



QANON 2

SPREADING CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON TWITTER

PRODUCED BY
MEDIA DIVERSITY INSTITUTE
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

TEXTGAIN
LICRA
KARPOS
AMADEU ANTONIO STIFTUNG
CENTER FOR INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM
EUROPEAN NETWORK ON RELIGION AND BELIEF
EUROPEAN UNION OF JEWISH STUDENTS

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Produced by



Led by the Media Diversity Institute (MDI) with the support of 7 partners spread throughout Europe, **Get The Trolls Out!** (GTTO) works to counter anti-religious hate speech through exposing individuals and organisations, finding and debunking dangerous narratives in the media, and educating young people how to spot and respond to online trolls.



The Media Diversity Institute (MDI) works internationally to encourage and facilitate responsible media coverage of diversity in order to promote understanding between different groups and cultures.



Textgain is a language technology spin-off company from the University of Antwerp, that develops AI for addressing societal challenges, such as online hate speech, disinformation and radicalisation.



The Center for Independent Journalism (CIJ) is a non-profit and non-political organization aiming to promote ethical, fact-based journalism and independent media in Hungary.



LICRA fights against the growing political and social acceptance of xenophobia and discriminations in France and offers free legal assistance to victims of racism and anti-Semitism.



Karpos, is a Greek organisation which develops local and European projects encouraging expression and the exchange of views and creative ideas through the use of media.



Amadeu Antonio Stiftung is one of Germany's foremost, independent, non-governmental organizations working to strengthen democratic civic society and eliminate neo-Nazism, right-wing extremism, and anti-Semitism



The European Union of Jewish Students (EUJS) is a pluralistic, inclusive and non-partisan umbrella organisation. EUJS supports Jewish student unions throughout Europe and represent its members in international institutions.



ENORB strives to provide a civil society platform of different religions and beliefs to facilitate dialogue and promote the rights and freedoms and in other international human rights conventions.

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OVERVIEW

From 1st October to 5th November 2020, we analysed half a million Twitter messages related to 'QAnon' conspiracy theories, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods with the help of Natural Language Processing AI (NLP) and **Get The Trolls Out!** (GTTO) partners.

Our quantitative analysis identified seven recurring themes of QAnon; support for Trump, support for EU-based nationalism, support for QAnon, deep state conspiracies, corona conspiracies, religious conspiracies especially antisemitism and extremism,

GTTO partners then examined the variance and relative threat of QAnon through a series of cases studies within the geographic regions of France, French-speaking Belgium, Flemish-speaking Belgium Germany, Greece, Hungary, and the United Kingdom.

Throughout all our analysis, current QAnon theories have shown to reflect age-old religious superstition and antisemitism. While intimately tied to the Trump presidency, during the COVID-19 pandemic these conspiracies have spilled over from the US to Europe, acting as a rallying flag for far-right discontent.

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KEY FINDINGS

3,000

different QAnon-related Hashtags

1,250

QAnon supporting Twitter profiles

1/3

of all tweets centre on coronavirus denial

1/4

of tweets originate from the U.S.

7

main topics found among the QAnon profiles:

support for Trump,
support for EU-based nationalism,
support for QAnon,
deep state conspiracies,
corona conspiracies,
religious conspiracies
and extremism

1/5

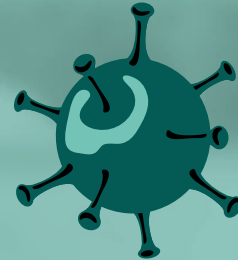
of all tweets target 'Jewish Elite' and 'hordes of immigrants'

KEY FINDINGS



QAnon profiles use similar sources

including Trump tweets and YouTube disinformation videos and also each other's tweets in a mutually reinforcing confirmation bias.



Nazi Germany rhetoric

is found in numerous tweets surrounding the debate in Germany about coronavirus health measures.



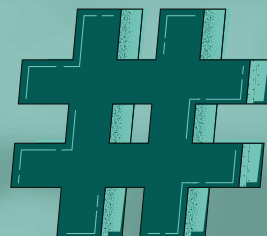
Donald Trump

is often portrayed as Jesus, as a superhero, clad in medieval armour, with references to Bible quotes and a coming apocalypse in which he will defeat the forces of evil.



Antisemitism

is highly prevalent in English far-right groups in tweets with 'deep state' conspiracy theories.



A variety of hashtags

which include support for Donald Trump (#MAGA, #MarchForTrump), support for European QAnon movements (#QAnonGermany, #QAnonSpain), to spread political conspiracies (#Macronistan, #SorosFunded), COVID-19 conspiracies (#Plandemia, #CoronaDiktatur), religious conspiracies (#GodWins, #TrustThePlan) and hate speech (#Holocough, #FakeJewsMedia).

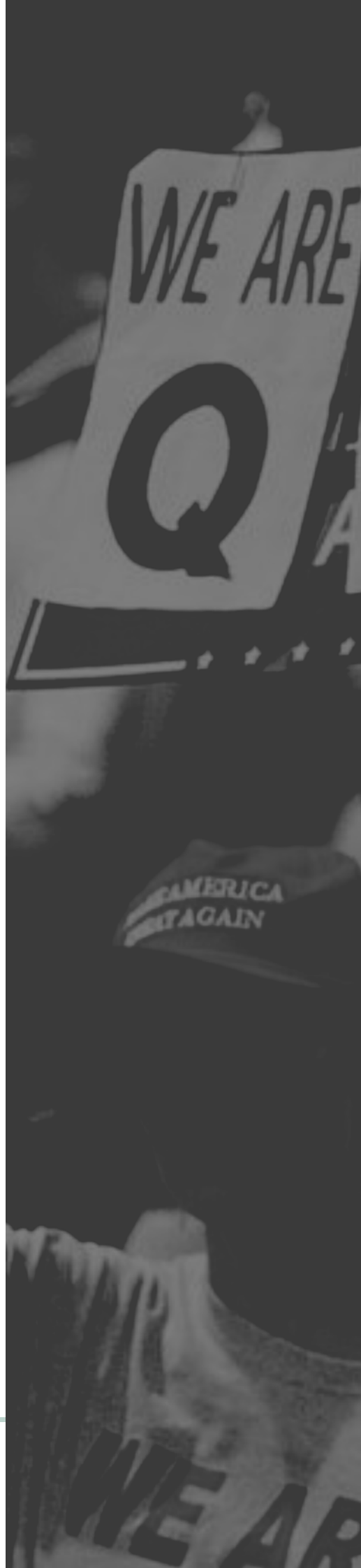
INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories have been constant throughout history, but the 21st-century technological advancements have provided a powerful infrastructure for connecting conspiracy-minded individuals on a global scale. QAnon, the US-originated conspiracy theory derived from a mysterious figure 'Q' in 2017, has become a movement with the ability to produce and promote conspiracy ideas at an unprecedented scale. Its members and followers, united in mass rejection of reason, have demonstrated the ability to produce, share and tie together worldviews that distort and shatter reality, and create an environment that resembles the birth of new religion.¹

QAnon started when an anonymous individual known as Q, who claimed to be a US government insider, pronounced that “an elite cabal of child-trafficking paedophiles, comprising, among others, Hollywood A-listers, leading philanthropists, Jewish financiers, and Democrat politicians, covertly rule the world” and “only President Trump can bring them to justice with his secret plan that will deliver what QAnon’s disciples refer to as *The Storm* or *The Great Awakening*”.² By 2020, Q’s conspiracy theory has significantly expanded. Its followers are believed to be in the hundreds of thousands united by a shared hate of mainstream elites, a belief in the existence of invisible power groups that run the world, ignorance towards institutions of the political and social system, contempt for journalists, and rejection of mainstream media and their representation of reality.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/20/the-qanon-conspiracy>




QAnon believers' claims are complex and contradictory, crossing ideological lines. What started as "a sprawling but unfounded conspiracy theory claiming the existence of a global network of political elites and celebrities who want to take down Trump",³ soon expanded to include a secret cabal running a child sex trafficking ring (#PIZZAGATE), a secret war between the Trump administration and a 'deep state', wide corruption of the political system, powerful elites using coronavirus as a cover to implant people with microchips, governments erecting 5G towers during lockdown to surveil the population, and many other apocalyptic predictions wrapped up in evangelistic Christianity that increasingly defines the movement.

Rooted in populism, the QAnon movement aims to evoke resentments of the everyman. Its series of confusing claims resemble the conspiracy legends of the past, but the power of online social media has given them platforms to share, promote, and connect. Efforts have been made to reduce this power. In July 2020, Twitter suspended 7,000 QAnon-related accounts. In August, Facebook deleted over 790 groups, 100 pages, and 1,500 ads tied to QAnon and restricted the accounts of hundreds of other Facebook groups and thousands of Instagram accounts.⁴ Still, more is to be done.

Get the Trolls Out! (GTTO) is a project by the Media Diversity Institute in cooperation with six European partner organisations. International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism (LICRA), Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, European Union of Jewish Students (EUJS), European Network on Religion and Belief (ENORB), Karpos and Center for Independent Journalism (CIJ). The GTTO media monitoring team, working on the analysis of discrimination and intolerance based on religious grounds in Europe, already observed the rise of conspiracy theories and Qanon on social media platforms two years ago.

³ <https://theconversation.com/qanon-believers-will-likely-outlast-and-outsmart-twitters-bans-143192>

⁴ <https://theconversation.com/why-qanon-is-attracting-so-many-followers-in-australia-and-how-it-can-be-countered-144865>



Online hate speech, usually generated by political extremes, has gradually risen by merging with the US QAnon conspiracy theory, tapping into more and more people's fears and insecurities during a global time of crisis.

GTTO QAnon Report 1 (July 2020) found evidence that, in context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the QAnon conspiracy theory centres around a few fundamental assumptions, spreading claims that the global state of lockdown is not about safety, but rather a means for political actors to take control. The report documented the QAnon presence in Europe and its links to religion-based discrimination.

GTTO QAnon Report 2 (December 2020), the new report, examines the spread of conspiracy theories on Twitter, and the power of social media to promote and shape any given viewpoint by presenting information that supplements, expands, or localises its narrative. This trend seems to be particularly salient with QAnon, where followers mutually reinforce each other to take interpretation and action into their own hands, rather than at the explicit direction of founder of QAnon.⁵

We conducted an analysis of QAnon tweets ahead of the US presidential election 2020, hoping to capture their migration from US-based conspiracy theories to Europe in the slipstream of worldwide discussion about the election. In particular, we were interested to observe what role religion plays in spreading conspiracy theories, the most likely topics of tweets where religion and conspiracy theory merge, and what social groups are most active in spreading conspiracy theories.

The first part of the report (sections 1-8) presents a fine-grained analysis of QAnon tweets during the US presidential election using quantitative methods and new language technology for detecting hate speech developed by Textgain. The second part offers case studies of mainstream media reporting, that touch upon QAnon and conspiracy theories and its subsequent discussion on Twitter in the countries involved in the GTTO project: UK, France, Germany, Belgium, Hungary and Greece.

⁵ <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-qanon-conspiracy-theory-a-security-threat-in-the-making>

DATA COLLECTION

In the period between October 1 and November 5, in the run-up to the US presidential election, we monitored Twitter for QAnon tweets, using the common definition of QAnon as a far-right conspiracy theory “alleging that a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles is running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotting against US President Donald Trump, who is fighting the cabal” (New York Times).⁶

First, we manually composed a list of about 100 known hashtags (e.g. #QANON, #WWG1WGA), 100 known profile names (e.g., @Qanon76, @QanonVlaanderen) and 100 related keywords (*pedocrats*, *sheeple*, etc.). Using the Twitter API and Textgain’s Grasp AI toolkit (github.com/textgain/grasp), we then continuously searched Twitter for matching tweets. We observed around 0.5M relevant tweets from nearly 250K Twitter users in this time period.

We found about 3,000 other hashtags related to QAnon (section 2) and about 1,250 other profiles related to QAnon worldwide (section 4). Related tweets exhibit an alarming level of antisemitism (section 5) and there is little doubt that the users are spurred on by Donald Trump’s Twitter profile, which they vigorously cite (sections 3 and 6).



⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html?>

Some data was discarded, e.g. searching Twitter for '#6%' yields all tweets that include '6' or '%' and are therefore mostly unrelated to QAnon. Other results may include either QAnon propaganda or counterspeech. For the purpose of this analysis, we have aimed to filter out the counterspeech. To this end, we created a subset of tweets from 1,250 profiles which we are highly confident are ardent QAnon proponents (henceforth the identified QAnon profiles). These profiles were selected based on their profile name or description, which must include one or more of 20 predictive expressions like *QAnon*, *QArmy*, *WWG*, *We Are The Storm*, *Save The Children*, *Great Awakening*, and so on, and which were then manually reviewed.

The screenshot shows a Twitter profile for 'Vlaanderen Qanon Flemish Patriots Together' (@QanonVlaanderen). The profile picture is a yellow circle with a black lion rampant. The header image features the text 'SAVE THE CHILDREN' in a stylized font, a figure in a dark cloak standing on a large, light-colored object, and a large 'Q' in the background. The profile bio reads: 'Q supporters from Belgium #WWG1WGA Great awaking! #SaveTheChildren STOP FAKE NEWS and MSM agenda STOP human trafficking!'. It also lists the location as 'Gent, Belgium', the website 'qmap.pub', and the join date as 'June 2020'. The profile has 579 following and 517 followers. Below the profile information, there are tabs for 'Tweets', 'Tweets & replies', 'Media', and 'Likes'. A pinned tweet is visible, dated October 1st, with the text: 'Ik vroeg me af waarom er geen interactie is met mijn account. Het antwoord is schaduw ...'.

TWEET HASHTAGS

The dataset contains over 50K different hashtags. Some occur more often than others. For example, the most frequently used hashtags include #MAGA, #COVID19, #COVIDIOTEN, #SOROS and #PROUDBOYS. The subset of tweets posted by identified QAnon profiles contains about 3,000 different hashtags, where #MAGA, #QANON, #AGENDA21, #PLANDEMIC and #GODWINS occur most often. The top 150 of those 3,000 are shown in the network diagram below, where connections between hashtags indicate that they often co-occur in the same tweet.

To examine the network, it may be necessary to zoom in on the digital version of this document. The structure of the network diagram is interesting. It reveals three hubs around the #MAGA, #QANON and #COVID19 hashtags. The #MAGA hub illustrates how this hashtag tends to co-occur with a variety of conspiracy theories (e.g. #Q, #JEWSWILLNOTREPLACEUS, #CLINTONCRIMEFAMILY) and how it blends into the hub around the #QANON hashtag, which in turn co-occurs with more esoteric conspiracy theories (e.g. #GREATAWAKENING, #SAVETHECHILDREN).

The dense hub around #COVID19 shows how this hashtag appears to function as a hook for additional hashtags written in non-English languages (e.g. #QUERDENKEN, #PLANDEMIA). This seems to support the argument that the coronavirus pandemic has helped to promote QAnon in Europe.⁷ For example, one email received by the BBC reads: "Coronavirus is a cover-up for child sex trafficking, a major issue in this world and nobody wants to report about it," fluidly blending coronavirus denial with the QAnon conspiracy theory that Donald Trump is fighting against a secret elite of satanic paedophiles.⁸

⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/qanon-europe-coronavirus-protests>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-53997203>

A brief explanation of some core hashtags:

- **#PIZZAGATE** emerged in November 2016 during the presidential election, in social media messages claiming that Democratic Party officials and US restaurants were part of a child-trafficking ring.⁹
- **#PLANDEMIC** (*plan + pandemic*) emerged in May 2020, in the wake of an anti-vaccination video claiming vaccines exist for Big Pharma money-making, and that coronavirus was planned for this purpose.¹⁰
- **#GREATAWAKENING** (*The Great Awakening, The Storm*) occurs in social media messages from religious Trump followers, who view him as a Messiah sent by God to stop a coming apocalypse.¹¹
- **#GREATREPLACEMENT** (*The Great Replacement*) occurs in far-right extremist posts claiming that white people are being replaced by immigrants. Not previously QAnon-related, but slowly blending in.¹²
- **#PROUDBOYS** (*Proud Boys*) is an organization of American far-right extremists that advocate political violence, and some of which believe that Jews are seeking to replace white people.¹³
- **#NWO** (*New World Order, Illuminati, Elders of Zion, ...*) is a conspiracy wildcard that alludes to world domination plots by communists, satanists, masons, elites, Jews, Nazis, Knights Templar, aliens, etc.¹⁴

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pizzagate_conspiracy_theory.

¹⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plandemic>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QAnon#Conspiracy_claim

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Replacement

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proud_Boys

¹⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_World_Order_\(conspiracy_theory\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_World_Order_(conspiracy_theory))

Anonymized @anonymized

Replying to @anonymized

#Killary Had 1 Electoral Vote to Cast If #CrookedBiden Won NY and @realDonaldTrump @WhiteHouse @RudyGiuliani HOW DOES #FakeDossierPayer #ClintonEmails Scandal, #QueenOfHaiti Money Missing, #UraniumOne #Pay2PlayCrook #Benghazi Person Get Cast This? She Lost Lawyer License 4 REASON

2:11 PM · Nov 4, 2020 · Twitter

3 Retweets 5 Likes

Anonymized @anonymized

#Anons! #Q #QAnon #QAnons #QAnon2019 #QArmy #WWG1WGA #WWG1WGA WORLDWIDE #GreatAwakening #GreatAwakeningWorldwide #MAGA #MAGA2020 #KAG #KAG2020 #TrumpTrain #Trump #Trump2020 #Trump2020Landslide #WeAre #wearethepeople #WeThePeople #WalkAway #RedOctober

Anonymized @anonymized

#Anons! #Q #QAnon #QAnons #QAnon2019 #QArmy #WWG1WGA #WWG1WGA WORLDWIDE #GreatAwakening #GreatAwakeningWorldwide #MAGA #MAGA2020 #KAG #KAG2020 #TrumpTrain #Trump #Trump2020 #Trump2020Landslide #WeAre #wearethepeople #WeThePeople #WalkAway #RedOctober

Consider: Dept of Homeland Security controlled "official ballots" production.

