

## Ctrl+Alt+Dem

Jan Blommaert's research blog

# Ergoic framing in New Right online groups: Q, the MAGA kid, and the Deep State theory



Ondřej Procházka & Jan Blommaert

(working draft)

## 1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories have had a long life in social research (e.g. Hofstadter 1967), and they have more recently become conspicuous as a topic of research on online social and political action.<sup>[1]</sup> The relationship between the online world and conspiracy theories is often described as synergetic:

*Conspiracy theories, defined as allegations that powerful people or organizations are plotting together in secret to achieve sinister ends through deception of the public (...), have long been an*

*important element of popular discourse. With the advent of the Internet, they have become more visible than ever. (Wood & Douglas 2013)*

The Internet is also seen as *influential*: it is the place where conspiracy theories emerge and grow, before being moved into mainstream media:

*However, as the Internet developed into a major form of communication, its function as a medium for the spread of conspiracy theories began to exhibit some important characteristics. Most obviously, ideas that in the past would only have reached the small audiences of conspiracy publications and late night talk radio now could potentially reach many more. Less obviously, it became clear that once fringe ideas appeared on the Net, they could eventually migrate into mainstream media (Barkun 2016: 3).*

Conspiracy theories themselves are often left undefined, and remain caught in moralizing – usually dismissive – but analytically superficial discourse:

*In Conspiracy Theories and the Internet – Controlled Demolition and Arrested Development (Clarke, 2007) he argues that many contemporary conspiracy theories suffer from vagueness. Looking at the development of conspiracy theories on the Internet, he argues that such theories have fared badly, since it does not take long for them to be analysed and subsequently shown to rely upon shaky or shakily interpreted evidence. As such, conspiracy theories online are now phrased in vague and less precise ways in order to avoid being easily falsified” (Dentith 2014:162)*

In what follows, we intend to engage with conspiracy theories in a way that does justice to their complexity as a *social fact* in the online-offline nexus characterizing contemporary social life (cf. Blommaert 2018). Examining a recent case of online group activism, we will focus on (a) how a particular form of reasoning is consistently developed and maintained, a form we shall call *Ergoic* (after Latin *ergo*, “therefore”), and (b) how such a form of reasoning generates and sustains a particular type of community, which we call a *knowledge activism community*; (c) we shall do this from a specific angle, which is *action-centered* rather than content- or identity-centered.

The latter point demands some clarification. The specific case we shall examine in this paper instantiates a central analytical problem of online research: that of people performing social actions online anonymously, under an alias or using avatars. This simple and widespread given has momentous consequences for analytical approaches of online social action: we cannot reliably assume participants’ identities and use them as a priori categorizations in the analysis (cf. Blommaert, Lu & Li 2019). We cannot, for example, use particular demographic and

sociological diacritics – gender, age, even nationality or place of residence – in the analysis, since none of these data are available to the analyst, except when advanced software tools and analytics can be deployed. What we do have, however, are data documenting specific social actions – online interactions in which specific normative codes evolve and circulate; in which particular epistemic, affective and ideological stances are being semiotized by means of specific resources; and in which we see, through all of this, the emerging *communities* whose collective work (or, in Garfinkel's 2002 terms, “congregational work”) generates sometimes considerable social effects. The communities are generated by the actions they are involved in, which is why we privilege these actions as the objects of inquiry. We shall see how this action-centered approach enables us to be very precise in the identification of the communities: specific forms of action generate specific forms of community.

We shall examine a particular conspiracy-theoretical event in which an online New Right activist community called Q used the mainstream media reports of an incident involving a white student (the “MAGA kid”) and an elderly Native American man to produce elaborate reframings of what happened, using “ergoic” arguments grounded in a conspiracy theory which we shall call the “deep state theory”. In the next section, we shall briefly introduce the incident; the subsequent sections will discuss, the nature of the congregational work performed within the Q community and the structures of the ergoicargumentative work they display in their online actions. In our conclusions, we shall return to the main themes of this paper and connect them to some major issues in research on online communities such as Q.

## 2. Q and the MAGA kid incident

In January 2019, two marches clashed on the Mall in Washington DC: the pro-life *March for Life* and the *Indigenous Peoples' March*. While the first one could be roughly described as politically conservative, the second could be said to be politically liberal within the US political universe. One incident from the meeting of both marches went viral as a short video clip on social media: an encounter between a young white Catholic high school student called Nick Sandmann, wearing the iconic “MAGA hat” (the emblem of Donald Trump's *Make America Great Again* campaign), and an Omaha elder called Nathan Phillips.

The clip itself circulated in a variety of versions and these versions became a topic of heated controversy. Initially, the dominant reading of the clip opposed a dignified Native American elder and a “smirking” white chauvinist kid. The “smirk” was read as an expression of disrespect, racism and white supremacy, thus strengthening the theme of the Indigenous Peoples' March.

The fact that Nathan Phillips was also said to be a Vietnam veteran highlighted the inappropriateness of his attitude: veterans command respect, period. Memes were made in which this reading was codified (see Figure 1), and mainstream media broadcasted the story in these terms.



Fig. 1: “No apology” meme

Nick Sandmann’s MAGA hat (by means of which he is identified in Figure 1) evidently laid a strong indexical link between Sandmann, the incident and Donald Trump, and in online discussions this connection was elaborated (see Figure 2).



Fig. 2: “Donald Trump defends Nick Sandmann” meme

A New Right forum (or *hivemind*) called Q also immediately picked up the incident, and in the remainder of this section their reactions and reframing attempts will be central.

