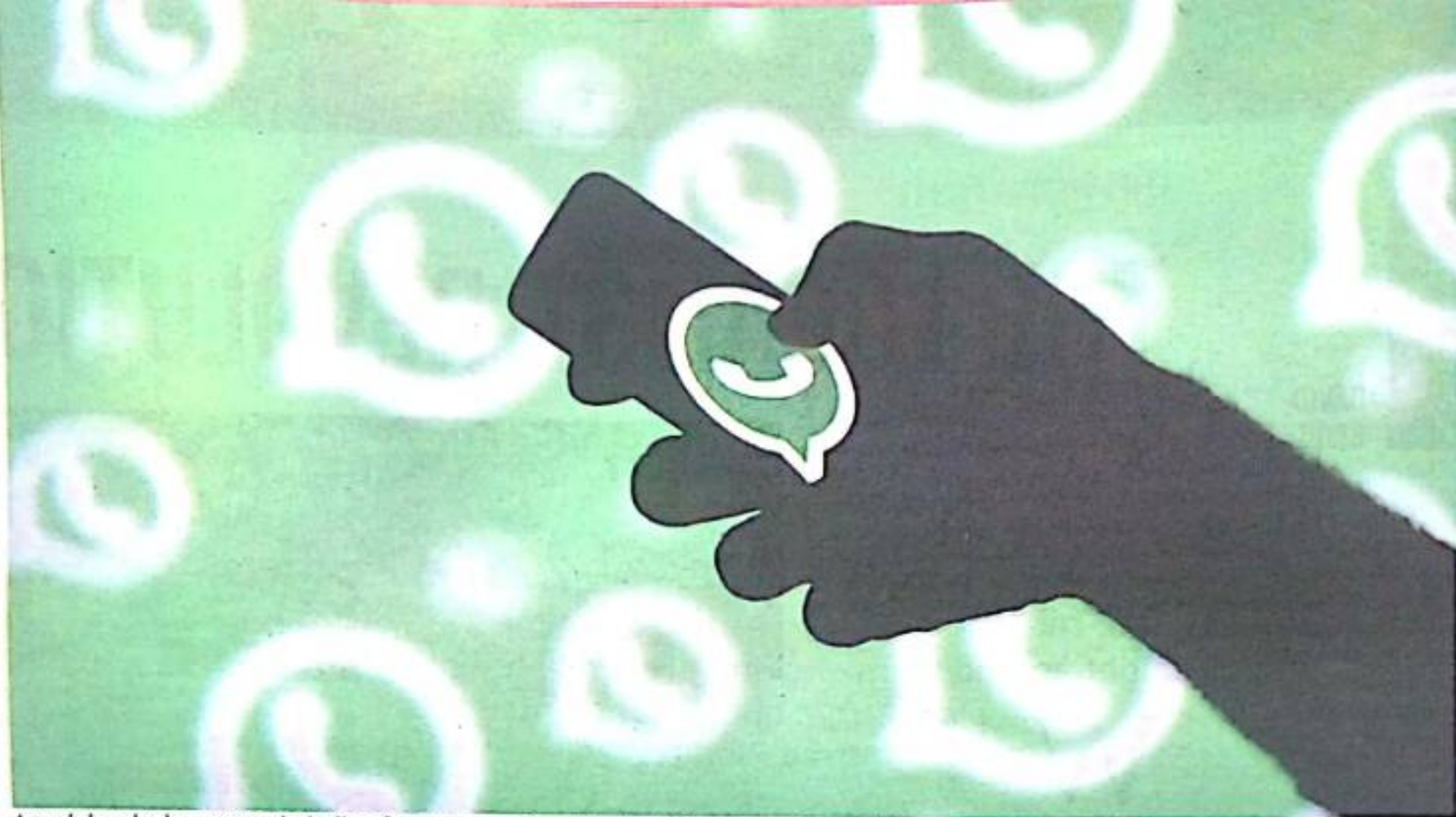




DR
SABARIAH
MOHAMED
SALLEH



A mob lynched a woman in India after rumours circulated on WhatsApp about child kidnappers. REUTERS PIC

WHATSAPP

WHEN NOT TO SHARE TEXTS

Especially messages that can cause harm to people or lead people to make decisions that can ruin their lives

According to an analysis by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, about 84 per cent of Malaysians receive unverified information or fake news via WhatsApp. A staggering amount. The trend is indeed worrying.

The surge of information disseminated via social media, including WhatsApp makes it difficult to verify each and every piece of information. Some messages may be conveyed to others as an act of goodwill, but it cannot be denied that these messages could also cause people to pass biased judgements, make misguided decisions or panic.

A report published by *The Australian* claimed that WhatsApp has been known to be used in South Africa to spread false allegations of corruption and hoax warnings of natural disasters such as fires and storms.

It is also an effective tool to spread rumours, as in the infamous white van case which was supposedly spotted around Klang Valley, allegedly used by a kidnapping syndicate which steals body parts and organs.

The case of sharing information

is especially unique when disseminated via WhatsApp. One of the messaging platform's feature is that the stream of messages are solely generated by users. Thus, users play a pivotal role in deciding the messages they wish to share and forward to groups or people in their contact lists.

So, what motivates one to share information, some of which, may not be true?

In my opinion the need to share is influenced by what scholars term as the third person effect, which was made popular by sociologist W. Phillips Davison. In 1983, he hypothesised that a person assumes a message will have greater effect on others than on themselves. For instance, when receiving a message related to health or security, an individual may have the pressing need to share it as they feel that it would greatly benefit others, especially those who they are close to despite the fact that they personally find the message of little use for themselves.

During the recent hand, foot and mouth disease (HFMD) breakout, I received a lot of messages regarding the disease, especially from various school re-

lated WhatsApp groups I am in.

Politically laced messages; gory pictures of accidents coupled with advice to be careful when I drive; the new restaurant my friend thinks I should try when I travel; a massive warehouse sale with supposedly good, irresistible deals, and juicy entertainment gossips are just some of the messages I often receive.

As I scroll through my messages, I cannot help but wonder, is sharing really caring? While I do, at times, appreciate the thoughtful gesture, most of the time I find it unnecessary.

I remember receiving a lot of texts during the disappearance of MH370. Various insights and conspiracy theories flooded my inbox which led me to voice my opinion on the rumour mongering and requested a group that I was part of to verify all information before sharing it. My opinion was not well received and as a result, I chose to leave the group.

I honestly wish people would be more discerning when sharing messages.

Undeniably, WhatsApp is one of the most intimate messaging platform where people are com-

fortable to share minute details of themselves because they knowingly select who would be exposed to these information.

However, I think one should realise not that everybody in the WhatsApp group would be interested in the information that is about to be conveyed.

In addition, sharing minute details about yourself to a select few may also pose a danger. This is because, in this day and age, these details can easily be screen captured and shared amongst people whom you may not even know in real life.

This is one of the reason why I believe it is important to embed media literacy in the school curriculum. Being media literate is not just about being able to analyse fact from fiction, but it is also about being a conscious individual who is aware of what he is sharing in the media. This, I hope, will ensure that the media is used for the greater good.

sabariah@ukm.edu.my

UKM Senior Lecturer Sabariah, an expert in young people and the media, hopes that media literacy would one day be embedded in the school curriculum.

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