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[HOST: CELESTE HEADLEE]

[STORY: EXTREMELY ONLINE:  
WHAT'S UP WITH WHATSAPP?]

[CONTENT: AYMAN EL TARABISHY,  
STEPHANIE HANKEY, RUSSELL  
BRANDOM]

11:00:00

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11:00:08

### CELESTE HEADLEE

This is 1A. I'm Celeste Headlee in Washington filling in for Jenn White. Facebook has dominated recent headlines. Revelations from whistleblower Frances Haugen and Congressional subpoenas have revealed some of the company's shady strategies. What has gotten less buzz and may impact people, just as many people is the role that WhatsApp plays in the spread of misinformation and the privacy concerns it poses for billions of users around the globe.

11:00:36

### CELESTE HEADLEE

Facebook owns WhatsApp. The communications platform allows users to message hundreds of people at a time for free across country lines. Many Americans were unaware of just how widely used WhatsApp is across the globe until the outage of Facebook and WhatsApp earlier this month.

**11:00:55**

**JAIME DEMICK (CALLER)**

Hello, I'm Jaime Demick, the COO of the Latin Podcast Awards. We use WhatsApp as our primary means of communication with our international podcasters and their audiences. We were gearing up for our live red carpet event which precedes the Latin Podcast Awards ceremony when Facebook and WhatsApp went down. This caused a lot of confusion for all of our clients.

**11:01:23**

**JAIME DEMICK (CALLER)**

When Facebook and WhatsApp came back up, we were inundated with spammers who would enter our group, leave spam and exit. And we actually had to close the group down right before our big ceremony and rely on Twitter and Telegram.

**11:01:39**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

For this month's edition of Extremely Online, our series taking a deep dive on the internet, we're talking about WhatsApp. Joining us in studio is professor Ayman El Tarabishy, deputy chair of the Department of Management at the George Washington School of Business. Thanks for being with us.

**11:01:53**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

Thank you.

**11:01:54**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

Joining us from Cambridge, Massachusetts is Stephanie Hankey, executive director of Tactical Tech. That's a nonprofit organization focused on the impact of technology on society. Hi, Stephanie.

**11:02:06**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

Hi [unintelligible] thanks.

**11:02:08**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

And on with us from Brooklyn, New York is Russell Brandom, policy editor at The Verge. Thanks for joining us, Russell.

**11:02:14**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

Thanks for having me.

**11:02:15**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

Our producers spoke with a representative from WhatsApp yesterday and invited them to join today's program. They declined but provided some written information pertaining to the topics that we will discuss. So, okay, Russell, let's go back to the global -- the outage a few weeks ago. What did we learn about WhatsApp during that outage?

**11:02:39**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

Well, I think the main thing we learned is just how fragile the system really is. I mean, for six hours it was just wiped off the internet along with, you know, the rest of Facebook and its properties, so Instagram and Facebook. But, you know, I think for folks in the US where WhatsApp is sort of less endemic, it's easy to forget the impact that an outage like that can have.

**11:03:02**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

So, you know, since then we've had anecdotes coming in of, you know, cleaners in Brazil was one piece we wrote that, you know, they use WhatsApp to communicate with clients, sales people who were sort of using it to arrange sales. And they basically lost a day of work. I mean, that's money that they can't get back. And so it was immensely disruptive in enormous parts of the world.

**11:03:26**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

And certainly, many people lost touch with family members. Rama Roud [ph] tweets, my family greatly enjoys our WhatsApp experience. Thirty-two years ago when I came to the US I was paying over \$3 per minute to call India with spotty connection. Now, we're in constant touch with our family back home.

**11:03:43**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

But, Ayman, you have monitored the activity of small businesses, like Russell mentioned, across the global south for years. At what point did WhatsApp start to emerge as sort of a crucial tool for many of these small businesses?

**11:03:58**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

Well, it started slow before the pandemic. Then it was kind of people were exploring it and how to use it. But once the pandemic hit and once people realized that they have to switch their business operations and how things work, WhatsApp became the go-to app in terms of coordinating many of their activities. In communication and operations and messaging key important aspects between the companies and the people inside the company and their clients, right. And you can see that increase more and more.

**11:04:28**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

What'sApp is important because it keeps business operations flowing. And small businesses use it critically at all times of the day because that keeps them moving fast and nimble.

**11:04:41**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

And not just commercial entities either in things like doctors, healthcare providers. Some of the essential services have also started using WhatsApp, correct?

**11:04:53**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

Absolutely. It has changed, morphed into different aspect of the society. It's being used as kind of connecting everything and moving things in a very easy, manageable, intuitive manner. Doctors, patients, clients, even delivery who are all using it because it's intuitive.

**11:05:14**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

So, Stephanie, at what point -- we're talking about at what point WhatsApp became sort of ubiquitous, but at what point did your team at Tactical Tech start to have concerns about how WhatsApp was being used and its widespread nature?

