

Screenshot News Within Italian Fringe Telegram Channels

Elisabetta Zurovac*

Abstract

In the context of a fragmented and hybrid digital public sphere, Telegram has emerged as a paradigmatic fringe platform that hosts alternative epistemic communities operating at the margins of mainstream legitimacy. This article¹ investigates the role of screenshots within Italian anti-mainstream Telegram channels, focusing on how these visual artifacts are mobilized to perform three interconnected functions: witnessing, amplifying, and proving. Through a qualitative methodology combining digital ethnography and thematic visual content analysis, the study analyzes a year of content shared in public Telegram channels linked to conspiratorial, anti-vaccine, and pro-Russian narratives. Findings show that screenshots operate as infrastructural tools of evidence-making and narrative alignment, anchoring oppositional readings of mainstream content and enabling affective forms of truth production. Two rhetorical figures emerge from the analysis: the *watchdog*, who surveils and exposes institutional actors and the *investigative reporter*, who frames screenshotting as an act of epistemic labor and populist expertise. By examining the sociotechnical affordances and symbolic uses of screenshots, this article conceptualizes “screenshot news” as a vernacular mode of knowledge production and dissemination that challenges traditional regimes of credibility, visibility, and authority. The study contributes to the understanding of fringe communication practices and the visual politics of truth in post-platformized media ecologies.

Keywords: Fringe platforms; Telegram; screenshot; qualitative content analysis.

ISSN: 18277969 (digital)

DOI: 10.26350/001200_000252

Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

Contributo sottoposto a *double-blind peer review*.

* Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo – elisabetta.zurovac@uniurb.it.

¹ This work was supported by the project «Countering Online Radicalization and incivility in Italy: from fringe to mainstream – CORIT», cod. P202293P5P_001 (CUP: H53D23009660001) funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU, within the framework of PNRR Mission 4 – Component 2 – Investment 1.1 under the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR) programme «PRIN 2022 PNRR».

1. Introduction

In contemporary digital ecosystems, the circulation of information no longer adheres to the hierarchical structures of traditional media. Instead, it unfolds within what Chadwick² defines as a hybrid media system, characterized by the interaction of institutional and non-institutional actors (ranging from legacy news organizations to ordinary users) across a multitude of platforms. This hybridization has generated a fragmented and polycentric public sphere in which users are not simply consumers but active participants in content production and dissemination. But while the digital turn has broadened communicative agency, it has also facilitated the diffusion of harmful content such as misinformation, disinformation, and conspiratorial thinking³. These developments have contributed to a growing distrust in institutional forms of authority (journalistic, scientific, or governmental) fostering a cultural climate marked by disintermediation and epistemic skepticism⁴. In this climate, alternative knowledge regimes gain traction by offering emotionally compelling narratives that resonate with users' affective and ideological dispositions⁵. The proliferation of such narratives reflects not irrationality per se, but a rationalization of insecurity and a reconfiguration of trust toward peer-based or non-institutional sources⁶.

This epistemic reorientation is particularly salient in populist and conspiratorial discourse, which frequently discredits mainstream narratives as ideologically compromised⁷, positioning themselves as bearers of suppressed knowledge⁸. Within these discursive formations, trust is affective rather than cognitive, and evidence is often decoupled from conventional

² A. Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

³ E.C. Tandoc Jr., Z.W. Lim, R. Ling, "Defining 'Fake News': A Typology of Scholarly Definitions", *Digital Journalism*, 6, 2 (2018): 137-153.

⁴ P. Saurette, S. Gunster, "Ears Wide Shut: Epistemological Populism, Argutainment and Canadian Conservative Talk Radio", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 44, 1 (2011): 195-218.

⁵ S. Aupers, "'Trust No One': Modernization, Paranoia and Conspiracy Culture", *European Journal of Communication*, 27, 1 (2012): 22-34.

⁶ J. Jossset, *Conspiracy Theories: How to Spot Them and Why They're Dangerous*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

⁷ J.E. Uscinski, C. Klofstad, M.D. Atkinson, "What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions", *Political Research Quarterly*, 69, 1 (2016): 57-71.

⁸ M. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

criteria of verification⁹. These dynamics are not merely cognitive, but infra-structural: mainstream platforms such as Facebook or YouTube have come to be perceived as enforcers of hegemonic norms, concentrating visibility and control in the hands of a few global actors. As a result, moments of perceived censorship or algorithmic bias often precipitate what Abidin¹⁰ calls refracted publics: strategically mobile user communities that migrate across platforms in search of environments perceived as more open, authentic, or ideologically hospitable. It is in this context that deplatformization emerges as a key catalyst in the reorganization of digital publics¹¹. Commonly implemented as a governance mechanism to curb the spread of hate speech, extremism, or misinformation, deplatforming rarely eliminates problematic communities altogether¹². Instead, it prompts reterritorialization processes whereby expelled actors reassemble¹³ on so-called fringe platforms, which are spaces defined by operational and normative distance from the mainstream¹⁴. These platforms are not mere shelters; they serve as generative infrastructures that enable the formation of technological counter-publics¹⁵, whose communicative practices are tailored to resist platformed forms of surveillance and regulation.

