

Development Trends of Regional Telegram Channels: Specifics of Audience Engagement

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Abstract—The aim of the article is to study the dynamics of regional Telegram channels development in the period of media system transformation in 2022-2024. The authors argue that the blocking of a number of social networks and the transition of the audience to other digital platforms caused a powerful influx of Telegram messenger audience. A comparative study of the development of 52 regional Telegram channels in Russia and Belarus allowed us to periodize the changes in the regional media space and draw conclusions about the reasons for the changes. Our research shows that many regional Telegram channels are in search of new communication strategies to work with their audiences. It was found that Telegram should serve not only as a one-way information channel, but also as a platform for creating engaging content. We argue that official media often cede leadership to Telegram channels with user-generated content built around publicizing the region's trouble spots. The results confirm that the ongoing changes are quite dynamic and are rapidly reshaping the structure of the media market in the regions.

Keywords—social networks, messengers, Telegram, regional Telegram channels, media platforms, audience.

I. INTRODUCTION

The topic of this research is related to the need to study the increasing role of Telegram messenger and digital communications in the regional media space. The media market of Telegram channels, growing due to the expansion of the number of organizations and individuals wishing to representative their activities in the public space, has increased since 2022. Public channels are a key feature of Telegram. Due to the display of posts in chronological order, the speed of news posting, and the high level of interactivity, they are becoming an alternative to both social networks and traditional media sites.

The blocking and declaring undesirable some social networks that were popular before this period put the Russian audience in front of a choice - to go to new, uncharted social media (TenChat, Yappy, etc.) or to fill more familiar platforms with channels and content. After some transitional period of hesitation, the Russian audience chose the second choice and intensified its presence in Telegram and VKontakte. According to some estimates, Telegram's audience in Russia grew by almost 10 million people over the year: from 52 million in June 2023 to 61 million in June 2024.

In the Republic of Belarus, Telegram has an audience of about 2.5 million people, second to Viber with its 5.5 million users. However, Viber has a different functionality and is more often used for interpersonal communication. Telegram combines the functions of a messenger and a social network. More than 80% of Telegram users read any channels, not just exchange messages. The overwhelming majority of channels with the highest coverage are dedicated to news and politics. This is also evidenced by the growing interest in Telegram channels on days with an acute information agenda. Entertainment channels, such as blogger and game channels, play a significant role among the youth audience.

The low threshold of entry into the digital environment has allowed any user to create a channel in Telegram, set their own news trend and form a community of loyal users, without having a journalistic education and without being affiliated with any editorial office. Channels, while not being full-fledged media, are capable of supplying unique author's content. It is important to take into account that the most popular means of accessing the Internet today is the smartphone. Messengers gained popularity among the audience with the development of mobile devices and improvement of their functionality. Mobile Internet users are actively switching to Telegram messenger as a source of news information. It should also be emphasized that Telegram accumulates the most active and young audience.

Since the ongoing changes are quite dynamic and rapidly alter the structure of the media market in Russian and Belarusian regions, the consideration and recording of the peculiarities of Telegram channels development in the period of 2022-2024 is a relevant direction. Telegram as a media platform for information dissemination has already been written about in different aspects. The general specifics of the messenger have been considered [1-3], opportunities for mass media [4], features of content distribution [5], promotion of individual Telegram channels, and opportunities for bloggers [6; 7]. A separate block of studies devoted to the development of regional Telegram channels can be noted [8-10]. At the same time, the changes of recent years in the regions in the regional Telegram segment have not been practically touched upon, which makes the novelty of the research obvious, which consists in considering the changes in the regional Telegram market, analyzing adaptations to the changes, problems and prospects.

The purpose of the article is to consider the features of interaction with the audience in regional Telegram channels.

The objectives of the study are the following: to consider changes in the regional segment of Telegram channels in 2022-2024; to analyze adaptations to the current transformations; to compare the development of Telegram channels in the regions with the development of large federal resources; to identify problems and prospects for the formation of regional Telegram channels.

