

QAnon: Into the Rabbit Hole

A Deep Dive Into a “Conspiracy” in Times of Turmoil

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Abstract

The phenomenon of 'QAnon' took the world by storm after the insurrection on the United States Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, and as a topic of discussion, it was almost inescapable on the news. Everyone was curious and concerned as to what QAnon was, who 'Q' was, and why people were drawn to QAnon. The sensationalism surrounding QAnon stems from years of looming on social media, growing in size and popularity to the point of reaching previous president Donald Trump's attention. The identity of the 'Q' persona is still a mystery at this time of writing; however, QAnon is not made up of one person, but describes a community of adherents believing in various conspiracy theories which targets many different areas and people. For centuries, conspiracy theories have been part of society, yet with QAnon it is difficult to pin down its conspiratorial features compared to what is known as classic conspiracy theories. We see public support of the conspiracy theory by political figures, voicing pro-QAnon rhetoric, disregarding the conspiracy theory's very anti-democrat and anti-establishment beliefs. This body of work seeks to explore the world of QAnon. Our problem formulation for this thesis will be answered by analysing from three different perspectives. Firstly, we examine which theoretical categories QAnon can be described as, and attempt to describe its conspiratorial element; an area which concludes that QAnon shares many similarities with Rosenblum and Muirhead's theory of new conspiracism, social movements, religious doctrines as well as our own construction: 'conspiracy narrative'. Secondly, we look into the relationship between QAnon and social media; a relationship leading us to conclude that QAnon and social media are deeply intertwined with each other, where QAnon's emergence from the beginning to its popularity today can be attributed primarily to social media, and internet based concepts such as echo chambers, filter bubbles and hashtag hijackings. Lastly, we examine the role of social and political polarisation, and discuss what it means to have a conspiratorial President in the White House. We conclude that the environment in which QAnon thrives is created by social and political polarisation, and that having a conspiratorial president in power does surprisingly little for QAnon, compared to the impact of Trumpism which is indicative of the current political decay.

Keywords: QAnon, social media, polarization, conspiracism, Donald Trump

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
1. Introduction	1
2. Problem Formulation	4
3. Theory	5
3.1 Brotherton: Key Features of a Conspiracy Theory	6
3.1.1. Context	6
3.1.2. Content	8
3.1.3 Epistemic Rationale	8
3.2. Rosenblum and Muirhead: Classic Conspiracism and New Conspiracism.....	9
3.2.1. Conspiracism and Epistemic Standard	10
3.2.2. Figure 1: Classic Conspiracism and New Conspiracism	11
2.3. Echo Chamber and Filter Bubble.....	13
2.4. Hashtag Hijacking	15
2.5. Hellinger and the Trumpian Age.....	17
2.6. Richard Hofstadter: The Paranoid Style of American Politics.....	18
2.7. Theoretical Scope	20
2.8. Literature review	21
2.8.1. Academic Scepticism.....	21
2.8.2. The Political History Behind Conspiracism in the US.....	22
2.8.3. Comments on Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles	23
2.8.4. What academia defines QAnon as	26
2.8.5. On Polarisation.....	27
4. Methodology.....	28
4.1. Categorising Conspiracism	28
4.1.1. Conspiracism: Distinctive Terms	29
4.1.2. Figure 2: Elements of Conspiracism	30
4.2. The analytical process.....	30
4.2.1. Analysis: comparing labels and features.....	32
4.3. Limitations.....	33
4.4. Addressing QAnon’s adherents	34
4.5. Data Treatment	35

5. Empirical Data.....	36
5.1. Statistic by Gallup on presidential job approval ratings.....	36
5.2. CNN video: Biden’s inauguration led to mom escaping QAnon	37
5.3. CNN video: Former QAnon follower explains why she left the movement.....	37
5.4. Twitter Screenshots from August 15 and October 31, 2020.....	37
6. Analysis	38
6.1. Which theoretical categories can be used to describe QAnon?	39
6.1.1. Robert Brotherton’s Conspiracy Criteria	39
6.1.1.1. Context.....	39
6.1.1.2. Content.....	42
6.1.1.3. Sub conclusion	43
6.2. New Conspiracism and Classic Conspiracism.....	43
6.2.1. QAnon’s development as a Conspiracy Narrative.....	44
6.2.2. Figure 3: A visual Overview of Classic Conspiracism and New Conspiracism.....	46
6.2.3. A Social movement?.....	48
6.2.4. Sub conclusion.....	51
6.3. Conspiracy Narrative, or Something Entirely Different?	52
6.4. ‘Q’ Works in Mysterious Ways	53
6.5. Epistemic Standard: Believing is Belonging.....	55
6.5.1. Sub Conclusion.....	56
6.6. What is the relationship between QAnon and Social Media?.....	56
6.6.1. How Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles Helped QAnon	59
6.6.2. Sub Conclusion.....	62
6.7. How and why #savethechildren was hijacked	62
6.7.1. Sub conclusion.....	68
6.8. The influence of Political and Social Polarisation.....	68
6.8.1. Sub Conclusion.....	76
9. Discussion.....	77
10. Conclusion.....	80
11. BIBLIOGRAPHY	82
Appendix 1 CNN Video 1	
Appendix 2 CNN Video 2	
Appendix 3 Twitter Screenshot 1	

Appendix 4 Twitter Screenshot 2

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories have been subject to both research and scepticism in the world of academia for many years. There seems to have existed a common belief among researchers in the political and international relations sphere that conspiracy theories are not actual theories and are more connected to the academia of psychology where the focal point surrounds people who associate themselves with conspiracy theories (Hellinger 2019, 13). As researchers we were puzzled by this attitude from scholars, since in recent years, conspiracy theories have become more present, serious, and dangerous; especially in US politics, culture, and society. While conspiracy theories as a research field in international relations is still quite scarce, studies pertaining to conspiracy theories in different interdisciplinary fields have become increasingly relevant and grown in the last decade (Douglas et al. 2019, 1).

One conspiracy which has been prominent on the internet for some years, and has been enjoying much media coverage as of late, is QAnon. QAnon, briefly summarised, is an online conspiracy phenomenon composed of two separate words; ‘Q’ being the name of the person who uploaded the posts which started the conspiracy, and the term ‘anon’, which is an abbreviation of the word ‘anonymous’ (Merriam-Webster 2021), whose followers believe the former president is fighting a ‘Deep State’, which is “a high-level Democratic child-sex operation” (The economist 2021, 36).

The idea of a ‘Deep State’ did not begin with QAnon; the idea is bestowed with historical significance in the US, and has recently been largely revived by the Trump administration. Jacob Silverman argues that the Deep State “has become the administration’s catchall term for a nebulous collection of Obama-era appointees and civil service veterans who are working to undermine the Trump agenda” (Silverman 2018, 27). Additionally, it has been mobilised as the governmental “boogeyman” (27), allegedly responsible for numerous conspiracies aimed at Trump’s agenda and policies, or the wellbeing of the people.

QAnon is highly supportive of previous president Donald J. Trump, and the support QAnon has shown Trump throughout his presidency along with their presence at the Trump rallies have been noticed by the former president, who has neglected to condemn QAnon while also making statements insisting “that he hadn’t heard much about the movement “other than I understand they like me very much” and “it is gaining in popularity”” (Associated Press 2020). Such a statement regarding a conspiracy theory and its adherents has never before been articulated by a person, who at the time, arguably had the most powerful position in the world. Additionally, Trump’s response can be considered more abnormal when considering that the FBI had issued a bulletin in 2019 warning about QAnon and how “conspiracy-theory-driven extremists have become a domestic terrorism threat” (Associated Press 2020).

A tipping point for many in realising how dangerous conspiracy theories can be, was the riots on Capitol Hill. Trump had, during and after the 2020 election, spent time alleging voter fraud, claiming the election was ‘rigged’ and that the Democrats stole it. The construction of this narrative was successful in convincing several groups, e.g. Trump supporters, Republicans, Proud Boys members and QAnon adherents that the election was fraudulent (Spocchia 2021 and BBC 2021).

On January 6th, 2021, Congress had assembled to certify the results of the presidential election. The day began with Trump giving a speech, wherein he “reiterated multiple falsehoods, claiming the election was rigged and that Democrats had committed voter fraud” (Tan et al. 2021). In the afternoon, Trump once again encouraged his followers to go to the Capitol and demonstrate. He said “If you don't fight... You're not going to have a country anymore” (Tan et al. 2021). Shortly after Trump's speech the violence began. Protesters broke through the safety measures and entered the Capitol building. More and more Trump supporters breached the Capitol, “breaking windows and climbing inside the building, then opening doors for others to follow” (Tan et al. 2021). A while later both houses of Congress began to evacuate. At this point, the violence had spread to other states as well, which prompted the evacuation of the Capitols in New Mexico and Utah.

Citizens and official institutions all over the country called on Trump to speak to the rioters and stop the chaos which was taking place. Initially, Trump ignored the calls for him to act, however, he finally asked them to go home while still maintaining his claims that the election was

fraudulent. Ensuingly, the situation came under control, and Congress could finish the certification of the election results. Five people died as a result of the violence, and shortly after, “Twitter permanently suspended Trump's account [...] for “incitement of violence”” (Tan et al. 2021). Throughout the following days, many members of Congress expressed their anger and some “called for Trump's immediate removal from office, either through the 25th Amendment or impeachment” (Tan et al. 2021).

The capital riots also brought about increased focus on the role of social media in relation to extremism. Trump was known to be an avid user of Twitter, and in 2017, he uttered “*I doubt I would be here if it weren't for social media, to be honest with you. [...] When somebody says something about me, I'm able to go bing, bing, bing and I take care of it*” (Hutchinson 2021 [italics in original]). The role of social media in relation to the Capitol Hill riots is unique because this “was the first time where the full plan of action, from inception to outcome, was traceable via social post and activity, with the President actively playing a part in provoking and inciting the mob” (Hutchinson 2021). QAnon is frequently used as an example to describe the move from online violence, e.g. harassment and threatening behaviour to offline violence; QAnon was one of many groups to participate in the Capitol Hill riots, and some have questioned if QAnon would ever have developed into what it became, if only social media had taken harsher actions to clamp down on right wing extremist groups earlier. In this respect, it has also been discussed if the Capitol Hill riots could have been avoided altogether, had social media acted sooner (Hutchinson 2021).

The Capitol Hill riots signal a development in how conspiracy theories and misinformation travel on social media, as well as the consequences hereof. Via social media, Trump has been “able to use his social media presence to build a cult-like empire, which eventually lead to him being able to effectively incite a coup in an attempt to keep himself in power” (Hutchinson 2021). This can certainly be argued to illustrate the impact of social media, and provides a unique opportunity to investigate how groups such as QAnon are able to ascend from offline violence to online violence.

It is, however, difficult to explain how social and political polarisation and tensions pertaining to the election can cause this level of political violence which has not been seen in the US in modern times, and the digitally unprecedented, conspiratorial influence of QAnon

presumably plays a role. The emergence of QAnon is an example of a movement transcending the borders of online violence which – in the case of QAnon – took the shape of hatred for the political opposition, and an almost unconditional belief in its leader; Q. The nature of QAnon – whether it is a conspiracy theory or not – is unique in the way it emerged from the rubbles of the ‘pizzagate’ controversy, and has now garnered millions of devoted followers without providing proof for its claims, or a face to its leader. It is puzzling how a phenomenon can emerge in dark corners of the web and turn into an indisputable idea or belief that so many have embraced. Based on this puzzle, and the uniqueness of QAnon, we have formulated the following question:

2. Problem Formulation

“How does the emergence and nature of QAnon compare to the emergence and nature of classic conspiracy theories?”

We believe the question that makes up the problem formulation covers the puzzle we encountered while researching the QAnon phenomenon. Nevertheless, the problem formulation covers a large area, which is why we have chosen to incorporate research questions, not only to answer the problem formulation, but also to structure the thesis in a coherent manner. The thesis will entail six research questions in total and will be divided into three strands for analysis: ‘QAnon’, ‘Media’ and finally, ‘Politics’.

The first strand; ‘QAnon’, consists of one research question: ‘which theoretical categories can be used to describe QAnon?’. With the use of set categories, we will try to describe the nature of QAnon. We found that articles and the media have a tendency to label QAnon as various things e.g. as a cult, a movement, or as a conspiracy theory, and little effort was put into distinguishing between what these labels entail, as well as explaining how and why QAnon is being described as such. In addition to providing QAnon with labels and categories, we will also analyse the different elements and beliefs behind the justification of why QAnon has such a diverse set of labels. To define QAnon is not the purpose of this project, however, a goal is to describe its distinctive

features, which allows for a sound analysis of QAnon's nature. Constructing the analysis in this manner will simultaneously not limit our scope and cause the analysis to become too narrow-minded or faulty. We strive to avoid an exact definition of what QAnon is; rather, we wish to make sense of the labels which are often used to describe and categorise it, and through that, describe its nature, including its facets and beliefs.

The second strand - 'Media' - consists of one research question which is: 'What is the relationship between social media and QAnon?'. As pointed out in the introduction of this thesis, QAnon is an example of a group which has transcended from online violence to offline violence, and the ascended violence is exemplified through the Capitol Hill riots. Additionally, we know that the ascend from online violence to offline violence sparked debates regarding the role of social media, as well as their responsibility in battling extremism. The ability to see the early steps of what was going to be the Capitol Hill riots via social media, as well as the previous President's encouragement, provides a unique opportunity to examine how groups can use social media to spread right-wing extremism.

The third and last strand 'Politics' consists of two research questions: 'What does political and social polarisation have to do with it?' and 'What is the significance of a conspiracist president?'. We pose these questions because in recent years, polarising political conflicts in the United States have increased. One main factor causing the increase in tensions was the inauguration of Republican Donald J. Trump as President in 2017, who has been argued to be the most controversial president in American history (Woolfrey 2021), and whose rise to presidency was "built in no small measure by capitalizing on partisan polarization and on mistrust of government" (Hellinger 2019, 81).

3. Theory

The theories explained in this section are theories which we are convinced, through preliminary research, will prove fruitful in the analysis. Firstly, we will present Robert Brotherton's key features of a conspiracy theory. Second, we will explain Rosenblum and Muirhead's theory on 'classic conspiracism' and 'new conspiracism'. Third, we will explain GCFGlobal and Sunstein's concept of 'echo chamber', followed by an outline of Pariser's theory on filter bubbles. This will

be followed by an explanation of hashtag hijacking, as proposed by Gilkerson and Berg, and Girginova. Lastly, We will account for Hellinger's theory on the 'Trumpian Age', and in this respect, include Hofstadter's idea of the paranoid style in American politics. Our reasoning for choosing these theories can be found in section 4.2..

3.1 Brotherton: Key Features of a Conspiracy Theory

The uncertainties surrounding what the terms 'conspiracism' and 'conspiracy theories' entail warrants attention and caution when it comes to defining the sphere within which QAnon emerged. Brotherton, however, tries to characterise the so-called 'unspoken assumptions' about what a conspiracy theory is, without inducing it with a set definition. The articulations of these assumptions are separated into three characteristic features, which combined are common to conspiracy theories.

We will use Brotherton's characteristic features to determine whether QAnon can be called a conspiracy. Brotherton also uses the term 'conspiracy theory' and does not distinguish between conspiracy with, and conspiracy without, theory. However, we find that his definitions are broad enough to define both phenomena within classic conspiracism, as well as new conspiracism. The benefit of applying Brotherton's key features of a conspiracy theory is that Brotherton does not attempt to define it; rather, Brotherton attempts to address the underlying assumptions of what a conspiracy theory is (Brotherton 2013, 9). Elsewhere in this thesis we have discussed the difficulties of defining what exactly a conspiracy theory is. Brotherton works with this difficulty by addressing the underlying, unspoken assumptions, and attempts to articulate them into a general set of features that are generally applicable to a given conspiracy theory.

In the following, the three characteristic features of a 'conspiracy theory' according to Brotherton are listed and explained, along with their respective sub criteria.

3.1.1. Context

'Context' is the first of Brotherton's features, and within it he lists three sub-criteria. The first dictates that *conspiracy theories are unverified claims*, and that the term 'conspiracy' "usually refers to explanations which are not regarded as verified by legitimate epistemic authorities" (10).

Followers of a conspiracy theory often claim that the conspiracy is ongoing, and apply this as reason for the potential lack of empirical basis; therefore, Brotherton argues, “conspiracy theories actively cultivate the perception that events are unsolved by searching for ambiguity and arguing that all is not as it seems” (10).

The second criterion within ‘context’ is that *conspiracy theories are less plausible alternatives to the mainstream explanation*. Here, Brotherton points out the relativity of ‘plausibility’, and states that conspiracy theories “are defined in part by their oppositional relationships with other explanations of the events or situations to which they pertain” (10). In this way, Brotherton argues, the official explanation becomes a tool for adherents of the conspiracy theory, and argued to be “evidence of a conscious plot to distract the public - *that’s what they want us to believe*” (10[italics in original]).

The third and final criterion within ‘context’ is that *conspiracy theories are sensationalistic*. Here, Brotherton differentiates between ‘conspiracy’ and ‘conspiracy theories’, and argues that the sensationalism of the claims within a conspiracy theory is a defining factor; whereas conspiracies typically entail covering up petty crimes or some type of profit - financial or other - conspiracy theories revolve around events which are “of obvious national or international significance [...] such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, disease pandemics, the deaths of celebrities, and plane crashes” (10). These events typically have a large-scale impact on people and are constantly covered by the media, and “the larger the impact, the more likely an event is to garner conspiracy theories” (10), Brotherton argues, but the sensationalism of a conspiracy theory is also based on its ‘scapegoat’. For example, conspiracy theories often argue that the act of conspiring is carried out by those whom the people are supposed to trust, e.g. media and democratically elected leaders. In this sense, the sensationalism of a conspiracy theory also comes from the impact which would occur if the claims were to be true, since it would change “our understanding of freedom, liberty, privacy, knowledge, political transparency, and even free-will” (11), and would “justify the impeachment of whole governments, the disbandments and criminal prosecution of entire organisations and industries, and the rewriting of history” (11).

3.1.2. Content

The first criterion in this part claims that *conspiracy theories assume that everything is intended*. Conspiracy theories are induced with suspiciousness, and their adherents believe that “almost nothing happens by accident, only by agency” (11). Conspiracy theories largely ignore the chance of randomness and “the conspirators are assumed to be hyper competent in their ability to successfully plan and control events and subsequently keep secret their actions” (11).

The second criterion is *that conspiracy theories assume unusually malign intent*. Here, Brotherton distinguishes between benevolent and malevolent conspiracies; what characterizes a conspiracy theory is typically the latter because “conspiracy theories postulate a black-and-white world in which good is struggling against evil” (11). A benevolent conspiracy would be e.g. friends conspiring to positively surprise a common friend. Here, the conspirators are acting with good intent. Conspiracy theories, however, often “portray the conspirators as being Evil incarnate: of having caused all the ills from which we suffer, committing abominable acts of unthinkable cruelty on a routine basis, and striving ultimately to subvert or destroy everything we hold dear” (11).

3.1.3 Epistemic Rationale

Epistemic rationale consists of two criteria, however, only one will be included here. We have excluded the first criterion which entails that *conspiracy theories have low standards of evidence*, since the epistemic standard and conspiratorial attitude towards evidence is sufficiently explained through Rosenblum and Muirhead’s works. See model in section 3.2.2. for a detailed explanation.

Brotherton’s second criterion within epistemic rationale claims that *conspiracy theories are epistemically self-insulating*. As explained earlier, conspirators are viewed as a powerful, unparalleled evil; this means that the failure to see or bring conspiracies into the light “can be interpreted as evidence of their complicity in the plot” (12) and lends legitimacy to the conspiracy theory “by implicating more and more people in the alleged scheme” (12). The act of implicating the opposition and presenting them as being part of the conspirators is also known as ‘cascade logic’, which is an epistemic strategy to enhance validity of conspiratorial claims (12). If the opposition is declared part of the conspirators, conspiracy theories become almost impossible to

falsify. Additionally, Brotherton argues, any attempt to provide evidence against a conspiracy theory - credible or not – “can even have the unintended consequences of reinforcing it” (12), precisely because conspiracy adherents tend to implicate the opposition, and therefore strengthen the idea of evil acts being carried out in secrecy.

3.2. Rosenblum and Muirhead: Classic Conspiracism and New Conspiracism

The emergence of the term ‘conspiracism’ signals that research on conspiracy and conspiracy theories is a field in and of itself. Merriam-Webster defines ‘ism’ as a noun, and as “a distinctive doctrine, cause, or theory” (Merriam-Webster 2021). Conspiracy as a field of research becomes an ‘ism’ when it refers to the collective study of the elements within conspiracies, e.g., conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thought, rather than to just the singular elements respectively. For example, Rosenblum and Muirhead’s work on conspiracism shows that their interest lies in studying the development of conspiracy tendencies, and therefore, the developments within conspiracism as a whole. Hellinger also studies conspiracism in the context of the ‘Trumpian Age’, including if Hofstadter’s notion of a return of the paranoid style is happening which signals that the development and role of conspiracism as a field is the object of research.

Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead have engaged in research pertaining to newly emerged conspiracy theories, and whether these can be referred to as conspiracy *without* the theory. The 9/11 conspiracy theory is what Rosenblum and Muirhead refer to as ‘classic conspiracism’ - or conspiracy *with* the theory. The main characteristic of classic conspiracism is that it attempts to offer an explanation of a given event, where other - typically official - explanations or accounts are not satisfactory, or deemed incomplete (25). In recent years, however, a new type of conspiracism has arised, known as ‘new conspiracism’ - conspiracy *without* the theory. While it has its roots in classic conspiracism, it defies the basic definition of offering an explanation and its “typical form [...] is bare assertion” (25).

