

Telegram as a multifaceted platform for antagonistic political passion: The Finnish alternative groups under the scope

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine Finnish alternative actors using Telegram within the right-wing and anti-systemic frameworks. We draw on Chantal Mouffe's concept of political passion to argue that it offers a useful lens for explaining the underlying dynamics among these actors. Using Finnish Telegram groups as an approximated example, we conducted a network analysis to map the landscape, identifying four distinct clusters of actors. We also qualitatively analysed how different modes of political engagement manifest among these antagonistic groups through their selection of topics and rhetoric. Our results reveal how alternative voices can rapidly shift from general critique to extreme viewpoints, driven by far-right ideology and amplified through anti-democratic Russian propaganda.

KEYWORDS: Telegram, fringe platform, alternative actors, political passion, network analysis, political engagement, antagonism

Introduction

Telegram has been described as a platform that fosters the creation of alternative public spheres, allowing diverse audiences to voice their concerns and discuss issues of importance (Al-Rawi, 2022). By the 2020s, the platform had amassed a global user base of 700 million active users, including young people, millions of former WhatsApp users, tired of controversial privacy policy regarding user data collection, and MAGA Trump supporters (Collier et al., 2021; Deakin, 2021; Jost et al., 2023; Lou et al., 2021). Known for its strong commitment to free speech, Telegram caters to individuals seeking high levels of anonymity and minimal content moderation (Rogers, 2020). The platform has become a hub for various actors who leverage its features not only to share information but also to coordinate activism, as it increases efficiency, improves collaboration, and lowers barriers to participation. Founded by the Durov brothers in 2013 in response to Russian state censorship of online speech, Telegram is now widely used in Russia, particularly by activist groups engaged in anti-government and anti-war discourse (Oleinik, 2024; Zhong et al., 2024). Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, active Telegram usage in the country surged by 60 per cent within just seven months (Brand Analytics, 2022).

At the same time, Telegram has become a refuge for individuals banned or removed from mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook, X, and YouTube, due to violations of platform policies (Rogers, 2020; Urman & Katz, 2022). Often labelled as deplatformed actors, these individuals are predominantly located on the far right of the ideological spectrum (Rogers, 2020: 213). Deplatformisation refers to the process by which major tech companies push extreme right-wing actors to fringe platforms by restricting their access to essential online services (Van Dijck et al., 2023: 3439). By offering an uncensored and anonymous communication environment, Telegram has enabled many deplatformed actors to rapidly re-establish connections, effectively reconstructing the networks they previously maintained on mainstream platforms before being banned (Schulze et al., 2022; Urman & Katz, 2022). Telegram enables encryption (Anglano et al., 2017), facilitates many-to-many communication, and features channels in which administrators serve as primary communicators (Jalilvand & Neshati, 2020). This structure allows for large audiences, fewer filters, and more direct communication (Nobari et al., 2021).

In this study, we examine alternative actors using Telegram, previously characterised as a unified blend of far-right actors, ideologies, activists, movements, alternative media, conspiracy theories, and Covid-19 scepticism (Almodt, 2024). By alternative actor, we refer to Mayerhöffer and colleague's (2024: 94) definition of alternative news media: diverse groups operating from "different ideological standpoints – including nativist, libertarian, nationalist, socialist, communist, and progressive positions – or from a cross-partisan anti-systemic, or even conspiratorial, outlook". We focus on the grassroots actors who position themselves in opposition to the dominant public discourse, often within broader right-wing and anti-systemic frameworks.

We use an approximated representation of an ecosystem of Finnish alternative actors on Telegram as a case study for two key reasons. First, there is limited knowledge about the platform from the perspective of Finnish alternative users. In the Finnish context, Telegram has predominantly been characterised as a space in which conspiracy theorist content proliferates (Valaskivi et al., 2023) and as a potential channel for jihadist online communication, including the planning of violent attacks and the dissemination of supportive materials (Malkki & Pohjonen, 2019). Despite the limitations of collecting data on Telegram, mapping this terrain remains essential for gaining a broader understanding of how right-wing alternative public discourse unfolds on Finland's digital fringe platforms.

Second, situated at the intersection of the Western and Eastern worlds, Finland stands out among the Nordic countries due to its distinct public discourse dynamics. Throughout its history, Finland has experienced notable shifts in political debate, including periods of extreme polarisation (Koivunen, 2021). Geographically, the country developed a distinct foreign policy strategy during the Cold War (Uutela, 2020). Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has reportedly triggered a "psychosis of fear" (Arter, 2023) in the country, amplifying historical anxieties surrounding territorial loss. The adversarial and contradictory nature of public discourse, compounded by Finland's vulnerable position adjacent to Russia, suggests a heightened need for platforms such as Telegram, which facilitate anonymous and effective communication. A 2024 survey revealed that 23 per cent of Finns used Telegram, with 3 per cent reporting daily use multiple times a day (Clausnitzer, 2025). In comparison, Telegram usage in Sweden and Norway remained under 10 per cent, and Denmark had the lowest usage, with only a few per cent in 2023 (Newman et al., 2023).

This study has two main objectives. First, we map the ecosystem of Finnish alternative actors and examine their connections within the right-wing and anti-systemic frameworks of Telegram. Drawing on Mouffe's (2005a) concept of political passion, we understand passion as a collective driving force that helps explain the underlying dynamics among these actors. Second, we conduct a qualitative analysis of how different modes of political engagement emerge within these groups, as reflected in their topics and rhetorical strategies. By exploring the Finnish Telegram ecosystem both structurally and in terms of content, we contribute to political communication research with this study by providing new insights into how the suppression of antagonistic modes of engagement is reflected in the resurgence of alternative actors on fringe platforms.

Navigating the intersection of extremism and activism

In recent years, several online movements have emerged across Northern Europe, expressing distrust and resistance towards public authorities, political elites, and mainstream media (Kristensen et al., 2023). Scepticism towards mainstream media is often cited as a key feature of populist, anti-establishment

attitudes, which have gained traction across the Western world in recent years (Haller & Holt, 2019). In the mid-2010s, populist, anti-system, anti-immigration, and anti-elite sentiments were increasingly linked with the rise of alternative news and opinion media, which expanded across Europe and the US during the so-called European refugee crisis (Haller & Holt, 2019). Researchers have observed a particularly high degree of distrust among far-right actors and movements, who are more likely to seek out alternative media sources (Ihlebak & Holter, 2021). Especially during societal crises, far-right extremists have exploited increasing discontent with political decision-making, creating fertile ground for the growth of public feelings of uncertainty and distrust (Schulze et al., 2022).

