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Fake News and Information Disorder: A Journey Through QAnon's Conspiracy Theory

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Introduction

Information has always been a key element capable of shaping human society. The mainstream media, such as newspapers, the radio, television and recently the web platforms, have been the principal means of information delivery. Along the presence of these mainstream ways of informing the people, there was the creation of a parallel universe of newsread named disinformation. Disinformation, commonly known as fake news, have been the main antagonist of pure and unadulterated news. The first deployment of fake news has been registered long before the first steps of the internet information, so it is not a recent phenomenon. However, it has drastically evolved during the recent digital era. The reason for this skyrocketing is due to the evolution of the web as well as the massive diffusion of the use of the internet in the everyday lives of most of the population. Another important factor in the development of this great danger to mainstream media is the prominence of social media in today's lives of the people. Thanks to this widespread use of platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, or simply online forums, people have been able to talk and spread content for any issue area.

This phenomenon has revamped conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are based on fake contents which are then shared by the people online and stem from innocuous theories to more compelling stories that bring violence and troubles. One of these theories is QAnon, a recent theory based on the United States history and recent events. According to this theory Ex-President Donald J. Trump is the savior of humanity, on earth for the purpose to derail the evil plans of the so-called Deep State. This Deep State is an obscure organization that has in its ranks people like Hilary Clinton or pop singer Madonna. The plan of the Deep State is to control the world in the shadows, drinking blood to live forever and subduing the world population through pandemics and through puppets in governments, maneuvering their strings from their underground base.

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the complex scheme of information disorder and analyze the birth and the plans of one of the most prominent conspiracy theories of our time: QAnon. This analysis will be carried out through the comparison between the US, the birthplace of this group, and Italy, a perfect example of the European translation of QAnon.

In the first chapter we will analyze why it is better to use the term information disorder rather than the term fake news, being it a better way to call such a phenomenon. In the second chapter it will be addressed the birth of QAnon, its origins and the evolution through the years of this conspiracy theory. In the third and last chapter we will talk about Italy, going through the arrival of QAnon in the European continent and why the luck of this organization has been so high in the US, while in Italy as well as other European countries is still at its first sparks. Finally, in the conclusions there will be the drawing of the final statements and it will address the final goal of the thesis: information.

Chapter 1 - Defining the news arena

1.1 General overview

Nowadays some people have less trust in the media. They directly filter information and manage to challenge reliable sources like journals or verified sources. This is a trend for just a part of the population. However, the rest still believes everything they are fed from any source of information, being it verified or not, rendering them the perfect victims for those people who want to shape their minds through the use of what is called fake news, or information disorder¹ to be more precise. This phenomenon is not something of a new craft, rather the evolution of older practices that have left their traces. Today is very easy to share something, thanks to the well-known social media platforms. Since the birth of social media platforms and, in general, the internet, everyone has free and fast access to news. People now not only are the readers of news articles, but they also take in consideration the mission to write themselves the information which they are provided, being protagonist and spectators at the same time. Obviously with this wide freedom of speech and news-spread there is the huge risk of bumping into fake news articles. It is obvious to say that not everyone writes, on the internet or under journals, for the same purpose. Some write to share knowledge, to inform people about serious threats and situations that could change everyday life, some write to share gossip and chit chat while others just post their own fabricated contents, like invented stories with the intent to amuse. On the other hand, instead, we have people that write with malevolent intentions, eager to damage people with their 'information'. With this broad spectrum of news writers, being false or real, it is possible to take note of three main definitions to connect in the news arena: information disorder, fake news and real news. For information disorder it is meant the pollution of news, defined by three main categories: mis-information, dis-information and mal-information². These categories also contain a further distinction in seven forms: satire, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false connection, false claims and manipulated content, which differs from one another for the degree of intention to harm³. For fake news instead it means a broader spectrum of content that is not real. It is possible to say that is the deliberate spread of false claims through the use of different typologies which have been collected through the years: news satire, news parody, news fabrication, photo manipulation, advertising and public relations and propaganda⁴. Real news is the transposition of what happened on a certain occasion, containing the details about the event and letting the public know what happened.

¹ The term information disorder is more precise than fake news. It grasps a specific part of what composes fake news itself and it doesn't narrow it to a single definition that would lead us to overgeneralize.

² C. Waddle, H. Derakhshan, 2017

³ Ibid.

⁴ E. C. Tandoc Jr., Z. Wei Lim, R. Ling, 2018

1.2 What is news?

But what actually is news? News can be defined as the transposition of what happened on a certain occasion, containing details about the event and letting the public know the steps of the event. Real news is based on facts, the things that are written under the name of news are real and not facetious. Journalists need to report what happened without masking the reality, rendering it fake news. News makers though are not objective, they do not just tell the story. They add comments and thoughts, opinions and insights about the situation they experienced and serve it to the public. Journalists of course have their own opinions about certain situations, but what really matters is the orientation of the journal they work for. Alone a journalist can make a post on a journal, online or paper, and add his personal opinion only, or analyze a certain event according to his specific view. If some journalists work for a specific journal, they have to analyze the event under the lens imposed by the journal itself. If, for example, the journal has generally a democratic view on the news that is served to the public, the journalist will be forced to write about a certain event under democratic lenses, delivering the issue to the public interviewing democrats or analyzing the situation explaining the pros and cons for the democratic party and the population. Making an example, if one day there is a strike, the next day probably most of the journals will talk about this strike. Of course, everyone will agree that the strike happened, yet there will be a number of views depending on the different journals that will take the issue in their redactions. One journal will focus on the number of people and what they say, another will talk about what the politicians said, there will be the sport journal that will talk about the match that was cancelled for the strike and so on and so forth. News outlets are unique in their style of writing, in their affiliations and in the advertisement, they put into their papers. Yet, they all share a common goal: the spread of real and punctual information. This is what differentiate fake news from real news: the goal to share some real content and bring it to everyday people. Though even famous journals might be subject to mistakes and take to the public mis-information, which is fake content made without the realization of the creator of that content. Obviously, this case is very rare because journals usually control strictly every content that is written by the journalists, but even then, mistakes can be made: human nature is not perfect. An astonishing fact about today's media consumption is that it is immediate and always available. This is because the new world is always connected in some way with their devices, being it a phone, a laptop or a tablet. With an internet connection the user is able to watch and read the news wherever he goes at any time. This has changed the way people consume the news. Until a few years ago, one had to watch the newscast or buy the latest journal before the newsstands closed. Now no matter at what time, with a click or a pression on the screen users are easily able to access anything they please, from news streaming to online journals, that are slowly overshadowing the mainstream information channels. The network outlets and social media though are different things. While in the first case the news makers can upload news at any time, so that they can inform the public with fresh news as they receive them, on social media we have actually a funnel where the news is gathered and re-

posted by the users. Along with a greater consumption of news we also have an effect over the quality of the consumption. People almost always just read the main title of the article, maybe a few words out of curiosity but nothing more. Not many people actually read the whole article after skimming through the titles of their favorite journals because the new generations have lost the ritual of the news. In the past, reading a newspaper was a moment of break during the day, where people would sit down, at home or in a bar, and comment with friends and family about the news that they were reading. This new kind of behavior instead leads the people to just take the emotional input of an article through the title, without opening it up and maybe get more information than just a small catchy title made to attract the new lazy newsreaders. In addition to that we must say that nowadays the technological consumption has a huge gap between young people and elderly people. Most of the time we see young kids with phones in their hands, playing or chatting with friends. Not many elders are actually interested in these new technologies, they feel detached from it and are reluctant to use the technology that young people use. Youngsters prefer contents that are easily consumable, leaving the newspapers to others. These contents on the go can also be defined as tailored for the consumer. The people decide what to see and when to see it, based on their preferences and their subscriptions. Technology tracks our habits and allows companies to analyze our data, giving us every piece of information or advertising that matches our interests. This eases our research for news and products, since the network already knows what is that the people like. In the past, the audience had to choose what was fit for them to view in their free time in an ocean of content among the selection of media outlets. The recent typologies of media enable the public not only to be spectators of the news, that are fitting to the desires of the viewer, but also creator of contents by the use of news platforms or social media. In the past, information was based on a top-down model. The media channels like newspapers, the radio and the television that delivered the news were at the top, while the people receiving the information were at the bottom. Nowadays it is possible to experience instead a horizontal relationship where the media still feeds people the news that they need to consume, yet there is also the possibility for the same people to share and produce the news through the new technologies developed in the last decades.

1.3 What is information disorder?

Information disorder can be said to be the pollution of the news itself. It can be divided into three main definitions: mis-information, dis-information and mal-information. It is possible to define mis-information as the phenomenon of people sharing bits of information that are fake but without being aware of the damage. This means that those people are actually convinced that they are sharing valuable, and most importantly real, information, unaware that they are spreading some fake news instead. Dis-information is that kind of content that is produced in order to cause harm and it is intentionally fake. This type of content has the aim to harm another person and it is fake in its entirety. Mal-information instead is the sharing of real content, usually embarrassing for the person or highly private, in order to cause harm to that person.

This is usually achieved by the invasion of another person's privacy, with the aim to unravel the deepest secrets of a person, in order to cast a shade of shame over that person. In figure 1 by First Draft it is possible to distinguish the three typologies for the falseness and the intent to harm.

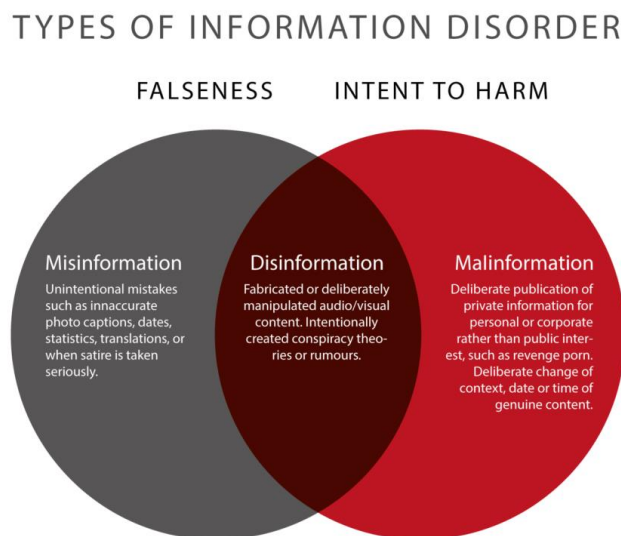


Fig.1

As for mis-information it only has the falseness accounted for, a person who makes an honest mistake has no intention to harm. Dis-information lies on both the circles, since it is both fake and there is an intention of harming a person or a group. Mal-information only accounts for the intention to harm, being it real content shared to the public in order to hurt someone. When analyzing these typologies, it works for fake news as well, it is appropriate to keep in mind that often it is possible to define three elements in the creation and delivering of the deceiving content. The three main elements that are essential to build these types of content are: the agent, the message and the interpreter. The agent is the person, or persons, that create, produces and deliver the message⁵. These three phases are often made by three separate individuals and consist in creating a message, using it to create a product to share and the actual sharing of the product. It is possible then to analyze a fourth phase: re-production. In this phase the message is shared by other people other than the agent that actually delivers it (figure 2).

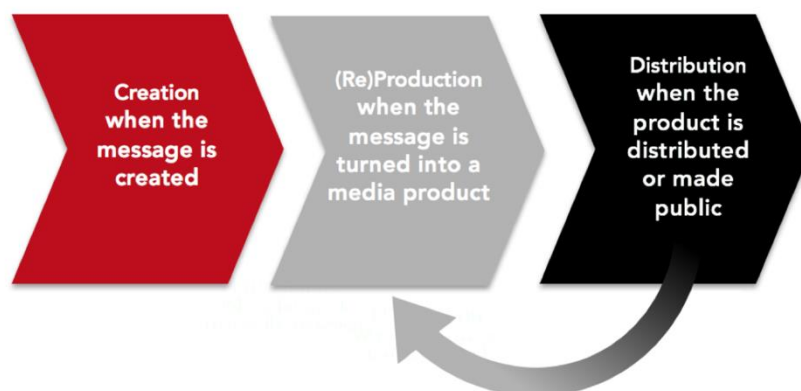


Fig.2

⁵ C. Waddle, H. Derakhshan, 2017

These people are connected to the network that works to produce and share these types of fake news spread. To amplify further the process there are then other people that share that piece of news: supporters or people against the matter at hand. If it is news against or in favor of a politician for example these people will be supporters or averters of the political party or the person itself. Analyzing the three main elements it is possible to have a better grasp on the reasons why fake news is produced, as well as the usual reaction by the public. It is possible to see that there are some characteristics that are observable in each of the three elements. The agent is the character which is present in the three phases of the production of news and it is the most important figure since its essential in the making of the fake news birth. Moreover, its nature can vary according to several different factors. The first one regards the typology of the actor, more precisely whether it is an official member of an institution or not. The second characteristic is the degree of organization, namely if the person works in an organization and hence has a complex network behind or if it works alone and hence has less capabilities as a lone wolf. Another factor is the motive, which could be further divided into four types: financial, political, social or psychological according to the purpose of the agent. Of the utmost importance is then the audience, that is to say the kind of people that they want to reach in order to spread their ideas through the technological capability of the agent, who can either use automated technology or rely on other technologies to ease the delivery of the message. At last come the intentions, which tell us if the agent is planning to use the message in order to mislead or to harm someone. The message can be delivered by the agent in three main ways: in person, text or through images. The majority of the fake material that is delivered today is usually sent out in the format of images, or through video content. This is because there is a huge difference in capabilities between the way in which a computer is able to analyze text content and the way in which it analyzes images or videos. In analyzing the message delivered it is possible to look at some characteristics as well: the durability, if the message is used only for a brief time, for example during an electoral campaign, or if it has a longer life; the accuracy, that is to say if the message is made to be either misleading, manipulated or fabricated; and the legality of the message, if the message can be persecuted by law in the country that is delivered in, for example an hate speech or a violation of intellectual property. The last important piece of the jigsaw is the audience. The audience is the passive protagonist, it doesn't do much except for taking in the information which was shared by the agent and assimilating it according to its own thoughts. Then the audience will re-share the information with others, becoming a medium for the exchange of the first given information, giving his or her thoughts on the situation just discovered through the fib. The audience can metabolize the message in three ways: they can accept it as it is delivered without any change, they can accept only part of it or they can decline it in its entirety. A good schematic of this analysis is figure 3 by First Draft where it is possible to see the steps to take in order to have a good analysis of the three important elements.

