9

"Do Your Own Research"

Everyday Misinformation and Conspiracy in Online Information Worlds

Gary Burnett and Shannon Williams

INTRODUCTION

Access to everyday information has evolved rapidly over the last twenty years and so have information-seeking behaviors. With the ever-increasing amount of data made available to individuals in this Information Age, there is a trending movement to filter information and tailor it to one's individual interest and algorithms help us achieve this goal.

The Pew Research Center reports the Internet of Things (IoT) is making it virtually impossible to disconnect from all forms of internet access making the ability to avoid undesirable information near impossible. Pew researchers Rainie and Anderson (Rainie and Anderson 2017) report that despite wide concern about cyberattacks, outages, and privacy violations, most experts believe the Internet of Things will continue to expand successfully over the next few years, tying machines to machines and linking people to valuable resources, services, and opportunities. Connection begets connection.

All this, with the ubiquity of social media and the constant stream of all different kinds of information flowing through one's daily feed, the concept of "everyday information" as a category distinct from more consequential (or "serious") information becomes blurred – all information is constantly accessible and constantly within view, so all information becomes, in a sense, "everyday information."

Conspiracy theories are predicated on the spread of misinformation and disinformation in such a way that it becomes an integral part of people's everyday information practices and how they view and understand all aspects of the world around them, affecting family and workplace relationships (Rothschild 2021).

The findings below were gathered through close monitoring and open-ended interpretivist analysis of numerous public Facebook pages over several months, augmented by extensive searching of websites, web archives, YouTube videos, and more, for related content. Our analysis of the online activities of conspiracy theorists and their related posts can help uncover the mis- and disinformation being

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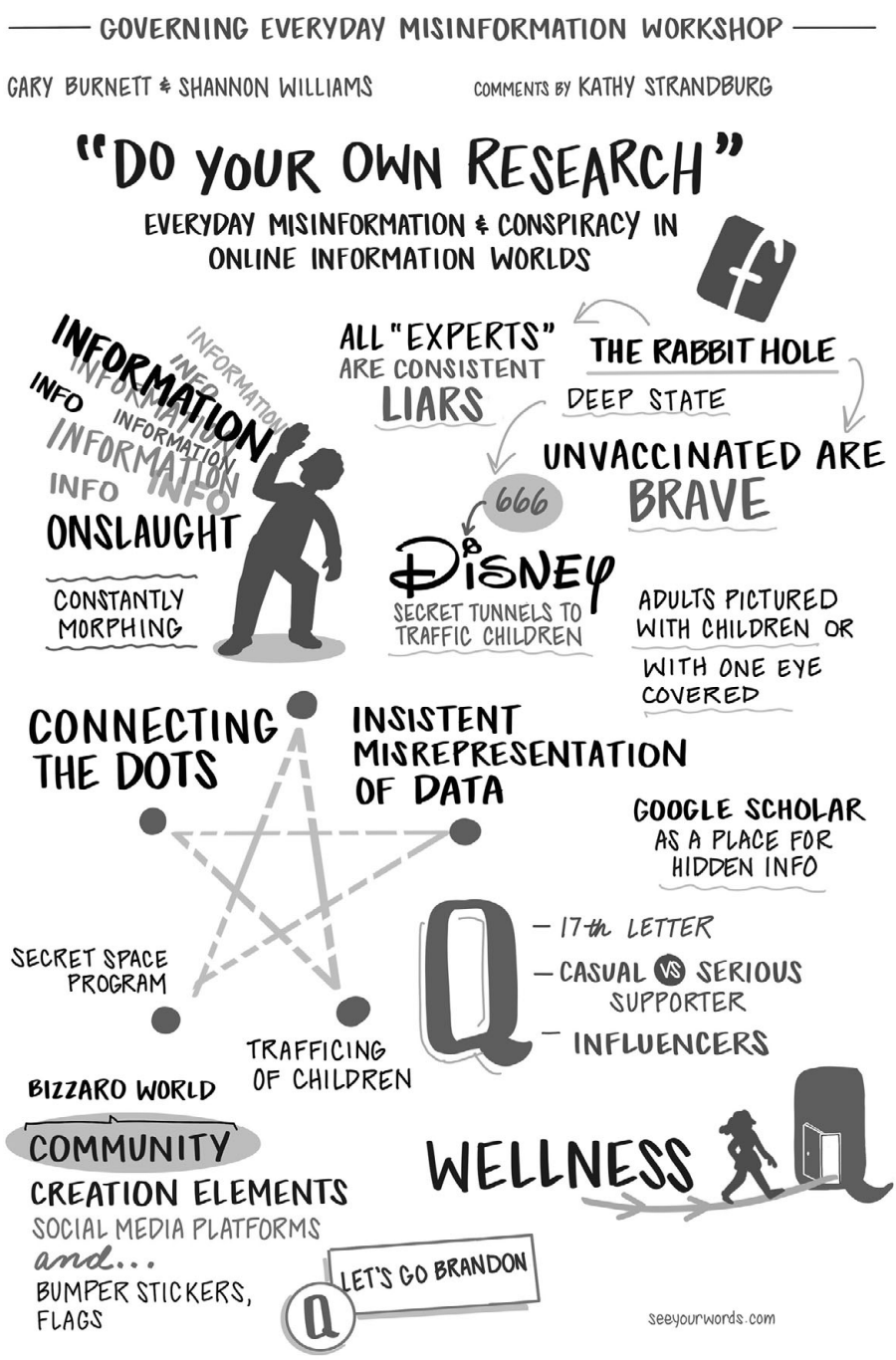


FIGURE 9.1 Visual themes from "do your own research": everyday misinformation and conspiracy in online information worlds.

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promoted and, in some cases, and can help us gain insights about the connections between the creating, sharing and the receiving of misinformation as "fact."

Our analysis was influenced by theory of Information Worlds and by the Governing Knowledge Commons (GKC) framework. The GKC framework, which is discussed more extensively elsewhere in this book, investigates how the rules-in-use of a particular community are codetermined by the background environment, including rules and norms determined at higher contextual and societal levels, and that helped influence our thinking (Sanfilippo, Frischmann, and Strandburg 2021).

For some, the continuous onslaught of everyday information is managed by filtering what one wants to encounter as opposed to information adverse to one's beliefs, therefore inadvertently and sometimes purposefully creating filter bubbles that generate small worlds that generate information worlds.

Small worlds, a theory developed by Chatman (1991), erects barriers against unwelcomed information and restricts information sharing thus creating an insider/outsider environment. Jaeger and Burnett further process Chatman's theory by connecting the ways in which information creates the social worlds of people (Jaeger and Burnett 2010).

