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

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The QAnon conspiracy is largely an extension of several older conspiracies. A particularly influential conspiracy includes PizzaGate, which alleged that coded words and symbols found in hacked emails of John Podesta, chairman of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, point to a secret child trafficking ring in the basement of the Washington, D.C. pizza restaurant, Comet Ping Pong (Benton and Peterka-Benton, 2021). While the conspiracy was dismissed as absurd (there is no basement in the pizzeria targeted), Edgar Maddison Welch accepted it as true driving to Washington D.C. from North Carolina armed with an AR-15 rifle and a .38 calibre handgun in the hopes of "liberating the children being held by child

traffickers." He entered where families were enjoying their meals and made his

way towards the back of the building to locate the secret entrance to the

basement 'dungeon' (Benton and Peterka-Benton, 2021). While no one was hurt,

it was an indication that conspiracies like this, no matter how absurd, represent a

serious threat when people act on them. As PizzaGate evolved into the broader

QAnon conspiracy that a cabal of elites were trafficking and sacrificing children,

authorities began speaking out on the threat. An FBI bulletin from 2019 states,

"these conspiracy theories very likely encourage the targeting of specific people,

places, and organizations, thereby increasing the likelihood of violence against

these targets" (FBI Phoenix Field Office, 2019). With the risk posed by such

conspiracies and the accompanying political violence associated with the QAnon

theory that emerged (Aliapoulios et al., 2021), social media companies attempted

to eliminate such content from platforms (Guynn, 2020). This emphasis on the

removal of overtly problematic content would ultimately be at odds with the

reduced moderation proposed by Elon Musk as he took over the former Twitter

platform in 2022.

ELON MUSK'S X AND MISINFORMATION

Elon Musk's arrival as CEO on Twitter brought an immediate spike in hate speech as those producing incendiary content viewed the potential for reduced moderation as an invitation (Benton et al., 2022). Follow-up research indicates that this initial spike was not an anomaly with problematic content continuing to have an outsized presence on the platform (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2023). This is consistent with material posted by Musk which has included conspiratorial content related to the attack on Nancy Pelosi (Klepper, 2022) and allowing anti-LGBTQ content that suggested the community systematically abuses children (Perry, 2023). Most recently, Musk validated and boosted an antisemetic referring to it as "the absolute truth" to his millions of followers (*CNN*, 2023). Potentially relevant to that recent post is the fact that QAnon, the theory originating from PizzaGate, traffics in numerous antisemetic tropes (Antisemitism and Next, 2021).

PIZZAGATE REVIVED

Consistent with previous controversial content associated with his purchase of Twitter, on November 28, 2023, Musk posted the following item:

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

To what extent did Musk's post generate online activity that utilized the term "PizzaGate?"

To answer that question, the Tweet Binder analytics program was utilized. The aggregated 30-day (from October 31 to November 29) X data was collected. Specifically, the term associated with this investigation (PizzaGate) was examined to see if frequency of use increased in correlation to the Musk's PizzaGate post. Posts, accounts, and images most frequently posted, shared, and viewed were collected and analyzed in terms of their role in driving discussion around this term.

