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From Clickbait to Cruelty:
An Analysis of Terrorist Recruitment via Social Media

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Abstract

Social media has become an ever-present part of our modern society. However, with sites like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter favoring user engagement over the safety of their customers, these platforms have begun to be used for a darker purpose. Although terrorists have mobilized the Internet for most of its existence, their presence online is continuing to expand into more mainstream social media platforms. This leaves thousands of users susceptible to being shown terrorist content, or worse, being directly targeted by terrorist organizations. This paper seeks to examine the phenomenon of online terrorist recruitment to paint a clearer picture of the strategies used to bring new members in via social media. By using traditional theories of political recruitment, this paper will give these theories new life by testing their applicability to online recruitment. With the case study of QAnon, online terrorist recruitment will be put to the test in order to develop a profile of the users that are most susceptible to online recruitment. With the increase of domestic terrorists and white supremacists in the United States mobilizing these technologies, it is more important than ever to discover what makes a person likely to be targeted by terrorist groups online.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, social media has become a pervasive part of our everyday lives. The speed and ease of communication has made it much simpler to stay connected with friends and family all over the world. Despite these benefits, social media has been taken advantage of in many different ways, especially by terrorists. Terrorists groups have used the benefits of social media to spread their rhetoric to audiences that they normally would not be able to connect to in real life. By doing so, they have increased their recruitment capacity by spreading misinformation and violent speech. Both the investigation in the wake of the January 6th insurrection and the congressional hearings about Facebook serve as excellent examples of this concept.

In September 2021, thousands of pages of Facebook's confidential internal research was shared with the *Washington Post* to create what has since been referred to as the Facebook files (Lima 2021). Frances Haugen, the whistleblower, worked at Facebook for over two years, studying the algorithms that helped to amplify misinformation on the site (Allyn 2021). Upon realizing the danger presented by much of the internal research created by Facebook, Haugen made the decision to quit in May 2021. However, she did not leave empty handed. Haugen copied thousands of pages of internal Facebook research to share with the public and filed eight SEC complaints, arguing that Facebook is lying to its investors by hiding this information (Allyn 2021; Pelley 2021). The content includes a mix of presentations, research studies, discussion threads and strategy memos that all come to a similar conclusion: Facebook is prioritizing user engagement over the safety of its users.

One of the main points presented in these documents is that the social media giant actively chooses not to censor hate speech and misinformation in order to maintain user

engagement. Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg, and his Facebook executives have continually lied about doing so. In fact, Zuckerberg's testimony on March 25th 2021 to Congress states:

> We have removed content that could lead to imminent real-world harm. We have built an unprecedented third-party fact checking program. The system isn't perfect. But it is the best approach that we have found to address misinformation in line with our country's values. (Pelley 2021)

Despite this, the Facebook files demonstrate that Facebook has done little to address hate speech and misinformation on the site. An internal study showed that although Zuckerberg claimed that Facebook removes up to 94% of hate speech, only around 5% of hate speech is actually removed (Lima 2021). Many of the campaigns against hate speech and misinformation that were suggested by researchers were delayed in favor of maintaining user engagement (Lima 2021). Haugen explains that Facebook "...misstated and omitted key details about what was known about Facebook and Instagram's ability to cause harm" (Allyn 2021). By not removing hate speech from the site, Facebook allows actors, like terrorists, to spread their misinformation online with impunity. By prioritizing user engagement and not censoring certain content, Facebook created a breeding ground for terrorist rhetoric and recruitment.

Another major finding was the propensity for algorithms to prioritize angry and hateful messages on the platform. These algorithms also helped to introduce users to more violent content. The Facebook algorithm prioritizes posts based on the engagement that they receive online, meaning that more popular posts will be shown to more users. Also, posts are shown in order of popularity, instead of according to the time they were posted (Allyn 2021). This is important because users are more likely to see these popular posts first. Since most people tend to only scroll on social media for a few minutes at a time, the posts that they are shown first are

the ones that they are most likely to actually see. In 2017, Facebook changed its algorithm to weigh angry emoji reactions five times more than any "like" reactions (Lima 2021). Facebook most likely chose to do this because of the correlation between popularity and anger on social media (Brady et. al. 2021, 1). Since moral outrage posts tend to result in more likes, it creates positive feedback for users that cause them to repeatedly engage with the site (Brady et. al. 7). As a result, posts with angry reactions were prioritized in users' feeds and were shown to more people. Since these angry reactions mostly appeared on posts with misinformation and hate speech, these posts were amplified extensively on the site (Lima 2021). Facebook later chose to take away the weight from the angry posts, but the damage had already been done.

These algorithms have also introduced users to more violent content. In 2019, a study was conducted using a "dummy account" with conservative leanings to see what kind of pages were recommended to that user on Facebook (Lima 2021). Within five days, the "dummy account" was introduced to QAnon content, an online extremist group that was partially responsible for the January 6th insurrection (Lima 2021). This is consistent with the narratives of deradicalized QAnon members. Melissa Rein Lively, a former QAnon member, said that within weeks of looking up different self-care posts on Instagram, she was introduced to the QAnon conspiracy (CNN Video 0:00:43). This demonstrates how quickly one can be exposed to extremist content and hate speech online, especially on Facebook.

Facebook is not an isolated example. With over 2.8 billion users, Facebook is the largest of these media giants, but it also claims to be the best at regulating its content (Pelley 2021). Many of the popular social media platforms function similarly to Facebook and are also struggling with policing hate speech and extremist content. After the January 6th insurrection, Twitter and Instagram, the latter being a subsidiary of Facebook, also struggled to deplatform

many of the white supremacist groups responsible for the attack on the Capitol (Amaringsam and Argentino 2021, 42). Although these sites have begun to show that they are taking responsibility for the content on their platforms, it is not enough to protect their users from seeing these posts.

The aim of this thesis is to explore how terrorists have used social media to increase their recruitment capacity. In person recruitment is often limited to those in close proximity to the terrorist group. Social media has allowed these groups to reach a wider audience extremely easily and cheaply. By examining the case study of QAnon, it will become clear that terrorists have effectively mobilized on social media and it has increased their recruitment capacity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction:

Recruitment is considered to be one of the most fundamental process goals of a terrorist organization. Process goals are best defined as "... [goals] intended to sustain the terrorist group by attracting media attention, scuttling organization-threatening peace processes, or boosting membership and morale often by provoking government overreaction" (Abrahms, 2011, 587). Process goals do not reflect the political change the organization seeks to make, but rather goals that are used to further the existence of the organization. Essentially, "... terrorist groups must focus on process goals if their existence is to be anything more than transitory" (Faria and Arce 2012, 433). Given this definition, recruitment is an important mechanism used by terrorists to further their organization. Without recruitment, there would be no actors within the organization to help forward the political goals. Organizations need members in order to function properly. Thus, recruitment is a priority for terrorist groups.

The literature surrounding the recruitment of terrorists is split considerably over what makes a person more susceptible to being brought into a terrorist organization. The education level and socioeconomic status of recruits is said to possibly have an impact on their susceptibility to recruitment because terrorists want to recruit those that can adquately have the time and understanding to dedicate to the cause. More recently, mental health has also been examined as a factor that may make people more susceptible to terrorist recruitment. Military service may also increase susceptibility to recruitment. In addition, terrorist literature outlines different mechanisms through which terrorists choose to recruit their members. One of the most well-researched recruitment strategies is kinship radicalization, where family members can bring their other family members into a terrorist organization. Through this chapter, this paper will explore the debates surrounding the recruitment of terrorists and relate it to the case study of QAnon.

Profile of a Typical Terrorist Recruit:

In looking at theories of political recruitment, there is significant debate over the profile of the recruits that are brought into a movement. Researchers frequently disagree on the aspects that make a person more susceptible to recruitment by these terrorist groups. Given this, it is important to acknowledge these debates and use them to inform the assumption of who may be particularly susceptible to this kind of recruitment. The following section will outline some of the important debates within this field and attempt to determine which of these factors will be a helpful predictor for the recruitment of terrorists online.

Socioeconomic Status:

One of the most widely held beliefs about terrorist recruitment is that the poor are the most susceptible to recruitment mechanisms. In a sense, it is reasonable to assume this. Many terrorist organizations provide resources for their members, including housing or a salary (Hoffman 2017). Some organizations will provide payment to the families of martyrs that die in suicide bombing attacks (Krueger and Maleckova 28). Palestinian terrorist groups, like Hamas, are very well known for doing this (Krueger and Maleckova 28). QAnon does not normally provide services like this, but they do create a community in which followers may help each other in other ways. There have also been studies that examine the effect of aggregate economic conditions on terrorism. In a study of Palestinian suicide bombers, it was concluded that "...economic policies targeting short-run unemployment alleviation and long-run growth could be effective in decreasing suicide terrorism" (Sayre 2005, 17). This is primarily because economic conditions can push people to turn to suicide terrorism. Thus, it is definitely possible that there are people who are recruited for terrorist organizations because of an economic need that they have.

Despite this reasoning, there is not a definitive correlation between poverty and terrorism. This circumstantial claim is made by the literature. Poverty is not necessarily correlated with terrorism. In their preliminary study, Krueger and Maleckova determined that "...the evidence provides little reason for optimism that a reduction in poverty...would meaningfully reduce international terrorism" (Krueger and Maleckova 2003, 27). They posit that there is no correlation between poverty and terrorism. This has been supported by other research. Specifically, a study conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) in December 2001 showed that there is no correlation between individual poverty levels and terrorist involvement (Kruger and Maleckova 28). Research by Claude Berrebi comes

to a similar conclusion. In a study of 335 Palestinian terrorists, they found that "...31 percent of the Palestinians, compared to only 16 percent of the [Palestinian] terrorists, were characterized as poor" (Berrebi 2007, 17). This means that the poverty rate for terrorists were lower than the average population. Most of the studies on this topic were conducted using Palestinian subjects, which makes it difficult to generalize this to the rest of the world. With this, poverty is not necessarily an indicator of whether someone will be recruited by a terrorist organization. The question is: why is this the case?

This may be potentially due to the lack of time available to those in poverty since they are obligated to work longer hours. The poor often do not have the free time to get involved politically in any cause, let alone terrorism (Lee 2011, 204). Most of those in the lower classes need to work long hours in order to have enough money to support themselves and their families, therefore, they have very little time for political involvement (Lee 204). Lee argues, however, that "...participation in political violence is strongly conditioned by two factors: informational and resource barriers to political participation and economic opportunity costs within the participating group" (Lee 206). Essentially this means that the ideal candidate for participation in political violence is someone with access to the resources of political participation but with limited risk when it comes to their economic resources. For example, a rich person may not necessarily get involved in QAnon or other terrorist groups because the cost of risking their legitimate source of income may be too great. Alternatively, someone poor may not have the time resources or the connections to political activists in order to get involved in terrorism. The correlation between these can best be described as an inverted U shape. Given this, the ideal candidate is likely someone with a good enough income to allow them free time to consume political content and become active.

