

# Despicable “we”: Anti-mainstream reputation in the Italian Telegramsphere

by Giovanni Boccia Artieri, Stefano Brilli, Valeria Donato, and Elisabetta Zurovac

## Abstract

This paper investigates the rise of anti-mainstream figures in the Italian Telegramsphere and their role within Italy’s hybrid media system. It focuses on how claims of censorship and marginalization can coexist with substantial cross-platform visibility, including visibility on mainstream platforms. To address this paradox, we combined cross-platform mapping and qualitative analysis. Starting from 24 seed channels associated with conspiratorial and anti-mainstream content, the study reconstructs a broader network of 538 Telegram channels and examines the platform ecologies of the 413 channels that remained accessible one year later. Rather than forming self-contained alternative ecologies, these figures typically combine Telegram with mainstream services, using Telegram as a hub for the circulation of oppositional narratives and for the cultivation of direct audience ties. The qualitative analysis identifies four recurring rhetorical personas through which outsiderhood is leveraged: the Hero, the Rascal, the Professional, and the Faceless Ally. We argue that anti-mainstream visibility in Italy is built through the strategic conversion of exclusion, condemnation, and despicability into solidarity, support, and professional legitimacy.

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## Introduction

In the spring of 2021, after hosting it for 14 years, YouTube deleted the channel of Byoblu, an Italian alternative media outlet, for violating its COVID-19 misinformation policies. Within hours, the channel’s founder, Claudio Messori, had reframed the episode as an act of systematic political censorship: a deliberate attempt by technocratic elites, in collusion with institutional media and government, to silence an independent voice that had challenged the dominant consensus (Messori, 2021). What is striking about this

episode is not deplatforming in itself, but what happened alongside it and in its aftermath. At the very moment Messori was circulating claims of having been silenced and blacklisted, he was also finalizing the publication of a book with one of Italy's most established mainstream publishers, Rizzoli. Six months after the ban, he published *Il disallineato* (*The Unaligned*), which led to promotional appearances across mainstream media. The contradiction was evident, yet it did not weaken the narrative. If anything, it revealed a key paradox of contemporary platform culture: claims of exclusion can coexist with, and even benefit from, mainstream visibility.

This paradox needs to be situated within a broader transformation of the digital media environment. Contemporary digital culture is marked by a complex interplay of public, semi-public, and private spaces (Boccia Artieri, *et al.*, 2021), as well as by the relationship between mainstream platforms and digital spaces that position themselves as “fringe” (de Winkel, 2023) or, in different ways, “alternative” (Abbing and Gehl, 2025), all connected by ongoing processes of content circulation, user migration, and cross-platform adaptation. Despite growing academic interest in these dynamics, the ways in which anti-mainstream reputation is constructed and maintained, especially among Italian publics, remain underexplored. This paper contributes to that area of research within the broader CORIT project, funded through the Next Generation EU program. The wider aim of CORIT is to investigate the development of narratives capable of influencing, and at times destabilizing, Italy's hybrid media system. Within this framework, this work focuses on the rise of anti-mainstream public figures in the Italian Telegramsphere, examining both their cross-platform presence and the frames through which they position themselves as persecuted outsiders to the mainstream.

The Italian anti-mainstream Telegramsphere is not a sealed-off extremist enclave populated exclusively by radicals. It is a heterogeneous environment that connects a wide range of actors through a shared posture of opposition to mainstream institutions, media, and forms of expertise. In this sense, Telegram's role as a crossroads between different anti-mainstream milieus makes it a useful site for examining how conflicts between the mainstream and its perceived margins help shape public reputations.

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### **Anti-mainstream visibility between world-building and deplatformization**

Over the last decade, anti-mainstream discourse has become increasingly important in online reputation management and in the construction of the online persona. Opposition to mainstream media, to their actors and newsmaking procedures, and more broadly anti-establishment positioning, has become part of the self-presentational strategies of a growing number of creators, commentators, influencers, and news producers. “Alternative influence network” (Lewis, 2018), “extreme celebrities” (Rogers, 2020), “fringe creators” (Munger and Phillips, 2022), and “anti-wokes” (Postill, 2024) are some of the labels used in both scholarship and journalistic discourse to describe cross-platform internet celebrities whose visibility is rooted in antagonism toward the mainstream and who combine political content, lifestyle elements, and the careful cultivation of parasocial relations with their audiences.

Unlike antagonism as a discursive ethos, which has long characterized interaction in parts of the YouTube community (Pihlaja, 2014), the phenomenon at issue here is more structured. It concerns not only the vehemence or aggressiveness of communicative exchanges, but also the construction of reputational positions and counterpublics through forms of polarization that have become widespread, recognizable, and socially codified. In this context, opposition to the mainstream functions as a symbolic resource for the production of authority, visibility, and belonging.

Journalistic accounts have often attributed the rise of these figures to supposedly intrinsic platform biases and, in particular, to recommendation systems said to encourage drift or amplification toward radicalization. Munger and Phillips (2022), however, demonstrated that the algorithmic component was not a sufficient predictor of either the expansion or the contraction of radicalized far-right publics. In their

study, the audience for extremist content on YouTube had already peaked in 2017 rather than in 2019, the year in which the platform modified its recommendation system in an attempt to limit the circulation of such content. Understanding these phenomena therefore requires more than an analysis of platform affordances and regulatory devices. It also requires attention to the capacity of these actors to build durable parasocial communities around their public personas.

Postill (2024) moved in this direction in his long-term study of the formation of the anti-woke movement. He proposes focusing on the “worlding effects” of media practices, that is, on the ways in which digital practices such as podcasting, tweeting, opinion writing, broadcasting, content sharing, and commenting participate in the creation of “new social worlds.” These practices do not simply disseminate messages. They also help stabilize relatively coherent universes of characters, genres, languages, antagonisms, and imagined publics. From this perspective, some concepts that have emerged in recent scholarship can be read as examples of practices and postures that contribute to anti-mainstream world-building.

Lewis (2020) noted that, for reactionary YouTubers, microcelebrity practices centered on relatability, authenticity, and accountability became political resources deployed against the presumed opacity and distance of mainstream media and social justice-oriented politics. Distrust of the mainstream is translated into recurring rhetorical forms built around the creator’s promise of individual empowerment to audiences, rather than around the construction of a collective political identity. The topos of the “persecuted hero” analyzed by Baker (2022) among alt-health influencers, and the “bootstraps epistemology” described by Ma (2024) in the case of reactionary YouTubers, do more than intensify polarization. They use distance from the mainstream as part of a trajectory of epistemic autonomy that concerns politics, lifestyle, and health alike.

