



# QANON ACCOUNTS ON INSTAGRAM: WELCOME BACK

· OR MAYBE THEY NEVER LEFT ·

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# 1.

## INTRODUCTION

### Update 28 October 2020:

After we closed our research paper on 26 October, we learned that yesterday Facebook announced the removal of about 18,700 QAnon-related accounts on Instagram. Therefore our study sample downsized from 740 to 625 active accounts.



In summer 2019 Yahoo News exposed an FBI document warning about the US emergence of new conspiracy theories such as QAnon, advancing the need to address them as a domestic terrorism threat.<sup>1</sup>

Over one year later, very little has been done to curtail the spread of those unfounded theories, while social media have indeed pushed them even further. About two months ago, a Storyful report (republished on the Wall Street Journal) showed how QAnon was actually able to attract a broad range of followers especially on Facebook.<sup>2</sup>

Only after this and other reports on mainstream media, Facebook mentioned a platform-wide operation to crackdown on the misinformation strategies carried by QAnon and similar groups<sup>3</sup>. However, this supposed crackdown was another open failure, as pointed out by New York Times about a month ago.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Exclusive: FBI document warns conspiracy theories are a new domestic terrorism threat" Jana Winter, Yahoo News, August 1 2019, <https://news.yahoo.com/fbi-documents-conspiracy-theories-terrorism-160000507.html>

<sup>2</sup> "QAnon Booms on Facebook as Conspiracy Group Gains Mainstream Traction", Deepa S., The Wall Street Journal, August 13 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/qanon-booms-on-facebook-as-conspiracy-group-gains-mainstream-traction-11597367457>

<sup>3</sup> "An Update to How We Address Movements and Organizations Tied to Violence", Facebook, Facebook Inc <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/08/addressing-movements-and-organizations-tied-to-violence/>

<sup>4</sup> "Facebook Tried to Limit QAnon it Failed", Sheera Frenkel, The New York Times, Sept 18 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/18/technology/facebook-tried-to-limit-qanon-it-failed.html>

In a recent in-depth follow-up, the Wall Street Journal explained that “QAnon is a far right-wing, loosely organized network and community of believers who embrace a range of unsubstantiated beliefs. These views center around the idea that a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles—mainly consisting of what they see as elitist Democrats, politicians, journalists, entertainment moguls and other institutional figures—have long controlled much of the so-called “deep state” government, which they say seeks to undermine President Trump, mostly with aid of media and entertainment outlets”<sup>5</sup>

Experts, politicians and journalists alike underlined the inability - or unwillingness - by major social networks to properly address this issue during our particularly dangerous times, in the middle of a worldwide pandemic and on the verge of a historical US election. Among various top dailies, the Washington Post denounced that “Facebook and Twitter missed years of warning signs about the conspiracy theory’s violent nature”<sup>6</sup> and the Financial Times detailed “Why Facebook needs to be more paranoid about QAnon”<sup>7</sup>.

With this pressure mounting all around, on October 6 Facebook finally updated its August 19 announcement, explaining that “a new wave of account closures will begin on Facebook, Instagram and all its platforms”.

We decided to take a closer look into this new claim. We applied our data analysis skills and visual recognition tools to investigate whether Facebook actually managed, as QAnon members would say, “to get the rabbits back into the den” or if they are actually still around.

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<sup>5</sup> “What Is QAnon? What We Know About the Conspiracy Theory”, WSJ Staff, The Wall Street Journal, October 15 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-is-qanon-what-we-know-about-the-conspiracy-theory-11597694801>

<sup>6</sup> “As QAnon grew, Facebook and Twitter missed years of warning signs about the conspiracy theory’s violent nature”, Craig Timberg and Elizabeth Dwoskin, Washington Post, October 3 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/10/01/facebook-qanon-conspiracies-trump/>

<sup>7</sup> “Why Facebook needs to be more paranoid about QAnon”, Hannah Murphy, Financial Times, October 6 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/5e4ff099-caba-49c6-956c-bde2e51a8447>

## 2.

# OUR RESEARCH TEAM STUDIES AND EXPERTISE

As an independent research group focused on social media, in recent years Ghost Data covered such crucial topics as digital propaganda, online counterfeit<sup>8</sup> and terrorism activities<sup>9</sup>. We also studied social networks' major trends<sup>10</sup> and right before the 2016 US election we exposed the activities of pro-Trump bots and Russian accounts on Instagram<sup>11</sup>.

