

Zero-rating in emerging mobile markets:

Internet.org/Free Basics and Wikipedia Zero in Ghana

Genevieve Gebhart
University of Washington Information School

Zero-rating, Internet.org/Free Basics, and Wikipedia Zero

Zero-rating: The practice of subsidizing mobile data used for specific applications/services.

Sponsors can include telecommunications providers, platform providers, content providers, governments, etc.

Considerations in **development-oriented, digital divide-focused** implementation.

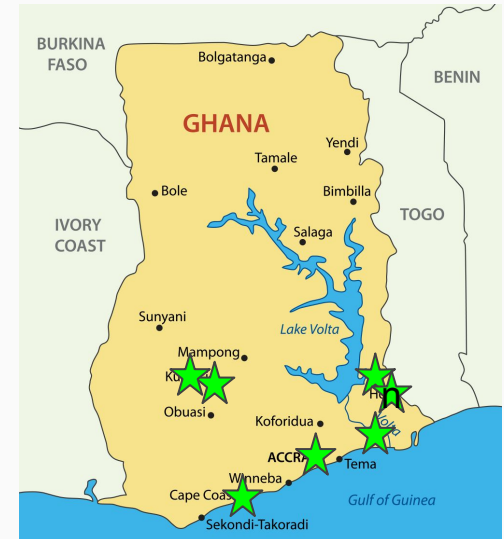


Motivations

- **Polarized discourse around zero-rating in developing countries**
 - **Perceptions:** Promoting Internet literacy? Or conflating “Facebook” and the “Internet”?
 - **User audiences and motivations:** Bridging the digital divide? Or exacerbating inequalities?
 - **Data-buying behavior:** “On-ramp” to adoption? Or “walled garden”?
- **Users’ (and non-users’) voices not present**

Methods and respondents

- 25 interviews in five cities, two villages in Ghana in Aug/Sept 2015
- Variation in gender, age, education, urban/rural
- To learn about:
 - Ghanaian mobile users' **perceptions** of Free Basics and Wikipedia Zero
 - What **motivates or discourages** use of Free Basics and Wikipedia Zero
 - What role Free Basics and Wikipedia Zero play in strategies for **choosing, buying, using mobile data**



Perception: Zero-rating as telco promotion

- **No conflation** among “Facebook,” “Free Basics,” “Wikipedia,” “Wikipedia Zero,” and “the Internet.”
- Instead, zero-rating applications seen clearly as **telco promotions**

Perception: Zero-rating as telco promotion

“In Ghana, what sells is what advertises a lot. So you see the way Airtel is doing it – ‘free Facebook on Airtel, free Facebook on Airtel.’ That’s how most of the telcos do here.”

Perception: Zero-rating as digital exclusion

- Ghana's global reputation as a center for email scam, fraud schemes
- The "Nigerian prince" stereotype
- Associated zero-rating with other Ghana-specific digital restrictions:
 - Amazon shipping
 - PayPal payments
 - Dating websites
 - Domain name registration
- Suspicious that zero-rated content was more restricted in Ghana than in other countries.

Perception: Zero-rating as digital exclusion

"It would be nice to find out, is it only the Ghana service of Free Basics that is limited in these ways? I am tempted to believe that it might be different in other countries. And if it's better in other countries, we want to tell them [Facebook and Airtel] to reconsider and give us more features."

Perception: Zero-rating as digital exclusion

“The high-level discussion of net neutrality is still growing. Net neutrality is not making a big dent here anyway. The buzzword here is digital inclusion. A lot of Ghanaians are still excluded from the digital economy.”

Motivation: Barriers to use

- Many Facebook and/or Wikipedia users among respondents - but only 3 active zero-rated app users
- Familiar upstream barriers:
 - Mobile broadband coverage
 - Electricity, rolling power outages, keeping phones charged
 - Phone ownership, particularly for women and youth
 - Language literacy



Data-buying: Mobile data repertoires



- Multiple phones and SIM cards taking into account:
 - Speed and area coverage
 - Network effects
 - Data “double bonus” deals
- Limited all-access preferred over unlimited partial access

Summary: Responses to the debate

- Zero-rating as **telco promotion** and even **digital exclusion**
- Considerable, **familiar barriers** to use
- Maybe “on-ramp,” maybe “walled garden” - **more than one** potential outcome to consider

Conclusion: More questions

- Need more empirical work - asking and observing users.
- **Advertising's role** in zero-rated application uptake, data purchase, Internet use?
- Role of zero-rating in other information environments? **Country- and region-specific nuances** that need to be considered?
- Range and number of users that zero-rated, text-based, mobile applications can **realistically** serve?
- How can supporters and critics of zero-rating **collaborate**?

Thank you!

Genevieve (Gennie) Gebhart
gennie@uw.edu
@gegebhart

