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Shaping Western Perceptions: The Role of English-language Verified Telegram Channels in Framing the Narratives around the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract

In this study, we examine Telegram's role as an information source on the Russia-Ukraine war, focusing broadly on how discussions on the platform may influence public opinion in the West. Specifically, we aimed to identify and study information-sharing practices of English-language verified Telegram channels, given their presumed audience in the West and their disproportionate impact on information-seeking and news consumption related to the war. Using a snowball sample of 21,907 Telegram channels, we identified 55 English-language verified channels linked to war-related content. Using a semi-automated topic analysis, we examined 125,840 public posts from these channels, all posted within the first year of the 2022 Russian invasion. While few channels exclusively focused on the war, our analysis found that far-right channels often echoed Kremlin-aligned narratives, aiming to discredit Western institutions and diminish support for Ukraine. We caution against relying on Telegram as a credible news source about the war, particularly for English-speaking users, due to the prevalence of low credibility and partisan content.

Keywords: Telegram, Ukraine-Russia War, Information Operation, Disinformation, Far-Right, Partnership, US Politics

Introduction

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, social media has emerged as one of the primary sources of news about the war for people living in the warzone and beyond (Alyukov, 2022; Pierri et al., 2023). This increased reliance on social media for news about the war poses significant challenges for policymakers and the public. Due to limited access to up-to-date information from credible mainstream media (Erlich & Garner, 2023), anonymous accounts, military bloggers, and pundits have filled this vacuum by sharing and discussing unvetted claims (Glassman & Kang, 2012).

In this study, we examine Telegram's role as an information source about the Russia-Ukraine war. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Telegram quickly became one of the primary platforms for near real-time updates from both the frontline and the rear of the conflict (DFRLab, 2024; Dutsyk et al., 2023). However, it also emerged as a hub for misleading, questionable, and outright false content (Hoskins & Shchelin, 2023; Ptaszek et al., 2023), highlighting the need for greater scholarly attention on who is sharing information about the war in Ukraine on Telegram and what they are sharing.

This paper examines and analyzes content shared by English-language Telegram channels that discuss topics related to the Russia-Ukraine war. We anticipate that these channels primarily target audiences outside Ukraine and Russia, aiming to shape Western public perception of the conflict, an aspect that remains underexplored. In particular, within the English-language channels, we focus on content shared by 'verified' channels as these are likely perceived as more trustworthy by users and may disproportionately influence information-seeking and news consumption about the war. For context, Telegram verifies a channel or group that has notable verified accounts on at least two other major social media platforms and if it is mentioned by at least two news articles from reputable publications (published in English) (*Page Verification Guidelines*, n.d.).

Both Russia and Ukraine operate official Telegram accounts, including English-language channels, likely to reach Western audiences (Kalogeropoulos & Rossini, 2023; Pamment, 2023). However, recent studies suggest that ordinary users may be unaware of how non-state channels on Telegram can operate as a conduit for the Kremlin's messages by sharing posts from and mentioning Russian state-affiliated channels to expand content reach (Buehling & Heft, 2023; Loucaides, 2023; Recuero et al., 2020;

Schulze et al., 2022).

At the core of this research is the analysis of narratives and counternarratives. While many studies examined how parties to conflicts compete for control of narratives in various other online platforms such as X (Alieva, Moffitt, et al., 2022; Mendelsohn et al., 2024; Weinberg et al., 2023), there are far fewer studies that have examined how politically motivated narratives and counternarratives are formed on Telegram (Weinberg et al., 2023). At their base, actors and events are building blocks of narratives. All parties in a conflict try to frame the narrative and position the discourse on their terms, portraying the victim and aggressor accordingly (Lewandowsky et al., 2013). The Russian government invests substantial resources in spreading pro-Kremlin narratives (Alyukov, 2022). Consequently, a large segment of the public in Western countries such as Canada has been exposed to these narratives on social media (Gruzd et al., 2023, 2024). Narratives questioning aid to Ukraine, for example, aim to sway public opinions and affect foreign policy in the West (Maschmeyer et al., 2023), thereby turning the discussion about providing aid to Ukraine into an increasingly polarizing topic (Smeltz & Baz, 2023). Meanwhile, the Ukrainian government has explored ways to use Telegram to provide counternarratives (Chen & Ferrara, 2023), and position the discourse in their favor (Ptaszek et al., 2023). What topics are discussed on social media helps to set the public agenda and vie for attention from stakeholders like Western audiences (Park et al., 2022).

To guide our research, we pose two interrelated questions. First, which English-language verified Telegram channels are involved in discussions about the Russia-Ukraine war (RQ1)? Second, what topics do these channels discuss (RQ2)? Understanding which channels are active in these discussions and what they share is crucial for mapping the information ecosystem surrounding the war, which, in turn, will help us understand the potential influence of the Kremlin's narratives on how information, opinions, and perspectives on the war are shaped and disseminated across English-language verified sources on Telegram.

Literature Review

Our study builds on two research areas: computational studies examining discourse shared on Telegram and the use of social media for propaganda and information operations (IOs). We briefly discuss each below.

Research on Telegram

As one of the top five messaging apps globally (Statista, 2024),

Telegram hosts numerous groups and channels that attract millions of users from all walks of life, including governments, politicians, activists, pundits, news organizations, spies and propagandists. However, the platform's lack of a formal mechanism for reporting illegal content has also attracted various illicit groups and activities to the platform. These include the use of Telegram to share terrorist and extremist content (Prucha, 2016), promote far-right conspiracy theories (Schulze et al., 2022), distribute non-consensual intimate images (Franco et al., 2024), and support white supremacist ideologies (Zhong et al., 2024). As a result, in recent years, Telegram has come under increased government scrutiny for its content moderation practices (Jamali, 2024).

