



Q VADIS?

The Spread of QAnon in the German-Speaking World

funded
by:

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2 Table of contents

5	<u>CENTRAL FINDINGS</u>
8	<u>INTRODUCTION</u>
11	<u>THE ORIGIN OF QANON</u>
15	<u>QANON IN GERMANY</u>
19	<u>QANON ON TELEGRAM: MEASURING A DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM</u>
21	<u>THE QANON PANDEMIC ON TELEGRAM</u>
28	<u>SURVEYING THE SCOPE OF RESONANCE: QANON CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES IN GERMANY AND AUSTRIA</u>
28	<u>Survey Design</u>
29	<u>HOW MUCH AGREEMENT WITH QANON NARRATIVES EXISTS IN GERMANY AND AUSTRIA?</u>
31	<u>Belief in QAnon Remains Especially Pronounced in the USA</u>
31	<u>Perception and Assessment of QAnon</u>
32	<u>Sociodemographic Profiles: Who are the QAnon Believers?</u>
34	<u>What are the Consequences of Belief in QAnon?</u>
35	<u>Contextualizing the Study – Some General Remarks</u>
36	<u>THE STUDY IN NUMBERS</u>

3	Table of contents
---	-------------------

39	<u>SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK</u>
----	----------------------------

39	<u>The Merging of Spheres, a New Challenge</u>
----	------------------------------------------------

40	<u>Understanding Digital Spaces as Social Spaces</u>
----	------------------------------------------------------

41	<u>Lessons from the Pandemic – Countering Future Crises</u>
----	-------------------------------------------------------------

41	<u>Conclusion: Quo Vadis, QAnon?</u>
----	--------------------------------------

43	<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>
----	---------------------

44	<u>ABOUT THE AUTHORS</u>
----	--------------------------

45	<u>ABOUT CEMAS</u>
----	--------------------

5 Central Findings

QAnon beliefs experienced enormous growth in German-speaking countries with the start of protests directed (ostensibly) against the government COVID-19 measures. With the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021, the danger of this ideology has grown increasingly clear. After a worldwide wave of attention, however, interest quickly waned, and reporting on QAnon declined. Despite the lack of public interest, the QAnon movement did not lose its following; on the contrary, more than a year after the storming of the US Capitol, QAnon conspiracy narratives remain prevalent in society and in digital spaces. Events like the storming of the Capitol in Washington make clear that even functioning and stable democracies can suffer the consequences of conspiracy narratives and far-right agitation – and that the dangers of these worldviews have long been underestimated.

For our report “Q vadis? The Spread of QAnon in the German-Speaking World”, we have collected and analyzed representative data on the spread and resonance of QAnon conspiracy narratives in German-speaking countries for the first time. In this report, we link these findings to an analysis of groups and channels on Telegram and YouTube that fall within the QAnon spectrum. These are our central findings:

- **With the beginning of the pandemic, the size and scope of the QAnon scene on YouTube and Telegram exploded.** Contributing to this was also a strong linkage of QAnon conspiracy narratives with conspiracy movements from the Reichsbürger¹ sphere.
- **QAnon content continues to be extremely popular on Telegram.** Six channels have more than 100,000 subscribers, which they were able to gain partly within the last year, and we identified a total of 115 German-speaking QAnon channels with at least 1,000 subscribers.
- **Messages from the QAnon sphere reach hundreds of thousands of accounts in the German-speaking world daily.** We identified a total of 123,100 accounts as members of 84 QAnon groups – and 346,006 accounts have been active in these groups since their founding. More than 8.3 million messages were exchanged in these groups in 2021 (4.6 million messages in 2020). Our results also suggest that German-speaking regions host the largest digital QAnon scene outside the USA.

1

“Reichsbürger” and other sovereignists believe that their individual or national sovereignty is being suppressed by an international conspiracy. While “Reichsbürger” appear mainly in Germany and Austria, the phenomenon of conspiracy ideological sovereignism is also present in other countries, for example in the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, France, Norway and Russia.

- Although the QAnon movement itself remains largely unknown, more than one in ten members of the German public agree with QAnon-related statements. Just under nine percent of those polled in Germany and six percent in Austria said they read somewhat or very much about QAnon. Nevertheless, the conspiracy narratives surrounding QAnon remain well-received: 12.4 percent of the 1,970 respondents in Germany agreed to some extent with QAnon-related statements. The rates of agreement were higher in Austria: 16.2 percent of the 1,012 respondents at least partially agreed with QAnon conspiracy narratives.
- There is a strong overlap between QAnon and the Reichsbürger/sovereigntist sphere in terms of both membership and agreement with conspiracy narratives. Moreover, agreement with QAnon narratives strongly correlates with belief in conspiracy narratives regarding COVID-19. QAnon is a meta-conspiracy narrative, with numerous other conspiracy narratives woven into it.
- Almost half of the currently unvaccinated people in Germany and Austria believe at least partially in QAnon conspiracy narratives. 46 percent of the unvaccinated population in Germany agreed at least partially with the central conspiracy narratives of QAnon, compared to only 8.7 percent of those who received at least one COVID vaccination shot. In Austria, the rates are similar: 41.1 percent of the unvaccinated agreed with the conspiracy narratives compared to 11.4 percent of the vaccinated.
- AfD (Alternative for Germany) and FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) voters are more likely to agree with QAnon narratives. In Germany, just under 44 percent of AfD voters (somewhat) agreed with QAnon conspiracy narratives. These conspiracy narratives were strongly rejected by other groups of voters, however, with 91 percent of Die Linke voters and 96.3 percent of Die Grünen voters rejecting these narratives. A similar pattern emerged in Austria, with 46.1 percent of FPÖ and 32 percent of MFG (People Freedom Fundamental Rights) voters agreeing with QAnon-related statements, while at least 90 percent of the voters from other parties rejected these narratives.

- People with strong beliefs in QAnon conspiracy narratives get more of their information from Telegram. In Germany, 18.4 percent of strong believers used Telegram daily to find information, with a further 9.8 percent using Telegram for this purpose more than once a week (in Austria, 15.9 percent of used Telegram daily and another 9.1 percent used it multiple times a week). In contrast, 80.8 percent of those who reject QAnon conspiracy narratives in Germany have never used Telegram as a source of information (78.4 percent in Austria).
- A total of 4.3 percent of respondents from Germany and 9.2 percent from Austria said they had participated in protests against public health measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic at least once - more than half of those who participated in protests believe in QAnon conspiracy narratives. In Germany, 58.1 percent of protest participants agreed with QAnon-related statements (50.5 percent in Austria), compared to a 10.3 percent agreement rate in Germany (also 10.3 percent in Austria) among those who never participated in protests.

In April 2020, when singer Xavier Naidoo tearfully claimed in a video that children had been set free after being tortured for years and having their blood used for regenerative drugs, many reacted with amazement or amusement. When hundreds of people stormed the U.S. Capitol in January 2021, fueled by their belief that the presidential election had been rigged and that Donald Trump remained the legitimate president of the United States, the reaction was dismay and horror. Five people died during the storming of the U.S. Capitol, and senior US politicians only narrowly escaped the violent mob. Five more people committed suicide in the aftermath of the storming. Authorities have arrested 725 people so far (ZDF, 2022). To this day, nearly half of all Republicans still believe that election fraud helped U.S. President Biden win the election (NPR & IPSOS, 2022). This attack showed the world that even democratically stable countries can suffer directly from the consequences of conspiracy narratives and far-right agitation, and that the danger of these world-views had been massively underestimated. It quickly became clear that QAnon narratives had fueled the storming of the U.S. Capitol and that QAnon supporters had played a leading role. In this sense, QAnon combines the modern world of networking with a meta-conspiracy that unites many different, often antisemitic, conspiracy narratives.

In Germany, too, the question was raised as to whether scenes like the one at the Capitol in Washington could occur here as well. Many have forgotten that an attempt to storm the Reichstag was already made in August 2020 – by protestors from the QAnon spectrum. Almost without acknowledgement by the general public, QAnon has successfully established itself in German-speaking countries over the past few years. This is possibly also because QAnon narratives are able to tie in easily with Reichsbürger/sovereigntist ideologies. The COVID-19 pandemic in particular has given the movement a further boost. QAnon's reach is still growing on Telegram. Many experts now believe that Germany hosts the second-largest QAnon following outside the United States. Despite this, there remains a lack of knowledge regarding the size of the QAnon sphere in German-speaking countries and how deeply QAnon narratives resonate with the population.

This report therefore examines the appeal of QAnon narratives among the German and Austrian populations and measures the influence of the scene on Telegram. In doing so, we adopt a multi-method approach. In a population-representative survey, we measure the approval ratings of QAnon-related statements in Germany and Austria. With this, we then examine which social groups are particularly susceptible to corresponding conspiracy narratives as well as the consequences of believing that an alleged Deep State is controlling events worldwide and that satanic networks are kidnapping children. These findings are then supplemented by an analysis of digital QAnon networks, their reach on Telegram, and a timeline of the growth of the QAnon scene in Germany. This combination of quantitative surveys and forensic analysis provides a comprehensive measurement of the QAnon sphere and its resonance.

