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## “No Reason[.] [I]t /Should/ Happen here”: Analyzing Flynn’s Retroactive Doublespeak During a QAnon Event

Josephine Lukito <sup>a</sup>, Jacob Gursky<sup>b</sup>, Jordan Foley<sup>c</sup>, Yunkang Yang<sup>d</sup>, Katie Joseff<sup>a</sup>, and Porsmita Borah <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Journalism and Media, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, USA; <sup>b</sup>Software and Societal Systems Department, Carnegie Mellon, Pittsburgh, USA; <sup>c</sup>Murrow College of Communication, Washington State University, Pullman, USA; <sup>d</sup>Department of Communication & Journalism, Texas A&M University, College Station, USA

### ABSTRACT

As digitally organized, conspiratorial extremist groups gain more attention in the United States, researchers face increasing calls to better understand their in-group and out-group communication strategies. Using the QAnon conspiracy community as a case study, we use data from news coverage, social media, and ethnographic field work surrounding a prominent QAnon conference to analyze the uptake and aftermath of a controversial comment made by a public figure at the event. Our mixed methods analysis finds that QAnon’s efforts to use retroactive doublespeak produced mixed results, persuading some members to re-interpret the comment; however, there was a limit to its effectiveness. Our findings contribute to the literature on political extremism and digital media by elucidating how anti-publics within the QAnon movement reconstruct events and thread the rhetorical needle to reconcile contradictory messages. In particular, we highlight the factors that precede anti-publics’ use of retroactive doublespeak and discuss its use to negotiate the tension between in-group and out-group interpretations of events.


### KEYWORDS

QAnon; hybrid media system; anti-public

It was Memorial Day Weekend in 2021, five months after the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. Capitol that elevated the QAnon conspiracy theory from a fleeting political spectacle to a legitimate national security threat. In a large, informal conference room in Dallas, three QAnon influencers answered questions on a panel at the “For God and Country Patriot Round-Up” convention (henceforth, “Patriot RoundUp”), the first and largest conference bringing together members of the QAnon conspiracy community. Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, former Director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency under Obama and former National Security Advisor to Trump, was the keynote speaker at the event, fielding most of the questions on his panel. He was assisted by the host, Doug Billings, and Jason Sullivan, a prominent right-wing communications advisor. The crowd jostled in anticipation, many eagerly raising their hands to ask a question.

“I need a microphone up front. This gentleman right here, thank you, alright,” Doug Billings pointed to an older man on his right, near the front of the stage. The audience

**CONTACT** Josephine Lukito  [jlukito@utexas.edu](mailto:jlukito@utexas.edu)  School of Journalism and Media, University of Texas at Austin, Austin 78712-1139, USA

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member wore a white baseball cap and glasses, and a dark coat. He took the microphone and spoke slowly, punctuating his words with pauses: “I’m a simple Marine. I want to know why what happened in Myanmar can’t happen here,” referencing Myanmar’s violent military coup d’état in February of 2021. The audience erupted in cheers and applause as the Marine confidently handed the microphone back, pumped his fist by his side, and yelled triumphantly. On stage, Sullivan repeated the question to Flynn. Flynn held the microphone with his left hand and raised his right in a shrug. “No reason. I mean, i-it should happen here. No reason. That’s right.” While the verbal endorsement of a military coup by a former high-level U.S. official was initially well-received in the QAnon community, it ignited a firestorm of criticism in the public sphere that forced Flynn to backtrack on his comment. The following day, Flynn issued a public statement, saying that he meant, “[t]here is no reason [the coup] should happen here.”

Flynn’s post-hoc reinterpretation of his original response, which we call “retroactive doublespeak,” illustrates an important dilemma extremist groups face when seeking to influence mainstream political culture: how does a group energize their base internally via exclusionary, anti-democratic rhetoric, yet legitimate themselves in the public arena? The dilemma is heightened by a hybrid media environment that blurs the line between public and private communication (Bimber et al., 2008; Chadwick, 2017). As our analyses will show, an unintended audience member watching the live-stream of the perceived internal, offline event triggered a flurry of news and social media criticism of Flynn’s answer.

Building upon the literature on publics and counterpublics (Asen, 2000; Warner, 2002), we use the theoretical framework of anti-publics (Davis, 2019, 2021) to analyze Flynn’s original statement, its democratic implications, and his public walk-back. Applying this anti-public framework to the Patriot RoundUp allows us to speak more broadly to the tension within groups like QAnon between advancing violent, anti-democratic ideas and maintaining a participatory culture appealing enough to influence mainstream political discourse. Combining ethnographic field work with quantitative data from multiple news and social media outlets, our analysis leverages the uniqueness of QAnon’s beliefs and lasting influence on U.S. politics to identify and understand a process that can be generalized to other publics and counterpublics alike.

## Literature Review

### *Anti-Publics*

Since Habermas (1991) canonical articulation of the public sphere, scholars have grappled with the tension between the normative ideals of a democratic public sphere and the functional processes of marginalization and inequality that characterize its lived reality in Western democracies. The ensuing debate about the status of different publics in civil society has complicated claims of a consensus-driven, deliberative public sphere, suggesting the need for a more dynamic account that recognizes the multiplicity of differentiated, and often overlapping, publics and counterpublics (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002).

Our study builds on this literature through the concept of anti-publics (Davis, 2019, 2021) to show how they articulate and rationalize their distinctively violent, anti-democratic beliefs. If a public is a set of self-organized relationships among people that is characterized

by a reflexive circulation of discourse and, importantly, attention to that discourse, counter-publics are marginalized publics organized around specific issues capable of sustaining an oppositional, counter-hegemonic group identity (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). However, the rise of right-wing populist nationalism in the U.S. (Marcks & Pawelz, 2022) and an “assertive turn” toward anti-rationalistic discourse and alternative facts (Foust & St. John Iii, 2022) have reinigorated the study of “anti-publics.” According to Davis (2019, 2021), anti-public discourse (1) lacks rationality or resource to evidence, (2) is antagonistic and divisive, (3) anti-elitist, (4) oppositional to state governance, (5) and anti-cosmopolitan, (6) and believes in the explanatory power of conspiracy theories.

