
FRAMES OF MISINFORMATION, EXTREMISM, & CONSPIRACISM Web Forums and Social-Media Discussions Monthly Summary February 2023

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This report contains top-line monthly numbers from a purposive sample of forums and discussions collected from 16 platforms that are known for hosting misinformation, extremism, and conspiracism (MEC sector).

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

Activity Summary

Methodological Notes: Activity levels are defined as the % of posts with at least one key word, phrase, or stem identified with particular themes. Because the study of language and ideology is a key aspect of the larger project, results are limited exclusively to posts with at least 50 words. The complete list of current platforms from which forums were selected can be found toward the end of this document. A user's manual and program code can be found at <https://www.rogersperspectives.com>. Any corrections for errors will appear in next month's report.

Key Trends

- For February 2023, a 5% increase in average daily volume was driven by increases in the Alternative Reality metaframe (Figs. 1, 10, and 16). Two events were key:
 - The shooting down of the Chinese balloons generated the highest daily volume since the 2022 midterm elections (Fig. 5).
 - COVID-19 misinformation escalated. While this rise was associated with the announcement that the public-health emergency would be regarded as over in May, it was also tied to the Chinese balloon incident as conspiracy theorists linked several events that were regarded as government “cover ups” (Figs. 14 and 16).

General Trends

- Among posts with at least 50 words in the purposive sample, February activity across all MEC sector forums averaged 11,992 posts per day, up 5% from the January 2023 and 7% over the first month from the previous quarter (Figs. 1-4). Activity was 27% below the peak month of August 2021.
- Average daily posts rose in 3 of the past 4 months.

Violent/Aggressive Discourse

- Violent / Aggressive discourse increased by 7% and was present in 27% of overall discourse, a slight rise from January (Figs. 6 and 7). Violent / Aggressive discourse increased 26% in Extreme-Left forums as the Extreme-Left was the most violent forums for the month at 33%. The Extreme Right had the second highest level of Violent / Aggressive discussion at 31% (Figs. 7).

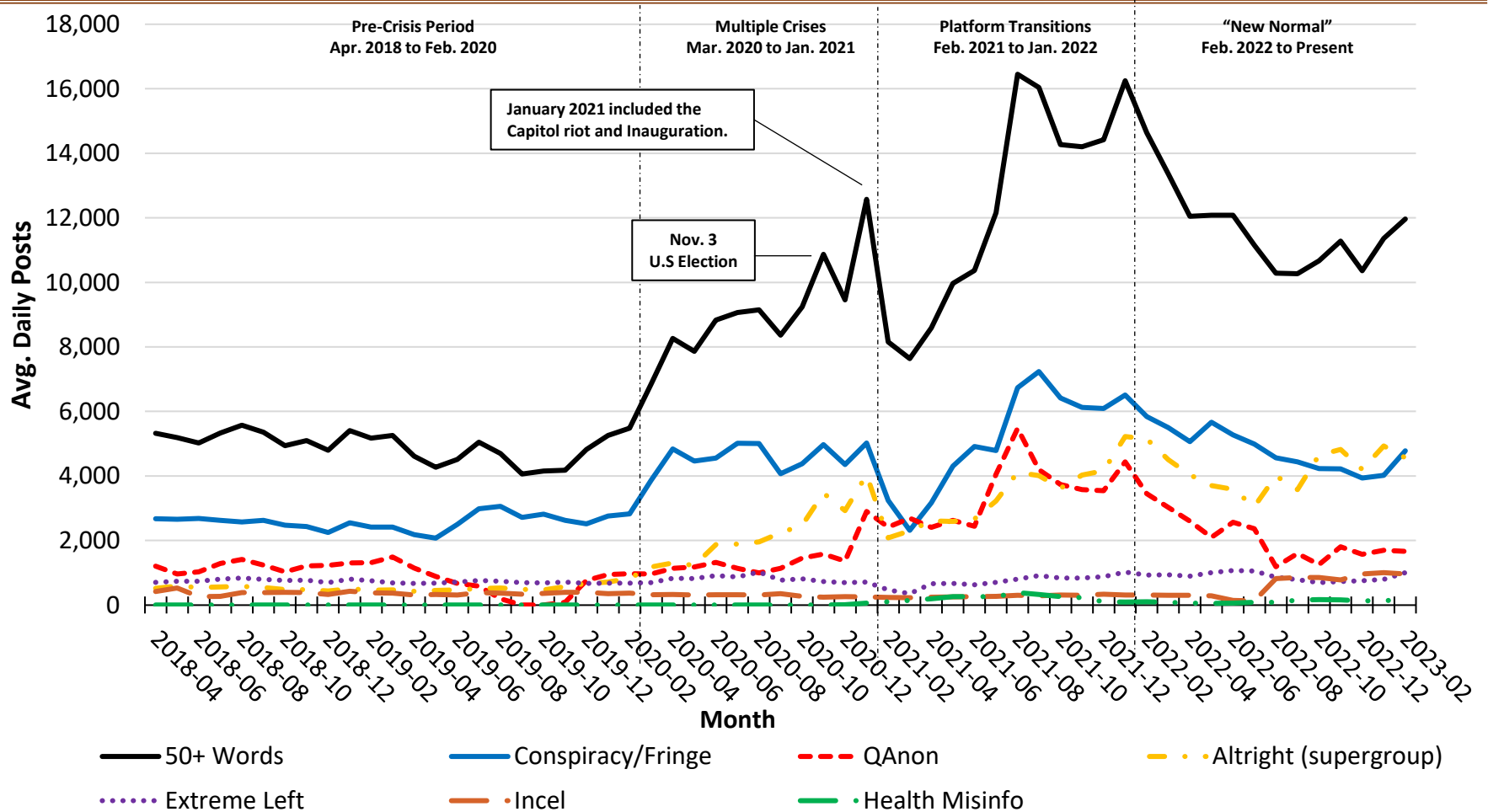
Religion

- The Religion composite increased only 1% in February and fell to 34% of overall discourse (Fig. 8).
- Christian Radical Right fell 2% in its activity level and fell to 12% of all MEC activity (Fig. 8).

Public Safety and Public Health

- References to sex crimes increased 4% in February 2023 (Fig. 12).
- The increase in Health Misinformation drove the 65% increase in the Health Frame in February (Fig. 14). COVID-19 activity surpassed the average daily posts for the Economy frame and was at its second highest point in the study period (Fig. 16).

