

The background of the slide is a black field with numerous thin, bright orange lines that create a sense of motion and energy. These lines are most concentrated in the lower right quadrant, where they form a dense, swirling pattern that resembles a comet's tail or a network of data connections. The lines extend across the frame, some appearing as straight streaks and others as more complex, curved paths.

# Graphika

## Facebook Downs Inauthentic Cluster Inspired by QAnon

05.2020

Takedowns

# Facebook Downs Inauthentic Cluster Inspired by QAnon

## Introduction

On April 17, Facebook took down a small network of pages, groups, and accounts, based in the United States, that used coordinated inauthentic behavior to promote a range of conspiracy theories. Some users also used the network to advertise merchandise, especially T-shirts.

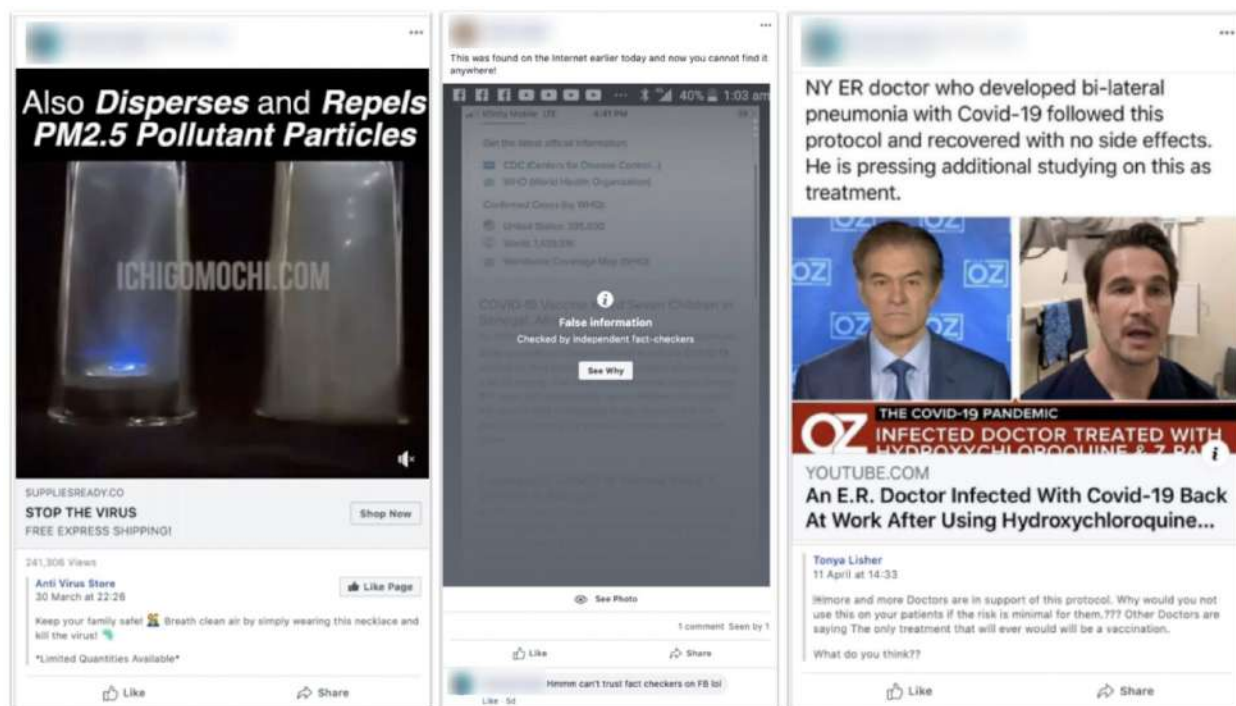
The network appeared to be run by a small group of users who used a mixture of genuine and fake accounts - sometimes multiple accounts per person - to manage their groups and pages. Their posts were closely coordinated, with the same content appearing on different assets in the network all but simultaneously.

As it [announced](#) the takedown on May 5, Facebook said, “The people behind this activity used fake accounts — some of which had already been detected and disabled by our automated systems — to create fictitious personas, like and comment on their own content making it appear more popular than it is, manage Pages and Groups, and evade detection and enforcement. (...) While it did not appear to be the focus of this campaign, some of the individuals behind this effort attempted to monetize their clickbait content by selling t-shirts and other merchandise.”

Before the takedown, Facebook shared the names of the assets with Graphika for an independent assessment.

The network focused on the QAnon conspiracy theory popular among [some pro-Trump](#) and [far-right circles](#). Though there are various branches of the QAnon support community who focus on different aspects of political conspiracy, the overarching theory centers around a secret government insider known as “Q” who is progressively exposing the machinations of the “deep state,” a worldwide network of child abusers, satanists, and “globalists” who supposedly control world governments, private industry, and the media. The conspiracy also focuses closely on President Donald Trump, whom QAnon supporters largely believe is working toward exposing and punishing those involved in the deep state in an event known as “The Storm.” This phrase represents a central tenet of the QAnon theory, having been allegedly referenced by Trump in a press conference in October 2017 in the presence of high-ranking military officials.

The network also dabbled in other conspiracy theories around issues including the 5G mobile phone network, the US presidential election, and the Covid-19 coronavirus, but their interest in these appeared more opportunistic and shifted with time. On Covid-19, for example, the network initially dismissed the “Chinese virus,” then shifted to urging users to wash their hands, and then shifted further to promoting remedies that had not been checked<sup>1</sup> and false stories that had been.



