency, The Donald added to a very long life of extraordinary achievements that already includes a beautiful family, billions of dollars, world celebrity and a very successful television show. So Much Winning Bigley” (Q Cards 2018). The Qanon community believes that Trump brings singular qualifications to the role of the presidency. Similar to how Trump depicts himself, the community focuses on his stated achievements as a businessman and dealmaker. They consistently paint him as a political outsider, and as such assume he is uncorrupted by the political establishment.

The Book of Q Proofs\(^{10}\) provides a timeline of “relevant events” leading up to Q’s activity, all of which center around Trump entering the political system. The first event is an interview between Trump and Rona Barrett on October 6\(^{th}\), 1980, where Trump states his

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\(^{10}\) The Book of Q Proofs is a lengthy publication by anons in the Qanon community dedicated to proving Q’s theories. Digital copies are linked on many websites and pages related to Qanon.
conviction that a proper president could turn the country around and make it “what is once was” (Book of Q Proofs, 22). He also discusses how he would not like to be president but would like to see someone like himself—who has strong views and convictions but might lack charisma—take on the role. From this interview, the timeline jumps forward to June 16th, 2015, where Trump announced his presidency. Subsequent dates on the timeline detail aspects of Trump’s more recent digital activity. This timeline strives to strengthen Trump’s legitimacy as a character opposed to the political establishment, with no desire to pursue power for personal gain and an unwillingness to compromise his values to appeal to voters. In this way, Trump is constructed as a selfless figure, taking on the duties of president for the benefit of the nation, rather than for his own personal gain. Building off of this, the community has construed Trump not just as a selfless public servant, but as a divine figure chosen to by God to restore America to its former glory. This idea is exemplified in the comment thread of “Q-We are the Plan,” where a user states, “Trump is a man not of his own, but chosen by God Almighty to fulfill his will and to revert all Political Damage done by the Cabal” (Signs of the End Times 2019).

The Qanon community not only idealizes Trump but believes that they have a unique relationship with him in which he sees and affirms their beliefs and actions. In the Book of Q Proofs, one of the first sections is dedicated to proving how Trump has been visiting Q’s 4chan thread. The book shows a 4chan post prompting Trump to demonstrate his presence on 4chan, and subsequent tweet by the president “confirming” that he saw this message. The 4chan post reads, “Mr. Trump if you actually do lurk here and you like this meme please use the word ‘amazing’ [italic added] somehow in your next tweet. this [sic] will be a wink and a nod (on the downlow) that you appreciate all of us here” (Anon 2016, Book of Q Proofs 29). Trump’s next tweet, published 5 hours after the 4chan post, reads “Colorado was amazing [italic added]
yesterday! So much support. Our tax, trade and energy reforms will bring great jobs to Colorado and the whole country” (Donald J. Trump, 2016, Book of Q Proofs 29). Many other anons have made efforts to confirm Trump’s presence on Qanon forums by using similar methodology of mapping Trump’s digital statements against community occurrences. Through this fixation on proving their proximity with Trump, the Qanon community strives to legitimize their claim to be part of a consequential political movement, endowed with insider knowledge. They conceptualize Trump not just as an idolized figure, but as a member of their community.

The production of knowing subjects

Qanon constitutes itself through a set of communal practices that extend beyond its analytical processes to include norms of behavior and interaction. While Qanon posits that it is a movement built of regular citizens and is thus accessible to all, individuals must undergo a process of transformation and subjectification to truly belong in Qanon. It is through learning and embodying the analytical processes, discursive practices, and cultural norms of Qanon that individuals become part of the community. Through establishing norms that govern interaction and subjectivity, the community constitutes itself as a cohesive and exclusive entity and demarcates the line between insiders and outsiders. Becoming a member of this community necessitates a process of initiation whereby one is transformed into a particular, knowing subject.

In this section, I will draw upon Lave and Wenger’s theorization of legitimate peripheral participation as a form of situated learning to explicate Qanon’s process of subjectification. Lave and Wenger posit legitimate peripheral participation as a way to understand that learning is a whole-body process which happens through the situation of individuals within social contexts. Learning is thus “an integral part of generative social practice in the lived world” (Lave and
Wenger 1991, 35). Through participation that begins at the periphery of social relations, individuals gain full access to a community as they come to embody its practices. “Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that mastery of knowledge and skills requires newcomers to move towards full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 29). Drawing upon Lave and Wenger’s description of how “newcomers” and “oldtimers” constitute communities of practice through situated learning, I will use the terms “beginners” and “researchers” throughout this section to explain Qanon’s process of subjectification.

The Qanon community articulates strict guidelines for participation, dictating different norms for beginners and researchers. All individuals are invited to view the discourse of the community, but only those who have been initiated, and transformed from beginner to researcher, are encouraged to actually participate. Qanon’s process of subjectification is explicitly outlined on the Welcome Page for Q’s 8chan thread, /QResearch/. This introductory page focuses on how beginners have the agency to become active members of the community, but also stresses that individual must commit themselves to learning how to be proper community members. The individual is depicted as an autonomous actor with agency to become a part of the community. In order to do so, they must learn the analytical process, worldview, and norms of Qanon. The Qanon community on 8chan asserts that it is not the job of researchers to communicate to beginners the dynamics of the community. Rather, beginners are entirely responsible for their own initiation, making the process of subjectification an individualized endeavor. It is the beginners, not the researchers nor the community as a whole, who are responsible for their own education and transformation.
The community upholds certain ideals of what constitutes a good citizen, using them as a guideline for how beginners should behave. The /QResearch/ Welcome Page begins with a description of what characteristics are valued within the community, with the implication that these are the defining traits of all patriotic citizens. As the page reads, adhering to the rules, not taking any shortcuts, and not asking for any exceptions to be made are the characteristics of good citizens. Each beginner is expected to embody these traits by patiently and silently becoming fluent in the ways of the community and taking it upon themselves as individuals to learn the norms. “Be gracious, and recognize you have a lot to learn... Be humble. Be patient. That is the foundation of being an effective patriot. Do you imagine Q started out by skipping those steps? Along the way, lurk with agency, study the boards, the bantz, the culture” (/QResearch/).

Asking questions about the norms and ideologies of Qanon on /QResearch/ is socially unacceptable. As the Welcome Page states, “Would you walk into a NASA meeting and ask help with your algebra homework?” (/QResearch/). In this statement, we can see how the community constitutes itself as a professional and specialized entity, where researchers are prestigious and educated, busy executing institutional goals. Beginners, in contrast, are illiterate and elementary, unable to engage with the complex and important work of the researchers, as they haven’t yet mastered the basics of the community. Because Qanon views itself as an agent battling for the fate of the country, setting time aside to answer the questions of new members would detract from their efforts at uncovering new information about what is really happening in the US. Drawing on Jordan (1998), the necessity that beginners respect the work being done by researchers indicates that “learning how to become a legitimate participant in a community involves learning how to talk (and be silent) in the manner of full participants” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 105). Engaging in Qanon is posited as a serious and consequential endeavor, and
beginners must learn to embody this dynamic by self-monitoring to ensure productive engagement.

