

The Genesis of a Conspiracy Theory



Key trends in QAnon
activity since 2017

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Executive Summary

Overview

QAnon is a wide-ranging conspiracy theory that claims that an elite group of child-trafficking paedophiles have been ruling the world for a number of decades and that President Trump has a secret plan in place to bring this group to justice. This briefing paper provides an overview of the key trends in activity around the QAnon conspiracy theory from 2017 to 2020. Crucially it points to major spikes in QAnon activity in March 2020, suggesting both an increase in activity to promote the conspiracy theory and the spread of this conspiracy to new audiences.

Introduction

On 28 October 2017, a user calling themselves Q who claimed to have high-level security clearance posted a series of cryptic messages on the “politically incorrect” section of the website 4chan. 4chan is an anonymous imageboard¹ with a “no rules” policy that has been associated with pranks, violence, and illegal and extremist content. This user claimed that they would work to covertly inform the public about President Trump’s ongoing battle against the “deep state”, a blanket term used to describe those in power working against the president. Over the next few years, users claiming to be Q have made over 4,000 posts, known in the community as “Qdrops”, fuelling the growth of a lurid meta-conspiracy connecting a range of harmful narratives. The QAnon theory now connects anti-vaccine, anti-5G conspiracies, antisemitic and anti-migrant tropes, and several bizarre theories that the world is in the thrall of a group of paedophile elites set on global domination in part aided by ritualistic child sacrifice.

In 2019, the FBI labelled QAnon a domestic terror threat, observing that conspiracy theories have the potential to encourage “both groups and individual extremists to carry out criminal or violent acts”.² In the 2020 US elections there are 14 congressional candidates on the ballot for November who express support for the theory.

To better understand the genesis of QAnon we have tracked discussion of the theory across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube since its inception, finding that all four platforms play an important role in the promotion of this potentially dangerous theory.³

In particular, this research highlights a significant uptick in the discussion of QAnon in 2020 and suggests that the theory is reaching a larger audience. The reasons behind this uptick need to be investigated further, but regardless of its genesis reflect a greater flow of traffic around this harmful conspiracy. An analysis of this recent surge in activity reveals how the theory and its adherents have been important in promoting disinformation around COVID-19 and the protests around the death of George Floyd.

The significant surge in support for the theory in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election is also

something that should be taken seriously. At its core, the QAnon community seeks to denigrate President Trump's political opponents while idolising his supporters. The widespread disinformation that is attached to the conspiracy means it has the potential to act as an important vehicle for disinformation leading up to the election.

Key Findings

Across Facebook and Instagram we have observed a notable increase of discussion around QAnon in 2020, as well as an increase in the number of unique users engaging in this conversation on Facebook and Twitter:

- The number of unique users engaging in discussion of QAnon have increased on both Facebook and Twitter in 2020. The most striking increase, in March 2020, saw the number of Facebook users increase from an average of 344 unique users per day between March 2 and 8, to 898 between March 22 and 29. Similarly, average Twitter users grew from 37,302 in the first week to 89,338 in the last.
- Both Facebook group membership and engagement rates within those Facebook groups increased significantly in March 2020. Membership of QAnon groups on Facebook increased by 120% in March and engagement rates increased by 91%.
- Further research is required into why the QAnon community is growing so rapidly, but possible explanations include that this is a by-product of people spending more time on social media as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns, or evidence of a coordinated push to amplify the QAnon theory.

Although the volume of conversation around QAnon on Twitter has been more varied than on Facebook and Instagram, all three platforms saw an increase of QAnon activity in March 2020:

- While we saw a sharp rise of QAnon activity in 2020 on Facebook and Instagram, Twitter traffic has had greater variance since 2017 and is often reactive to real-world events that have resulted in increased media coverage of the QAnon community.
 - The largest increase in Twitter conversation (249%) came just two months into the Q movement in January 2018 when the community latched onto the hashtag #ReleaseTheMemo.⁴ The sudden proliferation of this trend drew media attention, with research suggesting Russian bot interference on Twitter. This increase is not seen in Facebook conversation at the same time.
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- Other events which caused notable spikes on Twitter, but also on Facebook include the first appearance of Q followers at Trump rallies in August 2018 and the death of Jeffrey Epstein in August 2019.

Although primarily driven from the US there is some evidence that the QAnon conspiracy theory is being picked up internationally:

- - We found that the top four countries driving discussion of QAnon on Twitter were the US, the UK, Canada and Australia. On average the US accounted for 89.5% of mentions of Q-related hashtags from October 2017 to October 2019. However, in the last eight months this has dropped to 87%, suggesting that the conspiracy theory is spreading and taking hold internationally.

YouTube plays an important role in the sharing of QAnon-related content:

- The analysis showed that 20.4% of all QAnon-related Facebook posts contained links to YouTube, while on Twitter 5% of QAnon-related posts contained YouTube links.
- Matching bursts in activity seen elsewhere in this study, a significant increase in YouTube link sharing on Twitter and Facebook was observed in March 2020.

Findings

Trends in QAnon conversation across platforms Volume of QAnon discussion over time on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram

To better understand the sorts of events which correlate with spikes in QAnon activity we searched for mentions of a series of QAnon-related hashtags on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram using Brandwatch, a social media analytics tool, and CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned social monitoring platform.⁵

From 27 October 2017 to 17 June 2020, ISD recorded 69,475,451 million tweets, 487,310 Facebook posts and 281,554 Instagram posts mentioning QAnon-related hashtags and phrases. Across all three platforms, a clear trend exists showing a notable increase in conversation volumes coinciding with periods when lockdowns were issued in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

This also revealed several moments where QAnon activity spiked in correlation with particular events. An analysis of these moments reveals the types of activity which power the QAnon community.

