AWAITING THE STORM: Tracking QAnon's Global Growth and Laser Focus on The 2020 Election
| 03 | Message from SITE Director Rita Katz |
| 04 | Introduction: Background on QAnon |
| 05 | Key Points |
| 06 | Methodology |
| 07 | QAnon Online Presence Spikes in 2020 |
| 08 | QAnon Community on Facebook |
| 11 | QAnon Community on Telegram |
| 13 | QAnon’s Counteraction to Facebook Removals |
| 14 | Social Media Alternatives |
| 15 | Conclusion |
On October 28, 2017, a 4chan message announced “extradition” against Hillary Clinton was “already in motion.” The message resembled others by hoax artists on 4chan and, after no such event happened, it seemed destined to soon be forgotten. Instead, it started a global movement that would inspire terrorist attacks and rattle the foundations of American democracy: the QAnon movement.

The QAnon movement isn’t some harmless collective of tin foil hat wearers. It is an FBI-deemed terrorist threat, and not for no reason. QAnon’s mind-warping conspiracy theories and misinformation have inspired deadly attacks. Furthermore, ahead of the 2020 Presidential Election, declarations by QAnon adherents openly threaten violent confrontation, voter intimidation, and beyond.

There have been many attempts to unmask “Q,” the self-described government insider whose cryptic online posts formed QAnon, but exposing this person/people would not end the movement. “Q” could appear in a video tomorrow with comprehensive forensic evidence of their role and disavow the monster they created, and QAnon still would go on. It has become something larger, and in many ways independent of its founder(s). QAnon, despite its American origins, is now a global phenomenon. It can be found across major and niche social media sites in Italian, Turkish, French, and other languages.

The following report details and analyzes QAnon’s presence on two major hubs of the movement: Facebook and Telegram. The report shows that while QAnon remained relatively stagnant since its formation in October 2017 when the first “Q” messages emerged, it proliferated on these platforms beyond any imaginable rate come Spring 2020: tenfold since 2018, and tripling in the last six months alone between the two platforms.

This shift coincided directly with the full emergence of the coronavirus pandemic, when lockdowns and health dangers gave way to rampant conspiracy theories and protests. Feeding into the fervor were President Trump’s baseless assertions about the coronavirus and attempts to downplay it.

QAnon was also uniquely suited to thrive in this environment. As attention-grabbing as QAnon’s “satan-worshipping cabal” conspiracy theories may be, the pervasiveness of the movement lies more in its lack of a coherent narrative. QAnon mixes its own conspiracy theories with older ones about vaccines, Bill Gates, and others. This nebulous array of ideas allows QAnon to sneak its way into any community: actors, professional athletes, wellness-focused suburban moms, prominent military figures like General Michael Flynn, and beyond. The same goes for extremist communities. At the SITE Intelligence Group, we’ve seen QAnon sync in with various corners of the far right, from Neo-Nazis to militia extremists like Barry Croft, who allegedly conspired to kidnap Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer with five others.

The rapid growth of QAnon persisted through the summer and appears set to continue into November, highlighting what has become its dominant focus: the reelection of Donald Trump.

The QAnon movement has always described Trump as an ally, but recent months have taken it to new levels. QAnon pages have essentially become Trump reelection hubs, where adherents proliferate memes of Trump as a God-like savior and action movie hero. They echo the president’s talking points about “Sleepy” Joe Biden while pushing others about Democrat-enabled sex trafficking rings, Biden being a “pedophile,” and so on.

The implications of QAnon’s growth are grimly apparent. Even beyond the violence and harassment carried out by its adherents, QAnon is a profound threat to the most basic foundations of a functioning society. Scrolling through social media, it’s getting harder and harder to tell the truth from misinformation: misleadingly doctored pictures, bogus “news” stories, intentional misrepresentation of facts, forged quotes. There exist few culprits contributing to this problem more acutely than QAnon. In its quest to help reelect Trump, QAnon users sow content vastly and prolifically, creating clusters of disinformation spanning a seemingly endless array of blogs, websites, and corresponding accounts across different social media platforms. Viewing this overwhelmingly abundance of QAnon content on social media alongside the movement’s global growth, it begs the question of whether well-organized state actors are contributing to it.

