

Repetition, Rumination, and Determinism: Exploring the Temporal Logic of QAnon

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This article seeks to trouble common theorizations of online dis- and misinformation as characterized predominantly by temporal logics of speed, acceleration, or virality by homing in on the case study of QAnon, a digital-born conspiracy movement, and excavating the specific and distinct temporalities that make up the timescape of this phenomenon. Via a content analysis of the 4,966 Q-drops that constitute the central texts of this movement, I put forth that the timescape of QAnon consists of intersecting dynamics of repetition, rumination, and determinism, which broadly give rise to a temporality of slowness or stasis. I argue that this distinct temporality plays a role in coalescing QAnon participants into a political community via the construction of a shared “world” and shared affective investments. I conclude with a discussion of the potential application of temporality as an analytic through which we can bring into relief connections between conspiratorial thinking and other cultural phenomena.

Keywords: conspiracy, digital communication, QAnon, temporality

Which temporal dynamics are most relevant to the phenomenon of “fake news”? At first glance, it seems that fake news (here deployed as an encapsulation of the particular brand of dis- and misinformation that rose to prominence as a feature of political discourse following the 2016 U.S. election) fits neatly into theorizations of cultural acceleration which hold that society, in the wake of factors such as globalization, the demands of capitalist production, and the widespread adoption of instantaneous communication systems, is generally speeding up. The digital media technologies that are said to breed and propagate fake news are frequently theorized as having facilitated a “hurried, urgent, and unpredictable” pace of social togetherness characterized by immediacy (Keightley, 2012, p. 2). Empirical studies have pointed out the rapid spread of fake news facilitated by networked real-time communication technologies and have commonly characterized this dissemination as “viral,” or a “contagion” (e.g., Khan, Michalas, & Akhunzada, 2021; Törnberg, 2018). Venturini (2019) goes so far as to say that spreadability, instead of “fakeness,” is the “birthmark of these contents that should be called ‘viral’ news” (p. 126). Rapidity of dissemination is thus frequently theorized not as an ontic characteristic of fake news, but rather as an ontological parameter that plays a part in constituting the phenomenon as such.

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While this formulation situates fake news neatly within theorizations of acceleration as “the constant leitmotiv of cultural modernity” (Keightley, 2012, p. 2), work pointing to the unevenness and multiplicity of temporalities across different social contexts (e.g., Sharma, 2014) hints that it is an oversimplification that effaces the multiplicity of modern time(s). As pointed out by Keightley (2012), a preoccupation with cultural acceleration risks obscuring the “ways in which media texts and technologies structure, support, and facilitate senses of time which involve more than a determination of their speed, such as duration, generational experience, or . . . cyclical time,” in addition to overemphasizing the speed of information transfer within media technologies while neglecting the ways in which “time is organized, represented, and communicated in media content” (p. 4). Keightley points to experiences of time made possible not just through the technical affordances and speed of information transfer available in modern digital technologies but also through the ways that media symbolically constructs time within its content. In addition, scholars such as Stano (2020) argue that an overemphasis on virality as a governing modality of fake news propagation risks effacing the role of user interpretation and agency in the dissemination of fake news and the multiple temporalities that arise from such engagements.

Turning away from theorizations of modernity as structured by a single hegemonic temporal logic, Adam (1998) puts forward the concept of the timescape to account for the complexity of time and attend to the “multiple times, both natural and cultural” that contribute to the unfolding of a “holistic temporality . . . constituted in an ‘interactive unity of observer and observed whole’” (as seen in Keightley, 2012, p. 10). The concept of the timescape understands our experience of social time as being constituted in the “presence, implication, and absence of a wide variety of interacting and sometimes conflicting times” (p. 10). Building from Adam’s conceptualization of the timescape and aiming to disturb the by now well-trodden interrelations among fake news, digital media, and speed, this article seeks to excavate the specific, local, and distinct temporalities that permeate discourses of online mis- and disinformation by homing in on the case study of QAnon, a digitally born conspiracy movement.

As a result of QAnon’s proliferation from its obscure origins on the anonymous messaging board 4chan to mainstream visibility and influence, it is frequently characterized as a discourse predominantly structured by a dynamic of speed or virality. However, while QAnon has indeed propagated rapidly and widely, I argue that speed is not the most important, useful, or relevant analytic with regard to illuminating QAnon’s effectivity and affectivity. I conducted a content analysis of 4,966 Q-drops (the entirety of the messages posted thus far by the eponymous Q) to examine how time is mediated within the corpus of texts and images that make up the QAnon mythos. Drawing from this analysis, I conceptualize the Q-drop as a technology that mediates time and produces a distinct timescape characterized by a matrix of intersecting and occasionally conflicting temporal dynamics, which I broadly thematize as repetition, rumination, and determinism. I argue that these temporalities constitute an aesthetic that works to coalesce QAnon spectators into a community and, ultimately, a political movement and conclude with a discussion of the potential application of temporality as an analytic through which we can bring into relief connections both among various conspiracy movements and also between conspiratorial thinking and other cultural phenomena.

Technologies of Time

What does it mean for technologies to construct temporalities? We might begin to think about time through Paul Ricoeur's essential intervention in *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur (2014) initially identifies two temporal orders: phenomenological existential time (the subjective time of lived consciousness) and universal time (the seemingly objective, natural time that is the backdrop for human experience). While these two orders are frequently framed in opposition, Ricoeur's "human time" is a construction wherein phenomenological time and cosmological time are integrated and inscribed in one another; for example, the ordering of past-present-future that we experience in subjective time presupposes the chronological succession that characterizes cosmological time. Phenomenological time is anchored in cosmological time and vice versa; thus, Ricoeur argues that human experience can only be properly understood through a framework that combines these two orders, and identifies narrative as the only tool capable of doing so. Essential to Ricoeur's work is the idea that time cannot be directly apprehended; it is instead mediated through the technology of narration, which refigures time as it mediates it. The necessity for mediation is echoed by Koselleck (2002), who argues that time cannot be intuited and any attempts to do so instead refer to spatial indications—"to the hand of the clock or the leaves of a calendar that one pulls off every day" (p. 102). Such technologies, instead of providing a direct representation of time itself, construct specific temporalities.

Leaving behind the idea that time is either objective and natural or purely experiential allows us to understand time as a shared sociohistorical construct. In addition, it enables us to identify the political and ideological implications of chronological paradigms. For example, scholars have pointed to the role played by technologies such as clocks, calendars, the logics of industrial capitalism, and 19th-century labor reforms in producing a model of time as progressive, linear, and accelerating—the time of "modernity" (Harootunian, 2010). Efforts to standardize time in the 19th century were motivated by ideologies of global homogenization and imperial expansion (Martin, 2016).

Time and temporality are also means by which to configure political communities on the basis of shared identity. Benedict Anderson (2020) influentially argued that the abstract notion of "the nation" was congealed and "made real" in large part through the apprehension of shared time (Martin, 2016). The notion of simultaneity, enabled through technologies such as the clock and the calendar, allowed for a sense of shared temporality in which multiple events could be understood to occur within a single, universal time frame (Martin, 2016). In addition, Johannes Fabian pointed to the ways that the notion of "the Other" was associated with backwardness and primitiveness, existing on a fundamentally different temporal plane than the "progressive," "advanced" societies of the West. Fabian's insight illuminates the fact that chronopolitics is a central discourse through which relations of power are intensified (Martin, 2016).

Thus, we may establish a notion of time and temporality as mediated, constructed, and inherently political, as specific formulations serve to regulate the activities and identities of social agents by orienting them in particular ways, managing their conceptions of and affective relations to the past, present, and future, and toward other entities. Working with this formulation of time as mediated, this article investigates the Q-drop," the foundational rhetorical unit of the QAnon movement, as a time-mediating technology, one

that constructs a particular temporality that organizes the social agents in the community, motivates particular kinds of political action and political affiliation, and invokes particular kinds of affective investment.

A Brief History of QAnon

In October 2017, an anonymous user posted a message to the /pol/ section of the imageboard 4chan. This message would become known as the first Q-drop (see Figure 1).