Unique authors discussing QAnon on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram

In addition to looking at overall volumes of QAnon-related discussion, we also examined the number of

Date	Twitter	%+/-	Facebook	% +/-	Instagram	% +/-
Oct 2017 – Feb 2018	5,051,813		9,881		3,640	
Mar 2018 – Jun 2018	9,269,890	+83.5	20,662	+109.1	8,754	+140.5
Jul 2018 – Oct 2018	9,322,087	+0.6	39,114	+89.3	18,869	+115.5
Nov 2018 – Feb 2019	10,704,279	+14.8	40,621	+3.8	26,581	+40.9
Mar 2019 – Jun 2019	9,190,980	-14.1	51,997	+28	31,771	+19.5
Jul 2019 – Oct 2019	6,566,724	-28.5	67,473	+29.8	40,341	+27
Nov 2019 – Feb 2020	7,344,348	+11.8	68,707	+1.83	54,704	+35.6
Mar 2020 – Jun 2020	12,025,330	+63.7	188,855	+174.9	96,894	+77.1

Table 1 Volume of QAnon posts by the platform.

Figure 1 The volume over time of QAnon posts 2017 – 2020. Left-hand side y-axis is the volume of Twitter posts; Right-hand side y-axis is the volume of Facebook and Instagram posts.

Volume of QAnon discussion over time

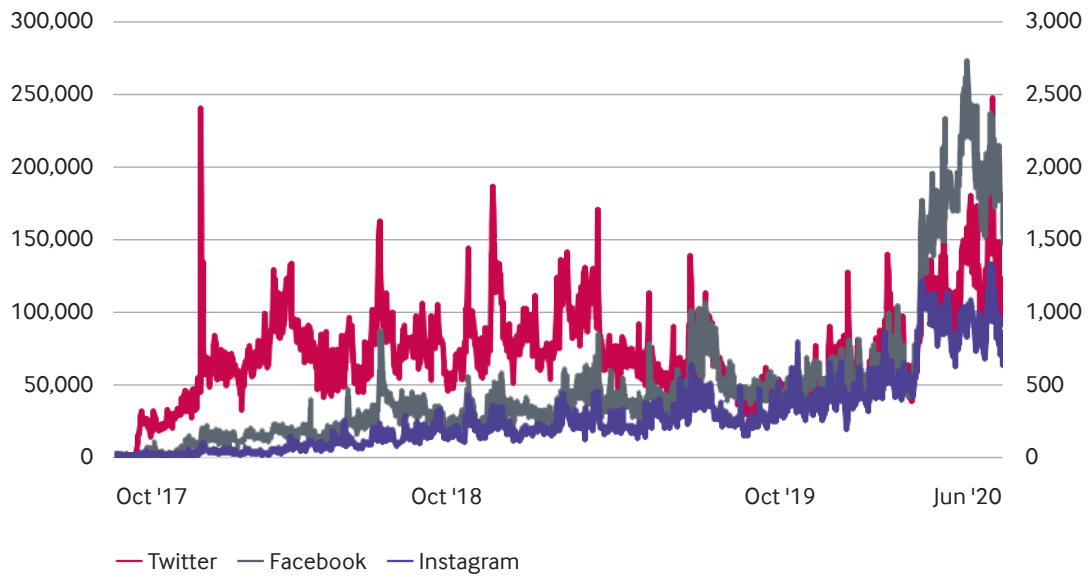
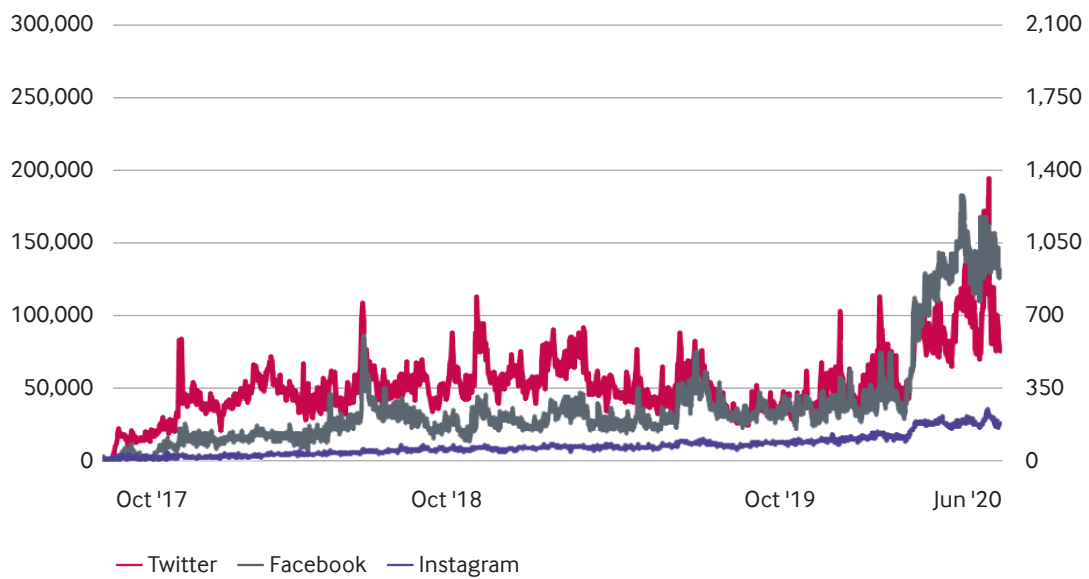


Figure 2 Unique authors discussing QAnon per day. Left-hand side y-axis is unique authors on Twitter. Right-hand side y-axis is unique authors on Facebook and Instagram.

Unique authors per day discussing QAnon



unique users, or individual accounts, interacting with the conspiracy theory.

