

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 21: The World According to Q

- Travis View: These aren't people who are merely misinformed. These aren't people who fell for that deep fake or cheap fake or something, they didn't just get bad information.
- Tristan Harris: That's Travis View, a researcher and writer who monitors and investigates the decentralized cult-like internet conspiracy theory group called QAnon. Travis hosts a podcast called QAnon Anonymous. He has spent the last few years trying to understand the people who've become wrapped up in the QAnon world and the concerning consequences as Q followers increasingly leave their screens and take extreme actions in the real world.
- Travis View: Let's take an example of like Cynthia Abcug. This was a Colorado woman who was arrested after plotting with other QAnon followers to kidnap her children, which she didn't have custody of, in an armed raid. Or take the example of Jessica Prim. This was a QAnon follower who was arrested in Manhattan with a car full of knives after posting threatening messages about Hillary Clinton or Joe Biden.
- Tristan Harris: QAnon entered the national consciousness in December 2016, when a man from North Carolina traveled to a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C. and opened fire. He was acting on a QAnon conspiracy theory called Pizzagate and believed that the pizza parlor was at the center of a pedophile ring involving D.C.'s elite. The outlander's theory was quickly dismissed and the shooter caught, but since then, QAnon has actually grown and more and more people are taking dangerous actions based on its ideas.
- Travis View: Alpalus Slyman, this was a QAnon follower. He live streamed himself leading the police on a 100 mile an hour car chase with his five children in the vehicle. And during that chase, he actually called out to both Trump and QAnon on that livestream.
- Tristan Harris: It might seem tempting to write these people off as outliers or troubled individuals or people who just made tragic spur of the moment mistakes, but Travis believes the problem is much deeper.
- Travis View: In all these examples, they were radicalized into an extremist worldview that convinced them that they were justified in taking some very dangerous or violent actions. And they got that idea because of extremist QAnon propaganda that they were fed in their social media feeds.
- Tristan Harris: So what is it about QAnon and the group loyalty and psychology that it commands from its followers? Well, QAnon groups and networks on social media platforms have played a central role in spreading some of the most wild conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 era. As many as six candidates who support QAnon are running for Congress and will be on the ballot for the 2020 elections, threatening to upend long-held Republican establishment seats. This just happened to a five-term Republican congressman in Colorado. Travis warns that dismissing QAnon as a fringe or partisan threat underestimates how quickly their conspiracies can leapfrog into mainstream debates on the left and on the right. So we're having Travis on the show today to help us understand this underreported threat before it grows too big to respond to. I'm Tristan Harris and this is Your Undivided Attention.
- Tristan Harris: So Travis, thank you for coming on.

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Travis View: Yeah, Tristan, thanks for inviting me.

Tristan Harris: So maybe before we get too deep, I think people may not know much about the QAnon, what it is. I know it's a very, very big rabbit hole, but could you give people two-minute summary of what is QAnon?

Travis View: Certainly. The broad QAnon worldview is basically that the world is controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles. And this particular cabal, they control everything. They control the media, they control politicians, they control entertainment. They basically pull the strings and hold all the levers of power. And QAnon followers believe that this particular cabal would have continued doing all of their evil behind the scenes invisible were it not for the election of Donald Trump. QAnon followers believe that Trump knows all about the evil that this particular cabal has been doing and that Trump is basically fighting an uphill battle to try and reveal all of this evil and destroy the cabal once and for all, and then end the illusion and free all of us.

Travis View: Now, QAnon followers further believe that Trump isn't doing this entirely in secret. He believes that he's doing it with help of a group of high-level military intelligence officials that they call Qteam. And this is a belief be just a group of people, very close to President Trump who are somehow involved in military intelligence. And they believe that this Qteam is basically sending out coded messages about their operation on these image boards. Like started out on 4chan, later moved to 8chan and now since 8chan went down, it's now on the website 8kun. And QAnon followers believe that by looking at these posts by this anonymous entity just known as Q and started decoding it, trying to decipher what these cryptic messages mean, they can understand what's really going on behind the scenes.

Travis View: Now in practice, this leads them to believe in all sorts of bizarre things, such as that JFK Jr. is actually still alive to this day and didn't actually die in a plane crash in 1999. Or sometimes they believe that there are mole children who have been imprisoned underneath Central Park, and there's a military operation to rescue them. Or they'll believe lots of other sorts of basically nonsensical things. But the only reason that they believe it is because they believe that these cryptic Q drops are giving them these messages.

Tristan Harris: Just to give people a sense of who you are and what got you into studying online conspiracy theories, what is your background?

Travis View: My actual background is in digital marketing and I really got interested in QAnon in part just because I happened to spend a lot of time online thinking about how information travels through the social networks as a consequence of my job. And I really started to notice QAnon in the middle of 2018. And basically I noticed that I was sort of vaguely aware of QAnon because I had heard about it on Reddit and stuff. At the time, I kind of dismissed it as a kind of a weird 8chan thing, there's a lot of those. But I noticed that this particular sort of phenomenon, this basically cult-like movement that convinced themselves that they're going to revolutionarily change the world just by sitting at their computer and posting memes, started to creep up into mainstream social networks and mainstream conservatives. In fact, the one that really got my attention was I noticed that Charlie Kirk, this pretty prominent pundit who's appeared on Fox News a lot, and he's met with the president and he speaks all over the country.

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Travis View: Charlie Kirk, actually, he started promoting some bogus QAnon statistics. He was sharing statistics that he falsely claimed came from the Department of Justice. He claimed basically that the number of human trafficking arrests had skyrocketed under President Trump when compared to the arrests under President Obama. This sort of falls in line with the QAnon narrative that President Trump is doing a lot more in order to arrest sex traffickers in other administrations because it was previously covered up. And this is sort of a crusade that Trump is on. But when I fact-checked that claim, when I traced the numbers to their true origin, I found that they actually came from the Q research board on 8chan. These were statistics that were basically totally bogus and they were compiled by QAnon researchers into a spreadsheet. And they were essentially based on a misunderstanding, it was all nonsense. And I fact-checked that tweet and then Charlie Kirk wound up deleting it. But that was basically my first realization that this bizarre phenomenon wasn't staying and serve the weird bowels of the internet anymore, it was creeping up into mainstream political discussion.

