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# FRAMES OF MISINFORMATION AND EXTREMISM

## Web Forums and Social-Media Discussions

### Monthly Flash Report

#### May 2022

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*This report contains top-line monthly numbers from a purposive sample of forums and discussions collected from 12 platforms that are known for hosting extremism and/or conspiracism.*

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# April 2022 Activity Summary

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**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. Since last month, the number of used posts dropped from approximately 8 million to 7.5 million due to the intention exclusion of an extreme-left forum that has become hard to scrape and a new parsing methodology that makes it easier to identify and remove global banners from 8kun. For lack of better language, the term Alt-Right is now used to describe the combination of the Extreme Right with the Political Right and other right-leaning forums. The study does not use forums promoting a specific political party or candidate unless a noteworthy amount of extremist or conspiracist material is present, and the term Political Right applies to MAGA and Tea-Party/libertarian sites that may meet this standard. It is clear from the study of PVD that these forums are less violent than the Extreme Right.

Among posts with at least 50 words in the purposive sample, May activity averaged 7,247 posts per day, down 17% from April and down 22% from the all-time study peak in August 2021 (Fig. 1).

- Not all forums were in decline.
  - Extreme-Left forums experienced a 23% increase in activity on a month-to-month basis and grew 69% since the August peak. The Extreme-Left reached its low point in March 2021, and since then increased four-fold (Fig. 1).
  - Activity in Alt-Reality & Conspiracy forums increased 12% in April and were 3% above their level for the same month last quarter (Fig. 1). The nature of the activity in these forums deserves further investigation to understand their content inasmuch as the Alt-Reality metaframe is in decline overall. Contrary to the metaframe decline is a 21% increase in the UFO subframe since March (Fig. 3). (An important reminder: Forum types and frames are not synonymous.)
  - Alt-Right forums fell 54% in April. While the decline was largely across-the-board for this group of forums, the unusually large size of the decline was driven by a massive decrease on a single large MAGA/Patriot platform (Fig. 2). Sharp one-time increases and declines are not rare in the purposive sample of forums, but it is unusual to see such a happening in a large, popular platform. I'm leaving open the idea that there was a problem with the host server, the transmission, or the web scrape and will revisit the matter in data collection for July and August.
  - QAnon & QAnon Adjacent forums fell 13% in April and were down 19% since the previous quarter (Fig. 1). The long-term decline in QAnon has been forwarded as a possible explanation for the sudden re-emergence of Q on the 8kun platform in late June. In particular, the claim is that the 8kun's owner may have hijacked Q's moniker in an attempt to offset declining usage levels. (For a summary about Q's return and associated skepticism, see Center on Extremism [2022], Press-Reynolds [2022], and Thompson [2022]).

