

## International

# In India election, a \$14 software tool helps overcome WhatsApp controls

## Political workers using these tools to boost campaigning

**NEW DELHI/MUMBAI:** WhatsApp clones and software tools that cost as little as \$14 are helping Indian digital marketers and political activists bypass anti-spam restrictions set up by the world's most popular messaging app, Reuters has found. The activities highlight the challenges WhatsApp, which is owned by Facebook Inc, faces in preventing abuse in India, its biggest market with more than 200 million users.

With fervent campaigning in India's staggered general election, which concludes on May 19, the demand for such tools has surged, according to digital companies and sources in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its main rival, the Congress party. After false messages on WhatsApp last year sparked mob lynchings in India, the company restricted forwarding of a message to only five users. The software tools appear to overcome those restrictions, allowing users to reach thousands of people at once.

Rohitash Repswal, who owns a digital marketing business in a cramped, residential neighborhood of New Delhi, said he ran a 1,000 rupee (\$14) piece of software round-the-clock in recent months to send up to 100,000 WhatsApp messages a day for two BJP members. "Whatever WhatsApp does, there's a workaround," Repswal said during an interview at his small, two-bedroom house.

Reuters found WhatsApp was misused in at least three ways in India for political campaigning: Free clone apps available online were used by some BJP and Congress workers to manually forward messages on a mass basis;

software tools which allow users to automate delivery of WhatsApp messages; and some firms offering political workers the chance to go onto a website and send bulk WhatsApp messages from anonymous numbers.

At least three software tools were available on Amazon.com's India website. When purchased by a Reuters reporter, they arrived as compact discs tucked inside thin cardboard casings, with no company branding. WhatsApp declined a Reuters request to allow testing such tools for reporting this story. "We are continuing to step up our enforcement against imposter WhatsApp services and take legal action by sending cease and desist letters to hundreds of bulk messaging service providers to help curb abuse," a spokeswoman said. "We do not want them to operate on our platform and we work to ban them".

### WhatsApp Clones

Modified versions of popular apps have become common as technically-savvy hobbyists have long reverse-engineered them. Tools purporting to bypass WhatsApp restrictions are advertised in videos and online forums aimed at users in Indonesia and Nigeria, both of which held major elections this year. For Indian politicians, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter are key campaigning tools to target the country's near 900 million voters.

Two Congress sources and one BJP source told Reuters their workers used clone apps such as "GBWhatsApp" and "JTWhatsApp", which allowed

them to cut through WhatsApp's restrictions. Both apps have a green-color interface that closely resembles WhatsApp and can be downloaded for free from dozens of technology blogs. They are not available on Google's official app store but work on Android phones.

WhatsApp describes such apps as "unofficial" and says its users can face bans, which means the company can block the account associated with a particular mobile number if it detects unusual activity. Some Congress workers said they did not care. "WhatsApp occasionally bans some of these numbers, but the volunteers would use new (mobile) SIM cards to sign up," said a Congress member with direct knowledge of the activities.

In Mumbai, a person in the social media team of a senior BJP candidate said no restrictions on JTWhatsApp meant his team could easily send forwards to up to 6,000 people a day, as well as video files containing political content which would be far bigger in size than allowed on the official WhatsApp service. Reuters was not able to ascertain the overall scale of such activities and found no evidence that BJP and Congress leaders officially ordered workers to campaign this way.

### 'Business sender'

In New Delhi, digital marketer Repswal said he would typically charge 150,000 rupees (\$2,161) for a month's service for creating digital content, providing a database of mobile numbers and then sending 300,000 WhatsApp messages. He uses a piece of software named "Business Sender" which he said he also sells for 1,000

rupees (\$14). A person can add many mobile numbers in a field and compose messages with pictures. Using a so-called "Group Contacts Grabber" feature, the user can also extract a list of mobile numbers from a particular WhatsApp group with a click of a button.

Repswal didn't name the two BJP members he worked for, but in a demonstration for Reuters, added dozens of mobile numbers in the software, typed a test message saying "your vote is your right" and hit "send". Then, his WhatsApp web version started delivering the messages almost robotically, one after the other.