Simultaneously, the digital media landscape has become prolific for Internet subcultures and online communities to manipulate news frames, set agendas, and propagate ideological narratives. Many of these groups position themselves as anti-establishment, opposing multiculturalism and globalism, while often promoting racist, anti-feminist, and antisemitic ideologies (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). These anti-mainstream and anti-systemic movements are increasingly challenging the socio-political order by creating alternative information environments online and using digital platforms to spread disinformation, conspiracy theories, and false stories (Henriksen, 2024; Kristensen et al., 2023). This trend has been particularly evident on Telegram, where the rise of anti-mainstream, nativist, and alt-right groups has coincided with the banning of far-right influencers from mainstream social media platforms (Urman & Katz, 2022).

Previous research has discussed whether deplatforming merely conceals the issue, potentially exacerbating the hostility of toxic speech as it migrates to fringe communication platforms and thereby facilitating the further radicalisation of both the speech and its consumers (Bryanov et al., 2022). Urman and Katz (2022) have argued that deplatforming extremist users from mainstream platforms may not be the most effective strategy for curbing their influence and preventing user radicalisation. For example, Telegram's permissiveness towards extreme content has facilitated substantial interactions among right-wing extremists and far-right communities, including groups such as the Proud Boys, MAGA Trumpists, QAnon adherents, and white-supremacist organisations (Zhong et al., 2024). During the Covid-19 pandemic, Querdenken, Germany's leading coronavirus protest movement, was found to act as a gateway to far-right ideologies, primarily due to its insular and radicalising communication dynamics on Telegram (Zehring & Domahidi, 2024). However, Schulze and colleagues (2022) contended that the increasing prevalence of radicalisation indicators on Telegram does not necessarily provide sufficient evidence of radicalisation throughout these movements.

Political passion as a driver of antagonistic engagement on fringe platforms

Recent research has increasingly highlighted the role of emotions in political discussions on social media, underscoring their powerful influence on individuals' engagement with topics and events (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2016; Humprecht et al., 2024; Ihlebæk & Holter, 2021). This study draws on Chantal Mouffe's (2005a, 2005b, 2013) concept of political passion, which we regard as a key element in how individuals and groups engage with politics and participate in public discourse. Mouffe (2005a: 24) defined passion as "the various affective forces which are at the origin of collective forms of identification". Mouffe (2013) has argued that liberal democracy is based on rational consensus and individualism, which often leaves out the antagonistic dimension of politics – the inherently emotional and conflictual aspects that cannot be fully addressed through reason alone. In Mouffe's (2013) pluralist view of democracy, passion is always present in political decision-making, where competing interpretations of ethical and political values are at play. Mouffe has claimed that if the productive conflict between opposing political views – what she calls agonistic dynamics – is suppressed, and people are prevented from expressing their political passions within a democratic framework, those passions can become destructive. As a result, suppressed passions may resurface in more extreme forms, often channelled into identity-based ideologies such as nationalism, religion, or ethnicity (Mouffe, 2013).

In this study, we suggest that a fringe and unmoderated platform like Telegram provides fertile ground for these suppressed political passions to develop freely and take on more antagonistic forms. Our understanding of political passion is rooted in Mouffe's emphasis on its collective nature, which is particularly relevant on fringe platforms where alternative or marginalised actors often seek like-minded individuals to reestablish connections (e.g., Urman & Katz, 2022). Although political passion may initially seem like an individual emotional response, Mouffe (2013) argued that meaningful political engagement relies on the formation of collective identities, with affective bonds playing a central role in the process of identification. Mouffe (2013: 46) defined collective identity as a shared sense of "we", shaped by deep emotional investment that unites members of a community. Crucially, Mouffe argued that political identity always involves drawing boundaries – there can be no "us" without a "them". When the "them" is seen as a threat to the "us", this opposition can escalate into a hostile friend/enemy dynamic (Mouffe, 2013: 5). We believe that this identification process is a key aspect of public political engagement and participation, especially for alternative actors. It refers to a sense of belonging to a group, developed through shared experiences, values, beliefs, and goals (for a more detailed discussion on belonging, see Cohen 2022). On fringe platforms, the emotional bond between individuals is likely to deepen, strengthening their sense of belonging and reinforcing a shared group identity.

In this study, we use political passion as an explanatory concept at the macro level of abstraction, while examining political engagement at the meso level, with particular attention to the suppression of antagonistic modes of engagement. By political passion we refer to the underlying drive that, as Mouffe (2013) has argued, motivates alternative actors to seek fringe spaces where it can be expressed. In this context, political passion reflects the conflictual dimensions of political issues that these actors perceive as suppressed and denied legitimate democratic expression. While their core interests may differ, they converge within the distinctive fringe environment that Telegram provides. By political engagement, we refer to the various antagonistic modes of participation and how they manifest among alternative actors, particularly through emotional appeals.

Finland: A unique case in the Nordic context

In this study, we highlight Finland's complex history as Russia's neighbour and its influence on public discourse. Finland's unique position at the crossroads of Western and Eastern influences may shape the right-wing and anti-systemic framework of its alternative ecosystem on Telegram, especially when compared to other Nordic countries.

In recent years, the state of public discourse in Finland and its impact on democracy have raised concerns among policymakers, researchers, and the mainstream media. The issue of increasing polarisation as a threat to internal security was discussed at the government level in the 2010s (Koivunen, 2021). During the so-called European refugee crisis in 2014–2016, societal discourse was polarised by loud and opposing opinions on immigration. The Finnish immigration debate was characterised by the metaphor of the extremes of two ends, in which “sensible people” disillusioned with polarised discussions observed from the sidelines without forming their own opinions (Koivunen, 2021).

During Finland's centenary celebrations in 2017, the then minister of justice, Antti Häkkänen, identified the intensification of the discussion culture as a factor weakening democracy (Häkkänen, 2017). The then president of the republic, Sauli Niinistö, viewed growing differences in opinion as a threat to national trust and fertile ground for Russia's hybrid warfare. The discourse on extremes was used as a cautionary tale a hundred years ago, when societal division escalated into a civil war in 1918 (Koivunen, 2021). Many citizens chose to withdraw from societal discussions, weary of the confrontational and polarised atmosphere (Kareinen, 2017). In contrast to Sweden, where the debate on “the corridor of opinion” raised concerns about the agenda-setting and gate-keeping roles of the news media, in Finland, the debate on “the extremes” – two opposing ends – raised concerns not only about polarisation but also about excessive debate, indicating a lack of belief in the value of deliberative public discourse (Koivunen, 2021).

