

Google, Facebook update contrasting plans to connect world

March 2 2015, by Joseph Wilson



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg arrives for a press conference at the Mobile World Congress, the world's largest mobile phone trade show in Barcelona, Spain, Monday, March 2, 2015. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez)

Sci-fi solutions or making friends one at a time? Google and Facebook want more people online, searching around and clicking on ads. And they are finding new ways to make it happen—from selling smartphone data plans, to using solar-powered drone aircraft as floating cell towers to partnering with telecom providers in the developing world to get people hooked on apps.

The two Internet giants gave updates on their efforts at the Mobile World Congress wireless show in Barcelona on Monday. And while Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Google Vice President Sundar Pichai say they might like to collaborate more, they are taking very different approaches to getting the world connected.

Internet.org is Facebook's fledgling effort to create new users in countries with little or low Internet use. Zuckerberg said Monday that it has launched apps with basic free services in six countries: Zambia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Colombia and most recently, India. Zuckerberg said initial feedback from telecom partners in those countries has been positive, and called the app an "onramp" for paid services.

"Even if they have never used Internet in their life, they have basic services they can use— communication, health, education and jobs— and that basically serves as an onramp so people can learn why they would want to pay for data," Zuckerberg said. "And we are finding that is growing paid subscribers and overall subscribers of the Internet."

The app is customized for each country and telecom operator so as to lure new users while not hurting the telecoms' already existing base of customers by offering free versions of services users already pay for. That is the reason why Internet.org does not include the WhatsApp messaging service, bought by Facebook last year.



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg speaks during a conference at the Mobile World Congress, the world's largest mobile phone trade show in Barcelona, Spain, Monday, March 2, 2015. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez)

Mario Zanotti, Senior Vice President of Operations at Millicom, said that Internet.org was working well for his company's business in Paraguay.

"Internet is an abstract concept. We need to bring it down to earth," he said.

Earlier, Pichai announced Google's plans to start testing the use of solar-powered drone aircraft as "floating cell towers" that could bring coverage to remote areas or even disaster zones. He also said that Google's "Project Loon"—which uses high-altitude air balloons to

provide coverage for rural areas—had advanced to the point that the balloons are expected to be ready in two years.

"The model is really beginning to work, so we have started large-scale testing," he said. "You can imagine a constellation of balloons and planes together, which we can stitch together to create a mesh of floating cell towers. That's what we trying to do.



Sundar Pichai, senior vice president of Android, Chrome and Apps, talks during a conference during the Mobile World Congress, the world's largest mobile phone trade show in Barcelona, Spain, Monday, March 2, 2015. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez)

"We will be flying these planes out in the coming few months. That's the next big step for us."

While both executives said they would be willing to work more together— Internet.org, for example, includes Google Search— they also made sure to underscore their differences.

"No one company can bring connectability at scale for 4 billion people, and we are happy to work with them to provide our services on Internet.org, so that's exciting for me," Pichai said. "Having said that, it's complementary, but what we are trying to do is different. We are trying to provide the actual backbone, the physical connectability at scale across the globe, so it is different."

Facebook is also experimenting with drones and satellites, however Zuckerberg said that the focus on high-tech fixes is "sexy" but not as important as helping local telecom operators grow their businesses.

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