



**FIGHTING
FAKE NEWS
WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT?**

Based on survey results collected
from 3000-odd people across 11 states

By Digital Empowerment Foundation

Fighting Fake News: Whose responsibility it is?

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become an increasingly powerful medium today. It is not just enabling people to fight information poverty at various levels but it is also enabling individuals or groups to spread awareness, mobilise communities, raise debates and change stereotypes or mindset. It's also amazing how social media and messaging platforms have been able to bridge the gap between citizens and governance, society and social issues, victims and aid providers, and service-seeker and service providers, among others. The mobile phone, particularly, is credited with having changed the way person-to-person communications take place today. One no longer needs to write a letter, post it and wait for days to be delivered before the receiver can write a response and post it back to the original sender, spanning anywhere from days to months for the exchange, depending on the distance between the two persons.

In the last 25 years, the Internet, as we know it today, has come a long way. In India, public Internet entered a few years later—in August 1995—and has since then largely remained a luxury, today a little more affordable than yesterday. However, Internet penetration has been steadily increasing in India. In the last few years, especially, marked by the entry of cheap smartphones, proliferation of mobile Internet infrastructure and falling data prices, mobile phone subscriptions (number of SIM cards sold) have crossed the billion mark in the country. This has put India at the second rank in terms of Internet using populations around the world—with 400 million people using the Internet—even though the **International Telecommunications Union** puts Internet penetration at only about 30 per cent in the country.

It must be noted here that India's Internet consumption, though on the rise, largely remains an urban phenomenon. According to a **report** released by Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) in 2017, Internet penetration in urban India was at 64.84 per cent in December 2017 as compared to 60.6 per cent in December 2016. In rural India, however, Internet penetration was at 20.26 per cent in December 2017, up from 18 per cent in 2016. Hundreds of first-time technology users are joining the digital bandwagon on a daily basis.

Interestingly though, the on-ground experiences of **Digital Empowerment Foundation** tell stories of how WhatsApp and Facebook are the first exposure to the Internet for millions of people in rural India who are getting online for the first time.

A villager in Uttar Pradesh bought a Chinese-made smartphone and went home with his new purchase, feeling excited. A few hours later, he returned to the shop from where he had bought his phone, feeling hassled. "My phone is not working," he told the shopkeeper. "What's wrong?" the shopkeeper asked. "I don't know, there's no WhatsApp on the phone," he responded. The man apparently thought that WhatsApp comes pre-installed on phones, or rather it is what owning a smartphone is all about. When he saw the icon for the same missing, he felt he had been cheated.

Even people with little or no formal literacy are using various messaging platforms today to communicate with their loved ones on a daily basis.

For the last 16 years, Digital Empowerment Foundation has been working in rural, remote and tribal locations of India, introducing marginalised communities

to digital literacy, digital services, the Internet and the almost infinite opportunities that the Internet has to offer. People often ask what use is technology to the poor when they don't have enough money to afford two good meals a day. However, they don't realise that people adopt technology easily and well as long as they are shown contextual relevance of the same. This is exactly what's happened with platforms like Google Search, Facebook and WhatsApp, the latter is actually even simpler to understand and use. With the help of audio or video calls and even emojis, people are engaging in digital-based conversations in real-time like never before.

Zakir Khan is a young man who lives in Nichlagarh in Rajasthan, an area that did not have Internet connectivity until 2016. Today, he uses the video call feature on WhatsApp to talk to his brother who's working in the Middle East.

Some are exchanging greetings, others are sharing useful updates, and many others are sharing information that they feel is worth sharing for reasons of emotions, political ideology or even religious beliefs. This is because the phone has the power to connect and organise individuals and communities to disseminate information or views independently and in a free-flowing manner to billions of people, across different parts of the world, at an extremely fast pace and at no additional cost, which one was charged earlier for every SMS sent. Today, even police departments and administrations are using social media and messaging platforms to stay connected with the citizens and vice-versa. The phone, in more ways than one, adds to the democratic nature of a nation and strengthens it.

The fact that WhatsApp has over 200 million users in India alone is a testimony to this. Across economic capabilities, social status, caste barriers, geographical terrains and literacy levels, people are adopting the technology, adapting to it and utilising it.

We see a new hashtag or a new cause every few weeks, trying to question a social, political or environmental evil. In so many cases, we have seen the power of crowd on social media as well as messaging platforms forcing authorities to take decisions to change laws, bring amendments and take cognisance of issues that they had perhaps been ignoring for far too long. Remember the peaceful protests after the December 16 gang rape in the Indian capital? Facebook, Twitter and even WhatsApp messaging were used to mobilise thousands to get out on the streets and demand amendments to laws around sexual abuse. Thousands of people gathered at India Gate day after day to protest against the state police and the government's apathy towards curbing such incidents. While public networking platforms helped reach out to people far and wide, private messaging platforms helped reach out to the inner circles. Had it not been for these platforms, would the Indian judiciary or legislature have felt compelled to change the rape laws?

INFORMATION DISORDER

In May 2018, Facebook, the parent company of WhatsApp, said that WhatsApp users send roughly 65 billion messages every day and more than two billion minutes of voice and video calls are made on the messaging platform on a daily basis. It would be silly to imagine that all 65 billion messages exchanged every day would be important, relevant, useful, verified or factual. In these exchange of messages—which no longer costs per text rather you pay once for the Internet and use it till you exhaust your data—people are often exchanging unverified information, and not necessarily intentionally.

The Internet brings with itself the good, the bad and the ugly. The Internet is also, in many ways, a reflection of the society. Conversations on the Internet are often a reflection of the conversations that one has offline. However, online conversations come with the advantage of not being restricted to a small group of people physically present around you. The barriers of geography and time do not exist online. However, not everyone uses this opportunities for positive messaging. Social media and messaging platforms are often blamed for initiating or escalating violence, for fuelling hate and for spreading fake news.

However, are social media and messaging platforms to be blamed or the people using these platforms? Can we blame the knife for a murder? Is it then fair to blame social media or messaging platforms alone for the problems of hate messaging, propaganda and misinformation?

Violence happened in the country even before the advent of social media and instant messaging platforms but it cannot be denied that social media, including OTT messaging applications, gives people anonymity or geographic distance to be aggressive or unaccountable. Though polarisation has increased in recent times, social media cannot be blamed for it alone. Social media is an inclusive platform that allows dissent, and comes with its pros and cons.

In the last couple of years, the phenomenon of information disorder—more popularly known as “fake news”—has only increased with increased efforts at polarisation in the US, in India and in various other parts of the world. While information disorder is a problem not unique to India, the situation is more worrisome in India because it’s leading to deaths.

Let’s take a pause here to take a look at the sources of news that are available to people in India.

According to government statistics, the All India Radio (AIR), which is the state sponsored radio channel, has a reach of **99.19 per cent of the population**. There are **197 million television-owning households**, with an expected viewership of 836 million people. The total readership of the dailies now stands around **410 million**; 20 per cent of all newspaper readers in 50 million plus population towns read newspapers online. Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram reach to a little more than 240 million users in India. Yet, fake news is largely being circulated through social media platforms, in networks not limited to those on social media. This means that conversations offline are moving online, and conversations online are moving offline. The problem of information disorder is impacting almost the entire country.

Before we go into the details of the problem of “fake news” in India, it is necessary to take a look at the seven common forms of information disorder, as listed by FirstDraft, a non-profit tackling misinformation globally.

- » Satire or Parody: No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool
- » Misleading Content: Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual
- » Imposter Content: When genuine sources are impersonated
- » Fabricated Content: New content is 100% false, designed to deceive or do harm
- » False Connection: When headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content
- » False Context: When genuine content is shared with false contextual information
- » Manipulated Context: When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive

The non-profit goes on to further define three types of information disorder.

- » Misinformation is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant
- » Disinformation is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm
- » Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere

Understandably, the problem of information disorder is not new, however, its scale is something that has not been witnessed earlier, especially not at the present pace. The problem also lies in India's population. With 200 million people using WhatsApp on a daily basis, it makes it all the more easy for a message to go potentially viral. However, it is the tendency among humans to spread negative news faster than the positive; the media houses, too, publish more about what's wrong around the world than showcasing the good that's happening around us.

THE PROBLEM IN INDIA

If one would recall the times when feature phones were new, wireless Internet a rarity and text messages chargeable, there would still be somebody or the other who'd share a long prayerful message. At the end of these messages would be a request to forward that message to 10 others lest they want a close one dead or the rest of their life marked by bad luck. Scared, scarred and marred by the superstitions that plague people in the Indians subcontinent, people would forward the messages dutifully to 10 others, and they to 10 others, and so on and so forth. Interestingly, these messages are still doing the rounds.

Then there is the photograph of India, shot from space, circulated every Diwali to showcase how beautiful India looks on Diwali eve; apparently every light and diya visible from the International Space Station! There is also the UNESCO Award that India gets every year for the Best National Anthem. Glorification of India, it seems, has always been a favourite among country men.



While not all fake messages have the potential to lead to unrest, many others do. It is also necessary to understand here how people's minds function.

Not everyone is creating fake message for the purpose of spreading disinformation or maligning someone's image. Not everyone is hitting the 'forward' icon with a malicious intention. Those with malicious intent are probably a few but organised in their efforts, the others are merely sharing the forwards to probably help their community members, warn their peers or share information received by them because "maybe, the message might be true".

