

Telegram

The Great Disruptor

Directed by Aleksandr Urzhanov & Igor Sadreev
Produced by Kobalt & Narra

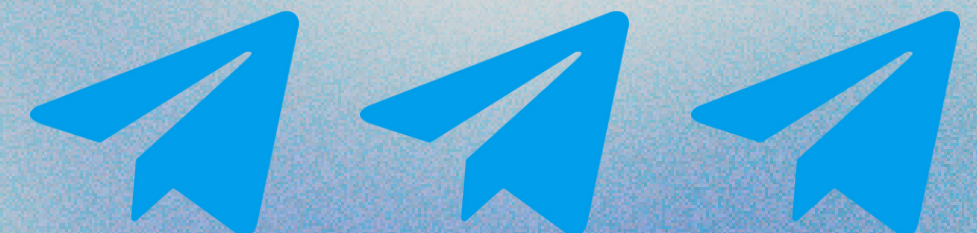
52'
90'



SYNOPSIS

On August 24, 2024, Paris-Le Bourget airport was the scene of an arrest that made headlines. Pavel Durov, French-Russian co-founder and CEO of the Telegram messaging app, a star and controversial libertarian figure of the tech industry was arrested. The multi-billionaire businessman, a symbol of the new economy is still under investigation. This criminal case brought up a key question the European Union has been asking Telegram and every other messaging app for a long time: to what extent is a platform's CEO accountable for the content it hosts? The case draws global attention, including from Silicon Valley.

The key question when it comes to Telegram and its mysterious founder is quite simple: is Pavel Durov a hero or a villain? Is Telegram some kind of refuge for extremists and propaganda messages? Or does it act as an advocate for free speech, privacy and dissidents? Telegram is often referred to as a messaging app, a social network or even a media, but no one is calling it what it actually is: a big disruptor of the offline rules. Just like Uber or Airbnb, only this time, for news sharing. In an age of digital firewalls, geopolitical tech wars, and massive antitrust fines, Telegram continues to operate as if we were still in the early stages of the Internet, back when it was a completely free system, deliberately defying borders and state control.



THE KEY QUESTION

The key question when it comes to Telegram, a widely used instant messaging app with over 900 million users worldwide – and its mysterious CEO and owner – is more like a dilemma. Indeed, what everybody is wondering is: does Pavel Durov serve extremists and criminals? Is he an agent of disinformation and propaganda? Or, is he the hero of anti-establishment activists, someone who advocates free speech, data security and privacy by offering refuge for human rights and freedom of thought activists? And after all, who is fit to decide?

Telegram apps are open source (meaning they're publicly accessible), but what happens backstage lacks transparency. Telegram is often referred to as a messaging app, a social network or even a media, but the app defies categorization. It is actually a big disruptor of the offline rules, just like Uber and Airbnb, only this time, for news sharing. In the age of the new "Cold War", the Great Firewall, America's war against TikTok and multi-billion-dollar antitrust fines imposed by the EU on tech giants like Apple and Facebook, Telegram's team appears to continue to operate as if we were still in the early stages of the Internet, back when it was a completely free system, deliberately defying borders and state control. France however, put an end to this, at least for now.



STATEMENT OF INTENT

The creators have been closely following Telegram's evolution since 2013, back when it all started. Back then, in a show called *Parfenof*, they made revelations about a Russian entrepreneur named Pavel Durov leaving Russia due to tensions with the Kremlin, and revealed he was working on a new tech project based in the United States. Although Durov's team initially denied this, the information later turned out to be accurate. After over ten years of investigation, they claim to have a deep understanding of Telegram. All this knowledge they have acquired through speaking directly with people close to Durov, but also with cybersecurity experts, hackers, investigators and international officials.

Telegram isn't just a messaging app. It reflects broader issues related to the evolution of journalism and society. The platform embodies the rise of propaganda, the spread of conspiracy theories, the growing prevalence of post-truth and alternative facts along with the growing distrust in scientific knowledge. All these trends have profoundly changed both the role and working conditions of journalists, with a decline in independent journalism and the erosion of trust in reliable sources.

