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Government of India
इलक्ट्रॉनिक्स और सूचना प्रौद्योगिकी विभाग
Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology
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D.O. No.

दिनांक / Dated 3rd July 2018

Sub.: Whatsapp – Abuse of platform – Need for remedial action reg.

Dear

I invite your kind attention to media headlines in India over the past two days:

Mob Lynchings Fueled By WhatsApp Sweep India: Foreign Media

<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/mob-lynching-after-whatsapp-rumours-mob-lynchings-fueled-by-whatsapp-sweep-india-foreign-media-1876929>

WhatsApp India: Five lynched after online child kidnap rumors

<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/02/asia/india-lynching-whatsapp-intl/index.html>

WhatsApp becomes India's new serial killer...via lynching

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/whatsapp-becomes-indias-new-serial-killer-via-lynching/articleshow/64825626.cms>

Fake WhatsApp rumours trigger series of mob lynching across the country

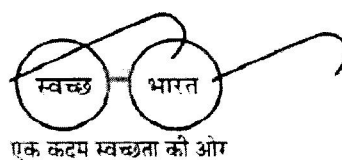
<http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/jul/02/a-timeline-fake-whatsapp-rumours-trigger-series-of-mob-lynching-across-the-country-1836934.html>

2. It is made out from the above reports that innocent people are being lynched by mobs that have been provoked by irresponsible and explosive messages circulating on Whatsapp. The unfortunate killings in Bolpur (West Bengal), Dhule (Maharashtra), Kalachchara (Tripura), Assam, Bengaluru, Tamil Nadu etc are deeply painful and regrettable. The repeated circulation of such provocative contents over Whatsapp that instigate to commit crime including killing, is a matter of deep concern and we take serious note of such irresponsible messages and its circulation.

Contd...2/-



Digital India
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एक कदम स्वच्छता की ओर

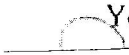


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3. You should note that platforms like Whatsapp cannot evade responsibility and accountability under such circumstances. You are expected to come out with suitable interventions that can contain the proliferation of such fake, motivated, sensational messages in order to control rumour mongering and thereby avoid such undesirable eventualities.

4. We hope that you will rise up to the occasion, realize your responsibility and take immediate steps to tackle this menace in the right earnest with prompt results. We expect that you will soon revert to us about action taken in this regard.

With regards

 Yours sincerely,

WhatsApp Inc.

1601 Willow Road

Menlo Park, California 94025

United States of America



1601 Willow Road
Menlo Park, California, 94025

July 3, 2018

Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology
New Delhi, India

Dear _____,

Thank you for your letter dated July 2. Like the Government of India, we're horrified by these terrible acts of violence and wanted to respond quickly to the very important issues you have raised. We believe this is a challenge that requires government, civil society and technology companies to work together.

Our strategy has been twofold:

- *First*, to give people the controls and information they need to stay safe; and
- *Second*, to work proactively to prevent misuse on WhatsApp.

Product Controls

WhatsApp cares deeply about people's safety which is why we designed our app with security in mind from the get go. For example, you can block anyone from messaging you with just one tap. And if someone who is not in your address book sends you a message, WhatsApp automatically asks if you want to block or report that user. We've also recently made a number of changes to group chats to prevent the spread of unwanted information, which we believe will address some of the specific issues you raise.

In Mid-May, we added new protections to prevent people from adding others back into groups which they had left — a form of misuse we think it is important to correct. And last week, we launched a new setting that enables administrators to decide who gets to send messages within individual groups. This will help reduce the spread of unwanted messages into important group conversations — as well as the forwarding of hoaxes and other content.

In addition, we have been testing a new label in India that highlights when a message has been forwarded versus composed by the sender. This could serve as an important signal for recipients to think twice before forwarding messages because it

lets a user know if content they received was written by the person they know or a potential rumor from someone else. We plan to launch this new feature soon.

Finally, just yesterday we announced a new project to work with leading academic experts in India to learn more about the spread of misinformation, which will help inform additional product improvements going forward — as well as help our efforts to block bad actors (see below) going forward.

Digital Literacy and Fact-checking

We are also working hard to educate people about how to stay safe online. For example, we regularly put out information that explains how to spot fake news and hoaxes — and we plan to run long term public safety ad campaigns in India, given its importance to us at WhatsApp. As a starting point, we will soon publish new educational materials around misinformation and conduct our news literacy workshops.

