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TELEGRAM AS A TOOL FOR POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND MANIPULATION

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In this article, the research is focused on the Telegram messenger as a tool for political influence and manipulation. The features of this media platform are analyzed in the context of Ukrainian socio-political and media realities. The author has made recommendations for journalists on how to use this messenger and how to cover information from anonymous political Telegram channels.

Key words: Telegram, messenger, Telegram channels, social media, fake news, political manipulation

Main objective of the study. First of all, Telegram is the messenger with the most active and dynamic audience growth in Ukraine. On the other hand, the war of political «information leakages» and «Dark PR» in Telegram channels swept Ukraine about a year ago. Anonymous Telegram channels have become an epidemic. Over the past year, more than a hundred «near-political» channels of different ideological directions have appeared in Ukraine. So the relevance of this research is to explore this dangerous trend in media and political technology.

The study aims to research the Telegram messenger as a tool for political influence and manipulation. To achieve this, the following tasks were required: 1) to analyze the Telegram as a messenger and a media platform; 2) to make a comparative analysis of the role of the Ukrainian and foreign Telegram markets; 3) explore the experience of using Telegram by politicians during the election process; 4) explore the political technology of using anonymous Telegram channels; 5) create a list of recommendations for journalists on how to use this messenger and how to cover information from anonymous political Telegram channels.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Telegram, as a tool of political influence and manipulation, hasn't been the subject of any Ukrainian research by media explorers, as well as by explorers in the fields of political science, sociology, etc. The only time this topic was discussed publicly at the expert and the scientific level was during a roundtable

«Telegram: a tool for communication with the public or the tool of election manipulation?»¹, which was organized by the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine in the summer of 2019. Journalists also began to raise this issue in analytical articles and investigations during the second half of 2019.

Methodology. The main scientific methods in the process of research were: observation, content analysis, and discourse analysis, which were analyzed the Telegram market as a whole and specific Telegram channels in particular. The empirical method has helped to conclude the specificities of the operation of the Telegram channel and its use through political technologies. It should be noted that the author of the study works with Telegram and actively researches it in practice for one year.

Presentation of the basic material. The main feature of Telegram is that it's not just a messenger for private communication. Telegram is a combination of the messenger and a blogging platform, the role of which is played by Telegram channels.

The posts appear chronologically and come as a message to the smartphone of each Telegram subscriber. The news feed in Telegram is significantly different from Facebook and Instagram, where the news feed is formed by special algorithms. Also, there is no targeted advertising in Telegram. As a result, the Telegram post is seen by a much larger percentage of the audience than in the social networks mentioned above. For comparison: one post in the typical Telegram channel receives more than 50 % views of the channel's audience (can reach 100 % and more). On the other hand, typical post in community pages of Facebook and Instagram receives only 5–15 % views of their audience.

Another important feature of Telegram is the high level of cybersecurity of this messenger. This is emphasized not only by the developers of the application but also by independent experts. For example, an article «What Is Telegram, and Why Are Iran and Russia Trying to Ban It?» in The New York Times notes: «Telegram started in the wake of revelations by Edward Snowden of large-scale state surveillance in the United States, and it was pitched as a champion of privacy. When Facebook acquired WhatsApp, another messaging start-up, Telegram attracted millions of new users. Although Telegram was founded by a Russian, Pavel Durov, the messaging app rejects any affiliation with Russia.

Mr. Durov, the founder of Telegram, is in exile. But not long ago, he was seen as Russia's Mark Zuckerberg. Mr. Durov started a social network, VKontakte, in 2006, when Russia still appeared to have a future as a haven for web freedom. “In some ways, it was more liberal than the United States,” he told The Times almost a decade later after he chose to leave his country following clashes with the government of President Vladimir V. Putin.

Mr. Durov sold VKontakte, which shared the look and feel of Facebook but was more popular in Russia, and left the country with a reported \$300 million in his pocket in 2014. Once abroad, he began Telegram, hoping to offer a service to people who were worried about their privacy»².

¹ Ukrinform (2019), Telegram: a tool for communication with the public or the tool of election manipulation...

² Karasz, P. (2018), What Is Telegram, and Why Are Iran and Russia Trying to Ban It...

As for the technical side of security and privacy as a messenger, its essence is as follows: «Telegram uses end-to-end encryption, as do WhatsApp and Signal. This type of encryption converts messages into a code without the help of a server in the middle, making it nearly impossible to gain access to communication between two users without their consent. But Telegram uses its own secure messaging protocol, called MTProto, and the robustness of that system is up for debate»³.

The Telegram has succeeded in capturing the markets of countries where there are serious problems with freedom of expression, precisely because of these security reasons. In particular, Telegram is extremely popular in Iran and Russia, where the government regularly tries to block it. Socio-political events have become the catalyst for the growing popularity of Telegram in some countries. For example, the huge audience growth in Telegram was observed during the 2019 summer protests in Hong Kong to protect the democratic freedoms of the local population. About 23 % of city residents (1.7 million people) used the app at the time⁴.