Theoretical significance of the study consists in compiling a periodization of Telegram channels development applicable to different Russian and Belarusian regions, identifying the reasons for launching new Telegram channels, analyzing the information space in the local Telegram segment, which can be applied and compared with other regions. This material can be both an intermediate stage of a large-scale study of the media system of one region and a part of an extensive study of media systems of several countries. In foreign mediaology, the trends in the development of regional Telegram channels have already received sufficient and theoretical comprehension, but the dynamics of their development during the transformation of the media system at the present stage remains insufficiently studied.

The practical significance of the study lies in the identification of problems and prospects for the development of Telegram channels in the region, which can be used by media professionals in improving their work with information resources. The analysis of innovations and the level of adaptation of Telegram channels in the region to all-Russian and global trends allows us to identify shortcomings in the work of regional resources and understand the directions of work with media resources.

II. METHOD AND DATA

Both institutional media channels and channels of bloggers, officials, government, public and commercial organizations, city publics, etc. were taken for analysis. The choice of the period - 2 years (from March 2022 to August 2024) - is due to significant changes in this media sector and insignificant study of changes in this time period in media research.

In the course of studying this topic, a sample of Telegram channels with different characteristics was compiled. This study also used as an analytical tool the largest directory of Telegram channels and chats TGStat, which includes more than 2 million channels and chats classified by countries, languages and topics. 100 Telegram channels of mass media, government representatives, business representatives, bloggers, urban communities, etc. were selected.

The most important statistical metrics of Telegram channels such as number of subscribers, average number of posts per day and average reach per post were investigated. In addition, the most important metric of the study was the degree of audience engagement. Additionally, the content strategies of the channels (formats and genres of materials, time and frequency of their posting) and their functionality (availability of comments, use of chatbots, etc.) were studied.

The objectives of the study were to record quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the selected Telegram channels in Russia and Belarus and to conduct a comparative analysis of their interaction with the audience based on the obtained data. The characteristics of the channels were analyzed, methods of content analysis of posts and classification were used. In addition, the methods of analysis, survey, comparison, generalization were used. The

forecasting method made it possible to outline the future prospects of Telegram development. The study recorded the dynamics of development of regional Telegram channels during a specific time period - 2022-2024, which is the novelty of this study.

III. RESULTS

The active development of Telegram in Russia at the beginning of 2022 was due to external reasons for its impact on the media space. Many channels began to expand the zone of their presence in social networks precisely after the changes related to the blocking of Meta products (recognized as extremist, activities in the Russian Federation are prohibited).

The influence of the Telegram platform as a source of news information increased dramatically in Belarus in 2020. While earlier Telegram was only one of the distribution channels for most publications, like another social network, starting from 2020 many media outlets started to use the messenger as the main platform and publish significant amounts of news content there [11].

Due to the uneven transition of many Russian media to the Telegram segment, it is possible to distinguish periods of change in the regional media space:

1. March 2022 - the creation of state structures in Telegram channels and the emergence of officials who, after the state's decision to block a number of social networks, were forced to stop maintaining these social networks and look for new solutions. Due to the fact that many had previously had their own publicks in VKontakte, there was little choice. For example, in Mordovia during this period the channel of the head of the region "Zdunov is here" was started - the first entry is from March 6, 2022. Another example is the channel of the Mordovian Republican Museum of Fine Arts named after S.D. Erzy - created on March 11, 2022. Many media outlets established their Telegram channels much earlier than this period. However, there were also those who switched to the platform in March 2022, such as Radio Vaigel (created on March 14, 2022)

2. April 2022 - December 2022 - gradual transition of other entities to Telegram. Many of those who created channels later were only duplicating information rather than completely leaving the blocked networks. The more difficult it became to enter the blocked social networks, the more channel owners took their content to other resources, particularly Telegram (@ludmilarez). The commercial sector was the last to go, losing contact with the majority of its clients' audience.

3. 2023 - to present day - more gradual development of Telegram, growth of audience and channels. Bloggers start to arrive (@katnikolavna). Other channels related to journalism are also created, for example, "In Focus Vidyaeva" (October 22, 2023), where the correspondent and presenter of the TV and radio company "Mordovia" begins to talk about her life and work, which already refers to the format of a full-fledged blog.