Last year we also published a report<sup>12</sup> about suspicious Instagram accounts, probably based in Eastern Europe, attacking Donald Trump through a series of meme campaigns. Later Instagram confirmed our analysis, removing some of such accounts<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> "Instagram and counterfeiting in 2019: new features, old problems", Ghost Data [https://ghostdata.io/report/Instagram\\_Counterfeiting\\_GD.pdf](https://ghostdata.io/report/Instagram_Counterfeiting_GD.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> "Islamic State backers find ephemeral platform in Instagram", Lori Hinnant, Associated Press, Sept 20 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/97119155ed934ad9ad438890a29828a2>

<sup>10</sup> "Spambots, fake views and other issues on Instagram and Tiktok", Ghost Data [https://ghostdata.io/report/ig\\_tiktok\\_fake.pdf](https://ghostdata.io/report/ig_tiktok_fake.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> "Donald Trump's Instagram Following Is Full Of Bots And Russians", Thomas Brewster, Forbes, Nov 7 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2016/11/07/25000-russians-follow-trump-instagram-bots-everywhere/>

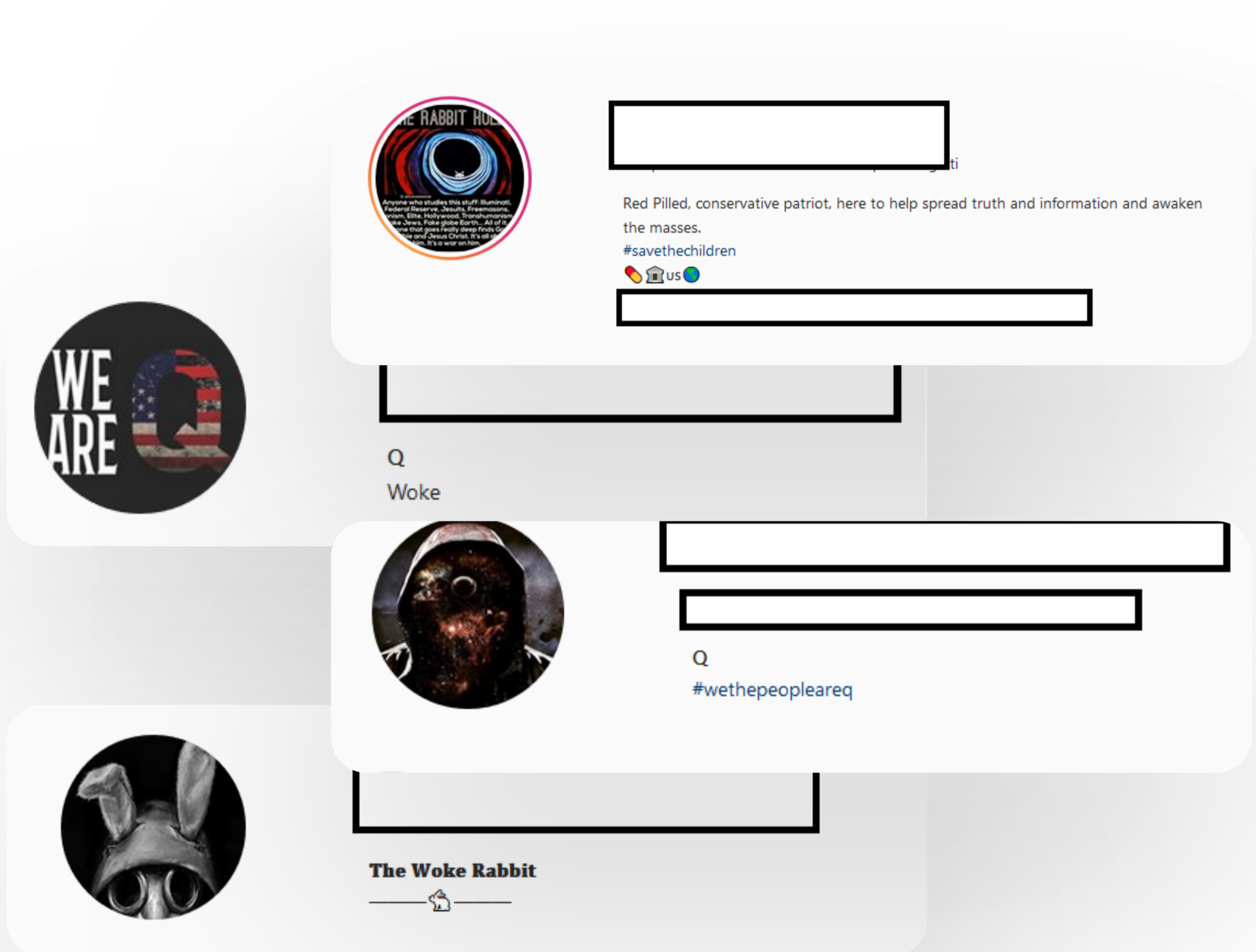
<sup>12</sup> "What's going on? Anti-Trump memes and other oddities on Instagram", Ghost Data, May 13 2019, [https://ghostdata.io/report/GD\\_IJDJT05.pdf](https://ghostdata.io/report/GD_IJDJT05.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> "Coordinated anti-Trump campaign emerges on Instagram: study", Crispian Balmer, Reuters, May 20 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-instagram/coordinated-anti-trump-campaign-emerges-on-instagram-study-idUSKCN1SQ1S9>

