LECTURE

From busting cults to breeding cults
Anonymous h/acktivism vs. the (a)nonymous far right and QAnon

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First emerging from the anonymous imageboard[2] 4chan.org in the mid-2000s, the aptly named "Anonymous" unexpectedly transformed. In the aftermath of a campaign against the Church and Cult of Scientology, it went from a chaos-inducing troll brigade to a media-savvy activist ensemble in 2008. Not long after, in 2011, different Anonymous nodes hatched off from the imageboards, and engaged in high-profile hacks. By 2015 new political formations sprung forth from 4chan and similar imageboards, like the little "a" anonymous far- and reactionary-right and the conspiracy-driven QAnon. In contrast to Anonymous, these two latter formations work against the cause of social justice and, in its stead, spread reactionary, racist, conspiratorial, or fascist political planks. But like Anonymous, these other two formations have,

at times, played outsized roles in politics. Anonymous, for instance, helped cement the now-common hack-and-leak tactic (Coleman 2017); the anonymous far right helped radicalize or in their parlance "red pill" people into racist and misogynist worldviews (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022). And followers of QAnon, who helped spread conspiracies, have elected officials among their ranks and helped drive the storming of the US capitol (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022).

My talk starts with a simple question: How are we to understand the relationships between these three currents? How, in other words, could imageboards, like 4chan and 8chan (and others), act as the initial springboard for political formations that embrace such different—even diametrically opposed—political sensibilities and epistemologies around truth?

In a nutshell, even if these three formations emerged from the same cultural bouillon, that is, the anonymous imageboard, the subsequent batch of ingredients that transformed the stock to soup made them substantially distinct, especially as each intermingled with other movements or current events. But even if each one is distinct, they do share striking similarities. All three are genuinely

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1. The text has been slightly modified, as the many PowerPoint slides part of the lecture presentation are not included here.

2. An imageboard is a type of internet forum where anonymous participants gather for discussion with a heavy emphasis on the sharing of images.

difficult to categorize and grasp—and that alone is one reason why they can be so easily merged in the minds of casual onlookers, journalists, and even some academics.

Indeed, these three formations can be seen as sociocultural ciphers and puzzles: partly rooted in the experience and affordances of anonymity, they also morph rapidly and unexpectedly, especially as participants leave the imageboards and seek new audiences and recruits on different online platforms. Each also churns out material, much of it ephemeral, at a bewildering rate and many conversations are inaccessible or are shot through with jargon or ironic encoding. They use similar cultural material like internet memes to get the word out. These formal similarities help explain why they have been portrayed—and I believe portrayed incorrectly—in linear and evolutionary terms: each one directly springing from the preceding formation (see, for instance, Nagle 2017 and Beran 2019). Once we look at their emergence, key moments of transformation, sense-making practices, and recruitment strategies, their differences become far more apparent, and we can see how these movements did not evolve one from the other—even if they do share some formal attributes, taxonomic roots, and cultural sensibilities.

Part one of this talk sketches their origins with an eye to how they jumped from niche to either more political or mainstream phenomena by looking at three critical events—one concerning the Church of Scientology, one called Gamergate, and another being President Trump's validation of QAnon. What I want to show is that we need to both attend to the very specific occurrences on the boards, but also understand that these cannot sufficiently account for the import of these formations. Part two then compares how each formation interacts in the wider public sphere, giving a window into distinct practices around setting public agendas, recruitment, attitudes toward journalism, and sense-making: it is here that the differences become quite stark. Part three concludes with the stakes of this comparison in light of questions of political awakening, subject formation, and political conversation online.

Part one

In the mid-2000s, there was barely anything that would indicate Anonymous would one day land in h/acktivist territory. At that time, the name—and this is important—was adopted from the default "Anonymous" username given to 4chan posters. 4chan is an anonymous image-board that was founded in 2003 and includes a slew of boards dedicated to various topics from anime to literature to fitness. One of its most distinctive sociotechnical features is anonymity: the imageboard posts are attributed to Anonymous. Although there is an option to fill in a name, the community preferred the shared authorship and shunning of individual reputation.

Prior to 2008, the name Anonymous was associated with "entertainment rather than advocacy," as media scholar Jessica Beyer put it (2014). It included churning out family-friendly or humorous content (think adorable cat memes), along with gruesome and often racist/misogynist or other taboo material. One of Anonymous's specialties was internet raiding and trolling (a sort of online flash mob designed to annoy/harass). Some (but not all) participants from 4chan and similar boards would coordinate, sometimes on invasion boards' /i/ swarming events that often led to doxing, harassment, prank calling, swatting, or tormenting people online for the lolz, aka for their own enjoyment (technically 4chan banned invasion boards, so Anonymous set up shop elsewhere too) ("4chan Chronicle/The /i/Nsurgency" 2015).[3] Trolling styles are diverse (Phillips 2015) but Anonymous's trolling was swarm-like, episodic, and so prolific in 2007 that Fox News anointed Anonymous as the "Internet hate machine." And even if it was often hateful, it was not hooked into any broader political mobilizing. Raiding campaigns tended to be one-off events that would hit like a big wave and then recede, until the cycle started again, unexpectedly, against a new target.

Six months after the Fox story, in 2008 trolls used the moniker Anonymous to troll-raid the Church of Scientology—hundreds of pizzas were sent to churches, along with black faxes, and lots of phone pranks, but this time it unexpectedly morphed into a sincere crusade. Crucial to this transformation was a video made by Anonymous that was part of the trolling but surprisingly prompted an earnest debate about protesting the cult. Longtime critics of the Church swooped in and urged these trolls to join their cause, for real, and not just for the lolz. Anonymous moved forward with an experimental but successful street protest on February 10, 2008,

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3. On 4chan.org and similar boards, participants known as Anonymous would coordinate to conduct "raids" against selected targets. Over time, dedicated "invasion" boards were established on imageboards solely for organizing these campaigns. These invasions involved hundreds, if not thousands, of anonymous participants uniting to swarm the chosen targets and create mayhem.

carried out in 127 cities across the world with over seven thousand people showing up. It was at this time they first adopted a subversive pop culture icon, the Guy Fawkes mask, to insulate themselves from a real fear of retribution.[4]

Still, between 2008 and 2010 Anonymous existed in a transitional state: trolls *and* activists coordinated different campaigns in different places but with the same name and symbols; the anti-Scientology campaign called "Project Chanology" (a reference to 4chan and the chan boards), continued online and on the streets, attracting many newcomers with no history on the boards. Many trolls were livid at how the do-gooders took over the brand. As one member of one insurgency board put it: "In the final slap in the face to the legacy and traditions of /i/, Project Chanology began to shift towards peaceful protest instead of the digital raiding of old. It's like when the Vikings became Christian: All their luster was not just lost, but destroyed" ("711chan" 2014). A subset of troll purists sought to reclaim the name Anonymous by dragging it through the mud, using terrifying trolling campaigns, like swarming epilepsy boards with flashing GIFs to induce seizures. Moderators of various boards censored all Chanology talk ("711chan" 2014). So even if many portray these boards as lawless spaces—that is true, but only up to a point. Board moderators or website owners have power to nurture, even eliminate some conversations.

