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Dear members of the committee:

The Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CITAP) thanks the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol for providing a comprehensive understanding of the events that transpired on that day. CITAP is committed to research at the intersection of politics and digital technology, studying the sociotechnical nature of platforms and the role they play in influencing the democratic process. It is an honor to be asked to submit a statement for the record regarding this event. We want to clarify this statement does not reflect our employer's perspectives nor our personal opinions. This Statement is grounded in more than five years of systematic research on the conservative information ecosystem in the United States. Utilizing multiple methods to study across platforms, our research reveals how the central themes and frames from this network blur the boundaries between the mainstream and extremism. In this Statement, we will draw on examples from our research to argue the following:

1. "Stop the Steal" is a disinformation narrative tracing back to the 1800s and designed to protect the white vote.
2. In the aftermath of the January 6th event, prominent conservative legislators and media personalities tried to deflect the violence by claiming it was committed by "Antifa," drawing on the same language from the 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia ("Unite the Right").
3. The Trump administration regularly used their taxpayer-funded email newsletter ([whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov)) to denounce Black Lives Matter protests as destructive riots, but never sent a single email concerning the events that transpired on January 6th. The Trump administration also never acknowledged Biden as the winner of the 2020 election nor attempted to assert a peaceful transfer of power to its email subscribers.
4. Conservative media organizations understand how search engine optimization works and are able to game the system to spread misinformation.

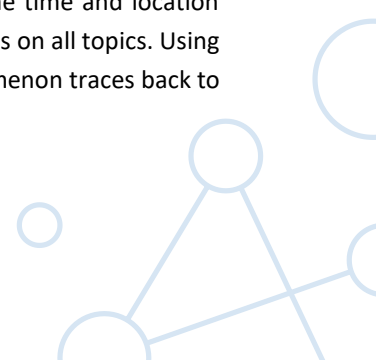


5. Organizing for January 6th was conducted on public Facebook groups that aligned on other issues (e.g., reopening public schools, businesses, and places of worship during COVID-19). No attempts by the platform were made to flag or circumvent this rhetoric.
6. Conspiratorial and partisan disinformation has become participatory, with members of fringe, far-right, and conservative online communities collaborating to create, amplify, and reinforce false and inaccurate information supporting their political goals.
7. Supporters of the conspiracy theory QAnon were well represented in the events of January 6 and in creating and spreading disinformation that the 2020 election results were fraudulent. The Trump administration repeatedly amplified QAnon ideas. QAnon is deeply tied to themes prominent in Evangelical and Christian Nationalist communities. It advocates for spiritual warfare in which an epic battle of good versus evil results in the mass execution of leading Democrats. Many QAnon believers thought this “Great Awakening” was tied to the 2020 election and would culminate on January 6th.
8. Representatives in Congress, conservative media personalities, and fringe conspiracy groups use the same tactics to effectively spread disinformation. They all encourage audiences/followers to “do their own research,” a process which involves rejecting information spread by traditional knowledge-making institutions like science, academia, and journalism in favor of self-confirmation of disinformation.

Overall, we reject the framing of “radicalization” to describe those who participated in the January 6th attacks. Instead, we see the false beliefs of those participants—including the idea that the 2020 election was stolen, that Democrats are part of an evil cabal, and that Antifa was responsible for both the violence in Charlottesville and on January 6th—as blurring the lines between extremism, fringe, and mainstream Conservatism. This blurriness is reinforced by digital technologies such as social media and search engines which facilitate such mainstreaming and make it possible for false frames and disinformation to spread rapidly between political elites, partisan media, and American voters.

Stop the Steal

Google Trends is an unbiased sample of the billions of queries that the search engine handles each day. The results can be viewed at any time, by anyone, at trends.google.com. Trends normalize search data to make comparison easier. Each data point is divided by the number of total searches based on geographic location and time. The resulting numbers are then scaled on a range of zero (the minimum search interest for the time and location selection) to 100 (the maximum search interest), based on a topic’s proportion to all searches on all topics. Using this data, [one can see](#) that allegations of a stolen election did not begin in 2020. This phenomenon traces back to



2016, when lies that the Clintons planned to steal the election surfaced on Twitter. By [analyzing 2016 tweets](#) that included the #StoptheSteal hashtag, one can see that many of the false statements circulating during the 2020 election were tested out four years prior. This standard set of lies centered around the anti-Semitic claim that George Soros (a Jewish billionaire and humanitarian) had paid to rig the election; that “illegal aliens” were voting and threatening democracy; and that voting machines were not reliable. Roger Stone, a conservative political consultant and lobbyist, openly supported the Stop the Steal movement in 2016, encouraging groups in contested areas to talk with voters as they left the polls and supporting Trump’s concept of “poll watchers.”¹

