

# Cutting the Cord: An Examination of Changing TV Viewership

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## Introduction — The Changing Landscape of TV Programming

On October 2, 1925, John Baird successfully transmitted the first television image. Since the early days of the new medium, television technology has constantly changed. Similarly, as the decades have passed the means for receiving television programming has also changed. Today, programs are delivered to millions of customers via cable connections and by satellite transmissions as those technologies were chosen by consumers to replace antennas as a means for receiving signals. The newer delivery mechanisms also provided many more channels to consumers compared to the handful of channels they could access in the antenna-only days.

The television programming delivery industry is still changing. More recently created services for receiving television programming include Netflix, YouTube, Hulu, and a variety of other online streaming services. Thus, consumers now have many ways to watch programming without having to purchase channels they do not wish to receive and pay for. In fact, the day of paying a monthly cable bill may be coming to a close as the phenomenon referred to as “cord-cutting” becomes a greater trend in the American society.

Cord-cutting, in regard to television viewing, is the dropping of a cable or satellite television subscription service in favor of one or more alternatives. Even an old-fashioned means of capturing content is making a comeback—the free, antenna-captured broadcasts from local TV channels. Whatever form of cord-cutting a consumer chooses, they all revolve around a consumer belief that competition between providers and the compartmentalization of services offered is good.

For example, one cord-cutting motivation is to be able to view programming on devices other than home televisions, including devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers. Additionally, there is the ability to watch programming more specifically tailored to one’s tastes and lifestyles. However, there are drawbacks to cord-cutting, including the loss of some convenience as well as the unavailability of some content.

## Factors Driving the Cord-Cutting Phenomenon

According to research done by the NPD Group (2014), the average American pays roughly \$90 a month for a cable television package that typically includes several hundred channels. Many consumers pose the question, “Why pay \$90 a month when only four or five channels get any degree of use?” Consumers may even conclude there is no reason to pay \$50 a month (for a basic cable plan) when they can essentially get the same content in full quality on their computers or mobile devices, including high definition content. In other words, the decision to cut-the-cord frequently results from a consumer performing a cost-benefit analysis and concluding that a cable or satellite package costs more than it is worth. A chairman of the FCC has been quoted as saying “. . . the average cable subscriber is paying for more than 85 channels that she doesn’t watch in order to obtain the approximately 16 channels that she does” (Unbundling Cable Television: An Empirical Investigation, 2015).

As noted earlier, cord-cutting doesn’t revolve solely around dissatisfaction and price, but also capabilities and technological lifestyles. According to research by Nielsen (2014), “Americans now own four digital devices on average, and the average U.S. consumer spends 60 hours a week consuming content across devices.” Current social trends have created a culture with a desire for immediate gratification. The increase in internet and wireless speeds, coupled with the multiple online programming services being offered, easily accommodates the demands of “I want” or “I need” consumers for online services that work together to deliver the total package of desired utility (Rizzo, 2014).

It should be noted that the consumer must have a suitable internet connection for the devices and streaming services to work and that connection rates vary depending on what an internet service firm provides in a geographic region or location. Thus, some locations are not as suited for cord-cutting as others—a rural area compared to a developed metropolitan area, for example.

Regarding age, many young consumers appreciate the fact that high-quality technology is getting smaller and cheaper. Purchasing a television and cable/satellite box is not an attractive option when laptops are much more portable and one can purchase streaming services online for less money and reduced complexity. Many young people do not have a steady income and cable or satellite television, with their high prices, are not considered a necessity. In addition, they often choose not to pay premium prices for a service that gives them unnecessary content when online streaming is cheaper and they are able to select the content that they want.

However, it is not just the younger consumer that is making radically new purchase decisions. According to Edwards (2013), the number of households with television sets reached a peak between 2010 and 2011 with about 116 million households owning at least one television. By 2013, this number had decreased by approximately three million even though the total number of households increased

during this time. One reason is that consumer leisure time is being spent doing things other than watching television. The Edwards study indicates that time that was dedicated to television viewing is now being redirected to mobile devices and other activities one can engage in on those devices. Along with the increased ownership and use of mobile devices, the availability of free WiFi has also risen in recent years, reducing or eliminating the dual expenses of cable and WiFi when WiFi is provided by a third party (such as a university).

## **Some Cord-Cutting Alternatives**

Among the cord-cutting alternatives that consumers are choosing are services provided by Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu. These alternatives are fairly low-cost in nature, some costing only \$8 a month with an option to cancel at any time. These services differ dramatically. For example, Netflix offers consumers the options of getting discs through the mail, streaming, and a combination of these. Netflix began as an online movie rental service. From 2002 to 2005, the Netflix subscription base rose from 600,000 to 4.2 million (Netflix, 2015).

