
FRAMES OF MISINFORMATION AND EXTREMISM

Web Forums and Social-Media Discussions

Monthly Summary

July 2022

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September 27, 2022

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This report contains top-line monthly numbers from a purposive sample of forums and discussions collected from 13 platforms that are known for hosting extremism and/or conspiracism.

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

July 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. The platform PinkPill is added to the study starting this month. The complete list of current platforms can be found toward the end of this document.

General Trends

Among posts with at least 50 words in the purposive sample, July activity averaged 10,616 posts per day, down 6% from June. It was 30% 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).
- Although most types of forms declined in July, QAnon forums stayed steady but were still 52% below August 2021 (Fig. 1).

Violent / Aggressive and Toxic Discourse

- Violent / aggressive volume activity fell 8% in July and was 30% below its peak in January 2022 (Fig. 3). The Extreme Right and Extreme Left are the two forum types with the highest percentage of violent / aggressive discourse, slightly more than a third of all posts (Fig. 5).
- Toxic discourse fell 6% in July and was 31% below January (Fig. 3). The toxicity of discourse was at 18% in June, which is tied for its all-time low (Fig. 4).
- Incel discourse is treated as toxic by definition because of the spin it puts on normal dating and fitness activities. The toxicity of Extreme-Right discourse continues to plunge to a level below the average for all forums in the FOME study (Fig. 6).

Religion and Alt-Reality Themes

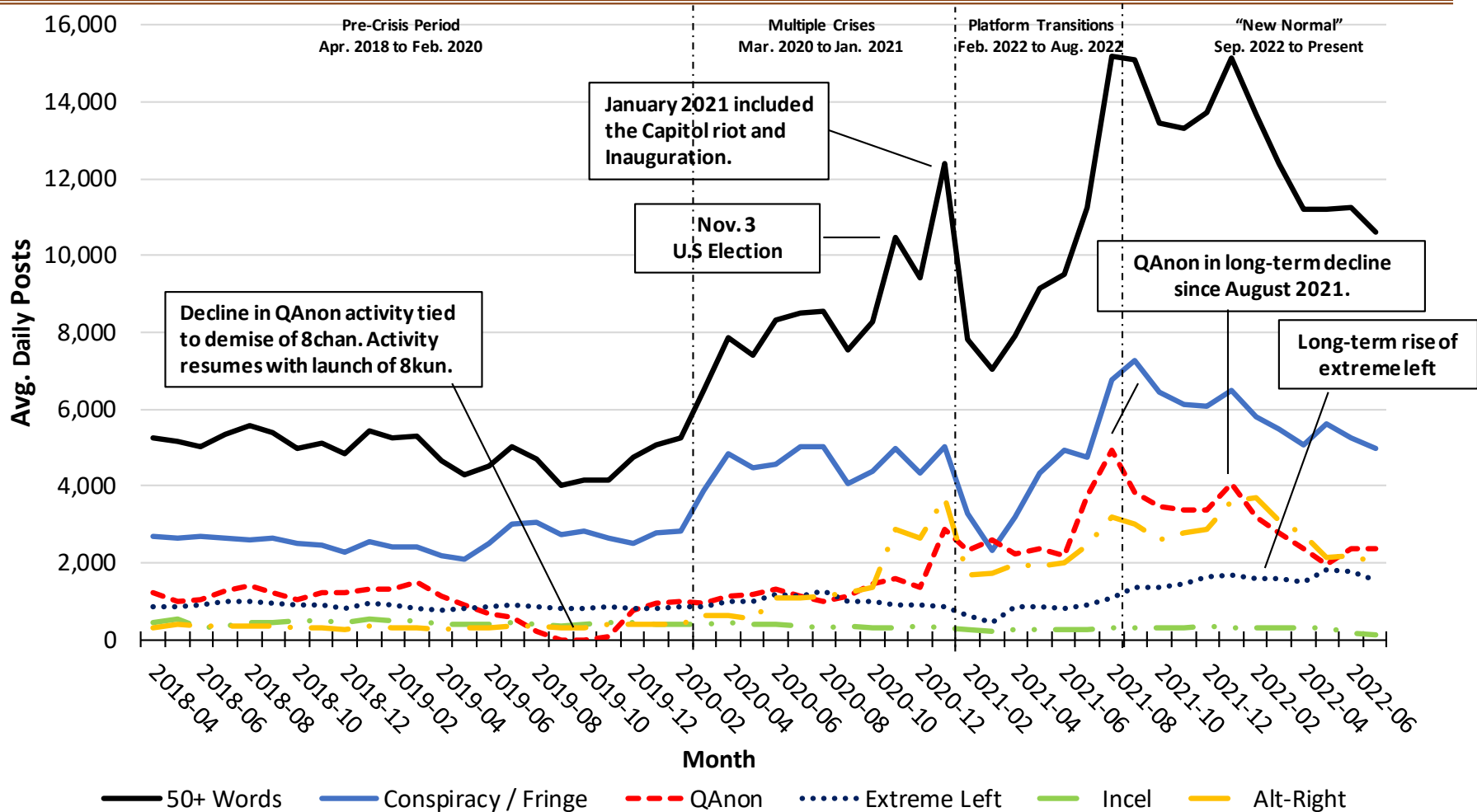
- The Religion frame declined 3% in activity volume in July. Religion continued its long-term trend since March 2021 of hovering near 30% of posts (Fig 7).
- The Christian Radical Right (CRR) continued to hover just below 10% of all posts (Fig. 7). Christian nationalism, which had risen as a percent of CRR between March and June, remained flat in July. Prophetic discourse was present in 17% of CRR posts in March 2021 and rose to 27% by July 2022 (Fig. 8).
- The activity volume for Alt-Reality themes increased 10% from April to July. During this period, posts referencing NWO conspiracy theories rose 22% and the fringe frame (alternative science and alternative history) rose 15% (Fig. 9)

Current Events

- The economy remained the major concern in the discussion of current events (Fig. 12).

