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The attack on the U.S. Capitol and the security threat posed by the QAnon conspiracy theory

I. Introduction

As Argentino states: “What is the cost of propaganda, misinformation, and conspiracy theories? Democracy and public safety, to name just two things. The U.S. has received a stark lesson on how online propaganda and misinformation have an offline impact.”²

A group of Trump supporters stormed Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, and clashed with police in violence that left four people dead. They were attempting to prevent the confirmation of Joe Biden's election victory. They descended on the U.S. Capitol after Trump made a speech to his supporters, imploring them to “fight” to stop the “steal” of the election. Police officers shot one woman dead, while three more Trump supporters died of “medical emergencies”. U.S. Capitol Police later released a statement confirming one of their officers had also died of injuries sustained during the riots.³ A leader in the QAnon conspiracy theory movement was one of the rioters storming the U.S. Capitol: the so called “Q Shaman” or “QAnon Shaman” aka “Jake Angeli” (or Yellowstone Wolf⁴), whose real name is Jacob Anthony Chansley. The movement has played a big role in organizing nationwide “Stop the Steal” protests in the two months since President-elect Joe Biden won the 2020 election.⁵

The FBI for the first time has identified fringe conspiracy theories as a domestic terrorist threat. The FBI intelligence bulletin from the bureau’s Phoenix field office, dated May 30, 2019, describes “conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremists,” as a growing threat, and notes that it is the first such report to do so. It lists a number of arrests, including some that have not been publicized, related to violent incidents motivated by fringe beliefs. This document specifically mentions QAnon.⁶ The FBI warned the U.S. about the growing dangers of domestic violent extremists and called it the number one terrorism threat in 2021.⁷

The aim of my paper is to shed light on the (national) security threat posed by the Qanon conspiracy theory. I intend to examine the problem of conspiracy theories and radicalization, and shed light on the origins of the “The Storm” conspiracy theory and its connection to QAnon. I introduce the evolution and basics of the QAnon conspiracy theory and the online presence of its adherents, and also examine the social media manipulation nearing the U.S. election. I examine the attack on the U.S. Capitol, the characterization of the

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² Marc-André Argentino: QAnon and the storm of the US Capitol: The offline effect of online conspiracy theories.

<https://qz.com/1954265/the-attack-on-the-us-capitol-shows-the-real-danger-of-qanon/> (21/01/2021.)

³ James Franey: US Capitol storming: What you need to know. <https://www.dw.com/en/us-capitol-storming-what-you-need-to-know/a-56154560> (21/01/2021.)

⁴ Rich Schapiro – Michael Kosnar: Capitol rioter in horned hat gloats as feds work to identify suspects. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/capitol-rioter-horned-hat-gloats-feds-work-identify-suspects-n1253392> (21/01/2021.)

⁵ Rachel E. Greenspan – Haven Orecchio-Egresitz: A well-known QAnon influencer dubbed the 'Q Shaman' has been arrested after playing a highly visible role in the Capitol siege. <https://www.businessinsider.com/q-shaman-qanon-influencer-capitol-siege-washington-dc-protest-riot-2021-1> (21/01/2021.)

⁶ Jana Winter: Exclusive: FBI document warns conspiracy theories are a new domestic terrorism threat. <https://news.yahoo.com/fbi-documents-conspiracy-theories-terrorism-160000507.html> (21/01/2021.)

⁷ Sarah Schulte: FBI warns America about domestic terrorism following attack on US Capitol. <https://abc7chicago.com/domestic-terrorism-fbi-us-capitol-building-the-internet/9634442/> (21/01/2021.)

incident, Qanon's role in the attack and the figure of the "Q Shaman", the people charged, the groups involved in the incident, and the online discussions leading up to the attack. Finally, I draw conclusions and make recommendations. My paper focuses on the criminological aspects and security issues related to the incident and the dangers of conspiracy theories circulating online. I only discuss the political aspects in such detail, that is necessary to understand the topic and the issues at hand.

II. Conspiracy theories and radicalization

According to Sternisko et al. conspiracy theories are "theories that a powerful group of people are secretly working towards a malevolent or unlawful goal."⁸ They "[...] are consequential as they have a real impact on people's health, relationships, and safety; they are universal in that belief in them is widespread across times, cultures, and social settings; they are emotional given that negative emotions and not rational deliberations cause conspiracy beliefs; and they are social as conspiracy beliefs are closely associated with psychological motivations underlying intergroup conflict."⁹

These theories pose a threat to democratic¹⁰ systems. With the development of social media, conspiracy theorists acquired a new platform to spread their unsubstantiated claims at an unprecedented rate and organize dangerous social movements.¹¹ The rapid spread of conspiracy theories such as Pizzagate, COVID-19 conspiracies, and QAnon, coupled to the dangerous real world actions that people have taken based on a belief in these narratives, are no longer a fringe phenomenon. Actual conspiracies and conspiracy theories threaten democracy each in their own particular way. An actual conspiracy usually comes to light because of the investigative capacities of a free and independent press, and reveals corruption in government or industry; as such, the discovery of an actual conspiracy confirms the power of democratic institutions. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, seek to undermine the very premise of democratic institutions.¹² Online fringe communities offer platforms for users to seek and share paranoid ideas fuelling suspicion of mainstream news, and outright conspiracy theories.¹³ According to Gradoń, one of the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has on the society, is the rise in cyber-enabled crime, terrorism, and information warfare including – but not limited to – disinformation campaigns and fake news propagation, that are undermining social fabric, causing civil unrest, and increasing the emotional consequences: fear, anxiety and uncertainty. This means increased challenges for the law-enforcement agencies and institutions responsible for public security and safety.¹⁴ The February 19, 2020, Hanau,

⁸ Anni Sternisko – Aleksandra Cichocka – Jay J Van Bavel: The dark side of social movements: social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 2020, Vol. 35, p. 1.

⁹ Jan-Willem van Prooijen – Karen M. Douglas: Belief in conspiracy theories: Basic principles of an emerging research domain. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 2018, Vol. 48, No. 7, p. 897.

¹⁰ About the relationship between democracy and the rule of law: Zoltán J. Tóth: A demokrácia és a jogállamiság kapcsolata. (The relationship between democracy and the rule of law) *Jogtudományi Közlöny*, 2019, No. 7-8, p. 302-317. (In Hungarian)

¹¹ Anni Sternisko – Aleksandra Cichocka – Jay J Van Bavel: The dark side of social movements: social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 2020, Vol. 35, p. 4.

¹² Timothy R. Tangherlini – Shadi Shahsavari – Behnam Shahbazi – Ehsan Ebrahimzadeh – Vwani Roychowdhury: An automated pipeline for the discovery of conspiracy and conspiracy theory narrative frameworks: Bridgegate, Pizzagate and storytelling on the web. *PLOS One*, 2020, Vol. 15, No. 6, p. 34.

¹³ Antonis Papasavva – Jeremy Blackburn – Gianluca Stringhini – Savvas Zannettou – Emiliano De Cristofaro: "Is it a Qoincidence?": A First Step Towards Understanding and Characterizing the QAnon Movement on Voat.co. p. 1. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2009.04885.pdf> (21/01/2021.)

¹⁴ Gradoń, Kacper. Crime in the time of the plague: fake news pandemic and the challenges to law-enforcement and intelligence community. *Society Register*, 2020, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 134.

Germany, shisha bar attack by Tobias Rathjen is a recent example of how conspiracy theories could play a role in radicalization to terrorist violence.¹⁵

III. Origins of “The Storm” conspiracy theory and its connection to QAnon

QAnon believers predict the secret war between Trump and the “deep state” network will lead to “The Storm” – a day of reckoning when Trump’s opponents will be arrested or executed. Recently, QAnon believers have also pushed a range of baseless coronavirus conspiracies. These include claims the virus is a hoax, or a Chinese bioweapon designed to hurt Trump’s re-election chances.¹⁶

“The Storm” became an overnight sensation online. It is a meta-conspiracy, in which the investigations into Russian meddling in the 2016 election and potential collusion with the Trump campaign is upside down. Special counsel Robert Mueller, in this universe, is preparing to indict hundreds of Democrats and Hollywood celebrities for their roles in a massive worldwide pedophilia ring, operated by “globalists” who are conspiring to destroy Trump, who is masterminding this “countercoup.” In a few weeks, the theory has become the obsession of almost every conspiracy theorist, notably Alex Jones and his Infowars¹⁷ operation, as well as social-media figures such as Liz Crokin.