Tristan Harris: What are some of the parallels or sort of insights from your background as a marketer that have you pay particular attention to the QAnon phenomenon?

Travis View: Sure. Digital marketing is basically all about establishing a brand and then selling people on the idea that you can offer something that will help them improve their lives and then hopefully getting that idea to sort of spread through social networks. And QAnon is the same thing. QAnon is basically a brand, but it happens to sell people on a product that's very, very appealing to people, basically utopia and the sort of the cleansing of evil on earth. It's a very apocalyptic sort of idea, but I realized is potential to grow because I'm aware of how these sorts of concepts and ideas and communities can spread very, very rapidly on these social networks.

Tristan Harris: It's kind of hard to believe as a listener. Here's this random internet website, here's this random person who's claiming to be Q says something and it suddenly just starts this following. I mean, I could go to a website today, I could just post something and I can't start a following that Tristan Harris has got the secrets to the world cabal. So, how does this actually get started? And how do you kind of catalyze something that could grow like this?

Travis View: QAnon actually is a part of a, I guess, a kind of a genre of posts that's actually kind of common on 4chan, they're called insider anons. Occasionally someone will show up on 4chan and they'll claim to be some sort of high-level government insider who is revealing top-level secrets. And some people on the boards, they'll play along, we'll ask questions, let's try and trip them up to see if they actually do have insider information. A famous one before QAnon that was actually called FBlanon. This was someone back in 2016 on 4chan who claimed to have insider information against basically criminal prosecutions against Hillary Clinton. But the thing about these insider anons, they usually stay on the chance that are usually just sort of playing pretend. And then it fizzles out, doesn't really go anywhere.

Travis View: QAnon is unique, is that this is an insider anon that kind of burst out of the chance into the sort of the wider social networks. So it's not just the types of people who lurk on image boards who are buying into this nonsense, now it's people who are maybe use Facebook or Twitter or more YouTube or more conventional social media networks who believe that this is sort of a secret government insider. It sounds like nonsense and

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it is, but there are a lot of people who are very attracted to the idea that there is some sort of government insider leaking information in that you can sort of understand what's going on beyond what the mainstream media is telling you just by listening to what these insiders have to say.

Tristan Harris: And so what were kind of clues that as he was first, or he I'm assuming, he or she, was first sharing that could legitimately say, "I actually am part of the inside. I know that the Q code is for some kind of secret clearance for nuclear weapons in the Department of Energy," or something like this?

Travis View: The very first couple of Q drops actually essentially claimed that Hillary Clinton was on the verge of arrest and that her passport would be flagged and that the National Guard was about to be activated. This was all the way back in October 28th, 2017. Now, obviously none of that happened, but that did the sway the sort of the small community around these Q posts that started forming and started believing that this was someone who was somehow really high up and revealing a secret operation in order to execute a huge mass arrest event that they call the storm and then usher in a great new sort of utopian age of peace and enlightenment that they call the great awakening. I mean, there isn't any real legitimate evidence that is anything besides someone who is very good at exploiting certain people's sort of fears and hopes.

Tristan Harris: I mean, so it sounds like it's rooted on a story of Hillary Clinton's arrest that would be attractive, very attractive to a set of people who would love for that to happen. And the idea that they would get fore-knowledge of that, I guess is sort of one aspect of what makes the theory persuasive, right? That you have some sort of inside view about the future.

Travis View: Yes.

Tristan Harris: And this person is telling you almost like a fortune teller, "Shake this eight ball, I'll tell you exactly what's going to happen."

Travis View: Right. It was especially appealing because there is a significant number of people who believe that they were promised by President Trump that Hillary Clinton would eventually be locked up. And months into his administration, it didn't seem as though there was much movement on that front. And so many of Trump supporters felt disappointed by that but then along comes Q to convince you that no actually, there is an operation in order to eventually arrest Hillary Clinton, but it's secret and it can't be made public. And if you would otherwise feel extremely disappointed that Trump wasn't living up to that promise, then this sort of the Q story can be very appealing.

Tristan Harris: I think it's also important before we get deeper to acknowledge that it's easy to think that we are just simply ignoring or making unimportant any conspiracy theory through time. I mean, there are significant things that the US intelligence services have done. We've got MKUltra experiments using LSD, psychedelic drugs being put on the population. We've got hypnosis experiments, we've got COINTELPRO infiltration of counter groups. So there are actually a history to legitimate or accurate conspiracies, but what's so confusing is the basis upon which we believe in.

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Tristan Harris: What's interesting to me about the QAnon phenomenon is that it is based on "research" that everyone in the community is theoretically saying, "I think there's expression, do your own research," to sort of say, "Oh, well, this is actually how you find the real truth." There's this notion of if you're living in the regular world, you're a muggle, you're part of the mainstream, you don't really understand how things work. But if you do your own research, this is what you can find. So can you say a little bit about how that dynamic kind of emerges? Because it is very persuasive to be told, "Look for yourself."

Travis View: Absolutely. You do make a good point about serve their grievances, about a powerful people abusing their power. As we often discussed on the QAnon Anonymous podcast, some of their broadest grievances I feel are legitimate. The intelligence agencies have abused their power, or even we were discussing powerful pedophiles is obviously outrageous that elites like Jeffrey Epstein can commit sex crimes without being held responsible for years and years. Now, that's a legitimate injustice that's worth addressing. Of course the issue is that they always spin out into wild stories instead of addressing the real sort of grounded issues that might help actually genuinely address these injustices.

Travis View: But in terms of them believing that they can sort of do their own research and sort of understand what's underneath the surface, and part of this stems from a general distrust of the mainstream media, the belief that the mainstream media is entirely controlled and there's no way you can possibly trust anything that comes out of it. And so they believe that they can sort of basically by looking through their own personal information, they can undergo what's really going on. And now I'm all for doing your research and reading well-sourced books and articles and other information that helps you get a better sense of the world.