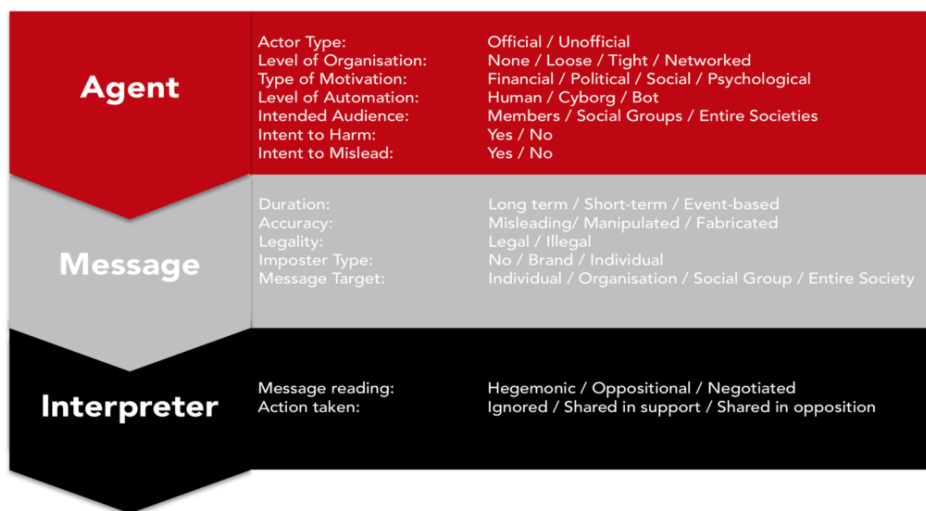


Fig. 3

When addressing the problem of information disorder, it is important to say that it can be divided into seven main types that differ from one another in their intention to harm. These types all fall between the definition of mis-information and dis-information and can be distinguished in: fabricated content, manipulated content, imposter content, false content, misleading content, false connection and satire or parody⁶. The highest degree of harm comes with fabricated content could be identified as the one with the greatest intention to harm and could be defined as a news content that is false in its entirety. It is designed to deceive and to do harm to others. It is this type of content that is fake at its fullest with no real claims to support it. The news is completely made up and the main goal is to harm a specific person or an organization. On a slightly lower level there is manipulated content, which is created when genuine information is changed, manipulated as the name suggests, in order to deceive and create scandal. It is the alteration of a real content which is made in order to mislead people into thinking another event has taken place instead of the real one. Different is the imposter content, which is the usage of the name of a source in order to impersonate that source, spreading content in their name and making people believe it is an original content. It is the publication of fake content by using a well-known logo or brand in order to deceive people into thinking it's a real content. False context instead is a genuine content which is shared with false contextual information, meaning that is decontextualized and used differently from the way in which it was designated. This typology refers to the reframing of new in a deceptive way, in order to mislead the reader and trigger strong emotions. Last for harm is the misleading content that can be explained as the use of information in order to frame an issue or an individual in a misleading way. Is the deceptive use of data to support one's argument? For example, using only some statistics and not the full research in order to support one idea over another. This could be done as well by cropping a picture in a way that it changes its meaning. With today's technology we are not able to detect misleading content, since computers are only able to detect true content and false content, while this type of information is a middle way. Another typology of information disorder is the false connection, which happens when the

⁶ C. Wardle, 2019

headlines, visuals and captions do not support the content inside the news, the so-called clickbait titles or news. This uses catchy pictures or phrases in order to lure the readers into pressing the link and seeing the content. This type of deception is used in order to gain more views and more reader, also allowing people to share the content to show others, without even looking at the content itself most of the time. Using clickbait though is something that is much needed in today's news context. Today exist a great number of news outlets and in order to stand out from the mass, one has to bait the viewers into taking a look at the post, becoming in this way relevant in the ocean of news that is drowning us. Satire or parody instead is fake news which is spread in order to fool and pull a laugh out of the viewers. It is the typology that has the least amount of harmful intention. It is considered as a form of art, yet it could be used to deceive by masking the evil intentions by claiming that it was exclusively for satiric means. Satire is slowly fading into the realm of hatred. Satiric pages, born with the aim of entertaining, once they begin to see the light of success in spreading around through post sharing, they gradually shift towards stronger positions and slowly get more insulting. These typologies can help in grasping the numerous shades of information disorder that are present in the internet realm (Figure 4).

7 COMMON FORMS OF INFORMATION DISORDER

SATIRE OR PARODY

No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool



MISLEADING CONTENT

Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual



IMPOSTER CONTENT

When genuine sources are impersonated



FABRICATED CONTENT

New content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm



FALSE CONNECTION

When headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content



FALSE CONTEXT

When genuine content is shared with false contextual information



MANIPULATED CONTENT

When genuine
information or imagery is
manipulated to deceive

Fig. 4

a model is needed through which to analyze three important factors in the fake news world: facticity, intention and the role of the audience. For facticity it is meant the degree of reliance on facts. This means how much the news takes from reality⁷. The intention is also very important in analyzing the fake news world, because it is possible to analyze what is the goal of the creator of the fake article, could be either laugh, harm people, mislead or just attract clicks from the public⁸. The audience is the most important piece of the puzzle because it is the consumer of the news. It is the audience that receives the message and takes the information from it, being it fake or real. The public is also the victim in this vicious circle, since not all the time it is able to detect the fake news from the real news or the producer makes it clear that it is a fake content, like in the case of satire and parody. It is possible to investigate the fake news phenomenon through six typologies: news satire, news parody, news fabrication, advertising and public relations, photo manipulation and finally propaganda⁹(Figure 5)



Fig. 5

News satire is the most commonly used tool and it refers to the mocking of news programs, using humor and exaggeration in order to entertain the public. A key feature is that the satiric programs advertise themselves as such. First and foremost, they deliver entertainment rather than information¹⁰; for this reason, these programs are not considered as news delivery programs. Satiric programs actually share sharp critiques on the news and give their own insight, providing the public as well with the tools to better judge what is happening around them. News parody is being defined as fake news by many. Parody relies on invented matters, taking hints from real facts, in order to provide humoristic contents unlike satire, which is based on true news¹¹. Both satire and parody have in common the fact that both the writer or the producer of the content and the consumer of said content know that it is not real news. This is the positive fact about these two typologies, they are fake but they aren't shared as real or as something to rely on for true

⁷ E. C. Tandoc Jr., Z. Wei Lim and R. Ling, 2018

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

information. Through this both satire and parody are able to keep the credibility of news high, unlike other types that make the people be less sure about what is real and what is not, making it hard to discern the reality of facts, like for example when news are fabricated. As for news fabrication, it is meant the publication of news that are completely fake, but that are published to look like real news. Unlike the previous two typologies, satire and parody, producer and consumer are not in cahoots in knowing that it is all fake. The producer is the one with the intention to mislead, while the consumer is just the victim of the scam. For this type of content it is possible to address two main issues: financial motives and the creation of news bots¹². As for the first, financial motives, it is safe to say that the producer often is driven by making clickbait content in order to attract advertisers, hence make money. As for the second, the producer is able to share the content widely through the use of bots that automatically share the news and spread it around, making it look like it was shared by many people. Photo manipulation is the processing of images in order to change what the picture was actually telling. This tool is used as well by mass media, even if not in order to mislead, rather to make minor changes to the picture in order to make it more appealing. This is because of the Reuters Code of Ethics on image manipulation that allows manipulation as a presentation tool, making minor changes to the picture with “no additions or deletions, no misleading the viewer by manipulation of the tonal or color balance to disguise elements of an image or to change the context”. The photo manipulation can take place as well when a picture is taken and inserted in the wrong context. While this is not recognized as fake news by the majority, it is a well-established practice that consists of taking a picture and captioning it out of its context. Of course, in this case the content is not fake, the picture is real and nothing is changed inside the picture, but the picture itself is placed in a context that is not the original one, hence is misinterpreted¹³. As for advertising it is meant the description of advertising material but disguising it as real news. With this trick people are driven to look at the news but instead they open an advertising page. This can be defined as fake news because it uses a false front page in order to force the person interested in the made-up article to open an advertising page. Propaganda is a very relevant matter in politics. It refers to news stories which are invented by politicians in order to influence the public¹⁴. Propaganda is based on actual facts, but these articles have some parts changed in order to boost the popularity of a candidate. These propaganda articles are always masked as pieces of news, made in order to inform people, though the actual goal is to get people to join their side, rather than feed them plain news.

1.5 What are the effects of fake news on the public opinion?

As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, the most important element in the fake news is the audience. In fact, the message is designed to influence and move the spectator's sensibility on specific

¹² E. C. Tandoc Jr., Z. Wei Lim and R. Ling, 2018

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

issues while at the same time discrediting the mainstream media networks. The target of the message is usually a weakened public, a type of audience that is not capable of unraveling the hoax. The recipients of the fake piece of information are thus generally part of the uneducated lower-middle class and of the elder part of society. The former does not have the cognitive tools to differentiate between reality and fiction. The latter instead are not familiar with the new generation's tools of information, hence they are often unable to correctly grasp the difference between a reliable and a fake news source. Moreover, not only these groups aim at debunking real news, but also their aim is to transform the receiver into a deliverer of the fake messages. To this extent, the privileged means of diffusion are social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and others. As a matter of fact, these tools have a twofold benefit for the fibbers: on the one hand, social medias are nowadays widely used by a huge percentage of the population and thus can easily reach a large portion of the public; on the other, they offer an immediate communication tool and, most importantly, allow for the quick condision of the message at the hands of the users, hence contributing to the diffusion of the media content. To better grasp the dimension of the importance of social medias as sources of information, it is useful to report a study conducted by Alcott and Gentzkow which founded that before the 2016's US elections the percentage of people who informed themselves on social web platforms reached 38 percent, a huge proportion compared to previous elections¹⁵. It is then evident that the increasingly prominent role social medias are playing in shaping the opinion of the public makes these platforms the perfect springboard for misleading news. There is no surprise that in recent times there have been many associations triggering a fake news scandal. On the one side there is QAnon, an American-based organization that has been flooding the newscast in recent days. This organization has a wide audience all across America and in some other parts of the world. It fuels its army of followers by sharing supposedly high-classified information from governmental archives. This seemingly verified source has brought its theory to be believed by a wide public and has placed it under the spotlight of many news broadcast companies. In fact, these types of organizations use imposter content as a means to verify their own lies and trigger a trusting instinct on the general public. Imposter content furthermore creates a sense of security on the less attentive reader, which recognizes a well-known news outlet and does not question the reliability of the source. In some cases, there are associations that creates authentic web pages in order to spread their own ideas and theories. This is the case of the well-known QAnon which has by now a comprehensive set of sites and blogs that explain to whoever is interested the purposes and historical framework of the organization itself. The organization's grasp does not end only in America but also reaches other parts of the world, which have their own sites and sources in order to reach a wider public with the native language. For example, also in Italy followers of the mysterious Q have gathered and translated most of the contents of their leader into an official website. In the country though this theory is not very popular and famous. While in America it created a great organization that is slowly trying to conquer the political sphere, in Italy there is a different situation. The Italian "fanbase" of the anonymous

¹⁵T. Lee, 2019

Q has a less impact on the general public. In fact, the Italian organization is less publicly active, unlike the organization's branch in the US.

This is because in Italy there is a different mindset for these kinds of organizations. The Italian population is less attracted in general by a mysterious person on the web, they rather have a more intense appeal over theories explained by verified sources, for example politicians or professors. Moreover, it is important to say that also the time frame in which these organizations grow is crucial. In a time where everything is smooth and the world is at peace it is very difficult to find a well-endowed organization based on fictitious facts. It is instead in difficult and dangerous times that these groups flourish, basing their theories on delicate issues and pointing the attention towards the weaknesses and fears of the public. This is the fertile soil that allows these groups to be effective and to gather a wide audience. This is because during difficult times people are easily scared by these types of theories and are keener to believe anything they are fed. On the contrary, when the population is not particularly worried and there is nothing scary on the horizon, people are less or not at all attracted by conspiracies and believe less in the lies that are offered to them. Organizations like QAnon flourish in times of crisis, and they feel less and less fake as time passes, thanks to the messages they deliver and thanks to the panic which links the population. Moreover, these organizations also benefit from the workings on the network they use. In fact, social medias use certain algorithms such as the so-called "cookies" system, which according to Oxford's dictionary it is: "a computer file with information in it that is sent to the central server each time a particular person uses a network or the Internet". Through these kinds of algorithms you are more likely to find, while looking through the internet, things you are already interested in, as for example conspiracy theories in which you believe. In this way an information disorder is generated in which the user is driven to look at contents containing always the same point of view. The algorithms used by Internet Server Providers play an important role in creating and disseminating fake news, that is, fake news spread intentionally on the Internet which can except deceive readers, consumers, citizens and voters. On the one hand, ISPs are known to use algorithms that are capable of selecting information to be proposed to the user; selection that does not take the news so much into account more reliable and truthful but aims to "cut out" the news on the user's profile. To the user, therefore, precisely in the context of a media environment that offers an enormous amount of information, "selected" news arrives, based on your profile, often not truthful but that reflects their way of thinking. Consequently, the user tends to lock himself in a sort of "bubble" - The Filter Bubble to use a term coined in 2011 by Eli Pariser²- built on the basis of the ideas and opinions of certain users. This creates "bubbles" which, in addition to limiting the comparison with different points of view, tend to filter the reality of the facts and create an echo effect, of amplification of fake news within closed systems. What is most notable, for the purposes under consideration, is that users are likely to seek the information that they would like to receive within what we can call an echo chamber, because you filter on the basis of your ideas and beliefs regardless of their veracity. It is in this particular context that the phenomenon

defined as “confirmation bias” has increasingly developed, according to which users are inclined to trust news that confirm their opinions and prejudices¹⁶.

