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Truth as a Victim: The Challenge of Anti-Trafficking Education in the Age of Q
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Abstract
The QAnon conspiracy threatens anti-trafficking education because of its broad dissemination and its focus on a range of myths about trafficking. These myths are rooted in historic and ongoing misinformation. This article examines the extent of QAnon’s co-optation of human trafficking discourse and evaluates its connection to myths about trafficking (particularly as they relate to gender, race, class, and agency). The article investigates the ways in which anti-trafficking education is positioned to respond to these myths by evaluating how human trafficking collegiate course syllabi construct “trafficking” conceptually. Implications of this analysis and a range of remedies for anti-trafficking education in the age of Q are considered.

Keywords: QAnon, Conspiracy Theory, Anti-Trafficking Education, Trafficking Myths.

A recent post to a local Facebook group reads, “just a quick heads up my daughter was in the beauty supply down by home depot and in came a large gentleman with a mask that only showed his eyes and wearing a snowsuit. he proceeded to follow my daughter through the store [...], all the while motioning to a car a grey Toyota Camry type vehicle with tinted windows and a bad exhaust (note this common with sex traffickers), that was waiting for him outside.”

While a concerned post about a scary interaction in a beauty supply store is not out of the ordinary, declaring the Toyota Camry the car of choice for sex traffickers appears a bit surprising. Or was it? Social media platforms have been flooded by posts by concerned citizens who seem to have inside knowledge on how to spot sex traffickers, how to keep children on playgrounds safe from random trafficker abductions or more broadly how to “save the children,” which has become the battle cry for any concerned mother who has joined the crusade against sex trafficking. But how did we get here and why are people unconnected to the world of human trafficking all of a sudden deeply invested? Social media has opened the doors to allowing a fringe conspiracy theory about “an elite group of child-trafficking paedophiles [...] ruling the world for a number of decades”1 and President Trump’s secret plan to bring them down, to become an acceptable conversation starter in living rooms across the world.

With that in mind, it is imperative for anti-trafficking educators to consider the ways in which QAnon has disrupted messaging about trafficking and clouded discourse surrounding the issue. To that end, this research will exam the virility of the QAnon conspiracy and reflect on ways in which this conspiracy reflects a range of historical myths about trafficking. From there, this

research will investigate the ways in which anti-trafficking education may be vulnerable to this conspiracy by looking at syllabi used in human trafficking courses at universities. By contextualizing QAnon and looking at ways in which anti-trafficking education may be hindered by it, the paper will conclude by considering some essential items that can help to inoculate anti-trafficking messaging from those looking obscure and co-opt it.

The Rise of QAnon
One of the challenges faced in anti-trafficking education is overcoming the myths, misperceptions, and misinformation that exist about human trafficking. These challenges became more difficult with the widespread dissemination of the QAnon conspiracy. QAnon was previously a fringe movement that was troubling but marginal. At its root, the Q conspiracy draws on some wildly antisemitic tropes with a cabal of global elites abducting children in large numbers for sacrifice and sexual slavery. The theory was previously confined to conspiracy sections of message boards such as 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun, but has now entered popular and political discourse so extensively that it broadly threatens anti-trafficking efforts. In a report issued by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in September of 2020, it states:

Interest in QAnon has remained high since its inception, with "Q" included on TIME's "25 Most Influential People on the Internet" in 2018. More recently, there have been several reports, which give a sense of the scale of QAnon's support online and in the real world... with more than 4.5 million aggregate (social media) followers... one Twitter account monitored for this report has gained close to 400,000 followers in the past 18 months; it currently has over half a million followers. Support for QAnon has also spread to alternative platforms like Parler... Popular QAnon hashtags have been utilized in hundreds of thousands of Parler posts including #WWGI WGA (234,000), #TheGreatAwakening (76,000) and #SaveTheChildren (50,000).