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine reignited Finland's collective memory of the 1939 Winter War, triggering a rapid shift in public opinion on NATO membership (Forsberg, 2024). Previously, both politicians and the public largely opposed joining NATO (Arter, 2023), with debates centring on whether membership would enhance security or escalate tensions with Russia, disrupting Finland's long-standing neutrality (Arter, 2023; Nisch, 2024). However, as consensus solidified – a hallmark of Finland's foreign and security policy tradition (Forsberg, 2024) – criticism of this accession diminished. According to Anu Kantola (2024), Finland's geopolitical position, sharing a 1,300-kilometre border with Russia, further discourages open debate on security issues, often rendering them taboo. However, Finland's cautious approach to foreign policy has deeper roots, particularly in the Cold War period, which became known as “the era of Finlandisation”. The complex and multifaceted concept of Finlandisation broadly denotes Finland's policy of neutrality and its deliberate efforts to avoid antagonising the Soviet Union, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. This strategy of neutrality involved political accommodation and self-censorship to avoid provoking the Soviet Union (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016; Uutela, 2020).

Grounded in our theoretical approach, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the main characteristics of the Telegram ecosystem formed by key Finnish alternative actors, and how do they interconnect through the content they share and reshare?

RQ2. How do different modes of political engagement manifest within this ecosystem and among these actors?

Data and methods

In this section, we first outline the criteria for our data collection and then describe the application of network analysis to generate insights into the Telegram environment. Finally, we detail the focus of our content analysis.

In their comprehensive literature review, Jost and colleagues (2023) discussed the theoretical and methodological challenges scholars face in defining, selecting, sampling, and classifying relevant actors and content on Telegram. One major challenge they highlighted was identifying the central actors, which is essential for studying communication on the platform. This challenge also arose in the early stages of our data collection, as little was known about active Finnish right-wing alternative actors. To address this, we applied snowball sampling, identifying actors based on prior research into right-wing alternative media and conspiratorial figures within the Finnish fringe media landscape (Tuomola, 2023a; Valaskivi et al., 2023). Due to Telegram's platform architecture, our selection of Finnish alternative Telegram channels includes only public channels and groups. Private groups are not searchable, and new members can join only by invitation from the group administrator. Public groups, therefore, serve mass coordination and discussion, while private groups facilitate more secretive

communication (Urman & Katz, 2022). Their public presence also influenced the basis our ethical decision not to anonymise their names. We consider Telegram's public channels to be intentionally visible, searchable, and designed for broad dissemination; as such, their administrators generally do not hold a reasonable expectation of privacy.

The data collection progressed in three stages. First, we examined five actors known to be active on Telegram during the period in question: Janus Putkonen/MV-lehti [MV Magazine], Valkohaalarit [The White Overalls], Q-Suomi [Q-Finland], Totuuden etsijät [The Truth Seekers], and Rapsodia Uutiskanava [The Rapsodia News Channel]. Janus Putkonen is the editor-in-chief of MV-lehti, Finland's most prominent right-wing alternative online publication. The White Overalls is a group of citizen activists that disseminates information about upcoming demonstrations across Finland, advocating, for example, against state corruption and the dominance of the pharmaceutical industry. Both Q-Finland and The Truth Seekers are noted for their Covid-19 pandemic and QAnon-related conspiracy theories. Q-Finland focuses primarily on the QAnon theme, while the chat of The Truth Seekers has expanded to other topics (Valaskivi et al., 2023). The Rapsodia News Channel has been linked to a Nigerian revivalist movement. During 2020–2021, the movement's website gained attention on mainstream media and the Christian TV7 channel for disseminating material filled with conspiracy theories and misinformation (Valaskivi et al., 2023). We repeated the snowball sampling process starting from these five initial accounts, examining their sharing activity and identifying other actors whose posts they forwarded.

Second, we combed through the threads of these channels and used frequently recurring keywords, such as *totuus [truth], *korona [corona], and *Suomi [Finland], to search for comparable active channels. Finally, we manually searched for similar groups by exploring Telegram's algorithmic recommendations, which suggest channels based on user engagement and thematic similarity (Telegram, 2023). While these actors and groups helped shape the focus of our data collection, we consider them an approximated sample of Finnish right-wing alternative actors, enabling us to expand our data collection further. We emphasize the term *approximated* to acknowledge that the ecosystem represented is not exhaustive but rather delineates the space in which these alternative actors operate and engage.

This iterative data collection process resulted in the identification of 74 initial accounts and chat groups, which we then verified for their continued existence and activity (see Table A1 in the Appendix for the list of the initial 74 groups). Some accounts were inactive, no longer existed, or were private, leaving a total of 47 active Finnish Telegram accounts. The collected posts spanned from 2019 to 2023, although most accounts showed minimal activity before 2020. This resulted in a total of 3,000,000 posts from 47 different actors. Although 1,300,000 of these were forwarded messages, only 60,000 were forwarded messages specifically between these 47 accounts.

The first phase of our study involved a network analysis, which we used to explore how each account contributed to the broader information-sharing

ecosystem on Telegram and to identify overlapping themes in their online communication. Research has found Telegram to be a highly networked platform in part due to the lack of algorithmically curated feeds (Willaert, 2023) and an emphasis on more direct forms of communication (Jost & Dogruel, 2023). Continued interaction with other channels and groups, including finding and re-sharing content, is an integral part of building and maintaining audiences, which is most strongly expressed via forwarding actions (Willaert et al., 2022). Following earlier studies applying network analysis to Telegram, we focused on relations between channels based on who is mostly forwarding or being forwarded (Bovet & Grindrod, 2022), eliciting community structures in the communication network (Buehling & Heft, 2023; Simon et al., 2023) derived from such forwarding relations.

A directed network was constructed based on the messages forwarded from and by each of the 47 included accounts (see Table A2 in the Appendix for a list of the in-degree and out-degree of the 47 Telegram accounts). The layout follows PageRank logic (Mayerhöffer et al., 2024), meaning that accounts whose messages are forwarded a lot by many other accounts are considered to have the largest impact on information flow. This approach to analysing information-sharing networks has been described as an ecosystem of nutrients and energy, in which original content represents the nutrients needed for the existence of the information-sharing network, while resharing activity is the energy required for binding the individual nodes together (Zuckerman et al., 2023). Many incoming edges of the nodes with few outgoing means that the account creates a lot of original content that is being reshared by others but does not engage in the resharing of content from other accounts. On the flip side, many outgoing edges with few incoming means that a given account mostly reshapes content from other actors.