Despite individual examples of high-quality Telegram channels, it should be noted that in many structures this function is performed as an additional burden by assistant managers, secretaries, heads of departments, etc. At the same time, business companies pay much more attention to informing about their activities and image. Thus, among the channels that use the new messenger features - stories and quoting - commercial ones are 30% and 23% more,

respectively. If we analyze the number of subscribers, the audience growth in Telegram is much slower than on other media platforms.

The specificity of the messenger is the mixture of work and personal chats with subscriptions to different types of resources - news, entertainment, useful, necessary, etc. The possibility for channel owners to see who exactly unsubscribed from their channel makes the unsubscribe function transparent, as a result of which not only the criteria of "like", "dislike", "need" or "don't need" come into force, but also "whether the owner will be offended if he sees the unsubscribe", which in conditions of a small region and close spheres of interests of many participants makes the messenger content even busier [12; 13].

At the same time, the growth of the channel audience is complicated by the constant cleaning of bots that channel owners have to carry out, which Telegram itself does in order to improve engagement indicators.

According to the high number of subscribers, channels can be divided as follows:

1. Governor's channel ("Zdunov is here", 10.7 thousand subscribers). In the conditions of spreading fakes and unverified information, special military operation, the channels of many governors become a primary source of information - for the media and society; an opportunity to report a problem and wait for its solution - for citizens; to make a repost, quote, showing participation in any events - for citizens. The study and comparison of governors' Telegram channels is the subject of a separate study. However, on the example of Mordovia and several other regions, it can be noted that the function of commenting on such resources is mostly disabled. This can also be explained by considerations of information security, as interest in such channels today is great on the part of various participants in the communication process. However, the impossibility to leave their appeal directly encourages the residents of the region to be active in other resources.

Belarusian executive authorities also actively represent and promote themselves on new digital platforms, including Telegram. Each of the six regional executive committees has its own official Telegram channel. In addition, several Belarusian mayors, governors and their deputies maintain personal channels. The study was conducted on the Telegram channels of three heads of local executive authorities in Telegram ("Uladzimir Privalau. Officially", "Valery Malashko" and "Isachenko Online").

It was found that the most successful channel "Uladzimir Privalau. Officially" channel is run most successfully by the chairman of the Gomel City Executive Committee. The channel started working on December 31, 2022, today it has more than 19 thousand subscribers. "This is by no means a news feed. I see no reason or sense to compete with journalists - they do their job professionally. In my Telegram channel I plan to tell what's on the agenda of the city authorities, to build feedback with the citizens, to share my thoughts on various aspects of life in Homel. The city, which I love very much and I'm ready to do everything in my power to bring to a logical conclusion the initiated projects and launch new ones, which will help to improve people's lives," shared details Privalov. The channel is actively quoted by other resources. Subscriber Engagement Ratio (ERR), or the ratio of the average reach of publications to the number of subscribers (including reposts to other channels) is 42%. The channel's news feed is informal, different visuals are used,

you can leave a reaction to each message (7 positive reactions are available to choose from), and commenting is disabled. Photos for the channel "Vladimir Privalov. Officially" channel is partially borrowed from the editorial office of the city newspaper 'Gomelskiye Vedomosti'.

A similar strategy of running the channel "Valery Malashko" was revealed by a deputy of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus. The channel, created in November 2023, already has more than 3300 subscribers. Thanks to active reposts in other channels, the ERR coefficient is 149%. Along with the posts, which are devoted to working days, personal content is also actively posted. In particular, on March 7, 2024, the channel published a photo of Valery Malashko with a bear cub in his arms. "I met personally with a new pet of Mogilev zoo - an unusually affectionate little bear cub. Impressions and positivity - an incredible amount!!!" - such was the caption to the photo. The study confirms the thesis that one of the distinctive characteristics of modern media discourse is the strengthening of emotional arguments, known as "emotionalization".