Among fringe platforms, Telegram has become particularly emblematic¹⁶. Despite its widespread adoption, it remains a space where certain channels and groups are defined as fringe due to the interplay between the platform's affordances, the public discourse surrounding it, and the oppositional identity positioning of its users. Originally designed as a secure messaging

⁹ M. Madisson, *Strategic Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Approach*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

¹⁰ C. Abidin, "From "Networked Publics" to "Refracted Publics": A Companion Framework for Researching "Below the Radar" Studies", *Social Media+ Society*, 7, 1 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120984458>.

¹¹ R. Rogers, "Deplatforming: Following Extreme Internet Celebrities to Telegram and Alternative Social Media", *European Journal of Communication*, 35, 3 (2020): 213-229.

¹² S. Jhaver, C. Boylston, D. Yang, A. Bruckman, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Deplatforming as a Moderation Strategy on Twitter", *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, (2021): 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3479525>.

¹³ K. Grusauskaite, J. Harambam, S. Aupers, "Reactionary Exiles. How Conspiracy Theorists Deal with Socio-Technological Exclusion", *Cultural Sociology*, (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755241248726>.

¹⁴ T. de Winkel, "Fringe Platforms: An Analysis of Contesting Alternatives to the Mainstream Social Media Platforms in a Platformized Public Sphere", PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2023.

¹⁵ M.T. Schäfer, I. Baxman, T. Beyes, C. Pias, "Unstable (Counter) Publics. Online Platforms as Hybrid Forums for Socio-Political Debate", *Social Media-New Masses*, (2016): 267-284.

¹⁶ R. Rogers (2020). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

service resistant to state censorship, it has evolved into a hybrid environment where diverse publics (ranging from dissident activists¹⁷ to conspiracy theorists¹⁸) coalesce around shared aspirations for autonomy and resistance. Its channel-based architecture, end-to-end encryption, and forwarding functionalities facilitate the creation of semi-public, resilient communication ecologies¹⁹. However, this same openness has made Telegram fertile ground for the circulation of disinformation, extremist content, and unverified claims²⁰ within homophilic networks²¹ tied to the anti-mainstream sentiment. Affect, also, plays a central role here: emotional echo chambers²² galvanize group cohesion not solely through ideological agreement but through shared sentiments of alienation, outrage, or betrayal. The authority of a message thus derives not from its empirical grounding but from its affective alignment with the community's worldview. This mode of circulation lends credibility to stigmatized forms of knowledge, which gain traction precisely because they are framed as excluded or censored by mainstream institutions.

Nonetheless, it would be misleading to characterize these publics as epistemically insulated. As Bruns²³ argues, mainstream content continues to circulate within fringe environments, albeit in recontextualized forms. These communities act as interpretive collectives²⁴, re-signifying institutional content to construct oppositional readings. This hermeneutic labor frequently takes the form of cherry-picking, a rhetorical practice of selectively extracting elements from both credible and dubious sources to substantiate a preordained narrative²⁵.

¹⁷ A. Urman A., J.C.-t. Ho, S. Katz, "Analyzing Protest Mobilization on Telegram: The case of 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill movement in Hong Kong", *PLoS ONE*, 16, 10 (2021). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0256675.

¹⁸ H. Schulze *et al.*, "Far-Right Conspiracy Groups on Fringe Platforms: A Longitudinal Analysis of Radicalization Dynamics on Telegram", *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 28, 4 (2022): 1103-1126.

¹⁹ M. Wijermars, T. Lokot, "Is Telegram a 'Harbinger of Freedom'? The Performance, Practices, and Perception of Platforms as Political Actors in Authoritarian States", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38, 1-2 (2022):125-145.

²⁰ S. Peeters, T. Willaert, "Telegram and Digital Methods: Mapping Networked Conspiracy Theories through Platform Affordances", *M/C Journal*, 25, 1 (2022): 1-10.

²¹ M. McPherson, L. Smith-Lovin, J. M. Cook, "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27 (2001): 415-444.

²² H. Eslen-Ziya, A. Giorgi, A.G. Tonon, "Emotional Echo Chambers on Social Media", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22, 5-6 (2019): 617-635.

²³ A. Bruns, *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, Cambridge: Polity, 2019.

²⁴ S. Aupers, "Decoding Mass Media/Encoding Conspiracy Theory", in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by M. Butter and P. Knight, London: Routledge, 2020.

²⁵ J. Musolino, "Cherry Picking and Scientific Evidence", *Foundations of Science*, 22 (2017): 691-710.

Within this broader matrix of epistemic contestation, infrastructural migration, and affective reorientation the mundane practice of screenshotting is among the practices observed in the circulation and endorsement of anti-mainstream ideas²⁶. As commonly known, screenshots operate as both visual artifacts and evidentiary tools: they anchor claims, crystallize moments, and boost the circulation of digital content “freed” by its original context. This article²⁷ explores the role of screenshots in Italian Telegram channels associated with fringe discourses, examining how mainstream information is captured, reinterpreted, and redeployed to construct alternative narratives.