Information Worlds is a framework for conceptualizing information behavior; it offers a multifaceted argument involving the intersection of personal and public information transfer (Burnett, Jaeger, and Thompson 2008); Jaeger and Burnett 2010). Information Worlds is rooted in the social study of information, taking into account activities that are situated in the customary practices of communities, specifically those affecting information interactions.

The internet has been available for public use for over twenty-five years and virtual communities have existed as a way to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk (Rheingold 1993).

Burnett et al. (2003) researched how language use both reflects and influences culture in a virtual community. Chatman's Life in the Round theory describes a situation where members understand the meaning of a group's particular expressions, language, and values, which defines what information is considered acceptable by the group (Zhu and Liao 2020).

The creation of a virtual community of like-minded individuals can easily play host to misinformation as members of the community primarily introduce information from sources that support their beliefs, and these sources are deemed trustworthy because they are harmonious to member ideals (Burnett, Besant, and Chatman 2001). Members of virtual communities, in time, develop their own language, expressions, and symbols to identify the insiders from outsiders and to solidify a bond or comradery amongst each other (Burnett, Besant, and Chatman 2001; De Vynck and Lerman 2021; Squirrell and Sonnad 2017).

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The algorithms of social media sites monitor the interests of their users and develop custom filter bubbles, which are the result of the careful curation of social media feeds that enable users to be surrounded by like-minded people and information that is congruent with their existing beliefs (Cooke 2017). A Facebook user who likes a post concerning flat-earthers will see ads and promotions for similar interests and conspiracies. Filter bubbles are further developed by confirmation bias, which suggests that users play a role in the creation of their virtual communities by actively seeking and using information that already coincides with existing mental schema, as opposed to seeking information from a variety of potentially conflicting sources (Cooke 2017).

A possible outcome of collective virtual information activities, like those associated with the QAnon movement, is information avoidance. Cooke (2017) states it is possible for people to avoid distasteful or upsetting information while in their social media filter bubbles. Case and Given (2016) refer to this as selective exposure, or selective information seeking, which is defined as the tendency to seek information that is congruent with prior knowledge, beliefs, and opinions, and to avoid exposure to information that conflicts with those internal states.

One such group of like-minded individuals refer to themselves as QAnon. QAnon is an American political conspiracy theory and political movement that originated in the American far-right political sphere in 2017 (Martineau 2017). The core of the QAnon movement centers around false claims made by an anonymous individual or individuals known as "Q" and the central QAnon theory is that a cabal of Satanic, cannibalistic sexual abusers of children operating a global child sex trafficking ring conspired against former US President Donald Trump during his term in office (Bracewell 2021). QAnon has direct roots in Pizzagate, an internet conspiracy theory that appeared one year earlier and which we discuss below (Roose 2021). It also incorporates elements of many other conspiracy theories, and some experts go so far as to describe QAnon as a cult (Davies 2021; Mulkerrins 2021; Polantz 2021; Roose 2021; Stanton 2020; Uscinski 2018, 1–32)

Despite efforts to ban or slow the sharing of QAnon-related information by Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms, the movement continues to thrive primarily because it weaves a myriad of conspiracies, from anti-vaccine and anti5G conspiracies to antisemitic and antimigrant tropes (Haimowitz 2020). Unlike other conspiracy theories that are linear and hard focused, studying the QAnon movement in an effort to combat everyday misinformation is ideal because this particular conspiracy theory has the fluidity to morph, accommodating the needs of each individual suspicious mind. While the main focus on Q is to stop the cabal of elites battling Trump, the conspiracy theory has managed to strengthen, grow appendages, and even diverge to different countries such as Japan where the conspiracies have included local issues on whether complaints that the prime minister's media ratings are inflated, to even suggesting that a Japanese movie, *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*, is warning the

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Japanese people of the pedophilia and cannibalism of the international elite (Haimowitz 2020).

It has become conventional wisdom in public discourse that misinformation and conspiracy theories have become more widespread since the advent and growth of social media platforms (Suciu 2020). In response, information consumers are forming behaviors and practices in an attempt to cope with undesirable exposure to content that can potentially become knowledge. This filtering or control of information on the internet has aided in the spread of conspiracy theories through social media platforms (Stecula and Pickup 2021).

Some of the most popular social media groups (specifically Facebook and Twitter) have taken steps to ban/remove major QAnon activity. As social media tightens restrictions on certain hate, violent, and sexual language, individuals develop alternate language to thwart algorithms and continue to communicate their message to insiders within their circle and newly interested individuals. Outsiders must do their own research to decipher the encoding in order to develop an understanding.

The infant formula crisis in 2022 is believed to be a conspiracy by QAnon followers. Parents across the US struggled to find baby formula after a national product recall triggered empty store shelves, higher prices, and retailers limiting sales of scarce products (Baldwin 2022). An example of the "encoding" practices related to the shortage shows on a public social media page as "M@N^UF^@CTo^R€D CR^!$^!$" and interprets as "Manufactured Crisis." The formula shortage, in fact, stemmed from a product recall by an Abbott Nutrition facility in Michigan, where unsanitary conditions and contaminated products led the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to temporarily shut down the facility (Pathak et al. 2022). The encoding practices haver been formulated as an attempt to circumvent speech restrictions on Facebook and other social media sites.

As a result of speech restrictions on major social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) alternative sites that are more amenable to QAnon and related conspiracy practices such as Telegram, Donald Trump's Truth Social, and so on, have developed to support believers. Telegram's appeal for fringe communities can be explained by its ability to reconcile private messaging and broadcasting, offering users both protected messaging and public channels to attain publicity (Rogers 2020). Unlike other social media platforms that are public-facing and require aliases to maintain anonymity, Telegram is at its core an instant messaging app with an emphasis on privacy (Urman and Katz 2020).

RELATED LITERATURE

The ease of accessing news and other data in this Information Age allows those seeking information to retrieve an abundance of data within seconds. Multiple

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sources of technology used daily bringing information to our fingertips have become an everyday part of most people's lives. So much so, that those individuals seeking to avoid information will find it difficult to do so.

There has been a surge in group activity on social media linking like-minded individuals to others who share the same beliefs, creating a comfortable "small world" atmosphere where one does not need to confront or defend alternative views, ostensibly creating spaces where everyday information is shared and received unchecked as truth from trusted community sources (Chatman 1991).

A report from NYU's The Governance Lab on the role online communities play in peoples' lives states that Facebook groups are used by 1.8 billion people every month with these users citing a sense of belonging and a strong sense of community in a virtual group as an attraction even when members are physically far apart (Noveck et al. 2021).

Virtual communities can not only be a positive place to collaborate with others, but it can also become a protected place to foster misinformation and breed conspiracy theories and other rhetoric on an everyday basis. The definition of a reliable source changes in these online groups as members develop trust in highly active information providers in the virtual community.

