

#CripTheVote: How disabled activists used Twitter for political engagement during the 2016 Presidential Election

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Abstract:

In preparation for the 2016 presidential election, disabled thought-leaders and activists used Twitter to create the #CripTheVote campaign, aimed at mobilizing their online communities to make disability access and inclusion a recognized social problem. Utilizing qualitative content analysis of over 11,000 tweets, this study found that the individual action goals propagated by disabled activists who engaged with the #CripTheVote hashtag differed from those centralized by the leaders of the campaign. Activists used #CripTheVote to counter pervasive ableist ideologies pertaining to political engagement. They connectively argued that: 1) disabled people are politically aware; 2) disabled people have voice; 3) the opinions of disabled people matter; and 4) disabled people will fight for their rights. This paper serves as a historiographical document of online activism taking place via #CripTheVote and aims to contextualize it within the corpus of disability studies literature.

Keywords: disability, community mobilization, political engagement, Twitter, counter-narrative

Introduction

Since the 1960s, disabled activists in the United States have fought for access to public and political participation, vehemently using a variety of activities, from protests to petitions. Today, many actions and organizing efforts are taking place online in the form of cyber activism. In preparation for the 2016 presidential election, disabled thought-leaders and activists organized via Twitter using #CripTheVote to mobilize their online communities to make disability access and inclusion a recognized social problem during the 2016 election. This paper analyzes the #CripTheVote campaign using the *logic of connective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) as a framework of community mobilization. Primary and

secondary goals of the campaign are examined, with a particular focus on the production of counter-narratives and political voice.

The Social Landscape of Disability

According to the 2017 Disability Status Report, approximately 12.7% of the United States population aged 21-64 have at least one disabling impairment (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2017). Despite disability rates increasing due to a rise in chronic conditions and longer life-expectancies, issues associated with life with a disability are often ignored or stereotyped by the media (see e.g., Zhang & Haller, 2013; Holten, Farrell, & Fudge, 2014).

Disability issues may be overlooked by the media partly due to the commonly held belief that the problem of disability is located within the impaired individual; i.e. a disability is a cognitive, physical, or mental impairment that is situated within the individual and which prevents them from engaging in a given activity like showering, eating, or socially engaging (Donoghue, 2003). This tendency to perceive disability as a problem of the individual saturates contemporary society, and is referred to as the *medical model* of disability (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Hogan, 2019). This view is one adopted by the Disability Status report referenced above wherein a *disabling impairment* (Erickson, et al., 2017) is defined as an impairment that limits or impedes a person's ability to perform actions considered to be 'typical' human activities. In other words, according to the medical model, a disability is seen as a person's inability to participate within society (Haegele & Hodge, 2016), and as a result, prevents disability issues as being seen as a social problem. (Beckett, 2006).

In response to the issues with the medical model, scholars have devised the *social model*. This model locates the problem of disability within the environment around the impaired individual (Oliver, 1990), arguing that societal structures and systems 'imposes disability on individuals with impairments' (Haegele & Hodge, 2016, para 12). Consider, for example, a wheelchair user. The social model posits that the physical need for a wheelchair does not produce the limitation identified as a disability, but instead the *inaccessibly*-built structural environment around the user does. If every physical structure was designed with wheelchair users in mind, movement and access to public life would not be restricted. The social model, when used in its extreme form, rejects impairment as a cause of disability altogether.

While this model was created as a critique on the medical model, this model itself has not been without its critics either. For one thing, it has been criticized for its overreliance on social factors (Hughes & Paterson, 2006). Furthermore, critics of the social model argue that to ignore impairment as it occurs within the body is to ignore the life experiences of disabled people. This is captured in a tweet by disabled activist Tamika (@ChronicTami on Twitter) who wrote "'We're only disabled because we live in an inaccessible society". I see where you're coming from, but for me, no. That feels like erasure, as if accessibility will magically mean this body isn't disabled. *does not compute*'. This tweet garnered hundreds of responses from individuals including fellow disability

leaders and activists in the Twitter space (ChronicTami, 2018). While recognizing this supremely valid representational issue, it remains imperative to consider the social model as a discursive tool that enables a radical and much-needed shift in perspective (Oliver, 2013).

An alternative, more contemporary model of disability was proposed by disability studies scholar Alison Kafer. The *political-relational model of disability* serves to radically shift perspective away from the medical model's individualized take on disability, while also acknowledging the real lived-experiences of impairment such as pain and depression (Kafer, 2013). Kafer's political-relational model of disability functions to 'move to a different register of analysis' that contends with the ways in which relationships are impacted by disability while establishing disability as within the political realm (2013, p. 8). Since the 1960s, disabled activists have used elements of the social model rhetoric to fight for physical access to public structures, access to public and political participation, and for recognition of disability as an identity label, among other things (Longmore & Umansky, 2001). In recent years, however, they have turned to the rhetoric created by the political-relational model to create social change.

While in the past much of the actions and organization of disabled people happened face-to-face, many actions and organizing efforts are now taking place online. Not only are these online activists interacting with each other, they are also collectively and connectively interacting with and evaluating media, academic, and social representations of disability in general (Mann, 2018b; Parsloe & Holton, 2017; Preston, 2016).

Online Disability Communities and Social Media Activism

Online communities have changed how protests that are centered on disabilities take place. The Internet is host to a variety of disability communities: some are based on a diagnosis, others center on a shared activity. As a virtual, rather than physical place, the Internet can be seen as an equalizing space, wherein disabled persons may choose to disclose their disability or not (Furr, Carreiro, & McArthur, 2016). For starters, participating online has been described as less risky because it allows for a decrease in form-based prejudice and discrimination (Kozinets, 2015). Unlike 'in real life' (IRL) communication, online communication also allows for a greater flexibility in identity and self-image construction (Bowker & Tuffin, 2007; Cole, Nolan, Seko, Mancuso, & Ospina, 2011), allowing someone to transform their disembodied presence as they see fit, rather than being reduced during social interaction because of a physical or neurological variation (Carr, 2010).

