

Use of the slur “retard” triples on X after Elon Musk shares the word in a post

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ABSTRACT

A joint study from Montclair State University faculty in the Joetta Di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III Center for Strategic Communication in the School of Communication and Media and the Department of Justice Studies suggests that an Elon Musk post containing the slur “retard” dramatically increased content containing the term on X. Noteworthy results from the study include a 207.5% increase in posts containing the r-word on X with 312,642 posts using the term identified in the period studied. Google Trends Analysis showed a similar increase in online search activity related to the r-word. The broader increase in stigmatizing language online with limited structures to curtail such content is also considered.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Significant academic research has identified how derogatory use of the word “retard” (called the “r-word” subsequently in this report) has a profoundly stigmatizing function for those with a range of cognitive challenges including the developmentally disabled (Albert et al., 2016) and the neurodiverse (Dababnah et al., 2018). Research informed programming has sought to eliminate use of the r-word as pejorative among populations (Siperstein et al., 2018) with broader advocacy against the word from advocacy organizations and the media, as well (*Specialolympics.org*, 2020). Federal legislation from 2010 eliminated the word “retarded” from all federal health, education, and labor laws instead referring to Americans living with an “intellectual disability” to avoid linkage to the stigmatizing term (Stavrakantonaki and Johnson, 2018).

Unfortunately, social media appears to be a space where usage of the r-word has been prevalent. A study from Kantar Social Listening found that seven in every ten posts are negative toward people with intellectual disabilities and six in every ten posts contain a slur (Mellas, 2018). Previously, many social media sites sought to mitigate the reach of the r-word community through guidelines and policies (Lubben, 2018). Such efforts at mitigation appear to be receding.

ELON MUSK'S X AND THE REVIVAL OF HATE CONTENT ONLINE

Elon Musk's arrival as CEO on Twitter brought an immediate spike in hate speech as those producing incendiary content viewed the potential for reduced moderation as an invitation (Benton et al., 2022). Follow-up research indicates that this initial spike was not an anomaly with problematic content continuing to have an outsized presence on the platform (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2023). This is consistent with material posted by Musk which has included conspiratorial content related to the attack on Nancy Pelosi (Klepper, 2022) and allowing anti-LGBTQ content that suggested the community systematically abuses children (Perry, 2023). In 2023, Musk validated and boosted an antisemitic post referring to it as "the absolute truth" to his millions of followers (CNN, 2023).

Rationalization of such content has been contextualized as "free speech protection" with hateful discourse framed merely as "challenging speech" that should be protected on a platform. The outcomes of reduction or elimination of moderation on social media platforms have been extensively researched. Consistently, nominally moderated social media platforms frequently become a haven for misinformation, extremism, and hate. There are challenges unique to moderation reduced social media platforms that make the removal of problematic content and the users who spread it particularly difficult (Artime et al., 2020). When a platform's focus is on largely unrestricted expression from users, those looking to share and spread antisocial content will presumably use such spaces to share perspectives that would likely be restricted elsewhere. Historically, examples of such "free speech absolutist" spaces suggest that this threat is very real. Specifically, 4chan serves as a space where online anonymity coupled with limited restrictions on speech have allowed virulent hate content to be shared without fear of platform response (Tuters and Hagen, 2020). 4chan has hosted a range of antisocial content including the call for the abuse

of women (Milanović, 2021), hostility towards the LGBTQ community (Sparby, 2017), aggressive antisemitism (Tuters and Hagen, 2020), and white nationalism (Thorleifsson, 2022). Other less moderated online spaces emphasizing open exchange have produced similar results (Urman and Katz, 2022).

When Billionaire Elon Musk indicated an interest in purchasing Twitter, a primary rationale was the reduction in moderation on the platform (Dang, 2022) with consistent rejection of “woke” limitations on acceptable discourse continuing throughout his tenure as CEO (Warzel, 2022). The emphasis on unrestrained discourse, the acceptance of cruel content targeting marginalized communities, and the stigmatizing power of the r-word coalesced on January 6, 2025.

THE R-WORD: REVIVED AND AMPLIFIED

Consistent with previous controversial content associated with his purchase of Twitter, on January 6, 2025, Musk posted the following statement in a reply to Finnish researcher Joni Askola:

