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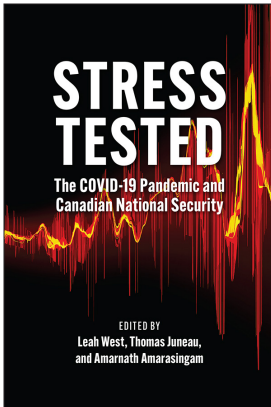
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STRESS TESTED: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND CANADIAN NATIONAL SECURITY

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PART I: Threats

They Got It All under Control: QAnon, Conspiracy Theories, and the New Threats to Canadian National Security

Marc-André Argentino and Amarnath Amarasingam

Introduction

On 4 December 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch drove from North Carolina to the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant in Washington, DC. He had with him an AR-15 rifle and a .38 revolver, and he wanted the owners of the restaurant to show him their basement, believing that children were being sexually abused and trafficked through the restaurant. On the drive there, he recorded a video for his daughters. In it, he says, “I can’t let you grow up in a world that’s so corrupt by evil, without at least standing up for you and for other children just like you” (Miller 2021). Years later, on Christmas Day 2020, Anthony Quinn Warner detonated a bomb in Nashville, killing himself and injuring eight people. In the days before the attack, Warner mailed packages to several individuals containing nine typed pages and some flash drives. These writings evince a deep interest in 9/11 conspiracy theories, theories that the moon landing was a hoax, as well as a belief that reptilians and lizard people secretly control the world (Hall and Wisniewski 2021). These isolated cases, and others like them, began to worry many researchers and law enforcement officials that conspiracy theories were no longer just circulating in dark corners of the Internet, but were starting to mobilize people to commit violence.

On 6 January 2021, protestors violently breached the US Capitol with the intent of disrupting the certification of the 2020 presidential election. As a result of the insurrection, five individuals, including US Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick, were killed. Another hundred people were injured. According to analysis by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), thirty-one QAnon followers, as of 1 March 2021, were charged for participating in the Capitol insurrection (Jensen and Kane 2021). However, this was not the first instance of violence of this kind. On 29 August 2020, ideologically motivated violent extremists, QAnon supporters, and anti-lockdown protesters attempted to storm Germany's parliamentary building, occupying the steps leading up to the Reichstag (Felden et al. 2021; Bennhold 2020).

The Capitol Hill insurrection and the storming of the Reichstag is evidence not only of the increasingly global reach of QAnon, but also of how conspiracy theories and disinformation about the pandemic have rapidly evolved into threats to democratic institutions, extremist violence, threats against elected officials, and attacks against critical infrastructure.

This chapter will closely examine the impact of the global pandemic on conspiracy theories and how this may prove to be an ongoing security concern. As we note in the short literature review below, much of the research so far has focused on the broader social impact of the pandemic—on social trust, on vaccine hesitancy, and misinformation. Less attention has been paid to how the pandemic and measures taken by the government to limit its spread have contributed to the unprecedented rise in conspiracy theories and the merging and blending of different conspiracies. There is probably no better example of this than the QAnon movement, which grew in popularity partly because it rode the wave of COVID-19-related conspiracies after March 2020.

In this chapter, we first provide a short introduction to some of the recent research on COVID-19 and conspiracy theories before delving into the QAnon movement, how the pandemic helped its rise in popularity and impact, and how this cocktail of beliefs and grievances has pushed some individuals to violent activity.

COVID-19 Conspiracies and Their Social Impact

Past research makes clear that pandemics and other moments of social crisis are often accompanied by conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). As Imhoff and Lamberty (2020, 1110) note, for almost all major events over the last several decades, the “official version of why these came about were confronted with various conspiracy allegations that proposed an explanation involving plots hatched in secret by powerful agents instead.”

The COVID-19 pandemic was no different. From the start, theories were floated about whether the launch of 5G technology in China produced the virus, whether the virus was actually a bioweapon, and whether it was a political ploy to bring about a new global order (Argentino and Amarasingam 2020). Several important studies soon followed, gauging not only the public health impact of COVID-19 conspiracies but also the broader social impact this kind of misinformation is likely to have on democratic institutions in a post-COVID-19 world.

