

Please find my counter comments to the responses given by telecom operators and activists on Consultation Paper on Differential Pricing for Data Services.

As a citizen of this country, it makes my heart leap to see the genuine concern and sympathy exhibited by telecom operators of India to the cause of introducing the digitally illiterate persons to the magic of the Internet and digital services.

Echoing the sentiments of not just the government, but of all citizens, practically all telecom service providers have underlined the importance introducing and enabling even poor citizens to access the vast ocean of knowledge that is the Internet.

WHAT OPERATORS SAY

Let us first congratulate our telecom companies for not just thinking about their bottom lines, but also stepping up to share the burden of introducing the digitally illiterate to the wonders of the Internet. (And unlike what the critics say, the operators are using the term 'Internet', not 'Free Basics' or 'Walled Garden', but the full Internet.)

As Bharti Airtel -- deservedly India's biggest telecom company -- says: "With approximately 1 billion people who are yet to be connected, a majority of customers are price sensitive. Therefore, **Internet access cost needs to be low** enough for its adoption by the masses.

"Toll free.. **enables first - time users and marginal customers, who cannot afford** Internet services, to experience them for free and later on, such users become regular data users, which is good for both the government and the industry."

Idea Cellular, part of the Aditya Birla Group, also echoes similar sentiments and has proven itself no less to its bigger peer in terms of its willingness to shoulder matters of social responsibility.

"With mobile broadband penetration in India around 7%, the top priority from Indian policymaker 's perspective should be to extend the **benefits of the internet** to the balance "1 Billion Indians" and make Internet available to all strata of society, especially the "**Unconnected ones**", " it has stated.

"**internet adoption** in India is a far more complex task. Besides providing mobile broadband coverage and making affordable handsets available to users, consumers need to be educated about the benefits of internet with relevant vernacular and regional content made available for their consumption," it goes on.

Like Airtel, Idea also suggest free trial access to the Internet for the unconnected masses.

"As the Indian consumers embark on the **journey of discovering the world of internet** and how it can transform their world, they will need to be educated. The demand for internet will be built up as it happens in every sector, through the process of trial packs... **trial packs at discounted or subsidized data rates will have to developed and promoted to consumers as they try and discover the se internet services**," it points out.

Similar sentiments are echoed by other telecom companies as well.

WHO WOULD OPPOSE IT?

Yet, their offer to provide free Internet to the masses has met with scathing criticism, that too from social activists, and that too in the name of saving the Internet -- the very thing that telcos are giving for free.

What explains this apparent dichotomy? Can we overcome this distrust and misunderstanding and bring everyone on the same page?

“MISLABELING”, “GATE KEEPING”

The main criticism against the telecom providers' offer for free Internet is that they are not offering the real thing, but only a part of it. At the same time, they are calling it digital inclusion, free Internet etc..

The activists believe that instead of getting enamoured of the Internet, such a policy of giving only 20 or 30 websites in the name of the Internet will actually put people off from the real thing. Of course, this also raises thorny issues about which 20 sites, on what basis they are selected etc..

THE VIA MEDIA

The problem is not that difficult to solve, and the answer too has come from within the telecom fraternity.

Aircel Cellular has shown the way. The company is offering free Internet at a reduced speed of 64 kbps for 90 days to all new customers.

The scheme is excellent for various reasons. One -- it doesn't hurt Aircel's revenues as anyone who wants to use Internet at the full speed will buy a commercial pack.

Second, it doesn't discriminate between websites and raise questions of net neutrality. All websites are accessible, and Aircel does not take money from website owners in return for the traffic. (This is different from Bharti Airtel's 'free scheme', which involved taking money from websites.)

And everyone, including the activists, are happy with Aircel scheme. Even the operator is happy because after experiencing the Internet at a slower speed, customers are much more likely to subscribe to a full pack than otherwise.

In other words, **the best way to educate** the people about the benefits of the Internet is to expose them to the Internet -- the full Internet in all its infinite possibilities.

So, the answer is obvious -- it is free Internet.

While Aircel has taken the option controlling the speed, Bharti and Idea can opt for giving full speed to its free customers, but put a restriction of the amount of data that can be consumed per month. For example, they can give 1 GB or 500 MB per month. Anyone who wants more than that has to pay.

There will, of course, be a slight increase in costs, but this can easily be overcome by

imposing a **special 'digital India' surcharge** on all Internet packs -- say about 2%. This money can be collected without any government intervention by the operator in return for providing all customers who have never subscribed to Internet packs free Internet (200 MB or 500 MB or 1 GB per month) as step towards digital India.

In fact, it is my opinion that the **TRAI should frame rules** to ensure that all operators -- and not just Idea Cellullar and Bharti Airtel -- offer free and full Internet (not just a few websites that pay them) to all customers who have never activated Internet packs before.

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