In terms of traction in the real world, in the United States as many as 77 Congressional candidates seeking election in November 2020 espoused support for QAnon. This phenomenon is not discrete to the United States, as evidenced that “the most popular German-language QAnon YouTube channel, QlobalChange, boasts more than 105,000 subscribers; a similar French-language channel has more than 66,000 and has tripled in less than a month. While Germany and France have the largest movements, there are a significant number of QAnon followers in Italy and the United Kingdom as well.”

The scope and scale of QAnon’s prevalence is well established. From 27 October 2017 to 17 June 2020, a study conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) “recorded 69,475,451

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million tweets, 487,310 Facebook posts and 281,554 Instagram posts mentioning QAnon-related hashtags and phrases.\textsuperscript{5} The study further investigated geographic locations of 39,839,607 tweets and found that while the US produced the majority of QAnon content, substantial activity was also located in the UK, Canada, and Australia, in addition to Russia, Germany and Indonesia.

A complete perspective, however, on the extent to which this conspiracy has permeated the online space is difficult to fully ascertain (by its nature, QAnon advocates frequently attempt to obscure their presence and outreach activities by using private and less visible channels), however additional indications of this extent are in evidence. A repository created by devotees to the theory called QResear.ch contains all tagged posts in 40 #Qanon-related data sources including 8chan/8kun, which are hubs for the origin of many Q related messages.\textsuperscript{6} A search of QResear.ch provides some sense of the scope of the extent of their focus with over with 279,561 posts related to “child” and/or “trafficking.” Likewise, by the time Facebook took action to remove the co-opted “SaveTheChildren” hashtag, there had been 3.5 million Q directed posts and videos about it with hundreds of millions more views of the content. The sharing of content was so extensive, in fact, that despite QAnon groups making up only 18 percent of those posting about the “SaveTheChildren,” they accounted for nearly 70 percent of the total interactions on the hashtag on Facebook and 75 percent of the interactions on Instagram. The viral spread of this hashtag served to support the 200 QAnon rallies held on August 23, 2020.\textsuperscript{7} The COVID pandemic, which spurred conspiracies and sowed fear in many, also appears to have increased interest in QAnon when coupled with online interaction about the U.S. Presidential election. In looking at the period of March to height of the election campaign, the total Wikipedia pageviews for “QAnon” (an indicator for online curiosity about a topic), there was an increase in daily views to nearly half a million on peak dates.

\textsuperscript{5} Gallagher et al. “The Genesis of a Conspiracy Theory. Key trends in QAnon activity since 2017,”
Such findings provide evidence that a once marginal fringe conspiracy theory has been gaining traction widely on different social media platforms across the globe.

**Disinformation Over Time: Trafficking Myths as QAnon’s Foundation**

While QAnon appears novel, the historical context for its broad dissemination is rooted in historical myths related to trafficking. Conceptually, anti-trafficking education has been hindered by disinformation and misinformation that typically serves institutional power and allows for social and gendered co-optation of the concept of trafficking. Within such a context, QAnon continues a tradition of using myths to reify the notion of discrete victimhood and a heroic response from traditional cultural structures. For example, Doezema’s work on “Loose Women or Lost Women” analyses many of the historical myths that form the perspective that would become QAnon.\(^8\) The emergence of a “white slave panic” in Europe and the United States has been repeated multiple times throughout history, particularly at the turn of the Twentieth Century. The narrative employed by these panics is remarkably similar to the narrative of Q with “the procurement, by force, deceit, or drugs, of a white woman or girl against her will, for prostitution”\(^9\) constructed as a massive social problem, despite the number of such cases being very limited. The power of this narrative had sufficient cultural resonance to produce global organizations devoted to its eradication, substantial coverage in the world's media, along with numerous novels, plays, and films. This panic was extensive enough to have policy implications with a number of international conferences and legal agreements including


