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How did the movement attract such a large, politically diverse base during a notably politically divided era? The movement's message alone does not explain how QAnon gained such a popular following in a short period of time, nor does its strategy and repertoires. I argue that QAnon aggregated the support from existing movements while amassing millions more in a collage of disparate followers by taking advantage of a divisive political environment and quickly attracting attention through the exploitive use of social media technology.

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QAnon's Mobilization to Disinformation**

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**The Great Awakening
QAnon's Mobilization to Disinformation**

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Introduction to the Great Awakening

In 2017, a movement called QAnon launched a call to other conspiracists. The movement began through a series of anonymous posts on the messaging board 4chan by an individual called “Q” who claimed to have access to secret government information. In spite of the movement’s obscure beginning, QAnon’s conspiracy campaign convinced 39% of Americans that a “deep state” colluded against then-President Donald Trump’s administration.¹ When separated by political party, the 2020 Ipsos poll estimated this figure as high as 71% among self-reported Republicans.² Through a unique repertoire of posing questions, offering “breadcrumbs” as clues, and suggesting “Anons” fact check for themselves, QAnon effectively spread a narrative to question “truth.”³ How did the movement attract such a large, politically diverse base during a notably politically divided era?⁴ The message alone does not explain how QAnon gained such a popular following in a short period of time, nor does its strategy and repertoires. I argue that QAnon aggregated the support from existing movements while amassing millions more in a collage of disparate followers by taking advantage of a divisive political environment and quickly attracting attention through the exploitive use of social media technology.

An analysis of QAnon’s mobilization process requires a dissection of the movement and its environment. Not unlike the movement itself, this requires going down a few paths. As Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow state, “no complex outcome ever results from the operation of a single causal mechanism.”⁵ This paper relies on social movement theory terminology and on conspiracy theory research to determine where scholarship may offer insight for analyzing the efficacy with which QAnon members mobilized. In comparing the literature, the analysis shows that QAnon found a fertile political environment. The group chose a strategic repertoire of collection actions, specifically the diffusion of conspiracy theories, to engage a receptive

American population. Analysis of the political climate details how a broad section of the US public was ripe for the movement. In addition to a willing audience, the analysis identifies how technology quickly amplified the message. The advantage of social media technology not only legitimized the movement, but also exploited inaccurate information. Understanding the components that catalyzed the QAnon movement may, likewise, shed light on how vulnerable the US is to this type of disinformation campaign going forward.

Literature Review

At the heart of social movement literature is the concept of political opportunities and political opportunity structures. Political opportunity encompasses the changing environment that might facilitate community grievances to become collective action in addition to the static mobilizing structures that already exist.⁶ Political opportunity structures help explain what enables actors to take action or signals enough threat to catalyze communities into risky counter actions. For QAnon, the movement is most remarkable because it reached across the political spectrum. Also, political opportunity structures often promote or repress a movement's communication, which for QAnon involved a repertoire of conspiracy theories.⁷ Conspiracy theory literature, which is rarely addressed within social movement discussions, explains how conspiracists and movement actors intersect and how the conspiracies themselves became a mobilizing mechanism, particularly in the unregulated social media environment.

Political Opportunity Structures in Social Movement Theory

Political opportunities and political opportunity structures (POS) describe the general setting, or the institutional context, that should affect social movements in a specific environment.⁸ For example, a country with laws against any kind of political protest hinders the ability for people to collectively organize. Although a cornerstone in social movement theory,

academic analysis varies on the definition and use of political opportunity concepts. The earliest academic reference to POS in 1973 was based on a study of riots across American cities which noted the effects of institutional access.⁹ Renowned social movement scholar Charles Tilly recognized that the relationship between the population's interests and its environment depended on factors such as power, repression, and opportunity or threats.¹⁰ These factors affect what strategies or tactics are used by the movement's actors to gain attention, recruit new members, or produce change. For instance, historically if the politically contentious claims of one population group have gone unheard, the group might finally feel empowered to publicly speak out when a sympathetic government official comes to power. Along the same lines, Sidney Tarrow describes political opportunities as "consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements."¹¹ Where Tilly emphasized the relationship, Tarrow's literature refers to the opportunities as signals.

The literature offers many examples of POS that emboldened or suppressed social movements. To conceptualize QAnon's environment, a comparison with McAdam's four broad categories of POS is useful. The author offers the following typology: (1) the openness or closure for movement actors; (2) the stability or instability of the political environment; (3) influence of elite allies; and (4) the state's ability to repress or facilitate the movement.¹² Arguably, QAnon faced favorable POS under each group. Explaining the political process of social movements as part of a system, Marco Giugni simply wrote POS are systemic factors that "affect the possibilities that challenging groups have to mobilize effectively."¹³ Overall, these scholars recognize that political opportunities involve power relationships, institutional systems, societal acceptance, and sometimes, for example, good timing caused by a global pandemic.