Right now, the situation in America is one of instability. The president has just been elected and the country had a series of strong events that shacked the tranquility of the population. This has made conspiracy and fake news stronger than ever, driving the Americans towards a deep state of belief towards anything that seemed to make sense in order to have some hope, or at least some explanation of what was happening and what was bound to happen. A recent and comprehensive example is the one of QAnon, which will be debated more extensively in the next chapter.

¹⁶ G. Marchetti, 2020

Chapter 2 - Case one: America

2.1 The origin of QAnon's conspiracy theory

QAnon's conspiracy theory has well-rooted origins in two other conspiracy theories which preceded it. One of these theories is rooted in the past while the other is of more recent events: the former, "Protocols of the Elders of Zion"; and the latter "Pizzagate". From these theories the mysterious Q has most probably drawn inspiration in designing its own narrative and research. For this reason, it is necessary to analyze in depth the major findings of the former theories to better understand QAnon's movement and ideology.

The Protocols of The Elders of Zion is an ancient made-up theory according to which the Jews were working in the shadows on a plan to dominate the world. This theory was first developed in Russia during the 20th century. It was developed in order to spread hatred and violence towards the Russian's Jewish community. This is because there was an already settled feud between the Russians and the Jews. In fact, during the end of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century the Jewish community was not fully embraced because of the trend of liberalism in Europe, the Russian ruling class imposed a ban for the non-Orthodox and non-Russian subjects, including those Jews that were trying to settle in Russia from border territories. The Protocols were composed of 24 texts, in which the Elders illustrated the way to the achievement of the control of the world by tricking non-Jews to go along with their will. In particular, the preferred methods to reach their aim are the diffusion of liberal ideas, the subversion of morals, the promotion of freedom of the press, the contestation of traditional authority and of Christian and patriotic values. Control of the masses through the media and finance is the means by which the traditional social order will be subverted.

At first the document circulated between antisemitic groups, while subsequently it was published for the whole public to see. The document was perceived as real in the first years from its publication, raising scandal amongst the whole population, even outside of Russia and even among those who were not antisemite. In 1921 it was debunked as a fake theory by the London Times: it was proven that the Protocols had been widely copied from a French political satire of 1864, "The Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu". Yet, these findings did not stop the anti-Semites from using it as a proof of the evil embedded in the Jewish population even in recent days.

The other conspiracy theory related to QAnon is Pizzagate. In 2016 a great scandal was brought to the public. According to the theory under the scandal, there was a trafficking of children under a pizza place in Washington DC. The theory has its roots in a set of emails hacked from the account of John Podesta, the manager of the presidential campaign of Hilary Clinton, that were published by WikiLeaks in its public page. From these emails there were conspiracy theorists that claimed to have found code words in those emails relating to pedophilia and human trafficking (Fig.5)¹⁷.

¹⁷ u/SomeoneStopMePlease, 2017

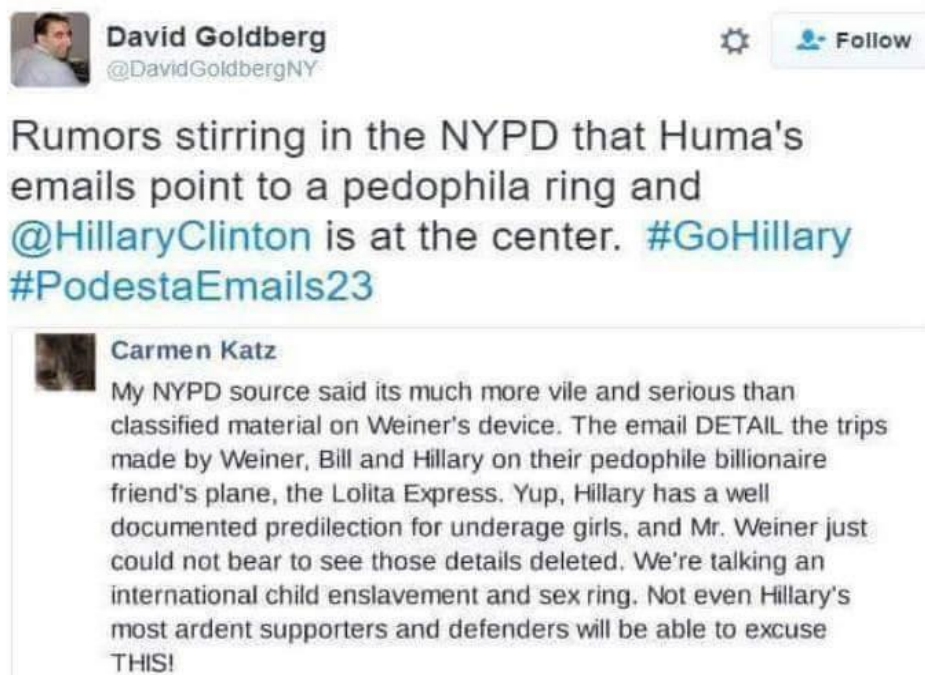


Fig.5

In particular it was believed that at the center of this human trafficking there was a particular pizza place called “Comet Ping Pong”, because the emails referred to an electoral dinner that took place in that restaurant. This theory has even brought a person to burst armed in the building in order to save the kidnapped children. Of prime importance in the diffusion of the theory were social media, which functioned as an echo chamber for the event. Many users were able to share the conspiracy through their personal blogs and accounts on platforms such as Reddit, Twitter, Facebook and others. What is important though about this event is the interest that the followers of QAnon demonstrated by embezzling, widening and taking inspiration from the initial theory. Now that we gathered the necessary information about the predecessor of QAnon’s theories, it is time to deeper analyze the main organization itself.

QAnon’s posts can be traced back to 2017 when an anonymous person, under the name of Q, began posting “the truth” about the US government, focusing in particular on the concept of Deep State. Q’s real identity is still a mystery, yet he claims to be part of the American Intelligence, which is an organization for the protection of America and for international organizations, as a high degree officer with access to information of Trump’s administration. This user claims to have obtained from his high-rank position secret files about an organization puppeteering the American government in secret, composed by members of a “cabal “of politicians, celebrities and billionaires¹⁸ which are involved in trafficking of children and acts of pedophilia. The reason for such a practice is to prolong the life of these characters through the assumption of abused children’s blood. People such as former President Obama and his vice-President Hilary Clinton are said to belong to this organization, which is however under attack from Donald J. Trump who is fighting a war to undermine the Deep State roots

¹⁸ C. Ran , D. Nipius, L. Rittmeier, S. Nuta, 2020

and to imprison the members of this evil congregation. In fact, one of the very first posts of QAnon claimed that if Trump was going to win the elections it would have meant the incarceration of his rival at the White House, Hilary Clinton, alongside with Barack Obama and George Soros, which also would have been incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay's prison. Obviously, these events never took place, however the support for QAnon ever since that moment continued to increase, with more and more people joining the ranks of the mysterious Q.

QAnon was also involved in the so-called Russia Gate. Under this scandal, which took place after the election of Trump, it was believed that the elected president was helped to get in the White House by Russia's president Putin. This raised many questions regarding the validity of Trump's votes as well as its connection with Russia. However, according to Q, the Russia Gate was a coverage that was born in order to hide the proofs of Clinton's incrimination. Moreover, another theory supported by Q states that the last loyal president to the United States was John Fitzgerald Kennedy, killed by members of the Deep State. Since then, the American presidency would have fallen into the hands of the world cabal. A handful of US military officials, including the Navy Seals, would remain loyal to Kennedy's memory and take an oath to JFK of loyalty to US values, with the goal of overthrowing the Deep State. According to QAnon, JFK's son, John Fitzgerald Kennedy Jr., was not really dead, but the fatal accident was simulated in order to secure him and put him in charge of the loyalist faction. According to supporters of QAnon, Trump will lead a worldwide wave of arrests, known as The Storm, carried out by military units loyal to him, in which thousands of people, members of the sect, will be arrested and likely sent to Guantanamo or subjected to court martial. . The result of this operation will be the inauguration of JFK Jr. as the new president of the United States and a great global awakening. Several QAnon supporters have adopted the Kennedy theory, claiming that a Pittsburgh man named Vincent Fusca is actually Kennedy in disguise and will be the candidate for vice president of Donald Trump's 2020 re-election campaign. Some attended the 2019 Independence Day celebrations in Washington in the belief that Kennedy would appear.

The main points that Q has taken from the previous conspiracy theories are hence two. From the Protocols of the Elders of Zion QAnon has inherited a profound antisemitism in union with the belief of a cabal of political leaders who want to puppeteer the world in the shadows; In a position paper written by the AJC (the Global Jewish Advocacy) for example it has been highlighted the evident similarity of Q's theory with the Protocols, which are embedded in a deep feeling of antisemitism. In particular, the paper focuses on the condemnation of the theory and on the steps that have to be taken in order to counter the movement through the help of various state and non-state entities: "If we are serious about rebuilding trust and transparency in our government and our democracy, fighting antisemitism and hate, and preventing the spread of misinformation and lies, then we must insist there is no place for QAnon in America or for QAnon followers to gain a foothold beyond the societal fringe."¹⁹. It appears to be clear then that the Jewish community unanimously condemns QAnon as it is considered to be a revamp of old antisemitic sentiments. Moreover, a former George Mason

¹⁹ Global Jewish Advocacy, 2020

University professor of genocide studies named Gregory Stanton wrote a brief article titled “QAnon is a Nazi Cult, Rebranded” in which he compares the rise of Nazis to power in Germany, which saw Adolf Hitler as the leader that would have ended the obscure Jewish plot to dominate the world, with the QAnon’s supporters belief that Donald J. Trump is the predestined savior that will vanquish the hidden cabal of corrupted politicians through the use of the so-called “Storm”, the mass incarceration of all the rotten members of the American state apparatus: “The Nazis worshiped Adolf Hitler as the Leader who would rescue the white race from this secret Jewish plot [...] QAnon true believers think Donald Trump will rescue America from this Satanic cabal. At the time of “The Storm,” supporters of the cabal will be rounded up and executed.”²⁰

From “Pizzagate” instead QAnon acquired the idea of a secret organization or cabal that is capturing children in order to accomplish satanic rituals as well as the idea of a deep state trying to dethrone ex-President Trump. As noted by Ayan Mohammed et alia writing on the “American Counterterrorism Targeting & Resilience Institute” (ACTRI) research organization, “The origins of Qanon can be *traced back to the notorious Pizzagate conspiracy* alluding to a child-sex trafficking ring among high-ranking Democrats”; moreover, “The theory is also based on the idea of a *deep state coup* against President Trump”²¹. The role of Trump in this narrative is pivotal. In fact, he is considered by QAnon as the paladin who will save America from this devious practice of child abuse.

Therefore, from the fusion of these two conspiracy frameworks QAnon has taken great success in the development of its own theory. However, even though QAnon has drawn inspiration from these two very important theories, it is imperative to address that it has also collected its own original bits. One of such case introduced for the first time by QAnon is the idea that JFK Junior is not really dead, but it was a hoax in order to escape the deep state which was trying to eliminate him. According to a Q follower named Liz Crokin JFK Junior could be Q himself. In fact, she is positive about a correlation between his faked death and a possible role as Q. During an interview, she actually declared in a video posted on YouTube that: “The one thing that always struck me about Q’s posts is the passion for John F. Kennedy Sr. When I say passion, I’m talking the passion for JFK Sr. is so intense, I don’t see how this passion could come from anyone that A) didn’t know him and B) didn’t love him. So you have to think about, well, who could that be? Well, if John F. Kennedy Jr. was still alive, that would make perfect sense.”²².

A further theory that could be defined as crafted by QAnon is the reinterpretation of the famous Russiagate. According to the original scandal Trump, in order to win the 2016 elections, entered in cahoots with Russian president Putin. This granted him a surprising victory over the second candidate, Hilary Clinton, rising suspect over the legitimacy of the elections. The revisited theory brought by QAnon instead addresses the Russiagate as a cover to shade the gathering of proofs to unmask Clinton's malevolent affairs, as the Pizzagate.

It is reported that during times of crisis, conspiracy theories flourish greatly, benefitting from the fear and the chaos which is already in circulation. This is the case as well for QAnon, which is riding the wave of the

²⁰ G. Stanton, 2020

²¹ A. Mohammed, A. Garry, R. Mohamed, and A. Andary, 2020

²² K. Mantyla, 2018

coronavirus pandemic situation in the world in order to instill fear and draw more people to take an interest in their crazy theories. QAnon follows mainly the path taken by ex-President Trump, downplaying the threat of this new virus and calling it out as a scam. This is because Q's followers firmly believe that the virus is a way to stop Trump, the savior, designed by the Deep State from being re-elected as President of the US. In fact the suspect comes from the fact that the pandemic burst out right before the elections and the electoral campaign. This brilliant idea did not last long after the World Health Organization declared a pandemic situation and the US closed the borders: QAnon's narrative changed once again, making the virus an instrument used by Trump to mask his plan, that is to say, to arrest the Deep State agents. However, it is important to stress out that all of these allegations about the virus were not written by Q himself. His very first post about Covid-19 was published on March 23, with its own view on the subject. According to Q the pandemic is actually a Chinese bioweapon, used in concord with the democratic party in America to stop the rise of a new Trump era. This thesis also proves the deep racist tone that the QAnon movement has embedded deeply into its rank, from the creator itself to the rest of the community around it²³.

