In Focus

Where We Go One, We Go All: QAnon, Networked Individualism, and the Dark Side of Participatory (Fan) Culture

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ABSTRACT

Participation in online spaces has afforded new fan cultures (Baym, Burnett 2009; Jenkins 2018) and enabled new communities of networked individuals (Rainie, Wellman 2012; Burgess, Jones 2020). Online participation also generates participatory cultures, which allow audiences unprecedented opportunity to connect with each other and with the media they share. However, it has also generated some decidedly anti-social and anti-democratic movements, such as QAnon (Amarasingam, Argentino 2020). In this commentary, we argue that QAnon can be thought of as a participatory fan culture gone awry. Using QAnon's entry into mainstream culture in 2020 as a case study, we explore the darker implications of online participatory culture, including misinformation, conspiratorial-thinking, and an undermining of shared realities. Lastly, we propose that these issues are made more explicit and difficult to attend to in a media sphere characterized by dominant neo-liberal corporate control of participatory media, and digital dualism.

Q OVERVIEW

QAnon is a widespread conspiracy theory composed of people (called QAnon believers) who hold the belief that former US president Trump is leading a secret war against an elite global cabal (or deep state) that practices satanism and sacrifices children in the name of everlasting youth and power (Kaplan 2020). Key tenets of this theory include distrust of the media, experts, and democrats or social and political liberals, as well as a desire to eliminate what they see as widespread corruption in politics and media (Robertson 2021). For many, belief in QAnon is made possible by an empty space created by what they see as an all-too-powerful and untrustworthy media ecosystem and political and economic tensions (Rothschild 2021). While the COVID-19 pandemic "supercharged" the QAnon conspiracy theory (Bloom 2021), believers had long found comfort in a theory that emits nostalgia for a time when white supremacy reigned unquestioned and provides a rationale (and scapegoat) for social issues (Rothschild 2021). However, one of the most appealing aspects of QAnon is the flexibility it provides in its theories' causations and rationales: as important dates and projections come to pass unfulfilled, QAnon adjusts its storyline to adapt (LaFrance 2020). In the process of adapting, it incorporates new elements and builds on its already complex map of connected conspiracies and far-reaching ideas. In order to maintain its momentum, it requires deep participation from those who believe in its ideas – from its fans. Participation among QAnon believers might include deciphering Q posts and making evidence collages

(Krafft, Donovan 2020), sharing theories and interpretations of Q posts with fellow believers, participating in conversations on social media, sharing the "prophecies of Q" (LaFrance 2020), and attending rallies and in-person meetings.

NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM

Online participatory fan cultures are made possible due to the affordances of online communication technologies which have facilitated what Rainie and Wellman (2012) call networked individualism. Participatory platforms allow people with very niche interests, like fans, to find one another (Jenkins 2006, 2018; Burgess, Jones 2020). In contrast to communities of place or communities created by genetics, communities of networked individuals allow people to express their individuality, which could be stifled in smaller or more parochial physical communities. Some say the ability of networked ICTs to connect like-minded people is an emancipatory and democratic force (Rainie, Wellman 2012; Jenkins 2006, 2018). It has allowed, for example, members of the LGBTQ community to support each other and has facilitated new forms of networked intimacy (Chan 2018); it has facilitated movements such as Black Lives Matter (Florinni 2017); and it has facilitated fan activism, when fans connect based on their shared love of a cultural text, but then branch out to fight for causes they care about, as in the case of KPop fans supporting the Black Lives Matter movement (Andini, Akhni 2021).

Fan communities are enabled by "establishing group conventions and norms, creating a sense of 'place', communication about personal issues within groups, members communicating outside of the fan environment and members offering one another assistance" (Deller 2014: 240-241). In other words, online fan communities are produced through shared norms as well as a shared interest in the topic that drives the fandom. Networks of fan cultures are not only and always a force that enables positive social change. They are made up of human beings who intentionally or unintentionally bring their own biases to participatory networked communities (Castells, Kumar 2014). Scholars have begun to note that the same social media algorithms that bring people together in shared interest also reinforce the primacy of the individual in ways that do not always favour the social good (Forestal 2021; De Blasio, Selva 2019). The problems with networks have led some scholars to note that "networks are in crisis" (Phillips, Milner 2021a: para. 2; see also Phillips, Milner 2021b). Speaking about conspiracies in particular, Phillips and Milner (2021a) provide three reasons for a networked crisis: first, networks now lead people to encounter harmful information without ever really trying; second, echo-chambers produce confirmation bias and lead people to believe that the information they see in their networks is true and accurate; and third, everyday people have more resources to investigate their versions of truth and facts and to propagate the theories they concoct based on those findings.

THE DARK SIDE OF FAN CULTURES

With the election of reality TV star Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016, the relationship between fandom and politics became salient. Whereas fan cultures previously had internal politics and were viewed for their potential to contribute to democracy more broadly, the intersection of fan culture with politics – as well as populism and potentially fascistic politics in particular – has until recently been underexplored (Stanfill 2019). Such research demonstrates the way fan cultures can enable political as well as other types of organizations. For example, research on football fan cultures in Greece shows a link between football fan communities and politically polarized fan cultures on both the left and right side of the political spectrum (Zaimakis 2018). Fan identities can be intertwined with political and other identities in ways that not only reinforce progressive ideas but also support fascistic identification. In fact, some platforms on which fans congregate lend themselves to a performative, almost radicalizing

expression of ideology. For example, in a study of a Sherlock fan community on Tumblr, Christensen and Jensen (2018) noted that because Tumblr does not allow delimited group boundaries, fans become more passionate and performative in their beliefs as a way to mark themselves as group members. This suggests that the more networked and unbounded a group is (like QAnon), the more it will encourage devout belief. As Stanfill writes, "Some things about fandom are disturbing. Some disturbing things are like fandom. Connecting reactionary politics to fandom seems increasingly plausible in the contemporary era, but does not quite fit how we typically understand either fandom or politics" (2019: 125). It is here to which we turn our attention. Understanding QAnon both as a type of participatory fan community as well as a type of reactionary politics – as it most often is – allows us to better understand and potentially mitigate the darker sides of networked individualism that are enabled via certain kinds of participatory fandom. It is important to examine precisely those aspects of participatory fan communities that we find most disturbing, otherwise how can we address them?