Now, as Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms begin ramping up their barriers against QAnon, this toxic movement will surely look to the array of well-suited alternative platforms available to it. Already, Gab CEO Andrew Torba announced he “welcomes QAnon.” Meanwhile, “free speech” platforms like Parler, Telegram, Gab, and VK signal little to no intent to keep it away. One platform called “WeGoGo” is even designed specifically for QAnon. As for the major platforms looking to get rid of QAnon, the movement’s adherents still find ways to operate under the radar: manipulating hashtags, disguising accounts, side-stepping detection algorithms.

The SITE Intelligence Group has compiled the following report to assess the troubling speed of QAnon’s growth toward the 2020 Election and how it will likely react to mounting pushback against it.
INTRODUCTION:
Background on QAnon

Conspiracy theories targeting perceived political enemies or marginalized groups have a long history of fueling violence and hate. While all such theories and movements share broad, fundamental qualities, the particulars of each is shaped by the conditions of their historical moments. It therefore seems somewhat inevitable that a movement like QAnon, which embraces a number of far-right conspiracy theories and recontextualizes them to address the concerns of an increasingly globally connected far-right, would become an international movement as health and political crises enact themselves across the world.

Nonetheless, QAnon is a relatively new movement. It began in October 2017 when a 4chan user identifying as “Q” claimed to be a US government insider with highly classified information regarding an ongoing battle between the Trump administration and the supposed “deep state.” These posts from Q (referred to as “Q drops”) are brief, cryptic, and supposedly symbological, with “true” meanings that are determined by the endless interpretations of adherents. The mythology of QAnon, as a consequence, continually incorporates additional public figures and narratives about them.

The QAnon ideology/mythology somewhat defies brief explanation. Broadly speaking, the movement’s thesis is that there is a cabal of satanist, pedophile Democrats who control the deep state of the United States and thereby nefariously influence world affairs. Attempting to stop this shadowy syndicate are an assortment of public figures, most notably President Donald Trump and John F. Kennedy, Jr. Even if not outwardly, the ideas that underpin QAnon’s theories are quintessentially far-right. Each of the terms “cabal,” “satanist,” pedophile,” and “Democrat,” has its own distinct history of as an antisemitic code word, and the idea of a small, elite group controlling world affairs echoes Protocols of the Elders of Zion and other anti-Semitic writings across history. Indeed, stripped away of contemporary specifics, QAnon begins to resemble other historical far-right movements.

Furthermore, the specifics of QAnon’s conspiracy theories and core premises have become increasingly irrelevant as its popularity has risen. Recent polling research suggests that many QAnon adherents do not believe or are not even aware of many of its foundational conspiracy theories, and that many of its conspiracy theories often exist outside of QAnon contexts. This ideological malleability has become a key growth factor to QAnon, allowing it to permeate a wider range of political and cultural communities.

Where QAnon most drastically differs from prior far-right movements is in its organizational structure, or lack thereof. Outside of the central Q figure, the movement is completely decentralized, taking place in countless online spaces across multiple platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram. Because it is effectively a leaderless pursuit, the ideology is collectively shaped by adherents whose sheer magnitude of content serves as a compelling substitute for substantive claims. This structure also allows the movement to quickly respond to developments in world events, especially the highly consequential 2020 US presidential race. As conspiratorial smears against the Biden campaign and the election process itself mount from the Trump campaign, Trump-loyal QAnon adherents amplify and elaborate on them, leading other disillusioned right-wing voters to adopt narratives that seem to explain the entirety of the situation in ways that are consistent with their ideology.

Those active in online groups often refer to themselves as “researchers” and are encouraged to submit new “evidence” extrapolated from current events (often those involving President Trump), in support of the prevailing narratives, in turn evolving them. This heavily participatory dynamic and ability to subsume news items into its narratives makes QAnon not only markedly different from other conspiracy theories, but much more resilient to fizzling out. As such, the movement is increasingly becoming an international phenomenon, with growing (and already formidably sized) online communities in a number of countries and languages.
QAnon's presence on Telegram and Facebook spiked in Spring 2020, coinciding with the start of international lock-downs and deaths from the coronavirus pandemic. Another noticeable spike was seen in July following several noteworthy developments: the massive wave of protests sparked after the killing of George Floyd, and a QAnon campaign to state pledges, at which time high-profile individuals like former US Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn participated.

