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The Battle for Dominance on Telegram: Mainstream vs. Alternative News Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ukraine

Bitwa o dominację na Telegramie: tradycyjne vs. alternatywne relacje informacyjne o pandemii COVID-19 w Ukrainie

ABSTRAKT

W prezentowanym tekście analizie poddano relacje informacyjne dotyczące pandemii COVID-19 na Ukrainie. W swoim badaniu Autor porównuje posty publikowane na platformie społecznościowej-Telegram (n=4427) prezentowane przez tradycyjne i alternatywne media informacyjne w dwóch odrębnych miesiącach (okres od 9 listopada do 9 grudnia 2020 r., oraz okres od 24 lutego do 24 marca 2021 r.), stosując ilościową analizę treści oraz metodę porównawczą. Wyniki pokazują wyraźną różnicę między postami tradycyjnych i alternatywnych mediów pod względem tematów i źródeł, ale nie w tonie emocjonalnym, co może wskazywać, iż tradycyjne i alternatywne media kierują się różnymi priorytetami podczas prezentacji informacji. Co więcej, pierwsza kategoria mediów opublikowała więcej wpisów na temat pandemii niż druga, a liczba źródeł politycznych przewyższa liczbę źródeł medycznych. Dodatkowo, na podstawie uzyskanych informacji badawczych, można wyciągnąć wniosek, że zarówno tradycyjne, jak i alternatywne media informacyjne przyczyniały się do upolitycznienia pandemii koronawirusa na Ukrainie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: COVID-19, Telegram, tradycyjne media informacyjne, alternatywne media informacyjne, Ukraina

Introduction

The New Year’s Eve of 2020 took place as usual. People bought gifts, prepared for the celebration and made plans for the upcoming year. At the time, no one suspected that a new type of coronavirus had been detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan. The

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World Health Organization registered the first cases of this disease with symptoms of “pneumonia of unknown aetiology”\(^1\). Two months later, SARS-CoV-2, known as COVID-19, turned into a “pandemic” that spread around the world\(^2\). Up to this moment, the official statistics indicate 599,825,400 confirmed cases, including 6,469,458 deaths. A total of 12,449,443,718 vaccine doses have been used to fight it\(^4\).

The virus became a surprise and a great challenge for politicians as well as medical specialists. They closed educational institutions, cities, and even entire countries for quarantine, encouraged people to wear medical masks, introduced restrictions on the operation of public transport, etc. It was important to reduce the number of infected people and overcome mass panic. The latter element was caused by insufficient knowledge of the problem. Thus, communication policy came to the forefront concerning the relations between authorities, health workers and citizens.

According to a global survey on the consumption of news about COVID-19, television remained the dominant source of information with varying degrees of trust, whereas the second place was taken by online sources\(^5\). Some researchers found that Internet media were even more popular than traditional media\(^6\). It has to be admitted that this trend will continue to evolve. Digital 2022 report summarized that 62.5% of the world’s population uses the Internet, while the number of active social media users has crossed the mark of 4.62 billion\(^7\). As an example, the author of this article does not have a TV at all.

Social media platforms have occupied one of the most prominent places in news communication about the pandemic. They offered a variety of sources: from traditional media (professional journalists) to alternative media (citizens’ journalism). On the one hand, it led to the possibility of choosing from a huge amount of diverse information. On the other hand, it created a risk of consuming fake news, manipulations, conspiracy theories and misleading rumours\(^8\).

The results of the literature review showed that scientists focus mostly on the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, China, Spain, Poland, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico in their research related to the coverage of COVID-19 on social media platforms. However, they completely ignored Ukraine. As of 15 November 2020, the country was in the world’s

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The top 10 in terms of the spread of coronavirus\(^9\). It is important to mention that the first case was registered there on 3 March 2020, when the pandemic was already spreading at a significant pace in other countries of the ranking\(^10\). It can be assumed that part of the problem of rapid growth was not only the quality of medical services but also the poor information policy. The level of distrust in vaccines only confirms this point. As of 3 November 2021, more than half of the citizens (54.6%) did not want to be vaccinated\(^11\).

