Everything Old is Q Again: X Activity About #PizzaGate Increased 9501.5% After Musk Boosted the Conspiracy

Dr. Bond Benton, Professor of Communication, Montclair State University
Dr. Daniela Peterka-Benton, Associate Professor of Justice Studies, Montclair State University

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The QAnon conspiracy is largely an extension of several older conspiracies. A particularly influential conspiracy includes PizzaGate, which alleged that coded words and symbols found in hacked emails of John Podesta, chairman of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign, point to a secret child trafficking ring in the basement of the Washington, D.C. pizza restaurant, Comet Ping Pong (Benton and Peterka-Benton, 2021). While the conspiracy was dismissed as absurd (there is no basement in the pizzeria targeted), Edgar Maddison Welch accepted it as true driving to Washington D.C. from North Carolina armed with an AR-15 rifle and a .38 calibre handgun in the hopes of “liberating the children being held by child
traffickers.” He entered where families were enjoying their meals and made his way towards the back of the building to locate the secret entrance to the basement ‘dungeon’ (Benton and Peterka-Benton, 2021). While no one was hurt, it was an indication that conspiracies like this, no matter how absurd, represent a serious threat when people act on them. As PizzaGate evolved into the broader QAnon conspiracy that a cabal of elites were trafficking and sacrificing children, authorities began speaking out on the threat. An FBI bulletin from 2019 states, “these conspiracy theories very likely encourage the targeting of specific people, places, and organizations, thereby increasing the likelihood of violence against these targets” (FBI Phoenix Field Office, 2019). With the risk posed by such conspiracies and the accompanying political violence associated with the QAnon theory that emerged (Aliapoulios et al., 2021), social media companies attempted to eliminate such content from platforms (Guynn, 2020). This emphasis on the removal of overtly problematic content would ultimately be at odds with the reduced moderation proposed by Elon Musk as he took over the former Twitter platform in 2022.
Elon Musk’s arrival as CEO on Twitter brought an immediate spike in hate speech as those producing incendiary content viewed the potential for reduced moderation as an invitation (Benton et al., 2022). Follow-up research indicates that this initial spike was not an anomaly with problematic content continuing to have an outsized presence on the platform (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2023). This is consistent with material posted by Musk which has included conspiratorial content related to the attack on Nancy Pelosi (Klepper, 2022) and allowing anti-LGBTQ content that suggested the community systematically abuses children (Perry, 2023). Most recently, Musk validated and boosted an antisemetic referring to it as “the absolute truth” to his millions of followers (CNN, 2023).

Potentially relevant to that recent post is the fact that QAnon, the theory originating from PizzaGate, traffics in numerous antisemetic tropes (Antisemitism and Next, 2021).

PIZZAGATE REVIVED

Consistent with previous controversial content associated with his purchase of Twitter, on November 28, 2023, Musk posted the following item:
Does seem at least a little suspicious

Pizzagate is real
No it isn’t, we have experts

They trafficked children
But we have experts

Your expert just went to jail for child porn

7:45 AM · Nov 28, 2023 · 4.3M Views
The content falsely suggests that there was a single person debunking the patently false PizzaGate conspiracy and that this individual person was recently convicted of sexually abusing children. The November 28 post follows previous references to PizzaGate Musk made during the week of November 20. Given Musk’s online reach, evaluating the effect this post had on reinvigorating discussion of PizzaGate in the online space is particularly significant. With that in mind, the following question is posed:

**To what extent did Musk’s post generate online activity that utilized the term “PizzaGate?”**

To answer that question, the Tweet Binder analytics program was utilized. The aggregated 30-day (from October 31 to November 29) X data was collected. Specifically, the term associated with this investigation (PizzaGate) was examined to see if frequency of use increased in correlation to the Musk’s PizzaGate post. Posts, accounts, and images most frequently posted, shared, and viewed were collected and analyzed in terms of their role in driving discussion around this term.
A Google Trend Analysis was also conducted to assess if online search activity increased in connection with Musk’s post. A key feature of Google Trends analysis is that it allows for identification of items of interest for internet users (Nghiem et al., 2016). These analyses are “normalized to the highest volume of searches for that term over the time period being studied. This index ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 recorded on the date that saw the highest relative search volume activity for that term” (Arora et al., 2019, p. 338). Search interest in a specific topic has reliably forecast social media posts and actions related to that topic (McCarthy, 2010).

RESULTS

Musk’s posts increased activity on X related to Pizzagate by 9501.5% from total volume on the topic in the month prior.
Spikes in activity correspond to the initial references made regarding PizzaGate with his post overtly boosting the conspiracy on November 28 leading to a high point of 83,053 mentions in the 24 hours that followed. Cumulatively, a total of 375,140 posts referencing PizzaGate were identified in the period studied.

Data similarly suggests that the total number of views, reach, and impact generated by PizzaGate content on X was substantial.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>368,479,678</th>
<th>210,947,890</th>
<th>18,863</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>potential impacts</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>potential reach</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>total contributors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>followers per contributor</strong></td>
<td>11,183.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>original tweets</strong></td>
<td>33,828</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>original contributors</strong></td>
<td>18,863</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at the 33,828 original posts with highest measured levels of potential impressions per tweet, potential impact (number of times the terms could have been seen), and potential reach (the number of unique users who could have seen the term), validation of the extent to which Musk’s post affected online discourse would appear to be established.

PizzaGate was not only amplified, but also supported by the most retweeted posts using the term on the X platform.
Similar results were found looking at the most liked posts in the period studied.
Effects beyond activity on X are also noteworthy in terms of impact. Search activity increased after Musk’s post referencing PizzaGate according to the 30-day Google Trends Analysis.

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that Musk presenting PizzaGate in a post corresponded with significant online activity related to the term. Noteworthy is that PizzaGate and the QAnon conspiracy that followed had increasingly been pushed to the margins of acceptable public discourse continuing primarily only in a coded fashion (Zihiri et al., 2022). The reaction to Musk’s post indicates that receding conspiracies are potentially better understood as dormant with a prominent event allowing them to be reawakened. While it might be suggested that some of the online activity may have been critical of the conspiracy, it should be noted that the visibility that
goes along with this can be instrumental in spreading content—even if the
discussion that content is critical (Zhang et al., 2018). Additionally, the most
viewed and liked posts on the platform in the period studied showed support for
the PizzaGate conspiracy and came from verified accounts.

Perhaps the most unfortunate implication of Musk’s (now deleted) PizzaGate post
is that it will further reinforce false, sensational, and counter-productive narratives
of human trafficking. Trafficking is systemic and victimizes in insidious and often
hidden ways across a range of sectors including labor exploitation and sexual
abuse. Absurd stories of trafficking cabals that do not exist have been weaponized
as slander against vulnerable communities while obscuring the face of the actual
victims of human trafficking.

WORKS CITED

Understanding the QAnon Conspiracy from the Perspective of Canonical
Information. forthcoming 2021.