Business Sender was "not supported or endorsed" by WhatsApp and was developed by "Tiger Vikram Mysore INDIA", its system properties said. A member of the software support team at Business Sender, Rajesh K, declined to identify the developer by his real name, but said the tool was designed in Lebanon about four months ago and takes advantage of what he called a "loophole" in WhatsApp's system. "This is not rocket science or fabricated software," said Rajesh. "There are hundreds of such software available."

In April, when a Reuters reporter responded to a text message with an "Election Special" offer of sending 100,000 "bulk WhatsApp" messages for 7,999 rupees (\$115), he was invited to an office in a dusty industrial area of Noida in northern Uttar Pradesh state. "How many messages you want to send, tell us: 10,000, 1 million, 2 million," a representative asked, while showing a black-colored, password-protected website they use for sending bulk WhatsApp messages. — Reuters

## As risks rise, too little is spent to avert disasters

**GENEVA:** Governments and businesses are still investing far too little to protect poor communities at rising risk from wild weather and other threats, the heads of the UN disaster prevention agency and the Red Cross said Tuesday. Countries are having to dig deep to bail out crisis-hit communities - as happened after Cyclone Idai killed hundreds and razed central areas of Mozambique's coast in mid-March, leaving large swathes of land flooded and property destroyed.

But lives could be saved and aid bills slashed by spending more upfront to avert the worst damage, as happened when India faced Cyclone Fani this month, the senior officials said ahead of an international conference on tackling disasters in Geneva this week. "Cyclone Idai was a reminder that the way we respond to disasters is out of balance," said Elhadj As Sy, secretary general of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

"Lack of investment to reduce and prevent disaster impacts results in more and more money needed to save lives and repair damages after the fact," Sy added in a statement. Ahead of the Mozambique disaster, which left an estimated 1.85 million people in need of aid, the Red Cross released 340,000 Swiss francs (\$337,000) in international funding to help evacuate and prepare communities in harm's way.

But the cost of Red Cross and UN relief operations after the disaster added up to nearly 1,000 times more, or about 315 million Swiss francs, the humanitarian network said. "Such a model doesn't work for people who are at risk of storms and flooding. It's also a model that doesn't make financial sense, especially as we anticipate increased weather-related disasters as a result of climate change," said Sy.

Measures aid agencies use to safeguard people include putting in place systems to warn them of danger - whether via mobile phone messages or megaphones - as well as designating robust public buildings as shelters, and positioning key supplies beforehand. Mami Mizutori, special representative of the UN secretary-general for disaster risk reduction, said that despite a target in the Sendai Framework, a 2015 global pact, to "substantially enhance" international aid to prevent disasters, "this is not happening".

Unlike climate change funding for developing nations, there is no numerical target or agreed percentage of aid for governments to spend on reducing disaster risk, she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Setting such a target could prove "tricky", she noted, as it could spark contention in a policy area around which governments are currently "very united". — Reuters

## Mahjong, parking: Aussie politicians court Chinese vote

**MELBOURNE:** Politicians courting Australia's 1.2 million ethnic-Chinese citizens ahead of Saturday's election are struggling to navigate a strikingly diverse community and fraught geopolitics. The click-clack of mahjong tiles barely registers amid the din of chatter at the Box Hill senior citizens club in suburban Melbourne. This band of elderly Australians gathered around the game tables are prime targets for politicians, who need to win every vote they can at the nail-biter May 18 election.

Chinese-Australians now make up almost six percent of the population, almost as many as Italian- and Greek-Australians combined. In the tightly contested Melbourne electorate of Chisholm, one in five households speak either Mandarin or Cantonese. Responding to these changing demographics, the ruling Liberal party and their Labor challengers have run Chinese-Australian candidates. They have also turned to Chinese platforms like WeChat to get their message across.

At the next parliament, Chisholm is all but certain to be represented by either Hong Kong-born Liberal Gladys Liu or the Taiwan-born Labor candidate Jennifer Yang. "Their policies consider Chinese immigrants as one group and do not distinguish between those from Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, et cetera," 78-year-old William Lam told AFP. He approves of the equal treatment, but any sense of a single community can also mask vastly different life experiences and political preferences among the ethnic Chinese diaspora.

Some in the community arrived as students from China in the 1980s and feel an allegiance to the opposition Labor party, whose then prime minister promised they could remain in the country after the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Other ethnic Chinese arrived as refugees from the war in Vietnam, or from Cambodia's genocidal Khmer Rouge regime, and want fairer treatment of asylum-seekers languishing on Manus Island and Nauru.

