FRAMES OF MISINFORMATION AND EXTREMISM
Conspiracy and Extreme-Right Discussion Forums
Monthly Flash Report
March 2022

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The *Frames of Misinformation and Extremism* series searches for the presence of extremist and conspiracist discourse in social media and discussion boards. This specific document focuses solely on conspiracist and right-leaning forums. Left-leaning forums will be handled through separate reporting in this series.

March 2022 Activity Summary (1 of 2)

This report provides top-line numbers of a frame analysis from posts in a purposive sample of conspiracy, extremist, and alt-reality discussion forums. Most of the analysis focuses on the content-rich material in posts with at least 50 words, though Figures 1, 3, and 5 report trends for the entire collection of material.

Main Trends

- Indicators for March 2022 were mixed. Overall activity was down compared to February 2022, but posts with at least 50 words were up.

- March activity averaged 83,488 posts per day, down 10% from February, and March was the 2nd straight month with a double-digit decline. Relative to the comparable month in the previous quarter (December 2021), overall activity was down 1%. Overall activity was more than double the same month one year ago (Fig 1).

- For posts with at least 50 words, March activity averaged 11,201 posts per day, up 16% from February. Relative to the comparable month in the previous quarter (December 2021), overall activity was up 7%. Overall activity was more than double the same month one year ago (Fig 2). The activity level rose sharply near the end of the month with March 31 experiencing the highest day of activity over the previous 12 months (Fig. 4 and 6). The growth in discourse related to (1) Ukraine War and (2) the problems of the economy were especially influential drivers behind the increase (Fig. 14).

Religion and Potentially Violent Discourse (PVD)

- Over the course of the month, PVD was found in 56% of posts. PVD was 44% of posts in December 2021, and it rose steadily each month. The jump in March was the largest and the only month in the previous quarter that more than half of posts were associated with PVD. The rate of increase for PVD in March was 34% (Fig. 11).

- The Religion frame consistently hovered around 34% of posts over the previous 4 months. The amount of religiously framed discourse increased 18% in March, comparable to 16% increase in the purposive sample as a whole, but it was still slightly below its level in January 2022 (Fig. 9). Not surprisingly, Religion communities had the most religious discourse over the quarter with 77% of posts containing identifiable religious content. Patriot & Military, QAnon, and Extreme-Right communities followed with comparable levels among themselves between 44% and 48% (Fig 10). (Frames and communities are not equivalent metrics.)

- Discourse using the language of the Christian Radical Right (CRR) accounted for 10% of all discourse over the previous 4 months. Religion and Extreme-Right communities each had 20% of their posts having CRR content, while Patriot & Military communities trailed only slightly at 19% (Fig 10). The largest components within CRR discourse varied by community type: Religion was split between Spiritual Warfare and Christian Nationalist content at 8% each, Christian Nationalism was the largest component for Patriot & Military at 11%, and the Extreme Right had 14% of its discourse identified with antisemitism and Christian Identity.

- Religion and PVD combined were present in about 19% of posts over the previous 4 months. In other words, religious PVD accounted for about one-third of all PVD and 56% of the Religion frame. The rate was highest in Patriot & Military communities at 36% (Fig. 13). Religion, QAnon, and Extreme-Right communities were between 25% and 30%.

Alternative Reality (Conspiracy and Fringe)

- The Alt-Reality metaframe (conspiracy theories and fringe beliefs) accounted for 42% of posts over the previous 4 months, not surprising given that the Conspiracy and QAnon groups were the largest two online communities in January with 52% and 29% of posts respectively (Fig. 7 and 8).

- QAnon results were mixed. Activity in the QAnon group fell a steep 6% in March, but the QAnon subframe rose 54% (Fig. 7 and 8).
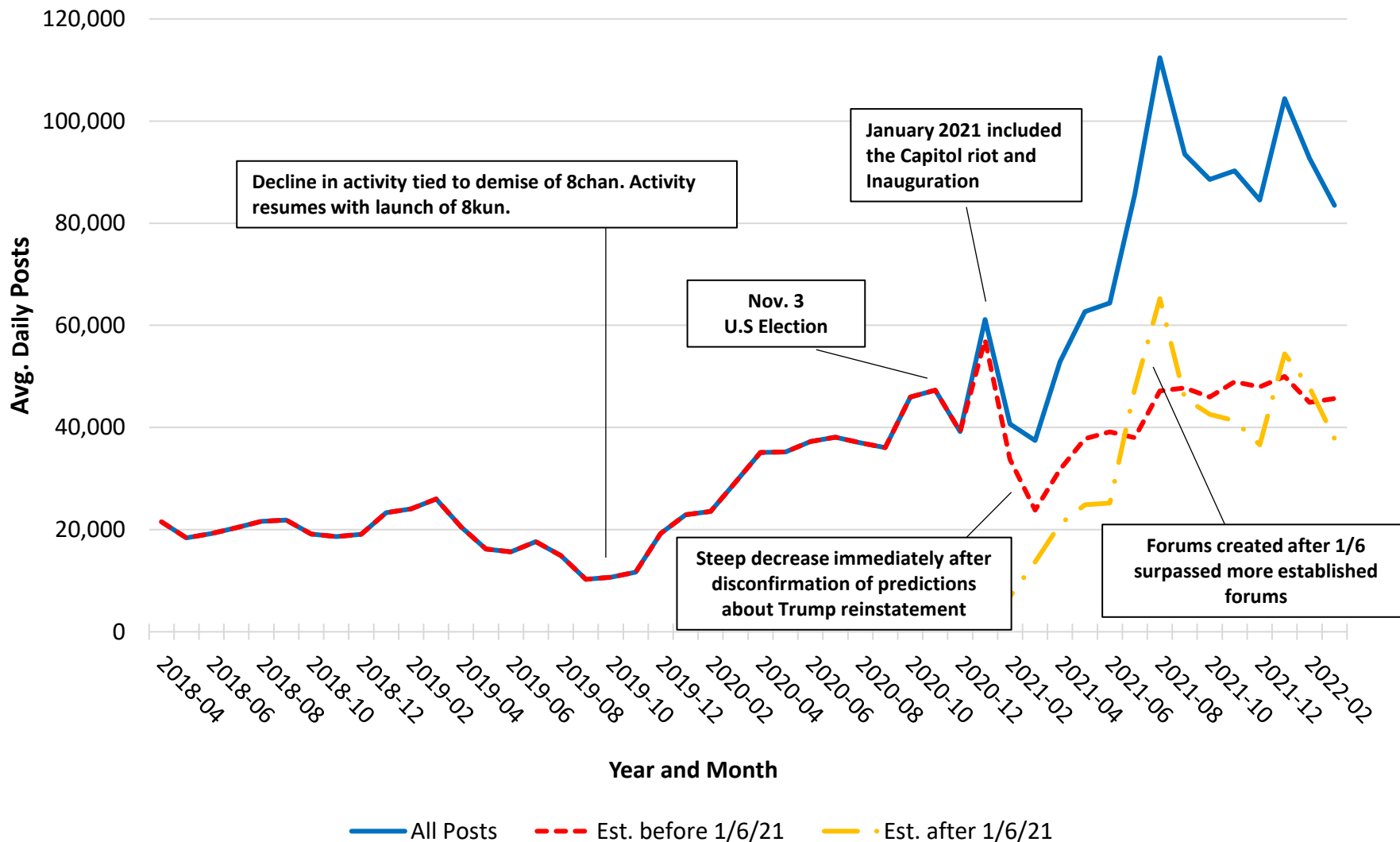
Current Events

