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# Information literacy in the age of internet conspiracism

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## Abstract

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been riven by information challenges, from mis/disinformation campaigns, fake news, and propaganda to online conspiracy theories. At a time when more people are literate than perhaps at any other time in history, we still see the rise and viral global spread of unhinged conspiracy theories across the web. The existence of such crowd-sourced conspiracy theories presents unique challenges for scholars and teachers of information literacy (IL), who face intractable challenges in inculcating healthy information practices. This is especially visible when we compare current IL frameworks with principles espoused within these conspiratorial movements. The online conspiracy theory QAnon demonstrates a particularly thorny problem for IL efforts because QAnon operates according to many of the same principles espoused in literacy frameworks. Since its inception in 2017, QAnon has become one of the most complex online conspiracy theories precisely because it relies on a complex set of informational practices enacted by thousands of followers known as anons. In this article, I argue that internet conspiracies such as QAnon weaponise IL through incitement to “do your own research”. I apply a qualitative approach to compare established principles advocated by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) to social media posts by Q and his anons to demonstrate the striking similarity in orientation toward questions of authority, context, literacy and research. In my analysis, we need new models for IL to combat conspiracism through a better understanding of the political contours of information ecosystems precisely because these similarities preclude effective engagement, and I conclude by gesturing toward future interventions.

## Keywords

conspiracy theories; critical information literacy; information literacy; information studies; political extremism; US

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## 1. Introduction

[I]t's up to American patriots to arm themselves with the information. (Donald Trump, 2022, p.3)

Two years after going silent following Donald Trump's electoral defeat in 2020, the mysterious individual known as Q, whose cryptic online posts launched the conspiracy theory QAnon, returned to the dark-web imageboard site 8kun: “Shall we play a game once more?” (Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6, 2022b). Like many of Q's posts, this statement reveals its truth within the enunciation. It contains the reality of the theory's own fictiveness within the very mechanism which gives it reality as discourse. It signals itself as a game, as fiction, even as it exhorts followers to (re)join the movement by appealing to their patriotism: “Are you ready to serve your country again? Remember your oath” (Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6, 2022a). This complex informational dynamic reveals the intractable challenges of 21<sup>st</sup>-century online ecosystems. At a time when humans have never been more literate about accessing information online, Americans still find themselves victims of fake news (disinformation about current events), misinformation

(inaccurate information spread unintentionally with no intention to deceive), disinformation (inaccurate information spread intentionally to deceive), and conspiratorial fantasies about shadowy cabals responsible for sociopolitical ills. This paradox characterises our online existence, with no signs of improvement in coming years, especially as far-right political extremism has only worsened the capacity for unreasonable behavior.

QAnon is one particularly complex and dangerous permutation of the information ecosystems of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century internet. QAnon began in 2017 as a series of cryptic anonymous posts on the imageboard website 4chan from an individual (or individuals) claiming to be a Q-level intelligence operative within the Trump administration, leaking sensitive information about an impending revelation of shadowy dealings within the Deep State. These revelations were believed to culminate in a cataclysm known as “the Storm” in which high-level politicians, celebrities, and elites would be indicted for various Satanic practices involving children (Hannah, 2021b; Zuckerman, 2019). Q called upon all patriots to help expose evil doers through a complex research process, and the theory spread globally, infiltrating various online non-profit organisations (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). QAnon’s radical ideology sparked multiple acts of mass violence and contributed to the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection (Beckett, 2020; Benner, 2021; Jensen & Kane, 2021). QAnon quickly grew to include thousands of followers in over seventy countries (Farivar, 2020). Followers of Q, known as anons, dedicated time and resources to interpret the mysterious Q posts through a process of research known as “baking the bread” and developed tactics to recruit family and friends, known as “red pilling”. As I will show, QAnon is the logical outgrowth of increasing political extremism combined with information technology; and, as the product of such a fusion, QAnon practices a strange form of information literacy (IL) which makes it difficult to combat.

As political extremism has Balkanised information according to political ideology—in which mainstream liberal news and academic authority is considered fake and far-right opinion is imagined to be revealed hidden truth, repressed by liberal orthodoxy—Americans are at risk of falling victim to radicalisation and extremism through online information sources. Social media platforms allow anyone to find information on any topic and share it globally, regardless of its veracity, and the potential for mis/dis/malinformation to impact decision making in dangerous ways has never been higher. According to a 2019 study conducted by Ipsos, nearly 86% of respondents who encountered fake news reported falling victim to it (Simpson, 2019). According to a Pew Research poll conducted in 2020, 41% of Republicans who had heard about QAnon described the conspiracy theory as somewhat or very good for the country (Mitchell et al., 2020b). And according to another poll conducted the same year, Americans who receive their news mainly via social media are less informed and less knowledgeable about information (Mitchell et al., 2020a). More people are plugged into online information sources than ever, yet the toxic impact of bad information has never been higher.

