LEX
LOCALIS

From Facebook to Telegram - The Migration of Radical and Anti-vaccine Groups Across Digital Platforms

AGNIESZKA LIPIŃSKA

Abstract After exposing the impact of Cambridge Analytica on the outcome of the 2016 US election, and due to the growing activity of terrorists and radical groups using this medium, both public and state authorities have begun to put more pressure on social media to control and regulate content disseminated via these platforms. This has made the online activities of groups disseminating controversial content more diverse. Recently, the Telegram instant messaging platform has become the most popular medium used to promote such content.

Keywords: • QAnon • anti-vaccination groups • ISIS • information bubbles • social protests • Facebook • Telegram

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS: Agnieszka Lipińska, Ph.D. student, War Studies University in Warsaw, Faculty of National Security, Aleja Generała Antoniego Chruściela „Montera" 103, 00-910 Warszawa, Poland, e-mail: lipinskaagnieszka065@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-3108-8095.

142   THE ROLE OF CYBERSECURITY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE - THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION
A. Lipińska: From Facebook to Telegram - The Migration of Radical and Anti-vaccine
Groups Across Digital Platforms

The opportunity to establish contacts and to share interests and passions with people from all over the world has been, for many years, considered the advantage of Facebook and other social media, as well as the main reason for their immense popularity. Thematic groups, both professional and private, make it possible to exchange views, to update knowledge and to get to know people we would never meet if we were not internet users. Social groups focusing on passions, parenting, interior design, culture, tourism or the automotive industry constitute platforms for the exchange of ideas and experiences, and they often provide support for people struggling with various problems (which was particularly visible in the initial period of the struggle against COVID-19 when, for example in Poland, due to the lockdown, the number of thematic and self-assistance groups increased, including Kultura w kwarantannie *(Culture in Quarantine)* or Widzialna Ręka *(A visible hand)*, the latter referring by its name to the popular 1980s TV programme Niewidzialna Ręka *(An invisible hand)*, in which help was secretly provided to those in need, usually the elderly). Closed groups are created for people with eating disorders, for adoptive parents and single people. Their users ensure a friendly atmosphere of the discourse by reporting inappropriate posts to the administrators. Such communication and support patterns create a sense of community and often play a therapeutic role.

For several years however, and especially since the Cambridge Analytica scandal in the United States came to light in 2018, the activities of some groups established on Facebook and other social media, as well as the content they publish, have been under strong criticism. The use which Cambridge Analytica made of the knowledge about individuals, their affiliations, political views and value systems resulted in attempts to influence their political choices through personalised and carefully crafted messages. Social engineering applied on such a large scale for the first time resulted in Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election in the USA. At the same time, it made a large part of the population realise that there are some mechanisms behind the choice and the display of content on the "wall", and that being closed and functioning within what is known as information bubbles has some adverse effects. In addition, this was confirmed by the so-called Facebook papers revealed by F. Haugen in October 2021. These were internal Facebook documents (Pierce, Kramer, 2021) showing that the algorithms of the platform are designed to evoke emotions and *de facto* polarise society. Although, in consequence of the feeding frenzy in 2017, the company declared that it would both abandon the meticulous profiling of its users and fight down hate speech and disinformation, its actions in this regard have proven insufficient. The results of the internal audit that Facebook committed to conduct at that time were not announced (in October 2019, the company made a settlement with the UK data protection supervisory body, agreeing to pay in full the £500,000 fine imposed by the ICO in 2018 in connection with the activities of Cambridge Analytica. https://techcrunch.com/2021/01/26/facebooks-secret-settlement-on-cambridge-analytica-gags-uk-data-watchdog/In January 2021, the UK Information Commissioner admitted that her office, under a secret agreement with Facebook, would not provide a parliamentary subcommittee with information on whether

it had actually completed that audit or not. Nor has any report been published to show the real impact of the audit or changes to its privacy policy; instead, lobbying efforts have been intensified).

