"Preserving the cultural heritage of Conspiracy Theories: The Case of "Q" and QAnon"

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Introduction

From november 2017 to december of 2020 the mystical anonymous poster "Q" filled their followers with messages regarding american politics acting like the person behind the Q was someone who had insight into both the intelligence community and the important political surroundings. Q posted on different image boards but as the amount of followers grew different web pages were created where canonical Q-posts (usually called "drops" or Q-drops") was preservered, numberered, tagged and interlinked. The Qanons – the movement formed around the messages from Q – were fierce discussants on the Internet occupying almost every possible social media platform. The movement reached it's peak when the Qanons spearheaded the attack against the Capitol on the 6th of january 2021. During the autumn of 2020 almost all big social media platforms had started to purge Qanons, kickbanning them and thus removing their accounts and created content.

Background

In january 2021 I started to preserve all Q-posts downloading them in raw text format and saving them as individual files and also saving them in picture format. It is a very interesting material, full of dog whistling, echo-chamber-like links to supporters social media and memes whose messages are very internal. Downloading the posts as text has given me a possibility to use different text processing tools to investigate the corpus. It has also given me an insight into what happens with preserved internet content when links suddenly are broken and the movement surrounding the content is banned. How do we preserve the content of a deplatformed movement? What are the limits of digital preservation of interlinked content created by a community?

In this poster I will use links to **Youtube.com** in the Q-drops to evaluate if and how much linked content that is still existing on an external platform.

Material & Method

To understand how much of the linked material still is available on the platform chosen as an example (Youtube.com), the following process were used.

- Converting Q-drop 1-4953 into text files (.txt)
- Using the POSIX-tool "Grep" (grep "youtube" *.txt > file.txt)
- Manual control of all links to Youtube-clips

There are 181 mentions of Youtube in Q-drop 1-4953. 175 of these mentions are links to the platform Youtube.com. Other are comments regarding Youtube, articles about Youtube and so on. Of the 175 links, a large amount (73) are duplicates

Results

This is an overview of the results, with duplicates of Youtube-links removed.