Anti-mainstream world-building is shaped not only by strategies of self-presentation and engagement, but also by interpretations of the rules and biases of the socio-technical environment of platforms. Junman (2025), for example, described how “platform folklore” plays a central role in far-right populist Twitter communities by sustaining both the ideology and the emotional life of that political milieu. Unofficial and conjectural forms of knowledge about the way the platform supposedly penalizes their worldview are used to confirm and make sense of exclusion from the mainstream.

It is in this context that the concept of *deplatformization* becomes central to the contemporary configuration of the online public sphere. The term refers to the process through which specific actors, and in some cases entire networks and communities, are excluded permanently or indefinitely from major digital platforms after violating platform rules. In milder, often preventive forms, the sanction may take the form of demonetization: the profile remains active but loses access to instruments of revenue generation, such as advertising or donations. In the platformized economy, where visibility functions as a crucial currency, such interventions directly affect the public life of the actors involved.

Deplatformization is therefore not only a practice of content moderation, but also a form of *social moderation*. It acts upon the public legitimacy of actors, especially the most visible ones, who become exemplary cases through which the threshold of what counts as acceptable is publicly communicated. This process can also be shaped by public pressure: organized groups may actively urge platforms, often reluctant to adopt drastic measures, to limit the visibility of those who spread hate, discrimination, or disinformation. Following Trump’s election in 2016, for instance, the activist group Sleeping Giants campaigned to pressure advertisers and financial service providers such as PayPal and Stripe to cut ties with Web sites such as *Breitbart News* and *8chan* (Hill, 2024).

The geography produced by deplatformization is far from stable. These flows are often reversible, as shown by the reinstatement of figures such as Trump or Andrew Tate on Twitter after Elon Musk’s acquisition of the platform, or by the way Tate continues to influence YouTube audiences without an official channel through the widespread re-uploading of his clips by third-party accounts (Rieder, *et al.*, 2026). At the same time, the growing ease with which new platforms and parallel services can be created reduces the effectiveness of exclusion as a purely containment-oriented measure.

Empirical studies do not offer a single account of the effects of these policies. Rogers (2020) explained that the removal of “extreme celebrities” from mainstream social media significantly reduced their visibility and disrupted the cycle of monetization and attention. Jhaver, *et al.* (2021) and Rauchfleisch and Kaiser (2024) likewise identified a decline in engagement and visibility among followers when these actors were banned and forced to migrate to alt-tech platforms such as BitChute. Other studies, including Horta Ribeiro, *et al.* (2023) and Russo, *et al.* (2023), pointed to effects in the opposite direction: an increase in toxic activity on less regulated platforms and, in some cases, a further radicalization of remaining followers in response to attacks on their reference figures. Exclusion can become confirmation of a suspicion already deeply rooted in many anti-mainstream communities, namely that they are subject to systemic censorship (Grusauskaite, *et al.*, 2024). This dynamic reinforces feelings of exclusion, strengthens collective identities, and encourages the search for alternative sources of support, including direct crowdfunding, which can in turn reinforce the cohesion and self-sufficiency of these groups (Siapera, 2023).

This is not to dismiss deplatformization as a legitimate measure for protecting the public sphere, but to recognize its complexity and its costs. In a fragmented media environment, where new spaces of connection can be produced with relative ease, exclusion may lead not only to migration but also to the reorganization and consolidation of alternative discursive circuits. For this reason, it is important to look not only at changes in the presence and reach of these personalities, but also at the cross-platform dynamics of the anti-mainstream world and at the media practices that shape its world-building.

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### **The Italian context: From vaccine skepticism to the anti-mainstream Telegramsphere**

The Italian anti-mainstream digital ecosystem did not emerge *ex nihilo* with the COVID-19 pandemic, although the pandemic dramatically accelerated its growth and transformed its character. Understanding the contemporary Telegramsphere requires situating it within a longer history of vaccine skepticism, institutional distrust, and populist anti-elite sentiment, because many of the actors who became central figures in the pandemic-era fringe media ecosystem were building on communities, networks, and symbolic resources that had been accumulating since at least the 1990s. Since around 1993, networks of associations started to play a structuring role in the public debate around pediatric vaccination, articulating a position that was not simply anti-vaccine in the bluntest sense but rather framed around the principles of informed consent, parental freedom, and skepticism toward pharmaceutical industry interests (Bory, *et al.*, 2023). In 2010, Italy registered some of the lowest levels of vaccine confidence in Europe (Giambi, *et al.*, 2018), and the decisive political turning point came in 2017, when the Italian government issued the Lorenzin Decree: a piece of legislation that expanded the number of mandatory vaccinations and made school attendance conditional on vaccination compliance. Yet the political moment of the reform was particularly fraught: Italy was entering an extended pre-electoral phase, and the two major opposition parties (the Five Star Movement and the League) chose to position themselves squarely against the decree (Casula and Toth, 2021). At the same time, the “free vax” or “no vax” movements gained greater visibility as they mobilized on social media, from YouTube (Covolo, *et al.*, 2017) to Facebook (Comunello, *et al.*, 2017). Online, this antagonist sphere organized defamatory campaigns against Minister Lorenzin, protests, and online petitions (Casula and Toth, 2019). In this environment, a lay public was structurally predisposed to regard official guidance with suspicion, having been consistently exposed to a media logic that frames public health as controversy rather than consensus, enhancing polarization dynamics, and to a political culture that normalizes the delegitimization of expertise as well as spectacularization of political issues (Lovari, *et al.*, 2021).

These dynamics did not dissipate but instead evolved into a broader anti-mainstream ecosystem, for which the COVID-19 pandemic acted as an accelerant. The Italian pandemic-era “infodemic” (Lovari, 2020) expanded both the scale and the scope of anti-institutional discourse. The introduction of the Green Pass provided a concrete and actionable grievance, while anti-vaccination narratives merged with wider