## Potentially Violent Discourse (PVD) and Religion

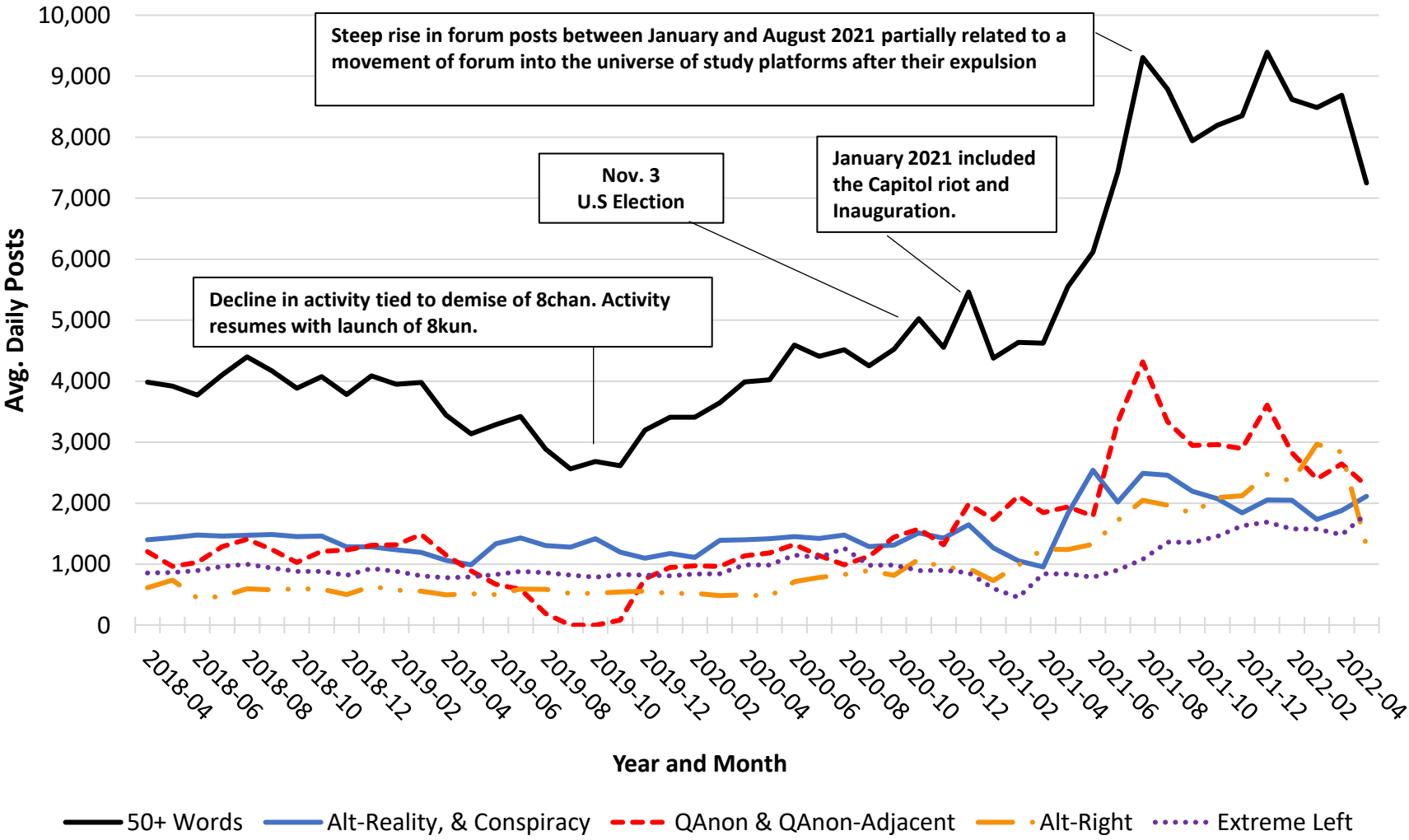
- A common theme of this section's highlights was the sudden turn of discourse associated with QAnon & QAnon-Adjacent and Extreme-Right forums in a violent direction. The massive one-time drop in a large MAGA/Patriot forum cannot account for these shifts.
- PVD was present in half of the posts and was well within the normal range of its monthly fluctuations. However, QAnon and Q-Adjacent forums rose 67%, a one-time increase of 10 percentage points. Extreme-Right forums rose 13 percentage points to 65%. At the same time, the MAGA and Tea-Party/Libertarian sites of the Political Right fell 8 percentage points, down to 41% (Fig. 7).
- Religion themes were present in 31% of posts, consistent with past levels. Religion forums not surprisingly had the highest level with religious content, which was present in 65% of posts, followed by QAnon & QAnon-Adjacent forums at 42%. In April, there were noticeable rises in religious content among forums identified as Political Right, Patriot & Military, and Extreme Right (Fig. 5).
- Religious PVD was present in 18% of posts. QAnon & QAnon-Adjacent forums had the highest level of religious PVD at 29%, with the presence of religious violence within the QAnon frame rising from 14% to 19% in a single month. A 4-percentage-point decline in religious PVD in Religion forums was offset by increasing concentrations in Extreme-Right and Patriot & Military forums (Fig. 8).