Figure 1: Musk r-word post

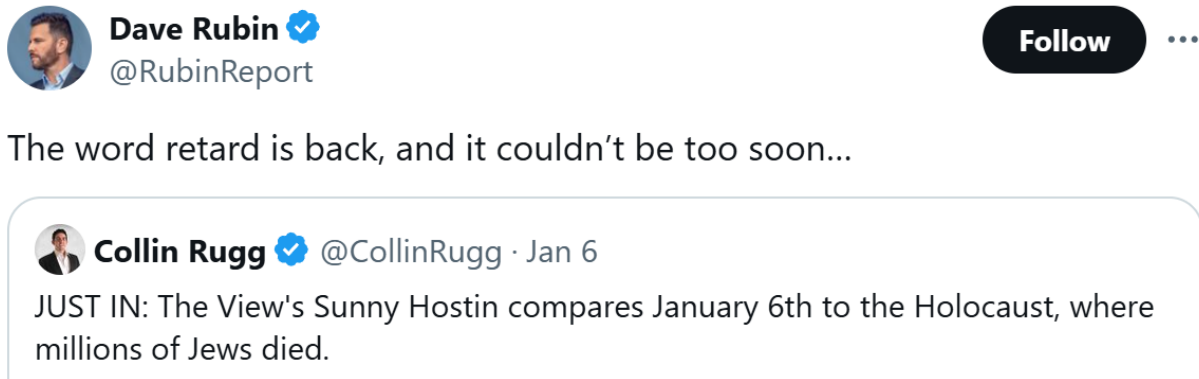


Source: X

Musk’s account has 211.6M followers and his previous tweets containing hateful and/or conspiratorial material have driven significant increases in posts validating such content on the

platform (Dickinson, 2023). In the period after the post above, Musk received validation for his use of the r-word from significant online voices. Dave Rubin, creator and host of The Rubin Report, a political talk show on YouTube and on the network BlazeTV, posted the following to his 1.5M followers:

Figure 2: Rubin r-word post



Source: X

With an influential voice such as Elon Musk using the r-word as a pejorative in a widely seen social media post and with his followers and supporters validating the use of the term, the following exploratory question emerges:

To what extent did Musk's post generate online activity that utilized the term "retard?"

To answer that question, the Tweet Binder analytics program was utilized. The aggregated 7-day (from 12/31/2024 to 1/8/2025) X data was collected. Specifically, the term associated with this investigation ("retard") was examined to see if frequency of use increased in correlation to the Musk's post.

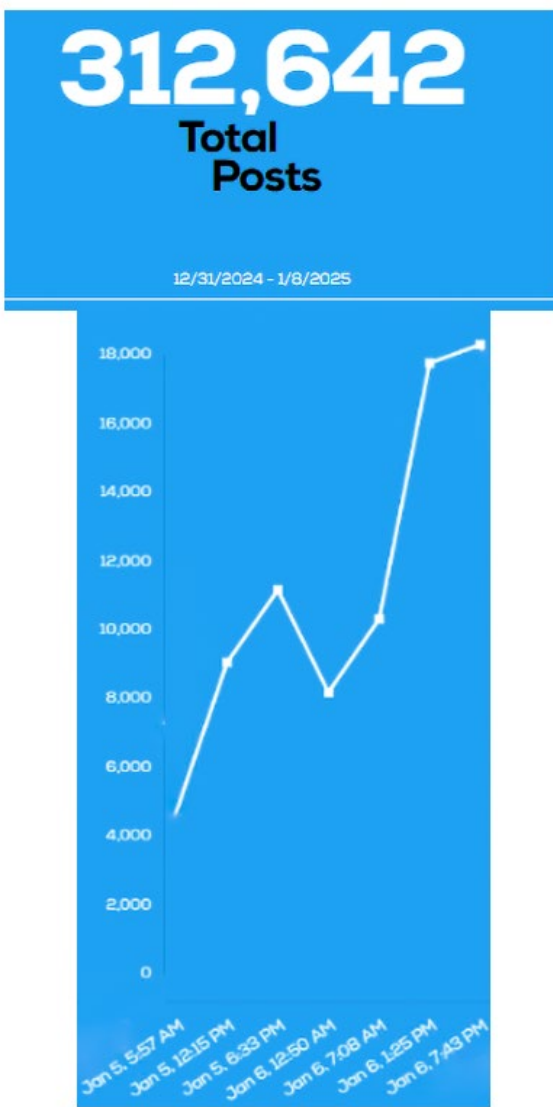
A Google Trend Analysis was also conducted to assess if online search activity for the r-word increased in connection with Musk's post. A key feature of Google Trends analysis is that it allows for identification of items of interest for internet users (Nghiem et al., 2016). These analyses are "normalized to the highest volume of searches for that term over the time period being studied. This index ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 recorded on the date that saw the highest relative search

volume activity for that term” (Arora et al., 2019, p. 338). Search interest in a specific topic has reliably forecast social media posts and actions related to that topic (McCarthy, 2010).

RESULTS

The two days after Musk’s post correlates to a doubling of content using the r-word on X from the period prior, with a 207.5% increase.

