
FRAMES OF MISINFORMATION AND EXTREMISM

Web Forums and Social-Media Discussions

Monthly Flash Report

June 2022

Richard Lee Rogers

Youngstown State University
Dept. of Criminal Justice & Consumer Sciences

Web Site: <https://www.rogersperspectives.com>
Email: rlrogers02@ysu.edu

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This report contains top-line monthly numbers from a purposive sample of forums and discussions collected from 12 platforms that are known for hosting extremism and/or conspiracism.

This project receives funding from the Ohio Supercomputer Center through a faculty grant.

June 2022 Activity Summary

Methodological Notes: Results are limited exclusively to posts with at least 50 words. Historical trends are restated on a monthly basis as forums are added or dropped from the study. I am rescinding the May numbers after digging into changes recently introduced in the data collection. There was an error on one major platform, though this in itself was not sufficient to change the overall conclusion. However, changes to a second platform captured much more material than the past and distorted the picture of the historical trends. These problems are corrected for this report. In addition, I have dropped the concept of potentially violent discourse after seeing how the numbers spread out by forum and have substituted summaries of violent / aggressive and toxic subframes.

General Trends

Among posts with at least 50 words in the purposive sample, June activity averaged 11,186 posts per day. Activity was stable for the second consecutive month, though it was 26% below the all-time study peak in August 2021 (Fig. 1).

Long-term trends:

- Conspiracy / fringe forums remain the largest component of the study, contributing 47% of posts in June (Fig. 1).
- The decline of alt-right discourse rose 3% in June but remained 31% below its peak in August 2021 (Fig. 1).
- QAnon forums were up 22% in June but still remained 52% below the August 2021 peak (Fig. 1).

Violent / Aggressive and Toxic Discourse

- Violent / aggressive language was identified in 27% of posts in June. This subframe has oscillated consistently between 25 and 30% after fall from its peak value of 35% in June 2020 after the death of George Floyd and subsequent BLM protests (Fig. 4, 5).
- Extreme-Left forums had 34% of posts using violent / aggressive discourse in June, which was near all-time highs for this forum type (Fig. 5).
- The toxicity of discourse was at 18% in June, which is tied for its all-time low (Fig. 4, 6).
- The toxicity of Extreme-right discourse continues to plunge, which may indicate the mainstreaming of these forums. The discourse of the Extreme-Left is now more toxic than the Extreme-Right (Fig. 6).

Religion and Alt-Reality Themes

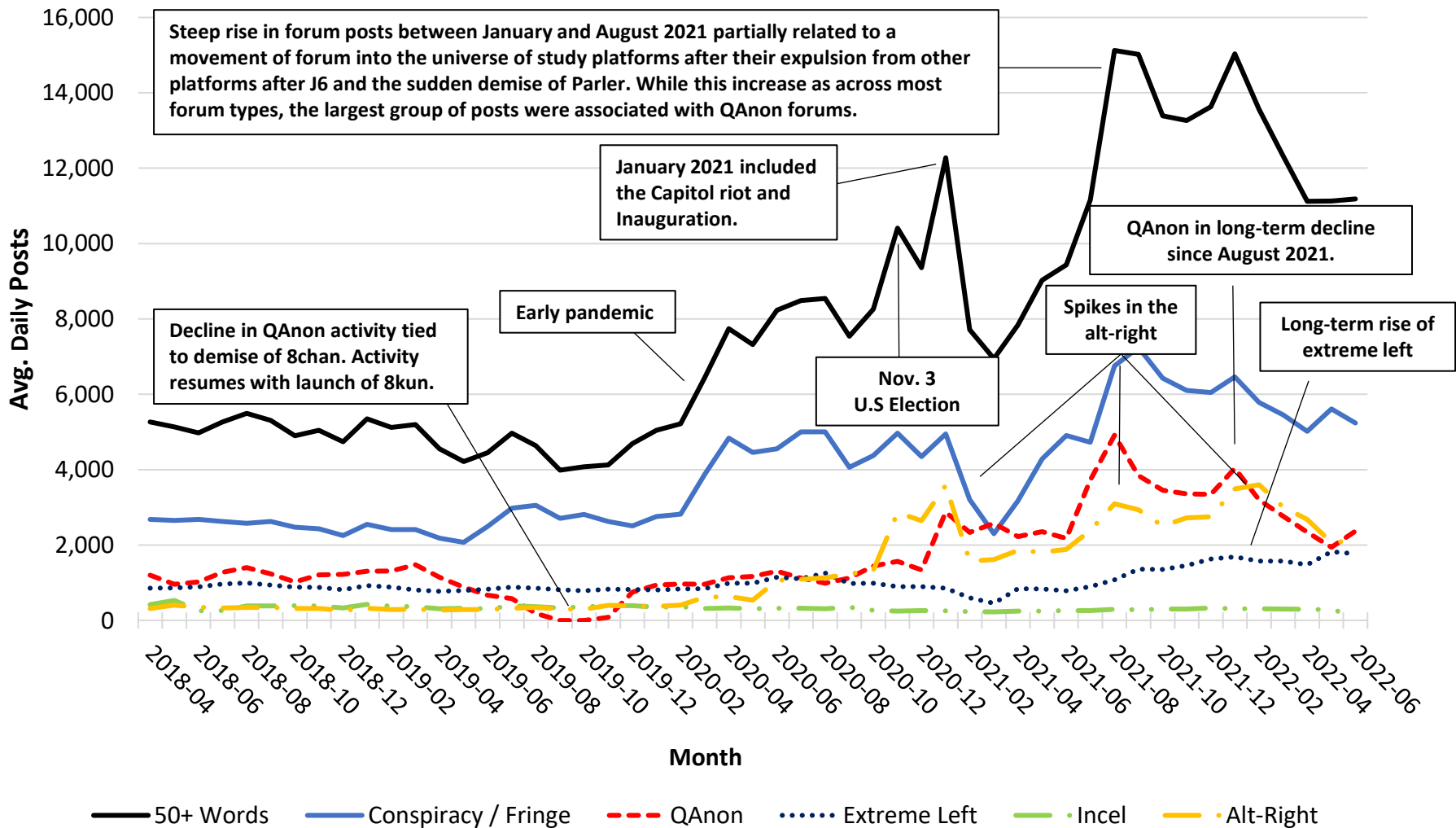
- The Religion frame continued its long-term trend since March 2021 of hovering near 30% of posts (Fig 7).
- The Christian Radical Right (CRR) continued to hover just below 10% of all posts (Fig. 7). However, since March, the presence of its Christian nationalism component rose from 34% to 39% of posts, though it remained far below the peak of 56% established in January 2021 (Fig. 8).
- The decline in Alt-Reality activity ended in June (Fig. 9)

Current Events

- The economy remained the major concern in the discussion of current events (Fig. 12).
- Discussion of reproductive issues rose in May and June due to the *Dobbs* decision on abortion rights (Fig. 12).

