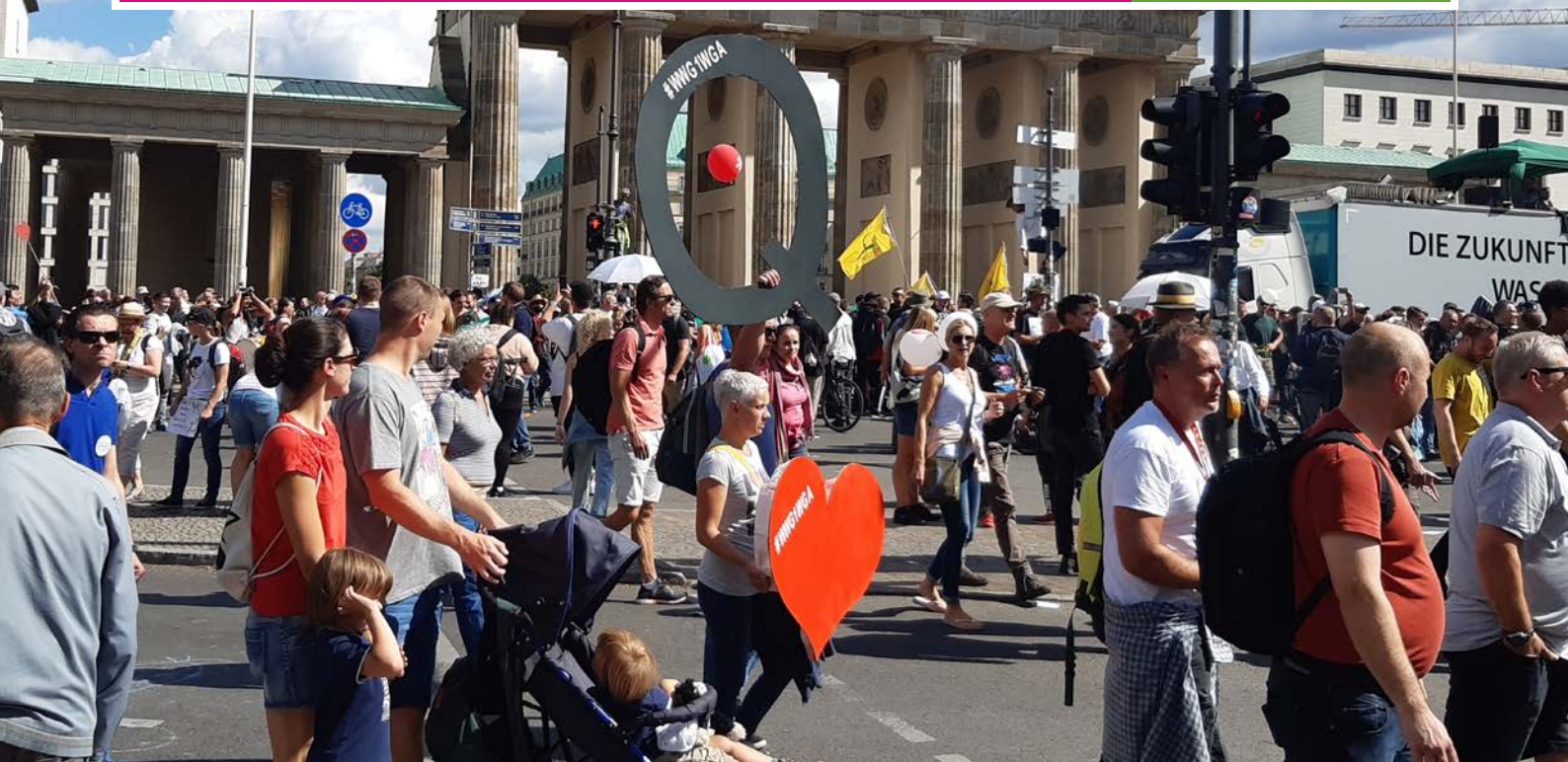


de:hate report #01

# QAnon in Germany

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# Preface



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The QAnon conspiracy ideology is the driving factor behind one of the most dynamic and dangerous antisemitic, right-wing extremist movements of the present day. It is a catalyst for radicalization, emotionalist responses and calls for violence. In referencing what may be one of the most emotional issues of all – violating the well-being of children – the movement is able to create immediate pressure to push back against the alleged conspiracy of a “deep state”, thus legitimizing forms of violence that extend to terrorist attacks. QAnon's goals can therefore be said to dovetail with the demonstrations against COVID-19 measures, which likewise propagate the notion of a “powerful conspiracy” and whose protestors believe that powerful elites have exaggerated the danger of the pandemic in order to push through their own plans. It comes as little surprise, then, that QAnon symbols have become increasingly visible at demonstrations attended by Querdenker groups (literally “contrarian thinkers” in opposition to government measures) in many cities around Germany.

Despite these recent developments, QAnon was a force in Germany even prior to the Querdenker protests, with the conspiracy narrative being cultivated by prominent musicians and conspiracy ideologists on relevant websites. Part of the movement's widespread support comes from its willingness to use ancient antisemitic tropes (metaphorical terms, imagery and phrases), with blood libels being one prominent example. The propagators of these potent, cruel lies often use fictitious, real or unsolved kidnappings, accidents or fatalities, especially involving children, for their own ends and present Jewish people as scapegoats. These myths cast aspersions on the alleged perpetrators and, in doing so, justify their oppression, persecution, and murder. They have sparked (and continue to ignite) pogroms and paved the way for the systematic extermination of

Jews during the Shoah.

QAnon is at risk of becoming as influential as the fabricated Protocols of the Elders of Zion, one of the most influential antisemitic propaganda tools used by the Nazis. Today, this book is joined by antisemitic fake news that supports conspiracy theories, along with propaganda and lies spread via social networks.

We have made the decision to publish this first issue in a new series in light of the election of QAnon supporters to the United States Congress, the ongoing dispute regarding the legality of the 2020 US presidential elections due to an alleged conspiracy, and the rapid spread of the QAnon ideology at COVID-19 protests in Berlin and Leipzig. This publication will complement the observations made in the monitoring reports of our de:hate project in a shorter format that appears more frequently. As well as offering a factual explanation for the rise of hate groups and conspiracy ideologies, it

will explore specific examples of radicalization and present intervention options for discussion.

We look forward to receiving feedback on this format and would be pleased to discuss the conclusions drawn by the publication. Additional recommendations for action and tips on prevention and intervention can also be found in our other recent publication, which we refer to at the end of this report.

**Timo Reinfrank**  
Executive Director  
Amadeu Antonio Foundation

# QAnon, the “Querdenker” Movement and COVID-19: How QAnon Gained a Foothold in Germany

In the summer of 2020, the letter “Q” was suddenly everywhere to be seen in Germany. On posters, on T-shirts, as cardboard cut-outs, dangling from necklaces: the letter became an increasingly conspicuous presence at protests against the COVID-19 measures imposed by the German government.<sup>1,1</sup> In this context, Q is shorthand for a series of conspiracy narratives about a fictitious final battle between good and evil involving a class of Satanic elites drinking children's blood, an apparent “deep state”, and President Donald Trump as a savior figure who would bring an end to the conspiracy. The idea is that there is a world order in which all “evil” in the world is believed to be the result of this conspiracy and which is immune to criticism and contradictions. Given the context, QAnon can be labeled a conspiracy ideology – espousing clearly antisemitic content. Blood libel, an old antisemitic conspiracy narrative revolving around the ritual murder of children, is updated and reproduced in the narratives pushed by QAnon. Followers also levy classic antisemitic accusations against Jews, who they portray as servants of Satan.

## Imageboards

Imageboards are discussion forums that primarily revolve around posting images and texts. Registration is usually not necessary, as anonymity is an important part of imageboard culture. There is little to no moderation on popular boards such as 4chan and 8kun.<sup>2</sup> This leads to crude humor and misanthropic content and allows discriminatory narratives to circulate without restriction. In 2019, several right-wing terrorists used imageboards for networking purposes and to livestream their crimes.

QAnon emerged on the Internet in 2017, specifically on the imageboard 4chan, and its narratives have become ever more widespread online since. In the USA, this conspiracy ideology has already proven to be dangerous offline: some followers of the movement have been

<sup>1</sup> Although these protests are supposedly in opposition to the German government's COVID-19 measures, they are also a meeting place for conspiracy ideologists, right-wing extremists and antisemitic persons.

associated with multiple crimes, including murder. After the US and other English-speaking countries, Germany is now the largest area of circulation for the Q conspiracy ideology. In Germany, QAnon first took root on the streets, when the French yellow vests movement gained a foothold in Germany. Prominent German artists and athletes have also used their social media presence to spread stories associated with QAnon to large numbers of followers. The presence of Q symbols at these protests shows that in Germany, too, QAnon followers are willing to stand up for their beliefs both online and offline. These current developments are worrying. Within a remarkably short period of time, the conspiracy ideology seems to have found more and more followers in the German-speaking world. How has the COVID-19 crisis contributed to this? How dangerous are its followers? How exactly do people radicalize themselves and become QAnon followers who are ready to use violence? What are the parallels between "Reichsbürger" (a group of citizens which does not recognize Germany's post-World War II Federal Republic) and QAnon?

