

To Plant a Seed of Chaos: How QAnon's Propaganda Works

**Participatory Propaganda, Weaponized Narratives &
Information Warfare**



Essay

Propaganda & Persuasion



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INTRODUCTION

“HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @12:01am. Expective massive riots organized in defiance and others fleeing the US to occur. US M’s will conduct the operation while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most major cities.”

Here is the first post published by “Q” on 4chan, an anonymous messaging board on the Internet. So emerged the QAnon movement. QAnon began as an American movement. It is consensually and generally considered as a far-right movement, promoting conspiracy theories, antisemitism and misinformation. At the very base of QAnon, can be found Q, who is anonymous as well. The supporters of QAnon advocate that QAnon means *“the Quiet Americans Noting Our Nation’s Scandal.”* After the election of President Joseph Biden, QAnon culminated in attacking the United States Capitol.

Some specialists describe QAnon either as a cult or a sect. For instance, one of the main beliefs shared by QAnon’s members is that a cabal is running through the United States, composed by Hollywood actors, high-ranking government officials and mostly Democratic politicians. According to QAnon, Donald Trump would launch the arrestations of the cabal’s members into action. The movement labeled the launch as the *“Storm”*. QAnon also shares links to social media troll accounts and media companies, such as the Russian Internet Research Agency¹.

Even though QAnon is originally an American movement, the movement’s ideologies are spreading through the whole world. QAnon’s affiliations grow especially in France, Japan and the United Kingdom since 2020. In 2019, the FBI qualified QAnon as a *“domestic terrorism”* movement. Since then, QAnon embodied the rise of *“conspiracy theories”*, *“fake news”* and *“computational propaganda”*. There are the central characteristics examined in this paper.

¹ Menn, Joseph. “Russian-backed organizations amplifying QAnon conspiracy theories, researchers say”, in *Reuters*, published August 24, 2020.



It is often claimed, by many specialists and politicians, that QAnon's messages are based on a propagandistic rhetoric. To know whether this description is accurate, the research question asks to what extent are these messages propaganda, from a technical perspective. This is the central question addressed in the pages that follow.

In order to provide responses, the first priority is to determine to what extent QAnon's discourses are effectively propagandistic, according to the traditional propaganda models, including Jowett and O'Donnell's 10-point model and Ellul's theorizations. **(I)** After stating that QAnon fits these two propaganda models, we will go a step further in the analysis by exploring the group's propaganda as communication tool, under the Wanless' 7-Step participatory propaganda's prism and its related elements. **(II)** Ultimately, we will link QAnon's propaganda with information warfare, depicting QAnon's propaganda as being a weaponized narrative. **(III) Through these three sections that apply recognized methods, it is demonstrated that QAnon's messages are in fact propaganda for the use of information warfare. Through these three sections that apply recognized methods, it is demonstrated that QAnon's messages are in fact propaganda for the use of information warfare.**

By the way, there are some terms that must be defined before going deeper into the analysis. A little delimitation of the scope is here enough to depict the conceptual framework within which this essay inscribes itself. These terms - *propaganda*, *weaponized narrative*, and *information warfare* – are the most significant ones when it comes to understanding QAnon and its communicational strategies. *Propaganda* is a concept designating a set of persuasion techniques, implemented to propagate an idea, an opinion, an ideology, a doctrine, or a specific meaning. The purpose is to influence the behaviors and the convictions of the targeted audience. In that way, it is necessary to note that the term propaganda is used in its scholarly meaning. Propaganda does not hold either a positive or a negative connotation. Propaganda has to be understood in its first and prior meaning, which is the study of something that is said, something that is propagated. The delimitation of the term propaganda leads us to approach the key concept of *weaponized narratives* because propaganda paves the way to becoming a weaponized narrative. A weaponized narrative is, literally, a discourse that turns itself into a weapon, a tool to harm. As we notified, propaganda is not connoted in either a positive or negative manner, and propaganda does not necessarily imply for an organization or a people to be harmed. On the contrary, the concept of weaponized narratives entails and includes a deliberate will to spread confusion, instability, doubt, conflict, and chaos. Propaganda is hence a critical component of weaponized narratives. Ultimately, the use of propaganda and notably



weaponized narratives can be a way to conduct *information warfare*. In terms of scale, information warfare is a subset of war itself. The conduct of war, otherwise known as warfare, does change its character, often through the application of technological innovations. This concept plays on psychological manipulation, deception, subversion, weaponized narratives, information disorders, and propaganda. Therefore, these three key concepts of the essay are all intertwined when it comes to studying QAnon’s communicational paradigm. Propaganda is one of the means that lead to weaponized narratives for the use of information warfare.

I. QAnon’s Discourse & Traditional Propaganda Model: Are QAnon’s Speeches Propagandistic?

Although it is often internationally stated that QAnon’s discourses effectively fit with the traditional and conventional propaganda’s features. It would be a huge and an intellectual mistake to satisfy ourselves with such a statement. Rather, we will discuss to what extent QAnon can be understood as using propagandistic tools. Even though QAnon is a mainly online phenomenon, its effects are ever more realised in the physical world. The transition from online to “real-world” activity can be assumed to be a sign of the messages’ potency and durability. David Gilbert declared then that QAnon is not anymore only an online phenomenon as it emerged on the 4chan board – rather, since the Capitol riots on January 6, the movement “*showed its more violent side*” and cannot be labeled as exclusively online².

Therefore, the basis for this analysis is based on the QAnon 2021 Conference held in Dallas, since it highlights messages that moved from online to in-person speech. **(A)** Once these messages are presented, we will examine them through the prism of the most conventional models of traditional propaganda. **(B)**

² Gilbert, David. “A Huge QAnon Conference Is Happening in a Dallas Hotel Owned by the City”, in *Vice* (Published 8 April 2021)



a. A First Step in QAnon's Propaganda: Basic Premises of Its Rhetoric & Ideology

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to review the main aspects of QAnon ideology (i) and rhetoric (ii). In May 2021, QAnon held a conference called “*For God & Country: Patriot Roundup*.” QAnon’s figures were invited during this three-day week-end conference. Thousands of QAnon supporters attended, each of them paying an entrance fee of at least \$500. John Sabal, better known as QAnon John, primarily organized the conference. Personalities such as Michel Flynn (former U.S. Army general), Jason Sullivan (Roger Stone’s social media adviser), Sidney Powell, actor Jim Caviezel and Representative Louie Gohmert gave speeches during the conference.

i. QAnon's Ideology: How to Save the US on Behalf of God

One could summarize QAnon’s main ideology as: “*saving the US on behalf of God.*”

The conference topics focused on conspiracy theories, such as a “*satanic cable [formed of] pedophiles, cannibalists at the government*”, holding anti-vax positions and relying on nationalism, patriotism and extreme Christianity. The interpretation of the events such as the 6 January riots and the American Revolutionary War were crucial components of the values and worldviews provided by the conference. QAnon created a parallel between these riots and the Revolutionary War: revolt equaled patriotic defiance against the pedophilic government elites. This conference introduced a righteous power struggle: the government is corrupted, international organizations work in their best interests, denying US people their sovereign needs and wills. Conspiracy theories are thus involved within the discourse, pointing out the “*pedophiles*”, the “*cannibalists*” at the government, the “*left-wing*” and the “*foreigners*”.

As a result, QAnon claimed that people needed raise as an “*army*” for the country’s sake³. Michael Flynn directly called for a military coup under the protecting eye of God. Christianity is thus called out as a structural mythos, and God is raised as a national figure. For the US to survive, the group evokes that God desires the “*ordinary American*” to fight against what the conference’s speakers called the common enemy of the nation, the “*establishment*”⁴.

³ Flynn, Michael. “Here is the video of former national security advisor Michael Flynn saying that he thinks a coup like the coup in Myanmar should happen in the US.”, Twitter, (@MC_Hyperbole, May 31, 2021)

⁴ Powell, Sidney. “At the “Patriot Round Up” QAnon conference in Dallas, Sidney Powell informs the crowd that Trump won’t get credit for “time lost” after he’s reinstated as president and Biden is forced to leave the White House.” Twitter, (@travis_view, May 30, 2021)



In our case at hand, establishment includes international organizations, free trade, and the corrupted US government embodied by Joe Biden. Another speaker, Sidney Powell, called for Trump to be reinstated instead of Biden. This reinforced the notion that for God’s sake, people *must* prepare themselves to a politic and civil battle to save the US.

