What's Up, Rural India?

‘What’s Up Rural India’ is a study of WhatsApp consumption and trend patterns in rural India carried out by New Delhi-based non-profit Digital Empowerment Foundation.
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Written by Udita Chaturvedi
Reviewed by Osama Manzar

Please note, this survey report is part of a larger ongoing training and research initiative, which will collect responses from urban WhatsApp users in Tier II and Tier III cities as well.

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Digital Empowerment Foundation
House No. 44, 2nd & 3rd Floor (Next to Naraina IIT Academy)
Kalu Sarai, (Near IIT Flyover), New Delhi – 110016
Tel: 91-11-42233100 / Fax: 91-11-26532787
Email: def@defindia.net | URL: www.defindia.org
What's Up, Rural India?
Conversations on the Internet, particularly social media, are often a reflection of the conversations that one has offline. However, online conversations come with the advantage of not being restricted to a small group of people physically present around you. The barriers of geography and time do not exist online. However, not everyone uses this opportunity for positive messaging.

India, with around 30 per cent Internet penetration (World Bank, 2016), already has more than 241 million users of Facebook alone (The Next Web Report, 2017). At least 136 million Indians are active social media users (Yral Report, 2016), across platforms. Further, when talking about social media, we cannot ignore the penetration of WhatsApp, which has reached more than 200 million users in India (Mashable, 2017). This means 200 million users in India are exchanging messages on a daily basis in real time. Thus, as one of the most popular channels of communications today, social media plays a significant role in both fighting hate speech and magnifying it. It is, in fact, a tool as powerful as the television with its audio-visual advantages.

In 2013, an article in the Hindustan Times cited professor Badri Narayan from the GB Pant Social Science Institute in Allahabad as saying, “From word of mouth, communal polarisation is now moving online. This is a dangerous trend since the Internet is very potent.” In 2015, a report by the Pew Research Centre on global restrictions on religion, The Social Hostilities Index, ranked India fourth with an index value of 8.7 out of 10, after Syria, Nigeria and Iraq. The Social Hostilities Index looks at 13 indicators—which include crimes motivated by religious hatred, mob violence related to religion, communal violence, religion-related terrorist groups, the harassment of women for “violating” religious dress codes and proselytising—to measure hostilities around the issue of religion. This trend is not unique to India. It is visible in various other countries as well.
It’s 2018 now, and in the last three years, we’ve seen social media, especially WhatsApp, being used as a popular tool to disseminate hate speech, misinformation fake news. According to data from IndiaSpend, there have been more than 65 cases of mob violence in the country in 2018; and 74 cases, since January 2017, of mob attacks triggered by rumours of child-lifting alone. The phenomenon of fake news threatens India’s democracy and secularism. Most recently, we saw an awareness video on kidnapping from Pakistan being edited and made viral in India to create the fear among people of child kidnapping.

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 five Indian states are ready to go for Assembly elections within the next couple of months. However, we must understand that technology is merely an enabler or a medium, which is used by individuals, groups or communities. It can be used for spreading positive messages as much as for spreading negativity. The platform of WhatsApp was designed and developed as a private messaging tool, however, persons with malicious intentions are increasingly using the platform to spread fake news. Then there are those who may not have a malicious intention but feel compelled to forward the message without verifying its content.

What’s Up in Rural India is a study of WhatsApp consumption and trend patterns in rural India carried out by New Delhi-based non-profit Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF). In this survey-based research study, DEF has carried out a primary data collection of 1,081 individuals across primarily 14 states in India. Each individual was asked a set of 20 questions related to their daily consumption patterns, their reason for using the messaging platform, and their faith in the platform for information access. Through this survey, DEF also aims to understand the role of WhatsApp in spreading misinformation.
CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