Social media platforms do more than just work to connect people with disabilities though. They encompass 'communication, exchange, activism and leisure' (Ellis & Goggin, 2015), but can also serve as a vehicle of protest.. For example, in 2015 disabled activists used social media to draw public attention to major sight-based accessibility issues in the popular television series, Netflix's *Daredevil*, which stars a vision-impaired lead character (Ellis, 2016). Similarly, disability online communities use social media to speak out against ableist ideologies, thereby extending counter-narratives into virtual public spaces like Twitter and the blogosphere (Parsloe & Holton, 2017; Preston, 2016). And in some cases,

counter-narratives are initiated or endorsed by disabled celebrities, like d/Deaf¹ actress and activist, Marlee Matlin. One example of such a narrative is the #CaptionTHIS campaign organized in June 2012. This social media activism campaign didn't just put forth a counter narrative, but also demanded direct media reform (Ellcessor, 2018). Ellcessor posits that some of the power derived by online campaigns like #CaptionTHIS comes by way of dismantling stigma. She argues, 'Stigma's enforcement of normalcy is weakened when stigmatized individuals and groups can speak back to the broader population and challenge the norm itself, as facilitated by social media and other forms of user-generated online content' (p. 259). Though celebrity endorsement of a substantive change-based social media campaign like #CaptionTHIS can alter or dilute the message of the campaign (Ellcessor, 2018), the fact that celebrities can jump aboard at all is indicative of a social media landscape rife with possibilities to engage the public via protest and counter-narratives.

Disability-related social movements have been the object of academic study as well. Prolific scholars on this subject, Ellis and Goggin, point to three primary features that publications on digital/online disability activism have in common: 1) a celebration of the accessibility of online spaces as entry points to various forms of social and civic participation; 2) the possibility of global and local collective change-making efforts; and 3) self-selected leadership of groups, campaigns, and movements (2018). In addition to the three common areas identified by Ellis and Goggin, disability-related social media movements also generally work to 'advance discourse on disability rights' through change-making efforts and more casual public sharing of personal experience and narrative (Mann, 2018b). Scholarship on disability rhetoric and social movements about disability rights alike attempt to situate disability as a minority group with a political agenda (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Kafer, 2013; Mann, 2018a). Commonalities aside, contemporary disability activism carried out in online spaces is time and context dependent – many movements deserving of study as historiographical events. This article explores one social media movement in particular, namely #CripTheVote. This movement, which started as a campaign, makes for an interesting case study because it demonstrates a significant event in contemporary disability activism, one that morphed into a community that continued long beyond the initial campaign – remaining active until, at the writing of this article at least, the 2020 United States presidential primaries. #CripTheVote offers a concentrated look into how disabled people used Twitter as a tool of political engagement in the 2016 United States Presidential election.

Thus, this article introduces and analyzes how disabled activists used #CripTheVote during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election cycle. This article will situate #CripTheVote within the disability studies literature as a historiographical event of online activism and connect it to extant work on community organization and mobilization.

The Logic of Connective Action

Community organization and mobilization is studied across disciplines in academia. Community psychology, community health, sociology, education, political science,

communication studies and anthropology, to name a few, all have developed theories and models of community action throughout their academic histories. One model particularly relevant for the present study stems from the intersection of political communication and digital media studies. The *logic of connective action*, proposed by Bennett and Segerberg (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), adapts the analysis of community mobilization to the online/digital context. Bennett and Segerberg's logic of connective action provided a context-specific counter example to the then predominant theory of community mobilization, which posited that community mobilization was dependent upon a unified agenda/ logic for change. However, as Bennett and Segerberg pointed out, digital media requires that scholars attend to the ways in which individuals think and behave according to their own individual action-frames, which when taken together presents multiple logics. The *logic of connective action*, then, is a model of action ideally situated to account for online social movements such as #CripTheVote.

To clarify, the logic of connective action yields an 'organizational dynamic based on more fine-grained individual engagement using technologies to carry personal stories and other content across networks.' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, pp. 196). In other words, unlike more traditionally formed action groups that collectively plan, act, and bargain as a collective unit, action groups formed in the digital space plan act and bargain individually using personal stories and networks. Lived experiences are central to any online-based social movements. The logic of connective action, then, suggests a shift from a one-size fits-all method of analysis toward an individually-spawned crowd-enabled case-specific analysis. In other words, actions are not seen as being carried out by a preformed group collectively identifying as a contained monolithic body. Rather, actions are the result of individuals personalizing inclusive discourses through the use and manipulation of action-frames such as 'we are the 99%'. Further, the logic of connective action 'is rooted in self-motivated sharing' toward the end of forming a 'mesh-work connecting often-disparate people to a set of common activities' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, 197).

Subsequently, the analysis of online social movements and campaigns begins with an examination of personal sharing through self-organizing networks and then moves into network-supported aims. Analyzing #CripTheVote data using the logic of connective action framework requires an examination of narrative action-frames employed by individual disabled activists (campaign participants) under the assumption that those frames collectively build the logic of the group. Further, such a framework also requires the methodological use of narrative analysis, discussed below.

Introducing #CripTheVote

#CripTheVote started as a political campaign on Twitter designed to increase disabled people's engagement with the 2016 election. Unlike spontaneous social media campaigns, #CripTheVote started in 2016 as an organized one, with goals and bipartisan rules of engagement. The campaign was organized by three disability activists: Alice Wong (@sfdirewolf), Andrew Pulrang (@AndrewPulrang), and Gregg Beratan (@GreggBeratan).

