



Rogue fan fiction: the peculiar case of QAnon

Description

QAnon is the alias of an entity (i.e an individual or a group) that claims to be an operative within the US Intelligence Service. The entity works undercover and discloses tantalising facts about how the US military brought Trump into power to overcome the Deep State.

The Deep State is that clandestine and pernicious organisation led by the Clintons, the Democratic Party, the Rothschilds and other nefarious interests that want to advance the cause of globalisation and liberalism, and to destroy America. Actors in the Deep State also abduct children and support child sex-trafficking!

The Special Counsel Robert Mueller is ostensibly investigating Russian influence in the 2016 election, but QAnon followers know this is a ruse. As an unwitting tool of Trump's genius, Mueller will in fact expose this Deep State corruption. I think Vladimir Putin is helping as well. Believers promote several variants around this general theme.

The Q code

Most mainstream media outlets have been reluctant to give such conspiracy narratives airtime. If these narratives are repeated often enough on the Internet, they will show up in search engines with ever greater frequency. The QAnon conspiracy theory group fell under the limelight at a Trump rally this week, with conspicuous placards brandishing the QAnon logo.

This QAnon has nothing to do with QR codes, Q in the James Bond stories, the Q in LGBTQ, Spike Milligan's 1970s tv show, or Steven Fry's QI programme. The Q of QAnon is meant to reference the security clearance grade of the anonymous rogue source in the Intelligence Service.

The conspiracy theorists and their followers see Donald Trump as their genius hero. Recent posts from QAnon apparently delight in the fact that they now feature in the mainstream news, even if just as an oddity.

Some commentators suggest that the QAnon narratives are an attempt by extreme right-wing Trump supporters to make sense of Trump's chaotic tweets and utterances, most of which he repeats many times, as if a code. For example, the number 17 seems to hold significance to QAnons. Q is the 17th letter in the alphabet. Trump had said he visited Washington 17 times before the election. He recently tweeted about "17 Angry Democrats", an arbitrary figure upped from 13 the week before.

Many commentators think that this particular conspiracy movement had its origins in a story that circulated online about a supposed child sex ring run by the Clintons in the basement of a pizzeria. This stupid story prompted one man with a gun to show up at the alleged pizzeria. It didn't even have a basement. There are other examples of people acting as if these stories are real. Some celebrities have been depicted as villains in these narratives and vilified without cause.

Some critics argue that this cultish nonsense indicates the death throes of hard-line Trump supporters who in the face of chaotic and aberrant national leadership can only resort now to wishful thinking and made up stories that try to make order out of the chaos.

Art of the ridiculous

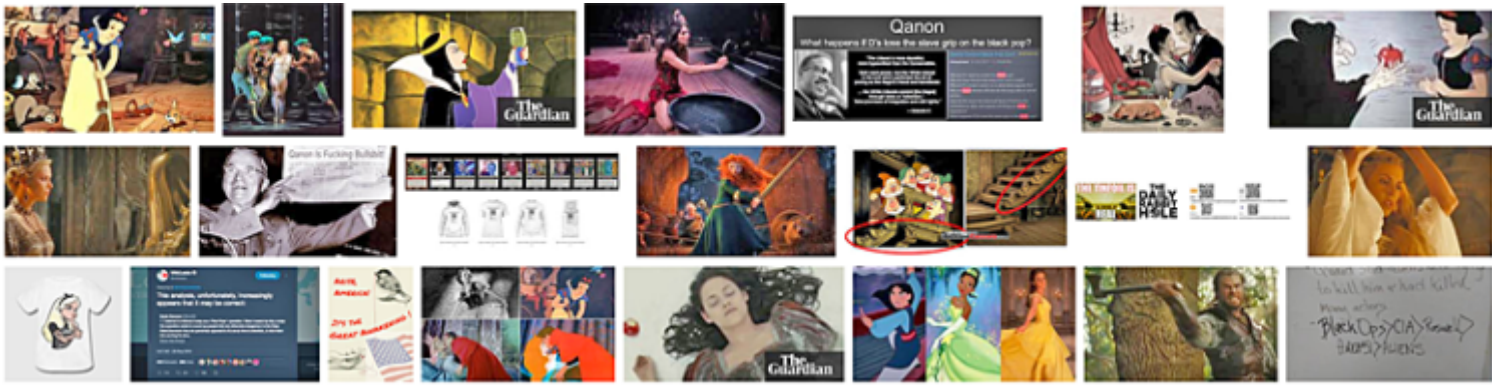
Were it not that the movement belongs to the humourless American extreme right wing it could be a joke, an exercise in the imagination or an art piece, and perhaps it is for some, including the initial perpetrators of the conspiracy theory.

