FRAMES OF
MISINFORMATION, EXTREMISM, & CONSPIRACISM
Web Forums and Social-Media Discussions
Monthly Summary
March 2023

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This report contains top-line monthly numbers from a purposive sample of forums and discussions collected from 15 platforms that are known for hosting misinformation, extremism, and conspiracism (MEC sector).

Preface to the March, April, and May 2023 Reports

The monthly reports were delayed to address numerous issues that converged at the same time, including (1) concern about a one-time event substantively impacting the timeline, (2) the recent inaccessibility of some channels to automated techniques, and (3) methodological changes. March, April, and May data were used to investigate the most pressing issues and make modifications, and the 3 associated monthly reports are issued simultaneously. June and July are in progress.

One-Time Event

The initial March data collection identified a 39% decline in overall activity tied to 3 steep declines in 3 channels – QResearch, patriots.win (thedonald.win), and greatawakening.win – and these low levels continued through April and May. This finding did not seem believable, especially after looking at activity in these forums. After further investigation, I found that all three channels experienced a substantial decline in the beginning of March, which suggested a cyberattack on right-wing platforms. In addition, the win channels added rate limits that control bot activity and web scraping. While I could not find direct evidence of a cyberattack, I did find discussion of a major attack at this time on another channel not in this study but frequently subject to such attacks, including a 2022 attack that also affected QResearch. After further investigation, I accepted the decline on the QResearch as accurate, but after adjusting my commercial web scraper for rate limits, estimates for activity from win channels were raised for March and subsequent months. The newly imposed rate limits will dramatically affect report turnaround going forward.

Inaccessibility of Some Channels

- Reddit has shut down use of Pushshift API for researchers as part of taking the platform public. Reddit constituted approximately half of the purposive sample, and its loss substantively impacts estimates of Conspiracy/Fringe and Extreme Left forums.
- Telegram exports are now completely automated. Telegram broadcast channels are often accompanied by associated chat channels, which can be public, private, or private with public links. (Telegram regards the latter as public because people can access the chat through the public link.) As I switched from manual exports to automation, 57 Telegram channels that were private chats with public links became inaccessible because my programs not longer accessed data through the public link. These private-yet-public channels have now been removed from the study, and their history has been removed..
- Several other Telegram channels have ceased supporting public chat channels. This is sometimes used as a strategy to minimize bot activity in an online community. The history of these channels is included in this study because the removal of these channels represents a legitimate decline in activity that should be counted.
- Twitter is not included in the study, so the removal of academic researchers from the Twitter API has no impact.

Methodological Changes – Current and Forthcoming

- The minimum word length in the study has been dropped from 50 words to 25 words.. The tag rate remains over 90%, which is a dramatic improvement from when the study was first launched and is a consequence of continuous additions to the program code.
- Incels.is and hexbear.net were rescraped after changes were detected on those platforms. The result was an expansion of historical material available on each platform.
- The purposive sample is being revised to incorporate a select group of web sites, YouTube channels, and Telegram adjustments due to the loss of Reddit and the 57 Telegram chat channels. These changes include efforts to replace the loss of Conspiracy/Fringe and Extreme-Left material due to the new restrictions on the Reddit API. It may take several months to include these changes.
- 4chan's r9k is being added to the study. This is a large scrape and may take 2 to 3 months.
- Note the use of the term "prevalence rate" is starting to appear in lieu of % posts. This change is in preparation for adding a second metric of activity to be called the density or density rate. Densities will begin appearing with June or July data and take several months to phase in. A high prevalence rate is now defined as presence of frame in 25% of posts
- Frame definitions are being expanded to incorporate forum types. The notion of the "composite" used with religion becomes obsolete once this is implemented. This will begin with June or July data.

Activity Summary

Methodological Notes: Activity levels are defined as the % of posts with at least one key word, phrase, or stem identified with particular themes. Because the study of language and ideology is a key aspect of the larger project, results are limited exclusively to posts with at least 25 words. The complete list of current platforms from which forums were selected can be found toward the end of this document. A user's manual and program code can be found at https://www.rogersperspectives.com. Any corrections for errors will appear in next month's report.

Key Trend

There was a 21% decline in daily activity during March (Fig. 1, 2, and 5). Leading the decline was QResearch on 8kun, which fell 94% in March.
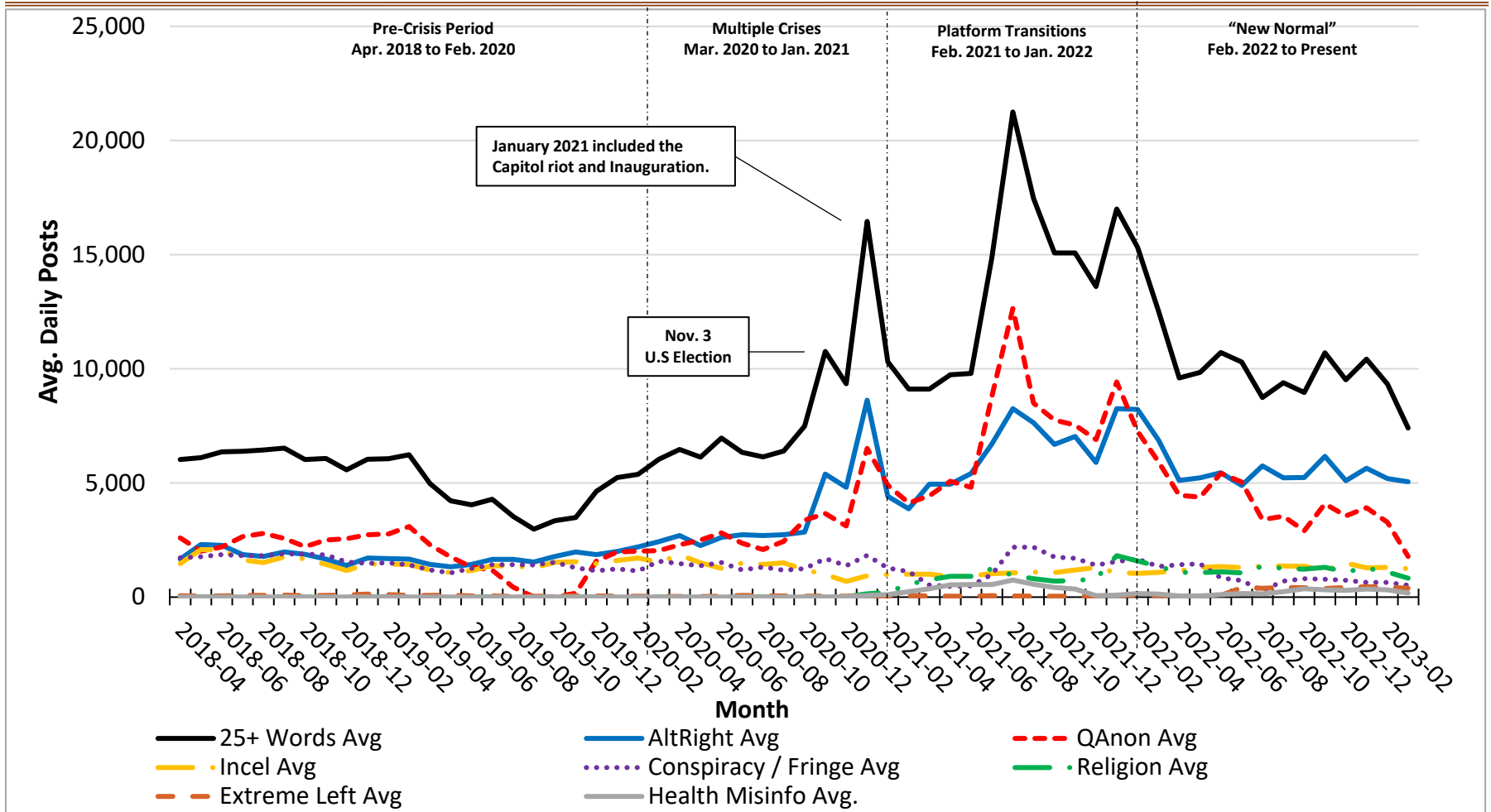
Other Trends

Average daily balances fell from 9,326 posts per day in February to 7,400 posts per day in March (Fig. 1 and 2).

The steep decline in QResearch contributed to a 46% decline in activity on QAnon forums (Fig. 2 and 5). However, activity associated with the Patriot / Military and Political Right forums increased 21% and 10% respectively in response to the progress of investigations into Donald Trump (Fig. 4).

The level of violent / aggressive discourse was near the top of the moderate range in March with a prevalence rate of 23%. Health Misinformation forums had the highest prevalence rate for violent / aggressive discourse at 27% (Fig. 7).

