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Predatory BT pricing under investigation

In a decision that could see BT forced to increase its broadband prices, the CAT (Competition Appeals Tribunal) has ordered telco watchdog Ofcom to carry out a second investigation into Freeserve's complaints of predatory pricing. The ISP filed the complaint with the Competition Commission last October, claiming BT had an unfair competitive advantage over other service providers. Its four allegations were:

- Cross-marketing campaigns between BT and BT Openworld
- BT Openworld having advance notification of BT Wholesale price reductions
- BT using its telephone census to the benefit of BT Openworld (Blue Billing)
- Predatory pricing by BT in the broadband sector

The CAT dismissed the first three points but ordered Ofcom to reinvestigate the pricing claims. Freeserve immediately claimed victory, not least because it was awarded costs against Ofcom for part of the decision.

When the complaint was originally filed with Ofcom, BT's Blue Billing system and marketing activities seemed to be Freeserve's main focus. But in the aftermath, the ISP insisted the three points that were rejected were "minor" and were "always secondary to pricing". "BT has been trying to squeeze out the competition; hopefully now it will be forced to increase prices," said Freeserve's spokeswoman.

ISP Tiscali has welcomed the new inquiry, claiming "BT has prospered at everyone else's expense". Freeserve's spokeswoman accused Ofcom of colluding with BT throughout the investigation. Ofcom denies the charge and now has until July to conclude its second investigation.

E-voting branded a success

This year's e-voting trials, which took place during the May local elections, have been branded a success despite doing little to target the problem of voter apathy. Nearly a quarter (21 percent) of voters in the 57 e-pilot areas used new methods to cast their votes.

Swindon alone recorded a massive 75 percent increase in turnout. Between 6am on 24 April and noon on 30 April, 6,895 locals voted via the internet, 2,792 by telephone, 330 by interactive digital TV and 163 at street kiosks.

But overall turnout throughout the UK saw no improvement, with only 30 percent of eligible voters bothering to show up. "It's always a bad idea to look for technical fixes to social problems. Election turnout would increase if citizens were convinced their vote would make a difference. Simply computerising the current system is unlikely to achieve this," said Ian Brown director at internet thinktank the Foundation for Information Policy Research.

The Royal National Institute of the Blind also hit out at the trials, saying basic design flaws of several council websites prevented some visually impaired people from voting. "The introduction of e-voting should mean that people with blindness and partial sight have new means to cast their vote independently and privately," said Julie Howell, digital development officer at RNIB.



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hit from all angles

The fight against spam, or unsolicited email, is intensifying, with three major internet firms – AOL, Microsoft and Yahoo – presenting a united front to battle the problem. The trio plan to spearhead a larger effort that will bring together other affected companies to share resources, technologies and strategies in the search for effective anti-spam methods.

“We are making a declarative and timely statement for the industry [to fight what’s become] an explosion of spam in the last several months,” said Nicholas Graham, a spokesman for AOL, the nation’s largest internet access provider. “We realise we can do much more by working together as team mates than by working as competitors.”

The group has laid out four initial goals, including protecting consumers from receiving junk mail by preventing spammers from falsifying sender’s email headers, and halting incoming email from systems determined to be vulnerable to unauthorised use through open relays, open routers or open proxies. Another strategy will be to try and stop the use of email services, such as Yahoo, AOL and MSN, to send spam to large numbers of recipients. That effort will concentrate on eliminating spammers’ ability to create fraudulent email accounts in bulk and other methods.

By joining forces, the three companies hope to open a dialogue that will include organisations across the industry to drive technical standards and industry guidelines that can be adopted regardless of what computer is being used. The process will be open, and other companies and groups will be encouraged to participate. In the UK, European laws, which should be in force by the end of October, will make unsolicited email illegal. But this will only tackle junk mail sent from within Europe, making partnerships like AOL’s, Yahoo’s and Microsoft’s vital for creating global agreements to stop unwanted messages.

Watch out

Wearable computers have been vaunted as the way of the future and communications expert E Ink has released its vision. The Massachusetts-based company has unveiled a prototype model of a 0.03mm-thick flexible display that can be used to display text and monochrome pictures, meaning you could soon be wearing your computer screen on your sleeve or rolling it up and putting it in your pocket. While its update rate of four times a second isn’t nearly fast enough for moving pictures, the ultra-thin display is a significant step towards the production of e-newspapers. More information can be found at www.eink.com.

MY TECHNOLOGY laurence llewelyn-bowen

Q. Mac or PC? Which do you use and why?

A. I have a PC at home, mainly for the kids. I’m quite a late adopter of technology and have only started to use it for my work quite recently.

Q. When did you last get angry with a piece of technology and why?

A. Web adverts are the most infuriating things this side of wonky shelves. You close one down and another one pops up – aaaargh!

Q. If you could invent a technological device for the future, what would it be?

A. Hmm... something that mutes [the BBC’s *Changing Rooms*] Handy Andy? To invent a time travel machine would be the ultimate. Besides, I think I’d be in my element in 18th Century France.