While it is not socially acceptable for newcomers on the 8chan /QResearch/ page to ask anons for help, this does not detract from the importance of recruitment as part of the Qanon community’s mission. Because the Great Awakening is said to happen when the population becomes intellectually liberated, enlightening people with the knowledge imparted by Q is an essential part of the community. New members are provided with a list of resources they can study so as to become fluent in the community’s discourses and ideas. They are encouraged to consult websites and videos produced by anons and study the original text of Q’s posts alongside proofs and interpretations.

Qanon’s process of initiation is described as a “boot camp for the mind” (Welcome Page, /QResearch/), and starts with beginners consulting Qanon’s provided resources and learning the complexities of the community’s theories and analytical processes. Becoming a member is arduous because of the complexity of the Qanon theory in general, and Q’s posts in particular, as well as the intricacy of sites such as 4chan and 8chan. Due to the expectation that beginners initiate themselves without the guidance of researchers, the community has little sympathy and tolerance for displays of ignorance. As the Welcome Page communicates, beginners are expected to lurk, observe, and do their own research before making contributions to /QResearch/. If these contributions are not considered insightful enough, they will be met with “newfag/shill smackdowns,” or essentially vicious verbal attacks and insults. After an unsuccessful attempt at participation, beginners are expected to go back to researching and lurking before trying again at posting. It often takes multiple cycles of rejection for new members to have their input received positively. Anons declare that, “If that sounds like a lot of work before you get any feels of
recognition, welcome to the world where not everyone gets a fucking participation trophy” (/QResearch/). This statement expresses an unforgiving attitude towards the ignorance of outsiders. It also indicates the harsh nature of the initiation process, where any display of noncompliance with norms or plea for help is met with aggressive rejection. Up until they become productive members of the community, beginners are deemed undeserving of a space in Qanon’s interactive sphere.

The way in which community members are not just recruited, but produced, mirrors Mahmud’s theorization of Italian Freemasonry as a community based upon the practice of discretion. As Mahmud discusses, discretion in the Freemason community is a practice which allowed them to see a coded reality superimposed over the existing one. It was only through this discretion that “Freemasons could learn to see a second version of reality superimposed over the existing one, neither concealed nor explicit” (Mahmud, 431). Moreover, becoming literate means undergoing a “process of enskillment” (Elyachar, 2011), in which the individual learns “to recognize visual symbols and spoken innuendos, winks, metaphors, and codes” (Mahmud, 431). From this process arises a dichotomy of initiated versus uninitiated, insiders versus outsiders, where only those within the community can see the codes and symbols superimposed over everyday reality. Just as the Freemasons must undergo this process, so too must the members of Qanon. The symbols and codes which reveal the true reality of the world, while not necessarily hidden, are nonetheless inaccessible to those who don’t know where to look for them. Members must learn for themselves where and how to look for the hints which will reveal what is really going on, undergoing a ritualized process of lurking, attempting participation, and being shunned for the ignorance of their initial posts. It is only once beginners become researchers who are
literate in the ways of the community’s hermeneutic practice that they can belong, participate, and see.

Cultural constitution

Qanon’s aggressive initiation process is indicative of a broader culture throughout the community, which rejects political correctness and embraces an extreme logic of free speech, in which inflammatory and abrasive language is the norm. This free speech culture is established as a tenant of the community. “You do not have a right not to be offended. You do not have a right to be ‘comfortable’. Everyone has a guaranteed right to Freedom of Speech. 'Inappropriate', 'offensive,' and 'problematic' are words that do not exist here. YOU are responsible for what YOU look at and how YOU feel about it; NO ONE ELSE IS” (/QResearch/). Speaking with intentionally harsh and offensive language becomes a way for Qanon to resist perceived restrictions on their individual rights and loss of autonomy over the state of the country. It also becomes a coded way to defend ideologies and make statements that are otherwise unacceptable, enabling individuals to use violent, oppressive, and harmful rhetoric with impunity by conflating it with their inalienable right to free speech.

This focus on free speech links directly with the community’s relationship to demographic inclusivity, which is simultaneously embraced and rejected in their rhetoric. As I will discuss more thoroughly in the following chapter, the Qanon community depicts itself as operating outside of partisan politics. Not only does it use good and evil as a coded way to discuss partisan politics, but a language of color and gender blindness to lay claim to inclusivity while in reality being demographically and politically exclusive. Qanon operates, both explicitly and implicitly, with hierarchical logics common to far-right groups, including, but not limited to,
white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, and anti-Semitism. As anon’s state, “We don’t care who you are, what your race or gender is, and we do not want to know. The game of identity politics is not played here. Here, we really are equal, and equally anonymous” (/QResearch/). Through this statement, it becomes clear that even though all participants are anonymous, they are in no way equal. To sustain the *proper* anonymity requires that anons mask all aspects of identity that diverge from the straight, white, male, conservative demographics of Qanon. While digital anonymity may mask one’s identity, identifying information such as political affiliation, race, and gender can still become legible through interactions. Anonymity in Qanon’s logic requires passing as a particular demographic subject by masking any divergent traits and affiliations from being displayed through statements and interactions. In this way, the digital space Qanon has constructed on 8chan reproduces the hierarchies, politics, and risks of the physical sphere.

The exclusivity of Qanon’s culture is not always expressed through coded means but is often aggressively and unapologetically declared by anons in their interactions and publications. The /QResearch/ Welcome Page reads, “If you ARE gender-female, then shut the fuck up about it and be an anon. Recognize that the culture of the boards, and of warriors, is metaphysically male... Women and SJW’s\(^{11}\) [Social Justice Warrior’s] have claimed every damn corner of the world, but this one is OURS.” Through this statement, the exclusivity of Qanon’s culture and politics is asserted, as well as their constitution as far-right political actors by attacking social justice.

\(^{11}\) SJW, or Social Justice Warrior, is a pejorative term frequently employed in right-wing politics as a condemnation of perceived extremism and disingenuousness in those pursuing social justice issues, such as feminism, civil rights, multiculturalism, and identity politics.
Despite Qanon’s assertion that it is a movement in which all citizens can belong as equals, it is fundamentally an exclusive and hierarchical entity. These elements are constituted both implicitly, through its construction of a particular type of anonymity, and explicitly, through its rejection of those who deviate from the political and demographic subjectivity Qanon embraces. In this way, Qanon asserts an extreme cultural exclusivity reflective of that held throughout the contemporary alt-right.

Archival impulses

The Qanon community exhibits a fixation around both researching and proving their theory of the world, in addition to archiving this information and making it accessible. Much of my research was enabled by their archival impulses, which served to counteract the ephemerality of 4chan and 8chan and make Q’s posts, as well as community proofs and publications, accessible. Throughout this section, I will discuss these researching and archiving impulses in conjunction with how the community constitutes itself.

