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QANON IN THE UK

THE GROWTH OF A MOVEMENT

David Lawrence and Gregory Davis

October 2020



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DEFINING QANON

QAnon is a conspiracy theory that alleges that President Trump is waging a secret war against a cabal of powerful Satanic paedophiles, alleged to be kidnapping, torturing and even cannibalising children on a vast scale.

The theory has developed beyond its roots in the intensely hyperpartisan and US-centric right, moving from a niche far-right interest that we have termed *orthodox QAnon* into a broader, less uniform type we call *eclectic QAnon*. This development has enabled the theory to gain supporters from across the political spectrum and of diverse backgrounds.

As it stands today it is a decentralised, grand and multifaceted phenomenon, at once a conspiracy theory, a political movement and a quasi-religion, with variants tailored to chime with different subcultures and national contexts. Its central narrative subverts legitimate concerns about child trafficking and child abuse with fantastical misinformation and antisemitic tropes, fostering a dangerous anger in the process.

Whilst it is important not to overstate the threat of QAnon in the UK, which remains marginal, there are reasons to be concerned about its further spread. Antisemitic tropes are inherent to the theory, and there is scope for the far right exploitation of the developing UK scene due to significant overlapping narratives. QAnon, which groundlessly alleges that countless authority figures are Satanic paedophiles, has the potential to sow an intense distrust in institutions, including healthcare authorities in the midst of a global pandemic. The theory also risks obscuring genuine child abuse and hampering legitimate efforts to better child welfare. Moreover, whilst it is impossible to know exactly how seriously QAnon followers take their beliefs, and when they will act on them, the highly emotive narratives at the core of QAnon have the potential to inspire individuals towards disruption, harassment and even violence.



“Stand Up For The Children” march on Oxford Street, London, 5 September 2020. Copyright: HOPE not hate

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- QAnon has broadened from its orthodox form to include more eclectic versions less rooted in US partisan narratives, allowing it to spread to other national contexts.
- Polling from September shows that QAnon is yet to penetrate the British mainstream, with only one in five polled having heard of the theory. However, our poll also found that 5.7% claimed to be QAnon supporters, and that broader conspiratorial notions that form part of the QAnon worldview are more widely supported. This suggests that there is potential for QAnon to spread, especially amongst the young.
- Brits have emerged as influential voices in the global QAnon scene, with Martin Geddes, a computer scientist from Staines, being one of the most popular QAnon influencers in the world.
- QAnon narratives have inspired a series of street demonstrations across the UK, which have been held in 17 cities and towns so far. Whilst most have been small, some have attracted hundreds of people, and QAnon is becoming an important component in the wider, conspiracy theory-driven anti-lockdown movement.
- QAnon repackages many long standing conspiratorial notions, and the groundwork for the movement has been laid by long-standing British conspiracy theorists such as David Icke.
- Adoption of QAnon by the UK radical and far right has so far been limited to an individual rather than organisational basis, but shared narratives and tropes means there is scope for further spread.



Children with signs at an anti-lockdown demonstration, Trafalgar Square, London, 26 September 2020. Copyright: HOPE not hate

GLOSSARY

- **Orthodox QAnon:** We are using this term to refer to the theory as it initially developed from 2017 in the US. Orthodox QAnon believers closely follow the pronouncements of Q and promote a hyperpartisan pro-Trump narrative, with a focus on American political figures and a use of a unique jargon. Orthodox QAnon is heavily tinged with religious themes, especially an American style of millenarian Christianity.
- **Eclectic QAnon:** We are using this term to refer to broader forms of QAnon that maintain the central notion of Satanic, child abusing elite cults, but have become decoupled from the Q drops, jettison much of the US-focus and the esoterica of orthodox QAnon, and, from July 2020, have adopted inoffensive slogans such as “Save our Children”. These versions have proved more easily translatable to other national contexts, and to people less familiar with online right-wing subcultures.
- **Deep State/The Cabal:** The antagonists in the QAnon narrative, an alleged secret Satanist cult entrenched in global institutions of power and engaged in the industrial-scale abuse of children. In orthodox QAnon the triumvirate of George Soros, the Rothschild family and the House of Saud sit at the centre of the conspiracy, orbited by various intelligence agencies, politicians and Hollywood celebrities.
- **The Storm:** The climax of the saga, in which a vast number of politicians, celebrities and other members of the cabal will be tried and executed for their crimes. The term originated from a cryptic comment made by Trump in October 2017, when during a photoshoot with military leaders he waved a finger in a circle motion and stated “You guys know what this represents? Maybe it’s the calm before the storm”. The phrase “Calm before The Storm” is sometimes shortened to the acronym CBTS, and can be paraphrased into slogans such as “The storm is coming”.
- **The Great Awakening (TGA):** The period following “The Storm” when humanity will be liberated from the many evils of the cabal, ushering in a new period of global prosperity. Visions of how this event will unfold vary greatly, but is often suggested to include the unveiling of previously concealed cures for diseases and a financial reset that includes widespread debt relief.
- **Q Drop:** A message from “Q”, an anonymous individual, or group of individuals, purporting to be a Trump insider with high level security clearance. The drops are usually cryptic and open for interpretation. The first Q drop was posted in October 2017 on the message board 4Chan, but Q later moved to 8Chan and then 8Kun, all closely related message boards with entrenched far-right subcultures.
- **WWG1WGA:** The abbreviation of “Where we go one, we go all” is a slogan adopted by QAnon followers from the 1996 action film *White Squall*. WWG1WGA is used to express allegiance to the theory, and solidarity with other believers.
- **Pizzagate:** A groundless QAnon precursor theory alleging that Hillary Clinton, John Podesta and other figures of the Democrat Party ran an occult child sex ring from the Washington DC pizza restaurant, Comet Ping Pong. The theory developed ahead of the 2016 elections following the leak of Podesta’s emails, which made references to “pizza”, alleged to be code for children. Pizzagate has become a key pillar of QAnon, with pizza often used to symbolise child abuse.
- **Adrenochrome:** A naturally-occurring chemical compound produced by the oxidisation of adrenaline. Many QAnon followers allege that adrenochrome is at the heart of the conspiracy, functioning as an elixir of youth and/or a powerful drug; the cabal is torturing and raping children to harvest the substance from their blood.
- **Frazzledrip:** A mythical video purporting to show Hillary Clinton gruesomely cannibalising a child. The video is alleged to have been purged from the surface web, and only to be found on the dark web.
- **White Hats and Black Hats:** A white hat is a powerful ally of Trump, especially in government or the military, who is aiding him to bring the deep state/cabal to justice. A black hat, on the other hand, is an individual doing the bidding of the deep state/cabal.
- **Red Pill:** A metaphor taken from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, becoming “red pill” refers to the process of becoming enlightened to the true nature of reality. Prior to adoption by QAnon, the metaphor has been used extensively by Men’s Rights activists and the Alternative Right.

SECTION 1: UNDERSTANDING QANON



WHAT IS QANON?

On 22 August 2020, as many as 200 street rallies were held across the US, Canada and other countries, as well as in eleven cities and towns in the UK, under the inoffensive slogan “Save Our Children. The deliberately vague branding belied the true motive of the events: to raise awareness that President Trump is waging a secret war against a cabal of powerful Satanic paedophiles, alleged to be kidnapping, torturing and even cannibalising children on a vast scale.

This is the worldview of QAnon, a groundless conspiracy theory that has spread rapidly in the US and developed pockets of support across the globe. From its inauspicious origins on the 4chan message board in October 2017, QAnon has spawned thousands of Facebook groups and Instagram pages, numerous documentaries, a subculture of researchers and promoters, a cottage industry of merchandise, and various campaigns, coordinated actions and street movements. Despite the FBI warning about its capacity to motivate domestic terrorism, and a number of attacks having been linked to the theory, President Trump has failed to condemn the movement and some of its believers appear poised to enter Congress in November.

A growing number of British people are being drawn to the theory as it develops beyond its roots in the intensely hyperpartisan and US-centric right, moving from a niche far-right interest that we have termed *orthodox QAnon* into a broader, less uniform form we call *eclectic QAnon*. This development has enabled the theory to gain supporters from across the political spectrum and of diverse backgrounds.

QAnon as it stands today is a decentralised, grand and multifaceted phenomenon, at once a conspiracy theory, a political movement and a quasi-religion, with variants tailored to chime with different subcultures and national contexts. Its central narrative blends legitimate concerns about child trafficking and child abuse with fantastical misinformation and antisemitic tropes, fostering a dangerous anger in the process.

THE ORIGINS OF QANON

QAnon began on 28 October 2017, when a user of the message board 4Chan, later identified as “Q”, claimed to have insider knowledge that Hillary Clinton would be arrested the following day. This kind of false lead would become an unintentional trademark for Q, who claimed in further posts to be a Trump insider with high level security clearance (at time of writing, Q’s identity remains unknown). Nonetheless, Q has made more than 4,800 subsequent posts (known as “Q drops”), cryptic messages outlining a predatory, Satanic conspiracy dictating world events. As users of 4chan refer to each other as “anons”, the name “QAnon” was born.

Q, who has moved from 4Chan to its successor sites 8Chan and then 8Kun, has gained an army of enthusiastic devotees who place faith in the supposed “Plan” to take down the cabal, as well as a cottage industry of influencers who decode Q’s messages. Q tells his followers that they represent a “digital army” whose role is to preach the truth of the movement in order to lay the groundwork for the eventual “Great Awakening”, details of which are so shocking that the population at large cannot be informed of them without the elaborate pantomime of gradual revelation. The grand QAnon narrative is inflected with shades of millenarianism; the battle between Good and Evil will end when the messianic President overthrows the Satanists, ushering in a new period of global prosperity. The role of orthodox QAnon influencers is to guide less well-informed adherents in much the same way as scholars interpret sacred texts for religious movements.

QAnon is a “superconspiracy”, capable of merging numerous pre-existing sub-conspiracies, with new theories flourishing and older tropes finding a new lease of life under its rubric. QAnon draws particularly from the “New World Order” (NWO) tradition, which for decades has alleged that a secret elite is controlling events across the globe for the purpose of world

Anonymous ID: BQ7V3bcW Sat 28 Oct 2017 21:44:28 No.147012719  **Report**

Quoted By: >>147017117 >>147017275 >>147036772 >>147039926,1 >>147039926,22 >>147039926,3 >>147039926,4 >>147039926,7

>>147005381

HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am. Expect massive riots organized in defiance and others fleeing the US to occur. US M's will conduct the operation while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most major cities.

The first Q drop

domination. A more recent precursor is the “Pizzagate” theory that emerged ahead of the 2016 Presidential election, which alleged that Democratic politicians were trafficking children for use in paedophilic rituals. The frantic, independent theorising of Q followers has proved capable of rolling any event into its grand narrative, from the momentous, such as the JFK assassination or the sinking of the Titanic, to the seemingly insignificant, such as the mispricing of items on the retail site Wayfair, or a “hidden symbol” in a frame of a Disney film. This gives QAnon a certain fluidity; in some cases, adherents of the broader ideology might choose to emphasise certain aspects and minimise others as part of a calculated effort to maximise its appeal to the uninitiated, but followers also naturally focus on the aspects of the narrative that resonate most strongly with them, and thus present the movement in differing ways. The overall effect is kaleidoscopic and disturbing, but for followers the core narrative provides a framework of Good versus Evil through which the world can be understood.

A strong sinew of antisemitism has run through QAnon since the beginning. Q has identified a triumvirate of “puppet masters” at the centre of the international cabal: the Rothschild family, George Soros and the House of Saud. Soros and the Rothschild family have long been common targets for antisemitism, with the latter smeared as sinister, sometimes supernatural global financiers for 200 years. Q has directly tapped into this toxic legacy, for example erroneously alleging that Rothschild has a controlling interest in every nation’s central bank. Q has also suggested that Hitler was a “puppet”, a notion popular among Holocaust deniers, and alluded to Israel’s role in the conspiracy, for example stating: “We are saving Israel for last. Very specific reason not mentioned a single time”.

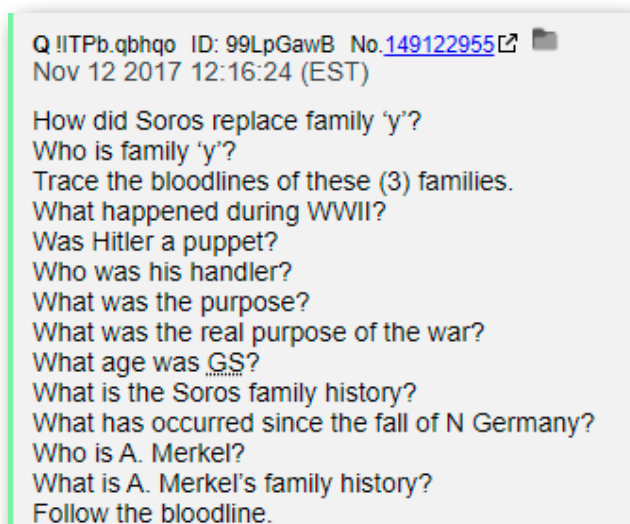
Such statements have encouraged some followers to import established antisemitic theories into the QAnon narrative. Like the NWO theories that preceded it, QAnon builds on old prejudices alleging the existence of a secret Jewish government, sometimes in league with Satanic forces, exercising a “hidden hand” behind world events. QAnon-aligned Facebook groups were riddled with theories of Jewish control, including references to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious antisemitic forgery outlining a fiendish plan for world control, including infiltrating the media and political parties to brainwash and enslave populations, themes prevalent among QAnon followers. A popular subsidiary theme alleges that “adrenochrome” is at the heart of the conspiracy, a mythical drug allegedly harvested by the cabal from the blood of children, echoing the ancient antisemitic blood libel myth.

QANON ADAPTS

QAnon as it developed from 2017-2019 - what we term *orthodox QAnon* - has limited global appeal, being a hyperpartisan pro-Trump narrative with a heavy focus on American political figures who have little relevance or familiarity outside of the US. However, a key turning point in its development has been the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent government measures around the world, allowing the once-niche theory to broaden and spread at a rapid pace since March 2020.

The exponential growth of QAnon has dovetailed with a boom of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, which include claims that 5G radiation is the cause of the health crisis and/or that a potential vaccine will contain a microchip to track populations. This is at least in part due to the efforts of Q, who has repeatedly suggested that measures to control the pandemic are part of a plot to subvert the US election. QAnon followers have variously speculated that the virus is either entirely fabricated or a deep state bioweapon to allow for election rigging, scuppering Trump’s “Plan”, and allowing the cabal to tighten their totalitarian grip; prominent figures in the fight against COVID-19, such as Bill Gates and Antonio Fauci, have been widely condemned as members of the cabal. The exploitation of fears around the contagion has greatly aided the spread of the theory; a July report by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD) found that membership of QAnon Facebook groups increased by 120% in March 2020, and that between 23-25 March, posts on Twitter containing both keywords relating to COVID-19 and keywords relating to QAnon increased by 422%.

