



Journalist Fellowship Paper

How journalists can address misinformation on Telegram

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Introduction

On the morning of August 30, 2019, journalists and relatives of Ukrainian political prisoners held in Russia gathered at Kyiv's Zhulyany airport. The previous night, a number of Ukrainian and Russian media outlets had spread reports that an exchange had been concluded and that the prisoners were being flown home. After several hours of waiting, no plane arrived from Moscow.¹

The historic prisoner swap — the first between Ukraine and Russia since the start of war in Ukraine's east in 2014 — did eventually [take place](#), albeit nine days later, on September 7.²

The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) would [later find](#) that misleading reports about an imminent prisoner exchange had first appeared on the messaging application Telegram, on anonymous channels that claim to publish insider scoops from the halls of power.³

Those rumours were picked up by media outlets in both countries and further amplified – and to a certain degree legitimized – by reposts from state officials. In response, the Ukrainian presidential office implored the public not to believe unconfirmed information from dubious sources.

¹ Novoye Vremya. 2019. *Обмін полоненими між Україною і РФ поки не провели. Що відбувалося з ночі 30 серпня.* [online] Available at: <<https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/politics/obmin-polonenimi-povernennya-sencova-i-moryakiv-onlayn-traslyaciya-novini-ukrajini-50039976.html>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

² Shulzhenko, D. and Kossov, I., 2019. *Free at last: Ukraine's prisoner swap takes place with Russia.* [online] Kyiv Post. Available at: <<https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/free-at-last-ukraines-prisoner-swap-takes-place-with-russia-developing.html>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

³ Osadchuk, R., 2019. *“Ukrainian Media Jump the Gun on Russia-Ukraine Prisoner Swap.* [online] DFRLab. Available at: <<https://medium.com/dfrlab/ukrainian-media-jump-the-gun-on-russia-ukraine-prisoner-swap-3216f860bc04>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

It was not the first time that Telegram was a source of rumours.

Former television comedian Volodymyr Zelensky rose to Ukraine's presidency in 2019, bringing to power with him a mixed cast of reformists and political novices. A web of anonymous channels soon launched smear attacks against the new leadership, mixing pro-Russian narratives with broader conspiracy theories involving the financier George Soros and the U.S. Democratic party.

In the span of the last decade, social media companies have gone – in [the words](#) of Turkish sociologist and author Zeynep Tufekci – from “instruments for spreading democracy to weapons of attacking it”.⁴

Facebook, famously, has faced a reckoning over the abuse of user data in disinformation campaigns by state actors such as Russia. The mysterious workings of social media's recommendation systems have been blamed for stoking hatred and growing divides, with YouTube blamed for leading users down radicalisation spirals.

Telegram, by comparison, has received far less scrutiny. Unlike many of its rivals, it does not algorithmically curate content to drive more engagement. And yet, it has still become a fertile ground for misinformation and extremist rhetoric.

Created by a self-exiled Russian tech entrepreneur Pavel Durov as a free speech platform, Telegram had a low profile in the West for many years. This has changed, in part as a result of policing elsewhere of information around the coronavirus pandemic and the 2020 U.S. presidential elections. As major Western social media

⁴ Tufekci, Z., 2019. *How social media took us from Tahrir Square to Donald Trump*. [online] MIT Technology Review. Available at: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/08/14/240325/how-social-media-took-us-from-tahrir-square-to-donald-trump/> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

platforms tightened their policies against misinformation and extremist content, Telegram became a global alternative platform for the spread of conspiracies and the organisation of anti-lockdown protests.

Following the 2020 election of Joe Biden as U.S. president, social media giants began cracking down on the “Stop the Steal” and QAnon movements, which claimed voter fraud. This culminated in the blocking of Donald Trump’s accounts after his supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Amazon, Google, and Apple removed Parler, a Twitter alternative popular with Trump supporters, from their app stores.⁵

This mass deplatforming coincided with WhatsApp’s announcement of changes to its data-sharing policy, prompting false reports that its parent company, Facebook, would have access to users’ private conversations. Telegram and encrypted messenger Signal both reported a spike in downloads linked to the “growing anxiety over the big tech companies”.⁶

As of July 2021, Telegram had 550 million active users worldwide – more than the individual user bases of Twitter, Snapchat or Discord. It is the fifth most-popular messaging app after Facebook-owned Whatsapp and Messenger, and WeChat and QQ which dominate the Chinese market.⁷

⁵ Nicas, J. and Davey, A., 2021. *Amazon, Apple and Google Cut Off Parler, an App That Drew Trump Supporters*. [online] New York Times. Available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/technology/apple-google-parler.html>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

⁶ Nicas, J., Isaac, M. and Frenkel, S., 2021. *Millions Flock to Telegram and Signal as Fears Grow Over Big Tech*. [online] New York Times. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/technology/telegram-signal-apps-big-tech.html>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

⁷ Statista. 2021. *Most popular global mobile messenger apps as of July 2021, based on number of monthly active users*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/258749/most-popular-global-mobile-messenger-apps/>> [Accessed 7 September 2021].

This rapid growth has increased concern among journalists and academics that Telegram is becoming the next big thing in viral disinformation. While the platform has responded to some pressure from tech giants like Apple and Google to remove violent content in the past, the company resists most pressure to fight rampant misinformation and conspiracy theories, and generally [doesn't respond](#) to media or government requests.⁸

It is harder to track how the information travels within messaging apps and private conversations. While the misuse of WhatsApp in places like India and Brazil forced the company to impose limits on forwarding messages, Telegram's outstanding feature is an ability to disseminate a message directly to the mobile phones of hundreds of thousands of people through "channels" and "mega-groups".