Dems print extras, not knowing about non-radioactive isotope watermarks on "official ballots".

Military sting operation.

After weeding out all counterfeit ballots, Trump landslide confirmed.

11:37 PM · Nov 4, 2020 · Twitter

Anonymized @anonymized

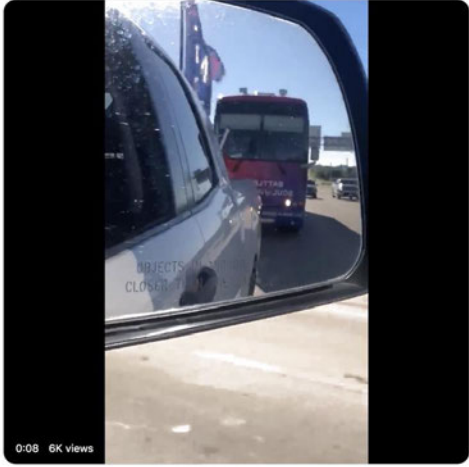
Replying to @anonymized

🔥🔥🔥 EPIC 🔥🔥🔥

You're a Biden supporter?

👉 Here, let us help you make your way down the road ways of Texas.

#NewBraunfelsTrumpTrain #WeAreTheStorm #BidenBusTour #BidenCrimeFamily #OpenTexas #NothingCanStopWhatsComing



0:08 6K views

12:49 AM · Oct 31, 2020 · Twitter

Anonymized @anonymized

#Gematria = "Murder Most Foul": (by Bob Dylan, re: #JFK "Conspiracy"), Buy Stock, Norma Jean Baker (Marilyn) Alive & Remain, God Is Christ & Christ is God, Day Of Atonement=The PERFECT STORM, Stock Market Up BIG, The Lord Is ON Earth, Return of the King, Jesus Christ #WWG1WGA

5:35 PM · Oct 28, 2020 · Twitter

2 Retweets 1 Quote Tweet 6 Likes

Anonymized @anonymized

#SaveTheChildren #darktolight #GreatAwakeningWorldwide #GodWins #HumanTrafficking #CIA #Truth is coming prepare and brace yourself #CrimesAgainstHumanity #Biblical 🙏🙏 #LinWood @POTUS #JFK #memo57 🙏🙏🙏🙏 #justice is coming #holdtheline

Anonymized @anonymized

EPIC | "Every Lie Will Be Revealed - They're Going to be Shocked at Level of P*dophilia - Satanic Worship" - Lin Wood Does Not Hold Back in EXPLOSIVE "Thrive Time" Interview (VIDEO) thegatewaypundit.com/2020/11/every-... via @gatewaypundit

4:53 PM · Nov 22, 2020 · Twitter

▲ Example tweets with QAnon hashtags

TWEET TOPICS

To provide a more fine-grained quantitative insight we identified 7 broad topics that recur frequently in the subset of tweets posted by identified QAnon profiles. These topics pertain to 1) expressing support for Trump, 2) expressing support for EU-based nationalism, 3) expressing support for QAnon, 4) deep state conspiracies, 5) corona conspiracies, 6) religious conspiracies and 7) extremism. Note that there is a convoluted overlap between these topics in real-life tweets, but for the purpose of gaining insight it is useful to treat them as distinct phenomena.

- **#MAGA: Make America Great Again**

Tweets that contain hashtags such as #MAGA, #MARCHFORTRUMP, #RESTARTLEADER, #HIDENBIDEN, and keywords such as *4 dimensional chess* suggest that Trump is a mastermind who is always two steps ahead. A typical characteristic of such tweets is professing great faith in whatever Trump says.

- **#MEGA: Make Europe Great Again**

Tweets that contain hashtags such as #MEGA, #QANONGERMANY, #QANONSPAIN, #QANONFRANCE, etc. These are commonly posted by far-right activists that believe in European Trumpism, i.e. nationalist anti-immigration law & order government policy, or in withdrawal from the EU (cf. #BREXIT, #NEXIT).

- **#QANON: Where We Go One We Go All**

Tweets that contain hashtags such as #Q, #QANON, #QARMY, #WHOSIQ, #IAMQ, #WWG1WGA (“Where We Go One We Go All”). After October 20 there was a steep drop in such content, perhaps indicating a crackdown by Twitter, with a number of profiles in our dataset being suspended on Twitter.

- **#DEEPSTATE: political conspiracies**

Tweets that contain hashtags such as #PIZZAGATE, #PEDOGATE, #SAVETHECHILDREN, #SOROSFUNDED, #KILLARY, and keywords such as *New World Order*. Popular targets are Bill Gates (who allegedly wants to implant everyone with a chip; a *Mark of the Beast*),¹⁵ Hillary Clinton, and billionaire George Soros.

- **#PLANDEMIC: corona conspiracies**

Tweets that contain hashtags such as #PLANDEMIC, #SCAMDEMIC, #COVIDIOTS, #NOFORCEDVACCINES and #IDONOTCONSENT. Popular targets include European political leaders dealing with the pandemic, e.g. *Merkelsystem, Macronistan, Sánchez El Sepulturero, Rutte en de pedofielen*, etc.

- **#GREATAWAKENING: religious conspiracies**

Tweets that contain hashtags such as #GREATAWAKENING, #THESTORM, #GODWINS, #TRUSTTHEPLAN, and keywords like *Armour of God* used by Christian evangelicals to hail Trump's 'church photo op'.¹⁶

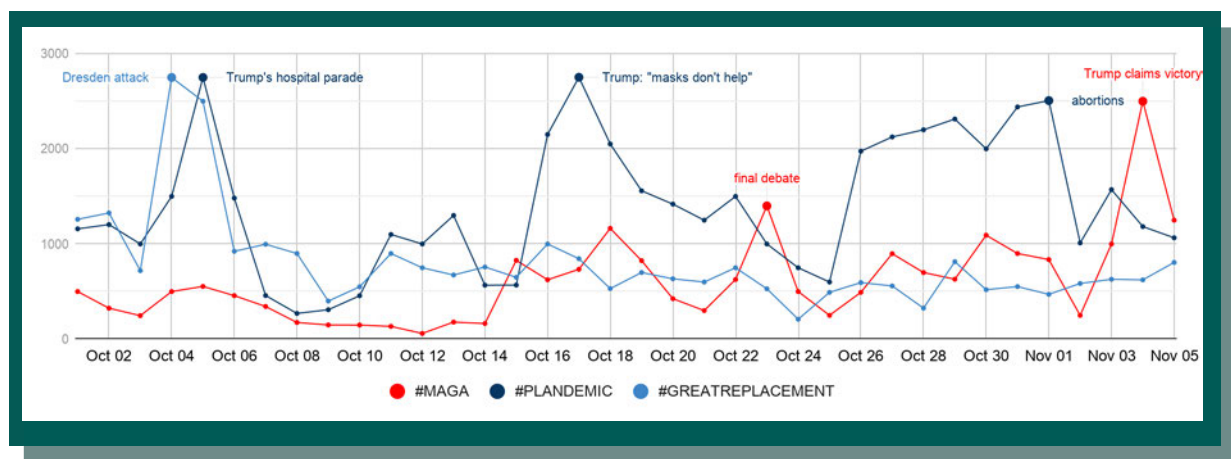
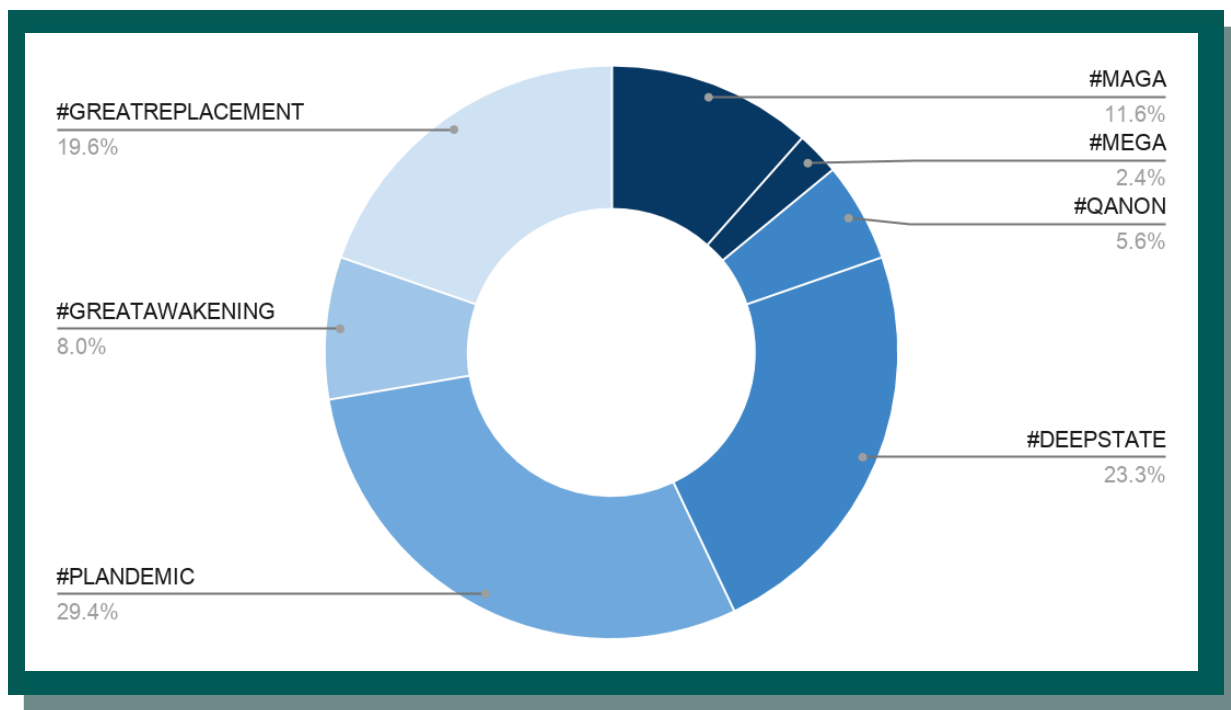
- **#GREATREPLACEMENT: hate speech (esp. antisemitism)**

Tweets that contain hashtags such as #PROUDBOYS, #STANDBY, #FAKEJEWSMEDIA, #HOLOCOUGH. These often refer to the *New World Order, Elders of Zion, kraken, useless eaters, Umvolkung, jihadists*, etc.

Using Textgain's Natural Language Processing technology (NLP), we can accurately predict the topic of each message in the subset of tweets posted by identified QAnon profiles. The figure below shows the distribution of topics among tweets. Almost unsurprisingly, about 30% of the discourse centres on coronavirus denial. Political conspiracy theories occur most often in tweets written in English and constitute about 25% of the discourse, followed by a striking 20% of far-right tweets targeting *Jewish elites* and their *hordes of immigrants* to replace white people and install the *NWO*.

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/54893437>

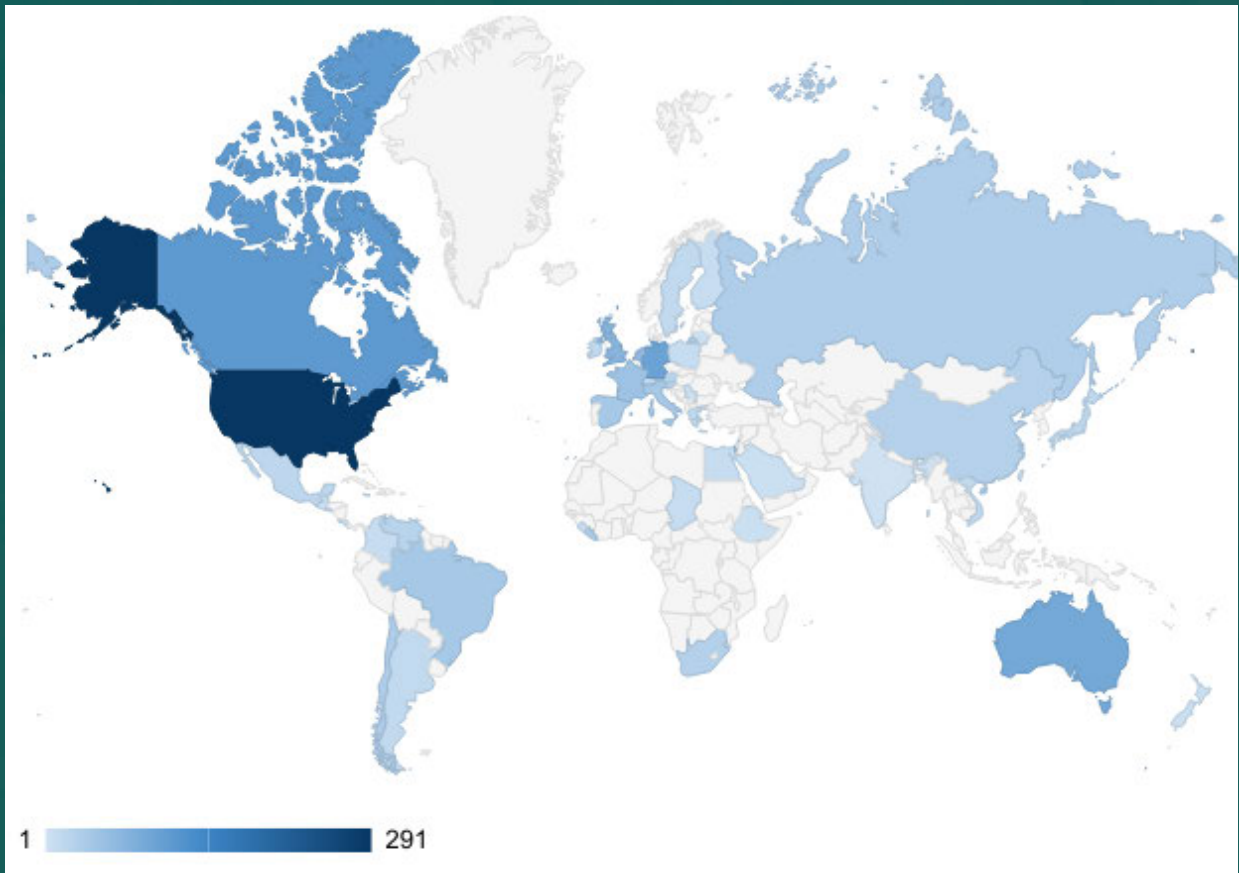
¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/03/donald-trump-church-photo-op-evangelicals>



The accompanying timeline shows the number of #MAGA, #PLANDEMIC and #GREATREPLACEMENT tweets posted between October and November 2020 by QAnon profiles. The spike in far-right hate speech on October 4 corresponds to the Islamist knife attack in Dresden (DE).¹⁷ The spike in corona conspiracy tweets on November 1 corresponds to news coverage about 'home abortion pills' used during lockdowns.¹⁸ Trump's campaigning is usually a driver for any other spikes in the graph.

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Dresden_knife_attack

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-52092131>



The world map shows the estimated geographic distribution of QAnon Twitter profiles, with a darker blue indicating more profiles were discovered in our dataset (most notably US, CA, DE, AU, UK). Some profiles display more than one flag, in which case they were counted for each of them. What is noteworthy in general is that about half of the profiles that display flags express affinity with non-US countries (1/4 of 1,250), supporting evidence that QAnon has become a worldwide phenomenon.

Most tweets in the dataset are written in English (200K, 45%). Other frequently used languages are German (15%), Spanish (10%) and French (10%):

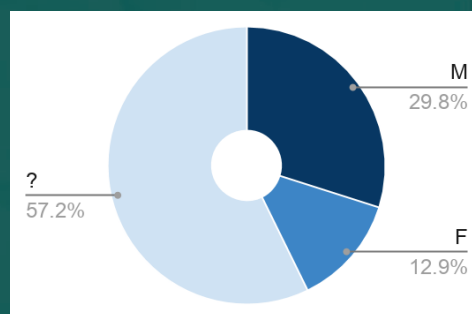
| EN | DE | ES | FR | NL | PT | IT | PL | SV | FI |
|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|------|------|
| 200K | 60K | 45K | 40K | 25K | 20K | 8K | 6K | 2K | 1K |
| 45% | 15% | 10% | 10% | 5% | 5% | 2% | 1% | 0.5% | 0.5% |

The most prolific QAnon profile in our dataset (@BeNosey, EN) posted about 1,500 tweets between October and November 2020. Other prolific profiles include @ThePlandemic (EN), @ElDoctorMabuse (ES), @Daeno791 (NL) and @Wijnand_nl (NL), all of which were suspended in October except one. The average QAnon profile posted about 5 tweets, while other profiles in the dataset posted about 1 tweet each. Dutch QAnon profiles, which posted about 30 tweets each were the exception.