The pandemic coincided with the decentralisation of QAnon into a broader, less uniform form we term *eclectic QAnon*. Eclectic QAnon is largely decoupled from Q drops and orthodox QAnon



A section of an early Q drop concerning George Soros

influencers, downplays many references to American political figures, does away with much of the dense jargon of orthodox QAnon and focuses on broader conspiratorial notions such as those about elite child trafficking cults, thereby translating to other national contexts more successfully. These broader forms of the theory have been greatly aided by the adoption of inoffensive slogans such as “Save the Children/Save our Children” from July 2020, an adjustment which also helped QAnon groups survive the social media crackdowns that month. The enormously emotive idea that thousands of children are being kept captive in dungeons and tunnel networks across the world has drawn in many who might otherwise have rejected the heavily pro-Trump and narrow political narratives of orthodox QAnon. QAnon researcher Marc-André Argentino reported in September that membership of 114 Facebook groups which present a softer anti-trafficking face, but were actually dominated by QAnon content, increased by 3,029% since July.

Over the summer of 2020, both Twitter and Facebook finally began to crack down on the QAnon groups, pages and accounts that had proliferated on their platforms for almost three years, and on October 6, Facebook announced it would attempt to remove QAnon’s presence from both Facebook and Instagram entirely. This was followed by what appears to be swift and decisive action. However, whilst this will undoubtedly impact the ability of the theory to spread to new people, it cannot reverse the damage that three years of largely unchecked proliferation on social media platforms has done.

QAnon is uniting long-standing conspiracy theorists and new converts into a loose movement that is making false promises and calls for action. The US election will have considerable knock-on effects, but there is little reason to think QAnon will disappear, whatever the result. As we enter a long winter of further lockdowns and isolation, and the economic impacts of the crisis start to bite, we could see more turning to disinformation and conspiracy theories in order to make sense of a chaotic world.



QAnon iconography at a far-right demonstration in Dover, 5 September 2020. Copyright: HOPE not hate.

THE THREAT OF QANON

News coverage of QAnon in the UK has, at times, verged on alarmist, and it is important not to inflate the threat it poses; as our polling shows, it is at present relatively niche. However, as we outline, there is scope for the further spread of the theory, which is cause for concern for the below reasons.

- Firstly, antisemitic tropes are inherent to the theory. Whilst some followers may be conscious antisemites, others may be ignorantly regurgitating tropes they are unaware are racist, and still others are simply turning a blind eye, denying charges of antisemitism as an “MSM” (mainstream media) smear. Regardless, the spread of the theory is promulgating an ancient form of prejudice, and has the potential to radicalise converts towards Jew hatred.
- Secondly, there is scope for the far-right exploitation of the developing eclectic QAnon scene in the UK, which lacks ideological and organisational structure. Support for QAnon comes from all political stripes, but the theory has developed pockets of support among the British radical and far right. Whilst this has so far largely been limited to an individual rather than organisational basis, the QAnon worldview overlaps significantly with pre-existing far-right narratives, opening up opportunities for further cross-pollination.
- Thirdly, QAnon has the potential to sow a dangerous distrust in institutions. All conspiracy theories exploit and compound distrust to some degree, which is not always wholly bad; a leading scholar in the field, Joseph Uscinski, has argued that conspiracy theories, as a form of political dissent, are “necessary to the healthy functioning of society because they help balance against concentrations of power”. However, QAnon emerged as a partisan smear, and the idea that various politicians and other public figures are infernal, child-eating enemies of the people is stoking a particularly toxic cynicism. Additionally, the incorporation of COVID-19 conspiracy theories into the QAnon narrative has the potential to erode trust in medical experts and authorities, and further the spread of health misinformation and pseudoscience in the midst of a global pandemic.
- Fourth, QAnon risks obscuring genuine child abuse and hampering legitimate efforts to better child welfare. Child trafficking and other forms of exploitation are pressing issues, and have, as the prolific crimes of Jeffrey Epstein, Jimmy Savile and others have shown, been carried out by well-connected people. However, the sole focus on elites distorts reality; as Lori Cohen of the anti-child trafficking organisation ECPAT-USA told *The New York Times*, “This is not happening in some secret cabal. It’s happening in every single community”. #SaveTheChildren began as a fund-raising campaign for the longstanding children’s charity Save The Children, but was hijacked by QAnon believers in July, leading Facebook to temporarily disable the hashtag after it became awash with misinformation. American human trafficking hotlines have reported being overwhelmed by false reports relating to QAnon. At demonstrations in the UK, QAnon acolytes have shared stages with highly impassioned campaigners against genuine child exploitation, some of whom claim to have been victims of such abuse themselves. The meshing of crucial issues with grotesque misinformation risks burying genuine cases among false, and diverting energy and resources from groups that could make genuine progress.
- Lastly, the highly emotive narratives at the core of QAnon have the potential to inspire disruption, harassment and even violence. The QAnon worldview is steeped in violent rhetoric, built on the idea that the promised global Great Awakening will be preceded by “The Storm”, the mass trials and execution of liberal politicians, celebrities and other figures aligned with the cabal. Q has presented this impending day of judgement as imminent and assured, which in the orthodox vision is to be carried out by mythical “white hats” rather than by QAnon followers themselves. However, the theory has spiralled out of both Q’s control and that of the traditional coterie of influencers. In 2019, an FBI memo listed QAnon and the related Pizzagate conspiracy theories as a potential terror threat, saying that they are “very likely” to “occasionally driv[e] both groups and individual extremists to carry out criminal or violent acts”. Numerous attempted and successful acts of violence have since been committed in the US by individuals who have endorsed QAnon. These have been uncoordinated actions by lone actors with minimal planning, and QAnon advocates rightly point out that such incidents cannot be taken as representative of a movement hundreds of thousands strong. There are, however, reasons to be concerned that QAnon has the potential for greater disruption. Fantasising about the bloodshed to come is a striking feature of the online spaces where QAnon adherents gather, including in the UK. It is impossible to know how seriously many followers take their beliefs, and whether they would act on them, but the risk remains that individuals may be motivated towards criminality.

BORN ONLINE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

HOW THE VARIOUS FUNCTIONS AND FEATURES OF SOCIAL MEDIA HAVE PROVIDED THE FUEL FOR QANON.

To perhaps a greater degree than any comparable movement, QAnon is a product of the social media era. Aside from the occasional QAnon placards that could be seen at Donald Trump rallies and the emergence in late Summer 2020 of anti-lockdown and #SaveOurChildren street protests, this ideological movement could rarely be seen outside of its home on social media platforms and web forums.

It is unlikely that it could have sprung into life anywhere else. Without the anonymity provided by the 4Chan and 8Chan bulletin boards, Q could not have kept up the charade of their assumed identity, and nor could they have found a more receptive audience than the users of those platforms. Host to a legion of bored, alienated and predominantly far-right users, the /pol/ forum of 4chan was almost uniquely suited to host the birth of a movement that combined conspiracy theory, a promise of violent retribution against a liberal elite and, importantly, the encouragement of the audience to participate by conducting “research” of their own. This element of gamification has remained of central importance to the movement even as it spread through other social media platforms, but was particularly suited to the “anons” of 4chan, notorious for their collective endeavours in promulgating hoaxes and targeted harassment.

Q’s reach would have remained fringe, however, if it was limited to 4chan and 8chan. It was the movement’s spread onto the mainstream social media platforms - and from there onto the streets - that made this phenomenon into a global concern, one that could do long term damage to the US political environment and an unknown potential for similar harm around the world.

Even prior to the explosion of interest in conspiracy theories as the pandemic struck, QAnon had become a visible and viral presence online. Prominent promoters of the theory had gathered hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter and YouTube, while QAnon Facebook groups had grown to tens of thousands of members.

Over the summer of 2020, both Twitter and Facebook finally began to crack down on the QAnon groups, pages and accounts that had proliferated on their platforms for almost three years. In July, Twitter announced that it had removed 7,000 accounts and “limited” 150,000 others, reducing their reach and limiting their ability to gain new followers. Facebook and Instagram followed in August, removing 900 QAnon groups and pages and limiting more than



10,000 accounts, though restricting the move to those that explicitly promoted violence.

This appeared to have had a positive impact by a number of measures. Traffic to QMap.pub, the most popular site to access Q’s posts, fell by almost a quarter. QAnon slogans were prevented from appearing in the trending sections of all three platforms, and although many of those suspended returned to set up new accounts, their reach was severely limited by the loss of their sometimes huge follower counts.

In October, both Facebook and YouTube went further still, announcing that they would attempt to remove QAnon’s presence from both their platforms entirely. This was followed by what appears to be swift and decisive action; the BBC’s Shayan Sardarizadeh reported that 80% of the Facebook groups and pages he had been monitoring were deleted in the 24 hours after the announcement, while many of the largest QAnon channels on YouTube disappeared within hours of their own announcement on October 15.

It remains to be seen whether Twitter and other platforms will follow up with similarly decisive measures, and whether any will have sufficient resolve to prevent the movement from simply reappearing under new guises. Whatever happens next, any actions taken now cannot begin to reverse the damage that three years of largely unchecked proliferation on social media platforms has done.

FACEBOOK

Research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) found that global membership of QAnon Facebook groups soared by 120% in March 2020, a growth rate that might have been even more pronounced in the UK. Prior to March, HOPE not hate had identified just three UK-specific Facebook groups devoted to QAnon, with a combined membership of less than 5,000. By mid-May, this number had grown to ten or more, with a fast-growing membership of over 20,000. However, groups devoted specifically to the promotion of QAnon represent only a minor element of its rise.

In March and April this year, the creep of QAnon messaging into ostensibly unrelated groups and movements became starkly apparent to those studying the broader conspiracy theory milieu. In the UK, the anti-5G movement had been around for years, but suddenly leapt into public consciousness as people began to associate the rollout of the technology with the pandemic. But as anti-5G groups began to add tens of thousands of members, they became a melting pot of alternative conspiracy theories, with QAnon playing an ever-increasing role.

This is, again, a feature of how social media is structured. In 2019, Facebook began to pivot from their previous prioritisation of the public news feed towards encouraging the growth of private groups. Citing a growing desire for private and segmented conversations over the default of sharing everything with one's wider friends list, the move had the effect of shifting dialogue into largely self-governing spaces, with content moderation left in the hands of the group's founder and their self-selected team of moderators. While individual members are able

to report content to Facebook's own moderators if they wish, this still relies on a self-selected group to both identify harmful content and be motivated to push for its removal.

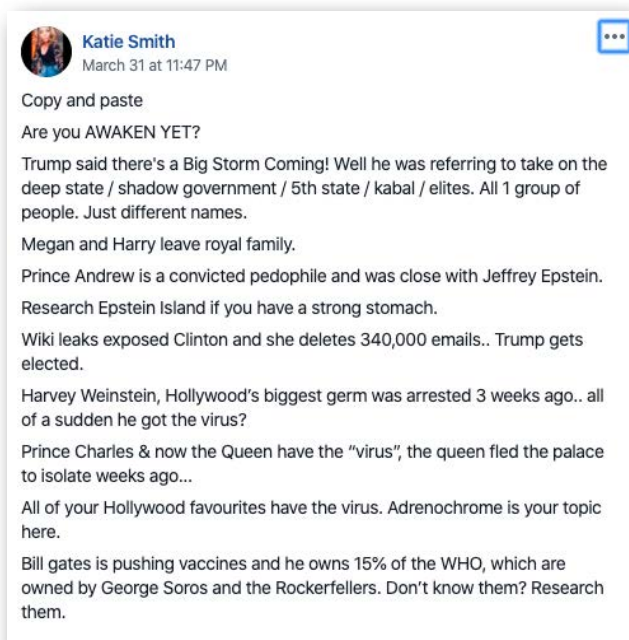
QAnon content can become widespread even if group moderators are opposed to the movement. There is no minimum number of moderators required for a group; a group with a hundred thousand members and thousands of posts per day can have just one or two admins, giving them little ability to oversee the content posted even if they wished to do so. Groups that are set up for a particular purpose are at perpetual risk of being derailed by constant off-topic posting, and so the extent to which a group serves the purpose it was created for depends entirely on whether the group's founder is motivated to keep it on track by reviewing content and recruiting a sufficient number of moderators who will take their responsibilities seriously.

For conspiracy theory groups, this dynamic has predictably meant that a group set up to promote one particular theory, whether it be Flat Earth, anti-vaccines or UFOs, often become a free-for-all of alternative ideas, sometimes more toxic and harmful than the group's titular purpose. These groups can then operate as a gateway from less extreme conspiracy theories towards grand superconspiracies, as group members seek a wider explanation for the particular conspiracy that the group details.

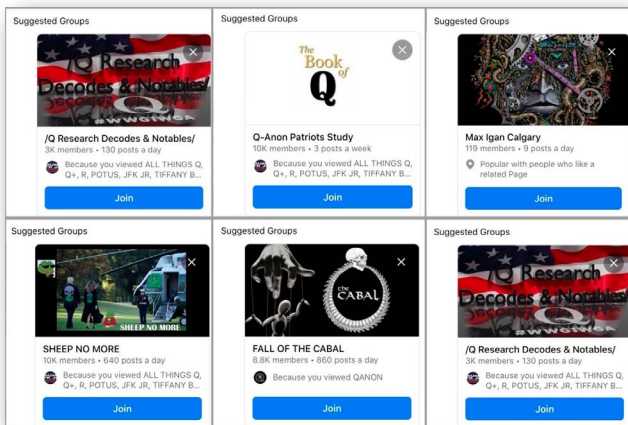
These groups have proven to be fertile ground for QAnon in part because it provides an apparent motive for smaller conspiracies. The logical progression for anyone who comes to believe that 5G internet radiation is lethal, for example, is to question why our telecom companies, healthcare providers and governments would be conspiring to inflict such harm and conceal the evidence of it. QAnon's assertion that global governments are controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles seems outlandish to most, but less so to someone who has spent weeks or months being bombarded by posts about a less macabre but still deeply troubling sub-theory.

Similar processes take place in anti-vaccine groups, such as "Collective Action Against Bill Gates. We Won't Be Vaccinated!!"; a group set up by British Facebook users in mid-April 2020 and which gathered almost 190,000 members until its deletion by Facebook in late September. QAnon posts became a regular feature of the group, due to the QAnon community's near-unanimous COVID-denial, and because the Satanic cabal narrative provided a more detailed motive for the supposed wickedness of Gates and other pro-vaccination campaigners.

