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**Writing Task for Applicants of Spring 2016 applying
to New Media Design and Production in Aalto University**

"Free Basics" and "Internet.org"

Internet.org and Free Basic are synonym of each other and are names for mission/ platform that tries to bring affordable access to selected Internet services to those below the poverty line. It is a highly controversial subject due to the partnership between six companies who plan on handpicking services that are available to access on this platform. Major criticism arises with the question 'net neutrality' and discriminating against companies not in the list. A main escapade of Facebook it was first launched on August 20, 2013 after CEO Mark Zuckerberg released a ten-page whitepaper on the view and expressed that "connectivity is a human right". 1

It is true that universal Internet access can lead to many improvements in the life of people and even more so in developing countries. According to statistics only about one third of the world's population is connected online. The rest 4,4 million people are unaware of the knowledge that the Internet holds. 2 While the concept was around the idea of free Internet it would only be accessible to certain sites and services. This is where the problem lies since net neutrality requires that the Internet be maintained as an open platform, on which network providers treat all content, applications and services equally, without discrimination. And even though the idea behind the platform sounds altruistic it's more like a colored lens warping the user into believing it is the 'whole' Internet. 3

Free Basics started on September 2015 and became the platform for developers to create content for the Internet.org by Facebook initiative. They market with a slogan, "Free Basics by Facebook provides people with access to useful services on their mobile phones in markets where Internet access may be less affordable." 4 They are trying to provide news, employment, health, education and local information for free. Controversially since it's not an open platform critics point out, that data for all the websites on Internet.org will be with Facebook, and restrictions are placed on them publicly disclosing usage of their sites and services by users on Internet.org. 4 Thus this platform would act as an access point to obtaining great amounts of data giving a competitive advantage to Facebook.

Research has shown that people prefer to use the open web for a shorter duration over a limited set of sites for a longer duration. That means short affordable Internet packs rather than costly subscription based models are one possible solution. A Finnish company Comptel is developing a solution for selling micro Internet packets for 5 mins and 10 mins durations which is currently being piloted in some African markets. 6 Another possible solution is proposed by operator Aircel in India which is offering low speed (64k) but without restriction access to the Internet.

The real problem with free basics is that Free Basics will essentially end up shaping the user behavior. "Just because Free Basics is free to use and does not cost anything, users will be much more inclined to continue using the limited content it provides, even when there might be much more better alternatives elsewhere."7 It is akin to predatory pricing, where big firms give unbelievable discounts to kill small businesses, aka small startup services online. In terms of Internet, the same thing might happen to another great website that could be even bigger then facebook or

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anything that has come before it.

FaceBook articulated concerns that all the people voicing their opinion are essentially already connected to Internet. The poorest of us who will actually benefit from Free Basics are currently not able to voice theirs. This fact while true doesn't change the other basis that the "people who have never been connected to Internet will in no way be able to distinguish a scaled down Internet from an Open Internet."7 These will consider the service Free Basics provides as "The Internet". Hence, for them to be actually able to make informed decision, they should first be able to access completely open Internet.

> **There's no such thing as altruism. No such thing as a truly selfless act. We always get paid, one way or another**
> **- Haha Lung, Mind Control: The Ancient Art of Psychological Warfare**

As I think about Internet.org and Free Basics I am always reflecting on this thought. Is it that by providing free services to poorest people we are serving them or are we hoping that by serving them we shall be serving ourselves?

In conclusion, it is hard to imagine how Free Basics is not a ploy to solidify Facebook and it's partners business model. After all the more people which use Facebook the better. If Facebook and its partners are seriously interested in bringing the next billion people online it would serve them well to collaborate with government organizations as well as network operators to reduce the cost of getting online.

Free basics is like a walled garden and no matter how green the grass is, how sweet the smell of flowers is and how juicy the fruits are, if there is a whole world out there beyond the walls of the garden which is equally rewarding if not more then its not worth it. Inside the walled garden you are always a prisoner.8
India has chosen to not let its citizens be prisoners to the whims and fancies of select corporations and their partners. I respect that.
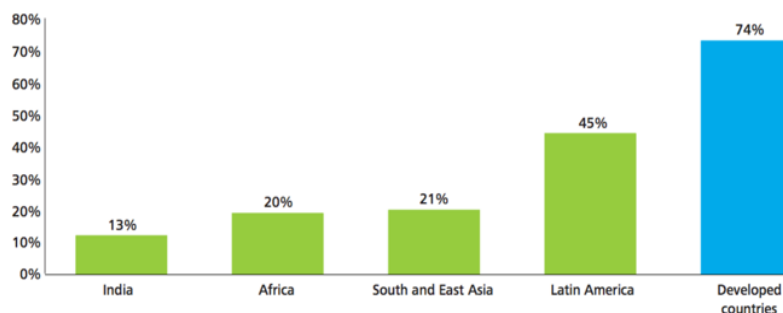
Deloitte estimates based on ITU World Telecomunication database and IMF data.3

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