

What Is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?

Explaining the “big tent conspiracy theory” that falsely claims that former President Trump is facing down a shadowy cabal of Democratic pedophiles.



Signs referring to the QAnon conspiracy theory — with a Q — appeared at rallies for President Donald J. Trump. Credit...Al Drago for The New York Times

By Kevin Roose

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By now, you’ve probably heard of QAnon, the internet conspiracy theory that has taken hold among many on the American right.

But you may still have questions about what exactly is going on.

QAnon was once a fringe phenomenon — the kind most people could safely ignore. But recently, it has gone mainstream. In 2020, QAnon supporters flooded social media with false information about Covid-19, the Black Lives Matter protests and the presidential election, and recruited legions of new believers to their ranks. A December poll by NPR and Ipsos found that 17 percent of Americans believed that the core falsehood of QAnon — that “a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media” — was true.

QAnon has also seeped into the offline world. Followers of the movement participated in the deadly Capitol riot in January, and other QAnon believers have been charged with violent crimes, including kidnappings, assassination plots and the 2019 murder of a mafia boss in New York. A terrorism bulletin issued by the Department of Homeland Security in late January warned of increasing violence from domestic extremist groups, including conspiracy theory communities like QAnon.

YOUTUBE CRACKDOWN

YouTube, which has played a big role in moving QAnon from the fringes to the mainstream, said it would prohibit content promoting the conspiracy.

QAnon has also made inroads in Republican politics. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, a first-term congresswoman from Georgia, has become the most prominent QAnon-affiliated lawmaker in the country. (Ms. Greene, who posted in support of QAnon on social media, has said she regrets her posts, but continues to promote many QAnon-supported conspiracy theories.) Elected Republicans at the state and local levels have also expressed support for QAnon.

QAnon is an incredibly convoluted theory, and you could fill an entire book explaining its various tributaries and subtheories. But here are some basic things you should know.

What is QAnon?

QAnon is the umbrella term for a set of internet conspiracy theories that allege, falsely, that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles.

QAnon followers believe that this cabal includes top Democrats like President Joseph R. Biden Jr., Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and George Soros, as well as a number of entertainers and Hollywood celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, Tom Hanks and Ellen DeGeneres and religious figures including Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama. Many of them also believe that, in addition to molesting children, members of this group kill and eat their victims to extract a life-extending chemical called adrenochrome.

According to QAnon lore, former President Donald J. Trump was recruited by top military generals to run for president in 2016 to break up this criminal conspiracy and bring its members to justice. Many of these cabal members will soon be arrested, the theory goes, and some will be imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay, while others will face military tribunals and be executed.

Is that all?

Not by a long shot. Since it began, QAnon has incorporated elements of many other conspiracy theory communities, including claims about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the existence of U.F.O.s, and the 9/11 “truther” movement.

QAnon Anonymous, a podcast about the QAnon movement, calls QAnon a “big tent conspiracy theory” because it is constantly evolving and adding new features and claims. But the existence of a global pedophile cabal is the core tenet of QAnon, and the one that most, if not all, of its followers believe.

Since the 2020 election, QAnon has also become a stronghold of support for the false theory that the election was stolen from Mr. Trump. Some QAnon believers maintain that he is still the lawful president, although some have reluctantly accepted the reality that he is not.

How did this all start?

In October 2017, a post appeared on 4chan, the notoriously toxic message board, from an anonymous account calling itself “Q Clearance Patriot.” This poster, who became known simply as “Q,” claimed to be a high-ranking government insider with access to classified information about Mr. Trump’s war against the global cabal.

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Q predicted that this war would soon culminate in “The Storm” — an appointed time when Mr. Trump would finally unmask the cabal, punish its members for their crimes and restore America to greatness.

Why is it called ‘The Storm’?

Image

It’s a reference to a cryptic remark Mr. Trump made during an October 2017 photo op. Posing alongside military generals, Mr. Trump said, “You guys know what this represents? Maybe it’s the calm before the storm.”