This set of beliefs is constitutive of the QAnon ideology exposed during the conference. The conference sought to arouse people to support the cause and to push them to fight against the ones who threatened their country. The ideology is composed of conspiracy theories, a predominance of a religious discourse, revolution against the establishment and the corruption in a nationalist and populist way.

ii. QAnon’s Rhetoric: How to Convince the “In”, How to Confuse the “Out”

Reusing Dyrberg’s⁵ notion, De Cleen and Stavrakakis theorized an in/out political axis. According to them, the dialectic of identification “*produces a sense of collective identity by relying on an assertion of difference. The construction of an in-group, for example, depends on the construction of an out-group. This localization of so-called “constitutive outsides” is a condition for identity formation*⁶..Linked with the previous section, rhetoric is used so that the members are convinced (*in*), and the external people are at least confused (*out*) by the statements held by QAnon – for a maximized dissemination of QAnon’s set of beliefs.

One of the main points regarding the rhetoric of QAnon is what could be called an *emotional call to the people*⁷. It can be seen especially during the 2021 Conference. The speakers appeal to fear, to God’s will, they are displaying on the most primitive feelings and on uncertainties. They talk about their children and the needs to preserve them from the satanic cabal as well as the corruption⁸. We can sum up this rhetoric by saying that QAnon works on *good vs. evil sides*. They call for a military coup on behalf of God, trying to influence the audience by pushing them to choose the “*good side*” which is saving the US, no vaccinations for children especially. Roger Stone’s social media adviser, Jason Sullivan, called for Hillary

⁵ Dyrberg, Torben B. “Radical and Plural Democracy: in Defence of Right/Left and Public Reason.” In *Radical Democracy. Politics between Abundance and Lack*, edited by Lars Tonder and Lasse Thomassen, Manchester University Press, 2006, 167-184

⁶ De Cleen, Benjamin, Stavrakakis, Yannis. “Distinctions and articulations: a discourse theoretical framework for the study of populism and nationalism.” In *Javnost: The Public* (2017), 24, no.4, 301-319

⁷ Canovan, Margaret. “Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy”, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (2002), 25-44, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403920072_2

⁸ Caviezel, Jim. “Jim Caviezel’s speech at Patriot Double Down event: “The Storm Is Upon Us”, YouTube, (Janice Griffith, October 25, 2021) <https://youtu.be/7Whlj1PRi1U>



Clinton's execution. He asked the audience for Clinton to be hanged, as she is, according to him, the "god-awful woman"⁹. As stated by Jim Caviezel: "*We are headed into the storm of all storms, yes. This storm is upon us. But not without Jesus, our rudder. [...] Evil is powerless if the good and unafraid God bless you*"¹⁰." The speakers and organizers display on a logical rhetoric and a discursivity which is based on a "black & white" vision, so to speak. The purpose of such a rhetoric is to convince the audience, QAnon members, that their cost is just and worthy of action normally outside of the law. The purpose is also to spread confusion, doubt, and chaos beyond the members' frontiers. The "out", the external people, are henceforth led to reconsider the situation to comprehend and appreciate the reality in a different way.

Aside this rhetorical aspect of a Machiavellian vision of the world divided between the Great people and the Bad people, the context in which the conference took place is also reveals a rhetoric made to convince and/or to confuse as much people as possible. For instance, the "1st Amendment Praetorians" were present during the conference. They depict themselves additional protections; the "*QAnon militia*". The praetorians are formed exclusively by ex-U.S. service members only. The hierarchy of the organization is also sharply defined. There is the QAnon militia, the speakers, the organizers, and finally the audience who had to pay an entrance fee before getting the right to enter the conference. Symbols of power and elitism are also exhibited, such as the U.S national flag. Even though they are not part of the rhetoric itself, it contributes to the very specific context in which the Conference occurred. The conference also ended up with a singalong of the national U.S. anthem by Sidney Powell. All of these features strengthen the identity of QAnon, by giving the feeling to its members as God's chosen people, the enlightened souls, who must fight for the further awakening of the rest of the world, the ones who have the real and genuine truth.

b. Traditional Propaganda's Models: A First Analysis of QAnon's Propaganda

Now that we have unveiled some of the main aspects concerning QAnon's ideology and rhetoric, we will now be able to put all of these emphasized features in praxis thanks to the Jowett and O'Donnell's 10-Point model and Ellul's theorizations. Is the communication of QAnon genuinely propagandistic? We will respectively go through three traditional

⁹ Sullivan, Jason. "Here is Jason Sullivan, Roger Stone's social media advisor, making a noose gesture in reference to Hillary Clinton and getting applause from the Dallas Patriot Round Up attendees.", Twitter, (@MC_Hyperbole, May 29, 2021)

¹⁰ Caviezel, Jim. "Jim Caviezel's speech at Patriot Double Down event: "The Storm Is Upon Us", YouTube, (Janice Griffith, October 25, 2021) <https://youtu.be/7Whlj1PRi1U>



propaganda's models before proceeding further: the Jowett and O'Donnell 10-Point Model (i), and the conceptual framework to think propaganda theorized by Ellul (ii).

i. Jowett & O'Donnell 10-Point Model

The 10-point model devised by Jowett and O'Donnell is a relevant point of departure when it comes to analyse a potential propagandistic case. To understand to what extent QAnon's unfolded features can actually fit with this model, we will focus on five of the ten points depicted by this model, which are the most relevant for the case at hand.

The first point is that propaganda provides an ideology which is a “*set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors as well as for ways of perceiving and thinking that are agreed on to the point that they constitute a set of norms for a society that dictate what is desirable and what should be done.*”¹¹ Providing an ideology affords, according to Kecskemeti, “*the audience with a comprehensive conceptual framework for dealing with social and political reality.*” Specifically, the QAnon conference afforded no shortage of framing regarding the world, society, and how they should be interpreted by the awakened people. As we stated previously, the narrative provides a general overview disclosing to what extent the US is threatened – most notably due to the supposed “corrupted government”. The terminology used throughout the conference particularly reveals of the ideological points of views spread by QAnon. This “*set of beliefs*” is therefore constitutive of the QAnon ideology, and the purpose is the conquest of the masses' brains and influence people.

The second point of the model is the context in which the propaganda occurs. It involves the content, meant to be especially understood as the “*myths [...] related to the current propaganda*”, the parties involved, the interpretations of the events at stake and the “*struggle over power.*”¹² During the conference, the given interpretation of the events such as the 6 January riots and the Revolutionary War are crucial components of the set of values and worldviews¹³. Thus, the parallel between these riots and the Revolutionary War is established, to convince the “in” and confuse the “out” even more. For followers of QAnon, the conclusion is clear: riots need to be launched for the US to survive. Similarly, the mention of a mythic

¹¹ Jowett, Garth S. and O'Donnell, Victoria. “How to Analyze Propaganda” in *Propaganda and Persuasion*, ed. Sage Publications (1992), 315.

¹² Jowett, Garth S. and O'Donnell, Victoria. “How to Analyze Propaganda” in *Propaganda and Persuasion*, ed. Sage Publications (1992), 316.

¹³ Gohmert, Louie. “A sitting member of Congress, Louie Gohmert, is currently speaking at a QAnon event in front of the event's logo, which has the QAnon slogan right in it.”, Twitter (@AlKapDC, May 30, 2021)



“World Order” made by and for the elites is also a crucial feature, because it takes a recognized term of description in the field of international relations but transforms it into an agent in and of itself. In each of the cases described early, narrative employs myths that resonate with the collective memory of the audience, ensuring belief and further spread.