They articulated the goal of the #CripTheVote campaign as getting disability issues recognized as a social problem during this presidential election cycle, thus earning disability issues a position on the political agenda. To do this, organizers Wong, Pulrang, and Beratan moderated frequent Tweet Chats, some taking place during the four televised presidential debates between then-presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Tweet Chats are pre-planned and deliberately designed Twitter meet-ups that aggregate around a particular hashtag (Chai, Ranney, Boyer, Rosen, & Lewis, 2017). The following statement was offered by organizers in blog coverage of the campaign:

#CripTheVote is a nonpartisan campaign to engage both voters and politicians in a productive discussion about disability issues in the United States, with the hope that Disability takes on greater prominence within the American political landscape. We hope to encourage people with disabilities to engage with the election at all levels from President on down, and to vote. We also want to hear candidates engage with disability policy issues and disabled people as much as possible (Wong, 2016).

Later blog posts and coverage of #CripTheVote activity revealed four campaign goals: 1) increase political engagement within the disabled population, 2) increase perception of disability as a social problem, 3) get substantive disability issues on the agenda for the presidential debates, and 4) push for and create policy change to improve the lives of disabled people.

The purpose of this two-study project was three-fold: (1) to qualitatively explore how disabled advocates used #CripTheVote as a tool of political engagement, i.e., (how they use it and what they hope to accomplish; (2) to uncover how disabled activists perceived and evaluated presidential debates and election processes; and (3) to identify thematic counter-narratives used by activists used to support and hold up the collective and connective goals of the group. The overall research questions for this study are:

1. How are disabled activists using the #CripTheVote campaign as a form of political engagement and community mobilization?
2. How are disabled activists interacting with and evaluating 2016 presidential election events and media coverage?

Methods

This study used a mixed-methods design to complete a multi-step data collection and analysis process. Data analysis took place in two phases, with the first study focusing on understanding how people on Twitter made sense of the four goals outlined by leader activists. The second study looked at the counter-narratives produced by the #CripTheVote hashtag. Throughout both studies, the established #CripTheVote campaign goals acted as sensitizing concepts throughout the analytical process. Because two separate analytical

process were completed, the results are presented in two sections. **Figure 1** shows a flowchart demonstrating the data collection and processing steps.

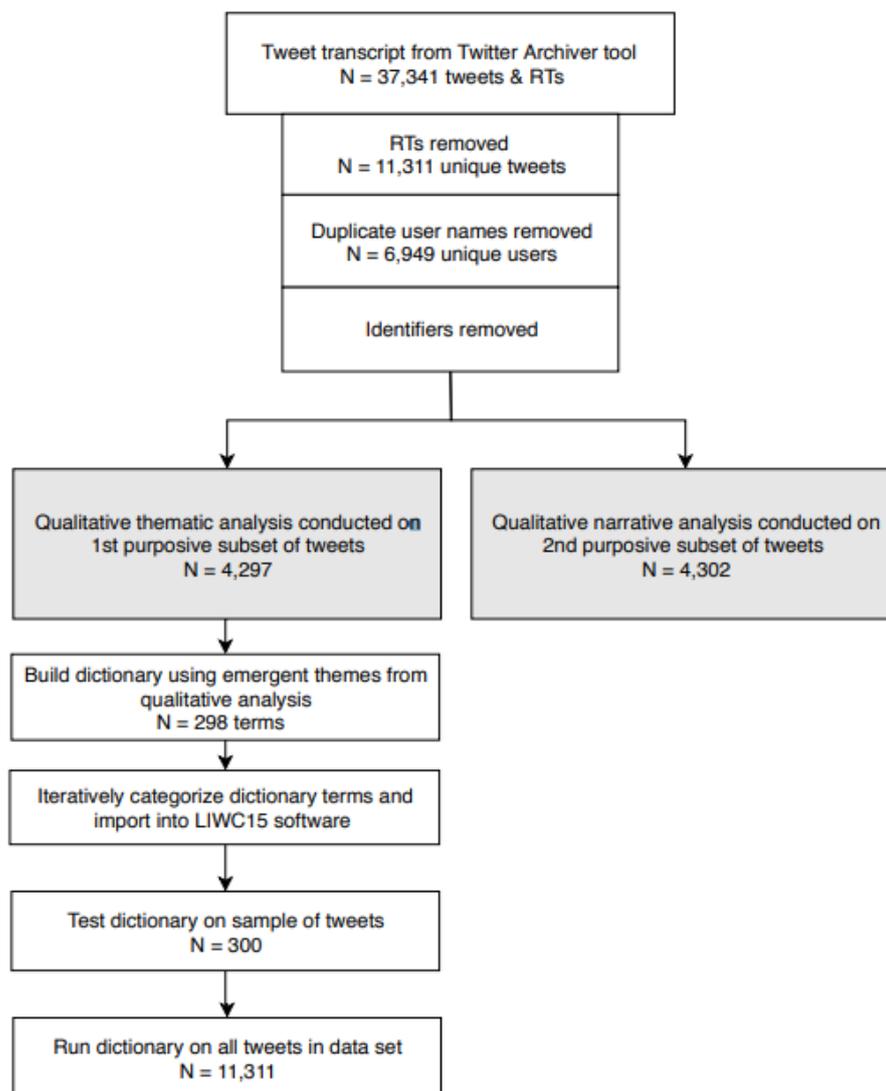


Figure 1: Flowchart of data collection and processing (RT = Retweet)

Data Collection

I conducted a retrospective analysis of #CripTheVote. The Twitter-Archiver add-on tool through Google Chrome was used to set parameters for Twitter content data extraction. The Twitter archiver tool automatically extracts the following pieces of data: date, screen name, reported full name, tweet text, tweet ID, app used to send the tweet, the number of followers the user has, the number of follows the user has, current number of retweets (RTs), current number of favorites, and user details which include whether they are verified, location, age of account, bio, and link to profile image. In compliance with Twitter privacy policies, the Twitter-archiver tool does not collect tweet content from private accounts. The parameters were set to extract data aggregated through #CripTheVote every five minutes from September 19th, 2016, the day of the first #CripTheVote Twitter chat, until the last

election-related Tweet Chat took place on November 11th, 2016. Of the data collected automatically by the Twitter Archiver Tool only tweet text, screen name, and number of RTs was maintained for processing. Only publicly-available tweets were included in the analysis.

