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Manipulative questions in internet discourse.

The case of a 4chan/8chan conspiracy theorist QAnon

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Pytania manipulacyjne w dyskursie internetowym.

Przypadek teoretyka spiskowego QAnona z 4chana/8chana

Rozprawa doktorska

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Miejscowość, data   Podpis autora pracy

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The language is given to man to hide his thoughts.

Charles Maurice de Talleyrand

Introduction

Interrogative sentences in legal, educational, or scientific contexts are of paramount importance. The ability to ask the right question can often be the first step towards defining the problem. The well-known saying "Ask the *wrong questions*, get the *wrong answers*" suggests a helpful strategy to consider alternative responses to a given question beforehand and possibly modify the question.

QAnon (or Q for short) is an internet persona(e), political movement and conspiracy theory which originated in the USA. It started in 2017 in the American far-right political scene. The central theme of QAnon is the use of false information provided by somebody using the nickname "Q", an unidentified person or persons writing on a popular imageboard 4chan (Griffin, 2020). Q's narrative has been repeated, expanded upon, and strengthened by various communities and personalities connected to the movement. Initially, the Q's posts were not signed in any way and, besides the trip code, i.e., a hashed password, were entirely anonymous. Later, the person(s) behind Q started to call themselves Q Clearance Patriot, a reference to government clearance introduced by the Department of Energy. Ironically, the sobriquet "QAnon" was coined by another anon on 4chan. Due to the lack of certainty as to the identity of QAnon or even whether there is one person or an entire team behind it, in this work, the term "QAnon" itself will be treated as a pseudonym for one person. However, it will take third-person singular endings (because of the image presented), while to emphasise the enigmatic nature of this character, it will be represented with the use of the pronoun "they".

The central premise of the conspiracy theory is that former American President Donald Trump and his political milieu were the main targets of the influential gang of Satanic, cannibalistic child sex traffickers throughout his period in office. The direct source and predecessor of the conspiracy theory promoted by Q is another conspiracy theory that has gained immense popularity in the United States and beyond, known as Pizzagate, which first surfaced a year prior. According to some researchers and publicists (Rothschild, 2021;

Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021), QAnon is an internet cult, destroying the relationships of hundreds of thousands of people with their families and friends and pushing many of them into criminal activities.

The first post ever published by QAnon went like this:

OCT 28 2017 15:33:50 ANONYMOUSID: gb953qGI147005381 >>146981635
Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM - 8:30 AM EST on Monday - the morning on
Oct 30, 2017

It initiated the wave of nearly 5,000 entries known as Q-drops. Informing on the upcoming wave of arrests, with Hillary Clinton being the most notable figure, obviously turned out to be false. As a reaction, Q forced a narrative that this concerned not the arrests in the country but in Saudi Arabia. Anons should then "learn to distinguish between relevant/non-relevant news" because "disinformation is real. Disinformation is necessary", as QAnon put it.

The main period of QAnon's activity as a character writing on 4chan, 8chan and 8kun imageboards is from 28 October 2017 to 8 December 2020. During that time, QAnon wrote with different frequencies, sometimes posting several entries per day to remain silent for a few weeks. The latter of the above dates is the beginning of the most extended break in Q activity so far and, at the same time, one of the greatest secrets next to the identity of this character. Just as no one knows why Q became silent for months, it remains a mystery why they suddenly returned to writing after a two-year break on 24 June 2022. However, since then, they have written much less than in the main period of their activity (5 entries in June 2022 and 8 after another break in November 2022 as compared to almost 5,000 in 2017–2020), and their entries have also achieved much less circulation.

After several months and possibly a change in the identity of the person who had written the entries on 4chan, QAnon moved to another imageboard called 8chan and then 8kun (Sommer, 2023: 61). Moving from one to another took place because a person or persons behind QAnon wanted to stay on the board with no moderation. This obsession with privacy could be interpreted as their wish to exercise their right to freedom of speech, or maybe they had some other ulterior motive, like a desire to promote another imageboard at the expense of others (Hoback, 2021).

The person or persons behind Q used a trip code, a unique string of letters created by shuffling and encrypting characters from the unique user's password. Therefore, pretending to be the Q was impossible, although they were 'anons' like any other user. There are many questions and sentence fragments in the posts called Q-drops.

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There is no clarity as to the origins of the name QAnon. Probably that was the very design of it from the very beginning, as 'Q' may stand for 'question(s)'. Likewise, 'A' may be 'answer(s)'. 'Anon' refers to anonymity on imageboards like 4chan, 8chan/8kun. This interpretation was corroborated by QAnon, who used it in this way. Another possible explanation is the Department of Energy's highest level of security clearance.

The present work is divided into eight chapters, plus this introduction and conclusions at the end of the work. The definitional issues surrounding the topic of persuasion and manipulation, along with the theories and concepts that go along with them, are thoroughly covered in the first chapter. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of research on manipulation, in addition to linguistic approaches, it also mentions definitional considerations from, among others, the philosophy of language, psychology, sociology, rhetoric, and ethics. It also includes a description of the theoretical approach to linguistic manipulation provided by Teun Van Dijk, one of the most important theoretical foundations of the work referred to in the analysis. The first subsection captures the issue of manipulation in terms of definitions, differentiating it from related concepts such as persuasion, lying, and deception. In addition, it lists the linguistic elements that may indicate a text's persuasive or manipulative nature. The second section briefly discusses the issue of linguistic impression management, which is developed in the third and fourth sections, which discuss the rhetorical elements used in persuasive and manipulative communication, as well as the elements of ideological discourse related to manipulation, pointed out by Teun Van Dijk in the theoretical framework of his socio-cognitive understanding of discourse analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings related to ethics, truth and fortune considerations associated with linguistic manipulation, after which an overview of manipulation theories in the humanities and social sciences, particularly psychology, that complement the cognitive component of Van Dijk's approach is presented. The following section deals with contextual considerations related to the sociocognitive elements of discourse, after which the basic assumptions related to its ideological dimension are listed. Finally, the last section in this chapter outlines the assumptions of a concept that originated in anthropology and sociology but was early adapted to the needs of linguistics, including in cognitive approaches, which is helpful in discourse analysis, i.e. the importance of linguistic framing and framing in communication, which seems to be particularly relevant to considerations of linguistic manipulation.

The second chapter, on the internet as a space for manipulation, begins with an overview of the tools and phenomena associated with this medium, which not only enables the manipulation defined in the previous chapter but also enhances it and provides

complementary means to achieve the desired effects in manipulation on a mass scale as well. The section that follows deals with the role of memes in manipulation, as reflected, among other things, in the concept of memetic warfare, which is vital because imageboard communities are highly influential in the creation and spread of memes, which they see as an essential part of their communication with each other and with the rest of the internet. Section three in Chapter two mentions the importance of Alex Jones, the world's most prominent conspiracy theorist, for promoting the Q message in its early stages. Then, section four introduces another internet conspiracy theory that Jones promoted, which became the essential component of the Q's narrative, i.e., Pizzagate.

Q drew not only on conspiracy theories and figures from online fringe culture but also on numerous sources and texts from popular culture, deftly diversifying the message into at least two separate, broadly defined social groups, i.e., users who regularly used imageboards already and incoming audiences with people who became familiar with their message through other media as it became popular. They are listed in detail in Chapter four, which closes with a section on the social aspect, i.e., a discussion of the QAnon movement and the celebrities who supported it.

The fifth chapter is a theoretical recognition of questions in linguistic concepts in syntactic, semantic and pragmatic approaches. Then, based on these findings, a general approach to interrogatives in linguistics, necessary for data collection, appears, after which the phonetic and phonological features of questions that complement the argument are described. Finally, the last part of this chapter discusses the role of questions in conversation analysis, which is highly relevant as it relates directly to data analysis in the work.

Representing a kind of extension of Chapter five, Chapter six is a discussion of the, unfortunately, only tentatively outlined approach to manipulative questions in linguistics and related fields of research. This discussion, together with the previous chapter, forms the primary analytical basis for the work.

Chapter seven is a review of the methods and materials used in the work, which first describes the research objectives and research questions, then presents the type of data, the method of preparing the corpus, and its features, followed by a presentation of the method, for which critical discourse analysis was chosen as, in the opinion of the present author, the most legitimate linguistic approach to analysing this type of material and taking into account the contextual considerations described earlier. The chapter concludes with a description of the medium in which Q's communication with his audience took place, understood generally as the internet, but more specifically as imageboards.

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The final chapter contains an analysis of the manipulative questions identified during coding and linked into interpretive patterns. They represent some types of questions identified in chapters five and six, but especially the larger interpretive units or fragments of the discourse of several to a dozen sentences in length, in which the questions played the central role. Some discourse elements discussed in earlier sections of the work were mentioned when necessary for analytical purposes. The entire work closes with conclusions about it, including a discussion of the research questions, considerations on the possibilities of further study of the type of discourse discussed in the work and its relevance in the broader social context, as well as more general considerations about the phenomenon in question as a whole.

THEORY OF PERSUASION AND MANIPULATION

1.1. Manipulation and persuasion

The concepts of persuasion and manipulation are permanently challenging to define and have been objects of heated debate for decades if not centuries. They both describe interpersonal activities with the asymmetrical direction of influence, in which, in Aristotelian terms, an 'orator' influences a 'hearer' (Harré, 2011). The difference is that while persuasion denotes activities and influence in the hearer's interests, manipulation implies treating the hearer instrumentally by the orator (*ibid.*) or that the orator has some ulterior motive and that the hearer is unaware of the direction of the communication process and its final, intended outcome (Tokarz, 2006). Therefore, as these two terms are discursive (or, in broader terms, semiotic), they are both very complex in both cognitive and moral sense.

Some thinkers believe that the concept of manipulation is broader, as it also includes activities for the hearer's benefit (Reboul, 2021). Others tend to believe that any kind of persuasion involves at least some elements of manipulation (Tokarz, 2006). Tokarz (2002) defines persuasion as any communicative activity that involves the conscious aim of bringing about a change, either in the addressee's attitude or belief system or even in their behaviour. In that sense, manipulation could be called *covert persuasion* (*ibid.*; Łukowski, 2012).

According to Teun Van Dijk (2006b: 1)[1], the term manipulation is one of the essential notions in Critical Discourse Analysis. He defines it as a form of discursive influence characterised by "illegitimate domination confirming social inequality", which interferes with understanding, resulting in biases (*ibid.*). Therefore, it is a form of abuse of power. As power is directly related to knowledge, the manipulator takes advantage of the specific knowledge necessary to tackle it that victims of manipulation lack (Wodak, 1987).

As for the actual content of manipulative discourse, not only is it truth-defective, i.e., not necessarily entirely false but not true either, but it is also ethically problematic (Todd, 2013). Due to those deficiencies, manipulation is a deceptive practice breaking at least one of the Gricean conversational maxims, i.e., the maxim of quality: "Do not say what you believe

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[1] As Van Dijk himself prefers an inseparable treatment of his surname and in self-citations uses the form 'Van Dijk' rather than 'van Dijk', placing himself under the letter 'V' rather than 'D' in references, he is referred to in a similar manner in this work.

to be false" (Grice, 1975, 1989). The breach is due to the manipulator's insincere behaviour aimed to influence their interlocutor without letting the latter notice that influence. Perelman argues that speech manipulation violates the truth and constitutes a failed argument; therefore, he calls it pseudo-argumentation (Perelman, 1989). Others view manipulation as a means of achieving goals through persuasion (Kress, 1990; Van Dijk, 1996).

Other notable works on manipulation in discourse include Manktelow and Over (1990), who associated manipulation with problems of inferential processes, and Sperber (1982, 1985 and 1997), who analysed the problems of irrationality and covert communication from an informational perspective. Taillard (2000) and Blass (2002) develop pragmatic aspects of manipulative communication in detail and tackle the complex relationship between informative and manipulative intentions. Their works share one common feature, i.e., that manipulation is often characterised by using ambiguous words and phrases, sometimes uttered out of context or in an improper context.

The terms 'persuasion' and 'manipulation' imply taking a particular theory of mind as, at least from the level of the sender, there is an intention to achieve specific goals at the expense of the receiver, who is implicitly unaware of these goals, which is an indelible element of the analyses, even if there are some recurrent linguistic elements indicative of persuasion or manipulation. Therefore, researchers dealing with this issue must not wholly ignore cognitive approaches, e.g. Sperber believes that there is an innate apparatus in the human mind, built in to detect deception (Sperber, 2000). For an orator-manipulator to be successful, they must have a good recognition of the target, a typical hearer of the message, since, according to de Saussure:

> The more confident the hearer is, the less critically he thinks, and the more efficiently the manipulator is likely to achieve his persuasive goal. (de Saussure, 2005: 131)

Most importantly, any attempts to dispose of psychologisation in the research on manipulation seem to be fruitless due to the manipulator's non-benevolent (if not malevolent) intention to act with words or other symbolic devices to persuade a hearer to act in the desired way. At the level of discursive practice, the intention mentioned above is closely related to the process of text production. The above considerations point to one critical feature of manipulative discourse, i.e., that it seems to lack any distinct, purely linguistic features enabling the analyst to detect it. Instead, an orator-manipulator employs various types of formal and informal fallacies, and some linguistic elements typical for persuasive discourse may signal the possibility of manipulation. Detecting them requires the hearer to have critical

thinking skills, some external knowledge, general vigilance and a certain amount of suspicion or limited trust in everything they hear. However, a high accumulation of linguistic rhetorical devices in the utterance, e.g., presuppositions, metaphors, rhetorical questions, or passive voice reducing the prominence of specific agents, may sometimes signal that we are dealing with manipulative discourse. As has already been said, in most cases, the average recipient has a critical apparatus that allows them to cope with the manipulation (de Saussure, 2005). They can be suspicious and not fall prey to the manipulators, but for some reason, many people believe them and sometimes even decide to follow them. The present author is therefore convinced that people are capable of believing even completely absurd narratives as long as they can be reconciled with their general view of the world (which is generally entirely rational), including political views, which will be referred to as deep memetic frames in the remainder of the work.

Among the psychological aspects of manipulation, the one that could be traced to the most apparent communication features is the speaker's commitment. From a pragmatic point of view, the greater the involvement of the speaker and the greater the activity and the frequency of manipulative devices, the easier it is to expose them and compromise the speaker, for juggling lies, half-truths, or manipulative behaviours might result in slip-ups or inconsistencies, increasing the likelihood of exposure. People may begin to notice patterns or contradictions in the manipulator's behaviour, which in turn may lead to distrust or scepticism. However, this does not apply if the manipulator's audience is already entirely convinced of what they are saying.

Although this is not a prerequisite for the existence of manipulation as such, in the context of this dissertation it is worth mentioning that communication on imageboards such as 4chan or 8chan/8kun, especially in sections like /pol/ (which stands for 'politically incorrect') is highly political, and thus undoubtedly also ideological. Teun Van Dijk believes that manipulation as a means to promote ideologies is one of the most important issues of Critical Discourse Analysis. According to Van Dijk, one of the essential aims of manipulation is to legitimise the goals of some groups, predominantly those most powerful (Van Dijk, 1998: 258), and create and promote their "preferred models of events" (*ibid.*: 260).

Researchers from various fields dealing with persuasion and manipulation highlight several possible characteristics of manipulative discourse, most of which reflect and expand three classical Aristotelian overall rhetorical strategies: *ethos* (particular methods and practical techniques used to convince listeners, primarily concerned about the speaker's credibility), *pathos* (taking advantage or optionally also changing the emotional state of the

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hearer), and *logos* (the arguments themselves and their logical structure and form of delivery, i.e. argumentation):

1. Ethos – in rhetorical tradition, it comprised good sense, high moral character, and good will. Persuasive messages employing *ethos* are often constructed to emphasise elements such as trustworthiness, respect, titles, accolades, accomplishments, humanitarian work, authority, and empathy (Carey, 1996). Following significant 20th century discoveries in social psychology, Cialdini (2013) presented a more contemporary version of this classic classic typology, i.e., six principles of persuasion, which was later expanded to seven:

   a) reciprocity: it is based on the social exchange principle and means that people feel obligated to reciprocate favours or concessions they have received. This principle is used in persuasion to encourage indebtedness and compliance, taking advantage of people's fundamental need to reciprocate, possibly making their decisions detrimental to their best interests;

   b) commitment (and consistency): this principle, based on cognitive dissonance theory, holds that people seek internal consistency in their ideas, attitudes, and behaviours. When people commit to a course of action, they are likelier to stick to it to retain their self-esteem and prevent psychological distress. Manipulative exploitation of this principle entails eliciting initial small promises or public pledges, gradually increasing demands, and exploiting the desire for consistency to gain compliance. Such manipulative approaches may cause people to continue engaging in behaviours or beliefs inconsistent with their valid preferences or values;

   c) social proof: people tend to follow the actions of others, especially when they are uncertain about what to do. When describing it, Cialdini referred to Solomon Asch's 1951 experiment that demonstrated that people were willing to go against evident logic out of a need to conform. This principle suggests that showing evidence of others' behaviour or opinions can influence an individual's decisions. For example, testimonials or reviews can persuade people to buy a product or service, and undecided voters who decide at the last minute to cast their vote are quite often guided by the polls rather than by their views or self-interest, which is also named the *bandwagon effect* (Bartels, 1988; Lanoue & Bowler, 1998; Schmitt-Beck, 1996);

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d) liking – based on social psychology and interpersonal attraction theories, the concept of liking proposes that people are likelier to be persuaded by others they find likeable or similar. Manipulative exploitation of liking entails strategically building rapport, flattery, or similarity to ingratiate oneself and influence others' decisions or actions. Such manipulation may take advantage of people's desire for affiliation and connection, causing them to be convinced by superficial charm or phoney camaraderie rather than solid arguments or proof;

e) authority – drawing on Milgram's obedience experiments (Milgram, 1974), the principle of authority holds that people are more inclined to comply with requests from perceived authority figures or experts. Manipulative exploitation of authority entails presenting oneself or others as competent and trustworthy authorities to get obedience or acquiescence (Cialdini, 2013). This manipulation may take advantage of people's deference to authority, causing them to abandon critical judgement and comply with requests or directions that may not be in their best interests;

f) scarcity (exclusivity, rarity, urgency, or excess demand): a manipulator creates an impression of the exclusivity or scarcity of a given commodity that they want to sell to someone, an idea they want to accepted by the speaker(s), or a message they present as an alleged secret (Cialdini, 2013). Some specific form of this tactic could be based on making the impression that the issue is urgent (time scarcity or urgency).

In building *ethos*, which refers to the credibility and ethical appeal of the speaker or writer, metadiscourse markers play a crucial role. They are an essential part of rhetoric and communication, used to help structure discourse, engage with the audience, and manage the interaction between the writer/speaker and the reader/listener. Some particular metadiscourse markers could be regarded as particularly important in building credibility, including:

(a) hedges – they are language strategies used to reduce the strength or certainty of a statement. They suggest that the author is not making a forceful, absolute assertion but rather expressing some ambiguity or qualification. Examples include phrases like "it seems that", "perhaps", and "to some extent", as well as the usage of modal verbs like "might" and "could";

(b) emphatics (or boosters) – these are linguistic elements that are employed to support or emphasise a specific point or argument in the text. They help to make the writer's assertions more powerful or persuasive. Emphatics include intensifying adverbs (e.g., "very", "extremely") with certainty markers (e.g., "certainly", "surely", "absolutely"), superlatives (e.g., "best", "most"), or rhetorical techniques that emphasise the importance or relevance of specific ideas;

(c) evidentials – they are linguistic markers or statements that show the source or certainty of information in a given utterance and which may be divided according to several features including (Chafe, 1986; Hassler, 2010; Kotwica, 2016): the mode of knowing (direct, i.e., acquired by senses vs indirect, i.e., acquired by report), the type of source (self, others, or data), the accessibility to the source (privative vs universal access to data) and the degree of (im)precision of the source (precise, i.e., unequivocally identified vs non-precise, i.e. impossible to identify as no data is provided). They include direct quotations (they indicate that the information being presented is directly sourced from another person or text, e.g., "According to Jonas (2012), …"), citations and references (addressing specific sources);

(d) self-mentions – markers of this kind provide a way to demonstrate authorial identity and recognition in a specific discipline. Using first-person pronouns generally improves the status of statements in the eyes of the audience (Martínez, 2004), highlighting the speaker's or writer's role, experiences, or responsibility, thereby personalising the discourse and enhancing credibility through personal accountability, e.g., "I believe…", "In my experience…", "We will see…".

2. Pathos – in the Aristotelian triad, the Greek philosopher listed appeals to various emotions the speaker may use in their speech to increase the persuasive effect, i.e., fear, duty, hope, love, humour, gravity, and patriotism. In Mai's classification (Mai, 2016), metadiscourse markers referring to *pathos* include:

(a) attitude markers – words that demonstrate the author's approach to a notion, such as "hopefully", "incredible", and "unbelievable";

(b) engagement markers – these include reader pronouns, personal asides, appeals to shared knowledge, inclusive expressions, personalisations, directives, and questions (including rhetorical ones).

3. Logos – its elements include constructions with logical conclusions drawn from statistics, citing authority, or using comparison/analogy/precedent. From a linguistic point of view, it requires using multiple cohesion markers. One of the most comprehensive overviews of those was made by Hyland (1998), who has distinguished the following elements concerning particularly academic discourse. However, they may be easily applied to manipulative online discourse as one of their main aims is to convince the recipients that a given piece is important and relevant, and thus they are virtually persuasive:

(a) interpersonal metadiscourse – it is the language speakers or writers use to connect with their audience or to develop and maintain rapport, politeness, and interactional coherence, encompassing a variety of linguistic devices designed to manage the speaker or writer's engagement with the audience, including:

- person markers – these are linguistic features that reveal the writer's and reader's position in the text (or the speaker's and hearer's position in the speech). They may contain pronouns (e.g., "I", "we", "you", "they") or other indicators signalling the writer's participation in the discourse;
- attributors – these are discourse markers referring to authorities to enhance the persuasiveness of the proposition;

(b) textual metadiscourse – it is "the function that language has of creating text, of relating itself to the context – to the situation and the preceding text" (Halliday, 1978: 48):

- logical connectives – these are symbols or words/phrases used in logic to connect propositions or statements, resulting in more complex propositions. These connectives help us explain relationships between statements and form logical arguments, e.g., conjunctions ("and"), disjunctions ("or"), negation ("not"), implication ("if… then"), or biconditional ("if and only if");
- frame markers – these are linguistic devices used to signal the structure, organisation, or progression of discourse. They help guide readers through the text, indicating transitions between different parts of the discourse or highlighting important points. Frame markers can

include words, phrases, or even punctuation that serve as signposts for readers to follow the flow of the argument or narrative. Examples of frame markers include "firstly", "secondly", "in conclusion", "on the other hand", "in contrast", "moreover", "however", or "therefore". These markers provide cues about the relationship between different ideas, helping readers to understand the text more easily and facilitating comprehension;

- endophoric markers – these refer to some other portions of the text and help to highlight additional ideational material, assisting addressees in recovering the addresser's argumentative aim. Furthermore, endophoric markers may be used to connect visuals and words, allowing the audience to form messages using images. Moreover, when used skillfully, they enable the speaker to repeat the persuasive message;

- code glosses – they are characterised as actions that the writer or speaker takes to elaborate their discourse and make it plain and accessible to their audience, or as "small acts of propositional embellishment", e.g., reformulations (either expansions like "In other words…", or reductions like "More specifically…"), exemplifications ("like", "for example", etc.).

All these elements do not yet imply that the discourse containing them is manipulative. However, an effective manipulator should be rhetorically proficient, making skilful use of the above elements to make the appropriate impression on their audience, regardless of the content of their speech or the level of their arguments in terms of logical consistency and reference to reality.

As for the relationship between manipulation and lying, untruthfulness, and deception, these terms are closely related and very often, yet not necessarily correctly, used interchangeably or otherwise confused, e.g., while lying is a primary instance of a strategic device in a manipulator's toolkit, they may as well tell only the truth and still be manipulative. Parret (1978) argued that truthfulness is an insufficient criterion for manipulation. From a pragmatic perspective, manipulation involves attempts to influence or control someone or something, generally happily and secretly, to achieve a desired end. Lying, conversely, is the purposeful dissemination of false information intending to deceive. Untruthfulness is a more extensive term that includes lying and other types of deception, such

as withholding facts or deceiving without directly expressing falsehoods. Manipulation can use a variety of untruthful practices, including lying or untruthfulness. For example, manipulators may use selective disclosure, exaggeration, or removal of information to persuade others. Another dimension where those two categories are divergent relies on the speaker's intention, as sometimes lies are told out of politeness, i.e., *social* and *white lies* (Sweetser, 1987). There are also situations where the speaker's awareness plays a significant role because they may be unaware that what they convey with the firm belief that it is factual information is actually false, so they certify an untruth, often in good faith, which would hardly be considered a lie. Both lying and untruthfulness at least potentially lack the element of bad will. As for the difference between manipulation and deception, it is quite widespread that manipulation is always deceptive, which is based on two premises: 1) every instance of manipulation involves a lack of transparency about the manipulator's actual intentions, and 2) a lack of transparency and openness concerning those intentions may lead to inaccurate beliefs in the other about the agent's state of mind, which fully meets the criteria of deception (Bělohrad, 2019). However, Cohen (2023) argues that not only is transparent (viz. non-deceptive) manipulation possible, but it is commonplace, e.g., in advertising, as the intentions of advertisers are clear, but techniques they use to coerce the audience are oftentimes manipulative. Therefore, deception is not necessarily manipulative, but clearly, these categories partially overlap.

1.2. Verbal manipulation in impression management

Messages that do not give the impression that their true purpose is to persuade the listener to do something are generally more effective than overtly persuasive or coercive messages (Walster & Festinger, 1962). In Irving Goffman's sociological project, identity pegs are cues that people use to create and convey the identity they want to others (Goffman, 1963: 57). They can be of linguistic nature, so they also occur in the context of online communication. For example, a person's accent, dialect, or slang can indicate their regional or cultural identity, schooling level, or social class. Someone may use a particular dialect or accent to indicate their affiliation with a specific group or to signify their belonging to a specific community.

Linguistic characteristics can also be carefully used to make a desired impression on others. For example, someone may alter their language use, such as using more formal English, to demonstrate their competence or intelligence. Similarly, they may employ

language associated with a specific social or professional group to obtain acceptance or project a desired image. In the context of internet communication, especially in social media, forums and imageboards and wide opportunities for creating and managing one's image there, identity pegs seem to be a relevant concept.

1.3. Manipulation through rhetoric (typology by Moore and Parker)

Brooke Noel Moore and Richard Parker are the authors of one of the most popular and comprehensive textbooks for teaching critical thinking (Moore & Parker, 2020: 143–158). Among many elements discussed by them was the enumeration of rhetorical techniques most commonly used in manipulation discourse. According to them, in typical communicative situations, language usually enables its users to choose between multiple options of words related to objects or situations. Euphemism is a word choice in which a user prefers a word with a neutral or positive connotation rather than with negative associations, e.g., Moore and Parker mention "waterboarding", which sounds like some outdoor activity, perhaps related to surfing, whilst in fact it is a brutal torture prohibited by international law, involving making the victim feel like drowning and suffocating by pouring water over a piece of cloth. Along with its opposite, dysphemism, euphemism plays an important role in affecting attitudes in the audience, i.e., the two are not necessarily manipulative, but their use is always persuasive. Examples of dysphemisms include portraying political opponents as extreme left/right, e.g. a social democrat as "a commie" or a conservative as "an ultra-rightist" (*ibid*.: 143).

A rhetorical (or persuasive) definition is an apparent definition whose function is not, as in the case of lexical or scientific definitions, to explain or clarify what an object, process or situation is or is about but rather to emotionally influence the recipient. Moore and Parker (*ibid*.: 85) provide an example of a liberal defining a conservative: "a hidebound, narrow-minded hypocrite who thinks the point to life is making money and ripping off poor people". This is an example of emotive use of language geared to elicit strong reactions of support or opposition.

Such a definition can be combined with a stereotype, which is another rhetorical device based on an overall strategy. It is an association or notion of a collective of people grounded on little or no evidence. The reference to stereotypes found in a given group is one of the most common and simple methods of manipulation as it refers to generalised impressions on particular groups of people shared by a considerable proportion of a given society, sometimes group-related, e.g., "teenagers are *always* rebellious", "*all* women are so

emotional", both including loaded language, i.e., "rebellious" may refer to seeking independence, and "emotional" implies being sensitive and irrational.

Innuendo is a rhetorical strategy focused more on the contextual than purely linguistic components of communication, used to insinuate some ideas, taking advantage of the audience's expectations and pre-existing assumptions. It is used to invite the audience to imply the arguments rather than providing them with evidence. Usually used in a derogatory way, its ultimate aim is to attribute some unwanted characteristics to an object of a comment while simultaneously avoiding the responsibility for what is said. Typically, it is based on employing such devices as significant mention (mentioning or implying something without addressing it directly), paralipsis (ostensible omissions), or apophasis (explicitly announcing omissions of some topics while, in fact, addressing them), e.g.:

> Ladies and gentlemen, I am proof that at least one candidate in this race doesn't make stuff
> up.
> ***
> Jim: Is Ralph telling the truth? Joe: Yes, this time.
> ***
> I didn't say the meat was tough. I said I didn't see the horse that is usually outside.
> ***
> She's just the aerobics instructor, at least that's what he tells his wife (*ibid*.: 148).

Loaded questions are questions containing unjustified or controversial assumptions. They are explained in detail in Chapter 6 (Manipulative questions).

Hedging devices or hedges (weaselers in the typology of Moore and Parker) are words or whole phrases intended to weaken a claim, also known in discourse analysis as hedges or hedging devices. With the use of hedges, a manipulator can make a strong and precise yet apparently false information in a claim sounding more neutral and nearly true. Using hedges adds nothing to the content of the sentence but may provide a space for a manipulator to defend in case of being exposed. Typical examples are "almost", "kind/sort of", "maybe", "probably", "somehow", "about", "up to", etc., although not all uses of these words imply hedging. In sentences like "Michael may be a murderer" or "Perhaps it was Frank who stole your wallet" hedges are used to form innuendos. Sometimes hedges are less direct, which is particularly often used in advertising. Hedges can be used in combinations as in the often cited example, a phrase "experts/researchers say", whose vague informational value can be further weakened by adding other hedges like "some" at the beginning.

Downplaying consists of attempts to make someone or something look less important or significant. It may involve using other rhetorical devices, including stereotypes, rhetorical comparisons, rhetorical explanations, or innuendos. Examples are "mere/merely", "so-called", "only", using quotation marks, frequent use of subordinating conjunctions and adverbs of concession such as "however", "nevertheless", "but", "although", or "even if". It is worth mentioning, however, that several of these words and phrases can also be used with exactly the opposite effect.

Every kind of joke on the opponent or their actions is considered a potent rhetorical device while rarely conveying any arguments *per se*. In a slightly narrower, purely argumentative sense, this means presenting the opponent's real or alleged views and arguments in a discussion as humorous, ludicrous, absurd or nonsensical. This technique is sometimes combined with appealing to the intelligence of the audience, hyperbole, straw man, sarcasm, or *argumentum ad hominem*. Other names for this or related techniques include appeal to ridicule, appeal to mockery, apagogical argument, *ad absurdo*, or *reductio ad absurdum* (Lee, 1973).

Another prominent type of device used in manipulation are hyperboles which may be grounded on dysphemism. This category may also overlap with ridiculing or irony. According to Van Dijk (2007), it is used to amplify the desired message of both positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Frequently, it is combined with metaphor. Proof surrogate is a statement that there exists some unspecified kind of evidence or authority to prove that the proposed claim is true. The typical examples of proof surrogates are phrases like "informed sources say", "studies show", "there is every reason to believe that…". This type of rhetorical device often replaces actual arguments. They include metaphors, similes and comparisons. In a tradition of rhetoric, similes are explicit analogies, whereas metaphors are implied ones.

A more general strategy used in manipulative discourse is employing emotive language. It is a type of language that makes people act emotionally rather than think rationally. It can be used to make a narrative more appealing and hence get the attention of the listener, enable the listener to relate emotionally and personally to the ideas conveyed, and finally, distort the truth. At the linguistic level, it is characterised by descriptive words, mostly adjectives and adverbs. It occurs when a speaker or writer uses emotional manipulation to "support" a claim rather than making a valid argument. It is perhaps noteworthy in this context that Bednarek (2008) makes a distinction between emotion talk (all conventional linguistic behaviour indirectly signalling emotions, e.g., through interjections, emphatic particles or intonation) and emotional talk (descriptive direct conceptualisation of emotions).

As far as emotive language as understood by Moore and Parker is concerned, it would include both categories as those that can refer to emotions and affect the recipient, who would be expected to respond empathetically, and additionally language that directs the recipient to feel specific emotions. According to a typology by Moore and Parker (2020: 194–198), emotive language is used mostly to distract the audience and is classified upon the broader category of relevance (or red herring) fallacies. Types of emotive language they mentioned are the following:

a) argument from outrage: it arises when someone intentionally incites anger in their listeners to affect their behaviour or mental processes;

b) appeal to fear (scare tactics): a fallacy that employs fear to intimidate people into believing the argument, such as dread produced by a credible prospective undesirable event. Unlike appeal to force resorting to physical threats, the scare tactics fallacy uses psychological fear to make an argument. Despite the lack of logic or rationale, instilling fear in others can be equally or even more effective than appeals to force. For Moore and Parker, a type of appeal to fear is peer pressure fallacy, which is designed to induce fear of being rejected by one's peers;

c) appeal to pity: a fallacy committed when pity or a related emotion such as sympathy, mercy, or compassion is improperly invoked to gain acceptance of a conclusion. The appeal to pity can take two forms: either the appeal to pity (or a related emotion) is irrelevant to the argument's conclusion, or the magnitude of the impassioned plea is excessive considering the context of the argument. It is also known as *argumentum ad misericordiam*;

d) appeal to flattery (apple polishing): a fallacy in which a person employs flattery and excessive compliments to gain support for their side by appealing to their audience's vanity. In classical rhetoric, it is known as *argumentum ad superbiam*;

e) guilt tripping: the fallacy of attempting to persuade someone to forsake a position by making him or her feel guilty for having it, and, by this token, it is one of the most common intimidation tactics. a type of intimidation strategy. Employing guilt leads to the victim's feeling of self-doubt, anxiety, and their submission;

f) appeal to envy: a faulty argumentation based on the idea that people who have more than you are wrong. Classical name for the appeal to envy is *argumentum ad invidiam*;

g) appeal to jealousy: similar to appeal to envy and often confused with it, but it refers to fear of losing one's position or situation to someone else.

Emotive language is an effective weapon for manipulation because it employs phrases that elicit strong feelings. It can elicit emotions of fear, pity, rage, or guilt to affect choices and actions. Words that imply threats or danger, for example, might arouse fear and anxiety, whereas expressions like "innocent victims" arouse empathy and win people over. Phrases like "unfair" or "betrayal" incite rage and unite people against perceived injustices, whereas language instilling shame forces obedience. It can skew perceptions by inflating or understating information, which distorts reality. Manipulated people can be coerced into doing things they do not want to by using language that plays on their emotional weaknesses.

1.4. Teun Van Dijk's elements of manipulative discourse analysis

The above considerations related to specific rhetorical devices, as well as the broader stylistic and rhetorical strategies associated with their use, became one of the most salient elements that Teun Van Dijk incorporated into his reflections on ideological discourse and manipulation (Van Dijk, 1984, 1988, 1991, 1993b, 1998, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008, 2014).

Among the numerous concepts developed by van Dijk and connected with persuasion and manipulation, one is particularly pertinent, i.e. an open list of manipulation strategies called elements of manipulative discourse analysis. Van Dijk referred to it in several texts, sometimes calling these elements slightly different, sometimes choosing a slightly shorter list of them. However, according to Van Dijk, what is a lie and manipulation for one group may be considered a truth and part of their reality.

1.4.1. Overall manipulative strategy: positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation

The crucial and most general strategy analysed by Van Dijk in his considerations on manipulation was a dichotomy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Van Dijk, 2006b) which could be incorporated easily into at least some types of questions, e.g., rhetorical or complex questions.

At the macro level, the implementation of the strategy is done by pointing out the positive actions of in-groups and the negative actions of out-groups, thus making accusations on the one hand and excuses on the other, and considering the general semantic structures, the most important is to have control over the topic selection. If control over the topic selection is

limited, it is very important to ensure that themes advantageous to the in-group are appropriately emphasised and those disadvantageous to the in-group are downplayed and to manage the weighting of themes against the out-group in precisely the opposite way.

At the micro level, the individual speech acts should interact closely with the global objectives described above, i.e. the speaker should, for example, make accusations as often as possible. Similarly, care should be taken with the descriptions of the individual actions relating to both groups, intended to support the speaker's position and strengthen the allegations/justifications, which is achieved by giving the right (large/small) amount of detail in their descriptions, speaking in general terms or being very specific, being vague or precise, and being explicit or implicit, depending on the needs of the communicative situation.

The overall strategic aims are, of course, also pursued on a lexical level through the selection of words and phrases with positive sentiment for in-group and negative one for out-group. Similarly, syntactic and grammatical constructions are chosen to emphasise or diminish someone's agency or responsibility, e.g. through an appropriate choice between the passive or active voice or nominalisations and verbalisations.

According to Van Dijk, the local rhetorical strategies corresponding to the above strategies are, in turn, hyperboles and euphemisms, as well as metaphors and metonymies, whose primary purpose is to support adjectival constructions defining specific properties of the two groups described.

Finally, the last element highlighted by Van Dijk are specific words that enliven and dynamise the utterance, i.e. words describing sounds and images, also attributed to both groups, e.g. loud, large, bold, top, bottom.

1.4.2. Categories of ideological discourse analysis

As an analytical extension of the overall manipulative discourse strategies described in the previous section, Van Dijk developed a set of strategies called categories of ideological discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2007). The list appeared in many forms in several of his articles and books (e.g., Van Dijk, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2014). Although not always did it appear in the context of explicitly addressed manipulation, the author linked it as a valuable tool to analyse instances of manipulatory discourse. The categories are from different levels of analysis, as the list is a combination of various tropes, figures of speech, or discursive strategies.

1. Actor description – different kinds of descriptions are included in any discussion of people and their activity. As a result, actors can be categorised as individuals or group members by their first or family name, function, role, or group name, as specific or general, by their acts or (alleged) traits, by their position or relationship to other persons, and so on.

2. Authority – it is a classical *argumentum ad auctoritatem*, a fallacious pseudo-argument to the authority or expert;

3. Burden – a *topos* based on attributing to groups of people the creation of difficulties, be it financial or social, for the general public;

4. Categorisation – dividing groups of people into smaller groups, along with the subjective assignment of valuations to the same individual groups (e.g. "good" asylum seekers vs "bad" benefit scroungers);

5. Comparison – according to Van Dijk, it is a form of rhetorical simile used to contrast in-group and out-group, e.g., "If we go abroad we learn another language" in which it is implied that both "we" as members of in-group assimilate when being immigrants abroad, and that "they", i.e., foreigners do not learn our language in "our" country.

6. Consensus – it is one of the strategies used to produce an agreement between "Us", sometimes directly aimed against "Them". It is about appealing to the audience to unite against external threats, most notably against the out-group.

7. Counterfactuals – a significant construction starting with phrases like "suppose", "what if", etc., widely used in argumentation because they enable the speaker to present grievous consequences of the opponent's actions to the audience. These can be formed either with declarative or interrogative sentences.

8. Disclaimers – they are local semantic moves used for positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation rather than to express attitudinal ambiguity, usually constructed through concessive adverbial clauses, e.g. "I did not say that every eastern European's application for asylum in this country was bogus. However… [Apparent denial]" (Van Dijk, 2007)

9. Distancing – using deictic expressions such as demonstrative pronouns instead of addressing groups of people directly to emphasise the distance between the in-group and out-group, e.g. referring to a particular group of people by expressions like "those people".

10. Dramatisation – similar to hyperbole, it is used to exaggerate the facts in one's favour. A characteristic feature of dramatisation is the use of intensifiers, e.g. "EXTREME

PANIC IN [DC]" (an example from the corpus, note that besides the use of intensifiers, dramatisation was built with capital letters – other verses in the Q-drop were written in lowercase).

11. Empathy – it is a strategy used mainly to manage how the speaker appears to the audience and, by this token, can be regarded as a functional part of the overall strategy of positive self-presentation (Van Dijk, 1993b). Since it is not possible to determine whether it is an expression of an honest feeling, in some of his works, Van Dijk called it "apparent empathy" (Van Dijk, 1993b, 1998). They are very often combined with concessions and then work as disclaimers, e.g., "I understand how hard it must be for you, but…" (Van Dijk, 2009: 215).

12. Euphemisms – they are one of the most widely used devices in manipulative utterances. Their primary role is mitigation and avoidance of negative impression formation. Among examples of their use is showing one's own negative actions as neutral or even positive ones. Van Dijk (2007) provides a specific instance of euphemistic talk from the European Parliament, in which racism or discrimination were sometimes expressed with an undertone of empathy as "resentment". In addition, Van Dijk (*ibid.*) also provides other possible uses when a person, wanting to appear favourably in the eyes of progressive observers, calls certain persons or situations in a slightly milder way than usual.

13. Evidentiality – it is a device a speaker uses when they provide some evidence or proof by naming the source of their knowledge or opinions, making their positions more plausible. Willett (1988) developed a widely used paradigm for categorising evidence markers into four categories: direct, indirect, hearsay, and inference. This framework provides a systematic method for categorising the varied range of evidential markers found in languages worldwide, allowing scholars to identify similarities and differences between linguistic systems.

14. Example/illustration – although they may not be commonly associated with manipulation, unlike more general claims, concrete examples like vignettes or short stories, be it true, entirely made up, or something in between, "suggest impelling forms of empirical proof" (Van Dijk, 2007: 53) and thus may help in creating the image of a "people's tribune" who is "close to their constituency" and "knows how it is like". In that sense lively examples may be a part of populist discourses with the use of which it is much easier to move the public.

15. Explanation – in Van Dijk's conceptual framework, the explanation is an empathetic justification or apology of the in-group's wrongdoings with a simultaneous lack of such empathy for the out-group, which employs the ultimate attribution error.

16. Fallacies – their usage is one of the features most commonly attributed to manipulation as they may not only be a sign of faulty reasoning in the speaker themselves but, above all, an attempt to compel the recipient to accept that faulty reasoning.

17. Generalisation – in contrast to particularisation, such as using examples, generalisations can serve the purpose of manipulation. Very often, both opposites are combined, i.e., a specific example is used to illustrate a general principle and is intended to prove it. From the point of view of fulfilling the conditions of truth, this is a somewhat risky way of argumentation because individual examples, even those representative, are subject to exceptions.

18. History as a lesson – this is one of the topoi used in manipulative discourses to prove that the current situation is in some way analogous to a situation from the past, usually to one that ended in tragedy. Behind these statements lies a shaky historical assumption known as historical determinism, stating that certain historical conditions always lead to the same effects. Therefore, if certain conditions lead to catastrophe, they should be changed. An additional problem with this line of argumentation is that we rarely deal with a situation where past conditions are actually precisely the same as today. Van Dijk's example is a quote of Jeremy Corbyn:

    History shows that unless we stand up for human rights wherever they are abused around the world, eventually it will come back and our human rights will be abused (Corbyn, Labour).

19. Humanitarianism – according to Van Dijk, it is the primary macrostrategy of the left, as opposed to the law and order strategy of the right. In this sense, the reference to human rights as principles that must be respected in all circumstances has been recognised as a conventional strategy that left-wing politicians, publicists and commentators can use as an ultimate argument.

20. Hyperbole – as one of the instances of enhancement of meaning, it is a form of exaggeration in which the image of reality is distorted to manage self- and other-presentation, i.e., alleged wrongdoings of out-groups are pictured as they are of

grand proportions. Hyperboles are sometimes expressed with the use of metaphors, so the scale effect is accompanied by the image effect.

21. Implication – for many reasons, the speaker may want to leave some information in their utterance implicit, e.g., because they are irrelevant or to remain polite, keep face, or follow cultural norms or propriety. However, in some instances, some ideas are not expressed directly because the author of the message wants to conceal them or, by some forms of indirectness, vagueness, or implicitness, leave some space for speculation to the audience.

22. Illegality – for Van Dijk, it is an argumentative figure based on the criminalisation of such groups as refugees or immigrants, often also by confusing these two categories of people.

23. Interaction and context – according to Van Dijk (2007), the interaction itself with its context may include action categories, setting, various forms of interaction, participants in many different roles, and their cognitive properties.

24. Irony – although the use of irony may be detrimental to the person who uses it in the discussion, in the eyes of at least partially convinced people, it may also create an image of the speaker as a funny and intelligent person. It may also be used to ridicule or derogate people and their actions, as in the example by Van Dijk (2007) in which the phrase "suddenly discover" expresses irony:

> Too many asylum seekers enter the country initially as family visitors, tourists, and
> then suddenly discover that they want to remain as asylum seekers. (Shaw, C)

25. Legality – according to Van Dijk's typology, this supplements the argument on illegality, which consists of presenting a legal path that enables a legal stay in which "illegal" immigrants and refugees are allegedly not interested.

26. Lexicalisation – it is an element of style, the process by which a particular concept or meaning is given a specific name or label. That name or label becomes associated with that particular meaning in the mind of the speaker and listener. It involves creating a lexical item, such as a word or phrase, associated with a particular meaning. The lexicalisation process can involve the creation of new words or the re-purposing of existing words to convey a new or more specific meaning, which should not be confused wording because wording, on the other hand, refers to the specific choice of words and phrases used to express a particular idea or concept. Wording is part of the more extensive process of linguistic expression, which involves selecting specific

words and the grammatically correct arrangement of those words. In other words, wording is a broader term that encompasses how a particular idea or concept is expressed. In contrast, lexicalisation is a more specific term that refers to the creation of a lexical item to represent a particular meaning.

According to Van Dijk, lexicalisation can be manipulative because the choice of specific synonyms in a given context can be suggestive and have strong positive or negative sentiments. For instance, in the context of debates on immigration, migrants may be called "economic immigrants", "bogus asylum seekers", or "benefit scroungers". On the other hand, the other party in the debate may present them as victims fleeing from "oppression", "crush", "torture", "abuse", or "injustice".

27.   Metaphor – it is a powerful persuasive tool because it allows the speaker to communicate complex ideas and abstract concepts in a way that is easy to understand and relates to common experience. Metaphors create a link between the unfamiliar and the familiar, allowing the audience to see the world in a new and different way. Metaphors can also evoke strong emotions and associations, influencing people's thoughts and feelings about a particular issue. By using metaphors that refer to people's values, beliefs and experiences, persuasive communicators can create a sense of shared understanding and empathy with their audience. Metaphors can also help simplify complex ideas and make them more accessible to a broader range of people. For example, by comparing migrants to flows of water, the speaker may present them as a real threat to the stability of the state, comparing them to the natural disaster of the flood. In this way, immigrants "inflow" (and, per analogy, emigrants outflow), which can be reinforced by the use of intensifiers as adjectives like "rapidly".

28. National self-glorification – Van Dijk borrowed the idea from Preiswerk's works on ethnocentrism and racism (Preiswerk, 1980). He mainly applied in the context of national parliamentary debates on immigration. However, it may be understood as a broader concept than when Peiswerk presented it. For him, positive self-presentation is embedded in larger units such as the nation itself and Western civilisation, its institutions, and monotheistic religion, regarded as the highest form of development.

29. Negative other-presentation – it is an overall strategy under which many others can be employed. Distinctions between in-group and out-group (or out-groups, as there may be "good", "bad", and "neutral" ones) are always based on some ideological assumptions. The group's political objectives are pursued discursively by combining

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positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. The latter is realised through fabricating or emphasising negative qualities or behaviours of the target group. Using negative words such as "lazy", "bogus", or seemingly neutral ones such as "economic migrants" to describe them can create a negative perception of the out-group in the hearer's mind.

30. Norm expression – it is about using normative language and expressing very firm axiological statements, such as what a particular group or a state should or should not do. Van Dijk (2007: 60) provides many examples of norm expression in parliamentary debates, e.g.:

> We should think a bit more seriously about how we treat those people (Corbyn, L).
> Europe must stop its xenophobic attitude towards those who seek a place of safety
> here and adopt a more humane approach.