Q is an online activist collective in which a particular vocabulary is being used, including one for identifying the hierarchical levels of members and the specific activities they undertake, as well as the themes they mobilize around and the opponents they choose to fight. Q operates at different levels, with ingroup core actions confined to the relatively marginal user-generated imageboard platform 8Chan, while actions reaching out to a broader network of (potential) followers being performed on Facebook. More specifically, Q is believed to be a high-ranking individual or a small group of individuals operating in Trump's administration with Q clearance, a level at which top secret and restricted data can be accessed. Based on their insider knowledge, Q post semi-coded messages ("crumbs") on *8chan*, which are compiled and discussed by their followers (Anons), who organize themselves in what they call 'Great Awakening': "an organic information and truth-seeking campaign, the goal of which is to help President Trump peacefully Make America Great Again, and by extension to make the world a better, safer place for all to live in peace" (Anons 2018: 1)<sup>[1]</sup>. This involves identifying and exposing both domestic and foreign enemies of Trump with a particular focus on what they have done (false flags operations, corruption, misdirection, cover ups, mind control etc.) what they do and will probably do with regard to current and past events.

Q's first wave of Facebook responses consisted of *rejections of mainstream media's version of the events*, swiftly followed by avalanches of messages offering *the truth* about what happened (cf. Figure 3).



Fig. 3: "hate hoax" Facebook update

In the days and weeks following the incident, ‘evidence’ was accumulated showing that Nathan Phillips was not a Vietnam veteran, that he had participated in several other public protests and activists’ meetings, that he could be identified as affiliated to organizations run by George Soros, and so on. The initially dominant frame was effectively turned upside down. Now, images of the incident should be read as involving an innocent, ordinary white kid being the victim of aggression by a professional activist claiming fake credentials. And from there onwards, the small incident became understood as a mere illustration of the big problem providing the *raison d’être* for Q: systematic anti-Trump machinations planned and performed in the US and elsewhere. The way the incident was cast in mainstream media, so argued Q members, was just another “hate hoax” – the fake news often qualified as “an enemy of the people” by Donald Trump.

The lines of action performed by Q in the wake of the MAGA kid incident have been sketched. We will proceed to deepen it, focusing on an examination of the particular ergoic knowledge regime developed and articulated within Q.

### 3. Ergoic reasoning: the Deep State theory and the MAGA kid incident

In order to understand what follows, we need to return to an old ethnomethodological principle: that people are *reasonable* whenever they try to make sense of social life, and that “reasonable” should not be confused with *rational* as conventionally used. Being “rational”, conventionally used, stands for the strictly regimented, detached, facts-only and evidence-based epistemic modality that characterizes, in the Enlightenment tradition, scientific reasoning and other modes of fact-based knowledge work such as journalism and forensic-legal inquiry.

Being “reasonable”, in contrast, consists of the construction of plausible explanatory formats in which details of everyday life can be related to some “theory” as proof of that theory (hence *ergo*, since the detail is explicable *because of* the theory). The theory – similar to what Goffman (1974) described as an overarching “frame” organizing experience – consists of general propositions of “how the world is” and how, consequently, everyday events can be made sense of as “logically” explicable with reference to the general propositions. The conventional understanding of being rational, then, is just one specific (and specialized) mode of being reasonable (Garfinkel 1967).

We can take this one step further. One can be “reasonable” precisely by *disqualifying* rationality in its conventional sense. The propositions of “how the world is” have the status of truth, and

when this truth is contradicted by “hard facts” (of science, journalism or the law), such facts can be dismissed as fallacies or lies. And what we seen in conspiracy theories is exactly that: an antirational mode of arriving at reasonable explanations grounded in ergoic relations between specific events and a general theory or masterframe of “how the world is”. The latter has the status of truth, and – here comes the conspiracy – this truth is typically *hidden* by powerful opponents and demands to be *revealed* through the actions of the conspiracy theorists.

The masterframe within which Q performs its actions can be sketched as follows; we shall use the Q jargon discussed earlier.

1. Q explicitly claims to work for *Donald Trump*. In that sense, it can be set apart from most other conspiracy theorists, who identify with the margins and pose as powerless voices. In the case of Q, there is an explicit alignment with the President of the US. The president, however, is described as locked into battle with what Q calls the “Cabal”. The Cabal are an alliance of several actors also qualified (by Trump) as “the swamp”: the real powers that control the US and the world. Q explicitly inscribes its actions in Trump’s plan to “drain the swamp”. Q members join Trump’s battle as “patriots”, self-qualifying as “We the People” (with its intertextual resonances firmly rooted in the foundational texts of US democracy). And they undertake “research” – knowledge practices aimed at publicly revealing a truth deliberately hidden by the Cabal.
2. The Cabal is – in practice – organized around four major actors. The first is *Hilary Clinton*, Trump’s opponent during the 2016 presidential elections and seen as guilty of a protracted conspiracy to weaken the position of Donald Trump and, thus, to undemocratically regain the power that she was democratically denied in 2016. Clinton is described as an active opponent who, through the machinery of her Clinton Foundation and related charities and NGOs, as well as through her connections with the DC elites, sets up an unending sequence of attacks on Donald Trump. Trump systematically used the epithet of “crooked” for Hilary Clinton.
3. A second major Cabal actor is *Barack Obama*. Obama, in Q discourse, represents the “deep state”; in that sense he is rather a passive opponent whose harmful influence is felt through the actions of state agencies such as the CIA, the FBI and the Supreme Court, all of which have been organized by Obama in such a way that they serve the interests of the Cabal.
4. The third major actor in the Cabal is billionaire entrepreneur *George Soros*. Q describes Soros as a “puppet master” who actively finances and implements the plans and schemes of the Cabal, usually through the NGOs and networks he runs. Soros is also a “globalist”, whose activities have a scope far beyond the US. Which is why Trump needs to develop a new international policy and new international partnerships.