Data Pre-Processing

Within the study time frame, 37,341 tweets were extracted and imported into a Google spreadsheet in chronological order. This study was set to only consider original content, therefore RTs were removed, leaving 11,311 unique tweets from 6,949 unique Twitter users spanning the two-month period. After the Twitter handles (screen names) were electronically separated and duplicates deleted, the identities of each Twitter user were removed so as to de-identify the data as much as possible. However, a secondary re-identification process took place after analysis was complete.

Data Post-Analysis Processing

Once the data was processed and analyzed and I had selected quotes to represent the emergent themes (see discussion below of the analysis for the two studies included in this article), the selected quotes were copied into a Twitter search box. All authors of quoted tweets that were traceable via the search box were contacted and asked their preference for privacy and identification². The choice to allow authors to self-select their level of privacy was made to serve as a form of community capacity building by crediting activists who tweeted #CripTheVote as authors of tweet content (Simmons, Reynolds, & Swinburn, 2011).

Study 1: Data Analysis

In this first study, I examined how Twitter users who utilized the #CripTheVote hashtag interpreted the four goals outlined by leader activists. Analysis centered around eight events; four televised debates and four scheduled Twitter chats. I purposely selected and qualitatively analyzed tweets associated with these events. This subset of tweets contained about half of the total number of unique tweets from each event. This selection of data based on events has been demonstrated to be efficient for the preliminary coding process (Kozinets, 2012). In total, 4,297 original tweets were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The initial thematic analysis was iterative and akin to grounded theory, and aimed to create a dictionary that could be used to quantitatively analyze the entire data set (n=11,311).

First I read through all 4,297 tweets over the course of five reading sessions to develop an atmospheric view of the data subset, then coded and categorized the data using the four campaign goals established by #CripTheVote leaders as sensitizing concepts. Tweets categorized as representative of each campaign goal were analyzed for repeated word usage across users and time. Words and word-phrases used in at least ten tweets in a given category were added to that category's word bank, which led to the development of

the dictionary of terms (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Because the #CripTheVote hashtag had to be included in the tweet text to be considered data for this study, it was not included in the dictionary of terms. No pronouns, prepositions, articles, or contractions were included. The combined banks of reoccurring words and word-phrases were used to develop a dictionary of political engagement for all #CripTheVote data.

To create a dictionary useable through the advanced word count software developed by social psychologists called Linguistic Inquiry Word Count 15 (LIWC15), the dictionary terms were computer-coded into a .dic file and ascribed a number profile. After the dictionary was developed and checked against a sample of 300 random tweets, all content from the 11,311 original tweets was analyzed using the LIWC15 software. The software uses user-generated dictionaries (like the one developed as a part of this study) to analyze frequency and pattern. The output is in percentages. In total, 201,292 words (from the 11,311 unique tweets) were processed through the LIWC15 software.

Study 1: Results

Qualitative thematic analysis of the first subset of tweets generated 298 terms for the dictionary around the four campaign goals. Terms were only added to the dictionary when used in at least ten original tweets per category. **Table 1** shows a detailed dictionary of terms attributed to each goal.

Theme	Dictionary Codes
Calling for more disabled people to engage in election politically through voting or other	absentee, absentee, access, accessibility, act, actions, activism, activist, align, alone, amplify, anger, assistance, ballot, black, blackness, blog, booth, chat, chronic, chronic illness, color, community, couldn't, counted, crip, crip the vote, crippling the vote, cripple, crip the vote, deaf, disability community, disease, diverse, diversity, empty, engage, everybody 1, everyone, existing, expand, gender, go vote, hashtag, heard, here, Hispanic, how can we help, identity, identity group, ill, illness, increase access, intersection, intersectionality, join, knowing, live, local, mail, marginalize, medical, mental, minorities, minority, npr, online, our reach, outreach, participate, participation, person, poll, queer, race, radio, sharing, sick, social, sticker, television, tv, tweet, Twitter, Twitter chat, vote, voter outreach, voter registration, voting, yourself
Calling for disability issues to be recognized as a social problem	#notyourprop, ableist, able, ableism, about us, ada, ada compliance, addicts, advocate, affected, affordable care act, anytime, approach, article, autistic, aware, be heard, believe, body politic, broke, cils, citizen, complain, concern, criminal, damage, death, denied, denied, devalue, disabilities, disabilities, disability, disability issues, disability representation, disabled, discounted, discouraged, discrimination, disparity, dollar, don't know, don't matter, disability rights, educate, educating, equal, erasure, even, expensive, experience, fight, find, future, health, home, ignored, illegal, income, inequality, information, inmate, inspiration, invisibilities, invisibility, jail, justice, kill, killing, looks down, machine, marginalization, matter, matters, mock, moral, need,

	news, no joke, offended, offense, offensive, our issues, paid, percent, personhood, physical, pities, pity, population, poverty, prejudice, prison, privilege, problem, protect, protest, pushed to margin, satisfaction, read, real, reporter, resist, right, speaking up, stamina, stereotype, stronger, systematic, systemic, tell, there, thought, threaten, time, tragedy, transportation, transportations, turned away, upset, upsetting, violence, vulnerable, we matter, white, work, world, worse, yell
Call for more coverage of disability issues during in presidential debate cycle	acknowledge, address, advisory, agenda, call for, calling, calling for, commit, commitment, debate, discourse, discuss, election, engaging, force, get, getting out, inclusion, invite, lead, loud, louder, make them, media, mention, must, newspaper, nothing, open, opinion, play role, political, politicians, position, positioning, power, president, pressure, pretend, process, promises, really, representation, represented, seat at table, share, show, spotlight, substance, substantive, take interest, taking an interest, voice, want, words
Call for policy change for disability	#ada, biased, bill, change, coalition, committee, department, disability policy, healthcare, legal, legislature, lobby, lobbying, office, policy, policy change, private, private sector, public sector, public sphere, question, save, writing

Table 1: Emergent dictionary codes generated through qualitative thematic analysis.