Figure 1

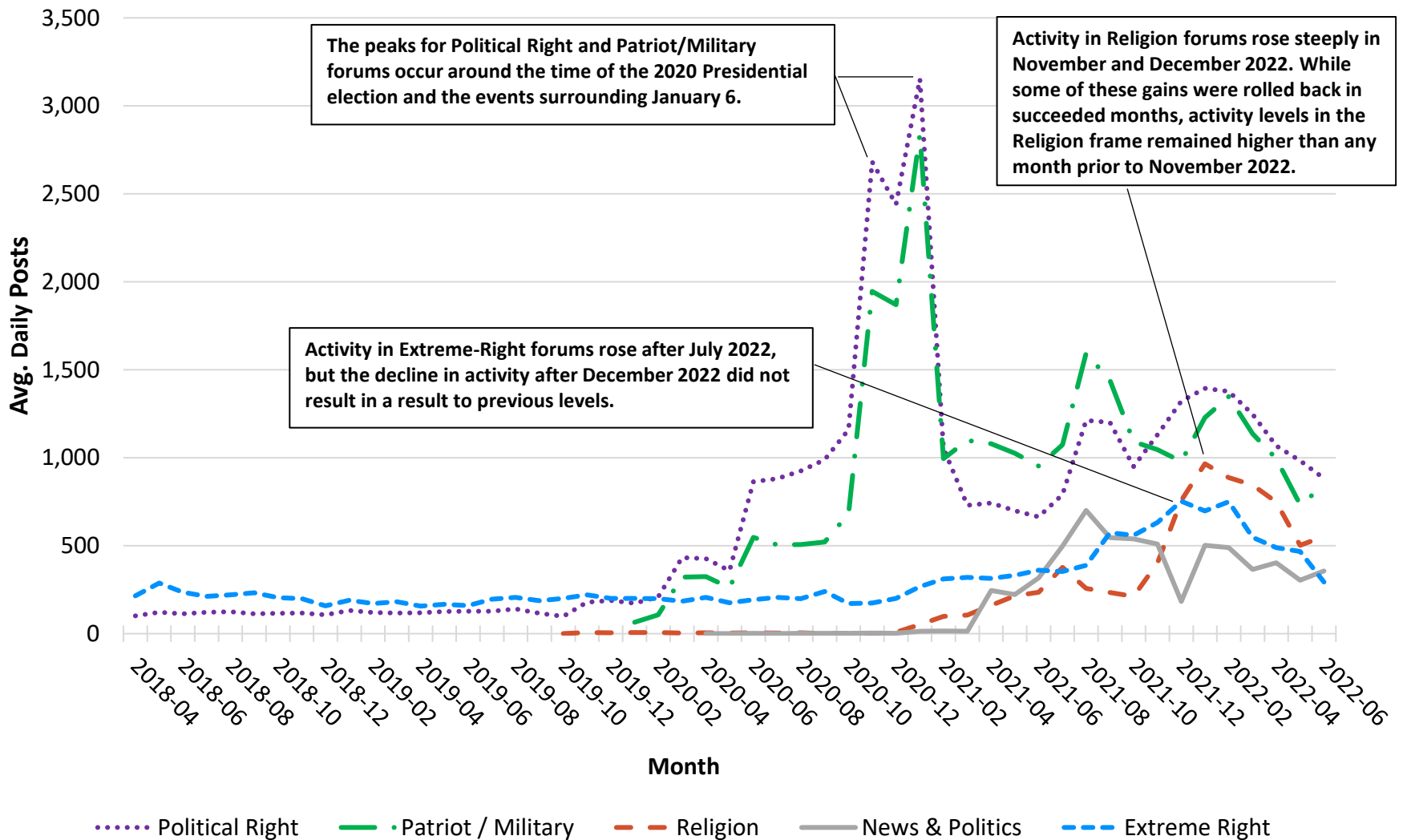
Avg. Daily Activity by Month



Note: 12,272,168 recovered posts with at least 50 words. Forums are not mutually exclusive. QAnon forums could be classified as both Conspiracy/Fringer and Extreme Right, but QAnon forums are separated due to their size and influence. This report uses a broad definition of Alt-Right, which include both Extreme-Right groups (e.g., neo-Nazis, Boys, secessionists) and right-leaning groups with which Extreme-Right groups appear to be forming ideological alliances (Rogers, 2021). The breakout of the Alt-Right can be found in Figure 2.

Figure 2

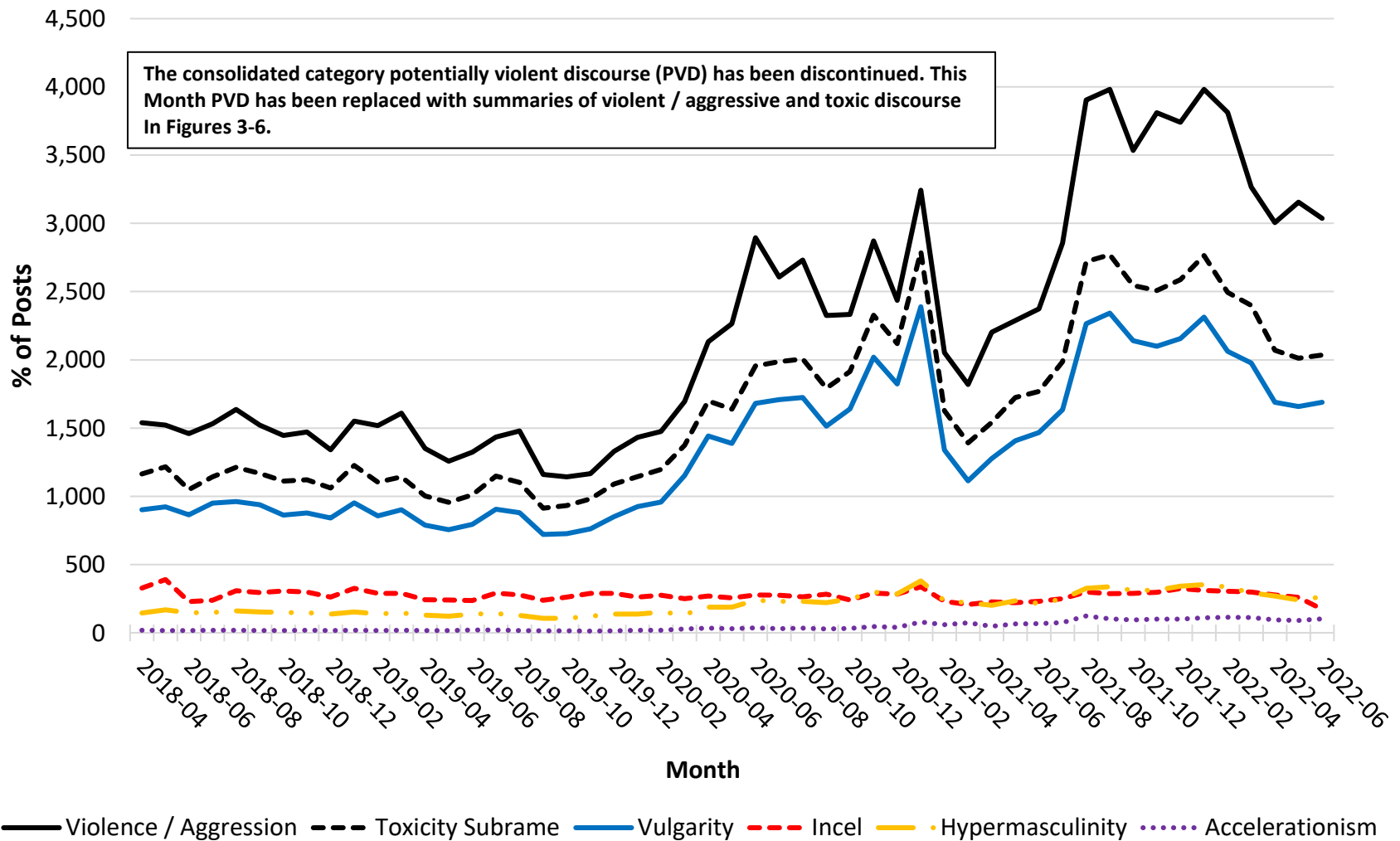
Avg. Daily Activity by Month for Alt-Right Forums by Month



Note: These groups are a subset of forums classified as Alt-Right in Figure 1. The category Extreme Right includes but is not limited to neo-Nazis, Proud Boys, and sovereign citizens. The Political Right includes partisan groups related to MAGA and libertarianism. While this study does not examine mainstream political sites, the discourse of partisan forums selected for the purposive sample often strays beyond normal partisan discourse.