5. Finally, there are *MSM*, the mainstream media, seen as the public outlets of the Cabal and therefore the main direct opponents of Q's fact-checking and debunking online actions. The media, so it is argued, are the tools of propaganda and disinformation of the American public, happily transforming meticulously crafted anti-Trump hoaxes into major news stories.

We can call this the “deep state theory”, and summarize it schematically as follows:

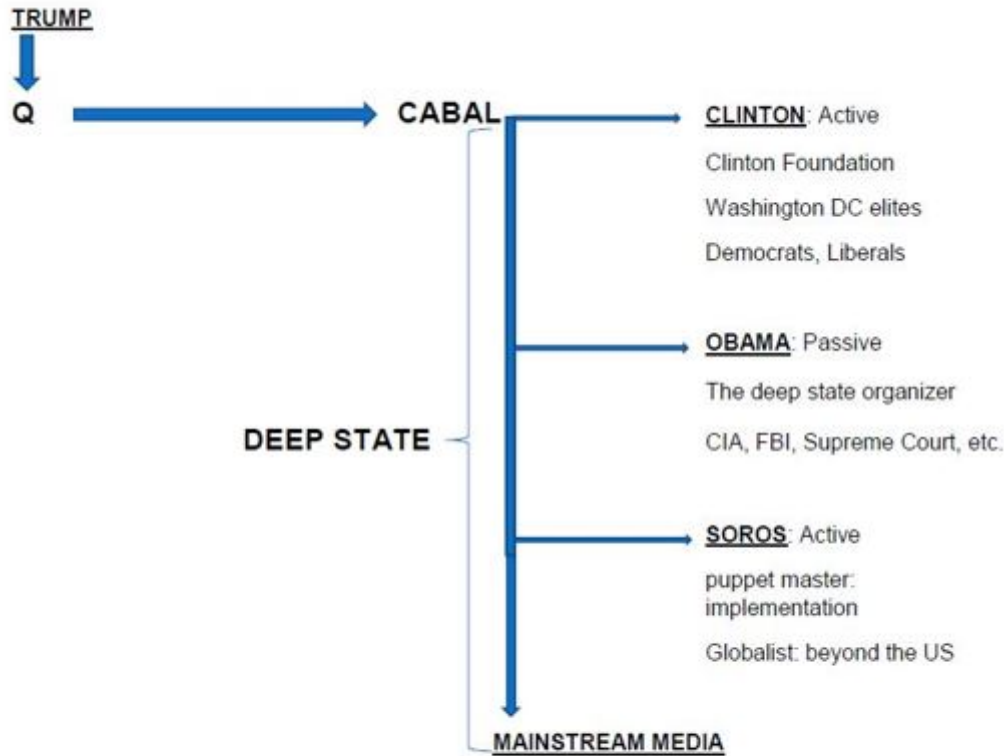


Fig. 4 Deep State Theory schema

This deep state theory provides the dominant ergoic logic for all of Q's actions. Whenever a case is opened by Q, the direction in which 'research' is taken is scripted in the terms of this masterframe. The first step, therefore, is the instant assumption that mainstream news is fake, after which the detailed fact checking must reveal the direct or indirect involvement of the various actors in the Cabal.

In essence, the masterframe pictures an all-powerful, totalitarian state undemocratically controlled by the Cabal and shaped so as to serve their interests. The term “deep state” stands for exactly this: a state the organization and functioning of which have been profoundly adapted to serve particular elite interests rather than those of the masses (“We, the People”). The all-powerful nature of that state is reflected, according to Q members, in the level of meticulous planning of hoaxes and the never-ending, massive supply of such hoaxes, suggesting top-level



organization, phenomenal resources and investments made available, and the mobilization of the “best and brightest” in the efforts of the Cabal. There are obvious pointers towards George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*, where *Newspeak* took the place of today’s “fake news” and where Big Brother sees all, knows all, and shapes a reality which is, in actual fact, a totalized lie intended to safeguard the power of the state from any unwanted form of interference. In the “MAGA kid” incident, the reference to Orwell is explicit in this meme:



Fig. 5: Reference to Orwell

Entering into greater detail, we see how the elements of the deep state theory serve, ergoically, as directives for practices of “research”. These practices are diverse and range from the constructions of “true” memes as didactic tools, over more elaborate explanatory practices in which features of evidence are being discussed, disassembled and reconstructed, and interactionally constructed modes of learning, mutual ratification and correction.

### 3.1. Data

The data were gathered from a Q-based Facebook group *QAnon Follow The White Rabbit*, which had roughly 37,000 members at the time of the incident. We joined the group several months (October 2018) prior to the incident to conduct a systematic ethnographic observation without active participation (commenting, liking or sharing). There are four main reasons why we selected this group in particular: i) the group is highly active (usually dozens of posts per day) and with a relatively high level of engagement from its members, ii) the group is sufficiently representative of the Q phenomenon in view of its gatekeeping mechanisms – it is a closed group (access is granted upon answering relating to Trump in which the applicant must show alignment with the Q masterframe), iii) the group shows little or no signs of content filtering or censoring activities and the vast majority of posted content is Q related; iv) the group has

enabled a search function that helps us to laser in on its reception of the MAGA kid incident as it unfolds in a number of contexts which we will describe below.

