

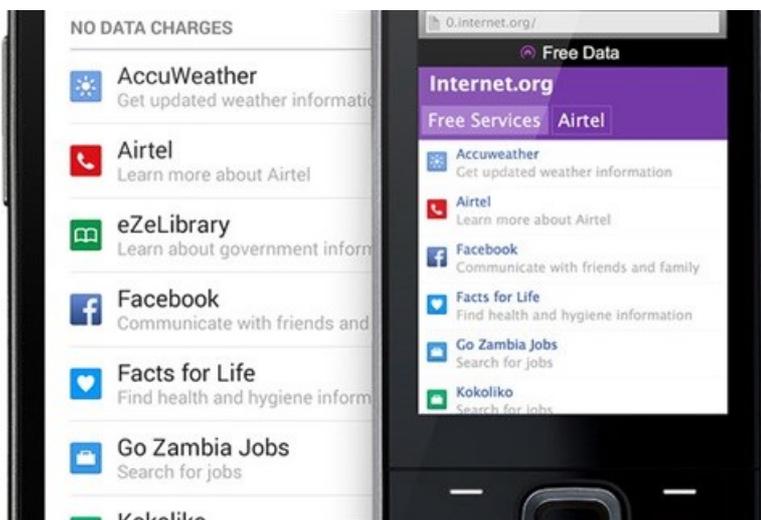
FB's mission: to get Africa online

By  Sindy Peters

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Consider how your life would change tomorrow if the internet was to be 'switched off'. Sure you could bear it for a week or so, but once the horrifying reality of, for instance, having to go into a bank kicks in...

Online banking is just one of the many joys the internet has heralded, beyond that it's created a scale of connectivity unimaginable just 25-30 years ago, pre-world wide web. Consider the benefits and improvements the internet has brought to your life; now imagine a world in which everyone has access to those benefits. In Africa, about 80% of the population remains unconnected* - part of Facebook's mission is to change this through Internet.org. Facebook's Chris Daniels spoke about the project at AfricaCom 2014 in Cape Town earlier this week.



Internet.org app

Benefits of universal internet access

Daniels, VP of Internet.org, explained that connecting the unconnected is mutually beneficial, "Getting people connected to the internet not only lets them improve their lives ... but it also improves all of us who are already connected. The reason it does that is that without these people online, we don't have access to their ideas, we don't have access to their innovation - the things that they care about. When they come online, it's better for all of us."

The benefits don't stop there. According to Daniels, citing a Deloitte study, there is potential for a 92% increase in African GDP, 44 million additional jobs, and a reduction in child mortality of 130,000 lives saved per year, should everyone in Africa have internet access. These numbers are reason enough to push for connectivity, but Africa faces significant barriers in the form of social access, affordability and infrastructure, explained Daniels.

Access barriers in Africa

Addressing these barriers, enter Facebook's Internet.org which offers users a free suite of services covering health, news and information, financial services, education, and communication. These tools aim to help users understand the benefits of the internet and help improve lives. Internet.org has already launched in Tanzania with Tigo, with Airtel in Zambia, and just this week, the project was launched in Kenya.

While a high percentage of Africa is covered by mobile data networks, there are still infrastructure gaps preventing people

from going online. In fulfilling its mission, Facebook is currently working on long-term R&D projects that aim to provide cost-effective alternatives to traditional infrastructure.

"We're actually building high altitude solar-powered planes that can soar at 60,000ft, be powered entirely by the sun, and provide internet access to people below. In the future, when these initiatives are ready, we're looking forward to rolling this out in partnership with operators," said Daniels.

Tackling Ebola

Daniels touched on Facebook's efforts in the Ebola crisis to emphasise the power of internet access. Beyond allowing every Facebook user to make a donation to organisations fighting Ebola on the ground via its platform, Facebook is also working with UNICEF to provide health information to users in affected countries covering what to do if they think they have Ebola, the symptoms of Ebola, and how to take care of someone who does have Ebola. Lastly, Facebook is working to provide connectivity solutions to the healthcare workers in West Africa.

"One of the ways that we're going to solve the Ebola crisis is providing better connectivity and better information to healthcare workers so that they can understand what supplies are needed where, they can perform contact tracing, they can have information on where help is needed most. We actually provided equipment so that healthcare workers can be more connected and help to solve this crisis more quickly," explained Daniels.

Concluding his keynote talk at this year's AfricaCom, Daniels said, "We think that if we all connect more people together, which we can do better together than we could do individually, we are going to improve many, many lives throughout the world, as well as improving ourselves."

For more info, go to www.internet.org. For more on AfricaCom 2014, go to www.africa.comworldseries.com.

*www.internetworldstats.com

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