The fourth point of the model (the third referenced in this paper) addresses the structure of the propagandistic organization. In other words, the structure and the authority should enable the propagandistic message to diffuse widely and be accepted positively by the audience. *“Leadership will be strong and centralized, with a hierarchy built into the organization. [...] The leader inspires loyalty and support.”*¹⁴ Additionally, the organization should hold a *“culture within itself”*¹⁵ and a *“set of formal rules”*¹⁶. As presented previously, the hierarchy and the membership composition are crucial points when explaining how the 2021 conference supported a huge propagandistic and political campaign. The conference divided the people into informal groups: the leaders, the political and the main figures invited to the conference, the supporters who paid to be allowed to enter, and the force group, formed by two subgroups: the 1st Amendment Praetorians and the police. In that way, there is a genuine hierarchy within the organization, with a centralized policy-making authority in the hands of the leaders. All the structure of the organization and of the conference has been done so that to grow the legitimacy of QAnon.

The seventh point of the model (the fourth point presented) deals with the special techniques used to maximize the effects of the propaganda and the discursive and persuasive discourses. Several aspects can be mentioned here, starting with the generation of group norms. *“Group norms are beliefs, values, and behaviors derived from membership in groups.”*¹⁷ Behaviors of the propagandees have been altered after the conference, e.g. behaviors such as holding a U.S. flag, believing that God is the only one able to save the US from the corruption, the belief that there are *“shadowy elites”* who work against people’s interests. It led to an audience that became more homogenous, producing consensus and continuing the process of regeneration because of the resonance created. Through the process of the echo chambers, *“group identity”* either emerged or was reinforced. Another special technique included the use

¹⁴ Jowett, Garth S. and O’Donnell, Victoria. “How to Analyze Propaganda” in *Propaganda and Persuasion*, ed. Sage Publications (1992), 318.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Jowett, Garth S. and O’Donnell, Victoria. “How to Analyze Propaganda” in *Propaganda and Persuasion*, ed. Sage Publications (1992), 319.

¹⁷ Jowett, Garth S. and O’Donnell, Victoria. “How to Analyze Propaganda” in *Propaganda and Persuasion*, ed. Sage Publications (1992), 326.



of music. As stated by Jowett and O'Donnell, "*from stirring patriotic anthems to protest songs, music and lyrics are important propaganda techniques.*"¹⁸ As we mentioned before, one of the guests – Sidney Powell – sang the national U.S. anthem to enthusiast people and give a feeling of an even better homogeneity regarding the audience. It contributed also to the audience's feeling that QAnon is genuinely working in the American's best interests, to save the country from the "*evil side*". Each of these techniques ensured the arousal of emotions. Jowett and O'Donnell point out that "*Propaganda is also associated with emotional language and presentations*"¹⁹. The call for the audience's emotions can be seen through many aspects, e.g. the use of a terminology related to the religious mythos, the use of war language, and the false claims exposed in entertaining speeches²⁰. Ultimately, the exhibited visual symbols of power also contributed to maximize the propagandistic effects²¹. Flags often usurped familiar symbology, such as the movement's logo – a Q fulfilled with the American flag, or the American flag with a Q in the blue part -, the presence of a militia, the presence of the huge flag with the slogan "*For God & Country*" in the background, or an imposing reception desk invoking power. They all contribute to an increased feeling of patriotism and nationalism.

Finally, the eighth point of the model (the fifth position presented) is the effectiveness of the message and the reception of the conference by the audience. As Jowett and O'Donnell state, "*the most important thing to look for is the behavior of the target audience... this can be in the form of letters to the editor, joining organizations, making contributions, purchasing the propagandist's merchandise.*"²² During the conference, the crowd was enthusiast, and many applauses can be heard while listening to speeches. Many bought flags, emblazed with the movement's logo and other paraphernalia. Resonance war nearly assured thanks to QAnon's targeted audience, mostly coming from 4Chan and 8Chan, where beliefs are similar to the narratives of the movement²³. Interestingly, despite the initial heavy use of American imagery, QAnon is currently growing and spreading beyond the U.S. borders, reaching European countries such as France and Germany. Thus, there is a genuine success in the spreading of the

¹⁸ Jowett, Garth S. and O'Donnell, Victoria. "How to Analyze Propaganda" in *Propaganda and Persuasion*, ed. Sage Publications (1992), 329.

¹⁹ Jowett, Garth S. and O'Donnell, Victoria. "How to Analyze Propaganda" in *Propaganda and Persuasion*, ed. Sage Publications (1992), 329.

²⁰ Caffier, Justin. "A Guide to QAnon, the New Kind of Right-Wing Conspiracy Theories." In *Vice* (Retrieved July 15, 2018) and Hayden, Michael Edison. "How 'The Storm' Became the Biggest Fake News Story of 2018." In *Newsweek* (Retrieved April 5, 2018)

²¹ Jowett, Garth S. and O'Donnell, Victoria. "How to Analyze Propaganda" in *Propaganda and Persuasion*, ed. Sage Publications (1992), 327.

²² Jowett, Garth S. and O'Donnell, Victoria. "How to Analyze Propaganda" in *Propaganda and Persuasion*, ed. Sage Publications (1992), 330.

²³ "The Making of QAnon: A Crowdsourced Conspiracy." *Bellingcat*, Retrieved February 7, 2021



QAnon’s propaganda message. Although other media sources were not allowed to enter, the targeted audience was reached and reacted positively to the given speeches. Further evidence of strong resonance includes the fact that some QAnon-related merchandise such as a blanket with a Q logo on it signed by Flynn, pro-Trump lawyer Lin Wood and MyPillow CEO Mike Mindell sold for thousands of dollars, among other things²⁴. Hence, QAnon’s persuasive communication can be qualified as propagandistic, according to the conclusions of this traditional propaganda’s model. (Table 1)

The ideology and the purpose of the propaganda campaign (1)	Whole set of beliefs Anti-vax positions, antisemitist ropes, corruption, nationalism, patriotism, Christianity The Good vs. the Evil side Will to convince the in, confuse the out
The context in which the propaganda occurs (2)	Struggle over power: against the establishment Mentions of myths, legends, national figures, God, a World Order Interpretation of the events and the urgent need of an American popular army
The structure of the propaganda organization (4)	Hierarchy and makeup of the organization Membership 1 st Praetorians Amendment

²⁴ Monacelli, Steven. You will not believe how much someone paid for this Q quilt”, Twitter, (@stevanzetti, May 30, 2021)

<p>Special techniques to maximize effects</p> <p>(7)</p>	<p>Groups norms & group resonance</p> <p>Group identity</p> <p>Musical propaganda</p> <p>Arousal of emotions</p> <p>Visual symbols of powers</p>
<p>Audience reaction to various techniques</p> <p>(8)</p>	<p>Crowd cheering</p> <p>Growth of QAnon outside the U.S.</p>

ii. Ellul's Conceptual Framework

In order to bring a second perspective on QAnon's communication as fitting traditional propaganda's models, we can also very briefly study QAnon under the prism of Ellul's conceptual framework. He theorized a semi-systematic classification of full field of propaganda by means of four pairs of categories. We will go through each one. (Table 2)

The first pair is the “*political and sociological*” one. Whereas sociological propaganda can be understood as distributing propagandistic messages unintentionally, e.g. through films and arts; political propaganda refers to a “*techniques of influence employed by a government, a party, an administration, a pressure group, with a view to changing the behavior of the public.*”²⁵ As QAnon involves a genuine attempt to spread an ideology, with the expression of political objectives, QAnon is a type of propaganda which is political rather than sociological.

The second pair is the “*agitational and integrational*” dichotomy. While integrational propaganda is meant to produce social cohesion and societal stability, often pursued by governments or societal agents; agitational propaganda aims to stir people to action for or against something. As QAnon's will is to launch revolution and a somewhat civil war against the establishment, QAnon is fitting the agitational propaganda's requirements.

Third, the question is whether QAnon's propaganda is irrational or rational. A rational propaganda would appeal to alleged facts and research, including data, polls, statistics. An irrational propaganda would rather appeal to emotions, fears, displaying on myths, avoiding a

²⁵ Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1965) (French: Propagandes; original French edition: 1962)



correct reasoning. As explained before, QAnon works on people’s fears, doubts, uncertainties, prejudices, “*we-feelings*”, and scars. Further, what QAnon tries to pass as “facts” are rarely supported by testable evidence.

