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Free Wi-Fi Kiosks Were to Aid New Yorkers. An Unsavory Side Has Spurred a Retreat.



A man sang and danced to a song by the heavy metal band Slipknot playing on a LinkNYC Wi-Fi kiosk in Manhattan on Wednesday.
Credit Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

By Patrick McGeehan

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The Wi-Fi kiosks in New York were designed to replace phone booths and allow users to consult maps, maybe check the weather or charge their phones. But they have also attracted people who linger for hours, sometimes drinking and doing drugs and, at times, boldly watching pornography on the sidewalks.

Now, yielding to complaints, the operator of the kiosks, LinkNYC network, is shutting off their internet browsers, but not their other functions, while it works out a Plan B with city officials.

The switch, announced on Wednesday, is a case study in unintended consequences, commendable goals gone somewhat awry. Mayor Bill de Blasio's aim of providing modern technology to the masses ran headlong into the reality of life on the city's streets. After months of complaints from residents, businesses and other elected

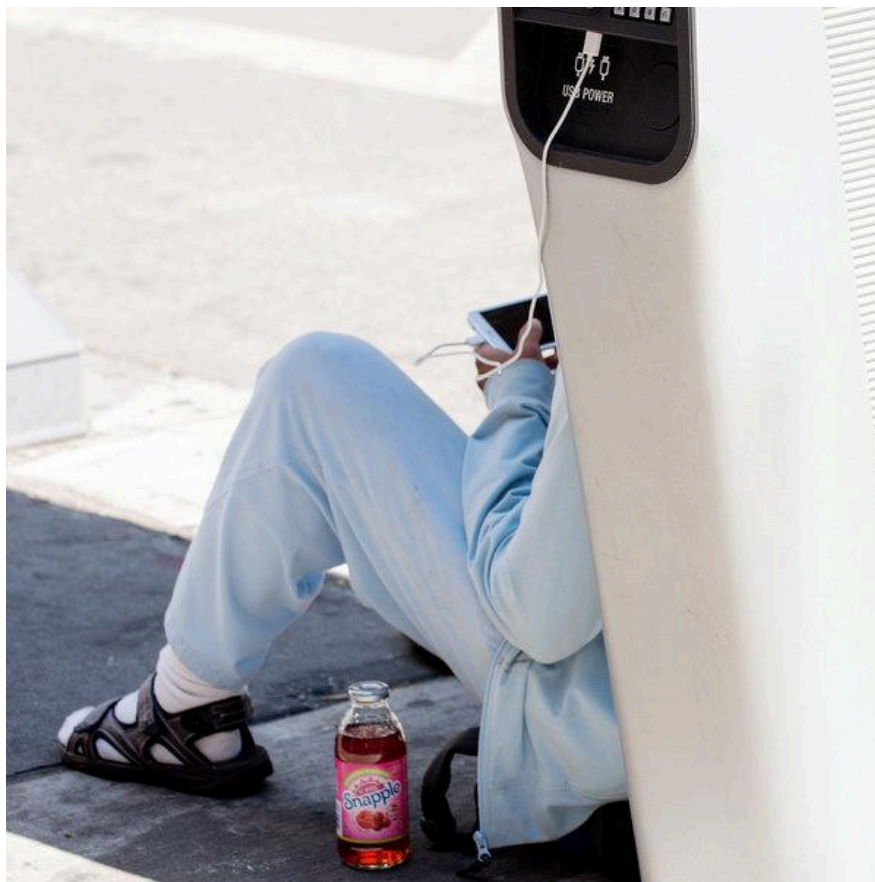
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officials, Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat, conceded that combining unfettered internet access with free Wi-Fi was a recipe for bad behavior.

The retreat comes just seven months after the mayor introduced the network amid much fanfare as a key plank of his promise to bridge the digital divide in the city. The kiosks would replace more than 7,500 public pay phones and bring free Wi-Fi and phone service to every neighborhood.