To reveal distinct communication patterns among the Telegram actors, the Louvain community detection algorithm (Blondel et al., 2007) was used to sort the network into clusters of actors, which maximises the modularity of the graph. We ensured robustness by iterating multiple splits of the same graph and selecting the partition that had the highest average similarity with all the splits (Rao et al., 2021). The selected partition was 96 per cent similar to all splits.

In the second phase of the study, we conducted a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023) to examine how different modes of antagonistic political engagement emerged among the actors and how they were distributed across clusters. To this end, we randomly selected shared and forwarded posts from each cluster, which we compiled into an Excel sheet for analysis. The timespan of the analysed posts ranged from 2021 to 2023. The collection consisted of ten posts from each of the most significant actors within each cluster, selected based on the results of the network analysis. However, given the consistent thematic focus of the content and rhetoric, the saturation point of the analysis would likely have been reached with a smaller dataset. We focused exclusively on textual material due to certain limitations in collecting visual data

on Telegram. In the in-depth content analysis, we systematically reviewed the posts, focusing on their tone, stylistic features, and the topics they addressed. More specifically, we coded 1) the topics discussed, 2) emotional expressions, 3) the tone, 4) the use of capital letters, emojis, and special characters such as exclamation and question marks, and 5) recurring special features.

In the following section, we begin by introducing the alternative information-sharing environment in broader terms – focusing on the identified clusters and the roles that distinguish the accounts based on their sharing activities. We then proceed to examine each cluster in detail, identifying the primary themes that elicit their strongest engagement. This analysis addresses the first research question (RQ1) by illustrating how the approximated presentation of the ecosystem of alternative actors evolves on Telegram. In other words, we uncover the overarching agendas that these actors communicate, reflecting the intensity of their ideological commitments. Finally, we investigate how the different modes of political engagement manifest among these actors. Through this content analysis, we respond to the second research question (RQ2).

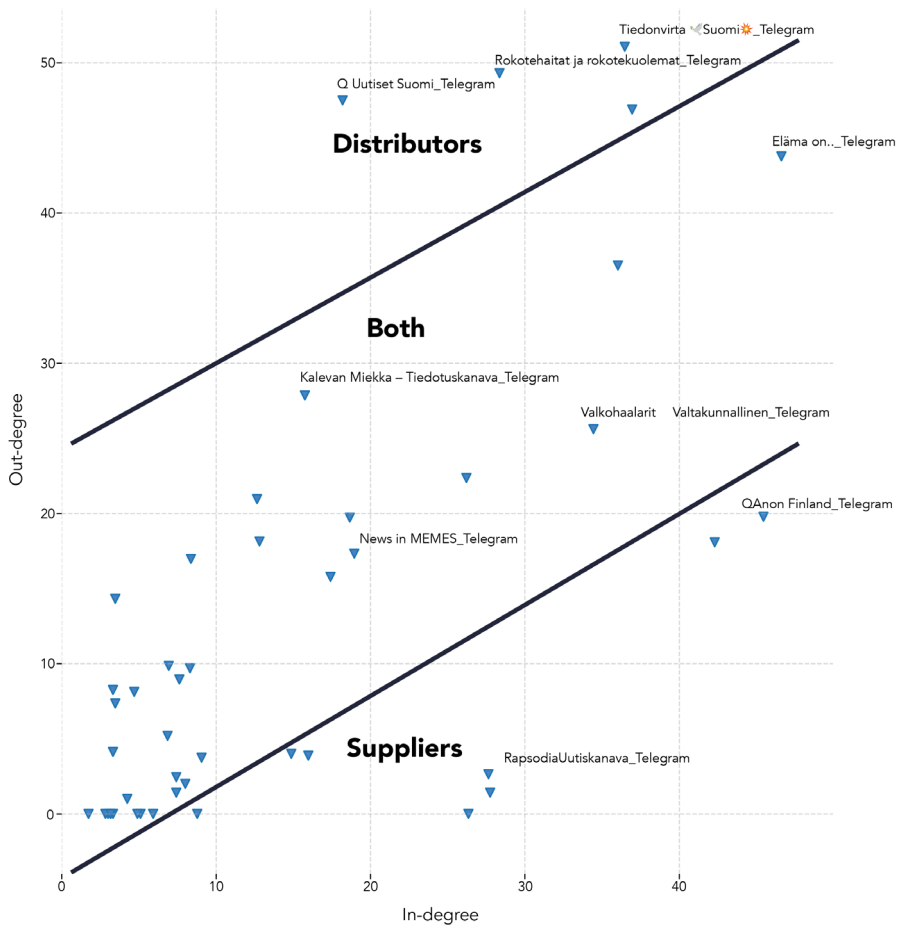
Findings

Network based on forwarded messages: Four clusters

We first constructed a unipartite network between the Finnish alternative Telegram channels. Figure 1 shows an approximated illustration of the network based on the accounts that forward each other's messages. We identified four distinct clusters, which we refer to by their assigned colours: pink, orange, green, and blue. As known from previous studies (e.g., Chunaev, 2020), the community detection techniques used to assign nodes to a cluster cannot account for the full complexity of relations between actors but can provide a rough estimate of what most of them have in common. The clusters were named based on different modes of engagement or topics identified in the content they shared. The pink arrows denote a cluster centred on anti-mainstream critique, engaging with various politicised topics. The green arrows mark the protest mobilisation cluster, where accounts share information about upcoming demonstrations nationwide. The orange arrows highlight a cluster focused on critiquing Western medicine and promoting alternative perspectives on healthcare and nutrition. The blue arrows represent the anti-democratic propaganda cluster, featuring pro-Russian content alongside conspiratorial and posts related to information operations.

content themselves but act as re-distributors of other actors' content. This is illustrated in the scatterplot in Figure 2, which shows the distribution of actors according to their average weighted in-degree and out-degree.

Figure 2 The distribution of actors based on their average weighted in-degree and out-degree



The green cluster is dominated by accounts that organise protest actions and other events that signal contempt towards mainstream actors and institutions. The orange cluster is largely composed of accounts that focus on criticising Western medicine. The blue cluster is distinctly pro-Russian but also combined with some general sharing of conspiracy theories, such as those propagated by the QAnon movement (see, e.g., Conner & MacMurray, 2022). Conductance measures the potential for a group of nodes to distribute information to other parts of the network. A low conductance indicates a tight cluster that communicates mainly with its own members (NetworkX, n.d.).