However, many of these qualities are not sufficiently distinguishable from counterpublic discourse. Counter-publics such as the German AfD party (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018) and some Christian far-right groups (Reijven et al., 2020) contain elements of anti-elitism, emotional fear-based appeals, anti-cosmopolitan, opposition to the state, or conspiratorial thinking. What separates anti-publics from counter-publics, though, is their antagonistic discourse.

According to Mouffe (1999), democracy is a conflict-driven competition between collective identities and interests operating within the bounds of an agreed upon set of democratic rules of engagement. While counter-publics engage in this adversarial struggle within the bounds of accepted democratic norms, anti-publics engage in antagonistic discourse that flouts them entirely, advocating for the silencing or outright elimination of groups they oppose.

Despite the harm of anti-publics’ antagonistic discourse on human dignity and democratic norms, these groups persist in the public sphere. While not all anti-publics are conspiratorial, fear-motivated conspiratorial beliefs are common in anti-public narratives (Gill, 2021). Anti-public leaders utilize the flexibility of conspiracy theories to exploit cognitive biases and advance misinformation, particularly amongst those that hold post-trust identities (Baker & Chadwick, 2021). Anti-publics are also exclusionary. For example, Cammaerts (2009) used the concept of anti-publics to study antagonistic discourse circulating on Stormfront, revealing how pro-violence white supremacists discuss news about attacks toward racial minorities in Europe.

Like counterpublics, anti-publics consist of in-group communication for identity formation and out-group communication for recruiting allies in the wider public sphere (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019).<sup>1</sup> The tension between in-group and out-group communication dynamics is acute for anti-publics, as they seek to justify more antagonistic and violent means of political exclusion in the public arena. As beliefs from anti-publics gain popularity – even if only among a relatively small population – they represent a fundamental threat to minority groups and democratic institutions. It is therefore imperative to understand how anti-publics’ online and offline discourse promote antagonistic ideologies.

### ***Anti-Publics in a Multi-Platform, Hybrid Public Sphere***

A key problem that arises when anti-publics try to engage in out-group agenda-setting is that their antagonistic, anti-democratic calls to action are not widely supported in the broader public sphere. Although surveys find that while nearly one in five people support political violence (Schwartz, 2022), the vast majority of the population remains committed to peaceful, democratic means of conflict resolution. Thus, anti-publics may subdue

antagonistic discourse during out-group interactions in the wider public sphere (Munn, 2019), revealing their anti-democratic nature once a recruit is indoctrinated.

There are two characteristics of the modern-day public sphere that are relevant to anti-publics. First, the public sphere is hybrid, consisting of both online and offline parts (Chadwick, 2017). Online engagement and discourse can motivate offline action (Badr, 2021), and publics, counterpublics, and anti-publics can use digital media to raise awareness about offline events and issues (Harlow & Harp, 2012). Through the hybrid media system, citizen groups and publics that traditionally do not have access to the institutionalized press can nevertheless gain attention (Chadwick, 2017). Second, the digital public sphere is characterized by a plurality of platforms, each distinguished by its affordances and modalities as well as the ideologies of the audience. As anti-publics are prone to suspension from mainstream platforms, users may relocate to alternative platforms that encourage prejudicial and extremist discourse under the guise of free speech (Kor-Sins, 2021; Rogers, 2020). This results in a further proliferation of not only platforms, but spaces within them that may be amenable to antagonistic discourse.

Taken together, the plurality of digital platforms and the hybridity of the public sphere helps anti-publics stay both separated from and connected to the public sphere. For example, anti-publics may rely on different platforms to recruit and troll versus communicate with like-minded individuals or organize events. However, the complexity of the fragmented media system also makes discursive spaces vulnerable to interlopers. It is this complexity of space and place in the modern-day public sphere that initially drove us to study anti-publics and their antagonistic discourse. How do anti-publics conceptualize themselves and justify their beliefs across discursive online and offline spaces to promote their anti-democratic ideas and gain attention in mainstream political discourse? To explore this question, we focused on one community (QAnon) through their organized event (the Patriot RoundUp) as our case study.

### ***QAnon Post-January 6 & the Patriot RoundUp***

Our study focuses on supporters of the QAnon conspiracy theory, a counterpublic whose ideological horizon extends to anti-public efforts that delegitimize foundational democratic institutions through a sprawling web of crowd-sourced conspiracy theories about Democrats, globalists, and the “deep state.” The conspiracy theory traces its origins to October 2017, beginning on the image board 4chan with posts by a user named “Q” (Papasavva et al., 2021), who claimed to be a U.S. government official with top-level security clearance. Though QAnon encompasses many conspiracies, one of the most prominent claims of QAnon adherents is the belief in a corrupt, global cabal embedded within the U.S. government (QAlerts, n.d.); this cabal purportedly engages in child sex trafficking (Q, 2019) and cannibalism (Q, 2020). A second core claim is the coming of a “great awakening,” led by Donald Trump and the U.S. military that will overthrow this cabal, saving the United States (QAlerts, n.d.). Owing to how QAnon crowdsources claims and conspiracies, QAnon is akin to a “super-conspiracy theory” (Papasavva et al., 2021) or a “greatest hits of American conspiracy theories” (Gault, 2020).

The flexibility of this conspiracy theory also means supporters should not be treated as a monolith, either in their beliefs or in their willingness to engage in anti-democratic actions (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021). Since coalescing as a niche online counterpublic, the QAnon

community has incubated significant, and growing, anti-public factions willing to engage in both violent online discourse and offline activity. Additionally, the exposure that resulted from news coverage of QAnon contingents attending Trump rallies and the January 6 insurrection thrust the QAnon community into a unique liminal discursive space where publics, counterpublics, and anti-publics collide in a hybrid media ecosystem.