In March the prevalence of religious discourse in the purposive sample remained high at 34% (Fig. 8)..
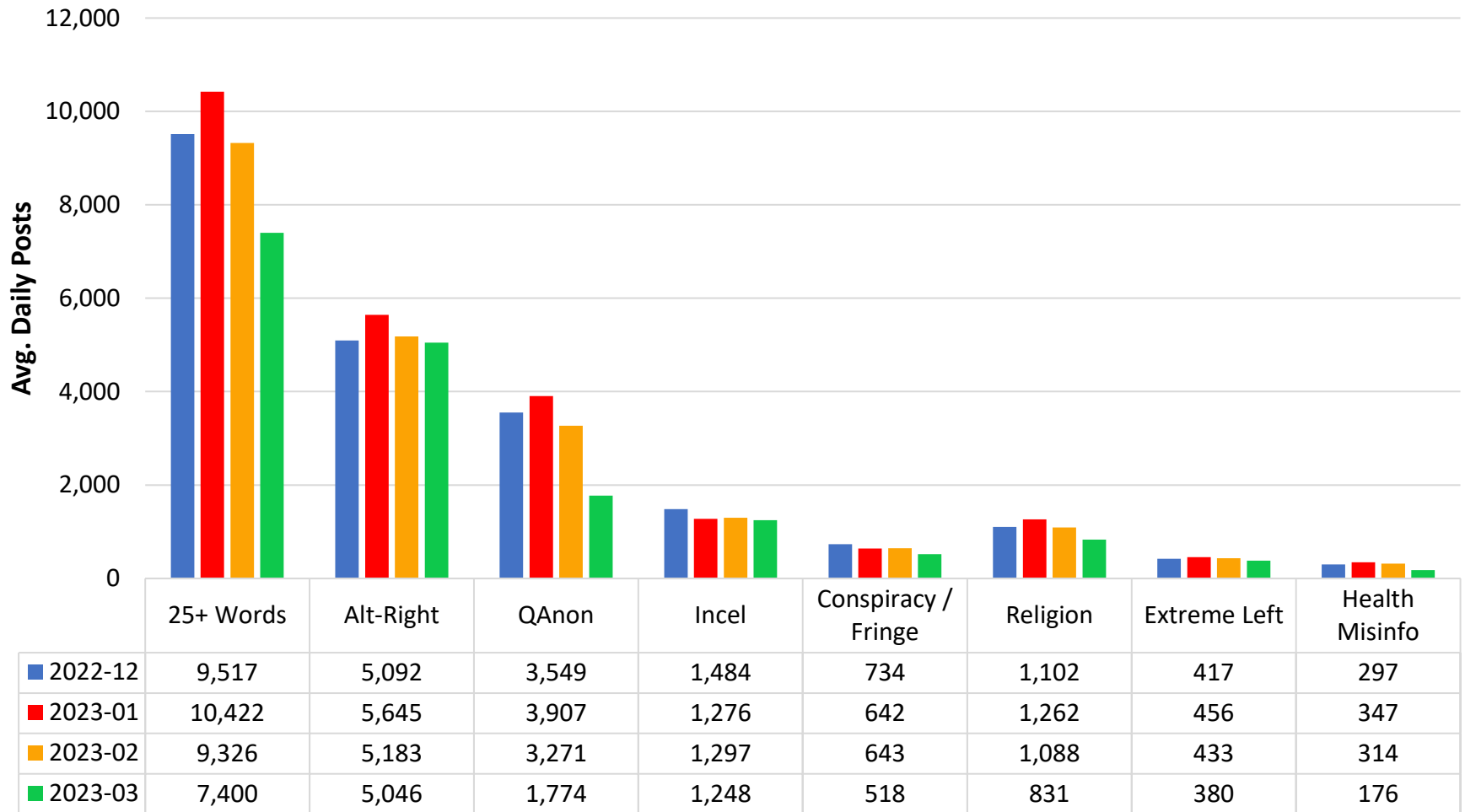
Figure 1
Avg. Daily Activity by Month

Pre-Crisis Period Apr. 2018 to Feb. 2020

Multiple Crises Mar. 2020 to Jan. 2021

Platform Transitions Feb. 2021 to Jan. 2022

"New Normal" Feb. 2022 to Present

January 2021 included the Capitol riot and Inauguration.

Nov. 3 U.S Election

Legend:
- 25+ Words Avg
- AltRight Avg
- QAnon Avg
- Incel Avg
- Conspiracy / Fringe Avg
- Religion Avg
- Extreme Left Avg
- Health Misinfo Avg.

Note:15,623,508 recovered posts with at least 50 words. Forums are not mutually exclusive. QAnon forums could be classified as both Conspiracy/Fringe and Extreme Right, but QAnon forums are separated due to their size and influence. This report uses a broad definition of the Alt-Right supergroup, 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 3.

Periods: The period of multiple crises refers to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, BLM protests, and 2020 presidential election activity. Platform Transition highlights the rise of new extremist and conspiracists forums in the universe of platforms, many due to their expulsion from Facebook and Twitter and the collapse of Parler.
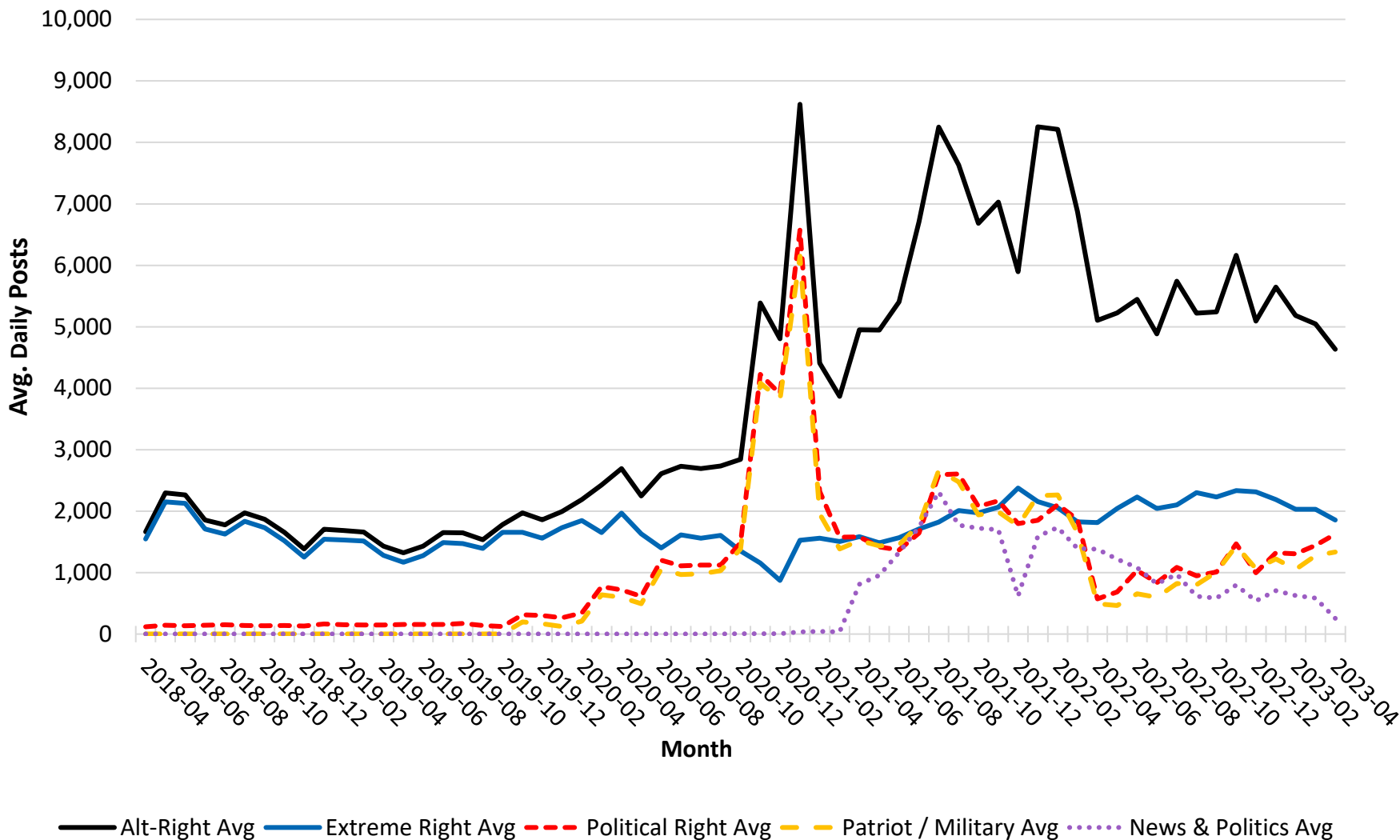
Figure 2
Avg. Daily Activity for Past Four Months

	25+ Words	Alt-Right	QAnon	Incel	Conspiracy / Fringe	Religion	Extreme Left	Health Misinfo
2022-12	9,517	5,092	3,549	1,484	734	1,102	417	297
2023-01	10,422	5,645	3,907	1,276	642	1,262	456	347
2023-02	9,326	5,183	3,271	1,297	643	1,088	433	314
2023-03	7,400	5,046	1,774	1,248	518	831	380	176

