
FRAMES OF EXTREMISM

Conspiracy and Extreme-Right Discussion Forums

Quarterly Detail Report

1st Quarter 2022

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

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Highlights

Quarter Highlights

In Q4 2021, daily activity for all posts regardless length averaged 93,558 posts per day, a 7% increase over the previous quarter and a double the same quarter in the previous year (Figure 1).

Outside Section I, this report focuses exclusively on posts with at least 50 words. In Q4 2021, there were an average of 10,764 50+ word posts per day, a 3% increase over the previous quarter and a 78% higher than the same quarter of the previous year (Figure 2).

Trends and Patterns

Over the past 13 months, 65% contained material from the Meaning and Morality metaframe, and the Science & Knowledge and Institutional metaframes were present in 62% of posts (Table 1). Conspiracy & Fringe and QAnon communities are the largest two online communities in the purposive sample (Fig. 16, 17).

The content of QAnon discourse has been changing for more than a year. In Q4 2019, the QAnon core mythology accounted for 61% of QAnon material. This percentage has fallen over time and in Q1 2022 was only 39%. The percentage of material related to QAnon “jargon” (e.g., where we go one we go all, “red pill”) has increased. Such sloganeering could have the long-term effect of creating solidarity within the QAnon community without relying on the core myth (Figure 20).

Potentially Violent Discourse and Religion

Potentially violent discourse (PVD) is at a high level compared to previous time periods in the study. Q1 2022 was its most active quarter with 5,365 posts per day. A total of 50% of material contained PVD, which was surpassed only in Q1 2021, which was influenced by the Jan. 6 insurrection and the March conspiracy theories of Trump’s return (Fig. 27). This activity was influenced by an increase in the Military & Militarism frame as a result of the Ukrainian War (Fig. 31). Capturing legitimate military activity was not my intent with the creation of PVD, so I will be looking into separate direct references to the military from militarism activity going forward (Appendix G).

Religious content was found in PVD at high levels, though in each case there has been a long-term decline in religious content. In Q1 2022, 40% of PVD was contained religious material, which matches the previous high of Q1 2021 (Fig 29.). The majority of posts related to the Toxic and QAnon subframes had religious content in the most recent quarter (Fig. 30).

Themes related to the Christian Radical Right (CRR) could be found in an average of 1,094 posts per day in Q1 2022, or 10% of all material analyzed (Fig. 25). Christian Nationalism, which was present in 50% of CRR posts in Q1 2022, fell to 40% over the course of a year. By contrast, Antisemitism & Christian Identity rose from 15% of CRR to 21% over the same period (Fig. 26).

Current Events

Discussions of COVID-19 fell from 30% of posts in Q4 2021 to 24% in Q1 2022. Meanwhile, discussion about the economy and the Ukrainian War are increasing (Fig. 31).

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, which could be easily altered to get a desired outcome. 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.

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Section I

General Activity

Figure 1

All Posts: Average Daily Activity by Quarter since April 2018

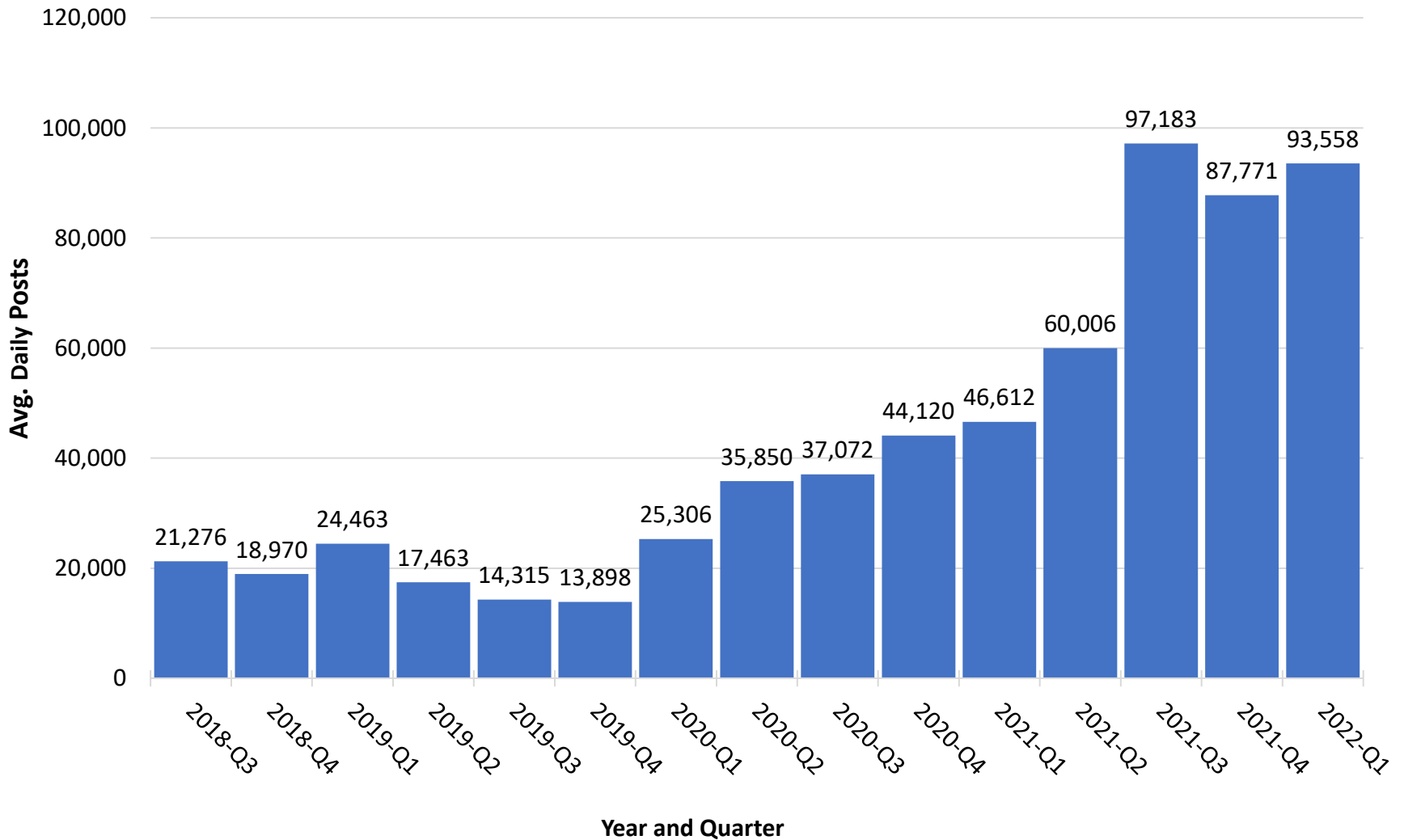


Figure 2

50+ Word Posts: Average Daily Activity by Quarter since April 2018

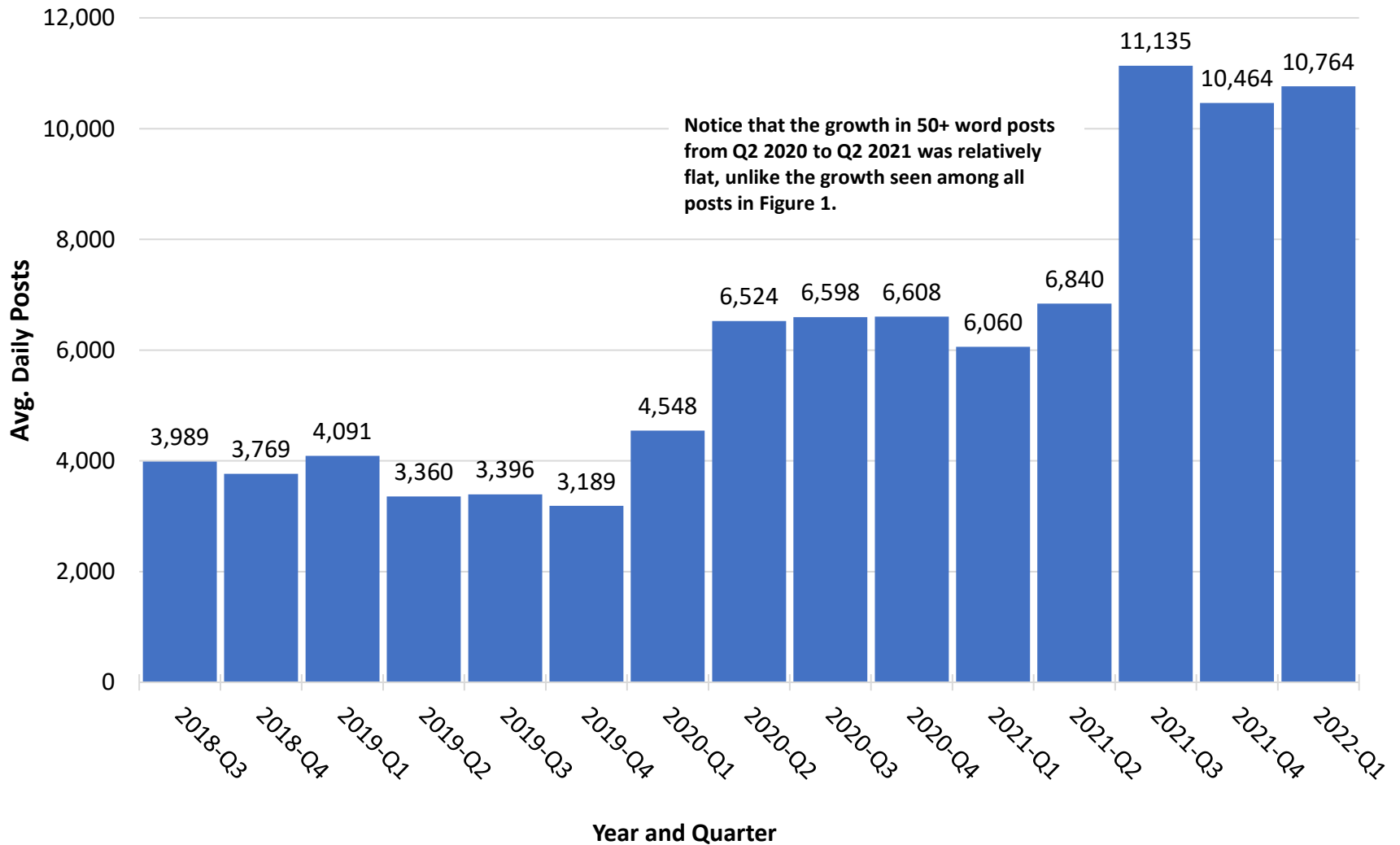
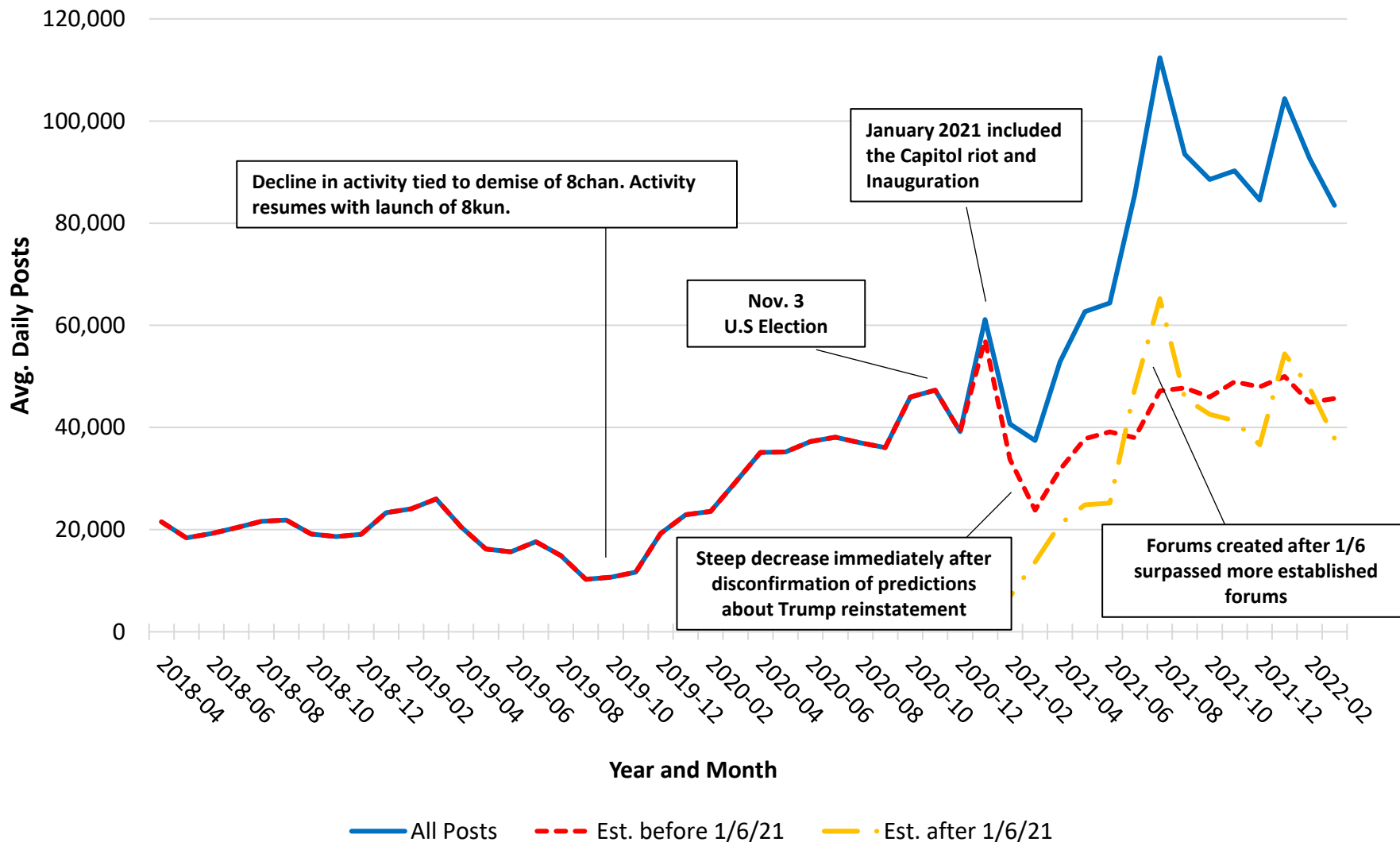


Figure 3

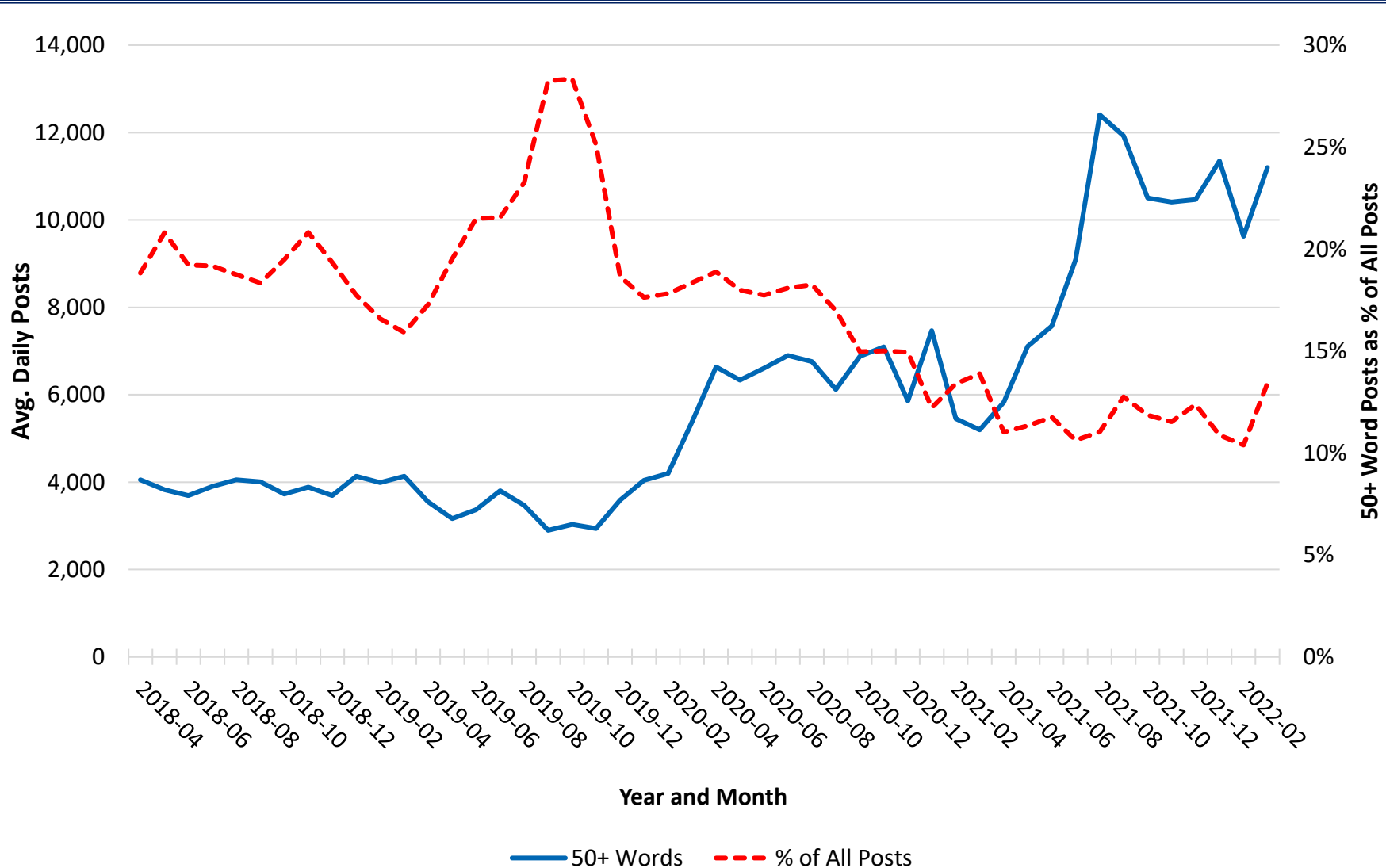
All Posts: Average Daily Activity by Month since April 2018



