
FRAMES OF MISINFORMATION AND EXTREMISM

Web Forums and Social-Media Discussions

Monthly Flash Report

April 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.

April 2022 Activity Summary

Results are now limited exclusively to posts with at least 50 words. The April 2022 report introduces the much awaited expansion of source material with the addition of extreme-left (self-identified socialists, anarchists, and antifa) and incel sites. A libertarian/Tea Party site has also been included on the assumption that there is a large amount of extremist or conspiracist material on it, but this site will be removed from the study if this assumption is not confirmed. Figure 10 comes from the first attempt to use the FOME data to identify trends in public-health misinformation beyond COVID-19.

Main Trends

- Among posts with at least 50 words in the purposive sample, April activity averaged 11,097 posts per day, down 9% from March and down 18% from the all-time study peak in August (Fig. 1).
- The declines varied by the type of forum.
 - Alt-Reality & Conspiracy forums fell 20% in April and were down 34% since August (Fig. 1).
 - QAnon & QAnon Adjacent forums gained 10% in April but were 39% below their August (Fig. 1).
 - Extreme-Right and Extreme-Left forums both experienced increases since August (44% and 38% respectively), though the Extreme-Left declined in April (Fig. 1).
 - In March, the Extreme Right surpassed QAnon & QAnon Adjacent as the second largest group of forums in terms of average daily activity due to activity in the MAGA and Patriot & Military Forums (Fig. 1 and 2).

Potentially Violent Discourse (PVD) and Religion

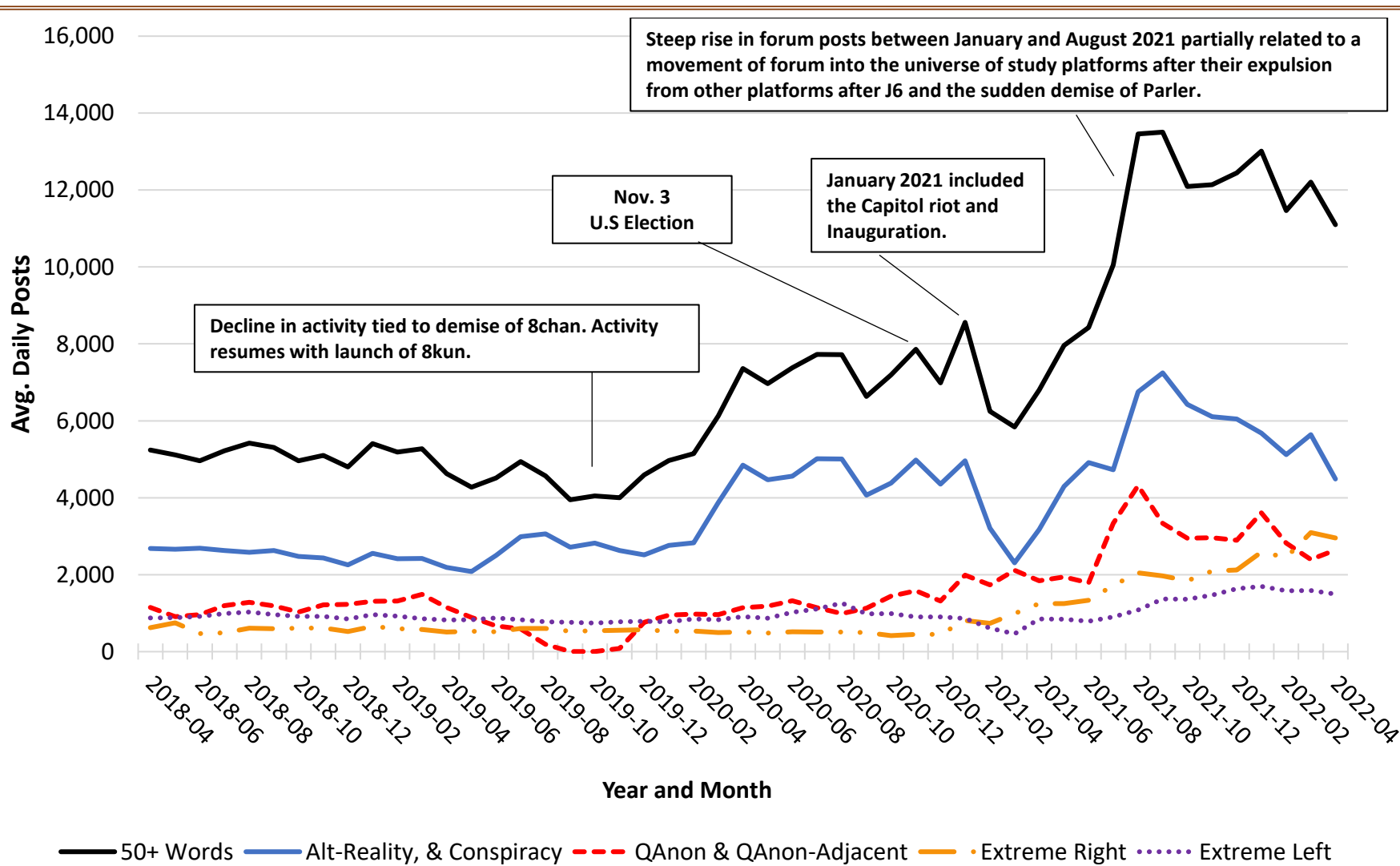
- Over the course of the month, PVD was found in 46% of posts. This was a decline from 51% in the previous month. This decline is best described as a return to normal levels. The uptick in March was undoubtedly driven up by a surge of activity related to the start of the Ukraine War, and the April decline in % PVD corresponded with a decline in references to the war. Religion forums were below the FOME average at 37% (Fig. 7 and 9).
- Since there is much ballyhoo about the antifa threat and this month's report is the first look at the Extreme Left, it is worth noting that PVD on the left is slightly below the average for all extremist and conspiracist sites (Fig. 7).
- The presence of Religion themes is fairly constant, present in 31-32% of posts. However, with in conjunction with the run-up in activity, Patriot & Military forums fell from having religious content in 44% of forums in March to 28% in April. This decline was preceded by a decline in religious content with Conventional Extreme Right forums from 40% to 25% in March (Fig. 5).
- Religious PVD was present in 16% of posts. The highest rates could be found in forum types related to QAnon (26%) and Religion (25%) (Fig. 8).