But virtual communities are not new to the internet. Virtual communities have been in existence since the widespread use of the internet in homes. America Online (AOL) provided space for publicly accessible themed chat groups and private chat rooms for group communication in the mid to late 1990s and the concept of virtual communities has survived through the decades. These virtual communities essentially transform into information worlds. Information worlds reflect the dual role of the individual in society, and it reflects an individual's day-to-day information habits (Jaeger and Burnett 2010).

Information Worlds is a very versatile theory that can be used with a variety of methods, and focuses on describing information in social contexts, ranging from very small and local contexts (e.g., an academic department) to the larger contexts in which those are embedded (e.g., a university) (Jaeger and Burnett 2010).

Information Worlds focuses on the social aspects of information in settings of all sizes, from very localized contexts to broader social contexts, and the interactions between those multiple worlds. It draws upon Elfreda Chatman's concept of small worlds (Burnett, Besant, and Chatman 2001) and Jurgen Habermas' concept of the lifeworld (Habermas 1992) – the "collective information and social environment that weaves together the diverse information resources, voices, and perspectives" across a culture as a whole (Jaeger and Burnett 2010). The theory argues that individual information worlds are never isolated. Instead, they overlap, intersect, and interact in a variety of ways, all of which has an impact on how information is conceptualized and used within and across worlds.

Burnett and Jaeger's theory of Information Worlds is comprised of a set of five interconnected concepts: Social Norms, Social Types, Information Value,

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Information Behavior, and Boundaries. The concepts of Social Norms, Social Types, and Information Behavior are derived directly from the work of Chatman (Burnett et al. 2001), while Information Value significantly revises her concept of Worldview. The concept of boundaries is the newest concept to the theory.

Social Norms refers to those agreed-upon observable behaviors that are common and accepted within a world. Within a virtual group of QAnon followers, the social norms would include anti-establishment ideologies rooted in a quasi-apocalyptic desire to destroy the existing, "corrupt" world order and usher in a promised golden age (GNET Team 2020).

Social Types refers to perceptions of the roles played by individuals within a world which may be explicit or implicit. QAnon followers perceive the enigmatic figure "Q" as the leader of the movement. Q is an anonymous poster claiming to be a high-level government insider who sporadically "drops" a series of cryptic posts, often written in the form of a set of questions on various aspects of US domestic and foreign affairs known as Q drops (Zihiri et al. 2022). The identity of Q has also been expanding; at times, online posts have implied that more than one person is involved with the account, and more specifically, that former US President Trump may be either Q or an even more powerful figure identified as Q+ (Zihiri et al. 2022). At the broadest level, QAnon adherents engage in social typing through their collective identity as "anons" and their typecasting all non-adherents as "sheep" or "normies."

Information Value highlights the notion that not only does each world have its own agreed-upon (if often implicit) scale for assessing the importance of different kinds of information but also that the kind of value attached to information (and the appropriate metrics for weighing that value) may differ from world to world (Burnett 2015).

As an ideology, the QAnon belief system allows for the development of symbolic resources that enable those who believe to place an information value of the highest level on "Q drops" viewed as "intelligence leaks" issued by "Q" online with the firm belief that these Q drops are based on empirical evidence and consequently, they rely on the creation of elaborate, often labyrinthine productions of said "evidence" in order to substantiate and decipher QAnon's coded claims (GNET Team 2020). See Figure 9.2.

For true believers in the movement, this reliance on the essential, coded "truths" of QAnon render it unfalsifiable and largely for this reason, QAnon adherents are not passive consumers of QAnon content; they are also online activists, content creators who generate memes, videos, texts, music, and films, much of which in turn goes on to have its own life, feeding and generating more "Q" claims (GNET Team 2020).

Information Behavior refers to the full range of normative activities and practices related to information within a world. A QAnon virtual community confronts information contrary to their beliefs by, first, delegitimizing voices of dissent both

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within and outside of the movement by utilizing primarily less credible information sources (Zihiri et al. 2022).

Boundaries are the places at which different worlds come into contact with each other in one way or another (Burnett 2015). Defining a boundary for the QAnon conspiracy movement is nigh impossible as QAnon has often been described as the umbrella term for a sprawling spiderweb of right-wing internet conspiracy theories with antisemitic and antiLGBTQ elements that falsely claim the world is run by a secret cabal of pedophiles who worship Satan and are plotting against President Trump (Hatewatch Staff 2020). QAnon adherents can include antimaskers, COVID-19 deniers and antivaxxers to Pizzagate and flat-earthers. The exact nuances comprising the conspiracy are challenging to pinpoint as the theory posits that a range of political, social, and cultural elites are waging war against freedom and decency while Trump leads a counterattack against these malicious forces (Zihiri et al. 2022).

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND INFORMATION BEHAVIOR

The QAnon conspiracy theory has been linked to numerous violent acts since 2018, with QAnon supporters arrested for threatening politicians, breaking into the residence of the Canadian prime minister, an armed standoff near the Hoover dam, a kidnapping plot and two kidnappings, and at least one murder (Beckett 2020).

Hannah (2021b) argues that despite the fact that Americans are navigating data at an astounding rate, we have still not developed national initiatives to promote media or information literacies to debunk bad information derived from that data. As a result of this exposure to massive amounts of data, Americans have become increasingly accustomed to interpretations of that data provided via visualizations and dashboards.

The QAnon movement comprised a group of anonymous online posters who organized a crowdsourced conspiracy theory believing they were coordinating with President Trump to expose and punish a cadre of globalist, Satanic pedophiles. In the QAnon eschatology, a "Great Awakening" was imminent in which President Trump, with the help of a mysterious intelligence operative known as Q, would unseal indictments of these globalists thereby destroying the conspiracy.

Through a uniquely modern fusion of dark Web anonymity, social media communities, distrust of mainstream media, and hostility toward academic expertise, we are now witnessing a "Great Awakening" as Q refers to it, of online organizing around particular notions of power and paranoia (Hannah 2021a). This theory of power relies on disdain toward government/media/academia and a belief that entrenched elites manipulate national policy for their own perverse desires, as followers believe that powerful politicians and celebrities are involved in trafficking children, pedophilia, harvesting organs, and worshipping Satan (Hannah 2021a).

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INFORMATION AUTHORITY AND GATEKEEPING

While we have seen claims on publicly accessible QAnon-related Facebook pages that the movement proper has *only* to do with the series of Q "drops" having to reveal the secrets of the elite "deep state" and the associated push to wrest power from those elites, other conspiracy theory beliefs, sometimes associated with QAnon, circle around what nonadherents would consider arcane or far-fetched ideas.

These include, for example, the notion that the elite are "really" shape-shifting lizard people or the association of flat-earth theory with complex "maps" of the firmament and the geographic regions of heaven, as well as frankly gruesome fantasies such as the core QAnon narrative about the "harvesting" of adrenochrome through the torture, rape, and eating of young children (much of the more recent – and even widespread – hysteria surrounding the ostensible "grooming" of children by gays, transexuals, or even Disney employees seems related to this particular narrative).

