



FACEBOOK AND WHATSAPP AREN'T JUST FLAWED — THEY'RE DOWNRIGHT DANGEROUS

By Vivek Wadhwa

Facebook's woes are spreading globally, first from the U.S., then to Europe and now in Asia.

A study by researchers at the University of Warwick in the U.K. has conclusively established that Facebook has been fanning the flames of hatred in Germany. The study found that the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated and those living in large cities and in small towns alike were susceptible to online hate speech on refugees and its incitement to violence, with the incidence of hate crimes relating directly to per-capita Facebook use.

And during Germany-wide Facebook outages, which resulted from programming or server problems at Facebook, anti-refugee hate crimes practically vanished—within weeks.

As *The New York Times* explains, Facebook's algorithms reshape a user's reality: "These are built around a core mission: promote content that will maximize user engagement. Posts that tap into negative, primal emotions like anger or fear, studies have found, perform best and so proliferate."

Facebook started out as a benign open social-media platform to bring friends and family together. Increasingly obsessed with making money, and unhindered by regulation or control, it began selling to anybody who would pay for advertising access to its users. It focused on gathering all the data it could about them and keeping them hooked to its platform. More sensational Facebook posts attracted more views, a win-win for Facebook and its hatemongers.

India

In countries such as India, WhatsApp is the dominant form of communication. And sadly, it is causing even greater carnage than Facebook is in Germany; there have already been dozens of deaths.

WhatsApp was created to send text messages between mobile phones. Voice calling, group chat and end-to-end encryption were features that were bolted onto its platform much later. Facebook acquired WhatsApp in 2014 and started making it as addictive as its web platform—and capturing data from it.

The problem is that WhatsApp was never designed to be a social-media platform. It doesn't allow even the most basic independent monitoring. For this reason, it has become an uncontrolled platform for spreading fake news and hate speech. It also poses serious privacy concerns due to its roots as a text-messaging tool because users' primary identifications are mobile numbers, therefore, people are susceptible everywhere and at all times to anonymous harassment by other chat-group members.

On Facebook, when you see a posting, you can, with a click, learn about the person who posted it and judge whether the source is credible. With no more than a phone number and possibly a name, there is no way to know the source or intent of a message in WhatsApp. Moreover, anyone can contact users and use special tools to track them. Imagine the dangers to children who happen to post messages in WhatsApp groups, where it isn't apparent who the other members are; or the risks to people being targeted by hate groups.

Facebook faced a severe backlash when it was revealed that it was seeking banking information to boost user engagement in the U.S. In India, it is taking a different tack, adding mobile-payment features to WhatsApp. This will dramatically increase the dangers. All those with whom a user has ever transacted can harass them because they have their mobile number, thus making it possible for people to be tracked in new ways.

Facebook is a flawed product, but its flaws pale in comparison to those of WhatsApp. If these were cars, Facebook would be the one without safety belts—and WhatsApp the one without brakes.

That is why India's technology minister, Ravi Shankar Prasad, was right to demand recently that WhatsApp "find solutions to these challenges which are downright criminal and violation of Indian laws." The demands he made, however, don't go far enough.

Prasad asked WhatsApp to operate in India under an Indian corporate entity; to store Indian data in India; to appoint a grievance officer and to trace the origins of fake messages. The problems with WhatsApp, though, are more fundamental. You can't have public meeting spaces without

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any safety and security measures for unsuspecting citizens. WhatsApp's group-chat feature needs to be disabled until it is completely redesigned with safety and security in mind. This, on its own, could halt the carnage that is happening across the country.

Lesson from Germany

India—and the rest of the world—also need to take a page from Germany, which last year approved a law against online hate speech, with fines of up to 50 million euros for platforms such as Facebook that fail to delete "criminal" content. The E.U. is considering taking this one step further and requiring content flagged by law enforcement to be removed within an hour.

The issue of where data are being stored may be a red herring. The problem with Facebook isn't the location of its data storage; it is, rather, the uses the company makes of the data. Facebook requires its users to grant it "a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any IP content" they post to the site. It assumes the right to use family photos and videos—and financial transactions—for marketing purposes and to resell them to anybody.

Every country needs to have laws that explicitly grant their citizens ownership of their own data. Then, if a company wants to use their data, it must tell them what is being collected, how it is being used and seek permission to use it in exchange for a licensing fee.

The problems arising through faceless corporate pillage are soluble only through enforcement of respect for individual rights and legal answerability. **N**

For more, read my book "Your Happiness Was Hacked: Why Tech Is Winning the Battle to Control Your Brain—and How to Fight Back" and follow me on Twitter: @wadhwa.