Figure 1 Avg. Daily Activity by Month

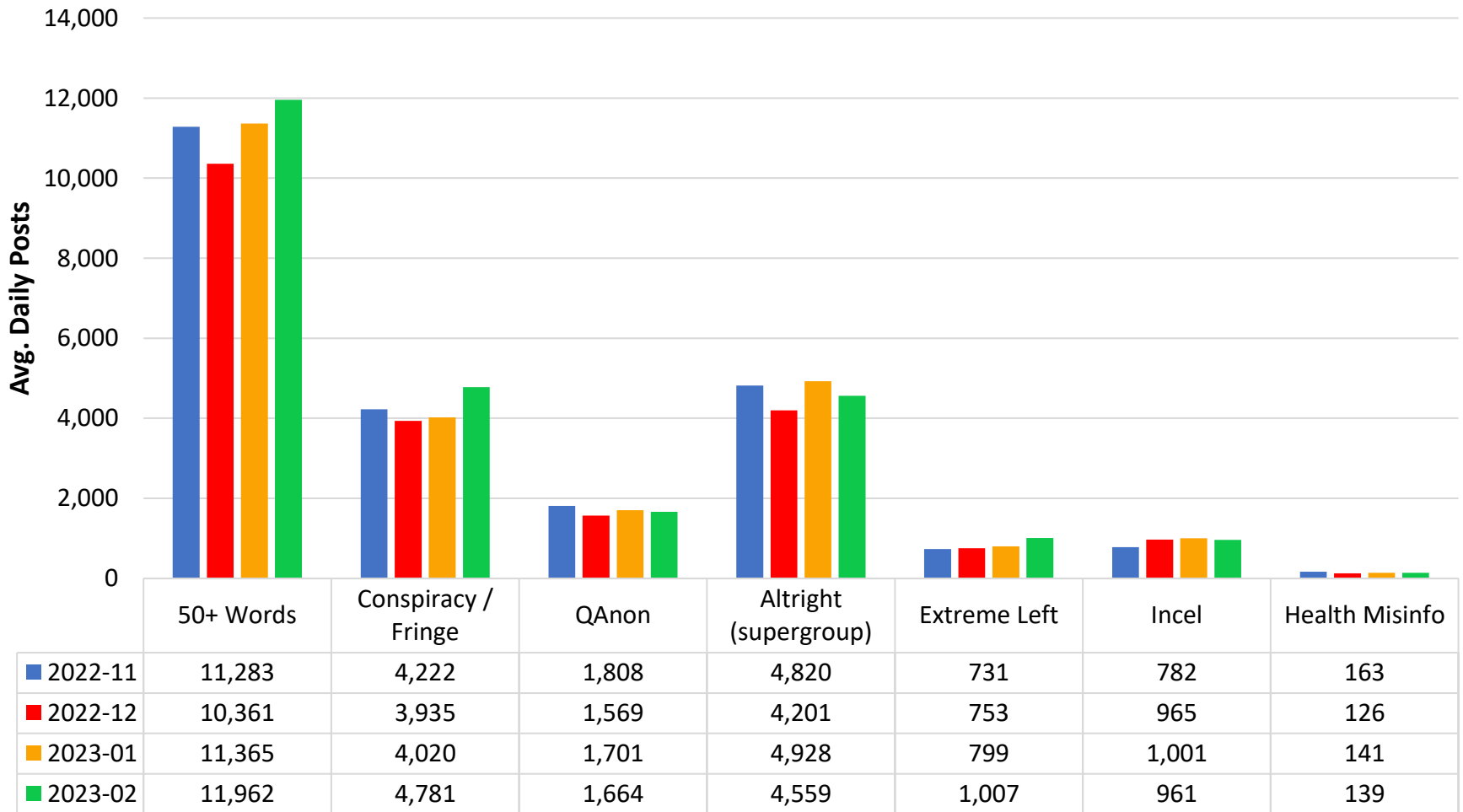


Note: 15,639,132 recovered posts with at least 50 words. Forums are not mutually exclusive. QAnon forums could be classified as both Conspiracy/Fringe and Extreme Right, but QAnon forums are separated due to their size and influence. This report uses a broad definition of the Alt-Right supergroup, which 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 3.

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 conspiracist forums in the universe of platforms, many due to their expulsion from Facebook and Twitter and the collapse of Parler.

Figure 2

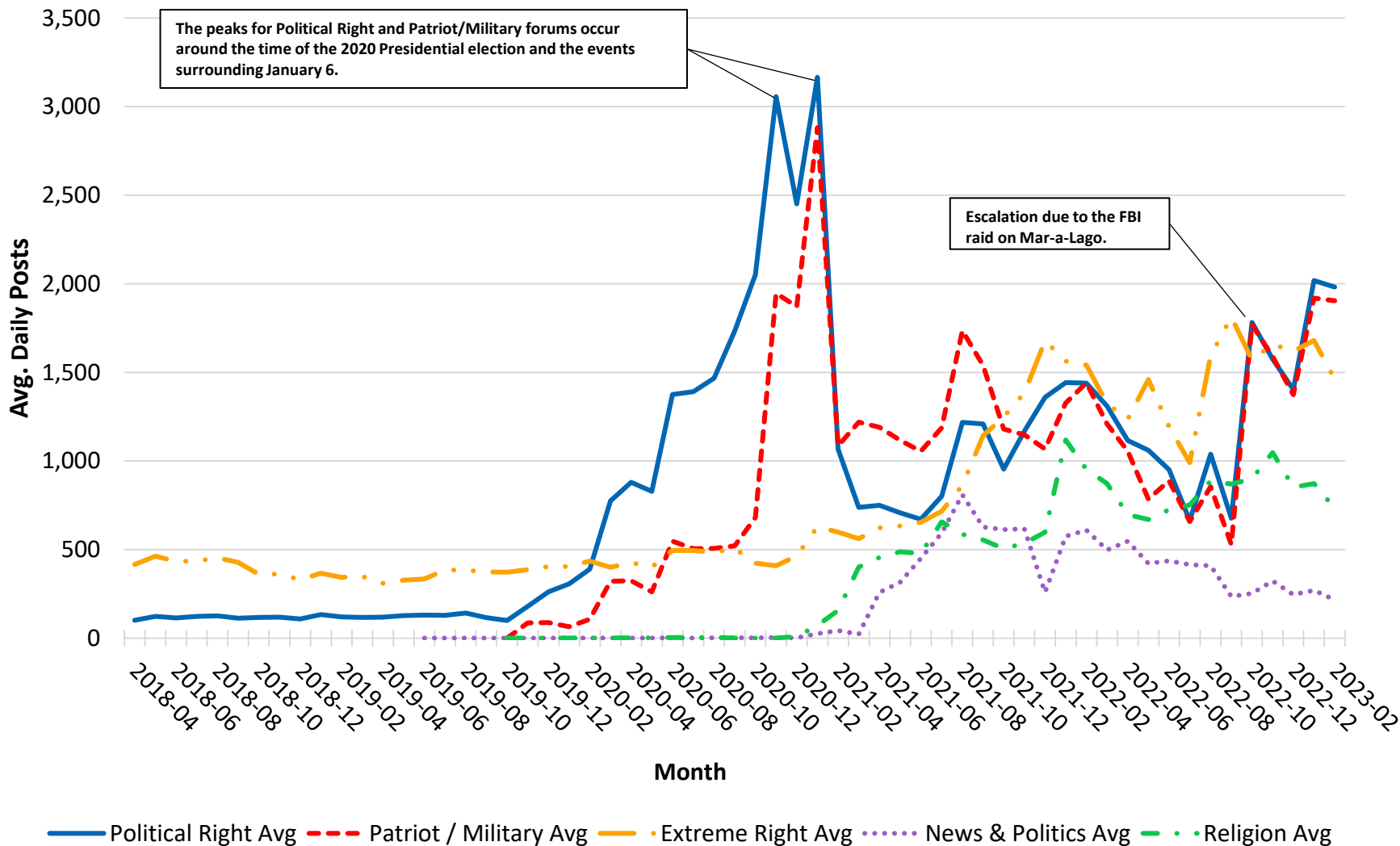
Avg. Daily Activity for Past Four Months



Note: 1,346,919 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 3

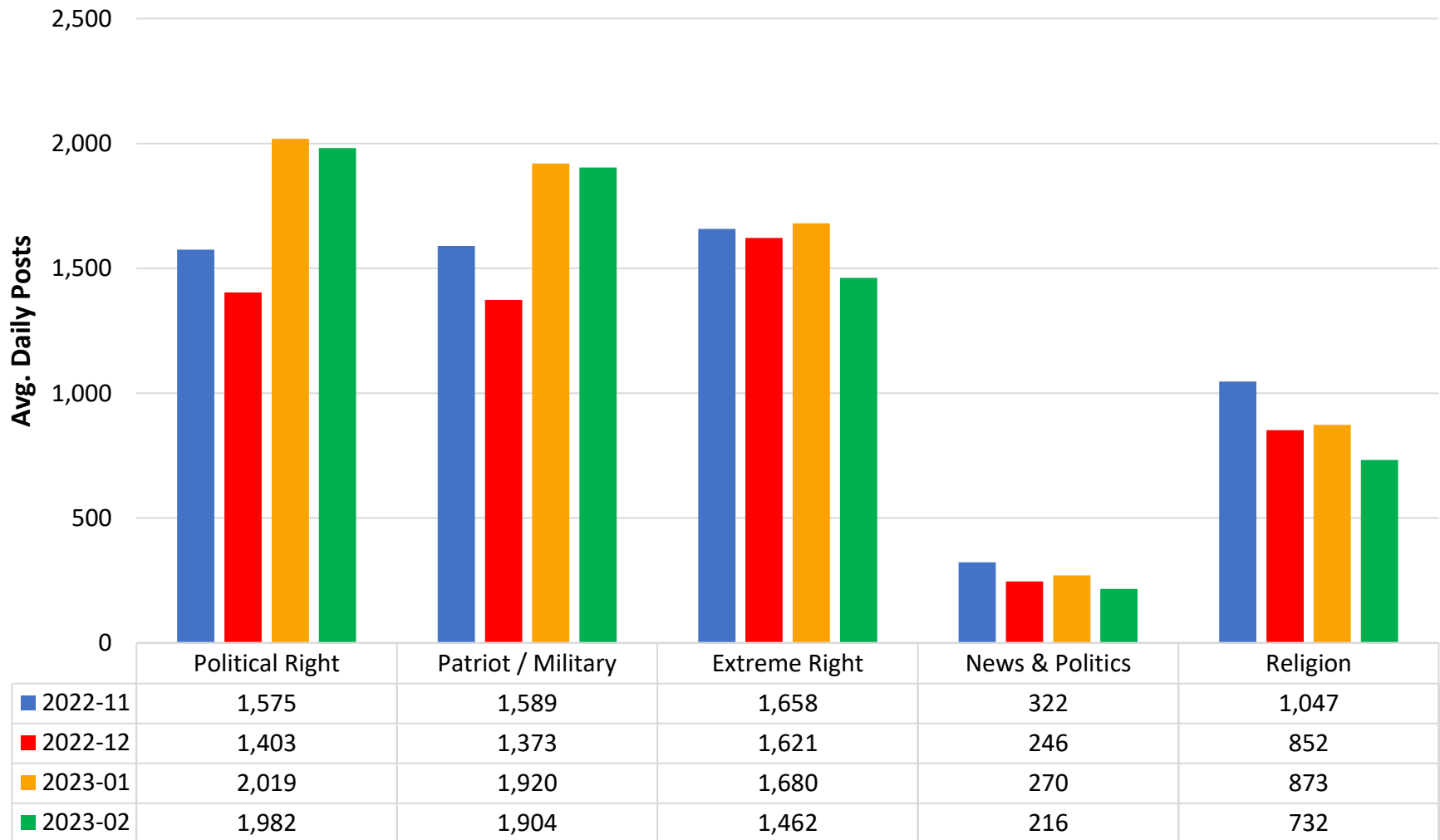
Avg. Daily Activity by Month for Alt-Right Supergroup by Month