This year, for the first time, we also started working with fact checking organizations to identify rumors and false news — and respond to them — using WhatsApp.

- For example, during the recent Presidential election in Mexico, we worked closely with the news consortium Verificado. Users sent thousands of rumors to Verificado's WhatsApp account and in turn were provided regular updates on what was accurate and what was false.
- In Brazil, we are now working with 24 news organizations on a similar program — the learnings from our experiences in both countries will help us fight fake news in India.
- Already in India, the fact checking organization Boom Live is available on WhatsApp and has published numerous important reports on the source of the rumors that have contributed to the recent violence.

This kind of work gives everyone a better understanding of the problematic fake news circulating on WhatsApp, and how it relates to misinformation being shared on other platforms. In addition, it's a helpful resource right within WhatsApp where people can get answers about content they've been sent. It's why we're looking at how best to ramp up these efforts in India going forward.

Proactive Action to Tackle Abuse

As you know, WhatsApp retains limited information and is end-to-end encrypted. We use this technology to protect our user's privacy and security. While WhatsApp messages can be highly viral, the way people use the app is by nature still very private. Many people (nearly 25 percent in India) are not in a group; the majority of groups continue to be small (less than ten people); and nine in ten messages are still sent from just one person to another.

People are increasingly using WhatsApp to get advice from their doctor, do business or communicate with their bank — as well as to chat with family and friends. They want to know these messages are private and secure — and that no-one else is reading them. This focus on privacy brings many benefits, though as with all technology there are trade offs. And for WhatsApp, that's the inability to see problematic content spreading through private conversations on our app.

That said, we do have the ability to prevent spam, which includes some of the misinformation that can create mistrust and potentially violence. Because we cannot see the content of messages being sent over WhatsApp we block messages based on user reports and by the manner in which they are sent. We use machine learning to identify accounts sending a high volume of messages (faster than any human could) and we are constantly working to improve our ability to stop unwanted automated messages.

We also respond to valid law enforcement requests to help them investigate crimes. And soon, we will start an engagement program with law enforcement officials around India so they are familiar with our approach and how we can be helpful. We also want to share best practices for how WhatsApp is used by local police as a resource for their community. For example, the police in Hyderabad have created a WhatsApp account that anyone can message with rumors that concern them. And by working with community leaders to get them using our latest features (see above), they can help keep their communities informed about hoaxes circulating locally. As we have already seen, this can help save lives.

If you would like to talk further about the actions we are taking and our plans going forward, please let us know. We believe that false news, misinformation and the spread of hoaxes are issues best tackled collectively: by government, civil society and technology companies working together. With the right action we can help improve everyone's safety by ensuring communities are better equipped to deal with malicious hoaxes and false information — while still enabling people to communicate reliably and privately across India.

Yours Sincerely,



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O.O.No. 20(9)/2018-CLES

दिनांक / Dated: 19.07.2018

Sub.: Whatsapp – Abuse of platform – Need for remedial action reg.

- Ref.: i) Letter dated 3.7.2018 from MeitY to Whatsapp.
ii) Response from Whatsapp dated 3.7.2018

Dear

I invite your kind attention to the following articles in the media that broadly indicate that there is much more that needs to be done in addition to the initial steps outlined in your response letter second cited above:

A lynching in Digital South

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/a-lynching-in-digital-south-whatsapp-rumours-facebook-5262350/>

WhatsApp groups are a hazard and need to be recalled

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/whatsapp-groups-are-a-hazard-and-need-to-be-recalled/storyssyoWrovD2mZ2LUexOVrHP.html>

2. As promised by you, the update that enables users to identify incoming messages as forwarded messages or original content composed by the sender is yet to be activated.

3. You would appreciate that the person to person or a person to group messaging platform is capable of being used as a broadcast or publishing platform wherein a message being repeatedly forwarded from various groups and users can reach a large audience. In such circumstances, when rumours and fake news get propagated by gullible users or mischief mongers, the medium used for such propagation cannot evade responsibility and accountability. Therefore, there is a need for bringing in traceability and accountability so that when a

Provocative / inflammatory message is detected and a request is made by law enforcement agencies, it should be possible to ascertain identity of the person(s) from whom the message originated and through whom it was propagated.

