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2 Telegram as a Developing Political Actor

3 Conceptualising Platform Actorness

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9

10 Abstract

11 The chapter examines how the popular messaging service Telegram functions as a platform
12 for politics. A platform's role in, and effect on, politics can only be fully understood by
13 analysing the relational agency of platforms vis-à-vis the platform's users, regulators, and
14 other stakeholders. Platforms are not mere conduits of politics: they are more than the space
15 where political participation happens, and more than a tool that provides political actors
16 with opportunities to influence public opinion or suppress discontent. The chapter covers
17 the development of Telegram since its launch in 2013 and reviews its evolution from a
18 niche private messenger into an increasingly popular multimodal social media platform.
19 Using an updated version of the conceptual framework of 'platform actorness', the chapter
20 explains how Telegram's performance, practices, uses, and perceptions as a political actor
21 inform its place in the hybrid media system and its perceived credibility and influence.
22 While Telegram's affordances, policies, and decisions enable particular communicative

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practices and networked spaces, the company's public performance and framing of its 'politics' shapes the platform's reputation and, ultimately, its uses. The chapter demonstrates the importance of closely studying the claims, performances, and practices of platforms in the context of civic and political activity.

Introduction

This chapter examines how the popular messaging service Telegram functions as a platform for politics and as a political actor in its own right, expanding on the conceptual framework of 'platform actorness' (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). The chapter explains how Telegram's practices (platform actions, affordances, and policies) and performance (how the platform communicates its actions and values), along with shifting platform uses and user/stakeholder perceptions of the platform as a political actor have informed the platform's development, its place in the hybrid media system and its perceived credibility and competitive advantage.

The chapter covers the development of Telegram since it was first launched. It provides an overview of its evolution from a niche private messenger into a multimodal social media platform that is increasingly popular across political regime types and user groups. As social media has become more embedded in political processes, from political campaigning and mobilisation to electoral manipulation and interference in military conflicts, it is essential to study how platforms differ in terms of their platform actorness. The chapter thus reviews

relevant scholarship on Telegram, including studies on political mobilisation, disinformation and propaganda, political repression and media censorship, online cultures, and conflicts and extremist/terrorist organising. We reflect on how scholars use the platform as a source of data for the study of politics and society and analyse it as a key architecture underpinning networks of social connections and political power in a range of national and transnational contexts.

By refining the platform actorness framework (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022) and applying it to the analysis of Telegram's development as a platform of global significance, the chapter demonstrates the broader importance of extending analysis beyond the affordances of platforms and associated user practices and content to also include the claims, performances, and practices of platforms in the context of civic and political activity.

What Telegram Is and Where it Came From

Telegram is a messaging app launched in 2013 by Russian tech entrepreneur Pavel Durov and his brother Nikolai, founders of Russia's most popular social networking site VK (VKontakte). It is currently one of the most popular messaging services in the world, with over one billion active users as of March 2025 (Mehta, 2025), compared to rival WhatsApp's three billion monthly active users. The largest shares

of its user base are in India and Russia, but it has steadily gained popularity across Europe, the Middle East, North America, and Africa.

There are several reasons Telegram presents an interesting case study in platform actorness. The platform offers a unique combination of private one-to-one messaging and voice calls and private or public group chats (with up to 200,000 members) and channels which allow broadcasting news updates and multimedia content to an unlimited number of followers. Unlike groups, channels do not allow readers to comment or interact, and only channel admins have access to the list of subscribers. This dual functionality and the platform's easy-to-use interface have made it popular with a variety of communities, groups, and news organisations seeking alternatives to dominant social media platforms.

Telegram's other key distinction, which sets it apart from the likes of Facebook or X, is its limited searchability and, until 2023, lack of algorithmic content amplification. This affects subscription scalability ([Kakavand, 2024](#)), but also gives users and channel owners more control over the content they produce and consume. At the same time, Telegram offers an accessible API for developers and researchers, making publicly shared data and metadata easy to collect and analyse, which sets it apart from most leading social media platforms which have been restricting API access in the 'post-API age' ([Freelon, 2018](#)).

1 Much of Telegram's core functionality is connected to its origin story. The
2 messaging app was founded in response to the Russian government's growing
3 crackdown on activism and political expression in Russia. Durov himself claims he
4 was forced out as VK CEO 'following his continued refusal to cooperate with the
5 Russian authorities by sharing user information' (Wijermars & Lehtisaari, 2020, p.
6 6) and left Russia in 2014. As a result, Telegram was created 'as a tool to protect'
7 activists' 'communication in the context of political persecutions' (Ermoshina &
8 Musiani, 2021).

9 The app prides itself on offering end-to-end encrypted messaging options,
10 making it popular with journalists, activists, and citizens seeking privacy and cover
11 from state surveillance. At the same time, the platform's approach to encryption is
12 distinct: while its Secret Chats use end-to-end or client–client encryption that has to
13 be enabled by users, regular Cloud Chats use client–server/server–client encryption
14 and are stored on Telegram's own cloud servers. Such an approach, where end-to-
15 end encryption is not enabled by default (and not at all available for group chats),
16 and the development of a proprietary encryption protocol has seen Telegram face
17 sustained criticism from tech experts and digital rights activists, who worry that the
18 platform misleads users with exaggerated claims about its security features
19 (Greenberg, 2021).

1 The platform's affordances combined with its comparatively lax content
2 moderation approach have made Telegram an attractive destination for extremist
3 groups (Shehabat et al., 2017) and internet influencers 'deplatformed' by other
4 services for violating platform policies. At the same time, the platform's own public
5 messaging on user privacy, especially in the context of authoritarian repressions,
6 and its interactions with state regulators on content moderation and data access have
7 cemented its position as an advocate of internet freedom, which has been largely
8 uncritically accepted, especially within broader public debates (Herasimenka et al.,
9 2023).