31. Number game – in Western culture, numeric values provided by the figures given by the speakers are to be associated with statistics and signal to the audience objectiveness and preparedness for a debate or speech. It partially refers to the concept of granularity (e.g. Schegloff, 2000), i.e., the amount of details in descriptions. Both too small and too large a number of details could equally obscure the picture and thus lead to deception. Generally, it is more convincing to give a specific figure than some kind of generalisation, e.g., "70 per cent of young adults in the EU live with their parents" will generally be more effective than "Most young adults in the EU live with their parents".

32. Openness, honesty – Van Dijk believes this has become almost a topos. It refers to situations in which politicians or other public figures call for a sincere or open conversation on a sensitive subject, which assumes that dishonest behaviour, or more precisely, evasion or mitigation, is the norm.

33. Polarisation, us-them categorisation – this is one of the most general strategies, permeating most of the others and based on the clear distinction between 'good' in-group (US) and 'bad' out-group (THEM). Van Dijk recognised that forming US and THEM depends on a set of parallel cognitive and social processes.

34. Positive self-presentation – it is a general, all-encompassing strategy and a form of impression management and/or keeping face, very often used with negative other-presentation. Combining these two strategies creates a distorted picture of social reality in which negative qualities, attitudes and behaviours of the in-group and

positive qualities, attitudes and behaviours of the out-group are overlooked. This strategy can be implemented, for example, in highlighting the positive features of the in-group in response to the allegations of their political opponents, e.g. when accusing xenophobia, intolerance and nationalism, Polish politicians used to refer to centuries-old traditions of tolerance in the country.

35. Populism – although Van Dijk prepared his framework primarily for analyses of parliamentary anti-immigration speeches and associated populism with conservatists, populism as the overall strategy may appear in the line of argument of politicians of any possible ideological orientation. Populism is based on the premise that "people" or "everybody" support or do not support a particular cause.

36. Presupposition – it is a specific kind of implication well recognised in linguistic literature that is tacitly taken for granted at the onset as common ground (Stalnaker, 2002) or shared knowledge (Strawson, 1964). It is frequently used in persuasive discourse, such as commercial advertising or political propaganda. Van Dijk provides an example of presupposition in a question, which is particularly relevant to this work:

> I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman will tell the House what mandate he has from
> the British people to share their citizenship with foreigners? (Gill, C).

In this question, it is implicitly conveyed that "he" (i.e., Jeremy Corbyn) can provide foreigners (i.e., immigrants) with British citizenship.

37. Pseudo-ignorance – speakers may pretend they do not have specific knowledge but suggest they do. By this means, they form claims that do not need to be justified. According to Van Dijk, such instances of pseudo-knowledge frequently appear in disclaimers such as "I don't know, but…". This type of construction, on the one hand, is a form of impression management as a speaker admits that they lack knowledge on a given issue, but on the other hand, they claim that the central part of the sentence is true regardless of their ignorance. Van Dijk provides the following example:

> (62) In addition to the breakfast that comes with the bed-and-breakfast
> accommodation, they have to be given a packed lunch, presumably in case they decide
> to go shopping in the middle of the day or to do a bit of work on the black
> economy--who knows? (Gorman, C).

In this situation, the strategy is used with a slightly different function: the speaker first presents a fictional scenario and then uses pseudo-ignorance as a hedging, which results in limiting the responsibility of the speaker for the words uttered.

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38. Reasonableness – it is one of the moves used as part of overall strategies of positive self-presentation and image management. It is used to demonstrate not only that the speaker's reasons are valid, but also that the speaker themself rational and reasonable. This is particularly important when the argument appears to imply that the speaker is unreasonable or biased. Van Dijk's example is the following:

> (63) (...) those people, many of whom could reasonably be called economic migrants (Gorman, C).

Although Van Dijk did not consider such an example, it seems that the strategy could be implemented indirectly by suggesting that not only should the recipient be reasonable and take any other perspective, but also that they should not be unreasonable or naïve and should take the opposite perspective. The following example appears in the collected corpus:

> Do you believe in coincidences?
> They think you are stupid. Puppets w/o power. They want your guns. Why? No power left.

In the example above, the speaker implies that both they and their recipients are discerning and intelligent and do not believe the opposing views associated with the out-group. It is a clear instance of using a technique known from classical rhetoric tradition, i.e. *captatio benevolentiae* (Latin for "winning goodwill"), a rhetorical device used to capture the audience's affection, especially at the start of a speech or plea.

39. Repetition – discourse producers attempt to consolidate their ideological perspective and establish a sense of consistency and coherence in their reasoning by repeating essential terms, concepts, or messages. Repetition can instil a sense of familiarity and normalcy in the audience, making the ideological statements appear more genuine and convincing. Its primary aim is to draw attention to and prioritise specific ideas or concepts over others. Discourse producers signal the importance of specific ideas and strive to direct the audience's attention by repeating specific words or phrases. Repetition can also promote group identification and cohesion among discourse producers and their audiences. Discourse producers develop a shared language and discourse community by repeating specific ideological themes or slogans, which can improve group members' sense of belonging and loyalty.

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Those in power can create the idea that their ideological perspective is the only acceptable and legitimate one by repeatedly using specific words and concepts and that competing perspectives are deviant or unreasonable, which can strengthen the ideology's hegemonic influence and hinder critical questioning or opposition. Analogously, repetition can also be used to suppress, exclude, or marginalise opposing viewpoints or voices that threaten the dominant worldview. Discourse producers can generate a sense of authority and superiority by continuously repeating one ideological perspective while discounting or ignoring competing opinions. These two typical uses of repetition definitely can serve to strengthen the positive-self and negative-other presentation.

40. Situation description – it is a device used to build specific representations of reality that correspond with the ideological attitude of discourse creators while supporting the actor's presentation, which includes deciding which events, acts, or individuals to emphasise, what information to include or eliminate, and how to interpret and evaluate circumstances in conversation. Situation descriptions may employ interpretative frames, causal explanations, or moral judgments to direct the audience's knowledge and judgement of the scenario, potentially impacting the audience's view of the situation while reinforcing the dominant ideology.

41. Vagueness – ideological actors may use ambiguous language to conceal or minimise power disparities, social hierarchies, or discriminatory actions. In Van Dijk's conceptual framework, vagueness involves the use of relative expressions such as hedges and boosters, making it harder for the audience to verify the information contained therein. Simultaneously, it helps to create and strengthen a specific impression desired by the discourse creators.

42. Victimisation – it entails portraying one's group as unfairly wounded, oppressed, or disadvantaged by others, which is frequently used to elicit sympathy, support, or justification for one's beliefs or actions. It means that when the Others are portrayed negatively, primarily when associated with threats, the in-group must be shown as a victim of such a threat. It can elicit emotions such as pity, outrage, or empathy, which may influence how people see and understand social issues or events. It is a vital instrument for influencing and reinforcing ideological discourse. Van Dijk says that by portraying one's group as victims, speakers or authors can gain sympathy and support from their audience while also positioning their group as morally superior or deserving of special treatment.

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The above elements, most of which pursue broader and more general rhetorical objectives and strategies than those in the previous section, provide some basis for potential elements to look at when analysing questions for possible manipulation. However, most of them per se do not constitute sine qua non conditions for manipulation to occur. To do so, we need to reflect on several other elements related to manipulation, namely its ethical conditions, its relation to truth and the pragmatic elements that determine its effectiveness.

1.5. Manipulation and ethical, truth and felicity conditions

The elements discussed in this section are not purely linguistic but fall within the meaning of discourse analysis in its broadest sense, which, in Van Dijk's terms, among others, should pay close attention to the context. With the context, we can say more about how the sentences spoken or written relate to extra-linguistic reality (truth conditions), what impact they have on society (ethical conditions) and by what means this takes place (pragmatic conditions).

According to a relatively common and intuitive understanding of manipulation, it is illegitimate because it violates the rights of its recipients (Van Dijk, 2006b). However, the very nature of those rights may differ. In other words, manipulation is not (only) 'wrong' because it violates conversational maxims or other norms and rules of conversation, but this may be one dimension of manipulative talk and text. Manipulation is illegitimate in a democratic society also because it (re)produces, or at least may reproduce, inequality (*ibid.*). Fowler et al. (1979: 186) argue that speakers are capable of manipulating listeners through the language they use:

> X manipulates Y through language, and X pulls the wool over Y's eyes through language. But these processes tend to be unconscious for most speech community, for much of the time. If they were not, they would not work.

One of the most important criteria related to the ethics of communication is the criterion of truth and, indirectly, the criterion of felicity associated with it. Truth and felicity conditions are two concepts used to assess the acceptability and appropriateness of a sentence or a discourse in a given context. Whereas the former relate to semantic analysis as they help to determine a sentence's meaning and how it relates to its context, the latter denote the set of requirements that must be met for a proposition expressed in a sentence to be considered appropriate or acceptable in a given context and thus are part of pragmatic analyses. However, they are closely related because truth conditions are necessary but not sufficient

conditions for an utterance to be felicitous in terms of the quality maxim in most contexts. In such speech acts as declarations, requests, or warnings, truth-conditions are irrelevant or loosely related to them. They all relate to future events and, as such, to unrealistic situations which cannot be assessed for their truthfulness at the time of their utterance. The hearer may assess the sincerity of a speaker, which entangles any possible analysis of such sentences in psychologism or detailed and contextual analyses that go far beyond linguistic considerations.

However, the traditional understanding of truthfulness and felicity as related to the maxim of quality and sincerity condition (Austin, 1962) does not take into account the situation of manipulation, when the person being manipulated is entirely convinced of the truthfulness of a particular judgement and that the information provided to them by the (initial) manipulator corresponds to the actual state of affairs. Therefore, it is a situation where, being completely sincere, they are not lying because they have no intention to deceive, although simultaneously, they are not telling the truth either because their judgements do not reflect reality (Rigotti, 2005). However, in the context of this work, it seems sufficient to provide for the manipulation of the situation in which the person has consistently certified untruthful, although their claims are effectively challenged if they perceive that the recipients of these untrue statements continue to believe them despite their refutation.

Among the linguistic theories interested in manipulation and exploring ideas of truthfulness and felicity, one clearly emphasises all these elements, i.e. Information Manipulation Theory (IMT). IMT is a theoretical framework developed by Steven McCornack to explain how individuals and groups use information to influence the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of others (McCornack, 1992; McCornack et al., 1992). IMT suggests that individuals and groups can manipulate information in various ways to achieve their desired outcomes. It is a deceptive discourse production hypothesis based on Gricean theory of conversational implicature. The vast majority of everyday deceptive discourse, according to IMT, is neither true nor false but involves sometimes complicated combinations of elements that fall somewhere between these opposites. The most common form of deception is editing contextually problematic information (i.e., messages commonly known as "white lies"). Individuals can deceive others in four ways: by manipulating the amount of relevant information supplied, including incorrect information, presenting irrelevant information, or presenting information in an unduly imprecise approach. Deception will succeed if such manipulations remain covert, i.e., undiscovered by recipients.

IMT proposes that there are four primary tactics of information manipulation, which correspond with four Gricean maxims of communication (Grice, 1989):

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1. Quantity violations – this category includes statements that generally contain factual information, are usually relevant but contain no new information, or the information content is low, so they are redundant statements, repeating information to increase its perceived validity and believability (McCornack, 1992: 9–10; also from a psychological perspective, related to the mere-exposure effect, see: Eagly and Chaiken, 1993).

2. Quality violations – it includes not only the most prototypical deceptive utterances, i.e. regular lies, but also "moderate violations of both Quantity and Quality [maxims]", often referred to as "half-truths" (McCornack, 1992: 11) and messages containing "all truth" but with much false information added. Therefore, this category contains utterances containing none, some or all accurate information known to a speaker who simultaneously may mix it with fabricated information.

3. Relation violations – the most notable feature of messages under this category is that they neither directly nor implicitly address the posed topic. Instead, they each start a different conversation to steer the conversation away from its intended route. As a result, they are all "irrelevant" according to the conditional relevance set by the speech act prior to the answer (*ibid.*: 11–12).

4. Manner violations – it is a situation where some of the known information is revealed in the message, although it does so in an unclear manner, i.e. it is vague, ambiguous, or euphemistic to manipulate perceptions and attitudes (*ibid.*: 12–13).

IMT also identifies three key elements that influence the effectiveness of information manipulation:

(a) source credibility – the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and reliability of the source of the information (cf. Hovland & Weiss, 1951);

(b) message characteristics – the content and format of the information, including how it is presented and framed (O'Keefe & Jensen, 2009);

(c) target characteristics – the characteristics of the audience or recipient of the information, including their beliefs, values, and cognitive abilities (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

IMT has been applied in various contexts, including politics, advertising, and social media. It suggests that information manipulation can significantly affect individual and

societal outcomes and highlights the importance of critical thinking and media literacy in navigating information environments (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953).

McCornack, along with some collaborators, worked on a revised version of IMT and, in 2014, proposed Information Manipulation Theory 2 with an expansion of this name to be more specific as to its content – "a propositional theory of deceptive discourse production" (McCornack et al., 2014):

> [D]eceptive and truthful discourse both are output from a speech production system involving parallel-distributed processing, guided by efficiency, memory, and means-ends reasoning; and this production process involves a rapid-fire series of cognitive cycles (involving distinct modules united by a conscious workspace), and modification of incrementally-constructed discourse during the turn-at-talk in response to dynamic current-state/end-state discrepancies"
> (*ibid.*: 15)

IMT2 is based on recognising three propositional sets necessary for deception/manipulation to occur:

(a) a specific context where telling the truth is challenging because at least this potentially threatens potential personal consequences, and where cheating is more potentially beneficial and/or its cognitive costs are lower;

(b) contingent inserting fragments of manipulative discourse into the natural exchange of information, in which the vast majority of its bits are true sentences or sincere declarations;

(c) manipulative intention, which may or may not appear in discourse production as its by-product is not necessarily present at the onset; simultaneously, many unconscious processes occur in parallel, among which are typical moments of deception (Walczyk, 2014).

There are several conclusions from the above (McCornack et al., 2014):

(a) manipulation is often easier than telling the truth, which is one of the main reasons why people use it;

(b) people rarely lie directly, creating all their statements from false information; instead, they insert some untrue, manipulative fragments to otherwise authentic narratives;

(c) it follows from the above that people who manipulate still consider themselves to be truthful, and no cognitive dissonance is produced in this way; they are unaware that they are manipulating and believe that what they are saying is accurate;

(d) researchers studying deceptive discourse should focus on manipulation in larger pieces of discourse rather than on particular messages;

(e) the most frequent violations of conversational maxims are not those of quality but rather quantity, as the undesired information is ruled out by the speaker;

(f) due to problems with the detection of quantity violations, the overall detection of manipulative discourse is difficult to conduct;

(g) individuals frequently start a conversation without any desire to manipulate, and once the problem information is retained in memory, the decision to manipulate is taken.

1.6. Message-oriented manipulation theories

Several message-oriented manipulation theories (from now on, referred to as MMTs) concentrate on developing and delivering messages to sway audiences. These theories and accompanying concepts have been developed mainly within social psychology and cognitive science, marketing and advertising studies, and political science. The inoculation theory, for instance, contends that individuals might be "inoculated" against persuasive communications by starting with presenting them with weaker iterations of the message. As a result, people may become more resistant to the message and less vulnerable to deception (McGuire, 1961; Pfau et al., 1990; Compton, 2012). According to the sleeper effect theory, persons who doubt the source of a persuasive message may initially reject it. However, they may eventually forget the source and be more swayed by the message itself (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Cook & Flay, 1978; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Kumkale & Albarracín, 2004). In MMTs, it is the message which is the most important in manipulation. In this type of approach, as a rule, the overall content of the message does not change. While this immutability makes it central to such messages, the manipulation process itself takes place at the psychological level.

Another MMT of great prominence is William McGuire's model of persuasion (McGuire, 1973: 221). It includes six (in some versions seven) steps arranged in chronological order and, simultaneously, increasing difficulty for the person whose aim is to manipulate the audience:

(a) presenting the message through some medium or media;

(b) participation of the target and paying attention through attractive form or repetition, leading to the stimulation of the target;

(c) comprehension of the presented message;

(d) acceptance or agreement with the message;

(e) keeping the content for future reference, which means that the audience remembers it and identifies with it;

(f) actions are modified by persuasion in a desired direction.

MMTs seek to explain how message recipients respond to persuasive messages they perceive as manipulative or deceptive. According to MMTs, message recipients respond to manipulative messages in two ways: they may resist the message or acquiesce to it. Resistance occurs when message recipients recognise and reject the manipulation attempt, whereas yielding occurs when message recipients are influenced by the manipulative message. MMTs often identify some shared factors that influence whether a message recipient will resist or yield to a manipulative message:

(a) sensitivity to manipulation, which refers to a message recipient's awareness of the existence and prevalence of manipulative messages in their communication environment. The more sensitive a recipient is to manipulation, the more likely they are to resist a manipulative message (e.g., Campbell & Kirmani 2000; Jain & Posavac 2004);

(b) perceived relevance, which addresses the issue of how relevant the message is for the recipient. If a message is highly relevant, i.e., when it is personal or valuable for the recipient, they are more likely to be influenced by it, even if they recognise it as manipulative (e.g., Pavlou & Stewart, 2000; Rimer & Kreuter, 2006; Zhu & Chang, 2016);

(c) cognitive load, which is the amount of cognitive effort a message recipient must invest to process a message (Vrij et al., 2015). The higher the cognitive load, the less likely the recipient is to recognise manipulation in the message. Moreover, under cognitive load, recipients tend to activate various heuristics and stereotypes, which in turn facilitates manipulating the audience (Mooren, 2008).

The factors mentioned above are interconnected and interdependent, as they depend on the chosen picture of reality and worldview, which is because it is more difficult for the recipient to understand and accept news that is entirely novel and in total contrast to their worldview. All of these factors are relevant in the context of this work, as QAnon seemed to target their message to a specific audience, having used a number of cultural references with which particular groups of people could identify, and activated a specific discursive framework for Donald Trump supporters and opponents of the Democratic party. Moreover,

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also because of the form of their message, they forced their audiences to make an increased intellectual effort

1.7. Situational manipulation theories

Situational manipulation theories are communication theories that seek to explain how situational factors influence communication behaviour. They are informed predominantly by the psychology of communication and social psychology.

For instance, Mucchielli perceived all communication as an exchange of arguments to create a future shared situation different from the current one through situational negotiation (Mucchielli, 2010: 8). Therefore, the essence of manipulation is that while the vision of ideal communication assumes a similar vision of the future situation shared by all participants, the manipulator imagines this situation utterly differently while trying to predict what the interlocutor expects and assumes towards them. The situational dimension of manipulation also includes defining the present situation, e.g., the power relationship. If people engaged in communication are at the same level of power, to be effective, the manipulator must first put them in a situation where their interlocutor will understand that they are in a weaker position (*ibid.*: 14).

According to such theories, situational factors can facilitate or inhibit manipulative communication. Facilitative factors are those that make it easier for a person to engage in manipulative communication, while inhibitive factors are those that make it more challenging.

Some examples of facilitative factors include anonymity, power differentials, knowledge of existing circumstances defining the situation, the ability to create new, desired situations on this basis, and a lack of accountability (*ibid.*: 24–25). For instance, people may be more likely to engage in manipulative communication when they can do so anonymously because they do not have to worry about being held accountable for their actions or when they are in a relationship of power with other participants.

Inhibitive factors, on the other hand, include transparency, accountability, and social norms against manipulative communication. When these factors are present, people are less likely to engage in manipulative communication because they know they will be held accountable for their actions.

Situational manipulation theories suggest that people are more likely to engage in manipulative communication when the potential benefits outweigh the potential costs. For

instance, politicians might be more likely to engage in manipulative communication if they believe it will help them win an election, even if they know it is unethical.

What the participants risk in the communication process, potentially manipulative, is their perception of the existing situation, as well as their perception of future situations resulting from the interaction. They assume that the other communication participants have good intentions and do not intend to lie, cheat or manipulate what liars, cheaters, and manipulators do. Therefore, creating a situational framework has a strategic dimension, regardless of the participants' intentions (Mucchielli, 2010: 26).

1.8. Manipulation and theories of communication

Although so far there has been no systematic theory of manipulation based on a seminal mathematical model of communication by Claude Shannon (1948), some researchers see potential in the elements highlighted by this model in the analysis of persuasive messages (López & Lombardi, 2019). The model is based on the idea that communication involves multiple elements, including the message's sender, the message itself, the channel or medium used to convey the message, and the receiver of the message. Each of these elements can be manipulated to achieve a specific outcome. According to the Transactional Model of Communication, communication is a dynamic and participatory process between the sender and receiver. This concept recognises that both parties take an active role in manipulation. Manipulation can occur when the sender uses strategies to deceive or distort information to achieve specific aims. At the same time, the receiver is persuaded or manipulated into accepting the message without full awareness of the sender's intentions. The approach acknowledges that manipulation can be a mutual process in which both parties affect each other.

According to another influential theory from the field of communication studies, the Elaboration Likelihood Model developed by Petty and Cacioppo in the 1980s, there are two routes to persuasion: a central route and a peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984, 1986). Individuals who are driven and capable of meticulously analysing information are likelier to pick the central route. People who take this approach thoroughly study the content of the message, consider the arguments, and critically appraise the information offered to them. Because it is based on strong, logical, and well-founded arguments, persuasion via the central route will likely result in long-lasting and durable attitude changes. In contrast, individuals are more prone to follow the peripheral route when they lack the desire or cognitive capacity

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for in-depth processing. People who take this path rely on heuristics, surface clues, and mental shortcuts to make quick decisions. Emotional appeals, celebrity endorsements, attractive slogans, or other superficial components of the message may be used to persuade through the peripheral route. Attitude shifts via the periphery are often less durable and more subject to change over time. Persuaders may use either path to attain their goals in the context of manipulation. To affect the recipient's mindset, manipulators may employ emotional appeals and superficial triggers (peripheral route) rather than offering substantial evidence and logical reasons (central route). Manipulative messaging may focus on eliciting emotion or exploiting cognitive biases rather than engaging in significant logical argumentation. However, manipulators more frequently take the peripheral route, primarily attributable to message creation economics, i.e., fabricating facts and crafting cohesive narratives based on it is more complicated and time-consuming.

1.9. Context of manipulation

In the context of the present work, some psychological aspects of manipulation, such as specific personality traits of the manipulator and manipulated persons, as well as attitude and action theory, seem negligible and non-relevant and sometimes speculative. However, for the sake of completeness and a better understanding of the possible reasons for QAnon's effectiveness in manipulation, it is worth mentioning the contextual aspects conducive to manipulation, as perhaps some of these elements influenced Q's success. Some of these are cognitive in nature, which is fully in line with Van Dijk's conceptual framework, e.g., mental models (representations of discourse in user's minds), which is important, for example, for the most basic reasons, such as the conviction of the audience as to who Q is. Following are some crucial conditions that are frequently present in instances involving manipulation:

(a) symmetry in information – manipulation flourishes when the manipulator and the target have a significant knowledge mismatch. The manipulator may have access to confidential or sensitive information, while the target does not. Because of the information asymmetry, the manipulator can influence the narrative and shape the target's perception. This was the case with QAnon, or at least that was the impression they managed to give;

(b) lack of critical thinking – manipulation is more likely to succeed when the target needs more critical thinking skills or is negligent in assessing information. Critical thinking entails asking probing questions, analysing evidence, and scrutinising

sources. Individuals who are less cautious and accept information without question are more vulnerable to manipulation. Therefore, finding such individuals or groups and properly targeting them with one's message appears to be one of the main skills of a successful manipulator and their potential promoters;

(c) emotional vulnerability – manipulators frequently prey on their victims' emotional vulnerabilities. Fear, insecurity, anxiety, or a craving for acceptance or recognition are vulnerabilities. The manipulator gets leverage over the target's thoughts and behaviours by targeting and manipulating these emotions. For instance, QAnon exploited the natural need to care for children, including those of other people, using the blood libel trope described elsewhere in this work;

(d) trust and authority – manipulation is facilitated when the manipulator maintains a position of trust or authority. People respond more to information or orders from trustworthy sources, such as authority figures, specialists, or influential persons. Manipulators may use this trust to propagate misleading information or alter views. Again, QAnon managed to convince some people that they were military or intelligence insider, or even someone from the President's immediate entourage;

(e) social influence and conformity – manipulation can be reinforced when it aligns with social norms and prevailing opinions. Individuals often conform to group norms and may be influenced by the actions and beliefs of others. Manipulators can exploit this tendency by framing their message within the context of social acceptance or by leveraging social proof;

(f) limited time or cognitive resources – manipulation can be more successful when the target is under time constraints or requires more cognitive resources to assess information adequately. Individuals who are busy, distracted, or stressed may rely on mental shortcuts or heuristics, leaving them more prone to manipulation,

(g) lack of transparency and accountability – manipulators usually operate in environments with minimal transparency or responsibility. When manipulators' actions are hidden from scrutiny, they can engage in dishonest practices without immediate consequences, increasing the possibility of effective manipulation.

According to Van Dijk's theoretical framework, the right context and cognitive conditions for manipulation make the task of demagogues significantly easier. Van Dijk studied such discourses mainly in the context of politics, i.e. parliamentary speeches, as well as in the media context.

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1.10. Manipulation and ideology

The relationship between language manipulation and ideology is complicated and varied, and it has received substantial research in linguistics and related disciplines. As established in previous sections, linguistic manipulation is the deliberate use of words to influence or persuade others, particularly with the intention of instrumentalising the recipient for one's own ends, frequently by manipulating meaning, connotation, or emotion. Ideology refers to socially shared group beliefs, values, and assumptions that create people's worldviews and impact their attitudes and behaviours. Using language to reinforce (or question) dominant ideological notions is one possible (and prominent) application of linguistic manipulation. Political leaders, for example, may use language to frame issues in ways that favour their ideological agenda or to rally public support for a specific policy or cause (a theme explored extensively by Van Dijk, e.g. in Van Dijk, 2009). It needs mentioning, however, that while Van Dijk did not exclude various progressive and left-wing views from the scope of ideology, he was mainly concerned with racism, sexism, classism and conservative liberalism because, in his understanding, while the latter support the domination and reproduction of power, the former provide the sociocognitive basis for their critique (Van Dijk, 1998, 2013). Another theoretical assumption implicit in such a definition of ideologies as merely belief systems is that they need to be separated from the ideological practices that stem from them, and thus also from the discourses themselves (Van Dijk, 2006a). Specific discourses may thus use ideologies as sociocognitive scripts, which are very often deeply rooted. This brings Van Dijk's understanding of ideology closer to the concept of deep memetic frames repeatedly referred to in this work. Among the many opportunities for the reproduction and perpetuation of ideologies, one of the most important routes is through the media sources, which may use both language and visual content to influence public opinion or reinforce pre-existing ideological biases (e.g., Fairclough, 2001). Language manipulation and ideology are also linked by the use of language to establish social identity and reinforce power dynamics. For example, linguistic indicators such as accent, dialect, and slang can signify group membership and perpetuate social hierarchies based on race, class, and gender (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Similarly, labelling and stigmatising oppressed groups through language can reinforce existing power dynamics and prolong inequality (Harris & Cameron, 2006).

Among the theories, concepts and approaches in linguistics that capture these two issues, also addressing issues of the socio-cultural context of the message, its medium, and its cognitive element, Critical Discourse Analysis seems the most appropriate. In some of its

formulations, e.g. Van Dijk's concepts, a purely rhetorical moment is relevant to the analysis of ideological (and therefore persuasive and often even manipulative) discourses. It therefore seems entirely justified to choose it as the interpretative method for the material in this work.

1.11. Linguistic and memetic framing

Linguistic framing is the process of influencing how people understand and interpret information through language, which is an intermediate element between ideologies and discourses. It entails selecting and emphasising certain situation aspects while downplaying or omitting others to support a specific interpretation or evaluation. One of the key concepts in the study of linguistic framing is the concept of *frames* or *schema* (Van Dijk preferred the latter word with similar meaning, e.g. Van Dijk, 2006a, 2013), which are mental structures that help us organise and understand information. Language can be used to trigger and manipulate frames, and specific linguistic structures, metaphors, and other rhetorical devices can reinforce or challenge established frames. Linguistic and sociological research has shown that framing can be an effective instrument for shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes. In an analysis of political speeches in the United States, for example, researchers discovered that candidates who used more positive and optimistic language were more likely to be elected (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Similarly, a study on climate change media coverage has revealed that how the problem is framed has a significant impact on public attitudes and policy decisions (Nisbet, 2009).

According to Goffman, frames are "schemata of interpretation that allow individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large" (1974: 21). Unlike in most other researchers employing the concepts of frames and framing in their work, Goffman's perspective is more inclusive of non-linguistic elements of framing, such as gestures and other nonverbal cues.

The concept of cognitive/linguistic frames was an inspiration for a similar concept, possibly more relevant in the context of internet discourse, i.e., the concept of (deep) memetic frames (Phillips & Milner, 2021: 19)

> Deep memetic frames grow forth from what we're taught, what we experience, and how we're conditioned to interpret information. They shape our realities, and by extension our actions, so thoroughly and so seamlessly that the people peering out from behind them likely have no idea the frames even exist. *This is just how the world is* [original italicisation]; the epistemological equivalent of breathing.

Phillips and Milner (*ibid.*) mention Satanic Panic(s) as an example of memetic frame, arising from the *network climate change* stemming from media technology. This McLuhanian media determinism arguably could explain the rise of alt-right among young, unemployed, single people, mostly white males, who channelled their frustration through internet imageboards.

Another source for the term is the concept of *deep stories* by Hochschild (2016): "deep stories are the paradigms through which we viscerally experience everyday life. We feel our way into deep stories; those same feelings form the core of deep memetic frames" (Phillips and Milner, 2021: 33). Finally, the component *memetic* implies the circulation in networks. For example, for many of the memetic frames relevant to this work, like the Satanic Panic memetic frame, people who were raised in White, Evangelical, rural communities were particularly likely to see through it. For other people, occult elements present in pop-culture starting from the 60s were merely some peculiar part of it and nothing more.

This section has sought to review the concept of manipulation and related ones, to present how it can be studied within linguistics (more specifically critical discourse analysis and rhetorical analysis), how manipulation is understood within it, through which techniques it is produced, and finally what circumstances manipulators use to enable its effectiveness. In the case of the author of the messages analysed in this thesis, we can undoubtedly speak of effectiveness, so in the following section we will look at the media context that facilitated the spread of the content created by QAnon.

Chapter 2.

INTERNET AS A SPACE FOR MANIPULATION

While linguistic manipulation can take place in direct, unmediated communication, those who are interested in mass influence on people, and this is understood to be the approach of the people whose language is described in this work, eagerly take advantage of the possibility of communicating linguistic content through the media, which also potentially amplify its manipulative power. The media of mass communication almost from their inception have been used to manipulate the masses. Manipulation was used by their owners or controllers, be it public or private, most frequently political authorities, to insensibilise the audience to specific arguments of political opponents, to present to them their own pseudo-arguments, or to distract them from topics uncomfortable for the owners of those media.

As Carr (2007) put it while describing the work of one of the most prominent figures whose work revolved mostly around media manipulation, i.e., Marshall McLuhan:

> McLuhan understood that as media become more interactive, they also become more potent tools for manipulation and control"; "our senses and nervous systems [are vulnerable] to the private manipulation of those who would try to benefit by taking a lease on our eyes and ears and nerves.

As for the questions themselves, among the many functions of questions in media discourse, the persuasive and therefore manipulative function is clearly prominent. One example of such use typical for a media context is questions placed in headlines, at the beginning of leads, or in news tickers. The main aim of such forms is to make the recipient curious and create a discourse frame to which the material itself refers, although this reference may be quite loose. Therefore, the information they present tends to be enigmatic or exaggerated, which, in the case of questions, could be regarded as some form of hedging device. This intuition is expressed in Betteridge's law of headings. The author of this adage, Ian Betteridge, made an observation that an answer to a headline ending with a question mark is "no" (Betteridge, 2009). Similarly, Marr (2004) described the same phenomenon in a series of comments on how the reader should read and interpret similar headlines:

> If the headline asks a question, try answering 'no'. Is This the True Face of Britain's Young? (Sensible reader: No.) Have We Found the Cure for AIDS? (No; or you wouldn't have put the question mark in.) Does This Map Provide the Key for Peace? (Probably not.) A headline with a question mark at the end means, in the vast majority of cases, that the story is tendentious or

over-sold. It is often a scare story, or an attempt to elevate some run-of-the-mill piece of reporting into a national controversy and, preferably, a national panic. To a busy journalist hunting for real information a question mark means 'don't bother reading this bit'.

Although this is not strictly speaking a "law", sensationalist journalism often uses similar solutions and, moreover, such questions in headlines are one of the most common forms of *clickbait*.

2.1. Manipulation techniques on the modern internet

This section discusses forms of manipulation on the internet resulting from the use of information technology or the use of the internet architecture itself. This is, of course, a different understanding of manipulation, but in principle its purpose is similar to that presented in the previous section, i.e., to present a particular world vision and to induce the audience to take certain actions.

Among all types of media manipulation, the internet is a unique place, where apart from the types of manipulation known from traditional media, many new phenomena and techniques have been developed that can be associated with manipulation. On the one hand, their source is that the internet is much more open, flexible and unmoderated, so that gatekeeping known from the press, radio or television has a much smaller range. The entry threshold for creating one's own content and the ability to spread it is much lower. On the other hand, especially social media have created this impression of bottom-up direction possible to be exploited on a large scale by people with appropriate technological and financial measures or at least some level of expertise. All instances of cyberattacks aimed at changing users' perceptions, predating the emergence of social media where such attempts became widespread, are known as *cognitive hacking* (Cybenko et al., 2002, 2004) or, especially when conducted on a national level, *computational propaganda* (Wooley & Howard, 2019). Among the extra-linguistic possibilities for manipulation offered by the internet, many concern techniques for creating the impression of popularity or relevance of specific content, for selecting information in a way that is favourable to manipulators, or for distributing visually attractive, simplified messages prepared in advance. For instance, people are generally more likely to distribute content from low-credibility sources when they notice that many other users have interacted with these items. As a result, being exposed to engagement metrics like the number of reactions or shares generates susceptibility to fake news or propaganda (Nikolov et al., 2019).

The example of *cognitive hacking* exploiting those psychological conditions is *astroturfing*. It is a deceptive marketing or public relations tactic in which an individual or organisation creates the impression of grassroots support for a product, service, idea, or political agenda. Although not new and unique to the internet in principle, the scale of its possible use, the difficulty of verifying that it has been used and the possible results achieved in a short time before countermeasures are applied due to the reach of the internet as a medium and the role of anonymity online make *digital astroturfing* one its most distinctive extra-linguistic manipulation techniques (Kovic et al., 2018). *Astroturfing* predates the internet, and it can take many forms, but with the advent of multiple instruments offered by the internet, it became much easier to employ it on a massive scale. The term *astroturfing* is derived from the word "astroturf", a type of artificial grass often used on sports fields, and is a kind of wordplay on the expression "grassroot" because it relies on artificially creating the impression that the popularity of certain content is the result of people's natural interest in it, or at least is based on algorithmically attributed interest following those natural. The very design of *digital astroturfing* typically involves coordinated use of paid or fake actors, bots, or automated systems to create the illusion of popular support for a particular cause or product (Schoch et al., 2022). It can include fake social media accounts, online reviews, comments on blogs or news articles, or even staged protests or rallies. One of the most notorious examples of astroturfing campaigns was a massive operation orchestrated by the Internet Research Agency with headquarters in Saint Petersburg, a Russian troll farm, conducted during the 2016 presidential election in the United States. They set up fake social media accounts and organised controversial events and protests to incite strife among American voters (National Intelligence Council, 2017). Although astroturfing is illegal in many countries, detecting and prosecuting it is an extremely challenging task. Perhaps because its cost is generally small and the potential penalty very unlikely, it remains a frequently used means of manipulation.

Like astroturfing, *information*, *idea* or *propaganda laundering* refers to tactics to manipulate public opinion, whose name and analogy of ideas is derived from money laundering. It is about disguising or concealing false news or propaganda messages by spreading them through multiple online platforms and sources, making it more difficult for the audience to identify them as false news or propaganda. The term was popularised by an American comedian and newscaster Jon Stewart (Merelli, 2016), but it has been used for much longer in academia (e.g. Klein, 2012; Korta, 2018; Wang et al., 2020), also in reference to its own problems with auto-citations and auto-references (Boghossian, 2019). It is a way of

circular reporting, i.e., a situation in which a piece of information looks to come from numerous independent sources but actually comes from only one.

In this process, propaganda messages are typically spread through a network of accounts, websites, and social media platforms that are often coordinated and controlled by a particular entity or group with an agenda. The messages are designed to influence public opinion, shape narratives, and manipulate the perception of individuals or groups.

By spreading propaganda messages through multiple sources, the perpetrators of propaganda laundering seek to create the illusion of legitimacy and credibility, making it more difficult for the audience to identify and resist the propaganda. Propaganda laundering can have severe consequences for democracy, as it undermines the ability of individuals to make informed decisions based on accurate information and can lead to the spread of disinformation and misinformation.

Another example of manipulation online is arguably the most common. *Clickbait* refers to headlines, images, or other forms of online content that are intentionally misleading, exaggerated, or sensationalised to attract clicks and generate traffic to a website or social media post. *Clickbai*t is designed to grab the reader's attention and entice them to click on the content, often with the promise of revealing shocking, surprising, or scandalous information. *Clickbait* content often falls short of the promised sensationalism (further reinforced with the usage of buzzwords or emotional wording) and may disappoint or underwhelm the reader once they click through. According to the study by Kuiken et al. (2017), clickbait headlines contain more signal words, emotive sentiments, citations, and interrogatives than regular headlines do.

Clickbait can be used to manipulate people in numerous ways. Some of these may include questions suggesting something counterintuitive or highly unlikely is possible or factual, which some authors call *deceptive clickbait* (Jodłowiec, 2023; Scott, 2023). Clickbait headlines may also contain inaccurate or incomplete information to persuade readers to click on the article, exploiting the curiosity gap. For example, a headline like "Scientists Discover Cure for Cancer" may not include enough context to clarify that the solution is still in the early phases of development and may not be available for years. Such headlines may exaggerate or sensationalise news topics to generate a sense of drama and urgency. For example, a headline like "Killer Asteroid Headed for Earth!" may overestimate the asteroid's actual hazard, e.g., the asteroid can pass the earth at a safe distance.

Studies found clickbait headlines to be generally effective in driving clicks and engagement (e.g., Apresyan & Orlov, 2022; Béna et al., 2023; Lu & Pan, 2020). However, they may also be manipulative and contribute to the spread of incorrect or misleading information. According to a 2016 study by researchers from Columbia University, clickbait headlines are more likely to be shared on social media than other types of headlines, even if the content is of poor quality or contains misleading information (Potthast et al., 2018).

The search engine manipulation effect (SEME) is the ability of search engine results to impact the opinions and attitudes of those who use them. SEME is a search engine optimisation (SEO) tool that manipulates search results to impact how people view specific subjects or situations. SEME is built on the premise that people rely on search engines to supply them with adequate and reliable information. Search engines, on the other hand, utilise complicated algorithms to rank search results. These algorithms can be influenced by various factors, including the popularity of specific websites, the use of keywords, and the regularity with which a website's content is updated. As based on studies, search engine results can have a considerable impact on people's attitudes and opinions regarding a variety of topics. For example, research published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences discovered that search engine rankings could sway people's perceptions about political candidates (Epstein & Robertson, 2015). According to the study, skewed search rankings can influence indecisive voters' voting preferences by up to 20%.

Researchers studying SEME have signalled the possibility of using search engines to promote propaganda or disinformation. Some governments and organisations have been accused of using SEME to influence public opinion or advance specific agendas. Cambridge Analytica, a data analytics firm, was accused of utilising SEME to influence the 2016 US presidential election (Gibney, 2018). The corporation exploited Facebook data to produce tailored advertising and messaging to sway voters. Russian troll farms have been accused of employing SEME to influence the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit vote (Epstein et al., 2017, Sultan, 2019). The trolls created fake social media profiles to sway public opinion and disseminated pre-crafted content. The Chinese government has been accused of employing SEME to disseminate propaganda and sway public opinion at home and overseas, e.g. by aiming their propaganda at Taiwan. The government has a history of using social media to promote its goals and denigrate its critics (Zhu et al., 2011).

Many search engines and social media platforms, e.g. Google, Bing, Facebook and Twitter have developed SEME prevention methods to address these issues, such as using complicated, difficult-to-manipulate algorithms, presenting users with more transparent and

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informative search results, and numerous ways for identifying and penalising users and organisations attempting to use SEME. However, SEME remains a significant issue that raises critical considerations regarding the role of search engines in shaping public opinion and the ethics of manipulating search results for political or economic benefit.

Social media have given rise to a new form of manipulation that combines algorithms, echo chambers, and polarisation (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Sunstein, 2017). These three elements work together to create an environment where people are more susceptible to propaganda, misinformation, and other forms of manipulation. Algorithms are computer programmes or scripts that sort and filter content on social media based on users' past behaviours, preferences, and interactions (Bucher, 2012; van Dijck, 2013) with a design to show users content that is most relevant to them. It can create a feedback loop reinforcing existing beliefs and values and limits exposure to different perspectives. Algorithms can lead to the formation of *echo chambers*, where people are exposed to opinions and ideas that are similar to their own (Bakshy et al., 2015; Pariser, 2011).

Echo chambers are social structures where people are only exposed to views and attitudes consistent with their own. They can arise when people interact only with others who share their beliefs and values and when algorithms show users content that confirms their biases. There are many examples of the use of this mechanism in social media, selecting the content based on previously displayed and approved texts, audio recordings, videos and photos, or the content most frequently viewed by users with similar preferences. This can lead to a narrow-minded view of the world, where alternative perspectives are ignored or dismissed. *Echo chambers* can reinforce existing beliefs and values, leading to further polarisation, which closes the loop (Sunstein, 2002; Sunstein, 2017).

All this makes it easier for politicians, activists, and other groups to manipulate public opinion and achieve their goals (Sunstein, 2017), making this mechanism a potent tool for manipulation on social media. These three elements are intertwined to create an environment where people are more susceptible to propaganda, misinformation, and other forms of manipulation. As social media continues to play an increasingly important role in politics and society, it is essential to be aware of these mechanisms and their potential effects on public opinion. So far, attempts to change social media architecture to be less conducive to formation of echo chambers have not produced satisfactory results.

Meme-hacking refers to manipulating internet memes to influence public opinion, exploiting the fact that memes are cultural symbols or ideas that spread quickly through society, particularly online. *Meme-hacking* involves altering an existing meme to serve a

particular political or social agenda, similarly to *détournement*, a technique developed in the 1950s by the Letterist International and later adopted by the Situationist International, and its reformulated version known as *culture jamming*. Memes are based on shared notions, preferences, and cultural conventions. As a result, they might be approved or rejected by the communities that circulate them, forming new online institutions that prize in-depth knowledge of specific subcultures. With the reworking of original references, memes can be "hijacked" or "captured", which is being studied within the framework of informed policy-focused research, e.g., studies dealing with *network contagion* and *memetic warfare* (Goldenberg & Finkelstein, 2020). The goal of *meme-hacking* is to make the manipulated meme more appealing to a particular audience and to encourage that audience to share it with others. The hope is that the manipulated meme will go viral and spread rapidly through social media and other online platforms, thus influencing public opinion. Research has shown that *meme-hacking* can be a powerful tool for manipulating public opinion. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) in their detailed report for the Council of Europe discussed using memes in propaganda campaigns, including how memes can be manipulated and weaponised to influence public opinion and spread disinformation. Phillips (2018) explored the use of memes and other digital resources by the alt-right movement in the 2016 US presidential election and how the alt-right community understood both as grassroots and volunteering yet digitally skilled users (including trolls and imageboard anons) and leading politicians and members of their electoral staff employed hacked memes to amplify their message and mobilise their base.

Another online manipulation technique, *sockpuppeting*, refers to internet "sleeper cells". It denotes fake personalities online, used to praise, argue, bully, mock, or ridicule. Therefore, it is an online identity fraud in which a person creates one or more false identities or personas to manipulate online debates, promote a particular point of view, or attack someone without revealing their actual identity. "Sock puppet" is a person who speaks as if a puppet on their hand were a different creature. It implies that such a disguise is usually very poor and relatively easy to expose, which is not necessarily true. In online discourse, it might entail making multiple accounts on a forum, social media platform, or website and then utilising them to publish comments or messages that promote or defend a specific position or to attack or discredit opposing viewpoints. *Sockpuppeting* can also involve using fake accounts or avatars to present a false identity, which can aid the user in gaining credibility and influence in online discussions. *Sockpuppeting* can be organised and coordinated on a massive scale, and is therefore linked to *astroturfing* (Zerback et al., 2020). However, there

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are records of its use by individuals, including some well-known, such as Orlando Figes, the acclaimed British writer and historian who published numerous comments and ratings on the global sales site Amazon from many different accounts under different pseudonyms, in which he criticised books by other historians specialising in Russian history while praising his own books (Topping, 2010). *Sockpuppeting* is a type of internet manipulation because it can provide the appearance of mass support or opposition to a particular perspective. It can also hinder open and honest debate by drowning out dissenting views and instilling fear or intimidation. *Sockpuppeting* is widely considered unethical and is frequently restricted by the terms of service of internet platforms. It can be very effective with other online manipulation techniques, such as *threadbombing* or *astroturfing*. Its detection and control remain important issues for most popular online platforms, and a great deal of research has also been devoted to them (e.g., Fornaciari & Poesio, 2014; Maity et al., 2017; Hosseinia & Mukherjee, 2018; Yamak et al., 2018; Li et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2019, Liu et al., 2020, Nguyen et al., 2022).

Filter bubbles, related to the phenomenon of echo chambers, defined by algorithmically curated material suited to individual preferences, have become a common element of the online landscape (Pariser, 2011). This phenomenon impacts users' information consumption behaviours, which may contribute to the spread of misinformation, internet manipulation, and propaganda. Sunstein (2017) underlines the potential for *filter bubbles* to produce echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing opinions in the research on *filter bubbles* and their effects on acquiring information. Such selective information exposure might increase confirmation bias, in which individuals seek and accept information confirming their previous opinions while disregarding contrary viewpoints (Tufekci, 2017). *Filter bubbles* are of the utmost significance in internet manipulation and propaganda distribution. Propagandists and manipulators can employ *echo chambers* to push customised narratives by selectively exposing information to targeted users (Pariser, 2011). Understanding users' preferences and biases allows manipulators to intentionally distribute content to specific populations, potentially influencing public opinion and polarising society (Sunstein, 2017). *Filter bubble algorithms* may prioritise engaging or sensational content, amplifying extreme or erroneous information (Tufekci, 2017). This amplification effect can hasten the spread of misinformation, exacerbate social tensions, and undermine the diversity of opinions required for educated decision-making.

Finally, *filter bubbles* limit users' exposure to varied opinions and high-quality news, which can lead to a lack of knowledge of complicated subjects (Pariser, 2011). Users may

lose out on vital information contradicting their beliefs or providing a more balanced knowledge of events and themes.

Bot farms are an emerging phenomenon in the digital age that has become a growing concern for policymakers, researchers, and society at large. They refer to networks of automated software programmes, commonly known as bots, that manipulate digital systems and services for various purposes. Those bots are often programmed to perform specific tasks automatically, such as posting comments, sending messages, or following accounts on social media platforms. According to a report by the University of Oxford's Computational Propaganda Research Project (Woolley & Howard, 2017), bot farms are used to manipulate the general public in various ways. Some of the most common uses of bot farms include:

(a) political influence – bot farms have been used in political campaigns to manipulate public opinion and sway elections, e.g., during the 2016 US presidential election, bot farms were used to disseminate fake news, spam, and propaganda on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and to create the illusion of popular support for Donald J. Trump (Howard et al., 2016; Woolley & Howard, 2017);

(b) brand manipulation – as businesses also use bot farms to manipulate online reviews, ratings, and feedback to influence consumer behaviour and market competition, e.g., Luca and Zervas (2013) found that 16% of restaurant reviews on opinion aggregator Yelp were likely fake, with many of them generated by bot farms. The findings of this study are consistent with another one conducted by Alma Economics on behalf of the UK Department for Business and Trade (Alma Economics, 2023), which found that between 11% and 15% of reviews in the most popular product categories on the major e-commerce platforms are likely to be fake;

(c) financial fraud – bot farms are used by cybercriminals to carry out large-scale fraud, phishing, or distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, causing significant financial losses to individuals and organisations. According to yearly reports by security firm Imperva, around half of all internet traffic is generated by botnets, many of which are used for malicious purposes (Imperva, 2024).

