

# Free Basics and Net Neutrality

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## 1 Free Basics programme

On August 20, 2013 an organisation, Internet.org was launched by Facebook having the mission statement as “Connecting the world”. Free basics is a programme within Internet.org, founded and developed by Facebook. It is a Mobile app and website that provides users a small selection of data-light websites and services without data charges. It claims to provide internet services to the poor and people without exposure to internet, which will make them aware of benefits of internet and help improve their lives. It claims that it includes content on news, employment, health, education and local information[1, 6].

## 2 Criticism

It clearly violates net neutrality. Net neutrality says the ISPs must treat all the internet equally and can not charge differently on the basis of user, application, platform, address, method of communication. But in this model the data is charged differently with respect to application, content and address[7]. It also does digital divide (uneven access, use, impact of ICT) by giving preferential access to selected websites. The homepage includes mainly US companies’ websites like AccuWeather, Johnson & Johnson BabyCentre, BBC news, ESPN, Bing search engine. Facebook is the only social networking site provided. There is no email provider[5, 3].

Zero rating forces consumers to confine to the given specific services. Thus, making the user think that these are the essential websites of internet. It does not expose the user to open internet where he can learn. It turns the user into a passive consumer of western content. In a way that’s digital colonialism. It does not serve the linguistic needs of users properly. Thus, it does not serve the main audience. The people who already know about internet make better use of it and uneducated people misuse, get fooled by this service[3].

Some researchers say that programmes like free basics may prevent bringing down data costs for paid Internet access. Facebook has access to all usage data and usage patterns on Free Basics. This also raises issue of security[2].

### 3 Experience from countries which allowed it

According to internet.org presently Free basics is present in 65 countries/ municipalities with one or more ISPs. There have been more negative reviews than positive ones worldwide. There have been many cases in which a false information has gone viral. Example, in Philippines a false information that people have died due to vaccination has reduced vaccination from 87% in 2014 to 68% in 2020 which has caused re-emergence of polio and other diseases[4]. In Mexican version of the app offered by Telcel there's only one local site on the first page which is of CEO of Telcel. It offers two Nigerian websites in Mexico. Users are not getting the websites they need and it has become mainly an advertisement platform[3].

It was launched in India on 10th February 2015. Citizens protested against it, for not obeying net neutrality. TRAI banned it on 11th February 2016 for violating net neutrality and being nontransparent[6].

### 4 My view

Internet access has grown very fast but free basics doesn't have a significant contribution to it. There are more elemental barriers for internet access like signal availability, devices, electricity etc which have to be solved first. Giving internet for free tends to more misuse, overuse of it. I feel without proper basic education giving internet will not give good result. With free basics the Facebook is trying to set market in newly emerging areas. I do not support this programme. Instead they can provide a limited amount of open data. This will make people know the importance of data.

### References

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