The media diet of an ordinary Ukrainian reflects the global one. According to a survey, media (63.3%) and social networks (48.8%) were among the most popular sources of information about coronavirus nova disease COVID-19\(^12\). Despite the fact that other researchers chose Facebook (mostly), Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, Reddit, Weibo and JinriToutiao for their investigation, the author decided to take a different path. This article focuses on Telegram as a platform that showed the highest growth rates of users in Ukraine from May 2018 to July 2021\(^13\).

The main aim of this paper is to analyze and compare coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Telegram channels of mainstream news media and alternative news media. It is transformed into the following research question:

**RQ1.** How does the coronavirus pandemic differ in coverage of mainstream news media and alternative news media on Telegram?

In order to find the answer to the main question, the author posed the following sub-questions:

**RQ1a.** Who is more active in publishing about the COVID-19 pandemic?

**RQ1b.** Are there any differences between mainstream and alternative news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of topics communicated via Telegram?

**RQ1c.** Are there any differences between mainstream and alternative news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of sources mentioned on Telegram?

**RQ1d.** Are there any differences between mainstream and alternative news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the story tone expressed via Telegram posts?

The research will accept or reject the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Political sources are more popular than health sources of information about the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the first attempt to include all of these components of analysis in one article.

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\(^13\) In Ukraine, the most popular social networks in July were determined, PRM.ua, [https://prm.ua/v-ukrini-vyznychli-naypopularnish-sotsmerezhi-za-lypen/](https://prm.ua/v-ukrini-vyznychli-naypopularnish-sotsmerezhi-za-lypen/) (10.05.2022).
Literature review

The new type of coronavirus has given impetus to research around the world. In particular, its media coverage was examined through the prism of sources, actors, themes, frames, emotional tonality and fake news. The authors worked with traditional media as well as social media. The time frame of the selected studies is from 2020 to 2022, as the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020.

Research in journalism has analyzed the uses of sources and actors by mainstream news organizations in social media posts about the pandemic. Media outlets from Europe (Germany, Spain, the UK) and America (the US, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico) were represented in it. The researchers chose Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for the examination. The results showed the global dominance of political sources (51.2%). They were more important in the countries of Latin America, while the same was true for doctors and other medical workers in the UK and the US. Health sources were the second (17.5%), and citizens – were the third (8.1%). The inclusion of actors reflected the same positioning14.

Zenan Chen and Xiaoge Xu compared how two Chinese news media, Xinhua News Agency (party-controlled) and The Paper (market-oriented), reported COVID-19 on their Jinri Toutiao15 accounts. They focused on user engagement, news framing and story tone. According to the results, both media organizations used episodic framing16 more than thematic framing17. The story tone of The Paper was positive, while Xinhua produced neutral news. User engagement metrics are irrelevant to the current article18.

A similar international comparison between the New York Times (the US, Twitter) and People’s Daily (China, Weibo) was made by Cindy Sing Bik Ngai Le Yao and Rita Gill Singh. The Chinese media outlet was more diverse in themes regarding coping strategies than the American one. Among the most popular were “national campaign for pandemic control” for the former and “pandemic control” for the latter. A positive tone with corresponding emotions dominated the posts of People’s Daily, whereas The New York Times took a different direction regarding this issue19.

Another study, which investigated topics posted by US media on Facebook, added a survey method. It was done to reveal a “crisis coverage gap” between the news the public wanted and the posts the users received. Among the important findings,
the government’s response was the most frequently covered theme (34% in March, 20% in April, 25% in June), followed by business issues (21%, 21%, 20%), information about positive tests (18%, 14%, 27%) and economic effects (14%, 20%, 16%)20.

Spain was chosen as the next country to examine the dissemination of news about the COVID-19 crisis by national media through their social media profiles. According to the results, international issues received the most interactions on Facebook, social issues did the same on Instagram, government management and current affairs were among the dominant ones on Twitter, and personal stories were the most popular on YouTube. Perceptions of risk and uncertainty are also recognized as contributing to the demand for information21.