Telegram's affordances support several forms of communication among its users. Channels support few-to-many communication in which the channel creator and administrators broadcast posts to subscribers (Buehling & Heft, 2023). Administrators control the visibility of their channel's content (Buehling & Heft, 2023), and have exclusive access to the list of subscribers (Kuznetsova, 2023). Content is not amplified by recommender algorithms or interrupted by advertisements, unlike other popular social media platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok (Borak, 2023). Subscribers cannot comment on posts or interact with others unless enabled by the channel administrators (Kuznetsova, 2023). In addition, Telegram supports one-to-one and many-to-many communication. Public or private, Telegram groups allow members to post and exchange messages (Hoseini et al., 2023).

Researchers have applied several computational methods to study users, discourse, and communication practices on Telegram. Kiddle et al. (2024) conducted a social network analysis to study how toxicity spreads across Telegram. The researchers uncovered that toxicity was especially prevalent in channels and groups that held "non-mainstream" views, including alternative news outlets, far-right groups, and conspiracy-themed groups. In another study, Boussalis et al. (2024) examined the prevalence of collective victimhood narratives on far-right Telegram channels, particularly in response to major news events like the George Floyd protests and the storming of the U.S. Capitol. According to researchers, feelings of collective victimhood are often associated with outgroup hostility. Using a machine learning approach to analyze posts from 1,870 far-right channels, the researchers found that both events significantly increased the frequency of these narratives, offering insights into the process of radicalization online. Bailard et al. (2024) investigated the link between Proud Boys' online communications on Telegram and their offline activities. Using machine learning, the researchers analyzed Telegram messages and event data spanning nearly three

years. They found that online grievances expressed on Telegram correlated with offline violence.

While we found several studies focusing on the use of Telegram by far-right groups (Kakavand, 2024; Rothut et al., 2024), few studies focused on using Telegram to share and discuss war-related content. One recent study that examined the use of Telegram in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war was by Ghasiya and Sasahara (2023). The researchers used topic modeling and sentiment analysis to analyze around 37,000 posts from two Ukrainian channels (UkraineNow and V_Zelenskiy_official) and one Russian channel (rt_russian). Their study found contrasting communication strategies when covering the war. Ukrainian channels focused on delivering war-related updates and rallying support, while the RT channel promoted pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation.

Smith and Dean (2023) and Vu et al. (2024) analyzed the volunteer-based "IT Army of Ukraine" channel on Telegram that mobilized and coordinated cyberattacks against Russian targets. The unique aspect of this case is that the movement seemingly consisted of civilians and operated independently of direct military involvement, thereby redefining the nature of modern warfare.

In another study using Telegram data, Khairova et al. (2024) examined prevalent issues affecting displaced Ukrainians who fled the war. Using topic modeling, the authors analyzed over 1.8M posts shared between February 2022 and September 2023 across 103 Telegram channels. Their analysis revealed 12 common challenges faced by Ukrainian migrants in Europe. The top five concerns included housing, passport and visa, refugee status, relocation and travel, and communication-related issues.

Our work builds on prior studies by analyzing a larger sample to capture a broader range of topics and Telegram entities involved in information sharing about the Russia-Ukraine war.

Research on the Kremlin's Information Operations

Since we are dealing with posts and content related to the Russia-Ukraine war, we expect to see the presence of pro-Kremlin narratives and counternarratives in our dataset. For this, we turned to the literature on IOs. IOs refer to the coordinated communicative activities by state or non-state actors to circulate problematic content intended to influence the target audience's perception of domestic or foreign politics and, ultimately, public opinions, which often entails disinformation (Alizadeh et al., 2020; Weinberg et al., 2023). Governments have been experimenting with various IOs, often part of hybrid warfare strategies, to influence public opinion (Gruzd &

Tsyganova, 2015; S. T. Smith et al., 2021). For example, Russia has launched multiple IOs to undermine the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government, culminating in the separatist movements in Donbas and Luhansk and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Alyukov, 2022; Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018). The two most prominent Kremlin IO actors are Russia Today (RT), a state-controlled media organization, and the Internet Research Agency, a state-sponsored 'troll farm' (Elswah & Howard, 2020; Glazunova et al., 2022; Vesselkov et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, have a long history of promoting disinformation to undermine democracies all over the world and distract international communities (Erlich & Garner, 2023; Vesselkov et al., 2020). The Kremlin uses Telegram to reach broad audiences and influence information spaces in Russia and abroad (Farbman, 2023; Kuznetsova, 2023). While attributing Telegram posts to the Kremlin's IOs is beyond the purview of the current work, we investigate the extent to which narratives in our dataset may serve the Kremlin's IOs by targeting Ukraine and its Western allies.

Method

Research Procedures

This section outlines the primary steps of our mixed-method approach, which includes data collection through snowball sampling, followed by social network and topic analysis.

