

Cut the Cable

Kathleen Weiss

Instruction and Technology Librarian

[kweiss@vapld.info](mailto:kweiss@vapld.info)

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CUT THE CABLE?**

Cable TV can be a costly way to access entertainment and buying basic packages means you pay for more content than you actually watch. Turning to internet-based options accessed through a streaming device may be a good alternative.

**Internet-based On-Demand and Streaming Media**

So just what is the difference between watching cable TV channels and using internet-based media?

There are two types of Internet-based media available through access devices – streaming media (where you watch whatever is playing on the channel at the time) or on-demand media (where you choose a specific item to watch and you can pause it, rewind it, or skip forward just like you would with a DVD). Shows that are aired on cable may have a delayed release on Internet TV, or may stream concurrently.

Different channels and apps on the access devices use either on demand access or streaming access. Some of these channels provide free access to media, while others charge a subscription fee for access, or others charge one time fees for access to particular items.

**WHAT DO YOU NEED TO CUT THE CABLE?**

You will need an internet connection and an access device.

**Internet Requirements**

Internet access in our area varies widely, so it’s important to find out what your options are and whether you can get access to the minimum bandwidth necessary for supporting streaming media. **Dial-up internet access is insufficient.** You need an internet connection with a minimum download speed of 5 Mbps per streaming user in your household. So, if you have a spouse who will also be streaming Netflix while you’re watching Sling TV, you’ll need an internet connection with at least 10 Mbps download speed. But don’t worry, **the average American home has 10 Mbps speed, so you should be fine.**

You can do a rough check on the internet service available for your home at: <http://www.broadbandmap.gov/>

**Access Devices**

In the last year, several new devices for accessing internet-based media have come on the market, and improvements in design and service are frequently being introduced. There are several devices to choose from but there are two main types: **set-top boxes** (Roku box, Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV) and **HDMI sticks** (Chromecast, Amazon Fire TV stick, Roku stick). Not every device may have access to the same channels and apps.

Below are reviews for the streaming devices shown in the Cut the Cable class. These reviews have been adapted from an article on CNET titled “Roku vs. Apple TV vs. Chromecast vs. Amazon Fire TV: Which streamer should you buy?” You can read the full article at <http://goo.gl/2OQc56>

**Google Chromecast**

**Price: $35**

**Pros: Cheap, simple and small**

**The Highlights:**

* **Major apps covered, catalog growing:** Netflix, YouTube, HBO Go, Showtime Anytime, Starz Play, Hulu Plus, Pandora, Google Music, Plex, Vevo, MLB TV, Crackle, Rdio, Vudu and numerous other apps. The ease of adding "Cast" support to pretty much any existing Android or iOS app has also helped the Chromecast library expand very quickly recently.
* **No onscreen user interface or standard remote**: By design, the Chromecast doesn't have a true TV-based user interface. Everything is controlled through your smartphone or tablet, which means you may need to unlock your device every time you want to pause or rewind.
* **No cross-platform search:** There's no equivalent of Roku's (or Amazon's, or Google's) search capability with Chromecast.
* **Screen mirroring can be spotty:** Screen mirroring or "TabCasting" is a beta feature on the Chromecast and it shows. While being able to project any content from a Chrome tab to your TV sounds great, in reality it doesn't always work well.

**Roku Stick**

**Price:** $70

**Pros:** More choice of devices, more apps

**The Highlights:**

* **Multiple hardware and pricing options:** Currently Roku has four different players, not counting Roku TV. If I could recommend only one, it would be the Roku 2 ($70).
* **Over 2,000 apps:** Roku is the winner when it comes to content (see the attached chart), with a massive channel library that includes Netflix, Amazon Instant, HBO Go, Hulu Plus, Pandora, Spotify, Rdio, MLB.TV, NFL Now, Amazon Cloud Player, Vudu, PBS, TWC TV, Sling TV, and YouTube. Roku is often the first to get new channels, plus the company has a good track record of bringing updates to its boxes and apps.
* **Best-in-class cross-platform search:** No other device in this group offers the ability to search for a title or other keyword across so many services including Netflix, Amazon Instant Video, Hulu Plus, Crackle, Fox Now, FXNow, HBO Go, M-Go, Time Warner Cable and Vudu. Roku's search can save you money by letting you know when you can avoid paying to rent a movie or show that might be available for "free" as part of a subscription. You can also search via voice using Roku's remote app for iOS and Android, or via the remote on a Roku 3.
* **Content-agnostic:** Roku's interface doesn't push you toward one app or service. The platform has a refreshing "come one, come all" vibe that seems more customer-friendly than Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV or Android TV, which all more or less push you toward the hardware makers' own content.
* **Weak mirroring and gaming:** There is no true AirPlay / Google Cast mirroring equivalent: Both Apple TV and Chromecast let you use native apps on your smartphone, tablet or computer to push content to your streaming box. The company recently added screen mirroring to the Roku 2, Roku 3 and Streaming Stick, but it's a beta feature that only works with recent Android devices, Windows 8.1 and Windows Phone.

