

Facebook's "Free Basics": For or against community development?

Moonjung Yim

University of Washington Information School,
USA

mjyim@uw.edu

Ricardo Gomez

University of Washington Information School,
USA

Corresponding Author.

rgomez@u.washington.edu

Michelle Carter

University of Washington Information School,
USA

mscarter@uw.edu

A recent discussion on a prominent community informatics (CI) listserv revealed arguments for and against the Facebook's Free Basics platform among researchers in the field. To continue and enrich the conversation, this study first examines the contrasting stances revealed in the CI listserv discussion and derives the CI researchers' major concerns about the platform. Under the light of these concerns, we then explore the nature of Facebook's Free Basics in relation to community development through analysis of one of the forefront services that Free Basics offers, i.e., Facebook. Specifically, we examine relationships between uses of Facebook and information technology (IT) identity formation and social capital. We argue that although projects operated by private companies may possess potential for supporting community development, much consideration is needed in embracing the technology solutions due to the risks and restrictions they can impose on its users. We also suggest the CI researchers to open the next round of discussion regarding ways to thoroughly assess possible flaws of Free Basics and help users of the platform make more informed decisions. IT identity is a new theory that can help shed new light on the challenges of using platforms such as Free Basics and their contribution to community development.

Yim, M., Gomez, R., Carter, M. (2016). Facebook 'free basics': for or against community development? *The Journal of Community Informatics*, 12 (2), 217-225.

Date submitted: 2016-05-13. Date accepted: 2016-05-13.

Copyright (C), 2016 (the authors as stated). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5. Available at: www.ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/1321

Introduction

Free Basics is a central platform to Facebook's Internet.org which is an initiative launched in 2013. It allows users to access and use Facebook and certain other websites for free without mobile data charges, made possible through Facebook's partnerships with local mobile operators in a number of countries (40 at the time of writing), mostly in Africa. According to the Internet.org website, the initiative was launched "in hopes that one day, everyone will be connected" ("Our approach", n.d.).

How realistic is the claim that free access to Facebook (and several other sites) will in fact help improve people's lives as the company claims? For over two decades researchers and practitioners have been trying to seek potential for information and technology for development, despite limited success (e.g. Gomez, 2013; Gomez & Pather, 2010; Heeks, 2008; Sey & Fellows, 2009). Is Facebook's initiative perceived by community informatics (CI) researchers as a solution that could lead to this long-awaited success in achieving community development through technology?

We address this question through analysis of one of the forefront services offered through Free Basics, i.e., Facebook. We first examine the online exchange about Free Basics on the CI researchers listserv (<http://vancouvercommunity.net/lists/info/ciresearchers>) and draw the CI researchers' major concerns about the platform. Then, we enrich the online discussion under the light of "degrees of self" (from information technology (IT) identity theory) and "forms of social capital" (bridging, bonding, and maintained) as we illuminate relationships between Facebook use and indicators of individual and community development, namely: IT identity formation and social capital creation. We conclude with implications for CI researchers' future discussion.

Community Informatics Discussion on Facebook's Free Basics

Between December 2015 and January 2016 there was a heated exchange on the CI researchers' listserv, discussing Free Basics and its contribution to development. The online discussion exhibited a conversation thread about Free Basics, and its relation to net neutrality, development, and privacy, involving those against and in favor of the platform. In our experience, the CI researchers' listserv has seldom had active threads provoking as much participation as the Free Basics discussion generated.

