

December 2022

# DISINFORMATION ON TELEGRAM: RESEARCH AND CONTENT MODERATION POLICIES

By EU DisinfoLab

EU DISINFO LAB



**Publication Date:** December 2022

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### **About EU DisinfoLab**

EU DisinfoLab is an independent nonprofit research organisation specialised in analysing disinformation.

We uncover and expose sophisticated disinformation campaigns. We seek to amplify the voices of our community of counterdisinformation experts across the EU and contribute with collective expertise to policy making.

You can find more information about our work on our website:

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# INTRODUCTION

This document shows how Telegram operates and can be exploited for disinformative purposes. It is designed as a resource for the community countering disinformation on this platform.

The technical document is structured as follows: (I) first, the organisation of Telegram chats is presented; (II) then, some tools on how to investigate the platform are introduced; (III) and the subject of how to report content is addressed, including an overview of policy aspects related to enforcement. (IV) Finally, a repository of recent case studies on Telegram is provided.

French-Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov created Telegram in 2013. Often presented as an encrypted messaging platform, its architecture allows different communication mediums.

The application is widespread in Brazil, where [J.M. Bolsonaro's](#) official Telegram channel has about 2.7M subscribers, and in Ukraine, with [Volodymyr Zelensky](#), who counts close to 1M readers. Regarding Europe, [figures](#) show that Telegram is one of the most downloaded apps in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

For starters, here are three characteristics about Telegram:

1. **A MESSAGE'S ID IS A SEQUENTIAL AND UNIQUE NUMBER THAT CAN BE ACCESSED BY COPYING A POST'S LINK AND PASTING IT INTO A TAB IN OUR PREFERRED BROWSER.** This can be "https://t.me/name\_of\_the\_channel/100", which means that 100 is the message's ID and the 100th message to appear in that channel. Hence, if it is the first available message in a given chat, it means that the 99 messages sent before have been deleted.
2. **USERS CONTROL THEIR PRIVACY THROUGH THE "PRIVACY AND SECURITY" SETTINGS**, choosing who can see their phone number, profile photo, last seen, and other information.
3. **EXCEPT FOR SPECIFIC CASES, EVERY FELLOW GROUP MEMBER CAN SEE IF OTHER USERS ARE PART OF THE SAME GROUP.** In the case of channels, only the administrators can see if a user is a subscriber, so other subscribers cannot.

# I. TELEGRAM CHATS AND THEIR ORGANISATION

Telegram is often branded as a secure instant messaging platform for users. Beyond actual private and, by default, unencrypted messages, Telegram also offers other communication mediums, such as groups and channels.

## TELEGRAM GROUPS

Telegram groups can be set up by a single user and are designed to share, react to, and comment on information with other group members. A Telegram group can be either public or private. The main difference is the possibility to access it by invite of a current member or via a special link named [invite-link](#).

A Telegram group has various types of membership with different administrative rights. These range from regular members, who are only able to view the content, to the owner(s) or administrator(s), who have full administrative rights (with rare exceptions).

In order to assess if a chat is a group or not, open the preview of the chat on a desktop (i.e., the banner showing its name on the top) and take a look at the text label that identifies the chat type.

## TELEGRAM CHANNELS

Telegram channels are designed as centralised distribution mediums where one or a few selected users can share information with a specific community. Just like Telegram groups, Telegram channels can be either public or private. Private Telegram channels can be accessed only through a specific invite link or by the invite of an administrator.

The subscribers of a Telegram channel can be either administrators or simple readers. The owner is a special administrator who created the channel and has full administrative rights to it. The main difference between groups and channels is that, in the latter case, only the administrators can see the list of subscribers.

It is also possible to assess whether a chat is a channel. Simply open the chat's preview and take a look at the text label that identifies the chat type.

## TELEGRAM DISTRIBUTION MEANS' ARCHITECTURE

Distribution mean	Distribution model	Maximum number of members	Visibility	Roles
Individual chats	1 to 1	2	Private	Equal roles
Groups ( <a href="#">different types</a> )	Many to many: everybody can post	200,000	Either public or private	Users can be promoted to administrators
Channels	Few to many: only admins can post	Unlimited	Either public or private	Users can be promoted to administrators

## II. INVESTIGATIONS ON TELEGRAM

Telegram differs from other platforms in many aspects; thus, researching the app takes a lot of work.

### CUSTOM SEARCH ENGINES

For instance, one may only have a bunch of hashtags and need help figuring out where to start. Telegram's simple search feature is thought to provide search results for a few (public) chats (groups, channels, or individuals) that include the keyword in either the handle or the name. However, this may not be enough.

To analyse deeper and further, researchers have to rely on third-party tools outside of Telegram. The so-called [Google CSEs](#) (Custom Search Engines) provide a valuable solution to accomplish this goal. [Here](#) is one managed and maintained by the EU DisinfoLab Research Team.

A Google Custom Search Engine is nothing more than a simple Google web search bound with some search operators – e.g., AND, OR. A complete list is available [here](#).

### DATA ACQUISITION

After identifying an initial seed (i.e., a lead), researchers can move to the data acquisition phase. Data acquisition means or systems are the tools and techniques that make it possible to acquire the information one seeks from the identified sources. The knowledge researchers will be able to gather (e.g., on channels or groups as a whole or specific content they share) depends very much on the tools and consequent methodologies (e.g., scrapers, APIs, etc.) they decide to use.

For example, researchers can acquire data for their analysis using a scraper. However, the "Chat Export" feature in the Telegram Desktop application lets them gather this information successfully through a more reliable, stable, and faster approach than a scraping-based solution.

