The Rise of Telegram: A Billion Users, Encryption and a Fractured World

Telegram has become one of the most influential digital platforms of our time. Despite growing pressure from governments worldwide, Pavel Durov's messaging app continues to forge its extraordinary path, combining mass adoption, privacy and economic viability.

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On August 24, 2024, Telegram founder Pavel Durov was arrested by French authorities in Paris shortly after disembarking from a flight from Baku, Azerbaijan. He was charged with twelve offenses, including complicity in the distribution of child pornography, refusal to cooperate with investigators, money laundering, and criminal conspiracy.

Telegram is a messaging app that offers the features of a social network and a public broadcasting platform. With over a billion users worldwide, it is known for its intuitive interface, strong encryption, and firm stance against data collection or collaboration with governments.

"An assault on freedom"

Edward Snowden

Durov's arrest came as a shock to all those committed to freedom of expression, triggering immediate reactions from prominent figures. Elon Musk promoted the hashtag #FreePavel on X, while Edward Snowden denounced the detention as "an assault on freedom of speech" and "a disgrace for France and the world."

Macron courted Durov intensively, but in vain

French President Emmanuel Macron was quick to frame the arrest of the Telegram CEO as a purely judicial affair, free from political interference. Yet the circumstances surrounding Durov's arrest suggest otherwise. The two men are no strangers.

In 2017, Macron's campaign team made extensive use of Telegram for internal communication—at a time when the app remained little known in France. In the year that followed, Macron actively courted Durov, inviting him to the Élysée Palace and urging him to relocate Telegram's headquarters to Paris, as part of his broader effort to brand France as a "start-up nation." He even went so far as to grant Durov French citizenship under an exceptional "étranger émérite" procedure, typically reserved for distinguished French-speaking foreigners.

At the time of his arrest, Mr. Durov stated that he had traveled to France for a scheduled meeting with President Macron. His detention raised the question of whether the legal proceedings were politically motivated, possibly initiated by the French President, or even at the request of the Biden administration. To understand why Telegram provokes such strong institutional reactions, one must look to its origins.

A Russian Biography of Success

Smart Russian Boys

The origins of Telegram—its philosophy, purpose, and success—are inseparable from the life and convictions of its founder, Pavel Durov.

Born in 1984 in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg), then part of the Soviet Union, Pavel was raised in a deeply intellectual household. Both of his parents were professors at Saint Petersburg State University. His father, a renowned scholar of ancient Roman literature, and his mother, of Ukrainian origin (née Ivanenko), a philologist and expert in classical languages. She also worked as a journalist and came from a princely family deported from Kiev to Siberia during the October Revolution.

Pavel's older brother, Nikolai Durov—Telegram's co-founder—is a prodigy in mathematics and programming. He won gold medals at the International Mathematics Olympiad (IMO) and the International Olympiad in Informatics (IOI). He holds two PhDs in mathematics, and built Telegram's technical infrastructure, including the MTProto protocol that underpins the platform's speed and security. This technical foundation would later establish Telegram as a formidable technological innovator.

Nikolai Durov, math champion and Telegram co-founder

At the age of four, Pavel moved to Italy when his father accepted a teaching post at the University of Turin. There, he learned Italian and experienced life in Western Europe. After the Soviet Union's collapse, the family returned to Russia. This early

exposure to both systems profoundly shaped Pavel's worldview. He became an advocate for free markets, freedom of expression, and civil liberties.

VKontakte – the Russian Facebook

In 2006, at the age of 21, Pavel and Nikolai launched VKontakte (VK), a social network often described as the "Russian Facebook", which rapidly gained popularity across the post-Soviet world—especially in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan—and reached 100 million registered users by 2010. VK stood out for its intuitive interface, open API for third-party developers, and a permissive approach to content sharing, allowing users to exchange music, films, series, and books— often with little regard for copyright.