Figure 3

Avg. Daily Posts for Violent / Aggressive and Toxic Discourse by Month



Note: Violent / aggressive discourse is a standalone subframe in the Values frame and excludes references identified in the Military frame. Toxic discourse, also a subframe in the Values frame, includes the use of vulgar language, incel discourse, hypermasculinity, and accelerationism. Accelerationism does not include prophetic discourse.

Figure 4

% Posts for Violent / Aggressive and Toxic Discourse by Month

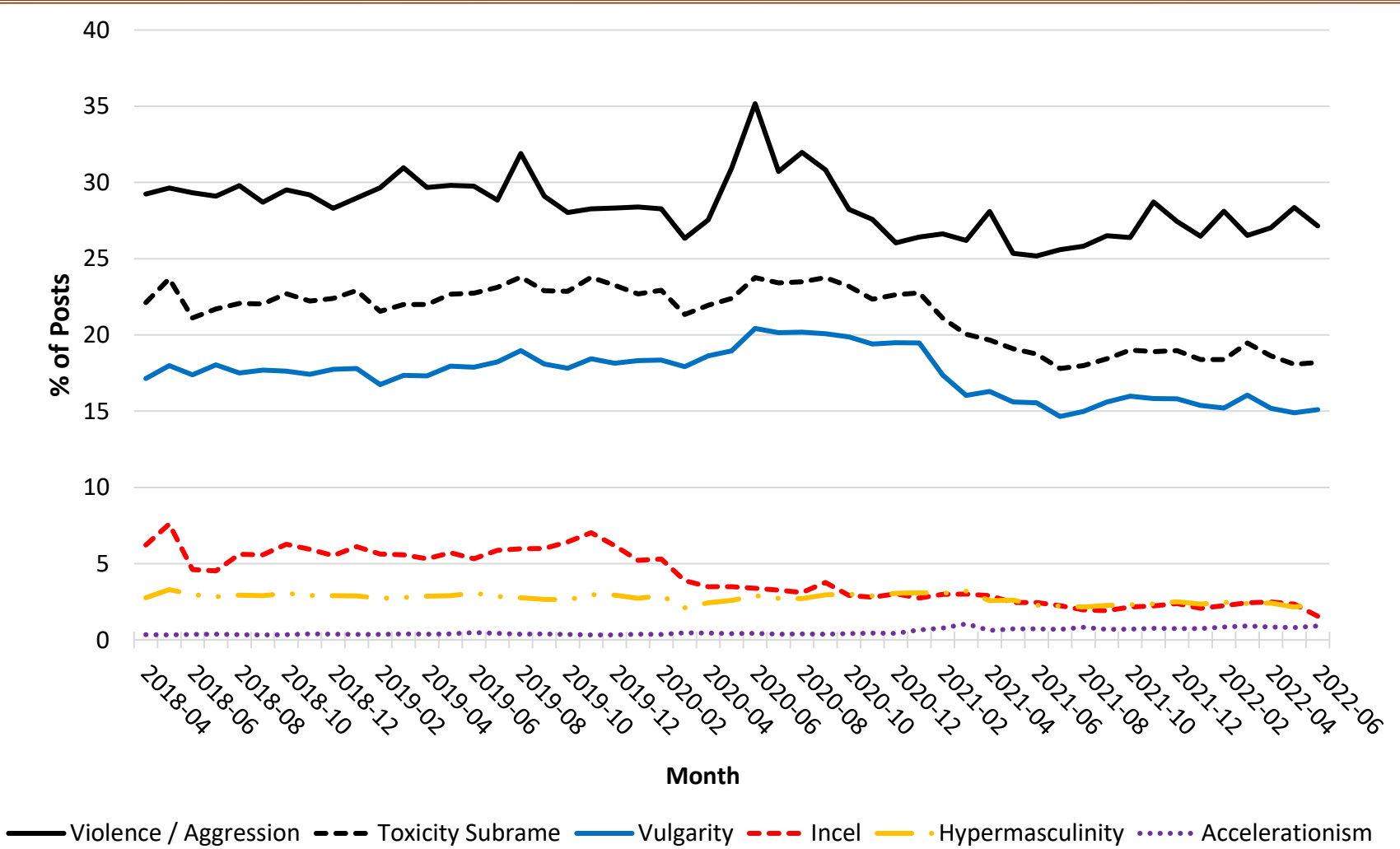
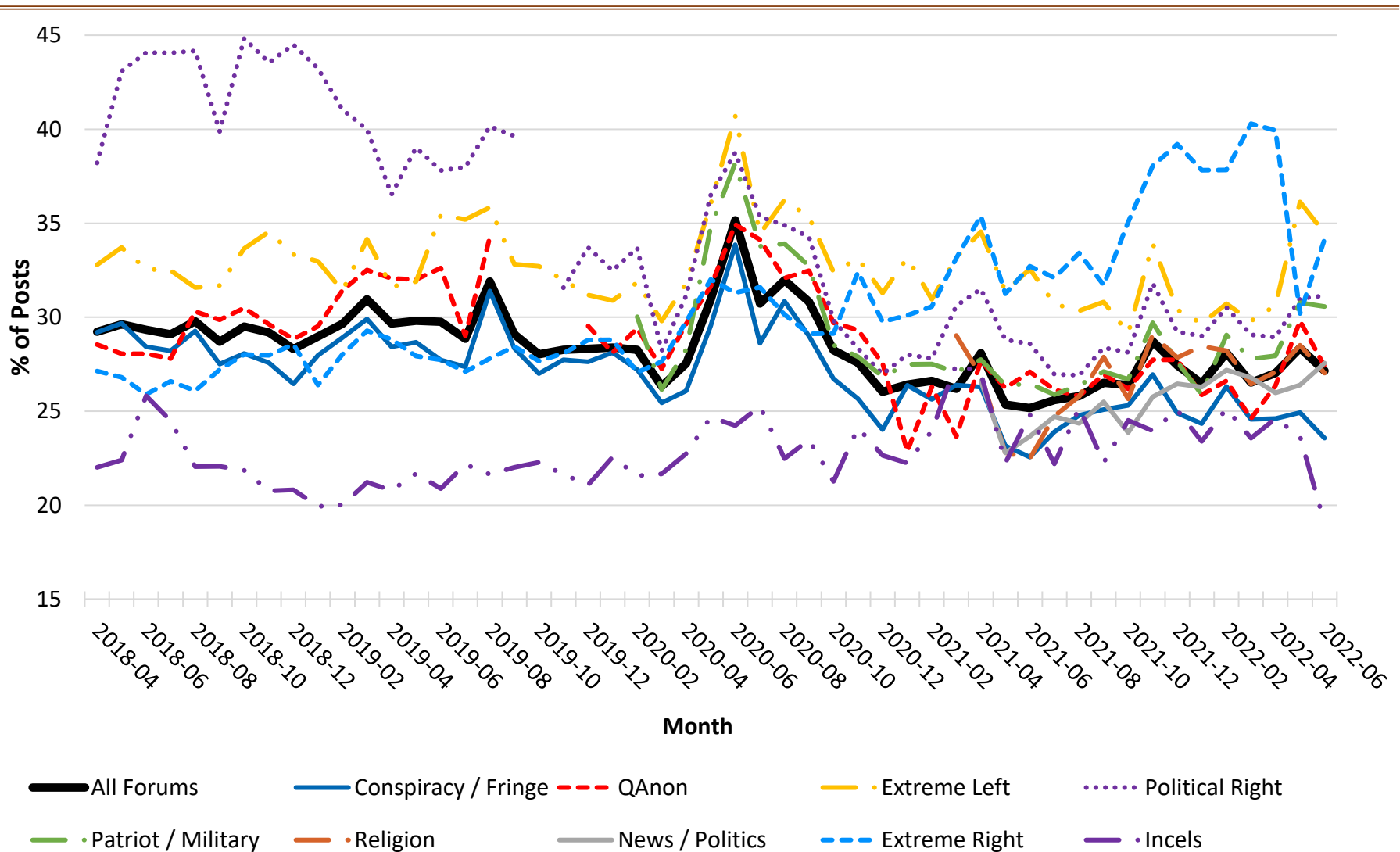