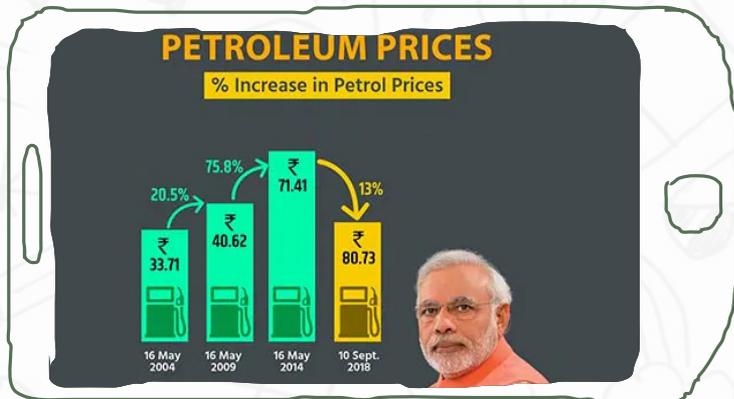
A BBC World Service study titled **Duty, Identity, Credibility: 'Fake News' and the Ordinary Citizen in India** under its Beyond Fake News programme released in November 2018 read that people in India were found to be following their 'nationalistic sentiments' while forwarding messages; also emotion, not factual correctness, is the driving force. Religion is a close second when it comes to topics that encourage users to hit forward.

Rumours of **Love Jihad**, consumption of beef and child abductions, particularly, have led to several deaths in the country. Most of these topics, which translate



from misinformation to offline attacks, are fuelled by majoritarian and radicalisation. Topics such as these are often used to spread fear, bank on hate and rely on mob anger. If one tracks cow-related violence alone, the numbers have been growing since 2013 when one such case was reported in India. In 2014, three cases were reported. The numbers rose to 12, 24, 37 and 21 in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018, respectively.

There are also messages that get nasty and target a particular religious or caste-based community. The intention of these messages is to fuel hate in the hearts and mind of one community towards the others. Or messages that use unverified statistics to pull a political party down or celebrate a party with botched graphics, often even by verified public accounts on social media.



Misinformation and messages spewing hate have not only polarised communities but have mobilised crowds into taking law in their hands. The year 2018 saw a spurt in grave cases of vigilantism and mob-violence. The lynchings

commenced in May 2017 with the killing of seven men in Jharkhand, but became a national concern only in the following year. Between May and July 2018, 31 people were killed on suspicions of child kidnappings alone after a part of a video went viral on social media in India, followed by a series of tweets that warned persons against unknown persons in their vicinities.

Following the circulation of a message on social media in some districts of Madhya Pradesh, two men were beaten close to death by a huge mob. The locals lived in fear after receiving a message in Hindi claiming that close to 500 people disguised as beggars were roaming in the conjoined districts with the aim of killing people and harvesting their organs. Such messages that alert people about their health and lives were widely shared in both urban and rural areas out of a sense of duty, care for their family and loved ones. The validity of the message, however, went thoroughly unchecked. In the following days, two similar cases were reported from nearby villages



The most fatal was a forwarded message that tightened its grip in Tamil Nadu and nearby states. An elderly woman Rukmani, who was visiting a family temple at Athimoor village in Tamil Nadu along with her family members, was **beaten to death** after the villagers suspected her to be a child trafficker. The police in its report said that the 65-year-old woman, after completing her prayers, came out of the temple and offered prasadam to two children standing outside the temple. Seeing this, a mob—that had already had heard rumours about presence of child traffickers in the area via WhatsApp—surrounded the family’s car, pulled the passengers out and started beating them, continuing to assault even after the local police arrived. There were close to 200 irate people who constituted the mob, palpably convinced that Rukmani was there to kidnap their children, all based on a forward on the personal messaging app, the authorities had confirmed.

This incident along with several others in the Southern state, however, stemmed from one single message that took no time to spread like a virus. More so because it concerned children and was accompanied with, what was later found, a morphed video showing children being snatched from the public spaces. According to **local reports**, an unidentified man recorded an audio message, alleging that 400 people had come to Tamil Nadu specifically to abduct children in April, a month before lynchings.

One message circulating in several parts of the country in the summer of 2018, read: “Suspected child lifters are carrying sedatives, injections, spray, cotton and small towels. They speak Hindi, Bangla and Malyali. If you happen to see any stranger near your house immediately inform the local police as he could be a member of the child lifting gang.”

Another message, even shared by some news pages on social media platforms, came with a picture of five young handcuffed men with the caption: “About 200 child kidnappers have arrived in Bangalore. 10 have been caught. The kidnappers said summer holidays is a best time. Please be watchful and take care of your kids. (sic)”

According to police, in all these cases, false information was spread by messages on WhatsApp. Some of these messages also made their way to Twitter and Facebook. The law and order officials also expressed helplessness in tackling such high intensity situations where either the mob was quicker to gather than the police or were so reckless that controlling a crowd that determined went completely out of hands. In several other videos recorded during the mob attacks, the police was seen doing nothing more than being a spectator to the attack.

The false information, through the most easily accessible channel to people, travelled far and wide in almost no time and took shape of North-Eastern state Assam’s worst fear. On June 8, 2018, two young men from Guwahati, Nilotpal Das and Abhijit Nath, were lynched in the remote Panjuri Kachari village of Karbi Anglong district. The **fear of child-lifters or xopadhora** already lived in the hearts of local people, who used the popular myth to intimidate children

in staying indoors, but it was evidently rumours floated on messaging platforms that enraged locals. Earlier in March same year, two Sikh men from Punjab were mistaken to be child-lifters and beaten by a mob in Assam's Kamrup. **The video of the two men begging for mercy** was widely circulated on social media.

More recently, days following the February 14, 2019, Pulwama terrorist attack in Kashmir valley that killed 40 CRPF soldiers, social media was abuzz with messages spreading hatred against Kashmiris and systematic warmongering posts calling Indian government to take strictest action possible against the perpetrators Jaish-e-Mohammed, a Pakistan-based terrorist group. A chain of message on WhatsApp and Facebook addressed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi also urged for nuclear attack on the neighbouring nation.

Within hours, morphed images of Indian soldiers, fake videos of bomb explosion started flooding the Internet. Even the global social media giants seemed worried about the sudden spike. CRPF took to micro-blogging site Twitter to issue an advisory saying such posts were meant to “invoke hatred”.

Two weeks later, after the Indian Air Force's retaliation attack in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, the Internet was again full of videos that claimed to be of India's attack on Pakistan (even as some of them were extracted grabs from popular action video games) and photos that celebrated the country's decision of carrying out surgical strikes beyond the Line of Control.

Priyanka Gandhi laughing after terror attack? Cropped video used to paint a false narrative



Priyanka Gandhi laughing after terror attack? Cropped video used to paint a false narrative
 "Priyanka Gandhi was laughing at press conference. Such vulgures". This tweet was posted by Twitter user, Ankur Singh in the backdrop of the tragic terror attack in P...

BOOM FactCheck @boomlive_in · Feb 16
 One such fake information that has gone viral is an old photograph of military personnel standing around a charred body



Disturbing Photo From Tawang Air Crash Being Shared As Pulwama...
 A picture from 2017 Tawang chopper crash is being circulated as that from the recent attack on CRPF convoy in Pulwama

Is This A Video Of Indian Soldiers Torturing A Kashmiri?: A FactCheck

Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir shares video alleging excesses by the Indian Army in Kashmir. However, the video appears to be from Pakistan.

By **Navvita Nivargan Kumar** | 3
 Published on Sep 24 2016 4:19 pm. Last updated: 10h 12m 46s ago



From old videos to doctored photos, a barrage of fake news floods social media after Pulwama attack

'BOOM' does a round-up of the misinformation that has been spread since February 14.



BOOM FactCheck @boomlive_in · Feb 16
 A fact-check shows that this bomb blast video existed online two days prior to the attack in Jammu & Kashmir.



Syria Blast Video Falsely Shared As CCTV Footage Of Pulwama Attack
 A fact-check shows that the video existed online two days prior to the attack in Jammu & Kashmir.

Less than 24 hours after the terror attack in #Pulwama, a photoshopped image shows @RahulGandhi with suicide bomber Adil Ahmed Dar.

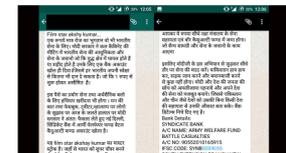


No, Rahul Gandhi is Not Posing With The Pulwama Attack Suicide B...
 The photoshopped picture claims that Adil Ahmed Dar is a close aide of @RahulGandhi

Did Akshay Kumar Ask People To Donate To An Army Welfare Fund?: A Factcheck

What does actor Akshay Kumar have to do with a welfare fund for the army? BOOM! finds out.

By a **Duff Sander** | 3
 Published on Sep 27 2017 4:34 pm. Last updated: 10y 10m 13h 20m ago

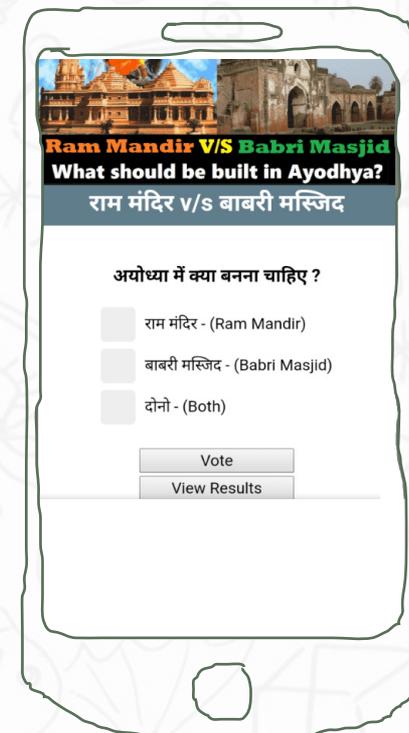


Analysing the scenario of a war-like situation in the age of Internet, journalist Karishma Mehrotra wrote, “This is a change from India’s “first televised war” in 1999, when the imagery of conflict in Kargil was beamed into living rooms for the first time. Just over 30 lakh people in India were then Internet users, according to the World Bank. Now, almost 40 crore people — a third of India’s population — use the Internet. For many of them, this week’s updates — true or not — landed in their smartphones. The Indian government attempted to stem this flow. The IT Ministry directed YouTube on Wednesday to take down 11 videos involving the IAF pilot, an IT Ministry official confirmed. The Home Ministry sent the list of videos to the IT Ministry, a source said. The IT Ministry official said that YouTube complied the same day, but as of Thursday evening, one could still view videos that have driven the news over the past couple of days. In contrast, no mainstream Indian news channel broadcast Ghafoor’s Wednesday press conference. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting had on Monday slapped showcase notices on two channels, ABP News and Tiranga TV, that had aired a February 22 press conference of Ghafoor. With no television channels showing Ghafoor’s press conference, the tweets from Pakistan were the first point of information for even government officials.”