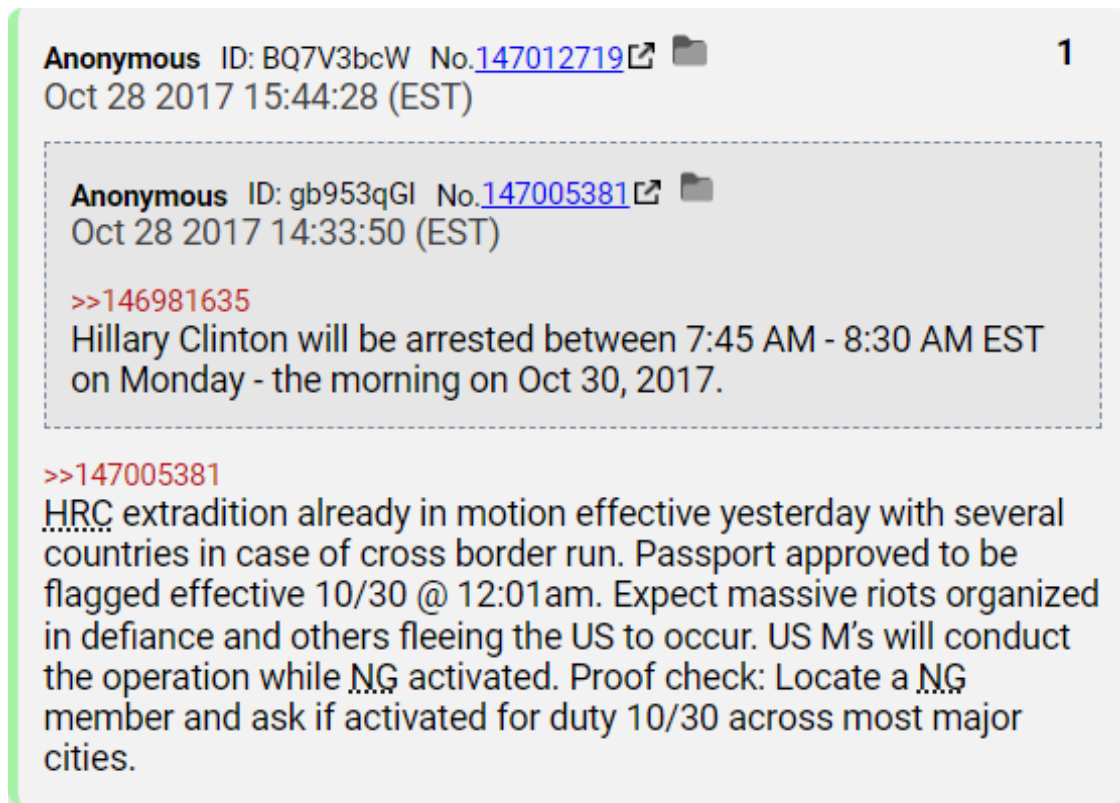


Figure 1. The first "Q-drop" (Q, n.d.).

Later adopting the name Q Clearance Patriot, this user claimed to be a high-ranking government official with access to Donald Trump's inner circle. This message marked the first in a series of approximately 5,000 posts that would come to form the mythos of the QAnon movement. Unfolding gradually through subsequent Q-drops and elaborated via extensive engagement and interpretation on the parts of other anonymous users, central elements of the story of QAnon include the existence of a global cabal of cannibalistic, satanic pedophiles that controls major institutions such as the government, the media, and Hollywood, along with the belief that Donald Trump is the leader of a resistance movement made up of a group of military intelligence officers called the Q team who are making preparations to conduct mass arrests of this cabal in an event referred to as "the Storm" (de Zeeuw, Hagen, Peeters, & Jokubauskaite, 2020). Figures associated with the cabal include Hilary Clinton, George Soros, various government officials,

Democrats, or anyone who has publicly opposed Trump (Bellingcat, 2022). While much of QAnon's rhetoric can be understood as an outgrowth of the culture of the preexisting /pol/ board, which was rife with racism, anti-Semitism, and right-wing conspiracism, the first Q-drop can be seen as the "official beginning" of the phenomenon (Hannah, 2021). Ensuing Q-drops would be the vehicles through which QAnon developed from a small, possibly satirical movement into one with millions of sincere adherents.

While the narratives of QAnon may seem outlandish, Packer and Stoneman (2021) point out that QAnon can be characterized as belonging to a paradigm for conspiracy theories famously developed in Richard Hofstadter's (2012) essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." QAnon displays each of the five features Hofstadter identifies as distinguishing conspiracy as a rhetorical genre: totalizing narrative, conspiracy as the explanation of historical events, public figures as villains, a call for an apocalyptic response, and large amounts of evidence that nevertheless demand of the audience a huge logical leap (Packer & Stoneman, 2021). As such, in terms of content, QAnon can be understood as belonging to a longer lineage of conspiratorial thinking, which includes theories involving secret groups controlling world affairs (such as conspiracies related to the illuminati or Freemasons), the flat earth movement, and the satanic panic (Vrzal, 2020).

More specifically, past scholarship has situated QAnon as one of numerous conspiracy groups that gained footing within a digital "alternative media ecosystem" (Starbird, 2017) and reached gained prominence during what some call "a golden age of conspiracy theories" (Hanley, Kumar, & Durumeric, 2023, p. 1), in which there was an "eruption of conspiratorial thinking across internet communities" (Hannah, 2021, p. 2). Mahl, Schäfer, and Zeng (2022) point out the significant difference in conspiratorial thinking before and after the prevalence of social media; while older conspiracies often existed as "'soft beliefs' that people quietly kept but rarely acted upon," the advent of social media platforms has led to a rise of "'high profile conspiracy theorizing' in the past few decades" (Mahl et al., 2022, p. 1781). Other notable conspiracy theories that either emerged within or gained significant footing owing to the structural conditions of digital communication include antivax conspiracies (which gained new fervor on the Internet as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic), climate change, the 9/11 attacks, and flat earth conspiracies (Mahl et al., 2022; Zeng & Schäfer, 2021).

While sharing generic preoccupations with past conspiracies, these "high profile" conspiracies are significantly influenced (in terms of content and form) by the affordances of a digital environment. A decentralized communication system allows for the easier dissemination of various narratives and increased degrees of participation and interaction, facilitating the emergence of a "complex network of individuals and domains that . . . generate and promote conspiracy theories that undermine online readers' trust in official information" (Stano, 2020, p. 485). Digital communications also supply affordances of spreadability, wherein content can be dispersed widely through formal and informal networks while being continually remixed and remade by users; as such, the structural conditions of the Internet both enhance the replicability of texts and facilitate their reinterpretation and adaptation to different social contexts. In addition, the effect of so-called social media echo chambers has been studied as a condition that enhances or facilitates conspiratorial rhetoric by ensuring selective exposure to like-minded content and thus giving rise to tunnel vision, whereby individual belief systems are reinforced (e.g., Grusauskaite, Carbone, Harambam, & Aupers, 2023).

Past work regarding the temporal dynamics of modern conspiracy movements has often referenced virality as a predominant temporal logic. Influenced by Richard Dawkins' (2016) depiction of memeticism, the virality model sees the spread of conspiracy theories in the digital media ecosystem as an "uncontrolled contagion" that has "infected" the Internet. This position is not without criticism: Scholars have pointed out that it figures users as essentially passive receptacles for ideology who uncritically accept messages, rather than active shapers of texts (Stano, 2020). Birchall and Knight (2022) argue that seemingly commonsense claims that "the Internet in general and social media in particular have increased the volume and virality of conspiracy theories" (p. 579) are ultimately unconvincing; however, the "contrarian position that the Internet has changed nothing" is equally unconvincing (p. 579). They argue instead for "the necessity of asking different kinds of research questions to understand how the Internet has shaped the form and function, the production and consumption, and the causes and consequences of conspiracy narratives" (Birchall & Knight, 2022, p. 579). Informed by scholarship regarding the relationship between technology and time mediation, as well as scholarship that has elucidated temporality as a means through which to configure political communities on the basis of shared identity, I propose that taking a closer look at temporality within conspiracy groups may serve as an entry point to asking different kinds of research questions not only about how digital affordances shape conspiracy narratives but also about how conspiracy groups form and endure.