Figure 5

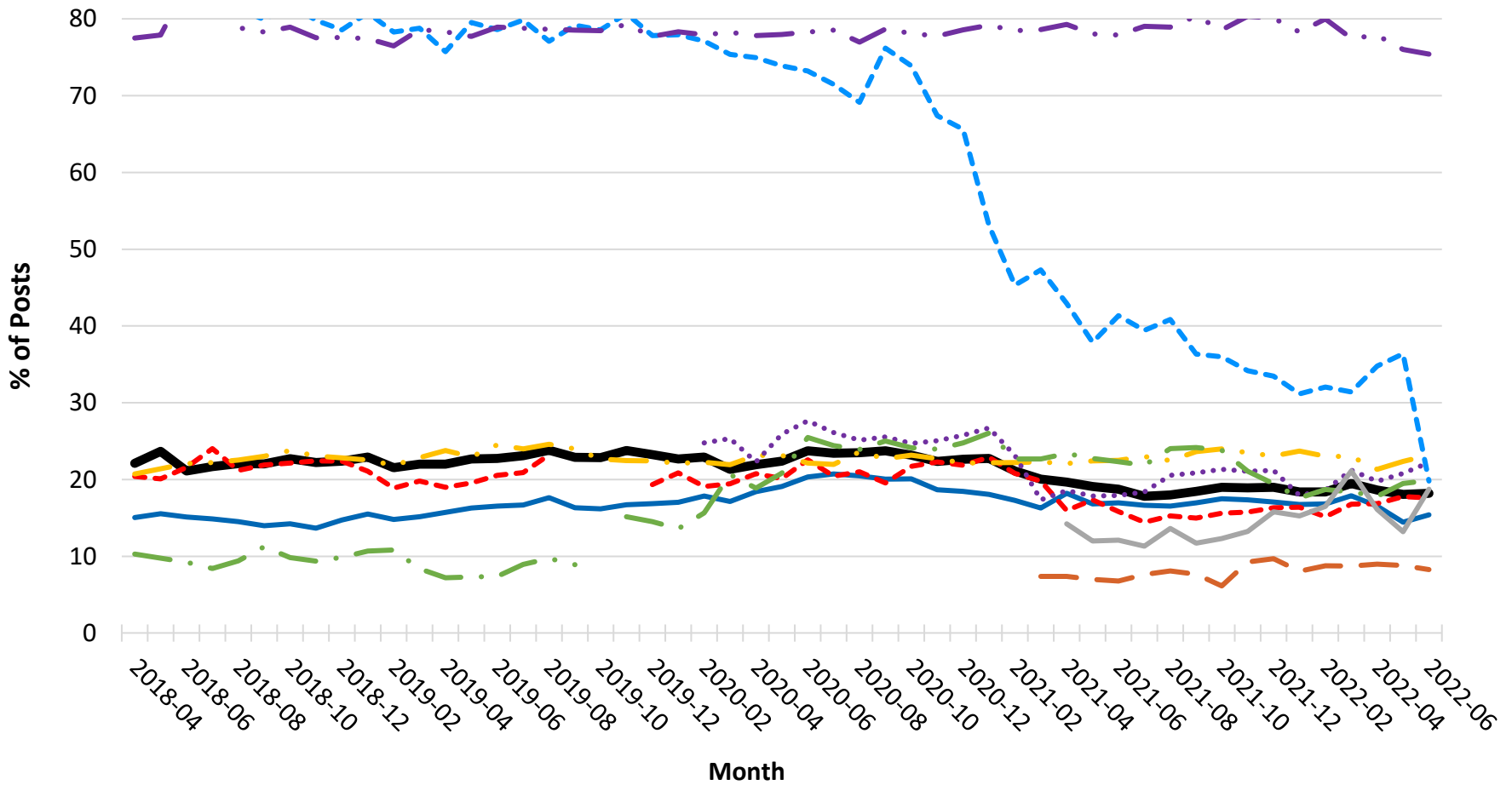
Violence as a % of Posts by Forum Type by Month



Note: The "All Forums" line is the base line for the entire purposive sample. Limited to months where the forum type had average daily activity of at least 100 posts.

Figure 6

Toxicity as a % of Posts by Forum Type by Month



Toxicity
 Conspiracy / Fringe
 QAnon
 Extreme Left
 Patriot / Military

Political Right
 Religion
 News / Politics
 Extreme Right
 Incels

Note: The "All Forums" line is the base line for the entire purposive sample. Limited to months where the forum type had average daily activity of at least 100 posts. Incel discourse includes language about dating, appearance, and exercise that would not normally be regarded as toxic but in Incel forums reinforce the idea of involuntary celibacy.