Implicit within this panic is a controlling notion of innocence and virtue that trafficking myths utilize for purposes of removing agency from populations viewed as vulnerable. Such populations are transformed from *actors* into objects that are *acted upon*, turning individuals into either victims or potential victims of the constructed narrative of ubiquitous forced trafficking. The historical context for such views has continued to hold traction in trafficking misinformation. Martin and Hill, for example, found that the historical myths of white slavery continue in media coverage and widespread acceptance of such myths.\(^\text{10}\) Their work examined the constructed link between popular sporting events and systematic forced sexual exploitation associated with those events. In looking at media stories linking trafficking and the Super Bowl between 2010 and 2016, they “found that 76 per cent of US print media stories reported a causal or correlative link between the Super Bowl and trafficking for sexual exploitation.”\(^\text{11}\)

The notion of predatory maleness and the systematic victimization of exploited and vulnerable women was transformed from myth to fact through the dissemination of this narrative. Like the white slavery panic of the past and the conspiracies of QAnon, the fear generated by this myth lead to policy actions in cities hosting the Super Bowl:

In 2016, two years before the Minneapolis Super Bowl, an Anti-Sex Trafficking Committee was convened to prepare the region for an anticipated increase in trafficking for sexual exploitation, based on media reporting about previous Super Bowls. The Committee sought support and coordinated efforts with law enforcement, social services (e.g., emergency shelters and street outreach), and volunteer training... with more than 100 representatives from these sectors as well as leaders in business and government, and it raised and spent above one million dollars...\(^\text{12}\)

The use of trafficking myths to generate interest and shape discourse about the subject has long been established in both historical and contemporary contexts. In considering the implications of these contexts on anti-trafficking education, it is important to establish some of the foundational dimensions of why such narratives have had and continue to have pull on public sentiment. These range from the creation of stories that validate traditional social cohesion to the construction of trafficking as cudgel against The Other to the tendency of power to co-opt and corrupt discussion of issues of social concern. The role of such trafficking narratives as instruments of social cohesion are well documented and explored. Andrijasevi and Mai argue that “the mythological function of the trafficking narrative and the victim figure are most visible in the fact that the trafficking plot never varies: it starts with deception, which

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\(^\text{12}\) Ibid, p. 16.
is followed by coercion into prostitution, moves on to the tragedy of (sexual) slavery and finally finds resolution through the rescue of the victim.”13 This plot casts the spectator into the role of a hero whose awareness and action can stop the omnipresent menace of trafficking. Such a role offers power to those consuming this narrative, yet important social dimensions are reinforced by the myth, as well. A collective identity where there is concrete morality is kept in place. Victimization is clear and perpetrated by specific bad actors, rather than the product of a broadly unequal system. The idea of a heroic role against clear villains in the trafficking narrative is validated by supporting media presentations, as well. In “When the Abyss Looks Back: Treatments of Human Trafficking in Superhero Comic Books,” Benton and Peterka-Benton examined instances where superhero comic books from 1991 to 2012 made human trafficking an overt plot point. In over 85% of these stories, the response of superhero characters was violence directed against traffickers who were universally cast as the primary cause of victimisation.14 Consistent with other media representations, portrayals of trafficking create issues of black and white with clear causation, judgment, and swift remedy. As Andrijasevi and Mai note, the outcome of such constructions inevitably benefits neoliberal institutions by preventing structural consideration of inequality while also providing the comfort of a simple and confirming morality play.