10 The company has publicly resisted collaborating with state authorities, at
11 various times facing bans in Iran, Russia (in 2018–2020) (Akbari & Gabdulhakov,
12 2019; Wijermars, 2022), Brazil and Vietnam. Telegram has also faced criticism due
13 to platforming criminal activities, including the distribution of child sexual abuse
14 material, terrorist recruitment, illegal arms, and drug sales (Urman & Katz, 2022).
15 Its continued lack of cooperation with law enforcement culminated in founder Pavel
16 Durov's arrest by French authorities in August 2024 (Lokot, 2024).

17 Ironically, the platform's vocal support of anonymity and encryption and its
18 distributed public–private communication architecture that have made it the go-to
19 app for protesters and activists, also make it a popular tool of political repression for
20 'information autocrats' (Trauthig et al., 2024) as it enables under-the-radar

spreading of disinformation and covert surveillance. These tensions underscore the complexity of Telegram's role in political power struggles and point to the relational nature of the interplay between platform self-presentation and actions, the regimes in which platforms operate, and user practices and perceptions.

Conceptualising Platform Actorness

Telegram's case illustrates the need to analyse social media platforms as political actors in their own right. A platform's role in and effect on politics can only be fully understood by analysing the *agency* of platforms and the relationality of this agency vis-à-vis the platform's users, regulators, and other stakeholders, such as advertisers or investors. We argue that platforms cannot be reduced to mere conduits of politics: they are more than the space where political participation and discontent happen, and more than a tool that enables citizens to mobilise or that provides political elites with opportunities to influence public opinion or suppress public discontent. A platform's affordances, policies, and actions reshape communicative and networking spaces, whilst their public reputation and performance shape how they are perceived and the purposes for which they are used.

The 'platform actorness' framework (summarised in [Table 26.1](#)) captures the complexity and relationality of social media platforms as political actors by

- 1 examining platform practices, platform performance, platform uses, and perceptions
- 2 of the platform as a political actor by other stakeholders.

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4 *Table 26.1* The platform actorness framework

Dimension	Definition	Key types/categories	Telegram examples
Platform practices	Actions taken and decisions made by the platform, including design choices and policies which circumscribe its use.	• Policy creation and enactment • Content moderation • Data sharing • Platform design and affordances • Technical facilitation of use • Reactions to state/legal demands • Reactions to media coverage	• Enabling anonymity solutions • Deploying circumvention technology to bypass blocking • Removal of terrorist content • Non-response to state requests for user info • Creation of thematic sticker packs
Platform performance	Communication by the platform of their actions and values in the context of politics.	• Framing of decisions • Framing of feature releases • Corporate messaging • Absence of communication on politically relevant actions	• Pavel Durov's public statements on specific events or actions • Telegram's corporate blog updates • Comments by founder or platform representatives to media (or lack thereof)
Platform uses	Use of platform features and affordances by	• Benign or constructive use cases: e.g. for activism, censorship circumvention	• Activists using Telegram to organise or mobilise public (e.g. in Belarus)

	(political) stakeholders and actors	• Malign or subversive use cases: e.g. state disinformation, extremist group organisation, state surveillance • Non-use or refusal of use motivated by political considerations or perceptions of platform performance or practices	• Extremist or terrorist groups using platform to conduct illicit or clandestine activities • Use of platform by (authoritarian) state officials, institutions and state-friendly media or bloggers for information laundering or propaganda purposes • Platform use by law enforcement for collecting user information • Platform bans and sanctions imposed by states • Platform users leaving platform or curtailing use
Platform perceptions	Perception of platform actions and performances by (political) stakeholders and audiences	• States' perception of platform actions <i>as political</i> • Political actors' perception of platform actions <i>as political</i> • Citizens' perception of platform actions <i>as political</i>	• Public and private discussions of platform's reliability, security, transparency, privacy, political orientation • State designation of platform as 'foreign agent', 'information distributor', or 'extremist' • User views or feelings about platform as (un)reliable or (un)safe

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3 The 'platform practices' aspect refers to the actions and decisions taken by

4 the platform that circumscribe whether and how users may engage with it,

1 including, but not limited to, the platform's features or policies. Such practices
2 include the design and introduction of specific platform features and the resulting
3 user affordances, decisions on content moderation and data access provision, and
4 the creation and enactment of platform use and privacy policies. Practices also
5 extend to how the platform facilitates access for users (e.g. in environments where
6 other actors seek to curtail it) and how it reacts to legal demands or claims in media
7 coverage. For example, Telegram's insistence on a hands-off approach to content
8 moderation (Urman & Katz, 2022) and its notable introduction of censorship
9 circumvention measures in response to state blocking efforts in Russia (Wijermars,
10 2022) are emblematic of its increasingly political platform practices.

11 The second element, 'platform performance', captures how platforms
12 communicate their values and frame their practices in the context of politics.
13 Through the justification of key moderation decisions, often in response to public
14 debate, or the rationales provided for releasing new features, platforms aim to shape
15 public perception of these as well as to maintain their corporate image. For
16 example, Telegram relies on its corporate blog and website to comment on features
17 and policies (Telegram, n.d.), but founder Pavel Durov often uses his personal
18 Telegram channel to frame key decisions, e.g. referring to the platform's
19 circumvention efforts in Russia as 'Digital Resistance' (Durov, 2018). In 2025,
20 Meta's Facebook supplemented a corporate blog post with a personal video by

1 founder Mark Zuckerberg to explain Facebook's decision to shut down its third-
2 party fact-checking programme in favour of a Community Notes model ([Kaplan,](#)
3 [2025](#)).