Particularly applicable to QAnon, Gamson and Meyer offer a relevant explanation that opportunities are “framed” and “a movement is a field of actors, not a unified entity.”¹⁴ This scholarship highlights that movements often allow for different actors to choose aspects of the movement that they support, which can subsequently result in mobilization differences.¹⁵ This assessment is especially relevant for QAnon, since the movement has an unknown number of actors involved. By having flexibility, it can reach a broader audience, recruit more members, accept multiple contentious claims, and aggregate other existing movements within the emerging movement. In summary, the attribution of opportunities or threats serve as an “activating mechanism” for social movements.¹⁶ These definitions and dimensions of political opportunities are useful for deconstructing the QAnon mobilization process. Certainly, the country faced political changes when QAnon emerged, just by way of a new president, but this does not tell the full story. Tilly’s emphasis on the relationship with the public interest would presume that QAnon understood or perceived correctly the public’s interest, which is not obvious since the movement started on a message board that was not part of mainstream social media. Overall, each of these perspectives adds to the broader question and analysis of how QAnon mobilized.

Criticism of the classic social movement definitions of political opportunities adds value to the QAnon analysis as well. In general, the literature on political opportunities evolved over the last two decades to accept that the environment may not affect all movements the same.¹⁷ As an example, the Black Lives Matter protesters may not receive the same police attention as a Tea Party Movement protest, or more importantly, one movement might anticipate a different environment and then self-repress or encourage mobilization. This theoretical expansion most notably recognizes that there are discursive opportunities, specific opportunities, and perceived opportunities.¹⁸ Discursive opportunities encompasses the cultural component which includes

both institutional accesses afforded to movements and the prevailing societal discourse that may provide openness or closure in the public domain.¹⁹ The idea of prevailing societal discourse is particularly interesting as it relates to conspiracy theories because typically the term would discredit a movement's conspiratorial claim. Specific opportunities recognize that the timing of certain events or support from a specific elite actor offers more opportunities or threats to some movements as compared to others.²⁰ The coronavirus pandemic certainly exemplifies a specific threat on a global level. The scholarship on discursive and specific opportunities adds to the analysis of QAnon's perception of the public's distrust in government, specifically during the pandemic. Finally, the current literature notes that opportunities exist if the actors accurately perceive the opportunity or threats to the movement.²¹ Typically, American culture views conspiracy theories in a negative light.²² As mentioned, discrediting an accusation or grievance reduces its legitimacy. In addition, QAnon's claims were provocative, vague, and sometimes even inconsistent. Despite this, the political opportunities were favorable, and the movement exploded in popularity across multiple ideologies.

Conspiracy Theories Reviewed

QAnon's narrative centered around the notion that conspiratorial suspicions are true – powerful and nefarious actors are running the country and possibly the world, while other actors are trying to protect the US and fight against the evil corruption.²³ The movement captured fears that are usually kept isolated at an individual level and elevated them across a community – a theoretical requirement for collective action. Demonstrated as a brilliant mechanism for mobilization, the conspiracy theories shaped the story the movement wanted told. Academia can help explain how this worked, or at least offer some insight as to why QAnon's version of information found salience within the political opportunity structures.

Conspiracy theories are “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.”²⁴ QAnon actors not only recognized that the opportunity to diffuse their narrative existed, they also recognized the considerable demand for answers based on conspiratorial ideations. The literature on conspiracy theorizing covers many disciplines from political science and psychology to history and humanities. A few common themes exist in the literature as well as gaps. The most notable gap is the absence of recognizing that conspiracy theories spread through the internet can be mechanisms for activating social movements.

Scholarship emphasizes the importance of realizing that conspiracies actually do occur, and that conspiracy theories can be true or false.²⁵ In other words, despite the general American cynicism towards conspiracies, history provides plenty of real examples. Conspiracy theorizing can be found across the political spectrum from the extreme left to the extreme right and even in the middle. Although decades of research fail to determine a definitive motivation for the conspiracy beliefs, four common threads surface within the literature as an explanation. The literature points to (1) an emotional need for answers; (2) personal experience; (3) conspiratorial mindsets; and (4) a connection to ideology.²⁶ Based on this literature, conspiracies have mobilizing benefits, such as an ability to transcend partisanship and develop new connections. The scholarship supports how the QAnon movement used a repertoire of connecting conspiracy theories to influence their “great awakening” master frame.