The QAnon movement’s online presence has become international, spanning countries such as Germany, Italy, Belgium, Turkey, and others. Yet, the vast majority of QAnon activity on Facebook and Telegram pertains to the upcoming US Presidential Election. This focus on supporting Trump is shared uniformly between US and non-US QAnon communities, far overshadowing intel “drop” messages from “Q.”

Among such election-related messages have been threats for voter intimidation at polling places and civil war upon a perceived “stolen” election.

English-language and US-tailored QAnon entities were far more prevalent on Facebook, with 132 of 150 total QAnon Facebook pages (88%) being in English.

Membership counts from a sample of 100 QAnon Facebook groups totaled nearly a half a million (tally not filtered for unique user counts). Categorizing groups by tiers of membership counts, the largest amount (nearly 50% of the sample) fell into the 2,000-and-under category, underscoring the conversational nature of QAnon activity that smaller groups facilitate. Only 10% of groups fell into the 10,000+ member category; these groups functioned less as conversation venues and more as outlets for QAnon media.

Despite Facebook’s initial deletion campaign against QAnon this past August, QAnon groups continued to grow on the platform. In the span of a week in late September and early October, a sample of 85 QAnon Facebook groups saw an average increase of 108 members and a cumulative net gain of 9,154.

Telegram houses the majority of the international QAnon community. The most prevalent language/nationality for QAnon on Telegram is German, with 84 of 150 groups and channels falling into that category.

Facebook has served as a major outreach asset for QAnon, and the company’s October 6 announcement that it would be escalating its removals of such content will likely disrupt the movement’s growth. However, QAnon will likely adapt by resorting to activity disguising measures and embracing the diverse array of online alternatives available to it.

While statistical data from Twitter was not used in this report, the platform nonetheless serves as an equally important venue for QAnon outreach, housing tens to hundreds of thousands of QAnon-adhering accounts. The same can be said for YouTube, where many QAnon-dedicated video channels are housed (though the platform announced on October 15 it was banning QAnon).
This report uses various points of data from 150 Facebook groups and 150 groups and channels on Telegram. Groups and channels included in this sample were created between July 2018 and September 2020. These channels and groups were chosen at random as a small but representative sample and are not intended to reflect the true scale of QAnon groups and channels on these platforms.

The determination of what constituted a QAnon channel/group was made based on the following criteria:

- Group name/description which directly referenced “QAnon” and/or associated terms/themes (e.g. “WWG1WGA,” “Dark to Light,” “#SaveTheChildren,” etc.)
- Group name/description which indirectly referenced “QAnon” through known “coded” terms meant to deceive content flagging algorithms (e.g. “Cue Anon,” “17,” “+++ <7,” “Hunt for Red October”)
- Group posts and comments that predominantly referenced QAnon and/or associated terms/themes

The Telegram and Facebook groups and channels were analyzed by several criteria/metrics, including the following:

- Admin/creator information
- Subscriber and/or membership count
- Date of creation and activity level as of September 2020
- Rate of subscriber/membership growth
- Significant point in time at which membership growth spiked
- Language(s) spoken by group members

This report analyses subscriber/member counts only from Telegram and Facebook for several reasons. Channels and groups on these platforms make for more confined spaces to identify QAnon adherents than follower/following lists on platforms like Twitter, which contain less barriers to separate QAnon users from non-QAnon users. Platforms like Twitter also don’t have discussion groups, which dilute chatter thereon with more noise from non-QAnon users. Thus, while Twitter and alternative social media platforms like Parler may also be widely used by the QAnon movement, Facebook and Telegram serve as more refined sources of data to analyze.