Additionally, a group of articles was devoted to the analysis of framing practices and the identification of sources in traditional media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Austin Hubner demonstrated that the outbreak (n=397), economic consequences (n=149) and social consequences (n=137) were the most common frames in the early stages of the pandemic. At the same time, citizens (n=927), interest groups individuals (n=722), and politicians (n=712) received the highest number of citations in The New York Times and The Washington Post. Unfortunately, public health officials (n=573) and the medical industry (n=238) were placed in the 7th and 8th position respectively22. Rui Zhang, who focused on the coverage of the lockdowns in Wuhan and Italy on the website of the New York Times, reached a similar conclusion. He emphasized the priority of political frames over health and science23. These results were partially confirmed in another research with a larger sample that included American newspapers as well as TV networks. The former mentioned politicians more often than scientists in their coverage, while the latter more equally used both sources24. Examination of the discourse in Germany also revealed the dominance of executive actors from government and political administration (37%), the prominent role of interest groups (almost 24%) and scientists (slightly more than 10%). The negative trend continued in relation to medical representatives, which accounted for significantly less than 5% of the references being made25. If we take the case of Serbia, health care (54%) and political instrumentalization (41%) were the main framing patterns26.

Some authors combined traditional and social media in their research. At least one

of them found that health-related topics appeared most frequently. Their main feature was high scientific quality. Sensationalism was attributed to politics and foreign affairs\textsuperscript{27}. In contrast, another paper summarized the low presence of topics about health once again. “Politics,” “global nature of the crisis,” and “testing/response” were among the most popular on Twitter. Reddit was represented through the themes of “epidemic” in general, its impact on “society,” and its “consequences.” Researchers noted that the low inclusion of news from the health sector could cause the spread of misinformation\textsuperscript{28}. For instance, socio-political fakes (76.24\%) prevailed in the content of Polish mainstream media on the Internet (websites, fan pages on social media, information portals), and medical ones (12.87\%) took second place\textsuperscript{29}.

A group of scholars prepared two separate articles on messages that appeared on the Facebook pages of mainstream news media and alternative news media in Germany. If the former emphasized the topics of “number of infected and dead,” “first chains of infection,” and “medical experts,” the latter focused on “number of infected and countermeasures,” “failure of governments in crisis management,” and “economic crisis due to misguided political action.” As you can see, the alternative media outlets were clearly opposed to the authorities. Additionally, the list of included names differed between these two types of news media. Alternative journalists used the strategy of personalization, while mainstream was more diverse in their references. Nonetheless, there were more politicians than leading experts and virologists, so the main trend remained the same. The next part of both studies identified fake news and conspiracy theories. The story about the laboratory origin of the coronavirus received the most interactions among readers of alternative media. The same applies to the fake about ibuprofen in mainstream media posts, which seemed to increase the progression of the disease\textsuperscript{30,31}.

In conclusion, the politicization of coverage of the COVID-19 crisis is high in terms of both frames and sources. Only a few articles indicated that the number of health-related posts exceeded the number of political ones. We could observe the difference in themes. One of the most visible was news stories about the government’s response to the pandemic. Moreover, a whole variety of emotions appeared in the studies. They depended on the ideology of the country of the particular media. Finally, the measurement of sources showed that politicians outnumbered medical representatives. The aforementioned research questions and the posed hypothesis are based on these results.