We shall limit our analysis to QAnon's reception and re/de-construction Nathan Phillips' media image based on the memes and comments as reactions to posts containing links to various media informing of the MAGA kid incident that had posted in the group between January 20 and 25. The data were collected in March 2019 after the activity pertaining the incident had ceased. To gain a better understanding of the networked chronotopic conditions in which our data emerge, we cross-checked and consulted our data with other Q-based platforms and websites, including q-research section on *8chan*, Q-related data aggregators (e.g. [qmap.pub/info](http://qmap.pub/info)) and other Q-related groups and pages on Facebook.

### 3.2 Analysis

We will focus on the following aspects of QAnon's knowledge activism in debunking of the (mainstream) media image of Nathan Phillips: 1) exposing his true military credentials and 2) dispelling his authority as a native elder, which provides basis for 3) revealing his ties to the Deep State, and finally 4) his complicity in more grand conspiracy theories connected with the Cabal, namely its crusade against Christianity. But let us not forget that our analysis is not aimed to (dis)prove conspiracy theories propagated by QAnon. Our goal is ethnomethodological: we look at how the members of the QAnon make sense of the MAGA kid incident through interaction; or more precisely, how their interactional engagement marks a congregational work producing conspiracies as social facts and conspiracism as a default mode of reasoning. On that note, we begin with a brief outline of the most circulated memes illustrating the masterframe with regard to each line of debunking, and then we proceed to the discussion of the comments along the line in question.

#### ***Nathan Phillips is not a Vietnam veteran***

Phillips' military credentials were immediately questioned and invalidated in the wake of media's reporting on the MAGA hat incident and subsequent interviews in which Phillips mentioned his military background and alleged service in Vietnam. QAnon's 'research' (comparing Phillips' earlier media appearances and other available information about him) shows discrepancies in his claims as well as questionable sincerity in his performance, which subsequently serve as ergoic arguments in undermining his account. The discrepancies are also documented in a number of memes circulating in the group.



Fig. 6: Phillips' discharge papers accompanied by an explanatory caption



Fig. 7: Age discrepancy in Phillips' account



Fig. 8: Phillips and other 'fakes'

Fig. 6 features Phillips' discharge papers (released under the Freedom of Information Act) indicating a number of AWOLs (absent without official leave) and no evidence of his Vietnam

service. Its explanatory caption indicates that while his military service is honorable (even for QAnons), his personal integrity is not; and therefore, he cannot be trusted. This creates an aura of unbiased and rigorous ‘research’ or ‘fact-checking’ in addition to constructing a sense of epistemic superiority (having access to classified or hard-to-get information) on the basis of which QAnon makes its ‘evidence’ more compelling.

Other memes point to discrepancies in Phillips’ account (fig 6.) or mock Phillips by putting him on par with another “fakes” gaining a status of a meme (fig. 8). These memetic figures include a NBC anchor Brian William (on the right) falsely claiming to be a wartime correspondent in Iraq and a survivor of Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, David Hogg (on the left), who is believed to be a crisis actor.<sup>[1]</sup> Memes propagated by Qanons inform and are informed by the masterframe of “how the world is”– the event was staged, orchestrated or simply ‘fake’. This is also reflected in the vocabulary resonating with the imperative to expose the role of Nathan Phillips played in the event.

(1) *NATHAN PHILLIPS FAKETRIOT.. “LOWLIFE”*

(2) *The old bloke is a FAKE – PAID ACTOR !!!!!!!*

(3) *He is a paid protester.*

(4) *Nathan Phillips is a fake and a plant. He was never in the service. Says he was a veteran. The Indians don’t like him, He gives them a bad name. He is a professional victim and a POS!*

(4.1) *Lets not forget stolen valor. Having never served as a “recon ranger” (no such job exists in the Marines) and never served in vietnam (As he professed to CNN)*

Commenters frame Phillips along the same lines of ingenuity: as a fake patriot ‘FAKETRIOT’, paid actor and protester, an activist, a plant (i.e. a planted undercover agent) and a professional victim. Full or partial capitalization and overpunctuation frequently mark the urgency and insistence of highlighting the superiority of the epistemic regime pertaining to the Q masterframe.

The last two comments show how ‘evidence’ can be further specified and elaborated by QAnons. While (4) outlines the baseline ‘facts’ about Phillips, (4.1) answers by a more nuanced expository account of the claims Phillips “professed to CNN” (see the full transcript in Sidner 2019). In this vein, Phillips is not just a mere ‘fake’ – he is charged with ‘stolen valor’ (lying about military service), which is arguably a higher offense earning him more deplorable status of a ‘LOWLIFE’

and 'POS' (piece of shit). Apart from his military records, his self-reference 'recon ranger' (presumably part of special operation forces generally known as Army Rangers) is what gives him away, as it, according to 4.1, does not correspond with the Army register (nor with his expertise as refrigeration mechanic, fig. 5). We thus see that QAnon brings together people with different levels of knowledge and expertise from a wide array of domains which they utilize in concordance in their pursuit of 'the truth'.

When the discrepancies became evident to general publics, CNN amended their report with the following note attached to the end of the transcript: "*Correction: After this interview was conducted, Phillips told CNN he was Vietnam-era veteran. He did serve in the military during the Vietnam War, but according to his service records, he was not deployed to Vietnam*" (Sidner 2019, n.pag). Commenters expressed both surprise and pride in furthering their endeavor in enacting the 'Great Awakening':

(5) *I can't believe that CNN have started telling the truth..*

(6) *Good news of the day – It's getting harder and harder for the MSM [mainstream media] to dupe us anymore. It's almost like a majority of us are waking up!*

We now turn to another mode of ergoic reasoning related to identity work. In the next section we will see how the Q masterframe drives the scrutinizing and meticulous invalidation of another aspect of Phillips' media image – his respectable rank among Native Americans.

