
FRAMES OF MISINFORMATION AND EXTREMISM

Web Forums and Social-Media Discussions

Monthly Summary

August 2022

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October 20, 2022
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This report contains topline numbers on the misinformation-extremism-conspiracism (MEC) sector based on a purposive sample of forums and discussion boards found on 13 platforms that are known for hosting this material.

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

August 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 complete list of current platforms can be found toward the end of this document. Work on adding channels to bring the study at or near maximum capacity will be near finished with the September report—there were substantial additions in August as part of this effort. There is a common practice not to draw undue attention to individual forums to avoid publicizing extremism, and I am in the process of figuring out which forums should be disclosed, and which should not be.

While turnaround times have dropped dramatically because of work over the summer, aspects of this report were rerun this month with the same methodology because monthly web scraping occurred in the midst of cyberattacks that hit two of the largest sites in this study. The change in numbers was substantial. I was able to catch the problem because of improvements in the timeliness of quality controls made possible by the movement of processing to the Ohio Supercomputer Center over the summer.

Key Trends

- Activity in the Alt-Right supergroup soared in August, undoubtedly in response to the FBI raid at Mar-a-Lago. While overall activity in the misinformation-extremism-conspiracy (MEC) sector fell 2% in August, activity in the Alt-Right supergroup grew 49% from 2,153 posts per daily in July to 3,210 posts per day in August (Fig. 3). The Alt-Right growth rate was highest among Extreme-Right forums (162%), which catapulted to the largest forum type in the supergroup (Fig. 8).

General Trends

- Among posts with at least 50 words in the purposive sample, July activity across the MEC sector as a whole averaged 10,680 posts per day, down 2% from July. It was 32% below the all-time study peak in August 2021 (Fig. 1).
- Conspiracy / fringe forums remained the largest component of the study, contributing 44% of posts in July, down from 47% last month. Activity volume in these forums declined 8% in August (Fig. 1).
- QAnon forum volumes fell 24% in August, and were 66% below August 2021. While QAnon generally has been in a long-term decline, the size of this month's decline was exacerbated by a cyberattack bringing down the largest QAnon forum for several days. In spite of the decline, QAnon forums were still a sizeable piece of the MEC sector at 17% of posts (Fig. 1 and 3).

Violence and Toxicity

- The volume of violent/aggressive discourse fell 1% in July, while toxic discourse rose 20% (Fig. 5). The rise of toxic discourse as a percent of overall discourse was especially noteworthy in Extreme-Right forums (Fig. 8).
- Volume in Incel forums increased 5 times in August. There was a massive spike on July 31 (last day of last month), and forum volumes remained at the heightened level throughout the month. This activity does not seem to be related to Mar-a-Lago. When patterns like this have been seen in the past, they have tended to be related to changes in web hosting or cyberattack defenses (Fig. 3)

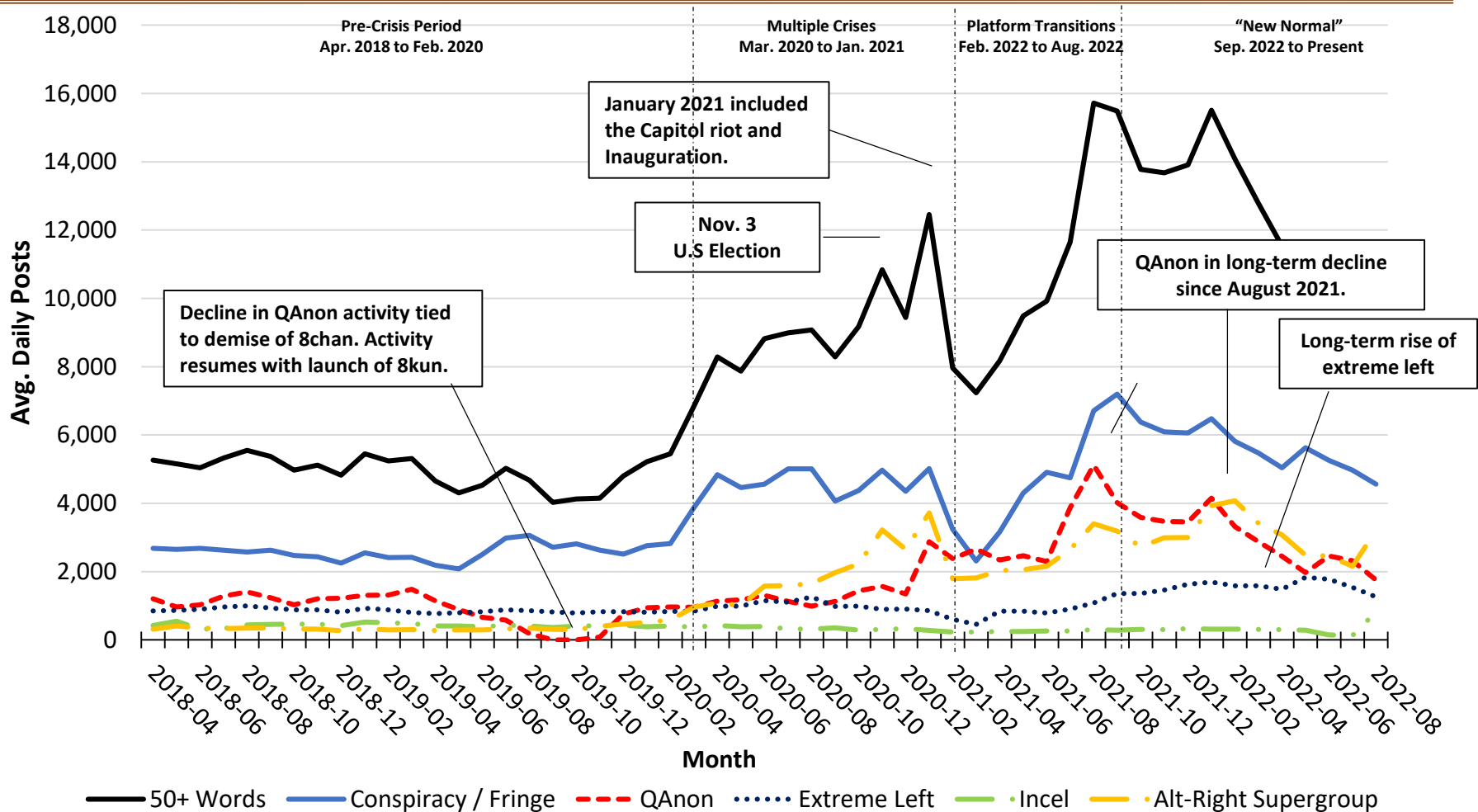
Religion Themes

- Activity in the Religion frame declined 7% in July in spite of a 36% increase in activity in Religion forums (Fig. 3 and 9).
- The Christian Radical Right (CRR) continued to hover just below 10% of all posts (Fig. 9). Christian Prophecy rose from 17% of CRR posts in March 2021 to 27% in August 2022, and in August became the second largest CRR component after Christian nationalism (Fig. 10).

Current Events

- The economy remained the major concern in the discussion of current events (Fig. 13). Although references to the FBI surpassed a daily average of 1,000 posts per day due to the Mar-a-Lago raid, FBI mentions were far below their levels at the time of the 2020 election and subsequent inauguration (Fig. 13).
- This report is the first one where Health Misinformation forums are broken out as a separate group. These forums turned out to be surprisingly small in volume in spite of widespread opposition to vaccinations in the MEC sector. It appears most of the discussion in health-related issues was happening outside these forums, and I am questioning the utility of this category (Fig. 1 and 3).
- Preliminary findings suggest a relatively high amount of misinformation is being communicated in the MEC sector about cancer treatment (Fig. 15).