Still other beliefs are linked to more mundane issues of day-to-day life in the modern world. Many of these are couched in rhetoric or ideas related to questions of information authority or governance and questions of source reliability. Given that the growth of QAnon has largely coincided with the spread of COVID-19, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the most persistent real-world conspiracy themes has centered not only around the efficacy and safety of the vaccination, but also more generally around information sources and the credibility and/or motives of these sources. This section reviews a few of such situations, in which authoritative information sources have been overtly challenged or rejected by conspiracy adherents, or in which such adherents have drawn upon a different understanding of what constitutes informational authority.

For example, the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) has been a persistent focus of attention. VAERS, which has been in existence since 1990 and has been used to monitor a wide range of vaccinations, explicitly disavows any causal relationship between vaccines and the "adverse events" it records. Rather, as their website says, "VAERS is not designed to determine if a vaccine caused a health problem" (VAERS n.d.), but only records chronology – adverse events of all sorts that take place at some point in time *after* a vaccination.

Still, in the QAnon information world – and in the conspiracy-oriented politically conservative information world more generally – the data reported by VAERS has been persistently, and loudly, misused to argue that COVID-19 vaccines had "caused" alarming numbers of dangerous reactions and even death; as one Facebook post, quoting an online article by the Truth and Liberty Coalition (an ultra-conservative religious group, not apparently linked to the QAnon movement, but sharing some of its political leanings) unambiguously puts it, "more than 13,000 vaccine-related deaths were reported in the United States through August 13 [2021], along with an additional 13,000 life-threatening conditions *caused*. More than

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54,000 hospitalizations were also *attributed* to the vaccine" (Truth and Liberty Staff 2021; emphasis added).

Such claims rely on at least a semblance of "authority" and evidence rooted in source data, albeit filtered through active and persistent misreading and misrepresentation. Given the conspiracy-related aspects of such misreading, rooted in "anti-vax" rhetoric and political claims that COVID-19 was created in a lab, it is not surprising that similar approaches have been used in relation to Dr. Anthony Fauci, long the most visible public figure in efforts to control the pandemic. A recent series of Facebook posts, portraying him as suffering from the "little man syndrome (like Hitler)," links to a variety of conspiracy-oriented websites in order to misread some of his own statements in order to vilify him and to suggest that antipandemic measures were always and simply intended to "take away our freedoms." For instance, a linked article in the far-right now-deleted site *Communities Digital News*, titled "The arrogance of Dr. Anthony Fauci and his fallible science" used a quote from him saying that "detractors 'are really criticizing science'" as evidence of his ego and "self-proclaimed infallibility," and linking him and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to eugenics. Ultimately, the article dismisses science altogether, claiming that it "like Fauci himself [is] devoid of that singular requirement of those with souls – a moral compass." (Note: as of this writing, *Community Digital News* no longer exists, but has been replaced by an equally far-right site named *American Wire: America's Political News Service*. The article from which we have quoted is no longer extant, and *Community Digital News* does not appear to have been cached by the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine or elsewhere; for *American Wire*, see https://americanwirenews.com.)

Again, this argument rests on a semblance of informational authority in its presentation, including quotations and citations to information sources, filtered through quite radical misreading. Dr. Fauci's statement that they are "really criticizing science" is, as the article itself ultimately demonstrates, entirely accurate, but it is not a statement trumpeting his own "infallibility," but rather a defense of scientific standards of evidence and process – the scientific method. The article – and the Facebook posts sharing it – rhetorically gestures in the direction of following standards of evidence by providing quotes and naming sources but uses those quotes and sources to present pure misinformation in support of a radically tendentious set of political claims.

While these two instances – misinformation ostensibly based on VAERS data and the misrepresentation of Dr. Fauci – mix a global-level crisis with day-to-day information activities via social media, a third is more "down to earth," in the sense that it has direct implications for the management of daily life, with or without a pandemic. That is, it offers a clear intersection between conspiracy theories, online dissemination of misinformation, questions of informational authority, and everyday life. As reported in a May 2022 article in *Vice* (Lamoureux 2022), a Canadian woman – a QAnon adherent, and an active participant in QAnon-related

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Telegram groups – decreed that she was the true "Queen of Canada," ruling the country behind the scenes, in the process garnering more than 70,000 followers. In this guise, she has issued a series of directives to her followers, clearly containing quite striking misinformation:

> Didulo has issued several "royal decrees" on her Telegram page, some regarding utility bills. The critical ones are "Decree 24," claiming that electricity is now free in Canada; "Decree 15," which abolishes income tax; and "Decree 23," which makes water bills illegal. Another decree, number 79, reverts the price of rent, housing, and propane back to 1955 levels. Other decrees issued by Didulo are that critical race theory is illegal in Canada (this was her very first decree, in fact) and that the age of consent was changed to 24 – which sparked an outcry from her followers.

In response, a number of her followers have stopped paying utility bills, as well as other standard expenses, with the predictable result of having such services suspended, resulting in no electricity, water, and so on.

A number of things are important here. First, and most obvious is the meaningful impact that blatant misinformation had on some people's daily lives. Second, as in both the VAERS and Fauci examples, this instance has clear implications for how information worlds can understand, interpret, and respond to informational authority. In the terms of information worlds, the value – and perceived accuracy – of information here appears to rest entirely on the "social type" of the source. That is, the information offered by the "Queen" was deemed to be more plausible than the established norms and practices of normal day-to-day life in an industrialized world precisely because of her role as an active and visible QAnon representative; in this role, she can be taken to be a trustworthy champion of "We the People" against the "criminal" enforcers of the shadowy and evil powers of the deep state and business-as-usual. The story communicated to her followers through her edicts fits the overall narrative of conspiracy in a way that standard information practices – particularly through "authorized" and expert channels – simply cannot. In other words, adherence to the narrative of conspiracy determines information governance in this particular information world.

"Connecting the Dots": Conspiracy and (Mis)information

In addition to the kinds of persistent misreading and misrepresentation discussed above, conspiracy theories rely on a particular persistent action arena – or a form of information behavior – in which chains of often dubious or tangential connections between people, events, and other phenomena are followed in order to discover evidence of and justify conclusions about conspiracies. This model is often accompanied by calls to "do your own research," a phrase which functions as a commonplace particularly in antivax information worlds (Maruf 2021). Also common are calls to "connect the dots" or claims that a particular narrative "connects the dots,"

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providing evidence to support some kind of claim (JT Editorial Board 2020). Indeed, even cursory searches of right-wing and conspiracy Facebook pages will turn up numerous instances of both phrases and, indeed, "connecting the dots" appears to be the primary process through which adherents "do [their] own research."