Educational Background:

Another widely held misleading assumption about terrorists is that they are not educated. In an article for the *Atlantic* magazine, the authors put forward the argument that "...the quiet truth is that many of the deluded [terrorist] foot soldiers are foolish and untrained, perhaps even untrainable" (Byman and Fair 2010). In conducting further research on this point, it was discovered that most of the articles referring to the lack of intelligence of terrorists were created by the media, rather than by academic sources. Thus, this argument may be less about a significant analysis of terrorist's intelligence but it is still worth discussing as the part of this paper.

The debate over the level of education of terrorists is still going strong. Terrorists may be more educated than the general population, but it is not a particularly strong claim. In a study of terrorists in the Cold War period, it was discovered that the "...Terrorists in general have more than average education, and very few Western terrorists are uneducated or illiterate" (Hudson and Majeska 1999). This shows that education is slightly more common in terrorists than previously thought. A study of Hezbollah concluded that having a secondary education or higher is positively correlated with joining Hezbollah (Kruger and Maleckova 2003, 27). Specifically,this study shows a positive relationship between having a higher education and becoming a terrorist, for Hezbollah specifically. Berrebi's study of Palestinian terrorists also comes to a similar conclusion. This research states that:

> …out of 208 observations in which information about the terrorist's education was available, 96 percent (200) have at least a high school education and 65 percent (135)

> have some kind of higher education, compared to 51 percent and 15 percent, respectively, in the Palestinian population of same age, sex and religion. (2007, 17)

This shows that there is a possible correlation between education and involvement in terrorism.

It is possible that this argument will not be as useful in explaining QAnon's recruitment patterns since many of the studies that argue this point are focused on Middle Eastern conflicts and terrorist groups. Since QAnon is located in the United States, the socio-economic circumstances of their members are very different from those in the developing world. However, this argument is still relevant because it will clarify if there is a specific socio-economic group or education bracket that is particularly susceptible to recruitment.

Mental Health Status:

The research on the connection between mental health and terrorism is one that is described to have "... a long, inconsistent, occasionally frustrating, and well-documented history" (Corner, Gill, and Mason 560). Most researchers have struggled to find concrete evidence that suggests that those in terrorist groups suffer disproportionately from mental illness. In a study of 172 Al Qaeda members, researchers found that there were only 3 possible cases of mental illness amongst the subjects (Corner and Gill 2017, 2). Paul Gill, John Horgan, and Paige Deckert found that only 25% of their sample of American terrorists had a mental health illness diagnosis, which essentially the same as the control group they analyzed (Corner and Gill 2). Studies such as these failed to show that there was a connection between mental health problems and involvement in terrorism.

Despite these studies, right wing terrorists often have higher levels of mental illness than those in other types of terrorist groups. In a study of right-wing terrorists, researchers found that 57% of the sample had some sort of mental health issue preceding or during their terrorist group involvement (Bubolz and Simi 7). This argument will help to explain the case of QAnon since it is often characterized as a right wing movement. Many of those that become involved in QAnon are Republicans or are conservative-leaning. Thus, the correlation between right wing terrorists and mental illness may help to establish a pattern of mental illness among QAnoners.

Many researchers have also found that mental health issues are most prevalent amongst lone wolf terrorists. Since lone wolves are often isolated and do not have co-offenders to support their choices, they often present more mental health issues (Corner, Gill, and Mason 562). In a study of 153 lone-actor, solo-actor, and dyad terrorists, around 40% of the sample had a diagnosed mental health disorder (Corner and Gill 1-2). Most likely, even more of these terrorists had undiagnosed mental health problems. In a study of police reports, Anton Weenik found that only 6% of his 140 lone wolf sample had a diagnosed mental health disorder, however, it was estimated that another 20% likely had an undiagnosed disorder (Corner and Gill 1). Mental health problems seem to be much more likely to manifest in lone wolf terrorists. This may relate to QAnon as well since it is an online movement. Although QAnon helps to provide a community for its members, they are mostly socially isolated, especially within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is also important to note that there is variation in the types of mental illnesses that are most prevalent amongst terrorists. In a study by Corner, Gill, and Mason, it was found that:

> The diagnoses included schizophrenia (8.5%), depression (7.2%), unspecified personality disorder (6.5%), bipolar disorder (3.9%), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD, 3.3%),

autism spectrum disorder (3.3%), delusional disorder (2.0%), unspecified anxiety disorder (1.3%), traumatic brain injury (TBI, 1.3%), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD, 1.3%), unspecified sleep disorder (0.7%), schizoaffective disorder (0.7%), psychotic disorder (0.7%), drug dependence (0.7%), and dissociative disorder (0.7%)

This wide variation in mental health disorders also helps to show that mental health issues can present themselves differently amongst terrorists. For example, schizophrenia is more common amongst lone wolves than amongst group oriented terrorists (Corner and Gill 4). Thus, when studying the mental health of terrorists, it is important to acknowledge this variation.

But how does this relate to the recruitment of terrorists? There are some researchers that "...speculate that selection effects play a large role in why there is very low prevalence of mentally disordered terrorists within terrorist groups" (Corner, Gill, and Mason 561). On the surface, this argument makes sense. Terrorist groups may choose to not recruit individuals that they know to have mental health problems because they believe that those with mental health issues would not be fitting recruits for the organization. However, newer research on recruitment by alt-right terrorist groups show that some terrorist groups actually recruit those with mental illness purposefully (Bubolz and Simi 2019, 8). In fact, "...individuals with a history of mental health problems may have been disproportionately rejected by conventional social networks and, thus, drawn toward marginalized social groups such as an extremist organization" (Jager, Schmidtchen, and Suellwold 1981). This makes it significantly easier for terrorist groups to bring those with mental health issues into the organization.

Military or Past Military Involvement:

There is already an established connection between prior military service and terrorism. Although this trend was initially of minimal concern, the involvement of more veterans in domestic terrorism in countries such as the United States, Germany, and others have presented a significant problem for their militaries. Terrorist groups have actively tried to recruit veterans, active-duty military, and military reservists (Jones et. al. 5). According to a report published by CSIS about the United States, "The percentage of attacks and plots committed by active-duty and reserve personnel rose in 2020 to 6.4 percent of all attacks and plots (7 of 110 total), up from 1.5 percent in 2019 (1 of 65 total) and none in 2018" (Jones 2). These statistics may not seem troubling initially, but this indicates a larger trend of increasing terrorist violence from military servicemembers. Veterans around the world have consistently been seen to be more violent than current active-duty military. In fact, it was estimated that around 10% of all domestic terror plots since 2015 had some sort of involvement from veterans (Jones 5). This is increasingly becoming a larger trend in the United States.

In researching the prevlence of veteran recruitment in terrorist groups, it quickly becomes clear that right wing terrorist groups have been the most effective at recruiting veterans. According to an FBI report published in 2008, the bureau found that white supremacist and right wing terrorist groups were making a concerted effort to recruit active-duty soldiers and combat veterans (Koehler 8). The FBI report "... identified 203 military personnel or veterans who were active members in white supremacist organisations during that period and lists a number of significant cases" (Koehler 8). Although this may not seem like a large number at first glance, more recent data paints a very clear picture of the danger that these white supremacist groups present. In a report published by CSIS, "White supremacists, extremist militia members, and other violent far-right extremists were responsible for 66 percent of domestic terrorist attacks and

plots in 2020." (Jones 8) This shows the rising threat presented by far-right extremists in the United States and their ability to recruit veterans and military service members only makes them more dangerous.

It may seem, at first, strange that terrorists would choose to recruit those with such dedication to their nation to join their organization. Military servicemen choose to serve their country and protect its citizens, which is seemingly an opposing motivation from most terrorist groups.Yet, military members and veterans often have skills that could be of use to terrorist organizations. As explained in a previous section, terrorists can be highly selective of their recruits and would likely choose to recruit those with the skills that they need (Bloom 606).These terrorist groups actively target veterans because of their specialized skill sets (Jones et. al. 2021, 9). For example, some of these possible skills include "...small unit tactics, communications, logistics, reconnaissance, and surveillance" (Jones et. al 9). With these skills, veterans can be extremely useful for terrorist organizations. Koehler even goes so far as to say that "...their [veterans] special training or combat experience can make them significantly more dangerous and deadlier in carrying out potential terror attacks than an average member of the public" (Koehler 3). This should help to explain why so many former military servicemen end up being recruited by terrorist organizations in Western countries. With their tactical skills, veterans and military service members would be useful to any terrorist organization. Additionally, it is extremely difficult for militaries to identify their service members that have been recruited by terrorist groups. One of the major problems that militaries face is their inability to screen potential targets of recruitment. The military also struggles with being able to identify those that may already be involved in a terrorist group (Koehler 2019, 6). In fact, former member of the National Security Council, Jeff McCausland said that the military has largely "...failed to

establish a comprehensive way to screen out extremists, especially right-wing oriented ones" (Koehler 6). This inability to screen potential terrorists has only made it easier for terrorist groups to recruit veterans and service members.

In summary, when constructing a profile of those that are most susceptible to terrorist recruitment, there are several important debates to consider. Based on the research conducted, there is a likelihood that middle class, college-educated individuals may be susceptible to recruitment by terrorist organizations because of their free time and disposible income. Those with mental health issues are also often recruited by terrorist organizations. There is also the possibility that veterans and former military would be likely to be recruited as well. With the susceptibility of these populations established, it is also important to explore some of the mediums through which terrorists can be recruited. The following section will explore a relatively common mechanism of recruitment: kinship radicalization.

Kinship Radicalization as a Method of Recruitment:

A common way that people are recruited into a terrorist organization is by their families. Kinship radicalization can best be described as the tendency for terrorists to bring in their other family members into a terrorist organization (Hafez 2016, 15). Examples of this phenomenon can be seen in some of the major terrorist attacks to happen in the past 10 years. The Boston Marathon bombing, the November 2015 Paris attacks, and the attack on the Charlie Hebdo office were all committed by pairs of brothers (Scremin 2020, 1). Empirical evidence can support this larger theory. According to a New America study, out of 474 ISIS fighters from 25 different Western countries, about ⅓ of these fighters have some sort of meaningful connection with a family member involved in jihad or another Islamist campaign (Hafez 15). In a study of Islamic

jihadists, some researchers found that family relationships influenced 50 out of 242 jihadists to become involved in the cause (Scremin 3). Another study showed that 14% of people in the sample had a family member already in a jihadist cell and were recruited by them (Scremin 3). Specifically in QAnon, family members often bring each other into the organization (Rothschild, Bloom and Moskalenko). This shows how common it can be for people to recruit their families into their terrorist group.