Travis View: But QAnon followers in practice, what they call research is really just high-powered confirmation bias. They'll do things like, for example, a classic example is with Pizzagate, they'll read through the Sandusky emails that were leaked by WikiLeaks in an attempt to find evidence of sex trafficking or something like that. And they'll try and find words like pizza or hot dog that they think is a code word for children or something nefarious. Now, is totally nonsense, but they sort of convinced themselves by reading through these emails and they think they, by understanding what they believe are codes, they can sort of understand what's really going on behind the surface.

Tristan Harris: What's interesting to me is, so for example like you said, have intelligence agencies abused their power? Yes. Has there been sex trafficking? It's been involved at high levels of power where you have Jeffrey Epstein with people, including Donald Trump and the Clintons and famous people and celebrities and Royals from England, Prince Andrew actually participating or being at certain places that we don't know what happened. Yes. Do we know that there were actually times when the media were going to cover? I think there's a famous video of ABC News I think they were going to cover Jeffrey Epstein and then they actually... The producer pulled it and so the reporters on this other program are filmed saying, "Yeah, I had this story back three, four years ago-"

Travis View: You are referring to Amy Robach who wound up not reporting that story for some reason. And yeah, that is a sort of legitimate concern. Here we have high-level abuse

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and then for some reason, a major media outlet is not exposing it. I agree that demands answers.

Tristan Harris: So, yeah. So I think it's important to legitimize here. What happens when there is a legitimate kernel of truth, and then you are correct about that truth, but then what is the boundary or what is the gating function that says all these other things I want to chain or hang off of that truth as also being true, like there's a Satanist global cult cabal that's running the world and they actually are all just like cheerleading monsters. I mean, going from one step to the bigger step is a separate question from kernels of truth that we can verify and validate. I have a background as a magician, as a kid in, and in mentalism. Mentalism is the form of magic where you're doing predictions, right? And you're trying to show people that you can predict things about them and mind reading and things like this.

Tristan Harris: And obviously one of the approaches is you throw out random features. There's something called cold reading where you look at a person and based on how their eyebrows flinch or not, you start throwing out descriptions of their life or their family or they had a grandmother who died, was it recently? And they'll just throw things out. And when they get what's called a hit, a hit means that it's a response, a positive response. They start nodding their heads like, "Well, how did you know that my grandfather or my grandmother just died recently?" Once you get one hit, you're building up confidence in that person. And then they're actually tuned to be more open to what you may further be able to predict about them. And specifically there's actually this kind of a technique, it's almost like saying there's a distinct possibility that something could be true? Saying there's a distinct possibility sounds like it's really saying something specific, but if it happens, you said, "I told you there is a distinct possibility." And if it doesn't happen you say, "I was only a possibility."

Tristan Harris: So it has this kind of it's casting this belief net that can make the receiver believe that you in fact know something when in fact you're just hedging, and if you get a hit or an alignment, you get rewarded for that match. But if there is no hit, you don't pay any penalty. And it seems like that's kind of what's going on here as you start to take this kernel of truth and then exploded out into... That means that the whole world's run by a global cabal of Satanists who were establishing the new world order of lizard people and the rest of it.

Travis View: Yeah. I mean, that is basically it. QAnon does something similar in that they throw out a lot of nonsense, but they hedge it all. In fact, a common Q saying is that disinformation is necessary. This is something where basically Q assures his followers that sometimes...

Tristan Harris: It's so clever.

Travis View: ... information that they spread is going to be false. And once you say that, then basically you have free reign to say whatever nonsense. And if just a one claim out of 100 is true, you can say, "Well, the rest were just necessary disinformation, but the one hit, that proves that I have some sort of insider knowledge or some sort of foresight." It's a cold reading trick that's been used for hundreds of years, but now it's online and on a mass scale now.

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Tristan Harris: It's beautiful because by claiming that it's actively disinformation... Typically there's also, I think you and I have both read up on the work of Leon Festinger who's written a book called *When Prophecies Fail*, studying these millenarian cults who said, "On this day, on this hour at this exact time the aliens are going to come down and take us all." Or, "The world's going to end." Or "The nuclear bomb is going to go off. And then when it doesn't happen, the creative ways that our minds justify and reroute what our original prediction was, "Oh, we didn't do the math, right. It's actually not August 6th. That was using the Mayan calendar, if you use the Aztec calendar you get the actual date." And so it's this kind of hedging.

Tristan Harris: But what's interesting is that's kind of based on ambiguity, whereas in Q's case, he's actually saying, he or she, "I actually am intentionally supplying disinformation to kind of fool you." So there's kind of no basis upon which you can validate that this person or this entity has accurate information or not. And moreover, just the fact that they're using that strategy, you would think would make them an untrustworthy actor to claim and use such poor epistemic methods.

Travis View: Yeah. It's funny, I've brought this up with QAnon followers and it's like your source that you claim has better information than the mainstream media admits that they distribute disinformation. So why you trust them? Why do you trust them more than, for example, the mainstream media if you consider them untrustworthy. And the response I usually get back is, "Well, Q at least admits that sometimes they're disinformation, whereas the mainstream media holds themselves up as a trustworthy authority all the time. And therefore Q was being honest about their disinformation.

Tristan Harris: Wow.

Travis View: It's very sort of convoluted kind of reasoning, it's very strange. I often get the sense that Q and the followers, I feel like they're desperate for any sense of truth. Just because their trust in other sort of more traditional media outlets it's been totally shattered that they're willing to sort of instead give themselves over to this source that even admits that sometimes they're lying.

Tristan Harris: What are some of the kind of other beliefs or other stories and myths that have been propagated by the Q community?