Durov defies state pressure

VK's strong stance on user privacy soon put it at odds with the Russian authorities. In 2011, opposition groups linked to Alexei Navalny used the platform to organize mass demonstrations. According to Pavel, the government demanded the removal of the groups and disclosure of organizers' identities, which he refused to do. Tensions escalated again in 2013, when protests broke out in Ukraine and activists used VK to coordinate ahead of the infamous Maidan coup.

This episode marked the beginning of Durov's transformation into a political outlier—one who would repeatedly defy state pressure.

In an interview with Tucker Carlson, Pavel recalled: "I had to make a difficult decision because I was offered basically a choice between two suboptimal options, one of which was I would start complying to whatever the leaders of the country told me to do. The other one was I could sell my stake in the company, retire, resign as the CEO, and leave the country. I chose the latter."

Leaving Russia as a Rich Man

In December 2013, he sold his 12% stake in VK to Ivan Tavrin, CEO of MegaFon, for an estimated $300 million, based on a company valuation of between $2.5 and $4 billion. In 2014, at the age of 33, Durov left Russia with approximately $300 million and 2,000 bitcoins.

Following these events, he and his brother Nikolai decided to create a new platform that would be fast, secure, and immune to surveillance and censorship. Telegram was born.

Telegram is born

Defying China, Iran and Russia

Telegram was created four years after WhatsApp and quickly found both success and problems across jurisdictions. In 2015, the Chinese government completely blocked Telegram, suspecting it of facilitating anti-government political activities. Unlike many Western tech companies, Telegram chose to forego access to the world's largest market rather than negotiate with the Chinese government and betray the trust of its users.

In Iran, Telegram has been officially banned by court order since May 2018. Nevertheless, it remains one of the country's most widely used messaging platforms at that time, with over 50 million active users who routinely circumvent censorship through VPNs and proxy tools. In Russia, the app was banned between 2018 and 2020, but its use never meaningfully declined. The government eventually lifted the ban in 2020. By 2024, more than half of Russians were using the app regularly.

Behind the Rhetoric of Democracy Promotion

Initially, Telegram was welcomed in Washington as a tool of digital freedom—a platform empowering "dissidents" to speak out in countries like China, Iran, and Russia. This view was consistent with US long-standing foreign policy of promoting "liberal ideas" abroad as instruments of soft power.

Since the end of the Cold War, Washington has actively used freedom of expression as a geopolitical instrument. According to political scientist John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, this reflects what he calls the "liberal hegemony": a belief in exporting democracy not only as a moral good, but as a mechanism for extending Western influence.

Non-governmental organizations such as the NED and USAID, independent media outlets, think tanks, and foundations like the Open Society Foundations have been deployed to "promote democracy, human rights, and press freedom" in targeted states. While these efforts may appear morally motivated, Mearsheimer argues that they also serve to undermine the internal stability of rival powers and in some cases, pave the way for regime change.

Within this broader strategy, the US has funded encrypted technologies like Signal, Tor, and VPNs through the Open Technology Fund (OTF)— tools meant "to empower dissidents in authoritarian countries". According to Mike Benz, a former

U.S. cybersecurity official, Telegram was initially seen as a "pro-freedom" technology aligned with American values and interests. That perception, however, began to shift dramatically after 2016.

Donald Trump's election and the Brexit vote were seen as major geopolitical shocks by the Western establishment. They represented an "informational Pearl Harbor"—a rude awakening for Western elites who suddenly realized they had lost control over the global narrative. These were, at their core, internet-driven elections. Online platforms played a decisive role in mobilizing opinion despite heavy resistance from mainstream media and U.S.-funded broadcasters.

Digital platforms once seen as liberating were now viewed as destabilizing. Especially those challenging the narratives upheld by what critics call "the Blob"—a bipartisan network officials, journalists, think tanks, and former policymakers united in a belief in US exceptionalism and interventionism. This elite consensus supports NATO expansion, sanctions, regime change, and preventive wars.