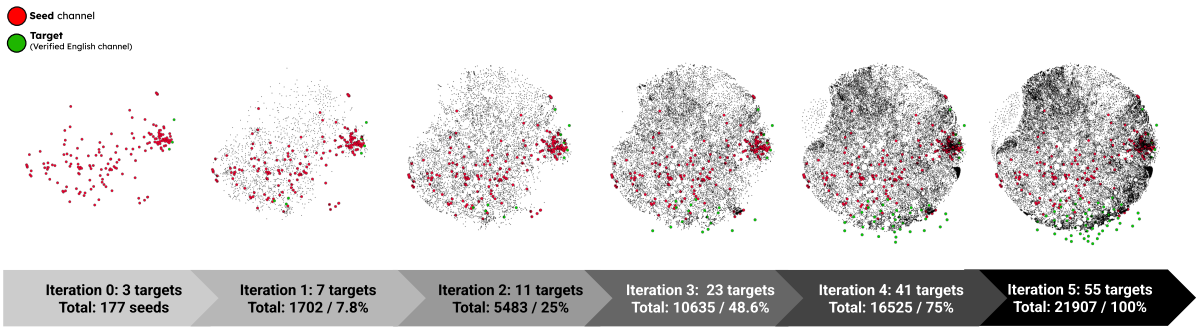
Snowball Sampling to Discover English-language Verified Telegram Channels

To discover English-language 'verified' Telegram channels that discussed the Russia-Ukraine war or were referenced by other channels or groups, we relied on snowball sampling, a non-probability approach to find new members of the population based on known members (Kuznetsova, 2023; Wich et al., 2022). This approach not only mimics how users discover new content on Telegram (Buehling, 2023), but also enabled us to identify the most influential Telegram channels and groups related to our topic, as these entities are frequently referenced and their posts are reshared.

Figure 1 outlines the main steps and progression of our sampling. The red dots are the seed accounts. The green dots are the target accounts—English-language verified channels (referred to as 'target accounts'). The black dots are other channels and groups discovered through this process. With each iteration, we found more target accounts: going from 3 English-language verified channels identified during the seed-building process (Iteration 0) to 55 target accounts at the fifth iteration. Most of the 55 target accounts (channels) were

discovered between Iterations 3 and 5, supporting our choice of using snowball sampling. The iterations are detailed below.

Figure 1: Snowball Sampling of Telegram Channels and Groups



Iteration 0: We created a list of seed accounts that frequently discussed the Russia-Ukraine war. To avoid a homogenous sample and ensure diverse representation, we included both pro-Russian[1] and pro-Ukrainian channels in our seed list. To build the seed list for the snowball sampling, we used the following strategies: 1) manually searching on Telegram for channels and groups based on the keyword “Ukraine” (spelled in English, Ukrainian, and Russian); 2) reviewing and adding major media outlets and popular Telegram channels in Russia and Ukraine listed on TGStat - an online directory of popular Telegram channels (TGStat, n.d.); 3) adding entities flagged by the Security Service of Ukraine as fake pro-Ukrainian entities that spread the Kremlin’s propaganda (SSU, n.d.). We located 177 relevant channels and groups at the end of this process.

Iteration 1-5: Next, we iteratively searched Telegram for additional target accounts (i.e., channels and groups) connected to the seeds via links or reposts. Specifically, we used a custom Python script and the Telegram API to collect public posts shared by the 177 seeds between February 24, 2022 (the onset of the Russian invasion) and July 26, 2023 (the data collection date). We used these posts to locate additional entities (in any language) that either linked to one of the seed accounts or were reposted by one of the seed accounts. Any new accounts found through this process were added to the list. We repeated the process several times to mitigate a potential bias in snowball sampling, where entities from the seed list can disproportionately influence the discovery of subsequent channels and groups (Urman & Katz, 2022). We stopped sampling after five iterations because we reached data saturation (i.e., the rate of discovering new target accounts had slowed) and to avoid diluting

[1] We use the term “pro-Russian” to refer to a broad range of Telegram channels and groups in our sample that support Russian objectives, including the goals of the “Special Military Operation”. We use “pro-Kremlin” when discussing narratives to emphasize their alignment with the official policies and messaging of the current Russian government.

the sample with channels and groups that were only marginally related to discussions about the Russia-Ukraine war. In the end, we discovered a total of 21,907 channels and groups.

Out of the 21,907 Telegram accounts discussing the war in Ukraine, 1,838 (8%) entities primarily posted in English and presumably targeted Western audiences. The English-language channels and groups were identified by analyzing 200 recent posts per account using a language detection Python library called langdetect[2]. Of 1,838 English-language Telegram entities in our snowball dataset, only 55 had Telegram's 'verified' status. All 55 were Telegram channels, not groups. These 55 channels became the focus of our study.

To understand the role of the 55 channels within the larger information ecosystem on Telegram, we reconstructed the information-sharing network using our snowball sample and examined the positioning of these channels within the broader communication network. We also manually reviewed their profiles and publicly available information to determine their professional roles (e.g., government, media, politician) and political leanings. If a channel belonged to a media organization, we used the partisanship and credibility rating provided by the Media Bias/Fact Check (MBFC) project[3] to assess the quality and positioning of their content. If a channel was outside the scope of MBFC, we relied on public information to assess their political leaning.

Collection and Topic Analysis of Posts from English-Language Verified Telegram Channels