- Discussions of COVID-19 were overtaken in size by discussions of (1) Russia and Ukraine and (2) the economy. COVID discussions fell 16% to 1,964 posts per day (Fig. 14). Russia and Ukraine rose 152% to 2,795 posts per day, and this activity drove a sharp increase in the Patriot & Military group in March (Fig. 7). Discussions of the economy rose 39% to 2,617 posts per day (Fig 14)

- Discussions of individual events in which fake claims about pedophilia and other sex crimes were rather small, e.g., controversies surrounding the Ketanji Brown Jackson nomination, Disney, and school board debates. As seen in previous months, major news outlets may be given more attention to the sex crime allegations made in these stories than can be seen in extreme-right and conspiracy forums. However, when all sex crime discourse was added together, including the QAnon core myth regarding the elite trafficking and sacrificing of children, discourse rose 84% to 614 posts per day (Fig 14).

Methodology

- A priority this month has been the stabilizing of the forums in the purposive sample, including filling out communities where content was thin and dropping some underperforming forums. Less effort was put into coding, which may result in understating alternative reality and incel discourse, where major additions in forums have occurred. It may take 2 to 3 months to work out the new word lists.

- The addition of two large forums related to incels and the tea party could not be finished in time for this report.

- A public-use data set and program will be released by May 1. See the link for documentation at the end of this report.

- Given the crunch on time, I am going to forego this month's quality audit. Getting a stable universe of forums is my priority right now because its absence inhibits some of my research. I will return to quality audits next month.
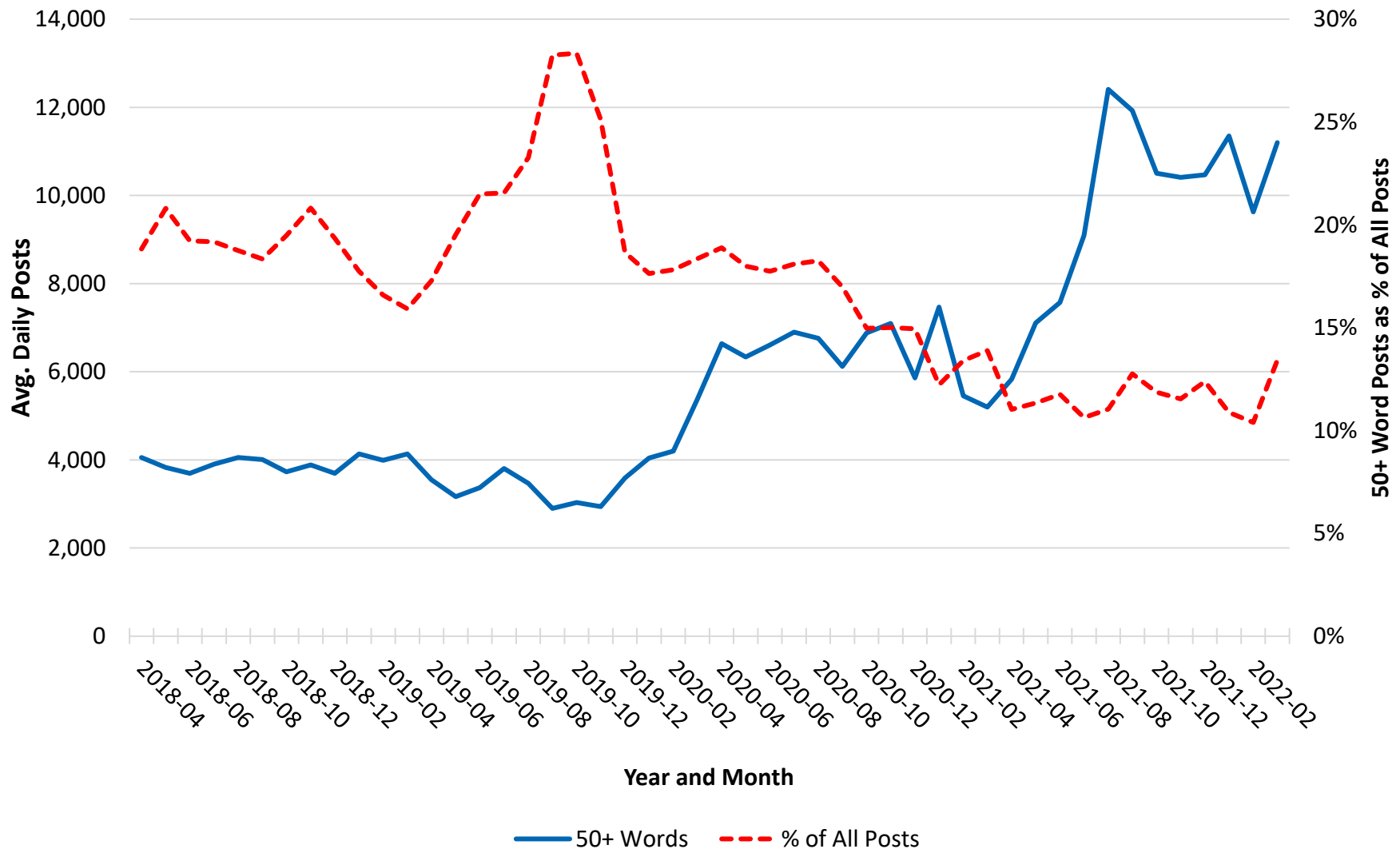
Figure 1
All Posts: Average Daily Activity by Month since April 2018

Decline in activity tied to demise of 8chan. Activity resumes with launch of 8kun.

Nov. 3 U.S Election

January 2021 included the Capitol riot and Inauguration

Steep decrease immediately after disconfirmation of predictions about Trump reinstatement

