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ARTICLES

BREAKFAST WITH Q-A-MOM: UNDERSTANDING & COMBATTING THE STEALTH THREAT OF WOMEN ENGAGED WITH DIGITAL DOMESTIC TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

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*Leah A. Plunkett**

“And I said, what about powerful pedophiles?
She said, I think that the rumors are true
And I’m sure you’d agree we both really hate it
And I said, well that’s the one thing we’ve got.”¹

INTRODUCTION

If you’re a woman² in Generation X or among the older Millennials,³ the refrain from the 1990s’ pop song, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is somewhere in the back of your consciousness.⁴ Maybe from a late-

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¹MIA BLOOM & SOPHIA MOSKALENKO, PASTELS AND PEDOPHILES: INSIDE THE MIND OF QANON 179 (2021).

² The term “woman” is hotly contested within and across disciplines. Mapping or engaging these debates is beyond the scope of this piece. In this article, “woman” is used to refer to adults (persons who have attained the age of legal majority) who self-identify as women based on their biological sex characteristics or any other factor(s) upon which they choose to rely. *E.g.*, Christen Price, *Women’s Spaces, Women’s Rights: Feminism and the Transgender Rights Movement*, 103 MARQ. L. REV. 1509, 1512 (2020) (“Some argue that sex should be defined not in purely biological terms [woman is an adult of the female sex], but also to include gender and gender identity.”).

³ See generally Michael Dimock, *Defining Generations: Where Millennials and Generation Z Begins*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Jan. 17, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins>; *Generation X*, PEW RESEARCH CTR., <https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/generations-age/generations/generation-x> (generational research and definitions for Generation X); *Millennials*, PEW RESEARCH CTR., <https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/generations-age/generations/millennials> (general research and definitions for Millennials).

⁴ By design, these vignettes of hypothetical scenarios for listening to *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* in the 1990s aim to evoke sitcom-style glimpses of contexts in which Generation X (“Gen X”) and older Millennial women would have heard this song in the 1990s—building on the tone of pop music as the basis for parody—rather than offer comprehensive coverage of contexts in which this song may have been heard. See generally DeepBlueStingVEVO, *Deep Blue Something - Breakfast at Tiffany’s (Official Music Video)*, YouTube (Oct. 9, 2009), <https://youtu.be/1ClCpfeIELw> (video for the original *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* song); *Deep Blue Something – Breakfast at*

night college party, which you're glad wasn't preserved on social media. Maybe from a high school road trip, as you rushed home to make curfew. Or perhaps from that new exercise class you took in your 20s, trying to work off the physical and emotional hangover of eating and acting like you were still sixteen.

Whatever its resonance, wherever it's situated deep down in your memory, it's a familiar refrain, albeit perhaps an unimportant one. But it feels comfortable, maybe a little titillating, and sticks with you. You know how the song goes, even if you don't play it often.

That's how QAnon starts. Not for everyone, but for many Q-A-Moms (with "Q-A-Mom" taken to mean all women involved with QAnon to any extent, regardless of whether they have children").⁵ In the noise of their digital lives, soothing and seemingly familiar refrains slip in, with a hint of intrigue and hope of deeper meaning.⁶ Some turn it down. Some hum along then switch the channel. Others turn the volume all the way up and hit repeat. These women become our Q-A-Moms.

Women in the United States involved with QAnon pose a stealth yet significant threat to domestic security, with "domestic" referring both to households (as situated within local and state communities) and to the nation. This threat is underexplored by legal scholars. This essay takes what appears to be a first pass, among legal scholarship, at mapping the Q-A-Mom digital ecosystem⁷ then identifying a framework and conceptualizing a legal solution space that can be applied more generally to understanding and combatting women engaged with digital domestic terrorist organizations in the U.S.⁸ The key to understanding and

Tiffany's Lyrics | Genius Lyrics, GENIUS, <https://genius.com/Deep-blue-something-breakfast-at-tiffanys-lyrics>.

⁵ See section I.B, *infra*.

⁶ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 187 ([The use of a 1990s pop song to recruit Q-A-Moms is consistent with their age demographic: Q-A-Moms are] "unusually old for a radical group. The average terrorist tends to be in their early 20s. QAnon followers, on the other hand, are in their late 30s and early 40s.").

⁷ "Digital ecosystem" is understood in this analysis to encompass all interconnected platforms, tools, and all other online and offline forms of engagement (if the offline engagement has any tie to digital content) through which QAnon activities occur. The term "ecosystem" is susceptible to different meanings with reference to different areas of digital or digital adjacent experiences. See, e.g., John M. Newman, *Antitrust in Digital Markets*, 72 VAND. L. REV. 1497, 1508 (2019) (explaining a "private digital ecosystem" as when "[a] firm that controls the primary portal to a particular digital product—general search results, for example—can protect its dominant position by creating an ecosystem comprising multiple portals among which users can easily switch.").

⁸ See generally MIKE ROTHSCHILD, *THE STORM IS UPON US*, xiii, xv (2021) (describing QAnon as a "domestic terrorism threat, and more than anything, a conspiracy theory of everything . . . [that] has sucked in an amorphous, but certainly massive, number of people through its unchecked growth on social media . . ."). It is important to note that domestic terrorist organizations, grounded in conspiracy or other theories, are not the only digital threat to personal well-being, public health and safety, rule of law

fighting this threat is to stop seeing it primarily, or only, as a digital problem with no easy digital solutions, and start seeing its off-line causes and consequences and, hopefully, off-line solutions as equally important.

This essay proceeds in three parts. It provides (1) a high-level description of what QAnon is and who the Q-A-Moms are; (2) an analysis of how and why women join QAnon, importing the general “quest for personal significance” framework (characterized by “need[s], network, and narrative”) from researchers in psychology to legal scholarship for this specific query into Q-A-Moms;⁹ and (3) an initial thought challenge to building the solution space for combatting the threat Q-A-Moms pose. This approach takes the core of the Facebook Supreme Court model (creating new quasi-judicial and law enforcement structures within the private digital sector to address novel problems caused by social media)¹⁰ and creates a new social media rough equivalent of a diversion program within a local court system to address the real life harms that Q-A-Moms (and participants in other hate-based online conspiracy theory movements) are causing to themselves, their families, their communities, and our public health, public safety, and democratic institutions.

I. WHAT ABOUT POWERFUL PEDOPHILES? DESCRIBING QANON & THE WOMEN WHO LOVE IT

QAnon is a domestic terrorist threat,¹¹ made more elusive and more effective because of its “one-stop shop”¹² nature. It is rooted in white supremacist ideology and other longstanding conspiracy theory tenets while also morphing to include seemingly disparate conspiracy theories, like anti-vaccination. QAnon is also a proven social media success, having crossed over from the “dark web” into mainstream social media during the COVID-19 pandemic—and bringing its conspiracy

in our democracy, and myriad other private and public goods. The “post-truth discussion” that increasingly characterizes our digital discourse and its off-line impacts and interplay is a complex ecosystem grounded in “disinformation and misinformation.” The distinction between them is somewhat debated. [One view] “defines misinformation as incomplete and vague information which the sender still believes to be true and accurate; disinformation . . . refers to the dissemination of deliberately false information borne of malicious or ill intent.” Kwanghyuk Yoo, *Academic Law Libraries’ New Frontier—The Post-truth Cognitive Bias Challenge and Calls for Behavioral and Structural Reforms*, 113 L. LIBR. J. 129, 130 (2021). A fuller exploration of this ecosystem and its impact on parents is reserved for future work.

⁹ SEYWARD DARBY, *SISTERS IN HATE* 37 (2020).

¹⁰ See section III.A, *infra*.

¹¹ ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at xiii.

¹² BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 77.

theory refrains to the women who were already logged in to Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms.¹³

A. “Amazon”¹⁴ of Conspiracy Theories

In 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) warned that QAnon posed a “domestic terrorism threat.”¹⁵ This “big tent’ conspiracy theory” had originated online roughly two years before the FBI’s assessment.¹⁶ The FBI defines a conspiracy theory as “an attempt to explain events or circumstances as the result of a group of actors working

¹³ See *id.* at 12. These include Peloton, TikTok, and Nextdoor, among others.

¹⁴ See *id.* at 176. See also *id.* at 77 (describing QAnon as a “black hole” because it “integrated conspiracy theories as diverse as anti-5G, lizard people, and Dominion voting machines having stolen the election from Donald Trump” just as an actual black hole “sucked in all the light from nearby galaxies”).

¹⁵ *Examining Extremism: QAnon*, CTR. FOR STRATEGIC & INT’L STUDIES (June 10, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-qanon> [hereinafter *CSIS Blog*]; Jana Winter, *Exclusive: FBI Document Warns Conspiracy Theories Are a New Domestic Terrorism Threat* (Aug. 1, 2019), https://news.yahoo.com/fbi-documents-conspiracy-theories-terrorism-160000507.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHRocHM6Ly93d3cuY3Npcy5vmev&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALzOzA6Q1kBlh1NrfnftK7E6SDQ4_p9bOxNKESsAiFzqzMFckM2mPwXlIF-Bf-jKwJHkv9YX9Fp2JGw_v8AoLjeTohhVRYOxeXRJM8N6sxU-vwgJRfRUpmZjMcnBZBJSVEo1Rg8kwZeEGTHA6n5fYm9fJgLmFxcc-xevrGmka5dm (publishing a 2019 FBI bulletin that designated QAnon as “the first FBI product examining the threat from conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremists.”). U.S. FED. BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, ANTI-GOVERNMENT, IDENTITY BASED, AND FRINGE POLITICAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES VERY LIKELY MOTIVATE SOME DOMESTIC EXTREMISTS TO COMMIT CRIMINAL, SOMETIMES VIOLENT ACTIVITY 5 (May 30, 2019) [hereinafter *FBI Bulletin*]. Academics had been worried about this type of threat for decades; for example, in 2000, one sociologist warned that “white supremacists’ use of the World Wide Web to reach far wider audiences suggests we need to explore the ways in which this discourse shapes Americans’ views on race and contemporary racial politics. The borders between organized white supremacist groups and the rest of the nation are becoming increasingly fluid and permeable.” Abby L. Ferber, Ryken Grattet, and Valerie Jenness, *Hate Crime in America: What Do We Know?*, 2000 AM. SOC. ASS’N, ISSUE SERIES IN SOC. RES. & SOC. POL’Y 16 [hereinafter *Hate Crime in America*]. But see Michael Jensen & Sheehan Kane, *QAnon Offenders in the United States*, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (2021), https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/START_PIRUS_QAnon_Mar2021.pdf [hereinafter Jensen & Kane, *START Study*]; Sophia Moskalenko, *Many QAnon Followers Report Having Mental Health Diagnoses*, THE CONVERSATION (March 25, 2021), <https://theconversation.com/many-qanon-followers-report-having-mental-health-diagnoses-157299> (“It could be that QAnon is less a problem of terrorism and extremism than it is one of poor mental health. Only a few dozen QAnon followers are accused of having done anything illegal or violent – which means that for millions of QAnon believers, their radicalization may be of their opinions, but not their actions.”).