## Current Events

- The economy remained the most discussed issue among current events being tracked. As seen in Figure 9, I am preparing for the possibility that activity could explode around Supreme Court decisions over gun rights and abortion as the June and July data is analyzed.
- I am still working out the methodology for the public-health study. Since the last report, I worked on improving the benchmarks for normal levels of health-related discussions, and for this purpose am now collecting data from 54 subreddits on a weekly basis. (My coding skills are improving so I can handle more data faster in less time.) The results for the first week of May can be seen in Fig. 10. The revised coding will be applied to the FOME data set by quarter's end.

# Figure 1

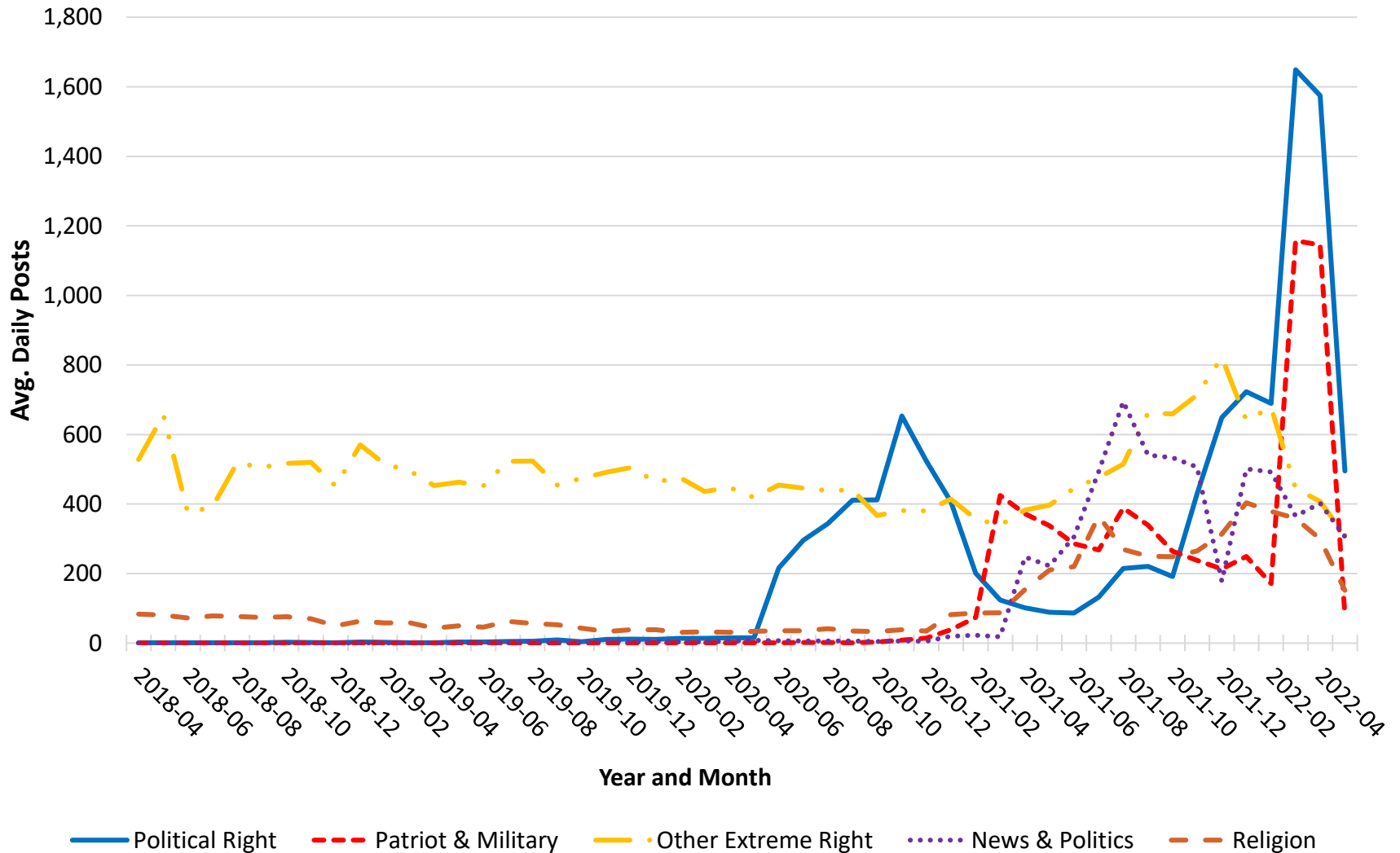
## Avg. Daily Activity by Month since April 2018



Note: 7,573,850 recovered 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. 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. Hexbear and its predecessor, Chapotrathouse, have been removed from the purposive sample, which results in a substantial decline in Extreme-Left activity in 2018 and 2019.