Note:1,108,616 recovered posts with at least 50 words. Forums are not mutually exclusive. QAnon forums could be classified as both Conspiracy/Fringe and Extreme Right, but QAnon forums are separated due to their size and influence. This report uses a broad definition of the Alt-Right Supergroup, 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 4.
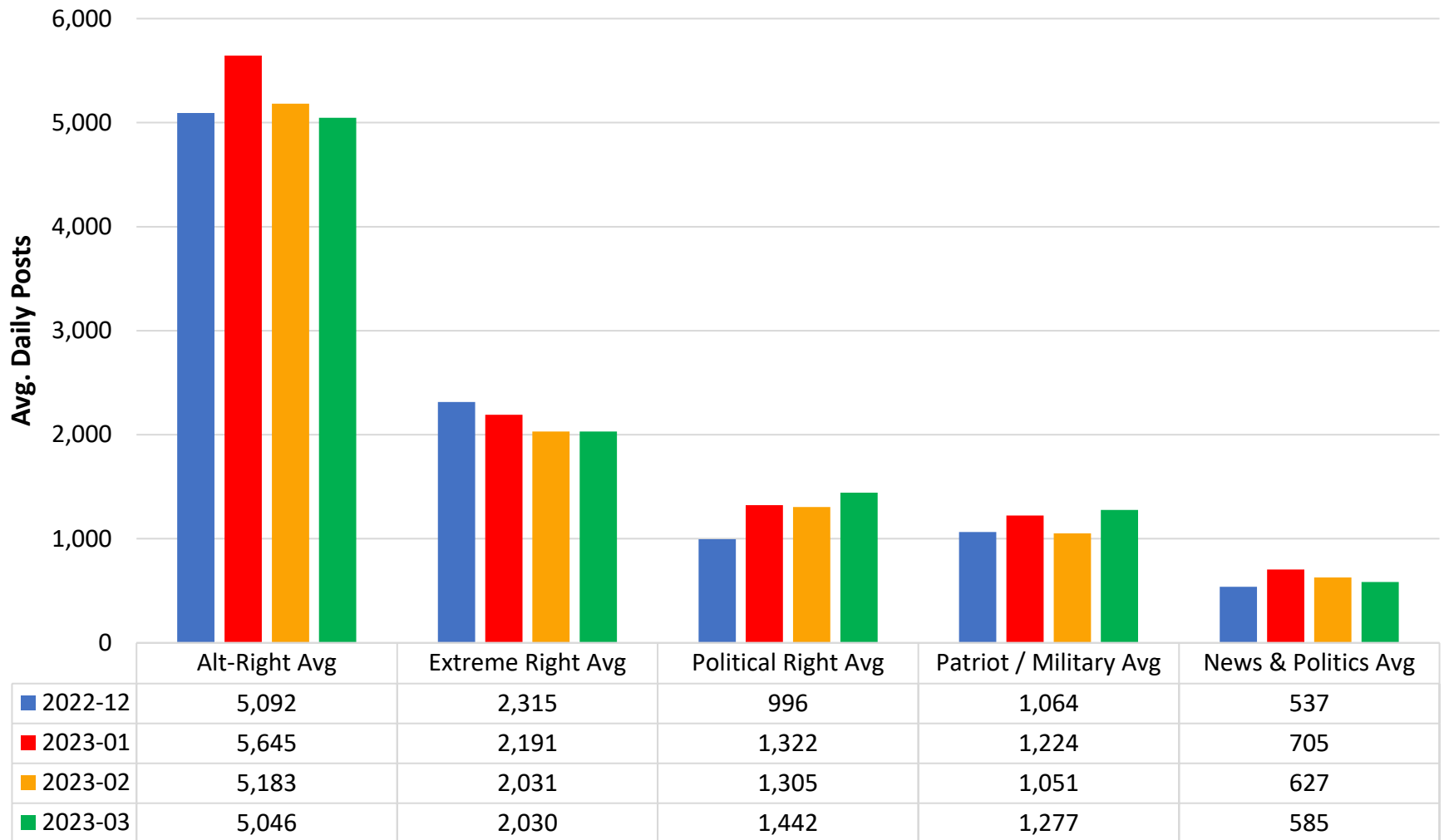
Figure 3
Avg. Daily Activity by Month for Alt-Right Supergroup by Month

Legend: Alt-Right Avg — Extreme Right Avg — Political Right Avg — Patriot / Military Avg — News & Politics Avg

Figure 4
Avg. Daily Activity for Alt-Right Forums for Past Four Months

	Alt-Right Avg	Extreme Right Avg	Political Right Avg	Patriot / Military Avg	News & Politics Avg
2022-12	5,092	2,315	996	1,064	537
2023-01	5,645	2,191	1,322	1,224	705
2023-02	5,183	2,031	1,305	1,051	627
2023-03	5,046	2,030	1,442	1,277	585

Note: 301,562 recovered posts. These groups are a subset of forums classified as Alt-Right in Figure 2. The category Extreme Right includes but is not limited 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.
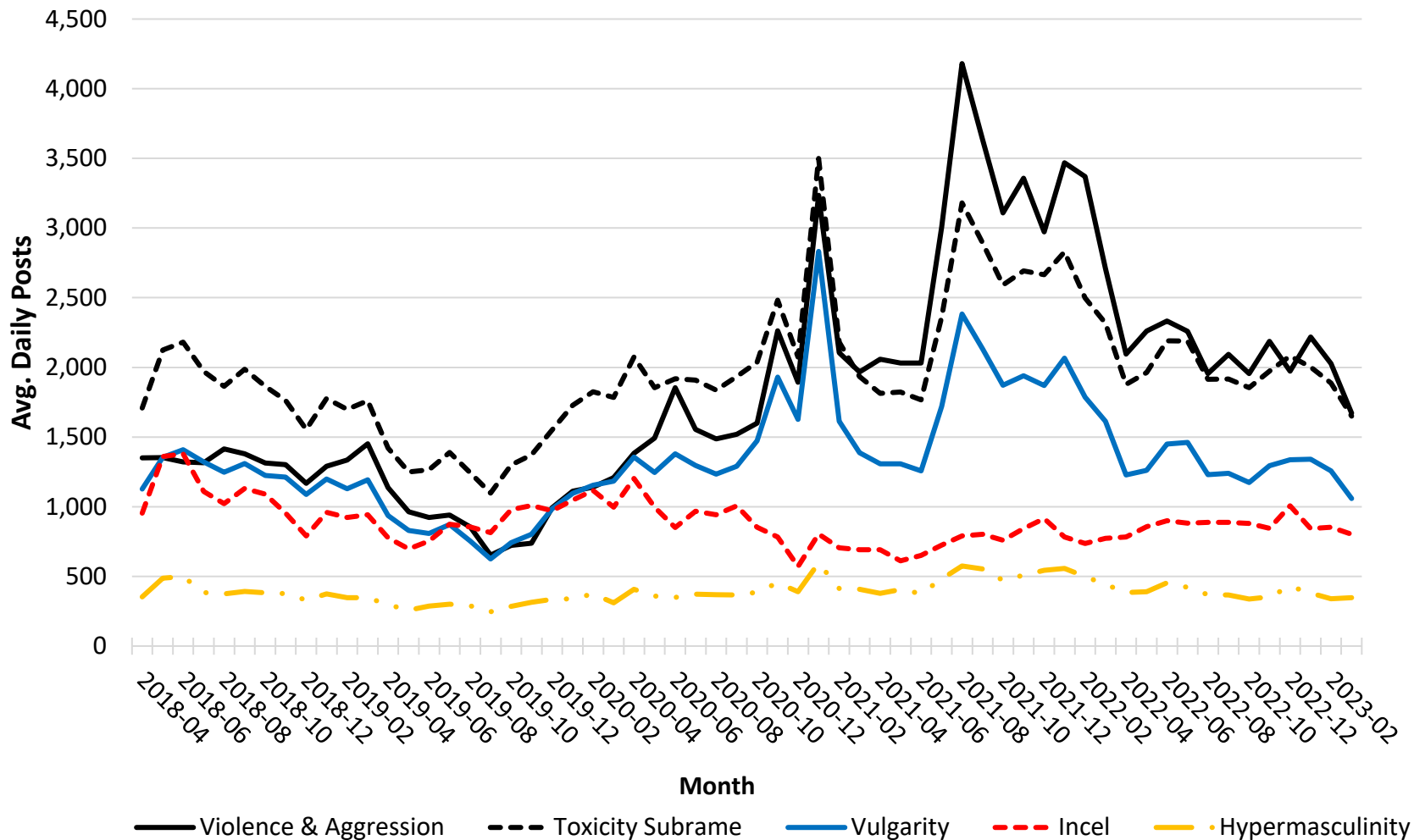
Figure 5
Daily Posts for Most Recent 4 Months
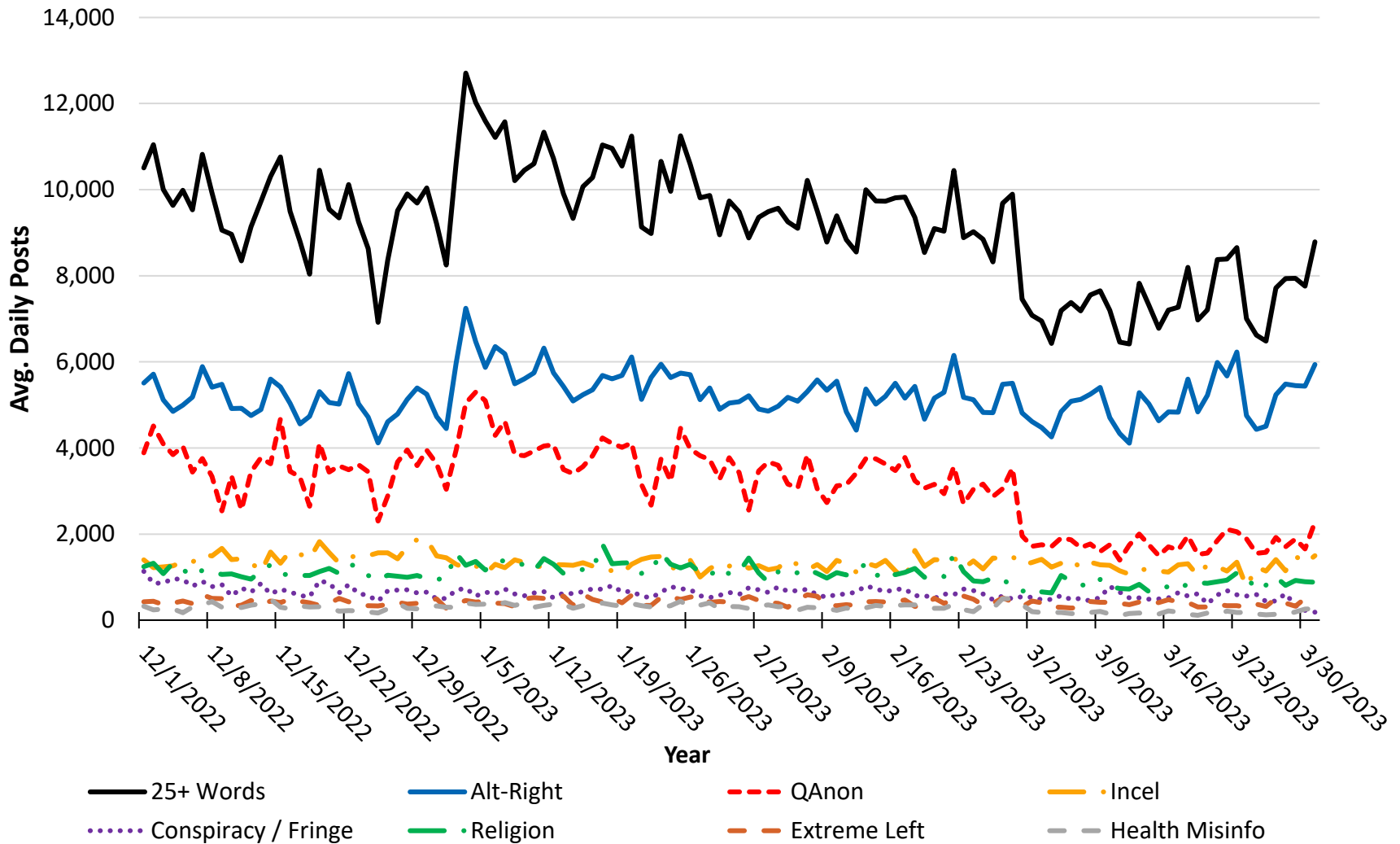
Note: 1,108,616 recovered posts. Forums and composites are not exhaustive and not mutually exclusive .
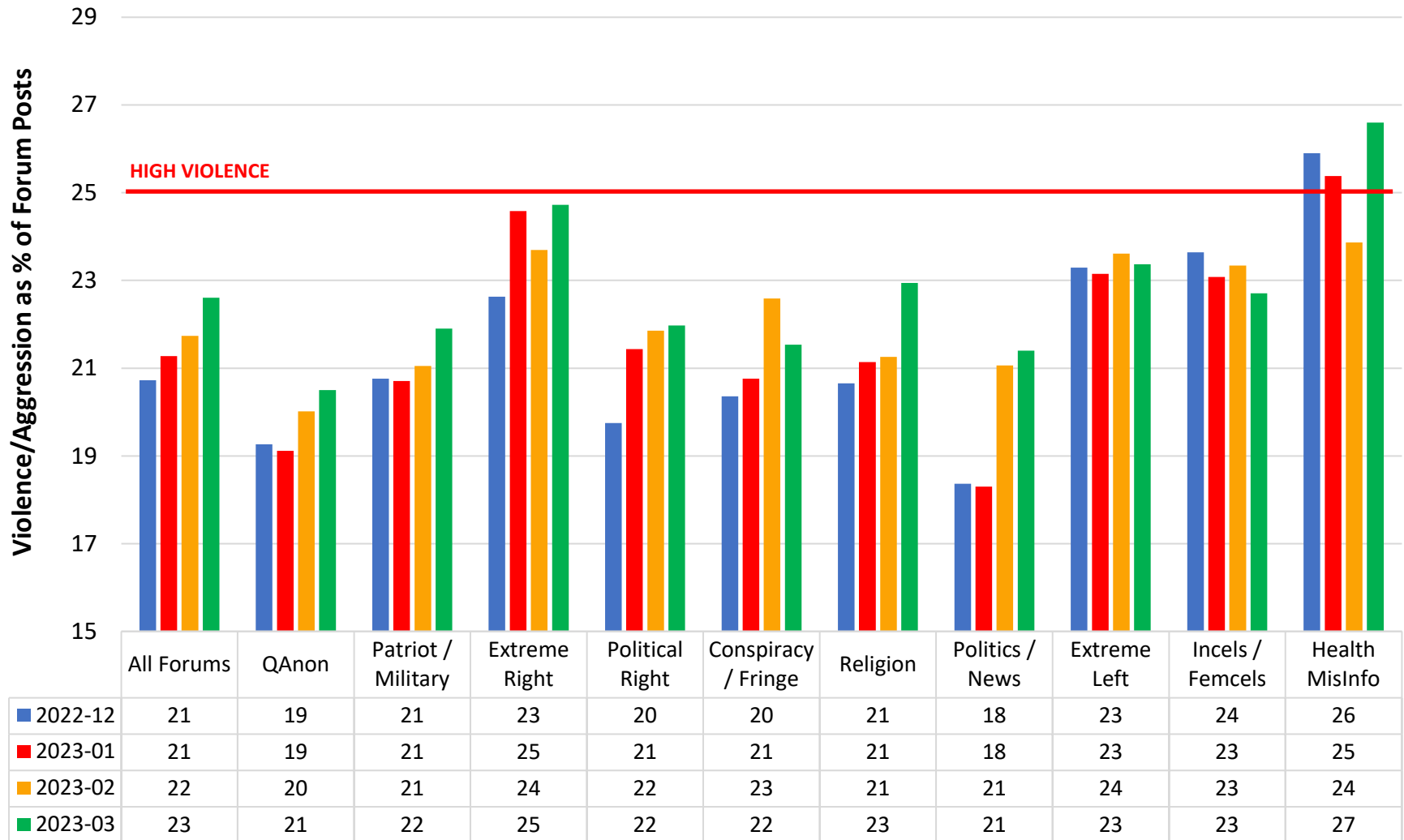
Figure 6
Avg. Daily Posts for Violent / Aggressive and Toxic Discourse by Month