Even if it is impossible to speak of all of the elements mentioned above directly if in QAnon's case, many of them were present in the propagation of its message. Q often shared memes by other Anons, found elsewhere, and perhaps of their own making, which suggests they understood imageboard culture. The memes included references to current political and social events. One possible way to interpret QAnon's activity is to view it as a disinformation

operation using, in addition to the linguistic components discussed later in this thesis, the mechanisms discussed in more detail in the section above. Among researchers and commentators, there are some (Rothschild, 2021; Guffey, 2022) who believe that the scale of Q's popularity, skillfully selected methods, knowledge of many themes previously present in mass culture, internet culture, fringe culture, or the world of conspiracy theories proves that it was a carefully thought-out and precisely executed disinformation campaign calculated to achieve specific social and political goals. The questions remain open as to if that is true and, if so, who organised this operation and what character it was supposed to have.

According to the Council of Europe (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), there is a distinction concerning three types of malicious information, among which the distinguishing factor is the intention of the author or the dissemination person:

(a) disinformation – intentionally produced and spread false and misleading information. The person(s) spreading disinformation knows it is untrue and does it deliberately;

(b) misinformation – inadvertently spread false and misleading information. People who spread misinformation believe it to be accurate;

(c) malinformation – information with a basis in reality spread pointedly and specifically to cause harm.

Having adopted such a distinction, it seems that QAnon used all three perspectives, first and foremost linking disinformation with malinformation and causing misinformation in misguided recipients. In addition to the disinformation component, elements of malinformation include the use of content published by Wikileaks, such as John Podesta's emails, which became the basis for the Pizzagate conspiracy theory. QAnon reached for similar sources very often, as they are generally regarded as quite reliable by those particularly suspicious of the political-media mainstream and are not rejected a priori by those commentators on public life closer to the mainstream. In many of their entries, QAnon referred to the term "disinformation". Interestingly, not only was it for the purpose of criticising or otherwise attacking Democrats and the rest of "the swamp", but Q also admitted that disinformation is part of their mission, possibly intending to misdirect the attention of the general public.

Although there is no evidence that anybody behind Q had any relation to Russia, web analysts confirmed that Russians amplified Q's message. They quickly understood that the QAnon narrative has the potential as a disinformation tool. As soon as a week after the first Q-drops, they started to promote the QAnon message online (Menn, 2020). According to

Melanie Smith, head analyst at social media analysis firm Graphika (Smith, 2019), in 2019, accounts removed from Twitter and suspected of being controlled by Russia's Internet Research Agency sent a high volume of tweets tagged with #QAnon and the movement slogan #WWG1WGA, short for Where We Go One, We Go All. Q's takes were then promoted occasionally by Russians after QAnon ceased to publish their entries, including during the war in Ukraine when one of the theories first published by Q was used by Russians as anti-American propaganda, i.e., the belief that the USA plotted with Ukraine and produced bioweapons in Kiev (Ling, 2022).

Some elements of Q's narrative were forged by Russians from FSB troll farms or are even older and were produced by KGB agents. Among them, one could be considered now as a universal trope. i.e., that pandemics like AIDS, bird flu, or SARS are man-made tools for depopulation. It originated when the Soviet KGB carried out an active-measure disinformation campaign to plant the idea that the United States had invented HIV/AIDS as part of its biological weapons research programme in the 1980s. First, the story appeared in 1983 in a pro-Soviet English-speaking Indian newspaper, *Patriot*. It circulated in various media, was corroborated by a dubious study of an East-German biologist, Jakob Segal and his wife, Lilli Segal, and circulated all over the world until it finally reached American media (Taylor, 2016). This idea then joined a wide range of concepts from Soviet disinformation, which permanently infected the thinking of Americans and citizens of other Western countries. It appeared in one of the Q-drops, i.e., QAnon entries:

Diseases created by families in power (pop control + pharma billions kb). Think AIDS.

There is a presupposition that the idea of AIDS being a man-made virus is a proven fact.

Among the features of conspiracy thinking, there are some QAnon almost enumerates in particular entries, e.g. the same set of sentences used twice in their drops:

Nothing is random. Everything has meaning.

The phrase resembles the assassins' creed, later adopted by Discordians, and possibly can be a dog whistle for anybody familiar with this lore.

In a similar vein, there were many instances of using the word 'coincidence' (in total, it was used as many as 269 times) in similar rhetorical questions:

Do you believe in coincidences?

2.2. Memes as a form of visual manipulation online

Visual manipulation has become the logical complement to verbal manipulation on the internet, where some new forms of communication and new genres have occurred. While some basic communication concepts may be similar to pre-internet genres, digital media and online communication features have resulted in significant variations. Above all, following McLuhan's suggestion that "the medium is the message", the internet itself has introduced significant changes in visual manipulation. Firstly, any form of internet discourse can potentially reach a worldwide audience, allowing for contact across geographical boundaries and cultural settings, which was not possible or at least limited in previous forms of communication.

While the transmission of content on a national or even international scale in a top-down direction, i.e. by large and organised content broadcasters, such as national media or large media corporations, was possible through radio and television, it was only the internet that enabled a bottom-up communication direction on an unprecedented scale.

Moreover, it allowed people to engage in conversations and discussions without being present in real-time. It also enabled streamers to include multimedia components such as photographs, videos, GIFs, emojis, or hyperlinks embedded in their content. During the decades of internet development, many sites and platforms with wide, even global reach have been created, allowing for active user participation and contact, adding comments, expressing attitudes and other forms of engagement with the shared content. Another important feature of the internet discourse is that it allows users to connect anonymously or behind pseudonyms, which can alter communication dynamics, honesty, and identity building in ways that traditional face-to-face or named contact does not.

What is exceptionally important for online manipulation is that internet discourse may spread quickly and virally, allowing information and ideas to reach many people very quickly, almost instantly. Most of the features of pre-internet visual manipulation have been encapsulated in the form of internet memes, perhaps the most characteristic form of visual communication on the internet. Memes and other online visual resources can be used to manipulate people's perceptions using a variety of approaches such as satire, image manipulation, memetic symbols or forms, memetic propaganda, and viral memes. These strategies can express various messages, disseminate misinformation, sway public opinion, and impact online communication. Memes can be used to make satirical or parody graphics that copy or criticise existing visual content like political propaganda, ads, or news items

(Shifman, 2013: 130). By recycling famous photos and adding amusing or critical comments, memes can visually modify the original content to express a different message or perspective. Satirical or parody memes frequently use irony and humour to question or criticise cultural conventions, beliefs, or power structures (*ibid.*: 149). They are widely available on social media platforms, online forums, and websites. Another feature of memes with manipulative potential is that they can transform photos by changing the colours, cropping, or adding components to an original image to produce a hilarious or ludicrous impact (Shifman, 2014). These modified photos can deceive or misrepresent reality visually in comic or convincing situations. Image manipulation memes frequently rely on visual cues and creative editing to create a distorted visual reality that can be amusing, bizarre, or provocative. Memes frequently follow a specific format (or templates) or employ distinctive visual symbols that internet users recognise. These symbols or formats can be repurposed or changed to produce new memes with different meanings or messages. Popular meme templates, such as "Distracted Boyfriend", "Expanding Brain", or "Condescending Wonka", can be visually modified to convey thoughts or beliefs outside their original context. These memetic symbols or forms have the potential to become visual shorthand for communicating complicated thoughts or emotions in a simplified and shareable fashion (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018). Several scholars believe that knowledge of memes formats, the ability to create them and thus provide visual commentary for current events has become part of internet literacy (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005; Procházka, 2015; Kanai, 2016; Wang et al., 2019) which means that being ignorant of them significantly limits the ability to understand modern online culture.

Upon becoming viral, memes may be used to propagate misinformation, deception, or extremist views by using humorous or relatable content. Memetic propaganda can be visually altered to elicit emotional responses, reinforce beliefs, or promote a specific agenda, frequently influencing public opinion or behaviour, including disseminating false information, distorting facts, or manipulating images to create a misleading narrative. Memetic propaganda can enhance ideological or political statements, sway elections, or promote specific social, cultural, or religious beliefs.

The default assumption of this work is that memes and other visuals are an essential element that complements the manipulative discourse expressed verbally, as they constitute a universal communication code commonly understood by users of imageboards, the medium through which QAnon communicated with their audience. The persona itself very often shared memes, sometimes without any additional commentary, which means that the meme itself can constitute the entirety of the message.

Memes used specifically on websites like 4chan or 8chan move back to the very origins of the term. The term "meme" predates the Internet age. As early as 1880, Thomas Henry Huxley expressed the idea that pieces of cultural information are governed by the same rules as living organisms, i.e., they replicate, develop, and, finally, are subject to the laws of evolution. There is no agreement as to who used the term in more modern meaning, but it is most often attributed to Richard Dawkins (1976), who at first came up with the idea in his most famous book, *The Selfish Gene*, very much in the vein of Huxley's:

> If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. [...] When you plant a fertile meme in my mind, you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.

However, internet memes are a different phenomenon, as later stated by Dawkins himself, who eventually accepted that there is a fundamental difference between his original understanding of memes and the modern usage of internet memes. In the digital age, the term has been co-opted by Internet users to mean snippets of information that self-replicate on the Internet (Dawkins, 2016; Shifman, 2014). Dawkins's understanding of memes, also in its most recent formulations, seems to have an explanatory potential in the context of manipulation. As any recipients of messages usually are not naïve and can judge the falsity of manipulated messages, there must be some other feature that makes them acceptable:

> The human reliance on communication is so great, the risks of deception and manipulation so ubiquitous, that it is reasonable to speculate that all available cost-effective modes of defense are likely to have evolved. (Sperber, 2000: 135)

The possible explanation is that they reflect their worldview and have a viral character, which makes approving and sharing them irresistible. Its function combines intertextuality, self-reflexiveness, juxtaposition, irony and pastiche. It accomplishes this through a series of visual arguments in the form of a proposition, rebuttal, reaffirmation, second rebuttal, and a final statement.

Phillips and Milner (2021) proposed a different viewpoint on memes as part of the internet ecosystem, in ideas moving back and forth between collective norms and individual actions, evolving as they travel. They placed memes at the core of their reflections on the mutual influences of culture on the internet and beyond using an environmental metaphor, which is, in a way, a return to the original definition of the meme as the cultural counterpart

of the gene as coined by Richard Dawkins. As far as *viral*, a related term quite often used interchangeably with a *meme* is concerned, both in popular and academic discourse, according to some scholars, e.g., Shifman, there is a significant difference between the two. Both share an element of virality, but whereas viral is a "single cultural unit" that is replicated repeatedly (which is close to the classic definition of meme by Dawkins, what is possibly one of the reasons for the confusion), an Internet meme is "always a collection of texts" (Shifman, 2014).

Internet memes can be used strategically by evoking strong emotions through linguistic and visual means. Like emotive language used in linguistic manipulation, memes often convey ideologised messages. According to studies in various disciplines such as media studies, social psychology or media sociology, the importance of memes from imageboards, particularly 4chan, for the development of Internet culture is enormous (Hine et al., 2017), to the extent that in the opinion of some researchers, there has been no global meme format since 2011 which would not have been initiated on 4chan (Phillips, 2015), quite often by regular 4chan trolls, and were designed to "hack the attention economy [...] and mainstream media" (boyd, 2017). The result is the requirement for some level of "meme literacy" with some rules on being able to recreate or at least decipher the aesthetic of online culture, respond to memes correctly, and, most importantly, being characterised by an ironic and self-ironic attitude, taking nothing entirely seriously, which partly explains QAnon's popularity, as a significant portion of imageboard users quickly understood the potential of this narrative, even though they did not believe in most of it, in opposing the forces and values they are fighting against, including the liberal media, big capital, and political elites.

Some of Q's statements show that he not only considered memes to be an essential part of the functioning of the movement created around his narrative but actually one of the main weapons in digital warfare:

> Source meme(s) material from battlefield and/or garage [highlight & share][take & drop]
> Mission 1: Dispute [reject] propaganda push through posting of research and facts
> Mission 2: Support role of other digital soldiers [one falls another stands (rises)]
> Mission 3: Guide [awaken] others through use of facts [DECLAS 1-99 material and other relevant facts] and memes [decouple MSDNC control of info stream] _ask 'counter' questions to initiate 'thought' vs repeat [echo] of MSDNC propaganda

The use of the terms "battlefield" and "digital soldiers" are two of many examples of the militarisation of discourse in the QAnon community. For instance, the section on biblical references mentions quotes in which the "armor of God" appeared.

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2.3. Influence of Alex Jones

Exploiting the opportunities offered by the internet is perhaps the most significant difference between QAnon, which is both a name for the character and the movement, and most previous conspiracy theories. It is likely, however, that QAnon would not have existed on such a vast scale were it not for the influence of the many people who could use the techniques discussed in the previous sections of the work, promoting their message and interpreting their puzzles. This section discusses the influence of arguably the world's best-known conspiracy theorist, who first made a massive presence on the internet, i.e. Alex Jones, on the promotion, particularly early on, of the QAnon narrative, in which he used the power of the internet, but also of television.

As a full-time broadcaster, film author, host of the InfoWars website and arguably the most popular promoter of conspiracy theories worldwide, Alex Jones was essential in making QAnon known to the general public. He rose to fame in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Throughout his career, he has promoted several conspiracy theories, including the belief that the 9/11 attacks were an inside job, that a secret cabal of globalists controls the government, that vaccines are the means of depopulation and that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was a hoax, with parents of the victims being hired actors (Ball, 2023: 81).

Jones was an early supporter of the QAnon conspiracy theory. The importance of Jones for popularising QAnon's message is so vital that he was one of the people who were most often suspected of hiding behind the letter Q (this theme was hinted at in a vital text describing Q, the documentary for HBO *Q: Into the Storm*; Hoback, 2021). He frequently invited individuals who claimed to be QAnon insiders, e.g., one of the most popular QTubers, Tracy Beanz, or supplied evidence to support Q's claims.

However, the paths of the QAnon movement and Alex Jones began to diverge as early as January 2018, when one of Jones' more important experts and the head of one of his offices Jerome Corsi began to claim that Q's identity had been stolen and someone had begun to impersonate them (which was later duly confirmed, including by stylometric studies, e.g. Roten, 2020, Pousaz & Roten, 2022; Cafiero & Camp, 2022). Jones began to distance himself from the conspiracy idea, which infuriated QAnon fans, who accused him of being a traitor or a shill for the deep state (Sommer, 2023). Jones's break from QAnon exemplifies the ephemeral nature of the conspiracy theory landscape, in which personalities can earn or lose credibility with their followers based on their devotion to specific beliefs or narratives.

2.4. Pizzagate

It seems that what Q accomplished initially with the help of QTubers (they will be discussed in the section on the QAnon movement), as well as Alex Jones, would have been much more difficult if much of their narrative had not already been ingrained in the minds of a broad audience of conspiracy theorists and imageboard trollnet. Among the elements that led to the formation of Q's narrative, Pizzagate was one of the most popular in American society. It originated in 2016 with the hacking of the private email account of Hillary Clinton aide, John Podesta. According to the United States government and the OSINT[2] specialists, the account was hacked by Russians from a special group called Fancy Bear. Then, it was handed to Wikileaks, which published them online. Finally, a Russian troll factory under the official name Internet Research Agency forged a conspiracy theory from some factual details found in the emails on a pizza restaurant Comet Ping Pong in Washington, D.C., where child trafficking and abuse allegedly took place in the basement. Such content was initially published on a web content aggregating site, Reddit. Then, the discussion on possible doublespeak keywords in Podesta's email messages moved to imageboards like 4chan.

An example of a message went like this:

To: "john.podesta@gmail.com"   <john.podesta@gmail.com>,   "podesta.mary@gmail.com"
<podesta.mary@gmail.com>
Cc: Tom Steyer <tsteyer@fahrllc.com>
Subject: Walnut sauce?

Hey John,
We know you're a true master of cuisine and we have appreciated that for years ...
But walnut sauce for the pasta? Mary, plz tell us the straight story, was the sauce actually very tasty?

Love to all the Podestas from the Steyers! Cheers,
Jim

Then, the list of possible keywords went viral. It included such elements:

- "hotdog" = boy
- "pizza" = girl
- "cheese" = little girl

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2 Abbreviation for Open Source Intelligence, i.e., techniques of collecting information about people and organisations using publicly available, legal sources of information.

- "pasta" = little boy
- "ice cream" = male prostitute
- "walnut" = person of colour
- "map" = semen
- "sauce" = orgy (after Badham, 2021: 132)

Like many other conspiracy theories, Pizzagate was internally consistent. However, the idea that Comet Ping Pong was a meeting point of a paedophile ring that used its basement as a child rape dungeon, besides being contrary to common sense, proved to be false when confronted with facts. The idea was instantly debunked, as the restaurant had no basement. However, it did not put a damper on speculations over illegal activities allegedly taking place there, and owners and employees of the pizzeria experienced various forms of harassment, both online and in real life. Eventually, it culminated with the incident of 4 December 2016 when a gunman entered the restaurant to "self-investigate" the site. He threatened the employees and clients, mainly families with children, and took three shots, destroying the door to a storage room (Ball, 2023: 51). Upon having discovered nothing was alarming there, he left the spot and was arrested soon afterwards (Badham, 2021: 152–162), which seemingly should be conclusive evidence for disproving the theory of Pizzagate, but still, a few minor incidents happened there after that. In QAnon's posts, Pizzagate was treated as a confirmed truth and a basis for further speculations.

Quite symptomatically, QAnon, on numerous occasions, suggested with his posts, including by uploading pictures, the interconnectedness between people from the political elite and people who have been proven to have committed sexual abuse, e.g., the acquaintance between the Clintons and Jeffrey Epstein, which constitutes no evidence from a legal point of view. However, for people among Q's audience who have already been directed to a certain kind of thinking about the world, visual stimuli of this kind probably had an impact. Of these entries, some relate directly to Pizzagate, e.g., Q explored the connection between John Podesta, Marina Abramović, and Allison Mack. One of the emails stolen by Russian hackers contained an invitation to the party presenting a 1996 art installation by Abramović titled *Spirit Cooking* in MoMA, containing recipes written on the walls with what was supposed to look like blood. Podesta neither replied nor attended the party. Q later referred to Marina Abramović by posting a tweet by Allison Mack with a photo of Abramović, thus seeking another link between them. Allison Mack was one of the members of an exposed sex cult of NXIVM. Mack was indeed a sex slave recruiter, as is further explained in the following

subsection (Berman, 2021). According to Q, Mack's arrest was expected to have a snowball effect [6], as they expected her to release names from a wider circle than NXIVM itself under pressure from investigators or prosecutors [2], as suggested in the fragment below. Note the conspiracy thinking characterised by the search for connections between co-occurring events over time:

[1] Allison Mack [NXIVM] arrested [date]?

[2] When does a bird sing?

[3] Schneiderman resigns [date]?

[4] Coincidence?

[5] Eyes Wide Open.

[6] Who will be next?

In another of his posts, Q linked Pizzagate and the Marina Abramović exhibition again:

Spirit cooking.

What does Spirit Cooking represent?

Cult.

What is a cult?

Who is worshipped?

This came directly after Q's questions on inverted crosses and suggestions on Satanic cults.

Two of the following entries referring to "spiritual cooking" included the transition from Pizzagate and Abramović to Rachel Chandler, Rachel Chandler, a New York-based photographer who allegedly collaborated with Jeffrey Epstein in the abuse of minors:

http://www.rachelchandler.us

How many 'girls' were waiting for their return to the boat?

Who owned the boat?

What does a 'handler' procure?

Is the 'handler' [one of many] connected to Epstein?

Flight logs reveal many hidden artifacts.

[RC]

***

WHAT HIGH-PROFILE 'ELITE' PEOPLE FUND AND PROVIDE RACHEL W/ HER PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO?

WHAT IS THE STUDIO USED FOR?

WHAT IS THE STUDIO REALLY USED FOR?

WHO HAS RC BEEN PICTURED WITH?

THIS GOES FAR BEYOND SPIRIT COOKING MODELS.

67

Notably, the lack of evidence linking these situations and following a purely speculation-based hunch did not prevent QAnon from creating this narrative, where an interesting construction appears at the end of both fragments. Both entries are composed of mere questions apart from the declarative sentences occurring at the very end of the entries. At the same time, the two declaratives, despite their categorical nature, are not elaborated in any way, nor is any evidence presented to prove that they are true.

This chapter aimed to show how the Q's narrative was propagated on the internet, who contributed to it and how. The first section was devoted to the technical elements found in the architecture of the internet, which may have played a role there. This was followed by a discussion of how an internet-specific visual-textual genre, i.e., the internet meme, provides a convenient ideological vehicle for those interested in promoting a particular ideology, i.e. also for manipulators like Q on imageboards and beyond. Subsequently, attention was given to the figure of Alex Jones and his InfoWars website, which was hugely important for the circulation of Q-drops among supporters of conspiracy theories more widely. It also discussed how Alex Jones seamlessly adopted QAnon into his worldview, as he was already promoting the conspiracy theory that was the primary source of the Q's narrative, i.e., Pizzagate. The next chapter discusses the phenomena that may have joined the core of the Q's idea in the form of Pizzagate, inspired particular elements of the content of the Q's narrative or shaped its form.

Chapter 3.

QANON AND SIMILAR AND RELATED PHENOMENA

This chapter discusses numerous examples of sources present in alternative culture that have been a source of inspiration or even part of Q's narrative. Many of these were likely to have been highly relevant particularly in the early days of Q, due to the specific audience, which was undoubtedly imageboard readers.

3.1. Various internet inspirations for QAnon – personae and phenomena

QAnon's modus operandi was not anything entirely new, as the tactics of using cryptic messages with a special kind of code broadcast on the electronic media, specifically on popular yet not mainstream platforms, dates back as far as 2006, when a collective of anonymous activists and hackers (or both, referred to with portmanteau coined with the two, i.e., hacktivists) named Anonymous. Moreover, much of Anonymous' online activity and communication was based precisely on imageboards due to their anonymity and popularity among technically proficient young people contesting socio-political reality (Coleman, 2023). An additional element that can be mentioned as a common part linking Anonymous and Q is that to some extent Q copied or imitated the hack-and-leak tactic created and propagated by Anonymous in the late noughties (Coleman, 2017).

Another source of inspiration for QAnon could have been LARPing, an abbreviation for "Live Action Role-Playing [Game]". There were claims circulating even on the /pol/ - Politically Incorrect board on 4chan that QAnon is just a role-playing game, some kind of joke on the users. QAnon laughed at this on numerous occasions:

> Remember, 'conspiracy' friends, LARPS have access to a full stock of 'original' surveillance photos.
> Nothing to see here.
> ***
>
> VIP PATRIOTS!
> [THEY] call in threats prior to each rally in an effort to diminish reach of message.
> ALL FOR A LARP.
> ***
>
> [Link to the New York Times article on QAnon]
> So much effort to 'KILL' a LARP.
> Nothing to see here.

***

Ask yourself a very simple Q.

Would the FAKE NEWS media (& other controlled assets) expend this amount of time and resource attacking [attempt to discredit - cast as conspiracy - LARP] this movement IF IT DID NOT POSE A SIGNIFICANT THREAT [DANGER]?

YOU ATTACK THOSE WHO THREATEN YOU THE MOST.

Logical thinking.

However, Manuel Chavez III, a famous gamer known by his nickname Defango, suggests that QAnon started exactly as an internet joke stemming from the previous internet puzzles named Cicada 3301 (Sommer, 2023). Another gamer, Thomas Schoenberger, argued that QAnon was initially a joke aimed at "radicalising smart people". The reason why QAnon posts are compared to LARP games is that they employ similar systems of genre structures, like rewards for correct or desired answers. Reed Berkowitz, a game designer, compared QAnon to internet games as their entries have a "game-like feel that is evident to anyone who has ever played an online role-play (RP) or LARP before" (Berkowitz, 2021). Some imageboard users believed that QAnon and Cicada 3301, one of the most public LARP games, was orchestrated by the same person or persons (Rothschild, 2021). Cicada 3301 was a cryptic and mysterious online quiz that emerged in January 2012. It began with intricate puzzles and challenges posted on numerous internet forums and websites, including 4chan and Reddit. The riddles were highly challenging, requiring expertise in cryptography, steganography (i.e., the practice of concealing secret data within a non-secret file or message to prevent detection), data analysis, and various esoteric areas. Participants had to solve several puzzles to advance to the next level. The riddles on Cicada 3301 were supposed to be exceedingly complicated, weeding out all but the most talented and persistent individuals. There were also aspects of mystery and hidden messages in the riddles, which frequently referenced historical persons, literary masterpieces, and secret societies. Cicada 3301 has a cult following, with numerous people and organisations working together to solve the puzzles and identify the organisation behind it. Cicada 3301 is widely assumed to have been a recruitment campaign for a covert organisation, an intelligence agency or a private think tank looking for individuals with extraordinary problem-solving and cryptography talents. On the other hand, the exact purpose and identity of Cicada 3301 remained unknown and shrouded in mystery.

Before Cicada 3301, another puzzling narrative caught the interest of the early internet crowd. The NESARA (National Economic Security and Recovery Act) movement was a

divisive and widely disproved scam scheme and conspiracy theory conceptualised by Shaini Goodwin that gained traction in the late 1990s and early 2000s. NESARA was allegedly a secret law passed by Congress in the United States in the 1990s. According to the conspiracy idea, NESARA was intended to cause dramatic changes in the country's economic and financial structures as it proposed debt forgiveness, abolishing the Federal Reserve, introducing a new currency, ensuring financial security for Americans, and holding new elections to remove treasonous officials. Supporters of the NESARA conspiracy theory argued that corrupt politicians with Bill Clinton in the lead (the link to the Clinton family is one of the many threads connecting NESARA to QAnon) and the deep state were keeping the law hidden from the public to block its adoption. They argued that once NESARA was declared and implemented, it would result in widespread abundance and a utopian society (Rothschild, 2021: 58–62). Obviously, NESARA has never been officially adopted or recognised as legislation by the United States government. Despite its lack of credibility, the NESARA conspiracy idea persists among fringe groups and people pushing for its implementation under the name GESARA, with "national" replaced by "global" (Sommer, 2023). Some traces of the philosophy behind NESARA can be found in the QAnon movement. One of the main features linking these two conspiracy theories is the belief that a significant part of the political class will be eliminated by dramatic events (the Storm in QAnon mythos) after they are publicly exposed as conspiring against America (Rothschild, 2021). Besides, the campaign has been partially revived in recent years thanks to the internet and favourable conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic.

NESARA was not the only myth that has somewhat influenced Q. Dancing for Dinars was a relatively obscure yet long-lasting both pre-internet and early internet scam which exploited the fall in the value of the dinar, Iraq's currency following the war with Kuwait and Western sanctions. Many people argued that a rebound in the dinar's value was inevitable, and the risk of failure was low. According to Mike Rothschild (Rothschild, 2021), a researcher on QAnon's impact on society and the movement's history, it was a direct precursor of QAnon. From this belief in a vein of gold awaiting the daring, an entire movement arose, a community that distributed narratives, sometimes being outright conspiracy theories, explaining why circumstances favourable to the growth of this currency and the tide of fortune flowing from it had not appeared. Rothschild argued that the characteristics of these movements are similar and that they resemble cults as they are based on awaiting some all-changing events.

Ong's Hat is one of the earliest internet riddles/conspiracies, relatively obscure but significant to internet fringe culture. Its significance for the development of the QAnon movement is that, as one of the first narratives, it was an attempt to test how fictional but stylised tales of serious threats, what later came to be known as creepypastas, could be accepted in the world of internet culture. Indeed, perhaps the Q's narrative can be perceived as such a story, an internet urban legend that has taken on gigantic proportions. The plot centres around Ong's Hat, a little hamlet in New Jersey that was supposed to have been abandoned in the nineteenth century and rediscovered in the twentieth century by a group of scientists experimenting with consciousness. According to the story, the scientists created a device that could transport people's consciousness to different realms or universes. They utilised this technology to explore numerous parallel universes, including one where they discovered the mysterious "Eggheads". In the 1990s and early 2000s, the tale of Ong's Hat was propagated through numerous internet forums and alternative culture magazines. Some thought it was factual as readers following the story and trying to unravel its mysteries encountered some real elements, while others thought it was a prank or a work of fiction, with its author Joseph Metheny adamantly refusing to explain which elements of the story are true (Rothschild, 2021). It is still a hot topic among people interested in fringe science, alternative history, and the paranormal. However, little evidence supports the legend's assertions, and it is primarily viewed as a work of fiction or an elaborate joke.

The figure of QAnon is often compared to Romanian hacker Marcel-Lehel Lazăr, known on the internet as Guccifer. Guccifer conducted several spectacular attacks, breaking into accounts of celebrities, politicians and their families, then publishing their private materials, including photos of former American President George W. Bush. His most notorious account intrusion is breaching the longtime Clinton family confidant Sidney Blumenthal's email account, which resembles the hacking of John Podesta's account, which sparked the Pizzagate conspiracy theory. This event has become somewhat of a founding myth of the QAnon movement. Additionally, Guccifer's hacks inspired other cybercriminals, contributing to the proliferation of cyberattacks. His arrest in 2014 and subsequent prosecution underscored the importance of international cooperation in combating cybercrime and raised questions about jurisdiction and extradition in cases involving cybercriminals operating across borders.

Furthermore, Guccifer 2.0 emerged in 2016 as a persona claiming responsibility for hacking the Democratic National Committee (DNC) during the U.S. presidential election. While Guccifer 2.0 claimed to be a lone Romanian hacker, investigations by cybersecurity

experts and U.S. intelligence agencies suggested ties to Russian intelligence agencies. The actions of Guccifer 2.0 further emphasised the geopolitical implications of cyberattacks and the ongoing challenges in addressing cyber threats.

Finally, according to Robert Guffey (Guffey, 2022), the QAnon cult is deeply rooted in one of the most extravagant intellectual pranks of the 20th century, i.e., Discordianism, a mix of parody religion and anarcho-libertarian philosophical movement aimed at the ontological undermining of all prevailing truths, laws and orders. For Discordians, who eventually became quite serious about their original joke of Eris, the goddess of chaos and disorder ruling the world, the reality is a permanent flux, susceptible to the whims of a malicious power impersonated by that feminine character. They believed (or not, as the part of the game was to discard one's own beliefs the moment one was aware of them as such) that there are no absolute laws governing the universe, let alone the human world. Their syncretic set of ideas included the alleged and most probably fake maxim by Hasan-i Sabbāh, a semi-legendary founder of the Order of Assassins, an Islamist cult and military group known for their fanaticism and effectiveness and precision in eliminating opponents: "Nothing is an absolute reality; all is permitted". The maxim was probably created by Vladimir Bartol, the author of a historical fiction novel, *Alamut*, portraying the Assassins' leader. Another novelist, William S. Burroughs, enjoyed the maxim so much that he used it in many of his works, including the one with arguably the most significant impact on the counterculture of the 60s and the 70s, i.e., *Naked Lunch,* in a slightly modified version: "Nothing is true; everything is permitted". The ideas of Discordians were, on the one hand, a direct response to the paranoia of the times of Nixonian politics, programmes of mind control such as MK-ULTRA, wars in Vietnam and Korea, and, on the other hand, the aridity and utopianism of hippies' proposals, which resulted in a proliferation of libertarian and anarchist ideas in the early Silicon Valley community. Guffey (2022) suggested that the playful yet subversive nature of Discordianism may have been copied exactly in the very different conditions of online reality and that, in addition to the two groups that followed Q's message, viz. naïve people genuinely believing in it and the one that took a much more sceptical approach, but at the same time opportunistically decided that its political potential was worth engaging with, there is also a third group of people who neither believe in satanic, violent paedophile orgies nor are interested in cynically promoting Donald Trump, and all they care about is undermining established orders and systems, no matter what ideologies they subscribe to.

3.2. Conspiracy theories and urban legends as sources of Q's narrative

In addition to Pizzagate, discussed in the previous chapter, the megaplex of conspiracy theories Q has also incorporated into its line-up of minor theories and concepts, which we will list in this section as a supplement to the context.

Conspiracy theories are theoretical models for explaining reality which are not accepted by the dominant scientific and political institutions (Harambam & Aupers, 2015). Jeffrey Victor calls them subversion myths (Victor, 1993), as their structure resembles myths, particularly those of Judeo-Christian origin, including heterodox traditions of Manichaeism and Gnosticism. In line with that, some researchers indicate that some people follow conspiracy theories because they adhere to a strictly Manichaean world vision, based on a sharp polarisation of good vs evil on micro and macro, local and cosmic scales. Others suggest that the conspiratorial mindset is based on a belief in rigid hierarchies, a pessimistic view of human nature, a high level of social distrust, a professed social Darwinism, or a belief that their own group is victimised (Oliver & Wood, 2014).

Conspiracy theories and urban myths or legends are stories with secretive, mysterious, or supernatural themes. While the two have certain similarities, they also have significant differences that separate them. Whereas conspiracy theories are initially fringe by definition, they may as well become mainstream over time. There is a constant tension between the two. Urban legends, on the other hand, very often have wide circulation, and the mechanism of their spreading is somewhat similar to the mechanism of spreading gossip.

Conspiracy theories are predominantly narratives that claim to explain events or situations as the consequence of a hidden, sometimes malicious, scheme by a group or organisation. They frequently entail secret intentions, cover-ups, and manipulation of information to achieve the conspirators' goals and can range from credible to ridiculous. The most popular conspiracy theories include NASA faking the landing on the Moon, the 9/11 attacks being the inside job, or the COVID-19 pandemic being produced and disseminated on purpose by some influential individuals or organisations, the last of which was at some point promoted by Q.

3.2.1. Seth Rich assassination

Seth Rich's assassination is a highly contentious and politicised incident. Seth Rich, a 27-year-old Democratic National Committee (DNC) employee, was shot and died in July 2016 in Washington, D.C. His death occurred amid a politically tense period, just weeks

before the Democratic National Convention and at the height of the 2016 United States presidential election. The circumstances surrounding Rich's death have given rise to a slew of conspiracy theories, including one promoted by Marjorie Green, a Republican member of the House of Representatives since 2021 and a promoter of the QAnon movement, who accused Barack Obama of ordering Rich's political assassination (Ball, 2023).

Some internet conspiracy theorists speculated that Rich was assassinated because he was the source of the leaked DNC emails disclosed by Wikileaks during the 2016 election. Such narratives were circulating on 4chan, which, according to Rothschild (2021: 23–24), further paved the way for QAnon there. This theory is mainly based on the fact that Rich was murdered in a high-crime area and that his wallet and other personal possessions were not taken. However, there is no evidence to substantiate the theories that Rich was the source of the DNC emails or that his death was politically motivated, which was denied by the disclosure of the source of the leak in Russian hacking activity in 2018. The FBI and the D.C. police department investigated Rich's death and found that it was the consequence of a botched robbery.

Despite the absence of evidence, conspiracy theories surrounding Seth Rich's death continue to spread online, and some have used his death to advance their political objectives. The controversy surrounding Rich's death serves as a reminder of how potent conspiracy theories can be in shaping public opinion and discourse. QAnon supporters think Rich was assassinated by the Democratic Party or the deep state because he was too knowledgeable about their corrupt practices. According to them, Rich's death was covered up by the mainstream media, and he was assassinated by Hillary Clinton or other members of the political elite.

3.2.2. Jeffrey Epstein scandal and suicide

For QAnon and their disciples, Jeffrey Epstein's scandal and his suicide were not so much circumstantial evidence as they were outright evidence for the existence of the conspiracy and secret ring of the paedophiles amongst the political and cultural elite. Epstein's name occurred 51 times in the Q-drop corpus, with some additional occurrences on posted photos, memes and pictures, indicating that this was a relatively frequently exposed theme, which is not surprising, given the fact that amidst the vast amount of speculation, unconfirmed links and some ordinary lies among Q's entries, this case actually linked a person with ties to the world of politics, media and entertainment to the abuse of minors (Cosentino, 2020). Q also

mentioned Epstein's associate and partner Ghislaine Maxwell, e.g. posting her pictures with Bill Clinton, Harvey Weinstein, or Prince Andrew Windsor (although, for some reason, they ignored the fact that Epstein was equally closely associated with Donald Trump), which was intended to prove the links between international pimping and leading politicians and lend credibility to QAnon's narrative. In a similar vein, QAnon was building his own image as a person privy to secret policy knowledge on the case and related threads, although it did not provide any new information or interpretations beyond those already circulating among people interested in conspiracy theories. After Epstein's death officially classified as suicide in 2019, the QAnon movement additionally pushed the prevalent theory that Epstein did not kill himself, i.e. that he was murdered by influential principals fearful that he would release their names in cooperation with justice (Sommer, 2023). Another and so far the last major contribution to the Epstein thread, which occurred after his death and already after the last Q entries, was the publication of the so-called "Epstein List" or "Epstein Files" (Zhou, 2024). The said list aroused some interest, for it contained the names of people who allegedly visited the infamous "Epstein's Island", where numerous sexual abuses were alleged to have taken place. However, despite considerable online interest, the list, firstly, did not actually contain any new information and, secondly, some of the content presented in it was downright false.

3.2.3. Behold a Pale Horse

A phrase taken from the biblical Book of Revelation was a title of one of the most important books for the American conspiracy theorists by Milton William Cooper, who claimed to have served in the United States Navy, the United States Air Force, and Naval Intelligence, which arguably gave this author credibility as a holder of inside knowledge of practices within intelligence and military organisations (Cooper, 1991).

The book is a detailed account of Cooper's experiences and discusses various issues, including purported government conspiracy ideas, secret societies, and the supposed cover-up of extraterrestrial life. The author also describes numerous conspiracy theories surrounding the JFK assassination and the Oklahoma City terrorist attack. Cooper also outlines his views on the global power structure and his projections for humanity's destiny.

The book is organised into chapters covering distinct aspects of conspiracy theories and the New World Order. Cooper claimed that the US government is involved in a wide range of conspiracies, including the cover-up of extraterrestrial life, economic manipulation, and false flag terrorist attacks. Cooper explored the claimed existence of secret groups such as the Illuminati, the Bilderberg Group, and the Trilateral Commission, which he alleges are

working towards the establishment of a global government. He believed that a small group of individuals, dubbed the "Power Elite", controls the world's governments and financial organisations. He also stated that the group declared a "silent war" against the American nation. The war is about draining energy out of the masses, tracking and controlling them and keeping them unaware of what is really happening. What links Cooper's claims to QAnon in a meaningful way is that this small group of people in power treats official religion as a tool to control the masses and secretly adheres to Satanism, worshipping Lucifer and not shying away from blood sacrifices. Cooper was also a figure who could have been a role model for QAnon. Indeed, he gained significant recognition in part because few questioned his experience in the military and in intelligence. Americans in particular seem to trust their former soldiers, especially at officer ranks. Finally, there are some fragments in the book with some sequences of questions resembling those by Q (Cooper, 1991):

> Were you aware that Hitler and his entire staff were Catholic?
>
> Did you know that the Nazis dabbled in the occult?
>
> Did you know that the New York Times of April 14,1990, quotes George Bush as stating, "Let's forgive the Nazi war criminals."
>
> I wonder why he said that?
>
> Did you know that the Los Angeles Times, December 12,1984, quoted Pope John Paul II as saying, "Don't go to God for forgiveness of sins, come to me."

Both characters' narratives can also be called conspiracy super theories because they are organised collections of conspiracy theories of their time (Gilroy, 2000; Barkun, 2013). The scale of complexity and the demonstration of how many elements and interconnections compound the conspiratorial understanding of reality in the case of the Q approach, which also characterises the Cooper approach, can be traced in Fig. 1. The main difference between them is that while Cooper's vision of reality involved the influence of extraterrestrial beings and UFOs as a central theme, QAnon was not much interested in the topic, and once even characterised it as a form of distraction crafted by the "three-letter agencies".

In Q-drop #376 (according to https://qalerts.app), Q addressed the question posed by one of anons: "Are UFOs a distraction?" in the following fashion:

> How far away is the closest star?
>
> What do you think?
>
> Q

In Q-drop #442 from 23 December 2017, it was written:

77

Message back.

UFO put out to detract from drops.

Q

Although incorporating many actual pieces of information from various fields, many of the assertions and conspiracy theories in *Behold a Pale Horse* are contentious and have been heavily challenged by major scholars and professionals as false, unsubstantiated or unverifiable (Gilroy, 2000: 352–353; Barkun, 2013: 60–63).

3.2.4. John Titor

Another mysterious person claiming to have been associated with the military, whose stories caused some stir a little later than Cooper's, and who is sometimes regarded as a forerunner of Q (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021), is known as a pseudonym of John Titor. John Titor is an alleged time traveller who claimed to have arrived from the future. He initially emerged on an internet forum in the year 2000, claiming to be a soldier from 2036 who had been sent back in time to 1975 to rescue an IBM 5100 computer. Titor predicted several future events, including a civil war in the United States, a terrible nuclear war in 2015, and the invention of time travel technology by 2034. He also claimed to have been to several points in the future and met his future self (Jensen, 2018).

The story of John Titor reminds, for example, of some feature themes related to time travel from the American film franchise *Terminator*. The vision of the world from Titor's stories is somewhat similar to that of Q's narrative because in both the world is but a Manichaean field of struggle for the forces of good and evil, where the scenario of the victory of evil is quite apocalyptic. Above all, however, these figures share the way they communicated. It can be said that John Titor, as an online person, was the first case of a person who presented an authorial alternative or conspiracy vision of a world with such an extensive narrative through the intermediary of Internet forums. Joseph Matheny, author of *Ong's Hat* discussed above, maintained that his story inspired the creators of the John Titor and that he knows them personally (Jensen, 2018). This may indicate that the creators of such stories not only know about each other, but also that there is a kind of transmission of the genre's patterns (Oelbaum, 2019).

3.2.5. Operation Mockingbird

It was an alleged CIA plot to obscure the truth and misinform the masses through mainstream media. This conspiracy theory has a solid basis in reality because in the short period between

12 March 1963 and 15 June 1963, at the request of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, there was a CIA-led operation of telephone intercept of two journalists to detect people being the source of government leaks. Information on the operation has been disclosed since 2007, and while its nature appears to be illegal yet to some extent justifiable (Pines, 2009), for numerous conspiracy theorists, as well as followers of the QAnon movement, it has become evidence of massive infiltration of the media by government agencies, which allegedly aimed to manually control the largest media outlets to push government propaganda. So far, declassified documents do not in the least confirm the existence of any such activities. Another source of speculation on the matter is the findings of the Church Committee, or the United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, which was a US Senate select committee in 1975 which investigated abuses by government agencies, including MKULTRA or COINTELPRO, and concluded that fifty journalists had official yet secret relationships with the CIA (Hadley, 2019). Regardless of that, the exaggerated nature of the wiretapping in the conspiracy theory is even reflected in its name. In fact, the name by which it is known is Project Mockingbird, which suggests that it was time-bound and one-off, whilst the conspiracy theory, very often mentioned by Q at the very beginning of their activity, is known as Operation Mockingbird, indicating the continuous nature of the wiretapping. Q used the word Mockingbird 12 times, including the phrase 'Operation Mockingbird' styled as 'Op[e]ration Mockingbird' or 'OP Mockingbird'. One entry shows how Q understands this operation. It is intended to be the use of social media by government agencies for the surveillance not just of journalists themselves, but of society as a whole:

> How is information transmitted?
> How are people inform[e]d?
> Why was Sarah A. C. attacked (hack-attempt)?
> Why was Op[e]ration Mockingbird repeated?
> Why was Jason Bourne (CIA/Dream) repeated?
> Think social media platforms.

3.2.6. Blood ritual myth

Although it was only hinted instead of being stated clearly and explicitly by QAnon, in the QNet, it is a trendy idea that the alleged elite of vampiric satanic paedophiles suck blood from tortured children to obtain high concentrations of a powerful psychedelic drug called adrenochrome from adrenal glands. Ludicrous as it may seem, the actual adrenochrome

hypothesis, though not present in Q-drops, circulates widely among Q researchers (Rothschild, 2021; Badham, 2021; Ball, 2023; Sommer, 2023). Q never denounced it and launched or at least promoted a campaign *#savethechildren*, simultaneously exploiting maternal and paternal instincts of protecting minors against violence (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021), which is a kind of use of the Think of the Children tactic, a cliché that exemplifies an appeal to emotion (Meany & Shuster, 2002).

One of the questions related to this theme was "How many kids disappeared?". It was asked in the context of Haiti as the alleged paedophile ring was accused by Q and their followers of being active on a global scale. Probably this was due to the fact that domestic disappearances were not so numerous as to back their beliefs of the existence of the cabal. Adrenochrome is an actually existing substance, but most likely nobody uses it for the purpose of intoxication, for it has no evident psychoactive effect. The following chapter in the section on the book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Thompson, 1971) explains the likely origins of the urban myth of the psychoactive effects of adrenochrome.

There is also a trope of the same origin known as blood libel which has been deployed specifically in the case of Jews repeatedly throughout history, but occasionally was used also against other groups like the Cathars in the thirteenth century or the Templar Knights in the fourteenth century. It claims that Jews kill Christian children to use their blood in religious rites, especially the preparation of matzah for Passover. The narrative has been repeated many times since 1235, when five children of a local miller were found dead in the German town of Fulda, which was attributed to local Jews who would testify that they had drained their blood into wax-impregnated bags (Langmuir, 1990)[3]. These charges proliferated throughout mediaeval Europe and beyond, frequently inspiring mob law and acts of violence against Jewish communities in the centuries that followed. Some most notable instances include the 1475 trials in Trent (interestingly, some followers of QAnon considered a sculpture of the victim, Simon of Trent, a representation of the extraction of adrenochrome from the body, e.g., Lee, 2022), the 1840 Damascus affair, where Jews were subjected to torture and execution on the pretext of these baseless accusations, or the Kielce pogrom in 1946 (Chazan, 1997; Ma'oz, 2010; Tokarska-Bakir & Skibińska, 2013). Political manipulation, economic jealousy, and long-standing religious conflicts were the main causes of these libels (Trachtenberg, 1982). Blood libel claims had dire repercussions, including widespread

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[3] Some sources, including QAnon researcher Mike Rothschild (Rothschild, 2021), consider the beginning of the blood libel to be 1144 and the murder of the boy known today as William the Martyr of Norwich, who was alleged to have been brutally tortured and crucified, of which local Jews were also accused. Some historians, however, separate these cases, calling the chronologically first one the crucifixion libel (Langmuir, 1990).

anti-Semitism, social exclusion, and deadly pogroms against Jews. Negative stereotypes were reinforced by these myths, which had an impact on popular culture and literature, leading to the creation of the infamous book *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Bronner, 2000). Blood libel-related beliefs and conspiracy theories still exist in the culture and media today, negatively impacting Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Muslim relations and serving as a vehicle for continuous anti-Semitic prejudice and scapegoating.

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Fig. 1. The great awakening map, also known as the Q Web or QAnon map (Parinya, C., n.d.; CC-BY-SA-4.0), is a visual representation that connects hundreds of global occurrences, people, groups, and conspiracy theories to demonstrate how intricately connected they are and to aid QAnon followers in comprehending the complexity of their environment (Hannah, 2021). The map became a visual use of the QAnon concept by those interested in alternative forms of spirituality and quickly gained popularity, finding its way onto T-shirts or posters as well .

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A certain socio-cultural phenomenon rooted in the tradition of accusations of ritual murder and blood libel and at the same time closely linked to stories of paedophile Satanists kidnapping, abusing and murdering children was the recurring waves of the Satanic Panic. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the Satanic Panic was primarily notable in the United States (Victor, 1993) with some offshoots in some other countries (e.g., LaFontaine, 1998; Frankfurter, 2006). It was distinguished by widespread belief in a Satanic cult conspiracy engaged in ritual abuse and human sacrifice, frequently involving children. The hysteria was driven by yellow media coverage, the popularity of occult-themed publications and movies, and the testimony of alleged "survivors" of Satanic abuse. According to Victor, it originated in rural areas, primarily inhabited by white Evangelical communities (Victor, 1993), which is an important resemblance to the populous core of the community which focused on the ideas proclaimed by QAnon. For Victor, it was an instance of a broader class of sociocultural narratives he called subversion myths or secret conspiracy myths. Stevens pointed to another source of Satanic Panic, namely black emancipation in the United States. In black Christian communities, the role of Satan's character was much more nuanced and multidimensional, and some of his depictions showed him in a much better light than among the white Evangelicals (Stevens, 1991).