### ***Nathan Phillips is not a true representative of Native Americans***

According to the research conducted by QAnons and testimonies of its members who identify as Native American, the Native American community is presented as ambivalent toward Nathan Phillips at best. Another series of memes and comment testimonies question the sincerity and authenticity in Phillips' behavior. Instead of promoting Native American traditions and culture, Phillips' presence in mainstream media reporting on the MAGA kid as well a past incidents shows 'evidence' that it has been in fact an intentional provocation falling in line with his previous public stunts that expose his true nature of an agent provocateur with a political agenda.



Fig. 9: Phillip’s former media appearances



Fig 10: Phillips as the ‘most interesting man in the world’



Fig. 11: A screenshot of a Tweet from a Lakota representative

In this vein, fig. 9 captures and comments on Phillips' earlier media presence tailored in a coherent frame that de-constructs his image as a respectable elder of the Omaha tribe, and re-constructs it as a provocateur political activist with ulterior motives. This includes, apart from the MAGA kid incident, a 2015 interview with Phillips following a similar confrontation with white students from the Eastern Michigan University (EMU) allegedly dressed as Indians in which Phillips claims that the students had approached him and eventually launched racist remarks on his address. Similarly to the MAGA kid incident, Phillips seeks moral vindication in the interview: "Whoever would sit judgement [sic] on them [the students], the university the law, society, that is their job" (Spencer 2015: n. pag.). The final fragment at the bottom of fig. 9 shows Phillips posing for a photograph in 2018 while being situated in the context of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests<sup>[1]</sup>. Being equipped with an eagle staff and jacket with Indian tribal patterns, Phillips' posture with his head not facing the camera, dark glasses and folded hands emanate a conceited look of a poseur or a model, and do not add up with the supposed protests that ought to have been going on. The composition of the photo thus does not speak of authenticity – it is taken as yet another piece of 'evidence' of the spuriousness behind his victim image presented by the mainstream media. Once again, Phillips' identity performance is mocked through semiotic work superimposing his head into another memetic format 'the most interesting man in the world' (fig. 10) that is supposed to convey an avuncular life advice from a refined gentleman. In the same vein, Phillips gives advice on how to exploit a disadvantaged racial background to your benefit by playing a victim. Finally fig. 11 shows that screenshot Tweets can also operate as memes, which, in this case, questions Phillips' representativeness of the Native American community by its own members.

Commenters attach great importance to Phillips' representativeness of the Omaha tribe as well as Native Americans in general. We can notice processes of ratification in the comment section

when it comes to extending the blame to the entire tribe, in which Phillips is taken as an elder.

(7) *If he's their elder what does that say about them?*

(7.1) *[referring to 5] Don't lump them all together. There are many elders in tribes. Elders mean older people. His tribe is probably embarrassed by him. Most Natives are good kind people. And will admit when someone is wrong.*

Interestingly, Phillips is immediately reproached as an isolated individual whose actions do not represent the views or position of his tribe. On the contrary, the leading and authoritative connotations behind his rank of an elder are invalidated (“Elders mean older people”) and severed from his identity (“His tribe is probably embarrassed by him”) in addition to being attributed several qualities incompatible with an imagined ‘Native’ (Phillips is evil, unkind and intentional liar). Other commenters anticipate similar lumping statements and preemptively intervene with an apology.

(8) *I am Native and this guy has done nothing good for native people.*

*I am assuming that because of his actions there is big money involved.*

*I will Apologize for his actions*

*But with this I am putting this out here too.*

*We do all really need to learn to get along or the groups*

*wanting to keep everyone fighting so we can't gang up on them*

By identifying himself as a ‘Native’, he presents an insider view on Phillips, confirming that his interests align with the Cabal (i.e. ‘big money’) rather than with the Native Americans. What can be also noted is the imperative for maintaining social cohesion of QAnons in the face of provocateurs like Phillips and “the groups wanting to keep everyone fighting” and limiting the QAnons’ options to “gang up on them”. This brings us to the collective enemy, the Deep State.

### ***Nathan Phillips is an agent of the Deep State***

Having outlined some of the aspects behind QAnons’ ‘evidence’ debunking Phillips’ mainstream media image, it is no surprise that the inconsistencies and discrepancies in his statements and inauthenticity of his self-presentations are associated with the conspiratory scheming and machinations of the Deep State.







Fig. 14: Phillips with Warren as con-men

Before we address more general connections with the Deep State drawn in the fig 12, let us first discuss another frequent type of memes (fig. 13 and 14) associating Phillips with a current prominent representative of the Deep State – Elizabeth Warren, a Democratic Senator, 2020 preliminary presidential candidate and a staunch supporter of Hillary Clinton. Warren has been consistently mocked by Trump and his supporters as ‘Pocahontas’ (or ‘Liawatha’<sup>[1]</sup> and the like) due to her purported Native American heritage she claimed after releasing results of her DNA test. Similarly to Phillips, she has been caught in a controversy, whereby their actions are perceived as political stunts and repudiated by the representatives of the Native American community. It comes as no surprise that when Warren praised Phillips’ endurance over “hateful taunts” on her Twitter account (Warren 2019), the compromised credibility she had accrued in the QAnon discourses was immediately transferred onto Phillips via memes as useful instrument.

Both memes possess captions drawing connection to the usual suspect of the Deep State (i.e. Soros, fig. 13) or evoking a sense of fulfilled anticipation, empowering and reinforcing the Q masterframe (fig. 14).