The academic literature identifies several reasons for conspiracy theories, which at a cursory glance can be reasonably connected to specific QAnon conspiracies. The allure of a conspiratorial version of history fulfills some relevant emotional needs for the believer.²⁷ This common explanation argues that emotional conditions, such as a feeling of powerlessness in

one's environment, feed the need for conspiracy theories.²⁸ Empirical research shows that conspiracies speak to certain people who feel politically alienated or have a higher sense of political cynicism.²⁹ This explanation aligns with the key tenet of QAnon that a “deep state” exists and was working against President Trump. Another study showed that people, when placed under considerable stressful situations, can see non-existent patterns.³⁰ This could be exemplified by parents believing in anti-vaccination conspiracies when their child has been diagnosed with autism soon after receiving a round of immunizations. The scholars explain that conspiracy theories provide a sense of control for those feeling powerless or provide a sense of community when feeling alienated.³¹ The author Uscinski supports this argument further by showing that people most affected or impacted by the potential conspiracy or theorized event are more likely to believe in the conspiracy.³²

Based on the conspiracy theory scholarship, QAnon's ability to align with existing political opportunities is not surprising. For example, the movement's conspiracies include a number of accusations related to pedophiles and child trafficking.³³ According to a study of QAnon members arrested, 83% of the female offenders experienced the physical and/or sexual abuse of their children by a romantic partner or family member.³⁴ The literature confirms these experiences may increase relevancy of the movement's distrustful narrative. Although the literature does not connect this research directly to the use of social media, one can extrapolate how a population would likely reach out to the internet for answers to these needs and quite possibly find and believe inaccurate, exploitive, or radicalizing information in response.

The conspiracy theory scholar Goertzel describes two belief systems, which he refers to as “monological” and “dialogical.”³⁵ In his research, a person with a dialogical belief system is open to context and uses dialogue to confirm or dispel beliefs.³⁶ A monological belief system is a

network of ideas that serve as evidence to expand and support existing conspiracist ideation.³⁷

The monological belief system concept is not supported by all scholars because sometimes people believe conflicting conspiracies, but it offers one explanation for why some people might have a conspiracist worldview and believe in multiple conspiracies.³⁸ This literature, written well before social media, has relevant application to how social media algorithms cause a type of closed feedback loop for the users. The echo chamber of social media, the way people receive similar-minded information and feedback, effectively causes a monological belief system.

Uscinski recognizes the connection to ideology as another common thread in the conspiracy theory literature.³⁹ Ideology, whether religious, political, economic, or otherwise, acts as the mind's framework for making sense of the world.⁴⁰ Ideology sets up an order to process and interpret new information.⁴¹ Ironically, the social media algorithm may parallel this filtering function for people who solely receive their news from their social media account feed.

Scholarship holds that a conspiracy theory will likely confirm or fit into one's ideology, referred to as motivated biases.⁴² In other words, certain people have underlying tendencies for which the conspiracy theory provides the preferable explanation of events.⁴³ As an example, right-wing supporters are more likely to believe conspiratorial behavior perpetrated by a Democratic (rather than a Republican) politician and vice versa. Barlet describes what he refers to as a symbiotic interplay between ideology and conspiracies.⁴⁴ He points to right-wing conspiracist subcultures and the conservative media as an example.⁴⁵ This scholarship is particularly salient to the method with which QAnon actors successfully targeted certain communities, such as health and wellness influencers or the yoga community for conspiracies related to the "pandemic."⁴⁶

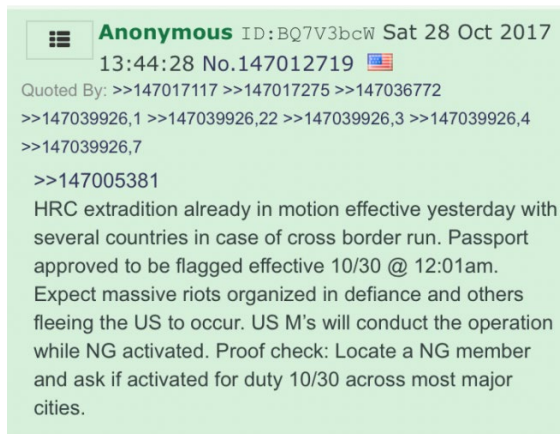
Uscinski concludes that the predisposition to conspiracy theories predicts social and political behaviors.⁴⁷ He suggests, along with other authors, that this predisposition occurs with

socialization early in one's life in a variety of ways.⁴⁸ For example, African American communities harmed by a legacy of institutional discrimination, including actual conspiracies, may purposely or inadvertently socialize the next generation toward conspiracies. The literature also links certain demographics and socio-economic positions as factors for predisposition to conspiracy beliefs.⁴⁹ These factors together point to how QAnon's use of conspiracy theories was able to broker connections between communities and reach a politically diverse audience.

