

REALTIME FILE

WVU – Retweeting COVID-19 Disability Issues: Risks, Support, and Outrage

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>>> Take a few minutes to look around Zoom and chat.
We have closed captioning for those who want to open that up as well.

>> Dr. Levitt, can you hear us?

>> I can, yes.

>> Wonderful.

Dr. Thelwall, are you comfortable if we get started?

>> Yes, that would be great.

Thank you.

>> Okay.

I welcome everyone to our December grand rounds, ability grand rounds at the West Virginia University centers for excellence and disabilities.

This is a very special edition of our grand rounds because we're international.

So I really want an enthusiastic in welcoming Dr. Thelwall and Dr. Levitt, both join us from the University of -- hopefully I'm pronouncing this right, please let me know if I'm not.

Wolverhampton.

>> That's it, yes.

>> In the United Kingdom.

We're very excited, we had a chance to take a look at their work and they've done some exciting work that they're going share today.

Dr. Thelwall is a professor of data science at the University of Wolverhampton, and Dr. Levitt is a professor at the research institute of information and language processing.

Both of them collectively have at least 375 journal articles that have been cited numerous times on their various works and products.

And today they're going to talk to us about their work entitled retweeting Covid-19 disability issues, risks, support, and outrage.

So this is very timely as we all continue to experience Covid.

And I think we all share the experiences of trying to notify gate this with individuals and families with disabilities.

So with that, other than housekeeping, again, if you haven't already muted your background, please do so.

We will have time for questions and answers.

Please use the chat.

I'll be facilitating that, and then we can use that at the end.

And with that, I'll turn it over to you, Dr. Thelwall.

>> Thanks very much, Lesley.

I hope you can understand my strong British accent.

At Wolverhampton, it's hard for people to pronounce even in the UK.

I'll try not to talk too quickly.

>> You're speaking with people with strong accents ourselves, and we're very proud of that, so feel free.

>> Thank you.

Okay.

So I'm going to present a talk about Covid-19 disability issues on Twitter.

And so essentially the study's based on an investigation of highly retweeted tweets that are about both Covid-19 and disability issues.

And we're going to look to see what kind of insights they give or reminders they give to -- about the disability during Covid-19.

Okay.

So the goal is to identify disability-related Covid-19 themes that resonated on Twitter, that resonated in the sense of getting many retweets.

We started off by looking at issues that were just discussed a lot without necessarily being retweeted a lot.

But it got better rules when we looked at the highly retweeted tweets, because these seemed to represent things that many people agreed with or thought were important. So they got retweeted.

Whereas, if you looked at average tweets around this issue, they didn't tend to identify or they didn't tend to be tweeted about the same things enough that we could say something coherent about.

The most important themes are the general tweets.

We focused on the highly retweeted tweets.

Some of these I think you will have seen these before.

If you're a Twitter user, think you'll have seen some of these before.

We wanted to record the core disability issues during the pandemic, particularly the early stage, and look for new insights into issues that we might have missed first time around or that might not have been covered in the media.

And we looked at highly retweeted tweets, because to be highly retweeted, the issue has to resonate in some way with the public, other ways it wouldn't get many retweets. So there's got to be something about the tweet that chimes with people in some way, although it's not always obvious what that is.

So these tweets might reflect issues considered important by many people, essentially. Lots of limitations with this approach.

First of all, tweeters aren't representatives, so about 22% of U.S. adults use Twitter, so this isn't a very good survey sample, if you think of it as a survey.

And also the people that use Twitter aren't represented of the general population.

For example, tend to be younger and more likely Democrats if they're on Twitter, according to the Pugh Research Center.

And also highly retweeting doesn't necessarily mean that the tweets really got to a core issue that people feel strongly about.

You can -- you can get to highly retweeted tweet because it resonates with people in other ways.

So this is one of the most highly retweeted tweets of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Well there are has got 1.9 million likes, and it's a cat playing -- we call it [away from mic] and crosses.

I think you call it tic tac toe.

But it was a very -- I think it resonated a little bit because people were fed up with the lockdown restrictions.