The main difference between ‘classic’ conspiracism and ‘new’ conspiracism is the attempt to provide an explanation based on errant data. While classic conspiracism is characterised by scepticism towards official accounts, and producing alternative explanations hereof, new

conspiracism contrastingly “seems to arise out of thin air” (25). Rosenblum and Muirhead describe the new conspiracist as positing “odious designs but not the how or why, and often not even the who” (25). Additionally, they do not provide or argue evidence, but state their convictions as true without necessarily pointing to a preceding event. As an example of new conspiracism, Rosenblum and Muirhead refer to Donald Trump’s loss of New Hampshire during the 2016 primary; Trump claimed that the election in New Hampshire was rigged hence a conspiracy was born, but there was no proof or material suggesting that irregularities took place during the voting, and “no stray facts to account for” (26), which is what classic conspiracism usually is based on.

3.2.1. Conspiracism and Epistemic Standard

Rosenblum and Muirhead argue that new conspiracism also comes with a new regime of truth. They argue that “new conspiracism sets a low bar: if one cannot be certain that a belief is entirely false, with the emphasis on *entirely*, then it might be true - and that’s true enough” (43 [italics in original]). They refer to this assertion - that if something is plausible, then its true enough - as ‘true-enoughness’ (42). The concept of ‘true-enoughness’ is characteristic to new conspiracism, as it is “unconcerned with explanation and encourages assent to and action on the basis of claims that are not disproved and are not impossible, and are therefore “true enough”” (43). Unlike classic conspiracism, ‘new conspiracism’ is largely based on claims and assertions, rather than alternative explanations, and applies a different ‘regime of truth’ than classic conspiracism does. This regime of truth within new conspiracism can shortly be explained as the ‘true enoughness’, cf. Rosenblum and Muirhead, who explain that the “logic of “true enough” breathes life into the new conspiracism as it corrodes standards of verification and validation” (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 50).

The element of true-enoughness is central when it comes to distinguishing between classic conspiracism and new conspiracism, as it sets them apart in terms of their respective methods and their perspective on reality. To properly illustrate these differences between the two conspiracisms, the following table has been created.

3.2.2. Figure 1: Classic Conspiracism and New Conspiracism

	Classic Conspiracism	New Conspiracism
Logic	To provide explanations for an event where official accounts are less plausible. The aim is to account for ‘stray facts’ and provide a more plausible explanation.	To make claims/uncover ‘truths’ based on any level of existing plausibility. The aim is to make claims about potential facts or actions existing in secrecy.
Method	To analyse public accounts of events, identify potential shortcomings or illogical ‘facts’, and provide an alternative explanation which makes sense to the adherents.	If something is plausible, it has most likely happened. Can carry elements of analysis, but arguments to back up claims are mostly not made. Rigorous research can occur, but is not reliable.
Verification	Adherents seek verification of their alternative explanation (theory), often via scientific methods or cross checking information.	Adherents seek verification through tribalism, i.e. repetition of their beliefs among like-minded acts as verification of their claims
Validity	Emerges when others engage in the discussion and accept its plausibility, as well as the scientific arguments behind the theory.	Comes from any level of plausibility, true-enoughness, and persistence by fellow adherents.
Epistemic Standard	High, since classic conspiracists strive to prove their claims and infuse a level of trustworthiness through often rigorous research.	Low, since new conspiracists do not try to prove their claims with rigorous/scientific research, nor do they try to provide facts that resonate with reality.

(Created by authors)

An examination of existing literature reflected little to no knowledge on how this new conspiracism comes into being, as well as how conspiratorial explanations, which are not tied to an event with ‘stray facts’ can manage to gather followers to the same degree as QAnon.

The existing literature did not provide insight into where the allegedly unfounded claims come from in new conspiracism, Whereas classic conspiracism shows a clear linear progression of how conspiracy theories come into being, including the reason for factual scepticism and the garnering

of adherents, new conspiracism is mostly dubbed as occurring ‘out of the blue’, as explained in the introduction of this thesis (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 25).

Looking at the categorised differences between ‘classic conspiracism’ and ‘new conspiracism’ in the above, significant differences can be seen. However, if a conspiracy theory loses its ‘theory’ part, and sheds explanation of facts or events, it can become difficult to distinguish it from other phenomena. For example, verification through tribalism and a lack of standard in plausibility is also sometimes seen in religious contexts. In terms of epistemic standard, the case is the same; many religions, e.g. Christianity, require devotion and blind faith in *him*, even though there is often no epistemic proof which speaks to the reliability. Additionally, scientific arguments against religious beliefs are often seen to be cast aside by adherents, and the person arguing for them is a nonbeliever, or in some cases, dubbed ‘part of the sheep’.

As researchers, we acknowledge that this may cause a degree of typological confusion, but we believe that these similarities are the reason for why the diverse labels should be included in the analysis. To neglect one set of labels, e.g. one describing a religious movement simply because it is too similar to another set of labels, e.g. that of ‘new conspiracism’, only enhances the risk of a faulty analysis since important aspects and traits of QAnon may be neglected, and therefore cause an incomplete depiction of the phenomenon. Therefore, we will look into QAnon outside the context of conspiracism, and relate its traits to the behaviour of other movements such as social movements, sects, cults and religions.

Rosenblum and Muirhead’s work to distinguish between classic conspiracism and new conspiracism signals a development in how conspiracies evolve and gain ground. Daniel C. Hellinger exemplifies this development by pointing to conspiracies that exist in current times, or as he calls it; ‘the age of Trump’. For example, the so-called ‘birther theory’, which claimed President Barack Obama was born in Kenya, and therefore not eligible for presidency, became a popular conspiracy because Trump supported it and often repeated it on e.g. social media, In fact, Donald Trump furthered the development of the conspiracy, and even suggested in a 2013 tweet that “a Hawaiian state official had been murdered as part of the alleged conspiracy to hide the president’s true place of birth” (Hellinger 2019, 26).

The entry of conspiracy theories into the white house further underlines this development within conspiracism. However, an examination of earlier research shows that ‘new conspiracism’ is a greatly understudied area. Hellinger, as well as Rosenblum and Muirhead have provided some

of the most in-depth research which engages with the shift from classic conspiracism to new conspiracism, as well as the emergence of conspiracy theories in recent years, and provides a useful framework for further research into how these conspiracy theories come into being, and what socio-political factors provide scepticism or legitimacy. Their work, however, is relatively new and breaks ground when it comes to how conspiracies develop in a globalising age, and does not include analyses or perspectives on the events surrounding the Capitol Hill riots; their research predates the Capitol Hill riots, however, in both Hellinger's, as well as Rosenblum and Muirhead's works, the turn of conspiracy development is thoroughly studied, and its effects in a modern world explained.

2.3. Echo Chamber and Filter Bubble

This thesis will apply GCFGlobal's official definition of what an echo chamber is, along with Cass Sunstein's comments on echo chambers from his book *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* from 2017. This incorporation of the two different sources has been decided upon, since Sunstein writes about echo chambers in a manner where the reader is already informed of what an echo chamber entails. We cannot do the same, so we decided to use the definition presented by GCFGlobal, since we believe it provides a short, but concise and comprehensive summary and overall idea of what an echo chamber is.

Echo chambers describe "an environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own" (GCFGlobal and The Oxford Dictionary 2021). These environments are "fueled by **confirmation bias**, which is the tendency to favor info that reinforces existing beliefs" (GCFGlobal 2021 [emphasis in original]). This enhancement of beliefs or bias a person has towards a certain topic can thereby construct a misconstrued perception or a very subjective opinion of information, news or objective facts (GCFGlobal 2021).

Sunstein argues that many people like or dislike the concept of echo chambers; some want to live in them whereas others want to expose themselves to opposing or different viewpoints (Sunstein 2017, 15). It is each individual's own choice. However, Sunstein does believe that we should be concerned about echo chambers, beyond the idea of 'just' the construction of misconstrued perceptions. For example, governance can suffer because of echo chambers since

“they can lead to terrible policies or a dramatically decreased ability to converge on good ones” (18). This is especially the case since certain political issues are extremely divisive and “political polarization on such issues is aggravated by voters’ self-segregation into groups of like-minded people, which can make it far more difficult to produce sensible solutions” (18). Another reason to be concerned about echo chambers is the potential for violent extremism. Sunstein argues that “If like-minded people stir one another to greater levels of anger, the consequences can be literally dangerous” (18). Furthermore, he warns about the possibilities that echo chambers contribute to individuals believing in falsehoods e.g. conspiracy theories, or propaganda (19). According to Sunstein, for a democracy to be well-functioning it is important that “people do not live in echo chambers or information cocoons” (7).

In *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, Sunstein emphasises the internet and social media’s role in relation to people’s power to choose. He also touches upon the topics of algorithm and filtering, and intertwines it with echo chambers to an extent where it becomes difficult to separate them. However, he does not mention Eli Pariser or the filter bubble theory - which argued for the algorithm first, so we have decided to exclude Sunstein’s arguments on the internet and social media, in favour of Pariser’s own theory of the filter bubble from 2011.

Eli Pariser published his book *The Filter Bubble* in 2011. In the book, he accounts for a new concept titled ‘filter bubbles’, a term which he feels summarises the evolution of how the internet and algorithms change what people see on the internet (Pariser 2011, 6). He argues that the internet has become personalised for each of its users, stating:

“The basic code at the heart of the new Internet is pretty simple. The new generation of Internet filters looks at the things you seem to like - the actual things you’ve done, or the things people like you like - and tries to extrapolate. They are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you’ll do and want next. Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us - what I’ve come to call a filter bubble - which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information” (10).

While there is an emphasis in the book on the personalisation Google provides for people, Pariser also presents social media outlets such as Facebook as equal contributors to the personalisation of one’s internet sphere. Pariser himself began noticing how his conservative friends’ posts on Facebook had disappeared from his feed in contrast to his more liberal friends’ posts, which he argued occurred more because he himself identifies as left-leaning, and has a tendency to engage

more with his fellow left-leaning friends' activities online (8). Pariser explains that this disappearance of opposing political viewpoints is dangerous for our democracy, since “Democracy requires citizens to see things from one another’s point of view, but instead we’re more and more enclosed in our own bubble” (8) and that “Democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead we’re being offered parallel but separate universes” (8). This idea of an online personalised filter can be appealing to many since the amount of information can be overwhelming, but also because it can provide people with a customised environment where all their favorite things and topics are right in front of them, and where the news they do not care for are not recommended (11-12). However, the consequences of existing online with these personalised filters - or, existing in a *filter bubble* - can be quite damaging for our society since “there’s less room for the chance of encounters that brings insight and learning (13).

While Pariser acknowledges that people have always been biased towards what type of media they consume, he introduces three aspects that are unique to the origins of the filter bubble. Firstly, individuals each have their own bubble i.e. we are alone in it (10). Secondly, the bubble is invisible. What is meant by this is that normally “viewers of conservative or liberal news sources know that they’re going to a station curated to serve a particular political viewpoint” (10), but in the filter bubble case, it is not as transparent since “you haven’t chosen the criteria by which sites filter information in and out, it’s easy to imagine that the information that comes through a filter bubble is unbiased, objective, true. But it’s not” (10). And thirdly, people do not choose to enter the bubble. The active process people themselves take to filter what they see e.g. on TV, cannot be done online since the articles, news, commercials etc. come to them (11).

2.4. Hashtag Hijacking

This section will account for hashtag hijacking, how it is applied and why people choose to utilise it. We will present Gilkerson and Berg’s definition of the concept along with one of their examples of how hashtag hijacking is done. However, since public relations theory in relation to brands and organisations is also a primary focus when Gilkerson and Berg explain hashtag hijacking, and that particular link is irrelevant for this project, we will supplement the hashtag hijacking concept with Katerina Girginova’s essay concerning ISIS use of hashtag hijacking.

According to Gilkerson and Berg, hashtag campaigns have become popular on social media, but “the trend of strategically “hijacking” social media hashtags is relatively new” (Gilkerson and Berg 2018, 141). The phenomenon concerns “a situation in which a *hashtag* (#), a tool widely used for designating and organizing online conversations on social media sites, becomes commandeered by others in the community and is then instead used to mock, satirize, or negatively critique the original hashtag sponsor (141 [italics in original]). While the first example of the usage of hashtag hijacking are not accounted for, Gilkerson and Berg presents the first widely known case which occurred on Twitter in January 2012, when a promotional campaign from the fast food chain McDonald’s went wrong. The idea was for Twitter users to use the hashtag “#McDStories” “with the intent of inspiring customers and fans of the brand to post cheerful anecdotes about personal experiences at the restaurant and positive memories associated with the food” (141).

McDonald’s decided to pay Twitter for their “promoting trends” to boost the hashtag’s visibility on the Twitter platform. A couple of hours after the hashtag promotion, MacDonald’s decided to cancel their campaign from Twitter “due to the prevalence of overtly negative, sarcastic, and inappropriate responses tweeted by the platform’s users incorporating the hashtag” (141). Since the “#McDStories” incident, hashtag hijacking has become “a viable and effective strategic tool used by individuals and activist groups to publicly shame companies, to pressure organizations to action, and to help get their own message amplified and heard by the general public” (142), which concludes that *intention* is the main aspect of hashtag hijacking.

Activist groups operate by trying to influence e.g. an organisation through action of persuasion, education etc. to pressure an organisation (144). Depending on public relations scholars, activist groups can either have a negative or positive impact on organisations (144). The internet and emergence of social media have become a useful and powerful tool for activist groups to utilise especially in relation to societal and political issues, since they have a broader audience they can align themselves with (145).

In the essay *Hijacking Heads & Hashtags*, Katerina Girginova writes about different types of online hijacking methods, in particular hashtag hijacking, which are used to infiltrate and showcase specific content on social media and uses ISIS as her case. She writes that using hashtag hijacking “produces a spectacular clashing of texts, worlds, and audiences, and results in a disorientation and virtual encroachment of space” (Girginova 2017) which “gives unprecedented proximity to the phones, hands, eyes, and ears of ordinary people around the world who would not

necessarily have had direct and immediate exposure to messages from such groups before” (Girginova 2017). She also argues that when a hashtag hijacking occurs, it is not just the hashtag itself but “*public attention, a commutative space, and a particular meaning and social convention*” (Girginova 2017 [italics in original]) which gets hijacked.

She also presents de Certeau’s concept of ‘textual hijacking’ from 1984 as another way to understand the function of hashtag hijacking, which “can be understood as a tactic played out by a less powerful actor in order to use, manipulate and divert the space and resources created by a more powerful one” (Girginova 2017).

2.5. Hellinger and the Trumpian Age

Hellinger looks into conspiracy theories in a context which he refers to as the ‘Trumpian age’. It concerns the period when Donald Trump was president of the United States. Hellinger’s work differs from Rosenblum and Muirhead’s in that his main focus is on the contemporary context within which conspiracy theories arise. He directly links the policies and rhetoric of Donald Trump’s presidency to Richard Hofstadter’s idea of the ‘paranoid style’ within the American political system, which is amplified by an increase of populism (Hellinger 2019, 3). The context Hellinger analyses concerns the social, economic and political conditions that are present in society. He further argues that while Trump is a key figure within the Trumpian age, he is not solely responsible for the context in which conspiracy theories throughout his presidency have surged;

“he has not ”single-handedly restored” the paranoid style, nor has it returned when “least expected”. Nativism and distrust of not only political authority but also media, science, universities, etc., draws upon anxieties that have been building in recent decades. The steady erosion of the moral and political certainties, the frayed welfare system, wealth concentration, and celebrity culture are all contributing factors to the growth of conspiracy culture” (99).

According to Hellinger, the context - or conditions - of the conspiracy culture had been established prior to Donald Trump’s political career. Nevertheless, what Trump perfected was to utilise populism as a discursive tool to amplify the context through two main tools; social media and the concept of ‘fake news’. Conspiracy theories thrive on social media because the grand scale of

people around the world are able to articulate whatever they want to any audience. The positivism centered around viewing the internet and social media as a good place to seek alternative news which could have fostered “a more vibrant democratic culture” (93), is now met with scepticism.

This scepticism can largely be credited to the concept of ‘fake news’, which often figures on the internet and social media. The concept of ‘fake news’ “originally came into use to describe false stories, sometimes manufactured by a single individual, that would “go viral” on the Internet” (81) which would later transform into a meme (81). Likewise with the context, Trump did not create the concept of ‘fake news’ or the social media environment where ‘fake news’ thrive on, but he implemented and exploited the usage of the concept to his advantage throughout his presidency (82), in which he “appropriated the “fake news” meme as a weapon in his attempt to undermine the regime of truth maintained by the mainstream media” (82).

2.6. Richard Hofstadter: The Paranoid Style of American Politics

Hofstadter argues that American politics has always been subject to expressions of anger and falsehoods by minority groups - particularly right wing groups (Hofstadter 2008, 35). He refers to this phenomenon as the 'paranoid style', because "no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind" (35), he argues. Additionally, Hofstadter states that the individual who engages in the paranoid style believes that their “political passions are unselfish and patriotic” (36) and that they go “far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation” (36). The paranoid style can be viewed as a synonym for conspiracy and/or populism, or at least as a specific type of populism. Hofstadter argues that the paranoid style has existed for centuries and continues to be a normality within American politics (37). However, the concept does not only apply to American politics, but has been, and still is, a recurring theme in the international sphere as well (63). For decades, the paranoid style has attributed to the vilification and anti-movements of groups such as Catholics, Masons and Jesuits in America, who were perceived as a threat towards the American way of life, where anti-movements believed they played a crucial role in fending off these threats (51-52). Hofstadter argues that the perception of what constitutes a threat towards America changed in the 20th century, and he agrees with Daniel Bell, author of *The Radicalised Right*, that the threat-perception of right-wing groups has changed:

“America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialist and communist schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, having as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners but major statesmen seated at the very centers of American power. Their predecessors discovered foreign conspiracies; the modern radical right finds that conspiracy also embraces betrayal at home” (52).

At its core, Hofstadter explains that the paranoid style is a way for people to express themselves and how they perceive the world (36), and that the “central image is that of vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life” (56). This construction of a threat lays ground for why people, who attain the paranoid style, have an apocalyptic mindset attached to their beliefs. They believe something must be eliminated or that they are running out of time, and therefore, they must act fast and accordingly to prevent the destruction of something (56). It is a constant battle between good versus evil. The anxiety this mindset entails “leads to the formulation of hopelessly demanding and unrealistic goals, and since these goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid’s frustration” (57).

Another aspect of the paranoid style entails the knowledge or exposure which ‘defectors’ of groups targeted by the paranoid style’s supporters bring forward; “the renegade is the man or woman who has been in the secret world of the enemy, and brings forth with him or her the final verification of suspicions which might otherwise have been doubted by a sceptical world” (60). The defectors’ previous experiences are used by the supporters of the anti-movements as evidence to explain why their cause, rhetoric and demands are justified (60). The excessive striving for details and the gathering of evidence is another aspect of the paranoid style. The literature which results from these efforts is known as ‘paranoid literature’, and entails “defensible assumptions and with a careful accumulation of facts, or at least of what appears to be facts, and to marshal these facts toward an overwhelming “proof” of the particular conspiracy that is to be established” (61-62). Hofstadter does admit that some will fabricate their own proof to prove a conspiracy,

however, the distinguishing notion in the paranoid style is the “curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events”(62) and not “the absence of verifiable facts” (62).

Social conflicts are the catalyst to why the paranoid style reappears as often as it does, whether it is class, religious or ethnic conflicts. It thrives on political confrontation and opposed interests and ideas which are perceived to be non-compromisable and is made worse “when the representatives of a particular political interest - perhaps because of the very unrealistic and unrealizable nature of their demands - cannot make themselves felt in the political process” (64).

2.7. Theoretical Scope

As an online phenomenon, QAnon is susceptible to modifications in its follower spectrum, activities and planning hereof, as well as which conspiracy theories are generally associated with it. As an area of research, QAnon is dynamic in shape, and therefore, information and/or theories may be discovered which shed light on aspects that are not included in our chosen theories. The dynamic nature of QAnon thus calls for a degree of theoretical flexibility - not only because it has been labelled as many different things, but also because its compatibility with the various labels may increase or decrease in accordance with which aspect of QAnon’s user spectrum we focus on, or depending on the activities which QAnon adherents carry out. Labels such as ‘movement’, ‘cult’ or ‘religion’ are normally labels which are ascribed to groups of people whose assemblance fits the typology. The difference, however, is that once these phenomena have been given a label, its form typically remains stable and it can be subjected to research with theories and methodology usually applied to the phenomena in question.

QAnon’s compatibility with these labels seems to change depending on the issue. The tendency to call QAnon many things, ranging from movement to cult, and back to conspiracy, reflects the confusion that arises from its dynamic nature, and it is the dynamic nature that calls for an open mind in terms of analysing its key features. In this thesis, we have included theories which our preliminary research has shown as relevant to the study of QAnon. Entering an analysis with fixed theories and no room to move outside the theoretical frame, however, is likely to result in neglect of information. Consequently, when it comes to studying a dynamic and fluid phenomenon such as QAnon, the theoretical scope must be open-ended.

The argument we make here is the same as the argument for why we will not define QAnon beforehand; we must remain open-minded and make room for discussions of all its facets and resemblances to other labels, and not presume that the selected theories alone will shed light on the full scope regarding the emergence and nature of QAnon. Therefore, other theories or methodologies, which lay outside the predetermined theoretical and methodological frame in this thesis, are expected to prove relevant in the analysis. If we encounter such theories or methodologies, we choose not to include them as a whole; rather, we wish to draw on them from a meta-perspective, which means we will draw on the theoretical scope from a peripheral perspective, and thereby use them to examine the shortcomings that may be left after the predetermined analyses have been conducted.