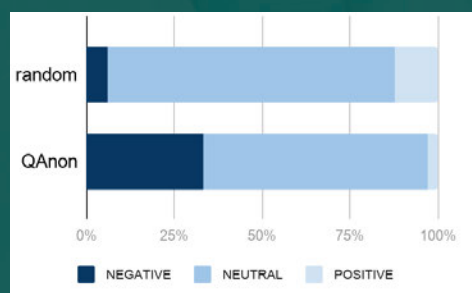
This can mean either or all of three things: 1) Dutch profiles are less likely to be suspended by Twitter and hence have more opportunities to continue posting, 2) they are more productive in spreading conspiracy theories and propaganda, and/or 3) other Twitter users in the Netherlands and Belgium post less counterspeech about QAnon, hence with less dilution in our dataset for that language.

Using a list of over 30K known first names for men and women, we can attempt to predict the gender of each profile in the dataset. This works for about half of the profiles. Others may have names like (((מתקן))), *The Truth Is Out There* and *Systemkritiker*. About 30% of the profiles

have a male first name and 13% a female first name. An overview is shown in the figure on the right.



Using Textgain's Sentiment Analysis API that predicts whether a text constitutes a positive, negative or neutral opinion of the author, we find that (overall) the QAnon debate is more polarized and negative than any given random debate on Twitter, especially in tweets posted by the 1,250 identified QAnon profiles, which is discussed in fine-grained detail below.



TWEET TOXICITY

Using Textgain's AI for hate speech detection,¹⁹ we put a score between 0.0 and 1.0 on each tweet, representing how toxic it is in EN, DE, FR, NL. For example, when a message contains pejorative words like 'kikes' or dehumanising expressions like *useless eaters*, the AI will predict a higher score.

The table below shows the average toxicity score of random messages on Twitter, and the average score for messages in our dataset relating to one of the section 3 topics, along with a bar indicator of how many messages were discovered. For example: the toxicity of a random German tweet is 0.05, while German #GREATAWAKENING tweets are about 2x more toxic (0.10). However, in the period from October to November 2020 we only found a couple of hundred of these (■□□).

| TOPIC | EN | DE | FR | NL |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| <i>random tweets</i> | 0.05 ■■■■ | 0.05 ■■■□ | 0.05 ■■■□ | 0.05 ■■■□ |
| #MAGA | 0.10 ■■■□ | 0.10 ■■■□ | 0.05 ■■■□ | 0.10 ■■■□ |
| #MEGA | 0.05 ■■■□ | 0.10 ■■■□ | 0.05 ■■■□ | 0.10 ■■■□ |
| #QANON | 0.20 ■■■□ | 0.25 ■■■□ | 0.05 ■■■□ | 0.15 ■■■□ |
| #DEEPSTATE | 0.30 ■■■■ | 0.10 ■■■□ | 0.05 ■■■□ | 0.10 ■■■□ |
| #PLANDEMIC | 0.20 ■■■□ | 0.70 ■■■■ | 0.10 ■■■□ | 0.10 ■■■□ |
| #GREATAWAKENING | 0.15 ■■■□ | 0.10 ■■■□ | 0.10 ■■■□ | 0.05 ■■■□ |
| #GREATREPLACEMENT | 0.40 ■■■■ | 0.25 ■■■□ | 0.20 ■■■□ | 0.10 ■■■□ |

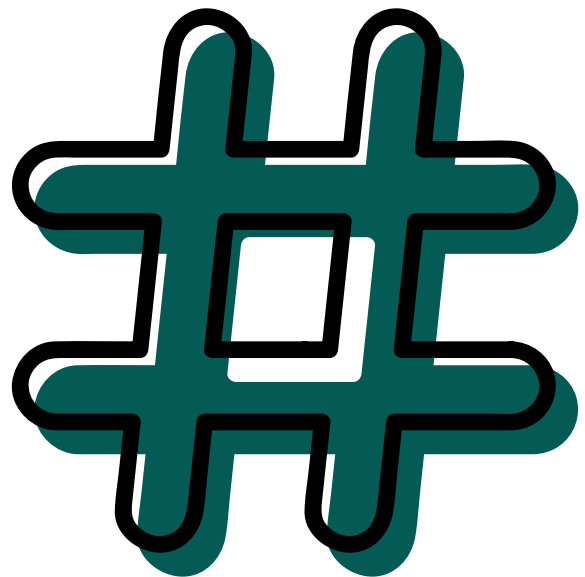
■ 4x ■ 6x ■ 8x more toxic ■□□ hundreds ■■■ thousands ■■■■ tens of thousands of tweets

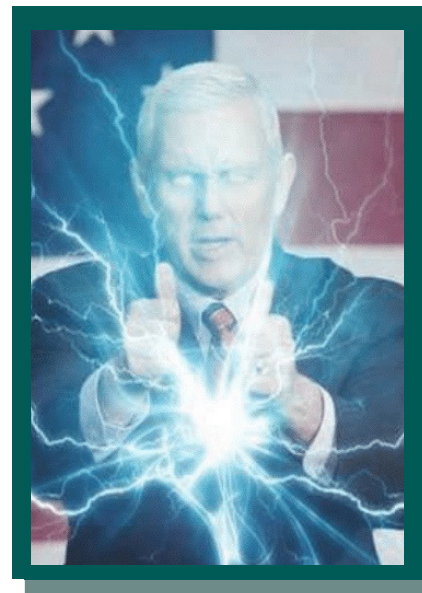
¹⁹ De Smedt, T., Voué, P., Jaki, S., Röttcher, M., & De Pauw, G. (2020). Profanity & Offensive Words (POW): Multilingual fine-grained lexicons for hate speech. Textgain Technical Reports 3. <https://www.textgain.com/resources/#technicalreports>

The analysis exposes two societal challenges. First, English-speaking QAnon fans have posted tens of thousands of antisemitic tweets in the run-up to the US presidential election. For example, one Twitter user with a Black Sun in their profile picture (*Sonnenrad*; neo-Nazi symbol) writes: “I refer to it as the holocough because neither are real,” suggesting that both the Holocaust and COVID-19 are fabricated stories.

References to conspiracy theories like the *New World Order* (secret globalist elite) and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Jewish world domination plot) are common in this subset, as are mentions of the *Proud Boys* (US far-right political violence group), *George Soros* (Jewish American billionaire) and derogatory expressions like *jew flu*.

Second, the German online debate about the pandemic seems to have polarised completely, with tens of thousands of vitriolic tweets. One user remarks: “Das schöne am Begriff #Covidioten ist, dass niemand mehr genau weiß wo er zu verorten ist” (nobody knows anymore who *covidiots* refers to).





One source of German political discord is the *Querdenken* movement, whose followers attempted to storm the Reichstag carrying WWGIWGA flags during a Covid 19 measures protest on August 29,²⁰ and who mention *Machtergreifung* (power grab; Nazi-terminology), *Maskenfaschisten* (mask fascists) and *Coronawahn* (corona madness) in their social media messages. With tens of thousands of conspiracy posts originating in the UK, Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, toxic US-based QAnon discourse appears to spill over into Western European countries, for example including Dutch fear mongering of *cultural marxist* Antifa violence if Trump wins, mentioning George Soros, Bill Gates microchip conspiracies, sheeple, *linkse islamofielen* (left-wing Islam lovers), etc.

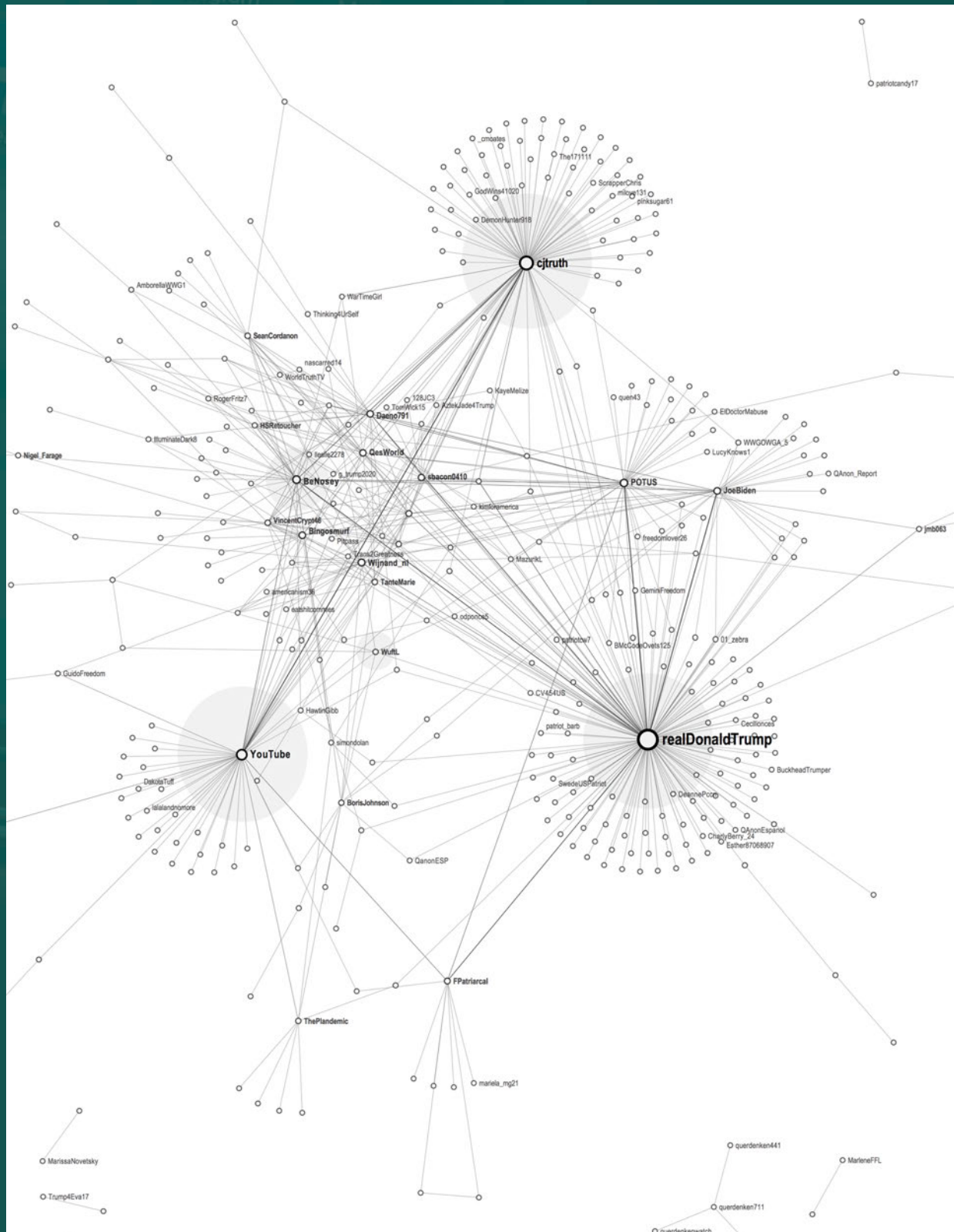
²⁰ <https://www.zeit.de/2020/38/matthias-poehlmann-qanon-bewegung-radikalisierung-corona>

TWEET MENTIONS

How does information propagate through the network of QAnon discourse? Who mentions who? On Twitter, users can include a @username in their post to reply to another user, or 'RT @username' to share someone else's post. In general, there are over 1M users responding to each other's posts in our dataset. Using Textgain's Grasp AI toolkit we can visualize the network structure but it is not very informative with so many connections.

Rather, we examined the subset of identified QAnon profiles and who they respond to. In general, over 90% of these profiles share the content of at least one other identified profile, perhaps as an effect of confirmation bias, i.e. the tendency to search for and favour information that confirms or supports one's prior beliefs. The network diagram below shows the connections between profiles. When a profile name is shown, it means this profile has thousands of followers. To connect 99% of all identified QAnon profiles in a single diagram, we only had to add 10 'missing links', most notably @realDonaldTrump, @BorisJohnson and @Nigel_Farage.

The network diagram shows how profiles tend to tap into the same sources of information. Sharing tweets by @realDonaldTrump or the religious @cjtruth profile is popular, as is sharing hoax videos posted on YouTube. Language borders seem to matter little. For example, the Dutch @WuftL profile ("President-elect of WuftLaffe des Vaderlandsch") shares posts from thegatewaypundit.com (a US far-right hoax website), German posts with corona conspiracies, Dutch posts about white genocide in South Africa, Belgian posts from far-right politicians, etc. With only about 350 followers, it shared or posted nearly 30K tweets since March 2019, acting as a sort of broadcast relay station.



▲ QAnon profiles that share each other's content or Trump tweets and YouTube videos

TWEET VOCABULARY

What words are frequently used in QAnon discourse? If we compare two samples of equal size on two different topics, both would roughly contain the same number of function words like *a, an, the, with, from*, and so on, since these are necessary to construct a readable sentence regardless of the topic. However, sports tweets (for example) will contain more mentions of team and winner, while climate tweets will contain more mentions of *renewable energy*. To observe which words are often used in English QAnon tweets, we compared a one hundred thousand subset of these to one hundred thousand random English tweets.²¹

As it turns out, some words are statistically more prevalent in QAnon tweets than in other random tweets. These include 'sensational' adjectives to amplify personal opinions, like *barbaric, disturbing, radical, suspicious and wary*. There are more adjectives used to convey negative emotions in general (*disgusting, furious, terrified*) and more adjectives used to refer to ethnicity (*African, Asian, racist*), ideology (*left-wing, far-right*) and sexual orientation (*gay, hermaphrodite*).

There are more pejorative nouns used to target out-groups (*libtards, invaders, morons, pedocrats, sheeple*), and more nouns to describe falsehood (*fake news, lies, madness*), i.e. - to deride 'sheeple' who are not awake and unaware of the world conspiracy known to the in-group of Q followers. Some nouns have an origin in rhetoric from Nazi-Germany (*eugenics, final solution, Volkisch*). Popular individual targets include Bill Gates, George Soros, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk and the Rothschild family, for being Jewish, influential and/or wealthy.

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Posterior_probability

Not unsurprisingly, there are many obscure terms that refer to various conspiracy strands, such as *blood libel* (Jewish child-eaters), *Elders of Zion* (Jewish secret elite), *Chyren* (Hindu saviour prophesied by Nostradamus), *Armageddon* (prophesied final battle between good and evil), *New World Order*, *demons*, *witches*, *wizards*, *vampires* and *alien lizards* disguised as politicians. This statistical outcome needs some clarification. In the run-up to the federal elections, we also find a lot of counterspeech in random English tweets. This can be users retweeting newspaper articles or academic reports about QAnon or COVID-19, discussing the phenomena, or posting taunts to QAnon fans. Therefore, political expressions that were often associated with QAnon such as #MAGA or #DEEPSTATE are not always good fingerprints anymore. What remains as fingerprints, which 9/10 times occur in QAnon posts, are combinations of words that are intimately tied to belief systems and the supernatural.

The list of words below shows approximately two hundred and fifty words that, when used in combination, are highly predictive of a QAnon post. Words displayed bigger were seen more frequently. We highlighted the words referring to belief systems and the supernatural in bold. For example, these include *Antichrist*, *Satan*, *Messiah*, *saint*, *savior*, *apocalypse*, *biblical*, *prophecy*, *rapture*, *ritual*, *Corinthians 10:4* (“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds”) and *Ephesians 6:10* (“Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes”). We also highlighted Nazi-Germany rhetoric in [blue](#).

God, blood libel, secret, elite, coronavirus, conspiracy, Elders of Zion, QAnon, awake, saint, satanic, ethnonational, sheeple, Bill Gates, George Soros, Maharaj Rampal Ji, prophet, cabal, Jews, religious, ritual, lies, resist, red-pill, Sucharit Bhakdi, African, amusing, famous, genetic, mankind, prophecy, Nostradamus, MAGA, Jesus, gay, nazi, pedophile, propaganda, visionary, wary, Chyren, Jewish, Blacks, racist, native, panic, scientists, 🧠, awakening, cult, prophets, hornet, chess, radical, corrupt, disgusting, Asian, Hindustan, savior, tyranny, Boris Johnson, satan-worshipping, Satan, sightings, OANN, nationalists, disturbing, world-victorious, storm, theories, christian, devil, Bible, Mohammad, Muhammad, left-wing, swamp, billionaire, criminals, MSM, fake news, pawns, quietly, supremacy, danger, globalist, gullible, ignorant, illegal, Bilderberg, belief, pray, worship, far-right, agenda, alien, ancient, antichrist, sacred, funded, brainwashed, bigot, fascism, Adolf Hitler, Armageddon, apocalypse, atheist, believing, biblical, Attila Hildmann, bio-warfare, bio-diversity, braindead, bloodsucking, centuries-old, brotherhood, chanting, child-trafficking, christians, communism, coup, crusades, David Icke, deep state, demonic, demons destruction, dinosaur, divine, end of days, end times, enemy, Elon Musk, epiphany, evangelicals, evil, extinction, fire, furious, greedy, foreteller, gods, heresy, hermaphrodite, hermetically, human-headed bird, ideology, idiot, Illuminati, imam, Isaias, Islam, Jew, Jihad, Judas, judgment, liberator, libtards, madness, marching, Mark Zuckerberg, medieval, merciful, Messiah, miracles, moron multimillionaire, nanotechnology, nemesis, New World Order, occult, paranoia, pastor, PCR, pedocrats, pedophilia, pharma, phrenology, pope, priest, priestess, puppet, quatrain, Quran, rapture, redeemer, religions, repent, reptiles, Rothschild, salt, satanism, scripture, scum, secretly, sex-trafficking, sinister, spirituality, supernatural, suspicious, terrified, violent, volkisch, weapon, Whites, witch, wizard, zionism believer, deceiver, faith, prophetic, final solution, gates of hell, gentiles, goyim, vampire, lizard, symbolism, eugenics, allegiance, eradication, radiation, rape culture, zombie, barbaric, invader, Orwell, Surah Ahzab 33:40, Ephesians 6:10-11, Corinthians 6:9, Corinthians 10:4-5, Matthew 24:6

▲ QAnon vocabulary, after filtering out words that would also appear in random English tweets



Sent by God. Various popular memes on Twitter depict Trump as Jesus, or as being guided by Jesus (e.g. while signing executive orders), taking a stroll with Jesus, etc. A survey by Pew Research Center found that over 25% of US adults believe that Trump's presidency is part of God's plan, and 5% (1/20) are convinced that Trump was sent by God.²² This unknown artist's interpretation is based on a movie still taken from *Son of God*, with actor Diogo Mogado in the role of Jesus. Here, the actor's face has been replaced by AI photo-editing tools with Donald Trump's face.

