

QANON AND THE RETURN OF JFK JR.

ETHICALLY COVERING CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE NEWS

On November 1, 2021, hundreds of ordinary, everyday Americans amassed on the streets of Dallas, Texas with the intention of gathering the next morning at Dealey Plaza – the location where 35th President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, was assassinated in 1963. The crowd was drawn here by the political movement QAnon, under false pretenses that the son of President Kennedy, John F. Kennedy Jr., was to address the crowd and announce that 45th President of the United States, recently defeated incumbent Donald Trump, would be reinstated as president with Kennedy Jr. as his vice president. Although this sounds like most other conspiracy theories regarding the 2020 presidential election, the flaw in this particular scenario is that JFK Jr. was killed in a plane crash in 1999.



A *USA Today* article about the event included a series of tweets from various journalists dismissing the crowd as “nuts,” taking on a condescending tone through mockery and sarcasm (Pitofsky, 2021). While the impulse to dismiss the crowd is understandable, doing so in an interpersonal format are done with intent to reach a wider audience. However, the same cannot be said for media outlets. We tend to believe that media should operate in an objective manner to inform the public, but news outlets instinct to take a flippant and patronizing voice towards the Dallas group begs the question: Does the media have a responsibility for engaging conspiracy believers? And to what extent should an ethic of objectivity apply to such cases?

The *USA Today* article is an exemplary case of the media’s status quo treatment of conspiratorial beliefs, especially about a political institution or event such as the 2020 presidential election. Current media attitudes towards people engaged in QAnon conspiracy thinking are comprised of condescension, haughtiness, and ridicule. For example, an article from *Maclean’s* titled “Welcome to Crazy Town: The QAnon Movement Explained,” discusses the political affiliations and intersections of theories peddled by QAnoners. The author refers to the individuals roped into these ideas as “trolls” and likens the group to “cockroaches” (Bethune, 2021). Similarly, *The Chicago Tribune* ramps up this discourse with a piece called “If You Fall for Conspiracy Theories, You’re Either Delusional, Psychotic, Dangerous, or Flat-Out Stupid. Take Your Pick.” In it, author Jerry Davich repeatedly uses terms like “nut-jobs,” “psychotic,” “dangerous,” “gullible dupes,” and says that these people are “flat-out stupid” (Davich, 2022). Davich goes on to say that he is “...here to publicly mock [them]” (Davich, 2022).

The issue here isn’t the fact that outlets are choosing to report on QAnon and its various manifestations, but *how* they discuss those who have been misled to believe these ideas. The disdainful tone used by media outlets, from calling people “nuts” to saying they have “the mind of a child,” isn’t neutral or objective – it’s

lazy and counterproductive. Journalism that is more concerned with attacking people, rather than ideas, isn't journalism concerned with informing an audience objectively. If it were, there would be more attempts to substantively deny claims being made by these groups. Strawman and ad hominem attacks on people within the QAnon movement isn't the kind of informative journalism that attempts to understand, sway, or rehabilitate these people. Calling people "stupid" or "psychotic" isn't doing the work to equip them with knowledge about the world that could help them disarm a conspiracy claim when it is first introduced. Even news articles claiming to 'debunk' the beliefs are rife with language that belittles believers (Pitofsky, 2021). Altogether, these things not only actively discourage changing one's beliefs to align with popular media, but it creates a feedback loop whereby conspiracies undermine confidence in the media, and the media reinforces that by attacking believers, which just further emboldens those beliefs (Andrews & Jadeja, 2020 and Davich, 2021).

On the other hand, media companies may be operating within their rights to dismiss QAnon believers, as it's possible that most of these people are engaging in conspiracies simply for entertainment. According to a study published in the *British Journal of Psychology*, people are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories when they are entertaining, especially in context of a "hotly contested presidential election" (Dolan, 2021). At some level, a choice is being made by individuals to dig in to QAnon literature, to wait for the next 'drop' of cryptic and infrequent messages posted by the leader "Q," and join Reddit pages dedicated to these beliefs. This would seem to justify the current treatment of believers by the media, as it means that QAnoners have *chosen* to ignore the advice of the media even when they had the agency to accept the truth, evidenced by their intentional denial of it. Moreover, taking these groups seriously could have the opposite effect of lending credibility to these groups. Indeed, moves to cover or debunk the minutiae of conspiracy theories may actually help the story and overall message spread to audiences "much faster than it would have traveled otherwise" (Phillips, 2018). In fact, contributors in chatrooms and message boards have directly "thanked journalists for the coverage and resulting wave of new participants" (Phillips, 2018).