The article is structured as follows. The next section contextualizes Telegram as a fringe platform and analyzes its affordances. The second section focuses on screenshotting as a sociotechnical practice of evidence-making. Section three outlines the research question and methodology. Sections four and five are dedicated, respectively, to the presentation of the empirical findings and to a discussion of their broader theoretical implications.

2. Telegram as an anti-mainstream refuge

Telegram has increasingly asserted itself as a paradigmatic site within the contemporary media ecology, functioning as a socio-technical infrastructure that facilitates the formation and consolidation of anti-mainstream publics. Its architectural design and governance logic (marked by a combination of decentralization, limited moderation, and encrypted communication) make it a hospitable terrain for actors and communities operating at the margins of institutional legitimacy²⁸. The so-called *super-groups*, and the broadcast channels, for instance, enable the reachability of content spread through the platform. The message forwarding mechanism, moreover, operates as a key vector of narrative contagion, allowing content to be recontextualized across distinct channels, thereby fostering what some scholars describe as “narra-

²⁶ E. Zurovac, *Screenshot Society: come le fotografie dello schermo raccontano il nostro stare online*, Milano: Franco Angeli, 2023.

²⁷ This work was supported by the project “Countering Online Radicalization and incivility in Italy: from fringe to mainstream – CORIT”, cod. P202293P5P_001 (CUP: H53D23009660001) funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU, within the framework of PNRR Mission 4 – Component 2 – Investment 1.1 under the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR) programme “PRIN 2022 PNRR”.

²⁸ C. Johansen, A. Mujaj, H. Arshad, J. Noll, “The Snowden Phone: A Comparative Survey of Secure Instant Messaging Mobile Applications”, *Security and Communication Networks*, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2021/9965573>.

tive coalitions”): transient yet powerful assemblages of thematic resonance across otherwise disconnected communities²⁹. In this sense, Telegram may exemplify the infrastructuring of a digital fringe, in which alternative epistemologies, antagonistic discourses, and counter-institutional narratives are not only articulated but also amplified.

The platform’s rise is deeply intertwined with the dynamics of deplatforming, whereby actors expelled from mainstream environments migrate to alternative digital spaces³⁰. In this sense, Telegram functions as both a tactical tool and a symbolic-affective environment for a wide range of actors operating at the margins of mainstream political and communicative systems. As noted by Wijermars and Lokot³¹ the platform’s technical resilience, exemplified by its successful circumvention of Russian government attempts at blocking access, has contributed to Telegram’s reputation as an enclave of alternative freedom, an environment explicitly chosen by many users in opposition to the institutional logics of surveillance and platform control. Therefore Telegram has also been described as a “safe haven” for political dissidents, ideological minorities, and controversial or stigmatized groups³². In fact, a growing body of literature focuses on the platform’s use by extremist actors, radicalized networks, and deplatformed communities. Empirical studies conducted in various national contexts show how Telegram has become a fallback infrastructure for far-right movements³³, conspiracy ecosystems such as QAnon³⁴, jihadist propaganda networks³⁵, often following their expulsion from mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. In Italy, some studies have explored the use of Telegram for sharing sexually explicit content, shedding light on forms of digitally mediated intimacy through the exchange of voice messages³⁶, as well as the platform’s role in

²⁹ K. Buehling, A. Heft, “Pandemic Protesters on Telegram: Digital Counterpublics and Platform Affordances”, *Social Media + Society*, 9, 2 (2023): 1-13.

³⁰ R. Rogers (2020). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

³¹ M. Wijermars, T. Lokot (2022). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

³² S. Peeters, T. Willaert (2022). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

³³ A. Urman, S. Katz, “What They Do in the Shadows: Examining the Far-Right Networks on Telegram Information”, *Communication & Society*, 25, (2020): 904-923.

³⁴ J. Ebner, C. Kavanagh, H. Whitehouse, “The QAnon Security Threat”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 16, 6 (2022): 62-86.

³⁵ N. Prucha, “IS and the Jihadist Information Highway – Projecting Influence and Religious Identity Via Telegram”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10, 6 (2016): 48-58.

³⁶ G. Boccia Artieri, S. Brillì, E. Zurovac, “Voices from the Locker Room: A Qualitative Analysis of Voice Messages within Italian Nsfw Groups”, *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2020i0.11174>.

facilitating the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images³⁷ and conspiracy theories³⁸.

Other research strands have turned their attention to the informational function of Telegram and its role in the circulation of news, opinions, and alternative narratives. Empirical evidence highlights the presence of a radical informational pluralism within Telegram³⁹, where verified journalistic and scientific content coexist with “junk news” and conspiracy theories. What sets Telegram apart from other digital spaces is the hybrid nature of its communicative architecture: information is often received in private or semi-private settings (such as closed groups and channels) but is immediately shareable and susceptible to viral dissemination. This blurring of private consumption and public circulation breaks down the classical boundary between individual reception and collective discussion, creating hybrid spaces in which information and affiliation are deeply intertwined⁴⁰. Users tend to trust and amplify content not necessarily because it is empirically verified, but because it originates from within a community that shares their worldview. The tendency toward ideological clustering and polarization is further reinforced by Telegram’s internal recommendation system. As Peeters and Willaert⁴¹ argue, even in the absence of active searching, users are often exposed to biased content through algorithmic suggestions, contributing to processes of radicalization and epistemic closure.