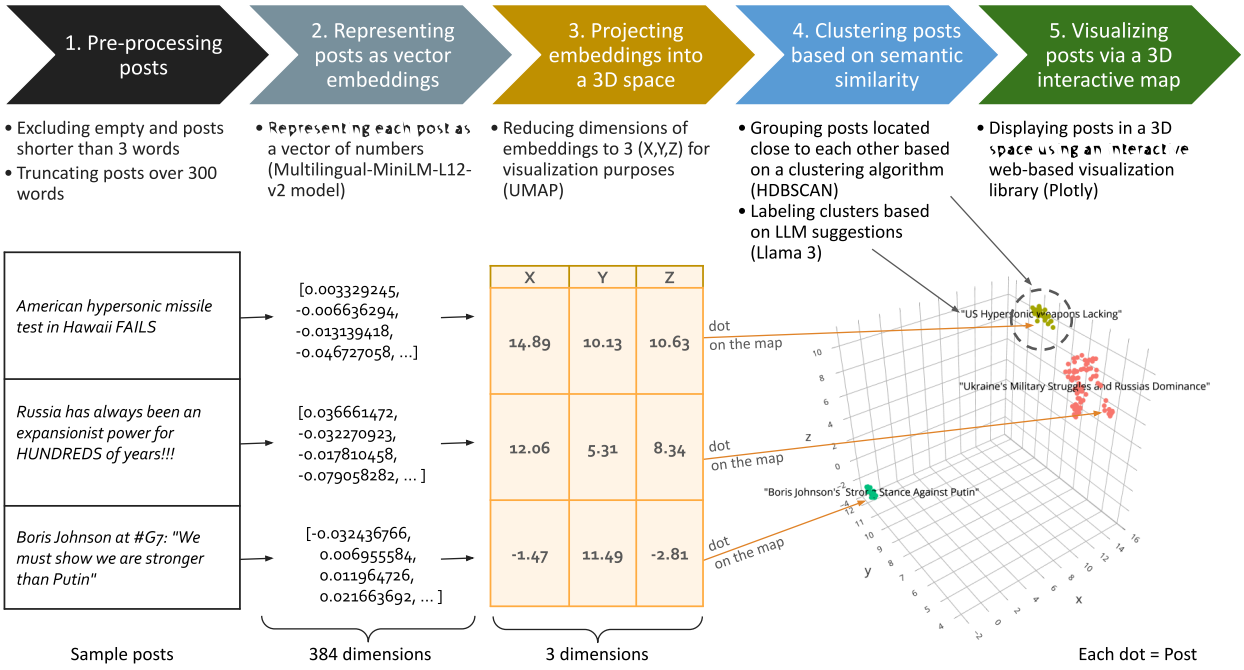
Next, we used a custom Python script and the Telegram Application Programming Interface (API) to collect 125,840 posts shared by the 55 channels during the (nearly) one-year period after Russia invaded Ukraine (February 24, 2022, and February 22, 2023).

To perform the topic analysis, we used Communalytic: a computational social science research tool for studying online communities and discourse (Gruzd & Mai, 2023). Communalytic allowed us to represent and examine the dataset as a high-level 3D map with posts clustered based on semantic similarity[4]. This helped us examine clusters of related posts visually. Each cluster represents a unique topic discussed by one or more Telegram channels in our dataset. Using the resulting interactive visualization, we labeled each cluster based on its underlying posts. The process is outlined in

2 126 accounts for which the library could not determine a language were reviewed manually.
3 https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/
4 We initially used traditional topic modeling techniques like LDA (Dahal et al., 2019; Surian et al., 2016). However, LDA often produces abstract, overlapping topics with no clear link to specific posts, making them difficult to interpret (Su et al., 2024).

Figure 2 and described below.

Figure 2: The Process of Visualizing Posts in a 3D Semantic Space



First, as part of data cleaning, Communalytic automatically excluded 38 posts because they were too short (fewer than three words) to capture semantic meaning. The tool also truncated longer posts to 300 words to accommodate the input size limitation of the embedding model and to improve semantic representation, as longer posts often stray off-topic.

Second, following a method similar to Müller-Hansen et al. (2023), Communalytic represented each post as a high-dimensional vector of numerical values (i.e., embeddings). To create embeddings, we used Multilingual-MiniLM-L12-v2, a multilingual sentence-transformers model (Hugging Face, n.d.; Reimers & Gurevych, 2019). Using embeddings helps to capture the meaning and context of posts. Embeddings have been used to detect Sinophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic on 4chan and Twitter (Tahmasbi et al., 2021); identify bots and partisan content on Twitter (Heidari et al., 2020); and analyze hyper-partisan news sharing (Naredla & Adedoyin, 2022).

Third, given the high dimensionality of the embeddings, Communalytic applied the Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection (UMAP) algorithm to reduce the vectors to a 3D space for visualization. UMAP is a popular dimensionality reduction technique that has been shown to capture both local and global structures in multidimensional data (McInnes et al., 2020).

The fourth step was to identify and group semantically similar posts. Among several clustering options available in Communalytic, we selected a clustering algorithm called Hierarchical Density-Based Spatial Clustering of Applications with Noise (HDBSCAN). HDBSCAN is known for its robustness in handling datasets with varying densities and shapes (McInnes et al., 2017; Tran et al., 2021). Since HDBSCAN is a hierarchical algorithm, it identifies clusters at varying levels of granularity. To fine-tune the clustering output, we iteratively adjusted the epsilon parameter, which controls the distance threshold for merging clusters. Initially, we set epsilon to 0.05 and gradually increased it to achieve an 'optimal' cluster count (e.g., optimal in terms of the number of clusters and their sizes relative to the dataset size). For example, setting epsilon to 0.2 or lower produced over 50 clusters with very granular topics. To avoid overly granular clusters while capturing key trends, we settled on an epsilon of 0.25, resulting in 25 clusters. We also set the minimum cluster size parameter, which determines the smallest allowed size, to 100, as clusters with fewer than 100 posts would be too granular for our dataset with over 125k posts. Based on the specified parameters, HDBSCAN automatically excluded 2,725 'outlier' posts as they did not fit within any resulting 25 clusters.

The final step in our semi-automated approach to topic analysis was to review and label clusters containing at least 1% of posts (relative to the full dataset). This threshold was chosen empirically, as clusters with fewer posts would likely represent niche topics that may not capture the dominant themes in our dataset. The decision to exclude clusters comprising less than 1% of the dataset was also motivated by the study's objective to identify persistent narratives that garnered significant attention during the study period.