Even when news channels and news websites have become 24x7 accessible platforms today, social media and messaging platforms are becoming the first source of news for many. There could many reasons behind it. Easy accessibility in the palms of everyone’s hands is, of course, one. The second is the ability to filter what you read or see. The third is potentially growing distrust in media houses. It was observed that a rising distrust on the mainstream media largely pushed people towards using alternative sources for sharing information.

However, there is no denying that communal messages aimed at flaring tension amongst minority communities have been seeing doing rounds on the Internet. Very recently, since the Ram Mandir question has gained momentum in the election year, a survey was doing rounds on various social media sites asking people to pick between Ram Mandir and Babri Masjid. To further make it sound serious and polarise the sensitive issue, the message added that the Indian Supreme Court had left the decision to the citizens and voting will be treated as referendum. “But till now there are more votes for Babri Masjid. So kindly all Hindus vote for Ram Mandir to be built in Ayodhya”.

Apart from communal messages, a trend was observed in the pattern of news sharing. Apart from messages relating to social awareness and ‘nation building’, a large chunk of fake news propagated on social media portrayed a rosy picture of the ruling government. News pieces related to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and major policy tweaks by the government—demonetisation, Aadhaar, GST, surgical strikes—were widely shared.



India is in its election year and the country will face General Elections in April-May. Times like this are ripe for miscreants to create an environment of misinformation for political gains. If media reports are to be believed, there are organised efforts by political parties to polarise individuals in India through social media. Several political parties have allegedly turned their IT cells into misinformation generation and dissemination machines.

However, instead of cracking down on individuals and accounts who have already been ousted in media for spreading hate or fake messages, the government is pushing social media giants to “cooperate”. For example, Facebook received over 22,000 data requests from Indian government in 2017. Twitter revealed in December 2018 that Indian authorities issued 355 requests for user information—26% higher than a year ago—between January and June 2018. WhatsApp, however, has stood its ground and refused thus far to the Indian government’s demand and pressure to end encryption on its platform.

The Indian General Elections 2019 are also feared to follow the example of Brazil’s elections last year, which had become infamous as WhatsApp Elections. Like India, Brazil also has a large population, over 120 million people that use WhatsApp on a daily basis. WhatsApp was allegedly used extensively to propagate all kinds misrepresentative messages to influence people towards becoming more favourable towards the right-wing presidential candidate, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, who eventually won.

For a closely-knit society that India is, WhatsApp also has become a private, low cost channel for sharing ideas and staying connected with their near and dear ones. Most of the people forward messages without checking its credibility

because it comes from a trusted source and the chain continues. However, Technology here can only be seen as a medium for exchange of mass messages. The end-to-end encrypted platform of WhatsApp here acts merely as a channel for information/ misinformation dissemination. It’s important to understand the societal mindset that pushes people to forward such messages. Here lays, the big question of accountability too.

In 2017, District Collector of Varanasi, Yogeshwar Ram Mishra, alongwith the Suprintendent of Police of the district, Nitin Tiwari, issued an order that any factually incorrect and offensive messaging on a WhatsApp group that threatens peace and harmony, could lead to an FIR against the group admin. At that time, it was just a unilateral directive by a local administration, but recently no less than Madras High Court denied anticipatory bail to the BJP leader SV Shekher with the view that sharing or forwarding a message in social media is equal to accepting and endorsing the message.

Since WhatsApp is an encrypted medium, people propagating misconceptions generally do not realise the repercussion of malicious content framed or forwarded by them. So where lies the responsibility?

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) recently issued a strongly worded warning to the instant messaging service that it cannot “evade accountability and responsibility” for the rumour-mongering on its platform. An article published on The Wire argued that the government has not understood the root cause of problem, instead has been fighting the symptoms for decades.

“Criminalising certain kinds of speech abdicated the government of the responsibility to ensure public safety. That it came at the cost of free expression seemed like an acceptable collateral for ‘subjects’ of the Raj. This time around, that abdication is being sought through an instant messenger. This legacy of shirking responsibility for the failure of public order is apparent in the government’s response to a spate of killings caused by the viral WhatsApp forward. So much so, that a district magistrate in Kishtwar, Jammu (aptly named Angrez Singh Rana) has demanded that administrators of all WhatsApp group chats pre-register with his office,” the article read.

14 This is true. There is very little understanding of technology among government officials. Even the heads of cyber cells are not adequately equipped and updated to address cases of online harassment and crime in their districts. Besides, social media enables instant communication between people, and one would expect government officials to take advantage of that, however, there is complete lack of coordination and sharing of information between government departments.

“The cyber cells in smaller cities find it difficult to get information or any help from cyber cells in bigger cities or metros,” said Head of Cyber Cell in Balaghat (Madhya Pradesh), Sub-Inspector Abhishek Choubey.”

Even senior police officials in Tripura complained that they find it cumbersome to coordinate with the Ministry of Electronic and Information Technology (MEITY) because the protocol suggests that any communication to seek information from Facebook or WhatsApp should be directed through the Ministry. There is also lack of interest, especially in the older government officials, to upgrade their knowledge and bring themselves up to speed with changing times. There were pleasant exceptions to this observation, but they were few and far between.

The extent of the problem around misinformation in India is the reason behind the unique partnership between WhatsApp and Digital Empowerment Foundation. Under this partnership, the latter carried out 40 workshops across 20 districts in 11 Indian states to create awareness about misinformation and share simple techniques that users can adopt to verify information they receive on their social messaging platforms. Together, WhatsApp and Digital Empowerment Foundation believe that the solution lies in a long-term socio-behavioural change, which can be triggered through education, rather than providing short-lived knee-jerk reactions.

SURVEY FINDINGS

This report drafted by Digital Empowerment Foundation does not analyse the reasons behind the spread of misinformation or disinformation. It neither intends to find solutions to the problem nor point fingers at anyone, it merely aims to present findings from a survey carried out among 3,000-odd individuals across 11 Indian states. These individuals were asked to share their responses to an objective questionnaire, presented to them at the start and end of a workshop series called Fighting Fake News.

In an effort to address the challenges of misinformation and disinformation in the country, Digital Empowerment Foundation and WhatsApp joined hands to create awareness among social media users around the problem of information disorder. The community-based workshops organised and moderated by Digital Empowerment Foundation from September 2018 to March 2019 focused on three core outcomes:

- » Encouraging WhatsApp users to be more open towards the other perspective
- » Enabling individuals to differentiate between opinions, facts, rumours and fake
- » Inculcating the habit of verifying information through simple checks before forwarding it to their friends and family

The objective is to create awareness among users about the need to verify information before sharing it. The awareness workshops, Digital Empowerment Foundation feels, is crucial to fight fake news, especially since mobile phone

and social media penetration is on a rise and will continue to be on a rise as almost 70 per cent of the country is yet to get online in India.

While digital literacy is on a rise, too, not enough people are truly trained media and information literacy (MIL).

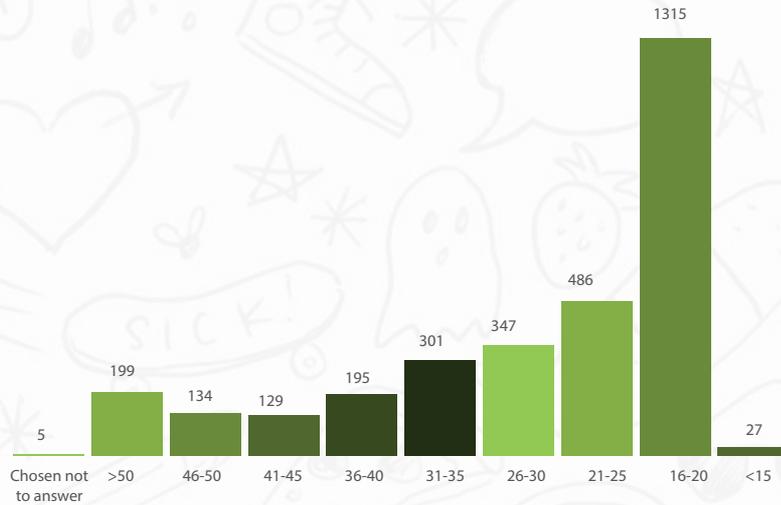
Media and Information Literacy (MIL) enables people to interpret and make informed judgments as users of information and media, as well as to help them become skillful creators and producers of information and media messages. The purpose of being media and information literate is to engage in a digital society not only as passive consumers of information but to be able to understand, inquire, create, communicate and think critically.

It is this incapability of the persons to critically assess the information that leads to the problem of information disorder rather than the technology's decision to respect its users' privacy.

At the training workshops organised by Digital Empowerment Foundation, a total of 4,000 persons were reached directly in Tier II and Tier III cities across 11 Indian states. These were Assam, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Mizoram, Rajasthan, Tripura, West Bengal, Telangana. Six of these states were due for Assembly elections before the end of 2018, while the other five had been identified as states that had witnessed a high number of violence on account of misinformation. Responses from a maximum of 3,138 participants have been recorded through survey forms, which bring to the fore some valuable findings.

