Free Basics in Mexico

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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 launched in Mexico in December 2015 on the Virgin Mobile network. This came more than one year after Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto met with Mark Zuckerberg and shortly thereafter announced that the government would support the Internet.org initiative. While media reports indicated that Telcel, Mexico's largest telco operator, would be the first to offer the service, it was actually Virgin Mobile (a Mobile Virtual Network Operator) who introduced it. It is unclear when Facebook formalized its partnership with Telcel in order to also offer Free Basics to its users.

ITU data shows that the percentage of individuals using the Internet climbed from 43.46% in 2013 to 57.4% in 2015. Mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants have hovered around 85% since 2013.[1] The most dominant telecommunication methods Mexicans use to communicate are mobile telephony (for SMS and voice calls) and mobile data (for internet and messaging apps). Internet-based messaging apps have substituted SMS as a means for communication. WhatsApp is particularly dominant.

The Freedom on the Net report gave Mexico a score of 38 out of 100 possible points (with zero indicating a wholly "free" Internet and 100 indicating a thoroughly "not free" Internet) in their methodology, which measures Internet access, limits to online content, and user rights of privacy and free expression. In the report, Mexico scored most poorly in the area of violations of user rights.[2]

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[1] http://www.itu.int/net4/itu-d/icteye/
[2] https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2016

Most Mexicans get their news through TV, [about 98% have TVs in their homes](#), radio, newspapers and online media outlets.[3]

How to buy a Free Basics plan

To use Free Basics, a mobile user needs to have an Android smartphone and a Virgin mobile SIM card. You can purchase a SIM card at a Virgin mobile point of sale (i.e. stand or kiosk), or [online](#). Virgin mobile points of sale are regularly located inside big malls or inside big stores such as WalMart.

Virgin Mobile stand. Mall in Mexico City.

A Virgin Mobile SIM card costs approximately USD $2. You are not required to present identification in order to purchase a SIM card.

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

In order for the app to work appropriately, the smartphone has to be a model included in one of the two lists from Virgin's [terms and conditions](#).[4] According to Virgin Mobile's personnel, because they operate within the mobile communication bands 850 MHz and 1900 MHz, not all smartphones are compatible with their network.

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[3] http://eleconomista.com.mx/industrias/2016/08/11/9-datos-sobre-consumo-tv-mexico
[4] http://www.virginmobile.mx/es/terminosycondiciones/

These specifications were surprising, as the advertising indicated that the app would work with any given smartphone as long as it is operating with a Virgin Mobile SIM card.

Upon installation, the app does not ask you where you live or your location and there are no geolocation settings. However, it is able to automatically pick up your data based on your phone number, which it uses for registration.

The app does not require you to create a Facebook account. You can access other features of the app without using Facebook, but it does automatically ask permission to sync the app with your Facebook profile (see screenshot below).
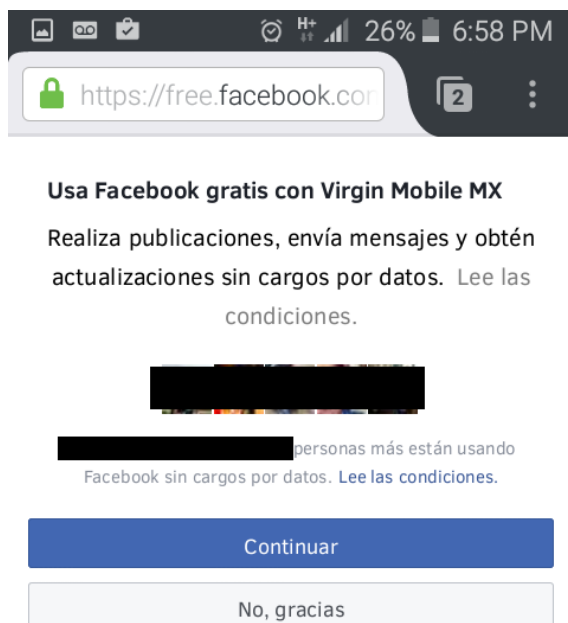

"Use Facebook for free with Virgin Mobile MX: Publish, send messages and get updates without data charges."