Table 1 The clusters illustrated by their conductance values.

Cluster	Conductance
Anti-mainstream critique	0.695
Protest mobilisation	0.319
Western medicine critique	0.44
Anti-democratic propaganda	0.199

Anti-mainstream critique

The most prominent connection is observed between the pink nodes, which comprise the cluster of anti-mainstream critique. This central cluster can be characterised as a network of general anti-mainstream accounts that present alternative or opposite perspectives on current news topics. Notably, the pink cluster is essential to the functioning of the entire information-sharing network, as indicated by the high conductance value shown in Table 1. The cluster includes the influential accounts Tiedonvirta_Suomi [The Information Stream_Finland] and Rokotehaitat ja rokotekuolemat [The Vaccine Disadvantages and Deaths], which function as key distributors of alternative content across the network. Another significant account is Elämä on... [The Life is...], which demonstrates both high in-degree and out-degree centrality. It functions as a hybrid actor, both producing original content for redistribution and actively sharing posts from other accounts. Rapsodia Uutiskanava [The Rapsody News Channel] is a key information supplier, primarily disseminating general anti-mainstream content, alongside religious posts and conspiracy theories. The account frequently shares a significant amount of content sourced from American right-wing media outlets, including Fox News and Infowars. In addition to its original content, Rapsody selectively amplifies posts from Q Uutiset Suomi [The Q News Finland], a member of the blue anti-democratic propaganda cluster.

Within the pink cluster, anti-mainstream critique emerges as the dominant mode of political engagement, expressed through topics such as Covid-19 vaccine side effects, the polarisation between anti- and pro-vaccine citizens, as well as anti-EU, anti-US, and anti-mainstream media narratives. At the same time, this critique actively fosters distrust towards authorities, policymakers, and other experts, who are portrayed as propagators of lies and distributors of misinformation. Mainstream media, often labelled as hypocritical and brainwashing, play a central role in the discourse of resistance. Some accounts that initially focused on Covid-19-related content have since expanded their scope to encompass a broader range of themes within this cluster. As a result, they occupy central positions in the network, serving as bridges between more specialised accounts that concentrate on distinct thematic issues.

Anti-mainstream critique is further reflected in the posts' critical tone and outspoken style. This discourse circulates persistently within the cluster, reinforcing

antagonistic dynamics across the broader ecosystem. Actors frequently employ an overwhelming number of emojis, capital letters, and punctuation marks to heighten the emotional appeal of their messages. The tone is often sarcastic and witty, clearly intended to provoke strong emotional reactions from the audience, for example, when claiming that blind faith in mainstream media can be lethal. Personal pronouns such as “us” are commonly used to emphasise collective identity, positioning “we” as the in-group that constitutes the whole. Slogans like “We are not going to yield to the tyranny of governments” and “Together we are strong” exemplify this rhetorical strategy. Overall, the communication rhetoric aligns with those commonly employed by right-wing populist actors (see Wodak, 2015).

Protest mobilisation

The second notable connection, identified through forwarded messages, centres on the green arrows representing the protest mobilisation cluster. Its primary sources include *Sananvapaus ja perusoikeudet Suomi ry* [Freedom of Speech and Constitutional Rights Finland Union], *Valkohaalarit Valtakunnallinen* [The White Overalls National], and *Suurkulkue* [The Grand Parade]. They can be categorised as information-sharing accounts focused on demonstrations and other forms of citizen activism activities. The majority of the main sources’ posts contain information about upcoming demonstrations or events, including discussions and peer support related to vaccine side effects or alternative nutrition choices.

Within the green cluster, political engagement is evident in enthusiasm for protest mobilisation, encompassing citizen activism, demonstrations, and involvement in societally relevant, controversial, and substantial issues. These range from freedom of speech and resistance to perceived corporate dominance to criticism of mainstream media, alleged government corruption, and opposition to the World Health Organization (WHO). The mode of engagement is strongly associated with democratic participation and civic involvement, prioritising mobilisation over opposition while reinforcing collective bonds. A shared sense of “we” is cultivated through positive emotional appeals, for example, when actors promote events such as the “upcoming procession of friendship”. Many posts adopt an engaging tone, calling on audiences to “participate and influence societal matters”, such as by joining “citizens’ walks through cities” or signing petitions addressed to members of parliament.

On the other hand, the cluster also illustrates how a single radical actor can introduce and circulate far-right discourse and communication strategies, including scapegoating, blame-shifting, and victim reversal (for more on far-right discourse, see Wodak, 2020). One such example is *Partisaani* [The Partisan], which shares content not only to demonstrations but also news from its online outlet. The topics promoted by this account align with far-right, antisemitic, anti-EU, and anti-globalist narratives, illustrated by claims that wealthy Jewish bankers pressure American universities to support war crimes and by questions such as “Who brought Muslims to Europe?” This dynamic demonstrates how suppressed political engagement can take on a more radical form when antagonistic modes gain ground through identity-based ideologies (see Mouffe, 2013).

Western medicine critique

The orange nodes form the cluster of Western medicine critique, with subtle connections between them. There are overlaps with the anti-mainstream critique cluster, particularly among accounts that share critical views on vaccines and other medical treatments. Notably, the most prominent accounts – Totuus rokotteista [The Truth about Vaccines] and Vain hyviä uutisia [The Good News Only] – dominate the information flow by consistently sharing and amplifying each other's posts. They both have high in-degrees and out-degrees, indicating their roles as information providers and distributors.

Importantly, the most influential accounts in this cluster are tightly linked to the anti-democratic propaganda cluster, sharing substantial content from pro-Russian and conspiracy-oriented sources. Additionally, Kalevan Miekka – Tiedotuskanava [The Sword of Kaleva – Information Channel] is a significant information supplier and distributor, particularly forwarding posts from QAnon Finland, a typical conspiracy-oriented account on Telegram. These overlaps reveal a strong emotionally driven connection between the clusters, suggesting political and ideological similarity, and possibly some extent of collaboration.

Political engagement in the orange cluster manifests through a strong resistance against dominant Western medicine, particularly that associated with Covid-19. By presenting medical treatments and vaccinations as “lethal”, responsible for “malformation”, and causing “over-mortality”, the discourse frames vaccine criticism as an act of awakening – one that claims to liberate “us” from the perceived tyranny of pharmaceutical corporations. In this sense, the orange cluster adheres strongly to anti-science and science-sceptical attitudes (see Grossman, 2025). The discourse is steeped in cynicism, conveyed through coarse, aggressive language, and amplified by exaggeration, hyperbole, and hate-driven rhetoric. One striking example reads: “Everyone advancing corona vaccinations is guilty of murder”. This extreme framing recasts health debates as moral battles driven by emotional appeals rather than scientific disagreements grounded in rational argumentation.

