

Free Basics in Ghana

Researcher: Kofi Yeboah

Time period: March - April, 2017

This case study was conducted as part of a research project by Global Voices, an international citizen media organization. The findings described here, along with findings from five other countries and can be found in our final report, "Free Basics in Real Life: Six Case Studies on Facebook's Internet "On Ramp" Initiative from Africa, Asia and Latin America." Read the final report at <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2017/07/27/can-facebook-connect-the-next-billion>.

Additional screenshots may be found at:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B4CiTwxNUEN3aXppM3p4ZW9UMUk>

Overview

Free Basics entered the Ghanaian market in 2015, under agreements with three telcos: Airtel, Tigo and MTN. While Airtel and Tigo have continued to offer the service, MTN dropped the service in mid-2016.

ITU data shows that the percentage of individuals using the Internet climbed from 12% in 2013 to 25.5% in 2015. Mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants have been over 100% since 2013. This does not mean that all individuals have mobile subscriptions, but rather that an increasing proportion of the population has more than one subscription. Ghana has never been assessed in the Freedom on the Net report.

In Ghana, the most dominant telecommunication methods include mobile voice call, SMS, and internet-based messaging apps. WhatsApp (a product of Facebook) is very dominant, particularly among the youth. Ghanaians typically get their news from a range of media, including radio, TV and social media platforms, especially the Facebook pages of media houses.

Multinational telecommunications firms Tigo (operated by Millicom International Cellular SA, headquartered in Luxembourg) and Airtel (operated by Bharti Airtel, headquartered in India) offer Free Basics to all of their subscribers. In June 2016, official data from Ghana's National Communications Authority showed that Tigo had captured 14.37% of the mobile market, and that Airtel was next in line with 12.78%. MTN and Vodafone led the local market with 48.01% and 22.11% market share, respectively.¹

¹ www.nca.org.gh/assets/Uploads/INDUSTRY-INFORMATION-JUNE-2016.pdf

How to buy a Free Basics plan

To use Free Basics, a mobile user needs a basic Android smartphone. There is no additional cost to the plan, apart from a baseline subscriber fee that covers talk and text services. These are most commonly obtained via a pre-paid SIM card, which can be purchased at the sales point offices of the telcos or from one of the telcos recruited sales promoters.

To purchase a SIM card from any telco, one must present a photo ID. The salesperson will record your name, ID number, date of birth and location. Free Basics does not require any additional identifying information at the time of purchase.

How do you set up the app? What information or actions are required?

Upon installation, the app does not ask for your location information, but it is able to automatically pick up your data based on your phone number, which it uses for registration.

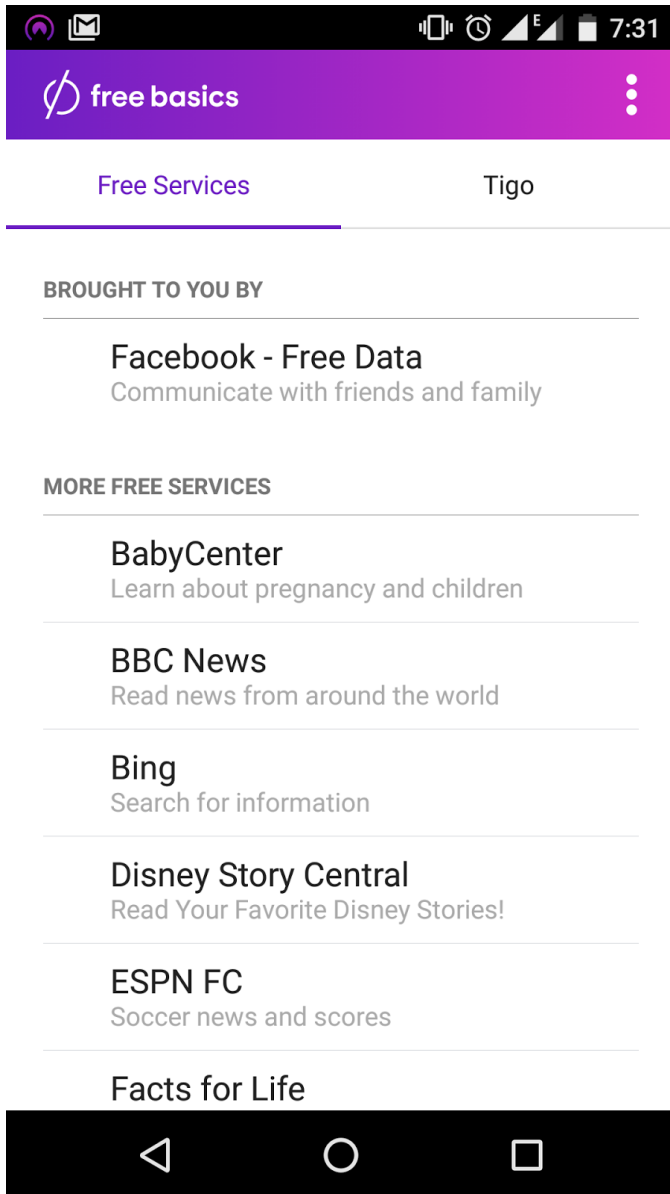
The app does not require you to create a Facebook account, but it does encourage you to do so, or to log into a pre-existing account. You can access other features of the app without using Facebook.