**11:05:30**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

Yeah, I mean, we were starting to look into the use of different technologies and platforms and social media platforms, for example, around the time of the 2016 elections in the US, the Trump elections, but also the [word?] referendum in the UK. And just after that we knew there were large-scale elections coming up in a number of global [word?] countries.

**11:05:49**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And so we started research around that time, so 2017 and 2018, looking at the use of WhatsApp in different countries around the world. And specifically in places like Brazil, Malaysia, Kenya, where there were big elections happening. And shortly afterwards (inaudible) in 2018. And we found through that research that WhatsApp was being heavily used for political campaigning during that time. In fact, that's how it kind of came to our attention that it's so broadly used.

**11:06:15**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

And I assume that the reason you became concerned is because some of the political campaigning was actually spread misinformation. Is that accurate?

**11:06:25**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

Yes, that's the case. And also, I think this, you know, [unintelligible] sort of examined area in which information was being spread. And I think we were interested in -- you know, I think we had become used to WhatsApp as something where you message individuals or, I think, in European context where I was at the time, you know, it was something that was quite personal even, messaging app. And I think we were quite surprised to find then that the WhatsApp was being used in these large group ways, you know, really at significant scale.

**11:06:55**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

I mean, the context of the Indian elections, reportedly two parties between them had 20,000 WhatsApp groups. So even though each WhatsApp group is relatively small, you know, just over 250 people can take part in a group, so it's limited, political parties and groups would have lots and lots of those. And then we'd also be monitoring not only at, for example, the national level but they might have district representatives who would be working with those too. And we were really interested in not only how it's being used but how is it being done? How are they getting all these phone numbers, you know, and what kind of organizing is happening here?

**11:07:28**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We're talking about WhatsApp, the messaging app that's changing commerce conversation and civic engagement around the globe. You can reach us with your questions or your comments about WhatsApp. You can tweet us @1a or find us on Facebook. Tim tweets, I used WhatsApp for group conversations, especially living in a rural area where not everyone gets good reception. I also use the voice function a lot because it can be a good substitute for talking when you're busy but you need to touch base or plan things. Russell, why has WhatsApp's growth been so incredibly rapid?

**11:08:02**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

Yeah, I mean, I think the basic answer is that for most of the people we're talking about, it is the cheapest and easiest way to communicate, right. So, you know, text -- we were hearing earlier about long distance phone charges, which obviously can get quite significant. Texting charges, you know, really add up, even though the amount of information that's being sent is not that big.

**11:08:26**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

So, you know, you can get a WhatsApp account. Basically anyone from any socioeconomic, you know, class. If you can have a phone you can have a WhatsApp account. You can -- it's not going to charge you for data so it's often the cheapest option. Everyone's on it, you know, in these areas.

**11:08:45**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

And also, I mean, one interesting thing we've learned in our reporting is the voice memo function, which you've maybe seen in texting apps where you can just record your voice rather than writing it out, has helped a ton in areas where literacy is much lower. So a lot of these sort of informal workers in Brazil, they'll say, okay, I'll leave a voice memo for the boss, you know, because they don't have the education to write it out.

**11:09:12**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We have about a minute-and-a-half here before we take a break, Ayman, but is there anything else you can think of that might explain why WhatsApp has become so ubiquitous so quickly?

**11:09:22**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

The phone, the cell phone is the most personal and private produce that any consumer has. If you have a cell phone, it's very private to you. WhatsApp has beaten the odds and got to your cell phone. And now it's between you and the person communicating. That's a private messaging that is so powerful that when you see a phone and see a message coming in, you pay attention.

**11:09:46**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

And that's what creates WhatsApp, the impact it is. It's a direct redline to the person that you're speaking to other than other messaging tools, which is emails and so on. So it has a powerful impact when you receive a What'sApp message, regardless if it's from your ma or it's from your ten-year-old boy or girl, right. When you get it, you pay attention and you get a little happy when you get a message like this because it's personal.

**11:10:10**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

You use WhatsApp?

**11:10:11**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

All the time.

**11:10:13**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

Do you have any idea how many groups you belong to?

**11:10:15**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

So many that I lose count and sometimes I realize I'm like, what is this group about? And then the images on each group also has some art to it. You know, you have a picture of your favorite cat or dog or cake or location, right. It's personal. WhatsApp is personal but it's business. And sometimes it has a dark side, as well, what we saw with the politics involved.

**11:10:37**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We're going to talk -- definitely going to talk more about that. We are talking to Stephanie Hankey, a technologist with the nonprofit Tactical Tech. Also Russell Brandom, policy editor in The Verge. And the voice you just heard is Ayman El Tarabishy, business professor at George Washington University. And we've been hearing from you about the role that WhatsApp plays in your life.