Kinship radicalization can also bring entire families into a terrorist organization. It may seem strange initially to bring an entire family together into a terrorist group. In some earlier terrorist literature, women were largely seen to not have agency and simply joined terrorist organizations because of political pressure to do so or pressure from their husbands to join them (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). Children may not necessarily be useful at a very young age since they cannot make meaningful contributions to the larger outcome goals. However, the recruitment of full families is extremely important for the longevity of a terrorist organization (Bloom 2017, 608). By bringing in entire families, these terrorist organizations ensure that the children brought up within the group will secure the future generations of the organization (Bloom 608). It is widely agreed upon that one of the best ways to recruit an entire family is to first recruit the mothers because "...groups that recruit women guarantee the entire family will be indoctrinated," (Bloom and Moskalenko 67). This is primarily because the inclusion of the mothers in the recruitment process ensures that the children will follow. Many fathers join terrorist organizations without bringing in their entire families, but it is rare for mothers to do the same.

Kinship radicalization can also be helpful from a security perspective. By recruiting family members, "... terrorists may indeed reduce the risk of information leaking out, and even of

being monitored by security forces, thereby making it more difficult for law enforcement to detect upcoming attacks" (Scremin 9). This is similar to the process of vouching, outlined in Weinstein's *Inside Rebellion*, where family members can speak for each other's credibility and trust (Weinstein 2007, 104). With this information in mind, it is easy to see the benefits that come from recruiting an entire family to the terrorist cause. It is likely that in this investigation, there will be some examples of kinship radicalization amongst the testimonies collected.

Theories of Political Recruitment on Social Media:

Thus far, all of the political recruitment theories outlined in this chapter are previously studied face-to-face recruitment. The goal of this thesis is to see if these theories can be applied to online recruitment via social media to explain the recruitment methods employed by QAnon. To accomplish this goal, one must establish how online recruitment works and how terrorist groups currently leverage social media technology to their advantage. The following section outlines the recruitment process of terrorist groups online.

Social media has provided terrorists with an extremely large audience for their political rhetoric. Since the turn of the 21st century, social media has become increasingly pervasive in our modern society as the internet has made it possible for these social networks to proliferate online and on smartphones. These networks have become the ideal mechanism for communication and sharing information both individually or within a larger group. On Facebook alone, there are over 2.8 billion users (Lima 2021). This gives terrorists a large group of people with which they can share their messages, which most of these groups have tried to take advantage of. According to the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, in 2014, there were over 30,000 different blogs and social media profiles that were connected to terrorist groups (Hossain, 2018,

140). In addition, Hossain states that "Evan Hohlmann, a cyberterrorism expert, argued that 'ninety percent of the terrorist activity on the internet takes place using social networking tools'" (Hossain, 2018, 141). With access to such a large audience, it makes sense that terrorists would take advantage of these platforms to forward their political agenda. This also gives these groups a leg up in their recruitment efforts. By having access to a wider audience, terrorists can reach those that they may never have been able to in face-to-face recruitment strategies. However, this larger audience can also prove to be threatening to groups since there is less of an opportunity for *vouching* and other screening measures, which leaves them susceptible to counterterrorist efforts. Despite this, the access to a wider audience has proven to be effective in the recruitment of foreign fighters and others that may not have been so easily brought into the organization without the far-reach of social media.

The lack of censorship on social media has been an object of frequent discussion and can be understood as a significant aid to terrorist activity on those sites. This is particularly salient after the release of the Facebook files that show the failure of the site to limit hate speech online (Allyn 2021, Lima 2021). Terrorists have found ways to avoid censorship from both government authorities and the social media sites themselves. Often, terrorists use sites that are not able to quickly take down their content. For QAnon, this would be sites such as 4chan or 8chan, that readily allow for their violent rhetoric. Both of these sites do not have a censorship system since they believe in free expression of ideas. Neo-Nazis, child pornographers, and many others have found refuge on those sites alongside QAnon. Terrorists do have a popular social media presence as well. Before January 6th, many popular social media sites were hesitant to take down white supremacist content but have since decided to delete those groups and accounts (Amarasingam and Argentino 42). One tactic to avoid censorship is swarmcasting, which happens when users

immediately create new profiles as their older ones are taken down (Hossain, 2018, 142). Hossain explains “If the authority shuts down any suspected Twitter or Facebook account of a terrorist group, immediately they open another account and all their friends and followers are moved to the new account” (Hossain 2018, 142). This means that terrorists are able to avoid censors easily and effectively on social media. The recruitment effort is aided by this because it means that terrorists can take advantage of the wider audience that social media gives them access to, without worrying about counterterrorism efforts online.

With these benefits in mind, it is extremely clear why terrorists have chosen social media as one of their platforms. But the question remains: How do terrorists use social media for recruitment purposes? In their article, Dean and Bell explain that, “Social media quickly presented itself as a cheap and effective tool for mass communication, as well as an effective method of specifically targeting key demographics” (Dean et al, 2012). This ability to target key demographics makes social media a wonderful vehicle of recruitment for terrorist organizations. Through their use of propaganda, terrorists are often looking to target specific people, usually those that are vulnerable to suggestion for a number of reasons (Hoffman, 2017). One way that terrorists have been able to do this effectively is through the Groups function on Facebook. Groups, on Facebook, are public forums for people with similar interests (Dean et al, 2012, 6). You can join a group through invitation or simply by searching the name of the group (Dean et al, 2012, 6). One of the features of this function is that, “... any member can send out notifications or messages to every user who has joined the group instantaneously and free of charge” (Dean et al, 2012, 6). This is extremely beneficial for terrorists because they can share their information quickly and for free. Thus, social media sites like Facebook provide terrorists

with an opportunity for recruitment by enabling them to share their propaganda online. This explains why social media is such an effective tool for these groups.

Conclusion:

As Bruce Hoffman explains in his seminal work, *Inside Terrorism*, "The terrorist campaign is like a shark in the water: it must keep moving forward—no matter how slowly or incrementally—or die" (Hoffman 679). This is no different for terrorist recruitment. Recruitment is a fundamental process goal of a terrorist organization and should be regarded as such by both terrorists and researchers. By looking at the various theories of political recruitment, this section has outlined some of the populations that are most susceptible to recruitment and the strategies that are being used by terrorists to recruit them. Even though these theories have traditionally been used to explain face-to-face recruitment tactics, it is likely that these will be able to be translated into the online space, specifically through social media. Thus, the remainder of this thesis will argue that these theories of recruitment will be able to explain the social media recruitment process of QAnon.

Chapter 3: Research Questions

With each of the theories presented in the section above, a series of questions have been raised about terrorist recruitment. Although these theories have been relatively well-studied for face-to-face recruitment, they have not been applied to online recruitment. Given this, this section will propose a series of research questions surrounding the applicability of these political recruitment theories to social media recruitment. By applying the case study of QAnon, these questions will help to provide new avenues for research on this topic.

Socioeconomic Status and Education:

As previously explained in the literature review, there are sizable debates in the terrorism literature about the educational and economic attainment of potential terrorists and terrorist recruits. Based on the current literature, the socioeconomic status of terrorists can play a role in their recruitment. The same can be said for education. Those with higher levels of education do often come from a higher socioeconomic status. This influences the level of disposable income and time that they have to get involved in a terrorist group. That free time may cause these people to seek out groups, but also makes it useful for terrorist groups to recruit them.

These theories can be applied to online recruitment. Social media allows for the targeting of specific populations. If a terrorist group, like QAnon, was looking to purposefully recruit people from a specific socioeconomic class, it would surely be possible to do so. The same can be said for education. Most social media platforms, like Facebook, ask for people to list their education level. This would make it easier for terrorists to target specific individuals that meet their needs. Thus, the first research question presented is:

> **RQ_1:** Will the socioeconomic status and educational attainment of potential terrorist recruits influence their susceptibility to online recruitment?

Mental Health Issues:

There is a presence of those with mental health disorders in terrorist groups, especially in right wing terrorist groups. Through these studies, lone wolf terrorists are also more likely to have mental health issues than those in groups (Corner and Gill). In addition, some terrorist groups do choose to actively recruit those with mental health issues (Corner and Gill, Bubolz and

Simi). It may seem counterintuitive at first, but these groups do actively seek out those with mental health issues.

This theory could be translated to online recruitment since lone wolves are mostly recruited online. The main reason why lone wolf terrorists tend to have more mental health issues than those in terrorist groups is because of the associated isolation and lack of support networks (Corner, Gill, and Mason). Online interactions can also be isolating. Although they are communicating with other people, they are not getting the same social benefits that one would get from face-to face interactions (Buonte, Wood, and Pratt). Isolation is definitely possible during the online recruitment process. It may also motivate people to seek out communities online that are receptive to their thoughts and ideas, making them highly susceptible to recruitment. With this being said, the second research question presented in this thesis is:

> **RQ_2:** Will the mental health diagnosis status of potential recruits influence their susceptibility to online recruitment?

Military Involvement:

In recent years, military and veteran involvement in terrorist organizations has become a larger trend. It may seem strange that military service members, people that volunteer to serve their country, would later become involved in terrorist plots against their state. Yet, these service members are becoming increasingly involved in terror plots (Jones, Jones et. al.). This is especially true of veterans, who are more violent and have been involved in more domestic terror attacks (Jones). Terrorist groups have begun to actively recruit active-duty military and veterans into their organizations, presumably to benefit from their tactical skills (Jones). This trend is especially salient amongst right wing terrorist groups (Koehler).

This theory could also serve well to explain online recruitment. In March 2022, the U.S. veteran unemployment rate was 2.4% compared to the average unemployment rate of 3.7% (United States Department of Labor). This is extremely high for a population that only makes up around 7% of the total United States population (United States Department of Labor). Since some veterans are unemployed, they do have the disposable time to become involved in an online movement like QAnon. For this reason, the third research question to be addressed in this thesis is:

> **RQ_3:** Will the military involvement or veteran status of potential recruits influence their susceptibility to online recruitment?

Kinship Radicalization:

Another theory of recruitment explained in the literature review is the idea of kinship radicalization. Kinship radicalization can best be described as the tendency for terrorists to bring in their other family members into a terrorist organization (Hafez 2016, 15). Essentially, family members are likely to try recruiting each other into terrorist groups. Kinship radicalization also provides benefits for the terrorist group leaders. It allows for the family members to screen the recruits before bringing them into the organization (Weinstein 2007). This provides a level of safety for the terrorist groups because it protects them from recruiting someone that is uncommitted or possibly harmful to the organization. Thus, kinship radicalization has become common practice for many terrorist groups.

It is highly likely that kinship radicalization will translate into online recruitment practices. Social media has proven to be effective in keeping family members and friends connected over large distances. It may actually facilitate kinship radicalization because family

members that would normally not meet face-to-face would be able to still bring their family members into the terrorist group through social media. It is much easier to share posts and information online. It is for this reason that the final research question is:

RQ_4: Will kinship radicalization be present as a method for online terrorist recruitment?

