

Over the Top

When I graduated from college and moved into my first place with two roommates, it was months before we decided to get cable. We used rabbit ears to get the basic channels. The images were fuzzy, but it was enough to watch the Red Sox games and *Gilmore Girls*. That was all we needed, because we spent most of our free time sitting around the kitchen table playing UNO and drinking cheap beer anyway.

Two new roommates and a few apartments later, I had Time Warner cable, a DVR, and several premium channels. I barely watched most of the hundreds of channels at my disposal, and I only occasionally used the DVR. But one of my roommates was a TV-aholic, so downsizing wasn't an option.

Now I'm down to zero roommates and back to no cable. Yes, I've cut the cord, so to speak. I've got a Roku box, a Netflix subscription, Hulu, and one of those converter boxes (the more modern version of rabbit ears). Part of my decision to abandon the cable company was financial, and part of it was simply out of anger at the industry. I'd grown sick of paying for hundreds of channels I didn't watch just to get the few I liked. Almost as importantly, I was sick of wasting hours of my life watching shows I didn't even really like just because they were there.

So it was with special interest that I sat through many sessions at Streaming Media East about cutting the cord and over-the-top video, listening to experts say that most people weren't really giving up cable. It seems that even folks on the cutting edge of streaming technology don't think giant cable companies need to seriously worry about losing customers.

The experts were right, of course: Most people aren't cutting the cord. I surely couldn't convince my grandmother to give up her hefty cable bill and hook her TV up to the internet—no matter how many old Westerns are available on Hulu+. But there are plenty of people, those fresh out of college, for example, who have no interest in getting the cable hooked up in the first place.

These people won't even have a cord to cut. While my roommates and I only had a dial-up connection, and Hulu and Netflix were still years away from being a reality, it's hard to

imagine any recent grad being able to live without a high-speed connection and Wi-Fi these days. With that connection comes access to plenty of free or inexpensive content, and it's hard to convince someone to pay for what they're used to getting for free (just ask the newspaper companies).

In a Streaming Media East session titled *Winners and Losers in Over the Top Video*, panelist Justin Eckhouse, senior product manager of emerging media platforms at CBS Interactive, declared set-top boxes (such as my beloved Roku) a temporary phenomenon. It's not that people will suddenly shun the web as a means of getting their video content; it's simply that web-connected TVs will make the boxes unnecessary.

One of the things I found most surprising, though, was how cable companies were starting to offer "TV anywhere" to try to keep customers happy. Since I hadn't been a cable customer for some time, this information flew somewhat under my radar. But it just so happened that an email about TV anywhere found its way into my inbox at the same time I was contemplating this issue. Cox's TV Online makes free TV shows, movies, and other video content from broadcast, cable, and networks available to its video subscribers through its online web portal. Other cable companies offer similar services.

As someone who has already cut ties with the cable company, I noticed that these services don't do much to lure me back, and I suspect those kids coming out of the college feel the same way. I'm sure people who absolutely need to be able to watch *Boardwalk Empire* while grocery shopping love tools such as HBO GO or Cox's TV Online. But for those of us who aren't convinced of cable's value, these new offerings still miss the point.

We want access to the content we want at a reasonable price, not access to a bunch of content we don't want while cruising the cereal aisle.

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Certainly, there are problems with the kind of a la carte options I'd like to see—namely that there are savings realized by "buying in bulk"—but I can't help but think that it would be a mistake if cable companies don't find a way to offer value to those generations of people who will never even have a cord to cut. Sooner or later, those content consumers will be the majority. **EC**

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