Yet these calls to action circulating around Stop the Steal were not new ideas at all. The language used by Trump to secure “election observers” is a recycled effort to suppress the minority vote and affect electoral outcomes. It was used in 1981, when the Republican National Committee created the National Ballot Security Task Force, a group of armed, off-duty police officers hired to patrol polling sites in traditionally Black and Hispanic neighborhoods.² The whole idea of a “stolen election” dates all the way back to the 1870s, when Black Americans used their voting rights to elect Black men to serve in the U.S. Congress following the passage of the Reconstruction Act. Shortly thereafter lies circulated that African Americans had “abused their voting privileges, engaged in corruption, and stood generally unfit for democracy.”³

The Recurring threat of “ANTIFA”

Antifa (pronounced by conservative pundits and politicians as an-TEE-fuh) is shorthand for the anti-fascism movement—a loose organization of people and groups who believe in active and aggressive opposition to far-right movements. The claim that Antifa regularly instigate violence at events designed and attended by Trump supporters first began circulating during the 2017 Unite the Right rally. At the time, using Antifa to capture the violence that transpired on August 12th was a tactical decision by white supremacists on 8chan to deflect public attention from the real neo-Nazis who boasted their attendance at the event. This media manipulation started on Nazi forums like the Daily Stormer and quickly spilled over into the rest of the right-wing information ecosystem in a process Dr. Marwick and Rebecca Lewis refer to as “trading up the chain.”⁴ First, *InfoWars* published an article entitled “[Bombshell Connection between Charlottesville, Soros, and CIA.](#)” Its author claimed that Soros (the same supposed villain behind Stop the Steal) had paid Antifa protesters to attend the Charlottesville rally and try to make Trump look bad. This purposeful misdirection and focus on Antifa as “outsiders” are reminiscent of the language used by segregationists to describe civil rights protestors in the 1960s. In the months that followed the

¹ Hayden, M. E. (2020). Far Right Resurrects Roger Stone’s #StopTheSteal During Vote Count. *Southern Poverty Law Center*.

² Pilkington, E. (2020). In 1981 a ‘Task Force’ Intimidated Voters at the Polls. Will Republicans Revert to their Old Tactics? *The Guardian*.

³ Sokol, J. (2008). *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975*. Vintage.

⁴ Marwick, A. E., & Lewis, R. (2017). Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online.

Unite the Right rally, the right-wing information ecosystem focused on Antifa as a threat to conservatism nationwide, featuring videos of alleged Antifa activists attacking conservatives on college campuses.

Antifa was also used as a dog whistle to delegitimize the hundreds of thousands of civil rights protestors who took to the streets following the murder of George Floyd. For example, Attorney General William Barr issued a press release on May 31, 2020, concluding that “the violence instigated and carried out by Antifa and other similar groups in connection with the rioting is domestic terrorism and will be treated accordingly.”⁵ That same day, Trump stated on Twitter that “the United States of America will be designating ANTIFA as a Terrorist Organization.” Two days later, the *Washington Examiner* published a piece titled “[Trump is Right: Antifa Is a Terrorist Group. It Always Was.](#)” The same theme was furthered by *The Right View*, a Zoom-based talk show recorded live and distributed via various web-based channels, including Trump’s 2020 campaign app and Facebook. In Lara Trump’s own words, it was tragic that “Antifa and other far-left anarchist groups are using this tragedy as an excuse to violently riot, burn down businesses and homes, and hurt the livelihoods of many Americans.” As disinformation researchers Joan Donovan and Brian Friedberg document, white supremacists actually ran the social media accounts that claimed to represent Antifa during the Floyd protests.⁶