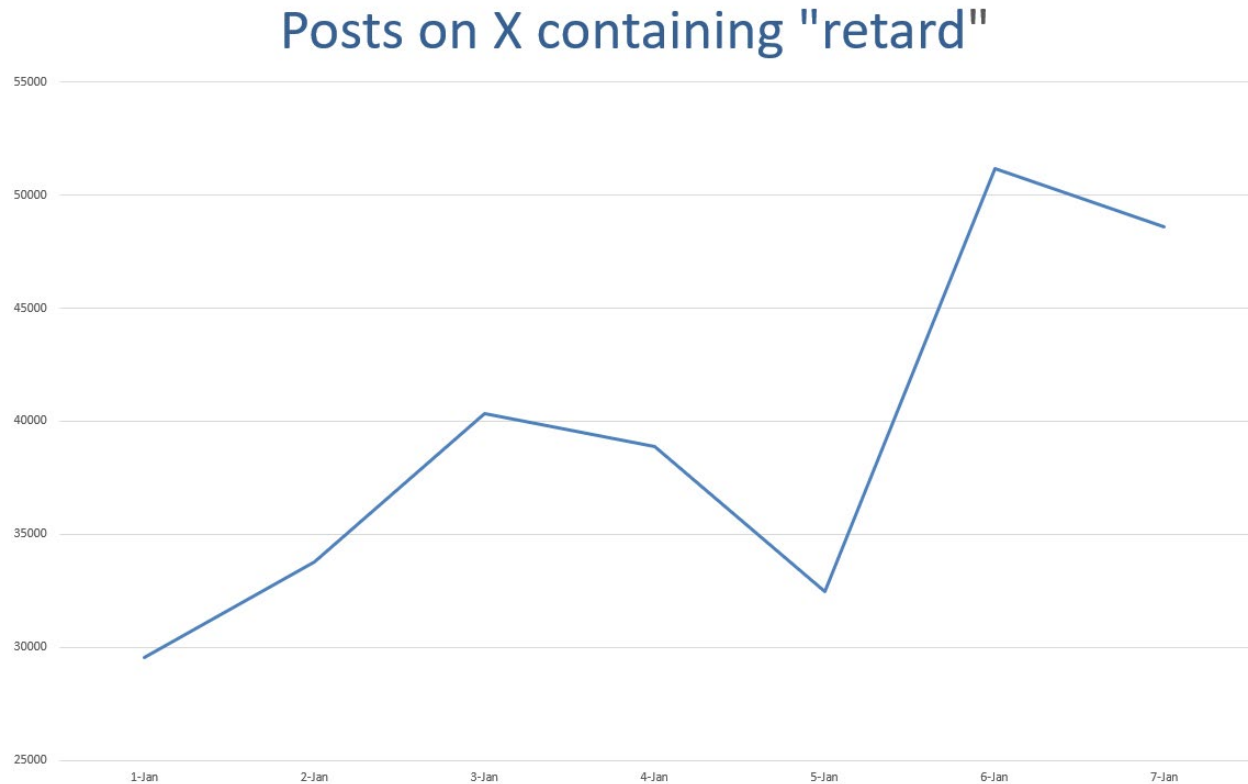
Figure 3: Volume and frequency of r-word posts on X



Source: Tweet Binder

This also correlates to a 185.115% increase over the 7-day average for posts containing the r-word.

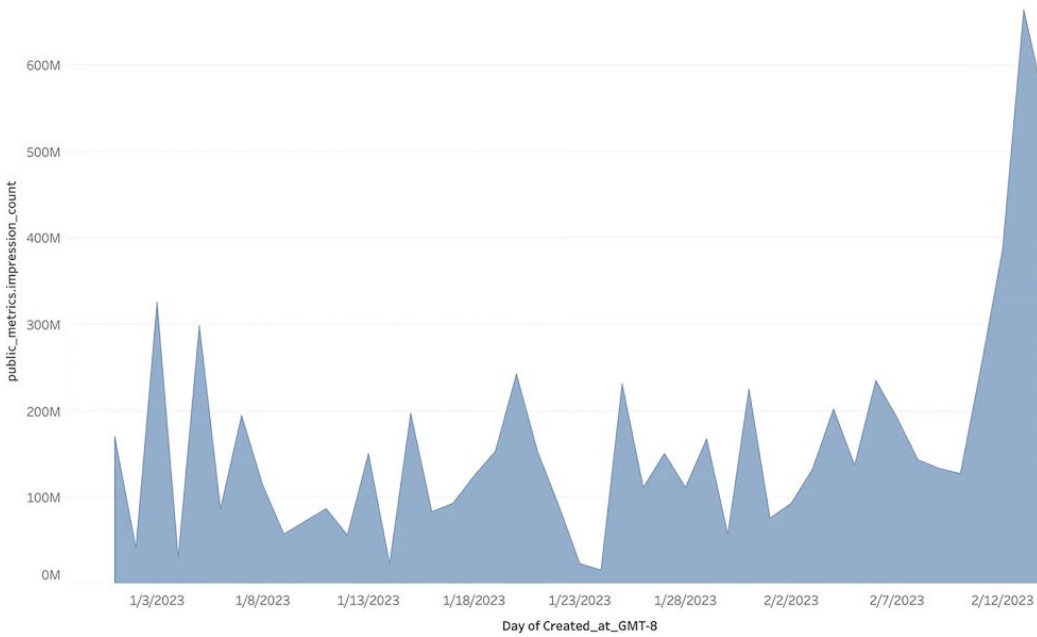
Figure 4: 7-day average for posts containing the r-word



