TELEGRAM AS A MULTIFACETED PLATFORM FOR ANTAGONISTIC POLITICAL PASSION: THE FINNISH ALTERNATIVE GROUPS UNDER THE SCOPE

Salla Tuomola
Roskilde University

Jakob Bæk Kristensen
Roskilde University

Abstract

Telegram has been described as a platform that fosters the creation of alternative public spheres, allowing diverse audiences to voice their concerns and discuss issues of importance (Al-Rawi, 2022). It has become a hub for various actors who leverage its features not only for information dissemination but also to coordinate activism, as it increases efficiency, improves collaboration, and lowers barriers to participation. At the same time, Telegram has become a refuge for individuals banned or removed from mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook, X, and YouTube, due to violations of platform policies (Rogers, 2020; Urman & Katz, 2022). Often labelled as *deplatformed actors*, these individuals are predominantly located on the far right of the ideological spectrum (Rogers, 2020: 213). Deplatformisation refers to the process by which major tech companies push extreme right-wing actors to fringe platforms by restricting their access to essential online services (Van Dijck et al., 2023: 3439).

We focus on alternative actors using Telegram, previously characterised as a unified blend of far-right actors, ideologies, activists, movements, alternative media, conspiracy theories, and coronavirus scepticism (Almodt, 2024). By *alternative actor*, we refer to Mayerhöffer et al.'s (2024, 94) definition of alternative news media: diverse group operating from "different ideological standpoints – including nativist, libertarian, nationalist, socialist, communist, and progressive positions – or from a cross-partisan anti-systemic, or even conspiratorial, outlook." We focus on the grassroot actors who position themselves in opposition to the dominant public discourse, often within broader right-wing and anti-systemic frameworks. We use an approximated representation of an ecosystem of Finnish alternative actors on Telegram as a case study for two key reasons. First, there is limited knowledge about the platform from the perspective of Finnish alternative users. In the Finnish context, Telegram has predominantly been

characterised as a space in which conspiracy theorist content proliferates (Valaskivi et al., 2023) and as a potential channel for jihadist online communication, including the planning of violent attacks and the dissemination of supportive materials (Malkki & Pohjonen, 2019).

Second, situated at the intersection of the Western and Eastern worlds, Finland stands out among the Nordic countries due to its distinct public discourse dynamics. Throughout its history, Finland has experienced notable shifts in political debate, including periods of extreme polarisation (Koivunen, 2021). Geographically, the country developed a distinct foreign policy strategy during the Cold War (Uutela, 2020). Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has reportedly triggered a "psychosis of fear" (Arter, 2023) in the country, amplifying historical anxieties surrounding territorial loss. The adversarial and contradictory nature of public discourse, compounded by Finland's vulnerable position adjacent to Russia, suggests a heightened need for platforms such as Telegram, which facilitate anonymous and effective communication.

This study has two main objectives. First, we map the ecosystem of Finnish alternative actors and examine their connections within the right-wing and anti-systemic frameworks of Telegram. Second, we conduct a qualitative analysis of how different modes of political engagement emerge within these groups, as reflected in their topics and rhetorical strategies. Drawing on Mouffe's (2005) concept of *political passion*, we understand passion as a collective driving force that helps explain the underlying dynamics among these actors. Mouffe (2013) argues that meaningful political engagement relies on the formation of collective identities, with affective bonds playing a central role in the process of identification. By exploring the Finnish Telegram ecosystem both structurally and in terms of content, this study contributes to political communication research by providing new insights into how the suppression of antagonistic modes of engagement is reflected in the resurgence of alternative actors on fringe platforms.

This study addresses the following research questions:
RQ1: What are the main characteristics of the Telegram ecosystem formed by key Finnish alternative actors, and how do they interconnect through the content they share and reshare?
RQ2: How do different modes of political engagement manifest within this ecosystem and among these actors?

The iterative data collection process resulted in the identification of 74 initial accounts and chat groups, which we then verified for their continued existence and activity. Some accounts were inactive, no longer existed, or were private, leaving a total of 47 active Finnish Telegram accounts. The collected posts spanned from 2019 to 2023, although most accounts showed minimal activity before 2020. This resulted in a total of 3,000,000 posts from 47 different actors. Although 1,300,000 of these were forwarded messages, only 60,000 were forwarded messages specifically between these 47 accounts.

The first phase of our study involved a network analysis, which we used to explore how each account contributed to the broader information-sharing ecosystem on Telegram

and to identify overlapping themes in their online communication. Following earlier studies applying network analysis to Telegram, we focused on relations between channels based on who is mostly forwarding or being forwarded (Bovet & Grindrod, 2022) eliciting community structures in the communication network (Buehling & Heft, 2023; Simon et al., 2023;) derived from such forwarding relations. A directed network was constructed based on the messages forwarded from and by each of the 47 included accounts. In the second phase of the study, we conducted a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023) to examine how different modes of antagonistic political engagement emerged among the actors and how they were distributed across clusters.

