

Opinion: Why WhatsApp is a terrible place to conduct important political conversations

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The leak of more than 100,000 WhatsApp messages exchanged between former health secretary Matt Hancock and his contacts has finally exposed the central role the messaging app has come to play in official government business.

A selection of the messages published by *The Telegraph*—a newspaper with an anti-lockdown stance—shows Hancock apparently [dismissing advice on testing in care homes](#) and wanting to "[frighten the pants off everyone](#)" to ensure compliance with lockdown rules.

The tone of the leaked messages suggests that the politicians involved had not anticipated public scrutiny. Critical political decisions are made in a style that appears flippant, which has been hurtful to many people who suffered during the difficult period of lockdowns. The politicians engage in insults, rivalries, sycophancy and jokes and use what has been described as a "[matey, testosterone-driven](#)" tone. This might reflect on the people involved in the exchanges, but it also prompts us to wonder whether WhatsApp is really the right place for political interaction.

Technologies such as WhatsApp do not determine behavior. People always have choices as to how they use a particular technology. But these choices are influenced by social factors. We tend to use technologies in the same ways as people around us. We develop habits that become hard to break.

Trivial and conversational

Our perception of WhatsApp—no doubt shared by politicians—is shaped not so much by the technology itself but by our habitual use of it for immediate, informal, intimate conversation.

Like all digitally mediated communication, WhatsApp carries some of the features associated with writing and some of the features associated with speech. The messages are undeniably written and, like written words, can be stored and leaked, as Hancock found.

At the same time, however, in our everyday interactions, many of us treat WhatsApp messages as ephemeral, private and inconsequential, like

much of our speech. Although the written medium affords planning and editing, we often dash messages off without giving them much thought. Sometimes we are rushed off our feet and send messages in a five-minute break between meetings. Other times we are messaging close friends and family and it feels natural to write in an informal and intimate way.

Some WhatsApp groups even demand flippancy and humor. Other messages deal with the mundane details of life—asking a friend for a lift, telling a partner you are on your way home—and are short and to the point. Many of the things we might once have done by talking to someone, we now also do through written messages.

This blurring of the lines between speaking and writing can have worrying implications for those who try to use WhatsApp to discuss more weighty issues. Politicians have always informally spoken to each other about important political topics, of course. However, we do not expect to see consequential issues being debated in WhatsApp messages in the same way as we would chat about what was for dinner or who should put the bins out.

Mobile technologies also muddle the distinction between work and home. They enable people to check in on family and friends while at work and to liaise with colleagues from home. The challenge for politicians—and others who use their private phones for work purposes—is to effectively maintain workplace conventions, standards and registers while using the same platform for jokey banter. It has become normal to conduct multiple conversations by WhatsApp at once, so that the tone of one conversation bleeds into the other. In Hancock's case, important political discussions are jumbled up with what appears to be banter and rivalry between friends, at times containing informal expressions and typos.

Part of our difficulty in maintaining this balance is the fact that our phones also blur the boundaries between offline and online. There was a time in the 1980s and 1990s when people had to make a concerted effort to get online. They had to go to their personal computer, plug in the modem, and wait to connect. At that time, there was a sharp disjuncture between "being online" and "being offline."

Rarely the focus of our attention

We might argue that government [oversight policies around communications](#) and security still operate on the basis of this outdated set up. But, in reality, the distinction between offline and online has gone. We now carry our phones around with us, share what we are doing online and send messages while commuting, at a party, or in a meeting.

[My own research](#) based on UK-based adults aged from their 30s to 70s suggests that most WhatsApp messages are sent while people are doing something else. Not only that but most people I spoke to were keen to emphasize that they prioritize the people they are with over incoming messages, ignoring them until they can steal a quick moment to respond. Some people engage in what is popularly known as "phadmin"—putting aside time when they check their their phone and respond to multiple WhatsApp conversations in one go. Some put their phone on silent so they are not distracted. Some switch to voice notes so as to continue messaging while engaged in activities that require both hands (such as cooking dinner). Generally speaking, for adults over 30 at least, WhatsApp is not something that warrants undivided attention.

This is, of course, one of the huge attractions of mobile messaging—unlike an in-person conversation or a voice call, we do not have to give it our full attention. This no doubt makes WhatsApp [a crucial tool](#) for busy politicians making real-time decisions in fast-paced unfolding situations. But they may not be giving the political decision-

making process their full attention.

WhatsApp does not inevitably lead to bad decisions, but [politicians](#) should take the platform more seriously.

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