Travis View: Really the main belief is the belief in what they call the store, which is a promised coming mass arrest event. And they believe that there are over 100,000 secret sealed indictments in the sort of the federal justice system. And one day soon, we don't know when, but eventually they believe these sealed indictments will be unsealed and it will lead to a law enforcement just arresting 100,000 people and not just nobodies, people from the highest levels of politics and entertainment and media. You're going to see Lady Gaga and the Congressman Adam Schiff and everyone at CNN all being swept up in a huge sort of arrest event and thinking that they are going to all possibly face military tribunals because their crimes will be so heinous that civilian courts will be too good for them. Some of them may even, they believe, go to be imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay, which is designed for enemy combatants. It's all ludicrous, but that's really their main hope. There's belief that basically all of the evil people will be exposed and then purged. And then that will allow us to live in a much more beautiful, peaceful place.

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Tristan Harris: So, I mean, it phrases like the storm, the great awakening. This has a very mythopoetic kind of classic deep union archetype kind of feel like there's this big grand moral narrative of the sweeping and cleansing the halls of power from injustice and taking those who have been unjust to hell or whatever it's going to be. What would have someone believe something like the storm is coming. What's your assessment, you've been setting this community for a long time.

Travis View: Yeah. I mean, obviously a lot of people who get the QAnon, they're either very religious before they were gotten to QAnon or they were generally just very interested in QAnon theories. Now at first, the people who are really interested in QAnon were evangelical Christians, and this sort of falls in line with Q drops. Many Q drops make reference to demons in their Bible verses. So it overlaps very nicely with a sort of the evangelical world view, especially like the coming rapture and stuff. In fact, a common phrase is that it's going to be biblical wherever the promised coming event is. However, it's also very attractive to people who are into more new age spirituality because the QAnon does literally promise that we're going to enter into a new age.

Travis View: And then the QAnon followers who saw it first, the people who understood the time that we were about to be in will be like the new sort of spiritual leaders in this new confusing time. And they'll be responsible for leading the rest of us blue pill normies into the truth because we will have been so blinded by the lying mainstream media and the cabal. So if you're already a very deeply religious person, if you already have a sort of apocalyptic worldview, then the QAnon story is going to be very appealing to you.

Travis View: A major promoter of QAnon for a while in 2018 was the subreddit The Donald which promoted a lot of QAnon theories. However, the QAnon moderators later wound up banning discussions of QAnon. And in fact, in September of 2018, right, it actually banned all QAnon subreddits. The Donald remained because it was just in support of Donald Trump. A lot of the QAnon specific subreddits were banned allegedly because of harassment.

Tristan Harris: But in the Q narrative, so Donald Trump is sort of the savior, the one who's going to cleanse the ranks of this sort of satanic cult from the power system with these indictments, with this system fighting back against the deep state.

Travis View: Yeah, they believe that Trump is essentially the only uncorrupt of the elite, he is the only one who didn't participate in all the evil doings that the rest of them are doing. Many QAnon followers even believe that Trump was recruited by the military decades ago to run for president now in order to save the world. So yeah, they see Trump not just as like merely as a good president or anything like that, they see him as the savior of humanity. And that one day, once Trump reveals the extent of the evil he's been fighting against, then everyone will be united and seeing how wonderful Trump is. And then they'll realize that the only reason that the people in the media were ever criticizing him was because they were sort of in on basically the worldwide satanic pedophile cabal.

Tristan Harris: One of the things about conspiracy thinking is, as you've mentioned, the sort of long arc that this event 10 years ago was actually all just part of the plan to set up what's going to happen now. That's like a huge common theme of what they call the strong theory, that all these different seemingly disparate events are actually all connected. One of the

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other interesting things about conspiracy thinking is the ability to reframe events in a new lens or new narratives. So no matter what happens, you can tell a story about how this actually adds up to this other thing.

Tristan Harris: I earlier in my own life, I studied cults. I actually went into several cults to understand how they operate. And I saw very, very smart people: doctors, lawyers, software engineers; people who are really, really intelligent. That intelligence was uncorrelated with how they would get sucked into... Especially 70s were new age cults for waking up in the 21st century. And how easy it is to tell a story that reframes things that have happened in a way that reconfirms what the cult has told you. So I think in the case, for example, in QAnon, where you're saying there's this storm and there's going to be this great awakening, I think there's a specific quote in QAnon that says, "Trust in the process," or something like that?

Travis View: Trust the plan.

Tristan Harris: Trust the plan, right. When you can tell people, "Trust the plan," it's a wrapper for your meaning-making that says, "No matter what chaos is ensuing in front of my eyes, trust the plan." Meaning this is all part of the great cleansing. So if the world is descending into chaos, if you have literally cars on fire all throughout Minneapolis, if you have police and military police being called in and Black Hawk helicopters raining down in Washington, D.C. If you're a subscriber of say the QAnon belief system, all of this is part of the plan and part of the bigger way that we're going to cleanse the world from sin. I find that just so interesting, how powerful when you give people a pre-lens to see the world that it will color the rest of their meaning-making no matter what happens.

Travis View: I mean, yeah. Other QAnon phrases in that same vein are, "Do you believe in coincidences?" And the implied answer is, "No, you shouldn't believe in coincidences." And also, "Everything has meaning." Now, I think it's a ludicrous way to view the world, there's clearly coincidences things sometimes just happen and they're just unconnected to anything else. And not everything is sort of imbued with the special meaning. But if you view it from this lens, you just take every event, all the information you see before you, and you think that it somehow applies to your QAnon worldview.

Travis View: I mean, there's one case recently, there was a QAnon follower named Alpalus Slyman who was arrested after a high-speed police chase. There's video of him explaining his theory that the radio was basically sending him messages that are related to QAnon. He thought that the song selections of this local radio station had special meaning, but of course they didn't. But if you buy into this QAnon worldview and all information, your input has special meaning and specifically has meaning in relation to your QAnon worldview, that kind of crazy thinking can make sense.

Tristan Harris: That's what's so dangerous, it seems, about these kinds of belief systems is it creates the strong theory where everything that said fits into this master narrative that can kind of reconfirm itself. And this is so common to all cults.

Travis View: Yeah, absolutely. That's the danger. Once you always work with the presumption that all information is related to the theory specifically through related to confirming why it's true and why it's sort of valid and why it's a good way to view the world, you don't allow the possibility that maybe that particular worldview, that particular belief is

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misleading you because that's just not even a thought that enters your mind, let alone something that you can sort of maybe consider in sort of a walk into. So yeah, it is very dangerous because once you have that mindset, then it's traps you into a cycle that's very, very difficult to get out of.