The disturbing consequence of functioning within an information bubble has been confirmed by studies conducted in many countries, focusing on the spread of disinformation on the internet concerning COVID-19 and the side effects of vaccinations against this disease. Although M. Zuckerberg has officially vowed to fight down disinformation on his social networking platform (as in the case of content disseminated via YouTube), such actions are limited and fail to bring the expected outcomes. Many groups and profiles that have been closed down are re-established under a different name or move some of their banned activities to different communication channels. As reported by NBC News (Collins, Zadrozny, 2021), attempts by US users to deceive Facebook algorithms take increasingly sophisticated forms. Groups (mostly private or hidden) spreading radical or conspiratorial views often use names completely unrelated to their subject matter. After the events in Charlottesville in 2017, with a right-wing radical murdering Muslims, a group for ultra-right-wing users changed its name to "Muslims for Peace". The anti-vaccine community operates in a similar manner, using such names for their groups as "Dance Party" or "Dinner Party". It also uses neutral key words/codes to hide messages from the algorithms that track down disinformation, with Pfizer's vaccination being referred to as "pizza" and Moderna's as "Moana" (Similar coding was previously used, for instance, by Islamic terrorists). This shows that the fight against this type of action fails to bring satisfactory outcomes. In the English-speaking space on the internet (Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook), more than 400 accounts were involved in transmitting and disseminating information to 58 million followers in 2019-2020 (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021). In Poland, according to a study of online activity conducted by A. Mierzyńska in January 2021, the 25 most active accounts and channels for disseminating anti-vaccination information on Facebook and YouTube had 1.66 million followers (Mierzyńska, 2021).

The 6 January 2021 events, and more specifically the attack on the US Capitol, clearly proved the impact power vested in groups that are united by a common mission. The above-mentioned storming of the US Congress shows how powerful it is to function within a certain cognitive paradigm and in a group that follows the same views. Representatives of the QAnon movement, who had previously gathered online, interrupted the session devoted to approving the results of the US election (and, more specifically, Joe Biden's victory), with four people being killed as a result of these protests. QAnon representatives were united by the thesis that only Trump could be the real president of the USA and only he would be able to lead the fight against the secret criminal organisation ruling the USA (supposedly including H. Clinton). However strange it may sound, the movement is very robust and gathers followers of various conspiracy theories, including right-wing extremists and anti-vaccinationists. Its members stigmatise certain journalists and politicians, encouraging their punishment and,

due to its radical attitude, the movement is becoming increasingly popular. Among its followers is Marjorie Taylor Greene from the US House of Representatives. The QAnon movement is also present in Europe, and its supporters have a variety of affiliations, ranging from the extreme right to declared anti-vaccinationists and so-called normal citizens susceptible to conspiracy theories.

The methods used to counteract the groups that create harmful information bubbles and spread disinformation and conspiracy theories have proven ineffective. These communities are capable of re-establishing their activities under new names, or they begin to diversify their content, moving to new communication platforms in order to reduce the risk of being targeted/excluded. The QAnon movement, as well as radical right-wing and anti-vaccination groups, have been present on Facebook and YouTube, to a lesser extent on Twitter, and for a few years also on Telegram.

Given their long-standing on-line presence and know-how about using the internet for propaganda purposes, terrorist groups best reflect these tendencies. According to researchers dealing with this subject matter, while ISIS was mainly present on Facebook between 2015-2017, they had already began to expand their activities to other social media platforms, including Telegram. This was confirmed by a study (Ayad, 2020) of the functional structure of the ISIS propaganda distribution channel on Facebook based on the example of the Fuouaris Upload network. With 90 main accounts, another 288 were affiliated, constituting a group of friends and followers of Arabic language users and, at the same time, running their accounts and distributing material to their separate groups created in local languages, such as Indonesian, Ethiopian, Somali, Bengali and Albanian. M. Ayad referred to these types of structures as expanding networks within networks. At the same time, ISIS had already been moving most of its operations to Telegram for several years, and the peak popularity of this instant messaging platform among ISIS supporters was recorded in 2017-2018.