Notes: 4,020,036 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, secessionists, 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 4

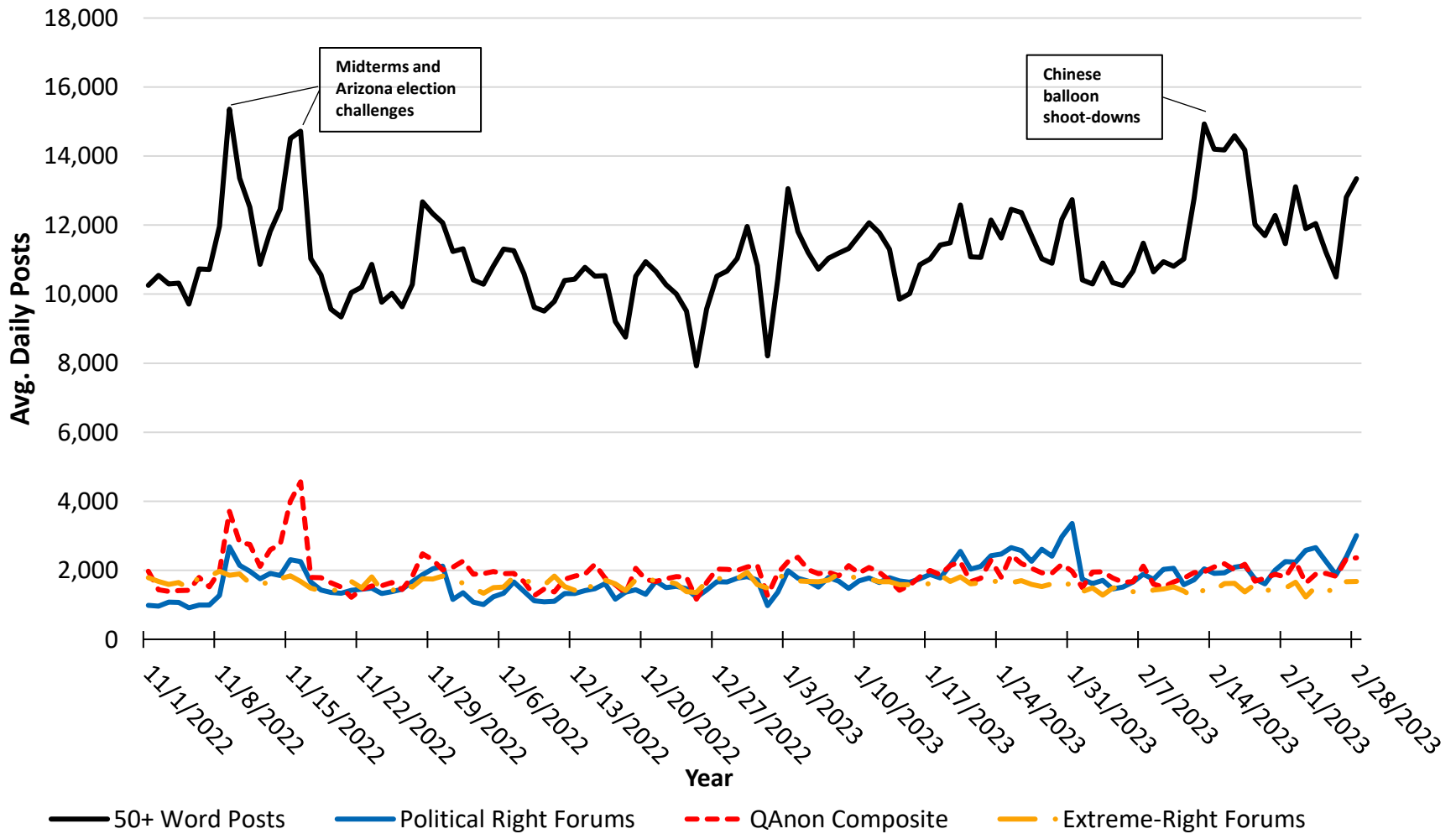
Avg. Daily Activity for Alt-Right Forums for Past Four Months



Note: 555,233 recovered posts. These groups are a subset of forums classified as Alt-Right in Figure 2. 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

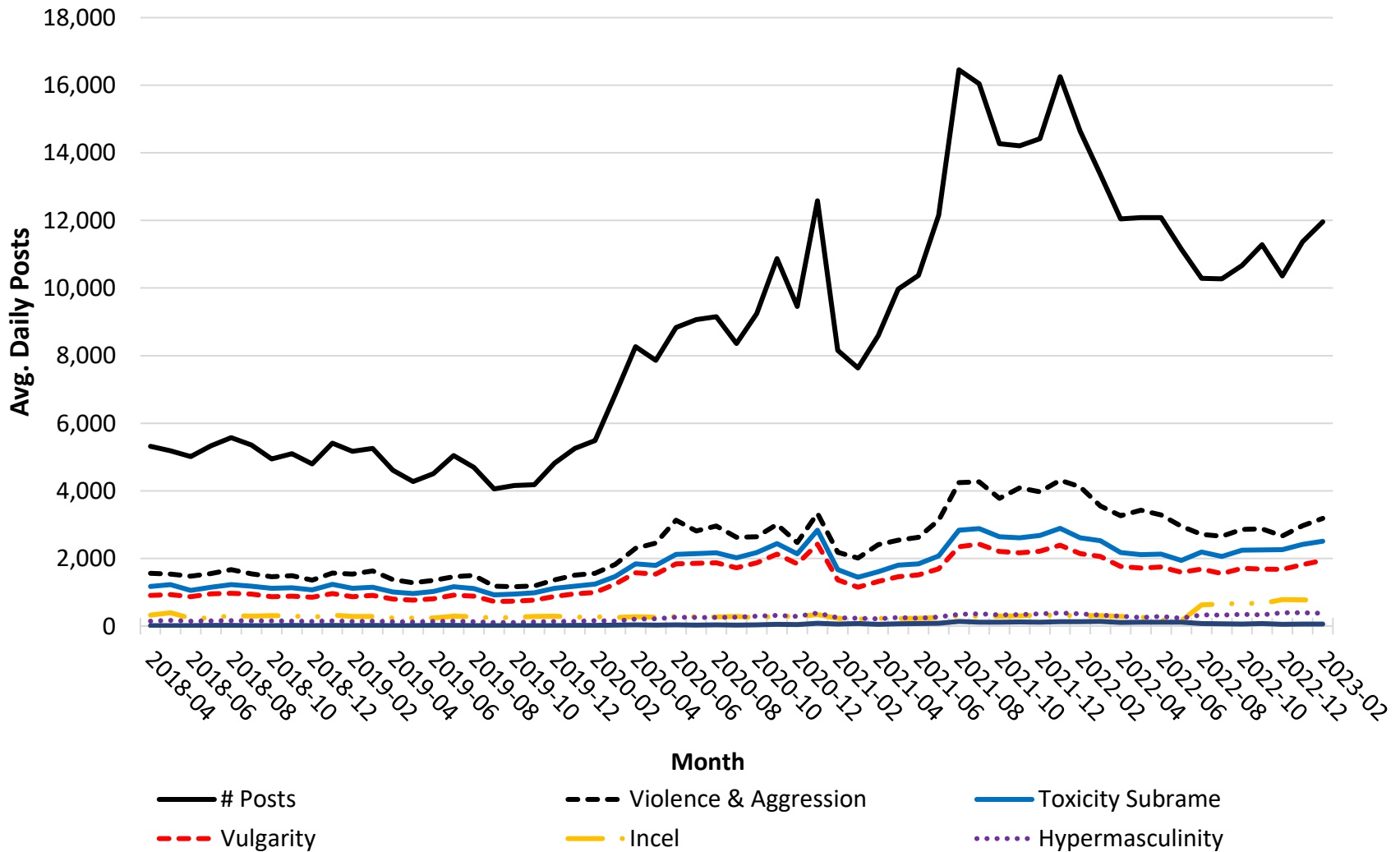
Daily Posts for Most Recent 4 Months



Note: 1,346,919 recovered posts. Forums and composites are not exhaustive and not mutually exclusive .