Tristan Harris: So why does this even matter? And I'd love for you to talk about some of the ways that this conspiracy theory has leaped out from the 4chan boards and Reddit forums and Q drops to influence real world events and real world politics and real politicians and world consequential elements of our national reality.

Travis View: Sure. You can start with the fact that President Trump himself has "tweeted" or retweeted QAnon accounts more than 130 times. And so he provided a lot of validation to the community. I imagine it's simply because he would provide validation to any community that was sort of fanatically supportive of him. We could also talk about the fact that there have been over 50 current and former congressional candidates who have promoted QAnon, and six of them actually are going to be on the ballot. And one of them actually, a candidate named Marjorie Taylor Greene, who's running in Georgia's 14th District is the favored candidate to win in that particular election. So starting next year, we're almost certainly going to have a QAnon-promoting Congress member. So I think it's important for that reason.

Travis View: It's also important because there have been multiple violent or dangerous incidents involving a radicalized QAnon follower. Perhaps the most famous example is the case of Anthony Camillo. This is a man in New York who was charged with murder after killing a reputed mob boss. He was actually recently deemed not fit to stand trial so we're going to see what that goes. There's also a case of Matthew, right? This is a man who had an armed standoff on the Hoover Dam Bridge because he believed that there was a secret inspector general report that was going to be released. This is a false idea, but he got the idea from QAnon. He later basically pled guilty to a terrorism charge. So there was already a case of a man who was charged and pled guilty to terrorism because of his QAnon beliefs. So this is something that is definitely leaping out to the real world, it's affecting people's lives, it's radicalizing people, it's putting people in dangerous situations. So I think it's very much worth addressing.

Tristan Harris: The people that are running for office are not just these fringe lunatics, but they're actually a rising force in US politics.

Travis View: Yeah, this is the first year we've really had a big crop of QAnon followers who are on the ballot. Like I mentioned, probably the most significant one is Marjorie Taylor Greene. The other big one is a woman named Jo Rae Perkins who won the Republican primary for the Senate seat in Oregon. So yeah, there are a handful of these QAnon followers who are running for office. And interestingly, there is actually some precedent for a survey conspiratorial movement getting a small but significant amount of power in US politics.

Travis View: In the early 19th century, there was a political party called the Anti-Masonic Party. And it was very short lived, but at its peak in 1832, it actually controlled about 10% of the House of Representatives, which is ludicrous when you reflect upon the fact that it was a single-issue party dedicated to the belief that the Freemasons were this fraternal

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organization running a shadow government. But that idea was popular enough to gain 10% of an entire branch of Congress.

Tristan Harris: That right there is just so fascinating because here you have essentially a direct parallel where the claim back in 1832 is there essentially is a deep state of Freemasons that are a secret cabal of people who are actually running things, which may not even have been too far from the truth in the sense of people conspire all the time to try to sort of steal the world and possibly ethical and humane ways where they could have it for nefarious purposes. And the Freemasons were a popular group. And the idea that there is now the same kind of impulse, that there's this secret deep state of people who are running society. Now, they claim that they're a pedophile ring versus they're trying to just stabilize the world and have anything not just run off a cliff. What can we learn from the history of the Freemasons and the anti-masons?

Travis View: I think that one of the things that we can learn is that a lot of things that we're seeing from the QAnon community aren't actually that new. There've always been a small but a significant part of the US population that is extremely conspiratorial. And the fact is conspiratorial enough to enforce their conspiratorial worldview through political means. What I feel like is new is that the social media has enabled this conspiratorial population to spread their message more widely and connect with each other more rapidly, which I think has turned them into a perhaps more formidable force than the anti-masons were in the early 19th century.

Tristan Harris: Because by comparison, the anti-masons were... How were they connecting and collaborating back in the 1800s? I mean, there was newspapers or meeting groups or town halls. I mean...

Travis View: Yeah, so basically the early 19th century there was a group of anti-masonic newspapers, there was also a political organizer and who saw the potential of the anti-masonic movement to turn into a political party. And he organized that party through basically a series of conventions in which the anti-masons would get together and they'd share notes, they'd pass resolutions, they'd suggest nominations for office and stuff. So they would have to organize basically in the meet space. And nowadays that isn't necessary.

Tristan Harris: So those were the tools of the anti-masons in the 1800s, but how have the tools of social media and the specific pathways and virality mechanisms enabled this to spread more rapidly, maybe going through an example with one of the candidates?

Travis View: Sure. One thing about QAnon followers is that they love validation. They love it with anyone, especially someone who is in a position of authority or a power nods at them or winks at them in any way. And so whenever there's someone who is running for office, or it's perhaps even an influencer or political pundit sort of says that they sort of buy into the QAnon worldview, they'll come rushing to their defense. It's basically a vast street team. And if you are an influencer, if you are a political candidate that's of course something that you'd want. You'd want a vast basically army of people who are willing to spend hours every single day defending you or spreading your memes or whatever. And so you don't have to do a whole lot as a political candidate in order to get a significant part of the online population on your side.

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Tristan Harris: So Travis, when we talk about people running for Congress who believe in QAnon, do you have a sense of how many of them sincerely believe it themselves versus are cynically using it as part of the game of power to get elected because they know that it works.

Travis View: He has a really good question. I feel like it's a mix. Like Marjorie Taylor Greene, for example, since she sort of won her Republican primary, she has not talked about QAnon much. In fact, she hasn't talked about QAnon a while. I feel like she is someone who perhaps sincerely bought into QAnon at one point, but then maybe she was told by some political consultants that that sort of messaging doesn't play well for the general election or campaign is really more focused on attacking socialism, attacking gun legislation and then attacking what she sees as left-leaning politicians such as Nancy Pelosi or AOC.

Travis View: Or she is taking a bit of a pivot since our QAnon days. Whereas a candidate like Jo Rae Perkins, who was running for senator up in Oregon, she is a true believer. She talks about QAnon every opportunity that she gets. So yeah, it is a mix of both people who sincerely buy into the bizarre QAnon worldview and people who perhaps merely see that QAnon is a vehicle to get a lot of supporters.