The chairman of Mahiliou Regional Executive Committee also runs his own channel "Isachenko Online" @isachenkoOnline, which has more than 2,300 subscribers. Unlike the two previous channels, the content is presented exclusively in an official business style and more like reports. This applies both to the general style of the posts and the tools of audience engagement. It is impossible to leave quick comments to them, the very model of channel management is reduced to one-sided informing. In this regard, it is possible to say that the most important factor in the successful distribution of political content in Telegram is its emotional appeal. We can also state that one of the indicators of successful political online communication of the heads of local executive authorities is the interaction with the audience. However, in Belarus, such channels are often filled not with original content, but with forwarded messages (reposts) from larger and more influential channels. Along with unsubscribing from such resources, the audience tends to avoid news by taking such actions as checking feed updates less frequently, turning off notifications, refusing to read news in the evening, or ignoring certain topics [14; 15].

2. Media channels ("Stolitsa S", 12.4 thousand subscribers; "Izvestia Mordovia", 7.1 thousand subscribers; "Proiskhivia | Saransk | Mordovia", 25.5 thousand subscribers) are traditional and habitual channels of information for the audience. However, in order to subscribe to a channel, one must have a conscious desire to receive all the news of the region or a particular media outlet and view it. Surveys of representatives of city ministries and district administrations showed that the prevailing source of news for them are materials that are displayed by search engines (88% of 50 respondents in the Republic of Mordovia), i.e. media texts selected by search engines as the most attractive for the audience. This, of course, is only a small part of all the materials of regional media, which are still mixed with the federal content and often compete poorly in terms of the form and quality of information presentation.

Among Belarusian online editions the channel of Onliner.by @onlinerby is the undisputed leader. The number of its subscribers is more than 140 thousand. On average, 33 posts are published per day, each of them is viewed by an average of 47 thousand people, ERR - 36.8%. The posts are short blocks with a description of the news, photos and links to the site. Quick reactions to posts in the form of animated

and interactive emoji are also available. Examples of posts: "Roquefort for 99 rubles, Kamchatka crab for 400, black caviar for 1000. We looked at the price of delicacies on New Year's Komarovka"; "Today we will summarize the main automotive results of the past year. What he was remembered for, what he will pass on to the successor - let's remember".

The official Telegram channel of the Belarusian Telegraph Agency @belta_telegramm, to which 75 thousand people subscribe, posts an average of 200 posts daily with an average reach of 3.5 thousand users and an engagement index of 15.4%. The agency emphasizes text posts, and quotes are often used. There are no cumbersome hyperlinks, only necessary phrases are linked. Several videos also appear daily in the Telegram channel. There are no reactions to messages. The Telegram channel of the Sputnik news agency @sputnikby uses a similar set of language tools. Numbered lists are more often used in text posts.

In the segment of Belarusian regional media, one of the leaders is the channel of the Berezovsky district newspaper "Mayak" @berezaby. It has 13 thousand subscribers, publishes an average of 10 posts per day, the reach of each publication is 1.7 thousand, ERR - 55.7%. Emoji are often used here, which are placed at the beginning of each paragraph. The bot is used to conduct polls every month (for example, "If I were the director of the House of Culture, then..."; "If I were Santa Claus, then...", etc.), the results of which are then published on bereza.by. Also one of the leaders among the regional channels in Belarus is the Telegram channel "Minskaya Pravda|MLYN.by" @mlynby, which has more than 15 thousand subscribers.

3. Urban communities ("Mordovian Swamp", 27.5 thousand subscribers). This content originated in VKontakte publics such as "Hello, now...", "Podsusheshano...", "Board of Shame..." and similar. The development of Telegram messenger as a source of news content and a platform for communication contributed to the fact that similar channels with user-generated content began to appear in Telegram. In Mordovia, the popularity of the above-mentioned resource was influenced by the temporary blocking of the "Board of Shame | Saransk," a public group known among the citizens of the city, some of whose subscribers moved to Telegram. The resource specializes in the publication of user posts with complaints and supporting photos or videos, collects a lot of comments and attracts the attention of various structures - authorities, commercial organizations, individuals responsible for the cause of the complaint. Thus, the post from 25.09.2024 about the transfer of the department for disabled children to another district of the city gained 243 likes, 182 comments, 46 reposts and 22.9 thousand views in "VKontakte". At the same time, an identical post in Telegram gathered 61 emoji, 5 comments (total from 2 text posts) and 5.8 thousand views, which indicates the numerical limitations of the audience in the messenger and less activity of the audience.

