

The Role of Telegram Channels in Audience Media Consumption: Public Trust in Information, Critical Thinking, and Media Literacy

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of contemporary media consumption is increasingly associated with social networks and messaging platforms that combine interpersonal communication with mass information distribution. Telegram occupies a particularly important position in this process because its channel-based structure enables information to reach large audiences rapidly and with relatively few barriers between content producers and consumers. This article examines the role of Telegram channels in audience media consumption with particular attention to public trust in information, critical thinking, and media literacy. The study employs a qualitative analytical approach based on secondary data and scholarly research related to digital news consumption, Telegram use, misinformation, and media literacy. The findings indicate that Telegram provides audiences with speed, accessibility, thematic diversity, and convenient access to news; however, these advantages coexist with risks related to source anonymity, misinformation, repeated forwarding, insufficient verification, and the blurring of boundaries between professional journalism and user-generated content.

Keywords: Telegram channels, media consumption, audience, information trust, critical thinking, media literacy, digital journalism, misinformation, social media, Uzbekistan

INTRODUCTION

Digitalization has fundamentally changed the relationship between audiences and news. Information consumption was previously organized mainly around newspapers, radio, television, and the websites of established media organizations. Today, audiences increasingly encounter news through social media, video services, messengers, aggregators, and other third-party platforms. The Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2026* describes a continuing movement away from direct consumption through traditional news outlets and their own websites toward platform-based information environments. Across the markets covered by the report, social media and video networks reached 54% as news sources in 2026, while overall trust in news declined to 37% [1].

Telegram should be examined within this wider process of platformization. Unlike a conventional messenger limited to private communication, Telegram combines interpersonal messaging with public channels capable of distributing information to large audiences. Such channels may belong to professional news organizations, government bodies, bloggers, businesses, experts, activists, or anonymous administrators. Consequently, a single technological environment brings together verified journalism, commentary, advertising, eyewitness material, opinion, entertainment, and potentially misleading information. This issue is particularly significant in Uzbekistan because digital access has expanded rapidly. Official statistics reported 30.1 million Internet-connected subscribers in Uzbekistan as of 1 January 2024, representing an increase of 12.5% over the previous year [2]. The expansion of connectivity has increased opportunities to access information, but it has also increased the importance of audiences' ability to assess the credibility of what they receive.

Research focused specifically on Uzbek youth already illustrates this transition. Djumanova's survey of 7,827 respondents aged 16–30 found that social networks and messengers had become a major source of information and that young people actively consumed digital media. At the same time,

the study assessed the level of information-checking literacy as moderate and found weaknesses in understanding the manipulative and commercial nature of media messages [3].

Telegram's popularity can therefore be interpreted as a double-sided phenomenon. On one side, it democratizes access to information, allows audiences to follow specialized topics, and facilitates fast updates. On the other, speed and convenience may reduce the time users spend verifying authorship, evidence, context, or original sources.

Studies of Telegram news consumption suggest that users are attracted not simply by content but also by platform affordances. Lou et al. identified information seeking, socialization, and efficiency among important motivations for consuming news on Telegram, while accessibility, customization, and the possibility of conducting simultaneous activities facilitated this consumption [4]. In other words, Telegram's popularity is related not merely to what information it provides but also to how conveniently that information fits into everyday routines.

The problem of trust is more complicated. A 2024 Insight Business survey, reported by UzReport, involved 6,000 Telegram users in Uzbekistan and found that 54% of respondents trusted information encountered on the platform, while nearly 60% followed news channels [5]. The figure is useful for understanding audience attitudes, although it should be interpreted cautiously because the news report provides limited detail about sampling procedures and measurement methodology. Trust, however, cannot be equated with factual accuracy. A user may trust a channel because it is familiar, fast, emotionally convincing, frequently forwarded, or recommended by friends. None of these characteristics guarantees that its information has been professionally verified.

Accordingly, the central research problem of this article is the relationship between Telegram-based media consumption, trust in information, critical thinking, and media literacy.

The study addresses three research questions:

1. What functions do Telegram channels perform in contemporary audience media consumption?

2. How does Telegram-based news consumption interact with public trust and the risk of misinformation?
3. How can critical thinking and media literacy improve the quality of audience engagement with Telegram information?

The purpose of the study is to analyze Telegram channels not simply as technological tools but as components of the contemporary media ecosystem whose social effects depend strongly on audience competencies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research uses a qualitative analytical and secondary-data approach. No new questionnaire was administered and no original respondent percentages were created for this article. Instead, previously published empirical findings, official statistics, international reports, and peer-reviewed studies were selected and interpreted in relation to the research questions. Ten main sources published between 2017 and 2026 were included. They were selected according to four criteria: relevance to digital media consumption; direct relevance to Telegram or social-media news; analysis of trust or misinformation; and examination of media literacy or critical thinking.