In Russia, these changes have been particularly noticeable, and Telegram has played a key role in those changes. According to the creators, what's happening in Russia could very well serve as a preview of the forthcoming changes in Europe. In that sense, their knowledge and experience of the Russian digital ecosystem, especially through their use of Telegram, is worth sharing if one wants to better understand the current changes in information and communication across the world.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Depicting the digital world visually is a challenge, it is usually done using very cliché representations such as cables, servers, screens and data flows. The creators of this documentary wish to take a very different approach. They want to capture the digital world's omnipresence – and the fear it can provoke – through a visual style that takes its inspiration from constant surveillance: hidden cameras, original takes, and an aesthetic that resembles that of smartphones and security technologies. Every interview and sequence will be filmed as if they had been secretly recorded, seen through ajar doors, windows and objects that partially block the view. This will allow them to recreate the feeling of a world where everyone is being spied on. This visual style will serve as a metaphor for the digital world invading our daily lives.

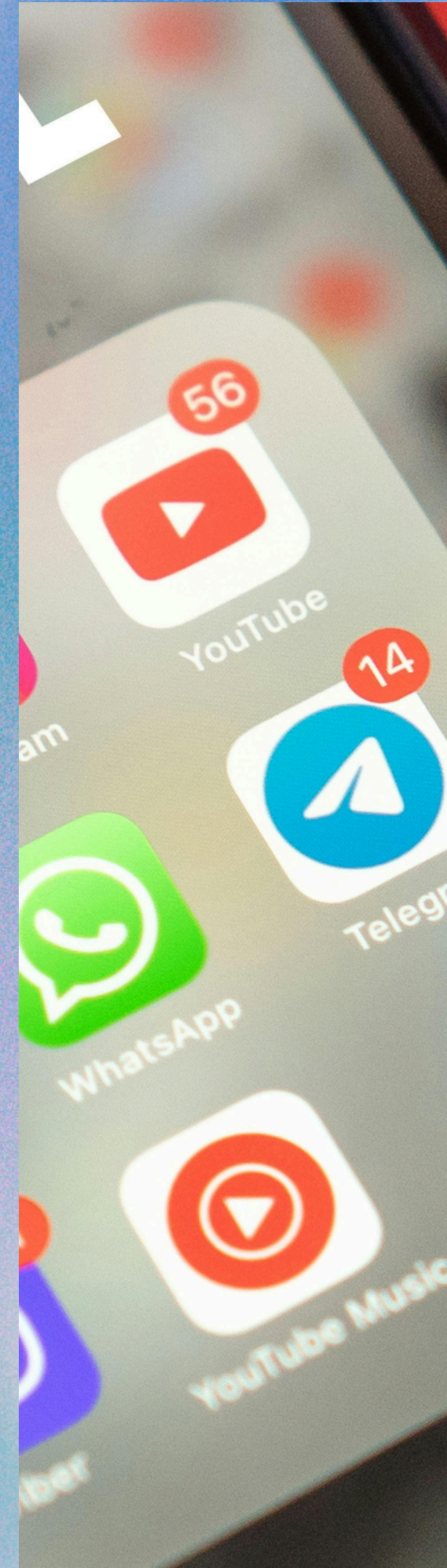
The key element of this film will be the studio reconstruction of Telegram's fictional headquarters, which will symbolize a secret command center where strangers pull the strings of our lives. This fictional setting will only be revealed as such at the end of the film, creating an element of surprise and forcing us to think of our perception of reality.

The narrative will be enriched with scenes shot in various iconic locations tied to the evolution of Telegram, such as an Art Nouveau villa in Saint Petersburg—where it all began—and the skyscrapers of Dubai, where Pavel Durov now resides. This setting highlights the global and tangible scope of this digital adventure.

The film will also include numerous texts taken from messages, recreated with the help of artificial intelligence using the original voices, in various languages. Archival footage and key historical events linked to Telegram such as protests, the COVID-19 crisis and wars will further enrich this immersive journey into a platform that is now playing a key role in today's global challenges.

THE PARTICIPANTS

- **Ilya Perekopsky** Vice-President of Telegram
- **Anton Rosenberg** Former Director of Special Projects at Telegram, he made revelations concerning a Telegram infrastructure being based in Russia.
- **Elies Campo** Former Director of Partnerships and Business Development at Telegram, he exposed the company's moderation practices.
- **Valeria Pozychanyuk** Journalist specialized in Big Tech. She covers Telegram and The Bell matters
- **Vera Jourová** European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency
- **Damien Leloup** Investigative journalist at Le Monde. He looked into how Durov got the French citizenship.
- **A member of the German Interior Minister's staff**
- **DOU, Ukrainian online community for IT specialists. Its members investigated Telegram's privacy policy.**



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