Trafficking narratives, however, are frequently rooted in tendencies even more insidious than institutional preservation. Human trafficking myths have historically been a tool where marginalized groups are constructed as a threat to white decency and sexual piety. Again, context proves informative in examining the rise of QAnon and a similar media furore that accompanied the release of the D.W. Griffith’s racist film epic “Birth of a Nation” in 1915. Writing about the implications of the film, Obasogie calls the film an “epic celebrating the Ku Klux Klan’s rise during Reconstruction to defend Southern whites’ dignity and honour against what were then seen as recently liberated Black insurgents.”15 What is important to note in relation to QAnon is both the exigence the film constructs and corresponding response the film generated. Specifically, the turning point in the film occurs when former slaves are constructed as a menace organising the abduction and sexual assault of genteel, virginal white women. The Ku Klux Klan is presented as heroically stopping this menace and the presentation was so powerful that the film is credited with creating a second rise of the KKK in that era. Like Q conspiracies, the idea of a powerful redemptive force standing up to a threat against traditional purity drew engagement and enactment from an audience primed to fear The Other. Similarly, the linkage between these myths and dissonance about pluralism has been present historically in antisemetic representations of trafficking panics. Antisemetic trafficking tropes date back to the Middle Ages and have persisted in the centuries since then. Early conspiracies “alleged that Jews were responsible for kidnapping Christian children and drinking their blood for religious

rituals. Those claims, called blood-libel conspiracy theories, persisted throughout the 1800s and into the 20th century.” The residual persistence of such myths can be found in QAnon messaging, with prominent Jewish politicians, entertainers, and business people frequently singled out as ringleaders in the abduction and exploitation of children. In this way, QAnon conspiracies both validate traditional conceptions of morality and provide adherents with clear and defined villains who represent a threat to a traditional Christian, white social order.

This tendency to co-opt and manipulate issues of concern to support regressive and reactionary social positions has been noted as both a contemporary and historical tactic. The concept of “hatejacking” whereby an extremist group claims the discursive space around a topic, brand, issue, or identity was operationalized in previous investigations. In such instances, extremist groups have tended to latch onto these items to gain legitimacy and to recruit support from people who would otherwise be unlikely to adopt such views. This sort of co-optation is described by Ganesh and Zoller as “a tactic of power” that frequently allows dominant groups to solidify institutional support through the repackaging of reactionary messaging. In the case of QAnon, people who would not necessarily be drawn to such a vile and conspiratorial worldview are brought in by the benevolent sounding messages of “saving the children” or “stopping the traffickers.” Particularly challenging for anti-trafficking educators is the fact that such “hatejacks” frequently make rebuttal and response to these positions difficult, as responding to these conspiracies can have the effect of giving the conspiracy the illusion of legitimacy. Cumulatively, the context, dissemination, and presentation of trafficking myths has allowed QAnon to flourish in trafficking discourse, making anti-trafficking education all the more difficult.

QAnon’s Continuing Linkage to Human Trafficking Myths
While QAnon broadly includes a range of frequently fantastical conspiracy theories, its most essential element focuses on the abduction and trafficking of children. As noted, the construction of trafficking in the space of QAnon mirrors many of the most common myths anti-trafficking education seeks to remedy, such as the common misunderstanding that all human trafficking is limited to sex trafficking, disregarding the many other different forms of human exploitation, including labor trafficking, organ trafficking, the use of child soldiers, or the practice of child marriage. Another common myth is the perception that only women and girls become the targets of human trafficking, while boys and men are equally likely to be trafficked,
albeit commonly for different forms of exploitation.\textsuperscript{21} Additionally most human trafficking victims are not kidnapped, contrary to many of the trafficking scares spun by QAnon supporters. Even though there are cases of kidnapping, the vast majority of authentic trafficking victims are pulled into the world of exploitation through means of deception, fraud and force, and some even through familial or romantic relationships.\textsuperscript{22} QAnon similarly precludes the possibility of autonomy with a “victim” label assumed even in cases where participation in labour such as sex work may be consensual.\textsuperscript{23} In this narrative space, both authentic trafficking victims and independent agency are symbolically annihilated. Only mythical victims, defined villains, and paternalistic protectors exist.