So the cat image, those funny images still do resonate with the experience anyway.

So we did two studies on the same topic.

First we looked at the really early tweets on April 4th this year and that was published as a journal article.

For this talk we looked for tweets up to November the 7th.

So we got many more months of tweets based on the early -- based on the same method as the published article.

And the top tweets in this new collection have been recorded here for the first time.

So we don't have it right up to date because it takes quite a long time to process all the data and get the results out.

And so essentially what did we do?

So we use the computer program to collect all English tweets mentioning Covid-19 in some way.

Continually since March the 10th.

And we got about 47 million different tweets after getting rid of multiple copies of the same retweet.

And then we identified a subset of this which contained a word or part of a word which seemed to match a disability issue.

So after looking at lots of these retweets, we came up with these four text match strings.

So any tweet containing any of these as full words or part words would count in our Covid-19 disability set.

And then we ranked the retweets, the tweets by retweet count.

And the most retweeted to the least retweeted.

Again, this is the computer program.

And then we checked the most highly retweeted tweets to get rid of the duplicates, a second manual duplicate elimination stage, and to also get rid of the irrelevant tweets.

There were a few tweets, not many, that were either not about Covid-19 or not about disabilities in any way that we got rid of.

And then we grouped the top 100 by theme.

So this presentation is mainly reporting themes that we found in terms of highly retweeted tweets.

So what kind of themes we detected by looking at all these top retweets.

Okay.

So for the top 100 retweets, these account for about just under half a million retweets and probably about 2 million likes.

So it's a small percentage of the population.

Small compared to the U.S. population, but it still represents a lot of people.

Probably many more people saw the tweets or liked the tweets and retweeted them.

And all except one of the top hundred retweets were in some way supportive of disability issues.

There was only one tweet that you could say was putting people down.

So 99 out of 100 was pretty good.

Three of the tweets announced the deaths of people with disabilities.

And then the remaining slides report the main themes that we found in the retweets.

So I'm going to quote most of the top three -- a selection of the top retweets, one for each theme.

So you can see what they were.

So the top theme was of untruths to people with disabilities being exposed, so that's what we called the theme.

And that accounted for four of the tweets and 142,000 retweets altogether from those tweets.

So this is the -- one of the top retweets of the whole set.

Things Covid has proven.

The job you were told couldn't be done remotely can be done remotely.

Number two, many disabled workers could have been working from home but corporations just didn't want them to.

Number three, Internet is a utility, not a luxury.

Number four, universal health care is necessary.

So disability, using that number two, but making an important point about particularly working from home, which I think resonated quite a lot on Twitter.

And the very similar point is made by this tweet from a different perspective.

As a disabled person, it hurts to see all the adjustments that we've been denied suddenly be made available because nondisabled people might get sick.

But we see you and your ableism.

Next time you deny us accommodations, we'll say, but during Coronavirus?

And think these tweets reflect a theme from well before Covid-19 where there have been ongoing complaints that companies and others don't take what we'd call in the UK reasonable adjustments for disability seriously.

I'm not sure if the same issue occurs in the U.S.

But these kind of show -- bring to light issues that occurred from before Covid-19, I think.

So, for example, as I'm sure you know, a right for people with disabilities is about double for people without disabilities in the UK and the U.S.

It's clearly reflected in these tweets, I think.

And the second theme, lots of tweets, not many of them with high retweet counts, but lots of different tweets essentially saying, don't write-off people with disabilities in one form or another.

And that is one of the top ones.

Folks, when you say the Coronavirus isn't a big deal, it only kills the disabled, elderly, chronically ill, and immunocompromised, the implication is that those permanent expendable.

Please be more careful.

And there are many other tweets that discussed this issue in different ways and here's another example.

If your college's Covid-19 plan doesn't center houseless students, first generation, low-income students, international students, immunocompromised students, and students with disabilities, then it isn't a recovery plan, it's a death wish.

And the fact that people with disabilities get ignored even in life-critical situations has been well documented before.

I think this issue resonated very strongly on Twitter.

