



# MOONSHOT CASE STUDY

YEAR  
2021



LOCATION  
USA



SECTOR  
NGO / NONPROFIT



PARTNER



SUBJECT

Tracking & Countering Conspiracy Theories,  
Disinformation & Violence Around the 2020 U.S.  
Presidential Election

PLATFORMS

**Google Search**

**Parler**

**Gab**

**Telegram**

**4chan**

**8kun**

**MyMilitia**

**Zello**

**MeWe**



ONLINE HARMS

**Violent Extremism**

**Mis-,Dis-, and Malinformation (MDM)**

**Conspiracy Theories**

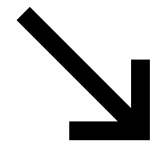
INSIGHT PRODUCTS

**Insight Reporting**

INTERVENTION PRODUCTS

**Disruption**

**Service and Support Connection**



## Background

In September 2020, Moonshot partnered with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to proactively monitor and respond to threats of violence and violence-inciting disinformation related to the U.S. Presidential Election. Moonshot produced weekly threat trend reports that informed ADL's direct outreach to state and local election security officials (**Product: Insight Reporting**), and also ran nationwide Redirect Method™ campaigns to provide users demonstrating interest in extremist violence with credible alternative content (**Products: Disruption, Service & Support Connection**).

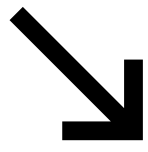
The project unfolded against the backdrop of increased risk of violence by racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE) and militia violent extremists (MVE) and a global pandemic that has led to unprecedented social isolation and a dramatic increase in internet usage by all Americans, including those most at risk of involvement in extremist violence.

## Approach

To effectively identify and counter violent extremist efforts online, Moonshot conducted ongoing monitoring, collection and analysis of extremist discourse on platforms like Telegram, 8kun and MyMilitia. Our team identified rhetorical patterns, slang, memes, events, organizations, individuals, merchandise and iconography used in these spaces, and threats of violence targeting American politicians, political groups and/or members of the public. ADL used these insights to inform state and local partners, while Moonshot used it to enhance and expand its online campaigns.

When an individual performed a Google search and that search indicated an engagement or interest in a violent group, narrative, ideology, or action, Moonshot served an ad on their search results page. These ads appeared above organic results, safeguarding that user and the wider ecosystem by offering a contextual, credible and safe alternative to the violent or harmful content they may otherwise have encountered.

Over the lifespan of the project, we expanded our initial sample of indicators from 14,000 to 125,000 in response to escalating tension in near real-time. This meant our Redirect campaigns were responsive to real world events, sometimes within hours, in order to safeguard the online space and disrupt incitements to violence from armed groups, and the spread of violence-inciting disinformation.



## Indicator Categories

### Armed Groups

207 indicators of interest in violent militias and other armed groups, including the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters and Christian Patriot movement.

*Examples: "Join Oath Keepers Militia", "Timothy McVeigh Patriot", "Waco martyrs", "You call it terrorism I call it patriotism t-shirt."*

### Conspiracy Theories

68 indicators of curiosity or engagement with anti-government conspiracies.

*Examples: "FEMA camps", "Waco Government cover up", "Industrial society and its future."*

### Political Violence

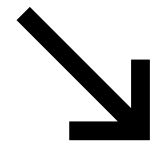
13,802 high-risk variations of a searcher's intent to harm presidential and vice presidential candidates and sitting US senators.

*Examples: "Kill Joe Biden", "Can we execute Susan Collins", "Murder Donald Trump", "I want to shoot Ron Wyden."*

### Targeted Violence

144 high-risk search phrases without a clear ideological or group affiliation. These were included for monitoring and safeguarding throughout the election period.

*Examples: "Anarchist cookbook pdf", "Bomb instructions", "how to make C4", "how to make a weapons cache."*



## Impact

Moonshot's campaigns targeted every county in all 50 states, allowing us to surge our efforts at the local level in response to events and threats. Over a three-month period, we recorded more than 56,300 high-risk searches and our safeguarding ads were shown more than 34,000 times. At-risk users engaged with our ads more than 1,300 times.

These users then watched more than 33 hours of video developed by credible third parties that undermined extremist narratives and promoted a peaceful civic response to 2020's uncertainty.

## Engaging At-Risk Audiences



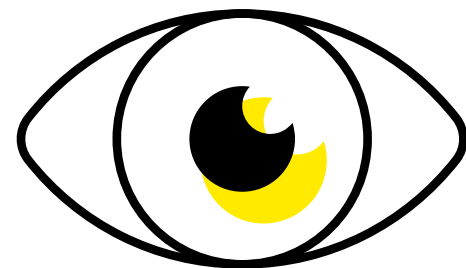
**56,300 searches**

related to violence or disinformation around the US election.



**1,330 engagements**

with our campaign designed to draw people away from violence.



**More than 33 hours**

of counter-content watched by our audience.

## Providing Critical Context

- The QAnon community began talking about suicidal ideation soon after the presidential election results were confirmed.
- Search traffic for “how to make explosives/Molotov cocktails/napalm,” peaked before and after Election Day.
- Offline violence escalated from the Million Mega Marches of November and December through to the Capitol siege on January 6.
- Members of QAnon began to align with anti-vax conspiracies in an attempt to remain relevant.
- After the Proud Boys were discussed during the first presidential debate, searches looking to engage with Proud Boys increased by 127% (for example, “forums,” “merchandise,” “how to join”).
- Election fraud narratives were propagated by armed groups and militias as early as June 2020, priming the conspiracy for widespread uptake.



## About Moonshot

Moonshot is a social enterprise working to end online harms by applying evidence, ethics and human rights. We work with global NGOs, governments, corporate clients and tech companies. We provide comprehensive insights on rapidly evolving threats and conduct the most advanced online interventions to safeguard vulnerable users.

## Press Coverage



## Contact Us

Our innovative online campaigns provide measurable impact for mission-driven organizations. Are you a nonprofit/NGO leader?

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