Therefore, Telegram represents a privileged site for the observation of contemporary transformations in digital publicness, radicalization dynamics, and counter-hegemonic meaning-making.

3. Understanding screenshots

Within contemporary digital culture, screenshots represent a hybrid communicative form that combines visual immediacy with documentary intent.

³⁷ S. Semenzin, L. Bainotti, “The Use of Telegram for Non-Consensual Dissemination of Intimate Images: Gendered Affordances and the Construction of Masculinities”, *Social Media + Society*, 6, 4 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120984453>.

³⁸ M.F. Murru, “QAnon and Its Conspiracy Milieu: The Italian Case”, in *Populism and Science in Europe*, edited by H. Eslen-Ziya and A. Giorgi, Springer International Publishing: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2022, 163-184.

³⁹ A. Herasimenka, J. Bright, A. Knuutila, P.N. Howard, “Misinformation and Professional News on Largely Unmoderated Platforms: The Case of Telegram”, *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 20, 2 (2022): 198-212.

⁴⁰ E. Zurovac (2023). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

⁴¹ S. Peeters, T. Willaert (2022). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

Initially designed to capture and communicate what appears on a digital interface, screenshots have evolved into polyvalent socio-technical artifacts. They serve as evidence, memory, weapon, and currency in complex economies of visibility, intimacy, and platformed interaction. Their ubiquity in daily life, amplified by the pervasiveness of smartphones, demands analytical attention not only to their technical functionality, but also to the cultural practices and social negotiations they enable and mediate.

From a technical perspective, screenshots are typically understood as images generated either internally (via the device capturing its own display) or externally (through photographic reproduction of the screen), a distinction theorized by Švelch⁴² in his taxonomy of screen captures. His framework differentiates among “screen capture” (an umbrella term), “photographic screen capture”, and “screenshot” proper, with the latter becoming widely accessible through the diffusion of smartphones. As Frosh⁴³ notes, the increasing normalization of screenshotting on mobile devices is deeply entangled with the photographic imaginary: the act of selecting, capturing, and saving is often accompanied by the sound of a shutter, mimicking the conventions of traditional photography. Indeed, several scholars⁴⁴ consider screenshots as part of the broader genealogy of photographic remediation. They are “photographs” not in a technical sense but in a cultural and epistemological one: they fulfill a documentary function, are perceived as traces of reality, and are imbued with an aura of evidentiary truth⁴⁵. This perceived transparency, however, must be critically interrogated. As Frosh⁴⁶ and Gaboury⁴⁷ caution, screenshots’ apparent objectivity conceals the subjective act of selection that underpins them: what is screenshotted, when, and for what purpose are all decisions embedded in social meaning. In the domain of video games and virtual worlds, for instance, screenshots have long been studied as vernacular paratexts that document in-game achievements or aes-

⁴² J. Švelch, “From ‘Screen Capture’ to Screenshot: A Taxonomy of Digital Snaps”, *Convergence*, 27, 5 (2021): 1236-1252.

⁴³ P. Frosh, “Inside the Image-Machine: Stock Images, Screenshots and Digital Snapping”, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 45, 2 (2018): 344-365.

⁴⁴ See: C. Book, “Gamer Photography: The Pleasures and Politics of Virtual Tourism”, *Visual Studies*, 18, 1 (2003): 4-12; C. Poremba, “Point and Shoot: Remediating Photography in Gamespace”, *Games and Culture*, 2, 1 (2007): 49-58.

⁴⁵ J. Gaboury, *Image Objects: An Archaeology of Computer Graphics*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021.

⁴⁶ P. Frosh (2018). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

⁴⁷ J. Gaboury, “A Prehistory of Digital Images: From Computer Graphics to Computer Art”, *Grey Room*, 74 (2019): 32-65.

thetically curated moments. Book⁴⁸ compared them to tourist photography, while more recent work highlights the emergence of “PlayStation photography”⁴⁹ as a creative subculture. These practices demonstrate how players use screenshots both as memory objects and as expressions of identity within gamer communities⁵⁰. Here, screenshots function as mnemonic devices and cultural capital, mediating the relationship between personal experience and collective participation. Scholars distinguish between purely documentary screenshots (captured to record events or scores⁵¹) and those that involve creative intervention, thus qualifying as transformative acts⁵².

Parallel to gaming cultures, a second major strand of research explores screenshots within social media ecologies, where the boundaries between public and private are particularly porous. In these contexts, screenshots are entangled with practices of intimacy, surveillance, and control. Studies in digital youth culture reveal how screenshots can simultaneously express agency and violate trust. For example, Mandau⁵³ documents the traumatic consequences of image-based sexual abuse among adolescent girls, whose sexually explicit content shared via ephemeral platforms like Snapchat is rendered persistent and shareable through screenshotting. Similarly, Handyside and Ringrose⁵⁴ highlight the asymmetry between the subject who is screenshotted and the one who screenshots, framing the act as a non-consensual production of visibility that exposes individuals to social sanctions and reputational damage. Jaynes⁵⁵ deepens this analysis by showing how adolescent girls experience screenshots as tools of social regulation, thus operate within a logic of ambient surveillance and relational power, reinforcing platformed hierarchies of visibility and control. Beyond these affective and power-laden dimensions, screenshots also invite reflection on their epistemic status and material logic. As digital objects, they participate in what Mitchell⁵⁶ calls the

⁴⁸ C. Book (2003). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

⁴⁹ D. Rizov, “The Birth of Console Photography”, *Screen*, 62, 3 (2021): 367-385.