Stories shared to the group Covid-19 Support Group by members of the network on April 12, 2020. Left to right, promoting a necklace to “kill the virus,” sharing fact-checked misinformation, and promoting a claim around the efficacy (and absence of side effects) of hydroxychloroquine.

<sup>1</sup> This is in line with the broader health misinformation spread by QAnon communities on Twitter, notably the claim that colloidal silver can cure Covid-19. See Melanie Smith, Erin McAweeney and Lea Ronzaud, “The COVID-19 ‘Infodemic’,” Graphika, <https://graphika.com/reports/the-covid-19-infodemic/>.



# Coordinated Posting

The network was built around a set of Facebook pages whose names all mentioned QAnon. They included the handles @RealTrumpQAnon, @RealQAnon41020, and @QAnonTees, which promoted the QAnon conspiracy theory and T-shirts immortalizing it.

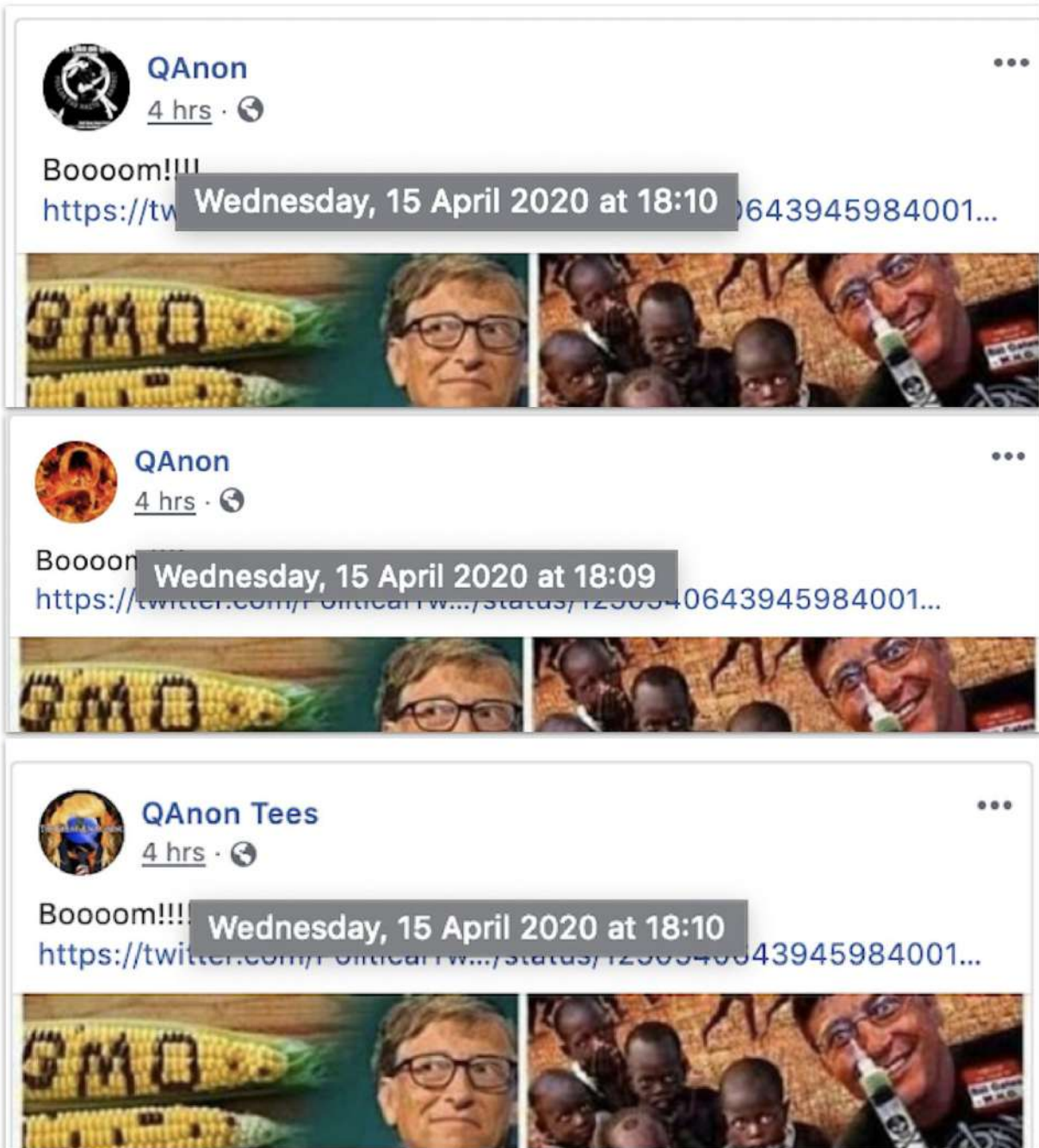
These pages were demonstrably coordinated. Repeatedly, they posted the same content in the same order, and even at the same time, down to the minute.



Posts by (left to right) @RealQAnon41020, @RealTrumpQAnon, and @QAnonTees, sharing the same tweet at the same time. Screenshots taken on April 15, 2020. Note the source of the tweet is @PoliticalTwtWar, described below in the section on cross-platform activity.



Boom Goes the Dynamite. Posts by (left to right) @RealQAnon41020, @RealTrumpQAnon, and @QAnonTees, sharing the same tweet at the same time. Screenshots taken on April 15, 2020. Note the source of the tweet is @PoliticalTwtWar, described below in the section on cross-platform activity.