Chapter 4: Methodology

In order to assess the research questions outlined in the earlier section, this paper employs a case study method in order to examine the complexities of online terrorist recruitment. Although there are some that doubt the strength of the case study method because they believe it is not generalizable or that it does not control for the intrusion of third variables, case studies can often serve as strong tests for qualitative research (Van Evera 1997, 51). Since each case study is performed with an extreme attention to detail, there is explanatory value inherent in this kind of test (Van Evera 54). Although large *n* statistical analyses can show a correlation between variables for a theory, they do not have the explanatory power that case studies have, in that they can find the reasons behind the phenomena, rather than demonstrating its existence (Van Evera 54). For example, case studies often make use of process tracing. Process tracing examines the series of steps through which the initial case conditions are translated into case results (Van Evera 54). It basically explains how something happens through telling the story all the way through. This helps to show why the independent variable may cause the dependent variable. For example, kinship radicalization would be an independent variable and the research would be investigating if using this tactic would increase recruitment to QAnon, the dependent variable. With these considerations in mind, the case study method should be an effective mechanism for analysing the social media recruitment methods of terrorists.

Case Study Selection Method:

For the purpose of this thesis, QAnon will be used as a case study to show how terrorist recruitment functions through social media. QAnon is a movement that has been completely organized online. QAnon has been able to take on an international scope in the year 2020, with different affiliates operating out of Europe and Latin America. Though, the focus of this study will only cover the United States and QAnon. Although it has not been as violent as other terrorist groups, the threat of violence from QAnon members has increased since the January 6th insurrection and the U.S. intelligence community has been monitoring this group more closely. QAnon was chosen as a case study for these reasons.

QAnon as a Terrorist Group:

QAnon's inclusion as a terrorist group is one that some dispute. For example, Melissa Rein Lively, a woman that left QAnon, frequently refers to the movement as a cult (CNN Video). Although there can be some comparisons made to cults because of the obscure nature of their belief system, this does not necessarily make the movement a cult. The lack of a charismatic leader may discount it from being a cult. Though, some still define QAnon as a terrorist group. A joint report from the FBI and Department of Homeland Security asserts that QAnon is in fact a domestic terrorism organization (FBI 2021, 1). This report also warns of the danger of the transition from digital soldier to real-life soldier as both federal agencies agree that QAnon will continue to inspire violence (FBI 2021, 2). Essentially, U.S. federal agencies do believe that QAnon is a threat and qualifies as a terrorist organization. Despite this assessment, others consider QAnon to be a cult or a social movement rather than a terrorist group.

There have been incidents of violence committed by QAnon members, similar to those of a terrorist group. For example, Matthew Philip Wright drove to the Mike O'Callaghan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge near the Hoover Dam and fired shots until someone would turn over a report that contained information about Hilary Clinton (Amarasingam and Argentino 2020, 39). He pled guilty to a charge of terrorism and was subsequently put into prison (Amarasingam Argentino 40). This is just one story of a QAnon follower committing violence, but it is not the only example. There have been 23 QAnon related attacks recorded since 2017, including shootings, kidnappings, and other forms of violence (Garry et al. 2021, 198). This does not include the incidents of violence that were perpetrated at the January 6th insurrection. Despite these incidents of violence, it is not entirely clear whether or not these incidents were examples of politically motivated violence. According to Bruce Hoffman, Martha Crenshaw, and other scholars of terrorism, terrorism is political violence or the threat of violence committed by an organization with a structure (Hoffman 2017, Crenshaw 1987). They assert that there must be a political argument that motivates these groups to commit violence. Although QAnon's beliefs are related to American politics, not all of their outcome goals are not inherently political. The main goal of QAnon appears to be the arrest and prosecution of those involved in the secret child sex trafficking cult. Thus, it may be difficult to argue that QAnon is, in fact, a terrorist group.

Rather than trying to force a comprehensive definition on a movement whose beliefs are so fluid, it is much simpler to argue that QAnon may not necessarily be a terrorist organization. However, its actions may very well be explained by terrorist literature because of its similarities to other right-wing terrorists. The beliefs and populations of these groups align well. The fundamental difference between QAnon and these other groups is that their central tenets may not be entirely political, even if they involve popular politicians. For the purpose of this thesis,

QAnon will be used as a case study because although it may not be a terrorist group, the terrorist literature does help to explain the group's recruiting practices.

QAnon on Social Media:

QAnon also has a fairly large social media presence on both small, niche websites and larger social media networks. QAnon began on the sites 4chan and 8chan. Those two sites are image boards that were created with the explicit purpose of freedom of expression. They are known to house particularly offensive and disturbing content that is usually moderated on other sites. QAnon was also quite popular on Reddit, a social media site popular for gamers. The QAnon Subreddit r/CBTS_stream eventually grew to have almost 23,000 subscribers and almost 700,000 posts (Rothschild 2021, 27). Before the removal of QAnon from Reddit, the r/GreatAwakening page had over 70,000 subscribers (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021, 41). As QAnon became more mainstream, it became very popular on sites like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. In 2018, there were 55 million hashtag mentions of Q on Twitter (Rothschild 144). Facebook groups dedicated to Q proliferated, having millions of followers and members before they were taken down (Rothschild 146). There were around 68 million uses of QAnon hashtags from October 2017 to March 2020 on Facebook alone. Each of these shows the reach that QAnon has had online. Although its presence has been removed from many social media sites after the January 6th insurrection, its peak during the 2020 election shows how powerful this movement became online.

Data Collection Methods:

This research project is going to examine testimonials from deradicalized QAnon members that have left the movement. The choice to use these testimonials was primarily one of ease. QAnon members' belief systems are naturally suspicious by nature, which makes it difficult to find interviewees. By only looking at testimonials from former members, it helps to mitigate the risk of interacting with someone that may have malicious intentions against someone attempting to study the group. Their distrust of the government and the "Deep State" only further demonstrate that it would be dangerous to interact with them in any way other than reading their stories.

These testimonials have been collected from a few different sources. Some former QAnon supporters have told their stories in the public forum in order to protect others from joining the movement as they have. Melissa Rein Lively, Jidarth Jadeja, and Ashley Vanderbilt have all been very public about their experiences within the Q movement. After leaving the movement, they have been interviewed by popular news outlets, *CNN* and the *Washington Post*. For this research project, multiple videos, articles, and interviews have been used to piece together each of their individual stories within QAnon. By using their own words, this paper will explore each of their journeys to see how their interactions on social media shaped their decision to join the Q movement.

Another source for testimonials is the two subReddits: r/ReQovery and r/QAnonCasualities. These subReddits contain stories from both deradicalized QAnon members and families of current QAnons. Although there is no way to guarantee that these users are real, this investigation assumes that all of these posters are real people. The posts were downloaded on December 13th 2021 so any thread posted before then could be used. The sample includes posts with over a certain number of comments. For QAnon Casualties, threads with over 100

comments were chosen. For QAnon ReQovery, only threads with over 50 comments were included in the sample. After creating this sample, the post titles were combed through, looking for keywords that correspond to an introduction into Q. This includes posts that reference their "Q story", recovery, deradicalization, or escape from QAnon. With this method, it resulted in 11 threads from each subReddit, totaling to 22 Reddit threads. These posts were then read and the notes were collected to see if their stories had any corresponding information related to the research questions presented earlier. In order to protect their anonymity, the usernames of these posters are not included anywhere within this text, even in citations.

This paper will also be using information from popular books and documentaries written about QAnon, which contain interviews with both former and current QAnon members. Rothschild's *The Storm is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, a Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (2020) and Bloom and Moskalenko's *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon* (2021) have some useful testimonials. The documentary, "Q: Into the Storm" (2020) also contains many interviews with current QAnon members. They go into detail about their belief systems and their motivations to join the movement. Each of these sources provides supplementary information to help support the larger testimonies that will be used in this thesis.

Chapter 5: QAnon Case Study

An Introduction to QAnon:

History:

The cultish conspiracy of QAnon began in October 2017 when an anonymous user made their first post online on a message board called 4chan (Amarasingam and Argentino 2020, 37).

On October 28th, a post on 4chan's a/pol/thread board was created with the subject line, "Mueller Investigation". It read:

> Hilary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45AM - 8:30 AM EST on Monday - the morning October 30, 2017.

This post is commonly referred to as Drop #0 and it served as the beginning of the QAnon movement. Although the creator of the post did not yet refer to themselves as Q, the poster introduced themselves as Q Clearance Patriot a few days after that initial post (Rothschild 2021, 22). After this, the drops simply kept coming.

QAnon started on smaller social media networks like 4chan, but it truly started to grow when it spread to Reddit in November 2017. Due to the content of Q drops, the subreddits associated with the movement were later taken down (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021, 33). This prompted a move to 8chan, a similar site to 4chan that had a leadership team more amenable to QAnon's content (Bloom and Moskalenko 33). The movement continued to grow from there, with Q continually making drops only on 8chan from January 2018 onwards (Rothschild 39). This remained the main platform for QAnon followers. The movement of Q to 8chan was endorsed by the owners, Jim and Ron Watkins (Q:Into the Storm 0:27:36). Thus, 8chan continued to allow Q to make their drops on the site.

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in March 2020 grew the QAnon movement. Rothschild explains that, "...the conspiracy theories seemed to spread as fast as the coronavirus itself" (123). QAnon conspiracies and beliefs started to trend on Twitter and Facebook. Q decoders started to take hold of the movement and share other beliefs online. For example, many QAnon pages touted the power of Hydroxychloroquine, a medicine most commonly used to treat Lupus, as a cure for COVID 19 (Rothschild 127). The pandemic brought many more

conspiracies to light and brought the QAnon movement into the mainstream in a number of different ways. One of the main ways this happened was through the Pastel QAnon and QAMom movements (Rothschild 131). Via Instagram, women were becoming increasingly engaged with QAnon, and these groups were, "...comprised of middle-class women interested in natural birth, parenting groups, yoga, or essential oils" (Bloom and Moskalenko 151). These women used pastel colored art to promote Q beliefs. It was a very easy way to get people more engaged in the movement.

The QAnon movement came to a head on January 6th 2021, when there was an insurrection in the U.S. Capitol by various political groups that believed the 2020 election was rigged in favor of current President Joe Biden (Rothschild 176). Some refer to this even as accelerationism amongst the far right. Accelerationism is "...the extreme far-right…becoming more unified toward an objective of overthrowing the country's prevailing political and social order" (Hughes and Miller-Idriss 2021, 12). As all of these groups worked together to overturn the results of the election, many people were arrested for their violent actions during the insurrection (Bloom and Moskalenko 61). There were a few fatalities as well, including a Capitol police officer and some of the insurrectionists (Bloom and Moskalenko 66). The investigation of the Capitol insurrection is still ongoing, despite the efforts of some Republican lawmakers to prevent it.

Since the January 6th insurrection, the Q movement has lost some of its followers. For example, Ashley Vanderbilt, an avid Q follower, dropped out of the movement after Biden's inauguration (Rosa 2021). She claims that it was the last straw for her in some ways because she realized that she was prioritizing her belief in Trump over her belief in God (Naik 2021). This story is reflective of many others. QAnon has not been completely unraveled. Although their

presence has been removed from social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, the content is still circulated on sites that have a large white supremacist presence like Parler or Telegram (Hughes and Miller-Idriss 16). In fact, downloads of Telegram from the App Store on Apple devices went up 146% in the few months after the January 6th insurrection (Hughes and Miller-Idriss 16). Given all of this information presented, it is likely that QAnon will continue to be a large presence in the American political arena.