¹⁶ *Examining Extremism: QAnon*, CTR. FOR STRATEGIC & INT’L STUDIES (June 10, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-qanon>; see also ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at xvi (calling QAnon a “big tent.”).

in secret to benefit themselves at the expense of others.”¹⁷ While not all conspiracy theories lead to criminal activity or violence,¹⁸ the FBI warned that the activity it detected in the QAnon ecosystem, which it characterized as “anti-government, identity based, and fringe political,”¹⁹ would “very likely motivate some domestic extremists, wholly or in part, to engage in criminal or violent activity.”²⁰

The FBI was correct. Between 2017-2021, “QAnon metastasized from a fringe movement on anonymous message boards into a cultlike movement . . .”²¹ On January 6, 2021, a mob stormed the U.S. Capitol and “threatened the country’s peaceful transition of presidential power” in “an act of domestic terrorism” designed to advance the (false) claim that former President Donald Trump had won the 2020 presidential election and prevent then President-Elect Joe Biden from taking office.²² The insurrectionists were an “ad hoc network of far-right militants, Christian conservatives, and adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory.”²³ The January 6th insurrection was the first time in over 200 years that the Capitol had “been breached.”²⁴ This breach has led to the “largest criminal investigation in American history,” which remains ongoing as of the writing of this article.²⁵

Donald Trump has played a pivotal role in the QAnon conspiracy theory.²⁶ He is credited with coalescing strands of emerging online anti-government, identity based, and fringe political theories to begin the QAnon conspiracy theory “with a cryptic comment” on October 5, 2017: he was “holding court with top-ranking military officers and their

¹⁷ *FBI Bulletin*, *supra* note 15, at 7.

¹⁸ *See id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* at 2. The “identity based” theories include that “Jewish agents secretly control the governments of Western states and are conspiring to achieve world domination” and that a “small Muslim community near Hancock, New York . . . is a terrorist training camp.” *FBI Bulletin*, *supra* note 15, at 8.

²⁰ *Id.* at 2.

²¹ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 2.

²² *The Capitol Siege: The Cases Behind the Biggest Criminal Investigation in U.S. History*, NPR (Oct. 29, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/09/965472049/the-capitol-siege-the-arrested-and-their-stories>.

²³ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 38. *See also* ROTHSCCHILD, *supra* note 8, at xiii (“Everywhere you looked during the frenzy of January 6, you could find symbols of QAnon iconography . . .”).

²⁴ Amanda Holpuch, *US Capitol’s Last Breach Was More Than 200 Years Ago*, THE GUARDIAN (Jan. 6, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/06/us-capitol-building-washington-history-breach> (explaining that the last time the Capitol was breached was by military troops of a foreign power, Britain, in 1814).

²⁵ *The Capitol Siege: The Cases Behind the Biggest Criminal Investigation in U.S. History*, NPR (Oct. 29, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/09/965472049/the-capitol-siege-the-arrested-and-their-stories>.

²⁶ *See* ROTHSCCHILD, *supra* note 8, at 15.

families” and said that the gathering represented “the calm before the storm.”²⁷

Whatever his intention with making that comment, QAnon adherents reserved for him god-like status in their “core conspiracy claim,” which “is that there is a ‘deep state,’ and the only person who is capable of fighting it and preventing a dystopian future (like the one depicted in the film *The Purge*) is Donald Trump.”²⁸ Deep state actors (such as Hillary Clinton and George Soros)²⁹ perpetrate many atrocities, in the QAnon worldview, notably masterminding a pedophile ring—a narrative that amounts to a “modern-day blood libel that leverages many of the historic anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews and the blood of babies.”³⁰ In the “white supremacist hierarchy” in the United States, Jews are “defined as a non-white race” and seen as an enemy trying to “‘race mix’ the white race out of existence.”³¹

²⁷ *Id.* at 15–16.

²⁸ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 4.

²⁹ *Id.* at 98; DAVID NEIWERT, RED PILL, BLUE PILL: HOW TO COUNTERACT THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES THAT ARE KILLING US 26–27 (2020) (explaining that QAnon is “a sort of meta-conspiracy theory involving Donald Trump, Robert Mueller, Hillary Clinton, and the same global pedophilia ring featured in Pizzagate.”).

³⁰ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 30. *See also* MAGDA TATEL, BLOOD LIBEL: ON THE TRAIL OF AN ANTISEMITIC MYTH 2 (2020) (defining blood libel as “the tale that Jews killed Christian children,” which originated in medieval times and endures through the present); ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at 50 (“QAnon is a deeply anti-Semitic movement.”).

³¹ *Hate Crime in America*, *supra* note 14, at 14. (“Jews, defined as a non-white race, are seen as the greatest enemy [in the white supremacist hierarchy]. White supremacists believe that the ultimate plan of Jews is to ‘race mix’ the white race out of existence. Since miscegenation is seen as the path to genocide, ‘real’ white men are urged to stand up and protect white women, who are depicted as being brainwashed by Jews into the arms of black men, or stolen away by them. For these racists, the only way to eliminate this threat is through the creation of a white homeland, or the elimination of non-whites.”). This article does not take a position on whether Jews or other racial, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups are seen as the “greatest enemy” in white supremacist thought. For this analysis, it suffices to state that Jews are deemed to be an enemy in the white supremacist worldview. This analysis adopts, as a broad understanding, that “[w]hite supremacy is a term used to characterize various belief systems central to which are one or more of the following key tenets: 1) whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they may co-exist; 2) whites should live by themselves in a whites-only society; 3) white people have their own ‘culture’ that is superior to other cultures; 4) white people are genetically superior to other people. As a full-fledged ideology, white supremacy is far more encompassing than simple racism or bigotry. Most white supremacists today further believe that the white race is in danger of extinction due to a rising ‘flood’ of non-whites, who are controlled and manipulated by Jews, and that imminent action is need to ‘save’ the white race.” *White Supremacy | Defining Extremism | ADL, ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE*, <https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/white-supremacy>.

Also pivotal to the QAnon conspiracy theory is what the FBI refers to as the “crowd-sourcing”³² of its “core conspiracy claim”³³ through online engagement “wherein conspiracy theory followers themselves shape a given theory by presenting information that supplements, expands, or localizes its narrative.”³⁴ QAnon has flourished by becoming a “meta conspiracy” theory,³⁵ including “anti-5G, lizard people, and Dominion voting machines having stolen the election from Donald Trump”³⁶ and “COVID-19 denial and vaccine skepticism.”³⁷ As a feature, not a bug, of QAnon, it is not susceptible to one universally agreed upon definition, instead offering a “one-stop shop that offers something for everyone” in the conspiracy theory marketplace of false information.³⁸

This analysis proceeds from the understanding that QAnon is, at its core, a “modern-day blood libel that leverages many of the historic anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews and the blood of babies”³⁹ and has developed into conspiracy-theory “Amazon,”⁴⁰ loosely analogous to how the actual Amazon grew from a bookseller to a global marketplace of goods and services.⁴¹ This analysis does not attempt to offer a comprehensive account, either historical or present day, of the people, platforms, places, beliefs, activities, criminal conduct, or other components of the QAnon ecosystem, both online and offline. Such accounts from credible experts and practitioners across disciplines are crucial to developing and deepening a multi-stakeholder response to the QAnon threat;⁴² however, for the purpose of the analysis and arguments in this essay, it is both necessary and sufficient to understand the core constructs and contours of QAnon.

Just as there is no universal definition of what the QAnon conspiracy is, there is no authoritative figure for its membership. Obstacles to counting QAnon adherents include agreeing upon how to

³² See *FBI Bulletin*, *supra* note 14, at 4.

³³ ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at 15.

³⁴ *FBI Bulletin*, *supra* note 14, at 4–5. For QAnon, the key information shaping the narrative device initially was the finding and reading of “Q drops”. ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at 6–9.

³⁵ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 33.

³⁶ *Id.* at 77.

³⁷ *Id.* at 62.

³⁸ *Id.* at 77.

³⁹ *Id.* at 30.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 176.

⁴¹ See, e.g., ROGER MCNAMEE, *ZUCKED: WAKING UP TO THE FACEBOOK CATASTROPHE* 137 (2019).

⁴² Such accounts from credible sources are crucial to understanding and combating QAnon. This paper is indebted to MIKE ROTHSCHILD, *THE STORM IS UPON US* (2021), RED PILL, BLUE PILL: *HOW TO COUNTERACT THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES THAT ARE KILLING US* (2020), and PASTELS AND PEDOPHILES (2021), for their thorough and thoughtful accounts.

define adherents,⁴³ as well as limitations on the ability of law enforcement,⁴⁴ researchers,⁴⁵ and other relevant stakeholders⁴⁶ to locate and count adherents in digital or brick-and-mortar spaces. One media expert on QAnon explains that “[i]t is virtually impossible to discern how many people believe in QAnon, but there are likely hundreds of thousands who buy into at least some part of the complex mythology—not just in the United States, but all over the world.”⁴⁷ Other longtime academic researchers of violent extremism put the global number of QAnon adherents in the millions.⁴⁸

Focusing on the United States, as of February 2021, a NPR/Ipsos poll found that “17 percent of Americans believe [the QAnon conspiracy] that a group of Satan-worshipping, child-enslaving elites want to control the world . . . [and] another 37 percent aren’t sure whether the allegations are completely false.”⁴⁹ Those percentages, taken together, reflect that a majority of Americans potentially or actually believe in the QAnon conspiracy—regardless of whether they have engaged with it online or offline or would self-identify as being QAnon members.

Perhaps more relevant than a head count are the momentum and composition of QAnon, which has been “getting more popular by the day,” even after the 2020 election.⁵⁰ QAnon membership “comprises people of *all* educational levels”⁵¹ and a “range of socioeconomic . . . strata.”⁵² Notably, experts who chronicle QAnon have not identified a range of racial, ethnic, or religious identities among QAnon membership, characterizing it instead as a “white racist movement.”⁵³ Membership

⁴³ Especially as QAnon went more mainstream, people have been interacting with QAnon content and adopting its beliefs without necessarily recognizing that they are engaging or adopting QAnon content. ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at xiii-xiv; *see also* BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 62.

⁴⁴ *See, e.g., FBI Bulletin, supra* note 14, at 1 (“Domestic extremists employ a number of indicators, some of which may be criminal and others which may constitute the exercise of rights guaranteed by the First Amendment of the US Constitution. The FBI is prohibited from engaging in investigating activity for the sole purpose of minoring the exercise of constitutional rights.”).

⁴⁵ *See, e.g.,* Shannon Bond, *NYU Researchers Were Studying Disinformation on Facebook. The Company Cut Them Off*, NPR (Aug. 4, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/04/1024791053/facebook-boots-nyu-disinformation-researchers-off-its-platform-and-critics-cry-f>.

⁴⁶ *See, e.g.,* Tim De Chant, *Facebook “is tearing our societies apart,” Whistleblower says in Interview*, ARS TECHNICA (Oct. 4, 2021), <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2021/10/facebook-is-tearing-our-societies-apart-whistleblower-says-in-interview/> (disbanding of Facebook civic integrity team).

⁴⁷ ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at xiii-xiv.

⁴⁸ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 2.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 3.

⁵⁰ ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at xv.

⁵¹ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 3.

⁵² *Id.* at 4.

⁵³ *Id.* at 40.

does now “transcend[] the political spectrum.”⁵⁴ Researchers have identified the “increasing number of women in QAnon” as a key factor in making QAnon “no longer just a right-wing movement . . . Many women who supported Bernie over Hillary ended up supporting QAnon.”⁵⁵ Let’s meet them.

