

# Free Basics in Kenya

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*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

Kenya became the third country in Africa where Facebook launched the Internet.org Free Basics app in November 2014 through a joint partnership with telecom provider Airtel (operated by Bharti Airtel, headquartered in India). Airtel offers Free Basics to all of their subscribers.

ITU data shows that the percentage of individuals using the Internet in Kenya climbed from 39% in 2013 to 45.6% in 2015. Mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants rose from 71.8% in 2013 to 80.7% in 2015. Official data from Communication Authority of Kenya showed that in the second quarter of 2016, Airtel had captured 17.6% of the mobile market, and that Safaricom led the market with a share of 69%.<sup>1</sup>

The 2015 Freedom on the Net report gave Kenya a score of 28 out of 100 possible points (with zero indicating a wholly "free" Internet and 100 indicating a thoroughly "not free" Internet) in their methodology, which measures Internet access, limits to online content, and user rights of privacy and free expression.<sup>2</sup>

The most dominant telecommunication methods people use to communicate are mobile cellular voice calls, SMS, fixed terrestrial line calls and internet via mobile data. SMS and WhatsApp are the most commonly used messaging tools (followed by Signal), with WhatsApp being the most dominant social media platform according to a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/business/2017/04/safaricom-market-share-hit-71-2pc-equitel-loses-study/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/table-country-scores-fotn-2016>

recent GeoPoll survey.<sup>3</sup> Geopoll data also showed that most Kenyans get their news through social media channels via smartphones.

### **How to buy a Free Basics plan**

Users in Kenya must have an Airtel line and a smartphone in order to use Free Basics. With a dual SIM phone, which is increasingly common in Kenya, one can switch data plans and download the app in order to use it with an Airtel line.

To make any SIM card purchase in Kenya, one must supply a National, Alien ID or passport (for non-Kenyans). An Airtel SIM costs about USD \$1. The relevant personal information that appears on an official ID is written in a SIM card/line application form at the Airtel customer service center. These exist countrywide. The SIM card registration process does not take more than one hour.

Once a SIM card is active, one must have an initial data plan or access to free wifi in order to visit the Google Play store to download the Free Basics app. This could present an additional obstacle for first-time users.

### **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. You can access other features of the app without using Facebook.

Upon launch, the app requires you to agree to multiple policies and conditions. You are required to agree to Terms of Use, a Data Privacy policy, and a policy concerning promotions sent by Airtel. These are described in greater detail below.

### **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. There is one version of the Free Basics app in Kenya, which allows the user to switch between English and Kiswahili languages for app instructions.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://blog.geopoll.com/african-millennials-mobile-usage-and-media-consumption>

Apart from the free services featured when you open the app, there are additional services that 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.

The list of additional services is very long and only appears sorted alphabetically, rather than being arranged according to categories such as education, information, news, games, et cetera. There is also no clear distinction between local/regional services and services based outside of Kenya or Africa.

There is no logical basis of the criteria used to list the existing services/websites. News, information, education, jobs and entertainment services are represented in no particular order. I found that to be disconnected from the PR around Free Basics, which lauds the service as a very functional one for those without internet access to find useful information. I expected more government service websites that a lot of Kenyans seek help from, such as the Huduma Center, which issues drivers' licenses and other forms of identification, or the eCitizen portal, which offers access to a wide range of government offices and services. These are not included.

Although Free Basics is a free service, the various applications within the app show the user links to external websites within the listed services in the app. These attract a data plan cost which the user is warned of through a clear alert that pops up when you click these links. If you do not have a paid data plan, you cannot access these services.

### **Connectivity, accessibility and language**

Free Basics opens much faster than other apps, even on EDGE connectivity (i.e. a 2G network.) The connection is steady, presumably because it is provided by Airtel, which is known to have a very stable connection in Kenya. The services in the app also load faster than they do with a regular Airtel connection.