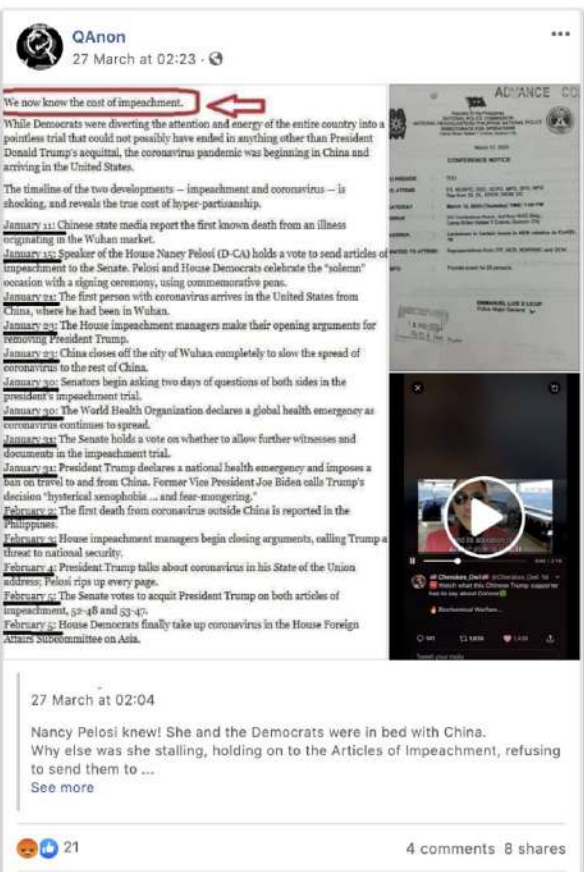
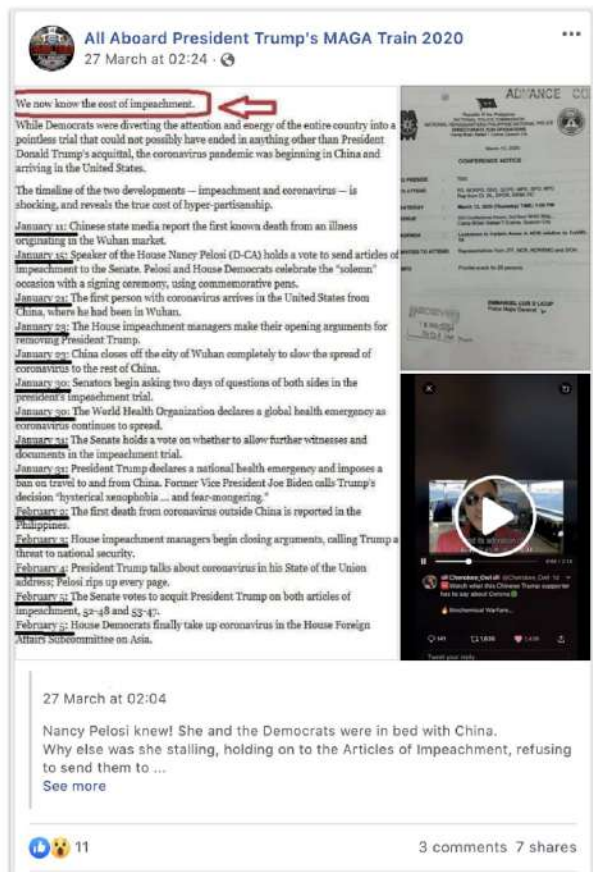


*Impeccable timing: posts by (top to bottom) @realQAnon41020, @RealTrumpQAnon, and @QAnonTees showing the exact date and time of posting.*

These were not the only assets to behave in this way. Other pages and groups in the network acted similarly, revealing a network of simultaneous or nearly simultaneous posting.



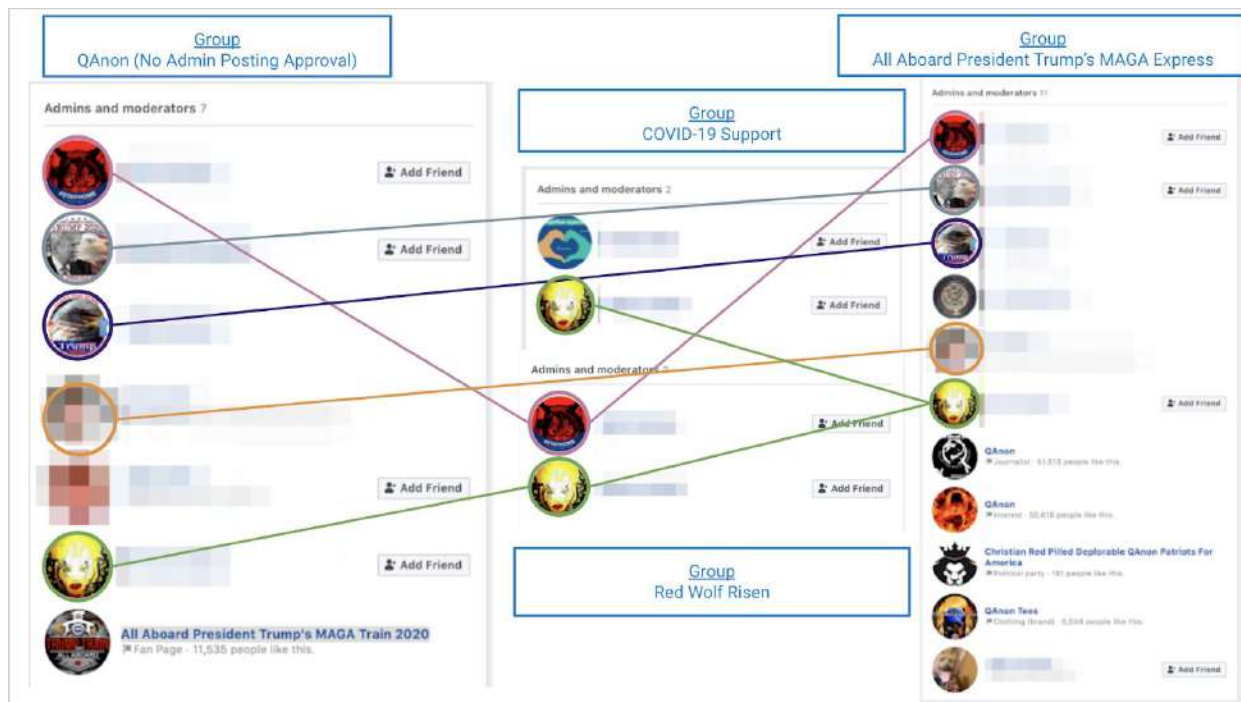
Simultaneous posts from the group QAnon Chosen and the page @RealQAnon41020, both members of the takedown set.