**11:10:55**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

A member of the 1A Text Club wrote, I use it to communicate with my family in different countries. I enjoy the platform because it's free and easily accessible for family in poor countries. I find myself engaging in WhatsApp chats less because of the high volume of conspiracy theories and vaccine misinformation sent by my older family members. I turned off notifications from the app because of this issue. We'll get back to our conversation about What's up with WhatsApp in just a moment. I'm Celeste Headlee. This is 1A from WAMU and NPR.

**[ INTERMISSION ]**

**11:12:00**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

I'm Celeste Headlee. This is 1A. We're discussing WhatsApp for this month's edition of Extremely Online. And we're speaking with Stephanie Hankey, a technologist with the nonprofit Tactical Tech. Also with us is Russell Brandom, policy editor at The Verge and Ayman El Tarabishy, business professor at George Washington University. Again, we spoke with a representative from WhatsApp yesterday, invited them to join today's program. They declined but did provide some written information that pertains to the topics we're discussing.

**11:12:32**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

So, with WhatsApp, for those who do use it in the US, it does tend to be isolated to communication with friends and family abroad.

**11:12:41**

**GREG (CALLER)**

This is Greg, Charlottesville, Virginia. I communicate through WhatsApp to people I met in Tijuana after I volunteered there two years ago as a physician treating the caravan people. I trust their texts and there's often long threads.

**11:12:59**

**CALLER (MALE)**

I used WhatsApp a lot because of having family all over the world. And it's been a great tool for communication amongst [word?] family members. So, yep, WhatsApp has been awesome in calls, video calls and texting, so thankful for WhatsApp.

**11:13:17**

**CHRISTINE (CALLER)**

Hi. This is Christine and I'm calling from Doylestown, Pennsylvania. I was never much of a WhatsApp user, however my son was deployed to Kosovo. And I can almost not say, without getting teary-eyed, it's wonderful to be able to connect with him while he's so far away and see his face and know that he's healthy.



**11:13:42**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

Russell, why has the popularity of WhatsApp been slow, at least slower, to grow in the US than it has in other areas?

**11:13:53**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

Yeah, well, I think, you know, we were hearing before the sort of WhatsApp conquered the direct messaging on the phone for the international world. And I think in the US there were -- once WhatsApp became prominent, most people already had some mode that they preferred, right. And, I think, in particular the iPhone, right. Like, the iPhone comes with iMessage. It's a baked in sort of direct messaging service. It has many of the same features that WhatsApp has, including the fact that, you know, you're not paying texting charges if you're just communicating between iPhones.

**11:14:31**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

And I also think, I mean, you know, we're talking about other parts of the world where WhatsApp is much more prominent. Those are parts of the world where fewer people are buying and using iPhones. And so, the idea of an iPhone to iPhone communication method just isn't that appealing or relevant.

**11:14:49**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We got this message from Diarra.

**11:14:51**

**DIARRA (CALLER)**

I do use WhatsApp and I use it for -- to be able to camera call. And most phones -- if you have an iPhone and if someone has an Android, they can't call each other unless they have WhatsApp. And I actually like WhatsApp. I've had it for a couple years now so, and I use WhatsApp to be able to camera call my family and friends.

**11:15:15**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

Stephanie, as Russell was saying, many people in the US already had a texting service, but there is one thing that makes WhatsApp fundamentally different from Apple's iMessage or Samsung's messaging platform. The company uses end to end encryption technology. And that prevents anybody who's not actually included in that message chain from reading the message itself. Can you explain what difference this encryption makes?

**11:15:43**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

Yeah, it means that the content that you're exchanging with either one person or with a group isn't readable to others outside. And that includes the company itself, so WhatsApp and Facebook themselves. But what they can see about that message is, you know, who's sending it, who you're sending it to, when it's sent, maybe even where you are. But you can't see the content.



**11:16:03**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And that makes things like getting a sense of what misinformation's spreading on the platform or what's happening on the platform quite difficult, both for outside researchers and journalists [sounds like] but also for the company themselves.

**11:16:14**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

And also for law enforcement. I mean, we hear sometimes about law enforcement agencies tracking chatter. They cannot track chatter on WhatsApp, correct?

**11:16:24**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

No, they can't but there are ways that the company can intervene. And, so, for example, you can actually report something as a problem and then the company can access that message. So it's not a completely closed system. Whereas there are other messaging services that are becoming more popular now like Signal, where it's completely closed.

**11:16:41**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And I think it's an interesting tradeoff because there are obviously many benefits for having closed conversations, especially when, not just in the context of personal exchanges, which you can imagine why you might want to have a private conversation with a family member or a friend, but also in the context even of commercial use of these technologies. You need some kind of security if you're going to do things like payments online, which is actually increasingly the case in WhatsApp in places like India and Brazil.