And another issue that I'm sure you're aware of, so there's a UK and a U.S. version of this issue which was the medical professionals take -- were being told to or taking steps that lower the value of the lives of some people with disabilities.

So in the UK, doctors were asking elderly people to sign do not resuscitate orders to make the end-of-life care for them more efficient because of the need for beds for Covid-19.

So that's what the first tweet was about.

And the second one was the legislation in Alabama.

So Alabama won't provide ventilators to the mentally disabled.

The Governor who signed the most dangerous antichoice bill into law included Eugenism in her Coronavirus response.

It's not hyperbole, Kay Ivey is a Nazi.

So these are important things to remember the steps that people took, especially near the start fortunate pandemic.

And a lot of tweets about Michael Hickson, in particular.

I understand there's a controversy about exactly what happened, but there were many tweets that were extremely alarmed by are the care that he apparently was given.

International press coverage as well.

And on the other -- kind of on the other hand in some way, there were lots of tweets about support for people with disabilities, tweets saying we need support people with disabilities or asking for support in different ways.

So some of the support was prayers, let us pray together for persons with disabilities and those who assist them.

Others were corporate efforts to help people with disabilities during the pandemic because the lockdown.

I think this news story got worldwide coverage in Australia.

Super market giving a special hour for people with disabilities and the elderly.

And this also got highly retweeted.

You know someone -- even though it's from Malaysia, it's from the capital city of Malaysia, do you know someone in Subang Jaya Gurdwara are able to cook their own meals due to old age and disabilities?

Sigh sue will deliver meals to them.

It's a temple, I found a picture of them on Google.

So this is, I guess, the other side of the coin to writing off people with disabilities, a parallel tradition of providing voluntary support, a systemic voluntary support or ad-hoc voluntary support to people or anyone in the community needing help.

And U.S. and UK I'm sure both have got long traditions of voluntary organizations providing support for various different types of disability, the charity sector or the nonprofit sector.

And also a different take on that perspective.

There were lots of political tweets about the need for Social Security and the fact that I believe the -- the government in the U.S. was trying to reduce Social Security payments, and that would affect people with disabilities more.

So, yeah, several tweets about this specific issue.

Social Security.

So the second one if is if you are as disgusted as I am by Trump's plan to reduce Social Security for seniors and people with disabilities in the middle of Covid-19, please respond with -- and I'm not sure what the thumbs down is.

Maybe that's an icon calling for a [away from mic] on Twitter.

So the parallels tradition to the voluntary sector tradition of providing state support rather than voluntary sector support, systemic support for people with disabilities.

Lots of political tweets as well.

So making wider political points, but mentioning disability in the context of these wider political points.

So, again, one from the U.S. and one from the UK.

Just so we're clear, the guy currently denying we have a Covid-19 problem stole money from a charity for children with cancer and kicked a developmentally disabled nephew off the Trump family health care plan.

And from the UK, the UK economy allows 54 billionaires to live tax-free whilst taking away mobility from disabled people and school dinners away from children.

So, again, they're making a wider political point.

But I think this is showing that steps taken against people with disabilities aren't forgotten, but they are -- we do -- on Twitter they're remembered and brought back to make wider political generalizations.

So there are a lot of tweets in which a disability was mentioned along with a range of other factors to attack a politician, for example, for their behavior.

And we also came across five tweets that we classified as positive, although they overlapped to some extent with the other themes.

Particularly like this one.

This is huge for disabled people.

Companies have been telling us disabled folks for years the reason that they wouldn't hire us because the work couldn't be done from home remotely.

Bullshit, it could have then.

It sure as hell can now.

Hire disabled people.

And then a link to a news about Microsoft saying it was going to let more people work from home permanently due to Covid-19.

And there were several tweets about different aspects of Covid-19, the people with disabilities were saying this is something we've already coped with, it's not a problem for us.

And watching nondisabled people throw spectacular tantrums about Covid-19 getting in the way of their plans as made me realize that some people never had a lost year or several.

Frankly the level of temporal entitlement is just astounding.

So positive in the sense of emphasizing abilities, I think.

Another positive tweet.