Share, and share a like: nearly simultaneous sharing by two pages in the network of a post by an unrelated user. The annotations to the screenshot are the original user's work.

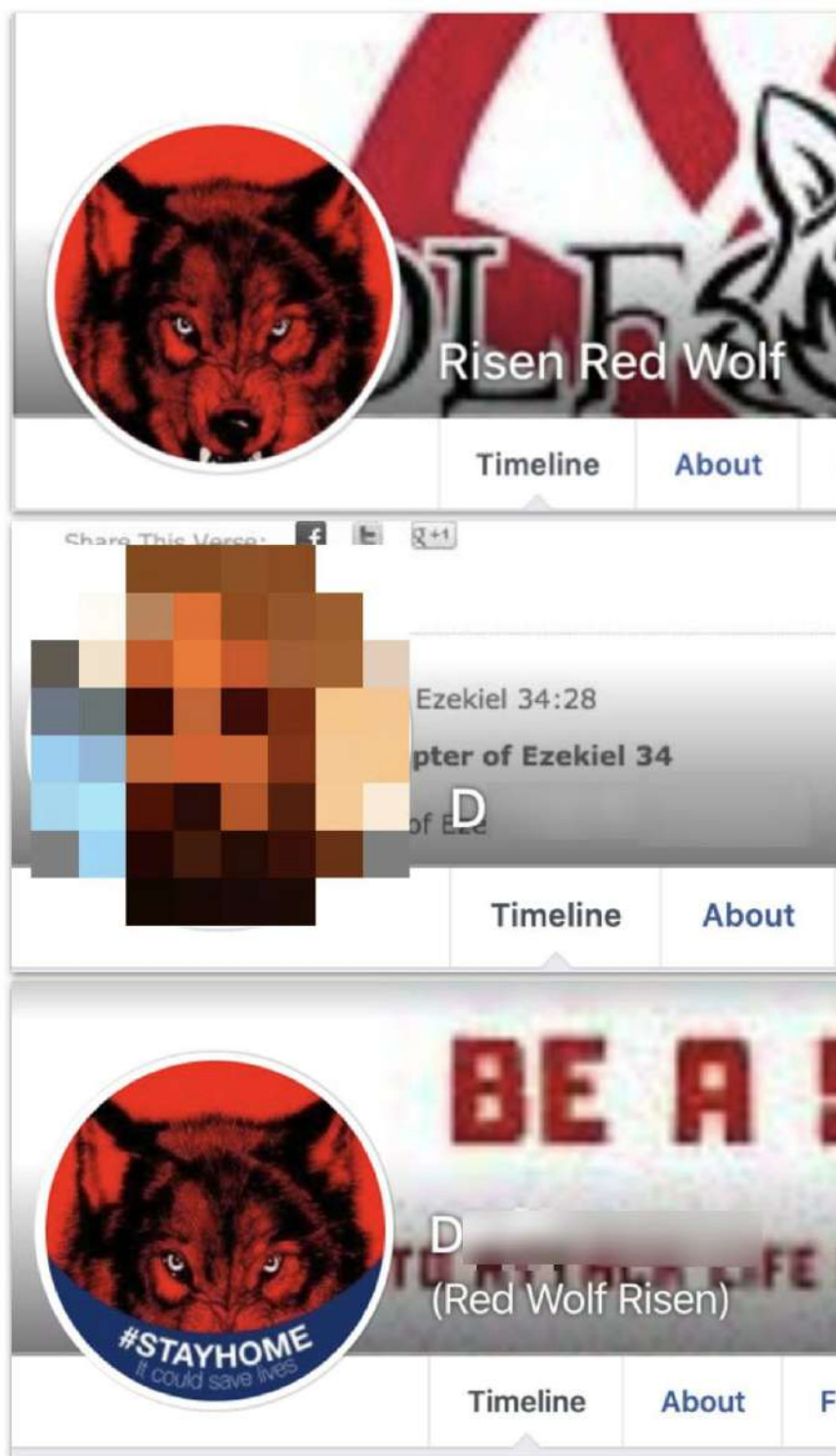


These pages and groups were managed by a closely intertwined set of accounts, with the same accounts administering or posting to multiple assets within the network. As a second tier of management, some of the pages that these accounts administered were themselves registered as admins on the groups, further reinforcing the network and binding it together.



*Overlapping admins for QAnon (No Admin Posting Approval), All Aboard President Trump's MAGA Express, Red Wolf Risen, and COVID-19 Support (Clockwise from top left)*

Some of the accounts themselves showed strong signs of inauthenticity. Some users appeared to be running multiple accounts with slight variations on the name and profile picture, a violation of Facebook's terms of service, which mandate one personal account (as opposed to page or group) per user. Others did not appear to make any attempt to indicate the real identity of the person behind the account, suggesting that they were dummy accounts created for amplification.