While it is difficult to calculate the sheer volume of information produced and archived by the Qanon community, it is undoubtedly high. Several third-party websites are dedicated exclusively to collecting information, primarily Q’s posts, and entering them into a publicly accessible archive. Throughout my research, I frequently consulted qanon.pub, a website which archives the entirety of Q’s posts and automatically updates when new ones appear on 8chan. This website is searchable and sortable by a variety of categories. Posts are also auto-collected onto qmap.pub, a similar, but more extensive, site to qanon.pub. Qmap.pub was drastically redone near the end of my research process, and now features many new and well-organized resources. Not only does it archive Q’s posts, but it now has extensive pages dedicated to topics
such as “Players in the Game,” “Prayer Wall,” (essentially a chat room), “Global Themes,” as well as photo, meme, and video libraries, amongst other resources. Unfortunately, I never had time to analyze this site in depth, as I only noticed that it had expanded beyond archiving into being a more comprehensive analytical and social forum in the last days of my project.

Third-party websites themselves often have multiple different domains and points of access. One such site, qanon.pub, “is hosted at multiple locations for redundancy should any go down” and has links to these different locations (qanon.pub). This demonstrates the ways in which Qanon’s archival fixation pushes it to make multiple backups of the same content. Beyond these websites, the community frequently creates publicly accessible google drive folders to store information and has domains on online data storage sites such as Mega. Undoubtedly, I am unaware of the extent of Qanon’s digital archival efforts. It wasn’t until near the end of my research that I discovered a link to the community Mega site, which hosts folders full of tens of thousands of images associated with a range of different topics. These images included not just Q’s posts, but analytical graphics dedicated to proving various aspects of the Qanon worldview, a diversity of memes, “America First” voting propaganda, and timelines of events related to the Qanon community. Additionally, a range of different conspiratorial topics were also archived, including folders entitled “Hillary’s Election Trap,” “Obama’s Secret Pardons,” “Trump’s Military Tribunals,” “Vaccine,” and “9/11” (Mega). Thus, the archiving impulses seem to exceed material directly related to the core content of the Qanon theory and apply to an entire network of conspiratorial and fringe content.

These archival impulses seem almost counterintuitive when considered in relation to how the community arose from, and was in large part enabled by, the anonymity of 4chan and 8chan. Their desire to preserve content runs counter to the ephemeral nature of interactions on these
sites, where a lack of oversight and fear of censorship has produced a culture with a militant commitment to free speech. However, the community’s simultaneous reliance on ephemeral sites and fixation on archiving are not so contradictory as they first appear. Rather, these two factors operate as dual aspects of the community’s constitution as an actor in a covert information war and perception of victimization.

The first of these two aspects, ephemerality, has already been discussed in depth. In the context of the Qanon community’s constitution as participants in an existential struggle, ephemerality and anonymity serve as a way to disclose information and engage in dialogue with impunity, bypassing perceived censorship. This acts as the first step in their proclaimed mission of intellectually liberating the population, enabling information to be disclosed by Q without their identities being discovered by the Deep State. They use ephemeral sites because they enable candid interaction, freedom of speech, and a buffer against any consequences or repression. Because Qanon believes that they are waging a war against corruption, these sites become a way by which to express what they would otherwise be afraid to express. Q’s whole persona is about disclosing information in secret and conducting a covert informational war, which is entirely enabled by the ephemeral and anonymous nature of 4chan and 8chan.

The second aspect lies in the archival process, which allows them to spread Q’s original content and their communal interpretations to the public, enabling everyone to learn to see what is “really happening.” The community believes it has a duty to preserve, analyze, and prove Q’s posts. Because these posts are the foundation of Qanon’s epistemological reality, archiving is required for their further interpretation and distribution by the community. Archiving in this sense is both practical and ideological. Because of the cryptic nature of Q’s posts, and convoluted worldview they produce, they require in-depth analysis and continual consultation in
order to understand. Qanon’s lengthy interpretive process is only possible in conjunction with an archiving impulse. Q’s serial cryptic messages are the source of Qanon’s hermeneutic practice. Thus, interpretation and the process of becoming enlightened is sustained by archives. Secondly, the archiving process is ideological. The community believes they are part of a movement to bring down the Deep State through large-scale intellectual liberation. Thus, the community must archive everything that is said and everything that has been “proved” to enlighten as many people as possible, and therefore liberate the population.

Additionally, the Qanon community’s paranoia over repression and sense of victimization feeds into their archiving fixation. As a community, they believe that they are being targeted and silenced. This is a commonly held belief throughout the right-wing, where white Americans often believe they are being dispossessed and displaced. But Qanon’s conviction of victimization goes beyond this right-wing anxiety. Their constitution as agents in a covert informational operation follows from their belief that Deep State forces are constantly striving to silence their intellectual engagement with Q and prevent content from making it into the public sphere. As Q Press reads, “Dear Patriots, In response to and in anticipation of the upcoming social media purge, we are implementing a number of new features to serve as a platform for patriots. Thank you for your patience” (Q Press home page). Thus, archiving becomes a way of resisting what they see as a society and government that wants them silenced, and a failure to archive is an act of submission. “As Q predicted, many of his original breadcrumbs have gone missing. So be sure to download and store Qanon breadcrumb graphics far from the reaches of the internet clowns” (qproofs.com/resources).

While the Qanon community’s fixation on archiving may at first appear antithetical to their reliance on anonymity, these two opposing factors work together to produce the
community’s constitution of itself. Because Qanon believes it has a mission to spread the truth and a duty not just to enlighten themselves, but to make information accessible to the public, archiving becomes the way by which they achieve this mission by giving permanence to Q’s anonymous crumbs and the community’s proofs.

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the ways in which Qanon constitutes itself as a community of hermeneutic practice. Through a standardized set of analytical practices, the Qanon community discerns meaning from Q’s cryptic series of crumbs and constitutes themselves through hermeneutic practice. Their communal constitution entails a process of subjectification, by which individuals transform from beginners into researchers through legitimate peripheral participation. Beyond their analytical style, Qanon also has established communal cultural traits intimately linked with the hierarchical and exclusive logic of alt-right groups. In the following chapter, I will transition to a discussion of the epistemology produced through Qanon’s analytical practices.
Chapter 4: Epistemology

Following my previous analysis of the community dynamics of Qanon, in this chapter I will focus on discursive themes and convictions throughout the Qanon community. In previous section I have introduced many of the Qanon community’s beliefs in the context of their hermeneutic practice, but I will now offer a more comprehensive analysis of their centrality within the Qanon community by evaluating the discursive practices and convictions that appear throughout Q’s posts and the community’s dialogue. I argue that through their hermeneutic practices, the Qanon community translates Q’s serial posts into an all-encompassing epistemology of the world around them. This epistemology is intimately linked with the contemporary social and political sphere of the US and is shaped by right-wing ideologies within the US political system.

The Mainstream Media

The Qanon community draws upon a fundamental distrust of information presented by mainstream news sources. This is not entirely surprising given the proliferation of doubt in the objectivity of news sources and validity of information in the current US sociopolitical atmosphere. Trump’s rhetoric surrounding media and journalism epitomizes this distrust through numerous declarations of “Fake News” and claims that mainstream news organizations such as
the *New York Times* and Cable News Network (CNN) are presenting inaccurate information, intentionally misleading the public, and seeking to promote their own political agendas by falsifying information. Beyond this, increasing digitalization of modern life and the freer exchange of information it enables has led to the proliferation of inaccurate or misleading news sources and information lacking factual exactitude. These factors contribute to a widespread uncertainty regarding how to differentiate between factual and false news. Qanon’s worldview has been fundamentally shaped by this context and is intimately linked with the politics of news consumption.