Note: 60,008,479 estimated posts

Figure 4

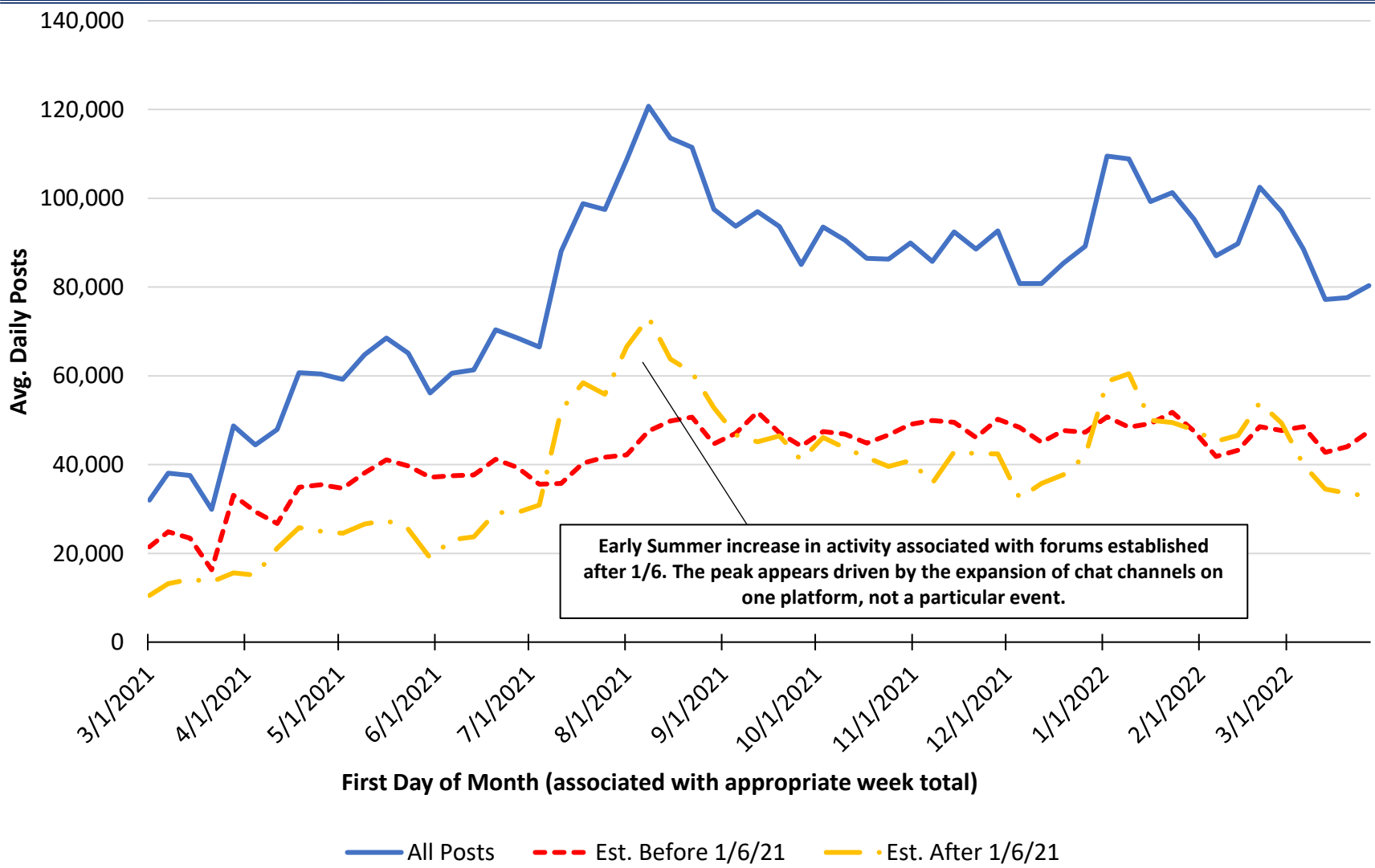
50+ Words: Average Daily Activity by Month since April 2018



Note: 8,690,777 estimated posts

Figure 5

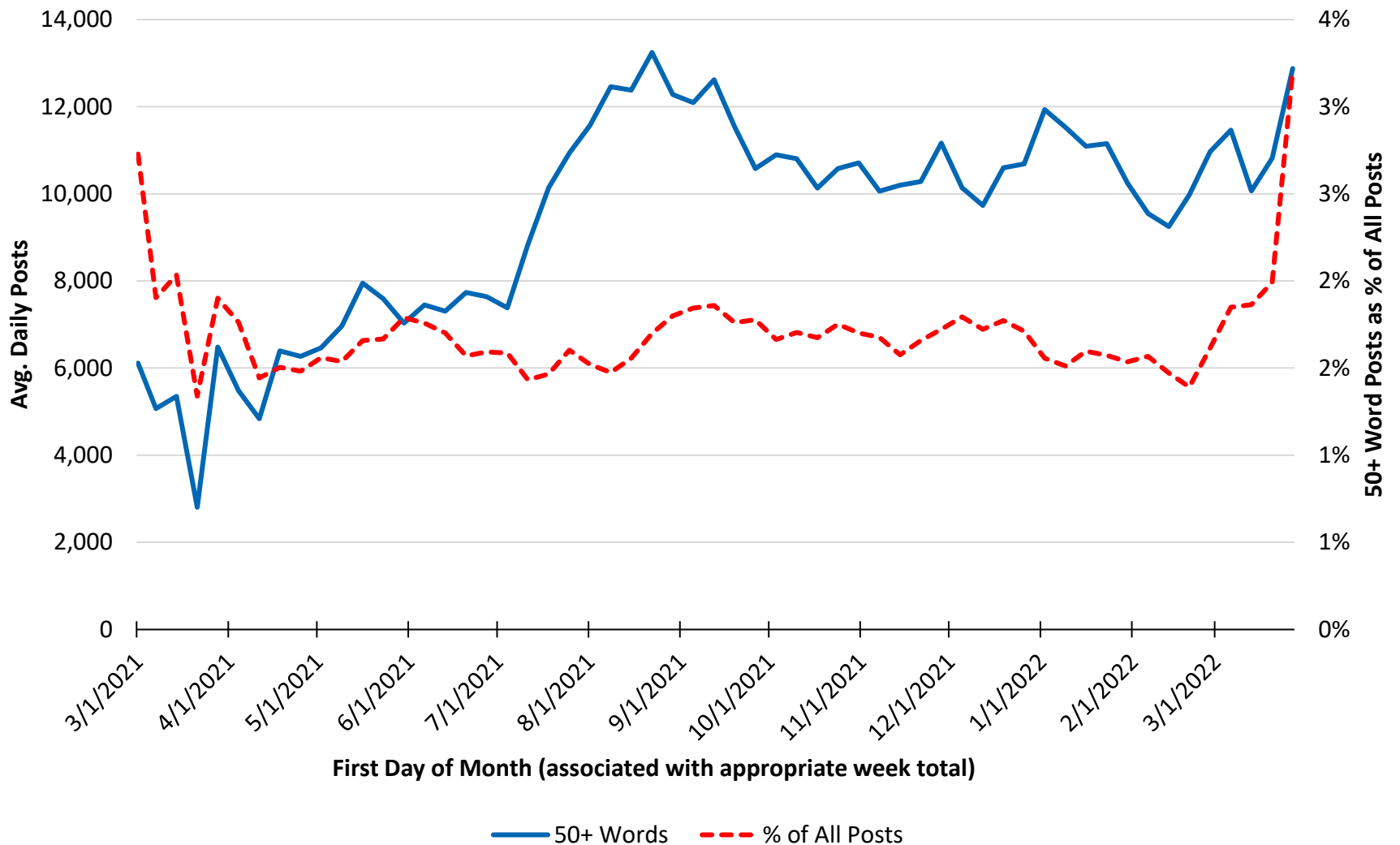
All Posts: Avg. Daily Activity by Week for the Past 13 Months



Notes: N=28,845,375 estimated posts

Figure 6

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



Notes: N=3,352,692 estimated posts

Table 1

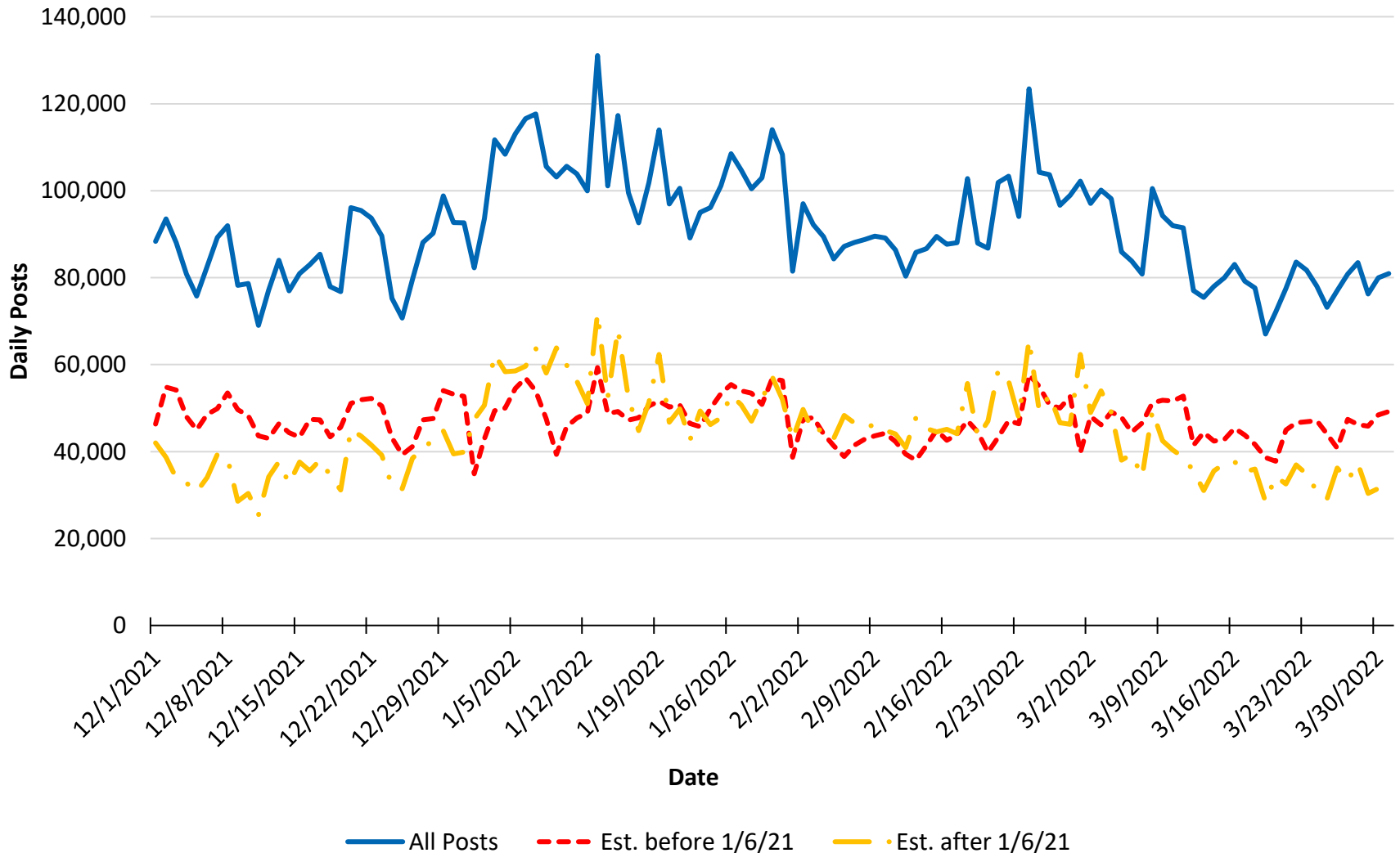
50+ Word Posts: Avg. Daily Posts by Month for Past 13 Months

Year-Month	Posts	Metaframes				
		Meaning & Morality	Institutions & Processes	Science & Knowledge	Conspiracy & Fringe	Status & Identity
2021-03	5,200	3,650	3,694	3,330	2,206	1,614
2021-04	5,829	3,779	3,702	3,442	2,527	1,093
2021-05	7,111	4,440	4,379	4,202	3,265	1,164
2021-06	7,571	4,558	4,646	4,379	3,437	1,202
2021-07	9,093	5,848	5,591	5,515	4,163	1,451
2021-08	12,411	7,848	7,573	7,944	5,587	1,837
2021-09	11,927	7,414	7,149	7,879	5,430	1,766
2021-10	10,507	6,672	6,300	6,821	4,632	1,616
2021-11	10,411	6,757	6,375	6,396	4,474	1,820
2021-12	10,471	6,816	6,216	6,896	4,693	1,733
2022-01	11,352	7,422	6,696	7,362	5,146	1,853
2022-02	9,631	6,452	6,326	5,788	4,256	1,934
2022-03	11,201	7,839	7,831	6,675	4,744	2,600
13-Mo Avg.	9,443	6,117	5,884	5,899	4,199	1,668
% Change						
Annual (Mar. to Mar.)	115%	115%	112%	100%	115%	61%
Quarter (Dec. to Mar.)	7%	15%	26%	-3%	1%	50%
Month (Feb. to Mar.)	16%	21%	24%	15%	11%	34%
% Distribution by Metaframe						
2022-03	100%	70%	70%	60%	42%	23%
13-Mo Avg.	100%	65%	62%	62%	44%	18%

Note: Metaframe definitions and an abbreviated mapping of frames can be found in Appendices A and B. Metaframes are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 7

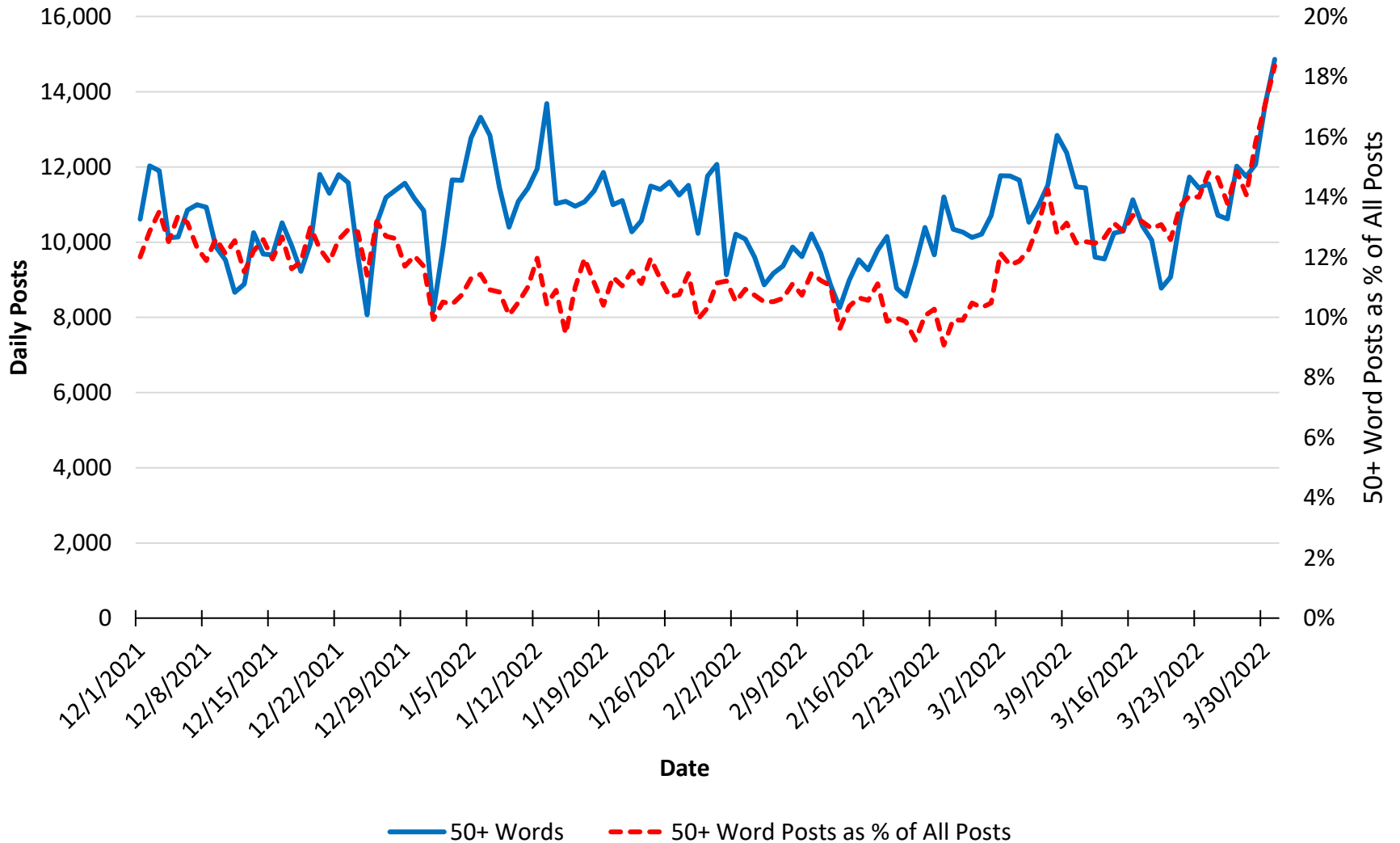
All Posts: Daily Activity for the Past 4 Months



Notes: N=11,041,250 estimated posts.