Figure 1 Avg. Daily Activity by Month

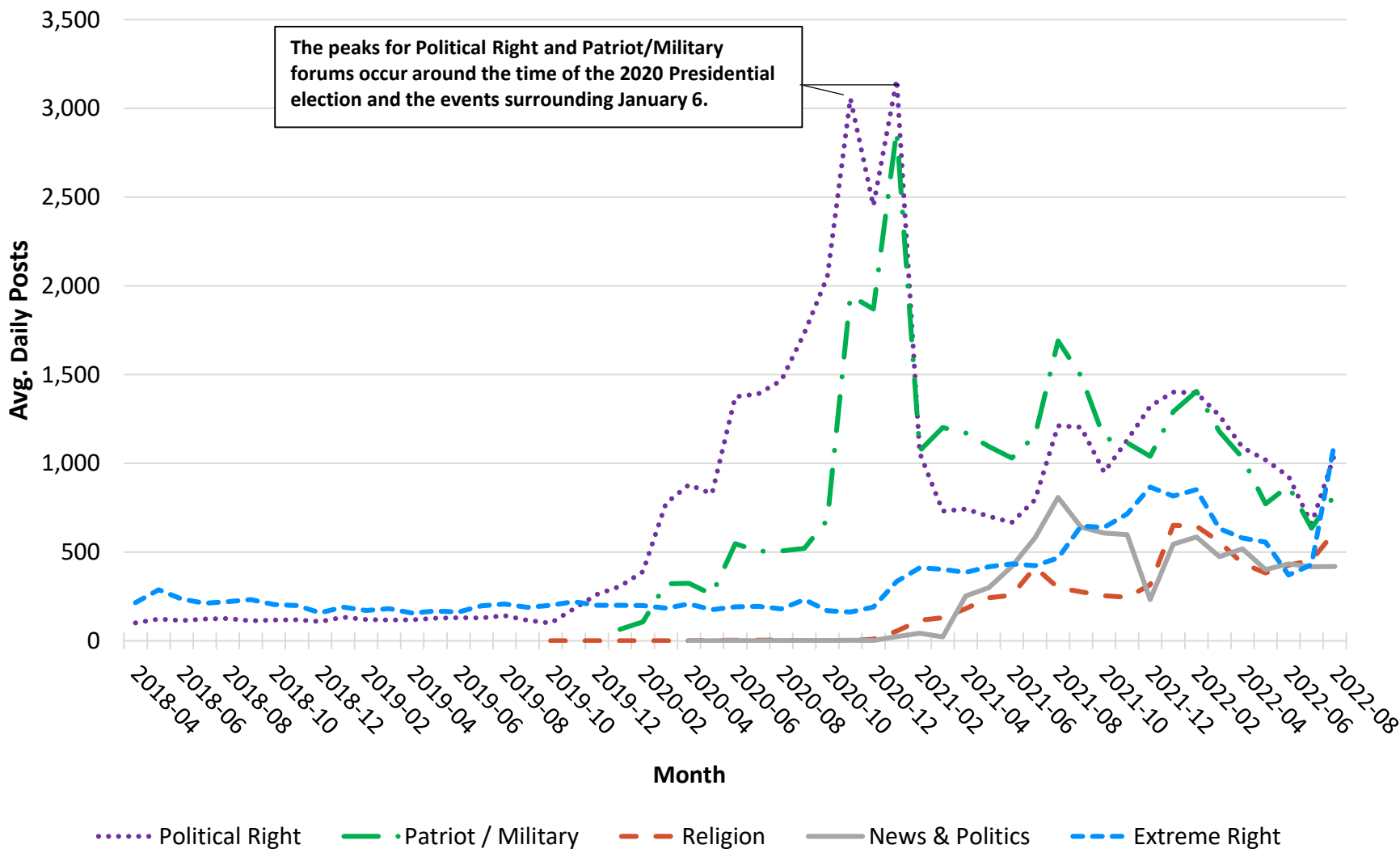


Note: 13,366,177 recovered posts with at least 50 words. Forums are not mutually exclusive. QAnon forums could be classified as both Conspiracy/Fringe and Extreme Right, but QAnon forums are separated due to their size and influence. This report uses a broad definition of the Alt-Right Supergroup, which 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 2. Health Misinformation forums are not shown due to their small numbers most months.

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.

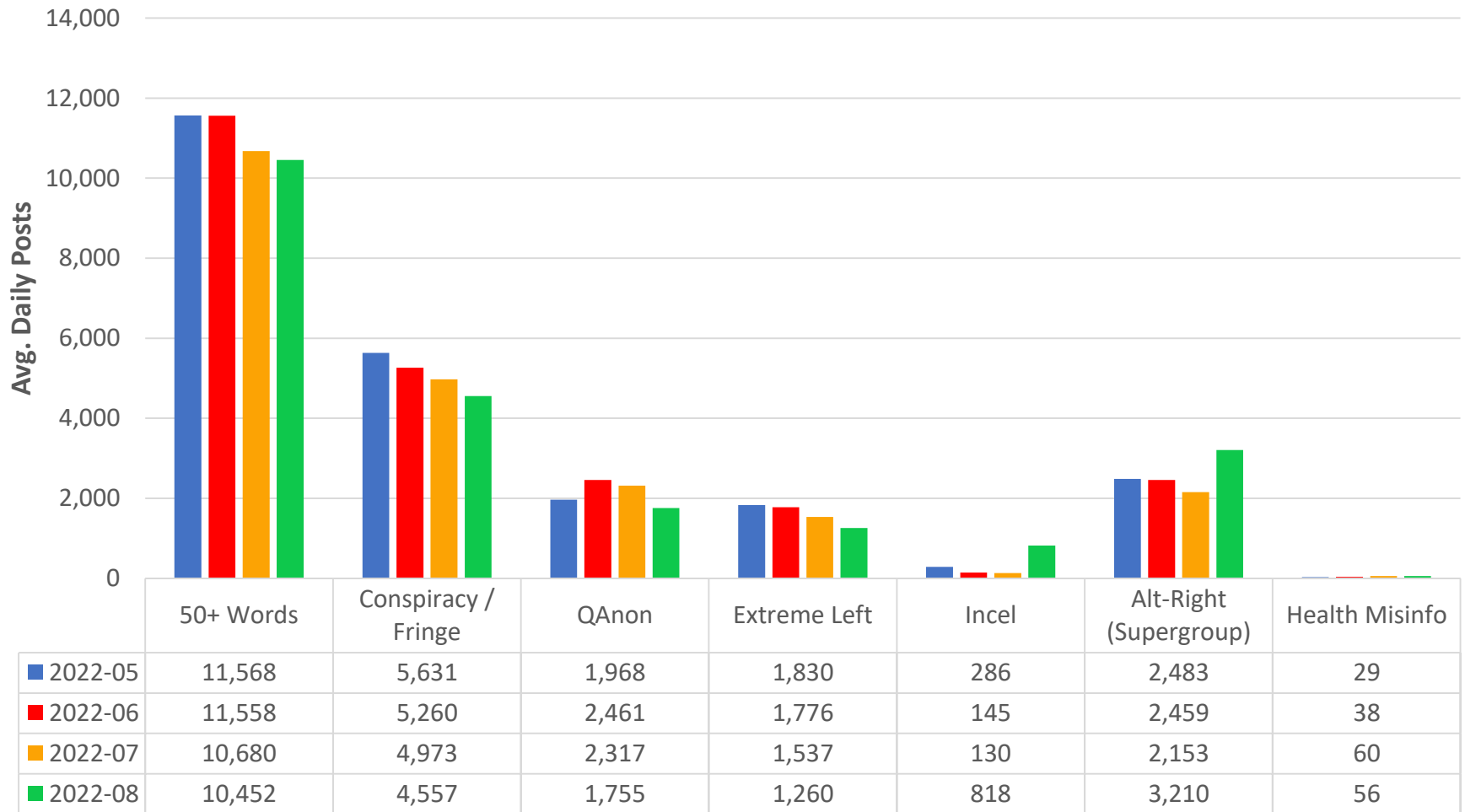
Figure 2

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



Note: 2,505,308 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 Activity for Past Four Months