Daniel Romer and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2020) conducted a national survey of 1,050 adults in the United States in the second half of March 2020 and a follow-up survey with 840 of the same individuals in July 2020. They found that conspiratorial thinking has a significant impact on whether individuals took preventive measures related to the virus and whether they are open to taking the vaccine. Significantly, they found that “conspiracy beliefs early in the pandemic continued to be related to subsequent behavior and intentions four months later” (6). Tomasz Oleksy and colleagues similarly looked at whether the presence of conspiratorial beliefs impacted whether people engaged in preventative measures recommended by public health officials. Based on two studies conducted in Poland with a sample of 2,726 participants, they found that belief in COVID-19 conspiracies was correlated to acceptance of xenophobic policies. They also discovered that conspiracy theories arguing that governments were using COVID-19 for nefarious purposes were positively correlated with the dismissal of public health recommendations (Oleksy et al. 2020).

Other studies explicitly focused on social media platforms and their role in spreading COVID-19-related misinformation. Daniel Allington

and colleagues (2020) conducted three surveys related to social media use, conspiracy beliefs, and health-protective behaviours related to COVID-19 among residents of the United Kingdom. Like the previous studies mentioned here, they found a positive association between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, the “use of social media as a source of information about COVID-19,” and people’s willingness to engage in protective behaviours recommended by public health officials (6). Interestingly, they found that people who received most of their COVID-19 news from traditional broadcast media were more likely to adopt protective measures.

The larger sociological literature on conspiracy theories also notes how important they can be with respect to the notion of theodicy, or the question of why evil exists in the world if God is good, all-knowing, and all-powerful. Conspiracy theories permit the development of symbolic resources that enable humans to define and address the problem of evil. As Michael Barkun (2013, 4) notes, “not only are events nonrandom, but the clear identification of evil gives the conspiracist a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose.” The essence of many COVID-related conspiracy theories lies in their attempts to delineate and explain evil (the pandemic and its multiple negative impacts).

In his influential work on conspiracy theories, Barkun argues that a conspiracist world view implies a universe governed by design rather than randomness. Barkun highlights three characteristics of conspiracy theories:

1. nothing happens by accident: the world is governed by intentionality, there are no accidents or coincidences, and whatever happens is by design.
2. nothing is as it seems: evil forces are constantly trying to deceive the world, and so what may appear as benign is actually a cosmic threat.
3. everything is connected: building on the first two characteristics, it follows that seemingly disconnected events and occurrences across human history form a seamless pattern that can be unearthed through diligent research. (2013, 3–4)

The core of most COVID-related conspiracy theories is linked to an intentionality behind the origin, spread, and duration of the pandemic (e.g., the virus was human-made, an elite group of individuals orchestrated the virus, or the virus is being used to control the population through quarantine and lockdown), and to the secrecy behind the plans to achieve an evil goal. Thus, the conspiracy theorist is not simply engaging in mindless sleuthing; they are a warrior in an ongoing battle between good and evil. Those who believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories hold to a world view whereby humans can and do direct the course of history according to their own will and intentions.

Thousands of studies look at the causes and consequences of conspiratorial thinking, and our discussion here only scratches the surface. However, for this chapter, it is sufficient to set the stage for our examination of how COVID-19 conspiracies could impact Canadian national security. We do this by looking closely at the QAnon movement as a case study. First, we examine how it rose to prominence during the COVID-19 lockdown period, and second, we look at how it has contributed to several instances of violence and civil unrest.

The QAnon Movement

QAnon is a decentralized ideology rooted in an unfounded conspiracy theory that a globally active “Deep State” cabal of satanic pedophile elites is responsible for all the evil in the world. Adherents of QAnon also believe that this same cabal sought to bring down President Trump, whom they saw as the world’s only hope in defeating it. The name “QAnon” refers to its followers’ belief that “Q” is a military intelligence operation geared toward supporting President Trump in his efforts to root out and eliminate the “Deep State” (GNET 2020).¹ The QAnon conspiracy emerged in October 2017, on 4chan’s² /pol/ (politically incorrect) page in a thread called “Calm Before the Storm,” when an anonymous user signing off as “Q” stated that “Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM–8:30 AM EST on Monday—the morning on 30 October, 2017.” Q claims to have special government access, which is a strategy employed in the past by 4chan users and is part of a wider “anon genre” of individuals claiming to be government officials with top secret information they need to share with the public.³