Fourth, the matter is to know whether QAnon’s propaganda is more vertical or horizontal. Vertical propaganda is based on a position of authority, while horizontal propaganda is based on an interaction which appears to be equal. Although QAnon presents a hierarchy (militia, the Q leader...), the given speeches are all highlighting the fact that they are all equal – because they are all these “*quiet*”, “*ordinary*” American. Reinforcing the horizontal nature, the propagandistic messages of QAnon are developed in small groups, spread through social networks, and social groups. This type of grassroots effort, aimed at the “take down” of established hierarchy indicated a more horizontal approach.

Political propaganda	Spreads an ideology Set of worldviews and political interpretations
Agitational propaganda	Aims to influence people in their actions Will to launch civil wars and popular riots
Irrational propaganda	Displays on people’s emotions and national myths
Horizontal propaganda	Grassroots cyber-activism Made by “ordinary American”

As a result of the analysis conducted in this section, it is clear that QAnon’s communication definitely displays propagandistic features. It enables us to qualify QAnon as being a propagandistic movement, spreading ideological messages in the way that traditional propaganda models understood it. In the last point of this section’s analysis, the matter of the



horizontal propaganda is introduced. The next section will focus on this feature, depicting QAnon's propaganda as not only being traditional propaganda but also as being the embodiment of a *participatory propaganda* launched *purposefully* to generate chaos and doubt. It is now time to apprehend, in a second phase, the depth and complexity of QAnon propaganda.

II. Being Propagandistic Purposefully: Propaganda as a Communicational Mean

QAnon's propaganda is more than merely a basic traditional propaganda. In the heart of our Digital Age, propaganda has changed. Its tools, its means, and even its extent and its purposes have been altered owing to digital and media changes. QAnon's propaganda is thus a kind of participatory propaganda (A), based on proper elements of this such as conspiracy theories and information disorders. (B) This statement will then lead us to apprehend QAnon purpose: a will to plant a seed of chaos and confusion. (C)

a. Participatory Propaganda's Model: A Deeper Understanding

As defined by Wanless, participatory propaganda is “*the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, direct behaviour, co-opting grassroots movements as well as recruiting audience members to actively engage in the spread of persuasive communications, to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.*”²⁶ Thanks to the 7 steps built by Wanless, we will see to what extent QAnon's propaganda is actually a participatory propaganda. (i) Secondly, the notion of truth and “fake news” will enter our paper thanks to the notion of computational propaganda and the “*firehose and falsehood*” theory. (ii)

²⁶ Wanless, Alicia. “Participatory Propaganda in 7 Simple Steps”, *La Generalista*, May 5, 2017, [Participatory Propaganda in 7 Simple Steps \(lageneralista.com\)](https://lageneralista.com/participatory-propaganda-in-7-simple-steps/)



i. Wanless' 7-Point Model: QAnon & Participatory Propaganda

According to Wanless, our world changes – and so does propaganda. Even though traditional propaganda's models are still useful when it comes the analysis of where the propagandistic message lies, they fall short of explaining the characteristics of propaganda in our modern times. By observing how contemporary propaganda works, she pointed out seven steps that demonstrated the application of a participatory propaganda model. Let us examine each of these points, applied to our case at hand.

The first point is to “*conduct hyper-target audience analysis*²⁷”. It means that movements such as QAnon can hire data companies to grasp psychographic data, to target an audience that is the more likely to adhere to the ideology presented by QAnon. Psychographic data reveals a lot about our tastes, what do we like, how do we behave, how we think, what are our thoughts, our personality, our beliefs, and so forth. Thanks to the extraction of this type of data, QAnon can delimit a scope of people it will target. To reach them, QAnon then divides the people into “*target audiences*²⁸” and generate micro-targeted advertisements and manipulative content. Even though QAnon have not done it intentionally, the processes of *echo chambers* and *bubble effects* created effectively this segmentation of the audience.

The second feature of participatory propaganda is to “*develop inflammatory content*²⁹”, described that once “*audiences [are] segmented and psychographics mapped, the next step is to develop inflammatory content that erodes faith in the opponent and manipulated audience cognitive biases*³⁰.” This point addresses more accurately *fake news*, *memes* and *data leaks*. This is precisely the case of QAnon. Disinformation is one of the very basic premises of work of QAnon. Anti-vax contents, conspiracy theories, are both at the cornerstone of QAnon's rhetoric as we have seen before. As Facebook defined it, fake news is “*articles that purport to be factual, but which contain intentional misstatements of fact with the intention to arouse passions, attract viewership, or deceive*.”³¹ For instance, on the official website of QAnon, can be found articles declaring that people can die from the cavvines. Memes are also one of the bases for spreading QAnon's message. (*Image 1*)

²⁷ Wanless, Alicia. “Participatory Propaganda in 7 Simple Steps”, *La Generalista*, May 5, 2017, [Participatory Propaganda in 7 Simple Steps \(lageneralista.com\)](https://www.lageneralista.com/participatory-propaganda-in-7-simple-steps/)

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ “Threat Report. The State of Influence Operations 2017-2020.” Facebook, May, 2017, [IO-Threat-Report-May-20-2021.pdf \(fb.com\)](https://www.facebook.com/threatreport/IO-Threat-Report-May-20-2021.pdf)



IMAGE I

In this meme, Donald Trump is depicted as being God's chosen one.

(Click [here](#) to reach the source)

The third aspect addressed by Wanless is to “*inject inflammatory content into echo chambers*”³². Wanless explained it as follows: “*Step Three then is to inject this deliberately provocative content into echo chambers identified through audience analysis. The key here is to have a desired actionable outcome from the content – whether that be to share it, sign up for a mailing list, or troll the comments section of news sites*”³³. QAnon is a perfect example of such process. Indeed, QAnon has its own official website on which people can share articles, spread fake news, organize polls, write an article. The official claim of the website is to organize resistance and re-information.

Fourthly, participatory propaganda will be “*manipulating feed and search algorithms*”³⁴. According to Wanless, there are two ways for this step: “*hyperlinking and seeding of content*” or “*botnets*”³⁵. The first way means to post content such as fake news and to repost it on numerous websites to boost Google and/or Facebook algorithms. QAnon adopted this strategy, by multiplying the types of websites claiming to belong to QAnon. Along the official website, there are many “QAnon” websites created thanks to WordPress spreading the exact same messages. The method of “*linking back*” also occurred in Twitter and Facebook spheres to give a greater visibility. The second way of proceeding is “*astroturfing*”, “*the use of fake online accounts or other means to make a message appear to be coming from another source, helping foster the illusion of grassroots support*”³⁶. Focusing mostly on data statistics and polls regarding this method, QAnon also did it. The aim here is to distort the reality of the

³² Wanless, Alicia. “Participatory Propaganda in 7 Simple Steps”, *La Generalista*, May 5, 2017, [Participatory Propaganda in 7 Simple Steps \(lageneralista.com\)](#)

³³ *Ibidem.*

³⁴ *Ibidem.*

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁶ *Ibidem*



information space, so that it will become nearly impossible for a user to discern where the truth ends and where the fake news and the conspiracy theories effectively begin.

The fifth point is to “*mobilize followers to action*³⁷”. Wanless explains, “*Campaigns will provide followers with simple actionable steps along with provocative content to help turn unsuspecting users into propagandists – which is what makes this new model participatory. Actions might include: telling people to share content; co-opting or borrowing influencer accounts to share content; or encouraging trolling activity to stifle debate*³⁸.” Once again, QAnon did it. Some examples can be given here. First, the official website appeals people to write their own articles, to share the articles and the re-information. Second, within the 2021 Conference, speakers have called out people to raise an army for conducting a military coup and reinstating Donald Trump. Third, being a troll is something validated by QAnon – the collaboration between QAnon and the Russian Internet Agency validates this argument³⁹. Pro-QAnon websites and personal pages are flourishing.

The sixth point is to “*win media coverage: be a trend; stage a scandal; or commune with the news*⁴⁰.” QAnon mastered it. QAnon is often mentioned on television, networks, and social medias. The Capitol attack brought a huge media coverage, people were constantly talking about this political scandal.