Figure 1

Avg. Daily Activity by Month

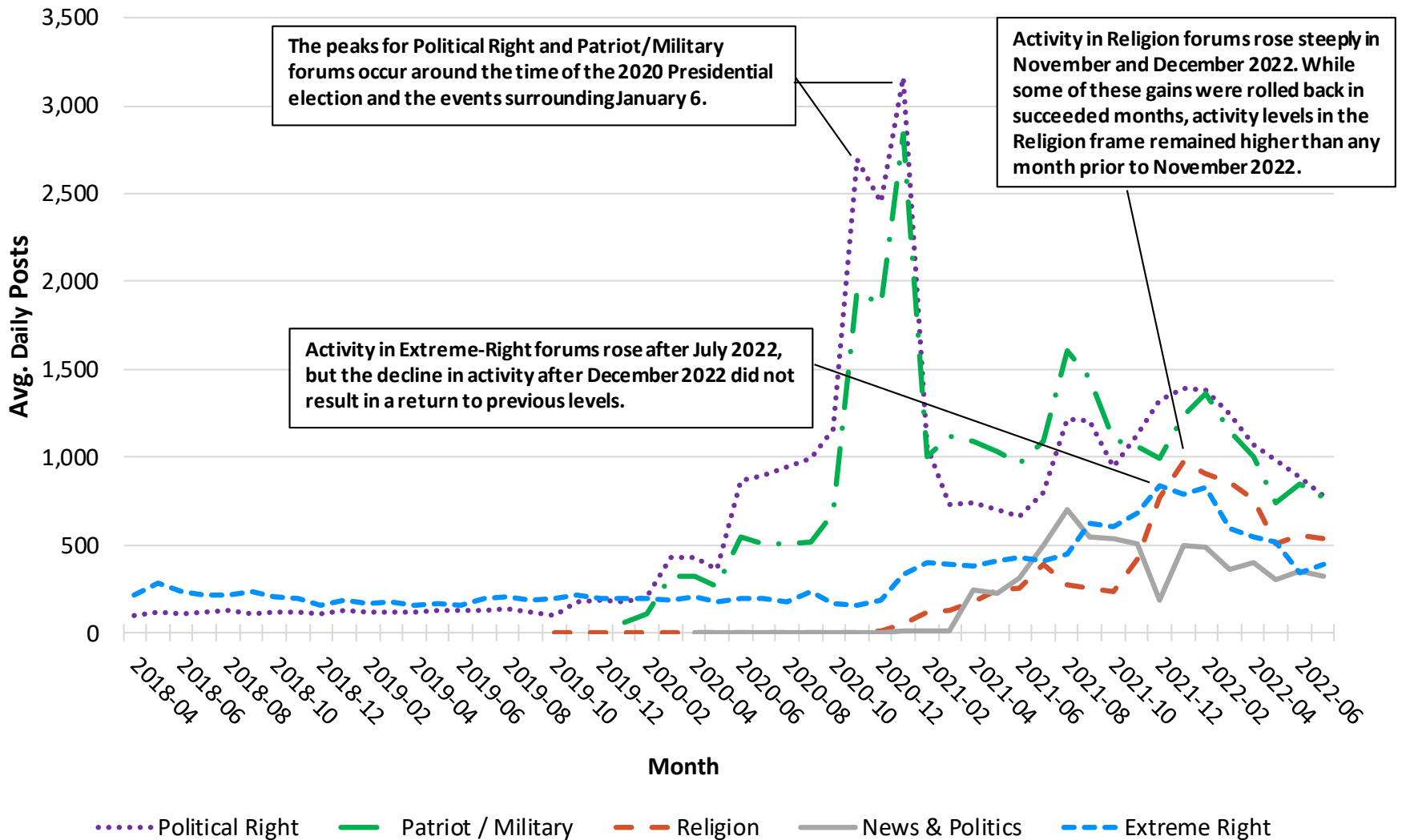


Note: 12,704,218 recovered posts with at least 50 words. Forums are not mutually exclusive. QAnon forums could be classified as both Conspiracy/Fringe and Extreme Right, but QAnon forums are separated due to their size and influence. This report uses a broad definition of Alt-Right, which include both 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.

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

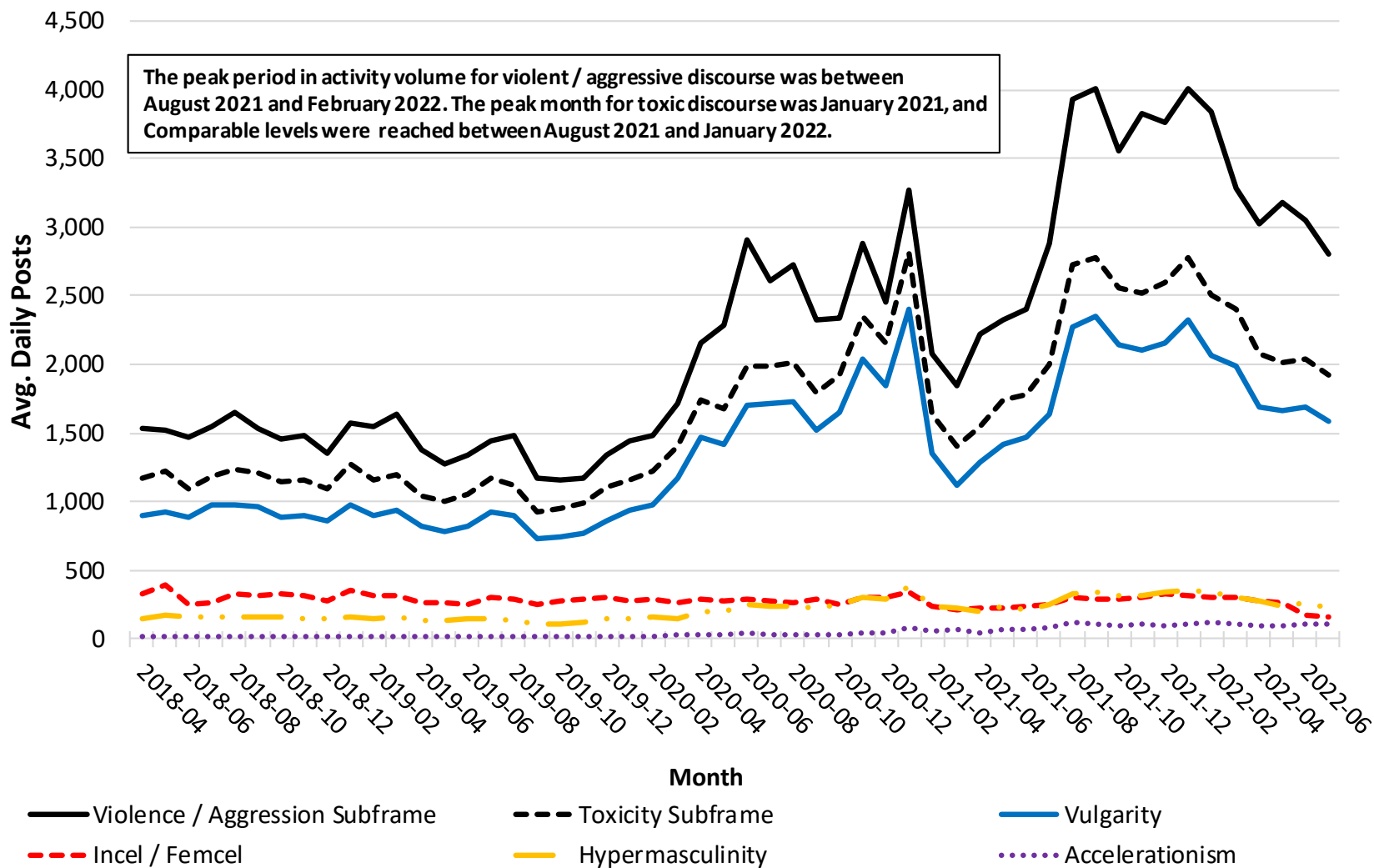
Avg. Daily Activity by Month for Alt-Right Forums by Month