Figure 8

50+ Words: Daily Activity for the Past 4 Months

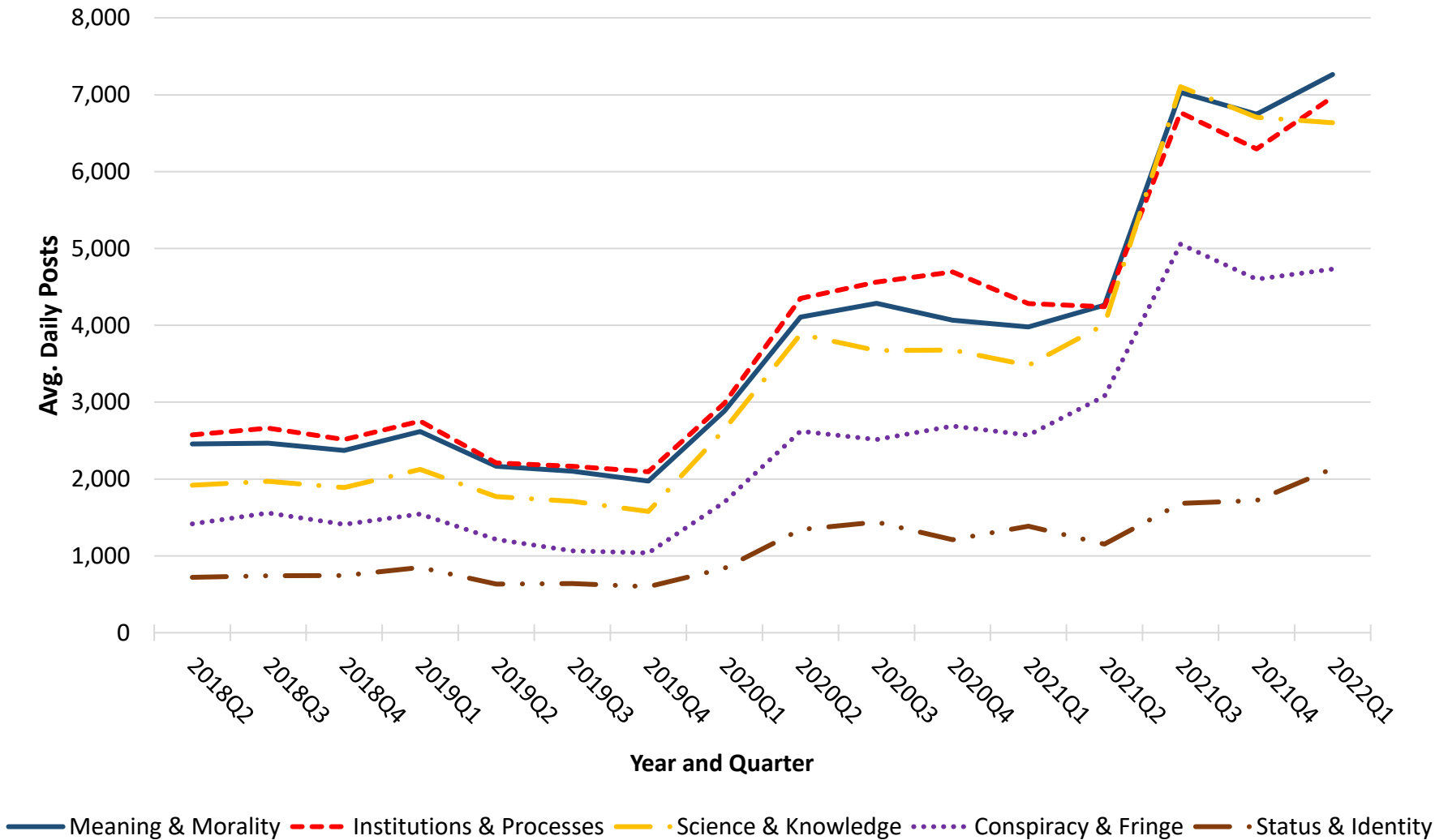


Notes: N=1,293,387 estimated posts.

Section II
Metaframes and Communities:
50+ Word Posts Only

Figure 9

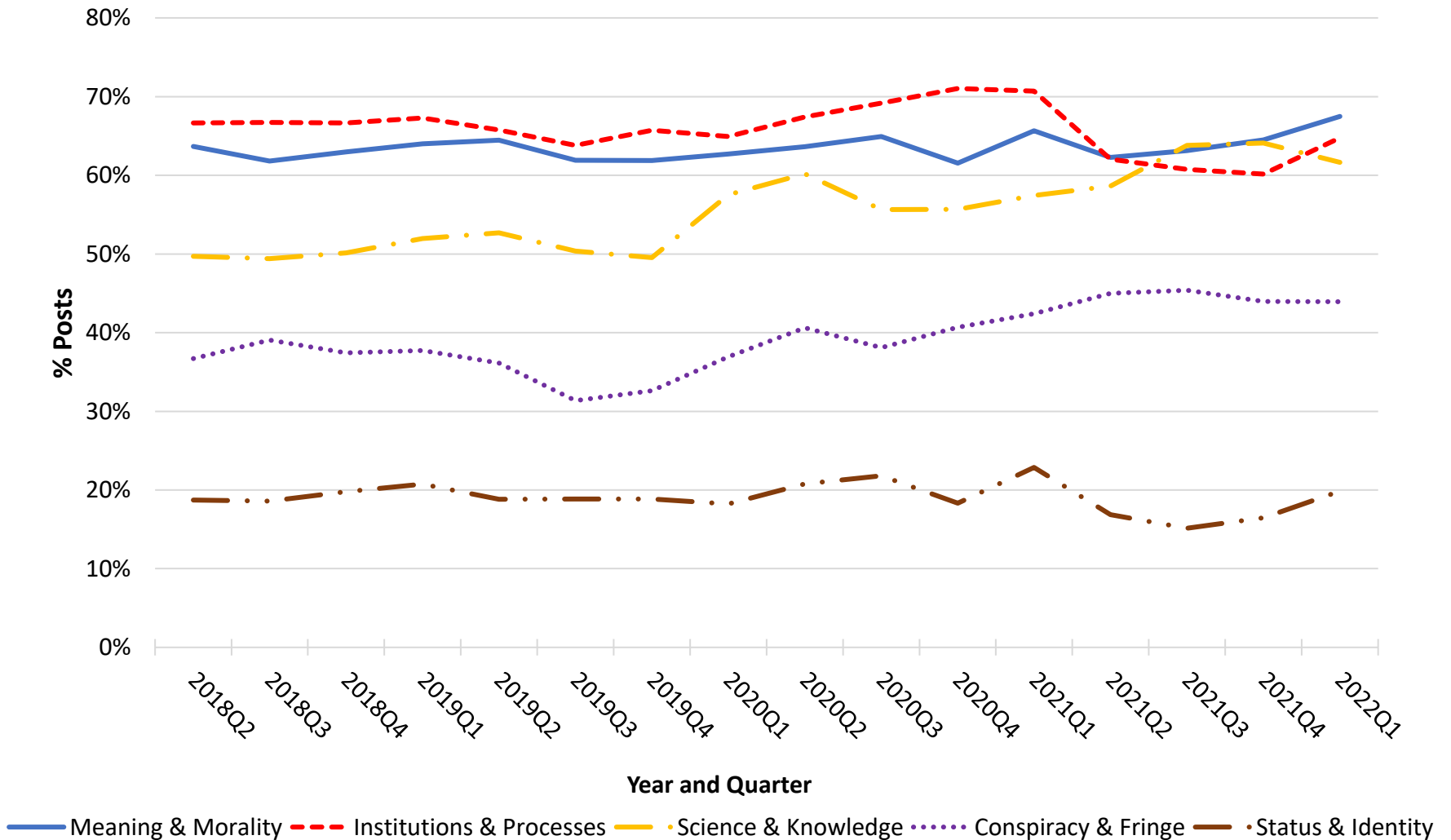
Avg. Daily Posts by Metaframe by Quarter since April 2018



Note: Metaframe definitions and an abbreviated mapping of frames can be found in Appendices A and B.

Figure 10

% Posts by Metaframe by Quarter since April 2018



Note: Metaframe definitions and an abbreviated mapping of metaframes can be found in Appendices A and B.

