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.

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.