Aside from these common myths, QAnon followers continue to spread much more unrealistic misconceptions and conspiratorial stories on social media. Among these is the unsubstantiated claim that the furniture store Wayfair is running a child trafficking ring, which names furniture pieces with the names of real child trafficking victims for sale. Another shared rumour cautions people to be suspicious of white passenger or commercial vans with external locks as a sign of possible trafficking activity.\textsuperscript{24} Looking at these online stories and bizarre items constructed for social media distribution, it would be easy to dismiss QAnon as a disturbing, but inconsequential viral fad. That, however, would miss the significant real-world impact that this conspiracy has had. Beyond the noted embrace of QAnon by prominent political figures,\textsuperscript{25} QAnon has been linked to a significant number of actual criminal activities where devotees have engaged in violent acts aimed at “saving trafficking victims.”

In December 2017, Edgar Maddison Welch drove his car to the Comet Ping Pong restaurant in Washington D.C. to free children allegedly trapped in a sex-slave ring in the basement of that restaurant. He fired a military-style assault rifle inside the establishment, but luckily did not hurt any patrons or employees present. He was driven by a widespread, unsubstantiated online conspiracy known as “Pizzagate,” which supposed Comet Ping Pong to be at the centre of a child abuse scheme led by Hillary Clinton. The judge in this case, Ketanji Brown Jackson, sentenced Mr. Welch to four years in prison and three years of probation in Federal District Court in Washington and he must pay $5,744 in restitution for property damage to Comet Ping Pong.\textsuperscript{26}

In March 2019, Anthony Comello drove to the home of Francesco Cali, a leader in the Gambino crime family, killing Mr. Cali with a gunshot from his car. Court documents verify Mr. Comello’s activities.

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connection to Qanon, which provided the basis for his crime against Mr. Cali, who he believed to be part of the so-called deep state, a group of criminals that Qanon conspiracy theorists claim controls the United States government. An analysis of Google search results for “Qanon crime” found sixteen cases between December 2016 and October 2020, in which the perpetrators committed actual criminal acts, motivated by the Qanon conspiracy. Among the crimes committed were kidnappings related to custody issues, weapons offenses, assault, murder, arson and terrorism. In one additional case the perpetrator(s) threatened democratic Senator Scott Wiener with decapitation for his controversial support of Senate Bill No. 145 which eliminates automatic sex offender registration for young adults who have anal or oral sex with a minor.27 So far, no arrests have been made in this case. While the findings of this case analysis are by no means to be considered representative or comprehensive, they do show that some people take the conspiracy theory into practice.

The range and extent of actions inspired by QAnon reached a culmination on January 6, 2021 when a group of protestors forced entry into and occupied the Capitol building of the United States resulting in at least five deaths. Analysis of those participating in the protest found that QAnon beliefs were common among those who heeded Trump’s call to come to Washington with reports from participants’ family members suggesting that concern about a global sex trafficking ring run by “America’s enemies” was a dominant theme in their lives.28 Events such as these, coupled with an emerging pattern of violent actions undertaken in the name of the group, indicate that the notion of QAnon being a modest online fringe movement is misplaced. The conspiracy results in action being undertaken in the real world with legitimate implications for anti-trafficking education and outreach.

Interrogating Anti-Trafficking Education in the Age of Q

Taken together, historical trafficking myths provide a substantial foundation for understanding the prevalence and virility of QAnon. With that in mind, it is imperative to consider the ways in which anti-trafficking education efforts are prepared (or unprepared) to counter such narratives. To further this end, this research sought to explore to the extent possible, which university human trafficking courses are positioned to counter or potentially enable perceptions that support the ideas advanced by QAnon. Specifically, syllabi from human trafficking courses were examined. Courses on this subject with publicly available syllabi from the years 2017 to 2020 were considered, as this corresponds to the period in which Q theories gained prominence. It should be noted that this investigation is not be considered representative, exhaustive, nor comprehensive. Many human trafficking courses may not have syllabi that are publicly available online. It should also be noted that the content of a course and the descriptions and outlines of a syllabus may differ considerably. Nonetheless, a syllabus

serves as a contract for learning content, as a permanent record, and as a learning tool. As such, those analysed provide an opportunity to look at specific instances of human trafficking treatments in the educational space. To evaluate the extent to which these syllabi affect a position that might enable or hinder a response to QAnon conspiracies about trafficking, the following areas were analysed for each course syllabus:

- The extent to which the syllabus overtly focuses on countering popular myths about human trafficking.
- The extent to which sexual “victimization” is framed as a primary dimension of trafficking.
- The focus on exploring trafficking as an outcome of structural/economic/social factors versus the construction of trafficking as a crime where institutional/legal prosecution is the primary remedy.

