16 November 2007 Astro has effectively raised its subscription fees again! This follows the June increase of about 15 percent. Astro has repackaged the previously basic-package or free-to-air satellite TV channels, such as Bloomberg TV, Al Jazeera, CCTVs, into &#65533;new neighbourhood&#65533; and will charge for them starting Nov 15.&#65533; Other than protesting the June increase (<u>Here's how to protest against Astro</u>), Astro subscribers need to think of ways to cut their subscription fees and punish Astro for its monopolistic greed (<u>Astro suffering from 'monopoly syndrome'</u>). The issues are ultimately broader and concern censorship, broadband Internet and the liberalisation of satellite and cable TVs. I reduced my Astro subscription bill by RM29.05 per month starting December. This is in addition to the RM5 reduction I made in August when I found out that I only need to subscribe to two &#65533;mini packages&#65533;, rather than the old minimum of three, so I dropped the mind-numbing cartoon channels. You should try that too.

Astro appears to be trying to squeeze as much as possible out of movie and Chinese-language channel subscribers. You can calculate the prices for various combinations of <u>Astro packages here</u>. The movie channels are expensive and costs RM35 if you subscribe to this &#65533;Super Package&#65533; alone. &#65533;Dynasty&#65533; Chinese Super Package is also expensive if you subscribe to it alone and will set you back RM40 per month. Subscribed together, they add RM51 to your monthly charges. Cutting both Super Packages (Movies and Dynasty) will save you RM51 a month. Astro is priced to get you to subscribe to both packages - dropping only Movies will save you only RM11, and dropping only Dynasty will save you only RM16.

Realising that this arrangement is becoming a burden to subscribers, Astro has finessed two other Chinese packages: &#65533;New&#65533; Emperor (RM22) and Gold (RM13). If you then add back New Emperor (some different channels than Dynasty) after cutting Movies + Dynasty, you will still save RM29. Be careful not to subscribe to both Dynasty and New Emperor, which are expensive and overlap substantially.

Movie channels, censorship and DVD conundrum

The question is whether you can give up Astro's expensive, repetitive and censored Movie package. Over time, that will depend on whether we can find legal DVD rentals in Malaysia. It is strange that illegal DVDs outlets are so efficiently marketed in mid-range malls, &#65533;pasar malams&#65533; and hawker centers, yet there are no major legal DVD rental outlets, physical or Web-based, where DVDs can be rented for essentially the same price as buying illegal ones.

It is either because the &#65533;triad&#65533; and the law enforcement branch are colluding to cultivate the illegal DVD market, or large crony corporations are trying to corner legal DVD supplies with the help of censors who control the release of DVD. Or likely both. Our censorship standards are completely outdated, in view of permissive Internet contents. By keeping silent on medieval censorship standards, we are aiding the growth of monopolies such as Astro, as well as both the legal and illegal DVD suppliers.

How to downgrade Astro

If you decide to downgrade your Astro subscription, here's how to do it.

First use this <a

href="http://www.astro.com.my/getastro/packages/default.asp" target="_blank"><u>Price Calculator</u> to decide on your new package. Second, have your Astro statement ready for reference to your account number. Third, call Astro at 1-300-82-3838. Do not use Astro's online form "Package Selection Changes". That web form will ask you to input all kinds of info, but Astro will simply ignore your downgrade demand. It is more reliable to telephone, although Astro's phone service quality is also patchy with long-waiting time, background noise, no music to indicate on-hold status.

Astro will charge you RM10 for each downgrade and none for upgrade. We should also protest this and make Astro charge RM5 for upgrade and downgrade. Is Astro saying that no work is involved when upgrading?

Astro MAX: The good and the bad

It may be worthwhile to spend RM850 to upgrade to an Astro MAX digital recorder. It allows you to maximise the value of your packages, such as recording odd-hour children, documentary, sports, and (surprisingly) substantial amount of cooking and traveling programmes in the basic packages.

But Astro Max is not as smooth as advertised. Controls are sluggish and erratic. Menu information updates are slow and can be incomplete. Recorded programmes can go missing mysteriously or its menu can get mixed up. So be prepared for a little headache.

Liberalise satellite reception and broadband Internet

Having punished Astro, the long-term solution is still to call for the liberalisation of satellite reception, local cable TV and broadband Internet.

Check out this <u>LyngSat page</u>, and you will see over 60 satellites broadcasting TV over the C band (large antenna dish) and Ku band (small dish like Astro) over Asia, about one-third of which can be received in Malaysia either encrypted or free-to-air. For more information, search Google for <u>"free to air satellite asia"</u>. With the variety of satellite programmes, a liberalised network of local cable companies and a new habit of apartments installing their own centralised antennas and amplifiers will deliver wide programme choices efficiently to Malaysian families.

Many of the satellite programmes are also available for free over broadband Internet. However, because of Telekom Malaysia"s monopoly, our broadband penetration rate is staying around the abysmal 3 percent. <u>Read this critique</u> by a foreign academic, on pages 9 to 11. Problem and solution: Both are political

The problems we have with Astro and broadband are not just caused by crony capitalism. It is broader than the matter of protecting or punishing Astro. The real hindrance is the Malaysian government's phobia of losing its stranglehold on information and power. Imagine the day when any commercial groups, opposition parties, and NGOs can simply broadcast their viewpoints over satellite, cable TV, and broadband Internet and reach the family living rooms. That will be the day when today's ruling political parties have to eat the humble pie.

All the stalling on broadband Internet and satellite is really an informal design to control information. The fact that this control is conflicting with Malaysia's ability to compete internationally and to live in liberty is getting

more and more obvious by the day.

What can we do? Punish Astro, call for the liberalisation of satellite and broadband Internet. And wear yellow on Saturday.

Here is <u>a useful quote</u> from an environmental expert in Penang: "The problems may be technical, social or economic, but the solution is political."</p>by Cheah Kah SengLetters, Malaysia Kini