RESULTS

The first major result of the analysis is that Telegram cannot be understood exclusively as a messaging application. For many users it performs functions traditionally associated with mass media: information selection, news distribution, commentary, notification, and thematic specialization. Its channel structure allows audiences to construct highly individualized information flows. A user may simultaneously subscribe to national news, local community channels, educational resources, job announcements, economic analysis, entertainment, and institutional updates. This creates a significant advantage: information efficiency. Instead of visiting several individual websites, users receive updates in a single interface. Lou et al.'s qualitative research similarly demonstrates that efficiency,

accessibility, and customization are important elements in Telegram news consumption [4]. Uzbekistan provides a particularly relevant context. Djumanova's earlier research reported Telegram as the most widely used social network/messenger in the country according to data available at the time of the study [3]. The continuing expansion of Internet connectivity further strengthens the conditions under which messaging platforms can become central information infrastructures [2].

However, convenience creates what may be called an information compression effect. Users encounter headlines, brief texts, screenshots, short videos, forwarded messages, and quotations removed from their original contexts. This may improve speed but reduce contextual depth.

The second finding concerns the distinction between subjective trust and objective credibility.

The 2024 survey reported by UzReport indicates that 54% of surveyed Uzbek Telegram users trusted information on the platform [5]. Yet international evidence demonstrates that platform-based information environments also contain significant misinformation risks.

Herasimenka, Bright, Knuutila, and Howard analyzed approximately 200,000 Telegram posts and examined the coexistence of professional news and misleading material on a relatively lightly moderated platform. Their study demonstrates that professional media and misinformation can circulate within the same Telegram ecosystem [6].

The implication is important. A Telegram channel's popularity, large subscriber count, attractive design, rapid posting frequency, or frequent forwarding should not independently be interpreted as indicators of credibility.

Trust may be based on several factors:

- familiarity with a channel;
- ideological agreement;
- recommendation by friends;
- repeated exposure;

- perceived insider knowledge;
- emotional language;
- rapid publication;
- visual professionalism;
- or association with a well-known name.

None of these features substitutes for evidence.

The global situation reinforces this distinction. The Reuters Institute reports that overall trust in news stood at 37% in 2026, whereas trust in news encountered specifically on social media was considerably lower, at 22%. Concern about false or misleading online information reached 62% across the surveyed markets [1]. Thus, audiences appear to experience a paradox: they increasingly depend on platform-based news while remaining concerned about its reliability.

Table 1. *Analytical relationship between Telegram media consumption, trust, critical thinking, and media literacy [1; 3; 4; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10].*

Dimension	Main opportunity	Main risk	Required audience competence
Media consumption	Rapid and convenient access to diverse information	Information overload and superficial consumption	Purposeful selection of channels
Trust	Direct access to institutional, journalistic, and expert sources	Trust based on popularity or familiarity rather than evidence	Evaluation of authorship and credibility
Forwarding and sharing	Rapid dissemination of socially valuable information	Fast reproduction of false or decontextualized claims	Verification before sharing
Critical thinking	Possibility of comparing multiple perspectives	Confirmation bias and emotionally driven interpretation	Evidence comparison and source tracking
Media literacy	Access to diverse digital resources and fact-checking tools	Lack of knowledge about verification techniques	Fact-checking, reverse search, contextual reading, and cross-referencing

The third major finding is that exposure to information and acceptance of information are two different stages.

A media-literate audience does not necessarily reject Telegram. Instead, it changes the way Telegram is used.

An ordinary consumption pattern may be represented as:

Receive → Read → Believe → Forward

A critical pattern is more complex:

Receive → Identify source → Examine evidence → Compare sources → Evaluate context → Decide whether to trust/share

This distinction is supported by empirical research on youth. Ku et al. investigated 1,505 adolescents aged 12–18 and found that critical thinking about real-life news was associated with internal motivation to seek news, cautious attitudes toward personalized information systems, and the habit of tracking news sources [8].

These findings are particularly relevant to Telegram because messages are frequently forwarded. Once a post is separated from its original channel or copied into another channel, users may focus on the message itself while ignoring its origin.

For example, consider a hypothetical Telegram message:

BREAKING: From tomorrow, all universities will move to online classes. Share immediately.

A low-verification response is to forward the post because it appears urgent.

A critical response asks:

- Who announced this?
- Is there a link to the responsible ministry?
- When was the announcement published?
- Is the image current or recycled?
- Have established news organizations independently reported it?

Critical thinking therefore acts as a cognitive barrier between information exposure and information acceptance.

Evidence from Uzbekistan shows that this barrier is not always sufficiently strong. In Djumanova's study, 66.3% of respondents did not question the authenticity of a fake landscape photograph presented to them, while only 11% indicated that they could disprove it with online tools. The same study characterized information-checking media literacy as moderate [3].

These results indicate that being digitally active does not automatically mean being digitally critical.

The fourth result concerns media literacy. Media literacy should not be reduced to knowing how to operate a smartphone or subscribe to a Telegram channel. Functional digital competence and critical media competence are not identical. UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy framework emphasizes competencies connected with understanding information, digital information processing, misinformation and disinformation, audiences, media influence, privacy, social media, and responsible participation in the communications environment [7].

In the context of Telegram, media literacy can be operationalized through a set of practical questions:

Who is the source?

A named editorial institution carries different accountability from an unidentified administrator.

What is the original source?