2.8. Literature review

2.8.1. Academic Scepticism

At the outset of our initial research, we were aware that an examination of existing literature review would likely not reveal much about the QAnon phenomenon due to its relatively short existence. What was found was mostly in the form of articles which focus on the conspiracy aspect of QAnon, and it was evident that journalistic works, rather than academic works, had produced the most information on similar phenomena. To this end, scholar Daniel C. Hellinger devoted time to uncover why academics seem to refrain from doing research on conspiracies and conspiracy theories, and his findings roughly concluded that the act of taking conspiracism seriously comes with a fear of being dubbed an academic conspiracy theorist, as well as becoming marginalised in the academic world since academics generally do not take conspiracies seriously (Hellinger 2019, viii). Hellinger suggests that conspiracism should be treated within political science, as the agency behind a conspiracy “can be combined with attention to larger forces, such as political polarization and the breakdown of consensus among political elites, to understand underlying forces of political instability in a society” (viii). In this sense, Hellinger shows the significance of studying conspiracies, as well as their origins, as they also may be a symptom of certain societal structures emerging.

Another obstacle within conspiracy research, and which may be a significant cause for the lack of research into conspiracy and conspiracy theories, is that not much legitimacy is granted to the study of conspiracies as political activities. Hellinger argues that academic researchers ought to be more aware of the symptomatic aspect of conspiracism, instead of inducing “conspiracy panic” against those who raise uncomfortable issues and question “prevailing understandings” and “simple facts” (47). In this sense, Hellinger argues, conspiracism can be applied as a method to better conduct political analysis. An example of a conspiracy rooted in societal structures would be “people seeking to identify the causes and the political sources of their social and economic distress” (47), and dismissing discontent transformed into a conspiracy theory, which this example might be, would mean dismissing fruitful research into how conspiracy theories come into being.

2.8.2. The Political History Behind Conspiracism in the US

Some scholars have argued that conspiracy in the US can be found as early as in the Declaration of Independence, and prompted historians to ask whether it is possible that “the circumstances of the Revolution conditioned Americans to think of resistance to a dark subversive force as the essential ingredient of national identity” (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 24). While stating that Americans were designed to think in certain ways due to how the American Revolution came about is a rather large claim to make, it is, however, relevant to view this in a comparative light of the structures behind the rise of QAnon in what Hellinger refers to as the ‘Trumpian Age’. If we adopt the view that conspiracies are symptoms of societal structures motivated by politics, it would be erroneous to neglect Rosenblum and Muirheads’ idea that the very origins of the US has its roots in the time when “revolutionaries resisted the British conspiracy to “enslave” America” (21).

The main argument within their idea is that the logic of ‘classic conspiracism’ in the US stems from the motivations behind the American Revolution, and this is especially relevant when it comes to examining phenomena such as QAnon, whose claims revolve around a ‘deep state’, which is influencing American politics and society from the dark. Historians have also identified this link between the Revolution and conspiracy-related tendencies in the last decades, and argue that American thought is influenced in a way so that if an important event took place, “it was because someone intended it to happen, though these intentions may have been concealed” (22).

Additionally, it has been argued that the “American thought “was structured in such a way that conspiratorial explanations of complex events became normal, necessary, and rational”” (22).

Talks of a ‘Deep State’, however, are not only heard among QAnon adherents. In 2017, Fox News’ Sean Hannity commented that “The deep state in Washington is targeting the president on a daily basis, by leaking information. That’s where the *Washington Post* got its latest fake news story” (Hellinger 2019, 82). Hannity’s use of ‘fake news’, and reference to the ‘Deep State’ may stem from rhetoric brought to the national stage by Trump, when he took over the presidency. Hellinger, as well as Moynihan and Roberts, agree that Hofstadter’s notion of a paranoid style in American politics can be used to explain the essence of conspiratorial Trumpism. Hellinger argues that “Donald Trump’s rhetoric, failure to repudiate hate groups, and policies bear hallmarks of [...] “the paranoid style in American politics” (Hellinger 2019, 3). Moynihan and Roberts echo Hellinger’s suggestion and argue that “Trump brought conspiracism to center stage, drawing on the paranoid style in his public statements more than any presidential candidate since 1948” (Moynihan and Roberts 2021, 153), and point out that Trump was insisting on the existence of ““deep state actors determined to see him fail” (153). Trump seemed to spend much time framing politics as a struggle between a corrupt elite and American citizens, and this mobilisation of populist discourse led to the conceptualisation of ‘Trumpism’.

2.8.3. Comments on Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles

Echo chambers and filter bubbles have become generally well-accepted and popular concepts in media discussions and academic research when addressing the fear of social media’s information limitation, polarisation, news, and politics in recent years. However, criticism pertaining to their definition and whether echo chambers and filter bubbles even exist have emerged as well.

One of the main issues regarding echo chamber and filter bubbles is the lack of a definitive definition of the concepts. In recent articles, researchers share a similar complaint or frustration that the concepts are too vaguely defined which makes them difficult to analyse or use as a theory to an analysis. In Kitchens et. al’s research paper: *Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: The Impact of Social Media on Diversification and Partisan Shifts in News Consumption* from 2020, they argue “Although there is no consensus definition for echo chambers

or filter bubbles, in considering the range of descriptions we identify two constituent characteristics that stand out” (Kitchens et. al 2020, 1622). This lack of consensus definition is further backed up when they account for the first constituent characteristic and use *five* different sources for detailing how echo chambers and filter bubbles differ in one paragraph. They also argue that echo chambers and filter bubbles can be considered more as metaphors than actual theoretical concepts. They claim that metaphorically, echo chambers and filter bubbles encapsulate the notion of “widespread public fear that the use of social media may limit the information that users encounter or consume online, thus failing to promote a shared experience of free-flowing information” (1619) as well as “With commonly vague and reactionary conceptualizations, echo chambers and filter bubbles are certainly powerful metaphors, but are ill-defined for use as rigorous academic constructs” (1622), agreeing that the research areas relating to echo chambers and filter bubbles are important to explore but not through the use of these concepts specifically.

Alex Bruns agrees with both notions. In his journal *Filter bubble* from 2019 he criticises the vagueness of both the echo chamber and especially the filter bubble definition as well as arguing why the concepts do not exist. Before we present his critique, it needs some context.

The creator of the filter bubble concept, Eli Pariser, published an article in 2015, arguing why his filter bubble thesis is still valid after Facebook released a study online, showcasing the data related to their algorithm. In his book, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You* from 2011 and during a TED Talk, Pariser argues that the filter bubble is “the personalized universe of information that makes it into our feed” (Pariser 2015) which is constructed through algorithm and social media, and the dangers of these filter bubbles is that it “narrow what we know, surrounding us in information that tends to support what we already believe” (Pariser 2015). While the study of Facebook’s algorithm showcased that Facebook users would see “more news that’s popular among people who share your political beliefs” (Pariser 2015), the percentage was significantly smaller than what Pariser initially anticipated, however, he argued that although he expected it to be higher, the data was not insignificant in proving his point.

Bruns argues that Pariser’s article confirms that the filter bubble theory and the author himself has evolved from its original conceptualisation which concerned internet search results

algorithm to include social media algorithm, and that the social media inclusion to the theory makes it “more and more interwoven with the related but earlier concept of ‘echo chambers’ unfortunately” (Bruns 2019). Bruns also argues that Sunstein’s vague definition of his echo chamber theory further contributes to the complications of distinguishing between the two concepts, and has created a tendency in scholarly articles and in media discussion to use the two concepts interchangeably, but also that it prevents accurate research; “This terminological confusion - about the exact definitions of either term in itself, and about their interrelationship with each other - has significantly hindered our ability to test them through rigorous research” (Bruns 2019). Additionally, Bruns argues “that empirical studies exploring the existence and impact of filter bubbles (and echo chambers) in any context have generally been forced to introduce their own definitions, which reduces their comparability” (Bruns 2019).

Both Kitchens et. al and Bruns agree that the topics echo chambers and filter bubbles are attached to are important issues which need further research e.i. the increase of polarisation, information flow on social media etc., but also that the two concepts are not the tools academia should apply when addressing those topics. Overall, Bruns believes that other well-formulated theories, research and observations have covered the research areas connected to filter bubbles better than what filter bubbles itself has done “Phenomena such as homophily (as well as heterophily) can be readily observed in contemporary communicative spaces, as can the algorithmic shaping and personification of newsfeeds and information streams” (Bruns 2019).

He argues that if a filtering of information does occur, then it is not due to an online algorithm altering what we see, but in people’s minds. Furthermore, the popular practice of using echo chambers and filter bubbles as discursive tools when accounting for why current societal challenges are the way they are, only do more harm than good, which is why Bruns champions the elimination of the two concepts in academia (Bruns 2019). Kitchen et. al. does, as established previously, believe that echo chambers and filter bubbles function as metaphors and not actual theoretical concepts.

However, where Bruns argues that established academia already accounts for filter bubbles and echo chambers research areas, and that the concepts should be removed from academia, Kitchen et. al. formulates their own concept of ‘information-limiting environments’ as an

alternative. This encapsulates “the primary concerns regarding echo chambers and filter bubbles - namely, that social network homophily and algorithmic filtering constrain the information sources that individuals choose to consume, shielding them from opinion-challenging information and encouraging them to adopt more extreme viewpoints” (1620) and would also incorporate ‘information source diversity’ and ‘information source slant’ “To make these attractive metaphors concrete” (1622). This showcases that Kitchen et. al. have a more positive attitude on echo chamber and filter bubble’s place in academia than Bruns, in that they do belong, however they need revision and added concepts to be more applicable.

2.8.4. What academia defines QAnon as

When it comes to explaining what QAnon precisely is, the academic works are divided; as mentioned earlier, scholars tend to avoid doing research on conspiracy theories, and those who have, opt to call QAnon a conspiracy theory and rely on the conspiratorial aspect of the phenomenon as sufficient explanation for the choice of definition. Rosenblum and Muirhead, however, go to great lengths to explain how QAnon - if it is a conspiracy - takes the form of a conspiracy theory *without* the theory, as explained earlier in this chapter. They argue that the “details of QAnon illustrate how the new conspiracism has brought us into a fight over the basic elements of reality and prompt the disorienting recognition that common sense is no longer common” (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 135), and therefore, QAnon falls within the realm of new conspiracism. QAnon does not seek to provide explanations for stray facts, but tries to impose a narrative as the new common sense, and as a result QAnon becomes “the fighting face of the most bizarre conspiracist narratives in politics” (135). In other words, Rosenblum and Muirhead argue that QAnon “is about a conspiracy to thwart a conspiracy” (133), and therefore the theory part of the conspiracy is both absent and in reality redundant according to their explanation of it.

Other scholars have turned to label QAnon as many things in attempts to define it. Mike Rothschild, an expert on conspiracy theories, has moved to describe QAnon as “a cult, a religion, a conspiracy theory, a shared delusion, a political movement” (Rothschild 2020). It is, however, necessary to point out that while Rothschild argues that QAnon can be described with all these labels, he emphasises the importance of not applying these labels individually as sufficient

definitions. The ambiguity of QAnon is that it has elements of a cult, a movement, indoctrinated beliefs, conspiracies and the likes, but Rothschild argues that its flexibility is what makes it difficult to define QAnon; “It’s got elements of a scam, but no obvious stream of money flowing toward its leader. It’s got elements of an online puzzle, but its members don’t think of it as a game. Q has elements of a cult, but there is no coercion and nothing preventing believers from walking away. So in that way, it’s not a cult” (Rothschild 2020).

2.8.5. On Polarisation

Jonathan Rauch argues that the meaning of polarisation in the US over the last 15 years has changed, and that what “we mean today by polarization and what we meant then are simply not the same.” (Rauch 2019). He distinguishes between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ polarisation. The ‘old’ polarisation refers to the type of polarisation which was seen at least 15 years ago, when partisans showed polarised tendencies and opinions on political issues. He refers to this as ‘issue polarisation’. ‘New’ polarisation entails partisans’ “subjective feelings toward one another” (Rauch 2019), and is referred to as ‘affective’ polarisation.

The distinction between two *types* of polarisation underlines a development in which problems US politics face. According to Rauch, it would seem that political polarisation is not so much about ideological differences in beliefs and goals anymore as such; rather, studies on polarisation were “looking for changes in *ideology* when changes in *feelings* are more important [...] Several research developments have brought about that reassessment” (Rauch 2019 [italics in original]). Pew Research Center has also registered the emergence of ‘affective polarisation’, noting that animosity towards the opposing party has heavily increased; in 2014, Pew concluded that within “each party, the share with a highly negative view of the opposing party has more than doubled since 1994. Most of these intense partisans believe the opposing party’s policies “are so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being”” (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Some scholars have moved to argue that polarisation lent itself to be exploited by prominent politicians; especially in the emergence of Trumpism. During Donald Trump’s presidency, several polarising functions were implemented. Trump was frequently seen to prioritise loyalty over competence when it came to instating officials on the White House, as exemplified through the removal, denunciation or public attack of authorities which challenged him. This included Anthony Fauci, “perhaps the most respected infectious disease scientist in the

world” (Moynihan and Roberts 2021, 154), who was publicly denounced after CDC reports portrayed Trump’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic as ineffective and costing lives (154). Another aspect which scholars dub characteristic to Trumpism is the tendency to base public communication on “personal beliefs rather than evidence” (154), where identity politics are communicated as the *truth* rather than subjective positions.

The attitude towards truth within Trumpism made itself felt in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Trump’s seemingly lax approach towards truth was also infectious, so at a time “when public servants are told to be evidence-based in their actions, many of their constituents deeply disagree on what constitutes evidence of objective facts (155).

4. Methodology

In the process of researching conspiracy theories and conspiracism, it became clear that certain difficulties would arise with regards to existing sources, and navigating in the understudied field of conspiracism. An examination of existing literature showed that there exists scepticism among academics when it comes to researching conspiracism. Moreover, we find ourselves very limited in terms of obtaining primary data under the current (pandemic) circumstances, but nevertheless, we believe that our research can be conducted in a reliable and fruitful way. This section aims to account for our methodological approach towards the issues that may arise in the research process, and to explain how we will nonetheless attempt to conduct the analysis of the three strands in a meaningful and transparent way.

4.1. Categorising Conspiracism

Since ‘conspiracism’ collectively refers to the elements within the research field of conspiracies and conspiracy theories, we find that it is important to properly distinguish between them; especially given the many viewpoints on what makes up a conspiracy theory. As mentioned in section 4.1.2. in this thesis, we also find it to be problematic that researchers apply the various terms within conspiracism interchangeably; especially when Rosenblum and Muirhead place great emphasis on the meanings attributed to e.g. conspiracy theory, and conspiracy without the theory.

Therefore, this section aims to set a standard within which the various labels can be analysed more fruitfully.

The decision to categorise terms within ‘conspiracism’ has been deemed necessary, since defining what ‘conspiracy theories’ are has proven difficult within the academic world (Bratich 2008, 5). Zack Z. Bratich argues that conspiracy theories are both advantaged and simultaneously disadvantaged in that they are “not just false” (3), nor do they qualify to be called ‘wrong’. Bratich explains that “they do not reach the threshold of acceptability to even be tested, to be falsifiable. If the mind is that sphere that can distinguish between truth and falsity, then conspiracy theories are beyond that sphere” (3).

Robert Brotherton agrees with Bratich when it comes to the intricacies of what conspiracy theories are. He argues that “‘conspiracy theory’ is a deceptively simple term” (Brotherton 2013, 9), and that explaining why some use ‘conspiracy theory’ to describe a phenomenon, can be incredibly difficult (9). This brings us back to Bratich’s notion of how conspiracy theories are both wrong, and not even false at the same time. In his works, Brotherton points out that many attempts at defining ‘conspiracy theory’ are either brief or highly superficial in depth, and at the same time often infused “with the unspoken assumption that the distinction between conspiracy theories and other claims is self-evident” (9).

4.1.1. Conspiracism: Distinctive Terms

During the preliminary research for this project, we found a tendency among journalists and researchers to apply the terms ‘conspiracy’, ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracism’ mostly interchangeably. We believe that using these terms as though they all refer to the same phenomenon may affect the analysis negatively, since QAnon is difficult to define; considering all concepts as descriptive of the same issue heightens the risk of neglecting relevant aspects in this project, and therefore we have decided to treat them as individual terms, where each describes its own nature. Therefore, we aim to categorise and label the most common phrases used within conspiracism. For this project, we have included Rosenblum and Muirhead’s application of the term ‘conspiracism’, which they apply as an umbrella term collectively comprising several conspiracy types, such as ‘conspiracy’, ‘conspiracy theory’, ‘conspiracy *without* the theory’, and finally, the act of ‘conspiring’ which Hellinger defines in his works.

For the sake of clarity, we have created the following table which shows our understanding of their respective structures:

4.1.2. Figure 2: Elements of Conspiracism

Term	Definition	Example
Conspiracy	A term to describe controversial and/or secretive actions/events brought about by agents/conspirators. It is best described as the event which occurs when two or more agents are (allegedly) <i>conspiring</i> .	Can be friends planning a surprise birthday party, or a coup to overthrow a sitting government (a conspiracy can be both benevolent and malevolent depending on the intent)
Conspiracy Theory	An alternative explanation which aims to make up for stray facts/inexplicable elements of an event that has taken place. 'Classic Conspiracism'	9/11 conspiracy theories, illuminati conspiracy theories, the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories etc.
Conspiracy Theory <i>Without</i> the Theory	Does not rely on the presence of an event. Claims seemingly occur without reason, but are taken by adherents to be commonsensical. 'New Conspiracism'	Conspiracy narratives, e.g. "5G caused Covid-19."

(Created by Authors)

4.2. The analytical process

As previously presented in the introduction, the overall problem formulation covers a large research area which is why we have decided to create research questions which can create a coherent analysis as well as answer the problem formulation. The analytical process for this thesis will consist of answering the research questions by constructing the analysis around three strands; QAnon, social media and politics.

Firstly, we will analyse what theoretical categories can be used to describe QAnon. Hellinger, and Rosenblum and Muirhead, engage in research pertaining to the development of

conspiracy theories, and acknowledge that a shift from classic conspiracism to new conspiracism has taken place, and that the then President Trump played a role in paving the way for new conspiracism to emerge in the US. While their works certainly provide insight into this development, it is nevertheless important to note that their respective works are from 2019, and therefore do not contain the most recent developments of new conspiracism. This is important to keep in mind since QAnon has also faced multiple modifications since then; predictions by ‘Q’ have failed to come through, social media platforms banned them, and finally, the Capitol Hill riots on January 6th 2021, which marked a major turning point for QAnon.

For this thesis, we have decided to apply Brotherton’s characteristics as sufficient description of a conspiracy theory due to its versatility; it provides us with a frame within which we can lay bare characteristics, nature and symptomatic behaviour of other phenomena similar to QAnon, while simultaneously not limiting us in our analysis like a set, strict definition may otherwise do. Therefore, we have decided to include Brotherton's characteristic features of what a conspiracy theory is in order to lay the basis for why QAnon is potentially a conspiracy.

When we have clarified if QAnon qualifies as a conspiracy according to Brotherton, we need to know if it can be further classified as ‘new conspiracism’. Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead engage in the relationship between classic conspiracism and new conspiracism, arguing that the shape and nature of new conspiratorial phenomena, of which QAnon is an example, no longer follow the structure of classic conspiracy theories, e.g. those pertaining to 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Kennedy assassination. ‘Figure 1: Classic Conspiracism and New Conspiracism’ serves to show our understanding of the various elements that constitute the two types of conspiracism according to Rosenblum and Muirhead. This visual distinction is expected to aid us in explaining QAnon’s conspiratorial nature.

Once we have attributed QAnon with labels that are academically deduced, we will look into the relationship between social media and QAnon. This will be done by applying GCFGlobal and Cass R. Sunstein’s explanation of ‘echo chamber’, as well as Eli Pariser’s theory on ‘filter bubbles’. Since QAnon originated online, we expect that an examination of echo chambers and filter bubbles connected to QAnon will shed light on how people may become exposed to QAnon, and decide to become QAnon adherents. Ensuingly, we will look into the concept of ‘hashtag hijacking’, as presented by Nathan Gilkerson and Kati Tusinki Berg, and Katerina Girginova. The

hashtag hijacking case will be #savethechildren, since we are aware of its connection to QAnon, and puzzled as to why a conspiracy theory would juxtapose itself to a cause like Save the Children.

After we have accounted for the relationship between QAnon and social media, we will focus on the social and political polarisation role and if having a conspiratorial president provides a significance to the QAnon phenomenon. Daniel C. Hellinger is more focused on the context of conspiracy theories - more precisely, the context which makes up Donald Trump's presidency, and what it entails when conspiracy theories enter the White house. He describes a 'Trumpian Age' in relation to conspiracy theories, and draws on Richard Hofstadter's explanation of the 'paranoid style', arguing that the entrance into a 'Trumpian Age' signals a reintroduction of the paranoid style into American politics. We will apply Hellinger and Hofstadter's works in our research, in order to determine the effects of a 'Trumpian Age' which is characterised by a conspiracist president. The findings will be related to QAnon, and the societal conditions from which it emerged. We will then proceed by discussing whether the paranoid style has returned, and if so, whether it has played a role in the creation and shaping of QAnon.