The Satanic Panic began in the late 1970s when a few isolated cases of alleged Satanic abuse drew the attention of law enforcement, mental health specialists, and the media. Initially, there were allegations of ritual abuse in daycare centres and other settings. They frequently relied on the testimony of young children affected by their experiences. The fear peaked in the 1980s when numerous high-profile cases drew national attention to the subject. *Michelle Remembers*, a book co-written by psychologist Lawrence Pazder and his patient Michelle Smith in 1980, claimed to detail the latter's memories of Satanic ritual abuse as a youngster. The book became a best-seller, popularising the idea of Satanic organisations engaging in ritual abuse, although soon most of its claims were discredited by several sources (see Frankfurter, 2006). The McMartin Preschool trial, which began in 1984 and involved allegations of Satanic abuse at a daycare centre in California, and the 1988 book *The Satan Seller*, which purported to be a true story of a man who had been involved in a Satanic cult, were also influential sources of the Satanic Panic (Eberle & Eberle, 1993). As some more severe claims like those mentioned above were refuted and scepticism emerged regarding the legitimacy of many of the accusations, the fear began to fade in the early 1990s with one of

the last greater surges of interest of the Satanic Panic by Lauren Stratford (a pen name of Laural Willson), whose book, *Satan's Underground*, had to be withdrawn by its publisher after being exposed as a fraud by *Cornerstone* magazine (Maechler, 2009).

The Satanic Panic's effect, however, continued to be felt in the lives of those wrongfully accused and how the public and law enforcement viewed incidents of child abuse and ritualistic crime. Advocates of Satanic Panic frequently portrayed themselves as moral defenders and child protectors against demonic powers. They framed the "us" as righteous and virtuous individuals. At the same time, the authorities worked to uncover and prosecute the perpetrators, "them", who were depicted as Satan-worshipping cultists or abusers, creating an apparent dichotomy between those allegedly upholding traditional values and those accused of subverting them. Satanic Panic typically targeted marginalised groups, including Wiccans and pagans, heavy metal music fans, and members of numerous alternative subcultures. These groups were frequently portrayed as deviant or hazardous to society, strengthening existing societal divides and prejudices while portraying specific groups as outsiders or threats to the mainstream. An example of a tragedy resulting from false accusations is the West Memphis Three, i.e., three men who were convicted as adolescents in 1994 of murdering three boys in West Memphis, Arkansas, in 1993. Damien Echols was sentenced to death, Jessie Misskelley Jr. to life imprisonment with two 20-year terms, and Jason Baldwin to life in prison. During the trial, the prosecution claimed that the minors murdered the children as part of a Satanic ritual. The case sparked great debate due to the questionable nature of the evidence and the possibility of emotional bias in court. Finally, they entered Alford pleas, having served 18 years (Leveritt, 2003).

According to Baym (2015), moral panics like the Satanic panic represent anxieties typical to societies undergoing dynamic social changes driven by new media. Satanic panic was a cultural script that helped believers grasp what was going on in the world. The reality is extremely complex, but many people seek simple answers and settle for ones that are consistent with their worldview. The use of the symbolism of Eastern peoples, e.g. Buddhist or Hindu, by a generation of hippies, evoked associations with Satanism in American Protestants who were unaware of the religious background of these cultures. Bromley (1991) believes that Satanism constitutes a metaphorical construction of a widely experienced sense of vulnerability and danger experienced by many American families, so it can be activated in the event of sudden socio-political changes and shocks. Many authors (e.g., Vrzal, 2020; Hearst, 2022; Beyer & Herrberg, 2023) link exactly those fears with QAnon's narrative, with this time the alleged Satanists being painted not as people living in the society and somehow

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distinguished by their appearance or behaviour, but as elites separated from other people, although looking virtually like them, which only increased the aura of mystery, conspiracy and crimes committed in secret.

3.2.8. Deep state

Though originally it was coined as a technical term in political science for naming a type of governance, it has been adopted by alt-right activists as a conspiracy theory, which gained momentum with the presidency of Donald Trump who used the phrase on numerous occasions. QAnon and their followers also used this sophisticated metaphor on its own as a self-evident fact on how the USA and the entire world look like. The idea of the deep state has many different versions, but its core is the alleged activity of some domestic actors plotting against the lawful authorities and performing clandestine operations beyond the law.

According to Robert Guffey (Guffey, 2022), a researcher studying conspiracy theories, the term was coined by Peter Dale Scott in the book *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Scott, 1993) and later appropriated by several conspiracy theorists, including Alex Jones, to eventually be used by Donald Trump and his acolytes.

Another origin of the term leads to Turkey where *derin devlet* (directly translated as "deep state") is a commonly known phrase referring to an alleged collection of powerful anti-democratic coalitions within Turkey's political structure, made up of high-level individuals from intelligence services (both domestic and foreign), the Turkish military, security agencies, the judiciary, and the mafia. This term has been ideologically employed by many political forces in the past, including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Some conspiracy theorists believe the deep state is a cabal of high-level officials collaborating to push a globalist agenda. In contrast, others say it is a collection of individuals committed to a specific political party or philosophy who aim to discredit its opponents.

As confirmation of the deep State's existence, proponents frequently point to supposed evidence of secret meetings, cover-ups, and other malicious acts by government officials. However, mainstream political analysts and scholars generally dismiss the concept of a deep state as unfounded and evidence-free. What is significant about the deep-state conspiracy theory in the context of QAnon is that it is one of the elements absent from Pizzagate, but linking the narrative of a paedophile network among the elite with the world of state and international big politics, indirectly also with concepts like the Illuminati or the Bilderberg Group.

Illuminati conspiracy is one of the most exploited tropes of this kind, and there are many elements of this conspiracy theory that can be traced in the QAnon community. It is interesting, however, that Q did not explicitly mention this trope by the name. The elements which can be associated with it are, e.g., the triangle of evil actors (Rothschilds, Soros, Saudis) with one arm being clipped at one point, Satan worshipping. There were also references to Rothschild symbolism (Minerva's owl and eye in a triangle, both often associated with the Illuminati), or allusions to symbols on tattoos of American celebrities and artists. Interestingly, the origin of the Illuminati as a conspiracy theory eerily resembles the origin of QAnon, as it was probably a joke at the very outset. Originally, the Illuminati of Bavaria, historically a factual secret organisation formed by Adam Weishaupt in Ingolstadt, operating as a kind of 'secret society within a secret society', as most of the members of the society were recruited from the local freemasonry (Billington, 1980).

Later, the term "Illuminati" has been used to refer to a number of organisations that claim or have been reported to have links to the original Bavarian Illuminati or similar secret societies, though such claims and reports have not been proved. Organisations like these have sometimes been accused of plotting to control world affairs, by masterminding events and planting agents in government and corporations to gain power and influence or even form a new paradigm of social and political situation in the world, which is sometimes referred to as 'New World Order' (NWO). As the Illuminati were an utterly progressive power, accused by their conservatist opponents of planning numerous events such as the French Revolution, they are now mostly associated with progressive movements (Barkun, 2013). After the organisation was dissolved as early as at the end of the 18th century, their heritage seemed to be lost forever, even though there were numerous attempts to prove that they remained active sub rosa, plotting against legitimate governments all over the world. The idea of the Illuminati as an ongoing international conspiracy was very fringe, however, until 1975, when a pair of American writers, Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, wrote a cult novel trilogy *Illuminatus* based on some ideas they developed when they were working in *Playboy* in a letters section. Coincidentally, in the very same universe created by the authors, the second leading power were the Discordians fighting the law and order imposed by the Illuminati (Smith Galer, 2020).

A most likely explanation why QAnon decided not to use this term was that they did not want to be associated with conspiracy theorists. This activity was intended to be treated

seriously, as the authors wanted to make the impression that they presented some insider information from the military, intelligence and governmental agencies. However, there are references to the New World Order there:

> Families combined (TRI) = NWO.

However, Q introduced some innovations to this term:

> The Nazi order.
> NWO [N does not refer to "New"].

This sounds somewhat eerily when compared with the quote from Vladimir Putin:

> "Vladimir Putin: The New World Order Worships Satan"

The theory of the Illuminati or a similar interconnected group controlling world events is highly prevalent among conspiracy theory believers and has been exceptionally deftly combined by Q with the concepts mentioned above. Among the important sources of Q's narrative, however, there remains a narrative perhaps less realised as a conspiracy theory and operating for a much shorter period, but at the same time highly momentous for Q's political messaging in the context of current events, such as the presidency of Donald J. Trump, namely concerning Bill and Hillary Clinton.

3.2.10. Clinton Body Count

The Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory claims that former President Bill Clinton and his wife, former Secretary of State and challenger to Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton, were engaged in several murders and mysterious deaths. According to one idea, the Clintons staged these deaths to conceal numerous scandals or to stifle possible whistleblowers and political opponents (Sommer, 2023: 3). The conspiracy theory gained traction in the 1990s, during Bill Clinton's presidency, and has remained in various forms since then. Proponents of the hypothesis refer to a list of people who died in inexplicable circumstances, stating that many of them had ties to the Clintons or had knowledge that could have been harmful to them. Ultimately, elements of Satanic Panic, the Clinton Body Count, and Pizzagate, combined with an alt-right belief in Donald Trump's unique role, evolved into the QAnon narrative as its main components.

3.2.11. Great replacement

The concept of the Great Replacement is a far-right conspiracy theory that proposes an intentional plan to replace white people in Europe and other Western countries with non-white immigrants, primarily Muslims. Proponents of this idea claim that there is a coordinated attempt, generally attributed to globalist elites, to promote immigration and diversity to dilute the white population and eventually destroy Western civilisation.

The term was coined by French writer Renaud Camus and popularised in his 2011 book "Le Grand Remplacement" ("The Great Replacement"). It gained popularity among far-right and white nationalist organisations in Europe and the United States, as well as internet forums and imageboards like 4chan, 8chan and 8kun, functioning there almost as a *locus communis*. QAnon as a conspiracy theory and the Great Replacement arose and gained popularity virtually in parallel in the same places and similar circles, among those positioning themselves as alt-right, far-right and adherents of white supremacy (Cosentino, 2020). There is allegedly also a political dimension to this, as the influx of immigrants would displace or, to stick to the metaphor of the theory itself, replace white voters.

3.2.12. CoViD-19 pandemic conspiracy theories

Among many events of more local character, QAnon and the Q community were very active concerning the CoViD-19 pandemic, forcing the anti-vaccine movement agenda, incorporating it into their elaborate socio-political ontology (e.g., Morelock & Narita, 2022; Beyer & Herrberg, 2023). The anti-vaccine message was embedded in the typical Q's narratives on the 'policy of fear', which, however, appealed to the anger of their readers rather than to their fear:

> MONEY.
> POWER.
> CONTROL.
> People are simply in the way.
> SLAVES.
> SHEEP.
> PAWNS.
> MASS EXT EVENTS DESIGNED TO DECREASE THREAT LEVEL OF POPULATION.
> GUN CONTROL.
> WARS [FAKE][TOP HAPPY][BACKEND DEAL].
> ELECTION RIGGING.
> CONTROL.

YOUR VOICE DOES NOT MATTER.

PHARMA [CLAS-D]

WATER

AIR

CHEMICALS PUSHED FOR HOME USE CLEANING [CANCER][BABY ON FLOOR-HANDS IN MOUTH - THE START].

VACCINES [NOT ALL].

TOBACCO.

OPIOIDS.

ULTIMATE WIN [DEATH + MONEY].

THE FED.

ROTHSCHILD.

'CONSPIRACY'

'CONSPIRACY'

'CONSPIRACY'

UK/GER [5 days].

Choice is yours.

REVELATIONS.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH.

Here, Q used the metaphor of 'sheeple' (a portmanteau of 'sheep' and people), popular on the right-wing, especially among libertarians, referring to the herd-like clueless public, allegedly allowing politicians to enforce anything they want to limit their freedom, primarily driven by fear induced through the media. In total, Q used the word 'sheep' as many as 59 times, often in the immediate vicinity of the words 'slaves' and 'pawns'.

On different occasions, Q promoted a controversial medicine, hydroxychloroquine, which was praised by Donald Trump as a cure for SARS-CoV 2. At the same time, Q accused Democrats and liberal media of "squashing all hope of a cure" to terrorise the public until the election. By doing this, Q ignored standard evidence-based medical procedures, which again proved appropriate. Initially, the FDA authorised the emergency use of the drug, but standard scientific investigations on the safety and efficacy of hydroxychloroquine demonstrated conclusively that it is possibly dangerous when taken without medical supervision and that it is ineffective in death prevention. Finally, the FDA revoked the emergency use in the USA. Q's narrative went like this:

https://www.foxnews.com/media/ag-william-barr-disappointed-by-partisan-attacks-levied-at-president-trump-says-media-on-a-jihad-against-hydroxychloroquine📁

Difficult to imagine media [D party] attempting to squash all hope of a cure?

Difficult to imagine media [D party] wanting public to remain in fear [re COVID-19] up until the election?

Difficult to imagine media [D party] willing to sacrifice lives in order to regain power?

ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE.

Difficult truths will soon see the light of day.

This fragment also included Q's oft-repeated argument that the Democrats' pandemic policy was an electoral strategy for the upcoming presidential election. According to Q, the 'politics of fear' was intended to discredit the president Trump:

https://twitter.com/NYCMayor/status/1255309615883063297

Why do they want you locked inside?

Why do they want you to panic?

WHY DO THEY WANT YOU TO LIVE IN FEAR?

Why is the media banning anyone who challenges the covid-19 narrative?

THIS HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH THE P_ELECTION.

WHO BENEFITS THE MOST?

Logical thinking.

All assets deployed.

Win by any means necessary.

[GRAPHIC WITH HENRY KISSINGER: "The Plan" quote from 1992 Bilderberg meeting]

Q also promoted another conspiracy theory related to CoViD-19, i.e., that was released on purpose by the Chinese government:

https://twitter.com/johnrobertsFox/status/1256576858923073539 📁

What National/Global impact immediately occurs re: [intel assessment] the virus was [intentionally] released [in coordination w/ [CLAS 1-99]?

How do you prevent a war?

MATTERS OF NATIONAL SECURITY?

Think timing.

Who benefits the most?

Common denominator:

Do you believe Biden would admit to sexual assault simply by asking him?

No?

So why do it [ask]?

Do you believe intel community would admit [DECLAS] foreign adversary intentionally released COVID-19?

No?

So why do it [ask]?

[Jan 15] [D] Impeachment Articles transfer to Senate?

https://thehill.com/homenews/house/478404-house-votes-to-send-impeachment-articles-to-senate📁
[Jan 15] First COVID-19 U.S. case?
https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/06/doctor-who-treated-first-us-coronavirus-patient-says-covid-19-has-been-circulating-unchecked-for-weeks.html

Some questions above include innuendos to intelligence agencies infiltrated by 'bad actors'. One of the following entries reinforced this narrative, linking this topic with Democrats who were accused of plotting against the USA along with the Chinese. In this fragment, Q provided a suggestive question with a ready answer to the audience:

https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2020/05/03/congressman-nancy-pelosi-blocking-investigation-chinese-coronavirus-origins/
Why would Pelosi [D] block origination-source [roll-out] investigation of COVID-19 in [China]?
Prevent public exposure of truth?
Ask yourself, why?
[D]_People's_Republic_of_China

Generally, Q's narrative on the virus and the pandemic was consistent with that of Donald Trump. There were also attempts to defend his positions despite the relatively poor crisis management of the Trump administration. Consider the following counterfactual question. Its purpose was to justify Trump's actions even though their results were suboptimal and suggest that the opposite would have even worse consequences:

"very non-threatening,….." - Intel assessment
What would have happened if POTUS challenged the COVID-19 narrative from the beginning?

In another entry, Q repeated the same counterfactual question. This time, the entry was elaborate and included an explanation, a kind of apologia aimed at proving that Donald Trump made no mistake in his approach at the onset of the pandemic and that he knows better. The fragment also shows a typical frame construction of Q's narrative, in which one topic started in previous entries was continued, after which some other topics emerged. They, in turn, are further developed in subsequent entries. This time, the topic was related to attempts made by Democrats to organise hybrid elections with multiple voting methods, including the mailing one. In Q's argumentation, the mailing method was not intended to save lives, especially elderly ones, but solely to regain power.

What would have happened if POTUS challenged the COVID-19 narrative from the beginning?
Sometimes you can't TELL the public the truth.

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YOU MUST SHOW THEM.

Who benefits the most?

WHY ARE [D]'S SOLELY FOCUSED ON CLOSURE [RETAINING] AND VOTE-BY-MAIL?

They do not care about your well-being.

You are simply in the way.

This is about regaining POWER.

Self-preservation.

Every asset deployed.

Win by any means necessary.

WIN OR DIE.

What seems particularly relevant in the context of QAnon is that his message gained much traction during the pandemic because people were confused and uncertain about the future. Many of them had much time on their hands and were confined to their homes which encouraged them to search for the information online. According to Google Trends data, QAnon had more than ten times as much Google search interest in mid-July 2020 as it did in mid-January. Data gathered by the Atlantic Council and shared with Axios confirm that QAnon pages and groups on Facebook received nearly ten times as many likes at the end of July as they did the previous July. According to data provided to Axios by GroupSense, the daily average number of tweets with prominent QAnon hashtags increased by 190% between March and August compared to the previous seven months (Kight & Fisher, 2020).

3.3. Internet cults

QAnon would have been just another Internet curiosity without any translation of their ideas into American society if numerous promoters of conspiracy theories had not promoted it. Their eagerness to disseminate Q's message made millions of Americans obsessed with it. It was sometimes referred to as "Qult"[4]. Cohen also referred to QAnon as a "religious apocalyptic digital cult" (Cohen, 2022). Rothschild (Rothschild, 2021) collected dozens of reports of families torn apart because of QAnon.

One of them was even quoted by QAnon themselves:

I am terrified to go to bed but I have to, I have work tomorrow… What if I wake up and everyone has moved to a new board, how will I know? I've been on this train since CBTS. I can't lose communication now!

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[4] For example: https://www.reddit.com/r/Qult_Headquarters/

Previously, several other cults used online communication mainly to advertise themselves, recruit new members and provide information material.

3.3.1. Heaven's Gate

One of the first electronic media-using cults was Heaven's Gate. While Heaven's Gate predated the internet, it extensively used online communication and recruitment during the 1990s. This cult claimed that the Earth was about to be "recycled" and that members needed to abandon their physical bodies to rise to a higher plane of existence. They used websites, email newsletters, and online forums to propagate their ideas and recruit new members. In 1997, 39 Heaven's Gate members committed mass suicide in an attempt to reach what they believed was an extraterrestrial spacecraft trailing the Comet Hale-Bopp. What it has in common with the QAnon movement and with many previously mentioned concepts is a specific kind of millenarianism involving a belief in spectacular, dramatic events, leading to a significant shift in consciousness.

3.3.2. NXIVM

NXIVM was a self-help organisation founded by Keith Raniere in the late 1990s, which eventually became engaged in scandal due to allegations of sexual assault, forced labour, and other illegal acts. Raniere was found guilty of sex trafficking and leading a racketeering conspiracy in 2019.

Regarding specific mentions of NXIVM by QAnon, there have been a few instances where QAnon posts have referenced NXIVM or related topics. In a Q-drop from 28 March 2018, Q included a link to the Fox News website with the information on Raniere's being accused of sexual abuse. With a short comment:

> Nancy Salzman [historical timeline].
> MSM will not highlight 'bottom to top' unravel,

Q suggested that NXIVM's case is not isolated, but it is one of the symptoms of organised, systemic sexual abuse by the progressives, or, in their own terminology, one of the crumbs. For example, in one post from 14 May 2018, QAnon referred to NXIVM, suggesting that arresting one of the NXIVM members, Allison Mack, is connected to the resignation of the NY Attorney General Eric Schneiderman due to his sexual misconduct.

In a Q-drop from 10 September 2018, QAnon suggested the connection even more explicitly:

Why are 'powerful' [influential] people resigning due to 'past sexual misconduct' allegations?

Why are these 'allegations' now surfacing [10-month span]?

WHY NOW?

Human trafficking arrests up?

SA cooperating?

NXIVM?

When does a BIRD sing?

EYES WIDE OPEN.

https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-working-end-human-trafficking/

Coincidence?

Network being dismantled?

SHEEP NO MORE.

This chapter discussed various sources and inspirations of Q's narratives found in alternative culture on the internet, conspiracy theories or contemporary cults, which could be collected under the broader term of fringe culture. While undoubtedly appealing to a relatively large group of people, these conceptual frameworks or loci communes would probably not have provided Q with the broad audience he managed to gain. To this end, they referred to a sizable number of other widely known and commented upon sources and often reflexively referred to them. The most important of these will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4.

INTERTEXTUALITY AND INTERDISCURSIVITY OF QANON. CULTURE, POLITICS, POWER, SOCIETY

In discourse analysis and literary theory, there are fundamental concepts essential in comprehending how texts interact and how they contribute to more extensive discursive activities, i.e., intertextuality and interdiscursivity. According to Kristeva (1980), intertextuality is the process where the meaning of a given text is shaped by other, previously written texts. It includes all the references, quotations, and influences that are combined to create a web of textual connections between texts. In turn, interdiscursivity operates on a different level and refers to how many discourses interact within a single text to show how diverse types and genres of discourse—such as political, scientific, and popular—cross over and influence one another (Fairclough, 1992). The description at the interdiscursive level thus operates with more general analytical categories, recognising not so much the particular references found in the text itself, but rather different kinds of conventions such as genres, styles or discourses themselves.

Like the other contextual information discussed in the previous chapters, this type of knowledge of possible sources provides the necessary analytical clues, without which it would be challenging, if not impossible, to read, for example, some of the presuppositions or allusions contained in the questions from the Q entries.

QAnon alluded to numerous literary and film works in approximately 5,000 of their entries. There are several reasons why QAnon has made these literary and film connections. One explanation is that they contribute to forming a sense of shared identity and community among QAnon members. QAnon's references to well-known works of fiction could foster a sense of familiarity and connection among its adherents, who may believe they are part of a secret society or elite organisation seeking to reveal hidden truths.

Another reason is that these references can help QAnon members understand complex and perplexing information. QAnon can simplify its message and make it more accessible to a broader audience by employing metaphors and parallels from literature and film. For example, by comparing the net of evil actors from their conspiracy theory to the Matrix, QAnon could imply that its believers are on a heroic mission to defend the world from evil powers.

Finally, these allusions might be used by QAnon to appeal to a broader audience and recruit new members. QAnon can tap into existing cultural trends and memes by

incorporating imagery and symbolism from popular works of fiction, reaching a larger audience of those interested in the same issues.

However, in addition to the direct references mentioned directly in the entries and referring to shared cultural codes and common pop culture literacy, there were also references or inspirations in Q's entries that were an integral part of the text without mentioning or even suggesting their source, attesting to a good understanding of alternative, less popular areas of culture, but at the same time indicating a somewhat patronising treatment of a significant part of their audience. It is noticeable that QAnon operated on two complementary levels, which may indicate that they wanted to reach as wide and varied an audience as possible. Firstly, they referred to some of the most popular and widely recognised texts of culture, choosing from them main rather than side motifs, which is a conscious element of any rhetorical narrative, i.e. *loci communes* (or *topoi*). At the same time, these were often texts present in the memosphere, which would link to the other group that QAnon was reaching out to, from the very beginning, as evidenced by the most prosaic choice of communication medium itself. As far as this group was concerned, its references were based on elements appearing on imageboards, e.g. conspiracy theories functioning there as almost axioms or specific shared meme formats, etc., which the first group probably did not know beforehand or considered a curiosity.

4.1. Matrix and Alice in Wonderland

Among many intertextual references, it is possible to find those referring both to the *Matrix* film trilogy and *Alice in Wonderland*. It seems reasonable to conclude that an essential part of QAnon's imagery comes especially from one scene from the first film in the *Matrix* series. It contains a dialogue in which Neo and Morpheus discuss a way to return to normal or be alert to the truth:

> This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the *blue* pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the *red* pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I'm offering is the truth. Nothing more.

The above example is an excellent example of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, as it refers directly to another cultural text and shows almost directly how particular text elements allude to the presented world. In Alice in Wonderland, the main character changes size thanks to a certain type of pill, metaphorically referring to changes in consciousness,

which is the link between the two cultural texts. The above quote also mentions Wonderland and the rabbit hole, which are also important metaphorical elements in Q's narrative. The very colours of the pills could also be deemed significant, as red is generally associated with Republicans, Trump and the MAGA movement. Though both colours are used widely on different occasions and in different proportions by all of them, red is primarily considered to be a colour of Republicans as opposed to blue colour of Democrats. Although posters or billboards connected blue with Trump and a 'Make America Great Again' slogan, they are widely associated with red caps. By this token, QAnon communicated with their followers predominantly via textual messages on imageboards and included some visual clues for their readers. To some extent, in parallel, redpilling became a kind of mental shorthand that other groups more closely or more loosely related to the QAnon movement, such as the incel community or (more broadly) the manosphere, began to use (Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022).

In the dialogue in the very scene, Morpheus directly mentions *Alice in Wonderland*: "I imagine that right now you're feeling a bit like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole?". *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll is also a source of metaphors and symbolism, which was one of the most frequently invoked by Q. As one of the best associated in Anglo-Saxon culture works describing individual experience related to the processes of initiation, transgression and solving the mystery, it is also both an exoteric and esoteric text: it speaks to everyone and is very inclusive. On the other hand, it builds a sense of mystery and deals with the very source of transgression. In one of the entries, Q identified themselves with Alice after several drops with the line "Alice&Wonderland":

> Q=Alice
> You'll soon understand the meaning behind Alice "&" Wonderland

QAnon associated Wonderland with the fake world produced by liberal propaganda and mainstream media covering the crimes of the satanic cabal of paedophiles, hence the expression "The Bloody Wonderland".

However, it is somewhat incoherent with another entry associating the character of Alice with Hillary Clinton:

> Alice & Wonderland.
> Hillary & Saudi Arabia.
> ***
> Things need to be solved to understand what is about to happen.
> Let's start w/ Alice & Wonderland.

Hillary Clinton in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll.

Saudi Arabia - the Bloody Wonderland.

Later, this phrase was repeated many times by Q when they suggested looking at the coincidences described in the adjacent lines, which, according to Q, provided an interpretative key because it meant that the events were directly connected, providing a genuine alternative to the false official narrative treating the events as coincidental.

There were also drops on a white rabbit and a hatter:

WHO ARE THE WHITE RABBITS?
***
#MadHatter
***
https://foia.state.gov/Search/Results.aspx?collection=Litigation_F-2016-07895_47
[Pg 20 - Assange Arrest]
By: Marty Torrey [Mad Hatter]

The above posts refer to Hillary Clinton's leaked emails, which show that metaphors from Alice in Wonderland were also used in her correspondence.

4.2. Snow White

Another widely known cultural text Q referred to as a clear indication that they were inviting the broadest possible groups of people to dialogue and solve their riddles was *Snow White*. Originally, it was a German fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, but the story is probably better associated in the USA with a 1937 Disney animated musical fantasy film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which appeared several times in Q-drops.

One of the first mentions was that the CIA Directorate of Operations was code-named Snow White[5], which was probably intended to further demonstrate, as in the case of Alice in Wonderland, that this hostile, corrupt world of bad actors, three-letter agencies and corrupt politicians itself relishes such metaphors:

The CIA has 7 supercomputers, and they are all named after the 7 dwarfs from Snow White (Doc, Dopey, Bashful, Grumpy, Sneezy, Sleepy and Happy)

---

[5] This was confirmed by numerous sources, e.g., *Chicago Tribune*: https://archive.ph/yCwf9

Readers of Q's posts also presented alternative interpretations that Snow White was Julian Assange and the Seven Dwarfs were NSA data miners. There were also some indirect references:

> What is a spell?
> Who is asleep?

These questions were interpreted as Q's cues that the society is under a 'spell' and is being controlled and ignorant about the truth, just like Snow White in an enchanted sleep after eating the poisoned apple. In one of the last entries mentioning Snow White, Q pointed out that the 'Seven Dwarfs' are there to silence them:

> Snow White utilized/activated to silence.
> Snow White Pounce.
> ***
> SNOW WHITE [1, 2, and 5] offline.
> ***
> Time to play, Dopey.
> ***
> SNOW WHITE 4 NOW OFFLINE.
> ***
> SNOW WHITE 6 NOW OFFLINE.
> ***
> SNOW WHITE 7 NOW OFFLINE.
> PACKAGE COMPLETE.
> HAVE A NICE DAY.

4.3. Godfather

QAnon also goes back to some classic productions like *Godfather*. The very expression of "Godfather" appears repeatedly (52 times) in the corpus. Interestingly, looking at the timeline provides the insight that almost all of them took place in early drops up to 9 December 2017. Most of these occurrences were simply the title of "Godfather III". Some anons interpreted it as a reference to the figure of Jeff Sessions, who was the attorney general at the time. Some anons believed Sessions to be "the intellectual godfather of a right-wing agenda" (Siddiqui, 2017), closely linked to President Donald Trump (Smith, 2017). Another idea was that the godfather was Trump himself. On the other hand, others linked this figure with the other side of the political spectrum, e.g. George Soros. The cryptic character of Q-drops made it difficult to interpret it unambiguously.

The plot of *Godfather III* revolves around the story of Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) wanting his family outside the Mafia structures. However, he experiences some major difficulties as the family constitutes an essential part of the crime world, and there are some "bad actors" plotting against his will to legitimise the business.

There is just one Q-drop containing the word "godfather", written much later, on 30 July 2019:

> https://twitter.com/Pontifex/status/1156165039545606144
> Godfather III
> It's going to be BIBLICAL.

The link leads to Pope Francis's tweet:

> Let us pray that the Lord will free the victims of human trafficking and help us to respond actively to the cry for help of so many of our brothers and sisters who are deprived of their dignity and freedom. #EndHumanTrafficking

It somehow resonates with the interpretation linking Godfather with the pope. However, the immediate co-text of the phrase in this entry is different from those from 2017. This indicates that it is likely that the term was reused in a different sense, perhaps by a different person or persons than before, which alludes to the possible acquisition of the Q account mentioned several times in this work, which is also confirmed by stylometric studies (e.g., Roten, 2020).

4.4. Speed

Several Q's entries made references to a series of films *Speed*, a widely acclaimed American blockbuster:

> Hero (DJT) racing against time to stop a Madman (Rocker Man in NK) blowing up the world.
> Iron Eagle: US and Russia teaming up to rescue hostages. Hostages = North Korean people.

In the movie *Speed*, the bus's forward momentum must be preserved to prevent a bomb from going off. The insane man (once again, possibly a parallel with Mad Hatter from *Alice in Wonderland*) and his plan will triumph, the passengers will perish, and forward momentum will not be maintained at a rapid pace. Q could be alluding to President Trump and his conflict with the swamp (a metaphor described in the final chapter). In this line of interpretation, Trump himself would become an element of the Swamp if he stopped its

drainage. In any case, Q encouraged his readers to interpret even such enigmatic or ambiguous elements of his narrative:

> Alice & Wonderland – understood.
>
> Snow White – understood.
>
> Iron Eagle?
>
> Godfather III?
>
> Speed?
>
> Everything has meaning.

4.5. 1984

George Orwell's *1984* is frequently used by numerous political groupings, including some on the right, to emphasise the dangers of totalitarianism and government overreach. While Orwell was a socialist who wrote *1984* as a critique of authoritarian governments, especially Stalinism, the themes of government surveillance, mind control, and dissent suppression are relevant throughout the political spectrum. Right-wing propagandists may use *1984* to criticise government intrusion, excessive regulation, or censorship, which aligns with their beliefs in minimal government intervention and individual liberty. They may claim that Orwell's dystopian vision serves as a warning against the rise of governmental authority, which they perceive as a threat to personal liberty and free markets.

> "Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And the process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right." ― George Orwell, 1984
> Sound familiar?

That was one of QAnon's later drops from June 2020, likely to be a reference to some social phenomena like Wokeism, Black Lives Matter, and American Antifa. This is evidenced by Q's reference to these topics in the immediate time frame, as well as their presence as some of the most frequently commented on in the media at the time.

4.6. Brave New World

Orwell's *1984* is often mentioned in one breath with another famous 20th century dystopian novel, i.e., Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The phrase "Brave New World" comes from William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, where Miranda uses it to characterise the new world

she discovers. However, its most well-known use is as the title of Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel, released in 1932.

Huxley's novel, *Brave New World*, depicts a highly controlled, technologically advanced future society in which individuality, emotions, and human relationships are suppressed in favour of stability, conformity, and efficiency. The government, sometimes known as the World State, controls all aspects of people's lives, including reproduction, education, and consumer patterns. The title captures the irony and ambiguity of the society described in the novel. On the one hand, the term evokes optimism and advancement, echoing Miranda's awe of the new world she encounters. Conversely, it conveys a sense of gloom and warning, as a lack of freedom, emotional depth, and authentic human connection marks the society depicted in the novel. It is rather surprising, however, that this quite obvious irony escaped Q's attention, as they seem to read this admiration literally:

> We are going to show you a new world.
> Those who are blind will soon see the light.
> A beautiful brave new world lies ahead.
> We take this journey together.
> One step at a time.
> WWG1WGA!

4.7. The Hunt for Red October

Another work of literature and film to which Q referred was the now classic techno-thriller from 1984 written by Tom Clancy titled *The Hunt for Red October*, filmed in 1990 starring Sean Connery and Alec Baldwin. There were many guesses among the Q community on the actual meaning of the *The Hunt for Red October* references. Tom Clancy's book's and John McTiernan film's title was mentioned in the corpus in full or just by the phrase "Red October" on multiple occasions (18 times in total). According to anons and QTubers, it could be a reference to Russian malware Красный Октябрь, the Bolshevik-like revolution of QAnon, the Russiagate affair (Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election), the Argentine submarine lost after being chased by a British helicopter, possibly hijacked by North Korea, Edward Snowden, some online game under the same title, or virtually any act of subversion.

4.8. The Bourne Trilogy

Literary and cinematic sources of reference in Q's narrative also include the Jason Bourne franchise. Both the book and the film revolve around the theme of identity. The main character, Jason Bourne, suffers from psychogenic amnesia and fights to recall his past and true identity. Throughout the story, he journeys in search of his identity while avoiding several obstacles and enemies who are after him. The plot of "The Bourne Identity" revolves around espionage, conspiracy, and mystery. Bourne learns that he has a background in clandestine operations and is involved in a complicated web of covert actions sponsored by government agencies and shadowy organisations. As Bourne deciphers the secrets surrounding his identity, he confronts his past deeds and considers the moral consequences of his previous existence as an operative. The novel by Robert Ludlum from 1980 to a larger extent delves into themes of atonement as Bourne strives to atone for his past actions and reclaim control of his life. As he becomes engaged in a series of perilous encounters while navigating a world of espionage and betrayal, he begins to explore the implications of his actions. Bourne is forced to confront the consequences of his previous decisions, as well as the impact they have on his and others' lives. The story explores issues of accountability, responsibility, and the ethical quandaries inherent in espionage.

The narrative also explores the implications of one's actions. Bourne is forced to confront the consequences of his previous decisions, as well as the impact they have on his and others' lives. The story explores issues of accountability, responsibility, and the ethical quandaries inherent in espionage. One "Jason Bourne", the fifth movie in the series from 2016, contains one scene to which QAnon apparently refers when they mention Deep Dream. In the movie, Deep Dream is a social media platform designed to monitor and track the behaviours of its users. Its creator, Aaron Kalloor, a character believed by many fans of the series to be based on Mark Zuckerberg (Truffaut-Wong, 2016), plans to sell all the relevant information to the CIA. Below are some Q-drops containing references to the series:

> Jason Bourne (2016)(Dream/CIA)
> ***
> Jason Bourne (CIA/Dream).
> ***
> Why was Jason Bourne (CIA/Dream) repeated?
> ***
> Jason Bourne (Deep Dream)
> ***

PROJECT DEEPDREAMv2[A]].

WE WILL NEVER FORGET.

ES FAILED.

WHERE IS ES?

***

"Project DeepDream v2[A]?" – Q

Do you believe in coincidences?

According to the creators of the subsequent parts of the series, Jason Bourne as a character was partly inspired by Edward Snowden and other whistleblowers (Seegmiller, 2016). Perhaps QAnon also wanted, by referring to this series, to suggest in these posts that he was some sort of insider who felt a moral objection to actions taken in secret from the public by employees of government agencies and decided to share his knowledge in this form to thwart these actions.

4.9. Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

A significant part of the narrative of Satanic paedophiles revolves around adrenochrome, a drug obtained directly from the adrenaline gland of living people. It was taken directly from literary fiction, a pseudo-reportage in the style of gonzo by an American journalist and writer Hunter S. Thompson, who in the most famous of his books, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* from 1971, pictured a scene of hallucinations on drugs containing almost all the threads later repeated in the QAnon mythology. His descriptions were vivid and evocative themselves, but the scenes based on them in the faithful film adaptation of the novel remain in many people's memories. Terry Gilliam's film, in which Johnny Depp plays Hunter Thompson's alter ego, Raoul Duke, soon achieved cult status. The adrenochrome theme itself did not appear in any of QAnon's entries, but many comments containing such speculation had never been corrected by them. The topic was further developed in the materials of many QTubers. The following excerpt from the book presents adrenochrome as an extremely powerful psychedelic drug (Thompson, 1971):

"Take a hit out of that little brown bottle in my shaving kit."

"What is it?"

"Adrenochrome," he said. "You won't need much. Just a little tiny taste." I got the bottle and dipped the head of a paper match into it.

"That's about right," he said. "That stuff makes pure mescaline seem like gingerbeer. You'll go completely crazy if you take too much." I licked the end of the match.

The next part touches upon the topic of its origin from living human beings. The monstrosity of such a way of obtaining it was echoed in Q imagery. Most QTubers, members of the Q community and Alex Jones of InfoWars, who amplified the visibility of QAnon, claimed that adrenochrome is extracted from the pineal gland instead of the adrenal glands. There is also a narrative of blood-drinking Satanists:

> Where'd you get this?" I asked. "You can't buy it."
> "Never mind," he said. "It's absolutely pure." I shook my head sadly. "Jesus! What kind of monster client have you picked up this time? There's only one source for this stuff…"
> He nodded.
> "The adrenaline glands from a living human body," I said. "It's no good if you get it out o a corpse."
> "I know," he replied. "But the guy didn't have any cash. He's one of these Satanism freaks. He offered me human blood – said it would make me higher than I'd ever been in my life," he laughed. "I thought he was kidding, so I told him I'd just as soon have an ounce or so of pure adrenochrome – or maybe just a fresh adrenalin gland to chew on."
> I could already feel the stuff working on me. The first wave felt like a combination of mescaline and mephedrone. Maybe I should take a swim, I thought.

To complete the picture, Thompson mocks right-wing Satanic Panic by mentioning paedophilia in their context:

> "Yeah," my attorney was saying. "They nailed this guy for child molesting, but he swears he didn't do it. 'Why should I fuck with children?' he says; 'They're too small!'" He shrugged. "Christ, what could I say? Even a goddamn werewolf is entitled to legal counsel… I didn't dare turn the creep down. He might have picked up a letter-opener and gone after my pineal gland."

Thompson could not have imagined that what was originally a satirical work of fiction would be treated very seriously by millions of Americans nearly five decades later. The beginning indicates that adrenochrome would allegedly be an extremely powerful drug that only the bravest would choose to ingest:

> "Why not?" I said. "He could probably get Melvin Belli for that." I nodded, barely able to talk now. My body felt like I'd just been wired into a 220-volt socket. "Shit, we should get us some of that stuff," I muttered finally. "Just eat a big handful and see what happens."
> "Some of what?"
> "Extract of pineal." He stared at me. "Sure," he said. "That's a good idea. One whiff of that shit would turn you into something out of a goddamn medical encyclopedia! Man, your head would swell up like a watermelon, you'd probably gain about a hundred pounds in two hours…

claws, bleeding warts, then you'd notice about six huge hairy tits swefling up on your back…"
He shook his head emphatically. "Man, I'll try just about anything; but I'd never in hell touch a pineal gland.

The subsequent part should leave no doubt that it was purely a fantasy with some grotesque descriptions of body deformations experienced after the consumption of pineal gland extract:

[...] I could barely hear him. I was so wired that my hands were clawing uncontrollably at the bed spread, jerking it right out from under me while he talked. My heels were dug into the mattress, with both knees locked... I could feel my eyeballs swelling, about to pop out of the sockets.

"Finish the fucking story!" I snarled. "What happened? What about the glands?" He backed away, keeping an eye on me as he edged across the room. "Maybe you need another drink," he said nervously. "Jesus, that stuff got right on top of you, didn't it?" I tried to smile.
"Well… nothing worse… no, this is worse…" It was hard to move my jaws; my tongue felt like burning magnesium. "No… nothing to worry about," I hissed. "Maybe if you could just… shove me into the pool, or something…"
"Goddamnit," he said. "You took too much. You're about to explode. Jesus, look at your face!"
I couldn't move. Total paralysis now. Every muscle in my body was contracted. I couldn't even move my eyeballs, much turn my head or talk.
"It won't last long," he said. "The first rush is the worst, ride the bastard out. If I put you in the pool right now, sink like a goddamn stone." I was sure of it. Not even my lungs seemed to be functioning. I needed artificial respiration, but I couldn't open my mouth to say so. I was going to die. Just sitting there on the bed, unable to move… well, at least there's no pain. Probably, I'll black out in a few seconds, and after that it won't matter.
My attorney had gone back to watching television. The news was on again. Nixon's face filled the screen, but his speech was hopelessly garbled. The only word I could make out was "sacrifice." Over and over again: "Sacrifice… sacrifice… sacrifice" I could hear myself breathing heavily. My attorney seemed to notice. "Just stay relaxed," he said over his shoulder, without looking at me. "Don't try to fight it, or you'll start getting brain bubbles… strokes, aneurisms… you'll just wither up and die." His hand snaked out to change channels.
[...] "The action never stops in this town," said my attorney as we shuffled out to the car. "A man with the right contacts could probably pick up all the fresh adrenochrome he wanted, if he hung around here for a while."

4.10. White Squall

One further source of QAnon narrative is the 1996 Ridley Scott's film *White Squall*, in which one of the most important slogans for the entire QAnon movement appeared, i.e., the phrase

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"Where We Go One, We Go All". It was later quoted mainly in the abbreviated form WWG1WGA, quite often hashtagged (Sommer, 2023). The QAnon movement has made this statement their motto to represent their cohesion and one goal. Supporters of QAnon view the movie's themes of surviving an unexpected and catastrophic storm as a metaphor for their own struggle against what they claim to be worldwide conspiracies. It was allegedly inscribed on the bell on John Fitzgerald Kennedy's boat, but its only documented appearance was in this mid-'90s American disaster survival film (Rothschild, 2021). The phrase is a travesty of a famous Latin slogan, *Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno,* known in English as *One for all, all for one*. It has a great cultural significance as it is an unofficial motto of Switzerland, and its French version, *Tous pour un, un pour tous*, was made famous by Alexandre Dumas in the 1844 novel *The Three Musketeers*, which is perhaps for many people the first, albeit actually wrong, association of where it might come from.

Fig. 2. Flag incorporating the letter Q, the motto "Where We Go One We Go All" from the film *White Squall* and its abbreviated form WWG1WGA (CC-BY-2.0).

4.11. The Bible

References to the Bible (such as Psalm 23, Jeremiah's) in Q-drops can testify to the fact that Q has an American Evangelical background or at least has a lot of knowledge about it and can

imitate the language of sermons and parables. Another possible explanation of why they often used such a language is that at least from some point in time they chose a group of American Evangelicals as the main recipients of their messages or understood that they constituted a significant part of their audience.

> For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

In addition, for some reason, not entirely clear even to their community, Q quoted some passages from the epistles to the Corinthians and Ephesians, in the case of the latter, quite lengthy:

> "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."
>
> – Corinthians 13:4-13

> "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."
>
> – Ephesians 6:10-18

It is, however, quite interesting that at least some parts of the latter passage have been cited by Q more than a dozen times. What is striking about this passage is the phrase "putting on the full armor of God", which would suggest that Q is not so much interested in the Christian message as such, but in the message of militarised Christianity. Therefore, what still connects QAnon to the Bible, however, is a reference to the American evangelical tradition of end of times preaching, which will, however, be discussed in a separate section as a source related to, but separate from, the Bible.

4.12. Evangelical and end of times preaching sources in QAnon narrative

QAnon is a conspiracy theory that incorporates various ideas and ideologies, including evangelical Christianity, so it is perhaps not surprising that a significant number of American Christians, one in four according to some surveys, believe at least part of the QAnon narrative, and that most American evangelicals believe that the real force in power in the United States is the deep state (Jenkins, 2021). Additionally, a substantial body of research demonstrates that there exists some parallelism between evangelical Christians' support for the QAnon conspiracy theory and a general support for conspiracy theories and evangelical orthodoxy (Dinulescu, 2021; MacMillen & Rush, 2022; Bond & Neville-Shepard, 2021) or even that adhering to some conspiracy theories and being an evangelical orthodox are functionally equivalent and, at least partially, they mediate such a support (Beyer & Herrberg, 2023). The final battle between good and evil is frequently emphasised in final times evangelical preaching, in which the forces of evil will be destroyed and God's kingdom will be established on earth. Likewise, Bloom and Rollings (2022) stated that Evangelicals recognised deep meaning in QAnon's depiction of good and evil, as well as what it called the storm—a day of impending judgement. QAnon has applied this concept to politics, believing there is a global conspiracy of deep state elites against President Donald Trump and his supporters, which, however, as prophesied by both the Bible and Q, must fall in the battle against the forces of good. According to the QAnon worldview, Trump is a hero working to expose and defeat this evil cabal, and his supporters are righteous soldiers in this battle.

Another way that apocalyptic evangelical preaching has affected QAnon is the concept of hidden information or secret knowledge. There is a concept in apocalyptic Christianity that there is a secret knowledge or hidden truth that only a select few are privy to, e.g., the Book of Enoch (Collins, 2014). QAnon has taken this concept and applied it to the assumption that a secret scheme, dubbed "The Plan", is being orchestrated by President Trump and a group of high-level military leaders to fight the deep state conspiracy (Mendoza, 2021). QAnon followers believe they are part of a small group of people who are privy to the secret plan and have access to information that the rest of the world does not. According to Ladner (2024), Q's message was primed among Evangelical Christians by Jerry Falwell and other dispensationalists, who had preached anti-liberal slogans for many decades, pointed out the necessity of linking the Scripture, in particular the Revelation of St John, with current events, and looked out there for predictions of certain political events. QAnon similarly predicted that

there would come a time of "the Storm", and therefore their supporters are expected to "trust the Plan". Falwell was also a fierce opponent of the Clinton family and promoted the documentary The Clinton Chronicles, presenting the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory.

4.13. Science fiction literature

Although it has not been fully substantiated what their nature was, for the sake of completeness of the argument it is perhaps worth mentioning other potential and much less well-known literary inspirations of Q.

Guffey (2022) believes QAnon took many ideas from science fiction and conspiracy stories authors such as Louis Tackwood, Alex Constantine, Walter Bowart, Maury Terry, John W. DeCamp, Gordon Thomas, Christopher Simpson, Jordan Maxwell, Mae Brussell, Lyndon LaRouche, Peter Beter, or Jack McLamb.

Unfortunately, this namechecking was mostly not elaborated on into a convincing explanation, and most names of these authors are rather obscure. However, in some parts of his book, Guffey provides an interesting account of other (counter-)cultural sources and possible linkages of QAnon's message, trying to prove that anyone who hides behind the letter Q must be a nerdy person aware of the history of the alternative culture in the USA.

4.14. *Out of Shadows* documentary

A slightly diluted version of Q's message was further promoted with Mike Smith's documentary film investigating conspiracy theories and charges involving Hollywood, mainstream media, and government agencies (Smith, 2020). The fundamental concept behind *Out of Shadows* is that the entertainment industry and the media have a hidden aim to manipulate and control the people using propaganda and mind control tactics. The film contends that influential persons and organisations use films, television shows, and news media to shape public opinion and achieve their goals.

Specifically, *Out of Shadows* investigates charges of child trafficking, Satanism, and corruption in Hollywood and the political establishment. It includes interviews with people who claim to have firsthand knowledge of the alleged conspiracies, including former stuntman and Hollywood insider Mike Smith himself. As with the whole QAnon narrative, critics argued that the documentary was primarily based on unproven accusations, anecdotal evidence, and guilt by association (Davis, 2020).