Ideology:

But what really is QAnon? Although it is referenced frequently in the media, there are still plenty of misconceptions about what makes up the movement and how it functions. The online movement follows an unknown profile that refers to themselves as Q. The figure Q claims to be a military intelligence officer with a high level security clearance which allows them to know behind the scenes information about the U.S. government (Rothschild 4). At first, most were unsure about who Q was. In early 2022, two groups of forensic linguists used a technique called stylometry to determine that Paul Furber, an early Q supporter, started posting as Q in 2017 (Kirkpatrick 2022, 5). These linguists also believe that Ron Watkins, one of the owners of 8chan, took over as Q in 2018 when Q moved onto his platform (Kirkpatrick 8). Both men still deny writing as Q.

Q's role is not as an organizer of the movement but as an informant for followers. Q makes periodic "drops" of information on social media sites like 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, or 8kun (Rothschild 31). These drops are meant to be investigated by QAnon followers like puzzles. Many of the messages are encoded and require popular "decoders" to unlock the hidden information (Rothschild 9). The decoders, like screen-names Praying Medic or Tracy Beanz,

have subsequently become minor celebrities within these circles (Rothschild 9, Bloom and Moskalenko 26). This is the main structure that makes up QAnon: Q posting drops and followers attempting to decode the hidden information.

The belief system of QAnon members is quite complicated because it is essentially an amalgamation of a series of different conspiracy theories and ideologies. It is "...a complex web of mythology, conspiracy theories, personal interpretations, and assumptions" (Rothschild 3). The basic tenets of the ideology are fairly simple. QAnon followers believe that there is a secret war brewing within the "deep state" of the federal government (Rothschild 4). They see this war as a fundamental conflict between good and evil. They believe that this war will end with many prominent Democrats and the Hollywood elite in prison or publicly assassinated (Rothschild 5). This theory plays into the moral and more religious side of QAnon. The central belief and the fundamental teachings of most of the major monotheistic religions are somewhat correlated, like battles between God and the Devil (Bloom and Moskalenko 200). This fundamental belief guides most of the other later conspiracy theories that have become influential in QAnon circles.

Although that is one of the fundamental beliefs of QAnon, this movement has become an all encompassing group for all different kinds of beliefs and conspiracies. Many "Anons", as the followers call themselves, believe that there are secret child trafficking rings run by prominent politicians. One of the more well known examples of this theory comes from the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory that alleges that a local DC pizza restaurant is a front for child sex trafficking (Bloom and Moskalenko 54). In December 2016, Edward Welch drove from North Carolina to the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria and opened fire in order to find the children, which he believed to be in the basement (Rothschild 26, Amarasingam and Argentino 39). Although this theory does pre-date the founding of QAnon, it reflects one of many conspiracy theories that have been

brought into this movement during its evolution. At the time of writing this paper, there have been additional theories about 5G cellular service, COVID 19 vaccinations, the existence of lizard people, and many others.

It would be impossible to talk about QAnon without referencing the importance of the Presidency of Donald Trump. Many QAnons believe that Donald Trump is the leader of the fight against the "deep state" (Bloom and Moskalenko 13). Around 4,953 drops were made during Trump's presidency, which equates to more words than the New Testament (Rothschild 202). In other iterations of QAnon that have spread internationally, Donald Trump plays a lesser role and is usually replaced with a leader with a similar belief system in that country (Bloom and Moskalenko 313). Despite this, Donald Trump and members of his closest team are a large part of QAnon and its ideology. For example, Michael Flynn has regularly spoken about the Q movement and owned a Q merchandise line (Q:Into the Storm). This shows the key role of the Trump administration within this movement.

Scope:

According to Rothschild, "...it is virtually impossible to discern how many people believe in QAnon" (xiii). Though this may be the case, empirical evidence can help to demonstrate its infiltration of online mediums. QAnon is one of the first conspiracy theory based movements to exist entirely online and it has continually made its presence known on both smaller and more niche sites alongside more popular social media. A study conducted by the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) showed that most white supremacist and QAnon Telegram channels had a range of 1,000-47,000 subscribers each, after studying 23 different channels (Hughes and Miller-Idriss 15). On the most popular Qmap, [websites

dedicated to tracking Q drops], there were over 10 million visitors to the site a month until early 2020 (Bloom and Moskalenko 46). Other popular sites, like Reddit, had a large Q presence as well. Before the removal of QAnon from the site, the r/GreatAwakening page had over 70,000 subscribers (Bloom and Moskalenko 41). As QAnon became more mainstream, it became very popular on sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. In 2018, there were 55 million hashtag mentions of Q on Twitter (Rothschild 144). Facebook groups dedicated to Q proliferated, having millions of followers and members before they were taken down (Rothschild 146). There were around 68 million uses of QAnon hashtags from October 2017 to March 2020 on Facebook alone. These are only some examples of the large online presence that QAnon has amassed.

There are also significant real-life examples of QAnon's scope. In the 2020 primary elections, there were 97 QAnon-affiliated candidates in 30 state elections (Bloom and Moskalenko 46). Around 24 of those went on to compete in the November 2020 election (Bloom and Moskalenko 46). In that election, 90 Q believers launched campaigns for the House (Rothschild 163). Two current U.S. House of Representative members are directly connected to the Q movement, Majorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert (Kirkpatrick 1). Ron Watkins is actually running for a seat in the legislature in Arizona on a QAnon-based platform for the 2022 midterm elections (Kirkpatrick 2). Each of these candidates and current elected officials show how deep QAnon has made it into our society.

QAnon Use of Social Media

QAnon is one of the first fully online social movements. It was created online and continues to operate through this medium. This is partially what makes QAnon such a relevant case study for this paper. As a movement, QAnon has effectively utilized social media by

creating echo chambers through which its members have difficulty escaping (Hacker 2021, 8). The conspiratorial thinking continues to spiral and it becomes very difficult for members to tell objective truth from misinformation that simply supports their belief systems. QAnon relies on slippage between data and information. They do so by connecting data that is not relevant and contextualizing it within a global conspiracy to influence the thinking of their members (Hannah 2021, 3). For example, QAnon members will take two completely unrelated events and claim that they are a part of a pattern because of small coincidences. The movement encourages its followers to "conduct their own research" to connect dots that do not really connect, which creates an elaborate conspiracy theory. This phenomenon is known as crowdsourcing, since it relies on many people to generate research (Hughes and Miller-Idriss 13). This section will outline the process through which QAnon has weaponized social media to forward their recruitment efforts.

QAnon was originally most active on imageboard sites, like 4chan and 8chan (Rothschild 2021). Imageboards are centered around posting photographs with small text attached. These are useful for QAnon because they are not as heavily regulated as popular social media sites (Garry et. al. 2021, 171). Anti-semitic, racist, and other offensive content make up many imageboards on these sites and is very rarely taken down. It is an ideal place for QAnon to operate. That is not to say that QAnon does not have a social media presence. Before January 6th, QAnon had taken hold on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (Rothschild). Their content was widely shared within Facebook groups and by Instagram influencers (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). QAnon content can also be found on Youtube, as many of the Q decoders have their own channels and post their videos on that platform. In fact, "Between March 1st, 2020, and November 1st, 2020, 4,422 videos were produced on YouTube regarding QAnon" (Garry et. al. 179). This shows how

widespread the movement has become in recent years. Despite the deplatforming by many mainstream sites, QAnon has not completely lost its footing in the online space, since it has continued on alt-right aimed platforms. QAnon has been able to spread its ideology online by utilizing memes, hashtags, and fringe media sites.

According to Merriam-Webster, a meme is, "...an amusing or interesting picture, video, etc., that is spread widely through the Internet" (Merriam Webster Dictionary). Memes have become increasingly popular as a medium for comedy. They typically include an image with some sort of text associated with the image. For example, this is a sample of a meme format:

Figure 1:

Memes can contain comedy that exemplifies life experiences, like the one shown here. They can also include popular culture references. Memes are an effective way to communicate with audiences because they use images to convey an idea. These images are important to online movements because they understand that images and mapping are fundamental to humans' cultural understanding of a given phenomenon, including conspiracy theories (Hannah 2021, 2). This may be a possible explanation for why alt-right groups, QAnon in particular, have taken on

using memes in their content. In fact, QAnon has slews of meme content on 8kun to this day (Hannah 4).

Hashtags are another way that QAnon has been able to manipulate social media sites into promoting their content to a wider audience. A prominent example of this would be the #SavetheChildren tag. The #SavetheChildren refers to a push by QAnon supporters that there is a secret child trafficking ring run by prominent Democrats and the Hollywood elite (Bloom and Moskalenko). By using this hashtag, QAnon supporters are hoping to spread the word so that this ring is shut down by law enforcement and the children are returned safely. Although this movement started on the imageboards, it did spread later. The death of Jeffrey Epstein brought this movement, alongside Pizzagate, into mainstream social media (Bleakly 2021, 2). This tactic is extremely effective for recruiting women (Bloom and Moskalenko). In a survey conducted on alt-right media sites, Gab and Telegram, researchers found that the #SavetheChildren was in fact the most effective recruitment tool for QAnon (Garry et. al. 197). Around 47% of respondents on Telegram said that they were interested in the messaging of QAnon because of the "save the children" messaging (Garry et. al. 187). This demonstrates that the use of hashtags like this one can be an excellent tool for QAnon to mobilize support and gain new membership.

Another way that QAnon has been able to mobilize social media is through posting their content on fringe media sites, such as alt-right websites, to capture those with similar interests and beliefs. Researchers are beginning to explore if there is a political predisposition to believing in conspiracy theories. Psychologically speaking, humans always want to contribute to our current worldview and not challenge it with contradicting information (Hacker 7). This means that some people's political opinions predispose them to agree with conspiracies due to their distrust of the government or "mainstream media outlets" (Hacker 7). This would explain why

QAnon chooses to spread their content to fringe media sites, where it may be more accepted by that online community. As of October 2020, there were around 32 QAnon related channels on the alt-right site, Telegram, with a total of 292,272 followers (Garry et. al. 186). A month later, that number jumped to 340,761 total followers (Garry et. al 186). This shows how quickly Telegram users can be indoctrinated into QAnon. Although it is not a large jump ideologically for many of these users, it still shows how QAnon has been able to mobilize fringe media to increase their recruitment capacity.

As a fully online movement, QAnon has been able to master a number of techniques in order to bring in their recruits. However, it is important to understand how effective this truly is in practice. The next section of this paper will take a look at testimonials of former QAnon to examine the relationship between QAnon's recruitment tactics and those that actually have joined the movement to see if these tactics influenced their decision to join.

QAnon Testimonials

As previously stated in the methodology section of this paper, the following section will examine testimonials from former QAnon members on how they were recruited into the movement. For a reminder, these testimonials were collected from publicly available interviews, books written about QAnon members, and Reddit threads. The Reddit posters have been made anonymous, to protect their identities, by not listing any of their screen names within this paper or its citations. Rather than their screen-names, they will be identified by User #_, so one can distinguish between testimonials. This section will be organized by research question to show which of the testimonials collected have data that is relevant to that research question.