Lizards Disguised as Politicians.

According to a conspiracy theory poll by PPP,²³ about twelve million Americans believe that lizards are running the government. The origin of this belief can be traced to a conspiracy theory by David Icke. He claims that shape-shifting aliens called *Reptilians* (*Reptoids*, *Lizard People*, etc.) wear people like skinsuits and occupy positions of power, sowing division to keep the world in a state of constant fear and chaos. Well-known Reptilians include the Clinton family, the wealthy Jewish Rothschild family, the British Royals (especially Queen Elizabeth II), George Soros, and so on. In our data, we find



about six hundred tweets referring to reptiles, as in: "Joe Biden's reptilian eyes! Just like Killary. #SATANICRITUALS".

²² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/12/?programs=religion>

²³ https://www.publicpolicypolling.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PPP_Release_National_1002.pdf

TWEETS IN GERMAN (15%)

Most of the German tweets in the dataset appear to involve the #PLANDEMIC, #DEEPSTATE and #GREATREPLACEMENT conspiracy theories. Users mock the pandemic as *Panikmache* (fearmongering) and the public health measures as *Coronawahn* (corona madness) propagated by *Covidioten* (corona idiots) that are replacing democracy with a *Coronadiktatur* (corona dictatorship). We find far-right rhetoric about corrupt political elites (*korrumpierte Elite*, *Verbrecherstaat*) vilifying Chancellor Angela Merkel as *Deutschlandhasserin* (Germany hater) and the media for suppressing free speech, while voicing support for antisemitic conspiracy theorists such as Attila Hildman (aka *Avocadolf*, vegan cook *Reichsbürger von Reichsbürger*) and public health critics like Prof. Dr. Sucharit Bakhdi, who is consistently mentioned with his academic title unlike leading virologist Christian Drosten.

For dramatic effect, when it comes to face masks, children are often brought into play, as in: “Junge, gesunde, unschuldige Kinder sterben weil wir sie zwingen Masken aufzusetzen” (young, healthy, innocent children are dying because we force them to wear masks). Some of the content is very aggressive, as in: “Der nächste der mir ein Ohr abkaut wegen dem Scheiß Gesichtslappen dem kotz ich in die Maske” (I’ll puke in the mask of the next person who bugs me about this damn face diaper,) or as in: “Laßt uns brachial durchgreifen gegen Merkel’s Gäste, Vergewaltiger, Messerstecher” (let us retaliate brutally/violently against refugees, rapists, stabbers). Self-identifying patriots such as the far-right *Der Dritte Weg* use historically sensitive language to talk about *Kameraden* (comrades), *marschieren* (march), *das Volk* (the German people), and so on.



Mind Control Microchip Vaccine

Proponents of the #AGENDA21 conspiracy theory think that Microsoft founder Bill Gates wants to dominate the world by implanting 5G-activated mind control chips administered by COVID-19 vaccination, turning all humans into slaves. In the religious version, believers point to a patent by Microsoft with number 060606, where 666 is the *Number of the Beast* from the Book of Revelation. Everyone receiving a vaccine will be branded by the *Mark of the Beast* and become a servant of Satan. On the left is Gates as The Terminator (movie cyborg antagonist).

There are sporadic tweets about divine justice with #GREATAWAKENING related hashtags, links to X22 Reports and Bible quotes, as in: "Nichts kann aufhalten was kommt aber auch gar nichts #GODWINS" (nothing can stop what is about to come, nothing at all), or in: "Es wird passieren ob sie es wollen oder nicht, das Gute wird die Dunkelheit besiegen #GODWINS" (it is going to happen whether they want it or not: Good will defeat Evil). Since the data was monitored in the month before the US presidential election, Donald Trump is a recurring topic of course, in combination with allegations of cheating liberals and #DRAINTHESWAMP hashtags. The *New World Order* is mentioned surprisingly often as well, perhaps because #NWO transfers easily from English to German language (*Neue Weltordnung*). The same observation can be made for Dutch (*Nieuwe Wereldorde*). Now and then, Bill Gates occurs as a *Massenmörder* (mass murderer) that conspires to create *Chip Zombies*, while George Soros is accused of financing despised establishments like the European Union.

TWEETS IN SPANISH (10%)

Most of the Spanish tweets in the dataset appear to originate from users in Spain and Latin America. The discourse predominantly propagates #PLANDEMIC (*plandemia*) and #GREATREPLACEMENT (*gran reemplazo*) conspiracy theories, and the perceived influence of Bill Gates and George Soros in IGOs and NGOs like the World Health Organization (WHO) and Médicos Sin Fronteras (MSF), as in: “George Soros, propietario de Médicos Sin Fronteras, trae a Valencia los soldados nigerianos de Boko Haram; las ONGs de Soros son el arma sin armas de la OTAN” (Soros, owner of MSF, brings Nigerian jihadists to Spain; his NGOs are NATO’s secret army). The narrative is grounded in denial of scientific evidence about the coronavirus, which the users think is a scam. They also question the demise of local economy by global markets, the destruction of indigenous cultures and national identity by mass immigration, and LGBT+ rights, feminism and abortion, as in: “Vamos a acabar con el aborto, por siempre, para siempre #MAGA #PROLIFE” (we are going to end abortion, always and forever).



Evil mastermind George Soros

Hungarian-born US billionaire George Soros is a Holocaust survivor and despised by the far-right for funding liberal causes. For years, Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orbán has fanned the flames of hatred against Soros, with state-funded banners in the streets of Budapest displaying Soros as a puppet master, and so on. The 90-year old man appears in almost every strand of conspiracies. He has been framed as a Nazi by Donald Trump, as a terrorist by Turkish president Erdoğan, as a conspirator by British conservatives, etc. With ties to wealth, power, ideological activism, he is always present in QAnon tweets. In a meme that resurfaces every now and then, Soros is depicted as Darth Soros (cf. Star Wars movie antagonist).

TWEETS IN DUTCH (5%)

Most of the Dutch tweets in the dataset appear to involve the #DEEPSTATE (35%) and #PLANDEMIC (25%) conspiracy theories. All sorts of local protest movements such as #NEXIT, #NIETMIJNREGERING (not my government), #BOERENPROTEST, #GELEHESJES and #VIROCRATIE are thrown on the heap of the QAnon super conspiracy. Remarkably, old debunked conspiracies are resurfacing. For example, the #DEMMINK hashtag refers to former Dutch Justice Ministry Secretary-General Joris Demmink, who was falsely accused of sexually assaulting two Turkish boys in the 90s.

Together with prime minister #RUTTE, he is a popular target of the far-right, and on platforms like GeenStijl and Twitter his name is mentioned alongside #BILDERBERG and #SAVEOURCHILDREN in various conspiracies ranging from child trafficking to satanic rituals, as in: “De smerige #DEMMINK beerput moet open. We moeten kinderen beschermen en niet de #ELITE!” (The Demmink cesspool must be opened, we must protect children instead of the elite). In Belgian Dutch tweets we also find #DEROZEBALLETEN, referring to alleged sex-and-drug parties involving politicians and minors in the 70s, along with #ANNEKELUCAS (alleged victim). Interestingly, the hashtag #POSTCODELOTERIJ (National Dutch Lottery) also appears frequently. One explanation might be that the organization’s founder is philanthropist and millionaire Boudewijn Poelmann, i.e. a lowlands version of Bill Gates or George Soros.

Frequent keywords include *verzwijgen* (conceal), *liegen* (lie), *afpakken* (steal) and *bestrijden* (fight). Creative language use is common as well, as in *mondluier* (face diaper, face nappy), *mindkapje* (mind control mask, muzzle), *mondkapwappies* (face mask idiots, masktards) and *pedocratie* (pedocracy). Relative to English tweets, we find less antisemitism (0.1%) and much more anti-Muslim sentiment (cf. #STOPISLAM).



The Chosen One

To defy a horde of satanic child-eaters, God has sent Trump as his Chosen One. Fan art depicting the God Emperor in literal God's Armour is plenty, but the description in *Ephesians 6:10* probably should be taken metaphorically:

- Belt of Truth
- Breastplate of Righteousness
- Helmet of Salvation
- Sandals with the Gospel of Peace
- Shield of Faith
- Sword of the Spirit
- Prayer

In this recurring picture on Twitter, the Shield of Faith seems to have been replaced by a claw.²⁴

²⁴ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:God_Emperor_of_America.jpg

TWEETS IN FRENCH (10%)

Most of the French tweets in the dataset appear to involve the #PLANDEMIC conspiracy theory and the handling of the crisis, described as a *dictature sanitaire* (public health dictatorship). This is the most frequent hashtag and keyword in the data. It is used to express dissatisfaction with the imposed government measures (e.g. lockdown, curfew, mandatory masks) as an infringement of fundamental rights. It fuels recent French protest movements against President Emmanuel Macron, like the yellow vests,²⁵ with hashtags like #REVEILLEZVOUS (#WAKEUP) and #RESISTANCE, as in: “Ils le font exprès ! Il faut qu'ils partent ou alors le réveil de la conscience populaire va être terrible ! #RESISTANCE (they are doing it on purpose and they must go or the awakening of the people's conscience will be terrible).

We also find mentions of Bill Gates, George Soros, George Orwell, Jeff Bezos, 5G, 666, Islam, #BILDERBERG and #AGENDA21 tied in to vaccination and immigration discourse, as in: “Pendant que la minable marionnette à #SOROS tue notre pays et distribue notre pognon... les nôtres crèvent !” (while the despicable Soros puppet kills our country and hands out our cash, our people are dying).

Mentions of Donald Trump (around 2,500) occur less frequently than mentions of George Soros (5,000) and Bill Gates (7,500). This suggests that French QAnon disconnects from its origins in Trumpism and instead fits the narrative frames to its local context. For example, it is unlikely that French citizens actually believe that Trump is God's champion, yet they adopt the rhetoric in a more general way: “On a déjà gagné. La lumière est de notre côté. Sortez votre plus belle armure. #REVEILLEZVOUS (we have already won, the light is on our side, bring out your finest armour).

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_vests_movement

TWITTER QANON EMBEDDINGS

Word Embedding is a technique in Machine Learning to expose related expressions (semantically or by spelling variation) in large collections of text, based on the insight that words derive their meaning from the words that surround them. For example, in online discussion groups like 4chan/pol, toxic adjectives often precede a variety of nouns that are popular targets: *filthy X*, *filthy Y*, *filthy Z*, etc. By using, say, *filthy idiots* as a search query, we can harness embeddings to automatically discover *filthy* <noun> targets that occur in similar sentences (i.e. *filthy bitch*, *filthy blacks*, *filthy jews...*).²⁶

We trained embeddings on 200K English QAnon tweets in our dataset. The model is available for academic research. To demonstrate its use: in section 6 and 7 we looked at polarizing keywords, yet the most toxic expressions usually occur only infrequently. These include creative neologisms, bizarre misspellings, ambiguous words, etc. By using embeddings as a conceptual search space, we can discover infrequent words that often occur in the same context as highly frequent words. The table below shows some semantically related concepts that we find by looking for highly frequent keywords in the embeddings:

²⁶ Voué, P., De Smedt, T., & De Pauw, C. (2020). 4chan & 8chan embeddings. Textgain Technical Reports 1. <https://www.textgain.com/resources/#technicalreports>

PRESIDENT

73,000,000
DECLASSIFICATION
DONALD TRUMP
HERO
RE-RELECTED

QANON

BLOOD LIBEL
CABAL
PEDOPHILES
PROTOCOLS OF THE
ELDERS OF ZION
REHASH

ILLUMINATI

FREEMASONS
PEDOPHILES
REPTILIANS
ROTHSCHILD FAMILY
SOROS

DEMOCRATS

ANTICHRISTS
CANNIBALS
COMMUNISTS
PEDOPHILES
SATAN-
WORSHIPPING

BLACK LIVES MATTER

ANARCHISTS
HARASSED
LOOTERS
RIOTERS
TERRORISTS

IMMIGRANTS

CARAVAN
ETHNOCIDE
ILLEGALS
NON-WHITES
TERRORISTS

MEDIA

FAKE NEWS
HYPOCRISY
LEFTISTS
MANIPULATION
MIND-CONTROLLERS

PANDEMIC

CON JOB
CORONAVIRUS
HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE
HYSTERIA
PROFITEERING

VACCINE

BILL GATES
IMPLANT
INFERTILITY
KNUCKLEHEAD
MICROCHIP

QANON AND BELIEF SYSTEMS

Throughout history, human beings have in times of crisis looked for simple explanations to complex problems over which they have little control, to provide psychological comfort and get on with their lives.²⁷ During a time of political turmoil in the US and a global pandemic to boot, today's QAnon conspiracies are no different and in fact somewhat uncreatively rooted in old superstitions such as an Old Testament-style test of faith, a belief in a coming Rapture rooted in evangelicalism, a belief in a grim Jewish cabal rooted in antisemitism, and a distrust of scientific evidence and policy-making which are not always easy to explain in a clear-cut good vs bad narrative. In a recent New York Times article,²⁸ historian Yuval Noah Harari succinctly formulated the emergent nature of QAnon:

Global cabal theories are able to attract large followings in part because they offer a single, straightforward explanation to countless complicated processes. Our lives are repeatedly rocked by wars, revolutions, crises and pandemics. But if I believe some kind of global cabal theory, I enjoy the comforting feeling that I do understand everything. The war in Syria? I don't need to study Middle Eastern history to comprehend what's happening there. It's part of the conspiracy. The development of 5G technology? I don't need to do any research on the physics of radio waves. It's the conspiracy. The COVID-19 pandemic? It has nothing to do with ecosystems, bats and viruses. It's obviously part of the conspiracy. The skeleton key of global cabal theory unlocks all the world's mysteries and offers me entree into an exclusive circle — the group of people who understand. It makes me smarter and wiser than the average person and even elevates me above the intellectual elite and the ruling class: professors, journalists, politicians. I see what they overlook — or what they try to conceal.

Yuval Noah Harari, November 20, 2020, The New York Times

²⁷ Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K., Seifert, C. M., Schwarz, N., & Cook, J. (2012). Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing. *Psychological science in the public interest*, 13(3), 106-131.

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/opinion/sunday/global-cabal-conspiracy-theories.html>

QANON AND BELIEF SYSTEMS

We may be hard-wired for prejudice as a thousand-years-old tribal strategy for survival,²⁹ blaming others for problems over which we have little control as a mental quick-fix that offers psychological consolation. Throughout history, Jewish people have been persecuted under the pretence of all sorts of bizarre othering conspiracies, from being targeted as greedy bankers in Ancient Rome to child-eaters in the Middle Ages and vermin in Nazi-Germany. The far-right's active interest in scaremongering QAnon conspiracies with a secret New World Order (NWO) or a Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG) is no different.

We may be susceptible to belief systems that offer simple answers, connecting all the dots in our mind, but this is often a form of confirmation bias.³⁰ In the case of Donald Trump, QAnon followers believe that he was sent by God and clad in God's divine armour to lead us through apocalyptic end times, while the man sulks over petty grievances while playing golf and signing in to all seven sins.

²⁹ Cottrell, C. A., & Neuberg, S. L. (2005). Different emotional reactions to different groups: a sociofunctional threat-based approach to "prejudice". *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 88(5), 770.

³⁰ Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Macmillan.

Case Study - FRANCE

Within the following case study, we examine how the COVID-19 pandemic created an environment of uncertainty and fear conducive to growth in the popularity and reach of conspiracy theories in France. In particular, we consider the public reaction to an interview by BFMTV, a 24/7 TV channel with the largest news channel audience in France. BFM TV is known for its close positioning to the national government's perspective but not as politically oriented as other channels like CNEWS. Because BFMTV usually promotes its interviews on their social media accounts, we are able to view how people responded to [a tweet sharing a BFMTV interview with Doctor William Dab](#). After the French government's second lockdown on October 29th, BFMTV spoke with the former Director-General of Health, Doctor William Dab, on November 1st. Following Doctor Dab's restrictive safety recommendations, many flocked to Twitter to express their opposition to it and promoting conspiracy theories about COVID-19.



















In the BFMTV interview with Doctor William Dab, they discuss changes in restrictions from the first to the second lockdown. Specifically, France allows schools to open (not universities), but children six years old and up have to wear a mask in school. Within this context, Doctor Dab recommended that children keep their masks on even when they return home, especially if they live in small apartments. He also recommended they have dinner separately to their family to decrease the likelihood of spreading COVID-19. It is this comment that likely sparked a flurry of comments on Twitter, leading many to turn to conspiracy theories as a way of rationalising their opposition to the lockdown.



