

Introducing SHIFT Analysis and Understanding Intra-actions within QAnon: Co-presence of Conspiracy Beliefs and Extremism

MICE²

INTRODUCTION

Eruptions of violence during the events of January 6th 2021 exemplified the need to understand how conspiracy theories and extremism interact to create security threats. Social media presents as a key player in this exchange, and this project sought to respond to that dynamic by exploring and seeking to understand the intra-actions in groups which discuss both conspiracy beliefs and extreme ideas. To achieve this, it synthesises techniques from computer science and social science to analyse data from platforms which enable and promote unguarded speech.

KEY FINDINGS:

- SHIFT analysis provides a research framework for understanding the online journey of conspiracy and politically extreme groups overtime by framing the distinguishing elements of member motivation, beliefs, grievances as the bedrock for their interpretation of events and world view. These elements can be tracked over time to chart a movements evolution.
 - Intra-actions are organised around three key master frames which fulfil three key roles. These frames were tracked over the wider dataset from the 1st of November 2020 to January 11th 2021.
1. **Isolator frame: Hidden truth** – which remained salient in all contexts studied, however was more influential in intra-actions than interactions as it served to isolate adherents from the broader mainstream.



2. **Bridging frames: Unfair treatment** – was particularly salient around the 2020 US election. It unified the social in-group and positioned them in opposition to out-groups.
3. **Motivational frames: Impending doom** – this motivated and legitimised extreme responses and was particularly influential around the 2020 US election.

In parallel to this report, a *second report* builds on the findings set out herein, to extend the analysis of interactions between conspiracy theory communities and far right groups that do not all meet the threshold of extremism. The interactions case study includes the results of a case study of the interaction between several conspiracy and far right groups on the Telegram platform and how they influenced one another in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The figurehead case study takes a deeper dive into this data to examine the role of figureheads within the group dynamics of conspiracy and far right movements.

GLOSSARY

CONCEPTUAL TERMINOLOGY

- **Extremism** – a political term which determines activities that are not in accordance with norms, are intolerant toward others, reject democracy and reject the existing social order (Sotlar, 2004).
- **Far Right** – an umbrella term used to refer to those to the ideological right of mainstream politics (see Lee, 2015). In this report, Far Right includes both those who are on the extreme right and those who do not meet that threshold yet remain on the 'radical right' of mainstream political beliefs.
- **Conspiracy Theory** – a belief that there are hidden mechanisms for events that are controlled by elites with a sinister goal(s) (Pigden, 2006).

TECHNICAL TERMINOLOGY

- **Frame Analysis** – Frame analysis aims to interpret and discover “the ‘socialframeworks’, that provide meaning, determine what is relevant and irrelevant when considering certain actors, issues, or events, and suggest appropriate behaviour” (Vliegenthart & Van Zoonen, 2011)
- **Netnography** – Netnography is a methodology designed to mimic ethnographic techniques but in an online space (Kozinets, 1999).
- **Abductive** – in abduction we pass from the observation of certain facts to the supposition of a general principle to account for the facts (Fann, 1970).

QANON CASE STUDY: QAnon - on the path to January 6th on Parler

Applying frame analysis to the QAnon dataset on Parler revealed the coalescing of intra-actions between QAnon users around three master frames. Central was a belief in a hidden truth, an ever-present grievance of unfair treatment, and an impending sense of doom. Rumours and religious references were found to be the currency of group interaction, fuelling belief and mainstream view intolerance. This also made users highly vulnerable to manipulation by political or external actors. Many demonstrated levels of psychological vulnerability, particularly social isolation from others, exacerbated by echo chamber social media. In the aftermath of the insurrection, several fissures appeared between QAnon adherents over whether to stoke up violent intentions or back down and turn away from the movement. While an exploitable vulnerability, it may also be a pathway to treatment interventions and social responses.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This is the Executive Summary taken from the Full Report: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/mapping-influence-between-conspiracy-communities-and-extremist-entities/

The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) is funded by the UK's Home Office and security and intelligence agencies to identify and produce social science that enhances their understanding of security threats and capacity to counter them. Its funding is administered by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Award ES/V002775/1).