Note: 2,128,150 recovered posts. 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

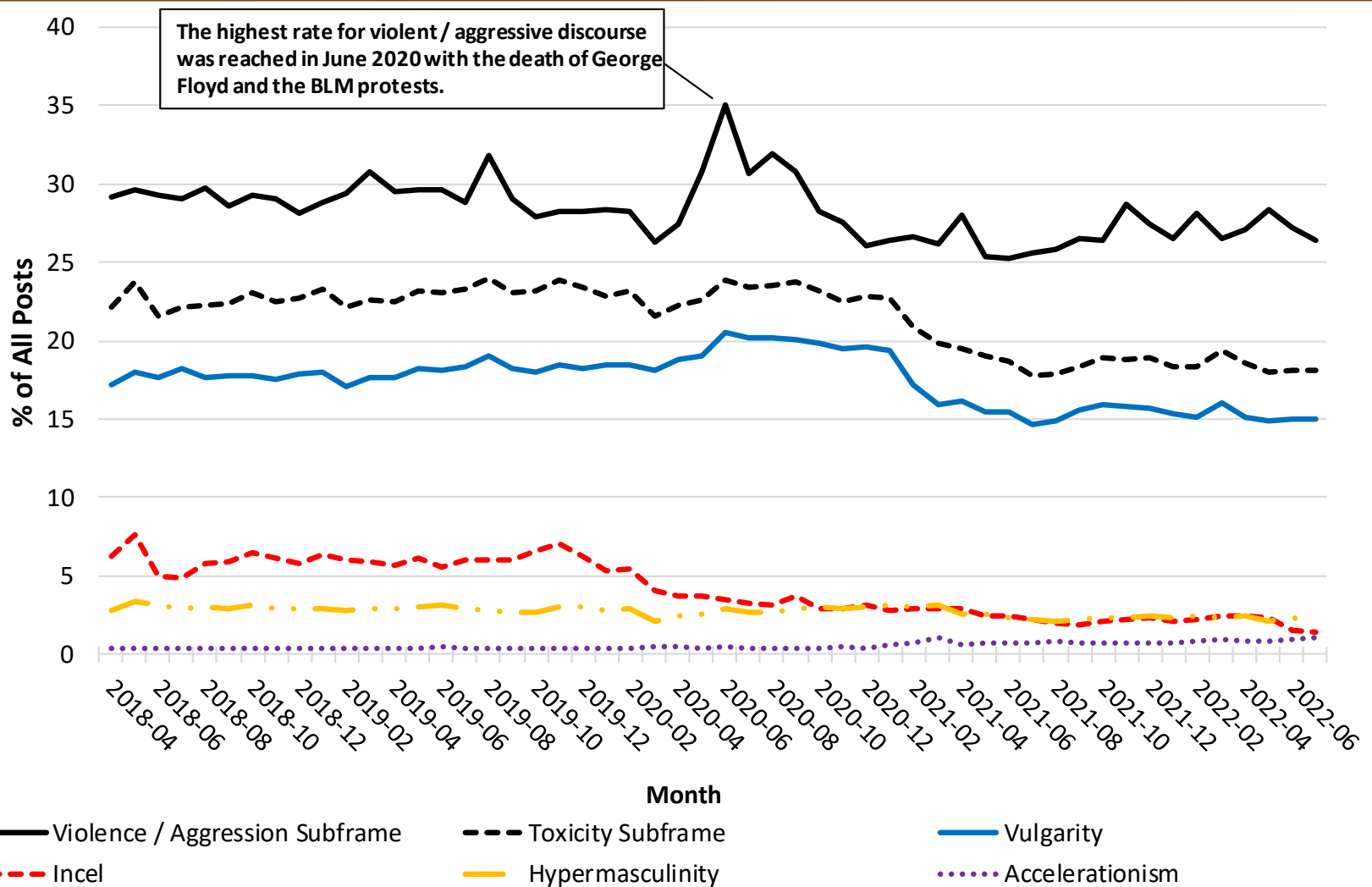
Avg. Daily Posts for Violent / Aggressive and Toxic Discourse by Month



Note: The Violence / Aggression subframe had 46,173 recovered posts. The Toxicity subframe had 34,941 recovered posts. The subframes are not mutually exclusive. 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

