

TALK OF CHANGE

Data usage via smart devices continues to grow, but voice calling service is ceding share to free mobile apps. **B4**



People use mobile phones at a department store in Bangkok. THANARAK KHUNTON

Shift away from voice calling proceeds apace

Messaging apps gobble bandwidth for services

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Overall data usage via smart devices continued to grow in the first quarter of 2018, up 17% year-on-year, while use of voice service fell 13%.

According to the latest report on the mobile market by the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), Thais increasingly prefer to make calls via mobile apps like Line, WhatsApp, Skype, Messenger and KakaoTalk.

That usage pattern is a key factor boosting mobile internet traffic in country.

The first quarter saw 7.7 billion minutes of voice service usage in Thailand, compared with 8.9 billion in the fourth quarter of 2017, a decrease of 13%.

Contrarily, mobile internet data usage in the first quarter totalled 1.21 million terabytes, up 17% from 1.03 million terabytes in the fourth quarter of 2017. (One terabyte

equals 1,000 gigabytes.)

The report found that mobile operators reduced their tariffs for voice service in the first quarter, driven by intense competition and the increasing popularity of voice service via mobile apps.

The average tariff for voice service in the first quarter was 0.41 baht per minute, down 4.7% from 0.43 baht in the fourth quarter of last year.

NBTC secretary-general Takorn Tantsith said traditional calls via mobile traffic are heavily affected by voice over internet protocol (VoIP) services and mobile apps that fit customers' digital lifestyle, especially the voice service on mobile apps.

Voice service via Line in Thailand for the first quarter reached 0.67 megabytes per minute, while other services included WhatsApp (1.52MB per minute), Skype (1.64MB), Messenger (0.67MB), KakaoTalk (0.6MB), Tango (1.1MB), Hangouts (0.68MB) and Viber (1.01MB).

For video calls via mobile app, Line registered 2.72MB per minute, WhatsApp 4.89 MB, Skype 10.01MB, Messenger 5.29MB, KakaoTalk 3.41MB, Tango 4.72MB, Hangouts 36.58MB and Viber 40.52MB.

Mr Takorn said mobile operators booked a combined 69.2 billion baht in the first quarter this year, up 0.7% compared with 68.7 billion baht in the last quarter of 2017.

Of the total 69.2 billion baht, 62.9 billion came from voice and data services and the rest from other services.

The average revenue per user (ARPU) of mobile operators did not change significantly in the first quarter compared with the last quarter of 2017.

ARPU of major mobile operators averaged 241 baht in the first quarter, comprising 154 baht of prepaid service, the same as the previous quarter, while ARPU of post-paid service was 532 baht, down from 537 baht in the fourth quarter of 2017.

Mr Takorn said the NBTC plans to auction a combined 270 megahertz of bandwidth on the 700- and 2600MHz spectrum ranges by 2020, with an alternative that the auction winner would be awarded spectrum in ranges of 3.5-, 26- or 28 gigahertz at no additional cost.

The move aims to avoid prohibitively high spectrum costs and broaden operators' financial capacity.