4 Third, 'platform uses' refers to how various (political) stakeholders,
5 individuals and groups choose to (not) use a platform's features and affordances,
6 and to what ends. Platform uses are necessarily shaped by platform practices and
7 performance, alongside a host of other exogenous factors, such as the level of
8 information freedom in a given state or the needs of the specific communities or
9 users. For instance, there is a growing body of research on the use of Telegram by
10 far-right communities for mobilisation and the maintenance of existing networks,
11 predicated by the platform's privacy- and anonymity-enhancing features ([Urman &](#)
12 [Katz, 2022](#); [Kakavand, 2024](#)). Emerging scholarship also suggests Telegram's
13 unique combination of personal messaging and broadcasting affordances, as well as
14 its unique features for automated bot account creation, have made it popular in
15 participatory warfare practices, including war remembrance ([Nazaruk, 2022](#);
16 [Hoskins & Shchelin, 2023](#)) and digital witnessing ([Bareikytė & Makhortykh, 2025](#)),
17 as well as spreading disinformation and hate speech ([Makhortykh & González-](#)
18 [Aguilar, 2023](#)).

19 Finally, 'platform perceptions' refers to how the platform's practices and
20 performances are assessed by various actors and audiences. For instance, state

1 actors' perceptions of a social media platform's actorness inform whether they see
2 the platform as a threat, and what types of regulatory or restrictive action they may
3 take. For example, in the context of Telegram's use during protests, authoritarian
4 regimes may fully or partially restrict access to the messenger to interfere in protest
5 mobilisation ([Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019](#); [Wijermars & Lokot, 2022](#)). At the
6 same time, state actors can perceive apps like Telegram or WhatsApp as a useful
7 means of spreading state propaganda or disinformation ([Trauthig et al., 2024](#)).
8 Conversely, how citizens perceive a platform's actorness informs how they assess
9 its credibility and whether they decide to use it for political purposes. Telegram's
10 privacy-adjacent encryption features and declarative support for anonymity and free
11 speech have made it popular both with democratic resistance movements in
12 Myanmar, Hong Kong, and Libya, for example ([Urman et al., 2021](#)), as well as with
13 secretive extremist groups or conspiracy theory communities ([Schulze et al., 2022](#)).
14 Yet the hijacking of the platform by disinformation actors, and its relative lack of
15 transparency about data sharing and server security, have led users to view
16 Telegram as less safe for sharing sensitive or private information ([Trauthig et al.,](#)
17 [2024](#); [Bareikytė & Makhortykh, 2025](#)).

18 In the sections that follow, we apply the platform actorness framework to
19 capture the development of Telegram as it grew into a political actor of global
20 significance. We also address the relational nature of platform actorness, showing

how the elements of the framework continually interact with and influence each other, thus shaping the platform's political agency in complex ways.

Platform Practices

Telegram's design and communicative affordances make it a welcoming environment for horizontal, decentralised forms of organisation and mobilisation. The platform practices have largely focused on the development of innovative, user-focused features to support both public and private communication, minimise platform intervention in user communications and facilitate user access in repressive environments.

The app's multiscalar architectures combine private chats, public and private channels, and groups, allowing users more control over how they can connect to other individuals and communities. Access-facilitating features include protocols for censorship circumvention introduced in response to the Russian state's attempts to block Telegram ([Wijermars, 2022](#)) and tools to support user anonymity and data privacy, such as various levels of encrypted messaging, i.e. secret chats, or features such as anonymous forwarding and the ability to unsend messages ([Ermoshina & Musiani, 2021](#); [Greenberg, 2021](#)). Importantly, Telegram offers a combination of 'enhanced privacy and anonymity' with 'opportunities to gain publicity' (Urman &

Katz, 2022). This unique combination of affordances has made Telegram a key tool for visibility management in social movements (Herasimenka, 2022; Urman et al., 2021).

Many of Telegram's privacy-protecting features were introduced in response to specific large-scale political events. For instance, during the 2019 Hong-Kong protests against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill, in direct response to activist complaints about privacy risks, Telegram introduced the ability to remove a user's phone number from their account profile (Urman et al., 2021). During the 2020 antistate protests in Belarus, Telegram rolled out another anonymity-focused setting called 'Anonymous Admins', enabling group administrators to remove their names/pseudonyms and to become invisible in the list of group members (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022).

Telegram's light-handed approach to content moderation and an early commitment to avoid monetisation through intrusive ads and algorithmic filtering have made it an attractive space not only for activists and protesters in authoritarian regimes, but also for far-right networks and other extremist groups (Schulze et al., 2022). Telegram's privacy-oriented design enables such actors to maintain under-the-radar, decentralised communities on the platform while allowing some measure of strategic visibility to recruit new members (Urman & Katz, 2022; Kakavand, 2024).

1 The messenger's approach to data collection and data sharing is another
2 aspect that makes it potentially beneficial for groups engaging in illegal or
3 clandestine activities. Telegram claims that it does not respond to third-party data
4 access requests about private chats or group chats (Telegram, n.d.). However, critics
5 posit that Telegram is less forthcoming about the fact that it collects and stores user
6 metadata (such as IP addresses, devices used, history of username changes) and
7 users' contacts, if the user opts into sharing them: while Telegram mentions that it
8 collects these data in its privacy policy, it does not specify if they are encrypted
9 when stored on its servers. There is evidence of successful state attempts to extract
10 metadata, as well as the content of channels and group chats (Meineck, 2020).