4. We are fully cognizant of the need to protect privacy when it comes to a normal communication between individuals or within groups and in respect of such communications there cannot be any compromise on privacy considering that it has been recognized as emanating from the rights of the citizen. However, as indicated above when a medium is used to propagate messages that have undesirable consequences, then in those circumstances there is a need to bring in traceability and thereby accountability.

5. As pointed out in the articles cited above it appears that there is not enough motivation to fix such aspects since it takes some effort to understand how users can be manipulated and then to come up with suitable solutions. The continued recurrence of undesirable events where mobs are roused by provocative messages as in the recent incident in Karnataka, confirms that such tepid response is inadequate.

6. In the absence of timely action by you in this regard, it may not be out of place to consider the medium [Whatsapp] as an abettor (albeit unintentional) in the instances listed in the reference first cited. Therefore, we expect Whatsapp to come out with more effective solutions that can bring in accountability and facilitate enforcement of law in addition to your promised efforts towards labeling forwards and weeding out fake news.

With regards

Yours sincerely,



1601 Willow Road
Menlo Park, California, 94025

July 27, 2018

Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology
New Delhi, India

Dear _____

Thank you for your letter of July 19. Everyone at WhatsApp cares deeply about people's safety and we have been horrified by the recent mob violence and murders. This is a challenge that requires government, civil society, and technology companies to work together. It's why we've already made significant product changes to help slow the spread of misinformation.

As we discussed with MeitY last week, we're testing limits to the forwarding of messages globally, and in India that limit will be just five chats at once. We've also removed the quick forward button next to media messages, i.e. photos and videos. In addition, we've launched a new label that highlights when a message has been forwarded versus composed by the sender. This will help the user know if the content received was written by the sender or not -- hopefully providing an important signal to think twice before forwarding messages. We'll evaluate the effectiveness of these changes over time. We will share what we learn from these changes.

In addition, we've introduced new features to groups. These include better protections for users who want to leave groups, as well as the ability for administrators to decide who gets to send messages within individual groups. We hope this will help address unwanted messages in group conversations and we will continue to investigate this area going forward.

We would like to work more with government and civil society to solve these problems together. We're conducting digital literacy workshops with NGOs focused on community leaders and users to help educate them about the threat of misinformation -- as well as running our own ad campaigns. These will soon include radio advertisements and online videos, helping to reach users who are coming online for the first time. We would also like to work together with you on digital literacy training programs, including to incorporate WhatsApp safety tips into MeitY's existing training programs. And in terms of government, we are hearing that the police use WhatsApp to improve the safety of their community and respond to questions from local citizens in many cities and villages

across India. We provide a channel for law enforcement to reach us and will also be communicating with law enforcement to help spread user safety best practices on WhatsApp.

We would also like to address several concerns MeitY has raised over the last week:

First, whether WhatsApp is being abused as a broadcast platform. We understand your concern and work hard to ensure we police abuse. For example, we actively work to block accounts that are trying to misuse WhatsApp. To do so, we utilize both machine learning and user reports to ban accounts engaging in abnormal behavior. We are also increasing our investigations into spam operations and look forward to partnering with local authorities on this effort.

Second, whether WhatsApp should be tracing messages back to their source. People rely on WhatsApp for all kinds of sensitive conversations, including with their doctors, banks and families. And we increasingly hear of the police using it to discuss investigations, as well as citizens to report crimes. It's why security and privacy have always been so important. Tracing private messages would undermine the private nature of the app with the potential for serious consequences for free expression, which would be very troubling to many users.

Third, we understand the concerns raised about abuse of groups, especially during the upcoming elections. It's why we recently made important changes to groups and forwarding as described above. We also agree that abuse during elections is a real concern. We are intensifying our election integrity efforts in advance of the Indian elections. During the recent Karnataka elections we detected dozens of WhatsApp accounts that were engaged in spammy behavior – all of which we banned. We also spoke directly to the Election Commission of India and political organizers last week to make clear that we will ban any accounts we find engaged in this kind of behavior, regardless of their political affiliation.

Finally, we agree that WhatsApp needs to have a local presence in India. It's why we recently established a legal entity in India and are actively looking for a local leader in India who can help us build a team on the ground.

We understand the seriousness and urgency of the challenge at hand. These attacks are horrifying — which is why we've taken swift action and we are prepared to work closely with your Ministry, the Government, and civil society going forward.

Sincerely,

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