Figure 11

Avg. Daily Posts for Meaning & Morality Frames by Quarter since April 2018

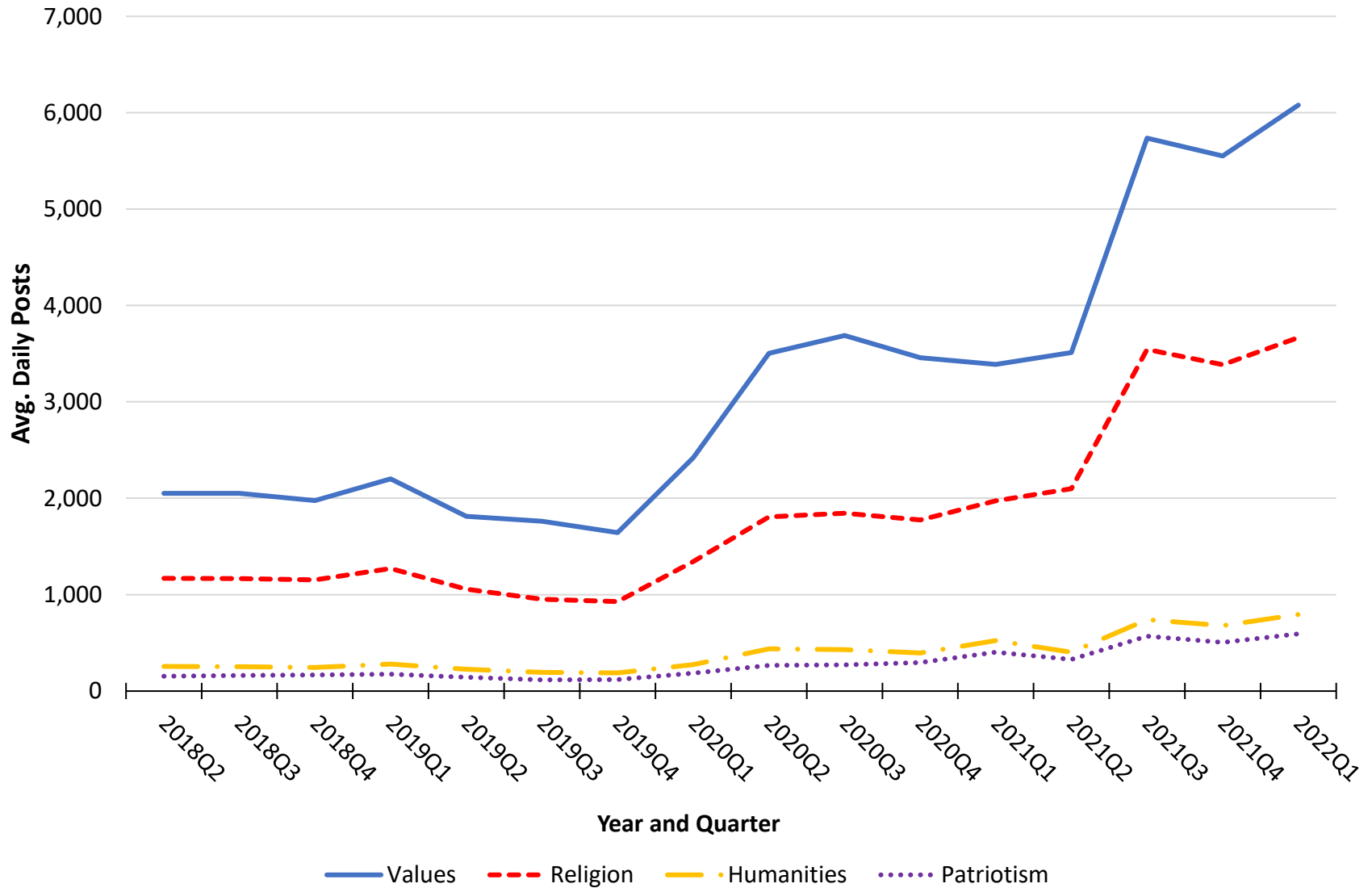


Figure 12

Avg. Daily Posts for Institutions & Processes Frames by Quarter since April 2018

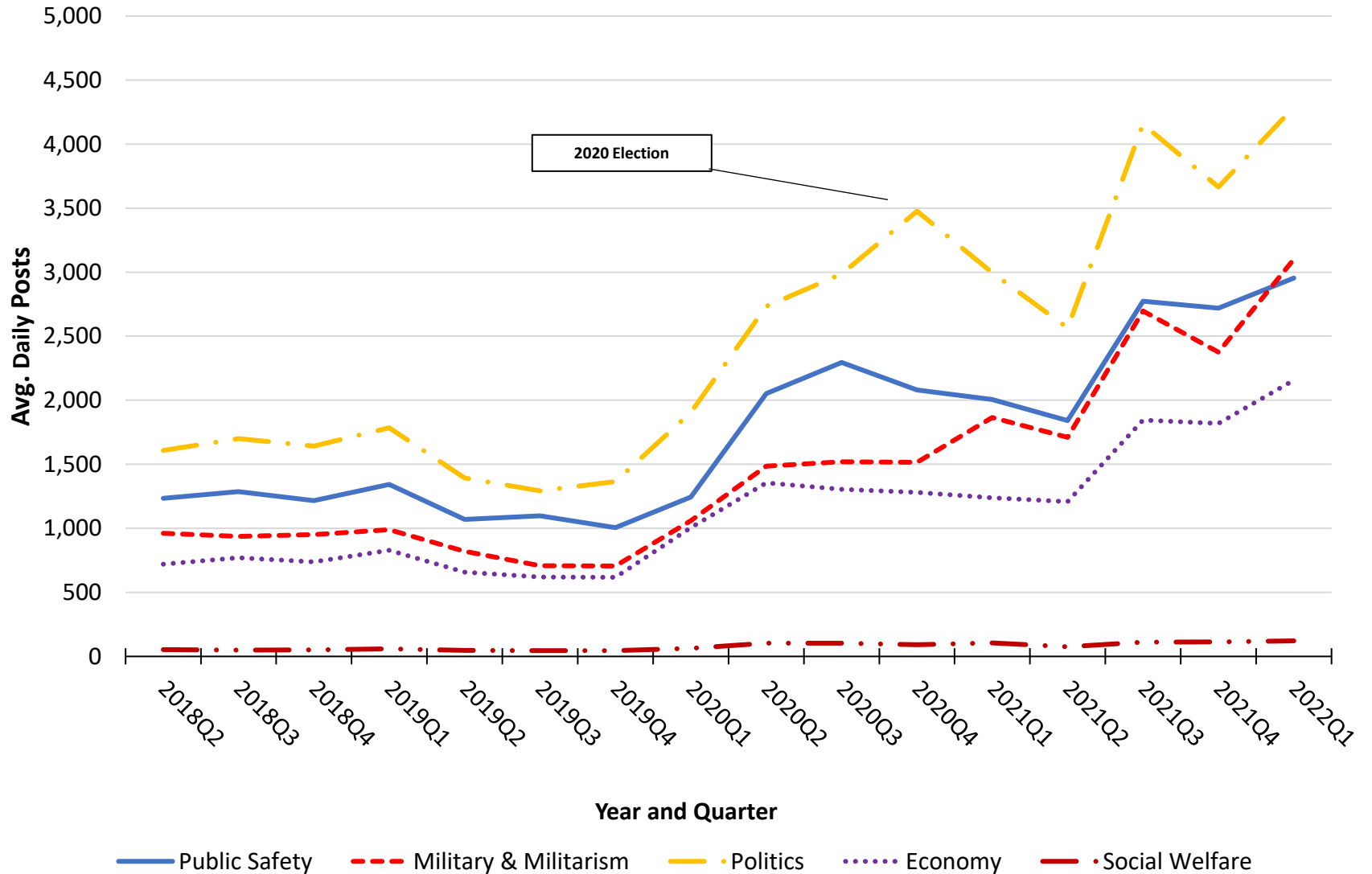


Figure 13

Avg. Daily Posts for Science & Knowledge Frames by Quarter since April 2018

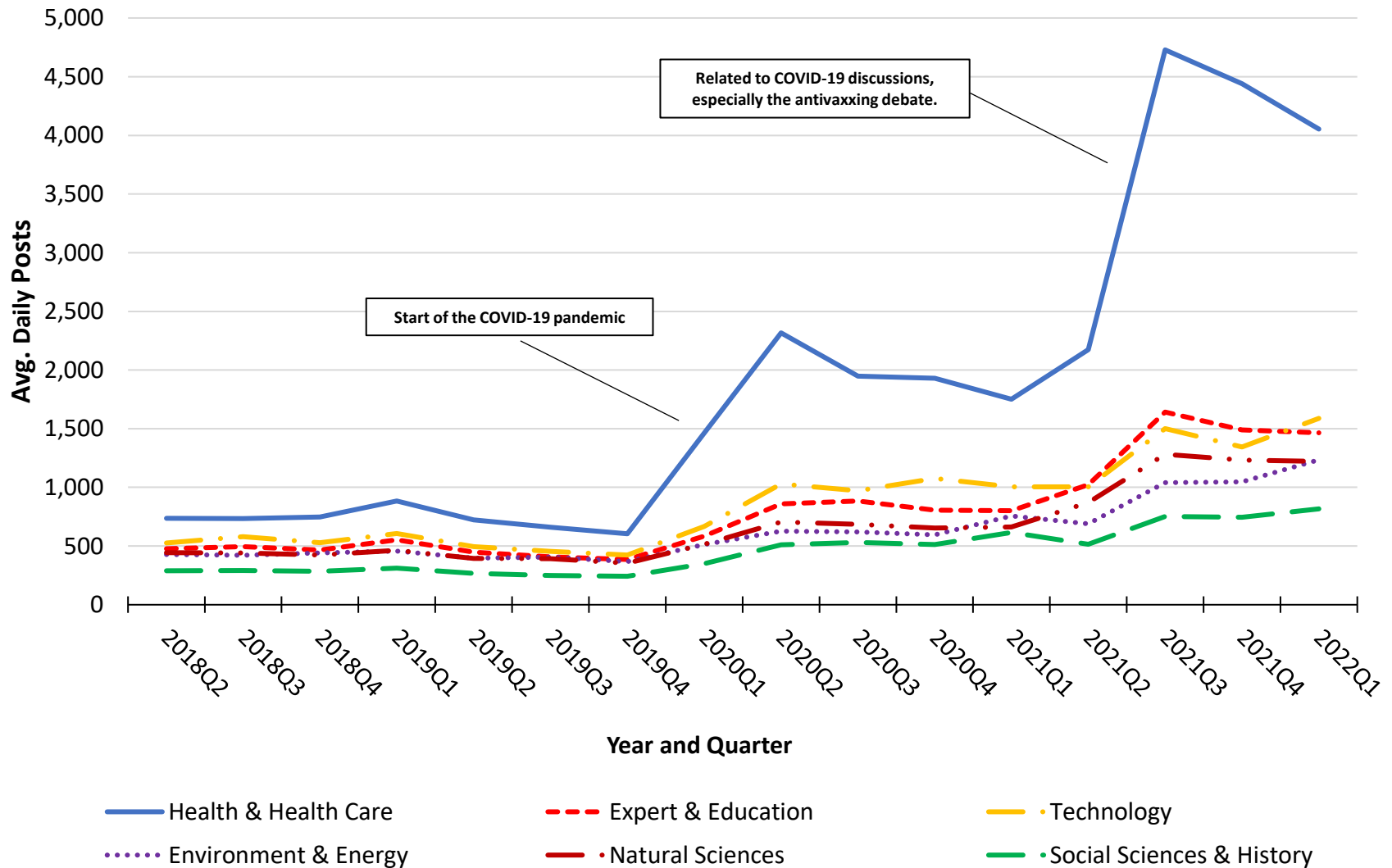


Figure 14

Avg. Daily Posts for Conspiracy & Fringe Frames by Quarter since April 2018

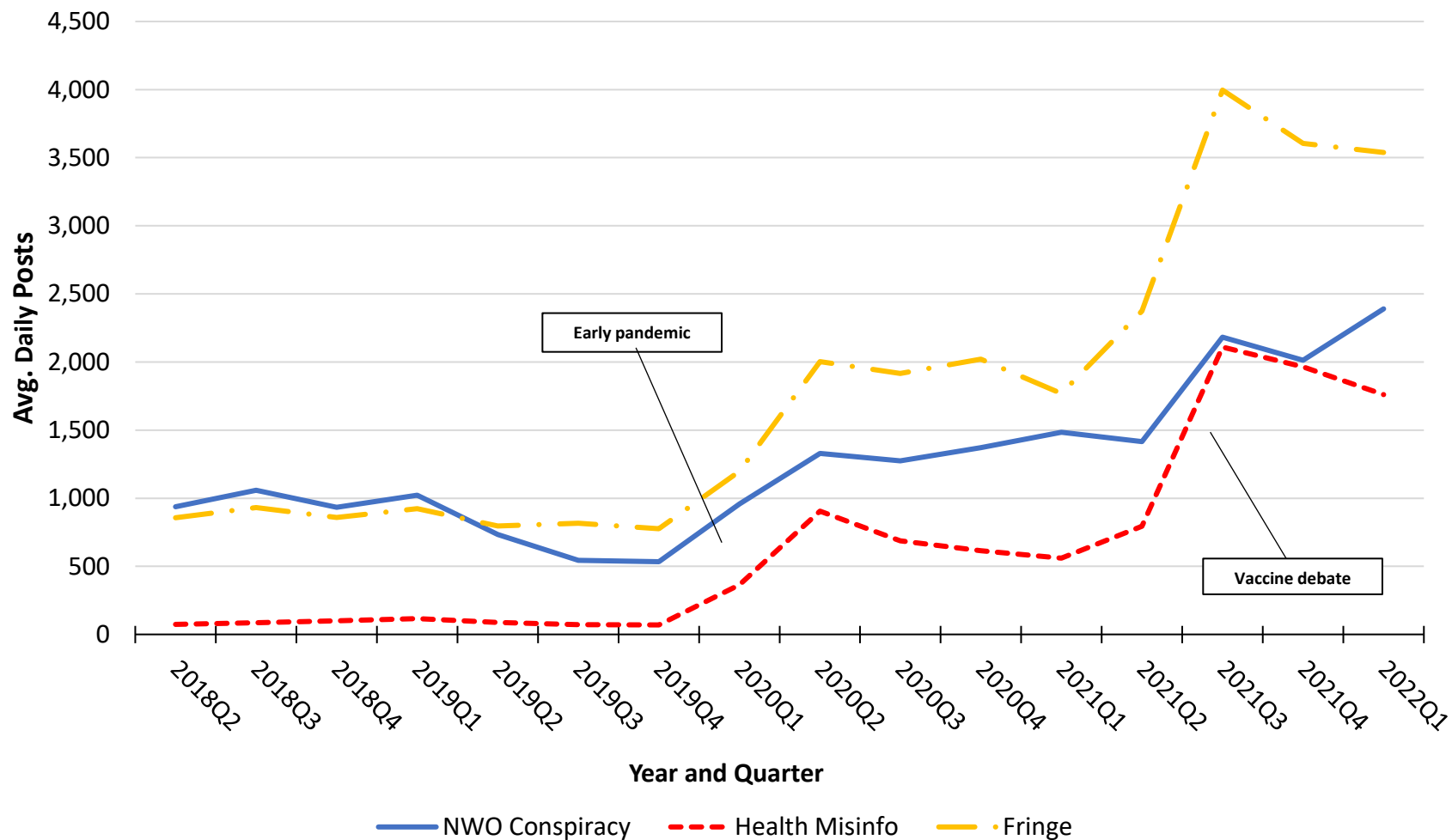


Figure 15

Avg. Daily Posts for Status & Identity Frames by Quarter since April 2018

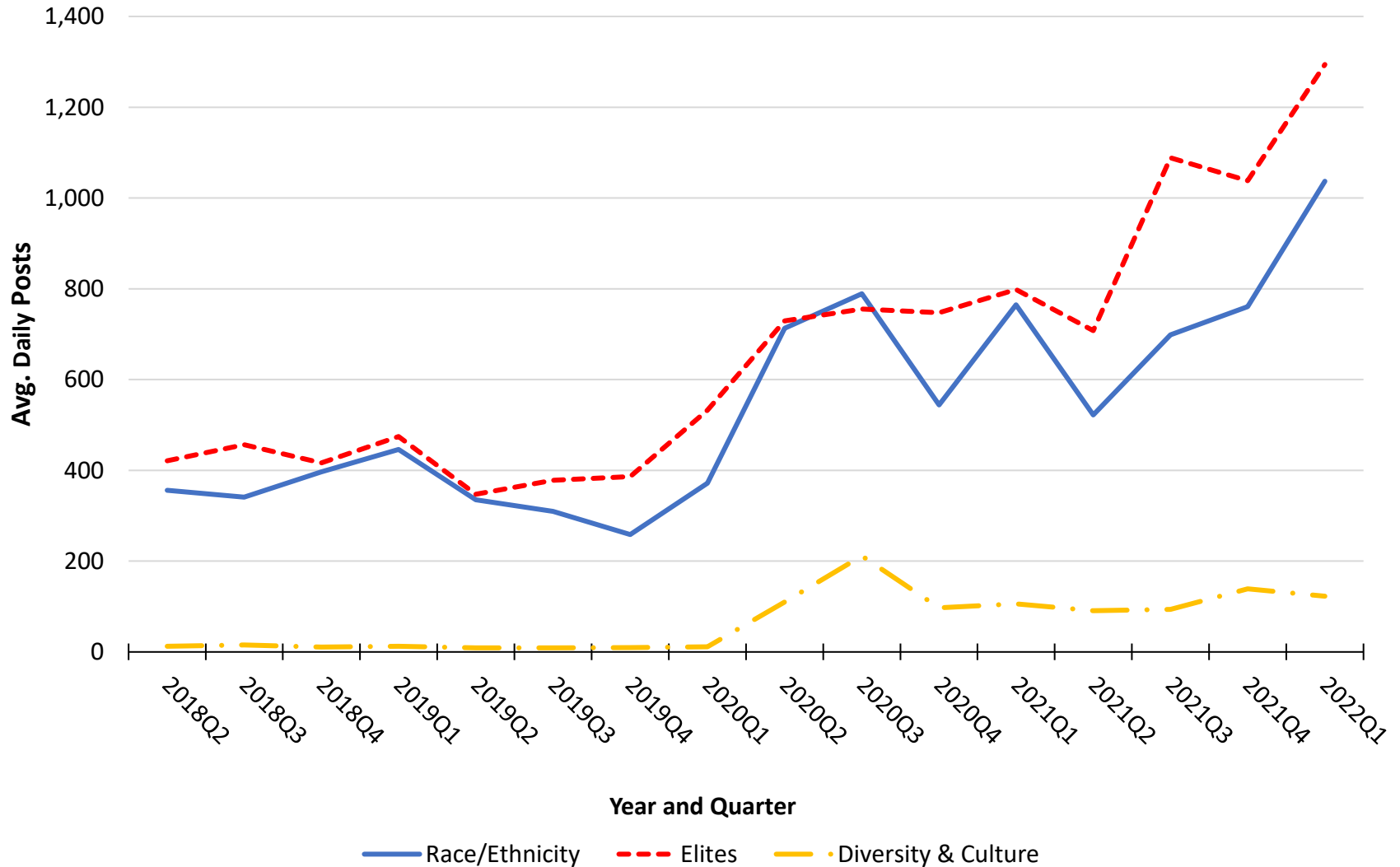


Figure 16

Avg. Daily Posts by Online Community by Quarter since April 2018

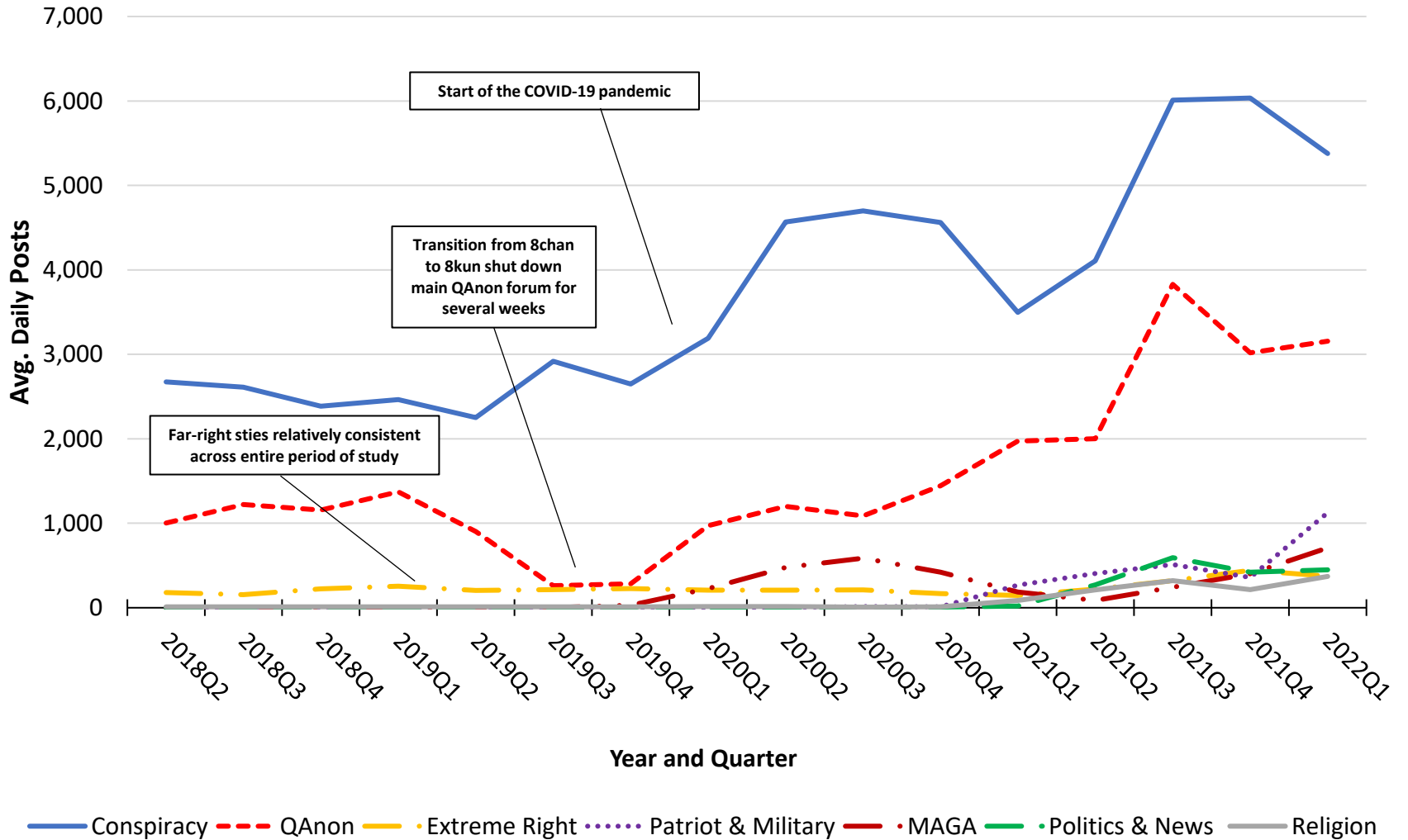
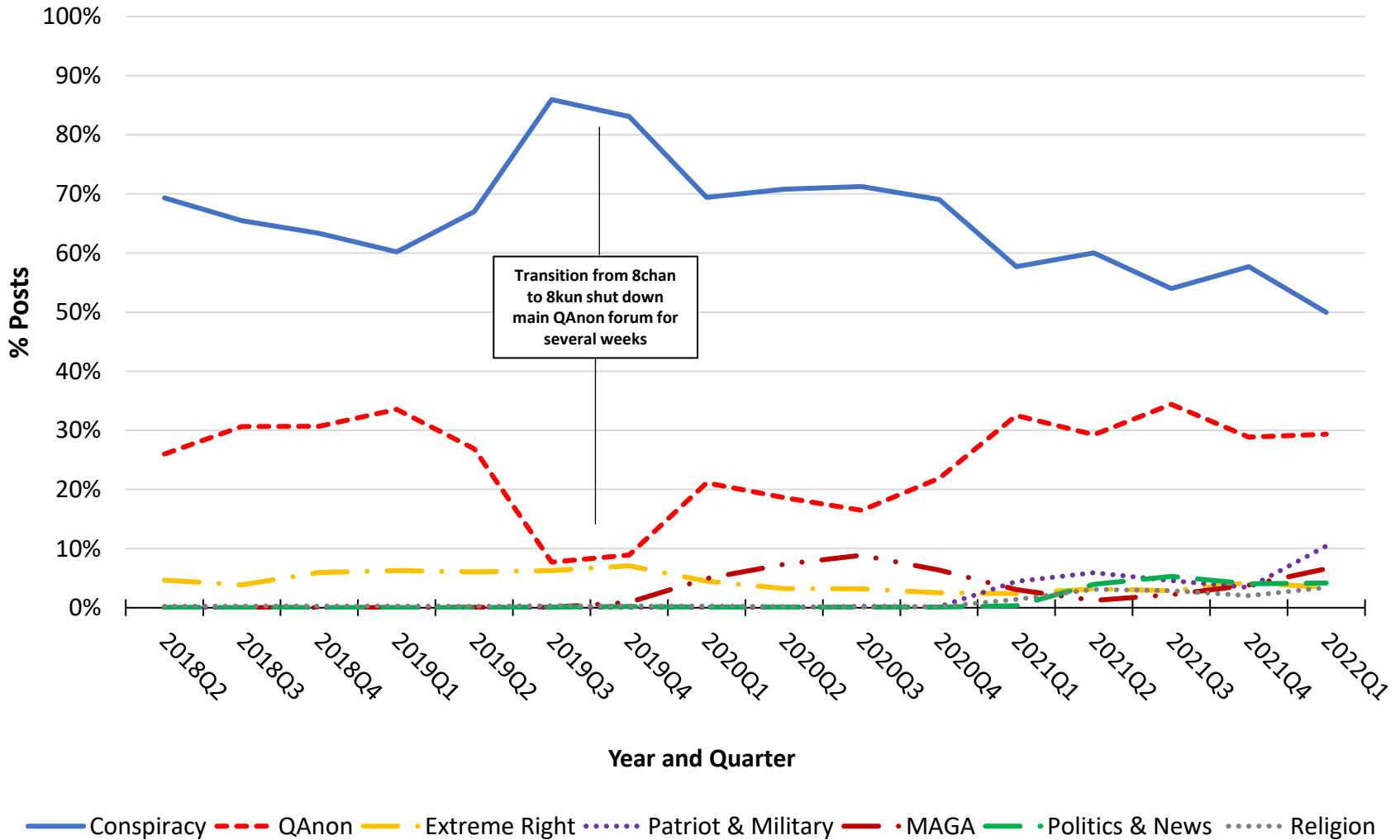