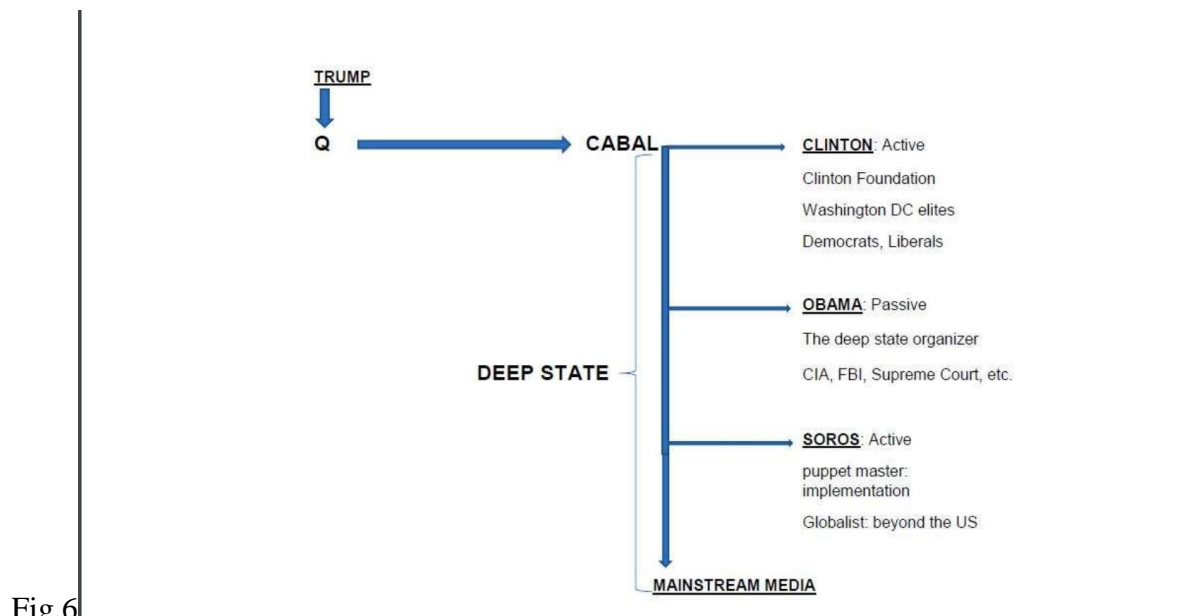
Going beyond the Coronavirus emergency, QAnon's conspiracy theory is principally based on the idea that a deep state is working in the shadows, constituting a government that is separated from the officially elected government. This narrative could also be seen in the other theories that are used by QAnon, like the Pizzagate theory or the presumed return of Kennedy. The deep state theory though was not originated by QAnon itself: it was long used in the history of the US as well as in other parts of the world. The term deep state has its root in Turkey and the historian Ryan Gingeras said that the term "generally refers to a kind of shadow or parallel system of government in which unofficial or publicly unacknowledged individuals play important roles in defining and implementing state policy."²⁴ According to this definition then the deep state is an unofficial organ that works alongside the official governmental office in order to deal with issues that could not be resolved in a conventional manner. As Gingeras further explains: "the deep state is not an entirely monolithic entity that shadows the bureaucracy, military, or civil society. Rather, it is an eclectic, ever-evolving political theater of competition, one that includes elements both explicitly legal and outlaw in nature. Paramount [...] is the extreme emphasis placed upon state security, a need that places both law enforcement and clandestine agencies in the forefront of both the formulation and execution of state policies"²⁵. According to QAnon the deep state can be analyzed in a hierarchical system. At the vertex lies President Donald J. Trump, who is outside the deep state but that fights against it. Then we find Q, which works for Trump and investigates the Cabal. He claims to have direct contact with Donald Trump and that he acts on his behalf alongside its followers, who call themselves "We the People". The Cabal is composed of four members, which are: Clinton, Obama, Soros and the mainstream media. Clinton is well known to be Trump's opposition in the 2016 presidential election. She is seen as an active opposer of Trump who uses her own foundation and her political

²³ M. Argentino, 2020

²⁴ M. Wills, 2017

²⁵ Ibid.

links to contrast and oppose the ex-president's work. Obama instead is regarded as an opposing figure who passively tackles on Trump's actions through the use of governmental organs like the CIA, the FBI and more in general via state agencies, serving in this way the interests of the Cabal. Soros, according to Q is the mastermind, the person who finances and implements the plans of the Cabal. In particular he is in charge of the foreign affairs of the Deep State's organization. For this reason, Trump focused on a strong foreign policy approach and connections to build new relationships to fight the Cabal. The last character participating in the Deep State is the mainstream media outlets: the media are tools of propaganda and misinformation for the US public, transforming the population into anti-Trumpers (Fig 6)²⁶.



Since mainstream media outlets are considered by Q transmitters of fake news and mind-shapers, it follows that the main information tools for Q's believers are thus Q's posts and affirmation. This in turn explains the reason why, even if many sources of information have publicly denounced the unreality of Q's declarations, there are still thousands of people that unconditionally trust Q's words and value them even when the contents are obviously fake. These types of organizations are the main means of fake news spreading. Through the distrust of mainstream media by the general public and their delegitimization by these kinds of organizations, these organizations are able to shape people's minds through what they pass as real news.

Q's strength is to not always be specific about the issues at hand. Sometimes he would just point at certain contents and pose some questions to its followers. This allows the people to think critically and to never fully trust what politicians or mainstream outlets say. The behavior is also mirrored in the practice of codifying its messages so that only certain people could understand the contents that Q posts. As stated in a brief article written by Florian Cramer and Wu Ming 1: "The mantra of the QAnon movement [...] is that it makes no final claims, but only gives critical thought-provocations, which everyone should research for themselves. Since

²⁶ O. Procházka, J. Blommaert, 2019

the “research” of most QAnon followers consists of Google and YouTube searches within their own filter bubbles, they end up confirming their own assumptions and conspiracy-mythological world view, but with the feeling of having reached these conclusions through their own individual research.”²⁷. This peculiar approach is at the basis of the unusual success of this particular conspiracy theory over others.

2.2 The deployment of fake news and the success of QAnon in the US

As previously stated, fake news covers a role of utmost importance in the development and spreading of these kinds of conspiracy theories and their organizations. As laid down in the first chapter of this paper, the information disorder’s realm can be divided in many subsets, varying between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation depending on the intention to harm. It appears to be useful then to categorize Q’s line of action along with this characterization. According to the evidence that we gathered through the first part of this chapter, it seems appropriate to conclude that QAnon’s newsread can be framed in an information disorder of the first two types above mentioned. In fact, there is no proof that Q is perpetuating the malinformation typology, being all of its contents fake. Even in the famous case of John Podesta’s stolen emails, part of the Pizzagate scandal, in which actual emails were leaked, the allegations brought forward by Q were fictional and related to phantomatic hidden references present in the text, while no explicit mention of child trafficking was made. At the same time, misinformation and disinformation could be consistently recognized while examining the QAnon organization. However, in order to better understand why both these categories could be used to describe QAnon it is firstly necessary to distinguish the association in its three main components: Q itself, Q’s followers which form the QAnon movement and Q’s believers, that is to say, the people that follow the contents shared but are not their active producers.

With the aim of better understanding QAnon’s composition and mission it is crucial to consult the First Draft’s analysis of misinformation groups seen in chapter one at figure 3. According to this schematic we are able to analyze any group through the categories of: agent, message and interpreter. Studying this association with these tools will help us to better grasp the aims and the functioning of QAnon. First of all, we must analyze the agent, the main actor maneuvering the organization, which in this case is Q. Through the analysis of the internet clues written by himself, Q claims to be an official actor, coming from a governmental organization and is not alone, since its followers, the QAnons, form an intricate network that works in the deep corners of the internet. When analyzing the actor, we also need to search for the aims of said actor. In this case Q’s aims are political aims. He claims to possess the truth about the Deep State and wants to share it with the world, along with the hope that former President Trump will banish these evil characters governing the Deep State. The aims of Q and its followers are pursued through the use of internet platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or forums like 4Chan, having also a private site where they put all of the information they gather and where people willing to join their ranks can talk freely without the conventional media trying to stop them or censor

²⁷ F. Cramer, Wu Ming 1, 2020

their content. Obviously, this message needs to reach someone: who is Q's audience? Q's audience is the whole world, with a particular focus on the United States population. His aim is to persuade and open the eyes of every citizen of the world, in order to finally unmask the underground plot that is happening under the eyes of millions of people. While analyzing Q's posts, we also must interpret the intention of the messages. Q's main aim is to unveil the evil doings of the Deep State and in order to do this he both tries to mislead the people through fictitious content and to harm the characters composing the deep state through real and fake contents which he shares.

Then there is the need to analyze what actually the agent says: the message. In this case we need to understand what typology of message Q is trying to pass. Q's messages are meant to stay in the web, the Q drops are pieces of information that shall stay on the internet for a long time, to indoctrinate and enlighten the minds of the people. Even though the message is meant to stay, it does disappear fast enough thanks to the social media platforms deleting and blocking any fake content when detected. A second way of defining the message is to see how it is accurate. Accuracy means how the message is and if it is Misleading, Manipulated or Fabricated. In Q's case the content of his drops is specifically designed to unveil the hidden structure of the Deep State using all three the above-mentioned methods. For example, in the Pizzagate case he used the emails leaked from the accounts of the White House and he gave them a new deceitful meaning in order to trigger a powerful reaction from the public and his followers, denoting a case of Misleading Content. Another meaningful case is the claim that the son of John Fitzgerald Kennedy is still alive and that, through his herald Trump, will conquer again his legitimate place at the White House, a clear case of Fabricated Content. There are no available sources for the analysis of the usage of Manipulated content by Q, due to the censorship pursued by the main sites used by Q and his followers.

An important feature of the content analysis when talking about information disorder is also the legality of the messages which are created. The messages themselves does not call for violent action and certainly are not legally prosecutable, yet there have been instances where the messages triggered a violent response from the audience itself, like the Pizzagate shooting or the great number of illegal actions taken by Q's believers for the sake of saving people and annihilating the evil forces.

A crucial element of this analysis is also the interpreter, the one who is going to read and interiorize the message. Q's messages are aimed at the entire population, meaning that its composition favors the assimilation by a large crowd. In order to better understand the fortune and the wide spreading of this conspiracy theory it is useful to refer to Schwartz and Newman's table on the criteria used by the people in judging the truth²⁸.

²⁸ M. O'Neil and M. J. Jensen, 2020

CRITERIA	ANALYTIC EVALUATION	INTUITIVE EVALUATION
Social consensus: Do others believe it?	Search databases, look for supporting statistics, or poll a group or audience.	Does it feel familiar?
Compatibility: Is it compatible with what I believe? Is it compatible with what I feel?	Recall one's own general knowledge and assess the match or mismatch with new information.	Does it make me stumble? Is it difficult to process, or does it feel right?
Coherence: Does it tell a good story?	Do the elements of the story logically fit together?	Does the story flow smoothly?
Credibility: Does it come from a credible source?	Is the source an expert? Does the source have a competing interest?	Does this source seem familiar and trustworthy?

Source: Schwartz & Newman, 2012.

Fig.7

As the table in figure 7 shows, there are a multiplicity of factors affecting the success of QAnon's claims among a consistent, yet minoritarian, part of the public. These factors are: *social consensus*, which can be framed as the most sociological criteria since it is shaped and influenced by what is commonly believed by the people; *compatibility*, which is related to the individual sphere and it is connected to the personal background of the single person, according to which it will be easier or harder to accept a claim as true or not; *coherence*, an aspect deeply influenced by the logical connections between the parts of the story being told; and finally *credibility*, which is linked to the quality of the source used and/or to the prestige of the person spreading the piece of information. To this extent, it is possible to affirm that Q had the capacity to use all these criteria to his advantage, building his claims around a well-established anti-political sentiment widely present in many Western democracies and in particular in the US. Even if his statements are often incoherent among each other and mostly imaginative, by basing his arguments around the distrust towards the American institutions and the claim that the mainstream media are instruments in the hands of a Deep State he was able to achieve both the support of a portion of the non-highly educated part of the population and the delegitimization of the conventional sources of information such as newspapers and television emitters. These elements are the keystones of the success of this conspiracy theory in recent times.

A very important point of this study is to analyze the reason why QAnon has so much popularity in the United States, while is less present in other states, or is less talked about. The phenomenon of QAnon and the first QDrops had the first manifestation in the US, as a consequence of the election of Trump, which by Q is praised as the savior of the United States, the president that will end the reign of terror of the Deep State, clearing out the competition as well as the rotten apples of the governmental organs. QAnon, as already stated, has its origin in the events of the so-called Pizzagate, as well as other mainstream conspiracy theories like the Elders of Zion. So it is safe to say that the US is the birthplace of QAnon's conspiracy, but why this country in particular? What made the spread of such a conspiracy movement possible? The answer could be found in the analysis of the American mentality, namely how the mind of the average American works in relation to these

types of fake content. The Pew Research Center conducted a survey on QAnon's believers²⁹. According to their findings the awareness of the American population regarding the existence of QAnon has increased towards the end of 2020, in September. In fact, looking at the numbers produced by the survey in February the 23 percent of the population have heard of QAnon, while towards September the number raised to 47%. The survey noted moreover that the Democrats were more aware than Republicans. The survey pointed out that even political knowledge has a great influence over the perception of the existence of such conspiracy movements, with a higher grade of knowledge when talking about Democrats. The people interviewed gave out vital information on the perception of QAnon as a good or bad movement. In the US 57% of the population said that QAnon is bad for the country, 17% claimed that it is somewhat bad while the 20% perceive QAnon as a good or very good thing for the country. Among these people the Democrats are those who are far more likely to address the movement as very bad or bad, while the Republicans are the most supportive of the conspiracy theory. Another indicator used in the survey is the degree of knowledge of the questioned people, with a 41% of the sample mentioning that QAnon is a group of some kind and with the 44% knowing that it is a conspiracy theory and group. According to these findings then, it is safe to say that there is a wide connection between political interest and the knowledge along with the appreciation of QAnon's plans. It is also possible to derive that QAnon is a movement that has its roots on the right-wing spectrum of the political sphere in the US, having the most success among the Republicans rather than the Democratic wing.

In order to understand the success of QAnon within the US it is crucial to point out the similarities to certain groups which could be found through the country's history: evangelicals movements. These types of movements base themselves on often extreme religious beliefs, where people would isolate themselves more and more, engaging all of their energies towards the realization of the interests of the group.