Regarding Facebook, this report uses groups—not individual accounts. Furthermore, QAnon Facebook data in this report was pulled after the company announced in August that it had ramped up its removals of QAnon groups. Facebook’s increased removals have not eliminated QAnon presence on Facebook, but did impact which QAnon Facebook groups were retrievable, as well as which ones were created after the increased removals. Furthermore, sample sizes in some sections of this report varied in size and date ranges due to certain data points of removed accounts being inaccessible.

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1 Where available
2 Assessed qualitatively
3 When removed from a platform, fringe and extremist groups often recreate those groups under different names or administrator credentials.
4 This largely pertained to Facebook over Telegram; the latter appears to have taken little to no steps in removing QAnon content from its platform.
QAnon Online Presence Spikes in 2020

Though QAnon has existed since 2017, the number of online spaces for its adherents increased at a significantly greater rate beginning in Spring 2020, in correlation with major world events across the globe. This growth was seen in both the creation of QAnon channels, groups, and other web venues, as well as the numbers of members and participants within them.

Of note, the proliferation of QAnon online venues was international, seen in countries such as Germany, Italy, Turkey, and others.

Global Community
The following chart analyzes the growth of the international QAnon community on Facebook and Telegram between July 2018 and September 2020. While the QAnon movement existed since 2017, the spike in QAnon venue creation began in March of 2020 upon worldwide shutdowns amid the coronavirus pandemic. This accelerated growth persisted in the months to follow, with another noticeable spike coinciding in July-August after the killing of George Floyd resulted in waves of protests across the world.

Not only did these account creation spikes start at the same times, but they appeared to move upward at remarkably similar rates. Throughout 2020, QAnon appears to have increasingly found purchase internationally, with new adherents abroad likely being motivated by the same global events as those which influenced more Americans to gravitate toward QAnon.

English vs. International Community
Filtering English-language QAnon groups from those of other languages among the 300 Telegram and Facebook groups/channels gave telling insights regarding platform usage. Doing so showed that while there was a similar increase in QAnon English on both platforms, QAnon groups in this language were significantly more prevalent on Facebook.

As the following graph shows, English-language Facebook groups far outnumber English-language Telegram channels and chat groups. Even after Telegram emerged as a prevalent QAnon venue in March, English language QAnon groups on Facebook were nonetheless created an average of 4.3 times more frequently since that month.

Comparing this English-filtered QAnon data to that of all languages shows yet more contrast in platforms used. Of the 150 QAnon groups/channels on Telegram, only 30 were in English. Furthermore, of the 150 total QAnon Facebook pages collected for this report, the majority were in English (132 of 150, or 88%).

The most likely explanation for these discrepancies is not just Facebook’s popularity among Americans, but also Americans’ widespread preference for SMS messaging over applications like Telegram. Statistical research has furthermore shown that even among messenger applications, Telegram ranks relatively low in usage by Americans, who more often opt for Facebook-owned platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger.
QAnon Community on Facebook

Facebook has long been a social media mainstay for the QAnon movement, particularly for the English speakers and Americans therein. Group memberships range from hundreds to tens of thousands, functioning as anything from QAnon content clearinghouses to discussion forums where users can connect.

Ahead of November, the QAnon Facebook community has been hyper-focused on the US Presidential election, whether by sharing news stories or discussing the political events and individuals (Hillary Clinton, the “Russiagate” scandal, etc.) in the orbit of election-related conspiracy theories.

This focus considered, Facebook has become all the more powerful in controlling how much election-related disinformation is perpetuated by the QAnon community. This influential role has driven the company toward increasingly aggressive measures against QAnon, pushing what are likely to be online migrations by the movement’s adherents.

The following subsections assess membership sizes and weekly growth of QAnon groups on Facebook, as well as the measures QAnon adherents have taken in response to Facebook’s increasing crackdowns of recent months.

Membership Sizes

To better assess the size of the QAnon movement on Facebook, SITE took a sample of 100 Facebook groups and placed them into categories based on how many members they had. Gross user counts for these groups (not accounting for recurring members⁵) came to nearly half a million (435,759).