Figure 17

% Posts by Online Community by Quarter since April 2018



Section III
Select Frame Components:
50+ Word Posts

Figure 18

Avg. Daily Posts for Public Safety Subframes by Quarter since 2018

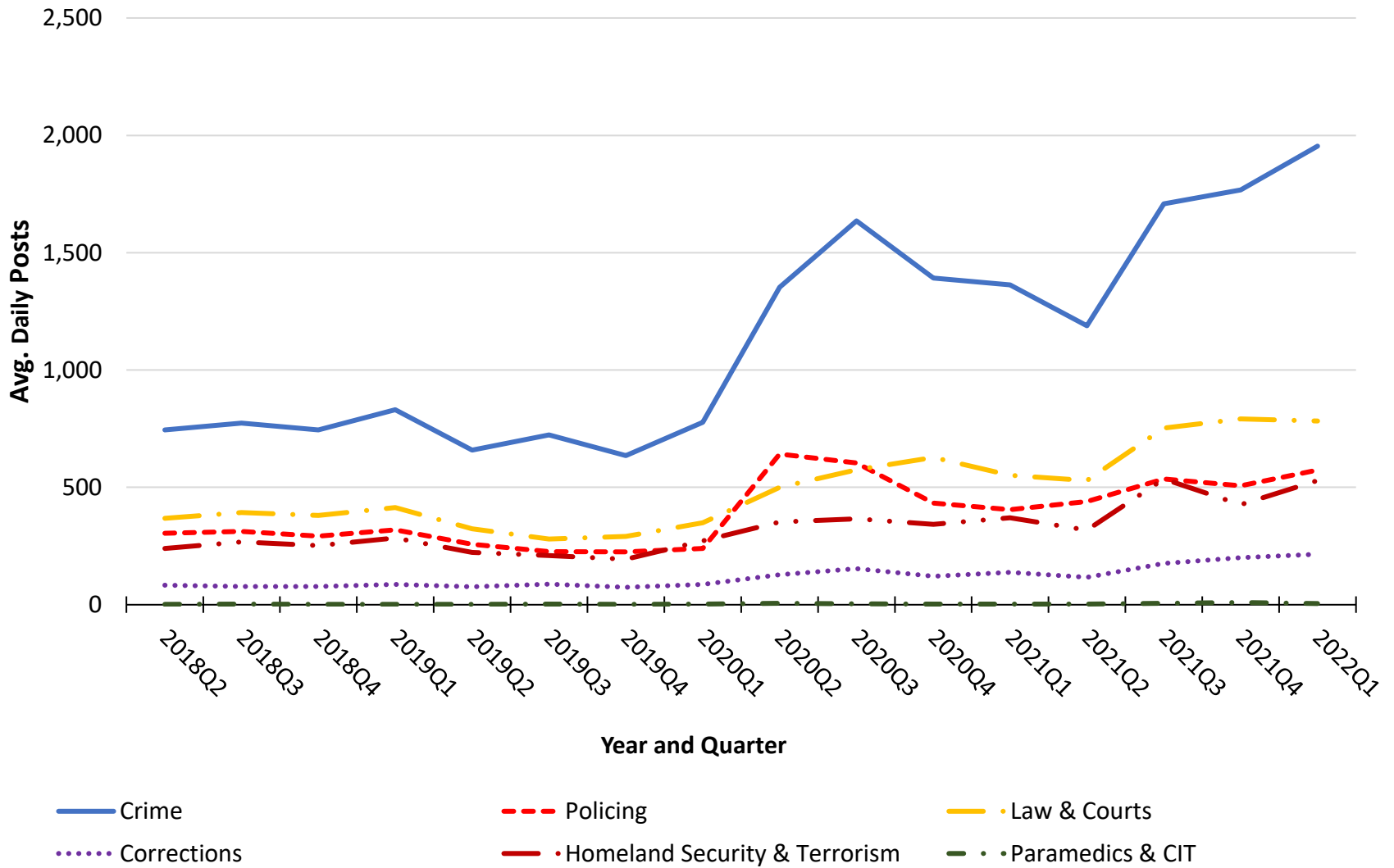


Figure 19

Avg. Daily Posts for NWO Conspiracy Subframes by Quarter since April 2018

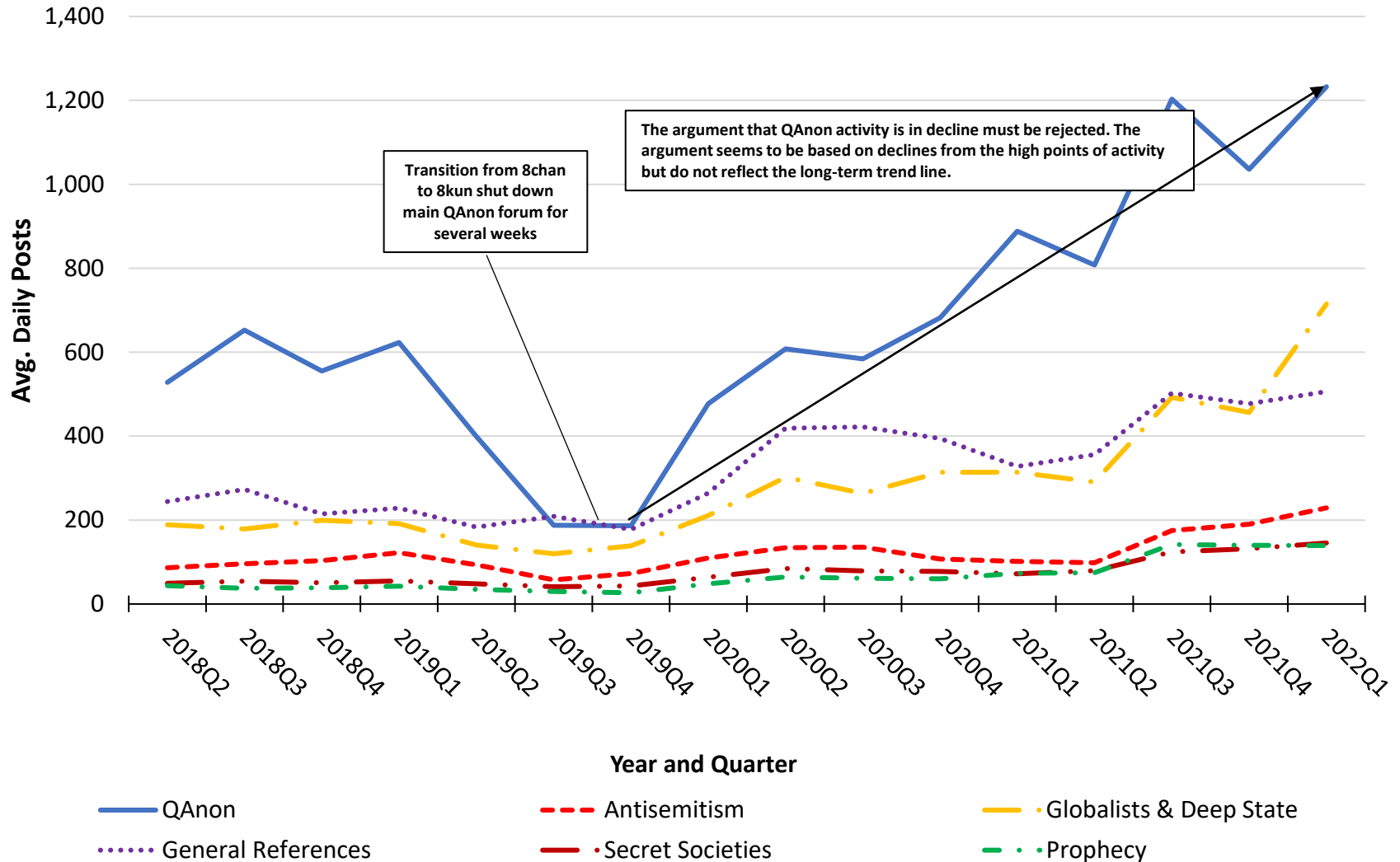


Figure 20

% Posts by QAnon Bits by Quarter since 2018

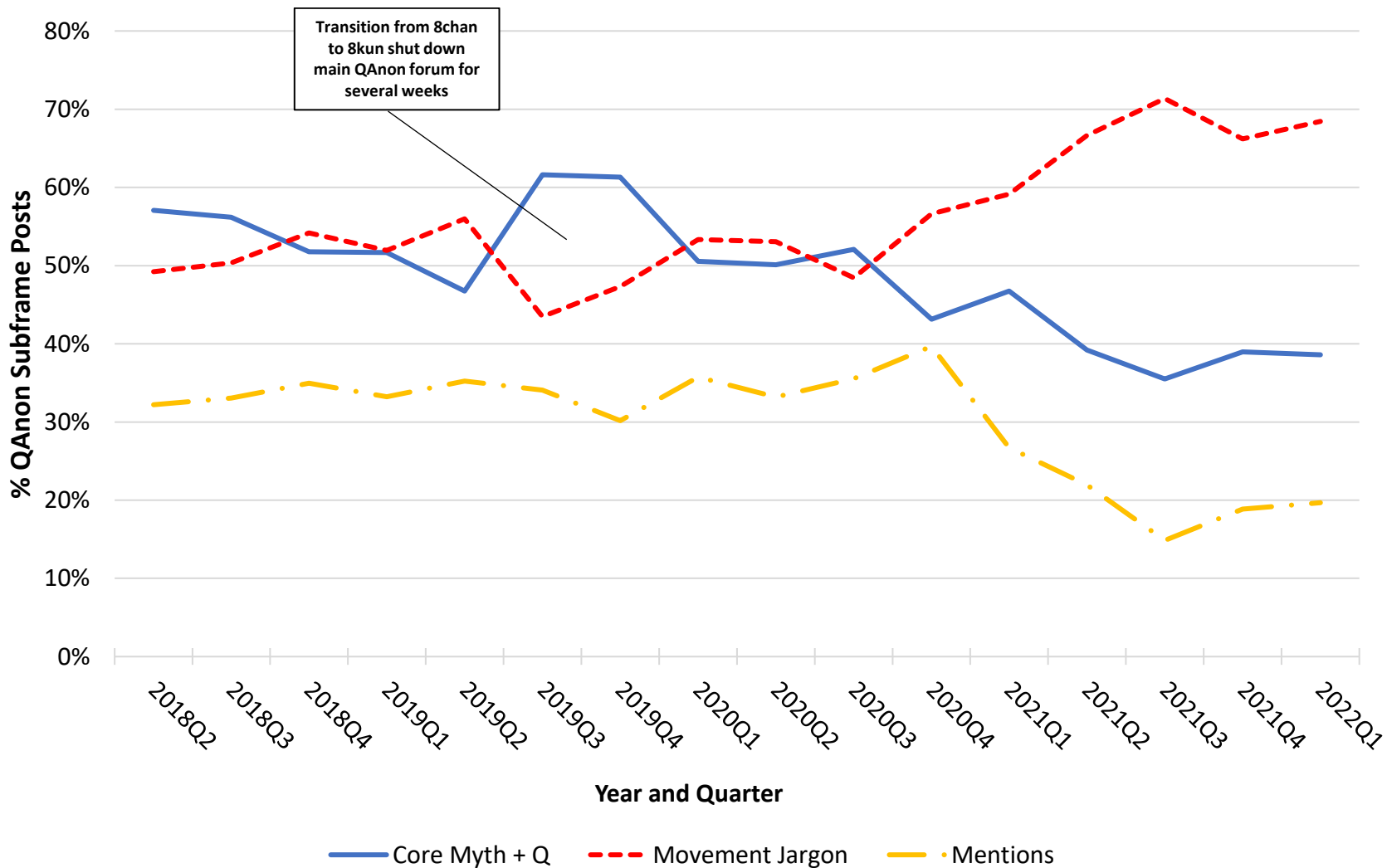
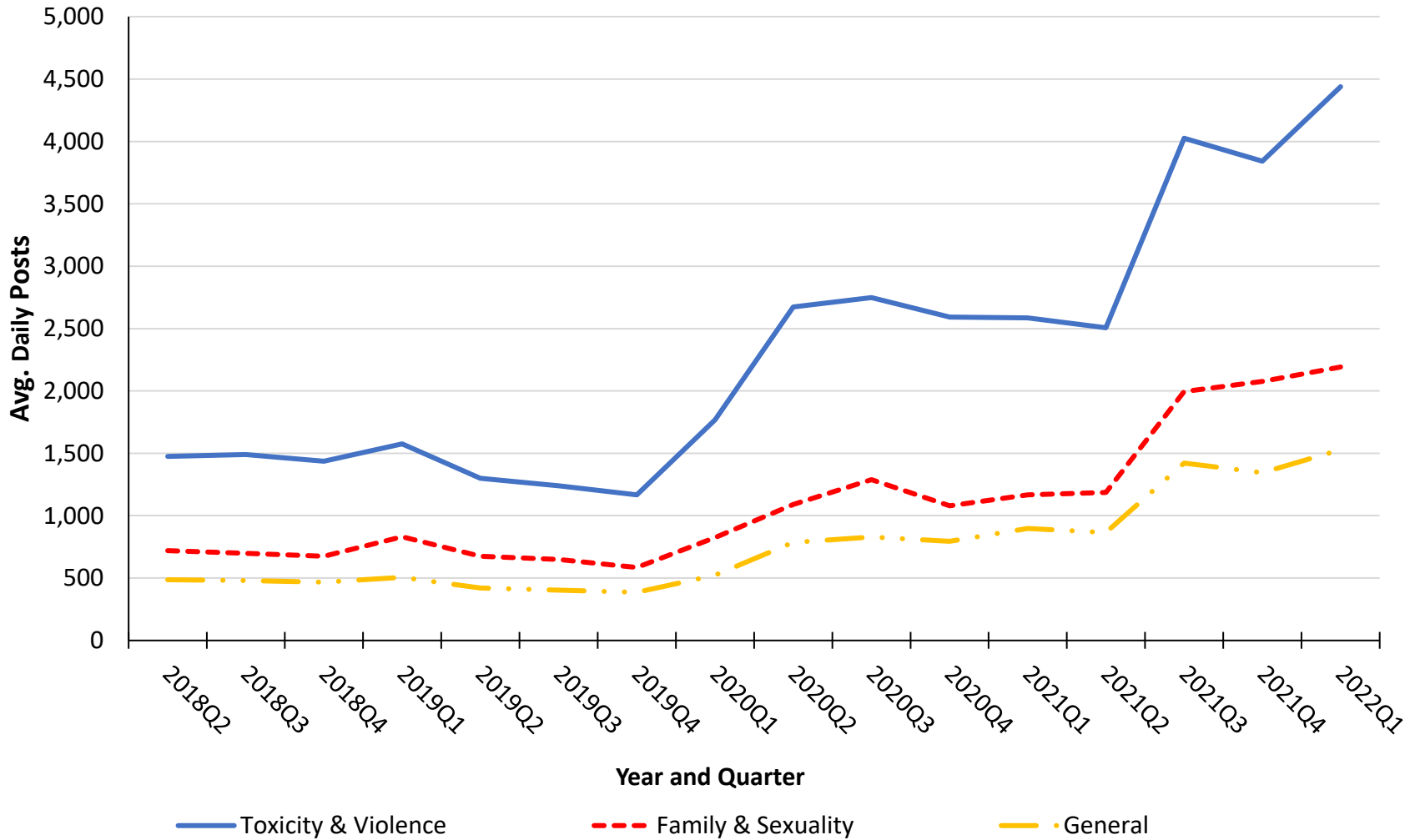


Figure 21

Avg. Daily Posts for Values Subframes by Quarter since April 2018



Note: Reference to a topic can be for or against the value system. Family & Sexuality includes LGBTQ and abortion discussions.