## Figure 2

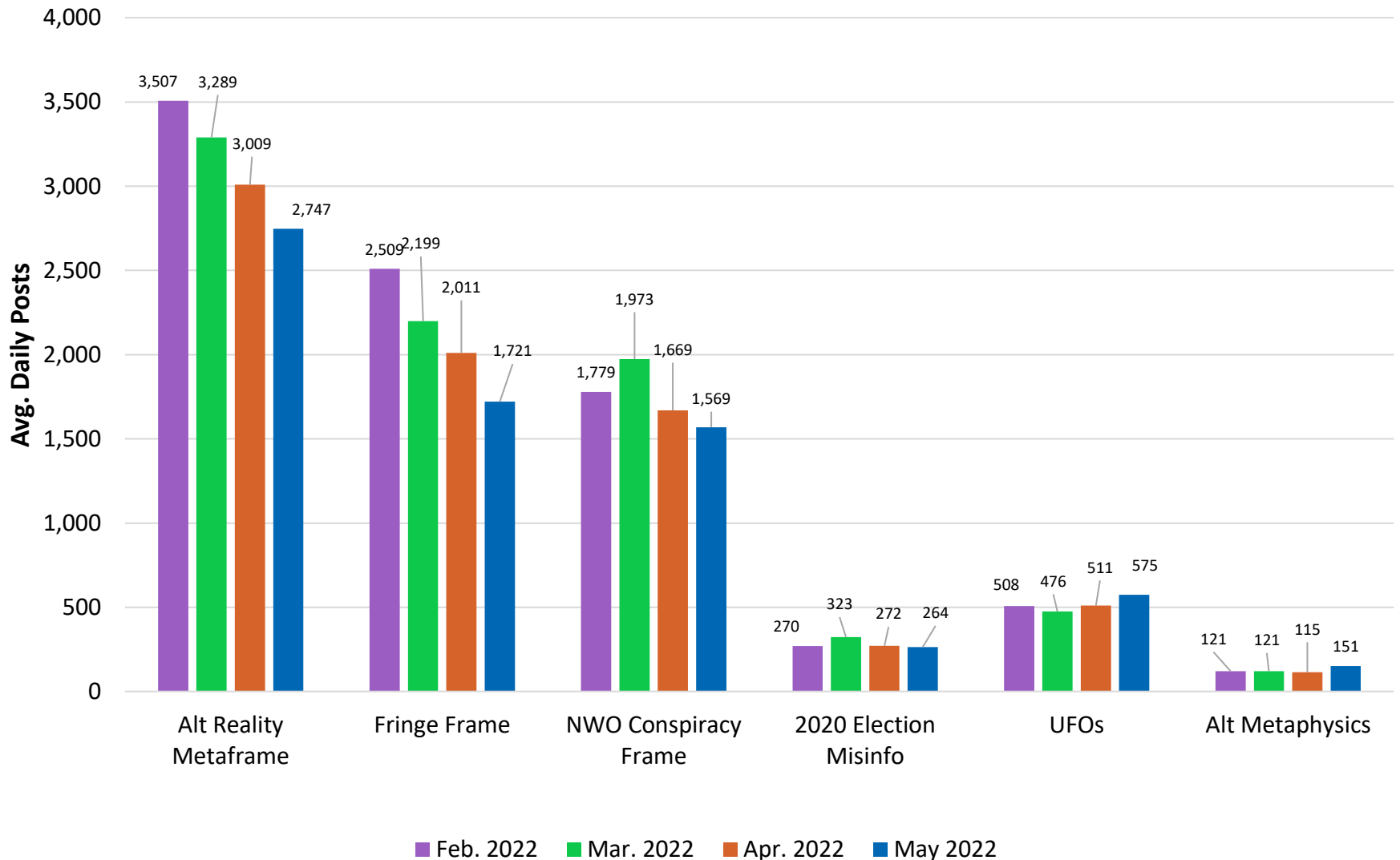
### Avg. Daily Activity by Month for Alt-Right Forums since April 2018



Note :These groups are a subset of forums classified as Alt-Right in Figure 1. 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 forums in the purposive sample often strays beyond normal partisan discourse.

