

EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF QANON & RADICALIZATION BY CONSPIRACY THEORIES

*Sophia Moskalenko, Adjunct Professor Psychology – University of
Pennsylvania, United States of America*

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

Key Events

On September 16, 2021, Dr. Moskalenko presented the Emergence and Evolution of QAnon & Radicalization by Conspiracy Theories at the 2021 CASIS Vancouver Defence Security Advisory Network Workshop. A key point of discussion was the growth of self-described “truth seeking” collectives such as QAnon. The QAnon collective has been growing in popularity at an alarming rate since the beginning of the pandemic, as the group uses multiple avenues to grow its network. Dr. Moskalenko discussed how the radicalization of individuals comes from conspiracy theories through the use of outlandish and striking conspiracies that act as entertainment, isolate individual from broader society and coincidentally, degrading mental health as a result of COVID-19.

Nature of Discussion

Dr. Moskalenko focused on how QAnon is a conspiracy collective that has managed to penetrate deep within American society. It is shown to have grown substantially as a result of COVID-19, bringing questions as to why and how the group has gained prominence.

Background

In the presentation: Emergence and Evolution of QAnon & Radicalization by Conspiracy Theories, Dr. Moskalenko discusses the rise and background of the conspiracy group. QAnon is identified as a loose collective of ideas and ideologies that stem from a growing disenfranchisement and degradation of trust in institutions. Further, it is a collective that is likely linked to mental health, which may be directly tied to the rate of mental illness within members of the group (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017, p. 227). While QAnon does not pose any physical threat, they are a growing sign of degrading democratic institutions. The best way to combat the degradation of faith in institutions is to increase immunity

to fake information, expose people to more ideas and to change their expectations in institutions. In attempting to study and track QAnon and other similar organizations, the crackdown and silencing of these organizations has made them rebrand and seek other social media platforms to congregate. This has made it increasingly difficult to track and study these organizations, posing a potential problem for future insight into QAnon and conspiratorial trends.

Dr. Moskalenko began the presentation with the discussion of how QAnon centers itself around the idea of self-research and the pursuit of truth within a world of lies in referencing the matrix. The self-description of QAnon goes further in its attempt to label the movement as fighting behind the scenes against perceived cabals with conspiratorial intentions. Dr. Moskalenko defines these cabals as being pedophilic and satanic in nature, which controls world governments and the media (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2021, p. 142). Dr. Moskalenko then goes on to state that QAnon itself is an umbrella for different conspiracy groups. QAnon and its affiliates share the same attributes, such as outlandish, bordering on paradoxical, anti-establishment conspiracies, that make these groups appealing to individuals. Particularly, entertainment value plays a large role in drawing in potential members, with the hook that allows for mass consumption being the spectacle of differing and outlandish conspiracies.

Dr. Moskalenko argued that QAnon is a symptom of the degradation of the consequence of action within the greater society. She discussed that when an individual's perception of consequence is nullified, they are easier to radicalize. Personal networks and contacts within QAnon circles draw people in and form bonds between those who have joined the group and those who are already radicalized. Therefore, further increasing the amount of disinformation and radicalized rhetoric the individual will consume (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017, p. 211). The degradation of consequence in turn undermines the government's position as a pillar of authority. Furthermore, due to perceived violations of trust by pillars of authorities, mistrust of government institutions has increased, especially within QAnon circles. Dr. Moskalenko argues that individuals who engage with QAnon are driven by a quest to find control and self-accomplishment. Their purpose is to demonstrate how institutions and governments are hiding truths from society and are not to be trusted.

Dr. Moskalenko then begins to discuss the effects that widespread mistrust, the ease and hook of QAnon content, and the self-driven research model has on QAnon participation. She states that, according to an NPR and Ipsos poll conducted in 2021, close to twenty percent of the American population believes a majority of what QAnon propagates (Jensen & Kane, 2021). Furthermore, a

large portion of the American population partially believes, or at least engages with QAnon linked conspiracies, pointing to deep rooted connections within American society. She points out that QAnon is attractive to individuals that have a degraded sense of consequence of actions, and as such are vulnerable to radicalization. These individuals who are vulnerable to radicalization, use QAnon as a source for alternative questions and concerns that they might have. While QAnon has received considerable media attention, Dr. Moskalenko states that it does not pose a serious risk in comparison to right-wing militia groups. In fact, she states that of all lethal crimes since 9/11, 75% of them were carried out by right-wing militia groups, which demonstrates that they are far more dangerous than QAnon.