An examination of these figures shows that user numbers increased in line with spikes in conversation, and often coinciding with media attention given to the Q community.

Similar to trends seen in conversation volume, numbers of individuals discussing QAnon increased significantly between 31 July and 2 August 2018, when Q followers were first spotted at a Trump rally in Tampa, Florida. In this instance, unique Twitter users rose above 100,000 for the first time. A similar trend was observed on Facebook, where user numbers more than doubled during those dates. Additionally, new users engaging in the conspiracy grew on both Twitter and Facebook throughout July 2019, with the arrest and subsequent death of Jeffrey Epstein.

As with the general volume of QAnon-related posts, March 2020 saw some of the most striking increases in the number of unique users becoming involved in conversation across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In March, unique users discussing QAnon increased by 161%, from an average of 344 per day in the first week to 898 in the last week. Similarly, average Twitter users grew by 139% from 37,302 in the first week to 89,338 in the last. Although user numbers involved in this discussion are much lower on Instagram, there was also a notable increase on this platform by 77%, from an average of 103 unique users per day at the start of March to 183 by the end.

Volume of Facebook group membership

On Facebook, we also analysed 109 popular QAnon groups for growth in membership and interactions with posts since 2017. Again both of these figures show a similarly stark increase in March 2020.

Links to YouTube

To better understand the role YouTube plays in the promotion of the QAnon theory we analysed the volume of YouTube links being shared within QAnon conversations on public Twitter and Facebook pages

and groups and public Instagram. All of this material points towards YouTube being an essential hub for the QAnon community.

On Twitter, more than 3.5 million mentions or 5% of all tweets in our set contained links to YouTube videos. On Facebook, this number was much higher, with 30% of all posts containing links to YouTube. An analysis of the volume of link sharing points towards an increase in activity in March 2020, matching trends seen on other platforms.

The highest peak in activity occurred on 9 February 2020, when YouTube link sharing increased by 389% above the median daily mention on Twitter. This was down to the widespread sharing of a video detailing the theory from a popular QAnon YouTuber.⁶

The most-shared YouTube link over the entire timespan from Twitter was a link to the 1hr 17 min QAnon film *Out Of Shadows*, which was released in April 2020 and has so far amassed more than 15.5 million views on YouTube, despite being demoted by the platform.⁷ We found that posts containing links to *Out of Shadows* on Facebook have received almost 2 million interactions since it was released.

The second most-shared link from Twitter to YouTube was a 10-min video released in February 2020 titled "QAnon - Ask the Q".⁸ The video says it provides a broad scope look at the growing QAnon movement through the lens of the mainstream media, and it has been viewed more than 470,000 times.

On Facebook, it is worth noting that several of the top-shared YouTube videos have since been deleted from the platform. The third-highest shared link from Facebook to YouTube is a 40-min video released in March 2020 that details coronavirus conspiracies linked to QAnon.⁹ It has so far amassed almost 300,000 views.

Geographic spread of QAnon Twitter content

To better understand which countries are driving QAnon communities we examined 39,839,607 tweets (57% of our total set) which could be geolocated, either through examining the location tags of the tweet or through inferences made from a twitter user's profile and time

Figure 3 Membership and interaction numbers with QAnon Facebook groups.