Figure 22

Avg. Daily Posts for Toxicity & Violence Bits by Quarter since April 2018

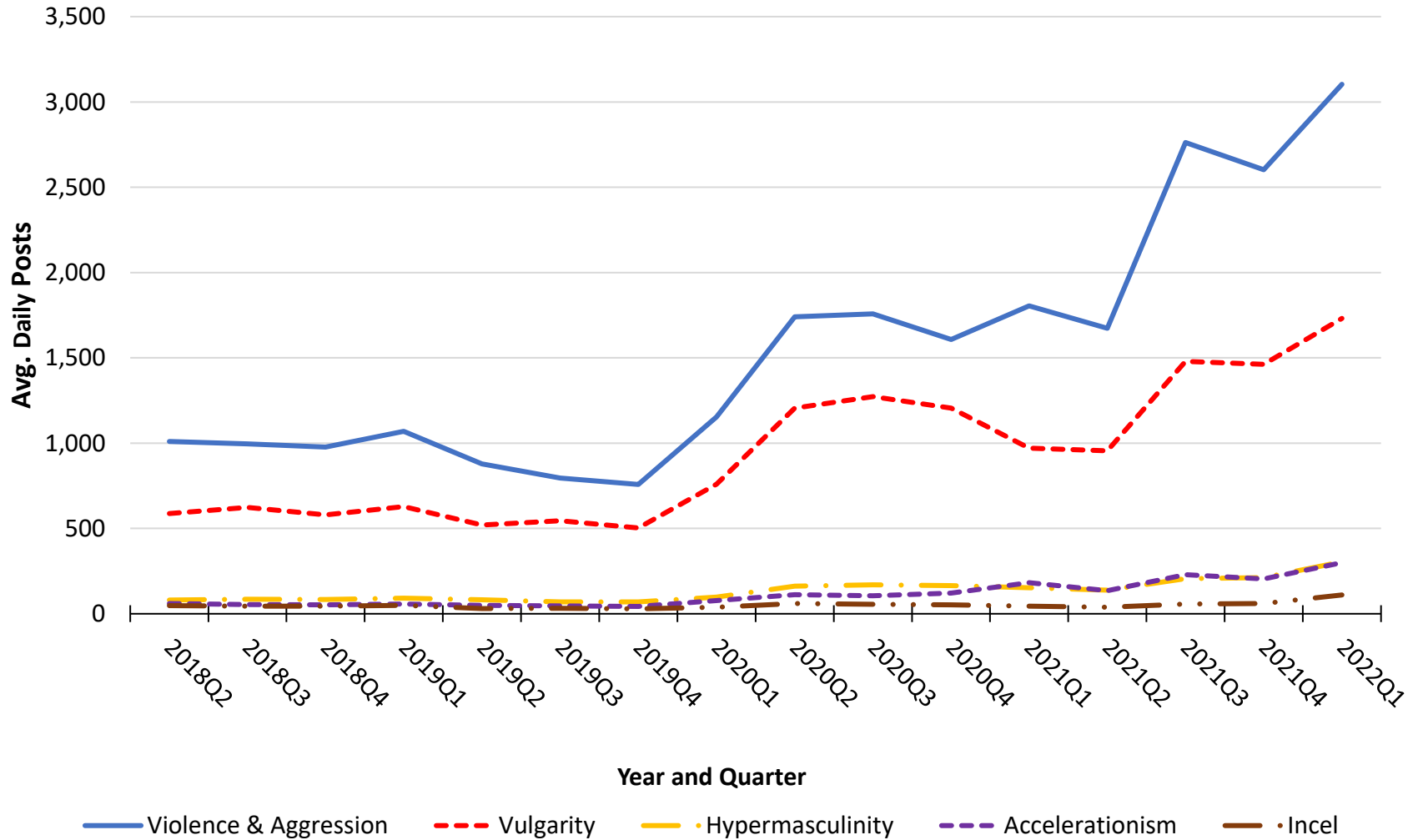


Figure 23

Avg. Daily Posts for Religion Subframes by Quarter since April 2018

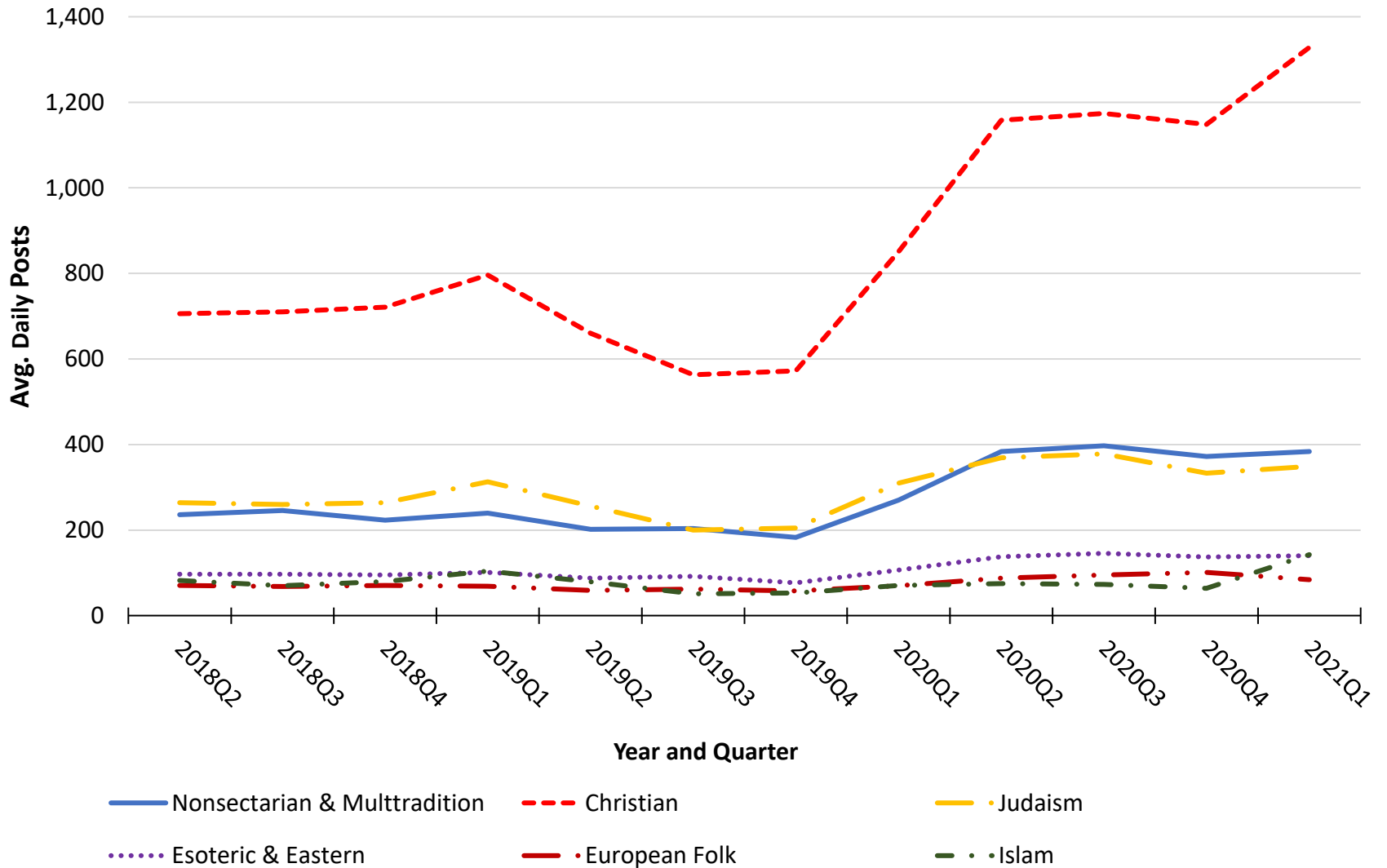


Figure 24

References to Antisemitism by Quarter since April 2018

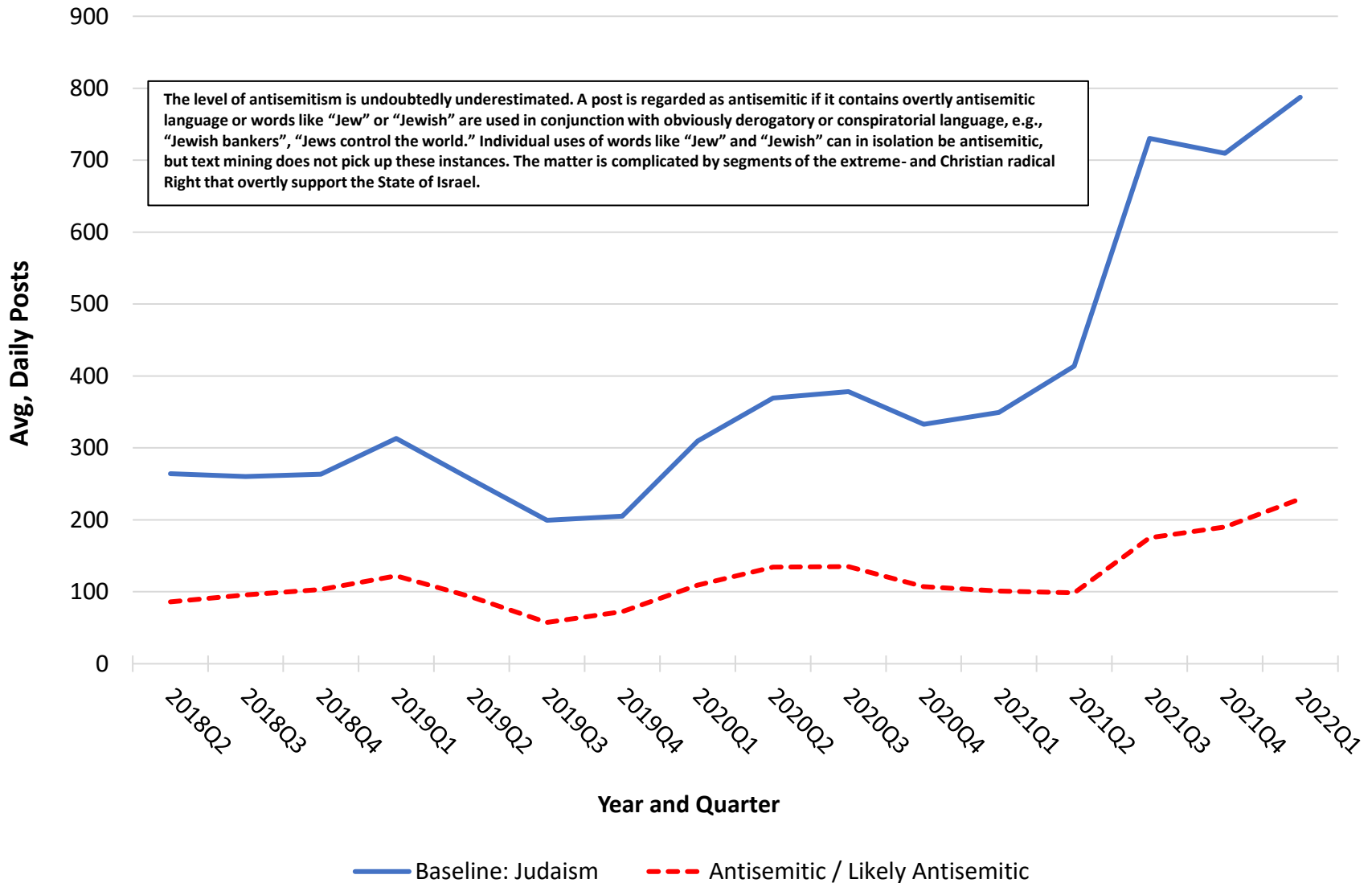
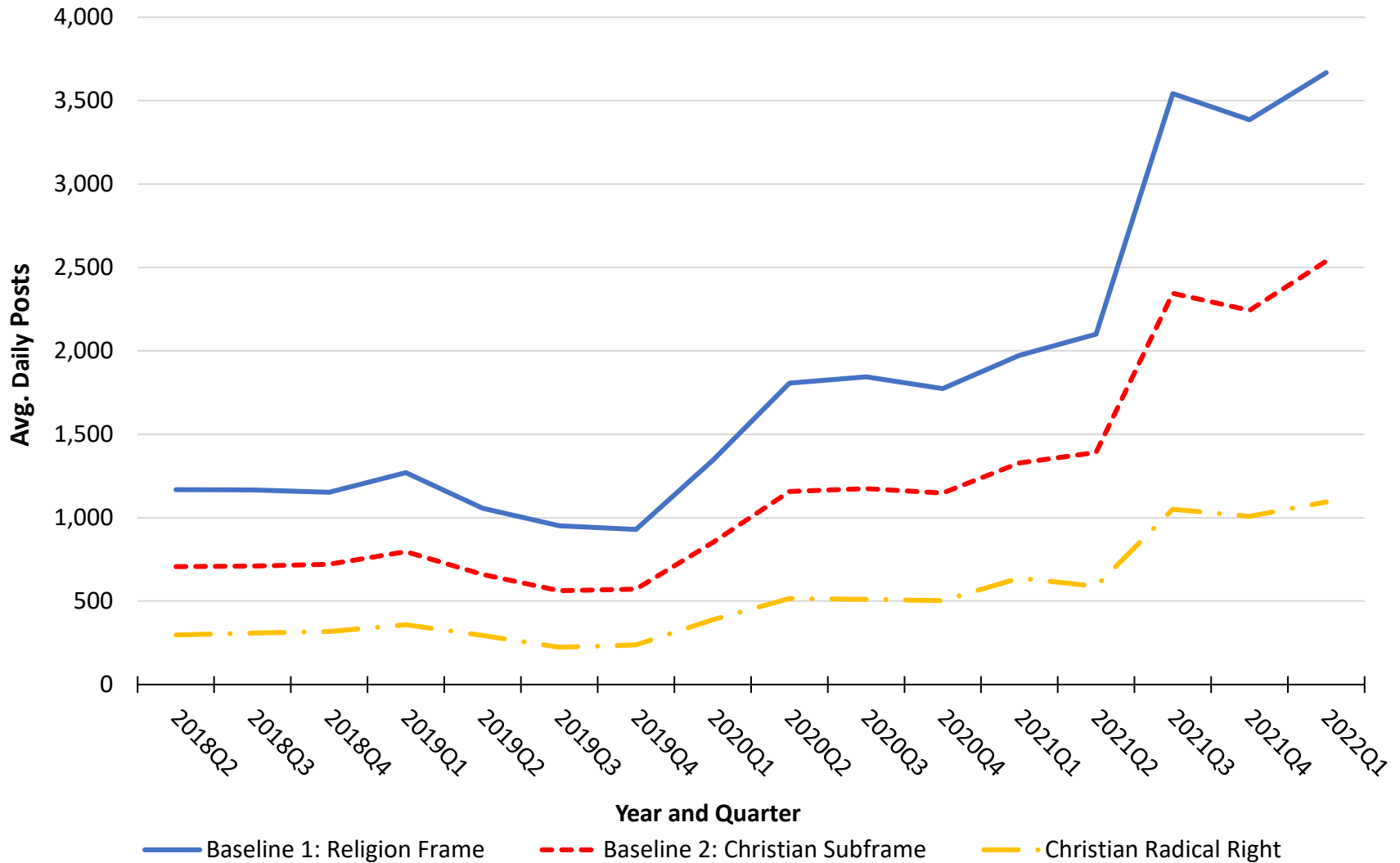


Figure 25

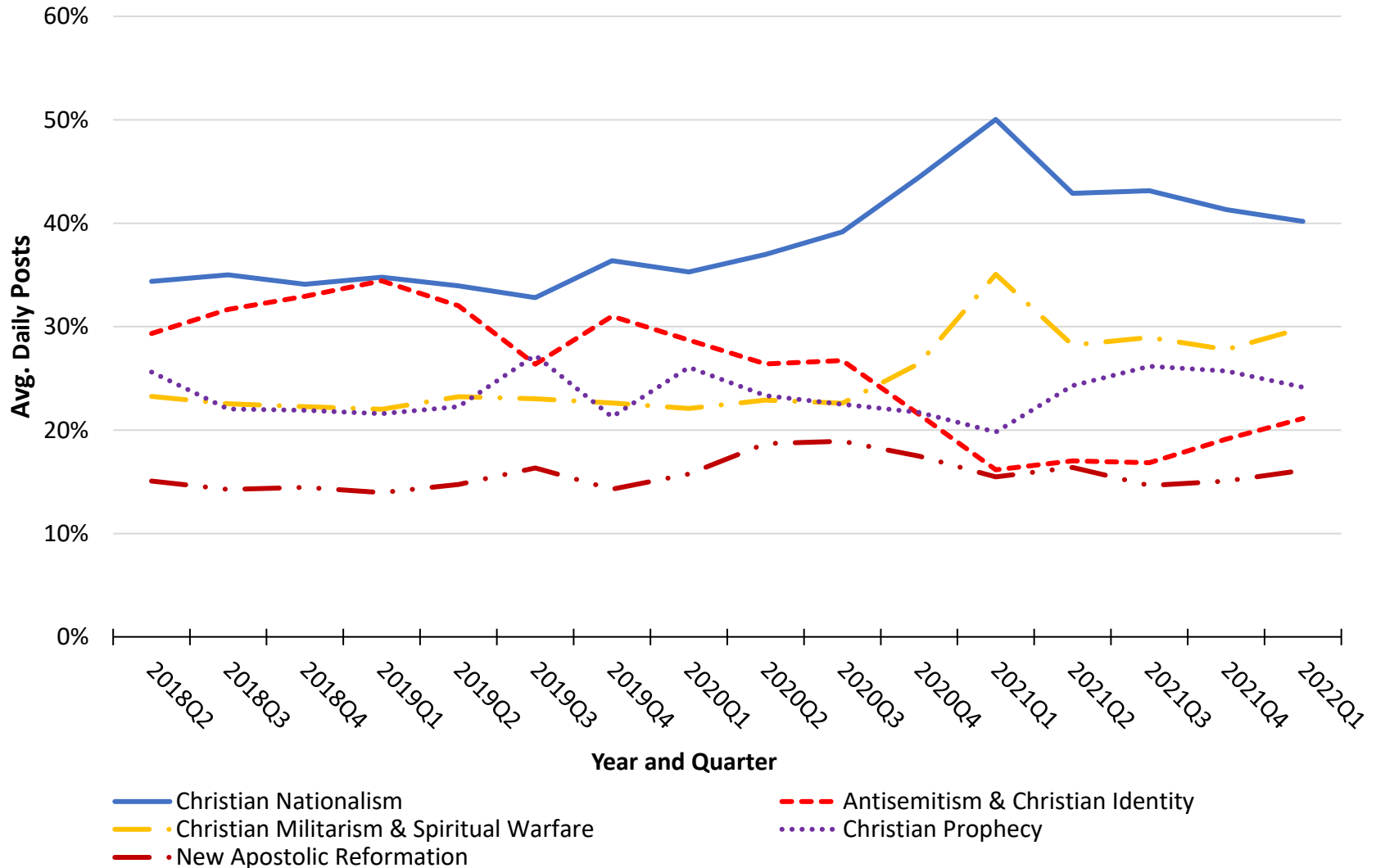
Avg. Daily Posts for Christian Radical Right by Quarter since April 2018



Note: The Christian subframe was a subset of the religion frame. The Christian radical right was a subset of the Christian subframe, and its components are listed on Figure 22.