When also analyzing the QAnon's beliefs it is possible to see that it is already embedded in a spiritual fight against the Cabal and the Satanic evil forces of the Deep State given by the core theory supporting the ideas of QAnon called the Elders of Zion.

According to Reese DiResta it is possible to compare the behavior and recruitment typology of these groups to QAnon and most conspiracy theory groups. In particular she points out the recruitment strategies that can be seen as common in both groups. "There are some common pathways reported by people who fall into, and then leave these communities. They usually report that their initial exposure started with a question, and that a search engine took them to content that they found compelling. They engaged with the content and then found more. They joined a few groups, and soon a recommendation engine sent them others. They alienated old friends but made new ones in the groups, chatted regularly about their research, built communities, and eventually recruited other people [...] This behavior resembles another, older phenomenon: It's strikingly similar to cult recruitment tactics of the pre-internet era, in which recruits are targeted and then increasingly isolated from the noncult world"³⁰. This leads people to isolate themselves from the outer world, a world full

²⁹ Pew Research Centre, 2020

³⁰ R. DiResta, 2018

of lies and deception in which only a small elite, which they joined, own the real truth, which others are not able to see and perceive because they were brainwashed by the mainstream media and the strong powers, which enables the people to see clearly what is underneath the facade they see every day. Once inside the organization you are no longer able to see the reality as you saw it before. Starting from a question or a doubt on the reality you go deeper into the hole of distrust of the mainstream media, from the common knowledge, believing it is something fabricated. Though it is possible to escape this roundabout of doubt and deception, usually through an inconsistency of a story, or an even deeper doubt that is unsolvable by the theories you married so deeply. Once you jump off the carousel you are finally able to see reality and to unveil your eyes from the deceiving material you have been fed. After the inauguration of Biden's presidency many supporters of the QAnon movement have seen their dreams shattered, the veil in front of their eyes has finally been taken out. Many people, who are now ex believers, have finally realized that the movement was not what it seemed at first, realizing that the facts that they were fed were actually fictitious and untruthful. This astounding truth has been able to open the eyes of many people who were deep in the rabbit hole that is QAnon, freeing their lives from the lies and dangerous thoughts they were being filled with. A prominent example is brought forward by Ceally Smith, a former Q supporter who finally realized the deep logical incongruence of Q's affirmations and started a process of what she defines as "detoxification" from the famous conspiracy theory. "I was one of those people too [...] I came out on the other end because I wanted to feel better". Ziv Cohen, a forensic psychiatrist and expert on extremist beliefs at Weill Cornell Medical College of Cornell University analyzes three typologies of outcome once a believer is stroked with reality³¹. The first outcome might be of disinterest: the person would simply move forward with their lives without issue. Another outcome deals with those migrating to more extremist groups, unable to leave the fake reality constructed around them. The last typology is filled with those who try to make sense of the outer world and revise the theory with the newest events. The social impact of this phenomenon are also very high. In fact, an aspect to keep in mind in conspiracy phenomena is the totalizing drift they tend to assume for the people who follow them. The theories related to the prophecies of Q become a lens through which to interpret the world, in a way not unlike a real religion.

As it spreads in the United States, cases of obsessive adherence to QAnon multiplied. The stories of those who saw a loved one dedicate themselves body and soul to the cause until they lost their jobs, alienated themselves from friends or family, started to accumulate. A place has spontaneously formed, r/QAnonCasualties on Reddit, with almost fifty thousand people registered, where those who have to face this problem tell their story and seek help. The titles of the posts, about twenty a day in recent times, are explicit: "Trump and QAnon took away the man I love", "I can't understand, my partner is no longer him" or "I think my brother and my mom are getting lost to Q, what can I do?".

Although in the US QAnon is a phenomenon that mainly involves white people belonging to evangelical churches, it is actually very open, if one adheres to the mental modality it requires and if one accepts the

³¹ D. Klepper, 2021

malleable basic postulates then there are no racial, cultural, economic barriers. or gender. Everyone is welcome. Those who, due to joining QAnon, lose family ties or lose their jobs receive support, sometimes even financially, through collections, from the community of "awakened by Q". It is a very active community, just open an account on social media to advertise QAnon and in a short time you will have dozens and dozens of people interacting, discussing and exchanging information.

The very functioning of social media, which tends to immerse you in a bubble of people of homogeneous opinion, reinforces this dynamic. It is socially rewarding and getting out of it can be very difficult.

It is crucial though to understand the reason why QAnon is so magnetic to a large number of the world's population. A fascinating thing about QAnon is that it could be compared to a game. The followers in fact, in order to be able to understand and follow the messages of their leader, need to discover clues through the so-called QDrops, hints and hidden messages that are shared by Q through the platforms used by the congregation. This keeps the crown entertained, letting them think by themselves, leaving out mere hints, so that there is a greater drive to look for more pieces of the puzzle. This leaves a sensation of challenge, Q not only shares its insights on the rotten side of the government which no one sees, it also gives the opportunity to its followers to arrive at the solution by themselves, creating a fun way to open the eyes of the people.

2.3 The success of QAnon worldwide

It needs to be stressed though that QAnon is not only well known and followed in America, also other parts of the world are catching the interest in this new phenomenon. This is due to the fact that the conspiracy theory building around the concept of a cabal of political figures that dominate the world can be easily applied even in other contexts than the US one. In France, the QAnon network joined forces with the yellow vest movement. In England the spark has struck with the followers of pro-Brexit online groups. While in Italy the QAnon theory has been able to draw from the vast pool of anti-vax movements. The US-made conspiracy theory, which today counts millions of acolytes around the world, mixing anti-government and anti-lockdown rhetoric fits well with some groups rooted in Europe. But the real fuel for the QAnons lies precisely in the particular moment due to the pandemic. More and more people find themselves spending many hours on the net and at the same time are bewildered by often contradictory scientific and institutional information due to the exceptional nature of a situation that has never been experienced. In this context, characterized by concern and desire to know, the conspiracy contents can become particularly suggestive.

If in the United States the debate on QAnon has now become public knowledge, especially after the presidential elections, in Europe the movement has so far remained confined to the margins. While in the US QAnon has an active role in political life, having conquered members of the right wing, in the rest of the world it is in an embryonic stage, a mere theory finding its purpose and inquiry. The derivation of European QAnon can be traced back in posts and Tweets whose purpose becomes to create plots to attack the governments in office. In Italy it has been noticed that more and more organized online groups are using the anti-establishment

message of the QAnon as proof that Covid-19 is overrated and that national blocking measures are not democratic.

On the Italian Twitter site, we can read very viral messages in which users are encouraged to force the measures of an authoritatively imposed lockdown to destroy small businesses. To recognize the speakers of these theories, you can pay attention to the profile of users marked with American, Italian and three-star flags. There are also profiles in Italian who comment and write pro-trump messages every day, relaunching the theories close to the QAnon.

It is also almost incredible to note that in some cases these tweets manage to reach higher levels of virality than the main Italian news outlets. For this purpose, there is a top of the Italian QAnon coordination. The profile in question, @ItalyQanons, also with the three stars, is followed by over 17,000 followers and boasts a direct connection with General Flynn, Trump's former national security adviser. The profile is presented as a link between the American and Italian online communities.

In Germany, on October 15, Google intervened to shut down “Qlobal-Change”, a YouTube channel that is a repository of anti-vaccine theories and the “usual” plot that wants Bill Gates as the creator of the pandemic for his own gain. In France, on the other hand, Qactus.fr is becoming increasingly popular, a website that sparks praise for Trump's handling of covid-19 and promotes conspiracy theories against local politics. In addition, in France, the anti-vaccine community - very rooted in the network - is promoting on Facebook, Didier Raoult, the French doctor who supports the use of hydroxychloroquine against Covid.

In the next chapter, the paper will deeply analyze the extent, the influence and the diffusion of the QAnon conspiracy mainly in Italy, with a mention of other countries as well, such as the UK and Germany in Europe. It will then attempt to compare the findings with the first carrier of these ideas.

Chapter 3 - QAnon In Italy

3.1 The Italian base

QAnon's theories have been slowly affecting Europe in recent years. In fact, even if the main rhetoric of the conspiracy revolves around the figure of former President Donald J. Trump as the herald of the "white hats" fighting against the political establishment of their country, nevertheless the idea of a transnational Cabal aiming at establishing a "New World Order" has been able to adapt also in some European countries, most notably the United Kingdom and Germany. In Europe the phenomenon of QAnon has started, as well as in America, from small circumscribed posts on the mainstream media platforms. This process was followed by a steady movement towards the main disinformation platforms, shifting from certified media outlets to more obscure and deceitful centered outlets. That is the case of AgoraVox.tv in France or Compact-Online.de in Germany as the main examples of centers of disinformation in Europe. Notable is the engagement of Databaseitalia.it in Italy which is composed of a section dedicated to QAnon's posts. Another pivotal factor in the luck of QAnon in Europe is the support of celebrities and politicians in the causes of the conspiracy theory. Examples in Europe are R&B Xavier Naidoo in Germany, which through his Telegram channels helped QAnon with the diffusions of their ideas, or Sara Cunial, no-vax and member of the Parliament, which in her speech at a Parliamentary meeting talked about an Italian Deep State: "And then in this set table there is all the Italian-alike Deep Stat: we find Sanofi, which along the colluded Glaxo, the friends of Ranieri Guerra, of Ricciardi and the notable virologist which we pay two thousand euros every ten minutes for the presentations in RAI, signs agreements with medical societies for the indoctrination of the future doctors, mocking their autonomy of judgement and their oath"³².

Focusing on Italy, the main cause for the arrival of QAnon in the Italian peninsula is the growing preoccupation of the world for the COVID pandemic. This is due to the increasing usage of the internet platforms as social media or online forums. In these places easily accessible by anyone people often find answers, but a large slice of the population is bombarded with even more questions. From these questions begins a journey to find even more disturbing content on the internet, carrying the unaware user towards the deep hole that are conspiracy theories. QAnon rode the wave of fear and distress in the population to spread its words. This widespread diffusion is due to the high flexibility of these conspiracy groups, the advertisement from well-known disinformation sites and media outlets and the notoriety given by politicians and public figures. As we have seen in the case of the US it even climbed the political ladder, becoming an independent party. This is due to the longer presence in the American continent as well as the theoretical bases from which their theories stem

³²D, Puente, *Coronavirus. L'intervento della deputata Sara Cunial e i numerosi complotti sul Covid-19 (e non solo)*, 2020

from. In the rest of the world instead the conspiracy movement is just at the surface: people are still trying to figure out what to do with this new foreign phenomenon, analyzing the original ideas and fitting them in their own system. The host state needs to mold the ideas of the home state in order to make sense of the dialectic, changing it in order to adapt it to the new environment in which the idea is being imported.

In this framework, Italy does not represent an exception of the trend pointing to an increasing popularity of the conspiracy phenomenon. QAnon in Italy is still a not very widespread phenomenon, but not insignificant so much so that it has reached, as we shall see, various figures in politics and culture.

In the summer of 2020, the most famous social networks carried out a reclamation that led Facebook to strongly limit the phenomenon, but not to defeat it. Some groups have survived, such as Q PARMA SUPPORTS CHANGE with over 1300 members, and there are attempts to return to the platform: for example, at the end of September the Qresearch.it page was reopened. Twitter for its part closed thousands of accounts, but the operation was very partial and, particularly in Italy, the QAnon bubble was almost completely saved. YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and others have also worked in this sense, but the main “social” place used by QAnon in Italy at the moment remains Twitter. On a global level, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, this has induced QAnonists and various alt-right fringes to divert to other social platforms, especially Parler, but also Rumble, MeWe and Gab. While Amazon is still a haven for QAnon, there are dozens of books and hundreds of themed gadgets on the large online sales platform.

The spreading of this conspiracy in Italy has reached a noticeable magnitude only during the pandemic. The YouTube channel Qlobal-Change Italia, born in October 2019, recorded 23,900 subscribers this summer, while in the first half of 2020 Facebook pages such as QAnon Italia (March 2020, over 13 thousand likes) and The Q Italian Patriot (May 2020) had been created (over 5,400 likes).

From July 2020 onwards, however, something has further changed: the succession of crime events attributable to QAnon, as well as an alarming information from the FBI that warns about the terrorist threat of QAnon, has prompted Twitter, Reddit, Facebook and YouTube to act by limiting and banning the contents and accounts related to Q's propaganda from their platforms. The action, obviously inserted in the conspiracy narrative as an "attack by the elites against the awakening of the people", nevertheless failed to limit the phenomenon, at least not entirely. And so, by reorganizing itself, QAnon Italia continues to grow almost undisturbed.

In Italy, within the platform that certainly managed to garner greater attraction, Facebook, many groups and pages have actually disappeared. However, it is enough to infiltrate the folds of research and with less direct terms than the previous ones such as "Trump 2020 Italia 2" or "Q Italia sostiene il cambiamento" it is possible to access groups in which the Q theory is spread without filters.

As a proof of the increasing interest towards the QAnon conspiracy theory, data gathered via Google Trend³³ (Figure 8) show how in Italy the users' attention with regards to this theory has sharply risen during the quarantine declared by the Italian government starting from the month of March 2020.

