

Indian regulator slams Facebook in row over free Internet

January 20 2016



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India's telecom regulator has attacked Facebook over an aggressive campaign to drum up support for its controversial free Internet project after being deluged with millions of comments asking it not to ban the service.

In a letter dated January 18, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) accused the social media giant of carrying out a "crudely majoritarian and orchestrated opinion poll" in its lobbying effort, entitled Save Free Basics.

Facebook has met a fierce backlash in India over Free Basics, which allows people who cannot afford the Internet to access selected websites for free via a mobile phone.

Critics including some of India's leading tech entrepreneurs say the service violates net neutrality—the principle that the entire Internet should be available to everyone on equal terms.

While not ruling explicitly on net neutrality, TRAI has halted Free Basics temporarily and could ban it altogether through an ongoing consultation on "differential pricing for data usage".

It asked for public submissions on whether, in general, telecom operators should be allowed to offer some data for free—which would include Reliance Communications, Facebook's mobile partner for Free Basics.

The regulator said the vast number of responses it received—16 million, according to Facebook—were largely irrelevant after the social network asked people to send automated pleas begging it to keep the service alive.

The template responses, sent by clicking a button online or leaving a missed call, implored TRAI to "support digital equality for India" and said "shutting down Free Basics would hurt our country's most vulnerable people".

In the letter to Facebook's public policy director for India, Ankhi Das, the watchdog said it had "deep misgivings" over the way the social

network had solicited the responses.

"Your urging has the flavour of reducing this meaningful consultative exercise designed to produce informed decisions in a transparent manner into a crudely majoritarian and orchestrated opinion poll," it said.

The nature of the campaign "if accepted, has dangerous ramifications for policy-making in India," it continued.

A Facebook spokesperson told AFP it had "attempted to cooperate with their (TRAI's) request" for specific responses and said a draft email used "the exact language from the four specific questions posed in the consultation paper".

India's 1.2 billion people make it a vitally important market for Facebook, which is still locked out of China, with the second biggest number of users outside of the United States.

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Citation: Indian regulator slams Facebook in row over free Internet (2016, January 20) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-01-indian-slams-facebook-row-free.html>

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