RESEARCH ARTICLE

The migration of news to Telegram channels in the Ukraine – Russia conflict

Dan-Valeriu Voinea ⬛, University of Craiova, Romania

Abstract

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 precipitated a significant shift in news consumption patterns, with the messaging application Telegram emerging as a dominant platform for information dissemination. This paper synthesizes existing research to analyze the factors driving this migration, situating Telegram's rise within the theoretical frameworks of networked gatekeeping and the hybrid media system. We examine how Telegram's specific affordances – notably its speed, broadcast capabilities, minimal content moderation, and perceived security – catered to the urgent informational needs of audiences and communicators during the initial phase of the conflict. The analysis highlights the platform's role in amplifying diverse voices, including citizen journalists and official sources, while also facilitating the rapid spread of unverified information (Herasimenka et al., 2022). Furthermore, we explore the complex interplay between Telegram and traditional media, discussing the implications for journalistic practices, credibility, and the evolving nature of conflict reporting in the digital age based on early observations and established theories. The paper identifies patterns in platform adoption during crises and contradictions regarding trust and verification.

Keywords: Telegram; Ukraine-Russia Wa; Misinformation; Gatekeeping; Hybrid Media

Introduction

The digital age has profoundly reshaped journalism, particularly during crises where the demand for immediate information intensifies (Singer, 2006). The onset of the large-scale conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 provided a stark illustration of this transformation, witnessing a significant migration of news audiences and producers towards the messaging platform Telegram. This paper synthesizes scholarly observations and empirical data presented in analyses focusing on the initial phase of the conflict to provide an in-depth examination of why Telegram became a central node in the conflict's information ecosystem, as we aim to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the understanding of this phenomenon, focusing specifically on the factors that made Telegram a preferred communication channel during the war's critical early stages in 2022. By integrating insights from gatekeeping theory and the hybrid media system framework (Chadwick, 2013), we analyze the platform's unique characteristics and their implications for news dissemination, credibility, and the broader media landscape in wartime.

Synthesizing the Literature: Digital Journalism, Social Media, and Conflict

Scholarship on digital journalism highlights a move away from traditional, top-down news distribution towards more networked, participatory models (Singer, 2006). The internet, and social media platforms in particular, have lowered publication barriers, enabling faster dissemination but also challenging established gatekeeping processes (Hermida, 2010). Platforms facilitate "audience gatekeeping," where users collectively

filter and amplify information, contributing to a dynamic but often chaotic news environment prone to misinformation (Herasimenka et al., 2022).

Conflict reporting has been particularly affected by these shifts. The concept of "social media wars," evident in conflicts like the Syrian civil war (Lebowitz, 2020), signifies the increasing reliance on user-generated content (UGC) and the challenges of verification it presents. The Ukraine-Russia conflict represents a further evolution, sometimes dubbed the "first TikTok war," but arguably more significantly defined by Telegram's pervasive role during its initial phase.

Existing literature suggests a pattern: during crises, audiences gravitate towards platforms offering immediacy and perceived openness. However, a potential contradiction emerges regarding trust. While users seek unfiltered information, the lack of moderation inherent in platforms like Telegram simultaneously fuels concerns about credibility (Herasimenka et al., 2022; Reuters Institute, 2022). Furthermore, while the rise of citizen journalism is often lauded for democratizing information, the reliance on unverified sources poses significant challenges for established journalistic norms (Lebowitz, 2020). A gap exists in fully understanding how users navigate this tension between the desire for speed and the need for accuracy within specific platform environments like Telegram during high-stakes events.

Analysis: Why Telegram? Affordances and Appeal in Wartime

The migration to Telegram during the initial phase of the Ukraine-Russia conflict in 2022 was driven by a confluence of factors rooted in the platform's specific design and the exigencies of war. Synthesizing the available data points from that period indicates several key reasons for its adoption:

Speed and Directness: In a situation demanding real-time situational awareness (e.g., air raid alerts, troop movements), Telegram's instant push notifications and chronological feeds offered unparalleled immediacy, bypassing the delays inherent in traditional broadcast media or algorithmically curated platforms. This speed was crucial for both civilian safety and military/political communication early in the conflict.

Scalability and Reach: Unlike group chats with participant limits, Telegram channels allow for unlimited subscribers, enabling official bodies, media organizations, and influential individuals to broadcast messages to vast audiences simultaneously (Reuters Institute, 2022). This one-to-many functionality positioned Telegram as an effective tool for mass communication during a national crisis.

Minimal Content Moderation: Telegram's historically laissez-faire approach to content moderation meant that graphic or sensitive war-related content, potentially restricted on other platforms, circulated freely (Reuters Institute, 2022). While this openness facilitated the rapid spread of vital information, it concurrently created a fertile ground for misinformation and propaganda, a central paradox of its appeal (Herasimenka et al., 2022). Users seeking uncensored views, whether factual or otherwise, found Telegram accommodating.

Perceived Security and Anonymity: Founded with an ethos emphasizing privacy (Reuters Institute, 2022), Telegram offered users a perception of security against surveillance, a critical factor in a conflict involving cyber warfare concerns. While the actual level of security is debated, this perception encouraged usage among those wary of state monitoring.

Accessibility and User Experience: As a mobile-centric application with a simple interface, Telegram was well-suited for populations potentially displaced or reliant on smartphones as primary information devices. Its ease of use facilitated rapid adoption across demographics early in the war.