³³N. Righetti, 2020

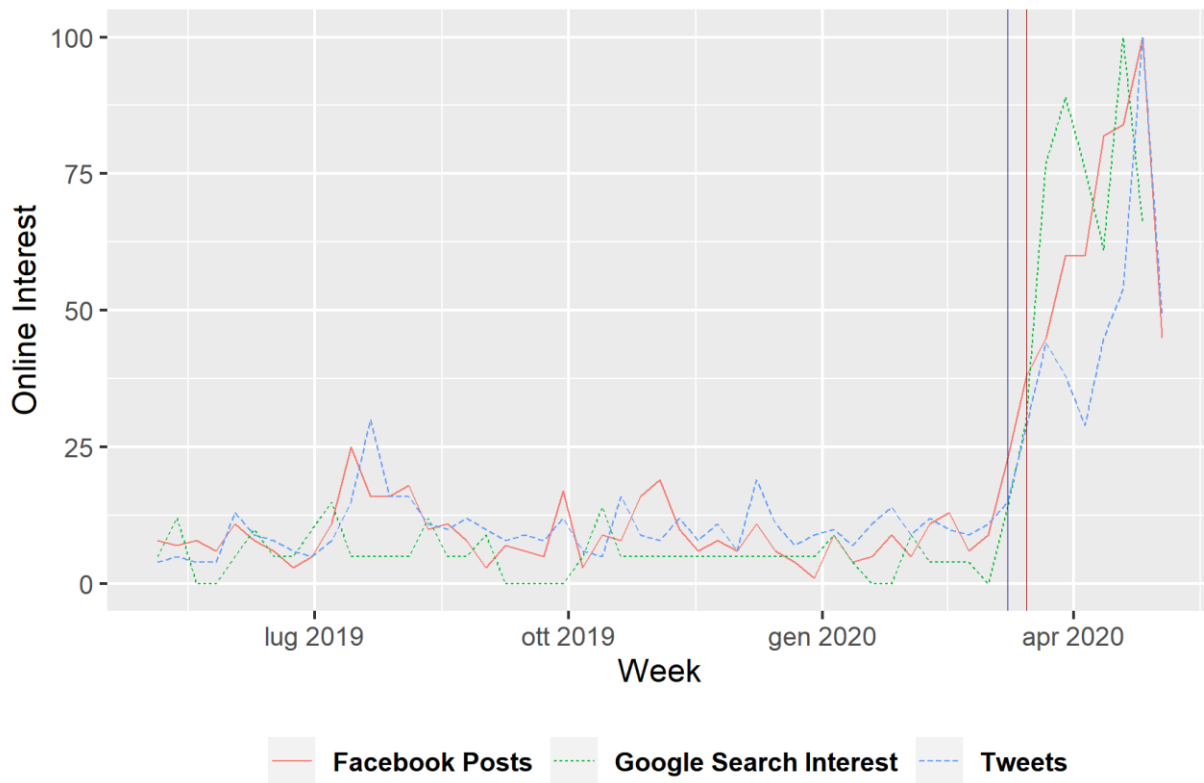


Fig.8

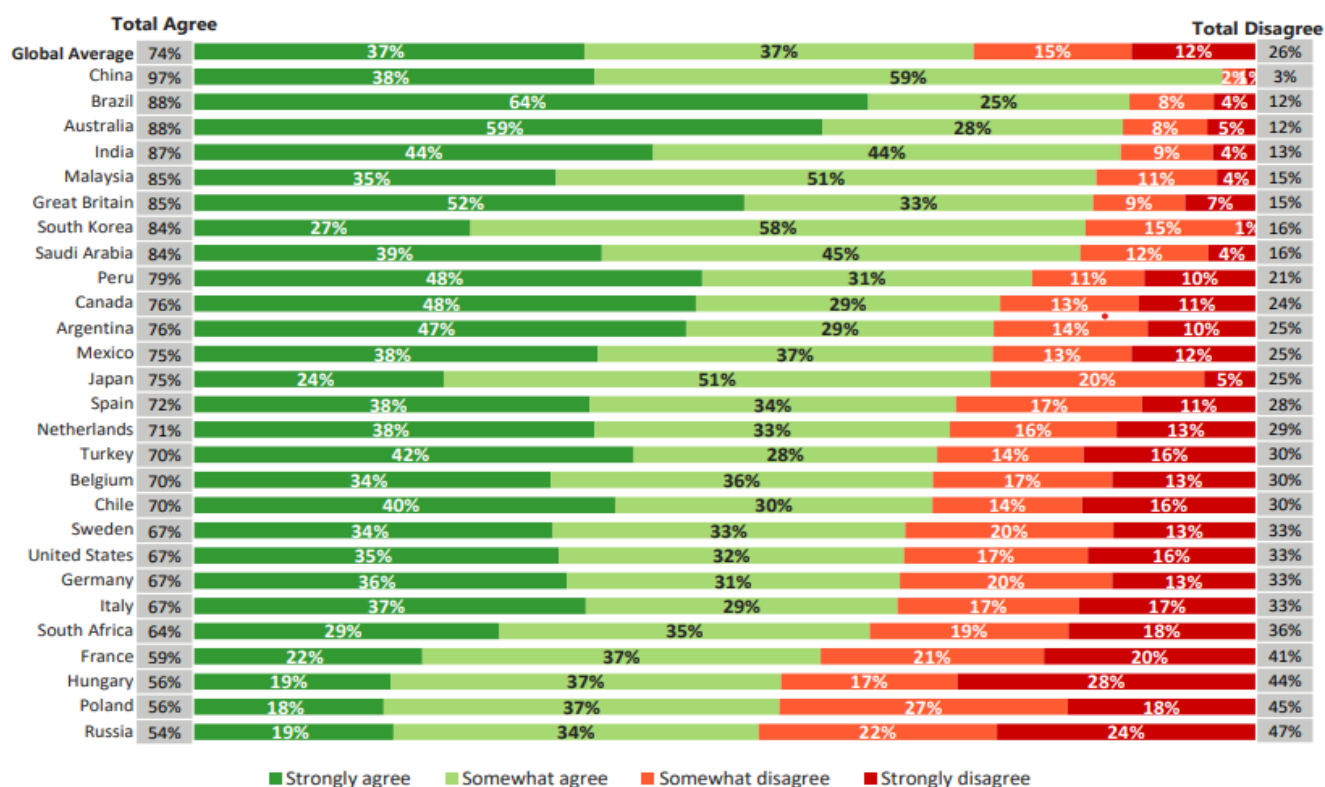
3.2 The Italianization of QAnon

In Italy QAnon is deeply embedded in the no-vax and no-mask movement stemming from the COVID pandemic. Its main point of leverage is the distrust of the mainstream media, the limitation to personal freedom and the manipulation of the information. Even if these points are not directly shared by the American branch, it all funnels to the idea of a Deep State controlling the everyday lives of the people by feeding them lies and deceiving them. Italian sites initially wondered how the issues QAnon focused on were related to their country, pointing out that the Deep State at the heart of these theories knows no borders. This allowed QAnon theories to slowly transform, slowly touching the local representatives of the "elites" at the center of Q's narratives, puppets to advance the elite plan for a New World Order.

In Italy, the conspiracy theory found fertile ground especially among those that are skeptic about the origin and contraindications of vaccines, who represent a good share of the total population. According to an Ipsos research, around 33% of the interviewed are somewhat contrary or totally disagree on being vaccinated³⁴, a number that can potentially hinder the possibility to reach a general immunity to the disease.

³⁴R. Franzin, 2020

If a vaccine for COVID-19 were available, I would get it



Base: 19,519 online adults aged 16-74 across 27 countries

Fig.9

These findings are the result of the mixture of various extreme right Italian groups, no vax, no mask and the new QAnon theory which are all based on the belief that vaccines are either dangerous for our health or an instrument in the hands of the Cabal aiming at subverting the world order.

Not even the institutional Italian right parties such as “Fratelli d’Italia” and the “Lega” have been publicly condemning the QAnon phenomenon. This “silent acceptance” is bounded to two facts: first, right-wing parties have been openly supporting the candidature of former President Donald Trump for his re-election to the White House and QAnon’s followers, who see Trump as the savior of not only the US but also the rest of the free world, thus represent a nice electoral consensus base to attain; secondly, since Q’s conspiracy claims around vaccines have been intertwining with no-vax and no-mask beliefs and, as we already stated, skeptic attitude towards vaccination is pretty common in Italy, the electoral relevance of that portion of the population pushes these parties to adopt to a skeptic stance on vaccines. In fact, it is not a coincidence that both these political parties have claimed to be in favor of the freedom of choice on vaccination. The strength of this part of the electorate is so relevant that even the Italian government, led by a center-left majority, has decided not to oblige citizens to get vaccinated³⁵.

In fact, it is notable the association of these leaders with QAnon, since the acceptance of the rhetoric pursued by the Q conspiracy had given notoriety to those supporting it or even simply addressing the matters at hand. This is a dangerous practice because the political leaders could be mistaken as open supporters of the

³⁵Il Messaggero, 2020

movement rather than piggy backers of the success and fame of their ideas. Obviously, these politicians have nothing in common with the QAnon movement, yet they pursue their goals with faint clues in their messages, triggering a positive reaction to the believers that are fond of the rhetoric of conspiracy pursued by the group. As an example, the slogan recently shouted by Matteo Salvini in a video posted on the Facebook group of QAnon supporters “Mai fermarsi! Mai avere paura! Sempre avanti!” may be interpreted as a clear rework of the Q slogan “Where we go one we go all” and the encouragement to never give up on searching and debunking the mainstream media. Firm believer of QAnon, Akim Volpato, seems to believe in the theory according to which Matteo Salvini has an active part in Trump’s plan to vanquish the pedophile ring of the Deep State. It is possible, analyzing the content of recent QAnon’s posts that Matteo Salvini is the only Italian politician until now to have been cited in the so-called breadcrumbs, the hints left on the internet by Q and its close followers. This active support towards Salvini by the QAnon’s followers is probably also due to the fact that he, in more than one occasion has expressed his consensus towards the dialectic and political plans of Ex-President Donald Trump. This sympathy gave the leader of the Lega a special place in QAnon’s heart, gaining more and more support by the Italian branch of the conspiracy theory.

Q’s theories in Italy have adapted to local narratives and have begun to strike local political and establishment personalities. Former Italian premier Giuseppe Conte, for example, has been suspected by some social users of being a member of a masonic order comprehending, among the others, the French President Emmanuel Macron. The reason for such a suspect lies in a gesture made by both of them in public at different moments, which in the opinion of these conspirators should prove the unequivocal membership of those members of the political class to a common organization³⁶. In reality, that gesture was unintentional on behalf of Giuseppe Conte while the one made by Macron was made to symbolize the Tour Eiffel during the candidature of the French country to the 2024 Olympics. Although bizarre, this example is quite useful to understand the extent of the imaginary lying underneath these conspiracy theories.

³⁶D. Puente, *La bufala complottista del «gesto massonico» di Giuseppe Conte ed Emmanuel Macron*, 2020

3.3 A comparison between US and Italy

QAnon has its roots mainly in America, yet it was able to expand them towards the rest of the world, mainly in the European continent. The analysis here is concentrated on the differences and similarities in the works of both the Italian and the American branches, even though most countries of Europe are affected in some way by the rotten roots of the conspiracy movement. Italy is a perfect example for the way in which such a movement from the US changes if taken to European countries. This is because even if it is the same theory and movement it has changed its facade with the change in location. The change in methodology and message is pivotal once the movement shifts places, due to the fact that Italy and America do not share the same mentality towards certain issue areas. It is still possible to find some similarities between the two movements, mostly as for the main components of the QAnon thought, namely the presence of a Deep State and the need for a savior to change the fate of humankind.

The main difference between the two is the degree of evolution. While in the US QAnon is a political group, which is very persuaded by their own idea and do not need to yap about conspiracy theories, in Italy the group is still at an embryonal stage, in which the politicization is still far and in which the conspiratorial ideas are strong and not yet well formed. As proof of this theory, it is possible to analyze that the American branch is less technical about their ideas, they firmly believe in what they seek, while in Italy the base is weaker. The followers in fact are forced to seek for more technicalities as well as their own original theories, most of them not making much sense neither to them. Since the conspiracy theory is mainly based on US issues, a new problem arises translation. Since most of the content of the QAnon narrative has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon world, the Italian followers most of the time have issues regarding the translation of the content which is available to them. In this jungle of contents, the Italian follower has, most of the time, to translate the messages and clues left by Q, sometimes using web translators. This results in a deeper confusion and in the lack of a common thread between contents.

Common feature of the two branches of QAnon's conspiracy theory is the deep need for a savior of humankind against a despicable enemy. In the US the main figure of this rhetoric is Donald Trump, which is seen as the God sent president who was supposed to take down the Cabal and the Deep State, formed by celebrities like Madonna as well as opposing political figures such as Hilary Clinton. As for Italy, the main figure of reference for the QAnosists is Matteo Salvini, in opposition to Giuseppe Conte, symbol of the establishment. Apart from supporting Salvini, many Facebook accounts such as “Amici di Trump” and sites such as “Noi con Trump”, both having a large number of followers (4.000 and 60.000 respectively), express their sympathy towards the former US President, stressing the link between the original American conspiracy theory and its Italian followers.

Another similarity can be observed in the “demonization” of the respective enemies. Biden, the main antagonist of the former President of the United States running for the elections, has been described as the expression of the Deep State trying to preserve its power and influence, spreading the fear for a virus which is considered to be fake news by Q’s followers. This narrative is taken by the Italian followers, which believes

that former president Conte is a member of the Deep State and he is trying to limit the freedom of the Italian population through the fear of a non-existent virus, which according to Q's followers is a hoax and a plan to control the population through the use of a vaccine.

As for the case for America it is possible to analyze QAnon's works in Italy through the lenses of First Draft's division of agent, message and interpreter as for the elements of information disorder seen in the first and second chapter. Obviously, many of the features of QAnon remain the same, as the agent and some features of the message, where the interpreter drastically changes because of the change in the mentality of the Italian population as compared to the mentality that we find in the United States. The agent is still Q, which is an official actor, as previously analyzed, claiming to be a high-grade official with high clearance as for secret documents from the government. The aims of the actor are still the same: taking out the evils of the society and demolishing the Deep State conducting its nasty business in the shadows. These aims are carried out through social media platforms as well as disinformation forums by mostly Q's followers, since in Italy the language barrier does not allow for Q to directly address the Italian branch.