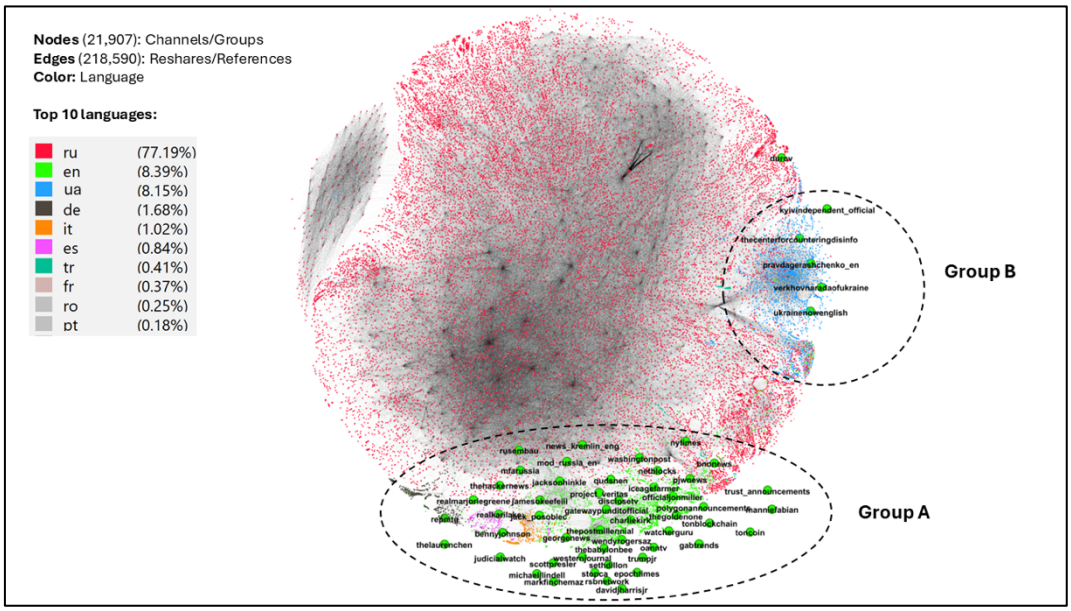
To help us annotate each cluster, we used one of the large language models (LLMs) available in Communalytic to suggest a descriptive label based on a random sample of 10% or 100 posts per cluster, whichever is smaller. We chose Meta's multilingual model - Llama 3 (Dubey et al., 2024). To validate and refine the automatically assigned labels, the research team collaboratively reviewed 100 sample posts within each cluster to reach a consensus on the labels. We paid particular attention to identifying 1) narratives typically aligned with the Kremlin's IO, such as amplifying divisive issues, exaggerating domestic crises, and using "whataboutism" to divert attention from Ukraine, and 2) partisan content through the language's framing and political bias.

Results

RQ1: Which English-language verified Telegram channels are involved in discussions about the Russia-Ukraine war?

Figure 3 visually represents the entire network of Telegram entities in our snowball sample of 21,907 channels and groups. Each node in the network represents a Telegram channel or group. 218,590 links in the network indicate when a channel or group referenced or reposted another at least ten times. Node colors are assigned to represent the primary language in which a channel or group operates (the legend in Figure 3 lists the top 10 languages). Most accounts (77%) posted messages in Russian, depicted in red, followed by 8% of accounts in English (green) and 8% - in Ukrainian (blue). While the full network will be the subject of a future study, we used it here to identify and examine the 55 channels—displayed in the network

Figure 3: A Network Visualization of the Telegram Channels and Groups (55 English-language Verified Channels are Labeled and Displayed as Large Nodes)



as large 'green' nodes with their respective account names—that post in English and have the 'verified' status on Telegram.

The peripheral position of the 55 channels within the network indicates their low influence on other channels. This finding is not surprising, given that Russian is the predominant language of this network. However, what is worth noticing is that most of the English-language verified accounts (49), marked as Group A and appearing at the bottom of the network, are interconnected and linked directly or via 'bridging' accounts to Russian accounts (as opposed to the Ukrainian ones). This includes connections to the Kremlin's official channels posting in English, such as the Russian Ministry of Defense (mod_russia_en), the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

(mfarussia), the Russian Embassy in Australia (rusembau), and a channel that reposts updates from the Kremlin's official website translated in English (news_kremlin_eng). The proximity to the Russian accounts suggests that these channels are either resharing or referencing Russian accounts, or are being referenced by them, even if not directly.

Only five (out of 55) are Ukrainian or pro-Ukraine channels that post in English and have verified status. This, for example, includes the Ukrainian parliament channel (verkhovnaradaofukraine). They are located in the middle-right part of the network, marked as Group B. As indicated by their connections to the blue color nodes (channels posting in Ukrainian), four of these five channels are frequently referenced by other Ukrainian and pro-Ukraine accounts. However, kyivindependent_official, a Ukrainian news organization posting in English, appears isolated in the network, suggesting its low impact on the information environment on Telegram.

Another verified account posting in English worth noting is the account of Telegram's CEO, Pavel Durov (durov). His channel is neither in Group A nor B. While he does not directly post about the Russia-Ukraine war, he has been referenced by others in the context of platform-related news by a news aggregator account. To learn more about the 55 channels in the sample, we manually reviewed and categorized them based on their profiles, public information, and the MBFC rating when available, and summarized the review results in Table 1.

Table 1: Manual Categorization of 55 English-language Verified Channels by Professional Roles and Political Leanings

Channel Category	**Count**	**Political Bias/Leaning** (# channels)	**MBFC Credibility Rating** (# channels)
media personality, political commentator, activist	14	Right** (14)	N/A
alternative/partisan media	11	Extreme/Far Right* (3) Right* (4) / Right** (1) Right-Satire* (1) Left-Center* (1) Least biased* (1)	Low* (7) Medium* (1) High* (1) N/A* (2)
government/state-affiliated	8	N/A	N/A
blockchain/cryptocurrency/ cybersecurity news	7	N/A	N/A
politician/elected official	5	Right** (5)	N/A
mainstream media	4	Left-Center* (4)	High* (4)
social media platform	3	Right** (1 – Gab Social) N/A (2)	N/A
advocacy/activist group	3	Right** (2) N/A (1)	N/A

Note: N/A is used when a category is not applicable, or there is insufficient information.
*As per MBFC (Political Bias: from 'Extreme Left' to 'Extreme Right'; Credibility Rating: 'Low', Medium', 'High'; More details at https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/methodology)
** As per the manual assessment by the authors; 'Left' was used to describe channels and individuals expressing liberal or left-wing views, while 'Right' was aligned with conservative or right-wing views.