Telegram's rise of popularity in Ukraine is still going on organically and has not been linked to either the Revolution of Dignity or the beginning of the Russian occupation of Crimea and the Donbass. However, as of the end of 2019, Telegram in Ukraine is the messenger with the most active and dynamic audience growth.

Telegram is the third most popular messenger in Ukraine after Viber and Facebook Messenger. There is no exact data on the size of the Telegram audience in Ukraine. According to various sources, these numbers range from 2.5 million to 4.5 million users. But we can confidently say that the target audience of this messenger is young people. This is confirmed by large research of the Ukrainian Telegram audience, which conducted by the TGStat analytics service at the end of 2018. According to the survey, half of the Ukrainian Telegram audience is 18 to 24 years old, and about 30 % is 25 to 34 years old⁵.

96 % of respondents said they use the messenger to read Telegram channels. 62 % of respondents are subscribed to 15 channels or less. 21 % of respondents are subscribed to more than 25 channels⁶. This confirms that Telegram has become an important source of information for a large number of Ukrainian citizens.

It should be noted that the TGStat survey at the end of 2018 showed that political channels are not popular in Ukraine. Their audience usually doesn't exceed 5,000 subscribers⁷. But over the next year, this situation has changed dramatically. As of the end of 2019, there is a trend towards political channels among the Ukrainian audience.

This trend was predicted by the author of this article a year ago. Because of the high level of privacy and security of the Telegram messenger, it is possible to create an anonymous Telegram channel for use the influence and manipulation of the electorate. The anonymous

³ Karasz, P. (2018), What Is Telegram, and Why Are Iran and Russia Trying to Ban It...

⁴ Koshelnyk, D. (2019), A study of Ukrainian Telegram: who, why and how uses a messenger in Ukraine...

⁵ Telegram Analytics (2019)...

⁶ Telegram Analytics (2019)...

⁷ Telegram Analytics (2019)...

Telegram channel is an opportunity for political technologists to impose topics and interpretations on people, spreading rumors and even speculations. It is also an effective tool for publishing «information leakage» and «Dark PR». In this case, politicians don't need to leak their information and political messages by their media, which makes it possible to trace the clear link between «information leakage» and its beneficiary.

Therefore, it was an opportunity for Ukrainian politicians to start working in a free niche, although they didn't fully understand the value of Telegram as a tool of influence and manipulation.

At the same time, it was possible to trace that in Russia Telegram channels became a powerful component of political technologies. They have occupied a niche alternative but interconnected with traditional media. Popular Russian political Telegram channels broadcast news from insiders in the Kremlin, ministries and Russian authorities before other media reported it. Although this information was often fake.

In 2017, the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* even devoted an entire investigation to the activities of the authors of Russian telegram channels. The publication praised the importance of the Telegram for Russian political life so much that it even called the article «When rumors rule society»⁸. Therefore, there were reasons to expect that in this way Telegram could change the Ukrainian political and media space. And as a result, it happened.

Telegram is definitely a good platform for personal and political brand development. This was proved by the case of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidential election campaign. His team of political technologists was the first, who effectively use Telegram to communicate with the electorate. First of all, they quickly increased the large audience for the Telegram channel «Zelensky's team»⁹. Also, there were created and developed regional pages for each oblast. Besides, there was achieved a viral effect – Zelensky's supporters began to create unofficial pages themselves in support of it. Zelensky's digital specialists also made good use of all the capabilities of Telegram bots.

Instead, the political technologist of his rival in the election – then-President Petro Poroshenko – completely ignored the Telegram before the first round of elections. Petro Poroshenko's Telegram channel¹⁰ was created just before the second round and it's wasn't so successful as Zelensky's channel.

Telegram is not the dominant media platform in the context of elections. But this is an additional opportunity to engage with the electorate, so the Telegram must be a must-have component of every election campaign.

Meanwhile, long before the start of the election campaign, a network of anonymous Telegram channels began to develop on the Ukrainian Telegram market, which still publishes unconfirmed political insider information and subjective views.

Only a year later, journalists for the first time publicly paid attention to this network of channels, noting that the tone of their posts is very similar – in the style of Russian propa-

⁸ Hans, J. (2017), When rumors rule society...

⁹ Telegram channel «Zelensky's team» (2019)...

¹⁰ Telegram channel «Petro Poroshenko» (2019)...

ganda, or Ukrainian media loyal to the politicians of the Viktor Yanukovich regime: «They write about Bohdan, Zelensky, support Portnov and hate Poroshenko. They are cited by Yanukovich-era politicians and Kremlin propaganda resources»¹¹.