Tristan Harris: And of course the problem is that the mob can come to eat you because if you keep reinforcing it, then suddenly you have a crazy base and the only way to serve them or get elected in the future is to pretend that you believe in the crazy thing. So, if you play these games over and over and over again, you end up debasing the playing field and so now you're dealing with essentially a crazy body politic that you now have to harness and now you're left with that.

Travis View: The problem with politics is that it's only a bad strategy if it doesn't work. We're going to see how well it performs in the coming election. But if basically winking and nodding at QAnon followers turns into a successful electoral strategy, I assume it's going to be something that we're going to see more frequently in the future.

Tristan Harris: You've said that you consider this almost like a religious or extremist cult. It shouldn't be seen as some kind of temporary phenomenon, but something that is here with us to stay.

Travis View: This is something that's much more than merely a disinformation problem, it's a problem of extremism. And this is just me saying this, the Phoenix field office of the FBI actually issued an intelligence bulletin warning about the threat of conspiracy theory-driven extremism and they named QAnon and Pizzagate specifically as possible sources of this extremism. So it's not just people who get bad ideas about how the world works, it's people getting information and data that radicalized them and makes their lives worse and then makes things possibly dangerous for people around them. So, yeah, even the intelligence agencies recognize that this is something that is worth considering if you want to counter extremism or terrorist threats.

Tristan Harris: Can you talk a little bit about the importance of relationships in this radicalization process? I think for one to become so radicalized that you would actually get in a car and speed down at 100 miles an hour or so radicalized that you actually take a gun and go to a pizza parlor. I'm guessing that the person didn't just read a bunch of stuff on a

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board, that they probably talked to other people, or is there any research on the formation of relationships? Because I know in cults, part of what makes cults really work is you start to develop relationships with people in this different way of seeing the world and suddenly more and more of your relationships are in that universe. And so you don't really want to talk to regular people anymore because you only really trust people who see the world the way that you do. So, is there any evidence of that in how this actually works?

Travis View: Yeah, you see it often is that QAnon followers when they start off by just reading the information, right? The Q drops or maybe some of the posts from other QAnon followers. But then they get involved in the community, they start basically sharing theories and then reading other theories and then commenting back and forth, or maybe even getting involved in sort of internal drama within the community. And that of course is self-reinforcing for a couple of reasons. Number one, people who get deeply into QAnon often alienate their immediate family members. And they often, because of their obsession, they aren't interested in talking about mundane things that will help them better connect with people in their actual life.

Travis View: And so when that happens, that just drives them further into the QAnon community and then further into the QAnon belief, just deepening the radicalization. And more and more, if someone might feel happier spending six hours a day on the QAnon Facebook group, because those are the people that they feel connected with even more so than the people in their immediate life. You'll see on Twitter where a QAnon follower will ask for emotional support. They'll say, "I lost my job today, patriots. Can I have a prayers up or could I have some... Think of me. Could I get some support basically." And then they'll get thousands of people who come to their aid and say, "Pray God will see you through, trust the plan." They'll get lots and lots of people who come to their support. And so that obviously must feel wonderful in your time of crisis, especially if that's not something you're maybe not getting through your personal life.

Tristan Harris: This reminds me as you shared that story a technique in cults, it's called love bombing and love bombing is... I mean, cults generally tend to prey on people who are in a moment of transition in their life. So usually it's like you've lost some significant source of meaning, you've gotten divorced, you've lost your job, someone in your family usually has died. There's this new search for meaning, a destabilized sense-making that is looking for a new reality.

Tristan Harris: And one of the things that cults explicitly do, this is from Margaret Singer's book *Cults in Our Midst* is great on this kind of material, is you find people in these moments of transition and then you surround them with love. You give them a lot more love and connection and relationship than they would find in their regular life. And once you have more love from that new group, this is like you enter into a group and they surround you with flowers or everyone welcomes you or get the most attractive people in the cult to kind of welcome you first and to sort of make you feel so at home. And it's not usually that that has people feeling like, "Well, this is just more love and more connection or more support than I'm getting in my regular life. Why would I go back to my regular life?"

Travis View: Exactly. You see this sometimes on Twitter too, where a QAnon follower they'll complain that it's like, "Well, I've been tweeting for three months or whatever and I

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only have 130 followers." And they'll use the QAnon hashtag and then other QAnon followers will use that as an excuse to rush in and follow them. And then as a consequence of this, they will get thousands of new followers in the matter of a couple days.

Tristan Harris: The new love bomb is the follow bomb. Instead of getting lots of hugs and support, you just get a lot of new followers on Twitter. It's a lot cheaper to provide that love at scale.

Travis View: Exactly. Yeah, you can love bomb someone very, very quickly on Twitter. Just takes clicking a single button, no actual emotional effort required.

Tristan Harris: Okay, so we have the ways in which major politicians will, if you nod to a QAnon meme by retweeting it or sharing it, that's one of the mechanisms. But what are some of the other mechanisms, because this is the first, I think mass mainstream internet-driven cult. So what are some of the other mechanisms that through the design of social media have enabled it to exist and thrive?

Travis View: One of the things that really makes the QAnon community really sort of engaging for the people who believe in it is the sort of the whole entire gamification of the process. It's not just something in which you are just receiving information, you're not just like reading an article and sort of understanding its content, it's interactive. And they believe that they can sort of do their own research and understand things and interact and decode. And it's participatory and this makes them much more involved and committed to the whole project. Now, in practice this leads to people just very aggressively promoting disinformation. For example, there was a case in which some Republican Congress members had their information doxed and it was a mystery who had committed it. The QAnon community had convinced themselves that it was committed by a staffer for Congresswoman Maxine Waters.