The de:hate project – which has monitored the online activities surrounding the QAnon conspiracy ideology since it first emerged – seeks to answer these questions in this report. It shows how the dissemination of these conspiracy ideologies has gathered pace on Telegram and YouTube in Germany over the past few months. A

timeline illustrates how violent incidents in connection with QAnon have increased in the USA since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, a case study highlights how QAnon followers can also become radicalized in Germany to the point where they may commit crimes. Miro Dittrich, head of the de:hate project, explains in an interview what makes QAnon so palatable to common citizens and why subsequent social crises will be a breeding ground for similar phenomena. Finally, the report provides recommendations for action on how to address and handle conspiracy ideologies such as QAnon. In short, these can be summarized as follows:

### **Recommended course of action:**

1. Conspiracy ideologies like QAnon should be labeled as such and be actively opposed.
2. Pandemic control measures and the prevention of radicalization must be tackled in tandem.
3. Security authorities must become well versed in conspiracy ideologies and continue to hone their expertise in this area.
4. Advisory services must be established and strengthened.

# How Donald Trump Became a Savior for Conspiracy Ideologists – QAnon's Origins

In December 2016, a man armed with multiple firearms stormed into Comet Ping Pong, a pizzeria in Washington, DC. Edgar W. had covered more than 540 kilometers to get from his hometown in North Carolina that morning to Comet Ping Pong. He was led there by Pizzagate, an unfounded conspiracy narrative claiming that the then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton ran a pedophile ring and kept children imprisoned in the basement of the pizzeria. When he arrived at the restaurant, Edgar W. did not save any children, nor did he even find a cellar on site. He managed only to scare employees and customers by firing at least one shot while searching the restaurant. No one was injured in the incident.<sup>3</sup>

Pizzagate contains all the broad strokes of a narrative that would later become solidified in the worldview adopted by Q followers. After the incident in Washington, some prominent Pizzagate followers did distance themselves from the conspiracy narrative, though the topic continued to be discussed on controversial online platforms like 4chan and 8kun.

Setting Pizzagate to one side, the story of QAnon can be said to have started around a year later. At a photo session

with representatives of the US armed forces on October 5, 2017, Donald Trump said something that made the press members in attendance prick up their ears: "Maybe it's the calm before the storm." The president was not willing to clarify what he meant by the statement.<sup>4</sup> These words would become part of the founding myth surrounding QAnon, with the conspiracy ideology ultimately taking shape after Trump's statement was interpreted from various different angles. In an early QAnon post, the alleged government source "Q" quoted Trump's sentence. Q's followers took this as confirmation of Q's existence.

On October 28, 2017, "Q Clearance Patriot" posted for the first time on the 4chan imageboard. The pseudonym alludes to a high level of secrecy within the US government. Later, the letter was combined with "Anon" – a term that stands for people who remain anonymous on online platforms – to become QAnon. In the beginning, it was possible that other Qs also used pseudonyms. Later, Q changed platforms: After moving to 8chan, now 8kun, Q used "tripcodes" to authenticate their posts. The identity of the person or group behind the posts is still unclear. As with many other conspiracy ideologies, the followers of QAnon are constantly challenged to think for themselves, to do

their own research and to question things."<sup>11</sup>

The zeal with which the conspiracy's followers set about analyzing anything even remotely relates to their worldview is remarkable. This not only applies to posts by Q, but also speeches by Donald Trump and statements from alleged members of the deep state. Even spelling mistakes made by Trump are considered to be secret messages. Every letter, every number, every element is seen as a possible code to be cracked. Meanwhile, the fundamental aspects of the conspiracy continue to be propagated on dedicated imageboards as well as platforms used by the general public, such as Telegram, Instagram and YouTube.

Q's first post prophesied the arrest of Hillary Clinton and subsequent massive social unrest in the United States. Neither of these predictions proved to be true. Nevertheless, Q has written thousands more posts since this first prediction. At the heart of the ideology that has built up around these posts is a Satanic elite, consisting of the deep state that allegedly runs a pedophile ring, and Donald Trump as a savior figure. To those who follow the conspiracy ideology surrounding Q, this is the ultimate battle of good against evil, at the end of which the elite will be brought to justice and executed. This web of conspiracy

narratives feeds into old antisemitic and Christian fundamentalist concepts of the "enemy", which Q's followers spread online and offline in the form of slogans and hashtags.

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<sup>11</sup> See "Findings from Monitoring QAnon", p. 36

# How COVID-19 Helped a Fringe Phenomenon Gain Mainstream Appeal – the Spread of QAnon

On the global stage, QAnon's role was negligible until the spring of 2020. Since that time, however, the conspiracy ideology has gained more and more followers outside the USA, with a report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) concluding that the English-speaking countries of Canada, Great Britain and Australia have been especially affected. Between November 2019 and June 2020, Germany was next on the list after these countries.<sup>5</sup> During the same period, QAnon attracted more followers in other European countries, including France and Italy. The conspiracy ideology also gained some political power: in the USA, where QAnon undoubtedly has its largest following, two followers of the movement were elected to Congress in 2020. Additionally, some QAnon candidates now hold political offices at state level. In Germany, only individual groups within the German far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and their youth organization Young Alternative (Junge Alternative) have been linked to the conspiracy ideology so far. The Junge Alternative group for the state of Baden-Württemberg, for example, used the hashtags #WWG1WGA (a popular QAnon slogan) and #qanon on Facebook. A regional AfD page from Leipzig shared a video of the singer and conspiracy theorist Xavier Naidoo on Facebook along with a post calling for people to "form their own opinion"

*One AfD page quotes singer Xavier Naidoo as saying: "Look up adrenochrome, check out the pictures... I've known for at least 15 years what's been going on." They also link the Google search results for Adrenochrome.*

*Source: Facebook*





*"Love of the homeland is blind to skin color #wwg1wga" is the message in one Facebook post by a regional chapter of the youth organization Junge Alternative, which also included the hashtag #qanon. Source: Facebook.*

about adrenochrome – one key QAnon conspiracy narrative states that a fictitious elite extracts the substance adrenochrome from the blood of tortured children, despite it being simple to produce in a laboratory.

But how exactly is the conspiracy ideology QAnon spreading in Germany? While the various image boards on which Q's posts, known as "Q-drops", are posted are difficult

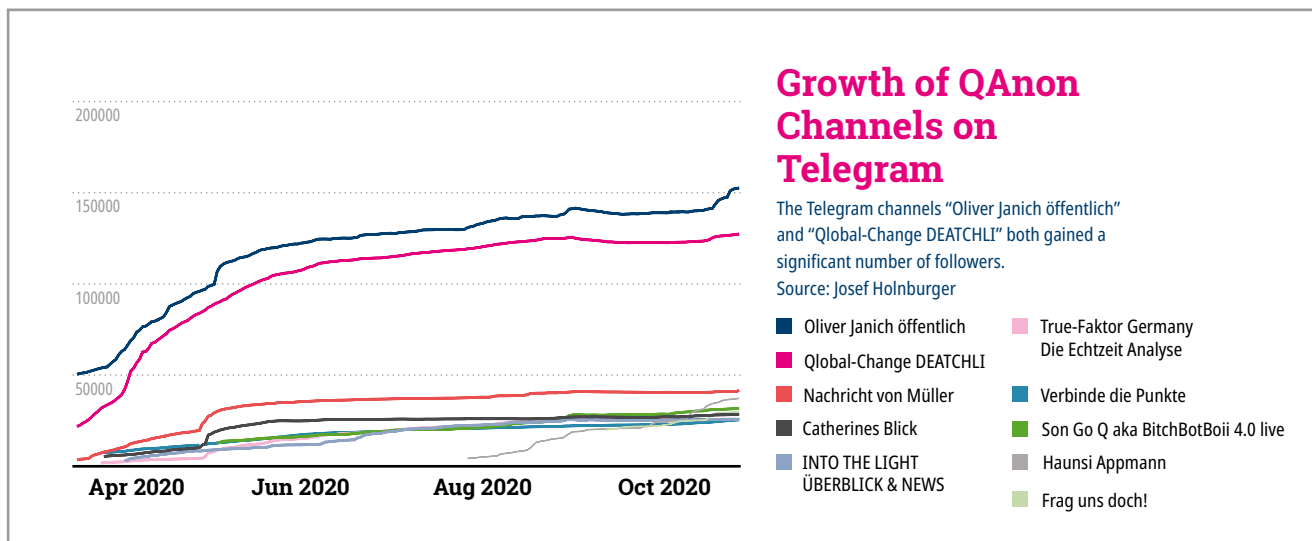
to navigate for the general public, the content of the individual posts is also reproduced on websites that are easier to comprehend, thus making QAnon accessible to a much wider audience. These websites provide infrastructure that has been essential for turning the former fringe phenomenon QAnon into a conspiracy ideology palatable to the masses. Additionally, there is a number of QAnon influencers who have made it their business to analyze Q-drops – in a similar manner to theologians who analyze the Bible – because many of the original posts are deliberately vague. The resulting room for interpretation also makes the content more difficult to refute. And while the analysis of individual posts is a central part of the conspiracy ideology for all its followers, the interpretations of individual influencers facilitates low-threshold access to QAnon.