4.2.1. Analysis: comparing labels and features

In 2020, Mike Rothschild who is a researcher of conspiracy theories and has conducted research on QAnon, stated the following about the phenomenon: "It's got elements of a scam, but no obvious stream of money flowing toward its leader. It's got elements of an online puzzle, but its members don't think of it as a game. Q has elements of a cult, but there is no coercion and nothing preventing believers from walking away. So in that way, it's not a cult" (Rothschild 2020). Rothschild's statement shows that describing QAnon as one thing is not enough; it is not enough to call it e.g. a conspiracy or a cult, as these labels do not sufficiently account for its multifaceted nature.

Acknowledging that QAnon should not be predefined as just one thing is the first step in the analysis of its nature and emergence, and therefore, we have decided to not include specific conspiracy theories which can be categorised as 'classic' conspiracy theories. Moreover, it would be erroneous to limit the comparative scope to just conspiracy theories. QAnon has been called many things throughout its life span, with labels going from movement, to 'internet religion, and all the way to 'terrorist threat' (Holdeman 2021). Since this thesis engages in how QAnon

compares to ‘classic’ conspiracy theories, we must also consider the other labels associated with the phenomenon. Therefore, we have decided to focus on various labels, rather than working with specific conspiracy theories, cults, religions and similar groups which have a set of labels attached to them.

We acknowledge that classic conspiracy theories have patterns which cause them to be labelled as ‘classic’, however, a comparative study based on conspiracy theory cases would tell us nothing more than how QAnon compares to that specific conspiracy theory, or theories. We wish to examine QAnon’s nature and emergence in its entirety – not just its conspiratorial elements – and therefore, we will compare it across a spectrum of conspiracy theories, religions, movements and others, to ensure a sound and just analysis of what makes up QAnon.

4.3. Limitations

It became apparent in the early stages of research that producing primary data for this thesis would be challenging on account of the aftermath of the Capitol Hill riots. Prior to the riots, social media outlets such as Facebook, Reddit and Tik Tok had begun removing content and hashtags on their platforms which supported QAnon. After the riots, the social media crackdown on QAnon material intensified and a large number of online groups and users have since then been removed on several platforms, e.g. Twitter removing over 70.000 QAnon accounts from their website (Greenspan 2021). Social media conglomerates’ effort to stop the online spread of QAnon has proven to be an obstacle in our attempts to locate and approach supporters or online groups affiliated with the QAnon conspiracy.

We had, prior to the knowledge of this impediment as well as warnings against contacting QAnon adherents, wanted to conduct online surveys - or if lucky, interviews - with QAnon adherents to receive information from their perspective, which we concluded could be a fruitful supplement to our research and a way for us to extract primary data from the results. However, the crackdown of outspoken adherents on social media conflicted with our intention and made the accessibility limited. QAnon supporters are still on the internet and on social media, but finding them has proven difficult since social media conglomerates are putting much effort into combating their existence on their platforms after the Capitol Hill riots.

Another issue regarding safety measurements was raised; we have been advised by people to not actively seek out QAnon adherents, or at least to be careful regarding how we would proceed

to extract primary data. We know that the risk of being threatened or harassed by groups who may be hostile to outsiders is real, and we wish to avoid any such unpleasanties. There is a possibility that the intentions of our research could potentially be misinterpreted as an attack against the adherent, and the risk of online or offline harassment, or worse, is not worth the effort when we can work our way through the data differently. Therefore, we have decided beforehand to not make any attempts to contact QAnon adherents, nor do we wish to engage in their communities - both online and offline.

Research conducted on conspiracy theories has had an overall focus on the identities of adherents, and the psychological aspects of why people believe in conspiracy theories, and why people come together to discuss their critics of the mainstream explanations, as well as why they tend to sympathise with the alternative explanation provided by conspiracy theorists. It is important to underline that we are disinterested in the motives of why certain groups of people are prone to support conspiracy theories, as well as any kind of psychological profiling of these groups. This thesis will include an analytical examination of whether the emergence of conspiracy theories is symptomatic of underlying societal or political structures but will aim to disregard the personal motives of individuals and groups of people when it comes to supporting a conspiracy theory. At most, we will engage in research pertaining to ‘symptomatic behaviour’; that is, the discussion of whether people are indeed searching for an explanation to their unsatisfying living conditions (poverty as an example), as some of the existing literature suggested.

4.4. Addressing QAnon’s adherents

Considering the nature of QAnon, which consists of allegations without proof or indications, as well as its digital origins, it is interesting how this new phenomenon manages to garner such amounts of loyal adherents, who firmly believe in claims about the political state of things. As Rosenblum and Muirhead put it; “QAnon has the look of classic conspiracy theory, but it is a species apart [...] using scraps of intelligence (called crumbs) that pile bizarre elements on top of each other” (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 27). Additionally, QAnon as a conspiracy deviates from classic conspiracism because it not only fails “to explain anything - it also lacks elementary coherence and defies common sense” (27), yet so many of QAnon’s adherents find that QAnon’s

claims about the world are in fact commonsensical, and deemed it necessary to violently storm Capitol Hill in order to ensure that Trump could save America from the ‘Deep State’.

Since we decided to exclude interviews and other methods which require contact with QAnon’s adherents, we are limited in our scope to speak of them in specific terms. We cannot conclude that their behaviour collectively follows a specific pattern, and then proceed to declare it universal across QAnon’s user spectrum. In our research, we have encountered actions taken by QAnon’s adherents, which can be presumed to be universal. These are e.g. faith in ‘Q’, or devotion to Trump. We know that these two are central to QAnon, and therefore, they can be presumed to be representative of the majority of QAnon’s adherents; however, we are aware that knowledge of 1% of QAnon’s user spectrum cannot be representative of the remaining 99%. For the sake of simplicity, we will speak in general terms when it comes to explaining how QAnon behaves as a phenomenon, and why. This does not mean that we attribute these behavioural traits to every individual who identifies as a QAnon adherent, but our aim is that any claims made in this thesis will be generally representative of the majority.

4.5. Data Treatment

During our initial research into QAnon and what it is, it became clear that close to no academic research had been conducted on the phenomenon. Therefore, our research will mostly draw on secondary data. As mentioned above, we have faced difficulties in generating our own primary data, and are therefore limited in our freedom to include representative sources. Moreover, we cannot avoid including sources in the form of news articles and other material, which is not peer-reviewed. We will, however, pay great attention to any ideological biases in relation to the material we choose. If we were to encounter biases, we will ensure that it will not affect the respective analyses, and results hereof.

Paying attention to bias is especially important when phenomena such as QAnon are the object of research, since most general information, and account of events relating to QAnon, e.g. of Capitol Hill, will mostly come in the form of news articles and journalistic works. As researchers, we are aware of this shortcoming, and will address any issues pertaining to this problem as they arise, so as to ensure transparency and the analytical trajectory.

Our justification for the third analytical strand; ‘politics’, is partly based on Trump’s controversial presidency. As mentioned on page 9, former president Donald J. Trump has been regarded as one of the most controversial presidents to ever have been in the White House. He is known to exploit the polarisation occurring in the US, and therefore, we expect beforehand to encounter articles and works which display subjective opinions or arguments regarding issues that relate to his presidency. We do, however, hope to find some interesting arguments and reflections among the heated debates that have spurred from Trump’s time spent in the White House, but careful attention will be paid to biases in the literature.

As a result of the scarce material available to us, our research will largely rely on the material that is available to us. This includes articles from various news websites and some opinion pieces detailing conspiracy theory research. We are aware that these sources are not ideal for this kind of research, since firstly, they were produced for other purposes than academic research, and secondly, their creators may not have been wary of biases, which are likely since QAnon is highly controversial. However, our review of existing literature on the topic showed that data is largely produced by way of investigative journalism or with the purpose of becoming news, and we believe that our awareness hereof enables us to curtail any potential descent down partisan paths.

5. Empirical Data

5.1. Statistic by Gallup on presidential job approval ratings

In 2020, Gallup conducted statistics on job approval ratings of presidents from 1945 to 2020. The job approval rates reflect polarisation tendencies by listing Republican and Democrat approval of the president in percentage points and shows the gap in between the approval rates of the two sides in a given year in office. For example, during Barack Obama’s eighth year in office, 12 percent of Republicans approved of his work, while 89 percent of Democrats approved. As a result, the approval gap was 77 percentage points, and reflects the political polarization between the two parties in that specific year. The gap is expected since the Republican Party and the Democratic Party are the two dominating political parties in the US, and there have “always been partisan gaps in ratings of presidents, just not to the degree seen over the past two decades” (Jones 2020).

The statistics also show that the most polarised years with respect to the US presidency job approval rates, have taken place within the last 16 years, with the main factor separating “recent years from the more distant past is how low approval ratings have been from supporters of the party in opposition to the president” (Jones 2020). The last year included in the statistics is Trump’s third year in office; 89 percent of Republicans approved of his work, while only 7 percent of Democrats approved. This put the approval gap at 82 percentage points, which reflects the highest degree of political polarisation documented so far. The approval rate by Democrats with respect to Trump’s third year is considered extremely low, however, “Trump's 86% approval rating among Republicans is on pace to be the second highest a president has received from his own party” (Jones 2020).

5.2. CNN video: Biden’s inauguration led to mom escaping QAnon

The 7:58 minute long video was posted on CNN’s official Youtube channel on February 3, 2021. This thesis will use the video from the 1:04 minute mark to the 2:15 minute mark in the form of a transcript. It entails an interview with CNN Business reporter Donnie O’Sullivan and a former QAnon adherent, and how she became affiliated with QAnon. She explains how she began receiving recommendations of online content that was associated with QAnon on Tik Tok, and how she approached friends, who were also Donald Trump supporters, for answers to her questions (Appendix 1).

5.3. CNN video: Former QAnon follower explains why she left the movement

The 4:55 minute long video was posted on CNN’s official Youtube channel on February 2, 2021. This thesis will use the video from the 2:38 minute mark to the 4:46 minute mark in the form of a transcript. The video entails a live interview between CNN host Don Lemon and a former QAnon adherent. In the chosen timeframe, they talk about social media’s role in promoting QAnon content, how it could potentially be stopped, and if social media played a pivotal role in her descent into QAnon (Appendix 2).

5.4. Twitter Screenshots from August 15 and October 31, 2020

The two screenshots which make up appendix 3 and 4 are from Twitter. Appendix 3 is from August 15, 2020 and depicts two tweets which utilises #savethechildren along with many pro-Trump and

pro-QAnon hashtags. Appendix 4 is from October 31, 2020 which also depicts two tweets utilising #savethechildren, where one tweet's political affiliation is in support of Donald Trump, and the other one is against Donald Trump. To make sure the screenshots are used in a way which does not conflict with either copyright or personal information infringement, the user names will be blurred out.

6. Analysis

The 'Pizzagate' Controversy, and the Birth of QAnon

While the QAnon phenomenon was established on, and grew from, an online culture which generally embraced counterculture and conspiracy theories, it was inspired by a viral 2016 conspiracy theory referred to as 'Pizzagate'. The controversy surrounding the 'Pizzagate' conspiracy theory began when WikiLeaks published John Podesta's hacked emails (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 55). Podesta worked as Hilary Clinton's campaign chairman during her run for the 2016 presidential election, and through the leaked emails it was revealed that a pizzeria named Comet Ping Pong, located in Washington DC, had corresponded with Podesta several times. The emails entailed details "of a Clinton fundraiser set to take place there" (55), but 4chan users were convinced that "Hillary Clinton was deeply involved in a child sex ring and satanic rituals (55). The users took to identifying clues within the emails, which "they believed pointed to the fact that Comet Ping Pong was the head-quarters of the purported child sex ring" (55). The 'Pizzagate' conspiracy theory soon escalated from online to offline violence, when one man took the conspiracy theory seriously, and in December 2016 entered the pizza place with an assault rifle, "claiming to be there to investigate the claims himself" (55). Shots were fired, but no one was injured.

QAnon emerged in October 2017 after the 'Pizzagate' incident. The QAnon core belief, summarised, is that "a cabal of satan-worshipping Democrats, Hollywood celebrities and billionaires runs the world while engaging in pedophilia (Wong 2020), and former president Donald Trump was secretly fighting against this establishment called the 'Deep State'. The belief about the 'deep state' is still the core idea of what QAnon supporters believe in, however, numerous 'sub theories' have since then attached itself to the original, expanding the belief to cover several other aspects. The most noticeable ones are the many conspiracy theories regarding

Covid-19, which covers a wide range of theories which entail e.g. claims that the virus is fake, and the pandemic is a cover-up so people do not pay attention to how the ‘deep state’ operates (Spring and Wendling 2020).

6.1. Which theoretical categories can be used to describe QAnon?

In terms of examining QAnon’s nature, the first aspect to look into is its conspiratorial element. Brotherton’s conspiracy criteria will be applied in this part of the analysis, so that QAnon’s conspiratorial tendencies can be determined. This will be followed by an analysis of whether QAnon falls within the realm of ‘new conspiracism’, as presented by Rosenblum and Muirhead. QAnon is mostly referred to as a conspiracy theory, however, it is also known that other labels, such as ‘cult’ or ‘religion’ have been applied to describe it. Inspired by Brian L. Keeley’s work, an analysis of how these terms apply to QAnon will be included as well.

6.1.1. Robert Brotherton’s Conspiracy Criteria

The following section aims to determine the correct labels for QAnon. QAnon’s conspiratorial aspects will be examined with Brotherton’s key characteristics of what a conspiracy is. This part of the analysis will be conducted with QAnon’s core beliefs as basis for examination, which entail the existence of a ‘deep state’, including a satan-worshipping pedophile ring, and Donald Trump’s role as a Messiah. It is clear that QAnon, as of 2021, is constituted by numerous conspiracy theories, however, its conspiratorial elements will be clarified with a focus on QAnon’s core beliefs regarding the ‘deep state’ and Donald Trump only.

6.1.1.1. Context

QAnon’s claims about the existence of a ‘deep state’ are essentially unverified, but for other reasons than just a lack of verification from epistemic authorities. Throughout its life span, ‘Q’ has allegedly predicted that several events were about to happen but did not; ‘allegedly’ being included since Q’s messages tend to be cryptic, and therefore up for interpretation. For example, Qanon adherents claimed that Robert Mueller’s investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 presidential election was simply a cover for the real investigation, which they claimed revolved

around paedophiles. However – and this is a tendency among QAnon adherents – when it “concluded with no such bombshell revelation, the attention of the conspiracy theorists drifted elsewhere” (Wendling 2021).

A central belief among QAnon adherents is that Trump was to take back the US presidency, and conduct mass arrests of those who were part of the ‘deep state’. This event is referred to as ‘the storm’ by QAnon adherents, and is a prophecy provided by ‘Q’. ‘The storm’ has had several dates on which it was supposed to happen; 20th January 2021, 4th March 2021, and again on 20th March, 2021, to mentioned a few examples, but the lack of action on each date did not thwart the belief as such; instead, it was claimed that the prediction was simply faulty and the conspiracy was still ongoing (Zitser and Greenspan 2021). Many left QAnon or began doubting ‘Q’, however QAnon is still going strong. The move to excuse the lack of events by claiming that the conspiracy is ongoing ties well into the criterion that these claims are unverified, along with the continued investigation by adherents to expose the ongoing conspiracy; by claiming that the conspiracy is ongoing, and therefore the predictions were faulty, adherents make room to continue the claims that ‘the storm’ has yet to happen even though they have been wrong in the past.

In terms of plausibility, Brotherton points out a given theory’s relationship with the mainstream explanation as being *defining* of the conspiracy theory in question; its plausibility is defined in relation to the plausibility of the mainstream explanation. This is a significant area in which QAnon falls short, since it does not provide an alternative explanation which contests mainstream or official explanations. QAnon’s claims did not arise as a result of an event, meaning that QAnon’s explanation came first. This is an interesting deviation from Brotherton’s criteria, since it does not necessarily diminish QAnon’s conspiratorial features, and simultaneously lends legitimacy to their claims since it is *their* explanation which must be challenged. In this way, they are distinctive in their conspiratorial nature, because it becomes clear that “QAnon is about a conspiracy to thwart a conspiracy” (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 133).

Since conspiracy theories essentially are alternative explanations, an implicit criterion is that an event must take place, which has an official explanation tied to it. Therefore, an official narrative must exist, which conspiracy adherents do not wholly agree with. Ensuingly, conspiracy adherents begin to theorise other explanations, tied to factors originating in the first explanation

that are questionable and require further explanation. This is problematic in relation to QAnon's core beliefs, since they do not proffer explanation or theories based on existing narratives; rather, they exist as claims, waiting to be proved in the future through 'Q's prophecies. In this manner, QAnon's core beliefs are not theories, but rather narratives, as they exist as explanations independent of events or other explanations.

The sensationalism of QAnon is one that is rarely disputed; some argue that it "is so preposterous, it is tempting to ignore it" (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 134), and this speaks to the levels of sensationalism embedded within QAnon's belief system. Not only do adherents of QAnon contest the reality proposed by the 'elite'; it claims to own and know reality, and its adherents are steadfast in arguing that its beliefs are absolutely commonsensical. Additionally, there is QAnon's ability to act as an umbrella term for more conspiracies; due to its versatility in terms of beliefs, it has been referred to as a history running parallel to history as we know it, or as an "all-encompassing theory of the world, it appears to tie together and explain everything from "Pizzagate" to ISIS to the prevalence of mass shootings and the JFK assassination" (Rahn and Patterson 2021). Unlike many other conspiracy theories, the QAnon community seems to bid all the other contenders welcome, meaning the level of its sensationalism might very well be unprecedented.

In terms of QAnon's 'scapegoat', the level of sensationalism is only heightened. As explained in the beginning of this section, QAnon targets the institutions and public figures that the people are supposed to trust or admire, e.g. democratically elected leaders such as President Biden and other Democrats, Hollywood celebrities and media. Their claims are centered around these public figures, and QAnon's 'umbrella effect' – the inclusion of other conspiracy beliefs – only makes it more sensationalistic. Brotherton's last point in regards to sensationalism is the idea of what would happen if the conspiratorial claims were true, and this is certainly an important factor to consider in relation to QAnon; if the reality was that the 'deep state' existed, and their claims regarding prominent and/or powerful people in the US were true, it would certainly "justify the impeachment of whole governments, the disbandments and criminal prosecution of entire organisations and industries, and the rewriting of history" (Brotherton 2013, 11).

6.1.1.2. Content

Regarding the content of conspiracy theory, it must firstly assume intention, and that intention must be malign. QAnon adherents believe that there exists an international network of satan worshipping pedophiles, and that its participants range from prominent politicians and democratically elected leaders, to Hollywood celebrities and high-standing government officials. This showcases how QAnon's adherents think of the alleged 'deep state'; as inherently evil. Brotherton also explains that conspiracy theories tend to see the world in black and white, or as two opposites. This tendency is also seen with QAnon. While QAnon has evolved to become a collection of conspiracies, its core idea was still that Trump was fighting against a 'deep state', and that Trump would eventually win and issue mass arrests against the assailants during 'the Storm'.

In terms of content, QAnon's adherents have shown that they largely believe everything is intended; as mentioned earlier in this thesis, Q's posts are cryptic and mostly up for interpretation, and therefore, much of the beliefs and ideas are a result of interpretations. For example, QAnon adherents claim Trump provides hints and clues for them intentionally through his speeches; during one speech, Trump said "the whole world is watching" (Yahoo! News, 2020), and QAnon supporters immediately took this as a Q reference. 'Q' has frequently used this exact phrase in his posts, and QAnon supporters took this as an intended confirmation of their beliefs regarding Trump's role. Additionally, during the same speech, Trump had performed a hand gesture, which prompted QAnon adherents to believe that "the president had traced the shape of the letter "Q" with his fingers as a covert signal to followers of QAnon" (Yahoo! News, 2020). Moreover, the assumption of hyper competence is also present; if these actors are part of a child-abusing pedophile ring, a lot of effort would be put into keeping their actions secret, both nationally and internationally.

Lastly, Brotherton argues that conspiracy theories are self-insulating, in that anyone who tried to challenge it may be included as participants in the conspiratorial plot. Within this criterion, QAnon is unique; since its claims are not based on a previous explanation, its claims arose first. This means that outsiders are provided with the option to either believe their claims, or to dismiss them, and dismissing them means becoming the opposition. Dismissing QAnon's claims means

denying the existence of a ‘Deep State’ cabale, and this leaves non-adherents in a clear cut position of always being either *with* or *against* them. There is no other option from the perspective of the conspiracy narrative. In this way, QAnon is highly self-insulating since it claimed ground-zero, and everything that comes after is either sympathising with QAnon, or contesting it and therefore part of the opposition.

6.1.1.3. Sub conclusion

The sensationalism of QAnon’s claims is the first significant factor weighing in on QAnon’s conspiratorial nature; if the adherents’ claims were true, and these prominent figures were participating in a satan-worshipping pedophile ring, it would shock society and rock the foundation of trust in democratically elected leaders and trusted institutions. Therefore, the sensationalist feature can be concluded to be one of the more prominent conspiratorial characteristics of QAnon. This is also true in regards to QAnon’s ‘target’; the ideas diffused are allegations containing extreme levels of malign intent, which are not verified by anyone with epistemic authority, and QAnon’s ‘explanation’ came about unprovoked, meaning any and all who challenge their claims, can be accused of being the opposition and therefore part of supporting the ‘deep state’. Additionally, since the claims arose unprovoked - that is, without basis in previous events or explanations - The core beliefs do not validate QAnon’s description as a ‘conspiracy theory’; rather, it can be concluded to be a conspiracy narrative. Lastly, QAnon’s ‘scapegoat’ is the elite, meaning the powerful people, the democratically elected leaders, and trustees appointed by the people, and these are believed to be the worst kinds of evil. The target of the conspiracy strengthens all the conspiratorial aspects of QAnon, and it can therefore be concluded that QAnon has sufficient conspiratorial tendencies to be called a conspiracy narrative.

