

What's wrong with WhatsApp | The Guardian

By William Davies

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In the spring, as the virus swept across the world and billions of people were compelled to stay at home, the popularity of one social media app rose more sharply than any other. By late March, usage of WhatsApp around the world had grown by 40%. In Spain, where the lockdown was particularly strict, it rose by 76%. In those early months, WhatsApp – which hovers neatly between the space of email, Facebook and SMS, allowing text messages, links and photos to be shared between groups – was a prime conduit through which waves of news, memes and mass anxiety travelled.

At first, many of the new uses were heartening. Mutual aid groups sprung up to help the vulnerable. Families and friends used the app to stay close, sharing their fears and concerns in real time. Yet by mid-April, the role that WhatsApp was playing in the pandemic looked somewhat darker. A conspiracy theory about the rollout of 5G, which originated long before Covid-19 had appeared, now claimed that mobile phone masts were responsible for the disease. Across the UK, people began setting fire to 5G masts, with 20 arson attacks over the Easter weekend alone.

WhatsApp, along with Facebook and YouTube, was a key channel through which the conspiracy theory proliferated.

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