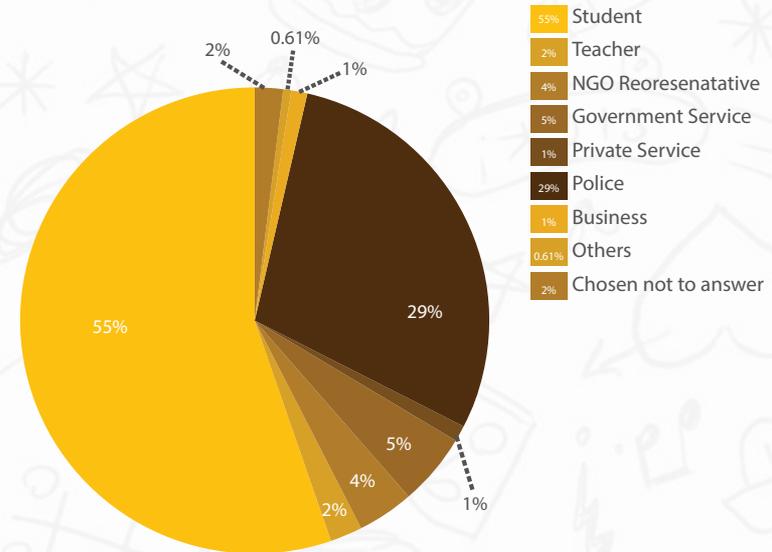
Which age group do you fall under?

The workshop population included 42 per cent participants in the age group of 16-20 years, 26 per cent of 21-30 years, and 16 per cent between 31 and 40 years of age. Almost 6 per cent people interviewed were above 50 years of age.



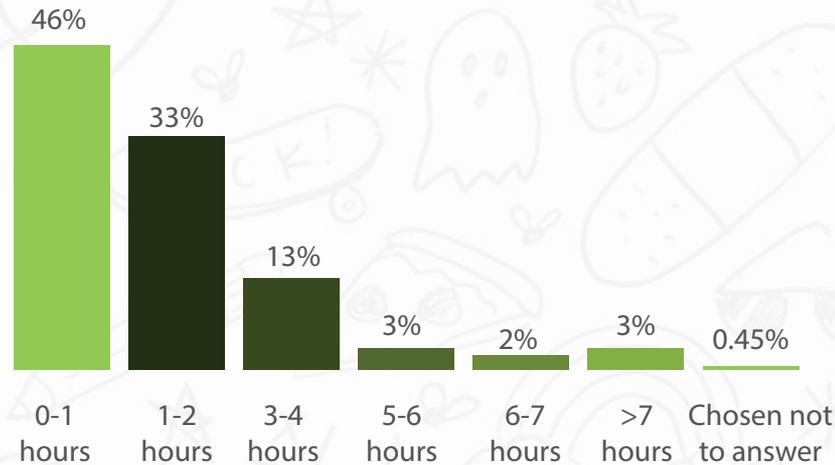
What is your occupation?

The workshops primarily targeted policemen and students as audiences, looking at them as influencers and high user base, respectively. As many as 55 per cent of the persons trained at these workshops were students, followed by police personnel at 29 per cent. The others were government officials, NGO representatives, teachers and persons involved in other professions.



On a typical day, how many hours do you spend on WhatsApp?

We asked the participants, how many cumulative hours a day do they actively spend on WhatsApp, reading or typing messages. On any given day, a majority of participants (79 per cent) said that they spend up to two hours on WhatsApp. About 13 per cent said they spend 3-4 hours, while 3 per cent reported spending more than seven hours on the messaging platform every day.



What do you use WhatsApp for?

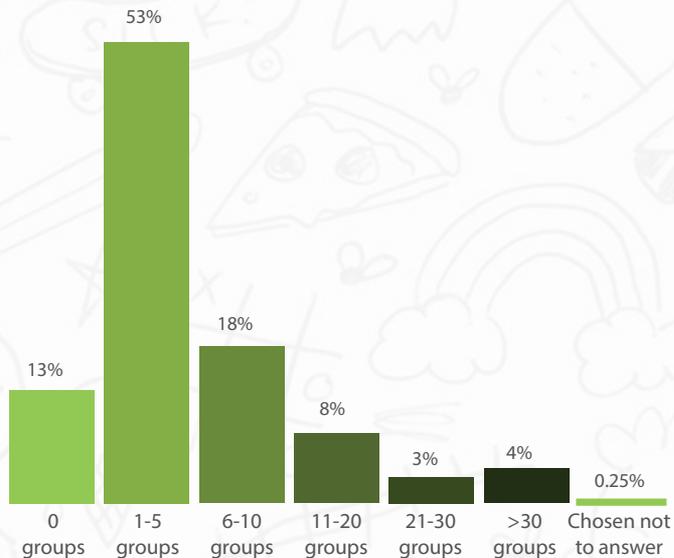
As much as 43.79 per cent of the respondents use the messaging platform primarily for personal and social interactions, followed by 29 per cent of the respondents who use it primarily for work-related communication.

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Personal & Social Interactions	1374	43.79%
Work Related Interactions	910	29.00%
Buyer & Seller Interaction	3	0.10%
Government to Citizen Interactions	30	0.96%
Political Discussion	14	0.45%
Religious Discussion	4	0.13%
Discuss Social Issues	52	1.66%
No Response	36	1.15%
Others (SELECTED MULTIPLE CATEGORY COMPONENTS)	715	22.79%
Religious Discussion + Personal Interaction + Social Discussion	75	10.49%
Work Related Interactions + Other discussions	227	31.75%
Government to Citizen Interactions + Others	123	17.20%
Buyer & Seller Interaction + Work Related Interaction + Other Discussions	63	8.81%
Other Discussions in Combination of Two (for example social discussion with work related)	227	31.75%

Over the years, WhatsApp has become the go-to application for all sorts of communications, ranging from personal and social to official communication channels in both public and private institutions. Further, the platform is also used by like-minded individuals to interact with each other on topics of their choice, which could be political, religious, business, social or other.

How many WhatsApp groups are you a part of?

While most of the conversations on WhatsApp are exchanged between two private chat windows, like-minded individuals or a group of people leverage the product's group feature. As many as 53 per cent of the respondents said they were in one to five groups, while 18 per cent said they were in six to 10 groups. About 4 per cent of the respondents said they were members of over 30 groups.



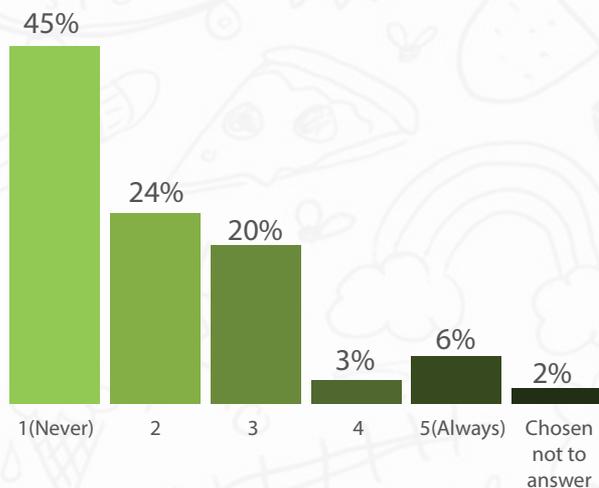
What is the nature of these groups?

As for the nature of these groups is concerned, 13.13 per cent of the respondents said they were part of Family Groups, 29.83 per cent said they were part of Friends Groups, 11 per cent were part of Workplace Groups and 39.10 per cent were part of a combination of groups, which could range from religious and political to community welfare groups, civil society networks, local administration communication channels or even news broadcast groups.

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Family Group	412	13.13%
Friends Group	936	29.83%
Work Group	351	11.19%
Religious Group	13	0.41%
Political Group	9	0.29%
Residence or Community Welfare Group	17	0.54%
Local Administrative Group	18	0.57%
Civil Society or NGO	13	0.41%
Local or National News Groups	37	1.18%
All Of The Above	21	0.67%
Chosen not to answer	84	2.68%
Others (SELECTED MULTIPLE CATEGORY COMPONENTS)	1227	39.10%
Work Group + Civil Society or NGO + Other Groups	35	2.85%
Family Group + Friends Group	298	851.43%
Family Group + Friends group + Work Group	309	103.69%
Family Group + Friends group + Work Group + Other Groups	355	114.89%
Friends Group + Work Group + Religious Group + Other Groups	71	20.00%
Friends Group + Political Group + Other Groups	57	80.28%
Others	102	178.95%

How often do you believe in the information you receive on WhatsApp?

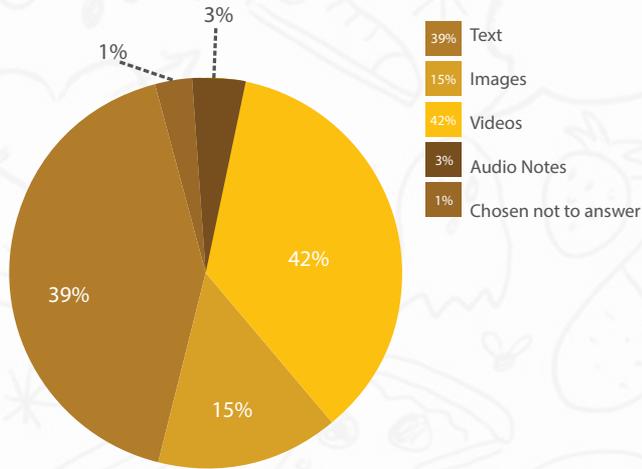
Clearly, millions of messages are being exchanged on WhatsApp on a daily basis. Not all of them are from credible sources or carry verified information. There have also been growing reports in the media that persons with malicious intent are using WhatsApp to spread misinformation or how the habit of blindly forwarding the forwards is creating a problem of information disorder that has reached grave levels. We asked the respondents how often do they believe information they receive on WhatsApp. As many as 45 per cent of the respondents said they never believe messages they get on the messaging platform. Another 24 per cent seemed sceptic of the information they receive on WhatsApp, 20 per cent of the respondents were divided in their opinion while 9 per cent were leaning towards having a tendency of easily believing information they receive via WhatsApp.



This could be a reflection on the growing awareness of the possibility of misinformation and disinformation circulating on WhatsApp. More and more people are becoming aware of the problem and are beginning to know that not everything can be taken on face value and that they may be easily be misguided if they believe information without verifying it. However, during the course of the workshops, we came across many people who claimed they were aware when they were forwarding a fake message. The reasons some of them shared were that it does not cost to share a message; some others said that while they were not sure if the message was fake or fact, they wanted the receiver to make the decision because “what if the message is true”; and there were yet others who thought the fake news was “interesting” or “catchy” to read.