Investigating the Timescape of the Q-drop

Informed by the literature regarding the relationship among time, technology, and the construction of temporality, this article presents a conceptualization of the Q-drop as a kind of time-mediating technology that contributes to the emergence of the unique timescape of the QAnon movement. While QAnon as a wider social phenomenon undoubtedly involves myriad forms of relation and sites of interaction, and is certainly not constrained to engagements with the Q-drops, this article takes the drops as a starting point through which to probe questions of temporality within the wider community.

This study is based on the corpus of 4,966 Q-drops attributed to the eponymous Q, which were posted on 4chan between October 2017 and November 2022. These posts have been collected and made available on a web archive located at <https://qanon.pub/>, whose creation is attributed to a developer known by the moniker "qntmpkts" (Wilson, 2023). This repository organizes posts in reverse chronology and presents them in essentially the same format in which they were originally published, with the exception of certain added affordances, namely, a search bar that allows for key word searches and the addition of an "ANSWERS" button appended to certain posts, which includes additional context for particular phrases or acronyms. Notably, this repository does not include the replies that would have accompanied original posts. While some Q-drops are replies to other users, and as such refer to wider discourses surrounding the posts, this method of organization formats the Q-drops (which were originally distributed gradually over time) as a larger, continuous text. This marks a significant difference from the original dissemination of the drops and presents a limitation to this analysis; future research may find value in studying the temporal dynamics emerging from wider QAnon discourses, including user responses to Q. However, it also facilitates the analysis of the narrative elements of the drops as a larger text and enables researchers to probe the temporal dynamics of both individual drops and the broader "story" of QAnon to excavate the relationship between these two dimensions in pursuit of an articulation of a broader timescape.

Accounting for these dynamics, I consider the Q-drops as a media text existing on two scales. On one hand, an individual drop can be said to constitute an enclosed unit of meaning and affect; on the other, the aggregate of drops builds up to a larger narrative unit. In an attempt to do fidelity to both the affective temporal experience of reading a Q-drop in real time, as it was posted, and to the experience of existing within the community for an extended period and gaining access to the broader QAnon narrative, I took care to bring both these registers to bear over the course of my analysis.

To bring into relief the most prevalent and relevant temporal themes, I undertook a review of the QAnon archive in two stages. In the first, I engaged in a close reading of the entire archive to draw out the range of temporal references present in the text and identify potential temporal themes, conceptualized broadly. This reading was guided by the following questions, which aimed to probe at temporality along multiple dimensions:

1. Which temporal key words or phrases are significant within the corpus? In other words, are there particular words or phrases that work to signal or structure a sense of temporality or a specific temporal dynamic?
2. What are the temporal dynamics at play within individual Q-drops?
3. What are the temporal dynamics at play within the wider Q corpus as a broader narrative?
4. How does the formal presentation of the Q-drops contribute to their temporal dynamics? In other words, how do matters of storage and dissemination contribute to the construction of a temporality?

Guided by these exploratory initial questions, several preliminary themes emerged. These were repetition of key words and phrases within and across Q-drops, repeated semantic structures within Q-drops, cyclical narratives, calls to action, unfulfilled promises/predictions, calls for archiving, calls for deep thought and analysis, building up of anticipation, accumulation and schematization of data, callbacks to past drops, and repeated use of time-related phrases or imagery.

In the second stage, the Q-drops were reviewed again, this time with the aim of developing the initially identified themes and identifying potential disconfirmation. This involved rereading the archive to both flesh out the initially identified themes and find points of relation between them. Over the course of this second review, the preliminary themes were refined and brought into relation. This resulted in the emergence of three overarching temporal dynamics: repetition, rumination, and determinism.

Thus, while the Q-drops give rise to a hair-raising and frenetic narrative marked by urgent messaging and calls for immediate action, I argue that the logic of speed is not the most important or prevalent temporal dynamic engendered by these texts. While affects of urgency occur throughout the Q-drops, I argue that these moments are contextualized as elements of larger prevailing temporal themes—repetition, rumination, and determinism—that more broadly engender a sense of slowness or even stasis.

Repetition

Repetition is perhaps the most prominent formal structure within the QAnon corpus, occurring at multiple levels both within a given Q-drop and across the body of text. Particular phrases, codes, calls to

action, and themes frequently recur within the Q corpus. For example, drops are often addressed to “patriots” and signed off as “Q” or as “Alice & Wonderland.” There is the repeated use of codes such as “BO” (Barack Obama) and HUMA (Harvard University Muslim Alumni), as well as repeated calls for adherents to “expand your thinking,” “learn,” “dig deeper,” “archive immediately,” “re-read crumbs,” “have faith,” and “enjoy the show.” Common subject matter includes the imminent revelation of shocking truths to the mainstream public in a “great awakening,” the arrest of “the corrupt elite” in “the storm,” allusions to wide-scale corruption among various world governments, quotations from Christian scripture, and assurances that Donald Trump is operating behind the scenes to keep the public safe.

Beyond the repetition of symbolic elements, the structure of the Q-drop as a rhetorical mode is also relatively consistent, with elements such as open-ended questions, codes, ambiguous predictions, calls to action (also usually ambiguous and coded), and assurances present in all or most of the drops. Q often begins by posing a series of esoteric and open-ended questions, frequently interspersed with ambiguous predictions, and concludes with a warning, affirmation, and/or sign-off. As a result, the process of reading through a Q-drop evokes a particular rhythm, which continues and resonates as readers make their way through the corpus. Multiple open-ended questions build intensity and attention, which are sustained and reach an apex with the ambiguous prediction. There is then a denouement, consisting of a closing warning, affirmation, and/or sign-off, which lowers the affective intensity of the anticipatory moment. Thus, the process of reading through the Q-drops involves the repetition of this rising and falling action, creating a cyclical affect of rising and falling intensity.

This cyclicity is echoed narratively; the Q-drops frequently involve the prediction of imminent events, such as the prosecution of political figures, the revelation of secrets, the public sharing of important information, or impending public riots (e.g., Figure 2). This momentum toward the future is reflected in the “Q-clock,” a schematic developed by QAnon followers wherein certain “times” on the minute hand correspond to the dates referenced in Q-drops (McIntosh, 2022). By “demonstrating” the connections between Q-drops and real-world events, the Q-clock is meant to bolster the authority of Q by proving their predictive accuracy. This continued gesturing toward the future builds up an anticipatory affect, which, crucially, is never completely fulfilled. While more ambiguous predictions can be retroactively mapped onto news events (e.g., a February 11 post that simply read “Ruth Bader Ginsburg” was assigned to the event of Ruth Bader Ginsburg falling and breaking three ribs and taken as “proof” that Q predicted Ginsburg’s fall), more explicit elements of the QAnon narrative are eternally delayed; for instance, Hilary Clinton was not arrested in 2017, mass arrests of child abusers did not occur at Biden’s inauguration ceremony, and Donald Trump was not elected for a second term in 2020. Importantly, predictions of this nature are continually made and continually unrealized.