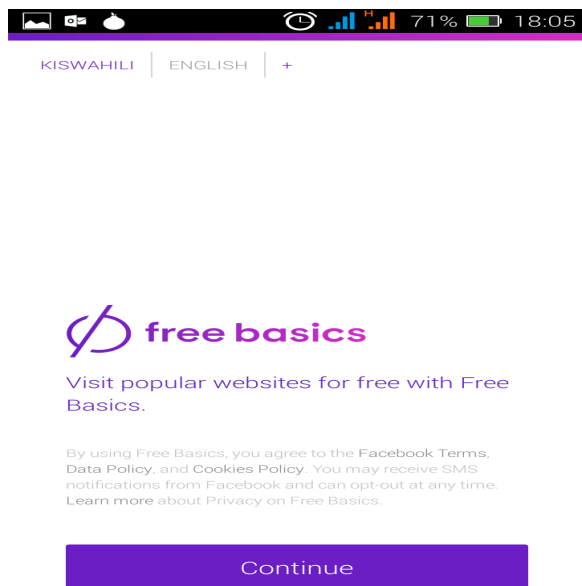
The Free Basics version of each site is different from the regular version of that site as it appears and functions on a regular mobile data connection. Most ads are stripped out as well as various motion-based multimedia.

Although the app instructions are available in English and Kiswahili, the default language for the app is English. Although Kiswahili is available as an alternative language of instruction (the app is available in a Kiswahili interface), most sites are not translated to Kiswahili for a user that opts to read content in that language. There are very few services in Kiswahili. Most are in English.

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

When one is launching the app for the first time, there is a summary with hyperlinks to the Terms of Use and data policy, which one can select and read if desired. The user however is not required to actively review or agree to these terms. Once you have launched the app, the terms are also available under the "Options" menu.



*Launch page for Free Basics in Kenya.*

The Terms of Use come bundled with a notification indicating that the user may receive SMS notifications from Facebook and can opt out of these at any time. However, the user cannot opt out of the SMS notifications at this point in time, as this information is conveyed alongside other policy information. Therefore, the user has to either agree or decline to both terms using a single 'continue' button. If the user declines, she will not be able to use the Free Basics service.

The first clause on Privacy leads to more pages of information on their data policy.

The ToU is not titled "Free Basics terms", but rather "Facebook terms". Thus the user agrees to the terms of Facebook, instead of Free Basics, which evidently does not have

a unique ToU of its own though it does have its own Privacy Policy. 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 both sets of 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. It makes very many assumptions: that the average user has the time to go through volumes of pages on terms. It also expects the average user to view the app as a very separate entity whose sole objective is to connect the un-connected but beneath the surface, it's not any different, it's just a tool to reach the previously hard to reach masses.

The Terms of Use and data policy are written only in English. Although English and Kiswahili are the official languages in Kenya, English is still very much the language for business in Kenya, Kiswahili is more widely spoken among the lower middle and lower income class Kenyans especially among the non- or less-educated. For the targeted semi-literate, who often only understand Kiswahili or other local languages (and who are among those least able to afford Internet access in Kenya) this choice in more use of English as well as the presence of more English based services heavily limits the utility of the Free Basics app.

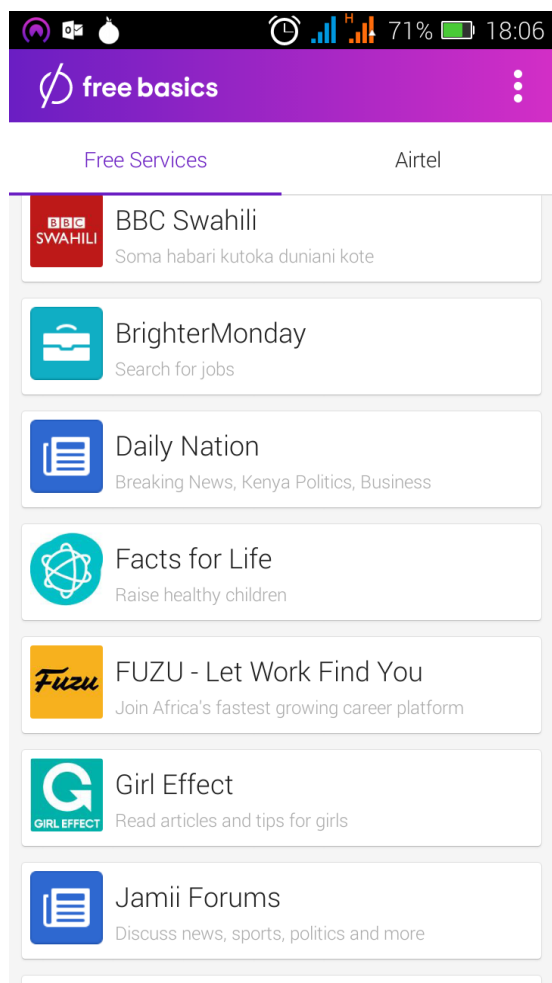
### **Content Analysis**

These are the services that appear in the main menu of the app:

Apps based outside of Kenya/Africa: Girl Effect, Messenger, OLX, Wattpad, Wikipedia, Facts for Life, Facebook, AccuWeather, BabyCenter, BBC News.