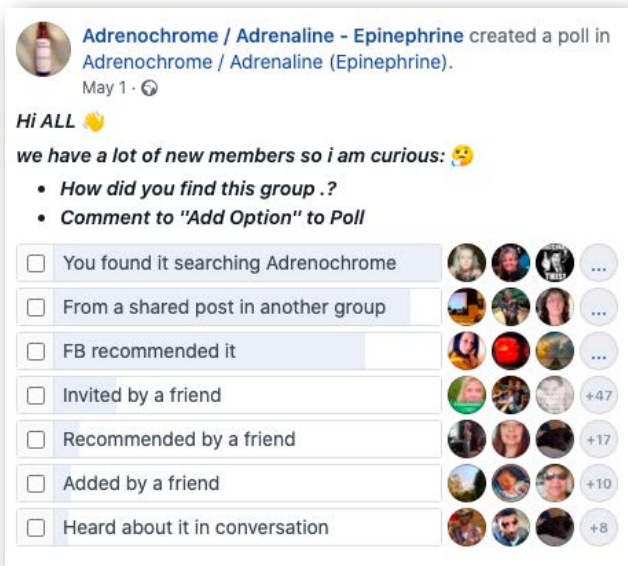
Other aspects of Facebook's structure have also helped to boost QAnon to its current strength. Facebook has long used recommendations



QAnon post from an anti-5G group in March



QAnon and other conspiracy theory groups promoted by Facebook



to promote pages and groups to its users, its algorithms generating suggestions based on the social media activity of both the user and their friendship group. While this feature might be beneficial when recommendations are based on hobbies or professional interests, it can become dangerous when it comes to the worlds of divisive politics, disinformation and conspiracy theory.

These recommendations appear to have a significant impact on the growth of conspiracy theory groups. In the poll from a QAnon group (pictured), over a quarter of the 950 respondents claimed to have joined the group as a result of a recommendation by Facebook. The group in question, called “Adrenochrome / Adrenaline - Epinephrine”, was devoted to the QAnon/ Pizzagate sub-theory that claims that a vast network of celebrities and politicians are trafficking, torturing and murdering thousands of children in order to harvest their adrenal glands for use as an elixir of life and recreational drug. That Facebook’s algorithms were directing its users towards this particularly ghoulish element of QAnon lore is a vivid example of the harms that such recommendations can do.



A Q drop in which social media platforms are described as “the battlefield”

Not only do such recommendations appear to be a major route by which people join these groups, but they might also draw in those on the fringes of the conspiracy theory world. A Facebook user whose friend shares a post from a QAnon group might be tempted to click through to the group from mere curiosity; from that moment onward, the algorithm will have registered their interest in the topic and present them with groups and pages that reaffirm those narratives. Facebook’s decision to remove all QAnon content will, if followed through on properly, solve this issue in this specific case. But it is vital that all platforms address the wider issue of algorithmic recommendations, which will continue to aid the development and spread of harmful ideologies unless radically overhauled.

TWITTER

Prior to the pandemic, the role of Twitter and its legion of QAnon influencers was perhaps even more influential on the movement than Facebook and Instagram. Twitter’s removal of 7,000 QAnon accounts in July suspended many of its most prominent cheerleaders. But as with Facebook’s actions in August, there were some very prominent and inexplicable omissions. The largest account devoted solely to promoting QAnon, *PrayingMedic*, remains on the platform and continues to preach his divisive message to his 400,000+ followers, as well as directing them to his YouTube channel. Many other promoters with hundreds of thousands of followers have similarly remained untouched, and it is unclear what criteria Twitter used to identify accounts for removal.

The appeal of Twitter to QAnon is similar to that for any aspiring movement or ideology; it allows an unparalleled reach and the ability to see and be seen by people well outside your own networks and echo chambers. It is also President Trump’s preferred medium, and allows them to support his messaging and berate his opponents in a much more public and accessible way than other platforms. Trump has himself assisted the growth of QAnon on Twitter by his over 200 retweets of its proponents, including tweets that contain QAnon slogans and hashtags.

The use of hashtags has also proven invaluable to QAnon. The movement’s instantly recognisable

slogans, such as #WWG1WGA and #QSentMe, allowed supporters to connect with one another and also boost the movement's wider visibility. Moreover, utilising unrelated hashtags created for specific news events or conversations enable tweets to gain visibility among users who do not follow your account; events such as the death of Jeffrey Epstein, the killing of George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic allowed for QAnon supporters to place their narratives into the consciousness of the wider population, by joining those conversations through related hashtags.

Twitter's importance to QAnon is illustrated by the response of its key influencers to the wave of bans they've faced. As part of our efforts to help social media companies to remove the toxic influence of QAnon from their platforms, HOPE not hate researchers have reported 54 separate QAnon Twitter accounts that were evading a previous ban from the platform, with a combined following of 883,081. Many of these users create new accounts as soon as their old one is suspended; we have been responsible for the removal of six separate accounts from a single user, who goes by the nickname InevitableET. While such activity highlights the difficulties of permanently removing users, it still causes significant disruption to their efforts: InevitableET's original account had 280,000 followers, while none of his recent accounts have managed to top 15,000 before their removal.

YOUTUBE

YouTube has played an essential role in the dissemination of QAnon narratives since the very earliest days – in fact, YouTube is the gateway by which it first spread into the mainstream. Just one week after the first 4chan posts by Q, a YouTuber named Tracy Diaz, who had previously covered the related Pizzagate theory extensively, produced a video summarising the emerging narrative from Q, bringing it to the attention of the wider conspiracy theorist community for the first time.

A huge community of QAnon interpreters emerged on YouTube over the following years, developing vast audiences for videos in which they dissect Q's posts and analyse the news cycle through the lens of QAnon. Some, like Diaz, had preexisting channels that pushed hyperpartisan right-wing conspiracy theories, but soon accrued vast audiences after adopting QAnon. The X22 Report channel, for example, had been producing doom-laden videos predicting imminent economic and societal collapse for over four years prior to the arrival of QAnon in October 2017, and had amassed 145,000 followers in that time. By the summer of 2017, his channel was already preoccupied by the supposed "deep state" plot against Donald Trump, and in many ways illustrated the cultural milieu from which Q would later emerge. But this number would then rocket to over 944,000 over the next

three years as the channel owner hitched his wagon to the QAnon conspiracy theory.

Analysis by ISD found that 20% of Facebook posts promoting QAnon contained links to YouTube videos, illustrating the importance of video content to the movement. This importance was illustrated most strikingly by the emergence in 2020 of a spate of documentaries that promoted aspects of the QAnon narrative, such as *Fall of the Cabal*, *Out of Shadows* and *Plandemic*. These videos received millions of views on YouTube, among other platforms, and the high production value of the latter two gave the subject matter a veneer of professionalism that individual bloggers and video producers could not provide.

Following the announcement that YouTube would remove "conspiracy theory content used to justify real-world violence", many of the most prominent QAnon channels were removed, including the X22 Report, PrayingMedic and others mentioned in this report. Many of those users had already set up backup channels on largely unmoderated video platforms such as BitChute, the owner of which has expressed support for conspiracy theories and welcomed its proponents onto their platform. Yet none of the alt-tech sites can begin to match the audience sizes that YouTube can offer, and as such this move represents a significant blow to both the channel owners and the movement as a whole.

LESSONS FOR THE PLATFORMS

It remains to be seen whether other platforms will decide to follow Facebook in attempting to remove QAnon from their platforms entirely, and whether they will dedicate sufficient time and resources to implementing their decisions. The audience size of the major platforms is sufficient enticement to guarantee that QAnon promoters will never stop trying to regain access; any action against them will therefore require endless vigilance against rebranded replacements repopulating the platforms.

But it is equally important that social media companies conduct a detailed interrogation of how their platforms were used and abused to create this phenomenon in the first place. Each company has been criticised in the past for their failure to tackle extremist ideologies such as white supremacism and Islamic extremism, but one could argue that their platforms were merely reflecting wider societal phenomena. In QAnon, they have been responsible for allowing a new movement to be born and raised on their platforms; one that could have been prevented from reaching even a tiny fraction of its current size if they had acted sooner. Social media companies must learn the lessons from this disaster and apply them consistently going forward.

DAVID ICKE: THE GROUNDWORK FOR QANON

In May 2020, Shaun Attwood, a former ecstasy trafficker turned YouTuber, released a 90-minute documentary titled *UK's Hidden Shadows*. Marketing his film as having been “inspired by Out of Shadows”, referring to a Pizzagate propaganda film released in April, Attwood explores numerous historic cases and allegations of child abuse amongst the British establishment, including Prince Andrew’s involvement with Jeffrey Epstein, Jimmy Savile’s influential connections, and accusations made against former Prime Minister Edward Heath and other MPs. One of the key voices in the film, however, is David Icke, who has labelled Heath a “Satanist” as well as “a shape-shifting reptilian” in print.

QAnon’s spread in the UK has taken many by surprise, but the theory draws from a number of ideological tributaries, repackaging conspiratorial notions that have existed for decades. Few have done more to lay the groundwork for the theory than Icke, the most famous professional conspiracy theorist in the UK. Whilst Icke has derided QAnon, believing President Trump to be a “fraud” and “the equivalent of a Hollywood actor”, he has also spent decades promoting the notion that a single, global ring of Satanic elites are trafficking, ritualistically abusing and cannibalising children, often in terms strikingly similar to QAnon rhetoric today.

Icke has gained a new prominence during the age of COVID-19, headlining conspiracy theory-driven demonstrations that have brought thousands into Trafalgar Square. Understanding his significance and his theories is one way to understand the spread of QAnon into the wider conspiratorial milieu, in the UK and elsewhere.

THE “WEB OF PAEDOPHILIA AND SATANISM”

Icke is today most associated with outlandish claims about a “Brotherhood” of extraterrestrial reptilians who have enslaved humanity and created powerful “hybrid human-reptile” bloodlines, such as the House of Windsor and the Rothschild banking dynasty, through crossbreeding. However, in recent years Icke has largely forgone direct references to reptilian theory, which is just one element of the hugely complex narrative developed over his 30 year career. Ickism incorporates chemtrails, vaccinations, microchips, mind control, radio waves, 9/11 trutherism and a barrage of paranormal and New Age beliefs; it is, like QAnon, a “superconspiracy”, capable of rolling any event, real or imagined, into its overarching narrative.

There are few wholly original aspects of Ickism, which borrows heavily from pre-existing New World Order (NWO) narratives, many of them drawn from American far-right militia movements of the 1990s, with his most notorious inspiration

being the noxious antisemitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Icke also draws from a spate of false allegations of Satanic ritual abuse made during the moral panics of the 1980s and 1990s. However, Icke’s talent for communication and self-promotion, alongside his prior celebrity as a sports broadcaster, have enabled him to spread his blend of NWO narratives, antisemitism and the paranormal to a wide audience.

Whilst his writings have developed over the years, his notion of a global, elite Satanic paedophile cult has remained a consistent theme from the 1990s to today. To take a statement from his 1999 book *The Biggest Secret*:

“[...] the Brotherhood hierarchy today are seriously into Satanic ritual, child sacrifice, blood drinking and other abominations that would take your breath away. Yes, I am talking about some of the biggest royal, political, business, banking and media names on the planet.”

For Icke, as with many QAnon followers, this evil cabal has been exploiting children for millennia under different guises. He uses the term “Satanism” to refer to a “highly destructive, negative force” previously known, among other names, as “Moloch”, who he describes as “an ancient deity to which children were sacrificed thousands of years ago and still are today in the vast Satanic ritual network”. Discussion of Moloch, commonplace amongst NWO theorists, has been adopted by some QAnon followers today. “Moloch Is The GOD The Elite Serve and They Do As Moloch Does”, wrote an admin of the UK Facebook group-turned-street movement Eyes Wide Open. “How quickly many unknowingly surrender their own children at the altar of Moloch”, wrote Martin Geddes, the most significant orthodox QAnon influencer in the UK, after referencing a number of COVID-19 procedures.



A comment from the Facebook group Eyes Wide Open

Strikingly, Icke also helped to popularise the notion that this cult is harvesting “adrenochrome” from its victims. For many QAnon believers, the naturally-occurring chemical compound is at the heart of the conspiracy, a potent drug/elixir of youth harvested by the cabal from the adrenal glands of children, who are tortured to intensify the drug’s effects. Adrenochrome has been a feature of Icke’s writing since the 1990s, claiming in *The Biggest Secret*: “Many Satanic initiates have the same addiction to the adrenalchrome [sic] which is released in the body just before a person is sacrificed. It is produced by the pineal gland during periods of terror”, he writes, later claiming that it “is, apparently, most potent in children”. He went on to reaffirm the notion during the peak of his reptilian obsession, writing in in his feverish 2001 book *Children of the Matrix*:

“Blood, the physical expression of the life force, is a key aspect of the rituals [...] the reptilians also feed off the adrenaline that enters the bloodstream at times of extreme terror. The ritual is performed to increase this terror to its maximum at the time of death. This is the way the blood they drink is full of this desired adrenaline.”



A Twitter post from David Icke

There are numerous other antisemitic tropes common amongst Ickism and QAnon, with Jewish individuals and organisations playing a central role in the many malevolent plots both Q and Icke describe. Both George Soros and the Rothschild family, arch-fiends in the QAnon worldview, have long been demonised by Icke as supernaturally evil puppeteers. Among other references, it is possible to discern shades of Icke’s hybrid bloodline theory in early posts from Q; when referencing Soros and Rothschild, Q makes allusions to “puppet masters”, Satanism

and elite paedophiles, but also asks readers to “follow the bloodlines” and “trace the bloodlines”. Again, whilst Icke has done much to popularise such sentiment, he is by no means its originator - the Rothschilds have been the target of antisemitism for over 200 years - and, like many QAnon supporters, he stringently denies that his views are antisemitic. However, the coded terms employed by both Q and Icke function as a prop to allow plausible deniability, while both continue to promote this ancient form of prejudice.

Whilst Icke has distanced himself from QAnon, he has also linked his ideas to related conspiracy theories which have since been incorporated into QAnon. Icke has demonised Hillary Clinton since 1999, reiterating his claims in 2016 as the Pizzagate conspiracy theory gathered steam. In a video titled “Pizzagate: The Context”, he urged a degree of caution about details of Pizzagate, questioning whether “all the detail about Pizzagate [is] supportable”, but reaffirmed his belief in “a massive elite paedophile network operating out of Washington DC”, and Clinton’s role in “the sexual abuse and torture of young women”. He went on to state that: “Whether every aspect, assumption or detail of Pizzagate is true or not true, it changes not one thing in relation to this: there is a global network of empathy-deleted, psychopathic paedophiles and Satanists”.

