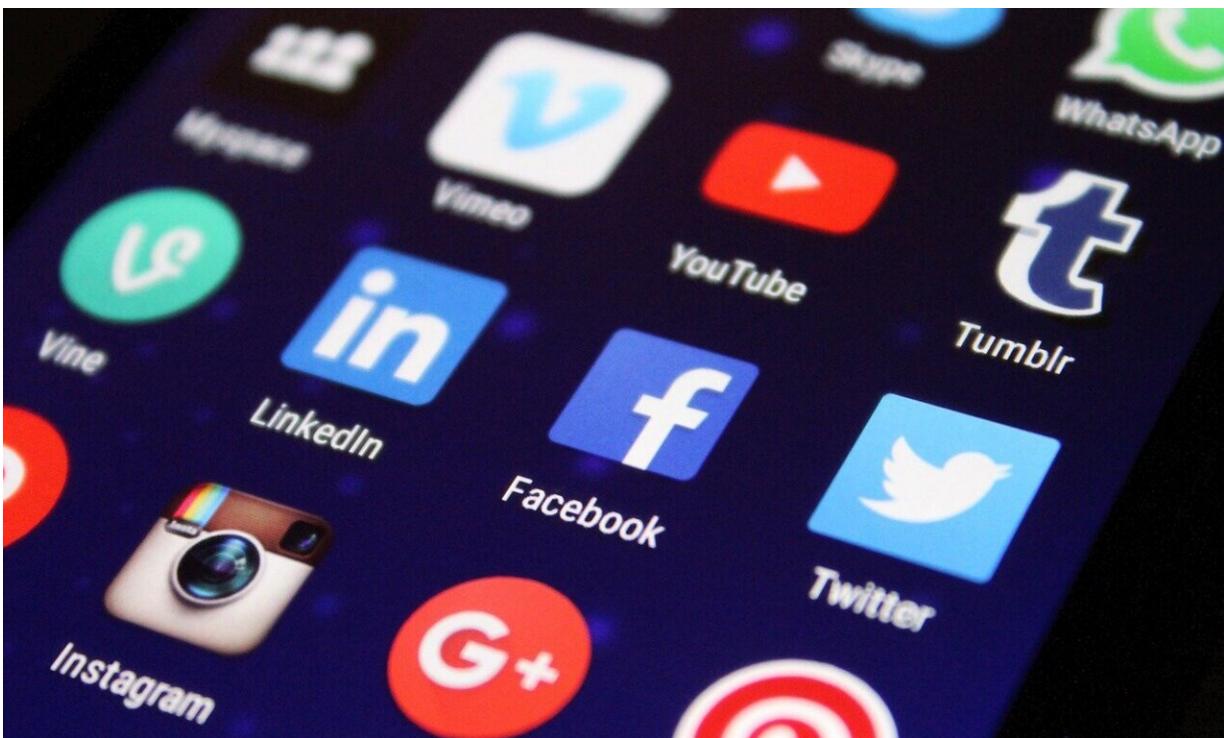


Debunked QAnon conspiracy theories are seeping into mainstream social media. Don't be fooled.

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An emboldened community of believers known as QAnon is spreading a baseless patchwork of conspiracy theories that are fooling Americans who are looking for simple answers in a time of intense political

polarization, social isolation and economic turmoil.

Experts call QAnon a "digital cult" because of its pseudo-religious qualities and an extreme belief system that enthrones President Donald Trump as a savior figure crusading against evil.

The core of QAnon is the false theory that Trump was elected to root out a secret child-sex trafficking ring run by Satanic, cannibalistic Democratic politicians and celebrities. Although it may sound absurd, it has nonetheless attracted devoted followers who have begun to perpetuate other theories that they suggest, imply or argue are somehow related to the main premise.

While many QAnon theories and content remain on fringe platforms like far-right message board 8kun, some have made their way into mainstream social media services like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. On those platforms, the bogus or misleading material is gaining traction among people who have no idea they're dabbling in QAnon.

While the major tech platforms have said they're cracking down on certain QAnon content, much of it continues to circulate.

Here are some key elements to watch out for:

Pizzagate

This [conspiracy theory](#) was a precursor to QAnon, but it has recently regained momentum and become intertwined with QAnon.