“The Storm” originates from Trump’s cryptic remarks on October 6, 2017 saying that a gathering of military leaders represented “the calm before the storm.” When asked what he meant, he said: “You’ll see.” Three weeks later, an anonymous at the message board 4chan – one of the main organizing and recruitment forums for the alt-right¹⁸ – who claimed he had high-level “Q” national-security clearance began publishing cryptic messages, that he claimed were “intel drops” intended to start informing the public about what was really happening inside the White House, and what Trump meant by his strange remarks. According to “QAnon,” Trump’s remark was a reference to the indictments handed down by Mueller in late October. “QAnon,” claimed that Trump was never under investigation, instead, those indictments were being directed at a massive conspiracy involving a global pedophilia ring operated by high-level Democrats and other “globalists” who were part of a plot to overthrow Trump’s presidency with a “deep state” coup. The same ring that was the focus of the “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory that excited much of the far right in the months after the 2016 election. The conspiracists, including Jones, claimed that Clinton campaign adviser John Podesta’s emails, stolen by hackers during the campaign and published on Wikileaks, revealed that he, Clinton, and a host of others were part of a pedophilia ring operating out of a Washington, D.C., pizza parlor.

¹⁵ Blyth Crawford –Florence Keen: The Hanau Terrorist Attack: How Race Hate and Conspiracy Theories Are Fueling Global Far-Right Violence. CTC Sentinel, 2020, Vol. 13, No. 3, Cited by: Amarnath Amarasingam – Marc-André Argentino: The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making? CTC Sentinel, 2020, Vol. 13, No. 7, p. 41.

¹⁶ Audrey Courty: QAnon believers will likely outlast and outsmart Twitter’s bans. <https://theconversation.com/qanon-believers-will-likely-outlast-and-outsmart-twitters-bans-143192> (21/01/2021.)

¹⁷ <https://www.infowars.com/> (21/01/2021.)

¹⁸ What is the alt-right? „Although the movement is notoriously difficult to define, a few overarching themes can be delineated: unequivocal rejections of immigration and multiculturalism among most, if not all, altright subgroups; an intense criticism of feminism, in particular within the manosphere community, which itself is divided into several clans with different goals and subcultures (men’s rights activists, Men Going Their Own Way, pick-up artists, incels).” Maxime Dafaure: The “Great Meme War:” the AltRight and its Multifarious Enemies. Angles, 2020, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 1.

In the new expanded version of the theory, this ring has gone global. “QAnon” and the conspiracy theorists at 4chan, 8chan, and on Twitter claimed that this pedophilia ring is the real focus of Mueller’s investigation. The general conclusion on social media, was that a wave of arrests – including Clinton, Obama, Podesta, Soros, Sen. John McCain, and a number of leading Hollywood figures and Democrats was about to happen. There has been a credibility issue for “QAnon” early on, since he posted in early November a scenario in which hundreds of arrests, and massive social turmoil were about to happen in a matter of days. November came and went, without any such event. But that has not decreased the enthusiasm of QAnon’s fans. These apparently include a significant portion of radical-right social-media users, as indicated by the Southern Poverty Law Center’s (SPLC) Hate Tracker, which monitors the spread of extremist ideologies and claims on Twitter.¹⁹

IV. The basics and the evolution of the QAnon conspiracy theory

QAnon is a big tent conspiracy theory, a meta narrative that knits together contemporary politics and old racist tropes with centuries of history. Qanon at its core is the idea that all American presidents between John F. Kennedy and Donald Trump have been working with a cabal of globalist elites called “The Cabal” to undermine American democracy and forward their own nefarious agenda.

(This cabal includes Soros and the Rothschild family, but the theory is more anti-elite than explicitly anti-Semitic.) In all versions of the mythos, the Cabal seeks to destroy American freedom and subjugate the nation to the wills of a world government. In some versions of the mythos, the agenda also includes pedophilia, blood sacrifice, Satanism and other attention-grabbing sins. QAnon is a hopeful conspiracy theory. “The Storm” is coming. Donald Trump is secretly working in league with Robert Mueller to arrest the Deep State who are working to destroy the nation. Sealed indictments have already been filed, and arrests followed by military trials, and possibly executions are coming any day now.

In many ways, QAnon behaves the way most conspiracy theories do. Its core appeal is its sense of a master narrative, an explanation for otherwise disturbing and confusing events that assures its believers that they understand the big picture in ways non-believers do not. This master narrative gives believers a sense of control over uncontrollable events. QAnon believers continually remind each other to “trust the plan,” that Trump and his team have reasons for the steps they are taking, including their decision to reveal their plans only through the internet’s shadiest message boards.²⁰

John F. Kennedy Jr. died in July 1999, when the small plane he was traveling in crashed, killing him and two others. The bodies of Kennedy and his fellow passengers were found in the Atlantic Ocean. According to QAnon, things happened differently: JFK Jr. survived an attempt on his life by the “Deep State” and will soon return to exact revenge and help Trump fight back against a globally active cabal of satanic pedophile elites that is responsible for all the evil in the world. The QAnon worldview is particularly prone to these sorts of predictions, and many adherents eagerly anticipate future events that will completely change the world, from “the Storm” to the “Great Awakening” (a time when the general population will come to realize that they have been lied to for decades). Years of research into millennial movements and how they survive the often-inevitable failures of these prophecies

¹⁹ David Neiwert: Conspiracy meta-theory 'The Storm' pushes the 'alternative' envelope yet again. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/01/17/conspiracy-meta-theory-storm-pushes-alternative-envelope-yet-again> (21/01/2021.)

²⁰ Ethan Zuckerman: QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal. *Journal of Design and Science*, 2019, No. 6, pp 3-4.

make clear that most movements can survive these, as long as certain conditions are in place. The fact that JFK Jr. did not come back on Saturday October 17th at a Trump rally, is only one of many QAnon “prophecies” that have not come true: Hillary Clinton has not been arrested, high profile elites have not been killed or sent to Guantanamo Bay, the hundred thousand sealed indictments were not released, and the promised Golden Age has not been delivered, and yet, the movement lives on.²¹

QAnon was born on the internet and continues to recruit members there.²² On 28 October 2017, a user calling themselves Q who claimed to have high-level security clearance posted a series of cryptic messages on the “politically incorrect” section of the 4chan (Later on 8chan and its successor, 8kun.²³), an anonymous imageboard with a “no rules” policy that has been associated with pranks, violence, and illegal and extremist content. Q claimed that they would work to covertly inform the public about President Trump’s ongoing battle against the “deep state”, a blanket term used to describe those in power working against the president. Over the next few years, users claiming to be Q have made over 4,000 posts, known as “Qdrops” (or “breadcrumbs”²⁴), fuelling the growth of a lurid meta-conspiracy connecting a range of harmful narratives. The QAnon theory now connects antivaccine, anti-5G conspiracies, antisemitic and antimigrant tropes, and several bizarre theories that the world is in the thrall of a group of pedophile elites set on global domination in part aided by ritualistic child sacrifice.²⁵

The most successful conspiracy theories morph and evolve in order to stay relevant for followers.²⁶ By 2020, Q’s conspiracy theory has significantly expanded. Its followers are believed to be in hundreds of thousands united by a shared hate of mainstream elites, a belief in the existence of invisible power groups that run the world, ignorance towards institutions of the political and social system, contempt of journalists, and rejection of mainstream media and their representation of reality. QAnon believers’ claims are complex and contradictory, crossing ideological lines.²⁷ What started as “a sprawling but unfounded conspiracy theory claiming the existence of a global network of political elites and celebrities who want to take down Trump”²⁸, soon expanded to include a secret cabal running a child sex trafficking ring

²¹ Amarnath Amarasingam – Marc-André Argentinio: QAnon’s Predictions Haven’t Come True; So How Does the Movement Survive the Failure of Prophecy? <https://religiondispatches.org/qanons-predictions-havent-come-true-so-how-does-the-movement-survive-the-failure-of-prophecy/> (21/01/2021.)

²² Stephanie Beene – Katie Greerb: A call to action for librarians: Countering conspiracy theories in the age of QAnon. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 2021, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 2.

²³ Chris Francescani: The men behind QAnon. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/men-qanon/story?id=73046374> (21/01/2021.)

²⁴ More on the language used by QAnon adherents: Steven Crimando: Q-Speak: The Language of QAnon. <https://www.asisonline.org/security-management-magazine/latest-news/online-exclusives/2021/q-speak-the-language-of-qanon/> (21/01/2021.)