6.2. New Conspiracism and Classic Conspiracism

In the analysis of QAnon’s conspiratorial aspects, it was concluded that QAnon sufficiently fulfills the criteria presented by Brotherton, and therefore, it qualifies to be called a conspiracy theory. What is also known, however, is that QAnon deviates from classic conspiracism in that it did not emerge as an alternative explanation to a given event. Moreover, it is clear that QAnon is not just

composed of one theory; rather, QAnon is a collection of many conspiracy theories. Rosenblum and Muirhead argue that QAnon is an example of new conspiracism, and state that the “details of QAnon illustrate how the new conspiracism has brought us into a fight over the basic elements of reality and prompt the disorienting recognition that common sense is no longer common” (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 135).

Rosenblum and Muirhead’s claim that QAnon is new conspiracism implies that QAnon is different from classic conspiracism in its structure. Classic conspiracism, in this sense, can also be understood as traditional conspiracism, as classic conspiracism describes conspiracism and conspiracy theories as they were before the rise of a new conspiracism. This section aims to explain if, and how, QAnon falls under new conspiracism, as claimed by Rosenblum and Muirhead.

6.2.1. QAnon’s development as a Conspiracy Narrative

QAnon certainly has prominent traits of a conspiracy narrative, however, its nature is unique in that it did not emerge as a result of a given event like classic conspiracy theories do; nor does it share the same characteristic theoretical deduction. According to Rosenblum and Muirhead, classic conspiracy theory seeks to challenge the mainstream explanation of a given event, and propose an alternative explanation or theory to those parts of the mainstream explanation which do not make sense.

The proposal of an alternative theory to a mainstream explanation is the starting point of classic conspiracy theories, and they often become known by the event which they spur from; for example, ‘9/11 conspiracy theories’ is a known phrase. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, many sought to find out how such a tragedy could take place without anyone knowing. Some refused to believe that the US government had not predicted it, and as a result, several conspiracy theories regarding the government’s involvement arose. These alleged discrepancies in the official explanation led to conspiratorial accusations, including that the US government let it happen so invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq were justified, and accusations that the US government carried out the attacks, and not Al-Qaeda (AETN UK 2021).

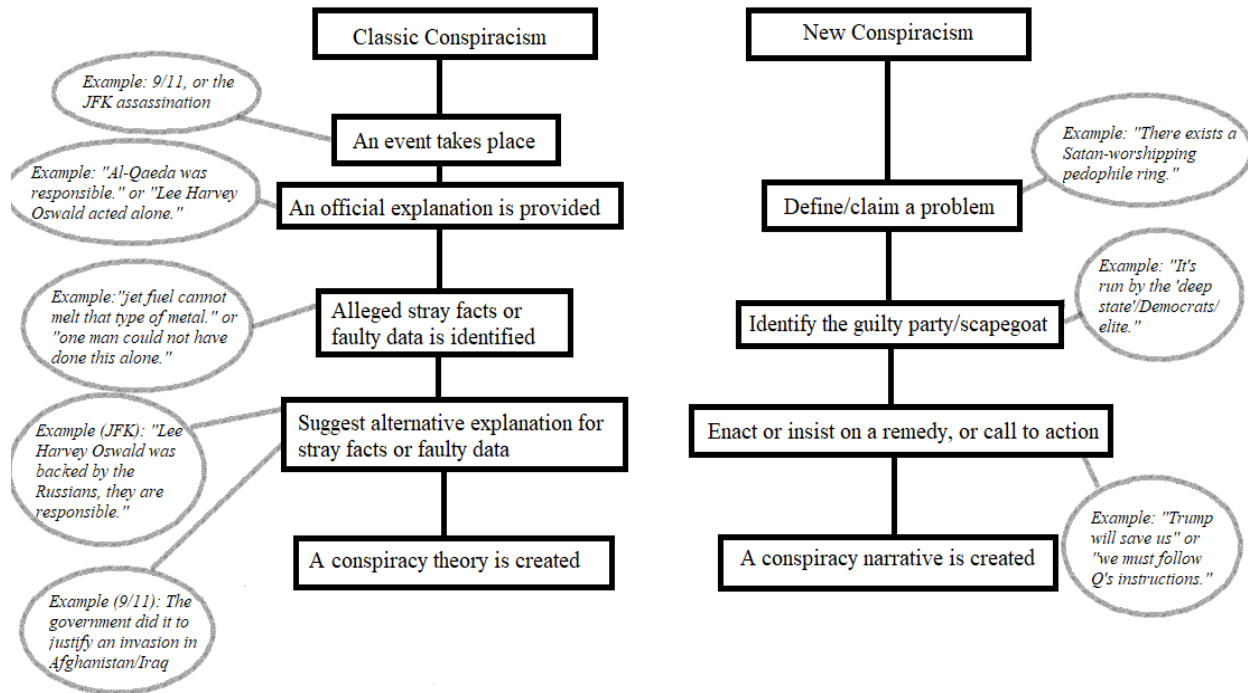
The 9/11 conspiracy theories are examples of what classic conspiracism is. In the example above, it is illustrated that conspiracy theories arose as a result of an event because some did not

find that the official explanation adequately explained what took place. In other words, the chain of events is clear. This is not the case with QAnon; while it is difficult to know which ideas the initial beliefs are rooted in, there are nonetheless two things that are known. QAnon emerged as a result of the ‘Pizzagate’ controversy, which consisted of unproved allegations, and its existence is tied to a person or group - ‘Q’ - rather than an event. This is a significant difference between classic conspiracism, and QAnon, since it shows that the driving force and essential purpose of the two conspiracisms are different as well.

In section 3.2.2., ‘Figure 1’, these differences in driving force and purpose are illustrated; classic conspiracism seeks to enhance plausibility, whereas new conspiracism disregards the level of plausibility, as long as it is plausible. For example, many have difficulties believing that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the JFK assassination. After all, four people were hung after Lincoln was shot (Patterson 2018). Many conspiracy theories have spurred from doubts surrounding the assassination, including conspiratorial accusations that the Russians and/or CIA was behind it. This illustrates how the driving force is based on filling the gaps in the official explanation of what happened. Moreover, it shows that the purpose entails making sense of the event, where sense-making is due.

QAnon adherents, in their core QAnon beliefs, do not seek to enhance plausibility through conspiratorial theorising, nor do they aim to compensate for discrepancies in official explanation. The pattern of QAnon is different in that its aim entails “defining problems, identifying the guilty, and enacting a remedy” (Bodner 2020, 173). In this way, it can be seen that QAnon is action-based, rather than explanation-based, and this is the most significant difference between classic conspiracism and new conspiracism; one seeks to expose (unverified) all-encompassing evil, whereas the other seeks to add validity and epistemic soundness to official explanations. The differences between classic conspiracism and new conspiracism with respect to their progression towards their end goal is illustrated in figure 6.2.2.. The model is designed by us to portray clearly the differences between classic conspiracism and new conspiracism, and is inspired by Rosenblum and Muirhead’s definition of the two.

6.2.2. Figure 3: A visual Overview of Classic Conspiracism and New Conspiracism



(Model created by authors)

The model above shows how the two forms of conspiracism emerge, from start to fruition. The examples applied in classic conspiracism are two of the most popular American conspiracy theories spurred from American events - the John F. Kennedy assassination and the 9/11 terrorist attack. The example applied for new conspiracism is QAnon's core beliefs.

What is interesting regarding the model, is that the examples from QAnon seem to fit the steps within new conspiracism quite well. On the other hand, it seems fully incompatible with classic conspiracism, and does not act in accordance with its progression. Taking the progression of the two conspiracisms into consideration, it would be relatively easy to conclude that QAnon is a perfect example of a conspiracy theory which classifies as new conspiracism, however, drawing such conclusions would be immature at this stage. In the depiction of how classic conspiracy theories progress, there is a clear linear development seeking to prove or disprove facts by e.g.

providing a more plausible account of events, with a focus on making up for stray facts or faulty data. Like much research, classic conspiracism deduces a theory - however unbelievable or unlikely it may be - and provides an alternative explanation based on the deduction and potential research.

New conspiracism does not follow this linear progression, which entails deducing a conspiracy theory based on facts surrounding an event. New conspiracism does not seek to provide any alternative explanations at all. In fact, according to Rosenblum and Muirhead, they do not seek to provide *any* explanation (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 19). Instead, new conspiracism calls for action, based on a (seemingly) identified problem, which needs to be remedied.

One of the labels with which QAnon has been identified is that of a *movement*. This is also a feature which is unique to QAnon; other conspiracy theories often exist in online communities among like-minded individuals, who engage in discussions regarding the plausibility of official explanations, as well as alternative theories. QAnon began as an online community as well but has since developed, appearing offline at Trump rallies and Q-rallies, or get-togethers hosted by QAnon adherents. Based on their offline appearance, and efforts to get together in the real world, it may be fitting to dub QAnon a 'conspiracy movement'. If figure 3.2.2. on 'new conspiracism' is taken into account, the argument is strengthened.

If the last step is viewed as 'an action narrative is created', it can be seen that new conspiracism progresses in the same manner as social movements. In order to examine QAnon's likeness to a social movement, it is ideal to look at its 'cogs and wheels'; that is, how it develops its course and how it mobilises adherents. Here, Benford and Snow's 'collective action frames' concept may be borrowed, since collective action frames are "constructed in part as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change" (Benford and Snow 2000, 615).

It was demonstrated earlier that QAnon, as a conspiracy narrative, falls within 'new conspiracism', and is not compatible with 'classic conspiracism'. However, Rosenblum and Muirhead do not address new conspiracism's likeness to how social movements emerge, nor do they consider the possibility that a conspiracy narrative within new conspiracism may simultaneously be a social movement. It has already been determined that QAnon's behaviour has

much in common with that of a social movement, and Benford and Snow's 'collective action frames' can help define this commonality.

The main difference between Rosenblum and Muirhead, and Benford and Snow, is that the first centers on the shift in conspiratorial tendencies; focus is on viewing the difference in how conspiracy theories form in recent times, and to proffer a definition or explanation for the development. Benford and Snow do not engage in the cause or epistemic stance of what is being claimed. Rather, their focus is entirely on how social movements build their cause, and offer a set framework within which a social movement can be studied.

6.2.3. A Social movement?

A social movement's core framing tasks describe how the movement goes about to describe its case. This includes identifying a problem, attribute blame and place blame, propose a solution, and finally, encourage others to join the cause. Benford and Snow conceptualise the core framing tasks as "'diagnostic framing' (problem identification and attributions), 'prognostic framing,' and 'motivational framing'" (Benford and Snow 2000, 615). If these concepts are utilised as a method, whereby QAnon's behaviour as a social movement can be examined, it becomes clear that certain commonalities surface.

Firstly, QAnon's core beliefs entail that a 'Deep State' is working to maintain a Satanic pedophile ring. Here, the problem is clarified; the 'Deep State' is evil and must be stopped, so that the children can be saved. QAnon also has an identified scapegoat - or, in social movement terms, agents which have been attributed blame - which is the Democrats, Hollywood celebrities and the political and economic elite. At this point, the problematic situation has been diagnosed, and the agents that need to be reckoned with are identified. The second step, 'prognostic framing', entails "the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan" (616).

In QAnon terms, this describes 'the storm'; the solution is that Trump will conduct mass arrests of the perpetrators, and everyone participating in the pedophile ring will be punished for their actions. However, it should be noted that QAnon deviates to an extent in this core framing task. Social movements utilise prognostic framing to provide possible solutions, and in this respect, they look to the future to see which actions would be the most fruitful in reaching their goal. QAnon adherents who hold its core beliefs to be self-evident, tend to speak in certain terms. They

do not plan which actions to take in order to optimise future aspects; rather, they insist that the future is fixed, and that everything will happen according to an articulated plan once Trump decides to move forward. To them, there exists only this option.

The last core framing task is ‘motivational framing’, which is also referred to as the agency component (617). This is because a social movement begins to ‘move’ at this step, and calls on others to fight for the cause by e.g. “constructing an elaborated vocabulary of propriety or duty” (617). While QAnon’s conspiracy narrative has been ridiculed by many, their identified problem is nonetheless about an issue which appals many, and therefore, appeals made to morale and conscience may be effective.

As illustrated in the above, QAnon can easily be likened to a social movement since QAnon’s behaviour progresses in the same manner as social movements conduct their core framing tasks, according to Benford and Snow.

Taking a look at figure 3.2. again, it can be seen that classic conspiracism does not inspire a call to action in the same manner as new conspiracism. Classic conspiracism focuses on providing an alternative explanation - *theory* - and to validify the epistemic value of the proffered theory. At best, its ‘call to action’ entails bringing out their ‘truth’, and encouraging others to do the same. It does not entail physical action as such. This is a significant difference which sets new conspiracism and classic conspiracism further apart; new conspiracism can behave like a social movement - and QAnon adherents likely see themselves as such - whereas classic conspiracism cannot. Adherents of classic conspiracy theories rarely take to the streets to call for action or change, and if they do, it is usually benign. In fact, classic conspiracism had its own version of ‘the storm’. In 2019, a Facebook event named “Storm Area 51, They Can’t Stop all of Us” emerged, and the plan “as the name implied, was to charge at the base in large enough numbers to bypass security” (Nevett 2019), so that alien activities could be exposed.

Area 51 has numerous conspiracy theories tied to it; most notably, conspiracy theories pertaining to the existence and harboring of aliens. The idea to storm Area 51 is based on these alien conspiracy theories, however it emerged as a joke and phased out as a joke (Nevett 2019), because classic conspiracy theories generally do not have change as an aspiration. The agency component entails theorising, and rarely does it move beyond just that. This is a prominently distinguishing factor in QAnon’s nature, compared to classic conspiracism. QAnon’s core beliefs entail changing the situation which they claim exists, and that resonates more with behaviour

associated with social movements, rather than other conspiracy theories. This is an important factor to take note of, since it causes questions to arise regarding whether QAnon is a conspiracy narrative, or if it is essentially a movement of sorts.

In relation to QAnon's motivational frame, its nature further differs from classic conspiracism in that QAnon has a motto; "where we go one, we go all", or 'WWG1WGA' abbreviated. Classic conspiracism does not utilise similar unifying means. Adherents of classic conspiracy theories strive to validate their claims with evidence, whereas conspiracy narratives, such as QAnon, seek validation through repetition. In figure 3.2.2., 'tribalism' was listed as the predominant form of verification within new conspiracism, and validity is achieved through persistence by adherents. This provides a basis for why a conspiracy narrative would practise unity through a shared motto, and strengthens the idea of standing together for a cause which is greater than the individual. Adherents of classic conspiracy theories engage in discussions with like-minded persons, but nevertheless there does not exist a tendency to validate conspiracist thinking through joining a community, such as QAnon. Therefore, the adoption of unifying mottos is another factor which sets QAnon apart from classic conspiracy theories. Q's cryptic messages require interpretation by the adherents and that leaves room for misinterpretation, but what is more is the unity among the adherents. While interpretations may fail, they still find a sense of community within QAnon and "identify with one another solely through the shared task of hermeneutic interpretation as they piece together Q's master-narrative" (Hannah 2021).

The collective identity building which results from the sense of community is also exclusive to new conspiracism. It can be seen that adherents of classic conspiracy theories come together with others who are like-minded, or share the same opinions, but it rarely moves beyond the conspiratorial discussion. As demonstrated in the above, QAnon has a unifying motto, which is shared both online and offline. Moreover, decrypting 'Q's posts is a shared activity and priority through which adherents identify with one another. This indicates that not only is QAnon a conspiracy narrative; it is a conspiracy community, which offers people an identity and a sense of belonging.

This is especially important given QAnon's digital origins; it was explained in section 6. that QAnon has its roots in the Pizzagate controversy, but evolved in the controversial Chan-culture, which has counter-culture as one of its cornerstones. The extremities that are often seen within this counter-culture entail opinions which are not politically correct or otherwise socially

acceptable; therefore, it can be assumed that people who uphold these untraditional worldviews seek out groups or forums where they can find like-minded people. Classic conspiracism engages in this behaviour too, however it does not engage in politics, nor are its viewpoints contingent on ideologies. At best, its political bias is expressed through a distrust in the political elite, but it does not move beyond political discussions, into e.g. action-based behaviour, as seen with QAnon.

In terms of collective identity building and political bias, it is interesting that the Democrats, the political and economic elite, as well as Hollywood celebrities, are the target of QAnon's conspiracy narrative. At this point, we know that QAnon's core beliefs state that *they* are part of a satanic pedophile ring. Additionally, *they* are against Trump. There exists a very strong 'us vs. them' narrative, and in terms of QAnon's core beliefs, the partisanship is not based on ideological differences; rather, it is based on identity. There is a degree of dichotomous identification, and the enhancement of *their* bad traits contributes to the collective identity building, and strengthens the identification among those in the in-group. This ties into the conspiratorial notion of a constant struggle between the inherently good and the inherently evil; the dichotomous takeaway becomes that adherents who embrace QAnon's core beliefs are inherently good since they are dichotomously defined by what they are *not*, which is inherently evil. As a result, QAnon adherents may feel a sense of being part of something greater, as they collectively fight evil.

6.2.4. Sub conclusion

Based on the analyses on classic conspiracism and new conspiracism, as well as new conspiracism's likeness to a social movement, it can be concluded that QAnon certainly falls within the criteria which make up new conspiracism. In Figure 6.2.2., it is illustrated that QAnon has progressed according to Rosenblum and Muirhead's definition of new conspiracism, however, it was also demonstrated that new conspiracism, and therefore QAnon, inhabits many traits which are common in social movements. Benford and Snow's explanation of a social movement's 'core framing tasks' showed that QAnon as a phenomenon engages in behaviour which is highly similar to the development of social movements specifically regarding identification of problem, placing blame, suggesting a way out, and finally, the means of motivating adherents, or followers.

6.3. Conspiracy Narrative, or Something Entirely Different?

In section 6.1.1.3., it was determined that QAnon is a conspiracy narrative according to Brotherton's conspiracy criteria, but it can also be seen that QAnon, to an extent, takes the form of a movement. Its versatility in form is therefore cause for ambiguity. It is a conspiracy narrative, but unites people who believe in the cause. A call to action exists, but its cause is not empirically proven. Therefore, it should be considered whether QAnon might be neither a simple narrative, nor a movement, but possibly something entirely else.

In explaining how 'new conspiracism' differs from 'classic conspiracism', Rosenblum and Muirhead state that "the new conspiracism sometimes seems to arise out of thin air" (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 25). As researchers, we do not believe that conspiratorial claims are not based on some form of societal structure. For example, we know that theories which can be categorised as classic conspiracism stem from an event and a distrust in the official explanation for reasons depending on the context. We also know, through the scarce amount of research which has been done on conspiracy theories, that researchers have engaged in the idea of conspiracy theories being a symptom of societal discontent. Existing literature also indicates that conspiracy theories can arise as a result of groups of people being unhappy with their living conditions, and therefore seek to provide an explanation for their situation. QAnon's characteristics seem to be compatible with Rosenblum and Muirhead's new conspiracism, however, there is no empirical evidence to support that conspiracy theories, which can be characterised as new conspiracism, do indeed emerge from nothing.

In 2007, Brian L. Keeley engaged in a discussion on the relationship between the nature of conspiracy theories, and what he calls "supernatural conspiracy theories" (Keeley 2007, 135). He describes the epistemic standard of supernatural conspiracy theories as "the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" (135), and explains that this logic is the same one which is applied to religious beliefs - or supernatural conspiracy theories, by pointing to the famous words of Donald Rumsfeld:

"Now what is the message here? The message is that there are known 'knowns'. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say there are things we don't know we don't know. So when we do the best we can and we pull all this information together, and we then say well that's basically what we see as the situation,

that is really only the known knowns and the known unknowns. And each year, we discover a few more of those unknown unknowns. Donald Rumsfeld, United States Secretary of Defense (6 June, 2002)” (135).

The terminology Keeley uses to explain the acceptance of the ‘known unknown’, is ‘Providence’, a term coined by philosopher Boethius. When an event is explained through phrases such as ““God must have had some reason to let this happen. It is not for us to question, but rather to have faith in God’s plan” Providence is being invoked” (139). This tendency is also seen with QAnon adherents, but it is more along the lines of ‘Q (or Trump) is right, we are not to question the plan, but have faith in it’. This echoes religious tendencies, rather than conspiratorial, and reflects the closing gap between Keeley’s definitions of ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘supernatural conspiracy theory’ (religion). Keeley himself is aware of this narrowing gap, and proposes that “our normal definition of a conspiracy is relativized to non-omnipotent agents” (140). In this way, it is still possible to distinguish between conspiracy theory and supernatural conspiracy theory.

Keeley argues that a conspiracy is partly defined as “the act of a *group of agents* working in concert” (140 [italics in original]), and therefore it can be argued that “God’s actions can never be accurately described as a conspiracy because He works alone. Providence is His plan and His plan alone.” (140). This difference between conspiracy theory and supernatural conspiracy theory causes some ambiguities in relation to QAnon. It is unknown who Q is, and Q’s cryptic messages are also ‘known unknowns’, and therefore up for interpretation; however, this may also warrant the idea of ‘Providence’ for adherents. It is difficult to say whether QAnon adherents think of ‘Q’ as their ‘mystical savior’, or if it is Trump whom they view in this manner, but the Providence-like belief in the cause certainly displays tendencies that are more in line with religious conduct, rather than conspiratorial behaviour.