conspiratorial frameworks encompassing governmental overreach, media manipulation, and global power structures. Within this expanding communicative field, Telegram emerged not simply as a platform but as a critical infrastructural node for anti-institutional communication. Its technical and cultural configuration, shaped by its origins in resistance to state control (Hakim, 2014), proved particularly suited to these dynamics. Designed as a privacy-oriented alternative to mainstream platforms, Telegram combines messaging functions with social networking features, large-scale groups, channels, and automated systems, enabling the formation of semi-public, loosely regulated communicative environments (Brilli and Zurovac, 2025). These affordances allow users to participate without strong identity constraints, facilitate the rapid circulation of content, and support the creation of communities organized around shared ideological orientations (Zurovac, 2023). At the same time, the very affordances that made Telegram attractive to anti-institutional actors (limited moderation, scalability, and relative anonymity) also contributed to its broader public redefinition. More broadly, Telegram hosted a heterogeneous information ecosystem in which verified content coexisted with “junk news” and conspiratorial material (Walther and McCoy, 2021; Herasimenka, 2022), often circulating through decontextualized formats such as screenshots that gained credibility within communities of like-minded users (Zurovac, 2025). In such environments, the validation of information is less dependent on factual accuracy than on processes of collective identification, reinforcing ideological homophily and echo-chamber dynamics (Peeters and Willaert, 2022). In the Italian context, these features enabled Telegram to function as both an organizational and symbolic infrastructure for anti-mainstream publics. From 2018 onwards, Italian media narratives increasingly framed Telegram as a “digital free zone” associated with piracy, illicit markets, and deviant practices (Monaco, 2020; Borrillo, 2020). This securitized framing intensified during and after the pandemic, as the platform became linked not only to anti-vaccination activism but also to a range of criminal and controversial activities, as well as to transnational disinformation and geopolitical tensions (Ottolina, 2022; De Vincentiis, 2024). Then, during the first two years of the pandemic, it became a central space for the dissemination of conspiracy theories, anti-vaccination narratives, and political mobilization against health measures. The Italian Postal Police’s “Operation Fake Pass” in 2021, which uncovered networks involved in the sale of counterfeit vaccination certificates (*La Stampa*, 2021), illustrates how the platform had become operationally embedded in these practices, extending beyond discursive contestation into illicit activity.

Therefore, Telegram came to occupy an ambivalent position: simultaneously an enabling infrastructure for alternative forms of participation and a contested space perceived as resistant to regulation and prone to risk. What makes this Italian scenario theoretically interesting is the entanglement of long-standing institutional distrust, platform-specific affordances, and shifting media logics, through which historically sedimented forms of skepticism are reactivated, rearticulated, and amplified within contemporary digital infrastructures.

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## Research questions and methodology

This study is conceived as an exploratory investigation of the visibility and reputational strategies adopted by actors in the Italian anti-mainstream Telegramsphere. It addresses two related research questions:

*RQ1:* What kinds of cross-platform ecologies characterize anti-mainstream actors in the Italian Telegramsphere?

*RQ2:* Through which frames and rhetorical figures do anti-mainstream personalities in the Italian Telegramsphere construct outsiderhood?

To address these questions, we adopted a mixed approach that combined the analysis of cross-platform presence with a qualitative examination of identity construction in personality-driven channels. The empirical basis of this study consists of 24 seed channels identified by the Italian debunking project

BUTAC as disseminators of conspiratorial or disinformative content. This initial set was then expanded through Telegram's API by using the platform's "similar channels" feature via a Python script. After two iterations of this procedure, a total of 569 channels were identified. After excluding 31 channels due to inaccessibility or language-related constraints, the final dataset comprised 538 channels, of which 413 remained accessible in October 2025. While alternative methodological choices may have yielded a different network configuration, the present approach is particularly effective in identifying channels that share audience overlaps with the initial seed set. It does not treat "alternative" and "fringe" as fixed or self-evident categories, given the dynamic, contextual, and often strategic character of these labels (Abbing and Gehl, 2025; Brilli and Zurovac, 2025). Instead, we coded channels as "anti-mainstream" through a criterion of self-positioning, asking whether, in their channel descriptions and pinned posts, they displayed an explicit "anti-" stance toward mainstream media, institutions, expertise, or dominant public narratives (Boccia Artieri, *et al.*, forthcoming). The 413 channels that make up our corpus were then classified into the following actor categories:

- *forwarding channels* ( $N = 177$ ), primarily devoted to reposting content;
- *fringe creators* ( $N = 67$ ), individuals producing original content and engaging directly with audiences;
- *committees, movements, and associations* ( $N = 60$ ), linked to collective actors engaged in advocacy;
- *alternative media* ( $N = 40$ ), established anti-mainstream outlets associated with recognizable public figures;
- *journalists and media personalities* ( $N = 32$ ), mostly right-wing commentators operating personal channels;
- *professionals* ( $N = 22$ ), such as lawyers and doctors providing forms of *expert dissent*;
- *politicians and parties* ( $N = 15$ ), using Telegram for political communication.

Subsequently, this study proceeded by mapping the cross-platform presence of these actors. For each of these channels, we investigated the actor's presence on other platforms in two ways: first, by examining the Telegram channel itself for mentions of other platforms or online spaces; and second, by searching the channel name on Google as an additional check. The relative weight of Telegram within each actor's media ecology was also considered by comparing follower counts across platforms, allowing the identification of different configurations of platform centrality.

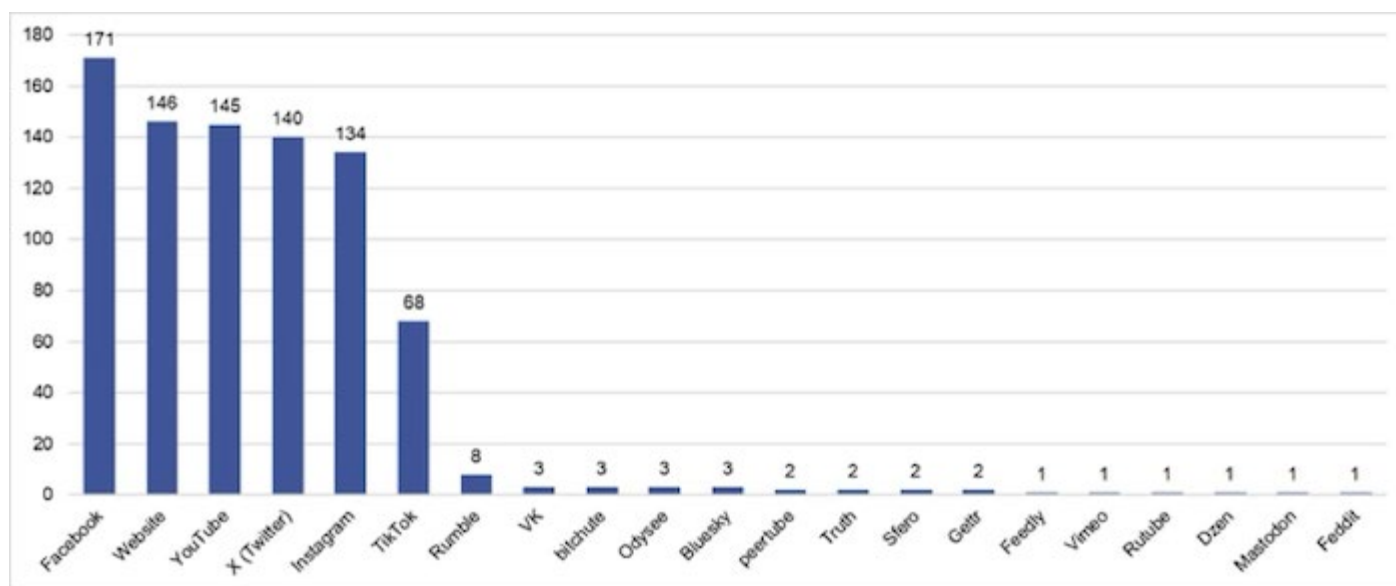
Building on this mapping, the analysis focuses on personality-driven channels: these are treated as key sites for the production of anti-mainstream discourse, as they generate original content, maintain cross-platform identities, and cultivate direct relationships with audiences. Adopting a discourse-oriented approach (Bouvier and Machin, 2020), we examined how these actors construct and stabilize recognizable personas. In this sense, the frames are treated as narrative devices (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989) through which creators articulate identity via recurrent strategies such as irony, counter-narratives, anonymity, and the delegitimization of mainstream media. Although the material analyzed derives from publicly accessible Telegram channels, channel names, usernames, and other identifying details have been removed or modified in order to limit traceability and reduce the risk of unwanted amplification.