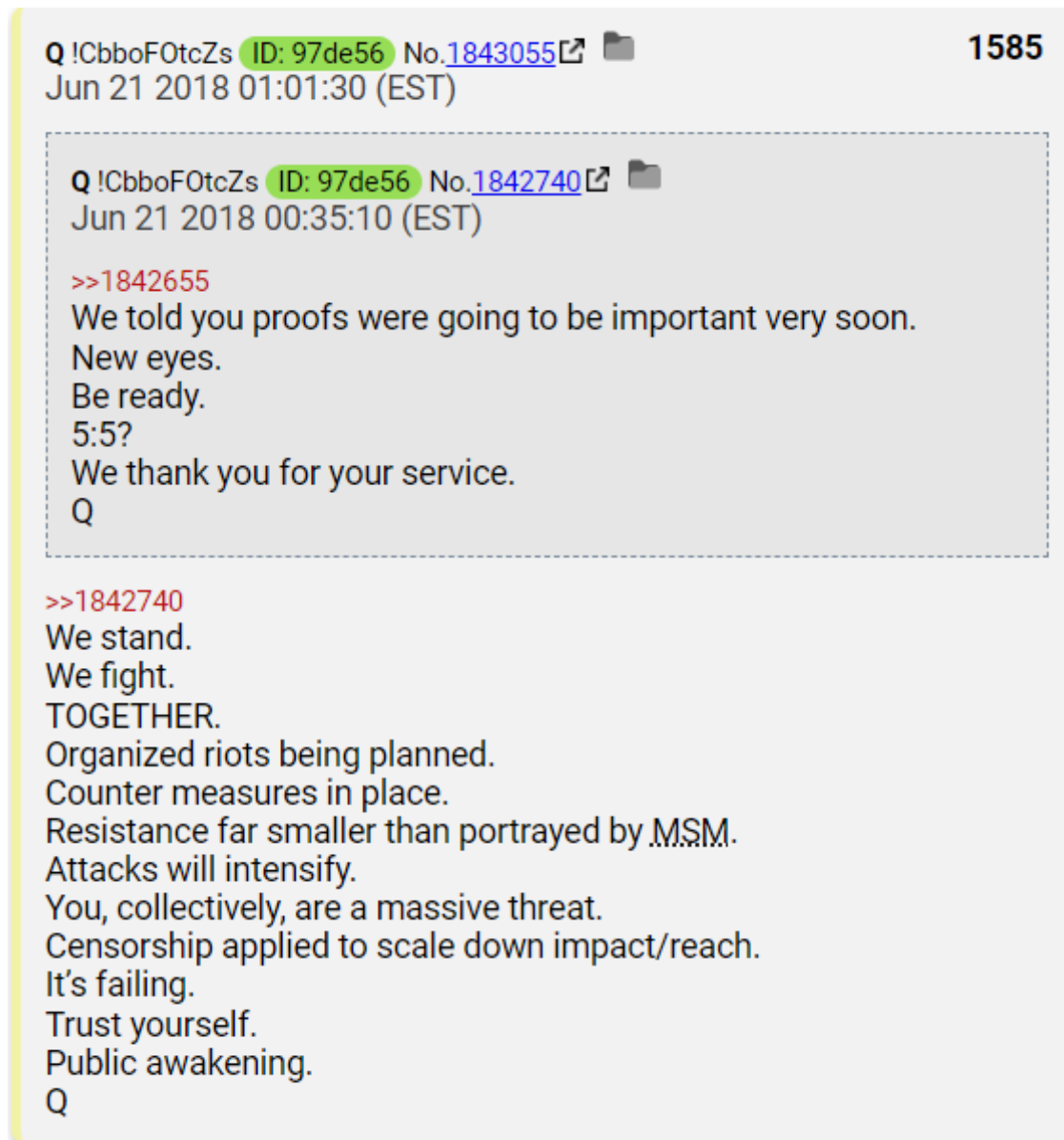


Figure 2. Predictions from Q (Q, n.d.).

This lack of fulfillment is frequently commented on within Q-drops in response to engagement from users. The impossibility of unambiguous confirmation of predictions and promises ("not everything can be stated 1:1, Q can't come out and tell us the exact meaning of his drops" [Q, n.d.]) is often attributed to the risk of "compromising operations" and surveillance from enemies. Questions from adherents or calls for explications of esoteric messages are rarely addressed directly or unambiguously; more frequently, Q instead offered more coded language (see Figure 3) and/or directed readers to refer to previous Q-drops and dig

deeper for veiled meaning (see Figure 4). As a result, there is rarely a sense of catharsis or completion to resolve the intensity of anticipation; the cyclical pattern of rising and falling intensity is sustained.

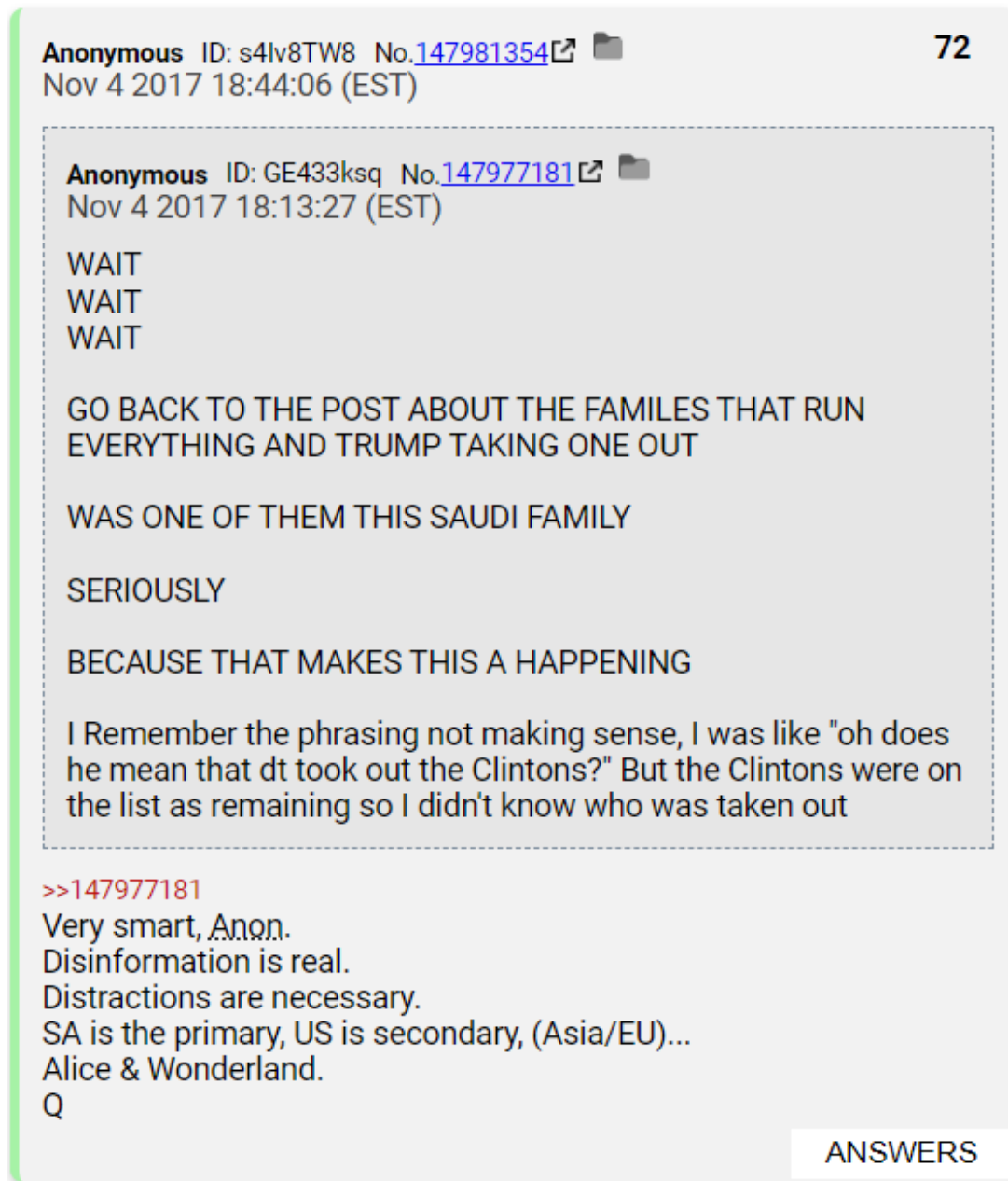


Figure 3. Coded language (Q, n.d.).