We identified four distinct clusters, based on content-forwarding patterns. The cluster of anti-mainstream critique consists of accounts that present alternative or opposite perspectives on current news topics. The protest mobilisation cluster revolves around accounts that organize protest actions and other events that signal contempt towards mainstream actors and institutions across Finland. The cluster of Western medicine critique is composed of accounts that largely criticize dominant medical treatments, particularly those associated with COVID-19. Lastly, the anti-democracy propaganda cluster is characterised by its strong pro-Russian stance, blending support for Russia with conspiracy-oriented content.

Our findings highlight a strong reliance on central distributors of information, which serve as key hubs for a diverse range of anti-mainstream content. While the network appears to have originated in response to COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns in Finland, it has since developed into a broader ecosystem that accommodates diverse anti-mainstream sentiments. Although each cluster focuses on different topics, central distributors act as amplifiers, disseminating content from dominant voices within their respective groups. This mechanism facilitates the widespread circulation of overtly far-right content, even among accounts that initially focused on demonstrations or general critiques of mainstream narratives. Additionally, our analysis illustrates that anti-democratic propaganda content has penetrated key distributors nodes through multiple connections, influencing the network's overall information dynamics.

We argue that the illustrated ecosystem reflects Mouffe's (2005, 2013) notion that suppressed political passions seek alternative channels for expression, often transforming into more antagonistic forms. In this manner, political passion serves as a driving force within this dynamic network – linking antagonistic actors engaged in moderate critique with those promoting overtly far-right and radical narratives. At the same time, political passion enables antagonistic actors who feel marginalized or silenced in public discourse to forge affective bonds with like-minded individuals. In this sense, political passion facilitates meaningful political engagement, which, according to Mouffe, is rooted in the formation of collective identities.

References

Almodt, R. (2024). From criticism to conspiracies: The populist discourse of COVID-19 sceptics in Germany's Querdenken community on Telegram. *Discourse & Society, 35*(1), 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265231191971

Al-Rawi, A. (2022). News loopholing: Telegram news as portable alternative media. *Journal of Computational Social Science, 5*(1), 949–968. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42001-021-00155-3

Arter, D. (2023). From Finlandisation and post-Finlandisation to the end of Finlandisation? Finland's road to a NATO application. *European Security, 32*(2), 171–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2022.2113062

Bovet, A., & Grindrod, P. (2022). Organization and evolution of the UK far-right network on Telegram. *Applied Network Science, 7*(1), 76.

Buehling, K., & Heft, A. (2023). Pandemic protesters on Telegram: How platform affordances and information ecosystems shape digital counterpublics. *Social Media + Society, 9*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305123119943

Koivunen, A. (2021). Managing moods: Media, politicians, and anxiety over public debate. In A. Koivunen, J. Ojala, & J. Holmén (Eds.), *The Nordic economic, social and political model: Challenges in the 21st century* (pp. 195–211).

Kuckartz, U., & Rädiker, S. (2023). *Qualitative content analysis* (Vols. 1–0). SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781036212940

Malkki, L., & Pohjonen, M. (2019). Jihadist online communication and Finland. *Publications of the Ministry of the Interior 2019:29.* http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-324-300-2

Mayerhöffer, E., Kristensen, J. B., & Ramsland, T. (2024). Curators of digital counterpublics: Mapping alternative news environments in Sweden and Denmark. *Nordicom Review, 45*(1), 92–119. https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2024-0009

Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. Routledge.

Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso.

Rogers, R. (2020). Deplatforming: Following extreme internet celebrities to Telegram and alternative social media. *European Journal of Communication, 35*(3), 213–229. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120922066

Simon, M., Welbers, K., Kroon, C., & Trilling, D. (2023). Linked in the dark: A network approach to understanding information flows within the Dutch Telegramsphere. *Information, Communication & Society, 26*(15), 3054–3078. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2133549

Urman, A., & Katz, S. (2022). What they do in the shadows: Examining the far-right networks on Telegram. *Information, Communication & Society, 25*(7), 904–923. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1803946

Uutela, M. (2020). The end of Finlandization: Finland's foreign policy in the eyes of the two German states 1985–1990. *The International History Review, 42*(2), 410–423. https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1577286

Valaskivi, K., Jääskeläinen, P., Huhtamäki, J., & Sumiala, J. (2023). "Holy shit!!! Jos tuo ei herätä ihmisiä niin sitten ei mikään!" Salaliittoteoreettinen populistinen kuvittelu ja tunnestruktuurit sosiaalisessa mediassa. *Media & viestintä, 46*(1), 67–91. https://doi.org/10.23983/mv.128479

Van Dijck, J., de Winkel, T., & Schäfer, M. T. (2023). Deplatformization and the governance of the platform ecosystem. *New Media & Society, 12*(25), 3438–3454. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211045662