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## Cross-platform presence of anti-mainstream actors

For more than half of the channels (56.9 percent), Telegram was not the only digital space in which they were active. Excluding Web sites, 13.6 percent of channels were present on one additional platform beyond Telegram, 10.7 percent on two, 12.1 percent on three, and 20.1 percent on four or more. The analysis of platform presence alone ([Figure 1](#)) clearly shows that this cross-platform presence is overwhelmingly concentrated on mainstream social media platforms rather than on "alt-tech" (Donovan, *et al.*, 2019), "fringe" (de Winkel, 2023), or "niche" platforms (Williams, *et al.*, 2021). Only 18 of the 413 channels (4.4 percent) were present on at least one such platform, with a slight, though not especially meaningful,

preference for Rumble.



**Figure 1:** Presence on platforms other than Telegram.

By contrast, the most common platforms beyond Telegram were Facebook (41.4 percent of channels), YouTube (34.4 percent), X/Twitter (33.2 percent), and Instagram (31.7 percent), followed at some distance by TikTok (15.7 percent).

The first key finding, then, is that despite their strong self-positioning against mainstream media and mainstream opinion, the network we examine is either confined to Telegram or embedded in a cross-platform dynamic that primarily combines mainstream social media services. In this case, we find no evidence of “parallel ecologies” centered on fringe or alt-tech services. This pattern may be related to the limited penetration of alternative platforms in the Italian context, where user bases tend to be more strongly tied to English-speaking audiences. At the same time, there have been attempts to create alternative services in Italy, such as Sfero.me (Giacomazzi, 2022) and Sharktube, the latter no longer accessible. Yet these platforms are almost entirely absent from the dataset, with only two channels linked to them.

In the second stage, we examined follower counts across platforms in order to identify the primary center of gravity within each actor’s cross-platform ecology. This analysis yielded four categories.

- *Telegram only* refers to channels with no observable social media presence beyond Telegram, excluding Web sites.
- *Telegram as hub* identifies cases in which Telegram functions as the main center of online presence, operationalized as channels whose Telegram follower count is at least 1.25 times that of any other platform.
- *Balanced cross-platform presence* refers to cases in which Telegram follower counts range between 0.75 and 1.25 times those of the actor’s most followed non-Telegram platform.
- *Telegram as satellite* captures cases in which the number of Telegram followers is lower than 0.75 times that of the most followed external platform.

A further 1.5 percent of cases were classified as *non-comparable*, as traces of an external presence were found but follower counts were not readable or accessible.

Applying this procedure to the full dataset produced the following distribution: 178 channels (43.1 percent) were classified as *Telegram only*, 81 (19.6 percent) as *Telegram as hub*, 15 (3.6 percent) as *balanced*, 133 (32.2 percent) as *Telegram as satellite*. Multi-platform expansion, then, does not automatically imply that Telegram remains the dominant platform. In many cases, Telegram continues to play an important role, but one that is secondary to the actor's "strongest" social media platform (Table 1). Channels active exclusively on Telegram also tend to be smaller than those in the other categories, suggesting that the most prominent actors in the anti-mainstream sphere are generally not confined to the platform in a condition of digital isolation.

<b>Table 1: Predominant cross-platform configuration.</b>				
<b>Category</b>	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b>Percentage of total</b>	<b>Mean Telegram followers</b>	<b>Median Telegram followers</b>
Telegram only	178	43.1	7,275	3,164
Telegram as hub	81	19.6	21,730	<b>14,904</b>
Balanced	15	3.6	21,713	5,525
Telegram as satellite	133	32.2	13,462	3,950
Non-comparable	6	1.5	8,029	5,928

Cross-platform behavior is far from uniform across the different segments of the anti-mainstream constellation.

The actors most strongly centered on Telegram are forwarding channels. By contrast, channels built around recognizable personalities tend not only to be present on a larger number of platforms, but also to attract larger followings outside Telegram than within it (Table 2), especially in the case of politicians and fringe creators. In the Italian context, then, an "anti-mainstream" reputation does not appear to be tied to a single platform; rather, it is managed through a cross-platform personal presence in ways not altogether different from other creators and media personalities. This pattern is somewhat less pronounced among journalists, who also tend to have larger followings outside Telegram, though to a more limited extent.

The fact that forwarding channels and, to a lesser degree, journalists are the actor types whose center of gravity lies most clearly within Telegram suggests that the platform is used primarily for affordances related to the circulation and distribution of news, rather than as a space for producing original content or cultivating parasocial ties. For those functions, other platforms may be seen as more suitable. In other words, we do not find evidence of actors building their reputational capital exclusively on Telegram. At least in our sample, there appear to be no fully alternative forms of fame detached from platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram; what we observe instead are largely complementary platform arrangements.

