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Facebook's Fraudulent Campaign on Free Basics

Prabir Purkayastha, December 25, 2015

Facebook is back with its game of trying to pretend that its platform is a substitute for the Internet, particularly for the poor. The originally controversial Internet.org is now back, re-branded as Free Basics, with full page ads in major papers, hoardings and a completely misleading on-line campaign using Facebook itself.

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India has issued a notice for public consultation on the issue. While TRAI has put on hold Facebook's agreement with Reliance offering Free Basics for now, it has not stopped Facebook's campaign.



Free Basics is a platform controlled entirely by Facebook that will offer access to Facebook, and a few other websites that are its partners. Today, the Internet has nearly a billion websites. This means that out of the 3.5 billion users of the Internet, on an average, 1 out of 3.5 of such users also create or run websites. The Internet is not just about our surfing the Internet as passive consumers of websites and apps, but also very much a vehicle for us to reach out to other netizens. What platforms such as Facebook would like to have, is that people visit only their websites. Instead of all the sites that we visit and search seamlessly today, we will have an enclosed Internet – a walled garden -- consisting of only Facebook and what it chooses to give us.

This Facebook campaign shows us the kind of market power that Internet companies such as Facebook exercise today. Facebook has more than 125 million users in India, the second largest in the world after the US. All Facebook users in India have been given a completely distorted view of what Free Basics is, and a vilification campaign launched against all those who would like to preserve net neutrality.

The Facebook campaign falsely claims that all those who support net neutrality, are

actually opposing free internet for the poor. It is repeating this claim in its ads and its hoardings, hoping that with repetition, its big lie would somehow become the truth.

This claim that those in favour of net neutrality oppose free internet for the poor is a lie. There are various ways of providing free data services or internet services. What we oppose is the providing access to a few websites and calling it a free internet. Free internet can be provided by having, for example, free minimum data download, similar to the free calls that we get with our fixed line telephone connections; it can be that at specified times – say late night or early morning -- we can surf the net freely. In other words, there are other ways of providing free Internet for those who may not be able to afford expensive data services, none of which would discriminate between different websites and would not violate net neutrality.

The second claim it makes is that all public services will be available using its Free Basics platform. This is similar to the failed attempt that Google made in trying to tie up with the Election Commission. No government can tie itself to a specific private platform for offering public services. Any such attempt would be a violation of our rights as citizens. Instead, the government has to offer such services directly through all the Internet Service Providers, the same way that the 100 Police Help Line service is provided by all telecom service providers. Tying up Facebook (Free Basics) or Airtel's (Airtel Zero) for public services cannot be a solution for the government. Instead, public services could be zero rated services, and given free to citizens by all Internet Service Providers as a part of their license obligations. This, to our mind, is the only zero rating services that would not violate net neutrality.

In the commercial world, there are strict rules of what names companies or products can have. A company cannot sell a car brand and call it Car. That would be stopped by the authorities. However, Facebook earlier offered Internet.org and is now offering Free Basics, branding its false messaging in the name of the platform itself. This is a violation of how a company can market its brand, or in this case, its platform. The Competition Commission needs to urgently address this issue.

Net Neutrality is the principle in which all web based services or websites have to be treated equally by the network operator – both telecom operators and Internet Service Providers. The Department of Telecom has already accepted that net neutrality is a basic regulatory principle for the internet and network operators should not act as gatekeepers. If we reject net neutrality, this will not only allow zero rating services such as Free Basics, but also lead to other forms of discrimination. The network operators can then demand money to speed up certain sites or slow down others. Cartels between the telecom companies and a few global internet monopolies will lead to further concentration of economic power on the internet, marginalising innovations and most of the progressive media. Instead of the multiplicity of sites and views, the Internet would then rapidly become like cable TV platforms, with a bouquet of a few websites. This is what Facebook is attempting, carry a few hundred sites as against the 1 billion we have access to today and call it the Basic internet.

The Government and Telecom Regulatory Authority of India have a responsibility for creating the right set of policies for the internet. Public money -- from the Universal Service Obligation (USO) Fund -- is being used to set up the most expensive part of the internet, its fibre optic backbone. The government simultaneously has to create policies that will allow free, non-discriminatory internet services up to a limit for all users. This is what universal access in the internet age means. This right should be a part of the universal service obligation that we already have as policy.

TRAI has to create the right regulatory environment for net neutrality. By allowing

private monopolies to dominate the internet using spurious claims such as free internet for the poor, they cannot allow the internet to become a private monopoly.

In Facebook's case these is an additional issue. As an American company, it provides data of all its users to the US security agency, the NSA. Allowing users data to be accessed by the NSA would be a violation of the right to privacy of the Indian citizens.

The Internet is rapidly becoming a public utility. It allows us access to knowledge, services of all kinds, a means of global communications and a myriad of other needs. In the name of the poor, we are seeing the enclosure of the Internet by powerful monopolies. Facebook's current Free Basics is another one of such attempts. This is what we need to fight against: the enclosure of the internet.

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