More Crises, More Fear? A (Semi-)Automated Analysis of Fear Speech in the Online Discussions of Radical and Extremist Actors 2020-2022

Crisis events can heighten feelings of insecurity, and thereby, not only generate diffuse anxiety, but also increase receptivity to emotional appeals (Hogg, 2014). Radical and extremist actors can exploit these individual insecurities and target fear by juxtaposing these diffuse feelings of fear or threat with a specific cause by employing fear speech. *Fear Speech* is any deliberate communicative act that explicitly or implicitly portrays a particular group or institutional entity as inherently and/or imminently harmful on a cultural, societal, financial, or existential level. This intentionally promotes a climate of threat and anxiety to increase the recipient's propensity for radical attitudes and behaviors. One consequence of fear speech is similar to other forms of hostile speech, it contributes to a climate of hostility. However, the central characteristic of fear speech is installing fear as the critical transmission for creating pressure to act (Buyse, 2014). Fear speech has been shown as a possible driver of violence acts (Buyse, 2014) and may have the same capacity to deliver hate as hate speech itself (Klein, 2021).

First studies show that digital communication environments are used to spread elements of existential dread through fear speech (Saha et al., 2023). Fear speech is not only much more prevalent than hate speech, it can also resonate more easily even with benevolent users (Saha et al., 2023). While hate speech aimed at devaluing another group can pave the way for violence, fear speech is believed to be a much stronger indicator of impending violence (Buyse, 2014). Since crises are strategically exploited by actors aiming at nurturing uncertainties, we ask how prevalent crisis-specific fear speech was in the online communication of extremist or protest movements.

To address this, we analyzed the Telegram communication of three movements: Querdenken, QAnon, and the Identitarian Movement (IB). Three channels representative for the movement were selected (authors left blank), and a total of ~105,000 posts were extracted for the period 04/20-12/22. These posts were content analyzed employing two (semi-)automated approaches: To extract topics, we used unsupervised BERTopic Modeling (Grootendorst, 2022). Next, we domain-adapted a DistilBERT model (Sanh et al., 2020). This model was fine-tuned on a dataset of custom-developed manual annotations

(N=2,389) that contained fear and non-fear speech posts. The classifier reached a sufficient prediction rate (F1-Score= .76). With this two-step approach we first extracted topical patterns in the data and then trained a classification algorithm that determined the (non-)existence of fear speech in these topics.

Overall, 38% (N=40,214) of all posts contained at least one form of fear speech (figure 1). Fear speech prevalence increased until winter '21 and then remained at a high level until fall '22. But the distribution showed movement-specific differences: quantitatively, QAnon (N=33,303; 35%) disseminated the most fear speech and thus, continuous readers of QAnon posts were exposed to the largest amount of fear speech. Identitarian Movement communication contained (N=4,001; 44%) less fear speech in absolute terms, but posts included more frequently fear speech. The lowest amount of fear speech was found in Querdenken communication (N=2,910; 25%).

Concerning the crises-related fear speech, we found that crises were often associated with fear speech, but the proportion varied. Although the COVID19 pandemic was the most discussed topic across the observation period, it was much less likely to be associated with fear speech, despite the high levels of uncertainty and extensive protest activity (figure 2). The energy crisis, which grew in relevance especially in summer of '22, was presented with fear speech in every second post (figure 3). Russia's war (62%) was used to an even greater extent to spread fear speech (figure 4). The topic 'migration and Islamism' was most frequently presented with fear-inciting language (figure 5), which is less surprising given far-right rhetoric usually portrays migration as a danger (Carter 2019).

Altogether, the results show that the prevalence of fear speech peaked in spring 2022 and tended to stagnate in fall. Instead of an accumulation of online crisis events, it seems to be more the case that thematic differentiation through multiple crises led to a reduction in the likelihood of a uniform crisis assessment across movements. Instead, the movements seemed to have focused more on crisis topics that correspond to their core narratives. Fear speech can thus be understood as a strategic communicative embedding that can be adapted to the norms and narratives shared within the group, as well as to current societal events.

