

QAnon conspiracy theory gaining ground in UK, analysis shows

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Followers believe that Donald Trump is waging secret war against ritual child abusers

A conspiracy theory that Donald Trump is waging a secret war against an elite who engage in ritual child abuse is growing across UK social media, Guardian analysis has found.

The [QAnon](#) conspiracy theory is propelled by an unlikely coalition of spirituality and wellness groups, vigilante “paedophile hunter” networks, pre-existing conspiracy forums, local news pages, pro-Brexit campaigners and the far right.

The Guardian tracked five slogans associated with QAnon shared by UK-run Facebook pages over the past year, and found interactions on posts containing these keywords increased fivefold between April and August, the last full month for which data was available.

The unfounded conspiracy theory also draws on predecessor [conspiracy theory Pizzagate](#), which was prevalent during the 2016 US presidential elections, [as well as much older antisemitic conspiracies](#).

In April, there were 18,000 interactions on posts from UK pages containing the keywords, according to the Facebook-owned analytics tool CrowdTangle. By August this year, engagement had increased significantly with 96,000 reactions, comments and shares. Offline, a nascent street movement linked to QAnon, has organised at least 15 protests across England, Scotland and Wales.

The conspiracy theory is spreading widely among groups who would not usually be associated with the far right.

The Guardian categorised the 273 UK-run pages that had posted QAnon content, and found that pages dedicated to alternative medicine, spirituality and mysticism accounted for the highest proportion of engagement, with 68,000 interactions during the past year.

Gregory Davis, a researcher at Hope not Hate, a charity that monitors extremist groups, said: “It’s concerning to see [QAnon] diversifying in terms of how it’s spread and what parts of it are being emphasised.

“What’s happening with this diversification is that many groups [are] taking up different elements of it and introducing elements. The danger is that this makes it even less disprovable.”

A Facebook page linked to a business selling essential oils and courses in numerology, spiritual guidance and meditation, which has more than a million followers on Facebook, received the second-highest number of interactions of any page measured.

One of these posts was a viral video describing a conspiracy theory about a toy doll, which the original poster alleged showed “the head of a Satanic Luciferian monster” when dipped in cold

water. It had 11 million views at the time of writing. Conspiracies about [toys containing secret messages](#) are common among QAnon believers.

The analysis also found QAnon is merging with pre-existing conspiracy theory pages.

There were more than 40 pages promoting other conspiracies, including chemtrails, flat Earth and anti-vax pages, which had recently posted content associated with QAnon, receiving 40,000 interactions during this period.

Vigilante [“paedophile hunter” groups](#), whose members sometimes pose as children online to entrap potential sexual predators, were also influential in spreading the conspiracy. The Guardian found 12 paedophile hunter groups shared QAnon material, receiving 13,000 interactions over the period.

The analysis also found 10 pro-Brexit pages and 28 far-right pages had shared QAnon content, receiving 26,000 interactions. One pro-Brexit news account often received thousands of interactions on its QAnon posts, which included false claims about Trump rescuing children from underground tunnels and an introductory video to QAnon for its sometimes confused British followers. A further nine pages analysed were specifically devoted to sharing QAnon news.

A number of QAnon-related posts found a less obvious home on local community Facebook pages, with 23 groups dedicated to a local area in the UK sharing material related to the theory.

Offline, a street movement with links to QAnon has hosted protests in 12 towns and cities across the UK. Most of the events have been organised by Freedom for the Children UK, a Facebook group that has about 12,000 members and was inspired by a US organisation of the same name.

Several of the organisers of the Freedom for the Children events have expressed beliefs in QAnon, according to a [report by Hope not Hate](#).

A spokesperson for Facebook said: “This analysis does not reflect either the actions we’re taking or the policies we have in place to keep people safe on our platform. We remove posts that incite violence; and we recently expanded our policies to specifically address organisations and movements like QAnon

... We have since removed 790 groups and 100 pages, and placed restrictions on over 10,000 Instagram accounts.”

The effects of Facebook’s crackdown, which happened in August, would not be reflected in the Guardian analysis.

Davis said: “We always welcome action from Facebook. Recently, they’ve removed a lot of harmful content, but it’s frustrating to see that so much of it is still there. Facebook deleted a few of the major accounts, but it’s still incredibly easy to find [QAnon content] on there

... It’s hard to put into words how dangerous this narrative is.”

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/18/qanon-conspiracy-theory-gaining-ground-in-uk-analysis-shows>