**Table 2: Cross-platform presence and follower distribution by actor type.**

Actor type	<i>N</i> channels	Percentage with cross-platform presence	Mean number of external platforms	Median Telegram followers	Median followers on most-followed external platform	TG/external max ratio
Forwarding channel	177	29.8	0.69	3,664	3,300	1.11
Journalists/media personalities	32	96.9	3.16	18,383	20,000	0.92
Associations/movements	60	48.3	1.33	3,828	6,500	0.59
Professionals	22	77.3	2.05	7,245	13,000	0.56
"Fringe" creators	67	65.7	1.94	7,135	16,800	0.42
Alternative media	40	97.5	3.30	7,826	41,000	0.19
Politicians/parties	15	93.3	3.80	5,314	39,731	0.13



### How anti-mainstream icons mobilize despicability: Four rhetorical figures

The qualitative analysis of how anti-mainstream public figures deploy their counter-reputations revealed four principal, and non-mutually exclusive, rhetorical personas: the Hero, the Rascal, the Professional, and the Faceless Ally. These personas are not rigid taxonomic categories but rather ideal-typical configurations of discursive and visual self-presentation, each mobilizing a distinct repertoire of tropes, affective registers, and legitimation claims. They are structured along two principal dimensions: the level of proximity between creator and audience (ranging from charismatic distance to identificatory closeness) and the dominant vocabulary and imagery deployed (ranging from heroic-epic registers to vernacular-combative ones, from credentialed-professional vocabularies to anonymous-collective ones).

#### *The Hero*

The Hero persona constructs a pronounced vertical distance between creator and audience. The creator is positioned above the public, not as an equal sharing their grievances, but as a figure of superior insight, courage, or moral clarity who descends into discourse to illuminate what ordinary citizens cannot see. The visual grammar is consistent with this elevation: dramatic chiaroscuro lighting, symbolic accoutrements drawn from the iconography of enlightenment ([Figure 2](#)).



**Figure 2:** The image of a lighthouse posted along with the caption: “We are keeping the beacon of free information shining!”

The creators present themselves as a guide, a truth-bearer, a figure of superior knowledge or moral courage who has accessed truths hidden from the general public. The vocabulary draws on motifs of revelation, battle, and guardianship, such as “breaking the chains of censorship”, “the shield deflecting attacks from the mainstream”, “I’m still in the trenches today”.

The theoretical framework most apt for understanding the Hero is Weber’s (1968) analysis of charismatic authority. Charisma, for Weber, rests on the recognition by followers of extraordinary qualities in the leader: qualities that exceed ordinary social categorization and that warrant a form of devotion that is at once personal and transcendent. The Hero thus draws selectively on two older cultural templates: the investigative journalist as truth-seeker and the dissident intellectual as conscience of the nation. From the first, the Hero borrows the rhetoric of documentary rigor and the tropes of exposing hidden power (Melley, 2022). From the second, the Hero borrows the posture of moral courage and the willingness to sacrifice career security for truth (Said, 1994). What distinguishes the contemporary Telegram Hero from either of these older templates, however, is the collapse of institutional mediation. The investigative journalist of the twentieth century operated within editorial hierarchies that vetted and validated claims; the dissident intellectual wrote in established literary and political venues that provided independent assessment. The Telegram Hero operates in a condition of apparent autonomy: their only validating mechanism is the audience’s continued subscription, engagement, and financial support. This produces what we may call a closed reputational circuit, in which legitimacy circulates internally rather than being anchored to external epistemic authorities. The Hero’s authority is legitimized by the audience, while the audience’s interpretive framework is stabilized and reinforced by the Hero’s beliefs, generating a mutually constitutive loop with no external checkpoints capable of interrupting it (Nguyen, 2020). Crucially, the Hero’s epistemic claim is structured by what Harambam and Aupers (2015) described as conspiratorial epistemology: a commitment

to the belief that mainstream knowledge is systematically distorted by powerful interests, and that truth is accessible only to those willing to bypass official channels. Within this context, therefore, credibility derives from the perceived capacity to oppose and expose hidden structures of power and manipulation, facing the consequences of doing so. The following appeal, for instance, illustrates how epistemic claims, moral positioning and economic independence are tightly interwoven:

“In such difficult times, it is becoming increasingly hard to provide information that challenges the system and exposes the elite’s schemes. Discussing the vaccine, the vaccination campaign, the war in Ukraine, and many other controversial topics from a different perspective is risky. Support the hard work I do every day by standing against the logic that allows information to flow only through mainstream channels in a sanitized form. Become a supporter and defend free information!” (Alternative Media channel).

Rather than functioning as a simple request for financial support, this text shows a series of interrelated operations, common to the Hero persona. First, it constructs a narrative of epistemic oppression, in which the information provided by the Hero is framed as endangered and difficult to produce. Second, it establishes an antagonistic divide between mainstream media and alternative sources, positioning the Hero as a necessary intermediary. Third, and most significantly, it reframes economic support as a political act: donating becomes the equivalent of “defending free information”.

Within this epistemology, the Hero’s demonetization or marginalization is a necessary proof that they have touched the real nerve of power. Because mainstream institutions are assumed to be corrupted or compromised, forms of exclusion are reinterpreted as evidence of independence and truthfulness. The more the mainstream is portrayed as rejecting the Hero, the more their status is validated. This inverted epistemic logic explains why attempts to “debunk” or “fact-check” Heroes typically strengthen rather than weaken their authority within the community (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). Such interventions are easily incorporated into the anti-mainstream frame as further evidence of suppression, thereby reinforcing the closed reputational circuit instead of disrupting it.

Therefore, the Hero persona draws on a long tradition of alternative media self-legitimation, but translates it into the economic logic of the creator economy. What emerges is a figure whose authority is not externally validated and therefore it subsists, while continuously co-produced within a self-sealing system of belief.

### ***The Rascal***

If the Hero operates through elevation, the Rascal operates through degradation or, more precisely, through a deliberate refusal of elevation. The Rascal stands alongside the audience, speaks its vernacular and derives authority not from claimed superiority but from claimed authenticity through despicability. This authenticity is performed through transgression; the language is therefore sarcastic and antagonistic and serves as markers of truth-telling freedom in contrast to the constrained speech of professional journalism. The following post, which includes a poll directed at the followers, offers a particularly revealing example:

“I’VE BEEN BANNED BY YOUSUIT. BY FACESHIT. BY VIMEOSHIT AND NOW BY PATREON SHIT. I’M THE MOST BANNED GUY ON ITALIAN SOCIAL MEDIA. WHAT SHOULD I DO? Anonymous Poll: Should I quit everything and focus on what I’m doing with cars? Should I build an independent information platform with other people banned by the system?” (Fringe creator channel).

