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COVER

What's the way forward?

There is no fail-safe technological firewall against hate-mongering through WhatsApp. The change has to come from a society that acts on rumours

By Osama Manzar

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Get the message: Earlier this month, after several dialogues between the India government and Facebook in California, the app rolled out a new feature that essentially tags a forward | [PIA](#) vic

Between the late 1880s and early 1900s, white Americans used lynchings as a means to terrorise blacks — in other words, exercise control over them. The lynchings often involved setting the victim on fire or hanging them from trees. The act was supposed to underscore the supremacy of one community over the other; and also allow

as punishment for crimes committed by non-whites. In the absence of mobile phones, 24x7 television and social media to potentially make messages or misinformation viral, the communication channels were person to person, from one community to another, from one town to another. It was a societal issue, and it was up to society to arrive at solutions. Eventually, the people realised the graveness of the situation, and decided to correct it. They advocated human rights, evoked empathy and invoked the Constitution of America. They came together to protect the rights of bla

India is going through a similar phase of intolerance for tl
According to data from IndiaSpend, there have been more th
mob violence in the country this year; and 74 cases, since January 2017,
of mob attacks triggered by rumours of child-lifting alone. The phe-
nomenon of fake news threatens India's democracy and secularism.
However, since this phase is unfolding in the age of information tech-
nology, people are also looking for solutions in technology instead of
just within society.

We must understand that technology is an enabler or a medium. It can be used for spreading positive messages as much as for spreading negativity. Let's take the example of WhatsApp. The platform was designed and developed as a private messaging tool. Unlike Twitter or Facebook, WhatsApp didn't set out to be a public messaging tool, which is why it ensures that its messages are encrypted.

So, rather than blaming technology for the propagation of hate messages, we need to first accept that there are not probably enough positive messages that are being sent out to counter the hate. And so, it is not technology that is making people lynch "others"; it is the people using this technology, in particular WhatsApp, who are creating a divide between "us" and the "others".

Earlier this month, after several dialogues between the government of India and WhatsApp heads in California, the app rolled out a feature that essentially tags a forward — to help users determine if their contacts have composed the message or simply advanced it.

However, can a "forward" truly awaken the conscience of the people? I believe a technological fix such as a label — though the step from Silicon Valley is encouraging— cannot solve a societal problem. I think more people may justify lynchings — or live in denial — not because they've received a message criminalising the "other" but because they've seen a person of authority or respect either encouraging the act or not penalising the actors.

Hence, a message that justifies lynching of the "others" will not con-

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vince me of the act. Instead, I would be more convinced of the act if I see a Member of Parliament garlanding a person accused of lynching, or if a Union minister visits the funeral of a man wanted in a lynching case.

In the last couple of years, there have been growing incidences of fake news and hate messages spread through social media channels; and WhatsApp has become synonymous with hate messages. Yet, when WhatsApp is blamed for fanning the flame, it is a classic example of shooting the messenger.

Unless society takes a stand, no labels of “forwarded” messages can check the proliferation of fake news and hatred. This is also because people will always have greater faith in people (the sender) than the medium (technology). This means that if I receive a message from someone I hold in high esteem, there are chances that I would believe even a message with a “forwarded” label. In fact, his/her name would convince me to keep the forward going.

With increasing mobile penetration — India has over 200 million WhatsApp users — the country is definitely at higher risk of receiving fake messages; it is especially worrisome since general elections are not too far away, and we’ve already seen the misuse of the platform and messages by a certain section of society in another part of the world. However, I still believe that the onus lies with the individual and not with the technology platform to decide how to deal with fake news.

Osama Manzar is the founder and director of Digital Empowerment Foundation

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