“Covid-19: the former Director-General of Health recommended pupils keep their masks on at home”. The tweet publicising the interview with Doctor Dab has 520 retweets, 2.3k quote retweets, and 1.1k likes. Using CrowdTangle, we found the total number of interactions with this content on Twitter reaches almost 10,000. This includes a long list of comments from Twitter users that mostly oppose Doctor Dab’s statements.

We saw a variety of profiles within the range of comments on the tweet, from teachers complaining about not being involved in the decision to keep schools open, to parents characterising the idea as “stupid” and “awful”.

| SOURCE (FOLLOWERS) | DATE | INTERACTIONS | LINK |
|---|-------------|--------------|---|
|  Les Stylos Rouges 13,499 | Nov 1, 2020 | 749 |  |
|  Christian Lehmann 22,273 | Nov 1, 2020 | 572 |  |
|  PENELOPPE 9,873 | Nov 1, 2020 | 475 |  |
|  Simon Dolan #KBF 80,590 | Nov 2, 2020 | 472 |  |
|  Robert Delord 3,075 | Nov 1, 2020 | 440 |  |
|  Irene Tosetti 3,728 | Nov 1, 2020 | 324 |  |
|  Padre Pio 32,368 | Nov 1, 2020 | 280 |  |
|  AymericCaronOfficial 39,256 | Nov 1, 2020 | 279 |  |

We examine the multiple comments opposing new lockdown restrictions and take it a step further by using conspiracy theories to rationalize the French government’s COVID-19 restrictions.

In our review of Twitter comments responding to the BFMTV interview, we found that many users who reacted angrily to the new COVID-19 restrictions provided various conspiracy

theories as justification. One comment in particular seemed to trigger a series of false and conspiracy-related responses that fed off one another. This comment, pictured below, says (translated): “The alarmist whining has NO LIMIT. Children should wear a mask at home according to this doctor. And eat alone! I will never consult him! #Resistance #LockdownAct2”. This may appear to simply be an expression of outrage at the situation, but there are key components of the tweet that indicate support for conspiracy theories. For instance, many people who promote conspiracy theories often use sensationalist words like “alarming” to create a false sense of urgency to generate support.

Additionally, the hashtag “resistance” is commonly used by the far-right, anti-maskers, and anti-government/anti-elitist proponents. It is important to note that this type of sentiment clearly resonated with others, as the tweet received 58 retweets, 19 quote retweets, and 164 likes.

Upon further investigation of the responses to the comment above, we discovered even more radical conspiracy theory content. One user replied with the following: “They are repeating what their masters have told them to say. These ‘fucking doctors’ are always on the TV, and the message is still the same; ‘you will be vaccinated no matter what you think.’ The follow-up will be concentration camps for the ‘obstinate.’” This user is clearly insinuating that doctors are

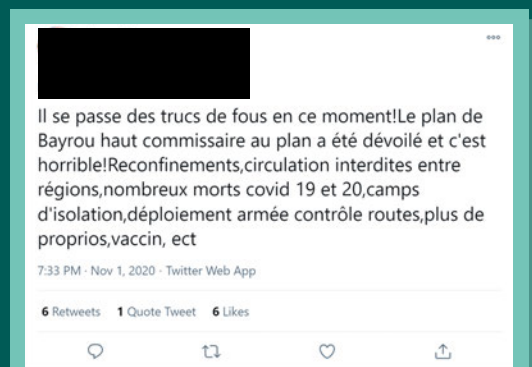


somehow controlled by a larger power and want to distribute vaccines to take control of the general population to harm them further. This is a complete denial of scientific evidence and an unmistakable reference to conspiracy theories. Another user comment includes a quote from Jacques Attali which says “In all countries, it will be necessary to isolate the one who is contaminated by his/her own family.” Attali is a famous French Jewish intellectual, and like other Jewish public figures, he is frequently scapegoated in various antisemitic conspiracy theories.

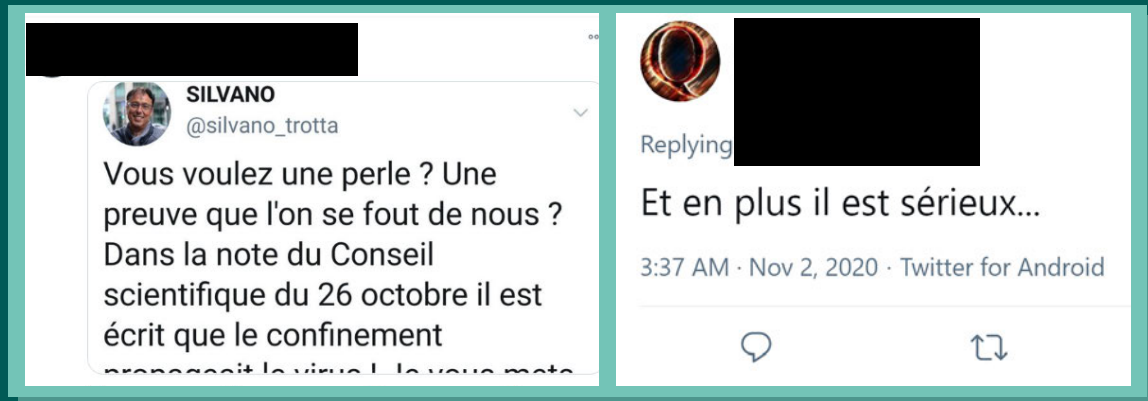


In particular, he is seen as a “puppeteer” in the QAnon-affiliated “New World Order” conspiracy theory which alleges that Jewish elites are plotting to seize control of the world.

Another Twitter user who was very active in spreading conspiracy theories on their own account commented the following: “Weird things are happening right now. The High Commissioner Bayrou’s plan has been unveiled and it is awful! Lockdowns, no movement allowed between regions, many people dead from Covid 19 and 20, isolation camps, deployment of the army to control roads, no more ownership, vaccine, etc.” Adding to the fear mongering about doctors and their intention to promote COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination, one Twitter user said “These doctors are paid by Gilead lab to increase fear... For these criminals veran, macron, Bill Gates, vaccination murderers, to prison with these rotten people.”



Others shared statements by key influencers of the French QAnon movement. Commenting on the quote below by Silvano Trotta, one user had the infamous “Q” symbol as their profile picture.



Overall, the BFMTV’s interview with Doctor Dab angered a number of individuals opposed to the stringent nature of the French government’s COVID-19 response. Many of these people took to Twitter and channelled their outrage by referring to and disseminating QAnon and other conspiracy theories’ ideas and narratives. While these ideas are based on entirely false premises, Twitter users utilized them to frame their wish to ignore COVID-19 restrictions as simply another side to a rational debate. Ultimately, it is apparent that COVID-19 and the response by the French government polarized the public and incentivized the spread of QAnon and other conspiracy theories as a way to rationalize opposition to government restrictions. While this case study focuses on how COVID-19 facilitated the promotion of QAnon in France, it is likely that COVID-19, at least partially, contributed to the rise of QAnon across Europe.

Case Study – GERMANY

Within the following case study, we investigate the alarming and pervasive online growth of the QAnon movement in Germany. In the quantitative section of this report, we discovered that German is the second most common language of QAnon-related tweets in our dataset, and that German language Tweets tend to be especially vitriolic. We expand on these findings by following one thread of comments on Twitter about a Tagesschau.de article about QAnon. Tagesschau is an independent German telemedia service and is also one of the largest mainstream news media websites in the country. Given their popularity, we expected a significant number of Twitter users to comment on this article, especially given the polarizing subject matter. By the end of our monitoring, we had observed a large quantity of toxic conspiracy theory and QAnon content on Twitter in response to Tagesschau's article, a notable indicator of the dangerous prevalence of QAnon in Germany.



In [“QAnon’ in Germany: The Interpreter of Hatred”](#), Tagesschau speaks broadly about the QAnon movement, noting that it is increasingly gaining followers in Germany. They describe QAnon as “a largely antisemitic and racist myth”. They also mention the implication of elite actors in an international child trafficking ring and the alleged all-powerful secret government in charge of the world. Interestingly, they also discuss a Berlin-based programmer who seems to have played a vital role in facilitating the spread of QAnon in Germany. Known as “Resignation Anon”, the programmer has a Telegram channel with 126,000 subscribers dedicated to informing Germans and even international supporters about QAnon’s “very important work”. According to Tagesschau, a few prominent media networks in Germany (WDR, NDR, and SZ) are responsible for identifying Resignation Anon and revealing the programmer’s role in creating projects and platforms to spread knowledge of QAnon to German-speakers. Tagesschau also notes that Germany’s security authorities observed a significant increase in the QAnon movement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When we searched for the link to this article on Twitter, we immediately discovered [15 search results](#). Additionally, [the actual tweet from Tagesschau’s Twitter account](#) has 37 retweets, 11 quote retweets, and 153 likes (as of 9 November 2020). There are also about 260 total comments and replies to the article with a diverse array of opinions. In the next section, we turn to the composition of these comments and the high volume of QAnon-related content within them.

In general, there are two types of comments in response to Tagesschau’s article. On the one hand, many comments make fun of QAnon and say that it is entirely bogus. To this end, one user comments: “For those of us for whom Scientology is too complicated. [laughing emoji] #QAnus #QIdiots”.

Another user tweets: “In other words: the stupidest part of the population.” However, many other users are supportive of QAnon and complain about the mainstream media’s negative reporting on the movement. For example, one user states, “They can't even name the movement correctly, but think they know what it is. A bit embarrassing, but now thanks to that a few more people are going to check out what Q actually is. [thumbs up emoji]”.



Another user dismisses the title of the Tagesschau article and declares that it is “once again typical satanic mainstream media”, a common insult utilized by QAnon supporters to denigrate mainstream media. In a more subtle comment, one user says the following: “Mmmm... quite often, when the #MSM [mainstream media] start to systematically attack a certain group, it's an indication that its influence is starting to be dangerous. This is, of course, not a guarantee of quality per se, but it CAN be an indication that it is worth a second look.” This tweet appears to invite other people to look into QAnon in a seemingly innocent inquiry, however, this is a tactic often used by QAnon supporters to draw in additional followers. This screenshot captures the comment from a Twitter user calling Tagesschau “typical satanic mainstream media.”



Within the broader group of individuals who reject QAnon, some Twitter users reply to several posts in order to debunk or use counter-speech as a tool against QAnon narratives. This is often in a sarcastic or humorous manner.

In our analysis of QAnon on German social media, it is important to note the prevalence of religious conspiracies and antisemitism in particular. The Tagesschau article itself mentions religion in the context of the QAnon movement's antisemitism. In a quote from Felix Klein, the German Government's antisemitism commissioner, QAnon is described as "highly dangerous because it can be connected to so many branches of conspiracy myths". Additionally, Klein sees antisemitism as the "binding agent" between different conspiracy theories. Because of this and other evidence of religious hate in QAnon, we expected to find religious-based conspiracy theories and hate speech in our monitoring of German-speaking Twitter. In fact, we did find that religion plays a major role in QAnon, and we explore our main findings below.

Firstly, we observed a trend of "whataboutism" in reference to Islamic terrorism. In the Tweet below, one user says it is "Typical that the #FactSwindler continues to only care about their favourite enemies. God forbid one would have to ever concern oneself with Islamic terrorism, that would be real journalism and something like that has no place in this attitude show!" This comment seems to implicate mainstream media and particularly Tagesschau in targeting QAnon but also failing to report on "Islamic terrorism". This false allegation focusses unnecessarily on all Muslim people by associating the entire religion with terrorism, an example of the kind of Islamophobic and prejudicial beliefs that are often embodied by followers of QAnon.

In a more blatant display of fearmongering, another user tweeted the following: “France has recognized that Islamo left-wing intellectuals are the biggest fools, a danger to state & citizens. Security services warn of civil war”. Overall, it



seems that both commenters use conspiracy theories as a conduit for their racism by placing speculation and blame on Muslims and the religion of Islam.

Additionally, overt antisemitism is a harmful force within the QAnon movement. In our monitoring of German-speaking Twitter, one user in particular pointed out how QAnon borrows a lot of its material from the fabricated antisemitic text “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” that goes back to the beginning of the 20th century. Antisemitism in QAnon is also sometimes disguised in the form of antisemitic tropes, dog whistles or the use of coded language to express in-group support without seeming blatantly offensive or even apparent to the public eye. One monitoring example from German-speaking Twitter is the meme which pictures a cartoon character unveiling COVID-19 and discovering the letters “NWO” (see below). While a typical Twitter user may not understand this meme or spot anything obviously hateful about it, “NWO” is a reference to the so-called New World Order, an antisemitic conspiracy theory which posits that various well-known Jewish elites are plotting to control the global population .

In this case, QAnon supporters are able to facilitate the spread of an antisemitic conspiracy theory much like in the previous case of the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” Because QAnon followers often use words or phrases that may seem initially unrelated to hate, they are often able to avoid having their content removed by social media platforms.



Throughout our monitoring, we detected an abundance of pro-QAnon comments in German stemming from this one Tagesschau article, many of which are not included in this report for the sake of brevity. From the evidence we found, it seems that German-speaking Twitter is especially conducive to the spread of QAnon and conspiracy theory content. Many of the comments we observed focus on core themes of the QAnon movement, such as the scapegoating of liberal politicians and wealthy elites, the implication of mainstream media, normalization of anti-Semitism, widespread support for Donald Trump, the supposed paedophilia within the “deep state”, repetition of theories like the “New World Order” and the “Great Awakening”, and ultimately seeking out the “truth”. This indicates that not only is QAnon widespread across German-speaking Twitter, but it is also representative of the entire movement. Ultimately, even though the United States is the nerve centre of QAnon, Germany serves as a prime example of how the QAnon movement has firmly established its roots within non-English speaking Europe.

Case Study - HUNGARY

Within the following case study, we focus on the harmful social media presence of antisemitic conspiracy theories in Hungary. In line with the findings from our quantitative report, we observed an alarming level of antisemitism in Hungarian QAnon-related tweets by looking at [an article published by 888.hu](#), an online news portal established in 2015 with close ties to the third and fourth Orban governments. We examine the resulting social media engagement. This article actively promotes an antisemitic conspiracy theory and thus is likely to foster the dangerous spread of antisemitism and hate. In particular, the article discusses a Hungarian right-wing conspiracy theory about George Soros, a well-known Jewish philanthropic figure who is often scapegoated for the baseless claim that Jewish people are trying to take control of the world. The theory asserts that Soros is aiming to attack and take control of Hungary, and eventually all of Europe. Ultimately, this article served as an amplifier for a problematic antisemitic conspiracy theory and resulted in additional hateful commentary about George Soros and affirmative engagement with this conspiracy theory by multiple Twitter users.



The 888.hu article is titled “George Soros himself has joined a series of attacks against Hungary”. It details the conspiracy theory of George Soros’ supposed influence on Hungarian politics through the words of István Hollik, the official communications director of the far-right Fidesz-KDNP party. Throughout the article, quite a few of Hollik’s comments affirm this conspiracy theory. For instance, Hollik declares that the Hungarian government has not and will not tolerate any blackmail or threats from George Soros, thus feeding into the idea that Soros has blackmailed or threatened the Hungarian government in the first place. Additionally, Hollik argues that a recent European Commission migration proposal has led to increased attacks on Hungary by Soros and his supporters. To further highlight Soros’ alleged imminent takeover of Europe, Hollik states that Soros already has control over Brussels and has loyal allies across various European institutions who have financially benefited from Soros’ wealth at some point. One of the lasting quotes from István Hollik is below and blatantly feeds into a few conspiracy theories, such as the far-right Great Replacement theory and the QAnon “New World Order” theory of a Jewish global domination plot.

In any case, George Soros and his allies want to create an empire, a united European state, inhabited by a mixed population, and which does not build on national sovereignty, on nation states, but wants to put it behind it, and with it Christian culture.”

- István Hollik

While this article contains a troubling thread of antisemitism and conspiracy theory affirmation in itself, it is important to investigate the impact and reach it has had amongst social media users. To this end, we used CrowdTangle to analyse the frequency of engagement with [the tweet 888.hu posted with a link to this article](#). We found that this particular tweet has 4 retweets, 1 quote retweet, and 14 likes. Additionally, a few Twitter users replied to the tweet of the article, all echoing and escalating István Hollik's calls to direct hate and blame at George Soros. We concentrate on these comments and the continuance of the thread of antisemitism and conspiracy theory affirmation within them.

In the first comment we looked at, one Twitter user called George Soros “the antichrist and the demon of all demons.”



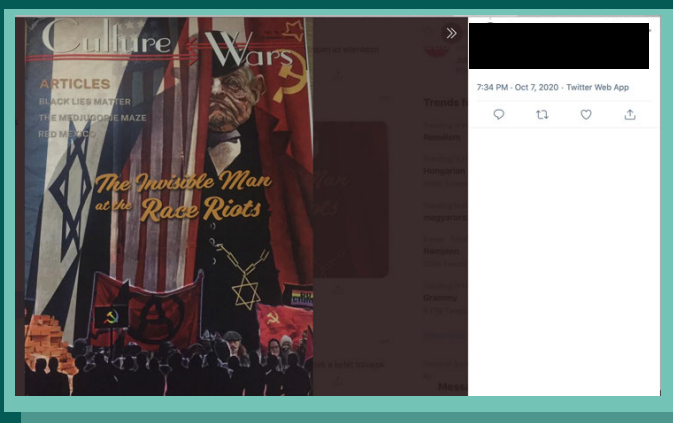
Another Twitter user left an offensive comment about George Soros' age followed by a cockroach emoji to underscore the insult.