**11:17:07**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

So, Ayman, Stephanie's talking about people using WhatsApp as this communication platform but also a source of news, which is how the misinformation spreads. What does that look like for people who are getting their news from WhatsApp? I mean, I've heard from people who say they don't even read the paper or watch news anymore. They get it all from WhatsApp.

**11:17:26**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

Yeah, again, double-edge sword with this information coming in. Some of it, of course, they're going to read it when it comes in unless they intentionally ignore it here. But when it comes in, they look at the source of who's sending it, right. And if they trust this person or they think this person, you know, is available in the sense of being honest, they'll be more readily enjoying it and saying, okay, I agree with him or her and I accept this information being sent.

**11:17:52**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

But it's tough. It depends on the source as well as where it's coming from. And if you're joining these different groups, you don't know who's sending the information, it's just you're inundated with spam, and people realize this. Now, depending on how gullible you are in accepting this stuff with all these stories around, then it becomes this [word?] responsibility to kind of say yes, it's true or not.

**11:18:13**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

In all of the groups that you're a member of, have you seen some of this misinformation come across?

**11:18:18**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

Yes. And sometimes you shake your head, you're like, why are they even sending this information? Is it just a joke or is it they actually do believe it? And when you message them saying, are you sure about this information, they start saying, well, no, I don't. I just sent it. And you're saying, okay, well, stop sending this stuff.

**11:18:35**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

Russell, can you fact check WhatsApp? I mean, we're hearing a lot about fact checking on Twitter, on Facebook, on flagging posts or removing them. Can that be done on WhatsApp?

**11:18:48**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

Well, I mean, I think when it is done it looks like what we just heard. I mean, it looks like individuals saying, hey, I don't think that's true. I would also say, I mean, everything that we're describing is just a feature of people talking to each other, right. Like this is, if you just got all of your news from what you heard when people sort of came by your house and told you, oh, I heard there was this issue with inflation, you would probably also not be very well informed.

**11:19:19**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

And so, I mean, I think there are -- I mean, Facebook itself is an example of, like, technologies that people can be concerned, oh, the algorithm is amplifying misinformation. But WhatsApp, really, at its core is just making it easier for people to talk to each other. And when you have people having private conversations, it's not always 100 percent verified information. Some people are wrong.

**11:19:44**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We spoke with a representative from WhatsApp yesterday, invited them to join today's program. They declined but they did provide some written information on these issues, including this piece on how WhatsApp has curbed vaccine misinformation in particular.

**11:19:58**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

It reads, quote, "Since the start of the pandemic, WhatsApp has partnered with hundreds of national state and local governments to help connect people with the latest information on country cases, connect them to COVID-19 symptom checkers and direct them to medical resources. To date more than 4 billion messages have been sent across these COVID help lines as vaccines roll out. Governments are using these help lines to connect citizens privately to accurate vaccine information and registration."

**11:20:27**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We are talking about the role of WhatsApp. With us is Stephanie Hankey, a technologist with the nonprofit Tactical Tech. Also, Russell Brandom, policy editor at The Verge and Ayman El Tarabishy, business professor at George Washington University. And we would love to hear from you. How do you use WhatsApp? You can comment on our Facebook page, you can tweet us @1A or send us an email. It's 1A@wamu.org. And we heard from some of you through our Vox Pops app, like Jay Holloway here in Miami.

**11:20:55**

**JAY HOLLOWAY (CALLER)**

I use WhatsApp primarily to talk to my friends in other countries and to share larger files. I don't know if it's any more secure but it seems like I was told that it was or whatever. But, anyway, with some of the stuff I've seen on it, I don't think is as monitored as maybe the mainstream text messages system. So maybe it is more secure, I don't know.

**11:21:26**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

Stephanie, I wanted to go back to what Russell was saying was that, essentially all WhatsApp and some of these other platforms are doing is making it easier for people to talk. Is that what is behind the spread of misinformation on these platforms?

**11:21:40**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

I think they do -- obviously they're facilitating discussions both nationally and globally, and interconnections between communities as well. But I think that I would say, describing as -- well, just facilitating conversation is kind of underestimating the role that they're playing. I mean, this is a kind of global communication infrastructure at this point. You heard that from some of the Vox Pops there.

**11:22:06**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And it's kind of a discussion right now about whether it's a utility as well because so many things are built off it, not just one-to-one conversations. You know, in other parts of the world, as you heard at the beginning of the show, it's very much [unintelligible] comments as well or [unintelligible] services.

**11:22:20**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

So I think the idea that -- sorry, [unintelligible] or just trying to facilitate discussion is a little bit underestimating the role they're playing. And they know that. I mean, they have over -- well over 2 billion users. And I think the Facebook leaks, which we've heard lots about in the news these last weeks, show that they're very aware of the problems with these platforms but they're not doing enough to try and solve them.