6.4. ‘Q’ Works in Mysterious Ways

In 2019, Keeley presented a comparative discussion on the similarities between conspiratorial thinking and theological beliefs. Implicitly following the criterion of ‘one or more agents’ in defining the boundary between the two, he states the following:

“Sometimes, Western theism explains events by reference to supernatural entities acting in ways unseen by, or largely unknown to, those of us in the world. Those supernatural entities - be they evil (Satan and his minions) or good (God

and his Angels) - are attempting to execute a plan of which we mere mortals are only dimly aware, at best. Described this way, these explanations seem of a piece with secular conspiracy theories, which attempts to explain events in the world as being the result of the machinations of powerful, secretive organisations of conspirators” (Keeley 2019, 70).

Via comparing conspiracy theories to supernatural conspiracy, i.e. religion, Keeley emphasises the similarities between the structure of a conspiracy theory and religious doctrine. In section 6.2.2., it was clarified that new conspiracism is not conditioned by a preceding event - rather, it is conditioned by a mysterious figure whose cryptic messages guide the way for adherents; ‘Q’.

Merriam-Webster defines a Prophet as “one regarded by a group of followers as the final authoritative revealer of God’s will” (Merriam-Webster 2021). Religiously translated, ‘Q’ would then be the Prophet, announcing the coming of the Messiah; Trump. At this point, it is clear that QAnon’s conspiratorial narrative does not seek to counter official accounts of events; rather, it seeks to confront an all-encompassing evil, and its adherents will support Trump in his fight against the ‘Deep State’, when the time comes. As explained in the Introduction, Q’s posts are interpreted as a prediction of ‘the storm’, which entails the mass arrest and/or execution of those who are part of the pedophile ring. ‘The storm’, then, can be understood as doomsday for the Deep State, which is regarded as the ultimate evil by QAnon adherents. ‘The Storm’ will be led by Trump, and the innocents - children - will be delivered from evil.

The core belief within QAnon has emerged and progressed in the same manner as religious doctrine, and therefore, these two can be fruitfully compared. At this point, it is evident that its emergence has more in common with religious tendencies, rather than classic conspiracism, in more than one way. Speaking in supernatural terms, as Keeley calls it, ‘Q’ takes the role of a Prophet, in that ‘Q’ is announcing the coming of ‘the storm’, and Donald Trump’s role in the event as a Messiah. The structure appears to be the same as that of Christianity, which is largely characterised by the presence of *Him*, prophets to announce the arrival of *Him* through cryptic messages given to them based on their ‘special’ status (think ‘Q’ versus e.g. John the Baptist). Adherents of classic conspiracist theories do not predict, nor do they prophesize a savior who will correct the wrongs which they claim exist. Adherents engage in discussions about explanations and narratives, and discuss ulterior motives for why an official explanation may be constructed in the way that it is. They do not focus on the future, but always on the past, and attempt to apply logic to make sense of the world around them.

New conspiracism looks to the future to explain their claims. QAnon's core beliefs are centered on 'the storm', which will act as proof for what they claim is happening in the moment. In other words, they rely on the future to prove the past. This is a significant contributor in keeping QAnon alive, since all previously failed predictions become just that; previously failed predictions. The lack of 'predicted' events is less harmful for QAnon, since it becomes written off as misinterpreted. Matthew Hannah largely accredits this understanding to Q's continued insistence on "the connectedness of all events in time, no matter how random" (Hannah 2021).

6.5. Epistemic Standard: Believing is Belonging

Adherents of theories that classify as classic conspiracism strive for a high epistemic standard in their treatment of stray facts. They generally desire to provide explanations which they argue to be more plausible than whichever explanation was given officially. In section 3.2.1., the epistemic standard was listed as a difference between classic conspiracism and new conspiracism, since the latter does not engage in proving that their claims are true; only that 'Q' is right and that 'Q', like Trump, works in mysterious ways. The illusion to the religious phrase is intentional, since it demonstrates the epistemic standard with which QAnon operates. While many adherents have left the QAnon community following a series of unfulfilled 'prophecies' by 'Q', many still believe that 'the storm' will take place and that the Satan-worshipping pedophile ring exists. Ed Stetzer, an evangelical pastor and dean at Wheaton College, explains that here may be a number of reasons for why people still believe in 'Q', but one of its appeals is the adherents' tendency to "describe their mission in religious and quasi-religious terms" (Stetzer 2021).

Another significant difference between classic conspiracism and new conspiracism is their relationship with 'known unknowns'. In figure 3.2.2., it was explained that adherents of classic conspiracy theories aim to account for 'stray facts', or parts of the official explanation that do not make sense. The identified stray facts or discrepancies in the official explanation can also be understood to be the 'known unknowns; adherents do not know what the alleged discrepancies are rooted in, but they strive to find out. This signals a denial to accept that some aspects of the explanation are nonsensical, and the strive to know 'the unknown' begins, and ultimately ends in the birth of a conspiracy theory.

In the case of QAnon's adherents, the relationship with the known unknowns is generally different. As explained previously in this section, QAnon's epistemic standard appears to be defined by a belief in 'Providence', rather than on uncovering the 'known unknown'. It seems QAnon's core beliefs are based on the epistemic standard of what Keeley describes as "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" (Keeley 2007, 135). 'Q's predictions regarding when 'the storm' will take place have not come true, but the predictions are nonetheless not considered debunked. 'Q's posts are cryptic, and therefore, there is room to be wrong without damaging legitimacy - and if adherents insist that the predictions were initially correct, they can do so by reason of Providence; "Trump must have had his reasons for delaying it, and it is not our duty to question him". In this way, absence of action may be interpreted as a deliberate act by God - or in this case, a deliberate act of Trump - and 'Q's cryptic way of communicating also excuses interpretations of prophecies, which fail to come true.

6.5.1. Sub Conclusion

To sum up the findings in the analysis conducted regarding QAnon's religious characteristics, it can be concluded that tendencies associated with religious doctrines are certainly present. By including Keeley's notion of 'supernatural conspiracy theory', it became clear that QAnon is more fruitfully compared to religious movements, rather than traditional conspiracy communities. Moreover, adherents are more likely to invoke 'Providence' when prophecies do not come true. Adherents of classic conspiracy theories are not known to engage in prophecising, nor do they accept the idea of mysticism. QAnon's adherents look to the future for answers, and they do not seek to excuse prophecies which fall short with epistemically sound explanations. Adherents of classic conspiracy theories look to the past to identify discrepancies, and regard mysticism as the ultimate enemy, which must be removed by way of epistemically sound research. Based on these analytical observations, it can therefore be concluded that QAnon is highly comparable with religious movements and doctrines, whereas classic conspiracism cannot be compared to such phenomena at all.

6.6. What is the relationship between QAnon and Social Media?

The emergence of QAnon online is a large research area if one wants to analyse every aspect of the emergence; from pre QAnon to present day. From a purely observational perspective, some of

the emergence can be attributed to the scale of social media and its audience. Predicting what event or idea goes viral on the internet is difficult, because people are unpredictable. What the analysis in the 'Media' strand will aim to do, besides answering the research question 'what is the relationship between QAnon and social media?', is to showcase that some emerging aspects of QAnon on social media can not only be predicted, but also that certain aspects are unique to its rise. The analysis will be divided into three parts. The first part concerns describing where QAnon originated from. The second part will focus on echo chambers and filter bubbles and the third part focuses on the usage of hashtag hijacking.

While Facebook and Twitter are perceived as more mainstream social media outlets, other types of social media have also emerged in the digital age. Websites like Reddit, 4chan and Tumblr have become increasingly popular as alternative social media where the platform consists of a blog-oriented/imageboard interactive media forum where people can post anonymously or behind a username. Furthermore, the 'chan' websites such as 2chan, 4chan, 8chan and 8kun differ from the alternative social media style; throughout the progression from 2chan to the later ones, a new internet culture has been established and is referred to as 'chan culture' which primarily consists of memes, politically incorrect content, and counterculture (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 11).

Recently though, this internet culture has been more recognised for its extremism. One of the first - or at least more mainstream - controversies which were tied to 'chan culture' and originated on 4chan was 'Gamergate' in 2014. 'Gamergate' became a popular hashtag used by 4chan users to express their resentment towards game journalists whom they disagreed with. However, the outrage resulted in displays of aggressive misogyny on the platform, and "participants asserted that feminism - and progressive causes in general - are trying to stifle free speech" (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 9). At the peak of the controversy, the creator of 4chan began removing explicit posts from 4chan. Ensuingly, Gamergate participants relocated to 8chan, where "hate speech and extremist ideology flourished" (25), and where the content was "now uncontested by the more moderate voices that had been present on 4chan" (25).

The establishment of 8chan attracted many who participated in the explicit communities on 4chan to the new forum, and soon, the so-called '/pol/' board dedicated to extremists followed. The extremism has since transcended from online violence to offline violence where, within recent years, several manifestos have been posted onto the /pol/ board before terrorist attacks, including

the 2019 El Paso Walmart shooting and the 2019 Al-noor mosque shooting. Although many users of the chan websites have since claimed that the people who performed such atrocities only mentioned 8chan to draw negative attention to it, it is still argued that “violence found ideological justification on 8chan” (Crawford 2019).

This is the internet space QAnon originated from. 4chan was the original forum for the first QAnon posts, or ‘drops’, which would later move on to the forums of 8chan and 8kun (Ondrak and Backovic 2020). On these chan websites, anonymity is an important aspect, since it allows people to post e.g. claims and stories without consequences. A popular concept within the ‘chan culture’ is for anonymous users to pretend to be personnel with high security clearance to establish legitimacy to claims they make online (Zadrozny and Collins 2018). This concept also concerns QAnon, since many supporters claim that whoever Q is, s/he or they must be affiliated with the government and have a high security clearance due to how revealing and classified the posts or ‘drops’ are perceived by its supporters to be (Wong 2020). ‘Chan culture’ can be viewed as an internet subculture, and through its evolution; an aggressive subculture. The sphere can be perceived as a “safe space” for individuals who feel like mainstream social media is too politically correct for them. While the ‘chan culture’ can be categorised as an internet subculture, the chan websites themselves, and more specifically the different image boards created around certain topics operate as a form of echo chamber for its users. It does so by being an online platform where like minded people can find each other, converse and share similar viewpoints and come to agreement on issues with each other. Environments such as these are fueled by confirmation bias, not necessarily in the form of information reinforcing existing beliefs, but rather that of people doing so. ‘Chan culture’, although aggressive, has primarily been “contained” to only exist on the chan websites, however, QAnon and its supporters have, since its beginning in October 2017, managed to go beyond its subculture containment and transcend into both mainstream social media and also American politics.

So, how did QAnon emerge online? According to Zadrozny and Collins, the increase in popularity has been helped by supporters of QAnon by assisting in spreading Q’s posts on different platforms, but also by dissecting them (Zadrozny and Collins 2018). Three people are specifically being credited by some for the rise of QAnon on social media. Two people who are moderators on 4chan - ‘Pamphlet Anon’ and ‘BaruchtheScribe’ - made contact with a youtuber named Tracy Diaz

who had uploaded videos about ‘Pizzagate’ onto her Youtube channel. They joined forces, and created the subreddit ‘CBTS_Stream’ (Calm Before the Storm) which attracted many new followers who were not on 4chan (Zadrozny and Collins 2018). Another effective help provided by a supporter was the establishment of the website QMap.pub which was made to “collect Q’s posts on other message boards and collate them in a searchable database” (Ondrak and Backovic 2020). This would go on to include profiles of individuals mentioned in Q’s posts and a glossary section, and the website “has been hitting over 10 million monthly users” (Ondrak and Backovic 2020). QMap.pub and the CBTS_Stream subreddit are no longer accessible or have been terminated. The few examples above account for a few of the reasons why QAnon began emerging online. However, in the next two sections of the analysis, we will account for two other defining aspects which have helped QAnon relocate from its subculture to mainstream social media platforms.

6.6.1. How Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles Helped QAnon

In the second part of the ‘Media’ analysis, we will showcase the role of echo chambers and filter bubbles when it comes to the emergence of QAnon online. Two videos where former QAnon adherents detail their descent into QAnon will be used as our cases. We recognise that two accounts from previous adherents do not illustrate all adherents' descent into QAnon and their opinion in relation to social media’s role in their descent. Additionally, both videos are from CNN, and while they are considered more centrist media, there still exists a bias. However, we do not consider ideological or political bias a necessary disqualifier for using these videos, since focus exclusively concerns their own account of how they became a part of QAnon.

In the first CNN video, titled ‘Biden’s inauguration led to mom escaping QAnon’, the reporter Donnie O’Sullivan explains that Ashley Vanderbilt “fell deep down the QAnon conspiracy theory rabbit hole before November’s election” (Appendix 1). It then turns to Vanderbilt, who explains that she first started to encounter QAnon material on Tik Tok. Tik Tok is a relatively new but extremely popular social media platform which in 2020, along with other social media outlets such as Facebook, Reddit, Youtube and Twitter, began removing QAnon content from their platforms (Greenspan 2021). However, QAnon has, as will be showcased in the next analysis, also managed to infiltrate social media through none-QAnon related hashtags, meaning that targeting QAnon content online and banning it has been a difficult task, unless the content is explicitly QAnon affiliated, or at least obviously showcases that the content is QAnon

related. Vanderbilt continued to explain that she was not aware that the content she was viewing was conspiracy related. Ensuingly, she reached out to friends who were also Donald Trump supporters, seeking confirmation that what she was viewing was true. In return, they would send her QAnon related Facebook live- and Youtube videos, which caused her to dive deeper into QAnon (Appendix 1).

Vanderbilt is an example of an individual who becomes trapped in an echo chamber. Echo chambers can occur both online and offline, and in Vanderbilt's case it was both. In the video, she proclaims to be a Republican because her family told her they were. She also chose to seek out her fellow Trump supporting friends, who she knew shared the same political affiliation as she did, to guide her to understand what she was viewing online. This fuels the confirmation bias, which enforces a positive assumption that QAnon speaks the truth along with reinforcing her support of Donald Trump. She also proclaims that she does not watch or read news due to Donald Trump's rhetoric of proclaiming mainstream media as 'fake news'. Not wanting to expose oneself to other news - or in Vanderbilt's case, any news at all - and only rely on the content one views on social media and friends whom one agrees with - in this case, QAnon - hinders the possibility of being exposed to news debunking QAnon's ideology, and gives a misconstrued perception of what is really happening.

In the next part of the video, O'Sullivan asks Vanderbilt for her idea as to how QAnon related videos started showing up on her feed. She is not sure how it happened, since she states she only uses Tik Tok for entertainment, but she believes that her online algorithm might be at fault, since she liked many pro-Trump and anti-Biden videos during the 2020 campaign. As previously mentioned, filter bubbles arise online because the algorithm sorts out material, and displays recommended material it believes the user might like or agree with. In Vanderbilt's case, a filter bubble situation has approximately occurred, just not to its full extent. The algorithm that generates the filter bubble isolates individuals from information and ideas which it thinks you would not like or agree with. In Vanderbilt's case specifically, an isolation of news and information is not articulated. Additionally, Vandebilt being recommended bipartisan or news-related material in general is slim since she does neither watch nor read news. In Vanderbilt's situation, she was recommended material which prompted her to seek out a most likely already established echo chamber which also engaged in QAnon related topics which might have reinforced a bias towards the former president she already had, since she was already a Trump supporter.

The second video titled ‘Former QAnon follower explains why she left the movement’, anchor Don Lemon from CNN *News* interviews a former QAnon supporter known as Linka. In the video, Linka acknowledges that there are many different pieces that are connected when discussing QAnon and the descent into QAnon. She begins to talk about social media and the algorithm, saying that “as soon as you click or like or share on a video or a link or what have you, that (.) .hh might have some bases in conspiracy or some agenda (-) you know by the end of the week, your entire newsfeed is filled with very similar material” (Appendix 2). This presents a scenario where there exists an escalation from curiosity to unavoidability, which people might be unaware of can occur. She directly blames the algorithm, and indirectly proclaims that it entraps people in a way so that they cannot avoid seeing QAnon related material. Although she does not provide any evidence to her claim, her statement echoes exactly what a filter bubble does to people. It isolates people in an environment where e.g. QAnon related content is primarily what an individual will see. She then goes on to say that she believes social media plays a *very big* role in relation to QAnon. Lemon proceeds to ask her, whether or not there should be more guarding and fact checking on platforms, instead of people being able to do or say whatever they want. Linka responds by saying she is unsure whether more fact checking would work, since people would probably want their information fast and would not have time to conduct more fact checking themselves. She also goes on to state that social media provides all the information one might want.(Appendix 2).

Linka’s assessments are bounded in reality. Around 53% of adult Americans get their news from social media, although the platforms struggle with combating fake or misleading news and statistics shows that 29% of Americans believe they understand current events better from using social media, 49% do not believe social media makes a difference, whereas 23% believes social media has made them more confused on current events (Shearer and Mitchell 2020). They end the interview with Lemon asking Linka whether or not she blames social media and if it helped in grooming her, to which she answers *absolutely*. Linka can only account for her own experience, but she does construct her narrative so it's presented as ‘this is what many QAnon followers have experienced’. Her primary focus in the clip from the interview concerns her distrust of social media and declares social media as “a monster that’s out of control at this point”, and if filter bubbles trap individuals and their information has been determined and distorted by algorithms, she might be right.

6.6.2. Sub Conclusion

It can be concluded from the analysis above that filter bubbles and echo chambers have had an effect in relation to bringing more people into the QAnon environment. The Vanderbilt case illustrates a perfect example of someone who was already in a form of an echo chamber since her family are Republicans and Donald Trump supporters, but the echo chamber was more tightly strengthened since her friends not only were QAnon supporters themselves but operated as her guides into the QAnon world. Linka's case illustrates an individual's certainty that social media and algorithms have a defining role in attracting more people into the QAnon environment, since the algorithm is a defining contributor to what individuals view online, which parallels how filter bubbles emerge online.

6.7. How and why #savethechildren was hijacked

In section 6.6., we accounted for how QAnon originated on an alternative social media platform, 4chan and later 8chan, and then transcended further into mainstream social media like Facebook and Twitter by adherents' dedication to spread the message of 'Q' beyond its original platform. In the latter part of 2020, several articles (Roose 2020; Zadrozny and Collins 2020; Seitz 2020) reported how QAnon supporters had begun appearing in mass through one specific hashtag on Twitter and Facebook. We will account for what the situation entails, if a 'hashtag hijacking' situation occurred, whether it corresponds with Gilkerson and Berg and Girginova's definitions of hashtag hijacking and if so, why QAnon supporters "stole" it.

According to *New York Times* journalist Kevin Roose, throughout 2020, QAnon adherents began implementing #savethechildren in their posts when tweeting about child exploitation and human trafficking. Many of QAnon supporters' tweets have been a combination of factual and accurate data about child trafficking and QAnon beliefs, making them difficult for some to separate (Roose 2020). We were unable to establish when exactly the #savethechildren was first used by QAnon adherents.

To confirm whether or not QAnon supporters' usage of #savethechildren was as prominent as Roose stated, a Twitter search of the hashtag was conducted. We are aware that #savethechildren

does not pertain to Twitter only, and is used on other social media platforms, but compared to Facebook and Instagram, on Twitter, it is possible to do an ‘advanced search’. An advanced search provides the ability to search any word, phrase or hashtag and set a specific timeframe to see previous tweets. The timeframe was set from August 1st to October 31st, 2020, since the media coverage, including Roose’s article, was released around this period, which provides an approximately accurate timeframe of the hashtag usage.

Throughout August 2020, many of the tweets with the #savethechildren had a direct link to QAnon. As presented in Appendix 1, several tweets only consisted of hashtags, but many were QAnon affiliated hashtags used alongside the #savethechildren such as #Q, #Qanon and #WWG1WGA (Where we go one, we go all). By October 2020, the hashtag was still in use by QAnon supporters but the direct link to QAnon had become more blurred and less direct as with the tweets in Appendix 1. More tweets with #savethechildren focused on the 2020 presidential election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, debating which of the two were trying to save children (Appendix 2). The two appendices do not account for the only ways the hashtag was applied. Several Twitter users used the #savethechildren to tweet about specific cases regarding human trafficking, and retweeted or commented on posts from the Save The Children organisation etc.. However, while the appendices do not showcase all the applicable ways to use the hashtag, the screenshots do present a large portion of the tweets encountered when conducting the advanced Twitter search of #savethechildren, which is why it can be confirmed that the hashtag was utilised by QAnon adherents. It should also be noted that since the riot on Capitol Hill, Twitter decided to remove over 70.000 accounts who were openly supporting QAnon. We are not positive if former tweets by these accounts have been erased along with the accounts, but if so, it is safe to assume that there might have been many more tweets using #savethechildren around this time. With the confirmation of the hashtag utilisation by QAnon adherents, Roose’s claim that the #savethechildren was “hijacked” by QAnon supporters needs to be researched.

The ‘Save the Children’ slogan is trademarked and registered by the international organisation Save The Children (Save the Children 2020), and according to Roose, the hashtag was “a legitimate fund-raising campaign for the Save the Children charity” (Roose 2020). Furthermore, on August 7, 2020, Save the Children released an official statement, addressing the increased usage of the #savethechildren; “Our name in hashtag form has been experiencing

unusually high volumes and causing confusion among our supporters and the general public” (Save the Children 2020). In the statement, the organisation does not refer or hint to QAnon, yet the date of the statement matches the time frame of the publication of Roose’s article, meaning that the possibility they are referring to QAnon supporters’ usage of the hashtag is high. The concept consists of two words; ‘hashtag’ and ‘hijacking’, meaning that in its literal form, the idea is to take over an already established hashtag, and since #savethechildren already existed, it had a specific purpose and the organisation had to distance itself from how it was applied by others; “While people may choose to use our organisation’s name as a hashtag to make their points on different issues, we are not affiliated or associated with any of these campaigns” (Save the Children Statement on use of its Name in Unaffiliated Campaigns 2020), it can be confirmed that it was hijacked on these conditions.