It is worth noting that, despite the prominence of the QAnon conspiracy theory in public discourse, expressed support for the conspiracy theory is low and stable over time (Enders et al., 2022). While a majority of Republicans in 2020 believed at least a part of the conspiracy (Beer, 2020), by 2022, only a quarter of Republicans identified themselves as QAnon believers (PRRI, 2022). Even fewer are likely to attend offline QAnon events. Nevertheless, as the January 6 insurrection showed, even a small group of extremists can have a great impact on American politics, particularly given their relationship to Donald Trump (Tollefson, 2021) and the tendency of some factions within QAnon to use violence as a means of political redress.

While most research on QAnon has focused on their online activity (e.g., Hannah, 2021), QAnon has also gained offline popularity among Republican politicians (Cohen, 2020). The most infamous of QAnon's offline, anti-public activities, however, was the participation of Q-sympathetic individuals in the January 6th insurrection. Following January 6th, many QAnon users and pages were removed from mainstream social media sites (Rogers, 2020), with some relocating to alt-tech platforms such as Parler and Telegram (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). While this allowed QAnon to continue organizing, limited access to mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube make it inherently harder for QAnon to recruit.

It is under this context that QAnon supporters began organizing offline events, including the first Patriot RoundUp event, taking place from May 28 to 31, 2021. News reports (Hooks, 2021) and organizers claim that the event had between 800 and 1,000 attendees. It was also live-streamed to several more thousand viewers on the website magatv.info. The Patriot RoundUp was organized by QAnon John (real name John Sabal) and his partner Amy (Vaughn, 2021).

We were motivated to study this event for several reasons. For one, it was a high-profile, well-promoted event. Secondly, the event featured key members of Donald Trump's inner circle, including Flynn, who had direct access to Trump serving as National Security Advisor for 24 days before resigning after he had misled Vice President Pence on a communication with the Russian Ambassador to the United States. Though Flynn pled guilty to making false statements to the FBI, he was later pardoned by President Trump on November 25, 2020 (Tucker, 2020). Since his resignation, Flynn has become a celebrity in the QAnon movement (Cohen, 2020). The anti-public discourse that circulated during and after the Patriot RoundUp conference provides the backdrop for our analysis of how Flynn's retroactive doublespeak negotiated the tension between the antipublic in-group and the (counter)public out-group.

### ***Retroactive Doublespeak***

We define retroactive doublespeak as a discursive strategy that backpedals on a prior statement after it has been criticized by others in the public sphere. There are three steps to the retroactive doublespeak process. First, a speaker makes a statement. Then, that

statement is criticized, often by members of the broader public. Finally, the speaker (knowing that the original statement can never be fully withdrawn) backpedals or reinterprets their first statement, denying its initial interpretation. While retroactive doublespeak can be employed by anyone, anti-publics may be more motivated to leverage its strategic ambiguity to plausibly deny their anti-democratic efforts. It is worth noting that this definition does not speak to the effectiveness of retroactive doublespeak, nor does it address how different groups (e.g., journalists and other publics) respond to it; rather, this definition is meant to help identify when it occurs.

Given that Flynn's comments at the Patriot RoundUp received widespread criticism, we shifted our research question's focus to studying how retroactive doublespeak could help us make sense of Flynn's attempt to deflect this criticism. With this in mind, we ask three questions: (RQ1) How were Flynn's comments initially interpreted by the event's audience? (RQ2) How were Flynn's comments outed via an unintended audience member? (RQ3) How did Flynn and other event organizers employ retroactive doublespeak as a response?

Retroactive doublespeak is a form of textual polysemy (Boxman-Shabtai, 2020), wherein one text or discourse can generate multiple, strategically ambiguous interpretations. Other examples of textual polysemy include dog-whistling, when messages are crafted to signal a smaller group without alienating a larger group (Albertson, 2015), and traditional doublespeak (e.g., euphemisms, see Feldman, 2014). In exploiting linguistic ambiguity, textual polysemy tactics help anti-public supporters find prospective recruiters while avoiding scrutiny for using antagonistic discourse. However, unlike other forms of textual polysemy, speakers use retroactive doublespeak *after* they have gotten in trouble, not before.

As with other forms of deception, retroactive doublespeak helps deflect criticism through deception or manipulation. Obfuscation in political discourse, such as dodging or deflecting questions (Clementson, 2018) constitutes a withholding of truthful information. For example, Trump's repeated use of "fake news" helped deflect from his scandals, encouraged media distrust, and allowed Trump to more easily spread mis- and disinformation (Ross & Rivers, 2018). Retroactive doublespeak, as a discursive tool to deny and obfuscate, may help anti-publics rebuff accusations of pro-violence discourse and advance exclusionary beliefs in the broader public sphere, not unlike other forms of deception (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022).

However, using retroactive doublespeak does not necessarily guarantee reputation management for an anti-public. Because retroactive doublespeak is reactive, it lacks the advantage of preemptive language control seen in other forms of deception or textual polysemy. To assess the effectiveness of this strategy, we therefore ask one final research question: (RQ4) what was the interpretation of Flynn's retroactive doublespeak among QAnon supporters?

## Methods

We focus on a narrow window in time to provide a rich description of the event. In doing so, our analysis is broad in its consideration of the U.S. media ecology (see Chadwick, 2017, who similarly uses an array of archives to study the hybrid media system). To study these multi-platform dynamics, we consider discourse across three levels: [1] the initial statement (the question and answer); [2] the QAnon spaces, constituted by the offline place (which

was also recorded via the livestream and YouTube videos) and the online space, Telegram; and [3] the public sphere, inclusive of Twitter and news organizations.