Table 2 shows the code distribution per goal that was imported to the LIWC15 software.

<i>Code labels</i>	<i>Dictionary search terms</i>
1 (more engagement)	91
2 (social problem)	129
3 (coverage during debates)	55
4 (policy change)	22
<i>Total</i>	298

Table 2: Dictionary Term Distribution

Taken together, the goals from the first wave of analysis can be best described as *calls to action*. **Table 3** shows the percentage output of calls to action generated by the LIWC15 software. LIWC15 generates these percentages based on the frequency by which the collection of words attributed to each code appears in the full text. The percentage is representative of all words analyzed within the data set (201,292 words from 11,311 individual tweets).

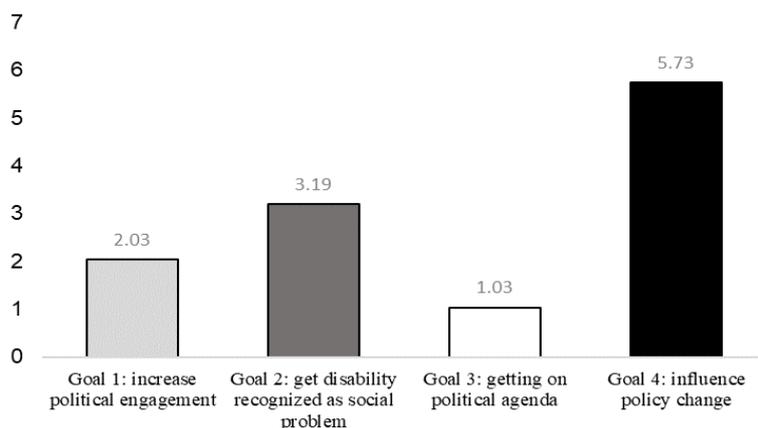


Table 3: Tweet Reference to Primary Campaign Goals

Based on the generated dictionary, the goal that the campaign organizers had identified as primary, namely to get disability issues mentioned in the presidential debates, had the lowest frequency of mention amongst activists engaged via #CripTheVote, with only 1.03% of all tweet content (see also **Table 4** below).

<i>Date of debate</i>	<i>Number of mentions of disability-related issues</i>	<i>Percent of mentions related to policy</i>	<i>Number of original tweets responding to mention*</i>
<i>September 26, 2016</i>	0	0%	34**
<i>October 9, 2016</i>	3	0%	48
<i>October 19, 2016</i>	2	0%	52
<i>October 4, 2016</i>	1	0%	28

Table 4: Disability Mention Frequency in Presidential Debate Cycle 2016.

* Not including RTs

** Number of comments reflecting lack of mention

The most frequently discussed goal, calling for disability-specific policy change, still only covered 5.73% of content. Second most frequently discussed is the call to increase perception of disability issues as a social problem, covering 3.19% of content. And third most frequent by mention is the call to increase the rate of political engagement among the disabled population, covering 2.03% of content. I will discuss the meaning of these findings for the overall goal of the movement below.

These numbers also raise a second question: How did Twitter users active in the #CripTheVote movement interpret the various goals?

Engagement

The first campaign goal was to increase political engagement among the disabled population. The following tweet sent out by the American Association of People with

Disability (AAPD) shows an understanding that one purpose of organizing around the hashtag is to create an outlet for, or location of, political participation:



A2 The discussion through tonight's [#TwitterChat](#) is a fantastic example of political participation!
[#CripTheVote](#) [#REVUP](#)

Tweets such as this were attributed to the campaign-defined goal of increasing the political engagement of disabled people. A total of ninety-one words and word-phrases were attributed to this theme. The theme suggests that, to disabled activists using [#CripTheVote](#), political participation means speaking up, voting, going beyond voting, reading/being informed, joining the Twitter chat, attending lobbying events, writing on issues that matter to the collective, protesting, increasing access at polling places, building coalitions with other marginalized groups, and 'sometimes just existing.' One tweet by disability activist, Eb, demonstrates the politicization of being disabled that generally defies common expectation:



A1. As a multiply marginalized person, my whole being is politicized. I can't avoid participation. [#CripTheVote](#)

Recognition

The second goal examined involves a call to increase public perception of disability issues as a social problem. A total of 129 words and word-phrases were attributed to this theme. Much content that fell into this theme centered around exposing injustice done to the disability community by way of discrimination, devaluation, prejudice, stigma, ableism, etc. Disability rights were considered in this category, but no content discussing specific policies were included here. Three examples follow:



A3: Ableism creates a structure through which some people are perceived from the start not to have value
[#CripTheVote](#)



Donia 🇵🇪 ♿
@DoniaLilly

Wonderful. More discrimination against **#disabled** voters.
As if AZ's literally excruciating lines in Dem Primary weren't enough 😞
#CripTheVote



2:58 PM · Nov 5, 2016 · [Twitter Web App](#)



Anonymous
@...



Disabled people doing ANYTHING public is so radical: we fought for our right to be a part of our communities. Still do.
#CripTheVote

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

These three representative tweets call attention to the discrimination and prejudice embedded in American culture that create or maintain disability-related social problems. The first tweet, by activist and scholar Lisa Diedrich, problematizes ableism-based cultural and social devaluation of disabled people. Her tweet demonstrates ideology-based discrimination. Donia's tweet, on the other hand, calls out place-based injustice – citing inaccessible line lengths for voting in the democratic primaries as a barrier to political participation. The third example tweet from an anonymous activist describes a common response to social injustice inflicted upon disabled people, for communities and to recognize the action of forming them as a radical, political act.