Note: 1,368,432 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 4

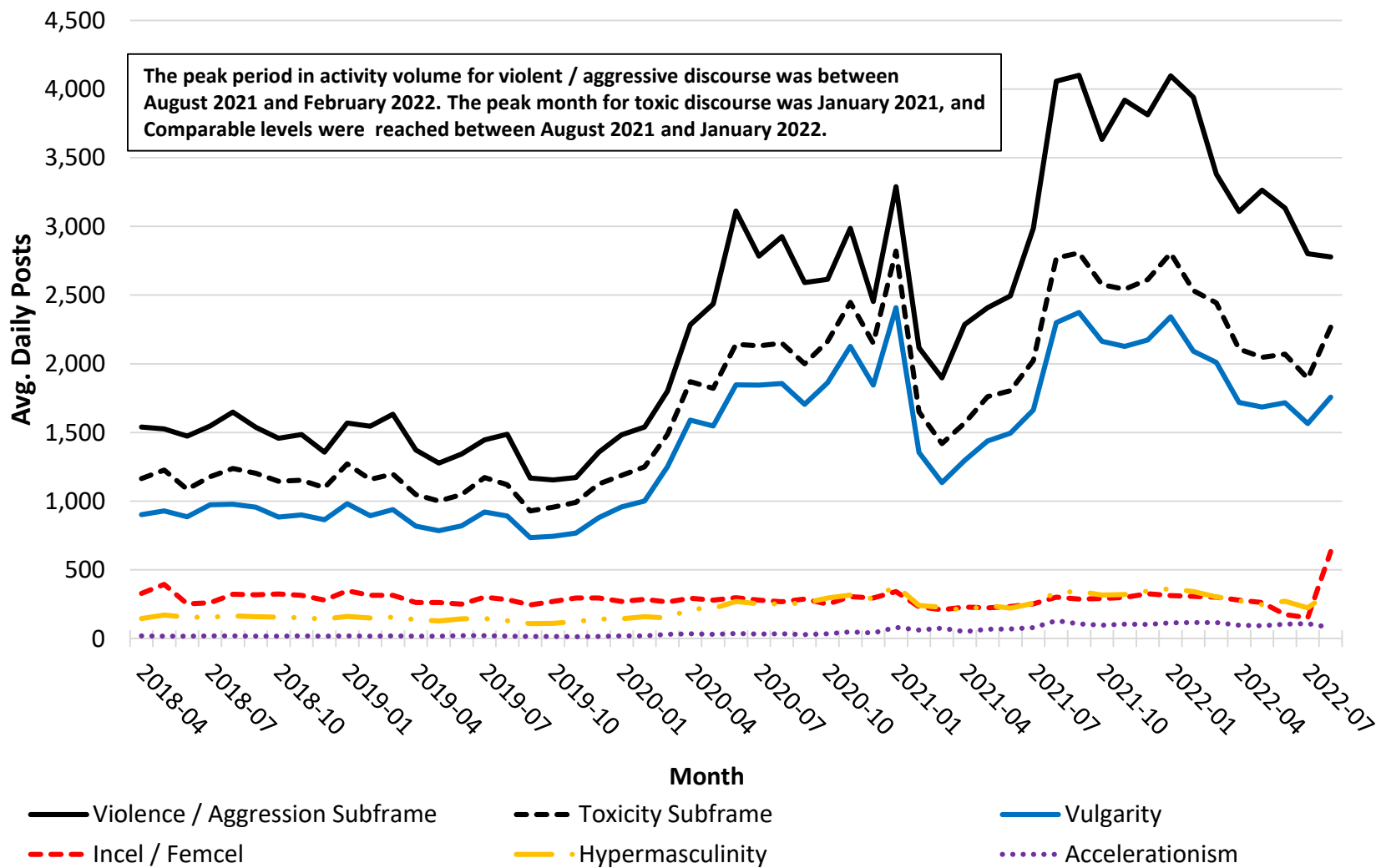
Avg. Daily Activity for Alt-Right Forums for Past Four Months



Note: 316,988 recovered posts. These groups are a subset of forums classified as Alt-Right in Figure 3. 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 5

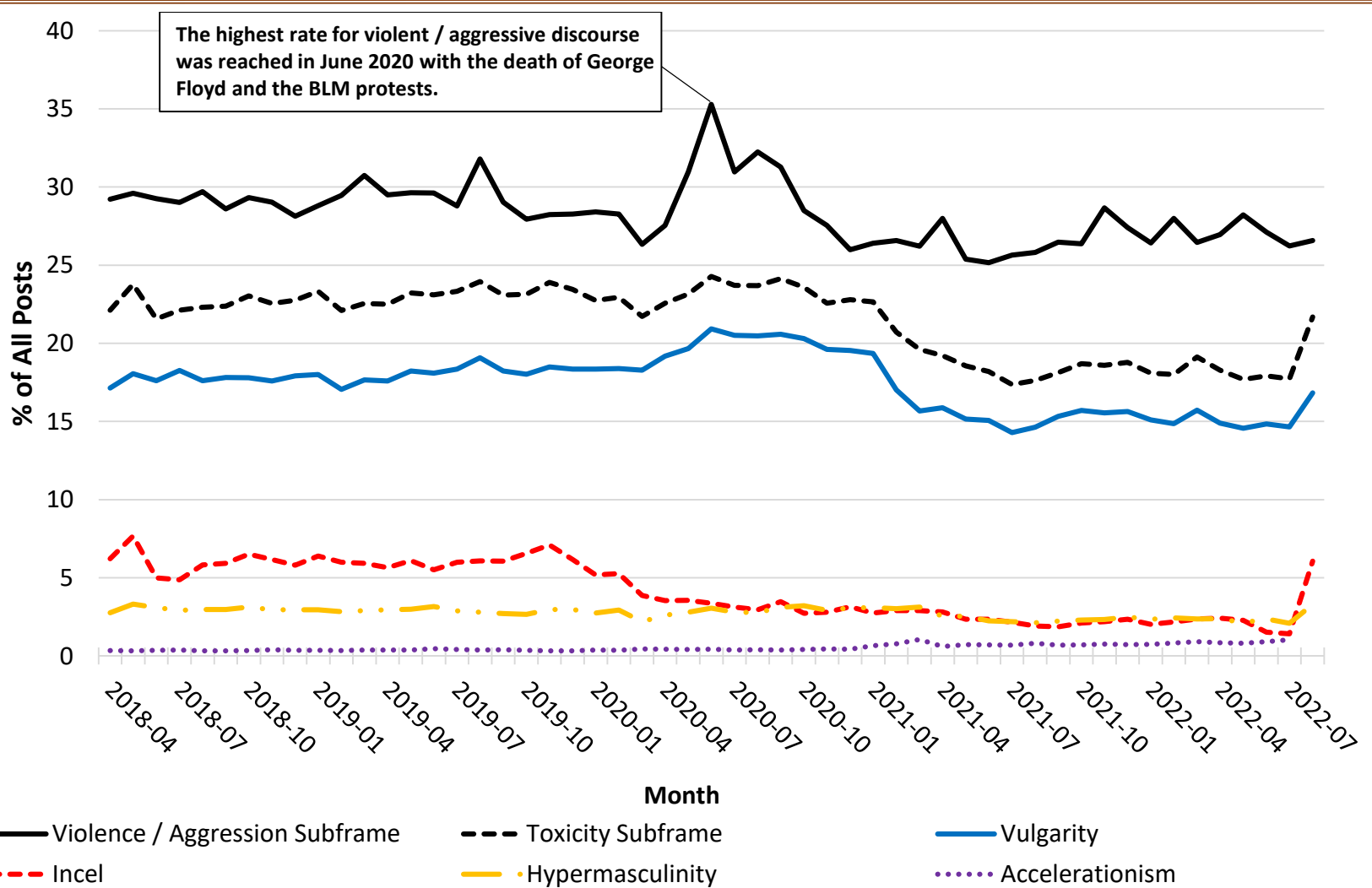
Avg. Daily Posts for Violent / Aggressive and Toxic Discourse by Month