The need for flexible IL efforts is significant in an age in which the former president of the United States actively perpetuates lies about the security of U.S. elections, online platforms enable the crowd-sourcing of conspiracy theories such as QAnon, extremists use social media to coordinate an assault on American democracy during the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack and public health initiatives to halt a global pandemic are mired in disinformation (Nelson et. al., 2020; Suciu, 2022). Because so much of our lives is online, and because factual information in a time of historical crises is so important, the information landscape is incredibly impactful on the overall health of American society. As researchers who study IL, we must find effective tools to intervene in this time of information crisis, especially since our current tools have proven insufficient. Furthermore, we must shoulder some responsibility to engage the American public and students around these questions as our very democracy may be at stake. In this article, I analyse the landscape of internet conspiracies as a particularly dangerous form of IL and assess possible responses for information professionals. Qualitatively comparing principles of IL

with values espoused by QAnon, I argue that this online conspiracy theory has weaponised IL as an essential component of building the movement.

## 2. Information Landscapes in the Post-Truth Age

Before analysing QAnon as a form of IL, I want to sketch the particular interventions of IL in the post-truth conspiratorial age in which we live (Merlan, 2019). As a pedagogical and scholarly intervention, IL has long tackled complex informational challenges surrounding the capacity of internet users to assess the veracity of information, question expertise and critique information sources. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) describes IL as an “educational reform movement” designed to intervene in a “dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem” (2016, p.7). Lanning (2017) defines IL as “the ability to recognize an information need, find, evaluate, manage, synthesize, use, and communicate information efficiently, effectively, and ethically to answer that information need” (p. 51). Lloyd (2010) describes information literacy as a socio-cultural practice operative within a landscape of information. Information is thus *a priori* embedded in an ecosystem of information production and consumption, which shapes and molds the information as it is received and interpreted by readers who then demonstrate literacy by evaluating, assessing, managing, synthesising and communicating that information.

Since the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, public consumption of “bad” information has been thrown into sharp relief within a context of increasingly extreme political divides and simmering dissatisfaction with the status quo (Pew Research Center, 2019). The influence of false narratives, spread virally on social media by foreign actors and bot farms, was immediately recognised as a site for critical engagement by educators (Agosto, 2018; Journell, 2019). In an effort to respond to the information crisis, scholars have reassessed IL as a tactical response to online mis/dis/malinformation. Furthermore, public consumers of online information are particularly at risk due to the behaviour of literate audiences who believe themselves internet savvy (Cooke, 2018). As COVID-19 has ravaged the globe, the viral spread of online mis/dis/malinformation has resulted in what some scholars are describing as an infodemic (Cinelli et. al., 2020; Islam et. al., 2020) In many ways, the concept of the infodemic is reflective of our contemporary moment, the so-called post-truth era (McIntyre, 2018).

In responding to the spread of such mis/dis/malinformation, scholars have posited IL as a possible solution (Espina & Spracklin, 2022; Naeem & Bhatti, 2020). Whereas there are many kinds of online literacy, Jones-Jang et. al. (2021) demonstrates that IL may be the best tactical response to help audiences recognise fake news and misinformation. Stephanie Beene and Katie Greer (2021) argue for a shift from IL heuristics to mindsets and behaviours as a response to conspiracy theories. Having a public impact on the information landscape may also require researchers to promote IL beyond institutions of higher education as it has become clear that the information crisis is centered on public consumption of information, which cannot be addressed solely within the halls of academia (Lloyd, 2010; Trott et al., 2014). The 2021 theme of UNESCO’s annual Global Media and Information Literacy Week focused on IL “for the public good.” The need has become critical for interventions that can short-circuit fake news, mis/dis/malinformation, and, most notably for this article, online conspiracy theories. I argue that IL as it is currently conceived may be insufficient because internet conspiracies operate according to similar principles; rather, a re-conceptualised IL may open a space for impactful interventions.

An essential aspect of IL efforts is the development of frameworks for inculcating literacies. The ACRL argues that higher education requires renewed attention to foundational ideas about information landscapes. Crafting a framework for IL provides a structural model for literacy pedagogy. The ACRL’s (2016) framework proposes six central principles as foundational ideas, which are designed to inculcate skepticism toward received authority, to recognise and assess

the production of information and to position research within broader scholarly conversations. The Big 6 (<https://thebig6.org/>) process model, developed by Mike Eisenberg and Bob Berkowitz, is a model for teaching IL and relies on a process of defining research tasks, seeking and using information, and synthesising and evaluating such information (figure 1). While I focus primarily on the ACRL's framework, due to its epistemological assumptions about information, I mention the Big 6 model here as a further example of the ways in which conspiracy theories may already implement such tactics as task definition, information seeking, use of information and evaluation. Each of these tasks is an essential component of internet conspiracy theories.