Upon installation, the app asks users to agree to Terms of Use for both Facebook and Tigo.² These are described in greater detail in a subsequent section.

User experience and interface

For an experienced Android user, the app is relatively easy to use. The interface is not overly technical and the free service offerings are presented in a clear manner.

² <https://www.tigo.com.gh/facebook-flex-terms>



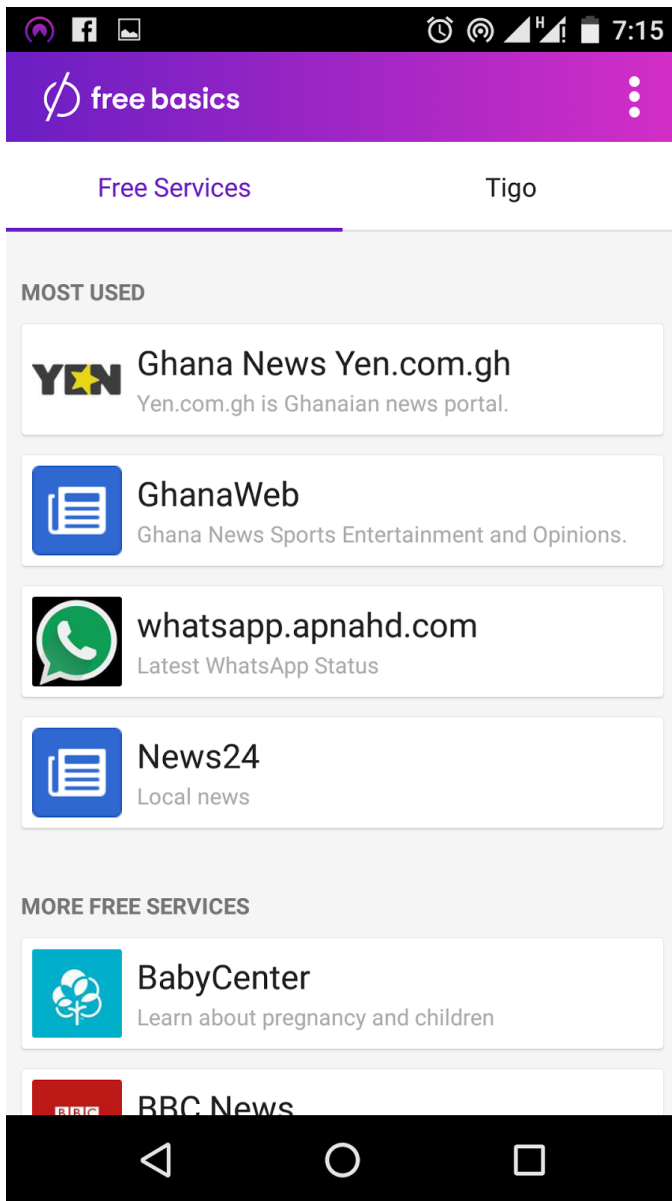
Screenshot of Free Services page.

The screen depicted above represents the featured “Free Services” that are readily presented to the user upon opening the app.

The screen below shows the first page of the full set of free services, which can be found by selecting the drop-down menu from the upper right-hand corner and selecting “More Free Services.” It is not clear why some services are featured and others are listed more discreetly.

When you try to access information beyond the websites and services offered, you are told you must buy a traditional data plan. For example, although Free Basics includes

access to the Bing search engine, nearly all results that the engine offers are not freely accessible for the user, as illustrated below.



Screenshot of Tier Two services.

Connection, accessibility and language

The Free Basics app itself opens a bit faster than other apps, and the connection remains steady without any cuts. All apps on Free Basics open a bit faster than the normal Facebook app.

The default language for the app is English. There are no options for other languages, despite the widespread use of regional languages including Twi and Hausa. The language setting is same in both Airtel and Tigo versions.

