



## The Rise of QAnon: From Chatroom Board to an International Movement

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### Abstract

*This project will investigate how online indoctrination of the conspiracy theory QAnon has led to the formation of groups and movements in an international context through time. QAnon is an overarching online conspiracy theory that has many different beliefs, including that the world is run by a Satanic cabal of pedophiles or that JFK Jr. Is still alive. This is important because the belief in the QAnon conspiracy has led to violence, both in the United States and internationally. Such events include January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, and the “Freedom Convoy” in Canada. Regardless of the origin, the ideas rooted in QAnon conspiracies have grown worldwide; if you have access to a computer, you are able to interact with QAnon content. The main concern surrounding QAnon is how it has co-opted a legitimate movement to push their narrative, with #savethechildren. Moreover, QAnon has given rise to and fueled similar conspiracies worldwide. We will utilize the Twitter API and the coding language python to create a model to track the spread of QAnon through time. Once we get key data points, we will cross-reference them with what was in the news at the time. This project is done to contribute to the new research of extremism online.*

### Literature Review

#### *Introduction*

QAnon is a family of conspiracy theories that began online. Because it is a family of theories, and not just one, there is a wealth of information surrounding QAnon that it is hard to pick just one aspect of the theory to research at a time. I specifically chose to research QAnon on Twitter because I could research how the theory became more mainstreamed. Even though the theory started on the fringes of the internet, it moved to places like Twitter and Facebook where more “normal” people could interact with it without having to go on sites like 4chan or 8kun. These sites are dangerous because they are host to various taboo and upsetting content. This content includes child pornography and antisemitic and racist rhetoric that, such as the one at a Buffalo, NY grocery store.<sup>1 2</sup> The data gathered for this project was only from Twitter, which cannot give the full picture of the presence of QAnon online, but it can give us insight into the spread.

#### *What is QAnon?*

If you have been online in the past 6 years, you have probably interacted with some form of QAnon or QAnon adjacent content. This includes movements like “Stop the Steal” or #savethechildren. But what exactly is this theory? QAnon is a family of conspiracy theories

online that started on 4chan in October 2017.<sup>3</sup> In this context, a conspiracy is defined as “alternative explanations of historical or ongoing events claiming that people or groups with sinister intentions are engaged in conspiratorial plotting,” (Mahl, Schafer, and Zeng, 2).<sup>4</sup> The origins of the theory state that the world is run by a Satanic cabal of pedophiles but has broadened to distrust of all authority. 4chan is an image board that is home to fringe groups online. An anonymous poster, “Q”, posts on 4chan, and then 8chan (and its successor 8kun) are called “Q-drops”.<sup>5</sup> Below is the first Q-drop that was posted on 4chan.<sup>6</sup>



The theory is everlasting because it migrated away from the chans and onto mainstream social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This migration has made QAnon dangerous. In an increasingly online society, people have stopped questioning the sources of information on the internet, and just believe what is posted is the truth. In 2020 these social media platforms recognized the danger of QAnon and started to crack down on QAnon content.<sup>7</sup> This sterilization of the sites did not deter believers—it did the opposite. Their beliefs in Q became validated. That does not deter believers though, including those in the United States government such as House Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene.<sup>8</sup> However, she has since backtracked on promoting QAnon beliefs while in office.<sup>9</sup>

### *Who is Q?*

The QAnon conspiracy states that Q is a government insider that tells us what is going on behind the scenes. This person is an individual in the Department of Energy with “Q level” clearance.<sup>10</sup> This clearance just means that they have access to top secret information within the United States government. Looking at the Q-drops, Q speaks with a level of authority that lends credibility to the theory that allows people to be more comfortable believing in it. There is linguistic evidence that shows that Q is not a member of the Department of Energy, but rather two individuals—Ron Watkins and Paul Furber.<sup>11</sup> Both Watkins and Furber have history with the chans. Watkins is the son of the owner of 8kun and Furber is an administrator for 8kun. Two independent research teams used a “mathematical approach called stylometry”.<sup>12</sup> Stylometry is the process of studying cadences and the use of certain words over others. To figure out who Q is, the two research teams compared Q drops to posts made by Watkins and Furber. The first team compared patterns in three-character sequences with vocabulary and syntax. The second team used artificial intelligence that learns an author’s writing patterns and compares it with Q drops. These two teams independently came to the same conclusion: Ron Watkins and Paul Furber are most likely behind QAnon.