11 Platform practices such as these can be seen as political, as they directly
12 shape citizen approaches to information sharing, including for mobilisation and
13 coordination purposes, and are thus of particular importance in the context of state
14 restrictions on online communication, surveillance or internet shutdowns. Together
15 with platform performance, they also come to shape platform perceptions and uses.
16 For instance, scholars find cross-country evidence that users perceive Telegram's
17 communicative affordances and privacy-enhancing practices as 'activist-friendly'
18 and conducive to polycentricity in movement organisation (Herasimenka, 2022;
19 Urman et al., 2021). At the same time, researchers point out that some of the very
20 same practices make Telegram appealing for authoritarian actors seeking to conduct

concealed misinformation campaigns or covertly monitor grassroots activity in online spaces (Trauthig et al., 2024).

As Telegram's user base has grown in the past decade, the platform started to focus more on its viability and profitability as a business and its position with investors and venture funders. This has resulted in changes to key platform practices, including technical features and affordances, content moderation and platform governance approaches. Since 2015, the platform provides an open API for developers, allowing for the creation of customised bots, in-chat services and mini apps. These automated features have also become a key monetisation tool, with Telegram launching an affiliate programme for bot developers in 2024 (Telegram, n.d.). Alongside these, Telegram has expanded opportunities for monetising user-generated content through charging subscription fees (for both human-led channels and automated agent-produced content), while introducing an internal currency system allowing users to purchase Telegram Stars and use them to pay for in-app purchases and gifts.

Despite insisting that 'making profits will never be an end-goal' for the platform, in 2021 Telegram launched 'sponsored messages' (paid, non-targeted ads) in public channels which it presented as 'privacy-conscious' (Telegram, n.d.), while private user chats remained off-limits for advertisers. In addition, in 2022, the messenger introduced Telegram Premium, offering paid subscribers perks such as

1 expanded upload limits and download speeds, access to exclusive stickers and a
2 range of customisation options ([Telegram, n.d.](#)).

3 To resolve investor debts following the unsuccessful development of its
4 blockchain platform, TON, in 2018–2019, Telegram placed several rounds of public
5 bonds between 2021 and 2024 to raise over US\$2 billion in debt financing to
6 support a future IPO bid and to ‘enable Telegram to continue growing globally
7 while sticking to its values and remaining independent’ ([Murphy, 2024](#)). Founder
8 Durov also claimed Telegram had plans to ‘improve its moderation processes’ in
9 the run up to multiple global elections in 2024 and ‘deploy AI-related mechanisms
10 to address potential issues’ ([Murphy, 2024](#)). In December 2024, Durov announced
11 that Telegram had reached profitability, citing Premium subscriptions growth and
12 Telegram ad sales, as well as other monetisation features, as key drivers of profits
13 ([Mehta, 2025](#)). In a controversial move, in May 2025 Telegram signed a US\$300
14 million deal with xAI, Elon Musk’s AI startup, to provide the functionality of the
15 AI-powered Grok chatbot within the platform ([Singh & Babu, 2025](#)).

16 After Durov’s run-in with French law enforcement and investigations of
17 Telegram’s involvement in criminal activity ([Lokot, 2024](#)), Telegram announced in
18 September 2024 that it would hand over users’ IP addresses and phone numbers in
19 response to state and law enforcement search warrants or other ‘valid legal requests’
20 ([Jamali, 2024](#)). This signals a marked reversal in the platform’s user data-related

practices and demonstrates how these can shift in light of state demands, business priorities, and media coverage or public opinion (Bossetta, 2020). These changes also point to how the platform's performance can evolve alongside its actions, justifying its decisions or framing its priorities in a new light.

Platform Performance

A platform's actions alone do not fully reflect its political actorness. Evaluating how platforms 'perform' their actorness is important since users typically have limited insight into the inner workings of platforms (e.g. in the case of moderation practices or algorithmic transparency). At the same time, it is crucial to track how such communication aims at specific target audiences or responds to certain political events, and how platforms justify certain actions on their part. It is also important to identify those decisions and instances of (in)action that are *not* publicly commented on or explained by platforms.

Both Telegram's official corporate channels and Pavel Durov's personal channels are used to communicate about platform policies, new features and services, and corporate achievements. Reactions to public controversy or framing Telegram's actions in more politicised contexts are usually reserved for Durov's own messages, closely tying his persona to the platform's public image.

1 A key theme in Telegram’s performance has been its continued framing of
2 the messenger as a ‘privacy-focused’ app prioritising user security and free
3 expression. For instance, in a June 2020 update on his personal channel after Russia
4 lifted the ban on Telegram, Pavel Durov referred to the messenger’s blocking
5 circumvention tools as ‘unique among social media apps’ and claimed that the
6 Digital Resistance technology facilitating access to the app was being continually
7 updated for use in ‘other places where Telegram is still banned by governments’ at
8 a time when ‘more governments may try to block privacy-focused apps’ (Durov,
9 2020).

10 Telegram’s self-positioning as a protector of privacy and free speech also
11 juxtaposes it with competitors such as Meta’s WhatsApp or the more privacy-
12 oriented Signal. Dunking on both apps has long been part of Telegram’s marketing
13 strategy, with Durov suggesting WhatsApp and Signal were ‘backdoored by the US
14 government’ and arguing, somewhat counterintuitively, that only Telegram’s in-
15 house encryption protocols were ‘really trustworthy’, despite the lack of default
16 end-to-end encryption (Green, 2024). Telegram has also been critical of app store
17 proprietors such as Apple and Google, which have faced Durov’s ire for imposing
18 undue moderation obligations and profit-sharing rules on independent app
19 developers and tech startups (Ermoshina & Musiani, 2021).