⁵⁰ C. Moore, “Screenshots as Virtual Photography”, *Convergence*, 20, 4 (2014): 473-489.

⁵¹ K. M. Gerling, R. Mandryk, M. Birk, “Activities and Techniques for Gameplay Screenshot Production”, *Proceedings of CHI*, (2018): 1-12.

⁵² J. Švelch (2021). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

⁵³ M. Mandau, “Screenshotting and Non-Consensual Image Sharing among Teens”, *New Media & Society*, 22, 8 (2020): 1394-1413.

⁵⁴ S. Handyside, J. Ringrose, “Snapchat Memory and Digital Intimacy”, *Continuum*, 31, 3 (2017): 278-288.

⁵⁵ V. Jaynes, “The social life of screenshots: the power of visibility in teen friendship groups”, *New Media & Society*, 22, 8 (2020): 1378-1393.

⁵⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

“excessive archive” of digital photography: they are easily produced, rarely curated, and often forgotten, contributing to a chaotic personal repository that resists retrieval. Cramer, Jenkins, and Sang⁵⁷ offer a valuable systematization of screenshot practices along modalities which underscore the inherently ambivalent nature of screenshotting: it can be protective, archival, relational, or adversarial, depending on intent and context. What unites these diverse practices is the screenshot’s function as a moment of materialization and decontextualization. It materializes the intangible, transient digital flow into a stable visual object and simultaneously detaches that content from its original interpretive frame. In doing so, it invites reinterpretation, circulation, and contestation⁵⁸.

Screenshots reveal how digital culture is saturated by micro-acts of capture and control: technically trivial but socially consequential. They are not neutral records but interventions that express agency, construct memory, and often redistribute power. To study screenshots, therefore, is to interrogate the infrastructures of visibility and the everyday frictions of life within networked publics.

4. Research question and methodology

This study explores the role of screenshots in the circulation of content within Italian anti-mainstream Telegram channels, focusing on their functions as visual artifacts of mediation, evidence, and narrative construction. Guided by the research question “What types of content appear in shared screenshots, and from which sources do they originate?”, the investigation adopts a qualitative research design that combines digital ethnography and thematic visual content analysis. The empirical corpus was selected from the Telegramsphere mapped within the national research project “Countering Online Radicalization and incivility in ITaly: from fringe to mainstream (CORIT)” funded by the European Union⁵⁹. From the said network (n=538),

⁵⁷ E.M. Cramer, Y. Sang; S.T. Park, “Uses and Gratifications of the Screenshot in Human Ccommunication: An Exploratory Study”, *Electronic Journal of Communication*, 29 (2019): 1-2.

⁵⁸ E. Zurovac (2023). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

⁵⁹ Said Telegramsphere was constructed starting from an initial list of channels, compiled by the Italian debunking initiative BUTAC, expanded via a Python script that queried platform’s “similar channels” feature (based on overlaps in subscriber bases). For a detailed account of the methodology used to construct this network as part of the broader project, see G. Boccia Artieri et al., “The fringification of funding: monetization strategies within the Italian anti-mainstream Telegramsphere”, *New Media & Society* (forthcoming).

seven channels were selected taking into account a) the recurring themes within the Telegramsphere (anti-vax; multipolar geopolitics; anti-European Union sentiment; pro-Russian narratives; holistic wellness; traditionalist Catholicism; alternative finance; conspiracy theories) and b) their popularity in terms of number of subscribers (usually an indicator that the channel is still active). They also included a range of actors: from self-identified fringe creators to anonymous collectives and alternative media outlets; therefore reflecting the heterogeneous character of the sample. For ethical reasons, all channel names were anonymized. In line with established digital methods⁶⁰, Telegram was treated both as an ethnographic site and a tool of inquiry, with its internal features (such as forwarding mechanisms, channel architecture, and archived searchability) facilitating native data extraction. More precisely, content taken into consideration (n=200) was produced between May 2024 and May 2025. The analysis followed a grounded approach adapted for visual content⁶¹, integrating technical, textual and contextual dimensions to understand the embeddedness of screenshots within communicative strategies. Technically, screenshots were first analysed for their interface traits: visible status bars, platform icons, or other UI elements served as “native authenticity markers”, reinforcing the perceived legitimacy of the content. Platform provenance was established through design features and interface markers, revealing how credibility is visually encoded through residual traces of the original environment. Sources were classified according to platform of origin: social media platforms (Facebook, X, Instagram), journalistic articles, private messages or chats, institutional websites, and blogs. The analysis further engaged with the relationship between screenshots and their accompanying captions, focusing on discursive alignment, contradiction, or amplification. Captions often serve to anchor interpretation or to embed the screenshot within broader argumentations and polemical scripts⁶². Screenshots were also analysed for their communicative functions within the Telegram environment. Four primary (not mutually exclusive) uses emerged: documentation (archiving content for future reference), testimony (providing visual proof), bookmarking (graphic highlighting), and cherry-picking (strategically selecting fragments to support a position). These functions were frequently associated with decontextualization techniques: the removal

⁶⁰ R. Rogers, *Digital Methods*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012.