Forums created after 1/6 surpassed more established forums

Avg. Daily Posts

Year and Month

— All Posts   - - - Est. before 1/6/21   — · Est. after 1/6/21
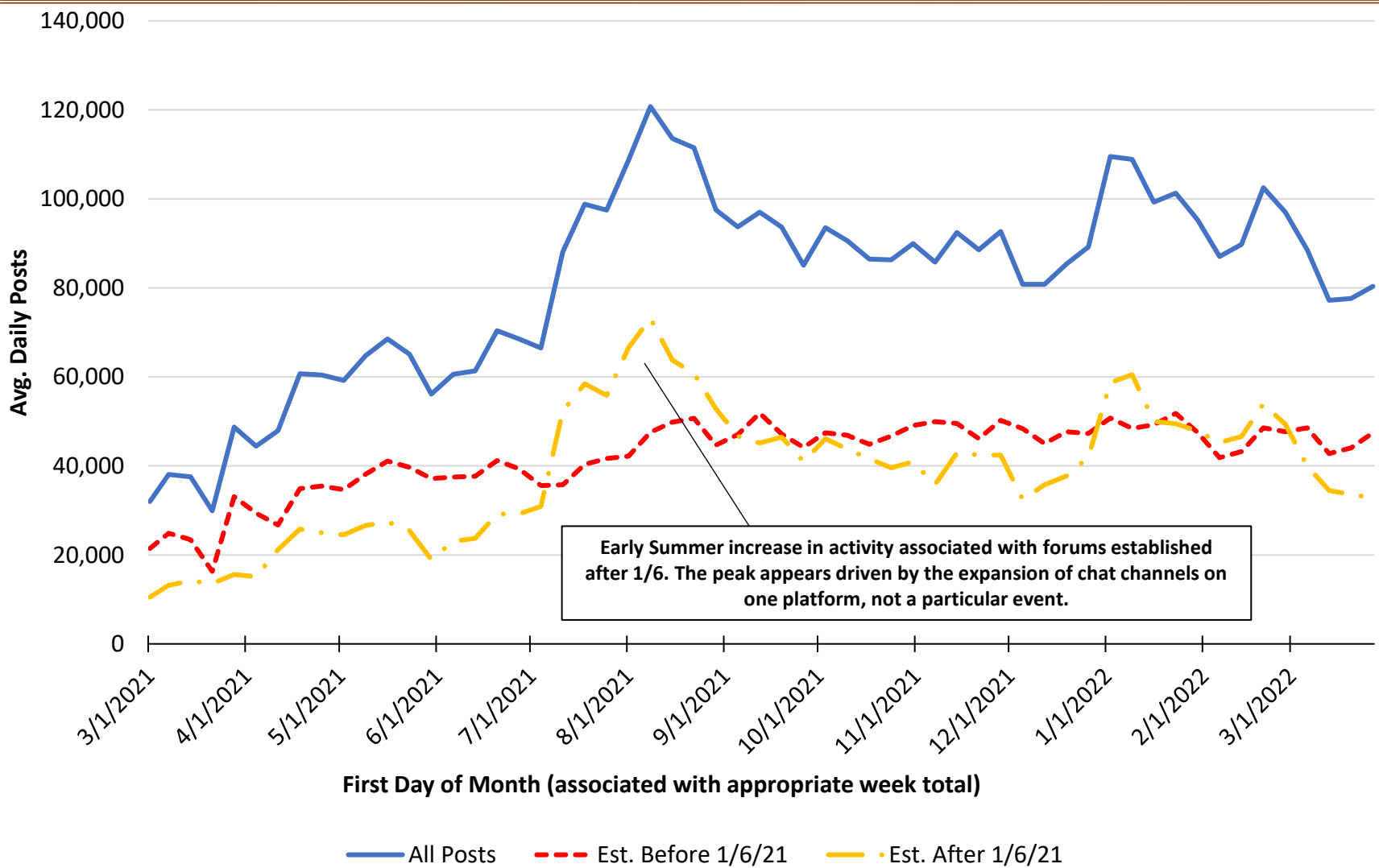
Note:60,008,479 estimated posts

Figure 2
50+ Words: Average Daily Activity by Month since April 2018

Note: 8,690,777 estimated posts

Figure 3
## All Posts: Avg. Daily Activity by Week for Past 13 Months

Early Summer increase in activity associated with forums established after 1/6. The peak appears driven by the expansion of chat channels on one platform, not a particular event.

Avg. Daily Posts

First Day of Month (associated with appropriate week total)

Legend: All Posts — Est. Before 1/6/21 — Est. After 1/6/21

Notes: N=28,845,375 estimated posts

Figure 4
50+ Words: Avg. Daily Activity by Week for Past 13 Months

Legend: —— 50+ Words   - - - % of All Posts
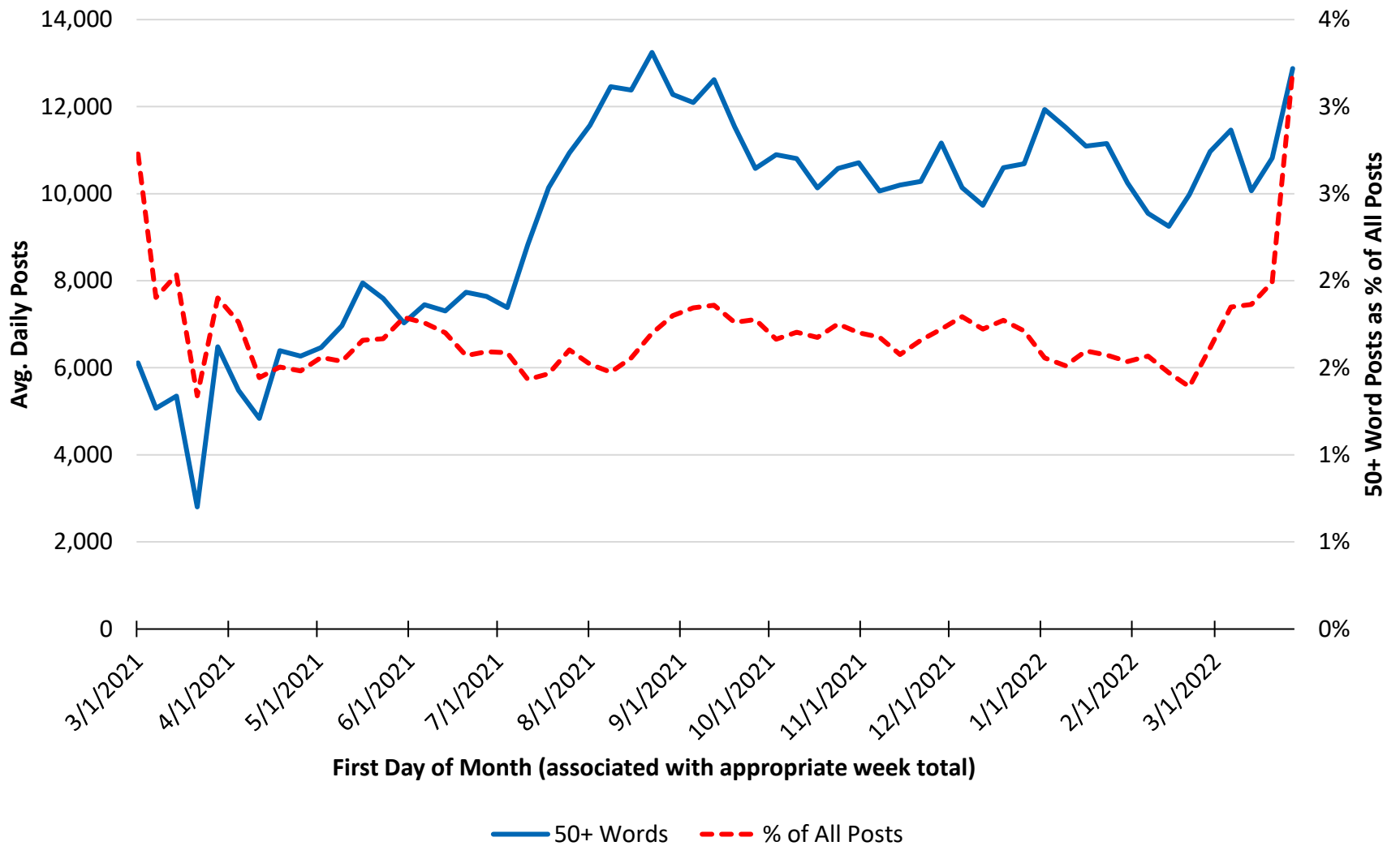
Notes: N=3,352,692 estimated posts