**Figure 1:** ACRL and Big 6 frameworks

ACRL	Big 6
Authority is Constructed and Contextual	Task Definition
Information Creation as a Process	Information Seeking Strategies
Information has Value	Location and Access
Research as Inquiry	Use of Information
Scholarship as Conversation	Synthesis
Searching as Strategic Exploration	Evaluation

As I will argue, IL may be insufficient to intervene in arguably the most dangerous information crisis of our time: the rise of bizarre online conspiracy theories, which deploy similar tactics to IL frameworks. QAnon represents a significant challenge to IL efforts because it is structured on recognition of and respect for the importance of authority and information combined with facility in navigating information landscapes. The unique combination of information technologies with widespread availability of social media platforms on which to share information and mainstreaming of extremist right-wing politics means more Americans than ever are susceptible to conspiratorial delusions (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019). We are confronting an information crisis wherein the consequences of online conspiracism have resulted in active threats to American democracy. The effects of such an information crisis have only begun to be felt as we approach the 2024 presidential elections, with recurring conspiracies about election fraud and the COVID pandemic gaining traction among many Americans.

### 3. Resurgence of the Paranoid Style: the Age of Internet Conspiracy

Online conspiracy theories are informational challenges in which “doing your own research” has become an essential organising principle, fuelled by a politically motivated resistance to mainstream authority. In a response to the January 6th Congressional hearings, former president Donald Trump doubled down on false claims that the 2020 elections were stolen, issuing a call to arms: “it’s up to American patriots to arm themselves with the information” (Trump, 2022, p.3). Calling on “patriots” who are far-right political partisans to conduct “research” weaponises the information gathering process within the context of extremist political positions, and Trump’s conspiratorial declaration echoes QAnon’s own emphasis on patriots doing research, called “baking the bread,” as part of a broader frontline in an ongoing global sociopolitical conflict.

Conspiracy theories have long been a central aspect of American sociocultural life. From the moon landing to the JFK assassination to 9/11, conspiracies have long fascinated Americans of both political parties because they hint at nefarious deeds and shadowy figures who maintain power through deception and obfuscation (Pipes, 1997). American cultural life is full of conspiracies too, with novels from authors such as Thomas Pynchon and Dan Brown, films such as *Conspiracy Theory* and *Three Days of the Condor*, and television programs such as the *X-Files* (Knight, 2000). In the conspiratorial account, social ills and national tragedies can be

explained as the machinations of secretive organisations and powerful individuals rather than the material conditions of late capitalism. Conspiracy is a master narrative in which disparate historical events and figures are woven together into an overarching story which explains social ills.

More fundamentally, conspiracy theory is a theory about power. As Mark Fenster (2008) articulates, “Conspiracy theory as a populist theory of power, then, is an ideological misrecognition of power relations, calling believers and audiences together and into being as ‘the people’ opposed to a relatively secret, elite ‘power bloc’” (p. 89). As American political life has increasingly fragmented along ever more extreme positionalities, we have seen a resurgence of what Richard Hofstadter (1965) described as the “paranoid style” in American politics, a conspiratorial form of political power fueled by fear of secretive machinations. In American politics, such a paranoid style has been exacerbated by an increasingly unhinged media landscape dominated by outrage and anger toward others deemed hostile toward traditional ways of life (Kludt & Stelter, 2018). In recent years, we have also seen a toxic and dangerous resurgence of this paranoid style in the viral spread of online, crowd-sourced conspiracies.

Conspiracy theories of the internet age have increasingly appeared as a militant frontline in the so-called culture wars characterised by sustained disagreements about cultural and social beliefs. The battle lines of the American culture wars have been drawn since Pat Buchanan’s infamous denunciations of Bill Clinton in 1992: “There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America” (para. 39). The culture wars have flared up dramatically in the age of social media as a broader response to progressive beachheads on sexuality, gender identity, abortion rights, healthcare, and racial inequalities facilitated by the ubiquity of communications technologies. Running battles about topics such as transgender rights rage across social media, fuelling reactionary responses from the far-right. With Trump’s election, characterised by Taylor (2021, title section) as the “white power presidency”, such far-right extremism has been given an accelerant, mainstreaming extremist anti-immigrant, white-supremacist and patriarchal rhetoric. Extremist positions have fuelled a concomitant rise in conspiracy theories, predictably targeting minority groups. As Fenster warns, “More dangerously, conspiracy theories can express – and in American history frequently have helped organize – virulent hostility to racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, or political Others” (2008, p.11).

As mentioned above, internet conspiracies weaponise IL as an acceleration of the paranoid style. Informational weaponisation is structurally intrinsic to the conspiracy theory itself. Fenster (2008) theorises this structural aspect of conspiracy as the hermeneutics of conspiracy: “There is always something more to know about an alleged conspiracy, the evidence of which is subjected to an investigative machine that depends on the perpetual motion of signification” (p. 94). This perpetual motion machine compounds signification such that disparate events seem connected. This process, known as *apophenia*, constructs a theory out of the very process of meaning making, of the (mis)interpretation of the relations between signifiers and signifieds. The gap between signifier and signified is filled in by the conspiracist, slotted into the theory being constructed. “As an interpretive practice” Fenster continues, “conspiracy theory represents an impossible, almost utopian drive to seize and fetishise individual signs in order to place them within vast interpretive structures” (p. 96). As a vast interpretive structure, QAnon relies precisely on these dynamics, accelerated by the internet’s research capacities. As an online conspiracy theory, QAnon has proven to be remarkably resistant to fact-checking and IL efforts in large part because research is baked into the theory itself fuelling the delusion through misinterpretation of disparate events (Holoyda, 2022). QAnon represents a perverted form of IL, weaponising the same values and principles that inform existing IL frameworks and models. Because QAnon is an online conspiracy theory, its membership crosses all layers of society, including our classrooms. I have personally seen QAnon paraphernalia on my own campus. To