11 The Origin of QAnon

The QAnon conspiracy narrative began with several users who posted under the pseudonym “Q” on various imageboards². The first post from “Q” came on October 28, 2017, as a comment on the popular imageboard 4chan. In a thread titled “Calm Before the Storm”, a user alleged that Hillary Clinton would soon be arrested, and signed their post with “Q” (LaFrance, 2020). The account would also sign early posts “Q Clearance Patriot”, alluding to the fact that the poster was allegedly sharing insider information, with “Q” standing for the highest level in U.S. security clearance.

Although commenters usually post anonymously on imageboards like 4chan, posts can also be tagged with a “tripcode”. Users generate this publicly visible identifier with a password, allowing the same user to be recognized by others but also allowing anyone with the password to impersonate the user. Q’s tripcode changed often, either because the password had become known or because the poster had changed imageboards. Q went on to post on the imageboard 8kun (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018). Experts believe that several people posted under the “Q” pseudonym (Aliapoulis et al., 2021).

The vast majority of the nearly 5,000 messages were written in cryptic, pseudo-military language. Numerous elements and points of well-known conspiracy narratives were woven in, including the Pizzagate³ narrative and narratives about a supposed Jewish world conspiracy. Additionally, some posts included only individual names, memes, or links to YouTube videos and far-right internet portals like Breitbart – Q also often reacted to posts by other users (see Figure 1). QAnon is therefore often referred to as a meta-conspiracy narrative, as it integrates a wide variety of related conspiracy narratives under its label – even today, users continue to work on possible interpretations of Q’s posts.

The content of these posts revolves around an alleged “Deep State” that holds the reins of power around the world and a supposed plan by former U.S. President Donald Trump to destroy it. The Deep State is presented as a group of satanic elites who operate a worldwide child sex trafficking operation. The children are supposedly tortured to extract a substance called adrenochrome, which the elites then use as a life-extending elixir. Although adrenochrome has never been mentioned directly in Q’s posts, the concept has taken hold in large parts of the QAnon scene. The conspiracy narrative is reminiscent of the antisemitic myth of Jewish blood libel.

Q positioned themselves as a supposed insider from the

2

Imageboards are Internet forums in which users post text (and often images), usually anonymously, which other users can then comment on. Users refer to themselves as “anons”. The name QAnon is also used to describe the movement of followers who believe in “Q”.

3

The Pizzagate conspiracy narrative refers to alleged secret codes in Hillary Clinton’s leaked emails that reference the ritual murder of children in the basement of a pizzeria in Washington, DC.

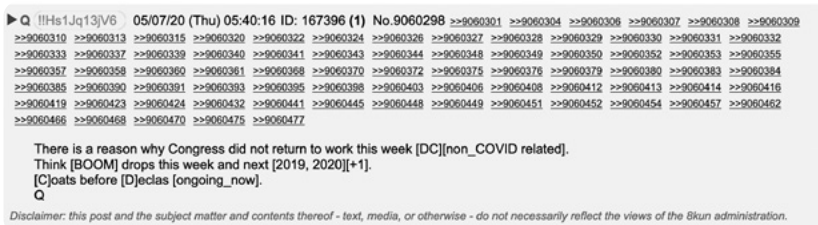


Figure 1: A Q Drop with the tripcode !!Hs1Jq13jV6, posted May 7th, 2020, on 8kun

US military transmitting coded messages to expose the existence of numerous conspiracies and to convey that Donald Trump would act against these conspiracies through a plan that has been years in the making. Q encouraged trust in Donald Trump with repeated statements like “Trust the Plan”. With the completion of this plan, the traitors and Trump’s political opponents would be imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay and executed, ushering in a golden age for QAnon followers referred to as “The Great Awakening”, which would return the world to a natural and divine order. This order would have to be brought about at least partly by force on the part of “patriots” - the supposed “golden age” would be preceded by “Ten Days of Darkness”. What exactly these “Ten Days of Darkness” would entail, like so many parts of the conspiracy, is left open by Q - followers often associate it with an upcoming civil war. Q’s messages are written in a pseudo-cryptic manner, supposedly so that Trump’s political opponents remain unaware of the coming plan. The followers can then support this plan by lying in wait as “digital soldiers”.

With these narratives, political opponents become the embodiment of an absolute evil that murders and sexually abuses children. Donald Trump, on the other hand, is elevated to the position of a savior carrying out an ingenious plan to stop them. Due to the cryptic nature of the Q Drops, users saw themselves as responsible for decrypting posts from Q in order to draw out concrete messages and predictions. Users then posted these supposed decryptions on YouTube and other platforms. Even after Q’s last post on December 8th, 2020, Q Drops still hold a central position in the scene. To this day, members of the scene continue their attempts to decrypt Q’s posts. Although Trump, contrary to Q’s predictions, was not re-elected (and none of Q’s other prophecies came to fruition), there remains an active scene of QAnon supporters. The largest of these scenes outside the USA is found in German-speaking countries.

i

Slogans and Language in the QAnon Universe

“Where We Go One, We Go All”, abbreviated as WWG1WGA, is the best-known slogan among QAnon supporters. This serves as an identification marker outside of the imageboards. On August 1st, 2020, the leader of Querdenker 711 (“Lateral thinkers” – a movement that mobilized against COVID measures, spreading conspiracy narratives), Michael Ballweg, signed off his speech with this phrase at the largest demonstration from the Querdenker movement at that time in Berlin. Other slogans and emojis are also used to allude to the conspiracy narratives around QAnon. The popcorn emoji (🍿) references Q’s commonly-used expressions “Enjoy the Show” and “Got Popcorn?”, which encourage followers to sit back and let the plan unfold. The boom emoji (💣) is used often to mark the announcement of news supposedly related to the plan. Other common emojis include the frog emoji (🐸) (in reference to the comic book character Pepe

the Frog, which has been adopted by the alt-right movement, see Gruber (2017)) and a white rabbit, in reference to Alice in Wonderland and The Matrix. In both stories, a rabbit leads “deeper down the rabbit hole”, signifying the revelation of deep secrets. The phrase “Tick-Tock” alludes to a ticking clock, the coming of justice against perceived political opponents. To circumvent blocks from platforms like Facebook and YouTube, followers often use the number 17 in place of Q, as Q is the seventeenth letter in the alphabet. In a “Q Drop” in October 2020, it was claimed that the term “QAnon” was invented by the media to discredit the movement and was not used by the movement itself. This was a false claim, but in its wake, numerous QAnon channels have renamed themselves, often making use of the slogans or symbols listed above.

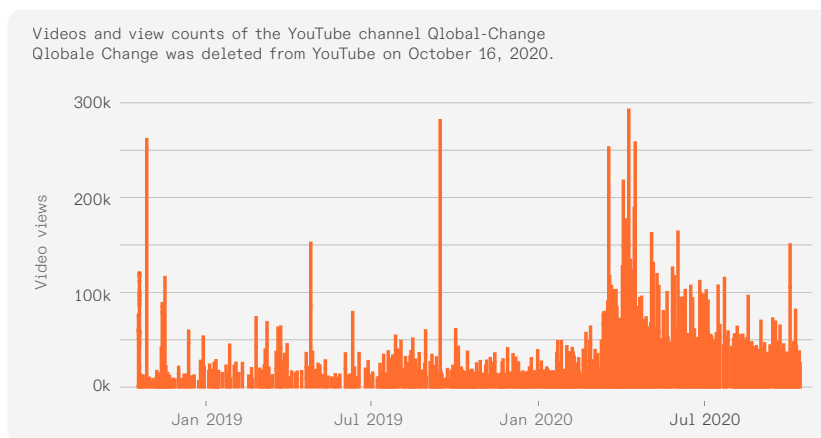


Figure 2: YouTube videos and their view counts for Qlobal-Change

Conspiracy ideologue Oliver Janich created the first major German-language post on QAnon with a YouTube video published on November 25th, 2017⁴. In the video, titled “Who is Q? Trump’s secret agent? Merkel with Illuminati symbol in SZ”, Janich discussed this alleged insider on 4chan just weeks after the first Q Drop (Q first posted on October 28th, 2017). The video amassed 90,000 views before the channel was deleted by YouTube, but the video remains available on other platforms. Several German-language QAnon-focused YouTube channels gained large followings, including Qlobal-Change (108,000 subscribers)⁵, Hans Joachim Müller (95,900 subscribers), and Verbinde die Punkte (“Connect the Dots”; 57,300 subscribers). Among these, only the Hans Joachim Müller and Oliver Janich channels existed on YouTube prior to 2018. Many of the channels were deleted in the wake of a change in YouTube platform policy on October 15th, 2020, having already faced restrictions on their reach (YouTube, 2020).

Qlobal-Change filled one of the most important roles in the German-language scene: translating English-language posts into German. Several others also regularly translated content into German, including the alternative health practitioner and activist Tamara K., who also called for the storming of the Reichstag on August 29th, 2020 (Leber, 2020).