When Gilkerson and Berg, along with Girginova, account for hashtag hijacking, the most defining aspect of it is intent. Is it for comedic purposes? Do people or groups not like the organisation or brand’s hashtag? Intention is key, they argue. The intention behind QAnon adherents’ use of the hashtag hijacking method has proven difficult to establish since we have not come across any previous posts made by QAnon supporters or from ‘Q’ detailing why they have decided to hijack the hashtag. We can also not assume that every single adherent has the same intention for the utilisation of the #savethechildren, since the level of engagement in the community can vary tremendously. But while we cannot prove intent, we can hypothesise it.

From what is known, the Save the Children organisation has focused on combating child trafficking for decades. Since QAnon supporters believe that the ‘Deep State’ is filled with pedophiles and people conducting human trafficking, their reason to use #savethechildren could be that they believe they are fighting the same cause, albeit with different perpetrators and therefore the hashtag is applicable to them as well. As mentioned in section 2.4., Gilkerson and Berg state that some may use the same hashtag to be sarcastic or critical of whatever the hashtag symbolises, and when the internet is filled with “trolls” who want to create chaos and antagonise, it is not unlikely that some may utilise #savethechildren for that purpose. However, it seems questionable that many would use it for comedic purposes in this specific case since QAnon adherents, but also people in general, take child trafficking seriously. Both Gilkerson and Berg, and Girginova, claim that hashtag hijacking can be implemented to amplify awareness of a specific cause, which results

in clashes of audiences. In QAnon's version the perpetrators are Democrats, Hollywood celebrities and other powerful people, but since the causes are similar, a clash of audiences occurs because these are new-established villains the Save the Children audience are unaware of, and are being told by a new wave of people to look out for.

It could also be theorised that some of QAnon supporters use the aspects of clashes of audiences and messages as a way to legitimise their arguments and beliefs. In the beginning, QAnon's following were contained in an environment with similar-minded people, where people could fully express their conspiratorial opinions and not meet much resistance from outsiders. After their ascent to the mainstream social media the environment and audience is different, and conspiratorial posts are viewed with scepticism and ridicule from the mainstream. So, to be able to stay on these platforms but still remain able to express themselves, they use #savethechildren as a way to legitimise their beliefs and the hashtag becomes a "symbol" to use so that supporters' posts referencing QAnon beliefs appear less conspiratorial, more legitimate and establish a narrative of fighting the same cause as Save the Children.

Intention is also heavily influenced by how QAnon supporters perceive themselves as a group. What is meant here is that QAnon adherents would likely not agree that they are a part of a conspiracy theory. Their devotion to Q suggests that they believe they are informed with the truth, and the mainstream needs to be enlightened. QAnon supporters may perceive themselves as e.g. an activist group, where their purpose of hashtag hijacking concerns influencing an organisation like Save the Children through action. Gilkerson and Berg explain that these actions occur through education and persuasion, and are deliberately carried out on social media to connect with a larger audience. If QAnon adherents perceive themselves as part of an activist group, intention is established. Since the hashtag hijacking is performed by followers to spread awareness, they could expect that their newly established influence with the hashtag would be enough to pressure Save the Children to take them and their claims seriously, and for the organisation to act accordingly i.e focus on, and combat, who QAnon identifies as perpetrators. However, if the purpose of hashtag hijacking by an activist group is to influence an organisation, then QAnon's attempt can be considered a failure. The failure can be attributed to Save the Children's official statement from August 7, 2020 which detailed how they are not affiliated with other groups utilising their name and hashtag, and this would include QAnon. QAnon's adherents who have used the hashtag have

thus not been successful in persuading Save the Children to listen to their cause, but has had enough influence to make them respond to QAnon's affiliation with the hashtag.

In Girginova's essay, she explains how ISIS uses hashtag hijacking to spread the message about their cause. The idea is similar to what Gilkerson and Berg presents in that it produces a clash of worlds and audiences, which happened when QAnon's adherents' used #savethechildren. However, Girginova claims that using hashtag hijacking, so that a less powerful actor can challenge the forum created by a more powerful actor, is intentional on ISIS 'part. QAnon followers could operate in a similar fashion, where they consider themselves as a less powerful player challenging a more powerful one and its space. But with the QAnon case, the 'powerful actor' is difficult to establish. Is it the Save the Children organisation? Is it the "evil" elite? Or is it the people who have a positive perception of the elite who QAnon proclaims to be villains? QAnon adherents directly challenge someone by utilising social media to conduct hashtag hijacking, and thus construct narratives such as 'these powerful people are bad', or implement 'fake news' or partisan news to back up claims they make. Yet no specific powerful actor is presented. Girginova's definition of hashtag hijacking is not dedicated only to how a terrorist group operates; ISIS is just the case she presents, but nevertheless, while the FBI has marked QAnon as a possible domestic terrorist threat, they would not perceive themselves as such, and neither would ISIS.

In Roose's article, he categorises QAnon as a conspiracy theory, but also as a movement, and writes "Like any movement, QAnon needs to win over new members" (Roose 2020), claiming that recruitment is the intention for the hashtag hijacking. Neither Gilkerson and Berg, or Girginova, specifically account for the idea of people or groups using hashtag hijacking as a recruitment tactic; rather, it is indirectly implied with their explanations of 'clashes of audiences' and 'spreading a message', that recruitment can occur. Nevertheless, it is an intentional strategy which makes sense for performing a hashtag hijacking.

Roose suggests that by infiltrating social media groups and hijacking #savethechildren, QAnon supporters can sway the conversation in their favour and thereby recruit people to fight for their cause. This tactic works, since "speaking out against child exploitation, no matter your politics, is far from an objectionable stance" (Roose 2020). Like Roose, we established in section 6.2.3. that QAnon can be categorised as a social movement, because its 'modus operandi' aligns

with Benford and Snow's theory on 'core framing tasks'. The task of 'motivational framing' entails the call to fight, and describes what QAnon supporters have done with the hashtag hijacking of #savethechildren. It would be logical if QAnon adherents perceive themselves as a movement with recruitment as its purpose. The more adherents QAnon garners the bigger it becomes, and the more influence it gets. Moreover, Roose argues that the acts of infiltration and recruitment by QAnon adherents have worked since "Facebook engagement on human-trafficking-related content has surged" (Roose 2020) and that "Prominent "mommy-bloggers" and Instagram fitness influencers have begun posting anti-trafficking memes to their millions of followers" (Roose 2020).

Due to the popularity of the hashtag in the QAnon community, Facebook temporarily disabled it from their platform in August 2020 "with a warning that it went against community standards" (Zadrozny and Collins 2020). The hashtag hijacking also prompted the participation of many QAnon adherents at Save the Children events, along with some QAnon adherents creating their own 'Save the Children' events. According to an NBC News analysis conducted on Facebook, one Saturday in August 2020 had over 200 'Save the Children' demonstrations planned by QAnon supporters.

The #saveourchildren hashtag also rose in popularity as a result of the hashtag hijacking of #savethechildren, and many QAnon followers have since switched from using #savethechildren to #saveourchildren. In the same article, it is stated that; "QAnon groups make up only 18 percent of those posting about #SaveOurChildren. But they accounted for nearly 70 percent of the total interactions on the hashtag in August" (Zadrozny and Collins 2020). This shift from hashtag to hashtag could potentially be the reason why QAnon related content on Twitter with #savethechildren was less visible in October 2020 compared to August 2020. The reasoning behind why many began switching to #saveourchildren was Bill Gates' affiliation with the Save the Children organisation. Bill Gates has been a popular target of conspiracy theories created by QAnon, particularly since the pandemic began (Zadrozny and Collins 2020), and while Bill Gates is not the owner of Save the Children and only provides donations to the organisation, many were not happy with this discovery, and did not want to use a hashtag which in part is associated with him, so they began advocating for the usage of #saveourchildren instead (Dwilson 2020).

6.7.1. Sub conclusion

Based on the analysis above, it can be concluded that QAnon adherents did perform a successful hashtag hijacking of #savethechildren. Their large presence on Twitter became apparent when researching the hashtag on the platform, and the Save the Children organisation had to publicly denounce their affiliations with other campaigns using their hashtag, which we highly assume were directed at QAnon and its supporters. Although there was no official proclamation of intent by QAnon and its followers to do a hashtag hijacking and regardless whether the intention for the hashtag hijacking was to create chaos, spread a message, challenge a powerful actor or for recruitment, the end result was still in QAnon's favour.

6.8. The influence of Political and Social Polarisation

In the last decade, the US has been facing challenges in many forms. Rosenblum and Muirhead note that in 2019, scholars were still attempting to grasp where the development stems from, but what they observed about the situation is summed up in the following;

“seasoned political observers record violations of informal democratic norms such as tolerance and restraint; journalists chronicle and correct the avalanche of official lies and falsehoods at the same time that they contend with threats to the independence of the press; psychiatrists point to dangerous patterns of overt derision and hostility toward individuals and whole groups by the president and other public officials; and civil rights organizations document an increase in hate crimes” (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 167).

In section 2.8, we discussed that the emergence of conspiracy theories may sometimes be considered a symptom of societal discontent. Certainly, Rosenblum and Muirhead's observation points in the same direction of discontent, leading people to engage in activities that violate Democratic norms. It is likely not a coincidence that QAnon's core beliefs “strike at the heart of regular democratic politics: rigged elections, plans to impose martial law, depictions of political as criminal” (168) and more. Rosenblum and Muirhead also connect the rise of new conspiracism to the weakening of political institutions, which strengthens the connection between new conspiracism and political decay. The instability and increase in partisanship may heighten the animosity towards the opposition, and the disorientation that arises from the incompatible mix of

identity politics and ideology causes a delegitimation of the “foundational democratic institutions” (169).

In 2016, Donald J. Trump won the American presidential election, and was to become the 45th President of the United States. Trump had already gained a reputation as controversial prior to his presidential win, however, post-election it was argued that with Trump, “there is always a plot, and every conceivable problem - whether it be social, economic, political - can be traced back to a cunning and calculated group of conspirators who want to destroy America and its culture” (Hellinger 2019, 105). For example, Trump engaged in spreading and generating fake news long before ‘fake news’ evolved into the popular concept that it is today, and post-election Trump “began to use “fake news” as a defense against what should have in normal times sunk any candidate’s political aspirations” (111). Trump managed to thwart much bad press by dubbing it ‘fake news’, and much of his popular support - including sympathetic news media - began reiterating the concept, causing ‘fake news’ to quickly become an every-day phrase.

After the 2016 election, Trump was portrayed negatively as a hostile figure by the media. In response, “Trump appropriated the “fake news” meme as a weapon in his attempt to undermine the regime of truth maintained by the mainstream media” (82), and his iterations were repeated by right-leaning media online and offline. But, it is peculiar how Trump was able to harvest the benefits of ‘fake news’ when other candidates would have achieved negative results, as Hellinger argues. The mobilisation of fake news in recent times points to the emergence of a post truth society. Elmeri Hyvönen has conducted much research on political theories and phenomena, and has observed that recently, factual truth is no longer found objectively in political contexts; it “stands at the beginning of the processes of agonal debate, of wooing and persuasion, not at their end” (Hyvönen 2018, 3). Additionally, he points out that “instead of being *distilled from* the plurality of perspectives, truth *invites and makes possible the expression of different viewpoints* (Hyvönen 2018, 2-3[italics in original]).

Hyvönen’s observations on ‘truth’ are indicative of post-truth society, in that opinions and subjectivity are dominating, rather than factual truth. Hyvönen argues that with post-truth society comes post-truth politics, which can be “understood as a predicament in which political speech is increasingly detached from the factual infrastructure” (3). This is a prominent factor regarding why the parties as institutions have become weak; a strong institution brings “people together for joint effort on common projects, which builds community” (Rauch 2019). If the current

partisanship in the US is taken into consideration, logic dictates that the institutional parties have most certainly become weak. A recent Gallup poll (see section x) showed that political polarisation has been on the rise for over a decade, and that party polarisation has reached the highest in history during Trump's third year in office. While it is expected that party adherents inevitably approve more of their own party than of the opposition, the numbers also reflected that partisan support was increased within the parties themselves. Put differently, there is an increase in partisanship which may prove to be relatively independent of ideological differences.

Like with new conspiracism, it is hard to believe that the increase in partisanship is not rooted in something; Rauch himself suggests tribalism as a potential factor. It is curious how tribalism, and not ideological differences, may direct the ideological course of adherents, but it is not impossible. In section 3.2.2., it was concluded that verification and validity of adherents' claims regarding QAnon was based on tribalist tendencies, and there is nothing to suggest that this tendency is exclusive to QAnon's adherents. In the US, political and social polarisation has brought the sense of a shared community to a low, and this development can be attributed to two factors: the first factor is that weak institutions cause community and democratic measures to decrease, which in turn allows oppressive, antisocial and parochial behaviour to emerge:

“The more parties weaken as institutions, whose members are united by loyalty to their organization, the more they strengthen as tribes, whose members are united by hostility to their enemy (whether real, exaggerated, or invented). In that respect, polarization is called upon to provide solidarity when institutions cannot. If we cannot sustain institutions, we will instead create bogeymen.” (Rauch 2019).

The other factor is the effects brought about by the emergence of post-truth politics. If people find unity by being hostile to other parties, then animosity cannot be concluded to stem from ideological differences:

“What if, to some significant extent, the increase in partisanship is not really *about* anything? To put the point in a less metaphysical way, what if tribalism as such, not ideological disagreement, is behind much or even most of the rise of polarization? What if emotional identification with a partisan team is driving ideology, more than the other way around?” (Rauch 2019).

Rauch continues by arguing that “the weakening of parties as *organizations* has led individuals to coalesce instead around parties as *brands*, turning organizational politics into identity politics” (Rauch 2019 [italics in original]). The development ultimately leads to people seeking identity through organising, rather than organising according to political orientation. In other words, the high level of polarisation today may be considered misplaced *tribalisation*; the animosity towards other parties - or tribes - stems from an inability to act less parochially, and proffer solutions to neutral authorities, as well as expect that the opposition will do the same. In the US, the Republican party is especially marked by this reluctance to narrow the polarising gap between the the Republicans and the Democrats; in fact, it has been argued that Trump has played the card of polarisation deliberately, which caused Republicans and Democrats to “view the other side as enemies instead of merely neighbors with mistaken ideas” (McManus 2020).

In his work, Hellinger argues that Donald Trump did not restore the paranoid style, but he promoted it enough so that it became mainstream, and capitalised on the results hereof. Logic dictates that a return of the paranoid style is conditioned by a development in the ‘regime of truth’; as a minimum, there is more room for doubt, and an openness towards thinking that things may not be as they seem. Hellinger argues that “Trump has disrupted this regime in the United States” (Hellinger 2019, 40), and while it is true that Trump perfected the use of ‘fake news’, which in turn generated a new regime of truth, it can still be argued that Trump is merely a product of the conditions in contemporary society. Earlier in this section, it was demonstrated that ‘truth’ no longer exists independently of the plurality of opinions. Another way of describing this development is that ‘truth’ develops opinions, and not the other way around. This sums up the notion of post-truth, as opinions *become* truth, and ‘factual truth’ is disregarded.

In the realm of politics, post-truth can become problematic - especially if we return to Rauch’s idea that political polarisation is driven by tribalism, rather than ideology. In this respect, Rauch argues that “presenting people with facts that challenge an identity- or group-defining opinion does not work; instead of changing their minds, they will often reject the facts and double down on their false beliefs” (Rauch 2019). An example of this behaviour would be the 2020 presidential election; the truth held by most Trump supporters was that the election was stolen from the Republicans, and the Democrats were behind all of it. No proof was ever presented to support the allegations, however, animosity was on the rise. While Trump and his team insisted on voter fraud, several smaller allegations seemed to arise, e.g. that the voting machines were

partly owned by Bill and Hillary Clinton (BBC 2020), or that Democrats were smuggling in votes. These allegations are a result of the voter fraud allegations, but they also qualify as conspiracy theories. However, in this case they were not considered as such; they were held to be true, even after they were dismissed by courts as unproven or wrong, and any attempt by the opposition to argue against the allegations only fuelled the debate.

The situation regarding the 2020 election is an example of polarisation driven by identity politics; accusations were aplenty among Democrats and Republicans, but they were not rooted in ideological differences. Instead, animosity towards the other was fuelled simply because they belonged to different ‘tribes’. If tribalisation and identity politics are the cause for polarisation, it is clear that politics on its own cannot be held responsible for the current political climate. In section 6., it is described how QAnon emerged in 2017, which is well before the 2020 election. In order to understand the emergence of QAnon, it is important to look at the contemporary societal conditions it was born out of.

In the last decade, many societal issues in the US have been brought to the surface; issues, which have been confined to the margins of agendas to promote equality. In 2014, the US saw the beginning of the movement ‘Black Lives Matter’, when Michael Brown was killed by the police. He was but one example out of many unarmed black persons who have been killed by US police as a result of untreated, systemic racism; Hooker argues that “there is no discernible end to the tragic parade of the unarmed black dead” (Hooker 2016, 449), and that “perhaps the only difference is that now some of us, their fellow citizens, though certainly not all, make a point of saying their names and asserting that black lives matter” (449). The problems of systemic racism have been confronted many times over since Brown’s death - most recently in 2020, when George Floyd suffocated after being pinned to the ground by Derek Chauvin, a white police officer (Hill et al. 2021). In the aftermath, anti-racist protests took place and hashtags were created to shed light on the issue, and to engage people. For example, the hashtag #icantbreathe was used on over 1,2 million posts on Instagram to spread awareness of systemic racism (Instagram 2021). The hashtag is a reference to George Floyd’s utterances about not being able to breathe while being pinned to the ground, which eventually lead to his death.

In October 2017, the hashtag #MeToo was popularised on social media, and became the beginning of a social movement. Hollywood celebrity Alyssa Milano used the hashtag #MeToo,

prompting millions of users to share it as well, illustrating “just how widespread sexual assault and harassment actually are” (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019, 2). Moreover, it showed that experiences of sexual harassment “are *routine* and *normalized*, in short, confirming many feminist arguments about ‘rape culture’” (2). #MeToo was used by many to let victims of sexual harassment know that they are not alone, and to encourage others to come forward.

Phenomena such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo are known to generate polarising discourse, since they confront societal issues that are otherwise being pushed down, and those who confront the structure are often silenced (2). However, as of recent times this is no longer the case. Derek Chauvin, the white police officer who pinned George Floyd to the ground, was tried and convicted of murder. Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, who allegedly sexually “harassed female employees over nearly three decades” (BBC 2021), was forced to face the consequences of his actions in court; the allegations against him is what ultimately popularised the #MeToo movement. These events are significant, because they serve as examples of transformation. The backlash was large enough to prompt proper action against societal injustices, which have previously been so ingrained that relevant issues barely made the news. These are measures taken to counter bigotry and inequality, and surely much has been done to push back at offensive and discriminatory viewpoints.

Against the backdrop of the emergence of movements such as Black Lives Matter or #MeToo, discussions arose whether things had gone too far; to abide by the unwritten laws of political correctness was in focus. Both online and offline, people began calling out other people who uttered offensive things. This is also known as conducting ‘political correctness policing’, which means ensuring that people’s utterings are ‘politically correct’. The result hereof was the emergence of ‘PC culture’ (Political Correctness culture), and is mostly described as a development in society where discriminatory language and offensive content is no longer accepted. This development included phenomena such as ‘cultural appropriation’ and ‘wokeness’; the first entails the inappropriate borrowing of symbols or attire from other cultures, and the later refers to a state of mind where one is aware of social problems or injustices, i.e. being ‘woke’.

As explained in section 6.6., political correctness had no place in the ‘chan culture’, where profanity, racism and general counterculture dominated the boards. Soon, ‘chan culture’ became one of the few places where people could openly express opinions and viewpoints which would not be accepted by the general mainstream. Prominent politicians found themselves being held

accountable for any actions deemed politically incorrect no matter when they had happened, e.g. Justin Trudeau when he painted his face black for a party back in 2001. It was as if freedom of expression was restricted.

Taking Hofstadter's idea of a 'paranoid style' into the context, it can easily be argued that people who were of mindsets deemed politically incorrect felt hunted; the sudden surge of discursive regulation and public shaming on social media directed at those who spoke against societal issues, such as racism or gay rights, was marginalising those who practised the counterculture which e.g. Chan culture offered. The general rule was if you do not practise wokeness, you are part of the problem. This marked the emergence of a culture of offense, where being offended became juxtaposed to being better than the politically incorrect masses; it became a struggle of morals, and a competition about who possessed the highest morals.

To sum up the events, while simultaneously arguing that marginalised people employ the paranoid style because they have reason to feel persecuted, we draw on Kenneth Thompson's idea of 'moral panic' which he accounts for in five points;

"The first is that they take the form of campaigns (crusades), which are sustained over a period, however short or long. Second, they appeal to people who are alarmed by an apparent fragmentation or breakdown of the social order, which leaves them at risk in some way. Third, that moral guidelines are unclear. Fourth, that politicians and some parts of the media are eager to lead the campaign to have action taken that they claim would suppress the threat. Finally, the commentator judges that the moral campaign leaves the real causes of social breakdown unaddressed" (Thompson 1998, 2).