At the same time, unlike other platforms, Telegram does not algorithmically push content on its users and does not feature a centralised "news feed". As a result, users are less likely to inadvertently encounter radical content on Telegram. Instead, audience growth and information spread on Telegram are dependent on off-platform promotion. New users are typically directed to information through links on other social media sites, fringe news websites, or via real world events such as demonstrations.

For this paper, I looked at Telegram's policies and functionalities to help understand what made it so attractive to misinformation actors both in the Ukraine, which has a long history of Telegram engagement, and Brazil, Spain and Germany where it has had more of an impact in recent years.

According to the journalists and digital researchers I interviewed about investigating misinformation and disinformation on Telegram, there are ways to address the

⁸ Telegram FAQ. *Do you process data requests?*

<https://telegram.org/faq#q-do-you-process-data-requests> [Accessed 23 September 2021]

issue, both on and off the platform: by investigating movements and their political or financial interest, by producing more responsible journalism, through clearer communication from governments, and through the continued moderation efforts on other social media platforms.

What's more, media outlets and public organisations could themselves take advantage of Telegram's broadcasting functionalities, chat bots, and news feed to reach broader audiences and build communities.

A medium

Telegram combines the functionality of a messaging app with a social network. Users can create groups, which can be open or closed to the public, and can contain up to 200,000 members.

There are also “channels” — something most other messaging apps don’t have — which allow administrators to broadcast information to an unlimited number of followers. (By comparison, WhatsApp limits groups to 256 members, and one message can’t be sent to more than 256 contacts at once. Signal limits groups to 1,000 users, and forwards to five chats.) Recently, Telegram expanded its broadcast options to allow for live [video](#) and [audio](#) streams to an unlimited audience, promoting them as “your own TV or radio station”.

Telegram’s functional versatility and privacy-protecting settings, as well as its anti-censorship policy of fairness to all regardless of political views, have made it popular with a wide range of groups around the world: from pro-democracy protesters in Hong-Kong, Belarus, and Thailand, to Islamic militants and far-right extremists in Europe, and even journalists in Ethiopia and Azerbaijan. It has also been used as a marketplace for drugs and leaked databases.

An increasing number of people use Telegram as a source of news. Unlike Facebook or Twitter, the different channels users subscribe to are not mixed together into a single stream of posts. Rather it’s a multitude of separate streams of information. There are no algorithms to make popular posts more prominent.

According to the 2021 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, Telegram usage [doubled](#) in some countries over the last year.⁹ It is used for sharing and accessing news by 23% of respondents in Nigeria, 20% in Malaysia, 18% in Indonesia and India, 14% in Singapore, and 13% in Turkey and South Africa.

Telegram is not only growing in the Global South; western markets like Italy and Germany have seen growth, too.

Since its launch in 2013, Telegram promised high-level privacy and protection of users' data from third parties, be they advertisers or governments. Durov is a vocal critic of the U.S.-based tech giants and corporations. He [criticised](#) “traditional social networks” for having “exploited users and publishers for far too long with excessive data collection and manipulative algorithms”.¹⁰ He called WhatsApp [dangerous](#) because of its security vulnerabilities, and said Facebook's data collection was immoral.¹¹ He [spoke against](#) corporations, saying: “Apple and Google censor information and apps on our phones while Visa and Mastercard limit what goods and services we can pay for.”¹² Recently, he also [took a dig](#) at Netflix and TikTok for flooding users' minds with endless digital entertainment and irrelevant content pushed by recommendation systems that undermine people's creativity and productivity.¹³

Durov opposes the market trends of selling successful businesses to a tech giant, and submitting to any kind of state regulation. The company was reportedly initially funded by Durov himself, from his personal savings. He has acknowledged that in

⁹ Reuters Institute. 2021. Digital News Report. Available at: <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/dnr-executive-summary>> [Accessed 16 September 2021].

¹⁰ Durov, P., 2021. [online] Durov's channel. Available at: <<https://t.me/durov/153>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

¹¹ Durov, P., 2020. *Why using WhatsApp is dangerous*. [online] Available at: <<https://telegra.ph/Why-Using-WhatsApp-Is-Dangerous-01-30-4>> [Accessed 13 September 2021].

¹² Durov, P., 2021. [online] Durov's channel. Available at: <<https://t.me/durov/165>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

¹³ Durov, P., 2021. [online] Durov's channel. Available at: <<https://t.me/durov/166>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

order to grow, Telegram will need to monetise its user base but has [promised](#) that advertisements will appear in its large broadcast channels, and not in chats.¹⁴ Ads will not be targeted using user data, he said, but will instead be contextual, i.e. based on the theme of the channel.

In March 2021, Durov [announced](#) that Telegram raised an additional \$US 1 billion by selling bonds to an international investor.¹⁵

The platform operates through a network of companies registered offshore. Its headquarters are [in Dubai](#), and its data centres [are scattered](#) around the world.^{16,17}

Durov himself holds a passport from Saint Kitts and Nevis, an island state that sells citizenships in return for investment.

Telegram's position shouldn't come as a surprise for those who are familiar with the history of Vkontakte, a platform similar to Facebook for the Russophone world created by Durov in 2006. The social network was once criticised for its lax moderation of pornography and pirated content. Ahead of the massive anti-government protests in Moscow in December 2011, Durov refused to follow the order of the Russian security service (FSB) to shut down opposition groups. Later, he wrote that he did so not because he supported the opposition movement but because he didn't want users to migrate to foreign platforms.¹⁸

¹⁴ Durov, P., 2021. [online] Durov's channel. Available at: < <https://t.me/durov/153> > [Accessed 10 September 2021].

¹⁵ Durov, P., 2021. [online] Durov's channel. Available at: < <https://t.me/durov/155> > [Accessed 16 September 2021].