What medium do you believe the most when receiving news?

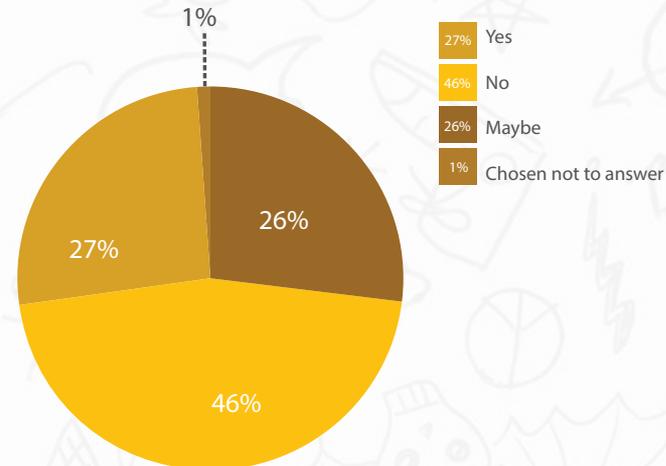
Among the media tools that make information more easily believable, 42 per cent of the respondents said that they find it easier to believe a piece of news if it is accompanied by a video. Another 39 per cent said they don't find it hard to believe information if received via plain text, in messages or in newspapers or other platforms. As many as 15 per cent said they trust images more while 3 per cent said that they believe in audio more than in any other media.



It is interesting to note that a number of participants believed that morphing a video is much more difficult than to morph an image, hence the credibility of videos is usually more in their minds.

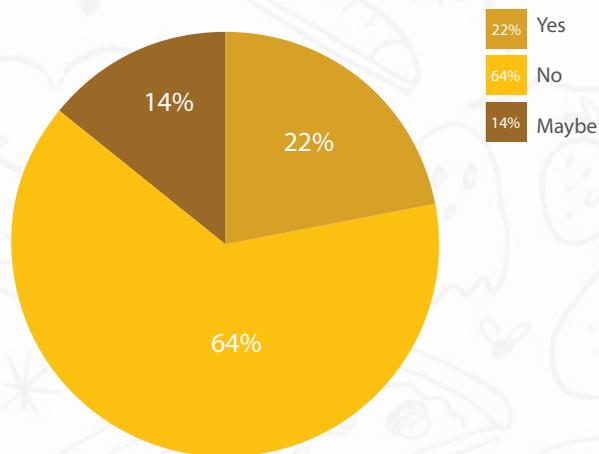
Do you think messages on WhatsApp are free from surveillance on by the government or messaging app?

In the last couple of years, WhatsApp has come out with a number of product changes to safeguard users' privacy or control the spread of misinformation or unwanted conversations. These could be features to report or block a contact, manage administrator control over groups or provide users with end-to-end encryption. Despite the encryption feature that promises zero surveillance, approximately half of the people who attended the workshops felt that the messages they send or receive on WhatsApp are being monitored, either by the government and intelligence agencies or by the messaging platform. As many as 46 per cent of the respondents said that the channel is not free from surveillance while 26 per cent were not sure if their messages were free from surveillance or not. Only 25.6 per cent of the respondents said that their messages were secure between the receiver and the sender.



Do you know what ‘encrypted’ messages are?

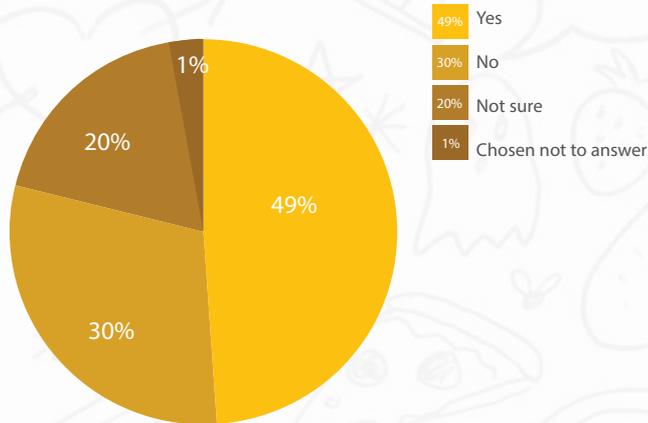
A key reason for this perception could be lack of understanding of what encryption truly is. Out of 3,138 respondents questioned for the survey, 64 per cent said they did not know what it means for a message to be “encrypted”. Another 14 per cent said that though they had come across the term “encrypted” in media or elsewhere, they weren’t sure if they truly understood the meaning of the term. Only 22 per cent of the respondents claimed that they knew what encryption is.



WhatsApp, a platform that provides end-to-end encryption to all its users, has been fighting against the Indian government’s repeat request to decrypt messages in order to hold miscreants accountable. The messaging site says that decrypting one chat will force it to lay open all conversations exchanged on the platform, hence going back on its promise of privacy. Keeping in mind user’s demand for a private channel, WhatsApp in August 2016 came up with ‘end-to-end encryption’ feature, which basically means that it doesn’t read or save any of the messages sent or received on its platform. This means that WhatsApp retains very little user data, in line with the data minimization principles, therefore making it free from mass surveillance. This is because every message is secured with a unique lock, and only the recipient and the sender have the special key needed to unlock and read them. There is no denying that the feature of encryption comes with its own advantages and disadvantages. While police officers, a major audience group for these workshops, feel it makes law and order management disabled and difficult, human right activists and digital security experts value this provision. However, many users in India still don’t know what ‘encryption’ means. Not just the rural population, the survey found that even police officials and urban students had no idea what encryption meant.

Are you aware of the “Forwarded” label on message?

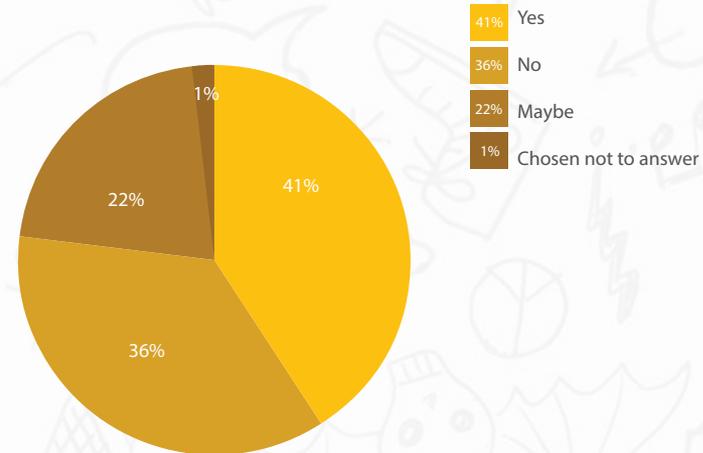
After several reported incidents of mass violence following spread of misinformation in form of forwarded message, WhatsApp introduced a “Forwarded” label, one of the more recent product changes it has made in recent time. The move that aimed at differentiating a forwarded message from an original one has managed to create some awareness. The survey found that 49 per cent respondents knew what the label meant while 30.2 per cent had no idea that a “forwarded” label existed. Another 20.8 per cent said they were unsure about the new feature.



The “Forwarded” label acts as a tool for socio-behavioural change, this is also something the trainers at the workshop aimed to push across. There is often a tendency to easily believe a message if it has been sent by a trusted peer, a highly educated acquaintance or an elderly in the social circle. The “Forwarded” label is a feature that asks the reader to pause, think and question the information before hitting the “Forward” icon.

Do you think the 5-forward limit has restricted the messages you send or receive?

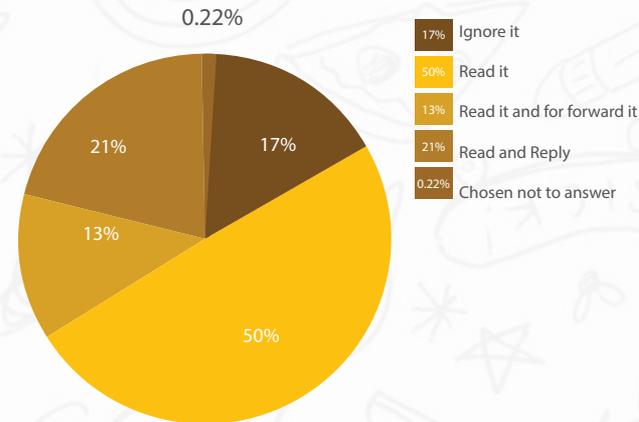
WhatsApp has recently taken several robust steps, keeping users’ privacy in mind, to check misinformation. In 2018, it restricted the number of times a message can be forwarded at one go, to five times. This five-forward limit was initially only rolled out in India, while persons in Mexico were restricted to sending up to 20 messages at a time. However, earlier this year, the limit was rolled out by the messaging platform globally. We asked the workshop participants if the five-forward limit has restricted the messages they send or receive on a daily basis. As many as 41 per cent were sure that they send and receive fewer messages ever since the product change was made. Another 22 per cent were not sure if the product change had affected their messaging capacity, while 36 per cent said that the five-forward limit had not affected the number of messages they send or receive.



WhatsApp representatives have stated that they intend to help keep WhatsApp as it was meant to be – a private messaging application and not a loudspeaker for public messaging. It is key to note here that a large group among the masses does not have the time, patience and capacity to copy-paste a message in multiple chat windows to reach to more than five recipients. Casual interactions with workshop participants revealed that if they felt compelled to share a message with more than five person, they would copy-paste the message in 10-15 windows at the top, and then they usually lose interest unless it was a festive season and they felt compelled to wish their entire phone book, accepting that it always seemed like an extremely tedious and time-consuming task. Small business owners, too, feel that this feature restricts their ability to reach out to their customers in large numbers. We must return here to the point that it is not the common man that has a malicious intent in mind and will not go to extreme lengths to make a message viral. Instead, these are more coordinated and organised groups that indulge in this kind of behaviour, with usually a lot of resources—in terms of time or otherwise—at hand.

