

UK accuses Meta of empowering child sexual abusers with encryption rollout

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Mark Zuckerberg's Meta has been accused by the UK government of empowering child sexual abusers after the tech firm began rolling out the automatic encryption of all messages on its Facebook and Messenger platforms. The home secretary, James Cleverly, described the move as a "significant step back" for child safety after Meta said it would introduce end-to-end encryption on the apps. The move means that only the sender and receiver of messages on the platforms will be able to access their content. Cleverly said: "Law enforcement, charities and our close international partners all agree: these plans to roll out end-to-end encryption without appropriate safety measures will empower child sex abusers and hamper the ability of the police and NCA [National Crime Agency] to bring offenders to justice." The new features will be available immediately, but Meta said it would take some time for end-to-end encryption to be rolled out to more than 1bn users as a default option. Users will receive a prompt to set up a recovery method to restore their messages once the transition is completed. Calls will also be encrypted. The government and child safety campaigners are concerned that end-to-end encryption will enable abusers to evade detection when grooming children and receiving and sending images of sexual abuse. Sir Peter Wanless, chief executive of the NSPCC, said: "By starting to roll out end-to-end encryption on their services, Meta are choosing to turn a blind eye to crimes against children we know to be proliferating on their platforms." Susie Hargreaves, the chief executive of the Internet Watch Foundation, which operates an online child abuse hotline, said: "We are outraged Meta has chosen to prioritise the privacy of paedophiles over the safety of our children. We strongly urge other platforms not to follow this dreadful example." Loredana Crisan, the head of Messenger, wrote in a post announcing the change: "The extra layer of security provided by end-to-end encryption means that the content of your messages and calls with friends and family are protected from the moment they leave your device to the moment they reach the receiver's device." End-to-end encryption will not apply to Instagram for now. Meta said in August that the change would apply to Instagram shortly after the Messenger upgrade was completed. Conversations on WhatsApp, also owned by Meta, are already encrypted. Encryption has also become one of the main points of contention in the UK's Online Safety Act, which contains a provision allowing Ofcom, the communications watchdog charged with policing the legislation, to order a messaging service to use "accredited technology" to look for and take down child sexual abuse material. Privacy campaigners have said the clause could threaten end-to-end encryption and messaging apps have threatened to quit the UK market over the row. However, the government has said the regulator would intervene only if scanning content was "technically feasible" and if the process met minimum standards of privacy and accuracy. A Meta spokesperson said the company had developed "robust" safety measures

for its products, such as restricting over-19-year-olds from messaging teenagers who do not follow them.