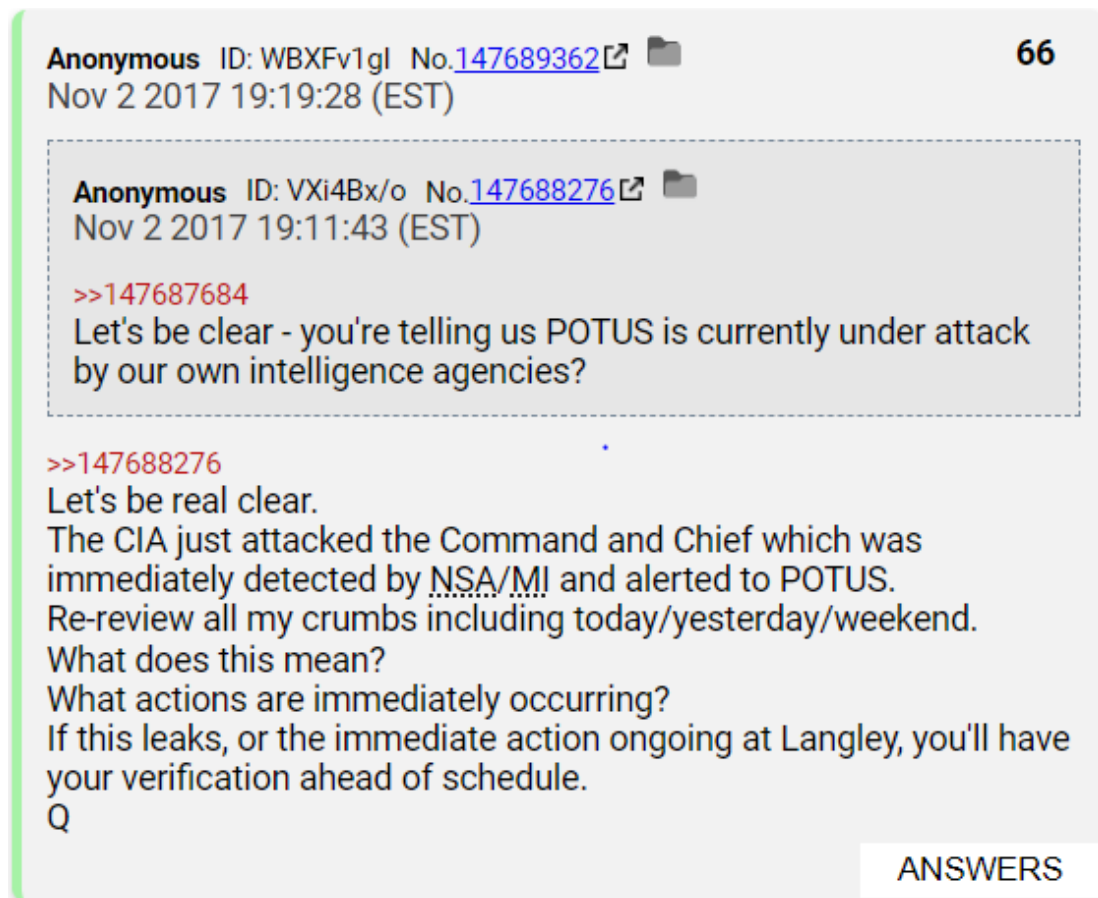


Figure 4. Calls to seek hidden meanings in past postings (Q, n.d.).

From Repetition With Variation to Repetition With Accumulation

Repetition is a prominent organizing logic both within the content of the QAnon corpus and with regard to the formal conditions of its mediality. Past scholarship has pointed to the relevance of the memetic affordances of digital communications in both shaping the content of QAnon and bolstering its spread and has illuminated similarities between the role of repetition in the propagation of online conspiracy theories and the transmission of oral communication. Venturini (2022) points to the influence of the ephemeral nature of 4chan image boards in informing the style, spreadability, and affective intensity of QAnon. Venturini (2022) identifies two important technical features of 4chan: the enforcement of anonymity on the part of users and the “evanescence by design,” wherein comment threads are placed on a ranking system based on the rate at which new comments are posted and are deleted after either falling below the 150th position or exceeding their comment limit. As a result, “the median lifespan of threads in the ‘random board’ (4chan/b/) is below four minutes, with the longest-lived thread lasting a little more than six hours” (Venturini, 2022, p. 66).

When highly popular threads get deleted, they are summarized and reposted in a practice termed “baking the thread.” The process of reposting threads involves the refinement of information, as users must identify the most salient and compelling themes of a given thread. Venturini (2022) posits that such processes can explain why memetic contents on 4chan “enjoy such a large and rapid spread in other online platforms”; “as species grow super-resistant by breeding in an exceptionally harsh environment, 4chan’s subcultures survive by creating meaning in a platform that is engineered to be ephemeral, superficial, anonymous, and forgettable” (p. 67). Venturini draws comparisons between 4chan and the communication styles of preliterate societies. Oral communication’s qualities of elasticity (the tendency for oral narratives to endure by “fluid adaptation” rather than “analytical accumulation”) and flagrancy (the “capacity to command and retain attention by shocking its audience”; Venturini, 2022, p. 72) are respectively comparable to the qualities of repeatability in digital conspiratorial folklore and memorability in online conspiracy posting (which involves the deployment of, e.g., shocking revelations and agonistic tones to provoke intense emotion). Such comparisons are in line with other literature examining the formal connections between the transmission of conspiracy and oral communication, such as Astapova’s (2020) discussion of the similarities between conspiracy and rumor. Astapova (2020) describes the generative effects of repetition within the transmission of both conspiracy and rumor, wherein each new narrator adds details “dictated by his or her unconscious motivations,” causing an amplification and cultivation of the narrative, wherein the most memorable story elements are more likely to “succeed” and be passed on through time (p. 393). This “repetition with variation” is thus a key component of both forms; in the transmission of both conspiracy and rumor, “much of the original content is lost during communication,” revealing that “memory is never accurate and [is] vulnerable to distortion,” and oral communication is likened to a “labyrinth,” wherein the origins and development of a given communication are impossible to fully track (Astapova, 2020, p. 393).

Such comparisons to oral communication are useful to understand the persistence and intensity of QAnon as it evolved and migrated from platform to platform. However, the seeming ephemerality of 4chan is countered by another key affordance of the digital environment: the archivability of the Internet. While QAnon’s original transmission on 4chan may have initially been characterized by ephemerality, evanescence, and “repetition with variation,” Q-drops have since been meticulously archived and recorded. Although the original posts have disappeared, there exist numerous digital archives where the entirety of the QAnon corpus is easily accessible and, furthermore, searchable. As a result, Q-drops are highly accessible and well-preserved.

Within the rhetoric of the Q-drops themselves, the matter of archiving is an oft-mentioned and emphasized theme. Q repeatedly calls for adherents to refer back to the increasingly large corpus of information that Q has provided to collect, archive, and reread the “crumbs.” Q encourages the storage and visualization of drops into an all-encompassing graphic that must be referred back to and reinterpreted frequently to discern higher levels of meaning. Q emphasizes the intentionality and care behind their decision to reveal data in particular orders and configurations (“This is so critical and why information is provided in a certain order and why some topics are continually emphasized more than others as those will be the recent happenings” [Q, n.d.]); the formal structuration of the data is just as important as the content of the information (“timestamps have meaning” [Q, n.d.]). The archiving of data is a crucial component of participation in the QAnon project, as adherents are continually beseeched to return to the archive, reread

Q's "crumbs," make connections, and accumulate "proofs" (see Figures 5 and 6). Thus, a logic of accumulation of the archive becomes an integral element of the experience and interpretive mode that Q encourages: "That's the entire point of this operation. It's up to you all to collect, archive (safely), and distribute in a graphic that is in order with the crumb dumps. It will all make sense" (Q, n.d.).

Q !ITPb.qbhqo

Q !ITPb.qbhqo

ID: 571cae

No. 60291

310

Dec 9 2017 13:34:24 (EST)

Anonymous

ID: b588f5

No. 60267

Dec 9 2017 13:31:10 (EST)

>>60244

>Justice

His speech in Pensacola mentioned the US military providing justice throughout the world.