**Apple TV**

**Price:** $69

**Why it's great:** An excellent iOS companion

**The Highlights**

* **It "just works" in the Apple ecosystem:** If you own a lot of music, movies or TV shows on iTunes, the Apple TV lets you access all that content on your TV and connected sound system. And if you use iTunes Match, all your cloud-stored music is available as well. iTunes Radio gives you a free radio option in your living room too.
* **AirPlay mirroring:** If you have other iOS devices like an iPhone or iPad, or a relatively recent Mac computer, it's simple to push music, photos and videos from nearly any app to your Apple TV. It also gives you access to a lot of apps that aren't supported natively by the Apple TV.
* **Plenty of apps (except Amazon):** The Apple TV used to get a lot of flak for its limited app support, but it's done a much better job recently, adding high-quality services like HBO Go and Watch ESPN.

**WHAT TECHNOLOGY, CHANNELS, AND APPS SHOULD YOU CONSIDER?**

**HD Antenna**

**Price: $15 - $80**

**Overview:** Before you’ve canceled your cable or satellite subscription, you’ll first want to investigate what’s available to you via an HD antenna. For people in urban areas, a good HD antenna likely offers all four major networks (FOX, ABC, NBC, and CBS), along with 10-15 other selections (PBS, CW, etc.) in full HD, for free. To make sure you’ll get decent reception, you can simply buy one and try it out, ask around the neighborhood. You can also try the FCC’s antenna analysis tool: <http://goo.gl/4TY7RS> or Antenna Web: <http://goo.gl/a5yphM> which will tell you which channels you can expect to receive and even offers a standardized color-coded system that can recommend specific antenna types.

**Note:** I recommend the Mohu Leaf 50 Indoor HDTV Antenna ($70). It’s low profile and picks up a picks up broadcast signals from as far as 50 miles away.

**Amazon Prime (Amazon Instant Video)**

**Price: $99/year or $8.25/month**

**Overview:** While Amazon’s Prime video service often crosses over into Netflix’s catalog it does have exclusive rights to a host of classic HBO series like The Sopranos and Oz, along with its own original series such as the critically-acclaimed Transparent. In addition to being a favorite among parents thanks to its extensive catalog of young children’s programming, Amazon also offers video on demand content, allowing you to rent or buy newer movies and TV shows. Plus, if you tend to do much shopping at Amazon anyway, Prime’s free 2-day shipping makes the subscription a no-brainer.

**Netflix**

**Price:** $8.99/month

**Overview:** An obvious choice, and one that is nearly essential to any cord-cutting list, Netflix’s catalog is loaded with full TV series (past seasons only), scores of movies, and original shows like House of Cards, all of which come commercial free.

**Hulu Plus**

**Price:** $7.99/month

**Overview:** Hulu Plus is best loved for its selection of current seasons of popular TV shows, most of which show up on the site soon after their original air date. Hulu Plus offers plenty of titles, but depending on how much new TV you catch from your trusty antenna, it may not be totally necessary. On the other hand, if you’re used to watching shows on a DVR after they’ve aired, Hulu is a good way to stay current, or catch up.

**Notes:** Hulu Plus contains commercials.

**Sling TV**

**Price:** $20/month

**Overview:** Sling is web-tv that includes: ESPN, ESPN2, AMC, Food Network, A&E, History Channel, History channel 2, TNT, El Rey Network, HGTV, IFC, Disney Channel, Polaris+, Maker, TBS, Travel Channel, Adult Swim, CNN, Bloomberg Television, Cartoon Network, ABC Family, Lifetime, Galavision as part of its base package. Add HBO live and on demand for $15/month, Sports Extra for $5/month, Hollywood Extra for $5/month, and Lifestyle Extra for $5/month. View details at [www.sling.com/package](http://www.sling.com/package).

**Notes:** You can only watch from one device at a time. Currently, Sling TV supports Roku, Amazon Fire TV, and Google Nexus Player. However, there is an iOS and Android app.