4.15. Q and Socrates

In terms of their historical and cultural settings, as well as their views and approaches, Socrates and QAnon are very dissimilar. There are some possible superficial parallels and divergences, though, that might be investigated, especially because such comparisons have already been made (e.g., Mastroni & Mooney, 2024).

Socrates used his maieutic or elenchus method of multiple questions to "give birth" to the truth by exposing various misconceptions about the world in his discussants who were guided to it by giving self-evident answers to the questions asked beforehand, from which, by applying logical inference, the recipients themselves came to the conclusion that their initial beliefs about the reality had not made the slightest sense. Through seemingly neutral yet crafty questions, Socrates managed to take the burden of proof off himself, forcing his opponents to come up with further and more desperate arguments to defend the initial thesis itself and its numerous logical implications, which usually resulted in aporia (Cooper, 1998). This approach to discussion provided the platform for comparison between QAnon and Socrates. Like Socrates, QAnon would have asked questions to anons on the /pol/ board, expecting them to come to equally self-evident conclusions. The axis of similarity would therefore be at the point where the other participants in the discussion are supposed to arrive at the truth and a kind of liberating feeling of enlightenment through answering questions.

Both Socrates and QAnon might be viewed as individuals who oppose the prevailing ideologies of their own eras. However, the common perception of their activities is fundamentally different. While QAnon has a reputation for disseminating conspiracy theories and alternate perspectives on political events of which few have been confirmed in any form, Socrates is renowned for challenging the legitimacy of the Athenian state and its officials, the role of sophists, the democratic system of Athens, and the traditional religious beliefs (Hughes, 2010). This rebellious attitude resulted in Socrates and QAnon having both attracted ardent supporters. However, while QAnon had a sizable online community that shared its ideals and participated in activism or even direct political actions, Socrates had a small yet influential group of followers who were profoundly inspired by his teachings.

The most apparent differences are those concerning the political agendas of both. Socrates' primary concerns were with ethics, morals, and the nature of knowledge, whereas QAnon is well recognised for emphasising political and current affairs-related conspiracies. Even though Socrates criticised democracy in its form at his time, he seemed to have no clear political purpose (Hughes, 2010), whereas QAnon has been unequivocally linked to

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right-wing populism and has directly backed former U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration.

4.16. Anti-Semitism and anti-Islamism

One of the elements of QAnon's entries, like many entries on the /pol/ - Politically Incorrect board on 4chan, was their anti-semitism. Besides the allegations mentioned above that Soros and the Rothschilds, all of whom are Jews, are two arms of the triangle of the secret group, cabal, there are many more antisemitic tropes which could be traced in the QAnon narrative. One of them is using triple parentheses[6] as a code for an antisemitic way of labelling people as Jews. Interestingly, QAnon used it as a signature:

> The Q will be answered (((WWG1WGA))).
> ***
> WWG1WGA!!!
> (((Q+)))

The very idea of a secret society (or "cabal") of children-abusing influential people is clearly reminiscent of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Q many times referred to George Soros as one of the arms of the triangle, funding "fake news media". However, the crucial trope, though not necessarily relating to Jews exclusively, was the blood libel trope present in the Q's narrative.

There were also numerous Q-drops with anti-Islamist content. Typical for Q, it usually contained many questions, as in the following fragment:

> Why was the arrest of Alwaleed and others important?
> How is Alwaleed and BO tied to HUMA?
> Why did Alwaleed finance BO pre-political days?
> Why did Alwaleed finance BO pre-political days?
> What is HUMA? Define.
> What book was BO caught reading?
> Why was this immediately disregarded as false?
> What is 'Post-American World by Fareed Zakaria'?
> Why is this relevant?
> Why would the President of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA be reading this book?
> What church did BO attend as pre-POTUS?
> Who was BO's mentor?

---

[6] Known also as (((echo))).

How is Alwaleed and HRC connected?

Who was HRC's mentor?

How is Alwaleed and Bush Sr./Jr. connected?

What occurred post 9-11?

What war did we enter into?

What was the purpose and disclosures given re: justification?

Who financed 9-11?

Why, recently, are classified 9-11 pages being released?

What just occurred in SA?

What FOIA docs are being publicly released (recently)?

Why is this relevant?

What information is contained within these c-releases?

Why is C Wray important with regards to these releases?

What does money laundering mean?

What is the single biggest event that can generate many nation states to payout billions?

Who audits where the money goes?

$15,000 for a toothbrush?

Reconcile.

At first glance, there is nothing particularly anti-Islamist there. However, it is suggested here that BO (Barack Obama) had strong ties to numerous Muslim countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, and that he is Muslim himself. There is also a reference to Fareed Zakaria's book titled 'Post-American World', which probably could be regarded as another reference to Islam. The title could be misleading, for it may suggest that Barack Obama is interested in reducing the power of the USA and secretly plotting against the national interests. However, such perception is very far from the truth, as Zakaria's book is rather an analytical essay complaining about the possible loss of domination position in the world. Zakaria was considered to be a 'liberal hawk' since the times of Reagan's presidency (see, e.g., the review by Singh, 2011).

The exploitation of anti-Islamic resentment is also evident in the following entries:

Focus on Hussein.
***
Why does Hussein travel ahead of POTUS?
***
Hussein is evil and a real loser.
***
Hussein Iran connection.
***

Hussein AIDS Video.

***

2011 Shuttle Program terminated by Hussein.

***

Hussein/HRC (& many more) must be terrified!

***

What did Hussein do for the black community?

vs POTUS?

Each of these sentences refers to the same person. Regarding the actor description, one can read from them some forms of disrespect, accusations of links to countries hostile to the United States, and references to sensationalist recordings; indeed, their very form was akin to clickbait headlines. The person to whom all these phrases refer is former US President Barack Obama, whose full name is Barack Hussein Obama II, from where Q and the community at large got the code name. The use of a second Muslim name to refer to Obama probably associates most unambiguously with Saddam Hussein or certainly exoticises his persona. It may also be a distant reference to the birther conspiracy theory that his birth certificate is a forgery and that he is not a US citizen born on US soil, meaning that he has stolen the office of the President.

4.17. QAnon as a form of American vigilantism

One of the by-products of QAnon entries and forming the community around the whole phenomenon was sustaining and developing the culture of vigilantism. Starting with the pre-Q Pizzagate times, several individuals exercised power without legal authority, apparently feeling free to do so because they felt obliged as citizens to fight the group of paedophile Satanists. This fits perfectly the definition of vigilantism proposed by Regina Bateson, who understands it as "the extralegal prevention, investigation, or punishment of offences" (Bateson, 2020: 923).

As a natural consequence, vigilantism has also moved to the internet, where ordinary users, but also people with particular ideological or political interests claiming to be ones and taking advantage of anonymity, can engage in various activities related to the display of behaviour considered undesirable by them, which do not necessarily warrant judicial intervention.

Among the above, there are many types of sources involved in tracking down 'signs' left by secret cults, societies or individuals involved in black magic or the occult in numerous

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popular culture texts. Some of these predate the internet and originate directly from American evangelicalism. However, undoubtedly, the internet has made vigilantism a popular, widely accessible and standardised way of reading culture. In addition to the more or less popular blogs, vlogs, online forums, and social media groups, one site of this type stands out in terms of activity and duration, as it appeared in the early 2000s: the Vigilant Citizen (https://vigilantcitizen.com). It is one of the most popular sources of its kind (according to web traffic analysis sites like Alexa or Semrush, visited by more than a million users a month), run by an anonymous blogger dedicated to analysing hidden, occult messages in pop music, somewhat less frequently in movies or other cultural texts. QAnon's work displays a positioning in the same current of interpretation of culture, politics and the world in general, a similar worldview of the authors and targeting a similar audience.

Moreover, QAnon has repeatedly directly called for vigilance:

Be vigilant.
See something.
Say something.
Know your surroundings at all times.

4.18. Socio-cultural dimension: the movement

The term 'bakers' was used in the QAnon community to address those members of the QAnon community who spent time compiling original cryptic 'drops' or 'crumbs' into easily digestible 'breads', i.e., they were people who interpreted the QAnon entries. QAnon has consistently voiced his happiness and appreciation for these people, as has most of the community. Bakers are highly valued in Q forums, and some have been welcomed as guests and experts by QTubers.

Autists was a name for the anonymous followers of QAnon who were particularly eager to search for any clues confirming Q's message and spent hours online interpreting Q-drops. The name was not derogatory in any way in the community; quite the opposite. The community and Q themselves admired their diligence. The name may be a direct reference to "weaponised autism", which describes people who have advanced or even expert technical skills related to computers, internet networks, hacking, and niche websites and simultaneously lack social skills and empathy (Welch et al., 2022).

Q's message was almost instantly amplified by a steadily growing number of Internet micro-celebrities and individuals who produced audiovisual content on YouTube and elsewhere. Some of them were already known as conspiracy theorists with some moderate

influence. A number of them could be considered early adopters and early promoters of QAnon. They played a crucial role in disseminating Q messages outside imageboards, which was so important because of the relative obscurity of this mode of online communication. One of the first people known to successfully transfer QAnon to the form of visual content was Tracy Diaz, known under the internet name Tracy Beanz. Diaz originally had some recognition among conspiracy theorists, and thanks to the QAnon movement gaining momentum, she eventually became one of the most famous people in the Q universe. Among other QTubers who contributed to Q's popularity were Craig James, Jordan Sather, Dustin Nemos, and Liz Crokin. Crokin was followed by Marjorie Taylor Greene, who first heard of Q thanks to Crokin herself. In 2020, Greene successfully started in the U.S. House of Representatives run-off and became a congresswoman, dubbed "QAnon representative"[7] by the media.

Numerous other notable figures praised QAnon and the movement behind their message. In general, the worldview Q has expressed is not shared by the majority of the celebrity mainstream. It may even be at odds with it, as part of Q's message was to connect the worlds of politics, media and entertainment, with figures such as Jeffrey Epstein serving as nodes connecting them. As a result, persons on the periphery of this worldview could afford to preach it, including retired cultural or sporting icons or figures who had formerly been a part of it but had withdrawn or been demoted for various reasons.

Among the many well-known people who have lent their support to the QAnon movement or contributed content by Q or Qtubers are: Roseanne Barr (actress and comedian)[8], Curt Schilling (a former professional baseball player)[9], James Woods (actor and conservative commentator)[10], Kirstie Alley (late actress and former Church of Scientology spokesperson)[11], Randy Quaid (actor)[12], Isaiah Washington (actor)[13], DeAnna Lorraine

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[7]

https://boingboing.net/2021/12/20/marjorie-taylor-greene-used-a-racial-slur-when-boasting-about-gop-diversity.html or
https://www.the-sun.com/news/2506711/qanon-marjorie-taylor-greene-biden-impeachment-illegal-aliens/, retrieved online on 20 May 2024.

[8] https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/31/politics/roseanne-barr-conspiracy-tweets/index.html, retrieved on 20 May 2024.
[9] https://www.thedailybeast.com/curt-schilling-backs-pro-trump-qanon-conspiracy-theory, retrieved on 20 May 2024.
[10] https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/12945354/qanon-james-woods-roseanne-barr/, retrieved on 20 May 2024.
[11] https://lamag.com/news-and-politics/kirstie-alley-qanon-twitter, retrieved on 20 May 2024.
[12]

https://www.thedailybeast.com/jimmy-kimmel-drags-trump-for-endorsing-randy-quaid-a-qanon-conspiracy-theorist, retrieved on 20 May 2024.
[13] https://x.com/willsommer/status/1284137149307195395?mx=2, retrieved on 20 May 2024.

(former political candidate and author)[14]. One other promoter of the Q's narrative, however, seems to merit a slightly longer mention. Jim Caviezel (actor), known for his role as Jesus Christ in the film *The Passion of the Christ*, has also expressed support for QAnon on numerous occasions. Moreover, he even participated in QAnon conferences as one of the speakers. Caviezel has a role to his credit in the film *Sound of Freedom*, in which he played the real-life former special agent Tim Ballard in a child trafficking case[15]. Although the film's director, Alejandro Monteverde, distanced himself from QAnon and also from Caviezel when he found out about his views, the film gained a fair amount of popularity among Q followers due to its subject matter and Caviezel's character himself. The actor also attended a conference on Q in which he openly supported the movement, using a quote from William Wallace's speech from the Mel Gibson-directed film *Braveheart*, with whom he worked on The Passion of Jesus Christ. As for the latter, there is no evidence that he has any connection with Q, but he was one of the more prominent people who openly recommended Monteverde's film (Wendling, 2023).

The participation of well-known people in this movement, statements of support or dissemination of posts and graphics could help to reach QAnon's message to more people and contribute to the normalisation of this type of content.

Pastel QAnon is a name for a particular aesthetic through which people involved in promoting the Q's message targeted a group of women, most notably young ones. The term was coined by Marc-André Argentino, a researcher at Concordia University, Canada, based on the pastel colours used in many memes and GIFs circulating online, used by the community to circulate especially on social media (Argentino, 2021). As women tend to spend time on Instagram rather than Facebook, some of the pastel content either originated there or was adjusted to suit this medium.

According to Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko, it would have been impossible for QAnon to stay popular among the wider masses in the USA and abroad without aiming at women as they are believed to be the force maintaining interest in the extremist ideas for the next generations, which has been observed consistently across all long-standing terrorist groups (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021).

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https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-qanon-conspiracy-theory-lorraine-b1780220.html, retrieved on 20 May 2024.

[15] https://www.npr.org/2023/07/19/1188405402/qanon-supporters-are-promoting-sound-of-freedom-heres-why, retrieved on 20 May 2024.

The name of the aesthetics is derived from pastel colours used as background or colour inscriptions in posts, relationships or memes. However, it is not limited to this because Pastel QAnon's characteristic features include rounded, trendy text typefaces or, above all, the media themselves, in which the content published in this aesthetic was circulating, which has a direct bearing on the aesthetic itself. While reaching other audience groups of QAnon's message could take place on imageboards, Facebook and YouTube, Instagram remains a medium much more frequently chosen by female and younger audiences[16]. In part, the use of this aesthetic, as well as the appeal to emotion in the form of spreading fear through the design of child endangerment, which was an appeal to the maternal instinct and the desire to stand in for children, led to the formation of another group that identified itself as QAmoms (ulthiin & Jeppesen, 2022).

This stood in contrast to QAnon's previously explored aesthetics, which roughly corresponds to what Nick Douglas (2014) called "Internet Ugly". This, in turn, is a kind of aesthetic characteristic of imageboards like 4chan or 8chan, where the torrent of images and text posted in huge numbers and the peculiar simplicity of these platforms promoted visual communication at a level often deliberately ostentatious against standard aesthetic canons. For example, QAnon has repeatedly shared memes and reworked images that reach both long-time imageboard users, but paradoxically also reach people who have flowed in there over time, who are often moderate internet users.

The most shocking display of Q's popularity was seen during Capitol riots of 6 January 2021, when a mob of approximately 2,500 Donald Trump supporters attacked the building of Capitol in Washington, D.C., with the aim to block the democratic process of transfer of power to the president-elect Joe Biden.

Many Trump supporters storming the Capitol were openly QAnon supporters exposing symbols and slogans associated with Q. Among them was a person who had been actually involved in the Q movement – Jacob Chansley, probably the most famous character who appeared as a symbol of these events, a painted figure with a horned fur hat, who referred to himself as "QAnon Shaman".

Another person who got the media's attention was Douglas Jensen, who was walking around the Capitol in a big Q-letter sweatshirt and signing "Trust the Plan", which was a

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[16] Although male Instagram users prevail over female users in the two youngest age cohorts (18–24 and 25–34), the total share of female users in these cohorts is much higher than in Facebook. In addition, all the remaining age groups already indicate women outnumber men in the case of Instagram with the reverse being true for Facebook. Overall, female users constitute 46,7% of Instagram users compared to 43,3% on Facebook. The distribution of results for Facebook is also much closer to normal than for Instagram, where a positive skew can be observed, which clearly shows a greater share of younger users (Statista, 2024a, 2024b).

refraining phrase throughout the corpus as it appeared 27 times in Q-drops and remains one of the most popular slogans associated with QAnon.

This chapter discussed the various intertextual and interdiscursive sources of Q's narrative, which made it more coherent and referred to ideas and themes that were often already familiar to their audience, which made it easier for Q to connect with them, and the content they conveyed was close to them and consistent with their cultural knowledge and their beliefs. In the rhetorical canon, in addition to rhetorical preparation, the message itself, knowledge of one's audience and the context of the message being delivered are the critical elements of effective communication in any rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968). Therefore, these strands addressed in this chapter may have been crucial to Q's success, being *loci communes*. The next chapter will discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the questions that played a unique role in Q's message, related to both the formal and content aspects of another of these elements, the message itself.

Chapter 5.

THEORY OF QUESTIONS

To determine how the scope of the data in the corpus was established and how the method of analysis was defined, it is helpful to look at the theory of questions in linguistics.

Questions are primarily defined in three different ways, depending on the perspective and theoretical orientation adopted (Groenendijk & Stokhof, 1994):

a) a specific type of word order, intonation, including interrogative pronouns and a question mark when written (syntactic and phonetic meaning),

b) speech acts that are typically expressed with interrogative sentences as requests to an addressee to provide the answer, *in aliis verbis* interrogative act (pragmatic meaning),

c) the very content of an interrogative sentence, the thing being asked which may be addressed, i.e., answered (semantic meaning).

5.1. Questions and their form – syntactic approach

Within the field of syntactic analysis, questions are classified according to their structural organisation. In English, this category includes *yes-no questions* (also called *polar questions* or *affirmative-negative questions*, e.g., "Are they coming?"), *wh-questions* (or *Q-word questions*, e.g., "What are you doing?"), and *alternative questions* (e.g., "Do you prefer apples or bananas?"). Among the most studied aspects in the framework of syntactic analysis, researchers are interested particularly in word order variation, fronting of interrogative elements, auxiliary verbs and interrogative formation, interrogative particles and markers, negative and positive polarity and interrogative embedding (e.g., Jespersen, 1966; Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 1999). Let us look at those categories one by one:

1. Polar questions are questions that can be answered basically with "yes" or "no". They come in several forms:

(a) declarative questions, i.e., statements that can be interpreted as questions based on intonation, e.g., "You're going with us?", "It's snowing in Zakopane?". They can be either affirmative, e.g., "You finished your work?", or negative, e.g., "You didn't finish your work?";

(b) interrogative questions, i.e., standard form of questions that start with an auxiliary verb or modal, e.g., "Are you going with us?", "Is it snowing in Zakopane?". There

are also negative interrogatives like "Aren't you going with us?", "Isn't it snowing in Zakopane?";

(c) tag questions, i.e., questions that add a short question tag at the end of a declarative statement, inviting confirmation, "You're going with us, aren't you?", "It's snowing in Zakopane, isn't it?".

2. Q-word questions (also known as wh-questions) are questions that begin with a wh-word (what, where, when, who, why, how):

(a) broad wh-, i.e., questions asking for general information, e.g., "What did you do there?", "Where are they going?";

(b) narrow wh-, i.e., questions that are more specific and seek detailed information, e.g., "What did you have for dinner yesterday?", "What are your favourite magazines?".

3. Alternative questions offer specific options to choose from, e.g. "Would you like beer or wine?", "Are you going to the beach or the park?".

Declarative questions are yes-no questions without subject-operator inversion, identical in form to declarative sentences (Quirk et al., 1985; Weber, 1993). The only difference between them and declarative sentences is the final rising intonation. In written form, they are like regular declaratives with a question mark instead of a full stop, e.g., "He's your boss?", "She's going home?". Declarative questions are productive and, similarly to tag questions with a rising tone, are used most frequently when the speaker expects the hearer's confirmation. They are generally considered highly controlling and are frequently used in court settings (Mortensen, 2020: 242–243). Mortensen distinguishes two types of declarative questions: plain declarative questions and declarative questions with a final tag (Mortensen, *ibid.*):

Q: And, to your knowledge, he had no weapons with him?
A: None that I saw

Q: But, he was leaning out of the truck, correct?
A: Leaning out of the window

Tag questions are constructions with a special status in English, especially in its British variant. Their usual form is a variable tag (a 'question' part) attached to a main clause (a 'declarative sentence' part), sometimes called the "anchor". The tag with its subject and operator is usually grammatically consistent with the main clause. They very frequently take a negative form (Biber et al., 1999). Tag questions are argued be important in structuring and

ordering discourse, building rapport, negotiating meanings, highlighting the topic of a conversation, and other interaction-related processes. Their essential function is to ask for confirmation from the recipient that the statement in the main clause is true or correct. When it comes to the actual impact of tag questions on recipients, most researchers agree to assume that together with language elements such as hesitations, hedges and polite forms, they are a sign of powerlessness and that their persuasive power is somewhat limited (see, e.g., Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005).

5.2. The content of questions – semantics of questions

Before questions and issues of their content were of interest to linguists, they were the subject of inquiry by logicians and philosophers of language, and this is where some of the conceptual apparatus that linguists initially used to study questions originated. However, the fundamental problem for logicians, partly inherited by linguists, was the unclear status of the questions regarding how to analyse them properly since they do not fit into the analytical framework of classical logic. There have been many attempts to address this issue from many different perspectives, i.e., through reducing the analysis of questions to sentence logic, most often by assuming that questions at a deeper semantic level express intuitions of some declarative sentences, followed by attempts to reconstruct how it is done (e.g. Belnap, 1966; Hamblin, 1967; Karttunen, 1977), using other types of logic to describe this type of sentences (Hare, 1949; Hintikka, 1978), e.g. many-valued logic or modal logic, or finally creating a separate question logic, most often called erotetics (e.g., Ajdukiewicz, 1960; Belnap, 1966; Belnap & Steel, 1976, van Fraassen, 1980). The logicians' recognitions have informed linguistic research on questions, as much of it has reduced descriptions of questions to some form of affirmative or imperative sentences (Danielewiczowa, 1996), which Danielewiczowa believes to be reductionist and deterministic.

According to Hamblin (1973), a question denotes a set of possible answers. Each answer is a proposition that provides a complete response to the question. In other words, the Answerhood Conditions in Hamblin's framework are such that an answer to a question is a proposition that belongs to the set denoted by the question.

Karttunen's (1977) approach is slightly different, i.e., he understands questions as entities denoting sets of propositions, but these are precisely the propositions that are true in the actual world. Therefore, Hamblin's model is more general and abstracts away from the actual truth of the propositions, focusing on the logical space of possible answers. In contrast,

Karttunen's model incorporates the actual truth conditions, making it more specific and tied to the real-world state of affairs. However, they are not usually treated as exclusive approaches but rather complementary ones. Whereas the former is used in analyses of the logical structure of questions and the range of potential answers, the latter is beneficial for understanding the interaction between questions and the actual world, i.e., studies on denotation.

Groenendijk and Stokhof (1984) proposed that the meaning of a given question partitions the set of possible worlds into equivalence classes, where each class corresponds to a different answer. This model treats questions and statements uniformly in terms of how they update the information state of a discourse. Questions are inherently inquisitive, aiming to resolve a particular issue by eliminating possibilities in interactional information exchange. The meaning of a question is seen as the set of possible resolutions to the issue it raises, focusing on the interaction between possible answers rather than just listing them (as in Hamblin and Karttunen's models). Therefore, in this framework, questions are tools to update the participants' context or knowledge state in a discourse. This dynamic approach integrates the idea that questions change the state of knowledge and expectations.

Among the findings made by logicians and philosophers of language potentially useful in the context of the present work, one by Ajdukiewicz seems particularly interesting and relevant. Ajdukiewicz defined the *datum quaestionis* as the sentence function building the question with some unknown where the result would be a complete sentence after substituting a specific variable in place of the unknown (Ajdukiewicz, 1974, 1978). For instance, for the question "What is the main substance of the world?", the *datum quaestionis* would be "x is the main substance of the world", and a possible answer could be "Fire is the main substance of the world". This notion can also be conceptually embedded in a slightly different way, recognising that although questions are not propositions, they have propositional content, which at the same time can constitute the content of a presupposition. Similarly, Frege (1918/1956) argued that the interrogative and the declarative can be taken to have the same semantic content:

> An interrogative sentence and an indicative one contain the same thought; but the indicative contains something else as well, namely, the assertion. The interrogative sentence contains something more too, namely a request. Therefore two things must be distinguished in an indicative sentence: the content, which it has in common with the corresponding sentence-question, and the assertion. (Frege, 1918/1956: 294)

This belief has informed quite a large body of literature, most notably in speech act theory (Searle, 1969; Vanderveken, 1990).

5.3. Interrogative acts – questions in speech act theory and other pragmatic approaches

In speech act theory and other pragmatic approaches, interrogative acts are considered fundamental components of communicative interactions. The study of interrogative acts involves examining how questions function not merely as requests for information but as multifaceted tools within language that fulfil various communicative purposes.

Austin (1962) categorised utterances into different types of acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Questions, as a type of illocutionary act, are characterised by their primary function to seek information from the interlocutor. However, Austin noted that the illocutionary force of questions can extend beyond mere information seeking, influencing the behaviour and responses of the listener. Austin's framework highlights that asking a question entails more than just using the right words; it also involves considering the intention behind the statement and the conventions that surround its use.

Building on Austin's work, Searle (1969) further elaborated the taxonomy of illocutionary acts. Searle identified questions as a distinct category of illocutionary acts where the speaker expresses a desire to obtain information that they believe the hearer can provide. Searle categorised questions with requests and orders under the same category of directives because he considered them to be requests for information. He developed Austin's concept of *direction of fit*, explaining that questions have a world-to-word direction of fit, i.e., the world must supply the information to match the query posed by the words. Searle (1969: 66) described questions under precisely the same rules as other illocutionary acts:

(a) the proposition of a question can be any sentence (for yes-no and alternative questions) or a sentence function (for wh-questions) – the propositional content rule:

(b) the sender does not know the answer, i.e., does not know whether the sentence contained in the question is true or, in the case of a sentence function, does not know the information needed to complete the sentence – the preparatory rule (i);

(c) it is by no means evident to either the sender or the receiver that the receiver, if not asked, would provide the desired information – the preparatory rule (ii);

(d) the sender wants the information – the sincerity rule;

(e) the sender regards the question as a means of obtaining that information from the receiver – the essential rule.

H.P. Grice made further advancements in understanding interrogative acts in pragmatics with his theory of implicature (1975). Gricean maxims of conversation—quality, quantity, relevance, and manner—offer a framework for interpreting how questions can convey implied meanings beyond their literal content. For example, a question like "Can you pass the salt?" often functions as a polite request rather than a genuine inquiry about the listener's ability to pass the salt.

In addition to these foundational theories, more recent pragmatic approaches have explored the dynamic and context-dependent nature of interrogative acts. For instance, Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) emphasises the role of cognitive processes in communication, arguing that questions are designed to maximise relevance by guiding the interlocutor towards providing the most contextually appropriate information. According to this theory, the interpretation of questions depends on the interplay between the speaker's intention and the hearer's inference-making capabilities.

While the above considerations apply directly to canonical questions, the question should be raised as to how exam or quiz questions should be treated, where the utterer does demand an answer not because of their lack of knowledge, but rather the willingness to check whether the recipient knows it or, in an even broader sense, to receive some form of a verbal response (Wierzbicka, 1987). The questioner has such knowledge, and the actual information is the change in the state of knowledge as to the state of knowledge of the person asked. Non-canonical questions usually do not differ much from canonical ones regarding their syntactic structure and semantic content. What further connects all these types of questions (and also connects them to other types of speech acts) is their deep thematic structure, which is founded on thinking about propositional content. The difference lies in the illocutionary purposes, which may be different in different situational contexts, and there are generally some clues in the question itself as to how the answer should be given.

5.4. Questions and interrogativity

The findings of logicians and more formally oriented linguists have led them to some divergent conclusions and approaches to the topic of questions, which, in more synthetic approaches such as that by Danielewiczowa (1996), have left us with the conclusion that question sentences can fulfil a whole range of pragmatic purposes and, as a result, authors of generalisation approaches attempting to define within a universalist framework the content of questions face a formidable task. Linguists studying modalities in various languages have come to similar conclusions. Quirk et al. (1985: 83) stated that interrogative and negative

sentences often function in very similar ways, so that they can be referred to as 'non-assertive'. Furthermore, they pointed out that even as elementary a type of questions as yes-no questions can be conducive, meaning they can reveal the speaker's preference for the response they had anticipated or desired. As a result, a question is biased in favour of a positive response when a question is posed in a positive manner. Palmer's modal approach (Palmer, 2001) added another dimension to the study of interrogativity by further addressing the role of modality in questions. He suggested that modality, which expresses the speaker's attitude towards the proposition, such as necessity, possibility, or permission, is crucial also in understanding the full range of interrogative forms. This approach examines how different modal expressions and discursive cues are used in questions to convey nuances like doubt, certainty, or obligation. This approach further supports the idea that interrogativity is not solely determined by syntactic form but also by modal and contextual elements. For instance, he referred to Bhat's (1999: 80–81) analyses of Khezha (Tibeto-Burman language), where there are eight types of markers for yes-no questions and another eight for wh-questions, decided on the basis of some corresponding features of discourse. Let us take a look at possible issues of yes-no questions there:

(i) The speaker knows and expects confirmation;

(ii) The speaker has reliable information and expects confirmation;

(iii) The speaker indicates uncertainty (a negative marker);

(iv) The speaker presumes the proposition to be correct but is uncertain;

(v) The speaker takes it for granted that the addressee will agree;

(v) The speaker is amazed at the proposition, asking for reaffirmation;

(vii) The Speaker has heard an unusual rumour and is asking for verification;

(viii) The speaker is unconvinced, as the event is unusual, and wants reaffirmation.

Other possible functions mentioned among examples from many other languages include ignorance, surprise, doubt, but also certainty, as for example in Spanish:

No es verdad	que ha	dicho	eso?
not is truth	that have+3so+PRES+iND	said	that

"Isn't it true that he said that?"

Another aspect of interrogativity could be derived from the idea of pseudo-questions. Munaro and Obenauer (1999: 184) define pseudo-questions technically as "non-standard questions (i.e., interrogatives which are not pure requests for information) and certain non-questions, i.e., certain exclamatives". They are primarily used to express

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"surprise/annoyance/disapproval [and] convey[ing] personal evaluation of the event referred to". They usually start with "how" or "what". This is relevant to any work concerning questions for methodological reasons so as to draw a demarcation line separating questions from non-questions. In our case, we conventionally consider a question marked graphically with a question mark, distinguishing it from exclamations in general. However, undoubtedly, pseudo-questions so understood occur in the corpus and are subject to analysis.

The problem of interrogativity was also addressed by Givón (1984) in his theorem on the scalarity of speech acts, i.e. the situation where one speech act masks belonging to another act, e.g. an imperative pretending to be an interrogative through its form. Givón proposed a solution to this categorial problem by applying the theory of prototypes and not assigning specific speech acts to only one category corresponding to them but placing them somewhere on the scale between two categories since there exist prototypical and atypical speech acts. Based on extensive cross-linguistic material, Givón indicated that there exist three or four structures exist that encode a prototypical speech act, i.e., (a) Declarative, (b) Imperative, (c) Interrogative: (i) WH-question, (ii) Yes/No question. Having chosen the classic "pass the salt" sentence, he presented the exemplary imperative–interrogative scale, with (a) and (h) representing the extremes being prototypes of imperative and interrogative, respectively:

FROM IMPERATIVE TO YES/NO QUESTION:
a. Pass the salt! [most prototypical IMPERATIVE]
b. Please pass the salt,
c. Pass the salt, would you please?
d. Would you please pass the salt?
e. Could you please pass the salt?
f. Can you pass the salt?
g. Do you see the salt?
h. Is there any salt? [most prototypical INTERROGATIVE]

In conclusion, while syntactic forms such as wh-movement, inversion, and question particles are strong indicators of interrogativity, they are not its definitive determinants. Interrogativity is a multifaceted concept transcending mere form and encompassing semantic, pragmatic, typological, and modal dimensions. Therefore, after Weber (1993), the term "question" in this work refers primarily to interactive function and only secondarily morphosyntactic form, with the latter only indicating the former. Questions are then understood here primarily in terms of their functional category. Following such an understanding, besides regular interrogative forms, this work is based on understanding questions as any utterances collected from the corpus which functionally resemble regular interrogative questions, with declarative clauses, particles, or single words and phrases included.

5.5. Phonological/phonetic indications of the questions

As a fundamental aspect of human communication, questions exhibit specific phonetic and phonological characteristics that usually distinguish them from declaratives and other utterance types. These characteristics vary across languages, but several commonalities can be identified, including prosody, intonation patterns, and specific phonological markers. Although these aspects are not particularly relevant to the present work, they are essential to the theory of questions. They are also undoubtedly extremely helpful in distinguishing them from other linguistic forms. Therefore, for the sake of completeness of the argument, it seems necessary to devote some attention to them here.

The prosodic features of questions are among the most salient phonetic aspects, distinguishing them from declarative sentences. In many languages, questions are marked by distinctive intonation patterns. For example, yes-no questions typically end with a rising intonation in English and many other languages. This rise in pitch occurs on the final syllable or word of the question, signalling the interrogative nature of the utterance. Wh-questions in English often have a different intonation pattern, usually featuring a rise on the wh-word followed by a fall towards the end of the sentence. According to Bolinger (1978), within about 250 languages, roughly 70% were reported to indicate questions with a rising terminal, while the remaining 30% were said to indicate questions with a higher overall pitch than non-questions. However, it is worth noting that questions can have rising or falling intonation patterns depending on the intended pragmatic meaning. For instance, rising intonation may imply uncertainty or a want for confirmation, but falling intonation may indicate a statement as a question. The seminal work by Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg (1990) outlines the role of intonation in conveying discourse functions, including questions.

In tonal languages, such as Mandarin Chinese, the intonational contours of questions are superimposed on the lexical tones. Despite the complexity introduced by the need to maintain lexical tone contours, questions in Mandarin often exhibit a final rising intonation, similar to many non-tonal languages, to indicate interrogativity (see, e.g., Li, 2003).

Another way of signalling questions is by using grammar-related phonological markers. These can include specific interrogative particles or morphemes attached to the verb or the end of the sentence. For instance, in Japanese, the particle *ka* is used at the end of a sentence to indicate a question (Shibatani, 1990). Similarly, in Mandarin Chinese, the particle *ma* is added to the end of a statement to form a yes-no question (Li, 2003).

In some languages, phonological changes within the sentence, as marked by syntactic structures, can signal a question. In Spanish, for instance, inversion of the subject and verb often marks a question: "¿Comes tú?" (Do you eat?) as opposed to the declarative "Tú comes" (You eat). This inversion is both a syntactic and a phonological phenomenon, as it changes the sentence's normal flow and stress pattern (Brown & Rivas, 2011).

The placement of stress within a sentence can also contribute to the interrogative nature of an utterance. Questions can be marked in English by shifting the primary stress to different words. For example, the question "You are coming?" with stress on "coming" implies a confirmation request, while "Are you coming?" with the stress at the beginning due to the auxiliary verb indicates a more straightforward inquiry (e.g., Bolinger, 1989).

In addition to intonation, pitch variations within the sentence can indicate a question, which is especially noticeable in languages with pitch accent systems, such as Japanese, where the pitch accent may shift to indicate different meanings, including interrogative forms (Beckman & Pierrehumbert, 1986).

In summary, the phonetic and phonological aspects of questions and interrogativity are multifaceted and language-specific. However, they commonly involve distinct intonation patterns, prosodic features, phonological markers, stress shifts, pitch variations, vocal quality changes, and temporal adjustments. These elements work in concert to signal to the listener that an utterance is a question, thus facilitating effective communication.

5.6. Questions in Conversation Analysis

Perhaps particularly pertinent to the present work is the contribution to analysing questions provided by conversation analysis. Conversations are structured in sequences, with each remark frequently evoking a particular kind of reaction. Typically, question and answer form a question-answer pair. This interaction's sequential structure enables participants to understand it and prepare for what will happen subsequently. Schegloff (1972: 107) presented numerous contextually embedded examples of such pairs, e.g.:

Q: Why don't you come and see me sometime?
A: I don't know just where this address is.

Following some recognitions in pragmatics mentioned before, Schegloff (1984) argued that the first sentence includes a component of imperative or injunction and called it "an injunction mitigator". Other examples he addressed were "why don't you…" or "would you like to…". What makes an utterance a question is its placement in the context of a

corresponding utterance, which Schegloff calls an adjacency pair. Both parts are coordinated by conditional relevance (Schegloff, 1972: 76), which means that after the first part of an adjacency pair (e.g., the question), the second part (e.g., an answer) becomes relevant and expected. There are several types of pairs with possible pragmatic categories labelling them such as "question-answer", "greeting-greeting", or "offer-acceptance/refusal". Let us briefly analyse the following pair:

> A: Why is it that we have to go there.
> B: Because she ((head-motioning to daughter)) can go out more easily than their kids can.

Schegloff argues that from this perspective, the first utterance has a form of question while being a complaint. Even though the response is an answer because it was interpreted as a question, one could easily imagine an adjacency pair not of question-answer type but a complaint-echo complaint. These are interactional categories of action based on common sense rather than some technical characteristics. Adjacency pairs reflect and enforce social norms and expectations, inviting participants to cooperation and mutual understanding. By responding appropriately to a question, the respondent not only provides information but also upholds the social order and expectations of the interaction. Each part of an adjacency pair is contextually embedded, meaning it derives its meaning partly from the surrounding conversational context. The first part of the pair sets a specific context that constrains and informs the interpretation of the second part.

In conversation analysis, specific responses are preferred because they align with social norms and expectations, while others are dispreferred. For instance, an immediate and direct answer to a question is a preferred response, while a hesitation or refusal is a dispreferred response. Participants in the conversation in longer sequences mostly give an indication of whether the answers are in line with these preferences or not. This concept highlights the normative pressures that shape how people respond in conversations. While there is some overlap here in many cases, perhaps even most, it is worth noting at this point that the categories of preference/disposition are not psychological, but rather interactional-structural categories (Schegloff, 2007). Schegloff (*ibid.*) provides an example of an invitation to a family party which, although unwanted by either party, is sent and accepted because social norms require it. If the second part is not provided, it is noticeable, and its absence can be interpreted as meaningful, potentially prompting further conversational work to address the omission. Conversation relies on a system of turn-taking, where speakers alternate turns in a relatively orderly fashion. Adjacency pairs help facilitate this turn-taking

by providing a clear structure where one speaker's utterance creates an opportunity space for the other speaker's related response.

This chapter briefly discussed the most important concepts in the philosophy of language and linguistics related to the topic of questions, providing the basis for the next chapter. It will present a brief overview of manipulative questions as a category found in linguistics and related fields.

Chapter 6.

MANIPULATIVE QUESTIONS

The concept of manipulative questions is not particularly well rooted in the linguistic tradition, nor does it have one clear definition. The topic of persuasion and manipulation has received the most attention and consideration in the context of questions within forensic linguistics and legal language research, as it is a highly relevant and essential issue in the context of interrogations (e.g., Rigney, 1999; Catoto, 2017; Lubis et al., 2023). To date, there is no systematic list of types of manipulative questions, as virtually any type of question can be manipulative; it is decided by the context (and co-text) and intentions of the speaker, which is in line with a principle treated almost as an axiom in discourse analysis stemming from one of the most widely used definitions of discourse, i.e. that it is any statement beyond the limit of a single sentence, such as at least two related sentences within a single text, or, for example, a question and an answer, as well as any extensive stretches of text. In this study, incomplete sentences with question marks are also treated as questions, which seems reasonable after assuming that such individual lines of text are not taken into account in the analyses in isolation. Let us consider the following text passage:

[1] When was POTUS' Twitter taken down? Has this ever happened before?

[2] Why now?

[3] Coincidence?

According to understanding questions as complete interrogative sentences, we have only two questions in the above passage, namely two sentences in line [1]. However, at the same time, we can or even should discursively reconstruct a few more sentences from this passage based on the sentences in line [1] and the others, i.e. the sentence "Why was POTUS taken down now" is the functional equivalent of [2], and the sentence "Was it a coincidence that POTUS was taken down now?" the equivalent of [3].

It seems reasonable, however, that the analyses in this work, in addition to longer passages of text in which questions play an important role, should also take into account the types of questions that other researchers identify as manipulative. In addition, the analyses also highlighted some individual questions containing at least one of the elements listed in one of the previous sections. For instance, if the question refers to emotions, such as guilt, we can investigate further whether it is manipulative. There are no reliable linguistic elements to indicate at an automated level that an utterance, including one composed of or containing

questions, is manipulative, although it would undoubtedly be possible to identify certain recurring linguistic patterns that might indicate this. However, it seems that as a general rule we should study the context and co-text individually each time. There are several basic types of questions that are most often mentioned as manipulative, e.g., loaded, suggestive, leading questions. Another problem is that they are defined in different ways, and the distinctions between them are unclear.

Presuppositions are generally those parts of utterances that are taken for granted. A presupposition is some underlying assumption that remains constant regardless of whether a statement or question is affirmed or negated. Understanding how presuppositions act in questions is vital for studying how meaning is conveyed, inferred, and processed in discourse. The classic semantic approach to presuppositions studies the truth-conditional elements of presuppositions. A crucial idea here is the projection problem, which addresses how presuppositions of embedded clauses affect the overall sentence. For example, the interrogative "Does John know that Mary is coming?" implies the reality of "Mary is coming" (Karttunen, 1973). This technique also helps find presupposition triggers—words or phrases that intrinsically convey presuppositions. Researchers signalled many possible types of presupposition triggers (as collected by Beaver et al., 2021), e.g.: factives, aspectual verbs like "stop" or continue", temporal clauses headed by "before", "after", "since", etc., adverbs of manner, sortally restricted predicates of various categories (e.g., "bachelor"), cleft sentences, quantifiers, definite descriptions, or names.

Beyond truth conditions, the pragmatic approach takes into account the ways in which speaker intentions and context affect presuppositions. Contextual accommodation is the process by which listeners modify their mental representation of the situation to incorporate information that is presupposed (Lewis, 1979). This method emphasises the goals of the speaker and the shared understanding between the speaker and the listener, implying that presuppositions are a component of that shared knowledge. Questions frequently function to verify or review this common ground (Stalnaker, 2002).

Analysing presuppositions is closely related to studying speech acts. Levinson (1983: 48) provides the following example:

(i) A: So can you please come over here again right now?

(ii) B: Well, I have to go to Edinburgh today sir.

(iii) A: Hmm. How about this Thursday?

While the interrogative form of the first utterance may suggest that this is a question, the actual intention of the speaker A is not to gain information but to convey their message indirectly. The interrogative form can also convey a request in several ways, which is clearly expressed in the example above. Levinson explored the potential to carry presuppositions in questions, and in principle, in his view, these possibilities are at least as great, if not potentially greater, than in the case of affirmative sentences (Levinson, 1983: 184)

> [Q]uestions will generally share the presuppositions of their assertive counterparts. However, interrogative forms themselves introduce further presuppositions, of a rather different kind, which are what concern us here. It is necessary to distinguish different types of questions: yes/no questions will generally have vacuous presuppositions, being the disjunction of their possible answers, as in [1]. These are the only kinds of presuppositions of questions that are invariant under negation. Alternative questions, as in [2], presuppose the disjunction of their answers, but in this case non-vacuously. WH-questions introduce the presuppositions obtained by replacing the WH-word by the appropriate existentially quantified variable, e.g. who by someone, where by somewhere, how by somehow, etc., as in [3]. These presuppositions are not invariant to negation.
>
> [1] Is there a professor of linguistics at MIT?
> >> Either there is a professor of linguistics at MIT or there isn't.
> [2] Is Newcastle in England or is it in Australia?
> >> Newcastle is in England or Newcastle is in Australia.
> [3] Who is the professor of linguistics at MIT?
> >> Someone is the professor of linguistics at MIT

The manipulative potential in questions with presuppositions was recognised by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969: 159)

> The interrogative is a modality of considerable rhetorical importance. A question presupposes an object to which it relates and suggests that there is agreement on the existence of this object. To answer a question is to confirm this implicit agreement. The Socratic dialogues tell us a lot about both the usefulness and the dangers of this dialectical technique.

Next, they argue how important are questions with presuppositions in investigating, which indicate their persuasive or manipulative character (*ibid.*):

> The purpose of asking a question is sometimes to obtain a confession of an act the existence and circumstances of which the speaker presumes, without actual knowledge of it. The question "What did you do that day in such-and-such a place?" already implies that the person questioned was at the place indicated at a certain moment: if he answers, he indicates

his agreement on this point. But very often the questioning, though concerned with real events, is intended not so much to enlighten the questioner as to lead his opponent into inconsistencies.

Finally, they introduce the concept of double-barreled questions, with a statement that presenting one's own view in such a way is deceptive or insincere, which can be regarded as a marker of manipulation (*ibid.*):

> Questions are often merely a clever way of initiating a line of reasoning, particularly by the use of the alternative, or of division, with the complicity, so to speak, of the interlocutor who, by answering, is giving his endorsement to this mode of argument. Because of the presuppositions implicit in certain questions, the interrogative form may be regarded as a rather hypocritical way of expressing certain beliefs.

For Frege, sentences express propositions, which are the sense or meaning of the sentence (Frege, 1892/1948). Presuppositions are assumptions or background beliefs that must be accepted for a sentence to have a determinate truth value. They are embedded within the meaning of the sentence itself and are necessary for understanding the proposition expressed. Frege distinguished between the sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*) of linguistic expressions. The sense of a sentence captures its meaning, while the reference refers to the object or objects it denotes. Presuppositions help determine both the sense and reference of a sentence by providing the necessary context for understanding it.

Strawson, on the other hand, also acknowledged the importance of presuppositions in language, but his conception differs from Frege's in some key aspects (Strawson, 1964). He focused on the pragmatic aspects of presuppositions, emphasising their role in conversation and communication. According to Strawson, presuppositions are implicit assumptions that speakers expect their audience to share. They help structure discourse and guide interpretation by providing common ground between speakers and listeners. In Strawson's view, presuppositions are not necessarily built into the meaning of sentences themselves, as they are for Frege, but rather emerge from the context of communication. They reflect the background beliefs and assumptions of the speakers and listeners, shaping the interpretation of linguistic expressions.

Another type of questions with presuppositions is called complex questions, known also under many different names or associated with many terms such as loaded questions (this one applies when they contain strong emotive language), false questions, double questions, assumption of the previous question, tricky question, or the fallacy of many questions (e.g., Walton, 1999). They are particularly problematic because they contain more than one

presupposition, hence the name. Such accumulation of presuppositions demands more attention from the listener, whose aim should be to assess at once the veracity of all presuppositions included. If at least one of them is false, the question constitutes a fallacious argument. Complex (or loaded) questions are usually illustrated with the most popular example of a "wife-beater" (Layman, 2003):

Have you stopped beating your wife?

The question presupposes that the listener has a wife and that he has beaten her prior to the asking. In itself, it is not a fallacy unless the context in which it is used justifies asking it. However, this type of question can be used as an offensive device by a manipulator to imply the presumption of guilt. Such a tactic could be nullified by addressing the presupposition directly and negating it. In the example above, it could be an answer like "I've never done it", but in some instances, the opponent may attack the respondent by accusing them of evading the question. Tackling this technique is even more problematic when there is no direct respondent and possibly where the complex question is simultaneously a rhetorical question.

Questions containing presuppositions, especially bold ones, are called presumptive or perhaps even more accurately, presumptuous questions. In the theory of argumentation and linguistics, they are described as questions that assume the truth or validity of certain propositions, especially about the interrogated person, without allowing them to challenge those assumptions. These questions can be manipulative because they presuppose something to be accurate, potentially influencing the beliefs or behaviour of the person being asked and the audience. In argumentation theory, presumptive questions are often considered fallacious, as they do not allow for open inquiry and dialogue. According to Walton, presumptive questions can be a type of fallacious argument from presumption, in which an argument is based on an unsupported or unfounded assumption (Walton, 1995). In linguistics, presumptive questions are sometimes studied as presuppositions, which refer to assumptions taken for granted in a sentence or question. Linguistic studies have shown that using presuppositions in questions can be a manipulative tactic in persuasion and that asking leading questions can influence the beliefs and attitudes of the person being asked the question. Presumptive questions can be either unbalanced, i.e. they concern only one side of an issue, or balanced, i.e. providing two or more options, most typically and formally by including an option and its negative (Kellerman, 2007). Kellerman (*ibid.*) provides an example:

> Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?

Presumptive questions often occur in pairs or in longer sequences consisting of an initial question and follow-up (Kassin et al., 1990):

> Isn't it true that you have accused men of rape before?
> Isn't it true that, four years ago, you called the police claiming that you had been raped?
> ***
> Isn't it true that your work is poorly regarded by your colleagues?
> Hasn't your work been sharply criticized in the past?