The opponents of Free Basics centered their arguments on potential threats to individuals from Facebook (the corporation) exploiting its position of dominance, abusing people's privacy, and violating net neutrality. For example, one participant expressed concerns about the giant corporation using its considerable influence to exert pressure on regulators to allow Free Basics services operation in India. This participant accused Facebook of "misus[ing] its special media/platform position to launch a political campaign in its own favour" and argued, "a new consultation on 'platform neutrality' should be launched" against this. Another claimed that "Facebook and other providers such as Google (e.g. [i]n the US and Africa) have provided free services in order to lock in customers and earn revenues from hav[ing] such customer basis." Still, another participant expressed concerns over the corporation's ability to manipulate individual and/or public opinion. This was supported by the claim that there was a study in the past where "Facebook manipulated the newsfeed of thousands of users to add and subtract

negative news, and the goal was to see if this affected the tone of the users' comments on their posts in general.” He/she added that “[i]f they can figure out how to successfully manipulate news feeds to shape public opinion, the possibilities are endless...” This comment seemed to imply ethical concerns surrounding Facebook’s ability to access and manipulate user created data—which is also related to privacy concerns. Moreover, one participant highlighted the importance of local control over content by asserting that “...community internet, by definition having some kind of verifiable local community controls should be able to be selective on promoting local content, and other kind of preferred content, as locally determined, in clear pursuance of community interest and autonomy...”.

In contrast, the proponents of Free Basics highlighted that the daily realities of people should be given higher priority than the discussion on net neutrality. One proponent argued that “[c]ommunity development is underpinned by the effective use of tools that enhance community reciprocity, the development of altruistic environs, the construction of commons[,] and ongoing development of social norms supportive of growth.” He/she added that “[m]y understanding of the Indian FB [Free Basics] initiative is it's all about developing social capital.” It was also claimed that “Free Basics provides free access to essential internet services like communication, education, healthcare, employment, farming[,] and more.” He/she added, instead of having an argument about net neutrality, we should “go meet the people who don't have internet, and think about how [we can] bring internet access to those people...” It was also pointed out that there was “[a] lack of any reference or research to the ‘on the ground’ aspects of the Free Basics project” in terms of usage pattern and gains, etc. Specific cases where Free Basics platform has provided benefits to the people in the developing world were mentioned. For example, it was commented that the “mKisan portal (<http://mkisan.in/>) [that was made] available to remote Indian Farmers via Free Basics...provides a wealth of information relevant to farmers...” Additionally, one participant insisted that “Facebook chose not to side with Netflix, Microsoft, [the] US Government and other corporate and foreign interests all pushing for ‘Net Neutrality’...—Facebook chose instead to help a billion people and Facebook is now the target of a very large scale and organised demonization programme as [a] result.” Taking a slightly different approach towards a more neutral stance, another argued that developing communities should “experience the pros and cons of these developments and make adjustments if needed,” adding that accusations leveled against the Free Basics project had yet to be proven.

In sum, opponents of Free Basics largely expressed their concerns around Facebook’s exertion of power affecting the internet environment with regards to net neutrality and potential risks to the users as the company might be able to access and manipulate information. In contrast, the proponents mostly focused on what could be gained at the individual and collective levels as a result of using the service and argued that decisions surrounding the use should ultimately be made by the people in the developing world.

Therefore, the major concerns of CI researchers illustrated in the listserv discussion emerges mostly around what the users of Facebook’s Free Basics may gain versus the risks that the users would be exposed to. We aim to examine the nature and potential contribution of Free Basics to community development under the light of these concerns.

Facebook's Free Basics and Community Development

Before we move on to address the CI researchers' concerns, let us see where the connection lies between the services offered through Free Basics and community development. We hereby focus on examining Facebook—the social networking site (SNS)—because it is one of the forefront services that Free Basics offers.

Facebook is an example of information technology (IT) based platform provided by a private company which is arguably intended for individuals to use and create network effects. It claims to create social benefit as more and more people join the platform to keep in contact and exchange information. In this regard, there is, at least on the surface, a common claim between Facebook (whether restricted to Facebook or expanded to Free Basics) and community development projects utilizing IT. They both intend to promote social capital through enhancing the quantity and quality of exchanged information—despite the arguable differences in underlying aim, i.e. business driven or development driven. Both Facebook and community development related IT projects have generated unexpected consequences that may or may not match with their original intentions of creating and promoting social capital. We believe this common ground shared between Facebook and community development surrounding social capital creation opens up a space for Facebook's Free Basics to be mentioned in community informatics discourse.