I think quite funny one as well.

Abled people, no, we cannot do remote conferences.

It's so hard.

Disabled people, it's not that hard really, just try.

Abled people, no, the complexity, the cost, the problems.

Disabled people, just try.

Coronavirus, hi.

Abled people, we're pleased to announce our new remote conferencing system.

And so I think this was probably a lot funnier in March, April when lots of people were really struggling with conferencing but now we're kind of used to it now.

So I think this joke isn't as -- it's still a funny joke well written funny joke, but I think it doesn't resonate so much anymore.

And a big one from Barack Obama who tweeted a news story, @cripchick disabled activist understand what's temperatures like for people with particular vulnerabilities to come together for support.

Nice picture.

Yeah, the news story that he wrote about, wrote a tweet about and retweeted.

And then a few tweets about long Covid.

Long term complications from Covid.

So he's mentioned disability, just in the sense of saying that disability is part of what you expect from long Covid.

But not about disabilities as such.

Medical perspective on disability.

And a few tweets about voting in the U.S. elections for people with disabilities.

And so about specific acts to make voting more possible for people with disabilities.

The Vote Safe Act.

And another tweet, okay.

So voter suppression is no longer Billy clubs and Jim Crow.

It's closed polling sites, plus six hour waits without pay.

Covid is no excuse.

Who needs to vote in person?

The disabled.

The homeless or displaced.

Voters with language barriers.

Folks who didn't get their ballots in time.

Americans.

And then finally, and I thought this would be the biggest theme but it wasn't, it was the smallest but it was in there.

Many tweets saying that people with disabilities are at greater risk from Covid-19.

So there's the official World Health Organization guidance saying that.

That was one of the tweets.

So new World Health Organization guidance on disability during Covid-19.

Populations with disability may be impacted more significantly by Coronavirus.

This can be mitigated by simple actions and protective measures are taken.

So I think this was from early March.

This was the official announcement from the World Health Organization.

Not highly retweeted, particularly compared to the other tweets.

And then the other side of the coin to the wool worth's retweet.

Panic buying is not going to protect you from Covid-19.

Dear ableds, it's going to make daily life much harder for disabled people who are immunocompromised and need these products.

Please be mindful of your privilege and access, please.

So this is broadcasting the greater risk and the need for action.

So I don't really know why these tweets weren't retweeted more.

It might be that this was widely known through the mainstream media so people didn't feel the need tweet about it so much.

And that's the only thing I can come up with for that.

And then there were a few odd tweets that didn't really fit into the categories.

So there was one person about someone being released from prison and attacking a disabled elderly man.

And there was a tweet from the National Rifle Association about the need to have guns to protect you from the -- not from the virus, but from the pandemonium that -- when society breaks down.

This doesn't mean anything to me in England, I have to admit.

So we have, like, a butter knife, a sharp butter knife when we want to hurt people.

Okay.

So just to recap on the limitations, so minority of citizens use Twitter and the issues that were important might not be covered on Twitter because they're well covered on other mainstream media or well covered elsewhere.

There's a little bit of a left or liberal political bias to Twitter because of the people that use it.

And it was only a study of English language tweets and obviously Spanish is important in the U.S. plus other languages.

And other issues might be important, but just didn't get that tweet that was perfectly worded that became highly retweeted.

So this isn't necessarily a record of everything that was important on Twitter, but it was just everything we were able to find with this method.

So to conclude, so the highly retweeted tweets mostly discuss outrage at people with disabilities being written off, support in some way or Social Security, positive messages, politics, and disbelief that work adjustments are suddenly possible.

So that was one of the really big messages.

So nothing specific about disability-related Covid-19 risks, so that was something that we expected to find but we didn't find anything.

We thought there might be something about wider issues with the lockdown, but not in any of the highly retweeted tweets.

So overall, I think this is a record, a partial record or reminder of important issues during Covid-19.

And particularly about working at home and actions that were taken, shameful actions that were taken against people with disabilities from the health care community.

And the early -- particularly the early disregard of the extra vulnerabilities of people with disabilities at the start of the pandemic.

