

Don't forward 'as received'

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Abstract

Viral messages on messaging services can cause real harm, and has even resulted in dozens of lynchings in India. But the way to address such harms isn't by penalizing the service provider or removing encryption, but through education, improved moderation design, and police interactions with communities.

Lynch-mobs debase humanity. The reasons for their actions in the past have been varied: Suspicion of cow smuggling, thieving, and child trafficking. However a common thread in many cases has been the circulation of rumours that appeal to people's fears and bigotry on messaging platforms, especially WhatsApp.

While rumours leading to lynchings and even riots are not new to India, their frequency is alarming. Digital technologies afford us greater ability to communicate and to exercise our freedom of expression more fully than ever before. They also allow the spread of rumours in greater numbers, over greater distances and with greater impunity. While child abduction rumours on WhatsApp resulted in a lynching in 2015 too, the past month has seen such rumours spread all over South India, resulting in dozens of lynchings. The difference? Increased use of the Internet.

How can this menace be tackled? First, we have to accept personal responsibility. Never forward 'as received' messages whose veracity you aren't sure of; chastise those who do. This is also backed by the law: the IPC, under provisions like Sections 505 and 153A, allows for prosecution of certain categories of harmful rumours and falsehoods.

Second, WhatsApp's moderation-less design encourages rumour-mongering. WhatsApp implicitly discourages moderation of content in groups (e.g., it only has 'administrators', not 'moderators'), unlike, say, Facebook.

Research carried out by J. Nathan Mathias of MIT shows that reminding users of posting rules "actually prevent(s) people, especially newcomers, from commenting outside those rules". However, while WhatsApp's terms of service do prohibit "publishing falsehoods, misrepresentations, or misleading statements", users and admins are never told this except when they sign up. Even then, WhatsApp doesn't provide translated versions of "acceptable use" terms

in languages like Hindi and Tamil. This must change: People need constant reminding of what's acceptable and what isn't by group admins.

Third, while the police in some places have often been doing a commendable job in debunking rumours in affected localities, they also need to use WhatsApp's virally to quell these rumours.

And lastly, we must realize that social media and the mainstream media feed off each other. Last year mainstream media spread a hoax like 'Blue Whale Challenge', which even led to a Supreme Court order against the spread of a non-existent app. Thus, we also need to advocate greater press responsibility too. Research shows that since news over social media often comes from friends and family, people wrongly tend to trust it more. We need to be more critical of what we receive, even if from mainstream media, and, perhaps more importantly, in what we send.