

Case #12. How Does Telegram Thrive Amid Russia's Media Crackdown?

The social media and chat app has become an increasingly popular destination for unfiltered news, pro-Kremlin propaganda and everything in between

By Sam Schechner **The Wall Street Journal** March 18, 2022

Russia's campaign to restrict access to Twitter, Facebook and other sources of uncensored information on its invasion of Ukraine has skipped one crucial platform: the social media and chat app **Telegram**.

Telegram is a freeware, cross-platform, cloud-based instant messaging (IM) service. The service also provides end-to-end encrypted video calling, VoIP, file sharing and several other features. The servers of Telegram are distributed worldwide to decrease frequent data load with five data centers in different regions, while the operational center is based in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. All of Telegram's official components are open source, with the exception of the server which is closed-sourced and proprietary.^[9]

Telegram provides end-to-end encrypted voice and video calls and optional end-to-end encrypted "secret" chats. Cloud chats and groups are encrypted between the app and the server, so that ISPs and other third-parties on the network can't access data, but the Telegram server can. Users can send text and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share an unlimited number of images, documents (2 GB per file), user locations, animated stickers, contacts, and audio files.

In January 2021, Telegram surpassed 500 million monthly active users. It was the most downloaded app worldwide in January 2021 with 1 billion downloads globally as of late August 2021. (Current usage is not available at the time of this case preparation.)

Anyone in Russia who wanted to follow **Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's** address to the U.S. Congress on March 17 could find it on Telegram, along with images of Russia bombing civilian areas in Ukraine. Users are decamping *en masse* to Telegram from banned apps like Meta Platforms Inc.'s Instagram as well as others that are under threat of being blocked, like Alphabet Inc.'s YouTube.

That has helped push some of Telegram's Russian-language news, politics and commentary channels—already among the app's most popular—to double and triple their numbers of subscribers in recent weeks, with several gaining more than a million new followers in a matter of days.

Telegram's growth comes as **Russian President Vladimir Putin** is lowering a digital iron curtain on the country, which has been targeted by sweeping Western sanctions. Several channels with large followings carry posts that appear to defy the Kremlin's decision to criminalize what it considers to be false information about the conflict, such as describing it as a "war" or "invasion."

Назад

Varlamov News

1 295 510 подписчиков



Закрепленное сообщение

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4.1K

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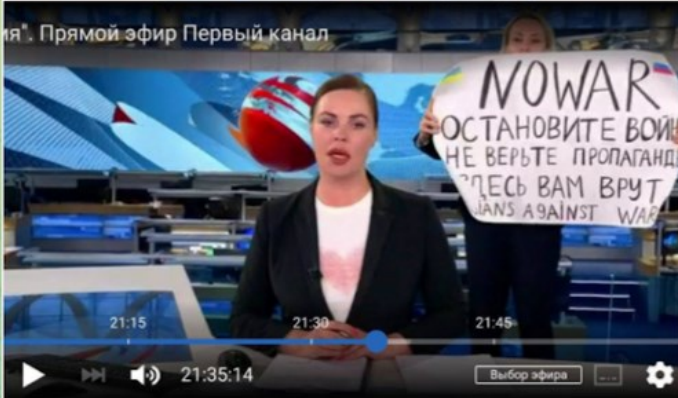
522

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В студии Первого канала во время выпуска новостей появилась девушка с антивоенным плакатом.

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3.2K

1.5K

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Varlamov News

Подписаться

Russian-language Telegram channel @varlamov_news on March 14 shared uncensored video of the moment when an employee of Russian state-television ran onto an evening news broadcast with a poster that read "Don't believe the propaganda."

One Russian-language channel run by independent journalist Ilya Varlamov, which offers a stream of news updates that have included footage of burning apartment buildings in Kyiv, increased its subscriber-count fivefold to nearly 1.3 million since the war began, according to statistics service Telemetrio. Earlier this week, the channel shared uncensored video footage of the moment when an employee of Russian state-television Channel One ran on its evening news broadcast with a poster that read "Don't believe the propaganda" while shouting "Stop the war." (above) It was viewed 1.2 million times.

The freewheeling nature of Telegram has experts guessing how the app has survived the Kremlin's cull of other social-media platforms. **Some analysts say the app's following in Russia makes it too big to cancel.**

For years, Telegram, which was initially started in Russia, has been the go-to news feed for many people in the country. It has become a major outlet for the Kremlin's own message, both through proxies and official government accounts. Many **pro-Kremlin channels on Telegram** are growing as fast, if not faster, than **independent or pro-Ukraine channels**. Russian state-owned news service RIA Novosti has increased its number of Telegram subscribers nearly fourfold to 1.6 million since the war began, Telemetrio data show.

"Telegram isn't perceived as a total enemy resource. It's not perceived as a tool of information war against Russia," said Ivan Kolpakov, editor in chief and co-founder of Meduza, a Russian-language independent publication whose website was blocked by the Kremlin but which remains available on platforms including Telegram. "In Russia, a huge culture of uncensored journalism and so-called journalism appears on Telegram," he added.

A Telegram spokesman said the company doesn't know why Russian regulators haven't blocked the application, or whether they will attempt to do so. He said that Telegram has seen "a notable influx of users from Russia and Ukraine," adding: "We believe in freedom of speech and are proud we can serve people in different countries in difficult times."

Both the New York Times and Washington Post have in recent days started using Telegram channels to publish some of their reporting on the war in Ukraine.