\textsuperscript{27} Mach K. J., Salas Reyes R., Pentz B., Taylor J., Costa C. A., Cruz S. G., ... Klenk N., News media coverage of COVID-19 public health and policy information, „Humanities and Social Sciences Communications“, 2021, nr 8(1), s. 8.
\textsuperscript{31} Boberg S., Quandt T., Schatto-Eckrodt T., & Frischlich L., Pandemic Populism..., op. cit., s. 1-21.
Alternative news media

Mainstream news media have earned a reputation of being hierarchical, biased, manipulative, elite-oriented, and even “oppressive” organizations owned by media groups. Traditional newsrooms consist of professional journalists. Their work depends on advertising sales. The content they produce is distributed primarily to a mass audience. It is important to specify this in order to understand the concept of alternative news media. The latter is characterized as a “counter-force or watchdog” or as a “corrective of ‘traditional,’ ‘legacy’ or ‘mainstream’ news media in a given sociocultural and historical context.”

Alternative news media is a civic form of journalism, or self-managed citizen journalism, where consumers become producers. Their reproduction technologies are simple and cheap, while the content is available and widely distributed, for example, through social media platforms. It is radical and critical in nature. A standard of objectivity is replaced by prioritization of specific news values, overt advocacy of different normative ideas, use of various sourcing practices, and establishment of audience relations. Other features are the absence of hierarchy in their structure and the symmetric distribution of power. What follows, is that: “The ecosystem of the alt-right alternative media” challenges “the national legacy news system” on the macro-level.

A new type of media has already become a significant part of the media landscape. It can transform into the mainstream and vice versa. The degree of alterness is determined by the number of differences from traditional media. On the one hand, people decide to join alternative news media because of a desire to help their workers, because of an attempt to “change the world,” and because of a dislike of mainstream and commercial news media. On the other hand, people may choose to read alternative news media in the case of COVID-19 in order to express disagreement with governments, their actions and statements.

According to Christian Fuchs, the academic field of alternative news media is “under-resourced, under-represented, and under-researched.”

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Method

In the current study, the focus is on both mainstream and alternative news media channels in Ukraine. Their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic was analyzed through Telegram posts. Since there is no app for data collection from Telegram, the author did it manually by taking screenshots. The database was created in more than a week (11 May 2022 – 22 May 2022). This was the time when message consumption changed from active to passive. No drastic changes were expected in it. Finally, these screenshots transformed into 4427 posts (2696 from mainstream news media and 1731 from alternative news media). They were obtained from public Telegram channels.

The sample consists of three mainstream news media (Television News Service, Country Policy and BBC News Ukraine) and three alternative ones (Ukraine 24/7, Ukraine Now, and Telegram News Service). The former were chosen based on different ideologies. Television News Service (originally ТСН новини / TCH.ia or Телевізійна служба новин) is the account of the pro-Ukrainian TV channel of the same name; Country Policy (Політика Страны) is the account of the pro-Russian website Strana.ua; and BBC News Ukraine (BBC NEWS Україна) is the account of the Ukrainian service of the British Broadcasting Corporation. In contrast, the most popular alternative news media, as of 9 November 2020, were selected for the examination. Ukraine 24/7 (Україна 24/7) had 457 thousand subscribers, Ukraine Now (Україна сьогодні) – 449 thousand and Telegram News Service (ТСН от Телеграмма служба новин) – 202 thousand.43

The research period covers two separate months. The first started on 9 November 2020, when Pfizer and BioNTech announced the effectiveness of its vaccine, and ended on 9 December 2020.44 The second began on 24 February 2021, when the first person was vaccinated in Ukraine and ended on 24 March 2021.45 The author considers these dates as peak seasons. Furthermore, the number of sick people rose during winter and spring, which additionally contributed to the final decision to include these periods in the analysis.

Quantitative content analysis and comparative methods are applied in this research. This is the first paper that uses this combination of methods in relation to the Telegram platform. It focuses on topics, sources, story tone, and the number of posts about the COVID-19 pandemic. The first two elements in the codebook were created through a two-step, inductive-deductive approach. An individual post could include more than one topic, source or emotion. Hence, their number can exceed the number of posts.

The author did manual coding. The main prerequisite for a complete analysis of

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the post was the presence of a reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. All results were recorded in two Excel coding sheets (mainstream and alternative news media) and rechecked. All calculations were made using a PSPP program.