### ***The Statement***

We began our analysis with an IRB-approved ethnography of the Patriot RoundUp. Two researchers attended the Patriot RoundUp from May 28 to 30, 2021. In addition to interacting with attendees, the researchers recorded the live-streamed speeches and took field notes. This approach has been previously applied to study conspiracy theory groups (Landrum et al., 2021). After, the researchers debriefed with the research team and wrote memos summarizing their findings using a grounded theory approach (Lempert, 2007; Scott & Medaugh, 2017). The first memo was written following the event to summarize our experiences. Next, we synthesized the memo and field notes in a summative memo. We then open-coded the memos and field notes.

Because this event was live-streamed on MAGAinfo.tv, we supplemented this ethnography with recordings of the livestream uploaded to YouTube (14 videos)<sup>2</sup> and Telegram (8 videos). We used these recordings to validate the notes and memos we had, particularly if there was a specific quote involved (e.g., Flynn's comment, see Appendix A).

After compiling the field notes and event recordings, we conducted a mixed-methods textual analysis of Flynn's comment and the reaction of the immediate, in-person audience. Our analytical approach is informed by conversation and discourse analysis (Schegloff, 1999). More specifically, we focus on the question-and-answer structure of Flynn's response, and closely consider the selection of Flynn's words in his response. We complement this with a phonological praat analysis. Praat is an open-source tool for phonetic analyses of pitch, tone, pauses, and other vocal features (Jadoul et al., 2018; See Appendix B).

### ***The QAnon Spaces***

To study QAnon offline, we relied on our field notes and recordings of the Patriot RoundUp to understand how the audience reacted to Flynn's initial communication. To study the online space for this event, we conducted a textual analysis of content on the platform Telegram. Telegram is a messaging service that is popular among Trump supporters (Solopova et al., 2021), especially those suspended from mainstream sites (Walther & McCoy, 2021). We specifically collected data from the public Telegram channel run by QAnon John (<https://t.me/QStorm1111>), the organizer of the Patriot RoundUp event. This channel had 19,886 members (as of October 27, 2021). A total of 6,829 messages from this Telegram channel, posted May 28 and June 5, 2021, were collected through Telegram. Because we were interested in messages specifically about Flynn's Myanmar comment, we conducted a human-coded content analysis, with three coders labeling for whether a message was about the Myanmar comment or not. Using Krippendorff's Alpha, these coders achieved an intercoder reliability of 0.87 (see Appendix C for more details). This coding yielded 246 posts focused on Michael Flynn's Myanmar comment, which we further analyzed using qualitative, textual analysis.



**Table 1.** Summary of methods.

Level of Analysis	Data Being Used	Analytical Approach
Statement	Event Ethnography	(1) Memo writing (2) Grounded theory
Statement	YouTube mp3	(1) praat analysis (Appendix B) (2) Conversation analysis
QAnon Space	Event Ethnography	(1) Memo writing (2) Qualitative discourse analysis
QAnon Space	Telegram Channel	(1) Content analysis (Appendix C) (2) Qualitative discourse analysis
Public Sphere	Twitter	(1) Qualitative discourse analysis (2) Analysis of key moments (3) Sentiment Analysis (Appendix D)
Public Sphere	News Coverage	(1) Qualitative discourse analysis (2) Analysis of key moments (3) Sentiment Analysis (Appendix D)

### ***Responses from the Public Sphere***

To study how the broader public sphere criticized Flynn’s comments, we focus on Twitter, because the unintended audience member posted on Twitter and because of its popularity among journalists (Swasy, 2016). Tweets posted from May 28, 2021 to June 5, 2021 were collected from the Twitter API through the R package *academicTwitteR* (Barrie & Ho, 2021) using the keywords “flynn” and “myanmar” and hashtags about Flynn (#generalflynn, #michaelflynn, #flynn, #boycottflynn). This produced a Twitter corpus of 87,701 tweets.

In addition to Twitter, we also collect news data from MediaCloud, a news archive compiled using RSS feeds from news organizations. Searching in 317 media sources (consisting of a variety of local, national, and international media such as Baltimore Sun, AP, CNN, NYT, Newsweek, and USA Today; see Appendix D), we find a total of 206 stories mentioning both Flynn and Myanmar from May 28 to June 5, 2021.

For this layer, we assessed when tweets and coverage peaked, treating these as key moments of public criticism toward Flynn’s comments (see Appendix D for additional text analysis). A summary of these methods can be found in [Table 1](#).

## **Results**

As we are studying a sequence of communicative interactions across multiple social media, we present our analysis chronologically; this approach to case studies has also been employed by Chadwick (2017). We begin by analyzing the original statement made by Flynn during the Patriot RoundUp (RQ1). Then, we study how the statement was outed by an unintended audience member and criticized by non-QAnon publics (RQ2). After, we look at Flynn’s use of retroactive doublespeak to counter the criticism (RQ3). Finally, we see how QAnon supporters on Telegram responded to Flynn’s retroactive doublespeak (RQ4).

### ***The Statement: Flynn Addresses the Patriot RoundUp Audience***

As noted, the Patriot RoundUp event was hosted in Dallas, Texas, from May 28 to 31, 2022, with roughly 800 people in attendance (Hooks, 2021).<sup>3</sup> Conversations with attendees and statements from speakers indicate that the event was organized, in part, as a response to social media suspensions following January 6th. Attendees also noted that this event was

unique to QAnon; there was a sense of surprise at the scale, size, and professionalism of the event.