Fallacious and hence manipulative complex questions are those in which there are unjustified presuppositions which are not accepted by the answerer. Both of these conditions are important because both parties to the debate should accept at least minimum of the context as common, which is a matter of relevance. Hamblin (1970: 38) provides another example:

> Why a live fish placed in a bowl already full of water did not cause it to overflow, whereas a dead fish did so?

Hypothetical questions are a special type of questions with a conditional component (Speer, 2012). Answers to them are by design presenting inexistent states of being, very often describing actions that should be taken to achieve them. Such questions propose some "what-if" situations which might be inexistent yet possible, or, in some instances, existent yet not accepted as a part of reality of a listener or an audience. Their variants were also called by researchers in many fields as "miracle questions" (Shea, 1998: 560) or "projective questions" (Puchta & Potter, 2004: 149). Wierzbicka (1997) argued that there exists a continuum of hypotheticality. Beside the conditionals of real possibility and counterfactuals, the third category of hypothetical conditionals can be discriminated. For the purposes of this work, we will call these types of questions according to one of the categories described by Van Dijk as counterfactual questions.

Rhetorical questions are very common in manipulative discourse and are frequently used in an ironic manner (Ilie, 1994; Gibbs, 2000; Schaffer, 2005). Rhetorical questions, also called fictive questions (Pascual, 2014) are believed to be questions not to be answered, in which the orator rather wants to *hear* the answer (or more often does not want to hear anything which is then implied as a confirmation of the assertion behind the question) than to *know* it (Moon, 1998). They "render evident the impossibility of providing a truthful answer

that satisfies the question's existential presupposition" (Langacker, 1999: 90–91). Therefore, at least some of them are rather pseudo-questions, to which the answer is unnecessary, and their primary role is to emphasise the certainty of the orator.

As has already been said, the recipient of the rhetorical question in most cases is not expected to answer it, and it is actually the orator who answers it more often as the means of reaffirmation (Davis & Brewer, 1997). Rhetorical questions set the conversational and discursive roles differently than regular questions—the recipient is more passive when not required to answer the question.

Although rhetorical questions from a syntactic point of view are formulated as questions, they are in fact imperatives e.g. the question "Can you get any slower?" could be equivalent to "Try and get slower". Another possibility motivated by the circumstances is that a question asked in this way would work like indirect assertions with reversed polarity (Frank, 1990), possibly signalling irony, e.g. "Can you get any slower?" could mean "You cannot get any slower". Langacker (1999: 90–91) provides another example of a rhetorical question signalising irony:

Who needs that car? ['Nobody needs that car'] ['I/We don't need that car']

Sometimes such questions besides being ironic are also humorous, idiomatic expressions being an answer to the previously asked questions, to which the answer is self-evident "yes" or "no" (Fraser 1996: 176):

Is the Pope Catholic?
Does a bear shit in the woods?
Do ducks swim?
Does Dolly Parton sleep on her back?
Does a snake do push-ups?

In some instances, rhetorical questions are understood not as inquisitive devices in which the speaker wants to fill in the gaps in knowledge, but rather as means for making some statements, claims, or assertions. Other possible usages may include: drawing attention, starting the discourse, engaging the listeners, and triggering a thought-emotional process that enables the speaker to exert the influence on the listeners desired by the speaker (Szymanek, 2021: 484). Szymanek (*ibid.*: 484–485) points to five different purposes for which the sender can use rhetorical questions in communication:

1) emphasising doubt, uncertainty, or the lack of knowledge. In such instances, the speaker may allow several possible answers. The question may be combined with casting suspicion;

2) expressing emotions such as anger, indignation, or surprise;

3) identification of the problem the speaker intends to pay attention to in the current passage of the speech or in any of its successive parts;

4) recalling some idea, emphasising it, and reminding that it is impossible to question it in a given group;

5) highlighting the fact that the answer to the question is obvious.

Rhetorical questions could be highly manipulative devices as they offer some reason (premise) to be supportive of the conclusion the orator wants the audience to accept (Bassham, 2004). In some contexts, however, when the orator is absolutely certain about the shared knowledge and the interpretation of reality, rhetorical questions may serve a role similar to phatic expressions which are used to establish, maintain or manage social bonds rather than to convey information. Quirk et al. (1985: 825) argue that "a positive rhetorical yes-no question is like a strong negative assertion, while a negative question is like a strong positive one.":

> POSITIVE:
> Is that a reason for despair? ['Surely that is not a reason . . . ']
> NEGATIVE:
> Isn't the answer obvious? ['Surely the answer is obvious.']

One possible categorisation of rhetorical questions is a classical rhetoric division into three types (Lanham, 1991):

(a) *anthypophora* (*antipophora*, *hypophora*), which means asking a question and answering it right after that;

(b) *erotesis* (*interrogatio*), meaning the question asked in the firm belief that he there would be a negative response, essentially not to express doubt but with intention to state the exact opposite of the original notion;

(c) *epiplexis* (*epitimesis*, *percontatio*), the one believed by rhetoricians to be the most offensive type of rhetorical question, signalling malevolence of the speaker.

For the purposes of this work, it may seem that the last understanding of the rhetorical question is the most accurate and relevant correspondence to the concept of manipulation and

thus fits with considerations and analyses in the dissertation. According to previously mentioned definitions of manipulation as intentional dishonesty and instrumental treatment of other people, in which numerous linguistic means can play an important role, epiplexis may be regarded as a model type of rhetorical question.

An important contribution to the understanding of rhetorical questions was defining reversed polarity questions (RPQs). According to Koshik (2002), they may be argumentative, defensive, justifying, ironic or even sarcastic, or accusatory. The question may present a difficulty to the one who is asking it. Accepting the challenge, the respondent adopts a defensive stance in support of their viewpoint. The term was coined by Irene Koshik (Koshik, 2002) who argued that the term "rhetorical question" in the context of questions with "ability to convey assertions opposite in polarity to that of the question" (Koshik, 2005).

This kind of question conveys an assumption as established truth or suggests that a particular answer should be provided in response. Psychologist Elizabeth Loftus's experimental studies have shown that attempting to provide an answer to such questions might lead to confabulation on the part of eyewitnesses (Loftus, 1996), which may hint that there exists a similar effect in people believing in conspiracy theories. Therefore, it seems legitimate to assume that conspiracy theorists may employ suggestive questions to make the audience speculate even further about the reality.

For the types of questions that are sometimes referred to as manipulative, it is worth mentioning direct questions. Direct and indirect questions may serve different roles depending on the power relations between the author and recipient of the question. Although there is nothing inherently manipulative in direct questions (i.e., those that lead to a concise answer, often even in one word, e.g. yes/no), they can, as it were, force the recipient to answer in a strong and unambiguous manner in situations where a response in line with the recipient's intention would be more complex and nuanced. Moreover, a manipulator can steer a respondent toward a specific response by asking a direct question in a way that suggests a desired answer, which can be accomplished by word choice, tone of voice, or non-verbal clues. For example, a question like "Don't you agree that this is the only choice possible in this situation?" implies that the manipulator anticipates agreement and may discourage disagreement.

Manipulators may ask a direct question with only a few predefined answers, limiting the respondent's opportunity to explore different points of view or choices. The manipulator can direct the respondent toward the intended outcome by managing the available options, e.g., "Would you prefer to buy this car in red or blue?", where the speaker assumes that the

respondent is already interested in buying the car, excluding the option to refuse or consider other colours. This strategy is commonly used in sales techniques, politics, and negotiations. Finally, direct questions can be used by manipulators to assert their authority or competence on a subject. The manipulator aims to erode the respondent's confidence and present themselves as the superior or more knowledgeable party by asking questions that challenge the respondent's knowledge or experience. This can be used to dominate or control a discourse.

Another manipulative use of questions can be through their repetition. In a sequence of question and answer, when the question is repeated, it makes the hearer think the first answer was incorrect or undesired, which may suggest changing it. Specific types of repetition may be associated with the corpus, i.e., the situation in which the question is written repeatedly without giving a chance to the audience to address it. In such a situation, it may suggest that the orator wants to emphasise the importance of the question. A manipulator can also be used by modifying someone's memory of an event or scenario by repeatedly asking the same question in slightly different ways, which is referred to in the literature as "memory priming" or "memory contamination" (e.g., Blom and Huang, 2021). Individuals may begin to doubt their initial recollection due to the repetition, making them more susceptible to trusting the manipulator's version of events. This phenomenon has been researched in the field of cognitive psychology, and studies have demonstrated that repetitive questioning can incorporate inaccuracies and distortions into people's memories (e.g., Loftus, 2005). Repetitive questioning can be used to instil erroneous beliefs or recommendations in the minds of others. A manipulator can make a particular notion or argument appear more trustworthy and enhance the likelihood of the person accepting it as confirmed by repeatedly repeating it. This strategy exploits the human predisposition to trust familiarity and repetition as markers of sincerity (Zaragoza et al., 2007). A manipulator can wear out someone's resistance or patience by repeating the same question, making them more likely to give in or supply the desired response. This technique uses the notion of "exhaustion" or "weariness" to gradually weaken the person's defences. Finally, repetitive questioning can be a gaslighting technique that can make someone doubt their own observations, beliefs, or even sanity. The manipulator might question the person's reality by continuously undermining their account of events or experiences, resulting in uncertainty, self-doubt, and psychological manipulation (Dorpat, 1996). Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse in which the perpetrator attempts to destroy the victim's sense of reality and mental sanity.

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The dichotomy of open and closed-ended questions is one of the most important in terms of the persuasive impact of the question on the respondent. While in open questions the respondents have a certain freedom to answer (note: not an absolute one because it should be relevant to the question asked), in the case of closed questions, the possible list of answers is finite and most often limited to two possible answers, e.g., 'yes' and 'no' (Peterson & Biggs, 1997; Peterson & Grant, 2001). These questions limit the speaker to agreeing or disagreeing, potentially discouraging them from suggesting alternatives:

> Isn't it true that our policies have reduced unemployment?
> Do you agree that this is the best course of action?
> You like the features of this model, don't you?

Forced choice questions could also be alternative questions:

> Do you prefer reading fiction or non-fiction books?
> Would you choose our product for its quality or its price?
> Do you support candidate A or candidate B in the upcoming election?

Closed-ended questions sometimes may make it difficult for respondents to deliver lengthy or nuanced comments. Manipulators can take advantage of this shortcoming by asking closed-ended questions to control the information supplied or discussed. The manipulator can lead the conversation towards their desired outcome while censoring competing opinions or details by structuring questions in a way that only allows for brief or preset answers. Manipulators can also use closed-ended questions to obtain responses that confirm their prior views or assumptions. They can control the narrative and create a consensus or agreement by asking leading closed-ended questions that align with their objective. This can be accomplished by carefully picking answer options most likely to result in the desired outcome and discouraging alternative ideas. Closed-ended questions can persuade people to take a particular course of action. They can provide the illusion of choice while coercing the respondent to select the desired option by limiting the available response alternatives to those that benefit the manipulator's goal. This strategy takes advantage of the psychological principle of "choice architecture", in which accessible options are deliberately arranged to affect decision-making (Thaler et al., 2012).

Finally, the last type of question worth mentioning in this context is the confirmatory (or confirmation) question. Confirmatory questions are designed to confirm or reinforce a belief or assumption. They are often used to seek validation or agreement from another

person and can effectively manipulate someone's thoughts or perceptions. They frequently take the form of negative yes/no questions (Han, 1997). Confirmatory questions can be used for manipulative purposes in several ways. Firstly, they may reinforce biases, as they can strengthen a person's existing biases or beliefs, even if they are not based on accurate information. Examples of confirmatory questions include the following:

> Don't you think [a particular group] is to blame for [a particular problem]?
> ***
> Don't you agree that this is the best product on the market?
> ***
> Don't you think [a particular policy] is the only way to tackle [a particular problem]?

The following parts of the chapter will focus on questions that, in specific contexts or particular uses, are understood to be manipulative.

One of them is "leading sentences", which is probably most commonly used in legal contexts. Their potentially manipulative impact has been recognised and regulated by law to define clearly how they can be used in courtrooms and hearings. The phrase implies that someone asked questions in a way that made it obvious which response was the appropriate or natural one (i.e., it leads people to a specific response). Loftus (1996: 97) defined it so concisely that it can be quoted in full:

> A leading question is simply one that, either by its form or content, suggests to the witness what answer is desired or leads him to the desired answer.

Black's Law Dictionary defines a leading question as "question that suggests the answer to the person being interrogated; esp., a question that may be answered by a mere 'yes' or 'no'" (Garner, 2014). Oesterle (1964) equated them with complex questions like the classic wife-beating one and pointed out that they are ruled out by courts of law in legal disputes. Leading questions may include either true or false information or assumptions. Notably, the latter can manipulate the respondents' perception of the situation or topic being discussed. These questions are divided into directive leading questions, e.g. "The car was red, wasn't it?" and non-directive leading questions, e.g., "Was the car red?" (Gous & Wheatcroft, 2020).

Double-barreled questions (alternatively named double-direct questions or compound questions, the latter especially in legal contexts) are a type of fallacious question combining two or more questions into one, which makes it difficult or even impossible for the respondent to provide an accurate response, which is because that the form of the question,

most frequently composed of two questions combined with the grammatical conjunction "and", does not allow to address them individually by providing two separate answers (Bradburn et al., 2004). Instead, the recipient is required to accept or reject a specific state of affairs expressed by this conjunction, which attempts to impose a specific framework of discourse. Therefore, this kind of question is frequently employed in deceptive speech to coerce the reply to provide an answer that advances the questioner's agenda. Sometimes, it is combined with other manipulation techniques like the *appeal to flattery* and exploiting cognitive dissonance in questions like "Would you be a nice guy and give me two quid?". Double-barreled questions could generate a false dichotomy, make the listener choose between two or more options, and constrict the range of acceptable answers (Dillman et al., 2014). Therefore, it is a specific closed-ended question, in which the speaker significantly reduces the number of possible response options and choices, constructing a specific state of affairs that they desire (or do not desire), making it legitimate to call this type of question an example of linguistic framing. For instance, a politician may employ a double-barreled question to sway public opinion on a contentious subject. The politician can lead the discourse and nudge the listener toward a specific answer by asking the question in a way that combines two or more concerns, like in the following example:

> Should the government spend less money on the military and more on education?

The person asking the question may want to encourage the recipient to accept the transfer of funds from defence expenditure to education expenditure, excluding other possibilities like increased expenditure on both.

Another concept related to manipulative questions is "begging the question" or *petitio principii*. The fallacy of "begging the question" has been discussed by many experts in logic and rhetoric (Hinton, 2021). According to Aristotle, it entails accepting an argument's conclusion as one of its premises, which leads to circular reasoning (Smith, 1989):

> To beg and assume the original question is a species of failure to demonstrate the problem proposed. [...] This may be done by assuming what is in question at once; it is also possible to make a transition to other things which would naturally be proved through the thesis proposed, and demonstrate it through them. [...] This is what those persons do who suppose that they are constructing parallel straight lines: for they fail to see that they are assuming facts which it is impossible to demonstrate unless the parallels exist. So it turns out that those who reason thus merely say a particular thing is, if it is: in this way everything will be self-evident. But that is impossible.

This kind of as yet unproven premises can also be found in questions, e.g., "Why does the government always fail to protect the environment?". This question assumes that the government always fails, which is a conclusion embedded in the question itself without supporting evidence.

Meanwhile, some academics contend that "begging the question" is not always a fallacy. Toulmin, for instance, makes the case that it is occasionally necessary to make certain assumptions to develop an argument and that doing so only sometimes results in circular thinking. According to him, such premises must be made clear and supported by evidence rather than buried within the argument (Toulmin, 1958). Douglas Walton offers an alternative viewpoint on "begging the question" by distinguishing between several circular reasoning styles. He contends that if specific inference criteria are followed, some circular arguments, such as those used in legal reasoning, may be acceptable. However, he agrees that if circular arguments do not satisfy these requirements, they may be erroneous (Walton, 2008: 64–66).

Provocative questions can trigger strong emotional responses, challenge beliefs, or provoke behaviours that can benefit the manipulator. They can divert attention from rational thinking and promote impulsive responses that match their agenda by appealing to emotions such as anger, fear, or outrage (as discussed in section 1.4. in the fragment on Emotive language), which makes them, at least potentially, persuasive or manipulative.

Convergent questions are close-ended questions which require only one response with only one answer envisaged as correct, as opposed to divergent questions, allowing more than one answer and having open-ended structure. As such, they may be manipulative in that asking a question may close the options for a respondent, steer a conversation, lead to specific conclusions intended by a speaker, and frame a respondent into consensus.
A redirecting question draws attention back to the questioner's chosen issue and away from whatever the reply discusses. It is helpful in steering conversations around indirect replies and avoiding confrontations.

The above examples of question types provided an overview of their possible uses, which the literature describes as manipulative. On the other hand, the very lack of systematisation, the overlapping of meanings, e.g., in different contexts like legal or juridical, or listing them under different levels of description, i.e. syntactic, logical-semantic, pragmatic, make this type of approach to them problematic. The next chapter will discuss the method used in this thesis, which advocates a unifying discursive treatment of manipulative questions, which allows all these levels of description to be taken into account within the contextual analysis.

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Chapter 7.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

QAnon is a figure of considerable interest to researchers in various fields such as sociology, cultural studies, political science, social psychology, or media studies. However, insufficient research has addressed the strictly linguistic aspects of this online figure's activities. Most of those that have appeared have revolved around an analysis of Q's style of expression or the community around them. These include several stylometry studies that have involved investigating the possible identity of Q. The first of those demonstrated that there were two persons behind Q (Roten, 2020). One of them started to publish Q-drops and wrote them until November 2017, when the other person started to post them. Then, the subsequent studies conducted by computer scientists using machine learning confirmed those findings, associating the first author of Q's entries with Paul Furber, a.k.a. Baruch the Scribe, a South African software developer. Then, in 2018, another person took control over Q-drops, and according to the studies, it was Ron Watkins, a.k.a. CodeMonkeyZ, the administrator of the imageboard websites 8chan and 8kun. It confirms the intuitions expressed in the HBO's documentary series on the history of the QAnon movement titled *Q: Into the Storm* (Hoback, 2021). The first group was formed under the aegis of a Swiss start-up, Orphanalytics and coordinated by Lionel Pousaz and Claude-Alain Roten. At the same time, the other was led by the French computational linguists Florian Cafiero and Jean-Baptiste Camp. These were the results of the stylometric analysis of forensic linguists, who apply mathematical tools to find patterns in word choices.

However, the studies mentioned above were not based on idiosyncratic specifics of the styles of particular persons. Roten and Pousaz (Pousaz & Roten, 2022; Pousaz et al., 2022) relied on software measuring the similarity of three-letter patterns across multiple texts. The level of similarity took into account both vocabulary and syntactic complexity. Cafiero and Camp's team (Cafiero & Camp, 2022) used a form of artificial intelligence to learn the author's writing patterns in much the same way that facial recognition software learns human traits.

Much closer to the method and objectives of the present study was an article by Chandler (2020) presenting QAnon's public discourse. The main objective of the paper mentioned above was to show the characteristic elements of Q discourse by presenting the most significant themes based on previously conducted content and thematic analysis. Unlike the present work, however, the author did not pay special attention to that distinctive element

of Q discourse, which is questions, nor did she take into account, despite roughly outlining the background and context of the QAnon movement, a possible triangulation suggested by Van Dijk, i.e., paying attention to the cognitive and social elements of the discourse. However, this work was written a relatively long time ago, when QAnon was a relatively new and poorly recognised phenomenon among researchers, which is always a good field for work of this preliminary, contributory nature.

These gaps were partly filled by another work that focused much more on the social elements of the context. Fitzgerald (2022) started from somewhat similar assumptions and used a similar method. However, it was extended to analyse a much larger number of sources external to the Q entries themselves, focused on the dialogic ways in which ontological anxiety is constructed in Q discourse. His fine-grained analyses undoubtedly captured this part of Q's discourse, but again concerned a different take on it, far from presented in this work in which the focus was very much on using questions and the persuasive nature of Q's discourse.

An interesting longitudinal and dialogical approach to the Q discourse was presented by Bortolon (2022), in which the main focus and central axis of analysis was to show how Q's discourse evolved over time and the growing criticism and disagreement with their claims. Again, the researcher used the method of thematic analysis, and his findings of a change or correction in the 'trajectory' of discourse in Q, while extremely interesting, differed significantly from a more linguistics-oriented account of QAnon's discourse as presented in this work.

7.1. Research questions

The literature review of linguistic and near-discourse analysis research found above clearly indicates that the present work is already well established among the various approaches to this specific discourse that Q has developed over the years. The importance of this type of research is at the same time underlined by the grasp of many aspects and problems that can be identified from reading these entries and related content.

As one of the parallels to those presented above, QAnon's use of advanced persuasion techniques to alter beliefs and attitudes can be shown by analysing how they structured their questions. This knowledge can improve media literacy and critical thinking abilities, making spotting and rejecting misleading material easier in the future. As the QAnon movement proved several times, conspiracy theories can have significant social consequences, including

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undermining trust in institutions and fueling divisiveness. Analysing manipulative interrogative sentences can reveal insights into the psychological processes of belief formation and the cognitive biases that lead people to believe conspiracies in general. These insights can consequently inform psychological interventions and support services for those heavily influenced by these narratives.

Therefore, the primary, overarching question that was attempted to be answered by studying questions in QAnon's online discourse was what role questions play in the discourse. Based on this question, another one was also asked, i.e. whether these questions play a role essential to Q's narrative or whether their considerable accumulation, already visible *prima facie*, played a purely stylistic role there. Finally, the third main question was what techniques QAnon used to manipulate their audience, and whether they implemented this exclusively through declarative sentences. Another question flows from that one, i.e., what discursive constructions or schemes were created on the basis of these questions and what strategies they were meant to implement. An additional goal of this work is also to reconstruct as broadly as possible the image of the world presented by Q and at the same time internalised by millions of people worldwide.

7.2. Corpus

Although some researchers on QAnon and the Q community (Rothshild, 2021), persistently claim that there had existed a canonical body of Q-drops with 4953 entries up to the moment of Q's return in 2022, there is no agreement on which entries exactly form the canon. This is because Q-drops were often deleted directly after posting, and some of them were removed from the server permanently. Moreover, the entries include a significant number of both intentional and unintentional repetitions. There were also problems with migrating between platforms. Q-drops were collected by members of the community and posted on some aggregating pages, but there existed some discrepancies between them in regards to the content. However, many aggregators for Q-drops were removed or discontinued.

The existing differences in the content led to a study in which a comparison of the most popular aggregators at the time was made by Aliapoulious et al. (2021). In the study, the authors enumerated six: qmap.pub, qanon.pub, qanon.news, qalerts.app, qagg.news, and operationq.pub. As of April 2022, two of the six sites, i.e., qmap.pub and operationq.pub, have been discontinued, and the third one, qanon.news, presents only the news related in some way to QAnon. Therefore, there are three aggregation sites operating as of December 2023:

qanon.pub (4854 entries), qalerts.app (4953), qagg.news (4954). All of these were considered as supplementary material and a possible backup source of data for analysis.

Initially, the design of the corpus for this study consisted in writing one's own script in the Python programming language which would enable downloading QAnon's entries from one of these pages and thus creating the MS Excel spreadsheet available in the cloud.

However, throughout the process of collecting information about the QAnon movement, it turned out that such a collection of Q-drops already exists, is well developed, and the reliability of its authors does not raise any doubts. The set of entries is available on the website of the Bellingcat group, the British-Dutch collective of investigative journalists and open-source intelligence specialists (Bellingcat, 2021)[17]. The document created by the group consists of 4952 entries, so it is very similar to those found on the above-mentioned aggregators. To create the corpus, the document provided by Bellingcat was copied, cleared of comments (it contained direct answers to Q-drops and some additional notes), and supplemented manually by entries from 2022 retrieved from https://qalerts.app, totalling 13 items.

The nature of Q-drops was varied. Some were very short, counting only a few characters; others were reasonably long, i.e., counting thousands of characters). Moreover, they contained very complex statements. They also include posts containing only graphics or reposts of their own or other users' statements, sometimes with commentary and sometimes without it. The corpus prepared by Belligcat includes information on reposts and the use of graphics. All such posts have been annotated with descriptive comments in capital letters enclosed in square brackets. The corpus discussed above was subjected to an in-depth qualitative analysis. After removing any comments from the spreadsheet file, a corpus containing only QAnon entries was obtained, which was then saved as a docx text file and uploaded to QualCoder, a qualitative data analysis programme (Curtain, 2020). As far as the data itself was analysed, it was based on finding candidate question sentences, with, of course, based on the scalarity theorem for speech acts, these were understood overly broadly. The entire corpus was therefore searched manually and, based on the identified manipulative entries, a twofold decision was made in each case: firstly, whether the entry bore the hallmarks of interrogativity, and secondly, whether it was a manipulative question. The data coded in this way were then grouped into patterns, which are discussed further in the analysis

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[17] The document can be found at
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/11MhW-P-9el9dg_cTjutwtIiQGMfL8jfH3SOaLZSBV2g/edit#gid=1596710080 as of 2 April 2024.

section. A strong indicator of interrogativity was, of course, the presence of question marks. The number of question marks indicating questions in the corpus was 3135. The focus on more classically conceived sentences seemed reasonable insofar as it had a strong rationale in that Q relatively rarely used non-standard questions beyond the reduced questions discussed in the analysis.

7.3. Method

Once the corpus of Q entries had been established, the next step was to analyse the manipulation questions and additional question-related interpretative elements, such as whole sentence sequences. For this purpose, the QualCoder qualitative data analysis software was used, where the text elements mentioned above were coded into recurring patterns. In addition, a residual spreadsheet file was used as a supplementary data source, for it appeared to be more convenient for quick searches for particular phrases. The questions analysed were primarily understood to be any lines or paragraphs containing a question mark, whether they contained single words or were longer compound sentences. This means that questions in the reported speech were not included in the analysis, if only because the very form of this would indicate quotations or paraphrases and thus would not relate to the questions asked by Q themselves.

7.3.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

Most considerations related to ideology and manipulation in the linguistic context occurred in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which further justifies its choice as an interpreting tool for this work. In the digital age, the development of internet platforms like social media or imageboards has allowed for unparalleled information transmission and idea exchange. Despite the benefits of connectedness, the internet has become a breeding ground for manipulative discourses aiming at influencing users' ideas, attitudes, and behaviours. Critical Discourse Analysis emerges as an appropriate framework for investigating these manipulative discourses, systematically identifying the underlying power dynamics, ideologies, and linguistic tactics used in online communication.

In the late 1970s, critical linguistics (or CL) was developed as an approach adopted by researchers, primarily linguists and literary theorists, who were dissatisfied with the popular linguistic theories of the time, e.g., structural linguistics or generative theory, which persistently avoided analysing political and social issues, focusing on more formal aspects of

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language. The ideological motivation is the main feature which differentiates CDA from similar approaches and theories like narrative analysis or conversational analysis, as it scrutinises the relations between discourse, power, and social injustice or inequality in text and talk (Van Dijk, 1993a). In general, it is a multidisciplinary, heterogeneous approach more than a theory, as it merges linguistic theories like text linguistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, applied linguistics, and pragmatics with classical rhetorical tradition, epistemology, cultural studies, sociology, and many more. The rationale for such a broad selection of ancillary fields is the need to reconstruct the sociocultural background of the discourse under analysis since, in addition to its interest in the linguistic elements themselves, Critical Discourse Analysis also focuses on the conditions and processes of its (re)production.

Disinformation campaigns, propaganda, hate speech, and deceptive advertising are just a few examples of manipulative discourses that take place online. CDA offers a methodological framework for evaluating these discourses by examining the linguistic traits, discursive techniques, and sociopolitical settings that underpin their creation and reception (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). CDA allows researchers to discover the vested interests, power dynamics, and ideological biases that shape communication practices in digital settings by dissecting the discursive creation of online communication (Fairclough, 2013).

In terms of justifying the use of Critical Discourse Analysis in the context of this work, it is worth mentioning that QAnon's message was virtually uncritical of then-incumbent US President Donald Trump and his administration and subsequent associates, while at the same time co-creating a vision as fake and describing other actors, i.e., his political opponents as extremely despicable people. The anonymity and the feeling accompanying imageboard users that they represent an alternative to the message of the mainstream media (which includes media favouring Trump, such as Fox News) testify that the message was favourable to Trump also because a message in line with his goals was communicated on secondary platforms like Reddit, YouTube, Facebook or Twitter by the community, and its specificity allowed for the utterance of content that Trump or anyone favouring him in public could not openly present without losing the trust of more neutral voters. That Q's message favoured Trump was also compounded by the fact that he repeatedly supported the move, e.g., by sharing entries by QAnon endorsers like Marjorie Greene on social media, or using the same rhetoric when addressing the mainstream news media (Kassay, 2021). It thus served the propaganda purposes of that establishment, which further justifies the choice of Critical Discourse Analysis as a research method.

Norman Fairclough (1995, 2001) proposed a three-tier mode of discourse analysis:

1) textual analysis, a micro-level linguistic analysis, e.g., of specific use of syntax, deixis, metaphors, metonymies or other particular rhetorical devices,

2) discursive practice analysis, a meso-level analysis, which aims at studying processes of text production, distribution and consumption, and finally

3) discursive events analysis, a macro-level analysis, concerned primarily with scrutinising broader intertextual and inter-discursive patterns under the influence of which particular instances of discourse emerge.

Fairclough argued that focusing only on microstructures, i.e., texts or some of their elements, an approach typical of conversational analysis, provides a researcher with a somewhat limited and "implausible image" of what really happens (Fairclough, 2001). Therefore, for the purposes of this work, in addition to analysing the linguistic elements, mainly contained in the questions, the socio-cultural, political, and media background that all contributed to how Q's entries became so popular and had a reflexive impact on society, culture and politics in the United States and globally is outlined.

Although all these approaches seem to be valuable in the context of this work, there is another one particularly interested in cognitive processes, specifically taking place in the speaker and the hearer when manipulation occurs, i.e., cognitive pragmatics. It is a relatively new school in CDA, combining socio-cultural analyses with cognitive approach to pragmatics. The concept of manipulative discourse is in fact one of the pivotal terms for one of its most notable scholars, i.e., Louis de Saussure. For de Saussure, manipulative discourse is truth-conditionally or truth-functionally defective and doubtful or unacceptable within a particular culture (de Saussure, 2005).

Critical Discourse Analysis understood as the analysis of a text based on hermeneutic tools such as those indicated in the sections on the language of manipulation or descriptions of manipulative questions, should be linked to descriptions of context and co-text, understood in a broad sense, i.e. This should be understood broadly, i.e. taking into account the circumstances of the text's production related to socio-cultural conditions (the place of production and the primary audience were Americans, initially imageboard users, later wider groups interested in conspiracy theories or criticism of the Democrats), the media, as well as the cultural sources used in the final product itself.

Such emphasis on the importance of context is important in most CDA formulations, especially (in addition to van Dijk's version, which is particularly relevant to this work) in the discourse-historical approach (DHA) developed by Ruth Wodak, which aims at a

comprehensive analysis of context, particularly related to socio-historical entities, and the way in which it affects the process of discourse production. According to Wodak and Ludwig (1999: 12), "discourse (...) is always historical, that is, it is connected synchronically and diachronically with other communicative events which are happening at the same time or which have happened before".

The above description of the method used in this thesis justifies the extensive description of the context of Q and the QAnon movement made in earlier chapters, and illustrates what levels of analysis were of interest in the context of the discursive construction of manipulative questions. However, the media context also played an important role and, in addition to its general conditions outlined earlier, it is important to look at the overall environment and the specificity of the channels where the discursive community in which Q operated was generated.

7.4. Medium

This section will discuss the media determinants that enabled QAnon to emerge as a phenomenon in online discourse, starting with its libertarian roots, which made it a haven for any person who wanted a medium for free expression where freedom of speech would be virtually unlimited, as characteristic of the American context in which QAnon emerged as a social phenomenon. Next, the specifics of Web 2.0 as a variant of the Internet were discussed, characterised by the greatest traffic centred first around online forums and later social media, which also saw the emergence of platforms called imageboards, where QAnon published directly. Finally, some attention was given to imageboards themselves.

7.4.1. Libertarian origins of the Internet

From its very beginnings, the internet had been a safe haven for American libertarians and anarchists, which led to the emergence of a philosophy to a large extent shaping the architecture of the medium in its early days called technolibertarianism or cyberlibertarianism (Borsook, 2000). Many individuals who theorised about the Internet wanted it to be a platform in which the freedom of expression would be unlimited, without any national or international regulation or censorship. Among them was Stewart Brand, the probable author of the expression "information wants to be free" (Brand, 1987), the motto of the early internet with clear libertarian undertones. Technolibertarianism is basically libertarianism addressing the importance of the internet as the most important platform for the circulation of knowledge

and information. Like previous forms of libertarianism, primarily American, it is based on the Meiklejohn's theory on free speech absolutism stemming from the First Amendment (Meiklejohn, 1948).

Another important voice from this perspective was by John Perry Barlow from the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the author of *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (Barlow, 1996). It was a direct response to making into law the Telecommunications Act of 1996 in the United States, the important part of which was Communications Decency Act (CDA) aimed at regulating pornography online. The opening lines of the *Declaration* are the following words:

> Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.

These documents were actually mainstream in the 90s and 00s as not only hackers, web activists or ordinary users did agree fully with their content as among the followers of this philosophy there was no shortage of actual creators of Internet architecture, e.g., I.T. engineers, web designers and developers or startup owners.

This kind of thinking on the cyberspace and the internet of today has been present in the imageboards, trollnet and dark web, which are the last places on the internet where no censorship is welcome whatsoever, particularly in such sections as /pol/. Imageboards are one of the last places on the official, public internet where libertarian ideas continue to be fully relevant, although Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter and his actions immediately afterwards indicate that, with capital support, they may be entering the mainstream. It was precisely in such a media and information environment and the climate among users that the QAnon phenomenon could emerge. In the discussion on the role in shaping the online discourse, which is played by the very medium of the internet and by the various relevant sub-media within it, it is essential to mention the changes in the internet which affect the process of creating the discourse. As the content created by QAnon and the community formed around occurred in a specific media environment, i.e., in the declining moment of Web 2.0, it seems necessary to discuss the most relevant features of this media environment and its discursive characteristics.

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7.4.2. Web 2.0

Web 1.0 to Web 3.0 are terms used to describe different phases in the evolution of the World Wide Web. While there is no precise definition or cut-off point for these terms, they are generally used to describe different eras of technological progress and changes in how people interact with the web. Web 2.0, relevant to the media context in which QAnon emerged as a social phenomenon, refers to the second generation of the web that emerged in the early 2000s. Coined by Tim O'Reilly, the term of Web 2.0 refers specifically to a shift from static, read-only websites to dynamic, interactive and participatory web applications. O'Reilly (2005) came up with some of the key features of Web 2.0, which are described in the following paragraphs. Web 2.0 saw the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, allowing users to share content and interact on a large scale in real-time. These platforms became important spaces for public discourse, enabling individuals to express their opinions, engage in conversations, and form communities around shared interests. These, in turn, reinforce existing beliefs and create echo chambers, which can support conspiracy ideas while making it challenging to hear different points of view.

Web 2.0 allowed users to create and publish their own content, such as blog posts, videos and photos, and share it with others online. This feature was essential to the emergence of numerous new phenomena and broke the traditional top-down media scheme of gatekeeping transmissions. This led to a democratisation of content production, allowing individuals to contribute their perspectives and engage in online discussions. However, it also enabled disinformation and conspiracy theories such as QAnon to reach a large audience without the need for standard fact-checking and verification procedures.

Web 2.0 introduced collaborative, usually free of charge tools such as wikis (e.g. Wikipedia, Wiktionary and thousands others, very often niche ones), which allow multiple users to create, edit and organise content on a shared platform. They enabled users to collectively create and curate information, further challenging traditional gatekeeping mechanisms. Web 2.0 platforms used algorithms favouring engaging and sensational material, frequently resulting in the spread of conspiracy theories. The algorithms were designed to maximise user engagement, which could contribute to spreading disinformation and conspiracy content. Of the theories in communication sciences and media studies that deal with issues similar to those in this thesis and on which the findings related to Web 2.0 were primarily based, computer-mediated communication is worth discussing here.

7.4.3. Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC), or simply electronic communication in its classical formulations, means communicating about and using computer technology (Thurlow et al., 2004). This definition was formulated as early as in 1995 by Santoro (1995: 11) in the following form:

> At its broadest, CMC can encompass virtually all computer uses including such diverse applications as statistical analysis programs, remote-sensing systems, and financial modelling programs, all fit within the concept of human communication.

Another definition was formulated by December (1997):

> Computer Mediated Communication is a process of human communication via computers, involving people, in particular contexts, engaging in processes to shape media for a variety of purposes.

However, the rapidly changing environment and emergence of several new channels of communication have led some researchers to turn their attention to the need to retire or at least de-emphasise the term "computer" and highlight the "mediated" part of the name (Carr, 2020). Having discussed the general specifics of the media environment in which QAnon's message was created and understanding the conditions under which it might have been created, it is necessary to go into more detail about the specifics of the very platforms on which they operated, i.e. imageboards.

7.4.4. Imageboards

Imageboards are a sort of online platform distinguished by its emphasis on image-based content and simple interface, allowing users to submit and discuss images anonymously. They arose as a prominent phenomenon in Web 2.0, promoting user-generated content and establishing communities based on certain hobbies or topics. Imageboards differ from standard online forums and social media platforms in their features and styles of engagement. Typically, imageboards consist of a number of themed boards or forums where users can upload images and respond to current posts. One of the distinguishing features of imageboards is the emphasis on anonymity. When uploading content or participating in discussions, users are rarely prompted to create an account or provide any identifying information. Although anonymity promotes the free flow of ideas and content, it can also lead to a lack of accountability and the possibility of abusive behaviour. Imageboards are also

characterised by the fact that each thread has a fixed 'capacity', the number of entries, after which the oldest one is deleted. In this way, the archiving of Q's entries by its readers was crucial to bringing them together in such a way that the corpus of entries was complete.

Another distinguishing feature of picture boards is their focus on image-centric communication. While text-based discussions remain popular, photos are the predominant means of expression and communication. Users frequently utilise images as shorthand to express complicated thoughts, jokes, or sentiments, resulting in a highly visual and meme-driven culture inside imageboard groups. Furthermore, imageboards are often minimalist in design, with simple layouts and limited functionality other than image posting and commenting. This simplicity encourages a sense of egalitarianism, as all users have equal access to the platform's functionalities, regardless of technical expertise or community standing. At the same time, this egalitarianism is accompanied by a kind of elitism, as imageboard users consider themselves to be unique internet users, distinguished from those who do not use those parts of the internet as they do, do not know their language and some of their cultural scripts, and if they do learn them, it is with a long delay, when they often no longer use them. Such ordinary internet users who are considered inferior by the anons (imageboard users) are called "normies" by them (Nagle, 2017). Imageboards prioritise real-time, ephemeral discussions above long-form, stored threads compared to regular internet forums. Threads on imageboards typically have a short lifespan, with older threads being archived or purged to make place for fresh content. Concentrating on the current instant creates a fast-paced and dynamic environment where subjects can quickly surge and fall in popularity.

Originally, imageboards were propagated online in Japan with sites like 2chan. The most specific content there was both soft and hardcore porn, with manga and anime genres of *ecchi* and *hentai* being arguably the essential sources of aesthetics there, which were later transferred to their subsequent American counterparts.

Another essential part of posting style on imageboards is boundary-less trolling (i.e., posting deliberately offensive, provocative or sarcastic content online; for more details see, e.g., Dynel, 2016) baiting and mockery. The history of imageboards is full of semi-organised attacks (or "raids") on some individuals or groups. Most notorious of them were conducted on many parts of the internet and outside, with people being doxxed (i.e., their personal information being revealed publicly), threatened, stalked or even assaulted. The most vivid example of this type of action was an event that went back to history under the name Gamergate. It was an organised campaign of hatred organised on the Internet by right-wing

users, which targeted mainly women, but also sexual minorities and promoters of progressive values in the video games industry. Among its victims were media critic Anita Sarkeesian and female game developers Brianna Wu and Zoë Quinn, all active commentators on the game industry (Murray, 2018). Gamergate involved various types of harassment, including the violence offline. Some researchers studying the QAnon movement, e.g., Ball (2023), link Gamergate to QAnon as it the first large-scale operation that cemented the imageboard community around a common enemy: feminist-minded players. In his view, it also had, like QAnon, an element of gamification, a kind of competition in gaining information about victims or showing them hatred or even using violence digitally or in the real world.

Q's entries were first posted on 4chan's politics sub-forum /pol/, notorious for its saturation with conspiracy theories, obscenity, anti-Semitism, anti-Islamism, white supremacy and neo-Nazi content. As part of Internet culture with dank memes and ironic Internet humour on 4chan, encapsulated with possibly the most iconic image of Pepe the Frog, Q's message most probably started as a kind of joke, but shortly it gained momentum and went from 'extreme fringe' into 'mainstream fringe' of Alex Jones's InfoWars and further spread into Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, or Parler. Finally, it became so popular that it merged with the mainstream Republican Party imaginarium. An NPR/Ipsos poll points out that as many as 17 percent of Americans believe that Q's story about satanist child traffickers is true, and another 37 percent think that this may not be totally false (Duoba, 2021). It means that even 35.5 million Americans could be named outright QAnon followers.

The joint study of MIT and University of Southampton analysts (Bernstein et al., 2011) concluded that anonymous users of 4chan manifested high levels of disinhibition due to the very fact they were anonymous and that there was virtually no moderation on the website.

On 14 May 2022, 18-year-old Payton S. Gendron killed ten people near Buffalo. As was later revealed in his manifesto, he was heavily influenced by the content he had found on 4chan:

> Before I begin I will say that I was not born racist nor grew up to be racist. I simply became racist after I learned the truth. I started browsing 4chan in May 2020 after extreme boredom, remember this was during the outbreak of covid…. I never even saw this information until I found these sites, since mostly I would get my news from the front page of Reddit. I didn't care at the time, but as I learned more and more I realized how serious the situation was. Eventually I couldn't take it anymore, I told myself that eventually I was going to kill myself to escape this fate. My race was doomed and there was nothing I could do about it.

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Although nothing is yet known about the shooter's adherence to the QAnon mythos, the story reveals the same pattern as other instances of violence, which could be somehow connected to the QAnon conspiracy. A toxic culture perpetuated on 4chan and similar boards fosters the radicalisation of other individuals.

This relation was very close to the narration of the Christchurch shooter (Liang, 2022):

Q: From where did you receive/research/develop your beliefs?
A: The Internet, of course. You will not find the truth anywhere else.

Almost complete anonymity, the pervasiveness of offensive or graphic content and inciting criminal activity, which eventually led to the penalisation of imageboards in some countries like Australia and New Zealand, are the reasons why they are sometimes regarded as the gateway to the deep web and dark net. Probably the most controversial side of them is that they allowed live-streaming of shootings, which was the direct reason for banning them in Australia and New Zealand. Such individuals are not exceptions, as numerous other users praised them. Their actions were the most extreme events of violence, but there were a lot more like these. This attitude is explained in part by the psychological phenomenon known as the indignation effect, where users are more likely to post negative content online than positive content (Larsson, 2018).

7.4.4.1. Ideology, politics and political activism on imageboards

Although still sometimes considered niche, imageboards were the birthplace of some internet phenomena affecting large-scale politics. From their very beginning, they mainly gathered young males interested in computers, video games, popular culture, and porn, thanks to which they are popularly associated as a place where incel culture was born (Fathallah, 2021).

Although now they are usually associated with libertarian and extreme right-wing politics, they were much more diverse at the very beginning. Its architecture, allowing almost unlimited freedom of expression, resulted in the emergence of a predominantly left-wing group known as Anonymous. Anonymous is a loosely organised transnational group of activists and hackers. They are recognised for their internet presence and use of the Guy Fawkes mask as a symbol. The group formed in the early 2000s, first receiving notoriety for their protests against the Church of Scientology under the code name "Project Chanology". The group lacks a formal leadership structure, and members frequently work independently or in small groups. They use a variety of internet platforms and communication channels to plan

and coordinate their activities. The agenda of Anonymous is fluid and can change based on the individuals participating and the current situation at hand. However, they have participated in various actions, including rallies against censorship, government corruption, corporate greed, and human rights violations. They have also launched cyberattacks on organisations and persons they see as oppressive or unjust. Anonymous gained widespread attention in 2008 with their protests against the Church of Scientology, which were sparked by the Church's attempts to suppress a video of Tom Cruise discussing Scientology beliefs. Since then, they have been involved in numerous high-profile actions, including attacks on government websites, corporations, and other targets. Until QAnon, the group remained the most significant entity ever to emerge or openly use imageboards.

7.4.4.2. Mode of communication on imageboards

Typically, imageboards are full of content combining images and text. This is one of the most important features of this medium, similar to posts on more traditional internet forums. The most important difference is that entries on imageboards are almost uncontrolled streams of conversations where anyone can start a new thread about anything (Nagle, 2017). The only requirement to meet is that the message should be relevant to the topic, which is usually explicitly addressed in the very name of the sub-forum. Designed to provide absolute freedom and anonymity, they produced their own language, rituals of entry and membership. Anonymity there is not tantamount to the lack of recognition of the most prolific users, as they still may leave some signatures to be linked to particular messages.

7.4.4.3. Imageboard personae before QAnon

Though possibly calling QAnon a specimen of a specific Internet posting genre would be an overstatement, there were a few similar personalities writing on boards in a similar style. Back in 2016, the first of them, aptly named FBIAnon, appeared in several threads, writing some messages resembling Q-drops specifically on the Clinton Foundation and alleged instances of corruption of the foundation and associated politicians and lobbyists. The persona behind it boasted about being a well-informed "high-level analyst and strategist" who had "intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the Clinton case" (Rothschild, 2021: 18–19), which also resonated in Q-drops. This feature makes that personality very similar to another called HLIAnon, i.e., High Level Insider[18]. Some other anons like HighwayPatrolman, Anon5 (known also as Frank) described alleged influential child

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[18] Interestingly, HLIAnon's posts gained some recognition and are aggregated on http://hli.anoninfo.net/.

trafficking rings. In 2017, another three-letter agency was used to form a nickname for somebody called CIAAnon or CIA Intern (*ibid.*: 18). The last one of similar personalities appeared soon before QAnon and was called WH Insider Anon or White House Insider Anon. None of those personalities, however, were anywhere close to QAnon in terms of popularity.

The description of this social and media environment, as well as the previously outlined themes, can be helpful in understanding the context necessary when analysing discourse at meso and macro levels. They make it easier to understand the dialogic nature of Q's narratives, especially at the initial critical moment of his activity, as it was to the imageboard users, initially 4chan, later 8chan and 8kun, that they directed their message. Over time, they gained a much wider audience and they were probably aware of this. The next and final chapter deals with the analysis of specific questions discovered during the coding process, based on the theoretical basis described in Chapters 1 to 6.

Chapter 8.

ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONS

"You can paint the picture based solely on the questions asked."

Q

The corpus of QAnon entries discussed earlier have already contained a significant number of questions that have become the hallmark of Q. The following analysis makes reference to a number of them, in particular their persuasive and manipulative nature. Although one might expect his entries to contain mainly questions taking various forms of rhetorical questions, in fact Q's questions were closer in nature to quiz or exam questions. While a rhetorical question most often signals a high degree of certainty, but sometimes also scepticism or disbelief towards the spoken thesis contained in the question, the questions uttered by Q mostly expressed absolute certainty about the thesis that the respondents were yet to arrive at through discussion. In form, therefore, they were close to canonical questions, i.e. questions whose purpose is to obtain information or confirmation (Trotzke, 2023).

Before analysing the questions as such, let us address the question of the beginning of Q's activity, which was crucial for building relationships with the rest of the 4chan community. In determining what is meant at any one point in a conversation, we rely on schemata or interpretive frames based on our experience with similar situations as well as on grammatical and lexical knowledge (Tannen, 1985). Such frames enable us to distinguish among permissible interpretive options.