Dark social media platforms such as Telegram offer the perfect tools for spreading conspiracy narratives

associated with QAnon. For a long time, though, QAnon content could also be shared easily on more common social media platforms by individuals as well as groups and channels. Some of them had names that very clearly

## Dark Social

Today, the term Dark Social stands for non- or partially-public communication online. This includes messenger services such as Telegram or platforms such as Discord. Dark Social is attractive for anyone who wants to openly express radical positions, as posts are rarely reported or deleted. They are also seldom met with any rebuttal or corrective information. In addition, opinion leaders can appear more credible in the eyes of their followers, since this form of communication seems more direct and personal.



declared their affiliation with QAnon. Various QAnon sub-categories were formed in response to the platform's target group. Instagram, for example, is home to a movement dubbed “QAmom” by Rolling Stone and “Pastel QAnon” by QAnon expert Marc-André Argentino, with the conspiracy ideology being disseminated – frequently by women – using a combination of softer language and pastel tones.<sup>6</sup> The hashtag “#savethechildren”, referring to QAnon's focus on the alleged abuse of children by an elite cabal was often used as a particularly relevant call to arms.<sup>111</sup>

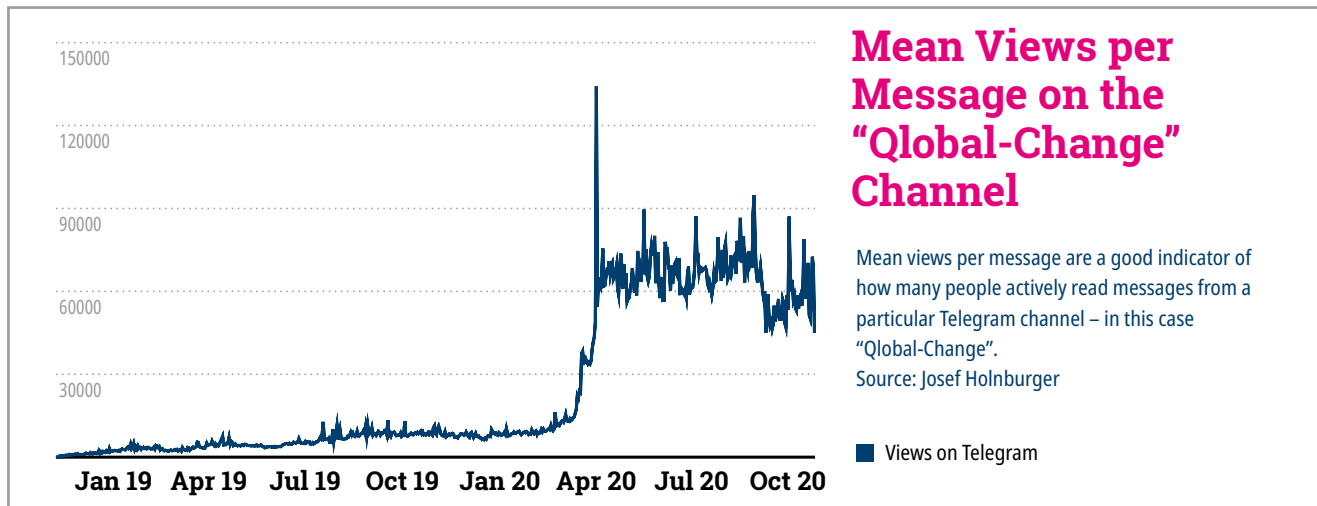
On Facebook and Telegram, QAnon groups became a melting pot of different conspiracy narratives that were integrated into QAnon lore. This ability to integrate different views is likely one of the reasons why QAnon has become so popular. Furthermore, Facebook's algorithm generates group and page suggestions based on the interests

<sup>111</sup> This bears no relation to the children's rights organization Save the Children, which was founded more than a century ago. Save the Children issued a statement distancing itself from the hashtag.

of users and their acquaintances. In other words, the algorithm will suggest similar groups to users who have already declared an interest in conspiracy stories and who may belong to an associated group.

## Deplatforming as a Counterstrategy

For a long time, QAnon was able to spread virtually unchecked across social media platforms. It was not until summer 2020 that Twitter, Facebook and Instagram started a wave of deplatforming and adapted their user rules to combat the conspiracy ideology. The platforms ramped up their efforts in July and August, and in October Facebook announced that its new goal was to prevent and delete all QAnon content. As a result, 1,700 Facebook pages, 5,600 groups and around 18,700 Instagram accounts were deleted.<sup>7</sup> YouTube followed in Facebook's footsteps shortly afterward, with the video



platform specifically citing the “real violence” triggered by such conspiracy ideologies as the reason for taking action.<sup>8</sup> Many of the major QAnon channels were deleted.

## Tracking the Spread of QAnon Alongside the Pandemic

How did QAnon spread in German-speaking spaces online? For this analysis, data from 50 YouTube channels, 48 Telegram channels with predominantly QAnon content, and 34 Telegram groups which primarily share QAnon content were evaluated. Some YouTube channels have been deleted from the platform in the meantime. False information about the COVID-19 pandemic has been distributed via QAnon channels and groups across all platforms. In mid-March 2020, there were COVID-19 cases in every German federal state. Schools and daycare centers were closed and entry bans were issued. On March 22, strict restrictions on leaving the home and person-to-person contact came into force throughout Germany. At the same time, the number of users of Telegram channels and groups indicated that interest in QAnon content and QAnon influencers began to grow during the pandemic. Groups and channels that had previously attracted no

more than 10,000 subscribers or 1,000 members suddenly exploded as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. We found a total of 48 telegram channels predominantly containing QAnon content through to the end of October.

This increase in users during the pandemic can be explained by analyzing the second-largest QAnon channel on Telegram. On March 17, roughly 21,000 users were subscribed

to the channel Qlobal-Change; three months later, on June 17, the channel had more than 111,000 subscribers. The number then rose steadily, peaking at over 127,000 by the end of October. Telegram channels are one-way communication channels, and looking at the number of subscribers alone can often be misleading: voyeurism and the like often leads people to subscribe to a channel. A better measurement of their reach is obtained by looking at how many people have actually seen their messages. At the beginning of February, around 9,000 people on average had viewed posts on Qlobal-Change; by the beginning of April, the figure stood at around 60,000 people. In addition, 34 groups that primarily distribute QAnon content were found on Telegram, with the number of members rising substantially in March. While there were only around 6,500 users on March 17, this figure had risen to more than 50,000 in mid-June and 79,505 by the end of October.

Oliver Janich was the largest German QAnon influencer for

a long time. By now, however, many of his accounts have been deleted. After his removal from Instagram (2019) and Twitter (2020), his YouTube channel was deleted on October 22. The former journalist has been part of the German

conspiracy scene since the September 11 attacks. He has been posting QAnon content since 2017, particularly on YouTube – long before it attracted the attention of the wider German public. He also shares a great deal of QAnon

## The top 10 evaluated YouTube channels with the most subscribers

In total, 49 YouTube channels were examined more closely. Some channels were deleted prior to the publication of this report in November 2020.