²⁵ Aoife Gallagher – Jacob Davey – Mackenzie Hart: *The Genesis of a Conspiracy Theory: Key trends in QAnon activity since 2017*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London/Washington DC/Beirut/Toronto, 2020. p. 3. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Genesis-of-a-Conspiracy-Theory.pdf>

²⁶ Stephanie Beene – Katie Greerb: A call to action for librarians: Countering conspiracy theories in the age of QAnon. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 2021, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 2.

²⁷ Tom De Smedt – Verica Rupar – Sylvia Jaki – Olivier Cauberghe – Pierre Voué – Joan Caballero: *The QAnon superconspiracy - Analysis of tweets during the 2020 US presidential election*. 2020. p. 2. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348281072_The_QAnon_superconspiracy_-_Analysis_of_tweets_during_the_2020_US_presidential_election (21/01/2021.)

²⁸ Audrey Courty: QAnon believers will likely outlast and outsmart Twitter’s bans. <https://theconversation.com/qanon-believers-will-likely-outlast-and-outsmart-twitters-bans-143192> Cited by: Tom De Smedt – Verica Rupar – Sylvia Jaki – Olivier Cauberghe – Pierre Voué – Joan Caballero: *The QAnon superconspiracy - Analysis of tweets during the 2020 US presidential election*. 2020. p. 2. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348281072_The_QAnon_superconspiracy_-_Analysis_of_tweets_during_the_2020_US_presidential_election (21/01/2021.)

(#PIZZAGATE), a secret war between the Trump administration and a “deep state”, wide corruption of the political system, powerful elites using coronavirus as a cover to implant people with microchips, governments erecting 5G towers during lockdown to surveil the population, and many other apocalyptic predictions wrapped up in evangelistic Christianity that increasingly defines the movement. The QAnon movement is rooted in populism, it aims to evoke resentments of the everyman. Its series of confusing claims resemble the conspiracy legends of the post, but the power of online social media has given them platforms to share, promote, and connect. Efforts have been made to reduce this power. In July 2020, Twitter suspended 7,000 QAnon-related accounts. In August, Facebook deleted over 790 groups, 100 pages, and 1,500 ads tied to QAnon and restricted the accounts of hundreds of other Facebook groups and thousands of Instagram accounts.²⁹ At first glance, QAnon, the bizarre assemblage of far-right conspiracy theories seems to present a far lesser threat to public security. However, it has contributed to the radicalization of several people to notable criminal acts or acts of violence. Though less organized than jihadi or far-right extremists, Amarasingam and Argentino argue that QAnon represents a novel challenge to public security.³⁰

In 2018, Time magazine declared Q one of the 25 most influential people on the Internet. argument to make. Q’s “drops” – thousands of cryptic posts posted on image boards 4chan and 8chan – have led to countless YouTube videos, podcasts, and an explosion of online and offline writing trying to interpret the utterances of the anonymous “Q Clearance Patriot.” In March of 2019, “QAnon: An Invitation to a Great Awakening”, a book written by QAnon followers and supporters, peaked at #2 on Amazon’s list of best-selling books.³¹

“Q” T-shirts and signs are regularly seen at Trump events. Qanon billboards have been spotted around the country. “Q” paraphernalia is readily available on Amazon. A Qanon app was surprisingly popular on Apple’s App Store until it was removed.³²

The FBI has identified fringe conspiracy theories as a domestic terrorist threat. The FBI intelligence bulletin from the bureau’s Phoenix field office, dated May 30, 2019, describes “conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremists”, as a growing threat, and notes that it is the first such report to do so. It lists a number of arrests, including some that haven’t been publicized, related to violent incidents motivated by fringe beliefs. The document specifically mentions QAnon.³³ QAnon believers have been linked to armed standoffs, attempted kidnappings, harassment and at least one killing since the conspiracy picked up steam in 2017.³⁴ Nevada man, Matthew Wright, armed himself with an AR-15-style rifle, a handgun and extra ammunition, and drove an armored truck onto a bridge near the Hoover Dam in June 2018. There, he engaged in a 90-minute standoff with police while demanding the release of an inspector general’s report on the government investigation of Hillary Clinton’s email practices. After his arrest, he wrote letters to Trump and other officials, calling himself a “humble patriot” and making references to the QAnon slogans “Great Awakening” and

²⁹ Tom De Smedt – Verica Rupar – Sylvia Jaki – Olivier Cauberghe – Pierre Voué – Joan Caballero: The QAnon superconspiracy – Analysis of tweets during the 2020 US presidential election. 2020. p. 2. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348281072_The_QAnon_superconspiracy_-_Analysis_of_tweets_during_the_2020_US_presidential_election_\(21/01/2021.\)](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348281072_The_QAnon_superconspiracy_-_Analysis_of_tweets_during_the_2020_US_presidential_election_(21/01/2021.))

³⁰ Amarnath Amarasingam – Marc-André Argentino: The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making? CTC Sentinel, 2020, Vol. 13, No. 7, p. 37.

³¹ Ethan Zuckerman: QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal. Journal of Design and Science, 2019, No. 6, p. 3.

³² Ben Collins – Brandy Zadrozny: The far right is struggling to contain Qanon after giving it life. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/far-right-struggling-contain-qanon-after-giving-it-life-n899741> (21/01/2021.)

³³ Jana Winter: Exclusive: FBI document warns conspiracy theories are a new domestic terrorism threat. <https://news.yahoo.com/fbi-documents-conspiracy-theories-terrorism-160000507.html> (21/01/2021.)

³⁴ Audrey Courty: QAnon believers will likely outlast and outsmart Twitter’s bans. <https://theconversation.com/qanon-believers-will-likely-outlast-and-outsmart-twitters-bans-143192> (21/01/2021.)

“Where we go one, we go all.” In Arizona, the leader of a local veterans-aid group in Tucson, Michael Lewis Arthur Meyer, was arrested in July 2018 after occupying a tower at a cement plant that he insisted was sheltering a child-sex-trafficking ring. Meyer “alleged a law enforcement cover-up and referenced the QAnon conspiracy theory as he and armed group members searched” for the nonexistent ring, according to the FBI bulletin. After the bulletin was prepared, there were other incidents in Arizona and Colorado. Timothy Larson was accused in September of taking a crowbar to the altar inside the Chapel of the Holy Cross in Sedona, while yelling about the Catholic Church and sex trafficking. Larson’s social media posts are filled with QAnon references and pro-Trump memes.

In December the police in Parker, Colo., charged Cynthia Abcug with conspiring with fellow QAnon believers to kidnap one of her children, who had been removed from her custody. Abcug believed her child was being held by Satan worshipers and pedophiles, according to her arrest warrant. Anthony Comello said in a New York City court in December that his belief in QAnon had led him to murder a Gambino mob boss, Francesco Cali, who he asserted was part of the deep state cabal working against Trump. Comello’s defense lawyer, Robert C. Gottlieb, said in a court filing that after the 2016 election, his client’s family “began to notice changes to his personality” that worsened over time. Comello’s support for QAnon went beyond mere participation in a radical political organization,” Gottlieb wrote. “It evolved into a delusional obsession.”³⁵ QAnon is arguably no longer simply a fringe conspiracy theory but an ideology that has demonstrated its capacity to radicalize to violence individuals at an alarming speed.³⁶

The far-right conspiracy movement has gained popularity in the run up to the 2020 election.³⁷ For months, Trump has falsely claimed the November presidential election was rigged and that is why he was not re-elected. The president’s words have mirrored and fed conspiracy theories spread by followers of the QAnon movement. While conspiracy theorists are often dismissed as “crazy people on social media,” QAnon believers were among the individuals at the front line of the storming of Capitol Hill.³⁸ QAnon is also gaining momentum in Germany.³⁹

After the inauguration of Joe Biden on January 20, 2021, some Q believers are giving up, while others still “trust the plan”.⁴⁰

V. The activity of Q believers on online platforms

To better understand the genesis of QAnon, Gallagher et al. have tracked discussion of the theory across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube since its inception, finding that all four platforms play an important role in the promotion of this theory. In particular, the research of Gallagher et al. highlights a significant increase in the discussion of QAnon in

³⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/09/us/politics/qanon-trump-conspiracy-theory.html> (21/01/2021.)

³⁶ Amarnath Amarasingam – Marc-André Argentino: The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making? CTC Sentinel, 2020, Vol. 13, No. 7, p. 42.

