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Eliminate any kind of digital divide...

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Lately, Facebook has been in the news for its rapidly emerging 'Free Internet' programme called Free Basics. Free Basics is a Facebook-christened programme to foster Internet usage in 36 poor countries. The programme allows users free access to Facebook and some other online services on their smartphones. Free Basics is the new avatar of internet.org, Facebook's older programme which it has modified. It allows users free access to select apps and services like, you guessed it, Facebook. The thinking, perhaps based on experience, is that half of the users, once they start using Facebook and other services, will start paying for full internet access very soon. It seems to be an innovative and helpful programme, especially for users in low income countries like India. However, it goes against the grain of Net Neutrality, a principle that the regulatory authorities and Internet service providers have agreed to adhere to, at least in India.

To give a recap of this much-talked about Net Neutrality, it's a principle that most developed countries observe when it comes to accessing websites over the Internet. The principle of Net Neutrality ensures that service providers enable equal access to all websites/content (provided they are legal, of course), without favouring particular websites/content.

Now you can see why Free Basics is not in harmony with Net Neutrality, given that Facebook (along with some other content) is all that the users can access until they choose to go for a paid plan after which they can access all websites. Without a doubt, the Internet continues to be the biggest revolution of our times in just about every area – be it business, commerce, entertainment, news or sports. In my opinion, for the revolution to continue, it is important that it abides by the same principles that delivered it to this stage – which is free, equal and unhindered access for all users across the globe. Internet fosters creativity and outreach differentiating itself from other mass media.

My opinion is that corporates should avoid using their status, brand appeal, money, power to promote a system of biased access to their products and services at the expense of others. This is why you have marketing, web banners and advertisements, so users learn about your website or content and can choose to visit it if they sense a connect. There is no need to tinker with Internet accessibility.

Service providers and telcos should not act as gate-keepers of the Internet by determining who gets to visit which website. That should be the government/regulator's job. It is also the regulator's job to make the Internet easily accessible across all corners of the country. This involves creating the back-end and making the Internet affordable by lowering cost at all levels. In fact, Nandan Nilekani, ex-Infosys CEO, opposed Free Basics, with the suggestion that the government subsidize a monthly allowance of free mobile data for all users.

Until we reach that stage, it should be the regulator's job to eliminate any kind of digital divide in the country.