Coverage

The third goal identified involves a call to get on the political agenda during the presidential debates. Fifty-five words and word-phrases were assigned to this category, including any reference to a media form or outlet, and any terms specific to acknowledgement within or around the debates. The following tweets from Andrew Pulrang and Cara Liebowitz serve as examples of this theme:



Andrew Pulrang
@AndrewPulrang



We need to tell the networks to ask a disability policy question before these debates are over. [#CripTheVote](#) [#Debates2016](#)

8:09 PM · Sep 26, 2016 · [TweetDeck](#)

71 Retweets 85 Likes



Cara Liebowitz
@spazgirl11



ONE mention of disability and not even in a policy context. We're the largest minority & we vote. ACT LIKE IT. [#CripTheVote](#) [#saytheword](#)

As exemplified by these tweets, activists both proactively and reactively discussed their hopes of having disability policy issues recognized in media coverage during the 2016 presidential election cycle. [#CripTheVote](#) organizer, Andrew Pulrang's tweet, urged other activists to use Twitter to proactively call on media networks to cover disability policy when writing debate questions. It was unclear whether or not activists tweeting via [#CripTheVote](#) did reach out to networks, but Andrew's tweet was retweeted 71 times, suggesting the idea was amplified across the campaign audience. Cara Liebowitz's tweet took place just following the 4th presidential debate on October 4th, 2016 and calls attention to a lack of substantive disability policy content during the debate. As a response, she also highlights disability as a minority category deserving of social and political recognition.

Policy Change

The fourth and final goal involves a call to push for and create policy change to improve the lives of disabled people. Twenty-two words and word-phrases were assigned to this category which included many policy-specific terms: such as [#ADA](#) or sector. The following anonymized quote exemplifies this theme:



Anonymous
@...



Follow

“The ADA laws on voting are WAY stricter than what is in practice. Access would be improved if existing laws were enforced. [#cripthevote](#)”

Reply Retweet Favorite More

Study 1: Discussion

This first study shed light on 1) the popularity of the four goals identified by the founders of #CripTheVote, and 2) how these goals were interpreted by Twitters users. The low number of tweets that were classified as addressing these goals suggest that activists using the hashtag may not have been focused on the goals set forth by the movement's leaders, that the everyday style of tweet communication for this community does not fit with the methodological use of a word analysis software, or that to this group, achieving campaign goals requires the sharing of experience and ideas as a form of doing, rather than simply talking about campaign goals. As a result, it was necessary to more holistically understand how disabled activists were using the hashtag for political engagement and how they perceived and evaluated the election process. If they were not discussing content related to the campaign goals, what were they discussing?

Study 2: Data Analysis

A second wave of qualitative analysis was completed to answer this question and complement the findings produced by the first study. Using the same dataset, I relied on narrative analysis to shed light on what #CripTheVote analysts were talking about (Barton, 2007). Narrative analysis was selected for this second study based on recent scholarship suggesting that because Twitter limits word count, each tweet communicates only bits of a bigger picture. Narratives can be 'generally understood as stories that order events across time and also structure accounts of these events in ways that give meaning to the experiences of the story tellers' (Stephens, 2011, p. 63). Thus, the use of narrative analysis allowed me to read tweets as part of a larger developing story, rather than as individual thoughts. According to Sadler, 'the information expressed in individual tweets is necessarily limited. The value of reading Twitter in terms of stories therefore lies in narrative's power to create sense from jumbled and fragmentary information by interpreting it in terms of larger narrative ensembles' (2018, p. 3270). In order to make sense of this set of Twitter data, I analyzed tweets as fragments of a larger coherent narrative and logic.

This second subset of tweets was pulled from the same dataset using the same eight events (four televised presidential debates and four Twitter chats – comprising roughly 500 tweets per 60-90-minute increments). I manually checked the second subset and removed duplicates that were captured in the initial subset. In total, 4,302 tweets were analyzed for this study.

Study 2: Results

Narrative analysis of the second subset of tweets (N = 4,302) found that disabled activists were using the #CripTheVote hashtag for several reasons that complement, but not directly mention the campaign goals. In this dataset, #CripTheVote was used (1) to amplify disabled voices through the sharing of disability-rights and narrative focused media articles, (2) to make meaning from hegemonic and medicalized representations of disability in the media

by raising concern over them, and (3) to co-create a safe space (Roestone Collective, 2014) online to disseminate politically-relevant counter-narratives to show that disability issues matter and disabled people matter.

Across all uses identified, the following four narratives that counter ableist ideologies, or counter-narratives, emerged: (1) disabled people are politically aware; (2) disabled people have voice; (3) the opinions of disabled people matter; and (4) disabled people will fight for their rights.

Although the results did reveal these four major counter-narratives, it is important to point out that not all the data fit into these categories. Several tweets didn't appear to address these or the activists' narratives. These outliers tended to be direct endorsements for various candidates without justification statements. These expressions may reflect personal examples of discrimination, exclusion, and erasure, but did not outright reference back to their experiences with disability. Additionally, a number of tweets included pointed toward blogs or websites that were only indirectly related to #CripTheVote content, confirming the messiness that characterizes a great deal of Twitter conversations (e.g., Bouvier & Rosenbaum, 2020).

Counter-Narrative 1: *Disabled People are Politically Aware*

During every Tweet Chat and live-tweet debate event, disabled activists expressed their awareness of political topics and subjects. Activists demonstrated their knowledge of policies, past and present. An example of this came from disabled activist, Dominick Evans, reacting to Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump's mention of Ronald Reagan during the first Presidential debate:



Ronald Reagan fucked over disabled people....not selling yourself, Donald #Debates2016 #CripTheVote

This activist expresses their knowledge of past policies and goes on to share their own political reaction. This counter-narrative also emerged through activists expressing their political and social opinions. The following tweets exemplify this:



Anonymous
@...



We need a President who truly understands intersectionality & wants to work towards real social justice for all.
#cripthevote #Debates2016

Reply Retweet Favorite More



Hailee Yoshizaki
@HaileeYoshizaki

"Law and Order" is what is killing marginalized people.
This is a systemic issue, not a result of "criminals."
[#CripTheVote](#) [#debatenight](#)

Activists often invoked intersectionality to extend their political arguments to other marginalized groups. The use of the term intersectionality encapsulates multiple marginalized identities and groups and was used often across themes. This was also one way in which activists tweeting [#CripTheVote](#) co-created a safe space to disseminate politically-relevant counter-narratives. Activists also argued the issues they face are systemic and systems-based, rather than individual-based – as is demonstrated by activist and scholar Hailee Yoshizaki. They produced connective content which countered the idea that disabled people are not politically engaged.