³⁷ Emilio Ferrara – Herbert Chang – Emily Chen – Goran Muric – Jaimin Patel: Characterizing Social Media Manipulation in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. First Monday, 2020. Vol. 25. No. 11. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i11.11431>.

³⁸ Marc-André Argentino: QAnon and the storm of the US Capitol: The offline effect of online conspiracy theories. <https://qz.com/1954265/the-attack-on-the-us-capitol-shows-the-real-danger-of-qanon/> (21/01/2021.)

³⁹ Esther Felden – Jordan Wildon – Anne Höhn – Lewis Sanders IV: As Donald Trump exits, QAnon takes hold in Germany. <https://www.dw.com/en/as-donald-trump-exits-qanon-takes-hold-in-germany/a-56277928>

⁴⁰ E. J. Dickson: QAnon Believers Struggle With the Two Hardest Words: ‘President Biden’. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/qanon-joe-biden-inauguration-donald-trump-1116733/> (21/01/2021.)

2020 and suggests that QAnon is reaching a larger audience. The reasons behind this uptick need more investigation, but regardless of its genesis reflect a greater flow of traffic around this conspiracy. An analysis of this recent surge in activity reveals how the theory and its believers have been important in promoting disinformation around COVID-19 and the protests around the death of George Floyd. The significant surge in support for the theory in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election is also something that should be taken seriously. At its core, according to Gallagher et al., the QAnon community seeks to denigrate Trump's political opponents while idolising his supporters. The widespread disinformation that is attached to the conspiracy means it has the potential to act as an important vehicle for disinformation leading up to the election.⁴¹ The key findings of Gallagher et al. across Facebook and Instagram are the following: Gallagher et al. have observed a notable increase of discussion around QAnon in 2020, as well as an increase in the number of users engaging in this conversation on Facebook and Twitter. The number of users engaging in discussion of QAnon have increased on both Facebook and Twitter in 2020. The most notable increase, in March 2020, saw the number of Facebook users increase from an average of 344 users per day between March 2 and 8, to 898 between March 22 and 29. Similarly, average Twitter users grew from 37,302 in the first week to 89,338 in the last. Both Facebook group membership and engagement rates within those Facebook groups increased significantly in March 2020. Membership of QAnon groups on Facebook increased by 120% in March and engagement rates increased by 91%.

Further research is required into why the QAnon community's growth is so rapid, but according to Gallagher et al. possible explanations include that this is a by-product of people spending more time on social media, because of the COVID-19 lockdowns, or evidence of a coordinated push to amplify the QAnon theory.

Although the volume of conversation around QAnon on Twitter has been more varied than on Facebook and Instagram, all three platforms saw an increase of QAnon activity in March 2020. While Gallagher et al. saw a sharp rise of QAnon activity in 2020 on Facebook and Instagram, Twitter traffic has had greater variance since 2017 and is often reactive to real-world events that have resulted in increased media coverage of the QAnon community. The largest increase in Twitter conversation (249%) came just two months into the Q movement in January 2018 when the community latched onto the hashtag #ReleaseTheMemo. The sudden expansion of this trend drew media attention, with research suggesting Russian bot interference on Twitter. This increase is not seen in Facebook conversation at the same time. Other events which caused notable spikes on Twitter, and on Facebook include the first appearance of Q followers at Trump rallies in August 2018 and the death of Jeffrey Epstein in August 2019.

It is primarily driven from the US, but there is evidence that QAnon is being picked up internationally: Gallagher et al. found that the top four countries driving discussion of QAnon on Twitter were the U.S., the UK, Canada and Australia. On average the U.S. accounted for 89.5% of mentions of Q-related hashtags from October 2017 to October 2019. In the last eight months this has dropped to 87%, suggesting that the conspiracy theory is spreading and taking hold internationally. YouTube plays an important role in the sharing of Q-related content: The analysis showed that 20.4% of all Q-related Facebook posts contained links to YouTube, while on Twitter 5% of Q-related posts contained YouTube links. Matching bursts in activity seen elsewhere in the study, a significant increase in YouTube link sharing on Twitter and Facebook was observed in March 2020.⁴²

⁴¹ Aoife Gallagher – Jacob Davey – Mackenzie Hart: *The Genesis of a Conspiracy Theory: Key trends in QAnon activity since 2017*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London/Washington DC/Beirut/Toronto, 2020. p. 3-4. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Genesis-of-a-Conspiracy-Theory.pdf> (21/01/2021.)

⁴² *ibid.* p. 4-5.

VI. Social media manipulation nearing the U.S. election

Social media have been reportedly used to distort public opinion nearing elections in the U.S. and beyond. With over 240 million election-related tweets recorded between 20 June and 9 September 2020, in the study of Ferrara et al. social media manipulation in the context of the November 3, 2020 U.S. presidential election was charted. Ferrara et al. focused on characterizing two salient dimensions of social media manipulation, namely automation (e.g., the prevalence of bots), and distortion (e.g., manipulation of narratives, injection of conspiracies or rumors). Despite being outnumbered by several orders of magnitude, according to the study, only a few thousands of bots generated spikes of conversations around real-world political events in all comparable with the volume of activity of humans.

Ferrara et al. discover that bots also exacerbate the consumption of content produced by users with their same political views, worsening the issue of political echo chambers. Ferrara et al. draw a clear connection between bots, hyper-partisan media outlets, and conspiracy groups, suggesting the presence of systematic efforts to distort political narratives and propagate disinformation. Their findings may have impactful implications, shedding light on different forms of social media manipulation that may ultimately pose a risk to the integrity of the election. The analysis of Ferrara et al. focused on three main conspiracy groups: 1. QAnon 2. “gate” conspiracies 3. Covid conspiracies.

1. QAnon: These users frequently use hashtags such as #qanon, #wwglwga (where we go one, we go all), #taketheoath, #thegreatawakening and #qarmy. An example of a typical tweet from a QAnon supporter is: “@potus @realDonaldTrump was indeed correct, the beruit fire was hit by a missile, oh and to the rest of you calling this fake, you are not a qanon you need to go ahead and change to your real handles u liberal scumbags just purposely put out misinfo and exposed yourselves, thnxnan.

2. “gate” conspiracies: Another indicator of conspiratorial content is signalled by the suffix ‘-gate’ with theories such as obamagate, an unvalidated claim against the Obama’s officials that allegedly conspired to entrap Trump’s former national security adviser, Michael Flynn, as part of a larger plot to bring down the then-incoming president. Another is pizzagate, a debunked claim that connects several high-ranking Democratic Party officials and U.S. restaurants with an alleged human trafficking and child sex ring. An example of a typical conspiratorial tweet related to these two conspiracies is: “#obamagate when will law enforcement take anything seriously? there is EVIDENCE!!!! everyone involved in the trafficking ring is laughing because they KNOW nothing will be done. @HillaryClinton @realDonaldTrump. justice will be served one way or another. literally disgusting.”

3. Covid conspiracies: an excess of false claims related to the coronavirus pandemic emerged recently, mostly about the scale of the pandemic and the origin, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of the disease. The false claims typically go alongside the hashtags such as #plandemic, #scandemic or #fakevirus. A typical tweet referring to the false claims regarding the origins of the coronavirus is: “@fyjackson @rickyb_sports @rhus00 @KamalaHarris @realDonaldTrump The plandemic is a leftist design. And it’s backfiring on them. We’ve had an effective treatment for covid19, the entire time. Leftists hate Trump so much, they are willing to murder 10’s of thousands of Americans to try to make him look bad. The jig is up.”

Looking at conspiracy-related narratives in their dataset, Ferrara et al. observe that QAnon related material has more highly active and engaged users than -gate narratives. The most frequently used hashtag, #wwglwga, had more than 600,000 tweets from 140,000 users;

by contrast #obamagate had 414,000 tweets from 125,000 users. This suggests that the QAnon community using hashtags such as #wwglwga has a more active user base.⁴³

VII. The attack on the U.S. Capitol

8,000 pro-Trump demonstrators streamed down Pennsylvania Avenue after hearing Trump speak near the White House. Within 15 minutes Sund's outer perimeter on the Capitol's west side was breached. With 1,400 Capitol Police officers on duty, the forces were quickly overrun.⁴⁴ The ceremonial session of Congress to formally declare President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s victory turned into a scene of violence and chaos on January 6, 2021, when the pro-Trump mob stormed the Capitol, halting the counting of electoral votes. The large group broke through barricades and breached the building.⁴⁵

When President Trump railed against the election results from a stage near the White House on Wednesday, January 6, 2021, his loyalists were already gathering at the Capitol. For weeks, Trump had urged his supporters to go to Washington to stop the certification of the election results, and several simultaneous rallies were planned for Wednesday.

