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THE CONSTRUCTION OF ALTERNATIVE FACTS: 'QANON' RESEARCHERS AS SCIENTISTIC SELVES

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Background

QAnon is a right-wing conspiracy theory based on a series of posts (“Drops”) made to the image boards 4chan and 8chan by “Q,” an anonymous poster who claims to be a Trump administration insider (Zuckerman 2018). Q Drops are cryptic, consisting of obscure tidbits (“Crumbs”) of information and questions posed to the reader about national and global events, written as if seeking interpretation by a participatory audience. These drops have indeed been taken up by a lively community whose collective interpretation posits that President Donald Trump is actively working against the so-called deep state to bring down a global conspiracy of elite pedophiles that includes Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and media elites.

The collective interpretation of Crumbs by QAnon “Bakers”—members of the QAnon community who actively participate in the creation and dissemination of knowledge about the QAnon conspiracy—involves a process that takes place on social media in which archival sources, technical instruments, and hermeneutic practices are leveraged to produce agreed-upon evidence (“Bread”). These truth claims are canonized as “Proofs” and used to establish the legitimacy of Q, the QAnon community, and President Trump’s administration and policies as a whole.

Though QAnon was initially obscure, the conspiracy gained traction on YouTube, where conservative content creators began uploading videos in late 2017 decoding Q drops that attracted hundreds of thousands of views. By early 2018, QAnon had spawned a vast network of YouTube channels, podcasts, and books devoted to the advancement of the conspiracy, as well as QAnon-themed merchandise. Soon after, QAnon slogans and symbols, such as the hashtag #WWG1WGA (“Where We Go One We Go All”), began appearing throughout the conservative media ecosystem and even at rallies across the country hosted by President Trump. Simultaneously, QAnon has been

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implicated in multiple targeted homicides, criminal harassment, and extensive interpersonal strife, culminating in the designation of QAnon as a domestic terror organization by the FBI, the first conspiracy to be classified as such.

Research Questions and Theoretical Backing

Because of both the considerable size and intensity of belief exhibit by its adherents, we consider that QAnon is an important research site. Furthermore, we view QAnon as a window into understanding far-right media practices, literacies, and knowledge-making practices. Accordingly, we ask: In what ways do QAnon “Bakers” produce, institutionalize, and disseminate knowledge about the QAnon conspiracy? What archives, research techniques, and interpretive tools do QAnon researchers draw upon? What do these practices reveal about the politics and practices of participatory media?

To address these questions, we combine approaches from the literatures of the sociology of scientific knowledge and participatory media to consider how Bakers leverage the affordances of the social web in producing, maintaining, and disseminating knowledge about the QAnon conspiracy.

In particular, we adopt science studies’ “symmetry principle” (Bloor 1978 [1991]), which encourages scholars not to dismiss problematic information out of hand but to consider the tools and techniques utilized by knowledge-makers that led to (and shaped) their conclusions (e.g., famously, Latour and Woolgar, 1986 [1979]). This orientation has been used to great effect to study “fringe” science (e.g. Harding 2001) and offers a compelling framework for studying knowledge-making practices in QAnon. We also pay close attention to the “boundary work” (Gieryn 1983) performed by Bakers to separate (and legitimize) serious Q researchers from “trolls”. Additionally, we situate QAnon within the academic literature on participatory culture (Jenkins 2008) and its more recent critiques, especially Thorsen Quandt’s notion of “dark participation” (2018).

Methodology

This study utilizes several qualitative methods. Most significantly, we conducted sustained “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998), a lightly participatory form of observation in which the researcher spends a significant period of time with a group under study but is less systematic than formal ethnography, in 20 QAnon research Facebook groups. Additionally, we monitored popular hubs for Q research, including 8chan, o-chan, and 8kun. Our observations were supplemented by content analysis of the extensive archives, compilations of Proofs, and YouTube channels that Bakers have established in the process of making and disseminating knowledge about the QAnon conspiracy.

Argument

We argue that QAnon Bakers adopt a “scientific self” (Proctor 2018), an identity oriented towards the production and maintenance of knowledge that ensures the cohesion or a social or political community across space and time. We demonstrate the tools and techniques Bakers use to arrive at their conclusions by (re)constructing the

process by which Drops become Proofs, as well as an analysis of a technical instrument—the “Q Clock”—that some Bakers use to interpret Q drops. We argue that this institutionalized orientation towards knowledge production distinguishes QAnon from other conspiratorial online communities, which primarily rely on anecdotal evidence rather than systematic inquiry or seek to sow doubt in scientific consensus. Rather, we contend that Q research is intended to produce certainty through the *construction of alternative facts*.

In making this argument, we share and build upon other scholars’ critiques of participatory culture, noting that the coordinated spread of doubt (often called agnotology) is only one way in which digital media has failed to live up to the progressive mythologies that accompanied its emergence. Indeed, it is precisely the participatory affordances of the social web that have made QAnon so potent. Our research further casts doubt on appeals to media literacy that rely on individual “Critical thinking” practices, which are problematized in the face of a counterfactual conspiracy theory in which participants celebrate research and close textual interpretation—what Francesca Tripodi calls “scriptural inference” (2018)—above all.

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