

StarHub must give names of illegal anime downloaders

BY CHUA HIAN HOU

THE Singapore distributor of popular Japanese animated cartoons called anime has won the right to track down fans who download the programmes illegally using their StarHub Internet accounts.

A Subordinate Court has ordered the telco to disclose the identity of about 1,000 of its subscribers accused of illegally downloading anime.

It is believed to be one of the largest crackdowns on illegal Internet downloading by home users in Singapore.

The recent hearing was held in a closed chamber session, so few details of the case are available publicly. The action was taken by local anime distributor Odex.

StarHub had initially resisted the company's efforts to get its customer data, said a spokesman for the telco, as it had "an obligation to protect our customers' information".

But it now has no choice but to comply with the court order, as Odex had "satisfied the court of its need for the information".

Once Odex obtains the identities of these Internet users from StarHub, it is expected to write to them demanding a settlement of up to \$5,000 and a promise to stop further illegal downloading.

In May, Odex went after 17 SingNet subscribers after obtaining a similar court order. It then sent more letters to an undisclosed number of other SingNet subscribers also accused of illegally downloading anime.

Odex director Peter Go said a few infringers with financial difficulties were allowed to settle for about \$1,000. He added that a number of those who had received the letter had engaged lawyers, but did not contest Odex's case.

Having succeeded in getting SingNet and StarHub customer lists, Odex will now go after customers of another Internet service provider, Pacific Internet (PacNet), in the Subordinate Courts later this

week. It is understood Odex has accused about 1,000 PacNet users of illegal downloading.

PacNet spokesman Bernard Ho said the firm was "resisting the application" made by Odex in court.

However, lawyers familiar with such applications say they have a strong track record of success. But information obtained this way is not always useful to the plaintiff. For instance, the user may no longer be in the country.

Popular with both children and adults, the anime industry was worth as much as US\$5 billion (\$7.5 billion) worldwide, according to a 2004 BusinessWeek report. However, illegal downloads, available online since the late 1990s, have cut deeply into the profits of producers and distributors.

Mr Go said the South Korean anime market, once the world's second largest after Japan, collapsed several years ago due to piracy problems.

This prompted Japanese studios making anime to band together to mount the crackdown here as they were worried Singapore, although not as big a market, would end up the same way.

A 23-year-old anime fan acknowledged that there was some truth to Mr Go's words.

"At my peak a while ago, I used to download five to 10 gigabytes of anime a week," said the undergraduate, who declined to be named.

Now, he is resigned that his past will catch up with him.

"It's just a matter of time before I get the dreaded Odex letter."

chuahh@sph.com.sg