Users were expected to make short stops at the kiosks. But the sites quickly attracted homeless people and other idle users who took full advantage of the unlimited access to the internet to turn the kiosks into al fresco living rooms, watching movies and playing music for hours.

“People are congregating around these Links to the point where they’re bringing furniture and building little encampments clustered around them,” said Barbara A. Blair, president of the Garment District Alliance, a business group in Manhattan. “It’s created this really unfortunate and actually deplorable condition.”



The Wi-Fi kiosks were intended to replace phone booths and offer people a place to consult maps, browse the internet and charge their phones, like a man was doing on Wednesday on Eighth Avenue.

Credit Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

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Ms. Blair said her organization of Midtown merchants and property owners had welcomed the kiosks as an overdue replacement for increasingly outdated phone booths that were attracting vagrants and drug dealers.

“We’re a modern city; we should have Wi-Fi,” Ms. Blair said. “But when something has an outcome that you completely weren’t anticipating, then you have to go back and reconsider. Maybe other cities don’t have this problem.”

Councilman Corey Johnson, a Democrat whose district encompasses Greenwich Village, Chelsea and part of Midtown, said police officials had asked for the removal of “several problematic kiosks” along Eighth Avenue. He said he had observed people watching pornography on the kiosk screens with children nearby.

“These kiosks are often monopolized by individuals creating personal spaces for themselves, engaging in activities that include playing loud explicit music, consuming drugs and alcohol, and the viewing of pornography,” Mr. Johnson wrote in a letter last month to officials of the city and LinkNYC.

In a Sept. 1 meeting at his office, Mr. Johnson said, officials agreed to his demand for a moratorium on the installation of additional kiosks on Eighth and Ninth Avenues in his district.

But a spokeswoman for the mayor, Natalie Grybauskas, said the Police Department had not made any official request for kiosks to be removed. In a statement explaining the decision, Ms. Grybauskas said: “There were concerns about loitering and extended use of LinkNYC kiosks, so the mayor is addressing these quality-of-life complaints head on. Removing the internet browser from LinkNYC tablets will not affect the other great services LinkNYC provides — superfast Wi-Fi, free phone calls or access to key city services — but will address concerns we’ve heard from our fellow New Yorkers.”

Jen Hensley, general manager of LinkNYC, said the consortium that built and operated the kiosks had begun “removing the internet browsers while we look at ways to enhance the service.” She said those changes could include adding services, as well as bringing back the browsers with limitations on their use.

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From left: Lulu Patillo, Baybay Washington and Keisha James and watch a video on a LinkNYC network kiosk screen on Eighth Avenue in Midtown on Wednesday.
Credit Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

Ms. Hensley described the process of designing the kiosks as “iterative,” noting that several changes had already been made, including turning down the volume of the speakers at night and adding filters to prevent users from accessing pornography.

The latest change would not slow the planned rollout of the kiosks throughout the five boroughs, she added. So far, about 400 have been installed in the Bronx, Manhattan and Queens. Continuing to build the network is critical for the consortium, which is relying on the sale of ads on the sides of the kiosks. It has pledged to share at least \$500 million in ad revenue with the city over the first 12 years.

Despite the efforts to filter out objectionable material, city officials have continued to receive complaints about people watching pornography at the kiosks. The filters do not affect internet access using the Wi-Fi signals on personal phones or hand-held tablets.

Gale A. Brewer, the Manhattan borough president, who had demanded changes to the kiosks, said she was pleased to hear about the shutdown of the browsers, and noted that the free Wi-Fi was the true benefit of the kiosks.

“I don’t think anybody should be able to sit there and watch movies all day long,” Ms. Brewer, a Democrat, said. “People are pulling up sofas or chairs or what have you.”

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She likened turning off the browsers to the decision during the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s to block pay phones from accepting calls. All along Amsterdam Avenue, she said, crack dealers were using pay phones as business offices.

“When we changed the incoming calls, we got rid of the drug dealers at the phone booths,” Ms. Brewer recalled. “I don’t know where they went, but they were gone.”

Rick Rojas contributed reporting.

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