Before we delve into the nature and possible implications of Free Basics for community development, we will develop our analytical framework. We will first discuss IT identity as a theoretical construct and then describe notions of social capital. Doing so will offer a basis to evaluate the CI researchers' claims in favor and against Free Basics and the platform's potential contribution to community development.

IT Identity

To explore the topics related to Free Basics discussed in the CI listserv, we first refer to IT identity theory (Carter & Grover, 2015). IT identity formation begins with an individual recognizing the potential for self-expansion through a certain technology, although he/she might not be aware of the full consequence. It must also be possible for the individual to engage in an intense period of exploring and experiencing the technology. If, in this period, a person feels a rapid increase in his/her sense of efficacy, the person may be encouraged to embed the technology into his/her social world and, over time, this embeddedness could lead to IT identity formation. Once an IT identity is formed, an individual perceives use of an IT as integral to his/her sense of self and, as life's problems arise, he/she turns to the technology as a means to solve them. At that stage, the person is so empowered through use of the technology that, in its absence, the individual experiences losses of technological capabilities and competencies, as if a part of the self is lost.

While IT identity formation is individual, it is related to the social structures in which people are embedded. For example, where meaningful use of a technology extends to a group of people, it gives rise to observable patterns of IT use. These patterns constitute shared expectations which individuals internalize as IT identities with regard to their own behaviors. Hence, IT identity's expression and social impact extend beyond the individual, to the collective or social realm.

These processes of IT identity formation in individual and collective realms can also be observed in community development utilizing IT—empowered individuals through the use of a technology constitute as units that possess potential to reach community development by forming social capital at the collective level. Applying the notion of IT identity to community development field, the question for CI researchers can be: How can IT identity formation leading to individual empowerment translate to form collective behavioral patterns in a society which in turn bring about community development through social capital creation?

As we can see from above, IT identity theory entails the notions of individual and collective realms which provide explanatory power for the theory to be an analytical lens for understanding the potential implications of IT for individual empowerment and social capital formation in community development.

Three Different Meanings in the Course of IT Identity Formation

In a study that analyzes young adults' self-identification with cellphones, Carter et al. (2012) found three different types of meanings that undergraduate students formulate as the use of mobile phones become increasingly embedded in their lives: (1) functional meanings, focused on features afforded by cellphones; (2) relational meanings, focused on creating and maintaining social ties through use of the device; and (3) self-identification meanings, focused on the self as a unique individual whose cellphone use permeates all aspects of one's life. When an individual reaches self-identification stage, he/she would use a wide range of features across multiple social situations and relationships, talk of the device as being "part of me" and of being "lost" or "not real" without it (Carter et al., 2012). IT identity formation necessarily involves each of these sets of meanings, as a technology becomes increasingly embedded in all aspects of daily life. Functional, relational, and self-identification meanings represent the degree (or extent) to which a person views a technology as part of the self. Hence, we call the extent of embeddedness of a technology in one's daily life as "degrees of self" in IT identity formation.

Social Capital: Bridging, Bonding, and Maintained

In addition to IT identity, different forms of social capital can help understand the discussion of Free Basics and its contribution to development. In brief, social capital can be defined in relation to its purposes:

"Social capital...is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible." (Coleman, 1988, S98)

The underlying premise of social capital is that the social networks in which people participate have value. Given this, the formation and strengthening of social capital are key elements in community development. Putnam (2000) describes two different types of social capital: bridging and bonding. He illustrates bridging as inclusive, outward looking network which involves social connections among people from diverse backgrounds. Also, he describes bridging as formation of weak ties which are useful for spreading out information and reaching

out to assets that exist outside of one's close friends or family. The author highlights the benefit of bridging as "generat[ing] broader identities and reciprocity" (Putnam, 2000, p.23). He provides examples of bridging social capital as the civil rights movement, youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations (Putnam, 2000, p.22). In contrast, Putnam (2000) describes bonding as exclusive, inward looking network involving people from similar backgrounds. He links bonding social capital to formation of strong ties that reinforces people's own "narrower selves" and the connection which can be good for "mobilizing solidarity" and "provid[ing] crucial social and psychological support" (Putnam, 2000, p.22-23). The author mentions ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women's reading groups, and fashionable country clubs as examples of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000, p.22).