ICKE’S INFLUENCE

Whilst Icke remains controversial among QAnon believers due to his anti-Trumpism and his extreme supernatural beliefs, he is receiving increasing recognition from the British QAnon scene and conspiratorial circles more widely. A common sentiment, expressed by one user of a British QAnon Facebook page, is: “The reptilian side, nah! But the rest I totally get!”. Others are more effusive in their praise, for example Geddes claiming that “AFAICT [as far as I can tell] Icke is a courageous hero who has been consistently right on this issue for a very long time”. The 49,000 strong Eyes Wide Open Facebook group recommends new members watch Icke’s presentations in order to “understand” the group, with one member posting: “Remember in 1991 when David Icke told us all that the world was run by a satanic paedophilic cult. How we all laughed”, with dozens of replies affirming support.

Icke has effectively exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to gain a new prominence, denying the existence of the virus in videos viewed millions of times. At the time Icke was removed from Facebook in April following consultation with HOPE not hate, he had nearly 800,000 followers, and was perhaps the single largest promotor of such content on the platform. Our polling that month found that 51% of respondents had heard of Icke, with 12% having read a text by Icke or watched one of his videos in the last



David Icke speaking at the Bilderberg Fringe Festival 2013. Photo: Tyler Merbler / flickr.com

six months. Icke has also emerged as a central figure in a series of large street protests in the UK, the headline speaker in protests in August and September which each attracted upwards of 10,000 attendees, with QAnon signs plainly visible in the crowds.

Whilst Icke's views may seem niche, we should not underestimate his ability to introduce dangerous notions to new audiences. During a friendly 3-hour interview on the True Geordie podcast in September 2019, which has received 982,000 views to date, he alleges "a very common theme of paedophilia" among elites, alongside "Literally human sacrificing and animal sacrificing Satanism. And you can chart these bloodlines, if you like, back into ancient history [...] The cement that holds this web together is paedophilia and Satanism". The London-based podcast primarily produces sports and comedy content, and has built up 1.88million subscribers, many of whom are young people. In disseminating these lies, Icke has helped to sow the seeds from which QAnon has grown.

QANON EUROPA

QANON IS ADAPTING TO NEW NATIONAL CONTEXTS THROUGHOUT EUROPE.

Until early in 2020, QAnon was a largely unknown phenomenon outside of the US, and even within it. While some European individuals and groups had been promoting the theory since its earliest days, they were largely looking in from the outside at an explicitly US-centric phenomenon and a narrative with little applicability to the politics of their own nations. While international conspiracies have always formed part of the narrative of QAnon, with the Rothschild family, the House of Saud and George Soros all identified as part of an all-powerful global Satanic elite, the primary narratives have always been centred on the machinations and minutiae of political developments in Washington DC.

However, it was in 2020 that QAnon truly began to spread and take root across Europe, adapting itself to local contexts and interacting with culturally-specific reference points rather than existing as a foreign import. In August, academic researcher Marc-Andre Argentino used a set of criteria to define whether a country had an independent QAnon presence, such as whether

it had a specific national QAnon Facebook group and whether local influencers were applying the narrative to domestic issues. He identified such a presence in almost every country in Europe, with only Estonia, Montenegro and Albania being without a movement of their own by early August.

Some countries appear to have a significantly larger presence than others when accounting for population size. Lithuania has a dedicated QAnon facebook group with 7,300 members, a remarkable number for a country with just 2.7 million inhabitants. This high engagement has been boosted by the endorsement of prominent figures such as the psychotherapist and owner of the Minfo.lt news website Marius Gabrilavičius, who has written numerous articles promoting QAnon on his platform.

One of the largest QAnon movements in Europe is that of Germany. The German-language *Qlobal-Change* network has 106,000 subscribers to its YouTube channel and a remarkable 122,000 subscribers to its Telegram channel, a huge number of users for that platform and a huge spike from the 20,000 subscribers it had in February. The vast majority of *Qlobal-Change's* output is translations of videos from popular US



A QAnon flag alongside Reichsbürger flags, Berlin, 29 August 2020. Copyright: Amadeu Antonio Stiftung

QAnon influencers, with no Germany-specific content.

The largest pan-European QAnon group was QAnon Europa, which had 20,000 members prior to its removal by Facebook in August 2020. The group was set up by German-speakers and the vast majority of the content was in German, although an accompanying website set up in July now also has content in Russian, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Greek, English, French and Thai.

However, QAnon is also forming a distinct German identity through its adoption by the *Reichsbürger* movement, an existing far-right conspiracy theory that denies the legitimacy of the modern German state and pledges allegiance instead to the defunct German Reich of 1871 to 1945, claiming that it was never legally dissolved. At recent anti-lockdown protests in Germany, the presence of QAnon iconography displayed by Reichsbürger groups was noted.

The Reichsbürger movement is itself a subset of a wider global phenomenon which also includes 'Sovereign Citizens' and 'Freemen on the land', groups most commonly found in the English-speaking world which deny the legitimacy of their national government and invoke misinterpreted or long-superseded legal principles to assert their personal sovereignty and freedom from local laws and taxation. A prominent UK-based advocate of such beliefs is YouTuber and English Democrats activist Graham Moore, who is also an enthusiastic QAnon promoter.

Along with British influencer Martin Geddes, the European QAnon influencer who has had the greatest impact on the movement both in the USA and internationally is Janet Ossebaard, the

Dutch producer of the viral documentary *Fall of the Cabal*, the English language version of which gained millions of views after its release in March 2020 and has been translated into numerous languages. The opening monologue lists a series of conspiracy theories that apparently serve as proof of its veracity, many of which have not been referenced even in passing by Q. They include fake forest fires in California, poisons in vaccines, 9/11 as a "false flag" event, sexual references in Disney cartoons, chemtrails, and "reptilian details" in the architecture of the Vatican.

Yet amongst the largely US-focused content of the documentary, Ossebaard also inserted numerous references that would resonate more strongly with her viewers in Europe. Having described the Pizzagate theory of mass-scale child abuse by Democratic politicians in the US, she then listed what she claimed were similar examples of elite Satanic abuse networks in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Ireland and the UK. This linking of QAnon themes to older European reference points is a key element to packaging QAnon for an international audience.

"The world is experiencing the biggest revolution ever. The worst nightmare of the Cabal has come true: the people have woken up."

Elsewhere, Ossebaard falsely credits QAnon with sparking the *gilet jaunes* protests in France and wider Europe, painting the protests as a popular revolution against the cabal-supporting President Macron and George Soros. While it is true that QAnon has caught on among some fringe elements of the Yellow Vests movement, they represent only a tiny fraction of the movement





and QAnon ideology had nothing to do with the initiation of the protests, which were instead sparked by fuel prices.

Perhaps the most vivid examples of the conflicting political interpretations of QAnon is its manifestations in the former Yugoslav republics. Pro-QAnon groups can be found in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia, and existing uploads of the *Fall of the Cabal* translated into Serbo-Croatian have received well over a million views, indicating widespread exposure to QAnon in the region.

The largest QAnon Facebook group in the region is called *QAnon Balkan* which, as its name suggests, aims to unify the peoples of the region in support of the theory. As the group's description states:

"We do not divide people by religion and nation, because we are all hostages of a handful of globalists, dangerous psychopaths, who have placed their puppets at the head of our states and institutions [...] Our intention is to spread awareness among the people, so that Qanon in our region can encourage people to break the shackles and get rid of globalists forever".

Yet there are other Facebook groups which reflect national concerns rather than regional unity. Much of the discussion in the largest Serbia-specific QAnon group, for example is fiercely nationalistic, with group members frequently expressing the desires to reassert Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo. Many group members have expressed their fury over Serbia's normalisation of relations with Kosovo, a rapprochement apparently carried out with

Trump's support and which seems likely to impact on the ability of QAnon to make further inroads into Serbian nationalist spaces.

This exemplifies the challenges of adapting an ideology designed by and for American nationalists to new national settings. The Satan-worshipping cabal is believed to be a global phenomenon, and thus non-American QAnon followers often emphasise the struggle against it as an event that can unite humanity, as in the QAnon Balkan group.

Yet as self-described 'patriots', their own interpretation of justice and peace will often conflict with that of patriots in neighbouring countries. Just as neo-Nazi militias can be found fighting on both sides of the war in Eastern Ukraine, so the QAnon narrative offers no meaningful template on how border disputes, religious tensions or other sources of friction might be overcome in a post-cabal future.

Whatever the future of the core US-centric QAnon narratives, it seems clear that the imported themes will continue to impact on the conspiracy theory milieu across Europe. The extent to which QAnon can be adapted to new national contexts will impact on its ability to implant itself in new locations, but could also lead to utterly distinct variants emerging that can no longer usefully be classified as belonging to the wider movement.



Janet Ossebaard, creator of *Fall of the Cabal*

SECTION 2: QANON IN THE UK



QAnon sign at the “We Do Not Consent” anti-lockdown rally in Trafalgar Square, London, 26 September 2020. Copyright: HOPE not hate

A STORM BLOWS IN

QAnon established small pockets of support in the UK from the outset, including a key global orthodox QAnon figure in Martin Geddes, a computer scientist from Staines with a 210,000 Twitter following, and who has crossed the Atlantic to network with American QAnon figures. The earliest explicitly QAnon Facebook group we have identified in the UK dated back to June 2018, roughly eight months after the first Q drop. However, QAnon remained an exceedingly niche interest in the UK for the first two and a half years of its existence; prior to March, we had identified just three UK-specific Facebook groups devoted to QAnon, with a combined membership of less than 5,000.

This was to change with the onset of the pandemic. New QAnon groups began to spring up regularly, and Facebook data cited by *Wired* shows an 800% increase in the membership of the top 20 UK QAnon-oriented open groups that were “regularly posting about QAnon or QAnon-adjacent themes” in the period between 1 March and 18 September 2020, to roughly 160,000 members. Private UK Facebook groups presenting an ambivalent relationship to QAnon, but still heavily featuring QAnon content, have grown at a remarkably rapid rate; for example, Eyes Wide Open (EWO), founded in June, currently boasts 49,000 members, and Freedom for the Children UK (FFTCUK) has gained 13,000 since launching in July. Both groups have evaded the bans as of early October.

British conspiracy theorists have refocused the theory to incorporate UK issues, such as the Operation Yewtree and Operation Conifer investigations into historical child sexual abuse, Prince Andrew’s implication in the Jeffrey Epstein scandal, and the disappearance of Madeline McCann. The influence of British conspiracy theorists such as David Icke, who has promoted the idea of a global, elite Satanic paedophile cult cannibalising children long before QAnon, is also discernible. QAnon camouflages such fantastical claims amongst the legitimate, with news items about the conviction of paedophiles, grooming gangs, and allegations that children are imprisoned underneath Buckingham Palace, flowing together into a soup of outrage and often violent language.

The energy building on social media has also manifested on the streets of the UK. In July 2020, the first “Save the Children” rally was held in Hollywood, California with successor events quickly arranged in as many as 200 cities in the US, the UK and other countries. FFTCUK, the outfit behind the British demonstrations, has held events in 17 cities and towns in the

UK so far, and whilst many of these were tiny, some attracted hundreds of attendees, QAnon believers mingling with people concerned by legitimate child welfare issues. EWO co-organised a 5 September protest that brought together as many as 1,000 people to march from Hyde Park to Broadcasting House, hurling abuse at the Oxford Street Disney store on route. Anti-lockdown, anti-5G and anti-vaccine demonstrations in the UK – including two Trafalgar Square events upwards of 10,000 strong – have seen a noticeable QAnon presence. Notably, the most energetic conspiracy theory-driven anti-lockdown protest group in the UK, Stand Up X, is increasingly adopting eclectic QAnon notions as campaigning issues.



QAnon sign at the “Unite for Freedom” anti-lockdown rally in Trafalgar Square, London, 29 August 2020. Copyright: HOPE not hate

UK QANON SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

In early 2019, HOPE not hate noted that the traditional far right had evolved from a movement dominated by organisations with conventional membership structures into a far more disparate movement that was instead taking its lead from an array of online influencers. This development highlighted how social media allows people to unite over shared beliefs online without having to commit themselves to a particular authoritative leadership or manifesto.

As a movement born and raised on social media, QAnon assumed this form of influencer-directed structure from the outset. While Q's posts on 4chan and later 8chan represent the closest thing the movement has to a foundational text, their cryptic nature and exhortations for readers to contribute their own research has given rise to a legion of interpreters who seek to flesh out and develop their own narratives. These influencers do not usually claim any intrinsic authority, but can build up audiences of hundreds of thousands of followers who look to them for both narrative development and encouragement.

While there are many minor British figures promoting QAnon online, only two have achieved popularity to rival their US counterparts: Martin Geddes and Charlie Ward. They are notable not just for the size of their online followings but in how they differ, illustrating the diversity of ideology and activity that exists within QAnon, and how it might evolve to fill new spaces in the future.

MARTIN GEDDES

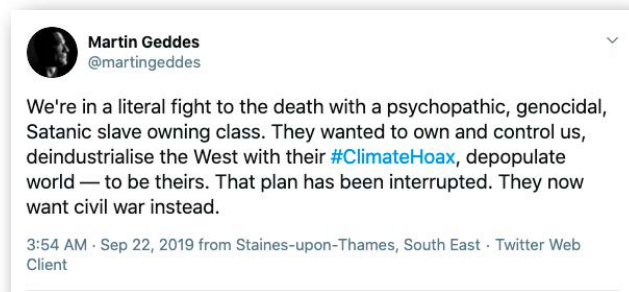


Martin Geddes is by far the most significant British figure in the world of orthodox QAnon, and among the most popular QAnon influencers in the world. Geddes was an unusually early adherent to the theory, claiming to have “watched QAnon right from the outset”. By January 2018, three months after the first Q post, he had openly endorsed the theory.

“My homeland is a soggy European archipelago, and not America. Yet this fight for independence and freedom is everywhere the same, and

transcends national boundaries. My loyalty is to all good citizens of this planet, not to parasitical monarchs and power-mad egomanics”.

Describing himself as a “volunteer propagandist”, Geddes runs one of the most popular QAnon Twitter accounts in the world, with over 210,000 followers. He has also written lengthy tracts in support of the movement online and in print, and in November 2019 travelled to the US to meet American influencer Dave Hayes (AKA Praying Medic), an evangelical faith healer and one of the most high-profile QAnon influencers in the world.



