Concerns with WhatsApp Fake News

What is the issue?

During fragile situations in India WhatsApp is being used as a tool to spread fake news.

What are the reliable features of WhatsApp?

- WhatsApp messages are encrypted end-to-end, a feature that is great from the perspective of privacy of users.
- It ensures only sender and receiver can read and see what is sent, and nobody in between.
- This feature helps messages, photos, videos, voice messages, documents, status updates etc. from falling into the wrong hands.
- In India number of monthly active WhatsApp users in February 2017 was 200 million which was exponentially greater from August 2013, when it was just 20 million.
- The messaging application is being used more and more by rural and older populations, who are often new to the internet and less tech-savvy.

How WhatsApp is being misused in India?

- The problem of fake news and misinformation being spread via WhatsApp is not exclusive to India, It has become a trend across the globe.
- During emergency situations like protests, communal violence, disasters
WhatsApp is most widely used as a medium to spread rumours about the incident.

- It is also being used by political parties in favour of them and for spreading anti-religious sentiments.

**What are the challenges in containing WhatsApp fake news?**

- WhatsApp works in a way that is fundamentally different from Facebook and Twitter.
- In the latter, it is comparatively easier to check fake news and prevent the spread of misinformation.
- Posts on Facebook can be viewed by the friends of a user, since WhatsApp messages are encrypted end-to-end it is impossible locate the origin of the message source.
- Fake news messages are mostly shared on groups, where one might not have the contact of the person who has shared the message saved on phone.

**What measures can be taken?**

- As of now there is no apparent solution or even a proper diagnosis of the problem which WhatsApp poses for law enforcement agencies, and society at large.
- The spread of fake news through WhatsApp is something cannot be controlled directly, this puts the responsibility of stopping spread of misinformation on citizens and the media.
- People need to be told that messages on WhatsApp can be dangerous and false information can be spread by people looking to create trouble.
Public figures and authorities need to stop sharing messages they receive on WhatsApp.

From its part the messaging app should also issue disclaimers stating that messages can be false.

Source: The Indian Express