¹⁶ Abbas, W., 2021. *Sheikh Hamdam meets founder of Dubai-based Telegram*. [online] Khaleej Times. Available at:

<<https://www.khaleejtimes.com/business/sheikh-hamdan-meets-founder-of-dubai-based-telegram>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

¹⁷ Available at: <<https://core.telegram.org/api/datacenter>> [Accessed 16 September 2021].

¹⁸ Lenta.ru. 2011. *Письмо создателя "ВКонтакте" Павла Дурова о цензуре и митингах*. [online] Available at: <<https://lenta.ru/articles/2011/12/12/durov/>> [Accessed 16 September 2021].

He reiterated that the company's position on censorship remained unchanged: "It's senseless to remove from one website what can be quickly found on others."¹⁹

In December 2013, the FSB demanded Durov disclose personal data of Ukrainian users who administered groups in support of EuroMaidan protests.²⁰ He refused again. In April 2014, he left Russia after being forced to sell off his stake in Vkontakte to a Kremlin-aligned business group.

It is however not black and white. Apple and Google have still been able to use their app-store leverage to get Telegram to remove illegal content. In the aftermath of the Paris terror attacks in 2015, Telegram [changed](#) its policy at their behest, banning "calls for violence, pornography and copyright infringement on public broadcast channels".²¹ Since December 2016, it [has blocked](#) tens of thousands of ISIS bots and channels, and [collaborated with Europol](#) to crack down on terrorist content.²²

In February 2021, Telegram was forced to block a number of doxxing channels that published the phone numbers and home addresses of people who participated in anti-government protests across Russia, as well as those of journalists, judges, and prosecutors. It decided to block problematic channels only after Apple refused to approve Telegram updates for iOS.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Голицына, А., 2014. *Дуров продал свою долю во "Вконтакте" из-за конфликта с ФСБ*. [online] Vedomosti.ru. Available at: <<https://www.vedomosti.ru/technology/articles/2014/04/16/durov-prodal-svoyu-dolyu-vo-v-kontakte-iz-za-konflikta-s-fsb>> [Accessed 16 September 2021].

²¹ Durov, P., 2017. [online] Durov's channel. Available at: <<https://t.me/durov/69>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

²² Europol. 2019. *Europol and Telegram take on terrorist propaganda online*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/europol-and-telegram-take-terrorist-propaganda-online>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

“I call on authors of public Telegram channels not to distribute calls for violence and other people’s personal information. Thanks to this, we will be able to update Telegram in App Store and Google Play,” Durov [posted](#) at the time.²³

While he has acquiesced to removing calls for violence, Durov has said that he believes censorship only makes it harder to fight misinformation. Removing conspiracy theories only serves to strengthen them, he has argued. “Spreading the truth will always be a more efficient strategy than engaging in censorship,” Durov [wrote](#) in July.²⁴

Durov has also argued that it’s not the platform’s role “to decide for our users what they should believe”. However, when it comes to the Covid-19 pandemic, he has conceded Telegram needs to play a role in promoting reliable information. Arguing that “users have the right to be informed about Covid by official sources that reflected scientific consensus”, Telegram launched its own [Covid channel](#) in April 2020. It shows up as a top result for all coronavirus-related search queries and contains links to verified channels of health ministries from 19 countries.

²³ Durov, P., 2021. [online] Durov’s channel. Available at: < https://t.me/durov_russia/30 > [Accessed 10 September 2021].

²⁴ Durov, P., 2021. [online] Durov’s channel. Available at: < <https://t.me/durov/163> > [Accessed 10 September 2021]

A network

Telegram was created to counter the censorship and propaganda of authoritarian regimes like Russia and Iran. Both states [blocked](#) it in 2018.^{25,26} It remained blocked in Russia until mid-2020 for its refusal to hand over encryption keys to the authorities in compliance with anti-terrorism laws.

Yet Russian users could still access the app through VPN and Telegram's [own anti-censorship technology](#).²⁷ Even Russian lawmakers and government officials continued using it, [according to](#) the Russian news website RBC.²⁸

Moreover, whilst actively censoring Telegram, the Kremlin authorities continued to manipulate the platform for their own propaganda ends. In a 2018 investigation, independent outlet Proyekt Media [revealed](#) that the Kremlin had been paying top anonymous political channels on Telegram to spread their narratives and discredit the opposition.²⁹ For a fee, owners of the channels would post prescribed talking points and avoid posting negative information about certain individuals or events.

²⁵ Hatmaker, T., 2018. *Telegram blocked in Iran as the government orders telecoms to cut off access*. [online]. Techcrunch. Available at:

<<https://techcrunch.com/2018/04/30/is-telegram-blocked-iran-april/>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

²⁶ Reuters, 2018. *Paper plane protesters urge Russia to unblock Telegram app*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-telegram-protests/paper-plane-protesters-urge-russia-to-unblock-telegram-app-idUSKBN1I11O5>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

²⁷ Meduza. 2020. *Telegram founder says anti-censorship tech that defeated Russian authorities should be used against Iran and China*. [online] Available at: <<https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/06/22/telegram-founder-says-anti-censorship-tech-used-to-defeat-russian-authorities-should-be-used-in-iran-and-china>> [Accessed 12 September 2021].

²⁸ РБК. 2018. *Власть осталась с Telegram*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2018/04/19/5ad7524f9a794707903b96e8>> [Accessed 12 September 2021].