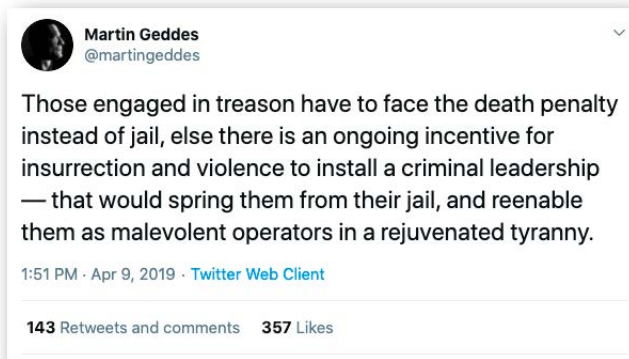
Yet Geddes is in some ways unusual among his peers. Many of his counterparts present their social media accounts in ways that reflect both the violent rhetoric of Q and the hyperpartisan internet subculture from which it emerged, with anonymous usernames containing the words “pain” or “punish”, and profiles heavy with meme images such as Pepe the Frog. Geddes, however, uses his real name and photo on his profile, and his social media output in general largely eschews the meme-heavy content of his colleagues.

He also appears to be more reflective than many in the world of QAnon. A collection of his essays offers lengthy explanations of his beliefs, laying out what he perceives as the extensive evidence supporting QAnon and addressing the accusations levelled against it by sceptics. In one tract from July 2018, he declares his certainty that QAnon is a real and earth-shattering historic event, but goes on to consider the possibility that he might be wrong:

“On the other hand, if I/we are wrong, then the power of social media and propaganda to create and inflate bubbles of insanity — trapping intelligent people of goodwill — greatly exceeds anything we dared to imagine. The information age will be darkened by having divided society, destroying a consensus reality.”

Geddes clearly considers himself to be among the “intelligent people of goodwill” that subscribe to QAnon. Yet his ideology is firmly placed in the orthodox tradition of the movement, and is no less toxic than that of his less sophisticated

comrades. For all his contemplative moments, Geddes does not shy away from contemplating the death penalties that will be handed out to those guilty of “treason”, which according to Q includes many, if not most, of President Trump’s domestic political opponents. So how did a mild-mannered communications consultant and Oxford alumnus become a leading figure in this extreme and belligerent scene?



From his own words, he was previously an unlikely candidate for a movement that centres on the adulation of President Trump; he describes himself as a “leftish-liberal”, claims to have “never voted for a right-of-centre political party” and that he initially viewed Trump as merely a “loud-mouthed billionaire with a colourful history, and the probable lesser of two evils”.

Moreover, while the QAnon movement draws influences from various New Age philosophies and conspiracy theories, its orthodox form is strongly imbued with Christian theology and language, with Q regularly quoting from the Bible and urging his followers to “put on the armor of God”. Geddes, on the other hand, speaks of having a deep distrust of organised religion, prompted by his childhood experience of his family’s relationship to the Jehovah’s Witnesses. In 2018, Geddes addressed this strange juxtaposition between his personal identity and that of his counterparts in the global movement in which he now plays an influential role.



Geddes claims to have “totally changed my perspective as more verifiable data sources have arrived (with Q just being one of many)”, and his Twitter history does provide some clues as to his journey prior to the arrival of QAnon. Days after the 2016 Presidential election he accused Hillary

Clinton of being a “treasonous psychopath”, and suggested that the evidence for that claim was being uncovered by “a detective process comparable to one that revealed paedophilia and blackmail at the highest levels of UK society”.

This strongly suggests that Geddes had been closely following the Pizzagate conspiracy from the very outset, and that his adoption of QAnon was part of a longer descent into conspiracy theory. In the months preceding Q’s first posts in October 2017, Geddes also retweeted a string of far-right figures unconnected to QAnon, including former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke and the British anti-Muslim activist Anne Marie Waters. While Geddes might still consider himself to be a “leftish-liberal” at heart, his recent journey does not reflect those denominators at all.

It is the “epic battle of good versus evil” that Geddes sees playing out around him that is the central core of QAnon belief, and one that has come to dominate his life. His role in the movement might perhaps have come at some personal cost; he has alluded to the fact that some family members consider him a “conspiracy theorist” but remained optimistic that they might one day come to appreciate his efforts. It is perhaps more likely that it is Geddes who will one day be forced to accept that the movement he has given three years of his life to is, in his own words, “a bubble of insanity”.

CHARLIE WARD



Ward is very much a representative of the newer, more eclectic strand of QAnon. Whereas Geddes has been promoting Q since late 2017, Ward first began promoting QAnon content via his YouTube channel in March 2020, when interest in the movement first began to spike around the world. By mid-September his channel had reached 170,000 subscribers before YouTube removed it; his replacement channel already has 43,000 subscribers as of mid-October and is likely to rise further unless it is removed.

His channel is prominently branded with instantly recognisable QAnon slogans and symbols and, like many QAnon promoters, is very public about his Christian faith, with many of his early videos titled simply *Jesus loves you*. Yet he interviews and

promotes a wide range of guests from preexisting and tangential conspiracy theories that have little to do with either orthodox QAnon lore or Christianity. His recent guests have included anti-5G campaigners, New Age spiritualists and even Black Hebrew Israelites, who explained their belief that black people are the only true descendants of the Biblical Israelites as Ward nodded along in seeming agreement.

Living in Marbella, Spain, Ward has been described as a businessman, entrepreneur and oil tycoon and appears to live a jet setting lifestyle, listing his location as “Dubai, Singapore, Marbella” on his Instagram profile. His videos contain advertisements for companies selling products from vodka to precious metals, often with a unique discount code that can be used when purchasing. Similarly, the captions to his videos direct his viewers to a dizzying list of websites that Ward appears to control, and his website invites readers to join his ‘Insiders Club’ for a €100 annual fee or purchase equipment that supposedly protects from the harmful effects of 5G radiation.

Ward has also done perhaps more than anyone else to popularise the claims of New Zealand man Joseph Gregory Hallett, who styles himself King John III and claims to be the true heir to the British throne. Until his removal from Twitter and Facebook in late summer, Hallett had amassed tens of thousands of followers, largely drawn from QAnon supporters, for his grandiose fantasies, which also included a claim to be the messiah. Ward has produced 19 videos in promotion of Hallett’s claims, while his friends David Mahoney and Jack Kidd appear to have had a major role in producing Hallett’s documentary, *The Hidden King*.

Ward is particularly focused on the NESARA/ GESARA conspiracy theory, which holds that President Trump will soon unveil laws that create a “financial reset” that will, among many wild claims, lead to universal cancellation of debts, the removal of all taxes bar a flat sales tax and a universal basic income that will cover all household expenses. Like so many aspects of eclectic QAnon lore, this theory has never been mentioned by Q, and has its roots in a longstanding financial scam. Despite the utopian, debt-free economy that is supposedly to arrive “in the next six months or so”, Ward and his guests frequently stress the importance of various investment opportunities that viewers should take advantage of, usually recommending the buying of gold, silver or various cryptocurrencies.

This is not the only area in which Ward’s QAnon narratives might also be providing business opportunities for others. In a video from July titled “F%&K THE MASK”, Ward discussed his strident opposition to the use of facemasks with his close friend Lee Dawson, who also lives in Marbella. The pair suggested that viewers

should instead seek to build up their immune systems through exercise and a healthy diet. The video soon became a sales pitch for a nutrition supplement sold by a company that Dawson works with, which he claimed allowed you to “absorb 90% of what you eat instead of the normal 30%”. Ward gave a link to Dawson’s website in the caption to the video, and again provided a discount code for his viewers to use when ordering.

While there is no evidence that Ward has received any financial benefit from the promotions that his channel is hosting, the melding of his eclectic QAnon narratives with promotion of investment opportunities or health advice illustrates the ways in which conspiracy theories can sometimes also present a risk of profiteering or financial exploitation.

POLLING QANON: SUPPORT AND REACH IN THE UK

One cannot judge the threat posed by a movement merely by its size; even a small number of radicalised individuals can cause significant harm. However, with so much talk in the media about the rise of QAnon in recent months it would be easy to overstate the support for this conspiracy theory. For that reason, HOPE not hate commissioned new polling in September 2020 to gauge knowledge of, and attitudes towards, QAnon and related conspiracy theories in the UK.

We found that QAnon remains a marginal force in British society, with just one in five having heard of the theory. While this is a small section of the British public, the figure is surprisingly high considering QAnon remained an incredibly niche phenomenon in the UK until the beginning of the year.

However, measuring support for QAnon is more complex than one might think. Whilst 8% of our sample claimed to support QAnon, a number of these “supporters” also claimed in a previous question that they had not actually heard of QAnon, results that echo a recent survey in the US.¹ Taking those who claimed to have both heard of QAnon and to support it as a more accurate figure, we get the still considerable figure of 5.7% (3.2% strong support, and 2.5% soft support), although it is unclear what importance these respondents place on that support.

We also found that broader conspiratorial notions that fit into the worldview of QAnon are

more widely supported, and that young people especially are more open to conspiracy theories. This suggests there is scope for QAnon to grow further in the UK.

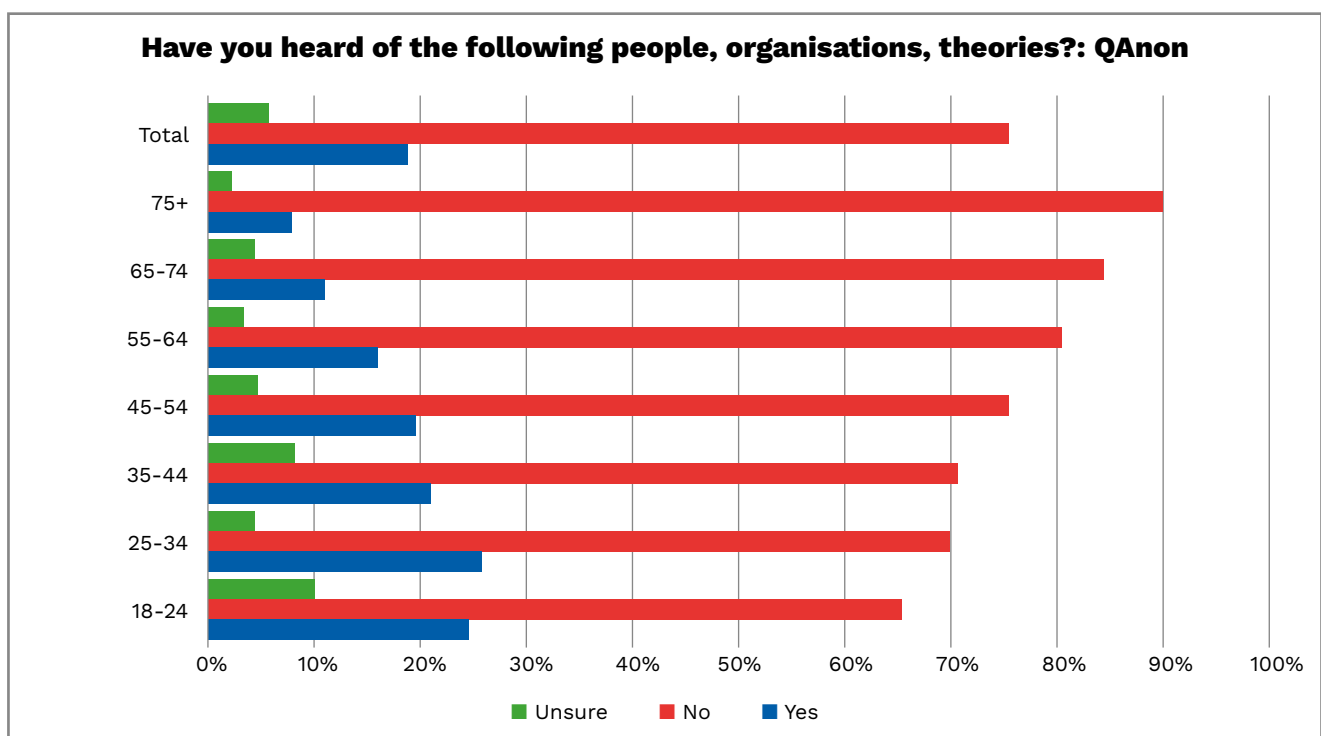
This is the first poll examining British attitudes towards QAnon, and further surveys, interviews and focus groups are required to fully explore the extent and shape of QAnon belief in the UK.

QANON AND ADJACENT THEORIES

Our questionnaire sought to gauge knowledge of and support for QAnon. We also asked about the Pizzagate theory, which is closely related to QAnon, alongside the more established notion of a New World Order, and the world-famous British conspiracy theorist David Icke. The hope was to explore the extent to which the public is familiar with, and open to, long-standing conspiracy theory scenes that share common tropes with QAnon.

We found that:

- 19% had heard of QAnon, while the majority (76%) had not and 6% were unsure. Younger people are more familiar with the theory: 24% of 18-25 year olds, and 26% of 25-34 year olds. However, knowledge of the theory does not exceed one in four among any age group. Men (23%) were more likely than women (15%) to say that they had heard of the theory, and graduates (26%) were more likely than non-graduates (15%) to voice knowledge of QAnon.

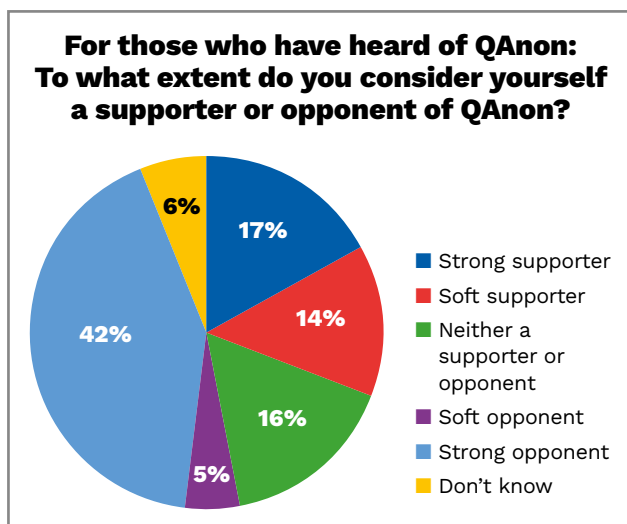


- Almost one in ten (8%) claimed to support QAnon; 4% claimed to be a “strong supporter”, with a further 4% claimed to be a “soft supporter”. However, twice as many (17%) selected “Neither a supporter or opponent”, while 1% saw themselves as “soft opponent”, 10% “strong opponent”, and the majority (63%) were unclear, selecting either “don’t know” or that they “had not heard of either QAnon, Pizzagate, New World Order, or David Icke”.
- However, only 85% of those “strong supporters” claimed in a previous question that they had actually heard of the theory (with 14% claiming they had not, and 1% unsure). This discrepancy was starker amongst soft supporters; only 57% of this group also claimed to have heard of QAnon (with 39% claiming they had not, and 4% unsure). This means that only 70% of those who claimed to support QAnon were sure they had previously heard of the theory.

