

QAnon conspiracy kicked off Twitter as platform bans thousands of accounts

Enlarge / A cluster of Trump supporters, sporting Q-emblazoned T-shirts and the campaign's signature red MAGA hats, waiting in line to get into a rally in Tennessee in 2018.

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Twitter is removing thousands of accounts and tweets that support the baseless QAnon conspiracy theory from its platform, citing the movement as “coordinated harmful activity” that leads to harassment and other harms.

“We’ve been clear that we will take strong enforcement action on behavior that has the potential to lead to offline harm,” the company announced in—naturally—a series of tweets. “In line with this approach, this week we are taking further action on so-called ‘QAnon’ activity across the service.”

In addition to suspending more than 7,000 accounts so far—and possibly as many as 150,000 before all is said and done—Twitter says it will no longer include anything associated with QAnon in trends or recommendations, make sure not to highlight it in search, and block certain URLs associated with Q from Twitter.

Q-related content has apparently been on the upswing lately, which is perhaps not surprising, as the US is currently

experiencing both an out-of-control pandemic and a widespread civil rights protest movement at the same time. Adherents have also apparently been trying to do end-runs around Twitter's rules, which the platform is also pushing back on. "We will permanently suspend accounts Tweeting about these topics that we know are engaged in violations of our multi-account policy, coordinating abuse around individual victims, or are attempting to evade a previous suspension—something we've seen more of in recent weeks," Twitter wrote.

The FBI last year warned that QAnon and other "anti-government, identity-based, and fringe political conspiracy theories" posed a concrete threat to domestic safety.

"Although conspiracy theory-driven crime and violence is not a new phenomenon," the FBI wrote at the time, "today's information environment has changed the way conspiracy theories develop, spread, and evolve."

The agency also specifically warned of continuing threats as the 2020 election approaches, writing that domestic fringe movements, "very likely will emerge, spread, and evolve in the modern information marketplace over the near term, fostering anti-government sentiment, promoting racial and religious prejudice, increasing political tensions, and occasionally driving both groups and individuals to commit criminal or violent acts."

To date, QAnon followers have been tied to at least a half-dozen violent incidents, including kidnappings, attempted arson, and at least one murder.

"It's a letter of the alphabet, as far as I know..."

Three years ago, QAnon kicked off with an anonymous post on 4chan claiming to have insider information about former

secretary of state and recent presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and grew from there. As with many conspiracy theories, the details are somewhat inchoate and often contradictory, but the core belief more or less posits that an anonymous insider (or insiders) known as “Q” is sharing information about President Donald Trump’s tortuous, long-term plans to take down the “deep state.”

QAnon has since oozed from the Internet’s most unsavory corners into the right-wing mainstream, picking up celebrity endorsements along the way. Trump has amplified QAnon-related messages on Twitter, and signs from Q adherents are a regular appearance at his in-person rallies. At least eight QAnon supporters have a chance at being voted into Congress this fall after winning Republican primaries in their states this spring and summer.

Making the leap from 4chan to the more accessible Reddit in 2017 and 2018 helped the Q conspiracy gain steam. Reddit ended up banning several Q-related subreddits in 2018, saying they violated site content policies. “We are very clear in our site terms of service that posting content that incites violence, disseminates personal information, or harasses will get users and communities banned from Reddit,” a spokesperson said at the time.

Facebook removed a small handful of Q-related pages in May, citing its policies against coordinated inauthentic behavior.

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