²⁹ Проект. 2018. *Телега из Кремля. Рассказ о том, как власти превратили Telegram в телевизор*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/>> [Accessed 10 September 2021]

Kristina Potupchik, the former press-secretary of pro-Putin youth movement Nashi who was named as one of the main Kremlin subcontractors on Telegram, has since spoken openly about the rules of this market. “Nothing has changed: back in the day we bought paid-for articles in newspapers,” Potupchik said in a [July 2021 interview](#).⁵⁰ Asked about how to discern who is behind a Telegram channel, she said: “You have to pay attention to where a piece of information appears and who reposts it, but even this doesn’t prove anything: placement can be bought in different unrelated channels, which could be not in the same network.”

The popularity of anonymous Russian political channels on Telegram was a response to the information vacuum created by state censorship and opaque institutions. As the investigative journalists of Projekt Media put it: “Those channels created an illusion that some well-informed insiders are telling the truth [while] hiding behind nicknames.” One of hungriest audiences for this sort of misinformation have been the people who should know better: journalists and public officials.

In democratic Ukraine, such channels have also thrived. Despite having far more freedoms than their neighbour, Ukraine’s media is still largely dominated by powerful oligarchs who act as kingmakers, backing certain parties and politicians. Trust in it is low. So when Ukraine went through an unprecedented change of the ruling class, anonymous Telegram channels became part of the influence operation on new leaders.

Ukrainian voters [elected](#) political upstart Zelensky as president by a landslide in 2019.⁵¹ They also [gave](#) his party of largely fresh faces, Servant of the People, the

⁵⁰ 2021. *Серый кардинал Телеграма Кристина Потупчик: анонимные каналы, фейки, покупка блогеров и Лена Миро*. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBRRClxGhyU>>

⁵¹ Talant, B., 2019. *Joy, elation at Zelenskiy headquarters as actor elected president of Ukraine*. [online] Kyiv Post. Available at

majority seats in the parliament.³² The new parliament quickly [appointed](#) the new cabinet of ministers, marking the beginning of a new political era for Ukraine.³³

In the two-week run-up to the start of the presidential campaign on December 31, 2018, a cluster of political Telegram channels — Resident, Legitimate, Whisperer, Gossip Girl, Cartel, and Woman with a Scythe — were registered.

A second wave of political channels — Dark Knight, Zelensky’s Shawarma, Sorosyata, Green Little Elephant, and Joker — emerged between September and November 2019, after the new parliament and government set to work on passing a number of reforms.

All of them had different styles but essentially pushed the same negative messages against new lawmakers and ministers. Resident and Legitimate, for example, often cited their “own sources” in the presidential office or the government; Dark Knight posed as an MP from the Servant of the People party; and Joker posted screenshots of WhatsApp chats with lawmakers who were duped into believing they were talking to the prosecutor general.

The head of the Servant of the People party, Oleksandr Korniienko, speculated that their goal may have been to cause a split within the majority faction. He admitted, however, that Dark Knight posted true information, albeit with a negative spin, raising questions whether the author was an MP, or simply had informants in the

<<https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/joy-elation-at-zelenskiy-headquarters-as-actor-elected-president-of-ukraine.html>> [Accessed on 10 September 2021]

³² Talant, B., Kupfer, M., 2019. *New political era begins with marathon session*. [online] Kyiv Post. Available at

<<https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/new-political-era-begins-with-marathon-session.html>> [Accessed 10 September 2021]

³³ Talant, B., Sorokin, O., 2019. *Oleksiy Honcharuk named Ukraine’s new prime minister, Cabinet approved*. [online] Kyiv Post. Available at:

<<https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/oleksiy-honcharuk-named-ukraines-new-prime-minister.html>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

faction.³⁴ Journalists and the public speculated about who could be behind some of those anonymous Telegram channels. Two contrarian MPs from Servant of the People, Oleksandr Dubinsky and Maksim Buzhansky, who had their own popular channels on Telegram, often shared posts from these anonymous ones.

Independent Ukrainian journalist Lyubov Velychko surveyed MPs to see which channels they followed the most and how those channels might have influenced their political views or decisions.

“Many political neophytes entered the parliament and didn’t know how to navigate political processes. They needed information. You couldn’t find such political insights in mass media or Facebook,” she explained.

The five most-read channels by MPs were Resident, Legitimate, Dark Knight, and the official channels of the MPs Dubinsky and Buzhansky.

Velychko then conducted a content analysis of over 10,000 posts from these channels for [an investigation](#) published in July 2020.³⁵ Her examination led her to the conclusion that Resident and Legitimate might be administered from Russia.

“Content analysis is a powerful tool, if used correctly,” Velychko told me. “It may help understand who controls a certain Telegram channel or, at least, whose interests it promotes.”

³⁴ Roschenko, O., 2019. Голова "Слуги народу" про зливи в Telegram: "Темний лицар" хоче все розвалити. [online] Ukrainska Pravda. Available at <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2019/11/22/7232727/>> [Accessed 12 September 2021].

³⁵ Velychko, L., 2020. Телега” для Слуги. Як Телеграм-канали, що ймовірно ведуться з Росії, впливають на роботу Ради. [online] Texty. Available at <<https://texty.org.ua/articles/101438/tyelyeha-dlya-sluhy-yak-telehram-kanaly-sho-jmovirno-vedutsya-z-rosiyi-vplyvayut-na-robotu-rady/>> [Accessed 12 September 2021].

She said she conducted keyword searches on the names of prominent politicians and organisations to find what and how often those five Telegram channels wrote about them. She then divided all posts by tone: positive, negative, or neutral. She would also google posts to see whether they'd been copied from news websites.

She noted that anonymous Telegram channels like Dark Knight didn't target a wide audience. It's tone and use of vocabulary indicated that it would mostly only be understood by those who were familiar with the internal workings of the parliament and the ruling party.

Asked what made Resident and Legitimate stand out as likely administered by Russians and not, say, fellow Ukrainians who hold pro-Russian views, Velychko replied that the narratives, language, and sources used were hewed too closely to the official Kremlin line.