QAnon has become a master narrative capable of explaining in simple terms various complex events. The result is a world view characterized by a sharp distinction between the realms of good and evil that is non-falsifiable. No matter how much evidence journalists, academics, and civil society offer to counter the claims promoted by the movement, belief in QAnon as the source of truth is a matter of faith—specifically faith in Trump and “Q”. Though it started as a series of conspiracy theories and false predictions, over the past three years, QAnon has evolved into a religio-political ideology.

Why do people believe in conspiracy theories like QAnon? It is because they offer a way to make sense of a world in crisis. Where others see chaos, violence, and suffering, QAnon adherents see patterns and intentionality behind the pandemic, child abuse, political strife, war, etc. By rejecting coincidence and connecting the dots others do not—by “doing your own research,” as the saying goes—an individual adherent can build an answer that provides a coherent explanation for the pandemic that attributes malicious intent to an enemy toward whom they can channel their efforts.

The “do your own research” ethos and the crowdsourcing of answers to otherwise inexplicable questions makes QAnon adherents resilient to official messaging from governments, medical experts, scientific studies, journalists, etc. Many of these individuals do not trust traditional sources of information, such as science, the media, or academics—who are either deluded or part of the conspiracy—and so they have no choice but to circumvent traditional sources of expertise and attempt to uncover the truth themselves. This exercise is deeply meaningful for many; they feel they have been vested with a purpose and are part of a global movement to awaken a sleeping world.

A popular explanation for why conspiracy theories are attractive is what scholars call “proportionality bias,” defined as the tendency to assume that major events must have major causes (Leman and Cinnirella 2007). The pandemic, arising suddenly and having global consequences, seems to invite a kind of proportionality bias: something so major that brought the world to a halt could not possibly be caused by a random series of events thousands of miles away. This produces what Timothy Melley (2000) has termed “agency panic”—a sense of anxiety arising from not being in control of events that impact you or your loved ones. COVID-19

conspiracy theories and QAnon identify various culprits behind the pandemic while also offering adherents the possibility of reversing these events and preventing similar ones in the future. For QAnon followers who believe that COVID-19 is a hoax perpetrated by sinister conspirators, exposing these conspirators will mean waking the world up to the truth. Under this world view, their actions are righteous. Targeting individuals, institutions, or infrastructure responsible for the pandemic, along with pedophiles and those seeking to destroy the world, means that their actions are not problematic; they are revolutionary.

How COVID-19 Impacted QAnon: Evidence from Online Spaces

The 6 January 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol is a stark example of how offline violence can occur when online conspiracy theories are left to foment unchecked during a crisis. Although January 6 is the culmination of years of misinformation and disinformation, the leading cause of the spike in conspiracy theories, especially for the QAnon movement, was the pandemic and government policies to stem the spread of the virus. By mid-2019, the QAnon movement struggled to sustain itself, especially after the 15 March 2019 Christchurch attack in New Zealand, the 3 August 2019 shooting in El Paso, Texas, and the 4 August 2019 shooting in Dayton, Ohio. Because many of these attackers had posted manifestos and other content on 8chan, the page was taken down on 5 August 2019 (Robertson 2019; Mezzofiore and O’Sullivan 2019). At the time, 8chan was the only place where “Q” posted. A key concept from QAnon is “no outside coms,” which implies that “Q” will only post on 8chan and nowhere else—a deliberate strategy to prevent copycats. After its service providers and domain host took down 8chan, there were no posts from “Q” until 8chan re-emerged as 8kun four months later (Glaser 2019).