During the event, Flynn was scheduled to speak on stage twice: once for his keynote on Saturday, May 29th, and second as part of a “Digital Soldiers” panel with Jason Sullivan and panel host Doug Billings, on Sunday, May 30th. It was during the second appearance that an audience member asked, “[I’m a] simple Marine. I wanna know why || what happened in Myanmar (pronounced: /mɪnæ’mvɜːr/ instead of /mjæn’mɑːr/) || can’t || happen || here.” Flynn responded, “No reason. I mean, i-it should happen here. No reason. That’s right.” The audience responded to this remark very positively. Many cheered, particularly after Flynn’s use of the word “should” (this was picked up by the praat analysis; see Appendix B).

In conversation analysis, this back-and-forth exchange constitutes an adjacency pair (Antaki, 2008), with the response consisting of four parts: (1) No reason. (2) I mean, it should happen here. (3) No reason. (4) That’s right. In the first section, Flynn begins with an answer, “No reason,” providing the minimal amount of information needed to respond to the question. Next, he uses a filler phrase, “I mean,” (delimiting the first portion of the response from the second), followed by, “it should happen here.” This portion of Flynn’s response elaborates on his first, and matters for two reasons. Phonetically, the praat analysis reveals that Flynn’s pitch increases as he says “should,” signaling new information rather than a continuation of information (Brown, 1983). Semantically, Flynn escalates the modal verb used: though the speaker says “can’t” (a conjunction of “can” and “not”), Flynn uses a modal verb with a stronger tone (“should,” indicating obligation or advice), and a future-oriented perspective. Taken as a whole, this utterance affirms and escalates the belief embedded in the question: not only does Flynn think it can happen, but that it *should*. Following this, Flynn then repeats his initial statement, “No reason,” and affirms the audience’s applause by saying, “that’s right.”

This speech act is an example of antagonistic discourse, reflecting the belief shared by some members of the QAnon community that a military coup to reinstate former President Trump to office would be justifiable. In the live crowd, someone sheepishly looked around and said, “you can’t say that out loud!” to others around them, suggesting that at least some members of the audience knew that Flynn’s remarks were out of the bounds of acceptable speech, even in a pro-QAnon context. But by saying what others may not have been willing to vocalize, Flynn was perceived as a truthsayer and was celebrated for his response.

The references to Myanmar were not unexpected. Prior to the event, calls for a Myanmar-style coup in the U.S. appeared in QAnon-linked spaces, such as/pol/ (“politically incorrect”) on 4chan. At the event, discourse had also escalated over the weekend. While speakers on the first day focused on unity, the second day’s speeches were rife with election fraud claims, celebrations of January 6, and calls for a military intervention to reinstate Trump. By the time the Marine asked his question, such discourses were commonplace within the Patriot RoundUp.

Though the Patriot RoundUp was publicly accessible, there is reason to believe that attendees and speakers believed their discourse would only reach supportive ears. For example, the event’s security (run by the para-military group, “1st Amendment Praetorian”)<sup>4</sup> was tasked with removing so-called infiltrators, perhaps creating a false sense that the event was a safe space for antagonistic discourse. However, there was little the organizers could do to stop non-QAnon supporters from watching the live-streamed

footage or attending. And, as it happens, there was at least one unintended audience member in the virtual audience.

### **The Outing: Live-Tweeting the Patriot RoundUp**

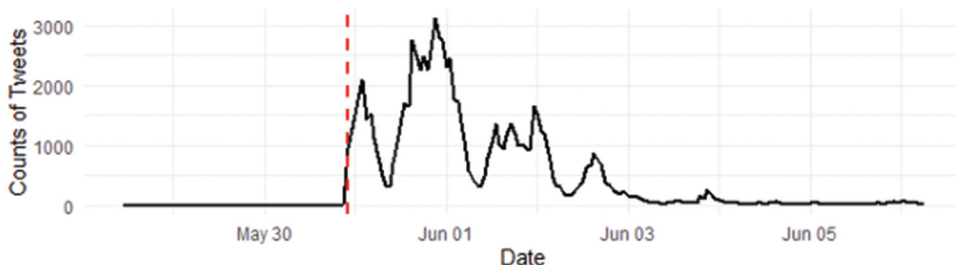
During the Patriot RoundUp, there was at least one Twitter user who would live-tweet the event while watching the live-stream: @MC\_Hyperbole (RQ2). As far as we can tell, @MC\_Hyperbole was the first to tweet about Flynn’s response: “Audience member is asking why what happened in Myanmar can’t/hasn’t happened here. Flynn replies that it should happen here.” (Hyperbole A, 2021a). They later posted a clip of it (Hyperbole B, 2021b).

Within minutes, it was retweeted by Alex Kaplan (ALKapDC, 2021), the Senior Researcher at *MediaMatters* with a verified account of over 25 thousand followers: “Former national security advisor Michael Flynn at the QAnon Dallas event endorses a military coup happening in the US like it did in Myanmar.” This tweet linked to a *MediaMatters* story (Kaplan, 2021), which did not discuss Flynn’s comments explicitly, but contained screenshots from online QAnon communities discussing the Myanmar coup.

Once shared by Kaplan and other journalists, the news proliferated on Twitter (see Figure 1). In the following days the most liked and retweeted posts in our sample were posted by House Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA), Paul Krugman, and former military officials condemning Flynn’s statement, with some calling for Flynn to be arrested for treason. Roughly 3.8% of these ( $n = 3,395$ ) retweeted, quote-tweeted, or mentioned Hyperbole’s tweets (2021b, 2021).

Given that media actors were among the first to amplify @MC\_Hyperbole’s tweet, it is unsurprising that news outlets quickly began publishing articles about Flynn’s comments. In the week following the event, 217 stories were written about Flynn’s comments (see Figure 2); with many citing @MC\_Hyperbole as a source. The first, by Business Insider, occurred a mere three hours after the comment was made (Vlamiš, 2021). Most articles (80%,  $n = 174$ ) mentioned the word QAnon, when describing the event (e.g., “QAnon event”), and 29% ( $n = 64$ ) mentioned the event’s name (“patriot roundup” OR “patriot round up” OR “for god and country”).