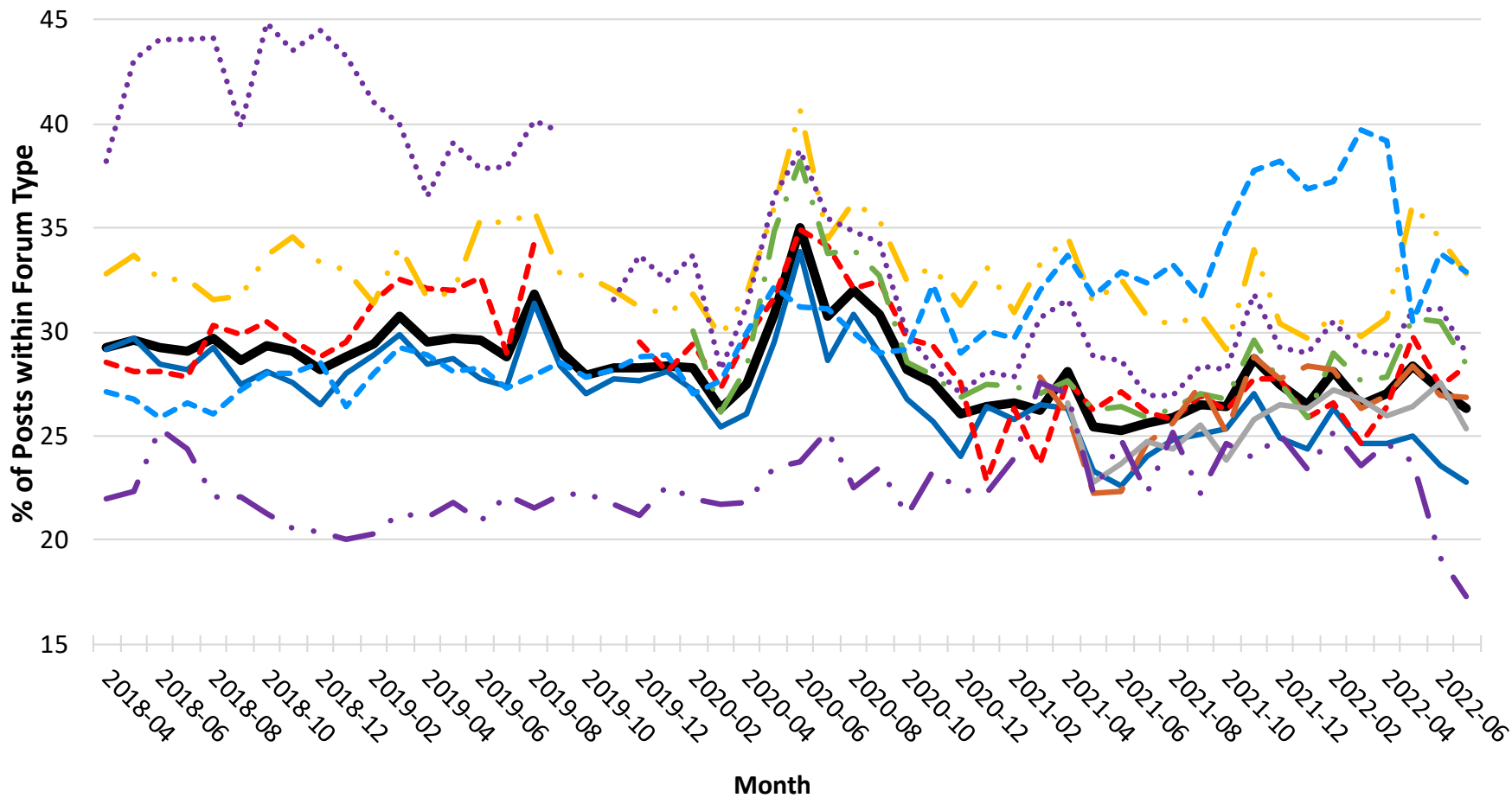
% Posts for Violent / Aggressive and Toxic Discourse by Month



Note: The Violence / Aggression subframe had 46,173 recovered posts. The Toxicity subframe had 34,941 recovered posts. The subframes are not mutually exclusive. 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 5

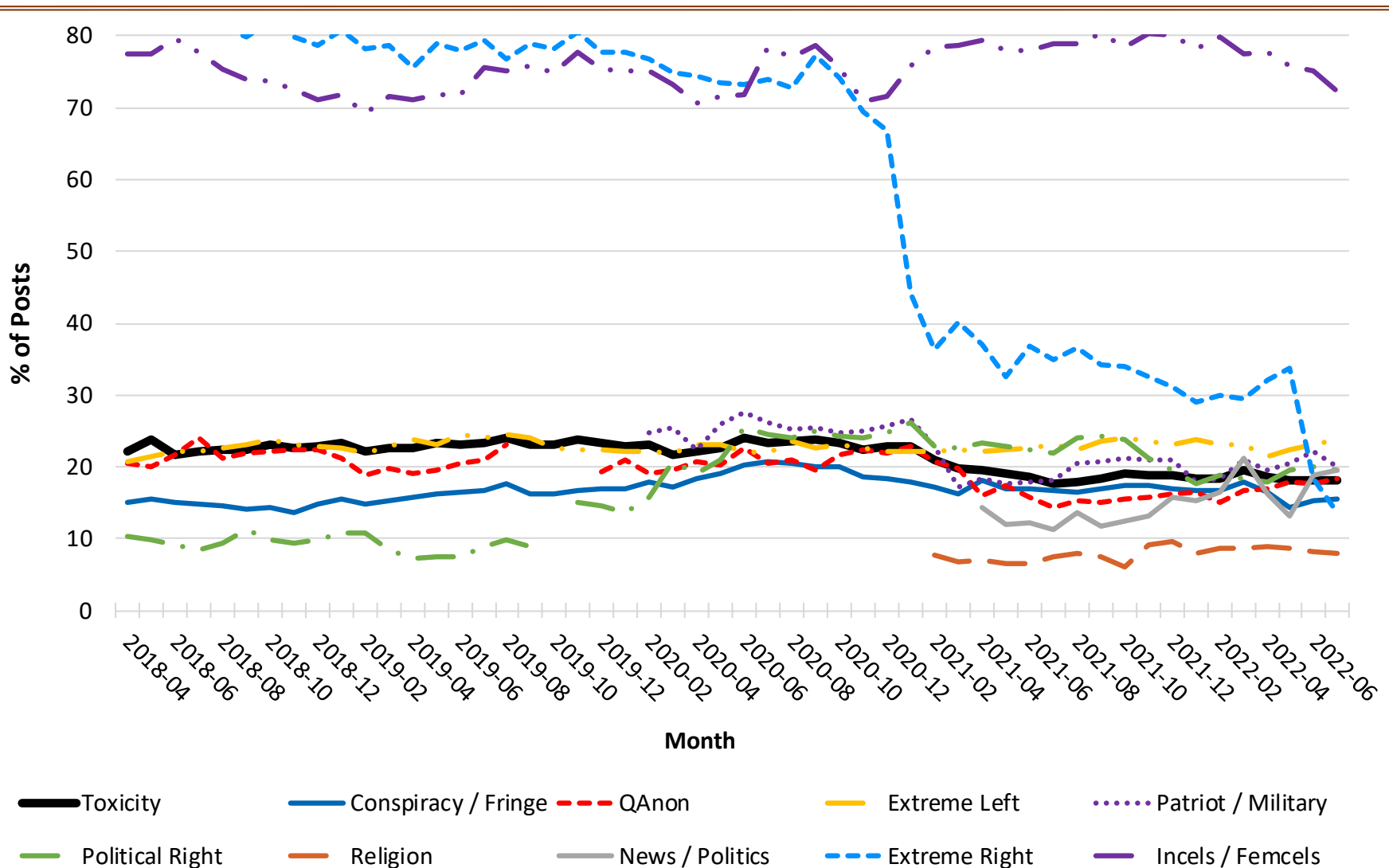
Violence as a % of Posts by Forum Type by Month