As people breached police lines on January 6th and began scaling the walls of the Capitol building, conservative politicians and pundits once again started spreading lies that Antifa were the ones behind the violence. Despite Trump’s clear motivational stance in his speech to his supporters and video footage showing hundreds of Trump signs and flags amongst those storming the Capitol, the immediate reaction on Twitter and conservative news media signaled that Antifa were responsible. Prominent conservative personality Candance Owens speculated on Twitter that “[Antifa Thugs](#)” were in the mix. Todd Herman began his [episode of Rush Limbaugh’s podcast](#) by claiming he had been monitoring Antifa “chat channels” and knew firsthand that Antifa had embedded themselves among the protestors and were the ones causing problems. On Fox News, [Sean Hannity](#) asserted that “groups like Antifa” were involved in the storming of the Capitol. Speaking on [Lou Dobbs’s Fox Business show](#), Rep. Mo Brooks said that there were “two parts” to this event and that there were indications that “fascist Antifa elements” had embedded themselves in the Trump rally. The *Washington Times* ran an article titled “[Facial Recognition Identifies Extremists Storming the Capitol](#)” where the reporter claimed that extremists had been identified as Antifa. Rep. Paul Gosar shared the story on Twitter claiming that January 6th had the “[hallmarks of Antifa provocation](#)” and the next morning Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) took to the house floor and used the article as evidence to claim that some people who breached the Capitol “were members of the violent terrorist group Antifa.”

⁵ Department of Justice (2020, May 31). *Attorney General William P. Barr’s Statement on Riots and Domestic Terrorism* [Press release].

⁶ Donovan, J., & Friedberg, B. (2019). Source Hacking. *Media Manipulation in Practice*, 4.

Although the FBI found no evidence to back these claims, disinformation surrounding Antifa and the insurrection persists. According to an April 2021 Amherst poll, more than one fifth of Republican voters blamed Antifa for the violence at the Capitol.⁷ When the House Committee on Homeland Security tried to create a bipartisan commission to investigate the January 6th attack, top Republicans insisted that any investigation of the lead-up to January 6th must also include an examination of violence from “far-left groups like Antifa during protests of police brutality last year.”⁸

Search Engine Optimization

In 2019, Dr. Tripodi testified before the [Senate Judiciary Committee](#) concerning allegations that conservatism is being silenced by search engines. Drawing on her research, [she explained](#) that the contrary is true. Relying on search engine optimization techniques, conservative elites are able to maximize the likelihood that Google will return information that highlights their causes and concerns. Specifically, Dr. Tripodi drew on webscraped metadata to compare the difference between how conservative and progressive YouTubers tag their content. She found that conservative media hosts were more likely to utilize keywords in order to maximize exposure, increasing the likelihood that their videos will appear when people search for or engage with content on popular platforms like YouTube. Part of this strategy is tied to what Microsoft researchers refer to as “data voids”⁹: when little to no information exists about a topic online, it is easier for conspiracy theorists to capitalize on these keywords and coordinate search traffic around them. In her research, Dr. Tripodi documents how conservative content creators latch onto concepts circulated almost exclusively within the right-wing media ecosystem. Content surrounding these key phrases are first produced online, and then the ideas are driven through talk radio or Fox News. For example, when you search on Google or YouTube for information about Nellie Ohr, one would only receive links or videos from sources like Fox News, Fox Business, The *Daily Caller*, and The *Washington Examiner*. Not a single non-conservative link exists in the first seven hits. This level of sophistication highlights how conservative groups systematically work to optimize their content for search and social media.

Dr. Tripodi’s findings also indicate that the process of matching keywords to content [can be gamed](#). For decades marketers have relied on search engine optimization strategies to maximize the likelihood that Google will return content that highlights their cause or company. Tripodi found that conservative production companies have an acute understanding of how search engine optimization works, and they are using it to maximize the exposure of

⁷ Sharpe, J. (2021). Republicans Blame Democrats, Antifa and U.S. Capitol Police for Jan. 6 Mayhem, According to New UMass Amherst/WCVB Poll. *University of Massachusetts Amherst*.

⁸ Herb, J., Nobles, R., & Grayer, A. (2021, May 14). House strikes deal to create independent January 6 commission. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/14/politics/january-6-commission-agreement/index.html>

⁹ Golebiewski, M., & Boyd, D. (2019). Data Voids: Where Missing Data Can Easily Be Exploited. *Data & Society Research Institute*.

their content. For example, the top News returns on Google for the phrase “AOC” are routinely conservative outlets like the *Washington Examiner*, the *New York Post*, and Fox News, despite the fact that “AOC” is the Twitter handle for the liberal Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. This matching is not accidental. Since algorithms are computer programs, they do not read like humans do. In order for datasets to be machine-readable, they must be tagged and categorized. This information about the data is called “metadata.” A webpage’s metadata or meta tags provide a description of the page’s content. Search algorithms rely on metadata to transform inputs (users’ geolocation, click-through data, and keywords) into output (directions, YouTube videos, or what is determined to be relevant news).