As Figure 2 shows, the number of YouTube views for Qlobal-Change increased with the onset of the pandemic. More videos were published, and these videos were viewed more times.

4

More information about the development of QAnon in Germany can be found in the Amadeu Antonio Foundation’s de:hate report (Dittrich et al., 2020) and the QAnon Anonymous podcast’s “Episode 176: QAnon Germany feat. Miro Dittrich”: <https://soundcloud.com/qanonanonymous/episode-176-qanon-germany-feat-miro-dittrich>

5

The subscriber numbers are from October 15th, 2020 – the day when many of the channels listed were deleted from YouTube.

This was not an isolated case. From March 2020 onwards, both the reach and number of posts concerning QAnon on various platforms exploded. One platform in particular became increasingly central to the scene: Telegram.

The QAnon Pandemic

As the pandemic began, the number and reach of QAnon channels and groups on Telegram rose significantly. The above-mentioned Qlobal-Change channel on Telegram had around 10,000 subscribers in October 2019, but by February 2022, that number had grown to around 140,000 subscribers. Messages from the channel were viewed, on average, just under 100,000 times each, with an especially high number of views from March 2020 onwards.

In January 2020, the channel's posts were viewed an average of 8,643 times each, while in March the number had risen to just under 29,804 views per post; by April, that figure had already reached 70,066 views.

During the early pandemic in Germany, numerous QAnon channels on Telegram, YouTube, and Facebook spread the false narrative that the NATO Defender-Europe 20 exercise, scheduled to begin during this period, was part of Trump's plan to destroy the Deep State in Germany and Europe as a whole. Numerous photos and videos of equipment transports such as tanks and other heavy military equipment went viral. Supposedly, these videos gave evidence of an impending military liberation, with the pandemic and lockdown instituted as a plan from Trump to keep the number of civilian casualties during the military operation low. These photos and videos were in fact part of the logistical preparations for the NATO Defender-Europe 20 exercise, which was then cancelled due to the pandemic.

These narratives tied in elements of the Reichsbürger scene with QAnon conspiracies, suggesting that Germany remained ruled by Allied occupation forces due to the supposed lack of a peace treaty after World War II (Rathje, 2020). SHAEF (the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force), which was disbanded two months after the unconditional surrender of the German Wehrmacht in 1945, plays a particularly important role in the narratives of the German-speaking QAnon scene, supposedly serving as a legitimate government organization acting on behalf of Trump.

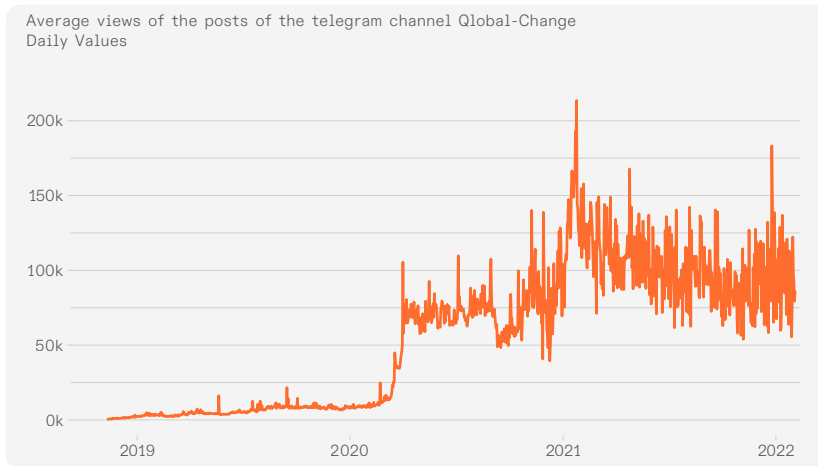


Figure 3: The average number of daily views for posts from the Qlobal-Change Telegram channel

Numerous groups and channels on Telegram therefore adopted variations on SHAEF and Defender 20 in their names.

A video from singer and antisemite Xavier Naidoo released in this same period (April 2nd, 2020) repeated the conspiracy narrative that children had been freed from underground facilities around the world during the pandemic. These children had supposedly been tortured and killed in these facilities to extract adrenochrome. This story and similar ones are continuously taken up in German-speaking conspiracy scene and become embedded in reporting on local events. For example, during the July 2021 flooding in western Germany, QAnon adherent Alexander Quade claimed on his 130,000+ subscriber Telegram channel that the flood waters had flushed the corpses of 600 children out from underground facilities and that the bodies had then been laid out in a gymnasium.

19 QAnon on Telegram: Measuring a Digital Ecosystem

German-language content about QAnon is shared and discussed primarily on Telegram. Telegram became the go-to platform for conspiracy ideologues as other social networks at first restricted QAnon content and then deleted it altogether (Facebook, 2020; YouTube, 2020; BBC 2020).

In total, we identified 115 German-speaking QAnon channels and 84 groups on Telegram. In these channels, a total of 2,391,392 posts were published, and 13,502,541 messages were exchanged by members up to February 2022. Six channels have over 100,000 subscribers, and the largest QAnon group has just under 50,000 members.

Although experts and journalists suspected that interest in QAnon and the number of followers would fall after the failed reelection of Donald Trump in 2020, the high number of messages in QAnon groups and channels suggests a sustained interest. Even channels and groups created as late as 2021, after the last Q Drop (posted in December 2020), were able to amass more than 100,000 subscribers (see Figure 4). Currently, the largest channels have plateaued between 125,000 and 150,000 subscribers. At this time, the size of the overlap between channel subscribers cannot be determined, as Telegram only provides such in-depth details about subscribers to channel operators.

This is not the case for groups: as group members are visible, we were able to analyze the total number of individual accounts represented in the 84 QAnon groups we identified. For this, we utilized the unique user IDs of group members. While users can change their publicly visible names, they cannot change the unique user ID assigned to them by Telegram. We identified 123,100 accounts that were currently members of at least one of these 84 groups (as of February 4th, 2022); over the entire period, a total of 346,006 accounts were either members of these groups or had posted messages in them. There were a total of 13.5 million group messages, of which 8.7 million had been posted by users. About 4.8 million messages were status updates about new members or messages from bots, which are often used by administrators to regulate group communication (for example, to welcome new users but also to exclude spammers from the groups). Similar to other social networks, only a small number of users, namely one percent, are responsible for a large part (64 percent) of the messages. The largest group has renamed itself several times and had more than 60,000 members