On a more general level, connections between Phillips’ *Native Youth Alliance*<sup>[2]</sup> and the Deep State are more didactically outlined in a diagram on fig. 12, which marks another line of ‘evidence’ that invalidates the institutional legitimacy of the organization that Phillips openly represents and promotes. This is done in a typical fashion – by following the financial trail or the ubiquitous question ‘cui bono?’ (who benefits?) which becomes pressing after Phillips’ purported identity virtues (a respectable elder with a noble cause) and credentials (Vietnam veteran) are dismantled. Exposing Phillips as “fake” is not enough – the ‘reason’, ‘motivation’ or generally ‘the truth’ behind his spuriousness must be explained. It is thus no surprise that QAnons’ research

discovers financing by the crown members of the Deep State (i.e. Soros and his Open Society in conjunction with other compromised foundations marked by red squares), indicating their vested interest which will be discussed in the following subsection. The need for rendering the event meaningful for the QAnon community is explicitly articulated in the caption “now it makes sense” (top left) – the meme then provides a direct visualization of the conspiratorial masterframe applied in the particular chronotopic configuration of the MAGA kid incident.

More specifically, making sense is here guided by a number of visual devices, namely red arrows, boxes and careful distribution of additional semiotic fragments (list of donors/supporters, logos, portraits, headlines and sub-headlines presumably from a website of or related to *Native Youth Alliance*) in a circular composition – a frequent visual trope in conspiratorial discourses drawing ties between different individual and organizations (Byford 2011: 74). The geometrical shape often evokes order and coherence to otherwise seemingly random patchwork of ‘evidence’. As far as the comments are concerned, commenters seem to be readily accepting the ties between the Deep State and Nathan Phillips.

(9) *ANOTHER LIB ACTOR BEING PUT IN HIS PLACE!!!*

(10) *Soros paid puppet*

(11) *And finally, the TRUTH !!! A Soros paid instigator.*

(12) *Chief smoking crack is a scum bag bought paid for by Democrats*

*Video clearly shows him walking to confront kid.*

*Kid did nothing wrong.*

*And once again CNN and the corrupt media spin it off against the kids*

*Promoting false propaganda*

*Again Media is AMERICAS ENEMY*

*CNN THE MOST TRUSTED IN FAKE NEWS*

The associations between Phillips with the Deep State point to its multi-layered and vague structure of that Popper describes as “a kind of group-personality” operating as “conspiring agents, just as if they were individual men” (Popper 1972: 125). In this regard, Phillips falls in line with the usual suspects of the Deep State: liberals (9), Soros (10 and 11), democrats (12), and of course the mainstream media (most notably CNN, 10). The act of exposing Phillip’s true motivation often sparks a conspiratorial *jouissance*– satisfaction in furthering QAnons’ agenda (9) and a fulfilling sense of closure (11), but also a call for more elaborate explanation (12) re-

energizing the purpose and validity of QAnon's enterprise. On that last note, 12 attempts to extract a 'take-home' message situating the MAGA kid incident into a larger perspective. The decisiveness in Phillips' movement towards the group of students have been interpreted as a sign of premeditation rather than coincidence (because he was paid to do so), which the mainstream media attempt to "spin" in promoting their own "propaganda" and the agenda behind it reaching and affecting the whole of 'AMERICA'.

Consequently, there is a larger agenda to be discovered or exposed through the prism of everyday public events and encounters. Note that the perceived relationship between Phillips and the Deep State is of subordinate nature; Phillips is a mere instrument – a "puppet", "actor", "instigator" (provocateur) in a more grand scheme of things. This brings us to the overarching narrative in the Q masterframe– its millennial alignment with Christian morality and values against which the Deep State conspires.

### ***Nathan Phillips provoked the standoff in a conspiracy against Christianity***

To understand QAnon's preoccupation with Phillips' complicity in a conspiracy against Christianity, we have to reiterate that the whole incident took place in a clash between a *catholic* high school students participating in a *March for life* and *Indigenous' peoples March* led by Phillips. Having revealed the true intent in Phillips' engagement in the *Indigenous' peoples March*, the conflict is quickly translated into a millennial fight between good (catholic MAGA hat kids) and evil (Phillips as an agent of the Deep State). Here we shall limit ourselves to the most prominent line of interpretation – staging the incident as a bid of the Deep State to incite anti-Catholic sentiments in order to weaken Trump's sway over the Supreme Court of the United States.



Fig. 15: A wake-up call

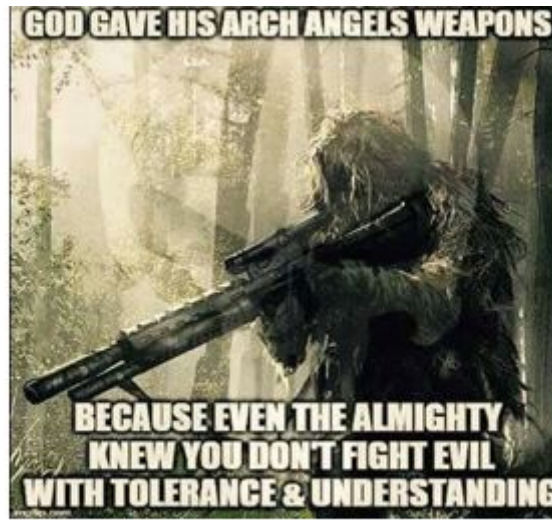


Fig. 16: QAnon's self-righteous fight with 'evil'

Nearly three months before the MAGA kid incident, an associate judge of the Supreme Court, Ruth Bader Ginsburg (RBG), had suffered a multiple rib fracture demanding surgery and considerable medical care, and vanished from both public and professional life to recover from the incident. This led QAnons and other germane groups to believe that she is in fact dead, and negotiations are taking place regarding her replacement. Memes in this respect point to an elaborate scheme (fig. 15) to thwart or delay the nomination of Amy Coney Barret – Trump's potential Supreme Court candidate and an openly faithful Catholic. Remembering that the ultimate goal of the QAnon community is the "Great Awakening", the memes in this regard also aim for a general galvanization of the QAnon to wake people up in the course of fighting the 'evil' (fig. 14). The incentive resonates strongly in the comment sections.