Note: The Violence / Aggression subframe had 3,367,457 recovered posts. The Toxicity subframe had 3,595,993 recovered posts. The subframes are not mutually exclusive. Violent /Aggressive discourse is a standalone subframe in the Values frame and excludes references identified with 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 (Fig.9).
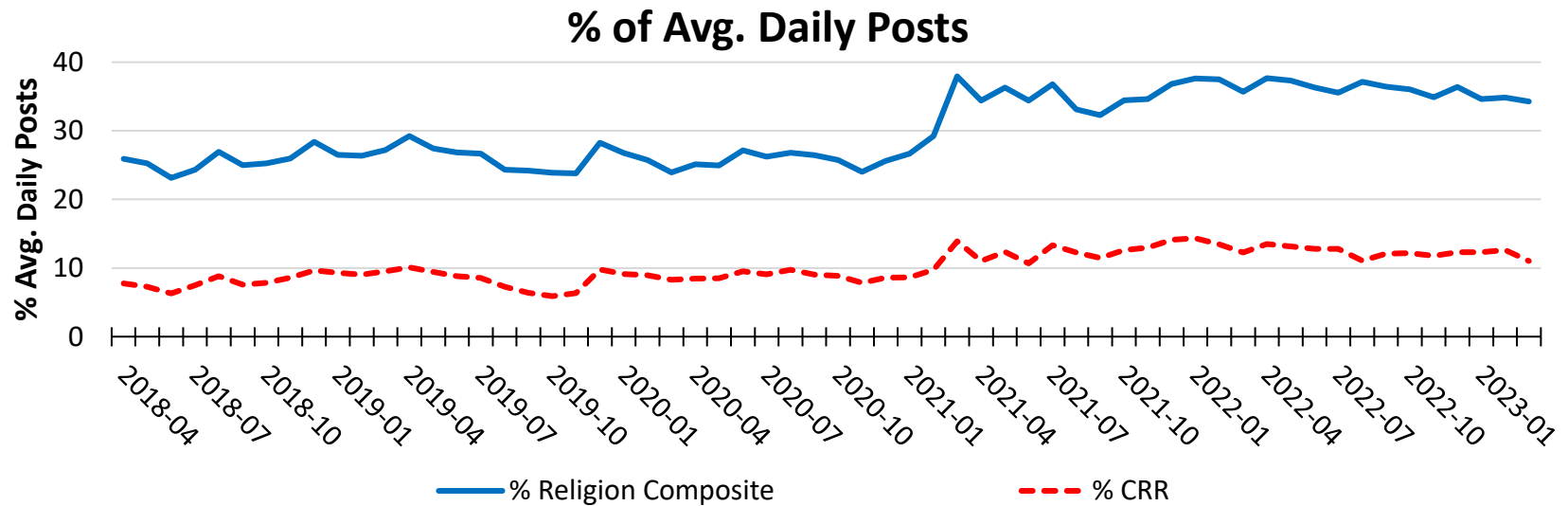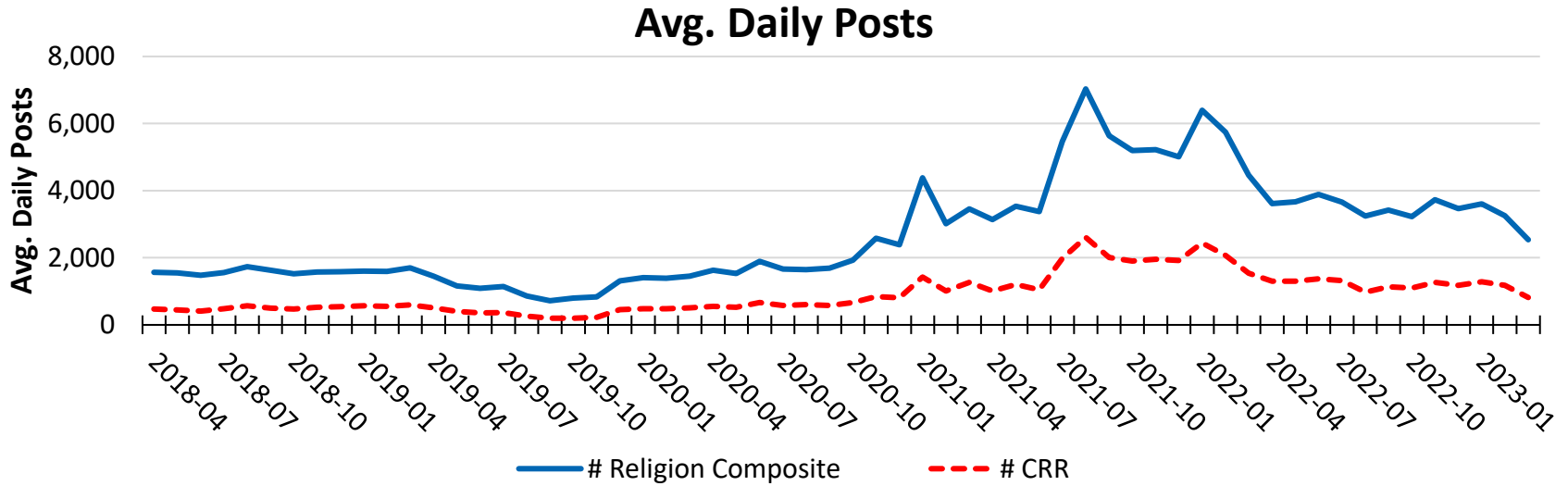
Figure 7
% Posts with Violent / Aggressive Discourse by Forum for Past Four Months