**11:22:42**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And some of those problems come from the fact that they're very focused on solving the problems around something like misinformation in the US but not enough focus on other parts of the world. And very little attention paid to that and also very little language translation.

**11:22:56**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

In fact, your organization Tactical Tech released a report on the role of WhatsApp in international elections in places like Brazil and Kenya and India. What are your takeaways from that report?

**11:23:08**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

I think we really saw that there's [unintelligible] what we think of as relational organizing. So, you know, the power of interconnectedness in political organizing is not a new thing. I think that's how it also works on the ground. But I think WhatsApp has the potential to work much quicker. And I think that's being exploited by different kinds of parties in different ways.

**11:23:30**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

I think we also found that, you know, we think of WhatsApp as a personal messaging service but it's actually something that's very much being commercialized in many parts of the world around marketing agencies. They're using those services to reach people. And even though it doesn't work conventionally through advertising, you know, like Facebook might or even Instagram, there are ways that you can organize around that. You know, getting people's phone numbers around political organizing and getting leaders around different political parties to give information of groups of people that they know.

**11:24:03**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

There's even black markets for some of these messaging groups for getting phone numbers in some parts of the world where phone numbers are kind of bought and sold in order to create groups. And then those are used for organizing, as we've seen from some of the elections around the world. Sometimes for influencing far right groups, for promoting hate speech. So there's been ways in which WhatsApp has been used definitely since 2016, '17 quite consistently, to create further divide in society.

**11:24:32**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

And I think, Ayman, it's fair to say that the outage of Facebook and WhatsApp really underlined the fact that some businesses and some individuals have become completely dependent on WhatsApp as their main, their primary source of communication.

**11:24:50**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

Yes, communication as well as business development, right. It's a dual thing. Communication saying we need to execute tasks today and WhatsApp is the means to get everybody moving to complete these tasks. But, at the same time, as we mentioned earlier, it's also for business development. Let me give you an image here. A florist wakes up in the morning, creates a nice bouquet, takes a picture of it on her phone or his phone and then sends it to their preferred 20 clients, right, and saying, here's the bouquet of the day. Would you like me to prepare one for you so you can come pick it up after work?

**11:25:24**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

That's what WhatsApp is used for. It's a personal boutique type of relationship building. So they send out 20 to their best clients or customers. Buyer responses, you know, I'd like to buy one today. I feel good. I'm going to buy one. What did it cost for marketing? Taking a picture on a cell phone, saying it's a special deal, sending it to 20 favorite customers and she got five sales or he got five sales within half an hour just putting a bouquet together. That's the power of WhatsApp.

**11:25:50**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

That's the positive WhatsApp. That's what I hope a lot of people see what's happening. Now, there's a dark side. Everything, there's a dark side to it here. You can be sending hate messages using WhatsApp. But I've seen some things that WhatsApp have done that were good. They limited the messaging forwarding to five, that you can't send a message to more than five groups or five individuals. And sometimes you can't send a message to more than one person that's been heavily forwarded, right.

**11:26:14**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

There are ways you cannot control these things or manage these things but who's in charge is the question. Who decides, right? And that's where the question of utility comes in. Is it a utility then? It opens up a big can of worms where now we're having a whole different conversation for a whole different show.

**11:26:30**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

Yeah, although it's related. And, Russell, we have a couple minutes here. Ayman's talking about this limit on forwarding. Although that's limited in its efficacy. If I forward to five people, every one of those five people can forward it to five people, and that mass suddenly starts to get very, very large. Are there national security risks associated with WhatsApp?

**11:26:53**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

Well, I think -- I mean, again, anything can be used to organize by bad people -- I mean, any organizing tool. As Ayman said, there's always a dark side. I should add, if a specific message is being copied and pasted a lot, it will -- there's an additional limit that will say, okay, you can only forward this once. So suddenly we don't get that exponential growth you're describing.

**11:27:17**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

As you say, it's limited. WhatsApp itself says this was cut down to three out of four, so they only have 25 percent of the spam sort of mass forwarding that they used to. But that's 25 percent. That's still a lot. I think the good thing, the thing that I really like about that move is that it's totally agnostic of what is in the message. They don't look at what's in the message. They just see this specific thing is getting forwarded a lot.

**11:27:47**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

So it's not, do we like these people, do we not like these people, are they from the wrong political party? Does this count as misinformation? Are we going to have to make some fact check ruling? All of that, I think you get into very, very dicey territory. And that's part of what we're seeing with Facebook and YouTube and all of that.

**11:28:05**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

This is very much, you know, we don't want to be a network of mass spam forwarding. We don't want that to be people's WhatsApp experience, even whether it's used for good or bad. And so, I think that was a very positive thing and I do think the forwarding problem and the spam problem, which, you know, we've heard multiple times over the show, is a real part of the WhatsApp experience. I do think they're going to have to continue to try to tamp that down.