Note: The Violence / Aggression subframe had 3,733,907 recovered posts. The Toxicity subframe had 2,767,306 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 6

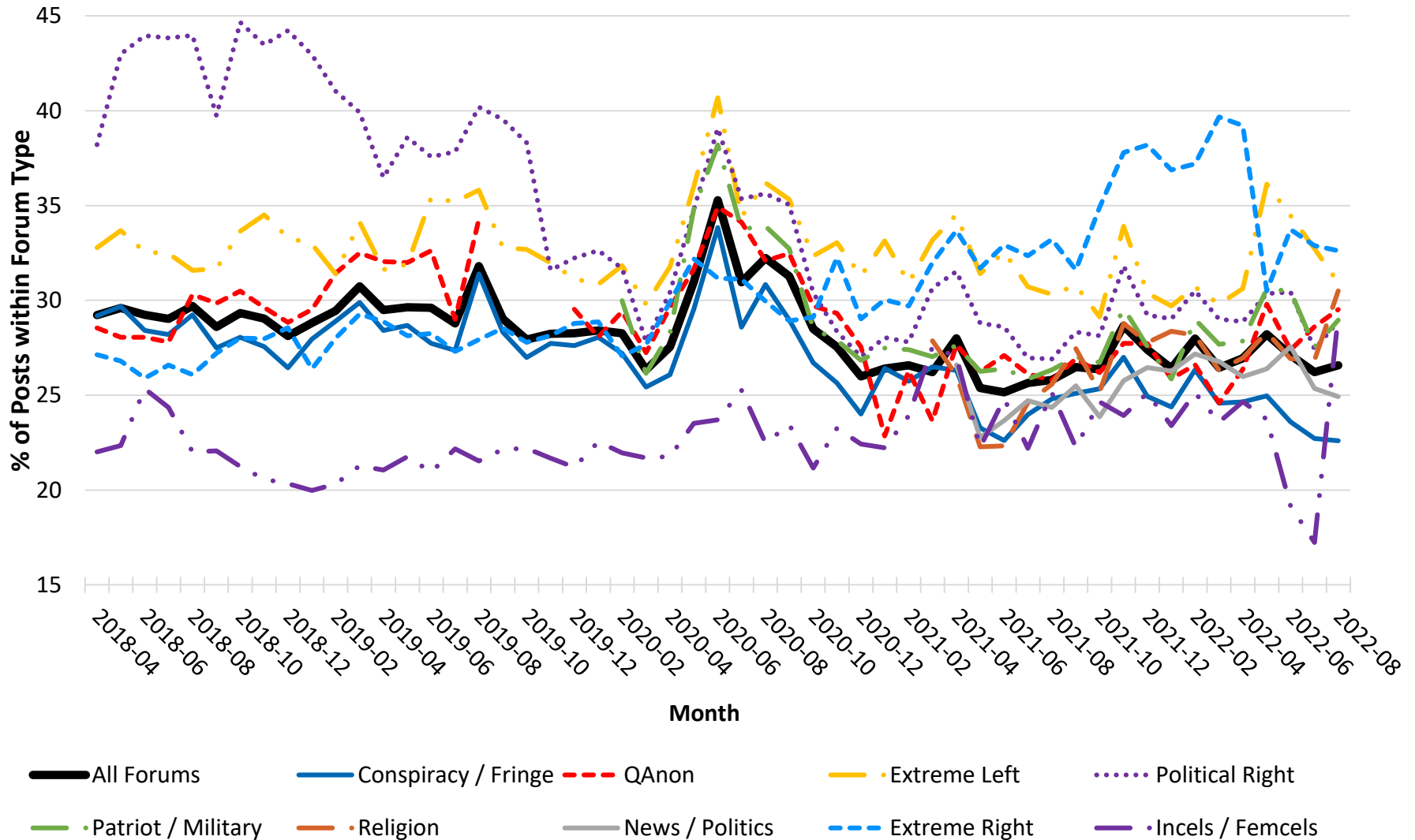
% Posts for Violent / Aggressive and Toxic Discourse by Month



Note: The Violence / Aggression subframe had 3,733,907 recovered posts. The Toxicity subframe had 2,767,306 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 7

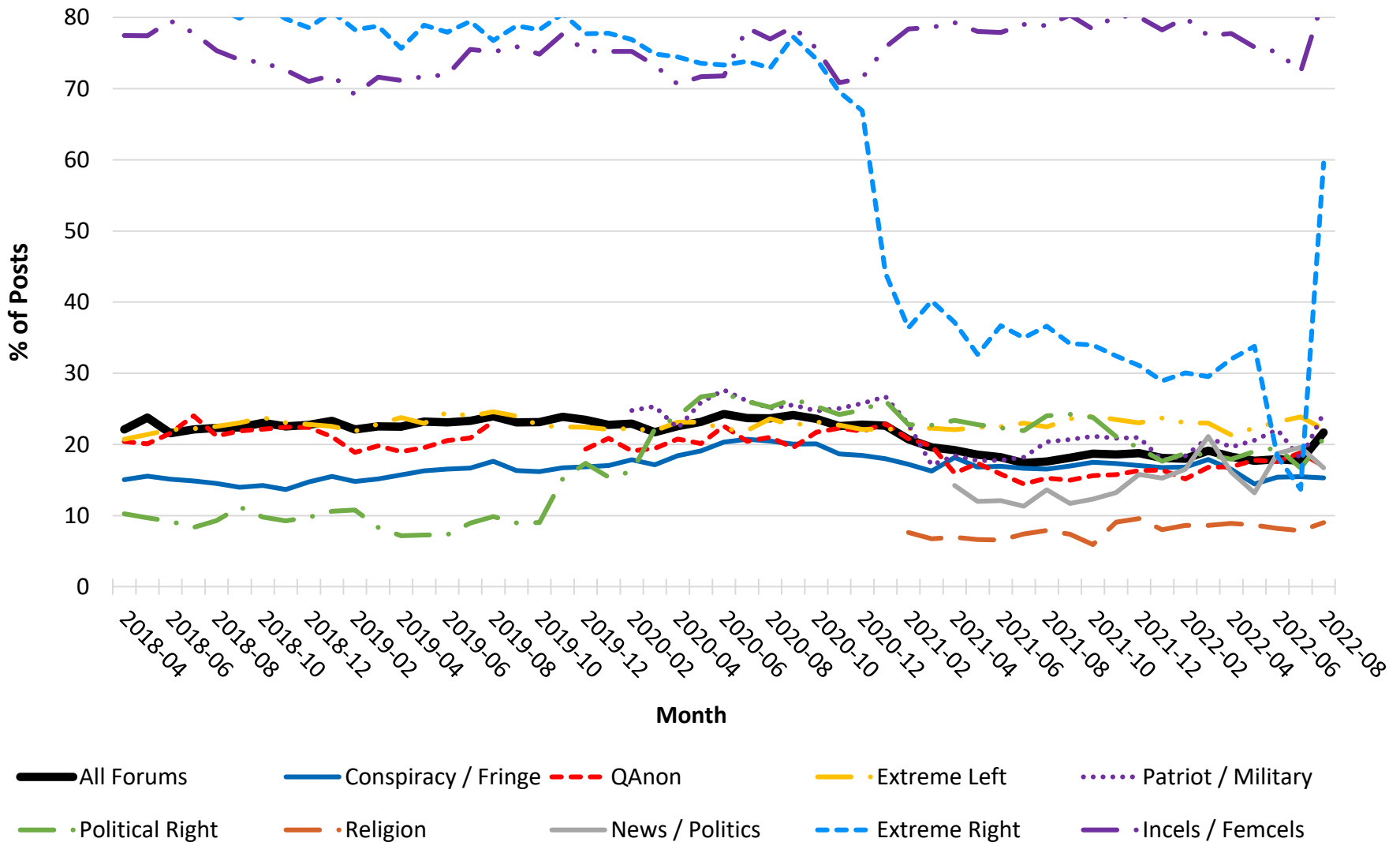
Violence as a % of Posts by Forum Type by Month



