The Free Internet

TRAI has called for consultation papers on differential pricing scheme of data plans. i.e. the schemes provided by our mobile operators such as Airtel whereby some websites are either allowed to be accessed free of charge (Facebook) or providing cheaper plans to people who access only WhatsApp or Facebook. Below are my views on the same.

At a high level, providing cheaper access to some websites might seem advantageous to the consumer, since it can reduce the cost to consumer if the websites he/she uses falls under the category defined by the ISP. It does appear like a Win-Win scenario, but if we consider the broad ways by which this type of pricing can affect the consumer in the long term, we will realise that it has moral implications as well.

Why Free?

First of all, why do the companies such as Facebook allow their websites to be accessed for free? What do they gain from it? These companies claim it is to help the consumer, to help the poor access the internet (From a recent statement by Facebook). But how much of this is really true? Is this their real intention? or is it some ploy to keep people hooked to their system?

If, as they claim, the intention is to help people apply for jobs, to allow poor people to access the internet, why would they allow only certain websites (conflict of interest) they determine to be accessed for free? Who determines which websites are useful for the masses? Is Facebook really that important for the poor? If you or myself wanted people to have access to internet for free aren't we more likely to provide a bandwidth capped internet service (Say 50MB) which allows all the websites to be accessed? OR would we say i will give free internet but you can access only my website? what does that say about me?

As with everything, actions speak louder than words, their actions clearly betray their so called intentions.

Non-Competitive

So what do the companies gain by making certain service cheaper? By making certain websites cheaper for the consumer to access, they can

 - Prevent competition from emerging

 - Provide biased information to be readily available

 - Allow rich companies to reach people easily

ISPs can act as the middle men to quash competition. For example before Facebook there was Orkut and MySpace, they are now history thanks to emergence of Facebook. Social networking websites depend on the presence of a certain critical population on their website to be viable. If all your friends are not on Facebook, you won't be. The companies have the advantage to keep people hooked to a system. By forcing this so called "free internet", they can prevent new and better alternatives from emerging. Because a new startup cannot afford to let people access their website for free and Facebook will not allow any potential competitors to join their gang.

Therefore, if we allow this system we are giving preference to certain companies over the others.

Nothing is free

Some of the people in support of giving access to some sites for free assume that the people doing this are philanthropic, that they are doing out of interest to help the poor. As already explained, if their motivation is philanthropic, this is the not the way you provide internet access to the poor. There is conflict of interest between their business and their so called philanthropic acts.

Facebook claims they do not advertise on their free site so they have nothing to gain. This is a naive argument, they own the website, nothing stops them from adding advertisements later on. Moreover, as the famous saying goes **"If you are not the Customer, you are the Product"**, Social networking websites are known to mine user data and this data is their resources. Data and information are traded for a service, this is not a one way exchange as some people assume. None of these companies are here to help people, they are out there to make money, this is a basic premise which we have to keep in mind when we are dealing with situations like these.

Something is better than nothing?

Some people argue that letting people have access to some websites is better than none at all. I disagree with this statement, When designing a policy we need to take into account how it will affect life of the people in the long term.

People have a natural tendency to want to save money. In this age, a lot of people are addicted to social networking websites, by allowing free access, most of these people might end up restricting their usage to these free websites. Even now, for a lot of college students i know, internet is only Facebook and WhatsApp, they aren't even aware how to spend time on the internet without these sites. Then the information these people will learn will be solely from the social networking sites and the sites that will be controlled by select few.

By allowing internet/media in the select few hands, we are allowing people to be controlled by the elite few. This i feel is a threat to democracy! Social media can be a great tool to manipulate people and share propaganda. This will only make people easier to control, limiting their options.

Our newspaper & media is already in the hands of the

select few, our only hope is internet, Please let at least internet be free. Let India be a good example for the rest of the world.