Webslingers Run Afoul of DirecTV, Sling Media

By Todd Spangler

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Internet company a2bTV worked up an innovative service that lets customers watch DirecTV programming delivered via Slingbox devices to any computer in the world with a high-speed connection.

There’s only one problem: The venture appears to be unauthorized.

For $99 per month, a2bTV claimed, it provides 185-plus DirecTV channels through Slingboxes hosted at its premises in Southern California. According to the company’s site, customers are supposed to subscribe separately to DirecTV, and a2bTV.com sets up and maintains the equipment for them.

But neither DirecTV nor Sling Media gave the go-ahead to sell such a service, and both companies said a2bTV appeared to be violating the terms of their subscriber agreements.

“We do not have a relationship with a2bTV.com,” DirecTV director of public relations Robert Mercer said, adding that the direct-broadcast satellite provider doesn’t permit subscribers to connect Slingbox devices to their DirecTV set-tops. But he said DirecTV has not “contemplated taking legal action” yet against a2bTV.

Meanwhile, Sling spokesman Brian Jaquet said the service a2bTV offers violates the Sling end-user license agreement, which specifies that users may not “lease, lend, rent or otherwise distribute the software to any third party.”

“We were not aware of this company,” he added. “I expect that we will be in contact with them soon.”

Nobody at a2bTV responded to e-mails requesting information sent to support@a2btv.com or sales@a2btv.com, the only e-mail addresses posted on its site. Messages left for “Greg”...
at the toll-free and 626-area-code phone numbers listed were also unreturned.

Starz Entertainment senior vice president of corporate communications Tom Southwick said the programmer wasn’t familiar with a2bTV and couldn’t comment on it. But, he added, “In general, we’re very aware of the copyright issues and the rights we’ve negotiated with the movie studios, and in the territories we can show them.”

For example, Starz’s Vongo Internet movie-rental service is accessible only within the United States. Vongo subscribers attempting to download movies from, say, England, would be blocked, Southwick said.

A2bTV’s site said its headquarters is in Cheyenne, Wyo., with data-center operations in Southern California, plus offices in Moscow and Tokyo.

In its “mission statement,” a2bTV said it “was founded by two like-minded individuals half a world apart. Our goal at a2bTV is to bring American television programming to expatriates and their families living abroad; anyplace, anytime, worldwide.”