

WhatsApp seems ready to restrict how easily messages spread in a bid to reduce misinformation | Nieman Journalism Lab

By Joshua Benton

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It would be difficult to design a social platform more optimized for disinformation than WhatsApp. Each of its best features — private! huge scale! 1-to-1 and 1-to-many! free! — comes with a corresponding downside. Being end-to-end encrypted is a win for security but makes it impossible to see how misinfo is spreading through the system — either for outside observers or for Facebook-owned WhatsApp itself. For fake-news peddlers, WhatsApp’s huge scale makes it appealing, being free makes it accessible, and being both 1-to-1 (chats) and 1-to-many (groups) makes it potent. WhatsApp was very good at removing friction in messaging — but so good that it removed friction for bad actors, too.

That combination of features has led it to be blamed, at least in part, for a variety of incitement-related sins: lynch mobs in India, lockdown panics in Australia, and people burned alive in Mexico.

[...]

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