Connectivity with Strings Attached: The Hidden Cost of Free Internet in African Countries. The Case of Facebook's Free Basics

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Free Basics, a Facebook-developed mobile app that provides "free" Internet access to many African countries. However, this humanitarian initiative came at a hidden cost: lack of data protection for its users. This paper debunks Facebook's win-win narrative arguing that the type of internet connection African users are connected to, and who gains from it, also matters.

If you're not paying for it, you're not the customer; you're the product being sold."

– Tim O'Reilly's tweet, 2 Sept. 2010

Information and communications technology (ICT) is seen as a powerful tool for reducing global inequality in the Global South (Friedman, 2005). In this regard, ICT for development (ICT4D) has become the new buzzword in development narratives. Since the early 2000s, there has been pressure for African countries to develop ICT to empower Africa as an actor in the new digital economy (Cline-Cole & Powell, 2004).

Nonetheless, a debate has emerged recently over the interaction between ICT policies and power relationships in Africa, in particular over corporations' power to promote win-win partnerships with local users, government and private firms (Mann, 2017). This new narrative of "connectivity with strings attached" argues that, although bringing Africa online is a priority, the type of internet connection used in African countries and who gains from that connection also matters (Mann, 2017). This paper will be structured as follows: firstly, a brief overview of ICT4D in Africa will be discussed. Secondly, I will show how the "humanitarian" initiative promoted by Facebook has mainly benefited the "connectors" rather than the "connected". Facebook has done this by extracting what is widely recognised as the new digital oil, namely users' personal data. Lastly, an agenda of possible alternatives for a fairer developmental ICT policy in African countries will be laid out.

In the past decade, Africa has been labelled the world's fastest-growing ICT market (UN 2008), and the UN has devoted an entire special project to ICT4D called the UN Development Programme to engage private companies in social and economic transformations in Africa (Mann, 2017). Initiatives like the M-Pesa, a mobile-based money system developed by Vodafone in partnership with the UK's Department for International

Development, have played a great role in promoting a positive image of ICT4D in the African context (Gikunda, Abura & Njeru, 2014). However, some doubts have arisen as to the effectiveness of ICT4D, especially when private companies are involved. Omwansa & Sullivan (2012) point out that M-Pesa had profoundly negative effects on the Kenyan informal economy. Murphy, Carmody & Surborg (2014), show that ICT4D initiatives in Africa have had limited success in integrating African countries into the world economy. So far, a better connectivity system has had limited effects in helping African countries in promoting their economic development.

1. Facebook's Free Basics was originally called Internet.org. It was rebranded as Free Basics in September 2015. However, both terms are currently used interchangeably.

This case study focuses on Facebook's Free Basics[1], a zero-rating mobile app. Zero-rate initiatives are mobile apps that, in partnership with mobile operators, offer users access to specific internet content without charge. Accordingly, in 2014, Facebook released in Zambia one of the most successful zero-rating apps ever developed: Free Basics. Since then, Facebook has implemented a number of international and local partnerships. Free Basics is now available in 30 African countries (Internet.org, 2019). By exploiting a humanitarian rhetoric, Facebook promoted "free" connection to the internet in the developing world, aiming at reducing the digital divide in the Global South. However, this free access to the internet came with strings attached.

Free Basics acts like an internet gateway that hosts several free websites in partnership with Facebook. The number of free web pages and services available vary depending on the country; each local Free Basics version has seen Facebook engage with both governments, mobile carriers and private firms. The Free Basics initiative has been successful worldwide and Facebook claims to have connected 40 million people as of November 2016 (Internet.org, 2019).

By declaring connectivity a basic human right (Zuckerberg, 2013), Facebook sealed a number of deals to promote Free Basics and its "humanitarian" goal. These partnerships include major

mobile carriers like Aritel, Orange, Millicom, Vodafone, as well as African governments (Internet.org, 2019). At the international level, Free Basics has successfully cooperated with UNICEF and WHO to support Education and Health information services, like in the case of South Africa (UNICEF, 2018). Facebook has reported that, by bringing "free" connectivity to developing countries, they have empowered local people: Free Basics gave them access to educational programs, reduced unemployment, and increased entrepreneurial ventures. The long list of successful partnerships, as well as interviews with local users, are widely advertised on the Free Basics website (Internet.org, 2019). Despite its humanitarian goal, the Free Basics initiative has sparked criticism and some have gone so far as to label Facebook's initiative "digital colonialism" (Solon, 2017). Many regard user data as the new digital commodity to be extracted by corporations in developing markets (The Economist, 2017). Figure 1 provides an outline of the personal data protection coverage in Africa; as is evident from the diagram, there is no homogeneous approach to personal data protection and many countries have no legislation or constitutional protection at all (Deloitte, 2017, p. 5). Figure 2 shows the presence of Free Basics in Africa in 2019 (Internet.org, 2019). As one can see, the penetration of Free Basics has mainly featured in countries where personal data protection is not present or has not yet been implemented. In addition, even when data protection laws are in place, these are not always enforced, as in the cases of Angola, Madagascar and South Africa (Deloitte, 2017, p.8). Critics of the new digital colonialism centre their arguments around three potential threats for Free Basics users: violating net neutrality, abusing people's privacy by exploiting Big Data, and relegating users to a walled garden experience of the internet (Yim, Gomez & Carter, 2016, p. 218).