Hundreds assemble on the Capitol lawn, more than a mile away from where Trump will soon speak near the White House. Among them are the Proud Boys, a far-right group, identifiable by their orange hats. About 15 minutes into his speech, Trump tells rally attendees to walk to the Capitol. "You have to show strength," he says. Supporters leave the rally before Trump's speech ends, and they head toward the Capitol. As they arrive, another crowd of supporters that has already gathered along the west perimeter fence becomes more agitated. A pipe bomb is reported at the Republican National Committee building, a block away from the Capitol, another is discovered at the Democratic National Committee headquarters. About 20 minutes before Trump's speech ends, some in the Capitol crowd harass officers at the barricades and start to get physical. Others follow suit, until they violently overwhelm the police and breach the building's outer perimeter. The mob quickly breaks through three additional barricades, forcing officers back onto the west Capitol steps. Capitol Police officers in riot gear arrive. The speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, begins the proceedings to certify the Electoral College vote at a joint session of Congress, alongside Vice President Mike Pence. As Trump's speech comes to an end, he calls on his supporters to "walk down Pennsylvania Avenue" toward the Capitol. Rioters there continue to violently clash with officers, including reinforcements from the local police department who have arrived. Inside the Capitol, members of Congress are unaware of the extent of the violence outside. The House and Senate have moved to their separate chambers to debate certifying the vote. Chief Steven Sund of the Capitol Police makes the request for immediate assistance from the D.C. National Guard. Rioters on the west side break into the building around 2:11 p.m. Two minutes later, as they reach the stairs next to the Senate chamber, the Senate is called into recess. Rioters enter through a door and a broken window on the northwest side. More than five minutes after the first rioters break into the building, the House also goes into recess. The

⁴³ Emilio Ferrara – Herbert Chang – Emily Chen – Goran Muric – Jaimin Patel: Characterizing Social Media Manipulation in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. First Monday, 2020, Vol. 25, No. 11, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i11.11431>.

⁴⁴ Carol D. Leonnig – Aaron C. Davis – Peter Hermann – Karoun Demirjian: Outgoing Capitol Police chief: House, Senate security officials hamstrung efforts to call in National Guard. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/sund-riot-national-guard/2021/01/10/fc2ce7d4-5384-11eb-a817-e5e7f8a406d6_story.html (21/01/2021.)

⁴⁵ Luke Broadwater – Emily Cochrane: Inside the Capitol, the Sound of the Mob Came First. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/us/politics/photos-capitol-building-protesters.html?auth=linked-google> (21/01/2021.)

police are clashing with the mob inside the building as some members of Congress are able to evacuate, others are trapped inside. Outside the building, the crowd grows as attendees from Trump's rally continue to stream in. The mob becomes more violent, dragging and beating officers. Three hours will pass before the sergeant-at-arms declares the building secure.⁴⁶ The rioters took over the house and senate chambers and smashed windows.⁴⁷ 5 people died in the Capitol riot: A police officer was beaten, a rioter was shot, and three others died during the rampage.⁴⁸ Two days before Congress was set to formalize President-elect Joe Biden's victory, Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund was becoming increasingly worried about the size of the pro-Trump crowds expected to stream into Washington in protest. To be on the safe side, Sund asked House and Senate security officials for permission to request that the D.C. National Guard be placed on standby in case he needed quick backup. But, Sund said Sunday, they turned him down. In his first interview since pro-Trump rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol last week, Sund, who has since resigned his post, said his supervisors were reluctant to take formal steps to put the Guard on call even as police intelligence suggested that the crowd Trump had invited to Washington to protest his defeat probably would be much larger than earlier demonstrations.⁴⁹

Twitter banned Donald Trump's account Friday, citing "the risk of further incitement of violence."⁵⁰ In a post to Twitter, which has since been deleted, Trump called for "peace" and told the rioters to "go home". However, he praised his supporters as "special". He repeated that the election had been stolen and encouraged his supporters to "remember" the day. In a first post since being locked out of Twitter, Trump on Friday condemned the "heinous" attack on the US Capitol and pledged a "smooth" transition of power to the Biden administration.⁵¹

Former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger posted a video to Twitter denouncing the violent mob that overtook the U.S. Capitol. The video starts by recalling Kristallnacht – or the Night of Broken Glass – an infamous night in 1938 when a mob of Nazi sympathizers stormed through Jewish neighborhoods in Germany, destroying thousands of businesses, rounding up Jewish men to be sent to concentration camps and killing dozens of people in the process. "Wednesday was the day of broken glass right here in the United States" Schwarzenegger says in the video. The broken glass was in the windows of the United States Capitol. But the mob did not just shatter the windows of the Capitol. They shattered the ideals we took for granted. They did not just break down the doors of the building that housed American democracy. They trampled the very principles on which our country was

⁴⁶ Lauren Leatherby – Arielle Ray – Anjali Singhvi – Christiaan Triebert – Derek Watkins – Haley Willis: How a Presidential Rally Turned Into a Capitol Rampage. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/01/12/us/capitol-mob-timeline.html> (21/01/2021.)

⁴⁷ Harriet Brewis: Jacob Chansley: 'QAnon Shaman' charged over US Capitol riots. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/trump-supporter-jake-angeli-jamiroquai-arrested-b789216.html> (21/01/2021.)

⁴⁸ Jack Healy: These Are the 5 People Who Died in the Capitol Riot. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/who-died-in-capitol-building-attack.html> (21/01/2021.)

⁴⁹ Carol D. Leonnig – Aaron C. Davis – Peter Hermann – Karoun Demirjian: Outgoing Capitol Police chief: House, Senate security officials hamstrung efforts to call in National Guard. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/sund-riot-national-guard/2021/01/10/fc2ce7d4-5384-11eb-a817-e5e7f8a406d6_story.html (21/01/2021.)

⁵⁰ Tali Arbel: Twitter bans Trump, citing risk of violent incitement. <https://www.myrecordjournal.com/News/National/Twitter-bans-Trump-citing-risk-of-violent-incitement.html> (21/01/2021.)

⁵¹ James Franey: US Capitol storming: What you need to know. <https://www.dw.com/en/us-capitol-storming-what-you-need-to-know/a-56154560> (21/01/2021.)

founded."⁵²

VIII. Was the attack on the U.S. Capitol domestic terrorism?

Joe Biden called the pro-Trump mob that sieged the US Capitol “domestic terrorists”. The offenders should not be called protesters, rather “a riotous mob, insurrectionists, domestic terrorists,” Biden said.⁵³ Some also called the protesters storming Capitol domestic terrorism,⁵⁴ others called it a coup.⁵⁵

Sacco in the report titled “Domestic Terrorism and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol. CRS INSIGHT, 2021.” discusses whether or not participants and their actions may be categorized as domestic terrorists and domestic terrorism, and issues around designating domestic fringe groups, such as the Boogaloo Bois and Proud Boys who were allegedly involved in the attack, as terrorist organizations.⁵⁶ The federal definition of domestic terrorism describes domestic terrorists as “Americans who commit ideologically driven crimes in the United States but lack foreign direction or influence.”⁵⁷ The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) generally relies on two sources to define domestic terrorism. First, the Code of Federal Regulations characterizes “terrorism” as including “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.”⁵⁸ Second, 18 U.S.C. §2331(5) more narrowly defines “domestic terrorism.” This definition comes from Section 802 of the USA PATRIOT Act (P.L. 107-56). According to 18 U.S.C. §2331(5), domestic terrorism occurs primarily within U.S. territorial jurisdiction, and involves “(A) acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State; (B) appear to be intended— (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping [...]”⁵⁹ According to Sacco, the participants’ actions seem to fit both definitions. Sacco states, that video evidence and media reports portray participants committing acts dangerous to human life and those actions appeared to be intended both to influence the policy of the U.S. government by intimidation and affect its conduct through possible assassination and/or kidnapping.⁶⁰ While the participants’ actions on January 6 may be consistent with the definition of domestic terrorism, Sacco notes that domestic terrorism is not a chargeable offense on its own. While individuals involved in the attack may belong to extremist groups such the Proud Boys and Boogaloo Bois or adhere to their ideology, Sacco states that the federal government declines to designate these groups as domestic terrorist groups and instead focuses on the violent

⁵² Kat Lonsdorf: Recalling Nazis From His Childhood, Arnold Schwarzenegger Decries The Capitol Assault. <https://www.npr.org/sections/congress-electoral-college-tally-live-updates/2021/01/10/955435826/recalling-nazis-from-his-childhood-arnold-schwarzenegger-decries-the-capitol-ass> (21/01/2021.)