Okay.

So, I'll stop there, I think.

So I'm interested in how these results match your experience, whether you found other issues that resonated in other places or you think there are other issues that I missed.

Yeah.

So any comments on any aspect of the presentation are welcome.

So thank you very much.

And Jonathan will jump in as well when he's ready.

So, shall I stop here?

>> Just remember that you're on mute if you did want to comment about how these messages compare to our experiences.

>> Hi, yes.

I did have a few questions.

First of all, thank you for the presentation.

It definitely sounds familiar to what we've been hearing through social media and other various media throughout.

So sounds very familiar.

In the beginning of your presentation, you did share some demographic information about Twitter users.

And I was just curious if you had any demographic info about the percentages of people with disabilities that are Twitter users internationally or other?

>> I don't have any specific statistics.

If you go on Twitter, you can declare a disability, if you want to, in your biography.

But not many people do, and that's probably not a very reliable indicator of disability.

So some disabilities people would be more likely to declare, I think, than others.

And, no, I don't know any statistics about whether the uptake in Twitter, for example, is greater or lesser amongst people with disabilities.

I imagine it would be higher amongst some groups, but not amongst others.

>> Yeah, there's Asian and political groups segments that you noted.

Thank you.

>> Thank you.

>> And there's a chat or a message in the chat noting that maybe some disability -- individuals with disabilities aren't able to access Twitter.

So there's some associability that people might want to take.

>> [Away from mic] that could be very liberal.

And typically if [away from mic] very much for [away from mic] certain people [away from mic] they're not made the [away from mic] for the impairment.

They can [away from mic] I think it's [away from mic].

>> That makes sense.

>> In terms of the -- I had a question about the approach.

I was really fascinated by looking -- by the fact that you all went to this source with its limitations, but using this mechanism that, you know, whether it's Twitter, Facebook, whatever format this social media aspect where we do so much of our communication and pull themes out of it, I just -- in your experience, is this -- it seems useful.

It seems very -- something that we should be doing to identify areas where innovations are needed, to identify gaps of where information isn't being shared and could be.

Is that inaccurate of me to think that?

I mean, seems like there's more opportunity to use social media than the way we're using it.

>> Yeah, I think there are opportunities to use it for some disabilities.

As Jonathan said, if you have a visual impairment, Twitter isn't a good medium for you, for example.

But other communities just like I think the ADHD community is quite active on Twitter.

So it would be -- it could well be useful to get ADHD the information on Twitter just because of the extensive uptake.

And it's -- for this, we had to monitor Twitter over -- continually monitor Twitter to filter out relevant tweets from the Covid-19 tweets.

But it's possible to monitor Twitter for free with free software that's available.

So if you wanted to track particular disabilities use, it is technically possible.

Yeah.

And they do allow research use of Twitter.

>> And there's something in the chat about Tiktok.

There's a lot of informational videos about ADHD as well as from not only therapists providing background information, but individuals who have been diagnosed providing their experiences.

Oh, that's great.

>> Someone asked can you tell us more about the software you used for your analysis.

>> It's a computer program called Mozdeh, m-o-z-d-e-h.

You can download it for free off the Internet.

So if you Google Mozdeh, Twitter maybe, then you'll find the program website.

And the way it works is that you enter a set of keywords.

So for this study I entered Covid-19 Coronavirus, and then Coronavirus as a phrase. And then the program goes to Twitter every 15 minutes and gives the queries to Twitter and then downloads matching tweets from Twitter and then saves them to your computer hard drive.

And you can leave the computers -- the programs switched on for as long as you like. And -- and then it gradually builds up a huge file of all the tweets matching your queries. So it's a relatively easy-to-use program and everything's free with it.

And so the disadvantage with the program is that it doesn't work retrospectively.

So if you wanted to now study early Covid-19, you couldn't do it.

You can only get tweets from a maximum of a week ago with the searches.

So it's something you have to think about at the start and set up.

But if anyone wants to test out some searches on Covid-19, I'm happy to run them on the copy of the Twitter that I've got from this study.