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

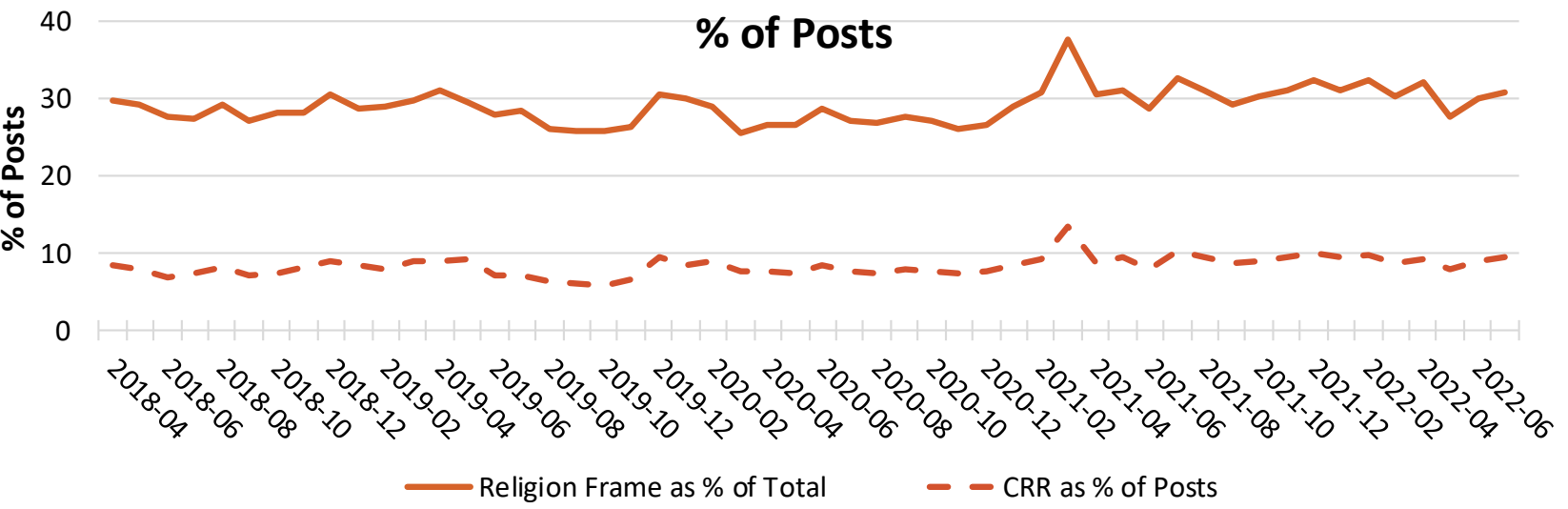
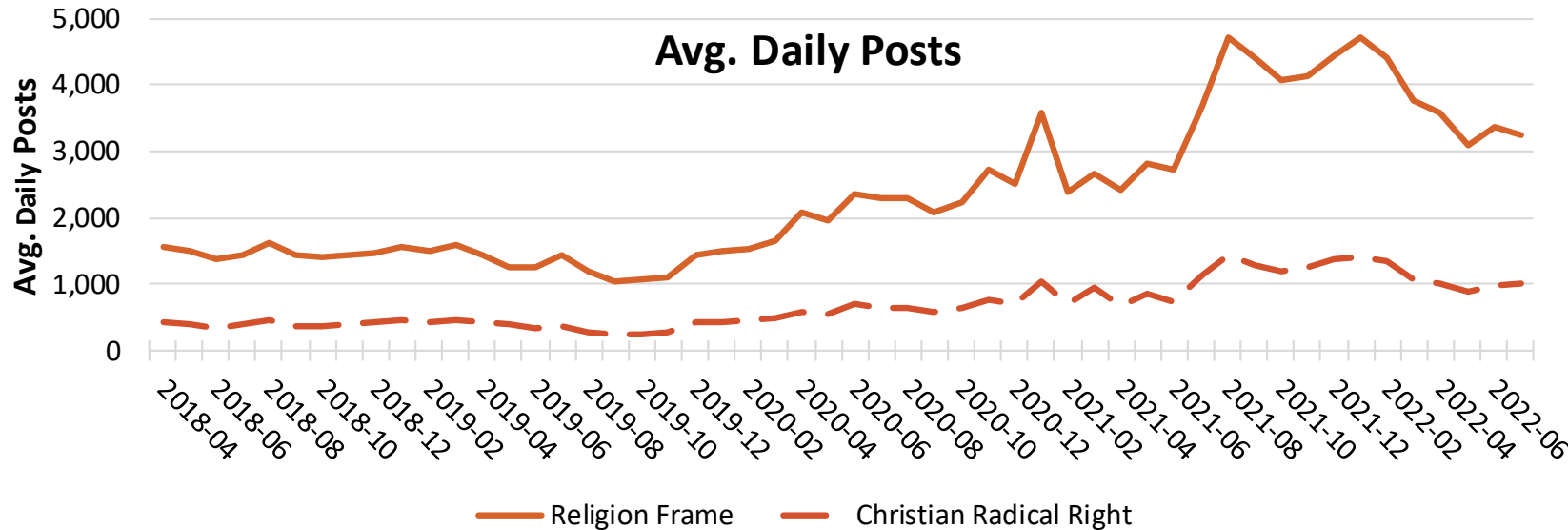
Toxicity as a % of Posts by Forum Type by Month