Based on the metadata of ten conservative YouTube channels and eight progressive YouTube channels, Dr. Tripodi found that the right-wing information ecosystem more actively engages in strategic tagging, using keywords outside of the conservative lexicon to reach a broader audience. For example, conservative vlogger Steven Crowder is more likely to tag content on his channel with “liberal” or “left” than with “conservative” or “right.” PragerU’s channel tags more of its videos with “transgender” than with conservative phrases like “free market.” Of all the channels analyzed, Jordan Peterson (conservative) was most likely to tag content with “social justice.” Fox News is 6.7 times more likely to use “AOC” as a search engine optimization tag than MSNBC, thereby increasing the likelihood that searching for the phrase will link audiences to conservative news coverage of a Democratic representative.

This recommendation system may seem like a harmless method for capturing attention, but it has ominous consequences when it comes to political content. Take, for example, the way the conservative ecosystem pushed out lies about Antifa to deflect from the violence Trump supporters incited on January 6th. Even though The Washington Times has since issued a correction to the article, disinformation about Antifa is just a simple Google search away. When an information seeker does their own research on “[Washington Times Antifa Evidence](#),” the top return is still the article, and under the headline reads an inaccurate and misleading summary “Trump supporters say that Antifa members disguised as one of them infiltrated the protestors who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday.”

Trump Administration Use of Government Email

The official White House newsletter was started by the Obama administration on the day of his inauguration (January 20th, 2009) and taken up by the Trump administration after he was elected. After taking office, the Trump administration renamed the newsletter the *1600 Daily*, and in 2017 made the content accessible via subscription only, removing its archive from [whitehouse.gov](#). Dr. Tripodi and her research assistant Yuanye Ma analyzed all



emails through the *1600 Daily* from October 19th, 2019–December 24th, 2020.¹⁰ Based on this data, they found that the White House primarily relied on sources within the right-wing media ecosystem, which researchers at Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society define as an asymmetrical political ecosystem fueled by conspiracy theories and fringe personalities who reject normative journalistic practices.¹¹ Not only did the White House source over 60% of their news from these sources, it embedded more nefarious content by hyperlinking sources labeled as CNN or the *Washington Post* to publications like the *Federalist* or the *Free Beacon*.

The emails also regularly intervened in politically contentious situations. For example, emails repeatedly referred to Trump’s first impeachment as a “sham” orchestrated by the “far-left” and painted long-standing Democrats like Nancy Pelosi and Adam Schiff as “liars” who were working as part of a “socialist movement.” As civil rights protests formed in response to the murder of George Floyd, the White House repeatedly sent out information denouncing the marches and framing them as “violent mobs” and “riots.” From June 2nd to November 3rd, the Trump administration sent out 34 emails denouncing the Black Lives Matter protests claiming they were attacking the police and leaving destruction in their wake. The administration explicitly framed the events in Kenosha as “violent riots” in three emails in September and one on August 31st and described Trump’s visit to Wisconsin as an opportunity to “survey property damage” (September 1st, 2020).

Yet this same account did not send a single email acknowledging the electoral outcome in which Donald Trump lost the 2020 presidential election. On November 13th, November 20th, November 25th, December 4th, December 11th, and December 18th, the White House continued to send newsletter subscribers “Five Stories President Trump Doesn’t Want You To Miss” emails. None of the information or news stories in these emails addressed the election, even though the Associated Press, Fox News, CNN, and all other news networks had effectively called Pennsylvania for Joe Biden by November 7th, providing him with the 270 electoral votes he needed to secure the presidency. While the administration sent a considerable number of emails denouncing Black Lives Matter protests as violent, it did not send a single email in response to the events on January 6th, despite one Capitol police officer dying and a reported 140 officers injured on the day of the attempted insurrection.

ReOpen Groups and their Connection to January 6th Events

In response to the mandates from local government officials to close businesses, schools, and places of worship, the Reopen the States Movement, aka ReOpen, formed. Groups first formed on Facebook in response to the

¹⁰ Tripodi, F., & Ma, Y. (2022). You’ve Got Mail: How the Trump Administration Used Legislative Communication to Frame his Last Year in Office. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-21.

¹¹ Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press.



closure of churches over Easter Sunday (April 12th, 2020). However, the disinformation activity that fuels ReOpen is not exclusive to any one digital platform, or even to online media. From April 2020–December 2020, Dr. Tripodi conducted ethnographic observations inside public ReOpen community groups on Facebook situated in four states across the United States.¹² Observations consisted of daily visits to these groups, tracking themes, taking screenshots, and noting information being used to support group members' arguments as they were discussed in threads. Similar to those who gathered on January 6th, ReOpen group members framed themselves as revolutionaries and individuals fighting against a repressive government. In response to mask mandates, the catchphrase #WeWillNotComply began circulating in ReOpen groups.

