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The Cost of Free Basics in India: Does Facebook's 'walled garden' reduce or reinforce digital inequalities?

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Abstract

In 2015, Facebook introduced internet.org in India and it faced a lot of criticism. The programme was relaunched as the Free Basics programme, ostensibly to provide, free of cost, access to the Internet to the economically deprived section of society. The content, i.e. websites, were pre-selected by Facebook and was provided by third-party providers. Later, Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) ruled in favor of net neutrality, banning the program in India. A crucial conversation in this debate was also about whether the Free Basics program was going to actually be helpful for those it set out to support. In this essay—written in April 2016 soon after the ban from TRAI—the author uses development theories to study the Free Basics programme. The author explored three key paradigms: 1) Construction of knowledge, power structures and virtual colonization in the Free Basics Programme, (2) A sub-internet of the marginalized: looking at second level digital divides and (3) the Capabilities Approach and premise of connectivity as a source of equality and freedom and investigated how the programme reinforces levels of digital inequalities as opposed to reducing it.

Note: This essay was written in 2016 and there have been various shifts in the digital and tech landscape. Further a lot of numbers and statistics are from 2016 and not all ideas held here may be transferable today. This should be read as such.

Key words: Development, Digital divide, Facebook, Free Basics, ICT, Net neutrality, walled garden

Introduction

There is widespread concern that the growth of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) is exacerbating inequalities between the information rich and the poor, especially when digital access is not uniform. ICT for Development research in the last many years has broadly involved the consideration of human and societal relations with the technological world and specifically considers the potential for positive socioeconomic change through this engagement (Burrell, 2009). In the current era of virtual societies, the presence of information asymmetries has definite disadvantages for those outside the network (Dicken, 2011).

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), four billion people from developing countries remain offline, which represents 2/3 of the total population of developing countries (ITU, 2016). As policymakers around the world are increasingly becoming aware of the impact of connectivity on socio-economic development, bridging the digital divide and bringing access to the unconnected are seen as critical policy issues of our time. Most recently, the newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set an ambitious goal of *"significantly increasing access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020."*

India, as a country with the third largest Internet user population - despite a low penetration rate of 24% - has put its connectivity agenda to the forefront of national policy making with its Digital India campaign. At the same time, new business models put forward by global tech giants like Facebook are attempting to tap into the "fortune at the bottom of the pyramid" (Prahalad, 2005) in a projected attempt at reducing digital inequalities.

This paper examines Facebook's Free Basics programme and its perceived role in bridging digital divides, in the context of India, where it has been widely debated, criticized and finally banned in a ruling from Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). While the debate on the Free Basics programme has largely been embroiled around the principles of network neutrality, this paper will try to examine it from an ICT4D perspective, embedding the discussion around key development paradigms.

This essay begins by introducing the Free Basics programme in India and the associated proceedings, following which existing literature is reviewed to explore the concept of development, the perceived role of ICT in development, thus laying the scope of this discussion. The essay then examines the question of whether the Free Basics programme reduces or reinforces digital inequality by looking at 3 development paradigms: (1) Construction of knowledge, power structures and virtual colonization in the Free Basics Programme, (2) A sub-internet of the marginalized: looking at second level digital divides and (3) the Capabilities Approach and premise of connectivity as a source of equality and freedom

The Free Basics Programme

The value proposition as articulated by Facebook for the Free Basics programme is that of a disruptive model designed to bring basic internet connectivity and some selected content to the economically challenged for free of cost. While it may lead to significant profit for Facebook in the long term, it will bring about a billion people on the internet in the near term. According to "IC4D, Information and Communications for Development 2009: Extending Reach and Increasing Impact", for every 10 percentage point increase in high speed Internet connections, there is a corresponding increase of 1.3 percentage point in economic growth. Thus it has an appeal to those who are not connected today.

"Eliminating programs that bring more people online won't increase social inclusion or close the digital divide. It will only deprive all of us of the ideas and contributions of the two thirds of the world who are not connected." (Zuckerberg, 2015)

Free Basics, earlier called Internet.org, is Mark Zuckerberg's pet project which sought to establish a partnership between telecom service providers and Facebook in an attempt to bring "affordable access to selected Internet services to less developed countries by increasing efficiency, and facilitating the development of new business models around the provision of Internet access." (Wikipedia).

