



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:  
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## **CONFRONTING AND DEMYSTIFYING HARMFUL PARTICIPATORY CULTURES**

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This year's AoIR gathering calls us to consider how "new colonizing forces" are "re-fashioning the world in their own image," and how we might resist such persistent narratives of destructive domination. Our panel examines various modes of online participatory culture and community building through three different frameworks: undetected semiotic affiliation on YouTube, the participatory religious storytelling of QAnon, and the neoliberal self-colonization of MLMs. Our collective aim is to expose existing colonial structures in online spaces (as well as their offline roots) and break them down in order to offer something new. We offer three interdisciplinary approaches that weave together a story about the desire for community and connection. Persistent narratives of individualism compete with the desire for welcoming spaces and shared values, but a long history of colonized internet threatens to reinforce linguistic and narrative hegemony within these online communities. These papers dive deep into the complex problem of finding kinship through destructive worldviews and alternative histories. Unless we find sustainable ways of recognizing and dispelling these pockets of fringe communities, they will inevitably continue to grow and draw in more participants.

The first presentation explores a dataset of YouTube videos about the "ID2020" conspiracy theory, which merges religious discourses about the "Mark of the Beast" with discourses about quantum dot and blockchain technologies. The results indicate that multimodally screenshots are used as a form of technological authority in order to legitimate claims, as well as biblical verses being used as a form of moral evaluation.

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The very nature of screenshots is understood through the lens of western, rational superiority, and exposes a root issue in the online experience of everyday users. Just as algorithms have been misunderstood as “objective,” so too, in this case, are screenshots. This presentation re-contextualizes the subjective nature and use of screenshots, re-orienting us toward a more judicious engagement with online viral videos.

The second paper traces how QAnon followers combine memes, religious beliefs, and conspiratorial thinking into an overarching and simplistic worldview. Through the use of memes, the QAnon community freely adopts aspects of *The Matrix* films and appropriates them into shareable “truths” that can be observed in the real world. For QAnon believers, references to on-screen storytelling act as a kind of shorthand, hinting at “secret” knowledge, offering implicit commentary, and building real worldviews out of fictional storytelling. Rather than embrace the complex (and often overwhelming) notion that the world has room enough for more than one story, Q “anons” gravitate toward simplistic, linear storytelling, which is rooted in colonial perceptions of the human experience. This paper also aims to re-steer the ship toward less narrow forms of participatory storytelling in the hopes of de-centering white Christian narratives (and making room for other imaginative myths and stories).

The final paper is a case study of the multi-level-marketing (MLM) business Amway, informed by political philosophy, political theology, and personal narrative. Just as screenshots and memes create the fodder for insular participatory communities in the first two papers, this presentation critiques the relentless neoliberal ethos of MLMs. This close examination of Amway draws the connection between colonization and exploitation on and through the internet with a broader analysis and critique of the political philosophy underlying the intensifying commodification of the internet and its users since at least 2008. In other words, the umbrella of unfettered capitalism threatens to curb any attempted progress in the direction of inclusivity. We must address the economic structures of early (and present) internet communities if we are to create more inclusive ones.

In a climate of rising individualism and distrust in institutions, communal spaces will continue to be a place of important contestation. People will inevitably gravitate toward (online) communities, but there is a growing concern about what *sorts* of communities gain the most traction and participants. This panel asks: How can we create more robust safeguards, more compelling stories, and less profit-driven modes of existing in community?

## **THE MARK OF THE BEAST AND CRYPTO COMMUNITIES: HOW RELIGIOUS AND TECHNOLOGICAL DISCOURSES INTERSECT IN COVID-19 CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON YOUTUBE**

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## **Introduction**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories on YouTube have become abundant. Despite YouTube announcing in October 2020 that any misinformation about covid vaccinations would be removed from its platform, videos remain on YouTube that spread conspiracies about COVID-19 under the guise of religious or technological content. This paper will explore a dataset of YouTube videos about the ID2020 conspiracy theory, focusing on how religious and technological discourses intersect within this specific conspiracy theory. A multimodal discourse analysis is undertaken in order to understand the visual evidence these communities use in order to legitimise their claims and how users affiliate around this evidence in the YouTube comments on these videos. This paper shows how we must avoid associating visual evidence such as screenshots with objectivity and avoid relying on algorithms to filter out all instances of misinformation, and instead move towards a more socially-orientated understanding of how misinformation arises in online communities.