QAnon believers pointed to this moment as proof that Mr. Trump was sending coded messages about his plans to break up the global cabal.

Who is Q, and what are ‘Q Drops’?

Q’s identity is still unknown, although there have been hints and speculation about it for years. Some speculate

that a single internet troll has been posting as Q the entire time; others say that multiple people are involved in posting as Q, or that Q’s identity has changed over time.

Making things more complicated is that Q’s online home base has changed several times. Q’s posts originally appeared on 4chan. Then they moved to 8chan, where they stayed until that site was taken offline last year after the El Paso mass shooting. They now live on 8kun, a site run by the former owner of 8chan. Each of these sites uses a system of identity verification known as a “tripcode” — essentially, a username that proves that a series of anonymous posts were written by the same person or people.

“Drops” are what QAnon followers call Q’s posts. There have been nearly 5,000 of them so far, and most take the form of a cryptic coded message.

Like what?

Here’s an example of a Q drop from September 2018:

PANIC IN DC

[LL] talking = TRUTH reveal TARMAC [BC]?

[LL] talking = TRUTH reveal COMEY HRC EMAIL CASE?

[LL] talking = TRUTH reveal HUSSEIN instructions re: HRC EMAIL CASE?

[LL] talking = TRUTH reveal BRENNAN NO NAME COORD TO FRAME POTUS?.....FISA = START

FISA BRINGS DOWN THE HOUSE.WHEN DO BIRDS SING?

Q

In this post, you can see coded references to “LL” (Loretta Lynch, President Obama’s former attorney general), “BC” (Bill Clinton), “HRC” (Hillary Rodham Clinton), and “HUSSEIN” (President Obama), along with references to John Brennan, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, and “POTUS” — President Trump.

Many QAnon followers use “Q Drop” apps that collect all of Q’s posts in one place, and alert them every time a new post arrives. (One of these apps hit the top 10 paid apps in Apple’s App Store before it was pulled down for violating the company’s guidelines.) They then post these drops in Facebook groups, chat rooms for the Discord chat app and Twitter threads, and begin discussing and debating what it all means.

Q’s account has been quiet in recent months, and has posted only a few times since Mr. Trump’s election loss in November. Many QAnon believers hope that Q will return someday, although others maintain that the movement no longer needs Q as a central figure.

How many people believe in QAnon?

It’s hard to say, because there’s no official membership directory, but the number is not small and is probably in the millions.

Before Facebook moved to block QAnon content, some popular QAnon groups on the platform had hundreds of thousands of members, and NBC News reported last year on an internal Facebook study that found thousands of QAnon pages and groups operating on the social network, with millions of members between them. Twitter removed more than 70,000 QAnon-affiliated accounts after the Jan. 6 Capitol riot. And some YouTube videos explaining the tenets of QAnon garnered millions of views before they were taken down last year.

And that's just the content that is explicitly pro-QAnon. There are likely millions more people who believe in QAnon-related conspiracy theories, like the "Save the Children" movement that erupted in 2020 after QAnon believers hijacked a hashtag campaign for a legitimate anti-trafficking organization and turned it into a recruiting drive that introduced millions of people to QAnon theories.

Who believes in QAnon?

It's a more diverse group than you might imagine. The earliest adherents were mainly far-right Trump supporters, but in 2020, the movement expanded its reach to include health-conscious yoga moms, anti-lockdown libertarians and evangelical Christians. Unlike the stereotypes of extremist movements, QAnon doesn't appear to be primarily dominated by young men, or people experiencing economic pain. There are Harvard graduates and Wall Street executives who believe in it, as well as people with less elite pedigrees.

QAnon has also developed an international presence, and has been embraced by conspiracy theorists and far-right extremists in countries including the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan.

Is QAnon the same thing as Pizzagate?