A Telegram post saying "according to experts" should lead the reader to ask which experts and where the original statement can be found.

Is independent confirmation available?

Important claims should preferably be compared with at least one or two independent credible sources.

Is the date correct?

Old photographs, videos, or announcements can be recirculated as current events.

Does the headline match the evidence?

Emotionally intense headlines may exaggerate what the attached document actually says.

Why is the user being encouraged to share immediately?

Artificial urgency can discourage verification. Research on fake-news perceptions also supports educational rather than purely restrictive responses. Jang and Kim found that perceptions surrounding fake news were associated with support for media-literacy interventions, illustrating the recognized role of education in combating misinformation [9].

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that Telegram's impact on audiences is neither entirely positive nor entirely negative. Its influence depends on the interaction of three elements: platform characteristics, content quality, and audience competence.

Telegram's architecture makes it especially effective for rapid information dissemination. A news organization can publish breaking information directly to subscribers. Government institutions can communicate without waiting for television broadcasting schedules. Local communities can receive immediate alerts. Experts can develop specialized audiences without owning expensive media infrastructure.

These characteristics make Telegram valuable for contemporary journalism. At the same time, exactly the same technological efficiency is available to unreliable information producers. A false claim can be distributed with nearly the same speed and visual appearance as a verified report.

This produces what can be described as a credibility-equality problem: at the level of interface design, credible and non-credible posts may look remarkably similar.

For example:

- Channel A: professional editorial team, transparent ownership, named journalist, original documents.
- Channel B: anonymous administrator, no source citation, emotionally charged claims.

Both can publish a text message containing a photograph, headline, emoji, and “forward” button. The technological form itself does not tell the audience which one follows journalistic standards.

As a result, responsibility shifts partly toward the user's verification behaviour. However, it would be incorrect to place the entire burden on individuals. Media organizations also have responsibilities. Professional Telegram channels can improve trust by clearly identifying sources, linking primary documents, correcting mistakes transparently, distinguishing advertising from editorial content, and avoiding sensational headlines.

Educational institutions have another role. Critical media skills should become part of general education rather than being restricted to journalism students. This need is supported by Uzbekistan-specific evidence: 63.7% of participants in Djumanova's study supported introducing media education and media-literacy learning designed to help young people recognize fake information and develop critical thinking [3].

The need for such education is consistent with UNESCO's understanding of media and information literacy as a broader competence for navigating complex communications environments [7].

Another important issue is confirmation bias. Telegram users choose which channels to subscribe to. This autonomy is convenient, but it can also create a highly selective information environment. If a person follows only channels that confirm existing beliefs, repeated exposure may strengthen confidence without necessarily increasing factual understanding.

Mihailidis & Viotty emphasize that contemporary media literacy must address not merely technical ability but also polarization, distrust, connectivity, and the rapid spreadability of information in digital culture [10]. Accordingly, mature media literacy should include the willingness to examine information that challenges one's existing position.

A useful distinction can therefore be made among three types of Telegram users:

- Passive consumers primarily receive information and evaluate it intuitively.
- Selective consumers intentionally choose preferred channels but may remain within a narrow information environment.
- Critical consumers choose sources deliberately, verify significant claims, distinguish fact from opinion, compare competing interpretations, and avoid forwarding unverified material.

The goal of media education should be to increase the proportion of the third group. The findings also suggest that trust should become conditional rather than absolute. A media-literate person does not need to say, "I trust Telegram" or "I do not trust Telegram." Telegram is a distribution infrastructure, not a single editorial institution. A more rational formulation is:

I evaluate the reliability of each claim according to its source, evidence, context, and independent confirmation.

This represents a fundamental change from platform trust to evidence-based trust.

CONCLUSION

Telegram channels have become an influential element of contemporary media consumption because they offer audiences speed, accessibility, personalization, thematic diversity, and convenient integration into everyday communication. Their role is especially important in highly connected digital environments

such as Uzbekistan, where Internet access and messenger-based communication have expanded significantly.

The study demonstrates, however, that increased access to information does not automatically lead to better-informed audiences. Telegram brings professional journalism, institutional communication, expert commentary, personal opinion, advertising, and misleading information into the same technological space.

Public trust therefore needs to be interpreted carefully. Trust in a channel may be based on familiarity, popularity, emotional appeal, or repeated exposure, whereas the reliability of information depends on evidence, transparent sourcing, and verification. Critical thinking is the central mechanism separating simple exposure from informed judgment. Audiences need to identify original sources, distinguish facts from interpretations, compare independent reports, check dates and visual materials, and resist pressure to share unverified information immediately.

Media literacy consequently becomes a practical form of information hygiene. Its purpose is not to discourage people from using Telegram, but to enable them to use it more intelligently. The broader implication is that the future quality of digital media consumption depends on three interconnected actors: platforms should support information integrity, professional media should maintain transparent journalistic standards, and audiences should develop critical verification skills. In this sense, the key question is no longer whether Telegram itself is trustworthy. The more productive question is whether audiences possess sufficient media literacy to distinguish trustworthy information from unreliable content within Telegram's complex information environment.

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