Current Events

- Discussion of COVID-19 continued to fall. For the second month in a row, the economy was the leading theme in current event discussions (Fig. 9).
- In the first look at public-health issues outside of COVID-19, references to natural and alternative medicine were higher in discussions about cancer and heart disease than such references were to COVID-19 over the past four months. There was a spike in these references regarding cancer and heart disease in public-health-related benchmarks in April (Fig. 10).

Figure 1

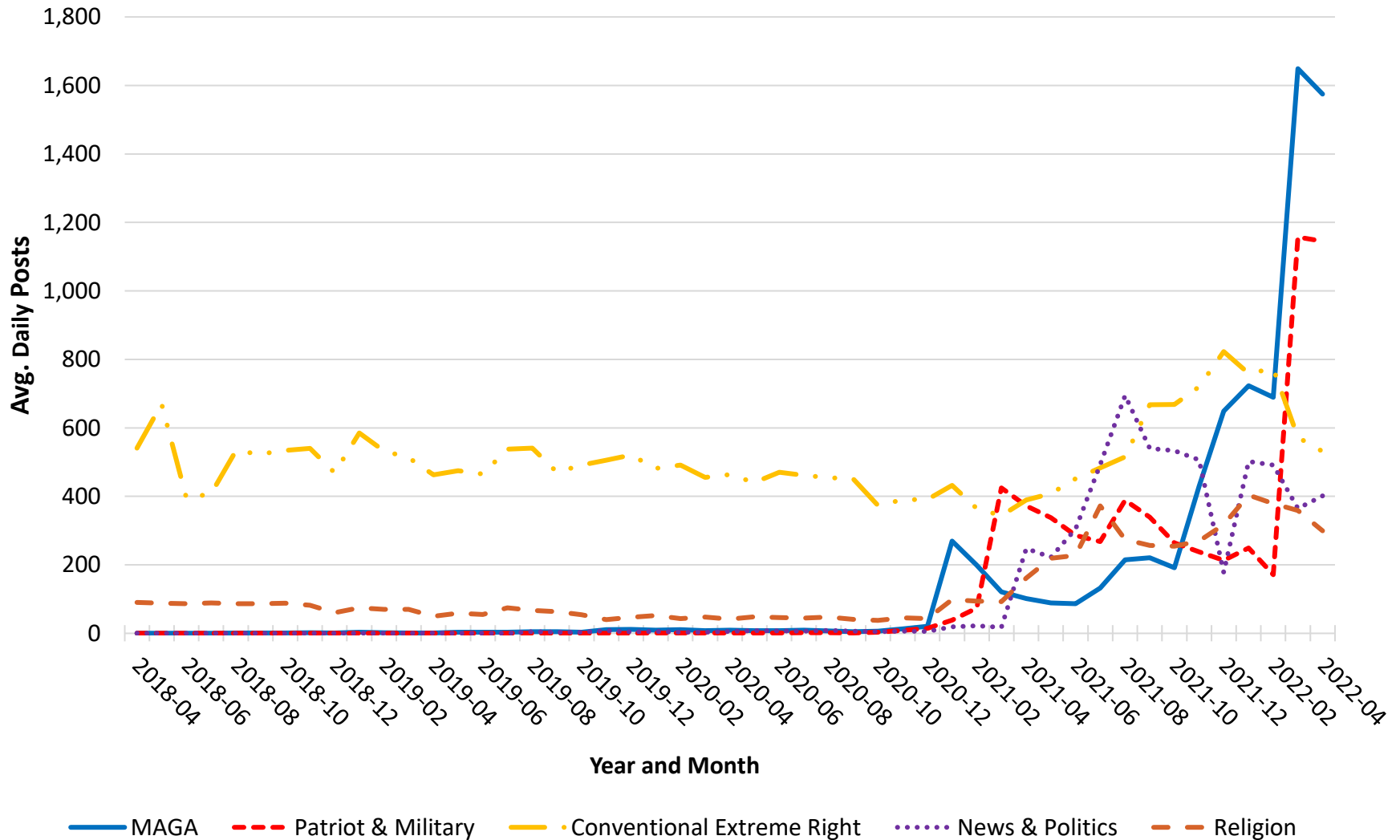
Avg. Daily Activity by Month since April 2018



Note: 1,435,744 posts with at least 50 words. Forums are not mutually exclusive. QAnon and QAnon-adjacent forums could be classified as both Alt-Reality & Conspiracy and Extreme Right, but QAnon & QAnon Adjacent forums are separated due to their size and influence. In the Extreme Left, submissions from the Chaptraphouse subreddit are included but not comments, which would substantially drive up extreme left numbers before the subreddit's movement to Hexbear in June 2020.

Figure 2

Avg. Daily Activity by Month for Extreme-Right Forums since April 2018



Note :These groups are a subset of forums classified as Extreme-Right in Figure 1. The category Conventional Extreme Right includes but is not limited neo-Nazis, Proud Boys, and sovereign citizens.