Research Question #1: Socioeconomic Status and Education

According to Bloom and Moskalenko, "The increasing number of people who believe in QAnon and the range of socioeconomic and educational strata to which it appeals mean that it is highly likely someone in your family or among your friends believes that QAnon is real" (2021, 10). For the most part, QAnon supporters are often thought of as uneducated because their beliefs are so inconsistent. This is not necessarily the truth. Marc-Andre Argentino, a terrorism researcher, asks on Twitter "Can we stop saying these are uneducated people, that they are crazy and wear tinfoil hats?" (Bloom and Moskalenko 10). By painting QAnoners as uneducated, one diminishes their intelligence and paints an inaccurate picture of the movement. QAnon has been able to appeal very strongly to a range of socioeconomic groups, which is not necessarily consistent with the narrative put forward in the terrorism literature. The disposable free time needed to get involved in the group is consistent with having a higher range of income. For example, retirees are often susceptible to QAnon, specifically those in middle income brackets (Rothschild 2021, 11). At the January 6th insurrection, an event attended by many QAnon members, around 40% of participants owned a business or worked a white collar job (Bloom and Moskalenko 109).

This fact is not really reflected in the testimonials collected for this study. Out of all of the testimonials collected, only one participant is an example of this: Melissa Rein Lively. Melissa is most well-known for being the woman that destroyed a face mask display at a Target during the height of the COVID pandemic in 2020 (Bloom and Moskalenko 117). One video version of Lively's destruction was viewed on Twitter over 10 million times (Andrews 2020). After her incident at Target, another video was posted by Lively's husband in her garage after he threatened to call the police on her (Andrews 2020). In this video, Lively claims to be a

spokesperson for QAnon and says that she speaks on the phone with Donald Trump “all the time” (Sharp 2021). Directly after this second video, Lively was taken to a facility and treated for a manic episode caused by the content that she read online (Sharp 2021). She has since come out against QAnon and has openly labeled the movement as a cult (CNN Video). Currently, she is working to rebuild her life and make her way back to her beliefs before QAnon. Melissa Rein Lively is relevant to this research question because she is a business owner of her own PR firm (Andrews 2020). She considers herself to be a PR professional and a Type A worker (Andrews 2020). This research question relates to her because she has an undergraduate degree and is a business owner, making her college-educated and a part of the middle class.

Melissa Rein Lively initially became indoctrinated by the QAnon movement because of her fear of the pandemic. She calls the year 2020 an “...overwhelming tidal wave of loss and rage and grief and confusion” (Andrews 2020). She also claims that she was interested in QAnon because of a mix of fear, anxiety, depression, and uncertainty (CNN Video 2021, 0:00:10). The panic started on January 27th, 2020 when she was on the phone with her brother who was in China (Stableford and Dickson 2021). They were sending her pictures of people suffering from COVID and the lockdowns, which scared her (Stableford and Dickson). That fear led Lively to the Internet to search for answers. She said that she initially looked for wellness and spirituality pages on Instagram (CNN Video 0:00:31). Most likely, many of these pages were co-opted by QAnon affiliated yogis and wellness coaches. This has been a common practice for QAnon in order to bring in new audiences that may not necessarily be on fringe sites, like 8chan or Telegram (Bloom and Moskalenko). In looking for solace on these Instagram pages, Lively was introduced instead to QAnon conspiracy theories related to the pandemic. She says specifically that:

> It basically purports to have all the answers to the questions you have. The answers are horrifying and will scare you more than reality, but at least you feel oddly comforted, like, 'At least now I have the answer,' (Andrews)

QAnon was able to indoctrinate Lively because of its explanatory factor in a situation where so many people did not know what or who to trust.

Lively also explained that the "Save the Children" messaging strongly appealed to her. (CNN Video 0:01:20). She claims that it took around two months for her to be fully indoctrinated into the movement (Sharp). At that point, she made a full 360 in her views on the pandemic. Lively went from being one of the first to start wearing masks in her office, to being a virulent anti-masker (Stableford and Dickson). This was around May 2020 (Stableford and Dickson). By July 2020, she had violently attacked a mask display in Target and was sent to a facility to be treated for her manic episode (Andrews). Within seven months, Melissa Rein Lively's life had completely changed because of QAnon. She lost her business and her husband threatened to divorce her (Andrews). She was given an ultimatum: her family or QAnon (Andrews). In an interview, Lively says that her time in QAnon was "...like hitting rock bottom for alcohol or drugs." (Sharp). Since then, she has been actively working to rebuild her life and her marriage.

In the process of investigating this research question, there was an important development discovered amongst the testimonials. A number of unemployed people have been known to join QAnon. The disposable free time that was used to explain why those of higher socioeconomic status may join a terrorist group helps to explain why there are so many unemployed people involved in QAnon. With the ample time that unemployment brings, there are some people that fall down internet rabbit holes because they are bored or looking for entertainment. Ashley Vanderbilt, a mother who was indoctrinated into QAnon, was unemployed

when she was recruited (Naik 2021). She had previously worked in construction and lost her job as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Naik). Her story is not unique. A famous Q influencer, Neon Revolt, decided to join QAnon after his failed screenwriting career (Rothschild 97-98). Neon Revolt blamed the liberal elite in Hollywood for not giving his material a chance (Rothschild 97). During this crisis of unemployment, QAnon appealed to him because of their hatred and revile of the Hollywood elite (Rothchild 98). Neon Revolt was able to completely reinvent himself once he was fully invested in QAnon. He quickly became the administrator of QAnon's most popular page on Gab, an alt right social media platform (Rothschild 98). Those that know him say that he "...believes himself to be the smartest in the room, and constantly on the verge of success," (Rothschild 98). These stories illuminate a possible gap in the current terrorism literature that fails to explain why the unemployed get involved in QAnon.

Research Question #2: Mental Health Status or Personal Crisis

Mental health issues have been known to be present amongst lone wolf terrorists, as explained by the terrorism literature (Corner, Gill, and Mason). Online interactions have been known to be isolating which may contribute to why lone wolves experience more mental illness than the traditional population (Corner and Gill). QAnon can be seen as fairly unique in this regard. Many that join the movement claim to have joined in order to have a sense of community. Thus, there may be another reason why QAnoners may experience mental health problems. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a mental health crisis for many people. QAnon provides an explanation: the pandemic is not real and is just being used as a scare tactic. By providing explanations during a time of crisis for many people, QAnon is able to effectively recruit these susceptible populations. No one wants to believe that their current life

situation is a result of their own actions because “Our lives are often full of failure - personal, professional, and collective. We do not want to believe these failures are due to honest mistakes by others or random chance” (Rothschild 87). Thus, QAnon uses its explanatory value to recruit those that are suffering through some sort of personal crisis or mental health issue.

Jitarth Jadeja is an example of someone facing a crisis before being indoctrinated into QAnon. Before joining QAnon, Jadeja was at a low point in his life. He had failed to graduate from university after years of study and was diagnosed with ADHD (Rothschild 92). Jadeja was initially introduced to the movement through watching an interview on Alex Jones’s show, Infowars (Rosen). This interview sent him down a spiral that kept him in the QAnon movement for over two years (Rosen). QAnon was able to effectively radicalize him by explaining that his ADHD was a strength, rather than a hindrance. QAnon told him that “He wasn’t a failure that couldn’t move forward, but a warrior whose ADHD gave him an ability to hyperfocus” (Rothchild 92). His hyperfixation with QAnon was likely a result of his ADHD. Hyperfixation on certain activities or ideas is a listed symptom of ADHD. Thus, a personal crisis that he was going through sent Jitarth Jadeja straight into the arms of QAnon.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a trigger for many to suffer a personal crisis in 2020. User #6 clearly states that “...I was in a very vulnerable place. If the pandemic never happened, I do not think I would have fallen down the rabbit hole.” In either March or April 2020, the User saw a QAnon-affiliated Tiktok video that encouraged the viewer to watch a documentary called “Out of the Shadows”. After watching that video, the Tiktok algorithms continued to show the User more and more QAnon related content. The User called it an echo chamber of QAnon ideas and claimed that it was like living in another reality. Being in such a vulnerable place mentally during the pandemic made this User much more likely to join the movement. After Biden’s

inauguration, the User chose to leave QAnon because many of the events predicted by Q never happened. However, the User then got caught up in the anti-vaccine movement for COVID-19. QAnon and the anti-vaccine movement have become closely tied during this pandemic. After spending months in this anti-vaccine movement, the User asked themselves why they were truly opposed to the vaccine. By consulting with friends and trusted doctors, the User was able to fully leave the movement behind. They continue to refer to QAnon as a cult and fully blame the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting personal crisis for their involvement in QAnon.

User #2 also references having a crisis during their testimony. User #2 was initially brought into the right wing media scene by their parents. They continually got more involved on "Politigram" on Instagram and other alt right media sites, like 4chan and Telegram. The details of their QAnon indoctrination will be outlined in a later section. Although they cite their parents as their reason for joining the movement, they also blame a crisis of faith that they were having. They said that they were "...driven by the apex of a faith crisis I was experiencing since late 2017. I was converted to Catholicism and began to integrate with niche extreme-right 'traditional Catholic' communities." This was intimately related to their journey within QAnon. This faith crisis shook their worldview and made them especially susceptible to recruitment. QAnon took advantage of their personal crisis and used it to bring them into the movement.

Mental health crises also made people especially susceptible to QAnon recruitment. User #7 on Reddit had a number of mental health issues before they joined QAnon. They had been diagnosed with autism, OCD, depression, and anxiety. Before their initial recruitment, they had been experiencing an existential crisis and a crisis of faith. The User was questioning God and the Bible due to the hateful rhetoric that used religion as its basis. This led to a rather serious mental health crisis filled with suicidal ideations. Joining the QAnon conspiracy was supposed to

be a way to relieve the doubts and fears that they had been feeling during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it proved to only get worse for them. In 2021, they stated that "...I have been dealing with severe depression, paranoia, and nightmares related to Q-adjacent conspiracy theories, and it has only been getting worse and worse recently despite seeing a psychologist." The User explains that QAnon has put them in a vicious cycle: they see a concerning conspiracy, they talk to their psychologist about it, they calm down, and then they see another concerning conspiracy. The User says that antidepressants and antipsychotics have not been enough to stop the nightmares and paranoia. Compounding a personal crisis, a history of mental health issues, and a larger global emergency made this User extremely susceptible to recruitment from QAnon.

Each of these testimonies help to show how QAnon was able to recruit those that were susceptible as a result of a personal crisis. Whether it be the COVID-19 pandemic, or a mental health problem, QAnon was able to recruit these susceptible people that were looking for an alternative explanation when their worldviews were shattered.