1 At the time of the antigovernment protests in Belarus in September 2020,
2 Apple, acting on a complaint from Belarusian law enforcement, asked Telegram to
3 take down three channels allegedly engaged in exposing its officers' personal
4 information (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). The company reluctantly complied but
5 responded to critical media coverage by framing the channels in question as 'used
6 by the people of Belarus to expose the identities of their oppressors', 'punishers and
7 propagandists' on its dedicated Belarus channel (Telegram Belarus, 2020). Despite
8 the personal data exposure, Telegram chose to side with the Belarusian protesters,
9 demonstrating that its 'privacy-focused' approach can be as selective as its
10 undermoderation, while allowing the platform to retain its performative stance as a
11 proponent of free speech.

12 Telegram's performative actorness is most obvious in how the platform and
13 its founder frame app design changes in the context of civic and political upheaval.
14 In a September 2020 corporate blog post announcing new features enabling
15 administrator anonymity and comments in channels, Telegram explicitly drew a
16 connection with the anti-government protests in Belarus, linking to a media report
17 about the use of Telegram by protesters (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022) and
18 acknowledging that the app 'is increasingly used to organize protests for democracy
19 and freedom' (Telegram, 2020). The Anonymous Admins and Channel Comments
20 were presented as 'another tool for safer protests' enabling participants to 'make

1 your battle for freedom safer’ and ‘to make sure everyone’s voice is heard’
2 (Telegram, 2020).

3 Telegram’s self-constructed mythology and performative rhetoric are
4 increasingly at odds with its efforts to survive in an information-capitalist
5 environment, where its attempts to experiment with cryptocurrencies, blockchain,
6 automation, and advertising in a bid to become profitable and attract investment
7 have faced stiff competition. While Telegram has positioned itself as supportive of
8 free expression and democracy activists in authoritarian regimes, from Belarus to
9 Myanmar, over time it has dialled down the ‘absolutism’ in its public performances.

10 In March 2024, Durov had balked at excessive policing of user expression
11 ‘unless they cross red lines’ (Murphy, 2024). However, in the run up to the 2021
12 Russian parliamentary elections, Telegram suspended several election information
13 bots connected to the Smart Voting project created by the Russian opposition, with
14 Durov claiming the censorship was due to threats from Apple and Google to fully
15 ban the messenger from app stores in Russia (Lokot & Wijermars, 2021). At the
16 start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Durov famously
17 suggested restricting Telegram channels in Russia *and* Ukraine, claiming that ‘they
18 were being used for military propaganda’ (Antoniuk, 2024) and argued access to the
19 app could be blocked in both countries to prevent it from being ‘used as a tool that
20 aggravates conflicts and incites ethnic hatred’ (Antoniuk & Peterson, 2022). There

1 have since been multiple instances of Russian and Ukrainian war-related channels
2 and bots, both official and grassroots ones, being suspended, with Telegram
3 justifying these as ‘false positives’ or as violations of its terms of service (Antoniuk,
4 2024).

5 The platform has also changed its tune on European social media regulation.
6 In a 2015 FT interview, Durov claimed the EU was ‘a “bureaucratic monster” that
7 stifles enterprise with red tape’ (Thornhill, 2015). Following his arrest by French
8 authorities in August 2024, Telegram said in an official statement that it ‘abides by
9 EU laws, including the Digital Services Act’ and claimed its moderation was
10 ‘within industry standards and constantly improving’ (Hern, 2024).

11 Following the French investigation, the platform changed its privacy policy
12 allowing it to share users’ IP addresses and phone numbers with government
13 authorities if users engage in criminal activity that violates its terms of service. In
14 response to user alarm at the announcement, Telegram and Durov said the changes
15 aim to ‘discourage criminals’ who ‘create a bad image for the entire platform,
16 putting the interests of our almost billion users at risk’ (Jamali, 2024).

17 Despite being vocal on user privacy and encryption, Telegram has offered
18 conspicuously little defence in response to accusations that the platform’s approach
19 to data sharing with governments is inconsistent (Lokot, 2024) or that its low-
20 moderation approach creates a hospitable environment for state-sponsored

1 disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy groups (Trauthig et al., 2024; Schulze
2 et al., 2022). Durov has deflected persistent concerns about Telegram being
3 controlled by the Russian state, suggesting in a 2024 interview that Telegram's
4 'Western competitors may have spread the rumour over fears about its growth' (The
5 Moscow Times, 2024). However, neither Durov nor Telegram have published
6 statements or responded to requests for comments in reaction to a 2025 *Important*
7 *Stories* investigation claiming that at least some of Telegram's network
8 infrastructure is managed by individuals linked to Russian special services (Anin &
9 Kondratyev, 2025).

10 We can conclude from Telegram's performed actorness that the messenger
11 deliberately presents itself not as a neutral technology, but as one with a specific
12 positionality. The above examples suggest that Telegram's platform performances
13 are context- and audience-specific and aim to narrate platform decisions in view of
14 the values referenced in its policies. These performances can evolve in response to
15 unfavourable media coverage or government intervention to further shape user
16 perceptions and use scenarios, as the platform seeks to manage its public image and
17 retain its reputation among users.

18

1 Platform Uses

2 While studies on platform practices and performances are scant, scholarly research
3 on platform uses and affordances of Telegram abounds, informing our observations
4 about who chooses to use (or not to use) Telegram and for which reasons.