These objectives are carried out through the message, which is, as already seen, the container and deliverer of the aims and purposes of Q and QAnon. The message focus is to encourage the people to move and do something about the evil doings of the Deep State. Obviously, the message has to be interpreted. While in the US it was easier to speculate about QDrops, in Italy the followers not only have to decipher the hints laid down by Q, but they also need to translate and contextualize the messages. One example of such a practice is represented by the translation of an open letter published by Q himself on qpost.online on the 30th of October 2020³⁷, whose Italian translation has been made available in the Italian QAnon webpage³⁸. The message contained in this letter is the warning of the plans of the Deep State to force a sanitary dictatorship to the world, through the fear created by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the new COVID-21, the new variation of the coronavirus. The letter also addressed the plan for the "Great Reset", which is "A global plan [...] that wants to subdue all of humanity, imposing coercive measures with which to drastically limit individual freedoms and those of entire populations"³⁹. These pressing issues are taken directly from the main Q posts and are translated without particular speculations about a possible Italianization of the phenomenon. This is the case for most of the content found in the pages of the Italian QAnon. This is due to the fairly recent landing of QAnon in Europe and Italy: the movement has yet to develop its own ideas, so it needs for now to speculate on the US branch in order to start forming its own main ideas.

As for what concerns the interpreters of the messages, the results of the comparison points to a substantial differentiation between the American and the Italian audience. In fact, especially among Republicans, Q's theories have shown to be accepted by almost 40% of the electorate; but also Democrats are not immune to

³⁷ Q, 2020

³⁸ Anonymous, 2020

³⁹ Q, 2020

QAnon's statements, as nearly 20% of them claimed that the conspiracy theory's affirmations are at least somewhat accurate⁴⁰.

Nearly 40% of Republicans Who Have Heard of QAnon Believe Its Claims Are at Least Somewhat Accurate

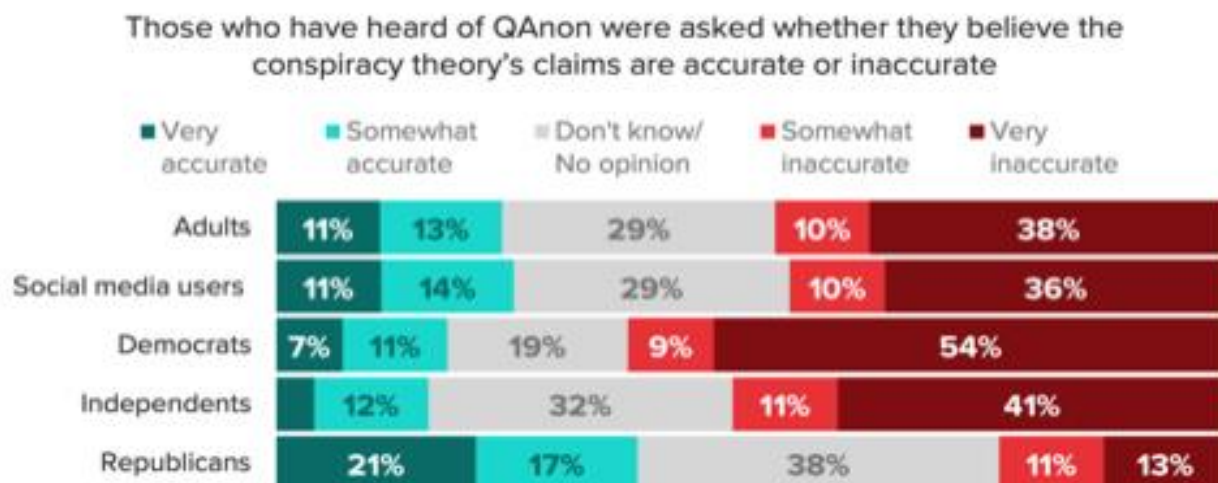


Fig.10

The most astonishing data available is the lack of reliable statistical evidence of the presence of QAnon in Italy as compared to the multitude of research regarding the US on the issue. However, this fact represents valuable information too because it marks the lower fame of the conspiracy theory in the Italian territory, as stated above. This is probably due to the mindset and cultural difference between the two countries taken as examples. Another possible explanation is the deep involvement of American characters in the conspiracy theory, while the original theory does not claim the involvement of any Italian figure. Obviously, it is possible that with time the Italian branch will grow in importance and develop its own ideas and its own adaptation of the theory.

That being said, it is now possible to move towards the conclusion of this research by summing the findings of the above data.

⁴⁰ S. Sabin, 2020

Conclusion

In the first chapter, we laid out the basis for the understanding of the information landscape. Through a deep analysis we were able to differentiate between three typologies of news: the real news, or mainstream news, information disorder and the well-known fake news. The first category is pretty straightforward, it is the unadulterated form of news that we are fed on a daily basis. Information disorder is a wide container for all of those news which fall in the categories of disinformation, malinformation and misinformation. This is not to be confused with the term fake news, which we were able to break down into more categories. In this chapter we were able to effectively explain why it is wrong today to sum all of the information disorder into the term fake news, and we gave a new meaning to the word fake news. This distinction allowed for our arsenal of knowledge to be widened and gave us the instruments to better understand the focus of our research: QAnon.

In the second chapter, in fact, QAnon was the main protagonist, with its history and birth explained through the data analyzed. In this chapter we searched for the reasons of its great distribution in the US as well as the reasons of its birth in such trying times. In order to do this a pivotal role was played by data, given by the QDrops themselves as well as articles found on the web by validated sources. Through these instruments it was possible to observe that in the US QAnon is very strong, and deeply rooted into the social stratum. This is mainly due to the strong dialectic used both by Q, creator of the conspiracy theory and QAnon, its devoted followers.

In the third chapter we analyzed the spread of QAnon in Europe. Through the analysis of the data available we were able to understand that the reach of this theory in the European continent is not as wide as it is in the US. This is due to a different mindset as well as a different political outlook of the European countries. We then took a deeper insight by analyzing the case of Italy, a perfect example of the change in luck and dialectic of the movement with a change in location. In fact, it was crucial in order to understand the power of these kinds of distorted theories. An astonishing feature of the Italian base is the absence of statistically valid data, a feature that was interesting to note since in the US there is an abundance of data available. This particular lack of data allowed us to see that the roots of QAnon are not as strong in Europe as they are in the US, and the reach of the phenomenon is still at its embryonic stage, slowly developing in the European continent and abroad, keeping its original base, but changing its modus operandi in order to address a larger scale of public. Analyzing QAnon through the lenses of what we saw in the first chapter, it is possible to categorize it as an information disorder typology. This is due to the fact that, analyzing the data, we were able to see that QAnon can be seen deploying in its dialectic the instruments of misinformation and disinformation, which falls in the greater category of information disorder.

After breaking down the information gathered through this journey, we are left with two main questions. The first question deals with the future of QAnon: will it survive, grow or disappear? Through the data gathered and analyzed it is possible to draw, as an answer to this question, some possible scenarios. Due to the recent election of US President Joe Biden the movement received a strong hit. In fact, it is possible to see that many

believers lost their faith in the theory, since at its base laid the re-election of Donald Trump. Most notable is the flop of the assault to Capitol Hill, which was seen by QAnon as a call for arms which was countered by the police. This event followed the di-satisfaction of many believers that found themselves without anything to follow. Thus, the outcome would be the disappearance of QAnon, or perhaps its mere devolution into a smaller group, with less importance that it has today. Another outcome of the recent events could be the possibility of the birth of another theory, without the role of the figure of Trump. Or else, the defeat of Trump could mean to them the defeat of QAnon, the victory of the Deep State, hence the followers of the anonymous Q need to gather more people and become stronger, fighting back for the freedom which they were denied.

The second questions regard the actual spread of this theory. As already seen the US is the birthplace of the theory, hence it is stronger and rooted deeply into its territory. In Europe as well as the rest of the world it is less present and far less famous. Italy was a great example to see that as for today, QAnon is not very widespread in the European community, without yet a goal to call their own. Though this could change, even if we do not possess statistically valuable data, notable is the effort of the QAnon base throughout the world to stand out and make a difference on their own. This means that surely this phenomenon will be on our tables for long, the condition though is the perseverance of the US base, which has yet to show its reaction to the recent political events. So, it needs some patience in order to see the results of the contamination of this theory in other countries, as a pandemic conquering earth with its vile seed.

To conclude, since the phenomenon is complex and far too recent to produce a conspicuous amount of valuable information, researchers and scholars are spurred to continue this journey through the lines of QAnon, an organization, theory and soon to be a political group, laying its spires from the US to the rest of the world.

“Doesn’t matter what you write, matters who reads it, doesn’t matter if it’s true, matters who believes it”

Dani J. Caile, Gubacsi Dulu: Book1

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Abstract

Da sempre l'informazione è un elemento capace di modificare la società. Al giorno d'oggi sempre più persone hanno meno fiducia nei media tradizionali. Queste persone filtrano e sfidano le fonti verificate per essere certi di ciò che leggono. Ovviamente questo si applica per una parte della popolazione, mentre una fetta sostanziosa crede a tutto quello che legge senza curarsi che la fonte sia ufficiale o che le notizie siano false. Queste persone sono le vittime perfette di coloro che vogliono modificare il pensiero comune attraverso notizie false o, per essere più precisi, disordine informativo. Questo fenomeno certamente non è di fattura recente, ma qualcosa di tracciabile anche nei tempi antecedenti al livello avanzato di tecnologia del giorno d'oggi. Ai giorni nostri il fenomeno è più presente grazie alle innovazioni tecnologiche del nostro secolo che hanno permesso alle notizie di viaggiare più velocemente e con molta più facilità rispetto a prima.

Ma cosa sono le notizie? Le notizie possono essere classificate come la trascrizione, solitamente da parte dei giornalisti, di fatti accaduti: notizie che vengono poi confezionate per essere rese pubbliche dalle testate giornalistiche. Certamente questa trasposizione avviene in maniera fedele, ma i giornalisti non raccontano semplicemente una storia. Essi, infatti, spesso si concentrano su determinati aspetti della notizia, talvolta aggiungendo commenti o pensieri personali. Inoltre, le notizie vengono riproposte al pubblico attraverso le lenti della testata giornalistica. Essendo umani, i giornalisti talvolta possono cadere in errore e proporre al pubblico misinformazione, ovvero contenuti non veritieri che vengono condivisi senza che il produttore si accorga della loro falsità. Certamente sono casi rari, ma comunque c'è la possibilità che accada. Con l'avvento di strumenti digitali sono anche cambiate le abitudini di consumo delle notizie delle persone. Mentre prima il mezzo più comune era il giornale o la radio, adesso le notizie sono disponibili con il tocco dello schermo, in qualsiasi luogo e in ogni momento. Grazie a questa immediatezza il consumo delle notizie è tuttavia diventato più veloce e disattento. I lettori, infatti, ormai non restano incantati dalla scrittura dell'articolo nella sua interezza, ma ne carpiscono l'essenza, solitamente dal titolo o da una breve introduzione, e passano a quello successivo. Inoltre, i lettori oggi non solo sono consumatori di notizie, ma diventano essi stessi creatori di contenuti. Questa trasformazione ha cambiato la relazione da top-down, ovvero il giornalista che dà allo spettatore la notizia, a orizzontale, ovvero i media danno le notizie alle persone, ma i consumatori possono a loro volta condividere le notizie dal loro punto di vista.

In questo quadro di notizie si colloca il disordine informativo. Questo termine raccoglie tre definizioni di tipologie di notizie contaminate: misinformazione, disinformazione e malinformazione. La misinformazione è definita come la condivisione di notizie false senza rendersi conto della falsità della notizia. La disinformazione invece è la condivisione di materiale fasullo in modo intenzionale e per recare danno. La malinformazione invece è la condivisione di informazioni veritiere su qualcuno o qualcosa con il solo intento di recare danno a quella persona. Queste tre categorie si distinguono principalmente per falsità e intenzione di recare danno. Nell'analisi di queste tipologie bisogna anche tenere conto di tre elementi fondamentali: l'agente, il messaggio e l'interprete. L'agente è colui che crea, produce e invia il messaggio. Solitamente

queste tre fasi sono portate a termine da persone differenti che creano, producono e inviano il messaggio fasullo al pubblico. A queste tre fasi è possibile aggiungerne una quarta: la riproduzione, che consiste nella successiva condivisione del messaggio da parte di colui che lo ha ricevuto. L'analisi dei tre elementi notabili nel disordine informativo è essenziale per comprendere meglio perché questi messaggi sono creati e la reazione successiva del pubblico. Per quanto riguarda l'agente l'analisi si basa sul capire principalmente che tipo di attore sia, se per esempio è ufficiale o meno, o il suo livello di organizzazione. Successivamente si va notare a quale pubblico si riferisca e che intenzioni abbia con il suo messaggio.

Quest'ultimo poi è anch'esso suddiviso in categorie di analisi, come la durata e l'accuratezza. Ovviamente poi c'è bisogno di analizzare anche se tale messaggio possa essere definito illegale o se rientri nella legge, siccome se esso sia inviato impersonando un'azienda o un personaggio pubblico. Infine, va individuato il pubblico al quale il messaggio è diretto, per esempio un individuo o un gruppo specifico.

L'interprete è colui il quale recepisce e assorbe il messaggio. L'interprete si può trovare in disaccordo con il messaggio, in accordo o può mediare il messaggio essendo d'accordo con solo parte di esso, e quindi ignorarlo, inviarlo a persone supportando o andando contro il messaggio.

Per quanto riguarda il fenomeno del disordine informativo non abbiamo solo bisogno di analizzare le tipologie di notizie contaminate, ma anche le forme con le quali vengono condivise. Le forme che sono state categorizzate sono principalmente sette: abbiamo la satira, il contenuto fuorviante, il contenuto impostore, il contenuto fabbricato, la falsa connessione, il falso contesto e il contenuto manipolato. Per quanto riguarda questi contenuti possono essere visti secondo l'intento di danneggiare e secondo l'intento di mentire. Le fake news possono essere identificate come la condivisione volontaria di informazioni false. Questo tipo di notizie sembrano reali e fanno credere ai lettori di star leggendo e condividendo informazioni veritiere. Quando si studiano le fake news bisogna avere in mente un modello per analizzare tre fattori importanti nelle fake news: l'oggettività, l'intenzione e il ruolo del pubblico. Il fenomeno delle fake news è investigabile attraverso sei tipologie: satira, parodia, fabbricazione delle notizie, pubblicità e relazioni pubbliche, manipolazione delle foto ed infine la propaganda.

