

INTERNET.ORG – ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

by Arghya Dutta - Monday, March 30, 2015

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“Technology isn’t progress by itself. Instead it enables progress and a lot of the things that we care deeply about. But technology, it has to serve the whole of society. Connectivity can’t just be a privilege for some of the rich and powerful. It needs to be something that everyone shares and an opportunity for everyone.”

-Mark Zuckerberg, 1st Internet.org Summit, New Delhi

Recently, Mark Zuckerberg posted a photograph on his Facebook page announcing that the Internet.org service has been rolled out in India. As of now, it has been rolled out in six states in association with Reliance Communications in India, and the team plans to launch it in pan-India level within 90 days. So what exactly is Internet.org? How is it going to be helpful for common people? Let’s tackle them all.

How Did It Begin?

Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has always been part of many philanthropic projects. Internet.org is another one of his pet projects to improve internet accessibility. His company Facebook has always been involved in projects that connected people globally. Today, just over one-third of the population has basic internet access. Internet is yet to reach the section of people who need it the most, in order to stay updated with the world, get livelihoods, connect to other people, get access to essentials and many more. Just think, with a little reach, if Internet has had a huge positive impact, imagine the impact it will have on mankind when each and every individual has access to it. With this aim, Facebook established a division whose job was to see the feasibility of the plan - to provide internet to every single individual on the planet and connect the globe.

On August 20, 2013, Mark Zuckerberg launched the project and released a self-written whitepaper, explaining that this was just an extension of his previous works like Facebook Zero. He explained how he thought that connectivity in this era has become a basic human right, and that affordable internet services should be given to every individual- tools for health, education, jobs and communication. The idea was immediately lapped up by several companies. Companies like Opera Software, Qualcomm, Mediatek, Microsoft and many more immediately came together with Facebook in order to collaborate and share the technologies of their domains in order to achieve their aim.

New Ventures - Full of Hurdles

To see the dream turning into reality, they had to overcome some hurdles- increasing the affordability of data plans, increasing efficiency of browsing, tweaking the architecture and developing new business models around it. It was important for Facebook to get in touch with network operators and browsing companies, to know what all were the shortcomings in the plans and how it could be made viable for both common people and the service providers. And while all this was going on, this project was being written

off in public by several media giants. Technical websites found this initiative to be philanthropic, and gave positive feedback to it. On the other hand, tech editors did not find it altruistic. Many pitted this project as another fight between IT giants Facebook and Google, since Google was also working on Project Loon, which aimed to provide basic internet services to people free of cost via balloons. For this, Facebook CEO Zuckerberg had to appear in public with different presentations, every time emphasizing on the fact that his only aim was to create a '911 service for the internet'. It was in Mobile World Congress, held at Barcelona in February 2014, where his keynote presentation had a huge impact. He clearly charted out his future plans in public, announced partnerships with educational, governmental and communication institutes and the setup of an Innovation Lab with Ericsson in its headquarters. He also said that this initiative would develop a group of basic internet services that would be free of charge to use, which could be a social networking service like Facebook, a messaging service (remember Whatsapp acquisition?), maybe search and other things like weather. He emphasized that rolling out a bundle of these complementary services to users will work like a gateway drug of sorts — users who can afford to pay for internet services may not realize the internet's worth. An initiative like this would give them some context for why they are important, and that will lead them to paying for more services like these.

In October 2014, Zuckerberg visited India where Facebook had the first Internet.org Summit in New Delhi. He discussed on various issues regarding internet accessibility and gave vivid descriptions of the advantages free internet can have on common people. He declared an innovation competition for the same and asked young developers to develop a website/app/similar thing which would be beneficial on their platform. He also met Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to talk about Facebook joining hands with Indian government to work in this direction together.

Wave of Success

In July 2014, Internet.org took its first step in the African country of Zambia. Then on, there was no looking back. Internet.org now covers Tanzania, Kenya, Colombia and Ghana. In February 2015, Facebook announced the initiation of Internet.org in 6 states, with Reliance Communication being the network service provider for it. Facebook is looking forward to expand its services in collaborations with other network providers in different developing nations soon.

How To Avail Services of Internet.org

The services of Internet.org are available in 6 countries at the time of the article being written. To avail the services, one needs to get a carrier network which has collaborated with Internet.org in that country. Like in India, you need a Reliance connection, or in Ghana, you need an Airtel connection. All that needs to be done then is to download the app and all the services under it is available for free.

Why It Would Be Successful?

Mobile has become an essential and necessary commodity in today's era. Almost everyone, irrespective of social or economical differences, possess a mobile phone. But most network carriers have hideous data plans which are hefty and unclear to users. Airtel in India, for example, started rolling out a USSD service for Facebook, where one could post statuses and could like and comment at various posts. This attracted a lot of users which turned out to be beneficial for both Facebook and the network providers. Users were always in a winning situation. So now, with the arrival of Internet.org and the concept of free access to

basic internet services, user base would increase manifold. In this way, not only the brand value of the organizations would increase, but also, common people would be able to learn about things, express themselves to get heard globally, or as Zuckerberg dreamt of - connect to the world.

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