Figure 26

% Components of Christian Radical Right by Month since April 2018



Note: These categories of content are used to identify the Christian radical right. In isolation, they would not necessarily be radical in nature, but the clusterings of their use can often be interpreted as radicalism. An additional category, Christian reconstructionism, is not shown here due to its small size.

Section IV
Current Events and Research Topics:
50+ Word Posts

Figure 27

Potentially Violent Discourse (PVD) by Quarter since April 2018

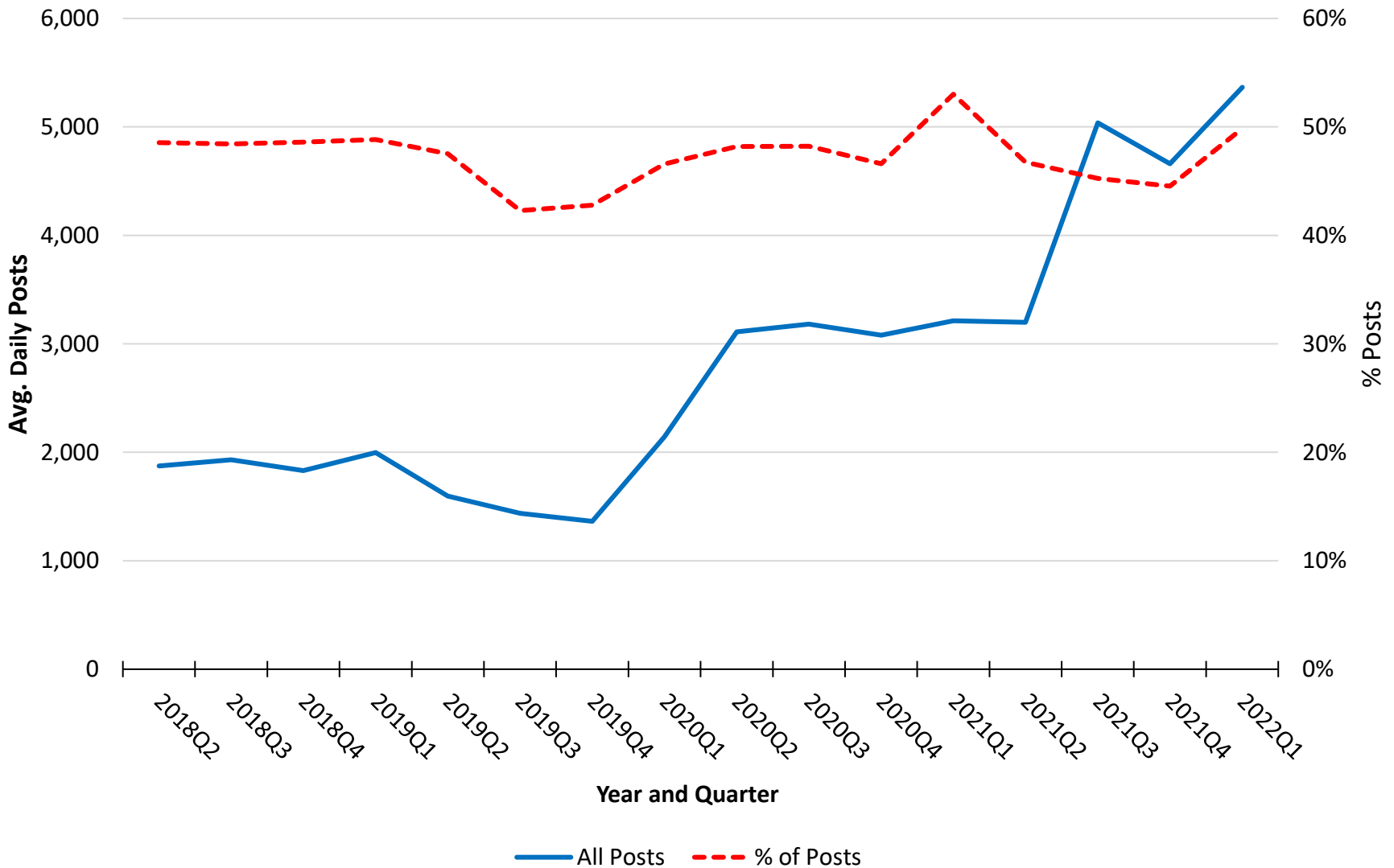


Figure 28

Components of PVD by Quarter since April 2018

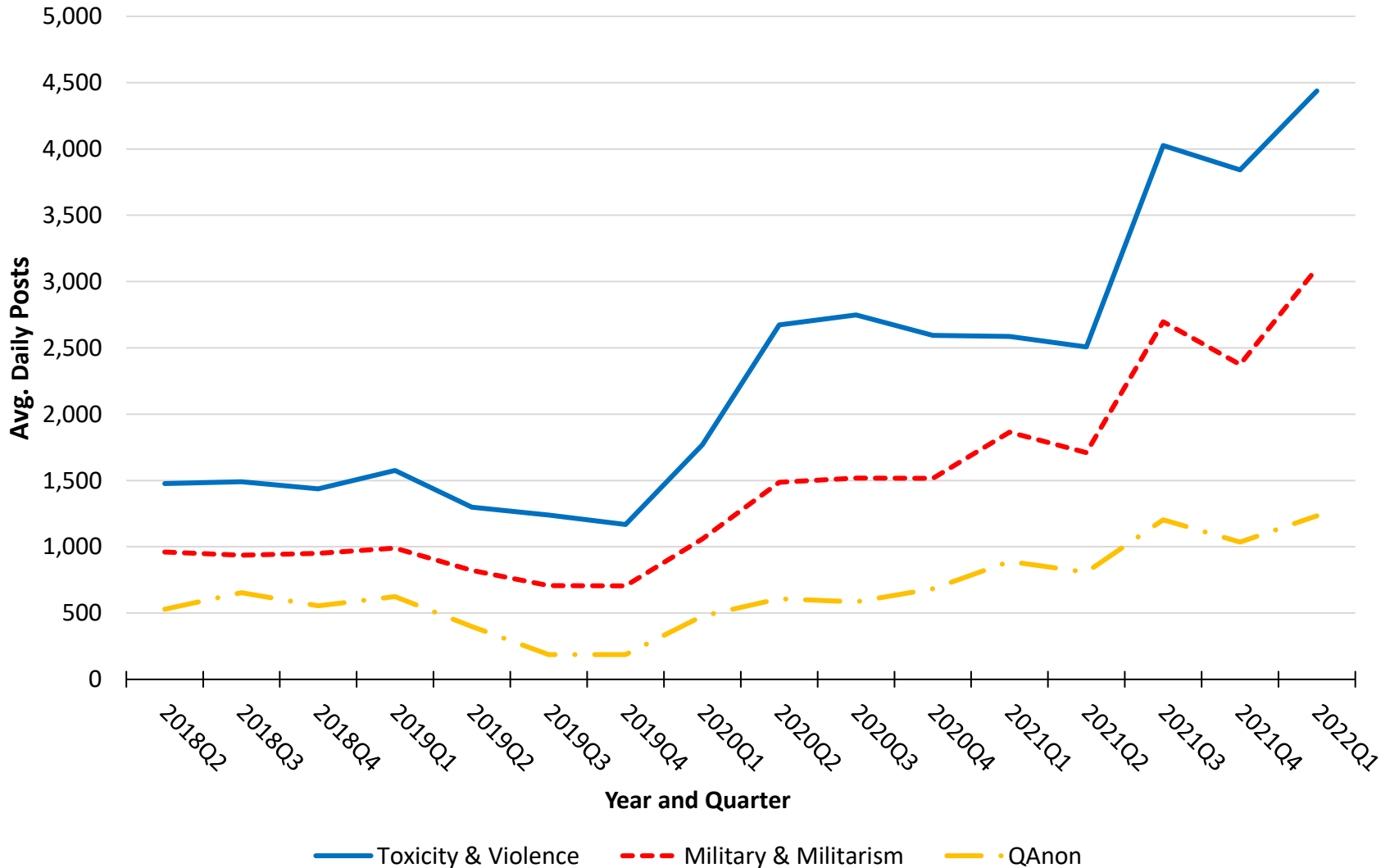


Figure 29

Avg. Daily Posts for Religion Frame w/in PVD by Quarter since April 2018

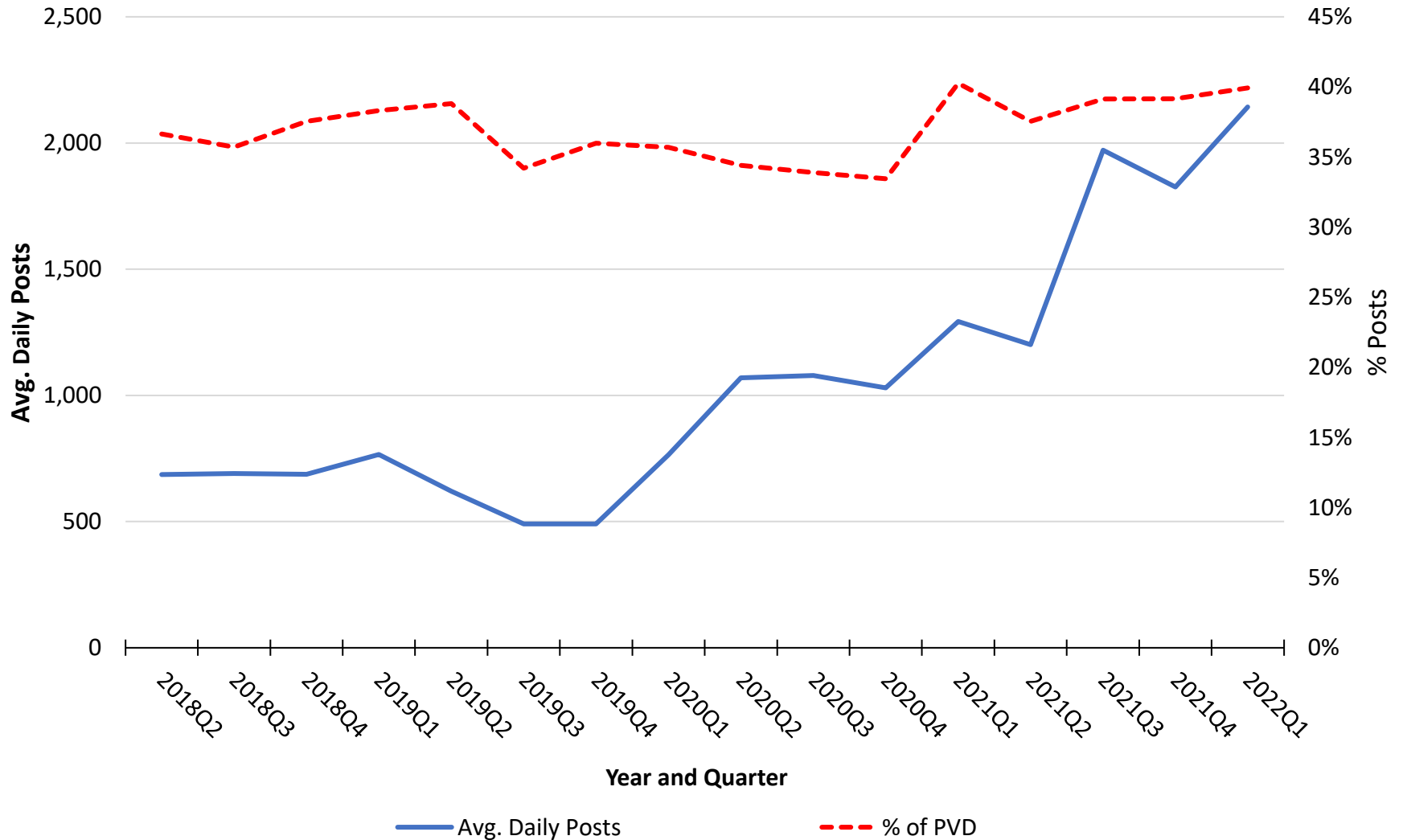


Figure 30

Religion Frame as % of PVD Components by Quarter since April 2018

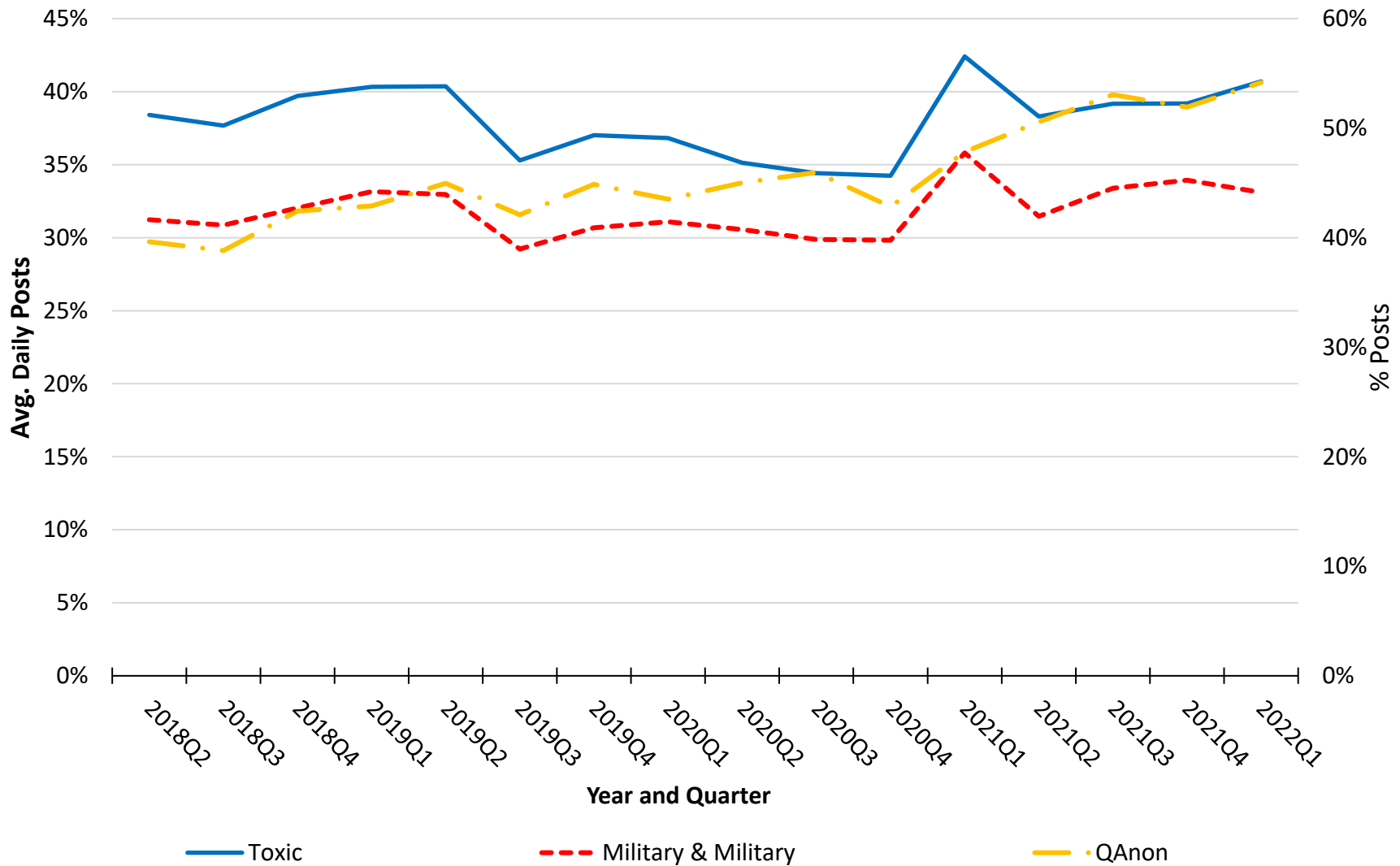


Figure 31

Avg. Daily Posts for Current Event Topics by Quarter since April 2018

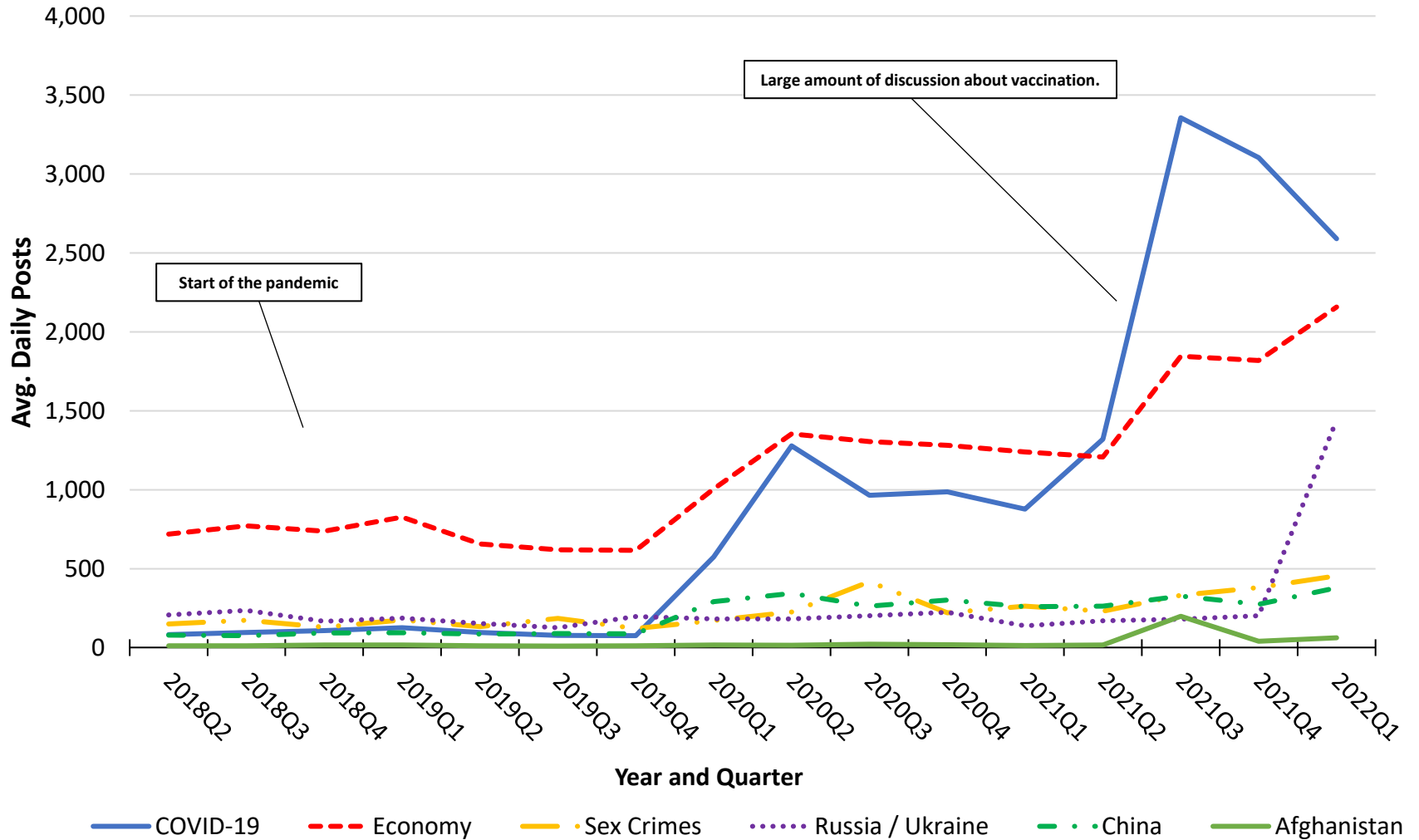
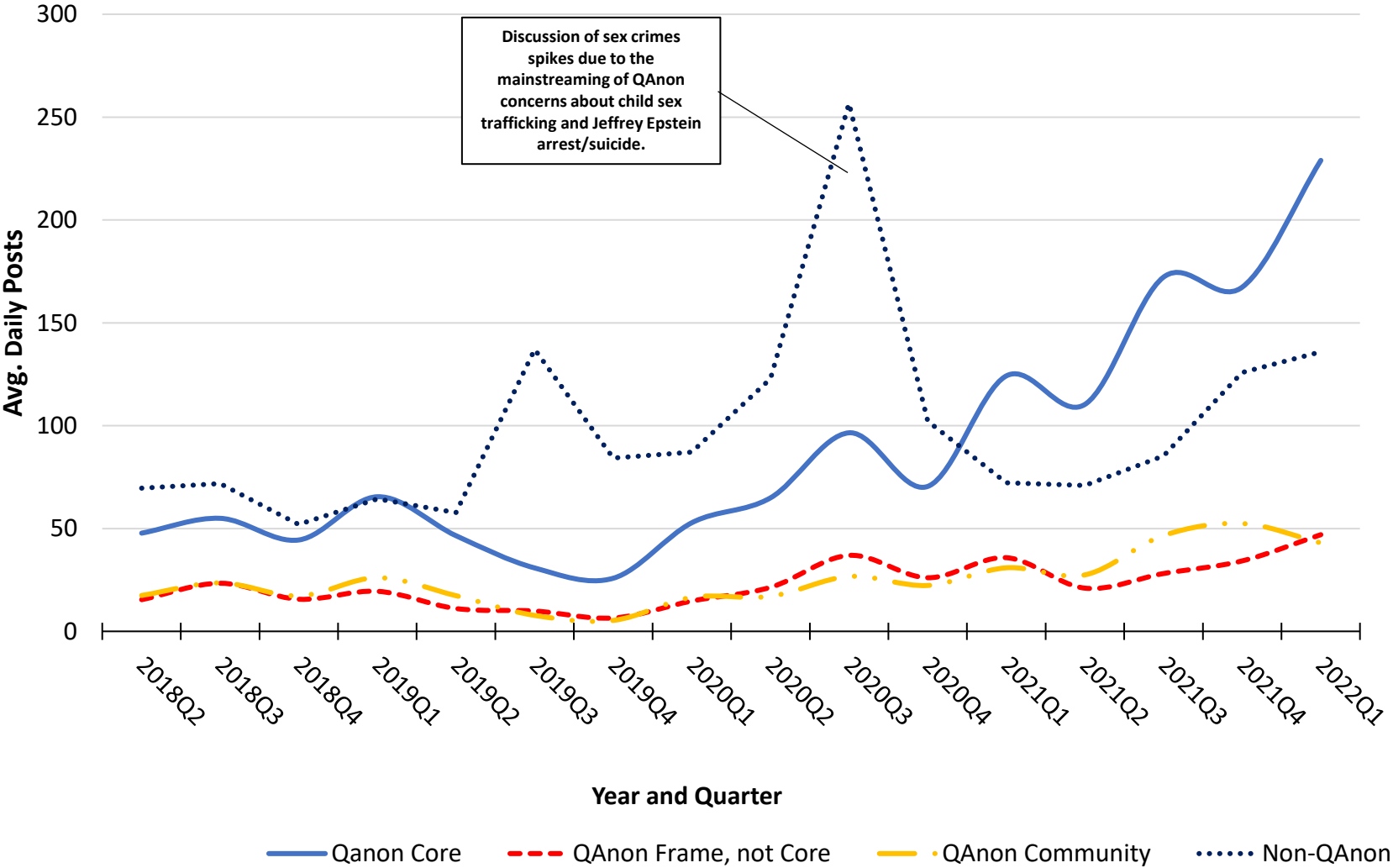


Figure 32

Avg. Daily Posts for Sex Crime References by Quarter since April 2018



Section V

Background and Methods

Appendix A

Definitions

Post: An individual contribution to a discussion forum. Posts include texts, memes, and links to videos and web sites.

Average Daily Post: The average number of posts per day within a designated time unit (e.g., week, month).

Topic: A selected issue for study that is not classified as a frame and is not included in a metaframe.

Frame: A frame or topic, regardless a person's position on the subject. An abbreviated mapping of frames can be found in Appendix B.

Metaframe: A cluster of themes or topics related to social position, identity, or process

Status & Identity: References to social position—social statuses and societal elites, including references to secret societies and cabals, and efforts to differentiate social groups on characteristics such as race/ethnicity and religion.

Institutional Metaframe: Core macro-level institutions used to regulate and defend the social order.

Meaning & Morality Metaframe: Personal values and beliefs and the religious and philosophical systems that accompany them.

Science & Technology Metaframe: Science, technology and knowledge as well as alternative and fringe beliefs

Community: Forums built around a particular emphasis. Posts are not limited to the emphasis, and posts about the emphasis can also appear outside the community.

Pre 1/6 Forum: Discussion forums established before January 6, 2021.

Post 1/6 Forum: Discussion forums established after January 6, 2021. Several forums moved to one of the study platforms after January 6 due to the banning of certain types of extremism on some social-media platforms and /or the unexpected demise of the first incarnation of Parler.

Appendix B

Frame Map

Metaframe	Frame	Subframe	Bitframe
<i>Cluster of themes or topics related to social position, identity, or process</i>	<i>Theme or topic</i>	<i>Points of view or specific language</i>	<i>Points at which research's interest or volume of material merits further designation</i>
Status & Identity <i>References to social position—social statuses and societal elites, including references to secret societies and cabals, and efforts to differentiate social groups on characteristics such as race/ethnicity and religion.</i>	Diversity & Culture Elites White Supremacism	Examples: Antiimmigration Antisemitism	None currently used
Institutional <i>Core macro-level institutions used to regulate and defend the social order</i>	Economy Military Politics Public Safety Social Welfare	Examples: Socialism U.S. political figures Western political language Individual crimes Police actions	Constitution (politics frame) Third party (politics frame) Biden (politics frame) Trump (politics frame) Police reform (pub. safety frame)
Meaning & Morality <i>Personal values and beliefs and the religious and philosophical systems that accompany them</i>	Humanism Patriotism Religion Values	Examples: Nonsectarian words (“god”) Christian terms Family Values Toxicity (vulgarity and hypermasculinity)	Masculinity Sexuality
Science & Knowledge <i>Science, technology and knowledge</i>	Environment & Energy Expert & Education Health & Health Care Natural Science Social Science & History Technology	Examples: Electric cars Pollution Ancient civilizations UFOs	Examples: Addiction (health frame) Infectious diseases (health frame)
Conspiracy & Fringe <i>Conspiracy theories, alternative interpretations of science and history, misinformation</i>	NWO Conspiracy Theories Fringe	Deep State Globalists QAnon Cryptids UFOs	

Appendix C

Methods

Note: I'm working on more extensive documentation. Stata code for my search strings are now available on my personal website at <https://www.rogersperspectives.com/fringe-theories>.

Summary of Data Collection and Sources

The analysis is based on a purposive sample of community discussion forums taken from platforms known for their hosting of extreme and fringe views (Appendix D). All information is taken from either (1) public boards (which were scraped directly) or (2) semi-public boards (which were accessible through a non-restrictive password and from which posts were downloaded by an associated API or platform tool designed for exporting data). No board or other communication regarded as private, secret or confidential was accessed. A total of 109 discussion forums on 7 platforms were collected. Boards were selected based on considerations regarding number of posts, number of subscribers, and the level of discussion. If more data are incorporated, some discussion boards may be replaced and the historical timelines recalculated.

