

BROADCASTING

US cable TV operators urge Thailand to act over piracy

SAENGWIT KEWALEEWONGSATORN

Despite efforts to improve its image, Thailand has a hard time convincing foreign copyright owners, especially those in the broadcasting industry, that it is seriously tackling piracy.

Members of the National Cable and Telecommunications Association (NCTA) in the United States are still very reluctant to trade online content in Thailand.

Their stand has barely changed even in the face of booming online media delivery worldwide and the fast-growing Thai economy.

Supinya Klangnarong, a member of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) broadcasting committee, said the NCTA had called on the watchdog to focus on solving piracy problems.

"NCTA members are seriously concerned about the piracy issue here and many fear to trade online content or over-the-top content with Thai operators," Ms Supinya said.

Over-the-top content refers to broadband delivery of video and audio by a third party directly to users without the internet service provider being involved in the control or distribution of the content. Netflix is an example of such a third-party content provider.

Online streaming content is increasingly popular as more viewers prefer to get content from broadband-enabled

devices, from personal computers to smartphones and tablets.

The NCTA is the main trade association for the US cable TV industry, representing more than 200 cable TV operators and networks such as Sony Pictures Entertainment, Time Warner, News Corp and CBS.

The International Intellectual Property Alliance (IIPA) said in its IIPA Special 301 Report that Thailand had been moved to its watch list from its priority watch list.

The report surveyed copyright piracy problems and market access barriers in key markets last February. It mentioned that the piracy of cable and satellite broadcast signals in Thailand, which involved unauthorised transmissions or retransmissions of US programmes over Thai systems, remains a major problem, especially outside Bangkok.

In recent years, some unlicensed satellite channel operators have run their businesses with stolen content and had substantial success without any hindrance by Thai authorities, whether their operations are legitimate or not.

The broadcasting of illegal satellite signals also harms satellite TV markets in nearby countries as well due to the spillover of signals from Thailand.

PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated that the Thai government lost tax revenues from multi-channel TV piracy of about US\$94 million in 2011, ranked

first in Asia, followed by Pakistan and the Philippines.

Last year, the country's leading pay-TV operator, TrueVisions, spent 2 billion baht to design its software and launch new set-top boxes to protect its content from piracy. This protection works well for premium packages.

Natee Sukonrat, chairman of the NBTC's broadcasting committee, said cable and satellite TV operators are being controlled by its non-frequency rules.

The regulatory system is wholly designed to get rid of all existing problems including piracy and exaggerated advertising. Operators applying for a licence must file channel details including content acquisitions.

The NBTC has awarded 335 licences for cable and satellite operators, while 59 are still in the approval process.

A local cable TV operator said the strong point of small operators is that their movie channels are made up of unauthorised DVDs including new films that are not released for TV distribution in Southeast Asia.

In the near future, small operators will be forced to form a consortium and buy foreign content or jointly produce local content to retain their subscribers.

"We also want to provide good content to our subscribers such as foreign movies. But popular movie channels such as HBO and Fox are exclusive to the TrueVisions platform," the operator said.