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

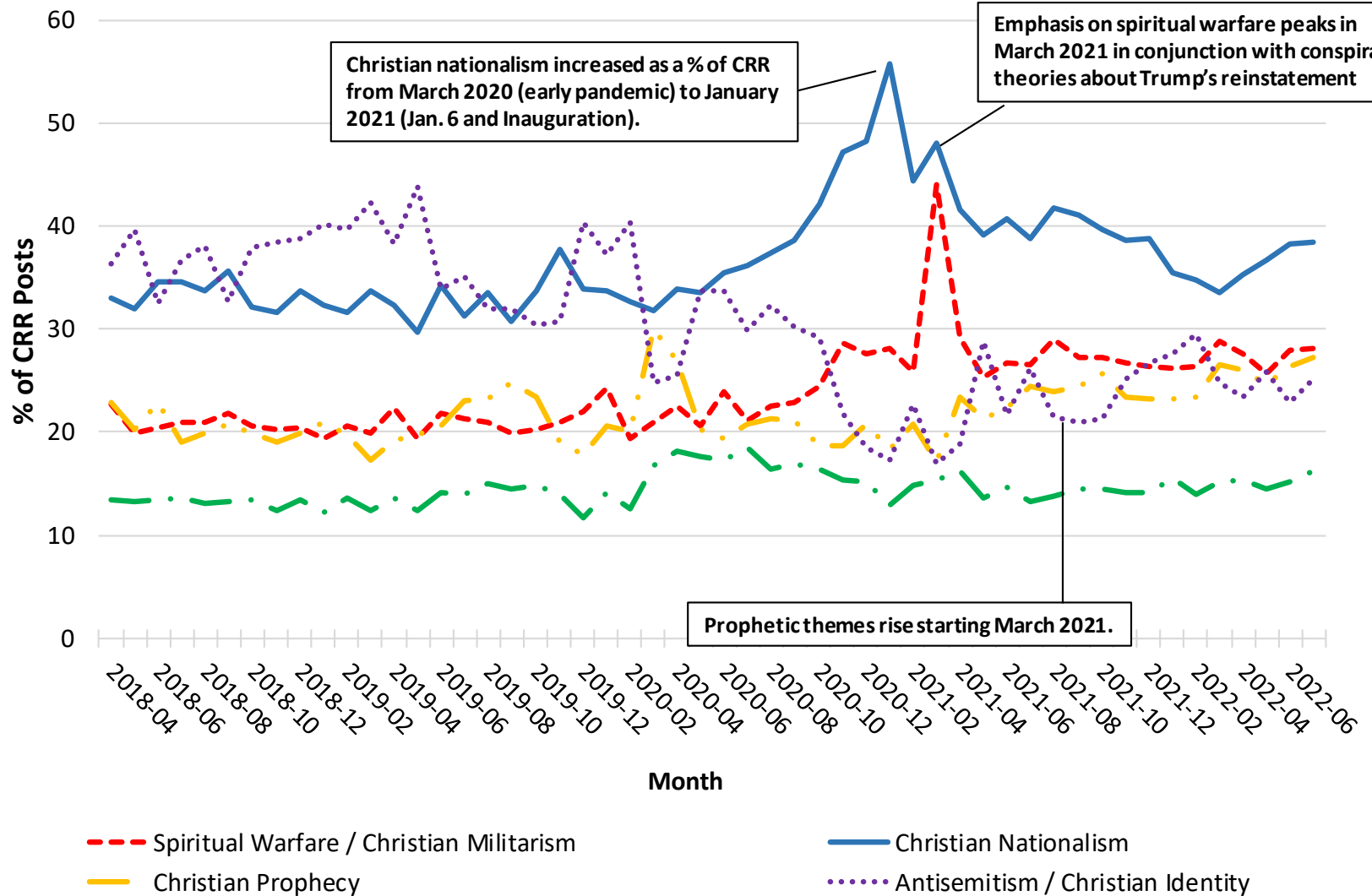
Activity for Religion Frame since April 2018



Note: The Religion frame had 3,736,899 recovered posts.

Figure 8

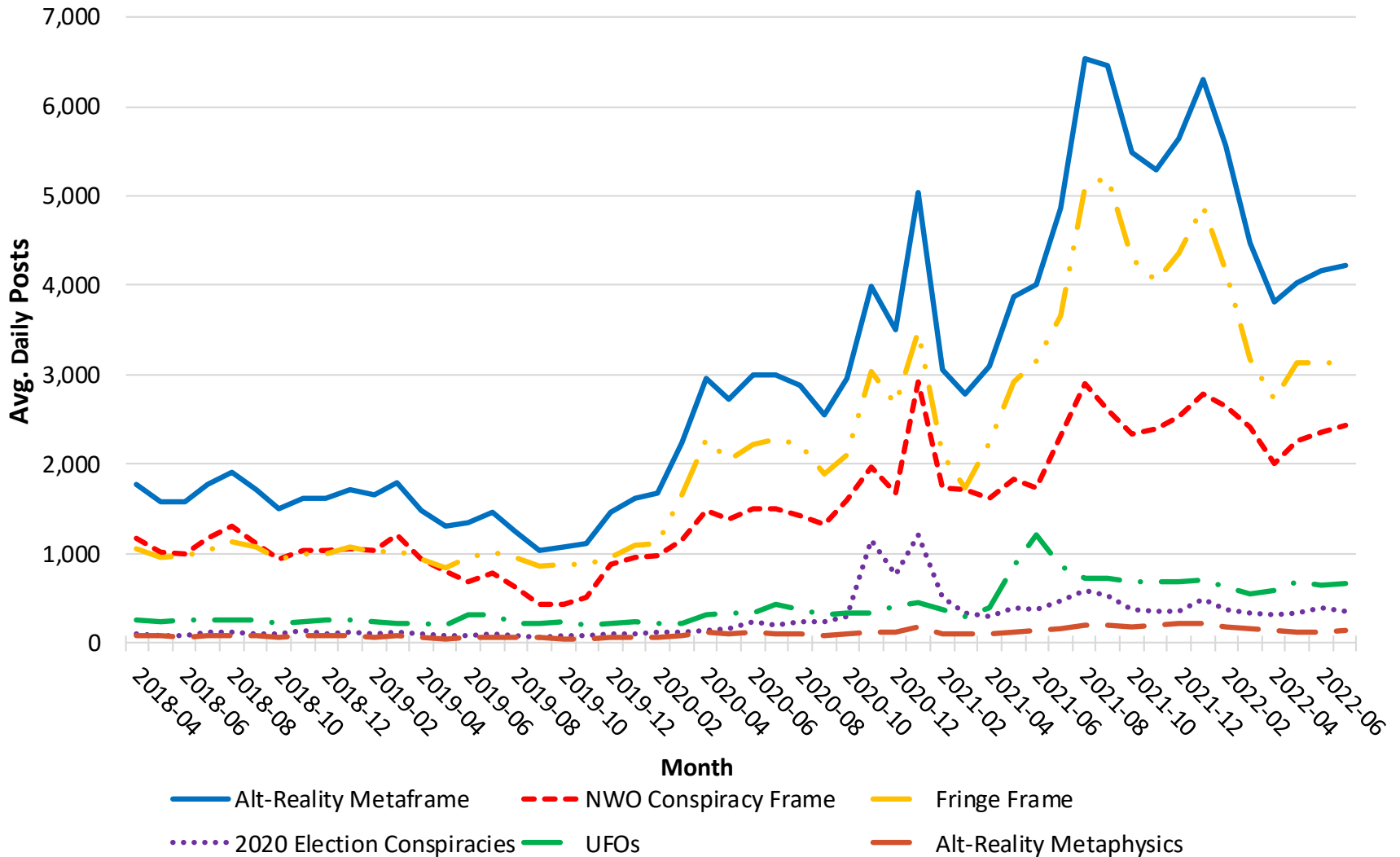
Components of Christian Radical Right as % of CRR since April 2018



Note: Christian Reconstructionism not included on this chart due to its small percentage of posts.