Filling a Vacuum (Notably in Russia): In Russia, the state's restriction of Western social media platforms and independent news outlets created an information vacuum early in the conflict that Telegram, remaining accessible, readily filled. It became a primary conduit for diverse viewpoints, ranging from pro-Kremlin bloggers to opposition voices, solidifying its influence.

These factors collectively explain why many in Ukraine and Russia turned to Telegram in 2022. It wasn't merely another social media app; its specific affordances directly addressed the unique communication needs and constraints imposed by the war, attracting both information consumers and producers (including state actors and citizen journalists).

Gatekeeping, Hybridity, and Lingering Questions

Telegram's rise exemplifies the concepts of networked gatekeeping and the hybrid media system. Traditional media gatekeepers saw their influence diminish as information flowed rapidly through Telegram channels managed by diverse actors – officials, journalists, citizens, propagandists (Singer, 2006). Gatekeeping power became more distributed, exercised by channel administrators selecting content and by users choosing which channels to follow and amplify.

The conflict media environment quickly became distinctly hybrid (Chadwick, 2013). Telegram did not simply replace traditional media; rather, they co-existed in a complex, interdependent relationship from the outset. Telegram channels often broke news that legacy media subsequently verified and reported, while traditional media reports were frequently shared and discussed on Telegram. State actors utilized both, issuing official announcements via Telegram while maintaining traditional press briefings. This interplay highlights how different media logics (speed and openness on Telegram vs. verification and curated narratives in traditional media) interacted and shaped the overall information flow in 2022.

A crucial element underpinning Telegram's utility and appeal in this context was its minimal approach to content moderation and censorship (Reuters Institute, 2022). In environments where state control over information tightened (particularly in Russia) or where other platforms applied stricter rules regarding graphic content or sensitive political speech, Telegram offered a relatively unmediated space. This lack of censorship was a double-edged sword: it allowed for the rapid dissemination of potentially life-saving alerts and eyewitness accounts that might otherwise be suppressed, fostering a sense of direct access to unfiltered reality. For users distrustful of official narratives or seeking perspectives outside the mainstream, this openness was highly valued. However, this same lack of intervention enabled the unimpeded spread of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, creating significant challenges for establishing veracity (Herasimenka et al., 2022). The platform's stance effectively shifted the burden of verification entirely onto the user and journalists, making media literacy and critical consumption skills paramount. The importance placed on this feature highlights a fundamental tension in crisis communication between the desire for open information flow and the need for reliable, vetted news.

Furthermore, this synthesis reveals contradictions and gaps based on early observations. While Telegram offered significant reach, the issue of credibility remained complex. Research from 2022 suggested misinformation might be concentrated within specific communities rather than universally consumed (Herasimenka et al., 2022), yet the potential for widespread impact persisted due to the lack of platform moderation. A significant gap, apparent even in 2022, lies in understanding the potential long-term impact of this reliance on Telegram on media trust and susceptibility to disinformation. Furthermore, while the why of initial adoption is clear (speed, access, openness), deeper qualitative research was needed even then to understand the nuances of user engagement and trust calibration over time. The ethical implications for journalists using semi-private or anonymous sources on Telegram also warranted investigation (Reuters Institute, 2022).

Conclusion

The migration of news dissemination to Telegram channels during the early phase of the 2022 Ukraine-Russia conflict was a defining feature of the wartime information environment. This synthesis confirms that the platform's appeal stemmed directly from its specific affordances: speed, scalability, minimal censorship, and perceived security, which aligned powerfully with the urgent needs of a population and communicators under duress in 2022. Telegram functioned as a key component of a hybrid media system, disrupting traditional gatekeeping roles and fostering a dynamic, albeit often volatile, flow of information.

While Telegram empowered citizens and officials with unprecedented communication capabilities, facilitated by its open environment, it simultaneously amplified challenges related to misinformation and verification (Herasimenka et al., 2022). The patterns observed – the rapid adoption of accessible, less-moderated platforms during crises, the complex interplay between new and legacy media, and the persistent tension between speed, openness, and accuracy – offer valuable insights for understanding contemporary conflict communication. Key contradictions, particularly surrounding user trust in an unmoderated

environment, and gaps concerning long-term effects highlighted areas ripe for future research from the conflict's outset. The Telegram phenomenon underscores the need for continuous adaptation by journalists, policymakers, and the public to navigate the evolving digital landscape, emphasizing the growing importance of media literacy and robust verification practices in an era where information itself is a battlefield.

References

Chadwick, A. (2013). The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power. Oxford University Press.

Herasimenka, A., Bright, J., Knuutila, A., & Howard, P. N. (2022). Misinformation and professional news on largely unmoderated platforms: The case of Telegram. Journal of Information Technology & Politics. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2022.2076272

Hermida, A. (2010). Twittering the news: The emergence of ambient journalism. Journalism Practice, 4(3), 329-338.

Lebowitz, M. (2020). Reporting the first social media war. The NURJ (Northwestern Undergraduate Research Journal). https://thenurj.com/2020/11/30/reporting-the-first-social-media-war-2/

Reuters Institute (Talant, B.). (2022, October 22). How journalists can address misinformation on Telegram. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. (Republished by World Freedom Alliance).

Singer, J. B. (2006). Stepping back from the gate: Online newspaper editors and the co-production of content in Campaign 2004. Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 83(2), 265-280.