In one sense, this can be seen as an instance of what Dervin (1992) has called "sensemaking," an ongoing process of information gathering and interpretation in order to bridge cognitive gaps and "make sense" of some aspect of the world in which we live. In the context of the everyday, this process is a way of inferring (or inventing) coherent and meaningful patterns in the flow of information as it goes by.

In Dervin's framework, such sensemaking is always provisional, and subject to further modification as new information comes along. In this regard, sensemaking functions as a kind of hermeneutic process, in which information and interpretation are both conceptualized as processes rather than conclusions; in the information social media worlds of conspiracy, this often manifests itself as a process of ongoing information sharing that purports to eliminate the provisionality of Dervin's model, substituting an unquestioned certainty in the veracity of the information uncovered in the process of "research"; as one common meme puts it, researchers "have no beliefs," but "choose to know things," no matter how far-fetched those things may appear to "normies" who do not buy into the tenets of the conspiracy. Despite such certainty in what one "knows," conspiracy is still imbued with process, as further research can simultaneously uncover new knowledge and reinforce already existing conclusions; that is, new "dots" reinforce already understood "connections" and patterns in knowledge. Participants engage in ongoing dialog to "connect the dots" between different bits of information (Burnett et al. 2003). To put it simply, there are always more "dots" to connect, and conspiracy "research" is a practice or process without a solid ending point except to use new discoveries to reinforce existing patterns.

When it comes to QAnon, such a paradoxical process seems to be built into the information world from the very beginning. The movement began as an online response to an ongoing set of "drops," made by a shadowy figure known only as "Q" to the website 4chan (Rothschild 2021). These "drops," which appeared between October 2017 and October 2020, when they stopped for almost two years (Tian 2021), are typically built out of a cryptic set of rhetorical and often leading questions, seemingly arcane references, vague prognostications, directives, and so on, as seen in the following partial extraction from the very first "drop" of October 28, 2017 ("/Pol/ - Politically Incorrect» Thread #146981635" 2017):

> Mockingbird
> HRC detained, not arrested (yet).
> Where is Huma? Follow Huma.
> This has nothing to do w/Russia (yet).
> Why does Potus surround himself w/ generals?

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What is military intelligence?
Why go around the 3 letter agencies?
What Supreme Court case allows for the use of MI v Congressional assembled and approved agencies?
Who has ultimate authority over our branches of military w/o approval conditions unless 90+ in wartime conditions?
What is the military code?

As such, Q "drops" function in a couple of different ways. First, through their curious combination of extreme vagueness coupled with a few specifics ("Huma," for example, referring to Huma Abedin, one of Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign managers) hint at information without actually containing any clear or verifiable information at all. In this case, the ordering of the statements – one a common QAnon reference to an ostensible Cold-War era CIA program to manipulate the media (see Rothschild 2021 for a useful account of the program) and the other two qualified by an ominous "(yet)" – and questions hint at a tantalizing but irreducibly nebulous set of people and situations that one can only imagine have to do with great crimes and potential punishments.

The other function of such a list is that – precisely because it is so nebulous, hinting at much but never quite saying anything – it requires its readers to become active participants in the construction of whatever signification or information may be present. That is, the "drops" require interested readers to engage in a process of "connecting the dots" to "do [their] own research" if they are to glean anything at all from them. In this sense, information behaviors associated with conspiracy, embedded as they are in the ubiquitous daily flow of information of all sorts (including mis- dis- and mal-information) and interaction that is the online world, simply become part of one's "everyday" life activity. This activity can even be thought of as a kind of daily "game," like Wordle ("Wordle – a Daily Word Game" 2022), except that instead of trying to guess a five-letter word in six tries, "players" decipher sets of hints and clues that seem to point to an unnamed but ominous evil. As Berkowitz (2020), a game designer, has suggested, conspiracy work (and QAnon, in particular) is a kind of "game that plays people," taking advantage of game-like pleasures of "connecting the dots" and emphasizing a "tendency to perceive a connection or meaningful pattern between unrelated or random things" (or "apophenia").

In the context of conspiracy-related information practices, such a quest to uncover connections through an ongoing process of "connecting the dots" far outpaces the ways pattern recognition and the fun of putting things together function in actual games (that is, a jigsaw puzzle always has a finite number of pieces and a clearly recognizable final stage). For conspiracy information worlds such as QAnon, the "game" functions as an action arena in which information work (or, more accurately, misinformation work) can take place as an open-ended project, in which there is no recognizable point when the pattern is actually complete. Indeed, as

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Rothschild (2021) notes repeatedly, QAnon adherents have a remarkable ability to simply move past unfulfilled predictions, seeing them merely as further proof-of-concept, as parts of an endlessly emerging pattern or inevitable narrative. Interestingly, a new "drop" from Q appeared on June 24, 2022, after a gap of more than a year, referring explicitly to the framing of the QAnon information project as such an endless game: "Shall we play the game again?" (Thompson 2022).

In part because of the very open-endedness of the game of "connecting the dots," the information products produced by conspiracy theorists often take quite elaborate form, as in the "Q-Web" or "Deep State Map" in Figure 9.2 (Hannah 2021b). A wide range of conspiracy theory maps and visualizations can be found as part of a blog titled "Through the Looking Glass," created by "The Infomniac" (The Infomaniac 2017).

As Hannah (2021a) puts it "anons have been engaged in a surprising amount of data collection and visualization, translating a labyrinth of speculation into a coherent visual narrative. That is, such conspiracy work can not only be conceptualized as a "game," but also as a large-scale, group-based and collaborative project to uncover, create, and share information widely, no matter how tenuous that information may be. In this example, the "dots" take the form of a set of nodes spread across a densely crowded visualized field, interwoven with arrows and lines, "proving" the connections between such disparate phenomena as the Pentagon (at the center of the image, immediately juxtaposed with "Nazi Germany"), the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Antarctica, the Library of Alexandria, and the Jesuits ("God's Assassins").

This map shows an interconnected web of "dots" indicating more-or-less "real world" information related to banking, religious hierarchies, presidents, recognizable geographic locations, and historical narratives (some of which are, of course, fabrications, fakes, and, at best, misleading), all pointing toward the various "plots" and misdeeds of the "Deep State."

Such "dot-connecting" is not limited to the recognizable quotidian world. A second map, which explicitly includes references to both "Q" and "Q Anon," further situates conspiracy within a much more expansive and esoteric universe, leaping from the surface of the earth both down into subterranean manifestations such as an "Inner Earth Civilizations" and up into interstellar space like "Secret Space Program[s], an "Offensive Space Fleet" beyond the solar system as well as promises of an "Ascension into 5th Dimensional Earth Age of the Golden Race" (see Figure 9.3).