Based on the review, most channels were associated with individuals or groups expressing partisan views. Many were from the United States and held far-right or right-leaning political views, as discussed below.

The largest category comprises 14 channels run by media personalities, political commentators, and activists with large followings. Four prominent examples are Jack Posobiec, a pro-Trump political activist who promoted the debunked Pizzagate conspiracy theory (Dwoskin, 2022; Valania, 2017); Donald Trump Jr., President Trump's son, and a businessman turned influencer; Paul Joseph Watson, a British political commentator who has contributed to the far-right conspiracy website InfoWars (BBC, 2017; Munger & Phillips, 2022); and Mike Lindell, the pro-Trump My Pillow CEO who spread misinformation about the 2020 U.S. election (BBC 2025). In addition to these 14 channels, five channels represent pro-Trump conservative politicians or elected officials in the U.S., such as Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican Congresswoman who promoted QAnon conspiracy theories (Kaczynski, 2021).

The second largest category consists of 11 alternative or partisan media channels. Eight out of 11 are rated as 'right' biased, including seven 'low' credibility channels. Examples include The Gateway Pundit, a far-right U.S. website known for publishing false claims and conspiracy theories (Chen et al., 2022); The Post Millennial, a conservative Canadian online news magazine (Yates & Rogers, 2019); and The Epoch Times, a conservative U.S. news media outlet run by the Falun Gong religious group and known for its critical stance against the Chinese Communist Party (Zadrozny, 2023). By contrast, there were only four mainstream media channels among the 55 English-language Verified Channels that posted about the Russia-Ukraine War: The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Kyiv Independent (an English-language Ukrainian online newspaper), and Mannie Fabian (an Israeli military correspondent from The Times of Israel). All four have 'high' credibility ratings and are classified as 'left-center.'

The third largest category has eight government-affiliated channels (four Russian and four Ukrainian). The Russian and Ukrainian governments appeared to understand the importance of broadcasting to the English language audience on Telegram. Some of these channels were linked to specific government ministries, such as the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. Others were media or fact-checking projects sponsored by the state, such as the Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation.

The breakdown of the remaining categories is as follows. Seven channels shared news about blockchains, cryptocurrencies, and

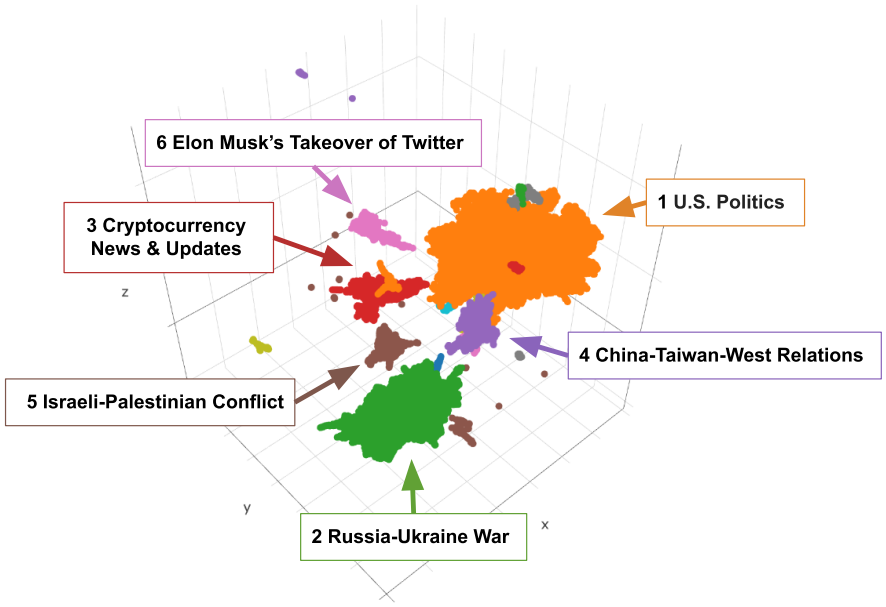
cybersecurity. Three channels were associated with social media platforms (two with Telegram, and one with Gab Social). The last category included three channels, which we broadly categorized as advocacy and activist groups (two U.S. conservative groups, Project Veritas, and Judicial Watch, and a channel discussing the challenges of the food supply chain in part due to the war in Ukraine).

Now that we have a clearer understanding of these 55 channels and their role within the broader information and communication network on Telegram, the following section proceeds with the semi-automated topic analysis of their posts.

RQ2: What topics do these channels discuss?

Figure 4 shows a 3D visualization produced by Communalytic representing 125,840 posts shared by the 55 English-language verified channels during the studied period. In this visualization, each dot represents a post. Semantically similar posts (dots) are displayed next to each other and have the same color based on clustering. As

Figure 4: 3D Semantic Similarity Map of 125,840 Telegram Posts From 55 English-Language Verified Channels



noted in the Methods, we used this visualization for exploratory analysis and to identify key topics discussed in the dataset.

Table 2 lists the largest six clusters of semantically similar posts. The remaining clusters contained less than 1% of posts from the dataset and were excluded from the subsequent analysis. Surprisingly, only 21% of posts directly discussed the Russia-Ukraine war. Most of the content focused on U.S. politics and other geo-political issues. We discuss each of the top clusters in more detail below.