### 3.

## METHODOLOGY

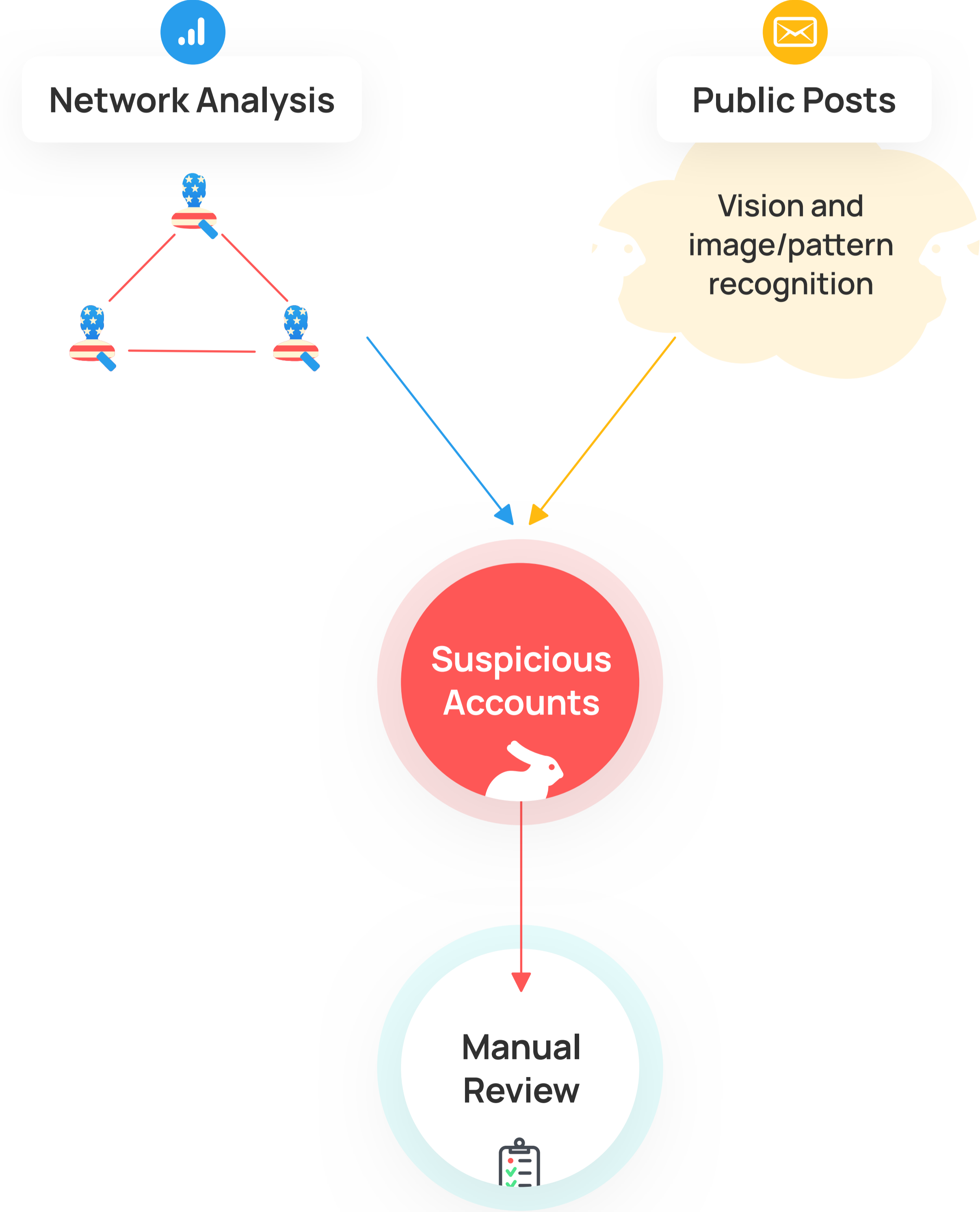
Applying and expanding our data analysis and visual recognition techniques used in our previous research studies, we started by analyzing contents and following-follower links of several QAnon accounts on Instagram.