QAnon: The History

Described as a “big tent” conspiracy theory movement, QAnon was not the first conspiracy theory posted on 4chan.⁵⁰ In fact, well before QAnon's first posting in October 2017, a rather meager “Anon” movement had begun on the image board. The “Anon” genre, short for anonymous, were posters touting special government access information, such as – CIAAnon, HLIAnon (high level insider), FBIAnon.⁵¹ Early, in November 2016, FBIAnon claimed to have inside information on the Clinton Foundation investigation and developed a following of 20,000 subscribers within the first 15 days.⁵² FBIAnon provided actionable details about a child trafficking ring involving Hillary Clinton run out of a popular pizza restaurant in Washington, DC. This conspiracy was known as “Pizzagate”.⁵³ A well-intended man from North Carolina, armed with an AR-15 and two other weapons, decided to embark on a solo rescue mission for these children.⁵⁴ However, soon after arriving and shooting open a closet door, he realized that no children were being held hostage, nor did the building have a basement.⁵⁵ The arrest of the man in Pizzagate led to the debunking of the conspiracy theory and FBIAnon.⁵⁶ Following this important lesson, the QAnon repertoire adapts toward more strategically vague or incomplete information, which is harder to debunk.⁵⁷

On October 28, 2017, for the first time, an anonymous Q posted a message, referred to as a “drop”, on 4chan and quickly followed with 16 additional drops primarily using recycled conspiracies related to Hillary Clinton, establishing Donald Trump’s key role, introducing a conspiracy about the news media called Operation Mockingbird, and posing provocative questions.⁵⁸ This was unremarkable until two 4chan moderators decided to “increase the following” and contacted a YouTube influencer.⁵⁹ On November 3, 2017, the YouTuber posted a video entitled “/POL/-Q Clearance Anon- Is it #happening???” which was watched over 250,000 times.⁶⁰ The actors in this episode created a sense of urgency, a hashtag, and amplified their message many times over. The movement began gaining attention. Over the next three years, there would be almost 5,000 “Q drops.”⁶¹ Below is the first drop:



Q's first "drop"

Throughout November and December 2017, Q increased activities to 442 drops while the YouTuber produced several more Q-themed videos calling for viewers to donate money through links in her post.⁶² These original actors soon concluded they should broaden their audience to a more user-friendly and widely used platform.⁶³ They created the Reddit community called

r/CBTS_Stream (calm before the storm) where approximately 20,000 subscribers met to discuss anything Q related.⁶⁴ The phrase used comes from a comment made by President Trump on October 6, 2017 prior to any QAnon posts. He made this statement after hosting several U.S. military generals at the White House for dinner.⁶⁵ The first month of drops connected QAnon to new members that may have been energized by the new president. By March 2018, Reddit shut down the r/CBTS community links for inciting violence and sharing personal information without proper consent (“doxing”). However, a larger community called r/TheGreatAwakening had already become the home to 70,000 subscribers.⁶⁶ Over the summer of 2018, Trump rally attendees wearing Q t-shirts, selling merchandise, and waving Q flags captured the attention of national media.⁶⁷ By August 2018, the original YouTube channel had more than 90,000 subscribers, the Twitter account had 97,000 followers, and the videos had in excess of 8 million views.⁶⁸ QAnon called for followers to be “sheep no more.”⁶⁹ More significantly, an almost untraceable number of Facebook groups spreading QAnon conspiracy theories amassed millions of members, and on Instagram, QAnon theories evolved into seemingly benign information shared by wellness and lifestyle influencers.⁷⁰ In September 2018, Reddit shut down the r/TheGreatAwakening community and all connected links, while Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter struggled to manage the bounding social movement.⁷¹

QAnon: The Main Conspiracies

To better understand the process that triggered QAnon’s mobilization across America, it is helpful to divide the movement in two ways: first, through the initial steps the actors took to gain public attention, and second, to delve into the most influential of QAnon’s conspiracies. This method of organization does not encompass a complete timeline, nor does it include the full array of actions by QAnon. Rather, this typology reflects notable actions and references to

specific conspiracies that brokered connections, diffused their messages, and effectively promoted coordinated actions based on political opportunity structures. There are too many conspiracies to review them all. However, there are four overarching conspiracy themes: the deep state, Operation Mockingbird, pedophilia and child trafficking, and the “plandemic”. Understanding the repertoire of conspiracy theories will lay the groundwork for the political opportunity analysis.