A similar scenario was observed among groups of right-wing extremists. They had been previously active on Facebook or created their own websites or fora. The most famous entity running its online services for the radical right was the Seattle-based company Epik. It registered domains and hosted far-right and neo-Nazi websites, including those which other providers had refused to serve (it also served the radical group 8chan). It is the group behind Parler (which was intended both to serve as a response from right-wing circles, mainly from the USA, to restrictions imposed by Facebook and to guarantee freedom of expression and the unrestricted exchange of ideas and beliefs, now operating in a limited form), which intensified its fight against right-wing propaganda after the attack on the Capitol in 2021. In October 2021, hackers from the Anonymous group revealed a massive leak of passwords, user data and phone numbers of people using Epik services. Both that leak and the aforementioned actions by Facebook related to the QAnon movement resulted in a large part of such groups and right-wing network users being transferred to Telegram.

At present, due to increasing pressure from the authorities and law enforcement in various countries, major technology companies take measures to fight down hate speech and to detect radical content on the web more efficiently. In addition, instant messaging platforms impose certain restrictions as to the number of group members. Telegram becomes a suitable choice for those wishing to bypass these restrictions. Along with the afore-mentioned ability to diversify information distribution channels, it is currently the least controlled medium. It is a mobile app with a range of mass communication features, as well as encrypted chat and file sharing options. Following the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, Telegram announced that it had gathered more than 500 million active users worldwide. The app is becoming increasingly popular also among American users. According to data from Sensor Tower, a company dealing with app measurements, Telegram downloads in the USA are growing significantly, with the platform becoming particularly attractive to QAnon supporters and right-wing extremists (Khan, 2021). This growth in popularity is also linked to the WhatsApp privacy update (the WhatsApp and Facebook crash of October 2021 resulted in more customers).

Telegram was founded by P. Durov, a Russian computer scientist and creator of the social networking platform VKontakte. A journalistic investigation conducted by Spiegel (Hebel, Hoppenstedt, Rosenbach, 2021) revealed that the owner of this instant messaging platform had created a network of companies registered in Belize and the Virgin Islands, and that it was difficult to get answers to letters about potentially dangerous users from a company registered in Dubai.

Telegram consists of three main components:
1 – channels – both public and private (most of which are one-way transmissions) that can be followed by an unlimited number of people;
2 – groups – public and private, in which up to 200,000 people can communicate (larger groups are faster and more powerful).;
3 – secret chats allowing individual end-to-end encrypted conversations, which makes it impossible for the police and services to discover the content of correspondence. It is also possible to delete messages displayed to all participants in a conversation. In addition, it has the option to enable an automatic deletion timer (to delete messages after a certain period, e.g., after 24 hours or a week) in each selected conversation (this is particularly important for some users as, for instance, the non-deleted records of a conversation between the participants in the 2016 military coup in Turkey made it easier to detect its members).

Contrary to other platforms, the app allows file storage, which makes it a very attractive medium for extremists distributing radical recordings and manifestos through it, and its worldwide popularity gives them the opportunity to attract wide audiences. Telegram provides the ability to share a wide range of files, including photos, audio messages and videos, sized up to 1.5 GB. Although the terms and conditions of using the service

prohibit the popularisation of violence in public channels, they make no mention of doing so via private channels or groups. The rules of content moderation also remain unclear. Recently, there has been evidence of more active content moderation on Messenger – since 2019, in cooperation with Europol, the company has been removing some channels that promote terrorism (e.g., distributing information on the production of home-made bombs). However, it is still possible to find some material containing ISIS propaganda. In addition to disseminating any content via the group which concerns maintaining cyber security and low-profile attacks, it maintains channels propagating a radical Salafist version of Islam.