The historic nature of this hashtag is also rooted in conservative ideals. The call for non-compliance originated at a "Second Amendment Sanctuary" rally protesting gun-control bills recently introduced in the Virginia state legislature.¹³ Associating social distancing and mask-wearing as violations of individual freedoms further frames the movement as a conservative effort driven by conservative logic. By framing resistance as a call to freedom and compliance a form of (forced) submission, #WeWillNotComply served as a battle cry for ReOpen. It allowed members to proudly assert their positions in public by refusing to wear a mask and positioned people obeying public safety measures as "sheeple" that had been tricked or fooled into thinking COVID was real because they did not "do their own research" on the subject.

After the presidential election, ReOpen groups quickly galvanized around President Trump's "Stop the Steal" mantra, organizing a series of rallies devoted to what they perceived to be a stolen election. ReOpen members also organized in-person events to gather signatures to prevent school closures or to try and recall governors. Despite the public health risks associated with large gatherings, it is telling that ReOpen members opted to collect paper signatures rather than circulating an online petition. Sites for in-person ReOpen rallies were indicative of ReOpen's connection to conservative values; multiple events were scheduled in Hobby Lobby parking lots, for example. Hobby Lobby holds cultural significance to conservatives after the CEO of the organization took a public stance against the Affordable Care Act mandate that companies provide access to contraception and the morning-after pill.¹⁴ They also cheered on violence leading up to the election, calling the "Trump Train"—vehicles displaying Trump flags that attempted to run a Biden campaign bus off the road—a "victory" for the movement.

¹² Tripodi, F. B. (2021). ReOpen Demands as Public Health Threat: A Sociotechnical Framework for Understanding the Stickiness of Misinformation. *Computational and Mathematical Organization Theory*, 1-14.

¹³ Swearer, A. (2020). Noncompliance with New Gun Laws Follows Historical Precedent. *The Daily Signal*.

¹⁴ Condon, S. (2014). Supreme Court Exempts Hobby Lobby from Obamacare Contraception Mandate. *CBS News*.

Participatory Partisan Disinformation

Disinformation can originate from a number of sources, including elites, so-called “fake news” and hyper-partisan websites, or on social media. However, extensive scholarly research on far-right and fringe social media sites including 4chan, 8chan, Gab, Discord, and Telegram demonstrates that disinformation is *participatory*, meaning that it is created by groups of people working together to interpret current events, share information, and push frames and stories that support their partisan beliefs.¹⁵ This participatory disinformation is frequently amplified by mainstream politicians and news organizations.

QAnon supporters amplified and spread the “Dominion” conspiracy theory, a core element of the belief that the 2020 election was stolen. This theory held that employees of Dominion Voting Systems Corporation, a company that makes voting software and hardware that was used in the 2020 election, were in league with an evil, Democratic cabal and switched millions of votes from Biden to Trump. While theories connecting Dominion to the Clinton family and (once again) billionaire George Soros had floated around far-right social media since 2016, the theory took off in November 2020 after it was discussed in depth on the QAnon message board 8kun. QAnons drew false connections between Dominion, their competitor Smartmatic, the Clinton Foundation, Dianne Feinstein, and Soros’s Open Society Foundations. The theory spread quickly to Twitter, where it was amplified by dozens of QAnon-related accounts including 8chan founder Ron Watkins.¹⁶ Watkins’ claim was picked up by One America News Network, which aired a report on Dominion theories. This report was retweeted by President Trump on November 12th. The Dominion theory was repeated two weeks after the election in a press conference at Republican Party headquarters held by Trump-supporting lawyers Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell. In this press conference, they tied Dominion not only to George Soros but also to Venezuela and even Antifa.¹⁷

This process shows how participatory disinformation is a complex process in which stories are amplified and guided by political elites and hyper-partisan news sources. Research by Kate Starbird from the University of Washington found that during the 2020 election, Trump and prominent conservatives repeatedly set expectations that the election would be fraudulent. For example, on May 24th, 2020, Trump tweeted “The United States cannot have all Mail In Ballots. It will be the greatest Rigged Election in history. People grab them from mailboxes, print thousands of forgeries and ‘force’ people to sign. Also, forge names. Some absentee OK, when necessary. Trying to use Covid for this Scam!” By setting this frame, Trump and other political elites primed conservative audiences

¹⁵ Marwick, A., & Partin, W. C. (2022). Constructing Alternative Facts: Populist Expertise and the QAnon Conspiracy. *New Media and Society*; Starbird, K. (2022). Unraveling the Big Lie: Participatory Disinformation and its Threat to Democracy. In *The American Association for The Advancement of Science 2022 Annual Meeting*.