Figure 5
All Posts: Daily Activity for the Past 4 Months
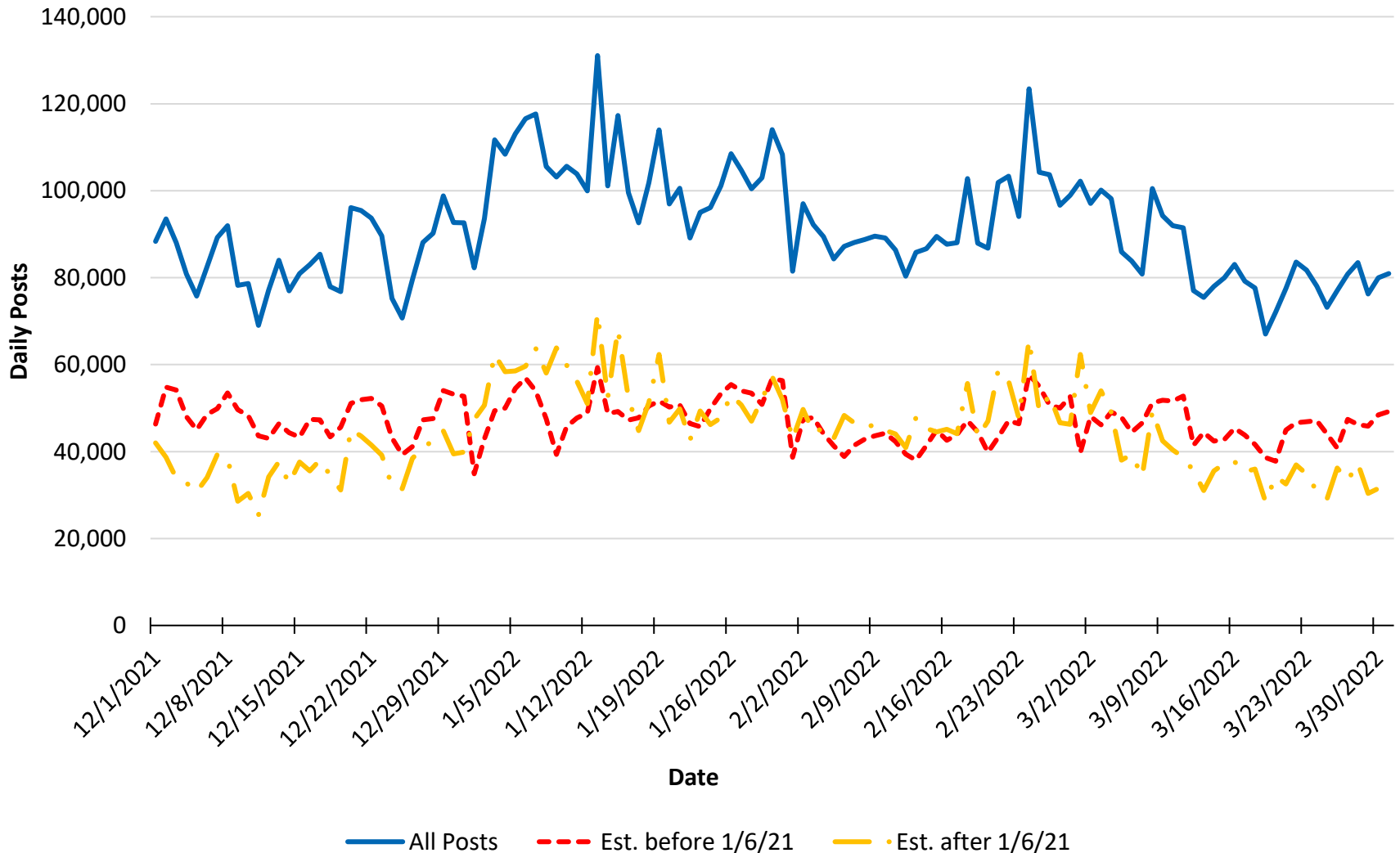