The deep state conspiracy is considered one of QAnon’s master frames because it encompasses all corruption by government and non-government elites. This conspiracy is one of the most useful because it can easily be adapted for current events. The first impeachment trial demonstrated this. In response to the upcoming trial, Q posted:

Get the popcorn, Friday & Saturday will deliver on the MAGA promise. POTUS knows he must clean house (gov't) in order to 'free up' and demonstrate who has authority in order to pass important legislation. This was always the priority. Remember, AG Sessions cannot look like an impartial player that is out to get all former Obama team members as we need him for other important work. All will come into focus and for anyone to think POTUS is not in control is kidding themselves. Also, he's 100% insulated with zero risk of impeachment (fact) [sic].⁷²

The Clintons, especially Hillary Clinton, plays a significant role in QAnon’s deep state conspiracy genre. For example, Q drop #33 asks, “Why did Soros’ son have several meetings with Canadian PM and how is that related to Clinton’s?” [sic].⁷³ The cast of characters expanded to include former President Obama, written in the drops as Hussein, as well as John McCain.⁷⁴ The intelligence community is also considered deep state. For example, QAnon refers to the CIA as a “tool in a corrupt cabal.”⁷⁵ However, the military is excluded from the deep state. For example, one Q drop states “Military Intelligence v FBI CIA NSA [sic].”⁷⁶ This alignment with the military may be an important allegiance for the movement to continue receiving support from the militia groups, such as the OathKeepers and the Patriots.

The completion of the Mueller report was a challenging episode for QAnon and its survival through this time demonstrated the movement's effectiveness and longevity. Until the report was published in April 2019, QAnon conspiracies suggested the real story was that Trump was working with Robert Mueller on an investigation aimed at the Clintons.⁷⁷ The movement's legitimacy could have been challenged when the published report contradicted Q's posts, but QAnon adjusted its repertoire. To explain contradicting or disproven conspiracies, the QAnon narrative referred to the contradiction as a "false flag" or suggested that the contradicting event was indeed part of a larger plan.⁷⁸ The deep state conspiracy also led QAnon to make a strategic appeal to the African American community through posts stating that Black communities are enslaved by the Democratic Party.⁷⁹ The deep state related conspiracies could be constantly tweaked to serve the movement's needs.

The deep state conspiracy tied into the election fraud conspiracies. In the fall of 2018, the US midterm elections coincided with a number of QAnon posts related to electoral fraud.⁸⁰ Examples of election fraud in the conspiracies include blank ballots filled out by the Democratic Party, the destruction of ballots, and the organized inclusion of non-eligible voters.⁸¹ The QAnon voter fraud conspiracies during the midterm were similar, almost foreshadowing President Trump's accusations in 2020. QAnon posted one final challenge in October 2020 stating, "are you ready to take back control of this Country?[sic]"

Operation Mockingbird is a QAnon conspiracy theory that dates back to the early Cold War years and is meant to explain why the mainstream media (MSM) is fake news. According to the conspiracy, the CIA engaged in a project that paid journalists to produce fake news. Because the conspiracy is a recycled one, QAnons can do their own research to find references to the operation which lends credence to the theory. Along these lines, Q posted a "hit list" of 101

reporters who they believe worked with the Democratic National Committee during the 2016 election and urged their followers to awaken from the “fake news media.”⁸² This conspiracy theory is also strategic as it allows for contradicting information to exist in other media sources that can debunk any of the theories. In other words, QAnon followers that are challenged for their beliefs can manage the counterarguments by discrediting any evidence from the mainstream media, or anyone not producing facts that already align with the conspiracy.

QAnon’s child trafficking conspiracy theories seemed to be the most outlandish until Jeffrey Epstein was arrested again in July 2018 and subsequently committed suicide.⁸³ Jeffrey Epstein, who was a convicted sex offender and also a financier and millionaire philanthropist, was publicly accused of sexually abusing children while also hosting the world’s elite at his private island.⁸⁴ Once again, this conspiracy connects to other ones. For example, the QAnon conspiracies connect Bill and Hillary Clinton to Jeffrey Epstein. Q drops related to this conspiracy begin with a list of questions. For example, “Epstein island. What occurs in a temple? Why is the temple on top of a mountain? How many levels might exist below? Have the puppet masters traveled to this island?[sic]”⁸⁵ These posts strategically let the reader fill in the blanks with their own discourse, bias, or experience as a convincing method to sell the narrative. This format also makes the conspiracy more difficult to disprove because it is only a list of questions.

An additional facilitating factor for QAnon came as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the president publicly offered advice on hydroxychloroquine as an effective prevention or treatment for the new virus, QAnon provocatively asked “what if a cure already exists?”⁸⁶ The Q conspiracies claimed that governors forced infected patients into nursing homes as a deliberate means to spreading the virus.⁸⁷ This realm of conspiracies launched public debate and likely contributed to the politically contentious nature of wearing a face mask. At this point, scientists

were still working to understand the virus, which provided ample room for conspiracies to emerge where official information was lacking. These conspiracies aligned with the mainstream confusion over causes and fault-finding which were also legitimized when the US left the World Health Organization.

Overall, QAnon's strategic use of conspiracies taps into a zeitgeist of cynicism and concern alive in the US public, such as reasonable concern for children's safety or an expedited vaccination clearance process. During the height of QAnon, there was conjecture over who the Q poster was. However, the answer to this question is fairly anticlimactic and arguably not important because the truth is that it does not matter. What matters is that this movement took the grievances and doubt existing in society and connected them to political opportunities as they arose. As the movement's energy grew so did the attention from politicians, which in turn translated to more political opportunities.