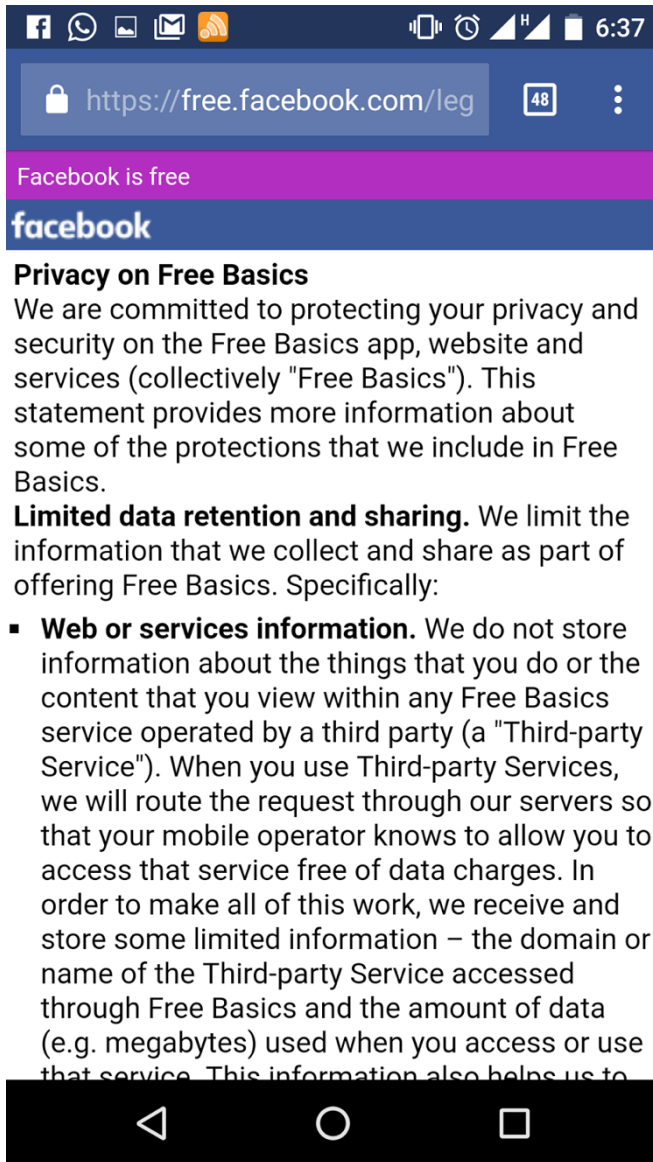
The app does not use audio. It would be difficult to use for individuals who are semi or illiterate, and for the seeing-impaired. For hearing-impaired individuals, all content is presented in writing.

Terms of Use and Privacy Policy

The Terms of Use (ToU) appear at the last stage of the installation process. The terms can also be found after the app has been installed, stored in the app itself. The terms are written in only in English. The terms describe the company's data collection practices as follows:

"We collect limited device, browser, and usage information when you use Free Basics. Specifically, we collect the type of device or browser and operating system you use, your app version, app ID and device ID, the time and date of your connection, your mobile operator, IP address, phone number, battery and signal strength, country, language setting, and the Third-Party Services you search for or use in Free Basics."

It later states that: "this means we collect the domain or name of the Third-Party Service accessed through Free Basics, encrypted cookies (for people who use Free Basics on a browser), and the amount of data (e.g. megabytes) used when you access the service."



Screenshot of Privacy Policy.

As a final step, the user is asked to agree to a Privacy Policy.

The ToU is not titled "Free Basics terms", but rather "Facebook terms". Though the Privacy Policy is designated as being for Free Basics, it is an agreement between the user and Facebook. This seems peculiar, given that one does not need to create a Facebook account in order to use the program.

It is easy to imagine that a first-time user would be uncertain as to whether the Free Basics app is the same as the Facebook app, as the terms are written for Facebook users.

Both policies are written in legal language that is not wholly accessible to the average user, and might be particularly difficult to understand for a first-time Internet user.

This case study was conducted as part of a research project by Global Voices, an international citizen media organization. The findings described here, along with findings from five other countries and can be found in our final report, "Free Basics in Real Life: Six Case Studies on Facebook's Internet "On Ramp" Initiative from Africa, Asia and Latin America." Read the final report at <https://advoc.globalvoices.org/2017/07/27/can-facebook-connect-the-next-billion>. Additional screenshots may be found at: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B4CiTwxNUEN3aXppM3p4ZW9UMUk>

This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC-BY-SA-4.0) License.