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 8

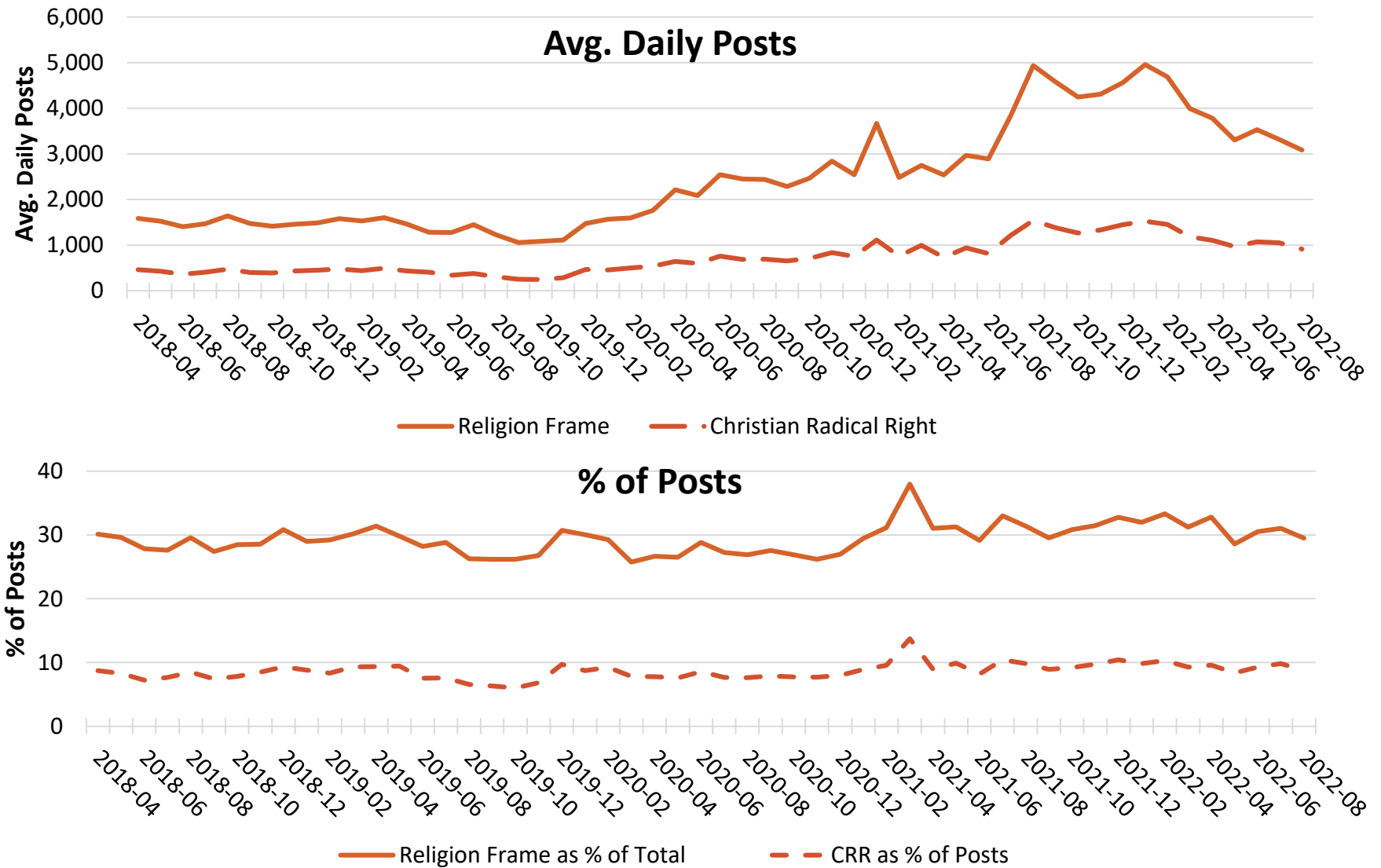
Toxicity as a % of Posts by Forum Type by Month



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 9

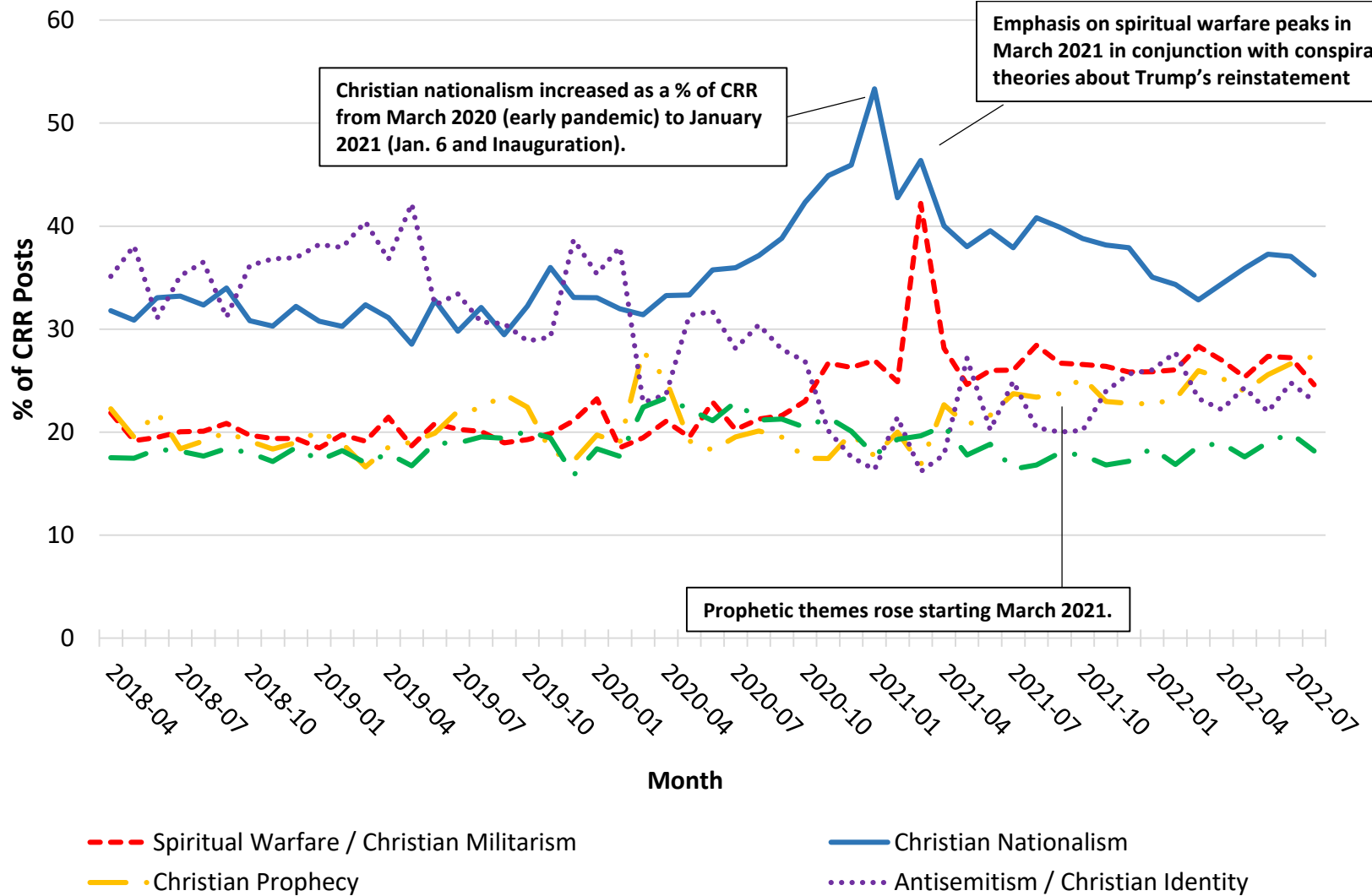
Activity for Religion Frame since April 2018