Ellison et al. (2007) on the other hand introduced the notion of maintained social capital, which illustrates "the ability to maintain valuable connections as one progresses through life changes" (p.1146). The authors argue that this dimension of social capital allows examining whether individuals can keep in touch with social network by going online after being physically detached from it. According to the authors, an example of population related to forming maintained social capital would be college students geographically moving away from home and trying to maintain social network that he/she has built in high school.

In sum, the literature has identified different forms of social capital, each with associated norms; bridging social capital is based on weak ties with external relations, bonding social capital is based on strong ties with family and close relations, and maintained social capital is based on the continuity of relations through life changes. These three forms of social capital complement the lens we use to explore Free Basics and its potential contribution to development.

IT Identity and Social Capital: Free Basics and Community Development

Using IT identity and social capital as analytical lenses, we can derive some implications for Facebook's Free Basics, to enrich the CI online discussion regarding the platform.

First of all, the potential contribution of Free Basics—and more specifically Facebook offered through the platform—to community development via social capital creation would largely depend on individuals' degrees of self in terms of IT identity formation. This is because an individual might be engaged in certain types of Facebook use related to certain forms of social capital depending on one's degrees of self. For example, individuals more closely associated with functional meanings compared to relational or self-identification meanings in terms of IT identity would be more active in types of Facebook use related to bridging social capital (e.g. consume information about what is happening in the broader world) compared to those related to bonding and maintained social capital (e.g. maintain perpetual contacts with close friends and family by using Facebook).

In a given society, as more and more individuals form IT identity (reaching self-identification level) and thus become empowered through Facebook use, the range of social capital created in society through Facebook can become more diverse. For example, if people in a society in general perceive Facebook as a mere tool (functional meanings), the society as a whole would likely be mostly engaged in activities that are related to generating bridging social capital. However, once more and more individuals give relational meanings to the technology and

identify themselves with it, the society would be engaged in increasingly broader set of activities that create bonding and maintained social capital.

Let us address some important tradeoffs and concerns in the use and perception of Free Basics as a community development tool. First, the way the project is designed might be restricting participants' choices by, for example, providing only a selective number of services, or influencing people to use certain goods or services over others. As mentioned in the CI listserv exchange, Free Basics has been criticized of harming net neutrality because if people are offered to access certain sites free of charge on data use, the owners of those websites earn unfair advantage over others (LaFrance, 2016). Moreover, although its creator has emphasized the openness of the platform in terms of anyone being able to add websites to Free Basics as long as they abide by the participation guidelines ("Free Basics platform", n.d.), Facebook nonetheless reserves the last word in reviewing and adding services to the platform. The issues are essentially pointing to the risks of participants losing freedom to make choices that best suits them in improving access to, and utilization of, information through ITs.

Moreover, Facebook was accused of using its own social networking platform to lobby India's telecom regulator to operate Free Basics in the country. The issue implies the possibility that participants of Free Basics might be exposed to information that reflects interests of certain stakeholders. This might result in participants making decisions that they would have made differently otherwise.

Privacy is an additional concern, especially as people disclose more and more personal data that is then captured and stored by Facebook. Though it is claimed that Facebook does not store users' personal navigation information from within the service beyond 90 days (Venkataramakrishnan, n.d.), Facebook the SNS has shown already that there is no limit to data storage: once online, there is technically no "delete" button—the postings can be reposted, shared, and screenshotted.