The seventh and ultimate step is to “*rinse and repeat*⁴¹”. As Wanless declared, “*participatory propaganda is a cyclical model [...] the next and final step is to start all over again, feeding the machine, tweaking with every new audience insight gained*.”⁴² QAnon manages a constant regeneration in the past four years.

Thus, QAnon’s propaganda is not just limited to traditional ways of proceeding, but rather, it also behaves according to the participatory propaganda model. If it continues to foster the involvement of the targeted audience, QAnon is even more likely to grow and to spread its propagandistic messages. (*Table 3*)

³⁷ Wanless, Alicia. “Participatory Propaganda in 7 Simple Steps”, *La Generalista*, May 5, 2017, [Participatory Propaganda in 7 Simple Steps \(lageneralista.com\)](https://lageneralista.com/participatory-propaganda-in-7-simple-steps/)

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Menn, Joseph. “Russian-backed organizations amplifying QAnon conspiracy theories, researchers say”, in *Reuters*, published August 24, 2020.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.



TABLE 3

Wanless' Seven Steps Applied to QAnon's Case

Conduct hyper-targeted audience (1)	Echo chambers Bubble effects
Develop inflammatory (2)	Disinformation Fake news Conspiracy theories
Inject inflammatory content into echo chambers (3)	Own official website Resistance Reinformation
Manipulating feed and search algorithms (4)	Hyperlinking Multiple "official" websites Astroturfing
Mobilize followers to action (5)	Participatory website Appeal to the people for an army and riots Troll the opponents
Win media coverage (6)	Constantly mentioned and criticized Huge coverage after the Capitol Attack
Rinse and repeat (7)	4 years

ii. The "Firehose of Falsehood" Theory: QAnon & Computational Propaganda

Participatory propaganda is not the only way that propaganda can take owing to our media and digital changes. Computation propaganda also emerged. Computational propaganda can be defined by *"the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully*



*manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks.*⁴³” One path that takes computational propaganda is the firehose of falsehood – or firehosing – propaganda technique. The essence of this technique is to constantly and continuously repeat a message as many times as possible, using multiple channels like tabloid newspapers, specific websites and social media. The specificity of such a propagandistic technique is that it absolutely denies the significance of truth, coherence and/or consistency. It is “*high-volume, rapid, continuous, and repetitive*” and “*lacks commitment to objective reality ... (and) consistency.*⁴⁴” Because understanding these issues is mainly an abstract exercise amongst the ideas originating from multiple people, it is safe to claim that understanding is a social construct. Therefore, through its breadcrumb dropping of stories, its simulacra eventually turns into what appears to be objective reality to many. As we have seen in the previous section, it is needless to repeat that QAnon effectively displays on fake news, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and a repetitive process to gain in visibility, to confuse even more the people who feel overwhelmed by this (false) informative deluge.

b. An Emphasis on Conspiracy Theories & Information Disorders

It is now time to focus on conspiracy theories and information disorders. Conspiracy theories, fake news and information disorders are the backbone of both computational propaganda and participatory propaganda – in that way, they are the essence of how QAnon’s propaganda works. Discussing information disorders (*i*) and conspiracy theories (*ii*) linked to QAnon will then enable us to conclude on a genuine manufacturing of doubt as the purpose of QAnon. (*iii*)

i. Information Disorders

Some experts claim that since 2016, we entered in a new area of disinformation and information disorders. They are often linked to other trending topics of interests, such as

⁴³ Woolley, Samuel C, Howard, Philip N, Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media, *Oxford Scholarship Online* (Published in November 2018)

⁴⁴ Christopher Paul & Miriam Matthews. “The Russian Firehose of Falsehood Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It.”, *RAND Corporation* (2016) <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>



conspiracy theories, populism, polarization, and so forth. Novel forms of propaganda such as computational and participatory types demonstrate a strong link with information disorders.

There are various ways to think about information disorders. Wardle even did a typology composed of seven categories of information disorders⁴⁵. However, when working with Derakhshan, Wardle suggested a simplified theory of three types of information disorders⁴⁶. Misinformation is false or misleading information that is unintentionally spread. Disinformation is false or misleading information that is intentionally spread. Finally, malinformation is factual information that is meant to harm. In that way, it could be said that QAnon operates mostly with disinformation.

QAnon deliberately displays false and misleading information to harm the so-called establishment and other related groups. These related groups include foreigners, those who lean on the political spectrum (such as Democratic politicians) and free trade organizations and international organizations which QAnon claim jeopardize U.S. sovereignty. The forms of disinformation include the otherwise mundane (e.g. satire, parody, memes) to genuine provocative and manipulating content. Even though the content diffused by QAnon is seldom 100% fabricated content, it often relies on false equivalence to produce a deceptive underlying meaning and their genuine sources are often impersonated, hidden, or distorted. For example, false equivalences often attempt to link death and chronic conditions such as asthma to vaccine uses. An example of manipulated content is taking a well-known correlation and turning it into causality, such as the rise of violence and immigration. Fabricated content such as the non-existent the “*satanic cable*” is a relevant example as well. When fabricated content is employed for implying the deliberate action of some sort of manipulative actor, a link to conspiracy theories is created.

ii. Conspiracy Theories

A “conspiracy theory” can be thought of as: “*the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties; spec. a belief that some covert but influential agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event.*”⁴⁷ In that way, conspiracy theories are interrelated and intertwined with the concern of information disorders within the propaganda afforded by QAnon. Indeed,

⁴⁵ “Information Disorders”, First Draft, accessed in November 2021

⁴⁶ Derakhshan, Hossein, Wardle, Claire. “Information Disorder. Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking.” *Council of Europe* (October 2017)

⁴⁷ “Conspiracy Theories”, Oxford English Dictionary, accessed December 25, 2021



QAnon generates and creates false equivalence, sloppy causality and even fabricated content as we just explained it. They can all lead to the production of conspiracy theories, in the meaning that they promote alternative facts and make truth decay possible and unavoidable.

Thus, the whole rhetoric and ideology broadcasted by QAnon relies on both information disorders and conspiracy theories in the frame of computational and participatory propaganda. These features can be even more greatly understood thanks to the “*manufacturing of doubt*” framework.

iii. The Manufacturing of Doubt

The expression “manufactured doubt”, according to Goldberg and Vanderberg, “*refers to actions that deliberately alter and misrepresent knowable facts and empirical evidence to promote an agenda often to benefit a broader industry, specific corporation, or group of individuals. [...] This type of deceit can result in confusion among audiences, thus delaying actions that threaten the group’s mission and giving parties undue influence in the very systems intended to regulate them*⁴⁸.” Even though QAnon may not spread misinformation and manipulate content for monetary benefit, QAnon does nonetheless use the tactics related to the manufacturing of doubt to propagate conspiracy theories, fake news, and to put the state into trouble to threaten the establishment as it is. QAnon is not an industry in the same way we think of tobacco⁴⁹ industries. However, QAnon behaves purposefully to spread their so-called “*awakening*” everywhere.

Five strategies have been identified as being related to the manufacturing of doubt: “gain support from reputable individuals, misrepresent data, suppress incriminating information, employ hyperbolic language, and blame other causes.⁵⁰” QAnon fulfilled four of the five strategic points. As we have seen in the frame of the 2021 Conference, QAnon searched support from public officials, such as Donald Trump and Representative Louie Gohmert. Further, QAnon misrepresented data by confusing and drawing false equivalence between two facts (e.g. increasing autistic troubles and the use of the vaccines.). With QAnon’s terminology based on extreme religious views and overly passionate language, the link to *hyperbolic language* is clear. Finally, blame is assigned to the corrupted government, foreigners, leftists, Democratic

⁴⁸ Goldberg, Rebecca F, Vandenberg, Laura N. “The science of spin: targeted strategies to manufacture doubt with detrimental effects on environmental and public health.” *Environmental Health* 20, no. 33 (March 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-021-00723-0>

⁴⁹ Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda* (1928)

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.



politicians, international organisations, and so forth. In that way, it is possible to conclude that QAnon is not only displaying, but deliberately employing fake news, information disorders and conspiracy theories. (Table 4)

They do not rely on the means of participatory propaganda and computational propaganda for nothing. The main point to understand here is that they do so purposefully. QAnon propagates confusion, by broadcasting doubt and uncertainties, exploiting and enhancing the vulnerability of people’s minds, in an attempt to achieve mass mobilization. Manufacturing doubt is in that way, a mean to produce individual consent as well. Planting a seed of doubt is the very first step for a propagandist to harvest chaos and to collapse the establishment, as QAnon desires.