**11:28:33**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We're talking about the role of WhatsApp for this month's edition of Extremely Online. You just heard Russell Brandom, policy editor at The Verge. We're also speaking with Stephanie Hankey, a technologist with the nonprofit Tactical Tech. And Ayman El Tarabishy is a business professor at George Washington University.

**11:28:48**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

And we're hearing from you about the role WhatsApp plays in your life. We heard from a member of our 1A Text Club. My son and his family moved to Warsaw, Poland this summer for his work. WhatsApp has been an absolute necessity to me to be able to talk and video chat with them. This Nanna would not survive without frequently talking and seeing her two youngest grandbabies. While I find it a bit more difficult to learn and use than Facetime and Messenger, I'm so grateful to have it available for free. I'm Celeste Headlee. We'll hear more from you and our guests in just a moment.

**[ INTERMISSION ]**

**11:29:54**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

So let's get back to this conversation on WhatsApp for this month's edition of Extremely Online. We're speaking with Stephanie Hankey, a technologist with the nonprofit Tactical Tech. Also Russell Brandom, policy editor at The Verge and Ayman El Tarabishy, business professor at George Washington University. And we spoke with a representative from WhatsApp yesterday, invited them to join today's program. They declined but did provide some written information on these topics.

**11:30:20**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We got this email from a 1A listener. We used the platform to communicate plans for dinner parties and social get-togethers when we were based in the Middle East. As gay expatriates, we were constantly looking over our shoulders facing potentially five years in prison in Dubai or worse in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. We felt safer using it within our friend circles. And, Stephanie, that brings up a use for the encryption of WhatsApp, the safety of WhatsApp that we haven't touched on before. That in some cases this may be keeping people safe in some very dangerous parts of the world, right?

**11:30:56**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

Yes, absolutely in WhatsApp's relied upon in an example you gave and many other examples. You know, different kinds of **[unintelligible]** who, for whatever reason, don't feel comfortable operating in the open or maybe may have good reason for **[word?]**. And that's not just in other parts of the world. When you think about the US and you think about the sort of protests and organizing that's happened here in the last few years, especially around racial justice and equity issues. You know, you can see that there's a real need for **[word?]** around how people use online organizing platforms.



**11:31:27**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

But I think one of the -- you know, we have to keep that in mind and at the same time it's very important not to get sucked into the idea that, oh, if I have nothing to hide, you know, I'm fine with using these open platforms. Because I think that that puts us into a full discussion. It's not only about protecting people and giving people a space to have private discussions. It's also about, you know, encryption is something, you know, which is the theme that allows us to have private messaging. It's something that's necessary for many, many other things.

**11:31:55**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And I gave an example earlier about exchange of services and money. You know, we rely on these tools, very much so. And bringing that example up because otherwise you end up in a quick dead end discussion of saying, what if I'm doing nothing wrong. I'm okay with my communications being open. But increasingly, people are also aware not only of that but how that information's being used for targeting them for advertising and other things that they may feel uncomfortable companies knowing about them.

**11:32:18**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

So, Russell, Facebook acquired WhatsApp in 2014. What is the business model here? How does Facebook make money from What'sApp?

**11:32:27**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

Yeah, so this is a very kind of fraught **[sounds like]** question. Originally WhatsApp had been, you know, a paid service essentially. You would pay a couple bucks when you signed up and that was how they did it. They didn't want to have any sort of targeting advertising information collection, which is the way most other sort of online services work, particularly Facebook.

**11:32:58**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

There was this plan to sell ads in WhatsApp. I mean, Facebook sort of had to back off on it because it was so controversial. But I think one of the ongoing intentions with the service is Facebook really does want to use it as an advertising platform and sort of sell -- you know, allow companies to target ads to WhatsApp users. That hasn't happened yet but I think in the long term, the writing is probably on the wall for that.

**11:33:25**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

So, Ayman, when we're talking about changing the business model, what does that call to mind for you. Since you're focused on these small businesses that use it, how would it affect their businesses if WhatsApp were to start including ads?

**11:33:38**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

It's a good thing for small businesses. It's actually a dynamic for small businesses because small businesses can't compete with big businesses in their marketing approaches here. So imagine you're a small business and now you have a website. And you can put a WhatsApp calling tool there and ask one of your, you know, team members to answer all messages coming to WhatsApp to sell a product, right. And so therefore, you have just opened up a new outlet for communicating with clients that are specifically interested in a specific product that they found on your website or in your store, right. And now, you can see this feature being rolled out.

**11:34:11**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

So anything that allows small businesses to generate more sales, to have a boutique experience or **[word?]** experience with a customer is positive, right. And it's that uniqueness that allows you to be seen, personalized service, you know, intuitive, flexible and fast, right. That's what customers are looking for. And WhatsApp can allow for this with a website, with the right person working on it.

