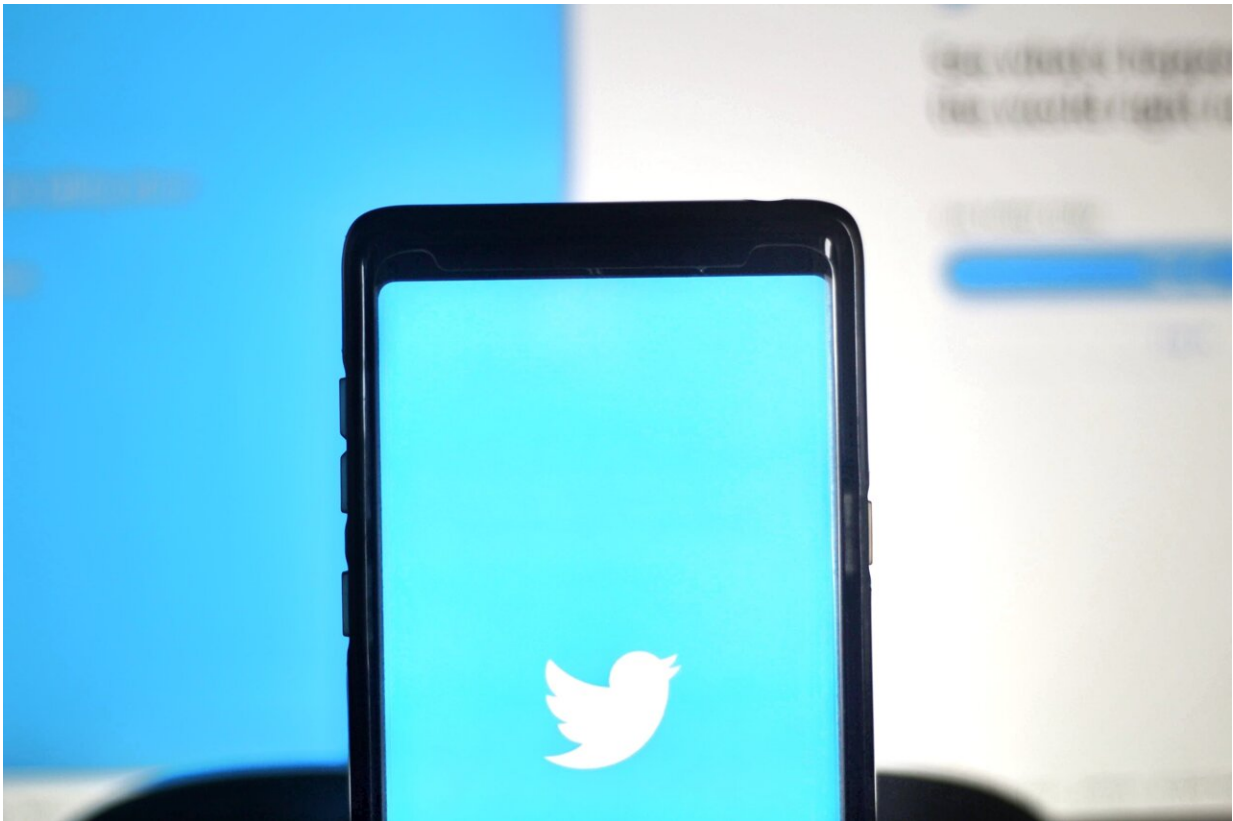


Study explores how QAnon went from fringe to mainstream on Twitter

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QAnon's journey from a fringe phenomenon in 2017 to a mainstream presence on Twitter represents an evolution that arrived by tapping into an interconnected media system, according to a recently published paper

by a University at Buffalo communication researcher.

The QAnon presence, which began as obscure actors on Twitter, was the start of a development that spread from the [social media](#) platform and realized further amplification from far-right media outlets.

"The QAnon Twitter accounts we analyzed knew well how to play the social media game. They gained retweets and follows by engaging in group identity performance, praising their own while disparaging opponents, but that was just a start," says Yini Zhang, Ph.D., the paper's lead author, and an assistant professor of communication in the UB College of Arts and Sciences. "Our results show the more retweets they gained and the more followers they accumulated, the more likely it became for far-right media outlets to embed these tweets in their coverage.

"This dovetails with prior research showing how journalists construct news stories by incorporating viral social media content and how audience reaction to social media content can influence their news judgment."

Research is limited regarding how some QAnon accounts have gained social media prominence and the role media amplification might have played in facilitating the rise of that popularity. The paper, which appears in the journal *New Media & Society*, provides a valuable new understanding into how the current media system contributes to the growth of conspiratorial actors on [social media platforms](#).

"This case describes a large problem in an information system where the wildest and most extreme comments on social media are more engagement-worthy and more likely to be picked up by partisan media," says Zhang, an expert in social media and political communication. "The result of this kind of interconnected amplification is that it has the

potential to further fortify extreme camps and intensify existing polarization."

The study's results show that the overwhelming majority of stories that quoted QAnon tweets appeared in partisan news outlets. Those tweets embedded in other outlets used the Twitter content mainly for analysis.

Indiscriminate media amplification can contribute to mainstreaming while spreading disinformation, according to Zhang.

"It's a new reality," she says. "Our findings suggest that moderate and [mainstream media](#) have learned the lesson of that new reality and have exercised their amplification power with greater caution to guard against exploitation by potential bad actors."

Zhang's research team used an existing database of Twitter users and selected 242 QAnon accounts that included in their Twitter bios keywords associated with the QAnon conspiracy. They collected their tweets and tracked follower growth over time, using an automated analysis to look at content. They also searched for [news stories](#) that contained QAnon handles, breaking the outlets into five categories labeled as conservative, hyper-conservative, moderate, liberal, and hyper-liberal.

Partisan media, however, is not the only force behind QAnon's peripheral to mainstream shift on Twitter.

"How QAnon conducts itself is one means of attracting followers and getting retweets, but the social media reaction they receive is a vehicle for adaptation," says Zhang. "Users should consider the unintended consequences of engagement with content they oppose."

Zhang says future research might look at social media platforms other

than Twitter. Because of unique dynamics among different platforms it's impossible to assume that social media in general can be reduced to a single identity.

"We have to consider cross-platform differences," she says. "Perhaps looking at Gab, Parler or Rumble."

More information: Yini Zhang et al, How a peripheral ideology becomes mainstream: Strategic performance, audience reaction, and news media amplification in the case of QAnon Twitter accounts, *New Media & Society* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/14614448221137324](https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221137324)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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