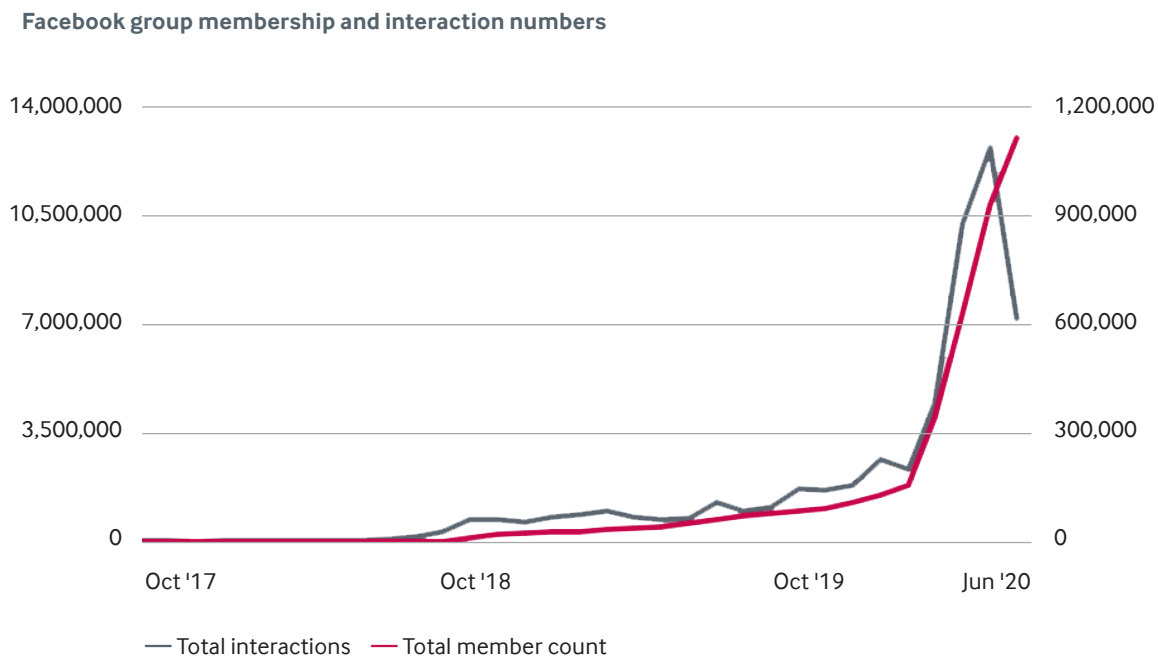
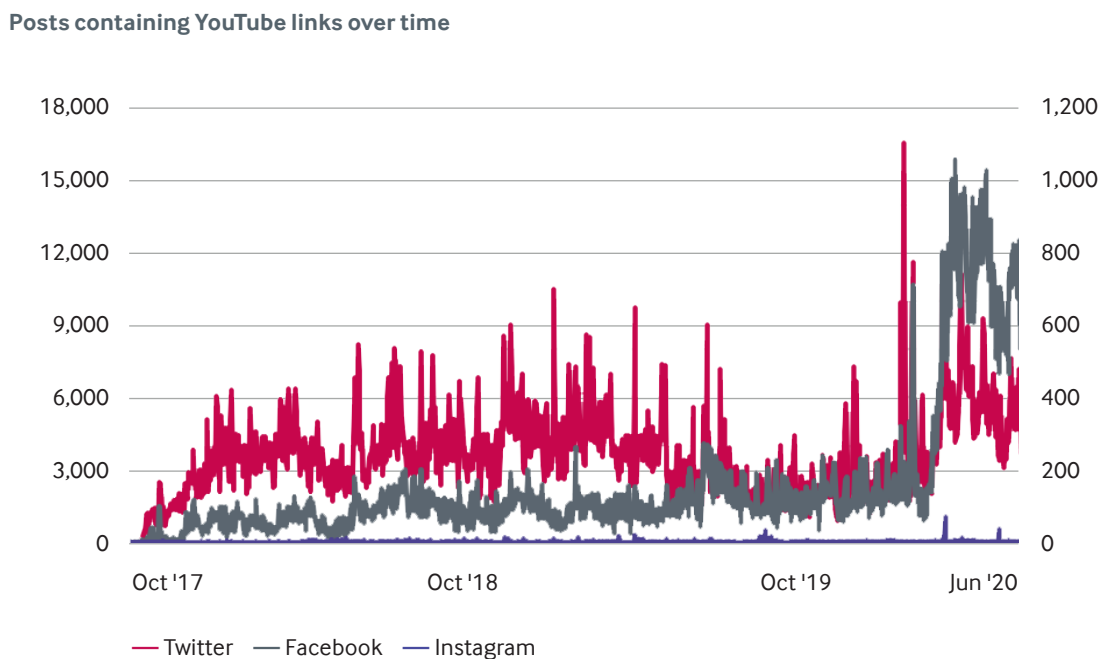


Figure 4 Volume of QAnon content from Twitter, Facebook and Instagram linking to YouTube.



zone. We then broke our dataset down into three seven-month blocks and one eight-month to detect any shifts in the demographics producing QAnon-related tweets over time.

Through this, we found that the US was consistently the largest QAnon content-producing country, followed by the UK, Canada and Australia. The fifth-largest QAnon content-producing country has shifted over time, with Russia initially occupying this spot before being replaced by Indonesia and most recently Germany. In the seven months between November 2019 and June 2020, the US' share of voice decreased slightly, suggesting the theory may be gaining more supporters internationally.

To help visualise the global share of QAnon discussion we have also produced a series of heat maps outlining the location of QAnon conversation on Twitter.

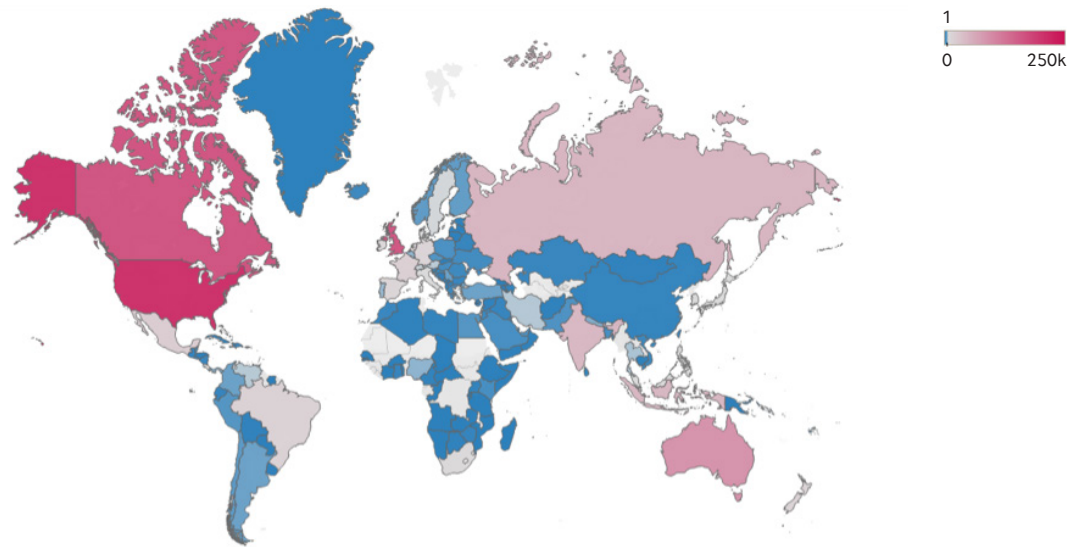
“ The US was consistently the largest QAnon content-producing country, followed by the UK, Canada and Australia ”

	Oct 2017- Jun 2018	Jul 2018-Feb 2019	Mar 2019- Oct 2019	Nov 2019- Jun 2020
#1 most-active QAnon country	US 7,641,488 tweets (88.9%)	US 10,178,468 tweets (89.8%)	US 8,159,892 tweets (90.0%)	US 9,443,791 tweets (87.0%)
#2 most-active QAnon country	Canada 194,972 tweets (2.2%)	UK 283,170 tweets (2.4%)	Canada 198,426 tweets (2.1%)	UK 309,652 tweets (2.8%)
#3 most-active QAnon country	UK 191,748 tweets (2.2%)	Canada 233,275 tweets (2.0%)	UK 193,552 tweets (2.1%)	Canada 296,488 tweets (2.7%)
#4 most-active QAnon country	Australia 105,545 tweets (1.2%)	Australia 113,222 tweets (0.9%)	Australia 124,198 tweets (1.3%)	Australia 191,210 tweets (1.7%)
#5 most-active QAnon country	Russia 56,534 tweets (0.6%)	Indonesia 53,156 tweets (0.4%)	Indonesia 40,759 tweets (0.4%)	Germany 64,438 tweets (0.5%)

Table 2 Top five countries producing Tweets mentioning QAnon (2017 – 2020).

