



Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:  
The 23rd Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

## FROM FRINGE TO MAINSTREAM: QANON NARRATIVES IN CENTRAL EUROPEAN DIGITAL SPACES

Marie Heřmanová  
Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences

### Background

The proliferation of conspiracy theories in digital spaces has been widely studied within the English speaking digital context and spaces (Bracewell, 2021; Forberg, 2021; Hannah, 2021). Attention has been paid to the emergence of dark platforms (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021) and their role in the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy narratives, the role they play in the global media ecosystem as well as to the effectivity and tools meant to prevent the spread of false or conspiracy content (Cobbe, 2020). Research has also focused on the role of influencers and digital opinion leaders in the proliferation of conspiracy narratives on social media (Lewis, 2018). Authors such as Remski (2020) and Baker (2022) focused on the overlap of lifestyle, spiritual and domestic content on Instagram with far-right political narratives and conspiracies within the U.S. and English-speaking influencer culture. The paper builds on the aforementioned research and focuses on how influencers and digital opinion leaders engage in spreading conspiracy theories in Czech and Slovak speaking online spaces. It builds on a case of study of the proliferation of QAnon-related content among Czech and Slovak influencers on Instagram and TikTok and analyses how this type of content moves from a) English speaking spaces to local communities of Czech/Slovak influencers and their audiences and b) how the content moves across platforms and gets mainstreamed in the process.

### Methodology

The paper employs a mixed-method approach. It is informed by an ongoing digital ethnography (Pink at al, 2016; Kozinets, 2020) of political radicalization among influencers (participant and non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews). Furthermore, the content created by the influencers was analysed using ethnographic content analysis (Altheide&Schneider, 2013).

### Analysis

Suggested Citation (APA): Heřmanová, Marie. (2022, November). *From Fringe to Mainstream: QAnon Narratives in Central European Digital Spaces*. Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

The analysis focuses on two selected narratives that are shared among Czech and Slovak influencers and their audiences: a) the narrative that explains the COVID-19 pandemic as an orchestrated political event that serves the hidden elites (namely people like Bill Gates and George Soros) as a tool to control the world population and b) the narrative that anti-covid vaccines are poisoning the blood of vaccinated people, especially children. These narratives became prominently visible in the Czech and Slovak discourse and their origins can in many cases be traced back to U.S. based QAnon adjacent websites such as for example GreeMedInfo.com or Questioningcovid.com. At the same time, the influencers and their audiences employ various discursive practices to recontextualize these narratives within the local political and societal context and framed by symbolic references to authoritarian past of Central and Easter Europe (CEE) and explains the intentions of world elites such as (Hungarian) George Soros as an attempt to return to the past.

The paper proposes a structure for tracing the journey of conspiracy narratives from English to Czech/Slovak speaking digital spaces: 1) the emergence of the narrative on a website such as GreenMedInfo.com, in English 2) the posting of the narratives on a platform that within the CEE spaces could be consider fringe (Bail 2012) such as Reddit, 8chan, Telegram or local web fora and discussion groups, were the content is translated into a local language 3) the reposting of memes, banners or posts based on these narratives in both English and Czech/Slovak within semi-closed communities such as Facebook groups or parts of TikTok – I propose the term niche platforms to describe the function of these platforms within the local context 4) the reposting by mainstream and major influencers and in groups on mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and parts of TikTok where the context of the original post with local narratives about authoritarianism blurs and merges together and finally 5) following backlash from mainstream publics and attempts at content moderation, the content moves to dark platforms (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021), within the Czech and Slovak speaking context now mostly represented by Telegram.

The analysis presents a case study of the involvement of influencers and digital opinion leaders in proliferating conspiracy content and traces the movement of content from one platform to another via influencers and their audiences.

### **Significance**

Since the movement of conspiracy narratives from U.S. / English-speaking environment to smaller and more closed spaces such as the Czech/Slovak speaking online communities is so far understudied, the proposed structure is meant as hypothesis that describes how the content moves from fringe to mainstream spaces withing different local contexts and what role do individual actors, such as influencers play in the process.

### **References:**

Altheide, D., & Schneider, C. (2013). Ethnographic content analysis. In *Qualitative media analysis* (pp. 23-37). SAGE Publications, Ltd, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452270043.n2>

Bail, C. A. (2012). The Fringe Effect: Civil Society Organizations and the Evolution of Media Discourse about Islam since the September 11th Attacks. *American Sociological Review*, 77(6), 855–879. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412465743>

Baker, S.A. (2022). Alt. Health Influencers: how wellness culture and web culture have been weaponised to promote conspiracy theories and far-right extremism during the COVID-19 pandemic. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(1), pp. 3-24. doi:10.1177/13675494211062623.

Bracewell, L. (2021). Gender, Populism, and the QAnon Conspiracy Movement. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2020.615727>

Cobbe, J. (2020). Algorithmic Censorship by Social Platforms: Power and Resistance. *Philosophy and Technology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-020-00429-0>

Forberg, P. L. (2021). From the Fringe to the Fore: An Algorithmic Ethnography of the Far-Right Conspiracy Theory Group QAnon. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416211040560>

Hannah, M. N. (2021). A Conspiracy of Data: QAnon, Social Media, and Information Visualization. *Social Media and Society*, 7(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211036064>

Kozinets, R.V. (2019). *Netnography - An Essential Guide To Qualitative Social Media Research*, Sage Publications Ltd.

Lewis, B. (2018). Alternative Influence. *Data & Society Research Institute*, <https://datasociety.net/library/alternative-influence/>

Pink, S. (eds.) (2016). *Digital Ethnography*. Sage Publishing Ltd.

Remski, M. (2020). The Conspiracy Report. Available at: <https://matthewremski.medium.com/the-conspiracy-report-home-5b6006b4543d>, retrieved 18.3.2021

Zeng, J., & Schäfer, M. S. (2021). Conceptualizing “Dark Platforms”. Covid-19-Related Conspiracy Theories on 8kun and Gab. *Digital Journalism*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1938165>