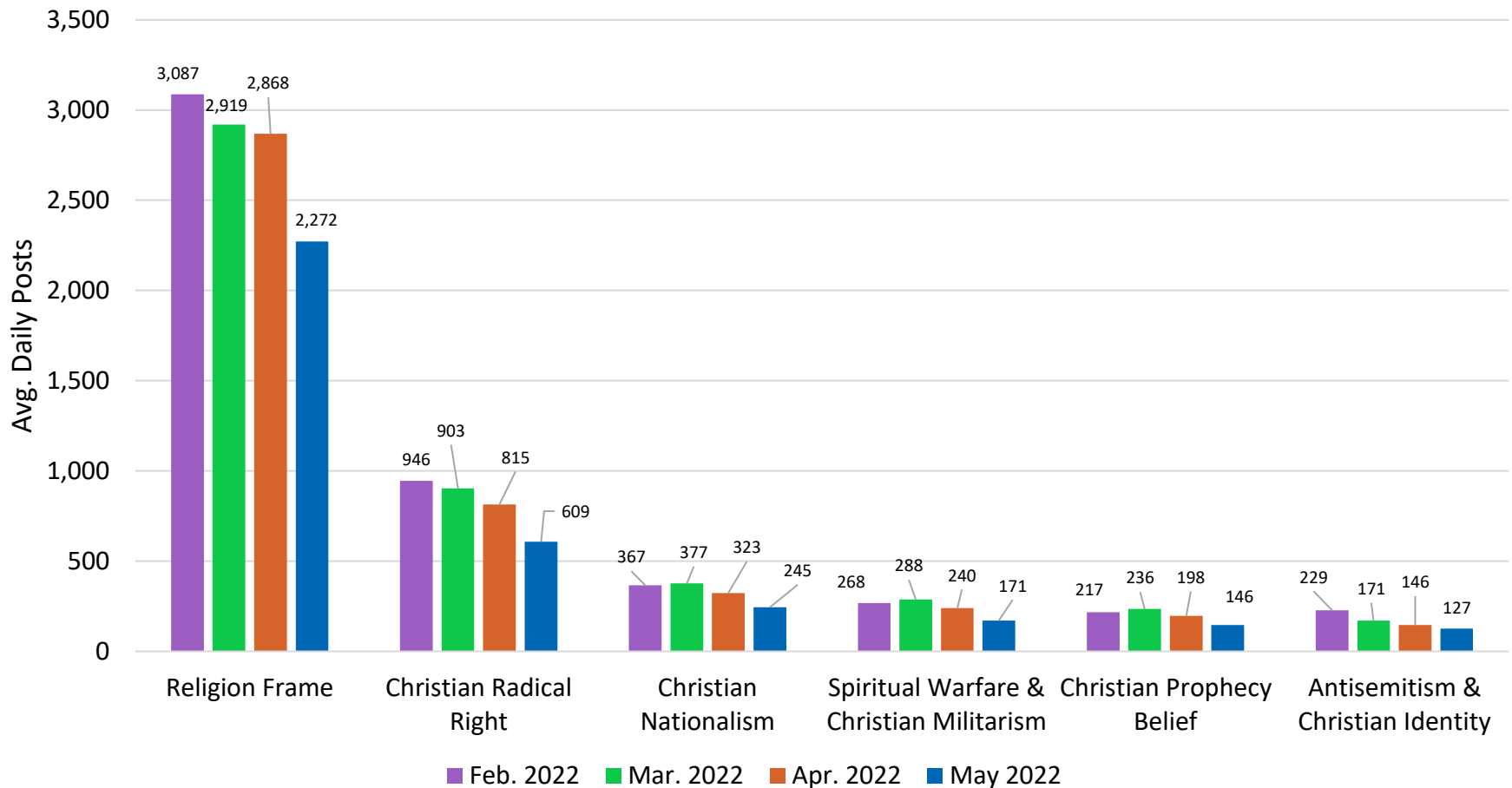
# Figure 3

## 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**

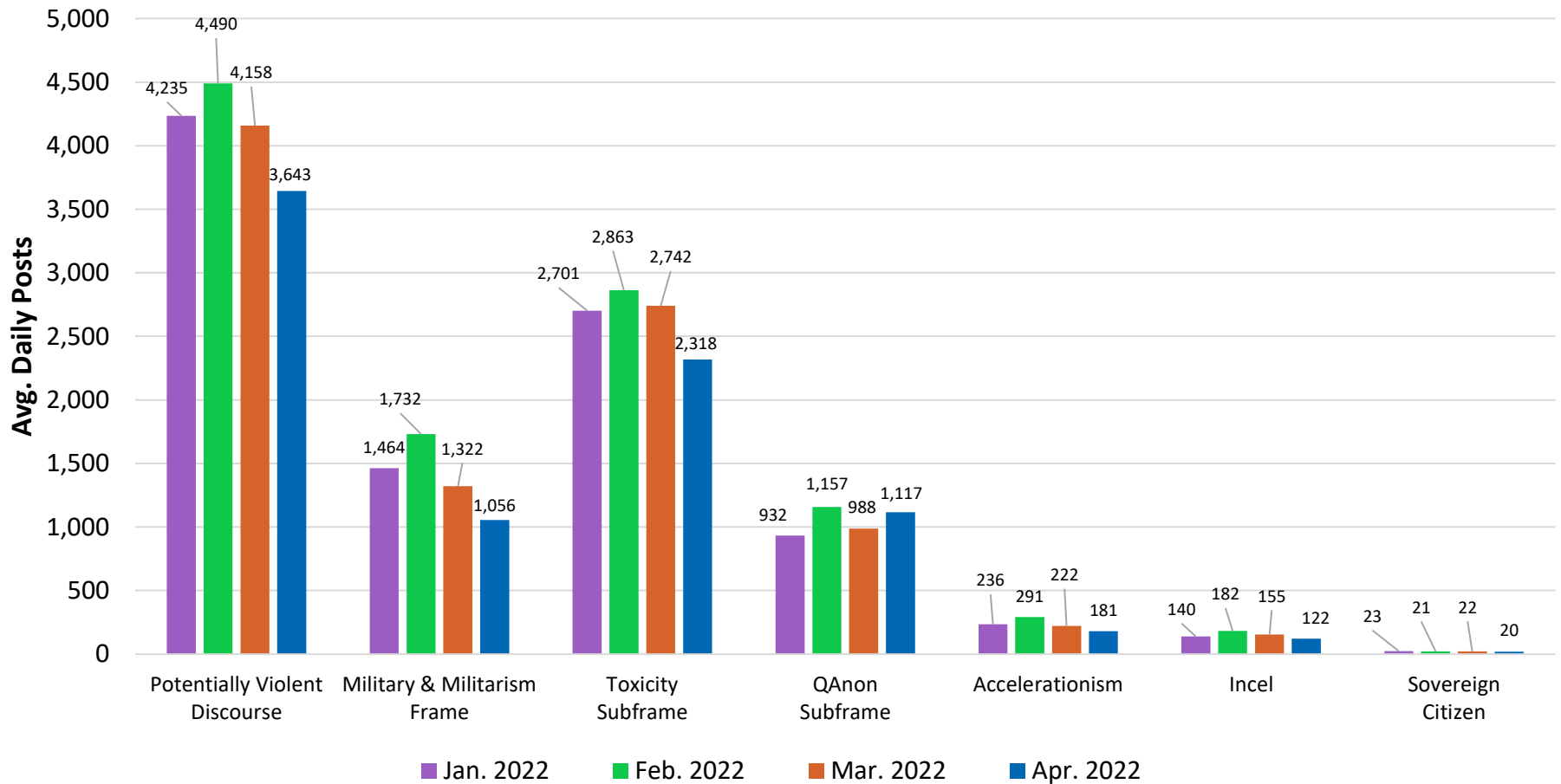
<b>Forum Type</b>	<b>Religion Frame</b>	<b>Chr. Radical Right</b>	<b>Spiritual Warfare</b>	<b>Chr. Nat'lism</b>	<b>Chr. Prophecy</b>	<b>Anti-semitism &amp; Chr. Identity</b>
Religion	65%	17%	5%	5%	5%	3-20%
QAnon & QAnon Adjacent	42%	13%	4%	5%	3%	4-10%
Political Right	↑ 39%	13%	4%	3%	3%	1-8%
Patriot & Military	↑ 35%	↑ 12%	4%	6%	3%	1-6%
Politics & News	34%	12%	4%	5%	3%	1-6%
Extreme Right	↑ 34%	9%	3%	3%	2%	3-8%
Conspiracy & Fringe	26%	5%	1%	2%	1%	1-4%
Extreme Left	20%	4%	1%	1%	1%	1-3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2-6%</b>