¹⁶ Collins, B. (2020). QAnon's Dominion voter fraud conspiracy theory reaches the president. *NBC News*.

¹⁷ Feuer, A. (2021). Trump Campaign Knew Lawyers’ Voting Machine Claims Were Baseless, Memo Show. *The New York Times*.

on social media to search for and create false or misleading stories claiming that voter fraud was rampant and the election was “rigged.” These stories were amplified by conservative influencers and activists and reinforced by political elites, creating a shared sense of grievance and urgency.

QAnon and January 6th

QAnon is a far-right conspiracy theory which positions Donald Trump as a righteous savior working to take down an entrenched cabal of murderous Democratic pedophiles. In addition to their role creating disinformation about the 2020 election, QAnon believers were widely represented in the January 6th attacks on the capitol. Participants in QAnon do not fit the stereotypes of the “alt-right,” or the primarily young, internet-savvy men who typified the participants in far-right online communities during the 2016 election. In contrast, QAnon supporters are mostly white, Christian, and lower-middle-class to upper-middle-class men and women. A survey by political scientists at Denison found that 45% of evangelicals believed in the conspiracy theory, while the American Enterprise Institute found that 27% of white Evangelicals maintained that the core tenets of QAnon were “mostly or completely accurate.”¹⁸ More specifically, QAnon is at its core a Christian Nationalist movement, which advocates that America is and should be a Christian nation, and that the American government should adhere to and support Christian values.¹⁹

Dr. Marwick’s research has found many parallels between QAnon, Evangelical Christianity, and Christian Nationalism. The core tenets of QAnon map neatly to Evangelical concepts of “good” and “evil.” QAnon maintains not that liberal Democrats are misguided, but that they are evil and in league with Satanic forces. Both communities believe that Satan, demons, angels, and other supernatural figures are material figures that exist on earth and influence human events. Supporters think that a Revelations-style apocalypse called the “Great Awakening” or “Storm” is coming, in which Democratic elites will be held accountable for their crimes through mass arrests and executions. Many Anons believe that this event will bring about widespread peace and prosperity, in which Christian values will be upheld in American political culture, widespread sex trafficking of children will end, and knowledge held back by Satanic elites (such as improvements in health care) will spread throughout the populace. QAnon supporters widely believed that this would take place in January of 2021, spurring their involvement in the January 6th attacks.

¹⁸ Djupe, P., & Dennen, J. (2021, January 26). *Washington Post*.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/26/christian-nationalists-qanon-followers-tend-be-anti-semitic-that-was-visible-capitol-attack/>; Jenkins, J. (2021, February 11). Survey: More than a quarter of white evangelicals believe core QAnon conspiracy theory. *Religion News Service*. <https://religionnews.com/2021/02/11/survey-more-than-a-quarter-of-white-evangelicals-believe-core-qanon-conspiracy-theory/>

¹⁹ Whitehead, A. L., & Perry, S. L. (2020). *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. Oxford University Press.

The Dominion conspiracy theory discussed previously demonstrates how QAnon beliefs resonate with and are reinforced by mainstream Conservative messaging, particularly that of the Trump administration. For example, former President Trump frequently claimed that the mainstream media is strategically lying to its audience; that the “deep state” was working against him; that a “globalist” world order is undermining American values; and that there is something deeply wrong with the current state of America. These are core QAnon messages. Former President Trump repeatedly failed to condemn QAnon, and, claiming that he knew very little about the theory, instead stated that they “basically believe in good government,” that QAnon supporters “are very strongly against pedophilia,” and characterized them as “people that love our country.”²⁰ Indeed, during his presidency, Trump retweeted QAnon-associated Twitter accounts such as “Major Patriot” and “MAGAPill” more than 300 times, including 8kun founder Ron Watkins five times.²¹ More recently, Republican politicians like Marjorie Taylor Greene, Lauren Boebert, and Josh Hawley have “dog whistled” to QAnon supporters by referencing child pornography and sex trafficking.