Originating during the 2016 presidential campaign, this falsehood claimed that emails exposed by Wikileaks showed Democrats with ties to Hillary Clinton had been running a child-sex ring from the basement of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria.

None of it was true, but that didn't stop a North Carolina man from traveling to D.C. to investigate the matter for himself. He fired his rifle in the restaurant before he was arrested and later imprisoned. No one was injured.

The Deep State

A common claim among QAnon conspiracists is that a shadowy network of politicians and bureaucrats secretly collaborate to control the government behind the scenes.

While this claim takes many forms, it generally centers on the suggestion that a cabal of powerful elites is manipulating the world.

For some, the fantasy of a Deep State is a pillar of their belief system regarding government, business and entertainment.

Trump himself has promoted the concept many times, including most recently to assert that a "deep state, or whoever," at the Food and Drug Administration was "making it very difficult for drug companies to get people in order to test the vaccines and therapeutics" for COVID-19.

It's one thing to allege that government bureaucrats are posing an obstacle to progress, or that politicians make too many back-room deals. Those are common criticisms.

It's another thing to suggest, without evidence, that a secret network of people are coordinating plans to disrupt the rule of law and democracy.

In a letter published by U.S. TODAY following Trump's accusations about the FDA, eight agency officials defended their processes and scientific integrity.

"When it comes to decisions to authorize or approve the products we regulate, or to take appropriate action when we uncover safety issues, we and our career staff do the best by [public health](#) when we are the decision-makers, arriving at those decisions based on our unbiased evaluation of the scientific evidence," the officials wrote.

COVID-19

Because of its massive effect on everyone's lives, COVID-19 has become the target of numerous conspiracy theories connected to QAnon. The World Health Organization has a term for the collision of the coronavirus and misinformation: "infodemic."

Some QAnon followers have suggested that the pandemic was a Chinese bioweapon or that its eruption was designed in part by Democrats to derail Trump's reelection chances. Scientists who are studying where the virus originated have generally concluded it emerged in nature and was passed on to humans after passing through animals, starting likely in a bat or pangolin. Scientists and others, including defense and intelligence experts, have said there's no basis for believing the virus was intentionally released as a bioweapon and that it's false to claim Democrats engineered the release to hurt the president. Some researchers have continued pressing the question of whether the virus was released accidentally from a lab in Wuhan, China, but the prevailing view among scientists is that the scenario is not supported by evidence and analysis.

Others have suggested falsely that Bill Gates, his foundation, or both had planned the pandemic. More recently, QAnon followers have promoted a false interpretation of CDC data, saying it proved that the pandemic was not as deadly as health officials have reported.

Taken together, the pandemic-related theories tied to QAnon illustrate

the movement's appeal, as it attempts to explain frustrating elements of life as developments that make sense in the broader scheme of things.

#SaveTheChildren

This hashtag, along with the related #SaveOurChildren, has circulated widely in recent months, posing as a harmless and, in fact, noble cause. Who can't get behind the idea of saving children?

The problem is that the hashtag has been used to promote QAnon's false theory that a broad network of pedophiles is using their collective power to run a child-sex trafficking ring.

The hashtag masquerades as a mainstream cause, drawing currency from the unrelated century-old humanitarian group with the same name.

Experts say that QAnon has gained momentum in part through posts with hashtags like #SaveTheChildren because people who share them on social media often don't realize that they're amplifying an insidious network of theories that the FBI has called a domestic terror threat.

Signal decoding

QAnon started with a mysterious, anonymous person using the name "Q Clearance Patriot" and claiming to be a high-ranking intelligence officer with access to insidious secrets.

The person, known to followers as "Q," has continued to publish mysterious posts with coded language that followers attempt to puzzle out.

In general, the suggestion that there are secret signals, like clandestine

acronyms and jumbled grammar, that can be decoded to reveal the truth about global mysteries bears the hallmarks of the QAnon community, experts say.

It can also take on the form of suggestions that users do their own research or that they have taken the "red pill," a reference to the film "The Matrix," in which the main character suddenly understands how his world has been manipulated after he ingests the drug.

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