Figure 7

Activity for Religion Frame since April 2018

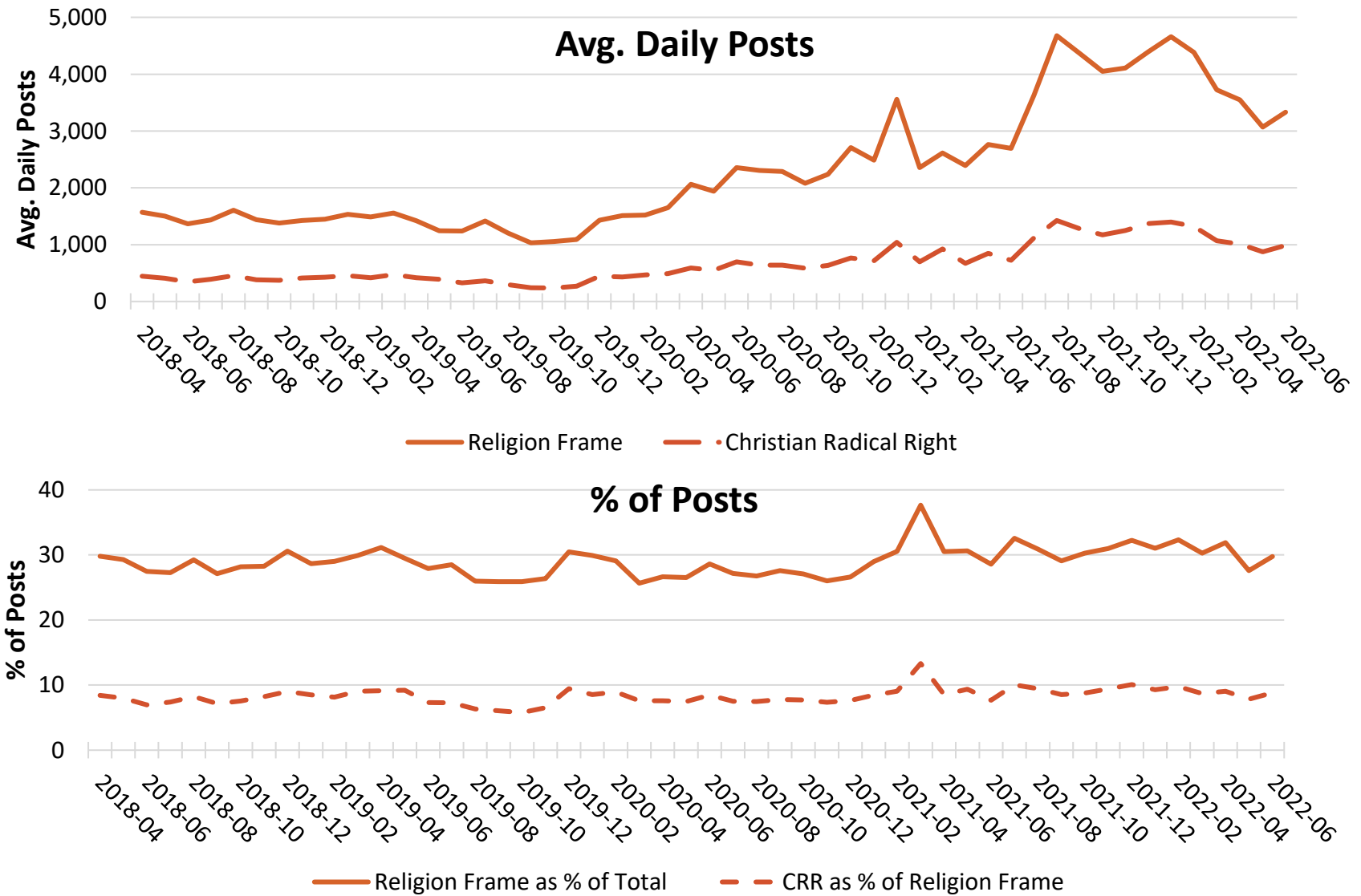


Figure 8

Components of Christian