	All Forums	QAnon	Patriot / Military	Extreme Right	Political Right	Conspiracy / Fringe	Religion	Politics / News	Extreme Left	Incels / Femcels	Health MisInfo
■ 2022-12	21	19	21	23	20	20	21	18	23	24	26
■ 2023-01	21	19	21	25	21	21	21	18	23	23	25
■ 2023-02	22	20	21	24	22	23	21	21	24	23	24
■ 2023-03	23	21	22	25	22	22	23	21	23	23	27

Note: 217,297 recovered posts.

Figure 8
Activity for Religion Composite since April 2018

Avg. Daily Posts

Legend: # Religion Composite, # CRR
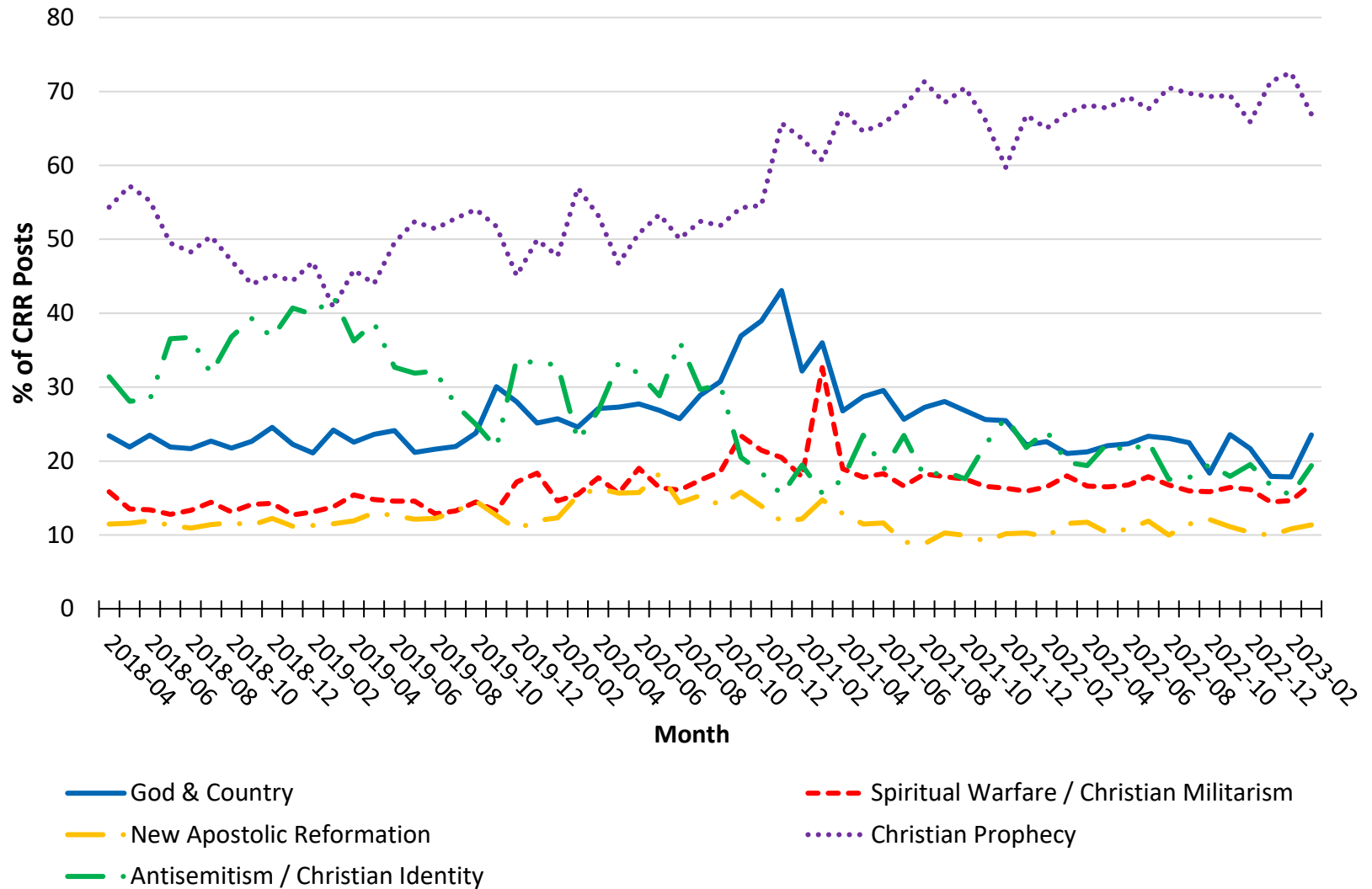
% of Avg. Daily Posts

Legend: % Religion Composite, % CRR

Note: The Religion Composite had 4,926,895 recovered posts. The Religion Composite combines Religion forums and Religion frames.

Figure 9
Components of Christian Radical Right as % of CRR

Legend:
- God & Country
- New Apostolic Reformation
- Antisemitism / Christian Identity
- Spiritual Warfare / Christian Militarism
- Christian Prophecy