Results

As mentioned above, Television News service, Country Policy, and BBC News Ukraine represented mainstream news media in this study. The number of their subscribers was significantly lower than that of alternative news media. Despite the fact that these are well-known traditional media, Television News Service had 59 thousand of them, Country Policy – 38 thousand, and BBC News Ukraine – 26 thousand. The first and third media of the aforementioned media platforms developed their Telegram channels in Ukrainian, while Country Policy – in Russian. The Bio of the Television News Service channel contained a link to its website and a contact for commercial cooperation. More links (to a website, YouTube channel and Facebook page) were included in the Bio of Country Policy. Its description stated, “News and analytics on the situation in Ukraine from the online newspaper “Strana.” In addition, BBC News Ukraine’s Bio confirmed that it is an official account and mentioned links to a website, Facebook page and Instagram account.

Ukraine 24/7, Ukraine Now, and Telegram News Service represent alternative news media in this research. Their popularity seems dangerous because all these Telegram channels are anonymous. The first and the second channel were developed in Russian, and the third – in Ukrainian. Telegram News Service could be easily confused with Television News Service because of their Ukrainian abbreviation (TCH). The Bio of the channel of Ukraine 24/7 included contact for advertising, a link to their chat and a link to their bot that anonymously receives content from subscribers. They called themselves “the main Telegram channel of Ukraine,” where current and hot topics can be discussed without censorship 24/7. The Bio of Ukraine Now explained that it posts news, photos and videos. The channel claimed to be a reliable source of information for its users. Their authors left a contact for advertising, and a corresponding bot at the disposal of their users and added links to their other Telegram channels. The last alternative media channel analysed in this study was the Telegram News Service. Its Bio included the same type of contact information as the previous ones.

In reporting the COVID-19 pandemic, mainstream news media (n=803) generated more posts on their Telegram channels than alternative news media (n=667). This is the answer to the first sub-question (RQ1a). However, the number of posts about the coronavirus constituted a smaller part of the content in both types of media (Figure 1). Furthermore, all mainstream news media posts about the pandemic received 15.5 million views, while alternative news media posts were viewed 76.7 million times. At this point, it seems important to specify their most popular posts altogether. Country Policy reported on police beating of anti-quarantine protesters in Hague (around
81 thousand views). At the same time, options for business assistance during the pandemic (around 712.5 thousand) were posted on Ukraine Now.

Figure 1. The number of posts published by Telegram channels of mainstream news media and alternative news media.

Mainstream news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic on Telegram was dominated by medium-sized posts (between 141 and 1000 characters, n=576). Most of them included hyperlinks (n=630). A possible reason for that was that mainstream news media wanted to get a high number of views not only on their Telegram channels but also on their other websites. It is a risky strategy because not all readers follow the links, which means that they consume incomplete information about a particular event. In addition, the number of emojis in the posts was significant (n=389), but not overwhelming (without, n=414). According to the author’s observations, only the channels of Television News Service and BBC News Ukraine informed readers about the successful trials of the vaccine against coronavirus on 9 November 2020. They also frequently published “Highlights of the Day” posts. Country Policy paid attention to the Russian vaccine “Sputnik” and compared the pandemic in Ukraine with the Russian situation. Its posts can be described as mini-articles.

Middle-sized posts (n=592) also dominated in alternative news coverage of the pandemic on Telegram. Most of them were original (n=393), and a big part had hyperlinks to related Telegram channels or other websites (n=265). The majority of
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posts contained photo(s) (n=498). According to the author’s observation, they started the day by publishing statistics of illnesses, recoveries and deaths from COVID-19. At some point, Telegram News Service stopped doing this. Furthermore, Ukraine Now and Telegram News Service used videos from mainstream news media in several posts.

Mainstream media and alternative media could present the same news in different ways. For example, Television News Service emphasized that 40% of Ukrainians do not want to be vaccinated against the coronavirus, while Ukraine 24/7 reported that 60% support this idea (Figure 2). Reporters of Television News Service wrote, “Ukraine will take part in clinical trials of a new coronavirus vaccine.” Instead, citizen journalists of Ukraine 24/7 came out with the following text, “They plan to test a new type of vaccine on Ukrainians” (Figure 3). Hence, readers of these Telegram channels could develop completely opposite perceptions of the same information.