combat such a dynamic internet conspiracism in the classroom and broader public sphere, we need to reassess and reform existing efforts to better target the structural and ideological parameters of future QAnons.

#### 4. QAnon as IL

In a recent post on Truth Social, a user named Relentless Truth (@lebronsonroids) bemoans the fact that “normies” think anons are crazy for following Q:

The biggest problem when trying to convince normies why we aren’t crazy for following Q, is that unless you’ve been an anon for quite some time and have actually taken the many hours required to read the drops and explore all the deltas and comms . . . It seems fucking crazy (2022, July 12).

This post captures the essence of QAnon as a form of IL. To anons involved in building the theory through extensive research, denunciations from normies are frustrating because they come from less educated rubes who have been fooled by the mainstream media. The home page for Q Research on 8kun makes similar claims. “There are lots of us here that also care about bringing the general public up to speed”, the page claims (Welcome to Q Research, n.d.). Anons believe themselves to be more literate about information than most “normal” Americans who refuse to question traditional news media and are thereby duped by powerful cabals.

QAnon is thus a distorted form of IL, a twisted form of epistemology predicated on research principles designed to lead believers down the rabbit hole. Whereas anons believe they are exposing truths through research and analysis, they are in fact translating information into an existing ideology perpetuated by Q. To demonstrate how QAnon functions as a twisted form of IL, I examine the conspiracy theory alongside the ACRL IL framework in an effort to clarify the challenges of using IL to intercede. While targeted at higher education explicitly, the ACRL framework is one of the most highly visible IL frameworks for advocating healthy information practices. A search on Google Scholar for the framework returns over 13,000 hits cited in articles dedicated to IL, including projects aimed at public engagement (Eisenberg, 2008; Ireland, 2017) and combatting fake news, political polarisation and misinformation (Addy, 2020). Unlike the Big6 process model, which emphasises tasks, the ACRL framework includes epistemological principles for IL, making it a natural and highly visible guide for IL efforts and a potential resource for engaging the public. As I will show, however, the ACRL framework may be insufficient for intervening in online conspiracies, whether in the classroom for students who may be adherents or in public literacy efforts.

Each framework principle corresponds to tactics deployed by anons in advancing QAnon. The following sections summarise the principles according to the knowledge practices listed, which demonstrate literacy, and are compared to QAnon’s practices as articulated by Q and selected followers. For purposes of brevity, the principles and attendant knowledge practices are emphasised, ignoring the dispositions, but interested readers will find it worthwhile to read the framework in full. Examples are selected primarily from the official Q posts, which have been collected and curated online and which form the basis for the conspiracy theory, but I also refer to select posts from the official site for QAnon research on 8kun (Welcome to Q Research, n.d.). Comparing these two sets of text reveal striking consistency between them, suggesting that IL as conceived by ACRL may be a priori insufficient at debunking popular conspiracy theories.

##### 4.1 Authority is Constructed and Contextual

According to the ACRL’s framework, information is constructed and contextual. Information can be produced by various authorities. In this model, recognising the constructedness of information and placing it into context is the mark of literacy. Knowledge practices revolve

around assessing and questioning the role of authority in knowledge. Literacy is present when a user performs the following: define different authority types, use research tools to assess authority, understand that disciplines have authorities questioned by other authorities, recognise that authority may be packaged formally or informally; may include other media, acknowledge that they are developing their own authority, and understand the social nature of information ecosystems (pp. 12–13).

Of the practices listed above, QAnon advocates all six. Anons are highly aware of the constructedness and context of information, questioning the authority of the mainstream media as a source of unbiased information. When KellyAnne Conway asserted that the Trump administration was operating according to alternative facts and when Trump himself declared mainstream media outlets fake news, both performed a perverse form of this principle, critiquing the authority of the mainstream press (Jaffe, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2018). The same ethos informs QAnon. Anons believe themselves engaged in a sophisticated critique of authority, recognising the constructedness of information. Q's drops are full of complex denunciations of authority. "Have you ever witnessed a full-blown international mainstream media constant [barrage] [counter]attack re: a 'conspiracy'?" Q asks in one post (Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6, 2020b). In another, Q articulates the need for anons to practice critical thinking to expose machinations of the elite: "A population that remains outside of free thought, and instead, remains isolated living in fear inside of the closed-loop echo chamber of the controlled mainstream media" (Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6, 2020c). Decrying the "closed-loop echo chamber" of mainstream media encourages anons to imagine themselves purveyors of truth within a hostile information landscape.