B. Q-A-Moms Next Door

We might have had breakfast, engaged in another household or community activity with or in proximity to a Q-A-Mom, although we may not have known. She may be our sister, our wife, our friend, our neighbor, our children’s teacher, our store clerk, our accountant, or myriad other identities. She may be across the table from us, across the street from us, across a store aisle from us, across a bus aisle from us, or across the country from us but reachable through social media at the touch of our fingertips, just as are the coffee spoons. According to longtime scholars of violent extremism, “[t]he increasing number of people who believe in QAnon and the range of socioeconomic and educational strata to which it appeals mean that it is highly likely someone in your family or among your friends believes that QAnon is real.”⁵⁶ Q-A-Moms are now the white women next door (or several neighborhoods over, for majority minority communities), in both literal and metaphorical terms.

The term “Q-A-Mom” is used in this paper as a shorthand for all women (meaning all people who identify as a woman in whole or in part) who engage with the QAnon ecosystem, even if they aren’t mothers and they don’t self-identify as QAnon adherents.⁵⁷ This definition expects that Q-A-Moms are typically white, as QAnon falls within the lineage of “white racist movements” in the United States.⁵⁸ This expansive definition reflects how key components of the QAnon narrative⁵⁹ about

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 72. Based on the definition of “white supremacist” used in this paper, *infra* note 56, as applied to the salient features of QAnon, this analysis understands QAnon most precisely as a “white supremacist” movement.

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 4.

⁵⁷ See Kaitlyn Tiffany, *The Women Making Conspiracy Theories Beautiful* (Aug. 18, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/08/how-instagram-aesthetics-repackage-qanon/615364> (This article did not coin the term “Q-A-Mom” but appears to be using it more expansively than its other uses.); see generally BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 40, 51-52 (highlighting QAnon’s draw for women).

⁵⁸ See BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 40 (situating QAnon within the historical context of “white racist movements” over the past century and noting that “[w]omen have been at the forefront” of these movements).

⁵⁹ *Infra* Part II.B. See generally DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 66 (“[T]he closest thing white nationalism [has] had to a campaign slogan... “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”). In this understanding, a “commitment to

and directed toward all women are bound up with conceptions of motherhood.⁶⁰ It also reflects how women have often found themselves engaging with QAnon as “posts . . . [on their] Facebook [or other social media] feed,” without necessarily knowing the QAnon origins or connections of the posts.⁶¹ During the pandemic, “QAnon grew exponentially in a very short time . . . but the movement only took off once it found fertile ground in feminine online spaces like women’s Facebook groups and Instagram.”⁶² Because QAnon “welcomes women,” it “is different from other U.S. far-right extremist groups [such as the Proud Boys] . . . [which] are male-dominated and misogynistic.”⁶³

Q-A-Moms are likely in our personal lives (whether or not we realize it) but often absent from media accounts or other arenas of public discourse.⁶⁴ This omission is likely due in part to QAnon’s origins “inside the hyper-masculine virtual spaces of 4chan like /pol/—the politically incorrect discussion board on 4chan,” which are not digital spaces in which as many women are typically found.⁶⁵ Even longtime researchers of violent extremism have found it surprising how QAnon has spread from these dark web corners and “has ensnared many women, causing incalculable damage to families and resulted in murders, kidnappings, and intense partisanship in U.S. politics”⁶⁶

The absence of Q-A-Moms from much public discourse is especially notable in considering the most high-profile crime in which QAnon members have participated to date—the January 6, 2021 insurrection—about which media coverage has focused on “the men who overran the Capitol . . . [b]ut it is the women who have been essential to

white supremacy is what makes them [women whose life focus is the preservation of white supremacy] white nationalists” DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 11. In contexts other than quoting SISTERS IN HATE, this paper understands “white nationalist” consistent with ADL definition that “white nationalist” is a sometimes considered more polite “euphemism for white supremacy.” *White Supremacy | Defining Extremism | ADL, ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE*, <https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/white-supremacy>.

⁶⁰ See generally DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 140 (“White nationalism promises clarity, treating motherhood as a cornerstone of its racial project.”). *But cf.* Sara Petersen, *Momfluencer Content Enrages Me. Why Can’t I Look Away?*, HARPERS BAZAAR (Jan. 28, 2021), <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/a35266612/motherhood-instagram-influencers> (“Though the QAnon moms exist on the extreme end of a spectrum and openly spread harmful misinformation, the hundreds (thousands?) of white momfluencers who celebrate nostalgia in the form of gingham aprons and SO MANY orange-slice ornaments strike me as more quietly insidious.”).

⁶¹ See BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 4.

⁶² *Id.* at 39, 44 (“This shift from the encrypted platforms and message boards through to the online ecosystem on the surface web explains how QAnon became a movement.”).

⁶³ *Id.* at 187.

⁶⁴ See *id.* at 40–41.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 38–39.

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 2.

sustaining the QAnon conspiracy as a movement.”⁶⁷ Notably, a woman “applied for the permit to hold the rally at the Capitol that day [January 6, 2021],” and women played a “pivotal role in bringing together” the mob that breached the Capitol.⁶⁸ In the insurrection, “two women died, both of whom were QAnon believers.”⁶⁹ That only 10 percent of indictments⁷⁰ against mob participants have been against women says more about the nature of work that Q-A-Moms are likely to do than it does about the overall extent of women’s engagement with QAnon, in its criminal and terrorist activities and in its non-criminal and non-terrorist efforts.

Q-A-Moms are to be found more backstage than on center stage, which is consistent with how “[w]omen have historically formed the bulk of behind-the-scenes support networks for terror groups.”⁷¹ This is not to say that all Q-A-Moms are taking concrete steps to advance terrorist or other criminal activities, but to identify those actions that Q-A-Moms do take toward these ends as more likely to be “behind-the-scenes.”⁷²

Turning now to the role of women as participants in “white racist movements” (a category related to but not synonymous with “terror groups,” as “movement” is broader than a terror group and the “white racist” focus is narrower than the foci of all terror groups), researchers have concluded that “[w]omen have been at the forefront of white racist movements for the past 100 years.”⁷³ “Forefront” does not necessarily

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 40.

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 38.

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 41.

⁷⁰ *Id.* at 38 (“Almost two dozen women have been indicted following the assault on the Capitol building, and although this number comprises 10 percent of the total present in the mob, women were nevertheless the driving force that day . . .”).

⁷¹ *Id.* at 52.

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ *Id.* at 40. *See generally* ELIZABETH GILLESPIE MCRAE, *MOTHERS OF MASSIVE RESISTANCE: WHITE WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY* 4 (2018). This essay is grounded in contemporary facts, not historical comparison. By way of reference, not to offer an exhaustive historical account, this analysis does include comparisons to work that white women did during the Jim Crow era to start and sustain white supremacist movements as a reference point because the late twentieth and early twenty-first century may be understood as being a new Jim Crow era, MICHELLE ALEXANDER, *THE NEW JIM CROW: MASS INCARCERATION IN THE AGE OF COLORBLINDNESS* 70 (2010). White women “are at the center of the history of white supremacist politics in the South and nation” because they “guaranteed that racial segregation seeped into the nooks and crannies of public life and private matters, of congressional campaigns and PTA meetings, of cotton policy and household economies, and of textbook debates and day care decisions.” ELIZABETH GILLESPIE MCRAE, *MOTHERS OF MASSIVE RESISTANCE: WHITE WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY* 4 (2018). *See also* CRYSTAL NICOLE FEIMSTER, *SOUTHERN HORRORS: WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF RAPE AND LYNCHING* 146–47 (2009) (“A white woman not only had the power to initiate mob action [against a Black man] by charging rape; once the process had been set in motion and a suspect captured, she also had the power to end his life by identifying him as the perpetrator. Conclusive evidence was

mean being the highest profile public face (although it may in certain moments, such as the temporary martyrdom of the two Q-A-Moms killed in the January 6, 2021 insurrection).⁷⁴ “Forefront” is best understood as “essential” (rather than high profile) as assessed by factors such as “continuity and plans for succession,”⁷⁵ creation of social bonds within or between groups,⁷⁶ and administrative work.⁷⁷

Women’s participation in QAnon (with participation being understood as all forms of engagement, not limited to terrorist or other criminal conduct) is consistent with this characterization of women’s participation as essential.⁷⁸ Q-A-Moms may be understood as putting a more friendly face to this modern-day blood libel,⁷⁹ making “the conspiracy appear palatable and perhaps even motivated by altruistic instincts to protect children” from a (non-existent) pedophile ring and other (false) threats.⁸⁰ Beneath an altruistic face lies a hate-based mentality; according to some contemporary, political science research, today, “white women are more likely than white men to hold ‘exclusionary views about what it means to be American, preferring boundaries around the nation’s identity that maintain it in their image.’”⁸¹ These views are reflected in voting patterns in the 2020 presidential election, in which “exit polls showed that more than half of white women nationwide had voted for the president [Trump].”⁸² While not all white-women-Trump voters are QAnon members, and not all Q-A-Moms would identify as white supremacists or consciously ascribe to hate-based beliefs, “[w]hite nationalists make explicit ideas that are already coded, veiled, or circumscribed . . . [and] have long exploited ideological intersections with the political mainstream.”⁸³

To see how and why QAnon has taken root with white women over the last two years, the next section applies the “quest for personal

not a requirement . . . some women gave specific instructions about the tortures they wanted the mob to use . . . other women participated directly in their [alleged assailants’] torture, execution, and mutilation . . . There were also women who chose to stand at the head of a mob in pursuit of an alleged assailant.”).

⁷⁴ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 41.

⁷⁵ *Id.* at 40. *See generally* KATHERINE M. BLEE, INSIDE ORGANIZED RACISM 118 (2002) (“Though the racial procreation [producing a new white generation] entrusted to white women is portrayed as essential, it remains decidedly secondary to the activism of racist men. As mothers, white women do not have to take conscious racist action. Rather, they safeguard the racial future through their passivity and adherence to conventional gender norms.”).

⁷⁶ *See, e.g.*, BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 38.

⁷⁷ *See id.* (explaining that women applied for the permit for the “Stop the Steal” rally).

⁷⁸ *See id.* at 40.

⁷⁹ *See supra* Part I.A.

⁸⁰ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 39.

⁸¹ DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 15.

⁸² *Id.* at 6.

⁸³ *Id.* at 7. Definition of “white nationalist” in note 58, *supra*.

significance” framework used by researchers in psychology to understand why people of all genders, races, ethnicities, religions, and other facets of identity are drawn into extremism of all kinds.⁸⁴

II. WE ALL REALLY HATE POWERFUL PEDOPHILES & LOVE ESSENTIAL OILS: USING THE *QUEST FOR PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE* FRAMEWORK TO EXPLAIN Q-A-MOMS

The “underlying force’ of extremism” seems best understood as the “quest for personal significance,”⁸⁵ which some people have filled with conspiracy theories to obtain a “feeling of empowerment”—even “before there was the Internet.”⁸⁶ This quest is broken down into three parts: “need,” “narrative,” and “network.”⁸⁷ Building on the work of a journalist who specializes in covering women in white supremacist movements more broadly and has applied this framework to that broader inquiry (not to QAnon specifically),⁸⁸ this section considers each part in sequence to explore the making of Q-A-Moms as a cohort.

