

Camera phones boost telco industry but raise security, privacy concerns

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by Roberto Coloma

SINGAPORE, June 19 (AFP) - Smile, you're on candid telephone! Digital camera-equipped mobile phones that can take high-quality pictures and video clips stole the show at CommunicAsia, the region's largest telecom fair, which drew thousands of industry players to Singapore last week. With sharper optics, bigger memory, music playback and high-speed data transfer, mobile phones have become powerful multi-media devices, creating new revenue streams for handset manufacturers and telecom operators.

"Camera phones are becoming more and more an essential feature for consumers," Aloysius Choong, lead analyst for mobile phones at research house IDC, told AFP. "Mobile phone makers have identified the need."

For operators, camera phones drive up average revenue per consumer as users are charged a premium for image data transmission, on top of already lucrative earnings from voice and Short Message Service (SMS) charges.

A camera phone can now be had for around 200 US dollars. With prices falling, for many younger Asians a plain mobile phone without a camera is not even worth checking out.

Peter Ang, senior manager for product marketing at Sony Ericsson, said eight of the company's 10 new phone models unveiled so far this year in the Asia-Pacific region outside Japan sport integrated cameras.

"Nowadays about 65 percent of Sony Ericsson's consumers are choosing

phones with cameras in them, which shows that there is significant demand for phones to be used as imaging tools," he said.

South Korea's Samsung has stunned the telecom and photographic industries alike by introducing a phone capable of taking pictures as large as seven megapixels -- more powerful than many digital cameras. "There is a bit of a debate about whether camera phones can replace digital cameras (among consumers)," said IDC analyst Choong. "It's not happening in a big way, but it's starting to happen."

Even large picture files can now be transmitted with relative ease through third-generation (3G) and General Packet Radio Services (GPRS) systems.

"Camera phones are a strategic business focus and we believe that the camera is becoming a basic feature of mobile phones," said Christian Collins, senior manager for overseas marketing at Samsung's mobile communication division.

Nokia spokesman Dinesh Subramaniam said that this year, the camera phone market "will grow to be over four times the size of the digital camera market."

"Some of the fastest-growing markets in Asia for camera phones are India, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia," he added.

The increasing popularity of camera phones, however, is raising security and privacy concerns in this age of terrorism and cyber-sex.

The phones can be used for surveillance of potential targets of attack, prompting foreign embassies, government agencies and military bases in Asia to ban visitors or even staff from bringing them in.

Obscene or embarrassing pictures of unsuspecting persons can easily be spread to the public.

In Australia, some local authorities have banned mobile phone cameras from gym changing rooms and swimming pools.

Last December a 25-year-old man was convicted of offensive behaviour for snapping topless women at a Sydney beach. He was fined 380 US dollars and the court ordered the phone camera destroyed.

In Thailand, national police spokesman Major General Chatchawal Suksomjit said that "for sensitive areas including airports, foreign embassies or other places where security is an issue, we have placed signs forbidding cameras."

In New Delhi, visitors including journalists are not allowed to carry camera phones into the Indian parliament, defence headquarters, foreign ministry, key government offices and foreign embassies.

In December, a 17-year-old private schoolboy in Delhi sparked a national scandal after using a camera phone to film a 90-second clip of his girlfriend performing oral sex on him and sending it to friends.

Taiwan's military personnel are barred from bringing camera phones to armed forces installations.

Public use restrictions are unheard of in technology-mad Japan, where most mobile phones sold have a camera function. But there have been frequent arrests of people using them for such acts as filming up women's skirts.

Sony Ericsson's Ang said manufacturers can't be blamed.

"Our products are made with good intent. It is ultimately the responsibility of the end user to not capture or download illegal or inappropriate content into their mobile phones," he said.

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