Table 2: Top 6 Clusters

Cluster #	Cluster Label (Theme)	# of posts (%)	Sample Posts
1	U.S. Politics	77,136 (61%)	• *"NEW - U.S. Department of State has been funding a "disinformation" tracking group to blacklist conservative media. [URL]"* • *"Priorities: Joe Biden Flies to Rzeszow Near Ukrainian Border - But Refuses to Visit Open US Southern Border with Mexico as a QUARTER OF A MILLION Illegals Storm Across Border This Month [URL]"*
2	Russia-Ukraine War	25,900 (21%)	• *"Briefing by Russian Defense Ministry ■ The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation continue the special military operation in Ukraine. […]"* • *"German Foreign Minister Says Support For Ukraine Will Continue "No Matter What Voters Think" [URL]"*
3	Cryptocurrency News and Updates	5,096 (4%)	• *"Bahamas Says It's Keeping $3.5 Billion of FTX Assets - FTX Says Bahamas is Holding Only $296 Million [URL]"* • *"JUST IN: Ethereum cofounder Vitalik Buterin has been supporting a DAO that has raised $8 million for Ukraine."*
4	China-Taiwan-West Relations	4,421 (3.5%)	• *"China Now Owns Large Section of Land Near Pearl Harbor - Another Effort to Disrupt US Response to China Offensive? [URL]"* • *"CHINA THREATENS: Foreign Ministry Says Taiwan Is "Not Ukraine" - Has Always Been Part of China [URL]"*
5	Israeli-Palestinian Conflict	3,322 (2.6%)	• *"Israeli military suggests Al Jazeera journalist may have been killed by Palestinian gunmen, offers joint investigation"* • *"BREAKING: At least 10 people shot near synagogue in Jerusalem"*
6	Elon Musk's Takeover of Twitter	2,464 (2%)	• *"Twitter Shareholders Approve $44 Billion Musk Buyout [URL]"* • *"Delaware Judge Sides with Twitter and Fast-Tracks Trial with Elon Musk to October"*

Cluster 1: U.S. Politics. This cluster primarily focused on societal fault lines in the U.S. Most posts adopted anti-Biden and pro-Trump messaging from right-wing media outlets such as The Epoch Times, The Gateway Pundit, The Western Journal, and The Post Millennia. Discussions often revolved around allegations of election-related fraud in the 2022 U.S. midterm elections and misinformation regarding Hunter Biden's business dealings with foreign countries like Ukraine.

In addition, some posts within the cluster addressed border issues, criticizing the Biden administration's handling of "illegal crossings." This criticism sometimes extended to comparisons between the U.S.-Mexico border and the Ukraine-Russia border, with arguments that the U.S. government was prioritizing aid to Ukraine at the expense of securing its own border.

Another significant topic in Cluster 1 was gun violence in the U.S.

Here, a prevalent narrative accused the left of attempting to "defund the police" while ignoring violence attributed to left-wing groups such as Antifa.

The cluster also touched on the abortion debate, mainly reflecting a pro-life stance and targeting pro-choice views, especially in light of recent Supreme Court rulings that overturned Roe v. Wade. Furthermore, discussions included transphobic and anti-LGBTQ sentiments, criticizing schools for being perceived as "woke" and allegedly indoctrinating children with LGBTQ content. This included calls for bans on transgender athletes in women's sports.

Cluster 2: Russia-Ukraine War. This cluster covers various aspects of the Russia-Ukraine war. Many posts in this category were military briefings about the battlefront dynamics from the Russian Ministry of Defense. A significant portion of the posts also revolves around missile and artillery strikes, focusing on Russian attacks and shelling of Ukraine. Ukrainian channels frequently posted about the human cost of the war, reporting on civilian losses and damage to infrastructure in Ukraine. In contrast, Russian sources often make claims about Ukraine allegedly mistreating civilians.

This cluster also featured discussions related to nuclear threats, including concerns about the safety of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and the potential use of nuclear weapons by the Kremlin. For example, some narratives caution the West against providing military support to Ukraine, suggesting that it would escalate the situation.

Finally, some posts in the cluster touched on the war's economic impacts. Related narratives blame the war in Ukraine and sanctions on Russia for exacerbating inflation in the West.

Cluster 3: Cryptocurrency News and Updates. Most posts in this cluster shared financial news, market updates, or promotional content about cryptocurrencies and non-fungible tokens (NFTs). Watcher Guru, a finance news channel, contributes almost 40% of the posts. A few posts discuss the prospect of cryptocurrencies for sanction evasion. We also observed limited fundraising and donation activities for Ukraine using cryptocurrencies.

Cluster 4: China-Taiwan-West Relations. The cluster focused on geo-political tensions between China, Taiwan, and the West, exploring one potential consequence of the Russia-Ukraine war: a possible conflict between China and the U.S. over Taiwan. Key narratives highlight China's information operations and espionage campaigns against the West while criticizing Biden for his perceived weak response.

Cluster 5: Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Even though we collected the dataset before Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, channels like Quds News Network (a Palestinian news outlet) and one by Mannie Fabian (a military correspondent for The Times of Israel) were actively discussing the Israel-Palestine conflict and sharing news from the Middle East. Some posts in the cluster engaged in "whataboutism" by accusing the West of a double standard when supporting Israel. Some posts sympathize with Ukraine but demand equal attention to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Cluster 6: Elon Musk's Takeover of Twitter. Posts in this cluster focus on news about Elon Musk, particularly his plans and legal actions related to his acquisition of Twitter. Additionally, there is a narrative suggesting that mainstream social media platforms censor conservative voices and restrict users' freedom of speech. Although this topic is outside the geopolitical discussions found in the other clusters, it likely reflects the interests of far-right Telegram users, who were at times disenfranchised or de-platformed from mainstream social media platforms like Twitter before its takeover by Musk. As a result, posts in this cluster often framed Musk's takeover of Twitter as a positive development.