We analyzed their following-followers connections, content activities (post, number of likes, number of comments), user profiles and related features.

We then carried out a manual review of those accounts to increase the reliability level of our research method. Overall, we deployed a variety of techniques and tools, including network analysis, visual recognition, text extraction from images (OCR), reverse image search and other content analysis.

We consider as QAnon accounts those that posted at least 5 posts about QAnon topics or with QAnon content. If those accounts have less than 10 posts in total, we consider them as QAnon accounts if they posted at least 2 QAnon-related posts.



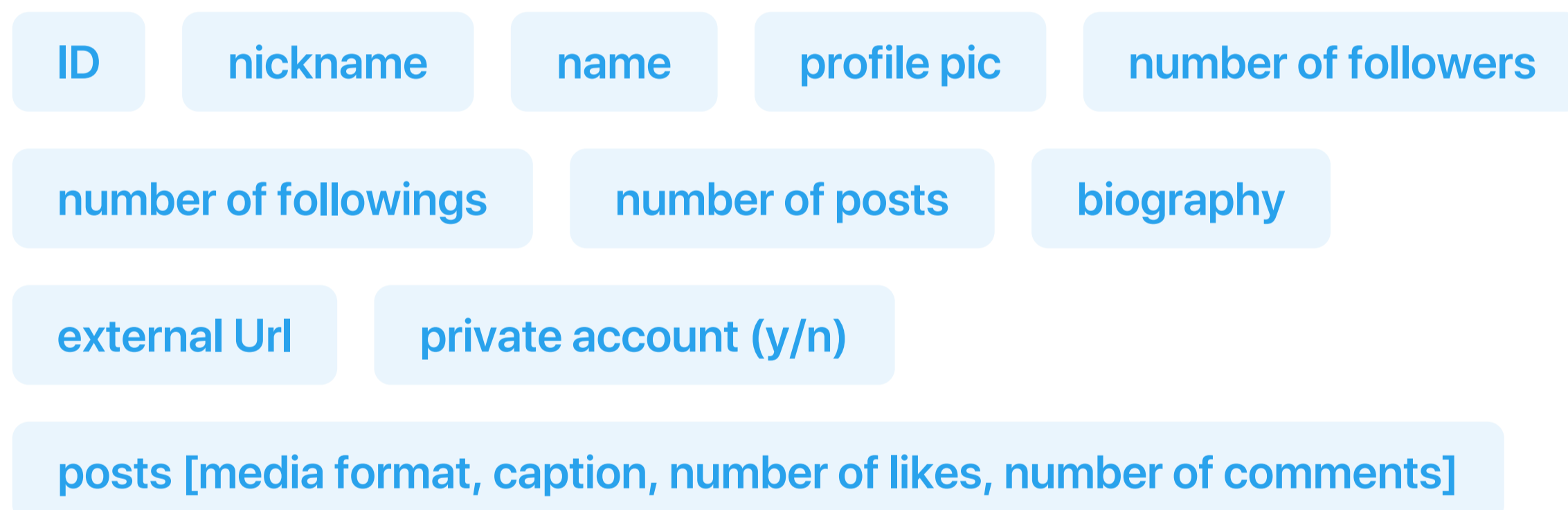
## 4.

### GENERAL DATA SETS

In its October 6 post, Facebook stated that “In the first month, we removed over 1,500 Pages and Groups for QAnon”. However, it failed to specify the quantity of profiles actually deleted on its various platforms, particularly on Facebook itself and on Instagram.

Our analysis began on October 8, 2020 and we were able to identify a network including about 740 Instagram accounts that regularly share QAnon material and/or openly qualify themselves as its members - using specific keywords or emoticons in their name, nickname, biography, external url or profile photo.