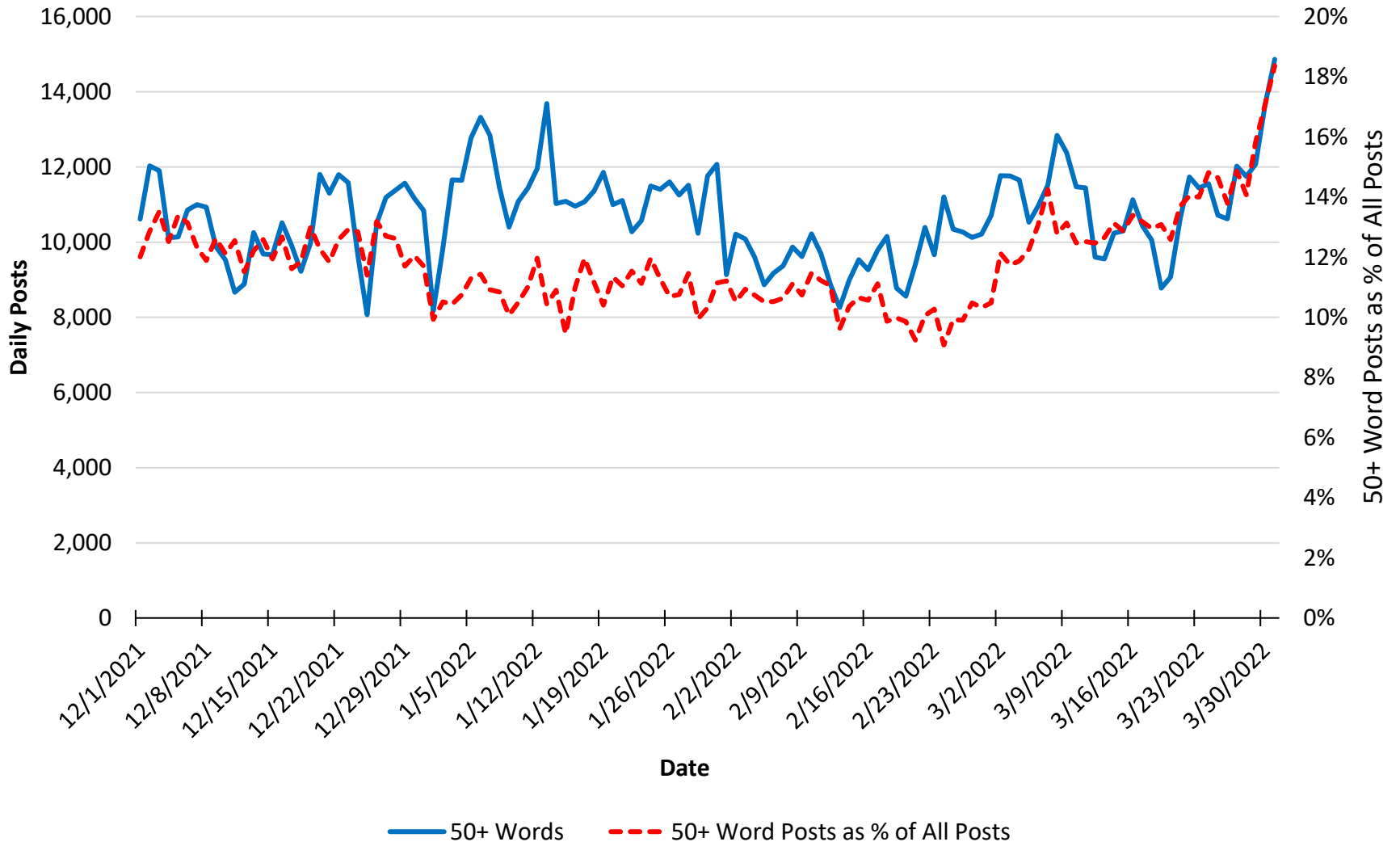
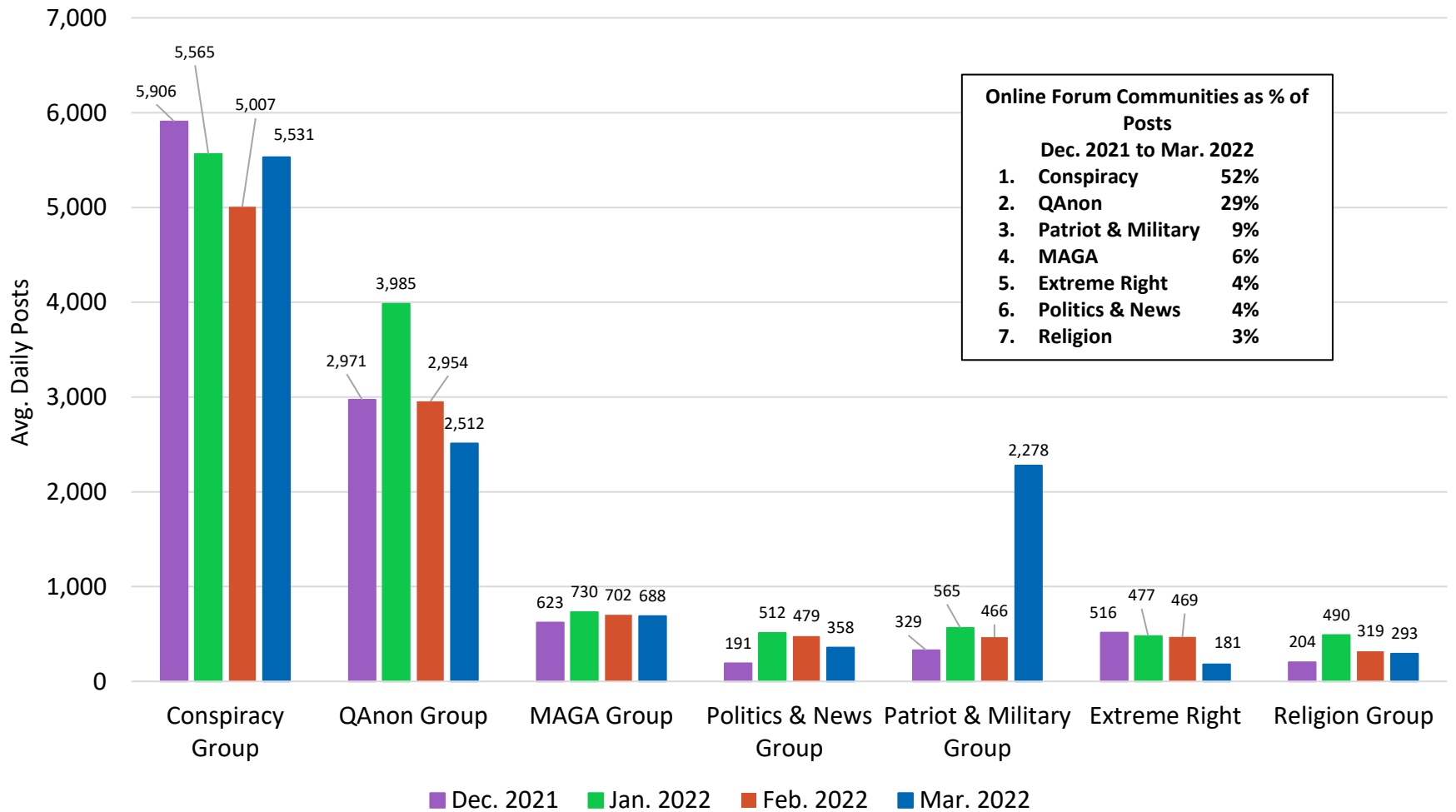Notes: N=11,041,250 estimated posts.