5 Telegram's persistent self-presentation as a privacy champion and its
6 'subversive affordances' ([Santos et al., 2024](#)) have made it popular with democracy
7 activists and protesters in authoritarian contexts. A large swathe of empirical
8 research on grassroots Telegram use focuses on its adoption to protect mobilising
9 citizens from surveillance, for instance in Iran ([Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019](#)), or to
10 facilitate circumvention of censorship, as was the case in Russia ([Santos et al.,](#)
11 [2024](#)) and Belarus ([Wijermars & Lokot, 2022](#)). In these contexts, activists and
12 protesters often single out Telegram as their preferred secure platform, citing both
13 its privacy features and the overall reputation cultivated by the platform itself: this
14 was the case in Myanmar, Libya, and Ethiopia, for instance ([Trauthig et al., 2024](#)).

15 As noted previously, Telegram combines privacy-affording design elements
16 with affordances for visibility management, allowing grassroots publishing (through
17 channels), and coordination and mobilisation (through groups) (Urman & Katz,
18 2022). These affordances, coupled with the platform's statements in support of
19 democratic protests, especially in authoritarian contexts, have enabled Telegram to
20 serve as a platform for a particular type of 'leaderless' protest movements, where

leadership tends to be collective, polycentric, and often concealed, as reported by scholars studying contentious politics in Belarus and Hong Kong, among others ([Herasimenka, 2022](#); [Urman et al., 2021](#)). Telegram's broadcasting features have made it a popular route for disseminating independent news in authoritarian contexts where media freedom has been restricted, leading to the proliferation of what [Al-Rawi \(2022\)](#) refers to as 'portable alternative media'.

Ironically, Telegram's privacy-oriented features, coupled with its self-presentation as the underdog among corporate tech giants, have also made it popular among extremist movements and terrorist groups globally ([Shehabat et al., 2017](#); [Urman & Katz, 2022](#)). [Rogers \(2020\)](#) posits that Telegram's combined public outreach and anonymity affordances solve the so-called 'online extremist's dilemma'. Telegram's low searchability and identifiability enable such communities to port over existing connections and networks from other platforms, where they face deplatforming or censorship ([Kakavand, 2024](#)). Islamist, far right and other extremist groups are able to maintain small, decentralised communities on Telegram in relative obscurity, as they use other platforms' connectivity affordances to subsidise the lower connectivity on Telegram ([Urman & Katz, 2022](#); [Kakavand, 2024](#)). The growing use of Telegram by these networks speaks to the relational nature of the social media ecosystem: be it Islamic State (IS) jihadists or the US far right, researchers note the direct impact of mainstream platform

takedowns on how quickly their presence on Telegram has proliferated (Conway et al., 2019; Bryanov et al., 2022), despite Telegram's commitment to removing publicly available terrorist content. Extremist groups have also taken advantage of Telegram's automation features, with IS supporters reportedly using networks of bot accounts to facilitate content amplification and community cultivation to 'lubricate and augment' IS influence activities (Alrhoun et al., 2024) while minimising discovery risks.

Telegram's bot-building capabilities have found multiple uses in other settings: in Ukraine, where the messenger has a large user base, chatbots are routinely used to provide local government information, postal tracking, and utility services to citizens, creating a layer of decentralised information networks to support the precarious mainstream infrastructure affected by warfare. At the same time, in the context of Russia's full-scale war, Ukrainian security services have used automated agents such as the eVorog bot to collect anonymised grassroots reports of enemy sightings and military movements (Nazaruk, 2022) in both Russian-occupied and Ukrainian-controlled territories.

The routinisation of digital media use in conflict and the advent of participatory warfare (Hoskins & Shchelin, 2023) have seen Telegram used by military actors to broadcast updates about air alerts of drone and missile attacks, and by civilians engaged in digitally witnessing the impact of the Russian invasion in

Ukraine ([Bareikytė & Makhortykh, 2025](#)). Officials, media and military bloggers also make use of Telegram's broad- and narrow-casting affordances to push both propaganda and counter-propaganda messaging ([Oleinik, 2024](#); [Ptaszek et al., 2024](#)). The spread of disinformation, particularly in the context of conflicts or political upheaval, is enabled by the platform's preference for undermoderation, fostering relatively small, yet active communities of users who consistently share links to known sources of misleading information through dedicated channels ([Herasimenka et al., 2023](#)).

Telegram's penchant for undermoderation, coupled with its under-the-radar mystique, has seen its growing use among conspiracy-themed, far-right activist, and COVID-19-sceptical communities ([Willaert et al., 2022](#); [Simon et al., 2023](#)). This has led to concerns about Telegram's polarisation and radicalisation capacity in the context of supporting fringe, siloed groups consuming socially and politically relevant information online, for example in Germany, the Netherlands and other democratic states ([Schulze et al., 2022](#)). At the same time, Telegram has been firmly incorporated into the 'information autocrats'' digital repression toolkit ([Trauthig et al., 2024](#)), especially in authoritarian regimes and struggling democracies with high levels of messaging app penetration. It is increasingly used for spreading populist messaging ([Jost & Dogruel, 2023](#)) and positive propaganda about autocrats, while creating challenges for opposition activists and civil society

fact-checkers working to prevent the spread of misinformation in the more private confines of Telegram groups and networks ([Trauthig et al., 2024](#)). For instance, in the case of antiregime protests in Russia and Belarus, our research showed that, despite Telegram's professed support for protesters, pro-government actors enjoyed an unfettered presence on Telegram ([Wijermars & Lokot, 2022](#); [Navumau et al., 2025](#)) and actively undermined civil society and opposition efforts. Their use of Telegram's affordances to control and manipulate the communication space ([Kuznetsova, 2024](#)) enabled them to frame antiregime resistance as detrimental to state stability in order to reinforce political dominance.