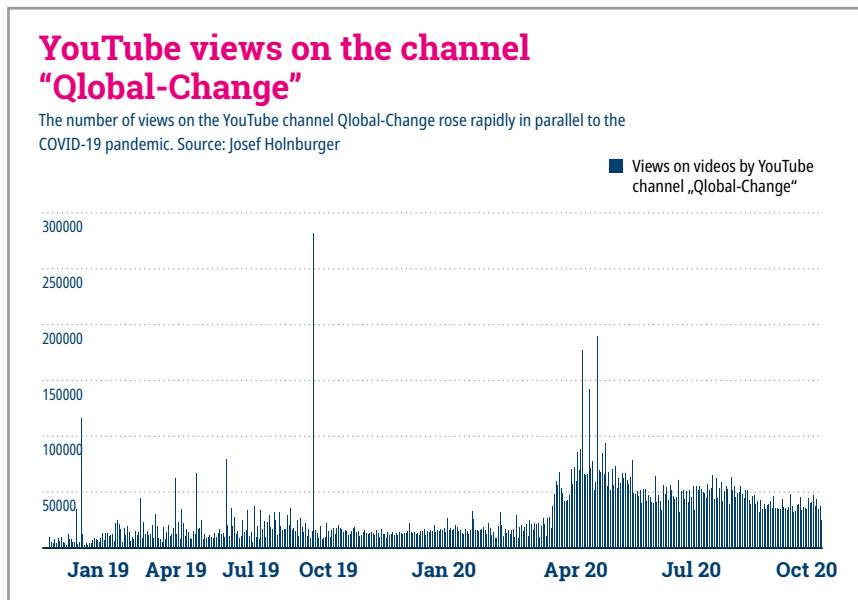
No.	Channel name	Subscribers	Views	Created on
1	Oliver Janich	160.000	48.413.591	01.02.2011
2	LION Media	146.000	20.250.886	12.10.2018
3	Qlobal-Change	146.000	18.934.464	19.10.2018
4	Hans-Joachim Müller	95.900	28.664.419	21.07.2012
5	Verbinde die Punkte!	57.300	11.928.464	20.01.2018
6	Antilluminaten TV	51.000	9.947.224	22.01.2018
7	Catherine Thurner	44.800	5.221.014	06.10.2016
8	Frag uns doch!	42.900	4.458.274	26.03.2020
9	Andi Kandare	30.100	3.922.282	07.09.2019
10	Schwert der Wahrheit - Jens Bengen	28.100	812.478	09.11.2019

content on Telegram via “Oliver Janich öffentlich”, the largest German-speaking QAnon channel. Already high, his number of subscribers rose from 50,400 on March 17 to 125,000 on June 17 and over 152,600 by the end of October. For a long time, Janich was also one of the most popular YouTube channels distributing QAnon content. Before it was deleted, it had 280,000 subscribers. A video uploaded on April 2, 2020 titled “Adrenochrome – Xavier

Naidoo cries for our children”, which contains a clear reference to QAnon, amassed over 495,000 views.

Of the 50 YouTube channels distributing QAnon content that were analyzed for this report, 18 had videos that had been viewed more than one million times. Although most of these channels share conspiracy theories other than QAnon, three do refer to Q in their names, one of which is

Qlobal-Change. Created on October 19, 2018, this channel's view count clearly shows that the general interest in QAnon increased in conjunction with the outbreak of the pandemic. In early January, the channel's videos rarely attracted more than 20,000 views a day. From mid-March onward, however, the views more than doubled, while on some days the channel received well over 100,000 views.



# From Child Abduction to a Dead Mafia Boss: QAnon's Potential for Violence in the USA

Until early 2020, the general public dismissed QAnon as a fringe online phenomenon. Even so, its emphasis on the impending apocalypse and the savagery of the supposed Satanic elite that QAnon adherents believe in are dangerous concepts for the society in which they are disseminated. These narratives create a sense of urgency to act that can radicalize its adherents to the point of committing acts of violence – the incident at Comet Ping Pong was a clear indicator of this.

In Germany, one incident in 2020 showed how dangerous this kind of conspiracy ideology can become: while the perpetrator of the shootings in Hanau is not known to be a QAnon follower, he nevertheless spoke about underground pedophilia rings – similar to established QAnon narratives – in some of the videos he posted online.

Within months of Q's first post, it became apparent that these interlinking narratives could be used to mobilize followers to commit violent crimes in the USA. The FBI has classified conspiracy ideologies such as QAnon as a potential terrorist threat since May 2019<sup>9</sup> due to the fact that QAnon followers in the USA are being increasingly linked to acts of violence or plots to commit acts of terrorism. What is striking here is that children are repeatedly at the heart of these crimes.

| **October 28, 2017**

First post by "Q"

| **June 15, 2018**

**California**

An armed man blocks the Hoover Dam with a truck loaded with ammunition to make demands on behalf of QAnon.<sup>10</sup>

| **March 13, 2019**

**New York**

A 24-year-old man allegedly kills a mafioso who he claims to have identified as part of the alleged elite described by Q.<sup>11</sup>

# QAnon, Conspiracy Ideologies and Antisemitism

In comparison to other conspiracy ideologies, QAnon can be characterized by two special features: as well as offering a view into an abyss populated by alleged conspiracies, pedophilia and doomsday fantasies, it presents a savior and a way out of these horrific scenarios. QAnon's basic narrative

states that ever since the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States, the alleged conspiracy is being defeated piece by piece by a counter-conspiracy overseen by the president and his followers. This is the party line according to Q, at least: "trust the plan" and everything will be fine.

As a world conspiracy, QAnon is also open to other ideologies and narratives that have little to do with Q's founding myth. Examples include 5G cell phone tower conspiracies, forced vaccinations and the restoration of the German Reich's political status. Whatever the narrative: in the eyes of QAnon followers, Trump will fix it. Esoteric self-improvement

## Deep State

In general, the term "deep state" refers to a situation in which political or military entities act against the political leadership. In recent years, it has been appropriated by U.S. conspiracy ideologues and has become synonymous with an alleged political plot against Donald Trump – as a way of discrediting Trump's critics. According to the QAnon conspiracy ideology, Trump is fighting for good, while the Deep State is on the side of evil.

| **September 25, 2019**

## Arizona

Mit einem Brecheisen beschädigt ein QAnon-Anhänger den Altar einer Kirche und kennzeichnet das Gebäude als „das Böse“. Dabei schreit er angeblich, dass die katholische Kirche Menschenhandel unterstütze. Online nutzt er QAnon-Hashtags.<sup>12</sup>

| **December 30, 2019**

## Montana

A mother is arrested on suspicion of planning to abduct her daughter, who was in the care of a foster family. Other QAnon followers are said to have been involved in the plan.<sup>13</sup>

| **March 26, 2020**

## Kentucky

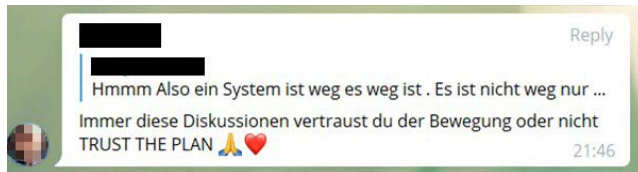
A woman is accused of kidnapping

or eschatological concepts linked to Christianity can also be effortlessly incorporated into the QAnon tapestry.

## A Focus on Action

However, supporters are not necessarily content to simply trust in the “plan”. QAnon is not supposed to be a sleeping pill for its followers; after all, the fact that Q’s prophecies regularly do not come true demands a lot from its supporters. A part of the movement has therefore dedicated itself to deciphering supposedly secret messages that circulate around

the world. This is also due in part to a conspiracy like QAnon’s desire to prompt its followers to take action via its “no time to waste” rhetoric rather than to stop and cultivate a critical understanding of the world. The focus, ultimately, is on destroying this evil conspiracy swiftly and decisively. Every possible chance to do so is framed as the last one to save the world: whether by converting other people through social media channels, slandering the alleged elite as pedophilic murderers, creating and spreading propaganda or even committing violent crimes. The linguistic dehumanization of persons who fit QAnon’s image of the enemy allows



*Doubt is not permitted in the QAnon community. Instead, a motto – trust the plan – is repeated ad nauseam. Source: Telegram.*

her twin daughters from their grandmother, the children’s legal guardian. The woman shares QAnon narratives and sovereign citizen movement content online.<sup>14</sup>

## | March 31, 2020

### California

A young man drives his truck into a group of peaceful Black Lives Matter protestors. Nobody is hurt. Previously, the man had organized a “civil disobedience” training camp on his family’s land. He had also previously shared QAnon conspiracy stories with friends.<sup>15</sup>

## | 29. April 2020

### Washington

A QAnon supporter armed with knives drives from Illinois to Washington and threatens to kill US presidential candidate Joe Biden.

its followers to shake off their inhibitions. Scholars refer to this as dangerous speech, something which precedes violent action. The more that people radicalize themselves through conspiracy ideologies, the more they are convinced of the bloodthirstiness and barbarity of the alleged conspirators, and the more violence appears to be a justified means of resistance against this evil.<sup>21</sup>

## Antisemitism

This tendency is particularly problematic, as conspiracy ideologues go well beyond simply referring to groups as a whole when naming and shaming “the guilty ones”, as they call them. Prominent Jewish people, such as George Soros or the Rothschild family, are often mentioned by name. This flirtation with anti-semitism is no coincidence. The myth of the “worldwide Jewish conspiracy” has been propagated in Christian societies since the Middle Ages and has been repeatedly revised, revisited and updated since then. QAnon also makes clear references to Christian fundamentalist messages and old antisemitic stereotypes. Blood libels – conspiracies about the ritual murder of children – can be found in a modernized form in QAnon narratives (such as Pizzagate/ Pedogate). In addition, followers rely on classic antisemitic accusations in portraying Jews as servants of Satan. Furthermore, the myth of the “worldwide Jewish/Zionist conspiracy” is also openly communicated in group chats on Telegram.