I hope that isn't just standard NeoCon justification to be the world's policeman ...

>>60267

What has been said about the US Military?

The speech yesterday verified and unlocked so much.

Expand your thinking.

Re-read crumbs.

Re-listen to yesterday's speech.

Connect the 'markers.'

News (in all forms) unlocks the map.

Expand your thinking.

The Great Awakening.

Q

ANSWERS

Figure 5. Calls to archive postings (Q, n.d.).

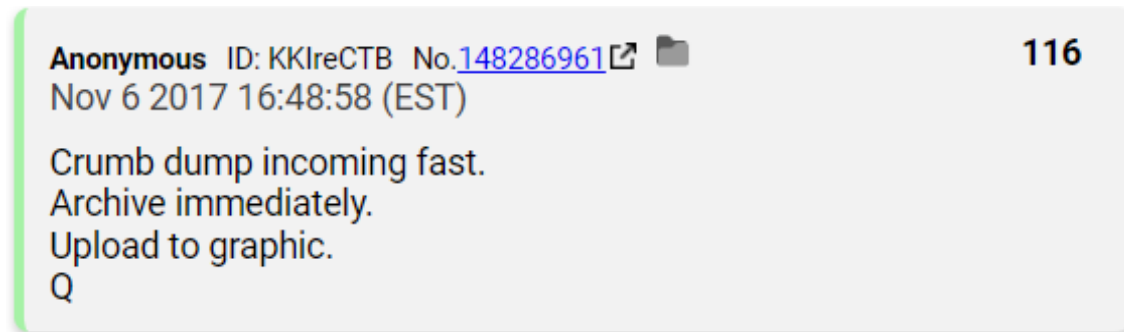


Figure 6. Further calls for archiving (Q, n.d.).

The collection, storage, visualization, and continual re-interpretation of data are key within the rhetoric of QAnon. As a result, both within the content of the text and in regard to its formal storage and organization, the oral logic of repetition with variation shifts to a logic of repetition with accumulation. A key difference between these temporal structures is the relation to the past. Whereas oral traditions of repetition with variation propagate toward the future and undergo transformation and change as they move through time (as repetition with variation favors the introduction of enticing novelty and relegates forgotten past elements to obscurity), a dynamic of repetition with accumulation is weighted toward the past, as it involves a continual accumulation of evidence accompanied by a continual turning back to the archive. This is emblemized by Q's refusal to directly answer questions; when Q is posed a question, users are ever directed to "return to the archive" (or otherwise are presented with more esotericism that must also be archived and analyzed to be unscrambled). Whereas the production of novelty would introduce a sense of linear development, change, or progression, the gesture to the archive inscribes a cyclicity and temporal stasis to the interpretive process; users are continuously returning to the beginning, to the origin. Through this emphasis on archivability and the interpretation of drops with regard to previous information, QAnon builds up a significant amount of data and lore. The accumulation of vast amounts of data, which must be frequently pored over and returned to, leads to readers requiring deeper and deeper knowledge of the accumulated lore to properly understand and decode subsequent drops.

Despite the rapidity with which new drops are posted (especially in the early days of the movement, when Q would make multiple drops per day) and the urgency of their messaging, this sense of accumulation (afforded by the formal qualities of the medium, the calls for archiving, and the subsequent development of heavily lore-based interpretive practices) produces a temporal rhythm of increasing lag or stagnation. Whereas initial drops may be read through quickly, the further one reads through the archive, the more slowly one must proceed, held back by the weight of accumulated data and "proof."

Rumination

The slow temporality engendered by the vast amounts of data, the emphasis on archiving, and the subsequent calls to return eternally to the archive to build the lore needed to interpret subsequent drops is supplemented by an emphasis on hermeneutic processes of interpretation. Nearly every Q-drop contains leading, open-ended questions designed to provoke further contemplation, analysis, and discovery via a

Socratic process. Adherents are ever encouraged to “expand their thinking,” “delve more deeply,” (Q, n.d.), and continuously seek to make connections between the vast number of clues within the Q-drops and events in the news cycle (see Figure 7). This ruminative, interpretive mode is prolonged and intensified by the extreme sparsity of confirmation, conclusion, or catharsis. As mentioned, adherents are directed to continue the cycle of contemplation and rumination. Myriad codes and puzzles are introduced, but never completely answered or completed (e.g., the presentation of time stamps, which are identified as leading to a major revelation when they are systematically collected or analyzed). Predictions and messages are ever ambiguous, and occasionally poetic, thus requiring practices of close reading, which counter the frenetic urgency of their messaging. Furthermore, this ruminative attitude is deliberately fostered as the ideal means through which to interpret all texts, not only the Q-drops; for example, adherents are encouraged to undertake paranoid readings of news events to uncover underlying truths (see Figure 8).

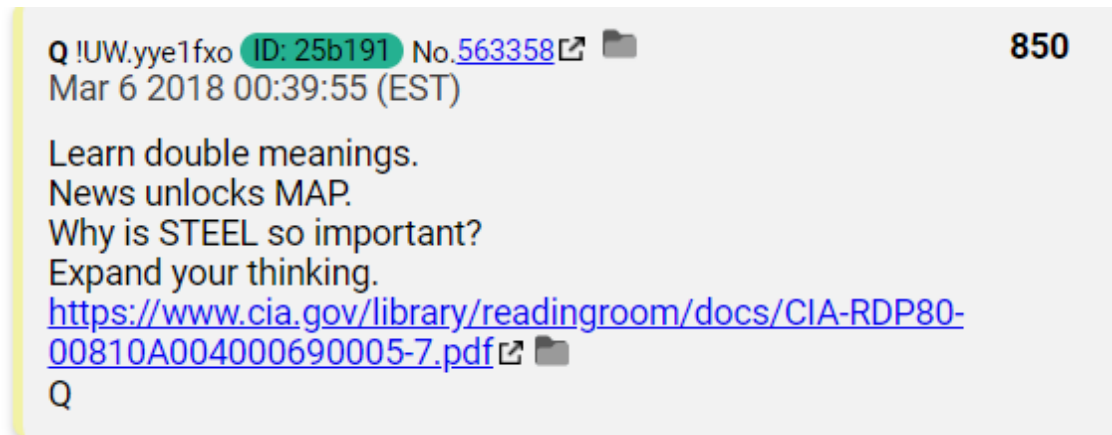


Figure 7. Calls to make connections (Q, n.d.).

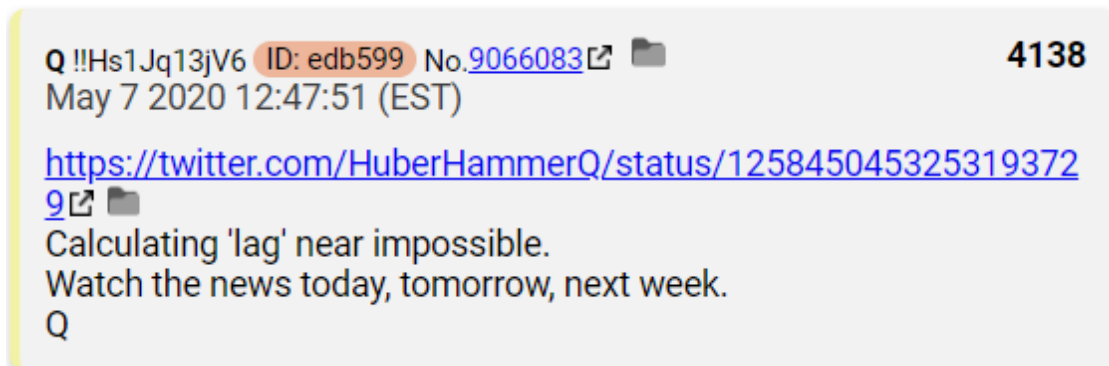


Figure 8. Calls to undertake paranoid readings of the news (Q, n.d.).

