Free Basics in Philippines

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This case study was conducted as part of a research project by Global Voices, an international citizen media organization. The findings described here, along with findings from five other countries and can be found in our final report, "Free Basics in Real Life: Six Case Studies on Facebook's Internet "On Ramp" Initiative from Africa, Asia and Latin America." *Read the final report at https://advox.globalvoices.org/2017/07/27/can-facebook-connect-the-next-billion. Additional screenshots may be found at: https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B4CiTwxNUEN3aXppM3p4ZW9UMUk*

Overview

Free Basics was introduced in the Philippines in March 2015 on the country's two major telecommunication networks, Smart (Smart Communications Inc) and Globe (Globe Telecom), both of which are locally owned and operated. Nearly all Filipinos subscribe to one network or the other. At the end of the 4th quarter of 2016, Globe had 52% of the market, while Smart had the remaining 48%.[1]

ITU data shows that the percentage of individuals using the Internet in Philippines climbed from 37% in 2013 to 40.7% in 2015. Mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants has been over 100% since 2013. This does not mean that all individuals have mobile subscriptions, but rather that an increasing proportion of the population has more than one subscription.

Use of mobile phones (SMS and calls) is the principal means of communication among Filipinos. Broadband Internet continues to rise as Filipinos connect with their family and friends who are living or working in other countries. There are 12 million Filipinos working overseas.

Through mobile Internet, apps such as Viber, WhatsApp, and Messenger have become popular in the country. Facebook is the dominant social media platform. Traditional media is still the top source of news in the country but an increasing number of young Filipinos are now getting their news and other important information through the Internet.

The Freedom on the Net report gave Philippines a score of 26 out of 100 possible points (with zero indicating a wholly "free" Internet and 100 indicating a thoroughly

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[1] http://business.inquirer.net/222861/mvp-admits-pldt-losing-globe-market-share

"not free" Internet) in their methodology, which measures Internet access, limits to online content, and user rights of privacy and free expression.

How to Buy a Free Basics Plan

To get the Free Basics package, one must have a basic smartphone with a SIM card. A prepaid SIM card in Philippines does not require registration or identification. SIMs can be purchased at kiosks, stores and supermarkets. A basic prepaid SIM card costs less than one US dollar, and can be instantly used to connect to the web, make calls, and send SMS.

However, this has limited value which means a user must buy a prepaid load (top-up) after a few days. About 95 percent of mobile phone subscribers in the Philippines are prepaid users. There is no additional cost to installing the Free Basics app on Globe or Smart.

How do you set up the app? What information or actions are required?

When installing Free Basics, the app requests your location, but does not require you to have a Facebook account. The app's services can also be accessed through the Facebook app, if you have it pre-installed. This seems to serve Filipino users well, many are using Free Basics to connect to the free version of Facebook.

User experience and interface

For an experienced Android user, the app is relatively easy to use. The interface is not overly technical and the free service offerings are presented in a clear manner.

Instructions for using the app are simple and written in Taglish (a mix of Tagalog and English). Navigating the main menu of Free Basics is easy. The featured websites are visible in the menu.

The user can load the websites featured by Free Basics without incurring charges. Facebook Free also allows a user to browse his or her timeline, write a status update, read comments, and use the Messenger app at no cost. But the Facebook Free app does not show photos or videos. If a user wants to switch to the regular Facebook menu, he or she must pay the appropriate data charges by buying a load (top-up) in a store. Similarly, if a Free Basics user wants to browse a website or app not featured by

the platform, he or she must pay for this service. This is stipulated in the Terms and Conditions of Free Basics.[2]

The app has a separate section called "more free services", where more services are available. This option is visible at the bottom of the main interface. A Free Basics user could mistakenly assume that the only accessible websites offered by Free Basics are those featured in the main menu.

Connection and Accessibility

The Free Basics app itself opens a bit faster than other apps, and the connection remains steady without any cuts. The Facebook app on Free Basics opens a bit faster than the normal Facebook app. The other apps on Free Basics open at the same speed.

This is convenient for users who need to access vital information such as breaking news, transportation routes, weather forecasts, and job vacancies. The Facebook Messenger app, which can be used to send messages for free, has become essential for many Filipinos who need to connect to their family and friends in and out of the Philippines.

But the use of Free Basics can be restricted by slow and unreliable Internet connections. Even if Free Basics loads faster compared to other mobile apps, it is still dependent on the speed and quality of network connections provided by local ISPs. This leads to fluctuating quality of connection which makes it difficult for a user to access the websites and apps featured on Free Basics.

Based on random interviews and the experience of this researcher, paying for data charges ultimately gives one a more reliable connection. This limits the potential of Free Basics and its objective of providing Internet connection to those who are least aware of its benefits.

The app features a mix of sites in Tagalog, English, and Taglish (a mix of Tagalog and English). It does not include versions in any of the other languages of the Philippines.