### *Core Beliefs*

One thing to keep in mind about QAnon, is that it is a family of conspiracy theories, not just one. The main themes that run through this theory includes the belief that the world is run by a satanic cabal of elite pedophiles, Donald Trump is our savior from this cabal, and that there is a “storm” coming that will take out the elites<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup>This cabal includes high-profile celebrities and politicians like Oprah Winfrey and Hillary Clinton.<sup>15</sup> The theory states that former President Donald Trump is the one to save us from said satanic cabal. They also believe that the election was stolen from Donald Trump in 2020. There are some aspects of the theory that not every Q believer believes in. This includes the idea that JFK Jr. is still alive and will become Donald Trump’s vice president in 2024.<sup>16</sup> Another branch of the QAnon theory is that JFK Jr. was assassinated by the Clinton family.<sup>17</sup> The family tree of QAnon has fractured and twisted into something unrecognizable. Even when there is the base belief that the world is run by a cabal of satanic pedophiles, there are some aspects of the theory that don’t relate to that. The cabal includes people like Hillary Clinton and other high-profile democrats. This base fear stems from the fear of the Democratic Party being in control of politics and life around the world. The satanic pedophile part of the belief is what connects the branches of the theory together—what reconciles the fear mongering between Hillary Clinton and the rest of the world.

### *History of Internet Culture*

To comprehend how QAnon evolved, there needs to be an understanding of the history of internet culture, especially surrounding the chans. The chans are online image and text boards that started in Japan in the late 1990s.<sup>18</sup> They were a place of solace for the more fringe groups of Japanese culture. In the early 2000s, the interest in Japanese subculture exploded into other areas of the world, including the United States. More people flocked to 2chan to interact with this content, as its interest in Japan and its culture was becoming more prominent. 2chan is the original iteration of the chans.

4chan was created by Chris Poole who went by the name “moot” in early October of 2003.<sup>19</sup> Poole says that he created 4chan because “I was very bored, in need of porno, and wanted a cool email address... The immediate result was a cool 2chan clone that provided me with all such things, but a few unwanted side effects.”<sup>20</sup> 4chan was meant to just be another 2chan— a place to talk about anime without repercussions. But as it evolved, it ended up succumbing to anons, trolls, and hackers. It was common for people to “shit-post” —posting something as a joke, not to be taken seriously— and “LARPing” or Live Action Role Playing. Memes were a large part of shit-posting. But 4chan is a double-edged sword. While there were people messing around on the site, there was a very real threat of people believing in the posts and subsequently acting on them. An example of a post would be what It is not uncommon for those on 4chan to joke themselves into believing something, no matter how horrid. There have been multiple cases of people posting their manifestos on 4chan before committing a mass-shooting or other terrorist attack. An example of this would be Peyton Gendron posting his manifesto on 4chan before committing a mass-shooting at a grocery store in Buffalo, NY in May of 2022.<sup>21</sup> Because of this, 4chan started to become more regulated. That is where 8chan comes into the picture.

8chan was created as a reaction to crackdowns on 4chan.<sup>22</sup> The founder, Frederick Brennan, wanted 8chan to be a refuge for free speech.<sup>23</sup> It was less regulated than 4chan, allowing for more shit-posting, LARPing, child pornography, and being pilled into the far-right and far-left ideologies. But as 8chan became more dangerous, the servers were moved to the Philippines where it would be less regulated. It was sold to a father-son duo—the Watkins'. As mentioned before, there is linguistic data that suggests that the son, Ron Watkins, is behind QAnon. There is also evidence from the newest Q-Drops that Q had to be an 8kun administrator, or someone close to admin.<sup>24</sup>