"I looked at what and how they wrote about Putin, war in the Donbas, or annexation of Crimea. They mirrored what Russian politicians and state media said," Velychko said. "Some posts were word-by-word copied from Russian news websites even if the same event was covered by Ukrainian websites. I had no doubts they were run from Russia."

Her analysis was proved largely accurate in February 2021, when Ukraine's special security service (SBU) [announced](#) it had uncovered a network of anonymous Telegram channels that had been curated by a special unit of the Russian Armed Forces.³⁶ The administrators were Ukrainian nationals who operated from Transnistria, a pro-Russian breakaway state internationally recognised as part of

³⁶ Security Service of Ukraine, 2021. СБУ викрила агентурну мережу спецслужб РФ, яка дестабілізувала ситуацію в Україні через Telegram-канали. [online] Available at: <<https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/sbu-vykryla-ahenturnu-merezhu-spetssluzhb-rf-yaka-destabilizovala-sy-tuatsiiu-v-ukraini-cherez-telegramkanaly>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

Moldova. This network included the channels Legitimate, Resident, Gossip Girl, and Cartel, as well as several local channels focusing on predominantly Russian-speaking cities in southern and eastern Ukraine.

The SBU identified the main administrator of those 12 channels and put him on the wanted list. Uncovering the scheme and individuals behind it became possible because those channels published paid-for materials, and SBU managed to identify nearly 50 clients who transferred money for their service.

A Kharkiv court ordered Ukrainian internet providers to block access to four of those Telegram channels but the execution of this order proved technically [impossible](#).⁵⁷ The channels are still active.

Roman Osadchuk, a Ukrainian researcher with Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, said the problem was not only that lawmakers and state officials paid close attention to what was written on anonymous Telegram channels, but that journalists did, too. Osadchuk analysed the prisoner exchange hoax, tracking down where the rumours originated and how they spread.

He told me that the good news was that many Ukrainian journalists have since learned their lesson, and that reputable media have stopped laundering rumours from Telegram channels. However, that has not entirely solved the problem.

“It’s a problem of the authorities in all post-Soviet countries: poor communication with the public,” he said. “They publish a press release on an official website without

⁵⁷ Detector Media. 2021. Суд постановив закрити доступ до Telegram-каналів «Легитимний», «Резидент», «Картель» і «Сплетниця». Але є одна проблема. [online] Available at: <<https://detector.media/infospace/article/185211/2021-02-24-sud-postanovyv-zakryty-dostup-do-telegram-kanaliv-legytymnyy-rezydent-kartel-i-spletnytsa-ale-ie-odna-problema/>> [Accessed 16 September 2021].

an adequate explanation of what happens and why. It creates an information vacuum for alternative views and interpretations.”

Rather than judging the political slant of a channel, Osadchuk focuses on tracking how a message spreads across Telegram. It’s important to remember, he said, that some posts and forwards are motivated by money rather than political conviction.

To conduct his analyses, he uses a paid version of [TGStat](#), the only analytical tool for Telegram data available openly so far. It shows where a message appeared for the first time. Since forwarded messages are an absolute copy of the original message, it’s possible to follow distribution. It is also worth googling to see whether the information was first published anywhere else on the web or was picked up by websites from Telegram.

Just as with the prisoner exchange rumour, anonymous Telegram channels are also used for defamation attacks against political opponents. In December 2019, former MP Ostap Yednak [was accused](#) of corruption by fringe media outlets that cited an anonymous Telegram channel.³⁸ The coordinated attack on Yednak appeared to be part of a broader anti-Soros campaign against western-backed, pro-reform politicians that started that Autumn and culminated in the dismissal of the Ukrainian government in March 2020.

A Telegram channel “Sorosyata” created on October 19, 2019, peddled the conspiracy theory that U.S. Democrat and billionaire George Soros had controlled Ukraine since the 2014 protests ousted pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich from power. The derogatory term “sorosyata” (a portmanteau of Soros and “piglets”

³⁸ Osadchuk, R., 2020. *Anonymous Ukrainian Telegram channels serve as gateways to fringe media*. [Online] DFRLab. Available at: <<https://medium.com/dfrlab/anonymous-ukrainian-telegram-channels-serve-as-gateways-to-fringe-media-84cd43aa9c95>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

in Russian, meaning “little Soros”) was used against anti-corruption and human rights activists, independent media outlets, investigative journalists, and pro-reform lawmakers and state officials.

The lines of attack overlapped with disinformation narratives being pushed in the United States by Russian operatives and some Ukrainian officials targeting Joe Biden, the fallout of which led to President Trump’s first impeachment.

From the start of his brief term as Prime Minister in 2019, Oleksiy Honcharuk was one of the main targets of this disinformation campaign. Telegram channels labelled him with epithets including “gay”, “loser,” and “idiot”. The head of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau Artem Sytnyk was branded “corrupt”, and Prosecutor General Ruslan Ryaboshapka “followed the orders of western patrons”. Reformist efforts to lift a moratorium on land sales, which experts said stymied the growth of Ukrainian agriculture, were cast as an attempt by “sorosyata” to sell off Ukrainian land to foreigners.

Honcharuk, his cabinet, and the Prosecutor General Ryaboshapka were dismissed by the parliament in March 2021.

The campaign wouldn’t have had the same reach and effect had it not been picked up and amplified by other Telegram channels, fringe media, and political figures such as MPs Dubinsky and Buzhansky. Television channels linked to a pro-Russian party also played a role in spreading the disinformation. In particular, the TV channel ZIK went on the offensive, dedicating hours of airtime to “Soros puppets in Ukrainian politics” and Joe Biden.