For each account we analyzed the following data:



Such accounts seem very active and produce a variety of content. These accounts published a total of 738,819 posts. Ephemeral contents such as Stories are excluded from these stats.

!!Hs1Jq13jV6 10/14/20 (Wed) 21:02:48 ID: e1ffb (2)  
 No.11076039 >>11076065 >>11076068 >>11076080 >>11076083  
 >>11076086 >>11076088 >>11076089 >>11076090 >>11076094  
 >>11076101 >>11076104 >>11076105 >>11076106 >>11076107  
 File (hide): 1b129fc0576cf95...:jpg (377.58 KB, 1500x1500, 1:1,  
 1b129fc0576cf95e41acf75474...:jpg) (h) (u)

After today, make more sense?  
 Buckle up.  
 Q

Disclaimer: this post and the subject matter and contents thereof - text,

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Heaven (ID: OgvLar/F) 10/22/20(Thu)01:23:16 No.284041652

Even The Little Boy Gets it.

1587446325447.png  
 614 KB PNG

>>284041305 (OP) #

[Redacted]

Creepy Joe.  
 #biden2020 #whereshunter  
 #bidencrimefamily #trump2020

[Redacted]

Kelly O'Donnell. (NBC News, NBC Nightly News, Meet The Press, Today, MSNBC)

18 U.S. Code § 2384 - Seditious Conspiracy  
 18 U.S. Code § 1962 - R.I.C.O.

[Redacted] the list goes on and on.  
 Enjoy the show... 🍷

1 sett.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

board...  
 SOROS puppets 🇺🇸 GALORE!!!  
 Stealing the election is how  
 America is SO messed up right  
 now...  
 TONS of voter fraud from  
 corruption and SOROS puppet  
 show money laundering

this is NOT a map of COVID...it is a map of human trafficking. if we spread the numbers about human trafficking like we do COVID, more people would be aware. multi-billion dollar industry that has 25 MILLION people enslaved USA is the largest for child porn. #SaveTheChildren

[Redacted] Segui

q.ue\_the\_truth\_ #savethechildren  
 #pedogate #awakening #qanon  
 #openyoureyes #pizzagate

[Redacted]

mainstream media

Wear a mask largest pedophilia ring ever known being unraveled

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

#corruptmedia #mediacorruption  
 #wearmask #childtrafficking  
 #childtraffickingawareness  
 #pedowoodisreal #pedogateisreal  
 #pedogate2020 #pedogatenews  
 #childsexualabuse  
 #childsexualabuseawareness  
 #adrenochrome  
 #pedophilesnomore  
 #everychildmatters #savethechildren



It should be noted that, since Instagram started deleting and banning those accounts, QAnon adherents have drastically reduced the use of their typical hashtags, such as:

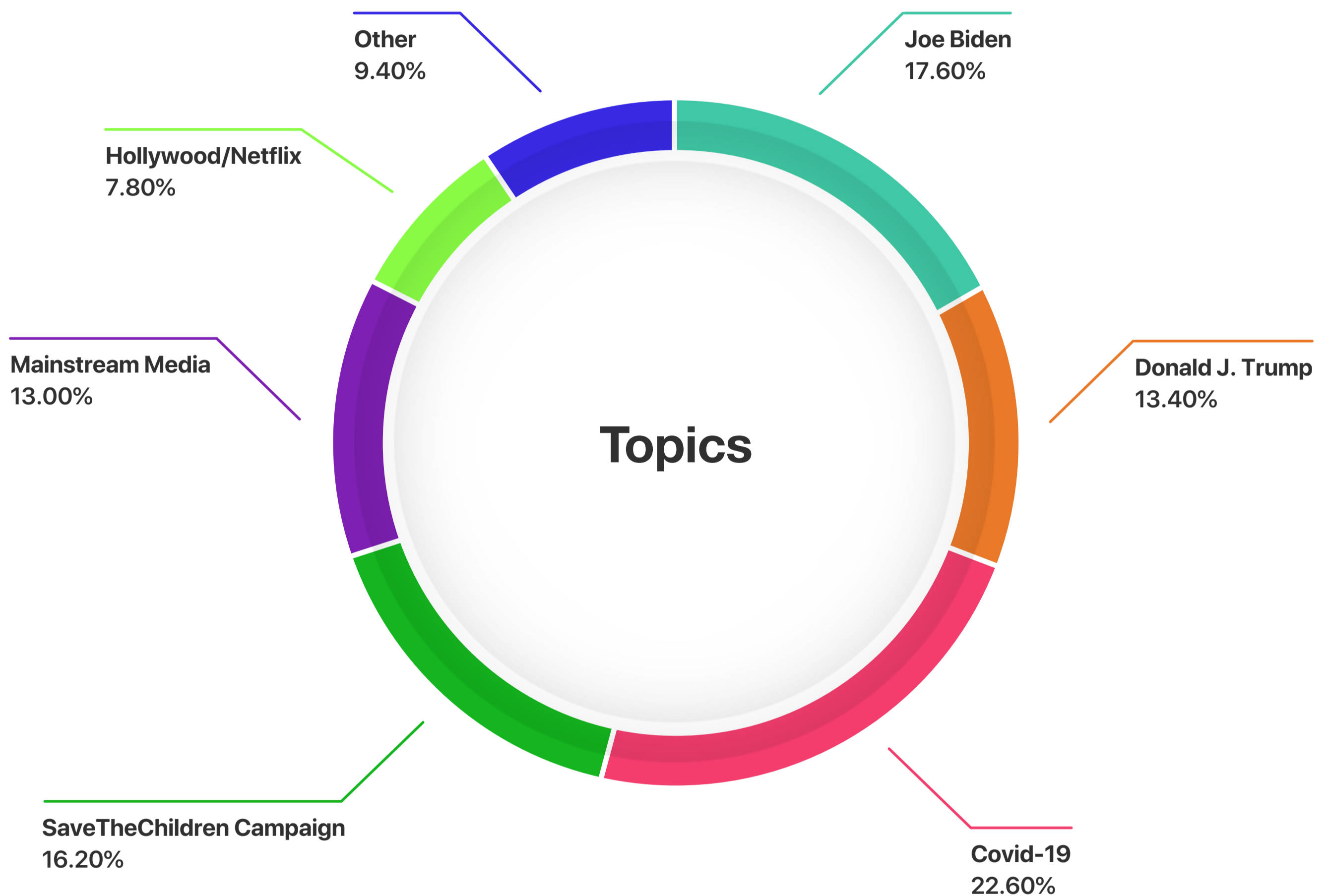


These changes further complicated our research, but we managed to estimate that those 740 accounts generated a total of almost 40 million engagement actions (39.9M). On average, each of them produces about 54 likes and comments per post. This is a conservative estimate, as the "save posts" are not public data.

## 5.

### DETAILED QANON TOPICS

On a sample of 500 posts analyzed using visual recognition and manually, the following chart details the main topics addressed by QAnon accounts on Instagram.