Figure 6
50+ Words: Daily Activity for the Past 4 Months

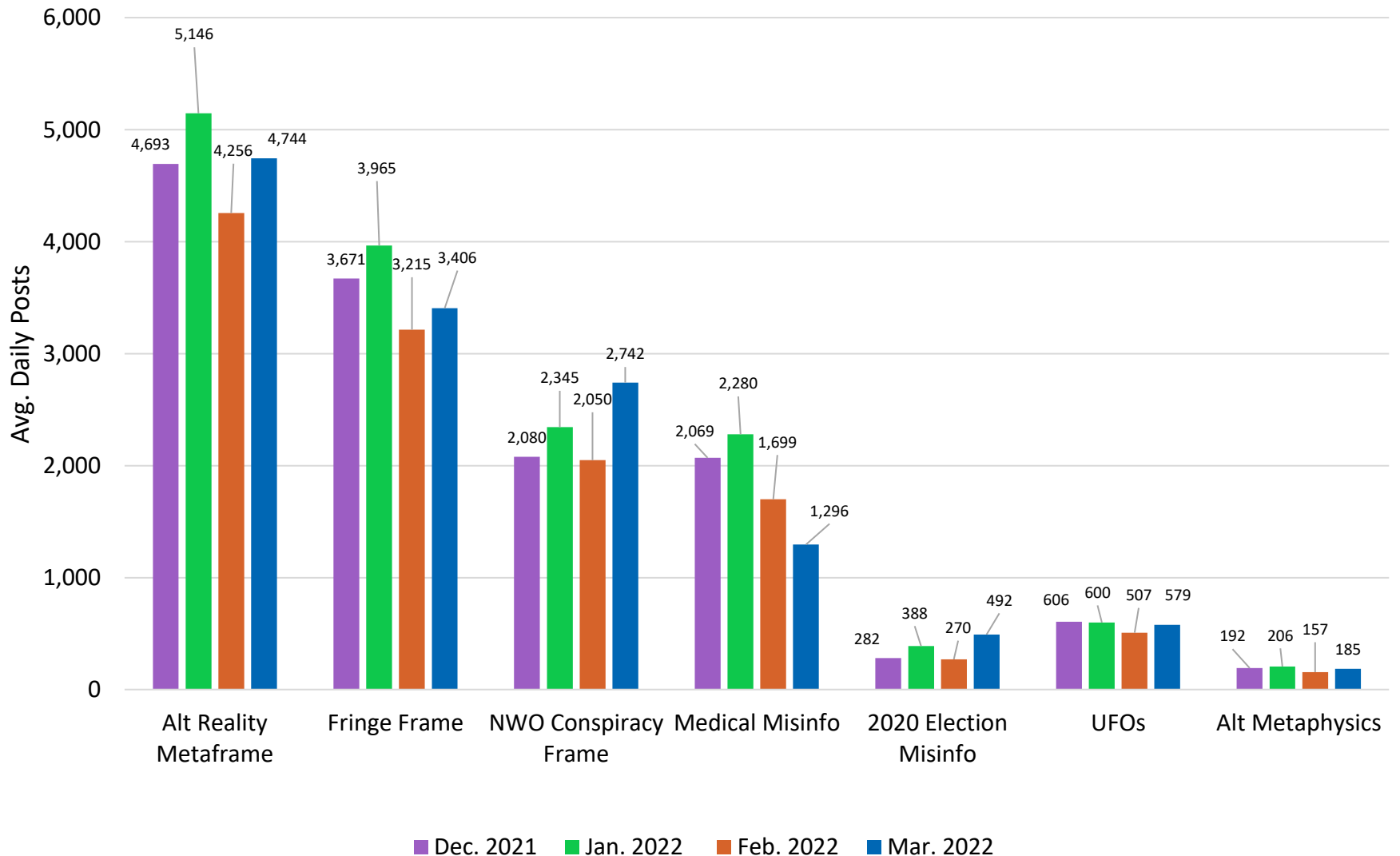

Notes: N=1,293,387 estimated posts.

Figure 7
50+ Words: Online Communities by Month for Past 4 Months

Online Forum Communities as % of Posts
Dec. 2021 to Mar. 2022

1. Conspiracy — 52%
2. QAnon — 29%
3. Patriot & Military — 9%
4. MAGA — 6%
5. Extreme Right — 4%
6. Politics & News — 4%
7. Religion — 3%

Legend: Dec. 2021, Jan. 2022, Feb. 2022, Mar. 2022

Y-axis: Avg. Daily Posts

Conspiracy Group: 5,906 / 5,565 / 5,007 / 5,531
QAnon Group: 2,971 / 3,985 / 2,954 / 2,512
MAGA Group: 623 / 730 / 702 / 688
Politics & News Group: 191 / 512 / 479 / 358
Patriot & Military Group: 329 / 565 / 466 / 2,278
Extreme Right: 516 / 477 / 469 / 181
Religion Group: 204 / 490 / 319 / 293

Notes: Online communities are categorizations of discussion forums, not frame classifications, and are not mutually exclusive. For example, a forum might be dedicated to QAnon yet might have posts related to non-QAnon frames, and there may be QAnon material posted outside of QAnon communities. In addition, a QAnon forum might have multiple classifications, e.g., a QAnon forum might also be categorized as Sov Cit.
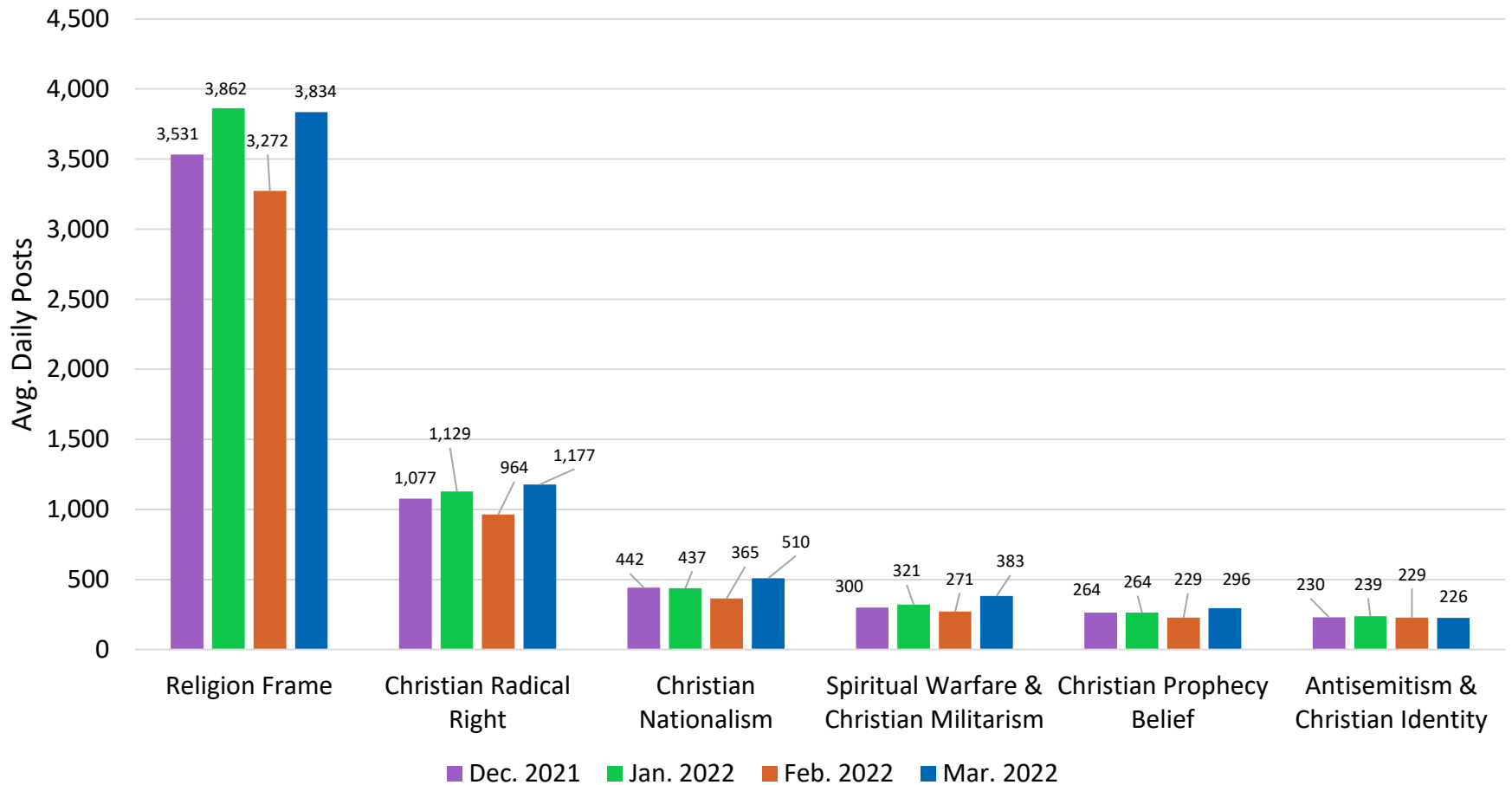
Figure 8
50+ Words: Avg. Daily Posts for Alt Reality Themes for Past 4 Months