In February 2021, Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council banned three TV channels – ZIK, 112, and NewsOne – as part of sanctions against pro-Kremlin politician Viktor Medvedchuk and his party. They have remained off air since.

A movement

Amid the lockdowns and public health restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic, there has been an explosion of misinformation online. Dubbed an “[infodemic](#)” by the World Health Organization, the problem has ranged from bad health advice to full-fledged conspiracy theories about shadowy plots by elites to use the pandemic to control the world.³⁹

Anxiety and a lack of information about the new virus, combined with low trust in governments, brought together Covid-19 sceptics, anti-vaxxers, and far-right groups. Anti-lockdown rallies swept across cities and countries. The QAnon conspiracy theory, which had started several years before and whose adherents believe that the former U.S. President Donald Trump fought against a secret Satan-worshipping cabal of elite pedophiles, saw a surge across the world, particularly in the U.S., the European Union and Brazil. Once distinct fringe movements merged into a broader pro-Trump and Covid denialist conspiracy community, interacting with and influencing each other. And as social media companies began cracking down on its groups, they migrated to Telegram. Four months before Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol, a similar event took place in Berlin. During a mass demonstration against Covid restrictions on August 29, 2020, members of the far-right group Reichsbürger and the QAnon conspiracy movement tried to storm the Reichstag, the German parliament.

Germany had the largest anti-lockdown movement in Europe, with groups such as Corona-Rebellen and Querdenken 711 drawing thousands. Another group, Freie Bürger Kassel (“Free Citizens of Kassel”), became [notorious after organising](#) 129 simultaneous protests across the world. Telegram was a key communication tool for them.

³⁹ <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic>

Josef Holnburger, political data scientist with Berlin-based Center for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy (CeMAS), said that while the app had been used by German far-right groups before the pandemic, a mass migration of German users to Telegram occurred in March and April 2020.

“Dissemination is much quicker on Telegram than on Facebook, and targeted more precisely,” he said. “There’s also another unique feature: disinformation spread by voice notes.”

Earlier this year, Holnburger teamed up with two journalists to study what they called “the anatomy of an infodemic” for [OpenDemocracy](#).⁴⁰ They documented how initially moderate and diverse Covid-sceptic circles overlapped with those of conspiracy theorists and shifted towards more far-right ideas. Through dozens of interviews and analysis of social media posts, they found that domestic alternative media – aided by foreign media outlets – played a role in that process.

Holnburger analysed over 20 million messages from nearly 2,000 public channels and groups on Telegram. They found that a uniting feature of Querdenken supporters was a distrust of traditional media, and a preference for “alternative media” and domestic influencers such as Janich.

The group’s most-viewed content came from foreign media outlets: namely the Falun Gong-backed Epoch Times and the Russian-state funded outlets RT and Sputnik (respectively rebranded for German audiences as RT DE and SNA).

⁴⁰ Loucaides, D., Perrone, A., and Holdburger, J., 2021. *How Germany became ground zero for the COVID infodemic*. [online] OpenDemocracy. Available at: <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/germany-ground-zero-covid-infodemic-russia-far-right/>> [Accessed 12 September 2021].

Holnburger's analysis for OpenDemocracy noted that Russia was not solely responsible for the Covid-sceptic movement in Germany. Rather, he found that Russian state outlets amplified Covid-sceptic voices and covered their protests. Drawing in new members on Telegram usually happens through meetings at real-world demonstrations or promotion on other social media platforms.

"I always say that they try to politicize people via YouTube videos and radicalize them on Telegram, because once you're on Telegram, you're in a bubble,"

Holnburger said.

But there is evidence that people are losing interest. Take the case of Oliver Janich, a former journalist and author of the second-most popular Telegram channel in Germany: his audience declined from 166,000 subscribers in February to 160,000 in September. Almost every channel is losing subscribers, except for Reitschuster, currently one of the biggest "alternative media" publishers, with nearly 216,000 subscribers.

There are several reasons for that, he told me. One of them is a lack of offline mobilization in the absence of real-life demonstrations. Deplatforming by other major social media has had its effect, he said, and the movements are struggling to amass as big an audience on Telegram as they used to have on Facebook and YouTube. "The change of policies of most platforms is helpful for democracy as we push [extremists] back into smaller rooms where they can radicalize 10 people instead of 10,000." Finally, frustration may factor in too. "With every failed demonstration and ever failed prophecy, you lose a bunch of followers. Not the die-hard fans but those who may have joined out of curiosity."

In mid-June, the Federal Office of Justice of Germany [launched](#) two proceedings against Telegram under its Network Enforcement Act (known as the NetzDG), a law

aimed at combating illegal content on social media.⁴¹ The grounds for these cases were an absence of an easily identifiable and immediately accessible channel for reporting criminal content on Telegram, and the lack of an authorised recipient for requests from German courts.

Outside of Germany, Jordi Pérez Colomé, a journalist covering technology for El País, discovered the same mix of QAnon content, conspiracy theories about Covid-19, and Trump-related hoaxes, when he began looking at Spanish Telegram channels.

Colomé hadn't paid attention to Telegram until a friend sent him photos of a flyer containing conspiracy theories about the pandemic that was distributed on the Madrid subway. The flyer included links to two dozen Telegram channels. He decided to check some of them, expecting to find a few thousand followers. Instead, he was surprised to find channels with as many as 100,000 subscribers.

For an [investigation](#) published in February 2021, Colomé and his colleague analysed approximately 150,000 messages on 30 Telegram channels with a total of 550,000 subscribers.⁴² Most of the channels were created in April and May of 2020.