After years of this tug-of-war, by 2010, the activist-oriented Anonymous groups won—and the name largely ceased to be used for pure trolling due to a number of contributing factors: the influx of newcomers, the very organized Chanology campaign, and because Anonymous established themselves with infrastructure beyond imageboards, where their discussions weren't censored. They created their own websites and organized on internet chat rooms where I spent much of my time doing research. They contributed to other actions, around the failed Iran Green Revolution, for instance. What's more, in 2010, a new, distinct, and extremely prolific Anonymous node formed outside the boards and it eventually cross-pollinated with "hacktivist" and WikiLeaks types, pushing it away even further from imageboard culture. What happened next was very important. This node assisted with the Tunisian uprising in 2011. Following this, and thanks again to a new infusion of participants,

Anonymous substantially lent support to every major progressive social movement and brought the name into alignment with social justice issues. Let me give two examples concerning the deep entanglement with these causes. I show here [in the lecture] a picture featuring Tunisian school children in Germany, some donning a paper Guy Fawkes mask, thanking Anonymous for getting involved in the 2011 revolution. Here is a tweet sent from the former account of Erica Garner, who, prior to her passing, campaigned against police violence after her father Eric Garner was killed by the NYPD: "Shout out to Anonymous . . . One of the first groups of people that held Erica down from jump street. She loved y'all for real #opicantbreathe" (Garner 2018).

But it was their prolific hacking—accompanied by catchy images and videos—that secured ample media coverage and helped the Anonymous meme spread. By late 2011, Anonymous qualified as an improper name or multiple-use name, as explored by media scholar Marco Deseriis (2015). Improper names, like Luther Blisset (a fictional character created by Italian activists in the early 1990s) or Captain Ludd if we want to go back further (a figure and name conjured into being by the Luddites across England to lay claim to distinct actions)—all of these reject symbolic ownership. This openness makes improper names subject to wide adoption and "unforeseen appropriations" (Deseriis 2015: 6). And it's one reason that Anonymous became global from Malaysia to Mexico.

Because Anonymous is a multiple-use name, the anonymous reactionary right could have in theory also taken the name but they did not. So let's now turn to them—and let me start with introducing them and then I will discuss the role of 4chan and #Gamergate in their rise.

Starting around 2014, but accelerating in 2016, the reactionary or far right—some of it anonymous, much of it not—deployed everything the internet had to offer—imageboards, Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, YouTube, chat rooms—to recruit members, deceive, spread hate, and support Trump. Composed of a loose coalition, it includes hard-core internet trolls, white nationalists and Nazis, men's rights activists, some libertarians, and many anonymous actors. One thing that unites them is a hate and demonization of those they've dubbed SJWs or "Social Justice Warriors," figures they perceive to be forcing a "woke agenda" on the world. They believe the "isms" like feminism or multiculturalism, supported by SJWs, exert too much cultural or normative power over others. Many believe these views have become hegemonic in

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4. This history is drawn from and covered in detail in Coleman 2014.

and thanks to the mainstream media ("MSM," in their lingo) and scapegoat the MSM as they attempt to convince others of the supposed cultural ill of the SJWs. This conversion strategy is facilitated by the concept of red pilling—(a concept rarely, if at all, used by big "A" Anonymous). A reference to a scene in *The Matrix,* to be red pilled means to be awakened to a previously hidden truth; in the context of the reactionary right this can mean "realizing" that the left is totalitarian, or that feminism is responsible for the decline of Western values, or that the MSM is a mouthpiece of the liberal elite.[5]

To be clear, many associated figures and groups like the Proud Boys are anything but anonymous. But the anonymous imageboards were key for this site of "metapolitics"—the idea that profound political change comes not only from the vote or policy but through culture itself;[6] or, as the founding editor of Breitbart news put it, "Politics is downstream from Culture." Let's see now how the boards became a central hub for a metapolitical culture war through far-right radicalization.

In 2011, as Anonymous was scheming on internet relay chat rooms and scoring victories in the media after major hacks, back on 4chan, a new microculture was talking itself into existence. While politically incorrect and racist speech had been present from 4chan's inception, a board called /pol/ was created for "discussion" with a politically incorrect bent. A growing collection of users were engaging in discussion of news and ideology, bringing in such reactionary, racist interpretations that would be difficult at that time to sustain in non-anonymized settings. This fact was not lost on other dark corners of the internet, and /pol/ became a magnet, drawing in all sorts of other racist and reactionary figures. They came from: one, the thriving neoreactionary blogging communities; two, white nationalist message boards like Stormfront; and three, offline far-right organizations like the American Third Position Party. The associated ideologies proved so popular that in 2013 one long-term 4chan regular, Andrew Anglin, created The Daily Stormer, a news and commentary site that stitched together Nazi and right-wing talking points with 4chan memes and lingo, and quickly became the most popular neo-Nazi website online. One Daily Stormer contributor, known on the site as Zeiger, explained the metapolitical potential for recruitment this way: "If we

can help mold a social movement like the hippies did, that should give us a huge source of radicalized and militant recruits to bolster our ranks in the next five years" (Reitman 2018).

Slowly, /pol/ grew and moderators of other 4chan boards continued to direct their most racist and offensive users to what many moderators initially saw as a "containment board." Here again we see the power of moderators, although in this case, they were not successful at containment; the influence of /pol/ spread far and wide.

While the term alt-right started to be bandied about at this point (that is, between 2011 and 2014), these anonymous posters on /pol/ didn't have a label or even a consistent, clear message, even as they used disinformation tactics that the reactionary right would eventually adopt more deliberately.

And then Gamergate happened. Just as the campaign against Scientology helped transform a block of Anonymous trolls into mostly earnest liberal and left political crusaders, so too did Gamergate became a portal, one through which a new generation of formerly apolitical participants were funneled into organizing—but for a rising reactionary movement (see Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022: chapter 3).

Gamergate began with a ten thousand-word online diatribe that was laced with accusations about Zoe Quinn, an indie game developer. Written by a vengeful ex-boyfriend, many latched on to an unsubstantiated rumor that she had affairs with game journalists to secure positive reviews for her games. This pried open the gates of harassment hell. Quinn and dozens of other female gaming figures (and their supporters) were harassed over months—a campaign with various factions. Misogynists used the debacle as an opportunity to lash out at women or push back on what they saw as political correctness encroaching on gaming. Trolls from /pol/ and neo-reactionary types promoted the chaos, and used the situation as an opportunity for "red pilling." There were also gamers who were legitimately trying to figure out what was going on or to stop the harassment—yet many came to tacitly support the more malicious actors, becoming frustrated by heavy-handed moderation on 4chan's videogames board, subject to red-pilling narratives by opportunistic pol users, and increasingly suspicious of what they saw as reductive characterizations and patronizing political moralization from gaming journalists and the broader media.

Gamergate happened prior to the publication of my book on Anonymous (Coleman 2014). Horrified at the

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5. See Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022 for a discussion of red pilling (and other forms of pilling).

6. On metapolitics and the reactionary right, see Stern 2019.

harassment, another concern of mine, I will admit, was selfish: my worry was that the Anonymous multiple-use name would become entangled with Gamergate, ending Anonymous's use for and association with progressive politics. I figured Anonymous could become connected to this campaign in one of three ways. One: troll hell-raisers could intentionally take the name and once and for all, yank it away from the h/acktivists; recall many imageboard users had never supported the moral turn that first happened in 2008. Two: nontroll Gamergaters could take the name as cover—or even earnestly, believing their cause to be just. The logic of an improper name, like Anonymous, invites such a reappropriation. Three: while it seemed unlikely that existing Anonymous groups would lend their support to Gamergate—the issue of free speech, tethered to Gamergate, could in theory draw some in, as Anonymous valued free speech as a principle.