References

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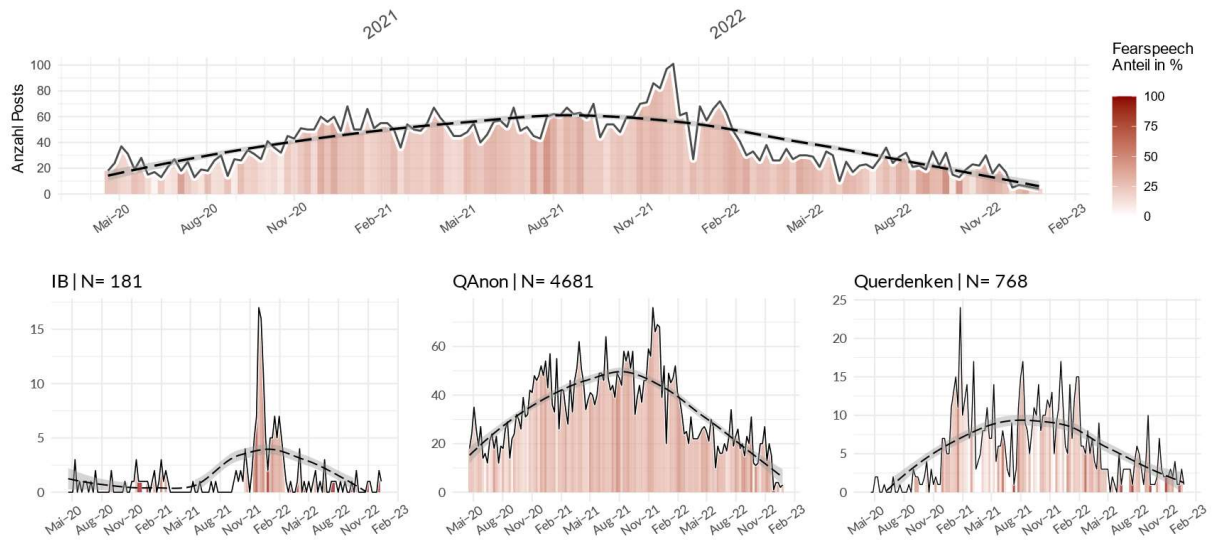
Figure 1

