

On Facebook's Free Basics

1 What is Free Basics?

Free Basics is a program of Facebook which will enable users to access a subset of the internet for free. Developers of web-sites and apps who wish to make access to their facilities free of internet charges will need to submit their details to Facebook, and, once approved by Facebook, their services can be accessed by users without paying any ISP charges. Users will need to subscribe to an ISP who supports Free Basics (Reliance, for example) and will need to have their SIM cards or broadband connections. Users will also need to download the Free Basics app on their mobile phones or use select browsers. The program is currently available in 37 countries in Africa, Asia-Pacific and Latin America, and has been withdrawn in a few (possibly temporarily) like Egypt and India.

1.1 Some functional technical details

All connections, from a user's client device to a participating web-site or app's service, will go through the Facebook's internet.org proxy servers. The connections will always be encrypted (tunnelled) between the client device and Facebook's proxy unless the participating service explicitly asks for it not to be so. The connection between Facebook's proxy and a participating service may or may not be encrypted (opportunistic) depending on the capabilities of the service. A dual certificate model is used for the encryption, and there is always a decryption step (bump in the wire) at Facebook's proxy server. There will be no end-to-end encryption.

2 Why should you support it?

1. Please read Mark Zuckerberg's compelling blog at <http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-edit-page/free-basics-protects-net-neutrality/>.
2. It is an excellent way to empower the vast majority of people (over 80% of India's and 60% of world's population), mostly underprivileged and poor who are not on the internet, with access to information and knowledge that the internet (at least a subset of it) provides.
3. The argument that Facebook will be at the centre of the digital universe is perhaps inconsequential. So what, especially if nobody is hurt and most people can benefit from it?
4. It is true that Facebook will have control of which sites and apps can participate. But Facebook's stated policy for inclusion only puts some mild technical conditions, mostly to do with efficiency and compatibility. It appears that all are welcome by Facebook to join the party. Facebook doesn't even say that sites depicting pornography, religious fundamentalism, sedition or some such, or even the ones with an overdose of the likes of A Goswami or B Ramdev, are unwelcome. It appears, as of now, to be a perfect model of free speech.
5. Even if only a subset is selected for the program, how can it hurt? After all, isn't something better than nothing, especially for the poor and the underprivileged?

6. Some unfortunate IIT and IISc professors have put forward confused counter arguments like “what if Facebook defines its own brand of toffee as basic food?”. Big deal! How does it hurt? Any toffee from Facebook is likely to taste good and have useful calories, and can always be discarded if not liked. More the merrier, for the poor and the rich alike, as long as it comes for free?
7. It appears to be clearly understood among economists that greater communication opportunity for the poor increases economic growth. Since economic growth is a key factor for us to be rid of poverty, surely the Free Basics is a good opportunity? Mark Zuckerberg and several others provide several compelling anecdotal evidences in their blogs and write ups to argue that this is indeed the case.
8. If all of us agree that poverty is a bad thing that needs to go away asap, then why should we reject Facebook’s initiative even if it helps a little just because it is a private enterprise?
9. The IIT-IISc professors also argue that nothing can really be free. So, there may be some ads down the line, but big deal! Google has ads, but isn’t the search facility absolutely wonderful despite them?
10. The same professors warn against loss of privacy and Facebook having access to data and logs. There is also the possibility that Facebook can mine access patterns and other information and use it to their advantage without paying anything to either the users or the web-site and app developers. While the possibility may exist because there is a decryption involved at Facebook’s proxy server(s), Facebook gives clear assurance that all personal information of users will be stored only for 90 days (for operational and legal reasons) and will be thereafter deleted and will not be used in any way that is detrimental to the user. Surely, an organisation like Facebook can be trusted? This is actually a bit of a non-issue because a vast majority of educated internet users, in India and worldwide, professors included, are compromised in far worse ways by using free mail, storage and other app services such as are provided by Google, Yahoo, Dropbox, Skype, WhatsApp, etc.
11. Facebook may provide useful analytics data to the website and app developers, not only to facilitate removal of technical bugs but also to understand access patterns. This will definitely be useful.

3 Why you should not?

1. Please see the reasons put forward by the IIT-IISc professors (<http://scroll.in/article/778805/full-text-facebooks-free-basics-will-limit-internet-freedom-say-50-faculty-of-iits-and-iisc>) and a plethora of other commentators.
2. Facebook’s documentation at <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/internet-org> is vaguely worded and ambiguous (possibly to make it accessible to people’s uncles and aunts, at the cost of correctness). What exactly is a “dual certificate model” in this context, for example? It is impossible to be absolutely clear of one’s rights, whether a developer or a user.

3. There is absolutely no legal framework or even a policy document of the Government of India that protects people's rights of free usage without any discrimination. Hence, despite good intentions, possibilities of violations, deprivations and unfairness will always exist. TRAI must get its act together before permitting such a half baked program to role out.
4. The Free Basics has probably not even been evaluated with respect to the provisions of the IT Act (2009 and 2012) of the GOI.
5. Most importantly, the mere process of selection by Facebook gives it a power to influence (if not control) the social and political discourse in this country. In the absence of any legal framework and protection of rights it will be impossible to ensure that social and political activists and groups of all hues and flavours can get on to the platform and disseminate information and view points without let or hindrance. Omissions and hindrance can be inadvertent or even deliberate.
6. Finally, if social and political processes in India ever determine that internet access for all is a basic right and a necessity, possibly through a legislation, then surely the Government of the day can find the technology and resources to ensure deep and subsidised penetration of internet in the country with equal opportunity to all? It will on the whole be prudent to wait for that day.