

“R-word” slurs triple on X after Donald Trump’s Thanksgiving post used the word

Bond Benton, Professor of Communication, Montclair State University

Daniela Peterka-Benton, Professor of Justice Studies, Montclair State University

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 shows a dramatic increase in content containing the slur “retard” on X after Donald Trump’s Thanksgiving Day Truth Social post used the word. Findings showed a 225.7% increase in posts containing the r-word on X with 1,129,438 posts in the studied period. The most viewed, liked, and shared content analyzed enthusiastically endorsed use of the r-word. Results appear consistent with the period after other prominent accounts used the word, but with greater overall volume reflecting the reach of a U.S. President.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

A robust body of academic scholarship has investigated the pejorative use of the word “retard” (called the “r-word” subsequently in this report). Current usage reinforces a stigmatizing function for those with a range of cognitive challenges including the developmentally disabled

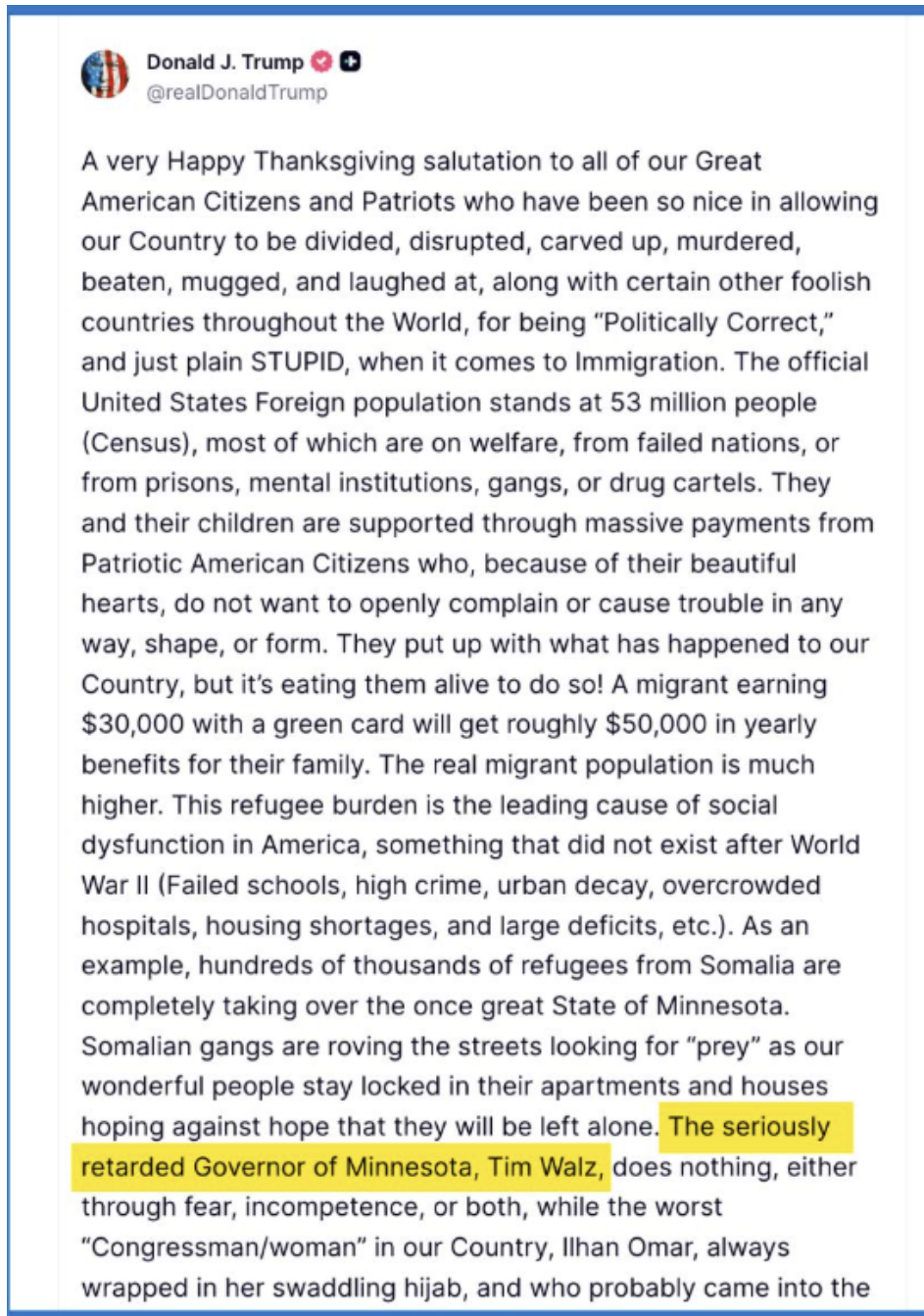
(Albert et al., 2016) and the neurodiverse (Dababnah et al., 2018). Broad efforts have been made to reduce use of the r-word as an invective (Siperstein et al., 2018) with advocacy against the word supported by organizations and the media (*Specialolympics.org*, 2020). President Barack Obama signed Rosa's Law in October 2010, which mandated the replacement of the terms "mental retardation" and "mentally retarded" with "intellectual disability" and "individual with an intellectual disability" in all federal health, education, and labor statutes to avoid linkage to the stigmatizing term (Stavrakantonaki and Johnson, 2018).