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[2] "You can now access a version of Facebook on your mobile phone without using your data allowance with Globe. However, if you leave this version of Facebook, or view content outside of Facebook, such as links to articles or external videos, then you might start using your data plan to see that content."

The app does not use audio. It would be difficult to use for individuals who are semi or illiterate, and for the seeing-impaired. For hearing-impaired individuals, all content is presented in writing.

Terms of Use

Before one can access the Free Basics interface, the user must first agree to the Terms and Conditions of Internet.org. Even if the Facebook app is already installed on the phone, a user must agree to the Terms and Conditions of either Globe or Smart in order to use Free Basics. In summary, the user agrees to give his or her personal information to either Globe or Smart, in addition to Internet.org in order to access Free Basics.

The terms read as follows:

"It is understood that upon opting in to Internet.org ("Service"), you agree to be bound by the Terms and Conditions set forth below. If you do not wish to be bound by these Terms and Conditions, you may not access or use the Service

[…]

You understand that to fully enjoy the service, several promotional activities and other campaigns will require you to register your mobile number and email address. Contact details submitted will be saved on Globe Telecom's customer database which will be used for market research and campaigns.

[…]

You understand that Globe and Internet.org may share data, including but not limited to your mobile number, balance and purchases, and this data sharing may cover periods prior to your use of the Service and for a certain time after.

Customer data collected by telcos is categorized as Personal Information and Non-Personal Information. Personal information refers to name, gender, date of birth, address, telephone/mobile number, email address, and proof of identification. Non-personal information includes services provided (call, SMS detail, location information), location of device whenever it is switched on if subscribed to location-based services, and use of network (network performance, diagnostics such as signal strength, dropped calls, data failures).

The terms indicate that customer's data is shared by telcos not just with Internet.org and their partner developers, but also with their other companies:

In order to help us evaluate the success of this service, and to enable us and your operator to understand your use Facebook's services, we may exchange some limited info with Globe (including any of its group companies). This includes info like your phone number, the amount of data you use and your load and promo balance. This lets us evaluate the success of this service.

[…]

As part of the service, you may receive targeted and relevant mobile advertising campaigns, SMS or email alerts on related content and other promotions us and Partner Merchants/Advertisers."

The parent companies of Globe and Smart belong to the top corporations in the Philippines. They have extensive investments in real estate, finance, media, and construction.

Free Basics users are told that their customer data and their privacy will be protected by the telcos:

"We respect your privacy. We take paramount care in protecting your Customer Data. As such, we secure and protect your Customer Data with proper safeguards to ensure confidentiality and privacy; prevent loss, theft, or use for unauthorized purposes; and comply with the requirements of the law."

Aside from being long and tedious, the Terms and Conditions are only available in English, not in Tagalog or any other major regional languages, of which there are nineteen.[3]

Content Analysis

Globe featured 25 apps/websites on the main menu of Free Basics. If other services are included or added which can be searched at the bottom of the menu page, a user can access more than 150 apps/websites.

Smart has 29 apps/websites on its main menu. Free Basics users can also access more than 150 apps/websites.

The featured apps of Globe are categorized into communication, learning, sports and entertainment, news and weather, buy and sell, jobs, and health. Smart also has similar

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[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_the_Philippines

categories aside from offering apps listed under finance, health and safety, and women.

There is no information about the criteria used by Free Basics and its telco partner (Globe or Smart) on how they selected the apps/websites featured on the main menu. Although this can be found on the "For Developers" page of the Internet.org website, [4] this information is really geared towards technology developers, not towards the consumer.

BBC is featured on Globe but not in Smart. Reuters is accessible at the main menu of Smart, but not in Globe. Sakay.ph is categorized as a learning app when it is more appropriate to describe it as a travel app.

While news written in Tagalog is available, most of the news apps are written in English. Breaking news content is accessible but some apps like GMA News require the user to pay additional charges.

The majority of the apps are owned by private companies. There are apps developed by government agencies such as Official Gazette and TESDA, but they offer content that is not up-to-date.

Through Free Basics, a user can access information that are popular in mainstream media. But some useful topics could have been given greater attention such as indigenous peoples, agriculture, environment, and even religion.

Overall, Free Basics provides a free platform for ordinary Internet users, especially those who have no means to avail of a data plan, to access at least more than a dozen apps/websites. While it is mainly used to connect to Facebook and its Messenger app, it has demonstrated the potential to broaden access to some online services, promote learning, and improve online interaction.

However, there is need for more discussion and broader criteria on the selection of apps to be featured on the main menu. Users must be immediately informed that there are alternative services that can be accessed in the other sections of Free Basics. Non-profit and public institutions should also be given greater space and support in the platform to ensure that content is not limited to what private corporations are offering. And finally, Internet connectivity must be improved and made reliable to maximize the use of Free Basics.

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[4] https://developers.facebook.com/docs/internet-org