The news of a new virus spreading in Wuhan, China, in January 2020 caught the attention of certain QAnon influencers, who began to amplify various conspiracy theories about the disease. It started with these influencers—who also peddle alternative health information and sell cure-all products to their followers—promoting and selling a product known as Miracle Mineral Solution as a way of warding off COVID-19 (Sommer 2020). As the pandemic began to spread around the world, so

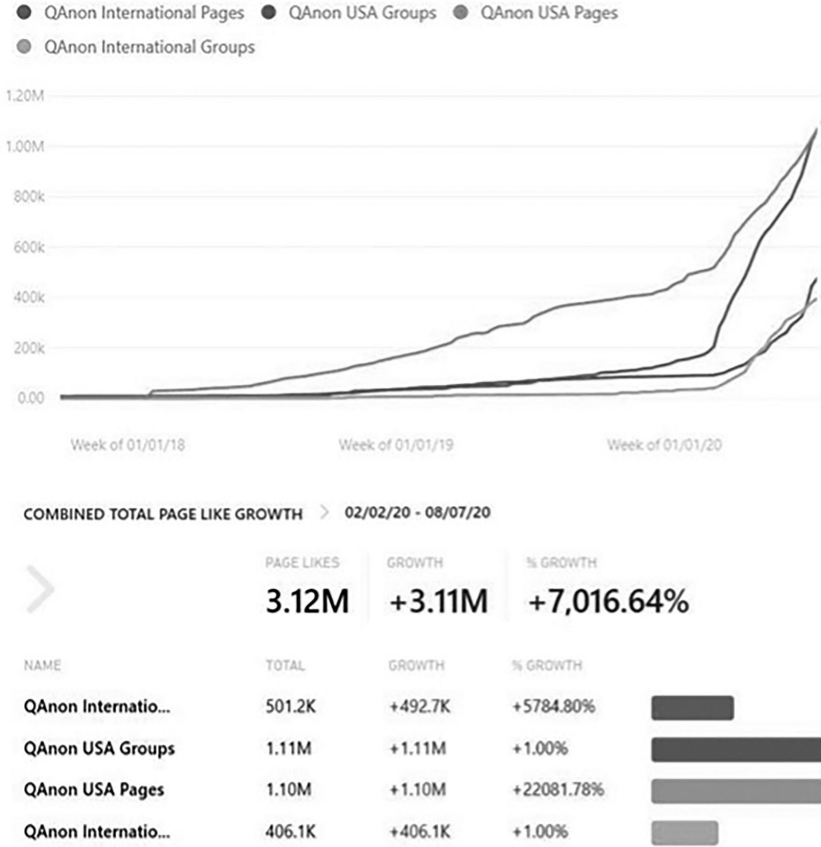


FIGURE 1.1: QAnon group and page membership as of 8 August 2020

did conspiracy theories about the virus. QAnon theories about the virus, as well as QAnon ideology more broadly, followed closely behind. This time, though, they were not relegated to the fringe image boards of 8kun, but rather were being pushed on mainstream platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

The turning point for QAnon’s mainstreaming was March 2020, when the United States, along with many other nations, closed its borders to control the spread of COVID-19. Taking a close look at the data related

to QAnon Facebook pages, it is clear how much QAnon grew during this period.⁴ The authors collected Facebook data from 406 QAnon and QAnon-aligned Facebook groups and pages. The graphs shown in figure 1.1 demonstrate that QAnon groups before March 2020 had approximately 220,600 members, whereas QAnon pages had 558,800 likes. By 7 August 2020, QAnon groups had approximately 1,516,100 members and QAnon pages had 1,610,200 likes.

Not only did group membership increase, but levels of engagement within these groups and pages grew drastically after March 2020. There are similar patterns of behaviour with respect to the number of posts, whereby posting increased following the March 2020 border closures in the United States and the dramatic impact of COVID-19 in Spain and Italy in March and April. Posts between March 2020 and August 2020 accounted for 65 per cent of all QAnon posts ever made on Facebook.⁵ With respect to overall activity, posts on international group pages were almost as high as the US-based groups following the impact of COVID-19 and the prolonged lockdowns (see figure 1.2). This increase immediately followed the growing anti-lockdown movements in Europe.