A crucial caveat: any individual Q-A-Mom’s personal quest may not fit into each of the elements described below, as “[t]here is no single type of person who becomes part of [a] hate movement, no demographic profile that allows for accurate predictions of extreme belief and behavior.”⁸⁹

A. *Need*

Despite the individual variation inherent in a “quest for personal significance,” it is reasonable to agree generally with the premise that “everyone experiences feelings of need.”⁹⁰ For Q-A-Moms, and other “budding extremists,” these feelings result in an “imbalance, ‘the tendency . . . to privilege one need over the expense of others.’”⁹¹ For example, one Q-A-Mom, who has since broken with the group, “all but ceased doing anything else like cooking, cleaning, or caring for her three children” when she was involved with QAnon because she believed that she “was saving the country [from a cabal of pedophiles] and the children

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 37.

⁸⁵ *Id.*

⁸⁶ NEIWERT, *supra* note 29, at 95.

⁸⁷ DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 37.

⁸⁸ *Id.* at 37–38. Darby does not specifically apply this framework to women in QAnon.

⁸⁹ *Id.* at 37.

⁹⁰ *Id.* It should be noted that this statement risks oversimplification, as it excludes people for whom mental, physical, or other disorders may preclude the ability to register feelings of need or similar emotions.

⁹¹ *Id.*

would benefit.”⁹² This mother felt the need to act for what she believed to be the wellbeing and protection of children, a need shared by many people, including those who do not ascribe to extremist groups.⁹³

In her case, and those of many other Q-A-Moms, this need became unbalanced and “‘allow[ed] formerly constrained behaviors to become liberated and be considered as reasonable and permissible’ in service of the big need . . .” of saving the children from a perceived enemy (here, a cabal of pedophiles).⁹⁴ Leading researchers of extremist groups have identified that “women who flocked to QAnon often did so not because of violent radicalization but from the perspective of wanting to ‘save the children’ . . . [a need that] evokes a visceral—even maternal—reaction among women.”⁹⁵ It is important not to overstate or oversimplify the complex and contested concept of “maternal instinct[s],”⁹⁶ although even the United States Supreme Court has not always resisted doing so.⁹⁷

Without attempting to define or analyze the existence (or lack thereof) of a shared “maternal instinct,” it is reasonable to accept researchers’ finding that many women involved with QAnon are demonstrating that they feel some need (whether it may be called a “maternal instinct” or other labels) to try to act somehow on behalf of children by their strong response to the rallying cry of child protection.⁹⁸

It is also important not to overlook that this felt need to act on behalf of children is focused, among Q-A-Moms, on protecting white children: “the visuals used as part of the QAnon hashtag #SaveTheChildren [which was appropriated from the legitimate charity

⁹² BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 59.

⁹³ *Id.* See generally *Humanitarian Aid Organization for Children | Save the Children*, SAVE THE CHILDREN, <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/protection> (the real Save the Children Website. Save the Children was founded over 100 years ago as the “first global organization devoted solely to serving children’s needs and securing their rights” that provided support to more than 197 million children through health, education, and protection programs, policy and advocacy, and emergency response efforts.).

⁹⁴ DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 37. For explanation of core conspiracy claim of pedophiles in QAnon, see *supra* I.A.

⁹⁵ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 58.

⁹⁶ *Id.* Today, the roles a parent may play in a child’s life are best understood as not inherently tied to gender or sex of the parent. See generally I. Glenn Cohen, *The Right Not to be a Genetic Parent?*, 81 S. CAL. L. REV. 1115 (2008) (unbundling the concept of what is considered “parenthood” into distinct roles within this ostensibly unified category), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1116269.

⁹⁷ See, e.g., *Gonzales v. Carhart*, 550 U.S. 124, 159 (2007) (“Respect for human life finds an ultimate expression in the bond of love the mother has for her child.”).

⁹⁸ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 58. The “save the children” hashtag was key to spread of QAnon on mainstream social media. See generally BLEE, *supra* note 75, at 119 (explaining how, even in the pre-social media era, white mothers were “seen as safeguarding white childhood” and identifying non-digital recruitment materials from organized racist groups in the United States that “mimic[ked] ads for abducted children with its stark message about a ‘missing’ future for white children.”).

of this name] featured battered and bruised children, almost all of whom were white.”⁹⁹ This imagery reflects QAnon’s core conspiracy claim of “modern-day blood libel,”¹⁰⁰ channeling the felt need to protect children toward white supremacist ends.¹⁰¹ In white supremacist beliefs, there is a (non-factually grounded) “near-apocalyptic sense of urgency [that] [t]he time is now or never for white people to protect their own kind. For women, that means bearing white babies . . . ” so that, in their minds, they are fulfilling the need not just of protecting white children but also protecting the future of their race.¹⁰²

Q-A-Moms’ felt needs to “save the children” in various forms have deepened and taken on new dimensions due to the ongoing global pandemic, which has introduced real rather than fabricated risks to children’s well-being.¹⁰³ With children facing a growing range of massive and traumatic disruptions, including risk of deadly infection, economic dislocation, death of loved ones, and school closures, women who were not previously Q-involved or even Q-curious found their way to QAnon to satisfy their need to protect children, as well as to protect families, communities, and themselves.¹⁰⁴

QAnon “went mainstream under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic: Lockdowns, economic insecurity, and extended hours online became the norm for many.”¹⁰⁵ During the pandemic, more women have found “QAnon an inviting social milieu” to address their need for connection than before.¹⁰⁶ In addition, existential needs to receive accurate and actionable information about new public health laws and guidelines, maintain an income, maintain housing, protect child and family health, and other vital domestic activities converted more women to Q-A-Mom allegiance to address these unprecedented challenges.¹⁰⁷

QAnon narratives¹⁰⁸ adapted quickly to create an “intersection of beliefs” such that needs arising from the pandemic could be addressed

⁹⁹ See BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 149.

¹⁰⁰ See *supra* Part I.A. (What is Part I.A.?)

¹⁰¹ See BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 30.

¹⁰² DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 11.

¹⁰³ See, e.g., UNICEF, *The State of the World’s Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, Protecting and Caring for Children’s Mental Health* (Oct. 2021), <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2021>.

¹⁰⁴ See BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 69–70. Cf. generally Leah A. Plunkett & Michael S. Lewis, *Education Contracts of Adhesion in the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 2021 UNIV. OF ILL. L. REV. ONLINE 1 (2021) (explaining the pressures on parents, especially women, in the COVID-19 pandemic), <https://www.illinoislawreview.org/online/education-contracts-of-adhesion-in-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

¹⁰⁵ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 60.

¹⁰⁶ *Id.* at 108.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.* at 69.

¹⁰⁸ *Supra* Part II.B.

within the expanding and increasingly digitally mainstream QAnon ecosystem.¹⁰⁹ According to researchers, “[p]arenting and anti-vaccine groups on Facebook blamed dark forces for the COVID-19 crisis, which spilled over into anti-mask, anti-lockdown sentiment.”¹¹⁰ In short order, “[b]eing anti-mask or insisting that the country reopen immediately went hand in hand [for the QAnon community] with believing in a global conspiracy theory of blood-drinking elites.”¹¹¹

All women in the country are arguably experiencing a range of needs due to the pandemic,¹¹² but not all women have become Q-A-Moms. An individual’s psychological profile appears to be a key factor impacting the nature and depth of the person’s needs and their propensity to turn to conspiracy theories to address those needs.¹¹³ Some experts have argued that “QAnon’s rise can be viewed as a symptom of a mass mental health crisis.”¹¹⁴ While there is no definitive psychological profile for who will become a conspiracy theorist, researchers have been looking into “personality type as a predictor to believing in conspiracies . . .”¹¹⁵

More developed psychological data do exist for a sub-group of Q-A-Moms: Q-A-Moms who engage in criminal activities in the service of QAnon. This sub-group appears to have unresolved and significant psychological needs.¹¹⁶ Notably, data collected around the January 6, 2021 insurrection show that “[m]ore than 40% of the 31 QAnon offenders who committed crimes before and after the Capitol riot radicalized after experiencing a traumatic event . . . [including] the premature death of loved ones; physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; and post-traumatic stress disorder from military service.”¹¹⁷ For the Q-A-Moms in this Capitol riot cohort, researchers identified “even higher rates of trauma [than in the full group of offenders]: ‘83% of the female offenders . . . experienced trauma prior to their radicalization that involved the physical and/or sexual abuse of their children by a romantic partner or family member.’”¹¹⁸

QAnon narratives offer the (false) identification of enemies whose actions are impeding adherents’ needs and (also false) explanations for

¹⁰⁹ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 62.

¹¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹¹ *Id.* at 69.

¹¹² *See generally* Plunkett & Lewis, *supra* note 104 (describing the burden on mothers).

¹¹³ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 43 (“Many women drawn to QAnon are vulnerable due to the circumstances in their lives.”).

¹¹⁴ *Id.* at 138.

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at 67.

¹¹⁶ *Id.* at 60.

¹¹⁷ *Id.* (citing Jensen & Kane, *START* Study, *supra* note 15).

¹¹⁸ *Id.* at 61 (citing Jensen & Kane, *START* Study, *supra* note 15); *see also id.* at 137.

how and why these enemies could be defeated and the needs then addressed. As one former Q-A-Mom explains, “the narrative from QAnon, while horrible, offers some consolation. Feeling like there is a plan, even an evil one, is more comforting than thinking bad things happen to good people in a random way . . . ”¹¹⁹ This sense of comfort from identifying an “evil plan”¹²⁰ is consistent with one of the identified pathways into “participation in organized racist activities” (even when hate is not the conscious motivator): “a desire for simple answers to complex political problems . . . [which can] co-exist with, even substitute for, hatred as the reason” for such participation.¹²¹

B. Narrative

QAnon narratives are “comforting” to believers the same way that other extremist narratives are: such narratives explain a need, “both its causes and its possible remedies,” with reference to a “framework for understanding the world that ‘directly promise[s] a sense of mattering and purpose to those who subscribe.’”¹²²

Central to the success of QAnon narrative is that it subsumes many seemingly disparate narratives within it, creating a “meta conspiracy theory” by “fold[ing] in adjacent or complementary conspiracies.”¹²³ To understand these narratives, this part unpacks its founding mythologies then considers the key adjacent theories resonating with Q-A-Moms that have become part of its meta-approach.

As with understanding the category of needs, above, a caveat about the variation between Q-A-Moms: “Not every QAnon believer holds to the same tenets of QAnon.”¹²⁴ But for all Q-A-Moms, the conspiracy theory has “offered [in some way, to some degree] a way to cope with disappointments and frustrations by collectively narrating around shared experiences.”¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ *Id.* at 70.

¹²⁰ *Id.*

¹²¹ DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 35–36 (“Hate can be understood as a social bond, a complex phenomenon that occurs among people as a means of mattering and belonging. It is a currency that arises ‘in particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts, and it shapes the possibilities for future social interactions . . . ‘Social camaraderie, a desire for simple answers to complex political problems, or even the opportunity to take action against formidable social forces can co-exist with, even substitute for, hatred as the reason for participation in organized racist activities.’”) (quoting sociologist Katherine Blee).

¹²² DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 37.

¹²³ *See supra* I.A; BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 33; *see also* BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 76–77.

¹²⁴ *Id.* at 33.

¹²⁵ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 103.