A more technical solution benefits from the [official Telegram API](#). One of the main advantages is that it allows monitoring relevant chats and acquiring information periodically without requiring any active user interaction (e.g., by using [cronjobs](#)) or, as soon as new information pops out, in a fully automated manner. To avoid getting too technical, this option will not be described here.

### III. HOW TO FLAG CONTENT ON TELEGRAM AND ITS ENFORCEMENT

#### CONTENT CATEGORIES THAT CAN BE REPORTED

Via any Telegram official app, users can report content for different reasons. However, these slightly differ between types of devices.

	Android (release 9.2.2)	iOS app (release 9.1.1)	MacOS (release 9.1.1, Apple App Store)	<a href="#">Web Client</a> (release 1.57 on Chrome, Firefox, and Safari)	Windows Desktop (release 4.4)
Child abuse	X	X	X	X	X
Copyright		X	X	X	X
Fake account	X				X
Illegal drugs	X	X	X	X	
Personal details	X	X	X	X	
Pornography	X	X	X	X	X
Violence	X	X	X	X	X
Spam	X	X	X	X	X
Other	X	X		X	X

#### HOW TO REPORT CONTENT

Depending on the type of content to be reported, there are different options. Users can report content (i.e., specific messages of a chat), for any of the aforementioned reasons, by any Telegram app. During the process, users can also add a comment to provide more information.

Users can also report content by writing an email to Telegram abuse contacts:

- [abuse@telegram.org](mailto:abuse@telegram.org)
- [dmca@telegram.org](mailto:dmca@telegram.org)

Telegram processes takedown requests for content reported as illegal. In their FAQ, they [write](#): "Please note that this does not apply to local restrictions on freedom of speech. For example, if criticising the government is illegal in some country (sic), Telegram won't be a part of such politically motivated censorship".

It is, therefore, unclear what Telegram rules are regarding content moderation of disinformation circulating on their platform.

## POLICIES AGAINST DISINFORMATION

According to the Digital Services Act, interpersonal communication services such as emails or private messaging services fall outside the Regulation's scope. That would also include Telegram.

However, the obligations for providers of online platforms may apply to services that allow making available information to a potentially unlimited number of recipients, such as public groups or channels (recital 14 DSA). Hence, Telegram public groups and channels would be in the scope of the Regulation. Telegram would need to comply with DSA obligations regarding these services as of 2024, when it starts applying to all online platforms, such as having user appeals and redress mechanisms and various transparency obligations. Yet, the instant messaging app is unlikely to be considered a Very Large Online Platform. If so, Telegram will not be required to make a systemic risks assessment, including on disinformation, and propose appropriate mitigation measures.

Telegram is also not a signatory of the strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation – future Code of Conduct under DSA. Although a voluntary tool, it would still incentivise a service such as Telegram to increase its efforts to fight disinformation through some public scrutiny. However, since the commitments do not apply to Telegram as long as it is not a signatory to the Code, it would typically have no specific impact on its disinformation policies.

Overall, at the EU level, the only policy on disinformation enforceable on Telegram consists of the general DSA obligations applicable to all online platforms. Hence, **it is entirely up to Telegram to decide if and how it wants to tackle the disinformation challenge.** Currently, its **Terms of Service overlook any reference to not allowing disinformation on the platform.** As a result, users do not have a way to report disinformation specifically, although they could report it under the content category "Other". Nonetheless, the lack of mention in the Terms of Service complicates the possibility of challenging a decision not to remove a flagged piece of disinformation under the user appeals mechanism in the DSA.

## IV. RELEVANT CASES ON HOW TELEGRAM IS USED IN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

Far from being exclusive, this section lists several recent studies exploring disinformation campaigns on Telegram.

- [Telegram and Digital Methods | M/C Journal](#) (7 January 2022). A methodological approach to the study of Telegram communities is presented through an analysis of 215 Dutch-speaking far-right and conspiracy public channels.
- [Metadata shows pro-Russian separatists filmed evacuation video days earlier](#) (18 February 2022). Looking at videos posted on Telegram, journalists were able to explore the metadata. This analysis reveals that the leaders of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics ordered the evacuations of civilians before the threat of a Ukrainian offensive, as the footage documenting the event was recorded days in advance. These findings point to a carefully planned information operation rather than an emergency decision.
- [German-language disinformation about the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Telegram](#) (4 March 2022). The Institute for Strategic Dialogue has worked on a corpus of 225 German Telegram far-right and conspiracy channels. The study shows this online environment's porosity to Russian war propaganda.
- [From COVID-19 denialism to pro-Putin hoaxes: the mutation of disinformation groups on Telegram in Spanish](#) (16 March 2022). This Maldita publication shows how the 10 most prominent anti-COVID-19 Telegram channels have shifted to pro-Russian propaganda over the war in Ukraine.
- [From Infodemic to Information War: a contextualisation of current narrative trends and their evolution in Dutch-language disinformation communities](#) (3 May 2022). An analysis of 225 Dutch-speaking far-right and conspiracy Telegram public channels displays the narrative shift of anti-vax communities towards pro-Russian war propaganda.
- [The disinformative ecosystem: link-sharing practices on Telegram as evidence of cross-platform amplification](#) (9 November 2022). A follow-up analysis of 30 Dutch-speaking far-right and conspiracy Telegram public channels observes their link-sharing behaviour. Findings depict disinformation as an ecosystem of cross-platform interaction and contamination.
- [Telegram occupation: how Russia wanted to breed a media monster, but ended up with a paper tiger](#) (15 November 2022). The study reveals how Russian information troops created dedicated Telegram channels for Ukrainian townships or communities. Posing as a source of local news, the channels were really used to disseminate Russian narratives and bolster support for the occupiers.