⁶¹ G. Kress, T. Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 2020.

⁶² T. Highfield, T. Leaver, “Instagrammatics and Digital Methods: Studying Visual Social Media, from Selfies and GIFs to Memes and Emojis”, *Communication Research and Practice*, 2, 1 (2016): 47-62.

of links, comment sections, or metadata; and selective cropping. Temporal markers were considered allowing the reconstruction of temporal manipulations or selective sequencing: this dimension revealed how screenshots are mobilized to sustain narrative arcs that challenge mainstream chronologies, often providing “proof” retroactively or predicting outcomes as a way to claim prescience.

5. Screenshot news: witnessing, amplifying, proving.

Within Italian anti-mainstream Telegram channels, screenshots perform three interconnected communicative functions: witnessing, by testifying that something has happened; amplifying, by giving visibility to events, actors, and claims otherwise ignored or silenced; and proving, by offering “factual” support for counter-narratives that challenge the credibility of mainstream.

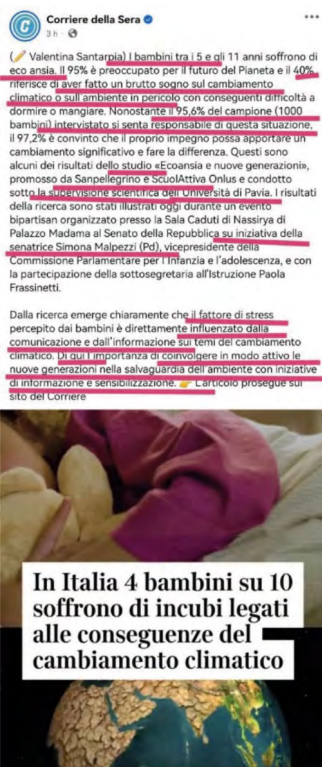
These functions are distributed across two broad strands of sources. The first includes mainstream news outlets and public figures whose statements are often reframed to expose perceived contradictions or ideological biases. The second comprises “deep-sourced” information, that we understand as materials lying outside the routine media diet of most Italians and require deliberate retrieval from less visible or less accessible sources⁶³.

The selection of what to screenshot is never neutral: what is made visible is always consistent with the channel’s antagonistic stance. Geopolitical topics (the invasion of Ukraine, the Palestinian genocide), or Italy’s relations with the European Union and NATO alliances are the most prominent. However, at times, topics such as climate science or sensational news stories about so-called “*sudden illnesses*” and “*unexpected deaths*” are routinely reframed to question the legitimacy of mainstream scientific consensus, reviving anti-vaccination sentiments or broader pandemic-related denialist narratives. Notably absent are mainstream pieces that offer nuanced or dissenting takes: content that might complicate the idea of the mainstream as a monolithic and manipulative bloc. This selective visibility contributes to constructing the mainstream as a flat, ideologically aligned voice, incapable of hosting pluralism or internal critique.

⁶³ This includes, for instance, excerpts from downloadable PDFs hosted on government or WHO websites, official statements buried in institutional portals, or even self-produced charts based on tools such as Google Trends, used to visualize interest in a given term and connect it to broader conspiratorial or anti-mainstream narratives. Such materials, whether documents, statements, or graphs, are then circulated as evidence of mainstream silence or manipulation.

Captions may sometimes be elaborate and emotionally charged, often framing the mainstream media and their representatives as ideologically compromised actors. In Figure 1, for instance, a Facebook post by the mainstream news media outlet *Corriere della Sera* reports on a study demonstrating that the 95% of Italian children suffers from eco-anxiety and it is accompanied by an image of a child clutching a soft toy in bed, which evokes vulnerability and fear.

Figure 1 - Screenshot of a social media post by Corriere della Sera, shared on Telegram on 29 March 2025



The body of the post also reports that the “*factor of stress perceived by children is directly influenced by communication and information on climate change*” and it advocates that it is crucial to involve “*younger generations through initiatives of information and awareness*”. This emotionally impactful post is interpreted not as public-interest reporting but as proof that the mainstream both causes the harm and prescribes more of