Unfortunately, however, research suggests social media has seen a resurgence in the word's use online. 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 through guidelines and policies (Lubben, 2018). These efforts receded when Elon Musk became the CEO of Twitter (later X). Musk's use of the term in a post in January of 2025 led to a 205.7% increase in posts using the r-word on the platform (Benton and Peterka-Benton, 2025). While Musk's post spurred an immediate spike, ongoing use of the r-word on the platform never receded to previous levels and has remained present in discourse on X.

FROM VISIBLE TO AMPLIFIED: TRUMP AND THE R-WORD

On November 27, 2025, President Donald Trump used the r-word to describe Minnesota Governor Tim Walz (Boak, 2025) in a Thanksgiving address on the Truth Social platform.

Figure 1



@realDonaldTrump Truth Social post, 11/27/2025

When asked for clarification on his use of the r-word from reporters on Air Force One, President Trump reiterated posting the term stating, “Yeah, I think there’s something wrong with him.

Absolutely. Sure. You have a problem with it? You know what? I think there’s something wrong with him” (Scott, 2025).

Influential voices such as Elon Musk using the r-word as a pejorative in a widely seen social media post correlated to increased use of the term on the X platform, as documented by previous research (Benton and Peterka-Benton, 2025). Given the significantly higher visibility of a U.S. President and considering the term’s existing frequency on X compels consideration of the following exploratory question:

To what extent did Donald Trump’s post increase content on the X platform that used the “r-word?”

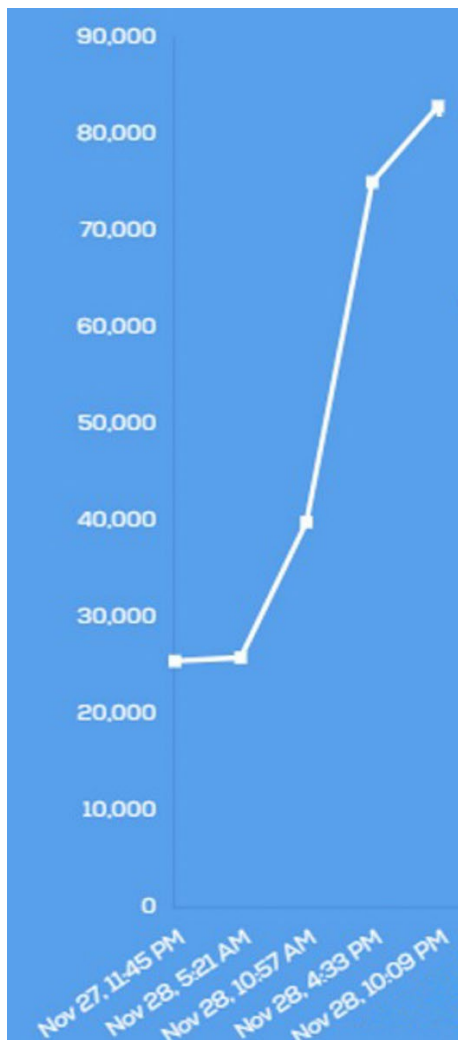
To answer that question, the Tweet Binder analytics program was utilized. The aggregated 7-day (from 11/27/2025 - 12/4/2025) X data was collected to show activity in the period immediately before and after the President’s post. A total of 1,129,438 posts on X were evaluated for this report.

The term associated with this investigation (“retard”) was examined to see if frequency of use increased in correlation to the Trump’s post. Beyond frequency, the posts receiving the most “likes,” “views,” and “reposts” were also identified to offer context on the main conversation drivers associated with posts containing the r-word (*Tweet Binder*, 2019; *Tweet Binder*, 2020).

