The Flow of Q

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The spread of conspiracy theories across the U.S. has sparked concern in public and government circles. QAnon, the most well-known conspiracy, started as a fringe concept and has made its way into mainstream conversation. While QAnon and other conspiracy theories are usually born in peripheral online message boards, social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube have become instrumental in the growing popularity of the conspiracies. The rapid transition of the QAnon conspiracy from fringe to mainstream illustrates how information flows operate in the United States.

Flows are the movement of people, goods, or ideas across space. In the age of the internet, where information can spread faster than at any point in history, flows of ideas and ideologies travel at an alarming pace. The rapid gain in popularity experienced by the QAnon conspiracy is an example of how information flows online, and how those ideological flows can influence real world events. QAnon, a “big tent conspiracy” that is constantly expanding, centers on claims that high-level celebrities and Democrat politicians are pedophiles involved in an underground Satan-worshipping cabal. The conspiracy has grown to include the claim that Donald Trump won the 2020 election and should still be the president. The ranks of believers of these theories used to be small, contained in far flung internet message forums. However, over the last few years, QAnon’s popularity has skyrocketed. Now, the number of believers is projected to be in the millions. Even prominent lawmakers and government leaders have supported false QAnon claims. What started as the flow of information across low-level internet message boards has expanded into a global information flow. Notably, QAnon’s spread hasn’t just taken place within the internet. It has expanded to influence events in the real world. For example, many of the people who stormed the Capitol on January 6 were QAnon believers. The attack of the Capitol itself was closely tied to the QAnon theory that the election had been stolen from President Trump. These events illustrate the impacts of flows of conspiracy theories in the real world.

Although many of the ideas in the QAnon canon are tied to politics, the flow of the QAnon movement stretches far beyond the political sphere. QAnon’s popularity rests largely in the sense of community that accompanies the far-fetched theories. One game designer compared QAnon to a multiplayer alternate reality game, because it offers dramatic story lines and intricate puzzles. Moreover, it allows people to escape into a fictional world that offers explanations for the things that feel wrong in their real world. The sense of community that connects QAnon believers in many different places is an important catalyst to the popularity of these radical theories. The flow across places and in to different online communities shows how a bizarre conspiracy can become “common sense” for those who choose to believe.