She livestreams the journey and her subsequent arrest via Facebook. In the video she openly refers to QAnon.<sup>16</sup>

### | June 11, 2020

#### Massachusetts

A QAnon supporter livestreams a police chase he is involved in across two US states. His five children are in the car. The chase ends when he rams a police car and drives into a tree. No one is injured.<sup>17</sup>

### | August 12, 2020

#### Texas

A 30-year-old woman pursues two cars and eventually rams one of them several times. She tells the police that the victim had “kidnapped a girl for human trafficking”. She explains that she wants to “save the child from pedophiles”. Multiple sources state that she is a QAnon supporter.<sup>18</sup>

## Blood Libel

The antisemitic conspiracy narrative of blood libel originates from the Middle Ages. It claims that Jews cruelly murder Christian children for ritual purposes, one of which involves harvesting their blood to make matzo (an unleavened flatbread) for Passover. This purely fictitious conspiracy narrative contributed significantly to the murder of hundreds of thousands of people of Jewish faith during the Black Death pogroms and has been revived in modified forms in the centuries since.

## | October 1, 2020

### Utah

A mother is arrested for the alleged abduction of her own son, who was in the custody of Child Protective Services. On Facebook, the woman distributed QAnon content that specifically referred to Child Protective Services.<sup>19</sup>

## | October 7, 2020

### Michigan

Thirteen men are charged with an alleged kidnapping plot. According to the charge, they wanted to kidnap US Governor of Michigan Gretchen Whitmer. At least one of the accused was said to have distributed QAnon content.<sup>20</sup>

# The Overlap Between QAnon Followers and “Reichsbürger” Groups

In addition to clear references to “Q” that were evident at the protests on August 1 and 29, 2020, against the German government’s COVID-19 measures, one other symbol was continually in attendance: the black, white and red imperial tricolor flag (known as the “Reichsflagge”) used by supporters of the “Reichsbürger” conspiracy ideology and by sovereignists.

Reichsbürger groups believe in the continued existence of a German “Reich”, or empire, and conclude that the Federal Republic of Germany is not a legal state. Instead, they believe Germany is still at war with the Allies, and it is this fictitious state of affairs that the “citizens of the Reich” seek to change. Their main concern is to establish what they see as a lack of sovereignty in Germany.<sup>22</sup>

At first glance, these concepts are difficult to reconcile with the belief in Donald Trump as a savior. In spring 2020, however, Reichsbürger followers and other sovereignists began to make favorable comments about QAnon as a result of the NATO exercise “DEFENDER-Europe 20”, which was scheduled to take place in the first half of 2020. The exercise was supposed to entail the largest deployment of US troops in 25 years. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe prevented it from taking place.

However, sovereignists flocking under the QAnon banner on Telegram were not deterred by this: both the QAnon and Reichsbürger conspiracy ideologies showed up in relevant channels and groups – some consisting of several thousand members – starting in February/March 2020. Meanwhile,



*In early 2020 QAnon, followers mixed with Reichsbürger groups on Telegram.  
Source: Telegram.*

an increasing number of celebrities have publicly embraced QAnon and Reichsbürger narratives, not least celebrity chef Attila Hildmann. What do the followers of the two conspiracy ideologies have in common?

**Antisemitism:** QAnon followers often believe in antisemitic stereotypes and the myth of the “worldwide Jewish conspiracy”. Reichsbürger groups share these beliefs.

**Government criticism:** The state and the government serve as bogeymen for both conspiracy ideologies. This has become especially evident during the COVID 19 crisis: to the followers of both ideologies the pandemic is a secret government-controlled conspiracy against “the people”. In their conspiracy ideologies the state is controlled by a foreign power.

**Promises of salvation:** In contrast to purely doom-oriented conspiracy ideologies, ideological sovereignism and QAnon offer promises of salvation: Reichsbürger groups offset the hopelessness of their world view with concrete tips on how to achieve the goal of regaining the sovereignty they crave. QAnon builds on this ideology by presenting its followers with the prospect of power, eschatological Christian fundamentalist ideas, and Trump as a savior.

These points are explained in detail on Belltower.News. There remains a lack of clarity as to why the US president is recognized as a savior figure by Reichsbürger groups. It is similarly unclear how the QAnon community can view this man – so obviously part of the actual US elite – as an opponent to a hated fictitious elite. What is certain, however, is that Trump has presented himself as an outsider ever since his first election campaign, and this narrative is likely to have solidified his acceptance in these circles.

# Down the Rabbit Hole – Radicalization in the Time of COVID-19

The numbers clearly show that during the COVID-19 crisis, many people have fallen prey to conspiracy narratives. The support for QAnon is particularly dangerous, as shown by the cases of violence in the USA. For its followers, the conspiracy ideology is not a hobby or an entertaining paper chase on the Internet; it is an all-encompassing worldview that does not allow for any counterarguments. Its impact is only intensified through the echo chambers of social media and may ultimately lead to violent outcomes.

Conspiracy myths can prompt their followers to lose touch with reality. This can be clearly seen in the case of Marco L.<sup>IV</sup>, who can serve here as a case study for many other relatively prominent people. L. radicalized himself to the point where he believed filming his face while committing an obvious crime would be a good idea. His is not an isolated case – it serves as an example of a very real danger in society today.

In April 2020, a video was shared in several German QAnon Telegram groups. The video showed a young man

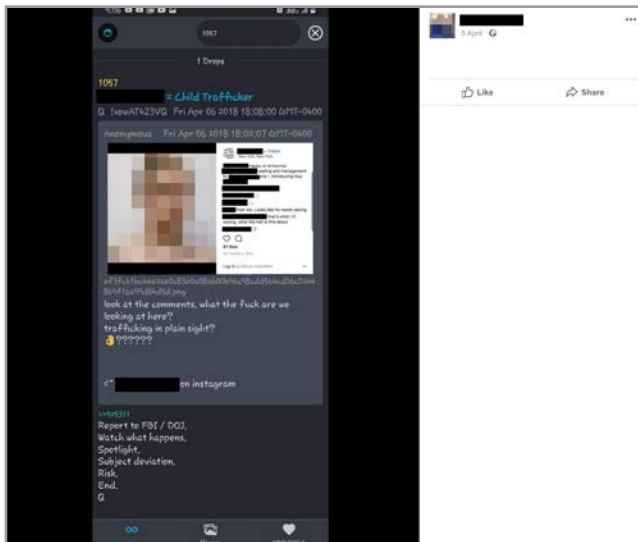


*The video showing Marco L. damaging the cell phone tower is shared in QAnon Telegram groups. Source: Telegram.*

with a bleeding wound on his forehead who is using a pair of garden shears to cut the wires of a cell phone tower. Afterwards, he looks somberly into the camera and says: "I expect you to go out and destroy this shit, too. I'm going to find the next one right away and cut that one up as well." The man in the video is Marco L. – and he is far from the only one to destroy cell phone towers and call on others to do the same. During the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, various conspiracy narratives surrounding 5G telecommunications technology have prompted followers worldwide to commit similar acts of vandalism.

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<sup>IV</sup> Name has been changed by the editorial staff.



In early April 2020, L. shares a Q-drop on Facebook.  
Source: Facebook.

Marco L. posted this video on Facebook himself without heed for the legal consequences. A short while later, the police searched his apartment, during which Marco L. supposedly told the officers present that he wanted to destroy more cell phone towers as they “endangered his health”. He then spent a brief period in a psychiatric institution. Later he used Facebook to boast about the crime

and the fine he had to pay, which he said was EUR 30,000. He repeatedly urged his Facebook followers to take action against 5G masts as well.