Figure 3

Avg. Daily Posts for Select Alt Reality Themes for Past 4 Months

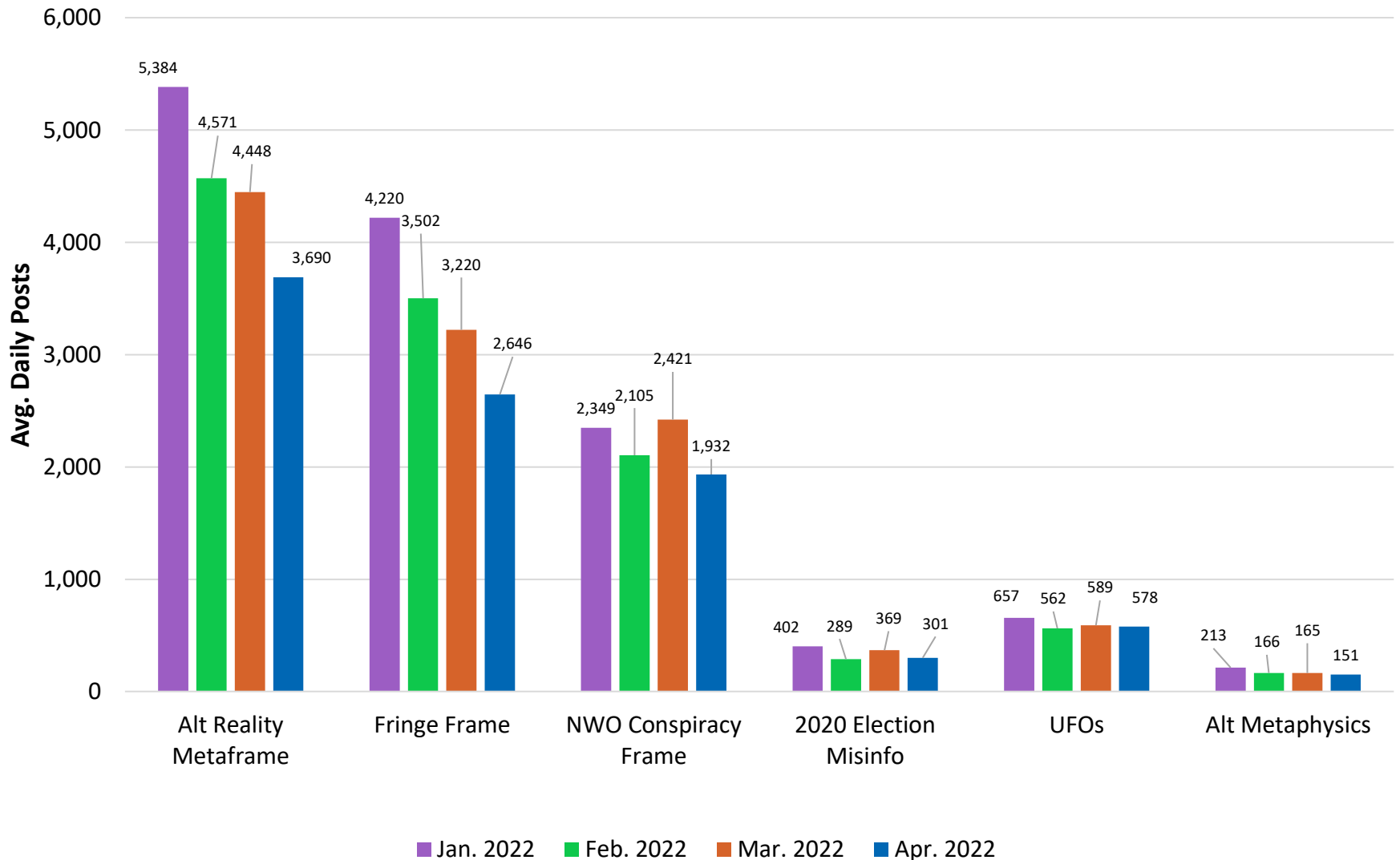
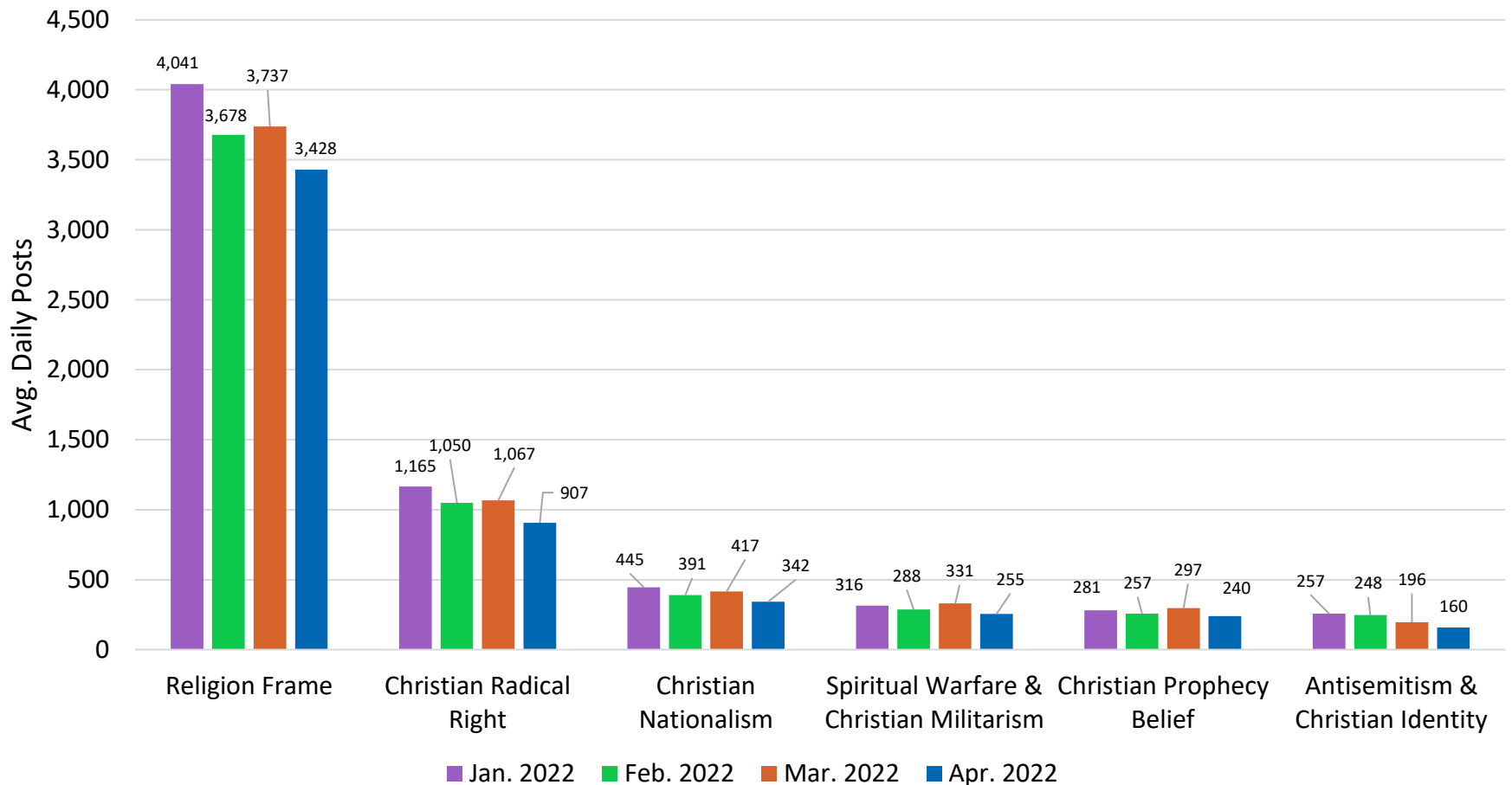