⁵³ Joe Biden slams pro-Trump mob as 'domestic terrorists'. <https://www.dw.com/en/joe-biden-slams-pro-trump-mob-as-domestic-terrorists/a-56163969> (21/01/2021.)

⁵⁴ David Rutz: Conservative media members erupt with anger over protesters storming Capitol: 'This is domestic terrorism'. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/conservative-media-members-erupt-anger-violent-protesters-storming-capitol> (21/01/2021.)

⁵⁵ David A. Graham: This Is a Coup. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/attempted-coup/617570/> (21/01/2021.)

⁵⁶ Lisa N. Sacco: Domestic Terrorism and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol. CRS INSIGHT, 2021. p. 1. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11573> (21/01/2021.)

⁵⁷ *ibid.* p. 1.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 1.

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p. 1–2.

⁶⁰ *ibid.* p. 1–2.

criminal acts of individuals, whether members of these groups or not.⁶¹ According to Sacco “In light of the attack on the U.S. Capitol and its domestic terrorism nexus, Congress may wish to consider any number of changes to related law and policy. Among other options, it could decide to make domestic terrorism a chargeable federal offense under Title 18, the main criminal code of the federal government. It could devote additional resources to the FBI, the agency with lead responsibility for terrorism investigations at the federal level, to counter the domestic terrorism threat. Further, it could authorize and devote resources to improving data collection and sharing on this issue (currently, the federal government does not maintain a publicly available database with information on incidents of domestic terrorism).”⁶²

IX. Qanon’s role in the incident and the “Q Shaman”

A leader in the QAnon movement was one of the rioters storming the Capitol: the “Q Shaman” or “QAnon Shaman” aka Jake Angeli (or Yellowstone Wolf⁶³), whose real name is Jacob Anthony Chansley. On January 6, 2021, he took photos on the Senate dais and marched through the Capitol with a megaphone. Known for wearing red, white, and blue face paint and a horned helmet, he has become a notable figure in the movement, appearing at far-right rallies in Arizona in the past year. The “Q Shaman” is one of many figures in the world of QAnon whose actions inspire and influence the movement. The movement has played a massive role in organizing nationwide “Stop the Steal” protests in the two months since President-elect Joe Biden won the 2020 election. As Q has become increasingly hands-off, giving fewer and fewer messages to his devotees on the fringe message board 8kun (previously known as 8chan), leaders like Angeli have gained fame and power in the movement. Angeli's presence at the riot, along with others wearing QAnon paraphernalia, comes as the conspiracy-theory movement has been responsible for the popularization of Trump's voter-fraud conspiracy theories.⁶⁴

Jacob Anthony Chansley is being held in police custody. He is suspected of being the protester photographed with his face painted and elaborate horned headgear. Images of him emerged on social media following the attack on the Capitol. A statement from the federal attorney for Washington DC said: “It is alleged that Chansley was identified as the man seen in media coverage who entered the Capitol building dressed in horns, a bearskin headdress, red, white and blue face paint, shirtless, and tan pants. [...] This individual carried a spear, approximately 6 feet in length, with an American flag tied just below the blade.” Chansley is among dozens of people arrested following the mob invasion.⁶⁵

Chansley was taken into custody Saturday. He told the FBI he came to Washington earlier this week “as a part of a group effort, with other ‘patriots’ from Arizona, at the request of the President that all ‘patriots’ come to D.C. on January 6, 2021,” according to a narrative from investigators in his court record. Chansley had called the FBI the day after the attack Wednesday and confirmed to them he was the person in the photos in the vice president's

⁶¹ *ibid.* p. 2.

⁶² *ibid.* p. 3.

⁶³ Rich Schapiro – Michael Kosnar: Capitol rioter in horned hat gloats as feds work to identify suspects. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/capitol-rioter-horned-hat-gloats-feds-work-identify-suspects-n1253392> (21/01/2021.)

⁶⁴ Rachel E. Greenspan – Haven Orecchio-Egresitz: A well-known QAnon influencer dubbed the 'Q Shaman' has been arrested after playing a highly visible role in the Capitol siege. <https://www.businessinsider.com/q-shaman-qanon-influencer-capitol-siege-washington-dc-protest-riot-2021-1> (21/01/2021.)

⁶⁵ Harriet Brewis: Jacob Chansley: ‘QAnon Shaman’ charged over US Capitol riots. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/trump-supporter-jake-angeli-jamiroquai-arrested-b789216.html> (21/01/2021.)

chair in the Senate, the court document said. His voluntary disclosure to the FBI is the strongest wording in court filings yet indicating coordination between followers of the President that led to the violent and destructive overrun of the Capitol.⁶⁶

Chansley will be held in custody until trial for his alleged role in storming the U.S. Capitol. “Chansley is the radicalized follower-turned-leader of a dangerous extremist group,” said Michael Bailey, U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona, in a legal brief filed on January 14. The brief also said Chansley “made himself the most prominent symbol” of the “violent insurrection that attempted to overthrow the United States Government” and he had planned to return to Washington for Joe Biden's inauguration on Jan. 20. Assistant U.S. Attorney Todd Allison backed away from that statement in court, asking the judge to strike it from her deliberations for detention. Prosecutors said they may reassert the claim during trial. “Strong evidence, including Chansley’s own words and actions at the Capitol, supports that the intent of the Capitol rioters was to capture and assassinate elected officials in the United States Government,” the government's brief said. Chansley faces a six-count federal indictment, including two felonies and four misdemeanors: civil disorder, obstruction of an official proceeding, entering and remaining in a restricted building, disorderly and disruptive conduct in a restricted building, violent entry and disorderly conduct in a Capitol building, parading, demonstrating, or picketing in a Capitol Building.⁶⁷

X. Other people charged

The Justice Department has charged more people from widely circulated photos, related to the incident. Jacob Anthony Chansley, Adam Johnson and Derrick Evans were all charged in a federal court for their alleged actions during January 6's insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, said a Department of Justice statement.

The Department of Justice statement also identifies Johnson of Florida as the man seen carrying the House speaker's lectern under his arm and through the halls of the Capitol. Both men's (Chansley's and Johnson's) identities had floated around social media over the past few days following the incident.

Evans, who was a newly elected member of West Virginia House of Delegates, streamed his participation live on his Facebook page. On Saturday, Evans resigned from his seat, effective immediately.

All three men were charged with one count of knowingly entering or remaining in any restricted building or grounds without lawful authority and one count of violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol Grounds. Johnson was also charged with theft of government property. The Justice Department says both Johnson and Evans were taken into custody on Friday. Among others charged and arrested is Richard Barnett, who was identified as the man who sat at a desk in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office during the siege.⁶⁸

Also on Saturday, Douglas Jensen was arrested for his involvement in the violent crowd breaking into the Capitol, according to the FBI and local authorities in Iowa. FBI officials presented Jensen to Polk County Jail for processing on Saturday and he was booked

⁶⁶Evan Perez – Katelyn Polantz – Paul P. Murphy: DOJ announces charges against man carrying Pelosi's podium, 'QAnon Shaman' in U.S. Capitol riot. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/doj-announces-charges-against-man-carrying-pelosi-s-podium-qanon-shaman-in-u-s-capitol-riot-1.5260904> (21/01/2021.)

⁶⁷ Melissa Blasius: 'Q Shaman' Jacob Chansley to remain jailed pending Capitol riot trial. <https://www.abc15.com/news/state/prosecutors-push-for-q-shaman-jacob-chansley-to-remain-jailed-after-capitol-riots> (21/01/2021.)