None of this happened but the outcome was worse: Gamergate became the crucible of the populist online wing of a much broader reactionary right movement. It shepherded disparate and fringe actors not into agreement per se, but into alignment. Many of the individuals and groups recognized they could work together in spite of differences, as Rebecca Lewis and Alice Marwick have amply documented (Marwick and Lewis 2017). The common enemy was the SJWs, a phrase that came to function as a classic example of what scholars refer to as a "boundary object" (Star and Griesemer 1989), allowing those with disagreements, in this case, to come together on this single issue.

Let me provide a snapshot of the infighting, which demonstrates how the SJW boundary object helped mediate differences. Participants quarreled over what to call themselves, their tactics, and goals. For instance, while some were insistent that nothing short of a "white genocide" was occurring, others saw the problem as unchecked anti-white bias; quite concerned with optics, some argued for the need for violence, while others clamored for peaceful reformist measures; some participants endorsed the most extreme forms of anti-Semitism, while others were concerned such views might stall recruitment.

During Gamergate and as the reactionary right grew in prominence in 2015 and 2016, the term SJW facilitated a sense of shared purpose and identity. The word was uncommon before this period, as you can see with this Google trends image, which is from 2013 to 2015 (Figure 1). The SJW was not the only boundary object that became established. Crucially, a secondary bound-

ary object appeared in the guise of the "mainstream media"—later shortened to MSM—one that would continue to be an object of derision for QAnon as well. The burgeoning far right treated the MSM as a key conduit for SJW, "woke" views.

Former Trump advisor and Breitbart editor Steven Bannon famously directed the Gamergate resentment, which he has explained as follows: "These . . . rootless white males had monster power. . . . I realized Milo [Yiannopoulos] could connect with these kids right away. You can activate that army. They come in through Gamergate or whatever and then get turned onto politics and Trump" (Snider 2017). He politically courted them by having writers pen stories to fan reactionary flames (see, for example, Yiannopoulos 2014). But Bannon was simply the most established and (I think conniving) figure among a dozen or so, a portion of whom constituted a large right/conservative/libertarian mediasphere—what Rebecca Lewis has described as the Alternative Influence Network (Lewis 2019). Not everyone in this network is part of the far right. Some avoided the more extreme content of white supremacists, but paved more on-ramps onto reactionary thinking.

Prior to 2016, the reactionary right was a niche topic, but due to Trump's popularity journalists scrutinized them—many asking whether the reactionary right got him elected. At this juncture, Anonymous had largely faded from public view, as activity waned due to scores of arrests and their anemic recruitment strategies (they recently have had a resurgence). While a few crossovers existed, some journalists and academics, unfamiliar with their history, portrayed the anonymous reactionary right as evolving right out of the ashes of Anonymous, rather than a formation whose genesis was partly indebted to a growing political bloc and a particular board, /pol/, that took off well after Anonymous left the boards.

And /pol/ would continue to play a key role by laying the groundwork for QAnon, first by cooking up a conspiracy theory—Pizzagate. Based on emails leaked by WikiLeaks from the Democratic National Convention hack, /pol/ participants homed in on the fact that John Podesta (a key Democrat figure) frequently wrote about cheese pizza in his emails. And the first two letters are "CP," which on the boards refer to child pornography. Further "connections" were made and they homed in on a pizza joint in Washington, DC, whose owner had ties with the Clintons, as the site where a pedophile sex ring was run by corrupt, Satan-worshipping politicians and donors. While some came to believe the allegations, which became quite complicated as they spread, many
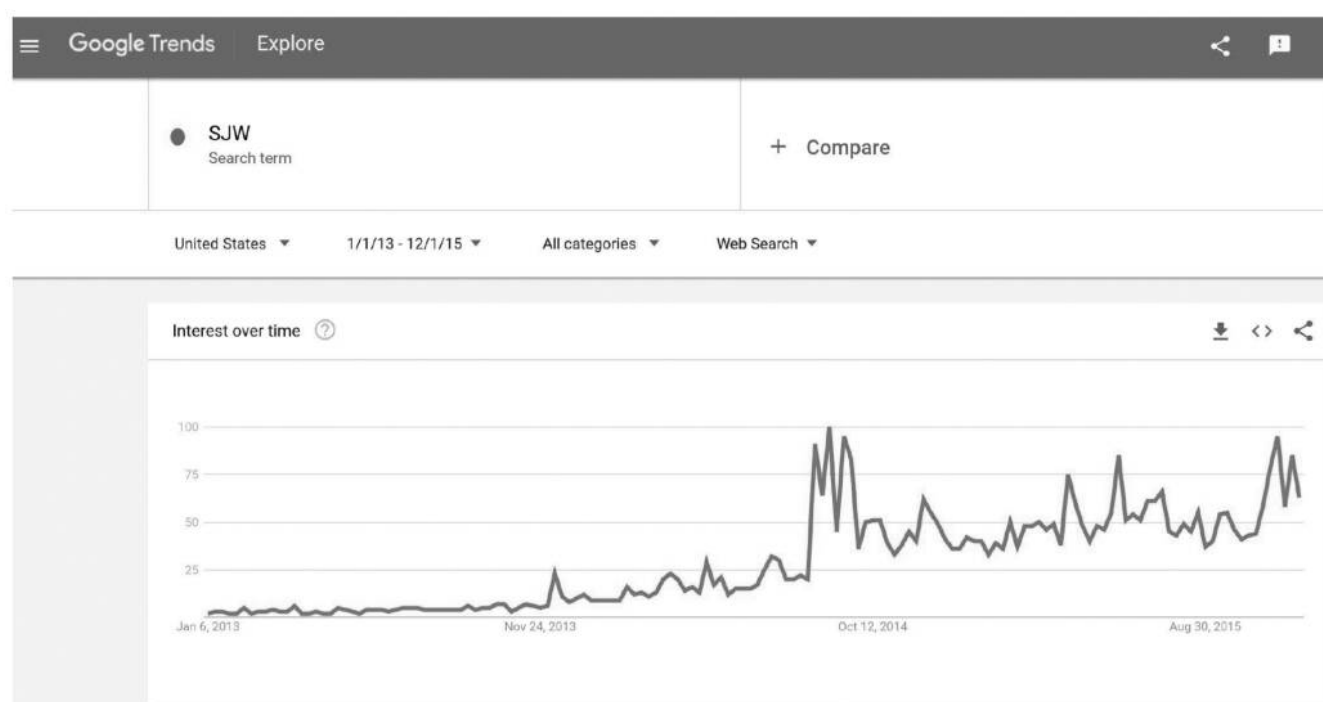
Figure 1: Google Trends graph for SJW (accessed March 1, 2022).

of the original /pol/ posters were knowingly seeding a hoax. As one /pol/ participant jubilantly put, "Let's meme this into reality, it's too good" (Schreckinger 2020).

One year later on October 28, 2017, yet again on /pol/, a post proclaimed the imminent arrest of Hilary Clinton: "HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run." Retroactively anointed as the first Qdrop, many drops followed, as the persona of a government insider with "Q level clearance" (a real type of security clearance) started to establish itself. QAnon urged followers to do research based on the "breadcrumbs," as believers came to describe the drops. Or has QAnon put it, "I can hint and point but cannot give too many highly classified data points" (Schwartz 2018). At the time of this writing, QAnon has shared over five thousand drops—they cover a diverse number of topics—but the core belief concerns how and when Trump, with the help of military insiders, will expose and arrest a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, made up of influential Democratic politicians, and Hollywood celebrities, along with figures like George Soros and the Pope, that have otherwise been protected by the establishment media.