Yet another Twitter user posted an image of the cover of Culture Wars magazine with an antisemitic representation of a wealthy old man. The old man was wearing a star of David necklace and hiding behind the flags of the United States and the former Soviet Union and an LGBTQ+ rainbow flag saying “do crime”, an anarchist flag, and a rainbow sickle and hammer symbol below him. [According to the Anti-Defamation League](#), the editor of Culture Wars, E. Michael Jones, is an antisemitic Catholic writer who believes that Jewish people have an agenda against the Catholic Church and thus hide beneath their religion in order to enact social revolution. Further, he says that Jews wish to destroy moral standards, social stability, and political order throughout the world. Jones not only speaks out against Jewish people, but also believes Judaism itself to be actively at odds with Christianity and describes it as having “a particularly malignant spirit.”

Overall, Jones’ entire worldview regarding societal issues is marked by his belief that civilization today is “a Jewish world run on commercial principles.” Additionally, [according to the Southern Poverty Law Center](#), Jones subscribes to many of the well-known anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of Jewish domination and power along with the idea that Jews have poisoned society through the “devotee of Satan”, Karl Marx, and the initiator of an “epidemic of sexual sin”, Sigmund Freud, and that the Holocaust was simply “a reaction to Jewish Messianism (in the form of Bolshevism).” Jones is also known to regularly cite extremist sources and even sells racist “neo-ethnic songs.” E. Michael Jones was deplatformed by YouTube and Twitter in 2020 for violating their hate speech community standards. While this Twitter user only posted a single image in response to 888.hu’s article, it is clear that they intended not only to support the antisemitic and conspiratorial claims made in the article, but also to spread additional conspiracy theories of Jewish dominance and greed.

One Twitter user warns that if Soros keeps playing with fire he might burn himself, and that he will be punished by fate for all the people he put in harm's way over the years because “no one can get away unpunished.” The user



further validates the conspiracy theory mentioned in the article by stating that Soros should be ashamed of working in secret against the Hungarians and believing that he can do anything with his money. Lastly, the user does mention what they call the “lying opposition sites”, citing the independent investigation site Átlátszó.hu as an example.

All Twitter comments responding to 888.hu’s article signal disapproval and often outright hatred of George Soros. Further, users who commented, shared, and liked the original post clearly support all efforts to discredit George Soros, many of which come directly from the Hungarian government. Most importantly, all of the users who commented on this tweet are



actively feeding into a conspiracy theory which is being fuelled by the governing party of Hungary, thus highlighting the consequences of limited and biased access to information in the media landscape for Hungarians and people everywhere.

While the article in this case study was chosen randomly, further investigation of 888.hu's website demonstrates that other articles also contain the same violent disapproval of Soros in defence of the Hungarian government. The common thread, which characterises the rhetoric of many of these articles and the responses from Twitter users, is the outright antisemitism which is used to villainize any opposition involved with attacks on Hungarian independence. Additionally, it is important to note the implications of the Fidesz-KDNP party's spokesperson's claim that George Soros and his allies are attempting to erase Christian culture in pursuit of a united European state. This point from the 888.hu article might have encouraged the responses that we have observed, such as calling Soros the antichrist, declaring his imminent punishment in purgatory, and even posting an image which suggests that modern progressive movements are the result of a Jewish conspiracy. Ultimately, this qualitative analysis reveals how real people are buying into conspiracy theories via social media, especially in Hungary where traditional government legitimacy is being taken advantage of by the ruling party in order to spread falsehoods and normalise antisemitism.

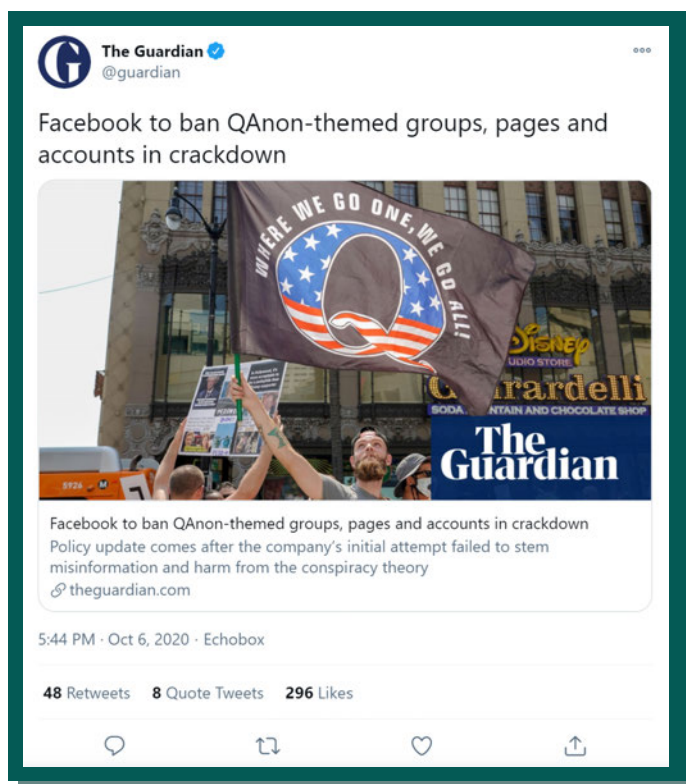
Case Study - UK

The UK case study looks closely at social media discussions developed from mainstream media platforms and their articles about conspiracy theory-related content. In particular, we focus on The Guardian, a globally known liberal-leaning British daily newspaper, and [its coverage of Facebook's recent crackdown on QAnon-related content](#). Before focusing on this article, we monitored a wide cross-section of UK-based media platforms for their reporting on QAnon and found that most of the recent articles were related to QAnon and the U.S. elections. Most of these articles were not shared on Twitter. Only some of the news stories focussed on antisemitism within the QAnon movement. The vast majority were published in the summer when QAnon was growing rapidly. Ultimately, we decided to focus on this Guardian article because it was published ahead of the US elections and it prompted heated conversations about conspiracy theories on Twitter. In particular, The Guardian's tweet on this article triggered a polarized debate on freedom of speech and the regulation of conspiracy theories on social media.



In The Guardian's coverage of Facebook's ban on conspiracy theory groups, the social media platform's reaction is framed as a step towards fighting misinformation. It is made clear that Facebook's move to stop the circulation of QAnon in large part due to the theory's promotion of antisemitic beliefs and hate. In particular, the article mentions Republican support for the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion', a conspiracy theory which alleges a Jewish world domination plot. The Guardian also emphasizes Trump's failure to dismiss QAnon and the movement's rebranding effort in claiming #SaveTheChildren and #SaveOurChildren as symbols of QAnon support.

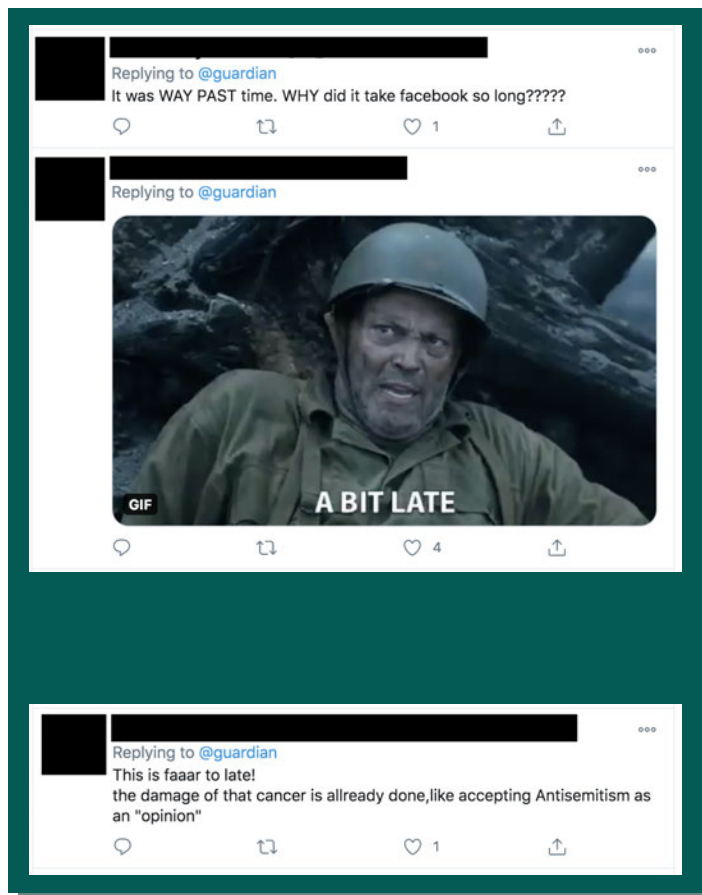
According to CrowdTangle, [The Guardian's tweet of this article](#) has 384 total interactions. The content has 48 retweets, 8 quote tweets, and 296 likes. Given this significant level of engagement, we analyse the multifaceted debate that emerges from this article being posted on Twitter.



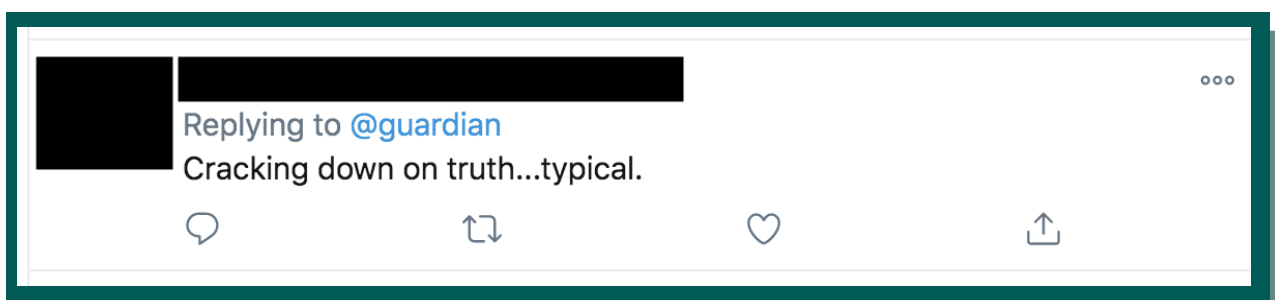
There appears to be two distinct sides to the argument about Facebook's regulation of QAnon content. On the one hand, many people are satisfied with Facebook's actions and believe they are long overdue. These Twitter users express approval of regulation in this case because they recognize the danger of allowing conspiracy theories, and especially QAnon, to continue to expand their bases. Conversely, another set of Twitter users feels that this is a form of censorship and further

“hiding the truth”. It is within this group we observe Twitter users actively showing support for QAnon.

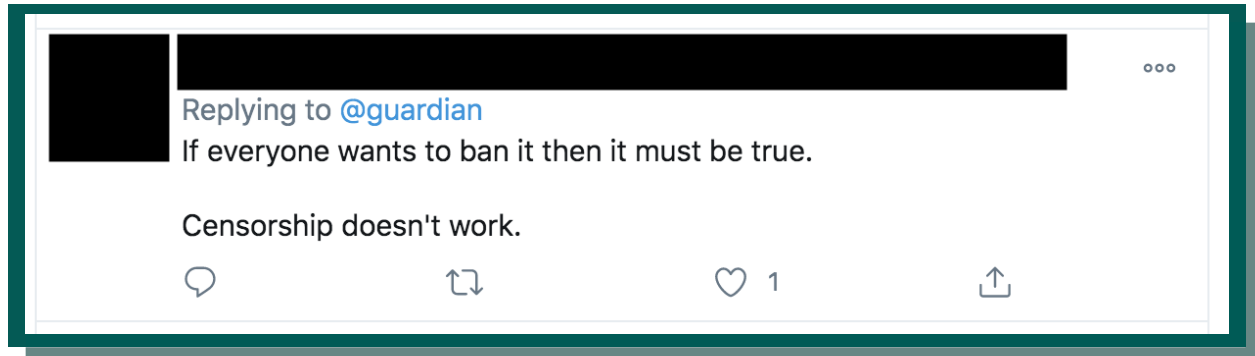
The following screenshots represent the type of comment we find to be in favour of Facebook’s actions. In this context, many Twitter users feel exasperated that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter took so long to react to the growth of QAnon because, as one user comments, “the damage of that cancer is already done.” This user also clearly recognizes the prevalence of antisemitism within QAnon in their comment.



While some Twitter users on this side provide their opinion on the salient issue of free speech, other users disagree with Facebook’s actions because they subscribe to the QAnon theory. In the screenshot below, this user associates QAnon with the “truth” and appears to believe that restricting this conspiracy theory is unjustified.



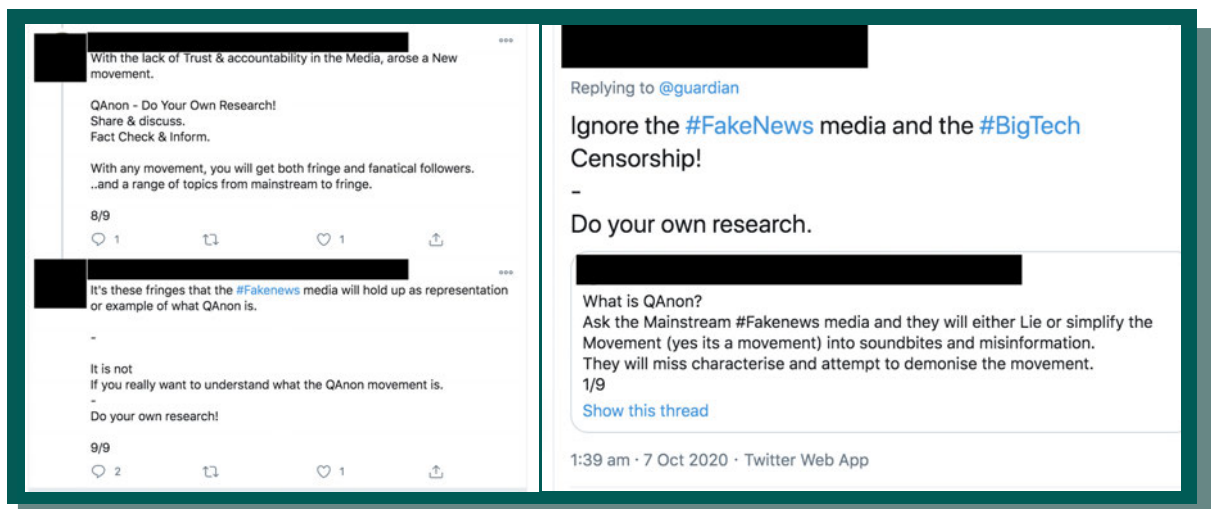
In a similar line of thinking, one user frames widespread pressure to curtail the spread of QAnon as simply a means to keep information from the public. They also believe that censorship in any form is futile.



Another user seems to claim that Facebook made this decision to protect paedophiles, a core belief within QAnon.



One user even provides a link to one of their previous tweets where they renounce mainstream media and encourage other users to do their own research on QAnon. This request which appeals to the reader's sense of rationality, asking them to simply "check the facts" is often used by QAnon supporters to draw in additional followers.



At the beginning of this case study, we note that most mainstream media outlets in the United Kingdom do not share their QAnon-related articles on Twitter. Throughout our social media monitoring, we also noticed that newer media organizations tend not to share QAnon coverage on their Twitter accounts and even seem to avoid using the term “QAnon” on their timelines. We see this as a preventative measure to avoid having content pulled from Twitter as social media platforms have become increasingly vigilant in taking down conspiracy theory content. In other words, it is likely that the existence of platform community standards encourages mainstream media to be cautious when promoting articles which discuss the QAnon movement.

Despite the limited number of QAnon-related articles posted by mainstream media on Twitter, our case study demonstrates the potential for debate if such articles are published on social media. Interestingly, we do observe comments from Twitter users who recognize the danger of conspiracy theories and vehemently oppose QAnon. However, we also discover a number of Twitter users who stand by the harmful belief that mainstream media is corrupt and hides the truth from the general public, a clear indication of support for QAnon.

This intersection between mainstream media and social media produces meaningful discourse about freedom of speech and conspiracy theories. In the future, it is important to recognize this intersection between mainstream media and social media in order to effectively direct attention towards halting the spread of QAnon and other conspiracy theories.

Case Study - BELGIUM (Flemish)

Given the scarcity of reactions on Twitter to mainstream news articles related to QAnon and other conspiracy theories, this case study focuses on two influential Twitter accounts based in Flanders that are clearly affiliated with QAnon. In our monitoring of Flemish Twitter, we found these two accounts to be active spreaders of QAnon content to a broad audience of Flemish-speaking Belgians and Dutch speakers. Additionally, we discuss the two accounts together because of the similar content and target audience of both users. In the quantitative part of this report, we identified seven broad topics which are often shared by QAnon supporters on social media, and these two Flemish accounts post content about almost all of these topics. We build on these findings in this case study by providing evidence of tweets which cover these topics. Not only do we discover a comprehensive discussion about QAnon from the two main accounts, we also observe further discussion and dissemination of QAnon content from Twitter users who comment on these tweets.