Separating QAnon Facebook groups by tiers of membership count, the largest portion (nearly 50%) fell into the less-than-2,000 member range, as the following chart shows. This membership tier dwarfed the next tier of 2,000-4,000 members, which contained just over 20% of the sample size.

The tendency toward groups below the 2,000 member/subscriber threshold points toward the community-heavy element of QAnon. Adherents use these groups as places to exchange memes and new facets of conspiracy theories, and to collectively analyze current events. The larger groups get, the less conducive they become toward such communal interaction.

For example, the Facebook group “QAnon Daily Videos Only” has nearly 11,000 members, making it one of the largest Facebook groups included in SITE’s sampling. The group functions strictly as a repository for QAnon videos with virtually nothing in the way of additional commentary, debate, or “analysis.” Furthermore, most to all of QAnon Daily Videos Only’s posts are made by group administrators (of which there are only four).

⁵ Individual members often occupy several groups at once, thus creating a gross membership count between QAnon groups that is higher than the amount of total unique users within them.
Contrasting to larger Facebook groups like QAnon Daily Videos Only are smaller ones like “QANON,” which has roughly only 3,700 members. On QANON, users converse much more freely about conspiracy theories about 5G cellular technology, George Soros, and other popular QAnon focuses. The most dominant theme of recent conversations has been the upcoming Presidential election, which often seems to be the context in which most topics are discussed.

One such post shares a screenshot of a compilation of tweets by Trump critics stating they will “remove” him from office and how “nothing is off the table” to do so. This user’s message about Trump supporters “surround[ing]” the White House in the event of him losing the election rings of other QAnon adherents’ anticipations and threats of violence. On October 4, a user in a QAnon chat group on Telegram wrote of “DC criminals out to steal” the election from Trump:

Do the DC criminals out to steal president Trump's reelection with fraudulent ballots realize how many heavily armed MAGA patriots with world-class military accessories will show up at the white house if anyone makes a move to illegally remove president Trump? It will beBIBLICAL.

Ex Military MAGA patriots will serve at the pleasure of the president as supplemental presidential law enforcement when called into action. CODE RED

MAGA patriots will explode on to the scene with unparalleled military leadership and weaponry.

Patriots with serious warfare skills will be prepared to legally protect president Trump at all costs and this post is not a joke.

Some troubling election-related messages appear inspired by the President himself, who has made various calls—both direct and implicit—for vigilante voter monitoring and enforcement. Across prominent QAnon Telegram venues, users shared calls to “volunteer to be a Trump Election Poll Watcher” while distributing links to the Trump campaign’s militarily toned "Army For Trump" website. Several related messages by QAnon users appear dangerously minded toward pursuing voter intimidation. As one user in a QAnon Telegram chat group with over 5,000 members wrote in part:

...sign up to become a poll worker and help keep an eye out at the polls...WE CANNOT GET COMPLACENT! GO ON THE OFFENSIVE!
Growth of Facebook Members within a Week

A focus on Facebook groups’ membership increases over shorter time periods offers valuable insights into the steadiness at which the QAnon movement is growing online.

To do so, SITE observed the growth of 85 QAnon Facebook groups in week-long intervals starting in the last week of September\(^6\). The sizes of these groups ranged from \(\sim100\) to \(\sim70,000\) members. Additionally, the groups included in this sample were selected to be comparable with the overall distribution of group sizes observed in the chart “100 Facebook Groups, Grouped by Membership.”

In this week span, SITE logged growth across the board, with each group seeing an average membership increase of 107.69 members. Between the 85 groups, there was a cumulative net gain of 9,154 new memberships recorded. The smaller groups (category of 0-2k members) had seen higher increase of new members.

As the chart above shows, the largest growth was observed in smaller groups, which averaged more than an 11% increase in new members over the course of a week. This growth further illustrates the community element of QAnon, whereby users may rely on larger-member clearinghouses of information, but nonetheless disperse across relatively smaller groups to interact.