Many more affluent migrants who came in the past decade fear opposition plans to curb tax cuts for property investors could hurt the inheritance they leave their children. Some of the younger "ABCs", or Australian-born Chinese, see no contradiction between progressive environmental politics and conservative economic management.

### 'Collateral damage'

"Chinese-Australian voters are like every other Australian voter - interested in politics, interested to have their say - but with a slight Chinese cultural lens on some of these matters," Chinese-Australian commentator Jieh-Yung Lo told AFP. But there is one common thread in the community: Foreign relations matter. Turbulence in the relationship between Beijing and Canberra can be felt in households across Australia.

A recent series of scandals over growing Chinese political interference has had a chilling effect in the Chinese-



**MELBOURNE:** A photograph taken on May 7, 2019 shows placards outside a polling station for Labor Party candidate Jennifer Yang and Liberal Party candidate Gladys Liu. — AFP

Australian community. The decision to limit telecoms giant Huawei's role in developing Australia's 5G network has brought furious condemnations and coincided with some Australian coal exports to China being blocked at ports of entry. Amid simmering tensions, a Chinese billionaire who showered millions to both major parties was banned from the country by Canberra on suspicions he was part of a Communist Party influence campaign.

Many Australian-Chinese feel like "collateral damage" amid the escalating rhetoric, Lo said. "They are concerned about how they are being portrayed, in terms of their reputation and their branding, but also the trust and confidence that their fellow Australians have in them," he added.

### Going negative

The first Chinese migrants arrived in Australia in the early 1800s amid a gold rush, and the community has since faced a long history of discrimination. The race-based "White Australia" policy, which favored European arrivals, was not fully dismantled until the 1970s. Many Chinese-Australians recall the 1996 maiden speech of right-wing firebrand Pauline Hanson, who said Australia was in trouble of being "swamped by Asians". Labor candidate for Chisholm Jennifer Yang told AFP elected leaders need to be "careful" with their language. "Once the community is divided it is very, very hard to heal," she said. "I don't want to see Australia going down that path again." Perhaps inevitably, both parties have found negative campaigning an easier way of connecting with Chinese-Australian voters. Mandarin-speaking former Labor prime minister Kevin Rudd has taken to WeChat to remind voters of the government's ties to Hanson's One Nation and her fellow populist Clive Palmer, who has railed against Chinese influence.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has fired back with WeChat posts recalling comments from a former state Labor leader who said "Asians with PhDs" were taking the jobs of young Australians. The battle has intensified online, with the opposition writing to WeChat owner Tencent after suggesting the government was linked to "fake news" spread on the Chinese social media site. But for the senior citizens in Box Hill, a visit by solicitous politicians is an opportunity to tackle the really pressing issues - like the price of parking. — AFP

## News in brief

### Teen kills self after Instagram poll

**KUALA LUMPUR:** A Malaysian teenager who posted an Instagram poll asking if she should live or die took her own life after a majority of respondents voted for the latter, sparking calls for an investigation. The unidentified 16-year-old from Kuching in eastern Sarawak state died after posting the poll Monday on the Facebook-owned picture-sharing platform. Police have classified the case as "sudden death". "Really Important, Help Me Choose D/L," she wrote, according to a report on the news portal Astro Awani, with the letters "D" and "L" apparently referring to "die" or "live" respectively. Sixty-nine percent of votes cast were in favor of her ending her life, with just 31 percent against, local media quoted police as saying. Ching Yee Wong, head of communications for Instagram APAC, said in a statement: "Our thoughts and prayers are with this young woman's family." — AFP

### Tehreek-e-Labbaik leaders get bail

**LAHORE:** A Pakistani court on Tuesday granted bail to the leader of an ultra-right Islamist group arrested last year after his supporters shut down cities and threatened judges following the acquittal of a Christian woman accused of blasphemy. The leader of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP) party, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, and his deputy, Pir Afzal Qadri, were arrested last year and charged with inciting terrorism and sedition after protesting against the acquittal of Asia Bibi who had spent eight years on death row on blasphemy charges. TLP leaders had threatened the Supreme Court judges who acquitted Bibi, urging their cooks and servants to kill them, and called for the overthrow of the army chief. — Reuters