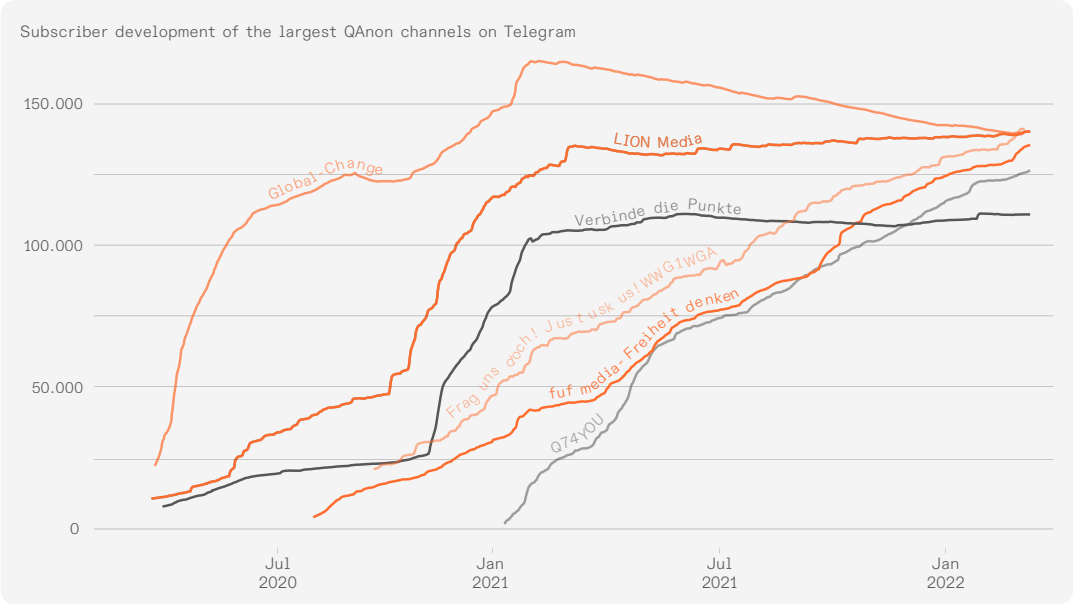
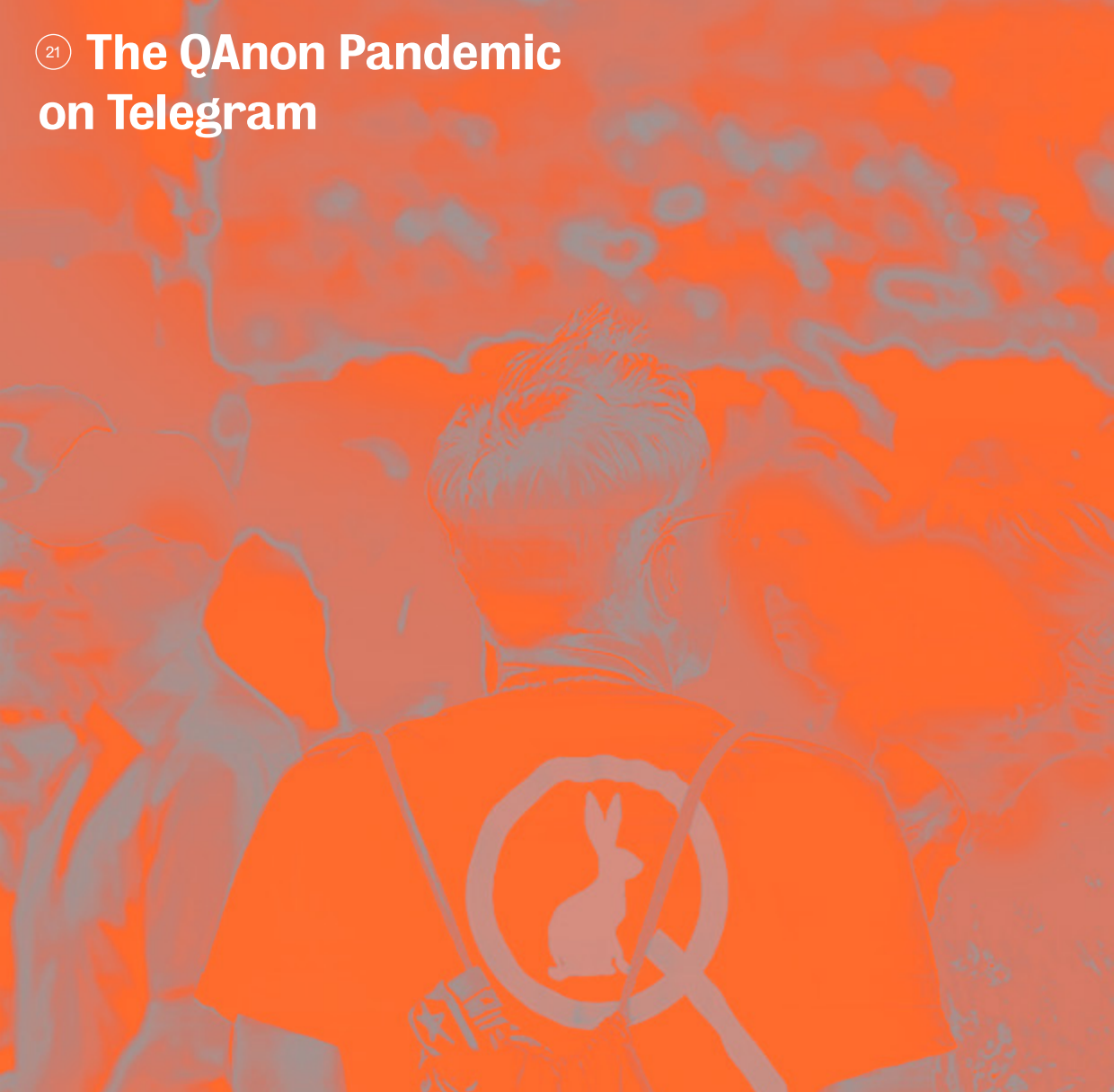


Figure 4: The growth of QAnon Channels on Telegram with over 100,000 subscribers

at its peak (January 2021). The second largest group “DEFENDER / SHAEF 2Q2Q” had over 23,000 members shortly before it was deleted by Telegram on January 12th, 2022. Telegram gave the reason for the deletion as a violation of the platform’s terms of use.

The data support the hypothesis that German-speaking countries host the largest QAnon scene outside of the USA. With around 140,000 subscribers, the German-language channel Qlobal-Change lags significantly behind the English-language channel GhostEzra (300,000 subscribers), but the latter channel appeals to a much larger audience. The 123,100 users who appeared in the 84 German-language QAnon groups form a large audience for the scene’s conspiracy narratives.

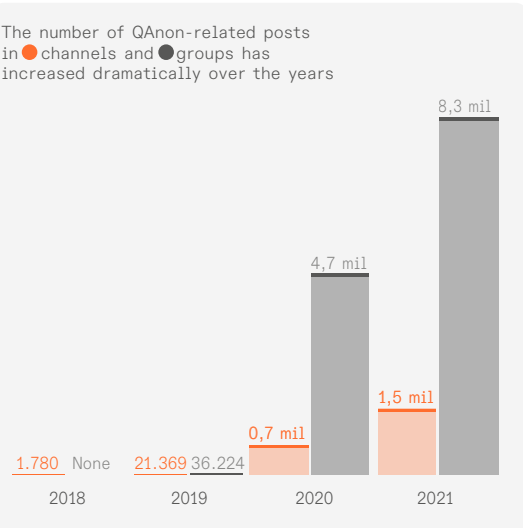
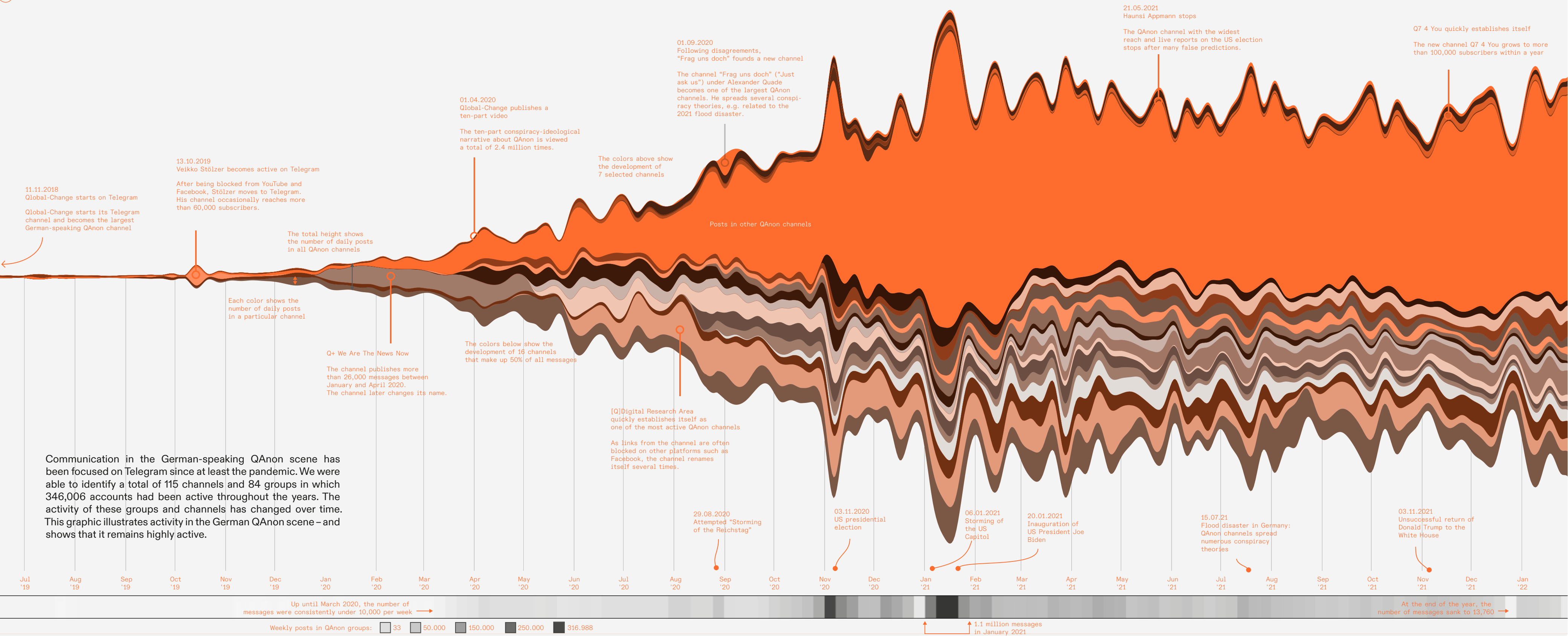
21 The QAnon Pandemic on Telegram



