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Chapter 1

Why Cut the Cord?

You can get a TV signal into your home these days in many ways, but most methods involve running some kind of cord into your home and then into a device. That device might be a TV, a set-top box, or even a cable modem.

So far, so obvious. My point here is to bring your attention to the cord itself, which carries this book's symbolic load. Why? Because a new and growing legion of people are using their cable TV cord as a symbol for protest.

Who are these people? The *cord shavers* (also called *cord trimmers*) take steps to reduce their cable TV bill. The *cord avoiders* look for online alternatives to paying for cable TV offerings. Next are the *cord haters*, who really dislike paying for cable TV. All these people look on in envy at the *cord nevers*, people who have never had a cable TV account.

The cord shavers, cord avoiders, and cord haters can't be cord nevers, but they can certainly become *cord cutters*. Those are people who metaphorically snip their cable TV cord by non-metaphorically canceling their cable TV subscription and looking for televised entertainment elsewhere.

If you find your blood pressure getting dangerously high each time you pay your cable TV bill, you might be ready to become a cord cutter. To make sure, this chapter talks about why you might want to go the cord-cutting route (and a little bit about why you might not).

What's So Bad about Cable? (Let Me Count the Ways)

Every year, various media organizations publish articles with titles along the lines of “The Ten Most Hated Companies” or “The Twenty Worst Companies.” A wide variety of industries is represented, from airlines to social media companies to banking institutions. The lists change year to year, but you can always count on at least one or more cable companies making the list.

Let's face it: Many of us *really* dislike our cable provider. What about you? How do you feel about the company that brings cable TV into your home?

Okay, you're reading a book about cord cutting, so I have to assume that you're at least peeved at your cable company. Or maybe a bit miffed. But however you feel, you might need coaxing before you go any further. Sure, I understand: Cutting the cord is a big step. To help you make your decision, this section details ten solid reasons why you might want to cancel your cable subscription and join the ranks of cord cutters.

Cable TV is expensive

Aside from essential utilities (heat, electricity, water, phone) and expenses such as groceries and a car payment, most of your regular monthly payments probably don't amount to that much money. Five dollars here, ten dollars there, twenty dollars somewhere else. Then your monthly cable bill comes due and, by contrast, it's probably a whopper: Depending on your channels, packages, equipment, and bundles, you can easily be paying a hundred, two hundred, even three hundred dollars or more — a *month!*

As much as you might enjoy the cable company's offerings, that cable bill qualifies as an extravagance. Now, as you soon see, money isn't the only reason to cut yourself free from cable, but for most would-be cord cutters, it's the reason that gets people thinking there has to be a better (and cheaper) way.

You still get bombarded by commercials

You pay your budget-busting cable bill and now you're stressed and angry. What's the antidote? You know: Watch a little TV. But when you turn on the set, chances are the first thing you see is a commercial. Then another one. And another. Sure, you're a savvy TV pro, so you know where to find the mute button on your remote.

But still: Doesn't it rankle? You pay a queen's ransom for (apparently) the privilege of watching TV, only to be subjected to endless come-ons for hemorrhoid remedies and car insurance. That's just wrong.

You probably watch only a teensy fraction of what you pay for

The Bruce Springsteen song "57 Channels (and Nothin' On)" was released way back in 1992, but it's still relevant today. Except now it's closer to 557 channels. However many channels come with your cable package, it's a safe bet that you find a depressingly vast majority of them unwatchable so they are therefore unwatched.

Sure, you have your favorite stations, but how many do you watch regularly? A dozen? Maybe a couple dozen? That still leaves hundreds of channels gathering dust. Even worse: You're paying for those dust-covered channels. Why would anyone do that?

Bundles are (usually) bad

The standard way to save money when it comes to the cable company is to invest in a *bundle*: a collection of cable company services that includes not only cable TV but also Internet access, a

home phone, a cellular plan, or some combination of these and other offerings. Instead of paying for each service by itself, you bundle them for a substantial discount.

That makes sense, but there's a fly in the bundle ointment: Almost always, at least one of the bundled services will be *terrible*. It might have cheap — or even used! — equipment, spotty service, minimal features, or (all too often) all of the above. Even though you save money with a second-rate service, you shouldn't have to live like that.

Long-term (read: loyal) customers pay more, not less

If you're a regular customer at your local coffee shop, every now and then the manager might slip you a free coffee or muffin. If you buy lots of clothes at a local independent retailer, the owner might give you a discount on a larger purchase. What these small businesses understand is the value of customer loyalty: It pays in the long term to keep regular customers happy.

Your cable company understands this, too, right? Hah, don't make me laugh! In fact, your cable provider probably does the opposite. That is, they probably offer discounted subscriptions to new customers, while charging substantially higher prices to long-term subscribers. It's madness, but welcome to the wacky world of the cable company!