RESULTS

The day after Trump’s post correlates to a tripling of content using the r-word on X from the day prior, with a 225.7% increase in the hours that followed.

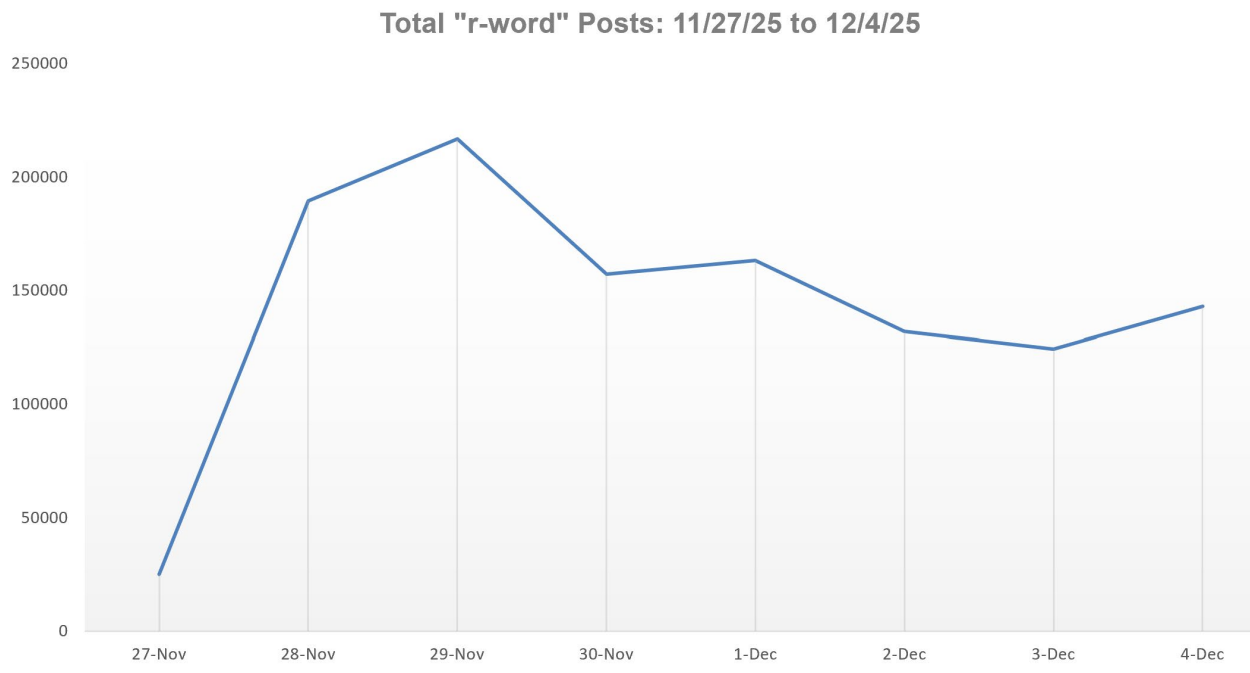
Figure 2: Increase on X after Trump “r-word” post



SOURCE: Tweet Binder

Cumulatively, a total of 1,129,438 posts containing the term were identified in the period studied, with corresponding views and reach easily cresting the hundreds of millions. A high volume of r-word posts persisted on the platform in the days following the initial spike.

