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Why are regulators silent?

FROM **CHUA SOO KIAT**

I see many similarities between SingTel's move to reduce its data bundle from 12 gigabytes to 2 GB and ComfortDelGro's move last year to increase cab fares.

First, both companies tried to present their new price/fare structure as fair. In Comfort's case, it said that its fare structure would better match demand and supply. The result was a fare increase for most taxi passengers.

In SingTel's case, it assured customers that they will enjoy faster download speeds as a result of the cap.

However, without a corresponding reduction in pricing, it would mean that each GB comes at a higher price than before.

It is the data, not the speed, that determines how much a consumer pays.

Second, their respective competitors exhibited similar behaviour.

Most of the taxi operators fol-

lowed Comfort's fare structure, while StarHub announced that it will follow SingTel, too. This is not unexpected, as SingTel and Comfort are dominant players in their respective fields, which is another similarity.

Incidentally, both companies are also Temasek-linked entities.

The authorities, too, responded in similar fashion: With silence, despite the complaints in the media.

The Land Transport Authority did not comment on the fare increase, especially on whether it was fair.

The InfoComm Development Authority has so far remained silent, too.

What about the Competition Commission of Singapore then?

By way of background, even if there is no collusion, dominant players in a market may infringe Section 47 of the Competition Act, which prohibits abuse of dominance, when they behave in ways unrelated to competitive merit that hurt consumers and businesses.

“Singaporean consumers, who are largely reasonable, need the regulators' views the most – as to what they think of the new data pricing structure.”

The fact that Comfort's and SingTel's competitors had followed, or announced that they will follow, the market leader are important factors that CCS should assess. But given its silence on taxi fares, we may likely see another non-response.

In contrast, at the time when the public were crying foul over unfair pricing of Design, Build and Sell Scheme flats, the National Development Minister suspended land sales under the scheme.

The heads of other regulators should be more responsive, too.

Fortunately, the Consumers Association of Singapore is following up after receiving three complaints, as reported in “CASE receives complaints on telcos' move to cut data plans” (June 14, online).

Singaporean consumers, who are largely reasonable, need the regulators' views the most, though, as to what they think of the new data pricing structure and whether it is fair.

Telcos must help us to understand data options

FROM **HENG ZHAO WENG**

A gigabyte (GB), when roaming, costs more than S\$23,000. That is no typo. The same GB, and more, is free if one signs up for an unlimited day plan for about S\$15.

As a phone subscriber, it looks like exploitation. As a telco shareholder, I would want to go after the chief executive officer for forfeiting such revenue, if the cost of providing that GB is really near S\$23,000, and subsidising those on the S\$15 plan.

A roaming subscriber has little legal recourse when he does not sign up for the right plan, or if he did so, is not connected to the correct foreign network.

It is not so easy to verify that one's phone is always configured to the preferred roaming partner. The active configuration is not easily visible on the phone.

Nobody would want to pay more for the same goods if, at the point of purchase, he is presented with the options.

It is like having the same two drink bottles in a supermarket, one marked S\$0.85 and one S\$5,000, and a shopper being obliged to pay S\$5,000 if he accidentally picks that bottle.

Telcos should not make money from their customers' unintentional mistakes. The regulator must compel telcos to get an effective acknowledgement from the subscriber at the point of purchase or consumption.

Consumers should not be complaining, either, lest one is the next to rack up a bill in the thousands.

The NEA's view on use of plastic bags

FROM **ONG SENG ENG**
Director, Waste & Resource Management
Department, National Environment Agency

We refer to the letter “Banning of plastic bags: What now?” (June 14).

The concerns over plastic bags relate to them being sent to landfills, where they can pollute the environment. In Singapore, most households reuse plastic bags to bag refuse.

The National Environment Agency (NEA) encourages reuse of plastic and other bags as part of our overall conservation efforts.

Our waste, including used plastic bags, is sent for disposal at the waste-to-energy incineration plants.

The disposal of plastic bags, therefore, does not pose an environmental

problem as they do not end up in our landfill. However, we do find plastic bag litter, which could end up in our drains.

Also, from a resource conservation point of view, excessive use of plastic bags is a waste of resources.

Hence, while the NEA does not advocate a ban on plastic bags, we support the efforts of retailers and environmental groups encouraging consumers to either bring their own bags or reduce the use of plastic bags.

We should practise the 3Rs (Reduce, Reuse and Recycle) for plastics and other recyclables.

Minimising waste and recovering resources from waste would help us optimise land use for waste collection and disposal facilities.

Teachers must be more than educators to children

FROM **NOEL CHIA KOK HWEE**

I read the report “Teachers feel more heat from parents” (June 8) with interest. Whether such parental behaviour is in the minority or majority, parents today are certainly different from those in the past. Families, schools and society are changing, too.

Parents strive to provide a safe, conducive environment for their children so that the latter can learn to function well in school and in the community. Parents today have to play multiple roles.

They continue to protect and nurture their children as society becomes more technologically advanced and complicated.

However, this increasing societal complexity means that parents find it more difficult to be totally responsible for all their children's needs.

Today, teachers, doctors, tutors, counsellors and institutions such as schools, tuition centres, clinics, libraries, places of worship and others are playing greater roles in our children's upbringing.

Although schools continue to assume more educational responsibilities, parents are first and foremost important educators of their children.

It is through parents that children learn how to live and relate to others.

Teachers now have some responsibilities that have historically been within parents' domain. They take on the responsibility of educating be-

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cause it requires knowledge beyond that which can be reasonably expected of most parents.

Even if parents possess the skill required to manage these responsibilities, they may not have time to provide formal lessons for their children.

Work commitments, career development and the need to provide for the family are sapping their energies and demanding their full attention. Hence, teachers' skills and knowledge overlap those of the parents.

If teachers' professional duties are to complement those of parents, they need a better understanding of families and how they function.

Firstly, since the efforts of teachers today correspond with those of the parents, they need to know their pupils' family backgrounds in order to be more effective.

Secondly, if teachers want to work with parents to help their children benefit from what they learn in school, and to stay safe from bad influences, they need to understand those responsible for children at home.

Lastly, with such understanding, we can be assured that our children are in the good hands of teachers.

Correction

● It was reported in “Driving tips for overseas trips” (June 20) that the Automobile Association of Singapore (AA) has planned an overseas driving forum aimed at Singaporeans planning to drive abroad. This is incorrect. AA is exploring such a plan, with no commitment yet. We apologise for the inaccuracy.

Clarification

● In the report “Japan's top goalkeeper in town” (June 18), a photograph of Japanese goalie Eiji Kawashima at Jalan Besar Stadium was published with the photographer's name omitted inadvertently. The photo should have been credited to S T He. We apologise for the omission.



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