⁶⁸ Jason Slotkin: 3 More Charged In Capitol Break-In, Including Men Identified In Viral Images. <https://www.npr.org/sections/congress-electoral-college-tally-live-updates/2021/01/09/955258659/3-charged-in-capitol-break-in-including-men-identified-in-viral-images?t=1610372361070> (21/01/2021.)

into the jail. He faces five federal charges, of unlawfully entering the Capitol, disrupting government business, violent entry and parading in a Capitol building and blocking law enforcement during the riot.⁶⁹

Philadelphia Police Department's Internal Affairs Bureau is investigating whether a detective played any role in the riot on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. One detective reportedly attended the rally in support of Trump that preceded the attack. Across the U.S., police and fire departments are opening probes into officers who attended the rally. In Seattle, Western Pennsylvania and Texas, officers are under investigation to determine if they took part in the violence.⁷⁰

By Saturday, prosecutors had filed 17 cases in federal district court and 40 others in the District of Columbia Superior Court for a variety of offences related to the disorder. These ranged from assaulting police officers to entering restricted areas of the US Capitol, stealing federal property and threatening members of congress. Prosecutors said additional cases remained under review, while dozens of other suspects were being sought by federal agents. The US attorney in Washington vowed that “all options were on the table” for charges, including possibly sedition.⁷¹ The acting US attorney for the District of Columbia, Michael Sherwin, has indicated that many amid the hundreds of pro-Trump rioters who violently invaded the US Capitol are suspected of a range of crimes including felony murder, sedition and conspiracy. At a press conference in Washington, prosecutors said there are at least 160 federal criminal cases open and they are ready to track down individuals across the country and apprehend them wherever possible – potentially arresting hundreds if not thousands of people. 'The range of criminal conduct was unmatched,' Sherwin said. He warned rioters: 'You will be charged and you will be found'.⁷²

XI. The groups who stormed the Capitol

Some of the protesters that broke into buildings on Capitol Hill were carrying symbols and flags strongly associated with particular ideas and factions. In practice many of the members and their causes overlap. Photos show individuals associated with a range of extreme and far-right groups and supporters of fringe online conspiracy theories, many of whom have long been active online and at pro-Trump rallies. Who stormed the Capitol? According to the BBC: 1. QAnon 2. The Proud Boys 3. Online influencers.⁷³ 4. According to Sacco, The Boogaloo Bois were also involved in the attack.⁷⁴

1. QAnon. 2. The Proud Boys: Another group spotted at the storming of the Capitol were members of the far-right group Proud Boys. The organisation was founded in 2016 and

⁶⁹ Evan Perez – Katelyn Polantz – Paul P. Murphy: DOJ announces charges against man carrying Pelosi's podium, 'QAnon Shaman' in U.S. Capitol riot. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/doj-announces-charges-against-man-carrying-pelosi-s-podium-qanon-shaman-in-u-s-capitol-riot-1.5260904> (21/01/2021.)

⁷⁰ Maggie Kent: Philadelphia detective under investigation after allegedly attending Trump rally in DC. <https://6abc.com/philadelphia-police-capitol-riots-trump-protest-dc/9537282/> (21/01/2021.)

⁷¹ Harriet Brewis: Jacob Chansley: 'QAnon Shaman' charged over US Capitol riots. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/trump-supporter-jake-angeli-jamiroquai-arrested-b789216.html> (21/01/2021.)

⁷² 'Sedition and conspiracy': prosecutors cite wide-ranging crimes in Capitol attack – video. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2021/jan/12/sedition-and-conspiracy-prosecutors-cite-wide-ranging-crimes-in-capitol-attack-video> (21/01/2021.)

⁷³ Capitol riots: Who broke into the building? <https://www.bbc.com/news/55572805> (21/01/2021.)

⁷⁴ A. C. Thompson – Ford Fischer: Members of Several Well-Known Hate Groups Identified at Capitol Riot. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/several-well-known-hate-groups-identified-at-capitol-riot/> Cited by: Lisa N. Sacco: Domestic Terrorism and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol. CRS INSIGHT, 2021. p. 1. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11573> (21/01/2021.)

is anti-immigrant and all male. In the first US presidential debate Trump in response to a question about white supremacists and militias said: “Proud Boys – stand back and stand by.” One of their members, Nick Ochs, tweeted a selfie inside the building saying “Hello from the Capital lol”. He also filmed a live stream inside. His profile on Telegram describes himself as a “Proud Boy Elder from Hawaii.”⁷⁵ The Proud Boys are an extremist organization with semi-autonomous US and international chapters, with approximately 3,000 members since the group formed in 2016. The leader of the group recently estimated the numbers are closer to 8,000, but according to Kutner, this number is likely inflated.⁷⁶ Proud Boys is being sold to young men as a fraternity-like organization to celebrate “Western ideals”. They operate on an ideology that consists of both symbolic and physical violence, and the popularity of these groups is growing. They use memes as propaganda.⁷⁷

3. Online influencers: Individuals with large followings online were also seen at the protests. Tim Gionet aka “Baked Alaska” was among them. A Trump supporter, Gionet has made a name for himself as an internet troll. He's been described by the Southern Poverty Law Centre, as a “white nationalist”, a label he disputed. YouTube banned his channel in October after he posted videos of himself harassing shop workers and refusing to wear a face-mask during the coronavirus pandemic. Other platforms that have previously shut down his accounts include Twitter and PayPal. A photo that went viral of a man who'd entered the office of senior Democrat politician Nancy Pelosi has been named as Richard Barnett. He told the New York Times that he took an envelope from the speaker's office and left a note calling her an expletive. Local media reports say Barnett is involved in a group that supports gun rights, and that he was interviewed at a “Stop the Steal” rally following the presidential election – a movement that refused to accept Joe Biden's victory and supports the president's unsubstantiated claims of electoral fraud.⁷⁸

4. The Boogaloo Bois: Hawaiian shirts have become the uniform of a growing movement of armed anti-government extremists who are preparing for a second US civil war under the name “Boogaloo”.⁷⁹ At the protests that have broken out across the U.S. after George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police officers, on May 25, 2020, the so-called boogaloo bois have stood out. Members of the overwhelmingly white online subculture have shown up to protests heavily armed and clad in Hawaiian shirts, as a reference to the “big luau,” an adaptation of the word “boogaloo.” Among the loose online network of adherents, the boogaloo is often presented as a race-blind call for armed insurrection against government tyranny. “The boogaloo movement is (for the most part) a libertarian group,” a member posted in a boogaloo-themed Facebook group after a week of protests. “The boog is not the people vs the people, the boog is the people vs the government. It's a revolution, not a civil war,” he wrote. Many members of the movement see the recent outbreak of protests as the potential kickoff for widespread revolutionary upheaval, where citizens will unite against the perceived tyrannical state. But a look at the movement's origins and its online communities make it clear that its politics are much more complicated than straightforward libertarianism, and that few of its adherents are interested in aligning with Black Lives Matter

⁷⁵ Capitol riots: Who broke into the building? <https://www.bbc.com/news/55572805> (21/01/2021.)

⁷⁶ Samantha Kutner: Swiping Right: The Allure of Hyper Masculinity and Cryptofascism for Men Who Join the Proud Boys. ICCT Research Paper, 2020. p. 2. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/05/Swiping-Right-The-Allure-of-Hyper-Masculinity-and-Cryptofascism-for-Men-Who-Join-the-Proud-Boys.pdf> (21/01/2021.)

⁷⁷ Julia R. DeCook: Memes and symbolic violence: #proudboys and the use of memes for propaganda and the construction of collective identity. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 2018, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp 485-504.

⁷⁸ Capitol riots: Who broke into the building? <https://www.bbc.com/news/55572805> (21/01/2021.)

⁷⁹David Charter: ‘Boogaloo boys’ prepare for next American civil war in Hawaiian shirts. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/boogaloo-boys-prepare-for-next-american-civil-war-in-hawaiian-shirts-wsmdmmclm> (21/01/2021.)

or antifascist protesters against police brutality, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.⁸⁰ According to Allam, “Boogaloo” is the new far-right slang for civil war.⁸¹

There was no evidence of antifa supporters at the attack on the Capitol. Many social media users, especially those associated with QAnon and Trump supporters, were claiming that agitators from the loose-knit left-wing group antifa were involved. The implication was that they were disguised as Trump supporters to create disruption. A number of prominent Republican politicians, such as U.S. Representative Matt Gaetz, claimed it was antifa masquerading as Trump supporters. One widely-shared post claimed one protester had a “communist hammer” tattoo, as evidence that he was not a Trump supporter. On closer inspection, the symbol is from the video game series Dishonored. There have also been suggestions that Angeli was a Black Lives Matter supporter, with users sharing an image of him at a BLM event in Arizona. He was at that event as a counter-protester. In images taken there, he is holding a QAnon sign.