Radical Right as % of CRR since April 2018

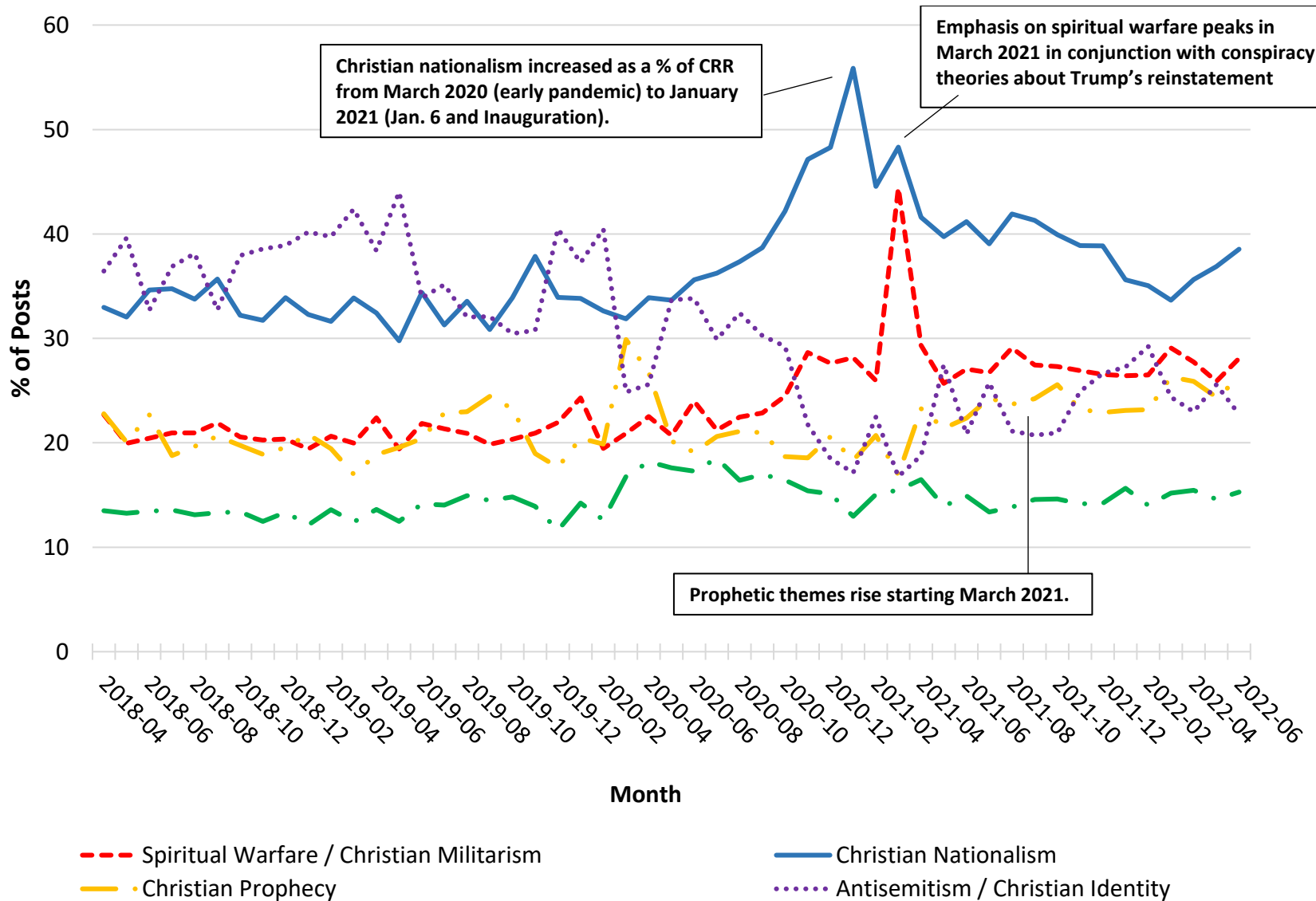
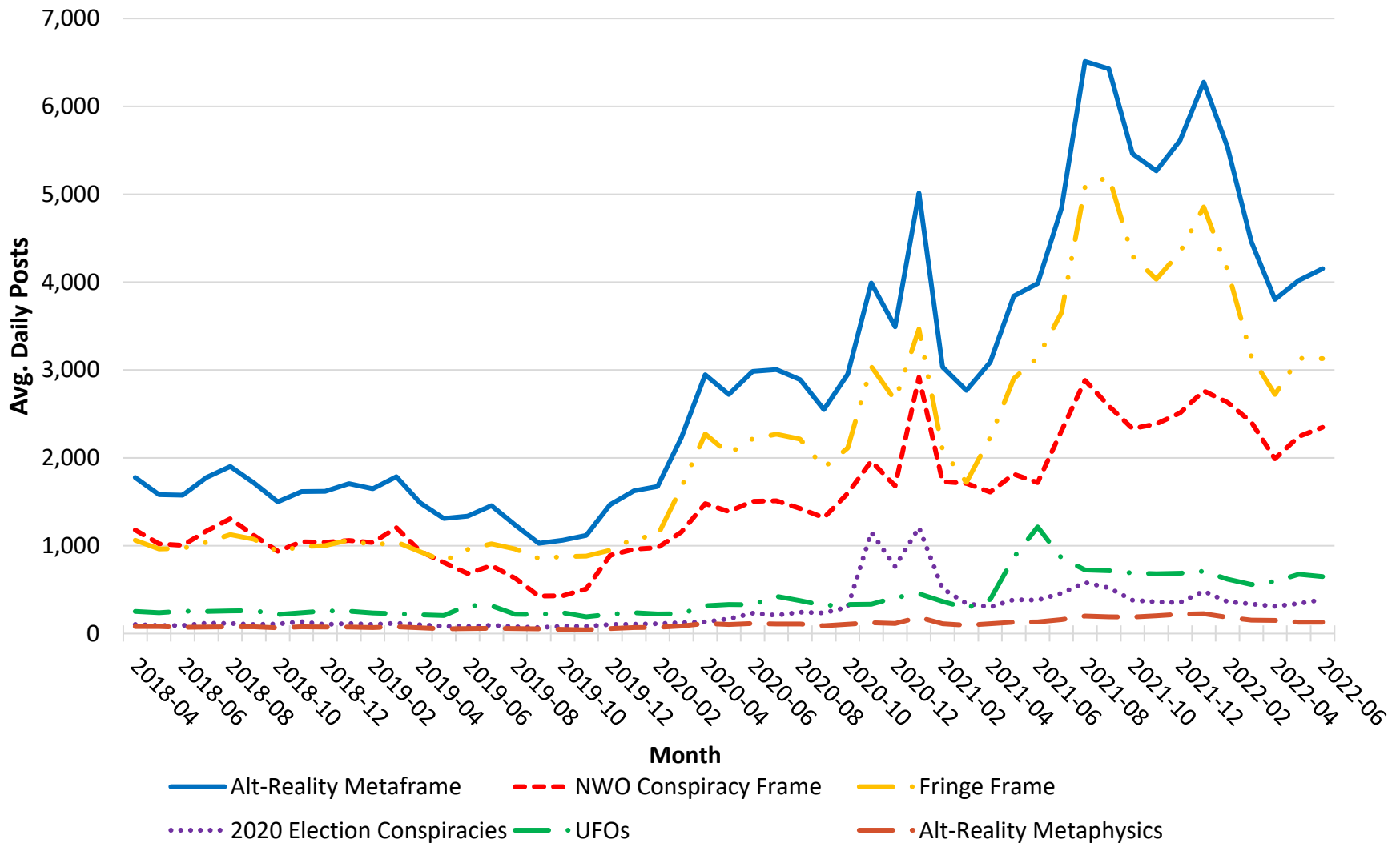