Figures 2 and 3. Coverage of the same news by mainstream media and alternative media.

Source: Own elaboration

The second sub-question (RQ1b) asked whether there were differences between mainstream news media and alternative news media in terms of topics. In order to answer it, the author selected a model of 14 topics. The government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic (n=461) included posts about the actions of international, state and local authorities in the fight against the coronavirus. Everything related to numbers, such as positive cases, death, new variants of the disease, and hospital bed loads were incorporated into the topic of coronavirus statistics and development (n=394). This was followed by the topic of vaccination (n=333), which included all relevant posts. The next topic concerned personal stories (n=126). It was focused on individual cases of the disease. Useful information related to the COVID-19 pandemic (n=122) contained various explanations, specifications of decisions and other important details. Subsequently, the topic of business response to the COVID-19 pandemic (n=92) included information on (non-)compliance with quarantine measures by airlines, restaurants, resorts, etc. Economic dynamics (n=22) revealed various rankings, profits and losses of countries or

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oligarchs, financial issues that were not related to the actions of authorities. Predictions (n=15) incorporated posts about the possible development of the pandemic. Religious issues (n=6) reflected the actions of churches during the COVID-19 period. Environmental issues (n=6) were about the impact of the coronavirus on animals and our environment. Comedy (n=6) included memes and jokes. The topic of the coronavirus outbreak (n=1) was related to the possibilities of its origin and, finally, fact checks (n=1) also included one relevant post. The author assigned 66 topics to the category of others.

The bar chart (Figure 4) presented below illustrates the distribution of topics on Telegram channels of mainstream news media and alternative news media.

**Figure 4. Topics in Telegram posts published by mainstream news media and alternative news media**

![Bar chart showing topic distribution](image)

Source: Own elaboration

As can be observed, both the former (n=244) and the latter (n=217) mostly focused their attention on the government’s response to the pandemic. It was the dominant theme for both types of media. In particular, there were a number of posts regarding discussions about possible quarantine measures. However, there were observable differences in news coverage of other topics. While mainstream news media posted more about vaccination (n=211), alternative news media showed more coronavirus
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statistics (n=216). It is important to note that these themes were in the top 3 of both media types but in the opposite order. Similarly, personal stories ranked fourth (n=71) in mainstream and fifth (n=55) in alternative coverage, useful information – fourth (n=59) in alternative and sixth (n=63) in mainstream coverage, and business response – fifth (n=66) in mainstream and sixth (n=26) in alternative coverage. Other topics were less common.

Moving to the third sub-question (RQ1c), the author grouped the sources into 14 categories: no source (n=659), political (n=347), health (n=236), media (n=135), business (n=33), anonymous (n=32), police/security/emergency services (n=27), citizen (n=17), scientific and academic sources (n=13), legal (n=3), celebrity (n=3), religious (n=3). The author assigned 34 sources to the category of others.

The chart below (Figure 5) details the number of these sources on Telegram channels of mainstream news media and alternative news media.

**Figure 5. Sources in Telegram posts published by mainstream news media and alternative news media.**

![Sources](chart.png)

Source: Own elaboration.
As it can be seen, journalists from both sides published the majority of their posts without sources. This is a serious violation of professional standards. The second common trend was the popularity of political sources. Both types of media had almost identical figures (n=174 versus n=173). There were no other important similarities. Mainstream news media provided references to themselves or their colleagues (n=121). There was no need for alternative news media to do the same as they function exclusively on social media platforms. Therefore, health sources were the third most popular category in their posts (n=129). Mainstream news media cited these sources 107 times. Unfortunately, there was no other source that was mentioned more than 100 times. Business representatives received equally low exposure in both types of media, but their number doubled in mainstream coverage (n=23). Interestingly, the popularity of anonymous sources also prevailed in mainstream news media (n=23). In conclusion, there are differences between mainstream and alternative news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of sources mentioned on Telegram.