The next massive wave of creation of anonymous Telegram channels was after the parliamentary elections. Political Telegram channels, which spread insider information and compromising about the presidential party «Sluha Narodu», became the headliners of this process. We are talking about the «Joker» Telegram-channel (78000+ subscribers at the end of 2019), which publishes pranks of messenger-communication with MPs. Also, it's about the «Temnyi Lytsar» (61000+ subscribers), whose author is allegedly a deputy of the party «Sluha Narodu», who is disappointed in his party, so he is mercilessly criticizing the party.

In parallel with these processes, news channels on the Ukrainian Telegram market are actively developing. The main purpose of most of them is to make money by selling advertising. However, quite often these channels, whose audience is hundreds of thousands, are tempted by political orders and fakes. An example is an investigation of «Toronto TV» journalists¹². They contacted an advertising agency that sells advertising on popular news channels in Ukraine and Russia. The journalists called themselves representatives of the press service of the pro-Russian party Viktor Medvedchuk. According to legend, journalists planned to order in the popular telegram channels a lot of hidden advertising. Later, the journalists suggested publishing a senseless fake: «the US was demanding the appointment of Petro Poroshenko as foreign minister». The intermediary agency contacted the administrators of the Telegram channels and replied that all of these channels, without any verification of this information, agreed to publish the obvious fake for UAH 27,600. According to the manager, such news will gain more than 200 thousand views in a day¹³.

Conclusions. The war of political «information leakages» and «Dark PR» in Telegram channels swept Ukraine about a year ago. After researching and analyzing the situation, the author of this article has made recommendations for journalists on how to use this messenger and how to cover information from anonymous political Telegram channels.

I. Don't publish unverified information from anonymous telegram channels. Thorough fact-checking is a must-have attribute for a journalist in today's media realities. Telegram channels can be used at the information gathering stage, but careful fact-checking is required.

II. Explain to the audience the risks of getting information from anonymous telegram channels. The topic of anonymous channel telegrams needs to be more actively investigated. It is necessary to detect fakes, to emphasize to readers on it. It should be explained to the Ukrainian audience: the information should be obtained from quality media, not from anonymous telegram channels. It is necessary to help increase the media literacy of the Ukrainian population.

¹¹ Vinnichuk, Y. (2019), How did a network of anonymous Telegram channels appear in Ukraine...

¹² Toronto TV (2019), «TV TORONTO INVESTIGATION: Telegram channels publish fakes for money...

¹³ Toronto TV (2019), «TV TORONTO INVESTIGATION: Telegram channels publish fakes for money...

III. Create and actively develop your own Telegram channels. The journalists have to do it today because there is a big request from the audience. Currently, there are 6 news channels in the top 10 most popular channels of the Ukrainian Telegram market. The Ukrainian audience wants to read the news in Telegram channels. The media cannot ignore this, so they must actively enter the Telegram market.

Moreover, the Telegram channel for the media is a good opportunity: 1) to attract a new audience for the media; 2) to develop media brand in social networks and messengers; 3) to get a new form of monetization.

It should be noted on the significance of this article it is the first Ukrainian scientific research of the topic of Telegram as a tool for political influence and manipulation.

The study of this issue will continue in the future. In particular, there are plans to analyze in detail the content of political Telegram channels and the methods of its promotion in messengers, social networks and media.

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**TELEGRAM ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ ПОЛІТИЧНОГО ВПЛИВУ
ТА МАНІПУЛЯЦІЙ****Дмитро Плахта**

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У статті розглянуто месенджер Telegram як інструмент політичного впливу та маніпуляцій. Особливості цієї медіа-платформи проаналізовані в контексті українських суспільно-політичних і медійних реалій, ґрунтуючись на яких сформовано рекомендації для журналістів, як слід використовувати цей месенджер і як висвітлювати інформацію з анонімних політичних Telegram-каналів.

В ході дослідження було детально проаналізовано функціонал та особливості Telegram як месенджера та медіа-платформи. Було проведено порівняльний аналіз українського та закордонного Telegram-ринків. Також було окреслено методи використання Telegram політиками під час виборчого процесу. Акцент у дослідженні був зроблений на детальному вивченні політичної технології використання анонімних каналів Telegram.

Основними науковими методами в процесі дослідження були: спостереження, контент-аналіз та дискурс-аналіз, за допомогою яких було проаналізовано Telegram-ринок в цілому та конкретні канали Telegram зокрема. Емпіричний метод допоміг з'ясувати особливості функціонування телеканалу Telegram та його використання за допомогою політичних технологій. Слід зазначити, що автор дослідження працює з Telegram та активно досліджує цей месенджер на практиці вже протягом року.

Актуальність і наукова новизна цієї статті полягає в тому, що це перше в Україні наукове дослідження месенджера Telegram як інструменту політичного впливу та маніпуляцій. Дослідження цієї теми буде продовжуватися і надалі. Зокрема, заплановано детально проаналізувати контент політичних Telegram-каналів і методи його просування в соціальних мережах і ЗМІ.

Ключові слова: Telegram, месенджер, Telegram-канали, соціальні мережі, мас-медійний чинник у політичному процесі, фейкові новини.