

Requirements for free TV licensees to broadcast RTHK programmes lifted

The following is issued on behalf of the Communications Authority:

The Communications Authority (CA) announced today (March 4) the revocation of directions issued to domestic free television programme service (free TV) licensees on the requirements to broadcast programmes of Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK).

Pursuant to the relevant licence condition in the free TV licences, the CA may direct a licensee to include in its service such television programmes and other material in the public interest provided by the Government. At present, Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) and HK Television Entertainment Company Limited (HKTVE) are required to broadcast 3.5 hours and 2.5 hours of RTHK programmes per week respectively on their integrated Chinese channels according to the directions issued by the CA.

On January 9, 2020, the CA received a request from TVB for lifting the requirements on the broadcasting of RTHK programmes. In the course of processing the request, the CA has consulted the relevant policy bureau, i.e. the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau (CEDB).

The requirements for free TV licensees to broadcast RTHK programmes were first introduced in 1990 when RTHK did not operate its own TV channels. Subsequently, RTHK started operating three digital terrestrial television channels (Channel Nos. 31 to 33) in 2014 and with the gradual increase in the number of transmitting stations, their population coverage reached 99 per cent last year, which was on a par with that of commercial TV broadcasters which also provide free TV service via airwaves. Furthermore, some of RTHK's TV channels are currently accessible through its website and mobile application. Some regular RTHK programmes are also being rerun on RTHK's channels after their first run on free TV channels.

After considering the free TV licensee's request and the views of the CEDB, the CA concurs that there is no justifiable case to continue to require commercial broadcasters to broadcast RTHK programmes. Furthermore, lifting the requirements enables free TV licensees to put the spectrum and airtime released to more efficient use. The timeslots vacated could be used to broadcast other programmes, thereby providing more diversified TV programme choices to the public. This could also allow commercial broadcasters to generate more advertising/sponsorship income, thereby facilitating their business amidst the increasing challenges faced by the broadcasting industry. This decision would be consistent with the policy objective to facilitate innovation and sustainable development of the broadcasting industry. There would be no impact on the public as viewers could continue to view RTHK programmes through its own TV channels.

The CA notes that RTHK has no objection to the request. The CA has

informed TVB and HKTVE of the decision to revoke the directions. The free TV licensees may decide whether and, if so, when to cease broadcasting RTHK programmes on their channels, taking into account their commercial, operational and programme scheduling considerations.