Apps based in Africa: Jamii Forums, SuperSport, BBC Swahili.

Apps based in Kenya: Brighter Monday, Daily Nation, FUZU



*Screenshot of Tier One services.*

Only three local services and three regional services are listed in the free services main menu of the app. They include:

**Jamii Forums:**

<https://www.jamiiforums.com/>

JamiiForums is a Tanzania-based social networking and messaging board website in East Africa. The website emphasizes its use of user-generated content to avoid penalties faced by traditional media for reporting issues in Tanzania.

The website has the latest Stories, Special Reports, News & Pictures, expert opinions, insights and trends mainly in Tanzania.

Jamii is a private company founded by Maxence Melo and Mike Mushi in 2006.

Language/s: English and Kiswahili

Content limitations: Although the content is available in English and Kiswahili, the language of instruction is English. There is in-app advertising. One can read the forum discussions as a guest, but one is required to create an account in order to participate in the discussions or to post any user-generated content.

**SuperSport:**

<https://www.supersport.com/>

SuperSport is a South African group of television channels owned by Multichoice and carried on the DStv satellite platform. It provides sports content in South Africa and abroad. It also provides sports coverage in many other African countries.

Ownership: Private

Language/s: English

Content limitations: The service has in-app advertising. Although the text content can be read from within the service in the app, All the videos (and they are quite a number of them) attract data costs. The service also has links to other Multichoice network channel sites which are not part of the service. Accessing these urls attracts standard charges. Interestingly, the 'cancel' option is greyed out with the 'continue' option appearing more visible and already highlighted. However, one can press 'cancel' to back to the Free Basics service.

There is also an option to visit the full SuperSport website. This also attracts data costs.

There is a section in the service that has quiz game competitions that users can participate in and win. On selecting one of the quiz competitions, one is required to agree to the terms and Conditions of the competition. A link is provided to the Terms and Conditions page, however, for one to read all the terms, a link is provided. Data charges apply if one wishes to read the full terms and conditions.

**BBC Swahili:**

<http://www.bbc.com/swahili>

International news service provided in Kiswahili

Ownership: The UK Government (national broadcaster)

Language/s: Kiswahili, English

Content limitations: Not all multimedia renders properly, such as images and embedded videos. The BBC service has a cookies policy through which they collect certain data about the user in order to enhance the user's future experience. This cookie policy is presented in English despite the service being a Kiswahili service. The user is therefore required to read and accept these cookies as part of the service. This is odd because their 'Terms of use' are fully in Kiswahili.

**Brighter Monday:**

<https://www.brightermonday.co.ke>

BrighterMonday.com is an East African jobs website. Founded in Kenya in 2006 and operating in all East African markets, BrighterMonday is committed to the goal of maximizing the opportunities for East Africa's job seekers and employers.

Ownership: BrighterMonday is privately owned and forms part of the investment portfolio of One Africa Media.

Language/s: Not able to determine. The whole service is behind data charges.

Content limitations: There is no aspect of the service that can be accessed free of charge within the Free Basics app. When one taps on the service on the main menu, the data charges prompt immediately appears. This negates the whole ethos behind the project as this service gives no value whatsoever to Free Basics users.

**Daily Nation:**

<http://www.nation.co.ke>

Daily Nation is a Kenyan independent newspaper and one the leading news publications in the country.

Ownership: The newspaper is published by Nation Media Group, a publicly traded company.

Language/s: English

Content limitations: The Top videos section of the news site is not accessible through the Free Basics app. Data charges apply for all videos on the site. Images of Google ads served on the service do not load. The link to a desktop view of the site also attracts data charges.

**Fuzu:**



<https://www.fuzu.com>

Fuzu is an online career and recruitment platform provides access to career advice, online learning and jobs in Kenya.

Ownership: Fuzu Limited is a Kenyan-Finnish company that launched the Fuzu employment platform in 2015.

Language/s: English and a bit of Kiswahili

Content limitations: Few limitations exist. The service has been fully customized for the Free Basics app including all the job ads that one can view without being a Fuzu member or being taken away from the app.

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