REMEMBER

If you plan on sticking with your cable subscription, at least for a while, you can almost certainly negotiate a lower price. Call the cable company, complain about how high your monthly bill has become, and then threaten to either switch to another provider (assuming there is one where you live) or cancel your subscription. It might take some perseverance on your part and a session with someone in the Customer Retention department, but you'll get there.

You're getting nicked-and-dimed

If you've ever been brave (or foolhardy) enough to examine the details of your cable bill, chances are you came away even angrier

than you were going in. It's not just the sheer size of the final total that stresses everyone out, but the long list of incidental and hidden fees and surcharges that are standard-issue line items in every cable bill. These fees go by various names:

- » Network access fee
- » Broadcast TV fee
- » HD technology fee
- » Regional sports surcharge
- » Terminal fee
- » Franchise fee

The list goes on and on and includes lots of regulatory fees mandated by the government, which the cable company is happy to pass on to you as so-called *pass-through fees*. These fees and surcharges easily cost you hundreds of dollars a year. Boo!

You're dealing with a near-monopoly

Mom-and-pop shops in the cable business don't exist because cable requires huge infrastructure investments. That's fine, but with recent consolidations in the industry, the gargantuan just keep getting gargantuan-er. The result is that even large markets have few options for cable TV providers, and small markets might have just a single company "vying" for their business.

This lack of competition is bad news for you. It keeps cable prices high, encourages cable companies to charge — and increase — hidden fees (as I describe in the preceding section), and gives cable behemoths zero incentive to provide decent customer service and technical support (travesties that I talk about in the next two sections).

Customer service is pretty much non-existent

Earlier I mention that cable companies always show up in lists of the worst or most hated companies. As this section shows, there are lots of reason why that's so. However, one of main complaints you see in surveys of customer (dis)satisfaction is terrible customer service.

You know what I'm talking about, right? Does anyone ever look forward to calling the cable company? Having such a call on your to-do list is likely to elicit feelings of dread and anxiety because the poor souls who work in a cable company's customer service department aren't allowed to be human beings. Instead, they're browbeaten into giving rote answers that never deviate from a management-approved script.

And if you get even a little frustrated or upset at the runaround you're getting, there's an excellent chance the rep will put you on hold forever and then simply disconnect the call!



TIP

You can see for yourself how bad cable company customer service is by taking a look at the American Customer Satisfaction Index for Subscription Television Services at www.theacsi.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=147&catid=&Itemid=212&i=Subscription+Television+Service.

Technical support is a pain in the you-know-what

Calling the cable company's technical support department is no better an experience than the customer service nightmare I moaned about in the preceding section. First, you have to wait on hold for a very long time. Second, the "technician" (note the sarcastic quotes there) will ask about your problem, and then spend a very long time going through an infuriatingly banal and wrong-headed flowchart-slash-script in an attempt to find a "solution" (more sarcastic quotes).

That approach *never* works, so now the rep will book you an appointment with an actual technician. Alas, the next available appointment is in two weeks (if you're lucky) and, yes, you'll

have to take half a day off work. Oh, and it will set you back \$50, \$75, or even \$100 just for the technician to show up.

Those darned contracts!

As I mention, you can often negotiate a lower cable bill by putting together a bundle of services, packages of content, or both. But there's usually a catch, actually *two* catches: You have to sign a contract (usually for two years) and the discount applies only for the first year! So you're stuck paying a higher price for the rest of the contract, unless you agree to pay an exorbitant termination fee to opt out. Grrr.



WARNING

After signing the contract, you'll receive a confirmation, usually by email. Double-check — no *triple*-check — the order to make sure you're getting what you asked for and what was promised to you. Cable company sales reps work on commission and will often simply modify orders — while betting that you won't notice — if doing so benefits them.

Some Reasons Why Cutting the Cord Might Not Be for You

This book is about cutting the cord, but I might as well admit early on that there's no perfect solution to going cable-free. My thesis here is that, for most people, saying goodbye to the cable company is a net win. However, a few aspects of cutting the cord fall on the "cons" side of any "pros versus cons" analysis, and one or more of those could be a deal-breaker for you. Let's see.

Your savings might be less than you hoped

Everyone goes into the cord-cutting adventure with big dreams of saving a ton of money every month. And those savings *are* possible, especially if you embrace free and almost-free services. However, most of the good content sits on the other side of a paid subscription.

You can still save lots of cash if you're prudent with your subscriptions. Unfortunately, many families find that they keep adding new services (particularly for popular content such as Disney, HBO, news, and live sports) and their monthly TV-watching costs rise accordingly.



REMEMBER

You can use lots of tricks and techniques to save money after you cut the cord. I talk about a bunch of these in Chapter 10.