The above screen offers two options: "Continuar" (continue) and "No, gracias" (no thank you). If you select the first, you proceed to use Facebook with Free Basics.

If you select the latter option, a new screen appears asking if you're sure you want to continue using Virgin mobile data to access Facebook (see below).

If you press the option "Go back" it redirects you to Free Basics' interface where you are asked to agree to Facebook's Terms of Use, its Data Policy and its Cookie Policy (see below).
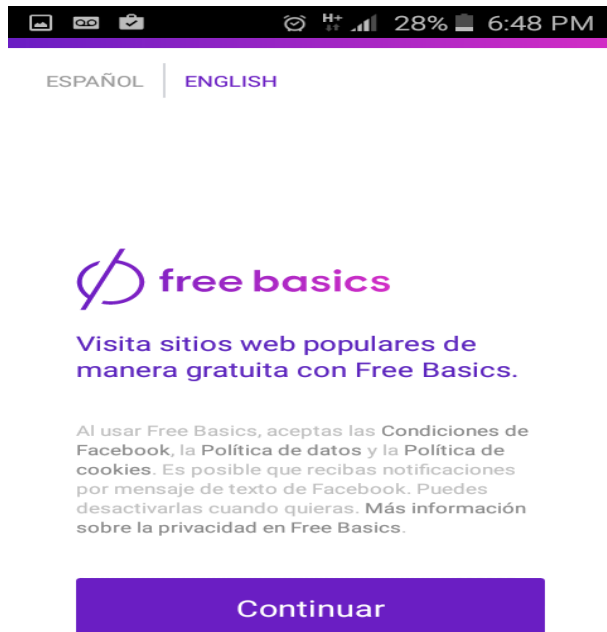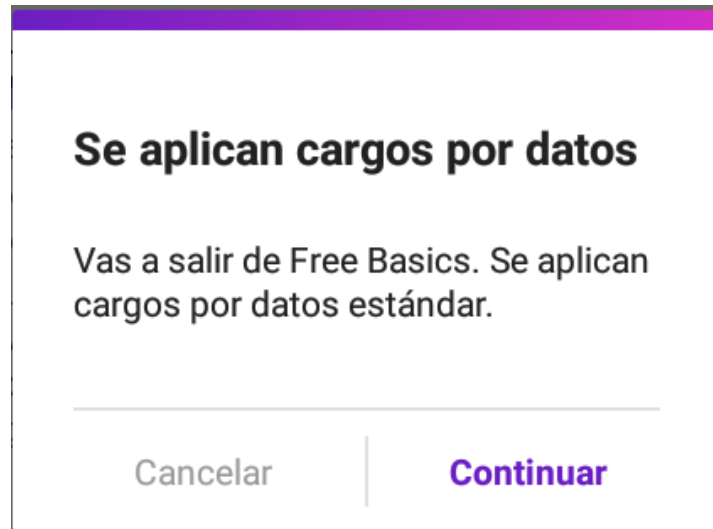

User experience & interface

For an experienced Android user, the app is relatively easy to use. The interface is not overly technical and the default free service offerings are presented in a clear manner. However, it is worth noting that the option to add more services is sort of hidden and it's not clear from the outset that the app offers additional services to those listed by default.

The list of services is sorted alphabetically, rather than being arranged according to categories such as education, information, news, games, etcetera. This could be confusing for a first-time user.

When you try to access information beyond the websites and services offered, you are told that data charges apply.

Se aplican cargos por datos

Vas a salir de Free Basics. Se aplican cargos por datos estándar.

Cancelar   **Continuar**

Connection, Accessibility and Language

Compared to other web-based applications, Free Basics operates slowly. The sites take more time to load and the connection cuts periodically (see below).

SE PRODUJO UN ERROR

↻ Tocar para reintentar

The default language of the app is Spanish, with an option to switch to English. It does not offer settings for local indigenous languages, of which there are many. It seems that the app is intended to be used by literate Spanish speakers, and some English skills are required (several sites' names are in English).