Here, obscenity and mockery are constitutive elements of the Rascal’s positioning, recalling what Tuters

and Burton (2021) described as “burlesque traditionalism”, where provocation and bad taste become markers of anti-mainstream authenticity. This self-positioning requires the continued existence of a sayable/unsayable boundary that mainstream media is alleged to enforce. The degradation of platform names simultaneously delegitimizes mainstream infrastructures and elevates the speaker as someone who is not constrained by their norms. At the same time, the post oscillates between irony and seriousness. The exaggerated self-description (“the most banned guy”) carries a humorous tone, yet it also establishes a narrative of exclusion. The poll structure invites audience participation, but the options are asymmetrical. The first option is framed as resignation, while the second aligns with the Rascal’s trajectory, transforming the poll into a mechanism of collective endorsement rather than open deliberation. In this sense, the parasocial dimension of the Rascal persona is more intense than in the case of the Hero. The Rascal’s rhetoric casts the audience as co-protagonists in a collective struggle, heroizing the audience itself: it recruits the audience not as patrons but as allies.

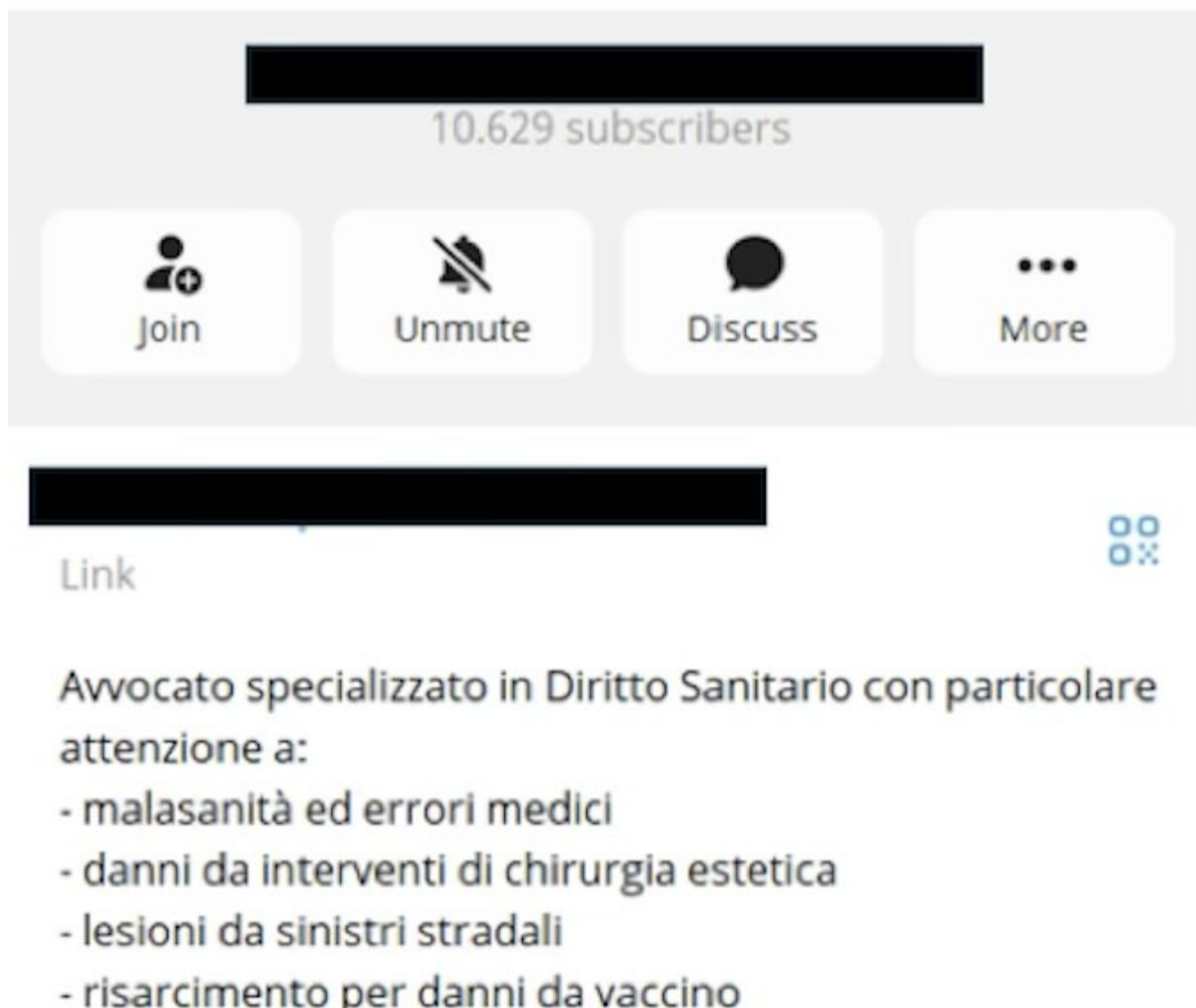
The theoretical tradition most relevant here is the anthropology of the trickster. Hyde’s (1998) classic study of trickster figures across world mythologies identifies them as boundary-crossers whose authority comes precisely from their willingness to break the rules that ordinary members of the community must observe. Digital media scholars have productively extended this framework. Phillips (2015) and Milner (2016) have shown how the transgressive vernacular of early Internet cultures (4chan, Something Awful) was gradually professionalized into a repertoire available to far-right political entrepreneurs, who adopted trickster poses as a way of circumventing the conventions of mainstream political speech.

The Rascal’s counter-reputation is openly built around victimhood, but a victim who refuses the moral posture of victimhood. This is a crucial distinction: unlike the classical victim of populist discourse, whose legitimacy rests on suffering passively endured (Al-Ghazzi, 2021), the Rascal’s victimhood is aggressive. Each instance of demonetization, content removal, or critical mainstream coverage is reframed as a badge of honor, evidence that the Rascal is hitting targets too sensitive for the establishment to tolerate. This logic corresponds precisely to what Hronešova and Kreiss (2024) termed “hijacking of victimhood” in populist political communication: the discursive operation through which membership in a historically dominant group is reframed as the condition of a new, unacknowledged minority being persecuted by the very institutions the group once controlled (Chouliaraki, 2024).

Abidin’s (2018, 2015) work on influencer culture has demonstrated how digital creators actively cultivate parasocial intimacy through strategies of “communicative intimacy,” that is, performances of vulnerability. The Rascal mobilizes these strategies in a specifically political key: the personal revelations concern not lifestyle but persecution and the vulnerability is not just emotional but existential.