As many as 1,018 rural respondents were surveyed for this report. These respondents were reached out via DEF’s ground staff primarily in 14 Indian states, besides getting responses from six other states. The number of respondents reached in each state varied, however, collectively the respondents’ answers gave an overview of the consumption patterns and trends in rural India. As many as 224 respondents were surveyed in Madhya Pradesh, 104 in Maharashtra, 73 in Odisha, 48 in Rajasthan, 45 in Tamil Nadu, 62 in Telangana, 91 in Uttar Pradesh, 36 in Uttarakhand, 53 in West Bengal, 39 in Andhra Pradesh, 37 in Assam, 134 in Bihar and 57 in Jharkhand. The rest of the respondents were from Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Puducherry. DEF was also able to collect an occasional couple of responses each from Andaman & Nicobar, Chandigarh, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Meghalaya and Puducherry.
Among the surveyed individuals, 39.1 per cent respondents stated that they use WhatsApp for 1-2 hours every day. This was followed by 27.8 per cent of the respondents who stated they use WhatsApp for 3-4 hours a day. As much as 9.5 per cent of the respondents said they use WhatsApp for 5-7 hours per day while 5 per cent said they use WhatsApp for over 7 hours a day. There were also 18.6 per cent respondents who use WhatsApp for less than one hour every day.
Meanwhile, as many as 399 respondents stated that WhatsApp is the only social media platform they use, however, a whopping 832 respondents said they use Facebook as well. As many as 242 use Twitter and 274 use Instagram, besides WhatsApp.
Among the rural target group that was targeted for this survey, 26.2 per cent respondents said they exchange 11-30 messages a day; 21.3 per cent said they exchange 1-10 messages a day; 20.9 per cent exchange 31-60 messages; 18.1 per cent exchange 61-100 messages; and 12.1 per cent send and receive more than 100 messages a day. A small group, 1.4 per cent, said they don’t use WhatsApp.

**Figure 3: On an average, how many messages do you exchange on WhatsApp in a day?**
Recently, in an effort to curb the growing menace of misinformation and fake news in the country, WhatsApp had rolled out a feature that limits users to only send a forward to five persons at a time. As many as 88.1 per cent of the respondents said they were aware of the ‘forward’ label on WhatsApp. While 8.4 per cent said they are not aware of the ‘forward’ label, 3.3 per cent said they were not sure if they had seen the ‘forward’ label or not.
Among those who are aware of the 'forward' label, 25.7 per cent said they receive 6-10 messages a day; 23.1 per cent receive 3-5 messages a day; 20.5 per cent receive 11-20 messages a day; 12 per cent receive 21-50 messages a day; and 6.5 per cent receive more than 50 messages a day. A group of 12.2 per cent respondents said they receive less than 3 forwarded messages a day.
We asked the respondents what do they do when they receive a forwarded message; most of them (35.6 per cent) said they read it, 24.5 per cent they read and forward it further, 22 per cent said they read and respond to it with a reply, 13.2 per cent said they don’t usually read the forwards that they receive. Less than 5 per cent of the respondents said they question the sender about the information they receive.

**Figure 6: What do you usually do when you receive a forwarded message on WhatsApp?**
While the 5-forward limit has restricted seamless messaging to a certain extent, we asked if the restriction has affected the number of forwards a person receives or sends. A majority, 34.7 per cent of the respondents, claimed they sent a forward to not more than 5 chat windows; 26.6 per cent states they usually forward a message to 6-10 chat windows; 23.5 per cent share it with 11-25 chat windows; 11.7 per cent share it with 26-50 chat windows while 3.5 per cent share a forward in more than 50 chat windows.
While the users of higher trust in certain formats than the rest, 19 per cent of the respondents stated they neither believed information received via WhatsApp too easily nor do they shrug it off as misinformation too easily. This group marked a scale of 1-10 on 5, 1 meaning they never trust information on WhatsApp and 10 meaning they always trust the information they receive on WhatsApp.
With the increasing penetration of smartphones and Internet connectivity, social media has become a popular and fast tool to disseminate information and news pieces. In fact, there have been several instances where a piece of news has been first broken on Twitter, then spread by Facebook or WhatsApp, and eventually picked up by news organisations. WhatsApp, too, has become a popular tool to reach out to a large number of people in a short span of time, with several people first receiving a piece of information on WhatsApp, and then receiving on news channels or newspapers. At least 38.5 per cent of the respondents agreed that they received at least one news-related message every day on their WhatsApp. 31.9 per cent of the respondents said they received 4-8 pieces of news every day on WhatsApp; 16.6 per cent stated they got 9-15 news related messages a day on their messaging app while 9.3 per cent said they received a minimum of 15 news-related messages per day on their WhatsApp. A group of 3.6 per cent respondents said they received no news item on their WhatsApp.
In an effort to further understand what platform is most trusted, we asked users where are they most likely to find news and believe it. Most of the users, as much as 42.7 per cent, said they trust news channels the most when it comes to news-related information. This was followed by 25.9 per cent of the respondents who said they trusted newspapers the most. Interestingly, WhatsApp ranked third when it comes to news-related information with 14.7 per cent respondents confirming that they trust WhatsApp the most for news-related information.
Interestingly, 61.8 per cent of the respondents stated that, the receiving news via WhatsApp, there is either no source mentioned or is rarely mentioned. However, 38.1 per cent of the respondents stated that they usually find some news source in the message too.
As many as 38.5 per cent respondents stated that they were members of five or less WhatsApp groups; 23.3 per cent were in 6-10 groups, 15.3 per cent were in 11-20 groups, 9.7 per cent were in more than 30 WhatsApp groups.