They weren't able to provide a total audience tally for the channels, since one person can be subscribed to many channels and Telegram does not disclose lists of subscribers. Nor could they pinpoint whether those subscribers came from Spain, Latin America, or elsewhere. However, their content analysis showed that, aside

⁴¹ Frankfurter Allgemeine, 2021. *Bundesamt für Justiz geht gegen Telegram vor*. [online] Taz. Available at:

<<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/digitec/telegram-bundesamt-fuer-justiz-geht-gegen-messen-gerdienst-vor-17388586.html>> [Accessed 12 September 2021].

⁴² Colomé, J.P., and Andrino, B., 2021. *La desinformación explota en Telegram: cientos de miles de cuentas siguen canales conspirativos en español*. [online] El País. Available at:

<<https://elpais.com/tecnologia/2021-02-06/la-desinformacion-explota-en-telegram-cientos-de-miles-de-cuentas-siguen-canales-conspirativos-en-espanol.html>> [Accessed 12 September 2021].

from U.S. politics and events, the only widely mentioned country was Spain and its president, Pedro Sánchez.

In June, on the day I was talking to Colomé via Zoom, a conference titled [World Freedom Forum](#) was taking place in Barcelona. Tickets to the live stream of the event cost between €40 and €85. Among the speakers were well-known U.S. and European Covid deniers with medical credentials such as [Dolores Cahill](#), [Judy Mikovits](#), and [Heiko Schöning](#). Also present were a number of Spanish alternative medicine practitioners, and other pandemic truthers. Among them were Rafael Palacios, author of the largest Spanish Telegram channel, Noticias Rafapal, which has nearly 137,000 followers, and Mitoa Edjang Campos, host of a crowdfunded podcast, [El Vórtice](#).

“I always look at the economic motivation behind [this], because at the end of the day, this is a kind of power, having an audience of 100,000 people,” said Colomé. “And these people? They have podcasts and Patreon, YouTube channels, and books.”

He said Telegram provided a good backup for those who have a large following on major social media but want to talk about controversial things they might be censored for on other platforms.

“Telegram has become a safe place for saying weird stuff but it’s difficult to grow the audience there. It’s like a base but they go fishing on the open web and ask people to join them on Telegram,” he said.

One place where US-centric far-right conspiracy theories have reverberated particularly strongly has been Brazil. When Trump and some of his more extremist supporters were deplatformed from major social media after the U.S. Capitol riot on January 6, Brazilian far-right groups followed them to Telegram and Parler. Brazil’s far-right President Jair Bolsonaro – a man dubbed [“the Trump of the Tropics”](#) – used [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) to call on his followers to migrate to

alternative platforms: Telegram and Parler. Ahead of the 2022 presidential election, in which Bolsonaro will stand for re-election, Brazilian journalists are concerned with the lack of cooperation from Telegram. They see a risk that the platform [could become](#) the next battleground for election disinformation in Brazil.⁴³

WhatsApp was misused in the 2018 presidential elections to the benefit of the then-presidential contender Jair Bolsonaro. Patricia Campos Mello, journalist with Folha de São Paulo, [broke the story](#) about the messaging campaign against Bolsonaro's opponent Fernando Haddad.⁴⁴ Conservative businesses that supported Bolsonaro paid for so-called "mass blasts", sending hoax stories about Haddad to voters via WhatsApp. Since then, the company has limited mass forwarding of messages and has collaborated with fact-checking organisations.⁴⁵

As of September, Bolsonaro has over 920,000 subscribers on his official Telegram channel – more than double the number he had in January. Mello said there are groups where "thousands of people discuss how the elections will be fraudulent." During her [Reuters Memorial Lecture](#) on June 9, 2021, I asked Mello how her newsroom was preparing to cover the next election.⁴⁶

⁴³ Mello, P. C., 2021. *Telegram tem domínio de canais bolsonaristas e risco de enxurrada de fake news em 2022*. [online] Folha De S.Paolo. Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/06/telegram-tem-dominio-de-canais-bolsonaristas-e-risco-de-enxurrada-de-fake-news-em-2022.shtml> > [Accessed 12 September 2021].

⁴⁴ Mello, P. C., 2018. *Businessmen Fund WhatsApp Campaign Against PT*. [online] Folha De S.Paolo. Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/brazil/2018/10/businessmen-fund-whatsapp-campaign-against-pt.shtml> > [Accessed 12 September 2021]

⁴⁵ Singh, M., 2020. WhatsApp introduces new limit on message forwards to fight spread of misinformation. [online] TechCrunch. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/07/whatsapp-rolls-out-new-limit-on-message-forwards/> > [Accessed 16 September 2021].

⁴⁶ Reuters Institute, 2021. Patrícia Campos Mello, How to Rescue Journalism in an Age of Lies. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zeg8h-dGjw> > [Accessed 12 September 2021].

“I think we will invest more in digital forensics. We were only covering political disinformation in a very reactive way, instead of really investigating who’s paying for it, where it’s coming from. But that needs cooperation from social media platforms,” Mello said.

“We are going to be more proactive. Fact checking is important but we have to go beyond that. We hope we won’t repeat mistakes from the past elections, in terms of just following the script of politicians, only covering ‘he said, she said’, and really go into the thick of it.”

More than 30% of Brazilians over the age of 16 with internet access use Telegram, a Brazilian data journalism website Nucleo reported in July citing a local survey.⁴⁷ But as the platform popularity has been on the rise, journalists’ frustration with the lack of response from the company has been growing, too.