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.

Virgin Mobile -- the only ISP that offered it at the time of the study -- is not present outside of big cities, and its marketing campaigns appear to young people who want to use Facebook.

Screenshot of Mexican Virgin Mobile's website advertising Free Basics App. "Free Basics by Facebook. Surf Facebook without a cost with Free Basics. Connectivity for All". http://www.virginmobile.mx/es/free-basics/

Screenshot Mexican Virgin Mobile's Facebook account advertising Free Basics App. "We bring Internet to Everyone".

Terms of Use and Privacy Policy

The Terms and Conditions, as seen in the "How do you set up the app?" section, appear to be intended for people who do decide to sync their Facebook profile with Free Basics.

You are informed that when using Facebook for free, via Free Basics, you give Facebook permission to inform other people about your usage of this version of Facebook including the mobile operator (in this case, Virgin Mobile) and other "third party" companies. You also give them permission to inform other parties about your data usage and phone number. You allow Virgin Mobile to give Facebook access to your phone number, balance and promotional balance (see screenshot below).

Yet, in order to access Free Basics and its services, you are asked to agree to Facebook Terms of Use, its Data Policy and its Cookie Policy (see below), immediately after you open the app for the first time. There's also a fourth link if you want to know more about "privacy on Free Basics", which directs you to Free Basics' privacy policy, which is also an agreement between Free Basics users and Facebook.

The terms and conditions of using Facebook with Free Basics are fairly easy to understand, whereas Facebook's [terms],[5] its [data policy],[6] and [cookie policy][7] are long, complicated legal documents.

The privacy policy for Free Basics is divided in two main topics: privacy and security. The privacy part is fairly easy to understand, but the security one is a bit more complicated mainly because it explains security protocols, HTTPS, encryption, etc. Finally, the fact that by using the app you're agreeing to all of these documents and settings is quite complicated in itself.
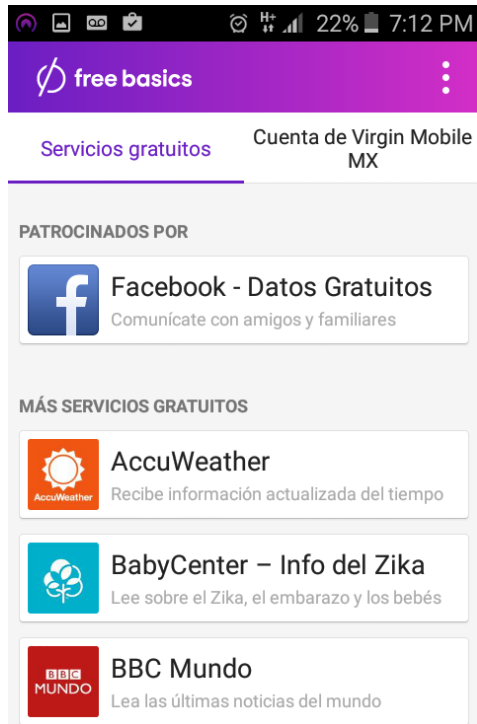
Content Analysis

The app offers access to 16 default sites/services, including Facebook and Facebook Messenger.

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[5] https://www.facebook.com/legal/terms

[6] https://www.facebook.com/about/privacy

[7] https://www.facebook.com/policies/cookies/

Only two sites are hosted in Mexico (OCCMundial, a recruitment site and Crea Comunidades de emprendedoras, an NGO for women entrepreneurs.)

Eleven of the featured sites are run by private companies (three of them -- Money Matters, Smart Business, Smart Woman -- belong to ChangeCorp, a US-based company). Three of the sites focus on providing Zika virus information, despite the fact that the spread of Zika has been relatively limited in Mexico.

Finally, in these set of default services there's no way to access information beyond what the app offers, as it doesn't have a search engine option.

Apart from the 16 default free services, there are 135 additional services that can be found by selecting the drop-down menu from the upper right-hand corner and selecting "Más servicios". It is not clear why some services are featured and others are listed more discreetly.

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