To try to understand the QAnon narrative, it can be helpful (perhaps counterintuitively) not to get too close to the details of the narrative. There is a “rabbit hole”¹²⁶ risk of getting lost in the trees, to intentionally mix metaphors. QAnon rests on a “mythology that’s virtually impenetrable to outsiders”¹²⁷ that began with a “fantastical, bizarre technothriller laid out in public . . . >”¹²⁸ For this technothriller, the “core conspiracy claim . . . is that there is a ‘deep state,’ and the only person who is capable of fighting it and preventing a dystopian future (like the one depicted in the film *The Purge*) is Donald Trump.”¹²⁹

Some QAnon adherents, including some Q-A-Moms,¹³⁰ consciously see themselves as “digital soldiers” for liberating the United States from (falsely accused) insidious deep-state actors and other enemies.¹³¹ At the core of this liberation is “violent ideation” that “revolves around an anonymous group of military intelligence insiders who collectively refer to themselves as Q.”¹³² These insiders dispense clues or “drops” online through various channels, which have focused on a “world-changing event called ‘the storm.’”¹³³ Digital soldiers work to interpret these clues in the service of what they believe is “a secret war between good and evil—a war that will end with the slaughter of the enemies of freedom.”¹³⁴ Some digital soldiers have gone further than interpretation and carried out dangerous, criminal, or terrorist actions in the service of QAnon, notably in the January, 6, 2021 insurrection to “stop the steal.”¹³⁵

That facts repeatedly disprove QAnon prophecies—notably that “January 6, 2021, came and went without any of the cabal being arrested [in the so-called “storm”] as Q had prophesized”—has not led all Q-A-Moms to repudiate QAnon, although some have “dropped out, disillusioned.”¹³⁶ Crucial to QAnon’s continued appeal to many Q-A-Moms is the iterative nature and presentation of its core conspiracy claim (in addition to folding in adjacent claims) such that facts which do not support the claim may be explained away.¹³⁷

¹²⁶ See ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at 13–14.

¹²⁷ *Id.*

¹²⁸ ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at 14.

¹²⁹ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 4.

¹³⁰ See, e.g., BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 43.

¹³¹ *Id.* at xvi.

¹³² *Id.* at xv.

¹³³ *Id.*; see also *id.* at 113.

¹³⁴ ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at xv; see generally DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 37 (“Hate” is one of the “alluring narratives” for extremism because it orders the world into “clearly defined, black-and-white terms that allow no room for ambiguity or cognitively demanding nuances.”).

¹³⁵ See *supra* Part I.A.

¹³⁶ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 113.

¹³⁷ See *id.* at 113–114.

Having a “softer side of QAnon, posting messages in pastel colors” with calls to “save the children” and other messaging around domestic life, personal health, and wellbeing has proven especially resonate with Q-A-Moms.¹³⁸ A significant form of social media discourse, outside of QAnon, involves parents, grandparents, and other trusted adults sharing private information about their children and families—sometimes offering themselves up as experts in these matters based solely on personal experience or perception.¹³⁹ Thus “softer” QAnon messaging has been consistent with non-extremist engagement such that it may slip in undetected between birthday parties, temper tantrums, and non-conspiracy theory “commercial sharenting” (in which parents and other adults seek to monetize their disclosure of private child and family information).¹⁴⁰

Against this broader social media backdrop of child and family discourse, the rallying cry to “‘save the children’ has been part of QAnon’s successful pivot into mainstream culture and was [successfully] taken from one of the oldest charities dedicated to child protection.”¹⁴¹ This pivot has mobilized Q-A-Moms into off-line action, including through hundreds of street rallies in the U.S. and other countries in summer 2020 to “save the children.”¹⁴² This pivot further demonstrates that “Q-Anon, like the terrorist group ISIS, understands that one of the *best* ways to appeal to women is by exploiting their altruism.”¹⁴³ It also reflects that a “‘narrative that casts followers as key players in the fight against child exploitation and sex trafficking’” may draw in women who are trauma survivors.¹⁴⁴

Here is how this “fight” calls its “key players” to action and fuels their transformation to Q-A-Moms: accompanying the seemingly innocent, even praiseworthy “save the children” banners have been

¹³⁸ *Id.* at 58, 70–71, 73–74.

¹³⁹ LEAH A. PLUNKETT, *SHARENTHOOD: WHY WE SHOULD THINK BEFORE WE TALK ABOUT OUR KIDS ONLINE* 60–61 (2019), *available at* <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/sharenthood>.

¹⁴⁰ *See id.* at 55–75 (defining and describing “commercial sharenting”). *See also* ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at 70 (assessing online marketplaces for QAnon goods and concluding “it’s clear that YouTube ad revenue, merchandise sales, book sales, and other income streams were making a lot of Q believers at least some money. And for a few, it was quite a bit.”)

¹⁴¹ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 58.

¹⁴² *Id.* at 149.

¹⁴³ *Id.* at 58. To the extent that this analysis claims or implies that women are somehow innately more altruistic than men, it would be prudent to meet that claim or implication with healthy skepticism but, taken as an expert insight that claims of altruism have proven effective at motivating women’s extremist participation across different types of extremist groups, it carries some weight.

¹⁴⁴ *Id.* at 61 (quoting Jensen & Kane, *START* Study, *supra* note 14). It is possible to accept that women may respond to altruism-based appeals without claiming that women are innately altruistic or more altruistic than others.

“images and videos” that are “graphic,” creating an “intense focus on harm being done to children.”¹⁴⁵ Beneath this seemingly innocent phrase lurk false and threatening claims, including that “Hillary Clinton trafficked and abused children”¹⁴⁶ and that Clinton and others extract “‘adrenochrome,’ a supposed super-drug . . . from the adrenal glands of live children to confer eternal life to its consumers.”¹⁴⁷

This (false) claim about adrenochrome extraction deepens the link between the “save the children” narrative and centuries’ old white supremacist narratives, building out the “blood libel for the social media era” that “goes well with the ‘elite cabal’ mythology of Q.”¹⁴⁸ The rejoinder to those who might express skepticism that “[w]ealthy elites” would do “horrible things to children to keep their decrepit husks alive” would be to ask how the doubters “could prove they [wealthy] elites weren’t” engaged in such acts¹⁴⁹—a strategy of sowing doubt under the guise of empowering individuals to investigate claims for themselves that permeates QAnon narrative.¹⁵⁰

The trope of individual empowerment in the service of self-preservation and self-improvement has also spawned other narratives salient for Q-A-Moms.¹⁵¹ These include the “concept of purity—the idea that you can ‘cleanse yourself and your life and your family’s life of pollutants.’”¹⁵² On social media, particularly “Instagram[,] where image mode rather than text dominates,” QAnon “co-opted messages about natural living or health food” that resonated with Q-A-Moms.¹⁵³ These warped messages led to a social media ecosystem in which, among other pathways for information transmission, “Facebook pages about herbal remedies, vaccine skepticism, home birth, and essential oils would suggest QAnon women’s groups.”¹⁵⁴ Such suggestions and other social media algorithmic functions are part of the network pathways that lead to a “potato chips” consumption pattern for conspiracy theories in the United States today: “people can’t stop at just one.”¹⁵⁵

Within the broader “concept of purity,”¹⁵⁶ there are two specific narrative strands that have entwined themselves around Q-A-Moms in a high- impact way. First strand: “indoctrination into white nationalism

¹⁴⁵ *Id.* at 58.

¹⁴⁶ *Id.* at 58.

¹⁴⁷ ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at 52.

¹⁴⁸ *Id.* at 54.

¹⁴⁹ *Id.* at 54-55.

¹⁵⁰ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 106-07.

¹⁵¹ *See id.* at 61 (referencing “individual identity”).

¹⁵² *Id.* at 70.

¹⁵³ *Id.* at 70-71.

¹⁵⁴ *Id.* at 70.

¹⁵⁵ *Id.* at 61.

¹⁵⁶ *Id.* at 70.

and xenophobia” followed from “co-opted messages about natural living or health food” and similarly innocuous or even positive concepts.¹⁵⁷ QAnon is not a self-professed white nationalist or white supremacist group;¹⁵⁸ its adherents “hold themselves up as a nonpartisan, race-blind movement of researchers”¹⁵⁹

Its adherents’ self-conception and public presentation are unsupported by the facts. QAnon does trade on white supremacist beliefs: its ideology is “deeply anti-Semitic,”¹⁶⁰ and its adherents regularly espouse “racist” beliefs.¹⁶¹ According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “[t]he conspiracist milieu in which QAnon resides is adjacent and sometimes overlaps with other dangerous beliefs—for example, the New World Order and the Great Replacement theories—that have inspired white supremacists and militia extremists for decades.”¹⁶²

It is crucial to recognize that white supremacist narratives do not always take the form of “slurs and violence . . . [instead] [w]hite supremacy [often] lurks in . . . civility.”¹⁶³ Women engaged with white supremacy have long “weaponized normalcy to advance racist initiatives . . . [by engaging in] performance of good white womanhood.”¹⁶⁴ Looking at “the contemporary hate [white supremacist] movement and what, before the Trump era, was perhaps white nationalism’s last overt mainstream stand . . . [in the period of] grassroots opposition to the civil

¹⁵⁷ *Id.* at 70.

¹⁵⁸ This paper uses “white supremacist” consistent with ADL definition that “white nationalist” is a “euphemism for white supremacy.” *White Supremacy, Defining Extremism: A Glossary of White Supremacist Terms, Movements and Philosophies*, ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE, <https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/white-supremacy> (last visited Nov. 28, 2021, 5:10 PM).

¹⁵⁹ ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at 50.

¹⁶⁰ *Id.*

¹⁶¹ *Id.* at 146.

¹⁶² *CSIS Blog*, *supra* note 15. See also The Anti-Defamation League observes that: “Several aspects of QAnon lore mirror longstanding antisemitic tropes. The belief that a global “cabal” is involved in rituals of child sacrifice has its roots in the antisemitic trope of blood libel, the theory that Jews murder Christian children for ritualistic purposes. In addition, QAnon has a deep-seated hatred for George Soros, a name that has become synonymous with perceived Jewish meddling in global affairs. And QAnon’s ongoing obsession with a global elite of bankers also has deeply antisemitic undertones.” *QAnon*, ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE, <https://www.adl.org/qanon> (last visited Nov. 28, 2021).

¹⁶³ DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 10 (“White supremacy lurks in mediocrity and civility as much as it fuels slurs and violence . . . According to legal scholar Frances Lee Ansley, [it] is ‘a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.’”) (citing Frances Lee Ansley, *Stirring the Ashes: Race, Class, and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship*, 6 CORNELL L. REV. 74, 993-1077 (1989)).

¹⁶⁴ *Id.* at 98–99.

rights movement,” the concept of “[m]otherhood” has been central to women’s hate-based activities in both eras.¹⁶⁵

Now, as then, white supremacist women have “justified their white supremacy as maternal responsibility.”¹⁶⁶ In part because of the centrality of “maternal responsibility” and related concepts in QAnon narrative, some Q-A-Moms may not (consciously) realize when they are crossing the line from social media discussion of “essential oils [] or natural childbirth” into becoming “conspiracy theory peddling harum-scarum.”¹⁶⁷ Even those Q-A-Moms who cross over to the most extreme part of the QAnon community—by engaging in criminal activities, such as kidnapping or the January 6, 2021 insurrection—may lack insight into their motivations or actions, although they are unlikely to lack recognition that they are part of the QAnon community.¹⁶⁸

Second strand: anti-vaccine and other COVID conspiracy theories. “Many people who practiced yoga were already suspicious of vaccines” before the pandemic.¹⁶⁹ These suspicions felt to many burgeoning Q-A-Moms like they were confirmed by the wild conspiracy theories that spread through social media by the same “people who were likely to suggest that natural medicine and meditation would offer better protection from the coronavirus than CDC recommendations.”¹⁷⁰ Key plot points that took hold on social media in spring 2020, especially on

¹⁶⁵ *Id.* at 146. This observation is not to overlook or minimize those tenets of white supremacy that encompass men’s [understood as people who have obtained the age of legal majority who identify as men based on their biological sex characteristics or any other factor(s) upon which they choose to rely] attempts to assert control over or perpetrate violence toward women. Engagement with white supremacy may be grounded in or intertwined with misogyny, such as convicted white supremacist mass murderer Dylann Roof, whose attack has been analyzed as seeking “to restore white supremacist hierarchies by terrorizing the black community through violence. The specific justification that Roof claimed comes from a patriarchal tradition that ostensibly seeks to ‘protect’ women, but in reality demonstrates the propensity of white mainstream masculinity to control and dominate the sexuality of white women. This enforced hierarchy vaunts white masculinity by not only portraying women as weak and in need of protection from white masculinity, but also by disciplining the perceived hypermasculinity of the black male into subordination.” *E.g.*, Stewart Chang, *Our National Psychosis: Guns, Terror, and Hegemonic Masculinity*, 53 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 495, 499–500 (2018). Rather, this observation looks to characterize the some general patterns of women’s engagement with white supremacy, when they do engage with it.