i Methodology

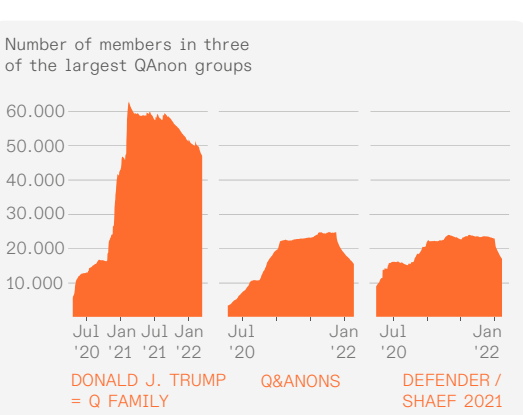
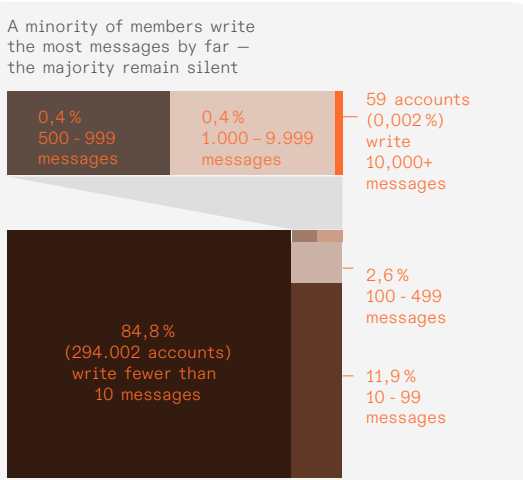
To identify as many public German-speaking QAnon channels and groups as possible and to include them in the survey, we first created an initial list of groups and channels. To do so, we drew on the CeMAS data set of 3,335 channels and groups, ranging from groups focused on conspiracy ideology to far-right extremist groups, and pulled groups and channels that showed relation to QAnon based on their name, description, or content. As criteria for inclusion, we considered, for example, the use of slogans included in the info box “Slogans and Language in the QAnon Universe”. Here, we followed the methodology of Hoseine et al. (2021). In a further step, we checked which channels had been shared over a hundred times among our initial list of channels

and groups. We then assessed whether these channels and groups included German-language QAnon references in their name, description, or content. Only channels with at least 1,000 subscribers (included associated discussion groups) and groups with at least 1,000 members were included. Finally, another CeMAS senior researcher reviewed a randomly-generated sample consisting of 20 percent of the initial channels and groups to check for plausibility (cf. Zihiri et al., 2022). Through this methodology we were able to identify 115 channels and 84 groups belonging to the German-speaking QAnon scene.



The approximately 13 MILLION GROUP MESSAGES include:

- 97 days worth of audio messages
- 1.9 million images files
- 622,042 uses of the "Boom" emoji
- 37,795 uses of the acronym „WWG1WGA" ("Where we go one, we go all")



QAnon became known among a broader German-speaking audience with a YouTube video posted by the conspiracy theorist Oliver Janich on November 25, 2017. This video was viewed 90,000 times on YouTube alone until it was deleted. In the coming years, numerous other YouTube channels and Facebook groups would devote themselves to Q's posts and conspiracy narratives from this scene.

In 2018 and 2019, the German-speaking scene was still concentrated primarily on the platforms of Facebook and YouTube; this changed at the latest with the start of the pandemic in 2020.

Within a few weeks, the number and reach of QAnon messages on Telegram exploded. Channels like Qlobal-Change were able to grow from 20,000 subscribers (March 2020) to more than 100,000 (May 2020). Numerous Telegram groups and channels were founded.

At the start of the pandemic in Germany, conspiracy narratives spread concerning the then-planned NATO mission Defender-Europe 20, claiming that the mission was secretly a supposed plan by Donald Trump to destroy an alleged “Deep State”. These stories took up elements of the Germany’s Reichsbürger scene and linked these with QAnon narratives.

With the deletion of many YouTube channels in October 2020, Telegram became even more relevant to the QAnon scene. The scene was particularly active in the aftermath of the US presidential election on November 3, 2020: many had expected a Trump victory. After the ballots were counted and Trump’s defeat appeared inevitable, many suspected voter fraud.

The activity of these groups and channels reached its high point with the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021 – and since then has remained at a consistently high level.

28 Surveying the Scope of Resonance: QAnon Conspiracy Narratives in Germany and Austria

This study measured the level of agreement within the German and Austrian population with respect to QAnon and Reichsbürger/sovereignist narratives. Not everyone who agrees with these narratives automatically identifies with the scene. Rather, the survey captures how well these narratives may resonate within the population. It indicates how many people in a population are open to these ideas and the extent to which these narratives can spread within society. Several studies already conducted within the USA similarly measured how open respondents were towards QAnon-related statements. In this study, we used the same statements to determine how strongly the German and Austrian population agree with QAnon narratives. In this way, we can draw comparisons with the USA.

Survey Design

For this project, a representative sample of the German and Austrian population was surveyed about their attitudes and behaviors. The survey focused on conspiracy narratives related to QAnon and the pandemic, as well as attitudes toward public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruitment of participants was planned so that the sample reflected the distribution of the general population with respect to key parameters such as age, gender, education, and federal state. The survey, conducted by the Bilendi & respondi market research institute, involved 2,202 people in Germany and 1,099 people in Austria over the age of 18 between January 17th, 2022, and January 22nd, 2022. After cleaning the data, responses from 1,970 people in Germany and 1,012 people in Austria could be used.⁶ The survey was conducted using a standardized questionnaire, which also collected sociodemographic information on gender, age, education, income, political attitudes, and vaccination status, as well as measurement tools to capture political and ideological attitudes, the prevalence of conspiracy narratives, and protest activity. Some of the measurement instruments were previously used in other surveys. Therefore, comparative values from other representative surveys are available for some of the data collected.⁷

6

We excluded separately for both countries the 10 percent of respondents who answered the questionnaire the fastest. The response time of these respondents was under 130 seconds, suggesting that insufficient time was taken to read and answer the questions. Beyond that, there were no other exclusion criteria. A detailed description of the sample is available at <https://osf.io/mjhpg/>

7

Following the standards of good scientific practice, the questionnaire used in the study has been uploaded to the platform of the Open Science Framework. It can be found at <https://osf.io/mjhpg/>. Further details on the sample can be found in the same location.

29 How Much Agreement with QAnon Narratives exists in Germany and Austria?

QAnon is often described as a meta-conspiracy narrative for its ability to act as an umbrella for several different conspiracy narratives. Nevertheless, there are certain narratives that are typical of this scene, such as the conspiracy narrative of alleged Satanic child-trafficking networks or that of the Deep State, a secret state within a state. In May 2021, the Public Religion Research Institute and The Interfaith Youth Core released a survey examining the prevalence of QAnon narratives in US society (PRRI & IFYC, 2021). Representative surveys allow researchers to measure social environments where the narratives and ideologies of movements and groups like QAnon find approval. In this way, researchers can determine how compatible these narratives are within a society. The higher the approval for these statements, the more acceptable these statements are within society at large, and the more likely that far-right groups may be able to exploit that approval for their own gain. In measuring agreement with QAnon, we draw on established scales from research on the topic. For our study, we translated the central statements from the US survey on QAnon and adapted them for the German and Austrian context. Additionally, we sought to explore additional elements with newly-constructed statements. Specifically, we asked about:

- Belief in the Deep State
- Belief in a worldwide Satanic child sex-trafficking operation
- Belief in a stolen election
- Agreement with the idea of a “great storm” that would restore the “rightful leaders”
- Agreement with the idea that “true patriots” must use violence to restore order

The overall results are encouraging. A large chunk of society in Germany and Austria did not agree with the statements. Nevertheless, rates of agreement in both countries require a closer look. In Germany, seven percent of those surveyed and in Austria nearly one in eight (11.5 percent) believe their country is dominated by a foreign power pulling the strings in the background. Less than five percent in both Germany (3.1 percent) and Austria (4.3 percent) believe that the government, media, and financial world are controlled by a group of Satanic pedophiles operating a worldwide

30 How much Agreement with QAnon Narratives exists in Germany and Austria?

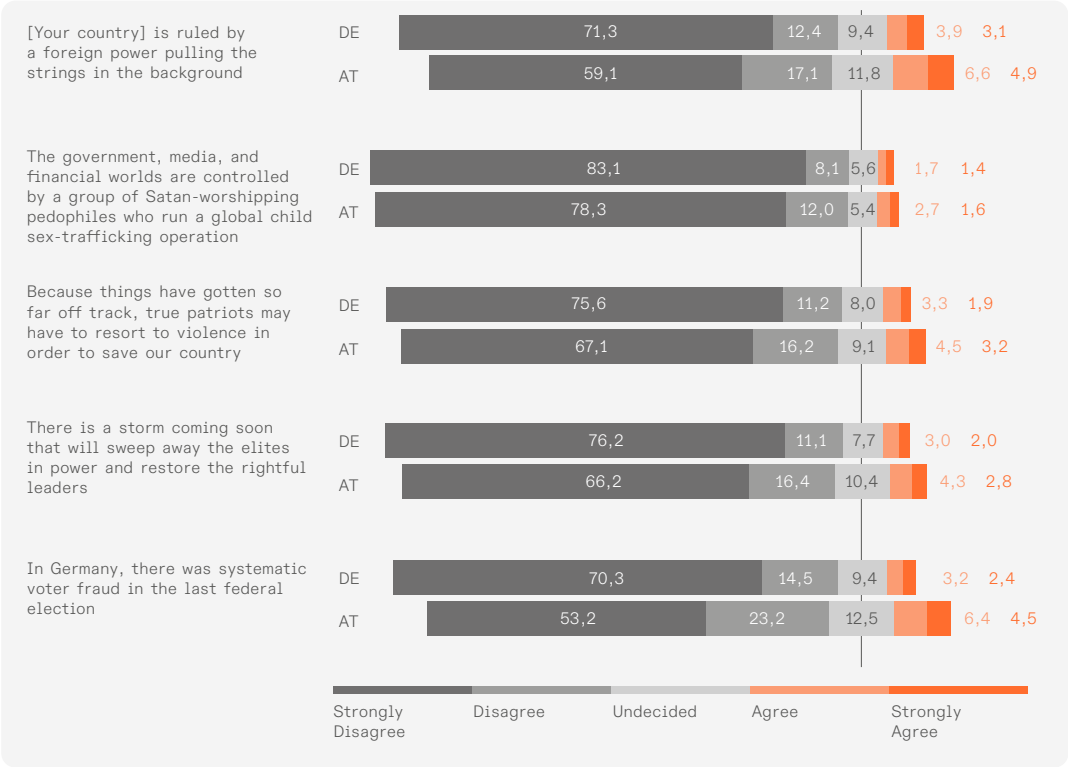


Figure 5: Agreement with QAnon Narratives in Germany and Austria.