Q. What technological product couldn’t you live without and why?

A. Our HP All-in-One machine that prints, scans and copies – I’m even able to use it without switching on my PC. I’m doing a series of designs based on photos I’ve taken with my digital camera, and the print quality is exceptional.

Q. What’s your home page or favourite website and why?

A. My home page is my website, www.llb.co.uk, because I’m always updating it. As for my favourite website, that would have to be www.google.com. I know that’s boring, but it really is the most wonderful source for everything and anything you need. I also frequent www.imdb.com for all my movie news.

Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen runs an interior design company, he has been a regular on the BBC series *Changing Rooms*, and will take over as presenter for the next series.

Two more Palms hit shelves

PDA specialist Palm has added two handhelds to its range in the shape of the Tungsten C (left) and the Zire 71 (right). The Tungsten C is the company's first PDA to use Intel's latest PXA255 XScale processor, running at 400MHz; it is also its first device to offer integrated 802.11b wireless networking.

The Tungsten C packs 64MB of memory (although only 51MB is free) and has a 320x320 TFT (thin-film transistor) display. The screen is reflective to provide what Palm claims is its sharpest screen for both indoor and outdoor viewing.

The Tungsten C is available now priced £340 ex VAT making it pretty good value compared to similar Wi-Fi devices like Toshiba's new e750 which costs significantly more at £425 ex VAT.

Palm's second offering is quite a bit cheaper at £212 ex VAT, but the Zire 71 is intended for the consumer market. This target market is evident in the features on the 71, which include a built-in digital camera and an optional digital audio player module. "Multimedia became the focal point of our new Zire handheld," explains Palm's Ken Wirt.

The slider design used on the Zire 71 both reveals and activates the digital camera, so users can take snapshots wherever they are. Photos can be stored on the 13MB of free onboard memory or on a Secure Digital card.



Life in numbers: searching the nation

When MSN.co.uk released its internet search chart, there was far more interest in the bottom 10 entries than those at the top. The popularity of mainstream obsessions from soaps to Sars was rightly ignored in favour of the news that someone somewhere in our sceptred isle has been using the web to research the rules of naked petanque. So, how many of these have you searched for?

10 UK places with 'Z' in the name

9 Love of stones

8 Rules of naked petanque

7 Ham sandwich digestion

6 Hedgehog houses

5 Black pudding throwing

4 The Queen's Blue Peter badges

3 Monkey origami

2 Sausage calories

1 Walking with woodlice

Congrats to cable

Cable operators NTL and Telewest claim they have hit the one million broadband customer milestone, but many industry experts doubt the validity of that figure. NTL rarely reveals customer numbers, unlike Telewest which recently announced it had signed up 300,000 broadband subscribers. Only because of Telewest's figures can we get an idea of how many broadband customers NTL has (the remaining 700,000).

But that figure includes NTL's 128Kbps (kilobits per second) service, which many claim is not fast enough to be classified as broadband. In its latest report, OfTel declared services up to 128Kbps to be narrowband, while the Advertising Standards Authority ruled NTL's 128Kbps service could not be advertised as 'high-speed', but that it was a broadband service nonetheless.

"We include 128Kbps services because other countries do, so we need to make a like-for-like comparison," said an OfTel spokesman. But the watchdog's upcoming review of the DSL (digital subscriber line) market only looks at services over 256Kbps. "There is a level of discrepancy, but because most broadband services are delivered at this speed or over, we made this our starting point," added OfTel.

This lack of a single definition leaves some suspicious about the accuracy of the figures. NTL further complicates matters by refusing to reveal how many of its 700,000 customers are subscribing to its 128Kbps service.



Telewest hits 2Mbps

Telewest has announced the launch of its 2Mbps (megabits per second) broadband service, allowing home users to experience the "ultra fast" download speeds normally reserved for businesses. The ISP was inundated with volunteers when it announced trials of the high-speed service back in March, proving that demand was there. "High-speed surfing is like all good things in life – once you've had a taste you want more. While BT and other major ADSL providers offer a one-size-fits-all service, we recognise people

have different needs and provide a menu of cable services to suit," said Chad Raube, director of internet services at Telewest. "As with all new services, we've listened to the views of our customers and used them to shape a mind-blowing internet experience. Our 2MB trialists, (85 percent of which), said the service had met or exceeded their expectations," added Raube. Telewest now offers 512Kbps (kilobits per second), 1Mbps and 2Mbps services to which existing customers can upgrade for free.

Holiday roaming rip-offs

The Consumers Association has warned pay-as-you-go mobile users about the heavy price of using their phones abroad, advising them to use alternative communication methods. For prepay (or pay-as-you-go) customers, it generally costs more to make and receive calls abroad than it does for those on a monthly contract, according to the watchdog.