Such an orientation toward information extends to a critique of authority. Conspiracy theories are notably hostile to official information sources. Q exhorts followers to remain critical of authority: "What happens when people are no longer allowed to challenge their authority?" (Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6, 2020e). Such a critique is also predicated on freedom of thought, as defined by Q: "'Free thought' is a philosophical viewpoint which holds that positions regarding truth should be formed on the basis of logic, reason, and empiricism, rather than authority, tradition, revelation, or dogma" (Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6, 2020d). The question of authority, and who has it, is a prevailing theme in the Q posts, and anons who join the movement are trained to both understand and critique sources of information. Of course, such critique is targeted *a priori* to undermine journalistic and academic outlets while ignoring the fact that Trump himself represents the ultimate state authority.

## 4.2 Information Creation as a Process

In the second principle, information users understand production and modes of delivery and recognise the protean nature of information ecosystems: "The dynamic nature of information creation and dissemination requires ongoing attention to understand evolving creation processes" (ACRL, 2016, p. 14). Knowledge practices within the second principle include: articulate capabilities and constraints of information developed through different production modes, assess fit between information creation and need, recognise different perceptions of information based on format, recognise implications of dynamic vs. static formats, monitor different values of information, transfer knowledge to new information, and develop an understanding of how choices impact the purpose and use-value of information (ACRL, 2016, pp. 14–15).

QAnon operates according to similar principles. Due to belief that mainstream media is a tool for inculcating ideology to maintain political hegemony, anons are invited to participate in the conspiracy theory by seeking alternative sources of information across different modalities and communicate that information via multiple formats. Most visibly, such information is created and shared via social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and the chans (anonymous message boards notorious for problematic content). Anons rely on memes, posts, maps, and graphics to communicate the theory to others in a process I have described elsewhere as a



“conspiracy of data” (Hannah, 2021a). Q repeatedly asserts the value of individual research processes in helping unearth the evildoers within the Deep State: “Focus on content [information]. Research for yourself” (Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6, 2020a).

In addition, QAnon developed complex processes to inculcate research processes into newcomers. Because anons are unknown to one another in real life, posting to various platforms as anonymised or pseudonymised accounts, the research process requires extensive moderation. Q decries the gatekeepers who control how information is accessed and understood, asserting the need for free and open information: “an open internet allows innovators to bypass traditional gatekeepers and promote their work on its own merit” (Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6, 2020e). However, such freedom to conduct individual research must be circumscribed *within* the movement to avoid chaos. On 8kun’s “Welcome to Q Research” page, anons articulate precise ways for newcomers to participate:

Be humble. Be patient. That is the foundation of being an effective patriot. . . . Along the way, lurk with agency, study the boards, the bantz, the culture . . . If your confused what the hell everyone’s talking about, then Google shit before making an ass of yourself asking the people here. Would you walk into a NASA meeting and ask help with your algebra homework? (Welcome to Q Research, n.d.)

As a narrative machine, QAnon has developed its own methods for information retrieval and analysis, inculcating such methods into new anons eager to conduct their own research program. What is remarkable about this page is the way it includes pedagogical training in how to conduct research, training newcomers in effective methods to develop the theory.

### 4.3 Information has Value

The third principle of the ACRL framework emphasises the value of information as a commodity, educational tool, means of influence and way to understand the world. In this principle, information is power: “However, value may also be leveraged by individuals and organizations to effect change” (p. 16). Recognising the value of information is assessed through the following practices: credit others’ ideas, understand intellectual property as a legal and social construct, articulate the purpose of copyright, understand forms of oppression against some individuals surrounding information, recognise issues of information access or lack thereof, decide where/when to publish information, understand how commodification of personal information and online interactions affect information and make informed choices regarding online actions (pp. 16–17).

Information is inherently valuable to a conspiracy as it provides the rationale for the totality of the theory itself. Because QAnon is predicated on web research, information is especially valuable for its predictive qualities. Q frequently uses the phrase, “future proves past,” to reiterate the predictive value of drops (Q !ITPb.qbhqo, 2017), and anons refer to these predictions when arguing for the truth hidden beneath the mundane. One of the recurring themes among anons is that Q predicted events before they occurred, lending credence to the theory. The value of information, and the control of it, is thus an essential aspect of the movement. “The flow of information is vital” Q reminds his followers in one post (Anonymous, 2017b). In another post, Q articulates the need to understand information control: “Remember, information is everything, the flow of information is no longer controlled by the MSM but by you/others” (Anonymous, 2017c).

For anons, the value of information cannot be overstated, and they are highly aware of the forms of oppression and social complexities surrounding information. Anons leverage the value of information to effect changes in the national consciousness, which they term the “Great Awakening”. Despite all efforts to oppress and obfuscate the truth, anons argue, the information

they create from web research will awaken America to evils being committed by the global cabal. Q equates the “Great Awakening” with a process of rerouting information circuits outside mainstream channels:

The Great Awakening (‘Freedom of Thought’), was designed and created not only as a backchannel to the public (away from the longstanding ‘mind’ control of the corrupt & heavily biased media) to endure future events through transparency and regeneration of individual thought (Q !!mG7VJxZNCI, 2019).