Figure 4

Avg. Daily Posts for Religion Themes for Past 4 Months



Notes: Religious idioms were excluded. Religious idioms are 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” are regarded as markers of idioms unless the post is 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 are excluded from this graph due to their small size. Antisemitism includes Christian Identity and includes 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 5
% Posts w/ Religion Frame and Selected Components
by Forum Type for Report Month

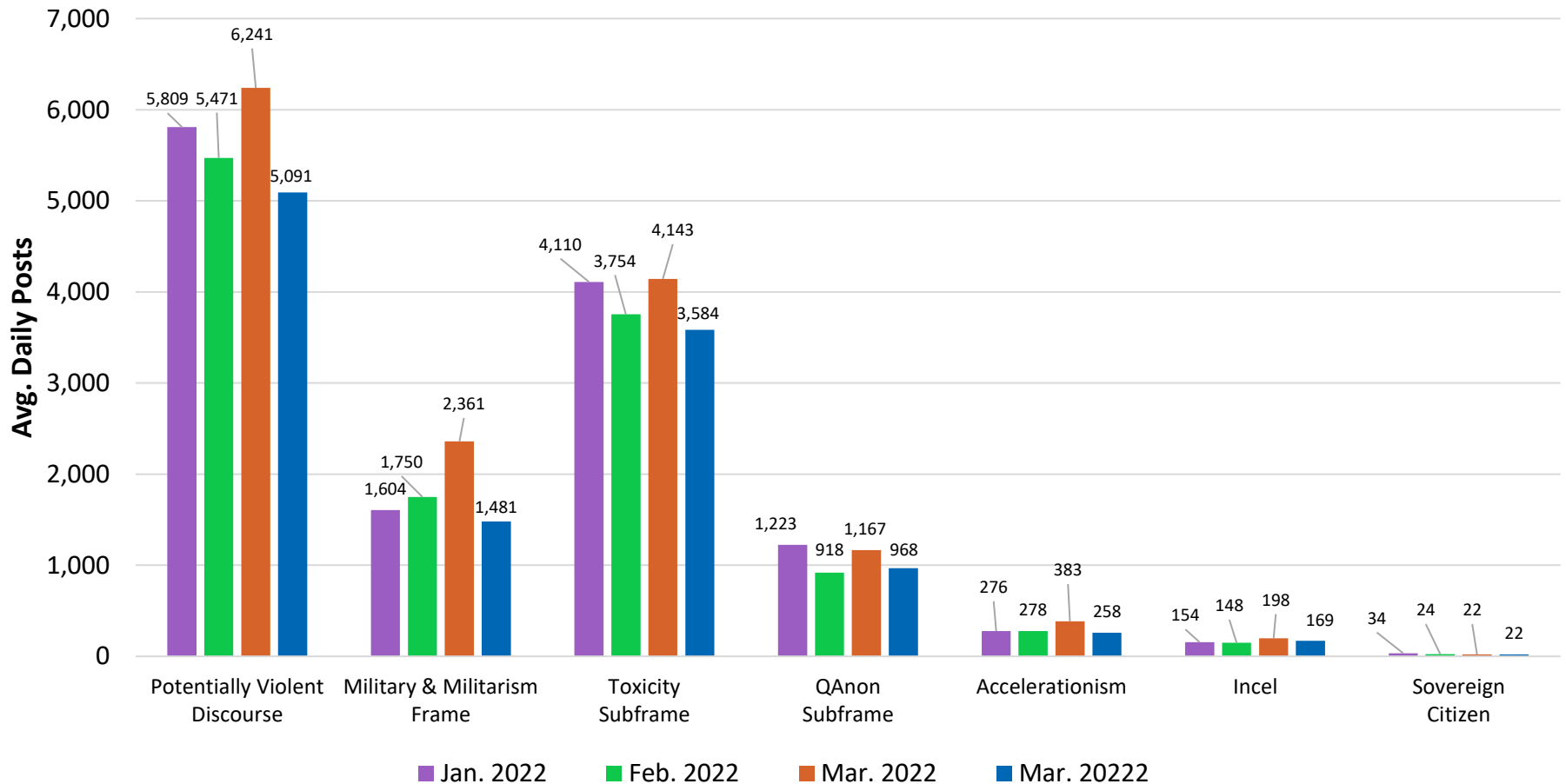
Forum Type	Religion Frame	Chr. Radical Right	Spiritual Warfare	Chr. Nat'lism	Chr. Prophecy	Anti-semitism & Chr. Identity
Religion	68%	20%	6%	7%	6%	2%
QAnon	43%	13%	4%	5%	3%	3%
MAGA	42%	14%	4%	6%	4%	2%
Politics & News	34%	12%	4%	5%	3%	2%
Patriot & Military	 28%	8%	2%	4%	2%	1%
Conspiracy & Fringe	27%	6%	1%	2%	2%	1%
Conventional Extreme Right	 25%	6%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Extreme Left	20%	4%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Total	31%	8%	2%	3%	2%	1%