The ID2020 conspiracy theory falsely claims Bill Gates is part of a global conspiracy planning to force people into having a COVID-19 vaccine that contains implanted microchips or 'Quantum Dot Tattoos' to track individuals. This conspiracy theory highlights Gates' role in the 'Digital Identity Alliance' or 'ID2020' a non-profit organisation partially funded by Gates that conducts research into real-world applications of digital identities. The ID2020 conspiracy also references 'the mark of the beast', a biblical reference to a mark that all humans will be required to have in order to 'buy or sell'.

YouTube is a worthy platform to analyse in relation to conspiracy theories due to its algorithmic affordances which provide users with a constant stream of recommended videos, and its commenting affordances of pseudonymous identities. These affordances have contributed to YouTube's history as a platform that promotes extremist views. Previous qualitative research regarding misinformation on YouTube, has explored right-wing extremist communities (Lewis 2018; Ekman 2014), populist YouTubers (Finlayson 2020) and conspiracy videos (Paolillo 2018; Allington and Joshi 2020). Whilst there is a large body of research analysing misinformation on YouTube, a close multimodal discourse analysis of the kind undertaken in this paper has been neglected. In addition, the legitimisation and affiliation frameworks used in this paper focuses on a nuanced interpersonal interpretation of conspiracy theories to understand why people bond around conspiracy theories, in contrast to an experiential interpretation, that focuses on identifying what is false but neglects social bonding.

## **Methodology**

This project started as an investigation into the range of COVID-19 conspiracy theories abundant on YouTube. YouTube Data Tools (Rieder, 2015) was used in order to obtain videos via a YouTube API (Application Program Interface). Based on this exploration, the scope of the project was narrowed to the ID2020 conspiracy theory, a popular COVID-19 conspiracy theory on YouTube at the time. From the data collection process, while there were 262 videos that mentioned the ID2020 conspiracy and had at least one comment, only 5 videos had over 10,000 views and over 1,000 comments. These 5

videos became the focus of a close multimodal discourse analysis, analysing the visual content and the comments on these videos.

Several frameworks within a multimodal discourse approach were applied to the data. The visual content of these videos was analysed via a legitimation analysis (van Leeuwen, 2007). Legitimation refers to how discourses establish authority through linguistic and multimodal resources. It consists of several sub-types including authorization (tradition or authority), moral evaluation (value systems and morals), rationalization (institutionalized social action or knowledge that society has constructed) and mythopoesis (narratives and future projections) (van Leeuwen, 2007).

In conjunction with legitimation, visual salience was also considered. Visual salience refers to the elements in an image/video that are depicted as the worthiest of attention. This attention can be formed by the following factors: size, sharpness of focus, placement in the visual field, cultural significance, and personal significance (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Many of the salient elements discovered in the videos could be seen as 'bonding icons'. By 'bonding icon' we mean a symbol that is used throughout a text that people rally around because they share the same values. This idea of bonding aligns with the linguistic framework of ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2011) that was applied to the comments on these videos. Ambient affiliation considers how bonding (the social alignment of values) occurs in environments where users are not necessarily engaging with each other directly. Users align via shared evaluative meanings (or values) that encourage users to rally around a broader community.

## **Discussion**

The key findings from this project reveal the role of technological authority and moral evaluation in rallying users around shared values. In the dataset, there were videos from channels that were addressed to crypto communities (users investing in cryptocurrencies) and videos that were addressed to Evangelical Christians in the form of Pastor sermons. These videos remained on YouTube despite YouTube's ban on vaccine misinformation, due to the outward appearance of these communities (as reflected in video titles and descriptions) as purely focused on cryptocurrencies or religion. Although these two communities appear very distinct, this shared interest in the 'mark of the beast' meant that they had overlapping discourses. Visually, these videos relied on technological authority (such as screenshots of online articles and social media posts) to persuade users to bond around their claims (e.g., that covid was planned by elites and that our liberties are threatened). Moral evaluation was prominent as in the repetition of biblical verses in the videos and again the focus on liberty (investing in decentralized currency and following one's own beliefs despite pushback from society). In the comments to these videos, various religious and political stances were adopted, such as anti-globalism, anti-technology, political scepticism and anti-vaccination. Within the comments, the visual content of the videos was also frequently used as a bonding icon to further rally around.