QANON AS A FAN CULTURE

Q has been described dismissively as a LARP by critics (Tuters 2018), but at the heart of this minimization is a key truth: just as live action role players participate in their own fantasy fan cultures, so too is QAnon a participatory culture in which political reality is shared and community is built via the technology and even sometimes game-like mechanics. Compared to other online communities that promote conspiracies as well as inappropriate and even extremist behaviour, QAnon stands apart in at least two ways: unlike troll communities, QAnon adherents are not doing it "for the lulz" (Phillips 2015), but rather out of a deep belief in the tenets of Q (Miler, 2021). And unlike many other conspiracy hotbeds found on any of the 'chans', which tend to focus on a singular conspiracy, QAnon acts as an umbrella under which any conspiracy can be captured.

QAnon culture has also benefited from some of the same things we would expect of fan cultures. This includes popular engagement with online networked spaces, such as YouTube, Twitter, 4chan, 8chan/8kun, and following efforts to remove QAnon content from more mainstream platforms, platforms like Telegram and Parler. QAnon believers have also developed a unique vernacular, memes, and lexical and linguistic cues typical of and specific to a community that allows members to find each other and connect (Tuters 2019; see also the Anti-defamation League's QAnon glossary of terms, ADL 2021). Communities have emerged that attend to, dissect, and add to common texts, including main actors and influencers within QAnon (Marwick, Partin 2020), as well as conferences where QAnon members congregate and listen to such influencers, politicians, and other key stakeholders speak and share ideas (Gilbert 2021). And finally, classic fan paraphernalia such as hats, t-shirts, and bumper stickers are available for purchase (Greenspan 2020). Thus, we can think of QAnon as a fan culture in which a few malevolent or ill-intentioned people gather a much larger group of people together to create a participatory culture that has rather serious and negative consequences.

CORPORATE DESIGN, CULTURAL HABITS AND TOXIC FAN CULTURES

The many issues associated with participatory fan cultures like QAnon are made more difficult to address in an atmosphere characterized by the dominant neo-liberal corporate control of participatory media. This is partly due to the way that late capitalism rewards economies of engagement. While absurd and toxic ideas have always been present online, the global reach of social media, along with their engagement algorithms, have greatly enhanced the scale and speed of how these ideas can spread. Social media algorithms do not simply facilitate the connection between individuals who share unique interests, they also prioritize content that keeps audiences engaged for

long (and ideally the longest) periods of time (Lewis 2020). Further complicating this are data voids, which are topics about which little information is available. Data voids are exploited on sites like YouTube by dark participatory cultural actors who create content – such as misinformation – to fill that void, thereby flooding searches for particular terms with nefarious content (Golebiewski, boyd 2018). Data voids, when coupled with recommendation algorithms that offer more extreme or niche content based on users existing search, result in an online environment in which QAnon related content is increasingly rewarded.

Relatedly, the ongoing decisions by platforms like Facebook to a) resist stricter self-regulation and lobby against outside regulation in the name of freedom of speech and expression (Silverman 2021), and b) a cultural mythos that online life is less real than offline life, exacerbates the problem of problematic participatory cultures. This latter point – that online life is less real – is known as digital dualism (Jurgenson 2011). One way that digital dualism manifests is through a false dichotomy between online speech and offline harms, and it is used to excuse online platforms (and users) from bearing responsibility when bad things happen offline that were organized in online spaces (Gosse, Hodson 2021). Digital dualism is a common discursive practice (Gosse 2021) that offers a kind of protectionism for online users who adopt the belief that online actions are a little bit less real and consequences a little bit further removed from offline life. This has consequences for how we can address the negative aspects of participatory cultures while protecting the positive aspects. For example, the January 6th riot on the US capitol demonstrates how the online activities associated with QAnon have real life and very dangerous consequences, which underscores how dangerous digital dualist thinking can be.

MOVING BEYOND COMMON ASSUMPTIONS: A WAY FORWARD

QAnon is one example of a fan culture that has resulted in negative social outcomes for society, such as the spread of misinformation, violence, and anti-democratic action. An examination of how this group functions as a participatory fan culture helps to highlight the reality of online participation: participatory cultures are not only forces for emancipation, but can also be drivers of conspiracies and radicalization. By minimizing our popular tendency to think of digital communities as somehow separate from other parts of our lives, and by critically interrogating the capitalist drivers of social media's algorithmic filtering, we can create and maintain online spaces for participatory fan cultures that maximize the benefit of these groups, while minimizing their potential harm.

As participants in, and scholars of, online communities, we need to move away from thinking of ourselves as networked *individuals*. Instead, we need to move toward a framework of *networked responsibility*. This framework, emphasizing the interconnection between online and offline, supports an ethic of care. It also opens us up to consider how algorithms, driven by capital, structure our relations with one another. Mobilizing these ideas will help move away from assumptions about online spaces, and participatory cultures that no longer serve us.

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