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 20% for the Christian Radical Right in the Religion group means that 20% of the Religious group's discourse contained at least one item coded as Christian Radical Right.

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

Figure 6

Avg. Daily Posts for Potentially Violent Discourse for Past 4 Months



Notes: Potentially violent discourse (PVD) refers 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 includes language that could be regarded as vulgar (such as profanity), hypermasculine, violent, aggressive, or accelerationist. Accelerationism refers to the idea that individuals must take matters into their own hands in order to usher in massive, disruptive social change; it includes 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 are usually described as proximate events. Accelerationist and incel discourse are two of a broader set of topics classified as toxic. Sovereign citizen language are included within the politics frame, which is reported quarterly.

Figure 7
% of Posts with Potentially Violent Discourse
by Forum Type for Report Month

Forum Types	Any PVD	Military & Militarism	Toxicity	QAnon
Patriot & Military	54%	12%	41%	12%
QAnon & QAnon Adjacent	51%	29%	31%	28%
Politics & News	50%	17%	30%	16%
Conventional Extreme Right	47%	28%	44%	1%
Extreme Left	43%	9%	37%	0%
MAGA	40%	15%	26%	3%
Religion	37%	15%	20%	9%
Conspiracy & Fringe	39%	12%	30%	1%
Total	46%	13%	32%	9%

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 31% for toxicity in the QAnon & QAnon Adjacent group means that 31% of the group's discourse contained at least one item coded as toxic.

Note: Forum types span multiple forums and are not mutually exclusive categories.

Figure 8
% of Posts w/ Both Religious Content & PVD
by Forum Types for Report Month

Forum Types	Any PVD	Military & Militarism	Toxicity	QAnon
QAnon & QAnon Adjacent	26%	11%	11%	14%
Religion	25%	10%	12%	7%
Politics & News	20%	9%	11%	6%
MAGA	19%	9%	11%	2%
Patriot & Military	17%	5%	11%	5%
Conventional Extreme Right	16%	5%	13%	2%
Conspiracy & Fringe	12%	4%	9%	1%
Extreme Left	11%	3%	9%	0%
Total	16%	6%	11%	4%

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 11% for toxicity in the Patriot & Military group means that 11% of the group's discourse contained at least one item coded as toxic.

Note: Forum types span multiple forums and are not mutually exclusive categories.