Overall, these results show the importance of a socially-orientated approach in understanding how misinformation arises in online communities. As the key findings highlighted, certain discourses remain undetected by YouTube, despite YouTube's

commitment to removing COVID-19 misinformation. Users bond around visual evidence such as screenshots in these conspiratorial communities, ways of communicating that are difficult to detect without a manual multimodal analysis. This paper draws attention to the need for breaking down a colonized and neoliberal internet, by conjuring new socially-orientated methodologies that make research more accessible and turn to the importance of understanding social values.

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## **EASTER EGGS, MEMES, AND MORALITY: HOW ONLINE FANDOM AND RELIGION LAY THE GROUNDWORK FOR CONSPIRATORIAL COMMUNITIES**

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### Introduction

If you browse through posts from the early years of QAnon's online presence (2017-2020), you will find frequent references to *The Matrix* films, including popular phrases, images, gifs, characters, themes, and plotlines. While *The Matrix* does not directly promote American patriotism, antisemitic conspiracies, or religiously-fueled violence, the QAnon community freely adopts aspects of *The Matrix* and appropriates them for

their own worldview. For QAnon believers, references to **on-screen storytelling**<sup>1</sup> act as a kind of shorthand, hinting at “secret” knowledge, offering implicit commentary, and building real worldviews out of fictional storytelling.

The way QAnon followers engage with memes, religious beliefs, and conspiratorial thinking reveals the unique ways internet culture has collided with religious communities and pop culture fandoms. All of these groups share a desire to connect, create community, and discover purpose, but what happens when these groups begin to share ideologies and beliefs that perpetuate conspiracy theories, falsehoods, and hateful colonialist rhetoric? A glimpse into QAnon’s meme storytelling reveals the dynamic contours of conspiracy theories, historical contestations, and the technological tools that allow us to encounter and create community in online spaces. QAnon understands reality through a **religious lens**, a **storytelling lens**, and a **participatory lens**, and their community beliefs and practices are influenced by all three.

## Theoretical Lenses

QAnon’s **religious lens** is most clearly illustrated in the *content* of Q-related posts and memes. Religious beliefs and rhetoric (primarily Evangelical Christian) are referenced just as frequently as references to *The Matrix* and other pop culture iconography (Q Origins Project Archive). As Kristen Kobes Du Mez argues in her book *Jesus and John Wayne*, imaginative storytelling readily fuses with religious meaning-making; in other words, QAnon believers draw from religious scripture as *well as* heroic figures and apocalyptic stories from film and television.

Religious beliefs become enmeshed with the linear and entertaining tropes of a **storytelling lens** that spans from ancient mythology to contemporary pop culture, with on-screen storytelling as some of the most influential and widespread modes of myth-making. As on-screen storytelling continues to evolve beyond theaters and cable networks, “narrative comprehension in audiences is becoming more sophisticated” (Atkinson, 3). Armed with the ability to stream anywhere, anytime, audiences can discuss, dissect, and connect with other fans online (Atkinson; Jenkins, Ford & Green).

On-screen storytelling often aims to be relatable and enjoyable, reflecting real human experiences and emotions, but what happens when audiences can directly participate in the act of reflecting? QAnon’s **participatory lens** has its origins in online fandom culture. Fans searching for “easter eggs” and deeper meanings within films like *The Matrix* have given way to screen-oriented sleuths who veer outside of fictional narratives and become determined to discover “truths” and hidden meanings in the real world. Their findings are often reflected and refracted through memes. By using memes as folkloric bits that operate on “*hypermemetic* logic” (Shifman, 4), anons build a vast narrative through individual memes that combine religious beliefs, internet humor, and popular on-screen stories. This “meme storytelling” combines “deep memetic frames”

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<sup>1</sup> *On-screen storytelling* refers primarily to scripted films and television, but also includes narrative video games and other video content found online. While social media platforms present a kind of “stage” from which users “perform,” **on-screen storytelling refers to narrative scripted content distributed on screens** and not to interpersonal relationships played out online (Ippolito, 2021).

(Phillips & Milner) that are woven into an overarching narrative (often religious) within participatory online communities (Coleman; Jenkins; Massanari).

## **Scope and Methodology**

My approach to analyzing QAnon “artifacts” (QAnon content that can be found online, including memes, catchphrases, tweets, images, videos, merchandise, etc.) can be understood in (roughly) three layers: Q drops, bakers, and anons. The original “Q drops” (the nearly 5,000 posts authored by “Q” between 2017 and 2020) have been archived by several sources and can be understood as a sort of “scripture” for QAnon followers (or “anons”). These cryptic posts have been analyzed and interpreted by “bakers,” self-acclaimed QAnon influencers who often monetize their channels and hold significant sway over the QAnon movement. Once these beliefs, conspiracies, and phrases have emerged from Q drops and promoted by the bakers, these ideas crop up all over the internet. This paper focuses on two Q drops (fig. 3 and fig. 4) and screenshots from four anons (fig. 1, 2, 5, and 6) collected manually from archived message boards and live social media sites.