Three of the personal accounts (as opposed to pages or groups) in the network. All three shared a combination of one or more of the same personal name, nickname, and profile picture; other content clues also confirmed that these were three accounts run by one user. We have obscured most details to protect the identity of the user.



Facebook said that the takedown was based on the finding of coordinated inauthentic behavior. Some individual posts were also taken down or labeled as false, or they linked to content that had been taken down already. At least one account had been temporarily suspended for an unnamed post but then reinstated, only to be restricted again. This underlines the range of options at the platforms' disposal: enforcement is not a binary of take down vs leave up but has a variety of degrees.



Left to right, posts marked as fact-checked, linking to deleted content on YouTube and linked to deleted content on Facebook. A further example of fact-checked content is illustrated on page 2, above.



Comment from one of the takedown accounts three weeks before the takedown, complaining about bans on their posts and restrictions on their content.

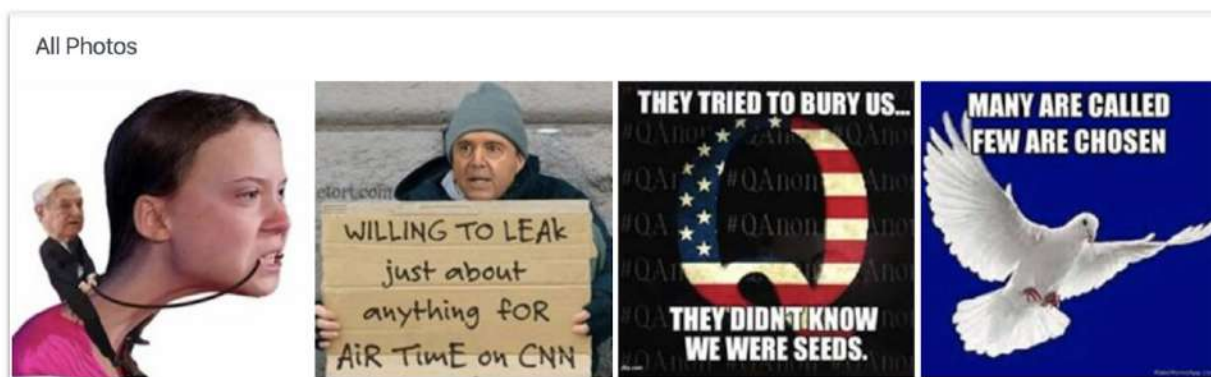
# Couture and Conspiracies

Much of the content posted by these accounts can be classified as conspiracy theories. Their core focus was QAnon, as witnessed by the names of so many of their pages and groups - @realDonaldTrumpQAnon, @QAnonChosenOne, @QAnon (No Admin Post Approval), and so on. Their posts were also laden with QAnon references, notably the phrases "Many are called, few are chosen," "The storm is here," and "Where we go one, we go all" or #WWG1WGA.



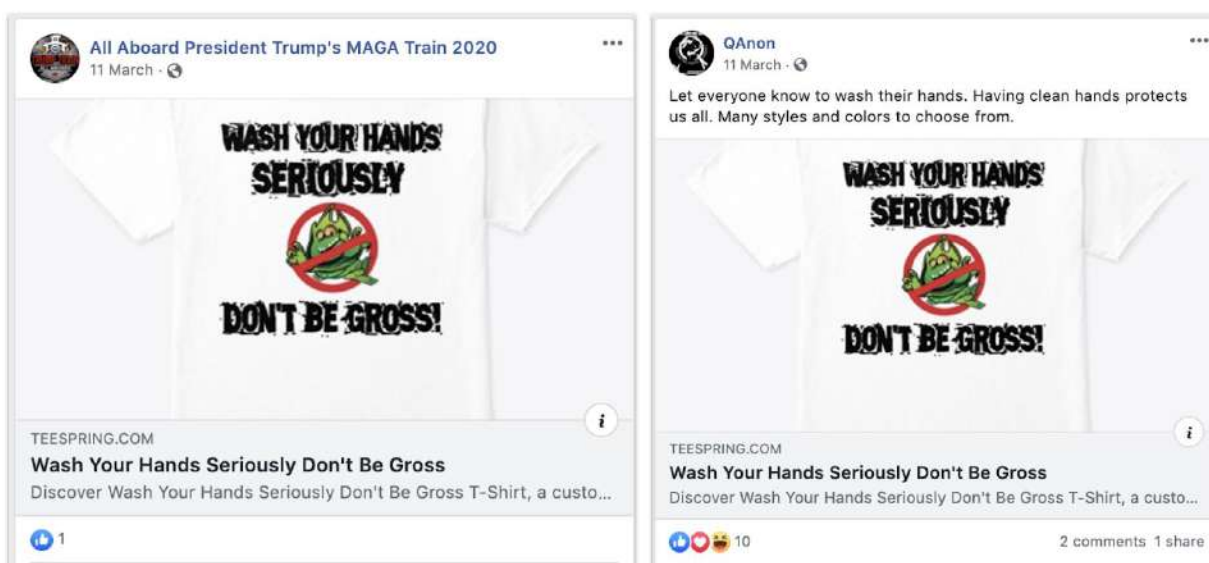
Banners from group QAnon Chosen (top) and pages @QAnonChosenOne and @realDonaldTrumpQAnon (middle and bottom) showing the selection of Q iconography.