Gain support from reputable individuals (1)	Donald Trump, Representative Louie Gohmert
Misrepresent data (2)	COVID-19 vacuums’ data and deaths’ data
Employ hyperbolic language (3)	Overly passionate terminology Verbs related to religion and war
Blame other causes (4)	Leftist Corrupted government officials Foreigners

To go back to the idea of convincing the “in” and confusing the “out”, manufactured doubt precisely fulfills this perspective. Disinformation propaganda, fake news, conspiracy theories, and manufactured doubt, can all produce two types of reactions. Internally, they can generate belief, but also acquiescence and compliance from the audience. Therefore, internally speaking, the “in”, the members are further convinced. Externally, the goal of such propagandistic tactics is no more to convince absolutely but rather to sow division, confusion, and doubt. The wish is to produce a political paralysis, perplexity, uncertainty, questions, and



from long-term perspective, chaos. Hence, even though the purpose could be to persuade the intended audience, another aspect of QAnon’s propaganda is also to sow discord and inaction among the opponents and the enemies. QAnon’s ability to convince the “in” and confuse the “out” by polluting the information environment⁵¹ make it highly effective.

c. How to Plant a Seed: Towards a Grassroot Propaganda

What we have concluded so far is that QAnon’s propaganda is not merely a traditional and a conventional propaganda (even if it fulfilled the requirements) but rather a participatory and a computational propaganda that relies mostly on information disorders, conspiracy theories and fake news. The use of these propaganda tactics is done purposefully, the goal being to convince the “in” and to confuse the “out” thanks to a manufactured doubt. But what makes this strategy so efficient, and how can the exponential growth of QAnon through the whole world be explained? Let us focus on the “in” side to explain what makes QAnon’s propaganda so especially powerful at creating political paralysis by convincing and confusing. Most notably, the participatory and computational propaganda features enable QAnon to grow “on its own”, thanks to its audience (i), raising the question of a “*grassroot propaganda*”. (ii)

i. *Ampliganda: How QAnon Engage the Users*

The propagandistic tools used by QAnon are more subtle than the ones used by traditional and conventional propagandists. Within the frame of the computational and the participatory propaganda, QAnon relies on the users and on the targeted audience to take as many benefits as possible from our digital age – to growth even faster. Let us see to what extent QAnon effectively involve the intended people within the increasing growth and influence of QAnon.

Following the theorization of Wanless and Berk⁵², participatory propaganda seeks active audience engagement in the propaganda for at least three aims. The first one is the segmentation. It means to generate groups, communities, that could be involved in propagandistic messaging. The second purpose is the amplification. These communities, this targeted audience will

⁵¹ Levent Orman, “Fighting Information Pollution with Decision Support Systems”, *Journal of Management Information Systems* 1, no. 2 (December 2015): 64-71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421222.1984.11517704>

⁵² Berk, Michael, Wanless, Alicia. “The changing nature of propaganda. Coming to terms with influence in conflict”, in *The World Information War*, ed. Routledge (1st edition, 2021), 18



broadcast the propagandistic ideology. In that way, the audience involvement in the spreading of propaganda is even more effective since it can be done through computerized information networks. The third and ultimate aim is the obfuscation. In this case, the obfuscation refers to the spreading even more the propagandistic messaging, the users will trouble and blur the sources of the messaging, leaving receivers ultimately unable to test its veracity. Because the message cannot be easily disproved, it continues to be trusted and spread amongst those inside the echo chamber. Although this tactic risks the loss of controlling the propagandistic message, it creates an outsized benefit that the propaganda will grow “on its own”.

Hence, the propaganda is not only participatory and/or computational – it also fits with the idea of a “viral propaganda”, also called “ampliganda”. As DiResta declared: “*For the first time in the history of information ecosystems, attention brokers could design instrumented and personalized media experiences, targeted to ensure that users remained on their platform and didn’t “change the channel.” [...] Their audiences served as both content recipients as distributors, as virality features put the power to amplify posts in user’s hands.*”⁵³

The matter of the amplifier is thus a matter that is central and crucial when it comes to QAnon’s propaganda. As we explain previously in this section, QAnon’s way of communication is utterly based on the people that it targets – participatory propaganda. The way it uses its own official website, sharing articles, asking people for sharing them and writing on their own as well – QAnon clearly use decentralized and interactive propaganda, as meaning regenerated thanks to its followers propensity to share, remix, and spread the propagandistic messaging each day.

ii. Towards a Grassroot Propaganda... Of The Deed?

Hence, it could be advocated that QAnon is somehow embodying a new type of contemporary propaganda, which is called a *grassroot propaganda*. Once again, this notion is to be understood as being anchored and intertwined with conspiracy theories, information disorders, and participatory propaganda. Grassroot propaganda, more accurately, refers to propagandistic techniques within which multiple users are involved from numerous parts of the world playing the role of the amplifier.

⁵³ DiResta, Renee. “Mediating Consent”, *Ribbonfarm* (December 2019) [Mediating Consent \(ribbonfarm.com\)](https://www.ribbonfarm.com/2019/12/01/mediating-consent/)



Ultimately, we can wonder if QAnon can lead to a kind of propaganda of the deed⁵⁴, which is a special type of participatory propaganda that is meant to launch revolution and riots. Here, the term “*deed*” refers often to terrorism, or at least to revolutionary behaviors. As we have seen in the very first section, speakers of the 2021 Conference were actually calling out for a military coup and for riots such as the Capitol Attack. It is needless to notify that QAnon indeed appeals for a civil disobedience.

To sum up, what we have concluded so far is that the traditional and conventional frame for propaganda analysis is not sufficient when it comes to grasp all the essence and the subtleties of QAnon’s propaganda. Indeed, QAnon uses propagandistic techniques which belong to participatory and computational propaganda and can be understood in an emergent “grassroot propaganda” form. Its main features are the bases of conspiracy theories, information disorders, fake news, and the engagement of the users – QAnon being a *viral participatory propaganda*.

And so what? We concluded that QAnon is a viral participatory propaganda with specific elements such as conspiracy theories and disinformation, thanks to the second section. What are the consequences and the effects of such a type of propaganda? In our digital age – what does it mean? Of what is QAnon the embodiment? What does it unfold concerning our fast-changing times?

III. QAnon’s Propaganda at The Heart of The Information Warfare: From Participatory Propaganda to Weaponized Narratives

This third and ultimate section will enable us to conclude on a matter that is “bigger” than only QAnon’s ways of communicating. In fact, QAnon is at the heart of the new *information warfare*. War is not anymore merely physical; war is also a concern of the mind, or cognitive warfare, made possible cyber operations and tactics. Knowledge is power – and so is information. Hence, QAnon uses the participatory propaganda’s means and tools to turn itself into a *weaponized narrative* directed against the establishment and what they call the “*World Order*” (A) in the context of information and cognitive warfare. (B)

⁵⁴ Houen, Alex. “The Secret Agent: Anarchism and the Thermodynamics of Law”, *ELH* 65, no. 4 (1998): 995-1016. <http://doi.org/10.1353/elh.1998.0031>



a. QAnon's Propaganda as a Weaponized Narrative

Weaponized narrative is “*an attack that seeks to undermine an opponent’s civilization, identity, and will. By generating confusion, complexity, and political and social schisms, it confounds response of the part of the defender.*”⁵⁵ QAnon as a weaponized narrative is hence based on two specific elements: a “*fast-moving information deluge*” (i) and emotional manipulation (ii).

i. A “Fast-Moving Information Deluge”

One of the primary features of a weaponized narrative is to proceed by a “*fast-moving information deluge*”⁵⁶. The purpose here is not to give space to the targeted people to think about the information that are broadcasted. They should not have time to evaluate the authenticity and the credit that they must give to such information. The very main goal is to be “*cognitively disorienting and confusing*”⁵⁷. This component is familiar from the earlier examinations as well.

