

# WhatsApp curbs India service after lynchings

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WhatsApp bought full-page adverts in Indian newspapers with tips on how to spot misinformation

WhatsApp announced limits on the forwarding of messages by its 200 million Indian users in an effort to stop a spate of horrific lynchings and

to assuage government threats of legal action in its biggest market.

More than 20 people have been butchered by crazed mobs in the past two months across India after being accused of child kidnapping and other crimes in viral messages circulated wildly on WhatsApp.

Late Thursday India's government, scrambling to find a response, threatened legal action against WhatsApp, saying the "medium" for spreading malicious rumours "cannot evade responsibility and accountability".

The Facebook-owned firm responded on Friday with an announcement it will test limiting the ability of its users to forward messages and cap at five the number of contacts or groups that messages can be forwarded to.

In addition, it said it will "remove the quick forward button next to media messages," a statement said.

"We believe that these changes -- which we'll continue to evaluate -- will help keep WhatsApp the way it was designed to be: a private messaging app," the company said.

Under pressure from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, the firm had already announced new features to help users identify messages that have been forwarded.

WhatsApp had also bought full-page adverts in Indian newspapers with tips on how to spot misinformation.

But in a strongly worded statement released late Thursday, India's information technology ministry said this was not enough.

"Rampant circulation of irresponsible messages in large volumes on their platform have not been addressed adequately by WhatsApp," the ministry said.

"If (WhatsApp) remain mute spectators they are liable to be treated as abettors and thereafter face consequent [legal action](#)," it said.

In India people forward on WhatsApp more messages, photos, and videos, than any other country in the world, the company said.

In its statement, the ministry also called on WhatsApp to enable the "traceability" of provocative or inflammatory messages when an official request is made.

But the platform on Friday was again clear that the privacy of its users was paramount, saying messages would stay "end-to-end encrypted".

## **Chocolates to kids**

Lynchings are nothing new in India, but the spread of smartphones—there are a billion plus handsets, and data is cheap—to even the most remote corners of India has enabled rumours to be shared at lighting speed.

The latest incident last Friday saw a 27-year-old software engineer beaten to death by a crowd of more than 2,000 people in the southern state of Karnataka after he and his friends offered chocolates to local children.

Fatal attacks have also been carried out on Muslims by "cow protection" groups roaming highways and inspecting livestock trucks. Cows are sacred to the majority Hindu community.

Indian authorities have launched awareness campaigns and patrols and imposed internet blackouts in some areas but the measures have had limited success so far.

One official "rumour buster" was himself beaten to death in the north-east in June.

Earlier this week India's Supreme Court told the government to enact new legislation to deal with lynchings and punish offenders.

In China WhatsApp is subject to major disruption, prompting people to use the homegrown—and unencrypted—WeChat, but elsewhere in Asia and beyond it and other tech firms have come under fire for the spread of "[fake news](#)".

Major media organisations, often in partnership with big technology and social media firms, have stepped up fact-checking and other steps to support fact-based journalism.

Internet firms, after initial reluctance to define themselves as "media", have stepped up efforts to identify false news and to "curate" stories from "trusted" news sources.

In Pakistan, WhatsApp this week began a week-long publicity campaign offering tips to spot fake news ahead of elections on July 25.

In India the firm is in discussions with the government on how to tackle spam [messages](#) ahead of upcoming elections and bringing in a fake news verification model similar to one used recently in Mexico, the Economic Times reported on Friday.

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