child sex-trafficking ring. Another six percent think this is at least somewhat true, both in Germany (5.6 percent) and Austria (5.4 percent). Just over five percent in Germany (5.2 percent) and just under eight percent in Austria (7.7 percent) believe that “true patriots” must resort to violence, if necessary, to save their country. Here, again, a relatively large group found the statement somewhat true in both Germany (8 percent) and Austria (9.1 percent). Five percent in Germany and seven percent in Austria (7.1 percent) believe in a coming storm “that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders”. Nearly eight percent in Germany (7.7 percent) and over ten percent in Austria (10.4 percent) found this somewhat true. The claim of systemic voter fraud, typical within QAnon (in our case, during the last German federal election), also found agreement. While just under six percent in Germany (5.6 percent) considered this to be completely true and slightly more

31 How much Agreement with QAnon Narratives exists in Germany and Austria?

than nine percent found it at least somewhat possible (9.4 percent), a much larger group in Austria (10.9 percent) considered it to be completely true. Additionally, more than twelve percent in Austria (12.5 percent) considered it to be somewhat true.

Belief in QAnon Remains Especially Pronounced in the USA

In the USA, QAnon's country of origin, the QAnon conspiracy narrative resonated even deeper than in Germany and Austria. A representative survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and The Interfaith Youth Core with 5,625 participants in March 2021 showed that almost one in seven Americans believed in QAnon conspiracy narratives (PRRI & IFYC, 2021). Overall, 15 percent of Americans surveyed agreed with QAnon's claim that "the government, media and financial worlds in the US are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation" (compared to 3.1 percent in Germany and 4.3 percent in Austria). Additionally, 15 percent found that "because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country" (5 percent in Germany, 7.1 percent in Austria). An even greater number of U.S. Americans, one in five (20 percent), believe in "a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders" (5 percent in Germany, 7.1 percent in Austria).

Perception and Assessment of QAnon

Even though prominent media coverage of QAnon might suggest otherwise, only slightly under nine percent of respondents in Germany (8.5 percent) and six percent in Austria (5.8 percent) reported having heard quite a lot or very much about QAnon. The vast majority said they knew nothing at all about QAnon. The data show a negative correlation: the more people had read about QAnon, the more negatively they evaluated QAnon in Germany ($r = -.474, p < 0.01$) and Austria ($r = -.498, p < 0.01$).⁸ Looking at the appraisal of QAnon, we see that only a small percentage of those surveyed showed a positive attitude towards QAnon, with 3.5 percent in Germany and 2.8 percent in Austria evaluating QAnon as positive.⁹

Behind QAnon stands a wide variety of conspiracy narratives. It therefore comes as no surprise that belief in QAnon correlates strongly with belief in conspiracy narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who tend to be more supportive of QAnon tend to be more

8

A correlation measures the strength of a statistical relationship between two variables. The strength of the statistical relationship can be between -1 and +1. If the value is 0, there is no relationship; if the value is 1, there is a perfect positive linear relationship. A positive value means that the higher the agreement with one variable, the higher the agreement with the other. Conversely, a negative value means that more agreement with one variable is accompanied by a reduction in agreement with the other variable.

9

Here we are evaluating only the answers from respondents who indicated that they were at least a bit familiar with QAnon. The 61.9 percent in Germany and 64.6 percent in Austria who indicated that they had not heard or read anything at all about QAnon were not included in this calculation.

32

How much Agreement with QAnon Narratives exists in Germany and Austria?

	COVID Conspiracies	Reichsbürger/ sovereigntist	QAnon
COVID Conspiracies	-	<i>.744</i>	<i>.843</i>
Reichsbürger/ sovereigntist	.698	-	<i>.828</i>
QAnon	.811	<i>.817</i>	-

Note: The correlations highlighted in italics are the results from Germany, while the other values are the correlations for Austria. All correlations are significant at the level of $p < .001$

Table 1: Intercorrelations of attitudes towards conspiracy narratives (correlation coefficients)

supportive of COVID-19 conspiracy narratives, and vice versa. In the German-speaking world, it has been repeatedly shown that QAnon overlaps with the Reichsbürger/sovereigntist scene. Empirically, our data backs up this correlation. The stronger the support for QAnon, the more people believe in statements indicating that Germany or Austria are not sovereign states and did not conclude a peace treaty after WWII.

Sociodemographic Profiles: Who are the QAnon Believers?

An important question: Which groups are particularly susceptible to QAnon conspiracy narratives? To determine this, we divided the group of respondents into those who tended to agree with the QAnon-related statements as a whole and reached an average score of above 2.5 (the “agreement” group). In contrast, we created another group of respondents who reached an average score below 2.5 (the “disagreement” group). The group of 1,970 respondents in Germany fell into a breakdown of 12.4 percent in the “agreement” group and 87.6 percent in the “disagreement” group.¹⁰ Austria overall saw a larger agreement rate, with 16.2 percent agreeing on average with QAnon-related statements and 83.8 percent disagreeing.

The results showed no significant difference regarding gender. In Germany, 15.5 percent of women agreed on average with QAnon-related statements, while 12.3 percent of men agreed. In Austria, the average remained the same regardless of gender, with 16.2 percent of both men and women agreeing with QAnon-related statements. Respondent age, on the other hand, showed significant relation to agreement with QAnon-related statements, although the

¹⁰ Where possible, we have also used the statements which have been summarised in a scale using parallel calculations and report the statistical calculations for the corresponding mean values.

effects were small: $\chi^2_{\text{Germany}}(1, 1972) = 25.970, p < .001$ The older respondents were, the less they agreed with QAnon-related statements, $r_{\text{Germany}} = -.117, p < .001$. We found no significant effect for Austria, $\chi^2_{\text{Austria}}(1, 1011) = 6.334, p = .176$. We also examined the differences between east and west Germany. The data showed no significant differences in agreement with QAnon-related statements. In the east, 13.4 percent agreed with the QAnon-related statements, while in the west, 12 percent agreed. Much discussion centers on the divide between those who have received the COVID-19 vaccine and those who reject it still after two years of the pandemic. Our analyses show that in both Germany and in Austria, those who were not yet vaccinated believed significantly more often in typical QAnon conspiracy narratives. Of those who had received at least one dose of the vaccine, 8.7 percent (somewhat) agreed with QAnon-related statements, compared to 46 percent of the unvaccinated. A similar situation was observed in Austria, with agreement rates of 11.4 percent among the vaccinated compared to 41.1 percent of the unvaccinated. Studies from the USA have already shown that QAnon-related statements found higher agreement among Republicans. According to a survey conducted by NPR and IPSOS in December 2021 among 1,126 US Americans, nearly half of Republicans believed that election fraud helped Biden win the 2020 presidential election (NPR & IPSOS, 2022). In the study conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and The Interfaith Youth Core, Republicans agreed with all the QAnon-related statements at a rate significantly higher than Democrats. The trend of supporters of conservative and right-wing parties agreeing with QAnon-related statements is also reflected in Germany and Austria. While 44 percent of AfD (Alternative for Germany) voters in Germany tended to (somewhat) agree with QAnon-related statements, the statements were rejected by supporters of all other major parties, with a 91 percent rejection rate from Die Linke voters and a 96.3 percent rejection rate from Die Grüne voters. In Austria, 46.1 percent of FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) and 32 percent of MFG (People Freedom Fundamental Rights) voters agreed with QAnon-related statements, while all the other parties saw a rejection rate of at least 90 percent.