So we've still got it, so we're -- I'm very happy to run any searches.

Just send me a list of keywords and I can run them through and send you the results.

>> You were asking about some of the results and Melina mentioned that this does resonate for us.

One example that I thought of when you were going through the findings was that families with special health care issues, for instance, couldn't go to the grocery store. So when you were talking about the grocery chain opening up designated hours, they did do that here eventually.

But -- but snap ed, so federal assistance for certain food programs, they still required for the longest time people to go into the grocery stores and get their foods.

And when that wasn't possible or they were very worried about exposure, that caused some great, great concerns for families.

So it's interesting that you're capturing -- you were able to capture some of that in a different --

>> Yeah.

It focused on Woolworth's, I think they were the first do it around the world.

We had first for elderly people and people with disabilities and then for health care workers as well for a while.

>> Any other questions?

Did you say Dr. Levitt was going to do another section or?

>> No, no, he's just here to contribute on anything relevant.

>> So as Covid continues, as much as I want it to end in 2021, I think it's going to continue, are you all -- are both of you going to continue to look at tweets?

You mentioned some long-term themes and presented some here.

>> Yes.

Yeah.

We're going to carry on probably for at least another year.

Hopefully it will be beaten in a year, but we like to keep tracking it and see how the -- everything changes.

So at the moment with the vaccines starting to become available, hopefully that will have a big impact, you know, I guess in a few months.

>> And here for vaccines the issue is access.

Will individuals with disabilities get access to it pretty quickly?

And how will that be distributed?

So I'm not sure, hopefully you'll see some of that in a positive way.

>> Yeah.

Hopefully stories about how that was achieved.

Yeah.

>> Any other themes that people can think of moving ahead as they -- as they look at these tweets?

Obviously the political environment will still hang around.

>> I had a question, Lesley, it's Cassie.

>> Go ahead.

>> Do you guys have any plans on taking the information that you found and measuring if there's any kind of influence over local, civic, kind of government agencies based on what you see retweeted in area and then seeing any kind of policy changes?

>> That would be really interesting to do.

But, unfortunately, we don't know the specific locality for many of the tweets, we just know the country of the original tweet.

We don't even know where the retweeters came from.

And some of the tweets have got country-specific information such as the one from Malaysia and some of the political ones are obviously tied to a particular country.

But, yes, it's a bit of a limitation that we don't have much geographic information.

So this is part of the information that you would have to pay Twitter for if you wanted to know where all these tweets are from.

Then you would have to be on the corporate data buyer ladder and then they would give you this information.

But with the free Twitter information, we only know the names of the -- the name of the person who made the original retweet.

>> You just need to ask all of Twitter to use qualitative hash tags so that you can plug it into your system easier.

>> Yeah, that would be fantastic.

>> The other thing I'm thinking about this, Melina, I'm thinking of you because Melina is always looking for stories, right?

Qualitative stories that represent the experiences of individuals and families.

And on seems like Twitter is a, you know, again, with all the limitations that you mentioned, but it is a source of those stories for sure.

Raw stories in many aspects.

Raw opinions.

And that can be good.

That can be very helpful.

>> Yeah, yes.

So for this, I've hit on really the most personal stories, which were the tweets about people dying.

But many of the non highly retweeted tweets gave personalized, specific stories or bits of information.

But they just didn't resonate to get into the top retweeted set.

But there was a lot of -- there's a huge number of tweets matching the query.

So a huge number of tweets about Covid-19 and disability, but just covering a very wide range of different topics that we couldn't put into things very easily.

But it would be interesting to go through and just read them at random to look for these individual stories.

>> Well thank you so much for sharing your time and joining us.

You have some chats, very interesting topic, thank you for sharing your research and perhaps write a book.

>> Oh.

[Laughter]

Thank you.

>> But thank you so much.

This is very valuable and we will follow your work to see what you find out as this continues.

>> Okay.

Thank you very much, Lesley.

It's really been a pleasure talking to you all.

So thank you very much.

>> Same here.

Take care.

>> Okay.

You too.

Bye.

>> Bye-bye.