

Facebook's Apps Went Down. The World Saw How Much It Runs on Them.

The outage disrupted the digital lives of small-business owners, politicians, aid workers and others. But for some, it was a welcome reprieve.

By [Raymond Zhong](#)

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For more than five hours on Monday, the world got a taste of life without Facebook and its apps.

People in many places discovered that Facebook and its apps had burrowed their way into nearly every facet of existence.

In Mexico, politicians were cut off from their constituents. In Turkey, shopkeepers couldn't sell their wares. And in Colombia, a nonprofit organization that uses WhatsApp to connect victims of gender-based violence to lifesaving services found its work impaired.

"Because we have a field team, we were able to mitigate some of the more serious risks today's outage presented," said Alex Berryhill, the director of digital operations for the group, Cosas de Mujeres. "But that might not have been the case for hundreds of other hotlines around the world. Today was a big reminder: Technologies are tools, not solutions."

[The Facebook outage](#) on Monday was a planetary-scale demonstration of how essential the company's services have become to daily life. Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger have long been more than handy tools for chatting and sharing photos. They are critical platforms for doing business, arranging medical care, conducting virtual classes, carrying out political campaigns, responding to emergencies and much, much more.

The unease about a single corporation mediating so much human activity motivates much of the scrutiny surrounding Facebook.

In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission has filed an [antitrust lawsuit](#) against the company, accusing it of being a monopolist that acquired Instagram and WhatsApp to secure its dominance. Facebook has been under fire for weeks after a whistle-blower, Frances Haugen, shared internal documents indicating, among other things, that the company [knew Instagram was worsening teenagers' body-image issues](#) and that it had a two-tier justice system.

The revelations have spurred criticism from regulators and the public. On Tuesday, Congress is scheduled to hear testimony from Ms. Haugen about Facebook's impact on young users.

Much of the recent criticism of Facebook has focused on the decisions the company's leaders make — or fail to make — about governing, running and making money from its platforms. But another consequence of Facebook's size is that many more people are affected when there are [technical lapses](#) like the ones the company says were responsible for Monday's disruption.

In Brussels, the hub of the European Union — where many government workers have turned to the rival messaging service Signal to communicate amid concerns about Facebook's reach — the outage led to a fresh round of calls for more oversight of the biggest tech platforms.

"In the global digital space, everyone could experience a shutdown," Thierry Breton, the European commissioner drafting new tech regulations, [said on Twitter](#). "Europeans deserve a better digital resilience via regulation, fair competition, stronger connectivity and cybersecurity."

In India, Brazil and other countries, WhatsApp has become so important to the functioning of society that regulators should treat it as a "utility," said Parminder Jeet Singh, executive director at IT for Change, a technology-focused nonprofit in Bengaluru, India.

People in India and other Asian countries where Facebook's apps are popular largely slept through the outage, which occurred overnight for them. But Mr. Singh said the disruption still showed why regulators needed to act to reduce overreliance on the internet giants.

Worldwide, 2.76 billion people on average used at least one Facebook product each day this June, according to the company's statistics. WhatsApp, which Facebook bought in 2014, has been downloaded nearly six billion times since the beginning of that year, according to estimates from the data firm Sensor Tower.

India accounted for about a quarter of those installations, while another quarter were in Latin America, according to Sensor Tower. Just 4 percent, or 238 million downloads, were in the United States.

In Latin America, Facebook's apps can be literal lifelines in rural places where cellphone service has yet to arrive but the internet is available, and in poor communities where people cannot afford mobile data but can find a free internet connection.

Cosas de Mujeres, the nonprofit in Colombia, has hundreds of interactions every month with Colombian women and Venezuelan migrant women who face domestic and emotional violence or are at risk of trafficking or sexual exploitation, said Ms. Berryhill, the organization's director of digital operations.

"WhatsApp is a very important tool for our service," she said. "Usually we have phone operators receiving messages from women all day via WhatsApp, but that was not possible, and women could not contact us."

María Elena Divas, a 51-year-old Venezuelan migrant in Bogotá, Colombia, uses WhatsApp to take orders for snacks like empanadas.

