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Months ago, Netflix argued that it was paying an unfair fee to Internet providers just so that its videos could reach you and me unmolested. That claim wound up contributing to a key part of the federal government's new net neutrality rules, which seek to prevent Internet providers from interfering with your Web traffic.

Now, some cable lobbyists are arguing that it's really the *Internet providers* that need

federal protection from content companies. Why? Online video companies, the lobbyists said in a regulatory filing Tuesday, could decide to charge cable companies a toll for accessing their exclusive content — effectively cutting off your viewing pleasure if the cable companies don't pay up. If it sounds crazy, that's because it's the same argument Netflix put forward last year, just in reverse. The claim sounds insidious because so many cable companies hold an effective monopoly over their Internet subscribers. As gatekeepers, those providers can determine which audiences content companies can reach. That's a lot of power — and as Netflix found out, the cable companies are more than willing to exercise it.

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But it starts to make a little more sense if you think about it this way: Netflix isn't the only provider of online videos. You've also got more traditional television programmers such as Disney, Fox, CBS and Viacom. And it's powerful, established companies like these that have some in the cable industry very worried.

Remember when CBS pulled its most popular content from Time Warner Cable, because the two companies disagreed on how much TWC should pay for all that video? Millions of customers lost access to shows like "CSI" and "NCIS" for weeks. TWC walked away from the experience having lost more than 300,000 frustrated subscribers.

Daily News
Yo, GOP, got
a message
for y'all

The same thing could happen online, the cable industry warns. TV blackouts could turn into Internet blackouts as CBS and other programmers start offering more of their content over the Web — and using a cable company's own video-hungry Internet subscribers as point of leverage in fee negotiations. Programmers could even begin asking cable companies to pay a fee when their Internet subscribers try to watch the streaming versions of their favorite shows, rather than the traditional broadcasts shown on cable TV, according to cable lobbyists. Smaller cable companies backed by the American Cable Association claim in a new filing to federal regulators that programmers such as CBS and Viacom have threatened to block certain cable subscribers from viewing videos that are "freely available on the Internet" to everybody else.

If they carried out their threats, "that result would not only be contrary to an open Internet, it would greatly inhibit broadband deployment," the ACA wrote to the Federal Communications Commission Tuesday. That last claim is super important. What the ACA wants is to get the FCC to apply its new powers over the Internet to change the pay-television market in its favor. This would be a huge deal. Doing so would effectively link two issues — cable TV and cable Internet — that have historically been separated from one another by technology and engineering. It would also recognize that these two issues can no longer be considered separately, as all forms of media gradually converge and become packets of data.

But it's a dangerous game the industry is playing. Asking for the FCC to regulate television more closely using its net neutrality powers sets the stage for more regulatory action — in ways that perhaps the industry won't ultimately like. "This only seems to suggest even more sweeping authority" when many Internet providers already view the FCC's net neutrality rules as an overreach by government, one cable industry official said. The cable industry's biggest trade association, the National Cable and Telecommunications Association, declined to comment.

Update: Netflix chimed in Tuesday by claiming vindication for the stance it said it'd been advocating all along. "One of the benefits of [Internet providers] and content providers agreeing not to charge each other," said Netflix spokeswoman Anne Marie Squeo, "is that it avoids putting consumers in the middle of [fee] battles like the ones between large cable companies and broadcasters." — *Washington Post*

Two minutes can probably go by in your normal life without a second thought -- but a 120-second delay? That seems like an eternity.

At least it did Monday night when I was watching the NCAA Men's basketball final online-only, and ended up a full commercial break behind reality. Live sports tends to be the main argument against cord-cutting, even in a world where one can watch many games online. So I tested out the experience to see if the (untelevised) revolution has really come.

By the three-quarter point of the game, I was in first-world agony. Which is unusual for me: I've never had cable -- apart from some experimentation in college -- and have fully embraced the cord-cutting revolution with four monthly over-the-top video services. (I've done the math on the cost, it still works in my favor.) With one exception, I'm not that interested in sports, so two minutes normally wouldn't bother me.

But in a world of second-screen viewing, being that far behind the rest of the world -- read: Twitter -- was pretty frustrating. So was hearing the neighbors cheer or groan through the walls, when I was still in commercials. Thinking that no one probably feels that strongly about chicken fries, I fired up my television to see just how far back I was. At that point -- as you can see in the picture -- it was just about a minute-and-a-half. By the end of the game, it was a full two minutes.

And that was nothing compared to what others had experienced this week. For some consumers, the streaming live and on-demand video service Sling TV had a full-on

meltdown during the semi-final games on TBS, displaying frustrating buffering messages or choppy video to its consumers. The service even apologized to users -- many of whom may have signed up partly because of Sling TV's heavy advertising that the new-ish platform would be carrying those particular games.

All of which is to say that, when it comes to cord-cutting, we're still in early days. And the pain of the early adopter is particularly bad when it comes to streaming services. Because while you may be okay with being able to only binge watch certain sitcoms or dramas, if you're paying for live TV, then you almost certainly want to actually watch live TV, as it happens, without having to question whether you've made bad decisions.

This does not mean that I am a streaming naysayer. The fact that we're to the point where we can even attempt to do things like live stream an NCAA championship game is impressive, and it's pretty clear that this is the direction where things are going. That's demonstrated by announcements such as HBO's launch of its standalone \$15 per month service, or even excitement over new streaming hardware from Roku and Apple. Also, Nielsen's data shows that watching television through streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon has gone mainstream — reaching 40 percent of U.S. homes.

I'm not even saying that cord-cutting can't work for people in its current form. I am saying, however, that the exercise does require a bit of work right now, and no small amount of patience. I pay for four over-the-top video services every month, but during the NCAA Championship Game, my best entertainment option was still the \$15 RadioShack antenna that I bought in 2011. — *Washington Post*



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