Note: Christian Radical Right based on 1,698,546 recovered posts. Christian Prophecy includes both interpretations of the Bible text and claims to have messages from God about future events. Christian Reconstructionism is not included on this chart due to its small percentage of posts.
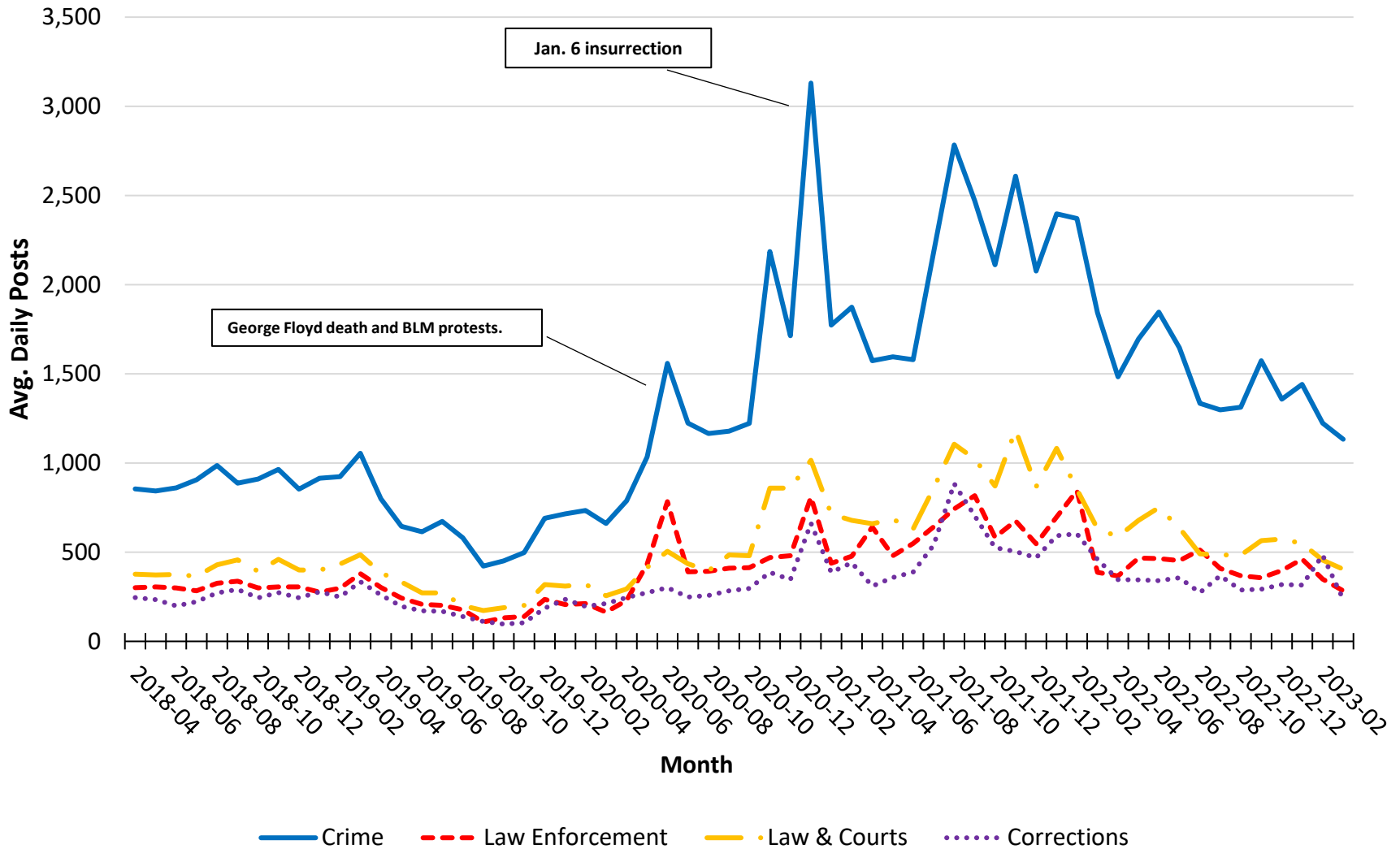
Figure 10
Alternative Reality Themes since April 2018
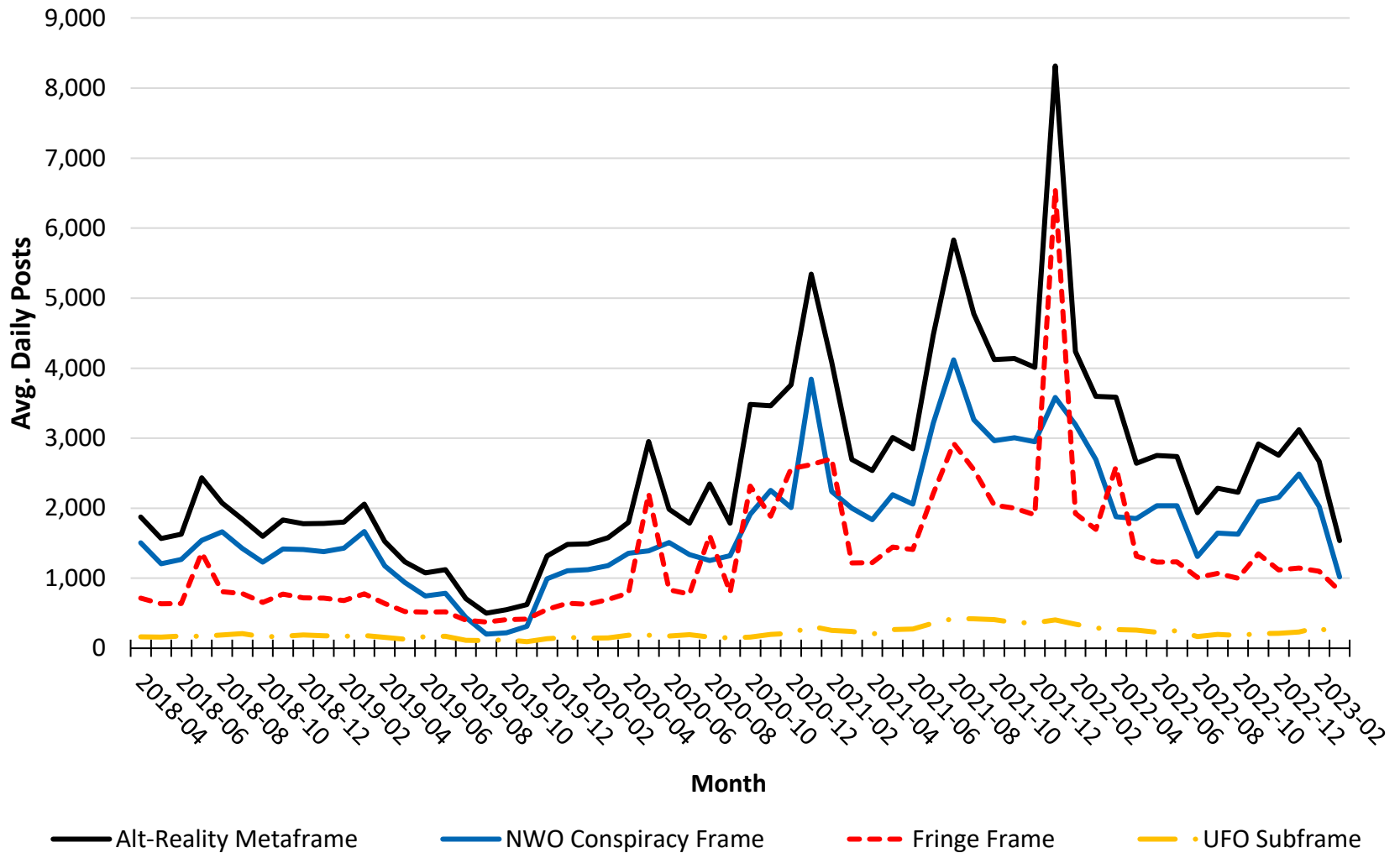
Note: Alternative Reality Metaframe based on 4,687,974 recovered posts.

Figure 11
Avg. Daily Activity for Public Safety Components by Month

Jan. 6 insurrection

George Floyd death and BLM protests.

Avg. Daily Posts

Month

Crime · · · Law Enforcement — Law & Courts ····· Corrections

Note: The Public Safety frame had 3,726,742 recovered posts.

Figure 12
Sex Crime References since April 2018

Avg. Daily Posts

% of Posts
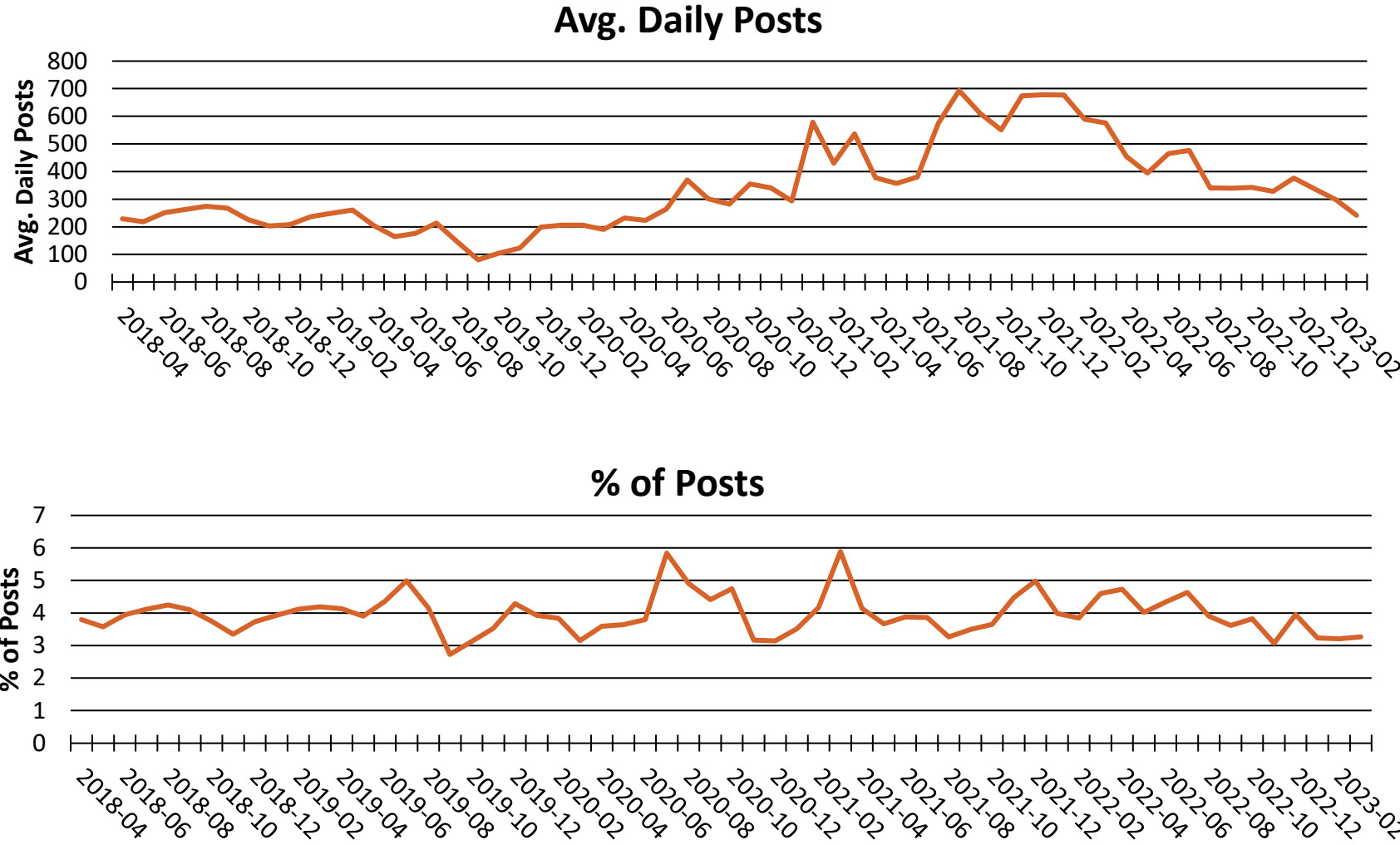
Note: Sex-crime-related themes were found in 615,929 recovered posts.