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 17% for the Christian Radical Right in the Religion group means that 17% of the Religious group's discourse contained at least one item coded as Christian Radical Right. For antisemitism, the range represents the distance between the % of discourse that is likely antisemitic and references to Judaism generally. A range has been made because antisemitism is difficult to identify in text mining: The mere mention of Judaism in most Extreme-Right forums is implicitly antisemitic in meaning even if no other linguistic markers are present, yet among certain Christian groups, Judaism may be mentioned positively in conjunction with evangelical support for the State of Israel and/or as part of the appropriation of Jewish observances, such as the blowing of a shofar or observance of Passover.

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
QAnon & QAnon Adjacent	↑ 67%	18%	32%	↑ 45%
Extreme Right	↑ 65%	15%	↑ 55%	5%
Patriot & Military	55%	↑ 20%	↓ 34%	↑ 18%
Politics & News	47%	16%	28%	15%
Extreme Left	46%	9%	40%	0%
Political Right	↓ 41%	15%	↓ 28%	3%
Conspiracy & Fringe	37%	16%	23%	1%
Religion	34%	↓ 10%	↑ 24%	↓ 4%
Conspiracy & Fringe	39%	12%	30%	↑ 1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>15%</b>

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 32% for toxicity in the QAnon & QAnon Adjacent group means that 32% 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**