What do you do when you receive a forward on WhatsApp?

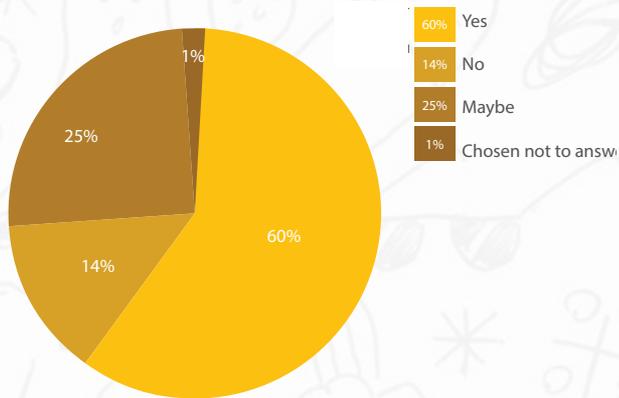
Among the respondents that DEF reached out to, there seemed to be a greater understanding that not all forwards should be forwarded. Half the number of respondents said they simply read a forward when they receive it, 17 per cent said they ignore the message, 1 per cent said they usually forward a message that they receive.



This greater awareness level among the participants could potentially be because a large number of them were police personnel (persons in a responsible role) or students (with usually short attention span to read through long messages).

Do you think WhatsApp can be used as a positive messaging channel?

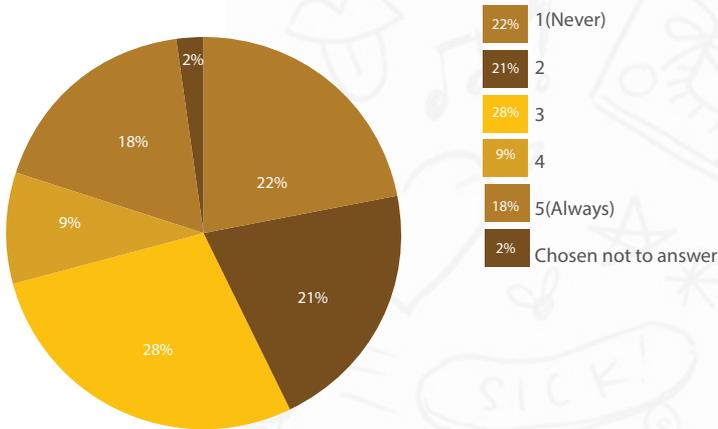
We accepted that a number of people are using WhatsApp as a platform to polarise, spread hate and proliferate fake messages, however, there are also people who are using WhatsApp as a positive messaging channel. Do the respondents believe that? As high as 60 per cent of the respondents agreed that WhatsApp is being used as positive messaging channel by various individuals and groups across sectors while 25 per cent were divided in their opinion. Another 14 per cent felt that WhatsApp is not being used as a positive messaging channel by its users.



The participants have a number of stories to share of how WhatsApp has been a boon for police officers for internal communications, for ASHA and Civil Society members for creating awareness around issues among their beneficiaries, and for students to form study groups for problem solving, etc. One district magistrate in Jharkhand, Ray Mahimapat Rai, remembers using the tool extensively during the riots in the state. He sent out advisories, asked if anyone needed emergency services, and debunked fake news circulating in his region. The Better India is a news platform that now has wide reach on WhatsApp to people who have subscribed to its positive news reports. In 2018, WhatsApp became a platform of comforting for thousands of women who went public about their #MeToo experience, and received support from their friends and family through personal chats.

How often do you receive useful information via WhatsApp?

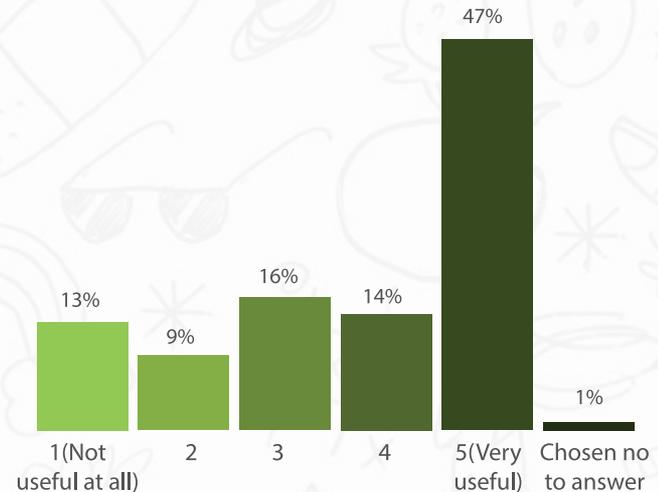
Interestingly, however, when we asked the participants to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 how often do they receive useful information via WhatsApp, only 27 per cent rated 4 or higher. As many as 43 per cent of the respondents feel they do not receive any useful information on WhatsApp.



is interesting to note here that participants do not count healthy person-to-person communication as useful information. The idea of being able to exchange necessary messages between friends and family is not counted as useful but as necessary by them, even though OTT messaging applications enable real-time conversation across geographical boundaries. The ability to speak to your relatives in different parts of the world is definitely an advantage, they feel, but paradoxically not "useful. Various others feel that the amount of misinformation or propaganda-based messaging received is higher than the amount of targeted positive messaging, when personal one-on-one communication are excluded, making the idea of useful information lopsided.

How useful did you find this workshop overall?

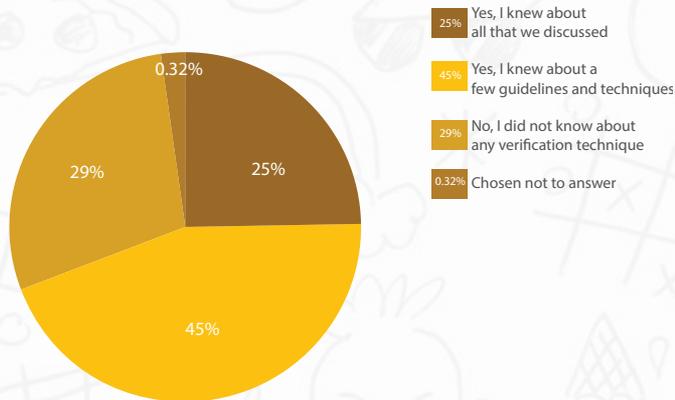
The workshops, thus, not only focussed on helping participants differentiate between fact, fake, opinion or rumour and verify information, but also asked them to break stereotypes and become a part of the positive messaging ecosystem. After spending three hours understanding the problem of misinformation and learning about some simple techniques to spot and verify misinformation, we asked the participants how useful did they find the workshop. As many as 47 per cent of the respondents felt this workshop was very useful, 14 per cent felt the workshop was useful while 16 per cent had a divided opinion. Another 22 per cent thought the workshop was not useful for them.



A number of police personnel who participated in the workshop went home disappointed because they had come in with the expectation that they will learn a trick or two to break into encrypted messages. They were keener to figure a way around encryption than understand the socio-behavioural patterns that are leading to the growing problem of misinformation or learning how to look out for possible symptoms of misinformation in a message. They were also even less interested in the first module, which focuses on understanding perspectives, breaking stereotypes and overcoming biases.

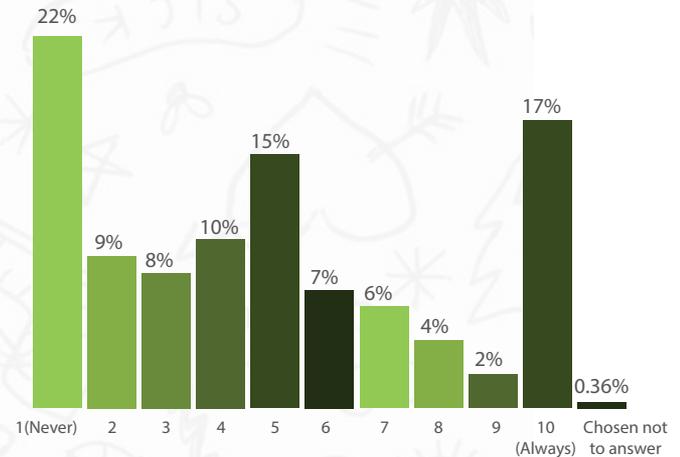
Before this workshop, were you aware of techniques or guidelines to verify information received on WhatsApp?

When asked if the participants were aware of the techniques or guidelines to verify the credibility of a message before attending the workshop, 45 per cent of the respondents said they were aware of some of the things that they learnt about at the workshop while 29 per cent found the entire workshop content new for them. Another 25 per cent felt they knew about all that we had discussed.



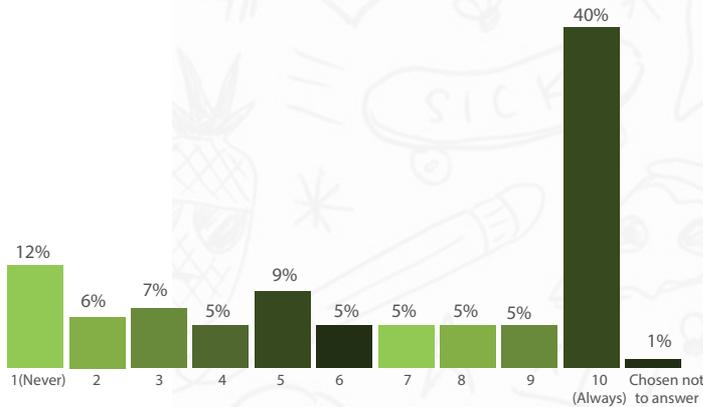
Before this workshop, how often did you usually verify information when you read WhatsApp messages?

It should be noted here that even among the 25 per cent of the participants who taught they were already aware of all that was discussed at the workshop, they did feel that they did not practice the knowledge on a daily basis. This can be estimated from the responses to the question, “Before this workshop, how often did you usually verify information received via WhatsApp?” The participants were asked to record their responses on a scale of 1 (never) to 10 (always). As many as 64 per cent of the respondents rated 5 or lower.