**11:34:37**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

I have seen many examples where customer service is being handled through WhatsApp with businesses, right. And that's a positive for them, right. Because you can't have three people sitting there just waiting to answer phones. They can be, you know, stocking the shelves, helping a customer. And then they get a message on their phone and saying, yes, we have this product in. I can wrap it up for you. When do you want to come pick it up? Here's a sale.

**11:34:59**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We got a message from Niko **[ph]**. There are better privacy-protected options than WhatsApp like Threema and Signal that don't include Zuckerberg. I use Threema and I'm very glad about it. But, you know, Stephanie, one of the concerns is one that we've had with many other industries in that when something becomes so dominant in any particular area, it means so many people are dependent on it that there aren't, you know, any real viable or strong alternatives. Does the very ubiquitous nature of WhatsApp mean that it's cause for concern?

**11:35:34**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

Yes. There are good old census **[sounds like]**, and just the one mentioned by the listener there, Signal, I mean, that's something where not only is that well respected in the technology community, but it's also a nonprofit company. So the motives are slightly different. You just heard that, you know, WhatsApp might open to advertising in the future, and I think it's one of people's concerns.

**11:35:52**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And one of the reasons that they are not opening up is because they know everybody will migrate to these other services. And that's what happened a few times when they've experimented with changing the privacy settings. They had mass migration of users to Signal and Telegram. But there is this kind of question of critical mass, as you're saying, that, you know, it's very hard to get off it. I think many people instilled [sounds like], for example, Signal briefly when they heard that these privacy settings were going to change or they thought of changing them. And then found that their friends and family weren't using it.

**11:36:25**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

So there has to be a sort of moment of mass migration, really, for them to take off. And we've seen it with other messaging services, obviously, before WhatsApp was popular, other things we used. So it can happen but it's hard to move it. And I think what's specifically hard about WhatsApp is, as we heard earlier, now, these are ways that people connect globally with family and, very important for example, with Diaspora.

**11:36:47**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And I think that WhatsApp was able to dominate those very strong markets in Latin America and India and other places where there's large amounts of people from all over the world living in other countries, through giving free services. So that's not just that the messaging is free when on the internet but actually free data as well, what we call zero rating. So they captured these massive markets and millions and millions of people [unintelligible].

**11:37:11**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

So the report that we discussed earlier that came from your organization, Tactical Tech, after that report came out you got to sit down and have conversations with some high level representatives from both WhatsApp and Facebook. What did you learn during that meeting?

**11:37:30**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

Yeah, I went to the Facebook head offices and talked to them about our research. That was mainly because, you know, the research we'd done was, at that point, unique. We were of the mind that maybe they weren't even aware of some of that. And I think it was surprising for us. They had a very small team working on policy and communication issues and they obviously had an engineering staff, as well.

**11:37:50**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

Sorry, when you say a small team, how many is that?

**11:37:52**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

Oh, I'm talking like three or four people at that point.

**11:37:54**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

Wow.

**11:37:54**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And which, for a company of that size, is really surprising. And that message **[sounds like]** was like, you know, first of all, we don't have the resources to deal with this problem, which is surprising given, I think Facebook **[unintelligible]** company. But also the message is, you know, we just want to keep it small. The view of, and the selling point of WhatsApp is often that it's, you know, keeping **[word?]** more conversation like in a living room which, of course, is not the case when you have over 2 billion users.

**11:38:21**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And I think some of those stories we heard earlier about families connecting or the good example about small businesses using this platform for, you know, selling flowers, whatever, that's exactly how people think of it. But I think WhatsApp itself knows that they -- that's not how it operates, that there are much larger concerns. And I think they've gotten away with, you know, all perception of WhatsApp is kind of a quite local small scale thing, which is obviously not the case.

**11:38:48**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

So, Russell, in January of this year, WhatsApp updated its privacy policy, and there was a pretty big backlash. Users were concerned that their messages were being read by Facebook executives. What happened there?

**11:39:05**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

Yeah, well, so as we -- we've been talking about encryption, this sort of end-to-end encryption. And really, you know, we've had this conversation in other context but it really is sort of an all or nothing proposition, right. If it's only - - only the people who have access to this are me and the person at the other end of this conversation, then there's a lot of stuff you can't do like scan **[word?]** information or sort of checking for various bad things on the platform.

**11:39:34**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

But it also means I don't need to worry about -- you know, we heard about the gay folks in Dubai and, sort of, they don't need to worry about the government having access to this. So there are lots of ways you can kind of chip away at that, and that's really what we saw in the privacy policy. And there was a huge outcry. I mean, I do think this shows that if WhatsApp made a really bad -- if it became a worst service either on the privacy front or on their liability front, you do start to see people voting with their feet.