Political Opportunities that Mobilized a Movement for "Truth"

QAnon's path to the Great Awakening mobilization depends on the ease with which the group's conspiracies can find legitimacy and saliency within the political environment. The political environment has the power to facilitate or repress the actions of its society. If QAnon's use of conspiracies were its mechanism toward the process of mobilization, the political opportunities and their structures are the key to activating those mechanisms into process. Political opportunities may appear fairly clear-cut, but consider the challenges presented when the movement's narrative is based on disinformation, misinformation, or partial information. The political environment may be less open if the movement's narrative – Q's prophecies and conspiracies - are debunked and the movement delegitimized. QAnon's rise to popularity is

clear evidence of favorable political opportunities to their Great Awakening narrative. This recycled phrase spoke to QAnon followers and found acceptance in the political environment.

An analysis of the political opportunity structures helps explain QAnon's ability to mobilize across such a diverse base. My analysis proposes that QAnon had a wealth of political opportunity structures available for its conspiratorial theories. I approach the analysis by organizing the political opportunities into five categories (1) the openness of long-term political institutions, (2) the media's openness and inability to manage conspiracies, (3) support from elite actors, (4) the specific opportunity caused by the global pandemic, and (5) the existing societal discourse. I provide QAnon conspiracy theories and catch phrases as evidence to the existence of the political opportunity structures. Because the role of technology within the QAnon conspiracy movement was so unique and so critical, it is afforded its own section.

The 2016 election cycle reflected a noticeable shift in the country toward further divide between political ideologies and demonstrated that US political institutions do not always result in predictable elections. During the primaries, this shift was evident in the populist rhetoric gaining attention at rallies by then candidate Donald Trump. The US political process, including the presidential primaries and the electoral college, affected the political environment and contributed to the election of a populist president that surprised many, especially within the polls and mainstream media. The 2016 primary elections offered a range of conservative candidates competing for the Republican nomination. Presidential candidate Donald Trump, framed as the outsider and underdog, ran a populist campaign that was the precursor to much of QAnon's rhetoric. Following the 2008 financial crisis, prior mobilization of the Tea Party movement, and the 2010 historically successful midterm elections, many Republican politicians adjusted to their constituents' demands.⁸⁸ Further support for the populist candidate was inherent in the two-party

political system, which funnels all support into one nomination for each party. Likewise, the electoral college process, set up as a balance of power, elected the president despite his losing the popular vote. The political structure provided access to the highest elected position in the country to someone with zero previous political or federal experience. Effectively, the election of President Trump signaled that a significant portion of the population wanted change and that it could occur within the political process.

QAnon's realization of this political opportunity is reflected in its repertoire of terms and conspiracy theories. As President Trump promised to "drain the swamp," QAnon cites a "deep state" of bad actors in the US government. The movement also uses the President's exact phrase, "the calm before the storm," to capitalize and legitimize its narrative. The movement's narrative aligned with a patriotic image of protecting the US with the President at the helm of the military and set a contrast to an alleged Antifa movement. In the movement's patriotic theme, the military was not part of the deep state, though the CIA was, which aligned with the president's criticism of the intelligence community. Overall, QAnon's original conspiratorial drops nested nicely into the existing political system, using the president's language as a tactic to appear connected.

The support from President Trump, the Commander-in-Chief, must not be underestimated in itself as a political opportunity structure. The President's perceived support offered legitimacy, importance, and urgency to the movement. QAnon repeatedly used his phrases, such as "the calm before the storm" to create a certain mobilizing mood. The group also found other support, real or perceived, within the government. For example, in December 2017, a government press release titled "United States Sanctions Human Rights Abusers and Bad Actors Across the Globe" was claimed to be written by Q.⁸⁹ Also notable was the absence of any opposition to the QAnon conspiracies from other members of Republican party, particularly

related to the election fraud claims. QAnon actors used the president's rhetoric as a strategic tactic and repertoire, which signaled legitimacy of the insider information. The strategy had a multiplying effect for the movement. First, it signaled the legitimacy in the movement and plausibility for conspiracies. Second, for some followers, the conspiracies aligned with their political or religious ideology, such as the conspiracies related to Democrats or Planned Parenthood.⁹⁰