Figure 13
## Sex Crime References by Source and Month
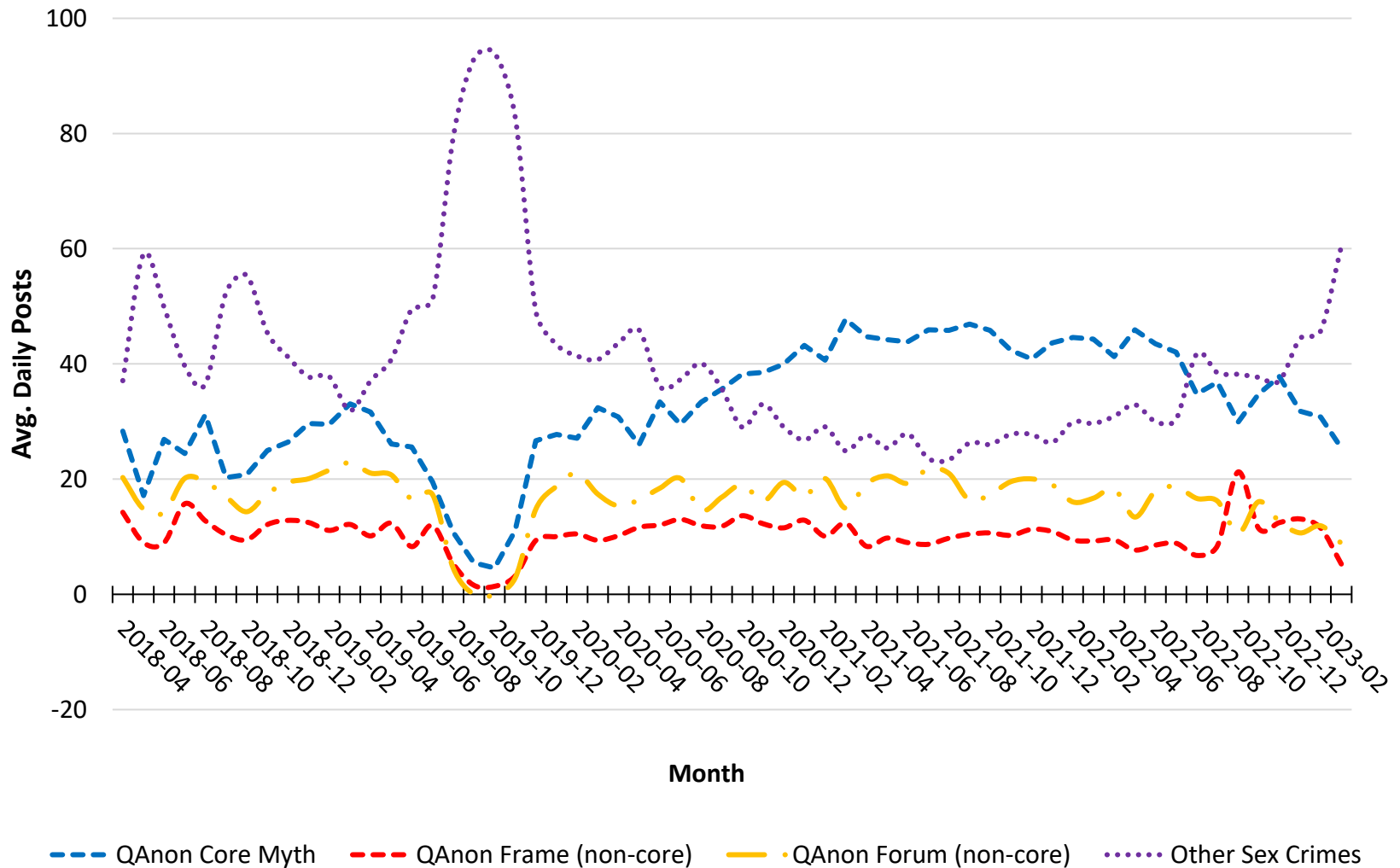
Note: Mutually exclusive categories. QAnon core myth refers to elites (Democrats) engaged in sex trafficking or Satanic sacrifice of kidnapped children. QAnon frame refers to references to sex crimes in QAnon frame that do not qualify as expressions of the QAnon core myth. QAnon forum are references in QAnon forums that cannot be regarded as part of QAnon frame. Outside references refer to discussions of sex crimes outside QAnon universe.
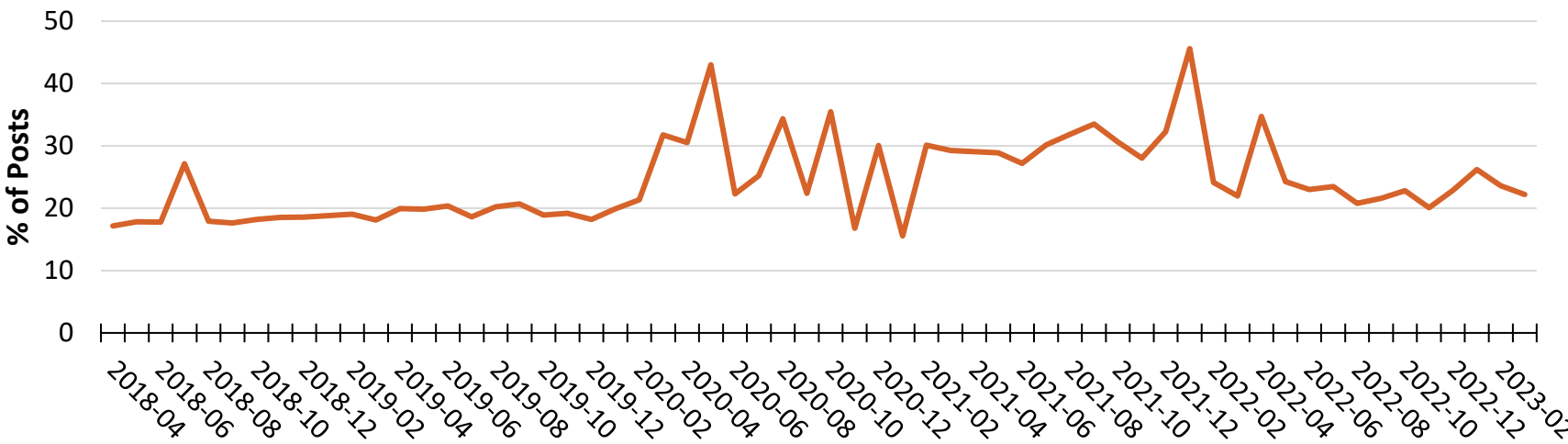
Figure 14
Activity for Health Frame since April 2018
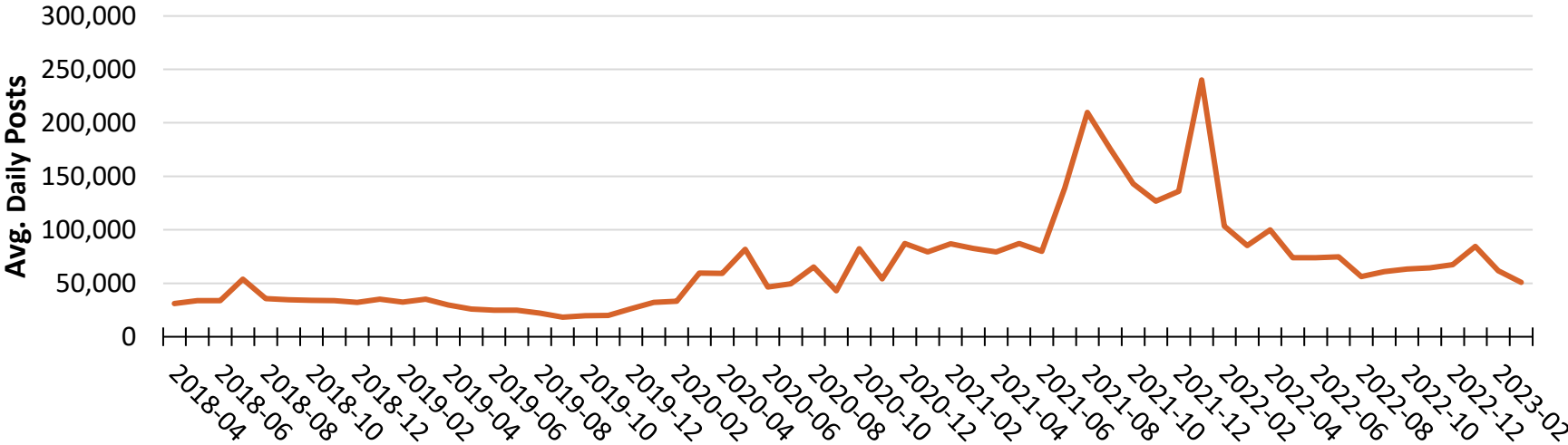
Avg. Daily Posts

% of Posts

Note: Health-related themes were found in 4,016,527 recovered posts.