**Method**

Sixteen publicly viewable syllabi from human trafficking courses taught at institutions of higher education from the years 2017 to 2020 were identified. The course description section and lessons description of each syllabus were considered. These sections were evaluated for the presence of content that countered trafficking myths, content that emphasized (or deemphasized) sexual exploitation as a trafficking focus, and how remedies to exploitation were framed (either systemic/structural or legal/prosecutorial). Linkage to the identified thematic clusters was made through textual analysis based on analytic induction whereby patterns of conceptual inclusion suggest the presence (or absence) of themes relevant to an investigation.

**Results**

From this exploration, relevant findings related to anti-trafficking education in the age of Q emerge. On the initial area analysed (“extent to which the syllabus overtly focuses on countering popular myths about human trafficking”), results showed that only thirteen percent of the analysed syllabi openly interrogated myths about human trafficking. For the syllabi that did evaluate the extent to which anti-trafficking efforts have been informed by ideological mythology rather than empirical data, the presentation for students was done in a comprehensive and compelling fashion. Exemplary sample text from this approach included:

> ...the white slavery hysteria was not only about prostitution. It also provided activists with a way to express anxieties about other cultural shifts, including, but not limited to: women’s increased employment, urbanization, immigration, internal migration, new forms of recreation, shifting gender norms, and changing sexual mores... the contemporary campaigns against sex trafficking bring together strange alliances as feminist organizations coordinate with Christian evangelicals to raise awareness of the

https://doi.org/10.1080/87567550209595875.

issue. Sex workers’ rights activists also contribute their voices to the current conversation about sex trafficking, drawing attention to the ways that ‘victims’ of sex trafficking are frequently rendered mute by the anti-trafficking activists who claim to be fighting on their behalf.

Another syllabus used a case specific approach to evaluate myths related to trafficking:

Before the World Cup held in Brazil in Summer 2014, many fans saw billboard posters and social media ads featuring the silhouette of a naked woman standing on a playing field, her feet clad in red high heels with chains shackled to her ankles. The ad was promoted by an anti-trafficking organization claiming sporting events like the World Cup become periodic "hot spots" for sex trafficking and exploitation, as millions of fans, athletes, and affiliated sponsors flock to major cities. However, the ad was met with protest from a number of organizations, especially sex workers’ rights organizations, that such publicity merely increased policing and police brutality around the event, and no increase in trafficking was actually reported.

The absence of exploration of trafficking myths in the other course syllabi should not presume that these courses are based on these myths nor should it be assumed such courses do not cover these myths in course delivery. It should be noted, however, that failure to overtly make interrogation of these myths a course focus creates a discursive space whereby conspiracies like QAnon can co-opt trafficking discourse for students in the class. By not overtly acknowledging trafficking as a space ripe for ideological co-optation, educators may inadvertently be enabling it.

For the second area analysed ("the extent to which sexual “victimization” is framed as a primary dimension of trafficking"), one-hundred percent of all syllabi analysed noted sexual victimization as a dimension of trafficking but also noted that other forms of exploitation (including labour, organ donation, domestic work, etc.) were also important forms of exploitation. An exemplary text for this sort of nuance included:

Our case examples will include issues that receive high media publicity—forced sex work, child labour in construction and clothing, and the illicit trade in organs—but also pay attention to ‘less sexy’ forms of trafficking and exploitation. These include exploitation and sexual violence in strawberry fields and American beef farms, debt bondage in Thai shrimp processing plants, abuses of Bangladeshi construction workers and Filipina domestic workers in the Gulf region, smuggling and exploitation after major natural disasters and post-war conflicts, and the exploitation of Dominican baseball players and Siberian fashion models alike.