The hypothesis is that any utterance can be understood in numerous ways and that people make decisions about how to interpret a given utterance based on their definition of what is happening at the time of interaction. In other words, they define the interaction in terms of a frame or schema which is identifiable and familiar (Goffman, 1974). From this point of view, it should have been compelling for many anons, rather repetitive and redundant in their comments, to read the first Q-drop:

> Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM - 8:30 AM EST on Monday - the morning on
> Oct 30, 2017

This statement, while being very short, concrete and encapsulating the maximum information possible, significantly deviated from most entries on this board. Therefore, it is not surprising that the first answer to this entry was the question: "Who are you?". However,

it was left unanswered by the author. This dry and matter-of-fact way of writing and the initial lack of interaction with the audience may indicate that Q wanted to create the right impression of a person not wasting time on nor being interested in choosing a sophisticated vocabulary, but instead opting for simplicity that achieves the most important communication goals, while also wanting to assert their dominance. It was also through this kind of conversation management that they were able to create and sustain for a long time the image of a person from military or intelligence circles.

Similarly direct and straight to the point was the first entry signed with 'Q':

> HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am. Expect massive riots organized in defiance and others fleeing the US to occur. US M's will conduct the operation while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most major cities.

As for the conversation frame Q constructed at this point, it was that they were either a person possibly well-informed and close to the sources in the government or some intelligence agency who was primarily interested in conveying their message and not necessarily in discussion and interpretation. Shortly after that, there came a first entry consisting mostly of interrogatives, afterwards very typical of Q:

> Mockingbird
> HRC detained, not arrested (yet).
> Where is Huma? Follow Huma.
> This has nothing to do w/ Russia (yet).
> Why does Potus surround himself w/ generals?
> What is military intelligence?
> Why go around the 3 letter agencies?
> What Supreme Court case allows for the use of MI v Congressional assembled and approved agencies?
> Who has ultimate authority over our branches of military w\o approval conditions unless 90+ in wartime conditions?
> What is the military code?
> Where is AW being held? Why?
> POTUS will not go on tv to address nation.
> POTUS must isolate himself to prevent negative optics.
> POTUS knew removing criminal rogue elements as a first step was essential to free and pass legislation.
> Who has access to everything classified?

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> Do you believe HRC, Soros, Obama etc have more power than Trump? Fantasy.
>
> Whoever controls the office of the Presidecy controls this great land.
>
> They never believed for a moment they (Democrats and Republicans) would lose control.
>
> This is not a R v D battle.
>
> Why did Soros donate all his money recently?
>
> Why would he place all his funds in a RC?
>
> Mockingbird 10.30.17
>
> God bless fellow Patriots.

This entry can be regarded as definitive for Q's style as it contained a mixture of interrogatives with some declaratives and occasional imperatives. Questions asked were left chiefly with no answers to drive speculations. Most of them were wh-questions, which implied the necessity to do one's own research by the reader. As for their semantic content, at the very surface level, they revolved around the military. It is worth noting, however, that military intelligence was intended to be contrasted with "three letter agencies", primarily civilian. That is confirmed with a part of one of the following entries:

> Focus on Military Intellingence/ State Secrets and why might that be used vs any three letter agency

Finally, it was expressed explicitly:

> Military Intelligence v FBI CIA NSA

It is an interesting discursive strategy in which Q started with the question. Then, they probably did not receive a satisfactory answer and finally emphasised their point with repetition of the same information in an even more straightforward manner. However, despite its seemingly speculative nature, the entire entry made it clear that the questions asked had a specific answer key forming a unified narrative presenting a particular picture of the world. Due to contextual factors, we can consider that most of the questions asked were guiding, if not leading questions.

From the pragmatic perspective, the questions in the entry contained several presuppositions that served the purpose of frame construction. For instance, the question about Soros contained a presupposition that he actually had donated all his money shortly before the entry was written. In fact, Soros transferred as much as 80 per cent of his fortune to the Open Society Foundations, his registered charity (RC). Soros was also a supporter of Hillary Clinton in her presidential campaign.

Finally, the question on AW could be interpreted as the first allusion to the paedophile ring and making a connection to Hillary Clinton. AW is most probably Anthony Weiner, a Democrat politician and privately a husband of Huma Abedin, who was also mentioned in the entry. Weiner is a convicted sex offender, who had been held in a federal jail at the moment when the entry was published. Huma Abedin, on the other hand, is Hillary Clinton's long-time advisor. Although his name was not mentioned in full, the context, including mentioning Huma Abedin in the same entry, made it evident to readers.

Q's questions and some puzzles addressed to the readers of /pol/ (Politically Incorrect) board on 4chan were quickly solved. In this way, Q managed to create a narrative on the group of influential people who either were part of a paedophile ring themselves or at least worked for them. In contrast, President Donald Trump wanted to stop them in the narrative; to do so, he consistently surrounded himself with people from military circles, who were associated with their patriotic attitude and willingness to oppose evil forces.

The following entry included one sentence implying that the author knew their audience very well and that they knew how to communicate on that board, which means that they had been following what was going on there for some time:

Not everyone is corrupt (fewer than you think).

It also included the first reference to the alleged satanism of the elite:

Many in our govt worship Satan.

There was no evidence for such claims, however, but the person or persons behind Q did not have to provide much of it as the views of the majority of users of this board and their worldview were entirely consistent with the content published by Q. Even if some did not fully believe in the conspiracy theories that Q referred to, they were still prevalent tropes that were promoted there, most probably for strategic reasons.

Among the features of such a depiction of this group is getting away from the allegation of being biased towards Republicans as QAnon provided some clues that "bad actors" were also present among them. Q-drops also looked somewhat reliable because there were not many generalisations there.

Following Searle (1975), questions are a type of directive usually used to obtain information from the addressee. The speaker hopes to provoke a response from the addressee by asking a question, which usually takes the shape of an answer or clarification. Second, like other speech acts, questions are distinguished by the speaker's desire to attain a particular

purpose, which is to obtain information. The effectiveness of a question as a speech act depends on both the speaker's ability to express the aim and the addressee's capacity to recognise it. The sincerity conditions require the speaker to sincerely need and expect the information they are requesting for a question to be effective as a speech act. Therefore, in the case of QAnon, it is appropriate to speak of a breach of this principle, as QAnon clearly wants to create the impression that they know all possible questions and all possible answers to them. However, as will be shown later, Searle's description does not quite match non-canonical questions such as those of Q.

What caught our attention during the analysis of the questions, and to which a separate section will not be devoted, is the almost complete absence of tag questions. Section 5.1 noted that these types of questions serve to negotiate meanings, build rapport, encourage dialogue and give voice to the other discussant(s), while also serving as an invitation for them to share their thoughts. They can also express doubts and hesitation. Their absence perhaps signifies a desire to present a vision of reality of which the sender is absolutely certain and accepts only the answers to questions given in the form which is consistent with that vision.

8.1. Frequently recurring patterns

The vast majority of QAnon's statements are based on a negative other-presentation with a positive self-presentation. The same applies to numerous questions, as QAnon has repeatedly put presuppositions and innuendos relating to the out-group(s), which will be shown later in the analysis. Both the in-group and the out-group are not defined in a completely clear and unambiguous way. In this respect, the deliberate vagueness further emphasises the mysterious tone of QAnon's statements, enhancing the conspiracy character of the presented world vision. For example, QAnon believes that "bad actors" are among both Democrats and Republicans, making this simple dichotomy not quite suitable for in-group and out-group formation. However, it is among the Republicans that there is much more "Us". One possible explanation is a kind of hedging against the possible discrediting of Q's statements when confronted with the facts. However, this kind of precautionary attitude, particularly towards the Republicans, is justified by the fact that Donald Trump won the Republican nomination for the presidential race without absolute unanimity, and there was an evident distrust of him among some party members even after he became president. Therefore, one of the main characteristics of an in-group is support for Donald Trump and General Flynn and their actions, especially against "three letter agencies":

> Why does Potus surround himself w/ generals?
>
> ***
>
> Under what article can the President impose MI take over investigations for the 3 letter agencies? What conditions must present itself? Why is this so VERY important? Who surrounds POTUS? They lost this very important power _ the one area of the govt not corrupt and directly serves POTUS.

Q had supported Trump virtually every time he had been criticised for his actions. Responses from the QAnon community suggest that it was the generals, led by General Flynn, who were Trump's greatest asset in the fight against "bad actors". While Flynn retired in 2014, with Trump's swearing in as President he was given access to intelligence as National Security Advisor, a position he held for a very short time and was later found to have been in contact with the Russians during the handover of power to Trump. On 4 July 2020, he was recorded swearing obedience to Q adding the hashtag #TakeTheOath to one of his Twitter posts (Ball, 2023). In addition, like Trump himself, he has repeatedly indicated that he supports the actions of the QAnon movement. As for Trump himself, sentences showing support for his actions will still be analysed later.

Another frequent theme in both affirmative and question sentences, although more often in the latter, is that of conspiracy thinking characterised by pointing to a direct link between events that are not related in the official accounts, expressed almost directly:

> Coincidence Senate Republicans pushing for Fed Judge confirmations last week?

In a grammatical sense, this sentence is incomplete. The zero copula construction in this question might have been used for discursive purposes as it highlights what seems to be the most important part of it, namely the noun "coincidence", as the interrogative form suggests that the sender implies the actions of the Republican senators are deliberate.

> Does anyone find it to be a coincidence there is always a terrorist attack when bad news breaks for the D's?

Similarly to the previous one, in this sentence, QAnon suggests that there is no coincidence between terrorist attacks and bad news (i.e., scandals) for Democrats, hinting that there are some actors able to do "inside jobs". The question implies that anyone believing in such a coincidence is gullible. It also contains presuppositions that such co-occurrence in time actually happens and that it always happens.

Conspiracy thinking in readers of Q-drops was also triggered through sequences of questions with presuppositions. Let us look at the following fragment:

> Who controls NK?
>
> Who really controls NK?

The first question in the sequence elicits a response "Kim Jong Un" or "North Korean communists". However, the second question suggests that this expected answer to the first question, which is in accordance with the official state of affairs, is false, and in fact, control over North Korea is in the hands of some other power. At this point, one may wonder why Q did not immediately ask the second question. Perhaps a priming effect was applied here, i.e., the reader was supposed to start thinking about North Korea, and the second question was supposed to shatter their previous beliefs about it. Given that QAnon's readers may have already manifested such an attitude, it may have been intended to change the original belief for another time. QAnon may, for example, have expected that at least some of the readers would have already given a non-standard answer with the first question, interpreting the question quite literally, i.e., referring not to someone who rules or governs North Korea but instead to someone who actually controls it in the first place. In this case, the recipient might first have thought that the answer was, for example, 'China' or 'Iran' (the former has some geopolitical justification, while the latter would have some justification in the context of QAnon's other sentences on North Korea's nuclear programme). The second answer could be based on the freest speculations and conspiracy theories. Therefore, these questions can be interpreted in a broader context. QAnon suggested that Barack Obama had contacts with the authorities of North Korea and that Democrats control their policies through agencies such as the CIA, where they allegedly have a powerful influence.

Interestingly, in the imaginarium of QAnon, manipulation is ubiquitous in the media which are almost without exception corrupt and hypocritical. Moreover, they are infiltrated by bad actors (mostly Democrats) and designed to present the viewpoint of the Deep State. This is particularly relevant to MSM ("mainstream media"):

> They [Democrats] rely on the MSM to keep the narrative going but tech is entrenching on their controls. They missed this in 2016 and desperately attempting to censor now due to CIA cash infusions.
>
> ***
>
> Why do D's, through the funding of the CIA, prop up and install Hollywood/media assets?
>
> Does this fall within Operation Mockingbird?
>
> What were the historical advantages D's gained by having MSM and famous people peddling narrative?

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This perception of the Democrats, essentially of the entire media and corporate world and the connections between them, is found throughout the questions from the entire corpus and presents a Manichaean, grim vision of the world.

8.2. Reduced questions

Instead of using whole phrases in informal contexts, especially while speaking, it is common to form reduced questions. Individual clauses, phrases, or even single words can be used to ask brief questions. In light of this work, let us adopt the following custom definition of reduced questions: it is a question from which we remove question markers and optionally any number of words, even a verb functioning as a predicate, and still the resulting question is reconstructable with no semantic loss. Normally, such reduced questions require some antecedents providing contextual cues. Significantly, the most frequent question of this kind in the corpus was "Coincidence?", which could be rendered with the full yes-no interrogative sentence "Is/Was it coincidence?".

In analysing the questions for the purposes of this work, mainly reduced yes-no questions were identified, although alternative questions could easily be imagined and, although few in number, they also occurred, e.g. "Coincidence or message?". An interesting pattern was noted for wh-questions. In general, wh-words cannot be omitted because they provide the essential information on the nature of the inquiry. However, the data from the corpus indicate that such examples occurred, and there were almost exclusively omissions of the word 'what'. Possible explanation is that 'what' or 'which' (optional in at least one case) are interrogative pronouns whereas other wh-words like 'why', 'when', 'where' or 'how' are interrogative adverbs. This could mean that the questions are primarily about nuclear elements like subject or object and not optional satellites like adverbials. As this issue appears to be as yet unexplored, perhaps it deserves further research in the future.

It should be noted that there were relatively few questions of this type and noticeably fewer than reduced yes-no questions. The following are examples of identified questions of this kind, with their versions added by the present author expressed in full interrogative sentences:

Name of the father? → What was the name of the father?
***
Relationship to Adolf? → What was [her] relationship to Adolf?
***
History of FATHER? → What is the history of her father?

***

Close proximity to? → What other place is located in close proximity to it?

***

Allison Mack [NXIVM] arrested [date]? → On what date was Allison Mack arrested?[19]

***

Schneiderman resigns [date]? → What is the date when Schneirdeman resigns?

***

Time of publish? → What was the time of publish[ing]?

***

Timing of drop? → What was the timing of the drop?

Very often, questions of this type occurred in large numbers right after each other used to make the narrative more dynamic and the message clearer and more focused. The following stretch of discourse from the corpus includes a several reduced questions, all of which were reduced yes-no questions:

What happens when 'racists' are running a supposed 'anti-racist' organization?

Hatred?

Violence?

Destruction?

Murder?

Division pushed every election year [4 years]?

Why?

Political advantage to one party over another?

Another fragment contains a series of questions with repeated elements:

[1] Social media platforms.

[2] Top 10 shareholders of Facebook?

[3] Top 10 shareholders of Twitter?

[4] Top 10 shareholders of Reddit?

[5] Why is SA relevant?

[6] MSM.

[7] Controlling stakes in NBC/MSNBC?

[8] Controlling stakes in ABC?

[9] Controlling stakes in CBS?

[10] Controlling stakes in CNN?

[11] Investor(s) in Fox News?

[12] Why is this relevant?

[13] What is Operation Mockingbird?

---

[19] Perhaps it is worth noting on this one point the possible alternative of 'which'.

[14] Active?

Items [2] to [4] and [7] to [10] could have probably been replaced by single sentences listing the particular names. One may ask why QAnon decided to put them in individual lines and what pragmatic justification there was for doing so. Perhaps such an arrangement suggests that Q expected a greater involvement of the audience, who were expected to deal with checking each piece of information one at a time, without overlooking any of the subjects in question.

In terms of the general rationale for the use of these types of questions, it is probably fair to assume that, since they are shorter than full questions, they serve a purpose of making communication more economical. On the other hand, when we assume that Q wanted to create the impression that they were a person or a team of people with access to secret information, implicitly of a high military rank, this way of communicating probably, in the eyes of the audience, fits this image and lends it credibility, as does the aforementioned lack of tag questions.

8.3. Questions containing US vs THEM polarisation devices

Among most typical devices used in political and ideological debates, polarisation between Us (good, innocent) and Them (evil, guilty) is all-permeating and arguably the most common. Ideologists hope to rally their base, create a sense of unity, and move supporters to take action, such as voting, protesting, or donating to a cause, by portraying a situation as a battle between the speaker's supporters or like-minded individuals and those with opposing views. Unsurprisingly, it was present in nearly all examples of Qspeak, as it was based on the opposition of good and evil forces as explained in the theoretical background. Creating a polarised view of the world is one of the fundamental features of Q discourse, present almost continuously throughout the collection of Q's entries. Many Q-drops featured explicitly signalled linguistic oppositions between in-group and out-group. An example of such forming a linguistic world image is as follows:

> We, the people, are who they are afraid of. We, the people, are who they fear will one day awake.

In some instances it took the form of "You" vs "Them", with "We" [Q] by "Your" side. Q somehow detached from the audience to give an impression of somebody acting behind the scenes, as in the following hypophora:

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> Do you believe in coincidences? They think you are stupid.

The sentence is an example of a construction fusing a rhetorical question with a sentence employing a polarisation technique, which makes it an example of hypophora (discussed in detail in section 8.5). What is interesting here is the skilful use of different personal markers, such as inclusive and exclusive "we". It may be worth mentioning in this context the reference to another group by the use of a declarative with the personal pronoun "you", this time without using any question:

> To those watching (you know who you are):
> You have a choice to make.
> You can stand up and do what you know to be right.
> Or you can suffer the consequences of your previous actions.
> Make no mistake, you are on the losing side.
> The choice is yours.

However, this change was signalled with the phrase "to those…", which displays awareness that also Q's opponents were reading their entries, while the whole passage only underlines the polarisation built up throughout the entries, as it is a direct appeal supported by a threat to take sides, almost an ultimatum.

What differentiates QAnon from other conspiracy theories is its participatory, interactive nature. It was created in real-time with the audience being actively involved not only in interpreting the content but also in creating it. Finally, Q many times and oft included calls to action. Some of the ideas and slogans attributed to Q were created by their followers, e.g., #freethechildren. However, US vs THEM polarisation was mostly constructed through negative other presentation, e.g. depicting "bad actors" as people covering "the cabal" of satanic paedophiles and bribing top American politicians:

> Why would investment be made in a former President pre-political days?
> What year(s) did this occur?
> What faith does HUMA represent?
> What faith does the MB represent?
> What faith does Huma represent?
> Who are the bad actors?
> Who funds majority of US 'senior' politicians?
> Fantasy land.
> Fantasy land.

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Once again, questions relating to faith exploit anti-Muslim resentment as "the MB" refers to the Muslim Brotherhood.

> Some things must remain classified to the very end. NK is not being run by Kim, he's an actor in the play. Who is the director? The truth would sound so outrageous most Americans would riot, revolt, reject, etc.
>
> The pedo networks are being dismantled.
>
> The child abductions for satanic rituals (ie Haiti and other 3rd world countries) are paused (not terminated until players in custody)
>
> We pray every single day for God's guidance and direction as we are truly up against pure evil.

The fragment above contains only one question, which nevertheless is the focal point of it. By the use of extended metaphor, Q is clearly suggesting that there is "the director" in charge of the puppet proxy state of North Korea. One can tell from the context that the director is someone connected to the American establishment. At the end of the passage, a group of Satanists is contrasted with the other group portrayed as devout Christians seeking divine guidance. It is a reference to the memetic framework of the Satanic Panic, and the vocabulary appeals to a believing audience reading Q. In the context of the storming of the Capitol on 6 January 2021 after the presidential election, in which Joe Biden won against Donald Trump, the suggestion that Americans will riot seems significant. Among the crowd breaking into the House of Representatives and Senate grounds, many people carried flags and wore clothing alluding to QAnon's activities.

Interestingly, good actors above are mentioned only indirectly through the use of passive voice. However, it can be presumed that these actions creating the atmosphere of horror are blocked by Donald Trump and his associates, especially those from the military like General Michael Flynn. Q suggests that they control three-letter agencies (FBI, CIA, NSA):

> POTUS installed his people within each top spot at each 3 letter agency except 1 (good reason there as Adm R kick started this and scrubbed all POTUS nominations to verify oath).
>
> Do you think they aren't in control of those respective agencies?
>
> ***
>
> Under what article can the President impose MI take over investigations for the 3 letter agencies?
>
> What conditions must present itself?
>
> Why is this so VERY important?
>
> Who surrounds POTUS?

> They lost this very important power _ the one area of the govt not corrupt and directly serves POTUS.

At this stage, i.e., Q's initial entries, a group of the "good actors" was presented quite clearly in terms of actor descriptions, to use one of the categories distinguished by Van Dijk, which interestingly coincides with the metaphor of theatrical performance presented by Q, to be mentioned later. Slightly more enigmatic and progressively presented was the other group, which probably can be explained by the need to maintain appropriate narrative dynamics. Creating such an atmosphere of horror is quite characteristic of many conspiracy theories, where there are generally some not fully defined 'they' behind the scenes of major events. In the following sections of this analysis, this theme will be explored further.

8.4. Rhetorical questions

The previous chapter briefly discussed some theoretical aspects of rhetorical questions, which are perhaps one of the first associations with what might constitute a persuasive or manipulative question. Although various questions of this kind were present in the corpus of Q entries, only a little space will be devoted to them separately here, as the focus of this work is mainly on discursive, mainly co-context-related, examples of the use of this kind of sentences, which will also be discussed in other sections. It was typical for Q to ask questions that could be classified as rhetorical precisely within longer stretches of discourse. Below is an example of a rhetorical question, quite characteristic of Q's narrative:

> Would it blow your mind if I told you BO has been to NK and perhaps there now?

The question above is actually a statement equivalent to the sentence "It will blow your mind that BO has been to NK and perhaps is there now". However, in actual use a sentence uttered in this form would be awkward, and its persuasive character would be more evident, as it would, in a way, realise the speech act of a promise. The interrogative sentence seems more modest in form and safer for its author, being a kind of hedging, although at the same time its informative value is identical to the corresponding sentence. The above example can also be interpreted in the context of the use of verbal epistemic stance markers, although there are also clearer examples of them in the corpus. Let us look at an example that we can consider with great conviction as a model case of a rhetorical question with this kind of device:

> Do you believe in coincidences?

Q used exactly this wording as many as 75 times in his posts in relation to various situations. It was mentioned earlier that this is an example of a conspiracy thinking trigger paving the way to perceive co-occurring events over time as linked. Some variations of the above question, with very similar meanings, also appeared several times in the corpus:

> Do you believe it's a coincidence extreme rhetoric is being pushed while at the same time [RR]
> is on the brink of collapse?
> ***
> Do you believe the timing is a coincidence?

The above examples of questions seem loaded at the same time, as they contain at least two presuppositions:

1. There are no coincidences.
2. One must be naïve or stupid to believe that such coincidences exist.

In several cases (to be precise, in four questions), a similar construction has been further reinforced by the use of the adverb 'really':

> Do you really believe you are still safe?
> Protected?

Similar were questions with another verbal epistemic stance marker, i.e., "to think":

> POTUS installed his people within each top spot at each 3 letter agency except 1 (good reason
> there as Adm R kick started this and scrubbed all POTUS nominations to verify oath).
> Do you think they aren't in control of those respective agencies?
> ***
> Do you think POTUS re-tweeted MAGA PILL for no reason?
> ***
> DO YOU THINK ANTIFA WAS GROWN ORGANICALLY?
> Purpose?
> ***
> Do you think the Asia live OP posted was for nothing?
> =

Among the Q-drops, there was also one in which sentences with both of these verbs appeared:

> Do you believe in coincidences?
> Mathematically impossible?
> Date 'public' became aware?
> Date 'anons' became aware?

> Reconcile.
>
> Do you think we are targeted and attacked by the largest media co's in the world because we're
> a LARP?
>
> Logical thinking.

The whole passage is interesting for the reason that, in addition to the two questions with the verbs mentioned above, there are also affirmative sentences with other markers of epistemic attitude, i.e. 'becoming aware', 'logical thinking', somewhat also 'reconcile' and a reference to mathematics. Q juxtaposes here the anon community and some of the public believing Q's message with the whole rest of the society, which is clearly also another example of the US vs THEM construction. This is at the same time a response to the sceptics who consider the whole movement as an example of LARPing. Another example of a similarly constructed reference to flattery comes with the following passages using the verb 'to see' understood metaphorically as TO SEE IS TO UNDERSTAND:

> Do you SEE (for yourself) the MSM = propaganda tool of the LEFT?
>
> Do you SEE FB/Twitter/GOOG censoring non LEFT POVs?
>
> Do you SEE the corruption?
>
> Do you SEE the EVIL?
>
> Are you a SLAVE?
>
> Are you CONTROLLED?
>
> Are you a SHEEP?
>
> ARE YOU AWAKE?
>
> DO YOU THINK FOR YOURSELF?

Noticeable and significant here is the use of capital letters, emphasising, among other things, the use of the verb 'to see', perhaps indicating that Q's perception of their narrative is evident and that one can indeed see the connections they were pointing out. Another instance of creating polarising social ontology is the description of people who believe in official narratives as 'sheep', popular among conspiracy theory believers and in alt-right circles, which is clearly an example of negative other-presentation. This was complemented with another contrasting fragment, this time with just one question, with positive self-presentation:

> We, the PEOPLE.
>
> ENOUGH IS ENOUGH.
>
> TOGETHER WE WIN!
>
> Do you think all these attacks on 'Q' (We, the People) is simply for a person on the internet
> who they label as a conspiracy?
>
> Think for yourself.

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> Trust yourself.
>
> Research for yourself.
>
> Be in control of yourself.
>
> NEVER let someone else DRIVE YOU.
>
> Those who try to DRIVE YOU are not your friend.

In this way, a sharp juxtaposition was created between independently thinking 'people' (with clear reference to patriotic tropes) and 'sheep' who follow others and listen to the voice of authority. As for the rhetorical question, there is again an element of US vs THEM polarisation, in which 'they' are those who call the QAnon movement a conspiracy theory. The effectiveness of such techniques can be attested to not only by the sheer popularity of the movement, but also by the cases described by Rothschild (2021) and Bloom and Moskalenko (2021), among others, of families and relationships broken up because of such polar perceptions of social reality internalised by Q followers.

8.5. Hypophoras

A specific type of rhetorical question, used very frequently by Q, and therefore worth devoting some space to, is hypophora. Hypophora is a rhetorical device in which a speaker asks a question and instantly answers it. It engages the audience, stimulates their attention, and highlights essential ideas of the utterance. This strategy enables the speaker to anticipate and address unspoken questions or concerns of the audience, thus influencing their mental processes (McGuigan, 2011). Examples of hypophoras include many commonly known from the history of public speaking, e.g., Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech:

> But how long will it take? [...]
>
> I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed:
>
> 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

Winston Churchill also used hypophoras in his speeches, as seen in this example: "What is our aim? I can answer in one word: it is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be".

> Qanon used hypophoras on many occasions, including the following:

> What is most valuable? Information
>
> ***
>
> Why are Senate Republicans dropping out? Not by choice and were offered a choice (rest assured they will vote pro Trump).

***

Why were certain rooms in the WH renovated? Clear bugs and tracking devices.

In this case, the probable purpose of using hypophora was to quell speculations about the possible answer or something along the lines of making the possible answer more explicit. Readers of Q's entries, already suitably primed for being almost paranoidly suspicious, could give two utterly opposite answers to the question posed in this way, i.e., that the interior refurbishment in question was intended to install spying devices or dismantle them. Here, however, Q may have wanted to emphasise that President Trump's administration or indeed himself is in total control, which is made plausible by a similar construction of this type, in which Q was even more explicit in his assessment of President Trump:

Do you believe HRC, Soros, Obama etc have more power than Trump? Fantasy.

What is notable here is the brevity and firmness of the answer, which, in this case too, could indicate a resemblance to the conciseness of the military style of speaking, which it displays at least in the eyes of the public.

8.6. Counterfactual questions

According to Van Dijk's research on ideological discourse, counterfactuals play a significant part in constructing political messages, generating an imaginary (or, as QAnon would probably suggest, only sounding so, and in reality hidden behind a curtain of appearances, lies and social illusions) space for speculation appropriate for building pseudo-arguments like *argumentum ad consequentiam*, or colloquially "slippery slope", which occurs when someone asserts that one action will necessarily result in increasingly harmful effects without providing adequate evidence to show the causal relationship between them. This line of argumentation is based on the assumption that even a little step at the beginning of the process will surely cause a chain reaction of events, resulting in a much more significant and often unrelated effect. The following interrogative sentences are an example of such construction:

[1] Why is ANTIFA allowed to operate?

[2] Why hasn't the MB been classified as a terrorist org?

[3] What happens if Soros funded operations get violent and engage in domestic terrorism?

[4] What happens if mayors/ police comms/chiefs do not enforce the law?

Interrogative sentences [3] and [4] identified as counterfactual questions are fairly similar in terms of their construction and closely related in terms of their discursive function. They are

preceded by two sentences concerning two separate movements or organisations, Antifa the Muslim Brotherhood, for various reasons both considered dangerous by Donald Trump's entourage, although they are allowed to operate in the United States. The question [3] outlines the background to the question [4], creating a counterfactual situation where Soros-supported organisations (and given the fact, pointed out by Q earlier, that Soros had transferred the vast majority of his private money into the accounts of the foundation he owns, suspicion of his actions has already been framed in Q's discourse) are already planning some kind of criminal activity and suggests that this is the case. The sentence [4] acts as a reinforcement of the first. In this sequence, the suggested answer to the first question would be "Nothing would happen, just like with those two", which means that instead of "What happens if…" the sentence could start with, for example, "Do you know that…" while the counterfactual form here is a kind of hedging, since in this situation, too, Q has virtually no evidence to support their claims.

A model sentence in this category would be "What if I told you that…", which functionally equals "I tell you that…" but has some pragmatic sense of revealing a secret or explaining some surprising but fundamental truth about some important piece of reality. The verb 'to tell', as opposed to 'to say', can only be used in a similar context if the speaker assumes that the listener does not know what the speaker wants to say. The verb 'to say' does not presuppose this, e.g. in the reported speech the sentence "Traffic is heavy today." can take the form "John told the blind man that traffic was heavy." but the speaker cannot use 'to tell' in this way if John addressed these words to a healthy man with no vision problems. In such a case, the only possible and meaningful construction seems to be a sentence like "John said to me that traffic was heavy" (cf. Łyda, 2007; Olmos, 2014: 157).

Interestingly, sentences in this category of questions function in the consciousness of many people, as in a quote from the film *Matrix*, whose fundamental role in QAnon's narrative poetics was explained in section 4.1. For many internet users, a frame from the *Matrix* film in the scene in which Morpheus explains to Neo how the Matrix works functions as a meme, with the caption being exactly 'What if I told you...', although neither in this scene nor in any other in the whole series does a similar sentence appear just once[20]. Even though it also does not appear in the corpus of Q's entries, the questions mentioned in this section are very similar to it and probably had similar overtones for many people:

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[20] https://mcdreeamiemusings.com/blog/2019/2/21/what-if-i-told-you-about-morpheus-and-the-mandela-effect
Accessed on 20 May 2024.

> What if the wizards and warlocks tipped off a local reporter as to the supposed unscheduled stop?
>
> What if the NSA under the personal direction from Adm R had this meeting miscat and logged under a false identity to prevent bad actors from locating while also verifying to said players all was clear _ no logs.

The resemblance to the meme mentioned before associated with the film work in question is an excellent example of the use of intertextuality and interdiscursivity to create one's own message at a very subtle level so that it appeals to different audiences, i.e., to those less aware of its origin it is almost transparent, which would fit into a more intuitive and colloquial understanding of manipulation, and to those who are able to recognise such rhetorical tricks through their knowledge of their cultural sources, it appeals by giving them a reason to be satisfied that they have understood the hidden level of the message. This line of interpretation would perhaps need to be developed, but it seems to support the argument that Q was directing their message to different groups by diversifying its elements into more esoteric and exoteric ones. This, in turn, would point to another similarity between the QAnon movement and a cult.

It is perhaps of note that the propositional attitude of these sentences is not to express fear, hope or even conjecture. These sentences presuppose that what constitutes their propositional content has actually happened. Although Van Dijk did not mention it in the context of counterfactuals in questions, he seems to be right about the fact that the recipients of these questions perceive them precisely in this way, not even as the construction of possible worlds, but after adding these scraps of information to a larger, already mentally formed whole, they form a representation of the world as they perceive it to be confirmed (Van Dijk, 2014: 42):

> Neuropsychological studies [...] suggest that if counterfactual discourse is plausible, language users have no problem understanding (at least plausible) 'counterfactually true' sentences in discourse even when referring to facts that are historically false. These results also suggest that construing mental models of counterfactual worlds and events is not fundamentally different from construing models of 'real' events – and so is the understanding of discourse on real events and the discourse on counterfactual or fictional events 'counterfactually true'.

Perhaps despite this status of question sentences akin to affirmative sentences without the counterfactual element, their very form leaves possible space for the audience to doubt. It seems likely that this is why Q repeated them quite often to emphasise that the state of affairs is reflected precisely as they suggested through them.

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8.7. Questions referring to cause-and-effect constructs

Q repeatedly referred his questions to cause-and-effect constructs or specific supposedly fixed laws like 'what happens when' or 'what happens if'. In a way, they resemble counterfactual questions and may even have the same form, whilst some extralinguistic cues, such as the shared/common knowledge about the world, suggest that they are slightly different. They also essentially perform the same function, namely they provide information about the actual state of affairs or the state of affairs indicated as factual by the speaker, except that, unlike counterfactual questions, it is information given explicitly and not in the form of a surprise that it is supposed to be for the hearer. Both types of questions also require the listener to imagine additional logical consequences that the content of these questions is supposed to imply. Structurally, they are all conditional questions. Below is an exemplary sequence of anaphorically constructed interrogative sentences:

> [1] What happens when 90% of the media is controlled/owned by (6) corporations?
>
> [2] What happens when those same corporations are operated and controlled by a political ideology?
>
> [3] What happens when the news is no longer free from bias?
>
> [4] What happens when the news is no longer reliable and independent?
>
> [5] What happens when the news is no longer trustworthy?
>
> [6] What happens when the news simply becomes an extension/arm of a political party?

The form of these sentences suggests that at the same time the answer to them is universal, i.e. under the conditions specified in them, their consequences will always be the same. However, this situation relates directly to the media environment in the United States, as indicated by the first sentence, which frames the others. In addition, it can be said that while the propositional content of the sentence [1] can be verified by comparing it with the facts, i.e., the article from 2012 from Business Insider confirms the consolidation of the American media[21], statements made in sentences [2] to [6] can be challenged, which is because the whole of the remainder in sentences [2] to [6] is based on the assumption that all the corporations listed adhere to the same ideology, which, when exemplified by the juxtaposition of two corporations from the list who compete not only economically but also ideologically, i.e. Disney and Fox, does not withstand confrontation with reality. Nevertheless, the whole construction is meant to maintain the impression of the absolute homogeneity of the media coverage in the U.S.A., which in turn is meant to reinforce the arguments made in other entries by Q about the close connection between the rotten world of the media and the corrupt

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[21] https://www.businessinsider.com/these-6-corporations-control-90-of-the-media-in-america-2012-6?IR=T, retrieved online on 24 May 2024.

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world of politics. Moreover, such juxtapositions cover all media, including hobbyist media, also completely specialised ones, far removed from ideological and political issues, as well as entertainment media. At the same time, the entire stretch of discourse indicates that the media equals the news.

8.8. Presumptive questions

As has already been pointed out in several places in the text, dealing with single questions does not always make much sense because there is nothing that reliably and universally distinguishes them formally from ordinary questions asked to obtain information, i.e., no clear and fixed lexical-semantic, syntactic or actually even pragmatic elements of this kind. Moreover, among the questions asked by Q, numerous ones contained several presuppositions of various kinds. Some of these have been mentioned in other sections; here, in turn, some others will be discussed typically in terms of indicating presuppositions contained therein, e.g., those identified in the following questions:

[1] Why do D's [Democrats], through the funding of the CIA, prop up and install Hollywood/media assets?

[2] Does this fall within Operation Mockingbird?

[3] What were the historical advantages D's gained by having MSM and famous people peddling narrative?

Questions number [1] and [3] are both presumptive and leading because they suggest nefarious motives behind the actions of Democrats without a clear substantiation. In contrast, question [2] may seem a direct question asking for clarification on whether the actions described in the previous question are part of Operation Mockingbird. However, it is still presumptive in that it assumes that the previous actions are part of this operation, without considering other possible explanations. The sequence of questions above demonstrates that direct questions, though as such do not contain any innuendos, presuppositions or suggestions, may refer directly to interrogative or declarative sentences containing these manipulative elements.

How is POTUS always 5-steps ahead?

Why is Pelosi's memory going?

***

Why are D's dropping HRC all of a sudden?

This question implies that Hillary Clinton was abandoned by Democrats as a loser in the presidential race in 2016.

> Can we expose every crooked politician?

The question above seems to be QAnon's aim statement. The question implies that their posts demonstrate some true information on corrupt politicians, although they did not reveal any piece of information leading to the disclosure of any offence proven before any court.

QAnon repeatedly used presumptive suggestive questions, very often in sequences, for example:

> Does the CIA have operators inside the MSM?
> What happens if exposed?

An example of similar construction was described in the section 8.6 on counterfactual questions. As there, the second question in the sequence leaves no space for alternative answers and is equivalent to an affirmative answer to the first question. Since such constructions are unmistakably assertions in the form of queries, therefore logically, they are instances of *begging the question* fallacy, or *circulus in probando,* i.e., circular logic. In the following section, the question sequences will be analysed a little more closely, also with a view to combining them into some fairly clear structures.

8.9. Sequences of questions

QAnon repeatedly used long sequences of questions or announcing sentences interspersed with questions. In the rhetorical tradition, this type of figure is called *pysma*.

Henry Peachum characterised it as "a figure by which the Orator doth demaund many times together, and use many questions in one place, whereby he maketh his speech very sharpe and vehement" (Peachum, 1593). For instance, it may serve as a complaint, a form of provocation, moving pity or grabbing attention, or as an insult, or either a confirmation or confutation. Finally, he equated this with a sophism of *plures interrogationes*. QAnon attracted attention with these series of questions, which were most often intended to tell specific stories and provide an element of proof that certain facts were closely related, which the viewer was expected to arrive at on their own and feel the satisfaction of reaching the correct conclusion.

The following sequence of questions is a juxtaposition of Donald Trump with prominent Democrats, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton concerning how all of them were treated as official guests in Saudi Arabia:

How did SA welcome POTUS during his trip [to Saudi Arabia]?

Why was this historic and not covered by MSM?

How did SA welcome BO during his trip?

How did SA welcome HRC during her trip?

The key question in this sequence seems to be the second question in which it is suggested that Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia had a historical dimension, which implies that it was at the same time more successful and more beneficial to the United States than other visits by the Democrat politicians. It is true that the visits of the other politicians were much more modest than Donald Trump's visit and that they were accepted with considerably fewer honours. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that Donald Trump's flight to Saudi Arabia was his first foreign visit, so the Americans themselves were the first to give their honours to the Saudis, and it is for this reason that this visit can be regarded as historical rather than that other politicians were welcomed less outspokenly. Moreover, these questions completely ignore Trump's approach to issues such as human rights violations in Saudi Arabia and in many other similar countries. None of the sentences questioning this sequence separately would be classified as manipulative. They are manipulative because they were put in such a sequence and because of their context, including some aspects of the whole situation which were not mentioned in them.

However, the image of Saudi Arabia was soon redirected in a completely opposite way. It is yet another example that it is possible to create the linguistic image of the world by using only questions:

[1] Why did JK [Jared Kushner] travel to SA [Saudi Arabia] recently?

[2] What is SA known for?

[3] Where do the biggest donations originate from?

[4] Why is this relevant?

[5] What else is relevant w/ SA?

[6] Safe harbor?

[7] Port of transfer?

[8] Why was there a recent smear campaign against JK and POTUS?

[9] Why is the timing important?

[10] Martial law declared in SA. Why is this relevant?

[11] How much money was donated to CF [Clinton Foundation] by SA?

[12] How much money was donated to John M Institute by SA?

[13] How much money was donated to Pelosi Foundation?

[14] How much money was donated to CS [Chuck Schumer] by SA?

[15] What other bad actors have been paid by SA (bribed)(Not just D's) [Democrats]?

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[16] Why did the Bush family recently come out against POTUS?

[17] Who is good?

[18] What are the laws in SA v. US (charged criminals)?

[19] What information might be gained by these detainees?

[20] SA ---> US

[21] Why is this important?

[22] What force is actively deployed in SA?

[23] NG [National Guard]?

The above stretch of discourse consists almost exclusively of questions, as 23 verses correspond to 22 questions. Previously, Saudi Arabia was presented as a country worth seeking the attention of, which was also appreciated by Donald Trump. Meanwhile, here there is an interesting change and Saudi Arabia is presented as a sponsor of progressive politicians and other "bad actors". QAnon used some redundancy and repetition here, e.g. in verses [11] to [14] whose message could have been enclosed in just one like "How much money was donated to CF, John M Institute, Pelosi Foundation, and CS by SA?". They refer to the Clinton Foundation, John McCain's John M Institute, Nancy Pelosi's Pelosi Foundation, and Senator Chuck Schumer. However, the separate mention of these foundations may have been an indication that the reader should take these donations seriously and not give a general answer like "since you ask, that's probably a lot", but instead analyse point by point thoroughly and check the official records of these foundations carefully. Further in the corpus, QAnon portrayed Saudi Arabia as one of the sides in the triangle of evil as the founder of the Satanic paedophile ring. Later, Trump criticised this country very harshly for killing Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi embassy in Turkey. One of the questions, i.e., number [8], implies that shortly before the time of these entries there had been an organised campaign of disinformation consisting of distortions, half-truths or lies aimed at Jared Kushner and Donald Trump, allegedly sponsored by Saudi Arabia.

Among the identified question sequences, one definitely stands out for its length but it is still a typical example of the narrative nature of questions asked by Q. It is another sequence alluding to Saudi Arabia's central role to the whole conspiracy theory. Due to its length, it has been divided into several parts, which will be discussed one by one for the sake of clarity of the argument:

[1] Follow HUMA.

[2] Who connects HRC/CF [Hillary Clinton/Clinton Foundation] to SA [Saudi Arabia]?

[3] Why is this relevant?

[4] Who is the Muslim Brotherhood?

[5] Who has ties to the MB [Muslim Brotherhood]?

[6] Who is Awan?

[7] What is the Awan Group?

[8] Where do they have offices?

[9] Define cash laundering.

[10] What is the relationship between SA & Pakistan?

[11] Why is this relevant?

The sequence above seems to be intended to steer the reader into thinking that the Democrats themselves, through a foundation owned by the Clintons, are funded by Muslims, about whom they in turn suggest they are a homogeneous entity. It is all based on a malinformed source from Wikileaks, which shows that the Clintons' foundation was getting transfers from Saudi Arabia. Apart from the clear play on anti-Islamic resentment ([2], [4], [6], [7], [10] explicitly and the whole fragment implicitly), the perception of distant and unconnected entities or events as not only closely related but also cooperating is clear here, which is essential for conspiracy thinking. The very beginning is based on unsupported accusations made against Huma Abedin, vice-chair of Hilary Clinton's 2016 campaign and associated with her since 2008, whose family members are alleged to have links to the Muslim Brotherhood. The accusations, made as early as 2012 by several Republican Members of Congress, have been criticised by many other Members of Congress, including Republicans, as well as many media outlets and NGOs. Abedin was also attacked over accusations against her husband ex-Representative Anthony Weiner of sexting with a minor. Indirectly, therefore, Hillary Clinton is also under attack here. The alleged network of connections is constructed as follows: Abedin, a Muslim woman of Indian-Pakistani origin with a family with alleged links to a legitimate Sunni pan-Arab organisation operating in Egypt, was at the same time supposed to be Hillary Clinton's direct link to Saudi Arabia (Abedin lived as a child in Jeddah, where her parents were employed at the university). Simultaneously, the same post uses another conspiracy theory with anti-Islamic overtones, linking a Democratic collaborator of Pakistani origin, IT technician Imran Awan, with alleged spying for Pakistan. His name is linked to the similar-sounding Awan Group, with which Awan has no apparent connection but which operates in Saudi Arabia, specifically in Jeddah.

Therefore, those questions are based on seeing connections in repeated and identical names and deliberate confusing sense with reference. At the level of reasoning, analogies were used in this case, where the connecting element was the name itself. What seems significant about this type of sequence is that, similarly to Socrates' maieutic method, the

questions are sequenced so that the answer to one question creates a space to ask the following ones. Unlike the Socratic questions, however, the sequence is generally not logically structured but more circumstantial, where usually one question, an anchor of sorts, generally one of the first in the sequence, is most firmly grounded in facts. The answer to it conditions the asking of the others, often based on speculation or relating to findings previously discursively recognised as "facts" made through analysis of prior entries.

Anti-Arab resentment and accusations of political corruption towards the Obama administration, including Hillary Clinton, continue in the remainder of this very long stretch of discourse consisting mainly of questions:

[12] Why would SA provide tens of millions of dollars to US senior gov't officials?
[13] What does SA obtain in exchange for payment?
[14] Why is access important?
[15] What happened when HRC lost the election of 2016?
[16] How much money was provided to the CF by SA during 15/16?
[17] HRC lost.
[18] Loss of access/power/control.
[19] Does repayment of funds to SA occur? If so, how?

This section presents a line of reasoning describing one strand of the whole narrative. At the very beginning, Q asks why the Saudis have spent vast sums of money on lobbying, perhaps deliberately avoiding the word, however, because in the American context it is not explicitly associated with corruption and is a practice that is legal and considered perfectly normal there. An additional justification for this omission may be the suggestion made in the subsequent questions that these sums are not spent to force legislation favourable to Saudi business in the oil and construction industries but rather to access information, implicitly classified, e.g. in the field of defence and security. Question number [19], or in fact two questions, in turn suggest that following Hillary Clinton's defeat in the election and the loss of access to the information, Saudi Arabia demanded the return of the funds. The second part of the question indicates that the answer to the first part is affirmative, so the first part is a purely rhetorical question. It would seem quite natural in the context of the second part asking how the repayment is delivered, to answer that it is done in cash so as not to leave any traces, for which, however, Q provides no evidence beyond linking this narrative to flights by Democratic politicians to countries in the Middle East region and other Muslim Asian countries.

[20] Why did BO [Barack Obama] send billions in cash to Iran?

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[21] Why wasn't Congress notified?

[22] Why was this classified under 'State Secrets'?

[23] Who has access to 'State Secrets'?

[24] Where did the planes carrying the cash depart from and land?

[25] Did the planes all land in the same location?

[26] How many planes carried the cash?

[27] Why is this relevant?

The above excerpt links the earlier discussion to the Obama administration's deal with Iran over its nuclear programme and the release of US hostages. This is a link between the situation described earlier regarding Saudi Arabia and the foreign policy conducted with another country otherwise hostile to the Saudi country. The next questions suggest that there are more countries in this chain of exchanges and engagements, and they are other countries hostile to the United States like North Korea and the self-proclaimed Islamic State:

[28] What does this have to do w/ NK [North Korea]?

[29] What does this have to do w/ SA/CF cash donations?

[30] What does this have to do w/ ISIS?

[31] What does this have to do w/ slush funds?

[32] Why is SA so vitally important?

[33] Follow the money.

[34] Who has the money?

At this point, interpretation becomes a bit more difficult, but it is probably safe to assume that this is a continuation of the narrative that Saudi Arabia is bribing American politicians ("Who has the money?") in anticipation of achieving its various goals.

[35] What is happening in SA today?

[36] Why is this relevant?

[37] Who was Abdullah bin Abdulaziz?

[38] What events transpired directly thereafter?

The time stamp of the above questions and the entire sequence is 4 November 2017, indicating the start of a months-long wave of arrests of senior government officials, managers of major state-owned companies, as well as some members of the royal family in Saudi Arabia related to the succession to the throne in the country, as Abdullah bin Abdulaziz mentioned in [37] is the late King of Saudi Arabia, who had died two years earlier. The event itself probably inspired the entire long post described here, and the likely explanation for why it was included is also that analogous purges according to Q also began in the United States with the presidency of Donald Trump.

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[39] How was POTUS greeted compared to other former US President's when in SA?

[40] Why is this relevant?

[41] What is the meaning of this tradition?

[42] What coincidentally was the last Tweet sent out by POTUS?

[43] Why is this relevant?

[44] Was that an instruction of some kind?

[45] To who?

[46] Why is this relevant?

During his visit to Saudi Arabia, Trump participated in a traditional warrior dance, originally intended to show the strength of the tribe in front of opponents, but which is also danced for numerous holidays, important state occasions or simply ceremonies such as weddings. Q asking about the significance of this tradition apparently suggested that in this case it was meant to send a message to Trump that the Saudis recognise an opponent in him, but also the earlier question about the greeting compared to his predecessors suggest that he was greeted with much greater honours, and therefore not as a supplicant but as a person to be reckoned with and therefore deserving of respect. The question about Donald Trump's latest tweet relates to his entry with the following content:

> Would very much appreciate Saudi Arabia doing their IPO of Aramco with the New York Stock Exchange. Important to the United States!