This discrepancy may in part be due to the role of the survey itself in the production of results. Professor Brian Schaffner of Tufts University polled Americans on QAnon beliefs in September, releasing his findings in a recent report with the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD). Schaffner writes: “many of these respondents may actually be hearing these claims for the first time when asked about them in the survey”, and so may inflate estimates of how widely conspiracies are believed. It seems a similar issue appeared in our QAnon polling in the UK.

When taking respondents who say they have both heard about the theory and support it, we get lower, but more accurate, figures:

- A still considerable 5.7% of our sample claim they support QAnon (3.2% strong and 2.5% soft support). 17% of all those who have heard about QAnon claimed that they strongly support it, with 13% soft support. 16% selected “neither a supporter or opponent”, 5% selected soft opponent, and 42% strong opponent, with 6% selecting “don’t know”.



Whilst this figure is still high, it is crucial to highlight that we cannot know what importance these respondents place on that support, and it should not be taken that “strong supporters” necessarily hold a diehard commitment to QAnon and an unquestioning belief in all its claims. As Schaffner points out, “views towards QAnon should not be taken as synonymous with conspiracy belief”, as he found that many of those who claimed to have both heard of QAnon “did not even know about, much less believe, all the QAnon conspiracies” he asked about in his poll. He goes on to state that “equating QAnon support in a survey with full adherence to the conspiracy claims put forth by QAnon likely overstates the extent to which QAnon supporters are fully enmeshed in QAnon and minimizes the penetration and influence of QAnon conspiracy theories beyond those who identify as supporters.”

The results do, however, at least indicate a concerning degree of openness to QAnon. Whilst it is undoubtedly still a marginal force in the UK, as we shall see, aspects of the QAnon worldview are more widely supported by the British public, suggesting scope for its further spread.

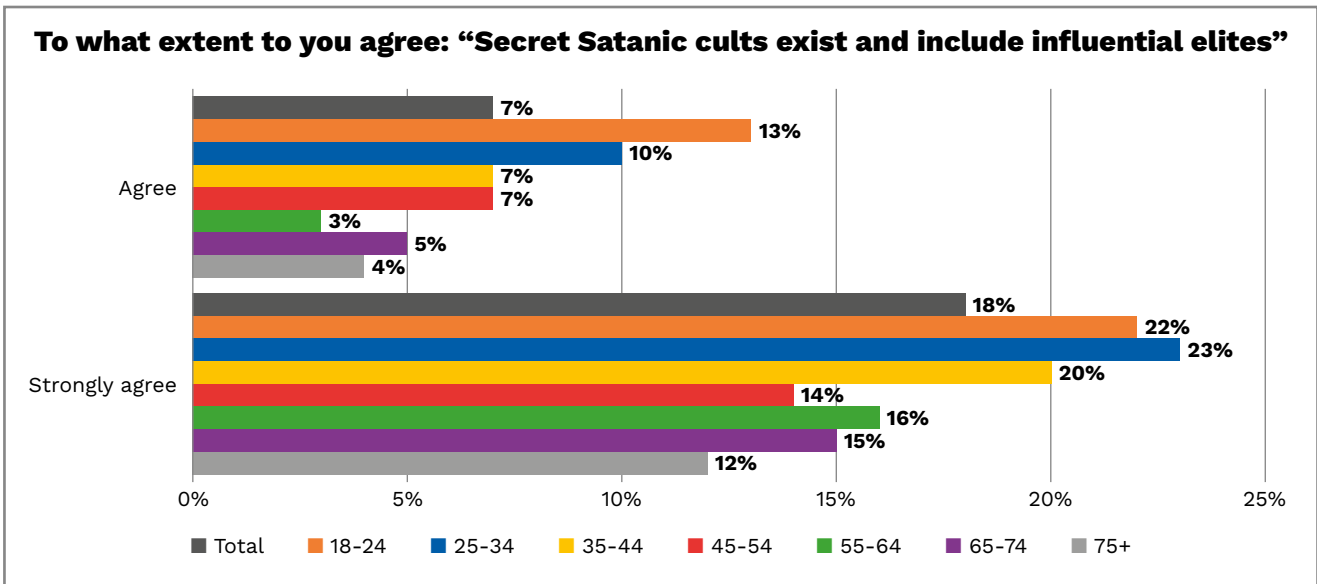
ROOM TO GROW

Our poll found that young Brits are especially open to broader conspiratorial notions, many of which predate QAnon but fit with the QAnon worldview.

Support for the idea of a secret cabal controlling global events is prevalent, especially among young people. 9% claimed they strongly agreed, and 20% claimed they agreed, with the statement: “Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organisations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together”. This rises to 38% and 43% respectively among the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups.

Though a minority, 7% of our sample claim they strongly agree, and 18% claim they agree, with the statement “Secret Satanic cults exist and include influential elites”; again, these statements were more widely supported among younger age groups (35% of 18-24s, 33% of 25-34s). The Satanic nature of the conspirators is core QAnon lore, but the idea that influential elites are secretly engaging in Devil-worship long predates QAnon, having been proliferated by religious groups for hundreds of years, so it is to be expected that the notion is more widely supported.

In addition, 8% of our sample claim to strongly agree, and 17% claim to agree, with the statement “Elites in Hollywood, politics, the media and other powerful positions are secretly engaging in large scale child trafficking and abuse”. Such results are perhaps unsurprising in light of continuing revelations about Jeffrey Epstein, a



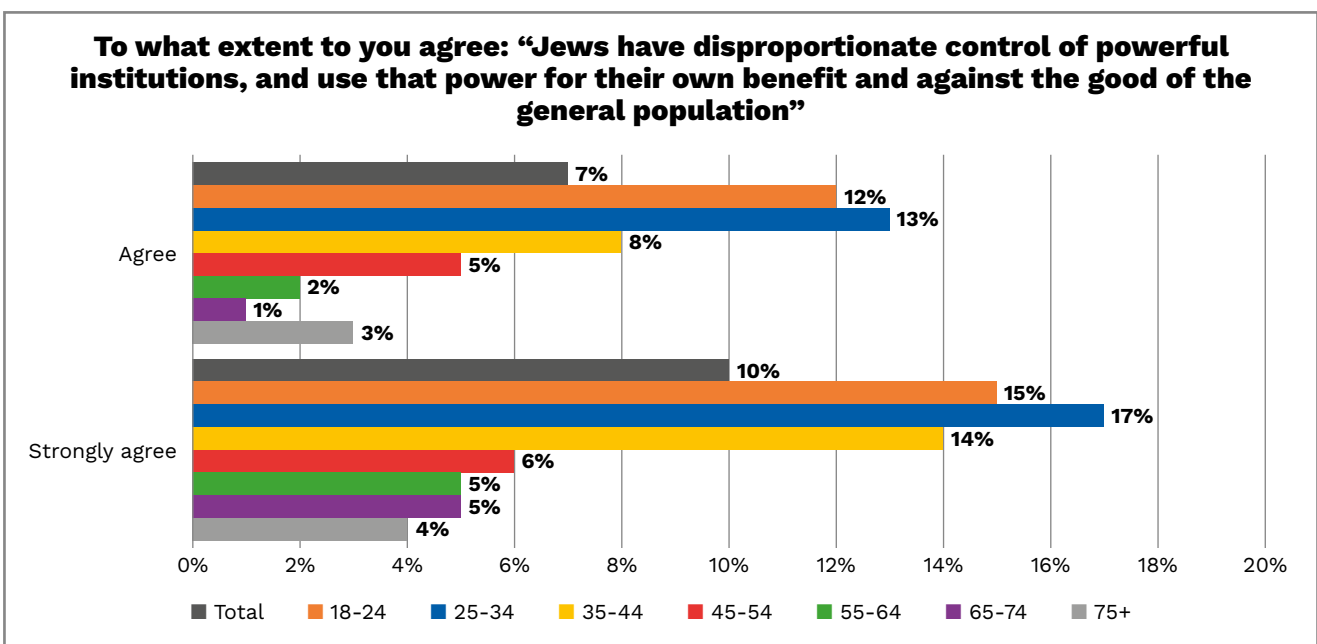
well-connected financier at the centre of a child sex trafficking network. The genuine horror of Epstein’s crimes has become a central focus for QAnon, which mixes real life tragedies with fantastical misinformation. The suspicion that Epstein is just a small node in a much larger web has likely done much to radicalise people into the QAnon worldview.

Worryingly, we found that that 7% claim they strongly agree, and 10% claim they agree, with the statement “Jews have disproportionate control of powerful institutions, and use that power for their own benefit and against the good of the general population”; only 46% disagree. Support for this antisemitic statement rises to 30% among the 25-34 age group. Antisemitism

is a long-established tradition of conspiracy belief, with Jewish people often explicitly or implicitly identified as the conspirators of various plots. QAnon has drawn from some of these established notions, with a strong vein of antisemitism running through the theory.

Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 have spread significantly since the onset of the pandemic and subsequent government measures. Our polling found that:

- Although a minority view, 5% claim they strongly agree, and 9% claim they agree, with the statement “A covid-19 vaccine will be used maliciously to infect people with poison or insert microchips into people”.



- Linked to this, 7% claim they strongly agree, and 10% claim they agree, with the statement “Covid-19 has been intentionally released as part of a “depopulation” plan orchestrated by the UN or New World Order”.
- Over one in five claim they agree (8% strongly agree, and 15% agree) with the statement “Covid-19 is a bio-weapon intentionally spread by the Chinese state to weaken Western economies”.

Again, these notions were more likely to be supported by younger respondents.

The growth of COVID-19 conspiracy theories has coincided with the spread of QAnon, and QAnon has incorporated such theories into its grand narrative, with followers variously alleging that the virus is fabricated, or a weapon released by the cabal to allow for election rigging, or other malign purposes.

One potential barrier to wider support for QAnon in the UK could be the poor opinion the British populace have towards US President Donald Trump. Orthodox QAnon is a hyperpartisan, US-centric narrative, with the hero figure of Trump at its centre; however, our polling finds that 77% hope Trump loses the Presidential election, and a majority of Brits view him in a “very unfavourable” light. However, as we outline elsewhere in the report, the theory has developed outside its

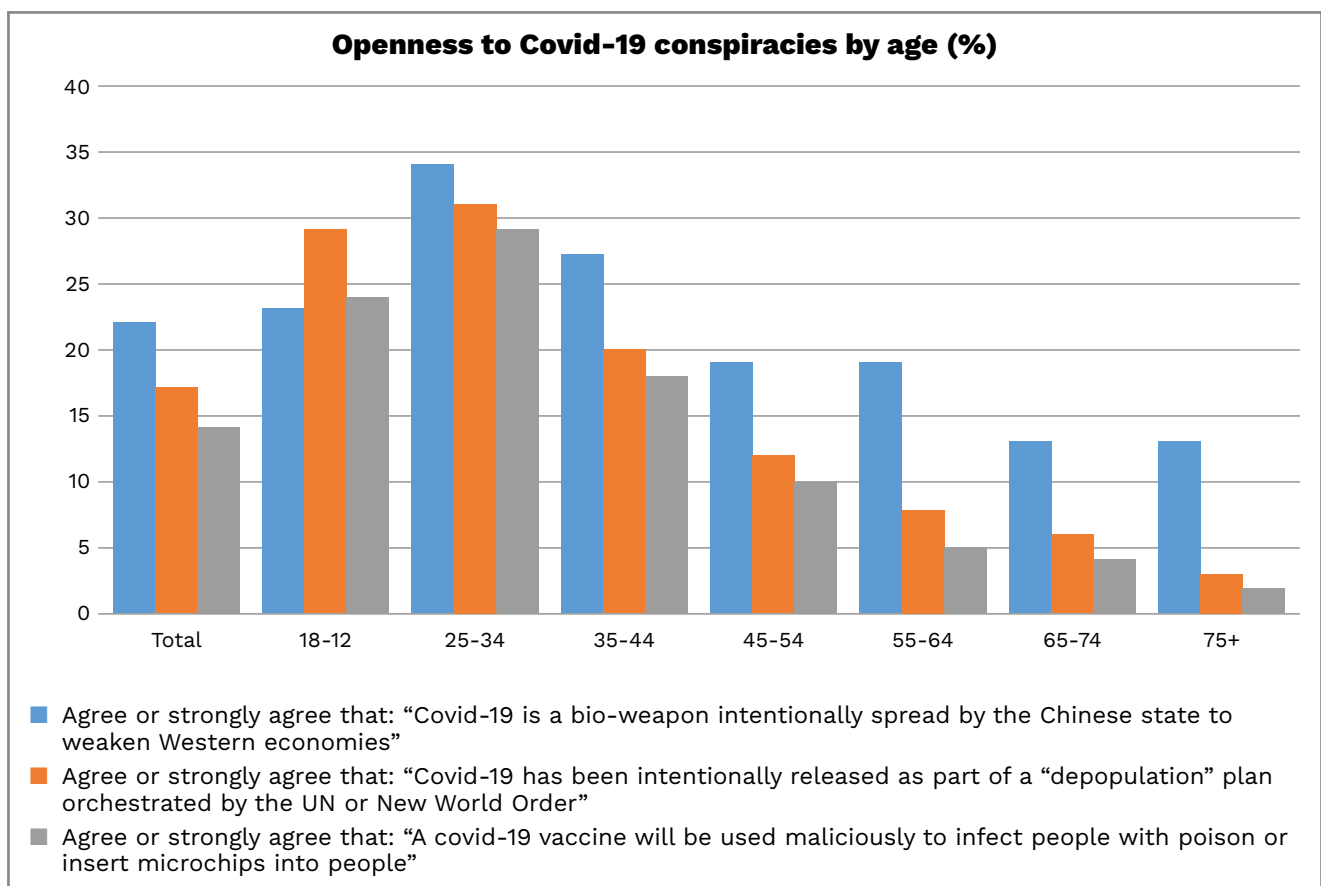
orthodox incarnation, downplaying many of the US-centric elements and thus becoming more translatable to other national contexts, meaning that negativity towards Trump may not be the barrier it once was.