In spite of the strong value proposition, and probably because it was clear that this will be hugely attractive to the less privileged, the creation of this walled garden (system where the service provider has control over the content that gets hosted on its platform) and a sub-internet has been criticized widely by critics across the world and specifically in India for violating the principles of network neutrality. Simply put, network neutrality upholds that all sites must be equally accessible and once an individual has an internet plan, one should be allowed to access any internet content without discrimination. After three consultation papers released by TRAI, the programme was finally banned in India for violating principles of net neutrality on February 8th, 2016.

As a run up to the final hearing, Facebook ran extensive campaigns (full page media advertisements in many major national newspapers) to gain support from the masses for the Free Basics programme. A lot of activists, academics and internet policy makers spoke against this, as quoted below.

"In the particular case of somebody who's offering ... something which is branded internet, it's not internet, then you just say no. No it isn't free, no it isn't in the public domain, there are other ways of reducing the price of internet connectivity and giving something ... (only) giving people data connectivity to part of the network deliberately, I think is a step backwards." (Tim Berners-Lee,

2015, The Guardian)

"Free Basics clearly runs against the idea of net neutrality by offering access to some sites and not others. While the service is claimed to be open to any app, site or service, in practice the submission guidelines forbid JavaScript, video, large images, and Flash, and effectively rule out secure connections using HTTPS. This means that Free Basics is able to read all data passing through the platform. The same rules don't apply to Facebook itself, ensuring that it can be the only social network, and (Facebook-owned) WhatsApp the only messaging service provided." (Graham, 2016).

While the TRAI ruled against the Free Basics and such zero-rated plans (practice of charging end customers for data used for specific apps by the service provider's network), the question on how to go about digital access and reducing such divides remains largely unanswered.

Development, Digital Divide and the notion of progress through access to the Internet

Before getting into the arguments around digital inequalities and the Free Basics programme, it is important to unpack some of these terms and see how the ideas of development and ICT have come to intertwine over a period of time. Many development theorists and welfare economists have attempted to define development.

Peet and Hartwick (2009) define development in the context of our current uneven world as meeting basic needs like "sufficient food to maintain good health; a safe, healthy place in which to live; affordable services available to everyone; and being treated with dignity and respect." They add that over and above these needs, the path taken by development is determined by the "material and cultural visions of different societies." From a normative understanding level to a global perspective, Willis (2006) writes that historical economic crises coupled with global environmental change have led academics and policy-makers to think about how 'development' in all parts of the world should be achieved. *"However, 'development' has always been a contested idea. While often presented as a positive process to improve people's lives, the potential negative dimensions of 'development' on people and environments must also be recognized."* (Willis, 2006). Peet and Hartwick (2009) talk about critical modernism as an offshoot of Marxism, critical post structuralism and post modernism which becomes essential in the discussion of development. They bring out an important point of the need to constantly contest the premises and conclusions of development as opposed to abandoning it, because it hasn't always worked in the past.

Given the context of overall development, what then does it mean to speak of the impact of ICT on development?

"The hype, skepticism, and bewilderment associated with the Internet—concerns about new forms of crime, adjustments in social mores, and redefinition of business practices— mirror the hopes, fears, and misunderstanding inspired by the telegraph (in the nineteenth century) ... Such reactions are amplified by what might be termed chronocentricity — the egotism that one's own generation is poised on the very cusp of history." (Standage, 1998).

Discourses of economic development are often based on unrealistic or exaggerated understandings of how the Internet can alter space and is considered to be free of spatial constraints (Graham, 2008). Graham also writes that there is no convincing body of peer-reviewed evidence to suggest internet access lifts the world's poor out of poverty (Graham, 2016). Yet, Heeks (2010) tries to provide an evaluative framework by looking at the policy arena of mobiles and enterprise, empowerment and gender and development studies, capability and choice and concludes that there appears to be a correlation between ICTs and development. He believes that there is empirical evidence that ICTs are both saving money and making money for those from low

income communities. While one can argue that this parameter may or may not be constitutive of development (as development is being understood differently by various theorists), **one can argue that there is an existence of a positive correlation between the use of ICTs and some aspect of progress, even if that is a smaller subset of human development.**

In case we agree that ICT and progress have a positive correlation, the idea of having a digital divide then becomes a negative function in society. The digital divide is understood in many different ways by various scholars, a succinct summary of which is outlined by Graham(2008): the technical and social aspect of the divide (availability of hardware and software, along with availability of skills); Lu (2014) and Norris (2003) speak about the global divide between the developed and developing countries, while Norris also speaks about a social divide (existing inequalities within a region), and a democratic divide (difference in levels of civic participation). Napoli and Obar (2014) speak about a second class digital divide that gets created between mobile phone users and computer users.