At least one of the rioters was holding a Confederate flag, which represented U.S. states that supported the continuation of slavery during the American civil war. It is considered by many to be a symbol of racism and there have been calls to ban it. Others see it as an important part of southern U.S. history. In July it was announced that the flag could no longer be flown on American military properties because of a new policy to reject “divisive symbols”. President Trump has defended the use of the Confederate flag in the past, saying: “I know people that like the Confederate flag and they're not thinking about slavery [...] I just think it's freedom of speech.” There were protesters holding flags featuring a coiled rattlesnake on a yellow background, often accompanied by the phrase “don't tread on me”. This is the Gadsden flag, harking back to the American revolution and the war to expel British colonialists. It was adopted by libertarians in the 1970s, and recently became a favourite symbol of conservative Tea Party activists. According to Margaret Weir, the flag has been adopted by the right over the past couple of decades, and it is also used by anti-government, white supremacist groups who embrace violence.⁸²

XII. Online discussions leading up to the event

There had been massive advance publicity for the “March for America”. It was promoted in tweets by the president and his allies. The upcoming event was cheered on social media, including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. But woven through many of the messages to stand up for Trump – and, if possible, block the congressional certification of the election he claimed he had won – was language that flirted with aggression, even violence. The term “Storm the Capitol” was mentioned 100,000 times in the 30 days preceding Jan. 6, according to Zignal Labs, a media insights company. Many of these mentions appeared in viral tweet threads that discussed the possible storming of the Capitol and included details on how to enter the building. To followers of QAnon, the word “storm” had particular resonance. In online discussions, some QAnon followers and militia groups discussed which weapons and tools to bring. “Pack a crowbar,” read one message posted on Gab, a social media refuge for the far right. In another discussion, someone asked, “Does anyone know if the windows on the second floor are reinforced?” Still, the many waves of communication did not appear to result in a broadly organized plan to take action. It is also not clear if any big money or

⁸⁰Cassie Miller: The 'Boogaloo' Started as a Racist Meme. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/06/05/boogaloo-started-racist-meme> (21/01/2021.)

⁸¹Hannah Allam: 'Boogaloo' Is The New Far-Right Slang For Civil War. <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/10/795366630/boogaloo-is-the-new-far-right-slang-for-civil-war> (21/01/2021.)

⁸²Capitol riots: Who broke into the building? <https://www.bbc.com/news/55572805> (21/01/2021.)

coordinated fund-raising was behind the mobilization, though some Trump supporters appear to have found funds through opaque online networks to help pay for transportation to the rally. “Patriots, if you need financial help getting to DC to support President Trump on January 6th, please go to my website,” a QAnon adherent, Thad Williams, of Tampa, Fla., posted on Twitter three days before the event. He said he had raised more than \$27,000. (After the Capitol assault, the money transfer companies PayPal and Stripe shut down his accounts. The website for his organization, Joy In Liberty, said it had given out \$30,000 to fund transportation for “deserving patriots.”) Other rally goers set up fund-raising accounts through the online service GoFundMe; BuzzFeed News cited at least a dozen, and GoFundMe has since closed them. The “Q Shaman” was linked to the online fund-raising. Chansley started a GoFundMe account in December to help pay for transportation to another Trump demonstration in Washington, but the effort reportedly netted him just \$10. Chansley retweeted Williams’s funding offer on Jan. 3, but it is unclear whether he benefited from it.⁸³ On Monday, Sund said, he began to worry about the Wednesday demonstration. “We knew it would be bigger,” Sund said. “We looked at the intelligence. We knew we would have large crowds, the potential for some violent altercations. I had nothing indicating we would have a large mob seize the Capitol.” Sure, there were claims that alt-right instigators had discussed storming the building and targeting lawmakers. But Sund said such threats had surfaced in the past. “You might see rhetoric on social media. We had seen that many times before,” he said. “People say a lot of things online.”⁸⁴

XIII. Why dealing with conspiracy theories is problematic

According to Amarasingam there are no easy answers to the question of what society or governments should do about conspiracy theories. Some argue that these ideas are not worth confronting. Others think that if these are left alone, will only grow and will have real impacts on the democratic way of life. Even if there is a consensus that these ideas must be confronted and disproven, it is not clear what the course of action may look like. Conspiracy theories are very resilient and the people that peddle them are always ready to fend off counter-arguments that they know are coming.⁸⁵ Social media decentralizes these theories, accelerates their spread and opens up challenges from non-traditional actors, and this is problematic. Some evidence suggests that even confronting conspiracy theorists only reinforces their belief and the mere act of engagement and argument solidifies these worldviews further. Therefore, governments and mainstream journalists often ignored them altogether, so as not to give them a platform of any kind. This has all changed thanks to social media, where conspiracy theorists can easily find other individuals to connect with or engage with in arguments.⁸⁶

⁸³ Dan Barry – Mike McIntire – Matthew Rosenberg: ‘Our President Wants Us Here’: The Mob That Stormed the Capitol. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/us/capitol-rioters.html> (21/01/2021.)

⁸⁴ Aaron C. Davis – Carol D. Leonnig – Karoun Demirjian – Peter Hermann: Backup was denied, former Capitol Police chief says. <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/backup-was-denied-former-capitol-police-chief-says/> (21/01/2021.)

⁸⁵ Amarnath Amarasingam: The Impact of Conspiracy Theories and How to Counter Them: Reviewing the Literature on Conspiracy Theories and Radicalization to Violence. In: Anthony Richards – Devorah Margolin – Nicolò Scremin (ed.): *Jihadist Terror: New Threats, New Responses*. I.B. Tauris, London/New York, 2019. pp 33-34.

⁸⁶ Yubo Kou – Xinning Gui – Yunan Chen – Kathleen Pine: Conspiracy Talk on Social Media. PACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 2017. Vol. 1. No. 2. Cited by: Amarnath Amarasingam: The Impact of Conspiracy Theories and How to Counter Them: Reviewing the Literature on Conspiracy Theories and Radicalization to Violence. In: Anthony Richards – Devorah Margolin – Nicolò Scremin (ed.): *Jihadist Terror: New Threats, New Responses*. I.B. Tauris, London/New York, 2019. p. 33-34.

According to Rottweiler and Gill “[...] cognitive factors, such as critical thinking skills and cognitive flexibility may effectively reduce conspiracy beliefs and thereby, could potentially act as protective factors for developing extremist propensities. The way we are consuming knowledge off- and online is affecting our capacity for ‘deep processing’ skills: inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection. Additionally, it is vital to equip young people with sufficient digital literacy in order to detect false and ‘counter knowledge’ online. Whereas government agencies and tech companies have to do their part in countering and detecting false information and conspiracy theories, civil society must also play a proactive role in confronting the lies and myths of conspiracy theories.”⁸⁷

Future studies should test for further contextual and situational influences on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism.”⁸⁸

XIV. Conclusions

QAnon is an extremely harmful and dangerous conspiracy theory and its spread must be halted. Online discussions of violence leading up to the attack on the U.S. Capitol should have been taken much more seriously and the U.S. Capitol should have expected and prepared for a siege, as every sign on online forums pointed to the direction that the crowd was going to be vast, angry and prepared to commit violence. Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund’s permission to request to place the D.C. National Guard on standby⁸⁹ should have been granted.

The events at the U.S. Capitol and other incidents prove that conspiracy theories, especially QAnon can pose a serious security risk. These harmful theories should not be left alone. These theories and the individuals who spread them and believe in them should be studied, and they should primarily be fought by education. I agree with Boross, that law enforcement agencies (in disguise) could post short articles, comments to moderate radicalized news portals, online forums⁹⁰ and social media sites and threads frequented by conspiracy theorists. Intelligence agencies must closely monitor known online forums frequented by conspiracy theorists and radicalized individuals, especially leading up to security-sensitive events. Signs of preparations for upcoming violent events on online platforms, posts and messages discussing and planning violent acts should be taken very seriously.

⁸⁷ Bettina Rottweiler – Paul Gill: Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related Morality. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2020. p. 14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288>

⁸⁸ *ibid.* p. 14.

⁸⁹ Carol D. Leonnig – Aaron C. Davis – Peter Hermann – Karoun Demirjian: Outgoing Capitol Police chief: House, Senate security officials hamstrung efforts to call in National Guard. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/sund-riot-national-guard/2021/01/10/fc2ce7d4-5384-11eb-a817-e5e7f8a406d6_story.html (21/01/2021.)

⁹⁰ Zsigmond Attila Boross: Humán faktor (Az emberi tényező szerepe az extrémizmus-elhárítás kérdéskörében). (Human factor: The role of the human factor in the questions of countering extremism) *Nemzetbiztonsági Szemle*, 2014, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 156. (In Hungarian)