Figure 9

Avg. Daily Activity for Select Alt-Reality Themes by Month



Note: QAnon falls within the NWO Conspiracy frame. As we move further from the 2020 election, election conspiracy theories are harder to identify, so this theme may be revisited.

Figure 10

Avg. Daily Activity for Public Safety Components by Month

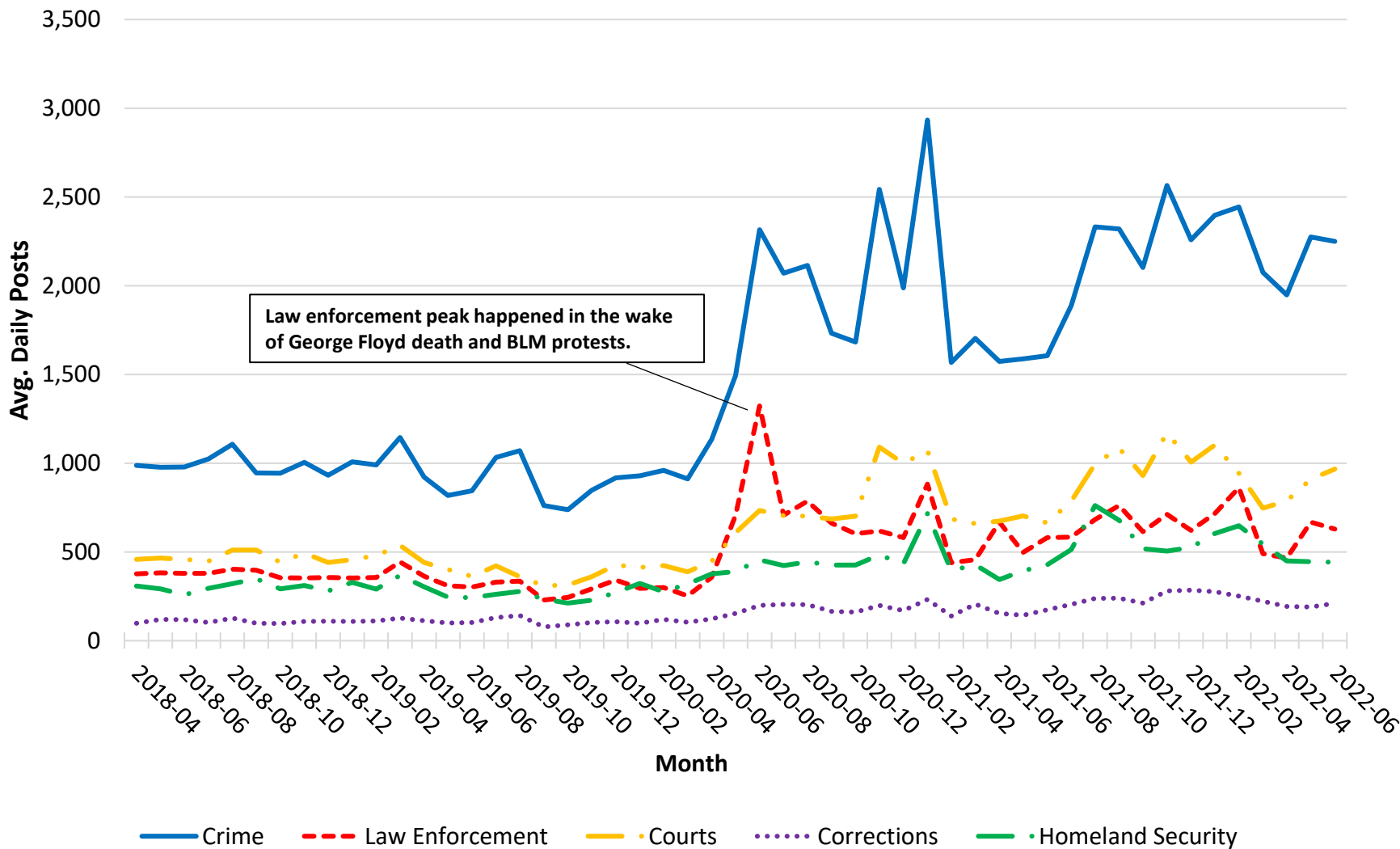
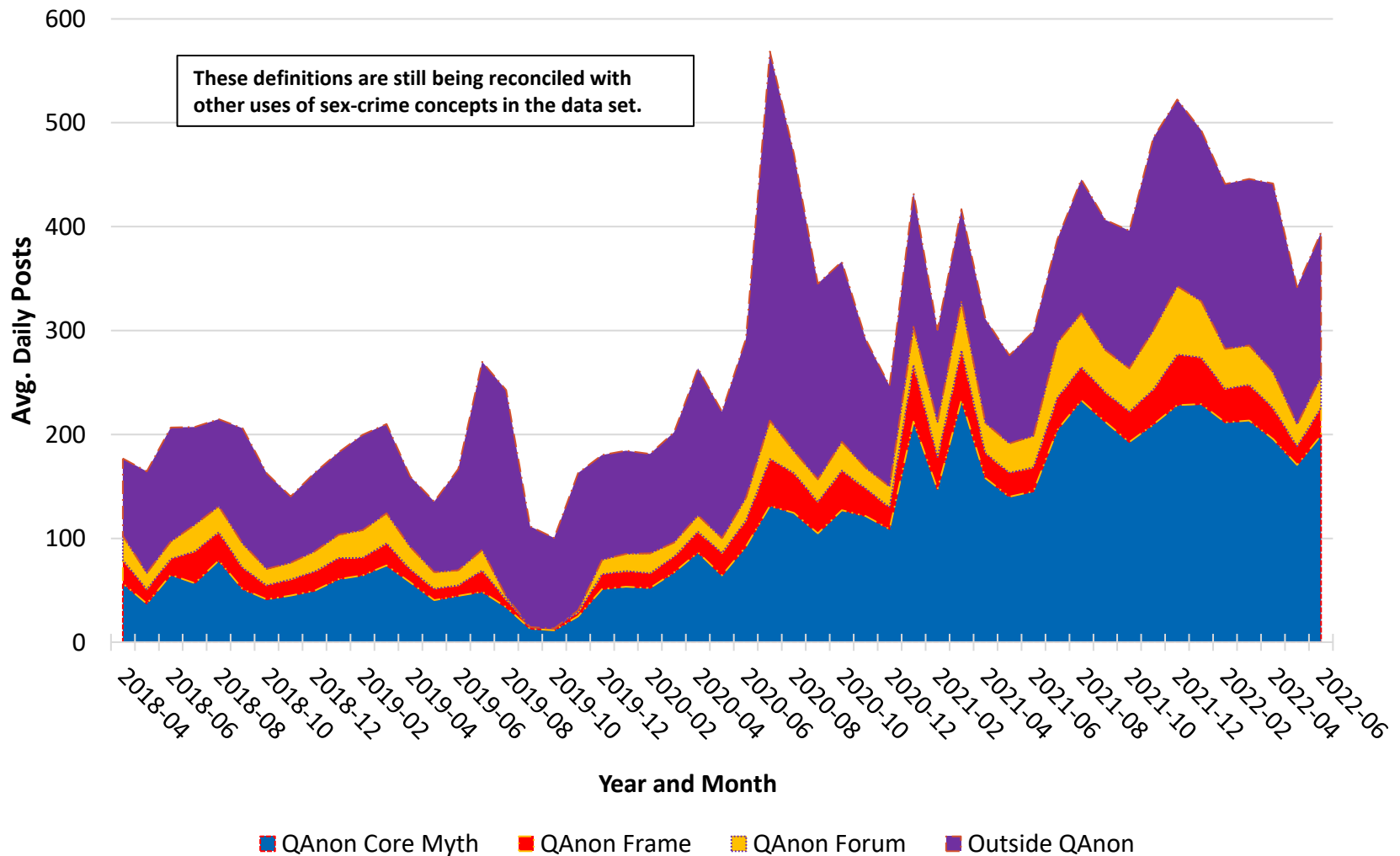


Figure 11

Pedophilia References by Month



Note: Mutually exclusive categories. QAnon core myth refers to elites (Democrats) engaged in sex trafficking and Satanic sacrifice of kidnapped children. QAnon frame refers to references to pedophilia in QAnon frame that do not qualify as expressions of the QAnon core myth. QAnon forum are references in QAnon forums that cannot be regarded as part of QAnon frame. Outside references refer to discussions of pedophilia outside QAnon universe.