Determinism

While Q rarely offers explicit confirmations or explications of intended meaning, Q-drops frequently feature calls for adherents to “make connections” themselves between ambiguous predictions and real-

world events and to meticulously visually represent these connections. This gives rise to the prominence of schematization in the discourse of QAnon; adherents are frequently told to add new information, reread, and reorganize “the graphic” or “the map.” The process of making representational graphics is intimately associated with the political goals of the movement, and rereading, developing, and spreading the graphics are conceptualized as means by which to gain access to truth and fight against perceived corruption (see Figure 9). Multiple visual representations of the QAnon mythos develop over the course of the movement; these include various maps and graphics in addition to the Q-clock.

Via this schematization, the associative logic of evidence is rendered absolute. Whereas physical evidence is perspectival and nonexhaustive (i.e., predictions may not be completely exhaustive of ensuing events—there is always the possibility of wiggle room, a perspective wherein the prediction has not come true or has only partially come true), via the binary mode of association established by the schematization of events (i.e., events either do or do not “equate” to a given Q-drop), events may absolutely correlate or be equivalent to one another. Through the iconic symbolization of real-world phenomena (made convenient by digital affordances, which facilitate the creation of networked, collaborative, and adaptable visual schematics), Q-drops negotiate the transformation of a phenomenology of physical relation to one of mathematical or logical relation. Dynamic and continuous relations are discretized into static expressions of mathematical logic; there is thus a shift from analogous degrees of fulfillment to absolute, discrete fulfillment.

This unambiguity is further underlined by the emphasis on the impossibility of coincidence (see Figure 10). The evidentiary ambiguity of coincidence is at direct odds with a symbolic mathematical logic, as coincidence is proof of the inexhaustiveness of physical evidence (i.e., even if a prediction comes true, the events that “prove it” may be dismissed as mere coincidence). Within mathematical or logical relation, it is no coincidence when $x = y$; it is rather a fundamental property of the identity and meaning of the entities that ensures the staticity of their relation as axiomatically, eternally, and exhaustively true.

Thus, relations and objects are evicted from the realm of experience, which has duration and space, and are understood via a syntactical temporality—that is, according to the instantaneous equivalence of mathematical relation. This has consequences for possibilities of meaning making, which are limited to the “uncovering” (the discovery of preexisting, static connections) rather than the “creation” of meaning. In this way, meaning making in Q-drops is rendered according to a temporal logic of determinism. Events are predetermined according to a pre-established closed set of available axioms. Proof, within an unambiguous mathematical logic, means equivalence. Thus, the repeated calls of “future proves past” can be understood as statements that reinforce the absolute, exhaustive correlation or equivalence between disparate events in time and space, which does not allow for experiences that diverge from a predetermined narrative. Through this preclusion of novelty and change, “future proves past” might be re-articulated as “future equals past”—or, in other words, “past equals future.” Once again, a repetitious, cyclical rhythm emerges, this time as a form of recursion in which phenomena are incorporated into a closed, looping system that defines itself in relation to its own axioms.

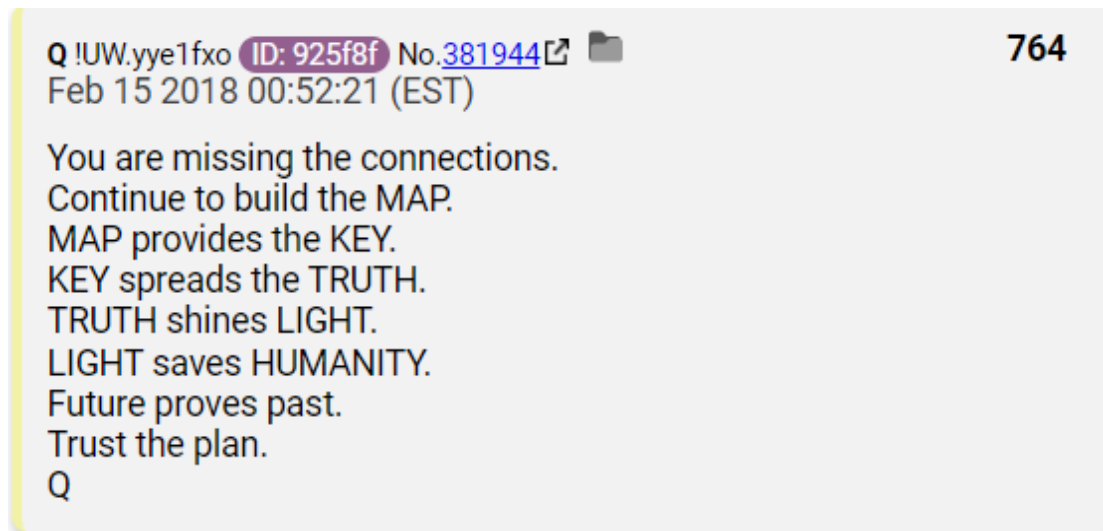


Figure 9. Q connects mapping to the pursuit of truth (Q, n.d.).

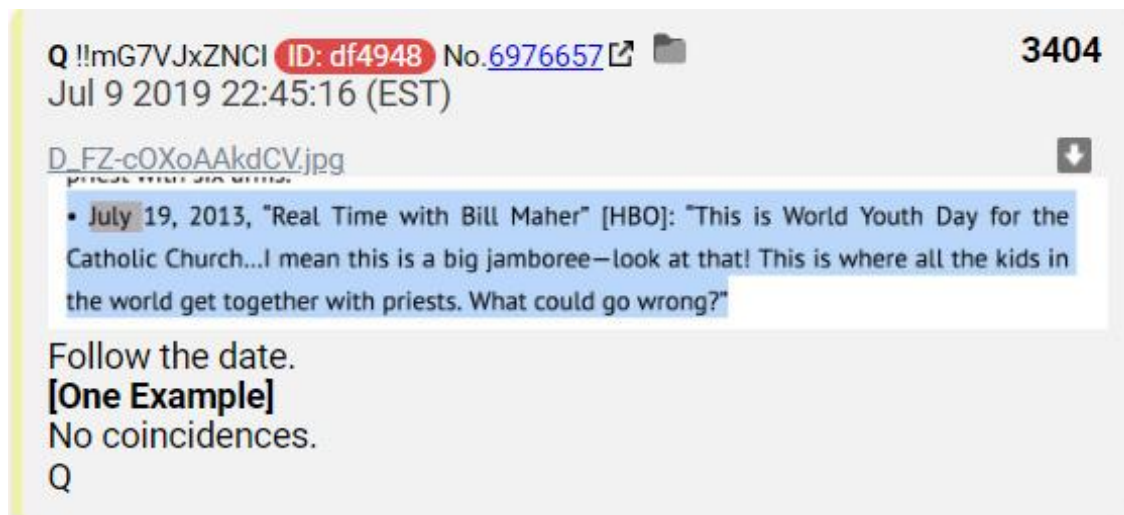


Figure 10. Coincidence is impossible (Q, n.d.).

Temporality and Community

Armed with an exploratory conceptualization of the constructed timescape of the Q-drops, I turn to past scholarship examining temporality as a means through which to configure political communities based on shared identity (e.g., Anderson, 2020). Here, I explore possible connections between the timescape of the Q-drop and the broader cohesiveness of QAnon as a movement, pointing to the ways in which temporality acts as a dimension along which communities are articulated. While past work has focused on the role played by elements such as political ideology, psychological factors, opportunities for financial

or personal gain, and social contexts in the formation of conspiracy communities (Douglas et al., 2019; Mahl et al., 2022), temporality has been largely neglected. This discussion aims to foreground the potential uses of temporality as an axis of analysis in the study of conspiracy communities.

The intersecting dynamics of repetition, rumination, and determinism make up the timescape of the Q-drop as a media form and give rise to a shared rhythm of sustained, looping intensity. The rhythms of the Q-drop are further intensified when agonistically contrasted with the timescapes of “normal life” as seen in, for example, Q’s calls for a paranoid reading of news events, which brings the ruminative and circular temporality of the Q-drop into stark juxtaposition with the faster tempo of the 24-hour news cycle.