In this section we unpacked the terms overall development, the relation between ICTs and development and the consequential creation of digital inequalities / divides. We also provide the idea thus that while ICTs may or may not have a direct impact on overall human development (more empirical studies needed to prove a direct correlation), it can be said that creating access may have certain positive effects, though not at the cost or in exchange of some of the basic needs spoken of above.

Construction of knowledge, power structures and virtual colonization in the Free Basics Programme

"Anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for the Indian people for decades. Why stop now?" (Andreessen, 2016)

Marc Andreessen, Facebook's board director, infamously tweeted this in response to Free Basic's programme being compared to colonialism post the programme ban in India. Bahri (2016), a professor who focuses on post-colonial studies summed up the similarity between colonialism and Free Basics programme: *"ride in like the savior, bandy about words like equality, democracy and basic rights, mask the long term profit motive, justify the logic of partial dissemination as better than nothing, partner with local elites and vested interests and accuse the critics of ingratitude."* In India, where Free Basics has been the subject of a long, public debate, plenty of people already rejected the platform due to its colonialist overtones and the corporate power structures and market concentration that it seeks to re-enforce.

In this section, we will look at some of the authors who have compared development to colonization and virtual colonization, and how the Free Basic's programme could be bucketed in the category of that form of colonization.

Schech (2002) argues that promises of new technologies for developing countries are formulated with a broader discourse of modernization and development, which is based on the assumption that a deficiency in knowledge is partly responsible for underdevelopment. His examination of threats that ICTs present for developing countries reveals different discourses of power and knowledge operating in the common strands of literature. While critics of mainstream literature, as he writes, view it as a "further penetration of the capitalist agenda", some are hopeful that the ICTs can become sources of "empowerment" and "emancipation", tools through which true knowledge can be established and disseminated. Schech (2002) provided a critical juxtaposition between the optimistic stances of the World Bank about technology which was strongly related to the modernization theory, while the pessimistic stance on ICTs was based on dependency theory (notion that resources flow from a "periphery" of poor and underdeveloped states to a "core" of wealthy states, enriching the latter at the expense of the former**).** This gives us a peek into the kind of power structures that get formalized when ICTs are disseminated by seemingly powerful actors to the less privileged.

As a comment on power structures, **Escobar (2008)** writes that *"with the consolidation of capitalism, systematic pauperization became inevitable."* As Escobar (2008) points out, the developed world viewed the essential trait of the Third World as its poverty and that the solution was economic growth and development, and these became *"self-evident, necessary and universal truths."* With the Free Basics programme and the images invoked by the company (similar to what Escobar speaks about of the images invoked by the developed world of the "Third World" -"need

for salvation", "child in need of adult guidance"), the "problematization of poverty" by them becomes evidently clear and the economic proposition for poverty upliftment through access is communicated under the garb of altruism and philanthropy.

On a similar note, **Cline-Cole & Powell (2004)** highlight how the discourse on ICTD in the context of Africa has been celebratory and has failed to look at the potential consequences it has on the social fabric of the society and also the inherent capitalist agenda, which seeks to sell ICTs to developing / under-developing economies to maximize profits. Expansion of the internet has been equated to early European colonization in this paper, similar to how Escobar equates the Western development agenda to colonization. **Contrasting two positions of what information society should be, they talk about a society where knowledge is objectified and sold to customers with a view to the customers "benefitting from the commodity" and knowledge as essentially a common property from which people and social groups gain value as they create it, exchange it, interpret it and adapt it.** The first position speaks to the functioning of the Free Basics programme, where what gets spelt out as internet and thus what knowledge is constructed amongst the users is determined by the corporate and lends itself to the monopolistic planning for future control of the internet.