This second map combines motifs from various spiritual and mystical traditions ("Samsara," "Bardo," "Tao Te Ching") with psychedelics ("psilocybin mushrooms") and references to other conspiracy theories ("WTC7 Controlled Demolition," "Area 51," "Chemtrails") together with a variety of references that, in another context, would likely be thought of as science fiction or science as filtered through science fiction ("hyperdimensional physics," "Torsion 'Warp' Drives") and allusions to information, both hidden ("Top Secret," nestled between references to "levels" of

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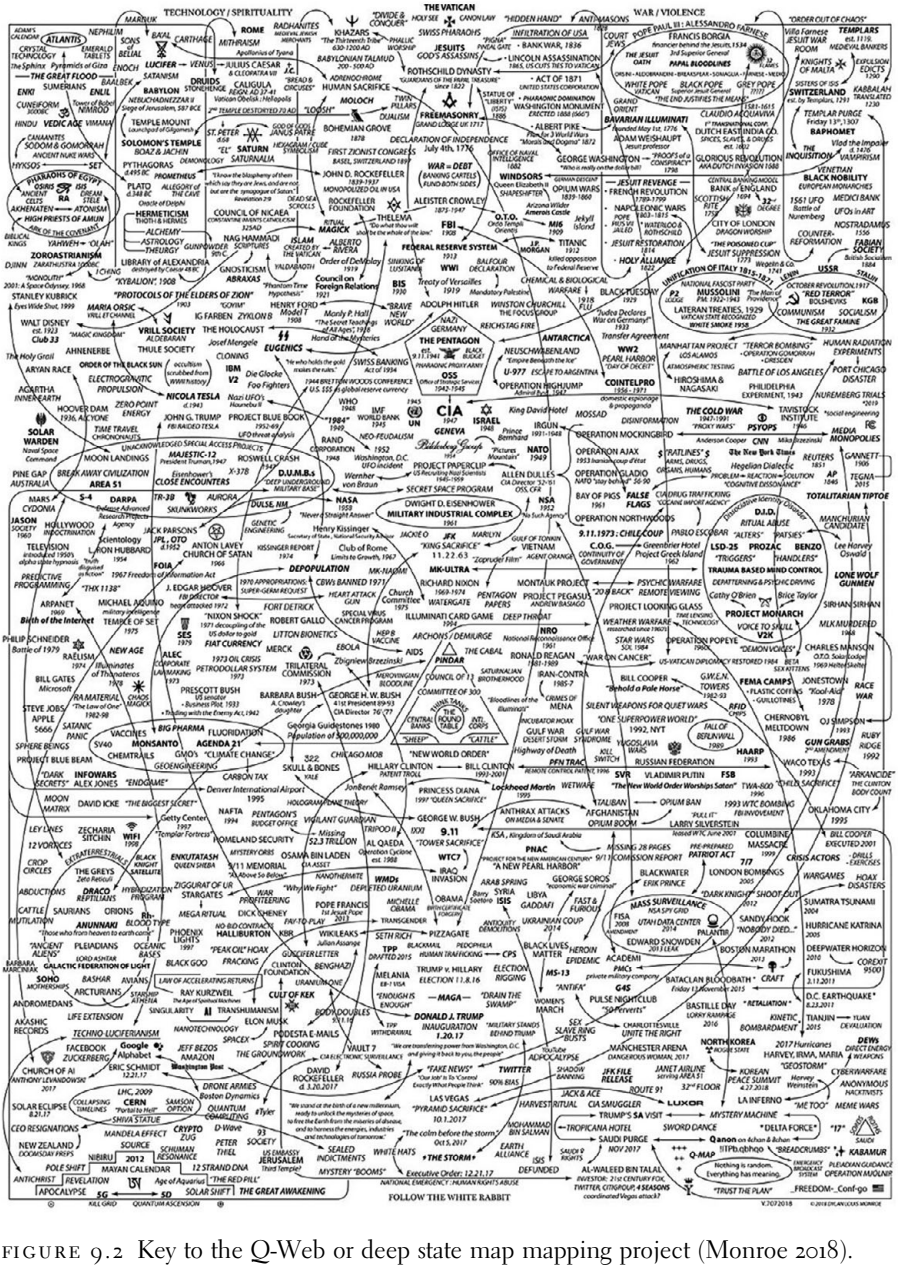


FIGURE 9.2 Key to the Q-Web or deep state map mapping project (Monroe 2018).

intelligence both above and below the "P.O.T.U.S.") and revealed ("Cosmic Disclosure," "[Secret Space Program Alliance] Whistleblowers"). Not only can some of the concerns of conspiracy theorists such as those associated with QAnon seem more closely aligned to science fiction novels than to the day-to-day world, but

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FIGURE 9.3 Great awakening map exposing and connecting all hidden global information (TyGunnard 2020).

science fiction itself is woven into the fabric of the QAnon narrative, with *The Matrix* movie series in particular being a recurring motif with "red pill" often used to label the disclosure of previously "hidden" information. In at least one case, this connection was directly implicated in the brutal murder of two children by their

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QAnon-following father; his decision grew "as he was lying in bed . . . 'seeing all the pieces being decoded like *The Matrix*,'" and believing himself to be the character Neo (Gilbert 2022). And, indeed, much of the QAnon worldview, to the extent it can be coherently understood, bears a striking resemblance both to the world of *The Matrix*, and to the hallucinatory novels of Philip K. Dick, a linkage that has been noted both by analysts of the phenomenon (Pettipiece 2021) and QAnon adherents themselves in social media sites such as Facebook, often with observations that his novels seem to be "true" and accurate representations of the real world due to their depictions of a world made of "simulated reality" á la *The Matrix*.

Such representations of "connecting the dots" not only follow a spatial metaphor as in the maps above, but also involve time, as in the "Q-Clock" (see Figure 9.4), which has appeared in numerous permutations designed to demonstrate the