Figure 6

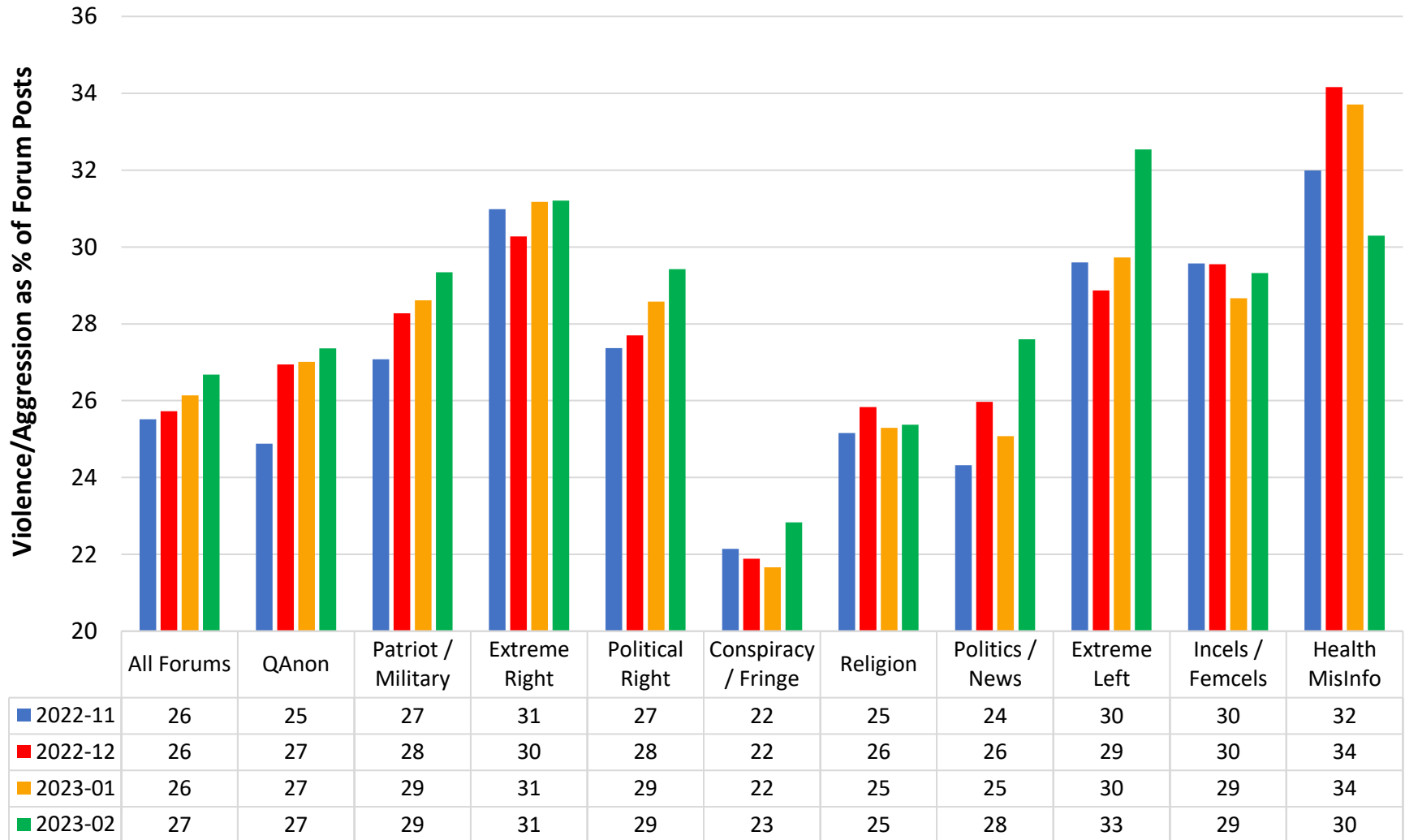
Avg. Daily Posts for Violent / Aggressive and Toxic Discourse by Month



Note: The Violence / Aggression subframe had 4,352,113 recovered posts. The Toxicity subframe had 3,199,352 recovered posts. The subframes are not mutually exclusive. Violent /Aggressive discourse is a standalone subframe in the Values frame and excludes references identified with 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 (Fig.9).

Figure 7

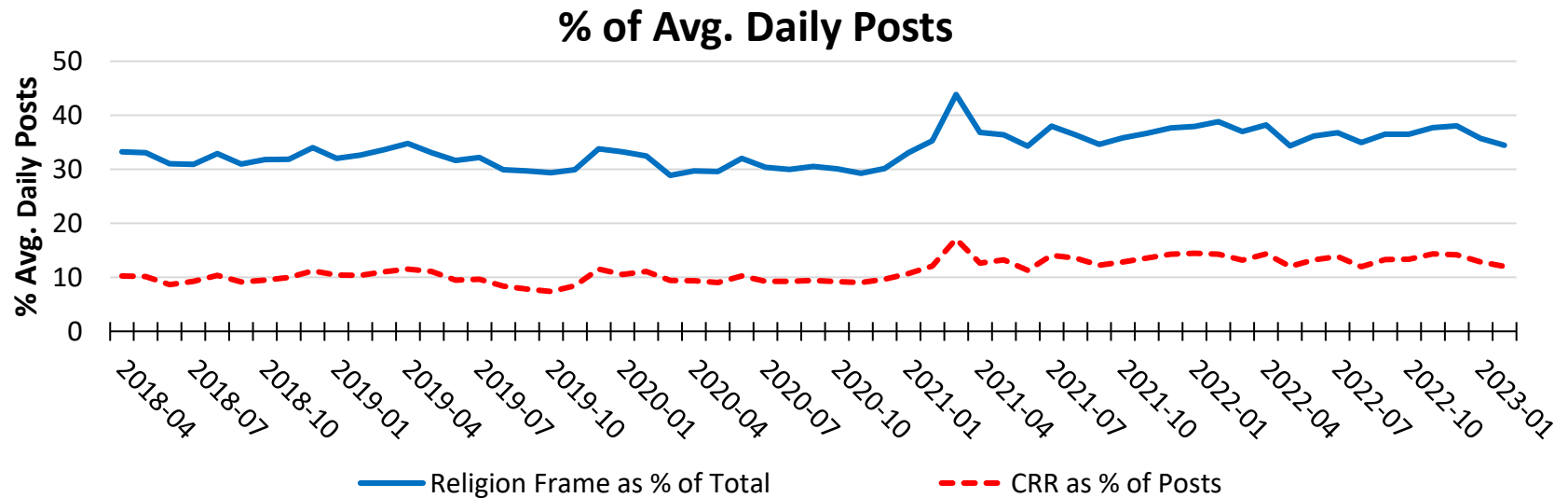
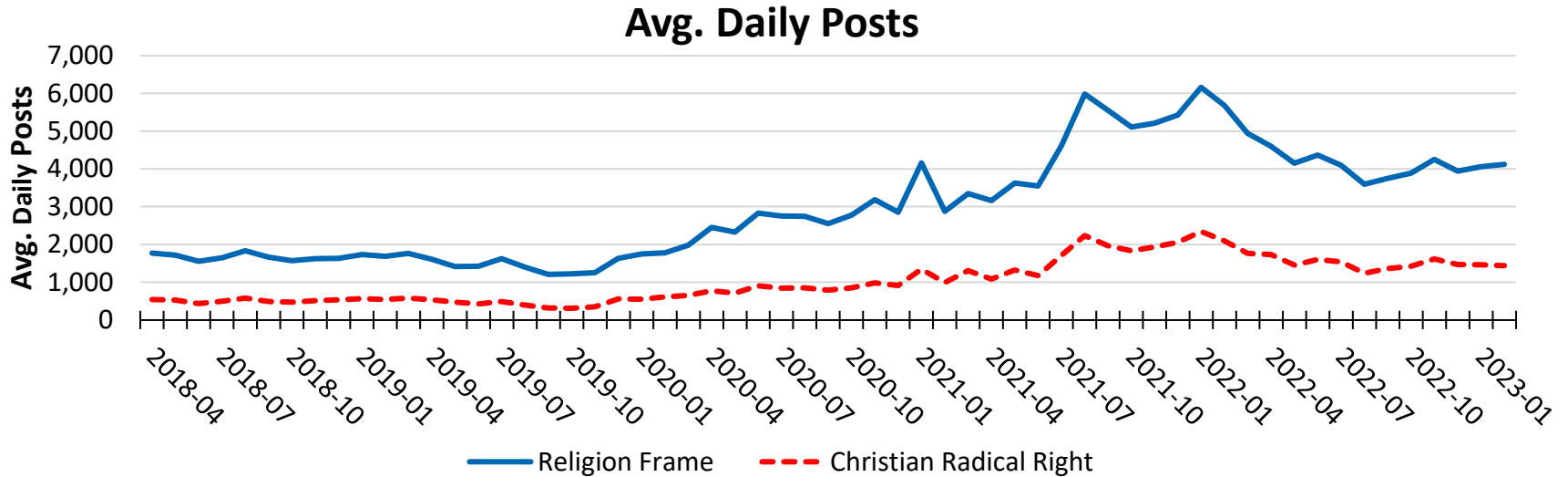
% Posts with Violent / Aggressive Discourse by Forum for Past Four Months



Note: 350,458 recovered posts.