Netflix built on its early success by personalizing movie recommendations and adding online streaming service. Netflix then began partnering with other companies to make their service available on multiple technology platforms. By 2010, Netflix became available through most internet connected devices—from televisions to tablets to smartphones. Demand for low cost, subscription based internet streaming television is not limited to the United States. As demand increased, Netflix began to offer its services to consumers in other countries in Latin America and Europe while maintaining a nearly identical business model in each of its new countries of operation (Boluk, 2015). With its great success, Netflix began producing its own online program series and has been nominated for over 31 daytime Emmys. Today, its membership base has grown to over 50 million subscribers globally.

What makes Netflix such an attractive alternative to traditional cable television? Netflix is not a single network. Netflix differentiates itself from specific channels on cable because Netflix can be “all things to all people.” Netflix and competing online distribution platforms can host programming aimed at consumers at any age whereas specific television channels have little choice but to cater to a specific demographic. Netflix has realized this and is continuously expanding its programming portfolio to reach the most consumers possible while maintaining its relatively cheap subscription fees and a high convenience factor to create a multimedia platform that is sure to meet nearly any family’s needs for a much lower cost than conventional cable.

The business models of other programming providers vary from the Netflix model and from each other. For example, Hulu plus makes major television network

shows available to their customers the day after they originally air. This programming is accompanied by commercials whereas Netflix streams with no commercials. Amazon Prime differs from both of them in that there is an annual fee. An Amazon Prime account comes with free two-day shipping on thousands of items, ad-free Amazon music, a wide variety of movies and television shows, and one free Kindle book loan per month. Roku, a strong competitor in the entertainment device category, was founded in 2002. A consumer only needs to decide which version they want to obtain the desired level of functionality. The path to use is the same, the consumer merely needs to purchase the device, plug it into their home network and hook it up to their television. The device itself can cost from \$50 to \$100. The service comes with many free channels and others can be added. Some channels, such as Hulu Plus and Netflix, require a subscription outside of the Roku device.

Higher cost programming alternative are HBO Go, Sony Vue, and Dish Network's Sling TV. These three alternatives are most closely related to cable subscriptions. HBO has recently added a stand-alone online service that allows users to watch everything on this network at any time of the day, including live streaming of new shows. Sony Vue entertainment and electronics company offers 75 different stations, is similar to traditional cable, and includes networks such as CBS, NBC, and Fox. The difference with Sony is that their service is only available on PlayStation game consoles, but will eventually be available on iPads and other non-Sony devices. A major attraction of this alternative is that it offers ESPN to the subscriber.

## **Technology Issues**

With the growing adoption rates of smartphones, tablets, internet connected televisions, and even dedicated streaming boxes, online streaming has grown dramatically. Netflix, as well as other content distributors like Hulu and HBO, ensure that their services can be accessed on as many devices as possible in order to reach as many consumers as possible by creating applications to run on each of these different devices.

However, as consumption increases, so does data usage. Many consumers rely on a metered internet connection from their internet service provider. This can present a problem for consumers wishing to cut the cord and rely strictly on online streaming for their entertainment. If a consumer desires high definition content, a single hour of Netflix content can rack up between less than half of a gigabyte of data to almost five gigabytes. This might not be an issue for one or two consumers sharing the same internet connection. However, families with multiple members who like to enjoy their own shows can quickly eat into the monthly data allowance.

Virtually any internet connected device that is able to play video can access Netflix and comparable programming distributors. Thus, access is not as large an issue for some consumers as internet speed. For a consumer with a base level of internet speed, the ability to enjoy high definition content without disruption due to buffering is next to impossible. Netflix states that to enjoy full HD content a consistent 5 megabytes per second speed is required. As content quality continues to improve and 4k television screen resolutions become the norm, more bandwidth will be required to stream video. Streaming 4k content can require roughly five times more bandwidth than for current full HD content. Content providers are constantly working towards better encoding practices to lessen the data strain for subscribers and bandwidth demands are almost certain to go down. As fiber optic cable continues to be deployed across the country, bandwidth (and data caps) will become less important.

## **Business Implications of Cord-Cutting**

Cord-cutting is a trend that is having a negative impact on Comcast, AT&T, and satellite services such as DirectTV. The cable and satellite industries are beginning to feel the effects of cord-cutting. For the first time in the history of pay-TV subscriptions, 2014 marked an entire year of decline as consumers increasingly reject the higher costs of cable and satellite services and embrace internet streaming as an alternative.