As was previously demonstrated in my close reading of post 14, Q frequently references “Mockingbird” in their posts. Operation Mockingbird is an alleged mission conducted by the CIA in the 1950s that tried to control public opinion by manipulating what information was distributed by news organizations. This included infiltrating student organizations or activist groups and setting up magazines or other such publications for the distribution of propaganda. Essentially, Operation Mockingbird was an experiment in social control, attempting to regulate what information was being produced and consumed in order to shape the social and political subjectivities of citizens. In the Qanon mindset, Operation Mockingbird provides a concrete example of how news sources have become compromised and corrupted to serve the government agenda. Moreover, it provides proof of the loss of intellectual individuality that underpins Q’s assertion of the Deep State’s control over both the minds and bodies of the US populace.

Through their continual references to Operation Mockingbird, Q strives to sustain and produce distrust, not just in news sources, but in numerous other aspects of social and political life. Because Operation Mockingbird has been said to involve infiltration of activist organizations, Q insinuates that modern social and political movements have been corrupted by
civilian intelligence agencies in order to shape public opinion. Beyond just insinuating that society has been infiltrated by government actors, Q explicitly communicates the idea that Operation Mockingbird is ongoing and that mainstream news sources are one such institution that has been coopted for propaganda purposes. The following excerpt from Q’s 144th post on November 12, 2017, demonstrates these ideas.

Who control the MSM [Mainstream Media]? 
Primary objective from beginning: POTUS discredit MSM…
Why was Opration Mockingbird repeated?... (Q post #144, Nov 12, 2017)

By enquiring about who controls the Mainstream Media and why Operation Mockingbird was repeated, Q is linking the two with the implication that both are tools of social control by the Deep State. In this way, Mainstream Media actors are painted as active agents in the erasure of individual autonomy through their goal of controlling social and political thought. Trump is depicted in opposition to these actors, and his continual labeling of media outlets as “Fake News” agencies becomes a way of resisting the Deep State and fighting for public freedom. Q’s invocation of Operation Mockingbird fits within the broader juxtaposition of military and civilian agencies. It legitimizes distrust of civilian agencies such as the CIA by setting a historic precedent for interference in social and political thought, while implying that this interference is ongoing.

References to Operation Mockingbird also serve the purpose of explaining inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and limitations in the information Q is spreading. Q claims in many posts that disclosing too much information is unsafe due to the fact that Deep State officials are monitoring digital forums. Thus, releasing more than just “crumbs” to the public would potentially compromise efforts to take down the Deep State by alerting them to the progress Patriots are making to regain control. In the same vein, Operation Mockingbird explains
away false predictions. Q’s posts have been interpreted as often disclosing inaccurate
information and making false predictions in order to mislead the civilian intelligence agents who
are supposedly monitoring digital media sites. This is one of the reasons why members of the
Qanon community believe that it is so important to fully decode and contextualize all Q
statements. In doing so, they can sort out false information targeted at the Deep State from hints
meant to inform them of Trump’s campaign against the Deep State and prepare them for the
Storm. As anons describe in an introductory publication, “Q’s use of allusions from popular
culture has a dual purpose: not only to maintain national security, but also as a foil to expose,
mirror and thus counter the media and entertainment industries’ deliberate development of
popular culture into a propaganda arm of those who advance their own agenda and, in so doing,
would do us all harm” (Anons, 3). Any false predictions made by Q become intentionally
misleading bits of information that are part of a disinformation campaign being waged to regain
control of the country.

The Qanon worldview draws upon many different aspects of conspiratorial thinking in
the US sociopolitical atmosphere, with one of primarily factors uniting these historical and
contemporary conspiracy theories being distrust in common modes of explanation. Drawing
upon West and Sander’s discussion of the overlap between the ideoscape of transparency and
practices of conspiracy enables a better understanding of how Qanon embodies anxiety and
resistance towards the modern discourse of transparency. News sources are perhaps one of the
strongest embodiments of the contemporary world’s fixation on transparency, striving to make
information accessible to the public and increase accountability throughout society. Qanon’s
mistrust in mainstream narratives and conviction that news agencies are corrupt shows how the
ideoscape of transparency is being resisted by alt-right individuals through their criticism of, and
paranoia over, the narratives presented. Conspiracy becomes a manifestation of resistance against the link between modern governance and transparency. As governments and societies increasingly draw upon ideas of transparency alongside the growth of the information age, paranoid thought expands as a mode of resistance against the promises of transparency. This demonstrates how “The depth of local wells of conspiracy ideas is as great, it would seem, as the breadth of global transparency claims.” (West and Sanders, 12)

Drawing upon contemporary anxieties over informational accuracy in the digital age and right-wing disenchantment with the state of US politics, Qanon depicts the Mainstream Media as an embodiment of all social and political ills. Concern over repression of individuality and perceived loss of social and political capital manifests as a rejection of the media as an arm of the Deep State. Moreover, references to Operation Mockingbird validate Qanon’s conviction that politics and society are being turned against them, controlled by unseen forces as part of a project in social and political control. By positing that the Mainstream Media is an agent in their oppression, the Qanon community can assert the informational accuracy of Q’s posts and reject any contradictory information, producing an informational network internal to their community.

Unification

As I discussed in the previous section, the Qanon community simultaneously lays claim to demographic inclusivity and exclusivity. In a similar vein, Q frequently uses a rhetoric of unity in their posts, with one of their most common statements being “WWG1WGA” or “Where We Go One We Go All.” Q often depicts Qanon as a movement of all people, regardless of their positionality or affiliation, and construes Qanon as a movement which is beyond partisan politics, transcending these divisions to unify against the Deep State’s all-encompassing
oppression. In this section, I will discuss Qanon’s relationship to partisan politics and how their juxtaposition of good versus evil becomes a de facto way to assert partisan values and beliefs.

Q’s posts articulate a contradictory relationship to partisan politics. Throughout their posts, they explicitly argue that the Great Awakening is not about partisan politics, nor about race, gender, nationality, or any other contentious struggle for group identity and equality. As Q states, “This is not about religions or party affiliation. EVIL is everywhere. There are no drawn lines. No boundaries. Good vs Evil” (Q Post #925 2018). Rather, Q posits that the true struggle of contemporary society is one of good versus evil that supersedes political and social divisions. In this worldview, Deep State actors are the source of all social and political ills. Systems of inequality and oppression, as well as all criminal and immoral activity, are not the result of biases, privileges, or harmful actions by US citizens, but are solely the result of the Deep State’s usurpation of society. In this same logic, social and political movements for racial and gender equality are said to be engineered by Deep State actors to weaken and divide the US populace and enable their continued exploitation by the Deep State.