### *History of QAnon*

One cannot discuss QAnon properly without putting it into context. Without understanding the movements that came before QAnon, one cannot grasp the complexity of it now. These movements include the Satanic Panic of the 1980's and 1990's, pizzagate, and #savethechildren. These movements all have one thing in common—moral panic surrounding the ritualistic sexual abuse of children. The Satanic Panic was a movement in the 1980s and 1990s that believed that children were being sexually abused by other adults in their lives, such as teachers, in Satanic rituals.<sup>25</sup> What is important to note is that in one case over 400 children were interviewed about this abuse and were coerced by the school and parents into giving false testimony.<sup>26</sup>

Pizzagate is a conspiracy theory that came out of the WikiLeaks of Hillary Clinton's emails.<sup>27</sup> A commonality between pizzagate and QAnon is that they both started on 4chan. In these emails, Hillary Clinton and John Podesta, her campaign manager, were discussing types of pizza to order, and there was mention of "cheese pizza". What sparked the pizzagate conspiracy was that "cheese pizza" and "child pornography" share the same initials. This then led people to believe that cheese pizza was code for child pornography. An important thing to note is that there is a high possibility pizzagate started as a joke. As mentioned before, 4chan is notorious for shit-posting. What is worrying is that people do not question the credibility of 4chan and 8chan and take what is posted at face value. This also occurs when Q posts on the chans. A frustrating aspect about pizzagate is that the believers are so concerned with what the theory states that they do not, or will not, see the impact it has had on real lives. This includes the owner of Comet Ping-Pong, the pizzeria that is at the center of pizzagate. Joan Donovan, the research director of the Shorenstein Center of Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School said, "the big difference between 2016 and pizzagate and QAnon [now] isn't the themes... it's the scale".<sup>28</sup> Essentially, QAnon is pizzagate on steroids.

A unique thing about #savethechildren is that Save the Children is a legitimate organization with the goal of protecting children around the world.<sup>29</sup> But the phrase was co-opted by QAnon. This led to #savethechildren and QAnon to be concurrent theories. At face value, #savethechildren is just about saving and protecting children from child sex trafficking—no rational person would discredit this as something bad. This ends up being harmful as people end up interacting with QAnon content without being aware. Part of the spread of QAnon is due to this hashtag.<sup>30</sup>

As with any movement, the QAnon conspiracy ebbs and flows. I will discuss this more in depth in the Data Analysis portion of this paper. During the time frame of 2018 to 2021, QAnon was more popular in the years 2018 and 2020. It is worth noting that both of these years were election years, which does have some impact, but there are other aspects of those two years that need to be considered. Even though QAnon started in 2017, it was popularized in 2018. There was a dip in 2019 due to QAnon moving from 4chan to 8chan. 8chan was then taken offline as a response to the El Paso mass shooting due to the shooter posting his manifesto on 8chan.<sup>31</sup> This removal on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019, meant that there were no new Q-drops to analyze. There was then a rise in 2020, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic; everyone was at home and had time to be online. This is also due to 8kun going live and the return of Q-drops.

## Data

### *Methods*

In order to track the spread of QAnon online, my research partner and I used the coding language Python and Twitter's Academic API. API stands for Application Programming Interface. Twitter has a few levels of API—Essential, Elevated, Elevated +, and Academic Research.<sup>32</sup> The Academic API is the most expansive of the 4 as it allows full access to tweets, archived or not. This allows us to get a full picture of the spread of QAnon on Twitter. We were able to have access to all of the tweets, instead of just a sample size. Once we had access to the tweets, including those that were archived (a feature of the Academic API), we were able to web-scrape tweets. Think of web-scraping as a latte with foam on top. The coffee part of the latte is the background code, and the foam is the content that is presented to the public. What we did was scrape the foam off the top, collected the presentable content. We then web-scraped tweets that had the hashtag #WWG1WWGA and #WWG1WGA. #WWG1WGA stands for "Where We Go One, We Go All". Think of this hashtag as the calling card of QAnon. This phrase comes from the 90's movie "White Squall".<sup>33</sup> Other hashtags could have been used such as #thegreatawakening, #thecabal, and #qanon.