Fear Speech Prevalence on Telegram for 2020-2022 (N=40214)
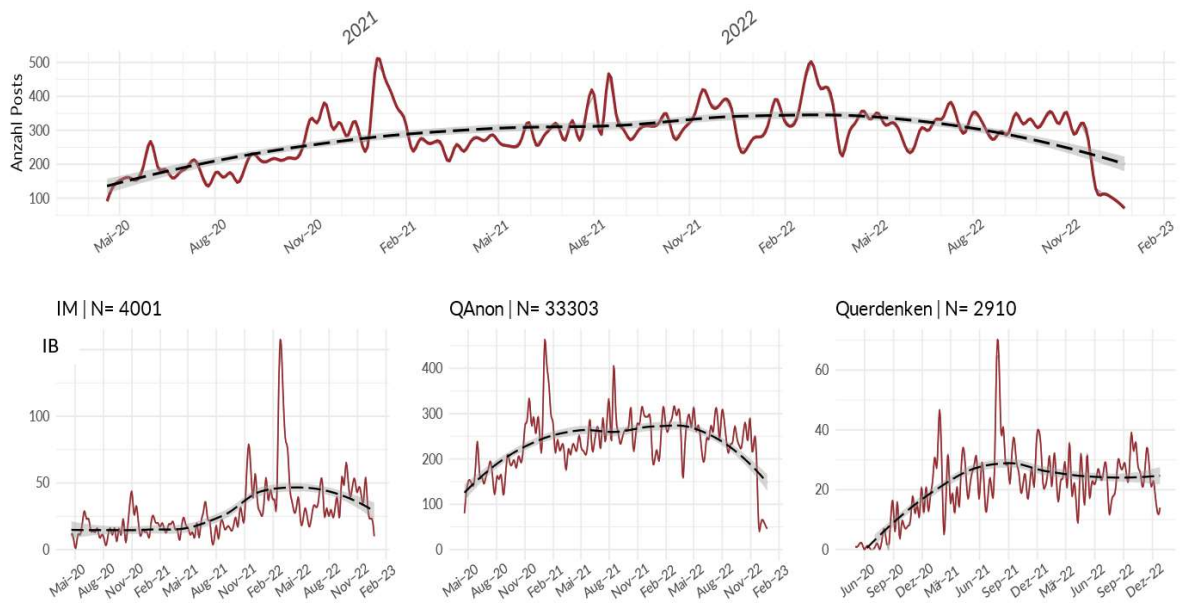
Note. Raw values were plotted in thin gray lines with a bold red interpolated spline on top. The fitted smoothed dashed curve was estimated using a nonparametric loess regression (for visualization purposes). The gray areas surrounding the dashed line represent the 95% confidence interval.
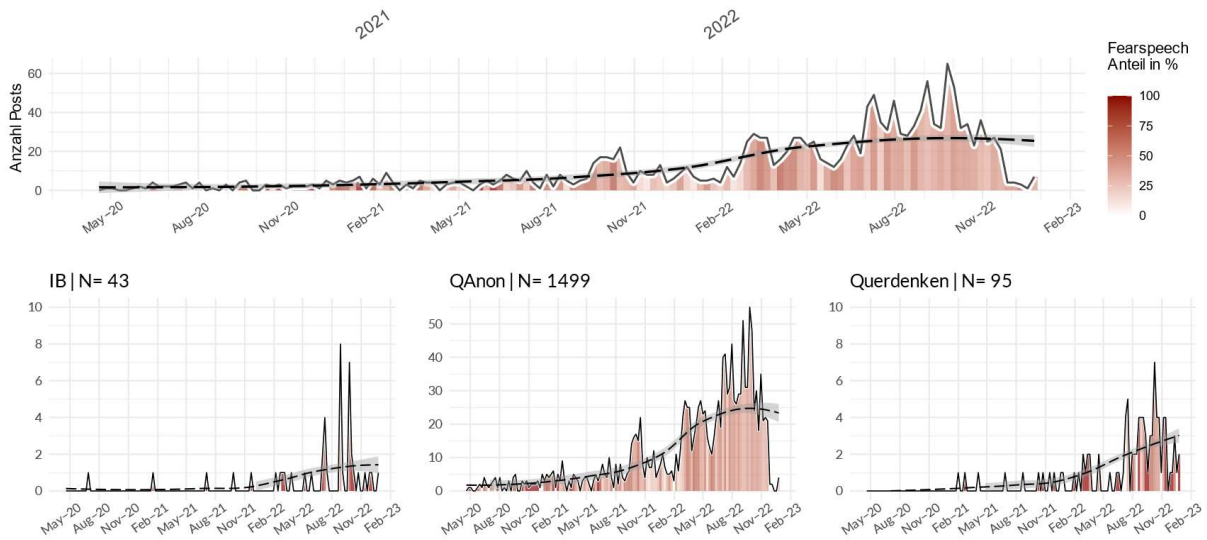
Figure 2

Fear Speech: COVID19 (N=5630)