Figure 8

Activity for Religion Composite since April 2018

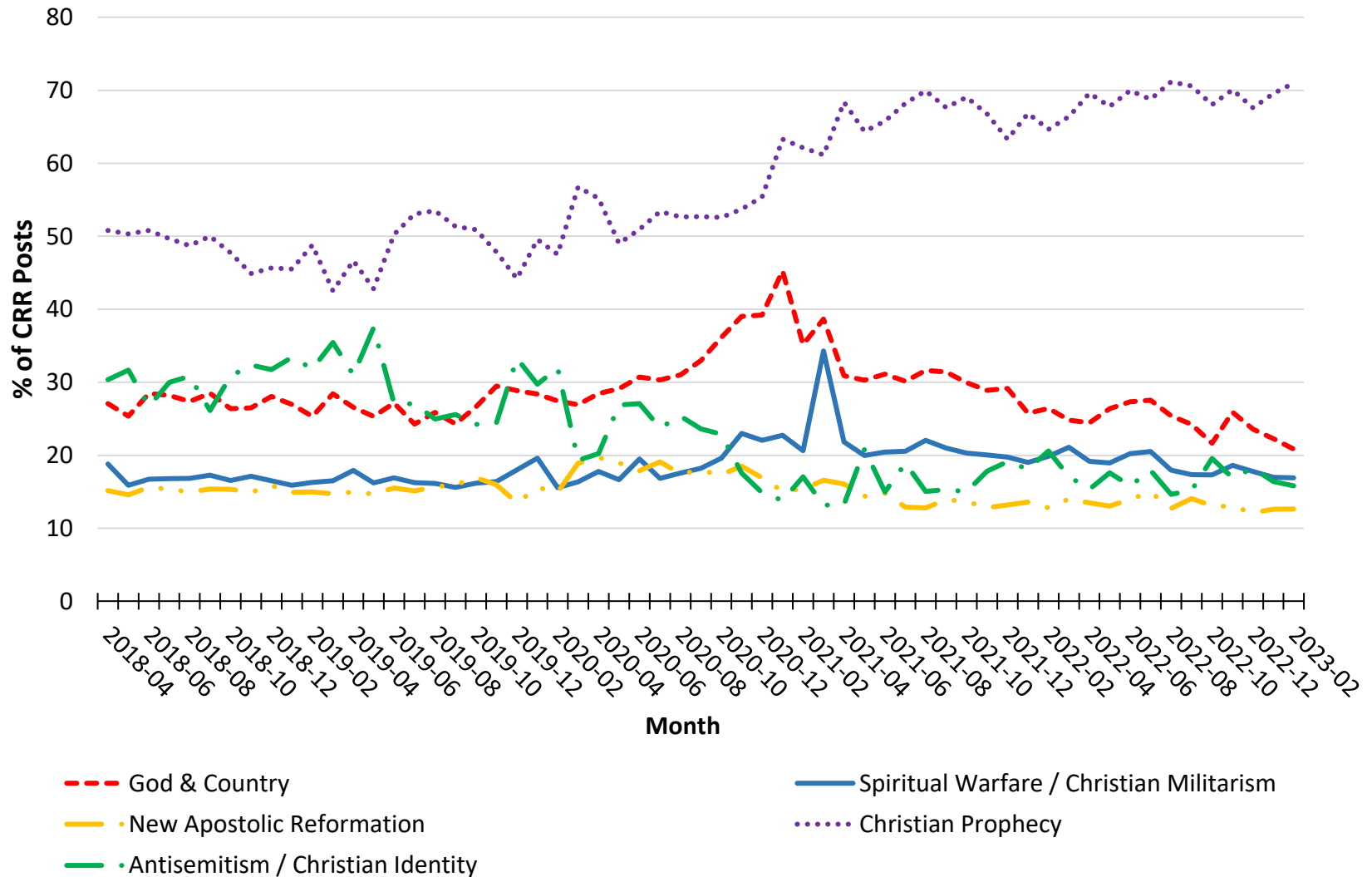


Note: The Religion Composite had 5,387,329 recovered posts. The Religion Composite combines Religion forums and Religion frames.

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Figure 9

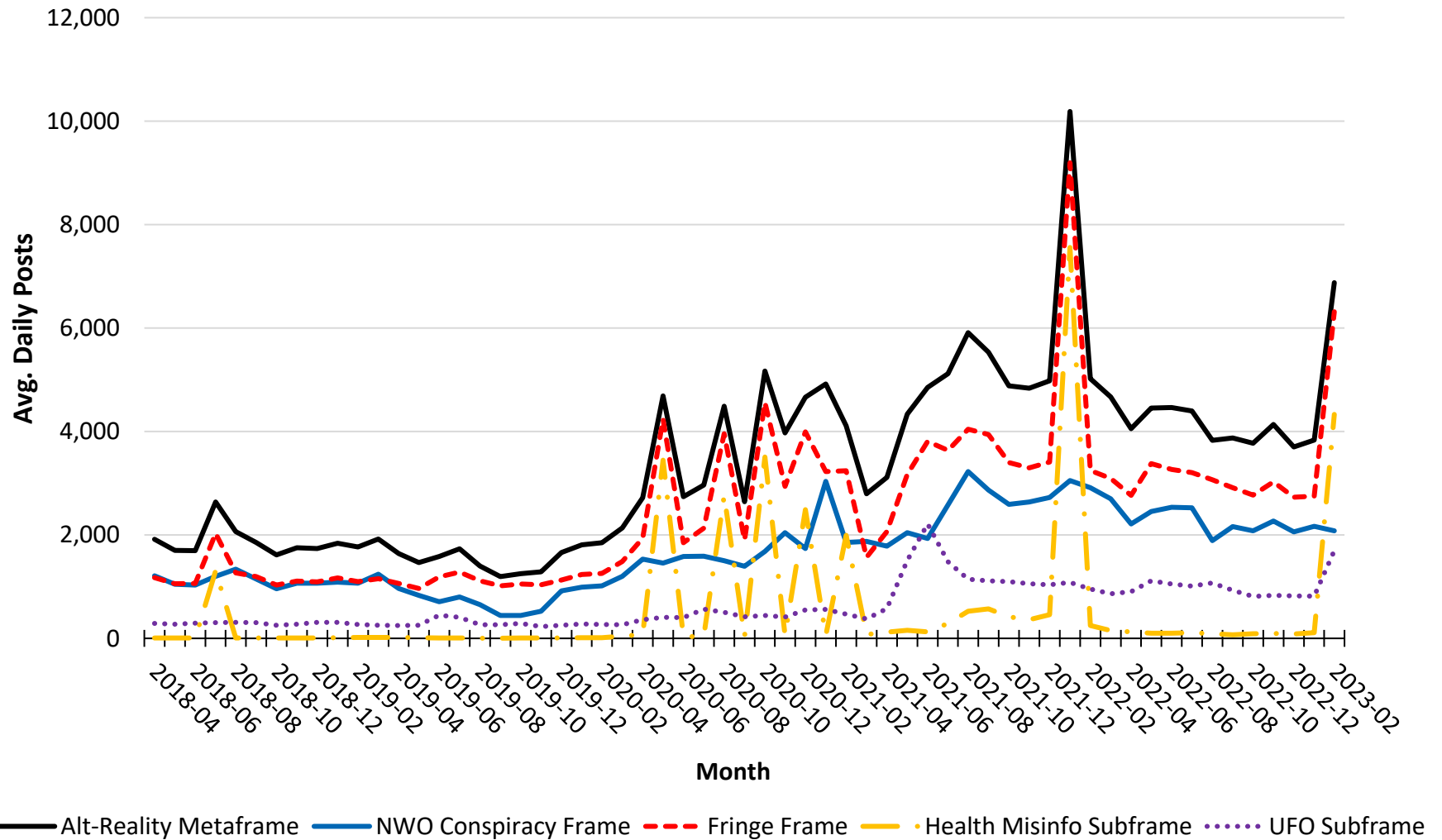
Components of Christian Radical Right as % of CRR



Note: Christian Radical Right based on 1,855,000 recovered posts. Christian Prophecy includes both interpretations of the Bible text and claims to have messages from God about future events. Christian Reconstructionism is not included on this chart due to its small percentage of posts.