### ***The Professional***

The Professional persona introduces a third rhetorical configuration: whereas the Hero claims superiority through charismatic power and the Rascal claims authenticity through vernacular expressions and intimacy, the Professional claims authority through institutional credentials that have been turned against the institutions that conferred them. Among Professionals we find lawyers, pharmacists, independent journalists, and other credentialed figures who present their Telegram channels primarily as extensions of their professional practices. As [Figure 3](#) shows, one lawyer outlines the range of issues they handle, including medical malpractice and alleged vaccine-related injuries.



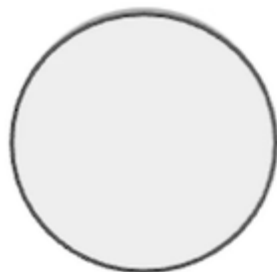
**Figure 3:** Example of a channel information section presenting the services offered.

However, such practices are reoriented toward dissent from the consensus of the professional community. While research has largely shown how populist discourses target traditional professionalism, casting the “expert” as the object of anti-elitist critique (Harambam and Aupers, 2015; Moffitt, 2016; Sunnercrantz and Yildirim, 2022), here we see a different strategy. Unlike the distrust toward system professionals described by Baker (2022) and Ma (2024), where the figures of the “persecuted hero” and “bootstraps epistemology” rely on distance from traditional professionals, professionalism is not elided here. Instead, institutional credentials are explicitly foregrounded.

Following Freidson’s (2001) perspective, professional authority rests on three connected pillars: specialized knowledge, institutional certification, and normative orientation, that is, commitment either to a profession’s code of ethics or to the field’s epistemic culture (Sweet and Giffort, 2021). Such “culture” is to be understood, in Sweet and Giffort’s (2021) words as “narratives, performances and shared goals of professionalized participants that are structured around claims to credibility and authority”. Within these narratives Sweet and Giffort identified the rhetorical persona of the “bad expert”, providing professionals with a figurative “other”. This figure allows for the construction of boundaries within the same domain of knowledge and field of expertise, serving to delineate what counts as acceptable through contrast with bad

practice. In our study, the Professional persona emerging within the Telegramsphere implicitly embodies the narrative construction of the bad expert. In fact, this figure does not operate outside the field, but from within it, positioning itself as deviant yet authoritative. The Professional mobilizes the first two pillars of professional authority (specialized knowledge and institutional certification) while strategically inverting the third. Medical doctors, for instance, retain their expertise and formal credentials, but reorient their normative commitment away from the epistemic consensus of the medical profession. This reorientation is not framed as deviation, but rather as a higher-order ethical stance: the consensus itself is portrayed as compromised by, for instance, economic interests or political pressures. As a result, such distance from institutional orthodoxy becomes evidence of independence, integrity and courage. This produces what Eyal (2019) has called the crisis of expertise in acute form: a situation in which the institutional mechanisms that traditionally produced public trust in experts have been undermined, such that the public is confronted with credentialed figures arguing for opposing positions, with no obvious way to adjudicate between them. The Professional persona thrives in this crisis not by transcending the logic of credentialism but by occupying both sides of it simultaneously: as a credentialed dissenter, the Professional is more credible than either the credentialed mainstream expert (who is “part of the system”) or the uncredentialed critic. This structural position enhances the distinctive symbolic value of the Telegram Professional: their content becomes invested with a heightened sense of authority, while simultaneously offering followers the possibility of direct access to the expert, often enabling the paid provision of professional services within the logic of liberal professions (*i.e.*, consultations, courses, seminars, webinars). By offering their services through the regulated framework of professional fees, the stance that their dissent occurs within the structures of mainstream practice is reinforced as well as their authority. This is the case, for example, of one prominent lawyer who undertook several legal actions on behalf of citizens fined or dismissed during the pandemic. The visibility gained through these actions has been reinforced within Telegram, which became one of the touchpoints through which he may reach future clients. As shown in [Figure 4](#), in the channel information of a lawyer, links are provided to get in touch with him and access additional content, while repeatedly emphasizing his professional title.

## Channel Info



**Avvocato** [redacted]

9.012 subscribers



t.me/[redacted]

Link

I video di approfondimento dell'avvocato [redacted]

Per contattare l'avv. [redacted]

www.[redacted]

**Figure 4:** Example of a channel information section including links to contact the professional.

### *The Faceless Ally*

The fourth persona, the Faceless Ally, operates through a radical de-individualization of the creator behind the account. While the Hero, the Rascal, and the Professional foreground individual qualities and capitalize on personal identity, there are channels run by individuals who never reveal their faces, use pseudonyms and generic images for their avatars ([Figure 5](#)).



**Figure 5:** Examples of generic images used for avatars.

For the first three personas presented the authority is biographical, traceable to specific individuals. On the contrary the Faceless allies focus on their social identity: a particular category of belonging through which an individual is positioned within collective structures (Goffman, 1986). While a strand of academic literature on anonymity in digital environments, especially in the earliest stages, understands it as producing disinhibition and therefore harm (Suler, 2004; Lapidot-Leffler and Barak, 2012), in this case we see how it provides a sense of relatability, belonging and credibility. In fact, especially for individuals who hold concealable stigmatized identities, anonymous online environments lower the perceived costs of self-disclosure (Cheung, *et al.*, 2015; Clark-Gordon, *et al.*, 2019) that carry social and professional risks when expressed under a real name (McKenna and Bargh, 1998). In this sense, as the Faceless allies do not disclose their identity, they are subtly suggesting that their ideological positions, beliefs and political views may cause backlashes if shared, which reinforces the idea of an attributed despicability by the mainstream. Moreover, in being “mysterious individuals”, somehow they represent the embodiment of a shared mood and ethos within the imagined community. Because they could be anyone, they appear closer to the public and almost contiguous with the ordinary user. This produces a communicative register in which the content of the channel is treated as a direct expression of a collective worldview rather than as the mediated opinion of an individual commentator. Anonymity, therefore, as it enables the expression of collective identities freely and without accountability costs, works as a strategic resource to maximize the salience of social identity in the audience’s perception. When the channel has no face, the audience’s cognitive default is to shift to group-level identification. Subscribers relate to the channel not as followers of a specific person but as members of a category whose worldview is embodied by the channel. In fact, the communicative register is non-hierarchical, but focuses on strengthening the bonds with the audience and between the members of the audience. As we see in [Figure 6](#), the post invites the audience to meet up to “*get to know each other*”, “*create new friendships*”, and to “*lean on each other*”.



