Methodology

Coding open ends

The open-ended question about QAnon was included in Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel survey conducted Aug. 31 to Sept. 7, 2020. Respondents were first asked, "How much, if anything, have you heard or read about QAnon?" Respondents who said that they had heard "a lot" or "a little" about QAnon were then asked, "In your own words, what is QAnon?"

To code these responses, researchers first ran them through spell-check and Spanish translation. Then researchers used a Python script to determine the most frequently used terms or phrases (unigrams, bigrams and trigrams). Those lists of words were then examined manually to determine a set of categories based on these keywords. These categories and associated keywords are listed below.

Using this set of categories and keywords, the responses were then categorized using a Python script. To further uncover any keywords that may have been missed, researchers then reviewed approximately 5% of all responses coded as negative for each category (i.e., that the response does not have mentions of those keywords) and identified keywords to add to each category from the list of false negatives. Responses were then coded a second time by the script with this updated keyword list, and researchers manually reviewed all the positive codes in each category to identify and remove false positives.

Keywords used to identify each category

Mentions that it is a conspiracy

- Keyword: 'Conspiracy', 'conspiracies'

Mentions that the source of the theories are from the right, or that the group is right-leaning

- Keywords: 'far right', 'right wing', 'rightwing', 'republican', 'gop', 'ultra right', 'extreme right', 'extremist right', 'conservative', 'right-wing', 'far-right', 'the right', 'right-leaning', 'right leaning'

Mentions that the subject of the theories are left-leaning

- Keyword: 'democrat', 'dems','democratic', 'hillary', 'liberal', 'soros', 'left'

Says that it is 'extreme'

▪ Keywords: 'alt', 'fringe', 'kooks', 'nutjob', 'crazy', 'terrorist', 'cult', 'extremist', 'radical', 'wack'

Mentions child abuse or trafficking

▪ Keywords: 'pedo', 'child', 'traffic', 'sex'

Mentions that the theory/org supports Trump (or views him as the savior or victim)

▪ Keyword: 'trump'

Mentions that it is a group (movement, community, organization, org, cult)

▪ Keywords: 'group', 'movement', 'community', 'org', 'cult'

Mentions don't know/not sure

▪ Keywords: 'not sure', 'don't know', 'no idea', 'do not know', 'don't really know' 'not really sure', 'idk'

Coding YouTube videos

An earlier study analyzed videos published by the 100 most viewed YouTube news channels in December 2019 (for details on how those channels were selected and how videos were analyzed see the methodology). One facet of that analysis was the extent to which those channels mentioned the conspiracy theories known as QAnon in the first 10 minutes of their videos (a mention includes a verbal or visual depiction). That study found that 11 channels mentioned QAnon in at least 10% of their videos.

To determine the extent to which QAnon was still coming up in these videos, researchers coded the first 10 minutes of all videos published in September 2020 by those 11 channels (N=236 videos) using the same criteria as in the earlier study.