Note: The Religion frame had 3,984,511 recovered posts.

Figure 10

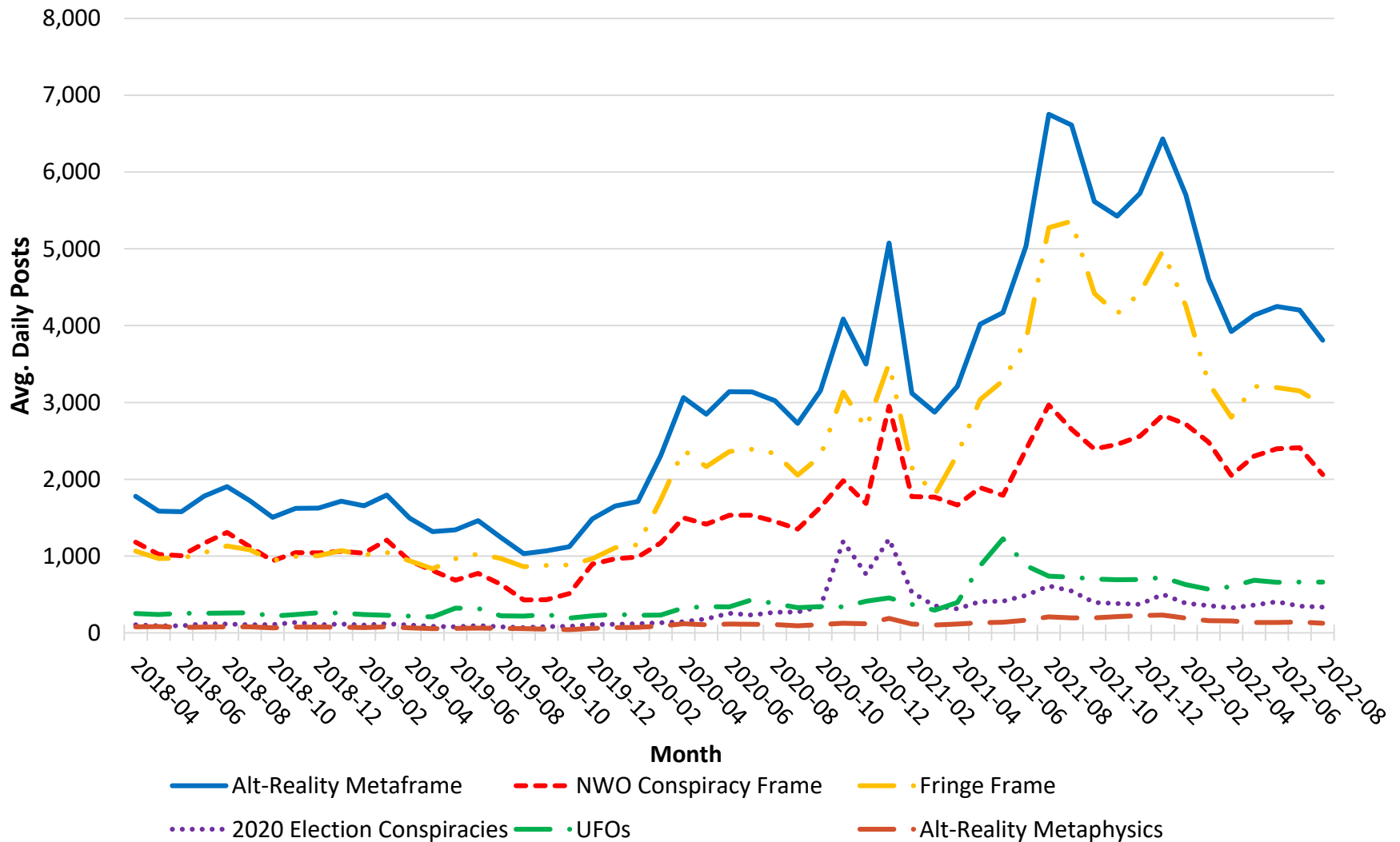
Components of Christian Radical Right as % of CRR



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

Figure 11

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



Note: The Alt-Reality metaframe had 4,899,418. 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 12