### *Data Accumulation*

I worked with a computer science student to help me with this research. The project began by researching different ways to pull data from Twitter. There were some outdated Python packages that might have worked, but do not look at archived tweets. We needed archived tweets as well as public tweets in order to get the full picture. Archived tweets are unavailable to the general public. After gaining access to the API, documentation was read on how to configure the request with different parameters. To do this, postman was used, which listed all available Twitter endpoints to hit, as well as what parameters to use. After testing out the API via postman, a script was coded in python to make the calls and save them in a JSON file. Some problems quickly arose, as Twitter has a max request limit of 2,700 requests per 15 minutes, which equates to 1 request every 3 seconds. Additionally, the Twitter API would randomly go down for brief periods of time overnight, crashing the program and inevitably wasting time. Once all of the data was collected, a graph was made to show how many tweets occurred each day. In order to make this graph, each tweet was looped to determine if it was posted the same day as the previous tweet



or a new day. Once a CSV file was created with the date and number of tweets, excel was used to create a graph. In order to create a word cloud from this data, all emojis, punctuation, and common stop words were removed. Each word of each tweet was looped to count how many times it occurs. From there, the CSV file generated was exported to a word cloud generating site. Below is an example of the world cloud, done with the typo that was made.



*Limitations*

As with any research project, there are limitations. Right now, Twitter is very unstable, and the type of research I am conducting can easily go sideways.<sup>34</sup> I might not be able to do research exactly like this in the future. There is also a large amount of information on QAnon, from the different aspects of the theory to “proto-QAnon”. Also, because QAnon has become an international movement, any tweet that we pulled with #WWG1WGA could be in any language. I only analyzed in depth tweets that were in English. Another thing that puts limits on this research is that QAnon is still *very* prevalent in the news.<sup>35</sup> Research into it can be done in any time frame from 2017 to present. I had to narrow the time frame to something that would give me the broad picture of the spread of QAnon, but not so narrow where I could not analyze the trends through time.

Doing research on Twitter is also challenging, especially when researching something within politics. This is because bots (robots or automated profiles) post a lot to flood the hashtag to artificially increase the number of tweets. The number of tweets could also be inflated because of the sheer number of retweets. However, in order to track the spread of QAnon online, it is important to include the number of retweets in the data. A retweet allows for the information to get out to that profile’s audience and not just the original posters.

*Data Analysis*

The data collected from web-scraping was put into an Excel file where a line graph was then made to show the frequency of #WWG1WGA and #WWG1WWGA. I included the typo into this table to show that there was also a trend, albeit small, in the frequency of said typo.. There is also a table just for #WWG1WGA which shows the frequency of #WWG1WGA over time. These tables are used to show the overall trend of both hashtags.

I also made tables for each year with the number of tweets per key dates. The dates selected were chosen from a timeline of Q-drops done by Edward Tian for Bellingcat.<sup>36</sup> Bellingcat is an investigative journalism website. He categorized Q-drops by important events in the news as well as the number of Q-drops per section of time. I separated the analysis of each time frame according to the timeline that Tian provided as it gives a broad perspective as to what mattered to the QAnon conspiracy. Within each of the time frames provided, a maximum of three dates were chosen to analyze. I also looked at the trends between months. An example of this would be looking at the number of tweets posted in March 2018 and May 2018 and then analyzing the transition between the two months—what happened in American politics that made QAnon more popular? In the Q-drops? From August 1<sup>st</sup> to November 11<sup>th</sup> of each year, I created a line graph to see if there was any significant impact on the number of tweets, even when Q had stopped posting on 8kun. This is because in 2019, 8chan was taken down. Q had already migrated from 4chan to 8chan. Q started posting again on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

2018

Timeframe	Date	Number of Tweets
January–March 2018	3/31/2018	71
January–March 2018	3/13/2018	4
January–March 2018	2/26/2018	3
April–May 2018	5/11/2018	1,882
April–May 2018	5/8/2018	1,873
April –May 2018	5/20/2018	1,843
June–July 2018	6/25/2018	3,316
June–July 2018	7/25/2018	2,942
June–July 2018	7/31/2018	2,822
August–September 2018	8/2/2018	4,007
August–September 2018	9/18/2018	3,993
August–September 2018	8/1/2018	3,834
October–December 2018	11/6/2018	5,052
October–December 2018	11/4/2018	3,636
October–December 2018	11/5/2018	3,399