Figure 5 Heat map showing geographic distribution of QAnon conversation

Oct '17–Jun '18



Jul '18–Feb '19

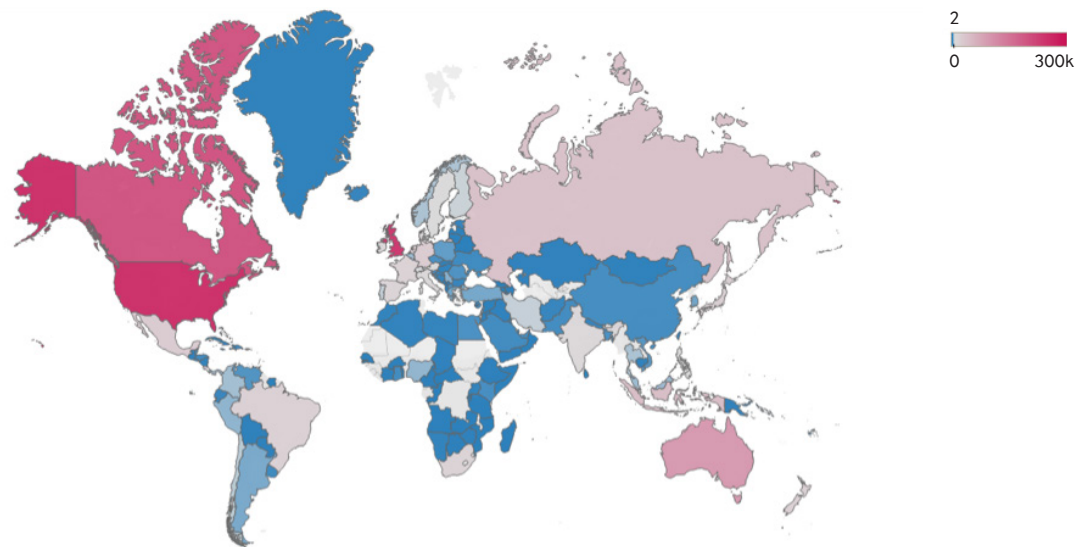
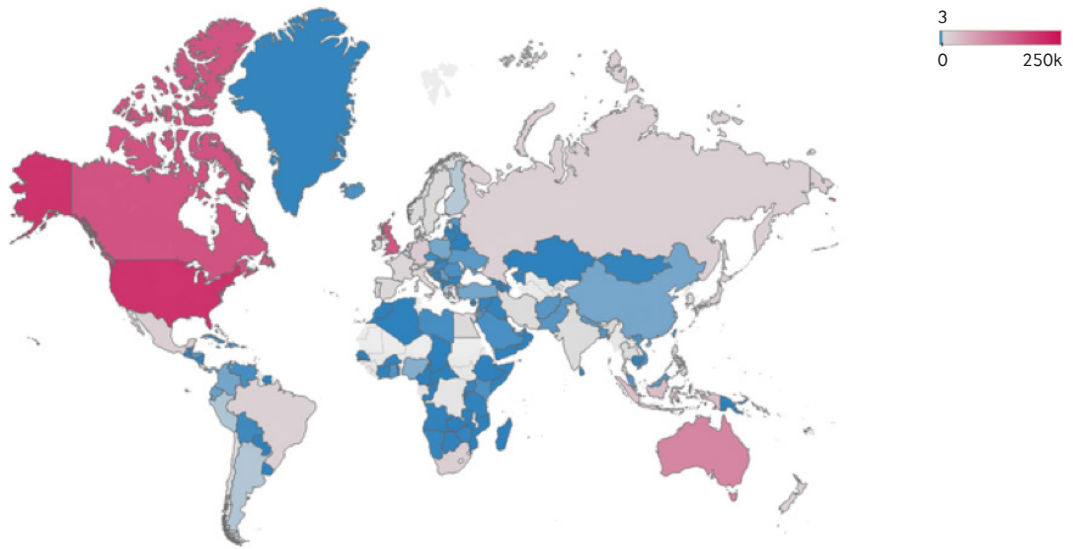
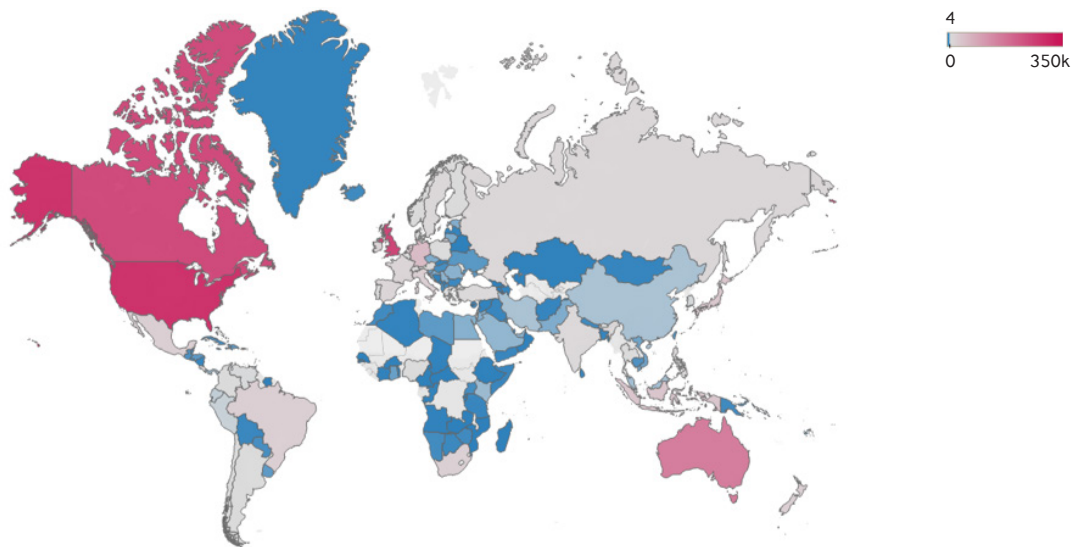