An example of such a community is the Telegram channel "Minsk. Main!" @minsk_gl, which has more than 86 thousand subscribers and positions itself as the main news Telegram channel of the capital of Belarus. Such communities, which compete with professional local media in the local media space, can be divided into two main types: informational (groups like "My city...", "Your city...", "Typical...", "Emergency...") and communicative (groups like "Podsusheshano", where the main goal is communication of residents). We have identified the replacement of the gap in the information and communication space by non-

professional resources. This is especially true for those regions where professional media have little interaction with the audience.

These Telegram channels often overtake district newspapers in terms of efficiency, independence, and even the volume of information. In addition, they have begun to play a significant role in the life of local communities, performing functions that are not typical of neighborhood media (not so much informing as provoking discussion, feedback, and bringing together citizens to solve problems together). Such community media fill a niche that is not sufficiently demanded by urban media: the niche of prompt solution of social problems and feedback [16; 17].

4. anonymous Telegram channels ("Golos Torama", 15.4 thousand subscribers). A decrease in the number of active anonymous Telegram channels (especially those criticizing the authorities) can be noted in the region. This may be explained by changes in the media market as a whole, balanced media policy and restrictions related to media content, including mandatory registration of channels with an audience of more than 10 thousand people in the Roskomnadzor register from 01.11.2024, which makes their anonymity rather mediocre and increases responsibility for the published content.

Analysis of the leading channels by number of subscribers showed that official media outlets are losing the leadership to Telegram channels with user-generated content based on the disclosure of the region's problematic points and specific individuals.

Comparison of regional channels with major federal resources revealed some lagging behind the media market trends. The problems identified in the development of the regional segment of Telegram allowed us to understand the general difficulties associated with the messenger's functioning in general (underdeveloped keyword search system in Telegram) and in the region (primarily, poor adaptation to new trends).

The reasons for the launch of new Telegram channels were revealed, which allowed us to trace the general trends in the development of the media market. Here we can also note that the prospects for the development of Telegram channels in the regions will be 1) general changes in the functioning of media platforms and the associated further transition from banned social networks; 2) the entry of new figures into the media space, which will require their media positioning; 3) the growth of individual organizations and communities, the emergence of their channels to deliver information about their activities.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, the initial goal of the article has been achieved - the dynamics of regional Telegram channels development in the period of media system transformation in 2022-2024 has been considered. The study of the regional Telegram segment in the period following the large-scale changes in the media market associated with the blocking and withdrawal of some media platforms from the Russian market was conducted. The chosen period from 2022 to 2024 allowed us, first, to emphasize the dynamic nature of the changes, and second, to fill a gap in the study of regional Telegram channels.

We argue that the Telegram messenger has taken an important place in the system of media communications in Russia and Belarus in the last 2-3 years. The Telegram platform allows achieving direct communication with users,

as content is delivered directly to their mobile devices. Moreover, it is an ideal platform for communication, characterized by such qualities as speed, security, multimedia and others. At the same time, it is obvious that the communicative potential of Telegram is not always fully utilized by administrators of regional Telegram channels. First, it is noteworthy that a number of the channels we studied do not offer the possibility to comment on posts. At best, interactive features are limited to quick reactions. Second, polls are very rare in the channels. Third, many channels do not have chatbots, which would greatly simplify communication with users. This leads us to the conclusion that Telegram channels are used as purely informational platforms. It is important to realize that Telegram should serve not only as a one-way information channel, but also as a platform for creating engaging content and a tool for audience feedback. With changing media consumption that focuses on digital attention and global platforms competing for user data, audience engagement becomes a cornerstone of digital strategy.

The results of the study can be used in the study of digital media communications in other regions, as well as by media practitioners in modeling the operation of their resources. The prospect of the study can be further study of Telegram channels, as the changes occurring in the digital environment are very dynamic and should be recorded in research papers on a regular basis. In addition, this work can be further extended to comparing different regions, conducting a comparative analysis of regional Telegram channels in several countries. The results provide an opportunity to open up future research directions that explore the potential of Telegram as a platform for media communication in the digital environment.

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