It is worth noting that the proliferation of research on Telegram's uses by civic, state and other actors owes much to the relative accessibility of data in public channels and the platform's user-friendly API ([Buehling, 2024](#)). This puts the platform in stark contrast with other social media giants, who have gradually reduced or restricted their data access for researchers. While this trend may be at least partially reversed with the implementation of the DSA's Article 40, mandating researcher access to platform data in the EU ([Klinger & Ohme, 2023](#)), scholarship on Telegram use should be interpreted in the context of privileged researcher access, Telegram's actual user numbers, the platform's own performances, and its perceived status and influence among its users.

1 Platform Perceptions

2 Platform affordances and performance have shaped not only how Telegram is used,
3 but also the perceptions of it as a political actor. The assessment of the platform's
4 practices and performances has been further circumscribed by user needs, the
5 political context in which Telegram has been used, and the availability and
6 affordances of other platforms. How Telegram is perceived, in turn, further shapes
7 its uses by citizens and states, as well as approaches to platform regulation and
8 levels of user trust.

9 Compared to the volume of research on user practices and content,
10 scholarship on perceptions of Telegram is less extensive, and mostly relies on
11 survey or interview data in contexts such as protest mobilisation, authoritarian
12 repression, and ongoing military conflicts. This means our knowledge of how
13 perceptions of Telegram are shaped and how they impact user decisions, state
14 policy or platform practices remains incomplete, and more research is necessary to
15 understand this aspect of the platform actorness framework.

16 State actors' perceptions of Telegram's platform actorness can inform their
17 approaches to governing platforms seen as threatening regime stability or violating
18 national law. For example, in the context of Telegram's pervasive use in
19 contentious politics, authoritarian regimes have restricted access to the messenger,
20 including in Belarus, Russia, and Iran ([Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019](#)). However, in

1 some cases, state actors perceive Telegram as a useful means of extending
2 authoritarian control beyond the traditional media and political space and have
3 relied on it to spread state propaganda and disinformation ([Trauthig et al., 2024](#)) or
4 to interfere with protest organisation ([Wijermars & Lokot, 2022](#)). Many
5 authoritarian regimes, including Russia, have gone from blocking Telegram to
6 attempting to co-opt the platform's affordances (Kuznetsova, 2024), seemingly
7 shifting their perception of the platform's utility in cementing autocratic control of
8 the communications space.

9 Media coverage of Telegram as a political actor plays an important part in
10 shaping platform perceptions. In our research on Belarus antigovernment protests,
11 we found that independent Belarusian media mostly reported on Telegram's key
12 role in supporting grassroots protest mobilisation. However, pro-government media
13 relied primarily on state Telegram channels for updates and framed protest-related
14 channels as 'dangerous spaces' run by 'agents of the West', implying channel
15 moderators instigated more violent behaviour among protesters ([Wijermars &](#)
16 [Lokot, 2022](#)). In Russia, state TV coverage of the Kremlin's 2018 ban on Telegram
17 defended the ban as both upholding the 'rule of law' and necessitated by national
18 security considerations ([Wijermars, 2022](#)). In both cases, Telegram and particular
19 channels were attributed a measure of political agency, which may explain why
20 autocracies use Telegram as an important component of their digital authoritarian

1 toolkits. This perceived political actorness also explains why autocrats may seek to
2 discourage citizens from using Telegram to pursue their own political goals, while
3 at the same time continuing to use it to bolster information autocracies (Kuznetsova,
4 2024).

5 Citizen perceptions of Telegram's actorness inform how they assess the
6 platform's utility and how much they trust Telegram with their safety, especially in
7 politically risky circumstances. Telegram's privacy-adjacent encryption features
8 and declarative support for anonymity have made it popular with anti-authoritarian
9 protest movements ([Trauthig et al., 2024](#); [Urman et al., 2021](#)). The very same
10 features have also made Telegram the go-to platform for extremist and conspiracy
11 theory communities displaced from other platforms ([Schulze et al., 2022](#)), whose
12 members view Telegram as a safe space with minimal policing and moderation
13 ([Guhl & Davey, 2020](#)). Especially in repressive political contexts, such as the
14 crackdown on anti-government protests in Belarus, protesters see Telegram as part
15 of the risky, yet necessary infrastructure for facilitating severely limited internet
16 access, but also see Telegram protest channels as the most trusted news source for
17 information about the quickly unfolding protest ([Wijermars & Lokot, 2022](#)).

18 Over time, the growing presence of conspiracy groups and autocrats, and
19 Telegram's relative lack of transparency about data sharing and server security,
20 have undermined trust in the platform as a secure and private space. Research on

1 private use of Telegram in politically contentious contexts from 2024 found that
2 while in some regimes, such as Myanmar, Ethiopia, and Libya, activists saw
3 Telegram as safest for activism, alongside Signal, citizens in Hong Kong and
4 Ukraine, and especially those with higher levels of digital literacy, were less
5 inclined to view Telegram as safe for sharing sensitive or private information
6 ([Trauthig et al., 2024](#); [Bareikytė & Makhortykh, 2025](#)). This growing distrust has
7 been shaped by the platform's reticence to detail a definitive policy on sharing user
8 data with law enforcement and its failure to disprove accusations of collaborating
9 with Russian intelligence and security services ([Lokot, 2024](#); [Anin & Kondratyev,](#)
10 [2025](#)).

