

## THE POWER OF MESSAGING APPS IN SPREADING DISINFORMATION ONLINE

### Challenges of a messaging platform that is not an open forum

It's very difficult to identify and combat disinformation that goes viral on WhatsApp because of its direct communication between users and encryption, which makes it hard to know what goes on inside. There is no way to guarantee that people and groups that spread false information will see a fact-check.

### Confirmation bias plays an important role

Factual information and news don't seem to have the same viral fanbase as the more emotional-based election content, so the messages that news outlets posted did not spread quickly or widely. Even when stories were widely debunked by fact-checkers, confirmation bias played an important role in what people believe and do not believe.

### When fake news is part of culture

WhatsApp's data show that especially Indians use the app differently from people in other markets — as much to share stories and images as to send private messages. India has one of the highest rates of forwarded messages of any country. There is a vast pool of digital novices in a society that relishes storytelling and gossip. There have been more than 50 deaths in WhatsApp-related killings by mobs in India in 2018.



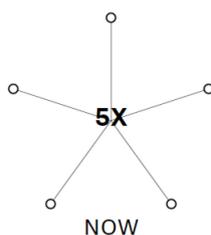
Picture: A portrait of Bala Krishna, a 33-year-old motorized rickshaw driver who was killed by a mob responding to social media messages about gangs of kidnappers looking for children.

### Next steps for fact-checking

It has been suggested to produce native content on WhatsApp and to viralize fact-checks by making the reports as fun and appealing as fabricated news and hyperpartisan memes. Images work well, especially those that have the brand of a newspaper or fact-checking agency. The more assertive and explanatory titles help, since many people do not click on links. It has been recommended to experiment with ways to attract loyal readers who become active "fans" of the news, who are willing to spread credible information in the same way that people spread rumors and fabricated news.

### Killing virality?

WhatsApp has a plan to help fight its dangerous fake news problem: It's making the service less viral.



**Today**, each person can forward a message to up to **5** groups

Each group can have up to **256** people

Meaning one person's message could theoretically reach

**1,280** people

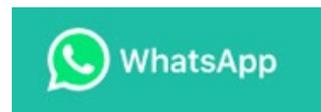
Source: Recode analysis of WhatsApp rules

**recode**

### Tips by WhatsApp to help prevent the spread of rumors and fake news

#### 1. Understand when a message is forwarded

Messages with the "Forwarded" label help you determine if your friend or relative wrote the message or if it originally came from someone else. Double check the facts when you're not sure who wrote the original message.



#### 2. Check photos and media carefully

Look at trusted news sources to see if the story is being reported elsewhere. When a story is reported in multiple places, it's more likely to be true.

#### 3. Look out for messages that look different

Many messages or website links you receive containing hoaxes or fake news have spelling mistakes. Look for these signs so you can check if the information is accurate.

#### 4. Check your biases

Watch out for information that confirms your preexisting beliefs and review the facts before sharing information. Stories that seem hard to believe are often untrue.

#### 5. Fake news often goes viral

Even if a message is shared many times, this does not make it true. Don't forward a message because the sender is urging you to do so.

#### 6. Verify with other sources

If you're still not sure if a message is true, search online for facts and check trusted news sites to see where the story came from. If you still have doubts, ask fact-checkers or people you trust for more information.

#### 7. Help stop the spread

If you see something that's fake, tell the person that sent it to you and ask them to verify information before they share it. Don't share a message because someone tells you to do so. If a group or a contact is constantly sending fake news, report them.

Compiled by SCM from

Shashank Bengali (FEB 04, 2019). How WhatsApp is battling misinformation in India, where 'fake news is part of our culture' Renata Johnson (2019, January 16). Lessons learned from fact-checking the Brazilian presidential election. IJNET WhatsApp (n.d.). Tips to help prevent the spread of rumors and fake news

Photo: (Mahesh Kumar A. / Associated Press)

Kurt Wagner and Rani Molla (2019). WhatsApp is fighting fake news by limiting its virality. Could Facebook and Twitter do the same? Recode

Mohammad Faisal (2018, November 15). Anatomy of a WhatsApp forward: Why people spread fake news. India Today