For /pol/ posters, the initial Qdrops were nothing extraordinary because the playframe of government insider, like FBIAnon or CIAAnon, who "leaked" wild government conspiracies was already well established. For many, this was just another LARP—Live Action Role Playing Game. But Q stuck, partly for how it spread quickly and away from 4chan. Two /pol/ posters—Paul Furber and Coleman Rogers—convinced a 9/11 conspiracy theorist on YouTube to make a video entertaining the validity of Q; she did.[7] It became popular. Furber and Rogers also set up shop on Reddit and many others followed. In a short period, a far-ranging ecosystem of figures, boards, YouTube channels, forums, apps, podcasts, all dedicated to analyzing and visualizing the drops, emerged. Established conspiracists like James Corsi showcased material, thus dropping the content onto an already primed audience. As Qbelievers showed up at Trump rallies, Trump validated the movement through hundreds of retweets and statements made on television, like these:

> Journalist: The theory is this belief that you are secretly saving the world from this satanic cult of pedophiles and cannibals. Does that sound like something . . . you are behind?
>
> President Trump: Well I haven't, I haven't heard that but . . . is that supposed to be a bad thing or a good thing, you know? If . . . if I can help save the world from problems, I'm willing to do it, I'm willing to put myself

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7. For background and some history of QAnon, see Rothschild 2021, Hoback 2021, and Gatehouse 2022a.

out there. And we are actually! We are saving the world from a . . . radical left philosophy . . . that will destroy this country. And when this country is gone, the rest of the world would follow.[8]

Having the support, even if implicit, of one of the most powerful figures in the world, the American president, who also happens to be a core figure in the core conspiracy, will go a long way in reinforcing and helping those ideas spread.

So what did some of the original /pol/ posters think of QAnon and did they become acolytes? The short version is no: they had little respect for what it became and made ample fun of QAnon believers. So even if it started on 4chan, it left that for its own board on 8chan, and attracted a new audience, though many acolytes posted on more mainstream social media or their own forums— even as it kept some imageboard conventions and lingo, like the "red pill" metaphor.

Part two

Now with this abridged history in place, I'd like to compare how these three formations interact, respectively, with wider publics, especially as mediated through journalists and the news. I am going to start with the anonymous far right as it provides a sharper point of comparison for the other two.

One of the central sense-making and information-processing rituals of /pol/ is what they call "Happenings" (see Figure 2). Generally, a Happening is something that occurs around a breaking news event, with users debating and scrutinizing information as fast as they can gather it. Examples over the years have included the arrest and trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, the mass shooting in Las Vegas, and the terrorist massacre of Muslim worshippers in Christchurch. They engage with stories from both far-right niche and mainstream establishment outlets, quoting them directly while developing counterfactuals and counternarratives. Often they will do their own intelligence gathering, speculating as to why the information they've acquired did not appear in reporting (often, they themselves come to recognize it as not credible, but not before they have worked themselves up over it). Sometimes, aligned external outlets of /pol/ (like the white supremacist site, The Daily Stormer) harvest the coun-

ternarratives for talking points, thereby organizing and amplifying them to the wider far-right publics. Sometimes /pol/ posters attempt to spread narratives that emerge from their sense-making by targeting Twitter accounts deemed as sympathetic and there are instances of news outlets like Infowars or even Fox News adopting narratives that emerge from these Happenings.

For popular events, discussion tends to span multiple, successive threads, as thousands upon thousands of variously informational, analytical, and irreverent posts pour in in rapid succession. I will show one snippet about the Las Vegas Shooter, Stephen Paddock. This post, a summation post, links to a series of stories. One is about Paddock attending an anti-Trump rally, another makes him out to be an Antifa sympathizer, and a third is about his father's criminal past. Some stories come from what most of us would deem uber-questionable sources like InfoWars, but others, like the ones about Paddock's dad and the FBI, are verified and are published by more trustworthy sources like the *New York Post*, or a story on CNN as well (see Figure 3).

Taken together, in a sort of collective synthesis and triangulation, these stories—and the copious adjacent commentary—serve to deflect suspicion that their ideology was involved in motivating the attack. While many of the theories concocted on these message boards are obviously conspiratorial, they create their theories by zeroing in on any inconsistency or other factual problem in the mainstream narrative (and we know there are plenty), which are taken as evidence that /pol/ is right (see Figure 4)—that the mainstream media are the true purveyors of falsity—rather than evidence of, say, bad reporting or simply a fluid story.

These examples of news-driven conspiracy, which abound across the platforms where the reactionary right communicate, complicate a popular theory of contemporary American conspiracism, which is captured in the book *A lot of people are saying* (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019). Written by two political scientists, the nub of their argument is that conspiracies simply go viral: "There is no punctilious demand for proofs, no exhausting amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern . . . The new conspiracism dispenses with the burden of explanation. Instead, we have innuendo and verbal gesture. . . . Or we have bare assertion: 'Rigged!'—a one-word exclamation . . . This is conspiracy theory without the theory" (2019: 3).

These authors obviously don't spend enough time online. While having elected officials so publicly peddle
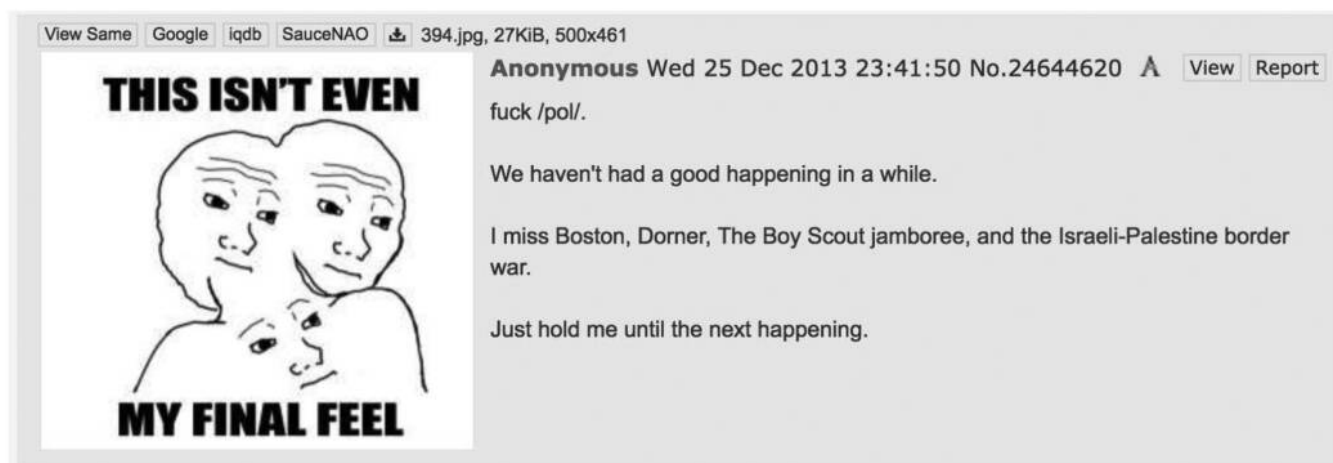
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8. Quoted in Francescani 2020.