Figure 12

Avg. Daily Posts for Contemporary Topics by Month

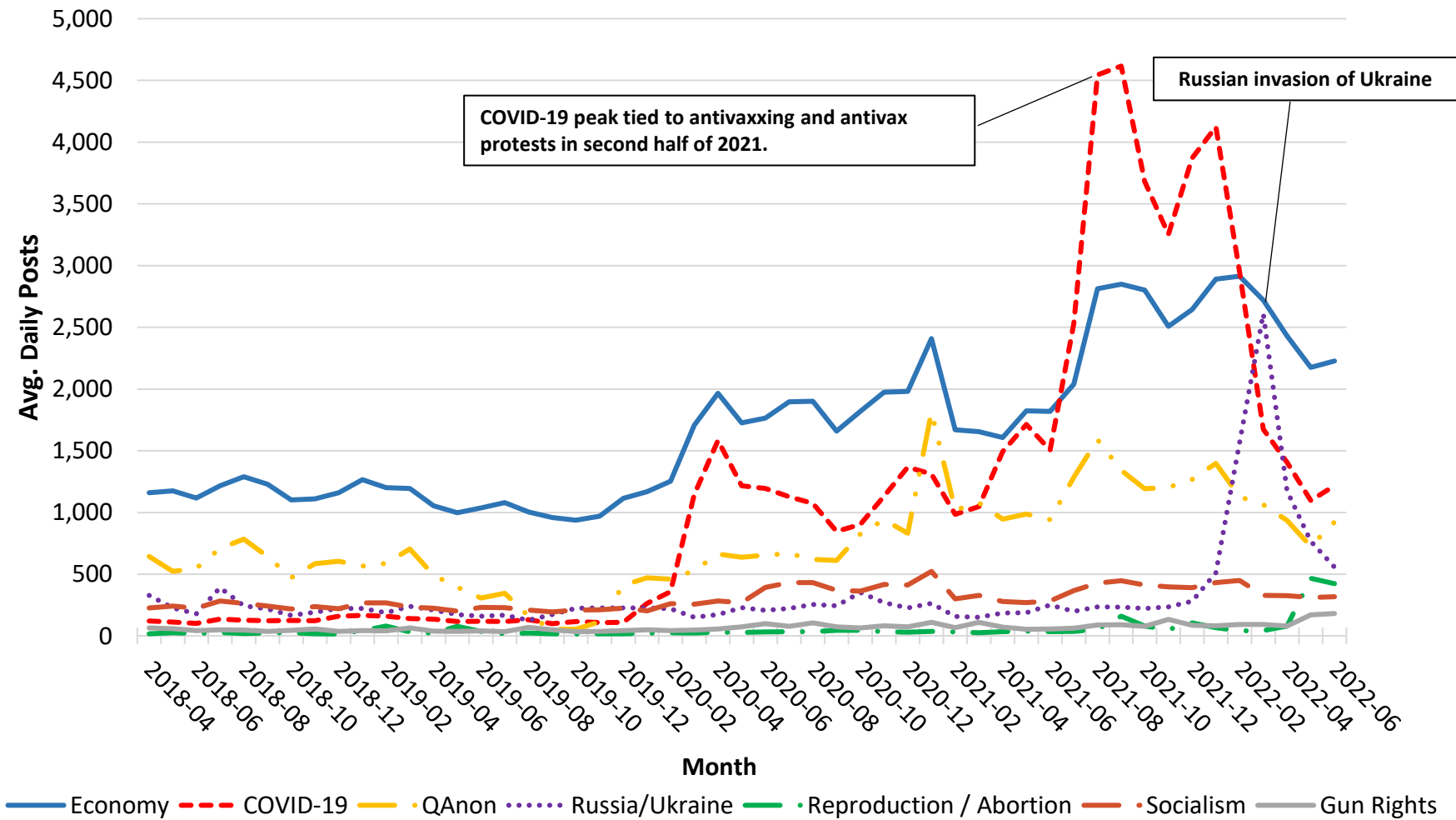


Figure 13

Public Health Benchmarks

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% Natural and Alternative Treatments Modalities Mentioned by Illness

	May 2022			August 2022		
	FOME	Bench- mark	Gap	FOME	Bench- mark	Gap
Contagious Disease	18.3	19.7	-1.4	19.0	17.2	+2.8
Mental Health	11.5	8.9	+2.6	13.9	10.4	+3.5
Substance Abuse	9.3	12.9	-3.6	10.7	13.2	-2.5
Cancer	7.0	22.8	-15.8	6.3	24.8	-18.5
Reproductive Health	0.8	5.9	-5.1	0.6	6.0	-5.4

Note: Benchmarks based on approximately 50 subreddits in Reddit. FOME numbers based on forums used throughout this study. Tracking natural and alternative medicine does not indicate a claim that such activities have not place in health care but that undue emphasis on them could be an early warning of medical misinformation. To establish whether FOME forums have an underdue emphasis, FOME numbers are compared to a benchmark consisting of approximately 50 subreddits from Reddit.

Forum Definitions

- **Alt-Right:** A coalition of right-wing groups including the Extreme Right and adjacent and/or sympathetic types of forums, i.e., Political Right, News/Politics, and Religion (Main, 2018).
- **Conspiracy/Fringe:** Forums that spread nonmainstream and questionable beliefs, such as conspiracies, beliefs in UFOS and the paranormal, and alternative positions on science and history. These sites are included in the study because of the argument that extremism and conspiracism are linked (Barkun, 2002).
- **Extremism:** Political beliefs and strategies that fall outside the spectrum of normal politics (Anti-Defamation League, 2017).
 - **Extreme Right** includes antisemitic and Christian Identity forums, neo-Nazis, Proud Boys, secessionists, and White pride groups.
 - **Extreme Left** includes anarchist and socialist forums.
- **Incels:** incel is short for involuntarily incelibate.cThese forums are known for their violent discourse.
- **News/Politics:** Sites that spread news or political comment that is extremist or conspiracist in nature. Mainstream media and Fox News channels are not included.
- **Patriot/Military:** Extremist or conspiracist forums that directly appeal to self-described “patriots,” current members of the military, or military veterans. Groups that call themselves “patriot” often have origins in QAnon.
- **Political Right:** Conservative, libertarian, America First, and MAGA forums that go outside of normal political discourse in their spread of extremist and conspiracist beliefs. Mainstream Republican/conservative forums are not included.
- **QAnon:** Movement that asserts elites (most Democrats) are engaged in the sex trafficking and human sacrifice of kidnapped children. It was claimed that Donald Trump had a plan to end these practices.
- **Religion:** Faith-based forums known to promote extremism and conspiracism. Mainstream religion forums are not included.

References

General Background

Barkun, M. (2003). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. University of California Press.

Merlan, A. (2019). *Republic of lies: American conspiracy theorists and their surprising rise to power*. Metropolitan Books

Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014). *American conspiracy theories*. Oxford University Press.

Report Citations

Anti-Defamation League. (2017). *Defining extremism*. <https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/extremism>

Barkun, M. (2022). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. California.

Center on Extremism. (2022, June 29). *After 18-month hiatus, new QAnon posts surface*. Anti-Defamation League. [fter-18-month-hiatus-new-qanon-posts-surface](#)

Main, T. J. (2018). *The Rise of the Alt-Right*. Brookings.

Rogers, R. L. (2021). Spiritual warfare and the Apocalypse: The religious framing of political violence among the American new right. In Crews, G., Markey, M. A., & Kerr, S., Eds., *Mitigating mass violence and managing threats in contemporary society*. IGI Global.

This report identifies patterns and tracks trends related to the framing of social and political extremism in conspiracy and right-leaning extremist discussion forums. The methodology implements automated text analysis based on key words, phrases, and word stems on a purposive from 12 major web-based and social-media platforms.

These numbers are top-line and are released through monthly and quarterly reports to facilitate timely monitoring. Although the trends in activity are interesting in themselves, the reports are not “market share” or “share of voice” reports because of the purposive nature of the sample. It is quite easy to get a different result simply by chance the mix of online forums. For example, if I want the religion frame to be the largest, I add more religion forums.

In spite of this limitation, the following should be noted:

1. Findings from the study are credible because the research includes several large, well-known discussion forums that are regarded as newsworthy.
2. Looking at the trend lines is a logical first step, even in a purposive study, if for no other reason than to see if the times lines correspond with known trends.
3. While the absolute numbers are easily misinterpreted when discussing overall volume and comparisons across sites, the use of a purposive sample can yield meaningful conclusions about trends within an online community, and comparisons of characteristics of online communities can be reasonably made when the data is standardized, e.g., comparisons are made on percentages and not absolute values.

The intent is not to address all issues in a single document. Rather, activity reporting is the first step in addressing key qualitative questions about how conspiracists and extremist movements coopt existing mainstream beliefs and practices to legitimate their positions and mobilize followers. The key questions include:

1. What frames are used to legitimate extremist views and interpretations of current events?
2. How has the use of frames in support of extremism changed over time?
3. What interactions are forming between frames?
4. To what extent do extremism, conspiracism, and fringe beliefs constitute a unified system of ideology, and to what extent are they decoupled?
5. To what extent are extremism, conspiracism, and fringe beliefs becoming mainstream?

Some specific issues are tracked with an eye on further research:

1. To what extent is religious discourse turning militaristic?
2. To what extent is political discussion turning violent? Most notably I am paying attention to the ongoing promotion of conspiracy theories surrounding the 2020 presidential election.
3. How is the core mythology of QAnon evolving?
4. How is QAnon and other New World Conspiracy theories interacting with religious communities?
5. What is hypermasculinity, and how is it influencing extremist discourse?
6. What conspiracy theories and misinformation are infiltrating the discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The quarterly reports will provide the most detailed top-line analysis, supplemented by monthly updates through flash reports. In addition, separate reports regarding the tracking of trends related to left-wing extremism, public-health (mis)information, and religion forums are in development. Detailed analysis of trends will be handled through peer-reviewed publications.

Coding has been made public and a link to a publicly shared Google drive can be online at <https://www.rogersperspectives.com/tracking-of-extremism-report>