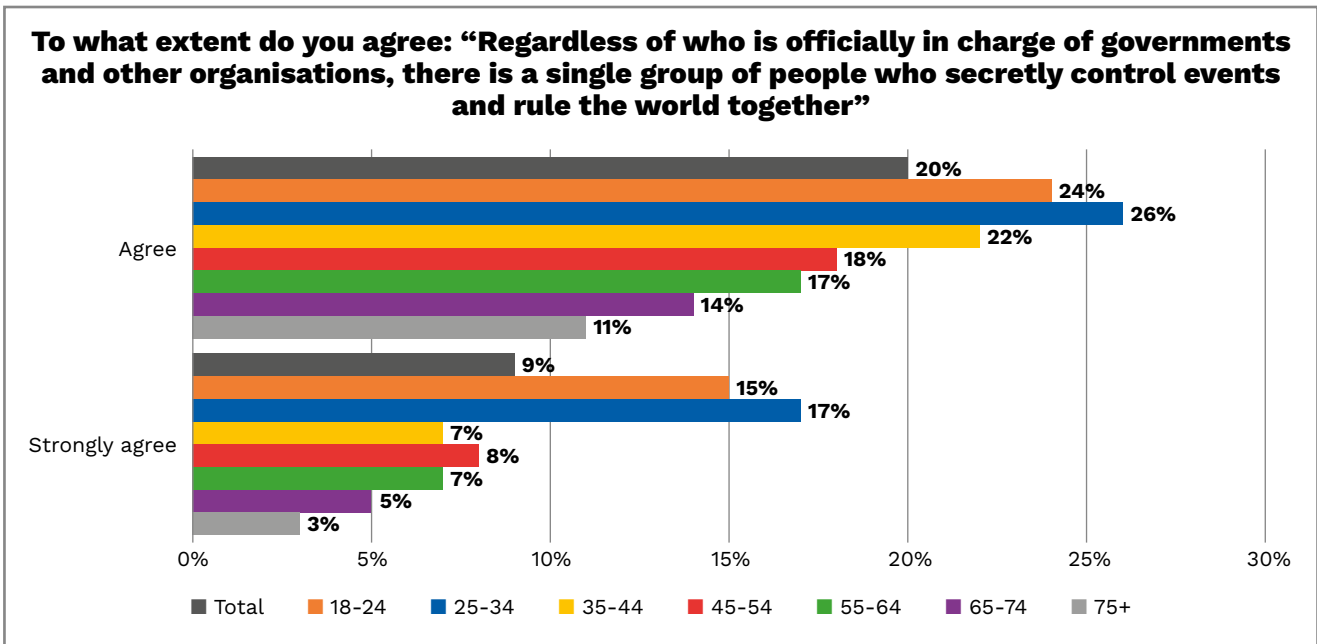
Whilst QAnon remains fringe in the UK, our results indicate a general unease amongst sections of the British population, especially the young, and an openness to antisemitism and the notion that sexual predation and Satanism are at work amongst the powerful. This suggests that there is room for QAnon to spread further, bringing together those already susceptible to its worldview.

WHO ARE THE SUPPORTERS?

The following analysis isolates those who have heard of QAnon (19% of our sample), and digs into a smaller group still - those who have both heard of, and support, QAnon (6%). Whilst this pool is far too small to draw any hard conclusions, it suggests what QAnon supporters may have in common.

Men and women were roughly as likely to support QAnon, and whilst support came across all social grades and working situations, non-graduates were more likely to voice support than graduates. Support was also much higher among the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups than older age groups.





QAnon originated in right wing US political subcultures, and strong supporters were more likely to have voted Conservative in 2017 and 2019 General Elections than Labour, and to have voted Leave than Remain. Those who identified themselves as a “Nationalist” or “Conservative” were also more likely to strongly support QAnon than respondents identifying with other options (Centrist, Liberal, Progressive, Socialist, Libertarian, Other, Don’t Know). These differences are not stark, however, and at least some degree of support came from across the political spectrum. As Joseph Uscinski of the University of Miami has argued, based on his own polling in the US, that rather than political alignment, QAnon beliefs are best explained by “conspiratorial worldviews, which are themselves uncorrelated with political orientations”.²

The jury is still out on who QAnon supporters are and what exactly they believe, and further analysis is required in order to fully understand this multifaceted and quickly developing phenomenon. However, our findings indicate a worrying degree of openness to QAnon, and potential for its further spread.

ENDNOTES

- 1: <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/qanon-and-conspiracy-beliefs.pdf>
- 2: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/18/qanon-america-conspiracy-theory>

METHODOLOGY:

Hanbury Strategy conducted a survey of 2,000 adults between September 8 and September 11 2020, using an online panel of respondents. To ensure the sample was as representative as possible, we sourced the most up to date census statistics to inform our weighting and sampling criteria, and collected responses according to strict quotas. Respondents under the age of 18 were disqualified.

Each panellist was assigned an individual ID by the online panel provider, which was used to select panellists for the survey according to the target sampling criteria and to ensure panellists were not over-contacted, which limits survey fatigue and potential bias. The data was also passed through a series of automatic and manual checks to deal with any poor quality responses or duplication that might have occurred.

Finally, to adjust for small discrepancies in sampling, the data was then weighted to be nationally representative using an RIM weighting scheme, which weighted respondents based on the interactions between region, gender and age.

QANON ON THE STREETS

On 22 August, several hundred protesters marched to Buckingham Palace, where a section of the crowd angrily chanted “paedophiles” outside the gates; a clip quickly went viral, receiving 3 million views in a matter of days. What many commentators missed in the moment was the QAnon iconography in the crowd, and the fact that the march was just one of eleven simultaneous events across the UK, organised by a new outfit, Freedom for the Children UK (FFTCUK). The marches were held in tandem with as many as 200 events across the US, Canada and other countries.

Two weeks later, as many as 1,000 people gathered in Hyde Park for a “Stand up for the Children” march, co-organised by an anti-lockdown protest group, Stand Up X (SUX), and a large Facebook group, Eyes Wide Open (EWO). Figures from various conspiratorial groups were present amidst a multitude of QAnon placards, and signs with violent slogans. Chanting “Fuck

Bill Gates” and “Hey, Pedos, leave our kids alone”, the group moved east to the BBC headquarters at Broadcasting House. En route, the protest gathered to heckle the Disney Store on Oxford Street with cries of “paedo!”.

QAnon narratives are animating followers to the streets in protests that are part of a wider phenomenon. Since lockdown restrictions came into force, an unprecedented number of conspiracy theory-driven protest groups have emerged in the UK and held dozens of demonstrations across the country. Whilst most have been small, anti-lockdown rallies in August and September addressed by David Icke have brought upwards of 10,000 people to Trafalgar Square. The primary thrust of these protests is an anti-elite, anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine agenda, but QAnon narratives are emerging as an important component of these events, which are becoming increasingly confrontational.



The “We Do Not Consent” anti-lockdown rally at Trafalgar Square, London, 26 September 2020. Copyright: HOPE not hate

THE BROAD ANTI-LOCKDOWN STREET MOVEMENT

The first significant anti-lockdown protest was held on 16 May, when roughly 100 gathered for a confrontational event in Hyde Park at which Piers Corbyn, a veteran conspiracy theorist and brother of the former Labour Party leader, was arrested alongside 19 others. Numerous protests have since been held around the UK, many of them headed by Corbyn and organised by groups such as SUX and Save Our Rights UK. These events have significantly boosted the profile of an array of professional conspiracy theorists and discredited medical figures, including Corbyn, anti-vaccine theorist Kate Shemirani and anti-5G activist Mark Steele.

The emerging scene is difficult to untangle, a fragmented mass of existing and newly-formed organisations, websites, campaigns, publications, broadcasters and individuals. Fliers for conspiracy theory-driven protests typically feature a multitude of logos, and it is often not immediately obvious which are organisations with formalised structures, which are online campaigns, and which are Facebook groups with a brand. The same protest is often advertised through several separate Facebook event pages, with fliers produced by an array of groups, and events are often advertised but fail to materialise.

This milieu lacks cohesion, but many groups founded on diverging issues have so far been able to set aside differences to unite under an anti-lockdown, anti-elite message. The crowds at such events are notably diverse, with a variety of ages, genders, and ethnicities present; far-right activists rubbing shoulders with the countercultural left and fringe religious groups, and veterans of the conspiracy scene mingling with those attending their first demo. The decentralised nature makes the scene both harder to track and more adaptable - if a prominent activist quits or a group folds, others can emerge in their place.

There are, however, rifts among erstwhile comrades, most notably Corbyn's falling out with Shemirani and Steele, which resulted in the pair organising a Trafalgar Square event a week prior to Corbyn's 26 September demonstration. The first event attracted more than 2,000 attendees with 32 arrests, the second upwards of 10,000 with 16 arrests, after clashes with the police.

THE QANON STREET MOVEMENT

The lines between the anti-lockdown and QAnon street movements have become increasingly porous. The first significant QAnon-driven demonstrations occurred more than three months after the first anti-lockdown demonstrations, but the influence of the theory on the broader anti-lockdown scene was already evident, with QAnon iconography visible at events.

QAnon-driven events in the UK have been held in coordination with rallies around the world under the inoffensive slogan "Save Our Children". The deliberately vague branding, shorn of the esoterica of orthodox QAnon, has attracted people motivated by legitimate concerns alongside ardent conspiracy theorists, with QAnon acolytes sharing stages with highly impassioned campaigners against genuine child exploitation, some of whom claim to have themselves been victims of such abuse. This lack of clarity has also given the marches cover; some local newspapers reported on the protests, but missed the conspiracy theory references in the crowds.

As with the broader scene, these demonstrations are funnelling an energy built on social media. FFTCUK and Eyes Wide Open built private Facebook groups of over 10,000 and over 45,000 members respectively before making forays into street activism. These groups function both as incubators for outrage, but also as the central hubs for organisation, providing materials, advice and coordination for local activists. In turn, events are live-streamed and fed back online.

Despite their collaboration, groups have employed varying approaches to street activism. FFTCUK has focused on organising simultaneous events across the UK in fortnightly waves, holding events in 17 cities and towns within a month. EWO, in conjunction with SUX, have channeled their energies into a single London event per month, and have adopted a more confrontational approach. The anger palpable at the 5 September event, especially concerning given the number of children present, has caused FFTCUK to distance themselves from the "negative" and "intimidating" atmosphere of the march.

The street movement has experienced something of a lull, however. FFTCUK has postponed further demonstrations after a disappointing turnout across the UK on 19 September, also citing a desire to avoid negative press for violating lockdown measures. Rifts have emerged within EWO, and the London event of 10 October received a fraction of the attendance of the 5 September event, leading a key organiser to call the event "a complete let down... heartbroken. What happened to our protest".

FREEDOM FOR THE CHILDREN UK

Freedom for the Children UK (FFTCUK) is a Facebook group-turned street movement led by Laura Ward and Lucy Davis, which has held fortnightly marches across the UK, in 17 different cities and towns so far.

FFTCUK's first actions were on 22 August, held in coordination with an international wave of demonstrations under the slogan "Save Our Children". The group held events in Aberdeen, Bristol, Dundee, Huddersfield, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Newport, Orkney and York. While some of these events were tiny, those in Manchester, Liverpool (which were held in coordination with other groups) and London were hundreds strong. A video of the London march received 3.7 million views within three days, with considerable resultant press coverage, including *The Express* headline "Prince Andrew under pressure after protests outside Buckingham Palace".

The group has officially presented an ambivalence towards QAnon, although Ward has told followers "I know there's a lot of Q followers in here, and I'm so glad that you're here because you're standing with us, you're standing up for what's right." FFTCUK's Facebook group, which has 13,000 members at time of writing, has heavily featured QAnon misinformation and references to Pizzagate. For example, when one member, speaking on the 22 August events, asked "What % of people on here are into the whole QAnon thing? Because there were quite a few QAnon placards on the marches today". Most of the hundreds of replies expressed outright support or sympathy for the theory, with some rejecting it as a "psyop", or unaware of what QAnon is.

The group has since held waves of demonstrations on 5 and 19 September, some of which have featured group meditations before marches. However, the events of the 19th received disappointingly low numbers, with some supporters reporting poor communication with local organisers among other difficulties. The group has indicated that it will focus on "community work" and letter-writing campaigns, and other actions, in order to not violate lockdown rules and to avoid further negative coverage.

STAND UP X

Stand Up X (SUX) is the most energetic conspiracy theory street movement currently active in the UK. The group primarily promotes an anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine, anti-5G agenda, claiming that "5G is necessary for the infrastructure of 24/7 Surveillance Tracking & Implantable Microchips". However, the group has also launched a sister campaign "Stand Up For The Children" motivated by eclectic QAnon narratives, mobilising as many as 1,000 in collaboration with Eyes Wide Open in London on 5 September, and supporting events in Manchester and Liverpool on 22 August.

SUX launched in May, adopting an anti-elite message and borrowing the slogan of the Occupy Movement, "We are the 99%". The group has brought together veteran conspiracy theorists, such as Piers Corbyn, alongside first time activists and people with far-right views, such as Jeff Wyatt, former Deputy Leader of the anti-Muslim group For Britain. SUX quickly succeeded in generating news coverage, most notably at a 16 May protest in Hyde Park, at which Corbyn and Wyatt were arrested alongside 18 others.

Whilst much of SUX's efforts are concentrated in London, it has developed local groups across the UK, and held anti-lockdown events in Bristol, Brighton, Sheffield, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham,



The "Stand Up For The Children" event at Hyde Park, London, 5 September 2020. Copyright: HOPE not hate

EYES WIDE OPEN

Bournemouth, Birmingham, Hull and Norwich among other cities. The group also contributed to the large Trafalgar Square events of August and September, which were attended by upwards of 10,000 attendees. The group's 40,000 strong main Facebook group was deleted in early September, leading to a push to alternative platforms, such as Facebook mimic MeWe and messaging app Telegram.

A spokesperson for the group told Shayan Sardarizadeh of the BBC that "We cannot be accountable for the views of each and everyone appearing at the rally and have no views about QAnon". However, at least one key organiser was promoting QAnon-adjacent notions as far back as May, and on 4 July a SUX demonstration took a detour to chant "paedo" outside BBC Broadcasting House. SUX supported the hundreds-strong marches in Liverpool and Manchester on 22 August, and in early September launched a sister campaign, "Stand Up for Our Children", which includes QAnon hashtags in its posts on social media. Debate has continued among supporters of the group about whether the events are a legitimate cause, and whether the group should instead focus on opposing lockdown and 5G.

SUX has also drawn influence from known antisemites, its website linking to material from Icke, Manchester-based radio host Richie Allen, and Holocaust denier Max Igan. Corbyn himself has previously rubbed shoulders with prominent Holocaust deniers at unrelated conspiracy theory meetings.

Eyes Wide Open (EWO) is a large QAnon-related Facebook group, which, having quickly built a substantial following, has co-hosted demonstrations in London.