Figure 12: How many WhatsApp groups are you a part of?
Among these groups, majority of the respondents (21.2 per cent) said they were in WhatsApp groups with 26-50 members. Another 20.7 per cent said the average size of their WhatsApp groups was 50+. This is followed by group size of 11-15 (17.6 per cent), 16-25 (16.3 per cent), 6-10 (16.2 per cent), and 3-5 members (8.1 per cent).

**Figure 13: On an average, how many members are there in each WhatsApp group?**
Most of the respondents said they were part of family WhatsApp groups, followed by colleagues, village, community welfare, panchayat and local administration.
Among the surveyed individuals, 63.2 per cent of the respondents said they did not use WhatsApp in 2014 or earlier; 36.7 per cent said they were using the Internet-based messaging platform even in 2014.
Interestingly though, among the existing surveyed WhatsApp users, 40 per cent of the total respondents said they are part of WhatsApp groups that have been created by members or representatives of political parties. As much as 59.9 per cent said they are not part of any such WhatsApp group.
While the number of WhatsApp users varied in every surveyed area, we asked the respondents to answer on a scale of 1-10 how many adult community members in their villages used WhatsApp (1 being ‘almost no one’ and 10 being ‘almost everyone’). Based on this scale, 39.2 per cent results showed that almost everyone in the village was using WhatsApp while 4.2 per cent respondents said that almost no one used WhatsApp in their village. Meanwhile, 25.4 per cent of the respondents marked the scale from 4 to 6.

**FIGURE 17: HOW MANY PEOPLE USE WHATSAPP IN YOUR VILLAGE?**
When we asked respondents if they believe viral messages on WhatsApp can lead to incidents of violence, a high 51.6 per cent agreed while 19.9 per cent disagreed. As much as 28.4 per cent said viral messages on WhatsApp can “sometimes” lead to incidents of violence.
CONCLUSION

The results show a wide range of consumption trends across users, irrespective of their region of origin. One of the striking analyses of the result is the trust factor. It is ironic to note that even though most users trust news channels and newspapers for information, people still hold WhatsApp responsible for propagation of fake news, even though it ranks third on a long list of social media platforms that consumers use. Further, media is witness that there are growing instances of the government and public demanding more solutions from the technological platform, rather than taking individual onus and looking for social solutions to the problem.

Technology can be both an enabler and a disabler. Here, we would like to share the analogy of a knife, which can cut both vegetables as well as a man. However, it would be unfair to blame the knife for the death of a person. We must understand that the menace of misinformation and fake news is a social problem rather than a technological problem.
ABOUT DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION

Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) is a New Delhi-based non-profit organisation. For the last 15 years, DEF has been working towards connecting unreached and underserved communities of India in an effort to bring them out of digital darkness and equip them with access to information through last mile connectivity, digital literacy and digital interventions. So far, DEF has digitally enabled more than 5,000,000 lives through its physical presence at 345 locations across 100 districts of 22 Indian states. Under its Research & Advocacy Wing, DEF carries out several research projects to understand the impact of digital inclusion, the effects of digital exclusion and advocate for Internet rights.