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My Bit

## The Unholy Grail

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These days, an ennui besets Malaysian telecommunications. We go through the usual motions, the usual tirades abound and the usual suspects go about their business with the usual dismal growth prospects. All in all, we're treading water. And just when I was about to do a no-show on my article for this week, stories on Time dotcom and Jaring land on my desk. My reader is an educated sort of guy and already knows the possibility of a potential merger between the two. No scoop there, but on delving a bit deeper, the tedium vanishes and we are awash with news. I find a Time that's seriously I love. All these years a lonely spinster, Time has found its white knight in 3G – its savior from past ills. Market talk has it that British consultants are being paid RM6 million to just write the proposal on 3G deployment. Time plans to marry this technology. Instead, it should bolt for the door.

At the commonsense end of the spectrum, we have another drama being enacted as Jaring works on its wireless broadband deployment. Using some really nifty antenna technology, Jaring plans to light up roughly 200 square miles for what the overseas consultant's report would cost Time.

So there we have it. The story of the week, with our tax dollars working hard to provide excitement, intrigue, bad science as well as rocket science. And while we're still some distance from the denouement, one only has to peek at the national track record to predict how all this goes down.

Bad genes and bad science ensure the odds are stacked up against Time's 3G adventure. I diagnosed Time's ailments in detail a year ago. No one deigned to listen then and now the malaise is worse than ever. Adding something as fraught with difficulty as 3G to the cocktail can only ensure an unhappy ending to a business already gone awry. Spending RM6 million to write up a bad prescription is adding insult to the taxpayer's injury.

In stark contrast, the Jaring story could have brought unadulterated cheer if it weren't for the merger talks. It's almost as if we sometimes fear success and subconsciously shoot ourselves in the foot just when some good is about to happen.

Jaring intends using WiFi for nationwide wireless broadband coverage. This envisaged WiFi deployment emulates cellular and makes WiMax redundant before inception. Jaring is testing equipment to expand a WiFi Access Point footprint beyond that of a conventional hotspot – equipment that is literally rocket science. Manufactured by Altai, the long-distance WiFi Access Point uses a signal-enhancing algorithm the Altai folks developed for Nasa to enhance digital photographs taken and transmitted from Mars. So much for the "short range" stigma attached to WiFi in the past.

Whenever the cellular lobby tries to take a bite out of WiFi, it stresses issues pertaining to "distance" and "voice". Having successfully addressed the distance challenge, Altai recently announced its decision to make its equipment voice-friendly by dedicating different frequencies to voice and data. Hearing of these developments, it becomes clear that WiFi would whoop 3G simply because it's a lot cheaper to address WiFi's distance and voice issues than it is to augment 3G's serious data shortcomings. There is no getting around this, unless miracle of miracles, we somehow marry the two. This brings us back to the merger.

Dr. Mohamed Awang Lah, CEO of Jaring, explains the WiFi-cellular integration as inevitable.