**Figure 6:** Screenshot from a post, providing an address and inviting the audiences to meet up.

The audience does not look up to the Faceless allies as they look up to the Heroes. They look across to a figure who, being no one in particular, is in some sense everyone. The anonymous channel becomes a shared imaginative resource through which subscribers imagine themselves as members of a community of like-minded strangers, bonded through collective recognition of a shared positioning. The facelessness, in this sense, is a facilitator of this imagined community as it allows each subscriber to project their own emotions, experiences and “we sense” onto the channel. The audience is systematically addressed endearingly as “friends”, “family”, or similar epithets that emphasize belonging to a community of peers. This horizontal register produces a sense of belonging to a community whose members are united by shared essence, strategically deploying a status of ordinariness. The person who appears in public discourse without having sought celebrity recognition derives a distinctive kind of credibility from their very reluctance to occupy the limelight (Couldry, 2007). If the media center is presumed to confer status, those who appear to resist this conferral acquire a form of anti-status that functions as its own variety of authority: the refusal of individual visibility within the attention economy becomes, within the anti-mainstream community’s economy of credibility, a mark of commitment.

## Conclusions


This paper has examined how anti-mainstream public figures in the Italian Telegramsphere build their reputations, both in terms of the platforms they inhabit and the discursive strategies they adopt. The analysis of cross-platform presence suggests that their visibility is not grounded in isolation from the wider media environment, nor in a fully separate fringe ecology independent of mainstream platforms. Platforms more properly described as alt-tech remain extremely marginal within this Telegramsphere. For actors with recognizable public identities, Telegram is usually only one space among several, used less for the cultivation of parasocial relations than for the circulation of news and commentaries.

This has consequences for how anti-mainstream visibility is understood. The Italian case does not point to a world of self-contained outsider media, but to a configuration in which mainstream exposure and anti-mainstream self-positioning remain deeply entangled. The most sophisticated dimension of this dynamic is the way in which mainstream media's very denunciations of anti-mainstream actors contribute to, rather than undermine, their counter-reputational standing. When mainstream news outlets cover anti-mainstream figures they simultaneously amplify the names and faces of those figures to audiences that might not previously have encountered them, and they provide the anti-mainstream community with further evidence of the systematic nature of the mainstream's hostility. The "*smear campaigns*" denounced by anti-mainstream actors are, in many cases, genuine media coverage: and that coverage, however critically framed, is converted by the anti-mainstream narrative frame into confirmation of the actor's importance and threat. Claims of censorship or marginalization do not require full exclusion from mainstream circuits. On the contrary, they often gain force while actors continue to circulate through them. Even if the Italian case does not show widespread forms of total deplatforming, the rhetoric of exclusion remains highly visible in the presentational and persuasive strategies of these channels. In a context of generalized institutional distrust, of a widespread sense of epistemic crisis, and of established suspicion toward mainstream media, the claim of systematic suppression finds fertile soil not because it is materially verified but because it fits coherently with existing affective and ideological dispositions. The exclusion narrative works because it is already believed, at a general level, before any specific enforcement event occurs.

The four personas identified here — the Hero, the Rascal, the Professional, and the Faceless Ally — represent different articulations of outsiderhood. What they share is a discursive logic through which external disdain is converted into evidence of authenticity, courage, integrity, and, at times, belonging. At the same time, each persona relies on a different relationship between reputation, moral performance, vernacular immediacy, and informational credibility. The Hero derives authority from moral elevation and epistemic sacrifice. The Rascal turns vulgarity, mockery, and offensiveness into anti-mainstream credibility. The Professional foregrounds institutional credentials while detaching them from professional consensus. The Faceless Ally suspends personal celebrity and offers a more horizontal form of identification, built around anonymity and the promise of a shared "we". Symbolic exclusion is a narrative operation: it takes actual or alleged enforcement events and reconstructs them as evidence of a systematic campaign of suppression, transforming what might be a targeted regulatory intervention into a sweeping act of political censorship. In this sense, within the Italian anti-mainstream Telegramsphere, "exclusion is reframed as exclusivity" (Brilli and Zurovac, 2025).

Rather than concealing or managing the stigmatized aspects of their identity (Goffman, 1986), the anti-mainstream actors in our study amplify them, constructing communities in which the stigma is positively valorized. Although all four figures are shaped by a relationship to controversy, only the Rascal makes explicit use of despicability as a medium for converting exclusion into reputation. The other figures may refer to being treated as despicable by mainstream actors, media, or institutions, but they tend to reverse that judgment into a sign of higher moral or professional virtue. In this respect, despicability does not operate uniformly across the anti-mainstream field. Telegram's role in sustaining this milieu cannot be reduced to weaker moderation, especially since similar discourses extend well beyond the platform and

because the analysis did not reveal a widespread use of openly uncivil or heavily extremized language. More plausibly, what matters is Telegram's own reputation, within the Italian digital media system, as a platform "at the margins". That symbolic positioning appears to reinforce anti-mainstream identity more than any single affordance or simple regulatory permissiveness.

This study has several limitations. It focuses on a single national context, on publicly accessible channels, and on a strategy of channel selection partly shaped by Telegram's own recommendation system (Boccia Artieri, *et al.*, forthcoming). The cross-platform analysis also provides only a synchronic snapshot and cannot account for longer-term trajectories, reintegrations, or demonetization processes. Further research should follow these figures more closely over time, both online and offline, and examine how they make sense of their position in relation to the mainstream and to the imaginaries attached to Telegram itself. 

## About the authors

**Giovanni Boccia Artieri** is a full professor at the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies, University of Urbino Carlo Bo. His research interests focus on mediatization processes; fringe platforms; online hate speech studies; media manipulation and disinformation.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1398-7823>

E-mail: giovanni [dot] bocciaartieri [at] uniurb [dot] it

**Stefano Brillì** is an associate professor at the Department of Communication, Humanities, and International Studies (DISCUI) at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. His research interests focus on irreverence and celebrity in digital culture, live digital media, and the sociology of the arts.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9892-0993>

E-mail: stefano [dot] brilli [at] uniurb [dot] it

**Valeria Donato** received her Ph.D. in sociology of culture and communication from the University of Urbino Carlo Bo, where she is currently a research fellow. Her research primarily examines the dynamics of power at the intersection of politics, technology, and platform society.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5939-0430>

E-mail: valeria [dot] donato [at] uniurb [dot] it

**Elisabetta Zurovac** is an associate professor at the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies, University of Urbino Carlo Bo. Her research examines the entanglement of online self-narrative practices and algorithmic visibility strategies; especially focusing on the digital turn in the mediatization of memory.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8246-9256>

E-mail: elisabetta [dot] zurovac [at] uniurb [dot] it

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