Travis View: And they were so convinced of this they spread it everywhere. The claim wound up going on some far right publications like Gateway Pundit and they felt like by participating in basically this active process of decoding and digging and uncovering, they had solved a crime essentially. Now in truth, it was not committed by a staffer for Maxine Waters. In fact, Maxine Waters had to put out a statement denying that this was the case because the claim has spread so far. But even though this research and this participation isn't very fruitful in actually uncovering the truth, it still makes them feel like they are doing a lot, just because it's an active process rather than a passive process.

Tristan Harris: This has been documented in the growth of conspiracy theory thinking especially in the United States that as you feel further and further away from the halls of power and you feel out of touch with that power and don't believe that it serves you, it's directly correlated with the extent to which you develop kind of conspiracy theory thinking. I mean, you feel kind of not participating in the process. You're so many layers away from what happens, or what's going to happen in Washington or something like that. That this was providing a new method of participation, even a new purpose, because this is part of the storm and the great awakening and I can be part of the great reawakening of society. And as you said, I mean, because Q is doing these periodic drops, you're dropping little notes and clues even with cryptic codes, which you want to talk briefly about the cryptic codes in terms of how those have been distributed?

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Travis View: Yeah. Q will release some sort of cryptic phrase and I think there are over like 4,000 of these Q drops that they call them. And Q will say something like, "Watch the water, watch the water." What the hell does that mean? It's not very informative, it doesn't really tell you anything. But if you're convinced that it has to mean something significant, then you're going to dig and research and try to find what exactly watch the water really means. And they'll come up with all sorts of nonsense sort of explanations.

Travis View: One popular one is that they believe that it was a reference to one time in which Trump paused in the middle of a speech in order to drink a bottle of Fiji Water. And they believe that this was a secret reference to the Fiji Islands which is a major human trafficking hub. And this was a signal that Trump was going after human traffickers who happened to be using this hub. And of course these sorts of decodes aren't very productive, but for people who are really in it, it feels like you're doing something. It feels like you're uncovering some sort of mass secret that the authorities or perhaps the mainstream media doesn't want you to know.

Tristan Harris: There's an anecdote about how Trump's decision to wear a yellow tie to a White House press briefing about the coronavirus was a sign that the outbreak wasn't real. The quote was, "He is telling us that there is no virus threat because that is the exact same color as the maritime flag that represents the vessel has no infected people on board."

Travis View: Yeah. Again, that plays into the it's like everything has meaning, there are no coincidences. There's feeling even beyond the Q drops, that everything is a symbol for nothing else and that you can never take anything on face value.

Tristan Harris: Imagine someone who's been in this for a year, just anyone who's actually really been in this for a year and you've been following the drops and you've been following the speculation, you've been participating in the message boards. You have this strong theory. Part of what's so challenging and difficult and pernicious about cults is that if I want to walk away from that belief system, I have to admit that I have just been simmering in essentially nonsense. That what I have done with my time, occupying myself with all of these connections and references and secret code words that actually referenced this other thing. Essentially, there's this huge, almost spiritual debt that I've taken out in my life that I have to now pay back because the meaning that I had gotten as a person, as a living being has just gone to zero. And to sort of have put in all of this spiritual and meaning purposeful investment into this world, into these relationships, into this way of seeing, to walk away from that. Have you talked to people who've left sort of the QAnon world, and what's that process been like to psychologically release themselves from that?

Travis View: I have spoken to a couple of people who have realized that they are bamboozled by QAnon. Not many, mostly because like you said, it's very difficult, number one, to leave QAnon because after you've spent a year or more doing all the decodes, it gets people very invested and it's very hard to remove yourself from the environment. And also, I don't talk to many because even the people who do realize that they have been bamboozled, they're usually very reluctant to talk about their experiences because no one wants to admit publicly that they were duped for such a long time. That's generally not a great look. I mean, they usually just admit that well, just one day it stops being worth it, it stopped being worth the price, is they started realizing that they were being

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taken for a ride and they just sort of decided to move on with their life and it's very difficult process but I feel like it's very relieving for the people who finally do it.

Tristan Harris: So Travis the reason I really was excited to have you on is because of originally it was seeing the viral growth of the video Plandemic and the way that it gained traction online, Plandemic was the conspiracy theory video 26 minutes long which Judy Mikovits makes many false claims about the COVID-19 pandemic. It went online on May 4th and within three days, the video garnered over 9 million views on YouTube and 16 million engagements on Facebook. And I was reading a report about the spread of that video. And I was so surprised to find that QAnon groups were central to the spread of that video. And so do you want to talk a little bit about how QAnon has been affecting our information environment in a pandemic where it's never been more important that we get accurate information?

Travis View: Sure. What's really interesting about like the QAnon community is basically this online army of people who actively find opportunities to spread disinformation, it's not merely a passive sort of thoughtless thing. Like your grandma who perhaps didn't read the article sharing some bad info, they try to find whatever information they think contradicts what they call the mainstream narrative and then spread it. This is why that Plandemic video, even though it doesn't directly reference QAnon, what it does do is that it contradicts what they call the mainstream narrative with our basically medical science. And what sort of our public health sort of authorities were saying about the pandemic.

Travis View: And so they were very attracted to it for that reason. And so as a consequence, they acted like an accelerant for the propaganda, basically spreading it faster and further than it would have spread without them. One thing that gets especially destructive about the QAnon community is that they work very hard, many people, and they spend many hours trying to promote absolute nonsense in the same way that pop music fan would spread their favorite singer's new single or something. They're very aggressively spread up information that makes people more confused rather than more informed.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. One of our previous guests, Renee DiResta who studies disinformation on social media is one of the researchers behind the Russia investigation in 2016. She's also shown how Facebook groups cross-recommend other conspiracy theories. So for example, if listeners would Google for Plandemic and Erin Gallagher, who's the researcher who did this analysis. She found that QAnon groups were some of the major groups that were spreading the Plandemic video, the QAnon group, Official Q has more than 125,000 members. The other groups that most spread Plandemic were Chemtrails Global Skywatch, the conspiracy theory about Chemtrails, Drain The Swamp, Collective Action Against Bill Gates We Won't Be Vaccinated, Fall Of The Cabal, more QAnon groups, WWGI WGA which is where we go one, we go all, which is actually one of the Q common phrases. And part of the things that people need to know is when you join one conspiracy theory group on Facebook and Facebook has this algorithm that's tuned to say, "Hey, what are other groups we should recommend that you join?"