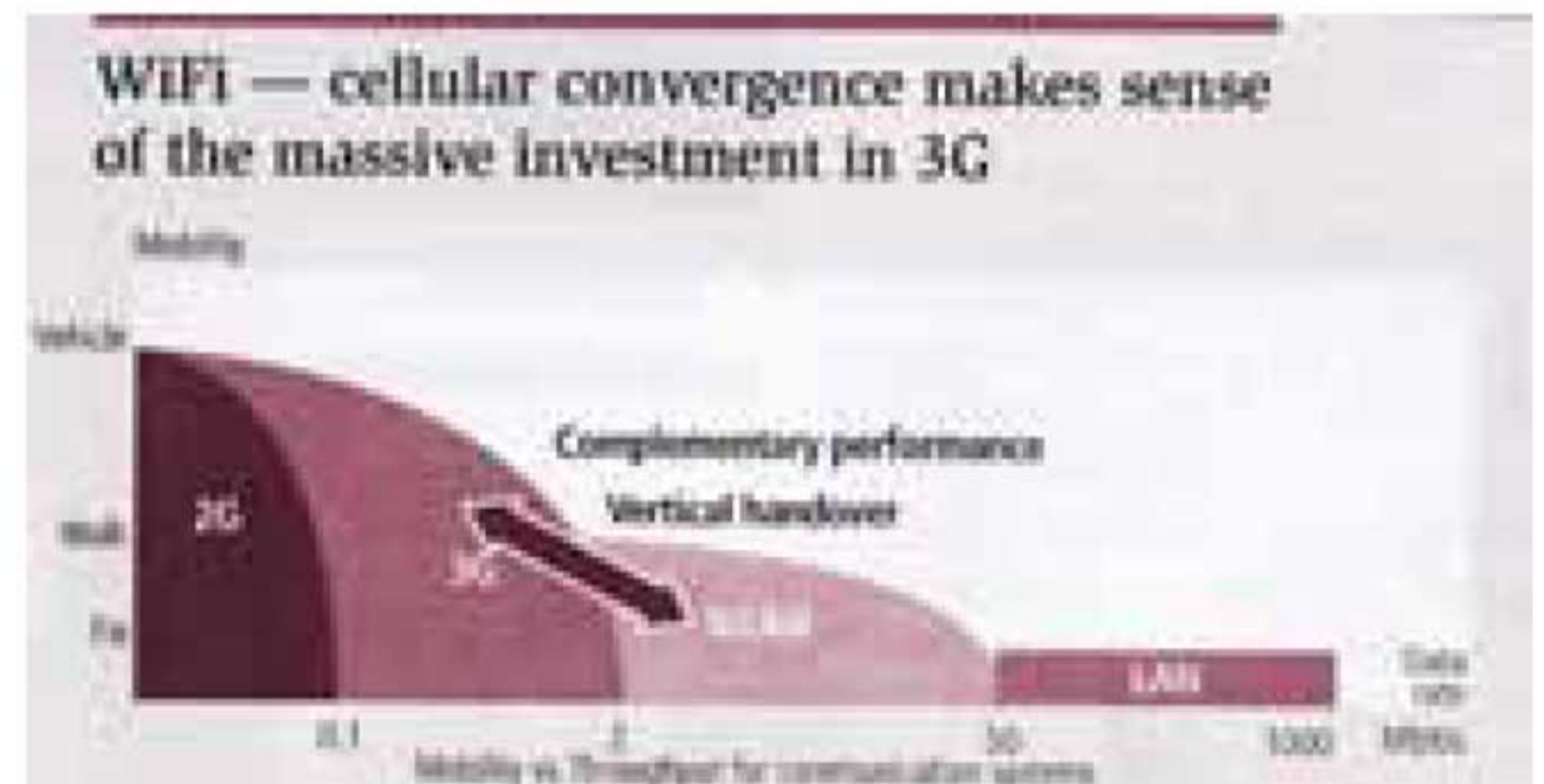
There appear to be two solutions. One, with the active cooperation of a cellular network called Unlicensed Mobile Access (UMA) and the other, independent of cellular operators called Handover Trigger Node Access (HTN). Mohamed already has a WiFi-GSM phone with HTN. In other words, his wireless broadband user can make a phone call over WiFi and then step out of range and continue talking while the call transfers seamlessly over to cellular. Try discussing this with Time and one is met with vacant looks.

If we accept the inevitable, then we accept that in the very near future, the only packets that matter are Internet Protocol (IP). And if IP

half-empty glass. Which, one suspects, is what will happen to the Jaring-Time merger, if not something a lot worse. I thought I would mention this again for the benefit of all those who give credence to these consultants. We would probably get better value if we just paid my neighbour's son to advise us every now and then.

Anyway, if the merger simply has to happen, then at least ensure that the people running the merged entity are those conversant with technologies that matter and are respected nationally and

| BY RAIS HUSSIN |



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packets are indeed destined for supremacy, then voice-over-IP (VoIP) aced traditional TDM switching technology. Another inevitability, we are told, is that wireless will trump wire line. So, in a wireless world ergo, VoIP over wireless broadband eventually makes mincemeat out of other packet-type air interfaces like 3G. Seeing the Altai magic and Mohamed's WiFi-GSM phone only reinforces such assertions. Good business thinking would therefore suggest Khazanah Nasional protect the Jaring initiative from contamination, that it let them do what they are doing while enabling and challenging them productively to deploy large-scale nationwide wireless broadband.

But the Malaysian establishment is enamoured with overseas consultants and consultants love mergers. It gives them something to do without actually doing anything and, of course, it makes them money, lots of money. While espousing the benefits of merging Time and Jaring, one such consultant mentioned it would be like merging two half-empty glasses to make one full glass of water. In a subsequent article, I wrote how my neighbour's pre-teen won't care through that disingenuous argument by suggesting that the laws of physics require that the merger of two half-empty glasses add up to one large

internationally. Today, the only such people one sees are at Jaring or Telekom Malaysia.

This leaves us with the happenings at Time. Enough said already and no need to belabour the point further. I nevertheless urge Time to keep away from 3G. Cellular per se is not a bad idea at all. But 3G is. Ask instead for a GSM licence and deploy GSM with EDGE (Enhanced Data for GSM Evolution), that is, 2.5G. After you decide on that or a similarly sensible solution, cut a deal with Jaring on WiFi – cellular cooperation. By taking that route, Time at least ensures that 3G's Unholy Grail does not short its already endangered lifespan.

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