Type	Amount	Dead
Youtube-Links	102	29 (28%)
Other	6	not relevant

Table 1: Dead vs Live links

There are several reasons why a Youtube-link could be removed. It could be claimed as "Not available" - with no further reason. It could be unavaliable because the account has made the clip private. It could be removed because the account has be terminated et cetera. For full list, follow the QR-code to the logbook.
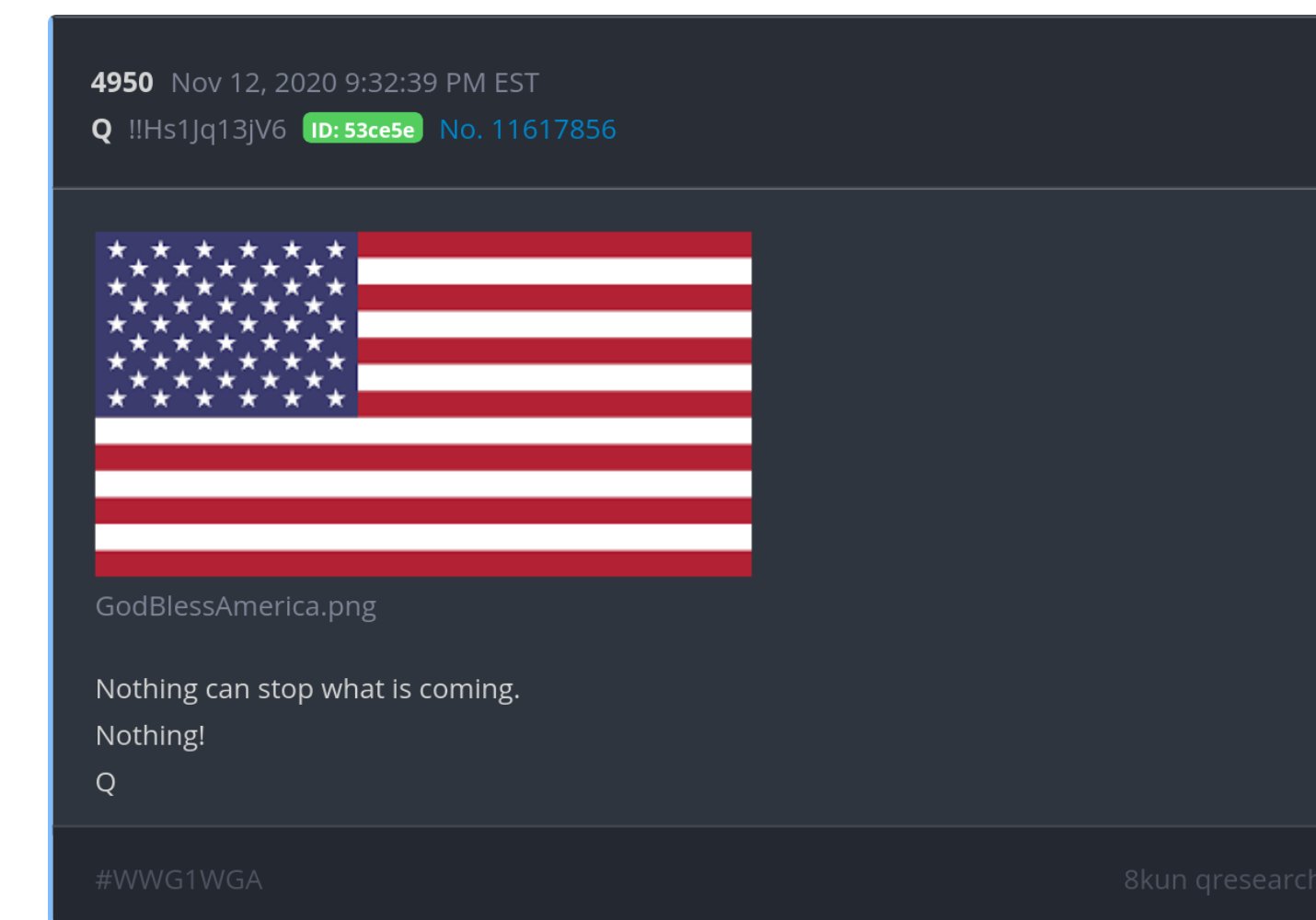
Conclusions

Figure 1: An example of a Q-drop

As we can see a large amount, almost a third, of the links are dead within just a couple of years in this type of material. The only evidence is the link itself which says nothing about the content of the video. There are a number of issues that could be discussed regarding this.

One issue are commerical platforms and how unstable the information flow of the internet is. Content can very easily be removed from a platform without leaving a lot of traces. There is a small clue in the material used in this poster ("terminated account" et cetera).

Although is not possible to prove under current circumstances, it is plausible to argue that content from more controversial movements will dissappear faster in the current infrastructure as long as platforms used to present content have policies which supports bans of content that go against those policies.

If we want to preserve content from internetbased political movements for future research it seems that the only possibility of success is to be proactive and preserve the content regularly following the movement and preserve content actively. This creates more work for the researcher, who must be his or her own archivist.

More

- This is my third poster presentation investigating the Q-drops. Earlier presentations includes work regarding content analysis of the Q-drop corpus and an analysis of Twitter-links in the Q-drops corpus.

- Although "Q" as a provider of content more or less have lost its relevance, it is plausible to think that the future will bring more internetbased political movements with a focus on linked content.

- To reach a log of the work preceding this poster presentation, including more material, raw material, discussions and links to my earlier work, please follow the QR-code. It will take you to a website with further content. Any questions regarding my work can be sent to rikard.friberg.von.sydow@sh.se or on Twitter to @rikardfvs