The idea of moral panic as a relevant factor in QAnon's emergence is certainly ideal; the social breakdown which Thompson speaks of can fruitfully be likened to the current social polarisation in the US. The moral campaigns which Thompson refers to can be understood as quintessentially those who partake in PC policing, as was described earlier. This is indicative of a fear of moral deterioration, and it would seem that the means - which entails silencing those who are of different minds - justify the ends, which entails reaching universal tolerance and open mindedness. The road to tolerance is problematic, however, since 'universal tolerance' - especially if it is forced on others through threats of societal marginalisation - is in fact intolerance. We acknowledge that this is a confusing paradox, but put simply, it means that universal tolerance does not leave tolerance for

intolerance. In this sense, universal tolerance is not tolerant, since it upholds margins within which opinions and viewpoints are to be kept. In other words, tolerance is only for those whose viewpoints are not too far away from those who attempt to assert themselves as morally superior.

Arguably, the moral panic which has emerged can be argued to have caused the feeling of persecution, which led people of different mindsets to the margins of society the internet. The most ideal way to hypothesise how QAnon adherents are affected by the moral panic can be done through one of ‘Q’s posts from October 6th, 2020;

“Why are we being censored? Why are we being attacked daily? Why are we being condemned by Congress? 1984 thoughtcrime? What happens when people are no longer allowed to think freely? What happens when people are no longer allowed to challenge their authority? What happens when people no longer fight back? Q” (qanon.pub, 2020).

‘Q’s allusion to the Orwellian concept of ‘thoughtcrimes’ sums up the problem of what happens when moral panic festers. Having politically incorrect opinions and viewpoints can be argued to be quintessential thoughtcrimes, and the mainstream permeates the “gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life” (Hofstadter 2008, 56). It is only possible to theorise about whether QAnon emerged as a conspiracy narrative targeting those whom it believes is attempting to silence alternative voices - however, it can be assumed that the moral panic, which has political correctness as its cornerstone, has prompted many of QAnon’s adherents to adopt the paranoid style. Moreover, the tribalist tendencies among QAnon’s adherents can be argued to amplify the existence of the paranoid style, since validity and verification rests heavily on repetition of beliefs.

The notion of a shared paranoid mindset should be considered in relation to the idea that QAnon offers an identity to its adherents, and that adherents practise collective identity building. This would entail identity building based on the paranoid style. As explained in section 2.6., Hofstadter argues that social conflicts are the biggest reason behind the reintroduction of the paranoid style in society. His argument entails that the paranoid tendency is attained “chiefly by social conflicts that involve ultimate schemes of values and that bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action” (64). It is clear that the contemporary social polarisation is fuelled by high degrees of hatred towards the opposition; however, we illustrated earlier that Rauch’s argument regarding the conflict being about identity politics, rather

than ideology, was valid. Therefore, it can be stated that the social conflict is indeed based on identity politics, and that the emergence of the paranoid style is a result of social polarisation, which in turn is rooted in the consequences of moral panic.

6.8.1. Sub Conclusion

To sum up the findings in the above, it can be concluded that political and social polarisation have played a significant role in the emergence of QAnon. By considering the argument that political polarisation may, in fact, be based on partisanship rather than ideological standpoints, it becomes clear that partisan animosity stems from a sense of tribalism, rather than from differences in viewpoints on political issues. Moreover, it can be concluded that weak political institutions in a post-truth society act as conditions for the rise of conspiracy narratives; truth is no longer objective, and truth no longer forms opinions as such; rather, it is formed *by* opinions, and thus truth is objective. Additionally, this perspective on post-truth may explain why QAnon's adherents insist on the truth of QAnon's core beliefs, and elude the norm of attempting to explain or prove their theory. Lastly, it can be concluded that social polarisation fuels the animosity, and that social polarisation is promoted by the implementation of political correctness. Moral panic causes people to become socially marginalised online and offline, showcasing that their opinions are no longer welcome if they are not politically correct. Therefore, it can be assumed that QAnon's adherents come together and perform collective identity building, as QAnon offers an identity and a sense of belonging to its adherents.

The next question within the sphere of politics entails the significance of a conspiracist president. At this point in the analysis, we have accounted for the conditions which prompted QAnon's emergence - both online and offline. We also know that QAnon is a multifaceted phenomenon, and is highly dynamic in nature. In section 6.4., we accounted for QAnon's likeness to a religious movement, and the results of that analysis are highly relevant in determining the significance of Trump's conspiracist tendencies. Therefore, this research question will be answered through an analytical discussion, wherein findings from the analyses will be discussed across the presented research questions.

9. Discussion

To begin with, it can be concluded with certainty that historically, classic conspiracism has not had the same influence on social media as new conspiracism. This can partly be argued to be based on its political agenda; classic conspiracism, at best, will inspire distrust in political institutions. It does not mobilise protests or call to action. New conspiracism, however, has proven to be unstable in terms of its exclusive existence online. The Capitol Hill riots showed that QAnon has the potential to take its cause off the internet, and onto the streets.

After QAnon's creation, social media platforms were reluctant to block pages, users or posts tied to QAnon, or QAnon's core beliefs. Some social media platforms, e.g. Twitter and Facebook had engaged in blocking QAnon-related content, however, they have faced criticism for not taking action quickly enough; especially in the aftermath of the Capitol Hill riots. Other platforms soon followed in limiting or blocking QAnon-related content, but in the midst of the efforts to limit QAnon's influence, another controversy arose, which revolved around whether social media should be taking a stance on such issues in the first place. It is difficult to clarify what responsibility social media conglomerates should have in cases such as these, but nevertheless, social media conglomerates made a move which has not been seen before; banning the US President.

In the aftermath of the Capitol Hill riots, both Twitter and Facebook permanently shut down Donald Trump's social media accounts on the two platforms. Trump was still President at the time, which makes the situation unique in that no American President had ever been silenced on social media before. What makes the situation even more interesting is that Amazon, who provided web servers for the conservative social media 'Parler', decided to shut down the servers. This move led Parler to sue Amazon Web services, and "the company claimed, "AWS's decision to effectively terminate Parler's account is apparently motivated by political animus" (Suciu 2021).

Since the bans, it has been argued that "President Trump and his supporters have largely been silenced" (Suciu 2021) across much of social media, and this has sparked debates about internet censorship. Trump has been known to be very active on his Twitter account throughout his time in the White House, and while the information he provides has not always been true, it is nonetheless information which reaches his followers. Trump's frequent use of Twitter is widely

considered to be his method of reaching the masses, and as a political move, it has arguably been fruitful. Moynihan and Roberts suggested that Trump's political behavior reflected a paranoid style of thinking (Moynihan and Roberts 2021, 153), and Trump's use of Twitter is an effective method to break out of the official frames of the White House. Traditionally, presidents are known to convey information through press conferences, interviews or other forms of formal settings, and are mostly announced well in advance so that journalists and others can record the event.

Twitter offers a way out of these frames. This is not to say that Trump has abandoned the traditional ways of speaking with regards to his status as President, but social media platforms - most prominently Twitter, in this case - allowed Trump to free himself of the restraints of discursive regulation. It can be argued that his continued presence on Twitter, combined with his way of untraditional conveyances of messages, made him appear human and ever present to the masses. This is significant in relation to his role as a Messiah in the eyes of QAnon's adherents.

At the onset of this thesis, we sought to find out what the significance is of a conspiracist president. However, after the previous analyses have been conducted, it has become clear that the significance does not lay in Trump's conspiracist tendencies as such; rather, it should be considered part of a whole, which is Trumpism. The question to be answered is rather what the significance of Trumpism is, in relation to the emergence and nature of QAnon, because Trumpism latched on to ongoing polarisation - both social and political - and exploited the early rise of tribalism, which was brought about by weakened political institutions.

It is not news that Trump exercised populist discourse. It can easily be argued that divisiveness was a significant factor in Trump's political conduct; whenever an issue had to be discussed, he often divided political groups into protagonists and antagonists, using phrases such as 'corrupt elite' or 'deep state' to describe the antagonist groups (Moynihan and Roberts 2021, 153). It would seem that Trump's engagement in conspiracism and attainment of the paranoid style not only furthered the division between groups; it carved a clear 'us vs. them' into politics, which will require repairs by the Biden administration. Moynihan and Roberts even found that many "swing voters supported Biden because he promised to act as a conciliator and peacemaker" (155) in hopes that Bidenism, as opposed to Trumpism, will "emphasize brokerage, conciliation and restraint" (155).

Trumpism has become the name with which Trump's philosophy of governing is recognised; however, to claim that Trumpism is exclusively political in nature is faulty. In section

6.4., we discussed and concluded that QAnon as a phenomenon has much in common with religious conduct. What is central to this conclusion is that while Trump is regarded as the Messiah, 'Q' is still someone who provides comfort for those who have lost faith in government, or do not feel like they are being represented. Animosity is lonely when an in-group is not there to *tribalise* with. 'Q's strength, in this sense, is therefore that s/he or they can be whoever the listener needs them to be. 'Q's cryptic messages can be bogus or intelligible, but the fact that they are cryptic in nature gives them metaphorical power, since the takeaway can take the form of whichever comfort the viewer needs.

So where does Donald Trump fit into all of this? What does Trump's use of informal, divisive rhetoric tell us about the nature and emergence of something so academically fluid as QAnon? The short answer is that Trump provides the same effect as the crypticism of 'Q's posts; he becomes someone who hears and sees those who feel unheard and unseen. Through speaking in ultimatums, and dividing the world into the good and the bad, Trump speaks to the people on a level where he can step out of his presidential role, and become human. He repudiated presidential norms and illustrated a willingness to set projects in motion that were previously unheard of, e.g. building a wall to keep Mexicans out of the US. While populist and racist, the discourse was nonetheless relatable. His opinions on immigrants were conspiratorial in nature in the way he spoke of them as a foreign evil, whose goal was to steal jobs and commit crimes (Mark 2018), but it provided a scapegoat for those who suffered from poverty, unemployment, or were victims of crime. Simultaneously, this strengthened Trump's legitimacy as a human being who heard them.

In the time leading up to and during his presidency, Trump was someone who was needed by people in the American society that did not feel represented. Not that there was a need for Trumpist politics, but in the sense that the scales needed to be tipped; causes needed to be spoken for, but there was no one to speak for them before Trump. There had been no one like him. This is not to say that his politics were not harmful to democracy, or that his use of e.g. nepotism in government was excused. As demonstrated in this thesis, political decay existed before Trump's ascent into the White House; Trump just accelerated it. Hellinger's outline of a 'Trumpian Age' encapsulates Trumpism's impact on the political milieu in the US, but the impact, which culminated in the Capitol Hill riots underline the severe degree of tribalisation; a force to be reckoned with in the future.

10. Conclusion

In terms of conspiracism in the Trumpian Age, it can be concluded that new conspiracism is not comparable to classic conspiracism because its source of origins, its impact on government and people, and its agency component makes it more compatible with social or religious movements. QAnon's nature cannot be likened to classic conspiracy theories, because firstly, its conspiratorial element does not spring from an event, and like Rosenblum and Muirhead argue; it sheds explanation. Therefore, it lacks the element of 'theory', and it does not emerge as an alternative explanation to an already existing explanation. With respect to QAnon's modus operandi, it can further be concluded that its behaviour has more in common with Benford and Snow's 'core framing tasks', than it does with classic conspiracism. The element which is defining in setting them apart here, is that of the agency component; QAnon's adherents have a motto, are goal-oriented, and motivate others by calling to action. Classic conspiracism does not engage in tribalist behaviour in this manner; its interest is mostly confined to critical discussions and to account for discrepancies in official explanations. QAnon's devotion to Trump, and the bestowance of him as Messiah, is also not something that is seen in classic conspiracism. QAnon centers much around Trump and the prophecy of 'the Storm', meaning it looks to the future for proof and answers. Classic conspiracism looks to the past, and seeks to explain events that have already happened; however, classic conspiracism does not do so based on faith in the government, or the President. They are mostly targets of distrust. In the case of QAnon's adherents, they entrust Trump with the future and prophesise that he will deliver innocents from evil.

What the analysis on the relationship between QAnon and social media has showcased, is that the relationship between QAnon and social media is strongly intertwined. QAnon's rise to what it has become today, could only have happened with the help of social media. Its beginning originated from 4chan, and has since then emerged onto other more mainstream social media outlets. Filter bubbles and echo chambers have been a big help in espousing people to QAnon, since algorithms have ensured that QAnon material is visible to people who may not have discovered it themselves otherwise. Since QAnon and its followers are biased towards former president Donald Trump, Trump supporters who were not part of QAnon have perhaps been more prone to the exposure than others, due to the environments both online and offline have been a of blend of pro-Trump and pro-QAnon narratives. Furthermore, since many Americans use social

media as their outlets for news, many partisan or agenda-based narrative news can show up on peoples newsfeeds, and distort or amplify already existing biases.

The emergence of QAnon on social media through the utilisation of hashtag hijacking also establishes that QAnon acts differently than classic conspiracy theories. It was already concluded in section 6.2. and 6.2.3. that QAnon can be classified under new conspiracism because it is ‘action-based’ among other things. The ‘action-based’ aspect can be likened to the hashtag hijacking adherents conducted, as it is a tactic with a purpose and therefore, an action QAnon followers have performed. Comparing this aspect of QAnon to that of classic conspiracism, amplifies the already concluded notion that QAnon is categorised under new conspiracism since classic conspiracism concerns itself with adding epistemic value to conspiracy theories, and is not action-based. Moreover, the hashtag hijacking tactic showcases that QAnon does not necessarily operate as a conspiracy narrative, but more like a movement. Classic conspiracy theories do not have a double function in this way, meaning that they do not operate both as a conspiracy theory *and* e.g. as a movement. New conspiracism is dynamic in this way, but what is interesting about QAnon is that tactics like hashtag hijacking further amplifies the idea that QAnon shares more similarities with a movement than a conspiracy theory, which makes it more difficult to compare to classic conspiracy theories since they have very little in common.

Regarding polarisation, it can be concluded that political and social polarisation has played a crucial role in the emergence, as well as in the molding of QAnon. The analysis of political polarisation showed that partisanship is increasingly rooted in identity politics, rather than differences in ideology, and we argue that the shift towards identity politics - that is, partisan tribalism - comes from a weakening of institutions, resulting in animosity towards the opposition which is largely based on an ‘ingroup vs outgroup’ attitude, rather than differences in political viewpoints. Moreover, we conclude that the animosity is further ingrained by the emergence of post-truth politics, meaning opinions make truth rather than the other way around. Shortly put, however, the effects of polarisation is something that sets classic conspiracism and QAnon even further apart; classic conspiracism is not affected by polarisation, in any form. Its political engagement pertains to degrees of mistrust in government and official narratives, but it does not go significantly beyond that. QAnon, on the other hand, is dominated by it. It emerged from the rubbles of social polarisation amidst a divided American people, and is being kept alive by political polarisation and the tribalism that dominates political institutions in contemporary times.

All in all, this thesis argues that the answer to the question: “How does the emergence and nature of QAnon compare to the emergence and nature of classic conspiracy theories?” is, that QAnon simply is not comparable - at least not in a meaningful way. The rise of ‘new conspiracism’, exemplified through QAnon, signals a new phenomenon which cannot be dubbed conspiracism as we know it. QAnon, like Donald Trump, is both a symptom and a product of its environment. It is a social phenomenon which has more in common with religious movements and social movements, and has very little in common with conspiracy theories classified as classic conspiracism. It is based on a conspiracy narrative, and aims to thwart an alleged conspiracy. Its goal is action-based, and therefore fundamentally different from classic conspiracists’ goal to explain and account for discrepancies. QAnon is unique in nature, and these authors suspect that QAnon will not be the last of its kind in the future.

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1 **Appendix 1: CNN Video 1**

2 DS = Donnie O'Sullivan

3 AV = Ashley Vanderbilt

4 The segment begins at 1:04 to 2:15

5

6 DS (narrating): Ashley Vanderbilt the South Carolinian mom who says she lost her job
7 early in the pandemic, fell deep down the QAnon conspiracy theory rabbit hole before
8 November's election.

9

10 DS (interviewing): How did you get into this world and go down this rabbit hole?

11 AV: Well, I started (-) seeing Tik Toks and I didn't know that it was conspiracy things, I
12 just thought it was (.) they were telling me something that nobody else knew (chuckle).

13 So, then I would reach out to (.) different friends of mine that were bigger Trump supporters.

14 I would say "you know what, I saw this on Tik Tok what do you think?" (-) .hh and they'd start
15 sending me Youtube (.) videos, they would start sending me different Facebook live videos, and
16 (.)

17 one thing led to another, I just went down this rabbit hole learning all this stuff. But I mean what
18 have we heard the last four-five years? (-) Don't watch the news (.) fake news fake news (.) I
19 don't

20 watch the news, I don't read news papers (chuckle) like I don't do anything, I've always been
21 someone that (.) you just tell me (.) what to do and I do it. I grew up being told we Republicans,
22 so

23 I've always been that straight red ticket.

24 DS: How do you think that videos like this started showing up in your feed?

25 AV: Well originally, I was just following like entertainment stuff (.) but sometime when maybe
26 (.)
27 people started like campaigning, I started liking a lot of Trump posts and things that were anti
28 Biden and (.) the algorithm (.) must have just brought that kinda stuff to me.

1 **Appendix 2: CNN Video 2**

2

3 DL = Don Lemon

4 L = Linka or Linca

5 The segment begins at 2:38 and ends at 4:46

6

7 DL: (?) just seems that there more, (?) seems that there (-) there are people who maybe more
8 prone

9 to believe conspiracies, cause I hear .hh your argument on the left about Bernie Sanders

10 again (chuckle) is-is the (.) mirror of the argument .hh that led to the insurrection (-) erhm, on

11 Capitol Hill, so (-) eh, could it be perhaps that there's just people (.) like yourself .hh who are
12 prone

13 to conspiracy theories (.) regardless of (-) what side of the isle they are on? Because er, er,
14 people

15 can't, er, um, I'm sure people won't be able to see how you went from (-) .hh Bernie Sanders and

16 the Democratic party (.) to Donald Trump and QAnon and the Republican party its just to far of

17 a

18 swing (.) on the pendulum, you understand what I'm saying?

19 L: [right]

20 L: An-and see that's why I said that there's so many different pieces, because now we can talk

21 about um, social (media) media and the algorithm. So, as soon as you click or like or share on a

22 video or a link or what have you, that (.) .hh might have some bases in conspiracy or some
23 agenda

24 (-) you know by the end of the week, your entire newsfeed is filled with very similar material

25 DL: [do you think there should be]

26 L: [(?)]
27 DL: [Do you think er, (?) so, ehrrm, what I 'm hearing you're
28 saying is, social media (.) plays a big role in this, .hh do you think that
29 L: [very big]
30 DL: [there should be, um, more fact
31 checking (.) um, a-and, more guarding of the platform (.) on social media (.) then just a sort of a
32 free for all, for everyone to be able to go on there and say whatever it is that they wanna say?]
33 L: .hh well if that were possible, ehrrm, you know, I know that I was studying how social media
34 works through documentaries like 'The Social Dilemma' and I-I it seems like it's kinda a
35 monster
36 that's out of control at this point.
37 .hh and um, (-) you know, I don't know how people can step aside and do some fact (checking)
38 checking now, they just want information so quickly (-)
39 DL: [Hey Linka]
40 L: [and when you (log on to) your social
41 media (-) its, you know, it's just all right there, keeps coming at you (.)
42 DL: [So Linka, we have to go]
43 L [(?)]
44 DL: [but
45 do you (.) do you (-) do you think that (.) do you blame social media in any way? Do you think
46 that
47 it helped and
48 L: [Yeah]

- 49 DL: [in some way to (---)]
- 50 L: [Absolutely]
- 51 DL: [to groom you a-]
- 52 L: [(yeah)]
- 53 DL: [and to cha- yeah okay]

Appendix 3: Twitter Screenshot 1

The screenshot shows a Twitter search interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the text "(#savethechildren) until:2020-08-15 since:2020-08-14". Below the search bar are five tabs: "Top", "Latest" (which is selected and underlined), "People", "Photos", and "Videos".

The first tweet is from a user whose name is redacted with a black box. The tweet text is: "#EndHumanTrafficking #SaveTheChildren #DarkToLight #TheGreatAwaking #WWG1WGA #MAGA2020 #Trump202 #Trump2020 #JFKJRLIVES #hydroxychloriquineworks".

The second tweet is also from a user whose name is redacted with a black box. The tweet text is: "#Q #Qanon #Qarmy #WWG1WGA #GODWINS #THEGREATAWAKING #NOTHINGCOULDSTOPWHATSCOMING #THEBESTISYETTOCOME #Whitecoatsummit #curenovaccine #PanicinDC #pizzagate #savethechildren".

Appendix 4: Twitter Screenshot 2

← (#savethechildren) until:2020-10-31 since:2020-10-29 ...

Top Latest People Photos Videos

4.4k views why are you taking them? 0:01 / 2:19

Joe Diaz @joe_diaz7 · Oct 30, 2020 ...
And I wasted my vote for Obama. Don't be a sell out stay on the right side of history #DrainTheDeepStateSwamp #SaveTheChildren #MAGA2020

Bison On The Carizo Plain @BisonOnTheCarizoPlain · Oct 30, 2020 ...
@realDonaldTrump is the trafficker! #SaveTheChildren

Janti Soeripto @jantisoeuripto · Oct 30, 2020
Vulnerable and terrified, Central American children are being sent by the US to Mexico, alone and without any family to retrieve them. This is unbelievably cruel, deeply traumatic & a blatant violation of children's rights.
Read @itscailinhd for @nytimes ow.ly/cnaf50C7Btn