This is exactly what QAnon is searching through all of its means and tools. Indeed, owing to participatory propaganda’s means, QAnon is organically growing – users’ engagement and disorientation. The fact that QAnon is a popular movement which works thanks to its growing members provides it with some opportunities to generate such an information deluge. Information is not processed, claims are not verified, no guarantee of authenticity is provided. And yet, this propaganda is very active and definitely effective. It is precisely because this propaganda is a weapon to destabilize the adversary, to provoke political paralysis, and to genuinely be this fabrication of doubt and this seed of chaos. As we have been describing throughout this paper, the aim is not simply to gain membership approval and compliance – the goal is as much to cause confusion, questioning, loss of comprehension. Hence, to provoke *vulnerability* and *defenselessness*.

⁵⁵ “Weaponized Narratives Initiative”, Arizona State University, accessed December 25, 2021, [Weaponized Narrative Initiative | \(asu.edu\)](#)

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*



ii. Emotional Manipulation & Intuitive Information

Emotional manipulation is another aspect of weaponized narratives. “*Opportunities abound for emotional manipulation undermining the opponent’s will to resist.*”⁵⁸ A discourse can turn into a weapon inasmuch that it takes advantage of primitive emotions, such as fear, doubt, uncertainty, scars, traumas. As we have seen before, we already concluded and examined to what extent QAnon actually plays on people’s emotions and fears, depicting a false reality dividing between a good and an evil site, to be better propagated.

Aside the fact of instrumentalizing emotions to better spread an ideology, another efficient way of propagating messages within the weaponized narrative’s framework is to avoid a complex reasoning, allowing to foster information and statements that are intuitively-formed. It is even better efficient when the information flows out from a set of values and beliefs already constructed and provided thanks to the movement’s propaganda. Depending on such a technical discursivity permits the propaganda to be spread quickly and widely. As previously discussed, QAnon instrumentalizes emotions and creates intuitively-formed information to convince the “in” and confuse the “out”. Because its target audience is convinced and/or confused as long by intuition rather than reason, QAnon tailors its messages to the sort, impactful, and rapidly delivered messages.

To conclude this section, QAnon’s discourse of propaganda is an effective weaponized narrative. This fact is supported by its participatory nature the many other characteristic discusses throughout this paper. In another words, thanks to the rapidity of informative sharing, engagement of the users, intuitively-formed worldviews (fake news, misinformation, conspiracy theories) and the instrumentalization of the feelings (*table 5*), QAnon’s propaganda is not harmless. It is a dangerous weapon, and a threat to rational ruse based society.

Future study is recommended to understand if participatory propaganda is a fertile target for weaponized narratives to flourish, especially when reinforced by a deliberate actor. A study on the Russian Internet Research Agency would be relevant on such a subject. It might demonstrate how top down reinforcement might be a catalyst for the bottom up proliferation and viability of dangerous weaponized narratives.

⁵⁸ “Weaponized Narratives Initiative”, Arizona State University, accessed December 25, 2021, [Weaponized Narrative Initiative | \(asu.edu\)](https://werras.asu.edu/)



In the meantime, since propaganda is an identified weaponized narrative, it is important to ask what it threatens. What does it jeopardize? A weapon directed towards what or who? As our final and ultimate step regarding QAnon propaganda analysis, let us go deep in the *cognitive* and *information warfare*.

TABLE 5

QAnon As a Weaponized Narrative: How It Flows Out from Participatory Propaganda

Participatory Propaganda	Weaponized Narrative
Media monopoly Grassroot Propaganda (of the deed) Engagement of the users	A “Fast-Moving Information Deluge”
Good vs. evil side Discursivity	Emotional Manipulation
Fake news Conspiracy Theories Disinformation	Intuitively-formed Information

b. The Heart of the Cognitive & Information Warfare

The NATO Innovation Hub presented *cognitive warfare* as the “*new third operational dimension, besides the cyber and the physical ones. [...] It embodies the idea of combat without fighting.*”⁵⁹

Carlo Kopp presented the basic paradigm of *information warfare* as follows: “*Exploring the taxonomy of IW/IO [e.g. information warfare/information operations], we have Cyberwar, essentially involving the organized cracking of other people’s systems, to spy, to deceive and alter, or to deny services. We also have the historically well established discipline of Propaganda, Psychological Operations or “Perception Management”, essentially the use of information to confuse, deceive, mislead, destabilise, and disrupt an opponent’s population and*

⁵⁹ “Cognitive Warfare”, Innovation Hub, NATO, accessed December 26, 2021, [Cognitive Warfare | Innovation Hub \(innovationhub-act.org\)](https://innovationhub-act.org)



armed forces. Then we have the Second Old Profession, the well proven art of intelligence/espionage and its siblings, the theory of deception, aimed at divining secrets from an opponent, inserting falsehoods into their perception of reality, and preventing the opponent from doing the same.⁶⁰

Within frame of cognitive and information warfare, we will enter a new notion: populism (i). Ultimately, we will depict QAnon propaganda as a participatory weaponized narrative that uses populist tools - a threat entering the field of cognitive and information warfare. (ii)

i. QAnon & Populism

Before proceeding further deeply into QAnon's place within cognitive and information warfare, *populism* is a notion that should be explored.

In this essay, language, music, emotional manipulation and intuitively-formed worldviews (weaponized narrative) were linked with the propagandistic messaging of QAnon. According to anthropologists Ianosev and Sahin: *“Research has repeatedly uncovered associations between various types of epistemically unwarranted beliefs, such as faith in the paranormal, conspiracy theories and pseudoscience, and right-wing populism. What all unwarranted beliefs seem to have in common is a higher reliance on intuitive thinking. [...] A higher reliance on intuitions, characteristic of conspiratorial and right-wing populist views, is more likely to focus on simple explanations and anecdotes to the detriment of scientific analysis or medical expertise. [...] Moreover, both right-wing populists and conspiracy theorists tend to explain important world events as outcomes of the actions of (hidden) powerful agents, a feature present in other highly intuitive worldviews such as religion.⁶¹”* Therefore, a first observation is to say that, even disconnected from our case at hand, conspiracy theories, fake news, and pseudoscience are interrelated to right-wing populism. These are familiar features of QAnon's propaganda, that were described before. This opens the door to a connection between populism and the QAnon movement, through their similar dependence on emotional instrumentalization and intuitions.

⁶⁰ Klopp, Carlo. “Information Warfare. Part 1 – A Fundamental Paradigm of Infowar.”, *Air Power Australia*, Accessed December 26, 2021. [Information Warfare - Part 1 A Fundamental Paradigm of Infowar \(ausairpower.net\)](https://www.ausairpower.net/Information-Warfare-Part-1-A-Fundamental-Paradigm-of-Infowar)

⁶¹ Ianosev, Bogdan and Sahin, Osman. “Can Human Evolution Help Us Understand Support for Populist Movements?” in *Political Insight* (September 2020).



A second point is to integrate the approach to populism by Ernesto Laclau⁶² that centers it to the core of the political. Laclau gives a special attention to the notion of the “people” of “people-ism”, since today’s politics and movements depends on the discourse between people and the leadership. He introduces several key terms in order to identify populism in today’s political speeches. Let us study our case at hand under the Laclau’s prism starting with the aspects of discourse and discursivity. According to him, the importance here is to understand the referential provided by the speech at hand. Our worldviews are all based on some referential systems other people afford to us. Nonetheless, definitions and understandings are active and constantly renegotiated by politics and public discourses. The populist logic is to provide a referential that is discursively Machiavellian and binary, notably between the “inside” and the “outside”, the “us” vs. the “them”. This is precisely the case of QAnon, which constructs all its discourses on a discursivity that provides a whole set of beliefs, values, and reality understandings to its members.

The second of Laclau’s points addresses the articulation and the nodal points. In other words, populism is also a political style and logic. Populism constructs the “people” by altering the identity of the individuals by linking them to other elements, to generate a new identity such as being a member of a nation, a member of the people... Nodal points precisely help in building and solidifying this new entity. Once again, this is also the case of QAnon. The 2021 Conference showed how QAnon desires also to frame a new identity of the “US ordinary American”, relying on religious and military imagery for example. It also frames a new identity by representing followers as oppressed by a corrupted government and their way of life, threatened by the immigration.