Between this core activity, the group posted on other conspiracy theories and scientifically unproven claims. This appeared to be more opportunistic in scope and included, for example, comments on climate change (including portraying climate activist Greta Thunberg as a tool of billionaire George Soros), US politics, and the impeachment of President Donald Trump.



Photos by page @QAnonChosenOne, showing the range of topics. The left-hand image shows Greta Thunberg and George Soros; the second from the left shows Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff.

In March 2020, the network's members began posting a range of content about the novel coronavirus Covid-19. This was not uniform in tone: some posts attacked the Democratic Party in the United States for demanding a lockdown, some promoted merchandise that advocated health measures including hand-washing, and some associated the virus with the 5G mobile phone network.

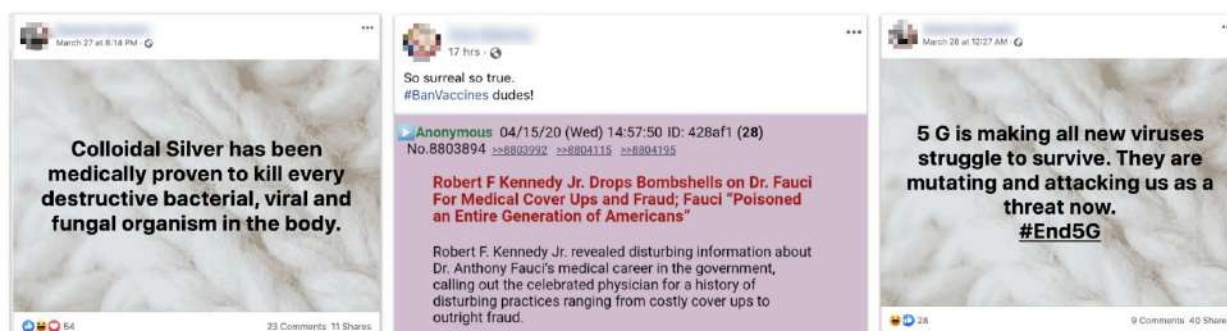


Posts in March advertising "wash your hands" merchandise from a T-shirt retailer the network promoted.



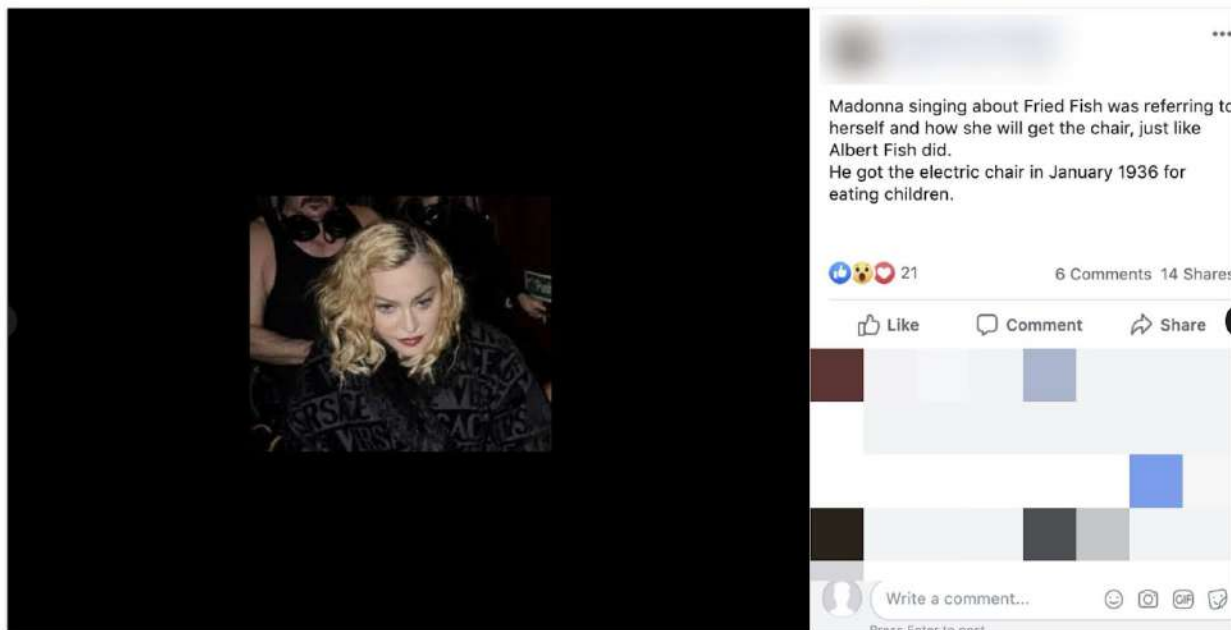


Posts in April on the “pandemic health policy” conspiracy and “5G message over the sky,” from @QAnonTees.



Posts on colloidal silver (a substance promoted by some conspiracy sites as a remedy; in fact, it is [considered](#) potentially dangerous), banning vaccines, and the danger of 5G, from accounts that featured in the takedown.

Other posts were simply conspiratorial, providing lurid interpretations of everyday occurrences to build them into a narrative of Satanic evil.