Figure 9

Avg. Daily Posts for Current Debates and Events for Past 4 Months

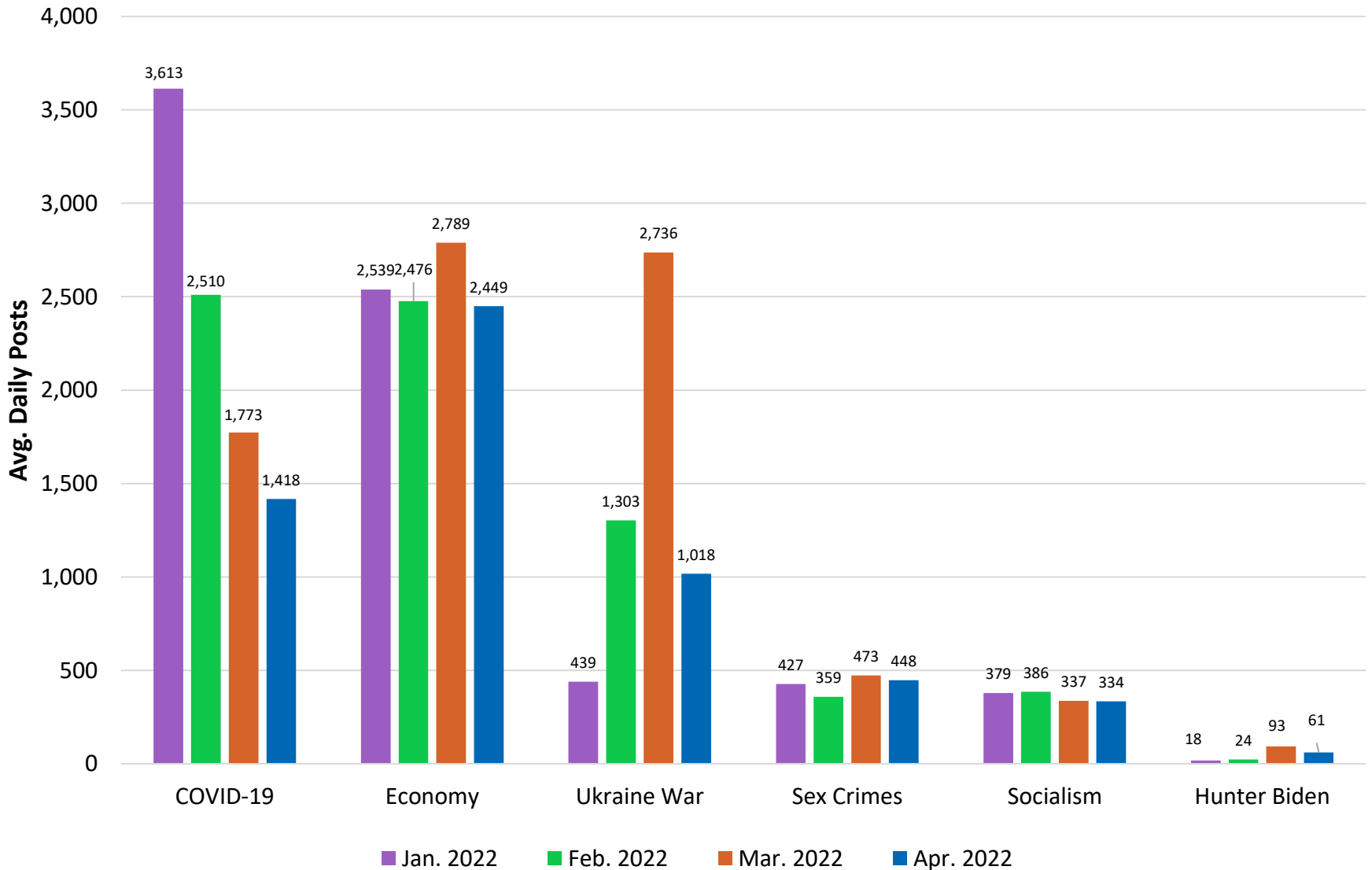


Figure 10

% Public Health Posts Mentioning Natural or Alternative Medicine Over Past 4 Months

Condition	Sample	Jan. 2022	Feb. 2022	Mar. 2022	Apr. 2022
All Posts	Benchmark	4%	3%	4%	4%
	FOME	10%	9%	10%	11%
By Condition					
Cancer	Benchmark	6%	6%	7%	10%
	FOME	15%	15%	19%	15%
Heart Disease	Benchmark	5%	6%	6%	11%
	FOME	11%	10%	15%	11%
COVID-19	Benchmark	4%	4%	4%	4%
	FOME	11%	8%	8%	8%
Total N	Benchmark	62,138	49,428	48,384	44,070
	FOME	168,050	110,808	106,512	90,800

Note: Natural and alternative medicine are nonclinical strategies for health care. Some of this care can be beneficial to general health, e.g. exercise, sunshine, eating right, vitamins. However, as the pandemic highlighted, their invocation can often be tied to an unfounded denial of the effectiveness of best practices in medical treatment. This analysis compares posts in the FOME Health Frame against a benchmark of 4 public-health-related subreddits.

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 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>