Avg. Daily Activity for Public Safety Components by Month

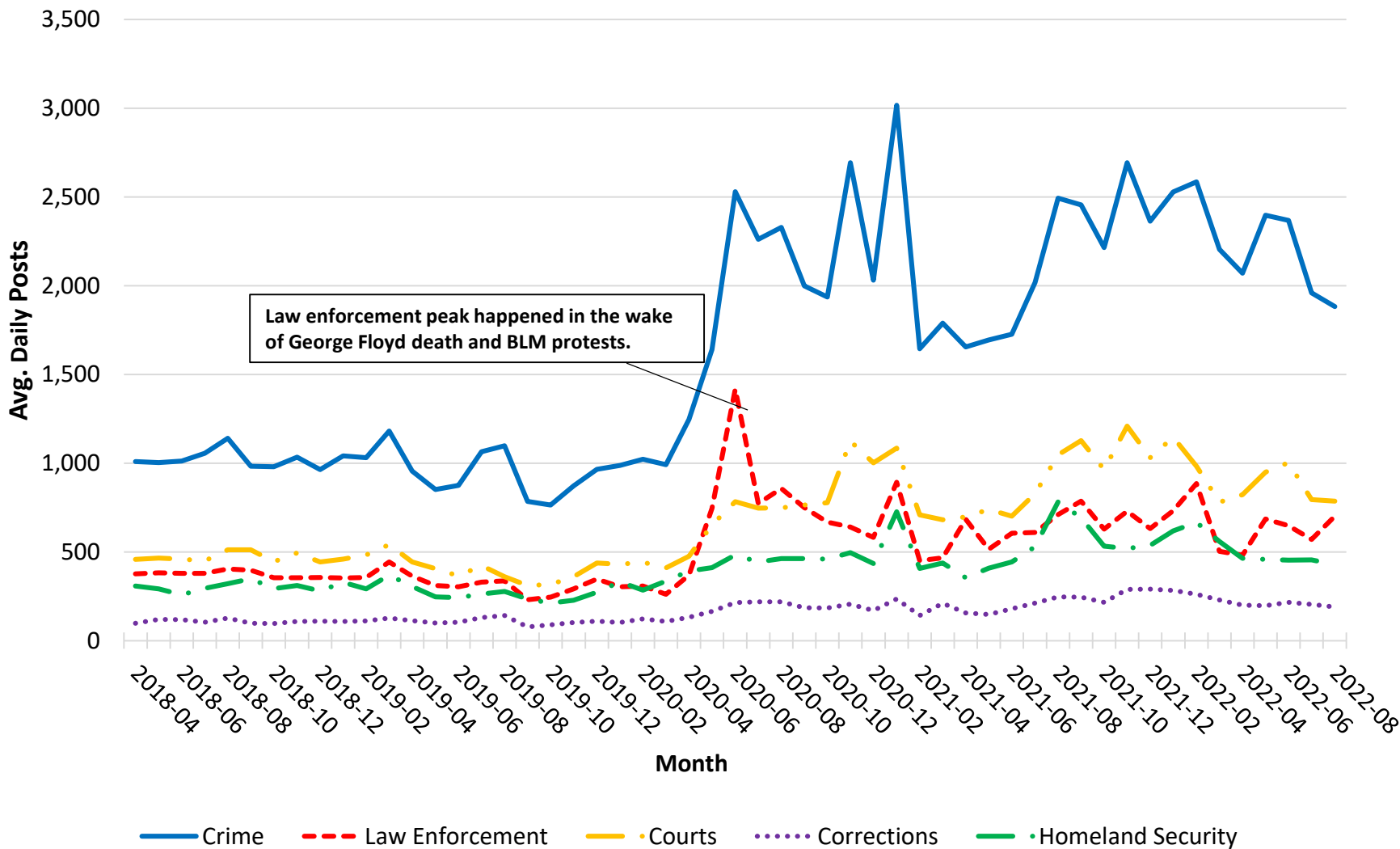
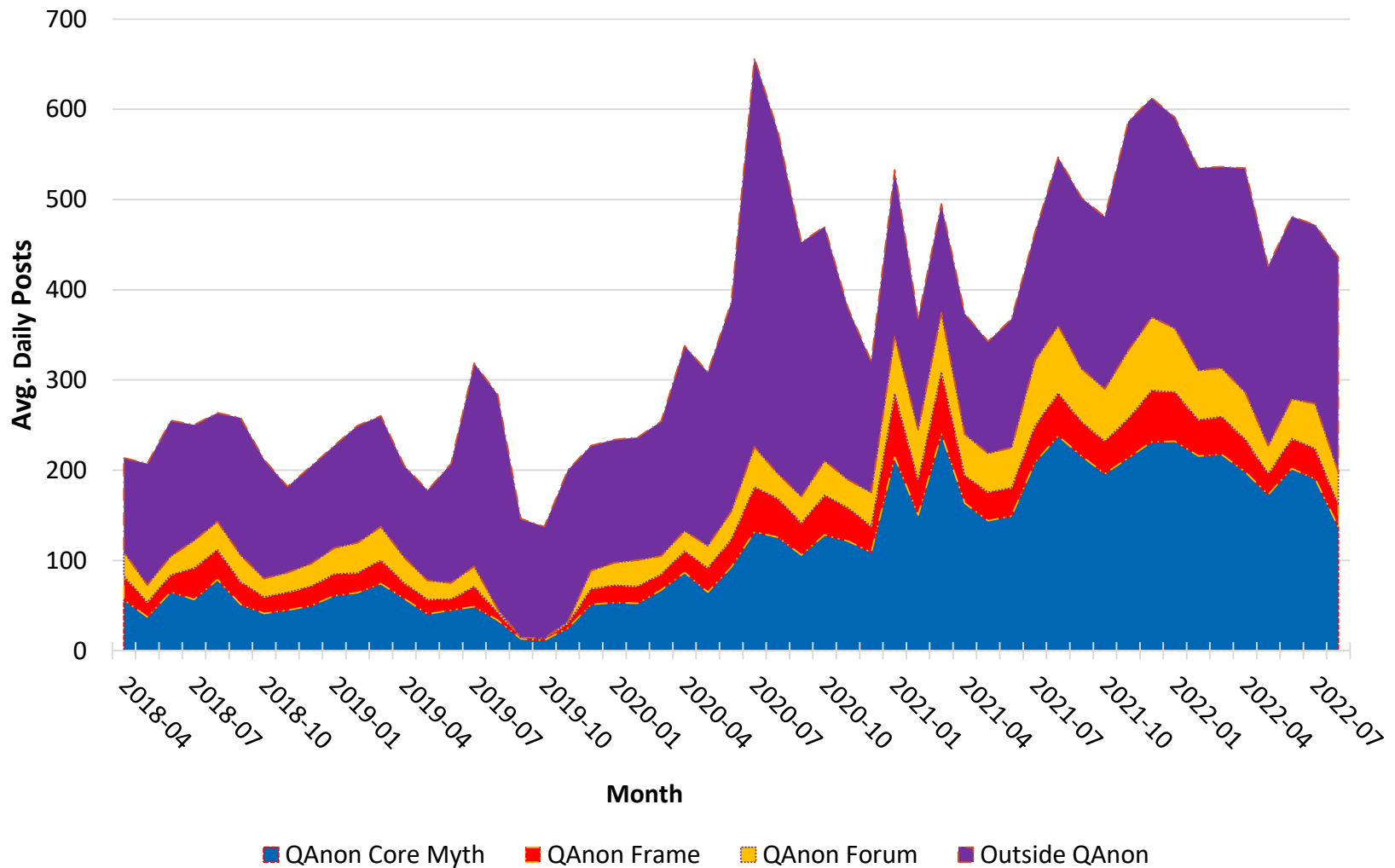