Figure 5 Heat map showing geographic distribution of QAnon conversation

Mar '19–Oct '19



Nov '19–Jun '20



Peaks and drivers of QAnon conversation

In January 2018, QAnon conversation on Twitter increased by 249%, fuelled by the movement's use of the hashtag #ReleasetheMemo.¹⁰

- The conspiracy's first brush with the mainstream media came less than three months after the movement's origins, when the community latched onto the #ReleaseTheMemo hashtag, referring to the memo written by the staff of US rep Devin Nunes that would allegedly show that the FBI's investigation into Russia was politically biased.
- This sudden jump in Q conversation pushed daily mentions of the movement to above 50,000 mentions a day on Twitter.
- At the time, research was released that suggested the hashtag was boosted by Russian bots on Twitter. Interestingly, our data shows that the #ReleaseTheMemo spike was not present in Facebook conversation at the time.¹¹

The role of celebrities, as both targets and supporters of the conspiracy, plays a role in the movement's growth.

- Celebrities who expressed their support for the QAnon movement early on, such as actress and presidential candidate Roseanne Barr, played a role in the movement's conversation growth, particularly when her association was highlighted in multiple media articles at the end of March 2018.¹²
- Not only does celebrity support boost the movement, but allegations of celebrities being involved in certain aspects of the conspiracy has also boosted conversation volumes. In April 2018, a feud between talk show host Sean Hannity and television host Jimmy Kimmel put Kimmel in the firing line of the QAnon community, where they attempted to link him¹³ to Pizzagate, a debunked conspiracy theory that claimed that references to "pizza" made in the emails of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's campaign manager, were references to child trafficking.

- Both Jimmy Kimmel and Roseanne Barr's association with the movement coincided with increases in conversation throughout March and April 2018.

Qdrops that point the community in the direction of people or subjects of interest also affect conversation volumes.

- At the beginning of December 2018, a post from Q alleged that there was a mainstream media blackout around the Yellow Vest protests in Europe. The Yellow Vest movement, which began in France in October 2018, called for economic justice for the working and middle classes negatively affected by government tax reforms. This post from Q caused the community to throw their support behind the movement and ignore the mainstream media further, despite widespread coverage of the ongoing demonstrations from major publications including the New York Times, NBC and the Wall Street Journal.^{14, 15}
- At the end of July 2018, the Q community focused on Michael Avenatti, lawyer to adult film actress Stormy Daniels, after a Qdrop pointed them in his direction.¹⁶ Daniels was involved in a scandal with President Trump and reportedly received 'hush' monies during the 2016 presidential election.



Figure 6 Example of a "release the memo" post.



Figure 7 Example of a QAnon post linking to Jimmy Kimmel.

- In April 2018, the hashtag #Pizzagate increased in usage again after a Qdrop mentioned Rachel Chandler, a modelling casting agent¹⁷ who the community believes has links to Jeffrey Epstein.
- Alternatively, decreases in Q conversation also coincided with silences from Q, seen especially during 1 August and 2 November 2019 when three months of silence from Q made conversation on Twitter drop to under 50,000 mentions per day.

Associations between the QAnon movement and President Trump and his campaigns have coincided with peaks in conversation volume over time:

- Conversation on Twitter increased by 113% (above the median daily average) at the start of August 2018, which coincided with the first appearance of Q followers at a Trump rally in Tampa, Florida on 31 July. This jump of the community from the fringes of the internet to real life was widely reported at the time.¹⁸
- At the beginning of December 2018, when the community focused their attention on the Yellow Vest movement, President Trump amplified a false claim about protesters in Europe chanting “We want Trump”, which was first floated by a QAnon supporter.¹⁹



Figure 8 Examples of the posts linked to Qdrops.

- Over a year later, the Q community were interested in the identity of the whistleblower involved in the impeachment trial. Amplified by tweets from the President himself, his name was revealed. This coincided with a 162% spike in Q conversation on 28 December 2019.²⁰

Jeffrey Epstein’s arrest and death dominated the conversation in July 2019:

- Following a lull in the conversation from April to July 2019, mentions of QAnon skyrocketed again, with conversation increasing by 136% between 8-9 July, when Epstein was charged with sex trafficking and conspiracy to traffic minors for sex.²¹
- Throughout July and August, Epstein was the second most-mentioned named individual behind Trump in QAnon discussion on Twitter.
- Epstein conversation centred around spreading a mixture of truths and conspiracies about Epstein’s past crimes and those associated with him, including mentions of Bill Clinton’s journeys on the Lolita Express (Epstein’s jet), donations received by US politician Chuck Schumer from Epstein, and recirculating lists of celebrities who allegedly visited Epstein’s island.