Source: Tweet Binder

Cumulatively, a total of 312,642 posts containing the term were identified in the period studied, with corresponding views and reach easily cresting the hundreds of millions. While some posting about r-word on the platform may have been critical of Musk's use of term, the widespread prevalence still serves a normalizing function. Noting that negative content is regular shared for purposes of criticizing such content, Zhang et al. suggest that people may be "reproducing his message specifically to add their own comment—likely critique—to it" but doing so still serves an amplification function (2018: 3574). Already, impressions of Musk's content alone have regularly eclipsed 300M for many hours of every day.

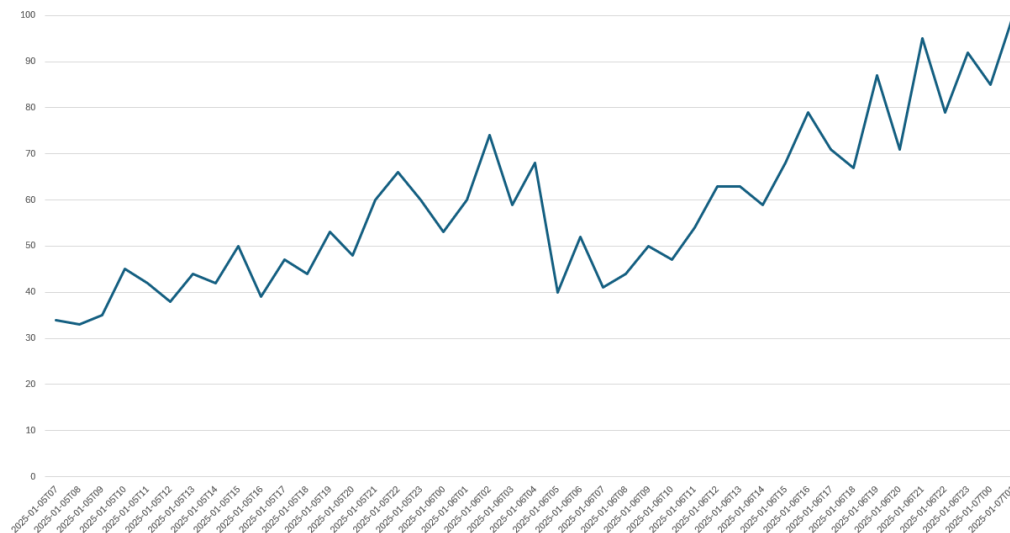
Figure 5: Tweet impressions per day for @elonmusk



Source: Dr. Timothy Graham

Effects beyond activity on X are also noteworthy in terms of impact. Search activity for the r-word similarly increased after Musk’s post using the term.

Figure 6: Google search activity for r-word



Source: Google Trends

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that Musk using the r-word in a post corresponded with significant online usage and activity related to the term. Potentially noteworthy is the fact that this may be representative of a larger shift against efforts to push the term to the margins of acceptable public discourse (Teitell, 2024). Advocates have already expressed fears related to Musk's posts and the broader normalization of the r-word it might facilitate (Klee, 2025). This report would suggest such an outcome may already be occurring in relatively rapid fashion.

While it might be tempting to view an event such as this as an isolated one-off, indications are that the widespread dissemination of hateful and marginalizing content may be an increasingly prominent feature on social media. On January 6, Mark Zuckerberg announced that fact checking systems would be removed from Meta's platforms (Horvath et al., 2025). In conjunction with this change, Meta also "eliminated multiple safeguards against dehumanizing rhetoric, leaving historically marginalized groups increasingly vulnerable" (Wiggins, 2025). Allowance for stigmatizing disability discourse is now overtly codified with no platform repercussions for those making such statements (Conger, 2025). This move was seen a bow the U.S. political climate (Chan et al., 2025) and was enthusiastically endorsed by Elon Musk, as well.

Figure 7: Musk's response to the elimination of fact checking on Meta



Source: X

Cumulatively, validation of terms like the r-word as legitimate discourse in social media suggests that vulnerable communities will need to approach participation in online spaces with a heightened sense of awareness. Stigmatizing content, while always prevalent, now risks becoming a consistent dimension of social media. More than just being present on platforms, recent events such as the one analyzed in this report would suggest that such content may be more than just allowed; it has the potential to be elevated. Such an elevation would add to the already significant schism between disability, difference, and online safety.

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