You might still have to deal with channel bundles

Most of us hate channel bundles because to subscribe to the one channel you want, you also have to get a fistful of channels that you wouldn't force your worst enemy to watch. So now it feels like you're paying the bundle fee for just a single channel. Cue the steam coming out of your ears.

Bundles aren't an issue with subscriptions such as Netflix, where one price gets you access to everything on the service. Unfortunately, far too many streaming services embrace the bundle model and surround premium content (such as HBO) with dreck.

You might still see commercials

For lots of would-be cord cutters, the real incentive is not cost savings but a commercial-free viewing experience. The good news is that most streaming services are on board with the commonsense notion that you shouldn't see commercials if you pay a subscription for the service. Sweet bliss!

However, some free streaming services *do* show commercials, because they have to pay their bills somehow. And, after all, seeing the odd commercial is a small price to pay for a free service.



WARNING

Alas, just because a streaming service doesn't currently show commercials, it doesn't follow that the service will always be ad-free. For example, Netflix, which is currently commercial-free, has run tests in which they show commercials between TV show episodes.

TV watching will become more complex for you

You can bad-mouth cable companies all you want (and I know you do), but they do have one genuinely good feature: simplicity. Sure, you pay a ton of money each month, but in exchange you get all your channels and apps and more in a single package with a single interface.

Once you cut the cord, that simplicity will probably become a thing of the past. I say “probably” because it *is* possible to create simple cord-free experiences where, say, you watch only live TV or you subscribe to only a single streaming service. But you’re more likely to end up with multiple subscriptions on multiple services. That means paying multiple bills, configuring multiple accounts, and learning multiple app interfaces. And you also run smack into a very modern problem: trying to remember which streaming service offers which content!

I wish I could tell you that the cord-free experience is getting simpler, but the opposite is happening. Media companies are falling all over themselves to launch their own streaming services. Whereas a few years ago you might have been able to count the number of streaming services using the fingers of one hand, the way things are going you’ll soon need the fingers of every member of your extended family.

You’ll use way more Internet bandwidth — and perhaps pay for the privilege

Streaming media comes to you via the Internet, where it’s distributed through Wi-Fi to your various devices. You don’t normally give it a second thought, but perhaps you should. Why? Because media streams such as movies, TV shows, and music stuff huge amounts of data into the pipe that delivers the Internet to your home. If your Internet service provider (ISP) puts a limit on your monthly bandwidth, blowing through that cap because you binge-watched *Better Call Saul* may cost you a ton of money.



REMEMBER

If you have an ISP plan that offers unlimited bandwidth (lucky you!), you don't have to worry about any of this because there's no ceiling to go through.

Your monthly Internet bill will probably go up

When most people are budgeting for a cord-free lifestyle, they usually compare their total cable bill with what it might cost for a few streaming services. That's a legit comparison if all you get from the cable company is cable TV. However, if you get multiple products — such as cable TV, Internet, and phone service — the comparison falls apart because the Internet portion of that bill is almost certainly discounted.

When you tell the cable company that you no longer want their stinkin' cable TV service, the first thing they'll tell you is that your monthly Internet bill will go up because you no longer have a proper bundle of services.

The quality of the streaming video might be poor

I talk in Chapter 7 about the Internet connection you need to support a cord-free life. For now, you just need to know that to be able to watch streaming media — particularly streaming video — you must have fast Internet access. How fast? The necessary download speed — measured in Mbps (megabits per second) — depends on the video quality you're streaming.

If your Internet download speed isn't fast enough, your streaming experience will be poor: slow starts, playback pauses and stutters, and overall lousy picture quality.

You might have to wait a long time to watch new shows

When a new cable show (or a new season of an existing cable show) is released, cable providers get first crack at broadcasting

it. When you banish the cable company from your life, you also lose the privilege of being first in line to watch this new content.

Sure, there's a decent chance that the new episodes will eventually end up on some other service, such as Netflix. But *eventually* is the operative word and often means up to a year after the show's release.

You might never see some new shows

Some folks are calling this the Golden Age of television because so much great content is being created. Think of shows like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Queen's Gambit*, *The Morning Show*, and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. Besides starting with the word *The*, each of these shows is original programming created by a streaming service: Hulu, Netflix, Apple TV+, and Amazon Prime Video, respectively. It's great that these services are pouring so much money into creating amazing television, but the downside is that the only way to see each of these shows is to have a subscription to the service that created it.

Is it possible that some of these shows might appear down the road on another service? Maybe, but I wouldn't count on it.

The Benefits of Severing Your Connection to the Cable Company

Given all the reasons listed near the beginning of this chapter as to why the cable company is so awful, clearly the main advantage to cutting the cord is never having to deal with your cable provider again! However, although getting Big Cable out of your life forever is a huge benefit, it's not the only one you get when you snip that cord. Let me take you through a few more.