Figure 9 QAnon post linking to whistleblower identity.

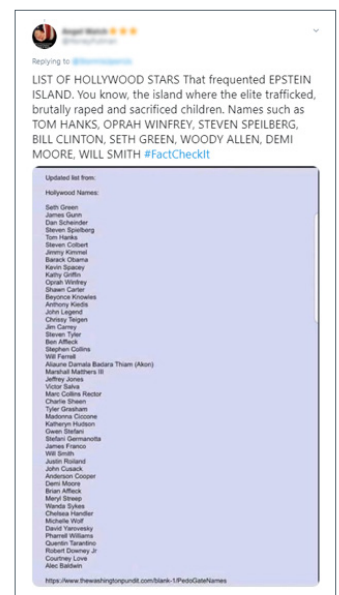


Figure 10 QAnon posts linked to Epstein.

Links between QAnon conversation and COVID-19

The almost uniform approach that most nations took in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the need for the public to listen to advice from several global institutions and the fact that people were confined to their homes, created an opportunity for QAnon conspiracy theorists to capitalise on. To better understand the impact that the pandemic had on the QAnon community we examined the prevalence of posts which contained keywords relating to COVID-19, and keywords relating to QAnon on Twitter and Facebook.²²

On Twitter, our analysis revealed that almost 8% (1,352,851) of QAnon-related conversation since the beginning of 2020 mentioned one or more of the COVID-19-related keywords. The largest increase in these conversations occurred from 23-25 March, with a 422% increase, and another large growth occurred between 11-15 March, when mentions increased by more than 304%, fuelled by conspiracies about celebrity infections.²³

During the week of 10-17 March, COVID-19 cases were spiking around the world and a number of countries,



Figure 10 QAnon posts linked to Epstein.

“ Lockdowns caused increases in usage of both Twitter and Facebook which also corresponded with a dramatic rise in QAnon conversations ”

states and regions announced new lockdowns and restrictions on travel. These lockdowns caused increases in usage of both Facebook and Twitter which also corresponded with a sudden and drastic increase in both QAnon conversations and user numbers posting about the conspiracy. Throughout that week, coronavirus was the third-most featured word in QAnon tweets, behind the hashtags #QAnon, #wwg1wga and mentions of President Trump.

Within this period Tom Hanks was a particular focus and his diagnosis with COVID-19 on 12 March was deemed to signify a connection between Hollywood elites and the virus. Connected to this, adrenochrome became another hot topic issue, with mentions of the drug increasing by 834% compared to the week before. The drug itself is linked to specific conspiracy theories that it is manufactured through the ritualistic torture of children before being consumed by celebrities, and this was quickly linked to COVID-19, with suggestions that the adrenochrome supply had in some way been infected with the coronavirus.

Links between QAnon conversation and George Floyd protests

In addition to analysing the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on QAnon discussion, we also examined

Figure 11 Volume of discussion linking QAnon and COVID-19 on Facebook and Twitter. Left-hand side y-axis is volume of Twitter posts; Right-hand side y-axis is Facebook and Instagram posts.

Volume of QAnon discussions linked to Covid-19 over time

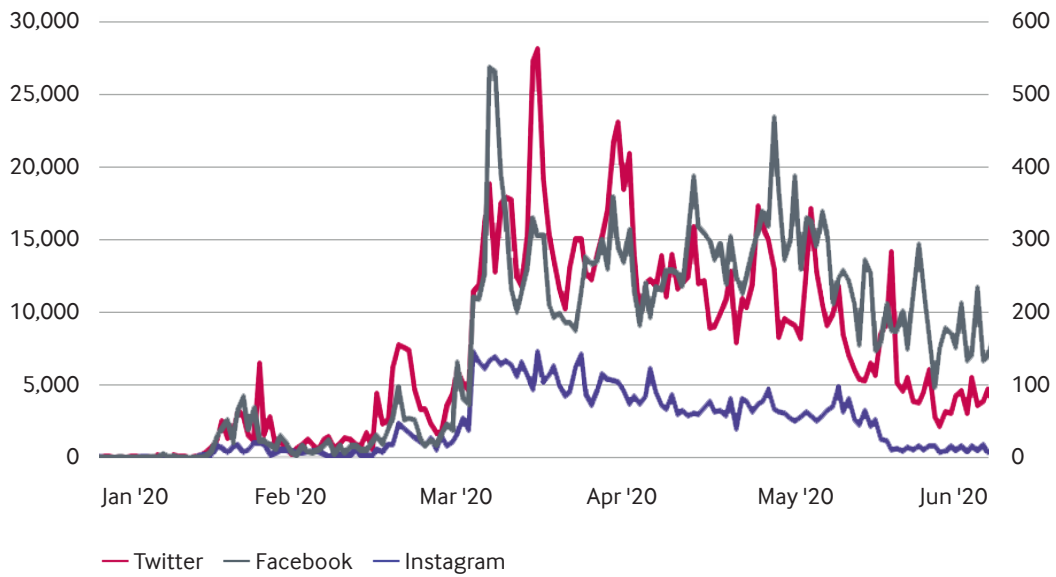
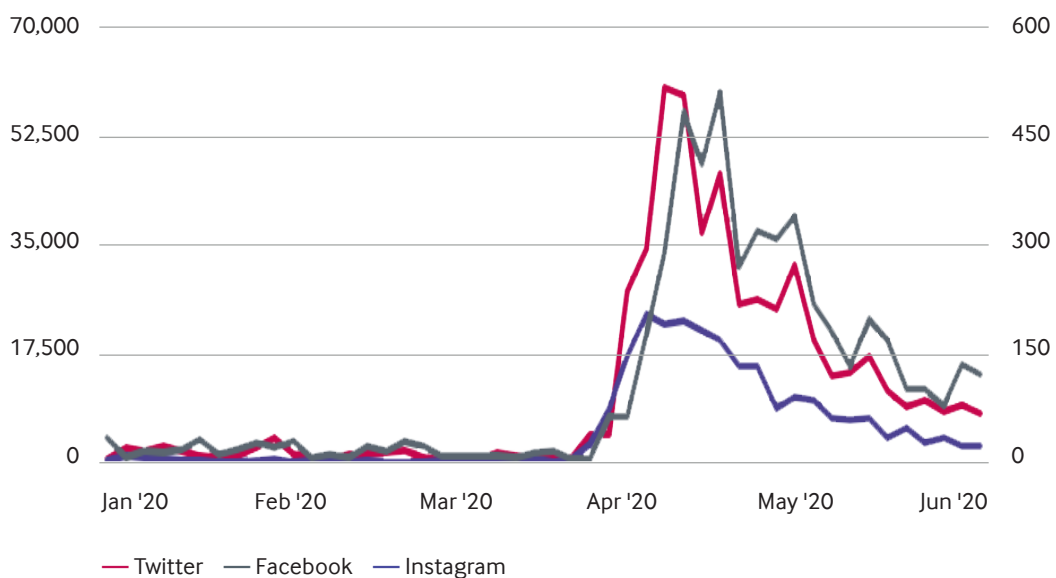