Founded on 13 June 2020, in little over three months the private group amassed 48,000 members. In an apparent bid to avoid detection from Facebook moderators, EWO claims "we are not a Q group or a pro-trump group (we are still on the fence)". However, the sole question pending members are required to answer before being allowed entry is whether they have seen QAnon and Pizzagate documentaries: "Documentaries that will help you understand this group are as follows.. The fall of cabal Out of the shadows Pizza gate bold new documentary David ickel world wake up tour Have you seen any of the above?". From the off the group has been awash with QAnon, adrenochrome, and Pizzagate misinformation, as well as propaganda from antisemites David Icke and Max Igan.

EWO's first demonstration was the 5 September event, held in collaboration with SUX, that brought as many as 1,000 people to Hyde Park, marching through Oxford Street to Broadcasting House and then to Whitehall. Whilst it was the largest event of its nature so far, the aggressive atmosphere of the march drew some criticism from attendees.

The group has suffered in recent weeks, however. In early October, the personal accounts of many of the admins were deleted by Facebook, and rifts developed between key figures. On 6 October, an admin of the group claimed that "the group is really struggling", saying that they have "tried to get everyone to another platform and failed massively". The heavily promoted 10 October event had a disappointingly low turnout, with one organiser calling it "a complete let down... heartbroken. What happened to our protest". It is unclear whether the group will continue in its current incarnation.



Eyes Wide Open organiser speaks at the "Stand Up For The Children" event. Copyright: HOPE not hate

QANON AND THE UK RADICAL AND FAR RIGHT

QAnon is not a solely right-wing phenomenon, drawing supporters from across the political spectrum, but it has developed pockets of support among the British radical and far right. Whilst the spread of the theory has so far largely been limited to an individual rather than organisational basis, QAnon has found proponents among a handful of influential online figures, and its narratives are beginning to take hold in far-right Facebook groups and street movements. The significant areas of crossover between the QAnon worldview and pre-existing far-right conspiracy theories and populist narratives has facilitated this spread, and provides opportunities for further cross-pollination.

REJECTION

Distinctively American political ideologies and styles often fail to translate to UK audiences, and orthodox QAnon has jarred with sections of the British right wing, who have variously rejected the theory as a “psyop” that appeals only to gullible people, or too Trumpian, disdaining its “Americanising” influence. There is a degree of tension between the strong anti-royalist streak of QAnon and British nationalism, which may have played a role in limiting its spread; Q has insinuated that the Queen is corrupt, and UK-oriented QAnon narratives have heavily promoted the notion that various members of the House of Windsor are paedophilic Satanists. Such narratives may have been off-putting for some who would otherwise approve of its pro-Trump narrative.

Notably, the remnants of the British Alternative Right, which mobilised behind Trump in the 2015/2016 campaign, have also largely ignored or rejected the theory. Some of the culturally concerned alt-lite deem QAnon a PR risk, for example the professional conspiracy theorist Paul Joseph Watson complaining that it makes “conservatives look like swivel-eyed lunatics”. For some on the racially obsessed alt-right, the theory is not racist enough; “Morgoth”, a key British alt-right figure, observes that despite QAnon spreading among otherwise non-political Brits, it fails to address “demographics” and “political correctness”, rendering it a “sanitized” version of the alt-right.

THE CONSPIRACIST CROSSOVER

There are, however, significant shared narratives and concerns that have facilitated the intermingling of QAnon and the British far right. Conspiracy theories and populism both employ a binary worldview that divides societies between corrupt or evil elites and the pure or unknowing

people, a framework that contextualises fears and hardships by personifying them into an identifiable enemy. British right-wing rhetoric has exploited the deep political and cultural divides in the UK, and an intense distrust of London-centric political and media “elites”, as well as shadowy “globalists” in the European Union. The turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent government measures has exacerbated this pre-existing distrust, and has facilitated an explosion of anti-lockdown, anti-5G and anti-vaccine conspiracy theorising, which has proved popular, as we have reported elsewhere, amongst sections of the far right. Belief in one conspiracy theory signifies an openness to others.

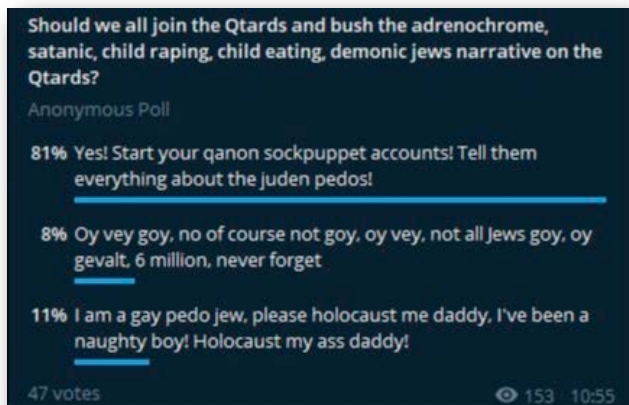
In some ways QAnon is particularly well suited for adoption by right-wing reactionaries, who present themselves as chivalrous “protectors” of the nation and the family, and so have long stoked fears about rapacious – and, in recent decades, south Asian and Muslim – child abusers preying on white children. Children play a symbolic role in nationalist discourse, representing the innocence of the nation as a whole, and so invoking a threat to children is an effective way of mobilising support against a group of people. From age-old antisemitic myths, to the exploitation of the grooming gang scandals, such discourse reflects both genuine fears but also a cynical political tactic; presenting an enemy as child molesters, murderers and, at the most conspiratorial end, cannibals is the most effective and unequivocal way to demonise them.

This crossover has facilitated the coalescence of QAnon and sections of the radical and far right around shared concerns, a notable recent example being the August 2020 furore around the Netflix film *Cuties*. A coming-of-age drama exploring the role of social media in sexualising children, Netflix’s promotion of the film, which included a poster featuring prepubescent children in suggestive poses, sparked an intense backlash, uniting QAnon converts and the likes of Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (AKA Tommy Robinson) against “Noncexflix”.

For QAnon supporters, *Cuties* is further evidence of widespread child abuse in Hollywood and the wider entertainment industry, and an attempt to corrupt viewers to make them more amenable to paedophilia. For the far right, it indicates the continued decay of traditional values and the West as a whole, a sentiment which for some is fuelled by the longstanding “Cultural Marxism” conspiracy theory, which alleges that sinister left-wingers embedded in cultural and political institutions are working to brainwash populations and undermine the West. Strains of this theory fixate on supposed plots to sexualise children and normalise paedophilia, and QAnon and

adjacent theories, such as Pizzagate, are easily incorporated into this narrative.

The notion that predatory Cultural Marxists are sexually targeting children is particularly popular with antisemites, who regard it as one means by which Jews are attempting to subjugate or eradicate whites. This, alongside numerous other antisemitic tropes pervasive in QAnon, has led to discussions among the extreme right about exploiting the theory to radicalise people into Jew-hatred. A post shared on nazi Telegram channels claims that whilst QAnon is “retarded”, it “serves as an opportunity to breach the gap and awaken people to whom truly rules us”. Indeed, some opportunistic antisemites appear to be tailoring their content to resonate with the theory. The nazi and leader of Patriotic Alternative Mark Collett addressed *Cuties* in a video titled “THEY WANT TO SEXUALLY ABUSE YOUR CHILDREN”, in which he states that “The establishment and the media are coming for your children”, and desire “A world where twisted perverts can pick up a child prostitute with no fear of recrimination.” Sections of the extreme right are also adopting QAnon terminology, with references to adrenochrome becoming increasingly popular on antisemitic Telegram channels.



A poll on an antisemitic Telegram channel

ADOPTION

The overlap between QAnon and the far right has seen several prominent figures with large online followings flirt with, or openly adopt, the theory. The most significant is Gerard Batten, former UKIP leader, veteran anti-Muslim activist, and a key figure in a series of far-right street demonstrations in 2018 and 2019, many of which focused on grooming gangs. Batten, who currently boasts 70,000 Twitter followers, has a strong conspiratorial streak, having promoted the notion of a “shadow world government” and Cultural Marxism for years. His conspiracy theorising has intensified notably during the pandemic, alleging that the virus is a bioweapon and that lockdown measures are a sinister elite power grab.

In April, Batten wrote approvingly of the Pizzagate film *Out of Shadows*, and in July, he wrote:

“The BBC attacking QAnon tells you there must be something in it. We know the Deep State organised the Russiagate coup against Trump, & failed. We know Epstein ran a pedo ring to compromise powerful figures. How much else will prove true? Time will tell.” However, whilst he has made other claims about Pizzagate and Trump’s alleged war against a “deep state”, QAnon appears a fringe interest for Batten, and he is yet to embrace it fully.

Brian Silvester, a disgraced former UKIP councillor and former leading figure in the anti-Muslim For Britain party, appears more dedicated. Silvester has built up a 50,000 following on Twitter through Islamophobia, but has focussed on the “scamdemic” since the onset of COVID-19. Silvester has promoted QAnon sporadically since December 2017, but appears to have embraced the theory in a more serious manner this year, including making an appearance on the Charlie Ward show. Another figure is David Vance of the AltNews Media blog, who had 170,000 followers before his Twitter account was deleted in September. Vance has pushed posts including QAnon hashtags as far back as August 2018, but, as the posts concerned generic right-wing talking points, it is unclear if he fully grasped their meaning.

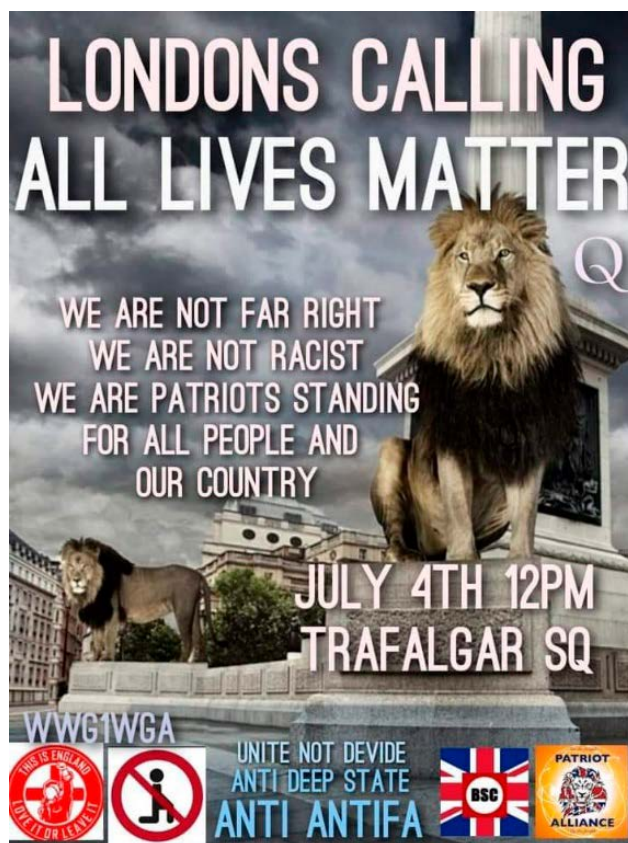
Whilst Batten and Silvester have significant social media followings, they are both currently politically homeless, meaning they cannot exert direct influence on an organisation. Members of a wide variety of radical and far right parties, including UKIP, For Britain and the 5 Star Direct Democracy Party (formerly Democrats and Veterans) have endorsed QAnon, but the theory has spread most significantly into the English Democrats (ED), a minor group that focuses on English, rather than British, nationalism. The loudest of the ED QAnon advocates is Graham Moore (AKA Daddy Dragon), owner of a 22,000 subscriber YouTube channel, where he broadcasts his “Full Breakfast” show and his various stunts, for example flying a Trump banner via large balloons bearing the letter Q outside Windsor Castle. The anti-British state attitude of ED to some extent chimes with the anti-deep state rhetoric of QAnon, and Moore in particular makes heavy use of pro-personal sovereignty politics similar to that of the American right. The party is, however, a minor force, standing just five candidates at the 2019 General Election, with Moore receiving just 1.2% of the vote.

ON THE STREETS

A more concerning development is QAnon’s inroads into right-wing street movements. One fringe group that appears susceptible to the theory is the Nottingham-based British Street Commandos (BSC), a pseudo-military outfit in which former English Defence League leader



A man wearing a QAnon hoodie and distributing the English Democrat newspaper, at a large anti-lockdown demonstration at Trafalgar Square, London, 26 September 2020. Copyright: HOPE not hate



A poster for a British Street Commandos “All Lives Matter” event, featuring QAnon iconography

Tim Ablitt has been active. A promotional poster for one of the group’s events featured QAnon iconography, and members of BSC attended a 22 August “Justice for All” rally, also advertised as the “Great Awakening” march, which brought as many as 1,000 onto the streets of Nottingham.

The official promotion of the event advertised the seemingly unconnected aims of “Raising awareness of veterans affairs, mental health & related suicides/child abuse grooming gangs”, which was explained by the QAnon beliefs of the chief organiser of the march, military veteran Dean Cumberpatch. In a video prior to the event, he uttered the Q slogan “Where we go one, we go all”, and claimed he is “well aware of the Satanic rituals.” He also claimed to have contact with “a general from Q” and a “group from Q” named “The Punishers”. “We are changing dark to light, you evil scum”, Cumberpatch grimly stated.

QAnon iconography was clearly visible at the event, as were the signs of various far-right groups, including open nazis (whom Cumberpatch later disavowed in strong terms). Q symbols were also visible at a 5 September far-right dominated event in Dover, held to

protest the “invasion” of immigrants into the country, alongside signs with slogans such as “#SAVEOURCHILDREN/END HUMAN MEAT”. There were ten arrests at the event.

Another example is the remnants of the Swindon Yellow Vests, led by former UKIP candidate Martin Costello, who held a tiny “Save Our Children” event in Swindon town centre. Costello, who has used QAnon hashtags, was formerly a leading figure in Make Britain Great Again (MBGA), an oddball Trump-worshipping group obsessed with Cultural Marxism. MBGA is best known for a 2018 incident in which Costello and eleven others entered the left-wing bookshop Bookmarks in London, with members of the group chanting “Trump” and one abusing staff as “fucking paedophile lovers”.

QAnon has yet to spread wholesale into the British radical and far right, currently featuring as one of a myriad of fragmented concerns. However, its potent blend of anti-elitism and exploitation of deep-seated fears, combined with the growth of anti-COVID-19 conspiracy theories, means there is room for far-right converts and opportunists to take up its mantle and spread the theory further.



A sign at a far-right event in Dover, 5 September 2020. Copyright: HOPE not hate. Photo: Jake Pace Lawrie

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