Figure 10

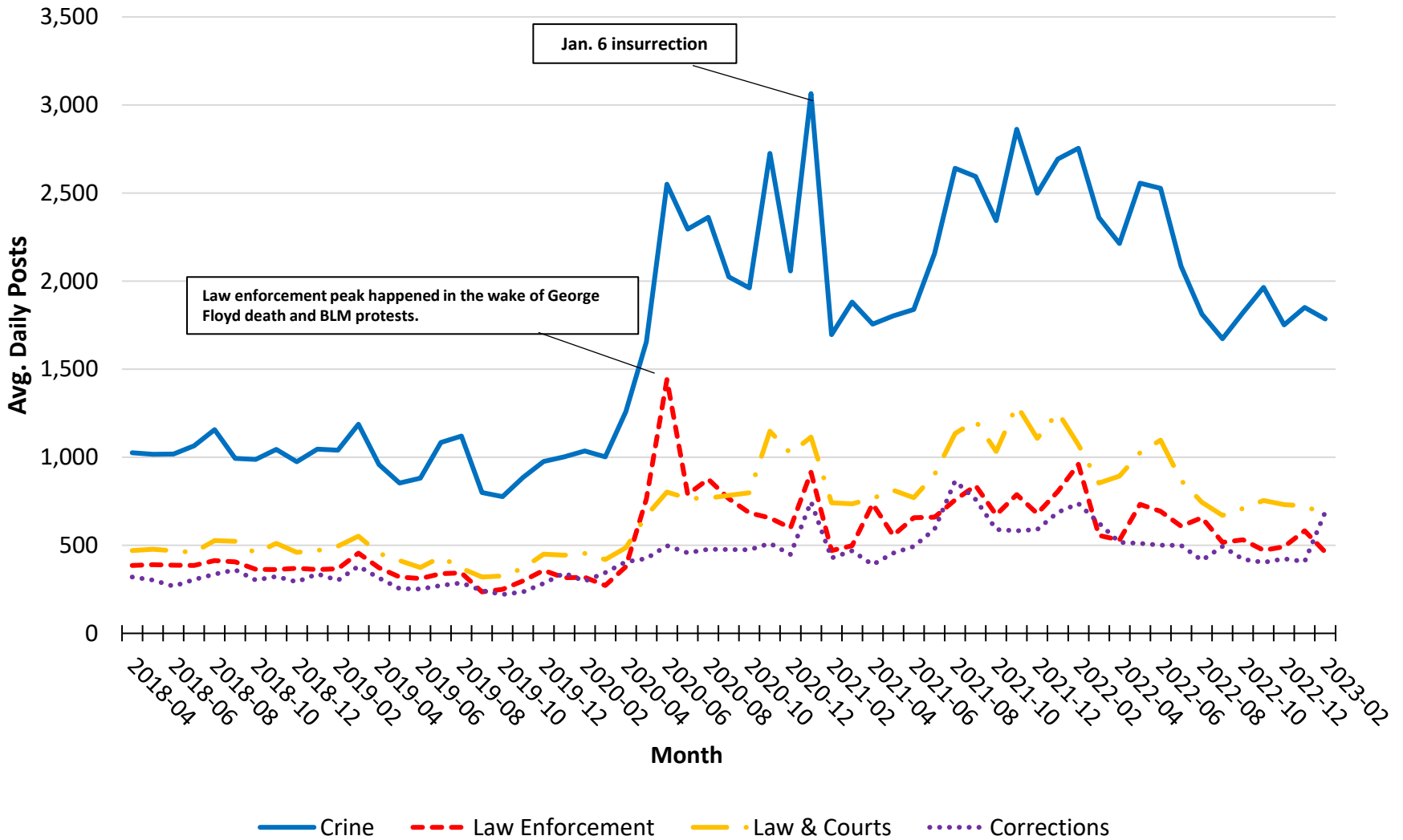
Alternative Reality Themes since April 2018



Note: Alternative Reality Metaframe based on 6,027,679 recovered posts.

Figure 11

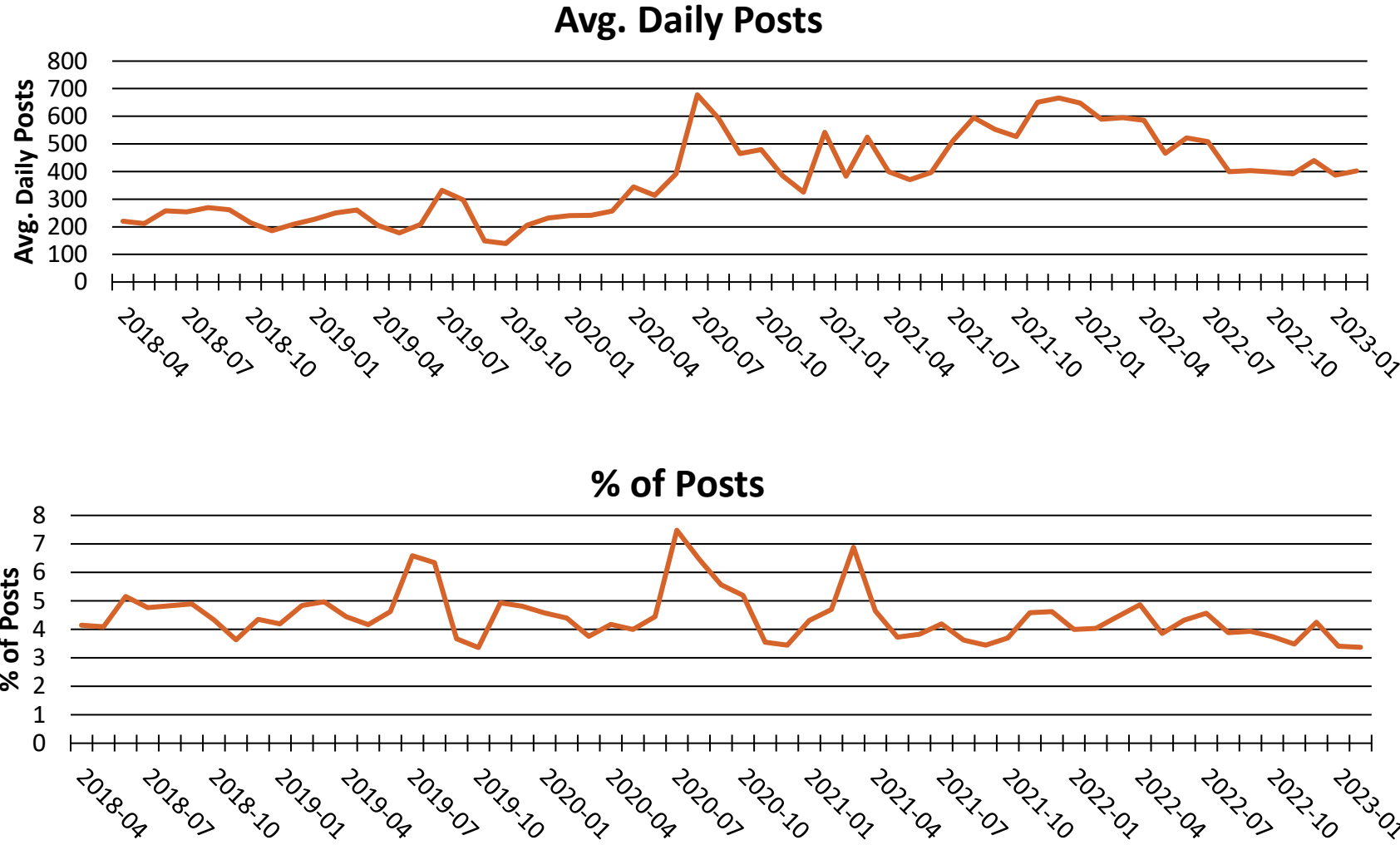
Avg. Daily Activity for Public Safety Components by Month



Note: The Public Safety frame had 4,605,977 recovered posts.