Right-wing extremist groups, like the American Proud Boys (a neo-fascist group founded in 2016), are also present on the instant messaging platform in question. The nonchalant or libertarian approach previously taken by its owner as regards the presented content also attracted Darknet vendors – Telegram's black market offers hacking services, sales of documents, drugs, etc. A separate user category is made up of pan-Slavic/nationalist groups bringing together Ukrainians from the Azov Battalion and Polish right-wing nationalists containing hate speech and praise for the supremacy of the white race. It also contains some anti-Ukrainian channels glorifying the Slavic Polish-Russian brotherhood (the author of one of these, Horus, in the description of his Twitter account, which abides by stricter restrictions, provides the following information about the content of his channel on Telegram: Due to the faulty system of material verification, I will be posting some/all of the content disputable for the "community" on (...) - *I deliberately do not give the address of the channel*). The European Eastern Resistance Movement, which promotes the activities of the so-called Waffen Division (a dangerous neo-Nazi group broken up in 2018, the reactivation of which was reported at the beginning of 2021), Extinction Rebellion and the Polish Rodacy Kamraci anti-vaccinationists also post their content there.

Channels and chats propagating violence and pornography also appear on the platform – in October 2021, The Male State (Мужское государство) channel, which demeaned, mocked and encouraged the persecution of gay men, feminists and women having relationships with dark-skinned men and men from Caucasus by publishing their addresses, photos and phone numbers, was shut down. Members of the group met to train in hand-to-hand fighting and shooting (Davidovic, 2021).

Following a journalistic investigation conducted in 2021, Telegram also shut down several dozen Korean chatrooms whose users had access to videos of under-age girls being forced into self-harm and sexual acts. These often included girls' names and addresses. On other channels, material obtained illegally from camcorders (Lee, 2021) installed in shops and changing rooms was made available for a fee (at the time of writing this article, a Google search displayed dozens of records for the term "Korean girls Telegram").

Polish anti-vaccinationists (e.g., the Kamraci Rodacy group) form small communities on Telegram, which often overlap with groups active on other social media platforms, and the videos and narratives they share mirror the anti-vaccine messages spread in other countries. Along with the issues connected with treating the coronavirus with alternative medicines, Polish users also post other material on their channels. They distribute videos documenting natural disasters in different countries, police brutality against anti-vaccine demonstrators and appeals about the need to counter oppressive regimes forcing free people to take harmful vaccinations. The content of all the posts and videos, often reproduced in different configurations by numerous small groups, is intended to serve as an illustration of the "besieged fortress" narrative. The presented examples aim at illustrating the world at its end, and this apocalyptic message reinforces the sense of entrapment and uniqueness of users of these groups and channels. Much of the material contains obvious disinformation, usually taken from German-speaking channels, with some content clearly relating to the narrative of the QAnon groups.

While the above examples prove Telegram's usefulness for various groups and non-state actors, this instant messaging platform may also, at some point in the future, make the rules of posting content more stringent. This is likely to happen given the increasing criticism in the global media or lawsuits brought against Google and Apple demanding that the app be removed from their app stores due to violent and extremist content which it is used to disseminate (Dormehl, 2021). However, financial factors may prove decisive. Expected profits among the holders of bonds issued by Mr Durov in March 2021 and a growing number of advertisers may force the owner of the app to place some restrictions on undesirable content.

Due to its wide reach, the platform is also frequently used by activists and protest organisers. In 2019, thousands of people protesting in Hong Kong against the current authorities used more than 100 groups set up on Telegram, with the aim of securing quick mobilisation and avoiding infiltration by the police. These were used to publicise information about the upcoming protests and interventions by law-and-order services, along with videos, photos and instructions for further action. In consequence, in June 2019, the platform "was subjected to a large-scale cyber-attack", as P. Durov announced, alleging that it was China that perpetrated it (Schectman, 2019).

The experience of the Hong Kong protesters was used by extensive groups of demonstrators after the presidential election in Belarus that took place in August 2020. The decision made by the authorities to decrease the speed of the country's internet resulted in an increased use of VPNs (instructions were posted on opposition Telegram channels). Lukashenka's opponents created a network of groups through which they called for protests, passed information about arrests, and published videos and photos. At the initial stage of the protests, they also publicised information from the organisers of the protests in Hong Kong, containing instructions on what to do during the demonstrations and how to use the app. These instructions mainly concerned security

issues, such as maintaining anonymity by hiding phone numbers, not giving nicknames identical to those used previously on other social networks, etc. Among many Telegram channels, Nexta TV became the most popular, enabling the posting of several hundred short films and photos each day in the initial period of the protests. In the first weeks of the demonstrations, Lukashenka officially complained that he could find no way to fight Telegram. As a result, the huge popularity of this medium forced the Belarusian authorities to adopt the communication approach used by the opposition to create their own, alternative narratives. These were, and still are, aimed at invoking fear of the omniscient authorities by publishing information about the regime's opponents and showing how brutally they are treated. For more than a year after the protests began, the Belarusian opposition and Lukashenka's regime groups and channels are active in the Russian-speaking space of the platform.