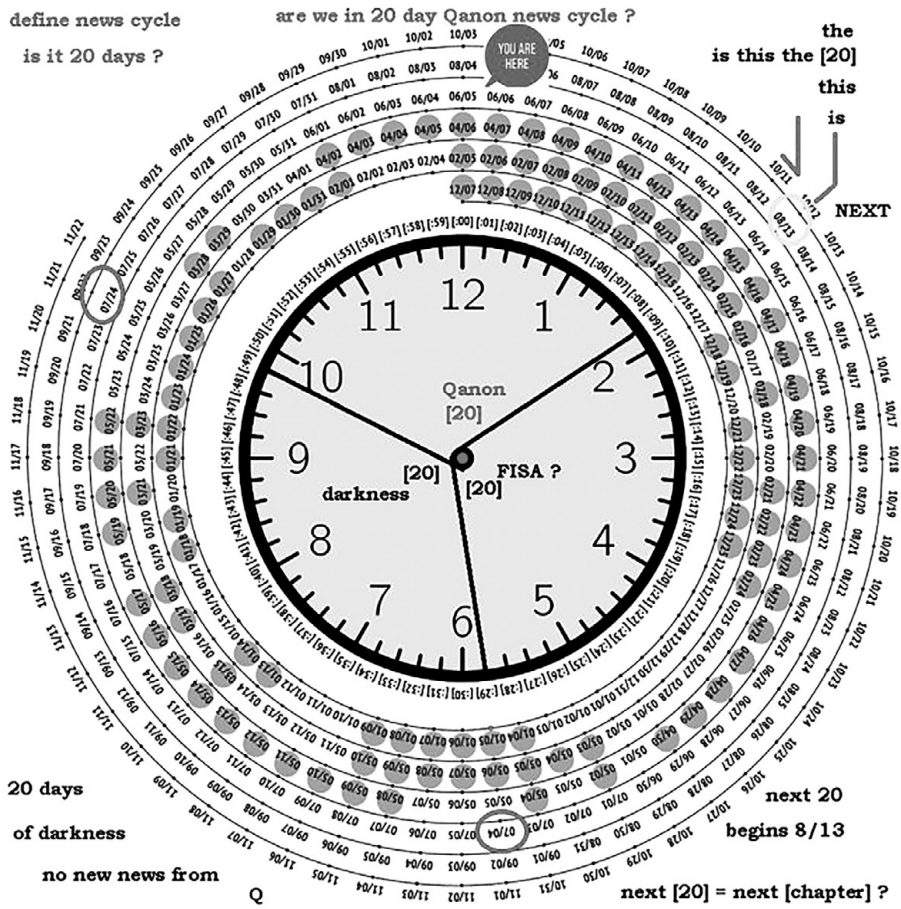


FIGURE 9.4 The Q-Clock ("how to read the Q-Clock" 2020).

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common Q credo "future proves past" through a complex representation of cyclic temporality. (Other related practices involve a variety of numerological processes, most often Jewish "Gematria" for "analyzing" and "discovering" relationships between otherwise unrelated phenomena ("Trump and Qanon Value in Gematria Calculator" n.d.).

Such geographic and temporal metaphors function in a couple of different paradoxical ways. First, they draw upon very familiar information tools – maps and clocks – in order to metaphorically situate a complex set of real and ostensible relationships within a recognizable framework in a form that, if printed out, could even be hung on a kitchen wall. This has the effect of turning the seemingly chaotic web of conspiracies into a part of the "everyday" world; to put it simply, the implication is that if something can be represented as something as quotidian as a map or a clock, it must be true, no matter how far-fetched it may otherwise seem. Second, their sheer complexity, highlighted by numerous lines and arrows connecting nodes to each other, makes it possible to suggest (or, for those inclined to believe) even "prove" that disparate phenomena are, in fact, closely linked. Indeed, another common QAnon credo is that "There are no coincidences," and the use of such visualizations suggests that connections can be established between any two possible phenomena because they visually occupy the same physical or temporal space (Hannah 2021a; Papasavva et al. 2021).

In terms of the theory of information worlds, such mechanisms of conspiratorial representation function as both observable social norms and as markers of information value. As social norms, they serve as a preferred mode of communication, offering a recognizable (albeit jumbled) set of information-sharing practices that are meaningful to the participants – the "actors," in GKC terms – of this particular information world. As representations of information value, they provide visual representation of the particular interwoven aggregate of information that is of particular importance within the conspiratorial world, even if the connections between different bits of information does not translate to the outside world of "normies." To put it another way, they function as visual markers of the "knowledge commons" of this particular world and its actors, yoking them together through a shared set of commonly understood and interwoven references that are not accessible to those who are excluded from the commons. Such patterns are further discussed in the next section.

"SYMBOLISM WILL BE THEIR DOWNFALL": CONSPIRACY AND THE EVERYDAY

In a world in which everything is interconnected – in which researching the "dots" reveal vast networks of relationships in which those relationships are obfuscated by equally interconnected networks of "lies" and conspiracies – it follows that every image, every action, and even every gesture can be taken as meaningful; in other

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words, every act, no matter how thoroughly intertwined with normal everyday behavior is understood to be imbued with "symbolism." Implicitly, there are three ways of understanding the significance of such patterns of "meaning": either one is part of the conspiracy (as a member of the "Deep State," the Illuminati, or some other often vaguely defined conspiratorial group), using such imagery to simultaneously communicate and obfuscate complicity in the conspiracy; or one is a "normie," blindly participating in the world without realizing the depths of its depravity; or one is engaged in the research necessary to uncover and reveal such hidden meanings.

Such an information world of conspiracy reinforces a strong sense of insiders and outsiders – people, as information actors, are either actively or passively complicit in the conspiracy, or are working to unveil the "truth" through ongoing "research" as part of their everyday routine. This dynamic underpins the common QAnon rallying cry of "Where we go one, we go all" or "WWG1WGA" (Rahn and Patterson 2021). While this phrase rhetorically gestures toward radical inclusion ("we go all"), it also depends on radical exclusion, implicitly omitting those who do not share the conspiratorial knowledge that "we" possess.

Although "symbolism" or the use of code to communicate clandestinely is at least thousands of years old, the 2016 "Pizzagate" conspiracy was perhaps the source of the current conspiratorial focus. Growing out of an assertion on 4chan that the phrase "cheese pizza" referred to child pornography and a series of emails by John Podesta (along with Huma Abedin one of Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign managers) this conspiracy asserted that a Washington, DC pizzeria was a front for a pedophilia ring with Hillary Clinton and other leading democrats at its center. Although this specific claim was tied to a very particular location and ostensible series of events, it grew into a much more elaborate theory focusing on a complex collection of "code words." At its most extreme, this theory cast doubt on such everyday words like "pizza," "hot dog," and "ice cream," any and all uses of which implied complicity in pedophilia. See the December 2016 *New York Times* article "Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories" (Aisch, Huang, and Kang 2016) for a good overview of these theories (the article is, interestingly, accompanied by a graphic "map" similar to those discussed above, as well as a variety of simpler graphic images linked to "symbolism" and hidden meanings).

Just as the process of "connecting the dots," if taken far enough as an action arena, can find linkages between any two disparate things, a focus on "symbolism" can take even the most quotidian words or images and transform them into indicators or even "proof" of pervasive conspiracy; instances are far too numerous to discuss thoroughly here, so just a couple of quick examples must suffice.