While some say it is impossible to rationalize with QAnon believers, current media representations of conspiracy theorists don't get at the heart of why people feel like they need conspiracy theories. When information changes quickly and sometimes contradicts, it may "lead to the rapid generation of... conjecture, and potentially [conspiracy theories]" (Georgiou, 2020). During uncertain times like the COVID-19 pandemic, political turmoil, and economic hardships, some may feel the need to latch onto "far-fetched theories to make sense of the... current crisis" (Coninck et al., 2021). Media coverage of things like the Dallas rally, while perhaps entertaining, fail to help make sense of the world, leaving some to turn to conspiracy. In the end, though news outlets do not have to agree with conspiracy theorists, perhaps they would best be served by reexamining their treatment of them.

Discussion Questions:

1. What ethical values conflict in current representations of QAnoners in the news?
2. Do you think that the treatment of the Dallas rallygoers in the media was fair? Why or why not?
3. Some propose "strategic silence" as the best way to address conspiracy theories. Do you think this is an effective strategy?
4. What sort of principles ought to govern media outlets in covering fringe sources and movements?

Further Information:

Andrews, Travis and Jitharth Jadeja. (2020, October 24). "He's a Former QAnon Believer. He Doesn't Want to Tell His Story, but Thinks It Might Help." *The Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/10/24/qanon-believer-conspiracy-theory/>

Bethune, Brian. (2021, July 7). "Welcome to Crazy Town: The QAnon Movement Explained." *Maclean's*. Available at: <https://www.macleans.ca/culture/welcome-to-crazy-town-the-qanon-movement-explained/>

Davich, Jerry. (2022, April 19). "If You Fall for Conspiracy Theories, You're Either Delusional, Psychotic, Dangerous or Flat-out Stupid. Take Your Pick." *Chicago Tribune*. Available at: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/opinion/ct-ptb-davich-qanon-conspiracy-theories-delusion-st-0420-20220419-g7cgd2m4dfhrcimaqwss2jzfq-story.html>

De Coninck, David, Thomas Frissen, Koen Matthijs, Leen d'Haenens, Grégoire Lits, Olivier Champagne-Poirier, Marie-Eve Carignan, Marc D. David, Nathalie Pignard-Cheynel, Sébastien Salerno, and Melissa Génereux. "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation About COVID-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, 2021. Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.646394>

Dolan, Eric. (2021, September 9). "New Research Sheds Light on the Psychological Payoff of Believing in Conspiracy Theories." *PsyPost*. Available at: <https://www.psypost.org/2021/09/new-research-sheds-light-on-the-psychological-payoff-of-believing-in-conspiracy-theories-61832>

Georgiou, Neophytos, Paul Delfabbro, and Ryan Balzan. "COVID-19-Related Conspiracy Beliefs and Their Relationship with Perceived Stress and Pre-Existing Conspiracy Beliefs." *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 166, Nov. 2020, p. 110201. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110201>

Phillips, Whitney. (2018, August 6). "How Journalists Should Not Cover an Online Conspiracy Theory." *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/06/online-conspiracy-theory-journalism-qanon>

Pitofsky, Marina. (2021, November 2). "QAnon Supporters Gather Over Theory That JFK Jr. Will Emerge, Announce Trump to Be Reinstated." *USA Today*. Available at: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/11/02/texas-qanon-believers-back-theory-trump-reinstated/6255234001/>

Authors:

Ralph Anderson, Kat Williams, & Scott R. Stroud, Ph.D.
Media Ethics Initiative
Center for Media Engagement
University of Texas at Austin
October 30, 2024

Image by Markus Winkler on [Unsplash](#)

This case was supported by funding from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. These cases can be used in unmodified PDF form in classroom or educational settings. For use in publications such as textbooks, readers, and other works, please contact the [Center for Media Engagement](#).

This work is licensed under **CC BY-NC-SA 4.0** 