**HBO Now**

**Price:** $14.99/month

**Overview:** Subscribe to HBO without a cable subscription. With HBO NOW, you get instant access to HBO’s award-winning original programming, as well as exclusive Hollywood blockbusters.

**Crackle**

**Price:** Free

**Overview:** Crackle is a free to use multi-platform video entertainment network of full length movies, TV shows and original programming.

**Notes:** Crackle contains commercials.

**Vudu**

**Price:** Pay-per-view basis

**Overview:** Through Vudu, you can either rent movies or purchase them to store in your digital library for viewing whenever you wish. Cost of a purchase is about the same as if you had purchased the movie in the store.

**Notes:** Ordering television on Vudu is often cheaper than ordering episodes a la carte on Amazon Instant Video.

**HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO CUT THE CABLE?**

The startup cost includes your access device and an HD antenna. Annual and monthly costs include your internet and the channels and apps to which you subscribe.

**Calculating the Cost**

Depending on how much you are paying for cable access and depending on your media interests, cutting cable may add up to savings.

Slate Magazine has a useful tool for calculating your cost with and without cable for the things you want access to: <http://goo.gl/qJnvAU>

Remember to consider things like promotion pricing that will rise after the introductory period is over. If you do decide to cancel cable access, the company may want you back enough to offer you incentives and deals that may make traditional cable access more affordable (but you may have to wait awhile without cable for them to begin offering you these options, so be prepared).

Here is an article about how to haggle with your cable provider to get a better deal: <http://goo.gl/rgPNYW>

**HOW DO YOU CHOOSE FROM SO MANY SERVICES?**

Time Magazine recommends plans based on your interests. Read the full article at <http://goo.gl/RSlA3z> or take a look at their list below.

In designing our guide, we took all of these factors into account and simplified things, designing five bundles of online television programing—one of which, we think, will suit just about any type of TV viewer. For each bundle, we show you the price, the projected savings compared to the 2014 average basic cable price of $66.61, and how many additional a la carte TV seasons (estimated $30 per show) you could buy before cable would be more cost-effective.

**The Basic Cable Junkie**

This option is for you if you like to follow the latest network and non-premium cable shows, like The New Girl, The Voice, The Flash, or Modern Family. Hulu Plus ($7.99 per month) offers current programs from FOX, NBC, ABC, the CW, as well as delayed or archived content from cable channels like Comedy Central and FX. You can add CBS shows, like Big Bang Theory, for another monthly fee of $5.99.

That still leaves a significant gap in cable content, which can be closed using Dish Network’s Sling TV. Sling offers AMC (Mad Men, Walking Dead), TNT (Falling Skies), TBS (Conan), A&E (The Returned), and ABC Family (The Fosters), among others, for $20 a month.

Sling is a good deal for serious TV fans, but if you’re not going to watch at least eight different shows on those channels per year, it’s cheapest to just get your Mad Men/Walking Dead fix by buying individual seasons on iTunes or Amazon Instant Video. That strategy, ironically, is pretty much what Dish Network’s chairman recommended back in 2012—before his company owned its own streaming business.

**The Plan:** Hulu, CBS All Access, Sling TV

**Price:** $407.76 per year ($33.98 per month)

**Savings:** $391.56 per year ($32.63 per month)

You could buy about 13 additional show seasons before cable becomes more cost effective.

**The Prestige TV Grazer**

First, the best TV moved from networks to cable. Now a similar transition is moving top talent from cable to the streaming world. Netflix ($8.99 per month for HD streaming) has House of Cards, Orange Is the New Black, and Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt—all of which have received almost universal acclaim—and Amazon ($99 per year for video and a variety of other services) isn’t too far behind with comedy Alpha House, crime drama Bosch, and the Golden Globe-winning Transparent.

Even if you’re only going to watch a few of these shows, the only way to do it is with a subscription, so buying just the programs you want to see isn’t an option this time. The same is true for another prestige network, HBO, which offers its shows exclusively through cable or a new $15 per month streaming option called HBO Now (unless, of course, you don’t mind waiting months to buy the latest of Game of Thrones episodes on iTunes). With these three services in hand, you should be able to fill in any gaps with a few single-season purchases.

**The Plan:** Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO Now

**Price:** $386.88 per year ($32.24 per month)

**Savings:** $412.44 per year ($34.37 per month)

You could buy about 13 additional show seasons before cable becomes more cost effective.