This sense of a shared, extraordinary time is essential to the construction of an affective publics. Borrowing from Papacharissi (2014) and Lünenborg (2020), the notion of affective publics accounts for the changing dynamics of public formation in the context of networked technologies, where the diverse media practices that cause publics to come into existence are not only discursive; instead, publics come into being also through affective dimensions such as rhythm and sympathy. Q’s construction of a shared time of communication and action creates, in the words of Dayan and Katz (1992), a “feeling of togetherness, of one bodiness” (p. 112). The intimacy engendered by this shared, extraordinary temporality brings to mind the etymological origins of the word “conspiracy,” which means “to breathe together,” and highlights the intense somaticism of QAnon as a shared experience. Through the fostering of a shared temporality that stands in contrast to the rhythms of normal life, Q-drops engender strong affective and embodied connections of sympathy and closeness. As pointed out by Dayan and Katz (1992), shared rhythm is essential in “converting an assembly into a community” by creating “embodied harmony between the participants” (Ural, 2023, p. 1043).

In addition to the affective coherences brought about by the condition of sharedness, the repetitiousness of rhythm is a key agent in the construction of shared territory and belonging. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) point to refrain as that, which does the work of “territorialising” (p. 300)—creating through repetition a sense of familiar territory that serves as the foundation for more complex communicative formations. As described by Brown and Capdevila (1999) and seen in May and Thrift (2001), refrains “are the basic means by which ordered space is marked out from disorder”; “as the territory becomes secured, so the refrain is ‘picked up’ or reiterated by others who come to occupy the same space” (p. 32). The particular temporality of the Q-drop is thus an agent that creates a shared space and thus a shared paradigm of communication and meaning making, which constitute the foundations of a political community.

The dynamics of archiving, collection, and continuous return to and reinterpretation of accumulated data do similar “worlding” work in setting the shared ontological parameters and conditions of possibility for QAnon as a community. This archival impulse is reminiscent of Derrida’s “archive fever” (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995), which, in part, refers to the valorization of the archive as a source of unmediated access to the past. As pointed out by scholars such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) and Saidiya Hartman (2008), the assumption that the archive is a locus of truth—the archive as “history itself”—is a construction that serves political ends. Archives are sites of both preservation and destruction and are a result of operations of power that produce particular “presences and absences” through decisions surrounding fact creation, fact assembly, and the thematization of data (Trouillot, 1995, p. 48). Archives play a role in constructing the

definitions and conditions of knowability, possibility, and enunciability and are therefore ultimately oriented toward the future (by way of an orientation toward the past). The archival impulse within the Q-drops might then be compared with projects of nation building that deployed archives to cohere a sense of shared national identity and past.

Lastly, I turn to the work of Ernesto Laclau (2018) and explore possible parallels between his theorization of the logics of populist movements and the cycles of anticipation and unfulfillment within the Q-drops. Laclau's theory of populism is concerned with the emergence of populist identities; rather than focusing on specific features of populism as they arise in different contexts, Laclau argues for a formal definition of the phenomena predicated on its particular logics. In short, populism is defined as community making based on a logic of equivalence over a logic of difference. While a logic of difference refers to social demands that are disparate or contradictory, and can thus be fulfilled differentially through institutional channels, a logic of equivalence stresses commonalities between a range of social demands and unites seemingly disparate actors, thus constructing the political entity known as "the people." Crucial to the logic of equivalence is the negative dimension of the chain of demands—their nonfulfillment. It is this that allows a chain of disparate demands to be linked and facilitates the creation of an antagonistic frontier between the popular subjects ("the people") and the perceived source of the nonfulfillment of their demands (the "other" or the common enemy, which might be an institutional system, the rich, elites, poor people, immigrants, etc.).

Laclau's (2018) formulation posits that the specific content of populist ideologies does not truly matter, as they are all collapsed through the equivalential chain. What really matters when it comes to populist subject formation is nonfulfillment (Palestrino, 2022). Thus, at the center of the community is an affective investment in the collective fantasy of a cohesive "us," constituted negatively and antagonistically placed in opposition to the outgroup. Unfulfillment, and the force of desire, is thus essential in the constitution of the movement as such (Vulović & Palonen, 2023). Just as the social negativity in populist logics is the source of the affective investments that create populist subjects and populist movements, I put forth that the eternal unfulfillment of QAnon's demands (i.e., their predictions) is in fact a source of affective glue rather than a cause of disillusionment. In other words, the more the promised future is delayed, and the more that Q's predictions fail to come true, the stronger the affective investment that adherents place in the movement.

Temporality, thus, interfaces with other affects of lived experience, such as disgust, fear, and anger, and both mobilizes them and is engendered by them in mutually constitutive enmeshments that shape the common territory of a shared political imaginary.

Conclusion

This excavation and thematization of the timescape of QAnon is in service of a wider project invested in shifting focus from the ontic to the ontological character of conspiracy—that is, from the specific properties and qualities of conspiracy theories toward an analysis of the structure and form of conspiracy as a mode or genre. This article posits that there is something to be gained by theorizing conspiracy as an aesthetic rather than as a specific collection of features—namely, that adopting temporality as an analytic

vector may be generative in evincing connections both between conspiratorial thinking and other social phenomena and among various different conspiracy movements and thus is helpful in elucidating the political impulses that animate our current cultural milieu. In this conclusion, I suggest three possible avenues for future research along these lines.

The temporal aesthetics of repetition, anticipation, and rumination are also found within the modality of paranoid reading, which, as argued by Sedgwick (2003), "has become nearly synonymous with criticism itself" (p. 130). Much critical scholarship within the humanities and social sciences engages a paranoid temporality that is mimetic, reflexive, ruminatory, and anticipatory. The aesthetic compatibility between critical scholarship and conspiracy is provocative; it may suggest there is something analytically compelling within conspiratorial thinking or, alternately, that we must be careful of the potential harms within the "unconscious" of the ruminatory critical mode. At the very least, it casts a paranoid gaze on paranoia itself and brings to attention the multiple possible political deployments of rumination. Taking account of the overlap within the timescapes of critical research and conspiratorial thinking is thus crucial in conceptualizing strategies for countering dis- and misinformation and avoiding the misapplication of paranoid rumination. While the determination of specific practical strategies for the countering of mis- and disinformation is beyond the scope of this article, the elucidation of similarities between the timescape of QAnon and that of paranoid reading as a mode of scholarship may serve as a conceptual starting point in identifying potential interventions in the spread of conspiracy by highlighting that conspiratorial rhetorics cannot be countered argumentatively through the techniques of critical scholarship, as these very techniques can be appropriated within the scholarly practices of communities such as QAnon.

Such paranoid temporalities are also to be found within seemingly unrelated cultural products and formations; for instance, the fan cultures of both the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Taylor Swift both engage a conspiratorial mode apparent in the intensive accumulation and archival of "clues" (which may consist of, among other things, coded messages in Instagram captions or Easter eggs that draw connections between different films) that are to be ruminated over and intensively reinterpreted to uncover insight into, for example, upcoming productions or details of celebrity personal lives. Again, such comparisons are potentially provocative; the presence of a conspiratorial temporal aesthetic might be reflective of changing trends within fan cultures or, perhaps, an indication of the collapse of formerly distinct cultural discourses into a common mode.

Lastly, comparisons might be drawn between the deterministic temporality within the timescape of QAnon and the temporality of predictive computational mechanisms such as algorithms. As pointed out by scholars such as Cheney-Lippold (2017), algorithms translate real-world phenomena into discretized symbolic representations through processes of data collection, sorting, and correlation. These schematizations of the real (or "measurable types") are then subject to forms of control and surveillance that have the potential to influence the existence of physical entities; for example, they may render people and communities vulnerable to a form of predictive control that damages the capacity for future-orientedness or hope (Stiegler, Ross, Stiegler, Nancy, & Jugnon, 2019). Within both QAnon rhythms and algo-rhythms, the process of discretization of "the real" into symbolic representation establishes material

and exhaustive relations of equivalence or correlation, which mediate a deterministic temporality and limit possible futures through the effacement of agency, novelty, and indeterminacy.

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