However, Dr. Moskalenko labels them as a radical idea group rather than a radical ideology. She supports this by detailing the link between QAnon and mental health. Dr. Moskalenko states that the rate of psychopathology within QAnon members is 68%, which is more than three times higher than the American average. She goes on further to stipulate that QAnon is a symptom of a massive health crisis, in which uncertainty, loneliness and a sense of betrayal has made QAnon grow. In engaging with QAnon, members find themselves isolated. In turn, the individual engages increasingly with only QAnon circles, who are welcoming to these people. Dr. Moskalenko concludes that multi-pronged approaches are required in combating QAnon and other conspiracy groups. She argues that addressing perspectives, immunity to disinformation, treatment of disinformation campaigns, increasing exposure and adjusting expectations are crucial in combating QAnon. In mitigating the effects of QAnon, Moskalenko argues that the organization is restructuring and re-branding, making it more difficult to track and study. Finally, Dr. Moskalenko concludes that the biggest risks that QAnon pose to a broader society are the gradual erosion of social trust, faith in institutions, and contracts, all of which are pillars of a functioning democracy.

Key Points of Discussion

- QAnon attempts to label itself as a group that pursues self-driven research
- QAnon itself is not a unified collective but an umbrella for minor conspiratorial groups that align with the values and drives of QAnon.
- On average, individuals in American QAnon circles have a higher rate of mental illness than the American average, indicating a link to mental health.
- A fundamental aspect of QAnon circles is the distrust and lack of faith in large institutions that are centers of knowledge/expertise.

- Isolation from the rest of society pushes people further into QAnon communities, increasing their contact with the collective's ideas.
- A large portion of the American population either partially believes in, or fully believes in QAnon conspiracies, indicating the penetration the collective has on the wider American society.
- Counter measures on disinformation should be a priority to help stop the spread of QAnon and the growth of conspiracy theories.

Critical Thinking Questions

- How could we avoid backfire from limiting exposure of conspiracy theories on social media if this approach could be perceived as the government and the media trying to hide the truth; thus, potentially fueling the same conspiracy ideologies that we are trying to fight?
- Is it possible to mitigate extremist content on social media platforms? If so, what are the consequences?
- Are memes a catalyst to the spate of manifesto-driven lone wolf attacks that have happened the past few years?

Key Terms

Cabal: the contrived schemes of a group of persons secretly united in a plot (as to overturn a government) (Merriam Webster, n.d.a).

Mental Illness: Mental illness, also called mental health disorders, refers to a wide range of mental health conditions — disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior. Examples of mental illness include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders and addictive behaviors (Mayo Clinic, n.d.).

Misinformation and Disinformation: “Misinformation” refers to the inadvertent sharing of false information” and disinformation is “the deliberate creation and sharing of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain” (House of Commons Digital, 2018. p 2)

Social Networks: an online service or site through which people create and maintain interpersonal relationships (Merriam Webster, n.d.b).

Further Readings

Gender, populism, and the QAnon conspiracy movement (2021) by Lorna Bracewell.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2020.615727>

Mass media and mental illness: A literature review (2004) by Dara Roth Edney

https://ontario.cmha.ca/wp-content/files/2012/07/mass_media.pdf

The dark side of social movements: Social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 35, 1–6 (2020) by Anni Sternisko, Aleksandra Cichocka, and Jay J. Van Bavel.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsy.2020.02.007>

References

- House of Commons. (2018, October 23). *Disinformation and 'fake news': Interim report: Government response to the committee's fifth report of session 2017–19*. UK Parliament.
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1630/1630.pdf>
- Jensen, M., & Kane, S. (2021). *QAnon offenders in the United States*. START.
<https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/qanon-offenders-united-states>
- Mayo Clinic. (n.d.). *Mental Illness*. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/symptoms-causes/syc-20374968>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.a). *Cabal*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cabal>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.b). *Social Networks*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20network>
- McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2017). Understanding political radicalization: The two-pyramids model. *American Psychologist*, 72(3), 205–216. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000062>
- McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2021). QAnon: Radical opinion versus radical action. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 15(2), 142–146.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27007300>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

© (SOPHIA MOSKALENKO, 2021)

Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>