It is important to highlight that, based on a qualitative assessment of the groups and pages collected, not all groups reflect a “canonical” treatment of QAnon. Within the aggregate of these QAnon ecosystems, ideological elements of QAnon have mixed with other movements and conspiracy theories linked to the pandemic. In Canada and globally, QAnon has latched on to anti-mask, anti-vaccine, anti-lockdown movements, as well as groups who believe that COVID-19 is a hoax. What all of these ideas have in common is that they are inherently anti-establishment and anti-government. Since QAnon served as an umbrella conspiracy theory, it grew in popularity as other conspiracies also came to prominence. QAnon was, for example, involved in spreading viral disinformation campaigns about the pandemic and where it came from, as well as fake cures for the virus (Brown 2020; ADL 2020; Frenkel, Decker, and Alba 2020).

Additionally, the mainstreaming of QAnon in the American political arena during the 2020 US election cycle was significant. Reporter Alex Kaplan noted that 2020 was the year “QAnon became all of our problem,” evidenced by the fact that 97 US congressional candidates publicly showed support for QAnon (Kaplan 2020a, 2020b). Lastly, 2020 was the year that

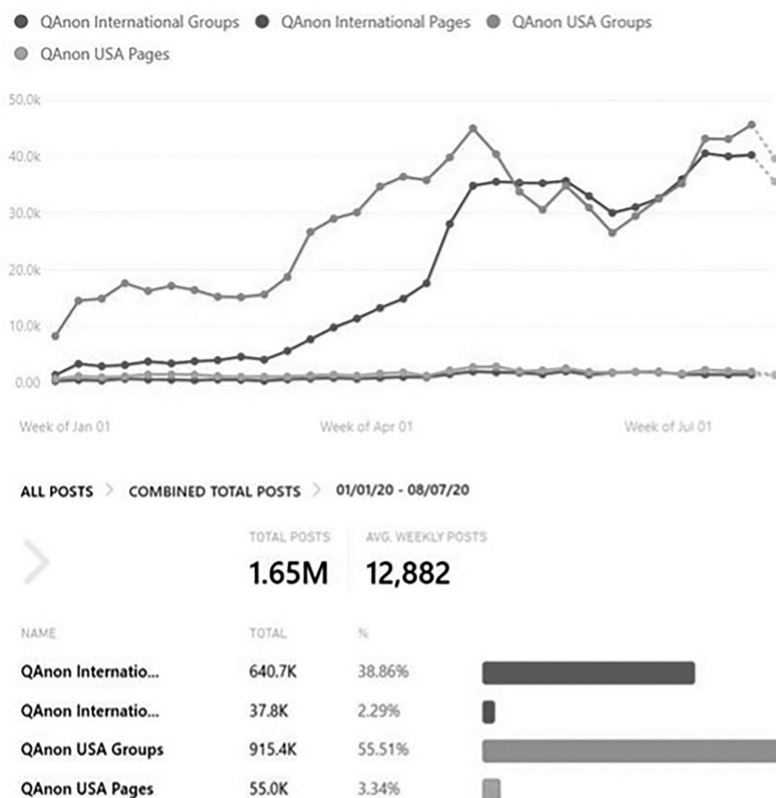


FIGURE 1.2: QAnon group and page posts as of 8 August 2020

former President Donald Trump finally gave QAnon supporters what they always wanted: respect. Since the start of the pandemic, Trump recognized the QAnon community in a way its followers could have only fantasized about when the movement started over three years ago. Trump is perceived as a messianic figure among QAnon adherents. He plays a central role in QAnon’s prophetic belief that he will lead its followers to victory over the Deep State and usher in a promised golden age of peace and prosperity. Therefore, when Trump acknowledged QAnon by repeatedly boosting or “quote tweeting” QAnon-related material, the movement’s followers

perceived this as Trump sending them coded messages in response to significant events. Not only did this reinforce belief for QAnon adherents, but reporters, even those who were not on the QAnon or extremism beat, created a Streisand effect, bringing QAnon further into the mainstream by reporting about how Trump was boosting QAnon during his presidency.