The US broadcaster and Trump supporter Alex Jones famously runs a conspiracy website (Infowars). As a defence in a custody battle with his ex-wife, his lawyers defended Jones's fits of rage by saying that [Jones is a performance artist](#). His rantings in numerous online videos are just a performance. To think otherwise would be like vilifying Jack Nicholson for his performance as the Joker in *Batman*. Is the QAnon phenomenon performance art?

Fan fiction

At least one commentator has described the QAnon craze as [an exercise in fan fiction](#) where followers of a well-known novel or film contribute stories around the characters, filling in the gaps and constructing scenarios the original authors never considered. Fan fiction authors target popular stories such as *Star Trek* and the *Harry Potter* series.

Unlikely narratives that introduce sinister surveillance, alien creatures, weird science, or magic into actual or plausible real-life events are standard fare in contemporary story-telling. Think of *The Truman Show*, *Dr Who*, *The X-files*, and *Men in Black*, which in turn draw on deep seated mythic themes.



I'm reminded of the first series of the hit tv series *Once Upon a Time* (2011), in which a small boy living in a twentieth first century American town entertains the fantasy fuelled by a book of fairy tales that his mother Regina is the Evil Queen, and his sympathetic school teacher is Snow White. In the series this turns out to be true.

In a later series the Wicked Witch of the West shows up and does battle with the Evil Queen. In one of many flash backs to the original fantasy stories we encounter the Wizard of Oz, the [snake oil salesman and con artist](#), a familiar figure in the current political context.

Child abduction myths

Child abduction recurs as a common theme in conspiracy stories as well as fiction. It's an evil against which anyone will object, and is a suitable charge to invoke anger against an adversary. The young boy in *Once Upon a Time* gets abducted by Peter Pan, the Pied Piper features at one stage, and the Wicked Witch steals Snow White's baby to cast a time-travelling spell.

Kirsi Sutherland reminded me yesterday about the Scottish myth of the *changeling*. When the fairies stole a child, they would substitute one of their own. This substitution story was a way of explaining the aberrant behaviour and appearance of a sickly child.

Of course, the Trump administration has been accused (with evidence) of separating children from their parents at the Mexican border. Conspiracy theories help invert the accusations levelled at the accused back onto the accuser.

What happens to conspiracy theories

Actual conspiracies to commit a crime, defraud, or to get information on political opponents from a foreign power are illegal. Is it ok to state that there is a conspiracy for which there is no evidence? Apparently, yes. The right to free speech (and its related rights to privacy, and against libel, inciting violence, etc) covers that.

One commentator has indicated that conspiracy theorists inevitably splinter into different groups. Not all narratives mesh to create a coherent whole world picture. How do alien encounters and the moon landing hoax mesh with child abduction rackets. But then conspiracy theories don't have to be coherent. There is now a rival group to QAnon that embraces the letter R!

In so far as they get generated, perpetuated and believed, unfounded conspiracy theories carry several perils. They diminish the capacity of a community to think rationally, respect evidence and think clearly and compassionately. They serve as an "opium of the people", to quote Karl Marx. They malign individuals and groups without cause, reinforcing prejudices and stereotypes. They can generate actions that cause physical, social and psychological damage, and instil uncertainty and confusion about what to believe and who to trust. They can extract donations from vulnerable people who think they are contributing to a worthy cause.

The upside is that they expose followers of a particular malign cause as not only dangerous but ridiculous - a heightened sense of which may yet save us.

Reference

- Martineau, Paris. 2017. The Storm Is the New Pizzagate - Only Worse. *New Yorker Magazine*, 19 December. Available online: <http://nymag.com/selectall/2017/12/qanon-4chan-the-storm-conspiracy-explained.html> (accessed 2 August 2018).

Notes

- A Google search for "QAnon" within the mainstream media provides plenty of elaboration on conspiracy theory networks.
- An article from [The Daily Beast](#) suggests that Fox News and other conservative media outlets see QAnon and similar groups as an embarrassment.
- Also see posts: [Laugh out loud security](#), [Is post truth politics a thing](#), [Encrypted city](#), [Let's play](#), [You can fool all the people some of the time](#), [Calculating belief](#), [Elect a clown; expect a circus](#).

Category

1. Media

Tags

1. children
2. ciphercity
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Author

rcoyne99