Such a conception of information access and control, while unhinged, echoes the ACRL’s insistence that IL recognise issues around assessing the value of information outlets.

#### 4.4 Research as Inquiry

The fourth principle focuses on the research process as inquiry. Because research is iterative, this section emphasises the need to ask increasingly complex and challenging questions, using information to answer them. As an essential aspect of research, disagreement and debate are foregrounded as essential aspects of research even beyond academia: “This process of inquiry extends beyond the academic world to the community at large, and the process of inquiry may focus upon personal, professional, or societal needs” (ACRL, p. 18). Knowledge practices include: formulate research questions based on information gaps or conflicting information, determine appropriate information scope, break complex questions into simpler ones, use various research methods, monitor information and assess gaps/weaknesses, organise information in meaningful ways, synthesise ideas and draw reasonable conclusions based on analysis (p. 18).

Inquiry is a structural mechanism for QAnon. In fact, there are 6,877 question marks in the 4,958 posts. Most posts are framed as sequences of questions designed to hint at the underlying structure, at linkages between events and individuals. QAnon is essentially a series of questions interpreted through internet research by anons. “Follow the money, it’s the key” Q encourages anons in an effort to expose corruption (Anonymous, 2017a). “Will you follow the narrative?” Q inquires in another post (Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6, 2020f). Q’s posts are provocations to discourse, generating a participatory movement operating outside mainstream channels with complete anonymity. By phrasing his crumbs as vague provocations, Q invites anons to contribute to the conspiracy’s signifying machine, grounding the movement in inquiry.

Anons developed tactics to recruit new believers through a process of inquiry. Anonymous pages on 8kun include a how-to manual for “red pilling” normies, exposing them to the hidden truths of the global cabal. The guide is instructive because it illustrates dynamics by which anons weaponise information to “bypass cognitive dissonance” of skeptical interlocutors (“Redpill Tactics”). The primary method to red pill normies is to coax them into understanding QAnon through guided Google searches. The page suggests anons begin the red pilling process by producing a mild form of cognitive dissonance through a small revelation about the existence of perverse elites, followed by guided inquiry:

Essentially, explain the basic Q shit and the existence of a child-sacrifice/abuse/trafficking network, HRC, Pedostas, etc. Then, right as the person starts to get incredulous with disbelief, tell them to google ‘tony Podesta art’.

They will literally be left with their jaw on the floor, sick to their stomach, and will believe EVERY WORD YOU TELL THEM from then on about The Storm. (Redpill Tactics, n.d.)

Focusing on a few key searches for information deemed more palatable—elites are corrupt and look to protect themselves—enables anons to make a case for the authenticity of the broader theory and back it up with easily accessible online information. Red pilling is based on targeted Google searches designed to support proffered interpretations. Of course, Google searches and

online information can be woven into any theory given enough linkages, but such information can prove compelling to a sympathetic audience. Rather than scare normies through exposure to the entire conspiracy, anons articulate that red pilling is incremental: small information dumps lead to deeper engagement over time. “[F]ocus on things that won’t scare off normies . . . You don’t need a normie to see the entire pictures” the anon claims, “They just need to trust and/or prefer our side. That’s our mission, right? To help mitigate a world-shaking shadow war, by spoon-feeding info to normies in amounts they can handle?” (Redpill Tactics, n.d.). Because they deliberately include an information strategy for anons, those who attempt to debunk the theory are dismissed as illiterate or brainwashed.

#### 4.5 Scholarship as Conversation

In this principle, ACRL emphasises the community of information users, who are in dialogue with one another. Scholars, researchers, and professionals are engaged in “sustained discourse” (p. 20) which surfaces new knowledge and discoveries through the dialogic process. Intriguingly, this principle recognises the power differentials that fuel QAnon’s mistrust of academic authorities: “While novice learners and experts at all levels can take part in the conversation, established power and authority structures may influence their ability to participate and can privilege certain voices and information” (p. 20). Knowledge practices foreground the following: cite work of others, contribute to scholarly conversation at appropriate level, assess barriers to entry, evaluate others’ contributions, identify contribution of scholarly modes, summarise evolution in scholarship, and recognise limitations of scholarly work (pp. 20–21).

Communal discourse is essential to QAnon, which leverages the participatory power of the internet to generate interpretations of the Q drops. QAnon influencer Dave Hayes (2020) (known as the Praying Medic) describes this participatory component in *The Great Awakening*, a book attempting to decode Q posts for broader readership: “Millions of people from all walks of life who follow Q’s posts conduct their research and report what they’ve found. Anyone is free to take the information and disseminate it. In function, the operation is similar to that of a beehive, where researchers work together. Rather than being consumers of news, citizens become reporters” (Hayes, 2020, p. 12). The viral success of this beehive relies on anons coordinating interpretations, discussing possible meanings behind the drops, and revising the overarching theory. Anon collaborations operate outside the official channels of journalism, academia, and government to place Q posts into the overarching narrative.

