Facebook Every Phone hints at a world without Apple

As Facebook's featurephone app hits 100m monthly users, low end devices are driving the market, with no response from Apple

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Facebook this week came out with a statistic to strike fear in to Apple's heart - the social network now has 100m monthly users of its Every Phone app, a figure that is pushing its estimated iPhone base (around $140m), and growing far more quickly. Every Phone is a simple Java app which runs on more than 3,000 varieties of basic handsets - and it represents a mobile future in which Apple (and BlackBerry and even some Android vendors) currently have no role.

This is not just about whether Apple should bring out a low cost iPhone, or whether iOS would work effectively on basic devices. It is about a whole new approach to the mobile experience, one which is being quietly created for the low end user bases where nearly all the handset growth will lie in the next few years, and which Apple has almost entirely neglected to acknowledge. Built around Java, Linux and the browser, the new mobile platforms will start at the low end, but will then become the norm - partly because a proportion of the users with featurephone or entry level smartphones will move up to more sophisticated devices, but more importantly, because there will finally be something that moves the whole mobile experience on from iOS/Android.

Microsoft tried to break those norms with Windows Phone, and did present a different approach to the smartphone UE, but it was still based around the same smartphone assumptions - a reasonable level of local processing power; a high speed, reliable connection; apps and downloads. Users are on the cusp of wanting something different, something that was not practicable when the iPhone made its debut - a cloud/browser experience which is not just a 'make-do' solution for devices with slow connections and small memories, but actually better suited to modern mobile usage than the iPhone approach. In that way, something that starts at the neglected low end will creep up to the high end users - the reverse of the usual process, and that will allow new players to grab the steering wheel.

Facebook would do well to focus on its opportunity here, rather than dithering over whether to work with Apple and Google on the smartphone, or create its own platform. Facebook for Every Phone launched in 2011 - a product of Facebook's acquisition of Snaptu - as a way to leap into the still-vast featurephone base ahead of Google and the others. It highlights the importance of the 'smart featurephone' category where Nokia is seeking to build a stronghold with Asha - handsets which are not too basic, but notably support Java plus a good browser (usually one like Opera Mini or Nokia Xpress which is kind to resource-constrained devices, doing most of its work in the cloud). Similarly, Snaptu's technology accelerates and optimizes the mobile apps server-side.

Nearly half of the 418.6m handsets shipped during the first quarter of this year were still featurephones, and they, along with ultra-cheap smartphones, cannot be ignored any longer if Apple wants to continue

to chase market share rather than revert to its old place in premium niches. This is where Facebook has the opportunity to define the new mobile experience, placing its social network at the heart of all the user's communications and media; this is Nokia's last big chance to regain its handset crown, now with Windows Phone but with its Xpress-based platform. Of course, low end Android implementations cannot be ignored, but five years from now, the Google OS will be looking old-fashioned. User habits will have changed, so that the emerging Linux-based platforms, many starting life on low end phones, will feel more natural to most consumers.

Among these are Firefox Mobile, which is being pushed by Telefonica, among others, on basic smartphones in high growth markets like Brazil; various Chinese efforts such as Baidu Cloud OS and Alibaba Aliyun; and Canonical's Ubuntu Touch. The last of these epitomizes the developing ecosystem, and now far that is from Apple's comfort zone. Based on open source software and based around HTML5, it will evolve into a cloud-based experience which will span mobile devices, PCs, TVs and other screens. Canonical is even adopting fashionable crowdfunding tactics to raise money for the Ubuntu Edge smartphone, which will dual-boot Touch and Android.

It may or may not achieve its goal of raising $32m in one month on Indiegogo, but that hardly matters - others will come along with their open software platforms and community funding/development techniques, and the traditional ways in which Apple, Google and Nokia have created, marketed and controlled their mobile operating systems will be entirely disrupted. Ubiquitous browsers and Java are close to being universal, and they are under no single giant's control. 100m Facebook featurephones are just the start of the next mobile era, and so far, Apple has not come up with a response.

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