## **Implications for Cable and Satellite Companies**

A writer for Forbes called cord-cutting “a disruption,” an activity bringing new offerings to the market and that offers cheaper, simpler, or more convenient offerings in relation to an existing product. In essence cable and satellite companies, over their history, can be viewed as product oriented businesses as opposed to firms seeking to serve consumer needs. Cable and satellite providers must take heed and adjust their practices to ensure they are as beneficial and competitive as possible. These firms must recognize that the cord-cutting trend will cause their product focused approach to be suboptimal. Market share will continue to be lost unless changes are adopted by established cable and satellite companies to mitigate the consumer shift.

For example, offering additional online programming could convince some consumers to not cut-the-cord. A potentially viable option would be to partner with services such as Apple TV or Hulu to offer more of an á la carte style for channel purchasing. Rather than buying a bundle of channels determined by the providers, customers could pick and choose which channels they want. In fact, Apple is already working on a service that would operate in this manner. Through direct partnerships with many of the major cable networks Apple is nearing completion of a “web-only TV package” that would have about 25 channels and cost only \$30 or \$40 a month. With this service, customers could have the best of both worlds. They

could drop their cable television service and still be able to watch all of the primary channels through the internet. Apple's service is only the tip of the iceberg and foreshadows a future of networks bypassing cable providers and taking a direct approach to reach viewers.

Comcast, a major cable firm, is fighting back by focusing on the one service consumers cannot do without if they want to stream content—internet access. Comcast's cheapest internet plan is priced at \$40 a month for the first year and price a Comcast customer will have to pay if they want to stream content. For \$10 more a month Comcast offers a bundle of internet and basic cable. Along with the addition of the basic cable channels is the option to access to HBO and HBO Go. Comcast hopes these extra incentives, for just \$10 extra a month, can lure customers into keeping a cable plan.

## **Learning Exercises**

### **Exercise #1—Consumer Needs**

1. Consider the consumption of television programming in terms of programs, means for acquiring programming, and devices on which programming is consumed. List the various consumer needs all of these products satisfy. Start with the broad, generic needs, such as the need for entertainment, and then break those down into more specific consumer needs.
2. Using the list developed for question 1, how does that list have to be modified when it is used to consider the needs of different age groups and in other ways in which markets can be broken down?

### **Exercise # 2—Consumer Decision Making**

1. What factors could cause television watchers to recognize they have a problem regarding the acquisition of television programming?
2. If you were considering the creation of a package of programming services to replace your cable or satellite services, how would you research these alternatives? List various sources of information you would access and how you would access them. Think of someone rather different than you are. How would their information search process differ from yours? Why?
3. How would you evaluate the cord-cutting alternatives available to you? What kind of decision-making process do you think you would use (compensatory vs. non-compensatory, etc.)? Using the same rather different person you considered in question 2, what decision making process do you think they would use? Why?

### **Exercise # 3—the Psychology of the Consumer**

1. Do you think people with different personalities—inner directed consumers vs. other directed consumers, for example—would approach the cord-cutting decision differently and one type be more likely to cut-the-cord than the other? Explain your

reasoning. Would other personality issues be important for marketers of TV programming to consider?

2. If you were selling a cord-cutting product—such as Netflix—which form of consumer learning do you think would most characteristic of consumers—one of the behavioral forms of learning or cognitive learning? Why? If your task was to design and advertisement or to create some form of promotion to influence consumers and bring about the kind of learning you identified earlier, what would you do? Why?

3. If you offered consumers a cord-cutting alternative product, how would you try to influence consumer's attitudes toward your product as an object? How would you try to influence their attitude about your product in terms of the consequences of choosing to cut-the-cord by buying your product and canceling their cable service? If your firm was a traditional cable company or satellite company, how would you influence consumer attitudes in an effort to keep consumers from cutting-the-cord?

Exercise # 4—the Social Life of Consumers

1. In what manner do you perceive reference groups and opinion leaders to play a part in consumer decision making regarding cord-cutting alternatives? How might a firm use these influencers to promote their cord-cutting alternatives?

2. How would the decision to cut-the-cord be different when the decision is being made for a family rather than for an individual? How? Why?

3. Would any subculture(s) have a greater tendency to cut-the-cord than others? Why?

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**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** The case enables instructors and students to consider the entrance of competitors in markets where consumers have had few choices and little market power. Product differentiation, pricing, and changing consumer desires in an evolving technological environment are subjects that can be explored along with the typical subject matter taught in a consumer behavior course. At the end of the case students should better understand how firms can invade existing markets dominated by large firms and carve out niches for themselves and how firms losing market share to new competitors can adapt and protect their markets. The case should be useful in various marketing classes, but particularly in classes where consumer needs, product utility, consumer decision making are major topics.

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**TRACK: Special Sessions/Case Studies**