Figure 2: Happenings.

conspiracy may be new and significant, conspiratorial analysis, of the sort common with Happenings, is based on an exhaustive search for and amassing of evidence and theory (we will see this as well with QAnon). The rush and glut of doing original research, and combing news stories to pick apart, keep participants hooked and coming back.

The anonymous reactionary right is also adept at seeding hoaxes they know to be false through which they can insert their narratives. They achieve influence in a few ways. First, by baiting journalists into airing and amplifying their beliefs, they are maintaining attention on issues—like immigration, white nationalism, or the supposed excesses of leftists. Second, by feeding the journalists false information, which they then sometimes reveal as false later, they are setting journalists up for future reputational harm.

I will give one quick example, #endfathers day, because most are such elaborate hoaxes, it takes too long to explain. First seeded in a different reactionary community, 4chan /pol/ more aggressively unfurled a deception campaign of #endfathersday, posting as feminists and racial justice activists using sock puppet accounts on Twitter, to sow chaos in those communities. Meant to cast feminists as hysterical extremists, within twenty-four hours of launching, #endfathersday went viral, and op-eds decried it. African American activists were the first to debunk it and countered with #yourslipisshowing, to identify the suspect accounts. But given the glut of information online, debunking is hardly effective (Hampton 2019).

Creating divisions by sowing chaos from deception is hardly new. But in the past, it tended to be some-thing only government intelligence organizations could pull off, such as with the FBI's secret COINTELPRO—a misinformation campaign targeting activists so wild in its details, depth of influence, and damage, that had it not been revealed, it sounds like a conspiracy.[9] These bottom-up far-right campaigns are in some ways even more insidious. They sow chaos among their enemies even as they provide lol/lulz and broadcast a sense of victory to those they want to attract into their ranks.

Let me compare these tactics—Happenings and disinformation campaigns—to some Anonymous "information-based" operations. Take the hack-and-leak, which became a standard tactic among Anonymous hacker crews. Happenings, focused on events like mass shootings, are mostly notable for their reactive reframing work. Hacks and leaks, on the other hand, often generate novel news events and are also high-risk, so much so that one Anonymous hacker, Jeremy Hammond, was given a ten-year jail sentence (Poulsen 2013). Anonymous, after acquiring an email cache, would post it online, hoping journalists would mine the emails for evidence of wrongdoing. And many did. Anonymous did not doctor or implant fake information in the emails. To be sure, Anonymous relied on the classic prank—lobbing out lies so absurd

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9. COINTELPRO, led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was an unauthorized government program that covertly monitored, infiltrated, undermined, and discredited radical American political groups. The clandestine program, which ran from 1956 to 1971, was only shut down after activists and journalists exposed its existence. For a history of COINTELPRO, see Blackstock 1988.
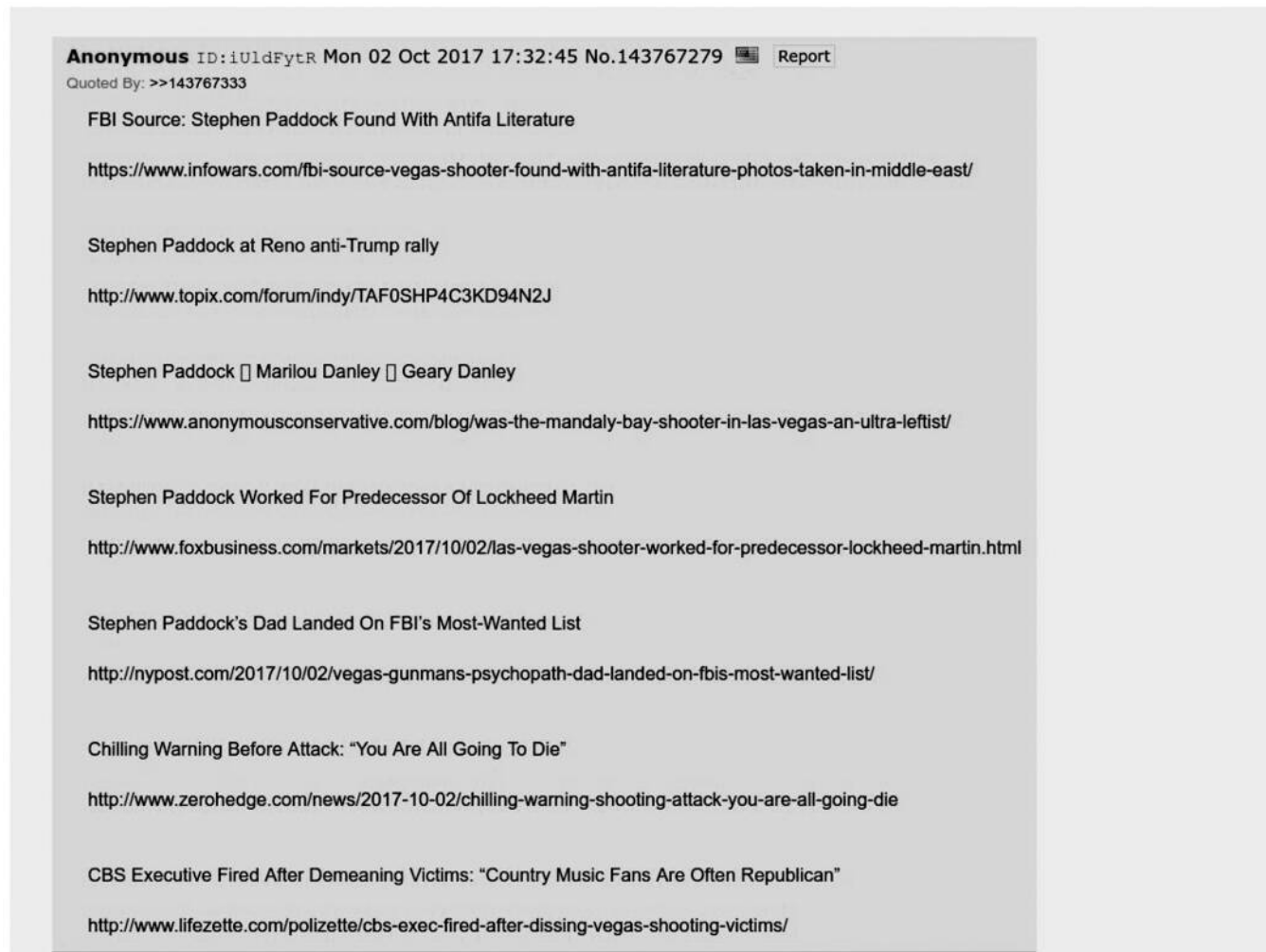
Figure 3: Summation post.

everyone recognizes them immediately as a fib—but that is hardly dissimulation in the way I've described above.

For instance, an Anonymous-affiliated group, Lulzsec, hacked and defaced the news site of PBS in retaliation for its Frontline film *WikiSecrets*. Lulzsec members condemned the film for how it sensationalized and psychoanalyzed the "dark" inner life of whistleblower Chelsea Manning, skirting the content behind her actions. The hackers implanted fake news about the whereabouts of two celebrity rappers. Featuring a boyish head shot of Tupac Shakur, the lead read "Prominent rapper Tupac has been found alive and well in a small resort in New Zealand, locals report" (Markoff 2011). Designed not to succeed in its deception, it was meant to bring attention to Chelsea Manning's plight and misrepresentation.