The Qanon community posits that mass oppression caused by the Deep State has produced an existential crisis, in which Qanon views itself as an integral part in a battle for the soul of the nation. This is summed up by the declaration that "the world is currently experiencing a covert war of biblical proportions. Literally the fight for earth, between the forces of good and evil" (The Plan to Save the World). The conflation of social and political ills with Deep State involvement is exemplified in a YouTube video entitled “The Plan to Save the World,” by Joe M12 which declares that "We are among the first to realize that our petty partisan divisions are

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12 Joe M, presumably an individual or group of Q researchers, is an account on YouTube and Twitter that makes posts and videos about Qanon and the Deep State. Their bio reads, “Humans do not naturally exist in a state of conflict. They become so when deliberately set against each other by the evil few that seek to control us all. 11/11” (Joe M. YouTube)
just trivial distractions, and we are all enslaved by a hidden enemy. We realize that the problem
was never capitalism or socialism, Democrat or Republican, black or white, Muslim or Christian.
We know it was just very powerful criminals who had too much power” (Joe M. 2018. “Q - The
Plan to Save the World (Subtitles)”). A language of unity becomes clear through this statement,
which declares that individual ideologies and positionalities are not the problem with society.
Rather, these problems are driven by evil forces outside of the lives of regular individuals.

The non-partisan rhetoric of Qanon’s worldview can be seen clearly through Q’s posts
and the Qanon community’s dialogue. In one post discussing Trump’s 2016 electoral triumph
over Hillary, and the Deep State by proxy, Q states that “They never believed for a moment they
(Democrats and Republicans) would lose control. This is not a R v D battle” (Q post #2, Oct 28
2017). This statement diverges from the majority of paranoid political reasoning associated with
the 2016 election, which primarily claims that Democrats such as Hillary Clinton were
collaborating to keep Trump out of office. Q explicitly pushes back on this partisan blame by
claiming that actors across the political spectrum were part of a plot to rig the election in favor of
Hillary. This anti-partisan politics discourse is a hallmark of Q’s rhetoric, which is echoed
throughout the community. In Praying Medic’s description of research methods in “Qanon for
Beginners,” he urges members of the community to avoid politicized sources of information and
seek objectivity. As Praying Medic says, “I would be cautious in listening to people with strong
political bias. Q has said often that his mission is not about politics... It really is kind of as simple
as good vs evil. Q has pointed out that there are as many corrupt Republicans in Congress as
Democrats, so Q doesn't really take a party affiliation” (Qanon for Beginners).

Through their pushback against partisan political divides, the Qanon community comes to
frame its struggle in terms of good versus evil, corrupted versus patriotic, instead of democrat
versus republic or liberal versus conservative. Talking about good versus evil is thus a proxy for discussing republican versus democrat in an attempt to “depoliticize” politics, while asserting the unquestionable validity of their conservative political viewpoints. Drawing upon Hellinger’s discussion of conspiracy as resistance and empowerment shows how this argument of a battle between good and evil, and conflation of good with conservative values empowers the beliefs of those who identify with far-right groups. Individuals in opposition to these values are labeled as evil, and therefore, Qanon demonizes resistance to the Trump presidency. The identity and politics of right-wing individuals is legitimized, as they are constructed as actors opposing the ultimate evil enemy.

This direct contradiction shows how, rather than being a descriptor of the content of Qanon’s worldview, their self-declared nonpartisan agenda is better understood as a rhetorical strategy to participate in partisan politics without naming it as such. In Qanon discourse, good becomes conflated with conservatism and evil with liberalism, so that speaking about evil actors becomes a de facto way to discuss liberal politics and Democrats in particular. Establishing this conflation serves to delegitimize and demonize competing claims within the US political system. Speaking of liberal political views as part of a pure evil agenda eliminates the need to debate the value of individual policies, actions, and actors, as all under the liberal umbrella have already been identified as intrinsically evil and corrupt. At the same time, this conflation serves as the ultimate dismissal of Democratic claims. Beyond the fact Democrats have been identified as universally evil, Qanon posits that they have created the very issues they claim to campaign against. Because they are agents of the Deep State, Democrats are said to have engineered social discontent by intentionally producing inequality. Thus, not only are Democrats said to be
pursuing ill-intentioned solutions, but the very issues they address are illegitimate, having been produced as a way to weaken society and enable further exploitation.

While Q employs nonpartisan and unifying rhetoric, the ideas they express are inherently political through their alignment with far-right political stances. Q's effort to depoliticize statements and attribute social issues to Deep State corruption is thus a rhetorical strategy to mask a specific, far-right political ideology. One especially salient example is the discussion of race in Q's posts. These discussions act to delegitimize concerns over racism and absolve all responsibility for racial inequality, while simultaneously placing blame on Democrats for social issues.

Why do D's want to control the black pop? Why do they intentionally keep poor and in need? ...
The network which controls this false narrative which in turns keeps the black pop under control is being dismantled. False local and national black leaders will be exposed next as shills for the D party. (Q post #19 2017)

The use of race by Qanon serves many purposes. By positing that racial issues are a intentional constructs of Democrats and the Deep State, Qanon completely delegitimizes any movement for racial equality as pursuing a baseless issue. Considering that movements for racial equality often clash with Republican politics, this bolsters conservative claims that society has entered a post racial era where politics should be colorblind. Beyond this, the Qanon community, like many right-wing movements, frequently draws upon a racist and white supremacist logic, thinly veiled by rhetorical strategies. By claiming that racial issues are an illegitimate concern, Q attempts to dismiss critiques of conservative racism. Additionally, by naming Democrats as the oppressors of the black population, Q furthers the association between the political left and the evil agenda of the Deep State. At the same time, Q's racialized logic serves as the ultimate
dehumanization and denial of agency for people of color, who are depicted as just pawns in the Deep State’s agenda.

Connecting back to the previous theme of the Mainstream Media, Qanon’s nonpartisan rhetoric constructs a self-image in opposition to how those outside of their community, especially mainstream news sources, depict them. The Qanon community describes its worldview as outside the partisan political realm—the polar opposite of how it depicts the Mainstream Media as a partisan propaganda apparatus. By rhetorically placing itself outside of the partisan political realm, the Qanon community affirms the validity of its beliefs, claiming objectivity through a rejection of partisan inclinations. This is both an affirmation of their worldview’s validity and an endorsement of informational sources within the Qanon community as more accurate than those in the Mainstream Media due to their political detachment.

Existential battle or a game?

Throughout the Qanon community, a tension arises between their depiction of themselves as agents in an existential battle against the Deep State versus participants in an immersive, game-like experience. Q explicitly states this intersection in one post, which reads that “Everything has meaning. This is not a game. Learn to play the game” (Q Post #885, 2018). Taken at face value, this post is enigmatic even for Q, as it intentionally asserts mutually exclusive realities. While this contradiction appears hard to reconcile, it is revealing of the dual ways in which Qanon becomes such a compelling site of engagement for those who follow it. I posit that participation enables members to feel that they agents in a righteous movement to liberate their beloved country and fellow citizens, while simultaneously offering a forum of engagement, entertainment, and satisfaction by being immersed in an ongoing, game-like reality.
Qanon becomes a live gaming experience, played out on a consequential field of moral righteousness and patriotism, where the prize is liberation.

