

## **The Whatsapp India Story: Inside the Digital Maya Sphere**

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Whatsapp has come a long way since it was aiming to charge its users \$1 per year to keep itself alive. The idea was to not depend on advertising and prioritize user's privacy. The simplicity of the app was attractive and it soon transformed the everyday life experience of its users. Over the years, the vision and the experience of using whatsapp has changed significantly. In some ways, it has transformed how humans communicate with each other. The impact of Whatsapp in India, a country with more than 500 million users has been profound. The affordable smartphones and cheap data has made whatsapp available to everyone. The whatsapp has even penetrated remote areas becoming a ubiquitous tool for not just information exchange but also community bonding.

In The Whatsapp India Story, Sunetra Sen Narayan and Shalini Narayanan provide a nuanced explanation of this phenomenon, exploring the app's nature both as an enabler of communication and also its dark associations with disinformation, surveillance and privacy concerns. The authors offer a rich analysis of the evolution of Whatsapp in India drawing on diverse disciplines including sociology, psychology, law, economics and media studies. Using a multimethod approach including personal narratives, case studies and quantitative data, the authors provide a holistic view on Whatsapp's social impact in India making this book a valuable resource for academics and industry practitioners.

The opening chapter of the book situates WhatsApp within India's distinctive socio-economic framework. By locating Whatsapp in the broader theoretical perspectives of technological determinism and surveillance capitalism, the authors highlight how the app significantly shapes users and societal behaviour. Approaching Whatsapp groups with Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities is particularly intriguing. The Whatsapp groups which are started to share information and keep people connected often become battlegrounds for opposing ideas and ideologies. The moderate voices become reduced to being spectators while the extreme voices become dominant leading to polarisation. The app has facilitated the creation of echo chambers where only users with like-minded perspectives remain active in a group.

The authors trace the journey of Whatsapp forwards in India, from them clogging the world's internet in the mornings to them becoming so abundant that terms like "Whatsapp University" had to be invented. The observations are complemented with In-depth surveys, making them reliable and credible.

The Duality of Whatsapp becomes visible when authors move to their exploration of political communication. On one hand, whatsapp is a tool for grassroots mobilisation, while on the other hand, it becomes a very handy tool for propaganda dissemination. All Over the world, political parties were looking at Whatsapp as a possible tool for elections, but the availability of cheap internet after 2018 made the app pivotal in Indian elections. The development of social media cells, troll factories and humorous memes have led to whatsapp becoming the battleground of Indian elections. The existence of content factories, the advent of AI tools and the role of money made it too real. As one political strategist puts it : "We wrestle on Twitter. The battle is on Facebook. The war is on WhatsApp". The authors document Whatsapp's use for targeted messaging, voter mobilization, and propaganda dissemination. As per a survey conducted by authors, almost 91% of the respondents believed that they were receiving propaganda messages on whatsapp. The content has serious ramifications as respondents admitted to being swayed by this propaganda.

The book examines misinformation and fake news in a comprehensive way. The authors delineate the lifecycle of misinformation on WhatsApp, demonstrating its role in inciting offline violence and political conflict. From the lynchings of people based on Whatsapp rumours of child-lifters to medical misinformation during Covid-19 pandemic made Whatsapp tragedies very real. The authors acknowledge Whatsapp's initiatives to fight misinformation but term them as inadequate in a nation in which few people have digital literacy.

The authors also provide an assessment of regulatory challenges surrounding WhatsApp in India. They point out the conflict between the app's end-to-end encryption, which protects user privacy, and government demands for traceability, often justified as a measure to ensure national security. The book also takes a critical look at India's Draft Digital Personal Data Protection Bill of 2022, exploring the heated debates about how it could increase state surveillance and weaken privacy safeguards. The authors also propose potentially imaginary scenarios, in one of which WhatsApp will be turned into a discriminatory social credit system, and in another privacy protections will be eroded by Indian court rulings that prioritize national security.

The book also sheds light on how WhatsApp helps users with disabilities break down communication barriers, offering them a sense of empowerment. At the same time, it critiques the platform for its shortcomings, like insufficient support for screen readers. This analysis

expands the conversation around digital inclusion and underscores the need for technology to be designed with accessibility in mind.

The authors also delve into how WhatsApp has become a crucial tool for professionals and businesses, simplifying communication and offering an affordable way to engage with customers. At the same time, they warn against relying too heavily on the app, pointing out risks like digital fatigue and potential privacy breaches. This balanced view is especially helpful for readers grappling with the challenges of modern digital workspaces.

The book offers a compelling case study on how WhatsApp serves as a driver of glocalization in this broader context. Narayan and Narayanan observe that India's digital path could land it somewhere between China's tightly controlled, censorship-heavy firewall model and the more open, liberal approach of the Western internet. Still, they emphasize that the final outcome of these regulatory debates is far from clear.

The book's strength is in its blend of theories, interviews, surveys and secondary data. This enables the authors to portray the real life experience of using whatsapp and providing a detailed analysis of Whatsapp's influence. However, the lack of a comparative analysis between WhatsApp and other instant messaging or social media platforms highlights an area ripe for further study.

The book is not just a valuable resource for academics, but it can also offer valuable insights for policymakers, industry practitioners and everyday users. *The Whatsapp India Story: Inside the Digital Maya Sphere* is a must read for anyone who is curious about how personal lives, society and governments intersect with technology. It is a valuable guide for anyone looking to navigate the complex digital sphere in India in the 21st century.