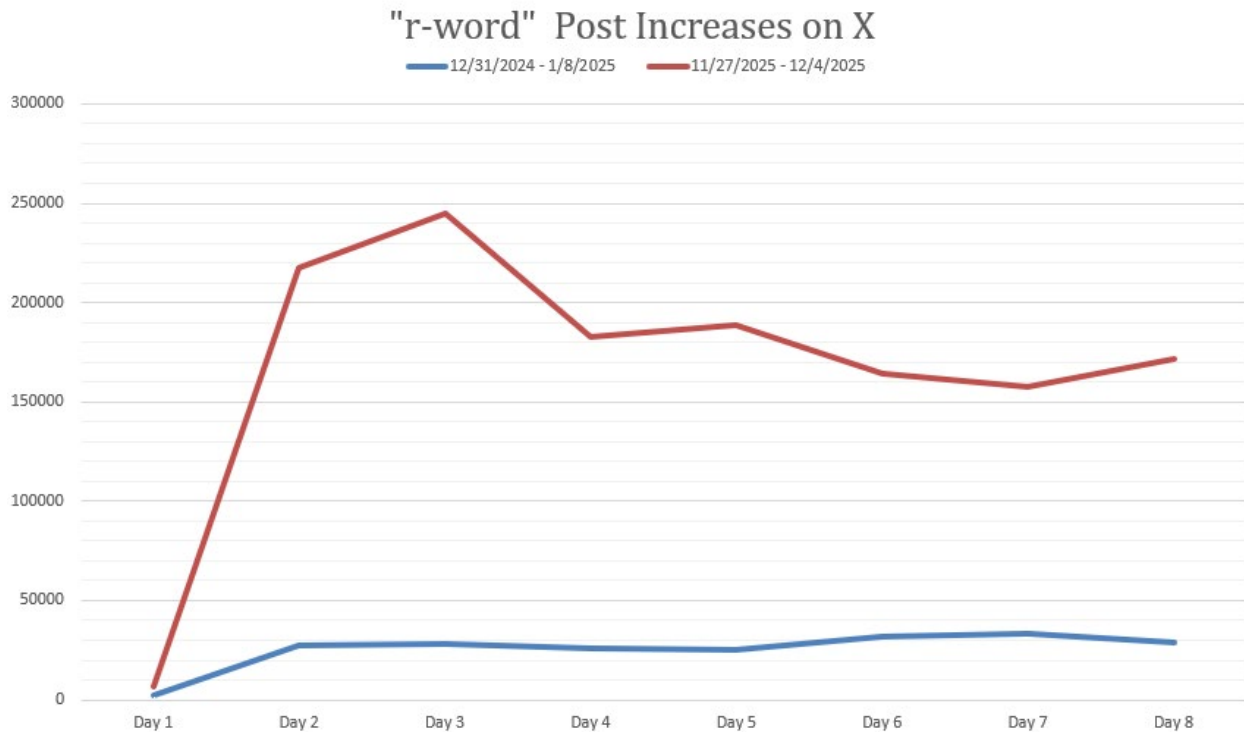
Figure 3: R-word posts 11/27/25 to 12/4/25



SOURCE: Tweet Binder

When comparing the spike generated by Donald Trump’s post containing the r-word to Elon Musk’s post in January of 2025, the percentage increase was similar, yet the volume of such posts in the weeks studied were dramatically higher.

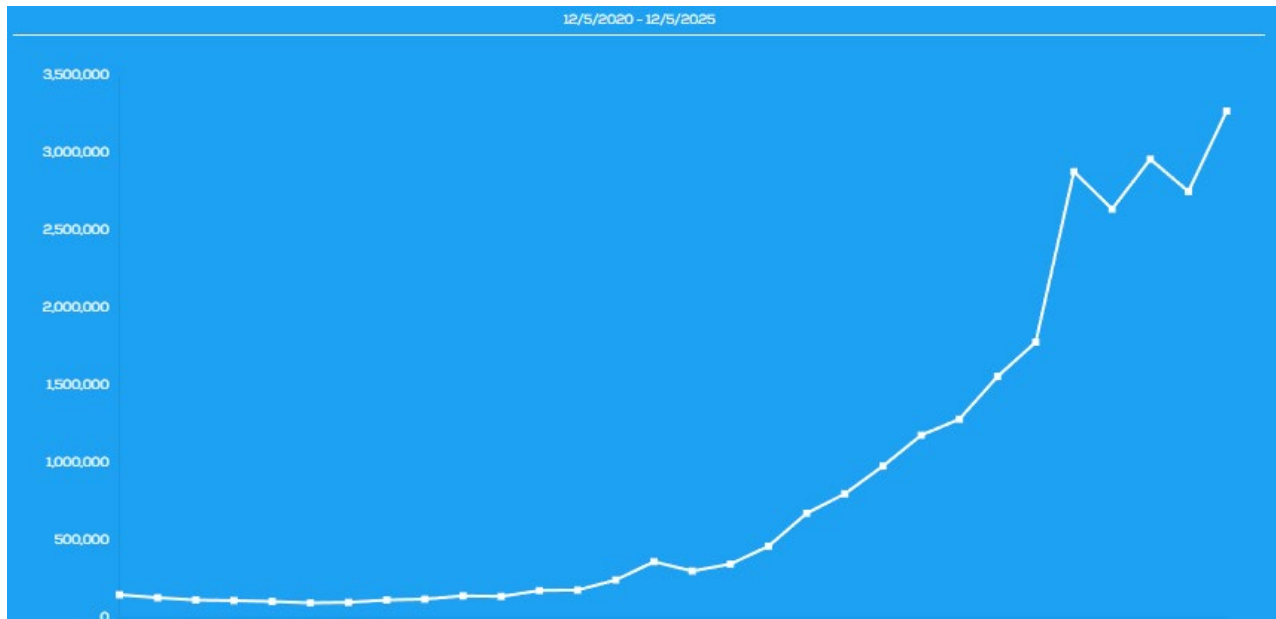
Figure 4: Comparison in r-word posts following Musk and Trump’s respective use of the term