Figure 13 Pedophilia References by Month



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 14

Avg. Daily Posts for Contemporary Topics by Month

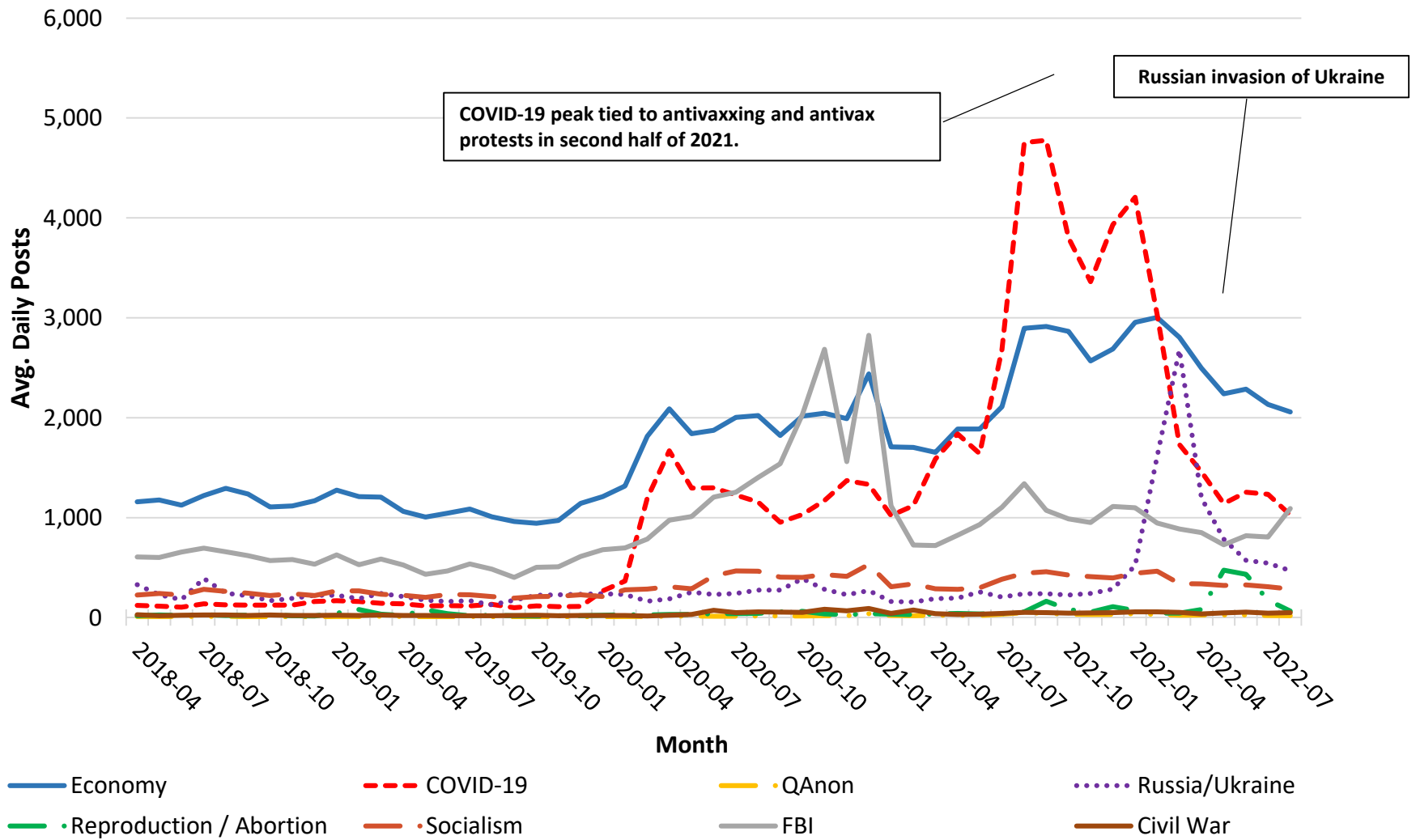
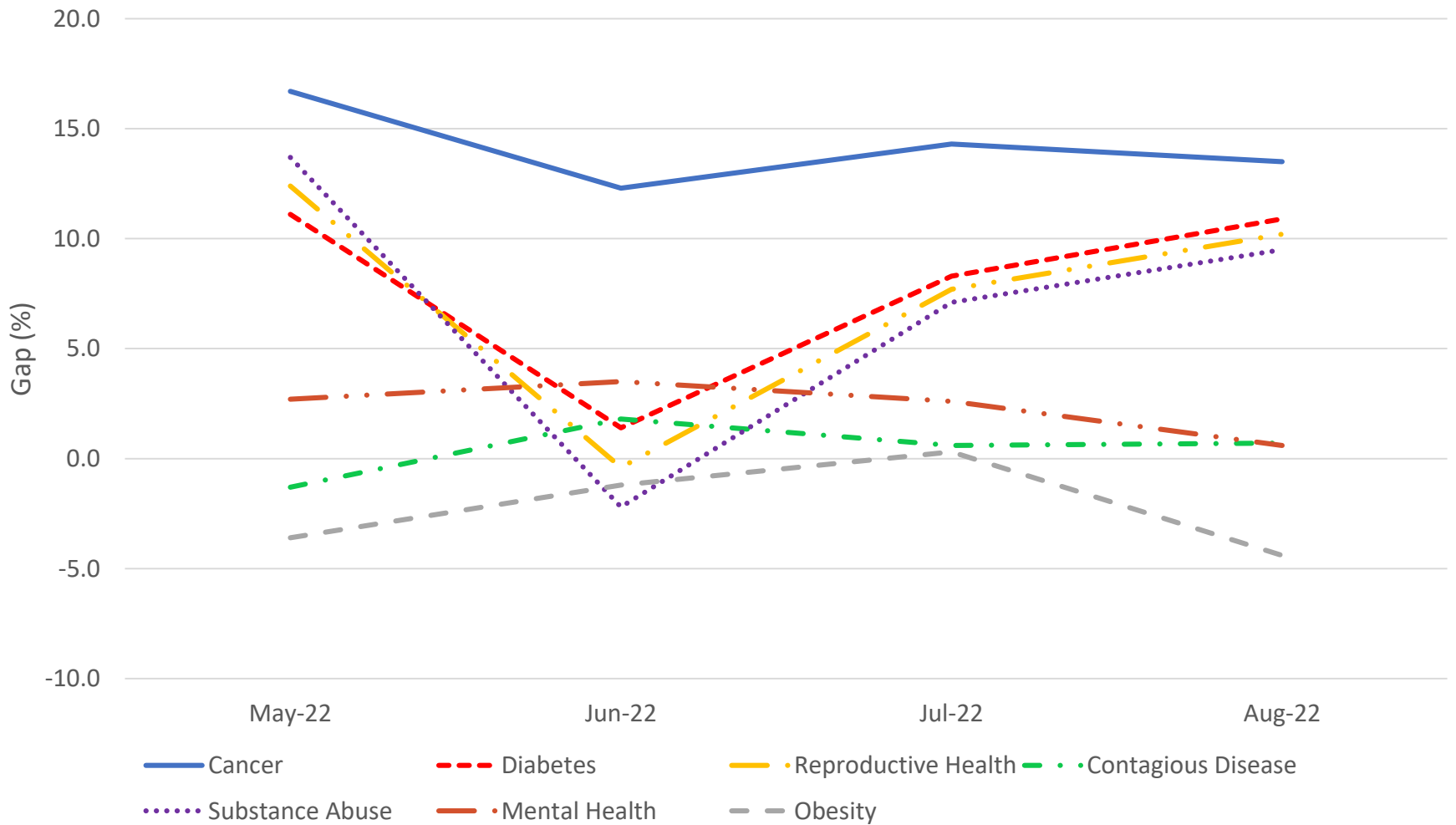


Figure 15

Gap Analysis for Selected Community Health Topics



Note: The gap here refers to the % references to natural and alternative treatments in FOME minus the % references to natural and alternative treatments in a benchmark database of over 50 subreddits.

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.

Platform Tag Rates August 2022

| | # Posts | % of All Posts | # Tagged Posts | % Posts Tagged |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Reddit | 176,776 | 54.6% | 168,581 | 95.4% |
| Telegram | 78,163 | 24.1% | 76,081 | 97.3% |
| Incel.is | 22,139 | 6.8% | 21,739 | 98.2% |
| 8kun | 21,282 | 6.6% | 20,824 | 97.9% |
| Win Boards | 21,760 | 6.7% | 21,123 | 97.1% |
| Above Top Secret | 7,829 | 2.3% | 7,408 | 94.6% |
| Stormfront | 2,040 | 0.6% | 2,040 | 99.4% |
| Liberty Forums | 676 | 0.2% | 674 | 96.2% |
| Raddle.me | 726 | 0.2% | 674 | 92.8% |
| Christogenea | 189 | 0.1% | 186 | 98.4% |
| EndChan | 133 | >0.1% | 133 | 100.0% |
| White Biocentrism | 63 | >0.1% | 62 | 80.7% |
| PinkPill.co | 62 | >0.1% | 50 | 100.0% |
| Total | 324,009 | 100.0% | 312,331 | 96.3% |

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 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 aims include:

1. Quantify the volume of public discourse related to these ideas.
2. Document trends related to the spread of these ideas among potential security threat groups.
3. Identify underlying ideologies used to legitimate these ideas.
4. Investigate propositions on the relationship between these ideas.
5. Describe the mainstreaming of these ideas.
6. Monitor community health misinformation.

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>