The finding of this study also confirmed the proposed hypothesis (H1). Political sources are more popular than health sources of information about the COVID-19 pandemic. This was true in general (political n=347, health n=236), and specifically in the mainstream (n=174, n=107) and alternative (n=173, n=129) news coverage.

The fourth sub-question (RQ1d) concerned whether there were differences between mainstream news media and alternative news media in terms of the story tone. The author identified neutral (n=918), negative (n=456) and positive (n=148) emotional tones of the posts. The results are presented below:

**Figure 6. Story tone in Telegram posts published by mainstream news media and alternative news media.**
What can be observed in the chart above, is that if we analyze mainstream news media and alternative news media separately, the trend remains the same. It seems that there are no differences in terms of the story tone expressed via Telegram posts when mainstream and alternative media are compared.

Additionally, the author decided to analyze the topic of vaccination separately. The findings showed that neutral emotions predominated in both mainstream (n=127) and alternative (n=64) coverage, while positive (n=39, n=24) and negative emotions (n=45, n=34) were close in number. It emphasizes the informative nature of this theme.

**Conclusion**

After comparing COVID-19 news reporting in Ukraine, it was revealed that Telegram channels of mainstream media and alternative media differ from each other in the number of posts, as well as in the way they prioritize topics and sources. For instance, coronavirus statistics were more important than vaccination, useful information prevailed over personal stories and business issues in the case of alternative news media whereas the opposite was true for mainstream news media. Moreover, mainstream news media preferred media sources to health sources, and anonymous sources to police, security and other emergency services. A different trend could be observed in alternative media’s news coverage. Additionally, mainstream news media were more active in publishing info about the COVID-19 pandemic than alternative news media. The only similarities that were observed concerned the story tone expressed via Telegram posts.

This study also demonstrated that political sources were more popular than health sources. These findings were in accordance with the literature, as the topic of the government’s response was considered the most popular. After all, the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic was highly politicized at a time when the need for the health sector to dominate in the news coverage was significant.

To conclude, this article makes a small but significant contribution to the existing research on media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. It reveals the Telegram platform as an important part of the Ukrainian media landscape, which goes beyond the trends in communication studies. Moreover, it demonstrates the rapid development of alternative media channels. Despite the lack of information about them and the smaller number of posts, readers are more interested in their coverage of the pandemic. This can have unexpected consequences in the future if, for example, these channels start to manipulate information or promote certain interests. Therefore, the author calls for more attention to the Telegram platform in general and its alternative media channels in particular.

The main limitation of this study is the absence of apps to collect data from Telegram. It significantly reduces the sample size and shortens the research period. Each Telegram channel produces a huge number of posts each day. It takes time to collect and code all of them.
It is recommended that future studies should choose more Telegram channels. Further recommendations include a longer research period. Scientists should pay more attention to the phenomenon of alternative news media as an integral part of our media landscape. It is also recommended that other social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) shall be included for comparison.

Bibliography

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Summary
In the present study, which examined the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ukraine, the Telegram posts (n=4427) of mainstream news media and alternative news media were compared. The research period covered two separate months (9 November – 9 December 2020, and 24 February – 24 March 2021). Quantitative content analysis and the comparative method of data analysis were applied to analyze gathered data. The findings demonstrated a clear division between mainstream news coverage and alternative news coverage in terms of topics and sources, yet not in the story tone of the presented information, which may be the result of the distinct priorities of the two media types in relation to news presentation. Moreover, the study revealed that the mainstream media published more posts about the pandemic than the alternative media, which was also the case for the number of political sources that outweighed the overall number of health sources. What can be concluded on the basis of the conducted analysis is that both mainstream and alternative news media contributed to the politicization of the coronavirus in Ukraine.

Keywords: COVID-19, Telegram, mainstream news media, alternative news media, Ukraine