In more recent conversations about the programme, some stakeholders have named the Free Basics programme a way of bringing in "digital apartheid" to the poor. A constant argument that has floated on the subject and as a rebuttal to the programme is that in case Facebook really meant to support bringing people online, they should offer the entire internet to people, not just certain chosen sites (like say 500mb a month free to every Indian). As Murthy (2015) articulates, *"they can, but no, they won't do that. They want to use our government's bandwidth to get our poor using Facebook with no other real option in sight."* The question of Free Basics is not just one of what it seeks to address but also of the discordant narratives that underscore this debate as opposed to the motives that many critics have outlined for this programme. While Facebook's intentions are characterized through rhetoric replete with "white man's burden" (Zuckerman, 2015), critics see the project as both colonialist and deceptive. *"It tries to solve a problem it doesn't understand, but it doesn't need to understand the problem because it already knows the solution. The solution conveniently helps lock in Facebook as the dominant platform for the future at a moment when growth in developed markets is slowing."* (Zuckerman, 2015)

A sub-internet of the marginalized: looking at second level digital divides

"To give more people access to the internet, it is useful to offer some service for free. If someone can't afford to pay for connectivity, it is always better to have some access than none at all." (Zuckerberg, 2015)

Contrary to the popular conception of the digital divide as one of access, Napoli and Obar (2014) argue that "second level digital divide" of use is a significant area of consideration for development policymakers. They push back on the tendency to uncritically celebrate the increase in access to the Internet brought about via access to mobile devices in developing countries and conduct a critical comparative analysis of mobile phones versus PC based forms of internet access. They argue that mobile Internet access offers lower levels of functionality and content availability; operates on less open and flexible platforms; and contributes to diminished levels of user engagement, content creation, and information seeking. At a time when a growing proportion of the online population is "mobile only", these disparities have created what they term as a "mobile Internet underclass" and they predict that this disparity is likely to be even greater for the growing population of "mobile natives"

In this context, Facebook's Free Basics thus becomes a cause for almost a third level digital divide, where the internet is not only available only through mobile but it is also not all of the internet, rather only a sub internet. This then presents serious policy questions around what kind of access is being imagined for the majority of the nation and thus the very idea of the internet. India's net neutrality proponents have a name for this: "Poor Internet for Poor People". As an internet researcher wrote:

"Free Basics' pitch has been: we'll get "the next billion internet users" (that is, poor people in developing nations) connected by cutting deals with local phone companies. Under these deals, there will be no charge for accessing the services we hand-pick. We will define the internet experience for these technologically unsophisticated people, with our products at the center and no competition. It's philanthropy!" (Doctorow, 2016)

Purkayastha (2015), pointed out that, *"the danger of privileging a private platform such as Free Basics over a public Internet is that it introduces a new kind of digital divide among the people. A large fraction of those who will join such platforms may come to believe that Facebook is indeed the Internet."*

As Morozov (2015), a columnist at The Guardian writes, the digital divide today is *"about those who can afford not to be stuck in the data clutches of Silicon Valley — counting on public money or their own capital to pay for connectivity — and those who are too poor to resist the tempting offers of Google and Facebook".* As he points out, *"the basic delusion Silicon Valley is nurturing is that the power divide will be bridged through Internet connectivity, no matter who provides it or in what*

form. This is not likely to happen through their platforms."

As is evident from the Free Basics platform, the "level of openness" (Napoli & Obar, 2014) is severely restricted and it gives rise to *"legitimate concerns about whether mobile users are able to use the Internet in a way that puts them on an even playing field."* (Napoli & Obar, 2014).
As Napoli and Obar rightfully conclude, while mobile Internet access may address the basic issue of getting individuals who previously did not have any form of Internet access online, the differences between mobile and PC-based forms of Internet access can reinforce, and perhaps even exacerbate, inequities in digital skill sets, online participation, and content creation.

Consequently, mobile-only Internet users become, in many ways, second-class citizens online, and more so in the case of a walled garden like Free Basics with access to only a few dozen sites on the internet. **Southwood (2011) writes that the mobile phone is a medium and media delivery platform and changes in handset devices and levels of literacy will affect who has access to what content and there are key equity issues to be addressed.** The divide between those who have access to phones providing a wider range of services like the internet and those that don't, experience mobile phones differently and in case Free Basics is the kind of access that gets provided, it could and would lead to an increasingly complex set of divides based on device ownership and access.