Anonymous loved to hate on establishment journalists. But not out of contempt; they expected better of them. Even as they engaged in illiberal direct action, their epistemology was fully liberal: they worked with establishment journalists to amplify their messages and get information out. They naturally also relied on their own channels of communication such as large Twitter accounts for publicity and would also attempt to recruit people calling on them to participate in particular actions, operations, and causes such as stopping whaling or fighting police brutality, for instance—the aim was participation in the "operation," not converting people to their worldview—and many sympathetic onlookers had no idea how to find Anonymous on chat rooms.

Now let me turn to QAnon By most measures, most Qbelievers, like Anonymous h/activists, are earnest and steer clear of intentionally spreading hoaxes to fool the masses . . . well, with the exception, maybe, of QAnon itself. Dozens of amateur researchers and journalists seek to unveil QAnon, assuming that this persona, the source of conspiracies, is a conspiracy itself. The specter
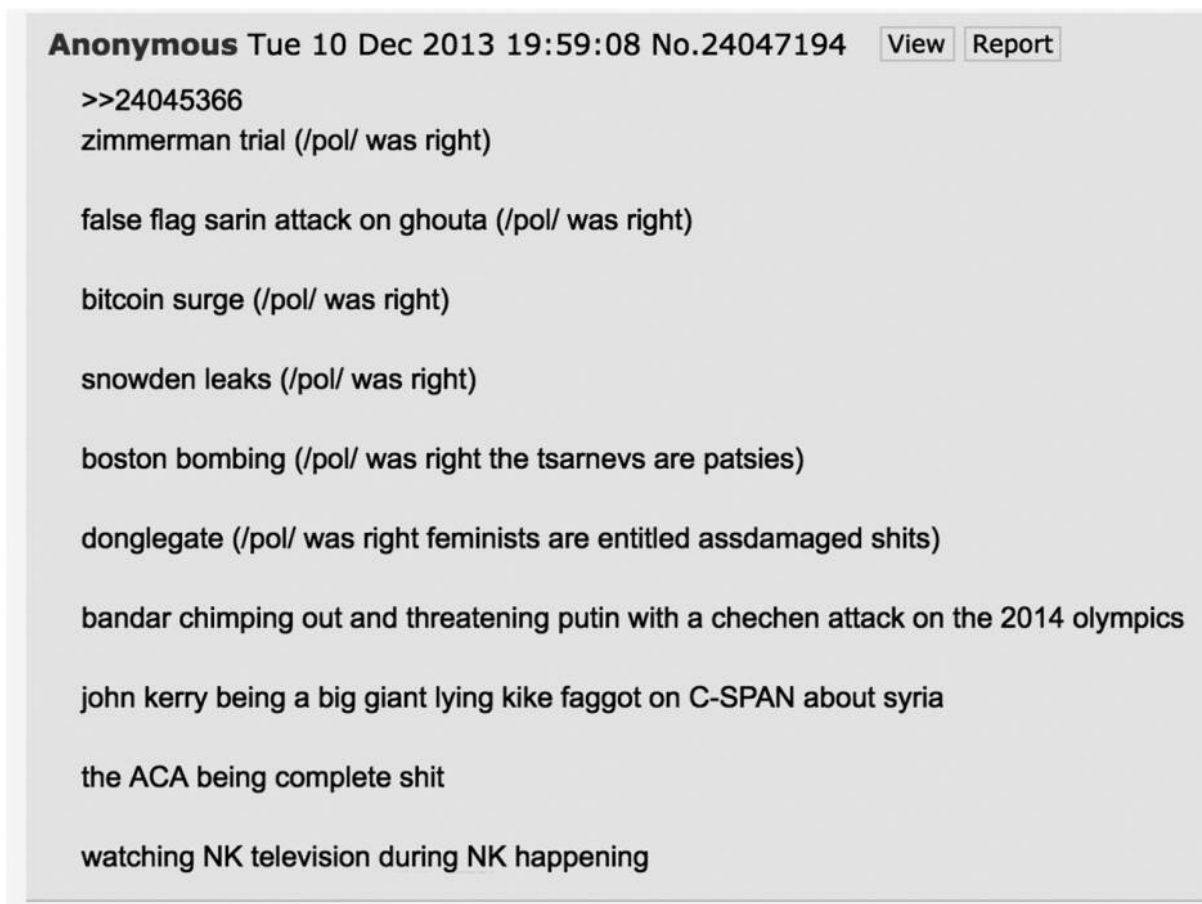
Anonymous Tue 10 Dec 2013 19:59:08 No.24047194   View Report

>>24045366
zimmerman trial (/pol/ was right)

false flag sarin attack on ghouta (/pol/ was right)

bitcoin surge (/pol/ was right)

snowden leaks (/pol/ was right)

boston bombing (/pol/ was right the tsarnevs are patsies)

donglegate (/pol/ was right feminists are entitled assdamaged shits)

bandar chimping out and threatening putin with a chechen attack on the 2014 olympics

john kerry being a big giant lying kike faggot on C-SPAN about syria

the ACA being complete shit

watching NK television during NK happening

Figure 4: /pol/ was right!

of conspiracy thus haunts every aspect of this formation, drawing in researchers to expose the ruse—ostensibly and most likely seeding the movement.

Most mainstream journalists and analysts largely dismiss QAnon out of hand, usually describing their ideas as "unhinged," "baseless," or "ludicrous" (see, for instance, Mahdawi 2020; Kunzelman 2021; Kuznia, Devine, and Griffin 2020) as they repeat the most famous core belief around the ultra-secret Satanic pedophile ring run by liberal elites who Trump and his allies will eventually snuff out. To be sure, QAnon theories are indeed wrong. But from different registers, QAnon can be understood in line with what George Marcus calls "paranoia within reason" (1999)—the way conspiracies can be read as sensible in light of other factors and explanation. Whether it's understanding the general logic of conspiracy, the historical building blocks of QAnon or their more specific modes of evidence gathering, the rise and appeal of QAnon for some people, I think, will make a lot more sense.

Let me start with a general point and then I will get more specific. As critical media theorist Jodi Dean has argued, part of conspiracy's allure and prominence stems from the logic of liberal publicity itself, which animates a particularly prevalent conception of American freedom and citizenship: "Freedom as information gathering," she notes, "confirms a conception of democratic engagement long part of the ideal of the public sphere: the public has the right to know . . . They must watch, surveil, expose, and reveal" (2002: 54). Many, including Dean, noted twenty years ago that the internet provides the perfect milieu for activating this sensibility for how you can "practice" conspiracy and how you can perform freedom by digging, following links, amassing massive troves of information and finding and triangulating it. With QAnon, sociotechnical infrastructure for this practice is not only extensive but very quickly was sculpted into something user-friendly (I will soon address a particularly user-friendly website Qmap.pub, now offline, that by early 2020, nevertheless, attracted

ten million visitors a month; see Turton and Brustein 2020).

Another sensible aspect—perhaps the only one that journalists are willing to accord to this domain—concerns its form: how aspects of QAnon embody the logic of online gaming. Many have even specified the genres, like an adventure game or a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (Berkowitz 2021; Daly 2020). None of this is wrong. Like Happenings, the form keeps participants jacked in and hooked. The interpretation of drops, which invite decoding for being brief teases, cryptic quips, or phrased as questions—can take on game-like qualities. Indeed, I would go even further and argue the imageboards embody a particular attribute of gaming as theorized by anthropologist Thomas Malaby. He argues online games provide arenas for "contrived contingency, capable of generating emergent practices and interpretations," (Malaby 2007: 95) which are experimental, unpredictable, and surprising. This quality is perhaps one reason why 4chan—a place for contrived contingency—where people communicate but also engage in game-like actions, like raids or LARPING, became the staging ground for Anonymous, the anonymous far right, and QAnon.