Beginning with the theme of existential battle, Qanon has cultivated a highly interactive environment that endows followers with perceived agency in constructing their future and actualizing their moral and political values. Q’s posts have created an atmosphere where participants in the community feel as if there is a level of risk in being a member of the community. This dynamic has been created by the way Q will occasionally address posts directly to members of the “Deep State.” In one such post, Q writes, “Let's pause and say hello to the rogue intelligence agencies currently monitoring these threads. Was the money worth it?” (Q post #127, 2017). By speaking directly to “rogue intelligence agencies” (presumably the civilian intelligence agencies, or the CIA, FBI, and NSA), Q places themselves in a real-world context, where their posts are not just rhetoric on an online forum but have repercussions in physical reality. Moreover, the implication that government intelligence agencies are monitoring Q’s statements gives them a high degree of credibility, as intelligence agencies would presumably only expend precious resources to monitor a credible, or threatening, thread. The idea of government, or Deep State, oversight of the Qanon community is mirrored in other aspects of Q’s behavior. Q’s migration from 4chan to 8chan was described as being due to 4chan being “compromised” by the Deep State, necessitating Q to retreat to 8chan as the primary posting forum.

Beyond this, the Qanon community’s description of itself as leading the “Great Awakening” movement solidifies the existential element of its ideology. As members of the Qanon community declare, "the world is currently experiencing a covert war of biblical proportions. Literally the fight for earth, between the forces of good and evil" (“The Plan to Save
Within this context, the Great Awakening movement is one of the key forces of good, with Q spearheading public recognition of the criminal actors controlling their lives and exploiting them behind the scenes. For members of the Qanon community, each individual has the imperative to seek the “hidden truth” and disseminate it to help the oppressed population “wake up” and seize their own liberation.

In contradiction with this is the idea of an entertaining, even game-like, atmosphere that simultaneously underpins the Qanon community. A lighthearted atmosphere is cultivated both explicitly through some of Q’s statements and through interactions between members of the Qanon community as a whole. As one of Q’s posts reads, “Get the popcorn, Friday & Saturday will deliver on the MAGA promise...” (Q post #16) Making a parallel between an entertaining activity such as eating popcorn at a movie screening demonstrates the way Q often speaks of the Great Awakening as a live show for the community, where they can choose to watch or participate. Members of the community frequently applaud the entertaining aspects of Qanon and how the structure of the theory is interactive and puzzle-like. Praying Medic expresses this in the concluding section of their “Qanon for Beginners” video by stating that "I find it kind of fun to follow Q and do the research. It’s interesting to me…” (Praying Medic 2018).

Another game-like phenomenon is decks of digital playing cards created by the Qanon community, similar to the types of cards that are used in popular multi-person deck-building games such as Magic the Gathering. As of February 24, 2018, 120 Qanon playing cards have been created and published on the Q Cards website, which was presumably created by anons. These cards have all been artfully designed with cartoonlike illustrations. Each card includes a standardized set of elements, including card number, title, slogan, name, description, and realm (either Make America Great Again – MAGA, or SWAMP – as in Trump’s campaign promise to
“drain the swamp”). Titles indicate which concept, phrase, or individual the cards are dedicated to, and are always topics that play important roles in constructing the Qanon worldview. The following excerpt is an example of the format and content of Q Cards. Attached in the appendix is an image of the digital copy itself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Card Number:</th>
<th>#001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>POTUS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slogan:</td>
<td>45th American President • PATRIOT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Donald J. Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description:</td>
<td>The President believes the United States has incredible potential and will go on to exceed even its remarkable achievements of the past. Trump's campaign slogan for President was and still is, &quot;Make America Great Again,&quot; and this is exactly what he is doing. &quot;Make America Great Again!&quot; -DJT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realm:</td>
<td>MAGA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While these cards appear to be for the purpose of playing a game, no actual card game is associated with them. Rather, they were presumably created for the purpose of sharing information with increased ease. As the website states, “Download all the QCards. Please distribute as you see fit... use to help RED PILL your friends and the rest of the WORLD” (Q Cards 2018). The term red pill and its counterpart, the blue pill, are frequently used in digital forums as a way to indicate the choice between knowledge and ignorance. The red pill represents the choice to pursue knowledge at all costs and liberate oneself from the confines of ignorance, while the blue pill represents living one’s life in the confines of blissful ignorance.

Through these cards, the dual dynamics of existential battle and game work alongside one another in a way that helps to explain Q’s previous statement, in which they both reject and

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13 The metaphor of red pill versus blue pool originated with the Matrix movie trilogy. In these dystopian, sci-fi movies, humanity has been enslaved by machines, who grow humans in tanks to harvest energy from. To keep humans passive, the machines have placed their minds in a virtual reality (the matrix), in which humans believe they are living normal lives. Early on in the movie, after having a feeling that something is “wrong,” the main character is given a choice by a group who are aware of the matrix’s existence: take the blue pill and continue to live in ignorance or take the red pill and discover what is really happening to himself and humanity.
asserting the game-like qualities of the Qanon theory. We can see that the cards are structured as a game, clearly intended to be engaging, entertaining, and easily accessible to a range of audiences with varying levels of fluency in the Qanon worldview. But beyond this structure, the cards are not meant to be used to play any kind of game. Rather, they are meant to increase exposure to the Qanon theory and consumption of its worldview. Merely by following Q, individuals are already participating in a game with real-world consequences. This indicates that the gamification of the Qanon theory throughout the community may serve the purpose of recruiting new members and keeping current members actively engaged. It may also add another layer of complexity to the forms of engagement and interpretation demanded of participants. Because Q’s posts, the basis of the whole theory, require such effort to interpret, a high level of engagement and enjoyment is vital for the continuation of Qanon. Gamification becomes a way to secure these ends.

**Individual autonomy**

While Qanon’s theory that evil is caused by the Deep State removes its proponents’ culpability for all social issues, the idea that individuals are autonomous actors with the power to make positive change is pervasive throughout the community. Q is constantly commanding readers to liberate themselves from misleading mainstream narratives, making statements such as “Think children. Think slaves. Think sheep” (Q Post #748, Feb 12 2018). Members of Qanon believe that through their participation in the community, they can exert power as autonomous actors with a role in liberating the US populace from the Deep State’s clutches. This idea is apparent in the language the Qanon community uses, such as how they describe themselves as part of the Great Awakening movement. By constituting themselves as a movement, rather than
merely a community based on researching and theorizing the state of the world, they orient themselves towards praxis.

As I will explicate further in the following section, becoming an empowered actor is a process of transformation, whereby individuals must reject mainstream narratives and pursue “the truth” through Qanon-based research and theorization. This process is exemplified in a YouTube video produced by a member of the community, which enquires, “Do you want to free yourself? It's easy. Follow Q, and turn Them [the Mainstream Media] off” (Joe M. 2018. “Killing the Mockingbird”). It is through this transformation that the Great Awakening is said to happen, in which individuals will choose the “red pill” and liberate themselves both psychologically and physically from the Deep State’s imposition of an oppressive reality.