Tristan Harris: If you join the Chemtrails group, what do we know it's going to recommend? It's going to recommend all these other groups as Erin says in her research and actually was recently released in the Wall Street Journal report on how 64% of extremist groups that were joined on Facebook were due to Facebook's own recommendations. And so

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what we really see here is the way in which Facebook's aggressive desire to "connect the world" by getting people into meaningful groups. That's how they get their "community" would actually be radicalizing and create the radicalizing networks by which Plandemic and other disinformation would most spread through the system in a time of a global pandemic.

Travis View: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the two things to say about that, the problem with generally conspiracy theories is that if you are having to be a conspiratorial person and you buy into one conspiracy theory, then you're probably going to be open to them all basically. And so...

Tristan Harris: Because there's actually research showing that if you, the best predictor of whether you'll believe in a new conspiracy theory, is whether you already believe in one. That's scientifically validated what you're saying.

Travis View: Yeah. Well, all of these people have in common, the Chemtrails people, or maybe the UFO secrets people and the QAnon people, it's that they all believe that the government and authorities they're all lying about everything all the time. It's not leaving kind of a selective thing where sometimes they tell the truth and sometimes they're lying, which I think is perhaps a more reasonable position, but rather they're just always lying. And then everything they're saying is nonsense and therefore anything that sort of rejects that narrative is more than likely true. That's basically all conspiracy theories, which I think is really, really dangerous. And yeah, that whole recommendation system is that problem because it's basically a radicalization engine.

Travis View: It gets someone who is maybe slightly skeptical of the government, or perhaps curious about alternate ways of seeing in the world and it funnels them into this extremist worldview. The other issue is that there's not really, I don't think, a financial incentive for the social media companies to dissuade this community from doing this. I mean, think about QAnon is basically a cult dedicated to posting as often as possible. They think that they can change the world by boosting their personal engagement metrics. And when you boil that down to pure numbers, that might seem like it's a really positive thing on the side of the social media company, but in practice is really ruining their lives because it's alienating them from their family and it's turning them into extremists that might wind up doing dangerous things.

Tristan Harris: Which is to say that the algorithms that optimize for engagement can't distinguish between healthy, conscious, wise thoughtful engagement and essentially radicalizing, alienating, and isolating people from their families and showing up on the Hoover Dam. To Facebook's algorithm it's the same thing, as long as it increases the amount of engagement.

Tristan Harris: So what should the technology companies do about the fact that their products have been radicalization engines? And I think it's important for people to look back through time and say, imagine society going through the washing machine, just like spinning around and out that radicalizing washing machine for something like 10 years where we've been recommending groups for people to join. And now we're coming out of that washing machine, being able to see clearly this artificial hypnotic spell, possibly the largest hypnotic spell we've ever run in human history on 3 billion human minds. What should technology companies do now? And what lessons might be learned from the past

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sort of dissipation of conspiracy theories and cults that have now gone by the wayside and we don't talk about or know about anymore.

Travis View: Number one, it would be valuable if social media companies started recognizing that a lot of these things that we call conspiracy theories are really extremist propaganda. And I feel like there's no value to being party to promotion of extremist propaganda. I mean, even if social media companies simply limited themselves to merely hosting the extremist propaganda and didn't do anything like recommending it and algorithms, I feel like that would be beneficial. But a step further, if they were to recognize that this kind of content has no value, it's the same as any other sort of like white nationalist propaganda. They generally don't allow on their platform ISIS propaganda, they try to sort of purge on their platform. These extremist conspiracy theories are no different. And I feel like they could recognize that it has no value, it doesn't benefit people's life and it should be discouraged on their platforms.

Tristan Harris: It seems like the problem fundamentally is when things become a moral consensus, when something that may not be true becomes more popular. It's not just a fringe thing. It's suddenly so popular that if you were to take it down, you'd be going against not necessarily the majority, but a large body of people. And so there seems to be this weird feedback loop where the longer they let the machine run, the more people believe in this QAnon universe. But that makes it actually harder to take it down later because they're going against the moral consensus.

Travis View: Yeah, I guess. But I feel like perhaps eventually you need to take a stand and be brave enough to just say to the world, "JFK Jr. died in 1999 and any content that promotes the idea that JFK Jr. is secretly alive isn't valuable." I feel like some things are just nonsense false claims that are clearly false claims and aren't valuable beyond sort of the brainwashing techniques of these particular cult leaders and cult promoters.

Tristan Harris: Is there anything else you'd like people in technology or policymakers who are having to deal with these effects they should know before we part for today?

Travis View: If you judge your success in a purely quantitative way it's going to have disastrous effects on people's personal lives and society in general. So I think that we need to take more seriously the more qualitative impacts that your algorithms have on people.

Tristan Harris: I really hope that people who work on Facebook groups and civic integrity and Twitter really take to heart the things that you're sharing because I think this is the kind of poisoning and changing of the basis of how we see reality and make meaning and even find consensus. Because if all of your family members are a sufficient percentage of your friends start believing in one of these rabbit holes, it's very hard for you to maintain relationships with them and continue. And so I really just hope people hear what you're sharing and think about it.

Travis View: I work for a tech company and feel like this kind of thing is hardest to explain to people who are actually pretty intelligent and tech savvy, because they view the lens through kind of empiricism and they have to live in the real world as a matter of professional necessity. And the idea that you could just read a bunch of nonsense posts and then be radicalized into believing that there're mole children or whatever. And they can't even wrap their heads around that. And so as a consequence, they don't take it seriously as a

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problem. Hopefully this is something that resonates with people with more influence than me.

Tristan Harris: Well, thank you, Travis.

Aza Raskin: Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology. Our executive producer is Dan Kedmey and our associate producer is Natalie Jones. Noor Al-Samarrai and Mara Kardas-Nelson helped with the fact-checking. Original music and sound designed by Ryan and Hays Holladay, and a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible.

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