The two Flemish Twitter accounts we chose to focus on are:

1. [@QanonVlaanderen](#) - “Vlaanderen Qanon Flemish Patriots Together”
2. [@WakkerBelgie](#) - “WAKKER BELGIE”

Both Twitter accounts are solely dedicated to sharing QAnon content and have 526 and 941 respectively several hundred followers. In our monitoring of these two pro-QAnon Twitter accounts, the content they shared can be categorized under four themes:

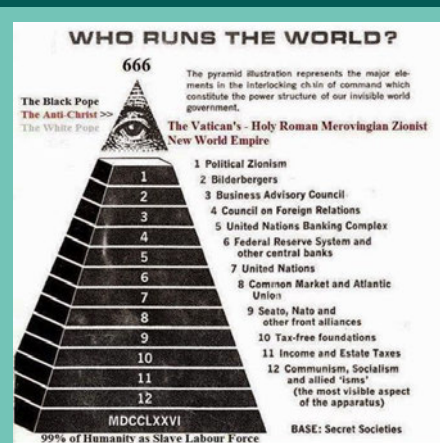
1. Making light of the COVID-19 pandemic and mocking governments’ responses to it around the world
2. Arguing that world power is kept in the hands of a narrow ruling elite and promoting other similarly antisemitic conspiracy theories
3. Spreading the conspiracy theory of a network of child trafficking and child abuse and other QAnon-related conspiracies
4. Demonstrating support for Donald Trump and mocking Joe Biden in the context of the recent U.S. elections

In the following section, we highlight three different tweets from these accounts in order to demonstrate their link to some of the overarching themes within QAnon, particularly the minimization of COVID-19 and antisemitism.

On October 20th, @VlaanderenQanon [retweeted this post](#). It translates to; “Covid was registered in a patent application by a Rothschild scion in 2015 [thinking emoji] why conspiracy theories [nerd emoji]”. This is a clear example of the kind of scapegoating of prominent Jewish figures employed by QAnon supporters, as the Rothschild family is a wealthy Jewish family. In this case, there is also a blatant reference to the coronavirus conspiracy theory which alleges that the current pandemic was entirely planned by elite actors.



This tweet also includes two images which are displayed below in greater detail. Both images are fabricated, which is an easy feat to accomplish nowadays. The relative ease of creating false images emphasizes the danger of unverified news sources, but also the ability of QAnon supporters to spread whatever information they deem meaningful. Further, the tweet has 280 interactions which demonstrates its dangerous reach.



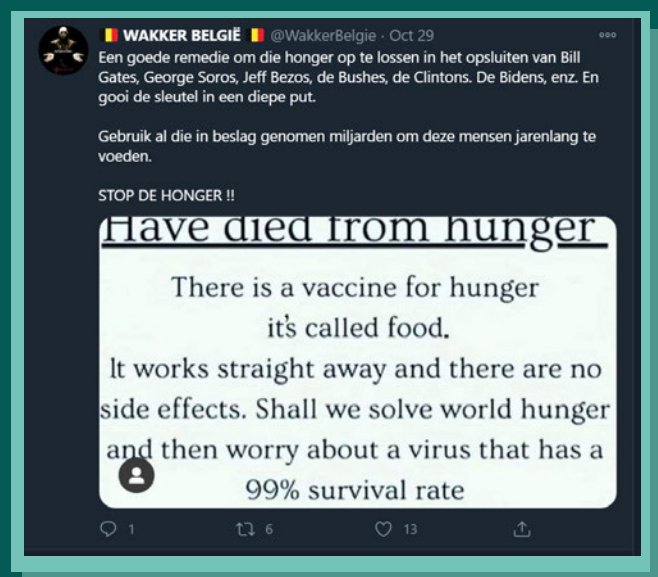
The image on the left shows a pyramid that represents a supposed secret infrastructure of world power. Placing “Political Zionism” at the top of the pyramid, it suggests that Zionists are ruling the world. This antisemitic line of thinking has been around for centuries in such conspiracy theories as the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. The image on the right states, “Why did Richard Rothschild register a COVID-19 patent in 2015?”, further condemning the Rothschild family in their supposed plot to take control of the world through COVID-19. As a whole, this tweet includes two of the four general QAnon themes; antisemitism and the narrow ruling elite and presenting the pandemic as a hoax.

In addition to the original tweet, there are many comments which reinforce these conspiracy theory claims. Above all else, the author of the original tweet actively criticizes people in the comments who question the content. When one user requests a link to the patent website showing the supposed registration of COVID-19 by the Rothschild family, the tweet author responds defensively; “You are already broken by the air of suspicion. [...] I have seen this patent application flutter by before but paid no attention to it > until now! Because it is all getting too much!”. From this quote, it is apparent that this user not only wants to share QAnon and conspiracy theory content, but also to push back on people who doubt the veracity of these theories. In this type of situation, the production of false claims and evidence is often utilized to convince those questioning QAnon to join the dangerous movement.

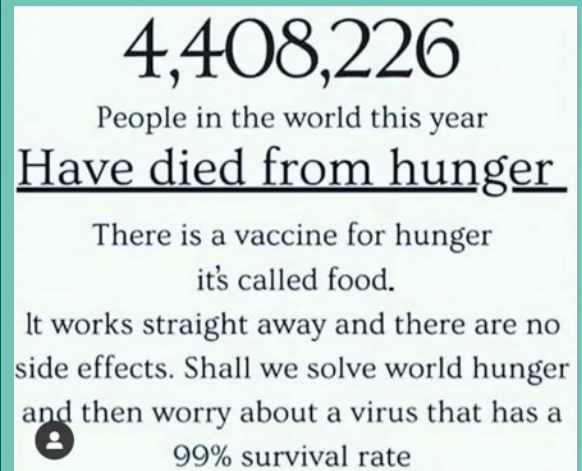
Additionally, a majority of all of the comments also support QAnon. For example, one user says, “exactly, and if you find out who developed and patented the PRC test tadah! [implying a revelation]”. Another user reiterates the claim that a secret government is attempting to control the world in the following statement; “Well I think the name is fine. We clearly see the conspiracy theory that's taking place...except it is the truth and not a plot we are carrying out, but it is a World Wide Plot! Only theory will turn into reality... ”. Lastly, it is important to note that the accounts which interact with this tweet are both Dutch and Flemish Twitter accounts. This reaffirms our overall findings that the Flemish Twitter user who retweeted this content is broadcasting QAnon information to both Flemish and Dutch Twitter users.

The next relevant tweet was posted by [@WakkerBelgie](#) on [October 29th](#). The description that accompanies this picture states, “A good solution to hunger is to lock up Bill Gates, George Soros, Jeff Bezos, the Bushes, the Clintons. The Bidens, etc. and throw the key into a deep well. Use all those confiscated billions to feed these people for years to come. STOP THE HUNGER !!”. In a direct appeal to the political conspiracy

which alleges that a deep state of political actors and wealthy elites has control of the world, this Twitter user clearly subscribes to QAnon. Additionally, the recurrent implication of George Soros as one of these elites serves as a reminder of the inherent antisemitism in this conspiracy theory.



Aside from the caption, this tweet also includes an image which attempts to diminish how lethal the COVID-19 pandemic is. In particular, the creator of this image says the issue of world hunger is being ignored at the expense of finding a vaccine for the coronavirus. By drawing the reader's attention



towards such an imperative issue, they may feel compelled to advocate for solving world hunger and, conversely, to villainize those who are not focused on addressing this issue. In this case, the image also falsely guides the reader to believe that COVID-19 is unnecessarily taking away resources from the fight against world hunger, especially given the statistic of a 99% survival rate without any context. In reality, even though a 99% survival rate sounds promising, taking it out of context fails to acknowledge the enormous loss of human life from the virus, especially since the outbreak is on a global scale. Ultimately, this confirms the danger of fabricated images within the QAnon movement because of the ability of the creator to frame an issue subjectively and in support of conspiracy theories.

Overall, this tweet addresses three of the four repeated arguments within QAnon; the concentration of world power within a small elite, the minimization of the danger of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the pro-Trump/anti-Biden sentiment within the context of the recent U.S. elections. Additionally, the tweet has 20 total interactions.



The last relevant tweet was posted by @WakkerBelgie on November 2nd. This tweet shares an article from The Economist which discusses various conspiracy theories in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The description of the screenshot of the article translates to; “Rot\$child = 21% stakeholder of the Economist Group (according to Wikipedia). They are now publicly warning against the ‘conspiracy thinkers’”. In an attempt to devalue this article’s argument against conspiracy theories, this

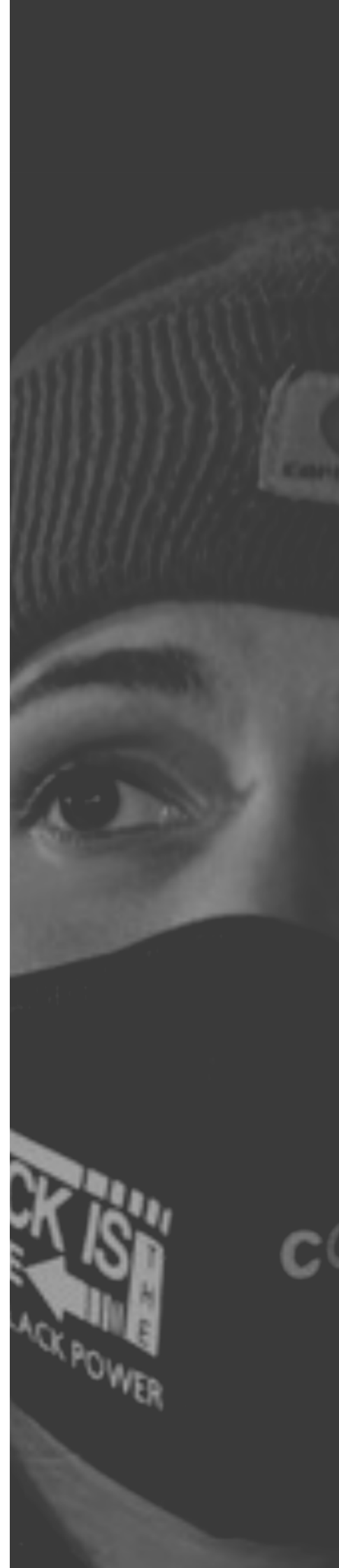
Twitter user cites the Rothschild family’s stake in this newspaper. This represents yet another attempt to vilify the Rothschild family simply because they are wealthy and Jewish.

This case also reiterates two of the four categories of QAnon-related content, namely that the pandemic is a hoax and that world power is consolidated into a group of wealthy elites. In a similar manner to the previous cases, the Rothschild family is mentioned as a significant part of the ruling elite, once again highlighting the foundational presence of antisemitism within QAnon.

Given the evidence presented within this case study, there are a few takeaway points regarding the prevalence and nature of the QAnon movement in Flanders. First of all, it is clear that the two Twitter users we monitored are part of an online space where Flemish-speaking Belgians and Dutch speakers go to learn about and support the QAnon movement. Additionally, this space is often filled with the same overarching theories repeated by all proponents of QAnon across the globe. In particular, we observed multiple cases of antisemitism and coronavirus conspiracies. Ultimately, even though we were not able to find any references to QAnon within the comments of mainstream media articles on Twitter, we still discovered the unmistakable presence of online support for QAnon within Flanders.

Case Study – BELGIUM (French-speaking)

In the following case study, we look at the link between mainstream media and social media and how this connection can lead to the spread of conspiracy theories. Specifically, we find that mainstream media coverage of conspiracy theories like QAnon can lead to the spread of these viewpoints on Twitter. In order to examine this issue, we monitored the websites and subsequently the Twitter accounts of various major news media outlets in French-speaking Belgium for articles discussing the QAnon conspiracy theory. In previous media monitoring, we found that many Belgian people rely on larger French-speaking groups, the French press, or American news outlets, to get QAnon-related information. Therefore, we expected a low rate of engagement on Belgian news outlets' Twitter accounts. However, we did find [a relevant article by Le Soir](#), one of the most popular Francophone newspapers in Belgium, which was shared on their Twitter account. This article focusses on Marjorie Taylor Greene, a pro-Trump candidate recently elected to the U.S. House of Representatives who has openly expressed her support for the QAnon movement. In response to Le Soir's tweet publicizing this article, we identified various Twitter users who demonstrated strong support for QAnon by engagement in discussions about the conspiracy theory.



In Le Soir's article entitled "Élections au Congrès américain: une pro-Trump proche des complotistes QAnon remporte un siège" (US congressional elections: A pro-Trump [candidate] close to QAnon conspirators wins a seat), they report that Ms. Taylor Greene acknowledged being part of the pro-Trump QAnon movement during her primary campaign. QAnon is further described as a far-right movement which supports the idea that Donald Trump is waging a secret war against a global sect of Satanist paedophiles. Prominent figures such as the Clintons, the Obamas, the Rothschilds, George Soros, and other well-known figures are supposedly within this secret "deep state". In a public endorsement of the QAnon movement, Majorie Taylor Greene said in 2017 that "Q is a patriot" and that electing her "is a lifetime opportunity to take down this global cabal of Satanist paedophiles and I think we have the right president for it." Additionally, Taylor Greene has said that white men are "the most abused group in America today" and has denied that African Americans are victims of racism in the U.S. When discussing the 2018 election of two Muslim women to the House of Representatives, she referred to their victories as "an Islamic invasion".

Given her public endorsement of QAnon as well as her racist and Islamophobic commentary, we expected that some QAnon supporters would utilize Twitter to defend this conspiracy theory in the comments of Le Soir's article on the platform.

Le Soir has more than 400k followers but the tweet publicizing this article, received only 3 retweets and 2 likes.



The level of engagement for these types of posts is usually low, and this number of retweets and likes is about average compared to other articles shared by major French-speaking Belgian media outlets. Importantly, the tweet also received 10 comments, and we examine these in the next section.

The first user (below) replies that “The whole of America agrees with Q without even realising it.” The second user says “This country is getting scarier and scarier!”, which triggers back-and-forth comments between them and a third user. The third user says that it is actually worse in Europe due to the media as “the more people watch it, the more they believe it!”. With this comment, the user shows that they are adopting the QAnon movement’s rejection of mainstream media and this conspiracy theory. Further, when the second user responds that not all the media is bad and that only certain outlets, politicians, and members of the public are responsible for spreading fear, the third user says that they have not seen a Belgian newspaper or journalist report issues that

are relevant to the public in several years, and instead they only speak to what interests them because that’s what they have always done to keep Europe distracted. This further demonstrates allegiance to QAnon and specifically the belief that a deep state of political actors controls mainstream media narratives across the globe.



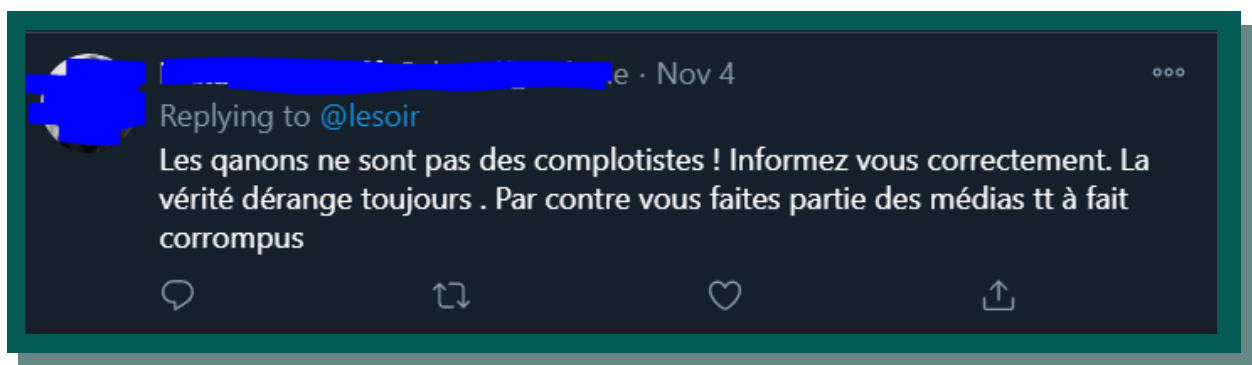
The QAnon supporter in this Twitter conversation goes on to say that “at this point you are all accomplices!!! I hope that justice will be done! For all the harm that you inflict on people’s minds and the attempts to distort reality and sell it!!! And for protecting child abusers!!!”. The user’s belief that mainstream media is distorting reality and spreading falsehoods in order to protect the group of elites who are supposedly participating in paedophilia fits with the rhetoric of QAnon. Additionally, the Twitter user insults Le Soir’s article and says that people call QAnon supporters a bunch of idiots who believe in conspiracy theories, in order to stop them from digging around and finding the truth. Lastly, they end with the phrase “Move along sheep!”, referring to the idea that those who

do not support QAnon do not know the truth and are therefore being herded around without knowing what is truly going on, like sheep. ‘Sheeple’ a combination of sheep and people, was one of the 100 key words used to search for QAnon related content in the quantitative part of our study. Another user comments that everyone is always ganging up on President Trump despite all the work he has done to



fight the cabal. “Europe is becoming sick, frankly disgusting”, framing the U.S. president as a saviour as many other QAnon supporters commonly do. They also say that Belgian people should focus on their own problem with their politicians who only think about money. Lastly, a user who commented previously about America being behind Q, adds the following response: “Close to the QAnons? So you obviously still haven’t figured out who is behind this Q? Journalist for 2 cents!”