You save money

Carving a sizable chunk off your monthly television-watching bill is the most common reason most people dream about cutting the cord. Sure, earlier I talked about how you might not save as much as you'd like, but how much you save depends on you. If you're happy to just "Netflix and chill" every night, you're going to save a ton of money each month. If you're a sports nut or news junkie, or if your TV tastes run towards premium channels such as HBO, you'll pay extra for the privilege.

Don't get me wrong: Cable subscriptions are so expensive these days that almost everyone ends up paying less each month when they cut the cord.

You'll probably be happier in the long run

Cable TV has what smarty-pants economists call *low perceived value*, which means you don't feel like you get your money's worth from your cable subscription. That is, although you pay a ton of money each month, you enjoy only a few shows, are indifferent to (or downright dislike) many more, and ignore the majority of what's available. That almost-no-bang-for-your-buck experience is depressing.

By contrast, surveys of cord cutters routinely show great satisfaction, which comes from having a *high perceived value* of the new lifestyle. To be accurate, the cord cutters who are happiest with making the change are those who've kept things simple by subscribing to only a few streaming services. The combination of saving money, having a simple setup, and being satisfied with what the services offer is the ticket to cord-cutting nirvana.

You unshackle your TV

A big problem with cable TV is the cable itself. Sure, lots of TV comes to your TV via Wi-Fi these days, but many people still have a cable outlet on one wall and a coaxial cable running from that outlet to a set-top box, which then connects to your TV. This setup is fine as long as you're okay with having your TV (and

therefore the rest of your entertainment center) relatively close to the cable outlet.

However, what if one day you decide that your TV-watching experience would be much better if you could move your TV to the opposite side of the room? Well, sure, you *could* do that, but it means buying a really long coaxial cable and stringing it along the base of your walls to the new TV location. That's ugly with a capital "Ugh."

And if you decide your TV should be on a different floor? Ah, now you're looking at the expense of bringing in a cable technician to move the outlet.

Cutting the cord, by contrast, means literally doing away with that freedom-restricting coaxial cable. With your content now coming in over the Internet and broadcast to your smart TV or your streaming device via Wi-Fi, moving your TV to the perfect location is easy.



REMEMBER

The big assumption behind this benefit is that you're *not* getting at least part of your TV fix using an over-the-air antenna, which still requires a coaxial cable connection to your TV.

You unshackle yourself

After you go cord-free, that freedom extends where you watch TV. You're no longer required to plop yourself down, potato-like, on the couch in front of your TV set. Instead, because every streaming service and device offers an app not only for configuration but also for viewing content, you can use your favorite tablet or smartphone to watch shows anywhere you want.

In the living room? Of course. In the bedroom or the kitchen? Sure. In the den? Perfect. In the bathroom? Um, your call.

You're in control

So much of the cable TV experience feels like coercion. The basic or standard package has ten stations you watch regularly, and fifty you didn't even know existed. A specialty package has one or

two channels you want, and eight or nine channels that do nothing for you. You need a set-top box, which the cable company is happy to lease to you forever at ten or twenty bucks a month.

When you throw down your scissors after cutting the cord, that lightness you feel is the lifting of these and similar cable company burdens. Now *you* are in control, deciding which channels or services and equipment you want. Ah, that's better.

Surveying the Cord-Free Landscape

What can you expect to find in a world where the cable company is a distant memory? Answering that question is what the rest of this book is about. To give you a feel for what's in store, take a quick look at the most prominent features of that landscape.

First, you should know that the cord-free world is broadly divided into two main categories:

- » **Over-the-air (OTA) TV:** Live television channels broadcast from a station transmitter. This setup usually requires an antenna, but some streaming services offer live TV channels.
- » **Streaming media:** Television programs — as well as movies, music, podcasts, and other media — made available over the Internet. You can use device apps to access streaming media, but most people use a device such as a smart TV, a set-top box, or a streaming player.

In these two categories, you can have one (or, heck, *all*) of the following viewing experiences:

- » **Watching OTA TV with an antenna:** You want to watch live local stations for free (minus the cost of the antenna, of course). To find out more about this option, see Chapters 3 and 4.

- » **Watching live TV with a streaming device:** You don't want the hassle of setting up a digital antenna. You can find the details in Chapter 5.
- » **Watching live TV with a streaming service:** You're mostly interested in live network broadcasts. To learn more, check out Chapter 5.
- » **Streaming media through a device:** You want to use a device such as a smart TV or a USB stick (such as Amazon Fire TV) to access streaming media through apps. I talk about all this in Chapter 6.
- » **Watching free streaming services:** You're too psychologically scarred from paying scandalously high cable prices and want only free content. I talk about free services in Chapter 8.
- » **Watching paid streaming services:** You want a subscription. Most streaming services require a subscription, so this is your most likely experience. For the details, head to Chapter 9.