Note. Degree of red indicates the fear speech proportion per topic-related posts per week. The darker the more fear speech is included.
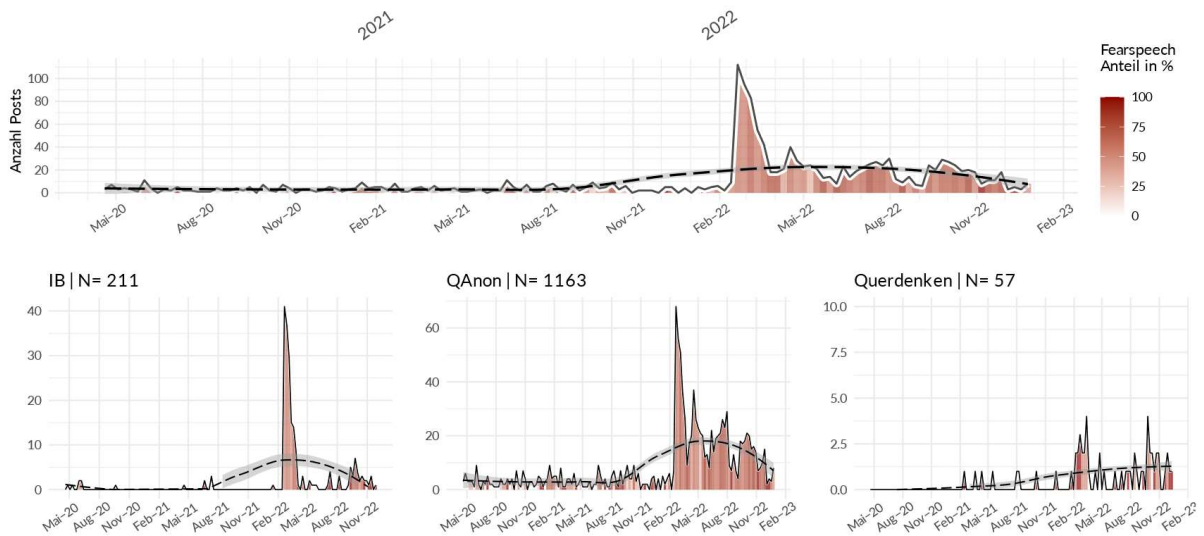
Figure 3

Fear Speech: Energy Crisis (N=1637)

Note. Degree of red indicates the fear speech proportion per topic-related posts per week. The darker the more fear speech is included.
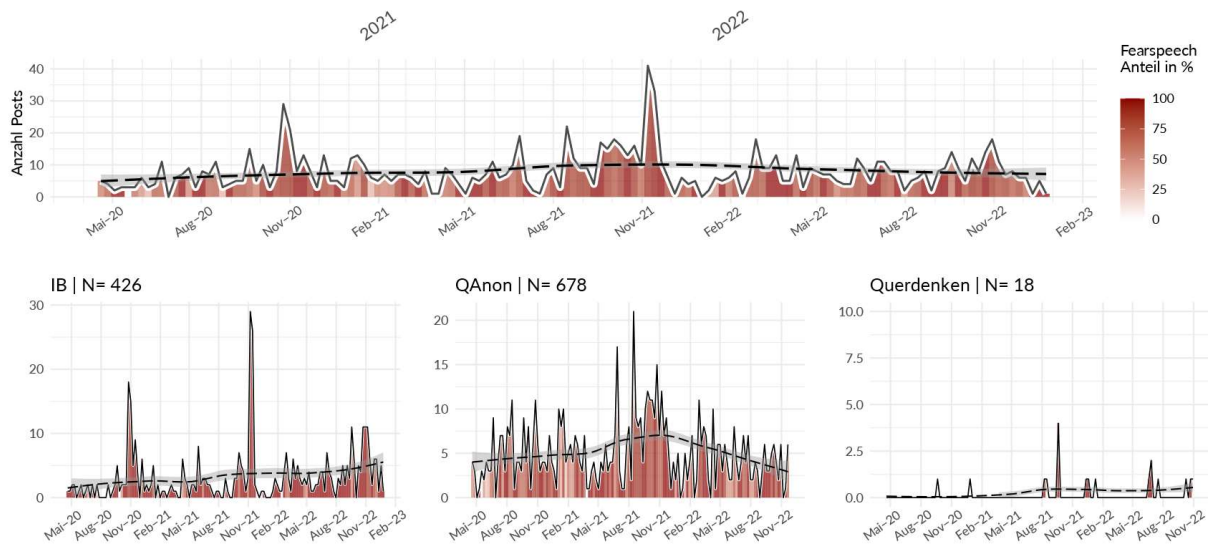
Figure 4
Fear Speech: *Russia's War in Ukraine (N=1431)*

Note. Degree of red indicates the fear speech proportion per topic-related posts per week. The darker the more fear speech is included.

Figure 5

Fear Speech: Migration & Islamism (N=1122)

Note. Degree of red indicates the fear speech proportion per topic-related posts per week. The darker the more fear speech is included.