*(13) This tells me that he is being paid to slury the media message about Catholics. Yep. Getting ready for [RBG]*

*(14) This is to get people riled up and anti catholic for the next Supreme court nominee once they announce Ginsberg is dead*

*(14.1) That is exactly the reason they are doing all of this. It is planned and paid for folks. Wake Up. The replacement for Ginsberg is going to be a Catholic female. They are trying to get the public up in arms about Catholics! It is called brainwashing the sheep!*

*(14.2) yes, I believe that is a piece of the puzzle*

As previously noted, Qanons are convinced that RBG is dead or her death will be announced in a near future (indicated in the QAnon code by a kill box [name] surrounding a given target, as used

by 13). Once again we see a call for unity against the divisive subterfuge and scheming of the Deep State “to get people riled up and anti catholic” (14). Looking at some of the reactions to 14, commentators do not perceive the incident as isolated; it is “a piece of the puzzle” (14.2) or a larger effort in “brainwashing the sheep” (14.1). A frequent attempt to realize or uncover the bigger picture consists of drawing parallels among similar events in order to ergoically infer the mechanisms or strategies deployed by the Deep State.

*(13) The Democrat Party Their sycophants Of The Main Stream Media And the Holly’s Wood elites, have become toxic... they have no respect for Christians or Catholicism ...they have escalated the false narrative about the incident instigated by Nathan Phillips, to the same level as “Obama and Hands Up Don’t Shoot”...this fake news has been used by the Democrats and their sycophants of the MSM to sow Racial and Religious Division among Americans...*

*(14) OK, this POS is obviously paid off to attack all things Catholicism..HmMMM...I wonder why??? Nothing to do with RBG and the new projected SCOTUS [Supreme Court of the United States] judge right? They are not even clever.. Their playbook is simple. You are a racist, sexist with masculine toxicity, homophobic committing face crimes while smirking. Don’t worry, I see some of my liberal friends starting to question and see the light. The BS is so thick right now that you would have to be mentally compromised or a victim of mind control to buy what the media is selling. Its bombastic and even more sophomoric than before. Doesn’t seem possible but it happens.*

In this regard, 13 draws parallel to the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown who had been allegedly killed by a police officer while surrendering. The event gave way to ‘Hands up, don’t shoot’ – slogan/gesture gaining media traction and quickly spilling into protests and activist moments (e.g. Black Lives Matter) against police violence. In the wake of the event, then-president Obama responded with sympathy for Brown and called the Americans to remember him through “reflection and understanding” (Obama 2014: n. pag.; cf. fig. 14) – a move which is now perceived as part of preparing fertile ground for contemporary division along the racial and religious lines, especially in the light of the controversy<sup>[1]</sup> that surrounded the shooting soon afterwards.

On the other hand, 14 tailors an ergoic frame laced with irony in a series of rhetorical questions, pointing to a ready-made scenario presumed to be enacted by the Deep State on similar occasions. The obviousness (“you would have to be mentally compromised or a victim of mind control to buy what the media is selling”) behind perceived behavioral order attributed to the Deep State seems to be the driving force reifying not only the Q masterframe, but also their knowledge activism gradually leading to fruition (“Don’t worry, I see some of my liberal friends starting to question and see the light”). Although the notion of the Deep State is rarely explicitly

mentioned, it functions as a codification of discursive properties or chronotopic conditions that organize and ratify meaning-making processes related to mediated events, whereby ‘the truth’ can be discerned as a historical contingency in which its individual parts (Obama as its architect, democrats – including Clinton and Warren – as the enactors, the mainstream media as its instruments, Hollywood’s elites as its promoters, and Soros as the financial engine) work in conjunction to manipulate the public against Trump.

To summarize, we see knowledge activism of the QAnon community as not just exposing or spreading ‘the truth’ in ‘Great Awakening’, but rather as an effort to instill a specific ergoic mode of reasoning to be applied in everyday life (alternatively described as ‘metapolitics’ (Maly 2018), ‘conspiracism’ (Barkun 2016; Byford 2011) or ‘paranoia’ (Hofstadter 1967)). The recipients or target audience are not categorized in terms of specific social or identity diacritics, and even the ideological opponents are not excluded – simply everyone “see the light”. QAnon’s knowledge activism strives to reach beyond echo chambers of the Q related groups and platforms – it is to be enacted both online and offline, but with a constant recursion to the source of Q and QAnons. In this sense, knowledge activism constitutes the main organizing principle of the Qanon community, it secures its social cohesion in the face of a great internal diversity as well as dispersed and disembodied character of social media giving rise to temporal and loosely connected light forms of sociality in the online-offline nexus (Blommaert and Varis 2015; van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2019).