In this last comment, another Twitter user states that “QAnons are not conspirators! Inform yourselves properly”. The user warns that when ordinary people understand the truth, it can be scary, however “if you are part of the media, you are the corrupt ones.” These remarks eerily echo a few core tenets of the QAnon conspiracy, identified in the first part of this report.



In all comments that support QAnon on Le Soir’s post, all except for one Twitter user, believe that mainstream media is corrupt and refuse to acknowledge that QAnon is a conspiracy theory. When we looked at the accounts of three of these users, we also found that they actively spread content about QAnon and other conspiracy theories, including the idea that COVID-19 is a hoax and that the American elections were fraudulent. Many users were also strong Trump supporters, a finding which aligns with the typical profile of a QAnon supporter.

In the broader context of French-speaking Belgian media, a significant number of articles cover news surrounding the QAnon movement. However, as previously noted, many of them are not shared on social media, and those that are shared receive a low level of engagement on average. Francophone Belgian news outlets that cover QAnon often connect it to violence and hate in general, but also antisemitism like the alleged involvement of Soros, the Rothschild family and Holocaust denial. Though Twitter is not a major social media outlet in French-speaking Belgium, in this case study, we found that even those who do engage with mainstream media coverage of QAnon participate in the spread of this conspiracy theory. These users frequently repeat the same fundamental “truths” of QAnon in what seems to be an attempt to garner credibility in the eyes of the public, or at the very least to draw in any additional supporters. These beliefs in finding the truth, rejecting mainstream media, supporting Trump, and refusing to be reduced to a conspiracy theory are not just consistent with users living in French-speaking Belgium, but rather across the globe. In combination with the accessibility of social media, it is this consistency which is most dangerous in the growth of the QAnon support base.

Case Study - GREECE

Within the Greece case study, we investigate whether or not QAnon and related conspiracy theories have gained significant traction in Greek-speaking Twitter. Throughout our initial monitoring of Greek mainstream media, we found a limited amount of QAnon-related coverage by media outlets. Further, we observed almost no interactions demonstrating support for QAnon within the Twitter threads of these articles. Still, there mainstream media occasionally reported on the issue and here we examine [an article entitled “Masks everywhere, but in the faithful”](#) from Kathimerini, a well-established, respected, long-standing Greek newspaper with a conservative centre-right agenda. Ultimately, while this article receives criticism from a number of Twitter users, there is no strong link between these comments and QAnon but there is a link to other conspiracy theories, such as the anti-mask movement, anti-vaccination movement, ‘New World Order’ (NOW) targeting Christian Greeks and 5G as a means of global elite control.



In their reporting on COVID-19 and religion, Kathimerini discusses how people attending church in Greece during the COVID-19 pandemic often do not follow public health guidelines. In particular, a significant number of church attendees and church officials have gathered without masks or proper social distancing despite the mask mandate in place everywhere. Additionally, some Christian Orthodox believers and priests associated with the anti-mask movement have said they think masks are useless in the fight against the coronavirus. Overall, we believe that

the controversial topic of this article is likely to encourage commentary on social media and we analyse the comments we found on the Twitter thread for this article next.

The [initial tweet](#) from Kathimerini's account has 27 retweets, 9 quote retweets, and 62 likes. Additionally, there are 17 comments associated with the tweet. These comments include two types of responses. One group of users highlights the role of the Greek Orthodox church in



spreading misinformation about COVID-19. Another group of users directly opposes the stance taken by the newspaper and criticises it for spreading lies. While the Twitter users who criticise Kathimerini employ a variety of religion-based insults, we find that there is no concrete evidence of a connection to QAnon or other conspiracy theories within these comments. Nevertheless, we look at some of the comments below.

In a complaint about the negative coverage of the Christian Orthodox Church, one user says “Enough with the Church. We get it. Will you now publish anything (...) about the Islamists who protested against Macron? You’ve changed direction, we have understood everything”. Another user also denounces what they see as a singular focus by the media on Christians and a failure to acknowledge the “herds of immigrants and anarchists”. Most users that oppose this article call the newspaper “Turkish” as a way of signalling that the newspaper supposedly serves an anti-Greek agenda. One user even responds with the following comment: “Unacceptable and traitors to their compatriots and themselves.”

It is important to note that in our monitoring of Greek-speaking social media, we found that other conspiracy theories, such as the anti-mask movement, anti-vaccination movement, and the conspiracy theory about 5G as a means of global elite control, have a larger audience on Twitter than QAnon. In general, supporters of these theories do not blame Jews or Muslims specifically, but rather argue that a “New World Order” targets Christian Greeks and benefits immigrants, Muslims, and everyone else. Even though there are some xenophobic and Islamophobic comments in response to Kathimerini’s article, there are no further references to any of these conspiracy theories within this Twitter thread.

In addition to Kathimerini, we also monitored a variety of Greek media outlets for QAnon related reporting. As a result, we found 10 Twitter posts by well-established Greek media outlets criticizing the QAnon movement, and we attach some of these examples below.

inside story. @insidestory_gr · 13 Οκτ

Το Facebook κατεβάζει τους λογαριασμούς #QAnon, των συνωμοσιολόγων που συνδέονται με τους αντιεμβολιαστές και σπέρνουν ψευδείς ειδήσεις. Αυτό το άρθρο εξηγεί τι συμβαίνει στις σκοτεινές γωνίες των σόσιαλ μίντια. #Plandemic

Plandemic: Η ακροδεξιά συναντά τους αντιεμβολια...
 Ποιοι κρύβονται πίσω από την πανδημία; Ποια σχέδια απεργάζονται; Ποιος κερδίζει και τι ακριβώς...
 ↪ insidestory.gr

LIFO @lifomag

Ο Τραμπ αρνήθηκε να αποκηρύξει τη συνωμοσιολογική QAnon - Οι θεωρίες για παιδεραστία και σατανισμό

Ο Τραμπ αρνήθηκε να αποκηρύξει τη συνωμοσιολογική QAnon...
 Ο πρόεδρος Ντόναλντ Τραμπ απέφυγε ξανά να καταδικάσει την QAnon, την ομάδα που διασπείρει θεωρίες συνωμοσίας
 ↪ lifo.gr

5:30 μ.μ. · 16 Οκτ 2020 · Echobox

1 Επισήμανση "Μου αρέσει"

Ioannina24.gr @ioannina24

Το YouTube θα απαγορεύσει τα QAnon βίντεο που στοχοποιούν άτομα ή ομάδες: Παρά το ότι η αλλαγή δεν αποτελεί μια πλήρη απαγόρευση στην προώθηση της θεωρίας συνωμοσίας, το YouTube περιμένει από τη νέα πολιτική να έχει ένα σημαντικό αντίκτυπο στο... dlvr.it/RjzNj0



5:17 μ.μ. · 20 Οκτ 2020 · dlvr.it

Protagon.gr @protagongr

Τα τρία «δεν» του Τραμπ: Δεν συμφωνώ με τη μάσκα, δεν ξέρω πότε έκανα τεστ, δεν καταδικάζω την QAnon



Τα τρία «δεν» του Τραμπ: Δεν συμφωνώ με τη μάσκα, δεν ξέρω πότε έκανα τε...
 Στην τηλεοπτική συνέντευξή του στο NBC, ο πρόεδρος των ΗΠΑ εμφανίστηκε απρόθυμος να προτείνει προς τους ψηφοφόρους τα μέτρα ασφαλείας που ...
 ↪ protagon.gr

12:18 μ.μ. · 16 Οκτ 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

Thanasis @thanasisgal · 16 Οκτ

Real.gr @Real_gr

Ο Τραμπ απέφυγε ξανά να καταδικάσει την QAnon - Περιθωριακή ομάδα που διασπείρει θεωρίες συνωμοσίας - BINTEO

Ο Τραμπ απέφυγε ξανά να καταδικάσει την QAnon - Περιθωριακή ομάδα που διασπείρει θεωρίες συνωμοσίας...
 ↪ real.gr

9:30 π.μ. · 16 Οκτ 2020 · dlvr.it

Within the Greek Twittersphere, QAnon supporters commenting on mainstream media posts are rare. The one we identified during the monitoring period was a response to the Greek edition of the Huffington Post's tweet about the QAnon movement. One Twitter user comments the following: "What do you mean by 'far-right'. Because I am also Q and consider myself in the (political) centre." Upon further inspection, this user has also declared their affiliation with QAnon in other Twitter threads. However, the type of content they tweet also leaves open the possibility that they are a troll of QAnon supporters. Regardless, this account is the only one we found that responded to a tweet from a Greek mainstream media outlet with some sort of association to QAnon.

Throughout our examination of Greek-speaking Twitter, we found evidence of conspiracy theories such as NWO, but almost no evidence of support for the QAnon as a movement. Despite the fact that Greek media coverage of the QAnon movement does exist, this content does not seem to entice Greek-speaking QAnon followers to comment on these types of tweets. We attribute this insignificant buzz to the overall absence of a QAnon community in



Greece and the relatively low level of popularity of Twitter amongst Greek social media users. In this sense, further monitoring of other social media platforms should be done to determine if Greek-speaking QAnon supporters organize on platforms other than Twitter. Further, it is also entirely possible that Greece is just an outlier compared to the other European countries in these case studies which have some degree of a QAnon presence on social media.

SUMMARY

This report looked at the spread of conspiracy theories on Twitter in the month before the 2020 US presidential election. Focusing on QAnon, Twitter and the US elections we aimed to explore one of the digital spaces where conspiracy theories are present, discussed, and contested.

There are several reasons for focusing on Twitter. Its increasing use – some estimates 330 million people used Twitter monthly in 2020 – has made it a powerful tool and element of political communication. Twitter has changed since its inception in 2006. It has shifted from encouraging users to share personal information in response to the initial question ‘what are you doing’ to a real time information network on ‘what is happening’. This change occurred roughly in 2009. This shift has had a profound impact on public debates. In academic terms, it brought concerns about “the ability of digital media to support the formation of a public sphere, where a diversity of opinion and information can interact, or, conversely, to function as an echo chamber that reinforces established perspectives and opinions”. In political communication, it gave an opportunity to politicians such as Donald Trump to promote, facilitate and mobilize social groups at unprecedented scale.



The ***Get The Trolls Out!*** media monitoring team, working on the analysis of discrimination and intolerance based on religious grounds in Europe since 2015, identified the rise of conspiracy theories and QAnon in particular on social media platforms. Our objective in this study was to explore the process of migration of US-based conspiracy theories to Europe and the points at which religion and conspiracy theory merge.

QAnon conspiracies are a signifier of wider social, political and communication processes. What started as “a sprawling but unfounded conspiracy theory claiming the existence of a global network of political elites and celebrities who want to take down Trump” (The Atlantic, June 2020), has expanded to include a secret cabal running a child sex trafficking ring (Pizzagate), a secret war between the Trump administration and a ‘deep state’, wide corruption of the political system, powerful elites using coronavirus as a cover to implant people with microchips, governments erecting 5G towers during lockdown to surveil the population, and many other apocalyptic predictions wrapped up in evangelistic Christianity that increasingly defines the movement.

Part 1 of the report presents results of the quantitative analysis of about half a million tweets posted in October 2020. We found about 3,000 different hashtags related to QAnon and 1,250 Twitter profiles, mainly from the US (300) then Canada (30), Germany (25), Australia (20), the United Kingdom (20), the Netherlands (15), France (15), Italy (10), Spain (10), and so on.



The hashtags are used to express support for Donald Trump (e.g. #MAGA, #MarchForTrump), support for European QAnon movements (e.g. #QAnonGermany, #QAnonSpain), to spread political conspiracies (#Macronistan, #SorosFunded), COVID-19 conspiracies (#Plandemia, #CoronaDiktatur), religious conspiracies (#GodWins, #TrustThePlan) and hate speech (#Holocough, #FakeJewsMedia). These hashtags are used more frequently after Trump tweets, or after news reports about Islamic terrorism attacks (cf. 2020 Dresden knife attack), abortion, and other ideologically sensitive topics.

We used automatic hate speech detection tools to assess the level of toxicity for tweets written in English, German, French and Dutch, English tweets by far-right groups, or tweets with deep state conspiracies included a high level of antisemitism, particularly targeting public figures such as George Soros, or reviving old conspiracies about secret Jewish plots for world domination. George Soros is also a popular target in other languages. We also find a highly polarised debate around the coronavirus public health measurements in Germany, with rhetoric of the Third Reich often used.

By observing how hashtags are combined in messages by different language users, we can examine a network structure of how conspiracies spread from the US to the EU. The global pandemic appears to function as an important conduit, while hashtags that are rooted in US evangelicalism (e.g. #WakeUp, #SaveTheChildren) take on new meanings in local EU regions such as expressing discontent with government measures and supporting various protest movements blending together.

Most of the QAnon profiles we discovered appear to tap into the same sources of information, like Trump tweets, YouTube

disinformation videos, and also each other's tweets in a mutually reinforcing confirmation bias. New language to express negative sentiments is coined and adopted by others, in particular pejoratives for face masks and slurs for mask wearers and political leaders.

Accompanying memes shared by the users focus on ridiculing political leaders, displaying them as alien reptilian overlords, antagonists from popular movies (e.g. Star Wars Sith lords, the cyborg from The Terminator), and so on. In the case of Donald Trump, he is sometimes portrayed as Jesus, as a superhero, clad in medieval armour, and so on, with underlying references to Bible quotes and an impending apocalypse in which he will defeat the forces of evil.


We also trained a Word Embedding model on QAnon Twitter content, which is interesting to explore as a conceptual space of how QAnon followers perceive political topics or religious ideas.

In Part 2, we applied qualitative analysis on a number of case studies. We examined the mainstream media's Twitter feeds in search of reporting on the QAnon movement in Europe. We observed a diverse array of pro-QAnon tweets in response to these articles.

The close textual analysis of tweets, confirmed a significant amount of COVID-19 denial along with all seven of the recurring themes of QAnon identified within our quantitative analysis; support for Trump, support for EU-based nationalism, support for QAnon, deep state conspiracies, corona conspiracies, religious conspiracies, and extremism, especially antisemitism. In the second part of our investigation, we examined the variance and relative threat of QAnon within case studies from France, French-speaking Belgium, Flemish-speaking Belgium, Germany, Greece, Hungary, and the United Kingdom.

The evidence presented in the case studies offered a number of insights on the presence, prevalence and nature of the QAnon movement in Europe. First of all, it provided evidence on the use of Twitter as an online space to learn about, discuss and react on the QAnon movement. This space is often filled with the same conspiracy theories which are repeated by all proponents of QAnon across the globe. In particular, GTTO monitors identified multiple cases of antisemitism and coronavirus conspiracies. While the mainstream media in most cases refrained from posting QAnon news stories on Twitter, even the topic of their stories and part of the information provided were used as a trigger for engaging in conspiracy theories.

Throughout these case studies, we also observed differences in the following of QAnon among different European countries. For one, German-speaking Twitter hosts a particularly dangerous and widespread QAnon movement, especially given that all of the core themes of QAnon are represented in this online space. On the other hand, Greek-speaking Twitter displayed some evidence of the spread of conspiracy theories but no evidence of a QAnon following. Countries also varied in terms of the main focus of QAnon supporters. In Hungary, the QAnon movement is largely characterized by an alarming level of antisemitism. In France, the environment of uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic incentivized the spread of QAnon and other conspiracy theories as a means of rationalizing opposition to government restrictions. In the United Kingdom, we discovered a meaningful debate about free speech and conspiracy theories and Twitter users who argued both for and against the regulation of QAnon and other conspiracy theories. We even detected distinctions between the two regions of Belgium, Flanders and Wallonia.



Even though we identified a connection between media coverage of QAnon and the subsequent spread of QAnon in French-speaking Belgium, we had to look further to find the presence of QAnon on Twitter within Flanders.

Our analyses confirmed that QAnon has developed into a loosely organised but still sustained set of far-right, conspiracy ideas about a social and political world. Using Twitter as a platform, this movement has an ability to produce and promote conspiracy ideas at an unprecedented scale. Its members and followers, united in mass rejection of reason, are demonstrating the ability to produce, share and tie together worldviews that distort and shatter reality, creating an environment that resembles the birth of new religion.

This report was finalized in December 2020, when it became generally accepted that presidential candidate Joe Biden had won the US election, having gained the popular vote as well as a majority of electoral college votes. However, spurred on by Trump's refusal to concede and instead intensifying his voter fraud and deep state conspiracy allegations on Twitter, QAnon tweets continue to proliferate. We can see Trump fans worldwide, galvanising, entrenching and becoming more outspoken about their world views.

Various societal drivers appear to contribute to this effect. On the one hand, QAnon followers are upset by Biden's victory, which they see as the deep state reclaiming its dark grip on US politics. On the other hand, QAnon followers are also infuriated by more stringent lockdown measures in the EU during the Christmas holidays, as coronavirus numbers refuse to abate.



GET THE TROLLS OUT

This report is produced as part of the **Get The Trolls Out!** project, which works to combat anti-religious discrimination and intolerance in Europe. Led by the Media Diversity Institute (MDI) with the support of 7 partners spread throughout Europe, the project harnesses the power of social media to disseminate innovative media outputs and generate dialogue in order to deliver a powerful counter-narrative against diverse forms of hate speech, including antisemitism, anti-Muslim hate, anti-Christian sentiment, and associated attempts to turn public opinion against migrants and asylum-seekers.

The project has a detailed [resources](#) section on its website, which collects reports and guides we have created (see below) along with those from our partner and associated organisations.