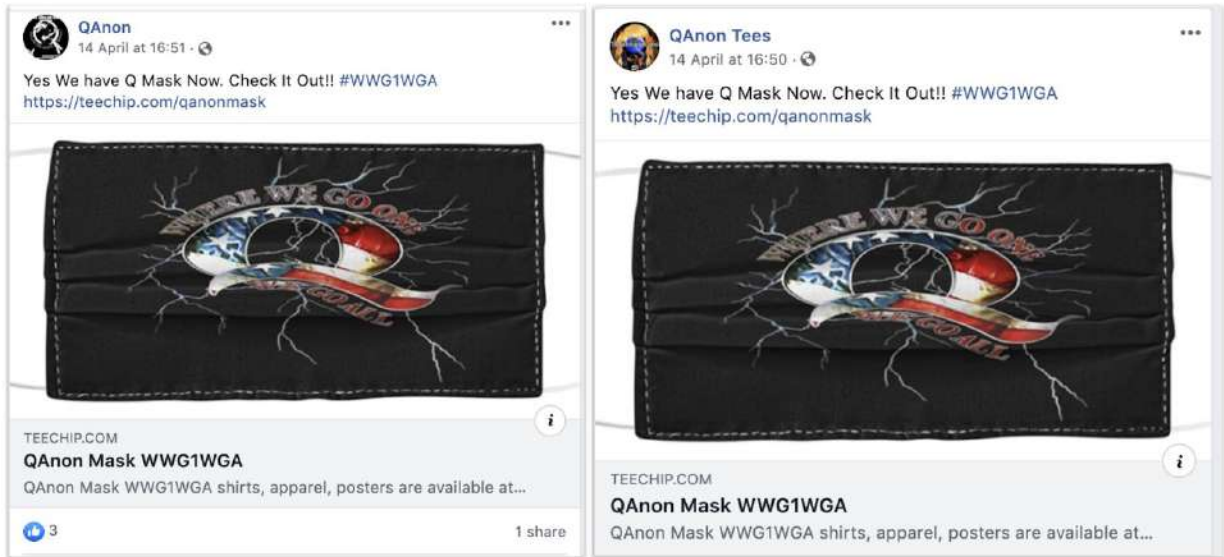
*Post by one of the users in the network, March 26, 2020.*

## Commercial Posts

Intertwined with this content were commercial posts that advertised a range of products, including T-shirts, hand sanitizer, and an “air purifier necklace,” in what appears to have been a subsidiary attempt to capitalize on the QAnon conspiracy theory and the coronavirus crisis simultaneously. (Most posts were not about merchandise, suggesting that financial gain was not the main goal of these pages.)



*Posts by one of the members of the network promoting a range of merchandise, April 2020.*



*Posts by members of the network advertising QAnon masks.*

Although some of this merchandise did promote genuine Covid-19 countermeasures, at the same time the network's members were making these posts, they were also posting and amplifying conspiratorial content, especially attacks on the head of the National Center for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the United States' leading public voice on the science of the epidemic. This suggests that the network's purpose in promoting apparently health-related products was to sell merchandise on that theme, alongside its efforts to sell merchandise on other themes, especially the QAnon conspiracy.



*Posts by @RealQAnon41020 attacking Dr. Fauci, April 2020.*

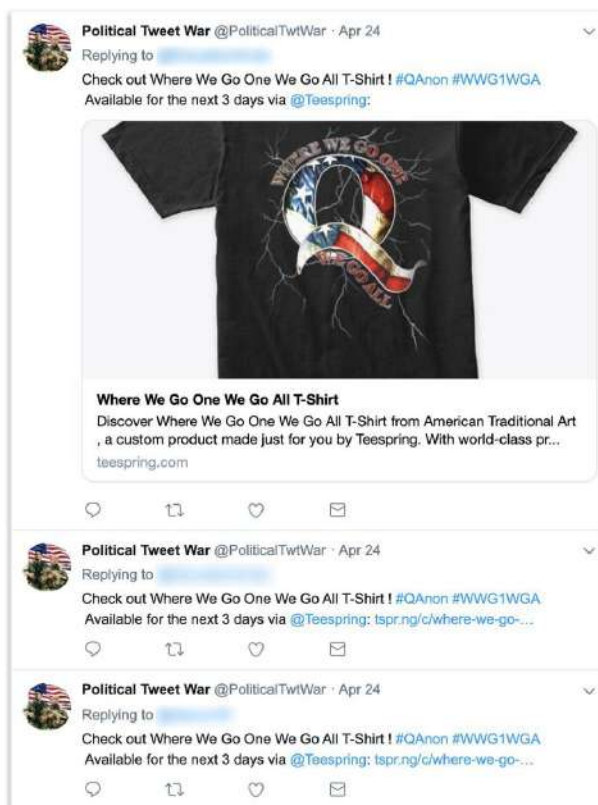


# Cross-Platform Amplification

Working out from the network of assets that Facebook provided, Graphika uncovered a related network of assets on Twitter that posted similar content and used some of the same personas. These personas changed their appearance and, in at least one case, their user handle after Facebook took down the network on its platform, indicating, at the very least, a desire to hide from further enforcement action. Terms of service vary from platform to platform, so a takedown on one platform need not indicate violations on the others.