Avg. Daily Posts

Alt Reality Metaframe: 4,693 / 5,146 / 4,256 / 4,744
Fringe Frame: 3,671 / 3,965 / 3,215 / 3,406
NWO Conspiracy Frame: 2,080 / 2,345 / 2,050 / 2,742
Medical Misinfo: 2,069 / 2,280 / 1,699 / 1,296
2020 Election Misinfo: 282 / 388 / 270 / 492
UFOs: 606 / 600 / 507 / 579
Alt Metaphysics: 192 / 206 / 157 / 185

Legend: ■ Dec. 2021 ■ Jan. 2022 ■ Feb. 2022 ■ Mar. 2022

Figure 9
50+ Words: Avg. Daily Posts for Religion Themes for Past 4 Months

Notes: Religious idioms accounted for an additional 2% of material that was excluded. Religious idioms were defined as religious words and phrases used every day as figures of speech but not intended to communicate religious points of view. In this study, the words "God", "Jesus," "Christ," "lord," and "pray" were regarded as markers of idioms unless the post was accompanied by other religious content. The components of the Christian radical right are (1) Christian nationalism, (2) spiritual warfare and Christian militarism, (3) Christian prophecy belief, (4) antisemitism and Christian Identity, (5) the New Apostolic Reformation, and (6) Christian reconstructionism. The latter two components were excluded from this graph due to their small size. Antisemitism included Christian Identity and included only derogatory comments beyond single-word references to Jews and Jewishness—this methodology is under further review. Other kinds of language associated with conservative Christian beliefs (e.g., born againism, fundamentalism, creationism) are not coded as part of Christian radical right – I am looking only for concentrations of ideas associated with extreme antigovernment behavior and threats of violence. For more on the content and activities of the Christian radical right in relation to recent events, see Manseau (2021), Rogers (2021), and Rowley (2021).

Figure 10
50+ Words: % Posts w/ Religion Frame and Selected Components
## by Online Community for Past 4 Months in Total

Online Community	Religion Frame	Chr. Radical Right	Spiritual Warfare	Chr. Nat'lism	Chr. Prophecy	Anti-semitism & Chr. Identity
Religion	77%	20%	8%	8%	4%	1%
Patriot & Military	48%	19%	7%	11%	4%	3%
QAnon	46%	15%	5%	6%	3%	3%
Extreme Right	44%	20%	3%	5%	2%	14%
MAGA	38%	11%	4%	6%	2%	1%
Politics & News	34%	11%	4%	5%	3%	2%
Conspiracy & Fringe	24%	5%	1%	1%	2%	1%
Total	34%	10%	3%	4%	2%	2%

How to read this table: The denominator in this calculation is the number of posts in the online community. Each cell expresses the presence of any religious content as a percent of all discourse within the online community group. For example, the 21% for the Christian Radical Right in the Religion group means that 21% of the Religious group's discourse contained at least one item coded as Christian radical right.

Note: Community groups span multiple forums and are not mutually exclusive categories. The Religion frame excludes idiomatic language.

Figure 11
50+ Words: Avg. Daily Posts for Potentially Violent Discourse for Past 4 Months
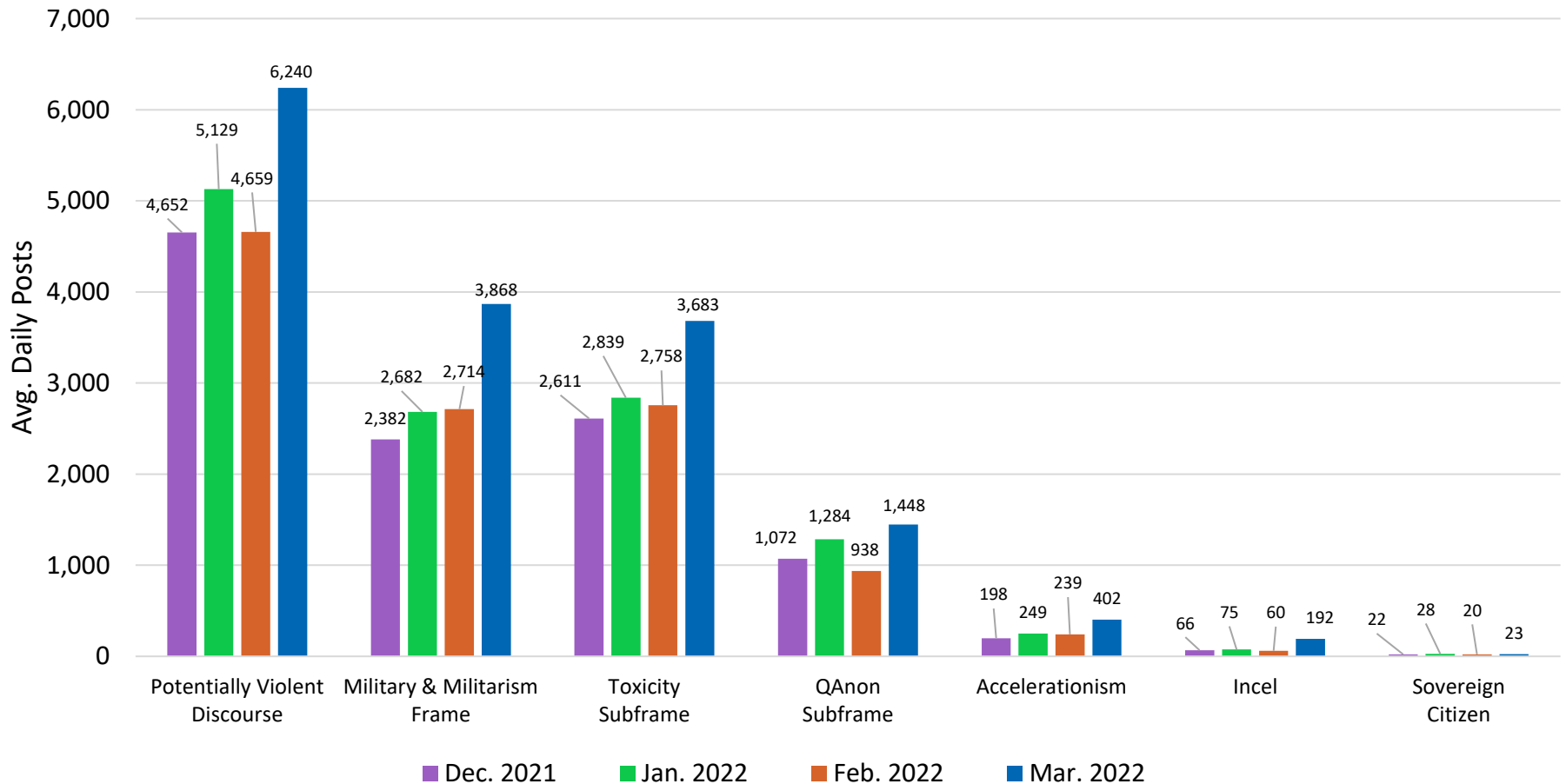
Notes: Potentially violent discourse (PVD) referred to language that could express aggression or violence. Individual posts in themselves might not be regarded as violent or might not result in violence, but the collective effect of this language could result in the radicalization of an individual or an escalation of extreme antigovernment or violent sentiments. The three components of PVD here are (1) the military and militarism frame, (2) the QAnon subframe, and (3) the toxicity subframe. The toxicity frame included language that could be regarded as vulgar (such as profanity), hypermasculine, violent, aggressive, or accelerationist. Accelerationism referred to the idea that individuals must take matters into their own hands in order to usher in massive, disruptive social change; it included words and phrases associated with direct discussions of the concept as well as conversations about a military coup, civil war, racial holy war, Armageddon, and prepping, all which were usually described as proximate events. Accelerationist and incel discourse were two of a broader set of topics classified as toxic. Sovereign citizen language was included within the politics frame, which is reported quarterly.