QAnon started to become more popular on Twitter in 2018. It wasn't until the end of March, however, that there were a significant number of tweets. On March 31<sup>st</sup> there were 71 tweets. This was a time period where Q was posting about the Obama administration and claiming that they aided Iran and North Korea by sending them technology. There were also posts about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. QAnon grew as a movement and by mid-May there were thousands of #WWG1WGA tweets posted, for example, on May 11<sup>th</sup> with 1,882 tweets. The popularity of QAnon consistently increased from May to the summer and fall months. In 2018, the day with the greatest number of tweets was the day of the Midterm Election, November 6<sup>th</sup> when there was a total of 5,052 tweets posted.

2019

Timeframe	Date	Number of Tweets
January–March 2019	3/28/2019	6,825
January–March 2019	3/29/2019	4,389
January–March 2019	3/10/2019	4,043
April–June 2019	5/24/2019	2,198
April–June 2019	4/11/2019	1,821
April–June 2019	4/14/2019	1,790
July–August 1 <sup>st</sup> 2019	7/12/2019	4,036
July–August 1 <sup>st</sup> 2019	7/18/2019	3,887
July–August 1 <sup>st</sup> 2019	7/30/2019	2,640
August 2 <sup>nd</sup> –November 10 <sup>th</sup> 2019	8/11/2019	2,317
August 2 <sup>nd</sup> –November 10 <sup>th</sup> 2019	8/12/2019	2,207
August 2 <sup>nd</sup> –November 10 <sup>th</sup> 2019	8/17/2019	2,182
November 11 <sup>th</sup> –December 2019	12/19/2019	2,509
November 11 <sup>th</sup> –December 2019	12/28/2019	2,467
November 11 <sup>th</sup> –December 2019	12/4/2019	2,062

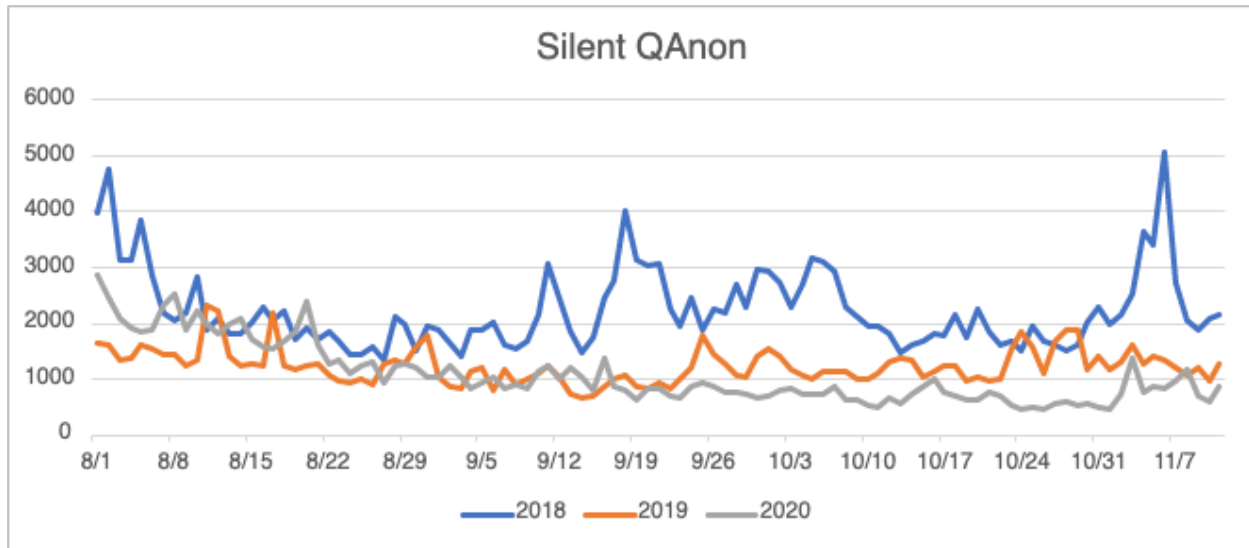
QAnon was still going strong in 2019 until August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019. Q had already moved from posting on 4chan to 8chan. This movement ended up being detrimental because 8chan was taken down on August 1<sup>st</sup>. From August 1<sup>st</sup> to November 10<sup>th</sup>, there were no new Q-drops. There is a significant dip in the number of tweets posted in that timeframe. The top three days within the timeframe of August 1<sup>st</sup> to November 10<sup>th</sup> are in the middle of August. The frequency of tweets dipped into the low 1,000s during that time. This could mean that because Q was not posting, people were not getting new content to push the theory.