Furthermore, this discourse provides mechanisms by which new researchers can join the conversation. Although couched in a certain dismissal of poseurs, QAnon attracts new researchers through an invitation to join the community only through hard work and dedication to the cause:

The success of this entire operation rests on our backs to take the information that has been gained by the Q posts as the anons that have come up with the undeniable proof (the keystone) and share that with the general population; intel already has all the facts. Our job in its beautiful simplicity is to communicate it to our friends and families. Q has made this crystal clear. The code is not complicated, because the target audience is YOU the worker, the family, the wonderful soul that you are. Your Great Awakening is our Great Awakening. We’re in this together and there’s no stopping the tidal wave of Truth. (Welcome to Q Research, n.d.)

Operating outside the mainstream allows QAnon to recruit under the assumption that every American has the capacity to do their own research. But more significantly, and more dangerously, QAnon inculcates newcomers with the mission of sharing that research communally with friends, family, and co-workers. Scholarship within the QAnon community is predicated on discourse, on conversation. And although this is a bizarre form of discourse, it is

the predominant mode of communication in the internet age, far more mobile and flexible than mainstream information landscapes such as journalism and academia.

#### **4.6 Searching as Strategic Exploration**

Finally, the ACRL's framework recognises the strategic nature of information search: "Encompassing inquiry, discovery, and serendipity, searching identifies both possible relevant sources as well as the means to access those sources" (p. 22). In what may be the most visible principle within the QAnon community, information search is deemed an essential aspect of information literacy, and effective knowledge practices include: determine scope of search task, identify interested parties who produce relevant information, implement divergent and convergent thinking in search, match information needs to appropriate search tools, refine needs and search strategies as needed, understand organisation of information systems, use different types of searching language, and manage search processes (pp. 22–23). Like many of the other ACRL principles, strategic information search and retrieval is an essential driver of the conspiracy theory. Anons strategically search for open-source information through various platforms and contribute new information to the theory. In his posts, Q provides hints for anons to conduct research, posing cryptic questions, which he calls crumbs: "Some of us come here to drop crumbs, just crumbs" (Anonymous, 2017e). Because the hints are so cryptic and vague, they require extensive strategic searching, and anons spend massive amounts of time scouring the internet for clues. This has led some scholars to speculate that QAnon is a kind of internet game in which the pleasure is in finding the solutions to the clues (Berkowitz, 2020).

QAnon's research is supported via web tools developed by anons for anons. In addition to sophisticated weaponisation of social-media platforms and imageboards such as 4chan and 8kun, QAnon also implements various tools to assist anons with research. Most of these have subsequently disappeared off the internet, but I have written about some of them elsewhere (Hannah, 2021a). For example, the Q Clock provides a heuristic tool for anons to crosscheck Q posts to find links among the breadcrumbs over time. Because QAnon operates according to the principle that "everyone is connected" (Anonymous, 2017d), the conspiracy can potentially expand indefinitely, and anons have built tools to facilitate the search and construction of ever more bizarre branches of the main posts. The development and application of graphics, keys, and maps allows anons to manage a chaotic system.

### **5. Critical Information Literacy as Tactical Response?**

QAnon is particularly resistant to IL frameworks designed to inculcate healthy information behaviours in students, some of whom may be involved in the conspiracy themselves. The insufficiency of such frameworks, as I have argued, is not meant to be a critique of IL, which is a salutary effort to intervene in twenty-first century information landscapes. Rather, I argue that the fundamental principles that inform such frameworks directly inform structural and psychological mechanisms within QAnon as well. Attacking the conspiracy theory with such frameworks is fraught as most anons may imagine they already practice such literacies in researching and contributing to the theory. If an individual has been deeply engaged in conducting research and debating the nuances of a conspiracy theory, then a framework which relies on the same principles is unlikely to be successful.

IL frameworks such as the ACRL's rely on certain assumptions about the nature of information. For example, these frameworks rely on a universal view of information as a social good and assume IL is an objective pursuit. Information users are trained to take a neutral view toward the myriad of sources, authorities, and landscapes (Elmborg, 2012; Tewell, 2016). Developing a framework under this assumption suggests that information is itself apolitical and that an effective reader of information will also be apolitical in assessing the truth of information. Each principle in the ACRL's framework approaches the problem of IL from such a neutral standpoint.

But IL is not necessarily neutral or objective. As Robert Hassan (2008) reminds us, “digital information is, at its root, ideological” (p. 1). IL is a highly political process in which ideology intervenes in the process of interpretation and assessment. While most liberal commentators scoffed at the notion of “alternative facts”—how could a fact be alternative? Alternative to what?—the structural information dynamics of the internet reveal that, in fact, there can be entirely alternate universes operating on top of one another within the same space (Greenhut, 2020).