A look at Marco L.’s timeline reveals that he appears to have radicalized himself during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to February 2020, he rarely posted on Facebook. Like many others, he seems to have used the social media platform mainly to send birthday wishes. His content prior to his radicalization mainly consisted of shirtless selfies or “funny” misogynistic quotes about sports and women. Then something changed. First, he started to post content indicating that he was mentally unwell. These posts



Other Facebook users ask L. about his whereabouts. He replies that he was released. Another user wants to know how high the penalty L. had to pay was. L. shares the information freely, stating that the fine was EUR 30,000.



*At the end of February, L. begins to share disinformation about the government: "Our people have never been so divided and hateful, and never has there been more terror, more crime, more rape, and more knife stabbings, as with this government."*

touched on isolation, depression and being shunned by society at large. At the end of February, the first post appeared that was critical of the government.

In mid-March, L. began to post more ideological narratives – at virtually the same time as the contact restrictions were imposed by the Federal Government (March 2). From this time on, he posted on Facebook several times a day. The content ranged from conspiracy myths about 5G and

chemtrails to openly anti-migrant and racist sentiments. On March 19, he wrote a post referring to the German government's measures taken against the pandemic: "I have always managed to not let myself be frightened and to get through life as well as I could. But now I am afraid! [...] I'm not afraid of the COVID-19 virus; I'm afraid of what the state powers are making of it."

Marco L.'s profile clearly shows that he is a QAnon follower. On March 24, he started posting QAnon-related content. In this instance, it was a text he had written himself about the COVID-19 restrictions, Donald Trump and the deep state. Marco L.'s profile shows that the worldview propagated by QAnon is highly adaptable as it is open to so many other conspiracy myths; it is a puzzle whose pieces consist of actual crimes (like the cases of abuse in the Catholic Church), established conspiracy narratives and the more recent fictitious development of Donald Trump as a savior.

In the weeks prior to the attack on the cell phone tower, Marco L.'s social media output underlined that he was becoming increasingly radicalized. As well as repeatedly sharing videos of popular QAnon groups, he produced his own videos containing ideological content, which were there shared within the community. He also repeatedly shared the sources of his radicalization, including alleged "documentaries" that were available on YouTube (a staple



L. further radicalizes himself, as the passages in blue indicate: "I am not scared of the coronavirus; I am scared of what the state authorities will do with it. I am scared of our policies. For the first time in my life I am scared of the people at the top! [...]"

"[...] Those who make decisions. I am scared about never being able to leave my house without fear again. I am scared they may forbid me from hugging my grandma and grandpa. What will be next? I want to be free! For the first time I can feel what those in power are capable of. They can make us scared of the virus and lock ourselves inside. People, we are under house arrest. They don't just lock us up – they do so in a way that makes us feel grateful for being locked up. It is unbelievable to me that we let them do this to us when we're scared of a virus. I was surprised, but those in power were not. [...] Those in power know the power we have, which is why they need to make us scared of the virus. This is what allows them to divide us and govern us. Your neighbor or you friend suddenly becomes someone who could infect you. We're all supposed to stay at home by ourselves. We're only supposed to go outside if necessary. I say: now is the time to go out on the streets and not stay home. We should go out and prove our own power to the powerful. We should scare those who scare us! We cannot let them do everything and anything to us just because a flu called corona is going around." Source: Facebook.



*Like many other QAnon followers, Marco L. shares content about the NATO exercise. Source: Facebook.*

for many QAnon followers), many of which are standard resources for radicalization. Marco L.'s behavior on Facebook was also striking in the way that he "liked" some pages referring to the Reichsbürger scene – among them groups focusing on the DEFENDER-Europe 20 exercise.

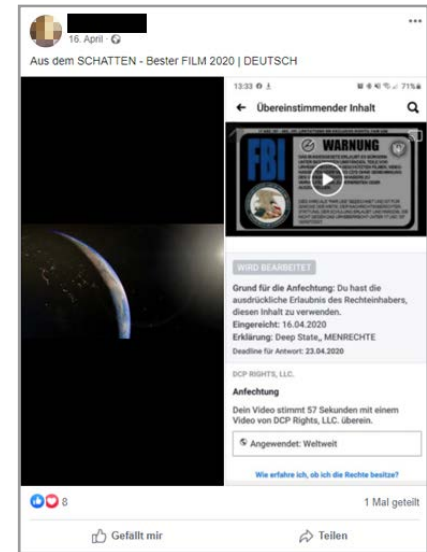
The increasing frequency of his posts as well as the intensity of his statements serves as proof of Marco L.'s radicalization. On April 2, he announced: "For those who think I'm joking

about what I say, I don't want anything to do with you when it's all over!". This post generated a great deal of encouragement, with virtually none of his Facebook friends contradicting his poorly sketched out theories. His actions were praised in the ideological scene: his video showing the damage to the cell phone tower was shared by QAnon supporters on Telegram and Facebook. Under another user's post referring to the attack, Marco L. confessed the crime and willingly shared a newspaper clipping.

In the weeks following the crime, Marco L. was extremely active on social media. On May 6, the German government loosened the COVID-19 measures substantially. Eleven days later, L. posted 22 times in one day, commenting on various conspiracy myths, sharing selfies and uploading nature photos.

After this time, he became less active online, even going so far as to ignore many posts from other conspiracy

followers on his timeline. On August 20, he began to share ideological content again. At present, he occasionally issues over 20 posts per day, primarily containing ideological content.



*L. shares "Out of Shadows", an ideological video promoted by many QAnon followers. Source: Facebook.*



*In mid-May L. shares explicit QAnon content. Source: Facebook.*



*A Facebook post by L. reads: "If you think you're too small to change anything, go ahead and switch off a 5G cell phone tower". Source: Facebook.*

# “Trust the Plan Soon Becomes Be the Plan.”



Miro Dittrich

## Interview with Miro Dittrich

Miro Dittrich is the head of the de:hate project, which presents its findings on right-wing alternative online spaces and QAnon in this fourth monitoring report. Anne Grandjean spoke with him a few days before the US elections in 2020.

### *Why do conspiracy narratives find such fertile ground in our society today?*

*People live in fragmented societies where opportunities to meet others in traditional settings are dwindling in general – and in particular in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, people long to be part of a community, and some find them online. They also long for narratives that give meaning to their lives – a meaning that many no longer find in everyday life. These people feel they are merely doing their job, without any deeper significance attached. As a result, they feel lost in the world, and this can lead them to find comfort in right-wing extremist narratives. Examples include the fight against Islam, migration and the Jewish community. We are now seeing a move toward conspiracy ideologies, which position the recipient as a great warrior helping in the fight against Satanists and the sexual molestation and torture of children. Ultimately, though, the fight is also against the Jews, as much of it is based on antisemitic prejudice.*

*The question that remains is: Can we counteract this by weaving a grand democratic narrative? Can we strengthen communities again and combat*

the fragmentation of our society?

**You have observed radicalized groups on the Internet for years. What do you find striking about QAnon?**

*Up to now, I had only seen this rejection of reality among Reichsbürger groups. Even in that scene, however, it was not to the extent of QAnon and not in a manner so difficult to fathom. In any case, the heightened cult status, the notion that a surrogate family is created for Q's followers and the speed of radicalization are all noteworthy. The ability to link QAnon to many other conspiracy narratives is also striking, as is the inclusion of topical issues. For the first time, an ideology also features a powerful person who appears to be taking a stand with the followers of the conspiracy ideology. They see President Trump as a warrior in their own ranks.*

**What makes QAnon so palatable for the masses?**

*QAnon draws on the work of many groups and individuals, including numerical codes, general gimmicks and already established narratives, such as Pizza-gate – all elements echoed by QAnon. In other words, QAnon can be compared to a puzzle made of many functioning pieces that had already been created and*

*which are now being placed side by side. Because of this and the fact that followers do not have to believe in every single story, QAnon is very successful.*

*In addition, the topic of children is always a successful mobilization tactic, because it puts the followers on the side of the alleged good guys. Similarly, the topic of peace is one proven to have worked at the Vigils for Peace in 2014: "If you are against us, you are against peace. And if you are against peace, you are a bad person". QAnon's logic is similar: "If you are against us, you are against the protection of children. That makes you part of the pedophile ring. You support them".*

*Finally, QAnon works as a game that you can follow, with new puzzles, tasks and characters that can be engaged with online. This self-acquired "knowledge" leaves a strong impression on QAnon followers.*

**In what way is COVID-19 contributing to the spread of QAnon in Germany?**

*History has shown that during every crisis people fall prey to conspiracy ideologies. This tends to be due to a perceived loss of control, which occurs when traditional authority figures do not know how to act. This creates uncertainty. People who fall prey to conspiracy*

ideologies are the final believers in an ordered world. An escape into an ideological world can also be seen as a coping strategy: their followers are overwhelmed by the fact that an accidental mutation of a virus in China has paralyzed the whole world. They need central actors who are remain in control and who actually control everything. This is a narrative that gives people a sense of security.