Many QAnon beliefs have filtered out of core QAnon communities and into other right-wing online spaces. For example, the #SavetheChildren movement to combat sex trafficking depends not on factual evidence on human trafficking, but on QAnon’s theories that an elite cabal of pedophiles is tied to globalist forces. Much of this rhetoric mirrors earlier moral panics, such as those around Satanic day care workers in the 1980s, “stranger danger” in the 1990s, and “online predators” in the 2000s. Social media is key to this spread, with many participants in #SavetheChildren unaware that they are repeating QAnon beliefs.

Our research shows that people participate in QAnon for a variety of reasons. It creates a form of political participation that makes people feel significant. People participate by interpreting the “secret messages” that Q left for others to find, or simply by consuming Q-adjacent content. Because Q purports to be a Trump insider with high-level security clearance, understanding Q’s messages gives Anons a sense of insider knowledge and global importance. The danger to children that QAnon emphasizes creates a sense of urgency for participants who may believe they must combat widespread sex trafficking, convince other people that QAnon is correct, or harass people who are “evil” or immoral. (This explains why Pizzagate adherent Edgar Maddison Welch drove to Comet Ping Pong pizza in Washington DC with a loaded assault rifle—he thought he could rescue children who were being held in the basement). QAnon also provides a simple explanation for a complex set of social forces and reinforces the partisan and even religious beliefs of participants. QAnon is an example of a culture which encourages participation, camaraderie, and political involvement; nonetheless, it is anti-democratic and seeks to overthrow elected politicians in favor of Trump-aligned officials.

²⁰Miller, Z., Colvin, J., & Seitz, A. (2020). Trump praises QAnon conspiracists, appreciates support. *AP News*.

²¹Kaplan, A. (2019). Trump has repeatedly amplified QAnon Twitter accounts. The FBI has linked the conspiracy theory to domestic terror. *Media Matters for America*.

"Do Your Own Research"

What unites many of the movements and communities discussed in this document is the desire to “do your own research.” This research can take many forms, but it often means rejecting institutional knowledge in favor of consuming far-right social media content.

There is an enormous partisan divide in institutional trust. Although distrust in the media is at an all-time low, this is especially true of Republicans, only 35% of whom have “a lot” or even “some” trust in national and local news.²² Similarly, conservatives also often reject academic knowledge and are particularly hostile towards the humanities. A 2019 poll from the Pew Research Center found that 59% of Republicans think universities have a negative effect on the United States.²³

In Dr. Marwick’s studies of QAnon, she found that participants rejected information from scientists, mainstream media, or government in favor of populist expertise, home-grown archives and knowledge created by those who may feel disenfranchised from mainstream political participation. QAnon participants built their own repositories of “alternative facts” by collectively interpreting posts made by Q, reading partisan and mainstream news stories, and making connections between disparate phenomena.

In contrast to stereotypes of conspiracy theorists as gullible fools, QAnons actively work together to create information that supports Q’s predictions. They create lengthy PDFs, hour-long internet documentaries, and hundreds of hours of podcasts that interested participants are encouraged to wade through.

For example, the ten-part QAnon documentary series *Fall of the Cabal* is three hours long and knits together well-worn conspiracy theories about 9/11, the Clintons, the Bilderberg Group, the Rothschilds, the Illuminati, the Vatican, and many others with stock footage and emotional appeals to protect children from Satanic sex crimes. It exemplifies the “Gish Gallop,” a well-known rhetorical strategy where an advocate presents a large number of arguments to overwhelm their opponent, even if each argument is weak or non-existent. However, searching for any one of these conspiracy theories will result in dozens of purportedly “supportive” documents, many of which may be new to interested QAnon participants. Because most conspiracy theories involve a shadowy group of elites manipulating regular people for nefarious purposes, the “big tent” of QAnon allows for the co-existence of theories that might previously have seemed contradictory.

²²Gottfried, J., & Liedke, J. (2021). Partisan divides in media trust widen, driven by a decline among Republicans. *Pew Research Center*.

²³Parker, K. (2019). The growing partisan divide in views of higher education. *Pew Research Center*.



Dr. Tripodi observed that conservative voters used a similar structure for verifying information during her ethnographic observations of a women’s Republican group and a college Republican group. By attending weekly events and other engagements organized by the groups as well as conducting interviews with members, she found that they also preferred to “do their own research” rather than rely on the perspectives of institutional elites. Through media immersion in the news sources her respondents identified as trustworthy, Dr. Tripodi found that right-wing media pundits use these same meaning-making processes to legitimize false narratives.