Counter-Narrative 2: *Disabled People Have Voice*

Activists wanted to be heard and demanded their voice and issues be recognized. Links to articles where disabled activists were interviewed around disability-related social and policy issues were often shared using the movement hashtag. Articles like the example tweet below also served to amplify disabled voices through the sharing of disability-rights and narrative-focused media. For example:



Growing Kids Therapy
@GKTCommunicates

Go Ben! How Americans w/ [#disabilities](#) see [#election](#)
pbs.org/video/23658819... [#PwD](#) [#cripthevote](#) [#vote](#)
[#nonspeakingdoesnotequalnonthinking](#)

This theme also looked like activists encouraging each other to use the voice they have, amplify those diverse voices around them, and recognize the strength of the movement. For example:



Anonymous
@...



Follow

Don't let your voice be taken away because
someone questions your validity!
[#fibromyalgia](#) [#lupus](#) [#invisibleillness](#)
[#cripthevote](#)

[← Reply](#) [↻ Retweet](#) [★ Favorite](#) [⋮ More](#)



Anonymous
@...



Maybe only thing in US politics we *do* want to replicate. Disability has had larger voice this elxn than ever-#CripTheVote big reason why

← Reply ↻ Retweet ★ Favorite ⋮ More

In demonstrating they have voice and that their story matters, these Twitter users encouraged others with disabilities to join the cause by describing the movement as effective. They argued that speaking for oneself, especially when one is a member of a protected marginalized class, is imperative. They argued against the common perception of disabled people as incompetent, as incapable of having and using voice.

Counter-Narrative 3: *The Opinions of Disabled People Matter*

Going beyond claiming the right to have an opinion, disabled activists demanded attention be paid to those opinions. This frequently looked like advocates calling out presidential candidates for using language they identify as ableist. Ableist language is that which objectifies and devalues the lived-disability experience by misappropriating disability-specific words and phrases (e.g., crazy, lame, and dumb). The following tweet exemplifies this:



Hailee Yoshizaki
@HaileeYoshizaki



WHOA miss us with the #ableism @HillaryClinton. No reason to refer to ideas as "crazy", even ones that belong to The Donald. #CripTheVote

During all debates, activists live-tweeted when candidates used ableist language terms and meanings. In the second Presidential debate, Donald Trump was questioned about his possible lack of stamina. #CripTheVote tweets following this line of questioning described the question itself as ableist because it points to an ableist ideology that favors species-typical bodies over disabled ones. Their connective incitement of this question to be ableist in nature put forward the imperative that humans who need breaks ought not to be considered weak and unfit for the position of President of the United States. By countering hegemonic and medicalized representations of disability in the media through problematizing terms like 'crazy' and 'stamina,' these activists draw meaning into them and power from them. This counter-narrative also directly emerged as activists argued that their voices matter. The following tweets exemplify this more direct position:

 **Vicky Kuhn** 
@curlywurlygirly

#Disabled 🙌 people 🙌 exist. 🙌 Do 🙌 not 🙌
dismiss 🙌 us. 🙌 Do 🙌 not 🙌 forget 🙌 us. 🙌 We
🙌 matter! 🙌 #CripTheVote  #CripTheRevolution


 **Hailee Yoshizaki**
@HaileeYoshizaki

Still waiting for #Disability to come up! Our issues
matter & intersect w/ race, gender, class, etc.!

#CripTheVote #debatenight @DisRtsBlog

Counter-Narrative 4: *Disabled People Will Fight for Their Rights*

Though the counter-narrative that disabled people will fight for their rights emerged across all uses and Tweet Chats, it emerged most strongly after the results for the 2016 presidential election were announced. While the #CripTheVote campaign was described as non-partisan, throughout the election cycle the tweet content appeared to become more polarized. After Donald Trump was named President of The United States, activists expressed fear, resistance, and a motivation to continue their activism toward the end of making social change for disabled people. The following tweets exemplify the content emergent through this counter-narrative.

 **Anonymous**
@...

#IAmAfraid but I have a job to do. I have
to teach the next gen of #pwd to advocate
for self & other. We need them. #pwdsvote
#cripthevote

 Reply  Retweet  Favorite  More

 **Anonymous**
@...

Fellow #CripTheVote team. We must
continue to participate in politics. Let's
follow each other and stay in touch.

 Reply  Retweet  Favorite  More



Lindsay Baran
@lindsay_baran

What do we do now? We organize. We recalibrate & focus on our long game. We have a lot of work ahead of us, folks. #CripTheVote

Activists used this counter-narrative to argue that they do not back down, that they are resilient, and that they are together.

General Discussion

On its face, the #CripTheVote campaign did not meet its most primary goal: To get disability issues mentioned during the presidential debate cycle. Considering there was no mention of substantive disability-related issues (policy-related) mentioned during the debates, it could be argued that the #CripTheVote campaign failed to deliver on this goal. It might be argued that this misalignment is attributable to the lack of group cohesion amongst activists. Or it could be argued that the voice of the collective didn't reach saturation into mainstream media. However, the findings of the present study indicate an alternative interpretation when examined through the logic of connective action.

The logic of connective action illuminates uses of connective counter-narratives binding the group through their individualized content streams. Their calls to action and counter-narrative use is indicative of a diverse group fighting for a shift in the social conditions and power structures maintaining their marginalized place in society. Disabled activists use the #CripTheVote hashtag to critically engage with the political process – raising issues with accessibility to political participation for disabled people in general. Other studies have found disabled audiences to be highly critical of disability representations in media (Ellis & Goggin, 2015), performance theater (Hadley, 2015), and web-content (Elccessor, 2010).