Anti-democratic propaganda

A smaller yet significant connection exists between the blue nodes forming the anti-democratic propaganda cluster. It consists of relatively few accounts, with the main nodes clearly distinguished. The most prominent information supplier, with the highest in-degree, is Janus Putkonen/News and Talks, which primarily shares news from the alternative media site MV-lehti. This account has a very low out-degree, meaning it seldom re-shares other accounts' content. MV-lehti is one of Finland's earliest and most popular right-wing alternative media outlets. Its current leader, Janus Putkonen, previously served as editor-in-chief of the Donetsk Press Centre from 2015 to 2018 (Tuomola, 2023b). The content from this account is frequently forwarded by QAnon Finland (with a high out-degree) and Q Uutiset Suomi (with a lower out-degree). A smaller content producer with

a lower in-degree is Z-Uutiset [Z-News], which is associated with a well-known pro-Russian figure in Finland. The letter “Z” in the account’s name refers to the symbol used in Russian propaganda to signal support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Marandici, 2023).

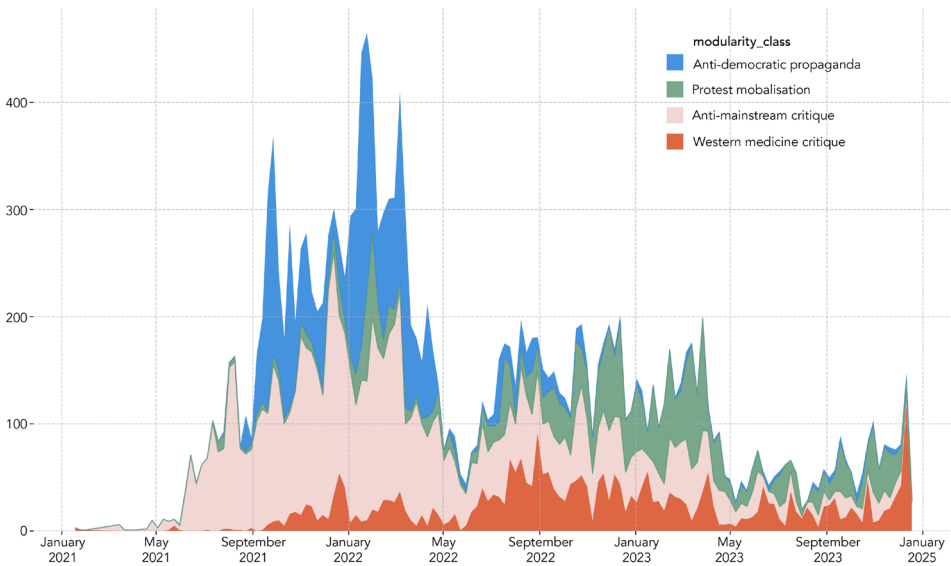
Despite its small size, the blue cluster exerts influence across all clusters, amplified by nodes that relay posts from high out-degree information suppliers and extend their reach across diverse ideological spheres. For example, there are notable overlaps between the anti-mainstream and Western medicine critique clusters, particularly regarding accounts that serve as central information distributors, such as *The Life is...* and *The Thought Crime Production*. The intrusiveness of pro-Russian content demonstrates how such dominant counternarratives can prevail even on fringe, unmoderated platforms like Telegram.

Within this cluster, emotionally charged information flows reveal a strong linkage between pro-Russian content and conspiracy-oriented narratives, ultimately coalescing into anti-democratic propaganda. The style and rhetoric of the original posts differ markedly from those in other clusters, with a significant share of content originating from the alternative online outlet *MV-lehti*. Its core ideology is conveyed through a professional, journalist-like style that enables the dissemination of deep distrust towards Finnish authorities and mainstream media, ultimately aiming to erode the foundations of the democratic state. While the rhetoric avoids vulgar or obscene exaggerations, the claims themselves are excessive, echoing Russian propaganda narratives and referring to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a “special operation” and employing phrases such as “Ukrainian attack helicopters penetrating Russian airspace” and “descendants of neo-Nazis raised in Ukraine”.

Antagonistic engagement exploding in the Covid-19 debate

Figure 3 illustrates the resharing activity of each cluster over time. Only messages forwarded by another account within the network are included, meaning the analysis highlights not the most active accounts but those that have the most influence on information flows within this ecosystem. We interpret this influence as prevailing throughout the network, guiding actors through their emotionally charged appeals. The temporal dimension of political engagement is clearly illustrated in the figure, indicating that suppressed emotions can resurface with heightened intensity during crises that threaten societal stability, such as those related to health or security.

Figure 3 The resharing activity of the clusters by week (number of posts)



Comments: Only messages that are later forwarded by another account in the network are counted.

The emergence of the network of the alternative actors appears to have been driven largely by a desire to share and spread scepticism about the authorities' handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent vaccination programmes. This process unfolded in two distinct waves. The first wave involved the anti-mainstream critique cluster, which began sharing stories about vaccine-related deaths and potential issues with lockdowns and vaccinations, primarily from a Finnish or Nordic perspective. This was followed by a second wave of activity from the anti-democratic propaganda cluster, which added a conspiratorial layer to the vaccine critique. The anti-democratic propaganda cluster incorporated narratives involving Chinese, American, and European perspectives, often presenting the vaccination programme as part of a broader plot of global mind control orchestrated by the US.

As time progressed, the anti-mainstream critique cluster began resharing content originating from the anti-democratic propaganda cluster, some of which filtered through the Western medicine critique cluster. Notably, The Sword of Kaleva imported content from QAnon Finland, which was later distributed by The Information Stream_Finland. This two-wave development illustrates how alternative voices on Telegram can rapidly evolve from general anti-mainstream critiques into more extreme anti-democratic sentiments, often fuelled by conspiracy theories and Russian propaganda.