Even if the stories of QAnon sound very complex and impenetrable, they are based on a simple black-and-white world with clear "bad guys" and "good guys". According to them, instead of solving structural problems, everything will be fine if, say, 10 bad people are eliminated. This provides grounds for hope.

At the same time, COVID-19 is a special case in that people were isolated from their traditional environments, resulting in a strong desire for community. In essence, conspiracy communities are communities in which ideas are exchanged. I think people felt like they were alone. Then there is the fact that we have all been spending more time online. These figures have increased across the board, and this is partly how people have come into contact with such conspiracy narratives.

**Q's predictions never come true. Why doesn't this lead to the disillusionment of their followers?**

QAnon narratives fulfill certain functions that remain in place even if the statements themselves are falsified. In any case, predictions that were demonstrably incorrect are confined largely to the beginning of the movement. At some point, Q learned that vague prophecies are more difficult to verify or dispute. Many safeguards have been put in place by the community and Q. For example, if a statement does not come true on a certain date, but does so two years later, it still has come true according to Q's followers. In other words, they try to interpret Q's older posts by analyzing current events.

Furthermore, Q claims that some of their posts are not addressed to their own followers, but, for instance, to security authorities. According to this theory, by raising awareness of the issue Q prevents certain things from happening or triggers other events. In principle, it is true that failed prophecies lead followers of conspiracy communities or cults to turn away from it.

However, we also see that communities that survive false prophecies have very strong social skills and coping mechanisms, allowing them to endure frustration and protect themselves and their beliefs. In fact,

we often see that these people tend to believe in the prophecies even more strongly later on.

***This seems like a decoupling from reality, which outsiders may find hard to understand. How can this be explained?***

QAnon followers are convinced of the existence of fictitious conspiracies that have already been invalidated in public discourse. They mutually facilitate a deeper understanding of the world, which, in extreme cases, drives them to use violence to fight for what they believe is "good". This kind of irrational, paranoid view can be compared to a "collective delusion" where objective facts play virtually no role and where followers repeatedly reinforce each other's beliefs. It is important to differentiate this phenomenon from mental illness. Conspiracy ideologies should not be pathologized. However, there are parallels to individual psychological delusions in their group dynamics.

***How dangerous do you believe QAnon is?***

I believe QAnon has great potential to be dangerous. In the mixed scenes that started to form when the crisis took hold – such as the Querdenker movement – we observed large, very disparate groups coming together with no common goal – and this often resulted in conflict. In contrast to this is the community effect

promoted by QAnon. There is no leader; it is a community. QAnon followers are under great pressure to act due to apocalyptic conspiracy narratives and the fact that many of them concern children. They feel they have the right to use violence. At the same time, the alternative – the "redemption" or "rapture" – is a purely fictitious event that cannot take place – because there are no mass arrests, because there are no bunkers, because the people in question have not committed any crimes, as Q claims. If this fictitious event is considered to be the solution for the epic struggle of good against evil, there is a risk that people will eventually take matters into their own hands. If they become convinced that political solutions are not possible and that only an external, extreme event can save them, they may decide to take action independently. In that case, "Trust the plan" soon becomes "be the plan".

***To QAnon followers, Donald Trump is a savior figure. What impact will the results of the US elections have on these people?***

If Trump is not re-elected, the community will split into factions. There will be those who will say: this is all part of the plan, so trust the plan. He's doing his work in private now rather than in public, because he can achieve much more that way. However, there will also be people who will say, "okay, maybe all this isn't true

*after all", and who will then turn away from QAnon. Still, there will also be those who are convinced of this epic battle of good against evil and of the narrative that the Satanists who want to exterminate us all have won and that we can no longer trust the plan – with the result that we must now take action and use violence ourselves.*

### **Can deplatforming counteract this?**

*It is important to deprive QAnon of its communication channels and preferably to delete them altogether, so that contact with conspiracy ideologies is made more difficult and fewer people are drawn into this delusional world. At this point, however, it is too late in some ways because the people who already believe in it will not stop believing in it. As the various social media platforms have let QAnon go on for so long, a large base has now been built up, a core of which can continue to exist on alternative platforms – on Telegram in Germany, for example – even when established channels are shut down. Furthermore, this worldview continues to perform its desired role, as seen with Pizzagate, for example.*

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<sup>v</sup> This campaign bears no relation to the children's rights organization Save the Children.

*QAnon has already evolved, and we are now seeing more accessible variations like the "Save the Children" narrative<sup>v</sup>. As long as the need for it exists, and as long as it continues to lead very different kinds of people to believe in these conspiracy stories, the next story can come at any time, lull people in, and become big again.*

### **What happens if there is a vaccine? Will QAnon disappear as a mass phenomenon?**

*One problem is that we are currently focusing primarily on offline events like protests and the actions of individual actors. Generally speaking, these movements are subject to a decay process. They disintegrate. When the acute crisis is no longer there, they disappear from the public view. However, the people who have been drawn into this alternate reality, who have learned to inform themselves through "alternative" media, who believe in conspiracy myths, will not change their world view; they will simply not be as visible anymore. It is as if they are asleep, waiting. This development can be compared to a mushroom: we see that online networks are forming, that the roots are growing. Once a crisis comes around, this is effectively the signal triggering the sudden growth of the mushroom. We see the body of the fungus, we see the fruit. When the crisis passes, the body disappears again. The roots, however, still exist – and will grow even bigger mushrooms during*

*the next crisis.*

*This was what happened during the Ukrainian crisis. The Vigils for Peace are another example: while the protests themselves have disappeared, the online networks are still in place and have continued to grow. Even if the fungus disappears now, the infrastructure will be stronger when it reappears. There are more alternative media sources and there are more people living in an alternate reality. If another crisis comes along – an economic one, for example – we will see more mushrooms.*

# Insights Gained from Monitoring QAnon – Theses and Predictions

## 1. QAnon as a Morbid Game

Superficially, QAnon is like a paper chase: followers and curious onlookers are repeatedly asked to question all information and to always do their own research on current affairs. They are also expected to help win the fight against the alleged conspirators. However, the alleged “research” happens exclusively within the conspiracy's bubble and is therefore not fact-based. Thus, the outside world – both online and offline – becomes a kind of game that leads followers to become lost in the depths of the conspiracy and to isolate themselves from their environment. All current developments are placed within the context of the conspiracy's worldview. On this level, QAnon is comparable to an alternate reality game (ARG).<sup>23</sup> Q's followers interpret all information collected within the framework of their worldview and draw incorrect conclusions accordingly.

## 2. QAnon's Links to Right-wing Extremism

The QAnon ideology paints an avowedly apocalyptic world view, which parallels right-wing extremist ideologies. This is not the only link the two share, however: right-wing

extremists and QAnon followers are also united on a range of conspiracy narratives, including, for example, the apparent goal to create a “New World Order” (NWO), the uniform media and the role of the deep state.

## 3. Is QAnon a Cult?

Another term associated with QAnon is “cult”, and there are some factors in support of the notion that the movement is indeed a cult. One of them is the worship of Q and of Donald Trump, insofar as the latter is interpreted as the “savior” of QAnon. Similar to various sects and cults, QAnon regularly issues prophecies that – despite rarely coming true – receive an irrational amount of support from followers. In addition, the function fulfilled by the QAnon community for its members has cult-like characteristics: Q isolates their followers from their old environment, while the other Q followers become a kind of substitute family. Other aspects do not support this thesis, however: for example, there is no evidence of systematic abuse (economic, sexual or any other kind) of Q followers by Q. Furthermore, followers are not actively prevented from leaving the conspiracy ideology, which is common in some cults. Even so, this is the nature of QAnon: provided

that the interaction has taken place online, it is easier to go underground than would be the case if the interaction had occurred offline. Nevertheless, it is useful to understand the parallels between QAnon and cults in order to be able to assess the danger posed by the conspiracy.

#### **4. QAnon's Links to Christian Fundamentalism**

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QAnon quotes Bible verses in their posts on 8kun. Additionally, the framework of the ideology resembles Christian fundamentalist eschatology – or the notion of the end time – which describes a final transformative event that is supposed to bring about the victory of good against evil, also known as “the rapture”. In the US, some groups of evangelical Christians are open to the ideas espoused by this conspiracy. In Germany, a recurring hallmark of QAnon followers is a depiction of the flaming sword of the archangel Michael.