**The Omnivore**

This is the option for TV fanatics who want everything and the kitchen sink. We’re talking network TV, cable shows, HBO, movies, and streaming exclusives, all on demand whenever you want.

Believe it or not, you can still have all this for significantly less than the price of cable. Even after subscribing to HBO Now, Netflix, Hulu, CBS All Access, and Amazon Prime Video, you’ll still be more than $250 in the black. Don’t care for Girls or Game of Thrones? You can replace the HBO option with Sling TV for $60 more per year ($5 more per month); about the same price as buying two individual TV seasons.

**The Plan:** HBO Now, Netflix, Hulu, CBS All Access, and Amazon Prime Video

**Price:** $554.64 per year ($46.22 per month)

**Savings:** $244.68 per year ($20.39 per month)

You could buy about 8 additional show seasons before cable becomes more cost effective.

**The Serial Binger**

If you have unpredictable tastes, but only focus on one show at a time, it might be most cost efficient to just buy all your television a la carte. For the price of a year of cable, the average viewer can buy 26 seasons of TV. Assuming these are all 45 minute shows with 14 episodes, that’s almost 300 hours of content. If you can’t ever imagine yourself watching more than that, then this plan is for you. Don’t forget to grab a TV antenna for major live events like the Oscars or the Super Bowl, or if you just want the option of kicking back and watching prime time now and then.

**The Plan:** Indoor TV antenna

**Price:** $8.55 per year ($0.71 per month)

**Savings:** $790.77 per year ($65.89 per month)

You could buy about 26 additional seasons of television before cable becomes less expensive.

**Sports Fans**

If you want—or need—to see a significant number of your local teams’ games, I’m going to stop right here. This is one area where streaming services can’t yet fully deliver. Local games are generally exclusive to regional sports networks, and you’ll still need cable for that. There’s also the issue of some online services being a little more unstable than die-hard fans might like. Dish’s Sling TV failed for many customers during the NCAA Final Four action, leading the company to issue an apology.

However, if you’re a more casual sports fan or a supporter of an out-of-market team, cord cutting is still a worthwhile option. Sling TV—assuming it can hold up under the strain of future events—will give you ESPN and ESPN 2 in addition to a handful of basic cable channels for $20 a month, and for another $5 you can get even more sports options, including ESPN U, ESPNEWS, and the SEC Network. Add in an indoor TV antenna and you’ll also have access to network sports.

For supporters of teams outside your local area, some sport-specific streaming options might also be attractive. Each major sports league offers some sort of online viewing option for somewhere in the neighborhood of $110 a year, with the caveat that local games are blacked out. (NFL fans can pay only $69.99 to watch any team they like, but must make do with replays.)

**The Plan (option 1):** Sling TV with sports package and an indoor TV antenna

**Price:** $308.50 per year ($25.70 per month)

**Savings:** $490.82 per year ($40.90 per month)

You could buy about 16 additional seasons of television before cable becomes less expensive.

**The Plan (option 2):** Sling TV with sports package, indoor TV antenna, and one sport-specific streaming package

**Price:** $418.50 per year ($34.88 per month)

**Savings:** $380.82 per year ($31.74 per month)

You could buy about 12 additional seasons of television before cable becomes less expensive.

**WORKS CONSULTED**

This packet was adapted and contains excerpts from the following resources.

What do you need to cut the cable?

CutCableToday: How to Get Rid of Cable TV, Date and Author not listed

<http://www.cutcabletoday.com/>

What technology, channels, and apps should you consider?

Digital Trends: Cord Cutting 101: How to Quit Cable for Online Streaming Video by Ryan Waniata, April 24, 2015 <http://www.digitaltrends.com/home-theater/how-to-quit-cable-for-online-streaming-video/>

How much does it cost to cut the cable?

Digital Trends: Cord Cutting 101: How to Quit Cable for Online Streaming Video by Ryan Waniata, April 24, 2015 <http://www.digitaltrends.com/home-theater/how-to-quit-cable-for-online-streaming-video/>

How do you choose from so many services?

Time Magazine: How to Watch All the TV You Want Without Paying a Cable Bill by Jacob Davidson, April 7, 2015 <http://time.com/money/3767927/cable-tv-without-paying-bill/>

Cut the Cable

This program was conducted by Molly Bitters at the Eisenhower Public Library District in Harwood Heights, IL in March 2015. The packet you are reading contains excerpts from her class resources.

**—**

**Access all the presentation materials from this class online at** [**http://guides.vapld.info/CutTheCable**](http://guides.vapld.info/CutTheCable)