After the initial hysteria surrounding the Covid-19 vaccinations subsided, most of the ongoing activity shifted to the orange (Western medicine critique) and green (protest mobilisation) clusters. However, as demonstrated in the previous

section, the connection between the blue and pink clusters plays a crucial role in facilitating the spread of anti-democratic propaganda narratives, particularly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Discussion

In this study, we mapped the approximated presentation of the ecosystem of Finnish alternative actors on Telegram. Furthermore, through qualitative analysis, we examined how different modes of political engagement manifested within these antagonistic groups. Our analysis identified four main clusters based on content-forwarding patterns. The anti-mainstream critique cluster consists of accounts that share politicised content, including critiques of Covid-19 vaccines, anti-mainstream media narratives, and anti-US and anti-systemic themes. The protest mobilisation cluster revolves around accounts disseminating information about protest activities across Finland. The Western medicine critique cluster primarily focuses on criticism on medical treatment and vaccinations. Lastly, the anti-democratic propaganda cluster is characterised by its strong pro-Russian stance, blending support for Russia with conspiracy-oriented content.

Our findings highlight a strong reliance on central distributors of information, which function as key hubs for a wide array of anti-mainstream content. While the network appears to have originated in response to Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns in Finland, it has since developed into a broader ecosystem that accommodates diverse anti-mainstream sentiments. While each cluster centres on different topics, central distributors serve as amplifiers, disseminating content from dominant voices within their respective groups. This mechanism facilitates the widespread circulation of overtly far-right content – even among accounts that initially focused on demonstrations or general critiques of mainstream narratives.

Additionally, our analysis reveals that anti-democratic propaganda content has penetrated key distributor nodes through multiple connections, influencing the network's overall information dynamics. Despite the cluster's relatively small size, its intense sharing activity amplifies its impact across other clusters, shaping the broader anti-mainstream ecosystem. Notably, this influence endures even though the direct resharing of pro-Russian content declined following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, our study reinforces previous research which indicates that on fringe platforms, right-leaning communication can easily become radicalised, driven by the increasing prevalence of anti-elitist rhetoric, political activism, conspiracy narratives, and support for violence (Schulze et al., 2022). Moreover, passion can escalate into fanaticism, which plays a central role in processes of radicalisation and extremism (Schuurman & Taylor, 2018).

We argue that the illustrated ecosystem reflects Mouffe's (2005a, 2013) notion that suppressed political passions seek alternative channels for expression, often transforming into more antagonistic forms. In this manner, political passion serves as a driving force within this dynamic network – linking antagonistic actors engaged in moderate critique with those promoting overtly far-right and radical narratives. At the same time, political passion enables antagonistic actors who feel marginalised

or silenced in public discourse to forge affective bonds with like-minded individuals. In this sense, political passion facilitates meaningful political engagement, which, according to Mouffe, is rooted in the formation of collective identities. Our study shows that antagonistic engagement can arise through diverse ideological frameworks that shape collective identity. Within the clusters, a shared sense of “we” is clearly present – drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders, while simultaneously reinforcing collective identity. This rhetoric has its roots in far-right populism, which is built on the antagonistic relationship between “the people” / “us”, the elites, and “the dangerous others” / “them” (Wodak, 2020).

Another notable feature is that the intensity of political engagement fluctuates across temporal and thematic contexts, often becoming particularly pronounced during periods of crisis. The network under examination initially emerged from discontent with the public discourse surrounding Covid-19 in Finland and later developed into a broader ecosystem. It is likely that such networks and ecosystems will continue to emerge and recede in response to the ebb and flow of political engagement. In other words, they are neither stable nor fixed in nature but rather reflect the shifting dynamics of public discourse and the narratives circulating within alternative spaces.

This study is not without its limitations. The architecture of Telegram’s platform imposed certain limitations on our data collection, as we were unable to access actors operating within private networks. Consequently, our analysis provides only an approximated representation of an ecosystem of alternative Finnish actors that emerged during a specific period. As such, it serves primarily as an illustrative example of how these types of actors communicate and the kinds of clusters that can be identified through the information flow between them. However, given the clear parallels with far-right rhetoric (Wodak, 2020) and the ideological attitudes commonly observed among users of right-wing alternative media across Scandinavia (Steen-Johnsen et al., 2025), we argue that our sample contributes to and reinforces existing research through its observations.

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Appendix


Table A1 Initial 74 groups

1	RapsodiaUutiskanava	https://t.me/RapsodiaUutiskanava
2	PoliceForFreedomSuomi	https://t.me/PoliceForFreedomSuomi
3	Janus Putkonen – Uutisia ja kuulumisia (SÄHKEET/TIEDOTTEET)	https://t.me/JanusTelegram https://t.me/janusputkonenCHAT
4	Tiedonvirta  Suomi 	https://t.me/tiedonvirta
5	The Finnish Awakening 	https://t.me/finlandrebellionnews
6	Valkohaalarit Valtakunnallinen	https://t.me/valkohaalarit
7	Sananvapaus ja perusoikeudet Suomi ry	https://t.me/sananvap_perusoik_suomi
8	Kotiinpaluuheimo	https://t.me/kotiinpaluuheimo
9	Henna Maria	https://t.me/hennamaria22
10	VASTAAN SANOMAT	https://t.me/vastaansanomat
11	Totuuden Etsijät	https://t.me/totuudenetsijat
12	Totuuden Etsijät keskustelee vol 2	https://t.me/+Jreet6lQ5jxkOTk0
13	Uutishuone	https://t.me/uutishuone
14	Me Kansa Kansanliike	https://t.me/MeKansa
15	Z-Uutiset Z-News Official	https://t.me/johanfin
16	VALOMEDIA	https://t.me/Valomedia
17	Valo Paljastaa	https://t.me/valopaljastaa
18	Kalevan Miekka – Tiedotuskanava	https://t.me/kalevanmiekka_tiedotus
19	QAnon Finland	https://t.me/QAnonFinland
20	Jaana Kavonius ryhmä	https://t.me/JaanaKavonius
21	UAP-kanava, Uuden Ajan Palvelut	https://t.me/uudenajanpalvelut
22	Totuus rokotteista .fi	https://t.me/totuusrokotteista
23	Vain hyviä uutisia!	https://t.me/vainhyviauutisia
24	Vapauden Puolesta	https://t.me/vpvirallinen
25	Partisaani	https://t.me/partisaani
26	VIDEOT ryhmä	https://t.me/tokentube
27	Totuus vapauttaa – viruksia ei ole olemassa	https://t.me/totuusvapauttaa
28	Totuus Raamatusta ja maailmasta	https://t.me/suomenraamattupiiri
29	MKR tiedotuskanava	https://t.me/mkrtiedotuskanava
30	Rokotehaitat ja rokotekuolemat	https://t.me/rokotehaitatjarokotekuolemat
31	Pelastetaan lapset / Uppo-Nalle Rescue	https://t.me/joinchat/4Ed4lcSUAelyZDg0
32	Suomen tulevaisuus	https://t.me/joinchat/KD3F28Ojiu9kNzJk
33	Koronatestit ja riskit	https://t.me/koronatestitjariskit
34	Kasvomaskit ja riskit	https://t.me/kasvomaskitjariskit
35	Corona Photo Bank	https://t.me/joinchat/yz-ku3XEXdY1NDk0
36	Corona Video Bank	https://t.me/joinchat/D9jwP6idvo8wYzc0