¹⁶⁶ DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 146.

¹⁶⁷ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 72.

¹⁶⁸ *Id.* at 58–59 (noting QAnon women cried when they were arrested).

¹⁶⁹ *Id.* at 73.

¹⁷⁰ *Id.* at 72.

Instagram,¹⁷¹ include that “5G technology caused COVID-19 or that any future vaccine developed was really cover for a secret tracking device.”¹⁷²

False vaccine information has continued to spread such that “[s]ome of the most popular QAnon conspiracies revolve around nefarious vaccine manufacturing: microchip trackers that Bill Gates would put into ‘vaccines’ and other vaccines causing autism and diseases that Big Pharma creates to get rich off the kids’ suffering.”¹⁷³ The traction of the anti-vaccine (sometimes called anti-vax or anti-vaxx, for shorthand) conspiracy theories has had, and continues to have, significant consequences for personal, familial, and public health: “[t]he gender difference in rejection of the COVID-19 vaccine (45% versus 33%) is believed to be due to more women (than men) who believe in conspiracy theories [about vaccines].”¹⁷⁴

When President Joe Biden recently lashed out at Facebook for “killing” people due to the spread of false vaccine information (a comment he later tried to walk back),¹⁷⁵ he was oversimplifying the relationship between digital discourse and non-digital action. Social media networks can’t, in and of themselves, kill people; some people within these networks, tragically, do sometimes kill people—and conspiracy theories spread online may contribute to their choices that lead, directly or indirectly, to these killings.

C. Network

Youth recognized a while ago what the adult world has been slower to see: there are no longer firm boundaries between online life and offline life.¹⁷⁶ It’s just life.¹⁷⁷ That Q-A-Moms are finding each other online does not make their network less real or impactful, either in their own lives or the lives of those around them.

In mapping extremist cultivation, the network is defined as a “group of ‘important others such as family members, close friends, or

¹⁷¹ *Id.*

¹⁷² *Id.* at 72-73. (A notable cause for the advance of QAnon during the pandemic was the film *Plandemic*, a “fake documentary fueling disinformation about the coronavirus,” including a “secret plot by global elites . . . to use the pandemic to profit and seize political power” which was seen by “8 million people . . . within days” before removed by “[m]ost social media companies.”)

¹⁷³ *Id.* at 94.

¹⁷⁴ *Id.*

¹⁷⁵ Betsy Klein, Maegan Vazquez & Kaitlan Collins, *Biden backs away from his claim that Facebook is ‘killing people’ by allowing Covid misinformation*, CNN (July 19, 2021, 8:31 PM), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/19/politics/joe-biden-facebook/index.html>.

¹⁷⁶ JOHN PALFREY & URS GASSER, *BORN DIGITAL: HOW CHILDREN GROW UP IN A DIGITAL AGE 1* (2016).

¹⁷⁷ *Id.* at 1–16.

comrades [who] function as an epistemic authority. The network reinforces the narrative, and together they fulfill the need.”¹⁷⁸ For Q-A-Moms, as for other contemporary networks grounded in hate, this “socialization . . . happens both online and off.”¹⁷⁹

The analysis below unpacks (1) who are the “important others” in the Q-A-Mom network?; (2) how do these others, collectively, create “epistemic authority” to reinforce the narrative?; and (3) how does need fulfillment happen—or fail to happen—through this network?

There are two key cohorts of “important others.” The first, seemingly larger, cohort of important others are the other Q-A-Moms—somewhere between the friend (usually in the social media sense of that word) and comrade categories.¹⁸⁰ These comrades create a sense of belonging (there is a home for you) and connection (there are others in the home who see you), coupled with a sense of meaning (there is a value to this shared home) and purpose (this meaning is being harnessed toward a common goal) that many have found elusive in the digital world, especially during the pandemic. But, in true potato chip form,¹⁸¹ the more of these “false friend calories” that are consumed, the more true hunger remains—and, the more that satiating the hunger is done with the ultimately worthless fast food/empty calories content, the worse the side effects are on top of the hunger—causing discomfort, disgust, and alienation.¹⁸² The cumulative effects can cause a new condition, isolation, that promotes further engagement with the Q-A-Mom network.

The second cohort of “important others” for Q-A-Moms are those who have “important” identities in spheres outside QAnon and also celebrity status within QAnon, notably in the political sphere. President Trump is the most-high profile “comrade” in this independently important category; he is sometimes referred to within Q-lexicon as “Q+.”¹⁸³ He may be seen as the “first conspiracy theorist president” in the United States, in large part because of the role he plays in the QAnon narrative and his engagement with that narrative.¹⁸⁴ President Trump

¹⁷⁸ DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 37 (citing Corinna Olsen, *Q’s about WN vs. Supremacy*, OPEN FORUMS: GEN. QUESTIONS AND COMM., STORMFRONT (March 21, 2008), <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t471121/>).

¹⁷⁹ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 38.

¹⁸⁰ *Id.* at 108.

¹⁸¹ *See id.* at 61. *See generally* BLEE, *supra* note 75, at 5 (“Racist activism is more than a sum of racist people or racist groups. It is a *social movement*, a ‘family’ of overlapping groups organized to spread racist and anti-Semitic ideas and terrorist tactics.”).

¹⁸² *See* NEIWERT, *supra* note 29, at 95, 104–05; *see also* BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 108 (describing a “vaguely real” set-up).

¹⁸³ *Id.* at 91.

¹⁸⁴ *Id.* at 101; ROTHSCHILD, *supra* note 8, at 15 (referring to Donald Trump as America’s “first conspiracy theorist president”).

wasn't just a reality TV star who crossed over into politics; he was a reality TV star who crossed over into stratospheric social media influencer-in-chief status, in significant part using the QAnon (and other conspiracy theory networks).¹⁸⁵ For many—but not all—Q-A-Moms, “Trump embodied the Prince Charming they envisioned . . . the ultimate masculine hero who would rescue abused children, smite the cannibals and pedophiles, and Make America Great Again”¹⁸⁶

Since the January 6, 2021 insurrection, Trump has fallen from his peak performance status, in large part due to social media bans.¹⁸⁷ But Trump has been enjoying plenty of company in political ranks: “[i]n 2020 there were 97 QAnon-affiliated candidates, [and] over half were women.”¹⁸⁸ Looking ahead to the 2022 elections, there are signs that Q-A-Moms will again be on ballots, although it is premature to establish the scope of this political push.¹⁸⁹

Together, these important others create “epistemic authority” because of the interplay between the digital technology they’re using and the way in which they’re using it. Attention is directed, divided, and distorted: social media commands our attention; divides us into filter bubbles so our attention gets focused in a certain direction; and, within the filter bubble on which our attention is focused, there is acceptance,

¹⁸⁵ See BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 101; Shane Croucher & Jacob Jarvis, *Who’s the Top MAGA Influencer Six Months After Trump Social Media Ban? A Newsweek Ranking*, NEWSWEEK (July 6, 2021, 5:30 AM), <https://www.newsweek.com/2021/07/09/20-most-influential-trump-supporters-survive-social-medias-capitol-riot-crackdown-1606525.html>.

¹⁸⁶ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 100–01.

¹⁸⁷ See *id.* at 115. See also Davey Alba, Ella Koeze & Jacob Silver, *What Happened When Trump Was Banned on Social Media*, N.Y. TIMES (June 7, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/06/07/technology/trump-social-media-ban.html>; Jeanine Santucci, *Donald Trump announces new social media platform, Truth Social, after being banned from major apps*, USA TODAY (Oct. 20, 2021, 10:49 AM), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/10/20/donald-trump-announces-new-media-platform-truth-social-after-twitter-ban/6113559001> (discussing Trump’s recent bid to launch his own social media platform).

¹⁸⁸ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 71; This book doesn’t confine this statistic to a level or type of office, the implication being that the figure is 97 known QAnon candidates for all offices, all levels, nationwide, with more than 50% female—for one point comparison, in 2020, 29% of major party candidates for US House were female. Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics, *Women as Percentage of 2020 Major-Party Candidates and Nominees*, CENTER FOR AMERICAN WOMEN AND POLITICS, <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-percentage-2020-candidates> (last updated Nov. 20, 2020).

¹⁸⁹ “At a Teller County Republican ‘Big Tent Event’ over the weekend, rumored gubernatorial candidate Heidi Ganahl praised the success of fellow Republican women being elected to political offices, including Colorado Congresswoman Lauren Boebert.” See Madeleine Schmidt, *Heidi Ganahl Praises ‘Our Lauren Boebert’ and ‘Red Wave’ of GOP Women in Politics*, COLO. TIMES RECORDER (Aug. 31, 2021), <https://coloradotimesrecorder.com/2021/08/heidi-ganahl-praises-our-lauren-boebert-and-red-wave-of-gop-women-in-politics/39388/>.

often valorization, of individuals being experts based on personal experience rather than objectively validated expertise.¹⁹⁰ Thus, we have the creation of truth by the capture of our attention, the command of our attention, and the direction of attention to false realities—and potentially terrorist or other criminal action based on those realities: “[w]ith algorithms offering a never-ending stream of conspiracy theories, a vulnerable individual can get sucked into the Q alternative reality in the comfort of their own home . . . [T]his Internet community can easily be mobilized for radical real-world action.”¹⁹¹

For Q-A-Moms, need fulfillment arises from experiencing a sense of truth revealed and reinforced by filter bubbles as part of an entourage of important others, both moms next door and celebrities, with a shared purpose. That purpose can be to spread the word, to reveal truth or to take concrete action or exist at other places along a spectrum of passive to active. The prospect of fulfillment also exists along a spectrum, from none to all-consuming. There is also a temporal spectrum to this fulfillment: falling down the rabbit hole to Q-A-Moms may feel initially fulfilling then, played out over time, may turn to the destructive.¹⁹² Like other addictions, the high fades.¹⁹³ There comes a point at which no amount may be enough, which can lead to departure from QAnon or further descent into it—with tragic results.¹⁹⁴

III. WHAT ELSE HAVE WE GOT? (OTHER THAN HATING POWERFUL PEDOPHILES): BLUEPRINT FOR SOCIAL MEDIA LOCAL COURT DIVERSION PROGRAM

¹⁹⁰ See generally TIM WU, ATTENTION MERCHANTS 6 (2016) (unpacking the work of “attention merchants” in today’s digital economy who play the “game of harvesting human attention [through social media and other platforms] and reselling it to advertisers”); MARTHA MINOW, SAVING THE NEWS 3 (2021) (explaining how “[t]argeted marketing and algorithms [drawing on people’s attention and also their private data] divide people into subgroups in what might be called ‘digital gerrymandering,’ leading to quite different news, agendas, ‘facts,’ and understandings.”); PLUNKETT, *supra* note 139, at 60–61. This description paints with an intentionally broad brush about the specific mechanisms by which misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy originate and travel online, as the interplay between different actors (including technology companies, elected officials, and others) and their relative weight in the process remains the subject of intense and important academic debate within and across disciplines. See generally Jacob Sweet, *Can Disinformation Be Stopped?*, HARV. MAG., July–Aug. 2021, at 30–31.