Our results found that respondents most often used Facebook and YouTube to find information about general current events, followed by Instagram. Overall, those who agreed with QAnon-related statements received more of their information through social media than those with lower agreement scores, $F_{\text{Germany}}(6, 1941) = 34.787, p < .001, \eta^2 = .0.097$ und $F_{\text{Austria}}(6, 1020) = 11.385, p < .001, \eta^2 = .0.063$. We found significant differences between all platforms in Germany

and Austria, except for Instagram. However, the largest difference related to the messenger app Telegram. 80.8 percent of those who disagree with QAnon-related statements stated they never used Telegram as an information source, while among those with a strong belief in QAnon-related statements in Germany, 18.4 percent use Telegram daily as an information source and another 9.8 percent use it several times a week. We found similar values for Austria. Among respondents with lower levels of agreement with QAnon narratives, 78.4 percent reported never using Telegram as an information source, while among those with higher levels of agreement, 15.9 percent used Telegram daily as an information source and another 9.1 percent used it multiple times a week.

What are the Consequences of Belief in QAnon?

The question of the role that conspiracy narratives play in protests has been previously examined in depth. Our analysis found that 4.3 percent of respondents from Germany and 9.2 percent of respondents in Austria reported attending at least one protest against COVID-19 public health measures. Protest participants differed greatly from the rest of the respondents in their belief in QAnon-related statements ($\chi^2_{\text{Germany}}(1, 1971) = 172,603, p < .001$ und $\chi^2_{\text{Austria}}(1, 1012) = 88.894, p < .001$). In Germany, protest participants agreed with QAnon-related statements at a rate of 58.1 percent compared to 10.3 percent of those who did not participate in any protests. In Austria, 50.5 percent of protest participants agreed with QAnon-related statements compared to only 10.3 percent of those who had not attended any protests. There was also a significant difference among respondents regarding the willingness to protest. While 43 percent of respondents in Germany who agreed with QAnon-related statements could (somewhat) imagine taking part in the protests, only 6.5 percent of those with no conspiracy beliefs said the same.

We also found significant correlation between willingness to take part in illegal actions and agreement with QAnon-related statements ($r_{\text{Germany}} = .583, p < .001$ und $r_{\text{Austria}} = .522, p < .001$). The more that people believe in QAnon-related statements, the more willing they are to participate in illegal actions against COVID-19 health measures. Furthermore, the more people believe in QAnon-related statements, the more they agree with that idea that the time for peaceful resistance is over ($r_{\text{Germany}} = .425, p < .001$ und $r_{\text{Austria}} = .423, p < .001$).

Contextualizing the Study – Some General Remarks

With this survey, we measured the resonance of QAnon and Reichsbürger/sovereigntist narratives within the overall population through a representative survey. However, representative surveys always face the challenge that not all sections of the population are equally well-reflected in the study. For example, online surveys, the method used in this study, exclude those without internet access. In addition, anti-science or far-right extremists may be hostile to science as an institution and less likely to participate in such studies (Sazak, 2019). Social desirability, the desire for survey participants to portray themselves in a positive light, can also influence results. Thus, the rate of agreement with QAnon-related narratives may be underestimated. That being said, the effect of social desirability is already reduced in online surveys as opposed to face-to-face interviews. At the same time, a challenge with representative surveys arises in distinguishing between those who agree with the statements without giving them much thought and those who are true supporters of a particular movement. Overall, a quantitative study is just one element of better understanding phenomena. This study is the first to systematically survey agreement with QAnon and Reichsbürger/sovereigntist narratives in German-speaking countries. However, quantitative studies cannot replace the forensic work that remains necessary to determine how many QAnon “members” there really are (Shanahan, 2021). For this reason we complemented the quantitative survey with an analysis of the spread of QAnon on Telegram.

Germany

Agreement with QAnon by
sex in % (DE)



Agreement with QAnon by
vaccination status in % (DE)



Austria

Agreement with QAnon by
sex in % (AT)

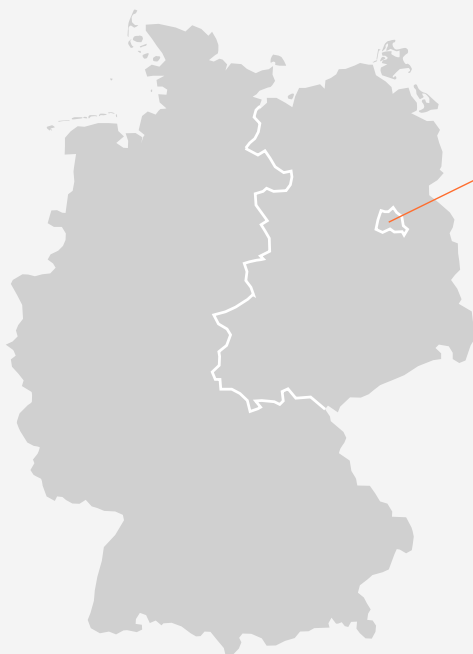


Agreement with QAnon by
vaccination status in % (AT)



Germany: Agreement with QAnon,
east-west comparison in %

12,0
Western Germany



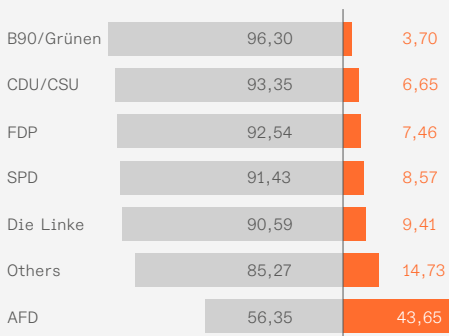
16,5
Berlin

13,4
Eastern Germany

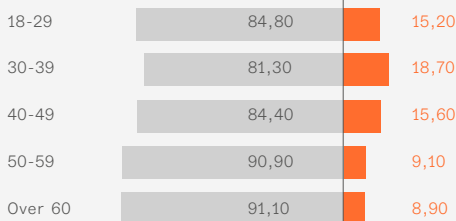
Germany

Others
QAnon supporters

Agreement with QAnon by party preference in % (DE)

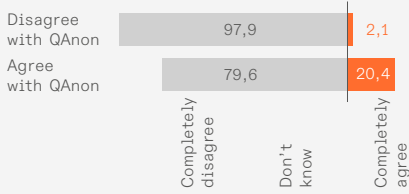


Agreement with QAnon by age in %



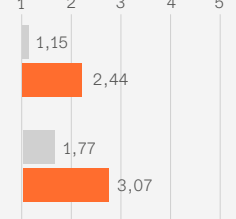
Agreement with QAnon and willingness to protest (DE)

"I have already protested against Coronavirus measures."



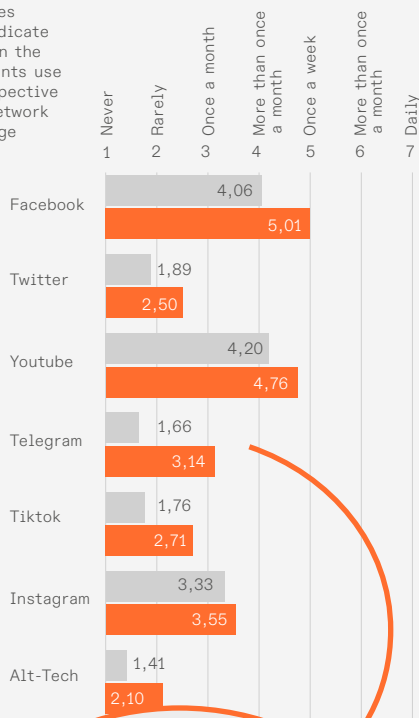
"I am ready to take illegal action"

"The time for peaceful resistance is over"

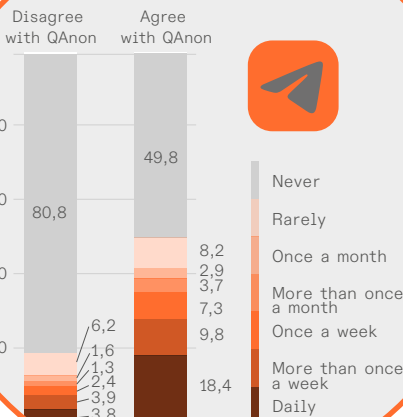


Social media use among QAnon supporters compared to others (DE)

The values below indicate how often the respondents use each respective social network on average



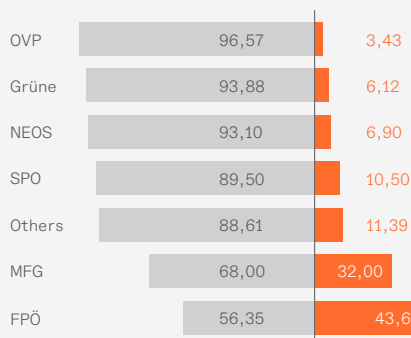
Telegram use and agreement with QAnon in % (DE)



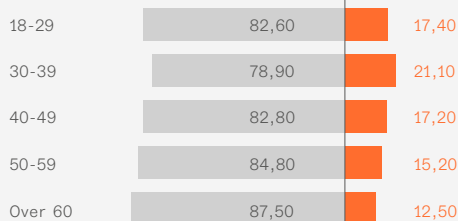
Austria

Others
QAnon supporters

Agreement with QAnon by party preference in % (AT)

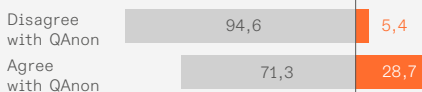


Agreement with QAnon by age in %

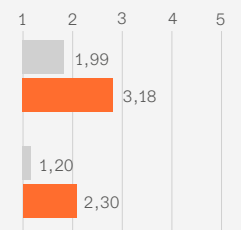


Agreement with QAnon and willingness to protest (AT)

"I have already protested against Coronavirus measures."



