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BTS fails to communicate

The BTS Skytrain has gone off the rails. Not literally, thank goodness, but in the past two weeks this vital travel line has failed the public and shamed itself. It has stranded tens of thousands of its own customers, and blocked and inconvenienced hundreds of thousands of others. There is some blame to share, but it is inescapable that the spotlight should fall on the Skytrain operator Bangkok Mass Transit System Plc (BTSC).

Behind the stranding of commuters and city travellers during the past two weeks, according to those involved, is a maintenance upgrade. Specifically, in late June BTSC began installing a new "radio communication system", which is more complicated than it sounds. The network controls the movement of trains, keeping them physically and thus safely separated along their routes. It also allows communication between headquarters, stations and the trains themselves.

This system is merely a built-out restricted wireless network. At its core, it's not much more complicated than a large, commercial Line or Skype group. But, in fact, it is quite complex, with many requirements. For those reasons, BTSC from the beginning has run the network on bandwidth separate from other commercial networks such as those used by mobile phone companies. Almost from its welcome opening along traffic-jammed parts of Bangkok in 2004, the BTSC network has broadcast on the 2400 megahertz (MHz) band.

It's important that this began in 2004, because at that time there was no broadcast regulator. There were almost no rules

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and little enforcement. While the people's constitution of 1997 ordered the setting up of a regulator there was an inevitable delay (and some resistance) as the enabling law was written. The Act on Organisation to Assign Radio Frequency and to Regulate the Broadcasting and Telecommunications Service

was concluded in 2010 and the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) finally came into legal existence in October 2011.

So for seven years, the BTS Skytrain ran its radio network without supervision or regulation. Shockingly, however, the NBTC never formally assigned the BTSC's frequency. The NBTC did, however, assign the 2300 MHz to TOT Plc, which then legally decided to operate a mobile phone network in a joint venture with DTAC.

Two weeks ago, without any notice to the public, the BTSC team began "upgrading" its network system. Almost immediately, still without informing its customers, trains began grinding to a halt because they could not properly pick up the signals. Of course, for safety reasons, when a train halts then all trains in the Skytrain travel circle are affected and have to cease running. Commuters quickly backed up into huge crowds on platforms, with lines quickly forming down the stairs and onto the streets. It was a tremendous inconvenience to city commuters who rely on the system and hardly have a cornucopia of alternative public transport options.

Convinced that the Skytrain broadcasts were degraded by mobile phone operations next-door in the bandwidth spectrum, BTSC executives went to the NBTC to complain. Legal problems were immediately evident. To his credit, the high-profile and often criticised NBTC secretary-general Takorn Tantasith tried to straighten out the problem. The elephant in the room is that the BTS Skytrain network could be legally considered unauthorised. This is why TOT and DTAC have been absolved of causing the bandwidth leak that is still causing fits among commuters.

The problems on the BTS show that the Skytrain is not communicating with its customers. The current problems prove the wisdom of the 1997 "people's constitution" which made it a necessity to regulate telecoms and bandwidth. There must be exacting rules for wireless communications, along with the regulators to enforce them. Unfortunately, the serial delays on the BTS show that the current regulators aren't yet up to the task.