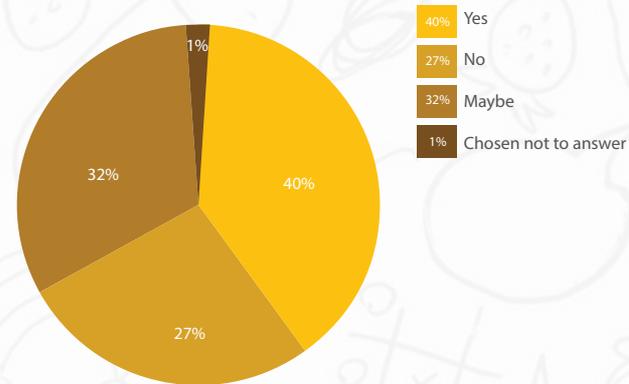
After this workshop, how often will you verify information when you read WhatsApp messages?

When asked how often would they verify information received via WhatsApp post the workshop and the training received, 60 per cent of the participants rated 6 or more.



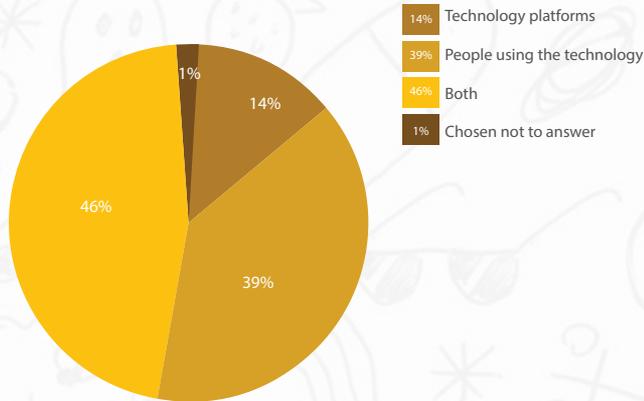
Do you think you will be more open to different political and religious opinions now?

One of the key reasons behind this was that the persons were not only taught about the various simple techniques that they can use to verify information but they were also spoken to about polarisation, stereotypes, propaganda, biases and clickbaits. This was intended to make them more open to different political and religious opinions that may be different from theirs. The idea was to push the message that not everything you say is right, not everything the other says is wrong. When asked, if they thought the workshop helped them be more open towards the other communities. As many as 40 per cent of the respondents said yes, 27 per cent said no, and 32 per cent said “maybe”.



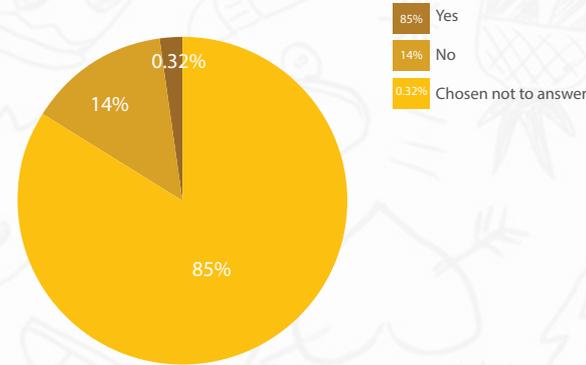
Who do you think is to blame for misinformation, disinformation and fake news?

Looking at the growing media and government attacks against social media and messaging platforms for allowing misinformation to be created, brewed and disseminated at a mass scale, we asked the participants who they thought should be blamed for this problem. As many as 39 per cent of the respondents said that it is the people using the technology who are responsible for promoting or curbing misinformation while 14 per cent said it is the responsibility of the technology platforms. And 46 per cent said both the platform and the users need to share the responsibility of tackling the problem and one cannot blame the other but need to share the blame, too.



Would you like to be part of a WhatsApp group that share only positive news stories?

The respondents are aware that newspapers, news channels and even their social messaging platforms are places where misinformation or negative news often finds its way. We asked if they would like to be part of a WhatsApp group that only shares positive news; 85 per cent of the respondents said yes, while 14 per cent declined the offer.



The survey findings presented in this report are merely a window into the usage patterns seen among WhatsApp users in Tier II and Tier III cities. It is also a reflection of their understanding of their personal responsibility towards the issue and the overall understanding of the product that they're using. Further, the survey findings represent how education around the issue can create a more informed and aware society in the long run, rather than look for immediate short-term solutions or knee-jerk reactions.

Conclusion

The problem of misinformation is not going to go anytime soon. It will also be unfair to assume that the social messaging platforms will be overnight cleaned of hate messages, propaganda or fake messages if the government changes in the upcoming General Elections. The problem of misinformation lies in our lack of education and our inability to question information. It lies in the mentality of easily believing whatever our friends and families say. It lies in the biases and stereotypes that we've come to believe in over the decades. It lies in the careless or bias reporting seen on mainstream media.

Creating awareness among the users is the tougher way forward but as previous instances have shown that tightening the noose around technology—shooting the messenger in this case—or coming up with stringent law and regulations are least effective in combating the menace in its current form. But the ability of the government, private companies, civil society and the media to work together at community level has the potential to bring about a change. Our workshops at the community level have taught us that the problem exists in rudimentary understanding of the subject.

While conducting these workshops in several states, we have observed that it's the older generation that is prone to propagate misinformation out of ignorance as compared to the younger generation.

During the workshop in Palghar, Maharashtra, a senior school teacher confessed to us that she had shared fake news quite often. Many a times, she knew what she was sharing fake news, but still went ahead and shared it with her friends and family because of “catchy headlines”.

It was observed that despite knowing that forwarded content might be malicious in nature, people tend to forward it without understanding the effect it can cause. People also feel a certain kind of peer pressure, like a lot of others around, to be the first one to share sensational news, irrespective of its authenticity. The recent Indo-Pakistan dispute is an example of this.

Further, people have a very cavalier attitude towards fake news. They are often unable to see the broader picture. It's just one innocuous forward.

We have often heard participants making the statement, “Ek forward se kya hota hai (What can one forward do?)”. However, we invariably get reactions of shock and disbelief when we show them gory pictures of victims of mob lynching, and how their one forward has contributed to that end.

India is suffering more from misinformation than disinformation, even though the latter is not too far behind.

There was a rumour that went viral in Balghat, Madhya Pradesh, that there is a gang that magically takes out people's kidney as they are talking to them. This created such a panic locally around Balghat that residents created security groups comprised of young men in their locality, lest the gang extracted their

kidneys while they were sleeping. The police had to initiate a campaign to make people aware that the rumour in question is scientifically bizarre. To extract somebody's kidney, one has to make an incision in the body, without which it is impossible to lay a hand on somebody's organs. The police, in this case, used both offline as well as online, particular WhatsApp, tools to reach out to citizens with counter-information.

Awareness about technology is very poor in non-urban parts of India. People just about know how to use WhatsApp, which has become the prime messaging platform because of its wide use and ease of operation. Therefore, content creation is not their forte. The only way they know how to engage with technology—and for many technology starts at a smartphone and ends on WhatsApp—is by forwarding messages, without much regard for verification.

Most of the participants had never heard of end-to-end encryption. Those who claimed to understand encryption, had a vague idea of the technology with several loopholes in their understanding. Most police officers, for example, were sure that there must be a way to hack into the system to read encrypted messages. Several others, who were still living in the past, did not even know that WhatsApp had become an encrypted platform in 2016 and they could no longer access messages like they could prior to the product change. In fact, the point that government not being able to read their text messages and monitor activities on social media was unimaginable for them, as if they had already surrendered their privacy to the omnipresence of the government. Even as WhatsApp has clearly explained through its website and social media channels what end-to-end encryption means through text, images, videos and animation, its mass reach is yet to show impact.

The police, in almost all the states, have shared their grave concern of not being able to catch the person who initiates fake news.

Senior police officials in Tripura called the trainers for a special session, where the team was repeatedly questioned that why are we yet not able to regulate WhatsApp. The concept of privacy and security were unacceptable to the law enforcement officials if it prevented them from taking direct action to control a law and order situation. However, all highly placed government officials we met through workshops agreed to using WhatsApp as primary mode of information sharing among them because it was a trusted and safe platform.

Assam Police, however, took cognisance of nuisance created by “fake news” and ran a social media campaign called #DontFakeIt to create awareness regarding misinformation. The campaign, with its catchy content taken from pop culture, was a success across social media platforms as well as offline.

In a landmark judgment, the Supreme Court of India had ruled that privacy is a fundamental right, and WhatsApp's encryption feature contributes to the that right. Further, WhatsApp has clearly become a part of everybody's daily lives. The platform has even taken over official mailing channels while being a private messaging channel as it is. Besides personal communications between two persons, human rights activists are using it to share confidential information, police is using it to share verified information, civil society and front line health workers are using it to stay in touch with their beneficiaries, administration is using it for efficient communication, media houses are using it to broadcast news, and government officials are using it for accountability in their departments.

One lady had been trying to reach her district magistrate for some official work in Ranchi, Jharkhand. When she financially got a chance to meet the district magistrate, she asked him why he had been ignoring her pleas, to which he replied that he wasn't even aware of her or her problems. The woman replied, "But when I sent you a WhatsApp message, I got the blue ticks."

In one Constituency of Delhi, area constables takes permission from Residence Welfare Association (RWAs) in their jurisdiction to be members of the RWA WhatsApp groups. This is to ensure that they are part of any important communication that may require law and order assistance, or to push verified or other necessary information that the police wants to send out to the citizens. In case any area constable comes across any unlawful activities or messages that may incite violence or unrest, intimation is sent to the nearest police station and the RWA WhatsApp group warned.

Unfortunately, somebody needs to be blamed. There is an attitude of 'Shooting the Messenger', and all the social misadventures have been attributed to WhatsApp in the Indian misinformation scenario in recent times.