"Censorship Industrial Complex" is Born

This led to the emergence of what Benz calls the "Censorship Industrial Complex"— a public-private alliance involving intelligence agencies (like the NSA and CIA), tech giants (Meta, Google, Twitter/X), government-backed NGOs, academic disinformation labs, and corporate media fact-checkers. Its purpose: to monitor, suppress, and redirect digital discourse under the guise of protecting democracy from "misinformation" and "foreign influence." What was once "free" speech is now framed as "dangerous" speech when it empowers the wrong voices.

"Mike Benz exposed architecture of censorship"

One could say that while Edward Snowden revealed the mechanisms of mass surveillance and the erosion of privacy in 2013, Julian Assange later denounced the war crimes and secret diplomacy of the United States, and Mike Benz exposed the architecture of institutional censorship in the digital age.

Mike Benz reveals how digital censorship works in the West

Telegram – the refuge for the deplatformed

Telegram quickly emerged as a refuge for those deplatformed by Twitter/X, Facebook, and YouTube: conservatives, Trump supporters, QAnon followers, COVID skeptics, anti-NATO activists, and critics of official narratives. What made Telegram a problem wasn't just its encryption or its Dubai headquarters—beyond the direct reach of the FBI and NSA—but the fact that it was increasingly used by Western citizens, not just "foreign dissidents".

The war in Ukraine only intensified Telegram's geopolitical significance. The app became a battlefield of information in real time, used by Ukrainian forces, Russian pro-war bloggers, journalists, militias, civilians, and countless independent observers.

1'000'000'000 Users

With over a billion users across both G7 and BRICS countries, Telegram has become central to the global battle over information. Its encryption, open channels, and mobilization power challenge the West's narrative control. As the unipolar world fades away, the growing pressure on Telegram reveals the decline of Western influence and accelerates that process. The more the platform is attacked, the more its appeal spreads.

Why is Telegram so popular?

When David fights Goliath

As of March 2025, Telegram officially surpassed 1 billion monthly active users, making it the world's second most popular messaging platform—just behind WhatsApp and ahead of Facebook Messenger, excluding China-specific apps like WeChat. And each year, the gap with WhatsApp continues to narrow.

While Pavel Durov's focus on privacy resonates in today's geopolitical climate, Telegram's growth is mainly fueled by its strong technology and user experience. What makes this growth particularly remarkable is that it was achieved without any marketing expenditure and that the company operates with a team of only 60 full-time employees.

Success through Innovation

Many of Telegram's innovations—now industry standards—were introduced years ahead of its competitors. Notable examples include:

- Channels (2015): One-way broadcast tools for reaching unlimited audiences. WhatsApp introduced its own version only in 2023, modeled directly on Telegram.
- Massive Group Chats: Telegram enabled groups of up to 200,000 members early on, with advanced moderation tools. WhatsApp only gradually increased its limit, lagging years behind.
- Stickers and Bots: Telegram popularized custom sticker packs and introduced its open Bot API in 2015, enabling developers to create everything from games to payment systems. WhatsApp later adopted bots—but in a much narrower, business-oriented form.
- Multi-Device Support: Telegram allows seamless access across multiple devices without requiring your phone to be connected. WhatsApp only introduced this feature in 2021.
- Privacy Tools: Features like Secret Chats with end-to-end encryption, self-destructing messages, and screenshot blocking were introduced by Telegram years before WhatsApp and Signal rolled out similar tools.
- Cloud-Based Storage: Telegram's architecture is fully cloud-based, enabling instant sync, easy file sharing, and unlimited message history. WhatsApp still relies heavily on local storage, with optional cloud backups.
- AI Integration (2025): Telegram recently partnered with Elon Musk's xAI to integrate the Grok chatbot across the platform—bringing conversational AI directly into the messaging experience.

Commitment to Privacy

But even the most advanced features would mean little without Telegram's core promise: a strong commitment to privacy. At the center of that promise is encryption—both a key element of digital security and a frequent source of controversy. Messaging apps often tout their own encryption systems while questioning the security of their competitors. These debates are usually drowned out by technical jargon, which confuses most users.

