

Call for Papers

for a special issue of M&K

Telegram in the Political Public Sphere

Guest editors: Gregor Wiedemann, Jan-Hinrik Schmidt, Jan Rau, Felix Münch & Philipp Kessling

With more than 700 million monthly active users, the instant messaging service *Telegram*, founded in Russia in 2013, has become one of the largest social media services worldwide in recent years. It also plays an increasingly important role in Germany, not only in private communication, but also for the political and social discourse. This is due to the special functions that Telegram offers its users. Unlike its messenger competitor WhatsApp, which limits the number of participants in chats to 256, Telegram allows private and public chat groups with up to 200,000 members. In addition, it is possible to create „channels“ without participant limits, in which only channel creators and administrators can post messages. These messages can then be accessed all the way back to the point at which the channel was created. These features indicate that Telegram is no longer only for private communication, but also for public communication. At the same time, the communicative architecture of Telegram differs from that which characterises platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram.

For a long time, these hybrid characteristics led to uncertainty as to whether Telegram was a service for individual communication or a social network within the regulatory scope of the Network Enforcement Act (NEA). It was not until 2021 that the Federal Office of Justice (BfJ) came to the conclusion that Telegram fell under the NEA and consequently, among other things, had to remove content from its platform that was obviously unlawful in Germany. Since then, the BfJ has been confronted with the fact that it has no direct contact with the operating company, because the website telegram.org simply does not have a legal notice. It is known that the development team is mainly located in Dubai. Unlike its competitors such as Meta, the company claims to offer „secure“ communication tools to protect the privacy of its users. However, possibilities to verify these claims according to the European General Data Protection Regulation do not exist. At the same time, the company claims to be resistant to official „censorship“ in that - in contrast to its competitors - it hardly ever moderates or deletes the content of its users, even if it represents obvious discrimination or even criminal offences in individual countries.

All these characteristics seem to have made Telegram an attractive communication venue for actors of the extreme right in the US and Europe. But other communities, which for various reasons prefer a certain „state distance“ in their public communication, also use the instant messaging service. In Germany, Telegram attracted a large number of users at the beginning of the Corona pandemic, from critics of the Corona policy and supporters of conspiracy narratives to openly right-wing extremist actors. Initial research findings also point to an increased relevance of the platform in the organisation of local protest events and mobilisation for them, whose thematic focus since the outgoing Corona pandemic is now directed at the domestic consequences of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (inflation, high energy prices, etc.). In addition, there are indications of strategic networking with other national discourses as well as attempts to

exert influence through targeted disinformation from abroad. Thus, it can be assumed that Telegram contributes significantly to the polarisation of the political public.

Research on the significance and impact of Telegram on the political public sphere is still rather limited. Therefore, M&K calls for contributions for a special issue and invites articles that for example

- Make a methodological contribution to Telegram research and open up the research field for other communication and social scientists,
- Deal with ethical research questions on Telegram as a hybrid entity between private messaging and a public political discussion platform,
- Deal with legal questions of Telegram's platform regulation through DSGVO, NEA, DSA and other relevant norms,
- Gain insights into typical Telegram user groups using tools from research on attitudes,
- examine communication content and networks with regard to the question of polarisation of the political public,
- Take a look at the international interconnections of platform communication,
- Carry out platform-comparative analyses (for instance, on communication on Twitter) as well as comparisons with mass media discourses,
- Make the spread of information across platforms observable,
- Examine the influence of (foreign) disinformation on political discourse,
- Shed light on the connection between Telegram activities and protest events in local communities, or
- Analyse business models of platform operators, advertisers and advertising target groups.

Colleagues who would like to contribute to this issue are asked to send an extended abstract of their manuscript proposal to the editors by **15 December 2022** (max. 6,000 characters including spaces). Based on the abstracts, the editors will prepare a concept and invite the authors to submit a manuscript by the **end of March 2023**. They will decide on the acceptance of the manuscripts according to the usual review process of M&K. The special issue is scheduled to be published in the 4th quarter of 2023.

Address: Editorial Office Media & Communication Studies, Christiane Matzen, c.matzen@leibniz-hbi.de