In light of the earlier narrative, the likely reading is that Trump was interested in strengthening economic cooperation between the US and Saudi Arabia on an official, interstate level. The Q community could read this as an act of goodwill, linking it to the purge mentioned earlier, which would not so much be the elimination of political opponents of the heir to the throne, but would be an act of removing 'bad actors'.

[47] Where was POTUS when that Tweet was sent?

[48] Why is that relevant?

[49] What attack took place in SA as operations were undertaken?

[50] Flying objects.

[51] What US operators are currently in SA?

[52] Why is this relevant?

[53] Questions provide answers.

[54] Alice & Wonderland.

Q then enquired about flying objects believed to be linked to Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Arab air defence intercepted missiles heading for Riyadh launched from Yemeni

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territory. This would mean that Iran supporting the Yemeni Houthis has responded to the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Moments earlier, they had asked where Trump was when he sent the tweet mentioned above. It turned out that he was in Hawai'i at the time, which the QAnon community read as a reference to where Barack Obama grew up. However, this thread was not developed, while Q seemed to be suggesting to his audience that there is no coincidence in Trump's US international policy and that he is capable of sending such subtle signals directed at those who are paying close attention, presenting him as a political genius. Let us recall and summarise that the entire long Q-drop was started by considerations of Saudi Arabia's meddling in the internal situation within the Democratic leadership prior to Trump's presidency, for which Q provided no evidence, but only some superficial associations impossible to verify. However, he deftly moved on to the second part contrasting the Democrats supposedly clumsy, servile and corrupt politicians with Trump conducting an efficient and transparent foreign policy from a position of strength or at least on a level playing field.

Let us take a look at much shorter sequence of interrogative questions with an anaphoric construction below:

[1] Why do D's want to control the black pop?
[2] Why do they intentionally keep poor and in need?

Noteworthy here is the use of the adjective "intentionally", which puts even more emphasis on the idea expressed in the first sentence, i.e., that the sender considers the Democrats to be manipulators who have a specific plan to control another group of people, or more specifically the black population in the United States. This message is strengthened with even bolder words:

[3] What happens if D's lose the slave grip on the black pop?

This sentence is just one element of a complex construction intended to accuse Democrats of extreme forms of racism, which could be considered an example of *tu quoque* ("you too"), a logical fallacy and debating technique that seeks to discredit an opponent's argument by attacking the opponent's personal behaviour and actions as inconsistent with their argument. In political propaganda, similar arguments were used as a technique known as *accusation in a mirror* or *mirror politics*. The context for these statements is the direct political struggle between the two major political forces in the United States and the popularity of the Black

Lives Matter movement, which was supported by many Democrats, including those of the highest party authorities.

These questions are followed by a question with distorted truth taken out of context:

How do D's cover the historical facts of forming the confederacy, KKK, and oppose all things pro black re: legislation?

A factual narrative, a reference to "historical facts" which are generally part of common knowledge in the USA taught in history classes, implies the presupposition that Democrats try to hide or obscure these facts. The second clause contains a presupposition that Democrats are anti-black in their legislation. The unquestionable truth is historical, but both parties moved in opposite directions in terms of race to the point of virtual switching of their positions.

A fairly similar construct used in another sequence of questions involving a positive self-presentation and a negative other-presentation was used for a description of a slightly different group. Let us start with a question that appeared in a longer stretch of discourse in section 8.4:

DO YOU THINK ANTIFA WAS GROWN ORGANICALLY?

At a certain point in Donald Trump's presidency and at the height of the popularity of far-right groups with an almost fascist provenience, a new phenomenon emerged in the United States, namely loosely affiliated groups referring to the European, mainly German tradition of Antifa (German Antifaschistische Aktion), essentially as a reactionary force to the already observed growing number of increasingly organised and unified groups on the right. On 4chan itself, too, the aforementioned right-wing dominated, so much so that actions began to be organised there against Antifa. The interrogative sentence quoted above suggests that American Antifa did not arise spontaneously at all, but was externally inspired or financed. Q's attempts to discredit Antifa also took other forms:

WHY DOES THE ANTIFA FLAG MIMIC THAT OF THE NAZIS?
COINCIDENCE?

In this case, the rhetorical question of whether a particular event was a coincidence is repeated, with the clear suggestion that it was not. The preceding question contains the presupposition that the Antifa flag in some way resembles or copies the Nazi flag. However, with the use of the same colours and perhaps also the centrally placed circular logo, it is quite

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difficult to find similarities here, especially as the very presence of red on both flags clearly refers to the labour movement. It was historically adopted by the Nazis from the socialists, not the other way around.

Let us finally reflect on the two questions asked just before those about flags:

WHO ARE THE TRUE FASCISTS?
WHO ARE THE TRUE RACISTS?

If these questions had been posed without any follow-up, they would probably have led to speculation. Perhaps someone might recall the earlier portrayal of a role reversal between Democrats and Republicans. However, these questions, given their immediate context, should be interpreted as suggesting that it is Antifa itself that is fascist and, in light of earlier suggestions that it was inspired by someone else, also that Antifa's principals are fascists.

Fig. 3 and 4. The above symbols represent two different movements formed over many decades. On the left is the logo of the original German Antifa, with two red flags referring to the two German parties opposing the fascists: the socialist SPD and the communist KPD. The modern Antifa uses the logo on the right, where the clearest difference is the presence of a black flag instead of one of red. While the red flag is meant to represent the socialists and communists together, the black flag refers to another ally in the fight against the fascists, namely the anarchists.

It is also worth mentioning that declaratives and interrogatives could be mutually embedded with interpretational dependencies, i.e., the meaning of a given declarative may be dependent on the previously uttered interrogative or the other way around, which was precisely the case with many of QAnon's longer statements.

8.10. Confirmatory questions

There were numerous instances when readers were guided to give the specific answer already contained in confirmative questions:

> Where did the $18b from Soros go?
> Why?
> Can it be used by bad actors (escape, bribes, rogue contractors, etc.)?

These questions were equivalent to writing that at least some of the Soros money could be used by "bad actors". Further questions in the sequence confirm this:

> Slush fund?
> Did the US gov't seize/stop/track other slush funds that prevent or create risk to operate?

This is a construction that first refers to the activity mentioned above by asking a question that suggests that George Soros's foundation could be a slush fund. Then, in the next question, it is already accepted as a fact, for it is referred to in the phrase "other slush funds".

> [1] What was POTUS' last Tweet (prior to)?
> [2] To who was it addressed?
> [3] When was POTUS' Twitter taken down?
> [4] Why is this relevant?
> [5] What was POTUS' last Tweet (prior to)?
> [6] Who was it addressed to specifically?
> [7] When was POTUS' Twitter taken down? Has this ever happened before?
> [8] Why now?
> [9] Coincidence?
> [10] How many times did the attack occur (secondary clean up)?
> [11] What is the purpose of tracking?
> [12] What is the purpose of disruption?
> [13] Why did POTUS have military guards (uniform) while in HI?
> [14] Why is this relevant?
> [15] Do military guards (uniform) typically assist the USSS?
> [16] Why is this relevant?
> [17] What flying object was recently shot down?
> [18] Why is this relevant?
> [19] How precise is geo tracking (non-public c-level pro)?
> [20] Why is this relevant?
> [21] Alice & Wonderland.

This sequence is yet another instance of outright conspiracy thinking. Lines [8] and [9] imply that there was no coincidence in blocking Donald Trump's Twitter account. However, since most Q-drops encouraged speculations, it might have been used to highlight this issue as particularly important, as it was clearly redundant. This sequence was also written to emphasise the role of the military as opposed to three-letter agencies.

> Why is the information re: BO important re: U1 and export approval to Canada to EU?
>
> Where is BO today?
>
> Did BO and/or his admin ever make false statements that U1 would never be exported from the US?
>
> Who made those statements?
>
> Who did they report to?
>
> Why is this relevant?
>
> The public has been given a select taste (i.e. sampling) - rest assured others have it all (100% verifiable and impossible to refute). Why is this relevant?
>
> Who controls the narrative?
>
> Why are left wing organizations beginning to report on DNC/D corruption?
>
> Does the CIA have operators inside the MSM?
>
> What happens if exposed?
>
> What happens if tied back as 'knowing' to execs?
>
> What does this have to do with 'leaking'?
>
> What if it can be verified no sourced stories (made up) were in fact (and approved) to be published?

It was pretty typical for QAnon to repeat the same subject several times in a series of posts with some minor changes while maintaining constant elements repeated like a chorus, which at the same time served the role of frame construction (e.g. with scaffolding on current events), which was intended to place the narrative in a given argumental space, and also used the rule of repetitiveness, which is helpful in effective manipulation. An example is the MS13 narrative:

> [1] Why is MS13 [Mara Salvatrucha] a priority _ nobody got this.
>
> [2] Could people pay such gangs to kill opponents and why / how to insulate against exposure?
>
> [3] The truth is mind blowing and cannot fully be exposed.
>
> [4] Also many are thinking from one point of view, US only, this evil is embedded globally. US is the first domino.

These sequences of questions appeared in the context of building the wall with Mexico and, as such, could be regarded as justification for its very existence. MS13 relates to an international

criminal gang, Mara Salvatrucha, mainly operating in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, the United States, and Canada and dubbed by the American media "the most dangerous gang in the world". QAnon exploited this ill repute to associate it with the out-group (Democrats) and employed the overall strategies of positive-self presentation and negative-other presentation:

[1] Who funds MS13?

[2] Why did BO [Barack Obama] instruct HS [Homeland Security] & BP [Border Patrol] to release MS13 captures at the border?

[3] What agency has direct ties to (2) major drug cartels?

[4] Why is AG [Attorney General] Sessions / POTUS prioritizing the removal of MS13?

[5] Why is AG Sessions / POTUS prioritizing building the wall?

[6] Immigration?

[7] Drugs?

[8] Who do you hire for a hit?

[9] Who can be eliminated after the job is complete?

[10] Who was found dead (2) shortly after his (Seth Rich) murder?

[11] What affiliation did they have?

[12] Classified.

***

[1] Why is MS13 a priority?

[2] Could people pay such gangs to kill opponents and why / how to insulate against exposure?

[3] The truth is mind blowing and cannot fully be exposed. These people are evil.

[4] Why wasn't HRC [Hillary Clinton] prosecuted for the emails?

[5] Why wasn't HRC prosecuted for the emails?

Later, in one of their drops MS13 was associated with the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and with Saudi Arabia:

Why is MS13 important?

What doesn't add up?

Was there only one shooter?

Why was JFK released?

What do the JFK files infer?

Was there only one shooter?

Who was in LV [Las Vegas] during this time?

What was the real mission?

Speculate

Why are survivors dying randomly?

What do each of these survivors have in common?

Did they talk on social media?

What did they say?

Were they going to form a group?

Why is this relevant?

How did they die?

What CIA report was released by WK [Wikileaks?]?

What can control a car?

How did the (2) of the survivors die?

Car crash?

How does this connect to SA?

What just happened in SA?

Who owns the top floors of the hotel?

What happened today in SA?

To who specifically?

Was POTUS in LV that night?

Yes/no?

Why was he there?

Who did he have a classified meeting with?

Did AF1 [Air Force 1] land at McCarran?

What unmarked tail numbers flew into McCarren that night?

Trace AF1 that entire day.

What do you notice?

Classified.

***

[...]

Why are immigrants important? (MB)(Votes)(Attacks)

Why are illegals important? (MS13)(Votes)(187)

The cartel was depicted as a shadow proxy army for a deep state, with the CIA being a mediating agency. Mara Salvatrucha was mentioned in the context of ISIS, which was probably supposed to mean that Q believed that they share the same characteristics of organisations which are sponsored or otherwise supported by the same organisations or countries or that they are somehow controlled by them:

Who created ISIS?

Who controlled ISIS?

What was the purpose of ISIS?

Who is MS13?

Why were known MS13 members released after capture?

Who controls MS13?

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> Who FUNDS MS13?
>
> Hard to swallow.
>
> Watch the news.

Much later, Q returned to MS13 again identifying them with ISIS:

> Open border (flood illegals: D win) ISIS/MS13 fund/install (fear, targeting/removal, domestic-assets etc.)
>
> ***
>
> Those who cannot understand that we cannot simply start arresting w/o first ensuring the safety & well-being of the population, shifting the narrative, removing those in DC through resignation to ensure success, defeating ISIS/MS13 to prevent fail-safes, freezing assets to remove network-to-network abilities, kill off COC [Chain of Command] to prevent top-down comms/org, etc etc. should not be participating in discussions.

The above narrative is another example of connecting threads that are presented as unrelated in official narratives. The question of the reliability of similar speculations may remain debatable, while it is difficult to deny Q's narrative prowess and handling of complex knowledge of the world.

8.11. Questions containing the number game element

As one of the categories shown by van Dijk, number game is one way of increasing the perceived objectivity of the message by the audience, even if the data is incorrect, out of context or irrelevant.

> USA total pop: 328 million
>
> COVID-19 deaths: 100,000 [lockdown]
>
> Japan total pop: 126 million [condensed (island)]
>
> COVID-19 deaths: 850 [no lockdown]
>
> 2 + 2 = 5?

In the following sentence sequence, the question in the reduced form "2 + 2 = 5?", which corresponds to a sentence like "Do they want to convince us that 2 + 2 = 5?", presents a critique of the lockdown-based management policy of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the lines preceding this question, summary figures for the United States and Japan are presented, most likely deliberately not in complete sentences to make the style impersonal and objective, and consistent with the reporting of the numeric data. The question mentioned earlier is therefore clearly ironic. As for the validity of these figures, they seem to completely ignore the context and other data, e.g. the number of tests, the percentage of the population wearing protective

masks, the fact that Japan reacted very quickly and decisively or the compliance with the restrictions and recommendations.

The excerpt below contains a lengthy enumeration of the sentence parallels that constitute the propositional content of an extended question with a shared beginning. Note that the numbering below is original and that the seemingly missing elements, i.e., 18th to 22nd seem to be some kind of invitation for readers to look for other ones or may signal that the list is open-ended, which was further emphasised with the use of ellipsis:

> How do you accomplish the following:
>
> 1. Terminate history-making economic gains made by POTUS prior to the election
>
> 2. Stall US-China trade phase II _buy China time _prevent loss of billions [locked new agreement]
>
> 3. Terminate [hold] POTUS record attendance rallies across USA _deplete and remove enthusiasm
>
> 4. Protect Biden from embarrassment re: mental health [clear cognitive decline], Q&A, rally attendance crowd size, lack of enthusiasm, etc.
>
> 5. Protect Biden from Ukraine scandal re: himself & son _C19 change of narrative
>
> 6. Protect Biden from sexual assault allegation _C19 change narrative
>
> 7. Protect and shelter #MeToo [D] created movement _preserve to target future [R] sexual assault allegations _allow hold vs Biden due to C19 narrative change
>
> 8. Create non_digital pathway to rig 2020 Presidential election _engage 80 million mail-in-ballot distribution [coordinated as early as April/May] to sidestep election night defeat [no 'concede'] attempt ballot harvest media push 'we don't know how many ballots are left undelivered by postal service' re: legal challenge battleground states _stall_challenge_push division/chaos _CLAS1-99
>
> 9. Create division hatred fear campaign primarily scare senior citizens from voting in person on election day _riots _protests _C19 death _eliminate enough senior [R] votes counteract [D] to [R] defection(s)
>
> 10. Create impression country divided _use EU-early war election gaming tactics against current administration
>
> 11. Propaganda blame attack current administration economic hardship(s), death toll, attack plan re: safety and wellbeing re: C19 failed _push Biden _stage Biden had answer to Pandemic early on _country will heal w: Biden victory _violence will end w: Biden victory
>
> 12. Change narrative 44 administration treason & corruption to POTUS C19 failure and death blame
>
> 13. Isolate faithful from each other _remove ability to attend Church [house of worship]
>
> 14. Justify social media censorship by using C19 W.H.O. claims as primary foundation _extend beyond C19 to other 'political' areas to remove and cut off forms of anti-narrative communication [seize control]

15. Leave door open to Constitution crisis

16. Avoid/delay public exposure of corruption & accountability _prevent loss of control/power

17. Avoid/delay loss of US taxpayer trillions due to loss of control _inability to enact corrupt policy to send money overseas disguised as goodwill/climate _unregulated _no audit policy

18.

19.

20.

21.

22.

…………

How do you accomplish the above?

Release a _____?

Who benefits the most?

Here, Q used a classic figure in rhetoric, particularly legal rhetoric, already known since the time of Cicero and Quintilian, i.e., *cui bono?* However, it should be borne in mind that, although it is generally regarded as a valuable tool in establishing the motive of the perpetrators of certain events and finding circumstantial evidence, it does not have the power of proof in an argument and is merely a heuristic, for many different reasons. Firstly, individuals and organisations may have various motives for their acts, making it challenging to identify a single benefit. Moreover, sometimes the true beneficiaries of an event are not immediately clear, mainly when there are multiple layers of deception or manipulation. It is also possible that biases and underlying assumptions can influence the question, causing an investigator to ignore other explanations or possible beneficiaries, as they may be interested in some form of distraction. Finally, in many circumstances, the investigator may have access to only some of the necessary evidence to determine who benefits from a specific activity accurately. In the case of such questions, manipulation is not self-evident, but at the same time it cannot be ruled out. A question of this kind may be suggestive of who is really behind the events in question, and the use of assumptions based on superficial signs may indicate malevolence on the part of the investigator.

8.12. Manipulative usage of metaphors in questions

One possible way to increase the persuasiveness of one's questions is to employ certain elements from the typologies mentioned in sections 1.1 to 1.4, for example, well-known metaphors anchored in one's audience's consciousness. For this to be possible, the author of the message should have knowledge of their audience and, for the increased persuasive effect,

recognise their deep memetic frames (Phillips & Milner, 2021). The persuasiveness of the message can be reinforced by appealing to shared knowledge or collective wisdom also expressed through the use of metaphors understood in more traditional or colloquial, if not cognitive terms. This section therefore presents a few of those that appeared most frequently, including in the questions, representing one of the most significant narrative and community-forming elements of Q's discourse.

The metaphor of AMERICAN POLITICS IS A SWAMP is very lively in American culture. The catchphrase of "draining" or "cleaning" the swamp has been very popular in American political discourse since the end of the 18th century, although it has taken on many different meanings over time. However, it was particularly often used by Donald Trump during his presidential campaign in 2016 and the years following the election, both in his speeches and tweets. He was claiming on numerous occasions that he was draining the swamp. There was a correspondence between Trump's speeches and Q's entries in this respect. However, the context of Q's posts may suggest a reference to the cabal from his previous posts. In this way, perhaps the familiar term was evoked as the means of broadening the possible number of followers.

As far as the source domain of this metaphor is concerned, the swamp is clearly negative, as something dangerous, absorbing everything that comes close to it, related to rotting and decay. The swamp is also inhuman and amorphous, but simultaneously ruthless and inanimate, which makes it seem as if it had the consciousness and the will to devour everything. For the many at least potential recipients of Trump's ideological message from the deep south of the United States, this metaphor is very vivid because the swamp is their immediate environment. An example is the Louisiana residents described by Hochschild (2016), who, despite having benefited from the social programmes introduced and announced by the Democrats, consistently vote for the Republicans. The swamp narrative is a fine instance of a deep story that must be compatible with people's feelings about who they are and what they value. Deep stories may not need to be perfectly accurate, but they must feel authentic. They are the narratives people tell themselves to express their hopes, pride, disappointments, concerns, and fears. Below are some examples of the metaphor appearing in Q-drops:

> RT [retweet] - how DC/swamp works.
> ***

We should use a 2nd SC in DC [SWAMP] [team of 20] and wait 2-4 years and hope for the best w/ NO CONTROL.

***

Welcome to THE SWAMP.

***

But… SESSIONS should appoint a 2nd SC in DC aka THE CORRUPT SWAMP

But… SESSIONS should appoint a 2nd SC in DC aka THE CORRUPT SWAMP [team of less than 20 typically] & wait 2-4 years [take a gamble]

But… SESSIONS should appoint a 2nd SC in DC aka THE CORRUPT SWAMP because unlike the CLINTON EMAIL CORRUPT CASE [as demonstrated by the FBI/DOJ people FIRED/REMOVED] this will be conducted faithfully and honestly [like MUELLER]

***

We are at the PRECIPICE.

[SWAMP] FIGHTING BACK

Remain CALM.

We are here for a reason.

Patriots are in control.

***

SWAMP FIGHTING BACK.

EVIL KNOWS NO BOUNDS.

PREPARE.

***

Something did happen to Dr. Ford in her past.

Use of that 'something' to 'frame' Justice K.

Dr. Ford's family has strong ties to SWAMP.

***

Why are we under heavy fire?

Why are we so important to the FAKE NEWS media?

Attacks coordinated?

THE SWAMP IS EVERYWHERE.

There is a reason some could no longer be trusted.

YOU ARE WITNESSING THE SYSTEMATIC DESTRUCTION OF THE OLD GUARD.

Forced exposure.

Standard deviation broken long ago.

P—A—I—N

The fragment above includes some highly speculative questions with assumptions that QAnon and the movement ("We") are being attacked by fake news media, i.e., mainstream media, which seems to be a direct allusion to Donald Trump naming CNN, the *Times*, NBC News,

Washington Post, and some other highly regarded media outlets "fake news media"[22]. The context indicates that both Trump and Q regarded these media as a part of the Swamp. The expression "fake news" (also spelled "FAKE NEWS") appeared as often as 149 times in the corpus, with 37 instances of the phrase "fake news media".

> If we are merely a LARP asking questions on the Chans, why are we being attacked daily by some of the world's biggest media co's, social media co's deliberately applying censorship/banning, shills paid/inserted to disrupt (media matters), blue checkmark coordinated attacks, etc.?
>
> All for a 'conspiracy' on the Chans?
>
> All for a 'LARP'?
>
> Why is there a constant flow of disinformation being pushed re: Q?
>
> Example:
>
> Disinformation push re: Mueller is a white hat.
>
> FAKE & FALSE narrative.
>
> Think BLOCKADE.
>
> When you can't attack the information directly, you attack the source, if that fails, you 'create false misleading information' to discredit knowing 'select' 'unaware' followers would not take the time to self-corroborate the claims (same vehicle/tactics used by FAKE NEWS media).
>
> Logical thinking always wins.
>
> Nothing can stop what is coming.
>
> As the target(s) turn to the other side, the attacks will intensify.
>
> We have the source.
>
> [SWAMP] contains RED & BLUE.

Apparently, it means that according to Q, politicians from both major American parties are believed to constitute the swamp. This is consistent with ideas expressed by some pro-Trump politicians, e.g., Matt Gaetz or Thomas Massie, and by Trump himself (DiMauro et al., 2020). The sequence above includes, among other things, rhetorical questions relating to allegations of LARPing (see section on LARPs as possible inspiration for Q) and spreading conspiracy theories without any basis in reality. At the same time, the implication is that it is about a real threat precisely from the swamp. The co-text, i.e. the other Q-drops, suggests that the swamp is a synonym for the Cabal, i.e., the gang of influential Satanic paedophiles. The metaphor is further extended, and Q suggests that the Swamp is not just a metaphor, that it is 'real':

> "DRAIN THE SWAMP" does not simply refer to removal of those corrupt in DC….
>
> ***

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> The SWAMP runs deep.
>
> ***
>
> 'DRAIN THE SWAMP' HAS 'REAL' MEANING.

This kind of literal reading or even 'tangibility' of metaphors may appeal to some audiences of evangelicals, where biblical literalism is still one of the popular strands of Bible hermeneutics.

The polarisation mentioned above was also constructed with metaphors, sometimes directly referring to Christian world imagery, e.g. light vs darkness:

> :Owls:
>
> Light will overcome d_a_rkness.
>
> Light will expose darkne_s_s.
>
> Light will _reveal_ darkness.

Although the first line of the entry may seem loosely related to the rest, it was retained because apparently there is a message hidden in it. This fragment may refer to the significance of an owl figure in signalling conspiracy thinking, as the owl is a symbol of wisdom, especially hidden, associated with Freemasonry and Illuminati. It is then in line with the rest of Q's message that created an image of hidden, occult and evil powers ruling the world. Stylised text involving underscores. It was also used in some questions, combined with the string character of ">>", possibly indicating the use of the right shift operator known from the JavaScript programming language, signifying some form of change. Moreover, some words have been clearly emphasised through the use of capital letters:

> >>Afghan Arabs>>Haqqani + Hekmatyar
>
> >>UBL [Osama bin Laden] [CRITICAL] Allies?
>
> Haqqani + Hekmatyar relations w/ C_A [CIA] (in_country)?
>
> Dark to LIGHT."

The entire broader excerpt allegedly referred to the contents of Podesta's emails published on Wikileaks and interpreted by Q as a list of intelligence assets of Muslim origin in public positions, particularly in state administration. and therefore also contained elements of polarisation, referring to anti-Muslim resentment.

Among metaphors used by QAnon, there is one that became particularly important for shaping the identity of QAnon community members. It is an extended metaphor which could be presented in its final and somehow implied form as INFORMATION IS BREAD, which

perhaps makes a parallel of QAnon community and Christianism with the similar metaphor TRUTH IS BREAD like in the following verse:

> The deeper truth is bread which is leavened by the word of God feeds the world (Matt 13:33)

However, the truth, as understood by QAnon, However, cannot, however, be achieved in the form of a holistic enlightenment, but rather part by part as individual elements because, as Q suggested, the truth is shocking:

> The truth is mind blowing and cannot fully be exposed.
> ***
> These are crumbs and you cannot imagine the full and complete picture.
> ***
> These crumbs are not meant to scare anyone but merely inform.

These elements were called 'breadcrumbs' as in "Breadcrumbs were being dropped", hence the expression "Q-drop". This element of metaphor was used the most often, as many as 49 times in all Q-drops. Let us look at some of them used in declarative sentences:

> Some of us come here to drop crumbs, just crumbs.

The above sentence suggests, and has been read as such, that more people than just Q know the 'truth' and that these are people active on 4chan. As Q wrote in one of the Q-drops: "Crumbs make bread". This is an example of mapping of conceptual structure from one domain to another, conceptualised, for example, the Lakovian theory of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Then, there was some enigmatic sentence: "Bad bread not updated" repeated a number of times in similar forms, by which Q informed anons that their interpretations were misinformed and moved in a wrong direction. Another interpretation is that it was not anons' fault, and that there were some "bad actors" meddling in the process with the intention to distract the attention of the emerging Q community. "Bread" was also used in the Q community as a synonym for a Q-drop. It was used interchangeably with "dough", meaning that the information given by Q should always be processed somehow:

> #3000 Dough
>
> https://pastebin.com/CcnwjNW1
>
> WE ARE Q
>
> CONGRATULATIONS ON 3000 BREADS !!

Productive though this metaphor may seem, it appeared to be insufficient to cover all possible situations concerning the domain of information: "Please revert bread back to original form".

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It may arguably be interpreted that Q was not that linguistically skilled to avoid some awkwardness as once baked bread cannot be reverted to its original form, not to mention this pleonastic expression of "reverting something back".

The metaphor of bread soon became even more structured because of those who were called "bakers", already mentioned in section 4.18, whom Q appreciated in an exceptional way by equating them all with patriots, which was even capitalised for emphasis and expressing particular respect for them:

> Personal thank you to the BO, Bakers, and Autists/Anons who continually dedicate their time and energy to the GREAT AWAKENING.
>
> You are all Patriots.
>
> The hard part is coming to an end.
>
> The next phase will bring JUSTICE.
>
> Q+
>
> ***
>
> We thank you for your service, BO.
>
> We thank you for your service, Vols.
>
> We thank you for your service, Bakers.
>
> We thank you for your service, Anons.
>
> God bless each and every one of you.
>
> Patriots, one and all!
>
> Pepe is proud and has never been more popular

Finally, this metaphor appeared in several interrogative sentences. Let us look at the following sequence composed mainly of questions:

> How many people are unaware of the 'truth' due to the stranglehold?
>
> How must people be made aware of an alternate reality?
>
> What are crumbs (think H-wood/DC)
>
> Define 'lead-in' (think play)?
>
> What has been occurring recently?
>
> The stage must be set.
>
> Crumbs are easy to swallow.

Again, they are undoubtedly linked into a single narrative whole, providing confirmation of what was written above, i.e. that the 'crumbs' are meant to gradually prepare the audience to know the 'truth'. What draws attention in this stretch, however, is giving the audience clues right after the question and introducing another metaphor related to theatre and "setting the stage" with the "lead-in". In fact, it had been alluded to many times before when Q had

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mentioned good and bad actors. The metaphor was intended to complement that of bread and crumbs.

As for the very nature of the Q's questions themselves, it seems that the vast majority were non-canonical in nature and similar to quiz or exam questions. However, it is worth pointing out one important difference between the two. Q's questions did not simply serve to test the knowledge of those being questioned, but were clearly narrative in nature, serving to present a particular narrative line and, in part, also to mould the community in a particular, predetermined way. Many of them were speculative in nature, encouraging the audience to independently combine the elements of the world presented in them in a non-straightforward manner into a picture of reality as intended by their author. It therefore seems reasonable to refer to them as narrative questions. This also answers the first research question. Q questions were useful, on the one hand, in building the narrative, and on the other hand, they had a community-building function. They constituted an invitation to participate, a kind of game, in which the reward for providing preferred answers was the activation of a further course of speech and, above all, the recognition of the growing community and its leaders, Q themselves. The questions, through their form, in contrast to declarative sentences, encouraged some form of dialogue, which could also be a counterbalance to the style of communication in the mainstream media, where, even despite the interaction possibilities offered by the online environment, the audience is not, or only rarely and in a residual form, a co-creator of content and has little influence on the shape of the discourse. This direction of top-down communication, which is anachronistic in today's world, seems to have put off the broad masses, who clearly expect to be treated more subjectively and to be valued as full participants in communication, which was definitely offered to them by the open (to a certain extent) narrative of Q. However, it is worth mentioning a few identified features of Q's discourse indicating a form of this dialogue from a position of authority, as Q gave the appearance of an omniscient high-rank military officer, through often very concise questions and answers, lack of tag questions, or passages where they instructed the audience that they had misunderstood the questions and were looking in the wrong direction.

One can therefore conclude from this that it was Q who controlled the discourse specifically by means of questions. It was not a fully symmetrical dialogue because one side was not interested in topics other than those they themselves imposed, nor did they respond to the others' questions. For it is the person who asks the questions who puts oneself in a position of power, which is most easily illustrated by the sentence uttered by the interrogator

who calls the person being questioned to order by saying "I am the one asking the questions here!".

The discursive techniques described above in the analysis provide examples of how this framing of discourse took place. Among these, reduced questions, extended question sequences, counterfactual questions and questions with cause-and-effect constructs are particularly noteworthy.

The above analysis provides answers to the research questions and additional insights into the nature and role of the questions in Q's narrative and the overall discourse in which these questions and narrative occurred. The next, concluding section of the paper will discuss these recognitions, as well as the significance of this work, its applications and resulting considerations of a more general, social nature.

Concluding remarks

The semantic analysis that some authors, including linguists, have done has often postulated a link between the question and the answer. This, however, gave rise to the problem of determinism – the concept of sets of propositions in questions do not take into account that the questions could have been answered differently from any of the logical alternatives of the answers predicted by the asker. In the case of our material, however, this problem partially disappears, for Q set up the game and its rules in a certain way, drawing the attention of the participants every time they started to wander, so the very situation is indeed deterministic. They also gave them clues, and after a while they were already actually directing their dialogue with their audience without much interference, also communicating exactly what they wanted through the questions. So there is this conception (by Hamblin, among others) partly in keeping with our material. The aspect of playfulness in QAnon, moreover, would lead us to look at this compositionality in the following way: the asker expects the answerer(s) to answer x (or possibly in some cases x or y), or at least give some approximation of such an answer, and any other answer will be treated as wrong or inappropriate and rejected. However, various clues or even suggestions will be included in the context, as well as in the questions themselves, and in time there will be some among the answerers who, deductively following the picture of the whole formed within this asymmetrical dialogicity, will generally respond within the framework established situationally by Q.

From a pragmatic point of view, the previous descriptions of the questions also encounter some problems here and the questions from the Q discourse do not apply to them in full. Nor does the assumption, postulated for example by Searle or later by Wierzbicka, that the question must contain a preparatory condition—i.e. that the sender does not know the answer—apply in this case. Also, the condition of sincerity does not quite apply, or rather, it seems inadequate in this case, for the sender here does not want the information as such because they already have this knowledge, or rather, under the guise of it, a masked intention. What, in the case of Q, was most important in this situation, and what, I feel, characterises manipulative questions in a public or even mass context, is a certain unique binding of the preparatory condition and the essential condition, i.e. the asker wants an answer (not information), i.e. they want it to resound and resonate, so that the answerers work out the answer collectively (sometimes with the asker) and internalise it themselves. The illocutionary purpose of such questions would therefore not be to gain information to know,

there is even a reversal of this situation, i.e. the asker asks the question so that the recipients know the answer. Adopting Hamblin and Karttunen's perspective, we could modify it slightly for the purposes of this analysis, since from the perspective of the socially created system through interactions, his expected answers were true, however much of them were untrue.

Chapter 6 signalled that the subject of manipulation questions in linguistics and related fields is unstructured, and the concept itself is generally treated as a mere label. This thesis points to the reason for this, namely the discursive nature of manipulation, while it also identifies other, previously unrecognised types or uses of questions of a potentially manipulative nature.

This work, particularly Chapter 8, points to the need for further research into linguistic manipulation and, consequently, the role of questions in it. On a mass scale, if such manipulation were to be effective, it is abundantly clear that such research would have to be multifaceted and interdisciplinary, for which, within the field of linguistics, certain formulations of critical discourse analysis, such as that of Van Dijk taking into account cultural-social, cognitive and, in part, also media dimensions, seem to fit best. The individual descriptions of context (or rather, contexts) made in the chapters preceding the actual analysis of the questions, while extensive and wide-ranging, probably do not exhaust the subject here either. This is because it is difficult to point out unequivocally the reasons for QAnon's success, especially if one had to point out briefly and directly what determined it. While the linguistic component seems to be one of those reasons, since the sequences of questions identified during the analysis, with sometimes complex logical structures and using numerous linguistic means indicated for centuries as effective, apparently had a rhetorical effect, one must not overlook the whole cascade of structural conditions and circumstances that fostered this manipulation, causing Q's message to be propagated, multiplied and amplified. While this was not a direct aim connected with the research questions, it should be mentioned as an additional justification for the complex and extensive descriptions of the context.

The present author believes that the present work makes a valuable contribution not only to the understanding of the QAnon movement itself as an isolated but complex, including linguistically, phenomenon, but also, which is in line with the general assumptions of the work, that the recognitions presented in it can make a valuable scientific, but also social contribution, helping to identify and analyse future phenomena similar to QAnon. The history of QAnon's predecessors suggests that their successors using similar means of communication are also likely to emerge. In turn, the complexity of the phenomenon and the

multitude of described elements used by Q and the movement as a whole not only makes the analysis itself difficult, but also justify those who followed them.

At this point, it might be worth making the point that this work can assist state institutions in shaping information or education policies, e.g. by introducing media education or elements of critical thinking into schools. Such a need undoubtedly exists, but such thinking, reflecting inoculative manipulation theory, ignores a very important piece of reality that has also contributed to the success of the QAnon movement. The inoculative theory by its assumptions refers by analogy to vaccination. The CoViD-19 pandemic showed us all too clearly the need for transparent information and education policies from the other side. In some countries in the absence of clear messages from the government side, inconsistent pandemic management policies or even open lies led to numerous acts of disobedience among citizens. The situation, of course, has not been improved by the introduction of novel vaccines, providing grist to the mill for all sorts of conspiracy speculation. It is worth noting at this point, as it may not have resounded emphatically in this work, that the present author stands on the conviction that this kind of scepticism about the above-mentioned actions of the government and big capital is fully understandable and justified by the long-standing practice of not listening to the voices of the public or even openly disregarding them.

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Abstract

This work deals with the issue of manipulative questions in online discourse using the example of conspiracy theorist QAnon operating on imageboards like 4chan and 8chan. Its main goals were to outline Q's narrative style of discourse, present question creation patterns, combine them into sequences, and discuss the manipulative techniques included in these questions. The work is also accompanied by a description of the sources of this discourse and its cultural and social references and borrowings. The complex theoretical apparatus of the paper was formed on the basis of linguistic considerations of questions and Critical Discourse Analysis as seen by Teun Van Dijk, and supplemented by detailed considerations of manipulation and questions from sociology, social psychology and philosophy of language.

The present work is divided into eight chapters, plus the introduction and conclusions at the end of the work. The definitional issues surrounding the topic of persuasion and manipulation, along with the theories and concepts that go along with them, are thoroughly covered in the first chapter. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of research on manipulation, in addition to linguistic approaches, it also mentions definitional considerations from, among others, the philosophy of language, psychology, sociology, rhetoric, and ethics. It also includes a description of the theoretical approach to linguistic manipulation provided by Teun Van Dijk, one of the most important theoretical foundations of the work referred to in the analysis. The first subsection captures the issue of manipulation in terms of definitions, differentiating it from related concepts such as persuasion, lying, and deception. In addition, it lists the linguistic elements that may indicate a text's persuasive or manipulative nature. The second section briefly discusses the issue of linguistic impression management, which is developed in the third and fourth sections, which discuss the rhetorical elements used in persuasive and manipulative communication, as well as the elements of ideological discourse related to manipulation, pointed out by Teun Van Dijk in the theoretical framework of his socio-cognitive understanding of discourse analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings related to ethics, truth and fortune considerations associated with linguistic manipulation, after which an overview of manipulation theories in the humanities and social sciences, particularly psychology, that complement the cognitive component of Van Dijk's approach is presented. The following section deals with contextual considerations related to the sociocognitive elements of discourse, after which the basic assumptions related to its ideological dimension are listed. Finally, the last section in this chapter outlines the assumptions of a concept that originated in anthropology and sociology but was early adapted

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to the needs of linguistics, including in cognitive approaches, which is helpful in discourse analysis, i.e. the importance of linguistic framing and framing in communication, which seems to be particularly relevant to considerations of linguistic manipulation.

The second chapter, on the internet as a space for manipulation, begins with an overview of the tools and phenomena associated with this medium, which not only enables the manipulation defined in the previous chapter but also enhances it and provides complementary means to achieve the desired effects in manipulation on a mass scale as well. The section that follows deals with the role of memes in manipulation, as reflected, among other things, in the concept of memetic warfare, which is vital because imageboard communities are highly influential in the creation and spread of memes, which they see as an essential part of their communication with each other and with the rest of the internet. Section three in Chapter two mentions the importance of Alex Jones, the world's most prominent conspiracy theorist, for promoting the Q message in its early stages. Then, section four introduces another internet conspiracy theory that Jones promoted, which became the essential component of the Q's narrative, i.e., Pizzagate.

Q drew not only on conspiracy theories and figures from online fringe culture but also on numerous sources and texts from popular culture, deftly diversifying the message into at least two separate, broadly defined social groups, i.e., users who regularly used imageboards already and incoming audiences with people who became familiar with their message through other media as it became popular. They are listed in detail in Chapter four, which closes with a section on the social aspect, i.e., a discussion of the QAnon movement and the celebrities who supported it.

The fifth chapter is a theoretical recognition of questions in linguistic concepts in syntactic, semantic and pragmatic approaches. Then, based on these findings, a general approach to interrogatives in linguistics, necessary for data collection, appears, after which the phonetic and phonological features of questions that complement the argument are described. Finally, the last part of this chapter discusses the role of questions in conversation analysis, which is highly relevant as it relates directly to data analysis in the work.

Representing a kind of extension of Chapter five, Chapter six is a discussion of the, unfortunately, only tentatively outlined approach to manipulative questions in linguistics and related fields of research. This discussion, together with the previous chapter, forms the primary analytical basis for the work.

Chapter seven is a review of the methods and materials used in the work, which first describes the research objectives and research questions, then presents the type of data, the

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method of preparing the corpus, and its features, followed by a presentation of the method, for which critical discourse analysis was chosen as, in the opinion of the present author, the most legitimate linguistic approach to analysing this type of material and taking into account the contextual considerations described earlier. The chapter concludes with a description of the medium in which Q's communication with his audience took place, understood generally as the internet, but more specifically as imageboards.

The final chapter contains an analysis of the manipulative questions identified during coding and linked into interpretive patterns. They represent some types of questions identified in chapters five and six, but especially the larger interpretive units or fragments of the discourse of several to a dozen sentences in length, in which the questions played the central role. Some discourse elements discussed in earlier sections of the work were mentioned when necessary for analytical purposes.

The entire work closes with conclusions, including a discussion of the research questions, considerations on the possibilities of further study of the type of discourse discussed in the work and its relevance in the broader social context, as well as more general considerations about the phenomenon in question as a whole.

Streszczenie

Niniejsza praca porusza kwestię pytań manipulacyjnych w dyskursie internetowym na przykładzie teoretyka spiskowego QAnona działającego na portalach takich jak 4chan i 8chan. Jej głównymi celami było nakreślenie narracyjnego stylu dyskursu Q, przedstawienie wzorców tworzenia pytań i łączenia ich w sekwencje oraz omówienie technik manipulacyjnych zawartych w tychże pytaniach. Pracy towarzyszy również opis źródeł tego dyskursu oraz jego kulturowych i społecznych odniesień i zapożyczeń. Złożony aparat teoretyczny pracy powstał w oparciu o językoznawcze rozważania nad pytaniami i Krytyczną Analizę Dyskursu w ujęciu Teuna Van Dijka, a uzupełniony został szczegółowymi rozważaniami nad manipulacją i pytaniami z zakresu socjologii, psychologii społecznej i filozofii języka.

Praca ta została podzielona na osiem rozdziałów oraz wprowadzenie i wnioski na końcu pracy. Kwestie definicyjne związane z tematem perswazji i manipulacji wraz z teoriami i koncepcjami, które im towarzyszą, zostały szczegółowo omówione w pierwszym rozdziale. Ze względu na interdyscyplinarny charakter badań nad manipulacją poza ujęciami językoznawczymi wspomniane zostały w niej również rozważania definicyjne z zakresu m.in. filozofii języka, psychologii, socjologii, retoryki i etyki. Zawiera ona również opis teoretycznego podejścia do manipulacji językowej przedstawionego przez Teuna Van Dijka, jednego z najważniejszych założeń teoretycznych pracy, które stanowi jedną z podstaw analizy pytań. Pierwszy podrozdział ujmuje kwestię manipulacji w kategoriach definicyjnych, odróżniając ją od pojęć pokrewnych, takich jak perswazja, kłamstwo i oszustwo. Ponadto wymieniono w nim elementy językowe, które mogą wskazywać na perswazyjny lub manipulacyjny charakter tekstu. W drugiej części omówiono pokrótce kwestię językowego zarządzania wrażeniem, co znalazło rozwinięcie w trzeciej i czwartej części, w których omówiono elementy retoryczne wykorzystywane w komunikacji perswazyjnej i manipulacyjnej, a także związane z manipulacją elementy dyskursu ideologicznego wskazane przez Teuna Van Dijka wśród założeń teoretycznych jego społeczno-poznawczego rozumienia analizy dyskursu. Następnie omówiono teoretyczne założenia związane z etyką, prawdą i fortunnością dotyczące manipulacji językowej, po czym przedstawiony został przegląd teorii manipulacji w naukach humanistycznych i społecznych, w szczególności w psychologii, które uzupełniają kognitywny komponent podejścia Van Dijka. Kolejna część dotyczy kontekstualnych rozważań związanych ze społeczno-poznawczymi elementami dyskursu, po czym wymienione są podstawowe założenia związane z jego wymiarem

ideologicznym. Wreszcie ostatnia część tego rozdziału nakreśla założenia koncepcji wywodzącej się z antropologii i socjologii, ale wcześnie zaadaptowanej na potrzeby językoznawstwa, w tym w podejściach kognitywnych, co jest pomocne w analizie dyskursu, tj. znaczenia ramowania językowego i ram komunikacyjnych, co wydaje się szczególnie istotne dla rozważań na temat manipulacji językowej.

Rozdział drugi poświęcony internetowi jako przestrzeni manipulacji rozpoczyna się od przeglądu narzędzi i zjawisk związanych z tym medium, które nie tylko umożliwia manipulację zdefiniowaną w poprzednim rozdziale, ale także wzmacnia ją i zapewnia uzupełniające środki do osiągnięcia pożądanych efektów w manipulacji również na skalę masową. Kolejna część również wydaje się niezbędna, gdyż dotyczy roli memów w manipulacji, co znajduje odzwierciedlenie między innymi w koncepcji wojny memetycznej, ponieważ społeczności imageboardów mają duży wpływ na tworzenie i rozpowszechnianie memów, które postrzegane są tam jako istotna część komunikacji w ich obrębie i w całym internecie. Część trzecia rozdziały drugiego wspomina o znaczeniu Alexa Jonesa, najbardziej znanego na świecie teoretyka spiskowego, w promowaniu przesłania Q na jego wczesnych etapach. Następnie część czwarta przedstawia inną internetową teorię spiskową promowaną przez Jonesa, która stała się istotnym elementem narracji Q, tj. Pizzagate.

Q czerpał nie tylko z teorii spiskowych i postaci z internetowej kultury alternatywnej, ale także z licznych źródeł i tekstów z kultury popularnej, zręcznie dywersyfikując przekaz na co najmniej dwie odrębne, szeroko zdefiniowane grupy społeczne, tj. użytkowników, którzy regularnie korzystali już z imageboardów oraz przychodzących odbiorców z osobami, które zapoznały się z ich przekazem za pośrednictwem innych mediów, gdy stał się popularny. Zostały one szczegółowo wymienione w rozdziale czwartym, który zamyka część poświęcona aspektowi społecznemu, tj. omówieniu ruchu QAnon i wspierających go celebrytów.

Rozdział piąty to teoretyczne przedstawienie pytań w koncepcjach językowych w podejściu syntaktycznym, semantycznym i pragmatycznym. Następnie, w oparciu o te ustalenia, zaprezentowano ogólne podejście do zdań pytających w językoznawstwie niezbędne przy gromadzeniu danych, po czym opisano fonetyczne i fonologiczne cechy pytań dla uzupełnienia tego omówienia. Wreszcie, ostatnia część tego rozdziału przedstawia rolę pytań w analizie konwersacji, co jest bardzo istotne, ponieważ odnosi się bezpośrednio do analizy danych w pracy.

Będący swego rodzaju rozszerzeniem rozdziału piątego rozdział szósty jest omówieniem, niestety tylko wstępnie zarysowanego, podejścia do pytań manipulacyjnych w

językoznawstwie i pokrewnych dziedzinach badań. Koncepcje te wraz z omówionymi we wcześniejszych rozdziale stanowi główną podstawę analityczną pracy.

Rozdział siódmy to przegląd metod i materiałów wykorzystanych w pracy, w którym najpierw opisano cele i pytania badawcze, a następnie przedstawiono rodzaj danych, sposób przygotowania korpusu i jego cechy, po czym zaprezentowano główną metodę, jaką była Krytyczna Analiza Dyskursu jako, zdaniem autora, najbardziej uzasadnione podejście językoznawcze użyteczne do analizy tego typu materiału i uwzględniające opisane wcześniej uwarunkowania kontekstowe. Rozdział kończy się opisem medium, w którym odbywała się komunikacja Q z odbiorcami, rozumianego ogólnie jako internet, ale bardziej szczegółowo jako imageboardy.

Ostatni rozdział zawiera analizę pytań manipulacyjnych zidentyfikowanych podczas procesu kodowania i ułożonych we wzorce interpretacyjne. Wśród nich występują niektóre rodzaje pytań zidentyfikowanych w rozdziałach piątym i szóstym, ale przede wszystkim większe jednostki interpretacyjne lub fragmenty dyskursu o długości od kilku do kilkunastu zdań, w których to właśnie pytania odgrywały główną rolę. Tam, gdzie było to konieczne dla celów analitycznych, przywołano także niektóre elementy dyskursu omówione we wcześniejszych częściach pracy.

Pracę zamykają wnioski na jej temat, w tym omówienie pytań badawczych, rozważania na temat możliwości dalszego badania omawianego w pracy typu dyskursu i jego znaczenia w szerszym kontekście społecznym, a także bardziej ogólne rozważania na temat omawianego zjawiska jako całości.

Słowa kluczowe: pytania manipulacyjne, teorie spiskowe, Krytyczna Analiza Dyskursu, dyskurs internetowy, dyskurs polityczny