Similar to the misinterpretations of VAERS data, discussed above, such readings of "symbolism" take intent to be a given – messages are often inferred to be proof of culpability with or without direct evidence that they are so. For example, one widely disseminated motif involves photographs of celebrities, politicians, or other popular

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culture figures with only one eye visible, taken to be prima facie evidence of Satanic, Illuminati, and/or pedophiliac involvement. This interpretation may be rooted in ancient images of the "Eye of Providence" or the "Eye of Horus" (Wilson 2020). See, for example, a YouTube video from a user named "Critical Thinker" (2020), which shows Madonna, Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*, Snoop Dog, the television network Nickelodeon, covering an eye. This short video further explicitly invokes the Q pronouncement that "Symbolism will be their downfall" (Critical Thinker 2020). In many cases, sets of promotional photographs of entertainers are presented not as single pictures but as collages or groupings of numerous photographs, in each of which a child appears, where one of the entertainer's eyes is covered, or the entertainer is making some other kind of common gesture; such collages are often accompanied by explicit statements that they are direct evidence of the "evil," "monstrous," or "satanic" motivations of the individuals portrayed. See, for example, Manoj 2016, a typical example drawn from an atypical source: an online highschool publication editorial report about the Illuminati and conspiracy theories.

Other such "symbolic" images target corporations and corporate logos. For example, the famous Disney logo is interpreted as willfully incorporating the number "666" in the swirls of its letters (see Clipart Library n.d. for one example among many). As one collection of such corporate symbolism puts it, "Examine this of Disney carefully and observe the three six camouflaged in the writing of the Walt Disney corporate logo. . . .There is SO MUCH Symbolism in their movies, too much for here." See Pouissant (2019) for the Disney claim along with numerous other "readings" of such logos, explicitly tied to Q and condemnations of the ways "Luciferians" control the world and sacrifice "our children by the millions"; the site from which this was taken, rattibha.com, appears to be a repository, primarily in Arabic, that gathers and stores Twitter content; in this case, the original post is from a user whose Twitter account has been discontinued, presumably because of such Q-related posts).

This kind of conspiracy-laden commons clearly sets itself apart from the mainstream and from any kind of mainstream normative "governance," substituting instead its own set of conspiracy-related norms and values that make sense only within the framework of the alternative conspiracy outlook itself. As argued above, however, if one plays the "game" of connecting the dots, it is clear that the dots are everywhere and inextricably entwined in that particular way of viewing the world. If one follows down that particular path, such a viewpoint encompasses everything – not only "serious" information, but also all aspects of the everyday.

CONCLUSION

It is quite challenging to characterize participants in conspiracy-related information worlds in settings such as Facebook groups, as members of a clearly identifiable and coherent community. For one thing, while such groups may have tens of thousands

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of members, most are nothing more than consumers or "lurkers," and posts are often made by a very small handful of active members. It is, further, impossible to know how many others monitor the groups but do not subscribe. In addition, given how Facebook's algorithms work, the information experience on the platform – what one does or does not see, the order in which posts appear, and more – can be radically different from user to user; it can even be difficult to retrace one's own steps to find a post seen earlier, whether because of the algorithm or because the post has been removed or otherwise hidden.

Indeed, the most extreme example, QAnon, has as its figurehead an actor who, despite having some ostensible characteristics such as top-secret security clearance and despite being the object of speculation, remains fundamentally unknown, and even prone to disappearing for months at a time (Rothschild 2021). In other words, the online QAnon world lacks a definable or recognizable center; it is decentered, built around a largely absent figure seen only in a series of radically indirect and suggestive texts of hazy provenance.

Further, online conspiracy information worlds are not only geospatially decentered, but also temporally askew, with no clear linear relationship between the production and dissemination of information resources and their consumption. Such temporal complexity is metaphorized in the QAnon credo "future proves past" and explicitly embodied in the Q-Clock. Chronology becomes one more mechanism for "connecting the dots" between temporally separated events, as in the "proof" that someone falling ill a certain number of days – or weeks, or months – after being vaccinated is clear evidence of causality. Conversely, as Rotheschild (2021) repeatedly notes, the fact that specific events – such as the arrest of Hillary Clinton – fail to materialize as predicted does not result in any diminution of QAnon fervor. Within QAnon, the very conception of time appears to be somewhat "unstuck" (to use the famous Kurt Vonnegut quote).

In this sense, conspiracy worlds are functionally built around a particular narrative assumption: that no matter what might happen in the meantime, the story's end is always already known; as adherents put it "Nothing can stop what's coming." In the case of QAnon, the projected conclusion most often takes the form of the ascendency of Donald Trump and the downfall of the "deep state" and all of the "normies" who unwittingly support it, replete with military tribunals and public executions. Just as the world of QAnon revolves around the absent center of "Q," this implicit narrative relies on an ending that is forever deferred but also always painted as inevitable. The endpoint of conspiracy theory, thus, is simultaneously certain and endlessly deferred, a promise according to which adherents live their lives and which is impervious to disappointment because it is always still in play as the assured outcome. Disappointment and unexpected events simply reinforce the narrative promise of an already known ending.

Such a dynamic is built into the very structure of a system like Facebook, because the platform is, as Sanfilippo and Strandburg (2021, drawing upon the work of McGinnis 2011) note, intrinsically nested. That is, all Facebook groups, whether public

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or private, are embedded within the larger framework of Facebook itself, and subject to its "exogenous" policies and algorithms governing both access and information flow. This embededness influences much of what is possible in the "action arena" of groups in a couple of different ways. First, it is not uncommon for individuals to run afoul of Facebook's policies when posting, resulting in restrictions, removal of offending posts, thirty-day bans, or even account deletion. Second, both individuals and groups in the Facebook conspiracy worlds tend to define themselves in opposition to the very platform that makes it possible for them to share information, often referring to it as "Fakebook" and vowing repeatedly to abandon the platform while nevertheless returning after bans and sometimes creating alternate identities in clear violation of the system's "community standards." In the terms of the GKC framework, that is, conspiracy adherents situate themselves in open defiance of the very background environment that, through its affordances and information dissemination capabilities makes their quite oppositional information (or misinformation) work possible.

Such a structure – a distributed, decentered information world nested within, and in opposition to, a larger context – results in a set of action arenas and informational strategies marked by seemingly willful misreading and misdirection, the drawing of spurious interconnections between disparate "dots," and a predilection to see nefarious intent "hidden in plain sight" in the most innocent of images, actions, and texts. And, further, this information world defines itself as the only truly literate world, compared to the external world of the "normies" inhabited by unthinking "sheep" who simply can neither accept nor even understand the truth in front of them, and who will ultimately either disappear or be driven to desperation when they finally grasp the depth of their delusions. In such a situation it is, to put it simply, hard to see a way to undo the workings of conspiracy, since any such effort will always already and a priori be perceived as just a further step in the inevitable process leading to the promised ending. In other words, conspiracy theories – and QAnon in particular – may be particularly impervious to intervention and corrective measures, since any such attempt simply reaffirms the "truth" of the conspiracy. Such conspiracy theories have persisted through time, and likely will continue to do so, although the specific content and focus of the theories may morph and though the numbers of adherents may wax and wane.

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