## **Conclusion**

What once started as fans gathering online to discuss easter eggs and hidden symbols has grown into a conspiratorial web of world-building through meme-ing. Religious communities and fandom communities are both anchored in “special” (holy) and trusted sources to help explain and interpret reality (fictional or otherwise). QAnon has taken trusted source material from religious believers and pop culture fandoms and propelled anons into a participatory mode of storytelling and gamified living. As trust in institutions continue to decline, the rise of fragmented, non-traditional religious affiliation and online fandoms (further) push acceptance of individual interpretation as the “best” form of truth and facts (over top-down consensus and expertise). Memes and collective storytelling allow for both: individual interpretation and expression within a (trusted) community.

What makes QAnon so compelling? The extreme narrative fueled by patriotism and conservative religiosity not only provides a compelling story, but also invites anons to join in the very act of storytelling. This demonstrates a two-way influence of internet culture and extremist ideology, where compelling storytelling meets compelling participation. In the end, we may need to focus on crafting compelling stories that move beyond colonial canons (much in the same way that we regulate conspiratorial information online).

## **Figures**



Figure 1. Screenshot from Reddit (2017)



Figure 2. Screenshot from Twitter (2018)

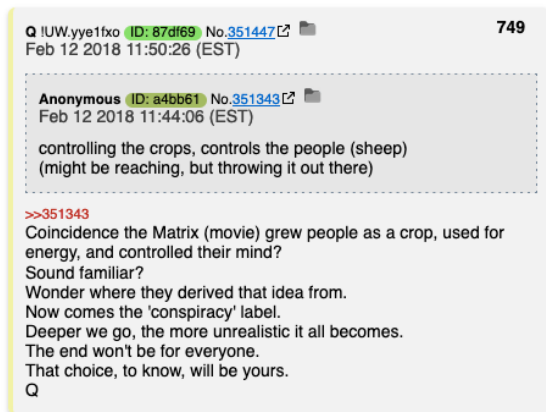


Figure 3. Q drop #749 (2018)

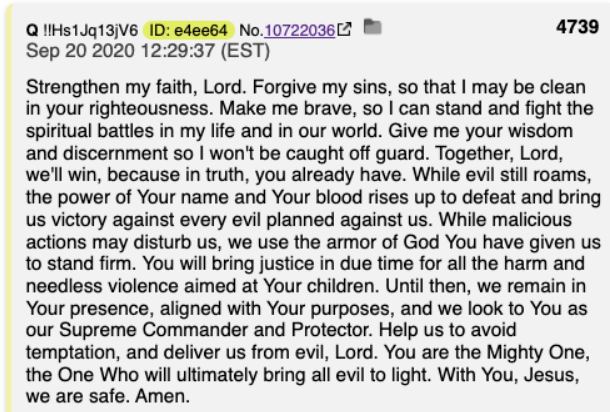


Figure 4. Q drop #4739 (2020)



Figure 5. Meme screenshot (unknown origin)



Figure 6. Screenshot from Twitter (2018)



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## **INTERNALIZING THE GRIND: MLMS AND NEOLIBERAL COMMUNITY-SUBJECT-FORMATION**

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What does it mean to “decolonize” the internet in the context of neoliberalism? This presentation draws the connection between colonization and exploitation on and through the internet with a broader analysis and critique of the political philosophy underlying the intensifying commodification of the internet and its users since at least 2008. As contemporary political philosophers argue, the political-economic framework of neoliberalism demands self-commodification by individuals, recreating people as human-capital and undermining attempts at decolonization. Since the 2008 financial crisis and recession, as many as 150 million workers in North America and Western Europe work in the “gig economy,” as independent contractors or short-term workers who lack many of the protections and benefits of traditional employment (Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski, 2018). While many jobs in the gig economy rely on the internet (Uber, Lyft, and other ride-sharing platforms, for instance), multi-level marketing (MLM) companies have particularly thrived through the utilization of social media platforms. Though the gig economy and the mass communication made available by the internet are new, the idea of highly profitable companies that offer scant or no benefits but promise unrealistic wealth creation have thrived in North America for decades in the form of MLMs. This presentation analyzes the Amway organization, one of the oldest and most successful North American MLMs, to demonstrate how Amway utilized/utilizes religious and cultural references to garner deep-seated support not just of Amway, but of neoliberalism in general. Any attempt to decolonize the internet must deal with this aspect of self-colonization and the rabid support it engenders.