\(\text{Average Membership Growth from Last Week of September 2020 to First Week of October 2020, Grouped by Member Count}\)

(The exact range of week ranges for each of the 85 groups depended on when each group’s data was logged by SITE researchers)

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\(^6\) The Facebook groups used in this report were retrieved from mid-September to early October, when Facebook’s mounting anti-QAnon policies gave way to frequent removal and recreations of related groups. Thus, the exact dates of week ranges for each of the 85 groups depended on when each group’s data was logged by SITE researchers.
A review of the QAnon community on Telegram also shows the vast international reach of the movement. As the following graph shows, the 150 QAnon Telegram channels and chat groups used in this report spanned 8 different languages. Furthermore, among these 150 Telegram channels and chat groups, more than half (84) were in German. This count dwarfed even the next-highest ranked language, English, which came in at less than half of that (30).

Total member counts per each group further speak to the dominance of German-language QAnon media and activity. Of the 827,706 total membership counts (not unique users) between each group/channel, Germany comprised nearly 600,000, almost 14 times higher than English and almost four times that of German/English-combined ones.

This apparent popularity of QAnon conspiracy theories among Germans on Telegram is fitting to activity in the country in the last year. This past August, thousands took to the streets of Berlin against coronavirus restrictions, with many invoking QAnon and President Trump while protesting against the German government. One sign at the rally, bearing reference to “Q,” read, “PLEASE MR. PRESIDENT, MAKE GERMANY GREAT AGAIN.” Protesters could also be seen wearing QAnon shirts.

### QAnon Telegram Channels & Groups by Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Subscribers</th>
<th>Number of Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Channels and Groups</td>
<td>827,706</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>589,936</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>41,926</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>14,318</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/German</td>
<td>155,258</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
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</table>
The prevalence of German-language content aside, the wide range of languages within this sample of 150 chat groups and channels speaks to the vast reach of the QAnon movement around the world.

But despite the different nations comprising the QAnon community on Telegram, all such channels and chat groups show the same uniform focus on Donald Trump's reelection as those in the US, as the following case study illustrates.

**Case Study: Prominent Channel “Qlobal-Change”**

“Qlobal-Change Deatchli,” a major QAnon Telegram channel created in November of 2018, serves as a telling example of several characteristics of the QAnon international community: the movement’s international growth, the prevalence of German, and the movement-wide fixation on Donald Trump’s reelection.

The Qlobal-Change Deatchli’s channel frames itself as a central hub for other “Qlobal-Change” sub-channels created for America, Italy, and Spain. Posts in the channel are largely in German, though, and frequently pull from a corresponding “Qlobal-Change” blog, which also uses German. Its description reads, “Qanon Drops auf deutsch uvm” (translating to “Qanon Drops in German and much more”).

The American origins and focus of the QAnon movement have not impeded Qlobal-Change’s growth, despite the channel being tailored to an international audience. Just as the Facebook groups mentioned earlier in this report saw rises in membership in early Spring 2020, so did the Qlobal-Change channel, going from roughly ~38,000 subscribers in March to over 122,000 by the end of September.

With this elevated audience, the Qlobal-Change channel has focused a significant majority of the content it posts, reposts, and shares on the US Presidential Election. Of 95 posts made between September 28 and October 5, 56 pertained to matters of US politics: President Trump, Joe Biden, “Russiagate,” etc. Only 26 were directly related to Q drops. Remaining posts about other topics pertained to other matters that, while not directly pertaining to the election, are often discussed in that context: COVID-19 vaccines, Bill Gates, etc.
QAnon’s Counteraction to Facebook Removals

In early October, Facebook announced an all-out ban of QAnon activity, marking a significant escalation in its actions against the group from months prior. As shown throughout this report, Facebook is a critical hub for the English-language QAnon community, and from there, the American QAnon community. Thus, large swathes of the QAnon movement are likely to take several adaptive measures to Facebook’s ramped up removals, from disguising their activity to seeking out alternative platforms to operate on.

Disguising Activity
QAnon has long been at odds with Facebook, with users and groups often forced to disguise their activity on the platform to avoid being removed.

In August, Facebook announced that it removed 790 QAnon groups on its platform along with restricting 440 pages and 1,950 other groups. Since then, some in the movement have expressed frustration, with one user on a QAnon chat group on Telegram stating upon joining, “Thank You, I’m happy I’m a member of this group since facebook is busy deleting our Groups.”