Because of these complex challenges, we need new models and frameworks designed explicitly to respond to online conspiracy theories (Dimitrova, 2022; Fister 2021). Such toolkits should be developed through multi- and interdisciplinary collaborations, and models should include both offensive and defensive mechanisms designed to intervene in these particularly complex online communities. One possible starting point for a tactical response to the problem of conspiratorial IL is in the area of scholarship known as critical IL. Rather than approach IL as a neutral, apolitical sphere of activity, we must inform our efforts with a critical, political orientation *a priori*. Not a political orientation based in two-party electoral politics but rather within the realm of reflexive critical deployments of IL as a tactical response to conspiracies. Such an approach would maintain an empathetic view of the actual personal ramifications of falling victim to conspiracy theories while also remaining capable of flexible mobilisation and tactical response.

Critical IL arose to understand how libraries may participate in systems of oppression and imagine how information professionals can intervene. Critical information literacy is thus a political project, drawing on critical theory and social justice discourse to assess how information fits within oppressive power structures. As Eamon Tewell (2016) claims, “At its core, critical information literacy is an attempt to render visible the complex workings of information so that we may identify and act upon the power structures that shape our lives” (Introduction, para. 4). Critical information literacy operates to inculcate a “theoretically informed praxis” which facilitates a tactical, critical engagement with information (Elmborg, 2006, p. 198). Such a tactical critical engagement is necessary in an increasingly unequal and divided information landscape.

Critical IL potentially provides an avenue for information researchers to develop new tools to respond to the exponential growth of online conspiracy theories, but it has yet evolved sufficiently to attack the underlying material conditions that make far-right conspiracies like QAnon so attractive to so many. Just as critical IL turns toward critical theories of race, gender and sexuality, we need a critical IL that attends to issues of ideology, political economy and the material conditions in which information is produced, accessed, managed and misused. As Arthur Bezerra and Christian Fuchs have argued, the linkages between critical IL and critical theory have still been undertheorised, tending to favor Paulo Freire’s critical work while ignoring Freire’s commitments to Marxist theory. Bezerra (2021) calls for a critical theory of information which fuses Freirian and Marxist critical theory, “forged through a theoretical-methodological program that finds in critical information literacy a reinforcement for the perspectives of social transformation and the fight against oppression in the dominant regimes of information” (p. 9). Critical IL should adapt the lessons gleaned from Marxist critical theories of capitalism to understand the material and economic conditions in which internet conspiracies proliferate. Fuchs (2022) argues for such an intervention:

It is, therefore, no surprise that we have been experiencing the proliferation of conspiracy theories in the past couple of years. The underlying reason for this proliferation is neoliberal capitalism's negative dialectic that has resulted in economic and political crises and rising inequalities. (p. 65).

Adherents of conspiracy theories like QAnon understand that something is terribly amiss in society, but their conclusions about the cause are incorrect. An IL that is critical of political ideologies under late capitalism may be our best hope to combat conspiracy theories forged under those same conditions.

Such a critical IL, embedded within a critique of capitalism, would provide a new and more sensitive toolkit to respond tactically to the material conditions in which such conspiracies originate. Rather than adopt a neutral observer positionality, this new toolkit would assess information as always already political, recognising the ideological conditions in which users research and share information while developing tactics with which to respond to evolving conspiracy theories. Such a toolkit would not replace one form of ideology with another but would instead foreground the critical possibilities for IL to make sense of economic, social and political realities without resorting to conspiracism, thereby targeting the true material conditions underlying current sociopolitical challenges. Whereas existing frameworks are designed to inculcate healthy information practices in the abstract, assuming a universalist position on the existence of some external truth, a critical IL would assume a positionality *a priori* in an effort to espouse politically and socially engaged information literacies.

Such a toolkit would also approach these seemingly intractable problems in much the same manner as Marxist critical theory, by turning to multidisciplinary perspectives on ideology and political economy. Drawing on work from psychologists, computer scientists, sociologists, and political scientists will help theorise the contours of online conspiracies, revealing possible axes of intervention. But until we recognise the need for such a critical theory of information, which goes beyond the universal assumptions about information which permeate existing frameworks, we will continue to fail in our collective response. Failing to intervene in such information spaces as online conspiracy theories is not an option.

QAnon is one symptom of a much larger political problem, evident in the ways in which the conspiracy theory has evolved in response to external pressures. While the predictive power of Q was called into question as the predicted Storm failed to manifest, QAnon advocates attended the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol attack (Dreisbach, 2022) and many believers in the theory have been elected to American government. The marriage of the fringe internet conspiracy community with mainstream political organising represents a dangerous moment in American political and cultural life, and we can be certain that new manifestations of the QAnon movement will continue to appear. The material, economic, political and informational dynamics which made QAnon so powerful and resistant to attack will continue to plague our society, impacting the very idea of truth in an age of internet conspiracism. To paraphrase Marx (1888, as cited in Tucker, 1978), information professionals have hitherto only sought to understand the information landscape, the point is to change it.

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