Facebook’s plan to offer free internet in developing countries ended up costing users, WSJ reports

Facebook partners with mobile carriers in developing countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Pakistan to give users free access to Facebook and a few other websites, but users have been unknowingly getting charged by their cellular providers, according to a report from *The Wall Street Journal*.

The service, called Free Basics, is offered through Meta Connectivity (formerly Facebook Connectivity) and is supposed to provide users with “access to communication tools, health information, education resources and other low-bandwidth services” at no charge. The program has been around since 2013, and as of last October, it serves more than 300 million people.

Pakistan has been charged the most for using Facebook’s “free” internet at a total of $1.9 million

In an internal report viewed by the *WSJ*, Facebook reportedly knew users were getting charged to use Free Basics for months and calls the issue “leakage,” as it occurs when paid services start overlapping with what’s free. And since most of the users the program serves are on prepaid phone plans, many of them don’t realize they’ve been getting charged for using mobile data until they run out of funds. The *WSJ* notes that users in Pakistan have been charged the most for using Facebook’s “free” internet at a total of $1.9 million, with around two dozen additional nations also affected.

The issue appears to stem from Facebook's software and user interface (UI), with videos at the root of the problem. Videos aren't supposed to appear on Free Basics, but glitches in Facebook's software let some slip through the cracks. Notifications that are supposed to inform the user that they'll be charged for watching videos also fail to appear. According to the documents viewed by the *WSJ*, Facebook found that about 83 percent of unnecessary charges come from these videos, which really aren't supposed to appear in the first place.

Facebook says it has since fixed the problem – for the most part. "We tell people that viewing photos and videos will result in data charges when they sign up, and we do our best to remind people that viewing them may result in data charges," Drew Pusateri, a Meta spokesperson, told *The Verge*. "The issue identified in the internal report that affected some of those reminders has largely been addressed. We'll continue to work with our partners to meet our obligations to these users and ensure accurate and transparent data charges."

As pointed out by the *WSJ*, Facebook's growth has largely come to a stop in developed markets and is only rising in low-connectivity countries. Facebook has been acting not only as a social site in these countries but also as an internet provider. It's deployed its own Wi-Fi throughout these countries and has also introduced Facebook Discover, a feature similar to Free Basics, which provides limited free data every day. India banned Facebook's Free Basics service in 2016, citing that it violates the values of net neutrality.

https://www.theverge.com/2022/1/25/22900924/facebooks-free-internet-less-developed-costing-users-wsj