37	The Mikko Kemppe Podcast	https://t.me/kemppepodcast
38	Medical freedom for healthcare workers in Finland	https://t.me/joinchat/1hWQZt5d6dcxOGU0
39	Akin lakiapu	https://t.me/joinchat/bdZ7-08bqMBkZGRk
40	Elämä on..	https://t.me/koronakapinalliset
41	Vapaa Kansa	https://t.me/joinchat/SRSdnyfagqEcGMgx
42	Tietoisku	https://t.me/Tietoisku
43	Heränneiden Sinkkuryhmä	https://t.me/joinchat/UDdTaUIWu3dmZmQ0
44	World Wide Demonstration Finland	https://t.me/worldwidefinland
45	News in MEMES	https://t.me/newsinMEME
46	SUURKULKUE - pienin askelin	https://t.me/suurkulkue
47	Suurkulkue	https://t.me/suurkulkuekesustelee
48	Tiedonvirta	https://t.me/joinchat/ZLlojaUvV1hYjNk
49	Suomi Uutiset	https://t.me/suomiuutiset
50	Q Uutiset Suomi	https://t.me/QUutisetSuomi
51	Ryhmät ja kanavat Suomi	https://t.me/ryhmat_kanavat
52	Omavaraisempi elämä ja preppaus	https://t.me/joinchat/KgPRW9SrwXlzZGE8
53	Kotikoulu Uusimaa	https://t.me/joinchat/rn_4F6zsdxE3NTU0
54	Lastemme vapauden ja terveyden puolesta - Kanava	https://t.me/lastemmevapaudenpuolesta
55	Flyerit	https://t.me/flyerit
56	Jaetaan flyereitä	https://t.me/joinchat/NMwXGpVYahkzNDJk
57	Valkoinen ruusu	http://t.me/valkoinenruusu
58	Luomujen pakista	https://t.me/joinchat/QXy4sVku4R0wZjdk
59	Parents For Freedom	https://t.me/joinchat/3GIMKEUtbl04ZmNk
60	Juttutupa	https://t.me/yleislakko
61	Ei lasten ja nuorten Covid-rokotuksille	https://t.me/Laste_Nuorten_Vanhemmat
62	Merirosvoradio	https://t.me/merirosvoradiochat
63	Kadulle	https://t.me/kadulle
64	Pandemiaopas	https://t.me/pandemiaopas
65	Suomi Uutiset Talk	https://t.me/SuomiUutisetTalk
66	Rokotekriittiset	https://t.me/joinchat/mNqVAUqTFLU3OGJk
67	Totuus rokotteista	https://t.me/totuusrokotteista
68	Yrittäjät vapauden puolesta	https://t.me/yrittajatvapaudenpuolesta
69	Miekkarikyltit ja sloganit	https://t.me/miekkarikyltit
70	Valta Kuuluu Kansalle	https://t.me/vkkfi
71	Kanta-Hämeen heränteet	https://t.me/joinchat/i0kok4-OLp05OTRk
72	Suomen Keltaliivit R.I.C	https://t.me/SuomenKeltaliivit
73	KOKO MAAN KATTAVA KALENTERI MIELENILMAUKSET JA VASTAAVAT TAPAHTUMAT, VALMIIT YHTEISKULJETUKSET YMS.	https://t.me/TapahtumaKalenteri
74	AjatusRikos Tuotanto	https://t.me/ajatusrikostuotanto

Table A2 In-degree and out-degree of 47 Telegram accounts

Cluster	Account	Weighted in-degree	Weighted out-degree
Anti-mainstream critique	Elämä on..	2,173	1,916
	Henna Maria	10	0
	Kadulle	3	0
	Kasvomaskit ja riskit	22	66
	Koronatestit ja riskit	48	97
	Kotiinpaluuheimo	8	0
	News in MEMES	359	300
	Pandemiaopas	64	4
	Partisaani	24	0
	PoliceForFreedomSuomi	35	0
	RapsodiaUutiskanava	764	7
	Rokotehaitat ja rokotekuolemat	804	2,431
	Tiedonvirta 	1,330	2,608
	Totuuden Etsijät	77	0
	Totuus Raamatusta ja maailmasta	70	288
	Totuus vapauttaa – viruksia ei ole olemassa	69	94
	UAP-kanava, Uuden Ajan Palvelut	55	2
	Valkoinen ruusu	47	27
	Vapauden Puolesta	221	16
VASTAAN SANOMAT	11	0	
Western medicine critique	Jaana Kavonius ryhmä	82	14
	Kalevan Miekka – Tiedotuskanava	248	776
	Me Kansa Kansanliike	18	1
	Suomi Uutiset Talk	26	0
	Totuus rokotteista	687	500
	Vain hyviä uutisia!	348	389
	Valo Paljastaa	303	249
	VALOMEDIA	55	6
	VIDEOT ryhmä	255	15

	AjatusRikos Tuotanto	58	80
	Ei lasten ja nuorten Covid-rokotuksille	12	205
	Flyerit	12	54
	KOKO MAAN KATTAVA KALENTERI MIELENILMAUKSET JA VASTAAVAT TAPAHTUMAT, VALMIIT YHTEISKULJETUKSET YMS.	1,298	1,333
	Lastemme vapauden ja terveyden puolesta - Kanava	9	0
Protest mobilisation	Miekkarikyltit ja sloganit	160	439
	MKR tiedotuskanava	10	0
	Sananvapaus ja perusoikeudet Suomi ry	1,789	327
	Suomen Keltaliivit	11	68
	SUURKULKUE - pienin askelin	694	0
	Suurkulkue	1,365	2,199
	The Finnish Awakening 	164	329
	Valkohaalarit Valtakunnallinen	1,186	656
	Janus Putkonen – Uutisia ja kuulumisia (SÄHKEET/TIEDOTTEET)	770	2
Anti-democratic propaganda	Q Uutiset Suomi	331	2,256
	QAnon Finland	2,066	391
	Z-Uutiset Z-News Official	11	17

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