Yes and no. QAnon has been described as a "big-budget sequel" to Pizzagate, because it takes the original Pizzagate conspiracy theory — which alleged, falsely, that Mrs. Clinton and her cronies were operating a child sex-trafficking ring out of the basement of a Washington, D.C., pizza restaurant — and adds many more layers of narrative on top of it. But many people believe in both theories, and for many QAnon believers, Pizzagate was a kind of gateway to the larger world of right-wing conspiracy theories.

One new element in QAnon is a number of clear and specific predictions about when and how "The Storm" would play out. For years, Q has predicted that mass arrests of cabal members would occur on certain days, that certain government reports would reveal the cabal's misdeeds and that Mr. Trump would coast to a landslide re-election.

None of those predictions came true. But most QAnon believers didn't care. They simply found ways to reframe the narrative and ignore the discrepancies, and moved on.

Why are some people attracted to the QAnon movement?

A common misconception is that QAnon is purely a political movement. But it functions, for people who believe in it, as both a social community and a source of entertainment.

Some people have compared QAnon to a massive multiplayer online game, because of the way it invites participants to cocreate a kind of shared reality filled with recurring characters, shifting story lines and intricate puzzle-solving quests. QAnon has also been compared to a church, in that it provides its followers with a social support structure as well as an organizing narrative for their everyday lives.

Adrian Hon, a game designer who has written about QAnon's similarity to alternate-reality games, says that believers "open a fascinating fantasy world of secret wars and cabals and Hillary Clinton controlling things, and it offers convenient explanations for things that feel inexplicable or wrong about the world."

What role have social networks played in QAnon's popularity?

Even though Q's posts appear on fringe message boards, the QAnon phenomenon owes much of its popularity to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, which have amplified QAnon messages and recommended QAnon groups and pages to new people through their algorithms.

In recent months, many leading social networks have taken steps to ban QAnon content from their services, citing the theory's potential for offline harm. In October, Facebook and YouTube both announced wide-ranging QAnon bans, and removed thousands of accounts, pages, and channels from their platforms. Twitter has banned thousands of QAnon accounts for engaging in coordinated harassment. And several smaller platforms, such as Etsy, Pinterest, and Discord, have also taken steps to limit QAnon's influence.

How did QAnon believers respond to Mr. Trump's election loss?

Mr. Trump is the central and heroic figure in QAnon's core narrative — the brave patriot who was chosen to save America from the global cabal. As a result, most QAnon believers expected that he would easily win re-election, and spend his second term vanquishing the "deep state" and bringing the satanic pedophiles to justice.

After Mr. Trump's election loss in November, many QAnon believers rallied behind the false theory that the election was stolen from him. Many expected that on Inauguration Day, Mr. Trump would not actually leave office as scheduled but would declare martial law, announce mass arrests of Democrats and stop Mr. Biden from taking office.

When that didn't happen, many QAnon believers grew disillusioned, and some even realized they had been duped. But others continued to believe that "The Storm" was still

approaching, and maintained that Mr. Trump was still planning a triumphant comeback.

Haven't there always been far-fetched conspiracy theories about powerful elites?

It's true that much of QAnon's subject matter is recycled from earlier conspiracy theories, and is rooted in anti-Semitic tropes that date back centuries. But QAnon is fundamentally an internet-based movement that operates in a different way, and at a different scale, than anything we've seen before.

For starters, QAnon is deeply participatory, in a way that few other popular conspiracy theories have been. Followers congregate online to decode the latest Q posts,

discuss their theories about the news of the day, and bond with their fellow believers. The Atlantic has called it "the birth of a new religion."

There's also the basic danger of what QAnon followers actually believe. It's one thing to have a polarized political discourse with heated disagreements; it's another to have millions of Americans who think, with complete sincerity, that the leaders of the opposition party are kidnapping and cannibalizing innocent children.

Combine those violent, paranoid fantasies with the fact that QAnon followers have been charged with committing serious crimes in Q's name, and it's no wonder people are worried.