India has a number of laws that protect against hate speech, defamation and incitement to violence but this has not deterred a section of society from actively partaking in it, often even publically on social media platforms. There is very little endeavour visible in the part of the government to address the problem of fake news robustly. If there was, there would be more concrete efforts against dedicated IT cells created by various political parties to generate and disseminate misinformation. If there was, there would be efficient action against those

who spew hate and spread violence-provoking fake messages on un-encrypted social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook where the identity of the sender is not hidden.

It's always somebody else's responsibility. Everybody wants a quick fix solution to fake news; an overnight solution, which is impossible. Shooting the messenger is a knee-jerk reaction and a short-lived half-baked resort, which will not solve the problem of misinformation in the long run.

Misinformation is ingrained in our culture. The problem of fake news can never be addressed, unless people go through total transformation in their attitude and mindset. It's a collective responsibility that we have to acknowledge, without agenda or malice.

Even if WhatsApp were to end encryption, there are platforms like Signal that could gain popularity, if not today, maybe in a few years. The solution lies largely in education, and education alone.

Yet, if we were to list some solution to tackle the problem of information disorder in the messaging space, we'd list the following:

Ability to question information

Rema Rajeshwari is a police officer, in the Indian state of Telangana, who is spreading awareness about fake news through street plays in Indian villages and telling people that WhatsApp should not be their source of news.

To some extent, the ‘forward’ label on the product intends to do that, it makes users question the source and credibility of a piece of information received by them, however, more similar efforts are required. Even though 200 million people are already using WhatsApp, 70 per cent of India still does not have access to the Internet. In the next few years, they will and they will get on to WhatsApp or other messaging platforms. At the time of sign-up, messaging platforms can make users watch a short video aimed at creating awareness about misinformation. Further, video is a great tool since it overcomes the barriers of education, literacy and languages.

Education around how to fact-check news

Digital Empowerment Foundation is already conducting workshops in partnership with WhatsApp to help police officers, local administration, teachers and students learn basic verification techniques. However, one organisation alone can only reach to a small section of the larger Indian population. More such efforts are required to provide quality trainings to WhatsApp users.

First Draft, an organisation dedicated to the cause of misinformation offers simple quizzes to help people learn whether they can differentiate between fact and fake. The platform also offers Certification Course for journalists and other interested individuals.

Accountability in the voice of media

Unfortunately, the media, too, is hugely responsible for spreading misinformation. In the last few years, there have been various instances where misinformation was passed as the Holy Grail on prime time. For those media houses who are working tirelessly, through tedious but traditional journalistic standards, to ensure they do not pass misinformation, they must also take the responsibility of pointing out misinformation when passed by their competitors.

Media must feel accountable and responsible. Earlier this year, the Information & Broadcasting Ministry had proposed stiff penalties for journalists who posted fake news. However, the circular was pulled down in less than 24 hours after pressure from media houses. This was also because ruling parties can often misuse this power. This is especially worrisome at a time when the public has begun to put more faith in their leaders and their Twitter feeds than their newspapers.

Political satirist Akash Banerjee runs a show called Fake or Fact that runs verification tests on popular messages doing the rounds on social media and mainstream media. Shows like these are few and rarely adopted by mainstream media houses around their prime time or on their first pages.

Access to alternative media platforms

The Wire, Scroll, Quint and The Print are alternate media houses that are striving towards neutral and fact-based reporting but their reach is limited to English speaking audiences only. Alternate media houses need more visibility, which can only be achieved through diversity in languages.

There are also efforts by BBC and Google in India to fight the increasing instances among media houses of publishing/broadcasting fake news. More such efforts are needed to tackle the problem.

/// Mechanisms to report fake news

On Facebook, under the “feedback” option, users can mark a post as False News but what happens after is unknown. On Twitter, there is no mechanism to mark a tweet as “fake”. On WhatsApp, a user can block or report an account, however, there is no mechanism to specify the reason for reporting an account. Additionally, the reporting feature on all platforms is usually a few too many clicks away and not visible as easily as the “share” icons are. However, it is accepted that these features can also be misused by more organised groups to mark a factual news as fake.

/// Awareness of fact-checking websites

It is estimated that in any given country, less than 2 per cent of the population is aware and accessing fact-checking websites or applications. Alt News and Boom Live are two popular fact-checking websites in India that sometimes work in collaboration with mainstream media houses, too. Their teams, however, are small, their fundings limited and thus their efforts can be for only so much.

The current political climate globally and social media have contributed to an extremely polarised society. Law enforcement officials’ response to hate speech or misinformation is often to shut down the Internet in the area for a while until normality resumes. The platforms have community guidelines and policies in place but this is not enough. There is a need for media sensitisation programmes

that will make us more conscious users of social media and messaging platforms and not just consumers. Each of us needs to take a proactive step towards becoming more responsible about our use of technology.

ANNEXURE: Positive Pings

/// Dial WhatsApp for Police

The Pune Police has announced a WhatsApp number (+91-8975283100) for citizens to send their complaints and grievances to. A deputy superintendent of police in-charge of the city police control room will analyse the nature of complaints received and take necessary action, and if the nature of complaints received is serious, then he will report the matter to senior police officials immediately. Citizens are also encouraged to use the facility to share suggestions which will be considered on merit. Further, the group welcomes feedback on issues related to traffic, parking, helmets, cybercrime, property and body offences.

/// WhatsApp for Swachh

The Indian Railways now deploys WhatsApp to monitor cleanliness of trains and ensure efficiency of the work done by the onboard housekeeping staff. As a pilot project, for now, the Northern Railways has introduced various WhatsApp groups for different departments manning their trains – from pantry departments to bedrolls, toilet cleaning staff and coach cleanliness staff. Every department is included in a different WhatsApp group. The mandate for onboard housekeeping staff of a particular train is to upload the status report of cleanliness in their particular WhatsApp group on a daily basis. The status

report includes photos along with details of the work done by them during their shift. These various WhatsApp groups are further monitored by senior officials to ensure efficiency of the work done.

/// A Network of Donors

Sixteen-year-old Chetan is the brain and muscles behind Khoon Khas, a non-profit organisation established in September 2016 that works towards providing blood donors when blood banks and all other sources are exhausted. What began as a word-by-mouth campaign via WhatsApp a year ago has now turned into a well-organised network of people of 40 members and 300+ volunteers on the same platform. Working in Delhi, Guwahati and Bengaluru, Khoon Khas is the first blood donation-related NGO to be working in the North East of India. It uses WhatsApp for both Internal and external communication in real-time, avoiding critical delays.

/// Text for Relief

Soon after Kerala was hit by floods in 2018, Darez Ahmed, the State Mission Director at the National Health Mission of Tamil Nadu, created a WhatsApp group with senior colleagues, district collectors and subcollectors of Tamil Nadu to respond to distress calls from Kerala. The group grew bigger and bigger by the hour, with messages going back and forth every minute. As soon as a relief request was placed, someone was on it, meeting the requirement. Within the first

week, the group had helped despatch 700-odd truckloads of relief materials from Tamil Nadu to Kerala. The WhatsApp group soon became the gateway for relief materials from other states too.

Click Send to Publish

*Iranian-Kurdish asylum-seeking journalist Behrouz Boochani, housed in a detention centre in Australia, didn't have access to a laptop or typewriter. He could not even write on paper for fear that the guards would attack the room and take away his writings. So he wrote his memoir through texts on WhatsApp. Boochani began to chronicle his experiences by typing notes in Farsi on his phone and sending them to his translator Omid Tofighian via WhatsApp messages. The thousands of messages eventually helped stitch together a 416-page book, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, which was awarded the 2019 Victorian Premier's Literary Award.*

Fact-Checked News

Digital Goa is a SMS-turned-WhatsApp-based news service, which has been authentically delivering information for the past 14 years. The service has four components — major news flashes, event listing, news bulletins and a roundup of eight to nine special stories by major English news channels. The subscribers receive news as and when it happens, while on the go, such as an accident; crime or a political developments. Extensive verification done from Digital Goa's end ensures that the end users are saved from spam and fake news. Launched in 2005, it now has over 25,000 subscribers.

Enable India

One Sign Per Day is a virtual initiative to spread knowledge of Indian sign language to make the society more inclusive for persons with disability. A subscription-based initiative of Bengaluru-based Enable India, One Sign Per Day broadcasts a micro video of a new word in the Indian sign language every day through a WhatsApp broadcast. This broadcast system, rather than a group, also ensures the privacy and security of subscribers who cannot be disturbed by other subscribers. The initiative caters to parents of deaf children, special educators, employers and anybody else who would want to communicate with persons who are hearing impaired. The need for such an initiative was realised because there are only 250 sign language interpreters in a population of 8 million deaf people in India alone. So far, One Sign Per Day has been able to register more than 1,000 subscribers.

These examples showcase the potential of the messaging platform in impacting lives, beyond geographies, cultures and economic barriers. While the challenges that come with technology are real and must be dealt with proactively, the advantages are aplenty, too, and must be realised and scaled up.

About DEF

Established in 2002, Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) aims to connect unreached and underserved communities of India in an effort to bring them out of digital darkness and equip them with access to information. With the belief 'Inform, Communicate and Empower,' DEF finds sustainable digital interventions to overcome information poverty in rural and remote locations of India, and empower communities with digital literacy, digital tools and last mile connectivity. Through its various projects across six programmatic areas — Access & Infrastructure; Education & Empowerment; Governance & Citizen Services; Markets & Social Enterprises; Knowledge Hub & Network; Research & Advocacy — DEF has marked its presence in more than 500 locations across 100 districts of 23 Indian states.

Under its Education & Empowerment programmatic area, DEF has designed and developed START, a digital literacy and MIL toolkit, which has been developed after years of experience in imparting functional digital literacy and media & information literacy through hands-on training and workshops in rural and tribal communities. It has been designed exclusively for first-generation technology users to promote digital inclusion and fight information poverty. Additionally, DEF launched the Social Media for Empowerment (SM4E) Awards in 2013 as a platform to recognise and honour best social media-based development initiatives across South Asia. In 2013, realising the need for leveraging social media for good, DEF began delivering SM4E trainings to tribal communities, civil society organisations, government officials, bureaucrats and academicians.





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