Telegram was founded in 2013 in Russia by **Pavel Durov** and his brother just months before Mr. Durov was ousted from VK, a Russian social-media platform that is similar to Facebook. Mr. Durov, now based in Dubai, has long taken a libertarian viewpoint on content moderation, saying his app, which allows users to encrypt specific chats, puts a priority on privacy, security and free speech.

On his Russian-language public channel, Mr. Durov said on Feb. 27 that he would consider restricting channels in Russia and Ukraine during the war to rein in unverified information, before reversing course, citing appeals from users.

Media coverage of Russian troops invading Ukraine is unfolding differently in Russia than in the U.S. Using maps and disinformation, many television programs are shaping public opinion by justifying Moscow's decision to attack its neighbor.

"I ask you to double-check and not take on faith the data that is published in Telegram channels during this difficult period," he added.

Telegram introduced public-facing channels on top of its private messages in late 2015, turning it into a social media platform—quickly leading to tensions with governments. The app faced criticism in Europe when Islamic State used its channels as a recruitment tool, and to help incite followers to commit a spate of terrorist attacks.

The company has added more content moderation and bans pornography and explicit calls for violence under its terms of service. Telegram says it removes tens of thousands of terrorist bots and channels every month, including 19,000 in February. The company also more recently complied with European Union sanctions orders to prevent accounts in the EU from viewing Telegram channels for Russian state-owned media outlets RT, formerly known as Russia Today, and Sputnik News.

In Russia, Telegram racked up 50 million rubles (~500,000 euros) in fines over the course of 2021, equivalent to around \$483,000 at today's exchange rate, for failing to remove banned content, the Telegram spokesman said. The app didn't remove any channels or automated accounts when **Russia's telecommunications watchdog, Rossvyaz**, in March asked it to remove a set of automated accounts offering information about captured or killed Russian soldiers, the spokesman added.

"Any requests related to political censorship or limiting human rights such as the rights to free speech or assembly are not and will not be considered," the Telegram spokesman said.

[2021 shutdown of Russian political bots

In September 2021, prior to the regional elections in Russia, Telegram suspended several bots spreading information about the election, including a bot run by the opposition party and critics of incumbent president Vladimir Putin's government, citing election silence as the reason, though a blog post by the company's CEO implied the company was following Apple and Google, which "dictate the rules of the game to developers". The blocking of the main Smart Voting bot was criticized by allies of Alexei Navalny, a Kremlin critic and former opposition leader. Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh called the block and the deletion of the tactical voting app from app stores "censorship [...] imposed by private companies. In a later blog post, Durov directly stated that the block was a result of pressure from Google and Apple as refusal to comply with their policies would result "in an immediate shutdown of Telegram for millions of users". The post included a screenshot showing an internal email sent by the App Store to developers, demanding the takedown of content related to Navalny. (source: Wikipedia]

Some digital-media experts say Russia might be tolerating Telegram's noncompliance in part to avoid a popular backlash. Telegram says that 7% to 8% of its users are in Russia, which works

out to more than 40 million people. Banning it risks driving people in Russia to explore using virtual private networks, anticensorship browser extensions and other tools to skirt past the online blockade, the experts say. That is what happened when Iran tried to block Telegram beginning in late 2017.

Another explanation may be that blocking Telegram might be technically difficult for Russia, internet experts say. The country attempted to block Telegram for more than two years beginning in 2018, citing its refusal to turn over account information in terrorism investigations. But despite regulators banning what Telegram described as thousands of IP addresses a day, the app continued to thrive in Russia.

“Telegram is able to do things that make it extremely difficult to knock it offline,” said Ethan Zuckerman, a professor of public policy, communication and information at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (U.S.)

In June 2020, **Russia’s telecommunications regulator, Rossvyaz**, lifted the block. Critics of Telegram questioned whether the app struck a deal behind the scenes with the Kremlin. But the company said that the decision was solely Russia’s. The regulator didn’t respond to an emailed request for comment on why it lifted the ban, but said at the time that it had done so because of Telegram’s stated willingness to counter terrorism on its platform.

“We have a consistent history of ‘zero compromise’ when facing bans in countries like Iran, China or Russia,” the Telegram spokesman said. “We didn’t negotiate with Russia in 2018 when we still thought their ban of Telegram might be successful, let alone in 2020 when it turned out their ban was ineffective,” he added.

Moving to block Telegram now would also risk disrupting the communications of some of the Kremlin’s biggest backers. The Telegram feed of Ramzan Kadyrov, leader of the Chechen Republic and an ally of Mr. Putin, has become one of the platform’s fastest-growing Russian-language channels, publishing a stream of pro-Kremlin bravado and taunting to 1.1 million subscribers, a group that has grown 20-fold since before the invasion, Telemetry data show.

ACTORS IN THE CASE

Telegram

Vladimir Putin

Russia’s telecommunications regulator, Rossvyaz

pro-Kremlin channels on Telegram

independent or pro-Ukraine channels on Telegram

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky

European Union

CASE QUESTIONS:

1. (3) If you were Telegram in April 2022, what would be the main issues and actors you would monitor as you seek to maintain your operations in Russia?
Format: I'd monitor _____ because _____.
(maximum words: 80)

2. (4) What is your most likely scenario for the next 90 days in terms of the war in Ukraine and how it will impact the Russian government policy toward (a) internal Russian media (b) Russian citizen access to external media and (c) Telegram?

3. (2) What public policy model do you think will best describe how Rossvyaz will decide if it will continue to permit Telegram to operate in Russia?
(maximum words: 40)

4. (6) Given that public policy model, what would be your strategy going forward from 2022 to maximize the possibility of Telegram not being shut down in Russia? **(maximum length 150 words)**