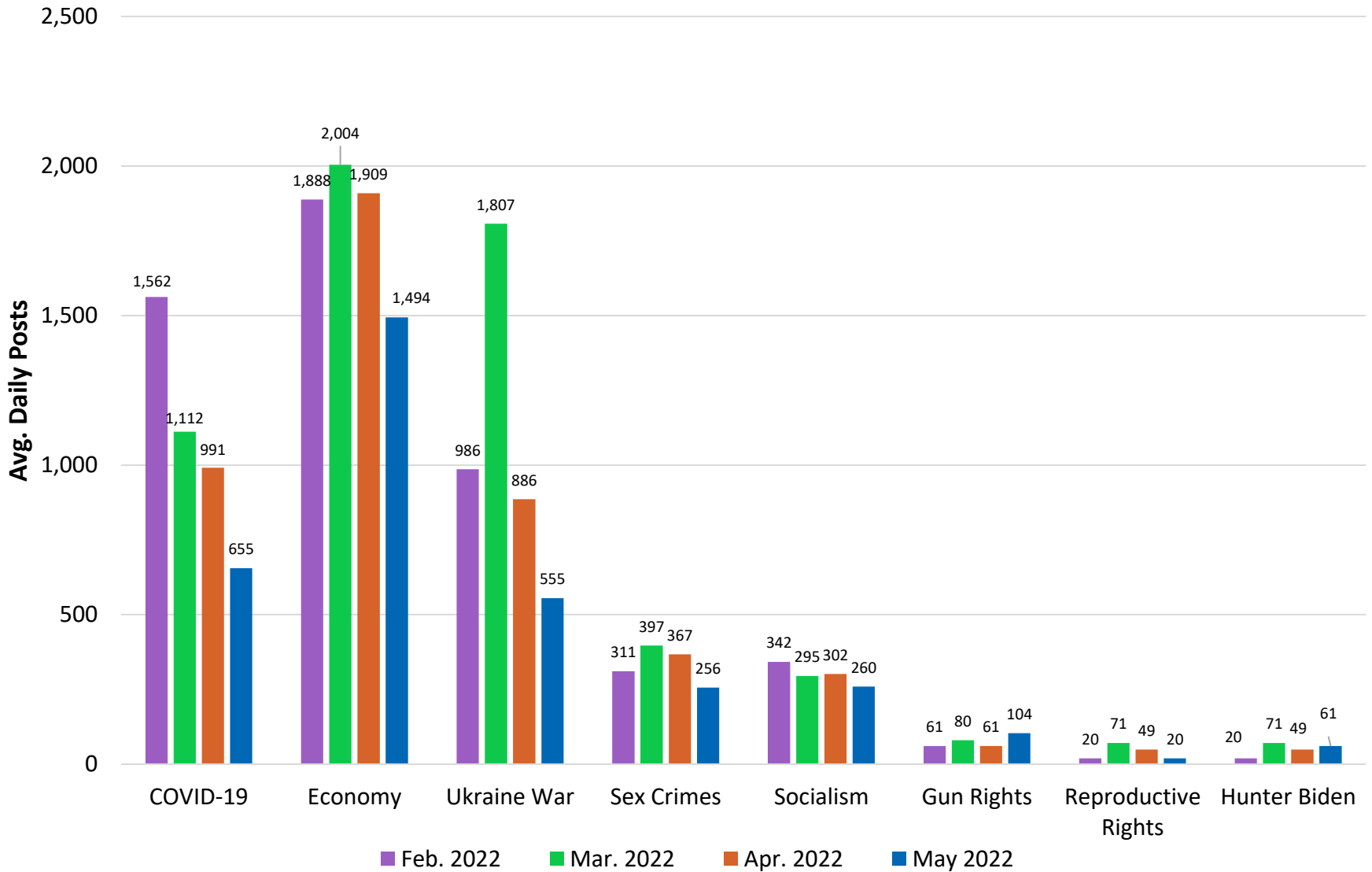
Forum Types	Any PVD	Military & Militarism	Toxicity	QAnon
QAnon & QAnon Adjacent	29%	10%	15%	 19%
Extreme Right	 23%	7%	 18%	3%
Patriot & Military	 21%	 9%	11%	 11%
Religion	 21%	7%	13%	 3%
Politics & News	18%	8%	9%	6%
Political Right	18%	8%	11%	2%
Conspiracy & Fringe	12%	5%	8%	1%
Extreme Left	12%	3%	10%	0%
Total	18%	 11%	 7%	 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 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 Benchmarks

### % Treatments Modalities Mentioned by Illness

TEST PAGE

Condition	Conventional Medicine	Wellness & Nutrition	Natural & Alternative Practices	Prayer & Healing
General Health	97%	10%	8%	2%
By Condition				
Blood Pressure	93%	16%	16%	1%
Cancer	95%	9%	8%	3%
Diabetes	94%	16%	10%	2%
Heart Disease	95%	17%	10%	2%
COVID-19	98%	6%	6%	1%
Hypertension	96%	17%	17%	2%
Mental Health	96%	10%	8%	2%
Obesity	90%	26%	17%	2%
Reproductive Health	97%	6%	6%	2%

Note: N = 21,300 recovered posts with at least 50 words from 54 health-related subreddits for the week of May 1, 2022. Natural and alternative practices are nonclinical strategies for health care. Some of this care can be beneficial to general health, but as the pandemic highlighted, their invocation can often be tied to an unfounded denial of the effectiveness of best practices in medical treatment. This data is now collected weekly, and the coding will be expanded so that comparisons can be made with FOME data in July.

# References

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## General Background

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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 12 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>