Materials produced by followers of Qanon establish the community’s action-oriented culture. One Q card, entitled “CHOOSE YOUR FUTURE,” embodies this cultivation of individual autonomy. The card’s description reads:

DEATH and War (or) PEACE and LIFE
FEAR and LIES (or) LOVE and TRUTH
CONTROL (or) FREEDOM
FORCE (or) POWER
PREY (or) PRAY (Q Cards 2018)

This card relies entirely upon the idea that individuals exert control over their own future. While the Deep State may exercise totalizing control over the physical world, its control over the human psyche is conditional upon the submission of individuals. Although many have been indoctrinated and enslaved by the Deep State’s agenda, all retain the capacity to become autonomous actors. In positing that liberation is always a possibility, the Qanon community uplifts the individual as an autonomous actor responsible for their own future. This card also
demonstrates the binary logic of Qanon’s epistemology, where the world is divided into two neat, distinct realms between which individuals can, and must, choose between.

**Hope and despair**

Building upon its conviction in an existential battle between good and evil, the Qanon community upholds a conceptualization of the world that is marked by both hope and despair. By mourning the loss of an idealized past, in which the American Dream was at their fingertips, Qanon articulates a discomfort with the present and a desire to return to “better” times. In doing so, they draw upon right-wing anxieties about the perceived loss of progress for white Americans. Even as it decries that evil actors are oppressing the world, the Qanon community’s epistemology is fundamentally hopeful, in that it claims that Q and the Qanon community will together bring about the return of an America that has been made great again.

As theorized by Harding and Stewart, apocalypticism and millennialism operate as dual elements in US political conscience. “Apocalypticism and millennialism are the dark and light sides of a historical sensibility transfixed by the possibility of imminent catastrophe, cosmic redemption, spiritual transformation, and a new world order” (Harding and Stewart 1999, 286). The Qanon community uses these two concepts as a way to embody both its dreams and discontents about the US political system. The apocalyptic elements are reflective of many anxieties and discontents within far-right political groups, one of which being disillusionment with the state of US politics. This is exemplified throughout Q’s posts, which draw upon ideas that the country has lost the qualities that once made it great and is no longer representative of its citizens’ interests. Simultaneously, drawing upon millennialism, Q alludes to an idealistic, patriotic future that embodies not only the “Make America Great Again” project, but depicts the
future in a divine light. This can be supposedly secured with the help of members of the Qanon community.

In the context of Qanon, elements of millennialism and apocalypticism are both constructed based upon nostalgia for an idealized America of the past. As Stewart theorizes, nostalgia for a lost past produces a framework for meaning in a social reality that may be in flux and unfamiliar. In the far-right political imagination, social and political life is seen as increasingly unstable and unfamiliar. The American Dream seems to be more of an elusive ideal than an achievable reality, and an increasingly diverse US population makes white conservatives feel that their interests and desires—the “real” American values—are being displaced (Hochschild 2016). Nostalgia thus provides a stable framework of meaning for conservative Americans and holds a dual role in constructing both apocalyptic and millennial potentialities. Apocalyptic conceptualizations of the future are constituted by the continued disappearance of the American past and its potential to slip away into the most distant recesses of memory. Conversely, the millennial future draws upon elements of the American past and realization of nostalgic desires.

The merging of these three elements of apocalypticism, millennialism, and nostalgia can be seen clearly in the language Q employs in the following post:

My fellow Americans, over the course of the next several days you will undoubtedly realize that we are taking back our great country (the land of the free) from the evil tyrants that wish to do us harm and destroy the last remaining refuge of shining light. (Q Post #34, Nov 1 2017)

Once again juxtaposing good and evil, Q invokes the idea of an existential threat against American politics and identity. Because the US is “the last remaining refuge of shining light,” its downfall would bring about a truly apocalyptic future, in which the powers of evil have gained global domination. In the context of a diversifying and globalizing national social sphere, Qanon
equates changes to social and political dynamics, such as immigration and racial equality movements, to attacks by evil actors’ intent on bringing about an apocalyptic future. All events and agendas which seek to challenge the “traditional” way of American life, defined by conservative political desires, are viewed as threatening to bring about an apocalyptic future that challenges the promise of a nostalgic utopia. This shows how “politics itself has been demonized in America so that ordinary conflicts among different publics are taken as evidence of a terrible state of political emergency. Images of political life ‘on the street’ become proof that a violent change threatens an idealized version of the nation” (Harding and Stewart 1999, 300). With preexisting anxiety over the deterioration of American values, daily occurrences are highlighted as proof of a coming apocalyptic reality.

Simultaneously, nostalgia produces the millennial elements of Qanon’s conceptualization of the future. Disillusionment with the present state of politics and society produces an idealization of the past and fixation on a return to “better times.” This conceptualization of the future maps the ideals of Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign promise. Members of the Qanon community are self-described patriots who, in their participation through Qanon, become agents in the movement to secure the millennial future of the US as a liberated nation. This idea of a return to the past is exemplified through the faith placed in Trump as an individual who will bring back American exceptionalism and the American Dream. As the central figure of Qanon, Trump is depicted as an almost godlike individual masterminding the manifestation of a millennial future. In the Qanon imagination, Trump is not just another politician, but an all-powerful government outsider working in collaboration with the military for the good of the population. He exerts supreme control, and as Q consistently states, “POTUS is 100% insulated - any discussion suggesting he’s even a target is false” (Q, post 6, Oct 29, 2017).
Drawing upon Harding and Stewart, Q’s promise of the potential for a return of the American Dream operates as a form of therapeutic culture, or a way of dispelling anxiety over lost autonomy and individuality in modern existence. As Harding and Stewart describe, conspiracy as therapeutic culture operates as “the nervous expression of the idea that social systems affect human action, that large organizations, bureaucracy, social institutions, information networks, ideologies, and discourses shape individuals, and that therefore we are not entirely free, autonomous, self-controlling individuals.” (Harding and Stewart 2003, 262) Qanon expresses these anxieties and provides a way of overcoming them by juxtaposing the apocalyptic potential of Deep State takeover with the promise of a future that revitalizes the lost past. Being part of the Qanon movement is poised as individual empowerment and a way to be part of the Storm which dismantles the oppressive mechanisms of state power. These dual elements of apocalypticism and millennialism work together to produce a sense of hope and stability. As Praying Medic says of his participation in the Qanon community, “...what it really does is it gives me hope. It gives me hope that there is a plan to end all these wars, there is a plan to end corruption, there is a plan to prosecute bad people. Q knows what the plan is, and Q has been telling us for months what the plan looks like” (Praying Medic 2018).

Despite their conceptualization that the US is a society coopted by the Deep State, Qanon is fundamentally about hope. It operates as an expression of right-wing desire for a return to the American past, and a rejection of elements which are seen to detract from the community’s vision of what the country should be. Qanon’s conceptualization of itself as part of the Great Awakening movement allows them to uphold a conviction that they are active agents in Making America Great Again. Simultaneously, Q’s constitution as an all-knowing agent allows members
of Qanon to trust in their claims that all social ills will soon be rectified and that the US will be restored to its former glory.