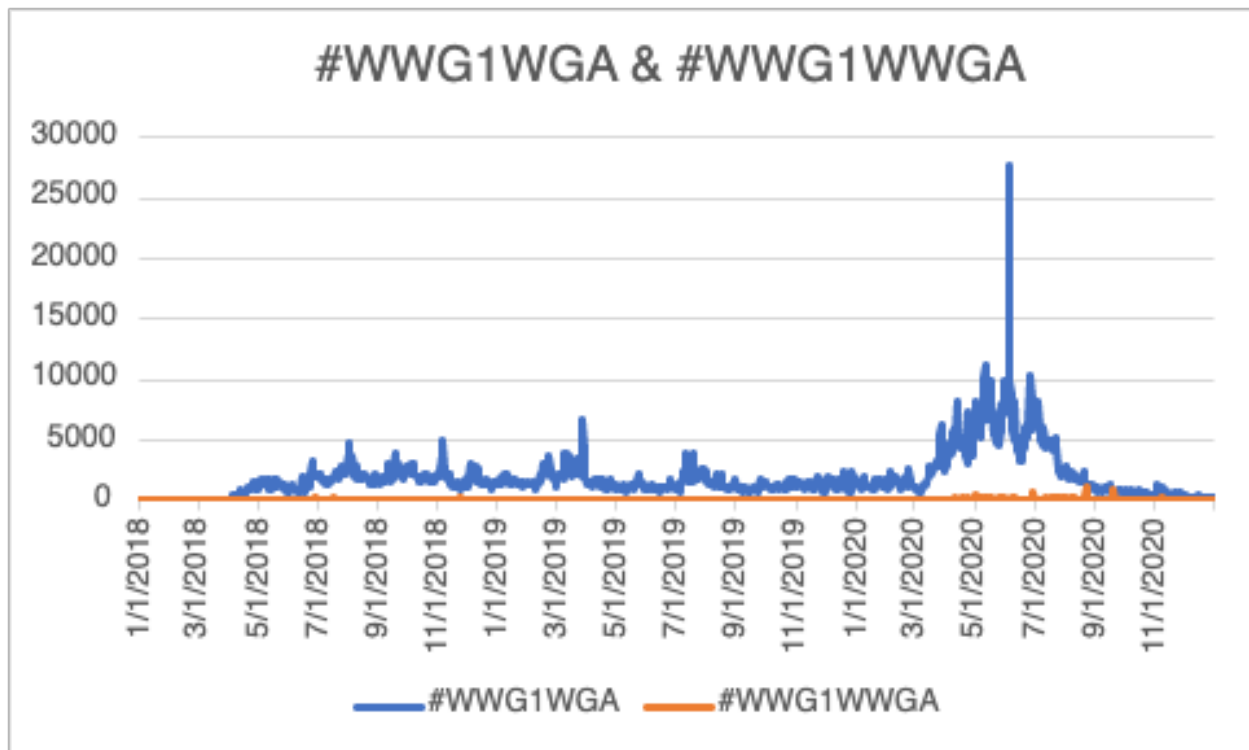
2020

Timeframe	Date	Number of Tweets
January–April 2020	4/12/2020	8,182
January–April 2020	4/14/2020	7,494
January–April 2020	4/24/2020	7,349
May–July 2020	6/5/2020	27,821
May–July 2020	5/11/2020	11,214
May–July 2020	6/27/2020	10,478
August–September 2020	8/1/2020	2,859
August–September 2020	8/8/2020	2,541
August–September 2020	8/2/2020	2,446
October 2020	10/16/2020	1,017
October 2020	10/7/2020	857
October 2020	10/15/2020	855
November–December 2020	11/3/2020	1,365
November–December 2020	11/8/2020	1,163
November–December 2020	11/7/2020	983