Conspiracy Theories and National Security in Canada

There have been several attacks over the last two years in Canada, seemingly spurred on by conspiratorial thinking (Amarasingam 2019). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracies related to the virus became quite prevalent and started to push some individuals toward criminal activity (Argentino and Amarasingam 2020). On 2 July 2020, for instance, Corey Hurren drove his truck into the gates of Rideau Hall, where he believed Prime Minister Justin Trudeau would be staying, armed with several loaded firearms and multiple rounds of ammunition. Hurren penned a two-page letter before the incident in which he expressed despair at how his life was turned upside down by the virus and the lockdown and how Canada was “now a communist dictatorship.” Event 201 is also briefly mentioned by Hurren, suggesting that he was consuming conspiratorial content. Event 201, a real pandemic tabletop event conducted in October 2019 and funded by the World Economic Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is now one of many examples used by conspiracists to claim that COVID-19 was planned in advance.

Hurren’s case highlights many of the second- and third-order effects of the pandemic that many who research political violence feared: an individual loses their business, financial consequences follow, and conspiracies come into the picture to provide clear explanations. Hurren recently noted in an interview with a psychiatrist that he believed he would be shot and killed as soon as he drove up to Rideau Hall, and he wanted his death “to be his message of discontent with the government’s response to COVID-19 and gun control” (Humphreys 2021). According to reports, the consumption of COVID-19 conspiracy theories arguing that global elites planned the pandemic “indirectly aggravated” Hurren to attack because it meant that “all the misery it unleashed in his life didn’t have to happen” (Humphreys 2021).

QAnon adherents in Canada are heavily invested in COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, such as the idea that 5G causes COVID-19, that the pandemic is a hoax used by the government to control the Canadian population, and that preventive measures are an example of government overreach. QAnon believers have also moved their narratives offline in the form of political action centred on the anti-mask, anti-lock-down, and anti-vaccine movements. Moreover, between July and August 2020 in Quebec, conspiracy theories about the pandemic played a role in on- and offline violent behaviour targeting journalists and elected officials (Monpetit 2020).

On 28 July 2020, police arrested a twenty-six-year-old man from Saint-Placide, Quebec, for allegedly making online threats against a journalist. His Facebook page had links to conspiracy videos about the pandemic and content from QAnon supporters. On 30 July 2020, police charged a twenty-seven-year-old man from Gatineau, Quebec, with intimidation, obstructing an officer, and three counts of uttering threats against Premier François Legault, Public Health Director Horacio Arruda, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. His Facebook page featured links to far-right content, videos by Radio-Québec, and various other conspiracy videos about the pandemic. This incident was related to one of Quebec's most prominent QAnon advocates and COVID-19 conspiracists, Alexis Cossette-Trudel. A forty-seven-year-old Montreal man with past ties to Quebec's Far Right, Cossette-Trudel is one of the leading figures of the anti-mask movement, broadcasting conspiratorial web journals rejecting the gravity of the pandemic (Remski 2021).

Radio-Québec is a collection of hour-long videos by Cossette-Trudel. Facebook removed Cossette-Trudel's personal page, which had about forty thousand followers at the time. The media channel gained a large following by translating into French QAnon's groundless claims about a secret cabal of child-sex traffickers that control world events. Since March 2020, Cossette-Trudel's videos have focused almost exclusively on COVID-19 and the pandemic. Like many QAnon followers, he believes the dangers of the disease are exaggerated as part of a plot to undermine Trump. He has become a leading figure in the movement to protest Quebec's public health rules, which include the wearing of masks in stores and on public transit. Cossette-Trudel has spoken at several anti-mask demonstrations

alongside Stéphane Blais from the Fondation pour la défense des droits et libertés du peuple. He has demonstrated a capacity to mobilize QAnon believers and anti-maskers in Quebec, and his Radio-Québec videos played a role in exporting QAnon to France, Belgium, Spain, and Italy, where his radio show has also been translated into Spanish and Italian.

There are also a few other, comparatively less serious, incidents related to QAnon and COVID-19 conspiracies. On 4 August 2020, a man in his sixties from Sainte-Brigitte-de-Laval, Quebec, was arrested for allegedly making online threats against both Legault and Arruda. The arrest came shortly after a Facebook account that circulates QAnon conspiracies published Arruda's home address. On August 7, a forty-five-year-old man from Drummondville was charged with intimidation and two counts of uttering threats, reportedly against Arruda. Along with conspiracies about the pandemic, his Facebook page also featured racist and antisemitic content.