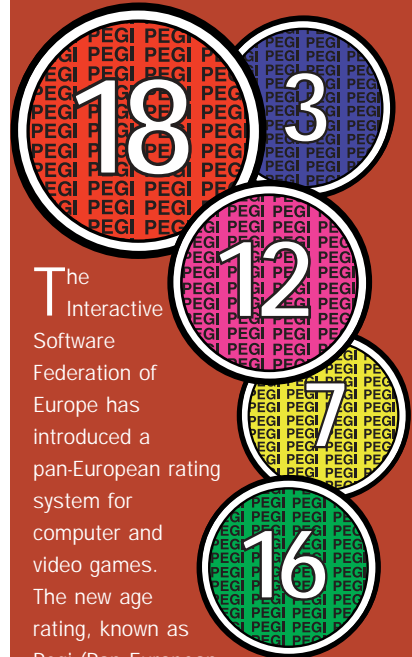
Which? Holiday magazine states an Orange prepay user will be charged twice the monthly customer rate to make a call home or receive calls from the UK while in Europe, meaning a five-minute call from the continent will cost £6 rather than £3. Prepay Vodafone customers are in for an even rougher deal, with a whopping £9.95 charge for a five-minute call from the US.

Telco watchdog Ofcom and the European Commission have been investigating these



so-called roaming charges for some time. Both are certain that current fees are too high but as yet mobile firms have not been ordered to slash prices.

Europe gets games rating



The Interactive Software Federation of

Europe has introduced a pan-European rating system for computer and video games.

The new age rating, known as PEGI (Pan European Game Information), will gradually take over from existing national systems.

The aim of the rating is to provide a universal way to check that the content of games is suitable for a particular age group. The rating is divided into two parts – an age rating and an indication of game content.

The age rating will be printed on the front cover and will let purchasers know which age bracket the title is suitable for. Age categories are: three and over, seven and over, 12 and over, 16 and over, and 18 and over. When deciding what age rating to give a game, the following criteria should be taken into account: violence, sex and nudity, discrimination, drugs, fear and bad language.

"The video games market is no longer dominated by titles aimed exclusively at children," explained Gartner analyst Paul O'Donovan. "As the industry moves into the mass market and appeals to a wider audience, any initiative that adds clarity to the effective national age rating schemes already in place is to be welcomed," he added.



JVC Mini Notes

JVC has revamped its Mini Note PCs adding two funky A5-sized models to the range. The company claims the MP-XP7230 and MP-XP5230 Mini Notes are the smallest PCs in the world to incorporate the low-voltage Mobile Intel Pentium III processor as its CPU.

Both models offer 933MHz clock speed, Windows XP Pro, USB 2.0 and come bundled with an external CD-ROM drive, port replicator and longlife battery. The MP-XP7230 comes equipped with a wireless LAN module allowing users to enjoy the benefits of hotspot connectivity.

The MP-XP5230 is on the shelves for £1,200 ex VAT offering 128MB of RAM and a 20GB hard drive, while the more expensive MP-XP7230 offers 256MB of RAM and a 30GB hard disk for £1,400 ex VAT. For more information on the MP-XP7230 see page 35.

Sars virus closes show

This year's Computex computer hardware show, held annually in Taipei, has been postponed due to the outbreak of Sars. Originally scheduled to run from 2-6 June, new dates are now being negotiated between the Taipei World Trade Centre and Taipei International Convention Centre. No date has yet been agreed.

The show's two organisers, TCA and Cetra (China External Trade Development Council), made the decision to postpone the show after conducting a survey of exhibitors and buyers to determine their thoughts on the issue.

Their opinions, coupled with a ruling by Taiwan's government to ban visitors from Hong Kong, Singapore, China and Canada, made suspending the show an obvious choice. Taiwanese residents returning from these areas are required to undergo a mandatory 10-day quarantine before entering the country, according to a statement released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Sunday.



Has silicon had its chips?

Researchers at IBM have used microscopic carbon molecules to emit light, a breakthrough that could replace silicon as the foundation of chips and lead to faster computers and telecommunication equipment.

The focus for the team was on tiny, tube-shaped carbon molecules, or nanotubes, which are more than 50,000 times thinner than an average human hair. The scientists were able to engineer the carbon nanotubes, not only to conduct current but also to emit light.

Already the foundation of today's high-speed communication networks, light could someday be used to process data in computers and other devices, as engineers run out of ways to cram more performance into silicon chips.

IBM's solid-state light emitter, said to be the world's smallest by the firm, is a single nanotube, measuring 1.4 nanometers in diameter and configured into a three-terminal transistor.

The research team detected light with a wavelength of 1.5 micrometers, one that is already widely used in optical communications, IBM said. Nanotubes with different diameters were capable of generating light with different wavelengths used in other applications.

News in brief

Apple music store a hit

Apple has sold over a million songs via its iTunes Music Store in its first week, with over half of the 200,000 songs available being purchased at least once. "We've become the largest online music company in the world," said Apple CEO Steve Jobs. Apple is now negotiating with European record labels.

Broadband beats dialup

While the majority of net connections are still dialup ones, broadband services are fast catching up. The year-on-year growth of dialup connections for February was 5.2 percent, while the increase in permanent connections was up by 252.2 percent for the same period. Broadband comprised 11.8 percent of total connections.

Festival for silver surfers

If you know anyone over the age of 55 who would like to use the internet, point them towards Age Concern. It's Silver Surfer Festival lets older folk sample what's available online with a free internet taster session at 75 locations across the UK. For more information see www.ageresource.org.uk.