Figure 15
Health Subframes as a % of Health Frame by Month

Legend: General — Professions / Institutions — Wellness — Illnesses — Medicine — Treatments — Alternative Treatment
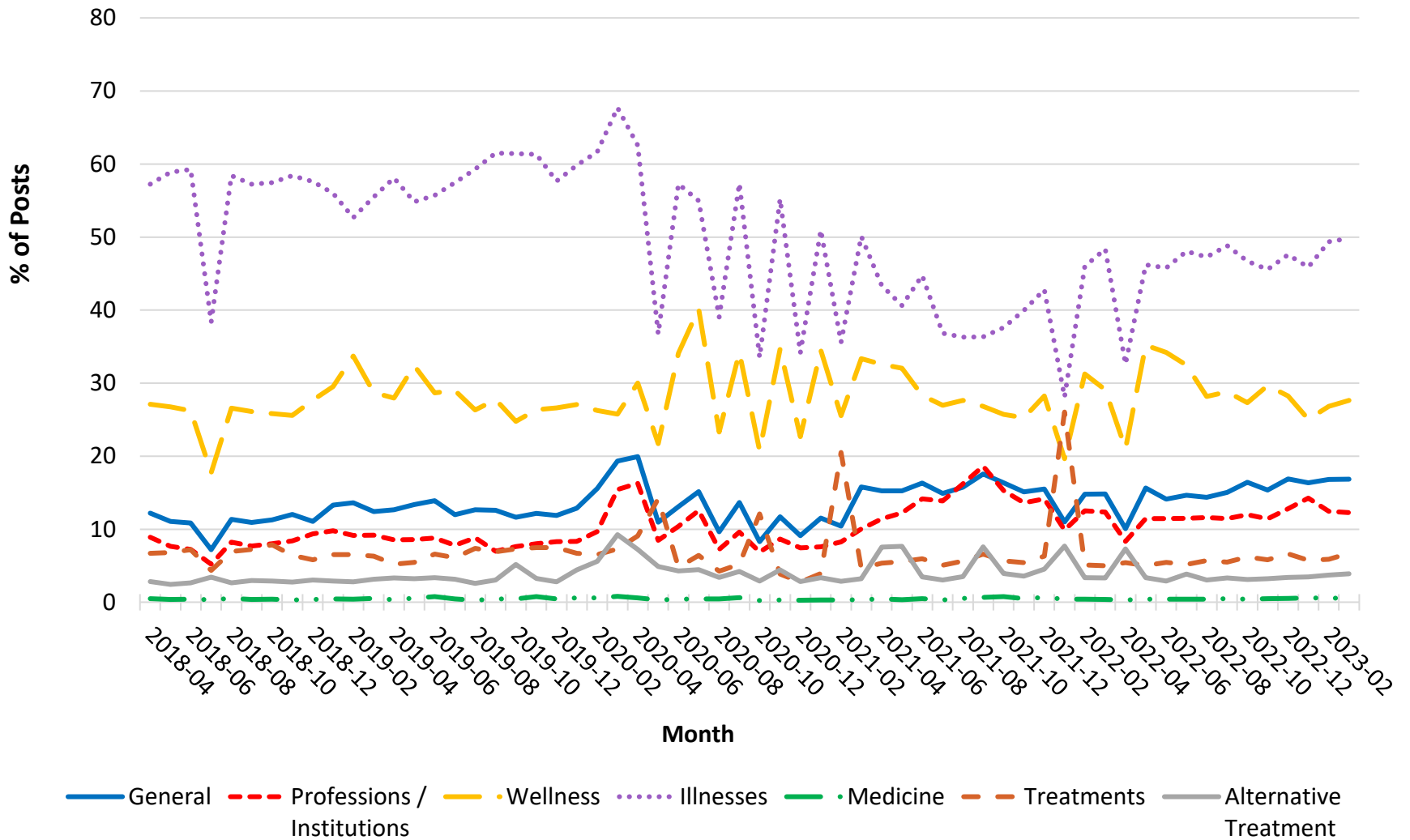
Figure 16
Avg. Daily Posts for Contemporary Topics by Month

Legend: Economic — QAnon — Trump Trials — Ukraine War — Election Fraud — LGBTQ — COVID-19
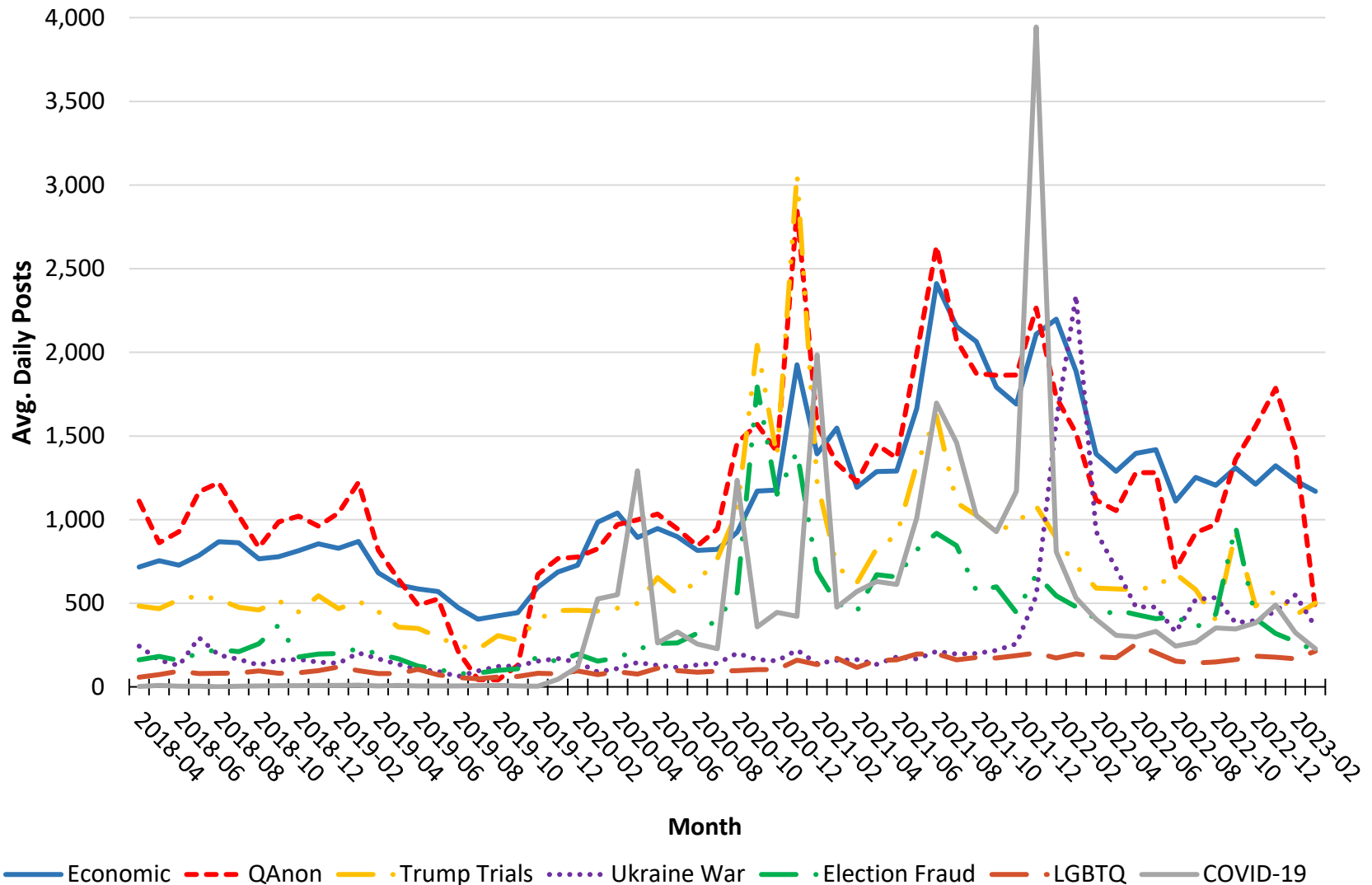
Definitions

Forum: A self-defined forum or channel on a web site or social-media platform

Frame: A group of posts identified with a particular theme based on key words, phrases, or stems

Composite: The combination of forums and frames related to the same subject matter. Composites were started to highlight the presence of a large amount of material that falls outside related forums. E.g., most religious discourse happens outside Religion forums.

Activity: % of posts with at least one key word, phrase, or stem identified with particular themes

Forum Types

- **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.

Platform Tag Rates from April 2018 to May 2023

Source	Posts	% Total	Tag Rate	% Zero Frames	% One Frame	Avg. Frames
Telegram	4,767,313	29.6	90.9	9.1	19.1	2.9
8kun	3,652,131	22.7	93.1	6.9	16.8	3.6
Incel.is	2,479,712	15.4	93.8	6.2	29.9	2.4
Win Boards	2,365,965	14.7	90.3	9.7	19.4	2.9
Above Top Secret	2,092,275	13.0	86.2	13.8	19.6	2.9
Liberty Forums	177,052	1.1	97.1	2.9	8.3	5.5
Stormfront	133,675	0.8	98.2	1.8	6.2	4.7
Rapture Forusm	129,663	0.8	93.5	6.5	15.8	3.7
HexBear	117,722	0.7	87.6	12.4	23.5	2.5
Graham Hancock	101,751	0.6	100.0	0.0	12.1	4.0
Raddle.me	86,302	0.5	84.0	16.0	34.1	2.0
EndChan	8,638	0.1	95.0	5.0	8.3	5.2
White Biocentrism	5,574	0.0	95.8	4.2	8.4	6.3
Christogenea	3,383	0.0	94.7	5.3	9.5	4.2
PinkPill.co	911	0.0	90.5	9.5	21.0	3.0
Other	162	0.0	98.1	1.9	18.5	3.4
Total	16,122,229	100.0	91.3	8.7	20.2	3.0

Interpreting Key Results

Purposive Sample

- The purposive sample should be thought of as a particular type of indicator, like a stock market indicator. It provides a important look at trends, but it not the only way that "market" activity can be measured.

- The purposive sample is designed to capture the diversity of the MEC sector and thus may oversample some groups, so it may be hard to compare volume numbers across forum types. Nonetheless, many of the best known channels in the sector are included in the study, so the trends within a forum type are noteworthy.

- I use a disseminated-based strategy to manage the complications of informed consent and protect confidentiality and copyright ownership of content creators and platforms (franzke et al., 2020) .

Definitions

- *Average Daily Posts:* The number of posts divided by the number of days in the time period.

- *Prevalence Rate:* The percent of posts where a particular theme is present. The effect size for prevalence rates is interpreted using Cohen's g with no frame activity as the benchmark. As a result, a high or large amount of activity is deemed present when the prevalence rate exceeds 25%, a moderate level of activity is achieved above 15%, and a small activity is regarded as present at 5%.

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

franzke, a. s., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., and the Association of Internet Researchers (2020). *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*. Association of Internet Researchers. https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf

Hagen, S., Straume, Ø., Bishop, E., Vavra, M., Koščík, M., Štebe, J., Ryan, L., Rød, L.M., Payne, E., Somby, A., L'Hours, H., Emery, T., Cizek, T., Krejci J., Høgetveit, M., & Jessop, C. (2019). *Guidelines on the use of social media data in survey research. Deliverable 6.2 of the SERISS project funded under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme GA No: 654221*. https://seriss.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/SERISS-D6.2.-Guidelines-social-media-data-.pdf

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 13 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