Figure 9

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



Note: The Alt-Reality metaframe had 4,676,534. 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

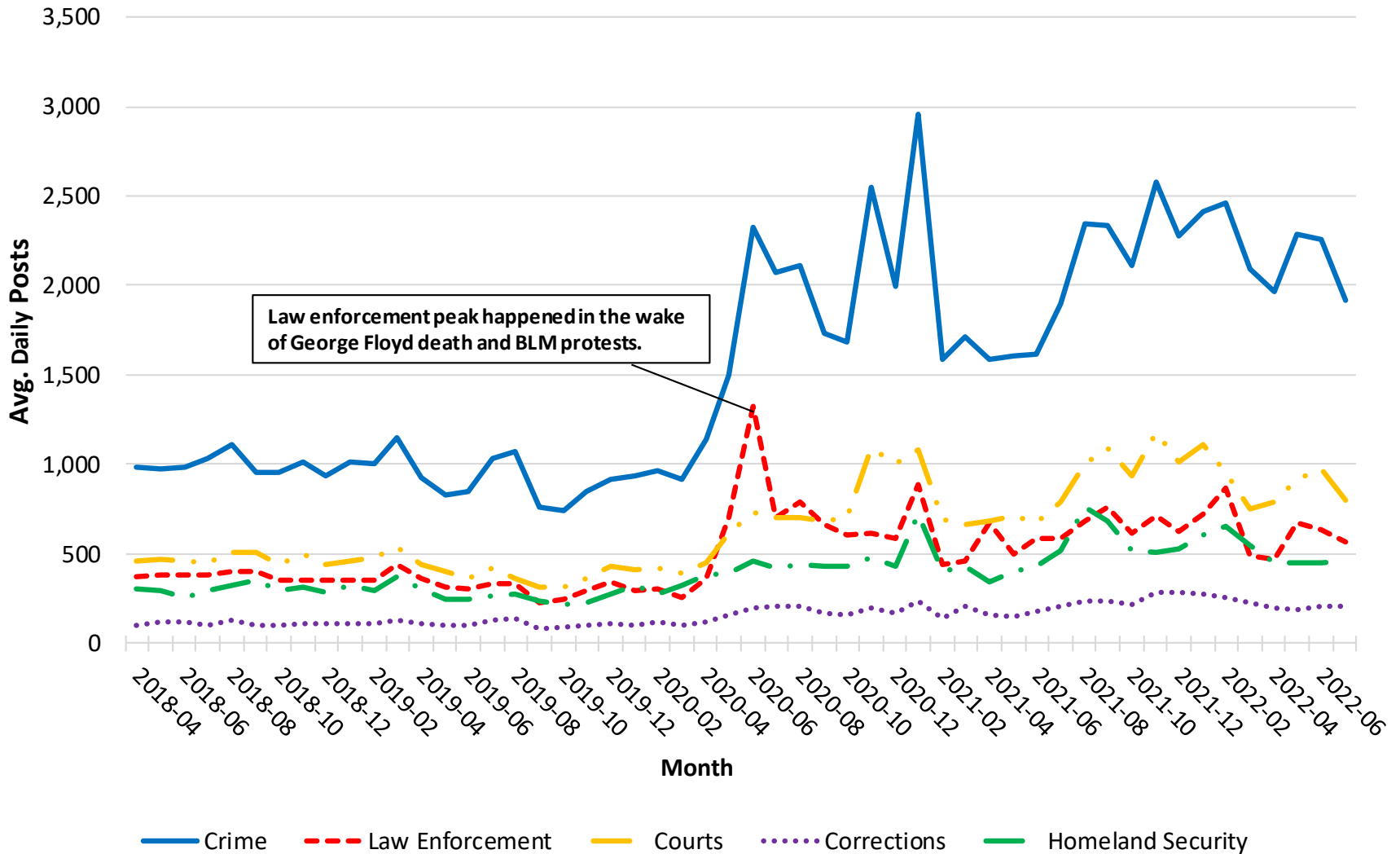
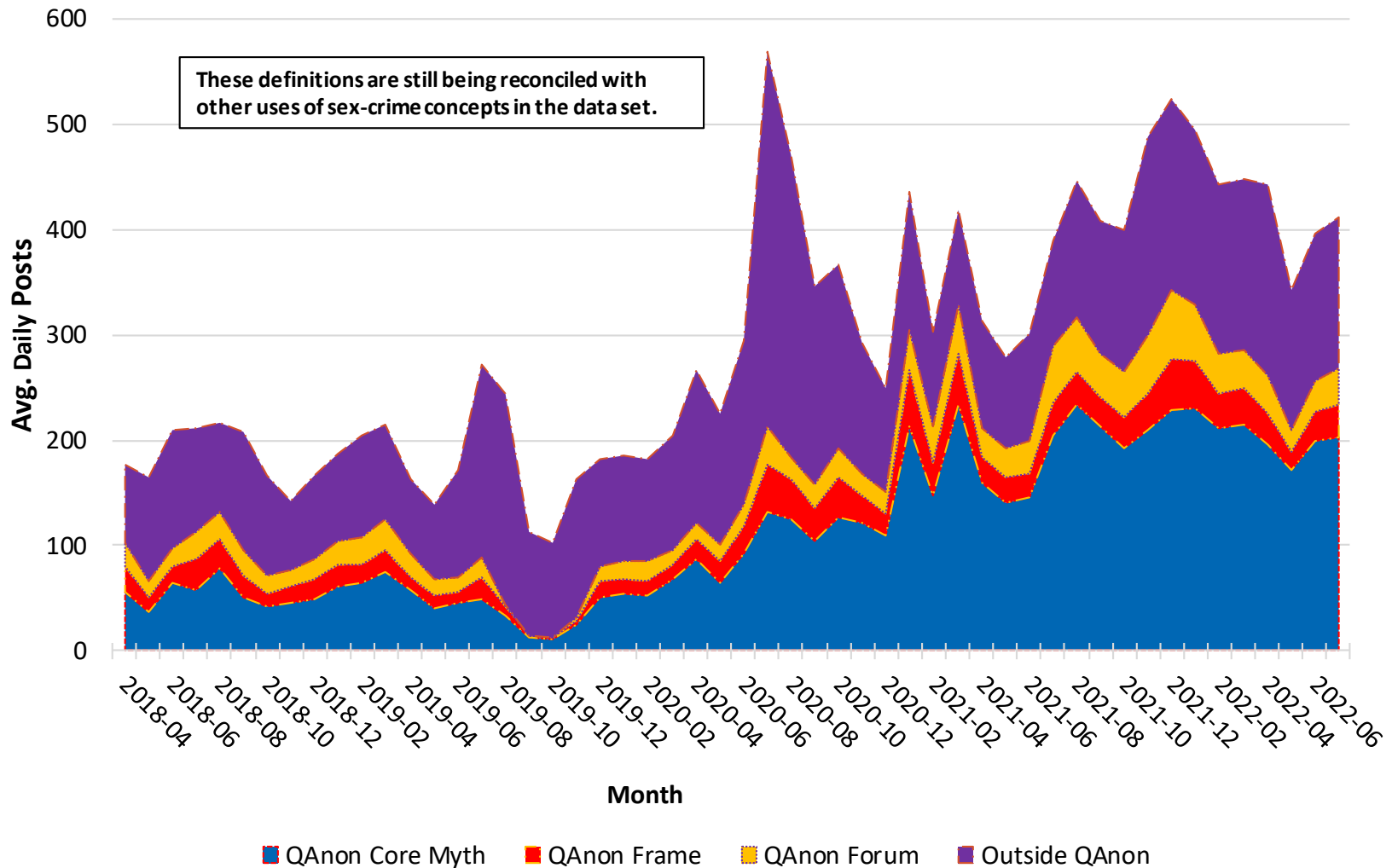