The time series in Figure 2 has several noticeable spikes in attention. Immediately following Flynn’s comment on May 30 and 31, many news stories covered Flynn’s comment. The second spike in attention, occurring on June 1, focused on Flynn’s retroactive



**Figure 1.** Hourly time series of tweets mentioning Flynn and Myanmar, May 28 to June 6, 2021 (CST). Notes: The dotted line refer to when @MC\_Hyperbole tweeted about the comment.



**Figure 2.** An hourly time series plot of the number of articles about Flynn’s comment. Notes: The dotted line refers to when @Mc\_Hyperbole tweeted about the comment.

doublespeak response. In this second spike, many of the headlines described Flynn as denying his comments, juxtaposing his denial to the live-streamed recording of his comments. Of the 217 articles, 70 referenced Twitter (of these, many directly mentioned @MC\_Hyperbole or embedded one of their tweets) and 50 referenced Flynn’s response, which we discuss below.

### ***The Response: Retroactive Doublespeak***

The organizers of the Patriot RoundUp and Flynn himself did not respond publicly until that night, at 1:38 AM CT on May 31, 2021, when Sydney Powell shared a screenshot of a tweet by writer Seth Abramson (who was critical of Flynn’s comments) alongside the following response: “The above is #FakeNews taken out of context and grossly magnified to the point of distortion” (John, 2021a, 2021b; The screenshot and Powell’s response were then shared by QAnon John to the Patriot RoundUp Telegram channel.

By that afternoon, other prominent organizers were criticizing the media attention. The first came from Billings, who posted on Telegram at 12:21 pm on May 31, 2022. In the post, Billings was critical of the media coverage: “The Fake News media is on a crusade to twist his response in the situation, and they are actively lying about it on social media and news outlets.” He also suggested that the self-identified Marine “was apparently wearing a hidden microphone and recorder,” implying that the person asking the question was an infiltrator. Flynn himself issued a statement on Parler (Chaitin, 2021):

“Let me be VERY CLEAR – There is NO reason whatsoever for any coup in America, and I do not and have not at any time called for any action of that sort.

Any reporting of any other belief by me is a boldface fabrication based on twisted reporting at a lively panel at a conference of Patriotic Americans who love this country, just as I do.

I am no stranger to media manipulating my words and therefore let me repeat my response to a question asked at the conference: There is no reason it (a coup) should happen here (in America).”

Like Billings, Flynn criticized news organizations’ interpretations of his Myanmar statement, describing it as “a boldface fabrication based on twisted reporting.” But it is in his last paragraph that Flynn engages in retroactive doublespeak: “There is no reason it (a coup) should happen here (in America).” This written form is a re-interpretation of his original

statement: “No reason. I mean, it should happen here.” In addition to reinterpreting the punctuation, Flynn’s exclusion of the filler phrase, “I mean,” obfuscates the meaning of his statement as he re-interprets it in written form.

These responses indicate that Flynn and the organizers of the event were adamant about refuting the broader media system’s interpretation of Flynn’s comments. Despite receiving initial support among their in-person audience (and, as we will discuss, online), the outpouring of criticism from an audience that Flynn was not intentionally speaking to appeared to generate significant pressure; at least, enough for Flynn to employ retroactive doublespeak.

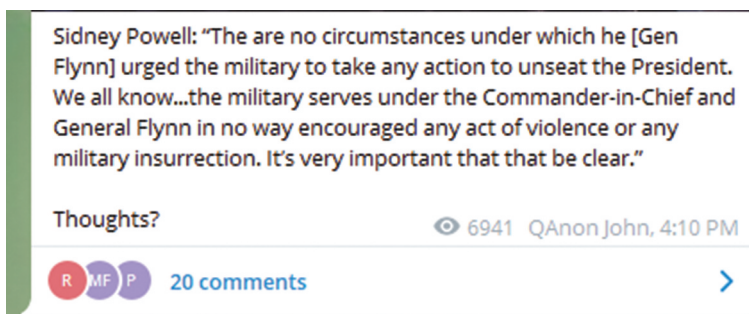
### **The Aftermath: Re-Interpreting Flynn’s Comments**

To understand how the QAnon community responded to Flynn’s retroactive doublespeak, we turn to QAnon John’s Telegram channel, consisting mostly of conversation about the Patriot RoundUp at the time. At 10:02 AM on May 31, QAnon John re-posted the footage of Flynn’s remarks at with the comment, “General Flynn says the quiet part out loud” (QAnon John, 2021c, Jadoul et al., 2018). The phrase, “quiet part out loud,” is not new, nor is it unique to Q supporters, but its use here is notable. First, the statement implies that there is something readily known but not explicitly stated (“the quiet part”). Second, verbalizing this knowledge (i.e., saying it “out loud”) is counter to social conventions.

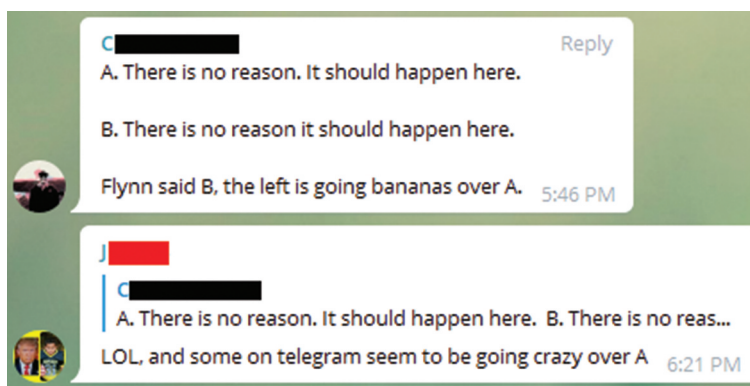
Though QAnon John was quick to share the retroactive doublespeak discourse of other Q influencers, he also built on the ambiguity of the interpretation, even soliciting the QAnon online audience to react and share their opinion, as seen in Figure 3.