Particularly outstanding in this sample text is the fact that it makes clear that sexual exploitation needs to be contextualized as a piece of broader exploitation. Similarly in other syllabi, sample text included statements such as the following:
Individuals are trafficked for numerous reasons and purposes, including for prostitution, domestic or agricultural labour, or exploitation in any number of commercial activities. The common thread is the reduction of the trafficked human being to a mere commodity, generating profits for his/her trafficker.

Within such text, the focus is clearly less on punitive judgments related to gender and sexuality and more clearly articulated in terms of violations of agency on the part of victims. While well intentioned, other syllabi were less overt in making this distinction. For example, one syllabus indicated the following:

At the end of this course, students will be able to identify and understand the many forms of human trafficking in the world today including sex, child, labour and organ trafficking.

This approach recognizes that there are multiple ways in which people may be exploited in trafficking, but does contextualize sexual exploitation in the broader space of commoditization. Given the nature of the myths that focus on the construction of trafficking as a prurient and salacious issue, care would need to be taken ensuring the inclusion of sex trafficking does not lead to the perception that all trafficking is sexual.

For the final area analysed (“focus on trafficking as an outcome of structural/economic/social factors versus the construction of trafficking as a crime where institutional/legal prosecution is the primary remedy”), seventy-five percent of the syllabi analysed focused overtly on the criminality of trafficking and legal/prosecutorial remedies. Example text for this perspective included statements like:

This course will provide an overview of... the most important developments in the legal and policy framework to address trafficking at the international levels as well as insights and evaluation of the practical application of these measures.

Similarly, other syllabi advocated this approach with statements such as:

...students will obtain a basic understanding of human trafficking networks, state and local efforts to respond to human trafficking, and various policy approaches to combat modern day slavery.

Such legalistic solutions would seem to provide concrete answers to the problem of exploitation and there is undoubtedly good intentions behind such an approach to anti-trafficking education. It should be noted, however, that if such a focus precludes investigation of systemic and structural causes of exploitation, the “remedy” to trafficking may be misunderstood on the part of students. By casting institutions in a role where they are potentially made to be the saviours of victims, there is the potential for student perceptions to be aligned with many of the previously noted trafficking myths; myths exploited by conspiratorial groups such as QAnon. Alternatively, of the twenty-five percent of syllabi that
eschewed this approach, a more nuanced view of the causes and remedies of human trafficking was considered. For example, one syllabus noted:

In this class we will use ‘slavery and human trafficking’ as starting points to help us critically analyze the relationships between sex, gender, and human rights; race, colonialism, and political economy.

By recognizing exploitation as a function of systemic and intuitional inequality, a more holistic approach to trafficking that moves away from potentially paternalistic solutions and systems emerges. In the case of each area considered, it appears that many of the syllabi analysed suggest a more complete, evidence informed view of human trafficking is emerging in anti-trafficking education. There are, however, blind spots in approaches that allow for the persistence of myths and the continued co-optation of the issue by conspiracies like QAnon.

Implications for How anti-trafficking myths impact on human trafficking training and education

The prevalence of QAnon has had disastrous implications for anti-trafficking education, advocacy, and research with such misinformation having significant real world consequences for anti-trafficking efforts. Viral conspiracy theories linked to QAnon have caused thousands of calls to trafficking hotlines clogging resources and response initiatives by anti-trafficking organizations. Such conspiracies also reinforce narratives of stigmatization that put vulnerable populations at risk. Additionally, legitimate anti-trafficking efforts may be targeted by QAnon supporters for failing to support the established myths of trafficking being advanced by these conspiracists. Speaking anonymously because of Q threats she has received, a senior staffer at a national anti-trafficking organization in Washington states, “it definitely impedes our work when we’re getting harassed and trolled over misinformation campaigns... It’s exhausting work. It’s traumatic work. It’s something that all of us do because there’s such an extreme need in our communities and around the country. And this just makes it all so much harder.”