A Google Trend Analysis was also conducted to assess if online search activity increased in connection with Musk's post. A key feature of Google Trends analysis is that it allows for identification of items of interest for internet users (Nghiem et al., 2016). These analyses are "normalized to the highest volume of searches for that term over the time period being studied. This index ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 recorded on the date that saw the highest relative search volume activity for that term" (Arora et al., 2019, p. 338). Search interest in a specific topic has reliably forecast social media posts and actions related to that topic (McCarthy, 2010).
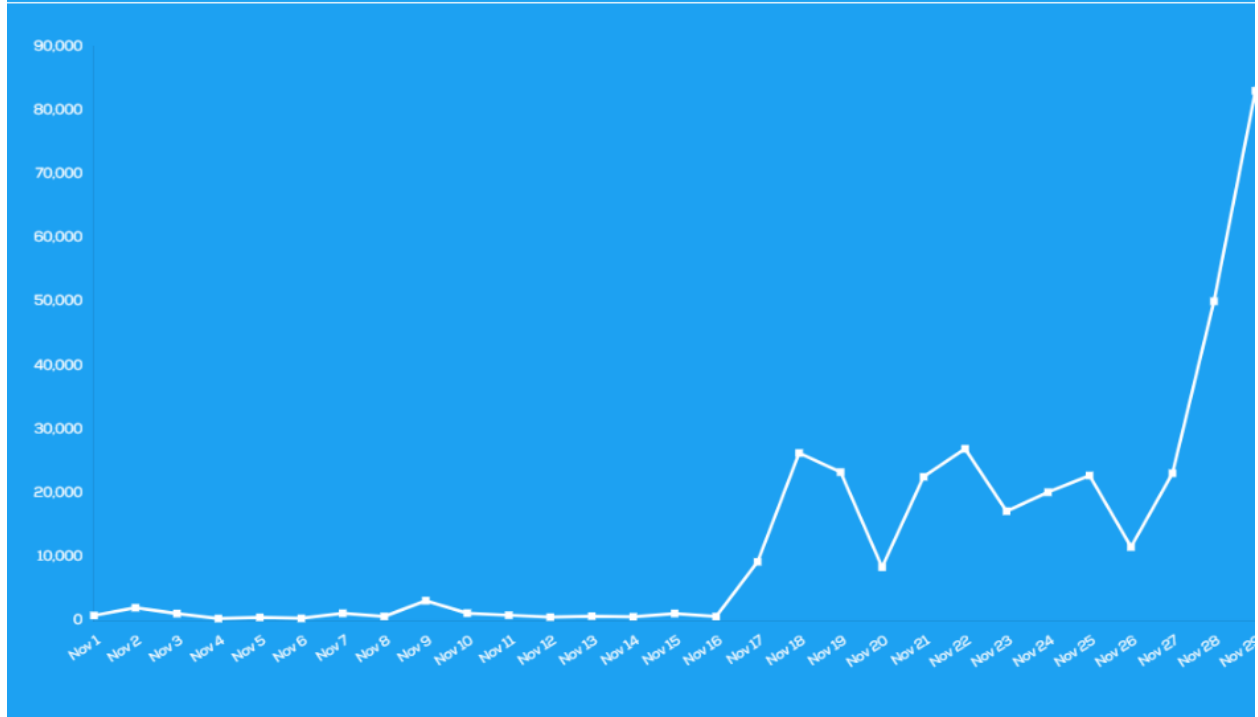
RESULTS

Musk's posts increased activity on X related to Pizzagate by 9501.5% from total volume on the topic in the month prior.

375.14k

Total
Tweets ?

10/31/2023 - 11/30/2023

Spikes in activity correspond to the initial references made regarding PizzaGate with his post overtly boosting the conspiracy on November 28 leading to a high point of 83,053 mentions in the 24 hours that followed. Cumulatively, a total of 375,140 posts referencing PizzaGate were identified in the period studied.

Data similarly suggests that the total number of views, reach, and impact generated by PizzaGate content on X was substantial.

368,479,678	210,947,890	18,863
potential impacts	**potential reach**	**total contributors**
11,183.16	33,828	18,863
followers per contributor	**original tweets**	**original contributors**

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

PizzaGate was not only amplified, but also supported by the most retweeted posts using the term on the X platform.

MattWallace888 | 11 days ago | 15539 Retweets
Not only was PizzaGate real... it is still happening today! Slade Sohmer, a journalist who runs in the inner circle of Hillary Clinton and John Podesta, was just arrested this week after an examination turned up more than 1,300 pornographic images and videos, hundreds of which... https://t.co/vqa3f5pu5S https://t.co/050RXpBqen

dom_lucre | 11 days ago | 9089 Retweets
🚨🚨DEVELOPING: John Podesta's Friend, Who 'Debunked' Pizzagate, Was Arrested for Raping Toddlers. Slade Sohmer, editor-in-chief at The Recount and friend of former Hillary Clinton campaign chair John Podesta, was arrested last month for raping multiple toddlers and babies. https://t.co/TWoKnDIR6C

LizCrokin | 1 day ago | 7815 Retweets
VAMPIRE HUNTER EMERGENCY EPISODE: PIZZAGATE GOES MAINSTREAM! - Elon Musk comments on Pizzagate exposing the truth about it to his 165 million followers on X. Musk replied to tweets reporting that John Podesta's pal was arrested on child porn charges and a post pointing out... https://t.co/Y9WazcS2vl https://t.co/0xg0LIvEB5

laralogan | 2 days ago | 7038 Retweets
Did I say this clearly enough: Liz Crokin is vindicated. The Pizzagate cover-up is being dismantled. The pedophiles and those who covered for them are done. Media Matters are evil and they are a hateful, partisan organization that has lied to the IRS and should be shut down... https://t.co/cruwUvhs1R

AwakenedOutlaw | 12 days ago | 9501 Retweets
Fact. Did you know that David Brock (left), the Founder & CEO of Media Matters for America, was one-half of a DC power couple with his partner James Alefantis (right), the owner of Comet Ping Pong pizzeria? Yup. That's the restaurant at the center of the infamous Pizzagate... https://t.co/6x0RndIlmr https://t.co/3elK8CgKLV https://t.co/sxkwJHkSHU