Through their hermeneutic practice, the Qanon community has decoded Q’s serial posts and articulated them into an epistemology that draws upon many elements of right-wing political thought. In this chapter, I have explicated some central elements throughout the Qanon community’s discourse that demonstrate their epistemology. Qanon’s continual references to the Mainstream Media indicates how their worldview is constituted by a rejection of common modes of understanding and a conviction that mainstream news sources are agents in their oppression. Through demonizing the Mainstream Media, Qanon posits an alternative economy of informational consumption and constructs its worldview in opposition to the perceived ignorance imposed on society by the Deep State. Additionally, in Q’s numerous rejections of partisan politics, they make a rhetorical claim to unity, while in fact furthering a highly partisan and exclusive ideology. Moreover, contradictory elements of existential battle and a game-like reality in the Qanon community demonstrate how they conceptualize themselves as agents in a game with real-world consequences, where the fate of the nation is the prize. Through Q’s proclamations of individual autonomy, members of Qanon are posited as being able to choose between ignorance or liberation, where following Q is the latter. Finally, Qanon conceptualizes the world through the dual elements of hope and despair. At its basis, the Qanon epistemology posits a fundamentally hopeful view of the future, where the coming Storm will revitalize the American Dream.
Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have traced how a community of hermeneutic practice has formed around Q’s serial cryptic texts and evaluated the products of this analysis. I have argued that through engagement with Q’s crumbs, Qanon has constituted a community of hermeneutic practice with its own analytical style, cultural norms, and process of subjectification. Through their hermeneutic practice, the community constructs and embodies a conspiratorial epistemology that draws upon contemporary social and political contexts to produce an understanding of the world in line with right-wing thought.

In my evaluations of Qanon, I have offered a unique and consequential analysis of a community that, while it may be fringe and extreme, is inarguably impactful. As contemporary life becomes increasingly digitalized, sites such as 4chan ad 8chan will continue to offer spaces for new and consequential forms of engagement, political and otherwise. Moreover, conspiratorial thinking will continue to be a pervasive force in social and political life that articulates complex realities. While Qanon is an especially extreme manifestation of conspiratorial digital engagement, it is in no way a community that exists in isolation. The very speed with which Qanon developed, translating enigmatic texts into community and epistemology, is indicative of its importance and relevance to modern social and political life. By tracing how the Qanon community has evolved, and the products of its engagement, I hope to
have offered an important window into how digital media and conspiracy work together to articulate social and political realities into forms of subjectivity, community, and epistemology.

The scope of an undergraduate thesis is rather narrow, and as such, this has been a limited and flawed attempt to analyze a complex and contentious topic. One of the primary topics I would have liked to address in my work is how race, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality impact the constitution of Qanon as both a theory and community. These elements are important for any topic, and especially necessary for a discussion of the alt-right due to the harmful and hierarchical rhetoric employed around these identities. However, in the scope of my thesis, I wanted to focus on the analytics and community of conspiracy. In narrowing my focus, I did not have room to do justice to topics of identity and demographics. Moreover, extensive literature exists on the alt-right’s demographic characteristics and ethno-nationalist ideology. In narrowing my topic, I hoped to contribute a new element to the alt-right, one which focuses primarily upon its conspiratorial elements. While there is heavy overlap between the alt-right’s ideological exclusivity and its conspiracy theorizing, there was not room to focus on this exclusively in its entirety.

Additionally, I would have liked to broaden the scope of my thesis to evaluate more thoroughly the evolution of Qanon over time, in addition to conspiracy throughout right-wing groups. Ideally, this would have included an extensive analysis of exactly how the theory became so compelling, and how Q established themselves as a legitimate figure in the 4chan and 8chan communities. Building on this, I did not analyze how Qanon has changed over time and focused mostly on earlier posts in the theory.

As I wrap up my research for this thesis, Q is still actively posting on 8chan, with their most recent post being the 3,330th recorded on archival websites. The Qanon community’s
interactions show little sign of dissipating. I did not have time to evaluate more recent posts made by Q or their interpretations by the community, so I can not say if the Qanon theory has shifted over time. But at the very least, Q still has an active presence, the community continues to engage, and the theory continues to have appeal. While it is hard to say what the future holds for Qanon, it seems unlikely that the community, or its legacy, will disappear anytime soon.
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As has been discussed throughout this thesis, digital media sites used by the Qanon community, especially 4chan and 8chan, are by their nature ephemeral and temporal. This makes providing a bibliography with full references difficult, if not impossible, in regards to information taken from these sites. When possible, I have provided references to third-party archival websites rather than 4chan/8chan, because these sites have a much longer lifespan. However, it is hard to determine how long these sites will be live, because this is dependent on the future of the Qanon community. Thus, many of the links within this bibliography may not adequately provide access to my sources. Even websites such as qanon.pub, which are currently stable and accessible, are not guaranteed to be available in the future if they are shut down by actors internal or external to the Qanon community.
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Appendix

Figure 1

[Image of a painting depicting a historical scene]

SCI[F]
Military Intelligence,
What is 'State Secrets' and how upheld in the SC?
What must be completed to engage MI over other (3) letter agencies?
What must occur to allow for civilian trials?
Why is this relevant?
What was Flynn's background?
Why is this relevant?
Why did Adm R (NSA) meet Trump privately w/o auth?
Does POTUS know where the bodies are buried?
Does POTUS have the goods on most bad actors?
Was TRUMP asked to run for President?
Why?
By Who?
Was HRC next in line?
Was the election suppose to be rigged?
Did good people prevent the rigging?
Why did POTUS form a panel to investigate?
Has POTUS "ever" made a statement that did not become proven as true/fact?
What is POTUS in control of?
What is the one organization left that isn't corrupt?
Why does the military play such a vital role?
Why is POTUS surrounded by highly respected generals?
Who guards former Presidents?
Why is that relevant?
Who guards HRC?
Why is ANTIFA allowed to operate?
Why hasn't the MB been classified as a terrorist org?
What happens if Soros funded operations get violent and engage in domestic terrorism?
What happens if mayors/ police comm's/chiefs do not enforce the law?
What authority does POTUS have specifically over the Marines?
Why is this important?
What is Mueller's background? Military?
Was Trump asked to run for President w/ assurances made to prevent tampering?
How is POTUS always 5-steps ahead?
Who is helping POTUS?

Last Modified: 1970-01-01T00:00:00Z

Figure 1: Q Post 14, taken from QPress.org.
Donald J. Trump · Yes, President Trump Is Making America Great Again ...
Six months into his first term, President Trump's headline achievements are often overshadowed by the media's daily assault on the White House... but let's face facts: By objective measures, Trump is fulfilling his famous campaign promise to "Make America Great Again."

Figure 2: Donald Trump's Q Card, taken from https://genesis55.github.io/QCards/?card=PRESIDENT-TRUMP.