Conspiracy theorists also targeted critical infrastructure in the United Kingdom and Canada due to conspiracy theories about 5G causing COVID-19. Over Easter 2020, there were twenty attacks on cell towers in England, Wales, and Scotland (Kelion 2020). A month later, seven cell towers were set ablaze in the Greater Montreal area. Jessica Kallas, a twenty-five-year-old Laval resident, and Justin-Philippe Pauley, twenty-eight, of Ste-Adèle, have since gone on trial for these crimes (Thomas 2020). According to reports about the court proceedings, Pauley and Kallas believed that their lives depended on the destruction of 5G cell towers (Lacroix 2020; Nguyen 2021).

Though mobilization by QAnon adherents and conspiracy theorists in Canada is on a small scale, all of these efforts have occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The QAnon and conspiracy theory community in Canada is strong, with top influencers living in Canada and large and active communities online. The transnational relationship between QAnon in Canada and QAnon in the European Union and Australia also presents a transnational threat different from QAnon in the United States. While QAnon as a movement accelerated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the long-term consequences are still unknown.

Conclusion

Historically, the Canadian government has rarely viewed conspiracy theories and misinformation as national security concerns. But times are changing. As a May 2019 FBI bulletin noted, it is probable that “anti-government, identity based, and fringe political conspiracy theories very likely motivate some domestic extremists, wholly or in part, to commit criminal and sometimes violent activity” (FBI 2019). The same report went on to note that conspiracy theories “very likely encourage the targeting of specific people, places, and organizations, thereby increasing the likelihood of violence against these targets” (FBI 2019). As our discussion above makes clear, ideas that used to live and die in the dark corners of the Internet are now making their way into the mainstream, pushing people to commit violent acts and impacting their overall commitment to democratic society.

The 6 January 2021 Capitol insurrection, as well as multiple acts of violence over the past twelve months, demonstrate that the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories are a threat to national security and public safety more broadly (Amarasingam and Argentino 2020). Policy-makers should take a more proactive approach to foster Canadians’ critical thinking and digital literacy and to help individuals cope with the second- and third-order impacts of the pandemic and lockdown. COVID-19 may, in hindsight, be a practice run for disasters to come—and the government should take an inventory of these hard-won lessons.

NOTES

- 1 There has been a fair amount of speculation about who “Q” is since the inception of the movement. There is no conclusive evidence as to who Q was, though there is ample evidence to suggest that the account was controlled by different individuals over the years. In an investigation for *NBC News*, Zadrozny and Collins (2018) found that the theory can be traced back to three people who sparked some of the first conversations about QAnon: 4chan /pol/ moderators, Pamphlet Anon (Coleman Rogers), BaruchtheScribe (Paul Furber), and minor YouTube celebrity Tracy Diaz. Some have inferred that the early Q account was controlled by these individuals; however, no one has yet to prove this conclusively. Presently, Q is believed to be either Jim or Ron Watkins, according to multiple media reports. In March 2021, “Q: Into the Storm,” a six-part HBO docuseries by filmmaker Cullen Hoback, argued that Q is Ron Watkins,

the son of 8chan founder Jim Watkins. Though this is the most common narrative, there is so far no conclusive evidence that this is the case. What can be confirmed is that Jim and Ron Watkins facilitated the continued existence of Q up until the last post on 8 December 2020.

- 2 4Chan is an anonymous image board broken up into threads in which users can discuss and debate different topics. Moderation was minimal, and, as such, vile content—including child pornography—flourished on the site in its early days.
- 3 Before Q, several 4chan posters asserted they had special government access, including FBIAnon and HLIAnon in 2016, and CIAAnon and WHInsiderAnon in 2017. QAnon devotees, many of whom may be familiar with this “anon genre,” are familiar with Q’s apparent need for anonymity and presumably take it as a sign of credibility.
- 4 The data was collected using CrowdTangle, a social media analysis tool owned by Facebook. It provides an aggregate count of group membership. For example, if a user would join fifty of the QAnon groups or pages identified by the authors, this user would be counted fifty times. This provides a measurement of the mainstreaming of the QAnon movement on Facebook, rather than a real count of unique members.
- 5 Posts on Facebook were collected between 27 October 2017 and 8 August 2020.

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