Responses to the retroactive doublespeak varied (e.g., Figure 4). While some users were more supportive of the initial interpretation of the statement, others advanced the revised interpretation of the organizers, blaming “Fake News” for mischaracterizing the statement.

The first user in Figure 4 used punctuations (specifically, the period) to distinguish the different interpretations. They describe “the left” as “going bananas” because the left had interpreted Flynn’s statement with a period (i.e., the standard interpretation). In response, the second user notes that “some on telegram” also interpreted Flynn’s statement accordingly (QAnon John’s statement that Flynn said “the quiet part out loud” would have interpreted Flynn’s statement as “A,” because if it were “B,” the intended meaning need not be quiet). Another user noted that they interpreted the statement as “A:” “But the



**Figure 3.** A post by QAnon John quoting Sidney Powell and soliciting comments.



**Figure 4.** An interaction between two users on The Patriot Voice Telegram regarding Flynn’s comments.

crowds and followers of this channel thought he said A, and that’s what they’re cheering for. How else would Trump be returned to the White House by August?” (user1573539685, 2021). Here, the user points to audience members as evidence for what Flynn said.

Additional comments took the conversation in another direction, focusing on how a military response would not be a coup because the coup happened on November 3rd:

Regardless of what he said/meant, it wouldn’t be a coup. The coup occurred Nov 3, 2020. A coup is overthrowing a legitimately elected official. That’s exactly what Biden did. It would be their duty, according to The Declaration of Independence, to defend this nation against a tyrannical government and/or takeover by a hostile/foreign power. Their DUTY. (user1386363645, 2021)

This line of discourse was notably pro-violent, often recommending a range of military actions, from enacting militia law to discussing the need to “get a noose” for liberals and news media. Another user suggested the following: “I’m thinking Martial law would have to be used in some cities or states. Some leftists can’t control themselves.” (user1509214736, 2021).

Naturally, this more violent discourse was (1) exactly the reason why these individuals were removed from mainstream media and (2) would only be present in QAnon-specific spaces. And even in a more supportive space, the use of doublespeak or intentional ambiguity was noticeable. Rather than explicitly saying violence is necessary, users spoke in less actionable verbs, relying on key noun phrases like “the military” and “martial law.” For example, the statement, “the military is the only way,” was a common refrain that did not explicitly call for violence but implied that the “only way,” means “the only way to take our country back.”

Finally, some celebrated the ambiguity of the statement, saying it was an effective strategy for saying something extreme while also creating plausible deniability: “The general is an absolute genius. Same words, different pauses and punctuation.” (user1532475558, 2021).

The full range of these responses reveals a backstage negotiation over the interpretation of Flynn’s retroactive doublespeak, going beyond a simple binary choice of acceptance or denial. The conversation reveals a series of textual winks that nod to the public necessity of walking back Flynn saying the “quiet part out loud.” Flynn’s categorical denial and construction of the media as the enemy aligned with the ongoing narratives in QAnon,

and yet some expressed skepticism given the difference between his statement and his subsequent claim.

## Discussion

Using the case of a QAnon-linked event, the Patriot RoundUp, our findings illustrate how retroactive doublespeak can be used by anti-publics trying to backpedal comments that have been outed to the broader public sphere. We first lay the conditions that initiated its use: (1) an antagonistic statement and (2) criticism from the broader public when the statement is disseminated by an interloper: someone who is not a member of the anti-public but is nevertheless present in the audience. This process – of making the statement and being critiqued for it – relies on the porosity of the hybrid media system and the desire for anti-publics to recruit audience members. Were the event not to be live-streamed, it is unclear whether Flynn’s statement would have received such rapid and widespread attention. Thus, the event’s effort to reach a broader, online audience was also its undoing, as it made it easier for unwanted audience members like @MC\_Hyperbole to watch and divulge the comment on Twitter, a platform heavily used by journalists (Jurkowitz & Gottfried, 2022). In turn, journalists amplified the criticism of the statement, producing over 200 stories on just one statement made at this event.

The widespread criticism of the statement in the public sphere, which we assess using both Twitter and news coverage, is ultimately what motivated Flynn and other event organizers to employ retroactive doublespeak. Exploiting the ambiguous nature of the statement in written form, Flynn took his own words out of context and reinterpreted them to produce an understanding in direct opposition to its original meaning.

Finally, we examine the extent to which members of that anti-public, including those that supported the original statement, accepted the revised statement. Our results suggest that the success of retroactive doublespeak is mixed – while some Telegram users aligned with this retelling of the statement, others were quick to point out that the revision did not fit with the spoken statement from the live-streamed video. This finding reveals the limits of retroactive doublespeak, particularly when a user can juxtapose the original content with the revision.

This analysis of an anti-public’s use of retroactive doublespeak yields two key insights. First, it highlights how the contentious relationships between anti-publics and other publics transpire in a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017). When an anti-public member, “says the quiet part out loud,” they may be rewarded by their in-group. However, the porosity of media systems – the ability for content to jump from one platform to another – opens this discourse to criticism from the public sphere. The exposure of this antagonistic discourse and the forced use of retroactive doublespeak, therefore, suggests that anti-publics can be repudiated if called out. However, without regular monitoring, pro-violence, anti-democratic rhetoric can just as easily flourish in anti-public spaces. In conducting this analysis, we lay out a framework for studying how anti-publics obfuscate anti-democratic discourse and try to deceive audiences into supporting political violence, with mixed success.