Figure 11

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

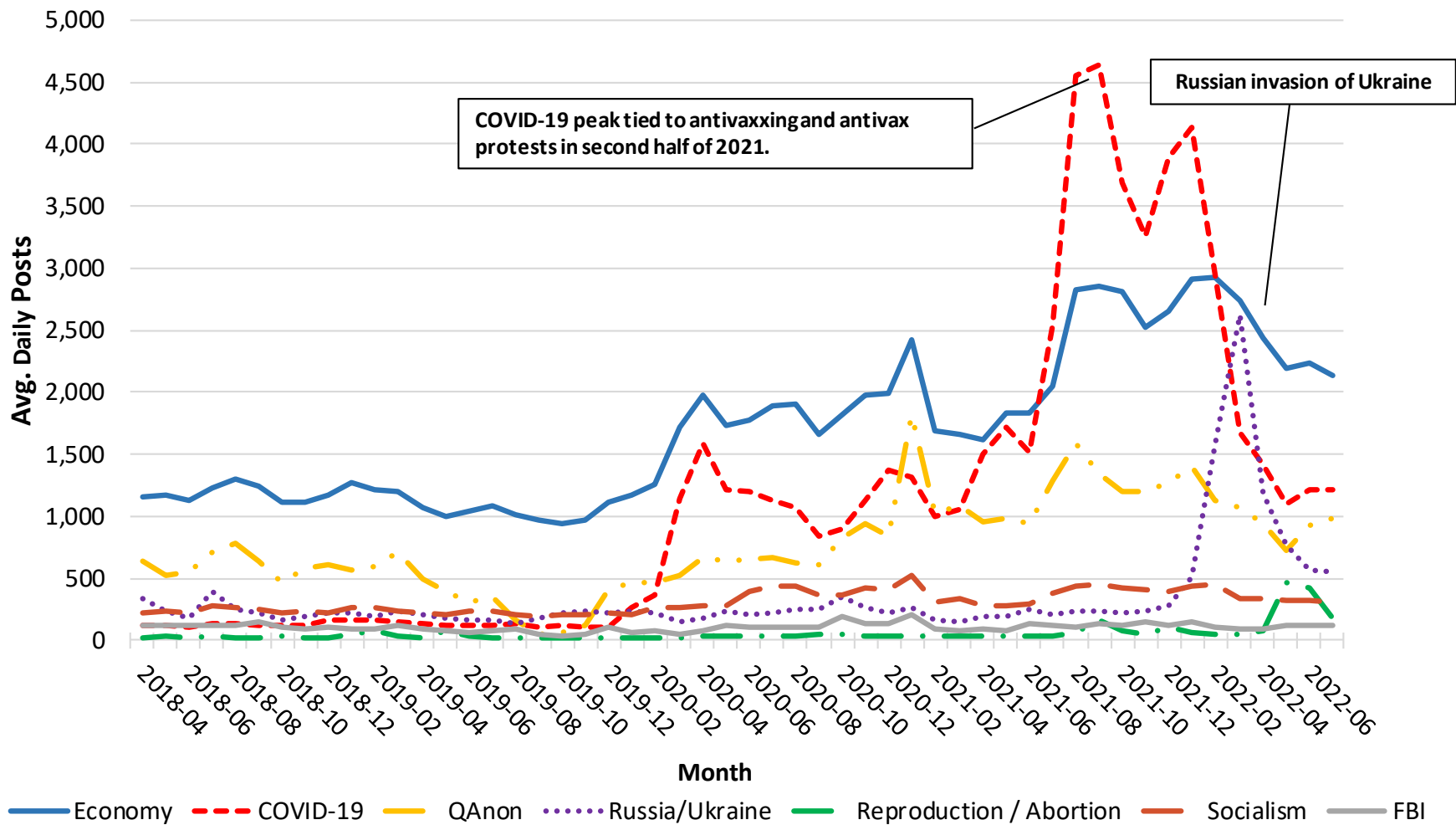


Figure 13

Public Health Benchmarks

TEST PAGE

% Natural and Alternative Treatments Modalities Mentioned by Illness

	May 2022			June 2022			July 2022		
	FOME	Bench- mark	Gap	FOME	Bench- mark	Gap	FOME	Bench- mark	Gap
Contagious Disease	18.4	19.7	-1.3	19.0	17.2	+2.8	18.9	18.0	+0.9
Mental Health	11.4	8.9	+2.5	13.8	10.4	+3.4	13.8	11.0	+2.8
Substance Abuse	9.4	12.9	-3.5	10.7	13.2	-2.5	12.4	12.3	+0.1
Cancer	22.8	7.9	+14.9	24.8	13.4	+11.4	26.9	12.7	+14.2
Reproductive Health	5.9	6.7	-0.8	6.0	5.3	-0.7	10.1	5.8	+4.3

Note: Benchmarks based on a 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 celibate. These 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 July 2022

	# Posts	% of All Posts	# Tagged Posts	% Posts Tagged
Reddit	187,797	56.7%	179,916	95.8%
8kun	41,823	12.7%	40,729	97.4%
Telegram	38,125	11.6%	37,066	97.2%
Stormfront	28,178	8.6%	27,342	97.0%
Win Boards	22,910	7.0%	22,371	97.7%
Above Top Secret	7,829	2.3%	7,408	94.6%
Liberty Forums	733	0.2%	704	96.0%
Raddle.me	650	0.2%	598	92.0%
Incel.is	596	0.2%	585	98.2%
Christogenea	224	0.1%	223	99.6%
EndChan	111	>0.1%	111	100.0%
White Biocentrism	97	>0.1%	95	97.9%
PinkPill.co	23	>0.1%	23	100.0%
Total	329,097	100.0%	317,171	96.4%

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
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Report Citations

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