General Studies – 3; Topic: Role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges, basics of cyber security;

Tackling Fake News on Social Media

1) **Introduction**
   - Fake news is a deliberate lie or a half-truth circulated with the intention to mislead or cause harm to a section of people.
   - In the wake of fake news spread over WhatsApp, government has been pushing WhatsApp to find a technology solution to trace the origin of messages that can help curb crimes like mob-lynching emanating from fake news.

GOVT'S WHATSAPP WISHLIST

▶ Appoint a **grievance officer** in India and find a tech solution to trace the origin of fake messages

▶ Establish a corporate **entity in India** and comply with Indian laws

▶ Start a **public awareness campaign** to prevent misuse of the app

2) **Spread of Fake News**
   - Fake news is 'news' that has been created knowing full well that it isn't true.
   - Often the fake news comes from sources and people we trust and believe implicitly.
   - Everyone with an Internet connection and a social media presence is now a content generator.
   - Free service has given access to everyone to post whatever they want and thus create a trend in fake news spreading like wildfire.
   - Everyone is in hurry to LIKE/SHARE/COMMENT rather than checking the authenticity of the news.
   - Competition among websites and social media platforms has sometimes resulted in the generation of fake news.
   - The most common fake stories revolve around politics and the attempt is to polarise society, particularly during political events.
   - Experts have warned that the Indian elections are at risk too with fake news.
   - No regulator in social media platform as we have in Print or Television media.

3) **Criticism**
   - The Centre has adopted a flawed approach in resolving the ongoing security crisis due to fake news being circulated on WhatsApp.
   - It is unfair to put the onus on the social media platforms alone for providing a solution to the menace of fake news.
   - Security requirements must also take into account the privacy rights of millions of genuine users.
   - Data leaks at Facebook and Uber in the recent past have proven that the encryption has to be so high.
   - Blocking mobile applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram on security grounds would be even more dangerous.
   - It could reduce Indian digital user welfare.
   - WhatsApp is important for rural users, as it helps them cheaply connect to family members far away and send pictures of their products to clients across India.

- Rather than to force a solution on technology providers alone, the Centre needs to address the consumer end as well and adopt a collaborative way to tackle the menace of fake news.

4) Consequences

- Even small everyday half-truths have their side effects.
- They can gradually brainwash into believing lies, or unfairly skew fair debate on crucial issues.
- Fake news leads to harassment and intimidation of innocent people and damages reputations.
- There is also a form of fake news that can take lives — like it has been doing in India over rumours about child-lifters and cattle thieves.
- The abundance of fake stories during the U.S. presidential elections has raised concerns about their impact on election results.

5) Concerns / Challenges

- Messaging platforms act as mere conduits for encrypted information.
- They deny decrypting or intercepting messages sent through their platforms.
- Traceability would undermine end-to-end encryption, weaken consumer privacy and cybersecurity.
- Since WhatsApp users converse outside Indian boundaries, the storage of a foreign user's data could come with its own jurisdiction issues.
- Asking a foreign company to establish an entity in India is only asking for greater control without clearly identifying the potential harm.
- WhatsApp's recent decision to restrict forwarding of messages to five users may only have limited impact in curtailing rumours.

6) Way Forward

- A better and more effective approach to limit the influence of hoaxes on WhatsApp and other platforms is to increase media literacy.
- The government should bring out a policy framework on the possible harm due to the internet messaging platforms to engage at a deeper level.
- Government of India could partner with local news groups to further educate citizens on how to identify real news from fake news.
- Technology companies should do more in creating awareness and educating users about fake messages.
- Facebook spent $14 million in 2017 on such a project in the US.
- If accomplished, such progress would not only help users become safer, more responsible citizens, but it would also increase the overall digital literacy in India.
- By using metadata and deploying human content moderation, WhatsApp could stop fake news, remove misinformation and even punish bad actors – without breaking end-to-end encryption.
- The State policing machinery has to be empowered to catch anyone responsible for circulating fake messages.
- Once a message has been reported and identified as fake, it should be permanently tagged so that if someone tries to circulate it months later, it should only be transmitted with a statutory warning.
- Imposing hefty fines, like in Germany the Social media companies face fines of up to €50m if they persistently fail to remove illegal content from their sites.