LizCrokin | 8 days ago | 7928 Retweets
THE MEDIA IS PIZZAGATE! If there is one show you watch this week -- this should be it! This is the most important story out there right now. In my latest episode of Vampire Hunter, I discuss the bombshell news that John Podesta's pal who debunked pizzagate was arrested for... https://t.co/9wEyJGN8aJ https://t.co/PFUQQh10Oc

LizCrokin | 1 day ago | 7557 Retweets
JUDGE ORDERS FBI TO TURN OVER SETH RICH'S LAPTOP – HOW THIS TIES TO PIZZAGATE! A Texas federal judge has ordered the FBI to disclose information on Seth Rich. Judge Amos Mazzant requested they turn over his personal laptop, work laptop, a DVD and a tape drive within 14 days.... https://t.co/PAOOPwkQWE https://t.co/eStFpynKR8

Similar results were found looking at the most liked posts in the period studied.

MattWallace888 | 11 days ago | 39336 Likes
Not only was PizzaGate real... it is still happening today! Slade Sohmer, a journalist who runs in the inner circle of Hillary Clinton and John Podesta, was just arrested this week after an examination turned up more than 1,300 pornographic images and videos, hundreds of which... https://t.co/vqa3f5pu5S https://t.co/050RXpBqen

laralogan | 2 days ago | 20485 Likes
Did I say this clearly enough: Liz Crokin is vindicated. The Pizzagate cover-up is being dismantled. The pedophiles and those who covered for them are done. Media Matters are evil and they are a hateful, partisan organization that has lied to the IRS and should be shut down... https://t.co/cruwUvhs1R

LizCrokin | 1 day ago | 19110 Likes
JUDGE ORDERS FBI TO TURN OVER SETH RICH'S LAPTOP – HOW THIS TIES TO PIZZAGATE! A Texas federal judge has ordered the FBI to disclose information on Seth Rich. Judge Amos Mazzant requested they turn over his personal laptop, work laptop, a DVD and a tape drive within 14 days.... https://t.co/PAOOPwkQWE https://t.co/eStFpynKR8

WarClandestine | 1 day ago | 16440 Likes
Reminder that Pizzagate was not about the basement of Comet Pizza. It was about the Wikileaks emails from Hilary's campaign manager, John Podesta, and his brother Tony, using FBI-documented code words for pedophilia. They also had a spirit-cooking dinner with infamous satanist,... https://t.co/OudHnzHUPi https://t.co/Ki1dD3zeHf

dom_lucre | 11 days ago | 20907 Likes
🚨🚨DEVELOPING: John Podesta's Friend, Who 'Debunked' Pizzagate, Was Arrested for Raping Toddlers. Slade Sohmer, editor-in-chief at The Recount and friend of former Hillary Clinton campaign chair John Podesta, was arrested last month for raping multiple toddlers and babies. https://t.co/TWoKnDIR6C

AwakenedOutlaw | 12 days ago | 19741 Likes
Fact. Did you know that David Brock (left), the Founder & CEO of Media Matters for America, was one-half of a DC power couple with his partner James Alefantis (right), the owner of Comet Ping Pong pizzeria? Yup. That's the restaurant at the center of the infamous Pizzagate... https://t.co/6x0RndIlmr https://t.co/3elK8CgKLV https://t.co/sxkwJHkSHU

beccalew | 1 day ago | 18065 Likes
Elon's discovery of pizzagate in 2023 is right on schedule https://t.co/daqM5XEUsD

Effects beyond activity on X are also noteworthy in terms of impact. Search

activity increased after Musk's post referencing PizzaGate according to the 30-day

Google Trends Analysis.

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that Musk presenting PizzaGate in a post corresponded with

significant online activity related to the term. Noteworthy is that PizzaGate and

the QAnon conspiracy that followed had increasingly been pushed to the margins

of acceptable public discourse continuing primarily only in a coded fashion (Zihiri

et al., 2022). The reaction to Musk's post indicates that receding conspiracies are

potentially better understood as dormant with a prominent event allowing them

to be reawakened. While it might be suggested that some of the online activity

may have been critical of the conspiracy, it should be noted that the visibility that

goes along with this can be instrumental in spreading content—even if the discussion that content is critical (Zhang et al., 2018). Additionally, the most viewed and liked posts on the platform in the period studied showed support for the PizzaGate conspiracy and came from verified accounts.

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

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