Figure 12

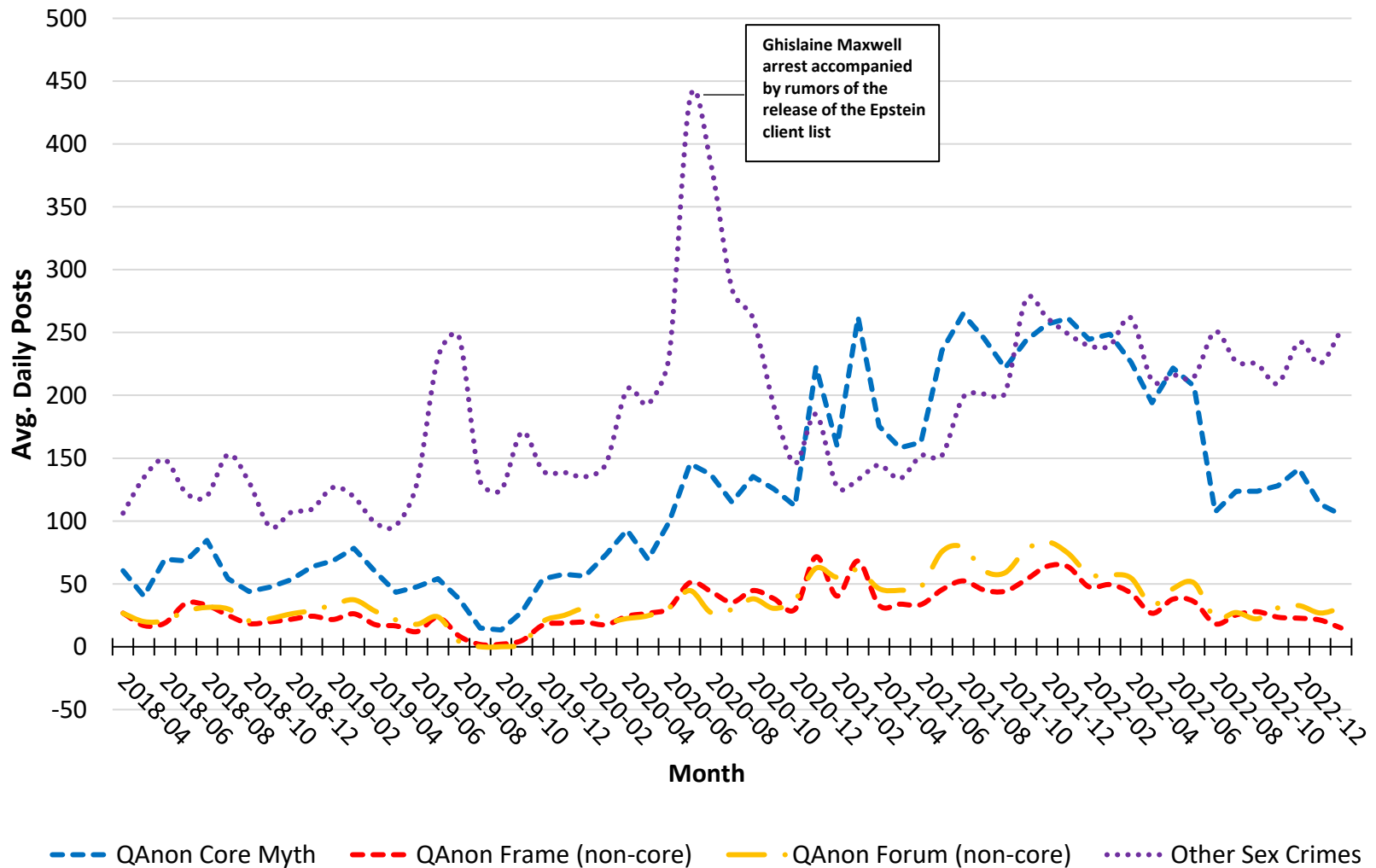
Sex Crime References since April 2018



Note: Sex-crime-related themes were found in 679,794 recovered posts.

Figure 13

Sex Crime References by Source and Month

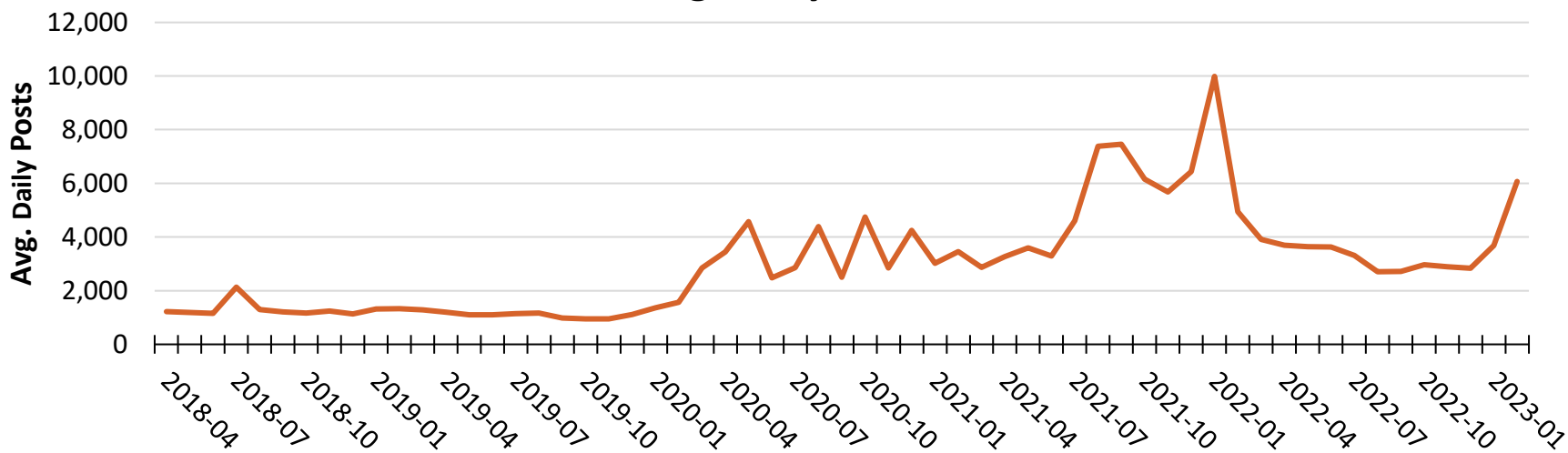


Note: Mutually exclusive categories. QAnon core myth refers to elites (Democrats) engaged in sex trafficking or Satanic sacrifice of kidnapped children. QAnon frame refers to references to sex crimes in QAnon frame that do not qualify as expressions of the QAnon core myth. QAnon forum are references in QAnon forums that cannot be regarded as part of QAnon frame. Outside references refer to discussions of sex crimes outside QAnon universe.