Discussion and Conclusion

Regarding the Free Basics discussion, the fundamental disconcert lies on the use of the for-profit platform of Facebook—even if embedded in a broader (though hand-selected) number of services—with the claim that it will help make a better world. It will certainly help Facebook increase its market share, number of users, and ad revenue, but will it contribute to community development? We can derive Free Basics' potential contributions and limitations in relation to development both at the individual (empowerment through IT identity formation) and collective (social capital creation) levels. To some extent we agree that Free Basics possesses aspects that generate critical concerns by individuals and society—restricting participants' choices, the implementer possessing virtual political power, and having potential privacy risks. However, despite its limitations, Free Basics is a platform of which use is largely determined by the participants (though controlled by Facebook). The preceding analysis shows that the relationship between Facebook use—a crucial element of Free Basics service—and individual and community development largely depends on individuals' IT identity formation and how they choose to use the technology. Moreover, from our analysis, we can see that at least Facebook offered through Free Basics has potential to provide a ground for participants to experience empowerment and a range of social connections. What is also worth considering is the way the platform allows people to exchange and create information that they perceive as

beneficial for them by using the services offered via the platform. In this regard, the platform leaves some room for participants to co-construct and pursue their own concept of meaningful empowerment and social capital creation. Therefore, it is difficult to say that the private company's initiative is completely incompatible with the creation of social good.

We recall that the CI listserv discussion centered around gains versus risks from using Free Basics. We hereby suggest CI researchers to open the next chapter of discussion regarding ways to thoroughly assess flaws of Free Basics and help users of the platform make more informed decisions. This might include providing information to the users about how uses of the platform may lead to positive or negative consequences, and that the social good intention may not necessarily result in actual social good for individuals and society. We believe such insight would be especially valuable for the participants in the 40 countries (at the time of writing) who are currently exposed to Free Basics platform. Completely rejecting attempts by business (Facebook, for example) to provide social good (through Free Basics, for example) might mean losing an important opportunity for benefiting different stakeholders, through contributions to strengthening social capital. Nonetheless, this does not mean uncritically embracing it either and it would also be important to note that the intent to do good is not enough guarantee that actual good will be done.

References

- Carter, M., & Grover, V. (2015). Me, my self, and I(T): Conceptualizing information technology identity and its implications. *MIS Quarterly*, 39(4), 931-957.
- Carter, M., Grover, V., & Thatcher, J. B. (2012). Mobile devices and the self: Developing the concept of mobile phone identity. In L. N. Lee (Ed.), *Strategy, adoption, and competitive advantage of mobile services in the global economy* (pp. 150-164), Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95-S120.
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1143-1168.
- Free Basics platform. (n.d.). In Internet.org website. Retrieved from <https://info.internet.org/en/story/platform/>
- Gomez, R. (2013). The changing field of ICTD: Growth and maturation of the field, 2000-2010. *The Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries* (EJISDC), 58.
- Gomez, R., & Pather, S. (2010). *ICT evaluation: Are we asking the right questions?* In Proceedings of the 4th International IDIA Development Informatics Conference. Cape Town, South Africa.
- Heeks, R. (2008). ICT4D 2.0: The next phase of applying ICT for international development. *Computer*, 41(6), 26-33.

- LaFrance, A. (2016, February 11). Facebook and the new colonialism. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/02/facebook-and-the-new-colonialism/462393/>
- Our approach. (n.d.). In Internet.org website. Retrieved from <https://info.internet.org/en/approach/>
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Sey, A., & Fellows, M. (2009). *Literature review on the impact of public access to information and communication technologies*. Seattle: Center for Information & Society, University of Washington. Retrieved from http://www.globalimpactstudy.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/TASCHA_Public-Access-Review_2009.pdf
- Venkataramakrishnan, R. (n.d.). Internet.org VP: We used the Facebook platform to lobby TRAI just like the people on the other side. *Scroll.in*. Retrieved from <http://scroll.in/article/778881/internet-org-vp-we-used-the-facebook-platform-to-lobby-trai-just-like-the-people-on-the-other-side>