Knowing that their audiences are primed to mistrust experts, QAnon and Fox News alike tell their audiences not to simply believe what they tell them, but rather “google it” for themselves to learn more on their own. Because they have a sophisticated understanding of how tags and metadata work, this strategy all but ensures that the information created by the producers in this network will be the first results returned—turning search engines into self-fulfilling information prophecies.

Marketers rely on a similar strategy when they encourage their consumers to build their own products, since by involving them in the process, researchers find that consumers value the items more.²⁴ This “IKEA effect of misinformation” makes audiences feel like they are drawing their own conclusions, thereby valuing them more. Propagandists, conspiracy theorists, and conservative pundits suggest that audiences go out and verify information on their own, but only after seeding the internet with problematic content and tagging it with keywords designed to surface and amplify those ideas.

Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene described this process first-hand when she testified before Congress on February 4, 2021.²⁵ She explained that her quest for more information was grounded in her support for Trump and disagreement with how mainstream media were portraying him. While “doing her own research,” she was exposed to the QAnon conspiracy. In her own words: “I started seeing things in the news that didn’t make sense to me, like Russian collusion, which are conspiracy theories also, and have been proven so, these things bothered me deeply and I realized just watching CNN or Fox News, I may not find the truth and so what I did is I started looking up things on the internet. Asking questions. Like most people do every day. Using Google. And I stumbled across something and this is at the end of 2017, called QAnon. These posts were mainly about this Russian collusion information, a lot of it was some of what I would see on the news at night and I got very interested in it. So I posted about it on Facebook, I read about it, I talked about it, I asked questions about it, and then more and more information came from it.”

²⁴ Michael I. Norton, Daniel Mochon, and Dan Ariely, “The IKEA Effect: When Labor Leads to Love,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 22 (2012): 453–460.

²⁵ “House Debate on Removal of Representative Greene from Committees,” C-SPAN, February 4, 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4943639/house-debate-removal-representative-greene-committees>.



As Dr. Tripodi documents in her research, “collusion delusion” was a term coined by Roger Stone in May 2018 during a Fox News interview which was then adopted by other conservative politicians and pundits and subsequently made its way into Google’s [autocomplete algorithm](#). It was this same narrative that then took Representative Greene down the path to QAnon as she tried to “do her own research.”

Conclusion

On January 6th, we bore witness to what can happen when political leaders deny free and fair elections and encourage their supporters to “do their own research” on what they know is not true. We saw what happens when lies become a reality. That day began with a speech from then-President Trump. Standing on the Ellipse, just south of the White House, Trump addressed thousands gathered to protest what they believed as a stolen election.

“Turn your cameras please,” he said to the news media covering the event, “and show what’s really happening out here, because these people are not going to take it any longer.” [In the speech](#), he credited his supporters for inventing the phrase “Stop the Steal” and went on to fill their ears with unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud. Trump claimed that dead people voted, that non-citizens, felons, and people who had moved voted, that tens of thousands of votes were switched from Trump to Biden, that Dominion voting machines had a 93.67% error rate, that secret operatives were stuffing thousands of unsecure ballots into duffel bags on park benches, and that mail-in ballots were being backdated so they could still count. At one point during his speech, Trump asserted that the Presidential election of 2020 was “the most corrupt election in the history, maybe of the world.” Framing those who stood before him as “patriots,” Trump proclaimed that “our brightest days are before us. Our greatest achievements, still away” before encouraging them to “fight like hell” because if they didn’t, they wouldn’t “have a country anymore.”

Although **radicalization** is the predominant frame used to explain why people participated in the January 6th attack on the capitol, our research shows that messaging claiming the election was stolen was mainstream in conservative circles, all the way up to the President of the United States. On social media, conservative users were primed by Republican elites to look for evidence of a stolen election, resulting in the production of vast bodies of “alternative” knowledge amplified through strategic search engine optimization and easily available to those inclined to “do their own research.” Similar events have long-standing historical precedents in the conservative media ecosystem dating back to the Reconstruction era. Most recently, this is seen in prominent Republicans’ attempts to deflect culpability for violence during the 2017 Unite The Right rally from far-right actors by placing the blame on Antifa, amplifying conspiratorial far-right media as evidence of Antifa’s supposed role in the violence. These events blur the lines distinguishing the “mainstream” from the “extreme.” Rather than emphasizing the role of radicalization in the January 6th attack, we recommend focusing on the **participatory** nature of



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conspiratorial and partisan disinformation and its ties to elite right-wing politicians, religious practices, and information systems.