"I didn't sell anything today," Ms. Divas said. "It was a hard day for everyone like me."

Elsewhere, people said that the disappearance of Facebook's apps hindered their work in some ways, but that it also removed a source of distraction and noise, making them feel better and more productive.

James Chambers was panicked at first for Chez Angela, the Canadian bakery he and his wife own in Brandon, Manitoba. They usually post four to five times daily on Facebook and Instagram to draw customers into the shop. In a community of 45,000 people, the bakery boasts about 14,000 followers total on the two platforms.

"Facebook is down, but our ovens are hot," they wrote on [the bakery's Twitter account](#), with a 12-second video that showed golden-brown pastries as Foreigner's slow-dance hit "I Want to Know What Love Is" played in the background.

But Monday suggested to Mr. Chambers that Facebook promotion may not be all that important.

"As the day went on, we actually found more people coming in and saying that it was good to be disconnected," he said. "It was their most productive day in a long time, and we closed the day 30 percent above our normal Monday sale."

Jan Böhmermann, a German comedian, [tweeted](#) that he wished Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp would remain offline forever. His post received nearly 30,000 likes.

Drogasmil, a pharmacy chain in Brazil, now takes many of its prescription orders via WhatsApp, said Rafael Silva, a Drogasmil pharmacist in Rio de Janeiro.

On Monday, there were none, Mr. Silva said from behind the counter that night. But because he and his colleagues also couldn't chat on WhatsApp, the day felt "more serene," he said.

Out of habit, Lorrán Barbosa, 25, a cashier in the pharmacy, found himself repeatedly refreshing WhatsApp on Monday. Even so, he said, he, too, found the day more peaceful and productive.

"I think it shows we can live without technology," he said.

In Brazil, surveys show that WhatsApp is installed on [nearly every smartphone](#) in the country and that [most Brazilians with a phone](#) check the app at least once an hour.

On “zap,” as WhatsApp is known in Brazil, restaurants take orders, supermarkets coordinate deliveries, and doctors, hairdressers and cleaners book appointments. During the pandemic, the app became [a crucial tool](#) for teachers to tutor students in remote areas of the country. It also has been central to the [spread of disinformation](#).

In Russia, the authorities took the outage as further evidence that they needed to further regulate social media and develop homegrown alternatives.

The disruptions “answer the question about whether we need our own social media and internet platforms,” said Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman for the Foreign Ministry.

Moscow has sought to increase control over foreign social media as it cracks down on dissent, particularly after antigovernment activists used Twitter and Facebook to organize protests in January.

But elsewhere, people were focused on their inability to use tools that had become crucial for mass communication and retail.

Selen Bayrak, the owner of a small shop in Istanbul that sells spicy marmalades and sauces, said that 80 percent of her sales were normally made through Instagram. She estimated that she managed to sell only a quarter of what she could have sold yesterday had Instagram not been down.

In Mexico, many small-town newspapers cannot afford print editions, so they publish on Facebook instead. That has left local governments without a physical outlet to issue important announcements, so they, too, have taken to Facebook, said Adrián Pascoe, a political consultant.

A municipality Mr. Pascoe is consulting for was unable to launch its new services on Monday because the site was down. The announcement will take place on Wednesday instead, he said, even though Monday is optimal for Facebook traffic.

“Facebook has become the most powerful way to communicate,” Mr. Pascoe said. “It is where you go when you want the masses.”

León David Pérez’s two companies, including Polimatía, which provides e-learning courses, rely on Facebook and Instagram to market their products. The customer service department is run on WhatsApp.

“The way businesses work, it’s been a crazy change in the last 20 years,” Mr. David said. “Then, we had no community online. Now we are hyper-connected, but we rely on a few tech companies for everything. When WhatsApp or Facebook are down, we all go down.”

Reporting was contributed by Julie Turkewitz, Steven Grattan, Ian Austen, Jack Nicas, Maria Abi-Habib, Adam Satariano, Valerie Hopkins and Christopher F. Schuetze.