Research Question #3: Military Involvement

Research has shown that there is a strong correlation between military involvement and joining the QAnon movement. There is a trend that "...former military and intelligence figures flocked to QAnon, either because they believed it was real, or more likely, saw a big money-making opportunity" (Rothschild 10). Former military members have taken to Q strongly. QAnon attendance at the January 6th Capitol insurrection is an important example of this trend. Actual eyewitness accounts of the insurrection stated that there were, in attendance "...actual ex-military and police types flexing their familiarity with arms and tactical skills" (Rothschild xii). In a study of those that were arrested after the January 6th insurrection, around 20% of those

arrested were veterans or active service soldiers (Bloom and Moskalenko 46). This shows that soldiers and veterans can be susceptible to recruitment by QAnon. In reading the testimonies of former QAnon members, there were some that had ties to the military.

Ashli Babbit, the woman killed at the Capitol insurrection, was an Air Force veteran for over fourteen years (Bloom and Moskalenko 45). She was reported to have been in distress after her return from service and had a difficult time transitioning from military to civilian life (Bloom and Moskalenko 45). After the 2016 election, she was introduced to QAnon content and became fully recruited into the movement very quickly (Rothschild 159). Before finding QAnon, she had been jumping from job to job, but QAnon gave her a new focus (Bloom and Moskalenko 45). Babbit found QAnon in the online space, but it was not clear how exactly she was introduced to it. Despite this, she continually posted QAnon content across her social media accounts and followed QAnon hashtags (Rothschild 159). She attended the Capitol insurrection on behalf of QAnon and was shot by a Capitol police officer (Rothschild 160). Babbit was one of a few casualties that day. This is just one high profile example of a military veteran that was wrapped up in QAnon because of their personal vulnerabilities.

Another example can be found in the story of Ashley Vanderbilt, who was previously mentioned in another section. Ashley Vanderbilt is a veteran and a mother to a young toddler (The View 0:02:32). Before QAnon, Vanderbilt did not consider herself to be a political person. She claimed that she only considered herself to be a Republican because her parents had always voted red (Naik). During the COVID-19 pandemic, she lost her job in construction (Naik). She felt depressed and started to spend too much time on social media (Naik). She was first introduced to QAnon on Tiktok because she was looking for pro-Donald Trump content (Rosa). Although she first was being shown mostly pro-Trump content, more and more conspiracy

theories began to make their way onto her For You Page on Tiktok (Rosa). “I was unintentionally getting conspiracy theories. I didn't know that it was QAnon. I didn't know any of that, but it started on TikTok,” she says (Rosa). Her indoctrination was complete within weeks.

During her time in the movement, she was particularly interested in the #SavetheChildren part of QAnon, since she was a mother (The View 0:01:53). Vanderbilt explains, “Child trafficking is real. Sex trafficking is real. It's a real problem … It piques your interest because as a mom, I want to protect my kid. I want to know everything” (Rosa). However, she did not believe in the main conspiracy of QAnon, but rather chose certain aspects of the movement to believe in (Rosa). Over time, she began to get more involved with alt-right social media, like Telegram (The View 0:04:49). Vanderbilt ended up leaving QAnon after the Biden inauguration because she found that Q’s predictions were no longer coming true (Naik). She thought that Trump was going to enact martial law before Biden’s inauguration to stop his ascent to the presidency (Naik). When that did not happen, Vanderbilt went into a full blown panic and feared for her daughter’s safety (Rosa). Her mother was the one to discourage the panic when she told her that it was God’s will for Biden to win (Rosa). Upon realizing that she had placed her belief in Donald Trump over her belief in God, Vanderbilt was able to leave QAnon behind, though not completely. Today, Ashley Vanderbilt tries to encourage veterans to not get pulled into QAnon. She told *The View* that many military members are still in QAnon and they need help to be deradicalized (00:02:42). Ashley Vanderbilt has almost become a spokesperson for helping veterans leave QAnon for good.

The Reddit threads did not have many accounts from former military personnel that chose to get involved in QAnon. One user did talk about her husband’s involvement in the law enforcement community. User #8 said that their husband was a former law enforcement officer.

He was initially introduced to QAnon by various Qtubers on Youtube. Some examples that they cited were Charlie Ward and Romana Didulo, two prominent Qtubers. The QAnoner husband threatened to leave the marriage if their spouse ever got vaccinated. The User was fearful of the COVID-19 pandemic and wanted to get vaccinated. Eventually, they made the difficult decision to get vaccinated because they believed in the science behind the vaccine. The User's husband ended up following through with the threat and left the User after 15 years of marriage and a 20 year long relationship. The User was devastated, but could not understand why their husband chose QAnon over them. Although the husband was not former military, they were a law enforcement officer, which may provide a similar susceptibility.

With these testimonies, it is clear that there is some evidence to suggest a link between former military service and QAnon. There is a military presence within the movement. Some QAnon members actually chose to take the United States military oath of enlistment and refer to themselves as "digital soldiers" (Rothschild 10). The concept of "digital soldiers" refers to the idea that QAnon members are fighting in an online war against the secrets of the "Deep State". Both the FBI and Department of Homeland Security have suggested that there may be a risk for these "digital soldiers" to commit real life violence.

Research Question #4: Kinship Radicalization

In his book, *The Storm is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, a Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything,* Rothschild received an anonymous message from the family member of a current QAnon member:

> He indoctrinated many family members. Luckily there are several of us who have supported each other as we watch our Q family members spiral. It blows my mind that family members that are good people and intelligent become these characters (99).

Unfortunately, QAnon members often indoctrinate their family members into the movement. Kinship radicalization, as a reminder, is a phenomenon whereby people tend to bring their family members into their terrorist organizations. This is a well-established method of recruitment because family members can effectively vouch for each other. Below are some examples of testimonials in which members were either indoctrinated by their family members or brought their family members into QAnon.

One of the more public examples of kinship radicalization is in the story of Jitarth Jadeja. The majority of his recruitment story was outlined in an earlier section. Although Jadeja was not indoctrinated into QAnon by a family member, he did try to bring his family into the movement. Jadeja was successful in convincing his father to join the movement. He said that his father was the only person who listened to his conspiracies and they often shared theories and ideas with one another, once he introduced his father to QAnon (Lord et. al). Jadeja explains that "...when we were in the cult together, it brought us very close in a way that had never happened before. And I was, for the first time in my life, I felt like my dad was giving me a lot of respect" (Rosen). Since leaving QAnon, Jadeja regrets indoctrinating his father (Rosen). His father is still a part of the Q movement as of mid 2021. Jitarth Jadeja's story shows the power of kinship radicalization.

A few of the Reddit thread testimonies acquired also showed the phenomenon of kinship radicalization. User #2 claims that their radicalization process started in 2016, while the User was in middle school. They were given a cell phone, to stay in touch with their friends, but

quickly became wrapped up in the 2016 election coverage. The User states that it was their parents that first got them interested in alt right media, which led them on a path to QAnon. They started to get heavily involved in the "Politigram" community on Instagram, which introduced them to a range of different alt right conspiracies, including QAnon. They started to only get their information from social media. By 2019, they were fully indoctrinated into various right wing circles. Once the COVID-19 pandemic caused the closure of public schools, the User was constantly finding their information on Instagram, Telegram, and the 4chan /pol/ thread. Through most of 2020 and 2021, the User was engaged with these conspiracies. Despite the fact that the events Q predicted were not happening, the User continued to believe. They finally came out of the movement once they distanced themselves from social media in mid October. The User does not give a specific reason for the change. Since then, the reader has consistently researched media to poke holes in the theories that once ruled their belief system. The highlight from this story comes from the fact that it was their parents' belief system that led them on a path to finding QAnon.

User #3 was also introduced to QAnon by their family members. They claim that most of their family is conservative, but some of them fall into the extreme far right. This User's family became interested in QAnon during the 2020 election cycle. They switched from traditional conservative news outlets, like Fox News, to *Daily Wire*, *The Epoch Times*, *Church Militant,* and *The Remnant*. The User was convinced by their family to read articles from these news sources, and soon began to seek out similar content on social media. This is where the User was first introduced to QAnon online. The User said that "...I would read Twitter feeds, then after the Twitter purge, found Gab and Telegram and started reading feeds from there." They also continued to look at content from different Qtubers on Youtube, such as X22, And We Know,

Praying Medic, Jordan Sather, Charlie Ward, and Mel K. QAnon began to take over their entire life. “I had gotten into periods where I was obsessed over news before, but nothing at all like this. It consumed my day, pretty much 75% of my waking hours were spent reading feeds and watching videos” they said. This User was obsessed with Q until around May 2021, when they were debating whether or not to get vaccinated. As a pharmacy student, the User trusted the science behind the vaccine and their belief in Q began to unravel the more that QAnon pushed against the vaccine. By June, the User had quit Gab, an alt right social media platform, and stopped watching all Q content on Youtube. It took another month before they quit Telegram. The User’s family is still heavily involved in the QAnon movement. They exclaim “I am so mad at QAnon and all associated with it because they have only sought to divide people and hurt relationships. I wish it would just go away and all of my family would be normal again.” This story reflects how difficult it can be to remain outside of QAnon, if everyone in your family has already been indoctrinated into the movement. The User was radicalized by their family and has been unable to get them out.

This is also reflected in the recruitment story of Users #4 and #5. User #4 says that they were indoctrinated into QAnon by their father. They say that “My dad is the head conspiracy theorist in my family. I think my mom just goes along with it, but my dad got hardcore into Q and election fraud in recent years.” They spent most of 2020 trying to piece together the difference between reality and fiction. They considered themselves to be a QAnoner, simply because their parents were both in the movement, but they are not really sure of what they believe. The User is an adult but because of the indoctrination that their parents inflicted, they are unable to make their own decisions about their beliefs. They cannot figure out if the masses have been brainwashed by the “mainstream media” or if their parents are the crazy ones. Despite

doing their own research, they have been unable to figure out if they still want to believe in Q or not. This User #4 has continued to struggle and is somewhat still involved in the Q movement. They are questioning and possibly trying to find their way out. User #5 has a similar story. User #5 was a commenter on a post entitled "What hooked you?" on one of the subReddits that was examined. They said that their family, especially their father, was the one to bring them into QAnon. They explained that their family "...[they] were already incredibly pro-Republican, so they naturally took the bait and dragged me in (I was still Republican at the time)." Each of these testimonies shows how strongly kinship radicalization functions as a recruitment tool for QAnon.

