
Zero-Rating Plans Across Borders

Mehrab Bin Morshed

Bangladesh University of
Engineering and Technology
Dhaka, Bangladesh
0905022.mbm@ugrad.cse.buet.ac.bd

Neha Kumar

Georgia Institute of Technology
Atlanta, GA
neha.kumar@gatech.edu

Abstract

A large portion of the world's population lacks access to the Internet, ubiquitous as it is considered, either because it is not accessible, not affordable, or both. Zero-rating plans by Facebook are trying to reach this population with a pre-determined subset of the Internet. In this workshop paper, we motivate a study of Facebook's zero-rating plans across international borders, offering potential research questions. We also suggest alternate ways of approaching the design of such plans.

Author Keywords

Facebook; Zero-Rating Plans; Internet Access

Introduction

While technological advancement has enabled the global economy to progress, a major part of the world is still grappling with crises such as illiteracy, poverty, and gender inequality. These adversities can be perceived as both the catalyst and the outcome of yet another plight: *"exclusion"*. Exclusion poses a threat of eventual obliteration of the freedom and voice of the world's larger portion of populations. With the aim of empowering people with accessibility and knowledge, Facebook launched Internet.org in 2013 [9]. Soon after the launch of zero-rating plans by Facebook, the company was widely criticized for harming the concept of net neutrality. In an open letter, Mark Zuckerberg argued in

favor of the coexistence of net neutrality and universal connectivity [10]. Best called this step praiseworthy but directed his focus on the issue of the lesser availability of robust mobile connections around the world as an impediment to Zuckerberg's goal [2]. While the net neutrality debate continues, there is considerable scope for new research on how zero-rating plans by Facebook impact their target groups - individuals and communities in the developing world with little or no access to the Internet.

Background

In Bangladesh, a total of 23 websites were made available by Facebook through internet.org in 2015 [6]. These websites included several international and local sites and services in the initial plan. Telecom operator Robi has so far been the sole distributor of free internet services. An online survey shows [7] the current listing of websites and services that are available through the internet.org service in Bangladesh. While sites like Wikipedia, Ask.com etc are projected to be useful for enriching knowledge, several local sites listed such as Maya, The Girl Effect etc. target the empowerment of women by giving them the freedom to access and express themselves on the Internet. Also included are educational sites such as Shikkhok.com that are designed entirely in Bengali, offering varied content put together by freelance tutors.

Research Questions

The provision of zero-rating plans by Facebook in Bangladesh (and in other countries) brings us to ask the research questions below, so that we might critically reflect on what internet.org might mean to the masses that it actually proposed to target in the first place.

- Would the people who can't afford Internet access be comfortable navigating their mobile devices to

avail the services offered by Facebook through internet.org? What design challenges might this interaction introduce?

- For those in marginalized communities who can now afford Internet access thanks to internet.org, how might the services offered benefit them? Do they find them useful?
- Crossing borders, how do people in different countries respond to the idea of a 'poor man's Internet', having no say in what services could be made available to them?
- Does one solution fit all countries? How might different design strategies be employed to address the adoption of these zero-rating plans in different countries?

Research Proposal

Just as different scholars have approached the study of Facebook adoption across countries [5, 4, 1], there is a need to research how diverse communities across the world might adopt restricted versions of the Internet. Dye et al. in her study in Cuba found that to overcome the restricted version of internet imposed by the government, Cubans have developed for themselves an "offline" version of Internet to get their desired contents (Youtube Videos, mp3s, movies, news) [4]. Residents in Cuba collect this version of Internet through USB devices referred as "packages" [3]. Another study revealed that Facebook was used as a medium for the Egyptians to communicate and support mobilization online rather than in the offline world due to the lack of freedom of speech [1].

The use of ethnographic methods could be particularly useful towards building an enriched understanding of Internet preferences of underserved communities, who have thus

far largely been left out of the fray. Wyche et al. [8], in their study of Facebook practices in rural Kenya, highlighted that infrastructure constraints were a major impediment in terms of accessibility and connectivity. Participatory design methods may reveal new design implications for the targeted communities of zero-rating plans by Facebook and other potential actors in this arena.

The HCI Across Borders workshop will allow me to connect with researchers studying Internet access in other marginalized communities across the world. Collaborations with them could be instrumental in building an enriched understanding of net neutrality and poorer/limited versions of the Internet, which are being hotly debated worldwide today. This would also allow us to come up with new approaches to designing the Internet experience for the communities being targeted.

REFERENCES

1. Ashraf M Attia, Nergis Aziz, Barry Friedman, and Mahdy F Elhousseiny. 2011. Commentary: The impact of social networking tools on political change in Egypt's "Revolution 2.0". *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications* 10, 4 (2011), 369–374.
2. Michael L. Best. 2014. The Internet That Facebook Built. *Commun. ACM* 57, 12 (Nov. 2014), 21–23. DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2676857>
3. Ellery Roberts Biddle. 2013. Rationing the Digital: The Politics and Policy of Internet Use in Cuba Today. *Internet Monitor Special Report Series 1* (2013).
4. Michaelanne Dye, Annie Antón, and Amy S. Bruckman. 2016. Early Adopters of the Internet and Social Media in Cuba. In *Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing (CSCW '16)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 1295–1309. DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2818048.2819947>
5. Irina Shklovski and Nalini Kotamraju. 2011. Online Contribution Practices in Countries That Engage in Internet Blocking and Censorship. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '11)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 1109–1118. DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/1978942.1979108>
6. The Daily Star. 2015. Robi users get free internet access to 23 websites. *Bangladeshi Newspaper*. (29 May 2015). Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/fLTM0a>.
7. Online Survey. 2015. An Online survey of the websites and services provided by Robi through Internet.org. Document. (2015). Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/s11hSy>.
8. Susan P. Wyche, Sarita Yardi Schoenebeck, and Andrea Forte. 2013. "Facebook is a Luxury": An Exploratory Study of Social Media Use in Rural Kenya. In *Proceedings of the 2013 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW '13)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 33–44. DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2441776.2441783>
9. Mark Zuckerberg. 2013. Is Connectivity a Human Right? Status. (2013). Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/JKe1Bg>.
10. Mark Zuckerberg. 2015. Response to open letter regarding Internet.org, net neutrality, privacy, and security in India. Status. (16 April 2015). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10102033678947881>.