¹⁹¹ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 177.

¹⁹² *Id.* at 108–09.

¹⁹³ *Id.* at 112.

¹⁹⁴ *Id.* at 113–20.

Facebook and the rest of social media are now having a “Big Tobacco moment,” according to Senator Richard Blumenthal.¹⁹⁵ This characterization implies that the harms engineered and inflicted by social media companies on people, communities, and institutions (including our country’s democracy) can no longer be minimized and require greater governmental regulation.¹⁹⁶ Even if Blumenthal is correct about this being a turning point for social media legislation and regulation, the experience of regulating tobacco reflects that it could take decades for lawmakers, regulators, and enforcement officials to implement and enforce comprehensive federal-level reform—if they ever do.¹⁹⁷

This section invites us instead to have “little tobacco” moments. Let’s focus on addressing the urgent threats to domestic security at the everyday domestic level—notably in our homes, our communities, our schools, and other local spaces—so that we can protect the people, places, and public goods (like public health) in most immediate harm’s way. If we can reach Q-A-Moms at the individual level, we can protect the quotidian domestic front and reduce the risk of further terrorist or other criminal activities that threaten our domestic (here meaning national) security.¹⁹⁸

A. *Threats to the Home Front*

Threats to the quotidian include criminal activities perpetrated against children or other people and local institutions.¹⁹⁹ Arguably more insidious, given that “of millions who believe Q-conspiracy theories, only

¹⁹⁵ Cecilia Kang, *Lawmakers See Path to Rein in Tech, but it Isn’t Smooth*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 9, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/09/technology/facebook-big-tobacco-regulation.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>.

¹⁹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁹⁷ *See id.*; *see generally* MCNAMEE, *supra* note **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, at 291–92 (imploing government to act to regulate “internet platforms” in more meaningful comprehensive manner than done to date). It should also be noted that Blumenthal may not have the best metaphor, as social media brings with it benefits in terms of connection, creativity, and exploration—whereas cigarettes are designed to create addiction and funnel poison into the human body.

¹⁹⁸ *See supra* Part I; *FBI Bulletin*, *supra* note 15.

¹⁹⁹ *See* BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 47 (Of the dozen crimes associated with QAnon from 2018-2020, “[w]omen were arrested for 5 of the 12 . . . many of the women who were so concerned about saving the children [a common QAnon trope] were implicated in kidnapping attempts of their own children after having lost custody.”). *See also* Leila Miller, *A Popular Surfing Instructor, QAnon, and an Unspeakable Horror*, L.A. TIMES (Sept. 2, 2021, 5:00 AM), <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-09-02/did-qanon-inspire-santa-barbara-surfer-to-kill-his-kids> (describing the Q-A-Dad who kidnapped then killed his two-year-old son and 10-month-old daughter).

a few dozen individuals have ever done anything illegal or violent,”²⁰⁰ is the dangerous impact that relying on conspiracy theories from a white racist movement is likely to have on vital personal or familial decisions, such as whether or not to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.²⁰¹ The impact of Q-A-Moms’ conspiracy-driven decision-making falls particularly hard on children: most children in the U.S. are in a home with at least one woman parent.²⁰² This nationwide distribution of family composition puts women in the position to make or contribute to making the significant majority of key child-rearing decisions, ranging from whether to trust mainstream medicine, with whom their children socialize, how their children learn about history and politics, whether to have their children wear masks during the ongoing pandemic, and countless other choices about health care, education, social interactions, belief structures, and beyond.²⁰³

Other children, adults, and local institutions outside the home also suffer from the negative impacts of these choices; notably, the failure to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, despite the overwhelming evidence that vaccination is essential to containing and ending the pandemic, exposes others outside of the home to unnecessary, reckless risk.²⁰⁴

Also alarming is the danger posed to children and adults from minority racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds when Q-A-Moms model and teach children white racist beliefs.²⁰⁵ QAnon (and other

²⁰⁰ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 189.

²⁰¹ *See id.* at 94 (“The gender difference in rejection of the COVID-19 vaccine (45% versus 33%) is believed to be due to more women (than men) who believe conspiracy theories.”); see Felicia Schwartz, *As Covid-19 Vaccines Approach for Young Kids, Many Parents Plan to Wait*, WALL ST. J. (Nov. 2, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-covid-19-vaccines-approach-for-young-kids-many-parents-plan-to-wait-11635863532>.

²⁰² *See* Paul Hemez & Chanell Washington, *Percentage and Number of Children Living with Two Parents Has Dropped Since 1968*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU (April 12, 2021), <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/04/number-of-children-living-only-with-their-mothers-has-doubled-in-past-50-years.html>.

²⁰³ *See, e.g.*, *General Facts on Women and Job Based Health*, U.S. DEP’T OF LAB., <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ebsa/about-ebsa/our-activities/resource-center/fact-sheets/women-and-job-based-health.pdf> (noting that “[m]others make approximately 80 percent of health care decisions for their children”); *Raising Kids and Running a Household: How Working Parents Share the Load*, PEW RSCH. (Nov. 4, 2015), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/11/04/raising-kids-and-running-a-household-how-working-parents-share-the-load> (“[E]ven in households where both parents work full time, many say a large share of the day-to-day parenting responsibilities falls to mothers.”).

²⁰⁴ *See Families with Vaccinated and Unvaccinated Members*, CDC (Nov. 3, 2021), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/about-covid-19/caring-for-children/families.html> (explaining that the CDC recommended adult vaccination to protect children too young to be vaccinated in late summer 2021 as schools re-open.).

²⁰⁵ *See, e.g.*, MCRAE, *supra* note 72, at 197 (noting that in the Jim Crow era, white women “built organizations that served to secure segregation where it has always been maintained—marriage and home, social welfare programs, schools, politics, and culture.”).

militant groups) “that recruit women guarantee the entire family will be indoctrinated . . . The best way to access the kids [as the next generation of members in the group] is to recruit the moms.”²⁰⁶ As the United States works to move through the COVID-19 pandemic, restore trust in its democratic institutions and processes, combat white supremacist violence (from all sources, not only QAnon), and tackle a myriad of other challenges, moms who are raising a new generation of adherents to a white racist conspiracy-theory movement threaten both current safety and the path to future recovery.

Q-A-Moms (and all parents) are more than decision-makers: they are key makers (or breakers) of emotional and psychological security for their children.²⁰⁷ With many Q-A-Moms turning to QAnon out of “[s]ocial isolation” and other mental health stressors,²⁰⁸ and QAnon exacerbating rather than solving these underlying emotional or psychological vulnerabilities,²⁰⁹ it seems likely that Q-A-Moms are not well-positioned to create home environments that foster emotional and psychological equilibrium for their children.²¹⁰ With many children and adolescents experiencing heightened mental health distress due to the pandemic, compounded by the difficulties in accessing treatment,²¹¹ it seems likely that those in Q-A-Mom households are in a more vulnerable position for having ongoing or worsening psychological and emotional wellbeing because of their parent’s or parents’ descent down the QAnon rabbit hole.

Let’s look at how we can bring Q-A-Moms (and by extension their children, families, communities, and broader society) back into the sunlight. Hint: we’re not going to run after the rabbit.

B. “Little Tobacco” Solution

²⁰⁶ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 40.

²⁰⁷ See generally, *Parents and Caregivers Are Essential to Children’s Healthy Development*, AM. PSYCH. ASS’N (2009), <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/parents-caregivers> (explaining that parents “provide the most intimate context for the nurturing and protection of children as they develop their personalities and identities and also as they mature physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially.”).

²⁰⁸ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 189.

²⁰⁹ See *id.* at 61 (“Like potato chips, people can’t stop at just one. People who are vulnerable to one conspiracy theory are significantly more likely to believe in other related, adjacent, or overlapping conspiracy theories.”).

²¹⁰ See *id.* at 59 (“A QAnon survivor, Lenka Perron, spent hours pouring over stories about the evil people in power. She all but ceased doing anything else like cooking, cleaning, or caring for her three children. Lenka was obsessed with tracking down the cabal.”).

²¹¹ See, e.g., Katherine Ellison, *Children’s Mental Health Badly Harmed by the Pandemic. Therapy Is Hard to Find.*, WASH. POST. (Aug. 14, 2021), https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/child-psychiatrist-counselor-shortage-mental-health-crisis/2021/08/13/844a036a-f950-11eb-9coe-97e29906a970_story.html.

We are going to think through how we design a new system to bring the rabbit back to the surface: creating the rough equivalent of a local court diversion program through Facebook.²¹²

Two years ago, Facebook created its own “Supreme Court.”²¹³ This Oversight Board’s started purpose is to “promote free expression by making principled, independent decisions regarding content on Facebook and Instagram and by issuing recommendations on the relevant Facebook company content policy.”²¹⁴ The Board has limited jurisdiction over the types of cases (“users can appeal cases in which Facebook has removed a post, called ‘take-downs,’ but not those in which it has left one up, or ‘keep-ups’”),²¹⁵ limited standing, limited room on its docket, and limited disposition and enforcement.²¹⁶ The tribunal is focused on “adjudication of online speech”²¹⁷ in high-profile and impactful circumstances, such as consideration of Facebook’s ban of former President Trump following the January 6, 2021 insurrection.²¹⁸

The core of the Board’s authority is “to decide whether Facebook and Instagram should allow or remove content.”²¹⁹ This authority being vested with the Board, rather than the company (subject to applicable laws, regulations, and governmental enforcement) marks a seismic shift in the social media sector’s approach to governance of user engagement. As one legal scholar correctly observes, “five years ago, few would have thought it possible that a private corporation would voluntarily divest itself of part of its power in order to create an independent oversight body. Like the past events that led to it, the future of the Oversight Board is impossible to predict, once humans start interpreting and understanding the documents and processes contemplated . . .” by it.²²⁰

²¹² Facebook is being used in this thought experiment because of its vast reach—roughly 1/3 of all people in the world—and because it has taken the step of having a Supreme Court already, but this blueprint could apply to other social media companies as well. See Kate Klonick, *Inside the Making of Facebook’s Supreme Court*, THE NEW YORKER (Feb. 12, 2021), <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/inside-the-making-of-facebooks-supreme-court> [hereinafter Klonick, *Making of Facebook’s Supreme Court*].

²¹³ Klonick, *Making of Facebook’s Supreme Court*, *supra* note 212.

²¹⁴ Oversight Board | *Independent Judgment. Transparency. Legitimacy.*, OVERSIGHT BD., <https://oversightboard.com> (last visited Nov. 28, 2021 6:18 PM).

²¹⁵ Klonick, *Making of Facebook’s Supreme Court*, *supra* note 212.

²¹⁶ Oversight Board, *supra* note 214.