Telegram's Privacy beats Competitions

Proprietary Encryption

Telegram secures its communications using a proprietary encryption protocol called MTProto, developed by Nikolai Durov—regarded as one of the most brilliant cryptographers of his generation. A protocol is a set of technical rules that determine how messages are sent, encrypted, and interpreted between users and servers. Designed specifically for mobile use, MTProto strikes a rare balance between speed and security.

The decision to develop a custom protocol reflects Telegram's broader philosophy of independence. This stands in contrast to the Signal Protocol, developed with U.S. government funding and now embedded in WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Google Messages or Skype.

US-Tech with State Involvement

As Pavel Durov has pointed out, U.S. tech companies seem unable—or unwilling—to develop encryption systems without state involvement. Yet when Telegram does so to remain independent, it is paradoxically criticized for not adopting the so-called "industry standard"—a standard it deliberately chose to avoid.

Frequently, criticism focuses on Telegram's selective use of end-to-end encryption (E2EE), a method that ensures only the sender and intended recipient can read messages. Unlike Signal or WhatsApp, where E2EE is applied by default to all chats, Telegram offers it only in "Secret Chats," which must be initiated manually. Critics often use this to claim Telegram is less secure—an oversimplification that ignores both technical trade-offs and user preferences.

Telegram offers two types of chats, each serving different priorities. Cloud Chats, enabled by default, are encrypted between your device and Telegram's servers. While not protected by E2EE, they support features like multi-device access, message search, and cloud backups—options that full E2EE would disable.

Secret Chats are fully E2EE and stored only on the devices involved. They offer maximum privacy but lack features like backups and cross-device access. This dual system reflects Telegram's pragmatic approach: strong privacy when needed, convenience by default.

Illusion of Privacy by others

This flexibility stands in contrast to the illusion of privacy offered by other platforms. WhatsApp, for example, promotes E2EE as a core feature, but most of its messages are eventually backed up—unencrypted—on Apple iCloud or Google Drive. Even if you disable backups, your contacts may not, meaning your supposedly secure messages can still be uploaded to the cloud without your consent.

There are also broader concerns about government-mandated backdoors. In the U.S., intelligence agencies have repeatedly pressured companies like Apple and Google to create hidden access points "for national security." Under laws like the Patriot Act and FISA, authorities can issue gag orders—secret legal demands that compel companies to comply without disclosing the surveillance, or even acknowledging its existence.

WhatsApp's Poor Securty

WhatsApp, in particular, has a very poor security track record. Since 2018, it has suffered from a series of critical vulnerabilities, including flaws that allowed attackers to hack phones via a missed call. In 2019, WhatsApp was used to deliver Pegasus spyware, targeting journalists, activists, and political figures. New severe flaws are discovered almost every year, many rated 9 or 10 out of 10 in severity. Despite its marketing, WhatsApp remains one of the most compromised messaging apps.

Zuckerberg questioned on WhatsApp encryption by Congress, April 2018

When Governments Recommend...

In Europe, Signal is often held up as the gold standard for secure messaging. It has been endorsed by the European Commission, the European Parliament and media outlets such as Euractiv and Euronews. However, as Twitter founder Jack Dorsey has pointed out, Signal's current leadership includes activists with ties to the U.S. State Department—raising questions about whether this "secure" app is truly independent. If, as the saying goes, power only targets what it fears, why then has Signal encountered so little resistance?

Telegram's challenges haven't only been political or technical. As it expanded and its costs skyrocketed, the company was also confronted with a fundamental question: how to achieve financial stability without compromising its principles? If Pavel Durov is now facing twelve criminal charges, it may well be because the French government aimed to undermine Telegram—tarnishing its reputation and, by extension, jeopardizing its financial viability just as it began to turn a profit.

Telegram is Profitable

Insistence on independence pays off

Pavel Durov's insistence on independence and the environment in which his company operates has shaped his bold approach to capital allocation.