11 Although security concerns and misgivings about Telegram's credibility or
12 its potential affiliation with adversaries may impact on user perceptions, changes in
13 perception do not always translate into changes in use. Other variables, including
14 the availability of alternative platforms, the restrictions on connectivity, and the
15 costs of and opportunities for connection, shape Telegram's perceived values and
16 utility. Citizens' reliance on Telegram's features and affordances as well as the
17 draw of established networks, communities and information conduits mean that,
18 even in more politically volatile contexts such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine,
19 Telegram remains in use by a significant proportion of the Ukrainian population
20 ([Antoniuk, 2024](#)). At the same time, in less contentious circumstances, Telegram

groups can be perceived by users as useful ‘local civic infrastructure’ enabling productive horizontal self-organisation in local communities (Pasitselska et al., 2025), regardless of the potential for abuse by authoritarian regimes or other rogue actors.

Apart from research on perceptions of Telegram in contentious politics and authoritarian regimes, broader scholarship on state and regulator perceptions of platforms is still lacking. How states and European and global regulatory bodies perceive platforms such as Telegram impacts on regulatory decisions, sanctions, platform approaches to content moderation, and broader national and international policymaking regarding internet freedom and digital sovereignty. Given the central role of platforms in multistakeholder internet governance (Gorwa, 2024) and in the co-production of security in online spaces (Bellanova & De Goede, 2022), it is crucial to understand how platforms are perceived as political actors and what shapes those perceptions.

Conclusion

Since its launch in 2013, Telegram has evolved from a niche private messenger into a powerful multimodal social media platform used across the globe. As platforms are now intricately embedded in global political processes, we argue that Telegram

1 should be studied as a political actor in particular contexts in order to fully grasp its
2 influence and politics. To do this, we refine the platform actorness framework
3 (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022) to analyse Telegram's development as a platform of
4 global significance. We also demonstrate the broader importance of extending
5 scholarly inquiry beyond the affordances of platforms and associated user practices
6 to attend to the performance and practices of platforms, and platform perceptions by
7 other political actors. We thus extend the scholarly debate on conceiving of
8 platform architectures and affordances as not only technical or communicative, but
9 also inherently social, wherein they contextually facilitate 'normative processes in
10 collectives' (Van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2024).

11 We posit that platform actorness should be understood not only in social, but
12 also in political contexts, and should be contextualised through platform practices,
13 platform performance and user perceptions. Such a holistic approach, we argue,
14 allows us to fully grasp how the various aspects of Telegram's platform actorness
15 influence decision-making related to platform use for political mobilisation and
16 influence operations, platform bans and censorship, and platform governance policy
17 development. It also accounts for less tangible aspects such as the impact of
18 Telegram's reputation and self-presentation on user trust, the perceived affective
19 connections to the platform and the networks it supports, or the potential for state
20 actors to abuse Telegram's undermoderation for autocratic ends.

1 Telegram's analysis as a political actor suggests that, in its interactions with
2 other actors and in the pursuit of its business aims, the platform draws as much on
3 its self-presentation and performance of its 'origin myth' as it does on its privacy-
4 and anonymity-focused features and technical affordances. At the same time,
5 Telegram's development and evolution are dependent on both user practices and
6 user perceptions, which shape how the platform evolves in response to user needs,
7 state bans, data protection and content moderation laws. Practices and perceptions
8 also circumscribe assessments of Telegram's utility or risk by activists, shadow
9 communities, and state officials. Platform actorness should therefore be seen as a
10 relational framework: while all aspects should be considered as a whole, there are
11 complex relations between them. For instance, Telegram is keenly aware of the
12 power of user perceptions and often hinges its acts or performance on what users or
13 governments do or say, introducing or scrapping security and usability features and
14 changing platform policies in response to public opinion or state sanctions.

15 The platform actorness framework enables examining Telegram's evolving
16 role in the hybrid media system and offers avenues for analysing Telegram's future
17 actions and standing across regime types and use scenarios. We argue that platform
18 actorness is always dependent on variables such as regime type, level of media
19 freedom, cultural and social norms, and the expectations and concerns of users. This
20 makes scholarly research and policy recommendations in the area of platform

1 politics and platform governance a challenging task. It also has broader implications
2 for researching platforms as political actors in a shifting global landscape in a
3 context-sensitive manner. Telegram, as we show, is never simply a champion of
4 digital resistance or a means of spreading propaganda narratives; it is only ever the
5 former – or the latter – in a particular country, in particular circumstances and for
6 particular users.

7 We conclude with several recommendations. Telegram as a site of
8 interdisciplinary research has largely been shaped by the openness of the platform's
9 API and public channel data. Platform affordances have therefore shaped the
10 research agenda, presenting challenges for researchers seeking to study encrypted
11 communications, grassroots organising, or propaganda operations in the darker and
12 more private spaces of Telegram. The development of more creative approaches to
13 platform research involving participatory, ethnographic and process-tracing
14 methods is required to enable future inquiry into the complex effects of public-
15 private meshing of chats, channels, and groups, and the impact of partial visibility
16 and limited access on differential use.

17 Another limitation of Telegram research is its largely case study-based
18 nature, which at best offers a fragmented understanding of Telegram's platform
19 actorness, often confined to specific politically contentious events, such as protests,
20 elections, or armed conflicts. While context specificity is key, we call for more

exploratory and comparative research interventions to better understand Telegram as a political actor across contexts, regime types, and use scenarios.

Finally, while research on Telegram's affordances, uses and content is abundant, scholarship on platform practices, performance, and perceptions is limited, occluding the complexity of platform actorness. As scholars seek to truly grasp the growing role of platforms like Telegram in political processes globally, it is urgent that the research agenda evolves to incorporate all aspects of the platform actorness framework to account for the increasing influence of the inescapable architectures that underpin networks of social connections, which now wield their own political power across national and transnational contexts.

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