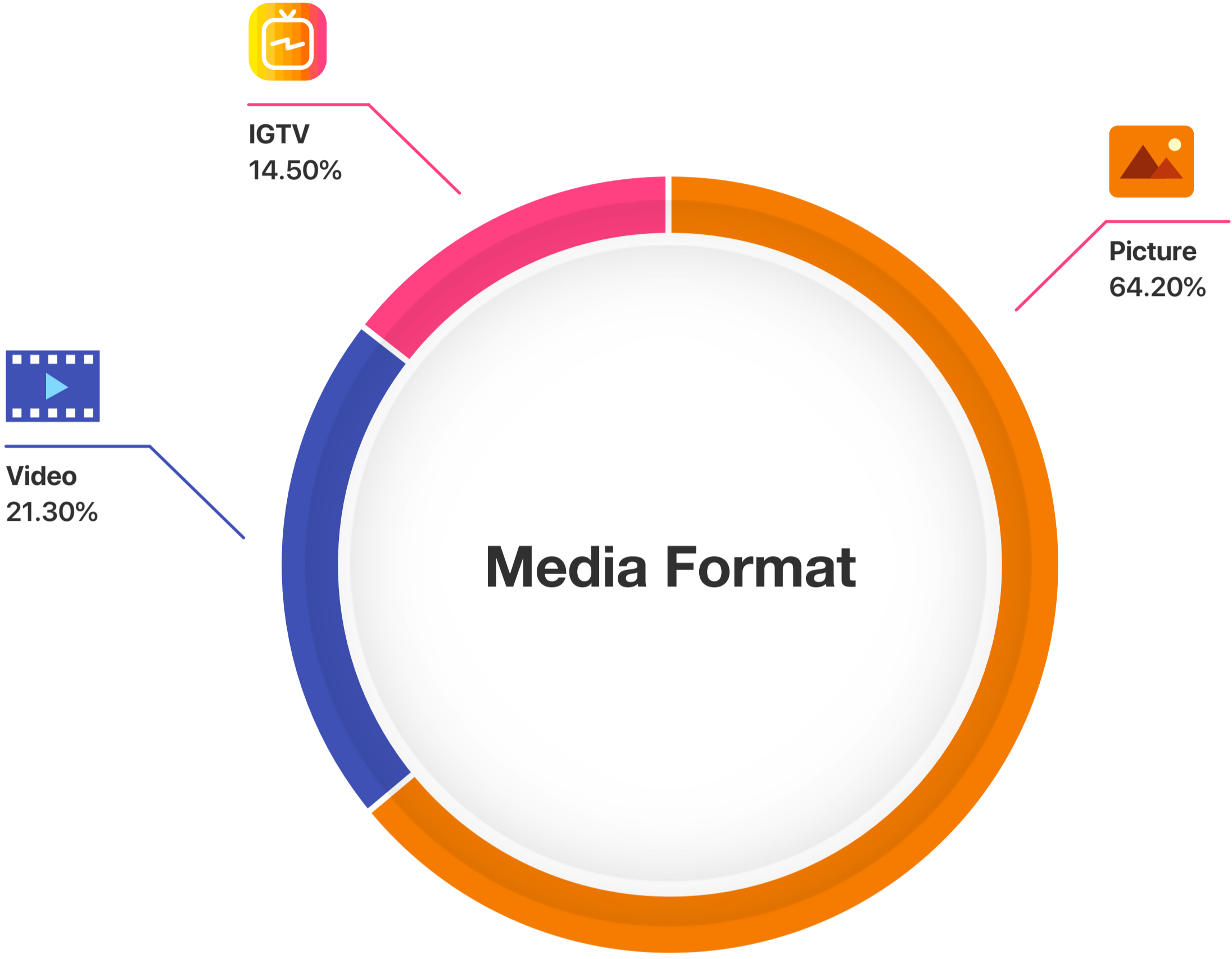


Other: includes posts against big tech companies for supposed censorship, “pizzagate” posts and similar issues.

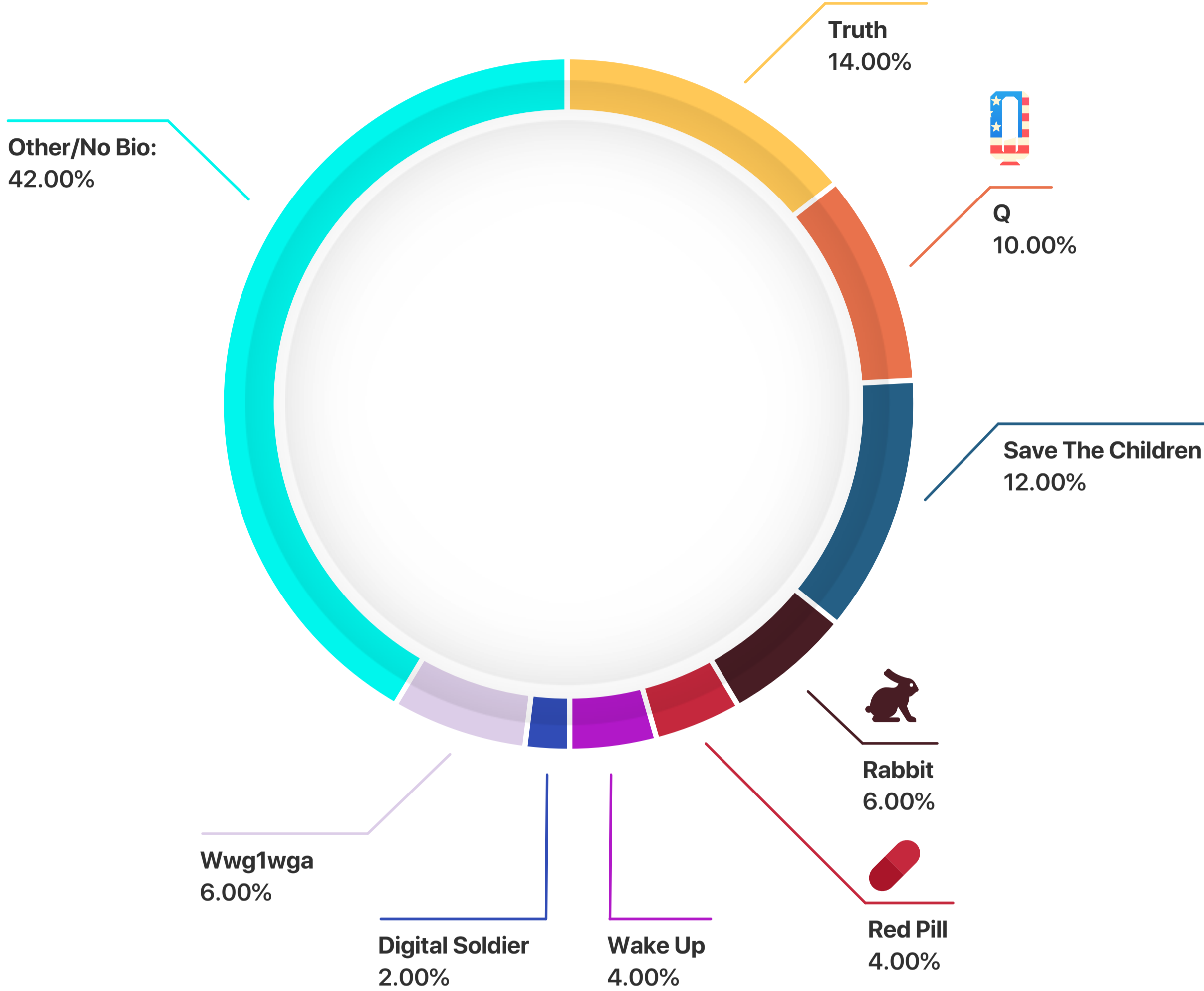
Donald J. Trump: most posts are endorsement and/or positive.