But we must also address QAnon's building blocks, that is, the history of their content—which media observers rarely do. For instance, most accounts pinpoint the genesis of Clinton conspiracy theories on Pizzagate. But the Clinton Conspiracy-scape was well established, fleshed out, and dates back to the 1990s (Gatehouse 2022b). Rumors about the Clintons' purportedly murderous ways and infidelities not only flourished on conservative talk radio and early internet chat rooms, but even hit a type of Evangelical mainstream after a popular documentary was widely circulated on VHS in Evangelical churches (Jackson 1994). This history, or the Satanism panics of the 1990s, help explain why some Evangelicals were compelled by these ideas (along with the fact that QAnon catered to this audience by routinely quoting the Bible or using apocalyptic, messianic, and Manichean moral motifs).

But so much of QAnon's theorizing has nothing to do with the past: it is deeply imbricated with the here and now, with current events, and with far more individuals and organizations than is ever, ever showcased in the media. Let me offer a truly minuscule sample: it includes the investigation into Russian interference, verified news about child pornography, actual resignations around key politicians, lots of Jeffrey Epstein (as you might expect, because come on, pedophilia and conspiracy are

stamped all over his actual case), the Mueller investigation, Edward Snowden, the corruption plaguing the Red Cross, the war in Syria, and so much more. The dozens upon dozens of tags featured on Qmap.pub provide a sense of this depth and breadth (see Figure 5; see also Qmap 2018).

QAnon analysis stitches together evidence with what might otherwise indeed be wrong/false, even at times outlandish, conclusions. In the case of QAnon, this "collaging" of truth and lies, as P. M. Krafft and Joan Donovan describe this prevalent misinformation tactic (2020), work quite powerfully to confirm symbolic truths for many Qbelievers. Take, for instance, how in December 2017 members of the Qcommunity latched onto the following government press release, which opens: "Today, the Trump Administration launched a new sanctions regime targeting human rights abusers and corrupt actors around the world" (see US Department of the Treasury 2017). Believed by them to be authored by Q, this detailed press release directly supports QAdherents' belief that Trump is a righteous, corruption-fighting patriot—and it thus fuels the hope that he will, one day, go one step further, and snuff out the deep-state cabal.

Sometimes they cherry-pick other real events that can counter other evidence they seek to discredit. Take for example this Qdrop (#2849) about American actor Jussie Smollett. Posted on Qmap, it opens with the following title, "Jussie Smollett's Hate Hoax False Flag was Politically Motivated"[10] (see Figure 6 for the full Q drop).

Smollett did indeed lie that he was the victim of a hate crime at the hands of MAGA supporters—and so unsurprisingly this was used by believers to entirely question the other race-based hate crimes fueled by reactionaries and sanctioned by Trump.

If you wade through Qmap, you can start to see just how many QAnon theories and modes of interpreting are tied to current events and the news (see Figure 5). Qmap, which is now offline and was created by a Citibank executive and staunch Trump supporter, Jason Gelinas, provides a minimalist interface. He made navigating the drops, which you can sort by theme, much easier. He also included the following categories: Proofs, Players, Global Themes, Videos, Prayer Wall, Resignations, Executive Orders, Human Trafficking, Sealed Cases.[11]

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10. https://web.archive.org/web/20190815165538mp_/https://qmap.pub/?pg=13.

11. To browse an archive of Qmap.pub, visit https://web.archive.org/web/20200501000000*/http://qmap.pub/.

☐ Fed/Banking	☐ 8chan & Anons	☐ 9-11 / Bin Laden	☐ Airplanes
☐ Antifa / Nazism	☐ Armenia	☐ Asia	☐ Australia
☐ BOOM	☐ Big Pharma	☐ Black Vote	☐ Bloodlines/Wives/Husbands
☐ Border Security / The Wall	☐ Cabal/Elites/NWO	☐ Canada	☐ China
☐ Clowns in America (CIA)	☐ Comms/Marker/Proof	☐ DC Swamp / Deep State	☐ DNC Servers / Seth Rich Leaks
☐ Dems	☐ Election Integrity / Rigging	☐ Emailgate / Hillary's Servers	☐ Epstein Island/Temple
☐ European Union	☐ Executive Order / Follow the Pen	☐ FBI / DOJ	☐ False Flag
☐ Fisagate / Memos	☐ Five Eyes / FVEY	☐ Foundations / Institutes	☐ France
☐ GITMO	☐ Germany	☐ God	☐ Gun Rights
☐ HUMA / Muslim Brotherhood	☐ Haiti	☐ Hawaii / DEFCON 1	☐ Hollywood / Stars
☐ Holy See / Vatican	☐ ISIS	☐ Inspector General Report	☐ Internet Bill of Rights
☐ Iran	☐ Israel / Mossad	☐ Italy	☐ JFK/Reagan
☐ Las Vegas	☐ Loop Capital	☐ MAGA / WWG1WGA	☐ MKUltra
☐ MS13	☐ Map/Plan	☐ Marines/National Guard	☐ McLean, VA
☐ Memes	☐ Mexico	☐ Military Intelligence (MI) / US Military	☐ Military Tribunals / Treason
☐ Missiles / Nukes / World Wars	☐ Mockingbird / Fake News	☐ Money	☐ Nasa/SpaceX
☐ No Such Agency (NSA)	☐ North Korea	☐ Pakistan / Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)	☐ Parkland / School Shootings
☐ Pedogate / Human Trafficking	☐ Planned Parenthood / Abortion	☐ Q	☐ Red Cross
☐ Resignations	☐ Rothschild	☐ Russia	☐ Russia Hoax / Dossier / Spygate
☐ Satanic Cult	☐ Saudi Arabia	☐ Scaramucci Model	☐ Sealed Indictments
☐ Secret Service	☐ SecureDrop	☐ Shills / Fake MAGA	☐ Social Media / Big Tech
☐ Steel Industry	☐ Stringer	☐ Strzok-Page Texts	☐ Syria
☐ Tarmac	☐ UK / MI5/6/SIS / Royals	☐ US Army Corps of Engineers	☐ Uranium One
☐ Weiner Laptop / Insurance File			

Players

☐ Adam Schiff	☐ Admiral Rogers	☐ Al Gore	☐ Alan Dershowitz
☐ Alex Jones	☐ Allison Mack	☐ Alwaleed bin Talal	☐ Amanda Renteria
☐ Anderson Cooper	☐ Andrew Kauders	☐ Andrew McCabe	☐ Angela Merkel
☐ Anthony Weiner	☐ Barack Hussein Obama	☐ Bill Binney	☐ Bill Clinton
☐ Bill Maher	☐ Bill Priestap	☐ Bob Goodlatte	☐ Brett Kavanaugh
☐ Bruce Ohr	☐ Christopher Wray	☐ Chuck Grassley	☐ Chuck Schumer
☐ Dan Coats	☐ Debbie Wasserman Schultz	☐ Devin Nunes	☐ Dianne Feinstein
☐ Ed O'Callahan	☐ Edward Snowden	☐ Elizabeth Warren	☐ Elon Musk
☐ Emmanuel Macron	☐ Eric Holder	☐ Eric Schmidt	☐ Eric Schneiderman
☐ Erik Prince	☐ Ezra Cohen-Watnick	☐ General Jim Mattis	☐ George Soros
☐ George W Bush	☐ Gina Haspel	☐ Hassan Rouhani	☐ Hillary Rodham Clinton
☐ Huma Abedin	☐ Imran Awan	☐ Jack Dorsey	☐ James Baker
☐ James Clapper	☐ James Comey	☐ Jared Kushner	☐ Jeff Sessions
☐ Jeffrey Epstein	☐ Jerome Corsi	☐ Joe Biden	☐ John Bolton
☐ John Brennan	☐ John Durham	☐ John F. Kelly	☐ John Huber
☐ John Kerry	☐ John McCain	☐ John P Carlin	☐ John Podesta
☐ John Ratcliffe	☐ John Solomon	☐ Julian Assange	☐ Jussie Smollett

Figure 5: Qmap.pub tags.