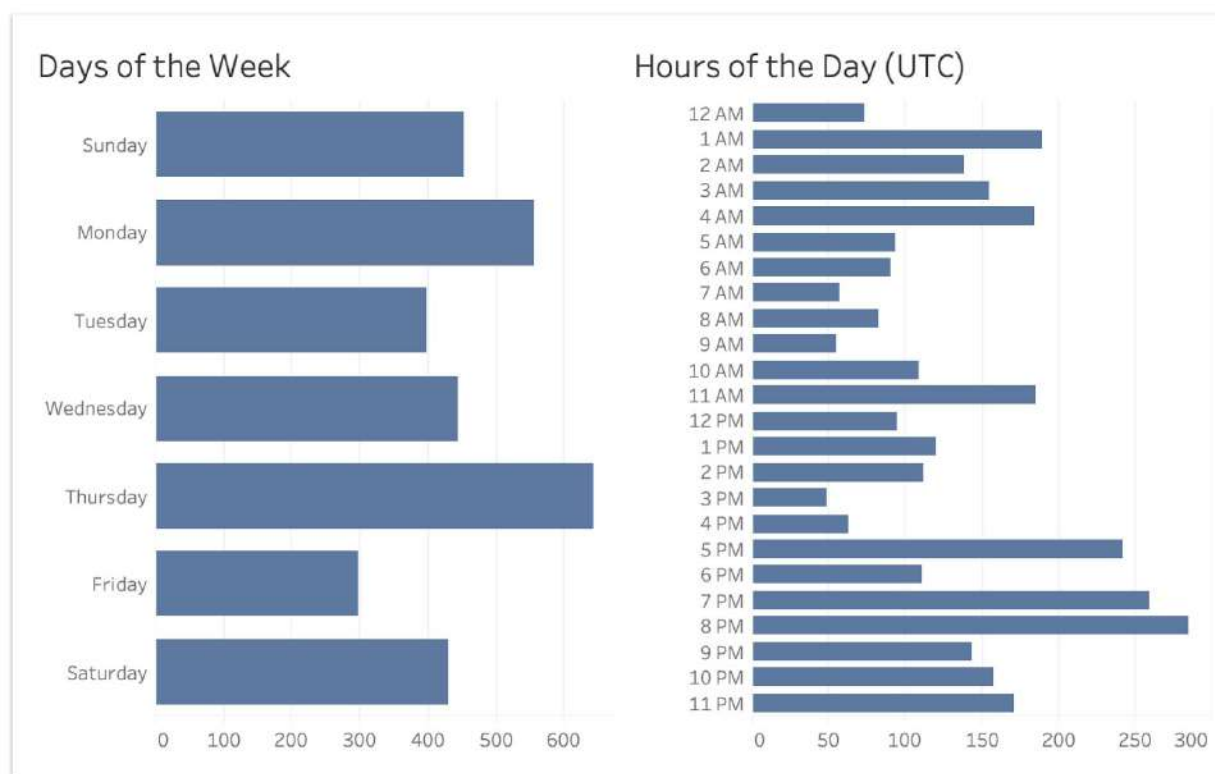
On Twitter, this network's activity appeared to center around an account called Political Tweet War (@PoliticalTwtWar). The account provided no personal details or information about the operator (or operators) behind it, but the members of the QAnon network regularly amplified it on Facebook (as illustrated above on page 3), and @PoliticalTwtWar returned the compliment.

The account also promoted some of the same merchandise the Facebook network did, in the shape of the QAnon T-shirts with the same logos, from the same producer.



*More couture: T-shirt ads from @PoliticalTwtWar pointing to the same TeeSpring storefront promoted by the network on Facebook.*

The account's bio described it as an aggregator: "Through a team of Twitter accounts Political Tweet War has collaborated all tweets on this account." A scan of its activity from March 7, 2020 to April 25, 2020 indicates the account posted 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at a relatively high clip of 64 tweets per day. This may indicate the account was partially automated, operated by users working in shifts or operated by a highly dedicated user.



*Post times for @PoliticalTwtWar from March 7 to April 25, 2020, over which period the account posted 3,199 tweets, for an average of 64 per day.*

The account appears to have tried to engage with high-profile figures, including President Donald Trump, his son Donald Trump Jr., and conservative figure James Woods. However, it struggled to gain followers: as of April 25, 2020, it was following 5,000 others (the maximum allowed for an account with under 5,000 followers) and promising to "follow back" other Trump supporters while "going after" leading Democrats, but it had only amassed 3,727 followers - not a negligible number, but significantly fewer than it was following.



Top, @PoliticalTwtWar's call for retweets, of which it received 82: again, not a negligible number, but not an indication of mass virality. Bottom, the account's statistics four days later, showing an increase of 215 followers. The tweet is also informative for the emphasis it places on follow-back arrangements as a way to increase its following.

To judge by the account holder's own comments, the inability to create a large-scale following because of Twitter's limit on follower/following relationships was a brake on the account's



development - like the fact-checked posts described on Facebook above, an illustration of the range of measures open to the different platforms.



*Tweets by @PoliticalTwtWar in April 2020, lamenting the Twitter rule that prevents accounts with fewer than 5,000 followers from following more than 5,000 others.*

It is important to note that none of this Twitter behavior in itself seems to have violated the platform's rules: automation is not an offense on its own, and Twitter does not insist on accounts representing the user's real identity. It does, however, confirm the network's interest in promoting its content (and T-shirts) across platforms, its deliberate targeting of one particular community (the Trump family and their supporters), and its relative inability to break through.

Other indicators point to a network that was keen to hide and intended to monetize its presence on social media. After the Facebook takedown of April 17, two of the individuals whose Facebook accounts had been taken down changed the names and profile pictures of their Twitter accounts; one also changed its handle. Another member of the group, who had two personal accounts taken down, complained that Facebook had taken away their "future livelihood."

Overall, this was a small community on both Facebook and Twitter. Its behavior was consistent with a single network of dedicated users whose main purpose was to promote their core conspiracy theory, that of QAnon, but who also promoted other theories and tried to sell some merchandise on the side. However, on both platforms, it failed to build a substantial audience, despite attempts to reach out to high-profile influencers.

The background is a dark, starry sky. In the lower right, there are several bright, orange-red light trails that curve upwards and outwards, resembling a comet's tail or a stylized flame. The trails are composed of many fine, overlapping lines of light.

Graphika

© Graphika All Rights Reserved 2020