Joe Biden: most posts are critical and/or negative, because, according to QAnon supporters, “he is a pedophile”.

For a sample of about 2,000 posts, the most relevant content formats are video and IGTV (standalone video application), followed by images only - as shown here below:



It is also interesting to note the most used words in the short bios of those Instagram accounts (based on a sample of 100 users):



As shown above, a majority of such accounts (sharing their following-followers with other QAnon-related users) includes explicit references to QAnon in their bio.

## 6.

### CONCLUSION

Despite some technical difficulties and a very tight deadline, we were able to identify and monitor a conspicuous set of Instagram accounts involved and/or connected to QAnon. Our research study provides a very clear outcome: the presence and activities of QAnon-related accounts on Instagram is still an on-going affair. It is safe to assume that this outcome is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg, even if it is now virtually impossible to further extend our analysis. After Facebook's announcement to remove them, independent researchers like our Ghost Data team had little time to get organized for a broader study.

Such a large quantity of very active accounts implies an even wider audience. We can safely assume that their posts have reached millions of American citizens. There is no doubt that the "crackdown" announced by Facebook arrived very late, to say the least. And the presumed closure of such accounts did not stop the on-going circulation of their controversial content – as confirmed by those 740,000+ posts we located on Instagram during our short analysis. Somehow QAnon users are still able to flood major social networks with their content.

While as independent researchers we do not have any ethical bias toward QAnon or cannot judge Facebook's internal procedures, we perfectly know that big tech companies can effectively block and delete most accounts on their platforms. As an example, Facebook has the ability to rapidly block both specific devices (hardware IDs) and certain IP addresses. This is happening only partially here, at best, since we are noticing QAnon users increasingly switching to closed accounts (with privacy restrictions) and a decreased presence of those hashtags already banned or restricted by Instagram.

In conclusion, today a behemoth like Facebook seems still unable (or unwilling?) to properly address this controversial issue and to protect Americans from disinformation and conspiracy theories in a particularly dangerous time. Unfortunately, it's true: Welcome back on Instagram, QAnon - or actually you never left?

Yesterday removal of about 18,700 QAnon-related accounts on Instagram, as mentioned in our updated introduction, requires a further comment. First, this sudden removal operation demonstrates the accuracy of our research approach and related data. Second, it seems reasonable to assume that our study sample is just one of the many QAnon-related networks still active on Instagram. Third, given that each of those accounts published an average of 1,000 posts, it is safe to assume that those accounts removed by Facebook have already published millions of posts, based on a conservative estimate. We therefore can simply reiterate our initial statement: QAnon accounts on Instagram: welcome back (or maybe they never left?).