This presentation pursues its thesis through analysis informed by the fields of Political Philosophy and Political Theology, which focuses on the intersections of Religious Studies and Political Theory. The presentation also utilizes personal experiences further informed by research into the history and practices of the Amway organization. The realities of colonization experienced on the internet require philosophical reflection in conversation with the lived experiences of the human beings who face the consequences of the constantly intensifying pressures to self-commodify their time in order to financially make ends-meet. Attempts to decolonize the internet *must* therefore address the problems of neoliberalism which both cause colonization of/through the internet and also buttress colonizing power structures by convincing individuals to actively support their own colonization/exploitation. Amway serves as an ideal case study of this latter practice, as it presents an explicit amalgamation of neoliberal concepts and religious belief that utilizes participatory storytelling to galvanize its

members. Amway provided the blueprint for the explosion of MLMs in the age of social media, and its development of community through participatory storytelling continues to shape neoliberal subject-formation in the contemporary gig economy.

I was raised as a religious practitioner of neoliberalism. I do not mean this in a trite way—during my childhood, my parents joined Amway, a multi-level-marketing (MLM) business that harnessed contemporary American evangelical trends and rhetoric to recruit and motivate prospects. My parents' demographic made them prime targets for the calculated combination of neoliberal rhetoric and American evangelicalism perfected by Amway in the 1980s. Political theorist Wendy Brown analyzes the neoliberal creation of *homo-oeconomicus*, a conception of philosophical/political subjectivity oriented purely toward economic ends. Amway serves as a prime case study for understanding how neoliberalism functions, and why neoliberal subjects ardently support and defend neoliberalism against criticism. Amway encourages members to embrace their ideology in concrete forms, through a biopolitics predicated upon consumption of Amway-produced food, vitamins, music albums, comedy albums, literature, and regular conferences. Members are further encouraged to consume Amway products while rejecting products from other companies (indeed, consuming Amway products help members reach their ultimate goal – to move up within the company by selling products). With its utilization of content from American evangelicalism, Amway functions as a religious tradition wherein the ultimate goal or outcome is the creation of a perfected *homo-oeconomicus*.

Two questions guide my thesis: Deleuze and Guattari's framing question, "why do people desire their own oppression?" and relatedly, "why, almost two decades after the MLM financially ruined my parents, do they still defend Amway?" (Deleuze and Guattari [1972] 2009). One answer to this question, particularly with reference to defensiveness of neoliberal regimes by working-class people in the United States, is that political, business, and ecclesial leaders consciously amalgamated American evangelicalism and neoliberalism. Working-class people therefore defend neoliberalism with similar emotional vigor as they defend their religious tradition, because, to their communities, neoliberalism and their religious tradition are one and the same. Through the potent cocktail of commodified American evangelicalism, capitalist business rhetoric, and fraudulent promises of wealth creation, Amway successfully co-opted my parents, even to the point that in 2021, they still defend the organization that consumed their time and money, and led them to financial ruin.

In her 2015 book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, political theorist Wendy Brown presents "a theoretical consideration of the ways that neoliberalism, a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms, is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy" (Brown 2015, 17). As a political-economic theory, neoliberalism subsumes all elements of human civilization and experience under capitalist economic pursuits. Brown's analysis provides the interpretive lens for this study of Amway's amalgamation of neoliberal ideology and American evangelicalism. According to Brown, under neoliberalism "all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized" (Brown 2015,

10). Thus, in Western liberal democracies, political subjects are no longer functionally *homo politicus*, but *homo oeconomicus* alone.

Following the Amway model, MLMs utilize social media to build communities wherein members are inculcated with neoliberal ideas and reshaped into neoliberal subjects. Whereas political-philosophical subjects from earlier eras of Western thought might understand themselves as citizens participating in collective pursuit of the Good (as individuals or nations/nation-states), neoliberal subjects understand themselves as individuals who must *work on themselves to become profitable*. The neoliberal subject must learn what the global market values, and fit themselves into the mold of that market demand. MLMs offer an acute example of this process, and serve as a guide for understanding the neoliberal subjectivization across the internet today. In order to decolonize the internet, reflection upon the realities of political/philosophical subjectivity, and potential responses to these circumstances, must be considered and pursued.

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