the same through further communication campaigns. In fact, the channel's caption opens with a mocking reference to the newspaper as "*Corriere della Ser(v)a*" a play on words that insinuates subservience to political interests. Then highlights, with evident indignation, that "*in the same study it says that the stress factor triggering these anxieties is COMMUNICATION and INFORMATION - and what would the remedy be? INFORMATION AND AWARENESS INITIATIVES*", concluding with the invective: "*Criminals and clowns! Leave the children alone!*". This example illustrates how mainstream journalism is not merely portrayed as biased but as an active source of social harm. The epithet "*criminals and clowns*" encapsulates a common trope in these fringe spaces: the delegitimization of mainstream reporters as either maliciously complicit or inept, positioning them not as mediators of knowledge but as performers in a manipulative spectacle. The screenshot thus becomes a vehicle for proving what fringe actors frame as a circular logic of problem creation and self-legitimation by mainstream media. Moreover, depending on the topic of the screenshot, journalists and politicians are usually accused of being "*Russophobic*", of conspiring to discredit Russia, or, alternatively, of being "*leccaculo*" (ass-kissers), for instance, toward Israel. These rhetorical choices reveal how screenshots do not merely document but amplify dissent, reinforcing the interpretative schema in which the mainstream is portrayed as siding with those defined as enemies, and actively opposing those framed as allies. Here, the screenshot becomes both visual proof and symbolic weapon: a still frame used to accuse, denounce, and invert the legitimacy of dominant actors. Channels frequently engage in metacommentary using these screenshots to build an archive of "mainstream lies", enabling their followers to expose contradictions and biases.

To illustrate more clearly how screenshots' sources and uses may vary and be deployed, Table 1 gives an example of a post shared in one of the analysed channels, consisting of five screenshots arranged in sequence. The channel's post is dated 17 December 2024 and it is accompanied by the short caption "*before and after the cure*".

Table 1 - Series of screenshots shared on Telegram as a post on 17 December 2024

Source	Mainstream, tweet, Salvini	Mainstream, tweet, Salvini	Deep-sourced, news, Europe Direct	News, n.a.	Mainstream, news, Lettera43
Screenshot					
Use	Documentation	Documentation, bookmarking	Documentation, cherry-picking, bookmarking	Documentation, cherry-picking	Testimony, bookmarking
Main function	Witnessing	Witnessing	Amplifying	Amplifying	Proving

The first two capture tweets by the politician Matteo Salvini from 2022, in which the government representative promises and claims to have delivered a reduction in road traffic fines. Notably, in the second tweet, the date is highlighted to draw attention to the fact that it is an older statement. These two screenshots therefore function as a form of witnessing: documenting and bookmarking what was previously stated, and effectively archived, by the fringe channels themselves. The third screenshot comes from the *Europe Direct* information network and reproduces a news item dated 10 March 2023 announcing “*New proposals by the European Commission on road safety*”. Given that this source, while public and mainstream, is not commonly visible in everyday news flows and must be actively searched for and extracted, it can be considered “deep-sourced”. In this case, the screenshot enables this information to gain broader visibility, amplifying its impact in the manner of an act of unmasking. The fourth screenshot provides no explicit clue about its source, which appears to be either a news outlet or a blog; it is dated 19 February 2024 and bears the headline “*Road safety in the European Union: here is the plan with the new measures*”. Here too, information about European Union proposals is selectively foregrounded to amplify its visibility and support the narrative of a European plan that may have escaped the

readers' attention. The last stage of this narrative culminates in the result, the definitive proof: the final screenshot, from December 2024, taken from the independent online newspaper *Lettera43*, reads: “*New Highway Code: 4,744 violations and 331 driving licences withdrawn in the first 48 hours*”. By this time, Salvini became Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, and he was promoting a reform of the Highway Code that substantially increased penalties, including financial ones, for traffic violations. Although the post itself contains minimal textual (the brief caption) or visual (a few highlighted dates) guidance, the curated sequence of screenshots constructs a temporal narrative drenched in anti-European sentiment. Therefore, “*the cure*” mentioned in the caption refers to the perceived reversal in Salvini’s stance. The post thus implicitly frames Salvini’s policy shift as an outcome of external pressure, suggesting that the minister, despite his previous rhetoric, ultimately complied with an agenda driven by the European Union. In this way, the sequence of screenshots not only reconstructs a chronological arc but also performs a causal interpretation, portraying the EU as the decisive force behind domestic legislative change and, by extension, as exerting influence over a right-wing national government. As shown within the example (Tab. 1), images of news are typically cropped to show only the headline, lead image, and opening paragraph, without providing clickable links to the original articles. This creates a closed communicative object that testifies to the existence of the news while removing the possibility for readers to check or interpret the content in its full context. Interestingly, and in contrast to earlier dynamics observed within other anti-mainstream communities, these channels rarely screenshot explicitly “alternative” sources such as conspiracy websites or well-known fake news portals⁶⁴. While disinformation often circulates, it does so under different guises. In many cases, the screenshots either omit the name of the source entirely (Tab. 1) or feature only excerpts of text that appear neutral and unsensational, distancing themselves from the aesthetic and stylistic cues typically associated with fake news (e.g., alarmist titles or excessive punctuation). This reinforces the strategy of proving without appearing overtly conspiratorial, giving the illusion of neutrality while subtly reshaping interpretation through framing and selection. Also, social media screenshots, particularly from platforms like X (formerly Twitter), are often stripped of metrics like likes or comments, decontextualizing the post and transforming it into pure content, disconnected from its reception (Tab. 1). This practice of screenshotting also plays a central role in reconfiguring reputational capital. Donald Trump’s posts on Truth Social represent a