**11:40:05**

**RUSSELL BRANDOM**

And, you know, their position in this, it's really because they've continued to stay on the right side of these fights. And usually -- you know, as in the case where you mentioned, they backed down pretty fast once things started to look bad.

**11:40:22**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We're talking to Russell Brandom, policy editor at The Verge, who you just heard. We're also speaking with Stephanie Hankey, a technologist with the nonprofit Tactical Tech and professor Ayman El Tarabishy, business professor at George Washington University.

**11:40:35**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

And, Ayman, do we have actual data to give us a better picture of the importance of WhatsApp to these small businesses? And can we separate the rise in the use of WhatsApp from what would've naturally happened because of the global pandemic? In other words, if What's App were to stop being such an important business for small businesses, do we know for sure that would have an impact on their bottom line?

**11:41:03**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

Okay. So, a couple of facts here and 95 percent of all businesses are small businesses, even more in some societies, you know. So let's just say that these small businesses that are run by the owners have also families. And what we heard before here is that they use WhatsApp for family communication and so on. But they also run businesses, these small businesses.

**11:41:24**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

So you could see that the WhatsApp now has morphed into two uses here. One is for family communication with grandma and granddad and the kids and so on. And the other is I have six people reporting to me about a business transaction, and the business owner is sitting there with the phone communicating both as a mom and a dad and as a business owner here.

**11:41:44**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

So, WhatsApp -- now people are starting to realize that it is potentially a money-making tool for them in terms of efficiencies, saving time and effort and executing the business, but also now they're starting to realize that there's sales opportunities that are coming [sounds like] . I can sell products and services.

**11:41:59**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

An example in Panama now [sounds like] , you can actually schedule your COVID-19 test to come to your house using WhatsApp by using that number. So there's this efficiency of sorts, or this service provided of sorts here.

**11:42:13**

**AYMAN EL TARABISHY**

Now, let's take WhatsApp away. Let's remove WhatsApp from the equation of business. It'll be still used as a communication tool between family and loved one, but then there'll be another tool popping up saying, why don't you use me as a business tool, right? Two billion is a misleading number because you have to break it down to smaller units. And that's what I'm looking at as a small business expert with the International Council for Small Business.

**11:42:36**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

We should note that President Biden has begun speaking the -- he says -- in the past few moments President Biden unveiled a new \$1.75 trillion package that seeks to overhaul the country's healthcare, education, climate and tax law. The newly announced plan, which the President called historic, expands Medicare benefits, promotes cleaner energy and offers free paid kindergarten. There's money, too, for tax credits and other aid that will chiefly benefit low income families.

**11:43:07**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

He has been forced to jettison some of his own priorities that includes a fuller expansion of Medicare in a plan to provide paid family leave to millions of Americans. You will, of course, be able to hear more about the President's remarks and responses to those remarks if you stay with us throughout the day.

**11:43:23**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

So, Stephanie, in the time that we have left, what needs to happen now? What needs to happen with not just WhatsApp but other messaging platforms that could reduce the spread of misinformation and their ability to use WhatsApp by bad actors?

**11:43:39**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

I think one of the things we need, first of all, is for the platform providers to be more open and collaborative and more transparent and honest about what they know is happening on that platform. I think we've seen with the Facebook leader Frances Haugen that internally they know a lot more than they're speaking about externally. And that's a problem for the public, that's a problem for governments. And this was a problem for their shareholders, which has been one of her points there.

**11:44:06**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And I think that transparency and openness about what's happening on the platform and access to what's happening in order to have a collaborative approach to solving some of these problems is essential. I mean, the company tends to push for self regulation. And what you've seen mostly is it's sort of Zuckerberg taking a kind of apologetic approach to what's happening. But it's not good enough, I think, anymore.

**11:44:28**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And so I think there's a lot of regulators and a lot of different governments getting serious about that **[unintelligible]** . I mean, being very clear that internally they know that this platform has an ill effect on society. They have to be responsible for that. So I think one of the other things we need to do is, whilst I agree with the other speakers about the **[unintelligible]** of WhatsApp, we can't just pretend that the good uses overshadow the difficulties. It's not just the downside. It's definitely a systemic problem on the platforms that they have to deal with.

**11:45:00**

**STEPHANIE HANKEY**

And we talked a lot about, you know, the problems with politics and other things. And there was a great example there of people getting access to COVID vaccines **[unintelligible]** but not about, for example, COVID misinformation which has been a major problem.

**11:45:14**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

That is Stephanie Hankey, executive director of Tactical Tech, a nonprofit organization focusing on the impact of technology on society. We've also spoken with professor Ayman El Tarabishy, deputy chair of the Department of Management at the George Washington School of Business. And Russell Brandom, policy editor at The Verge. Thanks so much to all of you for joining us today.

**11:45:34**

**CELESTE HEADLEE**

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