Webpages is downloaded from 8kun using HTTrack. Telegram provides an export tool. Screamingfrog is used to crawl Stormfront and Win communities. HTML from downloaded posts is parsed using third-party software, `htmlstext` for 8kun and `txtcollector` for Telegram. The parsing can be improved by custom designing a parser through a software such as Python, but this activity is not a short-term priority. The automated text analysis is conducted using Stata statistical software. Memes, videos, and documents are not analyzed but included in the denominator when calculating % of overall posts if regarded as part of a post on their host site. Frame designations are not mutually exclusive. There is precedent in the academic literature for removing short posts given the inability to code them, but the segmenting of the posts may not happen until the data is further understood, if the posts are removed at all. The percent of posts coded can be found in Appendix E.

Standardization across different time units (e.g., day, week, month) is attained through the use of daily numbers or aggregate daily numbers. Most timelines are based on aggregated weekly data converted to average daily posts.

The history of an entire frame is recalculated when edits to search strings are made. The most up-to-date version of the code is used any time a report is made, and each report contains the historical restatement of changes.

Limitations

The report discusses both activity (number of posts) and content (frames or themes). The principal focus of this research relates to the content of frames, though the question of activity levels is a natural one that helps grasp the big picture and point to specific frames receiving an unusual amount of attention. Nonetheless, the reader is cautioned about the use of activity levels and frame post counts to estimate “market share” or “share of voice” for individual frames. Three methodological limitations undermine any effort to establish market share:

- The sample of community discussion boards is purposive, and there is no consideration for how to weight the results to reflect the total universe.
- The use of community discussion boards draws attention to some forms of extremism over others, and there is no way to adjust the purposive sample to account from groups that do not use web-based platforms. For example, the QAnon community relies extensively on discussion boards and is well represented in this study, but the Oath Keepers do not use them and cannot be included here in spite of the group's importance as an extremist group, as demonstrated by its involvement in the January 6 Capitol riot.
- Although the coding of qualitative data can be managed in a way that yields consistent, comparable results, the initial formation of frames and selection of key words and phrases is initially subjective. For transparency, the research has released the code. See Appendix F for terms of use.

Nonetheless, the results have credibility in that the study includes some of the largest and best-known discussion boards for conspiracism and extremism. The measures here can be treated like stock market indices, which are useful in the discussion of trends despite their inaccuracies in estimating the entire universe.

Automated text analysis is fuzzy because its inability to recognize context. As a result, specific words or phrases in a post might be interpreted as evidence of a certain kind of frame activity, but this might not be the case when the context is considered. Nonetheless, the methodology is useful in identifying patterns in and clusters of activity, especially when dealing with an extraordinarily large amount of text as is present here. There still may be words or phrases that hard to classify, as occurs in this report in the attempt to separate antisemitic discourse from other references to Judaism and Jewish identity.

Appendix D

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 READ ME First! Containing information about permission to use the program code and data
- 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
- A “real-time” public-use data set with coded results

Appendix E. Quality Audit Tag Rates

Community	# Posts	# Tagged	% Tagged
QAnon	2,270,534	2,218,956	98%
Patriot & Military	244,348	238,757	98%
Extreme Right	341,999	302,887	89%
MAGA	307,035	300,583	98%
Religion	119,605	118,310	99%
Politics & News	162,964	158,281	97%
Conspiracy & Fringe	5,482,500	5,206,247	95%
Total	8,690,777	8,310,875	96%

Note: Online communities are not mutually exclusive. A post is regarded as tagged if at least one frame or topics is identified using the methodology for automated text analysis.

Appendix F

Current Work Plan

Plan for Q2 2022

- Ongoing
 - Quality audits by # posts, community type, and topic
 - Research related to religion and violence, QAnon, and sex crimes
- Complete addition of incel and liberty movement sites
- Prepare for possible movement of extreme-right groups to Twitter
- Separate militarism from Military frame. Also impacts violence and toxicity
- Quality audits of Win boards to examine influence of robot.txt files
- Quality audit of conspiracy and fringe sites (hold over from Q1)
- Being pre-2018 scraping of neo-Nazi sites
- Research influence of theosophy on conspiracism and extremism
- Begin analyses of public-health and extreme-left databases
- Clarification of the definition of accelerationism

Results from from Q1 2022`Work Plan

- Release public use data and begin release of documentation. Accomplished.
- Ongoing quality audits by # posts, community type, and topic. Always ongoing as part of routine maintenance
- Ongoing review of coding for the following topics due to writing and presentations: religion, potentially violent discourse, toxicity and violence, QAnon, antisemitism
- Frame consolidation: Make patriotism frame a subframe of values due to its small size. Consider consolidation of deep state and globalist subframe in NWO Conspiracy frame. Also review viability of diversity and social welfare frames. Accomplished, though patriotism has been kept (at least temporarily) due to the inclusion of Christian nationalism as a form of patriotism.
- Incorporate National Alliance White Biocentrism discussion forum. Accomplished.
- Quality audit of r/conspiracy subreddit to make sure decline is not an artifact of neglect of less known conspiracy theories. Not accomplished.
- Research topics:
 - Religion and violence . Ongoing--paper present at Henry Symposium at Calvin University.
 - Influence of QAnon on sex crime reports. Ongoing.