⁶⁴ E. Zurovac (2023). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

special case. Although not mainstream, they appear frequently in the screenshots, owing to Trump's symbolic status as a globally recognized antagonist to liberal institutionalism. This "marginal" platform and its ideological positioning make Truth Social an ideal source for amplifying claims perceived as underrepresented or censored. However, a gradual change in attitude towards Trump can be observed. In fact, from being a rebellious outsider worthy of praise and hope, with his words used almost as motivational quotes, he is subsequently harshly criticized, mainly because of tariffs and statements on Palestine. This shift reveals a transformation in the symbolic role attributed to Trump in these fringe spaces: from an amplifier of dissenting voices to an object of contestation and even a disciplining figure, signalling a form of boundary-work enacted through screenshots, whereby former icons of outsider politics are scrutinized and sometimes repudiated for failing to live up to the expectations.

Across all these modalities, screenshots are more than mere tools for information sharing. They are multimodal artifacts that condense narrative frames, structure interpretation, and provide a semblance of documentary proof. Through the triadic function of witnessing, amplifying, and proving, screenshots emerge as a central device in the symbolic reconfiguration of authority, truth, and visibility within Italian anti-mainstream Telegram ecosystems.

6. Conclusions

Far from being a neutral or merely documentary gesture, the screenshot operates as a strategic tool that mediates between information retrieval and ideological positioning. In fringe spaces, the otherwise ordinary practice of screenshotting acquires a distinct epistemic and rhetorical force. The ability to detach content from its original context, the perceived transparency of the "photographic" gesture, the capacity to capture and archive fragments of past information flows for later reactivation, and the option to visually highlight what is deemed significant (all familiar affordances of screenshotting) become weaponized. Their persuasive power stems not from the original source but from the curatorial act of selecting fragments and placing them in new interpretive frames, and from the very absence of contextual information, which can be readily filled by a shared narrative within the group. The interpretive authority thus shifts from the original source to the collective, where trust in the screenshotter and alignment with the group's perspective sustain the screenshot's aura of evidentiary certainty. Fringe channels ad-

ministrators, mobilize screenshots to draw attention to specific claims, individuals, or media while granting them a veneer of visibility and factuality. In doing so, they do not merely recirculate pre-existing content but mimic a distinctive form of “newswork” that relies on visual evidence rather than journalistic routines. The result of this work may be defined as “screenshot news”: assemblages of informative fragments (excerpts of posts, headlines, tweets, institutional announcements...) whose legitimacy derives from their visual immediacy and their resonance with a shared worldview. By freezing content at a specific moment in time, screenshot news strips it of its original context while enhancing its perceived authenticity, making it available for recirculation, reactivation, and reinterpretation. We therefore propose two dominant rhetorical figures that characterize how such users engage with and repurpose external content: the *watchdog* and the *investigative reporter*.

The watchdog role is evident when users appropriate content from mainstream media or institutional actors to expose what they perceive as manipulation, bias, or ideological corruption. Screenshots in this mode function as visual testimonies of surveillance and as archives of previous scrutiny. The investigative reporter reveals a more individualistic posture. Here, users present themselves as autonomous researchers who bypass both mainstream and alternative intermediaries to retrieve and reinterpret publicly available but “hidden”, deep-sourced information. The screenshots they produce are not meant to expose or promote per se, but to demonstrate competence, effort, and epistemic virtue usually. This figure resonates with the notion of populist expertise⁶⁵, where legitimacy stems not from formal credentials but from having the “right attitude” toward truth: skeptical, oppositional, and unaligned. In this case, the screenshot becomes a visual trace of epistemic labor: a way to prove one’s intellectual autonomy and to witness truths ignored by official narratives. As Frosh⁶⁶ and Švelch⁶⁷ have shown, this indexicality of the screen transforms the screenshot into a visual token of truth.

Within these fringe communities, the screenshot becomes a vehicle for what Parmigiani⁶⁸ calls participatory epistemology: knowledge is not imposed from above, but collectively constructed, verified, and circulated within a community of interpretation. Users direct the gaze of others not by producing new content, but by selecting, reframing, sequencing what

⁶⁵ A.E. Marwick, W.C. Partin, “Constructing Alternative Facts: Populist Expertise and the QAnon Conspiracy”, *New Media & Society*, 26, 5 (2024): 2535-2555.

⁶⁶ P. Frosh (2018). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

⁶⁷ J. Švelch (2021). DA COMPLETARE PER ESTESO

⁶⁸ G. Parmigiani, “Magic and Politics: Conspirituality and COVID-19”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 89, 2 (2021): 506-529.

already exists. The screenshot thus becomes a cropped reality: a carefully shaped fragment of the world that fits within a broader ideological story. In this sense, screenshotting exemplifies how a mundane digital affordance can be weaponized and repurposed as a collective evidentiary practice. By transforming dispersed fragments of digital content into screenshot news, fringe communities challenge dominant models of knowledge production and invite us to reconsider how truth, legitimacy, and expertise are visually and rhetorically constructed in digital environments.