The third Laclauian point is the *empty signifier*, which is symbolic images spreading an implicit message. It can be a poster, slogans, and so forth. By showing an image for instance, a bundle of ideas flow from it: it says more than what is explicitly presented. This is the case of QAnon’s logos, the visual symbols of powers that we have seen previously, such as the U.S. flag for example.

Additionally, the fourth point focuses on the building of antagonisms. According to Laclau, definition is created through comparison with the different, *constitutive outsides*: discourses and identities are necessarily exclusive and built as being vulnerable to the forces that are excluded from the definition. In that way, antagonism occurs when presence of “the

⁶² Laclau, Ernesto. *Populism: What’s in a Name?* (2005) 33-49



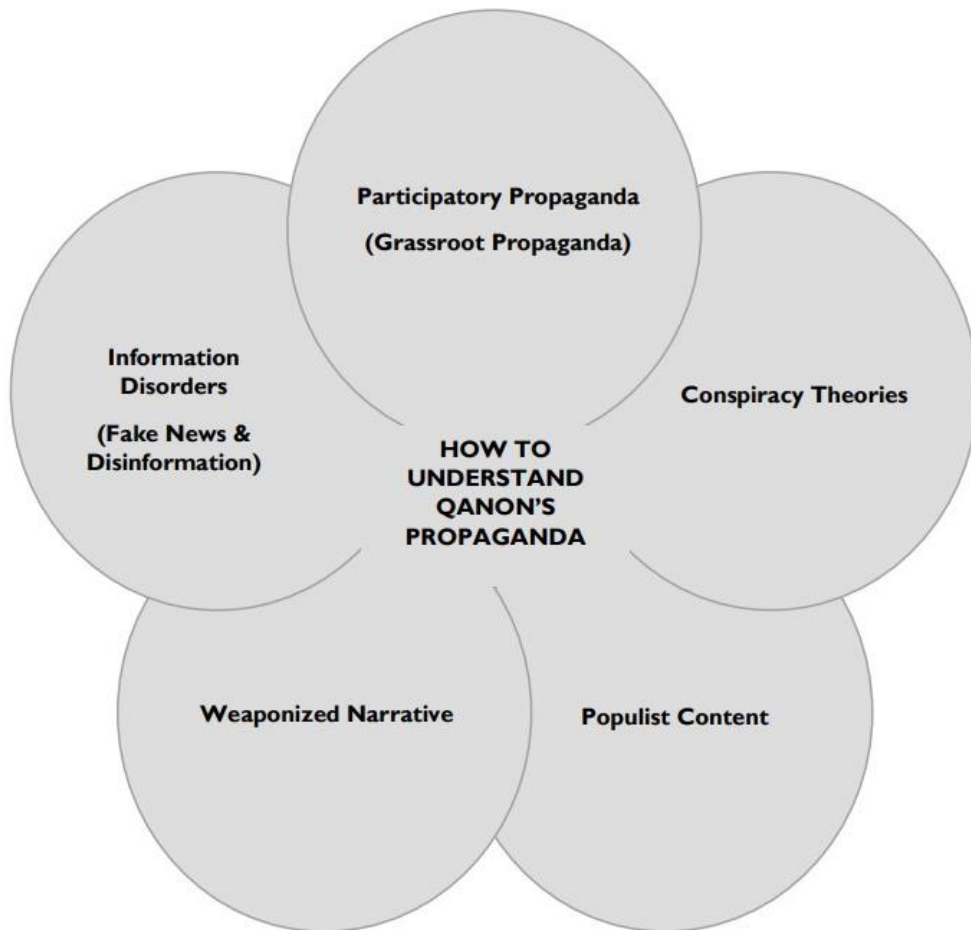
other” is perceived as preventing us from being totally “ourselves”. This is the classical antagonism of “us” vs. “them”. In this case, the “us” is the U.S. ordinary people that are oppressed because of the “them”, who is the corrupted government, the foreigners, the leftists. Finally, the ultimate point is to threaten the current hegemonic equilibrium in politics, thanks to the formation of a new common sense. In that way, populist discourse generates interpretations that jeopardize the hegemony, which makes adhering people to such propagandistic messaging. In our case at hand, the hegemony that is under the populist threat of QAnon is the present U.S democracy and the “*New World Order*”.

TABLE 6	
QAnon Populist’s Discourse	
Discourse and discursivity	Binary and Manichean worldviews Discursivity based on a whole set of beliefs, values, and understandings
Articulation and nodal points	Identity of the “U.S. ordinary American” Immigration and corruption resulting in people’s oppression
Empty signifier	Logo of QAnon U.S. flag
Antagonism	“Us” vs. “them” Constitutive outsiders: the foreigners, left-wing, Democratic politicians, international organizations
Hegemony	Threat directed towards the “ <i>New World Order</i> ”

Reviewing each of QAnon’s discourses provides deeper understanding. Shedding lights on populist tools and features used by QAnon’s propaganda enables understanding of the movement’s influence on the current political agenda. There is a natural bridge between propaganda and populism, when propaganda is thought of as a primary means of communication between members of the in-group and down from their leadership, but also

from the people to the leaders themselves. With a firm grasp of the essence of QAnon's propaganda (*figure 1*), we can move forward to its impact as planting a seed of chaos within our current order.

FIGURE 1 – How to Understand QAnon's Propaganda



ii. QAnon's Propagandistic Discourse as a Way of Spreading Chaos

The preceding facts bring us to a natural conclusion on the methods and impact of QAnon. QAnon fits the *participatory propaganda* framework. QAnon fits the *grassroot propaganda* notion. QAnon fits the *weaponized narrative* theory. QAnon appeals to emotions language. QAnon appeals to users. QAnon appeals to fake news, disinformation, conspiracy



theories. QAnon uses populist notions. QAnon spreads chaos as a weapon directed towards the “*New World Order*”. As such, it enters the fields of *cognitive and information warfare*.

It comes as a result that QAnon is definitely not only a matter of traditional or conventional propaganda. It is even not merely a matter of participatory propaganda. QAnon’s will is to influence the political agenda and to collapse what they call within their weaponized narratives the “*New World Order*”, jeopardizing the western liberal values and the democracy as they are now. In fact, QAnon incarnates a private psychological operation to influence people’s brains and perceptions of the reality. QAnon expands our world's threshold into an unexplored and unprecedented war.



CONCLUSION

The first section helped us to determine that QAnon's speeches are indeed propagandistic. Thanks to a primary spontaneous approach of the ideology and the rhetoric used by QAnon, we have been able to reuse this approach to put them in application within the framework of the traditional propaganda's models. We concluded, as a result of this, that QAnon is indeed a propagandistic movement.

A second step allowed us to go further and deeper in our propaganda analysis for our case at hand. After stating that the models dealing with traditional and conventional propaganda were not sufficient to understand all the subtleties of QAnon's propaganda, we gave a look at participatory and computational propaganda. Indeed, owing to our fast-changing and digital age, participatory propaganda's model provided by Wanless was even more helpful when it comes to unfold all the propagandistic techniques used by QAnon. In that way, an emphasis on conspiracy theories, information disorders and grassroots propaganda were unavoidable.

Ultimately, our study enabled us to open the door of the cognitive and information warfare as the final comprehension and understanding step regarding QAnon's propaganda analysis. We stated that QAnon actually provides a weaponized narrative, based on an instrumentalization of people's emotions and intuitive information – both being communicative tools of populism.

Lastly, thanks to these three steps of analysis, we claimed that QAnon's propagandistic discourse is hence a combination of all these propagandistic technics, with the goal of planting a seed of chaos and confusion to fight and collapse the "*New World Order*". Understanding these aspects is more than a useful academic endeavor. There is in fact no "New World Order" composed of actors directing the world. There is however a battle for ideas that seeks to mitigate the natural anarchy of world order in general. If ideas such as the liberalism and cooperation are to overcome internal anarchy, authoritarianism, religious extremism, and other malign ideas, it is up to each of us to not just to understand these mechanisms, but to create the mitigations to counter them. If we are successful, we can help create a continuously more just order for all, and not just some.



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