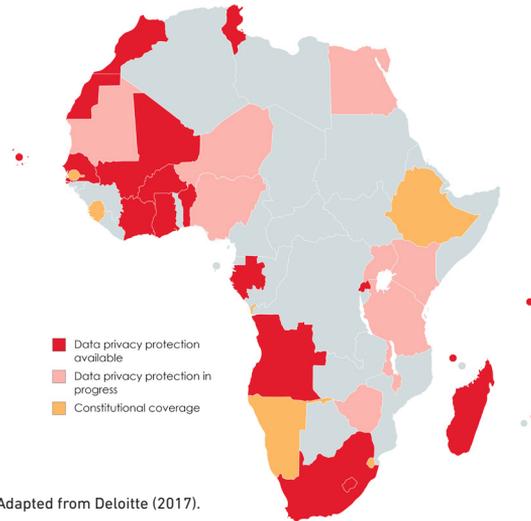**FIGURE 1** AFRICA PERSONAL DATA PROTECTION REGULATORY LANDSCAPE

Source: Adapted from Deloitte (2017).

FIGURE 2 WHERE FACEBOOK FREE BASICS OPERATES IN AFRICA

Source: Adapted from Internet.org (2019).

Net neutrality is the principle dictating that internet providers should treat all data on the internet in the same way, and not discriminate, block or charge websites differently by users (Galpaya, 2017, p.4). In the case of Free Basics, users cannot browse the internet openly, which is the main principle behind net neutrality. Instead, it offers a small set of services and websites that are prioritized in tiers. Upon launching the Free Basics app, Facebook access is prioritized compared to the other services like the weather or news. Further services like government, education and health information appear to be even more hidden in a third tier of the main menu (Global Voices, 2017, p. 3). This prioritization is indicative of the gatekeeping power that Facebook has over the internet in developing countries. Supporters of the Free Basics initiative argue that providing even limited access to the internet is better than providing no services at all. However, opponents have raised concerns over the pre-selection of internet services done by Free Basics, as this can lead consumers to prefer some services over others. This means that users could have to pay more to access competing web services outside of Free Basics (Global Voices, 2017, p. 3).

Connected to the issue of net neutrality is the problem of the user privacy and the collection of Big Data. To access Free Basics, users first must agree to Facebook's terms and conditions, even when the user does not have a Facebook account. By agreeing, users give Facebook permission to indiscriminately collect information about which third party sites Free Basics users access, when and for how long (Global Voices, 2017). Global Voices (2017, p. 7), a global anti-censorship network, reports that Free Basics user data is filtered through a Facebook-owned server where the information is collected and stored for 90 days. This has allowed Facebook to gather a vast amount of data on users in developing African markets, where Facebook is pushing to have an even stronger presence in the future (Global Voices, 2017). In addition, Free Basics' terms and conditions are

rarely explained in the local language and are often presented solely in English. This clearly poses a serious threat over the legitimacy of this data collection given that even basic English is not always widely understood, let alone legal terminology (Global Voices, 2017, p. 32). This lack of transparency has sparked criticism and led some governments to ban the Free Basics app and break their partnerships, as in the cases of Egypt and India (Bolton, 2016; Williams, 2016).

Lastly, detractors of Free Basics have pointed out that Free Basics builds a "walled garden" around its users. In this sense, it is significant that the only social media presence on the Free Basics platform is Facebook. This has a substantial impact on local businesses and individuals alike. Many companies do not have any incentive to build their own website at extra costs, finding it easier to market their products over Facebook pages. The same behaviour can be observed in online news sites. In Zambia, it is common for local news services to market their information by posting the contents on Facebook first, rather than using hyperlinks to external sites at an extra cost to the reader (Willems, 2016). The dominance of Facebook as a medium to exchange information, goods and services, has created a closed circle around the users, a "walled garden" around the use of a single social media site that has been increasingly seen as "the internet" by its users (Willems, 2016). This Facebook/internet synonymity has also been pointed out by Romanosky & Chetty (2018, p. 3) as they found many first-time internet users may misunderstand what the internet actually is.

In conclusion, connectivity channels in African countries are not neutral; power relationships do matter in shaping the political economy of ICT, especially considering the lack of homogenous legislation on data collection in African countries. If action on personal data protection is not taken seriously, African countries risk exploitation by powerful corporations that are capturing sensitive information in these emerging

markets. In addition, the recent allegations that Cambridge Analytica used Facebook data to interfere with the 2017 Kenyan general election suggest that the manipulation of sensitive data could pose a severe threat not only to users' privacy, but to democracy in African countries (Moore, 2018). So, what could a new "connectivity" agenda look like in the future? Firstly, the top priority is a broader, more comprehensive, and inclusive legislation over privacy and data protection. The legislative limbo in which African users are left is striking (Deloitte, 2017). Secondly, some have suggested that local governments could better implement alternative services by dealing directly with local network providers. These new partnerships could be in the form of free-access Wi-Fi areas, or free mobile internet data packages for low-income and rural households (Fripp, 2014). Nonetheless, these projects could only be effective by respecting users' privacy and net neutrality first. Those who have the power of connection "need to stop seeing the poor as mere beneficiaries of aid and start seeing them as economic and political agents in their own rights" (Mann, 2017, p. 30).

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