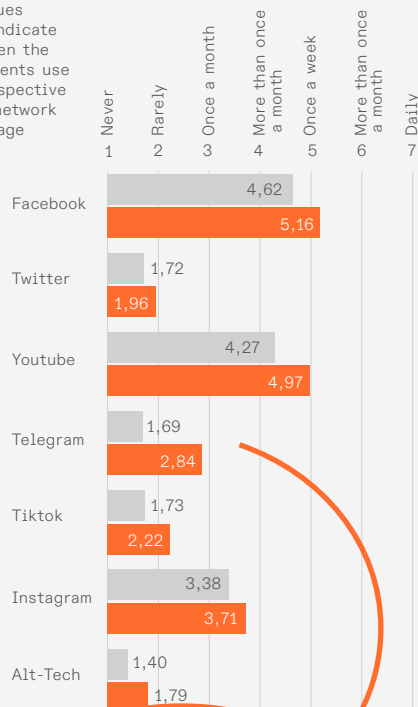
"I am ready to take illegal action"



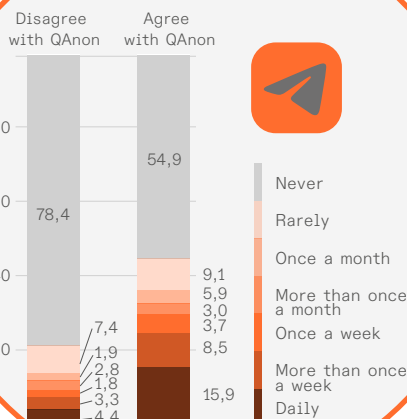
"The time for peaceful resistance is over"

Social media use among QAnon supporters compared to others (AT)

The values below indicate how often the respondents use each respective social network on average



Telegram use and agreement with QAnon in % (AT)



Although QAnon received extensive media coverage as the protests against COVID-19 public health measures began and in the wake of the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021, the conspiracy narratives of QAnon have now largely fallen off the radar. After Trump's failed attempt at re-election, many pundits and journalists predicted that the QAnon scene would decline and that its conspiracy narratives would be rendered meaningless.

However, these predictions have not come true. QAnon channels and groups continue to grow on Telegram, where the scene has predominantly organized itself. Posts about the alleged Satanic elite, their child sex-trafficking ring, secret underground facilities, and manipulated elections around the world continue to spread daily in Germany and are viewed hundreds of thousands of times. More than a year after the last post from Q, the supposed whistleblower and author of the Q Drops, there remains an active scene of 123,100 users in German-speaking countries. These groups exchanged 4.7 million messages in 2020 alone, and the number grew to 8.3 million messages in 2021. Our results support the theory that German-speaking regions host the largest QAnon scene outside of the USA. In this report, we have not only measured the digital presence of the scene, but also the social resonance of QAnon's conspiracy narratives through a representative survey.

Even if the prominent media coverage of QAnon at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic might have suggested otherwise, the data is clear: just under nine percent of respondents in Germany and six percent in Austria indicated that they had read somewhat or very much about QAnon. Nevertheless, the narratives spread by QAnon have found resonance in society: approximately one out of eight people in Germany at least somewhat agrees with QAnon conspiracy narratives. In Austria, the rate of agreement is even higher: of the 1,012 respondents, more than 16 percent at least somewhat agreed with QAnon conspiracy narratives. It is clear that even if QAnon is barely known among the general public, the conspiracy narratives circulating in this scene still manage to find their way into society at large.

The Merging of Spheres, a New Challenge

Our analysis showed an empirical overlap between QAnon and the Reichsbürger/sovereignist scene, both in our quantitative

survey and our assessment of Telegram and YouTube. Many members of the Reichsbürger scene have integrated QAnon into their own narratives, and seeded their narratives back into the QAnon scene. For example, many QAnon followers assumed that the NATO Defender-20 exercise in the Spring of 2020 was supposedly a sign that Trump also planned to liberate Germany, a phenomenon that CeMAS senior researcher Jan Rathje described in an article for the Federal Agency for Civic Education (Rathje, 2021). The conspiracy narrative around the exercise acted as a catalyst for the German-speaking QAnon scene, leading to an increase in the scene's reach on YouTube and Telegram. Despite the cancellation of the NATO exercise, many QAnon followers continue to believe the conspiracy narrative surrounding it.

During the pandemic, state offices for the protection of the constitution reported an increase in the number of individuals belonging to the Reichsbürger/sovereignist scene (MDR, 2022). In recent years, this scene was responsible for repeated acts of violence, up to and including murder, such as that which occurred in Georgensmünd in 2016 (ZEIT ONLINE, 2017). Our research found a close link between the Reichsbürger scene and QAnon. As belief in QAnon rises, so too does the justification of illegal activity, highlighting the potential for violence.

The potential for violence must be taken seriously. With respect to the enforcement of COVID-19 public health measures and fines, especially in relation to this scene, the potential for violence must be considered and protective measures taken. The potential for violence against public health measures extends to threaten vaccination personnel, media professionals, local politicians, and teachers. All who enforce public health measures and administer vaccinations are at the focus of this scene and are exposed to the risk of aggression and violence.

Understanding Digital Spaces as Social Spaces

Conspiracy narratives can be found wherever people gather online, from Telegram and YouTube to GuteFrage.net. But these aren't just digital spaces – they are social ones, and conspiracy narratives move beyond these original spaces. The extent to which conspiracy narratives spread on particular platforms is largely determined by the policies and responses of those platforms. While

YouTube deleted many QAnon-related channels, a large network was able to establish itself on Telegram. In our view, the debate around reducing agitation, misinformation and conspiracy narratives online must not be conducted from a purely technological standpoint, but must be understood as a social and democratic duty. At the same time, the conversation must focus on protecting those affected by the content and removing the hurdles experienced by those who are confronted by online agitators. There must be more consistent and faster prosecution of criminal acts that occur in digital spaces. Digital agitation leads to real consequences for those affected.

Lessons from the Pandemic – Countering Future Crises

The COVID-19 pandemic will certainly not be the last challenge confronting society. Climate change, for example, is already an attractive projection surface for far-right and conspiracy-narrative-driven mobilization. To better prepare for future crises, we must draw systematic lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to better counter disinformation and conspiracy narratives. When societies do not develop action plans until they find themselves already amid a crisis, their responses often come too slow to adequately react. Knowledge gathered from science and society can help inform responses to future disasters.

Conclusion: Quo Vadis, QAnon?

The example of QAnon clearly demonstrates the importance of systematic monitoring. The scene remains active, particularly in the digital space, and even continues to grow - independently of any new activity from the alleged “Q”. New and old conspiracy narratives are constantly weaved together and integrated into the scene. The strong overlap with the Reichsbürger scene is cause for concern, as QAnon conspiracy narratives lead to an even stronger disconnect from reality, fueling the spiral of radicalization. QAnon has not disappeared, but rather continues to adapt to new events.

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Josef Holnburger is a political data scientist. He studies the spread of conspiracy narratives, disinformation, antisemitism, and far-right extremism, with a focus on alternative platforms like Telegram. Holnburger is part of the CeMAS leadership.

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Maheba Goedeke Tort

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PL

Pia Lamberty

Pia Lamberty is part of the CeMAS leadership and as a social psychologist has spent years researching why people believe conspiracy narratives and the consequences such a worldview brings.

The non-profit Center for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy (CeMAS) aims to enable society to actively counter conspiracy ideology, disinformation, antisemitism, and far-right extremism in the context of current problems and future crises. To support this, CeMAS detects and analyzes anti-democratic tendencies in their early stages. CeMAS shares its analyses with a variety of social actors to constructively meet the challenges facing society.

CeMAS utilizes an interdisciplinary approach, combining perspectives from psychology and the social sciences with modern data science and investigative journalism. In this way, CeMAS stimulates a continuous exchange of expertise from different perspectives to fuel monitoring, analysis, and strategy. The Alfred Landecker Foundation recognized the importance of CeMAS's work at an early stage. We are pleased to share that CeMAS will be funded by the Alfred Landecker Foundation from 2021–2024.

**A Better Internet
is Possible –**

**A Better World
is Necessary.**

The non-profit Center for Monitoring, Analysis, and Strategy (CeMAS) brings together years of interdisciplinary expertise focusing on conspiracy ideologies, disinformation, antisemitism, and right-wing extremism. CeMAS addresses current developments in these fields through modern study design and systematic monitoring of key digital platforms to conduct innovative analysis and form recommendations for policy action. CeMAS advises decision-makers from civil society, media and politics.