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FACEBOOK FREE BASICS: BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE OR DESTROYING NET NEUTRALITY?

Free Basics is an initiative undertaken by the American technology firm Facebook and six other companies to provide free access to 'basic' internet services in over 50 developing countries across the world, including in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, with the purported aim of bridging the digital divide between those who can afford internet access and those who cannot. In India, the Free Basics initiative was launched in February 2015; the civil society, including several internet rights activists, vehemently opposed the programme, stating that it was a violation of net neutrality. Net neutrality – the rules concerning the protection of which was repealed in the United States in June 2018 - is recognised as one of the primary safeguards of an open internet; the principle forbids internet providers from blocking, slowing down or charging more for specific web content or services, or creating a 'fast lane' for certain privileged web services which would stream or load more quickly than the rest of the internet. Four years after India outlawed Free Basics, this case study re-examines the controversy to analyse, step by step, the ethical implications of the initiative, which continues to operate in over 60 countries.

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