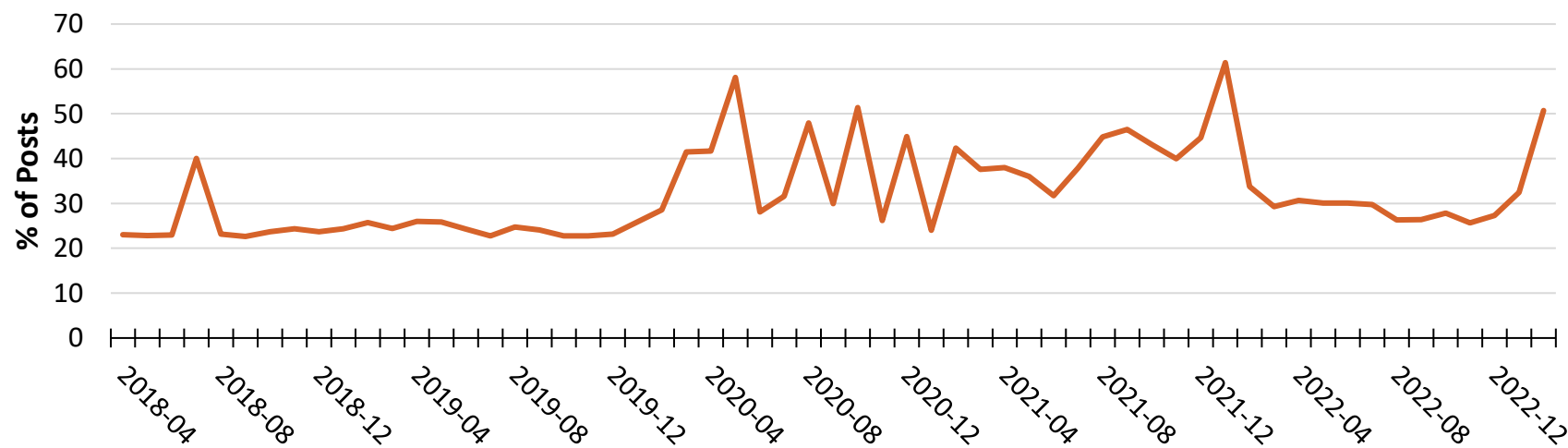
Figure 14

Activity for Health Frame since April 2018

Avg. Daily Posts



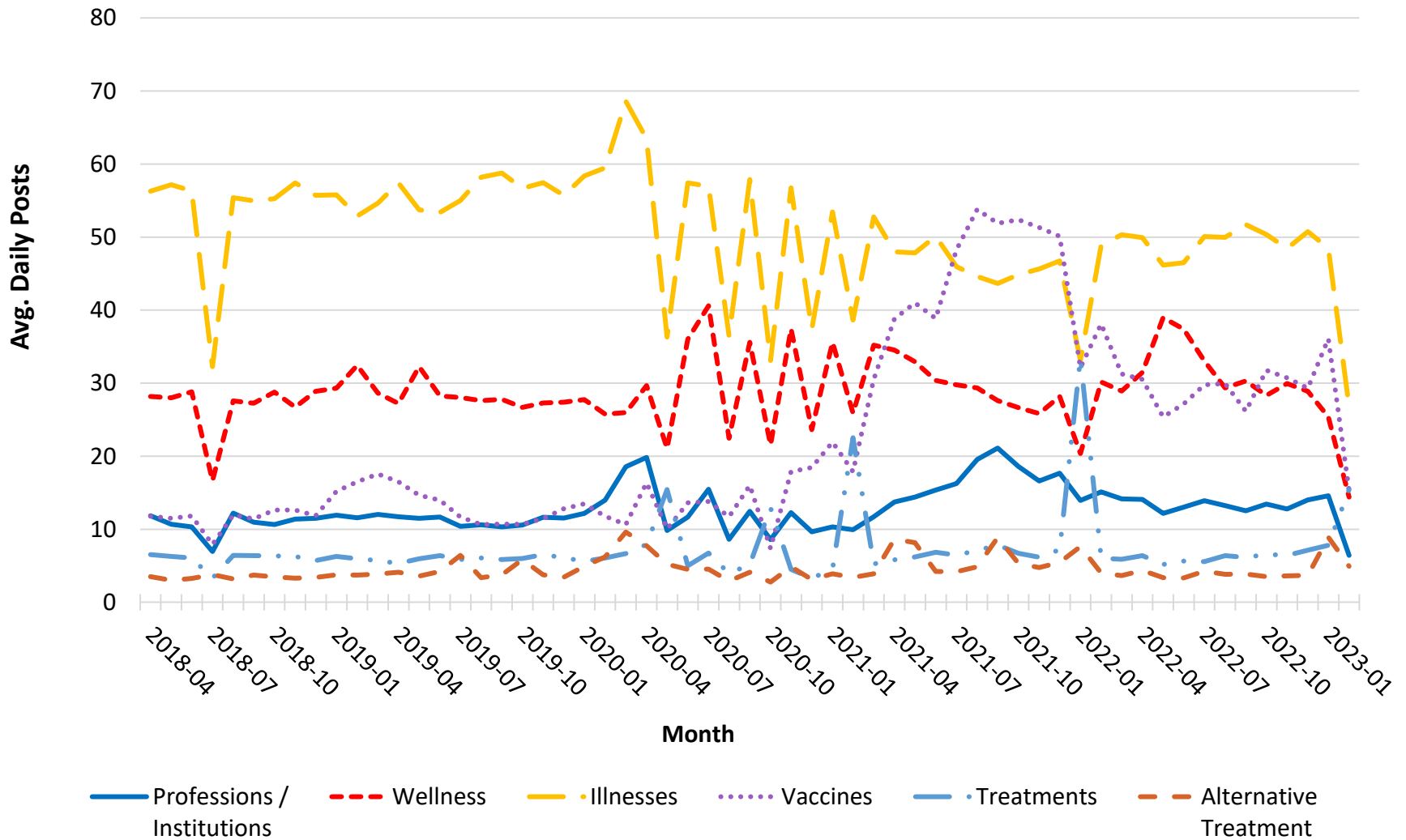
% of Posts



Note: Sex-crime-related themes were found in 5,227,945 recovered posts.

Figure 15

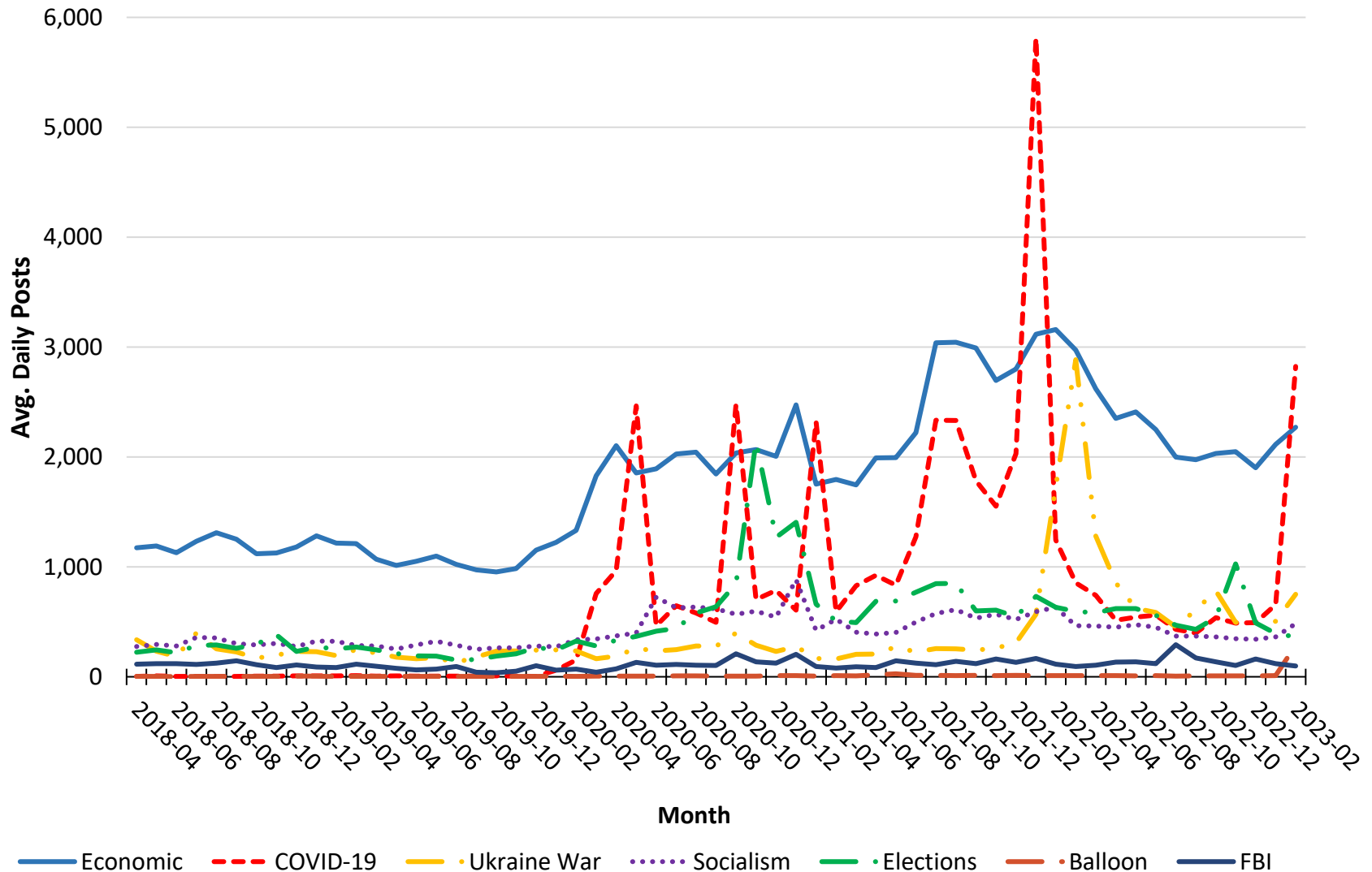
Health Subframes as a % of Health Frame by Month



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 16

Avg. Daily Posts for Contemporary Topics by Month



Definitions

Forum: A self-defined forum or channel on a web site or social-media platform

Frame: A group of posts identified with a particular theme based on key words, phrases, or stems

Composite: The combination of forums and frames related to the same subject matter. Composites were started to highlight the presence of a large amount of material that falls outside related forums. E.g., most religious discourse happens outside Religion forums.

Activity: % of posts with at least one key word, phrase, or stem identified with particular themes

Forum Types

- **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 since April 2018

Source	Posts	% Total	Tag Rate	% Zero Frames	% One Frame	Avg. Frames
Reddit	7,796,552	49.9	96.8	3.2	12.7	3.5
Telegram	2,600,544	16.6	97.0	3.0	9.7	4.0
8kun	1,707,974	10.9	97.9	2.1	6.9	5.2
Above Top Secret	1,450,483	9.3	93.9	6.1	13.8	3.6
Win Boards	1,179,001	7.5	97.5	2.5	9.7	4.1
Incel.is	427,709	2.7	98.1	1.9	18.2	3.1
Liberty Forums	140,968	0.9	98.7	1.3	3.6	6.2
Stormfront	94,871	0.6	99.3	0.7	3.2	5.4
Rapture Forumsm	89,035	0.6	97.4	2.6	9.6	4.5
Graham Hancock	75,325	0.5	100.0	0.0	7.7	4.6
Raddle.me	56,562	0.4	89.1	10.9	27.6	2.5
HexBear	7,230	0.0	94.2	5.8	13.8	3.7
EndChan	5,839	0.0	98.4	1.6	4.3	6.3
White Biocentrism	4,174	0.0	98.1	1.9	5.0	6.6
Christogenea	2,198	0.0	98.5	1.5	4.7	4.9
PinkPill.co	667	0.0	96.4	3.6	14.2	3.5
Total	15,639,132	100.0	96.8	3.2	11.5	3.9

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

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 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>