As such, it is imperative that educators in the field of anti-trafficking directly engage and counter the narratives perpetuated by the QAnon conspiracy movement and critically reflect on how these conspiracies exclude and preclude consideration of the real issues that require understanding in relation human trafficking. By understanding the cleavage between the human trafficking information being shared and the accuracy of that information, the challenges of navigating anti-trafficking in a Q world can be more clearly defined.

Combating QAnon in Anti-Trafficking Education

As noted, the QAnon conspiracy theory is pervasive, with extensive traction online. The misinformation is so extensive that tech companies have had to adjust their policies and

algorithms in attempt to slow the extent of QAnon content being shared.\textsuperscript{32} For anti-trafficking educators, this presents the very real possibility of Q inclined students and audience members co-opting legitimate discussions of trafficking with conspiracy and propaganda. There is also a chance that well-intentioned educational content will be recontextualized and manipulated by audiences primed to believe the misinformation of Q and the historic trafficking myths QAnon is based on. While daunting, there are approaches that can help in mitigating this and ensuring that educational outreach remain focused with an emphasis on accuracy and authenticity.

Broadly, anti-trafficking educators need to have an action plan ready for engaging with audience members focused on pivoting session focus to Q related conspiracies. With educational forums and classes overtly indicating that “trafficking” will be a focus, it is very plausible that the Q believers and Q aligned will treat this as an opportunity proselytize for their views. Preparation and realization of this possibility must now be a focus for all anti-trafficking educators and advocates. A starting point could be to ensure that a discussion of “myth versus reality” is placed early in any communication about human trafficking. By presenting popular and conspiratorial misperceptions of trafficking, educators can defuse potentially disruptive sentiment from overwhelming the discussion. Additionally, most QAnon conspiracy theories are localised to generate maximum fear and spread, as noted in the introductory example in this paper where shadowy “trafficking vehicles” are menacing neighbourhoods. Trafficking is a global phenomenon and by emphasizing its broader dimensions, the sensationalized (and often fictional) local incidents can be placed in a more realistic context. Finally, by providing data from reputable outlets (such as the United Nations and credible NGO’s), the discussion can be grounded in data rather than speculation and constructed narratives. Encouraging a systemic view of exploitation rather than one based on the simple heroes and villains of trafficking myths also should be encouraged. Reflection on the racial, cultural, and gendered prejudice of white slavery panics can also allow educators to explore how trafficking has been historically co-opted as an issue, perhaps mitigating the perceived novelty of conspiracies like QAnon. For anti-trafficking educators, countering misinformation and disinformation begins by acknowledging the existence of misinformation and disinformation. There is precedent for such an approach being successful. When Martin and Hill worked to educate local media about the “Superbowl causes human trafficking” myth, their data informed approach that directly countered this narrative produced results. In looking at subsequent coverage following their efforts, they found a 46\% decrease in media reporting this constructed “link” along with “less sensationalist language and fewer inflated numbers compared to previous coverage,”\textsuperscript{33}

Conclusion
In summary, the phenomena of QAnon is real and widespread. It both furthers and feeds on historic panics about white slavery. It contemporizes those panics and repurposes the historic villains of such myths for a modern conspiratorial context. It has become so widespread that


\textsuperscript{33} Martin and Hill, p. 26.
anti-trafficking education must engage with these myths and conspiracies or risk co-optation. The emerging prevalence of QAnon presents an enormous challenge for advocacy and education about trafficking. By contextualizing the space of trafficking myths QAnon exploits, educators can reclaim anti-trafficking discourse and ensure that truth replaces conspiracy as we train advocates to stand against exploitation and falsehood.

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