Eventually, at the urging of a supporter, Gelinas allowed participants to annotate posts and add additional material and evidence—again, many of the links featured on their websites stemming from actual sources.

For those Evangelicals who already see the world through a religious and especially scriptural lens, the connections they make are similar to what media scholar Francesca Tripodi describes as "Scriptural inference," a common practice among the highly educated, upper-middle-class conservative Christians she researched (2018). This technique is one of "closely reading "the Word" through documents like the "Constitution or the Presidents' speech" and then using this material to find any inconsistencies between mainstream news and their close reading of the document. For secular others, the sheer mass of Qdrops and the theories around them, many of which are diverse but also repeat topics and themes, come to rhyme and resonate with one another: indeed, this field of conspiratorial reasoning is an apt example of what anthropologist Susan Lepselter, in her wonderful ethnography on UFO believers, describes as an expressive modality called the
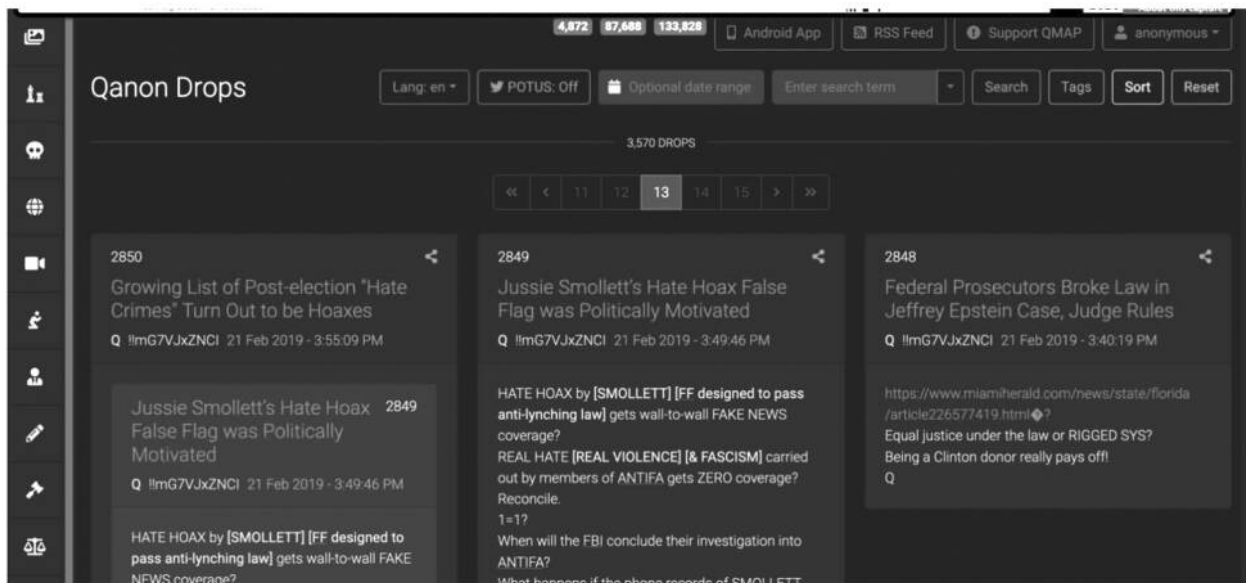
Figure 6: Qmap.pub QAnon Drops and commentary.

"resonance of unseen things." It entails " the intensification produced by the overlapping, back and forth call of signs from various discourses" (Lepselter 2016: 4) that often feels true. The difference is that today, this expressive modality is not only felt—it is—but can be fleshed out visually and textually with an enormous amount of specificity and information and data—from the drops, to the Proofs, to individual research, to the visualizations, to the research conducted on sites like Qmap.

Conclusion

Imageboards have underwritten the emergence of multiple, distinct, anonymity-infused political movements, each of which has inherited something from 4chan, whether lingo, or a certain style of information processing, but each has also changed after become entangled with different communities and belief systems. This helps us see how the three formations I addressed did not evolve in a straightforward and linear fashion, one giving way to the next, with the imageboards acting as a timeless and unchanging cesspool, as is routinely portrayed. Given how they can seed or more fully catalyze political possibilities—including the making and remaking of political subjects—understanding these dynamic processes in their full specificity and as they happen in time, is all the more urgent.

Too often commentators treat individuals on these boards as already constituted political subjects. The history does not accord with this reading and, more so, for those interested in political change, it blinds us to the processes of online recruitment and transformation. I can't help but think of many young Anonymous activists I met at the first Scientology protests. Many had hazy or no politics, until they became involved in these street protests. This is a similar scenario for the younger hackers who joined for fun in 2010 to target scuzzy corporations and dictatorial regimes. Eventually they cultivated a sophisticated commitment to social justice. Or I think about how even /pol/, which—at some level unsurprisingly became a hotbed for reactionary thinking, in its inception, was still libertarian in orientation—with many posters boosting Ron Paul during his 2012 presidential candidacy (see Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022: 37–44); other paths were politically possible. As I showed earlier, /pol/ was knowingly targeted, as others sought to transform "ironic racists" into dedicated foot soldiers for white supremacy or reactionary views—and they did, and many went on to red pill others, at a time when non-anonymous fascists and reactionaries had been emboldened. Even if Anonymous were adept with advertising "operations," they were haphazard in recruitment. This was only clear to me after the rise of the far right and the deployment of the conversion strategy red pilling, which allows those they address to identify the moment—it acts as a time stamp if

you will—and the particular reason—maybe it was an #endfathersday tweet—which "awakened" them to the purported truth of the authoritarian liberal left. QAnon opened a distinct political portal for engagement. It drew on and propagated reactionary ideas and memes already in circulation, and drew in patriots, other conservatives, and Evangelicals, as it also furthered anti-elite and anti-democratic sentiments which became part of its appeal; it rode on the wave of Trump's validation and hardened and calcified an already existing mistrust of the establishment media. From the perspective of Qacolytes, the ability to individually and collectively stitch together so much information, much of it from news and current events, likely strikes as quite rigorous.

I don't have any easy answers to the grave and dual problems of far-right radicalization and misinformation. Still, it's worth reminding ourselves that these are movements, where people were moved to adopt these views. If progressives were to challenge these trends, they would have to reckon with and dismantle the profound demonization of aspects of progressive politics and rebuild trust in institutions like the media that had eroded long before these formations came to be. But it is a task that calls for clever cultural messaging—about justice and equality—that can reach across the divisions, across progressive social movements, and among those yet to be awakened—a message that's righteous and entertaining, that inspires hope and possibility, that can override the message of division and hate that has been so cleverly spun and disseminated through our cultural and technical means of production.

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