Sérgio Spagnuolo is a journalist at Nucleo who has investigated Brazilian far-right groups as well as the illegal sale of guns and personal data such as credit card information or social security numbers on Telegram. The company has not acknowledged taking any measures against those activities on their platform, nor has it answered Brazilian journalists’ requests for comment. (Brazil’s top judicial body, the Superior Electoral Court, has also been unsuccessful in its attempts to contact the company.)⁴⁸

Spagnuolo said they tried to contact it through three emails listed on the platform for reporting illegal content, through a recently created bot for press requests,

⁴⁷ Martins, L., and Menezes, S., 2021. *Telegram Cresce No Brasil, Mas Empresa Opera No Escura*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.nucleo.jor.br/reportagem/2021-07-26-telegram-nao-responde/>> [Accessed 4 October 2021].

⁴⁸ Galf, R., 2021. *Telegram é um grande desafio para 2022 e estamos buscando contato, diz secretária-geral do TSE*. [online] Available at: <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/06/telegram-e-um-grande-desafio-para-2022-e-estamos-buscando-contato-diz-secretaria-geral-do-tse.shtml>> [Accessed 4 October 2021]

[@PressBot](#), and directly to Mike Ravdonikas, vice president for communication at Telegram. (He has given, however, comments to a number of U.S. publications.)

“They just don’t [respond],” he said. “And this is the main challenge. I see they took down some channels that posted copyright infringement material so it’s not that they don’t do anything at all.”

A tool

Journalists can use Telegram to monitor and report on misinformation and extremism, as in the examples given above. But it can also be used to disseminate high-quality journalism, to interact with sources, and grow audiences.

Here's some advice from investigative journalists and digital researchers for new users of Telegram.

Press contacts for Telegram

There are two main contacts for media inquiries about Telegram: [@PressBot](#), and the company's spokesperson, [Mike Ravdonikas](#). A response is not guaranteed.

Scrape and archive religiously

Telegram has an open API. There are two Telegram API frameworks for Python – [Pyrogram](#) and [Telethon](#) – which can be used to build data scrapers. Its desktop client is open source, so you (or a programmer in your newsroom) can build your own one. You can create and browse archives using [Archive.is](#) or [Wayback Machine](#). For a less technologically difficult option, Telegram allows you to download the entire archive of a channel in HTML format. Data can be imported into spreadsheets using the R programming language.

Analyse content and follow the spread

[TGStat](#) is the best option, and has both a free version and a paid version with more functionalities. You should also use any search engine to see whether a post appeared anywhere else on the web. Pay attention to engagement metrics such as the number of views a post gets. Take note of voice notes: misinformation can be spread through them, but they are much harder to track.

Map networks and connections

Pay attention to when a channel was created, whose posts it reshares (forwarded posts), and where a channel is mentioned for the first time. But remember that publications and reposts can be paid-for, and may not prove the channels belong to one network or have the same admins or owners. Recently, Telegram allowed for the hiding of the sender's name in forwarded messages.

Look for political or business interests

Disinformation spreaders may have strong financial incentives: from selling their books and seminars to collecting donations for their podcasts and earning conference speaker fees. They may also be seeking political influence or outcomes.

Be mindful of your safety, and that of your sources

Security experts recommend using a different SIM card to your usual one, and setting up a display username so that other users can connect with you without needing your phone number. For extra security, you should also set up a passcode for the app, as well as two-step verification with a strong password and a recovery email for extra security .

One-on-one chats on Telegram are not end-to-end encrypted by default

To use this function, turn on "Secret chats". Telegram allows users to completely erase chat history from both sides, no matter how old the conversation is. It also allows them to set up disappearing messages. Group chats are not encrypted.

Organise your channels and chats into folders

Divide them by theme or country and separate them from private chats. It's easy to get overwhelmed by the amount of information, so sorting and prioritising is key.

Connect with potential sources

With a person's username, you can find and message them without knowing their phone number. If you see someone in a group chat you want to follow or talk to privately, click on their "user info" to turn on notifications for their posts, send them a message, or add them to your contacts. Their phone number will become visible only after they add you as a contact. You may opt out of sharing your phone number.

Search outside Telegram

Curators of Telegram channels tend to use other platforms to attract new audiences. Search "<https://t.me/>", for instance, on Facebook or Twitter for links to channels or group chats.

Collect user-generated content and build your evidence library

Telegram allows for the uploading of photos and videos without compression up to 2GB per file. It is easy to download them directly from the app: just right click on file to save a video in .mp4/m4v format and photo in .jpeg. You can also download voice messages and any other files sent to groups and chats.

In addition, many channels add watermarks to videos and photos they post. It is worth using [InVid verification](#) plugin for fragmenting video into keyframes and conducting reverse image searches.

It is worth noting, however, that Telegram removes metadata from uploaded files.

Consider the ethics of reporting something from closed groups

People have a right to privacy and free speech, and closed groups give a safe space to people to express themselves. This creates ethical and legal challenges for journalists. First Draft's [2019 journalist guidebook](#) has a checklist of questions to ask yourself before embarking on reporting from messaging apps and closed groups.

There's no consensus on whether you should always use an alias or can reveal your identity as a journalist when you join a closed group. If you cover hate groups, you might want to stay anonymous for your safety. But there is a general agreement that threats to someone's safety should be reported, particularly if you can identify who has made the threatening posts. If a post has very few views, you could privately inform the person(s) being threatened. If the post has been seen by a large number of people, it is justifiable to report it to the public.

As a matter of policy, Telegram only removes illegal content – such as calls for violence, pornography, or copyright infringement – in public domains (i.e. channels, sticker sets, and bots). The messenger does not process requests related to one-on-one or group chats.

As has been mentioned previously in this paper, having more responsible journalism and clearer communication from governments are two of the most actionable tools we have in preventing misinformation on Telegram.

News organisations should become more proactive in addressing misinformation both on and off the messaging platform. Telegram itself offers broadcasting and community-building functionalities – such as the decentralised newsfeed, chat bots, audio and video live streams, channels, and groups – that news organisations could use to reach these audiences.