SOURCE: Tweet Binder

The cumulative effect of both Musk and Trump’s use of the term, however, becomes clearer when looking at five-year trends on the platform. In the last five years, the term has gone from being nearly unused on Twitter (later X) in 2020 to being prominent in the current context.

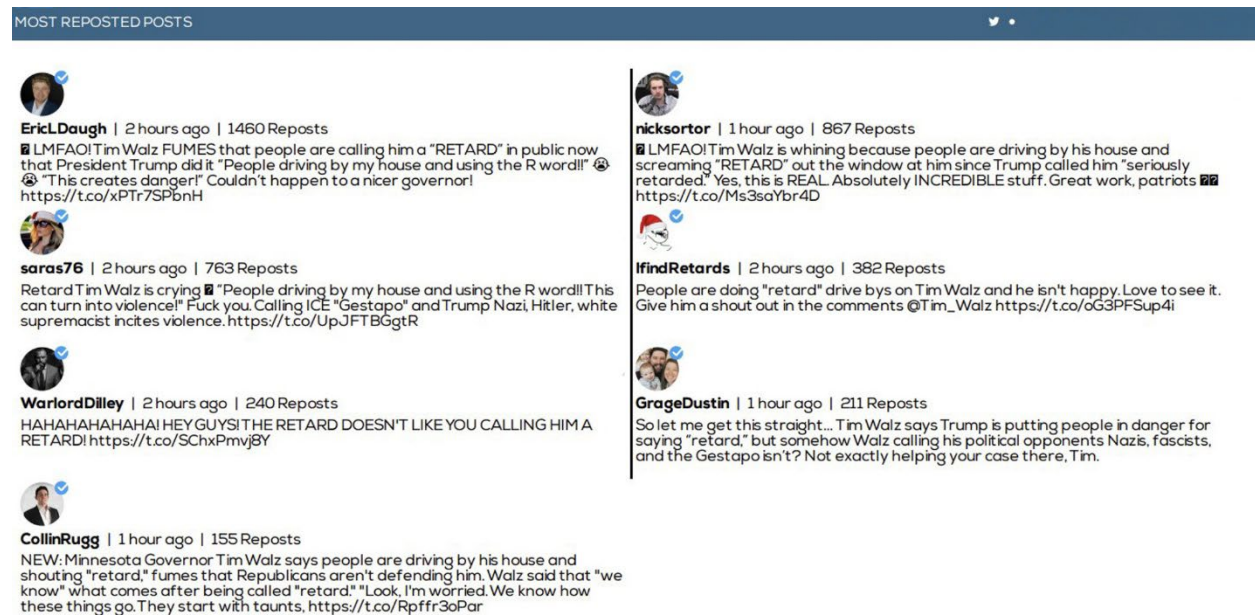
Figure 5: Five-year trend on use of the “r-word” on Twitter/X, 12/5/2020 - 12/5/2025



SOURCE: Tweet Binder

It is possible that some posting about the r-word on the platform may be critical of the term, however the widespread prevalence still serves a normalizing function. Noting that negative content is regularly 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). Furthermore, looking at the most influential accounts posting the r-word, tone and content would suggest that use of the term was enthusiastically supported. Accounts generating the most shares of content greatly increase visibility and the frequency with which platform users will view their posts (AgencyAnalytics, 2025). In this instance, content shared most frequently tended to view use of the r-word favorably on the X platform.