On the other hand, the President's antagonistic relationship with the free press, particularly the mainstream media, acted as another political opportunity. This contention was particularly advantageous for a movement using conspiracy theories as a repertoire. QAnon simply integrated the media's contradictions as supporting proof for their conspiracy and the media's corruption. The movement's contentious engagement with the media was further legitimized and strengthened when the President also took issue with fake news. QAnon additionally leveraged a growing disagreement over "facts" or "alternative facts" as the White House press secretary infamously called them.⁹¹ QAnon cultivated this political opportunity with the media to urge Americans to rethink their beliefs and not act as "sheeple." In 2019, a Pew Research survey showed that 73% of the public believed most Republicans and Democratic voters disagreed not just over political plans and policies but over "basic facts."⁹² Dubbed MSM for mainstream media, QAnon posts referenced a pre-existing conspiracy theory called Operation Mockingbird related to the CIA manipulation of the media against the US public.⁹³ The movement easily pointed to the contentious and negative relationship and reporting of the President as proof of the conspiracy. Advantageously, the effect of this perceived repression by the MSM presumably led the movement followers to other sources for information, especially sources online such as YouTube, Breitbart, or Fox News, that also likely supported QAnon's

message. After the 1987 repeal of the fairness doctrine, which required fair and balanced reporting, opinion “news” grew into its own media industry. The opinion news industry became fertile ground for the proliferation of conspiracies and support for the QAnon movement as exemplified by the Fox News article on Antifa.⁹⁴ In addition to its mobilizing effects, the movement’s frame of distrusting news sources further supported its conspiracies when they contradicted other information available because it could be discredited as fake news. For example, when conspiracy predictions failed to materialize, the movement simply waved off these contradictions as a part of a deception campaign in the overall plan.⁹⁵ Another catch phrase among a group of health and wellness supporters was “believe in the plan.”⁹⁶ For the QAnon movement, a crucial POS was the lack of structure for verifying accurate information within the media industry.

In January 2020, a global pandemic hit the world sending more uncertainty, suspicion, and fear into many Americans’ psyche. The pandemic deserves credit as a specific political opportunity for QAnon mobilization. The coronavirus, believed to have originated in China, became catalyst for additional conspiracy theories, including the origins and intent behind the virus’s spread. A Pew Research poll showed 47% of American people believe the virus originated from a lab in Wuhan, a fact that has never been scientifically proven.⁹⁷ This political opportunity structure was destabilizing and opened the movement to wellness and lifestyle social media influencers as well as vaccine hesitant crowds because the mandated mask laws signaled potential mandated vaccinations. With one conspiracy theory came many others, Americans were isolated at home where they might have more time to research online and less able to recognize their own budding conspiratorial ideas. Theories emerged, such as the notion that government agencies may collude to hide the real origins or prevent a cure because of

vaccination profits. While many people failed to recognize the source of their information originated from the movement, QAnon's conspiracy theories mobilized thousands.

A divided political discourse in America was another political opportunity for the movement. QAnon's wide reach depicts that the societal discourse contains an underlying trauma and distrust that conspiracy theories answered. For example, Jeffrey Epstein made the news as another elite player in the world of business, with a connection to politicians. Personal interviews from victims of Mr. Epstein's abuse claimed a connection with former President Clinton.⁹⁸ The accused, Mr. Epstein, faced charges that included a scheme to traffic young girls for his abuse and pleasure.⁹⁹ The reality of these events were catalysts for the believability of other similar conspiracies. The President's language was yet another symptom of prevalent distrust and openness to conspiracies in the public discourse. The President used a number of "common-place" lies, such as the amount of rainy weather during his inauguration, to conveniently explain certain events. Similarly, he was also recognized as using swear words as part of his appeal.¹⁰⁰ Although lying and swearing may seem disgraceful for a president, the acceptance of these tactics reflected a segment of the population's desire for authenticity against the establishment.¹⁰¹ The President's non-normative behavior signaled a hostility toward the politically correct norm and willingness to accept ideas previously shunned by the mainstream.

Arguably, political opportunities were the most critical component for QAnon's successful mobilization process. The political environment provided legitimacy, attention, and energy among other resources. Yet, other movements faced similar opportunities without enjoying such widespread, beyond-partisan success. While political opportunity structures were the rocket needed to launch the movement, technology was the fuel.

Technology Alone as a Political Opportunity Structure

The QAnon story, in particular, is connected to social media as part of its mobilization process. The movement would not be as successful leveraging the political opportunities without the amplifying power of technology. In other words, the technological environment served as a political opportunity structure. To outline this relationship, the impact from social media technology as a POS is organized into three categories: legitimizing, exploitive, and self-sustaining. These three factors demonstrate how technology directly impacted the movement. In fact, the lessons learned may be a lasting social change credited to the QAnon movement.