#### **5. QAnon and the “Satanic Panic”**

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The conspiracy ideology of QAnon and its call to “Save the Children”<sup>vi</sup> suggest a frequency of Satanic ritual abuse that is completely out of touch with reality. As well as playing into antisemitic myths, it is reminiscent of the “Satanic panic” that primarily gripped the USA in the 1980s and 1990s, but which also took hold in Germany. This period led to the fabrication of many reports about Satanic ritual

abuse.<sup>24</sup>

#### **6. COVID-19 as a Driving Factor of QAnon**

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The development of the ideology during the COVID-19 pandemic has consolidated QAnon's role as a global phenomenon. Alongside English-speaking countries and Germany, QAnon is particularly popular in Russia and Brazil, as indicated in a report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.<sup>25</sup>

#### **7. Loss of Confidence in Democratic Means of Political Involvement**

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The desire for external salvation through a unique event is characteristic of considerable individual and social frustration – and, especially in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, of a perceived loss of control. It is also an indication that supporters of conspiracy ideologies no longer perceive the democratic means at their disposal as practical for bringing about fundamental social change. This quest for salvation could be a function that QAnon fulfils for its followers.

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<sup>vi</sup> This has no connection to the children's rights organization Save the Children (<https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2020-press-releases/save-the-children-statement-on-use-of-its-name-in-unaffiliated-c>).

## 8. QAnon as a Coping Strategy

From wellness bloggers to the classic profile of the far-right extremist and from evangelicals to esoteric thinkers, QAnon is adept at radicalizing people from very different walks of life. One reason could be that QAnon allows for connections to be drawn to many different conspiracy narratives, which appeal to different groups of people. By questioning the welfare of children in particular (as evidenced by #savethechildren<sup>vii</sup>) QAnon is able to mobilize and unite people from a host of different backgrounds. Like other conspiracy ideologies, QAnon also fulfils a number of psychological functions for its followers, e.g. a need for control or belonging. To prevent such conspiracy theories from spreading as they do today, more attention must be paid to the functions they serve.<sup>26</sup>

## 9. QAnon Accelerates the Globalization of the Far-right Extremist Scene

In the USA, the far-right extremist scene and QAnon share the same digital spaces. Many conspiracy narratives and much disinformation – often focusing on current world events – that can be attributed to QAnon is spread online in the USA first, after which they quickly reach German

QAnon groups and are translated into German. In Germany, QAnon followers are also often connected to far-right groups. This is how the disinformation and conspiracy narratives that originate in QAnon groups become part of broader far-right discourse. This is a dynamic that also exists in other countries. Because the original narratives always refer to current news, a steady global flow of conspiracy narratives and disinformation is created in this way. QAnon is therefore adept at accelerating the globalization of the right-wing extremist scene.

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<sup>vii</sup> See VI.

# Recommendations for Action

QAnon poses a genuine threat to democratic civil society both online and offline. The conspiracy ideology and its success are symptoms of a fragmented society. In its strategy paper published in September 2020, the Amadeu Antonio Foundation set out concrete measures to prevent the continued spread of QAnon, the radicalization of its followers, and the formation of similar ideological groups. These recommendations include drawing attention to the threat posed by conspiracy ideologies to democracy as a whole; thus far, these recommendations have not been explicitly mentioned in any federal programs for the prevention of extremism and promotion of democracy. However, in order to develop strategies and provide advice, these programs need to be adapted and provided with additional funding. The Foundation also has a number of recommendations on how to deal with QAnon.

## **1. Conspiracy ideologies like QAnon should be labeled as such and be actively opposed.**

Within German scientific discourse, the term “conspiracy theory” has been widely deemed as misguided. While theories in science are based on facts that can be verified or falsified, QAnon is based primarily on fictitious narratives. To allow for a more selective analysis, its ideas can

be called conspiracy myths or conspiracy narratives. They form a closed world view or ideology wherein each individual conspiracy narrative is integrated into this overall outlook. QAnon's followers interpret all past and current events from the perspective of this fictitious world they have created. QAnon is therefore a conspiracy ideology and should be labeled as such by the general public.

## **2. Pandemic control measures and prevention of radicalization must be tackled in tandem.**

A crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic leads to major social change and restrictions. Direct communication about it should not be left to chance or the (in)competence of the media. Instead, the state should develop its own concepts to be implemented at supra-regional, regional and local level. People use Google, YouTube and Telegram to search for information. They should not only be presented with large volumes of disinformation; reliable, verified government sources should also be in evidence. At the same time, the population's information-gathering skills and media literacy as a whole should be improved in order to prevent people from unintentionally drifting into conspiracy-based communities that offer lurid and exonerating models that miraculously have an answer for everything.

### **3. Security authorities must become well versed in conspiracy ideologies and continue to hone their expertise in this area.**

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Conspiracy ideologues construct alternate realities that are disconnected from fact-based reality and can become a threat to democracy because they are able to radicalize a large number of people. Conspiracy ideologies like QAnon can even lead to violent crimes. Security authorities have to recognize this danger early, take it seriously, and take protective measures for those who are considered enemies in the eyes of conspiracy ideologues. After all, QAnon is no longer an online fringe phenomenon; it is a movement with hundreds of thousands of followers worldwide who discuss and contemplate committing acts of violence. To be able to prevent violence, digital hate communities need to be observed by experts. Categories like "right-wing extremism", "left-wing extremism" and "Islamism" are no longer sufficient for describing the sheer breadth of radical ideas in today's society – as shown by the heterogeneous following of QAnon. Digital change requires new categories to be created for extremist phenomena that endanger democracy. Such phenomena arise and evolve more rapidly in online spaces than they do offline. It is therefore essential for security authorities to develop, expand and keep refreshing their expertise in this area and pass this knowledge on to all levels of their hierarchies.

### **4. Advisory services must be established and strengthened.**

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Reaching people who have entered the world of a conspiracy ideology is not easy. There is a lack of experience on how best to set up programs, policies and mechanisms that could help facilitate a long-term departure from this world. Relatives play a central role in this process, because they usually notice the radicalization at an early stage and are still important enough to conspiracy believers that personal conversations are possible. Nevertheless, this is a challenge that requires the involvement of professional help. So far, however, there are few advisor services available, while those that do exist are currently overburdened. The establishment and financing of a nationwide counseling structure is urgently required.

# Informationen, Advice and Support


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## de:hate

Analyses, case studies and professional assessments on hate speech


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## No world order

Action against conspiracy ideologies and antisemitism

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## Support these projects for democratic culture online

The Amadeu Antonio Foundation supports a democratic civil society that consistently opposes right-wing extremism, racism, antisemitism and group-focused misanthropy in all its forms.

To this end, it backs initiatives throughout Germany that are involved in youth work, school, art and cultural projects, the protection and empowerment of victims, community networks and other areas. The Foundation has lent its support to more than 1,600 projects to date.

The Amadeu Antonio Foundation steps in itself when it identifies gaps and shortcomings in government policies and programs or civic activities. Through the use of analyses, pilot schemes, materials, training and consulting, it tests new approaches to processing current developments as a means of helping skilled workers and regional networks. The Foundation's projects address areas such as:

- Exploring the current forms taken by right-wing extremism, such as antifeminism, civilian militias, so-called "Reichsbürger" who reject the legitimacy of the modern German state, and nationalist settlers
- Preventing antisemitism and conspiracy ideologies from being used as a neo-fascist (also known as "Third Position" or "Querfront") strategy
- Combating structural and systemic backgrounds and effects of racism

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- Tracing the parallels and interrelationships between racism, antisemitism and other forms of group-based misanthropy
- Addressing hate speech online and finding ways to show civic courage in the digital realm
- Facilitating the transfer of knowledge between science, politics and practice

The foundation is named after Amadeu Antonio, a black man who was beaten to death by young right-wing extremists in Eberswalde, Brandenburg, in 1990. He was one of the first of more than 200 people who have been killed due to right-wing extremist violence since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The Amadeu Antonio Foundation is supported by the Freudenberg Foundation and is a member of the Federal Association of German Foundations. It is officially recognized as an institution of political education and is a signatory of the Transparent Civil Society Initiative.

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de:hate report #01

# QAnon in Germany



Removed from reality, antisemitic and dangerous: once virtually exclusive to the USA, the conspiracy ideology QAnon made the leap to Germany in spring 2020. User data collected from Telegram and YouTube – supported by findings drawn from qualitative monitoring methods – show that this development occurred in parallel with the COVID-19 pandemic. The first edition of the de:hate report shines the spotlight on the channels and groups that contributed to this development, the form taken by radicalization in conjunction with QAnon, and the underlying social conditions that have enabled this conspiracy-based ideology to thrive. The analyses and forecasts in the report are supplemented by specific recommendations on action to be taken by politicians, the media, security agencies and the general public.