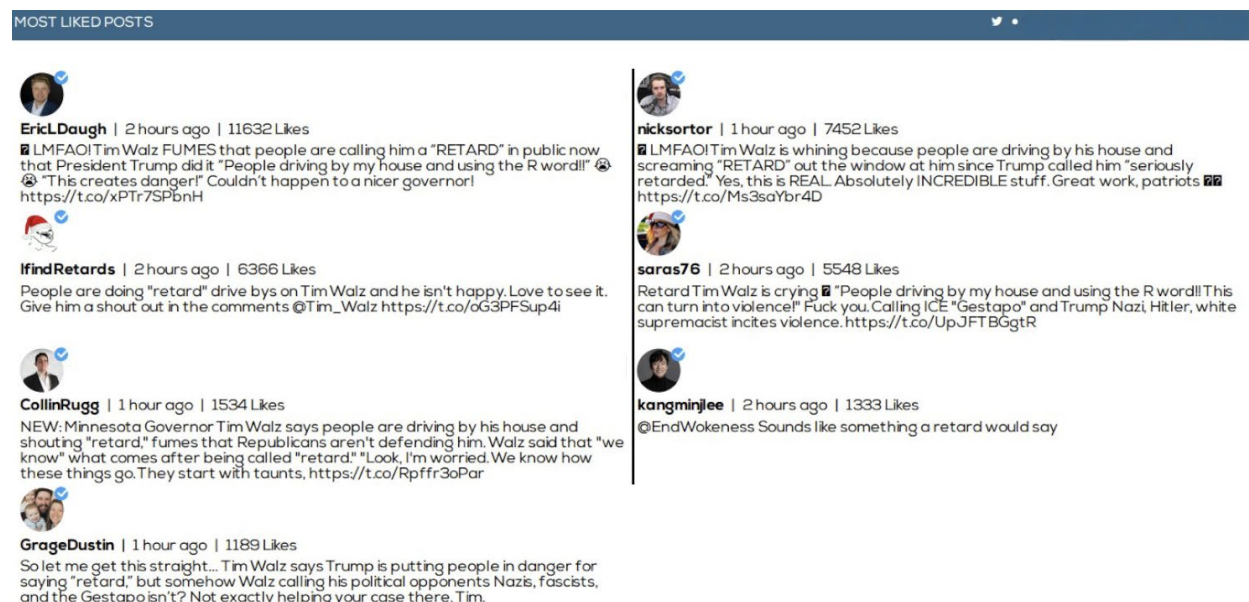
Figure 6: Most shared r-word posts



SOURCE: Tweet Binder

Similarly, “likes” on a social platform also tend to make content more seen, sharable, and influential on platform discussions (John et al., 2017). As with the most shared content using the r-word, the most liked posts showed similar levels of favorability towards the term.

Figure 7: Most liked r-word posts



SOURCE: Tweet Binder

The five accounts generating the most impressions (total views of content) that used the r-word each used the term as a pejorative and have expressed validation of President Trump's discourse.

Figure 8: Accounts using the r-word generating the most views

HIGHEST IMPACT		Impressions
	@grok Grok	94,274,849
	@CollinRugg Collin Rugg	5,824,556
	@libsoftiktok Libs of TikTok	4,551,701
	@nicksortor Nick Sortor	3,914,852
	@EndWokeness End Wokene...	3,913,811

SOURCE: Tweet Binder

The account making the most posts using the r-word in the period studied was **@of_ceo24460**, the handle of X CEO Elon Musk.

Figure 9: Most active account making posts containing the r-word

MOST ACTIVE		Posts
	@of_ceo24460 CEO of Tesla	27

SOURCE: Tweet Binder

Cumulatively, Trump’s use of the r-word in his Thanksgiving Day 2025 Truth Social post created an immediate spike in X posts using the term that was sustained throughout the period studied. This both drew upon and expanded sentiment on X consistent with other high-profile accounts previously making r-word posts. Evaluation of the main conversation drivers in terms of views, likes, and shares showed broad endorsement of use of the term by prominent accounts on the platform.

DISCUSSION

Results indicate that President Donald Trump’s use of the r-word in a post corresponded with significant usage and activity on X related to the term. This may further indicate a continuing shift against efforts to push the term to the margins of acceptable public discourse (Teitell, 2024). Advocates previously expressed fears with Musk’s post in January of 2025 that it could represent a broader normalization of the r-word (Klee, 2025). This report builds upon previous work and further validates the anticipated rapidity with which high profile accounts on social media can normalize a term on a platform.

In conclusion, the ongoing amplification of terms like the r-word as legitimate discourse in social media reinforces the ongoing need for vulnerable communities to approach participation in the online space with vigilant awareness. Stigmatizing content, while always prevalent online, is increasingly becoming a consistent dimension of social media. The implication of this sentiment, especially when shared by prominent voices, has the potential to produce broader, real-world dangers to the disabled.

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