Many users believe that Telegram abstains not only from seriously interfering with posted content but also from passing on information about individuals or communication keys to any state or entity. The reality, however, seems to be slightly different. The already mentioned closing down of certain channels as a consequence of Europol's intervention is not the only example. In 2019, Hong Kong activists pointed out that the architecture of this instant messaging platform might allow China to obtain the phone numbers of protesters. Following the aforementioned attack on Telegram, the phone number sharing feature was improved (Schectman, 2019). In June 2020, Roskomnadzor, the digital surveillance authority in Russia, which had been blocking the platform since 2018, lifted restrictions regarding the use of the app in the Russian Federation. This decision was officially justified by referring to P. Durov's commitment to cooperate with Russian authorities in the fight against terrorism advertised on the platform. Nevertheless, this fact and the current widespread use of Telegram by the Russian authorities to fight the coronavirus gave rise to some speculation that the platform owner's cooperation with the Russian Federation is not limited to fighting down extremism, but Russia has in fact gained wider access to the platform than it may seem.

References:

Ayad, M. (2020) *The Propaganda Pipeline: The ISIS Fuouaris Upload Network on Facebook* (ISD), available at: https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Propaganda-Pipeline-1.pdf (November 30, 2021).

Chan, S. (2021) *WhatsApp Rivals See Nearly 1,200% Growth Ahead of Privacy Policy Deadline*, available at: https://sensortower.com/blog/whatsapp-signal-telegram-install-growth (November 29, 2021).

Collins, B. & Zadrozny, B. (2021) *Anti-vaccine groups changing into 'dance parties' on Facebook to avoid detection*, available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/anti-vaccine-groups-changing-dance-parties-facebook-avoid-detection-rcna1480 (November 30, 2021).

Center for Countering Digital Hate (2021) *The Anti-Vaxx Industry. How Big Tech powers and profits from anti-vaccine misinformation*, available at: https://www.counterhate.com/anti-vaxx-industry (November 29, 2021).

Davidovic, I. (2021) *Telegram misogyny: 'They wanted to tie me and my child to a horse'*, available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-56801878 (November 27, 2021).

Dormehl, L. (2021) *Coalition for a Safer Web sues Apple for not giving Telegram the boot*, available at: https://www.cultofmac.com/732764/coalition-for-a-safer-web-group-sues-apple-for-not-giving-telegram-the-boot/ (November 30, 2021).

Lee, S. (2020) *South Korea's latest sex crime scandal is a blackmail ring streaming abuse on Telegram,* available at: https://qz.com/1824130/korea-shocked-by-telegram-chat-room-sexual-abuse-scandal (November 28, 2021).

Hebel, C., Hoppenstedt, M. & Rosenbach, M. (2021) *The Telegram Billionaire and His Dark Empire*, available at: https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-telegram-billionaire-and-his-dark-empire-a-f27cb79f-86ae-48de-bdbd-8df604d07cc8 (November 30, 2021).

Mierzyńska, A. (2021) *Są przekonani, że walczą przeciw niewolnictwu i segregacji. Antyszczepionkowcy w Polsce*, available at: https://oko.press/antyszczepionkowcy-w-polsce/ (November 29, 2021).

Pierce, D. & Kramer, A. (2021) *Here are all the Facebook Papers stories,* available at: https://www.protocol.com/facebook-papers (November 30, 2021).

Schectman, J. (2019) *Messaging app Telegram moves to protect identity of Hong Kong protesters*, available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-telegram-exclusive-idUSKCN1VK2NI (November 30, 2021).