Figure 12
50+ Words: % of Posts with Potentially Violent Discourse
by Online Community for Past 4 Months in Total

Online Community	Any PVD	Military & Militarism	Toxicity	QAnon
Patriot & Military	68%	42%	57%	26%
QAnon	59%	32%	41%	29%
Politics & News	51%	29%	40%	14%
Extreme Right	47%	28%	44%	1%
MAGA	44%	29%	38%	3%
Religion	41%	28%	30%	12%
Conspiracy & Fringe	40%	22%	37%	1%
Total	48%	27%	40%	11%

Example of how to read this table: The denominator in this calculation is the number of posts in the online community. Each cell expresses the presence of potentially violent discourse as a percent of all discourse within the online community group. For example, the 41% for toxicity in the QAnon group means that 41% of the group's discourse contained at least one item coded as toxic.

Note: Community groups span multiple forums and are not mutually exclusive categories.

Figure 13
50+ Words: % of Posts w/ Both Religious Content & PVD by Online Community for Past 4 Months in Total

| Online Community	Any PVD	Military & Militarism	Toxicity	QAnon
Patriot & Military	36%	25%	31%	17%
Religion	30%	21%	23%	10%
QAnon	28%	18%	21%	15%
Extreme Right	25%	16%	23%	1%
Politics & News	20%	12%	16%	6%
MAGA	19%	14%	17%	1%
Conspiracy & Fringe	11%	7%	11%	1%
Total	19%	12%	16%	6%

Example of how to read this table: The denominator in this calculation is the number of posts in the online community. Each cell expresses the presence of discourse that is both religious and potentially violent as a percent of all discourse within the online community group. For example, the 31% for toxicity in the Patriot & Military group means that 31% of the group's discourse contained at least one item coded as toxic.

Note: Community groups span multiple forums and are not mutually exclusive categories.

Figure 14
50+ Words: Avg. Daily Posts for Current Debates and Events
for Past 4 Months
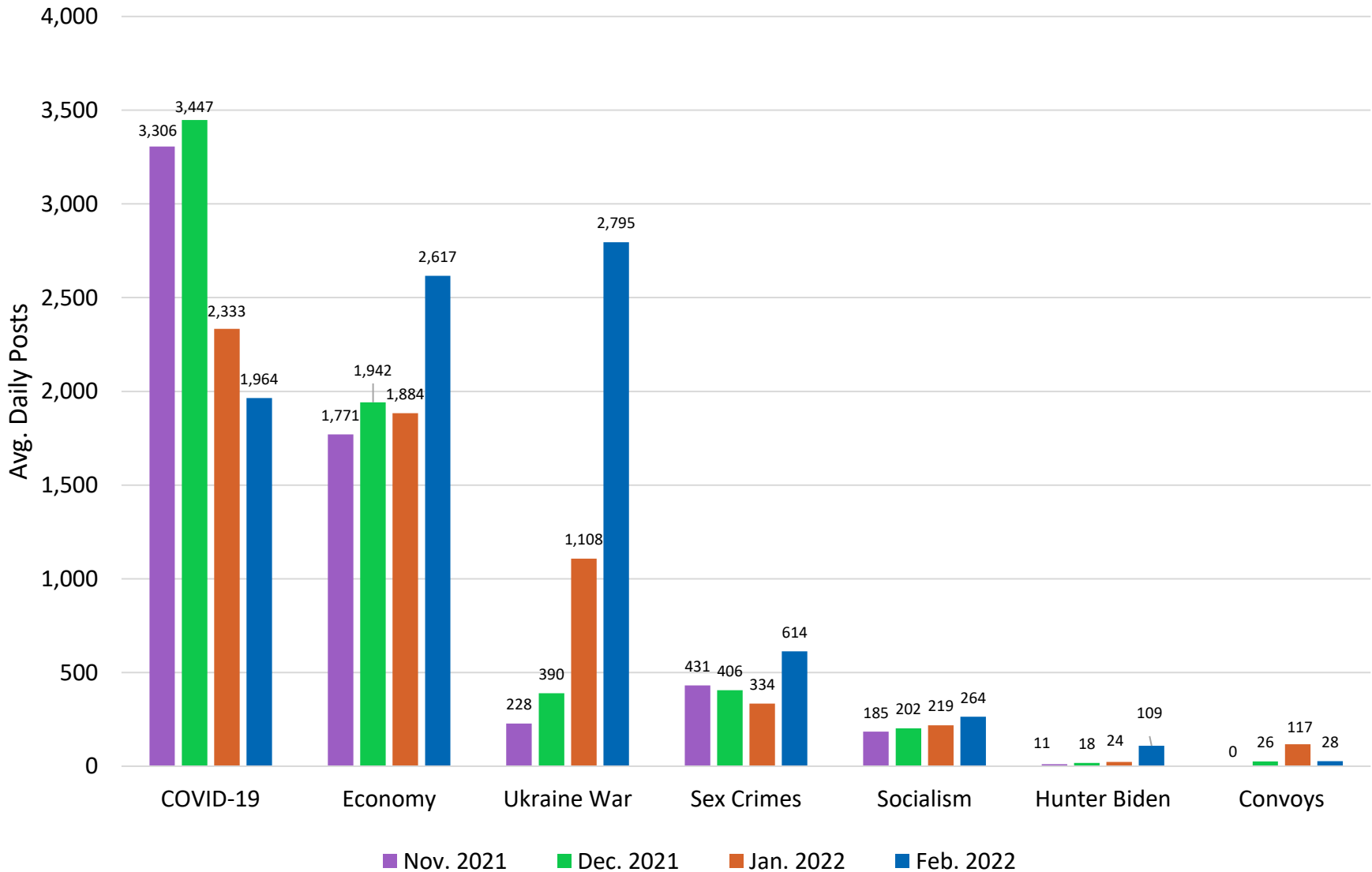
References

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

Manseau, P. (2021). *Religion at the Capitol siege with Peter Manseau.* [Podcast.] Straight White American Jesus. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/religionat-the-capitol-siege-with-peter-manseau/id1441649707?i=1000506538869

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.

Rowley, M. (2021). Prophetic populism and the violent rejection of Joe Biden's election: Mapping the theology of the Capitol insurrection. *International Journal of Religion, 2*(2), 145–164. https://doi.org/10.33182/ijor.v2i2.1697.

Documentation

Documentation is being moved to the web. A small amount of material is now available at:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-iy1GDpFtDyi4s-MXBwOe1Mr7FPmyhvz?usp=sharing

Available documentation currently includes:

- A list of discussion forums used in this study and their classification into online communities

- Criteria for inclusion in the purposive sample of this study

- A copy of the IRB protocol

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 sample of 134 discussion boards from 9 major web-based 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