²¹⁷ Kate Klonick, *The Facebook Oversight Board: Creating an Independent Institution to Adjudicate Online Free Expression*, 129 YALE L. J. 2418, 2499 (2020), available at https://www.yalelawjournal.org/pdf/KlonickFeature_yczqzsmc.pdf [hereinafter Klonick, *Facebook Oversight Board*].

²¹⁸ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 129–30; *Statement on Facebook’s Response to the Oversight Board’s Decision Involving Former U.S. President Donald Trump*, OVERSIGHT BD. (June 2021), <https://oversightboard.com/news/181834917194656-statement-on-facebook-s-response-to-the-oversight-board-s-decision-involving-former-us-president-donald-trump>.

²¹⁹ Oversight Board, *supra* note 214.

²²⁰ Klonick, *Facebook Oversight Board*, *supra* note 217, at 2499;

Here is one interpretation: the animating insight from Professor Noah Feldman that led to the Facebook Supreme Court—that “social-media companies should create ‘quasi-legal systems’ to weigh difficult questions around freedom of speech”²²¹—has broader potential application to difficult digital questions other than freedom of speech online. Specifically, it could be applied to address the threats that Q-A-Moms (and other adherents of white racist conspiracy-driven movements) pose to people, places, and institutions through their online engagement and related offline choices.

Here is a rough sketch of how the application would work in the United States to set up a new “quasi-legal system” loosely analogous to diversion programs through local courts:²²² Facebook would establish another independent entity (with an analogous set-up to the Oversight Board—control would be under a separate company, not controlled by Facebook) called the Wellbeing Group or a similar title to connote its focus on reducing threats posed by individual users to the offline world as a result (in whole or in significant part) of their social media engagement, rather than overseeing company decisions.

The Group would accept attributed or anonymous referrals²²³ from any Facebook user—on their own behalf or on another’s behalf (such as a minor child who might not have a Facebook account)²²⁴—about any other Facebook user thought to be a Q-A-Mom and, more broadly, any person thought to be engaging with any hate-based online conspiracy theory movement or other identified terrorist groups.²²⁵ Highly qualified staff (employed directly by the Group) would assess material submitted with the referral. The staff would not directly access any non-public content shared by the user who is the subject of the

see also Oversight Board, supra note 214. But see SHEERA FRANKEL & CECILIA KANG, AN UGLY TRUTH: INSIDE FACEBOOK’S BATTLE FOR DOMINATION 294–95 (2021) (describing the Oversight Board as yet another time when Facebook “had figured out a way to abdicate responsibility, under the guise of doing what was best for the world. It had no interest in enacting true reform, focusing instead on ‘performative changes,’ as Sen. Elizabeth Warren described the company’s iterative decisions on political speech.”).

²²¹ Klonick, *Making of Facebook’s Supreme Court* Klonick, *Making of Facebook’s Supreme Court, supra note 212.*

²²² *See generally Diversion Programs*, U.S. Att’y’s Off. for D.C. (March 3, 2021), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/diversion-programs>. Diversion programs are not one-size-fits all nationwide. Broadly speaking, as used as a reference point here, they are alternative mechanisms to addressing risky, illegal, or criminal behavior to promote rehabilitation using non-law enforcement resources, but with a court and law enforcement entity in the background.

²²³ The Group would need strong privacy safeguards, both for being repurposed by Facebook and shared outside this entity.

²²⁴ It may also make sense to have the Group accept referrals from the company itself (i.e., referral to the Group instead of disposition through company take-down or other sanction process).

²²⁵ To avoid complex line-drawing around what constitutes a prohibited group, the Group could follow designations made by the FBI or other relevant governmental authorities.

referral. They would then review the material to assess the level of engagement, the nature and level of potential threats to the user and others, and the best form of potential outreach (if any) to connect around and address the individual circumstances that brought the referred user to QAnon (or a similar group), such as social isolation.²²⁶ that have brought the referral subject to QAnon (or a similar group).²²⁷ Staff would have the discretion (within an established, transparent framework) to respond along a spectrum. This response could range from taking no action on a referral—if it were deemed frivolous or de minimis engagement, for instance—to passing pertinent information from the referral to law enforcement (if it revealed an imminent danger, potential criminal conduct, or similar types of exigency).

The Group's key mechanism for incentivizing the referral subject to engage with the offered intervention would be the prospect of the Group referring the subject to the company itself for possible take-downs of content, account suspensions or bans, or other potential sanction related to platform access.²²⁸ To avoid this referral—and potential disruption of social media access—the subject would need to follow the intervention steps—designed to promote ethical self-empowerment²²⁹—set out by the Group (with the ability to appeal within the Group if the steps are thought to be an abuse of discretion). The steps could include online actions (voluntarily removing QAnon posts from the subject's account, for instance) and, more importantly, offline ones. For a Q-A-Mom feeling socially isolated, for instance, the steps could include spending time with an offline social group, such as a local running club. For a Q-A-Mom focusing on white supremacist beliefs, the steps could include exposure to real-world “elves”—individuals whose job would be to add reality checks and counterarguments” to hate-motivated conspiracy content.²³⁰ Engagement with licensed mental health professionals employed by or contracted by the Group (with patient-provider confidentiality protections in place) could also be included in

²²⁶ See BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 108–09.

²²⁷ This approach is broadly inspired by the “offering treatment” approach and anchored in an individual life circumstances approach informed by the fact that “[r]esearch has consistently found that trying to clamp down on radical ideas is counterproductive.” BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 189.

²²⁸ Some clarification of and additions to current terms and conditions of use and relevant Community Standards may be necessary to create a broader range of potential actions by the company, while still respecting First Amendment requirements and general principles. Even with such an expansion, there would still be some referrals where the underlying behavior would not rise to the level of potential company sanctions—in this group, then, subjects would be invited to participate but not have the prospect of a referral in the background. There would also be defined, transparent circumstances and channels through which the Group could pass aggregate information and trends to the company.

²²⁹ See *supra* Part II, quest for personal significance.

²³⁰ BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 132 (suggesting “elves” as antidote to online trolls).

steps.²³¹ At any point, the subject could choose to withdraw from the intervention and proceed with any potential action by the company, with appropriate safeguards in place so that any prior engagement in interventions through the Group could not be held or used against the subject.

This new structure and process of the Group could be made part of the “agreements” that users enter into with Facebook to use the platform. Facebook users are bound by “clickwrap agreements” that set the terms of their engagement through the platform, as well as the terms by which the company can monitor, police, or otherwise act upon their content or use their data.²³² Facebook and other social media companies enjoy significant (arguably too much) latitude in how they set these terms.²³³ There has started to be some movement (through Twitch, for example)²³⁴ toward bringing certain offline conduct under these terms, a recognition that the boundaries between online and offline conduct and consequences are increasingly porous and complex.

The Group approach, sketched above, could play a meaningful role in addressing the domestic threats posed by Q-A-Moms and others in similar groups by offering a structure and process for rapidly deploying a scaled approach to de-radicalization with an individualized, human touch. Such an approach could not operate in isolation from other private governance approaches (like content removal)²³⁵ or public ones (like meaningfully funding studies into how to combat hate-driven groups).²³⁶ Nor could it even begin to operate without several years of transparent, multi-stakeholder input and development, similar to the process Facebook followed for the Oversight Board.²³⁷

There are also threshold questions not addressed in this sketch. These include whether Facebook (or other social media companies) would consider this type of approach that further divests company oversight of users while also expanding the use of company terms and conditions to take more corporate responsibility for threatening offline consequences of dangerous online engagement, and how advocacy groups and other non-corporate stakeholders would view the ethics

²³¹ *Id.* at 138–40.

²³² *E.g.*, PLUNKETT, *supra* note 139, at 80; *see also* Michael S. Lewis, *Pervasive Infancy: Reassessing the Contract Capacity of Adults in Modern America*, 19 U.N.H. L. REV. 69, 104 (2020), https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1400&context=unh_lr.

²³³ *See, e.g.*, PLUNKETT, *supra* note 139, at 80.

²³⁴ *See* Shannon Liao, *Amazon’s Livestreaming Service Twitch Will Police Users’ Behavior Outside of Its Platform*, WASH. POST (April 7, 2021, 1:04 PM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2021/04/07/twitch-conduct-policy-change>.

²³⁵ OVERSIGHT BD., *supra* note 214.

²³⁶ DARBY, *supra* note 9, at 16 (“We know relatively little about how to combat hate effectively . . . [and] the federal government has cut funding for programs to counter right-wing extremism and blocked the dissemination of data on the subject.”).

²³⁷ *See* Klonick, *Facebook Oversight Board*, *supra* note 217, at 2499.

(privacy chief among them) and practicalities of an approach that relies on peer surveillance and corporate action based on this surveillance.²³⁸

But as we confront a country where a majority of adults are bending reality by believing or potentially believing that the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives is a lizard person,²³⁹ we need to be willing to explore bending the boundaries of established forms of governance (private and public both) in a practical and creative fashion—without sacrificing ethical commitments to privacy, personal autonomy, freedom of association, equity, and other core values.

CONCLUSION

QAnon is flourishing online and, in turn, producing significant offline threats and harm to individuals and institutions, from kids whose mothers and other parents or caregivers go “down the rabbit hole” to the peaceful transfer of power in our federal government.²⁴⁰ Reaching Q-A-Moms is crucial to combat the full spectrum of digital domestic terrorism participation—especially because mothers often have a gatekeeper role to many essential components of personal, familial, and community health and safety.

This outreach must stretch and transform the boundaries of current private and public sector governance approaches to social media. One key rule of “conspiracist ideation” is that “any attempts to present contrary evidence is inherently proof that the conspiracy exists, and any such evidence is automatically presumed to be false or distorted.”²⁴¹ To avoid getting locked in an adversarial posture (presenting contrary evidence) that serves to deepen dangerous, hate-driven ideation, we need to look at novel forms of governance that are anchored in facts (reason, logic, and sanity) but side-step the temptation to try to refute conspiracy theories and those who believe in them with facts.

Facebook started with a Supreme Court. But Facebook (and other social media companies) need the equivalent of local courts and other importations of “quasi-legal systems” as well. This reform is about addressing the real-life impacts felt and caused by Q-A-Moms and others who fall down conspiracy theory rabbit holes. As part of a multi-stakeholder, multi-systems approach to combat people’s engagement

²³⁸ High-profile Facebook whistleblower accounts have led to heightened recent attention from lawmakers, regulators, and other key stakeholders in the U.S. and abroad on risks and harms posed by Facebook’s business model and choices around civic engagement, privacy, and other key domains of digital life. *See, e.g., The Facebook Files: A Wall Street Journal Investigation*, WALL ST. J., https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039?st=soflptrkmcwks93&reflink=mobilewebshare_permalink.

²³⁹ *See* BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 3 (“An NPR/Ipsos poll revealed 17 percent of Americans believe a group of Satan-worshipping, child-enslaving elites want to control the world.”).

²⁴⁰ *See* ROTHSCILD, *supra* note 8, at 13.

²⁴¹ NEIWERT, *supra* note 29, at 100.

with digital domestic terrorist organizations, we need to find the “thing[s] we’ve got”²⁴² that serve as touchpoints to offer ethical empowerment at the individual level to Q-A-Moms and others similarly situated, while holding the line at building a society that unequivocally rejects hate-based, conspiracy-driven terrorist movements.

²⁴² BLOOM & MOSKALENKO, *supra* note 1, at 179 (“Breakfast at Tiffany’s” parody).