QAnon adherents have tried to sidestep Facebook’s censorship by resorting to such measures as disguising QAnon-associated terms and hashtags with alternative letters, numbers, and characters to avoid detection by Facebook algorithms. As a QAnon user on Gab wrote in part on August 21:

**AVOID QANON CENSORSHIP:**

Don’t type Qanon/QANON on Facebook or Twitter. Use other similar letters:

Qan0n Qaq0n Qap0n Qan0n Qa0n Qa0n Qa0n Qa0n Qa0n Qa0n Qa0n Qa0n Qa0n Qa0n

Even some of the most prominent QAnon Facebook groups have devised such cautionary measures. In “QAnon Daily Videos Only” (the aforementioned group with nearly 11,000 members), an announcement reminds members that links to referenced videos will be placed in corresponding comment threads to avoid removals by Facebook:
Social Media Alternatives

On October 6, less than a month away from the November 3 election, Facebook announced it would be banning QAnon from its platform completely. The ban, according to Facebook, will apply to “Facebook Pages, Groups and Instagram accounts for representing QAnon.”

Gab

On October 6, the same day Facebook announced its newly escalated ban of QAnon, a statement from Gab CEO Andrew Torba welcomed the QAnon movement onto all of Gab’s “social network, news, and encrypted chat platforms.” He followed up by touting a large and growing QAnon presence on his platform: we have several existing QAnon groups on Gab that have grown significantly over the past few weeks to tens of thousands of members. Members of the QAnon community have been active on Gab for several years.

Gab, a “free speech” social media platform, has long been a haven of far-right extremists and fringe movements, though it is unclear to what extent QAnon adherents will embrace Torba’s invitation. Nonetheless, a review of several QAnon groups on Gab, some of which have thousands or tens of thousands of members, do corroborate Torba’s claims of a significant QAnon presence on his platform.

WeGo

In many ways, the most outwardly inviting venue for QAnon adherents is WeGo, a social media platform created specifically for QAnon members. The name WeGo is a reference to the QAnon slogan, “Where We Go One, We Go All.” It describes itself on its website as intended “to rescue social media from the evil bad guys by building a dope blockchain, community moderated, social network to save the world.” The platform tallies 40,782 users and 1,269,081 posts as of October 10, 2020.

Facebook’s escalation is likely to bring about increased disguising measures like those shown in this report’s previous section, as well as a new embrace by the American and English-language QAnon community for alternative platforms. Which new sites QAnon will seek as hubs remains to be seen, but several options have already proven well-suited.

Among those to create a WeGo account was Barry Croft, one of six militia extremists recently accused of plotting to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer. Croft created his account at least as early as April 2018, around the same time he had taken to Twitter to lament Facebook suspending his account. Though there are no standing posts on Croft’s account, those following and followed by him exhibit bluntly QAnon-themed icons and slogans.
QAnon’s exponential growth domestically and internationally has made it an immensely impactful force in America’s 2020 Presidential Election. Such a level of influence from a movement built on disinformation, anti-Semitic code words, and embrace of civil war threatens the US elections on multiple fronts, including voter suppression through disinformation/misinformation and, as QAnon adherents have clearly stated, violence.

How social media platforms prepare for QAnon’s misinformation will be a defining historical factor going into November. Facebook in particular is the most widely used social media platform in the world, making it a powerful tool for QAnon adherents to reach out to the non-converted. Thus, the company’s initiative to cut off that source of outreach will surely stunt the movement’s growth to some extent.

However, no one platform can blunt the QAnon movement by itself. QAnon maintains a vast (and growing) array of social media alternatives to fall back on, including major ones like Twitter, where QAnon accounts appear to run rampant in the tens-to-hundreds of thousands, and YouTube, where QAnon videos are frequently uploaded.

Thus, as important as Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms’ measures against QAnon are, truly thwarting the movement’s influence will require a shared priority among all online stakeholders, large and small. Considering the massive stakes of November’s election, this should be a foremost imperative for all such parties.