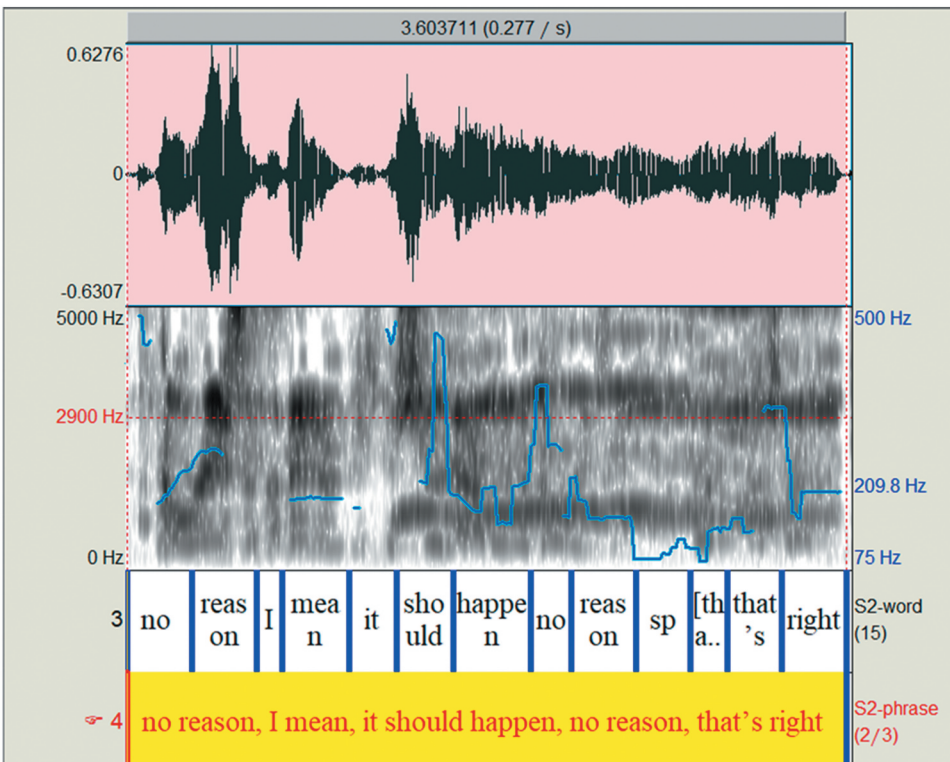
Second, by laying out how retroactive doublespeak could operate, future scholars can study not only its use by anti-publics, but also other political actors and groups seeking to create plausible deniability. Just as more proactive forms of doublespeak – including deception and dog-whistling – have been employed by many political actors (Albertson, 2015; Clementson,

2018), retroactive doublespeak is not solely used by anti-publics. Indeed, there are other notable examples of retroactive doublespeak in the mainstream, such as when Sen. Mike Braun claimed that he “misunderstood a line of questioning” about interracial marriage (Weissmann, 2022, para. 6), or when an attorney, defending an Oath Keeper serving as “security” for January 6 insurrectionists, stated that his client “met with Secret Service,” but quickly revised his statement to “encountered Secret Service” (Palmer, 2021). And the use of retroactive doublespeak in U.S. politics is not limited to the right: after a statement made by Biden that suggested Black people supporting Trump “ain’t black” (Wise, 2020, para. 4), the Biden campaign claimed the statement was made in jest. Aligning with our earlier definition of retroactive doublespeak, these examples follow the three steps identified through our analysis: an initial statement, public criticism, and the resulting revision of the initial statement.

However, anti-publics may be more reliant on retroactive doublespeak given their use of antagonistic discourse, which diverges from democratic norms. Additionally, anti-public use of retroactive doublespeak is also normatively more dangerous when used successfully.

**Limitations and Future Research**

We also acknowledge that our work may be limited by its narrow scope, which precludes us from making more generalizable claims. Future work can build on these findings by studying a greater array of anti-publics and discursive tactics, or by studying retroactive doublespeak in different political contexts. Additionally, while our analysis covers many platforms, the platforms we study are used only by a subset of the U.S. population, and there are still others worth considering, including Gab, BitChute, and Parler.





Nevertheless, our work reveals the importance of studying how antagonistic discourses from anti-publics emerge, and how it can be refuted. Tactics like retroactive doublespeak may be effective on some of an anti-public's audience, but it also cannot completely erase the damage done by the initial statement. Our hope is that this research motivates scholars to study anti-publics, retroactive doublespeak, and the dynamics of how publics compete and conflict within the hybrid media system.

## Notes

1. Anti-publics are not secret societies or hidden cults; they recruit supporters and build alliances in the public sphere. Historically, anti-publics such as the Ku Klux Klan solicited membership via bloc recruitment (McVeigh, 2009). Now, anti-publics recruit through online communication (Gaudette, Scrivens, & Venkatesh, 2022).
2. While we sought to study data from YouTube, 13 of the 14 videos we collected were removed within a month of being uploaded. None of the videos remain on YouTube.
3. Though the event was originally set to be held at a venue called Gilley's, the venue dropped the event (Vaughn, 2021), causing organizers John and Amy to relocate the event to Eddie Deen's Ranch.
4. The 1st Amendment Praetorians were later subpoenaed by the [January 6th committee](#).

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## Notes on contributors

*Josephine Lukito* is an Assistant Professor at the University of Texas at Austin in the School of Media and Journalism. She is also affiliated with the Center for Media Engagement.

*Jacob Gursky* is an affiliate fellow at the University of Texas at Austin's Center for Media Engagement.

*Jordan Foley* is an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Production at the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University.

*Yunkang Yang* is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication & Journalism at Texas A&M University. He is also affiliated with the Data Justice Lab at Texas A&M and Institute for Data, Democracy & Politics at the George Washington University.

*Katie Joseff* is an affiliate fellow at the University of Texas at Austin's Center for Media Engagement.

*Porismita Borah* is an Associate Professor at the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication, Washington State University. Borah primarily studies message effects in digital environment in the context of both politics and health.

## ORCID

Josephine Lukito  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0771-1070>

Porismita Borah  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1140-4233>

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