## 4. Conclusions

The different actions documented in the preceding section are all guided by the “truth” inscribed in the deep state theory; details of the event can be ergoically connected, through “research” by Q members, to features of the theory – which is thereby continually confirmed and reiterated as *the* truth about “how the world is”. The actions we observed are all oriented towards knowledge, and Q can, as a community, be described as profoundly involved in knowledge activism. This knowledge activism is “reasonable” while it is profoundly antirational: it operates according to a compelling logic, the validity of which resides in the quality of the theory. When the quality of the theory remains unexamined and unquestioned, it is very hard to dislodge the specific ergoic arguments produced in the process. Conspiracy theories, we can see, are powerful *argumentative* tools.

It is through attention to concrete actions performed by members that we get a glimpse of the structure of an otherwise elusive community such as Q and of the ordered, patterned character

of their actions. We are not observing an accidental congregation of people misled by first impressions and fake facts: we see a regimented community collectively performing a set of well-defined and ‘specialized’, genred actions, in a way that combines a light organizational structure with massive algorithmically mediated message circulation and considerable impact on public opinion, by systematically (and reasonably) dislodging and reframing what is widely accepted as the truth. This is serious business, and it is hardcore contemporary politics.

## Acknowledgment

Research for this paper was supported by the ESF project “International Mobility of Researchers at Charles University” (No.: CZ.02.2.69/0.0/0.0/16\_027/0008495). We gratefully acknowledge the stimulating input of Piia Varis.

## References

- Anons (2018).Q: The Basics An Introduction to Q and the Great Awakening. *8chan* 24/03/2019 [https://media.8ch.net/file\\_store/df825ce8cc8efe7b90579de958a15d47e4e8033e0ce38ae872d7682b6387e5a.pdf](https://media.8ch.net/file_store/df825ce8cc8efe7b90579de958a15d47e4e8033e0ce38ae872d7682b6387e5a.pdf)
- Barkun, Michael (2016). Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge. *Diogenes* 2016, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192116669288>
- Bengal, Rebecca (2018) Return to Standing Rock. *Vogue* 18/04/2018 <https://www.vogue.com/projects/13542941/return-to-standing-rock/>
- Blommaert, Jan & Piia Varis (2015) Enoughness, accent and light communities: Essays on contemporary identities. *Tilburg Papers of Culture Studies*, Paper 139: 1-72.
- Blommaert, Jan (2018) *Durkheim and the Internet: On Sociolinguistics and the Sociological Imagination*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Blommaert, Jan, Lu Ying & Li Kunming (2019) From the Self to the Selfie. *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies* paper 222. [https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/upload/c7b3f715-f213-4198-b196-42594e426181\\_TPCS\\_222\\_Blommaert-Lu-Li.pdf](https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/upload/c7b3f715-f213-4198-b196-42594e426181_TPCS_222_Blommaert-Lu-Li.pdf)
- Byford, Jovan (2011) *Conspiracy theories. A critical introduction*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.



Clarke, Steve (2007). Conspiracy Theories and the Internet – Controlled Demolition and Arrested Development. *Episteme* 4(2), 167–180.

Dentith, Matthew (2014). *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dijck, José van, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal 2018 *The platform society: public values in a connective world*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Garfinkel, Harold (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall

Garfinkel, Harold (2002) *Ethnomethodology's Program: Working out Durkheim's Aphorism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Goffman, Erving (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper and Row

Hofstadter, Richard (1967). *Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage Books.

Maly, Ico (2018). The global New Right and the Flemish identitarian movement  
Schild & Vrienden A case study. *Tilburg Papers of Culture Studies*, Paper 220: 1-27.

Obama, Barack (2014) Statement by the President on the Passing of Michael Brown. *The White House Office of the Press Secretary* 12/08/2014 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/12/statement-president-passing-michael-brown>

Popper, Karel R. (1972) *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Sidner, Sara (2019) Native American elder Nathan Phillips, in his own words. *CNN* 12/03/ 2019  
<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/21/us/nathan-phillips-maga-teens-interview/index.html>

Spencer, Dave (2015) Native American claims racial harassment by EMU students dressed as Indians. *Fox 2 Detroit* 22/04/2015 <http://www.fox2detroit.com/news/native-american-claims-racial-harassment-by-emu-students-dressed-as-indians>

Varis, Piia (2018) Conspiracy theorizing online. *Diggit Magazine* 12/05/2018,  
<https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/conspiracy-theorising-online>

Warren, Elizabeth (2019) “Omaha elder and Vietnam War veteran Nathan Phillips endured hateful taunts with dignity and strength, then urged us all to do better.” *Twitter* 19/1/2019  
<https://twitter.com/senwarren/status/1086824484278095872?lang=en>

Wood, Michael J. & Karen M. Douglas (2013) ‘What about building 7?’ A social psychological study of online discussion of 9/11 conspiracy theories. *Frontiers in Psychology*, July 2013.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00409>

## Acknowledgment

We are deeply grateful to our colleague and friend PiiaVaris for inspiration and guidance in the field of conspiracy theories. Piia’s work (e.g. Varis 2018) sketched the direction and raised the issues we try to address in this paper.

### Advertisements

Delen:



One blogger likes this.

### Related

### [Ergo: exploring the world of alternative facts](#)

In "communication strategies"

### [Anachronism as power](#)

In "online-offline"

### [From the Self to the Selfie](#)

In "identity"



#### **Author: jmeblommaert**

Taalkundig antropoloog-sociolinguïst, hoogleraar Taal, Cultuur en Globalisering aan Tilburg University.  
Politiek publicist. [View all posts by jmeblommaert](#)



jmeblommaert / 17 April 2019 / communication strategies, language use, online-offline, politics, social media

Ctrl+Alt+Dem / Blog at WordPress.com.