Like any CEO, he must decide how best to deploy funds—whether from cash flow, debt, or equity— across five strategic areas: reinvesting in the business, pursuing acquisitions, reducing debt, paying dividends, or buying back shares. But Durov, as Telegram's sole shareholder, has never issued equity. From day one, the company has been funded entirely through his personal fortune and private debt.

As a messaging platform, it operates in a space where network effects are the primary driver of value: each new user makes the platform more useful for everyone else, creating a compounding loop where scale fuels growth. Such dynamics often produce natural monopolies or oligopolies. Telegram bet heavily on that logic, prioritizing rapid expansion over short-term profit—burning significant cash in the process.

Wise Long-term Strategy

That long-term strategy is now paying off. Telegram became profitable for the first time in 2024—nearly eleven years after its launch in 2013. According to internal documents reviewed by the Financial Times, Telegram generated $1.4 billion in revenue in 2024—up from $343 million the year before—and posted a net profit of $540 million, a dramatic reversal from its $173 million loss in 2023.

Three Revenue Streams

According to the investor documents, the $1.4 billion in revenue in 2024, drawn from three main sources. The largest share—about 50%—came from "partnerships and ecosystem" activities. This includes revenue from developers building "mini apps" within Telegram, particularly in areas like commerce and gaming. These apps run on the TON blockchain, originally developed by Telegram and now maintained by the open-source community. Telegram earns income through third-party deals related to Toncoin, as well as by selling portions of its own Toncoin holdings.

The second major revenue stream was advertising, which brought in $250 million. Telegram has started monetizing public channels by offering an in-house ad platform for businesses to promote their content.

The third source came from premium subscriptions, totaling $292 million. Users who subscribe to Telegram Premium gain access to additional features such as faster downloads, larger file uploads, and exclusive emoji sets.

Private debt successfully refinanced

Telegram capitalized on its strong 2024 performance to refinance existing debt, raising $1.7 billion through a convertible bond — a form of debt that can be converted into equity if the company goes public — which closed on May 28.

The new bonds offer a 9% yield. Importantly, if Telegram goes public in the future, bondholders can convert their bonds into equity at a 20% discount to the IPO price. This structure mirrors the terms of previous bond sales.

In recent remarks to potential investors, Chief Investment Officer John Hyman stated that the company had met all of its financial targets and suggested that an initial public offering could be considered if market conditions become more favorable.

Looking ahead, Telegram's financial position may be further reinforced by a groundbreaking partnership with xAI (not yet signed), Elon Musk's company. Telegram could soon be able to access Grok, xAI's conversational chatbot, directly from the app. In return, Telegram would receive $300 million in cash and stock, as well as 50% of the revenue generated by xAI subscriptions sold through its platform. Pavel Durov described the deal as a strategic long-term boost that strengthens Telegram's independence while opening up new avenues for monetization.

Why Telegram Matters Now

From its origins in post-Soviet Russia to its global expansion in the G7 and BRICS countries, Telegram has grown by combining technical innovation, economic resilience, and maintaining a philosophy based on personal sovereignty. As of March 2025, Telegram had surpassed one billion monthly active users—while operating with a core team of just 60 employees, an extraordinary ratio of scale to manpower.

Telegram became profitable for the first time in 2024, generating $1.4 billion in revenue and posting a net profit of $540 million, reinforcing its financial independence. But this success has come at a cost. Pavel Durov's arrest in Paris came at a time when Telegram was reaching critical mass, transforming from a rebellious tech startup into a global platform that was too big, too private, and too free for Western powers to ignore.

Far from undermining its legitimacy, these pressures suggest Telegram is delivering on its mission. Governments increasingly view it not as a vehicle for digital freedom, but rather as a threat to their control over information. Legal attacks, media hostility, and regulatory scrutiny no longer appear to be random occurrences, but rather tools to attempt to influence Telegram's principles.

In a tech landscape where the brightest minds are often employed to engineer distraction—building platforms that serve addictive, low-value content to passive users—Pavel Durov has taken a different path: creating a simple tool that empowers individuals.