### Alleged Rohingya traffickers shot

**COX'S BAZAR:** Bangladeshi police shot dead two suspected Rohingya human traffickers, officials said yesterday, after rescuing 103 refugees in two days about to make the perilous sea voyage to Malaysia. The two Rohingya men were killed outside a refugee camp in the southeast on Tuesday evening, said Prodig Kumar Das, police chief of Teknaf which borders Myanmar. "They opened fire at the police. We fired back in retaliation," he told AFP. This is the first time in four years suspected human traffickers were killed in a gunfight in Bangladesh's southeast. It follows a rise in attempted human smuggling of Rohingya in the last few months. — AFP

## Kolkata on edge ahead of India vote climax

**KOLKATA:** Clashes between followers of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and an opposition leader heightened tensions in the key Indian city of Kolkata yesterday ahead of the final round of the country's hard-fought national election. Fifty-nine people were arrested in street battles late Tuesday that forced Amit Shah, president of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to leave an election rally in the eastern metropolis under armed guard, police in West Bengal state said.

A statue of renowned Bengal reformer, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, was destroyed and a college named after him ransacked in the troubles, which the BJP and rival Trinamool Congress (TMC) angrily blamed on each other. The state has been hit by repeated violence between the two parties during the six-week-long election that ends Sunday. Results will be announced on May 23.

Modi's BJP hopes to capture many of the state's 42 parliament seats from the TMC to compensate for losses predicted in other regions. The BJP accused West Bengal's chief minister Mamata Banerjee of orchestrating attacks on Shah's roadshow. "Has Bengal acquired a government of gangsters? The attack on Amit Shah's peaceful rally by TMC is deplorable," Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said on Twitter.

Banerjee, who called a protest rally for yesterday, hit



**KOLKATA:** In this photo taken on Tuesday, Indian police stand next to burning debris on a street following clashes by rival groups during a campaign rally held by Amit Shah, president of the ruling BJP. — AFP

back by accusing Shah acting like a "god" who does not allow protests. Trouble erupted when Shah's convoy drove past the entrance to Calcutta University, where TMC student wing activists had gathered. "It became worse when TMC supporters started throwing stones at the tail-end of the rally. A group of people then set two motorbikes and a bicycle on fire," said witness Partha Sinha. The BJP held a silent protest in Delhi against the violence in West Bengal. The TMC and its allies held rival protests in Kolkata. Political observers say the aggressive campaign by Modi's party against the TMC in the eastern state has made it one of the most bitter contests in the election. — AFP

## Sri Lanka situation 'under control' after anti-Muslim riots

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lankan authorities said yesterday they had the situation "under control" after mosques and Muslim-owned shops and businesses were targeted in a violent backlash after the Easter Sunday terror attacks. A second overnight curfew imposed nationwide ensured there was no repeat of Monday's violence against Muslims, who make up some 10 percent of Sri Lanka's population of 21 million. Many Muslims have been bracing for revenge attacks since three churches and three luxury hotels were bombed by local Islamist extremists on April 21, killing 258 people.

"The situation is now totally under control," said military spokesman Sumith Atapattu. "There were no incidents of violence overnight and we are arresting groups of people responsible for taking part in mob attacks." Ruwan Gunasekera, a police spokesman, said that more than 80 people were in custody as of Tuesday evening. Official sources said police deployed special teams to review CCTV camera footage to identify the perpetrators of the riots and many arrests were being made on this basis. More police and army units were seen deployed in the troubled area as the authorities lifted the nationwide curfew on Wednesday morning.

But Muslims in North-West Province remained nervous



**MINUWANGODA, Sri Lanka:** Sri Lankan Catholic priests walk past a damaged shop after a mob attack yesterday. — AFP

and stayed indoors yesterday, after sword-wielding rioters killed one man late Monday while vandalizing scores of shops and mosques. In Bingiriya, where some 2,000 people went on the rampage, Muslim cleric M I M Siddeeqe said the community was worried. "Our people are still afraid to go out," he told AFP by telephone.

Military spokesman Atapattu said security forces were arresting small groups of suspected trouble-makers and handing them over to police. They were being held under emergency laws under which convicts can be jailed up to 10 years, police spokesman Gunasekera said. — AFP