Discussion

Regarding RQ1, the notable presence of news outlets (both mainstream and alternative media), journalists, and media personalities among the 55 channels underscores Telegram's growing role as a platform for delivering news on various topics. However, this increasing reliance on Telegram for news introduces certain challenges. Our data shows that most channels in the sample were managed by individuals or groups with right-leaning or far-right political views, and some were connected to Russian or pro-Russian accounts.

This raises concerns that some channels may share partisan content or narratives aligned with pro-Kremlin perspectives. Notably, as was recently disclosed, right-wing influencers Lauren Chen and Benny Johnson, whose Telegram channels appeared in our sample, were associated with a media company alleged by the U.S. Department of Justice to have been financed and operated under the direction of RT (Marchman, 2024). To circumvent bans on official channels, the Kremlin often relies on non-state channels operated by influencers to amplify their narratives inside and outside Russia (Ptaszek et al., 2023; Rogers, 2020).

Eight of the 55 English-language verified Telegram channels were officially affiliated with either the Russian or Ukrainian governments. Russia has a documented history of using social media as part of its

broader information operations, especially in Ukraine (Gruzd & Tsyganova, 2015). Russian state-affiliated accounts began posting in English on platforms like Twitter as early as 2014, aiming to influence narratives and information dissemination surrounding key events such as the Revolution of Dignity (Gruzd et al., 2017). Aware of social media's reach among Western audiences and politicians, Ukrainian accounts associated with media, government and activist groups have similarly increased their social media outreach. However, our data suggest that the reach of verified Ukrainian and pro-Ukraine channels posting in English has been limited. Future research should explore the impact of other English-language accounts that are not necessarily verified but actively posting about the war in Ukraine. Examples include the account for the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Canada, the 'Donbass Devushka' account—a pro-Russian account affiliated with a US-based moderator (Millward, 2023), and bilingual accounts such as the official channel of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

In addition to the government-affiliated, media and partisan channels, we identified several channels dedicated to cryptocurrency and blockchain technologies. Their presence may reflect the growing use of cryptocurrencies in the context of sanction evasion and fundraising efforts (Greenberg, 2022; Willaert, 2023). Future research should examine the effectiveness of using platforms like Telegram and cryptocurrencies for fundraising by various parties involved in the war.

Regarding RQ2, the analysis revealed that only 21% of content exclusively focused on the Russia-Ukraine war. This finding is consistent with prior research on the use of Telegram during the Russia-Ukraine war (Ghasiya & Sasahara, 2023; Hoskins & Shchelin, 2023). We too found that the war-related content could be broadly categorized into three areas: 1) reports on military actions from both sides, including updates on casualties, concerns about the safety of Ukrainian nuclear power plants, news about damages to different regions in Ukraine, as well as information about evacuation from the war zones; 2) economic discussions covering topics such as sanctions targeting Russia, the global food crisis, the grain deal, and the energy crisis in Europe; and 3) posts soliciting donations for military and humanitarian purposes.

Our findings further indicate that pro-Russian channels often employ narratives similar to those observed since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. These narratives tend to shift responsibility away from Russia and onto its adversaries, aligned with a decade-long portrayal of Russia as being mistreated by the West (Alyukov, 2022; Ptaszek et al., 2023). For example, in discussions about Russia's

potential use of nuclear weapons, pro-Russian channels have attributed escalation to actions by Western countries such as providing military support to Ukraine (Sinovets & Shultz, 2023).

Most of the remaining contents were partisan, focusing on political, economic, and social issues, particularly those within the U.S. This pattern highlights Telegram's function as a tool for mobilizing partisan audiences, particularly on the right. One possible explanation for why Telegram's user base tends to skew right is the platform's relatively permissive content moderation approach (Schulze et al., 2022). This raises concerns that English-speaking audiences on Telegram, seeking credible news about the war in Ukraine would likely be exposed to low-quality content and misinformation, associated with partisan content (Gruzd et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2023; Recuero et al., 2020).

Moreover, consistent with earlier studies (Soares et al., 2023; Stone, 2022), we find that far-right discourse frequently echoes narratives aligned with pro-Kremlin viewpoints. This is observed in the amplification of divisive issues such as immigration and LGBTQ rights (Gruzd et al., 2024; Maschmeyer et al., 2023), and commentaries and news about various "crises" in the West, including gun violence and inflation. Such narratives may serve to divert attention to domestic problems and undermine support for Ukraine (Alieva, Ng, et al., 2022; Carrasco-Farré, 2024; Erlich & Garner, 2023). Many posts that exaggerated crises also promoted polarizing opinions and launched partisan attacks without necessarily offering solutions. Using polarizing political, social, and economic issues is a documented strategy used by Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors (e.g., Erlich & Garner, 2023; Maschmeyer et al., 2023). These findings suggest that rather than considering the Kremlin's narratives as isolated phenomena, a broader range of narratives may be at work, potentially influencing international support for Ukraine.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

Both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian actors have established English-language channels to engage international audiences and shape global narratives. However, our data indicates that Russia may gain a greater strategic advantage from its presence on Telegram than Ukraine.

This advantage is driven by several factors, including the broader reach and higher engagement levels of pro-Russian channels, coupled with Telegram's popularity among far-right users in the West. Given these dynamics, we caution against the uncritical use of Telegram as a news source about the Russia-Ukraine war, particularly among English-speaking users.

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