Results from this research indicate that the disabled experience in America and its active and engaged politicization via Twitter is an antithesis to common and pervasive ableist ideologies. While the unified agenda put forth by #CripTheVote organizers was not overwhelmingly discussed by disabled activists, what did propel the conversation forward were the lived experiences, personal stories, and experience-informed political preferences. While past scholarship has considered online activism by disabled groups, the present study contributes to that corpus a historiographical document of disabled activism in dialogue with communication theory explaining activist behavior.

Online campaigns and social movements like #CripTheVote have proven themselves to be suitable spaces for political engagement, given similar access constraints. Disabled people have found a platform through the use of social media that allows them to exercise their voice and make social demands. It is unclear if aligning with other marginalized groups via tweeting aids their connective aims or not. However, doing so does serve the purpose of

elevating the attention paid to their social status. By disseminating counter-narratives, activists actively redefine the disability experience and call for policies and politicians who see that nuance. Activists use the hashtag to mobilize and put forth their position as a radical group. Again however, in the case of #CripTheVote, they do so through their own individual action frames. Only when read together as one holistic narrative – as one social movement, does it come together to reflect the temporally and spatially specific events enveloped within its narrativity. When read together, the social and ideological environment at the moment in time during which the 2016 Presidential elections occurred becomes discernable.

As with similar social movements and campaigns like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, #CripTheVote is a response to oppressive cultural and social norms and further indicates a shift in the ‘public’s willingness to engage with resistance and challenges’ to them (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018, p. 237). Though the trending nature of social media may create the illusion that movements like these are born of a spontaneous spark that catches by chance and circumstance, like #CripTheVote, both #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter were indeed organized (Jaffe, 2018; Rickford, 2016). While #CripTheVote has yet to hit mainstream media like both #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have managed, it does reveal an unambiguous and transformative uptake of disability studies rhetoric and scholarship by disabled people across the country – not bound by physical location or space.

#CripTheVote represents a ‘watershed moment’ for contemporary disability studies. Within the tweets authored by these activists is a demonstrated knowledge of intersectionality, systems-based discriminatory practices at both state and institutional levels, and of ablest ideologies – ideas that have been percolating in ivory towers since Disability Studies emerged as a field in the 1980s (Garland-Thomson, 2013). While the field has always been deeply entangled with the innerworkings of activism and political organization, a majority of studies within disability studies center on physical disabilities and have historically been *too white* (Bell, 2017). #CripTheVote diverges from this significantly as the activists who write within it span the gamut of disability – from chronic illness and episodic disabilities to physical ones, and intersectional divides.

What has been articulated in disability scholarship as problematic and contentious, the relationship between disability and illness has also impacted activism efforts, agendas, and agents (Wendell, 2001). Disabled people who are able to ‘pass’ as non-disabled have reported feeling *not disabled enough* to qualify or even apply for assistance (Lightman, Vick, Herd, & Mitchell, 2009), a likely indication that they may also *not feel disabled enough* to show up and outwardly identify as disabled with a given in-person action or movement. The themes emergent throughout this study, which represent the connective narrative of an intersectional disability-ranging group of over six-thousand individuals (n=6,949), prioritize the micro-narratives of disability that politically active disabled people want changed. In 2016, there was a reported 62.7 million disabled people considered eligible to vote, accounting for approximately 17% of the voting population (Schur, Adya, & Ameri, 2015). However, only 16.0 million reported voting in the November 2016 election (Schur & Kruse,

2016). This systemic erasure, which was mentioned by many disabled activists via #CripTheVote, is specifically deserving of more attention by disabled activists, social scientists, scholars, and researchers. Further research is needed to connect the aims and goals of the #CripTheVote movement as well as other bonded online and offline social movements regarding disability and political engagement. How does #CripTheVote compare to in-person organizing efforts that have shaped the cultural and social environment in favor of disabled people? Where does it stand in the context of historical disability activism? These questions and others like it need probing in disability studies literature if #CripTheVote is any indication of where political activism is headed in the future.

There are some limitations to this study. First, both qualitative analysis processes were conducted by only one researcher. Though findings were discussed and shared with colleagues, it was only briefly shared with disabled activists who used the hashtag. The findings of this study would have been more reliable if a second or third researcher co-coded the data and activists were offered more opportunities to member-check the work. The dictionary generated by the researcher was subjective and based on her experience with the Twitter content and academic studies. However, she positions herself as an instrument of the research, which has been a traditional approach in the field of disability studies and some anthropological approaches (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Another limitation of this study was that the quantitative analysis was limited to frequency counts. If the scope of this study broadened, further quantitative tests would have been run and analyzed.

Lastly, considering the ever-progressing use of #CripTheVote over the last four years, future research ought to consider unpacking the evolution of the movement during and between Presidential elections.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the use of #CripTheVote as a tool of political engagement by disabled activists during the United States 2016 presidential election using the *logic of connective action* as a framework. It was argued that the personal action frames of disabled activists of #CripTheVote connectively formed the narrative of the movement. This paper used Twitter data to analyze 11,311 units of content (tweets) and found that while activists did not always produce content that discussed campaign goals directly, they did connectively generate counter-narratives that work to redefine the disability experience as a politicized one.

Acknowledgements:

This paper is dedicated to the activists who made #CripTheVote a reality, and to those who continue to sustain it today. Thank you for your work and dedication to create change for disabled persons and their rights to political engagement. For anyone interested in the #CripTheVote origins, goals & leaders visit <https://t.co/ObaMKMhxck> and follow @AndrewPulrang, @GreggBeratan, and @SFdirewolf on Twitter.

Biographical note:

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Notes:

¹ The d/Deaf moniker serves to acknowledge both deafness as an impairment and the cultural, linguistic, and identity-based usage of the word Deaf as a descriptor (Napier, 2002).

² Permission was not sought from all 6,949 Twitter users, but rather only from those activists whose tweets were selected to be quoted as representative of the emergent themes. If an activist was contacted and declined, their quote was not used. If the activist did not respond, the quote was used but anonymized to protect their privacy and identity.