In questo contesto di informazione il pubblico è di grande importanza. Il messaggio infatti ha come scopo quello di influenzare gli spettatori, scatenando emozioni forti in un pubblico solitamente vulnerabile. Il pubblico che assorbe il messaggio infatti è solitamente quella fetta di popolazione più sensibile a certi argomenti e che difficilmente riesce a svelare la truffa dietro i messaggi che legge nel web o che sente da amici e parenti. Gli strumenti principali con cui queste false informazioni vengono inviate e recepite sono i social media così come i forum del web, dove le informazioni possono girare liberamente e dove chiunque può scrivere e condividere materiale. Negli ultimi anni c'è stato un largo incremento di teorie che si basano sulle fake news e sul disordine informativo. Tra queste abbiamo QAnon, organizzazione con base negli Stati Uniti che ha inondato le recenti trasmissioni e testate giornalistiche grazie alla sua grande fortuna in America, senza contare il recente avvicinamento dell'organizzazione nel suolo Europeo. Sono presenti nel territorio persone

che seguono gli avvertimenti di QAnon, ma grazie alla differente mentalità, diversa da quella Americana, la fortuna del gruppo in Europa, prendendo come esempio l'Italia, è decisamente minore.

Bisogna specificare che l'avvento di QAnon in Europa è stato facilitato anche dalle recenti complicità dovute dall'epidemia del COVID-19, pandemia mondiale che ha fiaccato gli animi e ha reso le persone vulnerabili a questo tipo di contenuti. In America il fenomeno QAnon è nato dopo la candidatura dell'ex presidente Donald Trump, e la lunga serie di scandali legati alla sua permanenza alla Casa Bianca. Questo denota una maggiore forza dei movimenti che usano fake news e disordine informativo durante periodi di crisi, quando la popolazione è più vulnerabile e sensibile e cerca risposte che abbiano senso. Inoltre c'è da ricordare che queste organizzazioni lavorano con il favore delle piattaforme web, dove sono spesso aiutati dagli algoritmi di ricerca che "forzano" le persone, attraverso l'analisi delle ricerche più recenti fatte dall'utente, a trovare nelle loro pagine contenuti vicini alle loro credenze, spesso aiutando le teorie del complotto a sembrare più veritiere agli occhi dell'ignaro sostenitore.

La situazione politica degli Stati Uniti è una di instabilità e di caos, gli eventi hanno scosso la popolazione profondamente. Questo ha reso il movimento cospirazionista più forte e ha portato gli Americani a credere a tutto ciò che gli porta della sicurezza e delle spiegazioni del perché tutto questo sta accadendo. Questo è il terreno che QAnon ha trovato e che sta cavalcando per poter avere sempre più seguaci.

QAnon è una teoria della cospirazione che deve le sue origini a due teorie precedenti ad essa. Le due teorie sono: "I Protocolli dei Savi di Sion" e il "Pizzagate". Da queste due teorie ha preso ispirazione per la sua dialettica principale.

I primi post che si possono trovare riferiti a QAnon risalgono al 2017, quando un utente di nome Q scrisse di avere in mano "la verità" sul governo americano. Q non ha mai esposto la sua vera identità, dicendo semplicemente di essere un ufficiale di alto grado in grado di reperire informazioni classificate. Secondo Q alla base del governo americano c'è una Cabala di politici e celebrità di spicco che governano il paese in segretezza, manovrando i fili di persone definite marionette. Questa Cabala è accusata di trafficare esseri umani e di praticare riti satanici per riacquistare la giovinezza perduta. Tra i personaggi menzionati nella Cabala ci sono Hilary Clinton e l'ex Presidente Barack Obama, mentre il salvatore del mondo sembra essere l'ex Presidente Donald Trump, incaricato di imprigionare queste personalità di spicco e smantellare il cosiddetto Deep State.

QAnon ha avuto anche un ruolo nello scandalo del Russiagate così come la teoria secondo cui il figlio del defunto Kennedy sia ancora vivo, e che presto avrà la sua rivalsa nel mondo politico moderno, riportando la pace in questo momento caotico.

I punti presi da queste teorie sono principalmente due. Dai Savi di Sion ha ereditato un profondo senso di antisemitismo così come il termine Cabala per indicare il gruppo di persone che agisce nell'ombra. Al pari di Hitler votato alla salvezza della razza bianca, Trump viene visto come colui il quale dovrà sgominare il culto Satanico della Cabala e ripristinare l'ordine. Dal Pizzagate invece riprende la dialettica della presenza di una

organizzazione che rapisce bambini e gli usa per ringiovanire, attraverso l'assunzione dell'adrenocromo che viene raccolto dagli stessi. Sempre del Pizzagate è l'idea del Deep State, che muove i fili del governo e che deve essere sconfitto per poter portare la libertà al popolo statunitense.

La dialettica principale di QAnon prende principalmente spunto da queste antiche teorie, ma non bisogna dimenticare che ci sono dei contenuti inediti portati dal movimento. Esempio lampante è la credenza che il figlio di Kennedy sia ancora vivo e che un giorno tornerà a reclamare il suo posto alla guida della Casa Bianca, probabilmente con l'aiuto di Trump.

Altra teoria che Q ci ha donato è la reinterpretazione del Russiagate, lo scandalo che ha aleggiato sullo stabilimento di Trump alla Casa Bianca. Secondo QAnon infatti il Russiagate non è altro che un velo utilizzato per coprire il piano di Trump per sgominare il Deep State, un atto voluto per non farsi scoprire.

QAnon inoltre sta anche cavalcando l'ondata di caos creata dalla recente pandemia, così come le elezioni presidenziali che hanno visto la vittoria, a detta di molti illegittima, di Joe Biden. Infatti, la pandemia viene vista come un complotto del Deep State per sgominare Trump e favorire l'entrata in gioco di Biden.

La strategia di Q per fornire le sue teorie consiste nel lasciare briciole di informazioni, chiamati anche QDrops, dove non affronta direttamente le teorie, bensì lascia ai suoi seguaci libera interpretazione degli avvenimenti, aprendo gli occhi delle persone e spronandole a non credere ai media tradizionali, a controllare sempre le fonti e non dare credibilità ai giornali, che ovviamente fanno parte di questo sistema corrotto e non vogliono far scoprire la verità a chi la cerca.

QAnon utilizza quindi le fake news e il disordine informativo per accedere ad una platea maggiore di persone. Secondo le informazioni citate precedentemente si può dedurre che QAnon utilizza ampiamente gli strumenti del disordine informativo, con misinformazione e disinformazione. Con i dati alla mano non si può dire che venga utilizzato il tipo della malinformazione, poiché non vengono menzionati fatti realmente accaduti volti a danneggiare un personaggio pubblico, ma solo contenuti farlocchi e senza alcun fondamento veritiero.

Inoltre, per analizzare al meglio gli scopi di QAnon si può utilizzare la divisione dei gruppi di disordine informativo secondo le categorie di: agente, messaggio ed interprete. L'agente, Q, si definisce un funzionario di alto grado con la possibilità di accedere a documenti classificati. Q poi agisce principalmente attraverso i suoi seguaci, i QAnons. La missione di Q e dei suoi messaggi è principalmente di natura politica, con l'intento principale di persuadere il mondo, aprirne gli occhi e sgominare il Deep State.

Il messaggio è ciò che Q vuole passare al mondo. Il suo messaggio mira a rimanere nel tempo e cerca un audience ampio e variegato. Il messaggio è condiviso attraverso i social media comuni e attraverso piattaforme come 4Chan, blog meno conosciuti dove le regolamentazioni per la diffusione di materiale è meno stringente. Ma a chi deve arrivare il messaggio? All'interprete, che in questo caso è la popolazione mondiale. Q mira a convincere il mondo delle sue teorie e cerca di convincere sempre più persone. L'interprete è ovviamente fiaccato dagli accadimenti recenti e percepisce il messaggio facilmente, convinto dal senso delle parole di Q e dei suoi seguaci e dal senso di sicurezza che le sue teorie forniscono.

Importante punto di riflessione è la fama e il successo negli Stati Uniti di questa teoria, siccome il motivo per cui è meno presente in altri Stati. QAnon nasce in America e la maggior parte delle sue teorie ha base nei personaggi di spicco del mondo statunitense. Questo è uno dei motivi per il quale l'America è una base solida del gruppo cospirazionista. Altra causa può essere ritrovata nella mentalità degli Americani e della loro propensione a questo tipo di contenuti. Per esempio, i gruppi evangelici sono molto presenti nel suolo Americano, infatti studi su QAnon hanno rivelato l'affinità con questo tipo di gruppi, che sono particolarmente presenti in America.

Da questi gruppi QAnon ha come somiglianza il profondo senso di alienazione che i partecipanti provano una volta entrati nel gruppo. Le persone non hanno più contatti con la realtà e smettono di vivere la vita che conducevano, rinnegando amici e familiari al punto di isolarsi per la causa, incollati ai loro computer affamati di "verità" fabbricate da mani sapienti.

Per quanto riguarda QAnon questo profondo risveglio di molte persone è avvenuto con l'avvento di Joe Biden e la sua successiva vittoria. Molti, vedendo la sconfitta di Trump, hanno svelato la menzogna alla quale erano stati esposti e che li aveva rapiti dalla realtà. I forum sono pieni di persone che raccontano la loro storia e di come uscire dal circolo vizioso delle menzogne perpetrate da QAnon.

Altro elemento magnetico di QAnon è la sua somiglianza ad un gioco. Q semina indizi online e i suoi seguaci devono risolvere gli enigmi lasciati in rete tramite i cosiddetti QDrops.

QAnon ha come sede il suolo americano ma recentemente, soprattutto grazie alla pandemia di COVID-19, si sta espandendo anche in Europa. Essendo un fenomeno nuovo in Europa non troviamo ancora delle teorie ben strutturate, ma delle traduzioni fedeli dei post inviati dalla matrice statunitense. Esempio lampante della traduzione di una tradizione americana è l'Italia. In Italia c'è una base solida di seguaci del movimento cospirazionista e figure di spicco della politica come Matteo Salvini hanno avuto modo di dire la loro opinione riguardo l'argomento, seppur recente e ancora non ben radicato all'interno della tradizione italiana.

In Italia QAnon si appoggia principalmente al movimento no-vax e no-mask per raccogliere seguaci e consenso. Questo perché, seppure la dialettica americana sia di per sé efficace, essa risulta esserlo principalmente sul suolo americano. In Italia, non essendoci una base teorica solida il movimento non ha ancora consolidato le sue radici e non ha ancora sviluppato un pensiero proprio. Questo porta ad una minore fama a livello Europeo ed in particolare a livello italiano per questa teoria. In Italia però, pur non avendo una propria teoria basata sulla situazione italiana, QAnon sta riscuotendo un forte successo, soprattutto tra i gruppi più estremisti della destra. La destra istituzionale composta da partiti come Lega e Fratelli d'Italia non ha invece espresso consenso, ma neanche il dissenso richiesto dalle altre forze politiche. Questa accettazione silenziosa si basa sia sul supporto che questi partiti avevano espresso nei confronti di Trump sia per la presenza di no-vax e no-mask nel movimento e nei partiti, idee che la destra italiana si è trovata più volte ad abbracciare. Esempio del supporto della destra italiana per QAnon può essere trovato in Matteo Salvini, preso dai seguaci italiani di QAnon come la controparte nostrana di Trump, mentre a capo del Deep State all'Italiana viene messo ex-Premier Giuseppe Conte.

Di vitale importanza è capire come si traduce il movimento di cospirazione dal territorio americano a quello Italiano. Essenziale è comprendere le differenze di metodologia e di messaggio tra i due paesi. Prima differenza è l'estensione del fenomeno. Mentre in America si parla apertamente ed estensivamente del fenomeno QAnon, tanto che membri del governo hanno apertamente dichiarato la loro affiliazione, in Italia non si conosce molto questo fenomeno, ed è relegato ad uno stato embrionale, ancora in crescita e sviluppo. Comune alle due ramificazioni è la necessità di un “salvatore dell’umanità”: in America Trump e in Italia Salvini. Secondo elemento comune è la presenza di un nemico da sconfiggere, demonizzato: per entrambi il Deep State, capitanato da figure differenti ma sempre tra celebrità di successo e politici avversari dei loro beniamini.

Così come per il caso americano in Italia l'organizzazione del disordine informativo può essere divisa in agente, interprete e messaggio. In Italia l'agente rimane Q, il nostro agente di alto rango che ci dona informazioni vitali riguardo il Deep State. Il messaggio per l'Italia rimane quasi uguale a quello Statunitense a causa della mancata evoluzione della teoria riguardo l'ambiente italiano. Ciò che veramente si modifica è l'interprete, colui che legge e recepisce il messaggio. Questo avviene sia per il problema della lenta evoluzione delle idee di Q in Italia, che richiede un maggiore impegno per assoldare nuovi adepti della cospirazione ma anche per la barriera linguistica. I seguaci italiani, non avendo una base propria devono tradurre ed adattare in italiano i messaggi di Q, creando una trasposizione fedele delle sue idee.

Un fattore molto importante è poi l'assenza di dati del QAnon Italiano. Mentre in America abbiamo molti articoli così come un numero cospicuo di blog inerenti a Q, in Italia mancano i numeri e gli strumenti per analizzare il fenomeno di QAnon. Questo a causa dello stato ancora embrionale dell'organizzazione che non ha ancora dato risultati effettivi a livello statistico, non permettendo uno studio in profondità come nel caso dell'America.

In conclusione, QAnon recentemente ha acquisito notorietà, ma gli eventi di Capitol Hill e la stabilizzazione di Biden alla Casa Bianca ha portato delle nuove sfide teoretiche al movimento. Ciò che resta da fare è attendere nuove mosse da Q e i suoi seguaci, seguendo noi stessi gli avvenimenti della teoria complottista chiamata QAnon.