Figure 12 Volume of QAnon discussion linked to the BLM protests. Left-hand side y-axis is volume of Twitter posts; Right-hand side y-axis is Facebook and Instagram posts.

Volume of QAnon discussions linked to BLM protests over time



the impact which the protests over George Floyd's killing had on the conspiracy theory.

We found 520,741 tweets from 1 January-24 June 2020 mentioning our QAnon keywords and keywords linked to the Floyd protests, were delivered by 205,484 unique authors.²⁴

Within discussion linking QAnon and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, we identified a number of important sub-narratives. This included discussion of the political movement Antifa, which was mentioned 194,000 in conjunction with QAnon keywords. In particular, discussion tried to paint Antifa as a terrorist organisation, and puppet of the elite. In addition to this, many conspiracy theories emerged about Floyd himself and his murder. Commonly, these suggest that the murder was staged to harm Trump's re-election campaign and that Floyd himself was complicit in this plot.

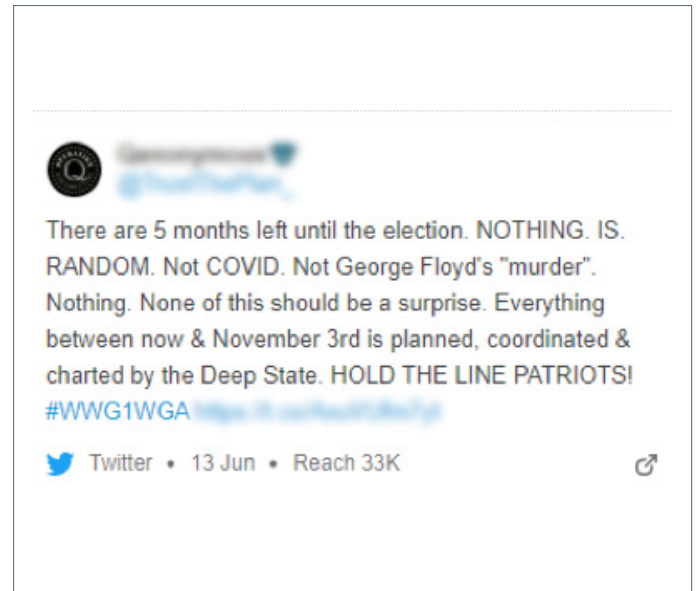


Figure 13 A QAnon post alluding to a conspiracy around Floyd's death.

Endnotes

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- 05 The chain of terms searched for is: wwg1wga OR QAnon OR followthewhiterabbit OR qsentme OR thestormiscoming OR thegreatawakening OR greatawakening OR weareQ OR fallofthecabal OR wherewegoonewegoall OR stormiscoming OR stormisuponus OR QAnon2019 OR QAnon2020 OR wwg1wgaworldwide OR trusttheplan OR adrenochrome OR qarmy OR pedogate2020 OR QAnonworldwide OR qarmyworldwide OR darktolight OR sheepnomore OR patriotsawakened OR thestormisuponus OR calmbeforethestorm OR thestorm.
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 - 20 Twitter, <http://twitter.com/ChristinePolon1/statuses/1210717842267504648>.
 - 21 Above the media daily average from 1 June to 31 August 2019.
 - 22 The Boolean chain used to search for COVID-19 related conversation is as follows: Covid OR covid19 OR coronavirus OR corona virus OR covid-19 OR chinesevirus OR billgates OR fauci OR gates virus OR kungflu OR wuflu OR wuhan virus OR virus OR bill gates OR respirator OR PPE OR wuhan OR wuhan bat OR batflu OR bat flu OR chink flu OR corona OR rona OR (eat AND bat) OR hydroxychloroquine OR chloroquine OR wuhanvirus OR bioweapon OR chinese virus.
 - 23 Above the median daily average from 1 Jan-17 June 2020.
 - 24 The chain used to search for BLM-related keywords is as follows: Black lives matter OR BLM OR George Floyd OR Police Brutality OR blacklivesmatter OR alllivesmatter OR justiceforgeorgefloyd OR derek Chauvin OR riot OR rioters OR loot OR looters OR looting OR rioting OR antifa OR icantbreathe OR protest OR protesters OR Georgefloyd.
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