The year 2020 brought a number of large events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and subsequent protests. From January 2020 to April 2020, the top three dates of tweets posted were all in April. This was the height of the COVID-19 lockdown and anti-mask sentiment. Many people who believed in the QAnon conspiracy also bought into anti-COVID-19 conspiracies. On June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the largest number of tweets within all three years peaked with 27,821 tweets. The Black Lives Matter protests in response to the murder of George Floyd had become intense and led to riots. Twitter banned a large number of QAnon content creators on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020. This can be seen by the large dip in tweets from June to August.



This line graph represents all three years of data that was collected from August 1<sup>st</sup> to November 10<sup>th</sup>. QAnon was most popular in 2018, as seen with the blue line. On November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the frequency of tweets peaked, going just above 5,000. The graphs for 2019 and 2020 look very similar in this timeframe. This was to be expected because there were outside forces interfering with the spread of the conspiracy. These outside forces include the lack of Q-drops due to 8chan being taken down the summer of 2019 and its transition into 8kun. In 2020, it was because major social media platforms removed prominent QAnon accounts, leading to a decrease in the reach of the conspiracy from those accounts.



The frequency of #WWG1WWGA did not make a strong impact on the frequency of #WWG1WGA. It was just genuine typos being made—a typo I made myself when pulling the tweets. #WWG1WWGA is inconsequential when it comes to looking at the spread of #WWG1WGA; it does add enough to affect the overall trends seen in the graph above the highest spike for #WWG1WWGA was in late summer of 2020—right when the 2020 presidential election was heating up.

### **Significance and Further Research**

#### *Significance*

It is important to research QAnon for a multitude of reasons. QAnon has prompted violent events that include people murdering their family,<sup>37</sup> running from the police,<sup>38</sup> kidnappings,<sup>39</sup> and the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection on the United States Capital.<sup>40</sup> Because of these events, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has determined QAnon to be a domestic terrorist threat.<sup>41</sup> QAnon is also related to other fringe groups like the Oathkeepers, the Proud Boys, and white supremacy in general.<sup>42</sup> This relation is due to the racist, antisemitic, transphobic, and homophobic tropes that it plays on. Because there is this undercurrent of distrust in the government within the theory, QAnon played a big role in the anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine, and anti-mask sentiments during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>43</sup>

This project contributes to the study of QAnon over time. While others, like Will Sommer, have done qualitative analysis of the growth and metastasizing of QAnon online, few have done a deep dive into the theory on certain websites, such as Twitter.<sup>44</sup> It is important to examine how the theory remained on social media sites, even after Q stopped posting, like in the summer and fall of 2019. This insight will let us know how social media sites handle conspiracy theorists and their impact on the site.

#### *Further Research*

There are multiple avenues of further research that I can pursue. I could conduct the same experiment but adjust the timeline from 2021 to 2022. This project could also be done but with different QAnon vernacular such as the “deep state”, “the great awakening”, and the “cabal”. I could also compare the depth of the theory before and after the 2020 presidential election. In doing this, I would be able to see the full effect of the election, January 6<sup>th</sup>, and the #stopthesteal movement. A similar project could also be done, but on a different social media site such as Telegram or Truth Social. I could also take a deep dive into internet subcultures, especially on 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun to gain an understanding of how conspiracy theories metastasize online. Lastly, I could potentially also research QAnon in general and its themes in our government. This includes members of our legislative branch who believe in QAnon and how that belief has affected their voting record.

**Endnotes**

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