The QAnon actors faced a legitimacy challenge because of their repertoires of conspiratorial claims, many posed in the form of questions or partial clues. These claims could appear to be the ramblings of a mad man or they could be urgent warnings of a courageous and knowledgeable insider. Many of the messages were hardly more than strings of code words. For example, Q's post on October 28, 2017 read "US M's will conduct the operation while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 [sic]."¹⁰² The need for decoding the messages mobilized online forums and further conspiracy videos. These forums became online communities, which in turn, solidified a collective identity for the QAnon followers. Q-related memes was another tool to spread the Great Awakening narrative as "truth." The decontextualized nature of memes served two purposes. First, they worked as a recruiting mechanism for new members by asking conspiratorial questions or providing partial information that could be "proof checked." Second, sharing the memes showed support for a particular conspiracy, even without explicitly referencing to QAnon. Using social media in this manner increased the movement's ability to actively propagate the information and project the conspiracies into the mainstream. The movement gained legitimacy while its QAnon phrases

trended in social media or when related messages were retweeted. With the rise of YouTube and other platforms, the barrier costs to producing a news-like video or channel decreased to only someone's time and energy. This, in turn, increased the spread of information related to the conspiracies as seemingly factual, particularly if it could be connected to someone in the military or a "health professional." Social media algorithms also fed into the legitimacy as followers received additional affirming messages in their social media feeds. Ironically, the explosion of information available through social media created more of a legitimacy problem for official scientific data than many conspiracy theories.

QAnon's ability to mobilize was also boosted by the financial motivations of the social media industry from Facebook and Twitter to much smaller influencers. Just as the original QAnon actors wanted to increase followers, Facebook, Twitter, a plethora of monetized YouTubers, and Instagram influencers also stood to profit from the conspiracies. To create further demand for these companies' services, certain communities such as yogis and young mothers were targeted.¹⁰³ The exploitive nature that technology added to the movement took many forms, including the online gambling site called PredictIt. The website allows gambling on the odds of specific political events occurring, many of which were QAnon's conspiracy prophecies.¹⁰⁴ QAnon followers also used exploitive techniques, called "doxing," to target and harass certain people by sharing their unauthorized personal information online.¹⁰⁵ As an unintended result or purposefully, the lucrative social media industry greatly expanded the reach of QAnon's narrative.

Finally, the participatory nature of QAnon's repertoire matched with the existing social media environment was a POS that enabled a self-sustaining movement even without Q drops. One journalist noted this as mimicking the addictive format of an interactive adventure video

game.¹⁰⁶ The Q “drops” offered bits of information like puzzle pieces leading to a great awakening in which the full “truth” would be discovered. Revealing new evidence in the conspiracy, like solving a mystery, became an opportunity for every QAnon follower. With the rise of the citizen journalists and the ease of bridging information between social media platforms, the movement mobilized a more active type of online participation which ultimately translated to offline mobilization as well. Overall, these coordinated actions to spread disinformation and diffuse Q’s narrative are cautionary tales that lean more toward cultism than social movement.

Conclusion

The QAnon movement is quite remarkable for starting from a post on a message board to mobilizing thousands of loyal followers waving Q flags, wearing Q t-shirts, and amassing millions more online from a diverse community of members across the political spectrum. The movement offers insight into the use of conspiracy theories as a mobilizing mechanism for collective action. The conspiratorial ideations address anxieties and trauma existing in society and offers a voice for the powerless. In short, conspiracy theories fill a need, but the term of conspiracy theory discredits the legitimacy of the claim unless it can gain credibility through the political opportunity structures. For QAnon, the initial claims by the movement’s actors leveraged the rhetoric of the newly elected populist President to gain legitimacy. The movement also strategically found four overarching conspiracies: deep state, corrupt mainstream media, child trafficking, and a planned global pandemic to reach a broad audience. The QAnon movement demonstrates how conspiracy theories can benefit social movements as a repertoire when met with condoning political opportunities structures. The QAnon movement also showed the importance of technology as a political opportunity structure. For the movement, the

technology was critical to provide legitimacy for the conspiracies because the QAnons message, often borrowing recycled conspiracies and phrases directly from the President, was able to accomplish a multiplying effect through social media influencers, memes, and opinion news sources. As “breadcrumbs” of the conspiracy theory exploded through the internet like a shotgun blast, the original source was no longer easily traceable. This led to the formation of communities that grew out of the desire to solve these conspiracies and reach the great awakening, in essence again multiplying the conspiracies and building a fellowship of QAnon members.

The way forward is complex to say the least. QAnon followers are not uneducated or unintelligent, but they are open to a different version of events.¹⁰⁷ This disagreement over basic facts hinders productive policy discussion and weakens the public’s trust in the US democratic institutions. The political opportunity structures favoring the boom of conspiracy theories need to be closed. New POS need to be developed that protect the US public against disinformation and encourages critical thinking, such as mandatory civics courses in schools and limitations on the exploitive nature of social media platforms, to build back the public’s trust in government institutions. Most importantly, the real fears and grievances underlying the QAnon theories need to be addressed by politicians at all levels of government and the media.

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