The capabilities approach and premise of connectivity as a source of equality and freedom

In this final section, we speak about Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (CA) and evaluate how the Free Basics programme fits into the model and whether or not it increases or decreases individual's digital equality and freedom. The CA (and associated work), for which Sen received the 1998 Nobel Prize for Economics, is located in his work on social choice theory and welfare economics. **At the core of the capability approach is the idea that poverty is best conceptualized as capability deprivation, rather than a paucity of satisfaction/happiness, income or resources. (Sen, 1999)** Sen has helped to make the capabilities approach predominant as a paradigm for policy debate in human development where it inspired the creation of the UN's Human Development Index (a popular measure of human development, capturing capabilities in health, education, and income).

The Facebook proposition puts the Free Basic programme at the center and not the individual. There is an inherent assumption that the provider 'knows' what is good enough for the 'poor' people and they will take what is given since it is free. **Substantive freedom is not experienced through Free Basics as it promises to provide access to only selective content / websites. It is yet unknown if such limited access will lead to any 'development' but it will definitely create a narrow vision of the Internet in the minds of the first time users.** This may lead to the belief that Free Basics is the Internet. This will curtail opportunities and freedoms of the individual thereby limiting the 'capabilities' of the person to achieve 'functionalities' that they value. On the Free Basics platforms, users may not enjoy the political freedom that Sen speaks off, as firstly, from a surveillance perspective, Facebook would hold all the information of the users on the platform thus curbing freedom and second, the kind of access may not provide arena for political debate and discussion thus curbing capability. Thus individuals hooked to the Free Basics will get excluded from the political debate thereby losing their freedom to act as an agent of change within the community/society. Thus one can conclude by inferring that the Free Basics programme does not seem to be supported by the Capabilities Approach.

CA is a moral framework. It proposes that social arrangements should be primarily evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value. Sen describes 'Functionings' as consisting of 'being and doing' that are the states and activities of a person. An individual values a set of functionings and may wish to achieve those. The 'Capability' is a derived notion. It reflects the various combinations of functionings (doings and beings) he or she can achieve. It is not the same as the material resources required and / or available to achieve those functionings. Capability reflects a person's freedom to choose between different ways of living. It is not the outcome itself. (Sen, 1999)

Concluding remarks

Through this essay, we looked at what Free Basics had to offer and whether or not it reduced or reinforced digital inequalities. We found that Free Basics and similar zero-rated plans have the potential to act as agents of virtual colonization by powerful corporations. In the garb of 'white man's burden', such programmes allow the providers to use indiscriminate influence to their own economic benefit, without a corresponding benefit to the target users. However, we also found that the condition of the recipient does not necessarily improve unless the economic condition improves. It was more a case of implementing the concept of 'Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid' propounded by Prahalad, to make a fortune out of the one billion target user base, through various means not yet disclosed. The Free Basics programme is not only a subsection of the Internet, it is also mobile-only. This was found to be a limitation termed as second and third level digital divide. Finally we looked at the highly acclaimed and globally accepted concept of the Capability Approach, by Amartya Sen, and found that the Free Basics is not satisfactory for this paradigm.

By application of various development paradigms and a welfare economics model, one can safely conclude that Free Basics plays a greater role in exacerbating digital inequalities than reducing it. **While first level access does get provided through the programme, the means which is the access, in itself cannot be inferred to be the outcome of reducing the digital divide.** Moreover, there is merit in further empirical studies to see how digital inequalities get measured and their correlation to development.

From the perspective of future digital access related policies, it can be safe to recommend that the need for digital access should be viewed as a subset of overall contextual development as opposed to programs unto themselves (which is the current discourse in many instances). There is a requirement for effective needs identification as part of ICT4D research to locate the users at the center and not at the periphery of the discussions. Lastly, policymakers should look into the addressal of more basic concerns like that of access to mobile phones, computer kiosks, and diversity of access while drafting plans for creating greater connectivity (need for careful inclusion of marginalized communities, women, and persons with disabilities into the policymaking) and not just on solutions which can be claimed as "quick-wins" in policy implementation.

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