Sometimes kinship radicalization was used but actually failed to bring the family into the movement. Jitarth Jadeja's first attempt at radicalization, with his sister, was largely unsuccessful. Jadeja attempted to indoctrinate his sister, Joy, much later during his involvement with QAnon (Andrews). In an interview with his sister from the *Washington Post*, Joy remarks that her brother once spoke about Q to her for two hours straight on a day trip (Andrews). When he would try to bring her into QAnon, she would say "Well what on Earth do you want me to do? If I'm going to die I'm going to die" (Andrews). On Reddit, User #1 was initially introduced to right wing media in 2016. They said that they quickly became a semi-famous black conservative influencer on both Youtube and Facebook. They were not formally brought into QAnon until 2017. Initially, they thought that the movement was very weird, but became heavily invested quickly. They were accepted by the QAnon community and given considerable support. This User tried to bring their family into the movement repeatedly. The User thought that they alone knew the truth and wanted to bring their family in. However, this action had the opposite effect, as their family actually helped them to deradicalize from QAnon. They specifically stated "That mindset changed and as a result my life changed for the better. I met new friends, and reunited

with old ones. I found myself being less angry, and less depressed." These are just a few examples of instances where kinship radicalization failed to bring family members into the movement. Thus, kinship radicalization has been a rather successful recruitment tool for QAnon, but has not necessarily worked in every situation in which it was used.

Conclusions:

Each of these research questions attempted to discover how QAnon has used social media as a recruitment tool to bring new members into the group. By specifically targeting certain portions of the population, such as those with mental health issues or former military members, QAnon has been able to augment their numbers and sustain their movement online. QAnon's appeal to a wide range of socioeconomic groups and education levels means that they are most likely not choosing to target specific populations in this regard. Additionally, using kinship radicalization appears to be an effective method for QAnon to gain additional support. With this information, one can have a better understanding of which populations are more likely to be indoctrinated by QAnon and how QAnon will bring them into the movement. Knowing these susceptibilities means that it is possible to create policy recommendations in order to help stem the growth of QAnon, and other similar terrorist groups online.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Discussion:

After having analyzed all the data from the testimonials collected, QAnon has used social media to its advantage in the recruitment process, recruiting specific populations and using kinship radicalization. This also shows that the theories of political recruitment traditionally used

to explain face-to-face recruitment should be able to explain online recruitment, at least within the context of QAnon. Most of these theories are reflected in the testimonials collected. Hopefully, this preliminary research will influence others to look further into these theories more systematically. Another hope is that this research will help to inspire stakeholders to take action to protect those on social media networks that will be exposed to this extremist content. The following section will suggest a few policy recommendations for both the public and private sector that should help to protect social media users from harmful content.

Policy Recommendations:

Based on the research conducted on QAnon, it is vital to introduce new policies in order to protect social media users. The first policy recommendation is to institute some sort of federal standard for media literacy. As of the writing of this paper, there is no national curriculum for teaching media literacy to students. Many students are not introduced to this concept until they start university. The federal government and the Department of Education should take responsibility for creating a standard and curriculum for media literacy so that people do not continue to fall prey to misinformation and terrorist ideologies. The second policy recommendation is for social media platforms to change their platform moderation policies to protect their users. Far too often, terrorist content and misinformation find their way onto social media feeds with impunity. As shown in the introduction of this paper, sites like Facebook choose to prioritize user engagement over safety. This needs to be addressed so that social media users are better informed and protected from hate speech, misinformation, and terrorist content. With these two policy recommendations, terrorists will likely have a much harder time gaining a foothold on social media sites.

Media Literacy Requirements:

As the social media landscape continues to become more polluted with misinformation and hate speech, media literacy has become more important than ever. This term, like terrorism, has some definitional challenges as many in the field are unable to come up with a comprehensive definition (Phillips and Milner 2021, 151). The National Association of Media Literacy Education defines it as "...the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication" (NAMLE 2019). Essentially with this definition, media literacy is the capability to use forms of media to complete certain objectives. For example, using Google to search for a recipe. This term can also refer to the ability for people to critically analyze the media that they take in (Phillips and Milner 2021, 151). Using the same example, this would mean that one could search for a recipe online, but also use resources like the number of reviews or the reputation of the source to determine if the recipe will turn out to be good. Americans are largely lacking this type of media literacy.

Many are unable to make the distinction between reliable and unreliable information. On social media, there is very little distinction between an expert and a novice, making it difficult to determine what information is reliable (Hacker 2021, 8). Even verifying sources and double checking claims are not always necessarily effective in the online world. With the proliferation of sites and accounts that cater to the beliefs of a specific audience, theoretically, anyone can find multiple sources that make the same wrong claim based on unreliable sources (Phillips and Milner 152). This does not mean that one should give up and give in to the misinformation being spread online. It is still possible to foster media literacy skills. This leads to the first policy recommendation to be explored in this paper: the creation of a media literacy standard.

Americans are consuming media at an exponential rate but there is still not a national standard for media literacy to help protect Americans from misinformation (Hannah 2021, 1). By creating a curriculum that teaches media literacy in schools, students will gain the skills necessary to prevent the continued spread of misinformation. Since it has been well-established that social media giants have little interest in filtering misinformation and hate speech, it is now the responsibility of the user to garner the skills needed to protect themselves against misinformation. A media literacy education would be extremely beneficial in this regard. For example, Kahne and Bowyer studied 2,101 subjects, ages 15-27, as they looked at partisan political content on social media (Bulger and Davison 8). They found that those that had media literacy training were "...more likely to rate evidence-based posts as accurate than posts containing misinformation" (Bulger and Davison 8). Media literacy does not just extend to political content, it can also help people to better identify violent content. In a study conducted by German researchers, they tested 627 middle schoolers after taking a 5 week media literacy course on evaluating violence (Bulger and Davison 8). The students that participated in this training were less likely to seek out violent content and did not actively accept aggression in their media (Bulger and Davison 8). Media literacy could help people to be able to identify violent terrorist content online and then avoid that information.

This relates to the research conducted within this thesis because having increased media literacy will protect people from being indoctrinated by terrorist groups. If one can identify a terrorist group's rhetoric and determine that it is misinformation, it will be much harder for those users to be recruited. Using the example of QAnon, there is another population that is frequently targeted by this group online: Baby Boomers (Bloom and Moskalenko 20). There are researchers that believe that older generations, like Baby Boomers, were very helpful for the spread of

QAnon content on mainstream social media platforms (Rothschild 35). It is explained that, "...one of the reasons why baby boomers have fallen in with Q to a surprising degree - many are empty nesters, on their own, or retired" (Rothschild 11). Their loneliness causes them to seek out content and connection on the Internet, but their lack of media literacy skills make Baby Boomers susceptible to misinformation and terrorist content. They are especially active on Facebook (Bloom and Moskalenko 20). For example, a 2019 study at NYU and Princeton found that those over 65 were around seven times more likely to share misinformation and fake news stories on Facebook (Rothschild). If these Baby Boomers had media literacy skills, they would most likely be more well-equipped to identify misinformation and would be less susceptible to recruitment. Since they did not grow up in the age of the Internet, they do not have these skills. This further emphasizes the need for media literacy skills in younger generations, as they grew up using social media very casually and still lack these basic skills. Having a national standard for media literacy that is taught in schools will hopefully protect people from being recruited by terrorist organizations online.

Platform Moderation:

In using the Facebook Files example from the introduction of this thesis, it was made clear that social media sites tend to prioritize user engagement over the spread of misinformation and hate speech online (Lima). Moderation is not something that is actively favored by these social media platforms. By limiting speech online, social media platforms open themselves up to criticism that they are policing the freedom of expression. In the United States, there are limits to the freedom of speech. For example, no one has the right to yell "fire" in a crowded area. This jeopardizes the safety of all of the people around them, as the chaos may cause some people to

get hurt. All forms of threats are not protected under the first amendment (HG Legal Resources). Specifically, “Speech is not usually protected when it constitutes a threat toward another that places the target of such speech of bodily harm or death” (HG Legal Resources). Since most terrorist content online contains violent messaging or threats, it would not be unreasonable for social media sites to remove this content. It would be within their constitutional rights to do, despite the belief that this would be considered as censorship.

This belief may also be partially related to a concept called *informational liberalism.* Informational liberalism refers to the landscape that has been created online where someone should single-handedly work to find information (Phillips and Milner 152). In their book, *You Are Here,* Phillips and Milner state “It aggrandizes autonomy and self-sufficiency, recasts communities as markets, and privileges individual freedoms from outside restriction over communitarian freedoms for the collective to enjoy” (152). Essentially, informational liberalism insists that users independently foster media literacy skills, rather than social media networks filtering misinformation. When people then fall victim to misinformation, social media sites have no responsibility to pick up the slack, as they prioritize freedom of expression over the safety of their users. This allows for terrorists to continue to use these platforms for recruitment purposes.

This is not to say that social media platforms do not censor any terrorist content. There have been numerous reports of sites taking down terrorist accounts. When asked about their moderation policy in regards to Hezbollah, Twitter “...referred to a transparency report detailing how it had suspended 205,156 accounts for promoting terrorism in the first half of 2018” (Frankel and Hubbard). In specific reference to QAnon, many social media sites have completely banned their content. Reddit was the first to deplatform all QAnon related accounts in 2018 (Rothschild). By July 2020, Twitter had suspended 7,000 accounts and said that they would limit

150,000 more because of their connection with QAnon content (Amarasingam and Argentino 42). Facebook, Instagram,Tiktok, and Youtube all made similar commitments. However, their efforts are not enough to actually prevent terrorist content from making their way onto these platforms. According to the *New York Times*, terrorist groups have continued to evolve so they can go around these moderation policies and continue to post their hateful content (Frankel and Hubbard). Terrorists specifically post content that can avoid the red flags that artificial intelligence based moderation systems are looking for (Frankel and Hubbard). This shows how much of a problem this continues to be. In addition, the algorithms created by these social media platforms have also been exposing people to violent content. In a study referenced in the introduction of this paper, a dummy account was created on Facebook with conservative leanings and within five days, the Facebook algorithm exposed this account to QAnon content (Lima). This is just another example of how social media platforms are responsible for people being exposed to this content.

This is why social media platforms need to make a commitment to creating new moderation policies that actually prevent terrorist groups from posting hate speech or misinformation online. By improving their AI systems, it would make it much more difficult for terrorists to continue posting their content. Although these sites have deplatformed QAnon, there are still many hate groups and terrorists that have access to these sites. It is not safe for other users to be exposed to this content. There are alternative, fringe media sites that are specifically catered to those that choose to share obscene or questionable content, like 8chan. Social media sites have a social responsibility to protect their users and should increase their moderation efforts.

Conclusion:

As Uncle Ben from the Spider-Man comics [and more recently in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Aunt May] has said "With great power comes great responsibility." Social media has brought an enormous amount of resources to modern society. It has allowed for people to stay in constant contact with one another, despite massive geographical distances. It has also democratized the spread of information so that more people can get access to the content that they need. However, these advantages also have darker consequences. Social media is being utilized as a tool for terrorist groups to recruit members and spread their content. Groups, like QAnon, have used the resources that social media has provided and used them for nefarious purposes. They are choosing to target populations and use the connections that make social media special to bring more followers into their terrorist organizations.

Yet, with all this power comes great responsibility. It is the responsibility of our federal government and social media companies to attempt to protect vulnerable groups from being targeted online for recruitment. By implementing the policy recommendations outlined in the above sections, people will hopefully gain the skills that they need to become protected from terrorist rhetoric online. And with time, optimistically, terrorist groups will be forced to find a new mechanism for recruitment.

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