What's Up and What's Down

with WhatsApp?

By

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Police swooped upon a man who allegedly had X-Rated porn on his phone in London, but the man was completely unaware that such a video even existed on his phone! Videos and pictures downloaded automatically on his mobile device, so he was unaware what people were sending him. What if his wife or father happened to also stumbled on this video? In Zimbabwe, statistics reveal that 14 prisoners escaped last year whilst the guards were engrossed in WhatsApp, and many examiners in South Africa were fired because scores of learners managed to copy under their vigil as they were too busy WhatsApping to care about their surroundings. Then we have the story of the stupid thief who stole a BlackBerry and uploaded a selfie of himself on it via WhatsApp and the person's wife seen it, and the husband who took his wife to court because she never cooked for him anymore due to her WhatsApp addiction.

A few months ago, we had Xenophobic attacks against our foreigners in SA. Pictures of burning and lynching of people which took place many months ago in the Central African Republic were circulated, and this increased the tension between countries to a dangerous level. People die before their time on WhatsApp, have wives they are unaware of, and conduct full court cases via this medium. Backbiting, lying and slandering others is not a sin on WhatsApp because it's not physical, but digital – or so they think. However, WhatsApp is not all that bad after all. If

used correctly, it's actually an excellent medium to communicate, network and share information. We can keep up family and friendship ties very easily through it, and many a lost friend and relative has been found on the "Funeral Notification" group on WhatsApp.

However, due to the fact that the people are not physically present in digital communication, we tend to forget some basics rules. These are as follows:

1.Privacy: The first basic rule is that of privacy. Many think that whatever is discussed privately or in a group on WhatsApp, is public property. With a mere screenshot or by pushing the "forward" button, they can share these conversations across different media platforms with everyone in the world. It must be known that a private or group discussion is a trust (
amaanat
), and cannot be shared with all and sundry, especially when a portion of the discussion can be misconstrued in its true context. This is nothing but creating mischief (
fitnah
). Nobody feels comfortable around a two-face, and on WhatsApp, the two-faced have many layers of cover. Remember that the rules of electronic communication are the same as face-to-face communication in Islam. Trust built up over a period of many years can be broken in an instance with one motion of the thumb!

A few years ago, our privacy was our most valuable treasure, but nowadays, there is no such a thing as privacy anymore. On WhatsApp, we now have some members whose purpose is only to read the conversations of others and either comment on them in their personal capacity and create behind-the-scene mischief; or worst still, to track what people are saying in order to report to others, otherwise known as spying. If a person differs with another, he will forward his conversation to an enemy of his to inflame further enmity. He then sits back and has a good laugh when the two start grabbing each other's throat. Both actions are not allowed in Islam.

2.Age Differences: When having a one-on-one conversation with someone, we are very conscious of the age of the person, or his relationship with you. He could be your younger brother, or an elderly teacher. He could be your fishing-buddy, or a distant cousin. You could be 20, and he could be 60, or you can be a Maulana and he may be a fashion designer. Some people are reserved, and some are more outspoken, some are sensitive to certain issues and some love certain topics. All these nuances are taken into consideration when we are having a physical conversation, but it all seems to get lost on WhatsApp.

We cannot use informal language or crack jokes in front of our elders, and the level of respect we employ in how we answer our elders is very different to how we respond to our buddies. On an electronic platform, we tend to forget all of this and often create unnecessary and very uncomfortable situations for ourselves. Long-standing relationships are put under strain and our happiness is affected. We tend to write and then think what we wrote, as nowadays our thumbs seem to work faster than our brains! A wise man once said: "I sometimes regretted my speech, but never my silence."

3.Dispute Resolution: This is the most dangerous habit many of us have – we use WhatsApp to ascertain facts, argue, debate, clear misunderstandings and problem solve. If dispute resolution and clearing misunderstandings cannot be done over the telephone without almost always aggravating the situation even further, how can it be ever resolved over WhatsApp? Doing this is nothing but a cowardly cheapskate mentality and a quick way to give vent to our anger and frustration. Many instantly regret what they write on WhatsApp, but a word is like an arrow. Once it is shot, it cannot be returned to the bow.

To gather disputing parties around a table is time-consuming and difficult, but it's well worth the effort. In fact, it's the only way to do it. In a physical situation, you can read body language, clear ambiguities, ask questions with the decorum it deserves and even shake hands before and after the fight. All this cannot be done over WhatsApp.

The above three aspects are the most important to consider when using this excellent application, but there are a few more to consider too:

1) Check and rectify your niyyah (intention) for your using of WhatsApp;

2) Ensure your post does not include backbiting, tale-bearing, or unfounded allegations. Rather use this medium to spread positivity and goodness;

3) Ensure you do not neglect the rights of others, or performing Salaat and reciting Quran, by excessive use;

4) Verify the authenticity of everything, especially religious postings, news of someone's death etc, before sending on. Always quote the source of Islamic traditions;

5) It is OK to disagree, but do it respectfully;

6) If discussing, hear out what the other person is saying before interrupting;

7) Refrain from conducting mixed-gender discussion groups. "Notification Only" groups are OK;

8) Kill falsehood by combating it if you can, or by just ignoring it;

9) Never send on pictures or videos showing nude people, or links thereto;

10) Choose the appropriate time to post. For example, don't send a joke immediately after a post on the death of a scholar;

11) Be aware that anything you post can reach many in a short space of time;

12) When writing the name of any Prophet, the Companions (Sahabah) or any pious person, remember to also accord them their due respect and prefix it with the appropriate salutation;

13) Thank and encourage people for beneficial posts;

14) Don't forward links before opening and checking their contents;

15) Ask yourself: Is the post you are sending a cause of reward or punishment for you multiplied in the Hereafter?

Lastly, use WhatsApp wisely. Don't say anything that will come back and haunt you ten years later. Even after deletion of your posts, it can be retrieved years thereafter by means of sophisticated software, which nowadays, is available to anyone. Currently, there is a web-based application called "WhatsSpy Public" which can be downloaded by anyone. It allows an attacker to track every move of any WhatsApp user, even if the user has locked down their WhatsApp privacy settings. It was created by Maikel Zweerink, and it allows an attacker to access and edit a WhatsApp user's messages, profile picture, privacy settings, status messages and online or offline status - even if the user has his privacy options to " nobody ," which in theory is supposed to mean "your last seen, profile photo and/or status will not be available to anyone."

Happy careful WhatsApping, everyone!